

# THE MAPILLAH UPRISE

Relevant for: null | Topic: Peasant Movements (1857-1947)

A picture by Topical Press Agency/Getty Images, captioned September 26, 1925: "Moplah prisoners go to trial at Calicut on the Malabar Coast in India's south-western state of Kerala, charged with agitation against British rule in India." | Photo Credit: [Topical Press Agency](#)

With the centenary of the Mapillah rebellion of 1921 fast approaching, [controversy has erupted over Malayalam movie projects](#) commemorating what was arguably the greatest challenge to British rule between the great uprising of 1857 and the Quit India movement of 1942. Right-wing radicals have [launched attacks on social media against actor Prithviraj Sukumaran](#) after he announced his role as the lead actor in the film *Variyamkunnam* that celebrates the life and exploits of Variyamkunnath Kunhahamed Haji, a leading figure in the Mapillah revolt against British rule.

The controversy surrounding the Mapillah uprising demonstrates that in the case of most important historical events no single narrative is accepted by all sections of society. There are multiple narratives propounded by people of different ideological persuasions. More often than not these divergent perspectives are shaped by the proponents' current political projects and their preferred visions of their societies' future. Frequently, it is not history that determines the present and the future but the political preferences of contemporary actors that dictates the reading of history at the popular level.

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

The Mapillah uprising is no exception to this rule. On the one hand, people of secular and nationalist persuasions see it as a major instance of resistance to British colonial rule. On the other, people of the Hindutva persuasion revile it as an example of ingrained Muslim hatred against Hindus. Both these perceptions are based on single-factor explanations of a very complex phenomenon. The rebellion can be understood only if one discards ideological blinkers. It is an excellent example of the veracity of the assertion that important historical events always have multiple causes and do not occur in a social, economic, and political vacuum.

The immediate trigger of the uprising was the Non-Cooperation Movement launched by the Congress in 1920 in tandem with the Khilafat agitation. The Malabar Congress, many of whose leaders were Nairs, was the most active participant in these twin agitations with several Hindu leaders addressing Khilafat gatherings.

The anti-British sentiment fuelled by these agitations found fertile ground among the Muslim Mapillahs of south Malabar living in economic misery which they blamed in large part on British rule. The British had introduced new tenancy laws that tremendously favoured the landlords and instituted a far more exploitative system than before. The pre-British relations between landlords and tenants were based on a code that provided the tenants a decent share of the produce. The new laws deprived them of all guaranteed rights to the land and its produce and in effect rendered them landless.

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

This change created enormous resentment among the tenants against British rule. The fact that most of the landlords were Namboodiri Brahmins while most of the tenants were Mapillah

Muslims compounded the problem. The Nairs formed an intermediate grouping of well-off peasantry with their own economic and social grudges against the Namoodiri landlords but largely unsympathetic to the economic travails of the Mapillahs.

The Non-Cooperation Movement combined with the Khilafat agitation provided the spark that lit the fire of Mapillah revolt against the British rulers and their Hindu landlords. The fiery speeches by Muslim religious leaders that accompanied the Khilafat movement added to the religious fervour of an already desperate peasantry and fuelled their ire against the British and the Hindu landlords leading to the atrocities committed by a segment of the mobilised Mapillahs against Hindus regardless of caste.

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

Non-partisan analyses of the uprising make clear that multiple factors contributed to the character of the movement. These included economic distress, anger against foreign rule and the tenancy laws it instituted, and religious zeal. But above all it was an agrarian revolt that simultaneously took on the garb of anti-colonialism and religious fanaticism.

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