

Participation of Mappila women of Malabar in Anti-Colonial struggles

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Abstract

This study examines the socio-political role of Mappila Muslim women in Malabar under British colonial rule, focusing on their historically marginalized yet active contributions to the Indian national movement. Despite early historiography largely overlooking Muslim women's involvement, evidence indicates their engagement in anti-colonial struggles and socio-political activities, challenging prevailing gender norms. Women's studies in Kerala's late twentieth-century academic landscape have highlighted the importance of recognizing women as integral historical participants rather than passive subjects. Over 150 years of colonial rule (1792–1947) reshaped local socio-economic structures, often amplifying patriarchal constraints and limiting women's agency. This research traces the complex interactions between Mappila women and Malabar's agrarian society, revealing how colonialism sparked a nascent political consciousness among them. It reconstructs the neglected history of Mappila women and provides a nuanced perspective on their motivations for participating in nationalist movements and the challenges they faced. By addressing their societal roles and modes of participation, this inquiry contributes to a more inclusive historical narrative, showcasing the bravery and resilience of women in shaping resistance against colonial powers.

Keywords: Mappila women, British colonial rule, Malabar region, Socio-political engagement, Anti-colonial struggles

Introduction

Colonialism, characterized by one nation's domination over another, profoundly reshaped India, particularly under British rule. The imposition of Western education, the English language, and new legal frameworks transformed the social, economic, and political landscape. Although some infrastructural and administrative advancements occurred, they were largely overshadowed by exploitation and repression, fostering economic hardships and a racial hierarchy that marginalized many groups, especially women. Despite the introduction of social reforms, such as the abolition of Sati and the promotion of female education, these measures reinforced existing patriarchal structures, deepening women's economic dependency and social constraints.

In Kerala, Mappila Muslim women experienced a distinct socio-cultural environment compared to other Indian Muslim communities. Notable figures like Sir Arthur Lawley and Qadir Husain Khan, commented on the relative freedoms Mappila women enjoyed, including their independence in areas like dressing, divorce and remarriage etc. However, Mappila women's experiences varied based on socio-economic status and education, with social norms limiting their mobility and confining them to domestic roles.

This paper explores the socio-political roles of Mappila women under British rule, highlighting their resilience and agency within the broader independence struggle. By examining their contributions and interactions with colonial structures, the study aims to shed light on the complexities of their legacy during this tumultuous period.

The Context of Resistance

The twentieth century in Malabar witnessed fierce resistance against both British imperialism and the oppressive feudal system, with notable contributions from Muslim women that often remain underrepresented in historical accounts. While men are frequently highlighted in the narrative of anti-colonial uprisings, women played crucial, though indirect, roles in supporting these movements. The Mappila Muslim communities, especially in Eranadu and Valluvanad, saw extensive tenant exploitation under colonial policies, resulting in around eighty recorded peasant uprisings from 1836 to 1900.

Although primarily seen as supportive figures, women were instrumental in sustaining the resistance, providing food, shelter, and moral support to activists and their families, rooted in their familial roles. The courage displayed by figures like Kummath Chirmammu, who defended her home against soldiers, exemplifies women's defiant spirit during this period. Inspired by leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Annie Besant, many women became active in political movements, including the 1930 Salt Satyagraha, during which over 500 women were arrested.

The involvement of women, especially Mappila women like Malu Hajjumma and Chakki Paramban Kunjaisha Hajjumma, demonstrates their resilience and commitment to the fight for independence. Recognizing their contributions deepens our understanding of Malabar's anti-colonial struggles, creating a more inclusive and comprehensive historical narrative. Their legacy underscores the necessity of acknowledging women's integral role in the resistance, shaping future generations of social and political activism in Malabar. Let's discuss about some profiles of brave ladies of Malabar.

Malu Hajjumma

Malu Hajjumma, also known as Malu Fatima, was born on July 20, 1873, into a family involved in local resistance, her upbringing in Eranaduthur East was influenced by her father, Paravetti Koyamu Haji. Unlike many women of her time, she received formal education up to the fifth grade, which laid the groundwork for her active participation in socio-political movements. Malu exhibited remarkable courage from an early age, developing a keen interest in horsemanship. Her personal life included several marriages, notably to Kunjahammed Haji, a revolutionary leader. As his partner, she not only supported him personally but also actively participated in the Malabar Rebellion of 1921. Malu was instrumental in organizing Khilafat meetings, galvanizing women from Pantallur and nearby rural areas to join the anti-colonial struggle. Her impassioned speeches inspired resilience and encouraged women to engage in logistical support, even risking their lives for their community.

Beyond her symbolic support, Malu actively participated in the armed struggle, joining her husband in the forests and sustaining injuries during confrontations with colonial forces. After Kunjahammed Haji's execution by the British in 1922, her grief transformed into a commitment to empowering her community through education. She revitalized the Kannath School established by her father, ensuring that children received food and resources, which established her as a respected leader. Malu Hajjumma's contributions included donating land for educational and religious institutions and managing her legal affairs independently, which was exceptional for women of her time. By the time of her death in 1961 at age 88, she was regarded as a "renaissance heroine" among the Mappilas of Malabar. Her legacy continues to inspire, highlighting the often-overlooked roles women played in India's socio-political movements. Her home remains a poignant reminder of her contributions, with ongoing calls for its preservation as a historical site.

Chakkiparamban Kunjaayisha Hajjumma

Born to Paravetti Unni Mammad Haji in Tuvvur, she married Chakkiparamban Moiteenkutty Haji, a key leader in the fight against British colonial rule. Unni Mammad Haji was a prosperous farmer and trader with extensive agricultural land. Her life transformed after marrying Moiteenkutty, who led the Mannarkkad struggle against colonial forces. Despite the constant threat from British soldiers, Kunjaisha supported his activism, even joining him on the pilgrimage to Mecca. Her husband's prominence made her a target for British harassment, enduring brutal interrogations that highlighted her resilience.

Kunjaisha and Moiteenkutty dedicated much of their wealth to supporting revolutionary fighters, sacrificing their resources for the cause. She raised her children with tales of Malabar's resistance, instilling in them bravery and patriotism. Despite facing societal ostracism and constant army harassment, she managed the family and provided refuge for those in need, regardless of caste or religion. Following Moiteenkutty's capture and subsequent death in exile, Kunjaisha continued her commitment to the resistance, donating her land inheritance to support the cause. She passed away in 1926, believed

to be buried at the Karuwarakund Mosque, leaving behind a legacy of courage, sacrifice, and patriotism in the Malabar Rebellion.

Mamburam Beevi

Mamburam Beevi, also known as Mambrath Beevi, was a key figure connected to the resistance against British rule, particularly in the aftermath of the deportation of Mamburam Syed Fadl Poo Koya to Mecca on charges of inciting riots against British exploitation in Ernad and Valluvanad. Syed Fadl Poo Koya's forced departure sparked outrage among the Mappilas, leading to the assassination of the Malabar Collector, Connolly, who orchestrated the exile. This act of retaliation resulted in the arrest of 164 people, including 14 women, some of whom were pregnant and gave birth during their trials. Beevi, the guardian of Mamburam's sacred tomb, played an influential role in the planning of Connolly's assassination. She provided support to the revolutionaries, an action that led to her imprisonment and subsequent deportation to Nellore Jail, where she gave birth while in confinement.

British magistrate Walter Elliot described Beevi as "a person of violent and fanatical disposition" who willingly aided the assassins, reflecting the British officials' animosity toward her. As a result, Beevi received no leniency, unlike the other imprisoned women, and was the only woman to be deported from Malabar due to her involvement in the Connolly case. Despite her reputed family background and societal status as the female head of the Mamburam tomb, Beevi faced severe punishment, marking her as a powerful symbol of resistance and a reminder of the significant role women played in the Malabar resistance.

Areepuram Parakkal Kadiyamu

Areepuram Parakkal Kadiyamu's story is another testament to the courage of Malabar's women. She was a young woman who lost her life in the Malappuram Adhikarathodi massacre while trying to protect her father and husband. Kadiyamu had come to Melmuri with her husband to care for her ailing father, Kunheen Haji, when the British army attacked. Despite repeated attacks with bayonets and being offered chances to escape, Kadiyamu chose to stay and defend her father, who was bedridden. When the soldiers attempted to drag him away,

Kadiyamu shielded her father, clinging to him to prevent the British from taking him. In a brutal display, the soldiers shot and killed Kadiyamu, her father, and her husband. Her courage and sacrifice resonate as a powerful memory among the people of Melmuri, symbolizing the fierce resistance spirit of Mappila women.

These accounts reveal the intensity of anti-imperial sentiment among Mappila women in Malabar. Figures like Mamburam Beevi and Areepuram Parakkal Kadiyamu led by example, inspiring future generations and shaping a legacy of resilience and patriotism among Malabar's people. Their stories underscore the active role of women in the region's resistance history, highlighting the often-overlooked contributions of women who stood unwaveringly against colonial oppression.

Ummacha

Ummacha became a symbol of resistance and sacrifice when she was martyred on her wedding day. The incident took place in Poothupadam village in Cherukav, near Kondoti, where Ummacha had just married Konnakodan Karangat Kuttihassan. Shortly after the Nikah, British forces arrived, searching for a revolutionary named Variyam Kunath. The soldiers surrounded the couple's home, and Kuttihassan bravely stepped outside to confront them. Ummacha followed her husband, but he pushed her back, hoping to protect her. Tragically, Kuttihassan was shot and killed instantly. Seeing this, Ummacha fearlessly charged toward the soldiers. Despite being shot in the leg, she stood up defiantly, challenging them with the words, "Shoot!" She was fatally shot, ending her life on her wedding day. Though they were denied the chance to begin their life together, their legacy endures as a testament to their courage and unyielding spirit in the face of colonial oppression.

Koorimannil Parappurath Pathummakutty

Pathummakutty was another extraordinary figure who provided unwavering support to the resistance movement, risking her life to aid fighters in hiding. The daughter of Valiya Cheko Haji, she offered food and shelter to Variam Kunnath Kunjahammed Haji and approximately 80 freedom fighters despite the severe risks involved. In February 1919,

after a clash at Nenmini where several revolutionaries were killed, Pathummakutty's role became increasingly critical. She welcomed the fighters into her forest-side home in Koorimannil, an act considered treason under British rule, as the authorities patrolled the area heavily.

On December 28, 1921, Kunjahammed Haji and his group reached her home after a secret journey through dense forests, defying British surveillance in the region. Even under the threat of harsh penalties, Pathummakutty, along with her father's close friend Sultan of Nilambur, provided them with food, lodging, and moral support. British officer Hitchcock's descriptions of Pathummakutty's forested homestead highlight its remote location and challenging environment, which she navigated with courage. Pathummakutty raised five children, passing down her bravery and resilience, a legacy now upheld by her descendants. The home she sheltered the fighters in stands as a symbol of her extraordinary defiance and her pivotal role in the resistance.

The bravery displayed by Ummacha and Pathummakutty reflects the spirit of the Mappila women, whose strength and commitment were instrumental in Malabar's anti-colonial struggles. These stories serve as powerful reminders of the role women played in the resistance, shaping a legacy of valor that inspired future generations.

Kollaramban Biyathumma Hajjuma

Kollaramban Biyathumma Hajjuma's encounter with Kunjahammad Haji during his 1899 stay in Makkah highlights her commitment to aiding fellow revolutionaries despite the risks. After Kunjahammad Haji was robbed during his journey from Makkah to Madinah, Biyathumma Hajjuma, who was also in Makkah for Hajj, came forward with financial and moral support to help him continue his journey. Her dedication didn't wane even as the resistance in Malabar intensified. Biyathumma Hajjuma's courage was apparent when she later offered support to Kunjahammad Haji, despite her son being a British officer—a conflict of interests that did not stop her from upholding her values and supporting the cause of freedom.

Kottakuth Mathayi Kadeeja

Mathayi Kadeeja stands out as an inspiring figure of patriotism and resilience. Her unwavering support for the freedom struggle is seen

in her willingness to send her 16-year-old son, Unnikoya, to fight alongside Kunjahammad Haji. When Kunjahammad Haji questioned Unnikoya's young age, Mathayi Kadeeja replied with courage, asserting that age was no barrier in the quest for freedom. She prepared a hearty meal for Unnikoya, understanding that this journey would likely lead to martyrdom. She found solace in her belief that dying for one's native land was a path to divine blessings.

Unnikoya became a loyal bodyguard to Kunjahammad Haji but ultimately sacrificed his life in the struggle, keeping his promise to his mother to serve and protect his people. Mathayi Kadeeja's bravery, as well as her profound faith, left a legacy of patriotism and maternal strength that underscored the crucial role women played in fostering resistance and encouraging the next generation to fight for freedom.

These stories of Biyathumma Hajjamma and Mathayi Kadeeja reflect the resilience and contributions of women in the Malabar resistance, showcasing the dedication with which they supported and inspired revolutionary efforts against British colonial rule.

Paravetty Aminakutty

Aminakutty, the wife of Koyamu Haji, served as a pillar of support and inspiration for her husband, who was a key commander under Chakkiparamban Moiteenkutty Haji, an Eranadan Caliph. She was proud of Koyamu's commitment to liberate their land and protect tenant rights against British rule. Before each journey, she prepared food and provisions, imparting her strength to him with words of encouragement. Aminakutty even expressed her desire to raise future generations of freedom fighters by saying, "I am giving you a Chakara Kutty as a gift to take with you when you go to war," reflecting her vision of passing on the revolutionary spirit to their unborn children. Aminakutty's legacy is underscored by her children, including figures like Malu Hajjamma and Manu Haji, who grew up embodying her fierce patriotism and resistance.

Melmuri Keedakaatt Fathima

Keedakaatt Fathima's story is one of youthful courage and tragedy. On October 25, 1921, at the age of eleven, she faced the British Dorset Regiment's brutality in Malappuram. Despite having the chance

to flee, Fathima chose to remain with her father, Keedakat Moitin, a freedom fighter, when soldiers arrived. When her father was forced outside to be shot, Fathima clung to his leg in defiance, enduring beating and bayonet stabs as she shielded him. Ultimately, she was shot in the chest, her life ending alongside her father's in an act of profound bravery. Both were laid to rest in Adhikarthodi, symbolizing the enduring strength of even the youngest in the resistance.

Variyan Kunnath Unnipathu

Unnipathu, the wife of Moiteenkutty Haji and mother of young Kunjathumma, also faced the harsh consequences of her husband's revolutionary activities. After Moiteenkutty was captured and sentenced to life imprisonment in January 1922, he suffered fatal torture in Kannur Jail. Unnipathu was left to care for their daughter, enduring not only the grief of his death but also repeated harassment and violence from British forces. Her experience underscores the silent sacrifices and enduring struggles faced by the wives of freedom fighters, who bore both the emotional toll and the physical dangers of resistance.

Variyankunnath Kadooran Ummuhani

Ummuhani was a woman of immense resilience and strength, married to the revolutionary leader Variyankunnath Kunjahammad Haji, who led significant resistance against British rule. As the daughter of Katuran Unnimammad, a respected civic leader and businessman from Morayur Pothuvettipara in Malappuram district, Ummuhani came from a background familiar with leadership and resistance.

Her marriage to Kunjahammad Haji subjected her to constant harassment and violence from the British, as she endured interrogations and beatings. Despite her husband's frequent absences due to exile, imprisonment, or his revolutionary commitments, Ummuhani maintained her courage and took care of their four children—Mahmood (Moiteenkutty), Fatimakutty, Aishakutty, and Beerankutty (Biravunni). The stress and hardships, compounded by the tragic loss of her daughter Fatimakutty, eventually took a toll on Ummuhani's health, making her chronically ill. She passed away in 1917, before the peak of the Malabar Rebellion. The strength and sacrifice she displayed continue to serve as an inspiration.

Variyankunnath Kadeeja's Daughter, Kunjamina, and Biravunni

Biravunni, Ummuhani's youngest son, faced brutal persecution from the British due to his association with his father's revolutionary legacy. When Biravunni was only twelve years old, he was imprisoned in Bellary Jail and later transferred to Palayamkota Children's Jail. Though sentenced to death as part of the British policy to eliminate all male members of Kunjahammad Haji's family, he was spared due to his young age and the intervention of a sympathetic British officer.

Biravunni spent most of his youth confined within the jail walls but eventually secured a job there as a warden, thanks to the support of an officer who had witnessed his plight. He married Kunjamina from Shornur and chose to settle in Palayamkot as he built a new life, far from the turmoil of his earlier years. Biravunni's unwavering resilience and perseverance embodied the enduring spirit of his family. As he recounted stories of his father, Kunjamina, often moved to tears, remembered his promise, "Later you will know who I was," a testament to his hope for posthumous recognition.

The prophecy finally found its fulfillment in 2020, when the story of his family's sacrifices came to light, allowing a new generation to honor the legacy of Variyankunnath Kunjahammad Haji and his family's dedication to India's struggle for freedom.

Pookottur Women and Their Role in the Malabar Struggle

The Pookottur Revolution marks a significant chapter in India's freedom struggle, showcasing the courage and sacrifices of the people of Malabar. Around 3,000 fighters, including approximately 400 who perished, bravely fought British forces on Pookottur soil. Remarkably, the role of women in this struggle was profound. Women encouraged their men, sent them off to battle with blessings, food, and even arms, and promised to meet again in the afterlife. They played an active part on the battlefield, and even after death, when bodies were buried, it was discovered that a Mappila woman had disguised herself as a man to fight. This heroism highlighted the commitment of Malabar's women to the cause.

Papatungal Thayumma, for instance, embodied bravery as she sent her two sons to war with food and her blessings, remarking, "We

will get the wages of Shaheed." Women from Melmuri and Pilakale villages faced heavy losses, but they remained unwavering, even burying the dead and caring for the wounded amidst the brutality of the British forces. These women did not bury their men with sadness but with the pride of knowing they were martyrs.

Resilience and Strategy and Legacy of Family in the Malabar Movement

Beyond the battlefield, Malabar women served as key logistical supporters, procuring weapons, delivering food, and passing vital information to the freedom fighters. They sang war songs to inspire the men and were ready to defend their homes with hidden gun holes near entrances for protection against sudden British raids. Women like Chetali Biyumma courageously stood up to the British, even when two of their group were killed. Figures such as Aminakutty (wife of Paravetti Koyamu Haji), Ummhani, Papatur Thayumma, and the Parappuram Kadiumma exemplified the tenacity of women during the Malabar struggle. When British forces came to subdue Malu Hajjumma, it was said that it took an entire army to confront her, showcasing her symbolic and actual strength against the colonizers.

The oral histories collected by local historian PT Shukur provide further insight into the spirit of the Malabar women. He recounts the story of his great-grandmother, Iyyacha, who joyfully prepared a rare feast of chicken curry for her son Cheku before sending him off to fight, a last meal he never had the chance to eat as he rushed to join the battle. Similarly, Shukur's great-uncle Thodiil Marakar, a seasoned fighter, endured 12 years of imprisonment in Bellary Jail, sustained by food sent from his family.

The women of Malabar, while mourning their lost loved ones, remained steadfast in their mission to support the fight for freedom. This deep commitment and resilience extended beyond the battlefield, creating a legacy that still resonates in the collective memory of Malabar today.

Conclusion

The transformative journey of Muslim women in Kerala, particularly in Malabar, has often been overshadowed in historical

narratives. A detailed examination of socio-religious reforms reveals a critical gap, with early writings frequently overlooking the significant roles played by Mappila women. Despite this, evidence of their active participation in socio-political movements is emerging, challenging the mainstream historiography that tends to reflect inherent biases.

The involvement of women in 19th-century rebellions illustrates their crucial role in the fight against colonialism. For instance, the case of Mambrath Beevi, who was arrested while pregnant for her participation in the plot against Colonel Conolly, highlights the bravery and agency of Mappila women. Her subsequent conviction and deportation emphasize the need to recognize women's contributions to resistance efforts.

This overlooked history necessitates further research into the roles of Mappila women, showcasing their activism and resilience. Acknowledging their participation enriches our understanding of Kerala's anti-colonial struggle and emphasizes the importance of including diverse narratives in the study of history. Ultimately, recognizing the agency of these women not only corrects historical oversights but also inspires a more inclusive perspective on the socio-political dynamics of the time.

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