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TIPU SULTAN'S STATECRAFT IN MALABAR: ADMINISTRATION, GOVERNANCE, AND RELIGIOUS POLICY

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ABSTRACT

Tipu Sultan's intervention in Malabar during the late eighteenth century represented an important phase in the expansion and consolidation of Mysorean power in southwestern India. His administration attempted to integrate the region into a centralized political and fiscal system while confronting resistance from local rulers, Nair elites, and other groups. The administrative programme involved revenue collection, territorial reorganization, military control, and efforts to reduce the autonomy of established intermediaries. At the same time, Tipu's religious policies in Malabar remain among the most debated subjects in South Indian historiography. Contemporary and later sources contain accounts of conversions, deportations, temple destruction, and coercive measures, while other evidence points to the ruler's patronage of Hindu institutions and the employment of Hindu officials elsewhere in his dominions. This paper examines Tipu Sultan's statecraft through administration, political integration, and religious policy, emphasizing the importance of distinguishing political repression from religious motivation. It argues that Malabar should be studied through multiple and sometimes conflicting sources rather than through a single image of Tipu Sultan.

Keywords: Tipu Sultan, Malabar, Mysore, administration, statecraft, religious policy, revenue, Nairs, political integration, eighteenth-century India

I. INTRODUCTION

Tipu Sultan inherited from Haidar Ali a state that was undergoing significant administrative and military transformation. When Tipu succeeded his father in 1782, Mysore was engaged in prolonged conflicts with the British East India Company and regional powers. Malabar had already become strategically important because of its ports, commercial connections, agricultural resources, and location along the western coast. Mysorean authority in the region was therefore shaped not only by administrative ambitions but also by military competition and repeated resistance. The incorporation of Malabar into Mysorean political structures was consequently a difficult process involving conquest, negotiation, revenue extraction, and military occupation.

Tipu's administrative philosophy generally emphasized greater centralization and direct control. Historical research describes his reforms as attempts to replace powerful intermediary groups with officials responsible directly to the central government. His administration developed a salaried bureaucracy and sought to strengthen direct fiscal extraction from productive areas. Such policies were part of a broader eighteenth-century process in which regional states attempted to consolidate revenue, reduce the autonomy of local elites, and create more effective military-fiscal institutions. In Malabar, however, the application of this model encountered a society in which political authority was dispersed among rulers, chiefs, landlords, religious institutions, and local communities.

Religious policy presents a more complicated dimension. There is substantial historical disagreement concerning the meaning and scale of Tipu's actions in Malabar. Some accounts describe forced conversions, destruction of religious institutions, deportation, and coercive measures against sections of the Hindu population. Other historians have argued that many such measures should be interpreted within the context of rebellion, military resistance, revenue conflict, and the struggle to establish Mysorean sovereignty. Evidence concerning Tipu's patronage of Hindu institutions elsewhere in his kingdom and his correspondence with the Sringeri monastery further complicates a simple interpretation of his religious policy.

The present study therefore examines Tipu Sultan's statecraft in Malabar through three interconnected dimensions: administrative restructuring and revenue governance; political integration and resistance; and religious policy and its historiographical interpretation. Rather than assuming that all state actions were either purely administrative or purely religious, the

paper considers how military, fiscal, political, and religious factors could overlap. This approach is especially important because the surviving sources were produced by different groups with different interests, including Mysorean officials, British observers, local traditions, and later historians. The evidence consequently requires comparison and contextual interpretation.

II. ADMINISTRATIVE REORGANIZATION AND REVENUE GOVERNANCE IN MALABAR

Tipu Sultan's administrative approach was closely associated with centralization. His government attempted to reduce the independence of local intermediaries and establish more direct relationships between the state and revenue-producing communities. Scholarship on Tipu's administration describes the creation of centralized fiscal institutions and salaried officials who were expected to report to the central government. This was consistent with a wider effort to construct a more bureaucratic state capable of mobilizing resources for administration and warfare.

The importance of revenue was particularly pronounced in Malabar. The region contained fertile agricultural zones, valuable commercial commodities, forests, and access to maritime trade. Control over revenue therefore had both fiscal and strategic importance. Mysorean authorities sought to reorganize existing arrangements and secure more regular flows of revenue to the state. Such efforts inevitably affected local elites whose authority and income depended upon older systems of landholding and collection. Administrative centralization could consequently be perceived as an attack upon established privileges.

Tipu's wider administrative system relied on written regulations and differentiated responsibilities. His government employed officials for revenue, policing, accounts, and other functions, reducing the concentration of authority in a single local intermediary. The attempt to create clearer bureaucratic responsibilities was significant because it represented a movement away from purely personalized political relationships toward more formalized state administration. In Malabar, however, implementation was complicated by the region's political fragmentation and the continuing resistance of local groups.

The introduction of new revenue arrangements also had social consequences. Existing landholding relationships were not simply economic arrangements; they were embedded within caste, political, and customary institutions. Changes imposed by a conquering

administration could therefore generate opposition even when they were intended to improve state revenue. Malabar's political economy was particularly complex because different categories of landlords, chiefs, cultivators, and local authorities possessed different claims over land and revenue. Mysorean attempts to reorganize these relationships therefore had implications beyond taxation.

Military expenditure further intensified the importance of revenue. Tipu's government faced repeated wars against the British and their allies, making reliable fiscal resources essential. The centralization of revenue enabled the state to maintain soldiers, fortifications, administrative personnel, and supply networks. In this sense, Malabar was not simply a peripheral administrative province; it formed part of the wider military-fiscal structure of Mysore. The connection between taxation and warfare helps explain why Mysorean officials placed considerable emphasis on administrative control.

At the same time, the effectiveness of these policies should not be assumed automatically. Malabar remained difficult to govern, and repeated rebellions demonstrate the limitations of Mysorean authority. The administrative programme therefore represented an ongoing process rather than a fully completed transformation. Tipu's statecraft in Malabar can best be understood as an attempt to replace fragmented political authority with centralized Mysorean control, an effort that produced both administrative innovation and intense local resistance.

III. POLITICAL INTEGRATION, MILITARY AUTHORITY, AND LOCAL RESISTANCE

Political integration was central to Tipu Sultan's policy in Malabar. Mysorean expansion brought the region into a state structure centered on Srirangapatna. This integration challenged the authority of established rulers and local elites, including the Zamorin of Calicut and Nair political groups. The political conflict was therefore not simply between Mysore and a unified Malabar population. It involved multiple local actors whose interests varied according to territory, status, religion, commercial position, and relationship with Mysorean power.

Military force was an essential instrument of this integration. Tipu inherited a powerful military state and used military campaigns to suppress resistance and enforce political authority. Malabar repeatedly experienced warfare and rebellion during Mysorean rule. Historical discussions of the region emphasize that Mysorean forces confronted Nairs and

other opponents while also dealing with resistance from Muslim Mappila groups. This evidence is significant because it demonstrates that political loyalty rather than religious identity alone influenced the relationship between Mysorean authority and local communities.

The position of the Nairs was especially important. They had traditionally occupied significant military and political roles in Malabar. The weakening of established ruling houses and the introduction of Mysorean administrative practices threatened their political influence. Resistance therefore had both political and socioeconomic foundations. Some groups opposed Mysorean taxation, others resisted the loss of privileges, and still others opposed military occupation. The resulting conflicts were consequently embedded in the broader struggle over political sovereignty.

The Zamorin's political position provides another example of the complexity of the situation. The Mysorean conquest challenged the authority of the traditional ruling house of Calicut. Later resistance was connected with efforts to restore political autonomy. Accounts of Tipu's administration in Malabar describe rebellions and military campaigns involving members of the Zamorin's political network and Nair forces. These events demonstrate that state formation generated direct conflict with established political institutions.

The experience of the Mappilas is particularly important when evaluating interpretations of Tipu's religious policy. Mappilas were a long-established Muslim community in Malabar, yet some Mappila groups also resisted Mysorean authority. Historical accounts record the suppression of Muslim resistance as well as conflicts with Hindu groups. This evidence complicates an interpretation in which Mysorean military policy can be explained entirely through religious affiliation. It suggests that political loyalty and resistance were significant determinants of state action.

The Malabar experience therefore illustrates both the ambitions and limitations of Tipu's state-building programme. Centralized administration could strengthen the state's capacity to collect revenue and deploy military resources, but it could also intensify opposition among groups whose privileges were threatened. Political integration was achieved unevenly and through a combination of administration, negotiation, military force, and coercion. Tipu's statecraft in Malabar consequently represented a process of contested state formation rather than a simple extension of Mysorean institutions.

IV. RELIGIOUS POLICY AND THE HISTORICAL DEBATE

Tipu Sultan's religious policy is one of the most contested aspects of his reign. The historical record contains evidence that has been used to support sharply different interpretations. Some sources describe forced conversions, deportations, destruction of temples and churches, and coercive treatment of particular communities. Other evidence records financial assistance to Hindu institutions, appointments of Hindu officials, and correspondence with Hindu religious authorities. The coexistence of these materials makes it difficult to reduce Tipu's religious policy to a single uniform principle.

The Malabar campaigns provide some of the strongest evidence for the coercive interpretation. Accounts associated with the Mysorean conquest describe conversions and deportations among sections of the population. A historical account preserved by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts describes Tipu's administration in Malabar as severe and associates it with attempts at conversion and the displacement of sections of the Hindu population. Such evidence must be considered seriously when assessing the human consequences of Mysorean rule.

However, the scale, motivation, and generality of these actions remain debated. Some historians interpret coercive measures primarily within the context of political rebellion and military resistance rather than as evidence of a universal policy directed against all Hindus. A historical discussion of Mysore-Kerala relations notes that some scholars have argued that political and economic considerations influenced temple destruction and conversion, while also pointing to grants to Hindu temples such as Guruvayur and Tiruvanchikulam. The existence of patronage does not erase evidence of coercion, but it does demonstrate that the state's relationship with religious institutions was not uniform.

Tipu's relationship with the Sringeri monastery provides particularly important evidence of interaction with a major Hindu institution. Scholarly discussion records correspondence between Tipu and the head of the Sringeri Math and identifies his support for the institution. Such evidence challenges interpretations that portray Tipu's entire state as systematically hostile toward Hindu religious institutions. At the same time, evidence from Mysore proper cannot automatically be used to explain every action taken during military campaigns in Malabar.

The source problem is therefore fundamental. British accounts were written during or after conflicts with Mysore and could portray Tipu in ways that served colonial political interests. Mysorean court chronicles had their own political and ideological purposes. Later nationalist and regional interpretations have also selected evidence according to different historical frameworks. Modern scholarship consequently emphasizes the importance of comparing sources rather than relying on isolated quotations or numerical claims.

A balanced interpretation should therefore distinguish between religious patronage, religious identity, political coercion, and wartime violence. Tipu was a Muslim ruler whose political language sometimes employed Islamic idioms, while his government also employed Hindu officials and supported Hindu institutions. In Malabar, however, military campaigns resulted in coercive measures that affected religious communities. The historical task is not to erase either side of the evidence but to establish the circumstances, extent, and motivations of individual policies. Such an approach provides a more historically defensible understanding of Tipu Sultan's religious statecraft.

V. CONCLUSION

Tipu Sultan's statecraft in Malabar emerged from the wider transformation of Mysore into a centralized military-fiscal state. His government sought to strengthen direct revenue collection, reduce the autonomy of local intermediaries, and establish administrative institutions capable of supporting military and political objectives. In Malabar, these efforts encountered a complex political society with established ruling families, Nair elites, commercial interests, and diverse religious communities.

Administrative centralization consequently generated resistance. Mysorean authorities attempted to integrate Malabar into their political system through revenue administration, military occupation, bureaucratic organization, and suppression of rebellion. The resistance of different groups demonstrates that local responses were shaped by political and economic interests as well as religious identities. The participation of Muslim Mappilas in resistance to Mysore is particularly significant in demonstrating that the conflict cannot be explained exclusively as a Hindu-Muslim confrontation.

Religious policy remains the most contested aspect of Tipu's Malabar rule. Evidence exists for coercive conversions, deportations, and attacks on religious institutions, but historians disagree about their scale, motivations, and relationship to broader state policy. At the same

time, Tipu's support for Hindu institutions and his correspondence with the Sringeri Math demonstrate that his religious relationships were not uniformly antagonistic. These apparently contradictory elements should be examined together rather than selectively.

The history of Tipu Sultan in Malabar is therefore best understood through the broader concept of contested state formation. His government sought greater political centralization and fiscal control, while local communities defended established privileges and institutions. Religious identity intersected with these political struggles but did not necessarily determine every state action. A careful study of administrative records, regional histories, court chronicles, British accounts, and institutional archives can provide a more nuanced understanding of the period. Tipu's Malabar policy consequently represents a complex combination of state-building, military coercion, economic restructuring, and contested religious governance.

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