

Towards a Post-Truth History: Debates over Variyankunnnan and Reconstruction of History

**Shemin K
Dr. Aysha Swapna K A**

The notion of post-truth has turned out a vital sociological and political concept in the twenty-first century. In the post-truth world, believability overpowers truth and there prevails half-truths, insensible claims or outright lies. The discourse of history also gets problematised in such a political context. The current socio-political condition of India demands scholarly investigation regarding whether there does exist an ideologically motivated project of re-writing history. Taking cases of heated debates over a historical figure, Variyankunnath Kunjahammed Haji, who was shot dead by the British army in 1922, into consideration this paper tries to examine how history is being re-narrated in the post-truth scenario. Variyan Kunnath Kunjahammed Haji is regarded as one of the major leaders of Malabar Rebellion, 1921 and he is counted as one of the freedom fighters in India. However, Indian Council for Historical Research (ICHR) recommended the removal of 380 martyrs of Mappila Rebellion of 1921 including Variyankunnath Kunjahammed Haji from the fifth volume of the Dictionary of Martyrs of India's Freedom Struggle in the centenary year of the rebellion. This decision resulted in a widespread ruckus. The announcement of a film based on Variyankunnath Kunjahammed Haji and the release of his rare photo also led to heated debates. The politically motivated arguments and debates over Variyankunnath Kunjahammed Haji

could be analysed in accordance with re-narration of history and post-truth history. This paper tries to look at how the re-narration of history does affect cultural memory and whether the nation is moving towards a post-truth history.

Keywords: post-truth, history, Variyankunnath Kunjahammed Haji, Malabar Rebellion, cultural memory

Post-truth has emerged as a powerful word capable enough to describe the whole political scenario of the twenty-first century. We are living in a post-truth world (Keyes, 2004; McIntyre, 2018; Ball, 2017; Block, 2018) where believability is held superior to truth and facts. A paradigm shift occurs regarding the notions of truth, fact and history in the post-truth age. The post-truth narratives claim authenticity even if they are outright lies or illogical statements. To create believable narratives favourable to the majority and to claim them to be true even in the absence of factual basis is the main concern of post-truth politics. The notion of history gets problematised in the post-truth world because history not only denotes “all the events that happened in the past” but also “the study of past events” as well as “a written or spoken account of real past events” (“History”). Since narratives play a pivotal role in post-truth (D’Ancona, 2017), how history is being narrated and re-narrated become significant procedures.

Re-narrating history has become a momentous practice in the age of post-truth politics. Claiming lineage and placing someone from a particular group in the historical timeline or wiping out historical records of events and people and thus reframing history altogether has become the new normal in the contemporary political scenario. Renaming of institutions, places, roads and so on could be considered as the miniature form of the grand project of re-narrating history. In such a post-truth context every bit of historical evidence acquires greater significance and this was reaffirmed by the publication of a rare photo of one of the historical figures in Kerala – Variyan Kunnath Kunjahammed Haji. The row raked up by a photo of Variyan Kunnath Kunjahammed Haji was not just about a person but, about the reframing of history; about how certain people are not supposed to be let forgotten with time as a result of political propaganda.

Variyan Kunnath Kunjahammad Haji, also known as Variyankunnan, is recognised as a freedom fighter from the Malabar region of Kerala (Mohamed, 2021). He is a significant figure in Indian history who established the first parallel government namely ‘Malayala Rajyam’ in the Malabar region fighting against the British government. Though a short-lived endeavour, ‘Malayala Rajyam’ is counted as the first parallel government in British India. Variyankunnan was captured and shot dead by the British in 1922 and all the records of Variyankunnan and his parallel government were destroyed along with his death.

In the centenary year of Malabar Rebellion, also known as Mappila Rebellion, Indian Council for Historical Research (ICHR) recommended the removal of 380 martyrs of Mappila Rebellion of 1921 including Variyankunnath Kunjahammed Haji and Ali Musalyar from the fifth volume of the *Dictionary of Martyrs of India's Freedom Struggle*. The decision which was taken in August 2021 created widespread ruckus in the nation, especially in Kerala, where the Malabar rebellion had taken place. ICHR's decision was based on the belief that Malabar rebellion of 1921 was not a part of India's freedom fight but just a fundamentalist movement focused on religious conversion. However, historians maintain that the Mappila rebellion was both a peasant revolt and an anti-colonial, nationalist movement. ICHR's attempt to remove the leaders of Mappila revolt from the history of Indian independence movement in the centenary year of the revolt led to serious discussions. A. Vijayaraghavan, the then acting state secretary of CPM, opined that it is an attempt to “communalise history” by those people who find “the combative spirit of Malabar rebellion upsetting” (Tnn). Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) asserted that Mappila revolt was essentially a nationalistic movement against the British rule. Syed Sadiquali Shihab Thangal, one of the senior leaders of IUML Kerala, alleged the central government of distorting history. Historian and former ICHR chairman, Prof. M. G. S. Narayanan also considered the decision a politically motivated move (Philip, 2021).

Even before ICHR's decision to denounce the relevance of Mappila rebellion and the patriots involved in it, a lot of discussions sprang up in Kerala on the historical figure, Variyankunnath

Kunjahammed Haji owing much to the announcement of a film by Ashiq Abu, one of the prominent directors in Malayalam film industry. Ashiq Abu announced “Variyankunnan” as his next project with the actor Prithviraj Sukumaran in June, 2020. The project was supposed to portray the legendary history of Variyankunnath Kunjahammed Haji and the Mappila revolt and it was expected to release in 2021 coinciding with the centenary anniversary of the rebellion. Prithviraj Sukumaran’s (now deleted) social media post read:

He stood up against an empire that ruled a quarter of the world. Etched out his own country with an army that waged a never before war against the British. Though history was burned and buried, the legend lived on! The legend of a leader, a soldier, a patriot. A film on the man who became the face of the 1921 Malabar revolution. #Vaariyamkunnan. Filming begins in 2021. On the 100th anniversary. (“Announcement”)

After the announcement, both the director and the actor had to face severe hate campaigning and cyberbullying. The announcement of the movie caused a political ruckus and heated debates about the 1921 rebellion in the state. The right-wing Hindutva proponents even threatened the film crew that they will not allow the shooting of the film (Balachandran, 2020). Later, anyhow, both Ashiq Abu and Prithviraj Sukumaran backed off from the project due to differences with the producer. However, the producer decided to go on with the project.

Rewriting History and Cultural Memory in the Post-Truth Era

Whether it is wiping out a name from a historical text or marking a person in a popular cultural artefact like film, each action has profound significance in political discourse, especially in the post-truth age. The post-truth condition, which denotes “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (“Oxford Word of the Year 2016”), places no importance to factual evidence or truth per se. Post-truth political scenario emphasises on playing with people’s emotional sentiments and nationalistic fervour. Nostalgia and narratives of the glory of a bygone age play key roles in the Indian post-truth political discourse. Consequently, history becomes a matter of debate as well

as a political tool. Truth becomes “subservient to ideology” and history becomes “a tool of propaganda” in the post-truth discourse (Gudonis and Benjamin, 2021). Romila Thaper, the eminent Indian historian, shared her concerns over the distortion of history that takes place at an alarming rate in the contemporary India and commented,

If we have to prevent history from being used as political propaganda then we have to insist on the right to critique textbooks as well as the freedom to present alternate explanations where these are required. This cannot be treated as anti-national acts as it often is by those in authority but it is an asset in the discussion on what is being taught. (Bhattacharya)

Marius Gudonis and Benjamin T. Jones argue that in the contemporary world, we need to deal with ‘post-truth history’ which is connected with the notions of pseudohistory, conspiracy theory, denialism and lie. Post-truth history is defined as

The communication of false information on a historical phenomenon that appeals to emotion and personal belief, where both the purveyor and recipient are indifferent to historicity and contemptuous of expert opinion that contradicts it, and where the underlying objective is ideological, especially in support of a collective identity or a political programme. (Gudonis and Benjamin 8)

The project of re-writing history that has been taken up by Hindutva nationalists in India, thus could be, conceived as a move towards post-truth history formation. Though Hindutva could be recognised as a way of life, in the present socio-political scenario it denotes more of an ideology and it is defined as “(in India) a political movement advocating Hindu nationalism and the establishment of a Hindu state” (“Hindutva”). Hindutva advocates the supremacy of Hinduism over any other religion or way of life (Savarkar, 2003) and in the present political situation, the proponents of Hindutva try to eliminate the importance of other religions in the history of the nation.

Reframing history is intrinsically associated with reframing cultural memory. Cultural memory, “the constructed understanding of the past that is passed from one generation to the next through text, oral traditions, monuments, rites, and other symbols” (“Cultural memory”), could be reframed by adding, removing or altering the text

or narrative through which it gets passed from one generation to the next. The renaming of places and institutions, and other endeavours made to restructure history texts in the post-truth India are, in fact, a conscious effort to reframe cultural memory. One of the prevalent narratives in the post-truth India is that the nation enjoyed a glorious past and that glory was destroyed over time. Proponents of the post-truth politics call for a turn back to the glorious past of the nation without giving any attention to the factual records of whether the nation truly enjoyed such a “golden period” in history. The new names alluded to the places and institutions work as references to the “golden past” that Hindutva wants to re-establish. The city of Allahabad was renamed to Prayagraj, Faizabad to Ayodhya and Mughal Saraj railway station in Uttar Pradesh was renamed Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Junction in 2019. By simply changing a name, the cultural memory related with it also gets altered. When Allahabad becomes a forgotten name, the Mughal history associated with it also gets forgotten. In the past, if renaming was done in order to erase the cultural imprints of colonialism, today, Muslim heritage of the nation gets obliterated through renaming. The Hindutva politics, which is inherently Islamophobic, attempts to efface the contributions of Muslims from the national history and has indulged in a project to re-write history in favour of Hindutva ideology.

Likewise, when Variyamkunnath Kunjahammed Haji’s name gets deleted from the historical texts, it is not just the person but the history of an important event in the nation’s history itself gets rewritten. It also, consciously, erases the contributions of Muslims in the freedom struggle of the nation. In an attempt to create a Hindu rashtra, the proponents of Hindutva try to re-narrate the nation’s history. By erasing certain names, the contribution of certain groups itself can be eliminated from history. History, after all, reaches to generations through written narratives, especially through the official written narratives. The religious identity of Variyan Kunnan, thus, achieves tremendous significance in the post-truth India which has become more intolerant towards minority groups in the nation, especially Muslims. Once, it was the British who tried to wipe out every document of Variyankunnan and his ‘Malayala Rajyam’ in order not to set an example for others.

Today, it is the Hindutva politics that tries to omit certain episodes from history and thereby to rewrite the political history of the nation.

The photo of Variyan Kunnath Kunjahammed Haji surfaced into the mainstream in such a political discourse on October 29, 2021. Till the researcher, Ramees Mohamed O, published the photo of Variyan Kunnath Kunjahammed Haji on the cover of his book titled *Sultan Variyankunnan*, no photographs, except one or two paintings, of the freedom fighter was available in India. According to Ramees, he got the photograph from a French publication during his research on Variyankunnan. The photograph, all of a sudden, emphasised the historicity of Variyan Kunnath Kunjahammed Haji and his fight against the British Empire. Catherine Keenan has observed that the photograph would lend a memory “an air of authenticity” (60). Variyan Kunnath Kunjahammed Haji’s photograph brought in such an authenticity to the history of the person and his community’s struggle against the British Empire. “The photograph, unlike the actual memory-image of a past event, can imprint itself on our memories again and again, without any diminution of its vividness” (Keenan 61). The existence of a photograph, thus, encourages people to know more about the man and the history behind the photograph as well as the person himself.

Just like photographs, representations in cultural artefacts, such as films, sculptures, literary works, etcetera, contribute to the cultural memory (Erll, 2008; Zierold, 2008; Hedges, 2015), though literary fiction and films portray historical events and people with a fictional overtone, they indeed provide documentation of the same and promote enthusiasm over the real incidents. The proclamation of a period drama based on the life of Variyamkunnath Kunjahammed Haji was an indication of such an addition to the cultural memory of people. It could be because of the same reason there arose protests and threats against the project on Variyankunnan. In retaliation to the announcement of a period drama on the ‘heroic’ character of Variyankunnan, another film was announced that intended to represent Variyankunnan as the antagonist. Ali Akbar, a strong right-wing supporter, who later converted to Hinduism and renamed himself as Ramasimhan, said that he will produce a movie through crowdfunding based on the 1921 Malabar rebellion and will present Variyankunnan

as the antagonist. The announcement of Ashiq Abu's and Ali Akbar's movies on the 1921 rebellion exposes how narratives can be used to tell the truth and to twist the truth as well. Cinematic representations can attract public attention and they remain in the sphere of cultural memory for a long time. That is why films also turn out to be strong political weapons in the post-truth age.

The story and photograph of a particular freedom fighter, thus, achieve more significance in the present political scenario of the nation. The photograph announces the historicity of the person and it proclaims how the minority groups had done their part in the freedom struggle.

Conclusion

The post-truth politics has paved the way for post-truth history. The project of re-narrating history according to Hindutva ideology in India could be read in relation to the emergence of post-truth history. In the post-truth history of the nation, certain episodes of historical events or persons get omitted or re-narrated in order to satisfy ideological concerns. The debates over Variyankunnth Kunjahammed Haji in recent times, once again, exposed the presence of post-truth history and how it works in today's political discourse. The attempt to remove Variyankunnan both from historical texts and cultural memory is a conscious effort of the post-truth Hindutva politics. In such a scenario, remembering becomes an act with tremendous political impact. It turns out as an act of rebellion for remembering, basically, as an exploration of the factuality of narratives in an attempt to reject false and misinterpreted narratives.

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Shemin K

Research Scholar

Department of English

Farook College (Autonomous)

Kozhikode

India

Pin: 673632

Ph: +91 9746019178

email: sheminkanniyan@gmail.com

Dr. Aysha Swapna K A

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Farook College (Autonomous)

Kozhikode

India

Pin: 673632

Ph: +91 9846481119

email: ay.spna@farookcollege.ac.in