

# Variyamkunnath and nuances of the Malabar Rebellion: Author Manu S Pillai interview



The recent announcement that director Aashiq Abu and actor Prithviraj are coming together to make a film on Variyamkunnath, who was one of the leaders of the Malabar Rebellion in pre-Independent India, has led to much controversy.

While Variyamkunnath is regarded as a freedom fighter by many, he's also painted as a communal bigot by others. The Malabar Rebellion, also called Moplah

Rebellion and Mappila Rebellion, has been acknowledged as a fight for freedom from the British by the Kerala government. However, it has also been characterised as a communal clash which led to extreme violence.

TNM spoke to author and historian Manu S Pillai to understand the Malabar Rebellion and its leader Variyamkunnath.

## **How did the Malabar Rebellion start?**

The rebellion has a prehistory spread over a century before 1921, which is why I am somewhat hesitant to view it in isolation as a single, spontaneous act of resistance. Certainly, as textbooks tell, the trajectory of 1921 itself was linked to the Khilafat and Non Cooperation movements, and a disproportionate, overly muscular response by colonial authorities provoked wholesale rebellion. But while this was the *immediate* trigger, there is also a pattern visible in the recurring “Moplah outrages” of the nineteenth century, featuring small acts of violent resistance. Think of it as a simmering pot, with hot bubbles letting out steam here and there for a time, till the lid blows off finally, in a giant, unexpected burst.

So 1921 was a mass movement: over 39,000 individuals surrendered by the end, besides 10,000 odd killed, captured, and wounded. In the preceding century, on the other hand, “outrages” were often led by individuals, and occasionally by a few dozen together—for instance, over

60 in 1849. But these smaller numbers do not make the events insignificant: several scholars have shown that these were not cases of random violence, but had a ritualised form to it, where the persons involved saw themselves as martyrs laying lives down for a cause.

The question then is, what was this underlying cause that made men go out to die, and why it did not become a mass movement earlier? The first question has multiple aspects to it: religious, economic, and even caste. For the second, it is that most of the outrages were contained before they spread. In 1921, on the other hand, the political horizon was already agitated due to Non-Cooperation and Khilafat, which, combined with earlier impulses and British suppression, mutated into something big, very quickly. Either way, symptoms of the problem that came to the fore in 1921 manifested regularly for decades before. So if you ask me how the rebellion began, the answer lies in a much longer history.

**The Kerala government recognised those who took part in the rebellion as freedom fighters in 1971. But there are many who say that it was about religion. Which of these narratives is true?**

To begin with, a lot of freedom fighters were deeply invested in matters of religion: Gandhi is an example, for his politics was heavily infused with religious conviction. The issue, then, gets complicated mainly

when *violence* meets religious justification. But, with all historical events, viewing things as an "either-or", or through a single prism is unsatisfactory. The rebellion certainly had a religious angle as well as a sustained economic angle, and a political aspect both local and linked to the wider Muslim world.

Since we live in times when historical events are used to target and vilify minorities, there has been a hesitation to speak of the religious element, and focus on economic factors instead. But both appear in the Mappila question. The earlier "outrages" tended to be led by poor men living marginalised lives. The vast majority of their victims were landlords, or those who served landlords. Even half a decade before the 1921 uprising, it was recorded that a handful of *jenmis* controlled hundreds of thousands of acres in Malabar. British policies were tilted in their favour, leaving the peasant at the landlord's mercy. Bearing in mind that much of the peasantry was Muslim in South Malabar, where Mappilas were concentrated, and nearly all landlords were Hindus, you can trace the economic logic to the clashes, as well as how this quickly became communalised.

However, it is also true that there was the use of sharp religious vocabulary and often the display of fanatical tendencies. Most of the participants in the outrages of the nineteenth century died in action, but the few dozen captured alive spoke of jihad: this was a fight against infidels, there were good things waiting in heaven for

those who killed kaffirs, and so on. In one case, a man admitted that he feared being shot in the leg, because death and martyrdom was the only way to get to heaven. But this is almost immediately also linked to caste: throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, we find many avarna Hindus choosing to convert, and identifying with the Mappilas. In 1843, for instance, a woman converted and immediately began to speak with greater confidence to an erstwhile caste superior—the man forced her to renounce Islam and revert to her low-caste status, but it is a glimpse into the uneasiness overall between Hindu landlords heading a caste order, and Mappila culture, which not only opened a door to greater dignity for many Hindus, but also provided a religious rationale to justify active resistance, indeed even glorify it.

So there was a serious religious element to Mappila resistance all throughout, but this was not divorced from economics, caste, and the dynamics of power. Because there was a clear divide in religious terms coinciding with an economic divide, the two factors are linked together.

**There are many who say that the Malabar Rebellion led to the Muslims killing Hindus in large numbers. Did this really happen?**

Broadly, we find that first the rebellion focussed on attacking government offices and prominent landlords, not least to stockpile money and resources. But as always

with movements like this, things can quickly spin out of control, and all kinds of horrors were indeed witnessed. There was a subsequent conference in which it was alleged that the full scale of the atrocities was not recognised, and that there were some trying to "minimise" what happened: the list includes flaying people alive, desecrating temples and garlanding deities with the entrails of slaughtered cows, etc. This business of killing cows appears in records of an "outrage" in 1852 also where we hear how animal entrails were used to "festoon" a temple. I have also seen Reuters reports on dozens of Hindu men forced to convert in one case, women forced to dress like Mappila woman, and stories circulating that Hindus were asked to convert or dig their own graves. The British Secretary of State for India acknowledged that forced conversions were reported. There is also evidence of Arya Samaj volunteers organising reconversion rituals for victims. Besides, Gandhi wrote a great deal about this: at first he had praise for Mappila bravery, then reference to "madness" on the part of some, to finally calling it a "test" of Hindu-Muslim solidarity, where he acknowledges "forcible conversions and looting". K. Madhavan Nair, a Congress leader and first managing director of Mathrubhumi, in his own writings acknowledges a phase in the middle of the rebellion where there were murders, conversions, plunder, and so on.

So a cursory scan of press material, the statements of

political leaders, and scholarly analyses does suggest regular violence, which means we must not get carried away with romanticising the rebellion—its triggers were inequality and loss, but in its course many others were also hurt. And because of the religious divide between victims and rebels, cultural animosity also appears.

I would still, however, hesitate to take all the claims made by groups today at face value. Madhavan Nair, for instance, acknowledged that a lot of information came from reports that circulated, which means there is no way to arrive objectively at a figure: one estimate says about 1,000 to 1,500 people were converted, unlike the tens of thousands some speak of now; in November 1921 the Calicut magistrate estimated conversions till then at between 500 to 1,000. At one point an official suggested obtaining a fatwa from Mecca against forcible conversion, adding that these were “as much oaths of allegiance” to the Mappila cause as they were about religion. So we can be sure that forced conversions did occur; to what extent remains open to question. I would be circumspect about believing the figures that circulate on the internet.

## **What do we really know from history books on Variyamkunnath's life and death?**

There is a great deal of oral history and collective memory around him, and Kunhamed Haji (Variyamkunnath) was one of the more prominent leaders of the revolt. His family, I understand, was involved in one

of the “outrages” from the late nineteenth century so there is an intriguing personal history there. Interestingly, during the 1921 rebellion, he wrote a letter to *The Hindu*, in which he made it known that reports on forcible conversion were “entirely untrue”, and that these were done by elements linked to the police to vilify the Mappila rebels (he uses the word “rebels”). Hindus are referred to in this letter as “brethren”, but he does add that those Hindus who helped the military and handed over “innocent moplabs” had been “put to some trouble”. If Hindus were fleeing, it was because the army was evacuating them, whereas he was willing to protect all who came to him, regardless of religious affiliation.

Again, one should not view this as an either-or situation i.e. because the leadership of the Mappilas was spread out and fragmented—even though efforts were made for a formalised structure of power, the nature of guerrilla techniques meant that there was only a loose control, and even within, there were rivalries, and sometimes even clashes between Mappila leaders who did not get along. So it is very likely that Kunhamed Haji was being entirely sincere when he put on record that forced conversions were not something his people did, because this may have been the doing of another set. Still, in his claim that the police was orchestrating this, there is tacit acknowledgement that such things were happening. The important thing to note is that there were half a dozen leaders and several “gangs”, as the British called them,

which sometimes coordinated action, while otherwise sticking to areas under their control. Their policies, outlook, and methods did not always match. When we say “the Mappilas” we forget sometimes that this was not one solid mass working like a battalion; it was more chaotic.

In any case, Kunhamed Haji does appear a great deal in the report the government put out a year after the rebellion, where he is described as “the most important leader” and the “chief rebel leader”. But here too we find contradictory information, where he himself tells the British after capture that he went to places to stop conversions, even as other leaders were filling wells with corpses of those refusing Islam. Kunhamed Haji appears repeatedly attacking the police, seizing arms, and disappearing, usually with 200 odd men; in January 1922, by which time it was clear the rebellion was failing, this dwindled to 80 “tired and hungry” men till he was finally captured with 21 supporters. But again, his capture did not end the rebellion—other “gangs” continued it for many weeks more.

What is interesting is that in the brief period that the Mappila leaders had a significant area of land under their control, the “Khilafat Raj” issued de facto passports, had a flag, had a judicial system, used titles like “Collector”, “Inspector”, “Colonel”, and even followed British models of revenue calculation. So there was a degree of political imagination, a big picture goal of some kind, even if in

reality power was fragmented, chains of command not solidly established, and in the end, the whole proposition set for doom. There was at least also one speech, when it was announced—and believed by many of the 2,000 gathered fighters—that British bullets would not have any effect on them. We see this kind of belief in divine support in several anti-British movements in the nineteenth century.

## **The British supposedly banned people from writing about Variyamkunnath and deliberately obfuscated what happened during the Malabar Rebellion. Is this true?**

I am not aware of any explicit orders; usually books were banned *after* they were written and not on the basis of themes and topics. The British had enough repressive legislation in hand to not need to pre-empt writing, because they could easily thwart publication, arrest writers, intimidate publishers, and inflict legal harassment, besides using that concept we have again become familiar with these days: sedition. I would be surprised if there is an actual order stating that a specific subject is banned (other than the usual vague lines about not writing anything against the British monarch etc.).

It may be that a book was written, but banned, and this led to the belief that as a topic Variyamkunnath was taboo. Or, what we see in other cases, is that mythmaking around historical figures also generates

stories that do not have a basis in hard fact but are widely believed, as part of a heroic narrative woven retrospectively. Perhaps those making the claim about Variyamkunnath will be able to answer this question better by pointing in the direction of the relevant evidence.

## **Many have been quoting BR Ambedkar's take on the Malabar Rebellion to show that this was a communal uprising against the Hindus...**

I have already earlier stated what the record shows, in which we do find Hindus at the receiving end of violence, not least because of economic grievances that had Hindus on the dominant side and Mappilas on the weaker side, even winning lower-caste Hindus to their side. The scholarly debate has always been about why: was it purely religion, or was it purely economic complaints? Or was it something in between: a blend of economic factors reinforced by religious ideology? Contextualising the Mappila community may help.

They were once a prosperous, powerful group, enjoying honours and recognition from local rulers. With the arrival of European trading companies, however, not only was this upset, but after a while political powers in the region (almost all Hindus) had no option but to start doing business with these new entrants in the game like the Portuguese. With a few exceptions, the Mappilas became

poorer, weaker, and most importantly, aware of their fall from prominence. Even in the sixteenth century we have the *Tuhfat ul-Mujahideen* demonstrating an awareness of this loss. The book was in fact dedicated to a sultan in the Deccan for his commitment to jihad, and urged Mappilas to fight the infidels. Except, the infidels referred to were not local Hindus, but the Portuguese.

By the second half of the eighteenth century the vast bulk of the Mappilas lived in poverty. A set of scholars argue that under Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan, they briefly enjoyed a renaissance: i.e. as many *jenmis*, princes, and others fled, Mappila cultivators lived happier lives during the Mysorean occupation. But the fall of Tipu, the restoration of the *jenmis*, and the lopsided terms set under British rule again drove them to ruin. To Mappilas, the British and the *jenmis* sat on the same side of the coin in oppressive alliance. This is why anti-colonial and anti-Hindu feeling may have coalesced as one substance, giving ideological force in religious wording.

**In this particular movie's posters, they have called it the Malabar Revolution and not riot or rebellion. The filmmakers believe that by calling it rebellion, history was whitewashed. Do you believe this assessment is true?**

There is truth to the claim that the British could deploy wording that played down the gravity of resistance to

their power. The great rebellion of 1857, for example: they always called it a "Sepoy Mutiny", which suggests it was merely a matter of a few soldiers mutinying and making trouble. But historical research shows that this was a much larger affair with participation by ordinary people, by religious mendicants, and of course royalty, landlords, bankers, and others. So rebellion against the East India Company's rule was, through wording, played down. This was also why Indians retaliated in due course by using their own wording of choice: Savarkar famously called it India's First War of Independence, a line that caught on among others also. So words come with their own politics.

In some ways, since the rebels did intend to set up a new kind of state, this could be termed as a revolution in Malabar. But if the suggestion is that all of Malabar rose up: that is where the record militates against this conceptualisation, because we know that for many, the experience was a nightmare, and viewed as pertaining to one religious segment, with its own religious and political ideology.

**Communist leaders like AKG and party organs like Deshabimani had celebrated Variyamkunnath even before the Kerala government officially acknowledged the Malabar Rebellion as a fight for freedom. EMS even called it an agrarian political mass**

## **movement. What explains this?**

The problem lies in simple categories like this: did the rebellion begin as part of a chapter in the freedom struggle? Yes it did. Did it go beyond that into matters of class struggle between the peasantry and landlordism? Yes it did. Did it become religious, with a display of fanaticism? This too is true. Students of history learn to negotiate these diverse and sometimes seemingly contradictory impulses manifesting alongside a single event; politicians, though, tend to reduce things into one, politically marketable commodity. The right wing will sell this as a "genocide" of Hindus, while others make it all about fighting feudalism. The truth, however, has many faces.

**A film about Variyamkunnath was made in the '80s and there have been other films on the rebellion. But the latest announcement has attracted the Sangh's attention and they see it as an attempt to 'whitewash' history. What do you feel?**

The pot should never call the kettle black when it comes to whitewashing.

As for the movie, we don't know the script, have not seen how the makers intend to approach this, and what their final take will be: as I understand, the controversy is because of some initial remarks. It is unfair I think to

castigate a film that has not yet been made. While films in general do take liberties with history, the filmmaker has a right to tell Kunhamed Haji's tale. I hope it is done in a nuanced way, that does not reduce history to black and white, and does not lose the many layers that appear in the Mappila story. Either way, whether people like it or not, whether the film is good or bad, the filmmaker's prerogative to take up this story is, in my mind, entirely legitimate.

## **Any books and articles on the Malabar Rebellion that you'd like to suggest?**

Stephen Dale has produced an excellent book on the Mappilas, and there is also that 1987 classic by Conrad Wood that is much quoted. Roland E. Miller has done a larger history and cultural study of the community. KKN Kurup has also written about this, besides the dynamics around land, peasantry, and economic relations in Malabar. And of course, KN Panikkar has made an effort to nuance discussions by bringing on board both economic and religious factors without succumbing to pointing out just one of these. Besides, there is a whole volume published by the British government with newspaper snippets, their own letters and telegrams from the time of the crisis, and so on.