

The Coorg Medals 1837

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During a visit to the United Service Institution of India (USI) at New Delhi in 2004, I chanced upon the specimen of the Coorg Medal 1837 in the medal display case in the library. This medal had been awarded by the British East India Company to some Coorgs.

Returning to the USI Library in June 2005, I decided to research the history of the Coorg Medal 1837. My research steered me to two of the most dependable written records - *The Historical Record of Medals and Honorary Distinctions Conferred on the British Navy, Army and Auxiliary Forces* by George Tancred¹ and *Medals and Decorations of the British Army and Navy 1897* by John Horsely Mayo, Vol I and II² and the internet web site <http://faculty.winthrop.edu/haynese/india/medals/EICMed.htm#02086>. The history of the Coorg Medals unfolded.

In 1837, there was a 'rebellion' in Amur Soolya in Canara, also referred to as the Sulya (present day Suliya in Dakshina Kanada district of Karnataka). The British propaganda gave an impression that the rebellion was confined to the Gowdas of Sulya. In fact, large number of Coorgs from Nalknaad and Bhagamandala joined the revolt. Some of Coorgs fought at the Battle of Katkai-Sulya along with Subedar Guddemane Appaiah Gowda. Some other Coorgs, led by their Dewans, *Ponnappa* (Cheppudira Ponnappa) and *Bopoo* (Apparanda Bopanna or Bopu) suppressed the rebellion with great gallantry. They had promptly intimated news of the 'rebellion' to the British and actively assisted in quelling the 'rebellion'. The effort of assisting the British in quelling the rebellion was construed as a unique display of loyalty to the British (East India Company). The Governor General-in-Council asked Lieutenant Colonel Mark Cubbon, the Commissioner of Coorg, 'to suggest the best mode of strongly marking by suitable distinctions, the sentiments of his high appreciation'.³

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Lieutenant Colonel Mark Cubbon, on the basis of the reports of the Superintendent of Coorg, Captain Le Hardy and others, recommended that the awards include 'Gold Medals for the two dewans, valued at 400 rupees each, and twelve at half that value for the Soubadars and principal chiefs; twenty Gold Medals, without chains, for the Parpatigars and others: ten of 50 rupees in value for Ryots who specially distinguished themselves; and 200 Silver Medals, without chains, for inferior leaders and distinguished Ryots, of the value of 10 rupees each, together with grants of land and presents of Pegu ponies, fowling pieces, shawls, clothes, turbans, and c, and a special plea for the Coorg, Soubadar Moonien, who, though 70 years of age, led on his men in one of the first attacks made on the rebels and slew his antagonist in single combat, but being inconsolable for the loss, on this occasion, of a sword which had been given to him by the great Raja Veerajeuder, the Commissioner had ventured, in anticipation of his Lordship's sanction, to promise him another, in the name of the Governor-General'.⁴

All the recommendations were approved and sanction for the same conveyed in a letter dated 28 August 1837. The design for the medals was approved in a letter dated 30 May 1838 and the medals were struck at the Calcutta Mint. There were 344 medals which included 44 Gold and 300 Silver medals. The details of the medals and their costs as assessed by Captain Le hardy and recommended by Lieutenant Colonel Mark Cubbon are given in the table below.

Table - Details of the Coorg Medals 1837 and their costs⁵

| No. | Articles to be Purchased or Manufactured | Cost | Weight of Medals | Final cost as incurred by the Calcutta Mint |
|-----|--|------|--|---|
| 2 | Gold Medals with chains for the 2 Dewans, each at Rs 400 | 800 | Each medal was to weigh about 9 Gold Mohurs or Tolas | Finally a total of 44 Gold Medals at a cost of Company Rs 3550.00 and |
| 12 | Gold Medals with chains for Soubadars and principal chiefs at Rs 200 each | 2400 | Each medal was to weigh about 7 Gold Mohurs or Tolas | 300 Silver Medals at a Cost of Company |
| 20 | Gold Medals with chains for Parpatigars and others, at Rs 120 each | 2400 | Each medal was to weigh about 4 Gold Mohurs or Tolas | Rs 2343.12 were minted |
| 10 | Gold Medals without chains for Jununah Ryots who specially distinguished themselves; at Rs 50 each | 500 | Each medal was to weigh about 4 Gold Mohurs or Tolas | |

| | | | | |
|-----|---|------|---|------|
| 200 | Silver Medals, without chains, for inferior leaders and distinguished Ryots, @ Rs 10 each | 2000 | Each medal was to weigh about 10 Rupees | 1426 |
| | Total | 8100 | | |

The design of the medals was⁶:-

Obverse : Circular medal, 50 mm. A Coorg warrior with sword raised and a musket in his left hand. An inscription along the edge in Karanese "For a Memorial of Fidelity to the Government of the East India Company in suppressing disturbances, during the months of April and May 1837." and,

Reverse : Trophy of Coorg arms surrounded by a wreath. Inscription around the edge "For Distinguished Conduct and Loyalty to the British Government" and below, "Coorg, April 1837." (Despite best efforts, the names of the recipients, other than the two Dewans, Ponnappa and Bopu, and Soubadar Moonien; are not readily ascertainable.)

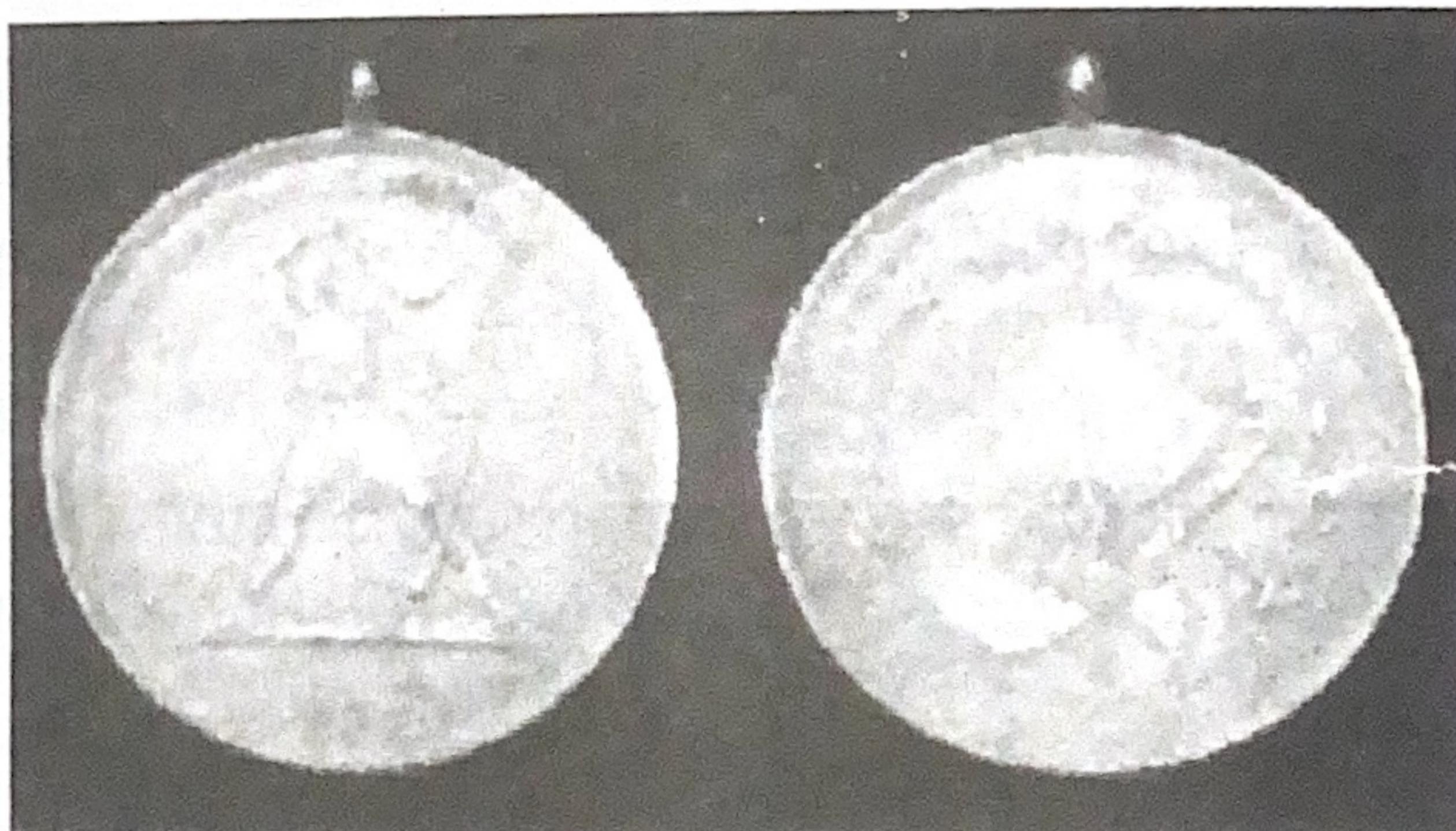


Fig. 1 : The Coorg Medal 1837 (Gold)



Fig. 2 : The Coorg Medal 1837 (Silver)

The significance of the award of the Coorg Medal 1837 is that the British East India Company, thereafter (from 1837), instituted the practice of award of the medals "Order of 'British India'" for officers and "Order of Merit" for Soldiers in their army; and ceased the award of special medals for gallantry in the field.⁷

Havildar Chookalingam of the Sappers and Miners of the Madras Army (of British East India Company) was awarded the "Order of Merit" with retrospective effect for displaying conspicuous gallantry during the advance of the column under the command of Colonel Foulis, during the operations in Coorg, in 1834.⁸ This, in effect made him the first recipient, and Coorg the site, of the first institutionalised award for gallantry in modern times.

The "Order of Merit" came to be referred to as the "Indian Order of Merit" to differentiate it from the Order of Merit that commenced to be awarded to the British in England and elsewhere. The British, nearly two decades later, instituted the "Victoria Cross" for gallantry in the Crimean War.

References

1. George Tancred, *The Historical Records of Medals and Honorary Distinctions Conferred on the British Navy, Army and Auxiliary Forces* (London : Spinks and Sons, 1891).
2. John Horsely Mayo, *Medals and Decorations of the British Army and Navy Vol I and II* (London : Archibald Constable and Co, 1897).
3. Tancred, n. 1, p. 256
4. Mayo, n. 2, p. 257
5. Details in table compiled from data given in Mayo, n 2, pp. 533-537. Columns 1-3 from Table on p 533, Column 4 - Indian Political Consultation 30 May 1838 No 2 on p 535, Column 5 - letter from Calcutta about Master dated 22 August 1839 on p. 537
6. Tancred, n. 1, p. 258 and Mayo, n. 2
7. Tancred, n. 1, p. 258
8. Tancred, n. 1, p. 255