

Captivity of Catholics of Mangalore

Written by W.J.Pais

On 24 February 1784, (Ash Wednesday), in a secret and well planned move, Tipu arrested a large number of Christians across the province of Canara and other parts of his kingdom. Accounts of the number of captives range from 30,000 to 80,000. According to church historian Kranti Farias, all arrests may not have been made on a single day, but instead carried out in stages

Letter of an officer to Tipu Sultan (Kirkpatrick's Collection of Letters) -

"We instantly directed the Divan of the Havur Kutchery to prepare a list of houses occupied by Christians, taking care not to omit a single habitation. After a detailed plan was made, we stationed an officer and soldiers in every place inhabited by Christians, signifying to them that at certain time they would receive orders that they would carry out in full effect.... On the morning of a specific day, (Ash Wednesday 24 February 1784) at the hour of Morning Prayer, let all Christians be made prisoner and dispatched to our presence. Accordingly all orders were everywhere opened at the same moment and at the same hour, namely that of the Morning Prayer."

According to the Barcoor Manuscript, written in Kannada by a Mangalorean Catholic from Barcoor on his return from Seringapatam, the Christians were interned in holding camps at Mangalore, Manjeshwar, Cundapore, Onore, Ancola, and Sunquerim, with the more rebellious Christians brought in in chains. They were then forced to climb through the dense jungles and gorges of the Western Ghat mountain ranges along two routes, one of which was along the Bantval-Belthangadi-Kulshekar-Virajpet-Coorg-Mysore route, and the other along the Gersoppa falls (Shimoga) route. On the 200 miles (320 km) journey from Mangalore to Seringapatam the Christians were accompanied by three priests, who had secretly joined them despite threats of expulsion by Tipu.

Trouble arose when guards began molesting captive Christian women at their first camp at Bantwal, although able-bodied captives were able to resist the guards. At the next camp at Jamalabad fort, the rebel Christian leaders were thrown down from the fort. The town of "Nettrekere" or "Netterkedu" in Tulu, on the cross roads from Maripalla to Kalpane, derives its name from the large pool of blood which resulted from the execution of rebellious Mangalorean Catholics on their march to Mysore.

According to a captive from Barcoor, pregnant women often gave birth en route, and their babies had to be borne bundled about them. When they rested, the infants were suspended in cradles from the branches of trees. If anyone happened to die they were buried on the spot. Captives were not given any rations, and when the time came to move on, those who had not finished cooking had to leave behind their rice and the cooking pots. The Barcoor Manuscript along with other British Government records suggest that 20,000 captives (one-third of the total) died on the march to Seringapatam due to hunger, disease, and ill treatment by soldiers. The journey to Seringapatam took six weeks. By 1787, some 30,000 captives, half the original

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number, had perished.

The Barcoor Manuscript records, "On four occasions the young able-bodied Christian men were thus drafted for the Army. Some of them were appointed jemadars, subedars, and havildars. The Sircar supplied them with ghee, butter, curds, firewood, etc. One hundred men were formed into one company, four companies into a risala, four risalas into a sufedar, and four sufedars were placed under a bakshi. Out of every company twenty-five men were taken and circumcised at the end of every month. When the wounds were healed, another twenty-five were taken and circumcised, and so on, until the whole company was initiated into Islam."

Those who remained, such as the lame, the blind and the aged, employed themselves in cultivating the land and doing other manual work. Many were made to carry baskets filled with gobra (cowdung) for three days as a public warning to others. The stubborn Christians were given the most menial tasks, and made to work in the paddy fields. They were underfed, and immediately imprisoned for fighting. Completely isolated from any women, the idea was for the captive men to die of old age without creating any progeny.

"In 1792, the King of Coorg, Dodda Vira-Rajendra, managed to escape from captivity at Seringapatnam, and, with the aid of the British armies under Lord Cornwallis, was able to regain Coorg for himself through the treaty of 1792 between the English, their allies and Tipu. Anxious to repopulate a kingdom depopulated by Tipu, Dodda welcomed the fugitive Konkani Christians. As an inducement to remain permanently in his territory, he granted them several privileges, obtained a priest from Goa, and built a chapel for them. After the relaxation of policies from 1792 onwards, the Christians began to resettle in Canara. Many Mangalorean Catholic students, who had studied for the priesthood in Goa returned to Mangalore." - *(This goes to show, that the captivity was a political move, and encompassed all people who could have helped the British.*

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"Several thousand Christians in the dominion of Tipu Sultan had often in past years represented to him the discomfort attending the due exercise of their religion. He had hitherto paid no manner of regard to their supplications. Nevertheless, the present state of affairs in his extensive empire had inclined his heart to mercy and not to harshness. Wherefore he had dispatched these his trusty messengers who might convey the words of his mouth in all variety, begging the Governor and the Archbishop not to refuse every needful exertion towards succoring their brethren Christians according to the obligations of their religion. And he would as soon as might be convenient rebuild at his own expense the Churches that the fate decreed agents of destruction had levelled to the ground."

Letter sent by Tipu to the Archbishop of Goa

After considering the changed circumstances, the Archbishop of Goa, by a provision issued on 20 February 1795, appointed Minguel José Louis Mendes interim vicar of the four sub-districts of Mangalore, Barcoor, Onore and Moolki. Some other priests also came to Canara with the new vicar. Those from Goa retained their old prejudices and could not accept the rule of Tipu, openly advocating rebellion against him, writing offensive letters and making offensive speeches. As a result, in 1797, the brief reprieve enjoyed by the Christians ceased and

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their persecution recommenced.

In the [Battle of Seringapatam](#) on 4 May 1799, the British army under officers George Harris, David Baird, and Arthur Wellesley stormed the fortress, breached the town of Seringapatam, and killed Tipu.[69] After Tipu's death in the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War, the Mangalorean Catholics were freed from captivity

British general Arthur Wellesley helped 10,000 of them return to Canara. Of the remaining Christians freed, about a thousand went to Malabar, and some hundreds settled in Coorg

In 1800, the British took a census of the region. Of the 396,672 people living in South Canara, 10,877 were Christians residing in 2,545 houses. According to the same census, in the entire province of Canara, out of the 5,92,000 people, the Christian population was recorded as 10,877 in South Canara, and 2,380 in North Canara.[108] Padre José Miguel Luis de Mendes, a Goan Catholic priest, was appointed Vicar of Our Lady of Rosary at Mangalore on 7 December 1799. He took a lot of interest in the re-establishment of the community from 1799 to 1808. Later, John Goldsborough Ravenshaw was appointed collector of South Canara, whilst Alexander Reade became collector of North Canara. Ravenshaw took an active part in the re-establishment of their former possessions and recovery of their estates. He constructed a church for them, which was completed in 1806. Churches destroyed by Tipu were rebuilt by the Christians.

[Source of Information](#)