



Agrarian Transformations, Religious Mobilisation and Local Identity: A Sociological Study of Pandikkad, Malappuram (c. 19th–20th Century)

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the interconnected processes of agrarian change, religious mobilisation, and the construction of local identity in Pandikkad, a panchayath in the Ernad taluk of Malappuram district, Kerala, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Drawing upon primary sources including panchayath records, oral interviews, colonial documents, and secondary historical literature, the study analyses how the feudal jenmi system, British colonial revenue policies, and the subsequent land reforms fundamentally reshaped social relations in this region. It further explores how the Khilafat movement and the Malabar Rebellion of 1921 served as sites of both anti-colonial resistance and articulation of local Muslim identity. The paper argues that Pandikkad's history reveals the complex interplay between economic exploitation, religious symbolism, and the emergence of a distinctive local political consciousness that continues to influence community harmony and developmental trajectories in contemporary Kerala.

1. Introduction

The study of local history has gained significant traction within sociological scholarship as a means to understand how macro-level processes of colonialism, capitalist transformation, and nation-state formation are experienced, negotiated, and contested at the micro-level. As the Annales historian Leroy Ladurie demonstrated through his pioneering work on Montaillou, the intensive examination of a single locality can illuminate broader historical dynamics that remain obscured in grand narratives.¹ This paper



undertakes a similar sociological investigation of Pandikkad, a panchayath in the Ernad taluk of Malappuram district, Kerala, with the objective of understanding how agrarian transformations and religious mobilisations shaped local identity formation from the late 19th century through the mid-20th century.

The present work is an attempt to write a local history of Pandikkad. In the general history of Kerala, aspects of Pandikkad may not be included. Aspects of localities that are neglected in a grand narrative can be highlighted in local history. The recent booming stage of globalisation and liberalisation presents an innovative tendency to undermine locality. In this context, it is necessary to know our history, culture, politics and identity. The implementation of Janakeeyasuthranam (People's Planning) at Pandikkad panchayath made local history a development need.²

Pandikkad occupies a distinctive position in the history of modern Kerala. Situated in the eastern portion of Ernad taluk, this region was characterised by its predominantly agrarian economy, significant Muslim population, and a feudal land tenure system that concentrated land ownership in the hands of a few jenmis (landlords), many of whom belonged to Nambudiri Brahmin and aristocratic families.³ The area gained particular historical significance as the "heart of rebellion" during the Malabar Rebellion of 1921, producing prominent Khilafat leaders including Varian Kunnath Kunjahammed Haji, Chembrasseril Thangal, and Ali Musliyar.⁴

Pandikkad played an important role in the Mappila riots of the 19th century, in the Khilafat movement, and in the Mappila rebellion of 1921. The tourist bungalow and the police station of Pandikkad are symbols of the Malabar rebellion. The area was connected with national leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, Rajeev Gandhi, and Vinobha Bhave who visited Pandikkad.⁵

2. Methodology and Sources

This study employs historical-sociological methodology, combining archival research, oral history, and analysis of secondary literature. Primary sources include official documents maintained at the Pandikkad Panchayath office, including the Samagra Vikasana Rekha (Comprehensive Development Record, 2000-2012) and annual information registrations.⁶ Colonial administrative records, particularly those documented by British officials including R.H. Hitchcock, C.A. Innes, and William Logan, provide valuable insights into the British perception of the Malabar region.⁷

Oral interviews constitute a crucial primary source for this study, as written records of local history remain scarce. Interviews were conducted with senior citizens of Pandikkad, including Ayamutti (age



90), Kunjalavi (age 79), Moideen Njaramthodika, Moideenkutti Melathil, and Ummermaster.⁸ These interviews provided invaluable information regarding local traditions, land relations, and the transmission of memory across generations.

Secondary sources include the Malabar Manual, district gazetteers, and historical works on the Malabar Rebellion by K. Madhavan Nair, M. Gangadharan, and Stephen F. Dale.⁹ The study acknowledges the limitations posed by the scarcity of written records specific to Pandikkad and has therefore triangulated multiple sources to construct a reliable analytical narrative.

3. The Agrarian Structure of Pandikkad: Land, Labour and Exploitation

3.1 Geographical and Demographic Context

Pandikkad panchayath, comprising the villages of Pandikkad, Vettikattiri, and Chembrasserri, is situated in the north-eastern part of Malappuram district. The region encompasses 966 square miles, bounded by the Olippuzha river to the east and north-west.¹⁰ According to the 2001 census, the population of Pandikkad Panchayath was approximately 50,000, comprising 25,500 males and 24,500 females, with literacy rates of 92.5 percent among males and 83.08 percent among females.¹¹

Geographical factors have greatly influenced every aspect of society in Pandikkad. The geography shows characteristics of both middle lands and highlands, including small mountains, hills, and valleys. The major hills are Mayyamala and More Estate, while Kuraya Pura is the highest rock hill. The panchayath can be classified into six geographical divisions: high plains (1700 hectares, 38 percent), steep slope (450 hectares, 9 percent), 8 km slope (900 hectares, 20 percent), valleys (400 hectares, 9.4 percent), plains (850 hectares, 18.6 percent), and river banks (275 hectares, 5 percent).¹²

Pandikkad is rich in water resources including the Olippuzha river, natural canals, tanks, and ponds. However, these resources are not properly utilised for drinking water or irrigation. The panchayath and Krishi Bhavan provide assistance to farmers for agricultural development, including digging wells and establishing pump sets.¹³ The area is known for cultivation of cash crops like rubber, coconut, areca nut, pepper, ginger, and cashew nuts.¹⁴

3.2 The Jenmi System and Colonial Revenue Policies

Prior to the land reforms of 1969, the agrarian structure of Pandikkad was characterised by the feudal jenmi system. Large tracts of land were owned by jenmis including the Nilambur Kovilakam, Mana Natumanu, Karuthedathu Mana, and other aristocratic families.¹⁵ These jenmis leased land to



intermediate tenants, who in turn sublet to actual cultivators, creating a multi-layered system of extraction that left the direct producer impoverished.

The British colonial administration, upon assuming control of Malabar following the Treaty of Seringapatam in 1792, largely retained the existing land tenure system while introducing revenue policies that intensified exploitation. The British demand for revenue in cash rather than kind, combined with their tendency to auction defaulting cultivators' lands, created conditions of chronic indebtedness and dispossession. As William Logan documented in the Malabar Manual, the eastern taluks of Ernad and Valluvanad witnessed repeated agrarian disturbances throughout the 19th century precisely because of these policies.¹⁶

In 1790, a revolt started under the leadership of guerrilla Elumpulasshari Unnimods as an anti-tax movement. In 1841, 2,000 farmers engaged in a district attack against British soldiers. The British implemented the Mappila Act to suppress resistance. In 1854, British collector Connolly was killed in a Mappila guerrilla attack.¹⁷

3.3 Agricultural Practices and Economic Transformation

The agricultural economy of Pandikkad was historically dominated by paddy cultivation. In Pandikkad, 1870 hectares of land are low lands or fields and 3675 hectares are high lands. According to the 1991 census, there were 1237 cultivators and 3765 agricultural labourers in the panchayath.¹⁸

However, from the 1970s onwards, a significant transformation occurred. The shift from paddy cultivation to cash crops, particularly rubber, became the most significant agricultural change. Rubber cultivation centres emerged in Chembrasserri, Karuvarakundu, and Valluvangad. This transformation was driven by rising costs of paddy production, scarcity of agricultural labour, low paddy prices, and higher profitability of cash crops. By the time of this study, only 20 paddy fields remained across 492 hectares.¹⁹

Coconut cultivation has also declined due to falling prices. Many coconut plantations have been converted for residential construction. Tapioca and plantain cultivation persist as subsidiary activities. Vegetable cultivation remains limited despite Krishi Bhavan assistance.²⁰

3.4 Land Reforms and Social Restructuring

The Kerala Land Reforms Act of 1969 (Act 35 of 1969) fundamentally restructured agrarian relations in Pandikkad. The Act abolished the jenmi system, conferred ownership rights on tenant cultivators, and imposed ceilings on land holdings. Leaseholders became owners of the land they cultivated.²¹



The abolition of the jenmi system had profound sociological consequences. First, it dismantled the economic base of traditional feudal authority. Second, it created a class of small-holding peasant proprietors, many from Muslim and lower-caste Hindu communities previously excluded from land ownership. Third, it altered patronage relations, including the relationship between temples and their traditional supporters. The decline in temple status following loss of landed property affected daily rituals and festivals.²²

The economy remains predominantly agrarian, and Pandikkad has been backward in industrial development. Existing industries include saw mills, rice mills, oil mills, furniture units, and hollow bricks manufacturing. The advent of Gulf money has transformed the economy, emancipating many families from poverty, though this money is mainly spent on consumption rather than investment.²³

4. Religious Mobilisation and the Malabar Rebellion

4.1 The Khilafat Movement in Pandikkad

The early decades of the 20th century witnessed the convergence of agrarian discontent and anti-colonial religious mobilisation in Pandikkad. The Khilafat movement, which sought to protect the authority of the Ottoman Caliph as the symbolic leader of global Sunni Islam, found fertile ground in Malabar. The movement's anti-British character enabled it to articulate agrarian grievances within a religious framework meaningful to the predominantly Muslim agricultural population.²⁴

In 1920, the Nagpur session of the Indian National Congress led to the formation of congress committees in Malabar. In Manjeri, under M.P. Narayana Menon, a committee was formed. Kattilassari Musliyar formed a Khilafat committee in Pandikkad. The Pandikkad volunteer corps was trained and led by Valarad Narayane Nambeeshan, indicating Hindu participation alongside Muslims.²⁵

Pandikkad produced several prominent Khilafat leaders. Ali Musliyar was born in Nellikuth. Varian Kunnath Kunjahammed Haji was born in 1866 in Nellikuth. Chembrasser Thangal belonged to the Chembrasser amsam. Other leaders included Payyanadan Moyin and Kuzhikkadan Muhammed.²⁶

4.2 The Outbreak of 1921: Events at Pandikkad

The Malabar Rebellion of 1921 unfolded dramatically in Pandikkad. On the morning of August 21, 1921, a rumour spread that the Mambram mosque had been demolished by the army and that several British officers had been killed.²⁷ The arms and ammunition at the Pandikkad police station were ordered to be sent to Manjeri. However, a gang of about fifty Mappilas led by Varian Kunnath Kunjahammed Haji



attacked the police party and carried away the entire arms and ammunition. Shortly afterwards, about one hundred rebels attacked the Pandikkad police station.²⁸

By approximately 8 PM, about 3,000 Mappilas gathered at the Pandikkad mosque for a meeting attended by both Haji and Chembrasser Thangal. The meeting made significant political decisions: Chembrasser Thangal was appointed ruler of Chembrasser, Karuvarakundu, Melatur, and Kalikavu; Varian Kunnath Kunjahammed Haji was assigned governance of Nellikuth and Velluvangad; Kodalayi Moosa Haji was appointed ruler of Pandikkad itself.²⁹

On September 9, 1921, a column of Dorset soldiers marched to Manjeri and divided into two parties, one proceeding to Wandoor and the other to Pandikkad. On November 11, 1921, the 2/8th battalion stationed at Pandikkad combined with the 3/70th battalion from Wandoor to attack rebel forces at Chembrasser. The rebels then launched an attack on the Pandikkad camp.³⁰

4.3 Varian Kunnath Kunjahammed Haji: A Sociological Profile

Varian Kunnath Kunjahammed Haji (1866–?) embodies the intersection of agrarian discontent, religious identity, and anti-colonial resistance. Born into a well-to-do Mappila family, he initially assisted his father in agriculture and trading activities.³¹ He was deeply interested in Mappila songs including *Badar Padappatta* and *Malappuram Padappatta*, which commemorate the sacrificial heroism of Muslims in conflict with hostile forces.³²

The British authorities considered Haji a person with criminal tendencies even before 1921. He was transported to the Andaman Islands and later forced to leave Malabar for Malaya. He returned at the end of 1913. By 1915, District Magistrate C.A. Innes was reporting on Haji as a person of concern.³³

According to K. Madhavan Nair, Haji was unknown to Congress-Khilafat leaders at Calicut, suggesting his leadership emerged from local conditions. Accounts indicate that Haji attempted to prevent the looting of Hindu property. When some Mappilas planned to loot a bank owned by a Nambutiri, Haji posted his own men to guard the bank and arranged for people to retrieve their pledged valuables without repaying loans.³⁴ This suggests Haji's rebellion was directed against the colonial state, not against Hindus as a community.

4.4 Chembrasser Thangal

Ottakath Kunikoya Thangal belonged to Chembrasser amsam. The total population of the amsam was 3190 in 1921 with 670 Hindus and 1520 Muslims. Thangal appeared to Madhavan Nair as a peaceful,



broad, and fair person with sympathy and compassion for all.³⁵ At the Pandikkad mosque meeting, Haji appointed Thangal as ruler to govern Chembrasser, Karuvarakund, Melattur, and Kalikavu. It was decided to attain Swaraj, achieve Hindu-Muslim unity, prevent looting, and protect Hindus.³⁶

5. Cultural Formations and Community Harmony

5.1 Religious Institutions and Syncretic Traditions

The cultural life of Pandikkad exhibits a remarkable synthesis of Brahmanical, tribal, and Islamic traditions. Temples and mosques constitute the twin centres of social and cultural life. Important temples include Poolamannkkavu Sri Temple, Kundeth Nair Temple, Chembrasser Pulivettikkavil Temple, and Payyappurambu Raman Temple.³⁷

The festival calendar includes both Hindu and Muslim celebrations: Kalipooja, Thalappoli, Ayyappanpattu, Pooram, Bakrid, Eid, Christmas, Onam, and Vishu are celebrated by all sections of the population, exemplifying inter-religious friendship and cooperation.³⁸

5.2 Educational Development

Modern education in Pandikkad began with the establishment of Velluvangad A.M.L.P. School in 1903 under Muslim management. Subsequently, Kodasser, G.M.L.P. School was established.³⁹ The establishment of Pandikkad Higher Secondary School on June 21, 1957, marked a milestone; the first SSLC batch passed in 1960-61.⁴⁰ The literacy mission of the early 1990s created further cultural transformation.

5.3 Libraries, Arts, and Sports

Pandikkad possesses a vibrant associational culture. Important libraries include Grandhavali, Vivekalam, Jana Savina Vidya Library, Nava Chethena Library, and Tharamgam. More than 35 arts and sports clubs are affiliated with the panchayath.⁴¹

The region has produced notable artists including M. Vinod (award-winning drama director), P.M. Shankar Narayanan, Rahman Kidangayam, and singer Rajive Master. Football is the most popular sport, with players like V.P. Jasir (international goalkeeper) and V.P.A. Nassar (AIF-recognised referee who established a football academy).⁴²



6. The Transformation of Local Identity

6.1 From Feudal Subject to Democratic Citizen

The transformation of political identity in Pandikkad can be traced through the shift from feudal subjecthood to democratic citizenship. During the jenmi period, social identity was defined by one's position within the land tenure hierarchy. The post-independence period, particularly after the land reforms of 1969, witnessed the emergence of the small-holding peasant proprietor with voting rights and access to local governance. The panchayath system was established in Pandikkad in 1956, with Kudumakkaran Shankaran Namboothiri as first president.⁴³

6.2 Memory and Commemoration

The transmission of memory regarding the 1921 rebellion constitutes an important dimension of local identity formation. The police station and tourist bungalow at Pandikkad remain as material legacies of the colonial period.⁴⁴ British sources depict the events as religiously fanatical outbreaks, while local oral traditions emphasise the agrarian character of the uprising and the attempts by leaders to protect Hindu property.⁴⁵ This contested memory continues to inform contemporary community relations.

7. Contemporary Challenges and Continuities

Despite the violence of the 1921 rebellion, Pandikkad has maintained remarkable communal harmony in the post-independence period. Factors include the shared experience of anti-colonial struggle, Hindu participation in the Khilafat movement, mixed festivals, and dense networks of voluntary associations.⁴⁶

The shift from paddy to cash crop cultivation has produced ambiguous outcomes. While rubber offers higher returns, it subjects cultivators to price volatility. The decline of paddy cultivation has reduced food self-sufficiency. The conversion of agricultural land for residential purposes, driven by Gulf migration remittances, has altered the social landscape.⁴⁷

8. Conclusion

This sociological study of Pandikkad has examined the interconnections between agrarian transformation, religious mobilisation, and local identity formation. Several significant findings emerge.

First, the agrarian structure was characterised by the feudal jenmi system, which, combined with British revenue policies, created chronic agrarian distress. Second, the Malabar Rebellion of 1921 represented an articulation of agrarian grievances within a religious framework, with rebel leaders attempting to



establish alternative administration and protect Hindu property. Third, the land reforms of 1969 fundamentally restructured social relations by abolishing the jenmi system and creating small-holding peasant proprietors. Fourth, Pandikkad has maintained notable communal harmony, evidenced by shared festivals and inter-religious associations. Fifth, contemporary economic transformation, particularly the shift to cash crops and Gulf migration, has produced new forms of social stratification.

The study demonstrates the value of local history as an analytical tool for understanding broader social processes. As Kerala continues to undergo economic and social transformation, the preservation and study of local historical records becomes increasingly urgent. The voices of senior citizens, panchayath documents, and material legacies of colonialism constitute an archive that deserves systematic preservation for future generations.

Footnotes

¹ Laduri Le Roy, *Montaillou* (London, 1970).

² Pandikkad Grama Panchayath, *Samagra Vikasana Rekha* (1998), p. 5.

³ A. Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History* (Kottayam, 1967), pp. 104-105.

⁴ R.H. Hitchcock, *A History of the Malabar Rebellion 1921* (Madras, 1925), pp. 157-158.

⁵ Safar Pandikkad, *Charithra Peruma Nediya Desam* (Malabar, 2014), pp. 5-10.

⁶ Pandikkad Grama Panchayath, *Samagra Vikasana Rekha* (1998); Pandikkad Grama Panchayath, *Information Registration 2009-2010*.

⁷ William Logan, *Malabar Manual* (Madras, 1887/1951); C.A. Innes and F.B. Evans, *Malabar District Gazetteers* (Madras, 1951).

⁸ Interviews: Ayamutti (Sept 20, 2014); Kunjalavi (Sept 17, 2014); Moideen Njaramthodika (Dec 10, 2014); Moideenkutti Melathil (Sept 19, 2014); Ummermaster (Dec 10, 2014).

⁹ K. Madhavan Nair, *Malabar Kalapam* (Calicut, 1971); M. Gangadharan, *Malabar Rebellion 1921* (Allahabad, 1989); Stephen F. Dale, *The Mappilas of Malabar* (Delhi, 1980).

¹⁰ Pandikkad Grama Panchayath, *Samagra Vikasana Rekha*, p. 19.

¹¹ Pandikkad Grama Panchayath, *Information Registration*, p. 20.

¹² Pandikkad Grama Panchayath, *Samagra Vikasana Rekha*, p. 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.



- ¹⁵ Interview with Moideenkutti Melathil, Sept 19, 2014.
- ¹⁶ Logan, *Malabar Manual*, Vol. 1, p. 64; K.N. Panikkar, *Against Lord and State* (Delhi, 1989), p. 27.
- ¹⁷ Menon, *Survey of Kerala History*, pp. 106, 27.
- ¹⁸ Pandikkad Grama Panchayath, *Samagra Vikasana Rekha*, pp. 24, 28.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 31; Interview with Moideen Njaramthodika, Dec 10, 2014.
- ²⁰ Pandikkad Grama Panchayath, *Samagra Vikasana Rekha*, p. 31.
- ²¹ Kerala Land Reforms Act, 1969 (Act 35 of 1969).
- ²² Interview with Ayamutti, Sept 20, 2014; Interview with Moideenkutti Melathil, Sept 19, 2014.
- ²³ Pandikkad Grama Panchayath, *Samagra Vikasana Rekha*, p. 37.
- ²⁴ K.K.M. Abdul Karim, *1921-ile Khilafath Lahalayum Alimusliyarum* (Thirurangadi, 1969), p. 321.
- ²⁵ Interview with Ayamutti, Sept 20, 2014.
- ²⁶ Abdul Karim, *Khilafath Lahalayum Alimusliyarum*, pp. 10-15, 323.
- ²⁷ Hitchcock, *History of the Malabar Rebellion*, p. 278.
- ²⁸ Gangadharan, *Malabar Rebellion*, pp. 158, 274.
- ²⁹ Ibid., p. 159; Madhavan Nair, *Malabar Kalapam*, pp. 200-202.
- ³⁰ Madhavan Nair, *Malabar Kalapam*, pp. 200-202; Hitchcock, *Peasant Revolt in Malabar*, p. 21.
- ³¹ Abdul Karim, *Khilafath Lahalayum Alimusliyarum*, pp. 323-324.
- ³² Ibid., pp. 264-265.
- ³³ Ibid., pp. 300-301.
- ³⁴ Madhavan Nair, *Khilafath Smarana Kurippukal*, p. 222.
- ³⁵ Dale, *The Mappilas of Malabar*, pp. 223-225.
- ³⁶ Innes and Evans, *Malabar District Gazetteers*, pp. 208, 239.
- ³⁷ T.K. Gopala Panikkar, *Malabar and Its Folks* (Madras, 1901), p. 401.
- ³⁸ Interview with Moideenkutti Melathil, Sept 19, 2014.
- ³⁹ Pandikkad Grama Panchayath, *Samagra Vikasana Rekha*, pp. 171-172.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 182-183.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., p. 182.
- ⁴² Ibid., pp. 183-184.
- ⁴³ Safar Pandikkad, *Charithra Peruma Nediya Desam*, p. 177.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 100.
- ⁴⁵ Hitchcock, *History of the Malabar Rebellion*; Interview with Moideen Njaramthodika, Dec 10, 2014.
- ⁴⁶ Interview with Ummermaster, Dec 10, 2014.



⁴⁷ Pandikkad Grama Panchayath, *Samagra Vikasana Rekha*, p. 31.

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Oral Interviews (2014)

Ayamutti (age 90), Kunjalavi (age 79), Moideen Njaramthodika, Moideenkutti Melathil, Ummermaster.

Appendix: Tables

Table 1: Geographical Division of Pandikkad

Division	Area (Hectares)	Percentage
High plains	1700	38
Sleep slope	450	9
8 km slope	900	20
Valleys	400	9.4



Plains	850	18.6
River banks	275	5

Table 2: Agricultural Productivity

Crop	Area (Ha)	Productivity
Paddy (1st)	650	2.8 tonnes/ha
Paddy (2nd)	542	2.5 tonnes/ha
Coconut	14	5325 nuts/ha
Plantain	610	6.76 tonnes/ha

Table 3: Small Scale Industries

Industry	Units	Industry	Units
Rice mill	36	Oil mill	17
Saw mill	10	Furniture	30
Hollow bricks	12	Copra	10