

# UPPER CLOTH MOVEMENT – A FORGOTTEN HISTORY

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## ABSTRACT

Travancore form an irregular triangle of 7.091 square miles in the area at the extreme south-west of the Indian Peninsula from the Cape Comorin the province extends south wards along the western or Malabar Coast of India. In the early decades of the nineteenth century the most important social movement in Travancore, perhaps in the whole of south India, was one for the right of women belonging to socially backward classes to cover their bosoms and wear upper-clothes. In certain regions the tremor of the rebellion was rather severe, while in certain others its intensity was comparatively feeble. It cannot be denied that the revolt was wide-spread and the government of Travancore was alarmed at its extent, for it forced the British government to interfere in the matter, During this time British India had entered upon an era of reconstruction and national consciousness, whereas Travancore had relapsed into forty years of great disorder and upheaval which shattered its existing social structure and led to a reformation.

## KEYWORDS

Travancore, Upper cloth, Nadar, kuppayam, London Missionary Society

## 1. SOURCES OF THE STUDY

Primary sources are extensively used in this study. Primary sources used in this study are letters, minutes, reports, published and unpublished documents, periodicals, newspapers and books.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

*Travancore* society caste rules regulated the dress of the people according to the caste to which they belonged. Caste rule imposed restrictions on the mode of the wearing dress. In many parts of Southern India women of the privileged castes used to wear a light piece of cloth across the breast and over one shoulder. This piece of cloth is called 'upper-cloth'<sup>1</sup>. In an unprivileged caste women covered her bosom it was considered an insult to the people of Privileged castes. The Nadars took the leading role in the revolt they enjoyed the support of the society<sup>1</sup> backward classes as well as the European Missionaries. By calling Nadar disturbance the wisdoms have narrowed its scope and covered its significance<sup>2</sup>.

Unprivileged caste women in Travancore were not permitted to wear anything above their waists. Serious evil arising out of the idea of caste pollution was that the covering of the bosom with clothing was forbidden in order to facilitate recognition and avoidance of the unprivileged castes by their masters. This rule of going uncovered above the waist as a mark of respect to the superiors is carried through all grades of society except the Brahmins<sup>3</sup>. The proper salutation from a female to person of same was to uncover the bosom. In the early decades of the nineteenth century the most important social movement in Travancore

perhaps in the whole of south India was the 'upper-cloth movement'. Historians have not properly evaluated the impact of this movement. On the social history of the country according to them this revolt was only a Nadar disturbance for securing the right of their women to cover their bosoms. Later on high caste Hindu women who were till then prevented from covering their bosoms decently in the presence of their caste superiors was also granted their right. Thus the revolt was actually 'a people's revolt'.

## 2.1 SOCIAL LIFE OF NADARS

The Nadars are Hindu inhabited in Thirunelveli and the Southern part of Tamil Nadu, they belong to the Dravidian race. The Nadars claim that they had a glorious past. The Nadar caste, wherever they claim about their past, during the nineteenth century was one of the agricultural caste. The hereditary occupation of the Nadars was that of cultivating and climbing the Palmyra palm<sup>4</sup>. The social conditions of the Nadars were deplorable in the beginning of the nineteenth century. To mark their degradation their women were forbidden to wear any cloth above their waists, they were not allowed to carry umbrellas, wear shoes and gold ornaments. The Nairs called them as the semi-foreigners. The Nadars must remain thirty six feet from the Nambuthiri Brahmins and must not come closer than twelve feet to a Nair<sup>5</sup>.

## 2.2 EARLY CONDITION OF WOMEN

The Missionary records about the condition of the women, their writing reveals that lives of women were appalling. The women married at a very early period of life and were to be playing running about with the children<sup>6</sup>. All women were to obey the laws and customs of the country and according to them they were considered simply as instruments for the happiness of men. The privileged men assumed the right of dishonoring any women, whatever might be her rank or circumstances. The law permitted them to put anyone to death on the spot, who would resist their brutal demands<sup>7</sup>. Without education, moral teaching and real knowledge of the world, the majority of women spent their time mostly within the four walls of the kitchen. The social evils of untouchability, and unseeability played havoc on the lives of women.

Barbarous treatment was extended to the women of Nadars by government officers for the non-payment of taxes by their husbands. Ringeltaube, the first protestant Missionary in Travancore had recorded many instances of such treatment<sup>8</sup>. He quoted an incident, that the women in absence of their husbands were tortured by having rice pestil twisted into their hair or a great stone placed on four small pebbles on their backs standing all the time in an unnatural posture. Some time even the privileged caste women were not spared by the tax collectors. Ringeltaube also reported that one of the Kelvikars (revenue officer) tortured privileged class women a Sudrathi (Nair women) somewhere near Puthapandi till dropped down dead<sup>9</sup>. The woman had delivered of a child only a few days ago and her blood was not yet staunch. While she lay in a swoon, her mother drew near and took her jewels with which she satisfied the tax collectors.

Chastity was considered as cardinal virtue by the Nadars women and they proved to be good wives and affectionate mothers<sup>10</sup>. To the unprivileged category belonged the slave women composed of the Parayas, Pulayas, Vedars and others. They were steeped in the ignorance and stupidity. They were let or transported at the choice of the master, offered as presents to friends or as gifts to temples. They were brought, sold or mortgaged in the same manner as the land on which they dwelt or as the cattle and other property of their owners<sup>11</sup>. One of the clauses in the deed of transfer as slaves was 'you may sell him or kill him or her'. The social circumstances and daily life of the poor slave women were constrained to labor for their subsistence or to starve. They could not approach their masters, enter the dwelling of any superior or

offer worship in any temple of the caste Hindus. She was prevented from entering the courts and meeting the officials if she got any complaints. Superstitious beliefs and its attendant cruelties multiplied their sorrows arising from ignorance and pitiless oppression .

### **Higher Authority against Women**

The women were compelled to do their assigned work. Early to be morning these women went with a pot to their master's house asking for food and instructing for their days work. While doing the work assigned, they were often ill-treated by their masters. For non-attending to work very early in the morning they were tied up and flogged severely<sup>12</sup>. The teeth of women were extracted by her masters as a punishment for eating sugarcane. There was an incident at Thazhakudi , a village of the Southern taluk of South Travancore which would give the true picture of the oppression. Madathy was a slave girl, when the ploughing was going on, the landlord ordered all his slaves to be in his paddy field. She was in an advanced stage of pregnancy, starved, sick and weak, she could hardly move around . Madathy could not go due to her pregnancy. The landlord was very much annoyed at her behavior and sent some of his slaves to bring her to the field . When she was brought, she was yoked her with a buffalo to the plough and made to pull the plough to the utter horror of everyone . He thought that she was well rewarded for her disobedience. But the poor women fell down in the mire while the driver was trying to make her to get up by harsh means using a whip. She breathed her last with loud shrieks of agony<sup>13</sup>.

Thus women were lived in utter darkness and fear of cruelty. Barbarious custom prevailed in the society on those days Nadar girls who must be shared the bed with their masters. A terrible incident indicates about this custom. Enchanted by the beauty of a Nadar girl, a king of Travancore sent his body guard, the Nairs, to her father to take away thr girl, but he refused. The Nairs left him with a warning that the Raja would came in the evening to have relation with her. Before the arrival of Raja to his house, the father cut his daughter into pieces and throw her into a nearby well and then jumped into the same himself<sup>14</sup>.

The Queen of Attingal, being women did not want to give freedom to her own sex. Gross, a traveler of the eighteenth century recorded that when a girl was lived in European centre for sometimes appeared before the Rani of Attingal with her breast covered, the Rani immediately ordered that her breast to be cut off. This incident was shameful to Rani since she was also a female sex<sup>15</sup>.

### **Peoples Revolt**

The Nadars of South Travancore, who had migrated from the Pandya country, had been agitated for the right to cover the bosoms of their women even before the arrival of the protestant Missionaries When they were in the Tamil country they were not forbidden from covering their bosoms and could adorn their persons as they pleased, They considered the restriction regarding dress as a sort of insult and humiliation . The Missionaries, when they arrived, felt the pulse of these people and urged them to cover their bosoms with jackets. In 1814 Resident Col. Munro issued an order permitting the Christian women to cover their bosoms with any types of clothes they liked. The Christian of the Nadars community in addition to wearing the jacket used upper-clothes also, like the women of the privileged classes<sup>16</sup>. But this was met with violent attacks from the other side.

The real trouble, however stared in 1828. Men were seized on the Sabbath for pubic work, schools were occasionally interrupted. The books were thrown into the streets or torn to pieces. The women were beaten up in the public bazaar for wearing the upper cloth over their bosoms and the clothes were stripped from their bodies. Chapels and Mission –run schools were burnt down and an attempt was made on

the life of Rev. Charles Mead, who was in charge of the London Missionary Society. Finally, troops were sent into the area to control the riot. The Travancore state sided with the Nair who were the main rioters<sup>17</sup>. The royal proclamation of third February 1829 stated ,”as it is not reasonable on the part of the Nadar women to wear clothes over their breasts, such a custom being prohibited , they are required to abstain in future from covering the upper part of their body “.

The proclamation accused the Nadar Christians for desiring to wear the shoulder-cloth contrary to ancient customs and asked them to wear only *kuppayams*. It prohibited the building of places of worship without the prior consent of the government . Most importantly it directed the Christians to lodge their complaints with the government instead of the Missionaries<sup>18</sup> . The laws the directives is significant as it show the Travancore state Church and the British political authority as overlapping . The persecution of the Christian converts continued as a regular affair in the subsequent years. In July 1855, the Missionaries presented a joint petition of the government of Madras giving details of the difficulties faced by the Christians and sought. Thus the Church turned over politically as an ally of British power, while facing opposition from the indigenous elite and the Travancore state.

The last major riot led by Nair against the Nadar Christians in South Travancore, started in October 1858 and continued till February 1859. Petty officials, claiming official sanction, stripped Nadar women of their shoulder clothes in public and armed gangs of Nairs attacked Nadar settlements. During the rioting nine Chapels and three schools were destroyed. The thatched At last the intervention of the Madras government , the king more or less conceded the demands of the Nadars<sup>19</sup>. In 1859, the Dewan wrote to the British resident, “his highness now propose to abolish all rules prohibiting the covering of the upper parts of the persons of Nadar women and to grant them perfect liberty to meet the requirements of decency any way they may deem proper, with the simple restriction that they do not imitate the same mode of dress that appertains to the higher caste”. Through this and other legal sanctions gave the Nadars certain freedom. Their everyday social life they continued to suffer from several civil disabilities such as access to public roads. While threat from the British government in Madras forced the Travancore state to concede the demands of the Nadar converts, the actual stance of the Travancore government was quite the opposite. On 24 November 1868, Dewan T. Madhava Rao drafted a proclamation granting the Nadar women liberty to cover the upper parts of their bodies.<sup>20</sup>

## 2. 3 CONCLUSION

The People’s Revolt was generally defensive, socially liberal and forward-looking, more concerned to restore what they had lost of a ‘golden past’ before their arrival in Travancore from the Pandya country than to blaze a trail for something new. Like the Pugache Rebellion in Russia, the Lofthuus Affair in Norway, the Wilkite and No Popery Riots in London and the peasant Revolts in Austria, the People’s revolt in Travancore reflected the growth of the revolutionary mentality of a people craving for rights and privileges. Thus the Nadars of South Travancore collected together and fought many bloodless battles, which had lasted for about forty years. This was the first organized movement against custom and caste in India. It was in all respects a struggle between the privileged and the unprivileged classes, not between the Missionaries and the Raja. The Missionaries were on the side of the unprivileged classes.

## 2. 4 ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I hereby declare that the research article entitled “Upper Cloth Movement - A Forgotten History” is my original and independent work.

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