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Rani Abbakka Chowta: The Fearless Queen of Ullal

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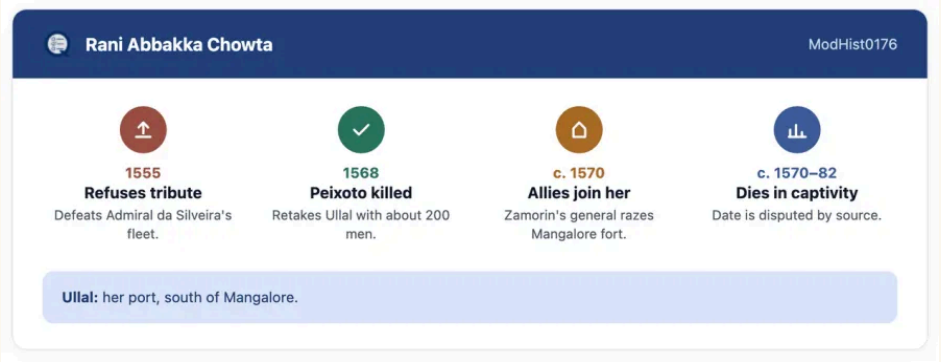
Rani Abbakka Chowta: The Fearless Queen of Ullal

In 1555 a Portuguese envoy came to a small port in coastal Karnataka. He demanded tribute. The queen of that port said no.

Rani Abbakka Chowta ruled Ullal. She held off one of Europe’s strongest navies for years. This was about three centuries before the Revolt of 1857.



Rani Abbakka on a 2023 Indian stamp. No contemporary portrait is known, so this is an artist's image. Image: India Post, Government of India (GODL-India), via Wikimedia Commons.



Four turning points in the Abbakka story, from standard historical accounts.

Ruled. Ullal, a port south of Mangalore.
Dynasty. The Tuluva Chowtas, with Puttige as the main seat.
1555. Refused tribute and beat a Portuguese fleet.
1568. Retook Ullal and killed General João Peixoto.
Allies. The Zamorin of Calicut and a Deccan sultan.
End. Died in captivity; the date is disputed.

Aliyasantana: a system of inheritance in coastal Karnataka where property and rule pass through the sister's line.

Tribute: a payment a weaker ruler makes to a stronger power.

Cartaz: a Portuguese sea pass. Ships had to buy one to trade safely on the Indian Ocean.

1 Who was Rani Abbakka?

Our story begins on the Tulu coast. This is the strip of land between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea. A line of rulers called the Chowtas held it.

Their main seat was Puttige. Ullal was the port town on the coast. Abbakka ruled from there.

The Chowtas followed Aliyasantana. Under this custom, power passed through the sister's line. So a nephew or niece of the ruler's sister could inherit. Her uncle, Tirumala Raya, is said to have crowned her.

She was a Jain. Her court and army still included Hindus and Muslims. This mix matters later, because her allies came from many faiths.

Sources differ on when she was crowned. Some say about 1525. Treat that year as an approximate date.

- She belonged to the **Tuluva Chowta dynasty**.
- Seat: **Puttige**; port town: **Ullal**.
- Rule passed by **Aliyasantana**, the matrilineal custom.
- She was a Jain, but her court and army were mixed.

> **Quick check 1.** Abbakka ruled Ullal as a Chowta queen under the matrilineal Aliyasantana custom. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

2 Why did the Portuguese want Ullal?

The Portuguese arrived on this coast in the early 1500s. They wanted to control the spice trade. Pepper, cardamom and rice moved out of small ports like Ullal.

They tried to force every trading ship to buy a sea pass. They also took over key ports and forts. A ruler who refused became an enemy.

Ullal sat close to Mangalore, a place the Portuguese wanted. A defiant queen on that coast was a problem for them. She also let her ships trade with Arab merchants. That cut across their plans.

The queen's small kingdom could not match their ships. But it had good local knowledge and loyal fighters. That gave her a real chance.

- Ullal shipped **pepper, cardamom and rice**.
- The Portuguese wanted to control the **spice trade**.
- They pushed ships to buy a **sea pass** (cartaz).
- Abbakka kept trading with **Arab merchants**.

3 How did she beat the Portuguese?

The first big test came in 1555. A Portuguese envoy asked for tribute. Abbakka refused. The Portuguese then sent a fleet under Admiral Dom Álvaro da Silveira.

She defeated that force. The Portuguese did not give up, though. In 1557 they plundered the nearby port of Mangalore. Ullal stayed in danger for years.

The most famous fight came in 1568. A Portuguese commander, João Peixoto, captured Ullal and entered her court. Abbakka escaped. She took shelter in a mosque that night.

From there she gathered about 200 soldiers. They struck back and killed Peixoto. They also took about 70 prisoners. Accounts add that her forces killed another admiral, Mascarenhas, and cleared the Mangalore fort.

Later tradition adds a vivid detail. It says she used fire arrows against Portuguese ships. This is legend more than record. Use it as a story, not a sure fact.

- **1555**: refused tribute; beat **Admiral Dom Álvaro da Silveira**.
- **1557**: the Portuguese plundered Mangalore.
- **1568**: **João Peixoto** took Ullal, then died in her counterattack.
- She sheltered in a **mosque** and rallied about 200 men.
- The **fire-arrow** detail is legend.

4 Who stood with her?

Abbakka could not win alone. So she built ties across religions and kingdoms. Her troops included Hindus and Muslims. Local fisher communities also fought for her.

Around 1570 she joined a wider coalition. It included the Zamorin of Calicut and a Deccan sultan. Accounts name the sultan of Bijapur, while others say Ahmednagar. Sources do not agree on this.

The Zamorin’s general, Kutty Pokar Markar, went into action. He destroyed the Portuguese fort at Mangalore. He was killed on his way back.

The picture is not one of simple unity. Abbakka's own husband, Lakshmappa Arasa Bangaraja II, is said to have helped the Portuguese. The two had long been estranged.

- Her army was **mixed**: Hindus, Muslims and coastal communities.
- Allies: the **Zamorin of Calicut** and a **Deccan sultan**.
- **Kutty Pokar Markar** destroyed the Mangalore fort and died on the way back.
- Her estranged **husband** sided with the Portuguese.

5 How did her story end?

In the end the Portuguese struck again. Her husband's help is said to have tipped the balance. Abbakka was arrested.

She died in captivity. The year is disputed. Some accounts say about 1570. Others push it as late as 1582. A careful answer says only that she died after years of resistance.

Folk memory gave her the title Abhaya Rani, the fearless queen. Stories also give her two daughters who carried on the fight. Treat that detail as tradition.

Ullal still remembers her. A yearly festival, the Veera Rani Abbakka Utsava, honours her. The Coast Guard named a patrol vessel after her. India Post issued a stamp in 2023.

- Betrayal is said to have led to her **arrest**.
- She died in captivity; the date runs from about **1570 to 1582**.
- Title: **Abhaya Rani**, the fearless queen.
- Memory: the **Utsava** festival, a Coast Guard ship and a **2023 stamp**.

6 What are the exam traps?

Queens of this period get mixed up often. Keep these points straight.

- Abbakka fought the **Portuguese**, not the British Company.
- She ruled **Ullal** on the Karnataka coast, not Jhansi or Garha.
- Do not mix her up with Rani Durgavati or Rani Lakshmibai.
- The 1555 admiral was da Silveira. The 1568 commander was Peixoto.
- Her death year is uncertain, so avoid an exact date.
- Read about Kittur Chennamma.
- Read about Rani Durgavati.
- Read about Rani Lakshmibai.

Quick check 2. Rani Abbakka's main enemy was the British East India Company. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Remember: 1555, she refuses tribute. 1568, Peixoto dies at Ullal. About 1570, allies join her. She died in captivity, date disputed.

Think it through: Why did a small kingdom last so long against a naval power?

The Portuguese ruled the sea. But Ullal had local knowledge, loyal fighters and allies on land. Her cross-faith network gave her troops and support the Portuguese could not easily break.

Quick check 3. Sources differ on the year of Abbakka's death, from about 1570 to 1582. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Practice MCQs

1. Rani Abbakka Chowta ruled which port town in coastal Karnataka, from around 1525 to 1570?

A. Bhatkal

B. Mangalore

C. Kundapura

D. Ullal

See answer ↓

2. In 1555, Rani Abbakka refused tribute and defeated a Portuguese naval force under which admiral?

A. Afonso de Albuquerque

B. Vasco da Gama

C. Dom Álvaro da Silveira

D. Francisco de Almeida

See answer ↓

3. In 1568, Rani Abbakka rallied about 200 soldiers to retake Ullal, killing which Portuguese general in her counterattack?

A. João Peixoto

B. Diogo Lopes de Sequeira

C. Afonso de Albuquerque

D. Dom Álvaro da Silveira

See answer ↓

4. Rani Abbakka's final defeat, around 1570, was aided by whom joining the Portuguese against her?

A. Her own uncle

B. Her own estranged husband

C. A rival queen

D. The Zamorin of Calicut

See answer ↓

5. Which dynasty did Rani Abbakka belong to?

A. Hoysala dynasty

B. Alupa dynasty of Banavasi

C. Tuluva Chowta dynasty

D. Kadamba dynasty

See answer ↓

6. Under which system of inheritance did Abbakka receive the throne from her uncle?

A. Doctrine of Lapse

B. Primogeniture

C. Matrilineal Aliyasantana

D. Patrilineal Mitakshara

See answer ↓

7. Which trade made Ullal valuable to the Portuguese?

A. Indigo and silk

B. Cotton cloth and opium

C. Tea and coffee

D. Spice trade in pepper and rice

See answer ↓

8. Which South Indian ruler's general helped Abbakka by destroying the Portuguese fort at Mangalore?

A. The Zamorin of Calicut

B. The Raja of Travancore

C. The Nayak of Madurai

D. The Sultan of Mysore

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.** She ruled Ullal, a major spice-trade port, under the Chowta dynasty's matrilineal Aliyasantana succession system. ↑ Q1
2. **C.** She defeated the force sent under Admiral Dom Álvaro da Silveira, after refusing to pay tribute to the Portuguese. ↑ Q2
3. **A.** She killed General João Peixoto in her counterattack, forcing a Portuguese retreat after he had briefly captured Ullal. ↑ Q3
4. **B.** She was finally defeated after her own estranged husband joined the Portuguese against her. ↑ Q4
5. **C.** Abbakka belonged to the Chowta dynasty of the Tulu country. Its main seat was Puttige, with Ullal as the port capital. ↑ Q5
6. **C.** The Chowtas followed Aliyasantana, in which the crown passed through the sister's line. That is why her uncle crowned her. ↑ Q6
7. **D.** Ullal was a coastal port that shipped pepper, cardamom and rice. The Portuguese wanted to control that trade. ↑ Q7
8. **A.** Kutty Pokar Markar, general of the Zamorin, destroyed the Mangalore fort. He was killed on his way back. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** ↑ 1
2. **False.** ↑ 2
3. **True.** ↑ 3

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