

The Hindu Explains | Why is there a controversy over a film project on the protagonist of 1921 Malabar Rebellion?

Why is there a controversy in Kerala over a new film project on the protagonist of an uprising against the British?

[Mohamed Nazeer](#)

The story so far: Malayalam film director Aashiq Abu, on June 22, announced a new film project, *Variyamkunnan*, on Variyamkunnath Kunhamed Haji, the main protagonist of the Malabar Rebellion of 1921 who was executed by the British. Soon, three more directors, Ibrahim Vengara, P.T. Kunju Muhammed and Ali Akbar, announced their own films on the same historic figure. The announcement of Abu, a Left supporter, [sparked a controversy](#), with Sangh Parivar outfits calling on actor Prithviraj Sukumaran, who is playing the role of Haji, not to accept the role in the film, *Variyamkunnan*. Akbar, a supporter of the Sangh Parivar, has declared that he will portray the 'real face' of the rebellion. A historical event that occurred a century ago [suddenly seems to have acquired](#)

Why has Aashiq Abu's film project announcement led to protests?

Unlike in 1988 when the late I.V. Sasi directed *1921*, a Malayalam movie based on the rebellion, political and communal polarisation in Kerala today has led to protests on social media. Amid criticism of Sangh Parivar leaders and attacks in the social media, Prithviraj wrote on his Facebook page that Haji "stood up against an empire that ruled a quarter of the world". The Hindu Aikya Vedi announced a year-long campaign to counter attempts to "glorify" Haji and other leaders who it said were responsible for atrocities against Hindus in southern parts of the erstwhile Malabar district of Kerala.

Also read | [Reports of Hindu-Muslim strife in Malabar baseless, wrote Variamkunnath Kunhamed Haji in *The Hindu* in 1921](#)

Why does the rebellion still stoke passions?

The Malabar Rebellion (also called the Mappila or Moplah Rebellion by the British) broke out in the southern taluks of Malabar in August 1921. By the time the government troops captured Haji in January 1922, the rebellion had fizzled out. It largely took the shape of guerrilla-type attacks on *janmis* (feudal landlords, who were mostly

upper caste Hindus) and the police and troops.

Mappilas had been among the victims of oppressive agrarian relations protected by the British. But the political mobilisation of Muslims in the region in the aftermath of the launch of the Khilafat agitation and Gandhi's non-cooperation struggle served as an opportunity for an extremist section to invoke a religious idiom to express their suffering, while working for a change in the oppressive system of administration. There were excesses on both sides — rebels and government troops. Incidents of murder, looting and forced conversion led many to discredit the uprising as a manifestation of religious bigotry. Moderate Khilafat leaders lamented that the rebellion had alienated the Hindu sympathy.

[Malabar rebellion | Mission to set the record straight](#)

How did Kunhamed Haji emerge as the leader?

Haji, who was one of the three most important rebel leaders, was the face of the rebellion. British officers viewed him as the "most murderous". Born in 1866 in a family with relatives involved in one of the Mappila "outbreaks" or "outrages" in the 19th century, he was familiar with the commemoration of *shaheeds* (martyrs) who fought against the tyranny of landlords and their helpers, mostly upper caste Hindus in the region. There

were several such outbreaks in the region during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The main actors of the outbreaks were individuals on suicide missions. The Khilafat movement launched in 1919 provided a fresh stimulus to the grievances of Mappilas. Now their sense of local injustice was sought to be linked with the pan-Islamic sentiments created in the aftermath of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire that rendered the Ottoman caliphate irrelevant. Haji was among those in the Malabar region inspired by the zeal of the agitation. During the rebellion, he led many attacks on individuals, including Muslims, who had been loyal to the British. Some contemporary accounts, however, deny that he favoured conversion of Hindus.

Also read | [Search begins for 1922 film on Malabar revolt](#)

What was the impact of the protests?

The rebellion of Mappilas inspired by religious ideology and a conception of an alternative system of administration — a Khilafat government — dealt a blow to the nationalist movement in Malabar. The fanaticism of rebels, foregrounded by the British, fostered communal rift and enmity towards the Congress.

Also read | [Variyamkunnan scriptwriter withdraws from film, following controversy](#)

The exaggerated accounts of the rebellion engendered a

counter campaign in other parts of the country against 'fanaticism' of Muslims. That said, the traumatic experience of the uprising also persuaded educated sections of the Muslim community in Malabar to chalk out ways to save the community from what they saw as a pathetic situation. The community's stagnation was attributed to religious orthodoxy and ignorance. The thrust of the post-rebellion Muslim reform movement in Malabar was a rigorous campaign against orthodoxy.

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