

Village Sovereignty and Anti-Colonial Resistance: A Micro-Historical Study of the Isur Uprising of 1942

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Abstract

The Indian Quit India Movement of 1942 witnessed localized explosions of anti-colonial resistance across subaltern geographies. Among these, the village of Isur (Esuru) in the Shimoga (Shivamogga) district of Karnataka stands out as a unique historical flashpoint where a rural community unilaterally declared independence from British rule, establishing a parallel village administration (*Esuru Sarkar*). This paper presents a micro-historical analysis of the Isur Uprising of 1942, examining the socio-economic conditions, peasant mobilization, the symbolic subversion of colonial authority, and the brutal state repression that followed. By analyzing primary historical narratives and regional archival dynamics, this study highlights how subaltern agency transformed national Quit India directives into radical local sovereignty, cementing Isur's unique place in Karnataka's freedom struggle.

Keywords: Isur Uprising, Karnataka History, Quit India Movement, Subaltern Resistance, Peasant Mobilization, Parallel Government, British Colonialism.

1. Introduction

Historiographical accounts of the Indian National Movement have frequently privileged urban political centers and elite nationalist leadership. However, regional micro-histories reveal that the anti-colonial struggle derived its momentum from rural, subaltern insurgencies. In Karnataka, the resistance against British imperialism took varied forms—ranging from early armed rebellions such as those led by Rani Chennamma of Kittur and Sangolli Rayanna in the 19th century, to mass agrarian protests in the 20th century.

The year 1942 marked a decisive turn with Mahatma Gandhi's call to "Do or Die" during the Quit India Movement. In the Mysore princely state, which was under indirect British paramountcy through the Resident and the Dewan, rural Karnataka responded with unprecedented fervor. The Isur Uprising of September 1942 represents one of the few instances during the 1942 movement where villagers successfully expelled imperial revenue officials, appointed child ministers to challenge adult legal prosecution, and

declared their village an independent republic (*Swatantra Halli*). This paper examines the political mechanics, agrarian triggers, and historical legacy of the Isur rebellion within Karnataka's freedom struggle.

2. Socio-Economic and Agrarian Context of Isur

Isur, a fertile agricultural village situated in the Shikaripura taluk of Shimoga district, was primarily dependent on paddy cultivation. During the early 1940s, the agrarian economy of the region was strained by forced grain procurement, high land revenues, and war-time inflation resulting from World War II.

The peasantry in Shikaripura had been progressively mobilized through the activities of the Mysore Congress and local agrarian leaders like Sahukar Jayappa, K. B. Channabasappa, and Mailara Mahadevappa. Discontent against revenue collectors (*Shanbhogs* and *Patels*) who acted as instruments of colonial extraction had reached a boiling point. When the All-India Congress Committee passed the Quit India resolution in August 1942, the leadership in Isur contextualized the national imperative into a direct confrontation with local colonial authority.

3. The Genesis and Course of the Isur Revolt (September 1942)

3.1 Declaration of "Esuru Swatantra Halli"

On September 25, 1942, the villagers of Isur assembled at the local Siddheshwara temple and unanimously passed a resolution declaring Isur an independent, free village (*Swatantra Halli*). They banned imperial officials from entering the village limits and hoisted the Indian National Congress tricolor atop the temple.

To subvert colonial administrative logic, the villagers formulated a novel administrative structure:

- **Appointment of Minor Ministers:** Recognizing that the colonial legal framework punished adults severely, the community symbolically appointed two young boys—Jayappa and Mallaiah—as the "Amildar" (Tahsildar) and "Police Inspector" respectively.
- **Prohibition of Tax Collection:** Villagers were prohibited from paying land revenue to imperial officers, and village registers were confiscated from the visiting *Shanbhog* (village accountant).

3.2 The Escalation and Clash

On September 28, 1942, Revenue Officer (Amildar) Chennakrishnappa and Police Inspector Kanthappa entered Isur along with police personnel to force revenue extraction and seize village land records. The villagers, wearing Gandhi caps, blocked their entrance and demanded that the officials wear Gandhi caps and sign a pledge recognizing *Esuru Sarkar*.

The refusal and aggressive posturing of the police officers triggered a violent confrontation. In the ensuing clash between the armed police squad and the aggrieved peasantry, both the Amildar and the Police Inspector were killed by the agitated crowd.

4. Colonial Repression and Judicial Retribution

The death of colonial officials prompted swift and ruthless reprisal from the Mysore State administration acting under British pressure.

1. **Military Occupation:** A military force accompanied by armed police was dispatched to Shikaripura. Isur was subjected to severe looting, harassment, and mass arrests. Villagers fled into the surrounding forests of Malnad to evade military violence.
2. **Trials and Executions:** Over 40 villagers were put on trial before a Special Bench. After a brief judicial process, five prominent freedom fighters—**Guruppa, Jinahalli Mallappa, Suryanarayanachari, Badiyappa, and Halappa**—were sentenced to death.
3. **Execution of Martyrs (March 1943):** Between March 8 and March 10, 1943, these five patriots were hanged at the Bangalore Central Jail. Female leaders, including Kanthamma and Halamma, served long prison terms for their active participation in the revolt.

The supreme sacrifice of these five martyrs turned Isur into a symbol of anti-colonial resistance across South India, giving rise to the popular Kannada adage: "*Esuru kottaru, Isuru kodevu*" ("We may give our lives, but we will not yield Isur").

5. Historiographical Significance in Karnataka's Freedom Movement

The Isur Uprising holds distinct historical significance within the broader spectrum of the Indian Freedom Struggle for several key reasons:

- **Subaltern Sovereignty:** Unlike urban protests that relied on satyagraha demonstrations, Isur demonstrated an active effort by a rural subaltern population to dismantle colonial authority and replace it with direct community governance.
- **Peasant Mobilization:** It illustrates how national political consciousness penetrated deep into rural Mysore, bridging national Congress ideology with regional agrarian grievance.
- **Gender and Youth Participation:** Women like Halamma and Kanthamma were central to the resistance, demonstrating that the revolt was a collective village movement rather than an isolated act by political activists.

6. Conclusion

The Isur Uprising of 1942 stands as a monumental chapter in Karnataka's history. It represents a rare moment where a local community shattered the myth of imperial invincibility by establishing a self-governing village republic. Though crushed by state violence, the martyrdom of Isur's heroes catalyzed popular patriotism across Karnataka and accelerated the moral collapse of colonial rule in the region. Integrating such micro-historical insurgencies into national historical narratives remains essential for a comprehensive understanding of India's independence movement.

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