

**Unsung Heroes of Freedom:
Contributions of Leaders, Women Fighters, and
Local Organizations from North Karnataka
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17411309>

ABSTRACT:

The Indian independence movement was a complex confluence of regional and national struggles, yet the contributions of North Karnataka remain underrepresented in mainstream historiography. This paper explores the region’s crucial role in shaping anti-colonial resistance through revolutionary leaders, women freedom fighters, and local organizations. Figures such as Sangolli Rayanna, Bhaskar Rao Bhave, Kittur Rani Chennamma, Rani Abbakka Chowta, Umabai Kundapur, and Bellary Siddamma exemplified multifaceted resistance—ranging from armed rebellion and peasant uprisings to educational reform and cultural assertion. Organizations like the Karnataka Vidyavardhaka Sangha, Seva Dal, and underground groups such as Hublikar Sanghatane nurtured political awareness, social reform, and nationalist solidarity. Through these interconnected struggles, North Karnataka demonstrated that the freedom movement was not a peripheral endeavour but an integral component of India’s nationalist awakening. Recognizing these regional contributions restores balance to historiography and emphasizes how local identities, gendered agency, and grassroots activism coalesced to challenge colonial domination.

KEYWORDS:

North Karnataka, Freedom Struggle, Revolutionary Leaders, Women Freedom Fighters, Local Organizations, Anti-Colonial Resistance.



Introduction

India's freedom movement was not a monolithic event but a mosaic of regional struggles that collectively dismantled colonial rule. Among these, North Karnataka's contribution remains substantial yet inadequately represented in national narratives. The region—including Dharwad, Belagavi, Bijapur, Bagalkot, Gadag, and Haveri—witnessed continuous resistance from the early 19th century onwards. From Kittur Rani Chennamma's defiance in 1824 to youth participation in the Quit India Movement of 1942, the region demonstrated sustained anti-colonial commitment (Desai, 2017; Kamath, 2001).

After the fall of the Peshwas and the British annexation of Kittur under the Doctrine of Lapse, colonial rule intensified. The imposition of the Ryotwari system and exorbitant taxation impoverished peasants, creating widespread resentment (Patil, 1998). Reformist and devotional traditions such as the Lingayat movement, along with modern nationalist thinkers like Aluru Venkata Rao and Hardekar Manjappa, fused social reform with patriotism (Rao, 1928/2015). Education and print culture—stimulated by institutions like the Karnataka Vidyavardhaka Sangha (1890)—fostered political awareness and connected villages to national movements (Chandavar, 2010).

This paper categorizes North Karnataka's contributions under three major themes:

1. Revolutionary leaders and uprisings,
2. Women freedom fighters and social mobilization, and
3. Local organizations and cultural-political movements.

Together, they reveal how the region's struggles mirrored India's broader nationalist ethos while maintaining distinct local character.

Objectives:

1. To document and analyse the contributions of revolutionary leaders, women freedom fighters, and local organizations from North Karnataka in India's freedom struggle.
2. To highlight the regional and grassroots dimensions of nationalism through the sacrifices of lesser-known individuals and collectives.

Colonial Context in North Karnataka

British consolidation in North Karnataka began after 1818, follow-

ing the defeat of the Peshwas and the annexation of local estates like Kittur (Desai, 2017). The Ryotwari system imposed direct taxation, often exceeding half of agricultural produce, leading to widespread indebtedness (Kamath, 2001). Forced cash-crop cultivation, periodic famines, and administrative interference disrupted local economies (Gopal, 1984; Kulkarni, 2005). Simultaneously, traditional governance and agrarian rights eroded under colonial centralization (Kattimani, 1996).

However, these exploitative policies inadvertently stimulated resistance and reform. English education and missionary schools in Dharwad and Belagavi produced an emerging middle class receptive to nationalist thought (Chandavar, 2010). The Karnataka Vidyavardhaka Sangha became a crucible for cultural revival and political consciousness, while the Kannada press and folk literature mobilized collective sentiment. Cultural identity thus became intertwined with political emancipation, making North Karnataka both a site of suffering and awakening.

Revolutionary Leaders and Uprisings

Sangolli Rayanna (1798–1831)

Commander of Kittur's forces under Rani Chennamma, Sangolli Rayanna continued resistance after Kittur's annexation in 1824. Employing guerrilla tactics, he organized peasants and local warriors against British forces. Captured and executed in 1831, Rayanna became a martyr symbolizing valor and loyalty to indigenous sovereignty (Patil, 1998).

Koppal Veerappa (1819)

Among the earliest rebels, Veerappa Desai of Kalkere led a peasant uprising against oppressive taxation. By capturing Koppal and Bahadur forts, he momentarily disrupted British control before being killed in combat. His defiance foreshadowed subsequent regional revolts (Kamath, 2001).

Deshmukhs of Bidar (1820)

The Deshmukhs, traditional landlords, resisted British-backed Nizam policies that curtailed local authority. Their 1820 revolt, although suppressed, revealed tensions between indigenous elites and colonial intermediaries (Sharma, 1998).

Halagali Bedas (1857–1858)

During the 1857 uprising, the Bedas of Halagali refused British

orders to disarm. Their armed rebellion was brutally suppressed—290 were executed—but their sacrifice remains enshrined in folk memory as a symbol of rural valor (Hiremath, 2007).

Bhaskar Rao Bhave (Baba Saheb of Nargund, 1818–1858)

A key leader in the 1857 rebellion, Bhave resisted the Doctrine of Lapse by raising an army against British forces. Despite initial victories, betrayal led to his capture and execution. His resistance linked regional loyalty with the national revolt against imperial rule (Kulkarni, 2002).

Mundurgi Bhimrao (1858)

A former revenue officer turned rebel, Bhimrao coordinated uprisings across Dharwad and collaborated with Bhaskar Rao Bhave. His leadership demonstrated growing peasant participation in the anti-colonial struggle (Deshpande, 2012).

Together, these leaders transformed local grievances into organized resistance. Their defiance against economic exploitation, political interference, and loss of autonomy positioned North Karnataka as a key frontier of early anti-British activism.

Women Freedom Fighters of North Karnataka

Women in North Karnataka redefined patriotism through courage and leadership in both armed and non-violent movements, challenging patriarchal constraints and colonial authority alike.

Kittur Rani Chennamma (1778–1829)

Queen of Kittur and one of India's earliest women to wage war against the British, Chennamma resisted the annexation of her kingdom under the Doctrine of Lapse. Her strategic leadership, military acumen, and refusal to submit turned her into an enduring symbol of resistance (Patil, 1998). Though captured and imprisoned, her defiance inspired subsequent revolts across Karnataka.

Rani Abbakka Chowta (c. 1525–c. 1570)

Preceding the British era, Rani Abbakka of Ullal resisted Portuguese incursions along Karnataka's coast. Her naval warfare and alliances protected local sovereignty and maritime trade (Bhat, 2009). She remains a legendary figure embodying early anti-colonial defiance and women's leadership.

Umabai Kundapur (1892–1992)

A Gandhian activist from Belagavi, Umabai founded the women's wing of Seva Dal, training thousands of women in political participation and non-violent resistance. She organized picketing, boycotts, and underground networks during the Civil Disobedience and Quit India Movements (Deshpande, 2006). Her integration of social reform and political mobilization marked a transformative phase in women's activism.

Bellary Siddamma (1867–1948)

An educator and organizer, Siddamma encouraged women's participation in protests, Swadeshi campaigns, and rural literacy programs. She linked education with empowerment, emphasizing self-reliance as a path to national freedom (Patil, 2014).

Grassroots Women and Collective Resistance

Beyond celebrated figures, numerous unnamed women from peasant and artisan communities participated in anti-tax agitations, strikes, and boycotts. Acting as messengers, mobilizers, and care providers to activists, their silent labour sustained the movement (Shastri, 1990).

Impact:

Women's engagement in North Karnataka blurred boundaries between domestic and political spheres. Their involvement not only expanded the social base of the nationalist movement but also redefined gender roles, situating women as moral and political agents of change.

Local Organizations and Movements

Regional organizations provided the institutional backbone for sustaining nationalist sentiment and linking it to local issues of culture, education, and economy.

Hublikar Sanghatane

An underground revolutionary network active in Dharwad, Belagavi, and Bagalkot, Hublikar Sanghatane coordinated secret communications, printed pamphlets, and sheltered fugitives. It translated nationalist ideals into rural idioms, ensuring the movement's reach beyond urban elites (Kulkarni, 2002; Patil, 2014).

Karnataka Vidyavardhaka Sangha (Founded 1890, Dharwad)

The KVS emerged as a cultural-educational institution promoting Kannada language and identity. Under leaders like Aluru Venkata Rao, it

linked linguistic pride with national self-respect (Rao, 1928/2015). Through literary conferences, publications, and debates, the Sangha cultivated awareness about colonial exploitation and the need for unity. It nurtured generations of scholars and activists who later joined the independence movement.

Seva Dal and Women's Mobilization

The Seva Dal, particularly its women's branch led by Umabai Kundapur, institutionalized Gandhian principles of discipline and service. By organizing rural women in picketing, spinning, and awareness campaigns, it created a cadre of socially conscious citizens. The organization bridged the gap between ideology and practice, reinforcing the participatory nature of nationalism (Deshpande, 2006).

Print and Literary Culture

Newspapers and journals in Kannada and Marathi became powerful tools for spreading nationalist thought. Writers and poets invoked local legends and folk forms to arouse collective emotion (Hiremath, 2009). The cultural renaissance strengthened unity across linguistic and caste divides, turning nationalism into a moral and cultural mission.

Discussion

The freedom struggle in North Karnataka was a confluence of economic distress, cultural revival, and political awakening. Colonial exploitation through taxation and land reforms spurred agrarian discontent, while Western education and print media facilitated ideological mobilization. Revolutionary leaders like Sangolli Rayanna and Bhaskar Rao Bhawe embodied armed defiance; women like Rani Chennamma and Umabai Kundapur symbolized courage and leadership; organizations such as the KVS and Seva Dal transformed regional identity into a platform for national awakening.

Unlike in many other regions, the struggle in North Karnataka combined armed resistance, non-violent activism, and cultural assertion. Guerrilla warfare coexisted with Gandhian campaigns, and folk traditions became vehicles of protest. The active participation of peasants and women underscores the democratization of the freedom movement—its expansion from elite politics to mass consciousness. Moreover, the intersection of language, education, and self-respect made cultural identity a powerful political force.

The historiographical neglect of these contributions stems from colonial administrative divisions and later centralization of nationalist narratives around metropolitan centres. Yet, North Karnataka's movements demonstrate that the independence struggle was decentralized and pluralistic—sustained by local heroes and community networks as much as by national leaders.

Conclusion:

The story of North Karnataka's freedom struggle reveals the depth and diversity of India's anti-colonial movement. Revolutionary leaders challenged imperial authority through valor and sacrifice; women freedom fighters broke social barriers and advanced Gandhian ideals; local organizations merged cultural revival with political education. Their collective endeavour transformed regional aspirations into national consciousness.

Recognizing these contributions restores regional balance in historiography and honours the unsung heroes whose efforts ensured India's independence. The North Karnataka experience reminds us that freedom was not bestowed from above but earned through countless local acts of courage, faith, and unity. Documenting these narratives enriches our understanding of Indian nationalism as a truly people-centred and inclusive phenomenon.

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Funding:

This study was not funded by any grant.

Conflict of interest:

The Authors have no conflict of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

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