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## **Anti-Colonial Tribal Resistance in Wayanad: A Historical Study of the 1812 Tribal Uprising**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The tribal uprising of 1812 in Wayanad occupies a significant place in the history of anti-colonial resistance in South India. Emerging in the aftermath of the defeat of Keralavarma Pazhassiraja in 1805, the revolt reflected the growing resentment of the tribal communities against British colonial domination and exploitative agrarian policies. The Kurichias, Kurumas and other indigenous groups of Wayanad played a decisive role in organizing and leading the rebellion. Beginning at Kurichiad near Ganapathivattam on 25 March 1812, the uprising rapidly spread across Wayanad and evolved into a mass movement involving peasants, agricultural labourers and local chieftains. Leaders such as Raman Nambi, Placka Chanthu, Vengalon Kelu, Ayiraveettil Konthappan and Karingari Kannan emerged as symbols of tribal resistance and anti-colonial struggle. This article examines the socio-political background of the uprising, its leadership, character and historical significance. It argues that the 1812 rebellion was not merely a local disturbance but an organized tribal resistance movement against colonial exploitation and agrarian oppression. The study also highlights how the British suppression of the revolt enabled the consolidation of colonial authority in Wayanad while simultaneously laying the foundation for future tribal resistance movements.

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## Introduction

The history of anti-colonial resistance in India cannot be fully understood without examining the role played by the tribal communities of all over India. The tribal people of Wayanad actively participated in the battles against British forces. After the death of Keralavarma Pazhassiraja in 1805, the British East India Company established its supremacy over Wayanad. However, the consolidation of colonial authority was accompanied by oppressive revenue policies, economic exploitation, forced control over agricultural production and interference in the traditional social structure of the tribal communities (K.K.N.Kurup, 1988). These developments generated widespread resentment among the people of Wayanad and eventually culminated in the great uprising of 1812.

The revolt that began on 25 March 1812 at Kurichiad near Ganapathivattam (Sulthan Bathery, Wayanad) soon spread throughout the Wayanad region (T.K.Raveendran, 1978). The movement was led primarily by the Kurichia and Kuruma tribes, supported by peasants, agricultural labourers and local chieftains. Historians and local traditions variously describe this rebellion as the Kurichia Revolt, Kuruma Revolt, Tribal Revolt, Indigenous Revolt, Wayanad Revolution and Agrarian Revolt (Civil and Military Correspondences between 1806-12). Since the movement was directed against colonial exploitation, expansion and anti-peasant policies, it represented both a tribal resistance movement and an agrarian struggle.

Unlike the earlier Pazhassi struggles, the 1812 uprising did not depend upon the leadership of a royal figure. Instead, it was led by ordinary peasants and tribal warriors who organized resistance against colonial authority. This characteristic makes the uprising one of the earliest organized tribal anti-colonial movements in South India (P.K.Devan, 2023). Unfortunately, historians and academicians did not give significant attention to these movements. As a result, the contributions of these resistance movements remained largely underrepresented in historical narratives.

## Colonial Policies and the Growth of Resistance in 1812

Following the suppression of the Pazhassi revolt in 1805, the British administration introduced harsh policies in Wayanad. Revenue collection was intensified, agricultural taxation increased and tribal communities were deprived of their customary rights over land and forest resources. Traditional systems of governance were weakened and the authority of tribal elders and local leaders declined under colonial intervention. Such severe circumstances led the tribal and indigenous people to fight against the British administration and policies.



The British authority also imposed restrictions on local trade and attempted to regulate agricultural production according to colonial interests. These measures severely affected the livelihood of peasants and tribal communities. The Kurichias, who had earlier participated in the Pazhassi struggles, became increasingly hostile towards British rule. The resentment generated by colonial policies gradually transformed into organized resistance. The tribal population viewed British authority not merely as political domination but also as an attack upon their traditional way of life. Thus, the revolt of 1812 emerged from a combination of economic exploitation, political oppression and cultural intrusion (T.K. Raveendran, 1978).

### **Nature and Character of the 1812 Uprising**

The uprising of 1812 possessed multiple dimensions. It was simultaneously a tribal revolt, a peasant rebellion and in all sense an anti-colonial movement. Since the Kurichias and Kurumas formed the backbone of the resistance, the movement came to be known as the Kurichia Revolt and Kuruma Revolt. As the entire tribal population of Wayanad participated in the struggle, it is also remembered as an Indigenous or Adivasi Revolt. The agrarian character of the uprising is equally important. The revolt was directed against exploitative revenue policies and colonial control over agriculture. Therefore, it may also be interpreted as an agrarian revolution. Since the rebellion originated from Kurichiad near Ganapathivattam and remained largely confined to Wayanad, the terms *Kurichiad Revolt* and *Wayanadan Revolution* are also historically meaningful.

The movement developed into a people's uprising with mass participation. Initially, the rebels started their movement from Kuppadi, only a small group supported Raman Nambi, the main organizer and leader of 1812 uprising. However, during the attack on the British post at Kuppadi which was the nearest military cum residence of British force, the number of rebels increased significantly (Colonel James Welsh, 1830). By the time the rebels assembled at the Murikkanmar Temple at Pulpally, nearly one thousand people had joined the movement. Within weeks, revolts emerged in more than twenty centres across the Wayanad region. (Colonel James Welsh, 1830)

### **Raman Nambi and the Leadership of the Revolt**

Among the leaders of the uprising, Raman Nambi occupies the most important position. A native of Kurichiad near Ganapathivattam, he belonged to the Kuruma tribal community and organized the Kuruma people as a fighting force. Raman Nambi was also trained in *Kolpayattu*, a martial tradition associated with *Kalaripayattu*. Originally known as *Ramar*, he served as a trusted representative known



as *Valiyakkaran* under the tribal elder of the Kuruma community (Kochangod Govindan Asan, 2025). He became affectionately known as *Nambi*, and later as Raman Nambi and became the leader of post Pazhassi revolts against colonial expansion.

Raman Nambi initiated the uprising by taking British officers captive at Kurichiad and later issued a proclamation at the Murikkanmar Temple in Pulpally on 27 March 1812 (T.K.Raveendran, 1978). This Pulpally temple proclamation reveals the spirit of their anti-colonial ideology. “The foreign rulers who crossed the seas are steadily conquering our land. To defend this sacred soil, *Ponnuthampuran* (Pazhassiraja) sacrificed his life, and Thalakkal Chanthu along with many of our brothers embraced martyrdom. The arrival of these colonizers has angered our *kuladaivams* (clan deities) and *maladaivams* (the gods of the mountains). Even the flowering of the bamboo groves is a sign of divine displeasure. They stand against our people, our gods and our homeland. Therefore, the foreign oppressors must be driven out. If we fail in this duty, the wrath of the mountain gods and clan deities will fall upon us; the land will perish and our clans will be destroyed. But the gods stand with us. Take up whatever weapons you possess and join the struggle. We must avenge the blood of *Ponnuthampuran* and our fallen brothers. May the Lord Mother and the Murikkanmars grant us courage and strength in this righteous fight against colonial domination.” (Kochangod Govindan Asan, 2024). This proclamation marked a turning point in the rebellion and later the revolts spread different parts of Wayanad region.

Raman Nambi achieved major success against British forces at Kuttiyadi Pass and emerged as the principal leader of the uprising. On 12 April 1812, the rebels declared Wayanad a territory free from British rule. In an effort to restore indigenous authority, they invited the nephew of the late Keralavarmaraja to Wayanad and proclaimed him as their king. However, due to the strict surveillance and oppressive control exercised by the British, the prince was unable to reach Wayanad. Consequently, the insurgents appointed Raman Nambi as the leader of the resistance movement and declared him the ruler of Wayanad (V.K.Santhoshkumar, 2022). This marked a significant attempt by the rebels to establish an alternative political order against British colonial domination.

By the end of April 1812, the British government had made extensive preparations to suppress the uprising through a powerful military campaign. A large force of troops advanced into Wayanad from Mysore, leading to intense fighting and heavy bloodshed throughout the region. The harsh and systematic methods of attack employed by the British created a sense of fear and uncertainty among the insurgents, and suddenly weakened the strength and unity of the resistance movement. The British captured members of Raman Nambi’s family (including his wife and son) from their house. Although he continued the



struggle with his small force more actively. On 30 April 1812, during an attack on a British military post in Kodagu (Coorg), Raman Nambi was shot dead. British reactions following his death reveal the extent to which they feared him. Colonel James Welsh, the then military officer who was in charge of the military operation, ordered that Raman Nambi's head be severed and presented before British authorities for identification (Colonel James Welsh, 1830). The detailed verification of his identity demonstrates both the importance attached to his death and the revolutionary threat he represented to colonial rule.

### **Other Leaders of the Uprising**

The uprising witnessed the participation of several courageous leaders from tribal and peasant backgrounds. However, many of these brave fighters still remain forgotten in the pages of history, their sacrifices and contributions largely unrecorded and unrecognized. Despite playing a significant role in resisting colonial expansion and protecting their land, culture and freedom, their names were often excluded from mainstream historical narratives. Recovering and documenting the names of these unsung heroes is essential not only for understanding the true nature of anti-colonial resistance but also for restoring their rightful place in history.

**Venkalon Kelu:** Venkalon Kelu was a prominent Kurichia warrior who continued the resistance after the death of Raman Nambi. Local traditions remember him as a fearless fighter. He was born into the Kurichia tharavad (traditional family) of *Venkaloni* and played a crucial role in strengthening the Kurichia forces known as *Kurichiappada* against the British forces (P.ramachandran, 2024). The British administration officially declared the rebellion suppressed only after his death on 8 May 1812 (T.H.Baber, 1805). Venkalon Kelu is remembered as one of the most powerful and courageous fighters of the 1812 tribal rebellion.

**Placka Chanthu:** Placka Chanthu belonged to the Kurichia fighting force and had earlier participated in the Pazhassi struggles. He was born into a well-known Kurichia tharavad of *Pilakkara* and played a crucial role in strengthening the Kurichia forces (P.Ramachandran, 2024). He actively joined with Raman Nambi in organizing resistance against the British in the 1812 Revolt. On 29 April 1812, he died heroically in the battle at Mananthavady, one of the most crucial centres of the revolt.

**Mampilamthodan Yamu:** Mampilamthodan Yamu, a warrior from the Chetti community, played an active role in several major battles, including those at Kurichiad, Kuppadi, Kuttiyadi Pass and Kunjhom. He also participated in the proclamation ceremony at Pulpally temple. He was born into the famous Chetti tharavad known as Mampilamthodan and played a crucial role in strengthening the Chetty people



against colonial expansion (Madhavan Chetty, 2024). Mampilamthodan Yamu was killed in battle at Kunjome on 28 April 1812.

**Ayiraveettil Konthappan:** Ayiraveettil Konthappan was a prominent Nair leader associated with the Nellurnadu revolt of 1 April 1812. He organized both Nair and Kurichia fighters and emerged as an important military leader of the uprising (Vijayan Koovana, 2025). He died in the battle at Kunjhome on 28 April 1812.

**Karingari Kannan:** Karingari Kannan was another major leader from North Wayanad. British officer James Welsh described him as one of the principal rebel leaders. He was captured by the British military officers from Valad on 26 April 1812 and was brutally executed by the British, who displayed his severed head as a warning to others (Colonel James Welsh, 1830). The British adopted such brutal measures with the deliberate objective of suppressing and disintegrating the resistance movement.

### **A Tribal Resistance Movement**

The 1812 uprising differed significantly from all other anti-colonial struggles in Kerala because it was fundamentally a people's movement. During the Pazhassi resistance, leadership was centred around Keralavarma Pazhassiraja, a royal figure from the Kottayam royal family. In contrast, the 1812 uprising emerged directly from the tribal and peasant communities of Wayanad. The revolt therefore represented a complete Wayanadan resistance movement rooted in indigenous society. The Kurichias, Kurumas, peasants, agricultural labourers and local chieftains collectively participated in the struggle. This broad social base transformed the uprising into one of the earliest organized tribal anti-colonial movements in South India.

### **Suppression and Continuation of Resistance**

T. H. Baber, the then sub-collector of Malabar, officially reported that the uprising had been suppressed on 8 May 1812 by the British military forces. But the evidences suggest that resistance continued very actively to 1820 in various parts of Wayanad. Revolts persisted in different regions such as Pulpally, Panamaram, Nellurnadu, Pulinjhal and Kunjome for a decade or more (Civil and Military Correspondence in 1812). Thomas Warden, the then collector of Malabar described 'these rebellions as movements that could neither be fully controlled nor permanently suppressed' (Thomas Warden, 1805). Whenever one uprising was crushed, another emerged elsewhere. However, after the deaths of leaders such as Raman Nambi and Venkalon Kelu, the resistance gradually became fragmented and leaderless. Without centralized leadership or organizational unity, later uprisings lacked the strength of the earlier



movement. Consequently, these movements failed to generate substantial political impact in the local people of Wayanad region. Owing to the absence of strong organisational structure and sustained leadership, many of these uprisings gradually declined and eventually disappeared over time.

### **Historical Significance of the 1812 revolt**

The significance of the 1812 uprising extends beyond regional history. It was one of the earliest tribal anti-colonial uprisings in South India and represented a direct challenge to British colonial authority. The movement also reflected the close relationship between tribal resistance and agrarian struggles. The rebellion demonstrated that colonial domination could not be accepted passively by indigenous communities. It also exposed the limitations of British military power in forested and tribal regions. The sacrifices made by leaders such as Raman Nambi, Placka Chanthu, Venkalon Kelu and Karingari Kannan remain important symbols of resistance in Kerala's historical memory. The uprising further reveals that the struggle for Indian independence was not confined to elite political leadership alone. Tribal communities, peasants and ordinary labourers also played a crucial role in resisting colonial exploitation.

### **Conclusion**

The tribal uprising of 1812 in Wayanad was a landmark event in the history of anti-colonial resistance in India. Emerging from the oppressive policies introduced after the fall of Pazhassiraja, the revolt represented the collective anger of tribal communities, peasants and local leaders against British domination. Under the leadership of Raman Nambi and other courageous fighters, the rebellion developed into a widespread people's movement.

Although the British eventually suppressed the uprising, the spirit of resistance continued in Wayanad for years afterward. The movement remains historically significant as one of the earliest organized tribal anti-colonial struggles in South India. More importantly, it highlights the role of indigenous communities in shaping the broader history of India's freedom struggle. It should be evaluated as a popular resistance movement that witnessed the active participation of the various tribal communities of Wayanad. It also highlights the remarkable spirit of co-operation between tribal and non-tribal communities in the anti-colonial resistance and movements.



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