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## SOCIO-RELIGIOUS AWAKENING OF NADAR COMMUNITY IN TRAVANCORE

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**Abstract:**-In the ancient time, Nadars were landlords; but later, after their migration to Travancore, they were pushed into the dungeon of slavery and considered as polluted class. Through western education and the introduction of Christianity, they gave up old heathen worship and they got enlightenment and became one of the dominant communities of South India.

**Key words:** Shattrar, Shantore, Nadazhvar, Shannar, Kshatriyas, Poorshandrum, Kuppakalca, Oolium Service, Madan, Bhadrakali, Amman, upper-cloth revolt.

Nadars are one of the dominant communities seen in the southern parts of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. They are known by different names such as Shattrar, Shantore, Nadazhvar and Shannar in different places.<sup>1</sup> But the title of the caste 'Nadar' was used only after 1924 by an order of the Madras Government.<sup>2</sup> The word 'Nadar' or 'Nadan' simply means 'ruler of a country' or 'lord of the land'.<sup>3</sup> In the very ancient time, they ruled the country and known as 'a ruling race'. But consequently, their rule was overthrown by later waves of Dravidians.<sup>4</sup>

Nadars or the Shannars are the original inhabitants of India, belonging to Dravidian race. Tamil was their mother tongue, but Malayalam was also spoken by some of the Nadars. There are different theories about the origin of the Nadars. They claimed a 'divine origin' and believed themselves to have been made to carry crowns.<sup>5</sup> Rober Caldwell is of the opinion that the Nadars were emigrants from Northern coast of Ceylon.<sup>6</sup> Some hints that found in the Tamil literature reveals that the Nadars or the Shannars belongs to a wave of war loving adventurers who migrated towards the south from North India.<sup>7</sup> Popular legends point out that Krishna, Godavari region, Madurai, South Travancore etc. as their earliest homes in India. Whatever may be the truth, the bulk of the Nadars are seen in Eraniel, Vilavankod, Agastisvaram, Kalkulam and Neyyattinkara areas. They are numerous and patronized by ancient Travancore kings.<sup>8</sup>

### Socio-Religious Condition of the Early Nadars

The Nadars claim that they had a glorious past. In the very ancient period, the Nadars were the rulers of the land.<sup>9</sup> Some of them held various higher positions in the administration. They believed that, they were the descendants of Chola, Chera and Pandya rulers and they have styled themselves as 'Kshatriyas'.<sup>10</sup> But after the Muslim and Telungu conquests, they migrated towards south and settled, especially at Tinnevely and Southern Taluks of Travancore.<sup>11</sup> It was a serious blow to the glory of the Nadars. Thus their old social status degraded. The high caste Hindus of Travancore and Southern districts of Tamil Nadu considered them as one of the polluting classes.<sup>12</sup> They oppressed the Nadars. Even the government imposed heavy taxes and suppressed them. Poorshandrum, Kuppakalca etc. were the important taxes levied upon the Nadars.<sup>13</sup> Also the government exploited them by imposing 'forced labour'. This kind of free services were called 'Oolium Service'.<sup>14</sup> Raja Rama Rao described the Nadars as "inferior to Sudras and superior to Parayas". Even though the social condition of the early Nadars were pathetic and

backward, they were hard working and industrious people. They cultivated the palmyra tree, the juice of which they boiled into a coarse sugar known as Jaggery. Thus toddy- tapping became the traditional occupation of the early Nadars<sup>15</sup>. They freely supplied Palmyra leaves for writing purposes. But from 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards many people of this caste gave up their traditional occupation and began to select other occupations<sup>16</sup>. A lot of people came forward to cultivate the soil and thus they became a prominent agricultural people of south India<sup>17</sup>.

With regard to their religion, the Nadars were both Saivites and vaishnavites<sup>18</sup>. They were very dirty, ignorant and wild in appearance. So they were not allowed to enter the temples. Their worship mainly took place in their own houses. They worshipped demons and evil spirits<sup>19</sup>.

'Madan', 'Bhadrakali', 'Amman' etc. were their favorite deities. They believed that they are children of Bhadrakali. Also they were in the midst of all kinds of superstitions. This illiterate and barbarous people got enlightenment only after the introduction of Christianity and education in Travancore<sup>20</sup>.

### Struggle for Social Equality

Till the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was no possibility for the Nadars to make progress. The rigid caste system and social structure did not give them any freedom in the society<sup>21</sup>. The high caste Hindus considered them as slaves and did not allow the Nadar women to cover the upper part of their body. The low caste men and women were not permitted to wear anything above their waists. If a Nadar women covered her bosom it was considered an insult to the people of the higher castes<sup>22</sup>. Against this atrocity, the Nadar community took up arms and revolted against the caste-Hindus. Accordingly, in 1812 Col. Munro, the then Resident of Travancore issued an order by permitting the Nadar converted Christians to cover their bosoms<sup>23</sup>. But due to the wave of opposition from the high caste Hindus, Munro modified his order of 1812 and permitted the Christian women to wear jackets called 'Coopayam'<sup>24</sup>. Unfortunately, the high officials did not strictly enforce the order of Munro and they tried to continue the old custom<sup>25</sup>. But with the help of the Christian missionaries, Nadar women designed their dress and used loose jacket with short sleeves. At that time, the Nadar women of Tinnevely enjoyed the right to wear upper cloth freely and the women of Travancore would have nothing less<sup>26</sup>. In addition to the jacket, some of the Nadar women had taken the liberty of wearing an additional cloth or scarf laid over the shoulder; called the upper cloth<sup>27</sup>. This incident created resentment among the caste Hindus which eventually led to a serious social protest.

In May 1822 the caste Hindus including the Nairs ill-treated the Nadar women of Kalkulam, Iraniyal taluks, even in the market places. They were stripped of their jackets and upper clothes. It led to series of communal riot between the Nadars and Nairs. Charles Mead, one of the missionaries of South India, complained to Padmanabhapuram court. The court decided in favour of the Nadar women. The Nadar converted women took this decree as an official sanction to wear upper-cloth<sup>28</sup>. The caste Hindus did not tolerate this development among the Nadar women.

The Nadar women always appeared with the upper- clothes and it roused the feelings of the caste Hindus. Also, they were irritated by the complaints of the Nadars and the Christian missionaries against them<sup>29</sup>. In such a situation they turned against the missionaries and the Nadar community. Thus, a riot broke out for the second time in 1828. It was more intense than before. Nadar women were beaten, stripped of their jackets and upper clothes and several chapels were burnt-down. On 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1828, a large number of Nairs assembled together at Attur to crush the Nadar revolt<sup>30</sup>. These disturbances went on for weeks. After the revolt Diwan Venkita Row visited the place and submitted his report to the Government. Accordingly, a royal proclamation was issued on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1829. It prevented the Nadar women from wearing clothes over their breasts<sup>31</sup>. It was a fatal blow to the glory of Nadar Community.

The converted Nadar women did not bother about the proclamation of 1829 and they continued to wear upper clothes. After this proclamation, they began to use coloured dress also. Encouraged by the examples of Nadar Christian women, the Hindus of the same caste also began to cover their bosoms and wear upper clothes<sup>32</sup>. Also, a good number of Nadars, both Hindu and Christian, were in the habit of visiting Tinnevely to take wives and in search of employment, where the Nadars at large wore upper

clothes. When they returned to Travancore and southern parts of Tamil Nadu, they refused to strip off their upper-clothes. Following their example, Nadar women from each nook and corner of southern districts began to wear upper-clothes<sup>33</sup>. The increased use of upper clothes had become the symbol of unwelcome change in South India. The caste Hindus wanted to push back the unprivileged class in to old social dungeon. They liked to see them moving through the streets with uncovered breasts<sup>34</sup>. This led an open rivalry between the caste Hindus and the Nadars once again.

The ill feeling of the caste Hindus burst out on 8<sup>th</sup> October 1858. A Nadar women was assaulted in the public market at Neyyattinkara and her jacket torn<sup>35</sup>. Similar attacks took place in different parts of Travancore and Southern Taluks of Tamil Nadu. During that time, the missionaries reported the matter to the British Government. As a result, in November 1858, Queen Victoria issued a proclamation and thus the feelings of both the communities assumed new dimensions. After the proclamation, Diwan T. Madhava Row paid a visit to the revolt affected taluks of Travancore<sup>36</sup>. After that, in order to prevent the collision between these two groups, on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1858, a proclamation was issued. By this proclamation, the Nadar women had no right to cover their upper part with an upper cloth, like the sudra women. The whole Nadar community considered it as a proof of Diwan's partiality<sup>37</sup>. Thus, the policy of the Diwan add fuel to the fire.

Both Christian and Hindu Nadars decided to fight against the proclamation and a violent revolt broke out in different parts of Southern Tamil Nadu and Travancore. In January 1859, a large number of Nadar women of Neyyur, Parasala, Neyyattinkara and Kottar were molested, so that the Nadar community once again took up arms against the caste Hindus<sup>38</sup>. They retaliated against the caste Hindu women. When the revolt reached its zenith, the Nadars collected men and money from Agastheesvaram and Tinnevely. The combined move of the Nadars created havoc in the minds of the caste Hindus<sup>39</sup>. In the course of time, the Madras government to do something. Accordingly, the Raja of Travancore issued another proclamation on 26<sup>th</sup> July 1859. The whole Nadar community got the right to cover their upper part in any manner; but not like the women of high caste<sup>40</sup>.

### **Work of Christian Missionaries for the Upliftment of Nadar Community**

The work of Christian missionaries for the socio-religious awakening of Nadar community was unforgettable. The barbarious Nadar community got enlightenment only after the coming of Christianity in south India. During the initial stage of Nadar revolt, many new mission centres were opened in southern parts of Travancore.<sup>41</sup> As a result, lot of Nadars converted to Christianity and accepted Jesus Christ as their 'Lord and Saviour'. Thus, they gave up their old demon worship and destroyed heathen shrines. They changed the shrines into small churches. Thus, Christianity gave a new outlook and new way of life to the Nadar community. The missionaries also rendered valuable service for the social emancipation of the Nadars as well as the other backward classes<sup>42</sup>. Ringel Taube, one of the protestant missionaries of Travancore influenced the British Government and Col.Munro, the then Resident of Travancore issued an order in 1812. In 1822 Charles-Mead complained to the Padmanabhapuram court against the atrocities committed by the caste Hindus. In 1858 also, the missionaries begged to the British Government to amend various social laws prevailed in the society. All these times, the judgement was infavour of Nadar community<sup>43</sup>. Thus, due to the continuous interference of the missionaries, the British Government enacted several laws for the socio-religious upliftment of the Nadar community.

William Tobias Ringel Taube, the first protestant missionary in Travancore, was responsible for the introduction of English education in Travancore<sup>44</sup>. He found the fact that, education is the only way to remove all the caste barricades. So, he established six schools in Travancore for the education of Christians and non-Christians. Instruction was given in three R's-reading, writing and primary arithmetic. Tamil grammar, Geography, History, English, Scripture lessons were also taught<sup>45</sup>. Free books were supplied to them. After their education, the male students were sent to the villages to propagate the gospel<sup>46</sup>. Charles Mead was another enthusiastic worker devoted himself for the propagation of Christianity and spread of education among the natives. To attain their objective, the missionaries established a number of schools in all the principal towns and villages of Travancore<sup>47</sup>. Also, a large number of youths were trained as Christian priests to continue their mission. A Bazaar school at Nagercoil

was also started for imparting education to the orthodox non-Christians. In 1820, a Boarding school was established for the women education. Through education, they wanted to put an end to the social inequality prevailed among the lower caste people<sup>48</sup>.

By the end of 1860 there was a famine and cholera in various parts of Travancore. The missionaries did much relief work. Funds were provided from all the sources. Also, they started charitable institutions, medical institutions etc in various parts of Travancore. Even the Travancore Government appreciated the work of Christian missionaries<sup>49</sup>. Thus, the Nadar Christians accepted the missionaries as their new social leaders.

### **Contribution of Vaikunda Swamikal for the Socio-Religious Awakening of Nadars**

Vaikunda Swamikal alias Muttukutti Swamikal was a native Nadars saint lived at present Kanyakumari district, formed an organization called “Samatva Samajam” to fight against the social inequality and the short comings of the state administration<sup>50</sup>. He wanted to make a social and religious reformation among the Nadar community. He was greatly affected by the suppression of the lower caste people by the caste Hindus. Based on the principle of “love and Cooperation”, he and his movement opposed life sacrifice, idol worship, false belief, demon worship, social anarchy etc, He tried to introduce purity and simplicity in worshipping God<sup>51</sup>. He coordinated the breast – cloth agitation among the Nadars and he conducted a crusade against the caste Hindus and the Travancore Government. Accordingly, in 1837, Swati Triunal, the Maharaja of Travancore, arrested Swamiji and put in Singarathoppu jail in Trivandrum<sup>52</sup>. Even then he inspired the Nadar community through his works “Akilathiruttu” and “Arulnul” against the social evils. Thus, the work of Vaikundaswamikal and his movement for the upliftment of Nadar community were praise worthy.

The above study makes it clear that, the early History of the Nadars were not so good and they were condemned as heathens; dirty in outlook with long hair known as ‘Kudumi’<sup>53</sup>. With the emergence of chaturvarnya system, Brahmins stood in the apex of the society. Though they were the priestly class, they controlled the whole society. So, these nice-looking people considered the Nadars as one of the backward classes. Up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they struggle a lot for social existence. They revolted against the caste Hindus to protect their rights and privileges. This oppressed community got a resurrection and enlightenment only after the coming of Christianity and western education, instead of Gurukula system. The missionary work among the Nadars were successful and this has done much to improve their material condition<sup>54</sup>. At present the Nadars are better educated and several of them occupy positions of ‘trust and responsibility’ in the service of government and else where<sup>55</sup>.

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