The Mapillah uprising

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Context

• With the centenary of the Mapillah rebellion of 1921 fast approaching, controversy has erupted over Malayalam movie projects commemorating what was arguably the greatest challenge to British rule between the great uprising of 1857 and the Quit India movement of 1942.

Conflicting narratives

• The controversy surrounding the Mapillah uprising demonstrates that in the case of most important historical events no single narrative is accepted by all sections of society.

• There are multiple narratives propounded by people of different ideological persuasions. More often than not these divergent perspectives are shaped by the proponents’ current political projects and their preferred visions of their societies’ future.

• On the one hand, people of secular and nationalist persuasions see it as a major instance of resistance to British colonial rule.

• On the other, people of the Hindutva persuasion revile it as an example of ingrained Muslim hatred against Hindus.

• The rebellion can be understood only if one discards ideological blinkers. It is an excellent example of the veracity of the assertion that important historical events always have multiple causes and do not occur in a social, economic, and political vacuum.

The revolt

• The immediate trigger of the uprising was the Non-Cooperation Movement launched by the Congress in 1920 in tandem with the Khilafat agitation.
• The Malabar Congress, many of whose leaders were Nairs, was the most active participant in these twin agitations with several Hindu leaders addressing Khilafat gatherings.
• The anti-British sentiment fuelled by these agitations found fertile ground among the Muslim Mapillahs of south Malabar living in economic misery which they blamed in large part on British rule.
The British had introduced **new tenancy laws** that tremendously **favoured the landlords** and instituted a far more **exploitative system** than before.

- The **pre-British relations between landlords and tenants** were based on a code that provided the **tenants a decent share** of the produce.
- The new laws deprived them of all guaranteed rights to the land and its **produce** and in effect rendered them **landless**.
- This change created **enormous resentment** among the **tenants against British rule**.
- The fact that **most of the landlords were Namboodiri Brahmins** while most of the **tenants were Mapillah Muslims** compounded the problem.
- The Nairs formed an intermediate grouping of **well-off peasantry** with their own economic and social grudges against the Namboodiri landlords but largely unsympathetic to the economic travails of the Mapillas.

**The spark that lit the fire**

- The **Non-Cooperation Movement combined with the Khilafat agitation** provided the spark that lit the fire of Mapillah revolt against the British rulers and their Hindu landlords.
- The **fiery speeches by Muslim religious leaders** that accompanied the **Khilafat movement** added to the **religious fervour** of an already desperate peasantry and fuelled their **ire against the British and the Hindu landlords** leading to the atrocities committed by a segment of the **mobilised Mapillahs against Hindus** regardless of caste.
- Non-partisan analyses of the uprising make clear that **multiple factors contributed** to the character of the movement.
- These included **economic distress, anger against foreign rule and the tenancy laws** it instituted, and **religious zeal**.
- But above all it was an **agrarian revolt** that simultaneously took on the garb of **anti-colonialism and religious fanaticism**.