



From Metallurgy to Revolt: The Socio-Political History of Karuvarakundu in Colonial Malabar

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the historical significance of Karuvarakundu, a region in Malappuram, Kerala, with a specific focus on its ancient and largely overlooked ironworking tradition and its subsequent role in the Malabar Rebellion of 1921. Historically, Karuvarakundu was a renowned center for iron ore mining and metallurgy, exporting finished goods to ancient civilizations. This study argues that this legacy of skilled labor and economic self-reliance contributed to the region's fierce participation in the 1921 anti-colonial uprising. Utilizing a micro-historical approach, the research draws upon local oral histories, interviews, and panchayat records to reconstruct Karuvarakundu's socio-economic history. It analyzes how the rebellion, particularly the attacks on the local police station and European-owned rubber estates, was a culmination of longstanding grievances, and explores the profound and lasting impact of the rebellion's suppression on the local Muslim community. The study concludes that Karuvarakundu's identity is deeply intertwined with both its metallurgical heritage and its pivotal role in a major anti-colonial struggle.

Introduction

Local history, as a discipline, provides an indispensable lens through which to understand the broader contours of national and regional narratives. It concentrates on geographically specific contexts, incorporating the social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions of a community's past.¹ This micro-historical approach allows for a re-reading and re-assessment of mainstream history, often revealing the



nuanced reactions of individuals and communities to larger historical events. The study of Karuvarakundu, a panchayat in the eastern part of Malappuram District, Kerala, India, is a prime example of this. While its name might be absent from many macro-historical accounts of Kerala, a deeper investigation unveils a locale with a profound and ancient industrial heritage that directly influenced its participation in one of South India's most significant anti-colonial rebellions.

The present work is adapted into this research paper to articulate a focused argument: Karuvarakundu's historical identity was forged in its ironworking tradition, and this identity of skilled, independent labor provided a foundation for its assertive role in the Malabar Rebellion of 1921. The rebellion itself was a complex armed uprising against British colonial authority and allied Hindu landlords (*janmies*), primarily led by the Muslim Mappila community of the Malabar region.ⁱⁱ While the rebellion's general history is documented, the specific narratives of key participating regions like Karuvarakundu remain underexplored.

This paper aims to fill that gap by first delineating the ancient history of Karuvarakundu, establishing its significance as a center for iron ore excavation and metalworking, with trade links extending to the ancient Arab and European worlds. It will then analyze the socio-economic conditions of the early 20th century, setting the stage for the rebellion. The core of the paper will detail the events of the 1921 rebellion as they unfolded in Karuvarakundu, including the attack on the police station and the raids on European plantations. Finally, it will assess the devastating impact of the rebellion's suppression on the local society, arguing that the brutal colonial response led to decades of socio-economic backwardness for the Muslim community, the effects of which are still discernible today.

The methodology is primarily descriptive and analytical, reconstructing historical facts from available sources before subjecting them to critical analysis. The research relies heavily on primary sources, including oral history interviews with local residents, and official documents such as the *Samagra Vikasana Rekha* (Comprehensive Development Report) of the Karuvarakundu Panchayat. These are supplemented by secondary sources including historical texts, newspaper reports from the era, and relevant scholarly works.

A Brief History of Karuvarakundu: The Legacy of Iron

Karuvarakundu, encompassing an area of 78.688 square kilometers, is a hilly region nestled near the Western Ghats, making it prone to landslides but also blessing it with rich natural resources and fertile land.ⁱⁱⁱ The name "Karuvarakundu" itself is central to its identity. It is derived from the Malayalam words



'*karu*' meaning iron ore, and '*kundu*' meaning a pit or place. Thus, Karuvarakundu translates to "the place of the iron ore pits," directly pointing to its primary historical occupation.^{iv}

The region's history is not merely agricultural; it is fundamentally industrial. Historical evidence and local oral tradition assert that Karuvarakundu was a major center for iron ore mining and metallurgy centuries ago. The local community known as Arippanikkar or Karuvans were traditionally engaged in the excavation of iron ore and the forging of tools, implements, and weapons.^v The significance of this industry was such that Karuvarakundu has been poetically termed the "Jamshedpur of South India" in local discourse.^{vi}

The scale of production was reportedly vast, with local sources claiming that swords and utensils manufactured in Karuvarakundu were exported to ancient civilizations including Egypt, Turkey, Rome, and Denmark over two millennia ago.^{vii} This claim, while requiring further archaeological corroboration, underscores the deep-rooted narrative of the region's industrial importance. The influence of iron is further embedded in the local topography. The place name Arimanal, within Karuvarakundu, is believed to originate from the presence of iron ore sand or soil (*ari* meaning iron).^{viii} Although large-scale mining has ceased, the landscape remains scattered with '*keedakkallukal*'—stones containing iron ore—serving as tangible evidence of this vanished industrial past.^{ix}

This metallurgical tradition also found its way into local cultural memory. The famous Mappila song writer, Moinkutty Vaidyar, is said to have referenced the swords made by the Karuvans of Karuvarakundu being used in the battles fought by the Prophet Muhammad and his companions against the tribe of Quraysh in Arabia.^x This narrative, whether historical or symbolic, powerfully links the region's economic output to the broader Islamic world, with which the Malabar Coast had ancient trade ties dating back to the 7th century AD, if not earlier.^{xi}

Politically, Karuvarakundu was under the rule of the Zamorin of Calicut, with the Nilambur Kovilakam (a royal house) acting as his chieftains (*samanthas*). The entire region was administered by this Kovilakam, which later leased the land to the British for 99 years.^{xii} It was during British tenure that rubber plantations were established in areas like Keralakunkundu and Pullangode, marking a shift in the local economy and introducing a new form of colonial agrarian enterprise where the local Mappilas often served as laborers.^{xiii}

Despite this shift, agriculture remained diverse, with crops like coconut, areca nut, pepper, cardamom, coffee, and tapioca being cultivated. However, the 20th century saw the rise of rubber as the dominant



cash crop. The modern economy of Karuvarakundu is heavily dependent on remittances from its large expatriate population working in the Gulf countries, a phenomenon that has reshaped its socio-economic landscape.^{xiv}

The Malabar Rebellion of 1921: The Crucible of Karuvarakundu

The Malabar Rebellion (also known as the Mappila Rebellion) of 1921 was not an isolated event but the culmination of a century of grievances. It erupted within the context of the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements, which provided an anti-British ideological framework. However, its roots lay in the exploitative land tenure system imposed by the British, which vested absolute power in the hands of upper-caste Hindu *janmies* (landlords) who ruthlessly exploited their predominantly Muslim tenant farmers (*ryots*).^{xv} The rebellion was, therefore, a complex interplay of anti-colonial nationalism, religious identity, and peasant revolt.

Unlike the more localized and religiously-focused uprisings of the 19th century, the 1921 rebellion aimed at the outright elimination of British imperial authority from the region.^{xvi} The initial actions of the rebels were uniformly directed against symbols of colonial power: government offices were destroyed, records burnt, treasuries looted, and police stations attacked. The communication infrastructure was severed, and the colonial administration in the Eranad and Valluvanad taluks effectively collapsed.^{xvii}

Karuvarakundu, part of the Eranad taluk, became a significant theater of this rebellion. The trigger was the news of the British police firing upon a crowd at the Thirurangadi mosque on August 20, 1921. This act ignited long-suppressed anti-British sentiments across Malabar, including in Karuvarakundu.^{xviii}

On August 21, 1921, local rebels attacked the Karuvarakundu police station. They seized arms and ammunition, forcing the police to flee for their lives. The sub-inspector, Krishnan, escaped to the nearby Kerala Rubber Estate, seeking refuge with the European planters.^{xix} The success of this attack emboldened the rebels and provided them with the weapons needed for further action.

Their next targets were the symbols of colonial economic exploitation: the European-owned rubber estates. The Pullangode estate (owned by S.P. Eaton) and the Kerala estate (owned by E.M. Brown and E.H. Colebrook) were both located in the Kalikavu-Karuvarakundu region. After some hesitation, a large body of rebels, estimated to be around 1,500 strong, decided to raid these plantations on August 22.^{xx}

The planters, warned by the fleeing sub-inspector, attempted to secure Brown's bungalow but soon retreated upon seeing smoke rising from the direction of Pullangode estate. They managed to escape to



the Nilgiri Hills, but their properties were not spared. The rebels set fire to the bungalows, factories, and dispensaries of the Kerala estate. They looted cash chests and personal belongings of the planters.^{xxi} The attack on Pullangode was even more severe. S.P. Eaton was captured by a gang of Mappilas, many of whom were reportedly workers on his own estate. He was beaten to death, an act attributed to the settling of scores for his past "highhanded acts" against them.^{xxii}

The rebellion in the region was not chaotic but somewhat organized under leaders like Variyam Kunnath Kunjahammed Haji and Chembrasserri Thangal. The liberated areas were apportioned among leaders, and Chembrasserri Thangal was given the responsibility to govern the areas including Karuvarakundu, Melatur, and Kalikavu.^{xxiii} This indicates that Karuvarakundu was significant enough to be considered a distinct administrative unit within the rebel territory.

The British response was swift and brutal. By September 1921, a powerful military force under the command of Stuart Burnet arrived in Karuvarakundu from Manjeri. The troops were given orders to burn the houses of suspected rebels and to "shoot at sight."^{xxiv} They established military barracks at Chembankunnu and Campinkunnu (the latter site now occupied by the Government Higher Secondary School), from where they conducted their suppression campaign.

The repression was ruthless. Many rebels from Karuvarakundu fled into the forests and the valleys of the Kumban hills to escape the military dragnet. The autobiography of K.T. Manu Musliyar, a renowned local educationalist, poignantly documents the hardships faced by these fugitives, including women giving birth in hiding places like *narimada* (tiger caves).^{xxv} Those captured were often executed or, like countless others from Malabar, transported for life to the cellular jail in the Andaman Islands.

Impact of the Rebellion on Karuvarakundu's Society

The aftermath of the rebellion left an indelible scar on the social fabric of Karuvarakundu, particularly on its Muslim community. The colonial suppression was not merely a military operation but a collective punishment. The violence unleashed by the police and military was extreme. Moidhu Maulavi, a contemporary scholar, noted that the most severe suffering was inflicted upon Muslim women and children.^{xxvi} Military forces were accused of shooting fleeing civilians, killing those in hiding, raping women, and burning homes indiscriminately.^{xxvii}

The demographic and economic impact was catastrophic. It is estimated that across Malabar, between 2,337 and 10,000 rebels were killed, over 45,000 captured or surrendered, and more than 1,400 were court-martialed and sentenced to death or deportation.^{xxviii} Fines amounting to lakhs of rupees were



extracted from the Mappila community. In some parts of South Malabar, up to 60% of Muslim households lost their male members to death, imprisonment, or deportation, leaving families destitute and vulnerable.^{xxix}

This pattern was undoubtedly reflected in Karuvarakundu. The community that had once proudly forged swords for distant lands was left broken. The rebellion and its brutal suppression created a long-lasting atmosphere of distrust between communities and, most critically, instilled a deep-seated fear and alienation from the state apparatus and mainstream education systems among Muslims. This led to a deliberate withdrawal from English education and government service, resulting in decades of educational and socio-economic backwardness that the community is still striving to overcome.^{xxx} The recent improvements are largely attributed to Gulf remittances and a renewed focus on education, not state-led rehabilitation.

Conclusion

The history of Karuvarakundu is a powerful narrative of rise, resistance, and repercussion. This paper has argued that its identity is dually constructed: first, upon its ancient and industrially significant ironworking tradition, which established it as a place of economic importance and skilled labor in the pre-colonial era, and second, upon its fierce and consequential participation in the Malabar Rebellion of 1921.

The attack on the Karuvarakundu police station and the raids on the Pullangode and Kerala estates were not random acts of violence but calculated strikes against the symbols of colonial political and economic power. The region's history of self-reliance and skilled craftsmanship may have provided a cultural foundation for this resistance. However, the price of this defiance was extraordinarily high. The brutal colonial suppression targeted the Muslim community with unprecedented violence, leading to mass casualties, deportations, and a systemic socio-economic decline that lasted for generations.

Today, Karuvarakundu is developing, with improved infrastructure, education, and a economy buoyed by foreign remittances. Its potential for eco-tourism is recognized. However, to understand its present fully, one must acknowledge its past—a past forged in the fire of its iron smelters and tempered in the crucible of a rebellion that sought to challenge an empire. The *keedakkallukal* (iron ore stones) that still dot its landscape are more than geological artifacts; they are silent monuments to a glorious industrial past and the tumultuous history that followed, reminding us that local histories are often where the most intense dramas of national struggles are staged and resolved.



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