CHAPTER V

SOCIAL EVILS AND CHANGES
SOCIAL EVILS AND CHANGES

For ages the Indian society has been bogged down by many social evils and many of them were pertaining to woman. A striking feature of Indian social life in ancient period was that, it accorded a very high status to women and the social evils like Sati, Child-Marriage, Purdah system etc. were unknown to them.¹ The Vedic age is regarded as the “Golden Age of Women in India” but subsequently, the position of women declined day by day and after the arrival of Muslims, “The Dark Age” of women started.² Much later the arrival of the European Christian Missionaries marked an improvement in the position of women all over India.

In South Travancore, women suffered from many social evils and their position gradually declined at the advent of the Missionaries. Many of the European travellers and Missionaries who visited South Travancore recorded the poor condition of women. There was no equality between the genders, the legal system, compiled and the social customs, which prevailed in the society, enslaved the womenfolk.

² Ibid., p.76.
Devadasi System

It was generally thought that the devadasi system was connected with temples and considered divine but later it became one of the social evils in the society.

Originally the "Dasis or Devadasis (hand maidens of the Gods) were dancing girls attached to the Tamil temples, who subsist by dancing and music and the practice of the oldest profession in the world". They enjoyed special status and they were allowed to take seats even in the company of royal women.³

The courtesans were the only women in India who enjoyed the privilege to learn, to read, to dance and to sing. A well bred and respectable woman would for this reason, blush to acquire any one of these accomplishments.⁴

In South Travancore, the temples remained centres of luxury and eroticism. Beautiful dancing girls were abundant in the temples, which paved the way for the heyday for the Nambudiris. All properties, including women became Lord Parasurama's gift to them. They made laws for their

convenience and enjoyment. They declared that, "Women need not observe
 chastity. They also declared that no female should cover her breasts".  

When a girl was admitted to the rank of Devadasi, she was granted
 a ‘kudi’ and ‘padi’ i.e., a house and allowance for the temple service.  

In fact, no shame whatever was attached to parents, whose daughter
 adopted that career. They also received a fixed salary for the religious
 duties they performed.

The Chieftain of the Karittekappillai went a step further. He permitted
 the high castes to put any one to death on the spot, who should resist their
 brutal demands. They assumed the right of dishonouring any woman,
 whatever her rank or circumstances.

Thus, an honourable profession became the sorriest of all trades.
 They became a prey to the lust of feudal Chieftains and landlords. They
 existed merely to entertain them.

With this degradation, the post of Devadasi became hereditary and
 came to be indentified with temple prostitution. In South Travancore the

---

5 Yesudas, R.N., A People’s Revolt in Travancore, op.cit., p.9.
6 Pillai, K.K., op.cit., p.284.
7 Dubois Abbe, op.cit., p.586.
Devadasis were much sought after till the beginning of this century, by members of the royal family, when they visited the temples.9

The Census of 1901 shows that there were 416 Devadasis in the temples of Travancore. Of them 243 were the natives of Agasteeswaram Taluk. In the later days, this sacrifice of young girls for the cause of prostitution in the name of God and temple, was viewed as “Peace of Injustice “.

Polygamy

The Institution of Polygamy became popular and was very common in South Travancore among almost all castes.10 The males from Nambudiris, Kshastriya and other higher castes who had their own caste wives, practised Polygamy by cohabiting with women of the Nayar caste.11 It was also regarded as a Hindu religious custom, thinking that Hindu Gods had many wives. The chief woman bears the name and title of wife, others were merely concubines and the children of the latter are considered illegitimate.12

---

9 Sreedhara Menon, A., *Social Cultural History of India*, Delhi, 1979, p.44.
Polygamy was tolerated amongst persons of high rank, such as Rajas, Princes, Statemen and others.\textsuperscript{13} Monogamy, Polygamy and Celibacy were all tolerated just as other customs; beliefs and other practises. \textsuperscript{14}

Social writer of eighteenth century Abbe J.A.Dubois interprets that this unnatural custom of Polygamy may be attributed to sinful lust, to abuse power of the strong over the weak and to the dominion of the one sex over the other.

The real reason for polygamy was the economic or social character. It contributed to a man’s material comfort or increased his wealth through the labour of his wives. It also added to his social importance, reputation and authority. \textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Polyandry}

Polyandry was very much practised in Souh Travancore and was common among Nayar women. The practice of the junior male members of the Nambudiri families, having illegitimate contact with Nayar women ushered in an age of unbridled Polyandry. It is the practice of a single

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Jawaharlal Nehru, \textit{The Discovery of India}, New Delhi, 1956, p.248.
woman having marital relations with several brothers (Pandavacharam).\textsuperscript{16}

"Polyandry is not heard of except in remote country part and among some poor families, where a number of brothers keep the same wife on economical grounds, but the community as a whole has shaken off this practice".\textsuperscript{17}

Several brothers living together were unable to support a wife for each; and take one amongst them who resides with them all. The children are reckoned to belong to each brothers in succession, in the order of seniority, such cases necessarily led to jealousies and disputes and other great evils.\textsuperscript{18} This practise was common among Shanars and Nayars in South Travancore.\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{Child Marriage}

Child-Marriage was another evil that made the society ignoble. Though it was in vogue among all the communities, the Brahmins and the high caste Hindus commonly practised it.\textsuperscript{20} Among the Brahmins, marriageable age for girls was five or seven and the boys was ten. The marriageable age for the suppressed caste girls like the Parayas were

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{18} Dubois Abbe, \textit{op.cit.}, p.16.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{20} Yesudhasan,v., & Issac Jayadhas, R., \textit{op.cit.}, p.66.
between five and twelve. Even before forgetting her mother’s feed she became a wife to a healthy youth and is compelled to conceive, inorder to become a mother. 21

Child Marriage was one of the social evils which enslaved the womankind in South Travancore. The girls among Nayars and Nambudiris were given in marriage before the age of puberty. “Girls were married off when seven or even five years old, while boys waited till they are sixteen, twenty or even older “. 22

Once a girl has passed the marriageable age, it was very difficult to find a husband for her, moreover, even if she dies, the man could marry again a little child, five or six years old. But generally the husband dies long before his wife and often even before she has attained the age, which would allow him to exercise his right as a husband. So the poor girl become a widow and may not marry again. 23 Re-marriage of widows was strictly prohibited till the end of the nineteenth century. 24 “Ezhava girls were all married in infancy as a mere form or custom, at various ages, from one to

21 Ibid., p.67.
23 Ibid., p.212.
nine. If not so married, the neighbours reproach the parents for their neglect and exclude them from social privileges. The Child Marriage was another essential feature to promote Varnasrama. The aim was to prevent a low born man from having a love affair with a high born maiden.  

There was a belief among sociologists that Kerala (South Travancore, then a part of Kerala) never had Child Marriages. This is incorrect due to fact that there were quite a number of ladies who became mothers at eleven. In the year 1891, in South Travancore alone, there were twenty six child wives between the ages of zero and four, 1,125 between five and nine, 13,559 between ten and fifteen.  

Further more, if a wife did not bear a child she would be ostracised as a sinner. She would be doubly oppressed and her barren-ness was blamed as a sin. Such was the humiliating condition of female children in South Travancore.

Dowry System

Dowry is defined as any property other than gifts given by one party to another in consideration of marriage. The dowry included various

---

26 Ibid., p.117.
27 Hepzi Joy, R.J., op.cit., p.256.
customary gift presented by the bride's parents to the bridegroom and his relatives. This was also known as "Sridhana".

"No money no marriage" was the principle which adversely affects the ladies of marriageable age belonging to poor and middle class families. It is another social evil which marred the progress of the South Travancore and during the nineteenth century, it was an inseparable custom and practice among the people. The communities which fostered this despicable system were Christian Nadars, Vellalas, Vaniyars and Brahmins. Of these communities, many Christian Nadars attained higher socio-economic status due to their education and perseverance. As a result, the wealthy among them, offered unbelievably huge amount of money and gold as dowry to their daughters in marriage. Immitating this, even the common ones and the merchants and traders among Nadars tried to give enormous amount as dowry many times beyond their capacity. In the matrimonial market, the salarised Nadar grooms after securing high position demanded incredible amount as dowry. Hence many young Nadar girls remained unmarried for a long time. This social evil caused an

29 Ivy Peter & Peter, D., *op.cit.*, p.56.
irrepairable wreck in the Christian Nadar Community rather than that of other communities. Many families disintegrated and many suicides have taken place.

But the spread of education, the emergence of communal organisations and the establishment of women's social organisations were responsible for merely contains this evil practice of dowry. It is unfortunate to say that this condition still prevails in our society.

**Pulapedi**

In South Travancore, there was a curious custom which endangered even the so called high caste and reduced them to slavery. This was the notorious *Pulapedikalam* system (the period of the pulaya terror) which was a nightmare to the high caste ladies. During this period (February-March) if a Pulaya met a Sudra woman he might seize her and she would 'ipso-facto' lose her caste as well as the connections with her relatives. This savage custom was called Pulapedi.31

If the touched woman came back to her home, she would be killed by her relatives or again sold as a slave. Dr. J.W.Gladstone interprets in his

---

book "19th Century Mass Movement", that though it was prohibited, it was indirectly supported in order to increase the number of slaves in South Travancore. Pulapedi was prevalent exclusively in Kerala and South Travancore and not found in any other part of India.

The method of seizing high caste women was done at a certain period of the year, when Pulaya men could capture, Nayar women just by hitting them with a stone after dark. These features suggest rather an unhappy society in which exploitation by the pure privileged is so great that it returns to havn't the lives of the exploiters.  


33 Ivy Peter, & Peter, D., op.cit., p.65.

34 Ibid.,

Thalikettu Kalyanam

One of the marital custom prevailed in the South Travancore was "Thalikettu Kalyanam", which prevailed even in the early part of this century among such non-Brahmin castes as Nayars, the Ezhavas and the Kammalas. Tali tying was performed on a girl or a batch of girls between the ages eleven and thirteen. The "Talitier" belonged either to the same caste or to a superior caste and the assumption was that with talitying the girl had become an eligible bride.
Nambudiri and wife
Sambhandam

Sambhandam was another practice prevalent among the Nambudiri men. Nambudiri marrying a lady of his own caste is called veli, which was allowed only once in life. But, he was allowed to keep concubinage with Nayar ladies and this is called Sambandam, which had no limit nor restriction. Likewise the Nayar ladies were not allowed for Sambandam with low caste men but the Nambudiris had Sambandam with low caste women. 35

Female Infanticide

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the cruel practice of infanticide had enjoyed a free play throughout the country including South Travancore. A female child was crushed under one of the legs of the same cot which witnessed her birth. In some places even to day the new born female babies are put to death by various methods like, putting the paddy grain at the throat of the child and by the oral application of certain locally available herbal juice. 36

---

Child Widow

As one of the Christian Missionaries had put it, "In the age of comparative childhood, she is united in marriage without any knowledge or having ever seen her husband, when they meet together for the first time, they are bound together for life". Thousands who are thus married in a state of childhood lose their husbands without having ever lived with them, and are doomed to a life of widowhood; for the law forbids them to remarry. Parents in some cases marry fifty or sixty daughters to one Brahmin, that family may be raised to honour by a marriage relation to their man. These females never live with the husband. This seems to be a cruel practice. 37

Deplorable Status of Widows

The position of a widow was more pitiable than any other social category. The caste guided conditions under which she was put up caused her to mourn till her death. 38 Widow was to give up eating betel leaves, compelled to bathe in cold water, were insisted to appear in pure white cloth, shaven head and naked forehead. She was also restrained from

37 EMMC, 1820, p.531.
38 Ibid.,
ornaments, amusements, attending feast and festivities. Her very appearance was reproached by others as bad omen. Thus the life of the widows was worse than that of an ascetic. 39

According to a belief, "The widow shall never exceed one meal a day, nor sleep on the bed, if she does so, her husband falls from swarga" (heaven).40 They should also not keep flowers or long hair, for newly married persons to meet a widow anywhere, portends approaching calamity and therefore they were carefully guarded against and avoided.41

There was a time when widow marriage was permitted among the primitive tribes of Travancore, but later in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries "Widows were never permitted to remarry".42

Slavery

One of the chief social evils prevalent in South Travancore was slavery, which proved to be highly inhuman and beyond human cognition. The depressed castes like the Pulayas and Parayas found at the bottom of the society, were treated as slaves and these poor sons of the soil

40 Devanesan, A., History of Tamil Nadu, Marthandam, 1997, p.39
42 Mateer, S., op.cit., p.209.
lived under it most insanitary and uncomfortable conditions. One Slave or a family of slaves was purchased for two or three Pagodas.  

Sometimes the slaves came from the high castes. The high caste criminals were treated as slaves. Brahmins punished for crimes like theft were treated slaves along with others. Children born to a Brahmin lady due to the cohabitation with a low caste man, were treated as the slaves of the king. There were organized bands of robbers who kidnapped the children from the low castes and sold them for pecuniary gain. There was also agrastic slavery in the sense that slaves were attached to the soil and treated as marketable property. 

The system of Slavery became hereditary in South Travancore and once born to a slave, one remained a slave all through life, passing down this ignominy to his or her posterity. Dharma Bhoomi, the land of charity had become the land of adharma, the home of slavery. 

In the land of plenty, where nature showered her choicest blessings of grains and roots, thousands lived eating reptiles, insects, ants and crabs. In this native State which produced some of the finest

43 Yesudhason, V., & Issac Jayadhas, R., _op. cit._, p.56
44 Sreedhara Menon, _op.cit._, p.235
46 Joy Gnanadhasan, _op.cit._, p.29.
woven cotton which adorned the persons of rich, thousand went about clad in dirty rags of coarse cloth. 47

Women of slave classes worked as actively as the men, for their living. Most of the women were engaged in field work, gathering leaves and cutting twigs of manure, carrying these to their fields, transplanting etc.

There occurred an incident at Thazhakudi, a village at the southern taluk of South Travancore, which would give a true picture of the oppression. Once a high caste landlord ordered all his slaves to be in his paddy field. But Madathy a slave girl who was in an advanced state of pregnancy, starved, sick and weak, could hardly move around. The landlord was very much annoyed at her behaviour and sent some of his slaves to bring her to the field. When she was brought, she was yoked with a buffalo to the plough the land to the utmost horror of everyone. 48

He thought that she was well rewarded of her disobedience. But, the poor woman fell down in the mire and breathed her last with loud shrieks of agony. 49 Thus, women lived in utter darkness and fear of cruelty. They were kept toiling throughout the day. In the evening they returned to their small

---

47 Ibid., p.36.
48 Ibid., p.17.
huts hungry. Then they boiled their rice and ate it with salt and pepper. During the month of scarcity they suffered much from sickness and from want of food.°

SLAVE TRADE

Slave trade was well practised in the nineteenth century, when the condition of the slaves both low caste men and women belonging the Pulayas and Parayas were deplorable. They were quite often sold and bought like a cattle or a commodity. The masters were at liberty to let or transfer slaves as they pleased, to separate children from their parents, the wife from the husband, to give them as presents to their friends or award them as a wedding dowry to daughter.

During famine, parents used to sell their children as slaves. Criminals, especially women, were turned into slaves. Women of high caste, in case of association with men of other castes, were invariably degraded to slavery. A Brahmin woman erring with a low caste man became the Raja's slave, a low caste woman allowing improper intimacy with Brahmin was sold to the Mohammedians.

50 Edgur Thurston, op.cit., p.1.
51 Justin Charles, op.cit., p.480.
52 Mateer, S., op.cit., p.211.
53 Kusuman, K.K., op.cit., p.28.
Slaves were not only bought and sold outright, but also mortgaged like lands. Female slaves were valued at double price. In 1852, before emancipation, the Rev. George Matthan wrote that the price of a slave was usually rupees six. The children were the property of mother's owner. Also the Raja might sell the slaves to other parts of India.

The Dress Code

In the beginning both men and women seldom wore clothes. Men almost went naked, having only a few inches of cloth round their loins and a small cloth on the head. The Thanta pulaya women formerly wore a thanta garment which covered their front and back. Thanta was a garment made of the leaves - a kind of sledge called thanta.

Marco Polo, the Venetian traveller who visited Kerala in the thirteenth century A.D., had made mention of their custom. He writes, "They all black and go naked, all slave a fine cloth, worn about the middle".

In the beginning of the nineteenth century the low caste women were forbidden to wear any cloth above the waist. Caste played an important role in the mode of the dress code of women. Caste had its own distinctive

---

54 Mateer, S., *op.cit.*, p.58.
55 Ibid., p.59.
style of dress and ornaments. The most notable feature was that women of all castes below the Nayars were forbidden to wear anything below the knees or above the waists. 58

The covering of the bosom with clothing was forbidden in order to facilitate, the recognition and avoidance of the lower 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 Brahmin". 59 "The proper salutation from a female to persons of high rank was to uncover the bosom." 60

The low caste fisher women (Mukkuvathikal) wore a cloth tied around the thorax which covered the breasts but left the shoulders bare. Nadar women were the first to wear the upper cloth and hence they were attacked by Nayars, who were worried about the dominant positions, power and privilege, that they got from Missionaries through education. Having forbidden to wear upper cloth, was considered to be a great insult and humiliation by the former. 61

59 Hepzi Joy, R.J., History and Development of Education in Kerala, Trivandrum,1860, p.44.
61 Yesudhas, R.N., op.cit., p.32.
Denial of Education

Education of Women in South Travancore was a taboo. They were forbidden to read and write and the society had a general prejudice against women and their education. The reason for banning the female education was that they could not have the knowledge to ask questions or competent in the application of their skill.

In the early nineteenth century the Christian Missionary Report brought to light that in an Empire comprising millions of females, there had not been a single school for girls and for thousands of years, the females had never seen a book.

But in the beginning of nineteenth century, there existed a kind of village education which was exclusively meant for high caste boys and a very small section of the middle class girls including Devadasis. It was against this background that the Christian Missionaries launched a new venture of providing education irrespective of caste and gender.

Oppressive Taxes

Many kinds of unjust and oppressive taxes were imposed and collected on low caste women without fail. In the high caste, women enjoyed many

\[62 \text{ Ibid., p.291} \]
\[63 \text{ Kunjan Pillai, E., } \textit{op.cit.}, \text{ p.121.} \]
\[64 \text{ Ibid.} \]
privileges and the low caste among them suffered a lot in the society, who were levied with oppressive taxes like "Tali Erai" (tax for wearing Tali by married women). The widow of a weaver continued to pay the tax on the loom (about a rupee per annum) long after the death of her husband and the cessation of the work. Their Houses were to pay a tax called Kuppa Kalchcha which consisted of one panam. There was also a tax for the breast of the women called as 'breast tax', which was to be paid by women from the age of sixteen to thirty two. The nature and collection of this tax compelled an Ezhava lady to cut off one of her breasts, to present it to a caste Hindu tax collector, for, she could not bear the humiliation of that inhuman act. In memory of this most inhuman and ignoble action the place of this occurrence, is still called Mulachi Parambu.

The most hated tax by one and all was the Capitation tax. The manner in which it was collected angered the people more than the amount of the tax, although they kept quiet. In 1754, a Head-tax was imposed on the Nadars to meet the military expenditure. Another tax imposed upon them was called

---

65 Ibid.
66 Hepzi Joy, R.J., op.cit., p.57
67 John A Jacob, op.cit., p.41.
68 Mateer, S., op.cit., p.292.
69 Ivy Peter, & Peter, D., op.cit., p.62.
"Purusantaram". The Nadars suffered much under the Clutches of the heavy "Poll-tax" imposed on them for generations. They paid the poll tax not only for those who were alive, but also for the dead. If failed to pay this tax, then their women were tortured by tying long cylindrical type of wooden pieces (ulakkai) with the hair. They were asked to bend forward and big stones were kept on their back with a compulsion to stand in the same position for a long time.

Unequal Wages

In the nineteenth century, women worked along with men in the fields but received unequal pay which was extremely lower. As the low caste and the slave caste women were not permitted to own land, they could not enjoy economic independence and freedom.

Untouchability

The Caste rules were operated in the most irrational manner. The triple social evils of untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability was observed by people at all levels of Hindu society. A Nambudiri who happened to see a Nayadi or Pulaya considered himself to have been

---

71 Mateer,S., op.cit., p.292.
72 Hepzi Joy, R.J., op.cit., p.49.
73 Mateer,S., op.cit., pp.299.
polluted. The Pulaya had to keep a distance of 60 feet from a Nayar. When
Nayar noble came out in the public roads, an attendant proceeded them
shouting po, po (getaway, getaway). so that they would not be polluted by a
person of low caste.74

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the self-awareness became
very strong in the society of South Travancore, that the low caste people
were not allowed to construct tile houses, nevertheless thatched roofs and
mud houses.75

Furthermore, the lower caste people were not allowed to fetch water
from the well of the high castes and also not allowed to keep moustache. If
only the low caste people desired to have the above said values, they were
to pay a tax to the higher castes. The man or woman of the low caste could
never be admitted into a high caste temple in South Travancore.76 They were
not even permitted to touch its outermost walls, nor, were allowed to hear
or read the sacred books.77 If one of a high caste touches/á man of low
caste or approaches him nearer than the distance prescribed, for intercourse

75 Ibid.
76 Mateer,S., op.cit., p.23.
77 Pillai, k.k., op.cit., p.35.
with men of low caste, it was necessary for the one of high caste to bathe and it was unlawful for him to eat before bath.\textsuperscript{78}

**Human Sacrifice**

People of South Travancore used to give human sacrifice to female demon called kali. One of the Machenzie Manuscripts says that an annual human sacrifice of peculiar atrocity was a custom to be followed. Once, a young pregnant woman with her first child was brought in front of the shrine, then beheaded with one blow of a sword, so that, the head rolled up in front of the image, on which the blood of the victim sprinkled.\textsuperscript{79}

Once a zamindar was endeavouring to build up a bund which the waters carried away as often an he made the attempt. Some Brahmins told him that he would never succeed till he had offered upon the bund, three young girls.\textsuperscript{80}

Lastly this was fulfilled and the ground was stained with the blood of these three innocent victims.

**The Upper Cloth Movement**

This was a movement of great significance and a landmark in the social history of South Travancore, which proved to be victorious a turning point of

\textsuperscript{78} Mateer,S., *op.cit.*, p.28.
\textsuperscript{79} Sreedhara Menon,A., *op.cit.*, p.96.
\textsuperscript{80} Ivy Peter & Peter,D., *op.cit.*, p.55.
the low caste over the upper caste. The social and economic disparities between the high castes and the low castes sustained a conflict between them. The high castes wanted to maintain the status, whereas the low castes wanted to bring about changes for their betterment as they became more and more enlightened. It was only natural, that the high castes responded adversely to whatever struggle the low caste launched for their liberation. The high caste adopted all possible means to supress any movement that stood and strove for the upliftment of the low castes.

As per the caste rules and customs which existed in South Travancore, the low caste people were forbidden to cover their body above the waist. In the early stages, the converts to Christianity in South Travancore came mainly from the low castes like the Shanars. The contact with the European Missionaries and the changes in their life conditions made the Shanars aspire for the right to use the dress of the Nayar women. The Sudras or the Nayars who considered themselves as the defenders of the traditional social order in South Travancore, tried to resist the assumption of the high caste costumes by the Shanars. This attitude of the Nayars and the Shanars led to disturbances in 1822, 1828-29 and 1858-59.  

Besides the wearing of the upper cloth by the Shanars, there were several other causes which contributed to the outbreak of the upper cloth disturbances. The Nayars viewed the assumption of the upper cloth by the Shanars, not as a mere change in the style of dress, but as an infringement of the long-standing custom and caste distinction, which were meticulously followed by the people in those days.\textsuperscript{82} Fixed distances were prescribed within which, the people of the low caste were not allowed to approach those of the high castes. A Nayar could approach, but not touch a Nambudiri Brahmin. The prescribed distances from a Brahmin for a Shanar and a Pulaya slave were thirty-six paces and ninety six paces respectively. Similarly, there were fixed distances to be kept between the other castes. The Shanars and other low caste people had to observe these fixed distance in relation to the articles taken for the ceremonies at the Hindu temples.\textsuperscript{83} The dress of the male and female Shanars was the only mark of their caste. The assumption of the upper cloth by the female Shanars rendered it impossible to distinguish them from other castes. The high caste Hindus feared that, if the Shanar women were found near the articles taken to the

\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{83} Diwan to Resident, 8 January, 1829, Enclosure in Pol. consultation Sl.No.2, Vol.193, Tamil Nadu Archives.
Pagodas they would be polluted and the ceremonies could not be carried on.

Another cause of irritation on the part of the Nayars was the exemption of all Shanars attached to the Mission from Ooliyam (service to Christianity) duties on Sundays and from works connected with Hindu festivals or places of worship. Not only Christian Shanars but those in mere connection with the mission were exempted from this obligation. All these reasons especially the right to wear clothes above the waist led to a struggle between the two sections of society in three stages.

**The First Upper Cloth Riot**

In May 1822, Shanar Christian Women in Kalkulam and Eraniel Taluks were ill treated for appearing in public and market places with the upper-cloth. As a long standing custom only Sudra women were allowed to use cloth over the waist. Therefore Sudra and other high caste people did not like Christian women in decent dress. They began to mock, abuse, ill-treat and tear the jackets in the market place.

---

84 Resident to Chief Secretary, Government of Madras, 16th February, 1859, Enclosure in Pol. consultation No.161, Vol.I, 1859, Tamil Nadu Archives.

85 John A. Jacob, *op.cit.*, p.41.
Shanar women did not complaint due to fear. But Rev. Charles Mead made complaints about these outrages to the Padmanabapuram Court, but to his great mortification no redress was made. 86

In the Orders of Enquiry the Court favoured the Nayars. So, Rev. Charles Mead appealed to the Resident, who ordered an immediate enquiry. Meanwhile, a complaint was lodged against Christians for not paying the arrear of the toddy rent and also against their women, for wearing the upper cloth. When it was decreed that they were to be fined, Rev. Charles Mead appealed to the Government. 87 He reported that “the Shanar and such other caste women, as have embraced Christianity ought to wear an upper cloth for the sake of decency when they go to church, the fair, 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 Rev. Charles Mead, the court decided not to fine the Christians on account of their women being permitted to wear upper cloth”. 88

The Sirkar had evidently no objection to wearing jackets, but they could not see their way to permit them to wear the upper cloth like other

86 Ibid., p.68.
88 Ibid.
classes. Wearing the upper cloth was one of the reasons of the persecutions of Christians during 1828-1830.

The Christian women took the liberty of appearing in public with jacket like the women of high caste. This elevation of Shanar convert women was resented by the high caste Nayars. The Nayars by keeping the law in their hands used violence to those who infringed on longstanding custom and caste distinction. The Sudra openly attacked the Shanar women who dared to appear in public in high caste costume and the Shanars duly retaliated. 89

The Second Upper Cloth Revolt

The Missionaries tried to establish themselves as an effective agency of communication between the Shanars converts and the Government. They received complaints from the Christian Shanar converts and forwarded them to the Residents or the Diwan. After 1822, Christianity spread rapidly among Shanars. 90 This jealousy fostered enmity between the two communities.

The converted Christians after getting awareness became restless and at last went against the high castes. The other underprivileged classes

90 Agur, C.M., op.cit., p.826.
also rose in revolt against the injustice and tyranny of the caste Hindus for their long standing right to wear upper cloth. "The fire was kindled but no fuel was added to make it widespread". ⁹¹

Eventually Hindu Shanar women also started wearing upper cloth and followed the Christian way of life. Therefore Hindu Shanar women also went against Nayars. ⁹²

This second upper cloth riots centered round Attoor, Kannanoor, Arumanai, Thirupparappu, Pulippunam etc. in Neyyoor District. The Nayars seized the women and tore their jacket. They burnt the Attoor church. ⁹³ They did not allow to open the school, They tore down the books of the students and many schools were burnt down. ⁹⁴ Once they cut off the ears of an old (ninety years) woman and stole the ornaments. Many youth among the Christians went to the forest for hidding. Women were harassed, annoyed in markets and waysides. ⁹⁵ The heathen threatened with vile language and manhandled in public places. The women were insulted and beaten in the bazaar; alarm and terror spread to every direction and many retired to the mountains for safety. ⁹⁶

⁹¹ Yesudas, R.N., *op.cit.*, p.3.
Kannanoor Incident

On 21st December 1828, some Nayars with the support of officers, attacked the Christians of Kannanoor on a Sunday, because Christians neglected to do the "Ooliyam" service on conveying young green coconut leaves for feeding the elephant. Some people headed by Easwara Pillai on Sunday seized a Christian, beat him and compelled him to carry the bundles of coconut leaves to Padmanabhapuram. On hearing this, many converts headed by a new convert called Esakimadan, overtook them and released the Christian. He then placed that bundle upon the head of a Nayar and made him carry it back to Kannanoor. But on 23rd December 1828, many Nayars of Attoor armed with weapons, swords, cleavers, rice beaters etc. advanced towards Christians with the professed purpose of seizing them and taking them to Padmanabhapuram. The Christians of Kannanoor except a few females and Children fled their houses and those who remained got a full share of scurrilous abuse from the Nayars. One was stripped naked and all were made to lay with bare breasts as it was considered an assumption of high caste women.97

97 Ibid., pp 834-35.
The Proclamation of 1829

A Royal Proclamation was promulgated on 3rd February 1829, by the Ruler of South Travancore who was against the Shanar Christians and Shanar women. The first section of the proclamation said “It was accordingly declared that the women of the Shanars have no authority to wear the upper cloth. Though Shanar women enjoyed the right to wear upper cloth, through the decree of the Court, obtained by Rev. Charles Mead in 1822, it was made illegal. The proclamation of 1829 was issued in the course of the Second Upper Cloth revolts, with a view to prevent the further spread of Christianity in South Travancore.

The Third Upper Cloth Riot

The self assertion of the converts to Christianity from the lower sections of the society and the opposition to it, burst out in the form of a Revolt in 1858-59 on the pretext of Nadar women, wearing the upper cloth. This was also the culmination of the feud between the Nayars and the Nadars. The rapid advance of Christians in education, social position and intelligence, all of which, were typified and manifested by their

98 Agur, C.M., op.cit., p.843.
99 Yesudas,R.N., op.cit., p.3.
100 Gladstone,J.W., Protestant Christianity and People’s Movement in Kerala, op.cit., p.81.
improvement in dress. During this period more Shanar women began to appear in public with an upper cloth on. In December 1858, the Sudras resisted and openly attacked the Shanar women and the latter also duly retaliated. The Christian Missionaries supported the Shanars and also encouraged them to wear upper cloth.

**Attack in Neyyattinkara**

In October 1859 widespread attacks were made on the Shanar women. A number of Ezhavas at Attingal who became Christians, were cruelly treated by the local officers. At Neyyattinkara, when Christians had assembled for their Sabbath worship, some Sirkar officials entered the church and ordered the males to go with them for forced labour which they refused. They illtreated the Catechist Arulanantham (Walsalam Sastriar's father) whose moustache they plucked and beat him till he became seriously ill. One Devasahayam died from the effects of torture.

These riots continued for five months and many cases were filed in the courts. But even in the proved cases all Nayars were set free.

---

103 John A. Jacob., *op.cit.*, p. 121.
104 Ibid., p. 121.
Christian woman was assaulted in the market place at Neyyattinkara and her jacket torn. This case was proved in the police court. Yet the offenders were left off with a slight punishment of fine. No wonder, they soon afterwards committed similar crimes. 106

**Participation of Hindu Nadars**

In many places instead of loose jacket, women began to wear vests and dressed in coloured clothes. The Hindu Nadar women followed the example of the Christian women. 107 By seeing this, the government officials reported to the Diwan: "The Christian Shanars having commenced to wear coloured clothes and vests (Rowkeys), the Hindu Shanars also seem disposed to imitating the example, thus set to deviate from usage and after mutual consultation their women, have as now represented to wear upper clothes on their bodies". 108

**Diwan’s Visit**

Meanwhile, the Diwan made a visit to the disturbed areas. The Nadars who went to present their complaints were beaten by the Government

---

108 Yesudas, R.N., *op.cit.*, p.174
officers, almost in his presence and the only crime they had committed was trying to give their petitions to him. \(^{109}\)

**The Press About the Riots**

On 7th February 1859, the LMS Missionaries, sent a petition to the Maharaja through the Resident arguing the cause of the Nadar Christians. The Missionaries received no immediate reply from the Maharaja. The news about the petition to the Maharaja and the silence on his part appeared in the columns of "**The Madras Times**". The newspaper report prompted the Madras Government to ask for an explanation from the Resident. The explanation of the Resident was not satisfactory. \(^{110}\) The whole matter was referred to Lord Stanly, the Secretary of the State and to the Supreme Government. \(^{111}\) The Governor of Madras ordered the institution of an enquiry, in which it was revealed that there were many cases including cases of murder where justice had not been done. \(^{112}\)

**Sir Charles Trevelyan**

In 1859 Sir Charles Trevelyan, the son-in-law of Lord Macaulay and a friend and relative of Sir Charles Wood, was appointed as the Governor

---

\(^{109}\) Gladstone, J.W., *op.cit.*, p.89.


\(^{111}\) John.A. Jacob, *op.cit.*, p.130.

\(^{112}\) Gladstone, J.W., *19th Century Mass Movement in South Travancore, op.cit.*, p.64.
of Madras Presidency. By this time the disturbances in Travancore had attracted "much attention both in England and in India. Sri Charles Trevelyan ordered the Resident to force the Travancore Government to change the existing rules with regard to the dress of women".\textsuperscript{113} Under pressure of Madras Government, a new Proclamation was issued by Resident of Travancore on 26th July 1859.

**1859 PROCLAMATION**

A Proclamation was issued by the Raja of Travancore on 26th July 1859, according to which there was no objection to Shanar women either putting on a jacket like the Christian Shanar women, or like the Shanar women of all creeds dressing in coarse cloth, and tying around it with the Mukkavattikal (low caste fisher women), or covering their bosoms in any manner whatever, but not like women of high castes.\textsuperscript{114}

The Proclamation failed to satisfy the aspirations and desires of the people in general and hence the revolt continued. The LMS Missionaries continued to send petitions to the British authority -Sir Charlés Wood. The

\textsuperscript{113} Gladstone, J.W., *Protestant Christianity and people's Movement in Kerala*, op.cit., p.91.

\textsuperscript{114} Mateer, S., *op.cit.*, p.305.
work of the LMS Missionaries backed by the British Resident made the Travancore Government to issue fresh legislation in 1865, granting this right to all the lower castes.  

**Shanars - The Winners**

The Upper Cloth revolt of 1829 and 1859 marked the climax in the revolutionary transformation among Shanar Christians against social atrocities. It was a landmark in the social and political history of South Travancore. For the first time, Shanars fought bitterly and succeeded after shedding sweat and blood and winning their rights and privileges to dress as they like. The fight for the rights of women to wear upper cloth formed a basis of the radical changes that took place in the beginning of the 20th century.

Ispite of all hardships, oppositions, resentment, repercussions, frustrations, this victory enhanced the prestige and influence of the Missionaries. Though the oppressors had all power in their hands to commit open acts of injustice, cruelty and atrocities to bring Shanars once more to subjection, they could not succeed.

---

115 Ibid.


119 *TDC Annual Report*, 1859, p.3.
Christian Female with Jacket and Upper Cloth
Subsequently, the Protestant Christian community was occupying good positions socially and morally. Many women were well educated and trained to do useful work. Their improvement and decency through education surpassed the upper community. After all the Gospel led them from darkness to light.


Social Changes

Girls Education

The LMS Missionaries, and other Christian leaders worked for the emancipation of women and brought about tremendous changes in South Travancore. Mrs. Mead was the pioneer in the field of female education in South Travancore. The impact of such activities particularly in the field of women's education has been felt in the various aspects of life.\(^{120}\)

Education for women could not be just thought of in the nineteenth century. However, thanks to the efforts of great social reformers, education for women later on became real. Women were even appointed as teachers and they acquired great expertise in embroidery and similar constructive endeavours. It was significant that education for women brought about many good changes in the society. Owing education, women were getting dignity in life.\textsuperscript{121}

The English School established for girls in Pettah is a case in point. Every one preferred to have English education since it would fetch them employment under Government. It was even thought that English education was a pre-requisite for success in life.

The educational activities of Missionaries coincided with the establishment of such institutions by the upper caste people. But the system of education did not reach the lower classes of society, since it was bound up by religion and laws. The Protestant Missionaries had turned the situation by opening schools for all irrespective of caste, race, colour, religion and sex. Vocational schools were also simultaneously established, which helped in solving the problems of employment to some extent.

\textsuperscript{121} Agur, C.M., \textit{op.cit.}, p.881.
Abolition of Child Marriage

Of all the social evils, child marriage which enslaved the womenfolk was too cruel. The Missionaries strongly instructed their Indian assistants to see that no girl under the age of fourteen got married. They even went to the extent of dismissing some members for giving their daughters in marriage before the suitable age. The Age of Consent Act of 1891 and the Sharda Act of 1930 were passed which abolished the system of Child-Marriage officially.

Widow Remarriage

The Missionaries encouraged remarriage of young widows. In the year 1863, "there have been sixty nine marriages performed of which, eight were remarriage of widows". This effort received wide publicity. By the influence of western education, in 1873, Shesha lyangar, a Brahmin pleader in Nagercoil arranged the remarriage of his widow daughter, at the age of thirteen. Shesha lyangar also came out with a radical mind to organize a "Widow Remarriage Association". He also published booklets in Malayalam and Tamil. He himself subscribed one hundred rupees, and with a few friends enrolled his name as a member of such an organisation.

122 TDC Report, 1864, p.5.
123 TDC Report, 1864, p.7.
Eventually with the help of the Missionaries, an organisation by Name “Vidhava Vivaha Sangh” (Society for Widow Marriage) was formed for encouraging widow-remarriage. The South Travancore Government also favoured the widow remarriage and in the year 1956, the Indian Government Passed Widow-Remariage Act.

Abolition of Devadasi System

The Devadasi system was in vogue in some of the temples in South Travancore. They had to perform certain services to the temple such as singing and dancing. This system had its own evils and it later became the institution of prostitution. By the effort of Christian Missionaries, this system was abolished in the temples in the South Travancore in the year 1930 and the Devadasis joined the Nayar family.

Freedom of Dress

The Shanars and Ezhava women were denied the right to cover their bosoms and the Lady Missionaries taught them to cover their breasts. The converted women began to wear jackets and upper cloth, which was disliked by the high caste people who indulged communal riots. The Government of South Travancore made two proclamation in 1829 and in 1859, but they failed to stop the riots.\textsuperscript{124} The Madras Government exerted

\textsuperscript{124} John A. Jacob, \textit{op. cit.}, p.125.
pressure on the Government of South Travancore to issue fresh legitimate. Which ultimately gave the right to all the lower castes to wear dress as they liked. This was the greatest achievement of the LMS Missionaries.

Voting Right for Women

For the first time in the history of South Travancore, women were enfranchised by the ruler, Mulam Tirunal Ramavarma (1885 - 1924). However, the total number of votes in his region was only less than 1\%\text{th}, i.e., about 2.5% of the total population. Yet it was a landmark in the South Travancore.¹²⁵

Women’s Public Life

Due to the efforts of the Missionaries, the status of women gradually increased. The women held very good position in public life and were held in high esteem. The position of women in South Travancore may be best described in the authoritative words of Her Highness Maharani Sethu Parvathi Bai, in her presidential address to the tenth session of all India Women’s Conference held in Trivandrum. The woman is here recognised as the head of the family and success is traced through her. No restriction on the holding and disposition of property and no inequalities regarding

education, social life and cultural growth have hampered our sex. The equality of women with men in the matter of political, as well as property right is today an established fact. Female literacy in South Travancore has attained a high standard. After getting good education from the boarding schools and the moral teaching from the established churches the girls adopted good character who became good wives to their husbands.

Social Reformers like Muthukutty and Narayana Guru influenced by the activities of the LMS Missionaries, became liberators of the Nadars and Ezhava Communities. By accepting the work of liberation, they themselves jumped into the field and started liberating their people.

The struggle of the people at different levels and the efforts of the Missionaries resulted in some unique ventures which led to a greater enlightenment of the womenfolk. The lady Missionaries who took up the initiative to educate them suffered much for their sake. The womenfolk touched new heights of enlightenment through higher education and professional training and thereby reached a higher level of human dignity and honour from dependency, insecurity, and slavery.

Women have become pioneers in many walks of life, have also provided the spiritual strength for every activity in the church. However, the churches are yet to recognise the leadership, administrative and spiritual gifts of women. Thus the struggle of women for equal participation in churches and society continues.  

The churches are challenged to affirm women's contribution to unveil women's history and to explore new way of exercising power. It is found that the days are not far off to see women occupying equal status in all walks of life in the society.

The Women's Association was founded on 8th May 1917 with the object of promoting the cause of women and particularly to secure the abolition of Child marriage and to encourage widow remarriage. Soon, its branches were formed in Mofussil centres like Tirunelveli, Tirupur, and Nagercoil.

Eradication of Slavery

The Christian Missionaries fought against slavery tooth and nail. They admitted slave children in schools, and vehemently opposed the sale and

purchase of slaves in market places. The Missionaries decided that the slavery could be avoided only by giving them basic education, therefore the Missionaries declared that the school masters would be paid one panam extra for every boy and one and a half 'panam' for every girl for taking care of these slave children in a year. More than one thousand slave children were collected and brought into Christian education.\textsuperscript{131} The fetters of slavery was eventually broken in 1845. The contribution of Christian Missionaries in putting an end to the evil system of slavery is indeed quite praise worthy. The influence of Missionary work penetrated deep into the society and cut it off from the social system. Finally a Proclamation was issued by Raja Marthanda Varma Uttaram Tirunal (1847-1860) dated 12th July 1855, notifying the abolition of slavery.\textsuperscript{132}

**Abolition of Caste System**

In the Missionary schools, students from both high and low castes sat together and studied. It was an epoch making event that Brahmin children sat with Paraiah children for learning. All communities sat and worshiped together in the Christian churches without, the least scruples

\textsuperscript{131} 40th Thanks Giving Festival Souvenir, CSI Kanyakumari Diocese, Nagercoil, 1999, p.16.

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.
about caste. The caste man in a Christian church drinks of the same "cup" that the depressed classman participates.\textsuperscript{133}

The Great Socio-Religious Reformers like Muthukutty Swamy and Narayana Guru strove hard to establish casteless society. They advocated intercaste marriage and inter dining. They used education as an instrument for breaking the Caste System.

All low caste people of South Travancore were also allowed to Hindu temples. The Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936 was a major landmark in the long chain of social reforms connected with the low classes. Despite pressure from powerful quarters against this step, Sri Chithira Tirunal of Travancore had the courage and vision to issue the Proclamation, by which he won an abiding place in the history of the state. This Proclamation was an unexpected blow to the caste Hindus, for it proved all their claims and postures on religious matters false. By this Proclamation the low caste people of South Travancore were benefitted. Thereafter, the low caste people had the legal right to exercise their equality in entering the temples along with high caste people. All these were made possible due to the

\textsuperscript{133} EMMC, 1845, p.216, 217.
incessant and constant work of the Christian Missionary which created a general awareness among the cross section of the people to overcome the evils of society.

Upliftment of the Backward Classes

The Christian Missionaries created an ideological and moral climate favourable for the rise of backward class movement in the South Travancore. Radical increase in literacy among the backward classes provided them new occupations in towns and cities, which gave them self confidence and ensured dignity in the society. The breast-cloth controversy in South Travancore and the abolition of the caste in the churches and in other Mission institutions were taken as precedents by the other backward communities.\(^\text{134}\)

Due to the efforts of the Christian Missionaries, the Christians in general became modern in the South Travancore. They set the standard for Tamil Culture and the Protestant Christian converts became the forerunners of the modern Tamils. The changes in the social and cultural customs and practices in course of time were adopted by other Backward

\(^\text{134}\) The Christian Missionary Records, IV, May 1859, p.125.
communities. The various experiments in cultural life styles which began in the church, had modified the life styles of the people South Travancore.

In short the work of the Missionaries changed the very life style of the low caste women in the following ways. The low caste people had their right to construct their houses with the modern roof tiles. They had their right to dress up with upper clothes. They were liberated from "Ooliyam" serving to the temple on Sundays, many people were settled in the lands of the Missionaries, bought for the Christian community. They also started business, went to Ceylon and work in the Tea estates and their children studied in Mission schools.  

\[135\] 40th Thanks Giving Festival Souvenir, CSI Kanyakumari Diocese, Nagercoil, 1999, p.16.