# Tipu Sultan's Place in History

## Why in news?

Karnataka Chief Minister (CM) B.S.Yediyurappa has announced that his government is trying to remove Tipu Sultan's history lessons from the state textbooks.

## Why has the government announced such a step?

- The government has long underlined Tipu's cruel treatment of Hindus, including torture, forced religious conversions, and the razing of temples in the course of his conquests, as the central feature of his personality.
- In the hills and jungles of Kodagu on the Kerala-Karnataka border, as well as in Kerala, Tipu is not seen as a hero.
- This is so as both Tipu and his father Haider Ali had strong territorial ambitions, and invaded and annexed territories outside Mysore.
- In modern times, the ruling party has sought to harness the anti Hindu strand of Tipu's personality to fulfil its political objectives.
- This was the project the BJP in Karnataka took up energetically around 2016-17, as the Assembly elections of 2018 approached.
- This aimed to build a broad 'Hindu' platform against then CM Siddaramaiah's coalition of OBCs and minorities.
- The BJP's opposition to Tipu was manifested in its strong opposition to the Tipu Jayanti celebrations that Siddaramaiah's government began in 2015.
- Violence broke out in Kodagu district in connection with the celebrations, in which two people were killed.
- The removal of Tipu from textbooks will fundamentally alter the history of early modern India.
- This removal will make a key individual in the society and politics of South India in the 18th century invisible, when the East India Company (EIC) was rapidly expanding Britain's colonial footprint over the country.

## What is the counter narrative to this understanding of Tipu Sultan?

- In this narrative, Tipu Sultan is the fearless 'Tiger of Mysore', a powerful bulwark against colonialism, and a great son of Karnataka.
- Tipu was the son of Haider Ali, a soldier who climbed the ranks in the army of the Wodeyar king of Mysore, and ultimately took power in 1761.

- Haider died while the 2nd Anglo-Mysore War (1780-84) was on and Tipu succeeded him in 1782.
- In the wider national narrative, Tipu has been seen as a man of imagination and a brilliant military strategist.
- In his short reign of 17 years, he mounted the most serious challenge the EIC faced in India.
- He was killed defending his capital Srirangapatnam in the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War.
- Tipu reorganised his army along European lines, using new technology, including what is considered the first war rocket.
- He **devised a land revenue system** based on detailed surveys and classification, in which the tax was imposed directly on the peasant.
- He collected this tax through salaried agents in cash, widening the state's resource base.
- He **modernised agriculture**, gave tax breaks for developing wasteland, built irrigation infrastructure and repaired old dams, and promoted agricultural manufacturing and sericulture.
- He **built a navy** to support trade, and commissioned a **state commercial corporation** to set up factories.
- As Mysore traded in sandalwood, silk, spices, rice and sulphur, some 30 trading outposts were established across Tipu's dominions and overseas.

## How is this narrative to be reconciled with the historical accounts of his brutality?

- The existing narrative doesn't seek to deny the accounts of Tipu's brutality, but it does seek to understand these specific incidents within the larger historical context of late medieval and early modern India.
- Tipu is only one of several historical figures about whom sharply differing perspectives exist.
- Opposing historical narratives have frequently been used as ammunition in modern political battles.
- This is because in much of India, history is frequently seen through ethnic, communal, regional, or religious lenses.
- As such, the case of Tipu is not unique, nor is the disagreement over him new. The controversy has been brought alive every few years by political provocation.
- Some political parties have seen Tipu as a nationalist because he fought the British.
- The roads, modern standing army, and systems of administration and irrigation that he built, have been stressed to decommunalise his legacy.
- Championing Tipu as a "statesman" is in line with the Congress's religion-

neutral nationalist tradition.

- On the other hand, his destruction of temples and forced conversions of Hindus and Christians feeds into the Hindutva narrative of the tyrannical and fanatical Muslim ruler.

## How should the historical figure of Tipu Sultan be assessed today?

- It is important to be aware that much of the criticism of Tipu is rooted in the accounts of those whom he vanquished - and of colonial historians who had powerful reasons to demonise him.
- Tipu defeated the EIC in wars, allied with the French to frustrate the attempts of the British to control the politics of the Deccan and Carnatic, and sought to challenge the vital trading interests of the Company.
- Tipu's keenness to subjugate Kodagu was linked directly to his desire to control the port of Mangaluru, on whose path Kodagu fell.
- Tipu battled nearly all powers in the region, irrespective of the faith of his opponents.
- His army had both Hindus and Muslims, and among the populations that he slaughtered in Kerala, there were sizeable numbers of Muslims.
- It is likely that Tipu's Islamic zeal had something to do with finding ideological ballast for his relentless warring.
- To argue that Tipu was a nationalist patriot and secular is misleading.
- Back in the 18th century, there was no "nationalism" or "secularism".
- These are modern concepts that should not be read back in time.
- But it is also misleading to argue that if Tipu fought the British, it was "only to save his kingdom" - because so did every other pre-modern ruler, in India and elsewhere.
- Just as there is evidence that Tipu persecuted Hindus and Christians, there is also evidence that he patronised Hindu temples and priests, and gave them grants and gifts.
- He donated to temples at Nanjangud, Kanchi and Kalale, and patronised the Sringeri mutt.
- When linguistic states were formed in the 1950s, many regions that read their historical past differently were merged under a common linguistic identity.
- Kodagu, now part of Karnataka, has always seen Tipu as an invader, and the old Mysore state's narrative of him as a moderniser would not be acceptable to Kodagu only because it is now the official state narrative.
- It serves no purpose to view Tipu's multilayered personality through the prism of morality or religion.
- It is not necessary that he be judged only in terms of either a hero or a tyrant.

**Source: The Indian Express**

