

## **ARCHETYPES OF SACRIFICE AND RESILIENCE: UNVEILING MEMORIALS AND MONUMENTS HONOURING MARTYRS OF PEASANT REVOLTS**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The Indian independence movement witnessed many peasant revolts, which played an important role in shaping the social and political aspects of the region. The memorials are often erected to remind people about their struggles and sacrifices faced by the peasant community in their fight against injustice. The contemporary English dictionary states that "Martyrs" indicates a person who sacrifices their life for great value or principle. Joyce Apstel stated that "Martyr" describes individuals targeted by racism and killed fighting for racial equality" (Joyce Apstel 2019:109). The martyrs of the peasant revolts indicate the individuals who fought against the inequalities and unethical rules that oppressed the poorer people of the region. Various memorials and monuments are constructed across different regions to commemorate the sacrifices of the martyrs. The general English dictionary defines monuments and memorials as one that honors a person who has died or serves as a reminder of an event in which many died. The most common memorials include statues, parks, sculptures, homes, fountains, etc. These memorials serve as a tribute to the martyrs and act as a collective memory. WulfKansteiner expressed that,

"Cultural memory consists of objectified culture, that is, the texts, rites, images, buildings, and monuments which are designed to recall fateful events in the history of the collective" (WulfKansteiner 2002: 182)

In addition, a geography scholar from the United Kingdom defined it as "Monuments that attempt to mold a landscape of collective memory, to conserve what is worth remembering and discard the rest" (Brian S. Osborne 2001). Federico Bellentani and Mario Panico expressed that "monuments in post-socialist cities first show that monuments are not neutral urban decorations,

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but rather important sources of cultural identity and memory" (Federico Bellentani and Mario Panico 2016). Also, the monuments serve as a memory and historical connection among the younger generation, offering a tangible interconnection to history that educates and inspires future generations.

Over the past years, Kerala has witnessed many peasant revolts and these revolts played a crucial role in shaping the social and political perspectives. The peasant revolts in Kerala are often provoked by the oppressive feudal practices and unethical colonial rules imposed by the British government and landlords. Some of the major revolts in Kerala include the Punnapra-Vayalar outbreak, Kayyur revolt, Malabar Rebellion, Karivellur struggles, and Kavumbayi Revolt (G. S. Bhalla 1983:37-59). These revolts are caused by sudden increase of land tax, oppressive rules, and exploitation of the poor peasantry by the landlords. This study investigates these historic peasant revolts in Kerala, and explores the memorials or monuments erected in honour of martyrs of these revolts. The main contributions of this research are described as follows,

J This study examines the historical context of the major peasant revolts by analyzing its root causes such as economic grievances, religious grievances, exploitations, and other oppressive reforms.

J This research explores the memorials or monuments constructed to honour the martyrs of the revolts, and examine their significance in empowering the cultural heritage and collective memory of the region.

J This paper aims to analyze how the memorials contribute to preserving historical memory and inspire the young generations to recognize and value the sacrifices made by their ancestors.

The present study is organised as follows: section 1 introduces the topic, section 2 explores the concept of memorials and monuments presenting various definitions that have been attributed to these structures, and section 3 the monuments and memorials erected to honour martyrs of peasant revolts in kerala, section 4 analyzes their significance and section 5 presents the conclusion.

## **2. What are monuments and memorials?**

Historically, the study of monuments and memorials received much less attention within the social sciences. Only a few studies have focused on investigating the

different aspects of monuments and memorials in a particular region. Traditional artisans described monuments and memorials as physical objects representing historical and artistic values. However, the English dictionary defines the words "memorial" and "monument" as correlated words with fine boundaries representing commemoration. The word "commemoration" represents how individual memories are constructed and rewrapped for public usage. The construction of commemorative structures enables the further generations to show their loyalty towards the martyrs. Michael Kammen said that,

"societies in fact, reconstruct their pasts rather than faithfully record them, and that they do so with the needs of contemporary culture clearly in mind - manipulating the past in order to mold the present (Michael Kammen 2019)."

Generally, the monuments and memorials are studied by examining their visual dimension, considering some major parameters such as size, colors, materials used for construction, and style. The geographers usually use "iconography" to find the symbols and signs presented in the monuments. The investigation using this methodology reveals the country's attitude, religion, class, or period.

Anthropologists and sociologists studied the monuments, concentrating on their commemorative functions. From the commemorative perspective, the investigation of memorials reveals the nation's history, past people's struggles, political functions, and wars. Geoffrey said that,

"Memorial narratives asserting the identity of a nation or group are usually modern constructs, a form of antimemory limiting the subversive or heterogeneous facts. Invented to nationalize consensus by suggesting a uniform and heroic past ("O say, can you see ..."), they convert "great memories" into political theology (Geoffrey Hartman 2009: 211)"

Primarily, the existing works on monuments focused on investigating the structure, shape, size, etc., examining the reason behind their construction and design. These studies focused on analyzing the monuments' and memorials' aesthetic and symbolic significance within their cultural and historical context. However, these studies paid less attention to historical analysis and the

significance of monuments and memorials for younger generations. This study investigates the social, political, and historical aspects of monuments and memorials erected to honor the peasants of Kerala.

### **3. Monuments and memorials Honoring martyrs of peasant revolts in Kerala**

This section discusses the history of the major peasant revolts in Kerala and explores the memorials and monuments constructed to honour martyrs of the revolt.

#### **3.1 Punnapra-Vayalar uprising**

The Punnapra-Vayalar uprising was a historic resistance movement of peasants and agricultural labourers against the oppressive practices of landlords. It also involved coir industry workers who fought against their employers, all striving for the establishment of a responsible government. This uprising was named after two distinct locations where the event extended. This revolt started in Punnapra and concluded in Vayalur. Thus, it was named the "Punnapra-Vayalar uprising" (Sreedhara Menon 1996: 373-374). Robin Jeffery said that

Jeffery Robin, illustrated three versions of this revolt: the communist, anti-communist, and a National campaign of insurrection. The communists claimed this uprising as an "Immortal Punnapra-Vayalar" by saying it was "a glorious chapter in the freedom struggle not only of Travancore but of India as a whole." On the other hand, the anti-communist commented that it was "A Shameful Betrayal" and stated that the communists started this revolt to regain their lost prestige. Also, they claimed that no top communist leaders died, but many common people were sentenced to death. The third version stated that this uprising was one of the broader protests organized and headed by the Communist Party of India (CPI). According to this version, "Punnapra-Vayalar looked so much like a rehearsal for the large Hyderabad uprisings of 1948 that one is tempted to believe that the Central Committee of the CPI planned it as the beginnings of a national campaign of insurrection (George Woodcock 1967: 247)."

The main course of the uprising was the proposal issued by Sir CP Ramaswamilyer. He proposed an 'American model' stating Travancore as an independent country. In response to this proposal, the socialist groups in Travancore merged to form a communist party and started to fight against the Travancore Kingdom in 1939. In addition, Sreedhara Menon, in the Journal of Indian History and Culture, stated that

"In spite of its immediate failure, the epic struggle of the workers of Punnapra and Vayalar made its own contribution to the eventual liquidation of autocracy and the establishment of responsible government in Travancore (SreedharaMenon 2019:282-283)."



Figure 1

The Punnapra-Vayalar uprising martyrs' memorial Kalarcode, Alappuzh

As presented in Figure 1, a Punnapra-Vayalar Samara Main Martyrs Mandapam was constructed in Kalarcode, Alappuzha district. It was one of the memorials constructed between Punnapra and Vayalar in the Alappuzha district to commemorate the martyrs who died in this struggle. This memorial reminds the current generation about the struggles faced by the Travancore community in their fight against British colonial rules and unethical government policies.

### 3.2 Kayyur Revolt

Kayyur uprisings, also known as the Kayyur Revolt, were a series of events in Kayyur village, Kasaragod district, Kerala, during British rule in 1941. In the olden days, Kasaragod and Karnataka were governed by the Ikkeri Nayakas,

and the British took control of the lands after defeating Tipu Sultan. The British officials amended the Permanent Settlement Act and introduced the landlord-tenant system. This amendment made some landlords dependent on the British government, and they started to abuse the peasant community by imposing high rents and taxes (Menon 2018).

Following that, the socialist groups comprising leaders like P. Krishnapillai and T. S. Thirumumpu supported the peasants and farmers in the district. They gathered the farmers from different locations and protested against the high tax collections. In the initial phase, they raised a complaint against Nileswaram Raja, the landlord of that region. On March 25 1941 , the sub-inspector had arrested some leaders like T. V. Kunhambhu and T. V. Kunhiraman. while the farmers and socialist groups marched towards Kayyur, Nicholas happened to come across the protest march. Participants of the march forced Nicholas to join the rally. In order to escape from the scene the sub inspector jumped in to a nearby river and died by drowning. Salim said that,

"Peasant patriots of that village under the leadership of Communist cell organized an anti-imperialist procession on March 28, 1941, in which a policeman was, killed (Salim P.M 2013:09)."



Figure 2

Monument at Kayyur

In response to this, the police force started to attack the farmers, which led to the injury of many people. The most prominent leaders, like Madathil Appu, Koithattil Chirukandan, PodoraKunhambu Nair, Pallikkal Aboobacker, and others were arrested by the police.

"They were executed at Kannur Central Jail on March 29, 1943. They walked to the gallows shouting Inquilab Zindabad and Communist Party Zindabad and died as brave Communists" (Dictionary of Martyrs, India's Freedom Struggle (1857-1947) 2019: 18).

The hanging of these leaders showed how mercilessly the revolt was conducted in the British period. Thus, the Kayyur incident has become an unforgettable chapter in the national freedom fight (Prakash 2017). To commemorate this brave sacrifice of these leaders, a memorial was erected in Kayyur. The memorial presented in Figure 2 was constructed in remembrance of the Kayyur revolt, and it acts as the symbol of peasant resistance against social injustice in Kerala. This also reminds people about the bravery of the communists and farmers against British colonial rules. In addition to this memorial, Malayalam filmmaker Lenin Rajendran directed "Meenamasathile Sooryan" in 1986 and many more documentaries are being made based on this incident

### **3.3 Malabar Rebellion**

The Malabar rebellion, also known as the Mappila or Moplah rebellion, began as a refusal against British colonial rule in the southern region of the old Malabar district. During the 19th century, there was a conflict between the Mappila community and Hindu landlords, who were supported and assisted by the British government. Thus, the rebellion also protested against the conventional feudal system managed by elite Hindus. Gangadhara Menon stated that

"But there has never been any doubt that religious fanaticism has been the main and dominant source of outrages and for this, there has been no effective remedy" (Gangadhara Menon 1971).

In addition to religious conflict, the hierarchical agricultural system was also a cause for this rebellion. William Logan, a British administrator, wrote

about the hierarchical agricultural system followed in the Malabar region. He stated that instead of one person owning a piece of land, multiple people hold ownership and responsibility for land in Malabar. He also showed sympathy for the cultivating tenants; thus, he is referred to as the "Father of Malabar Tenancy Legislation" (Kuttamath Kunniyoor Narayana Kurup 1988:80). Similarly, Mitavadi, a vernacular newspaper defined that,

"It is very grave news that . . . certain well-known jenmis of this district have issued an ultimatum to tenants, in regard to the agitation for agrarian reforms.... We are told that these jenmis would not renew the existing leases on their expiry, while some have filed eviction suits in the law courts just at present by a few jingoistic jenmis because the non-co-operator is abroad with his pernicious doctrines, which must necessarily seduce those tenants who are thrown out of their holdings by the declaration of war of Jenmis."

As per Logan's book (Malabar Manual:1887), Jenmi has the highest level of hierarchy (landlords), and they won't cultivate crops because of their social status. The landlords escaped to the neighboring states during the Mysore invasion in Malabar. During that time, the Brahmins and Nairs are forcibly converted to Islam (Tipu Sultan period). After five years, Tipu sultan was defeated by the British East India Company and returned the lands to Jenmi. Further, the British imposed Western Legal rules, making Jenmi actual landlords and giving them the authority to dismiss tenants.

In response to these rules, the Mappilas community (Muslim tenants) began to fight and protest against the Hindu landlords. In August 1921, the rebellion extended to around 40% of southern Malabar, and the British government introduced martial law, which led to the death of 1000 people. Also, many Hindus were killed, and more than 2,500 Hindus were forcibly converted to Islam. Another noteworthy event in this rebellion was the "wagon tragedy," where 61 peasants died because of suffocation in a closed railway goods wagon.





Figure 3

### The Variyankunnath Kunjahammad Haji Memorial Town hall

The reason for this rebellion is contemporary, as some people believe it was a religious conflict, and some argue that it was driven by Malabar farmers against landlords owing to increases in rent, taxes, and oppressive rules. However, Menon stated that this was one of the unprecedented events in Malabar,

Different memorials are constructed in Malappuram, Kerala, to commemorate the Mappila peasants who died in the Malabar rebellion. The Variyankunnath Kunjahammad Haji Memorial town hall in Malappuram Municipality is named after the leader of the rebellion to commemorate the most prominent leader of the Malabar rebellion "Variyankunnath Kunjahammad Haji", and it is shown in Figure 4. Also, the Wagon Tragedy Memorial town hall was constructed in Tirur to commemorate the peasants who died in the Wagon tragedy, and it is displayed in Figure 3. In addition, I. V. Sasi directed a movie named "Nineteen Twenty-One" in 1988 to remind people about the struggles and injustices faced by the Malabar community during the rebellion.

### 3.4 Karivellur Struggle

The Karivellur Struggle was the first major historic uprising, which took place in the Kannur district of Kerala in 1946. This uprising was a direct reaction towards the immoral and unethical practices of the antiquated landlords who utilized their power over the local peasant population. The aftermath of the Second

World War created situations like food scarcity, and the grains produced by the peasants were forcibly shipped to the Chirakkal Royal household (K.K.N.Kurup 1997).

In response, a massive force was organized at Kuniyan under the leadership of Comrade Krishnan's master, Comrade P Kunhiraman, and Comrade A V Kunhambu to resist these oppressive measures. In this protest, people, including children and women, marched to the Kuniyan River with weapons. Eventually, the Malabar Special Police issued a firing order, which cost the lives of two comrades, Thidil Kannan and Keeneri Kunhambu. Also, cases were registered against 197 comrades.

The son of Karivellur struggle's leader A V Kunhambu and the author of 'Karivellur: Charitram, Samaram, Jeevitham' (Karivellur: History, struggle, life) and the renowned playwright Karivellur Murali expressed that,

"Karivellur has a great role in the history of the communist movement, and it was here that the first youth organization, Abhinava Bharatha Yuvak Sangham, and also the first farmers' organization, Karshaka Sangham took birth in 1934 and 35 respectively (The Times of India 2016)."



Figure 4.

The Karivellur Struggle Memorial located in karivellur village in Kannur district

To remember the martyrs and brave hearts of this struggle, Karivellur Martyrs' Day was observed, highlighting the struggle of the legendary comrades on December 21. December 21, 2016, marked the 70th anniversary of this struggle, and the Communist Party of India state secretary Kodyeri Balakrishnan inaugurated a 20-day program to commemorate the martyrs of the Karivellur struggle. During the celebration, Murali also confessed that,

"In today's social system, the right over the land is also the base of wealth and access to food. Hence, the struggle that set the ground for the social uprising in the State against British imperialism and the feudal system should be learned deeply (The Times of India 2016)."

To remember the comrades' sacrifices, a Martyr's Memorial, Karivellur was constructed and this memorial reminds the people about the struggles faced by the peasants for food and wealth.

### **3.5 Kavumbayi Uprising**

The Kavumbayi uprisings are another important revolt in the Kannur district of Kerala, which took place in the same year, 1946. It was a bloody struggle for agricultural land in North Malabar. The immediate cause of this uprising was the economic hardships faced by the peasant community after the Second World War. The Second World War resulted in increased food shortage and economic deprivation for the peasant population. The landlords in the region imposed high rents, which created poverty. In response to these economic deprivations, the peasant community started the revolt. The struggle started by clearing the forest area in the hills for farming without the permission of the jenmi. The police team announced prohibition order in ten villages of Irikurfarka in order to oppose this farmers' organization at kavumbayi hills. On the early morning of 30th December the police opened fire with the help of Malabar special Police team against the protesters who gathered there, Pulukool Kunhiraman, P Kumaran, Manjeri Govindan, Alarambankandi Krishnan, Thengilappa Nambiar died at the spot. A monument was erected at kavumbayi Hills to commemorate these martyrs.



Figure 5

Memorial at Kavumbayi

#### **4. Significance of Memorials and Monuments**

This section analyzes the significance of the memorials and monuments erected in honor of the martyrs who died in the peasant revolts.

##### **Honoring the sacrifice and resilience of martyrs**

Johnson defined that "The "democratization" of the monuments allowed the memorial to symbolize the sacrifice of the nation " (Johnson 2010). Ustunipek stated the significance of the monuments by saying

"The sons of this nation, who did not hesitate to lose their lives in wars, of course, will not hesitate to make contributions to this campaign to honor the memory of the deceased " (Ustunipek 2020).

The monuments of the revolts remind the people about the sacrifices of the people who lost their lives in their fight against inequality and injustice. Also, they highlight the courage and bravery the martyrs showed in preserving justice and social equality.

##### **Promoting education among the young generation**

The primary significance of monuments and memorials is to commemorate the martyrs who lost their lives in the war or revolts. It is playing a significant

role in promoting education among the younger generation. Masberg and Silverman defined that,

"While commemoration has formed the primary reason for the existence of war memorials, education is becoming an increasingly important role, and heritage sites in general are often regarded as educational places" (Masberg and Silverman 1996).

Also, Caroline Winter stated, "Comments were also made about the need for education to ensure future generations will remember past events" (Caroline Winter 2010:223). He also described that monuments and memorials offer historical connections to the current generation, enabling the younger generations to learn about the stories of the important events in the landscape. In addition, they teach and inspire the current generations to show determination and courage against inequality and oppression, motivating people to fight for their denied rights.

### **Symbol of empowerment and platform for current social discourse**

These monuments also act as a symbol of resistance and empowerment against social discrimination and exploitation. They empower the strength of unity and highlight the refusal shown by the local peasants against injustice and colonial rules. Currently, these sites are used as a rallying point by the people for modern social discourse, reminding the community about unity and solidarity. Derek H Alderman said that,

"The memorial landscape can also express notions of regional identity, which is also open for debate and reinterpretation among social groups" (Derek H Alderman, 2020).

### **Encouraging social solidarity and cultural heritage**

The monuments also play a significant role in preserving cultural heritage and encouraging social solidarity. The "cultural heritage" can be defined as "monuments" as they provide outstanding universal value in the view of history, science, or arts. Krishnan S stated that the monuments have a "cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value" (Krishnan S 2018: 34). Also, they serve as a collective identity, showing the strength of unity among the

people, highlighting the collaborative efforts shown by the martyrs in their battle against unfair government amendments. Moreover, they attract more tourists from other states and countries and help boost the State's economic status.

### **Influence of the memorials on current generation**

The memorials also have a greater positive influence on the current generation, as the people as martyrs fought against injustice in society, it inspires. The heroic study behind this peasant memorials show them how strongly their ancestors have fought against their oppressive exploitation and socio-political rules. Brian Graham stated that,

"the legacy of physical arte facts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations (Brian Graham, 2002)"

He described that these structures play a crucial role in establishing connection between the past history and the current generation. In addition, they help in educating the current generation regarding the value of injustice, solidarity, resilience, etc., and remind them that the changes can also be made through collective action and resistance. Susana described that the memorials act,

"both as an element of cultural identity and as a source of inspiration and creativity for present and future generations (Susana 2002:356)."

He stated that the memorials not only signifies the cultural heritage of the region, but also inspires the future generation to show bravery and resilience towards social injustice and discrimination.

### **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, we may state that monuments and memorials serve as profound symbols of sacrifice, resilience, and empowerment. They honor the memories of those who bravely fought against inequality and injustice, providing a tangible link between the past and the present. These structures not only commemorate the martyrs but also play a pivotal role in educating the younger generation about historical events, instilling values of determination and courage.

Moreover, they act as platforms for current social discourse, fostering unity and solidarity within communities. By preserving cultural heritage, these sites remind us of the collective strength and collaborative efforts of those who came before us. As a source of inspiration and creativity, monuments and memorials continue to influence and empower future generations, encouraging them to fight for justice and equality. Thus, they are not just remnants of history but remain active contributors in shaping a just and informed society.

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