



## BEYOND THE MARGIN: NANGELI'S STRUGGLE AGAINST BREAST TAX

DIVYA J

Research Scholar, Dept. Of History, Iqbal College, Peringammala div2291997@gmail.com

### ABSTRACT

*The social condition in Travancore during the 19th century was characterized by a complex interplay of traditional hierarchies, caste-based divisions, and emerging reform movements. The caste system held a prominent place in society, dictating roles, occupations, and social interactions. The Tax system based on caste played a crucial role in Travancore society. In Travancore the non caste Hindus were forced to pay a variety of taxes including thalakkaram, pattom etc., and also taxes on women's breast, decorations, hair etc., Here the paper deals with breast tax. It also talks about the Nangeli, a Dalit women who lived in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Travancore region of present day Kerala, India. Nangeli sacrificed her life for protesting against unfair practices imposed upon Dalit women. She is remembered for her resistance against a practice known as the "breast tax" or "mulakkaram".*

*Keywords: Nangeli, Mulakkaram, Caste System, Body protest, Avarnar; Savarnar; Women.*

### INTRODUCTION

The social condition of women in 19th century Travancore was complex and marked by a mix of traditional practices, caste-based hierarchies, and evolving influences. Caste among the Hindus became a solid and sectarian institution because of its religious or ritual status.<sup>1</sup> The worst evils of the caste system manifested in the 19<sup>th</sup> century provoked Swami Vivekanandha to brand Kerala as a 'lunatic asylum'.<sup>2</sup> While some women enjoyed certain privileges, many others faced discrimination, limitations, and social restrictions. It was a period of transition, with changing dynamics that set the stage for later social and cultural reforms in the region.

Women had no freedom over her body, emotions and desires. Everything was controlled by men. In fact she was treated as an object in the hands of men. She was victimized in the inter-caste sexual relations. If a high caste (Nair or any other Shudra caste) women cohabitated with a low caste man, she was excommunicated and was sold as a slave. But if it was with a man of superior caste (Brahmin), it was not considered as polluting.<sup>3</sup> In the inter-caste relations, woman is polluted permanently, but man can be purified by certain rituals.<sup>4</sup> The

religious and social laws primarily victimized women, particularly the subaltern women. These laws were made by men to control and keep women within the social and religious boundaries. The women of low and slave castes had many social disabilities and restrictions. They were not allowed to wear gold ornaments or coloured clothes. Lower caste women were permitted to wear ornaments made of silver, and the poor slave women only neck- laces of beads. To wear ornaments, they required permission from the government.<sup>5</sup> Apart from domestic work, women of low and slave castes had to work in the fields for their livelihood. Low caste females were not allowed to carry water pots on the hip. They had to walk long distances where she could draw water without the stigma of pollution. The condition of female slaves was more difficult than male slaves. They had to obey the diktats of their master without slight defiance. They had no proper food and clothing. Often, they were not even able to feed their new-born children. Sometimes they had to work on a hungry stomach. They had to live in unhealthy huts in all seasons.<sup>6</sup> Though later it was abolished women criminals were punished by shaving their heads, and then banishing them from the country.<sup>7</sup> Women's

education was denied out of the patriarchal fear that they would be defiant and arrogant. In Travancore, 'Can she read?' 'Can she do needlework?' 'Can she keep accounts?' were not primary questions regarding women.<sup>8</sup> Negation of education to women basically reflects the anti-women outlook of the society. Until the arrival of London Missionary Society.<sup>9</sup>

The subjugated life of women, especially of the low and slave castes, in Travancore was unparalleled in any part of India. Religious and social laws controlled their mobility, freedom and natural rights. Being objectified in every aspect of life, women in general served men with their sweat and blood. Their dignity and status were defined by men. All through their lives, they carried the wound inflicted by the caste-oriented patriarchal culture. The women of low and slave caste had to serve the men of upper caste and lower caste with their broken body and wounded psyche. They had to be subservient not only before their men but also their upper caste masters. Lack of education coupled with numerous domestic and social restrictions conditioned the women folk not to question those restrictions but to obey them at their calling. The social context of Travancore shaped them to internalize the patriarchal 'truth' that they are inferior to men.<sup>10</sup>

Women were considered inferior and held in low esteem. They were not given respect but treated with contempt. In fact, they were objects in the hands of men. Women had to uncover their bosoms or upper part of the body before men of superior castes. Because of the low estimation and treatment, women used to exclaim, 'Better to be a clod than to have been born a woman.' The birth of a girl child was not celebrated. Sayings such as "Why do you sit as if a girl had been born at home?" and "Through the incapacity of the mid- wife, the infant is a female!" were common in the society. They had been taught to be submissive in conduct and speech. They were not allowed to speak directly to a male in the absence of a

responsible man in the family. Women of some castes were not permitted to speak to even male relatives. The society generally expected women to cook rice and work at home or in the fields.<sup>11</sup>

Social status in medieval Kerala, which was organised on the basis of the caste system was apparently revealed through dresses. Only the upper castes were allowed to avoid complete nudity and wear ornaments. Women suffered the most from the absurd and unjust caste system. Women belonging to castes like Ezhava, Channar and Parayar were denied the right to change their clothes in public, Where the women of South Travancore were the first to react against this social injustice.<sup>12</sup>

Many women have fought and struggled to completely annihilate the deeply-rooted customs and freed other women and those from future generations from suppressive norms. According to the Indian President Draupadi Murmu “ Kerala is a shining model in the history of women’s Empowerment, Unniyarcha had set a stirring example of self help through martial arts. She is immortalised in Kerala’s folklore. Nangeli sacrificed her life protesting against unfair practices imposed upon Dalit women including their personal clothing. She continues to inspire generations of those who fight for social dignity and justice”.<sup>13</sup>

Nangeli, also known as Nangeli Amma, was a historic figure from Travancore, a region in the southern part of present-day Kerala, India, during the 19th century. She is remembered for her act of defiance against the breast tax, a tax imposed on lower-caste women by the ruling Travancore princely state. Nangeli's story sheds light on the plight of women and the oppressive caste-based practices that existed during that time.

#### **NANGELI AND THE BREAST TAX**

The Sun reports that in 2010 hundreds of women in New York protested by baring their breasts in open. “The mobilisation, known as Go Topless Day, encouraged protesters to unhinge

their bras and free their nipples while proudly march through the streets in public.” Women paraded the streets displaying cards and banners that carried slogans like: “war is obscene, not my nipples”, “Free the nipple”, “Your body is not a mistake” or “Let’s make the body normal again”. It marked the march which fell on 26 August 2010 as the Women’s Equality Day and it happens to be the day when women earned their rights to vote based on Gender Equality in 1920.”<sup>14</sup>

As women around the world march top bare as a gestures of protest claiming their rights to expose body and celebrate freedom of liberating themselves, the condition of women a century ago in Kerala was not similar.<sup>15</sup> In the 19th century, Travancore had a deeply stratified society with a rigid caste system. The upper-caste communities enjoyed various privileges, while lower-caste individuals, especially women, were subjected to numerous social and economic injustices.

Lower castes including Ezhavas did not have the right to cover their breasts. A lot of taxes were imposed on lower castes for being allowed to cover their bodies or to use their work tools such as the breast tax, the head tax, the ladder tax, knife tax, net tax, cart tax, etc.<sup>16</sup> The "Mulakkaram" or breast tax was one such oppressive practice. The Breast Tax was a discriminatory and degrading tax that targeted women from marginalized and lower-caste communities. It was based on the belief that women from lower castes had to pay a tax for the "privilege" of covering their breasts, which was seen as a sign of modesty and dignity. The tax was calculated based on the size of a woman's breasts, with larger breasts incurring a higher tax. This meant that women with larger breasts were subjected to even greater financial burdens and humiliation. The Breast Tax led to severe social and economic oppression of lower-caste women. Many women were unable to pay this tax, and the consequences of non-

payment included humiliation, harassment, and even violence. It perpetuated the already-existing social inequalities and discrimination in society.

The Breast Tax was a glaring example of gender discrimination. It was imposed solely on women, and it was linked to the idea that women from lower castes needed to pay a tax for the "privilege" of covering their breasts, which was seen as a symbol of modesty. The Breast Tax and Nangeli are closely connected in the context of 19th-century Travancore, where the Breast Tax was imposed and Nangeli became a symbol of resistance against this oppressive tax.

Nangeli and her husband Chirukandan lived in Cherthala, a small coastal village. They worked as agricultural labourers and collected sap from coconut trees. Travancore Rajas ruthlessly extracted some 110 kinds of levies from Dalit people—on the fisherman’s net, ornaments worn, a moustache sported and so on. A general tax was levied on men called Talakkaram, literally ‘head tax’; Mulakkaram literally means ‘breast tax’.

Anyone of Ezhava or Nadar caste was expected to appear bare-torso in the presence of Brahmins, royalty or generally anyone of higher caste. Traditionally, it was common for men and women of various castes to be bare-chested and no shame attached to women’s bare chest. By the late eighteenth century however, clothing, especially women’s upper-cloth or blouse, took on pronounced symbolic significance as a marker of social identity.<sup>17</sup>

Among women, chest-covering was permitted only to those from high castes. Mulakkaram began to be collected from all Ezhava women beginning from puberty onward. The parvarthiyar, a local official, would collect Mulakkaram, going from door to door in Dalit neighbourhoods.

Anger was brewing against the unjust tax. Nangeli felt keenly the injustice her community was subjected to. The

burden of taxes left them with hardly a handful of rice to eat at day end. They worked to the bone, yet there was always some tax to be paid; a blanket of fear covered them, and so life carried on.

Nangeli knew the parvarthiyar would soon arrive to collect Mulakkaram. Born of intense anger, her resolve was building up over the years. She decided she would not pay Mulakkaram that day, or ever again. She could not win against state brutality by any of the usual tactics. Nangeli thought of something unprecedented, a dramatic act that would draw attention to the tyranny being enacted in Travancore.

When the parvarthiyar and his men came to collect Mulakkaram, Nangeli asked them to wait. They waited, relieved that she was quiescent, and would soon bring them the tax in the usual form, that is, rice. They were accustomed to collecting taxes thus: rice placed on banana leaves. Nangeli indeed had two long green banana leaves ready. She had sharpened her sickle too. All her life she had worked in the fields, and was adept at handling the sickle. She now picked up the tool, and in one smooth motion, slashed off one of her own breasts. The searing pain was unbearable; the wound bled on her body like a fountain. She carried on like one possessed another deadly stroke. Placing both breasts on the banana leaves, hardly any strength left in her mutilated body, she went out to the waiting officials. Nangeli offered them her two breasts, mangled flesh that had, a minute ago, formed an integral part of her beautiful body.<sup>18</sup>

Before she bled to death, Nangeli saw, to her great satisfaction, the stricken look on the faces of the parvarthiyar and his men, horror and panic writ large, as well as urgent recognition. She knew in that moment that her sacrifice was not in vain. The state official recognized her sacrifice, and wordlessly acknowledged the wrong done to Nangeli and all Dalits. Nangeli the fighter, passed away knowing that word of her brave deed would spread

like wildfire. It would make a difference. As Nangeli collapsed in a heap, the parvarthiyar fled, leaving the severed breasts lying next to her corpse. Neighbours gathered, and someone ran screaming to fetch Chirukandan. Grief-stricken, he joined his beloved wife. In protest against the unjust regime, the story goes that he jumped into her funeral pyre, and burned to death.<sup>19</sup>

Nangeli's protest sent shock waves throughout the state. The next day, Sreemolam Thirunal, king of Travancore, issued a proclamation revoking Mulakkaram, fearing an agitation. The area she lived in came to be known as Mulachiparambu (land of the breasted woman). However, Dalit women were still prohibited from wearing top clothing when in the presence of upper castes.<sup>20</sup>

*Maaru Marakkal Samaram*, or Channar Lahala (revolt) of Dalit women burgeoned in the state a decade later a collective revolt of Dalit women fighting for the right to wear upper-body garments. Nadar and Ezhava women campaigned to be allowed to cover their breasts. The British passed an order permitting Christian women to wear upper cloth in Travancore, but withdrew it after the Raja's council objected that this would obliterate caste differences. Nadar women were forbidden to wear upper-body cloth, but could wear a short jacket called *kuppayam*. Ezhava and Nadar women continued the struggle, and were violently opposed by upper castes. Travancore royalty issued a proclamation in 1829, denying Nadar women the right to wear upper cloths. As the agitation raged, in 1859, the Travancore Raja granted Nadar women the right to tie cloth around their upper body, but only in a specific way.

## CONCLUSION

Nangeli's act of resistance had a profound impact on the awareness of social injustices in Travancore. While her story is tragic, it did contribute to the eventual reform of some of the oppressive practices in the region. Over time, social

reform movements gained momentum, leading to changes in the socio-cultural landscape of Kerala and the broader struggle for women's rights and caste equality.

In 1930, the Travancore government formally abolished the breast tax and began implementing certain social reforms. Nangeli's courage and sacrifice became a symbol of resistance and inspired future generations to fight against oppressive practices and for the rights of marginalized communities.

Nangeli's story remains an important historical reference, underscoring the struggle for gender and caste equality and the resilience of individuals who challenged injustice, even in the face of extreme adversity. Nangeli's story is often cited as an example of the extent of suffering and discrimination that lower-caste women endured during that period and as a symbol of the need for social reform. Her act of resistance, while

extreme, contributed to the larger movements against the Breast Tax and other oppressive practices in Travancore. Over time, these movements, along with the efforts of social reformers like Sree Narayana Guru, played a role in the eventual abolition of the Breast Tax and brought about greater awareness of gender and caste injustices in the region. Over time, some of these social issues were challenged and reformed as the society in Travancore began to modernize, and as social reform movements gained momentum. The abolition of the Breast Tax and other discriminatory practices, as well as the gradual expansion of educational opportunities for women, were important steps towards improving the condition of women in Travancore. However, it's important to recognize that these changes were part of a broader struggle for gender equality and social justice, and significant challenges remained for women in the 19th century.

#### END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Sahadevan, M., *From Brahmanism to liberalism (Ideologies, Attitudinal change and modernity in Kerala)*, Anoja Saha M, Palakkadu, 2008, p.34.

<sup>2</sup> Swami Vivekananda, *Awakened India*, Vol.94, Neha publishers, Delhi, 1999, p.102.

<sup>3</sup> A., Sreedhara Menon, *Social and Cultural History of Kerala*, Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, 1979, pp.67-65.

<sup>4</sup> Leela Dube, *Caste and Women in India*, University of Delhi, p.10.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Mateer, *Land of Charity: A Descriptive Account of Travancore and its People*, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1991, p.60.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, Woodfall and Kinder Printers. London, 1883, pp.201-207.

<sup>7</sup> P., Shungoony Menon, *A History of Travancore From the Earliest Times*, Higginbotham, 1878, p.441.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Mateer, *Op.cit.*, pp.208-209.

<sup>9</sup> Viju Wilson, *The Upper Cloth Revolt In South Travancore Theological Interpretation of a Subaltern Movement*, Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, 2021, p.68.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.69.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Mateer, *Op.cit.*, pp.208-209.

<sup>12</sup> Dr. R. Radhakrishnan, *Ayithochadana Samarangal*, Malu Ben Publications, Thiruvananthapuram, 2019, pp.47-48.

<sup>13</sup> *Kerala Kaumudi*, Saturday, 18 March 2023,

<sup>14</sup> <https://bit.ly/3txtzee>

<sup>15</sup> Kishore, Ram, *Body as Revolt: The myth of Nangeli the Women Who covered Her Breast*, Shanlax International Journal of English, vol.9,no.4,2021,p.1.

<sup>16</sup> Dr. G. Krishnan Nadar, *Downtrodden Movement in Kerala*, G.Krishnan Nadar, Trivandrum, 2007, p.67.

<sup>17</sup> Deepti Priya Mahrotra, *Her Stories Indian Women Down the Ages*, Rupa Publications, March 8 2022.

<sup>18</sup> S. N. Sadasivan, *A Social History of India*, A.P.H. Publishing, New Delhi, 2000, p.478.

<sup>19</sup> Deepti Priya Mahrotra, *Op.cit.*,

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*