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Original Article

Sangolli Rayanna and the Struggle for Freedom: A Historical Analysis of Contribution to Karnataka's Anti-Colonial Resistance

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Abstract

Sangolli Rayanna occupies a significant place in the history of Karnataka's early resistance to British colonial expansion. His struggle, which emerged in the aftermath of the Kittur uprising of 1824, represents one of the important forms of armed resistance against the authority of the British East India Company in southern India before the Revolt of 1857. Rayanna was a trusted military commander associated with Kittur and a prominent supporter of Rani Chennamma.[1] Following the suppression of the Kittur resistance and the imprisonment of Rani Chennamma, Rayanna continued the struggle against British authority. Between 1829 and 1831, he organised local fighters and employed mobile and guerrilla methods to attack colonial administrative establishments, treasuries and centres of British authority. His movement drew considerable support from sections of the local population and demonstrated the capacity of rural communities to challenge colonial political and economic control.[2] This article historically examines Sangolli Rayanna's contribution to Karnataka's anti-colonial resistance, with particular attention to the political background of the Kittur uprising, the nature of British expansion, Rayanna's leadership, guerrilla strategy, popular participation, socio-economic dimensions of resistance, and his legacy in Karnataka's historical memory.[3] The study adopts a historical-analytical methodology based primarily on secondary sources, government publications, historical records, scholarly writings and documented folk traditions. The article argues that Rayanna's struggle should not be viewed merely as a local military rebellion. Rather, it represented an important expression of resistance to colonial sovereignty, economic exploitation and political dispossession. His movement also demonstrates the importance of subaltern and regional perspectives in understanding the wider history of India's anti-colonial struggle.[4]

Keywords: *Sangolli Rayanna, Kittur, Rani Chennamma, Anti-Colonial Resistance, British East India Company, Karnataka, Guerrilla Warfare, Colonialism, Peasant Resistance, Freedom Struggle.*

Introduction

The history of India's struggle against British colonialism is often narrated through major national movements such as the Revolt of 1857, the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement and the Quit India Movement.[5] However, resistance to colonial expansion began much earlier and occurred in numerous regions through local rebellions, armed struggles, peasant movements and political opposition. Karnataka occupies an important place in this history because several early challenges to British authority emerged in the region during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Among the important personalities associated with this early resistance was Sangolli Rayanna, a military commander connected with the Kittur state and a close associate of Rani Chennamma.[6] The Kittur uprising of 1824 and Rayanna's subsequent resistance illustrate the determination of local political and social forces to oppose the expansion of British authority. The Kittur conflict developed in the context of British attempts to assert political control over Kittur. Rani Chennamma resisted British interference in the succession of the Kittur state. The British eventually defeated the Kittur forces and imprisoned the queen. [7] The suppression of the uprising, however, did not completely eliminate resistance. Rayanna subsequently emerged as one of the most important leaders of armed opposition in the Kittur region. Government and historical sources describe Rayanna as a loyal follower of Rani Chennamma who continued the rebellion after the defeat of Kittur.

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During his campaign, he attacked British administrative centres and treasuries, particularly in places such as Nandagad, Beedi, Sampagaon and Khanapur. [8] The Government of India's Unsung Heroes archive records his organisation of revolutionary groups and his attacks on British positions. Rayanna's struggle is historically significant because it challenges a narrow understanding of Indian nationalism that begins only with the emergence of modern political organisations in the late nineteenth century. His resistance belonged to an earlier phase in which political sovereignty, local autonomy, agrarian interests and opposition to colonial authority became closely interconnected.[9] The present study therefore examines Rayanna not simply as a heroic warrior but as a historical actor whose resistance reflected broader political, economic and social tensions generated by colonial expansion.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the historical and political background of Sangolli Rayanna's resistance against British colonial rule.
2. To analyse the role of Sangolli Rayanna in continuing the Kittur struggle after the defeat and imprisonment of Rani Chennamma.
3. To examine Rayanna's guerrilla warfare strategies and military leadership against the British.
4. To analyse the social, political, and economic factors that influenced Rayanna's anti-colonial resistance.
5. To assess the historical significance and legacy of Sangolli Rayanna in Karnataka's anti-colonial struggle.

Methodology

The study is based exclusively on secondary data. Information is collected from books, research articles, historical journals, government publications, newspapers, biographies, and reliable online historical sources. The collected information is analysed using a historical and analytical approach to examine Sangolli Rayanna's contribution to Karnataka's anti-colonial resistance.

Review of Literature

1. Wodeyar, Sadashiva S., Rani Chennamma, New Delhi: National Book Trust, India, 1977, pp. 120–130. The work provides an important historical account of the Kittur resistance against British authority. It helps understand the political background of Rani Chennamma's struggle and the role of Sangolli Rayanna in continuing the resistance after the defeat of Kittur.
2. Minch, M. I., Rani Kittur Channamma: Her Revolt Against the British Rule, Gadag: Twarith Mudrana Offset Printers, 2006, pp. 94–110. This study focuses on the Kittur revolt and provides useful information about Rayanna's association with Rani Chennamma, his guerrilla activities, leadership and continued opposition to British rule. The work is particularly useful for understanding the military and political dimensions of the Kittur resistance.
3. Saravagol, Muttanna & Tadasad, Kamalaxi, "Sangollirayanna and the Emergence of Vernacular Nationalism in Colonial South India: A Historical, Archival, and Empirical Analysis," ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2026, pp. 351–359. This recent study examines Rayanna from the perspectives of anti-colonial resistance, vernacular nationalism, subaltern studies, military strategy and popular mobilisation. It argues that Rayanna mobilised people from different social groups and that folk traditions played an important role in preserving his historical memory.

Historical Background: British Expansion in Karnataka

The emergence of British authority in Karnataka must be understood within the wider political transformation of southern India during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The decline of older political formations and the expansion of the British East India Company created new political relationships between colonial authorities and regional rulers.[10] Following the Anglo-Mysore conflicts and the weakening of Maratha political authority, substantial portions of present-day northern Karnataka gradually came under British influence. The transition from indigenous political authority to Company administration affected traditional rulers, military retainers, landlords, peasants and local administrative institutions. The British sought to consolidate their authority through revenue administration, political intervention and the reorganisation of territories. Such policies frequently produced tensions because existing political arrangements were disrupted. The Kittur region was particularly affected by this transformation. Kittur had traditionally maintained a degree of political autonomy under its Desai rulers.[11] The British sought to strengthen their control over the territory, leading eventually to confrontation with Rani Chennamma. The historical significance of Kittur lies in the fact that resistance emerged before the better-known Revolt of 1857. The Government of India has described Rani Chennamma's armed resistance of 1824 as an important early revolt against British rule.

Kittur Uprising of 1824 and the Emergence of Rayanna

The Kittur uprising of 1824 constituted the immediate historical background to Rayanna's later struggle. Rani Chennamma opposed British interference in the succession of Kittur. The conflict developed into armed confrontation between the Kittur forces and the British East India Company. The initial Kittur resistance demonstrated that British military superiority did not automatically guarantee political submission. Kittur forces succeeded in inflicting serious losses on the British during the initial confrontation.[12] The British subsequently mobilised larger forces and eventually defeated the Kittur resistance. Rani Chennamma was captured and imprisoned at Bailhongal, where she died

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in 1829. Sangolli Rayanna participated in the Kittur struggle. After the defeat of the uprising, he was captured but later released. His association with Rani Chennamma and his experience of the suppression of Kittur deeply influenced his subsequent political activity. The defeat of 1824 therefore did not bring an immediate end to resistance. Instead, opposition continued in a different form. Rayanna gradually developed a mobile resistance network in the countryside. The historical relationship between Rani Chennamma and Rayanna is important. While Chennamma represented sovereign resistance at the level of the Kittur state, Rayanna subsequently transformed the struggle into a more decentralised rural insurgency.[13]

Political Causes of Rayanna's Resistances

Several factors contributed to Rayanna's decision to continue resistance against British authority.

1. Defence of Kittur Sovereignty: One of the central motivations of Rayanna's struggle was the restoration of Kittur's political authority. He remained committed to the Kittur cause and supported the restoration of Shivalingappa, the adopted heir associated with the Kittur succession.

2. Colonial Political Intervention: British intervention in the internal affairs of regional states generated resentment among sections of the local political elite and military retainers. [14] The replacement of indigenous authority with Company administration threatened established political relationships.

3. Economic Pressure: Colonial revenue policies also contributed to rural discontent. Historical accounts indicate that Rayanna experienced the effects of land confiscation and increased taxation.[15] Such experiences connected his personal grievances with the wider economic difficulties experienced by sections of the rural population.

4. Loyalty to Rani Chennamma and Kittur: Rayanna's personal loyalty to Rani Chennamma was an important motivating factor. His later resistance can be interpreted as an attempt to continue the unfinished struggle of Kittur after the queen's imprisonment.

Rayanna in the Context of Indian Anti-Colonial Resistance

Sangolli Rayanna's struggle should be understood as an important early phase of Indian resistance to British colonial rule, occurring decades before the Revolt of 1857. His resistance combined political, military and socio-economic dimensions. [16]

1. Early Anti-Colonial Resistance: Rayanna continued the Kittur struggle after the defeat and imprisonment of Rani Chennamma. His rebellion of 1829–1830 demonstrates that opposition to British rule existed well before 1857.
2. Defence of Political Autonomy: Rayanna aimed to challenge British control over Kittur and support the restoration of Shivalingappa as the ruler. [17] Thus, his struggle represented resistance to the loss of indigenous political authority.
3. Guerrilla Resistance: Unlike conventional armies, Rayanna organised small groups of fighters and used mobility, surprise attacks and local knowledge. He targeted British administrative centres and treasuries at places including Nandagad, Beedi, Khanapur and Sampagaon.
4. Popular and Peasant Participation : Rayanna's movement attracted support from local people and sections of the peasantry.[18] Historical studies connect his resistance with land confiscation and revenue pressures, giving the movement an important social and economic dimension alongside its political objectives.
5. Place in Indian Freedom History: Although modern nationalism had not yet developed in its later form, Rayanna's resistance represents an important regional and subaltern expression of anti-colonial opposition. His continued struggle and martyrdom helped preserve the memory of resistance to British authority in Karnataka.[19]

Sangolli Rayanna's contribution demonstrates that India's anti-colonial resistance developed through numerous regional struggles long before the emergence of the organised national movement.

Rayanna Contribution to the Indian Freedom Struggle with Rani Chennamma

The contribution of Sangolli Rayanna to India's early anti-colonial resistance is closely connected with Kittur Rani Chennamma. Their struggle in the 1820s represents one of the important early challenges to the political expansion of the British East India Company in South India. Although the modern concept of a unified Indian freedom movement had not yet developed, their resistance expressed a strong opposition to colonial political control and the loss of indigenous sovereignty. [20]

1. Defence of Kittur's Political Sovereignty: Rani Chennamma opposed British interference in the affairs of Kittur, particularly over the question of succession. Rayanna supported her position and became an important military figure in the resistance. [21] Their objective was fundamentally connected with protecting Kittur's political authority and preventing the British from taking control of the state.
2. Participation in the Kittur Resistance of 1824: During the Kittur uprising of 1824, Rayanna fought alongside the forces resisting the British. The conflict demonstrated that a relatively small regional power could challenge the authority of the East India Company. Although the British ultimately defeated Kittur, the resistance became an important episode in the early history of anti-colonial opposition in Karnataka.
3. Continuation of Chennamma's Struggle: The defeat of Rani Chennamma did not bring the resistance to an immediate end. After her capture and imprisonment, Rayanna continued the struggle against British authority. In

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this respect, his contribution was particularly significant because he transformed the defeated Kittur resistance into a continuing rural movement.

4. Rayanna remained loyal to the cause associated with Rani Chennamma and refused to accept British political domination. His subsequent activities demonstrated that the spirit of the Kittur uprising survived even after the queen was removed from the political scene.
5. Support for Shivalingappa: An important objective of Rayanna's resistance was to support Shivalingappa, who was connected with the Kittur succession. Rayanna's efforts therefore reflected the larger political objective of restoring indigenous authority in Kittur.[22] His resistance was consequently not simply an act of personal revenge against the British. It represented a broader attempt to challenge the displacement of the traditional political order.
6. Use of Guerrilla Warfare: One of Rayanna's greatest contributions was his effective use of guerrilla warfare. Rather than attempting to defeat the British in large conventional battles, he organised relatively small groups of fighters and used surprise attacks, rapid movement and knowledge of the local terrain.
7. Mobilisation of Local Communities: Rayanna's struggle received support from sections of the local population. Rural communities provided assistance through information, shelter, food and other resources. This local support made it difficult for the British authorities to identify and capture him.[23]
8. The participation of ordinary people gives Rayanna's movement an important social dimension. His resistance was not restricted to the royal establishment of Kittur but developed into a wider regional challenge to colonial authority.
9. Opposition to Colonial Economic Policies: The resistance also had an economic dimension. British revenue administration and changes in land relations created difficulties for sections of the rural population.[24] Rayanna's opposition to British authority therefore intersected with local economic grievances.
10. Courage and Military Leadership: Rayanna demonstrated considerable courage and leadership in confronting a powerful colonial government. His ability to reorganise resistance after the defeat of Kittur shows his determination and organisational capacity.
11. Relationship with Rani Chennamma: The relationship between Rani Chennamma and Rayanna represents an important example of continuity in resistance. Chennamma provided the political leadership of the Kittur uprising, while Rayanna continued the armed struggle after the queen's imprisonment.
12. Place in the Indian Anti-Colonial Struggle: The Kittur uprising and Rayanna's subsequent resistance occurred several decades before the Revolt of 1857. Therefore, they demonstrate that opposition to British colonial expansion existed in different regions of India long before the emergence of the organised national movement. It is important, however, to recognise the historical context.[25]

Sangolli Rayanna's contribution cannot be separated from the legacy of Rani Chennamma. Rani Chennamma initiated the major Kittur challenge to British authority, while Rayanna ensured that the resistance continued after her defeat. Through guerrilla warfare, popular mobilisation, political commitment and personal sacrifice, Rayanna kept the spirit of Kittur's resistance alive.

Discussion and Analysis

The study reveals that Sangolli Rayanna's resistance was a significant continuation of the Kittur struggle against British colonial authority. After the suppression of Rani Chennamma's uprising, Rayanna reorganised resistance and adopted guerrilla methods rather than confronting the British through conventional warfare. His attacks on British administrative centres and treasuries demonstrate a deliberate attempt to weaken colonial authority and disrupt its financial and administrative structure. The analysis also indicates that Rayanna's movement had an important social and agrarian dimension. Historical studies connect his resistance with land confiscation, revenue pressures and the difficulties experienced by sections of the peasantry.[26] Thus, his struggle combined the political objective of restoring Kittur's authority with opposition to colonial and local forms of economic exploitation. Rayanna's leadership was strengthened by support from local communities. His knowledge of the regional terrain, mobility, surprise attacks and network of supporters enabled a relatively small force to challenge a militarily stronger colonial power. This demonstrates that early anti-colonial resistance depended not only on military strength but also on local participation, geographical knowledge and popular support. From a broader historical perspective, Rayanna's struggle challenges the tendency to understand Indian anti-colonial resistance only through major national movements. His resistance in the late 1820s and early 1830s represents an important regional and subaltern dimension of the anti-colonial struggle. His legacy, preserved through Kannada oral traditions and historical memory, further demonstrates how local communities contributed to preserving the history of resistance. Overall, the analysis establishes that Sangolli Rayanna was not merely a military warrior but a leader of a wider regional resistance movement. His courage, strategic leadership, popular mobilisation and sacrifice contributed significantly to Karnataka's early history of resistance against British colonial rule.

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Findings and Recommendations

1. Sangolli Rayanna played a significant role in continuing the Kittur resistance against British colonial authority.
2. His use of guerrilla warfare, mobility and surprise attacks was an important feature of his military strategy.
3. Rayanna's movement received support from local peasants and different sections of society, giving the resistance a broader social base.
4. Colonial revenue policies and land-related grievances contributed to the growth of resistance among sections of the rural population.
5. Rayanna's martyrdom and his memory preserved through Kannada folk traditions have made him an enduring symbol of courage and anti-colonial resistance in Karnataka.

Recommendations

1. More historical and academic research should be undertaken on Sangolli Rayanna and Karnataka's early anti-colonial movements.
2. Historical documents, folk songs and oral traditions related to Rayanna should be systematically documented and preserved.
3. Rayanna's contribution should receive greater representation in history textbooks and university curricula.
4. Historical places associated with Rayanna should be preserved and developed as centres of historical education and heritage.
5. Universities and research institutions should promote comparative studies of Rayanna and other early Indian anti-colonial resistance leaders.

Conclusion

Sangolli Rayanna occupies an important place in the history of Karnataka's early anti-colonial resistance. His struggle emerged from the Kittur resistance and continued even after the defeat and imprisonment of Rani Chennamma. Through courageous leadership, guerrilla warfare and local mobilisation, Rayanna challenged British political and economic authority.[27] His resistance demonstrated the determination of local communities to defend their political autonomy and oppose colonial domination. His martyrdom at Nandagad in 1831 transformed him into a lasting symbol of courage, loyalty and sacrifice. Therefore, Rayanna's contribution deserves greater recognition in the broader history of Karnataka's and India's anti-colonial struggle.[28]

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