

Tribal Resistance and Anti-Colonial Struggles in Wayanad: A Subaltern Interpretation

Santhosh Kumar V K¹, Dr. Nanak Chand²

¹Research Scholar, Mangalayatan University, Aligarh

²Assistant Professor, Mangalayatan University, Aligarh

Abstract

This article examines the nature, forms and historical significance of tribal resistance to colonial expansion in the Wayanad region during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Moving beyond elite-centric narratives that privilege royal or nationalist leadership, it foregrounds the agency of indigenous communities such as the Kurichias and Kurumas, who actively resisted British intrusion into their socio-economic, political and ecological systems. By situating the Pazhassi revolts and related uprisings within the broader framework of subaltern studies and environmental history, the paper argues that tribal resistance in Wayanad was neither spontaneous nor merely reactive. Rather, it represented a structured political response rooted in customary rights, ecological knowledge and collective identity. By reassessing these movements, the article further highlights how colonial interventions in land, revenue and forest management destabilized indigenous life-worlds, provoking sustained resistance. Through a reinterpretation of these struggles, the study contributes to a more inclusive historiography of India's anti-colonial movements.

Keywords: Colonial Wayanad, Tribal resistance, Kurichias, Kurumas, Guerilla warfare, Pazhassippada, Girivargalapuram of 1812, subaltern studies.

Introduction

The historiography of India's anti-colonial struggle has long been dominated by narratives centered on elite actors nationalist leaders, princely rulers, and urban intellectuals. While such accounts have contributed significantly to our understanding of colonial resistance, they often marginalize the contributions of subaltern groups, particularly tribal communities (Ranjith Guha, 1983). In regions like Wayanad, located in present-day Kerala, this omission becomes especially problematic, as indigenous populations played a central role in resisting colonial expansion between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The historiography of Wayanad reveals a notable scarcity of scholarly work on the regions's tribal communities, particularly with regard to their contributions to anti-colonial resistance (K.K.N.Kurup, 2026). Existing studies seldom address the role of Wayanad's tribal groups in the broader landscape of India's freedom movement, resulting in the significant gap in the historical narrative.

Published: 23 June 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/IJSSR.2026.v3.i3.301164>

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).

Wayanad's history offers compelling evidence of sustained, organized resistances led by tribal communities. These movements, occurring roughly between 1760 and 1820, can be described as popular uprisings rooted in local socio-economic conditions. Unlike nationalist movements of the later period, these struggles were deeply embedded in the everyday realities of indigenous life, including land use, forest dependence and community autonomy (T.K.Raveendran, 1978).

This article seeks to reinterpret tribal resistance in Wayanad through a subaltern perspective. It challenges the tendency to frame these movements merely as extensions of elite-led revolts, particularly those associated with Keralavarma Pazhassiraja. Instead, it foregrounds the independent political agency of tribal groups such as the Kurichias and Kurumas, emphasizing their role as active political actors rather than passive supporters. These movements were not isolated or incidental; rather they formed part of a broader pattern of localised resistance against colonial authority (K.K.N.Kurup, 1988).

Conceptual Framework and Methodology

The colonialist, Nationalist, Subaltern and Marxist historians and ethnographers have created their own narratives in the field of tribal history. Colonial historians and ethnographers portrayed the tribals as uncivilised and tried to establish colonial supermacy among them. While Nationalist historians and ethnographers attempt to document the tribal society and history from indigenous culture and tradition. Marxist historians have emphasised the revolutionary measures of the tribal political movements and social heirarchy. But the above said historiographers and ethnographers not seriously studied the anti-colonial tribal revolts occurred in Wayanad region (K.K.Muhammed, 2026).

The approach from Subaltern studies has brought about an alternative approach to study the history of marginalised sections. Forest based tribal movements and their political uprisings received particular attention in this historiography. The study of tribal political history cannot rely solely on conventional archival sources such as official records, colonial reports or written documents. Instead, it requires a broader methodological framework that recognizes the centrality of oral traditions, particularly folk songs, stories, myths and legends. Oral traditions provide access to subaltern voices that have historically been marginalised or excluded from mainstream historiography (Kasthurba A.K, 2026). These sources enable historians to reconstruct a more inclusive, nuanced and community centered narrative that challenges dominant historiographical frameworks and foregrounds indogenous groups.

Historical Background of Colonial Expansion in Wayanad

The late eighteenth century witnessed significant political transformations in South India, particularly following the decline of Mysorean power after the Anglo-Mysore Wars. Wayanad, a strategically located highland region in the Western Ghats, came under British control as part of the Malabar district. Its geographical features—dense forests, rugged terrain and relative isolation—made it both a valuable resource frontier and a challenging administrative zone (C.Gopalan Nair, 1911).

The British East India Company sought to integrate Wayanad into its expanding colonial economy by introducing new systems of land revenue and forest management. These policies aimed to maximize revenue extraction through the cultivation of cash crops and the commodification of forest resources. However, such interventions disrupted existing socio-economic structures, particularly those of tribal communities who relied on shifting cultivation, hunting, and forest gathering.

Traditional landholding systems in Wayanad were based on customary rights rather than formal ownership. Tribal communities maintained a symbiotic relationship with their environment, practicing sustainable forms of resource use. The imposition of colonial revenue systems, which demanded cash payments and formal land titles, undermined these practices and led to widespread dispossession.

Moreover, colonial forest policies restricted access to essential resources, criminalizing activities that had long been integral to tribal livelihoods. These changes not only affected economic survival but also threatened the cultural and social fabric of indigenous communities. As a result, resistance emerged as both a necessity and a form of assertion against colonial authority.

Pazhassi Revolts and Tribal Participation

The resistance movement led by Kerala Varma Pazhassiraja between 1793 and 1805 is often portrayed as a royalist rebellion against British rule. While Pazhassiraja undoubtedly played a significant role, such interpretations tend to obscure the crucial contributions of tribal communities. Pazhassiraja mobilized all the tribal communities, especially Kurichias into the anti-colonial struggle through the guerilla warfare network.

The Kurichias and Kurumas formed the backbone of the resistance forces, known collectively as the *Pazhassippada*. Their intimate knowledge of the terrain enabled the use of guerrilla tactics, which proved highly effective against British troops who were unfamiliar with the forested landscape. These communities were not merely auxiliary forces; they actively shaped the strategies and direction of the resistance. The skilled hunters of the Kurichia community were transformed into the *Kurihiappada* under the leadership of Thalakkal Chanthu (P.Ramachandran, 2024). The performers of the Kuruma community who practiced their traditional artform *Kolppayattu* later transformed into *Kurumappada* (Kochangod Govindan Asan, 2025). Similar situation existed in the Nair and Chetti communities who participated actively in the anti-colonial struggles by forming *Nairppada* and *Chettippada* respectively, and became the part of the *Pazhassippada*.

One of the most prominent tribal leaders was Thalakkal Chanthu, a Kurichia commander who played a key role in organizing guerrilla warfare. His expertise in traditional archery and forest navigation transformed the tribal population into a formidable military force. Following his execution by the British, leadership was continued by Raman Nambi of the Kuruma community, who led the *Girivargakalapam* (Tribal Revolt) of 1812—one of the most intense confrontations faced by colonial forces in the region (Colonel James Welsh, 1830).

These developments indicate that tribal participation was not incidental but central to the resistance movement. The alliance between Pazhassiraja and tribal communities was based on shared opposition to colonial encroachment, rather than hierarchical subordination. All the tribal communities of Wayanad considered Pazhassiraja as a symbolic leader like *Ponnuthampuran* (beloved king) and joined with him to fight against colonial expansion (C.A.Kunhiraman Nair, 2005). This type of relationship between Pazhassiraja and tribal communities (tribal and non-tribal societies) underscores the need to reconsider the nature of leadership in anti-colonial movements.

Arthur Wellesley, a leading British Military officer was appointed to suppress tribal resistance movements in Wayanad. It is noteworthy that his experiences in guerilla style warfare in the forests of Wayanad played a significant role in shaping his military strategies (K.K.N.Kurup, 1988). These experiences are believed to have contributed to his later success against Napoleon Bonaparte at the Battle of Waterloo. From this context, we can understand the strength and fighting spirit of tribal warriors in anti-colonial movements.

Tribal Resistance against Colonialism After 1806

After 1806, Wayanad witnessed continued forms of tribal movements against colonial administration. The execution of Pazhassiraja in 1805 marked the end of a major organised and centralised phase of rebellion. Without a central leader like Pazhassiraja or Thalakkal Chanthu, the tribal resistances became decentralised.

The *Girivargakalapam* (tribal revolt) of 1812 was a significant continuation of tribal resistance in Wayanad. It reflected the persistence of anti-colonial sentiment among the Kuruma and allied communities against British authority in the Malabar region. It stands a powerful symbol of tribal uprising in Wayanad against colonial rule (T.K.Raveendran, 1978). It reveals the determination of indigenous communities to defend their land, autonomy and way of life against colonial intrusion.

The decentralised nature of post 1806 resistance highlights the deeply rooted opposition to colonial authority. Tribal communities continued to resist not only through armed rebellion but also through everyday acts of defiance. Despite the absence of centralised leadership, these movements were demonstrated resilience and adaptability.

Forms of Tribal Resistance

Tribal resistance in Wayanad was multifaceted and cannot be reduced to a single mode of opposition. It encompassed both overt and covert forms, reflecting the adaptability and resilience of indigenous communities.

Guerrilla Warfare: Armed struggle was one of the most visible forms of resistance. Tribal fighters utilized guerrilla tactics, including ambushes, surprise attacks and disruption of supply lines. The dense forests of Wayanad provided a natural advantage, allowing small groups to outmaneuver larger British forces. The tribal warriors used guerilla type of war tactics against colonial expansion and as an unfamiliar system the British had to work hard to suppress these resistance.

Refusal of Revenue Payments: Another significant form of resistance was the rejection of colonial taxation. The British demand for cash payments disrupted traditional systems based on barter and subsistence agriculture. Tribal communities refused to comply, thereby challenging the legitimacy of colonial authority.

Sabotage and Disruption: Tribal groups also engaged in acts of sabotage, targeting colonial infrastructure such as roads, supply depots and communication networks. These actions aimed to weaken the administrative and military capabilities of the British.

Continuous Resistance: Beyond organized rebellion, everyday forms of resistance played an important role. This included non-cooperation, evasion and the continued practice of traditional customs despite colonial restrictions. Such acts, though less visible, were crucial in sustaining resistance over time.

Social, Cultural and Ecological Factors

The relationship between tribal communities and their environment was central to their resistance. For indigenous groups in Wayanad, land and forests were not merely economic resources but integral to their identity and cultural practices.

Colonial policies that commodified forests disrupted this relationship, transforming common resources into state-controlled assets. Activities such as hunting, gathering and shifting cultivation were increasingly restricted, leading to ecological as well as economic displacement especially among the tribal communities. These policies adopted by the British government resulted in ecological displacement of the tribals alongside economic hardships (T.K.Raveendran, 2012).

These Tribal Resistance, therefore, must be understood not only in political terms but also cultural and ecological struggle for existence and survival (K.K.N.Kurup, 1988). Tribal communities sought to defend their customary rights and preserve their sustainable modes of living. This perspective aligns with the field of environmental history, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of cultural, ecological and social processes.

Subaltern Interpretation of Tribal Anti-Colonial Struggle in Wayanad

The marginalization of tribal resistance in mainstream historiography reflects broader biases in historical writing. Traditional narratives often prioritize elite actors and overlook the contributions of marginalized groups. Therefore, it is necessary to fill this historiographical gap through local historical studies.

Subaltern studies, emerging in the late twentieth century, sought to address this imbalance by focusing on the perspectives and experiences of non-elite populations. Scholars in this field argue that subaltern groups possess their own forms of agency and political consciousness, which are often obscured in dominant narratives. Scholars in this field highlight that tribal political movements were organized and strategic responses to colonial forest laws and economic exploitation, rather than spontaneous outbursts (Akash Kumar Rawat, 2024).

Tribal movements opposed all types of exploitative measures of colonial authority in various parts of the Indian subcontinent. Major historiography or school of thoughts did not

seriously study the tribal movements against colonialism. Applying the Subaltern framework to Wayanad reveals that tribal resistance was not merely reactive against the colonial administration, but constituted a coherent political, cultural and social response. These movements were organized, strategic and rooted in a clear understanding of colonial exploitation. By re-centering tribal agency, this study challenges existing interpretations and calls for a more inclusive approach to the history of anti-colonial struggles.

Conclusion

Tribal resistance in Wayanad represents a significant yet underexplored dimension of India's anti-colonial history. By highlighting the role of indigenous communities such as the Kurichias and Kurumas, this article challenges elite-centric narratives and underscores the importance of subaltern perspectives.

The resistance movements in Wayanad were complex and multifaceted, encompassing armed struggles, economic defiance and ecological preservation. They were driven by a desire to protect traditional ways of life and cultural practices, and assert autonomy in the face of colonial intrusion.

Future research should focus on oral histories, local archives and interdisciplinary approaches to further deepen our understanding of these movements. Recognizing the contributions of tribal communities is essential for constructing a more comprehensive and inclusive history of anti-colonial resistance and movements in India. This becomes a reality when the histories of ethnic and tribal communities and their local past are examined through subaltern historical frameworks.

References

- Rawat, Akash Kumar. Tribal Resistance against Colonialism: A Post Colonial Understanding of Subaltern Historiography, *The Academic: International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, Vol.2, August 2024.
- Arnold, David, and Ramachandra Guha, eds. *Nature, Culture, Imperialism*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Baden-Powell, B. *The Land Systems of British India*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892.
- Gopalan Nair, C. *Wayanad Its People and Traditions*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services.1911.
- Guha, Ranajit. *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Kurup, K.K.N. *Pazhassi Samarangal*, Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Bhasha Institute, 1988.
- Mohan, Sanal. Subalternity and the Kerala Experience. *Indian Historical Review* 32, no. 1 (2005): 45–68.
- Roy, Tirthankar. *The Economic History of India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Sarkar, Sumit. *Modern India: 1885–1947*. Delhi: Macmillan, 1983.

Singh, K.S. Tribal Movements in India. New Delhi: Manohar, 1982.

Skaria, Ajay. Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.

T.K.Raveendran, T.K. Institutions and Movements in Kerala History, Thiruvananthapuram: Charithram Publications, 1978.

Raveendran, T.K. Kurichia Kalapam-1812, Kozhikode: Vanavasi Vikasa Kendram, 2012.

Welsh, James, Colonel. Military Remniscence: Abstracted from a Journal of nearly 40years of active service in the East Indies, London, 1830.

Dr. K.K.N.Kurup, Author of the book Pazhassisamarangal, Personal Interview, 12 April 2026.

Dr. K.K.Muhammed, Eminent Archaeologist, Personal Interview, 12 April 2026,

Dr. Kasthurba A.K., Professor, Department of Architecture and Planning, NIT Kozhikode, Personal Interview, 12 April 2026.

Ramachandran, P, Anjukunnu, Deendant of Thalakkal Chanthu. Personal Interview, 30 November 2024.

Govindan Asan, Kochangod. Archery Trainer, Representative of the Kuruma community, Personal Interview, 30 April 2025.

Kunhiraman Nair, C.A, Eachome. Social Activist and Descendant of Edachana Kunkan, Personal Interview, 16 December 2005.