



# Wires of Empire: The Role of Telegraphic Communication in the Moplah Rebellion of 1921

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## Abstract

*The Moplah Rebellion (1921–22) in the Malabar region of the Madras Presidency is considered as one of the most significant peasant uprisings in colonial South India. The rebellion has been widely known for its communal and agrarian dimensions, the role of telegraphic communication in its suppression remains underexplored. The present paper examines how the British colonial state utilized the telegraph as an instrument for real time surveillance, rapid troop mobilization, and press censorship. It also highlights how Moplah rebels strategically targeted this infrastructure, exposing its deficiencies. The findings highlight how modern communication networks were central to both imperial power and native rebellions.*

**Keywords:** **moplah rebellion, telegraph, colonial india, madras presidency, surveillance, anti-colonial resistance, malabar**

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## Methodology

This study adopts a historical and descriptive methodology to investigate the role of telegraphic communication during the Moplah Rebellion of 1921 in the Malabar region of colonial India. The research integrates archival analysis, primary source examination, and secondary sources to explore how the British colonial state used the telegraph as a tool of surveillance, command, repression, and crisis management during the uprising.

## Introduction

The Moplahs, also known as Mapillai or Mappila, are a Muslim community primarily concentrated in the Malabar region of northern Kerala, on the southwestern coast of India. These coastal areas, historically part of the Madras Presidency under British colonial rule, it includes areas such as Kozhikode (Calicut), Malappuram, and Palakkad, and has long served as a hub of maritime trade due to its proximity to the Arabian Sea. The Moplahs trace their ancestry to early Arab traders and local Hindu converts, with their presence in the region dating back as early as the 7th century CE, when Arab



merchants established both commercial and religious ties with the Malabar Coast. Over time, the community evolved into a distinct socio-religious group actively involved in trade, agriculture, and small-scale industry.

Historically, the Moplahs are most noted for their anti-colonial resistance, particularly during the British period. They played a significant role in a series of agrarian uprisings, culminating in the Moplah Rebellion of 1921, a major insurrection against British authority and the region's Hindu landlord class (Jenmis). Although the rebellion was initially rooted in agrarian grievances, it soon assumed a communal and anti-imperialist character, prompting severe retaliation from the British government. The Moplahs' historical importance lies in their complex socio-political identity as both a marginalized peasant class and a community shaped by trans regional Islamic networks and global trade connections making them central to debates surrounding nationalism, colonialism, and communal politics in early 20th-century South India.

The rebellion itself broke out in August 1921 in the Malabar district, where the predominantly Muslim Moplah peasantry launched a revolt against British colonial officials and local landlords. Their resistance was driven by a combination of socio-economic injustices, religious mobilization, and the influence of the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movements. The uprising was violently suppressed, leading to the deaths of over 10,000 people and the imposition of martial law. The causes and consequences of the rebellion have been widely studied, less attention has been paid to the infrastructure that enabled rapid colonial response namely, the telegraph. Introduced in India in the 1850s, the telegraph revolutionized British administrative control. During the Moplah Rebellion, it became an essential tool for coordinating troop movements, transmitting intelligence, and controlling the dissemination of information. This paper discusses the role of the telegraph in the Moplah Uprising to demonstrate how technological infrastructure supported imperial power in moments of crisis.

### **The Telegraph in the Madras Presidency**

The telegraph was first introduced in the Madras Presidency in the 1850s, which connected Madras (Chennai) with Calcutta and Bombay. By the early 20th century, the Presidency's network covered major cities, ports, and administrative outposts. Malabar's coastal towns like Calicut (Kozhikode), Tellicherry (Thalassery), and Malappuram were key nodes in this network that served as channels of communication between the provinces of Rebellions and the Presidency capital.

The 1919 Report of the Telegraph Department noted that the Madras Presidency's network spanned approximately 7,500 route miles, with over 200 telegraph offices. Telegraph lines often followed railway routes, and allowed the rapid dispatch of both personnel and messages. Telegraph offices were usually attached to district Collectorates and police stations, the key institutions that were often targeted by the Moplah rebels.

### **Administrative and Legal Command Center**

The Madras Government functioned as the primary provincial authority responsible for administering Malabar during the rebellion. As the violence increased, the coordination of Martial Law was negotiated between the Viceroy's Home Department and Madras based civil authorities. Tamil Nadu officials supported against the use of special tribunals and courts martial, preferring instead to keep civil magistrates in control highlighting both a concern for administrative legitimacy and the challenges of managing a large scale rural uprising, the Madras Government ultimately agreed to a revised Martial Law Ordinance that would legalize military actions and direct punishments during the rebellion. These decisions, communicated almost entirely by telegram, emphasized the extent to which British legal control and repressive action were coordinated through modern communication infrastructure. The telegraphic exchanges between Madras and Delhi became the legal and bureaucratic structure to control uprising.



### **The Outbreak of the Moplah Rebellion**

The immediate spark was the police raid at Tirurangadi in August 1921, which escalated into a widespread uprising. Within hours, district officers such as C. A. Innes, the Collector of Malabar, used the telegraph to alert Madras about attacks on police outposts and local landlords. This triggered a series of urgent orders for troop movements, martial law proclamations, and reinforcements from garrisons in Bangalore, Madras, and even Rangoon. The speed of communication directly shaped the initial counter-insurgency measures.

### **Disruption of Telegraph Lines**

Aware of the strategic value of telegraphic communication, Moplah rebels frequently targeted telegraph lines. Cutting wires delayed the flow of intelligence and troop orders. Reports mention several instances of lines between Kozhikode and Palakkad being cut repeatedly, forcing the British to utilize armed guards to patrol routes and employ mobile repair teams. This reveals the rebels to understand the modern infrastructure is a tool of colonial surveillance and force projection. In some areas, local villagers aided rebels by refusing to assist telegraph repair crews, and disrupting communication channels.

### **Military Coordination and Intelligence Flows**

One of the telegraph's most significant roles was the coordination of military responses. British forces from Madras, Bangalore, and Coimbatore were moved to Malabar within days of receiving telegraphic orders. Additional troops were demanded from Burma and Ceylon when the rebellion escalated. Intelligence gathered by local police was telegraphed daily to Madras, and decisions regarding collective punishments, burning of villages, and internment of suspected rebels were communicated rapidly. Without the telegraph, such coordinated repression would have taken months, relying on couriers and physical dispatches.

### **Escalation and War Communications (August 1921)**

Telegrams from the Viceroy's Home Department captured the crisis's escalation. At Tirurangadi, government forces attempted arrests under the Moplah Outrages Act which had heavy resistance, resulting in British casualties. Rebels attacked post offices and railway stations, forcing detachments like the one at Malappuram into defensive positions. Madras to Delhi telegrams reported mobs of 10,000 capturing British officials, the collapse of civil authority, and extensive sabotage of telegraph and railway lines.

Naval reinforcements were dispatched to Calicut, while Europeans were evacuated. As government telegrams relayed news of looting in Parappanangadi and Tanur, military operations intensified. Columns from Podanur and Shoranur moved out, supported by trains and internal security units. Despite partial restoration of communications in places like Calicut, many areas remained volatile.

### **Collapse of Civil Administration and Military Governance**

British forces advanced, but resistance deepened as rebels attacked relief columns, cutting telegraph wires, and delaying of telegraph, which could reach only after 17 hours. Key roads and bridges around Malappuram and Nilambur were destroyed, leading to the deaths of British officers and planters. By 29 August 1921, a major encounter at Pookottur resulted in 400 rebel casualties and the death of two British soldiers. Railway connectivity to Calicut was improved, but much of South Malabar remained in rebel control. District courts ceased functioning, government offices were destroyed, and many officials fled. Refugees poured into garrison towns, and military columns reached Tirurangadi in early September. The telegraph was crucial in coordinating legal and military directives. A special Ordinance created tribunals with High Court judges, but civil governance remained largely suspended in interior regions.



## Post-Rebellion Surveillance and Bureaucracy (1925–1930)

Even after the active phase of the Moplah Rebellion ended in late 1921, the British administration remained deeply concerned about residual threats and ideological spread. Government Orders (G.Os) from 1925 to 1930 reveal how telegraphic communication and bureaucratic surveillance continued to manage Mappila prisoners and their families:

- **Denied Return and Surveillance Orders:** Individuals like *Alingal Aider (Chatrapur)* were denied permission to return to Malabar. Juvenile detainees such as *Kunnimal Ahamed* were released from Palamcottah Jail under surveillance conditions.
- **Family Welfare and Selective Concessions:** *Mukanran Viran's* family was granted clothing and travel allowances and *Puzhakka Thodi Aldermankutty's* wife received local family allowance.
- **Detentions and Transfers:** The British moved prisoners between jails like Katpadi and Vellore, often refusing relocation requests. Entire batches were transferred or released under close monitoring.
- **Legal and Compensation Issues:** Compensation requests, like that of *Madhava Menon*, a local headman wrongfully implicated, were denied. Telegraphic channels enabled such decisions to be rapidly processed.

This phase illustrates how telegraphic infrastructure underpinned not only military suppression but the long-term custody and bureaucratic strategies of the colonial state.

## Limitations and Local Workarounds

In spite of its reach, the telegraph was not strong. Poor weather, difficult terrain, and rebel sabotage disrupted lines frequently. In remote villages where lines were cut, the British reverted to older methods: couriers on horseback or relays of messengers through loyal landlords. These limitations exposed the fragile dependence of colonial governance on technological infrastructures, a fact that did not

escape the attention of anti-colonial activists in subsequent decades.

## Findings

This study underscores several critical insights:

- The telegraph significantly accelerated colonial response times.
- Telegraph disruptions by Moplah rebels was organized and strategic.
- Telegraph security weaknesses exposed the limits of British control.
- The telegraph was central to colonial intelligence and censorship.
- The rebellion prompted infrastructure hardening and expansion.
- Local resistance to telegraph infrastructure prefigured broader anti-colonial tactics.

## Conclusion

The Moplah Rebellion highlights how the telegraph served as both an enabler of imperial authority and a site of resistance. The wires that linked Malabar's remote villages to Madras and London were lifelines of colonial surveillance and power projection but they were also fragile threads that could be severed by communities fighting for autonomy. By situating the rebellion within the technological context of British India, this study contributes to a more complex understanding of how modern infrastructures shaped and were shaped by the dynamics of empire and resistance.

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