



Tragedy and Resilience: The Mappila Muslim Women in the 1921 Malabar Rebellion

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ABSTRACT

This study is an earnest attempt to reveal the untold experiences of Mappila Muslim women during the 1921 Malabar Rebellion, focusing specifically on the *Eranad* and *Valluvanad* regions. While providing a brief overview of the rebellion itself, the research adopts a gender perspective to reconstruct history through a feminine lens. Utilizing a micro-historical approach, the study draws upon local oral histories, interviews, weeklies, historical works, and traditional *lettersongs* (*kathupaattu*). It highlights the distinct roles played by Mappila Muslim women and examines the patterns of their involvement in the uprising. Ultimately, the study sheds light on the profound suffering, trauma, and losses endured by these women, analyzing how they navigated a highly disturbed social setup to protect their families, secure their wealth, and preserve their personal safety during this period of crisis.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, mainstream historical narratives have focused on public socio-economic and political events dominated by male actors. However, the rise of gender history has shifted focus toward marginalized groups. This study addresses a major gap in existing literature—which heavily emphasizes the political, economic, and communal angles of the 1921 Malabar Rebellion—by providing a localized, feminine perspective on the anti-colonial and anti-landlord uprising. To uncover the distinct suffering, trauma, and experiences of Mappila Muslim women during this martial law-driven conflict (and its aftermath, like the

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Wagon Tragedy and Andaman colonization), the research utilizes micro-historical sources such as personal memoirs, oral testimonies, photographs, and traditional *lettersongs* (*kathupaattu*).

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF 1921 MALABAR REBELLION

Following the Treaty of *Srirangapattanam* in 1792, Malabar came under British rule and later became part of the Madras Presidency. During this colonial period, Malabar witnessed a series of violent agrarian revolts in the *Eranadu* and *Valluvanadu* taluks between 1836 and 1921. While these early Mappila revolts were primarily the result of agrarian grievances, the 1921 Rebellion was waged against both the colonial power and the local Hindu *janmies*.

Decades earlier, T.L. Strange had been appointed to enquire into the causes of the initial outbreaks; he dismissed agrarian issues and recommended a repressive policy.ⁱ Later, the Malabar Special Police (MSP) was set up in 1921 to suppress the massive uprising, though the violent clashes continued intensely. The rebellion officially began on August 20, 1921, lasting for about six months, with peace taking several more months to be restored.

Rise of Khilafat Movement and the establishment of Congress-Khilafat committees in 1920 were encouraged the 1921 rebellion. British police raid on the *Tirurangadi* mosque in South Malabar on August 20, 1921—aimed at arresting local Khilafat and Congress leaders officially inaugurated the rebellion. The rapid progress of the Khilafat Movement in *Eranadu* and *Valluvanadu* had alarmed the colonial government, prompting them to place these taluks under Section 144.ⁱⁱ Malabar Rebellion was led by prominent leaders such as Ali Musliyar and *Variyamkunnath Kunjahammed Haji*. In response, the colonial government deployed British troops and Gurkha regiments to the troubled areas under martial law, unleashing brutal repressive measures that affected Mappila men, women, children, and the elderly alike. The Wagon Tragedy remains one of the most infamous and tragic episodes of this crackdown, claiming many lives due to suffocation.

As the rebellion progressed, the Mappilas turned more violent, and the uprising shifted into a fierce struggle against police oppression. At certain points, it took on a communal nature, particularly when local Hindus who remained loyal to the British government were perceived as traitors, leading to instances of forced conversions and looting by the rebels. The rebellion was ultimately suppressed by the British government with an iron hand. The primary rebel leaders were captured and executed, while thousands of others were either imprisoned or deported to the Andaman Island.



Gendering the Rebellion: The Resistance and Resilience of Mappila Women in 1921

The 1921 Malabar Rebellion (or Mappila Revolt) was a defining turning point in the anti-colonial struggle within the southern regions of the old Malabar district in present-day Kerala. While the Malayalam novel *Vambathi* illustrates women fighters actively participating in the 1921 uprising, this portrayal remains largely a work of fiction. The direct involvement of women in combat was historically very low or undocumented. When women did engage directly, it was typically in defense of their homes against military and police forces searching for rebels. A prime example is *Kannath Chinnamma* of *Valavanoor*, who confronted British military personnel using a domestic kitchen knife.ⁱⁱⁱ Apart from such isolated incidents, Mappila women primarily participated in the rebellion indirectly. Before joining the uprising, Mappila men routinely entrusted domestic and household responsibilities to others, relocating women and children to safer areas. Domestically, women supported the movement by encouraging the rebels, praying for their success, and managing the households.

British official H.F. Hitchcock reported on the *Pookottur* incident, noting that as rebels marched to the battlefield, women inspired them by singing *Badar Paattu* (traditional songs commemorating the Battle of Badr). Similarly, reports sent by him to the Madras Governor and Military Headquarters highlighted the motivational role played by Mappila women.^{iv} Although countless women lost their husbands, sons, and fathers, they spoke of them with pride as martyrs (*shuhada*). Mappila women demonstrated immense resilience, bearing the emotional and economic burden of family separation when their men left for *jihad*.

Beyond these domestic sacrifices, women bore the brunt of the harsh martial law implemented to crush the rebellion. After Mappila men retreated to the jungles upon hearing rumors of military advancements, British troops inflicted severe trauma on the unarmed, helpless populations left behind in the villages. Military forces looted Mappila homes, assaulted residents, and subjected women to widespread molestation, executing those who attempted to resist.

The Gurkha regiments, notorious for their hostile attitude toward the local population, exploited the situation without mercy. They molested an old lady and then shot her dead and enough women were kept under them.^v Countless women and children were bayoneted or shot dead by Lewis guns in their jungle hideouts.^{vi} Even though women and children did not actively participate in the frontline combat, they endured ultimate trauma and sacrificed their lives through their loyal support of the rebels. These joint military and police atrocities are well-documented in contemporary literature compiled around 1921, including Idasseri's poems about Muhammad *Abdul Rahman*,^{vii} and the *Kathuppattu* (letter-songs) of *Mariyakutty*^{viii} and *Puthoor Amina*.



Martial law completely devastated South Malabar. Mappila women and children desperately sought refuge in jungles, caves, and hills, while Gurkha units hunted down those who had fled their homes.

Homes along the main roads of *Eranad* and *Valluvanad* became entirely insecure. With almost all adult men imprisoned, women and children lived in a constant state of terror; one author notes that his grandmother was forced to give birth to his mother behind a thicket of bushes.^{ix} The military routinely engaged in the molestation of Mappila women and the systematic looting of households as punitive measures. For instance, while searching for *Pookottur Vadamkattil Muhammad*, military personnel abused the women present in the household.^x Soldiers frequently walked away with large sums of cash and jewelry confiscated from Mappila properties.

In the complete absence of men, the responsibility of securing family wealth, protecting children, and finding sustenance fell entirely on Mappila women. Women waited anxiously for their men until late into the night, never knowing if they would ever return. The rampant military looting triggered widespread public appeals across the country. Police forces targeted nearly every household in *Manjeri*, with destruction peaking in *Pandikkad* and *Karuvarakundu*, where entire villages and mosques were destroyed.

Furthermore, the military forced captive Mappila men and mothers into hard labor, chaining them together to rebuild broken roads and bridges.^{xi} An article published in the *Kerala Chandrika* newspaper dated July 22, 1922, reported that intoxicated policemen had raided houses at midnight, violating the chastity of helpless Mappila women.^{xii} National leaders like Sarojini Naidu strongly condemned these brutal military actions.^{xiii} The army operated under general orders to treat all local Mappilas as enemies and ensured no internal support system remained for the active rebels.

On October 25, the Dorset Regiment rushed into Mappila homes at Adhikari Thodi in *Melmuri*, executing a massacre of 246 Muslims, including women, children, and elderly individuals who attempted to resist. In Adhikari Thodi, one can still find the graves (*khabarsthans*) of two daughters who died shielding their fathers from military fire. Among them was an 11-year-old girl from the *Keedakadan* family; she tightly embraced her father as soldiers tried to pull her away at gunpoint, and when she refused to let go, the soldiers shot them both together. The second grave belongs to *Khadiyumma*, the daughter of *Parakkal Kunjeen Haji*. She had traveled from her matrimonial home to nurse her ailing father, and when the army captured him, she threw her arms around him. The soldiers executed both father and daughter on the spot. This tragic episode remains a glaring silence in mainstream historiography.^{xiv}



In the same area lies the grave of a man named Ali, dug only two feet deep. Because all the local males had either been killed or gone into hiding, local Muslim women dug the grave at night to bury the elderly man after he was killed by the army.^{xv}

From March 1922 onward, the post-rebellion period was defined by large-scale trials, severe famine, capital punishments, mass deportations, and exorbitant fines levied by special courts. Families of the arrested had no way of knowing whether their loved ones were dead or alive. Countless Mappila men simply vanished. Fathima *Poozhikuth* recalls that her grandfather was seized by the army from their home when her mother was playing in the courtyard; he was never heard from again.^{xvi} The infamous Wagon Tragedy stands out as the ultimate manifestation of British wartime brutality. Due to a severe shortage of localized prison space caused by mass arrests, hundreds of rebels were deported to the Andaman Islands under colonization schemes managed by the Punjab and Madras governments.^{xvii} In this volatile atmosphere, families could never guarantee a patriarch's safe return. *Alavikutty* Haji of *Thrikkalangode* recalled that even populations living in undisturbed, non-combat zones suffered heavily. Fearing arbitrary military violence, people refused to venture outside, causing local shops to close down and plunging the region into a state of starvation. Households remained pitch-black due to a total lack of kerosene.

Alavikutty Haji recounted: "My father and his friends somehow managed to procure a small supply of rice and kerosene. However, before they could distribute it, the army arrived and dragged them away. The women and children screamed in vain. Within two months, we received news of my father's death inside the closed railway wagon, without having received even a single drop of water to drink."^{xviii}

Many Mappila women were widowed during the earliest days of their marriage. Conversely, when deported Mappila men finally returned to their native land after serving long sentences in the Andamans, they found their old lives completely shattered. In several instances, thinking their husbands dead, young wives had remarried out of sheer economic survival.

This underscores the grim reality of the era; women could not easily survive or protect their children without male socio-economic support during a period of artificial famine. Consequently, a vast portion of modern oral histories and memoirs concerning the Malabar Rebellion shares such emotional stories of loss of beloved ones.

Both British authorities and certain local landlords treated these orphaned, destitute women and children with immense cruelty. *Mariyakutty's* famous *Kathuppattu* (letter-song) captures this profound sorrow,



illustrating a wife's deep longing for her imprisoned husband's protection, while casting light on the systemic exploitation faced by Muslim women in the absence of their men.^{xix}

To deal with the massive influx of prisoners, the Government of Madras introduced a colonization scheme to permanently settle Mappila convicts and their families in the Andamans. *Aakka Parambil Saithali Haji*, who was deported under this scheme, noted that about 30 families from the *Pandikkad* region alone relocated to the islands. He described the bittersweet joy of these families reuniting after long years of separation, where mothers finally introduced growing children to the fathers they had never known.^{xx}

Beyond physical violence and deportations, the British government extracted lakhs of rupees in punitive collective fines from impoverished Mappila households. This plunged the region into endless poverty and structural starvation, with women and children bearing the brunt of the economic fallout. British authorities rigorously collected these fines even if the male family patron was dead or exiled.

Some families never even received the standard 300-rupee compensation promised to the dependents of those who perished in the Wagon Tragedy. For example, the widow of Kutty Hassan (a Wagon Tragedy victim) had to use her entire compensation package along with funds raised from her husband's funeral charities just to clear the pending punitive fines imposed on her household by the state.^{xxi}

Women's survival became deeply complex amid acute food shortages, structural poverty, and the loss of family members. To keep their families alive, many Muslim women took up grueling physical labor, such as gathering and selling firewood.^{xxii} Even within elite rebel leadership circles, women carried immense structural burdens; in the absence of the top rebel leader, *Variyamkunnath Kunhahammed Haji*, his mother single-handedly managed the domestic affairs of their house. Haji himself later praised as an outstanding example of women's management capabilities.^{xxiii}

The deep suffering of the Mappila community is preserved in historical correspondence. In 1923, the nationalist leader M.P. Narayana Menon wrote a poignant letter to Yakub Hassan, pleading for immediate humanitarian intervention to save thousands of orphaned Mappila women and children. With entire villages in *Eranad* reduced to ashes, fields destroyed, and no men left to cultivate the land, economic life was completely paralyzed.

The widespread looting of Mappila homes by military forces led to a surge of public appeals. The Secretary of the Jamiath *Dhahvathi* Islam Sabha published a desperate plea for financial and material aid in the columns of the *Kerala Chandrika*.^{xxiv} Thereafter various community organizations initiated massive relief operations. Following the Kakinada Congress session, national leader Maulana Shaukat Ali travelled to



Malabar, and along with Abdul Qadir Gasoori, established six temporary relief camps.^{xxv} Shaukat Ali presented formal resolutions to secure national funding for Malabar's orphans, declaring it a profound religious and humanitarian duty to protect the children of the martyrs. Leaders like Abdhu Rahman Sahib wrote persuasive speeches to mobilize aid, and following the landmark Bombay Conference, substantial financial relief and supplies began flowing into the worst-hit rebel zones from sympathetic networks across North India. The workers of the *Jamiat Dhahvat-e-Tabeelighe* also arrived in Malabar.^{xxvi} And established a historic orphanage in Calicut to provide housing, food, and education for children who had lost their fathers.

All of these relief initiatives and contemporary newspaper records highlight the staggering structural hindrances faced by the Muslim community during the post-rebellion reconstruction era. The primary victims of every single tragic episode—regardless of community lines—were vulnerable women and children.

Uncovering these facts lifts the historical veil on the immense sacrifices, structural traumas, and silent endurance of Mappila women during 1921 and its long aftermath. Mappila women played a vital, foundational role in sustaining the ecosystem of the Malabar Rebellion while bearing its worst consequences. It remains a profound lapse in mainstream historiography that scholars have historically failed to record these women as core subaltern changemakers, struggle icons, or principal actors in the 1921 uprising.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores that the 1921 Malabar Rebellion, which originated from oppressive British land policies, exploitative tax systems, and unjust landlord (Janmi) evictions, evolved through the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movements into a complex anti-colonial and agrarian struggle. Crucially, this research uncovers the silent, foundational role played by Mappila women, challenging their traditional exclusion from mainstream historical narratives. Mappila women acted as the logistical and moral backbone of the uprising—sustaining the home front, protecting local wealth, safeguarding strategic secrets, providing provisions to rebels, and maintaining morale through prayer and the singing of traditional Badar songs. For this loyalty, they paid a huge price. The study reveals that women and children were victims of most vulnerable casualties of the post-rebellion military backlash. Deprived of their male patriarchs by massive imprisonment, the horrors of the Wagon Tragedy, and the sentences of the Andaman deportation scheme, these women faced structural trauma under martial law. They endured state-sanctioned displacements into jungles and caves, widespread sexual violence, starvation, collective punitive fines, and the destruction of their homes. Later Mappila Muslim women Forced into the roles of sole breadwinners during an era of



famine, they displayed remarkable economic resilience. Ultimately, this study concludes that the history of the 1921 Malabar Rebellion remains fundamentally incomplete without acknowledging the sacrifices of Mappila women. They were not merely passive bystanders or helpless victims of collateral damage; they were principal actors who sustained the social and economic fabric of Malabar under total warfare. Rectifying their omission from the historical record is not just an academic necessity, but a vital step toward a complete understanding of subaltern resistance in colonial India.

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