

Review of *Foreshadowing the Great Rebellion — The Vellore Revolt, 1806: Uprising of 1857 foretold*

A historian chronicles the revolt of 1806, frontrunner to the Meerut uprising, and says it was a political, rather than a military insurrection

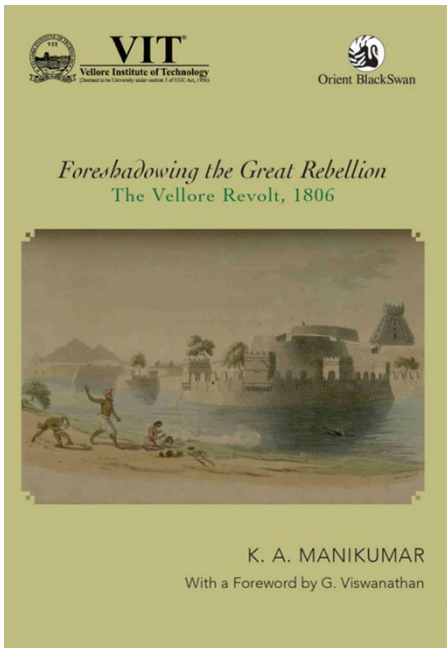
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Students light candles to pay homage to the martyrs of the Vellore Revolt of 1806, at the Government Museum inside the fort in Vellore. | Photo Credit: C. Venkatachalapathy



The run-up to Independence saw a number of agitations and revolts against the British. Not every insurrection has been analysed as much as the 1857 uprising; posterity has preferred to forget many other incidents. The Vellore Revolt of 1806 falls under this category. It does not figure prominently in textbooks at the national level. Historian K.A. Manikumar tries to make amends about this anomaly in his book.

Even though the Vellore revolt did not have the scale of the 1857 Rebellion, there are some similarities. In Vellore too, the revolt was triggered by the perceived hurt to religious sentiments, but it was crushed in a matter of hours. There was one more similarity between the two incidents. Like in 1857, wherein a Muslim king, the titular Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar, was proclaimed leader, the Vellore Revolt saw its participants declare Tipu Sultan's son Fateh Hyder as their king who, according to Manikumar, "did not succumb to such a tempting offer."



Storming of Delhi; the Sepoy Uprising of 1857. | Photo Credit: Getty Images

Diverse set of rebels

The author seeks to highlight the point that the Vellore Revolt was not a response of a homogenous group but that of a diverse set of people determined to drive the British out of power. In terms of religious composition, there were not only Hindus and Muslims among the rebels but also Christians, all of whom hailed from different parts of the then Madras province.



Tipu Sultan's son Fateh Hyder. | Photo Credit: facebook

Manikumar also emphasises that larger political interests, increasing evangelical activities of European missionaries and economic factors, including “oppressive land revenue” policies, were among the factors that contributed to the revolt. To substantiate his point that the uprising was more political than military in nature, he explains that the British East India company, which ruled the country then, had made every effort to reconcile with the rebels, notwithstanding the findings of two panels that went into the causes behind the revolt.



School students in Vellore paint their faces with images that reflect the Vellore Revolt of 1806. | Photo Credit: Venkatachalapathy C.

Manikumar gives enough indications that the Vellore Revolt had its impact in many southern parts of the country. He talks of the link between the event and the reported appearance of the call given by the Marudhu Pandiyar brothers against the British in the southern part of Tamil Nadu before being hanged publicly in October 1801.

British data



Marudhu Pandiyar brothers and Rani Velu Nachiyar. Illustration: special arrangement

Though the author's sympathy lies with those who led the revolt, Manikumar is objective in his assessment of the work of the British in the whole episode. For instance, he gives credit to a military court of inquiry for "painstakingly" collecting data regarding the rebels while classifying them. The book includes a caste-wise break-up of prisoners and soldiers, facing trial, which was prepared by the British authorities. Not many agree with the author's position on the role of larger political interests or the longer impact of the revolt on certain developments elsewhere later. Also, it is debatable whether a highly complex society such as the Tamil region would have been, as early as the early 19th century, developed a sense of cohesion in taking on, what was considered, a common adversary. However, all these aspects deserve to be studied further and the book is, it is hoped, likely to spur students of history to dig deeper. Such studies should get published in Tamil too. It is thoughtful of Vellore Institute of Technology to support Manikumar in his study. Other such institutions should take a cue from this and help spread knowledge regarding many inspiring agitations and uprisings that India saw before Independence.

Foreshadowing the Great Rebellion: The Vellore Revolt, 1806; K.A. Manikumar, Orient BlackSwan, ₹695.