



The Thangal Kings of Malabar: A Study of Sayyid Fazal Mouladdavila and Sayyid Husain Shihabuddin as influential leaders in nineteenth century Malabar

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Abstract:

In the 19 century AD, Malabar became a center of anti-colonial resistance involving *Sayyid* figures such as Sayyid Fazal Mouladdavila and Sayyid Husain Shihabuddin, who served as both religious and political leaders. Rooted in the tradition of the *Hadrami* diaspora, they combined spiritual authority and militant activism to mobilize resistance against British colonialism. The research method used by the author is the historical method, which is divided into four stages: source collection, criticism, interpretation, and historiography. This research also analyzes colonial correspondence, British administrative reports, and local archives to reveal the role of the Sayyids in resisting colonialism, the influence of *Sufi* networks, and religious legitimacy among marginalized communities. The findings show how *Sayyid* figures navigated religious, social, and political landscapes to challenge both colonial authorities and local feudal elites. Sayyid Fazal and Sayyid Husain were not only respected spiritual leaders but also central actors in organizing sustained resistance. Their integration into local society through kinship ties and religious leadership provided grassroots support and political credibility. Their activism represents a unique model of Islamic *anti-colonial* leadership that operated through theological discourse and strategic community engagement, offering a more nuanced understanding of Muslim resistance in South Asia.

Keywords: *Mappila* Muslims, Malabar, Sayyids in Malabar, Shihabuddin Family

INTRODUCTION

Malabar is a region that is culturally and geographically distinct on the southwest coast of India. The Malabar region has long been a center of *Arab-Muslim* interaction, particularly with the *Sayyid Hadrami*.¹ In this Malabar region, there are two figures who are very influential in social, religious, and political spheres, namely Sayyid Fazal and Sayyid Hussain. They not only hold religious authority but also act as political leaders and social reformers. Their influence stems from spiritual charisma, genealogical prestige as descendants of the Prophet, and deep involvement with the local community through religious institutions and kinship networks.²

These two leaders played a major role in mobilizing the *Mappila Muslim* community to resist the British forces and collaborating elites. They transformed religious authority into a powerful grassroots resistance force. Their legacy continues to shape communal memory and religio-political identity in Kerala. The Sayyids of Malabar were central to the anti-colonial movement, combining religious legitimacy with political activism. This case contributes to

¹ R. H Hitchcock, *A History of the Malabar Rebellion 1921* (Usha Publications, 1921), 72.

² Khalidi Omar, "Sayyids of Hadharmout in Early Modern India," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 32, no. 3 (2004): 186, https://brill.com/view/journals/ajss/32/3/article-p329_3.xml.

broader discussions about Islamic leadership, resistance, and transoceanic networks in South Asia.³

In previous studies written by others, there have been several writings related to Malabar, one of which is the work by Sharafuddin K.V titled *History Of Religious Organisations And Ideological Conflicts Among The Muslims Of Malabar From 1921-1989* M. This study discusses the development of Muslim religious organizations in Malabar (Kerala, India), the socio-political historical background of Malabar (1921-1989), ideological conflicts among Malabar Muslims, the influence of major events, social and cultural impacts. The second writing is by Thaniya Kaliyanthil Leela titled *Goddesses of North Malabar: An Anthropological Study on Kinship and Ritual in North Malabar*. This writing explores the relationship between kinship and the *theyyam* worship ritual in the North Malabar region of Kerala, India. Personal identity is the *theravada*, and the *theravada* is the place for *theyyam* roles (and other privileges). *Theyyam* is a socio-religious ritual in which mythological, divine, ancestral, animal, serpent, or heroic figures are represented, each with different physical forms and origin stories.

Looking at these two previous studies, the article that the author writes is not the same as previous research because although both discuss Malabar, the author emphasizes the two *Sayyid* figures in their role fighting colonialism in the Malabar region.

This article aims to explore the political and spiritual leadership of two prominent *Sayyid* figures in Malabar in the nineteenth century, namely Sayyid Fazal Mouladdavila and Sayyid Hussain Shihabuddin, in the broader context of anti-colonial resistance and Islamic leadership. Research on the Sayyids in Malabar is unique and interesting because they played a role in resisting and expelling colonialism. Therefore, the author is interested in publishing it to the general public so that many people know that the *Sayyid* community also contributed to fighting colonialism in the Malabar region.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative historical research approach, focusing on the political and spiritual leadership of Sayyid Fazal Mouladdavila and Sayyid Hussain Shihabuddin in nineteenth-century Malabar. The research methodology combines historical analysis with socio-anthropological perspectives in order to examine their influence on religious authority, anti-colonial resistance, and community mobilization.

Design the study is designed as a historical-analytical inquiry. It traces primary and secondary sources to reconstruct the socio-political context of nineteenth-century Malabar, emphasizing the role of the Sayyids as leaders who bridged religious legitimacy and political activism. Primary Sources, archival records, colonial administrative reports, court proceedings, petitions, and missionary accounts from the nineteenth century. Local Malayalam and Arabic manuscripts, letters, and religious tracts authored by or related to the Sayyids were also considered. While the secondary Sources, scholarly works, books, journal articles, and dissertations focusing on Malabar history, *Mappila* uprisings, Islamic leadership, and transoceanic *Hadrami* networks. Special reference was made to previous studies such as Sharafuddin K. V. *History of Religious Organisations and Ideological Conflicts among the*

³ Muhammed Shafi A. K, "Muslim Revivalism: Representation In Malabar During The Colonial Period," *MESMAC International Conferences* (Vashayoor), 2021, 5th ed., 194.

Muslims of Malabar from 1921-1989 M and Thaniya Kaliyanthil Leela's Goddesses of North Malabar: An Anthropological Study on *Kinship* and *Ritual* in North Malabar.

The collection of data was conducted through archival research. Archival was conducted in Kerala state archives, libraries, and private collections of religious institutions. Textual materials were collected through library research, while oral histories and family traditions of local theravada connected to the Sayyids were used to complement documentary evidence.

The analysis of data was carried out using historical-critical methods and contextual interpretation. The historical-critical method was employed to evaluate the reliability, authenticity, and conditions of colonial and indigenous sources. Contextual interpretation was used to situate the Sayyids' leadership within broader frameworks of Islamic reform, *kinship* networks, and anti-colonial resistance. Comparative analysis with other South Asian and *Hadrami Sayyid* leaders was also applied to highlight transoceanic connections.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Sayyids and their trans-local network

The period from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century, during which the travel and dispersal of Sayyids from Hadramawt to various Indian Ocean territories took place, was a crucial historical era that transformed the littorals in many ways. *Hadrami* Sufis and Sayyids, who crisscrossed the Sea as merchants and missionaries, carried their faith and tradition wherever they travelled. As one historian notes, "The history of Hadhrami migrations across the Indian Ocean is something of a fabulous tale, in which secrecy and exaggeration follow one another in quick succession. It is also a grand one: in Africa, India, and the Malay Archipelago, many reports tell of noble descendants of the Prophet being received with reverence, receiving the hands of princesses in marriage, and becoming leaders and rulers of Muslim states."⁴

This authority and widespread acceptance positioned them as esteemed figures, welcomed as honored guests by local rulers and merchants. As ho observes, kings and sultanates across the Indian Ocean littoral sought to demonstrate their adherence to civilized norms, ensuring that their domains were perceived as stable and conducive to commerce. In doing so, they not only legitimized their rule but also projected an image of political maturity, which was essential for fostering trade and diplomatic relations. Few means were more effective in achieving such objectives than appointing a resident Muslim jurist, capable of transforming a grim pirates haven into a new sphere of civilian concourse, one boasting a Friday congregational mosque, a court of Justice, and a school.⁵

The history of these migrations compelled Western writers such as Richard Burton (1856) and Snouck Hurgronje (1906) to describe them with a mixture of awe and resentment. They marveled at the apparent ease with which foreign Hadhrami Sayyids, descendants of the Prophet, entered the ruling echelons of native societies across vastly different regions.⁶

The sayyids ability to connect with people from all walks of life enabled them to build

⁴ Ho Engseng, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (University Of California, 2006), 98.

⁵ Engseng, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean*, 169.

⁶ Zubair K, *Systems of Religious Higher Education: Comparative Study between Kerala and Java Province of Indonesia* (School of Languages Jawaharlal Nehru University Press, 2010), 47.

cooperative and healthy relationships with diverse communities. For many reasons, they came to occupy high positions in the societies where they settled. Two key factors contributed to this. Their Religious sanctity and their exposure to international trading networks, both of which facilitated their ascent to positions of influence. Indeed. Sayyids are often regarded as among the most developed and enterprising groups to have emerged from the Arabian Peninsula.⁷

The Sayyid Authority over Malabar

Among the Arabs, who established sustained trade relations with Malabar due to their geographical proximity and knowledge of the monsoon winds, Yemeni merchants were the earliest and most frequent visitors. They Paved the way for later Islamic missionary activity. The spread of Islam further intensified *Arab* commercial engagement with Malabar, as trade vessels carried not only goods but also religious ideas and missionaries. At a critical historical juncture, these religious figures significantly shaped the region's trajectory by assuming leadership roles in *anti*-colonial resistance movements. Their alignment with exploited peasant communities and marginalized social groups proved instrumental in mobilizing opposition to colonial domination.⁸

The Hadrami Sayyids established themselves as a prominent lineage in Malabar through marital alliances with local women. Their claimed descent from the Prophet Muhammad conferred both religious legitimacy and social authority, reinforced by their recognized *status* among the Muslim faithful. During the sixteenth century, the *Mappila* Muslims came under the leadership of the *ulama*, originally centered in Ponnani, before gradually shifting to Chaliyam and Calicut.⁹ Notable scholarly families-including the Makhdūms of Ponnani, the qāḍīs of Chaliyam and Calicut, the Jufri's of Calicut, the Mouladdawilas of Mampuram, and the Shihābs of Malappuram-emerged as community leaders in successive periods. The Sayyids not only occupied positions as *Sufi* shaykhs and religious authorities but also played pivotal roles in organizing *Mappila Muslim* resistance against colonial powers.¹⁰

Sayyid Presence in Resistance Movements

The religious sanctity enjoyed by Sayyids gradually elevated them to the status of “blessed human” and “notable figures” within their communities. Over time, many assumed greater roles as Sufis, *spiritual* masters, arbitrators, community leaders and social figures of their times. During the colonial period, numerous Sayyids inspired or led their people in *anti*-colonial struggles against British authorities. In many cases, British Police investigation into the roots of an insurgence, rebellion, or outbreak often traced back to a Sayyid living in the region.¹¹

⁷ Omar, “Sayyids of Hadharmout in Early Modern India,” 329.

⁸ Muhammad J. Hasan, dkk, “Arab Accounts of Malabar History: The Early Episodes,” *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology* 8, no. 1 (2020): 165, <https://www.heritageuniversityofkerala.com/JournalPDF/Volume8.1/45.pdf>.

⁹ Sebastian R. Prange, *Monsoon Islam: Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 84.

¹⁰ J Paskhal, “Forgotten Narratives Indigenous Arab Asian Sources Of The Monsoon History In Malabar,” <https://ari.nus.edu.sg/ariscopes/forgotten-narratives-indigenous-arab-asian-sources-of-the-monsoon-history-in-malabar/>

¹¹ C. K Karim, *Kerala Muslim Charithram Sthithi Vivarana Kanakku Directory* (History and Detailed Information of Kerala Muslims, 1991), 71.

Despite strict colonial surveillance of Sayyid families, several members played significant roles in regional resistance movements, including the nineteenth-century *Mappila* uprisings and the 1921 Rebellion. A prominent figure was Kunhikkoya Thangal of Mampuram, a scion of the Bukhari *Sayyid* lineage, who emerged as a leader during the mid-19th century Mappila outbreaks. His collaboration with Athan Kurikkal of Manjeri against colonial authorities led to his arrest and trial on charges of inciting rebellion. Contemporary colonial records, particularly the official reports of H.V. Conolly, then Collector of Malabar, document these events in detail. Thangal's revolutionary activities culminated in his participation in the Manjeri Outbreak, where he met his demise alongside Kurikkal during the confrontation at Angadippuram Temple. In a final act of colonial retribution, his remains were disposed of in a disused well near the site of rebellion.¹²

Several other distinguished members of the Bukhari lineage emerged also as prominent figures, including Kumaramputhur Seethikoya Thangal, Malappuram Kunhikkoya Thangal, Sayyid Konyanhikkoya of Vadakara, and Cherunni Thangal of Konnar. Among these, Sayyid Muhammad Koya Thangal of Konnar occupies a particularly revered position as both a *spiritual* leader and *anti-colonial* activist. Contemporary accounts describe him as "a man of modest stature, clad in white garments and armed with a sword, a courageous and formidable leader." As a master (*shaykh*) of the *Qadiriyya Sufi* order, he maintained an extensive network of disciples throughout the region.

His political engagements were multifaceted: he served as a member of the Indian National Congress (1914-1919), presided over the local Khilafat Committee, and maintained close ties with Variyamkunnath Kunhahammad Haji, the renowned leader of the Malabar Khilafat movement.¹³ Variyamkunnath Kunhahammad Haji and his associates convened with Sayyid Muhammad Koya Thangal at Areacode to mobilize local support for the Khilafat cause. This strategic meeting represented a significant effort to disseminate both the political and religious objectives of the movement among Malabar's Muslim population.¹⁴

They subsequently organized the inaugural Khilafat Conference at Sayyid Muhammad Koya Thangal's residence in Konnar, which drew approximately 2,000 participants. Following, this, he established a Khilafat Court at Konnar, effectively creating a parallel system of governance that directly challenged British colonial authority in the region.¹⁵ A draft petition, believed to be authored by Konnar Thangal and addressed to the Officer Commanding the Troops of Malabar, was later discovered in his possession. It enumerated grievances concerning the conduct of troops, including insults directed at mosques, women and children.¹⁶

In October 1921, *Mappila* forces under the leadership of Sayyid Muhammad Koya Thangal launched an attack on the British military encampment at Poolakkodu, near Calicut. The confrontation took place in the early hours of the morning and resulted in heavy

¹² K. M Bahaudhin, *Kerala Muslimkal: Poraattathinte Charitram (Malayalam: Muslims of Kerala: History of Struggles)* (Islamic Publishing House, 1995), 88.

¹³ Hashim T, "In Search of Identity through Pan-Islamism and the Subsequent Multiple Approaches among the Ulamas of Malabar, Kerala," 2024, 94, <http://muslimheritage.in/innermore/147>.

¹⁴ Tottenham G. R. F, *The Mappila Rebellion 1921-1922* (Government Press, 1992), 68.

¹⁵ Hitchcock, *A History of the Malabar Rebellion 1921*, 126.

¹⁶ Hitchcock, *A History of the Malabar Rebellion 1921*, 136.

casualties among the *Mappila* combatants.¹⁷ In retaliation, the British troops charged at the Jamia Mosque of Konnar, where a number of local Muslims were killed. The Konnara force, led by Thangal and Karath Moideen Kutty Haji, had been camped in the hills of Areacode.

Following the capture of his village, Sayyid Muhammad Koya Thangal relocated to Calicut, recognizing the imminent threat posed by British forces advancing south of the river. His escape, however, proved unsuccessful. Colonial authorities eventually apprehended him, subjected him to judicial proceedings, and executed him by hanging at Coimbatore Central Prison.¹⁸

The Mampuram Thangals: Sayyid Alawi Mouladdavila and His Son Sayyid Fazal Pasha

Born in Tarim of Hadramawt in Yemen, Sayyid Alawi of Mampuram migrated to Malabar in 1768 M to join his maternal uncle Sayyid Hasan Jifri, a noble scholar and religious teacher came from Yemen to Kerala earlier. Traveling widely in Malabar, he propagated Islam and established mosques in prominent places. Being a pious man, he transmitted the light of heart to his followers living closely contact with common men, beyond the limits of caste and religion, and standing in the frontline freedom struggle. Following his uncle, Sayyid Alawi raised his voice against Muhammad Shah of Kondoty, an alleged *Syiah pseudo* Shaikh emigrant from Mumbai who spread strange practices with a liberal view of intoxicants like Hashish.¹⁹

The 19 th century revitalization and regeneration of religion among Mappilas adds to the credit of Sayyid Alawi. “His efforts were mainly addressed to the purification of religious practices and the creation of a sense of solidarity among Muslims. He travelled extensively, delivering religious discourses in different parts of the district where he helped to establish new, and renovate the old, mosques. He stressed the importance of unity and urged strict compliance with the tenets of Islam. His emphasis was on self-purification a Jihad against Nafs-which he considered essential for the development of the community.”²⁰ Being close with Dalits and upper caste people in one, he could become a trusted mediator. As K. M Bahaudhin says “The festival of Kozhikkaliyattom alone refutes the British propaganda that he was a fanatic.” Being a strong advocate of religion, his anti-colonial struggles were colored with religious sentiments. Validating the anti-colonial struggles against British government with verdicts of Jihad and crusade, he could incite common Mappilas into resistance movements. Saiful Bathar Ala Man Yuwalil Kuffar, a collection of religious verdicts made by Sayyid Alawi as an answer to eight questions from Abdullah al Ahdal, was circulated among Mappilas of Malabar. The book emphasizes the inevitability of war on British Empire and a total boycott of their administrative system.²¹

Though not a participant, he was summoned by Collector James Waughan (1816-26) for his alleged support and incitement of public, only to be sent back freely for the “reputation for sanctity and the high estimation which he held in the minds of the Mappilas

¹⁷ K. P Kesavamenon, *Kazhinha Kalam* (Times Past, 2016), 77.

¹⁸ Hitchcock, *A History of the Malabar Rebellion 1921*, 140.

¹⁹ Mohammed Abdul K. K. Sathar, *History of Ba-Alawis in Kerala* (University of Calicut Press, 1999), 41.

²⁰ K. N Panikker, *Against Lord and State: Religion and Peasant Uprising in Malabar 1836-1921* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 63.

²¹ Panikker, *Against Lord and State: Religion and Peasant Uprising in Malabar 1836-1921*, 69.

high and law.”²² The Marthias (elegy) of Umer Khadi, Kunhippari Musliar, Qadi Muhyudhin and Hawwani Veetil Ahmad Koya Musliar make his memories alive in the memories of his followers. Apart from that, the war ballads of Cherur Padappat and Cherur Chinth are composed in memory of his heroic fights in the battle field. Mamburamil Moulid of Kunhippari Musliar, *Manaqib* Sayyid Alawi al Malibar by Umar al Madani of Madina, *Minhathul Qawi fi Manaqib Qutubis* Sayyid al Mamburami (1912, Tirurangadi), *Manaqib* Sayyid Alawi Mamburamiyyah (1884-1885) by Keedakkat Alikkuty Musliar, *Al Nafhat fi Manaqibi* Sayyid Alawi Mouladdawilah (1934-1935 Nurul Huda Press Ponnani) by Qadi Muhyuddin II of Calicut, *Mahdanul Yawaqit* (1899-1990, Mifthahul Huda Press, Tirurangadi) and Sayyid Alawi Qissappat have become a part of rituals among the Mappilas.²³ His shrine was enlarged for visitors in different times and have become a popular pilgrim center both for Hindus and Muslims as Logan says “The shrine has been frequently visited by the *Mappila* fanatics for the purpose of invoking the Barakah of the great Thangal buried there and it is also largely resorted to by other Muhammadans and by Hindus to involve the great Thangal’s aid in many enterprises in which they are interested.”²⁴

The legacy of Mampuram continued by the coming of Sayyid Fadl Pookoya Thangal (Fadal Pasha/Fadl Pasha), the son of Sayyid Alawi, who was a true successor of his father and pedigree of his family. A scholar, fighter and a pious man, brought up in strictly Islamic culture, Sayyid Fadl became a hero among both learned and laymen. The mosque of Mampuram and its pulpit was the venue of his influential Friday sermons which made tremendous impact on socio-political developments of Malabar. The British commission reports that “he sought not only to direct Mappilas towards the practice of orthodox Islam, but also attempted to heighten their awareness of their Islamic identity and increase their independence from the dominant Hindu castes.”²⁵

As an advocate of community and its development, he spoke out for an honorable existence coming out of the clutches of Brahmin-Nair aristocracy and attacked the existing social order in which Nair and landlords enjoyed unlimited power at the expense of Dalits and Dalit converts to Islam. Keeping up with the *hadrami* tradition and genealogical sanctity, he devoted himself for the learning and spirituality in Alawi order and Sunni-Shafi’i school of Islamic law. *Uddathul Umara’ wal Hukkam li Ihanathil Kafarah wa Abadathill Asnam*, his master piece work provides us a collection of religious verdicts (Fatwas) made by Arab and Indian scholars against colonial invaders. *Fuyudathul Ilahiyyah* is an exclusive document of Ba Alawi Sayyid family and the sanctity of Prophetic bloodline. His versatile genius is shown by his works such as *Kaukabu Durar* (deals with Sufism), *Fususathul Islam*, *Asasul Islam*, *Hulalul Ehsan Fee Thasyeenul Insane*, *Thaqwiyathul Bathana*, *Al Qoulul Mukhthar*, *Risalathul Muslim Ila Habir lee Edrakul Gabir*, *Ish’aful Shafeeque*, *Athareekul Hanafiyy and Edhar Ul Asrar*.²⁶

Sayyid Fadl who stood intolerant against colonial masters was sometimes depicted as a

²² F Fawcett, *Nayars Of Malabar* (Madras, 1901), 91.

²³ Muhammad Abdul Sathar, *Mappila Leader in Exile: A Political Biography of Syed Fadl Thangal* (Other Books, 2012), 78.

²⁴ Sathar, *Mappila Leader in Exile: A Political Biography of Syed Fadl Thangal*, 80.

²⁵ Anne K Bang, *Sufis and Scholars of the Sea Family Networks in East Africa 1860-1925* (RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 80.

²⁶ Karim, *Kerala Muslim Charithram Sthithi Vivarana Kanakku Directory*, 247.

Wahabi because of his furious and fierce speeches, spreading hatred towards invaders among the public in general and the Muslim community in particular. His linkage with global scholarly networks is interpreted in a pan-Islamic view by a few, but he says that “we have little evidence for his actual support of Pan-Islamic doctrine and his writings gives nothing related to it. He makes it clear that it would be wrong to interpret the relationship of Fadl Pasha with Ibn Sumayt as one of an official pan-Islamist receiving a young, unknown distantly related Arab dignitary resident in Zanzibar. Rather the relationship is best understood as one of master student within the framework of the *Tariqah Alawiyyah*.²⁷

The spiritual and social status inherited from his father enabled him to mobilize the *Mappila* youth into outbreaks against landlords who supported the British government, usually culminated in suicidal attack of Mujahids. Though for a small period, he became the axis of *Mappila* outbreaks between 1836 and 1852 in the Malabar province. The *Mappila* outbreaks were uprisings by working class, reacting against the economic and social hegemony of rich elite class and castes supported by British government. Sayyid Fadl could organize poor tenants, landless laborers and petty merchants exploited by Zemindars or Jenmis. They raised the banner of revolt against the government, calling upon their co-religionists to join them in protecting the interests of the community which, according to them, were not safe under the British.²⁸

The agitation was fueled by persecution policies of government enhancing of rent, eviction of people and renewal of fee. All these were in support of government to the upper castes interest in social and economic fields in the expense of Mappilas. The *Manjeri* uprising of 1849, *Kolathur* revolt of 1851 and *Matannur* revolt of 1852 are some major events in this regard. Though not directly, Sayyid Fadl was responsible for his contemporary outrages as believed by Collector Connolly who investigated the cases. *Manjeri* uprising was led by Athankurikkal, a close disciple of Sayyid Fadl and possessor of weapons bearing a seal of the later. The alleged visit of rebels of *Mattannur* uprising to Mampuram was enough for government to prosecute him in the incident.²⁹

The Strange commission Report in 1852, emphasizes religious causes regardless of agrarian discontent and nationalist sentiments stating “The *Mappila* fanaticism was fostered by selfish, ignorant and vicious priesthood.” The deportation of Sayyid Fadl after the Strange Report was actually a plot prepared and carried out by Collector Conolly who found threat in the presence of Fadl Thangal. Leaving Malabar in tears, Sayyid Fadl took the boat from Parapanangadi in the presence of eight thousand followers who bade farewell to their trailblazing leader on March 19, 1852.³⁰

The sun set in Malabar only to rise up in Hijaz. Starting his abroad life at Taif from which he made visits to Constantinople and later entered Egypt where he received a royal reception by Abbas Pasha, the Ottoman governor, and was given a special grant. In Jeddah, his activities were sketched by British administrators for his alleged links with 1858 riots in which 22 people were killed. His life in Egypt made him able to join Pan-Islamist Jamaluddin

²⁷ Bang, *Sufis and Scholars of the Sea Family Networks in East Africa 1860-1925*, 88.

²⁸ Sathar, *Mappila Leader in Exile: A Political Biography of Syed Fadl Thangal*, 69.

²⁹ Panikker, *Against Lord and State: Religion and Peasant Uprising in Malabar 1836-1921*, 89.

³⁰ Sathar, *History of Ba-Alawis in Kerala*, 76.

Afghani.³¹ After shuttling between Hijaz and Istanbul, he could win the trust of Ottoman Sultan Abdul Aziz who was impressed with Fadl's caliber, but soon Fadl set out for Dhufar along with his son Sahl Pasha in 1875 when some dignitaries invited him to hold Amirate. They ruled the Amirate for four years successfully arbitrating between disputed tribal fronts, introducing several development projects and social welfare schemes which even impressed the British authorities. In 1879, he had to retreat to Muqallah near Hadramawt due to the invasions of Sayyid Turki combined with some rebel tribes. This setback fall only helped him to receive a much coveted call from the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II who was informed of his administrative legacy and creativity. To meet the expectations of Caliph, Sayyid Fadl practiced his skills and innovative ideas as a minister in Ottoman cabinet. *Proposal* for Hijaz rail road and Makkah-Jeddah rail road are some of his notable ideas added to his reputation as an administrator.³² By this, he became one among four trusted advisors of Caliph and was put in charge of Foreign Relations with South Arabia and India. The other three were, firstly Muhammad Zafir bin Muhammad al Madani al Tarabulsi (in charge of communitarian projects in Northern Africa and Egypt, secondly, Ahmad As'ad (in charge of relations with Haramayn) and thirdly Abdul Huda al Sayadi (in charge of Arab lands).³³

Despite holding high positions in different Ottoman territories, Fadl Pasha had a keen interest to return to his homeland, an exclusive character of every Hadrami in Mehjer. He kept requesting Sultan Abdul Hamid to persuade British authorities, especially the ambassador of Porte, to facilitate his way back to Malabar. He frequently interacted with pilgrims from Malabar in Makkah for which the British planned to remove him out of Arabian coast where they could keep an eye on him. He interacted with more than two thousand Mappilas who visited him seeking *Barakah* and his blessings. Dale mentions "He was, of course, no longer present to bless would-be martyrs, an important aspect in many incidents. But in the 1849 outbreak that *ritual* was performed by Kunhikoya thangal a disciple of Sayyid Fadl and it is probable that by 1852 the Sayyid had attracted a considerable following who became custodian of his doctrines which perhaps continuing to be influenced by him."³⁴

In spite of making several attempts for a return to home, he could not achieve it because of British vigilance and alert administrative network around him till his death. Sathar says 'The exile could make nothing with Sayyid Fadl except it made him grow up from a local leader into an internationally significant figure and widen the sphere of his socio-political positions against colonial invasion and crusade objectives. Neither the deportation of Fadl weakened his fight against British Empire nor the *Mappila* outbreaks at home; instead, it paved way to unprecedented outrages in inlands and finally culminated in the murder of Conolly, the collector of Malabar and master brain behind the deportation.³⁵

The character of Sayyid Fadl has been estimated in many ways by the indigenous and

³¹ Bahaudhin, *Kerala Muslimkal: Poraattathinte Charitram (Malayalam: Muslims of Kerala: History of Struggles)*, 84.

³² Stanford J. Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey: Volume II, Reform, Revolution, and Republic, the Rise of Modern Turkey 1808-1975* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 77.

³³ Bang, *Sufis and Scholars of the Sea Family Networks in East Africa 1860-1925*, 85.

³⁴ Michael Christopher Low, *The Mechanics of Mecca: The Technopolities of The Late Ottoman Hijaz And the Colonial Hajj* (Columbia University Press, 2015), 69.

³⁵ Sathar, *Mappila Leader in Exile: A Political Biography of Syed Fadl Thangal*, 120.

colonial historians. At first, he was a great scholar, firebrand orator and an inciting commander. His solid stand against landlords and British officers gained him popularity among *Mappila* who celebrated him as a nationalist hero and a spiritual saint in one. His close links with the agrarian society of Malabar came to be his powerful tool to mobilize them towards his mission. Besides, the purity of blood and the sanctity of genealogy won him the champion of Mappilas of Malabar. Considering his life in exile in Hejaz, Egypt and Istanbul, bang estimates his activities in a different way “it is possible to view as one of the several ambitious, enterprising individuals who, in the unsettled political climate of late nineteenth century Arabia, sought to carve out territory between the powers of the Ottoman Empire, the Imamate of Yemen, the Bu Sa’idis of Muscat and British naval interests. In this light, his pan-Islamism was opportunistic, at best. Second, it could be considered as a part of his anti-colonial attitude formed because of his experience in British India. Thus, his pan-Islamism, Ottoman commitments and self-led political moves can be viewed nothing other than his attempt to survive safely with political positions.”³⁶

Considering his exposure with totally different people, he adds that his outlook was broad, and his network transcended both genealogical and ethnic boundaries. It is clear that he used a bi-polar (against British and landlords) struggles for a mixed interest of religion, agrarian and patriotic aims. His Pan-Islamic face was purely a British creation as bang says “Among his writings we find nothing to even hint in that direction”. Breathing his last in 1900, though not a conclusive opinion regarding the date, he was buried near the grave of Sultan Muhammad Khan. The funeral was attended by Sultan Abdul Hamid II and a huge number of officials, elites, commons and scholars.³⁷

The zeal of Mappilas towards Sayyid cult and their respect towards its charisma could be found in their attempts to restore Mampuram Sayyids, the descendants of Sayyid Fadl who was exiled in 1852. The post 1921 repressive policies of British government made Mappilas think of their past years under Sayyid Fadl. It made them attempting to restore his descendants scattered in Arab countries like Egypt, to their position. The Charismatic Muhammad Abdurahman, leader of Indian National Congress and a notable visionary among Mappilas in the beginning of twentieth century, tried his best to meet some central issues concerning Mappilas like *Mappila* Outrages Act introduced in 19th century, restoration of Sayyid Fadl’s family to Mampuram, rebuilding of Mappila life in post 1921, Andaman Scheme and Wagon Tragedy incident.

He wanted to reverse the *Mappila* minds into their old days with Sayyid Alawi and Sayyid Fadl, and recollect the glorious memories of resistance against British-landlord duo. He also revitalised the sympathy towards Sayyid Fadl and the British injustice towards him. The very presence of his descendants in Malabar was thought as a source of inspiration for Mappilas to get together against the British government. During his pilgrimage in Makkah, Abdurahman met with Sayyid Ali, one of the descendants of Sayyid Fadl, and promised him all cooperation to let him back to Home. Coming back to Malabar, Abdurahman started to realise his plans through Mampuram Restoration Committee by early 1930s. Sayyid Ali found this a golden opportunity to return home and reclaim their ancestral properties including Mampuram Maqam and its endowments owned unlawfully by distant relatives,

³⁶ Bang, *Sufis and Scholars of the Sea Family Networks in East Africa 1860-1925*, 87.

³⁷ Bang, *Sufis and Scholars of the Sea Family Networks in East Africa 1860-1925*, 90.

who ironically took pro-British policies and held high positions with the government as Khan Bahadurs. Sathar says “This act may appear stranger than fiction, if we consider what Attakoya did after riot. When the Rebellion was over, and peace and tranquillity returned, “Attakoya” began to work out his plan. The head of the document, “The Mukhtiar of Mampuram Tarammal Syed Fazl Pookoya Thangal” was changed to “Puthia Maliyekkal Janmam”. Attakoya then renewed the Kanam Adharam (title deed) and the old Kachits (documents) were destroyed.³⁸

On 16 th January 1933, a public meeting was held at Town Hall, Calicut, in the presiding of E. Moidu Moulavi, the scholar and patriot. Muhammad Abdurahman detailed the meeting with the condition of descendants of Sayyid Fadl and enhanced the need for their return to the homeland. His comments were welcomed by the participants who formed Mampuram Restoration Committee with Pookoya Thangal of Koilandi as President. The Committee preferred scientific steps like circulation of booklets and writings rather than organising agitations against government in public. Along with this, public meetings were organised to convince common people the core of the problem. Abdurahman’s efforts bore fruition that the people came to be conscious of the legacy of Mampuram Sayyids and their leadership, and misdeeds of Colonial authorities towards the family in one. The people realised the British lenience towards Khan Bahadur Attakoya Thangal who sided with them and unlawfully captured the Mampuram properties with their support. In fact, for Muhammad Abdurahman, the Mampuram restoration was a double edged sword, one against British government and the other against his political enemy Khan Bahadur Attakoya Thangal who defeated him in 1936 Election to the vice president of Malabar District Board.³⁹

Owing to the longstanding struggles of MRC (Mampuram Restoration Committee), Sayyid Ali could travel to India through Ceylon. He reached by train from Madras to Calicut and sought for permission to stay in. unfortunately, the Home Department denied it, and under the report of the Malabar authority that “The Thangalship of Mampuram Mosque is still the cause of a good deal of subterranean intrigue among the Mappilas of Malabar”, he was ordered to return to Ceylon. Thanks to a series of legal and diplomatic procedures made by Abdurahman and supported by British officials in Malabar who maintained friendship with him, and French officials in Mahe, Sayyid Ali could stay in Malabar for almost 9 months after which he left for Egypt in 1934.⁴⁰

The presence of the Thangals or Sayyids proved instrumental in mobilizing the Mappila community during *anti*-colonial resistance movements in nineteenth-century Malabar. As spiritual and political leaders, figures such as Sayyid Fadl Pookoya Thangal and Husain Shihabuddin Attakoya Thangal epitomized the critical role of the Sayyid elite in consolidating dissent against colonial authority. Their influence extended beyond religious leadership, facilitating organized resistance by uniting local grievances under a collective anti-imperial struggle. Further research into regional networks of Sayyid leadership could yield deeper insights into their role in structuring *anti*-colonial solidarity across South Asia.⁴¹

³⁸ Sathar, *Mappila Leader in Exile: A Political Biography of Syed Fadl Thangal*, 133.

³⁹ Hussain Randathani, “MP. Narayana Menon: Malabar Leader of the Congress and the Khilafat,” *Ishal Paithrkam* 02, no. 27 (2021): 128, <http://ojs.ishalpaithrkam.info/index.php/ishal/article/view/486>.

⁴⁰ Abid T. Zainul, *Sufi-Scholarly Impact of Hadrami Sayyids in Malabar* (Routledge, 2024), 76.

⁴¹ Shafi A. K, “Muslim Revivalism: Representation In Malabar During The Colonial Period,” 126.

Shihabuddin Family and Sayyid Husain Shihabuddin of Malappuram

The Shihabuddin family, named after its eponymous ancestor Sayyid Shihabuddin who lived in 13 th-century Hadramawt, arrived to Malabar in 1767 M. Through his marriage to a princess from the only Muslim royal family of the Malabar coast, Sayyid Hussain, son of Sayyid Ali Shihabuddin Hadrami, reaffirmed the family's position at the top of Malabar's social hierarchy.

The relocation of the Shihab family from Calicut, then a thriving port city, seat of the zamorin, and a cosmopolitan hub of maritime trade, to the inland region of Malappuram has often been seen as a reflection of their outlook and commitment toward the grassroots of society. Malappuram (literally, "over the hill"), lay southeast of Calicut and was home primarily to agrarian communities working on the estates of landlords, (Zemindars). The reasons behind the family's decision to leave Calicut, where they were highly respected and where, the Grand Qadi resided, remain unknown. However, their followers maintain that the Shihabs voluntarily set aside worldly prestige to live among common people, echoing the tradition of their Hadrami forebears who engaged with local communities across the Indian Ocean world.⁴²

The family's main residence in Malappuram is in Panakkad, with their ancestral home known as Kodappanakkal. The name Panakkad is thought to derive from Pana or panar a large scheduled caste community in Kerala and Kadu, meaning "forest". Thus, Panakkad likely means "the forest of the Panas", who were traditionally craftsmen skilled in producing hats, baskets, boxes, and garlands from palm leaves. Interestingly, Kodappanakkal itself means "the site of palm trees".

Since the family's settlement, Panakkad has become one of the most recognized and celebrated names in the religious and political discourse of Kerala's *Mappila* muslim. The informal title. "Panakkad Thangal" come to denote the highest authority among the Mappila community. Referring to the eldest male member of the family in each generation.⁴³

The first Shihab to rise to the position of Panakkad Thangal was Husain Shihabudhin Attakkoya Thangal (1824-1885). He was arrested by the British for his role in anti-colonial activities and died in prison. His grave is preserved at the Vellur Juma Masjid in Tamil nadu. After him, the Position passed to his son Koyanhikkoya Thangal and later to Ali Pookoya Thangal, and others in succession.⁴⁴

It is estimated that the transfer of Sayyid Mihdar from Calicut to Malappuram took place in the middle of 19 th century. He resided near the Malappuram Juma Masjid, where his tomb is still preserved. Mihdar's marriage to Fathima, a daughter of the Bukhari family of Malappuram, united the Shihabudhin and Bukhari Qabilas. Mihdar's son, Sayyid Husain Shihabudhin Attakkoya Thangal, established their first residence at Panakkad-Konnathoduka Veedu.

According to legend, the land was gifted by a wealthy Hindu from the Olakara family in gratitude for Husain's miraculous healing. While there are no primary source to confirm this story, it closely resembles the case of Sayyid Cemal Sultan and Haji Bektas Veli

⁴² Linda Boxberger, *On the Edge of Empire: Hadharmawt, Emigration and the Indian Ocean 1880-1930* (State University of New York, 2002), 39–40.

⁴³ Najeeb Moulavi, *Sayyid Shihab 1936-2009* (Middle East Chandrika, 2010), 80.

⁴⁴ Moulavi, *Sayyid Shihab 1936-2009*, 85.

described by Tee.

Sayyid Husain, a prominent scholar, Sufi, and *anti*-colonial fighter, soon attracted many people to his new home. Which was crowded by visitors for various reasons. Later on, the home slowly became an axis of *Mappila* life in the region. Muslims and non-Muslims visited him for seeking his blessings, healing, settlement of disputes and inviting him to their special occasions. Panakkad thus transformed into a point of hope, source of solace, capital of commons and pilgrim center of poor. We have a good number of secondary sources illustrating the personal charisma of Husain Shihab attracting people from all around. We find a number of Sufi miracles reported in his hagiographies and *Manaqib* which shows at least the position he held in the minds of his followers and people around him.⁴⁵

The influence of Shihabuddin family in nineteenth century Malabar can be traced through Logan's correspondence with the Government of Madras. He writes:

"Some time in December a priest of the Ponani faction of an Arab family, influentially connected and settled for some time in Malabar, by name Panakat Atta Koya Thangal, came to Areacode on the Beypore River in Iruvetti amsam."

Logan further highlights Thangal's position among *Mappilla* believers, who "take his hands" once in their lives and regard it as the greatest fortune and blessing they could achieve. Although Logan notes that this "hand-taking ceremony included nothing else beyond what he explained in detail, and it would be, and doubtless is, as a rule, a very harmless ceremony", the British feared its power to attract people and mobilising them for political purposes.⁴⁶

Logan continues, describing circumstances that, in his view, link Sayyid Husain's influence to Kolakkadan Kutti Assan and his followers:

"I would have hesitated to have arrested the Thangal merely on the fact which he admits, that No. 2 took his hand...but there are other circumstances, as will be seen presently, making it almost certain that there was some secret understanding between them."

He also recalls the incidents surrounding Sayyid Fazal, which led to his exile in early 1852, as further evidence of the sayyid's societal impact and their close ties with the *Mappila* community:

"I am convinced that if he had been allowed to go at large, and if we had accepted his excuses, we should have run a great risk of having other outrages to deal with at an early date, and possibly the Thangal's following might have increased with increasing outrages until, as in Said Fazl's case in 1852, perhaps even 10.000 to 12.000 man, great numbers of them armed, might have assembled on a report that their Thangal was in danger. As it was, some 200 to 300 people assembled when he was brought in, and some artifice had to be used to get him away quietly".

Logan concludes: "I feel sure that some influence of this kind was also at work in the outrage which occurred in 1878, for the wounded fanatic mentioned a Thangal's name, and his visit to Paral seems to have been contemporaneous with the formation of the design to go out".

The *Maqams* (tombs) and burial places of Sayyids were widely revered by locals. On special occasions, people visited these tombs and performed special prayers in the "presence"

⁴⁵ M. N Govindan Nair, *Panakkad Thangal Smaraka Grandham* (Chandrika Daily, 1977), 253.

⁴⁶ William Logan, *Malabar Manual* (Government Press, 1887), 162.

of the blessed man buried there. In the “Kandasseri Raman incident”, Logan provides a narration of a long journey undertaken by the suspects from areacode to Malappuram. They started from Areacode in a boat hired from a boat owner, P. Kuttussa, allegedly for this purpose. According to Logan, the gang started from Perinkadavu in the Urugattiri *amsam* and travelled down the river, eventually reaching Beypore, where they spent one night.

From Beypore, their route continued upstream towards Mambram and Malappuram. One branch of the Malappuram River joins the sea at Kadalhondy, about three miles south of Beypore, the other branch flows parallel to the coastline for a few miles and then joins the Beypore River immediately to the east of the Terminal Railway Station. During this journey, “four of the gang, including No. 2, went by land to the Taramal Thangal’s tomb at the Mambram Mosque, and paid their vows at the tomb.” Logan further notes that “this tomb is that of the Thangal whose evil influence led to the outrages which took place around 1840-1843, and in the outrages which subsequently took place before Said Fazl, the Taramal Thangal’s son, left the country, it was customary for intending fanatics to come to this tomb, it is said, to have their arms blessed and to receive the blessing of Said Fazl.”⁴⁷

The following statement reveals that it was not only Muslims but also Hindus of the region who venerated the tomb. This suggests that the tomb was no longer regarded merely as a site of fanaticism or religious rivalry, but rather as a sacred place where anyone regardless of intentions, good or bad could visit and pray for their respective purposes.

“The tomb is largely resorted to not merely by Mappillas, but by Hindus of all sorts, who have vows which they wish to make before the shrine. These vows are, of course, in most cases kept secret, and, as a rule, they are perfectly innocent, being connected with recovery from sickness, with prayers for good crops, & c., & c. The door of the shrine, or in some cases only a window of the building, is thrown open, some passages from the Koran are recited by an attendant, the devotee makes his vow, offers up his prayers if a Mussalman, deposits an offering of coin in the lamp or in a box kept for the purpose, and retires after distributing alms to the beggars hanging about.”

Since the tomb was frequently visited by locals, the prejudiced British authorities “arranged with the custodian of the tomb to have a list kept of all visitors who come there in future to offer up vows.”⁴⁸

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the arrest of Sayyid Husain Shihab in 1885 created a vacuum of leadership in Malabar. The tragic events of the 1921 Rebellion are often viewed as an outcome of this absence of strong leadership. It is clear that the Rebellion not only failed to achieve its goal but also plunged the community into a crisis in every respects. Despite having powerful slogans such as “Khilafat” and “non-cooperation”, and despite the presence of national leaders like Gandhi and Shoukathali, the rebellion in some parts derailed, into communal clashes and destructive acts. It thus failed, at least partially, to take advantage of the positive forces surrounding it.

CONCLUSION

The lives and legacies of Sayyid Fazal Mouladdavila and Sayyid Hussain Shihabuddin illustrate the critical role played by *Hadrami* Sayyids in the socio-political and spiritual

⁴⁷ Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 164–67.

⁴⁸ Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 170.

history of nineteenth-century Malabar. Rooted in the larger *Hadrami* diaspora across the Indian Ocean, these *Sayyid* leaders emerged not merely as religious scholars and *Sufi* masters but as pivotal figures who galvanized popular resistance against colonial rule. Drawing upon colonial records and archival evidence, this study has shown how their spiritual authority and genealogical prestige were strategically employed to challenge both British power and entrenched landlordism.

Their ability to forge grassroots coalitions with marginalized peasant communities, while simultaneously asserting moral legitimacy through religious discourse, enabled them to serve as both spiritual leaders and political catalysts. Sayyid Fazal's fiery sermons and mobilization of the dispossessed, as well as Sayyid Hussain's charismatic leadership and symbolic presence at Panakkad, underscore how religious devotion was inseparable from political activism in the colonial context. British colonial correspondence documenting mass gatherings, ritual oaths, and underground networks further demonstrates the real and perceived threat these *Sayyid* figures posed to imperial authority.

In addressing both the religious and material dimensions of anti-colonial resistance, this article places the Malabar Sayyids at the intersection of faith, politics, and identity formation. Their leadership represents a form of indigenous agency deeply embedded in the local landscape, yet shaped by transoceanic connections and prophetic lineage. The case of these *Sayyid* leaders thus offers a compelling counter-narrative to dominant colonial historiographies and invites further comparative study of diasporic *Muslim* leadership in other parts of the Indian Ocean world. Their enduring legacy in Malabar's historical memory affirms the powerful synthesis of spiritual legitimacy and social justice at the heart of popular resistance.

This study contributes to broader historiographical discussions on Islamic leadership in South Asia by situating the Malabar Sayyids within the larger framework of *Muslim* resistance to colonialism. Their legacy challenges reductive narratives that either overemphasize religious orthodoxy or understate the political dimensions of Islamic leadership in the region. Future research could further explore comparative dimensions, examining how other *Sayyid* lineages across the Indian Ocean world similarly navigated colonial encounters. Ultimately, the case of Sayyid Fazal Mouladdavila and Sayyid Hussain Shihabuddin reaffirms the enduring significance of religiously sanctioned leadership in mobilizing anti-imperial movements, while also illuminating the unique socio-political dynamics of nineteenth-century Malabar.

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