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Kadakkal Rebellion 1938: A forgotten event in India's freedom struggle

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Abstract

The Kadakkal Rebellion of 1938 was a spontaneous and significant episode in the Indian struggle for independence, marking a unique event in the history of the princely state of Travancore. Kadakkal, a small village, became the epicentre of a popular movement against illegal tax collection and other grievances during the colonial period. Despite repeated complaints about unethical toll collections in the local market, government authorities failed to act. This inaction fueled a revolt, as peasants and villagers, under the leadership of local leaders, organised campaigns to resist. They actively prevented the collection of market tolls, refused to pay taxes, and closed schools and other government offices, excluding hospitals. To hinder military access, the protesters demolished culverts and roads. The rebellion effectively disrupted governance for nine days. However, the movement was brutally suppressed by the police, leaving an indelible mark on the history of resistance in Travancore.

Keywords: Muri; Pakuthy; Roopa; Kachery

1. Introduction

The Kadakkal Rebellion of 1938 was a civil disobedience movement in Kadakkal, Kollam district, against unfair toll collection. It played a unique role in the history of the princely state of Travancore. What began as a protest of excessive taxes and tolls by authorities soon led to the formation of a parallel administration in Kummil Pakuthy. After the uprising, the rebels declared Kadakkal an independent state. Which lasted for just eight days, making it possibly the smallest such administration in the world. The event, also known as the Kadakkal Riot Case, is recognised by the Ministry of Home Affairs as part of India's struggle for independence. The rebellion took place from 26 September to 5 October 1938. On 26 September 1938, a group of young members of the Travancore State Congress began protesting toll collection in Kadakkal. Led by Changuvila Unni, Beedi Velu, and others, they stopped the collection of market tolls and encouraged people not to pay taxes. When the police arrived to restart toll collection, a clash broke out between the police and the protesters. On 29th September 1938, the rioters attacked the police station. At the end of the riot, the police, unable to withstand the public protests, retreated. The people then declared Kadakkal an independent state, gaining freedom from the direct rule of the Travancore government for eight days. However, as the people became disorganised, the government sent in the police to suppress the rebellion and restore control over Kadakkal. Kadakkal rebellion was not a successful effort, but it encouraged India's Freedom Struggle.

1.1. Kadakkal Rebellion: Historical Background

The Kadakkal Rebellion of 1938 is an important event in the history of the Indian freedom struggle. Kadakkal is a small town situated in the eastern part of Kollam district, Kerala, located 44 kilometers from both Kollam City and Thiruvananthapuram. The Kadakkal Rebellion was a civil disobedience movement that arose in protest of the unfair toll collection at the Kadakkal market. At the time, Kadakkal was under the administration of the Travancore government. The socio-political condition of the Kadakkal region in the early 20th century was dire, marked by widespread

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exploitation and hardship. During this period, local markets served as vital hubs of social and economic life, and the Kadakkal market was no exception. It played a central role in the village economy, drawing people from neighboring areas such as Chirayinkeezhu, Paravur, and Attingal, especially on its designated market days, Mondays and Thursdays.

The Kadakkal market was under the control of the Travancore government, which auctioned the rights to collect market tolls to wealthy contractors. These contractors, along with their subordinates, often exploited farmers, merchants, and the public. This exploitation added to the grievances of the local population. The market was a bustling centre of commerce and an integral part of the village of Kummil Pakuthy. However, the oppressive toll collection system fueled widespread dissatisfaction, setting the stage for resistance and the eventual Kadakkal Rebellion. During this period, market contractors exploited the local people by charging excessive tolls, disproportionately burdening poor peasants. The contractors and their workers often harassed women and children, while the police, instead of ensuring justice, supported the contractors and targeted those who resisted with false criminal charges.

The Indian National Congress played a pivotal role in inspiring resistance by establishing the Travancore State Congress. This organisation motivated the oppressed people of the state to rise against those who violated human freedoms and values. The Hariपुरa Session of the Indian National Congress was a pivotal moment in the freedom movement, where the Congress resolved to establish local units in princely states to intensify the struggle for independence and expand its reach. Travancore, ruled by an independent king, was administered by Diwan C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, whose tenure was marked by widespread criticism for his autocratic policies and disregard for the majority population. Iyer took harsh measures against popular struggles and movements, using the police to brutally suppress Indian National Congress activities, further intensifying public discontent. The Indian National Congress, through its local unit, the Travancore State Congress, provided a platform for the oppressed people of Kadakkal to voice their grievances and organise their resistance, thereby playing a significant role in the Kadakkal Rebellion.

On 21st September 1938 (Malayalam Era Kanni 5th 1114), the Travancore State Congress held a peaceful assembly in Attingal. The event drew attendees from various parts of the region, including individuals from Kadakkal and Kummil Pakuthy, with the goal of promoting unified resistance. This unity was a powerful force against the oppressive regime. However, without any prior notice, the henchmen of C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, along with the "Five Roopa" police, violently attacked the gathering. This sudden act of aggression strengthened the resolve of the participants. Upon returning to their villages, they committed to transforming the motivation derived from the Congress meeting into active opposition against the oppressive regime. Following a pivotal meeting in Attingal, representatives from the Kummil Pakuthy area gathered in Kadakkal near the Bhagavathy Temple in Altharamoodu to strategise against oppressive market tolls. Changuvila Unni, Thenguvila Bhaskaran, and others were the leaders of this meeting. The meeting decided to protest the unfair tax collection in the market and to support Congress's struggles. It was decided that everyone would gather at the market on the next market day, 26th September 1938.

1.2. Course and Route of the Rebellion

On 23rd September 1938, a large gathering of people from the Kummil Pakuthy area assembled at the Kadakkal Market. The people of Kadakkal joined them at the market grounds, where Sankaran Pillai, a prominent leader of the Travancore State Congress, delivered a rousing speech. His determination and unwavering commitment to the cause inspired the masses to refuse payment of taxes to the government, fuelling the momentum of the protest. Inspired by his words, the people began setting up a parallel market along both sides of the road. Thousands of young men marched through the streets, chanting slogans in support of the State Congress and its leaders. The police, accompanied by government contractors and their associates, attempted to suppress the protest. However, the demonstrators resisted with determination, forcing the police to retreat to the outpost. The enraged crowd gained control of the situation and proceeded to shut down government institutions in the area. This remarkable event showcased the people's defiance against unjust governance and their unwavering support for the State Congress's mission for justice and reform.

29th September was an important day in the history of the Kadakkal Rebellion. On this day, news about the issues in Kadakkal reached different parts of the Kummil Pakuthy. Today, the market continues to operate along the sides of the road instead of at its original location. Around 8:30 AM, a police party led by the Taluk Magistrate and the Sub-Inspector of Kottarakkara arrived at Kadakkal in a special bus. At the same time, a group of about 50 demonstrators from the north reached the area. Without any provocation, the police disembarked and launched a brutal lathi charge on the demonstrators, including women and children. People were frightened by the sudden violence, and people scattered in all directions to escape. The police quickly took control of the marketplace. The goods brought by poor vendors were left scattered across the road. Hearing about the demonstration, the police set off on their bus to pursue the protestors. About two miles away, at Trikkannapuram, they encountered a crowd of nearly 1,000 people marching from the east. The group, shouting slogans in support of the State Congress and its leaders, was mostly dressed in khadi and armed

with stones and sticks. As the police bus approached, the protestors began pelting it with stones, showing their defiance and anger against the authorities.

The Magistrate ordered the protestors to disperse, but their leaders firmly rejected the demand. In response, the Magistrate instructed the Inspector to arrest the demonstrators. However, the crowd retaliated by throwing stones and attacking the police. Fearing for their safety, the Magistrate and his team retreated to Kottarakkara. Among the protestors was Raghavan Pillai, who emerged as a prominent leader despite sustaining a head injury during the lathi charge. Upon his release from the hospital, he addressed the crowd, urging them to continue their struggle against the government with unwavering resolve. Energised by his speech, then the protestors gathered at Kadakkal Junction, where they decided to target the police outpost. The crowd dismantled the outpost, breaking furniture such as tables and chairs, destroying notice boards, and throwing official records into a nearby well. The demonstrators believed that only by dismantling government offices and police stations could they pave the way for a responsible government in Travancore. Following the destruction of the police outpost, the protestors declared that Kummil Pakuthy had been liberated by the people, marking a significant moment in the Kadakkal Rebellion.

After destroying the police station, the leaders and locals gathered at the marketplace to plan their next steps. They decided to block police and military entry by building strong barricades at the main entrances to Madathara and Nilamel. Armed guards were stationed behind the barricades, and a gunners' camp was set up at the Karyath Mission School, strategically located on a hilltop. The protestors divided into groups and targeted key establishments, including the post office, forest range office, and Pakuthy Kachery, forcing their closure. They then marched to Karyathu, where they destroyed a culvert, and did the same to another culvert at Kizhakkumbhagom. In their efforts to resist government control, the people demolished roads, blocked canals, and cut off major routes in the area. What began as a movement for responsible governance had now grown into a full-scale uprising, with the protestors gaining complete control over the locality. On 30th September, people assembled at the Kariyathu Mission School to block the entry of police and army forces. However, no police arrived that day.

After the revolt, a meeting was held in Kadakkal, where the rioters announced that Congress rule had been set up in the area. They chose Raghavan Pillai as the "Raja of Kadakkal" and Chanthiran Kaliyambi as the Prime Minister. However, this victory lasted only a few days. The army and police quickly took control and ended the short period of rebel rule. For seven days, Kadakkal had no proper administration. The government hospital continued to run, but the police outpost was taken over by the people on 29th September 1938 and remained without officers until 5th October 1938. Schools in Kadakkal and Chithara were closed from 26th September and stayed shut for a week. The Pakuthy Kachery (Court) closed on 29th September and only reopened when the military and police arrived. The post office was also closed and reopened on 5th October. During this time, Kadakkal was effectively independent from the Travancore government. The first week following the revolt in Kadakkal was calm, with no disturbances. The army and police did not arrive to restore government rule during this time. However, the authorities were busy preparing to crush the movement and regain control. The Sub-Inspector, Taluk Magistrate, Forest Range Officer, and Anchal Master sent inflated reports to their superiors, recommending that the army be deployed to take charge of the area.

1.3. Suppression of the Rebellion

Soon after, the police and army arrived in Kadakkal and began to crush the already escalating revolt. They looted and burned many homes, destroying crops in the process. Women and girls were subjected to abuse, including rape and torture. The police and army carried out a series of killings, targeting innocent and defenseless people. They looted crops and valuables from the homes, leaving the community in devastation. One week after the incident, Kadakkal was not under direct government control, and there were no military or police around. The government, hearing exaggerated reports from local officials, decided to take back control of the area. Both the Taluk and District Magistrates suggested that the police and military should take charge. By then, the people of Kadakkal had become disorganised after the riots. In response, the government sent police to calm things down. Following orders from Diwan C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, the police were told to destroy the village.

The police and military force were divided into many groups. Based on confidential information from Kadakkal, the police had detailed knowledge of the individuals and leaders involved in the protest. Upon arriving in Kadakkal, they immediately looted and set fire to the homes of those who participated in the riot, as well as those of suspects and ordinary citizens. The police, who had destroyed all the agricultural lights in Kadakkal, took full control of the market and local shops, imposing complete restrictions on the sale of food items to the people. Only wealthy families who supported the government during the riots were provided with food. In the following days, the men of the village fled to various areas out of fear of the police, leaving only women, the elderly, and children behind. These days became a time of police brutality in Kadakkal, with women being harassed in large numbers.

The houses of Beedi Velu and Frango Raghavan Pillai were burned down, and their crops were destroyed. Over 80 houses were also burned in Chithara. Chankuvila Unni, who had been a key leader in the early stages of the struggle, escaped and never returned. Beedi Velu, Chankuvila Unni, and others were at the forefront of the movement. Beedi Velu was later arrested at his home. The police tortured him both mentally and physically, and he died in their custody. Thottumbhagam Sandanandan, another leader of the struggle, was also killed in custody during his trial at the age of 22. Puthiya Veettil Raghavan Pillai, the leader of the Kadakkal struggle, escaped the nearest forest for over one year. He surrendered in June 1940 in Chitara. The suppression of the Kadakkal struggle is a clear example of the harshness of the Travancore defense force and their leaders. C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, the Diwan, was determined to erase Kadakkal from Travancore's map. After the police action, a special Magistrate Court was set up at Kottarakkara to handle the trial of the Kadakkal revolt case exclusively. Sixty-two people were found guilty, including Puthiya Veettil Raghavan Pillai, who was added to the supplementary list. They were tried under Section 112 of the Travancore Penal Code, which carried penalties of death, life imprisonment, or property confiscation for those involved in such a revolt. The trial lasted for six months, and Raghavan Pillai was sent to jail

2. Conclusion

The way the Kadakkal struggle was crushed is a clear example of the ruthlessness of the Travancore defense forces and their leaders. C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, the Diwan, was determined to erase Kadakkal from Travancore's map. He led a long campaign against the unarmed people of Kadakkal and nearby areas. The wealthy landlords of the region, who worked alongside the Diwan, played a key role in oppressing the people. They represented the interests of the elite, as they supported the brutal suppression of civil liberties. The Kadakkal Rebellion was a significant chapter in the struggle for a responsible government in Travancore. Although the government succeeded in brutally suppressing the rebellion, the memories of the rebellion remain deeply etched in the minds of the common people. The Kadakkal rebellion was a failed attempt, but the rebellion influenced and inspired the struggle for the establishment of a responsible government throughout Travancore.

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