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## **Tipu Sultan and Malabar: A Conundrum of History, Fiction and Colonial Discourse**

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### **Abstract:**

History aims to provide a factual account of past events, but the intertwined nature of history and fiction at times leads to misconceptions and misrepresentations. The history of Malabar, a province of Kerala was often shaped by such misconceptions, shaped by colonial objectives. Malabar Coast became a strategic position for trade and military interventions for Tipu Sultan and the English East India Company. Being a formidable enemy of the English East India Company, Tipu Sultan, the King of Mysore was represented as a cruel and fanatical ruler. The English historians chose Tipu's military campaigns and administrative policies in Malabar to substantiate the colonial ethos and vilify his personality. The present study Tipu Sultan and Malabar: A Conundrum of History, Fiction and Colonial Discourse attempts to explore how the British historians James Mill and Mark Wilks employ

historiography as a tool to criticize Tipu Sultan and justify the actions of the British East India Company. The paper examines how the colonial ideologies of the English East India Company was maintained through the historical narratives.

**Keywords:** Tipu Sultan, Malabar, James Mill, Mark Wilks, Colonialism, *The History of British India, Historical Sketches of the South of India: In an Attempt to Trace the History of Mysoor.*

## **Introduction**

The English East India Company was the major political force that helped Britain to subdue the native powers in India and establish colonial rule. By establishing territories in foreign lands, the English East India Company accentuated the consolidation of imperial power in India. The colonialism in India was manifested through the settlements of territories, economic exploitation of the native resources and controlling the inhabitants of the colonies. The colonial ethos was often exhibited through colonial narratives and colonial historiography. After acquiring the Royal charter in 1600, the English East India Company sought to establish economic dominance in the Indian subcontinent. The historical texts and other colonial narratives emerged as a medium to propagate the Company's political propaganda.

It is often assumed that history represents truth, providing a factual account of past events. But when history itself turns to a kind of fictional writing, especially when historical narratives are constructed with gaps in evidence, a new conundrum arises. This intertwined nature of history and fiction at times lead to misconceptions and misrepresentations. The historical writings by English writers on Tipu Sultan in relation to Malabar province underlines such conundrum between history and fiction. The facts on Mysore interventions in Malabar as recorded by English historians emphasizes a complex mix of perspectives,

imbued with colonial interests. The present paper entitled Tipu Sultan and Malabar: A Conundrum of History, Fiction and Colonial Discourse attempts to expose the colonial undercurrents in the historical representations of Tipu Sultan by English writers.

### **The Malabar Coast**

The Malabar Coast is the Southwestern region of India, stretching from Konkan to Kanyakumari. The term 'Malabar' was used synonymous to Kerala in the past. The region has been a significant center for trade and political activity for centuries. The port at Calicut and Kodungallur were pivotal in establishing global trade networks between the Indian subcontinent and other parts of the world. Being the most sought out port in South India, the Malabar Coast became a strategic position for trade and military interventions for Tipu Sultan. The Malabar Coast provided access to the Arabian Sea and Tipu Sultan, the ruler to a landlocked kingdom, wished to capture and maintain control over the Malabar province. The control over the Coast would help Tipu Sultan in strengthening his navy, improving the maritime trade and establish connections with his allies, the French.

Tipu Sultan was the ruler of Kingdom of Mysore from 1782 to 1799. The kingdom of Mysore established under Haidar Ali and his son Tipu Sultan stood as one of the most formidable enemies of the English East India Company in the eighteenth century. After the Battle of Plassey, the English East India Company expected to gain control over the Indian subcontinent. The growth of the British Empire, orchestrated by the English East India Company was either accepted or resisted by the provincial rulers. Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan resisted the military expansion of the British Empire and fought four wars, known as Anglo Mysore wars. Though Haidar Ali and Tipu could yield good results in the first two Anglo Mysore wars, the third and the fourth wars destroyed Tipu Sultan who faced death in the Siege of Seringapatam in 1799.

## **Tipu Sultan and Malabar**

It was in 1766 that Haidar Ali invaded Malabar and since then the region played a significant impact on the history and life of Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan. The military campaigns of Mysore in Malabar since 1766 were distinct with military aggression and reforms in administrative and religious policies. Tipu Sultan, after Haidar Ali's death, followed the expansionist policy of his father and continued the military interventions in Malabar. Launching various military campaigns to suppress the revolts led by various chieftains in Malabar, he attempted to assert Mysorean control over the province. The first major invasion under Tipu Sultan was the capture of Calicut, an important coastal city in northern Malabar. Zamorin, the then ruler of Malabar committed suicide by setting fire to his own palace. After the seizure of Calicut, Tipu Sultan had to subdue Nair chieftains who opposed Tipu's military campaign and his policies. In 1788, Kingdom of Mysore began a renewed campaign in Malabar to destroy the remaining resistance of minor chieftains and other groups. Tipu attacked the fortified lines of Kingdom of Travancore, a neighboring state, who was an ally to the British East India Company. The Third Mysorean campaign in Malabar occurred during the Third Anglo Mysore war in 1792. Tipu had to face defeat against the British and Kingdom of Travancore, weakening his military control over Malabar. Following the defeat of Mysore in the Third Anglo Mysore war, Tipu was forced to cede parts of Malabar under the Treaty of Seringapatam in 1792. The remaining parts of Malabar witnessed local uprisings against Mysorean rule which ended with Tipu's death and defeat at the Siege of Seringapatam in 1799. As an aftermath, Mysore was then fully integrated into British territory.

The Malabar Coast was a crucial region for Tipu Sultan to construct a strong and independent Kingdom of Mysore. Besides providing access to the Arabian Sea, the Malabar Coast also acted as a neutral zone between Mysore and the British controlled territories. It

was mainly to protect and prevent his Kingdom from British attacks that he sought to strengthen his influence and control over Malabar. Another significant factor for Tipu's interventions in Malabar is its rich resources, especially spices like black pepper and cardamom. Calicut and Mangalore were important ports in Malabar which acted as gateways for international trade. Capturing Malabar was essential for Tipu Sultan in his struggle against the British East India Company and for his diplomatic ventures with other foreign powers like the Ottomans.

### **Orientalist Image and Tipu Sultan**

Tipu's interventions in Malabar became a focal subject in constructing an Orientalist image of Tipu as a tyrant and despot. The English portrayal of Tipu's actions in Malabar often reflects colonial interests. Both the English historians and the novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries shaped their narratives to serve the colonial objectives. The colonizer wanted to show themselves as the good Samaritans; the protector of the suppressed. They needed a formidable enemy and Tipu Sultan fitted to the category perfectly.

The colonial narratives emerged as a medium to propagate and instill the colonial ethos. The narrative reinforced the perceptions of England as a dominant European power and romanticized the colonial exploits. The English East India Company and its officers were idolized as noble Samaritans, one who labored for the improvement of the native race. Indians and other rulers, especially Tipu Sultan was often depicted as a demon and a fanatical ruler; necessitating the intervention of Englishmen. The English East India Company was portrayed as a civilizing and guiding force, bringing order and progress to a chaotic Indian society.

The narratives thus constructed played an important role in justifying and legitimizing the military campaigns of the English East India Company. As Elleke Boehmer points out,

“Readings of imperial texts suggest, therefore how it was possible for a world system which presided over the lives of millions to legitimate itself by way of myth and metaphor while at the same masking suffering” (21). By framing Tipu as a formidable enemy through the historical narratives, the colonialists could define their military campaigns as righteous and beneficial for the people.

The English colonial narratives often depicted Tipu Sultan as a despotic and fanatical ruler, thus showcasing a demonic figure. In his preface, Lewin B Bowring categorizes Haidar’s and Tipu Sultan’s rule as a “sketch of Musalman usurpation”, affirming that Tipu’s rule was marked by “his bigotry, his hostility to the English, and the fatuous obstinacy which cost him his crown and his life” (1). Tipu’s campaigns and policies in Malabar province are chosen as the chief subject for the colonial endeavors. Narratives about Tipu’s actions in Malabar were manipulated by the English writers to serve the colonial objectives. Some of the major objectives of the colonial representations were to denigrate Tipu Sultan as a despotic ruler, to justify the British military expansions, promote the superiority of British governance and to represent the British as the bearer of peace and progress. This study attempts to analyze how these objectives were advanced and nurtured by James Mill and Colonel Wilks in their historical narratives.

### **The Historical Narratives: James Mill and Colonel Wilks**

James Mill was a Scottish historian, political theorist, economist and philosopher. His work, *The History of British India* was criticized by the Indian historians for its colonial approach. As a proponent of British imperialism, he justified the military interventions of the English East India Company in India. By portraying the Indian society as morally degraded, he highlighted the importance of the civilizing mission of the British East India Company. *The History of British India* is published in three volumes, sketching the rule of English East

India Company in India. Published in 1817, Mill, in the text, classified Indian history into three; the Hindu, Muslim and English periods. James Mill admits that he had never been to India and doesn't know any Indian languages. Still, the text is included in the canon of historical studies about India. The text agrees with the Orientalist view that India is a land of backward culture with superstitions and ignorant people. Mill characterizes the Indian society as barbaric, relying solely on archival records and other documentary materials.

Colonel Mark Wilks was a soldier, historian and an administrator in English East India Company. He worked principally in Mysore as the acting Resident at the Wodeyar Court. In his text *Historical Sketches of the South of India*, Wilks examines the rise of Wodeyar dynasty and denounced the rule of Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan. Wilks draws on state records and his own experiences to write the three volume history of the Kingdom of Mysore between 1810 and 1817. It is in the first volume that he details on the emergence and rule of Mysore under Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan.

### **Tipu Sultan as a Cruel Despot**

The British Colonial narratives portrayed Tipu Sultan as a despotic ruler and a religious tyrant. He and his father, Haidar Ali are depicted as Muslim usurpers, emphasizing their cruelty against the Wodeyar dynasty. The image of a cruel despot helped the English East India Company to justify their military campaigns against the Kingdom of Mysore. James Mill and Colonel Wilks portray Tipu Sultan as a ruler of extreme cruelty, oppression and violent in nature. Their texts narrate incidents and events that occurred in Malabar to prove how Tipu Sultan used violence and fear to control the people of Malabar and subdue the offenders against his policies. Creating an image of a tyrant who was universally feared and despised, Mill and Wilks succeed in categorizing Tipu Sultan as a ruler who lacks justice, fairness and governance associated with civilization. This portrayal enabled the English



officers to justify the British rule as a means of protecting the native people from the oppressive ruler, Tipu Sultan.

The portrayal of Tipu Sultan as recorded by James Mill and Colonel Wilks aligns with the Orientalist framework which characterized the Indian rulers as despotic, irrational and incapable of proper governance. In his descriptions about Tipu's campaigns, Mill uses the words like 'merciless' and 'sanguinary' to denote the brutality of his actions. James Mill portrays Tipu as "one of those unhappy tyrants, whose character is formed by the union of pride and cruelty with enthusiasm and ambition" (482) whereas Colonel Mark Wilks records his military tactics thus, "He conducted his campaigns with a spirit of unrelenting hostility, characterized by rapacity and devastation" (36).

Tipu's military campaigns and his administrative policies in Malabar are criticized and opposed vehemently by both James Mill and Mark Wilks. The campaigns in Malabar and Travancore are viewed as being devoid of any legitimate purpose other than subjugation and devastation of the local communities. The historical writers, Mill and Wilks stresses the sufferings of the people with a detailed description of plunder and atrocities, allegedly committed by his forces. Mill writes, "The barbarities exercised upon the Nairs were too horrid to be described" (493) and "He carried on the work of devastation in a manner so remorseless as to fill the whole country with horror and despair" (494). According to Wilks, "His operations in the conquest of Malabar, as in every other case were stained with blood, and marked by rapine and cruelty" (132)

One of the major characteristics that Mill shows as an example to Tipu's religious intolerance and cruelty is the description of the forced religious conversions. Both Mill and Wilks assert in their historiography that Tipu Sultan was engaged in forced conversions of non-Muslims, especially Hindus and Christians in Malabar. According to them, Tipu wanted

to impose Islam as the one and only religion in his Kingdom. Mill states, “With a bigotry which exceeded even the measure of his father, he endeavored to spread the religion of Muhammed by the sword” (489). Wilks describes Tipu’s religious zeal as “an ardent zeal to spread the faith of Islam marked his actions, and his policies included forced conversions and the persecution of non-Muslims” (147).

James Mill considered Tipu as a cruel and a despotic ruler whose death or destruction was necessary for the prosperity of India. He remarks on Tipu as “A scourge to mankind...the fall of Tippoo was regarded as an event most propitious to the tranquility and happiness of India” (507). The accounts and records by James Mill and Colonel Wilks criticize Tipu for his perceived cruelty and intolerance which enabled the English East India Company to legitimize its actions against Tipu Sultan and his Kingdom.

### **The British as the Civilizer**

Tipu Sultan was often portrayed as a serious threat to the peaceful campaigns of the British. The British officers, especially the soldiers of English East India Company are often portrayed as ‘men of peace’. Their attempts to bring peace and prosperity to the native people are contrasted with Tipu’s aggressive policies. Tipu’s alliance with the British rivals, the French and his military techniques are criticized and ridiculed. Tipu’s attempts to create alliances with the Ottoman Empire and other foreign powers are exemplified as Tipu’s aggressive actions to expel the British from India. Tipu’s conflicts with the neighboring states are narrated to paint Tipu’s violent nature. His campaigns in Malabar, his fights with the Marathas and Nizam of Hyderabad are illustrated as aggressive expansions while British military campaigns were rendered as defensive measures.

The major narrative design of Mill and Wilks was to justify and legitimize the British military interventions. As Malabar was a strategic location to both Tipu Sultan and the

English East India Company, the English writers framed the British wars as a necessary effort to bring peace and order in Malabar province. The authors competed to delineate the Company's endeavors as noble and beneficial to India and England. India was often depicted as a dark land; a land of savage races, necessitating the intervention of Englishmen. Authors portrayed the English East India Company as a civilizing and guiding force, bringing order and progress to a backward and chaotic Indian society. James Mill justifies the British expansion against Tipu," The British Government, which had been the object of his unceasing hostility, found it necessary to reduce him to a situation in which his mischievous power could no longer be dangerous" (500). Such portrayal benefitted East India Company's imperialistic ventures as a benevolent mission to uplift the indigenous population. Colonel Wilks asserts the importance to subdue Tipu Sultan by stating that "Tipu's insatiable ambition and perpetual intrigues left the British with no choice but to contain his power" (158).

## **Conclusion**

The English East India Company orchestrated historical narratives to legitimize their invasions and rule in the foreign lands. The narratives, thus produced, were regarded as reliable guides to understand the indigenous population. Imperialism represented dispossession and displacement for the natives. But, the historical texts and colonial narratives often masked this reality of the conquests perpetrated by the East India Company. The deaths, starvations, transportations, epidemics and the brutal humiliation of the colonized were camouflaged and cloaked under the terms of progress and expansion. The English claim that it was their moral responsibility to protect Malabar and its people from Tipu's perceived tyranny was highlighted in the narratives to identify themselves as the savior of the colonized. The portrayal of Tipu as a cruel ruler emphasized the region's need for British rule and reform.

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