

Half a Century Controversy Awakened South Travancore

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ABSTRACT

The caste system was in scrupulous manner in South Travancore. It imposed rigorous, rules and regulations on the depressed and the backward communities in the name of pollution. The atrocities perpetrated against the backward and depressed communities were intolerable. This article highlights for the first time in the history of South Travancore one of the major suppressed communities the “Nadars” fought bitterly and earnestly and succeeded by shedding sweat and blood in winning their right and privileges to dress decently.

INTRODUCTION

The caste prejudices were rampant in South Travancore and the social economic, religions and political condition seems to be gloomy.¹ With the dawn of the 9th century the depressed and suppressed communities got awakened in their social sphere. The law was not equalitarian. The atrocities perpetrated against the backward and depressed communities were intolerable.²

Though this social evil seemed to have existed from time-immemorial, none found it an injustice done to a particular sect and continued unnoticed till the 17th century AD. During the Mughal rule in North India one of their commanders by

name Mukilan invaded this region and established his authority.³ He noticed this worst social evil in South Travancore. He took decision to eliminate this evil from society. So he ordered, women of his territory should cover their bodies when they were going out of doors.⁴ soon after the enactment, they dressed as they liked. But, this change fizzled out soon after his death and the people were forced by the upper-class to return to the old barbarous ways.⁵

The society remained as a crying wound which could be gleamed from the letter of Mrs. Mault to London Missionary Society dated 21 June 1830. ⁶ Direct involvements of Missionaries resulted in reform movements and causes conflicts in

the society. A Missionary in 1841 declared that “although our great work is to promote the external interest of the people, we cannot, but feel for these poor sufferers; and if consistently without higher projects, we can procure for them some relief from their temporal distress it is our delight to do so”.⁷ One such attempt is the Breast Cloth controversy. Caste rules restricted the mode of wearing dress in South Travancore.⁸ It is distressing to note that the women were denied even the right to cover their own body with cloth.⁹ The women of Nadars were desirous of having the freedom of dress, they were not permitted by caste rules, in which prohibition was supported by Government regulations.¹⁰ The Nadars who were called Shannars were denied off from their right.

The humanitarian activities, imparted education and the liberal Christian ideas led the new converts refuse to perform the age old customs. Missionary ladies devised a plain loose jacket for them.¹¹ In addition a scarf called “Thol Cheelai” was also worn by Christian women.¹² But the higher- castes did not like this and they began to mock, abuse and ill-treat in various ways. By hearing the harrowing tale and suffering of the poor, Col. Munro issued an order to the *Sarvadikaryakars* to take steps that there should be no obstacles put to the women

converted to Christianity, wearing clothes over their breasts.¹³ The Dewan of Travancore too issued an order in 1812 that the Christian women have the right to cover their bosoms like the Christians in other countries.¹⁴ In May 1814, the Government of Travancore issued a circular order penning the women of the inferior classes of the population who were converted to Christianity to cover their body with jacket as was worn by the women of Syrian Christians, Moplas and such others.¹⁵

In Kalkulam of South Travancore a taluk in the Padmanabhapuram division the higher-caste people illtreated the Nadar women in public places.¹⁶ Charles Mead, complaint about these outrages to the Padmanabhapuram Court¹⁷, says that they were instructed to do so and that it ought to be so ordered agreeable to Christianity.¹⁸ To confuse this situation with false facts, the upper-class people lodged a petition in the court charging them that they did not pay the toddy rent.¹⁹ So, the Resident Col. Newell ordered an immediate inquiry to be made into the matter.²⁰ He reviewed the case and asked Mead for a report. On receiving an affirmative reply from Rev. Mead, the court decreed that the accused Nadar Christians had no reason to be fined.²¹ The court decreed in favour of the Christians.²² Many converts to

Christianity regarded this as an official sanction to wear upper-cloth. The judgment relieved them for time-being.

The decree of the court obtained by Rev.Mead in 1823 says Christians to wear only *Kupayam* and not upper-cloth.²³ So the treatment towards Nadars was very cruel and the Nadar Christians were attacked in December 1828.²⁴ They stripped off their jackets, plundered their houses and burnt down many schools, rooms and chapels.²⁵ An eyewash enquiry was made by the Dewan of Venkata Rao, for it led to the reassertion of rules which denied Nadar women to have the right to use the upper-cloth.²⁶

On 3rd February 1829 the Travancore Ranees made a Proclamation, it afforded no relief to the Christians, which says “that the women of the Nadar have no authority to wear the upper-cloth and are hereby prohibited from doing so”.²⁷ The converts were ordered to respect the ancient caste system and they should refer their complaints only to the Government and not to the Missionaries.²⁸ During this critical situation the Nadar under Christian instructions continued to dress in the manner of higher-caste people.²⁹ Their mode exercised great influence and these provoked the Nadar Christians to enter into a struggle due to the aggravated

situation to secure the right of dress for their women.

So the Missionaries filed a joint petition to the Government which proved the political atmosphere of South Travancore as deplorably bad.³⁰ The Governor of Madras forwarded the petition to General Cullen. Cullen was against these activities; therefore he referred it to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Madras as a “people's revolt”.³¹ However the Madras Government did not want to intervene in this matter.³² Around October and November of 1858, troubles of a serious nature broke out. After the takeover by the British Government, Queen Victoria made a proclamation in which she said, we declare... that all alike shall enjoy the equal and impartial protection of the law and we do strictly charge and enjoy all those who may be in authority under us that they abstain from all interference with the religious belief or worship of any of our subjects.³³ So the high-caste masses began to attack the Nadars openly and they said that the order had been issued by the Government to strife the women of their jackets.³⁴

Dewan T. Madhava Rao noticed the disturbance and issued a public warning on 27th October 1858 to the effect that it was clearly wrong to violate ancient

usage without authority and that who's ever do so in future would be severely punished. The higher-caste Sudras were not to do anything themselves against the Nadar to break the peace.³⁵ The situation forced the Madras Government to intervene in this matter.³⁶ Finally, the Maharaja of Travancore issued a Proclamation on 26th July 1859 stating that there was no objection for the Nadar women to cover their upper-part of the body but it should not be like the dress code of women like higher castes.³⁷

CONCLUSION

As a result all classes of people have the right to move in the street, properly attired. This energized to achieve social equality in South Travancore. Thus the controversy which continued for over half a century came to end by awakening the social sphere and contributed in a large measure to the modernization of South Travancore.

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