



Historicity of Freedom Movement in Irinjalakuda

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Abstract

The freedom movement was undoubtedly one of the biggest mass movements in modern society has ever seen. It was a movement which galvanized millions of people of all classes and ideologies in to political action and brought to its knees a mighty colonial empire. Freedom movement played a pivotal role in the historical process through which the Indian people got formed in to a nation or a people. The Freedom movement as an aspiration and movement of various sections of Indian people to counter act the evil effects of the British rule to secure political freedom from British tutelage and to reshape Indian society on the basis of progress and prosperity. The history of Kerala's freedom struggle is very important because the voice of national consciousness and need for political freedom and social reformation echoed in Kerala much earlier than it reached other regions of the country. The freedom movement in Irinjalakuda, located in Kerala's Thrissur district, Irinjalakuda's contribution to the Indian freedom movement, while part of the larger narrative of resistance against British colonialism, stands out due to the participation of its local leaders and people. This small town played a notable role in the national struggle against British colonial rule, and its history reflects the spirit of resistance that spread across Kerala.

Keywords: Ayyankavu strike, Irinjalakuda, Bench throw, freedom movements



Introduction

The Freedom movement as an aspiration and movement of various sections of Indian people to counter act the evil effects of the British rule to secure political freedom from British tutelage and to reshape Indian society on the basis of progress and prosperity¹. one of the major objectives and functions of the movement was to promote the growing unity of the Indian people through a common struggle against colonialism².

The freedom struggle in Kerala was a significant part of India's larger movement for independence from British colonial rule. The struggle here involved a mix of peasant revolts, socio-religious reform movements, and mass political uprisings that were instrumental in fostering a sense of unity and resistance among the people of Kerala. The efforts of leaders, reformers, and the people of Kerala contributed significantly to India's broader struggle for independence.

Irinjalakuda, located in Kerala's Thrissur district, was active in India's struggle for independence and contributed significantly through local involvement in protests, support for nationalist movements, and social reforms. The Indian National Congress had a strong influence in Irinjalakuda, which soon became a hub for nationalist gatherings and meetings. Local Congress leaders organized public meetings and rallies to mobilize the people against British colonial rule. Public meetings, processions, and speeches against British rule became common in Irinjalakuda as local leaders encouraged people to participate in the national struggle.

Early History of Cochin

Kerala was never a unified political entity throughout her history except during the Perumals rule. The rule of the Perumals of the Mahodayapuram came to an end by the 12th century. There after political fragmentation took place in Kerala which paved way for the emergence of several Swaroopams³. When foreigners landed, Kerala was under the grip of local Naduvazhis who were never united. Kerala was fragmented as Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. This accounts for the absence of a common struggle against colonialism. The nature and intensity of the struggle for independence differed each other in these three territorial units of Kerala. The princely states of Thiruvithamkore and Kochi had their own struggles and agitation for responsible government and freedom. In Malabar, the struggle for political liberty was quicker which overshadowed the socio- economic movements.

Kochi was known as Perupadappu Swaroopam in the earlier times. First king of Cochin was the son of a sister of the last of the Perumal and was therefore



his direct heir under the Marumakkathayam law of succession. Nothing however is definitely known about the early history of Cochin, and it will probably have to remain forever involved in obscurity⁴. The port at Kodungallur became useless after the great flood of 1341, that changed the geography of the area of Kochi and island of Vypin become important. When the trading activities were shifted from Mahodayapuram to Kochi. Cochin royal house came in to political prominence only in the beginning of the 16th century that was after the arrival of the Portuguese⁵. But it had its origin as an independent principality immediately after the fall of the Kulasekhara Empire.

The period of the Mysorean invasion was one of stress and strain for the English East India Company's possessions in Kerala. Later the Company entered in to fresh treaties with the rulers of Cochin and Travancore. By the treaty concluded with the Company in 1791 the Cochin Raja became a vassal of the English and had to pay an annual tribute⁶. The company agreed to help the Raja in recovering the territories captured from Cochin by Tipu but he was to exercise control over them under the supreme direction of the Company. Raja was also assured that he would be placed under the control of the Madras government. Cochin State thus passed under the political control of the English. The establishment of British power in India was a prolonged process of piecemeal conquest and consolidation and the colonization of the economy and society. This process produced discontent and resistance at every stage.

The history of Cochin as a progressive state commenced with the reign of Sakthan Thampuran (1790-1805). The period immediately following the death of Sakthan Thampuran was one of political turmoil and hence little progress could be achieved in the field of administration. The failure of the revolt of the Paliyath Achan in 1809 led to the installation of his rival Kunjikrishna Menon of Nadavaramba as chief minister of the state, with the approval of British. Menon mismanaged the affairs of the state and brought it to the verge of financial bankruptcy. In 1812 he was sacked and Col. Munro, the British resident was appointed as Diwan of Cochin in order to reorganize the administration of the state on modern lines⁸. From the time of Munro's appointment Cochin was served by a long line of able Diwans.

The princely state of Cochin has their own struggles and agitations of a political character from the very beginning of the British period. The agitation which took place in the early period had for their aim the establishment of good government and those of the later period, the achievement of political rights like the association of the people at the various levels of administration. In Cochin the desire for good government asserted itself even in the early days of British rule. A notable instance



of an organized political movement started in 1834⁹. The administration of Edamana Sakara Menon, the Diwan was so corrupt and inefficient that a deputation consisting of representatives of the Brahmin, Nair and Christian communities visited the Governor of Madras at Ooty and presented a charge sheet against the Diwan. The Governor responded favorably and dismissed Sankara Menon from the post of the Diwan.

Congress Activities in Kochi

The National Movement in British India under the leadership of the Indian National Congress had its echoes in Cochin. A committee of the Indian National Congress was functioning in Thrissur, even as early as 1919. The Kerala provincial Congress Committee formally started functioning in 1921. Among the active workers of the Congress in its early days were Muthedath Narayana Menon, E. Ikkanda warrier and Kurur Neelakantan Nambutiripad. Several congress men from the state took part in the Non-Co-operation and Civil Disobedience movement of the twenties and courted arrest.¹⁰

The visits of Mahatma Gandhi (1925) and Jawaharlal Nehru (1927) to Cochin State served to generate mass enthusiasm in favor of the congress. The civil Disobedience movement started in 1930 in British India found its echoes in Cochin too. A large number of congress workers participated in the struggle and courted arrest. There was the reorganized boycott of British goods, toddy shops and educational institutions.¹¹

The Economic depression of 1932-1933 adversely affected the people of Kochi but the rulers exploited the situation and they gained benefits out of it. Most of the farmers lived on the verge of starvation. During this period peasants organized under their leaders and started peasant insurrection. The main centers were Kodungallur, Mukundapuram, Mapranam and Madayikonam. Participants of these uprisings were the Peasants, Small farmers and Dalit laborers. Their demand was to extend the duration of the reimburse of debts and they believed that responsible government should be established at center to avoid this. So they started a protest march at Northern side of Kochi and peasants from the different parts of the country participated in it. They marched as procession to Diwan's residence. The government used forces to disburse the March. In the meanwhile the government decided to take steps for the relief of peasants. With the royal proclamation the government extended the duration of the reimburse of debts¹².

However, it was the electricity agitation of 1936 that had accelerated the struggle for responsible government in Kochi. The electricity agitation took place in Thrissur (1936) while P. K. Shanmukham Chetty was the Diwan of Kochi. It was



the decision of the Diwan to entrust the work of distribution of electricity in Thrissur to a private company that resulted in the agitation¹³. The people of Thrissur wanted the government to entrust the work to accompany of their own (Thrissur Electrify Corporation). The Diwans action sparked off a popular agitation in Thrissur. It was led by such leaders as A R Menon, E Ikkanda Warriar and C R Iyyuni. The government tried to suppress it with an iron hand. The agitation ultimately fizzed out. It was an agitation confined to the Thrissur town only and produced no reaction outside. The significance of the revolt is that it assumed the character of a people's revolt which brought the people of diverse castes on a common platform. It accelerated the struggle for responsible government in Kochi by paving the way for the formation of the Kochi State Congress (1938).

The Cochin Praja Mandal (1941)

the Cochin Praja Mandal was a political organization founded in 1941 in the princely state of Cochin (now part of Kerala, India) to promote democratic reforms and advocate for the rights of the people under the princely rule. Leaders from the state of Cochin who were inspired by the ideals of the Indian National Congress established the Cochin Praja Mandal. This organization sought to address issues of social justice, transparency, and accountability in the Cochin administration and to end the autocratic rule of the princely state. The Cochin Praja Mandal raised political awareness among the people of Cochin and organized rallies, public meetings, and protests. This mobilization led to the eventual implementation of some democratic reforms in Cochin's administration, such as the establishment of a legislative council with limited powers.

The administration of Kochi knew that the struggle for responsible government in Travancore was gathering momentum and to avoid such a popular struggle in Kochi, the government introduced certain administrative reforms in 1938. This was based on the administrative reforms introduced by the British in India in 1919. The system of Diarchy introduced with the appointment of Sivarama Menon as the minister did not satisfy the progressive sections of the population of Cochin¹⁴. They launched a new organization called Cochin State Praja Mandal on 24th January 1941, with the aim of starting wider popular struggle for the attainment responsible government in Kochi¹⁵. The then President of the Prajamandal was S. Neelakanda Ayyar and V.R. Krishnan Ezhuthachan as the Secretary. The government of Cochin with A.F.W. Dixon as Diwan adopted a negative attitude towards the Prajamadalam and banned its first annual conference which was decided to be held in 1942 at Irinjalakuda. But in spite of police vigilance the conference take place. When the Second World War was begun, British government declared India as a belligerent of



Britain without consulting the national leaders of the Indian people. The congress offered its help to the British Empire in the war if Britain would declare that it would give independence to India after the war. However, this offer of the congress was turned down by the government. The congress party then decided not to cooperate with the war efforts of the British. So the government decided to interrupt the annual meeting of the Prajamadalam as they thought that it will adversely affect the war activities of the government. A. F.W. Dixon invite the leaders of the Prajamadalam to inform the decision of the government.

Ayyankavu strike

Ayyankavu struggle wrote the name of Irinjalakuda in the pages of freedom struggle of our country. The fire of independence struggle began to burn in Irinjalakuda during 1942. The persons who are suspected as Prajamadalam volunteers were imprisoned in Viyyur central prison. The volunteers around Cochin were also imprisoned. At that time Irinjalakuda was under the full security of police. The persons who promised not to indulge in devastating activities were begun to be released from the prisons. Some of them were released from the prison with the notion that the strike was cheated. E.Gopalakrishna Menon, M.D. Kochumani, M. S. Menon and P. K. Chathan master signed the paper given by the police with a promise that they will do nothing wrong but they strongly decided in their mind that they will sacrifice their life to protect the dignity of the country¹⁶. They swore in their mind that at any cost they will celebrate the first anniversary of Prajamandalam in Ayyankavu ground according to their previous plan. The place where now Christ College is situating was a forested area. The volunteers who accompanied them were municipal employees and lower division pupils.

They reached in the Ayyankavu ground swindling the Nair army and red caped ones who were the guards of Diwan administration and authoritarian order of the debarment of Prajamandalam. They reached in the center of Ayyankavu ground and shouted slogans like Bharath Matha ki jai, Mahatma Gandhi ki jai, prajandalam first anniversary ki Jai and In-Qui- lab-Zindhabad¹⁷. The armies of the King, Diwan and the police agents were stunned. They looked at them for a movement and then jumped at them and beated them. They were taken to the Tana police station and they were tortured in the police station. But they were not tired. Without losing their spirit for every beat they reacted with the slogan of In-Qui- lab-Zindhabad. All the newspapers published this news with striking headlines. In India the name of irinjalakuda raised into the political pedestal.

A. F. W. Dixon, the Diwan who always vaunted that at any cost he will never allow them to celebrate the Prajamandalam annual anniversary, would not sleep



at that night till releasing the prisoners and withdrawing ban. The proud children of the country successfully released from the Irinjalakuda prison on 27th morning. They were very tired and the people gave them a hearty welcome with full spirit. Thus Ayyankavu ground became a milestone in Kerala and also in Indian political history. After some days the security police of Ayyankavu ground shouted we want freedom to live and they started strike.

Bench throw in August

The Quit India Movement, initiated by Mahatma Gandhi in 1942, spread across the country as a call for the end of British rule. Although its effects were significant impact in smaller regions, including Irinjalakuda in Kerala. In Irinjalakuda, local leaders and activists contributed to the movement, with several youth groups joining the call for nonviolent resistance. Schools, colleges, and local institutions became centres for mobilizing people to take part in protests, boycotts, and other forms of civil disobedience. The local police and British officials tried to suppress these efforts through arrests and crackdowns, but the people of Irinjalakuda remained resilient. Lathi charge, stone throw and shooting are familiar to us. But in Irinjalakuda was a different experience. Here the government school students threw benches from the second floor of the school towards the police who were standing with guns¹⁸. Marath Sivaraman, Kandamkulathi Kunjavara, Thiruti Gopi, Narayanan kutti and Krishna Das were the leaders who gave leadership to this strike at that time. Marath died in prison torturing. Students who participated in this strike were suspended. Some pupil stopped their study. Some of them self-relegated. The government arrested the suspected leader of the strike Mr. Puthur Achutha Menon according to the Preventive Detention Act. It is one of the unforgettable events in Quit India strike. The Quit India Movement thus played a vital role in fostering a sense of unity and national consciousness in Irinjalakuda.

Conclusion

The historicity of the freedom movement in Irinjalakuda stands as a testament to the town's profound commitment to India's struggle for independence. Though often overshadowed by larger national narratives, Irinjalakuda played a pivotal role in shaping regional resistance against British colonial rule. From hosting fiery speeches and underground meetings to organizing satyagrahas and boycotts, the town became a vibrant center of political awakening and collective action. The contributions of local leaders, educational institutions, and the active participation of ordinary citizens underscore Irinjalakuda's integral place in the broader freedom movement. Remembering and documenting this legacy not only honors those who



fought for liberty but also reinforces the enduring spirit of resistance and patriotism that continues to define Irinjalakuda today. The story of freedom struggle in Irinjalakuda was a legend of bravery, torment and sacrifice. The freedom movement and the process of mass mobilization was an expression of the immense creativity of the people of Kerala. The advance of the freedom movement in British India and the accompanying increase in political consciousness about democracy, responsible government and civil liberties had an inevitable impact on the people of the Cochin state. And I wish that the memories of these struggles must be an inspiration to this generation and also to the coming generation.

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