



# From Postmemory to Prosthetic Memory: The Narrative Battle Over the Malabar Rebellion

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**Abstract**— This paper interprets the dynamic collective memory of a historical event (Malabar Rebellion, 1921) in the light of the oral narratives that I collected during my research fieldwork in the region after a century of its occurrence. I argue that the orature of the Malabar Rebellion is undergoing gradual mnemonic changes in both individual and collective levels through a continuous process which mediates and remediates the memory of the subjects within the research population. The medium includes cultural formations like songs and stories prevalent within the Mappila community of Malabar, everyday conversations and interactions comprising the communicative memory of the subjects, formal and informal conferences conducted with the aim of commemorating the rebellion, print and electronic media which re-present the event and generate multiple narratives from time to time, and institutional actions by governmental agencies. Cultural identity and socio-political utility of the present dominated the narrative of the participants rather than the emotional connection with their ancestors' past. Marianne Hirsch's notion of postmemory is used as the starting point to analyse the construction of narratives from transmitted memory. David Herman's theorisation of cognitive narratology acts as the methodological tool for the study.

**Keywords**— Malabar Rebellion, narrativisation, oral stories, postmemory, prosthetic memory.



## I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I have tried to interpret the dynamic collective memory of the Malabar Rebellion, foregrounding specific patterns in the light of the oral narratives that I collected during my research fieldwork in the region. The rebellion, which took place in 1921, was a six month long armed revolt led by Muslim tenants against the British and local Hindu landlords in the South Malabar region of the then Madras Presidency. The multi-layered event, with its complex socio-cultural intricacy, continues to generate polarized discourses even after a century. Shades of anticolonialism, class struggle, and religious fanaticism are ascribed to the event by different factions in varying degree. The orature of the Malabar Rebellion is undergoing gradual mnemonic changes in both individual and collective levels through a continuous process which mediates and remediates the memory of the subjects within the research population. The medium includes cultural formations like songs and stories prevalent within the Mappila community

of Malabar, everyday conversations and interactions comprising the communicative memory of the subjects, formal and informal conferences conducted with the aim of commemorating the rebellion, print and electronic media which re-present the event and generate multiple narratives from time to time, and institutional actions by governmental agencies which add to the dominant narrative of the event. Through this process of active mediation, the natural postmemory of the people whose ancestors were affected by the rebellion, develops into multiple prosthetic memories based on their social background. A meta-awareness of their own memory was evident in the narratives of most participants.

## II. DEPICTION OF THE REBELLION

In the aftermath of the rebellion, both colonial and nationalist narratives viewed it with abjection as something that should not have taken place. The initial support given by the Indian National Congress was withdrawn when the

movement took a violent turn and the rebellion was condemned. It was only after several decades that the rebellion gained some positive recognition, through revisionist accounts that followed a Marxist narrative.

### 2.1. Dominant historiography

The dominant historiography of the rebellion has its roots in the reports and accounts produced by British colonial administrators. *A History of the Malabar Rebellion, 1921* by R. H. Hitchcock (1925/1983), the then Superintendent of Police of South Malabar, is the prominent narrative account which elucidated the circumstances of the rebellion to the world. It designated religious fanaticism of the illiterate Mappilas of South Malabar as the primary cause of the rebellion. *The Mapilla Rebellion 1921-1922* by G. R. F. Tottenham (1922) and *The Moplah Rebellion, 1921* by C. Gopalan Nair (1923) are the other two works in this category that reflect the colonial attitude towards the rebellion and label it as a socio-political unrest caused by fanatic rebels and the leaders of Indian Nationalist Movement. Nationalist narratives on the rebellion tried to blame the British administration for creating the conditions that exacerbated the rebellion. Even while doing so, they echoed the colonial judgement in foregrounding the fanaticism and ignorance of the Mappilas as the causal factors of the rebellion rather than their anti-colonial or anti-feudal sentiments. Congress leader K. Madhavan Nair's (1971) historical work titled *Malabar Kalapam* [Malabar Rebellion] is a widely quoted text in this category.

### 2.2. Revisionist accounts

Communist theorist E. M. S. Namboodiripad's (1952) economic interpretation of the rebellion, as depicted in his work *The National Question in Kerala*, considers it as essentially "anti-imperialist" and "anti-feudal" (120). Resonating with Namboodiripad's argument, Robert Hardgrave (1977) categorically termed the rebellion as a peasant revolt citing agrarian discontent as its primary cause (97,98). Historian K. N. Panikkar (1989) highlighted the need to look beyond the dichotomy between economic and religious factors with regard to the cause of the rebellion. According to him, "it was in the interplay of these two factors and not just in any one or both of them that the uprisings were rooted" (Panikkar 1989:193). M. Gangadhara Menon in his 1971 essay "Mappila Outbreaks of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Malabar" views the rebellion as a natural culmination of the series of Mappila outbreaks from 1836 onwards which according to him had both economic and religious undertones (490). Though antagonism towards the

landlords and the British administration was the dominant emotion of the rebellion, it can only be critically examined if we take into account its inherent heterogenous nature. Rather than framing a historical narrative of the Malabar Rebellion, my objective is to locate it within the framework of postmemory and cultural practices of representation. Semi-structured interviews conducted from January to April 2024 in and around the sites of the rebellion provide the primary data for this paper.

### III. THE COMMEMORATIVE SURGE

The centenary of the rebellion has led to an increased production of multiple and contradictory narratives of the event through various media. Commemorative assemblies and publications carried out in this regard act as discursive practices of representation which modify the collective memory of the event. For instance, Malappuram Block Panchayat conducted a programme titled "1921 Malabar Independence Movement: Documentary Presentation and History Seminar" on January 16, 2024. The title itself declares that the rebellion is nothing but a part of the Indian Independence Movement. Academics, orators, and politicians who took part in the programme highlighted the valour and selfless fight displayed by the rebels in 1921. A short description of the rebellion was played as a voice-over repeatedly during the course of the programme. The narrative of this description was carefully scripted to engender a secular outlook of the rebellion among the listeners. While describing the leadership of the rebellion, along with the two prominent Mappila leaders, namely, Variyankunnath Kunjahammad Haji and Ali Musliyar, two Hindu leaders of the Khilafat Movement, namely, M. P. Narayana Menon and M. Brahmaddattan Namboodiripad were mentioned as if to balance out the participation from the two religions concerned.<sup>1</sup> The second example is a lecture regarding the nature of the rebellion published on an online platform called Sangam Talks. This narrativization outrightly labels the rebellion as "the Moplah genocide of Hindus" and stands in total contradiction with the previous discourse mentioned. The speaker commences the talk by enumerating the atrocities inflicted upon the Hindu community by the rebels: "Savage rape, dishonours, slaughter and slavery of Hindu women, slaying Hindus alive, wholesale slaughter of men, women, children, and infants, forcibly converting Hindus en masse or killing those who refuse to convert, throwing half dead people into wells and leaving them there to suffer and die" (Sangam

<sup>1</sup> In 1919, widespread Khilafat Movement gatherings took place in Kerala with the active support of Indian National Congress (INC). It had provided the political and ideological support for the Mappila community to rise against the propertied classes and

the British during the initial phase before the rebellion took its violent turn.

Talks, 2019). The term “Hindu” is repeated three times in a single sentence with the aim of reiterating the speaker’s claim that the community was brutally victimized during the rebellion. This is the premise upon which the whole narrative of the lecture is built upon.

#### IV. POSTMEMORY OF THE REBELLION

Postmemory encompasses the mediated knowledge assimilated by the present generation about their past and their relationship with it. Marianne Hirsch (1997), who theorized this concept, states that “postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation” (22). Since there is no direct experience involved, postmemory narratives are constructed with imaginative investment, according to the socio-cultural framework of the present. When new discourses of the rebellion are presented to the cultural consciousness of different communities, it modifies the existing orature on the event by altering the memory stories that people remember and narrate. The tension which currently exists related to the positioning of the Malabar Rebellion has its roots in the need of different groups to advance their ideology by constructing their version of the event. Here, the postmemory of the rebellion becomes a malleable raw material for the communities to mould a new sense of affiliation to the past event based on the needs of the present.

##### 4.1. Memory reconsolidation

Postmemory of the Malabar Rebellion is a knowledge corpus brimming with multiple narratives that are not completely exclusive from each other. The presence of a mnemonic battle where different groups argue on how the event should be remembered was evident in the oral stories narrated by the participants. While answering my question regarding the nature of the rebellion, Muhammad Ashraf, a middle-aged businessman from Kondotty claimed that “history is the creation of the present”. When probed further, he recollected that he heard this statement at a protest gathering that had been conducted a year ago against the central government’s move to remove the names of Mappila rebels from the Dictionary of Martyrs of India’s Freedom Struggle. Ashraf used to think about the rebellion as a peasant uprising that took place because of the economic oppression suffered by farmers. Discourses like television debates and public talks have significantly changed his perception of the rebellion: “I recently realized that the Malabar Rebellion was a significant part of the national freedom struggle. Islam teaches its followers to fight for their motherland. It was ultimately a fight against

the imperialistic forces. Sangh Parivar will not accept this reality. They are trying to alter historical facts for their political gains” (M. Ashraf, personal communication, January 21, 2024). Cultural identity and socio-political utility of the present dominated the narrative of the participants rather than the emotional connection with their ancestors’ past. This pattern became increasingly evident as we move down the generations. The very nature of postmemory, where individuals identify empathetically with their ancestors’ experience in the past through intergenerational transmission, gets challenged here. It should not be confused with the natural changes that happen to memory over time. This shift is far more drastic and extrinsically motivated than the natural modification of transmitted memory that happens via imaginative reconstruction of the past.

##### 4.2. Shift to prosthetic memory

Through continuous mediation and remediation, the postmemory of the rebellion is gradually evolving into and attaining characteristics of what Alison Landsberg calls prosthetic memory. “Prosthetic memories are neither purely individual nor entirely collective but emerge at the interface of individual and collective experience. They are privately felt public memories that develop after an encounter with a mass cultural representation of the past” (Landsberg 2004:19). Here, individuals who have not lived through a past event will develop a deeply felt but artificially constructed memory of the same as if they have experienced it themselves. Prosthetic memory’s significance lies in its ability to guide the political consciousness and subjectivity of an individual. Different political parties and cultural groups aggressively propagate their narrative of the event and actively participate in this synthetic construction of memory. Religious and other socio-cultural factors surrounding the individuals will influence their reception of the mass media narrative and the subsequent moulding of their prosthetic memory. For example, if two individuals with contradictory postmemory of the Malabar Rebellion attends a commemoration gathering with its own narrative agenda, they will automatically develop two distinctive prosthetic memories aligning with their own existing postmemory.

##### 4.3. Narrative battle

Distortion in the collective memory of the rebellion happening through “instrumentalization” and “narrativization” becomes relevant in this context (Schudson 1995:351, 355). Public conferences, social media discussions, books, and television debates on the Malabar Rebellion act as the major platforms through which political parties instrumentalize memory to meet their present strategic goals. Distortion by selective

rearrangement of facts or by favouring their own version of the event can be seen in such discourses. On August 19, 2021, Ram Madhav, a prominent national leader of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), labelled the rebellion as a manifestation of Talibani mindset while inaugurating a year-long program remembering the victims. Senior leader of Indian National Congress, K. Muraleedharan, negated this argument, stating that the rebellion was part of the Indian Freedom Movement and that the BJP is trying to execute their communal agenda by implementing the divide-and-rule policy of the British ("BJP, Congress spar over Malabar Rebellion," 2021). While the former tried to foreground the violent nature of the rebellion, the latter dismissed the accusation by underscoring its political significance.

#### 4.4. Mnemonic tradition

Shared memories of a thought community are formulated and collectively remembered by its members in order to project their social identity. How an individual perceives a past event (either experienced by himself or imbibed through second-hand narratives) depends on the need and interest of the cultural group to which he belongs. Eviatar Zerubavel (1997) uses the term "mnemonic tradition" to indicate the selection procedure adopted by communities to modify and thereby control what is remembered by its members (87). Along with the inclusion and exclusion of memories, this tradition also guides how an included memory should be remembered. "Being social presupposes the ability to experience events that happened to groups and communities long before we even joined them as if they were somehow part of our own past" (Zerubavel 1997:91).

#### 4.5. Exclusive communications

During my interaction with an elderly research participant named Unni Namboothiri, he showed me a magazine and asked me to go through it. It was the April 2021 volume of a quarterly magazine called *Swasthi*, published by Yogakshema Sabha, a community organisation of Namboothiri Brahmins of Kerala origin. The volume had a special section where the present generation readers can share the traumatic experience suffered by their ancestors during the Malabar Rebellion. Namboothiri was the primary propertied class or *jenmi* caste which suffered maximum losses during the rebellion. After making me read a few memoirs from the magazine, he asked me whether I believe the rebellion was actually a part of the Indian Freedom Movement: "If it was freedom struggle, why would they target and attack Hindu households? People are talking about the atrocities faced by their relatives in this book. Do you think they are lying?" (U. Namboothiri, personal communication, January 18, 2024). As seen in the case of this magazine, mnemonic traditions sustain and grow

through exclusive communications circulated within different communities. This transmission of narrative from person to person or generation to generation not only communicates the "facts" associated with the event, but also its explanation which narrativises the content.

### V. PATTERNS IN ORAL NARRATIVES

David Herman (2007) identifies five conceptual tools, namely, positioning, embodiment, distributed nature of mind, emotionology, and qualia for interpreting an oral narrative which according to him is inherently situated within "a specific discourse context or occasion for telling" (314). Positioning of the self and others in a particular way will help the narrator to coherently structure the storyline. As cited previously in this paper, the research participant Muhammad Ashraf criticizes right wing politics by saying "they are trying to alter historical facts for their political gains". The participant categorically distances himself from a group of people whom he thinks are ideologically different from him. This self-positioning and othering reveal the vantage point adopted by the narrator. Individual narratives make more sense when assessed in relation with other narratives and thereby arriving at the underlying patterns. Viewing mind as a distributed entity spread across individuals, places, and time elevates the individual act of cognition into a collaborative process. Memory of an individual strengthens when it gets validated by the memory of other members of his social group. This happens because the mind is "grounded in participants' relations with one another and their surrounding social and material environment" (Herman 2007:320). Shaheela Amjad, a research participant, recollected the discussion she had with her relatives at a marriage function:

We were talking about the latest movies released in Malayalam. During the discussion, my uncle started criticising film director Ashiq Abu for backing off from the announced biopic of Variyankunnath [Kunjahammad Haji]. He was saying that all the controversies surrounding the film was purposefully created by certain political groups to create communal tension. All of us know that Variyankunnath is a hero and I don't understand why some people have issues with him.

(A. Shaheela, personal communication, January 10, 2024)

Shaheela's idea of the rebellion is heavily influenced by the beliefs of her friends and family. Communicative memory of the subjects comprising of day-to-day conversations and

interactions had played a crucial role in modifying the orature on the rebellion.

### 5.1. Stock responses

Patterns identified from the responses point to the collective understanding of the rebellion cultivated and perpetuated among the members belonging to the same cultural groups. During the interview, I could record several stock responses from the research participants who shared similar outlook towards the rebellion. A significant number of participants who opposed the communal angle of the rebellion and supported the intent of the rebels had responded in similar fashion when questioned about the atrocities faced by the Hindus. They would negate the argument that only Hindus were attacked by pointing out that a Mappila policeman named Chekkutty Sahib was publicly beheaded by rebel leader Variyankunnath Kunjahammad Haji for having worked with the British. They go on to argue that irrespective of the religion, people who sided with the British were considered criminals and punished by the rebels. Similarly the participants who highlighted the fanatic nature of the Mappila rebels and sympathised with the sufferings of the Hindu victims would often quote lines from the Malayalam poet Kumaran Asan's poem based on the rebellion titled "*Duravastha*" ["The Plight"]. The most quoted line is: "*Krooramahammadar chinthunna haindavachorayaal*" ["With the Hindu blood spilled by cruel Mohammedans"] (Asan, 1978:line 7). They try to seek legitimacy for their claims from reputable sources. Even while narrating their own mediated memory of the rebellion, the participants tend to self-validate their arguments by quoting other people or media reports.

### 5.2. Mediation across generations

Mediation of memory across the generations have had significant impact on the ways participants from different age groups remember and identify with the rebellion. Elderly research participants, especially those above seventy years of age, have a nuanced understanding of the rebellion in general. Their postmemory narratives display an organic emotional connection with the past event. When asked about the dominant memory of the Malabar Rebellion, an elderly participant recited a folk song that his aunt used to sing when he was a child. The song narrated the military brutality endured by the Mappila rebels: "pregnant women were attacked with spears; the spears were adorned with their unborn infants" (A. Thangal, personal communication, January 8, 2024). They have spent their formative years listening to the first-hand oral narratives of the people who were alive when the rebellion took place. Though it was a fight against oppression, majority of them view the rebellion as a conglomerate of different events which have their own individual

characteristics. C. P. Muhammad Moulavi, who is seventy-seven years old, recognizes the significance of the rebellion and considers it as a part of the freedom struggle. At the same time, he agrees that "since there was no central leadership throughout the course of the rebellion, many people with malicious intent took advantage of the chaotic situation to attain their selfish needs" (C. Moulavi, personal communication, January 13, 2024). He is also the grandson of Ali Musliyar, one of the prominent leaders of the rebellion. Most of the research participants from the younger generations tend to approach the rebellion on an emotional level. Their attitude towards the rebellion is primarily moulded by the conflicting narratives propagated by different socio-political groups through online media. Prosthetic memory based narratives tend to display emotions recently constructed out of sensationalized representation of the rebellion. K. S. Mithun, a twenty-eight-year-old research participant from the Hindu community, animatedly declared to me during the interview that he will not forget the sufferings endured by his forefathers during the rebellion. He went on to question the logic behind labelling the rebels as freedom fighters: "how can the rebels be considered as freedom fighters when many among them mercilessly murdered innocent people including women and children" (K. Mithun, personal communication, January 30, 2024). When enquired about the source of his information, he replied with a smile that everything is now available on the internet. Discursive psychology defines emotionology as the collective understanding of a cultural group in employing and interpreting emotions. Socio-political factors which extrinsically cultivate collective emotions become relevant in this context.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The faction which perceives the rebellion as an uprising against colonial and feudal oppression will consider the people who died for the cause of rebellion as martyrs. But for those who view the event as a communal genocide, the innocent victims of violence are the real martyrs. Here, the remembrance of the event itself becomes a discursive practice of representation. When people consume and represent such narrativised representations again and again, their memory of the rebellion becomes prosthetically defined by their respective socio-political limits. In this way, orature on the Malabar Rebellion continues to undergo mediation through narrative reconstruction of the past events.

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