

The Anjengo Affair: A Vivid Picture of the Attingal Revolt, a Precursor to the Indian Independence Movement

Ms.S. Saranya

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Reg. No: 18113281082004

Department of History

Women's Christian College, Nagercoil.

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University,
Abhishekapatti, Tirunelveli- 627012. Tamilnadu, India)

Dr. D. Esther (Guide)

Associate Professor

Department of History

Women's Christian College, Nagercoil.

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University
Abhishekapatti, Tirunelveli- 627012. Tamilnadu)

Abstract

Aswathi Tirunal Umayamma Rani (1677-1698) was the most famous queen of Attingal. She was known for her valour, beauty and diplomacy. Umayamma was also the head of a confederacy of semi-independent states such as Travancore, Nedumangad, Kottarakkara, Kollam, Karunagappally and Kayamkulam. The Rani of Attingal was the head of the Venad Royal House, which followed a matrilineal system of legacy. It was during her period that the British came to Attingal, seeking permission to build a fort in Anchuthengu or Anjengo, as the British called it. In 1684, the queen of Attingal, known popularly as Attingal Rani, gave them permission to erect a factory at a hamlet called Anjengo, which was followed by a permission to build a fort at that place in 1690. The revolt came as the result of the general resentment against the policies practised by the English at Anjengo. The Attingal Outbreak is often regarded as the first organized revolt against British authority in Malabar, Cochin, Travancore, and India itself.

Key Words

Attingal, Anjengo, Permission, Revolt, Pepper, Factory, Fort, English East India Company, Venad, Regency etc.

Introduction

Aswathi Thirunal Umayamma, popularly known as Umayamma Rani, was the Regent Queen of Venad from 1677 to 1684 during the minority of her nephew Rajah Ravi Varma who ruled thereafter till 1718. The period of her regency between 1677 and 1684 was one of major political developments. The members at the time of Umayamma Rani's rule in the Royal family of Venad were Makayiram Tirunal, the Senior Rani of Attingal, Umayamma Rani herself the Junior Rani of Attingal and Makayiram Thirunal's son, Rajah Ravi Varma, excluding the collateral branches.

The Rani of Attingal was the head of the Venad Royal House, which followed a matrilineal system of legacy. It is generally believed that Umayamma Rani had six sons of whom five were drowned by the Ettuveetil Pillamar in the Kalippankulam tank, and that Ravi Varma was her eldest and only surviving son. However, with the help of the records of the Padmanabha Swami temple in Trivandrum and other credible sources, modern historians have not only disproved this fable but also positively concluded that Umayamma Rani did not have any children at all.¹

In 1682 the Senior Rani of Attingal died and Umayamma Rani succeeded as principal Queen of Venad. The Royal family followed Marumakkathayam or matrilineal system of inheritance and family for which presence of females in the royal family were essential. When the Senior Rani of Attingal died, Umayamma made three adoptions from Kolathunad. In 1682, Umayamma Rani adopted one male, Aditya Varma, and two females from the related Kolathunad Royal family. This was followed by war with an enraged Kerala Varma of Nedumangad which the Rani won and the claims of the Nedumangad family were found to be untenable. In 1684 Umayamma Rani also adopted an adult male from the related royal family of Kottayam, Malabar, a branch of the Kolathunad house. This adopted male was Kerala Varma and was given the title of 'Prince of Hiranyasimhallur' (Eraniel).

Kerala Varma of Kottayam took the task of pursuing the Sardar Mukilan, a Muslim invader and met him in a battle at Thiruvattar. The invader was killed along with many of his followers. Now Umayamma Rani was brought back to Trivandrum from Nedumangad in triumph. Unni Keral Varma was formally adopted into the Venad royal family and conferred the title of "Prince of Hiranyasimhanallur" (Eraniel). Kerala Varma thereafter helped the Rani in managing the affairs of the kingdom. The Koyikkal Palace is a palace situated in Nedumangadu, Thiruvananthapuram District in the erstwhile Venad Kingdom (Travancore – Kerala) where Umayamma Rani took refuge during the time of the invasion of Mukilan Padai. The palace is a double storeyed building and built with traditional architectural style of Kerala. The capital of Venad at that time was Kalkulam (Padmanabhapuram), and not Thiruvananthapuram.

The British East India Company were making inroads into Kerala to gain supremacy over their Dutch and Portuguese counterparts, so as to have monopoly over coastal trade, especially in spices. Historian M.G.Sasibhooshan says, a quintal of pepper would be bought from the natives by the Company priced at Rs.5, only to be sold at Rs.500 in Europe. By 1694, the English East India Company had succeeded in persuading the Rani of Attingal to build a fort at Anchuthengu, thereby reinforcing their trade presence while eliminating the rest of the competitors.

In 1684, the queen of Attingal, known popularly as Attingal Rani, gave them permission to erect a factory at a hamlet called Anjengo, which was followed by a permission to build a fort at that place in 1690.

Anjengo Factory

Rani Aswathi Tirunal Umayamma (1677-1684 A.D.) gave permission to the English to create a settlement at Anjengo (Anchuthengu, meaning five coconut trees) in 1684. The Queen of Attingal, also known as Attingal Rani, had special powers to deal directly with foreign powers. Aswathi Attingal Muttavar (Umayamma Rani), the Queen of Attingal, wrote a letter to the Factors at Calicut, inviting them to erect a factory in her territory. But the Company was apprehensive of Dutch opposition and doubtful of the Queen's ability to resist the Dutch. The negotiations with the queen were positive and in 1688 A.D., two places Rutterah (Valiyatura in Thiruvananthapuram) and Brinjom (Vizhinjam) were selected as factory sites.²

In 1684, during the Regency of Umayamma Rani, the English East India Company obtained a sandy spit of land at Anchuthengu near Varkala on the sea coast about north of Thiruvananthapuram city, with a view to erecting a factory and fortifying it. The place had earlier been frequented by the Portuguese and later by the Dutch. It was from here that the English gradually extended their domain to other parts of Travancore.

Umayamma welcomed the British in Attingal, thinking it would end the Dutch monopoly and bring more money to her land. Her manoeuvres were opposed by the Dutch and the merchants supporting them. The British, however, showered the queen with precious gifts and got permission to build a fort at Anjengo in 1694. They also got exclusive rights to buy pepper at a much cheaper rate than what the Dutch were offering.

The Treaty of Anjengo

Anjengo is situated near Attingal in between Varkala and Chirayinkizhu. Though the site was unattractive and inhospitable, it had some positive features as it was abundant with pepper brought through the Vamanapuram River. In 1695 Umayamma agreed to supply all her pepper to the English Company, only to withdraw from the contract and give it away to the Danes by a deal (1695) concluded with them at Edava, near Attingal. When the English Company strengthened the defences of Fort Anjengo without Attingal's sanction, she attempted to unite a military alliance against them. In November 1697, she sent a sizable force to evict the Factors at Anjengo, but the attack was easily repelled by the English. Earlier in 1695 Umayamma had already gone to war against the Dutch and destroyed Fort Tengapattanam.³

Pepper was the most important article of trade that was in demand mainly in the European countries. The Anjengo Factors collected pepper from various factories under their control like Vizhinjam (Brinjohm), Valiyathura (Rutterah), Vettur (Bettur), Karunagapalli (Carnopoly) and Kayamkulam (Kalliguillee). Pepper was also brought from the territories of Desinganadu, Perakkattuvali and Trippappur Swarupam. The procuring of pepper was not that easy as expected by the English. As the local people had enough experience in trading with European companies for about 200 years, they knew how to trade for their advantage.⁴

The local merchants went to the villages and mountain regions and collected pepper from planters either through contract or ready purchase. The Company officials gave money or materials to the merchants in advance who would bring pepper to Anjengo during season. As it was tough to load one shipful of pepper in one instant, the English had to give customs duty of 15 *panams* or five *Raj* (a gold coin current at that time) to the queen for every candy of pepper they exported, besides the annual presents they had to give to the queen.

The English also conducted cloth trade in addition to pepper trade. The handwoven cloth of the Kerala coast was in great demand in Europe during that period. They purchased different qualities of cloths and exported them to Europe. Other than Anjengo the main market of cloth was at Kottar, near Nagercoil, where there were a number of businessmen belonging to the caste known as Chetty who collected cloth from the weavers.⁵ The Factors gave advance to the Chetty businessmen who supplied cloth in due time. Here also the medium of transaction was *panam*.

Erection of the Fort at Anjengo

The exact year of the granting of permission to build the fort was 1693 A.D. when Mr. John Brabourn obtained a permission and agreement from the Queen of Attingal.⁶ The settlement had to be fortified and the Anjengo fort was completed in 1695.⁷ The fort was the East India Company's first permanent post on the Malabar Coast. Dutch commander Henrik Van Rhee, the Dutch Governor in Ceylon, had met Umayamma in 1677 A.D. Anjengo was a big fort with several bastions and strong and high walls. Big guns were mounted on the bastions to defend the fort in the event of encounter from the sea and from land.

Anjengo became a trade town and full settlement of the English. They had started trading in pepper immediately after the establishment of the factory at Anjengo, even before starting the construction of the fort. Pepper collected from Brinjom and Rutterah were brought to Anjengo settlement. A section of the feudal lords with an army of their own, the Pillais, turned against the British, along with the Nairs, the Ezhavas and the Muslim traders, opposing the construction of the fort. However, in spite of such opposition and unrest, the fort was built and on July 27, 1694. There were enough buildings inside the fort for the chief Factors and other Factors, and officials like a surgeon, commander of forces, gummer etc. There were buildings for soldiers, warehouses, banksaul etc. All these buildings were thatched, and there were some buildings outside the fort like the church, storehouse etc. There were also a number of Englishmen and their families and more than 100 Indian soldiers and their families residing in the fort.

After the completion of the fort in 1695 A.D., Anjengo became an important settlement of the English on the West Coast. Anjengo became a vital port visited by Bombay bound ships and ships from Bombay to England, Africa, China etc. Communications were sent to Madras, Tellicherry and Bombay through every ship that visited the port. Goods were loaded from the fort and unloaded to the fort for export and import. Ships passing through the Anjengo port were supplied with water and provisions whenever necessary.

The local people were against fortification, which they thought would destroy the freedom of trade they had been enjoying for centuries. The Queen with the help of the Pillamar who were ministers, declared war upon the English. But after one year the English succeeded to win one of the Pillais named Vancikuttattu Pillai, to their side. Because of the dissensions in her camp the Queen decided to enter into an agreement with the English. The President advised the Factors to agree for peace if the queen would agree to amend the earlier contract to be favourable to them. Later in 1698 A.D. (872 M.E.), peace was restored after prolonged discussions.⁸

The Company sought to almost annihilate agriculture in the region, leading to a drastic loss of livelihood for the common man. This, coupled with numerous contemptuous acts by the Company people irritated the natives to such an extent that both Hindus and Muslims came together under Kudaman Pillai, one of the Ettuveetil Pillamars who were the chieftains of the king, to take part in an uprising that later came to be known as the Attingal Revolt. Also the English men never lost an opportunity to mock the religious and cultural beliefs and practices prevalent among the local people.

The Attingal Outbreak

Within a short period Anjengo became a flourishing centre of trade. The officials of Anjengo also practised private trade along with the Company's trade.⁹ The Board of Directors at London had permitted the Company officials to conduct private trade so that the Englishmen under the service could make some extra money in addition to their salary.¹⁰ It was introduced as an incentive in order for them to work for the promotion of trade of the company. But on the contrary it promoted private trade. The officials dealt with unhealthy practices which resulted in jealousy and competition among the Factors. Later private trade came into the open and the chief Factor Kyffin was dismissed by the authorities of Bombay on charges of misappropriation of money and indulging in trade 'publicly'. Around the same time, the Company sent a new officer named William Gyfford, to the fort to check corruption as some officers were indulging in private trade.

The British used to send to the Queen costly gifts from the Fort of Anjengo annually since the establishment of the factory at Anjengo. Gyfford the Chief Factor at the Anjengo factory refused to hand over the customary gifts meant for the Rani of Attingal to the agents of the local feudal lords (Pillamar) and tried to hand them directly to the Rani. Gyfford presented the queen with gold coins, velvet and perfume. He and his team were served the traditional feast and liquor too on that occasion.

As the English were doubtful of the attitude of the Pillamar, they were reluctant to agree to the terms of the Pillamar. They were also reluctant to give the presents to the queen through the Pillamar, although the delay in getting the annual presents annoyed them. Under these circumstances, certain incidents which occurred in subsequent months alienated the Pillamar and the English further, and resulted in misunderstanding in the early months of 1721 A.D.

In April 1721, nearly about 140 British troops started their journey from Anjengo to the palace of Attingal for the purpose of handing over the gifts. But the local people rebelled, attacked, and destroyed the entire troops on their boats on the Vaamanapuram river at Kollampuzha, which is very close to the Attingal palace. The attack took place while the group was on its way back to Anchuthengu after visiting the palace.

The local people then laid siege to the fort and a small battle took place. The siege continued for about 6 months. Samuel Ince, the gunner, led the defence of the fort for six months till the arrival of the Company's troops from the British controlled Tellicherry. When the revolt was suppressed, the Company and the Rani of Attingal entered into an agreement.

- The Company was compensated for all losses sustained during the attack on Anjengo.
- It was given the sole monopoly of trade in pepper.
- It was given the right to erect factories in places of its choice.

Significance of the Revolt

Attingal Revolt of 1721 that occurred on the shores of Kerala is considered among the first open rebellions against the British. A handful of natives comprising Nairs, Ezhavas and Muslims who were trained in Kalari went on to cunningly kill 130 odd Englishmen. That was when the British East India Company were making inroads into Kerala to gain supremacy over their Dutch and Portuguese counterparts, so as to have monopoly over coastal trade, especially in spices.

The Englishmen were shrewd businessmen who had cunningly enticed the queen with expensive gifts, thereby ensuring a free flow of profits for the Company. As per historian M.G.Sasibhooshan, a quintal of pepper priced at Rs.5 purchased from the natives by the Company will be sold at Rs.500 in Europe. By 1694, the English East India Company (EEIC) had succeeded in persuading the Rani of Attingal to build a fort at Anchuthengu, thereby reinforcing their trade presence as well as decimating the rest of the competition. Such unfair trade practices naturally caused a severe blow to the once prosperous people of the region. The presence of William Gyfford the Factor, who was sent by the Company to take charge of the newly-built fort, only worsened the sense of distrust.

The newly-appointed Company Officer, William Gyfford, was invited to the palace by the queen on the occasion of Vishu as a goodwill gesture. Taking advantage of the golden opportunity, Kudaman Pillai and his band of trained Kalari warriors intruded the palace and attacked Gyfford and his men, when they were reportedly resting after a sumptuous feast. None of the 134 Englishmen survived the night. The natives went on to capture the fort, and were able to hold on till the arrival of additional British forces.

Historians consider the Attingal Revolt as the culmination of a long-simmering sense of discontent and injustice against the unfair trade practices of the British. Most importantly, it was one of the pillars of the Indian Independence movement, where the Nair, Ezhava and Muslim communities united against the better-equipped British troops. This sets apart the Attingal Revolt from other uprisings like the 1757 Battle of Plassey or the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny. The revolt hardly finds mention in the state's history textbooks, possibly due to an unwillingness to portray the Rani of Attingal as an accomplice. Very few British or Indian historians have referred to the events related to the Attingal Outbreak. Company records had put down the number of casualties to a mere 23, most probably due to a fear of loss of morale.

An explicit picture of the happenings emerged only from Dutch records, wherein the connivance of the queen in the rebellion was understood obliquely, a fact she vehemently denied till the end. Thushara Balakrishnan, a student with the College of Fine Arts in Thiruvananthapuram, and her team have depicted the Attingal Revolt in a mural on a 900-foot wall by NH-66 near the Aakkulam Bridge. "We have tried to recreate those times. Very few people seem to have knowledge about the Revolt. Our objective was to spread awareness. We hope this will inspire people to fight against all forms of injustice," said Thushara.

Backdrop the Outbreak

The revolt came as the result of the general resentment against the policies practiced by the English at Anjengo. The hostilities between the English and the local chiefs began when the English tried to build a fort at Anjengo. The building of the fort was generally objected by the local people from the beginning. But when the English started the construction, Vancikuttattu Pillai supported it and reaped money for supplying men and materials. But towards the completion of the fort the local leaders opposed the construction. There were many attacks on the English during the construction of the fort. The English always won at gunpoint. As the native forces have no gun and gunpowder, they waited for an opportunity to take revenge upon the English.

The revolt was well-planned and the leaders operated it smoothly. There were several reasons behind the revolt of the people of Attingal against the English traders. The affairs between the Factors and the local merchants at Anjengo had developed into discontent among the traditional merchants. The insult caused to the Muslim merchants added with the clandestine purchase of temple land for the use of the Company generated public opinion against the English.¹¹

The revolt was considered treachery and treason by the English. But to the native forces it was revenge against the long pending grievances against the English. As the native forces had no equal weapon to engage in direct fight, they had utilised a favourable situation. With this outbreak the attitude of the English towards the native power triggered a drastic change and later on they concluded an agreement with the ruler of Trippappur Swarupam which had a far reaching influence in the region in the future.

Conclusion

The Attingal revolt is important in the sense that it was the first organised revolt against British authority in Travancore. Following its failure the English and the Rani entered into an agreement under which the Company was compensated for all the losses sustained during the attack on Anjengo and was also given the sole monopoly of trade in pepper, as well as the right to erect factories in places of its choice. The Attingal Outbreak is often regarded as the first organized revolt against British authority in Malabar, Cochin, Travancore, and India itself. The main reason behind the resentment was large-scale corruption and the manipulation of black pepper prices by the Company. It was one of the pillars of the Indian Independence movement, where the Nair, Ezhava and Muslim communities united against the better-equipped British troops. It was one of the pillars of the Indian Independence movement, where the Nair, Ezhava and Muslim communities united against the better-equipped British troops. Historians consider the Attingal Revolt as the culmination of a long-simmering sense of discontent and injustice against the unfair trade practices of the British. This will inspire people to fight against all forms of injustice.

Umayamma dominated Travancore politics till her death in 1698 at Valiathurai. She regretted her decision of encouraging the English for trade at Anjengo. Umayamma wrote: "...they (the English) were troublesome to my people and therefore I ordered that they should go from there and make no more contracts in my land".¹²

The legacy of Attingal Ranees officially came to a stand-still when Raja Marathanda Varma in his attempt to establish monopoly over the whole of Travancore made the then Attingal Rani to sign the Silver Plate Treaty through which they relinquished all their sovereign rights in 1731.

References

- ¹A.Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, Published by A.Subramanian for S.Viswanathan, Madras, 1967, p.250.
- ²N.Rajendran, *Establishment of British Power in Malabar*, Allahabad, 1979, p.44.
- ³Manu S. Pillai, Papers and Articles. "Holding Kings to Ransom – Royal Women in Matrilineal Kerala", 2015.
- ⁴ Letter from the Factors at Anjengo, 17th October, 1996, Secretariat or Surat Inward Book, Vol.LA, 1656-1701, p. 179.
- ⁵ Letter from Anjengo to Bombay, Sept. 1696 A.D., Secretariat or Surat Inward Book 1656 to 1701, Vol. 1A, p.174.
- ⁶ Letter from Anjengo to the President of Council of Bombay, Dated 27th October 1741 Secretariat Inward Letter Book No. 3- 2 of 172, p.312.
- ⁷A.Sreedhara Menon, *Kerala Charithram* (History of Kerala) Malayalam, Kerala Books,1967, p.304.
- ⁸ Letter from Bombay to Anjengo dated June 27th 1698. Bombay Secretariat Outward Book No.6 of 1697-99, p. 92.
- ⁹K.K.Kusuman,*Slavery in Travancore*, Kerala Historical Society, Trivandrum, 1973, p. 83.
- ¹⁰ Leena More, *English East India Company and the Local Rulers in Kerala, A Case Study of Attingal and Travancore*, Tellichery, 2003, p.91.
- ¹¹Leena More, *English East India Company and the Local Rulers in Kerala*, op.cit., p. 103.
- ¹²Manu S.Pillai, Papers and Articles. "Holding Kings to Ransom – Royal Women in Matrilineal Kerala", 2015.