



THE ROLE OF NADAR WOMEN IN THE MAKING OF TRAVANCORE HISTORY

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Abstract:

Nadar is one of the prominent castes in Tamil Nadu and in Thiruvananthapuram district in Kerala. In Travancore, they identified with the title 'Nadar'. But others called them 'Shanar'. The life of Nadar women was more agonizing than their men in Travancore society. The restrictions of caste and patriarchy crushed the life of Nadar women. Nadar women had to bear the burden of domestic work, caste restrictions and patriarchal rules. They were the subalterns among the Nadars. Their long struggle, pain and humiliation led them to break the caste-cum-man rules by wearing the upper clothes, the privilege of high-caste women. It proves that subaltern women can also resist the forces of subjugation and break the restrictions. The dress code was one of the means to convey the social status and power of a particular caste in Travancore. Women of higher castes used to wear jackets with upper clothes. The upper cloth is a small piece of cloth across the breasts and over the left shoulder. It was the privilege of high-caste women. The mode and colour of the dress measured the value of women. The upper cloth was an important element of dress that conveyed women's status. For the Nadar men and women, it symbolised their social aspirations to shake off their social disabilities. With the Upper cloth, the Nadar women attempted to build a new body and identity to experience human dignity and freedom.

Keywords: dress, Nadar women, struggle, upper cloth

Introduction:

In the beginning of nineteenth century, lower-caste women were not allowed to cover their bosoms. Their dress was a single cloth which hardly covered the body above the waist and below the knee. ¹In 1812, Col. John Munro, Dewan of Travancore, issued a proclamation permitting women of low caste origin to convert to Christianity to cover their upper body. So, *Nadars* modified their dress. It irritated the *Nairs*, and a complaint was submitted to Col. Munro against the modification of dress. ²In response to the complaint, Col. John Munro issued an order regulating the dress of Christian women of low-caste origin in 1814. According to the order, they were allowed to wear only a jacket, like Christian or Muslim women. They were forbidden to imitate the *Nair* dress. ³In 1815, another proclamation was issued to state that as their religion demanded, the Christian women who

belonged to low castes, such as the *Nadars*, were permitted to cover themselves. These orders and proclamations are silent about the Hindu *Nadar* women. It implies that they were legally not permitted to cover their bosoms. Perhaps they had modified their dress after their Christian sisters. This can be understood from the proclamations of 1829 and 1859. ⁴

Despite the legal restrictions on dress, the *Nadar* Christian women began to wear jackets and upper clothes. They appeared in public in the costumes of high-caste Hindu women. In May 1822, the *Nadar* Christian women were ill-treated for appearing properly dressed in upper cloth in the *Kalkulam* mission district. The appearance of *Nadar* women displeased the *Shudras*, particularly the *Nairs*. They mocked and abused the poor women in markets and streets. This began the Upper Cloth Revolt,

which continued in different periods till 1859.⁵

The animosity between the *Nadar* Christians and the upper castes, particularly the *Nairs*, continued even after the *Padmanabhapuram* court order 1823. The *Nadar* Christians were accused of breaking the land's laws and creating disorder. The *Nadar* Christian women had not discontinued wearing the upper cloth. Occasional quarrels were common between the two groups, but an organized attack against the *Nadars* was started in 1828. The main reason behind the fresh violence was the innovation of dress by the *Nadar* Christian women. The *Nairs* were disturbed by the improvement of Christians of low-caste origin, particularly the *Nadars*, in education, religion and caste consciousness.⁶ The legal ignorance of the *Nadar* Christians was also exploited throughout the legal procedure. It may be the story of subalterns all over the world. They have limited access to the judiciary because of their scarce economic resources and social capital.

Mrs. Yesuvadial: Martyr of the Upper Cloth Revolt

The upper caste men had unleashed different forms of violence. The *Nadar* women were assertive and courageous throughout the struggle to restore their dignity and freedom in the casteist and patriarchal society. They had to face physical, mental and sexual violence and even death. During the second Upper Cloth Revolt, a group of women under the leadership of *Mrs. Yesuvadial* appeared with an upper cloth in public and challenged the restriction on dress in *Kannanoor*. They were beaten by the caste men and *Mrs. Yesuvadial* was injured by gunshot. Although they attempted to

shoot her by gunfire, she did not die. The enraged upper caste men tied and dragged her for nearly five kilometres and brought her to *Maruthoorkurichy*. Then, she was stripped off and tied to a jackfruit tree upside down. After some time, she died. She became a martyr for the cause of the dignity of lower-caste women. She risked her life by raising her voice against the caste and male hegemony of upper castes. She personifies the courage of *Nadar* women and the resistive power of subaltern women.⁷

The Proclamation of 1829

The second episode of the Upper Cloth Revolt was followed by a proclamation on 3 February 1829 prohibiting the *Nadar* Christian women from wearing upper clothing. It was issued by Her Highness the *Rani*(Queen) Parvathi Bai. This proclamation had seven sections dealing with different subjects, such as wearing the upper cloth, performing *oozhiyam* services, erecting places of worship, etc. However the main intention of the proclamation was to prohibit the *Nadar* Christian women from wearing the upper cloth.⁸

The *Nadar* Hindu women were not legally allowed to wear the upper cloth or the *kuppayam*, the dress permitted to their Christian sisters, till 1859. However, they followed their Christian counterparts in wearing *kuppayam* and upper clothes. If they had not imitated the dress code of their Christian counterparts, the Proclamation of 1829, they would not have asked them to restrain from modifying the dress. The participation of *Nadar* Hindus was minimal in the first two stages of the revolt. After the proclamation of 1829, however, they began to join hands with their brothers

and sisters who had been fighting for the liberty of wearing the upper cloth since 1814.⁹ Beyond religious lines, the *Nadar* Hindus and Christians joined in a common cause to assert the right of their women to wear upper cloth, the symbol of privilege and status, Nadar women, irrespective of religion, appeared with upper cloths in public. 156 *Nadar* Christians supported and even helped their Hindu brothers and sisters to prepare petitions against the restriction. *Nadar* Christian women also taught their Hindu sisters how to modify the dress. The *Nadars* fought together against their common enemy, the Sudras, mainly the Nairs. In the conflict, the *Nadars* were attacked their houses, plundered and burned. Though the *Nadar* Hindus participated in the revolt, the Christians were the chief target. Beyond religious boundaries, they could unite and challenge their oppressors in a caste-driven society. However, the dominant succeeds in dividing the subalterns based on religion in contemporary Indian society.¹⁰

The *Nadar* women, particularly the Christians, suffered untold miseries during the revolt. They had gone through physical assault, molestation and public harassment. The miscreants mercilessly ill-treated them. Though they were harassed, hither and thither, calculated attempts began in October 1858. Consequently, the first violence case was reported on 8th October 1858 when the *Nairs* assaulted a *Nadar* Christian woman and tore her jacket in the marketplace in the Trivandrum mission district.¹¹ They even spread the rumour that the government had issued an order to strip *Nadar* women's jackets. Even though the Proclamation

of 1829 allowed the *Nadar* Christian women to wear jackets, the *Shudras* forcibly tore their jackets also.¹²

A group of two hundred *Shudras*, mainly *Nairs*, attacked the *Nadar* Christians in *Thalakudi*, stripped off the women's jackets, and tore their upper clothes on 4th January 1859. In another incident on 7th January 1859, a mob of five hundred *Shudras* came to attack the Christians in *Comarapooram*. The *Nadar* Christian women were dragged out of their houses and stripped. They were subjected to indescribable deeds and sexually molested.¹³

The Proclamation of 1859

Ultimately, in 1859, the British government forced the Raja of Travancore to declare the old dress code obsolete, having earlier voiced its abhorrence. As promised to the British government, *Shri Padmanabhadasa Uthradam Thirunal Marthanda Varma*, the *Raja* of Travancore, issued the proclamation on 26th July 1859.¹⁴

The proclamation stipulated that *Nadar* women should not emulate the attire of high-caste women. High-caste women had upper clothes made of fine or coloured cloth. It was implied that the *Nadar* women, for their part, could wear upper clothes made of coarse or simple cloth. *Nadar* women appeared in markets and public places with jackets and upper clothes. This demonstrates their courage. The Upper Cloth Revolt was the first incident in which a community fought against their social disabilities, particularly of their women, imposed by the upper castes in Travancore.¹⁵

Conclusion:

In the Upper Cloth Revolt, women were the subject of narration and the agent of a historical event. It

was Nadar women who wrote the narrative of the Upper Cloth Revolt. They were writing a history of a community. It was not a political history of an individual but a history of an oppressed community, especially its women. Though their men supported them, the women were courageous to take bold steps to break the chain of oppression by the upper caste men. They were aware of the risk they had taken in society, which functioned within the framework of a religiously sanctioned and socially recognized caste system and patriarchy. Even though they were physically assaulted and sexually molested, they were persistent in their struggle. Their painful journey of struggle created a new history of women's liberation. In the Upper Cloth Revolt, women mediated the process of liberation. Perhaps it was the first women's rights struggle for justice by women in India.¹⁶

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- ¹⁵ Samuel Mateer. *op.cit.*, P. 71.
- ¹⁶ Robin Jeffrey. *op.cit.*, P. 66.