

# Upper Cloth Movement in South Travancore

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## **Abstract:**

In the nineteenth century European ideas of life and manners began to take root among the people. Orthodox views regarding the framework of society had slowly begun to give way to new and liberal ideas of the brotherhood of man. Encouraged by the orders of Munro dated 7 Edavam 989, (1813) the nader women began to wear the upper cloth along with the jacket. The caste hindus could not compromise with this violation of a deep rooted custom. However the first agitation, for the upper cloth right started in 1822 when the Nayers in Kalkulam mocked, abused and ill-treated the Nadar females who appeared in public with decent dress with upper cloth and jackets worn by them were torn. Soon the Nadar got a favourable decree from the Padmanabhapuram court in 1823, which confirmed the proclamation of Munro having felt annoyed the Nayers resumed persecution and subsequently the royal proclamation of 3rd February , 1829 prohibited the use of upper cloth by Nadar women

Key words : Travancore, Upper Cloth, Nadar, Kuppayam, London Missionary Society.

## **Rev.& MRS. MAULT (DEC.1819-1855)**

For two years Charles Mead worked strenuously for the progress of the Gospel in Travancore. He applied to the Directors for more missionaries. The Directors decided to strengthen the Mission and sent Rev.& Mrs.Charles Mault and Rev.John Smith. Mr.Mault and Mrs.Mault sailed from Liverpool on 18<sup>th</sup> November 1818 and landed in Bombay at the end of July 1819 and obtained a passport from Col.Munro, the British Resident of Travancore and “Proceeded to the Society’s mission in South Travancore to assist Mead in the superintendence of schools and congregations already formed by him and others under his charge”. They reached Nagercoil in December 1819. Then began a comradeship in service between the two pioneer missionaries in Travancore which, with unbroken harmony, lasted for 35 yaers. “Mault’s simple piety and patient service were joined to Mead’s energy and enterprise and resulted in the consolidation of the various branches of work established”.

## **THE FIRST UPPER CLOTH RIOTS- 1822**

In may 1822 Christian women especially of the nadir caste in the Kalkulam and Eraniel taluks were ill-treated for appearing in the public and market places with the upper part of their bodies covered. By long standing custom only women of the Nair and other high castes were allowed to use cloth or scarf over the shoulder called the “thol cheelai” as worn by women of higher castes. Nadar women in Tinnevely also wore the upper cloth. But the higher castes in Travancore, especially the Nair did not like the Christian women in decent dress. They began to mock, abuse and ill-treat them in various ways in markets and waysides.

There were many cases of ill-treatment and outrages and consequent riots in the Kalkulam and Eraniel taluks. Mead made complaints of these outrages to the Padmanabhapuram Court, but to his great mortification, no redress was made. So the appeal to the Resident describing the illegal actions of the upper castes (“sudras”) irritated the dress of the Christian women. The Resident Col.Newall ordered an immediate inquiry to be made into the matter.

Meanwhile a complaint was lodged against some Christians who had their heathen name as Shanars, for not paying the arrears of their toddy rent and for their women wearing upper cloth. When it was decreed that they were to be fined on account of their women wearing upper cloth, Mead appealed to the Government against this decree. By the order of the Resident, the court reviewed the case and asked Mead for a report. Mead reported that the women of the Shanars (nadars) and such other castes who had embraced Christianity ought to wear upper cloth for the sake of decency when they would go to church, fairs, markets and similar

places and that they were instructed to do so and that it ought to be so ordered agreeable to Christianity. Considering the report of Mead, the court decided not to find the Christians on account of their women being permitted to wear upper cloth.

## REV.MEAD'S APPEAL

As a result of Rev.Mead's appeals and agitations, the Padmanabhapuram court reinvestigated into the complaints and issued a decree in favour of the Christian women. The decree of the court relating to the wearing of dress by the Christians issued in 1823 was promoted. Rev. Mead to enquire if these people were Christians and if the religion required them to wear the upper cloth for the sake of decency when they would go to the fairs, markets and other places and if they were instructed to do so, if such instruction was agreeable to Christianity. The then Travancore Maharani was very much opposed to the freedom taken by the Christian women. Rev.Mead, after his success in the fight with the government, requested the Christian women to obey the orders of the Government and avoid creating disturbance to the public order. They were irritated by the complaints of the Christians to the missionaries against them. The hostility that prevailed among them again burst out after a period of five years, in 1828.

## The second Upper Cloth Riots- 1829

The second upper cloth riots centered round Cannanoor, Attoor, Arumana, Tirparappu, Odayaruvilai, Pilipanam, eraniel, Neyyoor, etc., The Nairs of Attoor in the morning of 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1828 assembled in a place about a mile away from the Cannanoor Church, armed with guns, swords, cleavers, rice-beaters, clubs and sticks with the professed purpose of seizing the Christians and taking them to Padmanabhapuram. The Christians of Cannanoor got the information of the threat to them fled away with the females and children. The women who remained got a share of scurrilous abuse from the Nairs. One was stripped naked and all were made to lay bare their breasts as it was considered usurpation of the privilege and their churches burnt down; but the heathen Shanars were not molested. The next day, similar atrocities were repeated. Though these disturbances were going on in the district, the Tahsildar feigned to be oblivious of what had been going on till all was over. When a Christian woman named Yesudian of Kallivillai went to the local market three men beat her and forced her to take off her upper cloth. Many chapels and schools were burnt. A poor man was tied to the hind legs of an elephant and ill treated for refusing to do forced labour without pay. An attack was made upon Mead. Early in 1829, news of a plot to assassinate him came to Mead's east and he obtained military protection from fort Udayagiri and for a fortnight, he was under the care of British troops.

Col. Morrison ordered an inquiry into the incident by Diwan. Venkata Rao. He came to Padmanabhapuram court to investigate these disturbances. Ashton had to accompany several women who had been ill-treated and whose clothes had been publicly torn off. The nair sepoys did not allow these women to pass through the gates of Padmanabhapuram with the upper cloths on the waist and ordered them to remove the cloths above their waist before they entered the court. There was a great tumult in the court caused by the headmen of the Nair villages when the inquiry was going on. After a few inquiries, the Diwan advised all to live in peace together, maintain the ancient custom without change, promising that a proclamation with regard to the use of the upper cloth would be issued. The inquiry was distinctly unfavorable to the Christians.

The proclamation came out on 29<sup>th</sup> February 1829. It afforded no relief to the Christians. The use of the upper cloth was absolutely forbidden. Christians were ordered to respect the ancient caste customs. No place of public worship should be erected without Government permission being first obtained.

In November 1828, Raman Thambi, a Nair leader of Neyyoor who was a friend of Mead, was one day suddenly summoned to quilon by the Diwan and was  $2\frac{1}{2}$  years without a trial. Mead appealed to the Resident that Raman Thambi did not in the least give cause for offence nor did he in any way behave treacherously as was alleged. Yet, he was put under arrest and made to suffer hardship FOR RENDERING ASSISTANCE TO THE English Mission. For a long time, Mead did not succeed in getting him released because Diwan was adamant and gave various reasons for the imprisonment. At last a favourable opportunity presented itself when

Col. Morrison left Travancore and was succeeded by Col. Codogen. The Resident used his influence to release Raman Thambi. Thambi returned to Neyyoor and was employed by Nead as a munshi and school inspector.

The period under review was one of consolidation and growth. Rev. and Mrs. Mault's steady and unobtrusive labour in Nagercoil had been ably seconded by William Miller and John Roberts. Mrs. Mead did not accompany him but continued to look after the work among women and supervise the girls' school. Charles Miller took charge of the work in the western division. Mead reached London on 30<sup>th</sup> March 1837 and had a hearty reception from the Directors of the L.M.S.

### **The third Upper Cloth Riot (1858-59)**

The causes of the persecution which occurred during 1854 to 1858 had been in operation for many years previously and there had been occasional outbursts of fanatical hatred towards the Christian converts. The marvelous spread of Christianity amongst the Nadars, Ezhavars, Sambavaras and Cherumars excited the envy and jealousy of the higher castes and attempts were to put an end to the progress of Christianity. In 1855, the liberation of slaves due to the efforts of the missionaries irritated the upper castes and others who were the owners of the slaves in South Travancore. The rapid advance of Christians in education, social position and economic condition was manifested in their dress improvement. During this period, more women of Nadar caste began to appear in public with an upper cloth on. The upper castes resisted with violence the infringement of longstanding customs establishing rigid caste distinctions. The upper castes had the Government proclamation of 1829 in their favour. They began openly to attack Nadar women who dared to appear in public with the upper cloth, the high caste costume. With this was mixed up also the demand for forced labour and Sunday work, which was resolutely refuted by the Christians.

Some of the expressions of the proclamation of Queen Victoria, declaring neutrality in religious matters that none should in any way be favoured, nor molested. The proclamation of 1329 allowed the Christians to use only "Coopayam" (loose jacket) and upper cloth. So the upper castes began openly to attack the nadir women who dared to appear in public with the "upper cloth". The Hindu nadars joined hands with the Christians in this matter and retaliated against the outrages on Nadar women. Both parties were determined to fight out though the upper castes were the majority and had the Government on their side. The Surdras gave out that an order had been issued by the Government to strip the women of their jackets '.

In October 1858, a Christian woman was assaulted in the public market at Neyyattinkara and her jacket was stripped off forcibly by the upper castes. The case was proved in the court, yet the offender was let off with so slight a the market hustled the Christians, spat on them and stripped them of the jackets and the striped jackets were hung up on stripped the top of trees. Following was the proclamation of 26<sup>th</sup> July 1859.

"In as much as we have been informed of the grievance accessed by the proclamation of the subject of the upper cloth of shanar women, and it's our will and pleasure to treat all people. as far as we can in such a manner as none shall feel aggrieved. We hereby proclaim that there is no objection to Shanar women, or to shanar women of all creeds dressing in coarse cloth and tying themselves round with it as the Mukkuvattigals [low caste fisherwomen] do or to their covering their bosom in any manner what's cover, but rot like women of high castes". Subsequently the official papers sent from India touching the recent disturbances in Travancore were printed under the title "Recent Disturbance in Travancore"[blue book]. The House of commons ordered to print the book on 6<sup>th</sup> August 1859. The blue book includes a petition addressed to the Resident signed by sismissionarics narrating the persecution of Christian converts at the hands of upper castes .They referred to the past and present incidents orders in connection with the upper cloth revolts.

The proclamation of 1859 in fact provided a vital impetus to the liberation of women of south Travancore from the age- old social oppression. In the course of time not only Nedor women but also women of depressed communities were allowed to wear imper cloth which was a basic need of all women of the country. This new right gave them right, gave them connections and they moved towards a better stanand life.

## Conclusion:

The social service rendered by the protestant Christian Missionaries, in addition to their usual evangelism among the oppressed community of South Travancore opened the eyes of the Nadar community which suffered much due to caste bias, the women of South Travancore met with various disabilities including dress restriction. All the lower class women were prevented from wearing upper cloth in Travancore Government in the name of custom. That inhuman custom invited the sympathy of Christian missionaries who took up this cause for lower classes and ultimately got success.

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