CHAPTER VIII

SOCIAL EMANCIPATION

In Agasteeswaram taluk, the then society was caste ridden.¹ The law of the land was not equalitarian. There was much in common between the Brahmins and the Nairs regarding their social status that they joined in the nefarious act of oppressing the lower classes, represented by the poor cultivators, labourers and slaves. The sooty institution of slavery remained as a crying wound in the body politic of the country which could be gleaned from the letter of Mrs. Mault to LMS dated June 21, 1830,² which says “Slavery as it exists in this kingdom is in some respects worse than that of the West Indies”. Their indeterminate social status which reduced them to the level of slaves with much socio-economic and civil disabilities such as infringement on their natural rights in the form of heavy taxation, inhuman treatment meted out by the upper caste and the inhuman

¹ Hacker, I.H., _op.cit._, p.16.
² Sreedhara Menon, _A Survey of Kerala History_, p.317.
practice of forbidding the women folk even to cover the upper part of their body.

In the wake of the new education being acquired, a new awareness came to be aroused that stirred the educated people. A critical approach towards the past came to be developed and rationalism took the place of faith. Superstitious beliefs gave way to scientific approach and a zeal for social emancipation overtook the country.\(^3\) The challenges posed by the Christian Missionaries led to a rethinking on the part of the intellectuals resulting in the emergence of social emancipation.

During 1840’s there was a conscious acceptance on the part of missionaries in Agasteeswaram taluk of increased social responsibilities. In 1841 one of the missionaries declared that “although our great work is to promote the eternal interests of the people, we cannot but feel for these poor sufferers; and if consistently without higher projects, we can procure for them some relief from their temporal distress, it is our delight to do so”.\(^4\) The missionaries were also directly involved in a few areas of social life resulting in reforms in society at the same time causing conflicts. One of such areas was the attempts of the missionaries for the Upper Cloth Movement.

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\(^4\) L.M.S. Report for 1841, p.72.
Upper Cloth Riot or Nadar Riot

The Question of Upper Cloth

In South Travancore caste rules regulated the dress of the people according to the caste to which they belonged. Caste rules imposed restrictions on the mode of wearing dress. Before the advent of the missionaries, women of the lower castes were prohibited from covering their bosoms when they appeared before men of higher castes. The breast of women was bared as a symbol of respect to those of higher status. In many parts women of the higher castes used to wear a light piece of cloth across the breast and over one shoulder. Though the women of Nadars were desirous of having the freedom of dress, they were not permitted by caste rules, which prohibition was supported by government regulations.

Dress of Christian Converts

Due to the influence of liberal Christian ideas and the humanitarian activities of the missionaries, the new converts refused to perform the age old customs. With the ascendancy of the Brahmins and the Nairs, this practice was strictly imposed on the depressed classes to mark their inferiority and their women were forbidden to wear any clothing above the waist. With the support of Protestant Missionaries the Christian women both rich and poor, felt bolder to do it. The Christian women

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3 Gladston, J.W., *op.cit.*, pp.81-82.
4 Ivy Peter and Peter, D., *op.cit.*, p.149.
5 Gladston, J.W., *op.cit.*, p.82.
realised that the traditional style of dress was quite incompatible with the modesty of Christian women.\textsuperscript{9}

When Missionary ladies particularly Mrs. Mead and Mault came to work in Agasteeswaram taluk, they did not like Christian women move about with their bodies exposed. So they devised a plain loose jacket for them.\textsuperscript{10} Some of the Christian women in addition to the jacket put on an additional cloth or scarf over the shoulder called the "Thol Cheelai" as worn by women of higher castes.\textsuperscript{11} But the higher castes in Travancore did not like Christian women in decent dress. They began to mock, abuse and ill-treat them in various ways in markets and waysides.

On hearing about the harrowing tale of sufferings of the poor Christians, Col. Munroe issued an order to the Sarvadikaryakhars 'to take steps that there should be no obstacles put to the women converted to Christianity' wearing clothes over their breasts.\textsuperscript{12} However the Christian women were permitted to wear jackets similar to those worn by the women of Syrian Christians. Not satisfied with this, the lower classes solicited the favour of the Rani and sought permission for their women to wear cloth over their bosoms. Accordingly the females of Ezhavas, Shanars and such other castes who had embraced Christianity were permitted to cover their

\textsuperscript{9} Agur, C.M., \textit{op.cit.}, p.935.
\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Order from Col. Munroe to the Sarvathikaryakars of Trivandrum and Neyyattinkara dated 19th Dhanoo 988 M.E (1812) political consultation Sl. No. 193, p.488.}
bosoms. It gave courage to Shanar women to wear the upper cloth along with the jacket. This was contrary to the established customs and hence tension mounted. It erupted ultimately in the shape of an organised struggle for social equality. The upper cloth riot developed in three stages.

First Upper Cloth Riot 1822 to 1823

The support of the missionaries gave confidence to the converts from the Nadar caste to wear upper cloth and so in May 1822 Nadar Christians were ill-treated. The disturbances started off with a few instances of the Sudras mocking, abusing and ill-treating Christian women in public places and on roads. Charles Mead, the missionary of the district, complained to the local court on behalf of the Christians. He reported that the Shanars and such other caste women who had embraced Christianity ought to wear an upper cloth for the sake of decency when they went to Church, the fairs, the markets and similar places and that they were instructed to do so, and that it ought to be so ordered agreeable to Christianity.

Meanwhile the Nairs lodged a complaint against some of the Nadar Christians for not paying the arrears of their ‘toddy rent’ and for permitting their women to wear upper cloth. When it was decreed that

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13 Proclamation by Dewan Soopyan Shangara Narrainen dated 7th Meenum 990 (1815) Political Consultations, pp.462f.
14 Robert L. Hardgrave, op.cit., p.60.
15 Augur, C.M., op.cit., p.779.
16 Gladston, J.W., op.cit., p.83.
17 John A. Jacob, op.cit., p.69.
"they are to be fined in consequence of their Shanar women wearing upper cloth." The court inquired Rev. Mead as to whether the wearing of upper cloth by Christian women was required by the Christian religion and on receiving an affirmative reply from Rev. Mead, the court decreed that the accused Shanar Christians had no reason to be fined. Many converts to Christianity from the Nadar caste regarded this as an official sanction to wear upper cloth. This judgement of the Palpanabhapuram court relieved the Christians of ill treatment by the Sudras for the time being; but it did not prevent the terrible out-break of persecution which took place later in 1827-30 and 1858.

Second Upper Cloth Riot 1827-1830

The hostile feelings of the Nairs were aroused when the women, "many of whom had been trained and educated by the wives of the missionaries and contrary to the old rules" began to clothe themselves above their waists. The second phase of the struggle began in 1827 and lasted up to 1830. This time also the struggle flared up in response to the adament attitude of the Sudras in resisting to share with the Shanars and lower classes the privilege of wearing the upper cloth which had been held to the livery of upper castes. In December 1828 the Nairs organised

18 Gladston, J.W., op.cit., p.83.
19 Substance of decree of the court of Palpanabhapuram relating to the uppercloth worn by Christian women. Vakeel No.177 dated 7th Vyakasi 998, (1823), Political Consultation, Sl. No.193, p.458f.
themselves and attacked the Nadar Christians.\textsuperscript{22} The Nairs stripped the women of their jackets, plundered their houses and burnt down many school rooms and Chapels.\textsuperscript{23} They threatened the people going to attend Christian worship and forced them to render Uliyam services.

An attack was made on Mead early in 1829 and news of a plot to assassinate him came to Mead’s ears and he had to obtain military protection from Fort Udayagiri and for a fortnight was under the care of British troops. Since the missionaries could not leave their station during such a perilous period, the half yearly meeting of the Travancore District Committee scheduled to take place at Quilon in July 1829, was held at Nagercoil.\textsuperscript{24} The missionaries took a serious view of the atrocities committed by the caste Hindus and made a representation to the government. Hence Venkata Rao, the Dewan went to Padmanabhapuram Fort where he held an inquiry. It seemed then that the enquiry was just an eyewash, for it only led to the reassertion of rules which denied Shanar women to have the right to use the upper cloth.\textsuperscript{25} He promised that there would be a proclamation with regard to the dress of women.

On 3\textsuperscript{rd} February 1829, the Ranee of Travancore made a Proclamation. It afforded no relief to the Christians, which says “that the women of the Shanars have no authority to wear the upper cloth and are

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\item[\textsuperscript{22}] Gladston, J.W., \textit{op.cit.}, p.84.
\item[\textsuperscript{23}] John A. Jacob, \textit{op.cit.}.
\item[\textsuperscript{24}] Minutes of the TDC dated Mondaikad and Nagercoil January 7, July 1 & 2, 1829.
\item[\textsuperscript{25}] Samuel Mateer, \textit{The Land of Charity}, p.280.
\end{itemize}
hereby prohibited from doing so". The use of upper cloth was absolutely forbidden. Christians were ordered to respect the ancient caste customs. No place of public worship should be erected without government permission being first obtained. The converts to Christianity should refer their complaints only to the Government officers and not to others meaning the missionaries. In spite of all the restrictions imposed upon them, the Shanars under Christian instructions continued to dress in the manner of Nairs. Their mode of dress exercised great influence on the Hindu Shanars. After 1850, the Nadar Christians entered into a fresh struggle which led to a riot in 1858-59 to secure the right of dress for their women.

**Third Upper Cloth Riot 1858-59**

The third phase of the struggle began in 1858 and lasted upto 1859, which was the last phase of the upper cloth riot. The marvellous spread of Christianity among the Nadars excited the envy and jealousy of the higher castes, and attempts were made to put an end to the progress of Christianity.

In 1855 the liberation of slaves due to the efforts of the missionaries irritated the Sudras and others who were the owners of the slaves in Agasteeswaram taluk. The rapid advance of Christians in

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26 *Proclamation of Her Highness the Ranee dated the 23rd Tye Makaram, 1004, Corresponding with 3rd February 1829, English Records.*
education, social position, and intelligence all of which were typified and manifested by their improvement in dress. In spite of the prohibition of 1829, the Shanar women wearing the upper cloth in public went on increasing. Their objection was that the Nadar women wearing blouses made it difficult for them to distinguish between the high caste and low caste women.

In the final phase of the struggle, the Sudras were agitated over the redemption of slaves which had been secured through the efforts of Christian Missionaries. In July 1855, the missionaries in Travancore presented a joint petition to the Government of Madras in which they complained that the Christian converts in Travancore were being persecuted. The abolition of slavery was a shattering blow to their economy and their prestige. Their hatred turned towards the missionaries who were solely responsible for this abolition. The Sudras as before attacked the Shanar women in the bazaars, stripping them of their upper garments. As a result serious rioting occurred, and consequently the entire mission was in a state of confusion.

About October and November 1858, indications of general ill feeling of the Sudras towards the Christians became more strained and

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31 Sungoo Menon, op.cit., p.504f.
32 Hacker, I.H., op.cit., p.42.
34 Robert L. Hardgrave, op.cit., p.63.
troubles of a serious nature broke out. There were several causes that aggravated the situation. Following the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 the rule of the East India Company came to an end. In 1858 the administration of India was taken over by the British Government from the English East India Company. In that connection Queen Victoria made a proclamation in which she said, "we declare ... that all alike shall enjoy the equal and impartial protection of the law; and we do strictly charge and enjoin all those who may be in authority under us that they abstain from all interference with the religious belief or worship of any of our subjects,..." some expressions of this proclamation were either wilfully or erroneously misinterpreted by the Nairs, as forbidding missionary efforts and the public proclamation of Christianity. The Shanars imagined that the proclamation had granted all that they desired while the Sudras regarded it as sanctioning their taking law into their own hands to repress what they took as an aggression into their caste domains. So the Sudras now began openly to attack Nadar women who dared to appear in public with the "Upper Cloth". The Hindu Nadars joined with Christians in this, and other related outrages on Nadar women. Both parties were determined to fight out, though the Sudras who were in the majority had the

36 Gladstone, J.W., op.cit., p.85.
38 Samuel Mateer, The Land of Charity, p.298.
government on their side. The Sudras said that an order had been issued by the government to strip the women of their jacket.\textsuperscript{40}

As soon as the disturbance was noticed, the Dewan T. Madhava Rao issued a public warning on 27\textsuperscript{th} December 1858 to the effect that it was clearly wrong to violate ancient usage without authority, and that whosoever do so in future would be severely punished. The Sudras and the people of higher castes were not to do anything themselves against the Shanars or to break the peace.\textsuperscript{41} Seeing in this Proclamation of the Dewan a tangible proof of his partiality the missionaries petitioned to Uttram Tirunal Maharaja for the cancellation of the Dewan’s order. But the Dewan held that the Christians had no cause for complaint and that the only course open to the Shanars was to observe the order of 1829.\textsuperscript{42}

Violence at Nagercoil

On January 4, 1859, upwards of 200 Sudras and others entered the houses of Christians in Nagercoil District armed with clubs and swords in search of Christians.\textsuperscript{43} The mob forcibly entered the houses of the Christians, broke and pillaged the furniture and dragged the poor defenceless women out of doors, almost naked, tearing their clothes and jackets and committing the most insulting acts.\textsuperscript{44} This serious situation

\textsuperscript{40} John A. Jacob, \textit{op.cit.}, p.125.
\textsuperscript{41} Samuel Mateer, \textit{The Land of Charity}, p.303.
\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Madhava Rao, T., to W. Cullen dated Trivandrum, February 12, 1859}, Copies of official papers, p.8.
\textsuperscript{43} Ivy Peter and Peter, D., \textit{op.cit.}, p.156.
\textsuperscript{44} Nagam Aiya, V., \textit{op.cit.}, p.529.
called for government intervention. On 14\textsuperscript{th} January 1859 Madhava Rao, the Dewan reached Padmanabhapuram along with Captain Dally who was put in command of all the troops in the south. The troops and the police were sent to all places of disturbances and tranquillity was restored.\textsuperscript{45}

On Sunday 23\textsuperscript{rd} January, the police seized the Catechist of Kulathuvilai Church while the Congregation was assembling for divine worship. On 29\textsuperscript{th} January a Chapel near Nagercoil and 3 houses of Nadars in the Jamestown District were burnt. The Nagercoil Christians were afraid that the Church in Nagercoil may also share the same fate and prepared themselves for a defence. They guarded the Church day and night.\textsuperscript{46} Many of the surrounding villages were now wholly deserted by the Christians. Congregations were deprived of their Catechists and teachers and public worship therefore ceased. The roads by which the Christians went to the markets and public places were closed against them and terror prevailed everywhere.\textsuperscript{47} Not only the Shanars and other inferior castes; but the missionaries also were humiliated and threatened and they had to keep guard at their residence.\textsuperscript{48}

Again the missionaries being the main cause for the introduction of Christianity were threatened with assassination. Their

\textsuperscript{45} Dewan Madhava Rao's Report to W. Cullen, the Resident dated Trivandrum, February 12, 1859, No.196, Copies of official papers, p.8.
\textsuperscript{46} John A. Jacob, \textit{op.cit.}, p.128.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{48} Samuel Mateer, \textit{The Land of Charity}, p.303.
houses were burnt and themselves driven out of the country. They and their families were thus kept in a state of constant alarm. They were unable to venture into some parts of the country to visit their people and schools. The Catechists and school masters were specially ill treated; they were seized, bound, beaten and imprisoned and their houses were plundered and burnt down. Christians were unable to meet on Sundays for worship.

Meanwhile the Dewan made a visit to the disturbed areas. The Nadars who went to present their complaints were beaten by government officers almost in his presence and the only crime they had committed was trying to present their petitions to him. Shangoony Menon who was directly responsible for the administration of the troubled areas put the entire blame on the Nadars and on the Missionaries. According to him the missionaries encouraged the converts to dress in such a way as to irritate the higher castes. The Missionaries justified themselves by claiming that they encouraged the people only to wear the mode of dress that was permitted by the law and asserting that they “ought to have” “the liberty” of dress.

The Resident sent regular reports to the Madras Government about the ‘disturbances’, and the Madras Government ordered the Resident

51 Yesudhas, R.N., A Peoples Revolt in Travancore, p.139.
52 Shangoony Menon, op.cit., p.382.
53 Gladston, J.W., op.cit., p.89.
that he may "impress the Raja of Travancore to change the existing rule regarding the dress of women." The Madras Governor also informed the Secretary of State for India about the happenings and repeated his request of appointing a commission to investigate into the happenings in Travancore. But for the moment nothing was done.

On 7th February 1859, the LMS Missionaries petitioned to the Maharaja to adopt measures to stop the persecution. 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". In 1859 Sir Charles Travelyan, son-in-law of Macaulay was appointed Governor to replace Lord Harris. By this time the disturbances in Travancore had attracted "much attention both in England and in India". Charles Travelyan decided to intervene in this. He ordered the Resident to force the Travancore Government to change the existing rules with regard to the dress of women. Charles Travelyan recorded in his minutes that

I have seldom met with a case in which not only truth and justice but every feeling of our common humanity are so entirely on one side. The whole civilized world would cry shame upon us if we did

54 Madras Political Proceedings, dated February I, 1859, p.144.
55 Governor of Madras to the Secretary of State for India, Letter dated 26.03.1859, official papers, p.3.
56 Petition of the LMS Missionaries to the King of Travancore dated 07.02.1859, Copies of official papers, p.39f.
57 Minutes by the President, dated May 7, 1859, official papers, p.43.
not make a firm stand on such an occasion ... the special object of which was to assure to Her Majesty’s Indian subjects liberty of thought and action so long as they did not interfere with the just rights of others.\textsuperscript{58}

Under such pressure from the British Government on 17\textsuperscript{th} May 1959, Dewan Madhava Rao wrote to the Governor of Madras through the British Resident as follows:

"His Highness now proposes to abolish all rules prohibiting the covering of the upper parts of the persons of Shanar women and to grant them perfect liberty to meet the requirements of decency in any way they may deem proper with the simple restrictions that they do not imitate the same mode of dress that appertains to the higher castes.\textsuperscript{59} This concession was accepted by the Governor as a temporary measure. On 26\textsuperscript{th} July 1859 the proclamation was made in Travancore which ran as follows:

"There is no objection to Shanar women of all creeds dressing in coarse cloth and tying themselves round with it as the low caste fisher women do or to their covering their bosom in any manner, whatever, but not like women of high castes.\textsuperscript{60} As the missionaries were not happy about the proposed Proclamation of 26\textsuperscript{th} July 1859, they petitioned to the Governor of Madras demanding full liberty for the Christians in the matter

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} Letter from the Dewan of Travancore to the Resident dated Trivandrum, 17\textsuperscript{th} May 1859, Copies of official papers, p.45.
\textsuperscript{60} Nagam Aiya, V., \textit{op.cit.}, Vol.I, p.531.
of dress and seeking exemption of all Europeans from liability to native law. They also demanded the removal of General Cullen from office as they viewed him as a Hinduised Christian supporting the native government in their opposition to the efforts of the missionaries.  

The LMS Missionaries also petitioned to Sir. Charles Wood, Secretary of State for India against the weaknesses of this Proclamation.\(^\text{61}\) The British authorities continued to express their desire to the Maharaja, with regard to the need for better legislation, granting perfect freedom to the lower castes in the matter of dress.\(^\text{63}\) This pressure made the Travancore Government issue fresh legislations in 1865 granting this right to all the lower castes.\(^\text{64}\) The relationship of the missionaries to the British administration encouraged them in their increased social activities.

The involvement of the missionaries in this and similar activities made the lower rank of the people look upon them as their protectors while the higher castes began to see them as their enemies who disrupted the established customs and traditions of society. The missionaries also accepted this role as protectors for the lower castes.

**Abolition of Slavery**

Slavery was a social evil and had its origin from time immemorial. "Slavery" says Toynbee is a non-voluntary system of


\(^{\text{62}}\) Petition to Sir. Charles Wood from Missionaries of TDC Correspondence No.127, 1859.

\(^{\text{63}}\) *Madras Political Proceedings*, March 1860, p.179.

personal reaction resting wholly upon force. The Tamil term for slave is Adimai. In Agasteeswaram taluk the origin of slavery was closely associated with the inception of the caste system which in turn was based on hierarchal social order.

The word 'Caste' comes from the Portuguese word 'Casta' signifying race. The word jati or caste used in India specifies a sub-division of the larger division, varna. Varna is believed to have been based on colour or race. Before the arrival of the Aryans writes Elamkulam Kunjanpillai, 'the caste system had been unknown to Dravidian society. The caste system was unknown in South Travancore in the early years, and her people shared with it a common cultural heritage. With the coming of the Brahmins into Travancore around the 10th century A.D., the whole scenario changed. From then on caste has been the dominant factor in the economic and cultural life of South Travancore. Society was divided into two large sections, the high and the low caste or the pure and the polluting caste. Brahmins were the only caste exempted from all social and religious disabilities. The kings of South Travancore regarded it their sacred duty to please the Brahmins and to rule the country in accordance with the advice of the Brahmin scholars.

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66 Paramarthalingam, C., op.cit., p.143.
67 Pillay, K.K., Studies in the History of India with Special Reference to Tamil Nadu, p.292.
68 Kunjanpillai, E., op.cit., p.311.
69 Sreedhara Menon, A Social and Cultural History of Kerala, p.44.
70 Sangoony Menon, op.cit., p.218.
Slavery was officially recognised in Agasteeswaram taluk. The lowest section in the society was the slave caste. The Government, the temples, the rich high caste and landlords owned them.\(^{71}\) There were also several kinds of slaves. During famines parents used to sell their children into slavery.\(^{72}\) Debtors who found it difficult to pay back loans, sold themselves to creditors and served them till the liability was over. One of the slave castes in Agasteeswaram taluk was Paraya. Parayan was not only associated with drumming; but also with several menial work. They were bought and sold like cattle. They were a dark skinned race, eating every kind of food and hard working and were intensely ignorant.\(^{73}\) When a cow or bullock died it was left to the Parayas to carry it away.\(^{74}\)

The rules of unapproachability and untouchability had their direct reflections on the housing conditions and the structure of the dwellings of the slave castes. The Parayas had to live in crowded ‘paracheries’ beyond the village limits under the most unhygienic conditions and from the habitation of the higher caste people for whom they laboured.\(^{75}\) They had no admission to the markets and they had to stand away at some distance and make purchases or sales as far as they could.\(^{76}\) They were not permitted to wear gold or silver ornaments.

\(^{71}\) Gladston, J.W., *op.cit.*, p.22.
\(^{72}\) Joy Gnanadhason, *op.cit.*, p.28.
\(^{74}\) *Report of the TDC for 1861*, Nagercoil Mission District, p.3.
\(^{75}\) Joy Gnanadhason, *op.cit.*, p.31.
\(^{76}\) Samuel Mateer, *The Native Life in Travancore*, p.36.
The slaves could not even speak the language of the ordinary people. The slaves were forced to use certain totally degrading words with about themselves, their families, children while addressing their masters.77 The slave had to address his master and even the very young male members of his family as ‘adiyen’ (servant) and his own children as ‘monkeys’ and ‘calves’. He referred to master’s house as ‘illam’ (Mansion) while his as ‘madam’ (hut). His rice he had to refer to as ‘Karikadi’ (dirty gruel). He dare not say that he was going to eat his food. He wanted to have his ‘Vella-kudi’ (to drink water).78 Their dress and habits were extremely filthy as no one was willing to wash for them and had no washerman of their own, like other caste. Public street was inaccessible to them.

Their condition was deplorable, because they had no access to education and because, being treated as polluting, they were prohibited from using the public roads. In fact they were treated even worse than animals.79 Very often they were so cruelly tortured that they were disabled for months. But the court of justice was closed against them, because as slaves and as ‘untouchables’ they had no access to the Court of Justice.80

Regarding the religious practices of the slave caste, they were demon worshippers. Some of them worshipped their dead ancestors called

77 Joy Gnanadhason, op.cit., p.32.
78 Samuel Mateer, The Land of Charity, p.45.
79 Ibid.
Chavars. 'Mariamma', 'Ponnyamma' and 'Kali' were the favourite deities of the Parayas. Devil dancing was their form of worship. The lower castes were banned from entering the temples and even the road leading to them. They were compelled to render uliyam services (work without pay) to the Sirkar. They were not allowed to carry pots of water on the hip. Any attempt to run away was usually met with a horrible death. In some places slaves were put to death by impalement for any attempt to escape from the master. Though the slaves groaned under the yoke of bondage, emancipation was not possible at that time without the assistance of an external force, because of their peculiar circumstances. The work of the Protestant missionaries and the response of the British administration were the external forces which led to the emancipation of the slaves.

**Efforts of Missionaries**

It was the missionaries who first raised their voice against slavery. The LMS missionaries had been trying various methods to emancipate the slaves.

**Mrs. Johanna Celestina Mead**

Ringeltaube's successor was Rev. Charles Mead who arrived at Colachel in December in 1817. After assuming charge of the Mylaudi Mission, he vigorously worked for the growth and spread of Christian

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85 Hacker, I.H., *op.cit.*, p.32.
religion and left no stone unturned for promoting the material and spiritual welfare of the depressed and downtrodden.\textsuperscript{86} In working out schemes for the welfare of the poor, Mead’s wife Johanna Celestina, the first Lady Missionary in Agasteeswaram taluk extended her fullest co-operation for 30 years. She started the first Girl’s Boarding school in Nagercoil for the benefit of poor orphan girls.\textsuperscript{87} She was able to bring a few slave girls into their boarding schools where they were taught the making of lace, along with reading and writing. She decided to alleviate the pitiable condition of slaves through schemes of women’s education by admitting slave girls in the Boarding school.\textsuperscript{88}

Besides free food and clothings, the children admitted in the school were provided with useful education and grown up children were taught sewing, cooking and also trained to lead a clean and healthy life.\textsuperscript{89} The girls were paid for their work and the missionaries helped them to save that money. From such savings the missionaries tried to buy their freedom.\textsuperscript{90} However this method had many weaknesses. First, the missionaries were able to bring only a limited number of children to their boarding homes. Secondly these girls could count as free only inside the ‘mission compounds’. Thirdly when the children were grown up, many of them were re-claimed back from the missionaries’ boarding home by their

\textsuperscript{87} John A. Jacob, \textit{op.cit.}, p.63.
\textsuperscript{88} Ivy Peter and Peter, D., \textit{op.cit.}, p.115.
\textsuperscript{89} Samuel Zahariah, \textit{The London Missionary Society in South Travancore} (Tamil) Part-I, Nagercoil, 1897, pp.77-78.
\textsuperscript{90} \textit{Extract of a letter from Mrs. Mault, E.M.}, January 1831, p.31.
slave masters, intending to put them to work in the fields and refusing to accept money to redeem them. Their attitude was, as one of the slave-masters put it, "it is enough for me if my bullocks and slaves do the work required in the fields." \(^{91}\)

Missionaries also offered the school masters an additional pay of one 'fanam' for every slave boy and one and a half 'fanams' for every slave girl they brought into the Christian school for education. "Within a year more than one thousand slave children were collected and brought into Christian education". \(^{92}\) However all these attempts turned out not to be very successful.

In the meantime in 1843 an Act was passed by the British Government regarding the abolition of slavery in India. \(^{93}\) In Travancore, the missionaries also wanted to abolish slavery. The major step towards the abolition of slavery in South Travancore began in 19\(^{th}\) March 1847 when the missionaries presented a memorandum on the lamentable plight of the slaves to king Uttram Tirunal Marthandavarma through the Resident. \(^{94}\) The Missionaries requested Uttram Tirunal to make a proclamation abolishing slavery. The chief measures proposed were I) it should be penal as in British India by the Act of 1843, ii) Slaves should

\(^{91}\) Ibid.
\(^{92}\) Agur, C.M., op.cit., p.892.
\(^{93}\) Banaji, D.R., Slavery in British India, Bombay, 1933, p.401.
\(^{94}\) Cover File No.286, Petition of the Christian Missionaries to the Raja of Travancore, 19 March 1847.
acquire and possess property like other caste, iii) Hereditary slavery should be done away with.\textsuperscript{95}

The memorandum created a storm of protest in the Travancore Court. The Maharaja knew that such a revolutionary step as the abolition of slavery would kindle the wrath and opposition of the high castes.\textsuperscript{96} Their emancipation, he feared would upset the economy of the whole country, and cause a social convulsion in the State, for which he was not prepared. His reply sent to the Resident (Cullen) through the Dewan gave the assurance that though he could not take such a decisive step at once, he would certainly improve the condition of the slaves by passing regulations from time to time.\textsuperscript{97} The missionaries presented another memorial in 1848, for which they received a reply from the Resident on behalf of the Maharaja that "he was decidedly averse to the entire abrogation of the existing laws on that subject.\textsuperscript{98}

It was General Cullen the Resident of Travancore who forwarded a memorandum to the Dewan on 12 March 1849.\textsuperscript{99} It provided that I) that no public officer should after that date i.e. (1843) enforce any Decree or order of the court or demand of rent or revenue from the slaves. ii) that slaves should acquire and possess property like all other classes and

\textsuperscript{95} Kusuman, K.K., \textit{op.cit.}, p.58.
\textsuperscript{96} Ivy Peter and Peter, D., \textit{op.cit.}, p.117.
\textsuperscript{97} Nagam Aiya, V., \textit{op.cit.}, Vol.I, p.508.
\textsuperscript{98} \textit{Madras Political Proceedings, August 27 to September 2, 1849}, p.159.
\textsuperscript{99} \textit{Cover File No.286, General Cullen to Krishna Rao, 12 March 1849}.
that no person should dispossess them of such acquired property on the plea that they are slaves.\textsuperscript{100}

Even this representation did not produce any positive result. The court of Directors of the London Missionary Society instructed the Resident to inform the Travancore Maharaja of their displeasure at the apathy of his government. Several strongly worded letters were written by the Resident which finally moved the Maharaja to action. With this end in view the State Government drafted a proclamation and it was sent to the Resident for final approval.\textsuperscript{101} This was the background of the historic proclamation of 1853 by which slavery was legally abolished.\textsuperscript{102}

According to this Proclamation children of the Sircar slaves born after 15\textsuperscript{th} September 1853 were declared free. But slavery was not abolished. The proclamation also emphasised the perpetuation of caste rules and it did not guarantee equality of the emancipated slaves before the law.\textsuperscript{103} The Madras Government was unhappy about the Proclamation made by South-Travancore. The Madras Government wanted the Travancore Government to rescind certain clauses and issue a fresh proclamation which should declare not merely the children but all the Sirkar slaves both young and old free.

\textsuperscript{100} Joy Gnanadhason, \textit{op.cit.}, p.95.
\textsuperscript{101} \textit{English Records}, Letter of Chief Secretary to the Resident dated 14 September 1853.
\textsuperscript{102} Kusuman, K.K., \textit{op.cit.}, p.49.
\textsuperscript{103} Gladston, J.W., \textit{op.cit.}, p.159.
Opposition of the Higher Castes to the Missionaries

Though slavery was abolished it took several years for society to accept it. The higher castes who resented the emancipation created obstruction and difficulties. The growing hatred of the higher castes towards the missionaries exploded in 1853.

Protest at Suchindrum

A group of missionaries with their families were returning from one of the mission stations. At a place called Sucindram a procession of Brahmins was approaching from the opposite direction towards the Missionaries. The Brahmins wanted the missionaries and their Palankeens "to descend a steep bank into the bed of the river." As one of the missionaries said that there was enough room on the road for both the Palankeens and the procession to go through, they let the Palankeen go through on the edge of the bank. One missionary, Lewis, whose Palankeen came some distance behind though got out of the Palankeen and placed it on the farthest edge of the road to allow the procession to go on was pushed down to the bed of the river where he was pelted with dust and sand and road material by the mob, especially by the Brahmin youth.

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106 This town has a famous Hindu temple and it was a centre of Brahmins in Agasteeswaram taluk (K.K. Pillai, The Sucindram Temple, p.1953).
107 *Mault, C., to the Resident, dated February 23, 1853, Correspondence regarding an assault made at Sucindram on Messers Mault and Lawis.*
On receiving a complaint from the missionaries, the Resident sent the matter for an enquiry by the Travancore Government. An enquiry was made and its report was submitted which was as far as possible in favour of the Brahmins.

**Protest at Panjalingapuram**

William Lee, a missionary of the LMS, went to one of his mission stations through a Brahmin village called Panjalingapuram\(^{109}\) on 5\(^{th}\) October 1868. Though he used this route very often, on this particular day some of the Brahmins asked him not to travel on the road which passed through their village, but to go along another way.\(^{110}\) The missionary obeyed them but he told them if the way suggested by the Brahmin was not good, he would return along the road. Lee returned along the road, where the Brahmins were waiting to attack him. Lee was severely beaten by them and only narrowly escaped death with the help of a fisherman who happened to be there at that time.\(^{111}\) The missionary lodged a complaint to the Travancore Government.

The Dewan of Travancore wanted to help the Brahmins as much as possible in this case. Within days the Dewan by his direct intervention had the way along which the missionary was asked to go made into a good "Cart road" at government expenses, so that the Brahmin could

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\(^{109}\) This is a village near Kanyakumari in Agasteeswaram taluk.

\(^{110}\) Ivy Peter and Peter, D., *op.cit.*, p.123.

\(^{111}\) Lee, W., *Letter M.S dated Nagercoil, October 5, 1868, India Odds, Box 17, CWMA.*
get off with impunity. He did, however make an enquiry and the token punishment of a small fine was imposed on the Brahmins. This caused the missionaries to complain to the British administration.

The British Resident reported that the road in question had been used by many Europeans before, including the Resident himself, and the Dewan obviously showed much “favouritism” to the Brahmin, which was “detrimental to the proper administration of magisterial duties.”

Free from Disabilities

The British administration was extremely unhappy about this incident and Lord Napier, the Governor of Madras, regarded it as a “premeditated” attack of the Brahmins upon “an Englishman, a gentleman and a clergy man” who in the ordinary exercise of his pastoral duty, approached the village by its only direct and convenient access. The Lord Napier also recorded that,

All are rather alarmed by the progress of Christianity and the growing demands of the lower castes. ...It is certainly not desirable, in my opinion, that converts to Christianity... the religion of the Paramount Sovereign and of the Englishmen ... should be treated as Pariahs are probably often treated still in Travancore.

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112 Gladston, J.W., op.cit., p.163.
114 Newill, H., (British Resident) to the Chief Secretary to Government dated December 22, 1868, No.80, MPP September 11, 1869, p.436.
115 Minute by His Excellency the President, dated May 30, 1869, MPP, September 11, 1869, pp.445-46.
116 Ibid., p.449.
Thus he condemned the Travancore Government's favouritism to the Brahmins in this case. The Resident was, therefore, asked to submit a report upon any substantial disabilities or oppressions to which the lowest castes in Travancore are still practically subjected. His report dated March 9, 1870 pointed out various disabilities of the lower castes which included:

1. the prohibition from the use of certain public roads
2. exclusion from public offices and courts
3. exclusion from government schools and
4. exclusion from public appointments.

"On April 23, 1870, the Governor ordered for an immediate removal of most of these disabilities in Travancore. This was the background of the proclamation of 26th Panguni 1045 (1870) which granted access to all public roads and market places". However this legislation did not alter the situation much. Again missionaries insisted the government to pass an order. After 14 years the British Government issued an order in 1884, quoting the proclamation of 1870, which helped the lower castes to free themselves from these disabilities.

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117 Ellis, R.S., (Chief Secretary), order there on, dated September 11, 1869, No.284, MPP, p.453.
118 Ballard, G.A., (Resident) to the Acting Chief Secretary dated March 9, 1870, MPP, April 13, 1870, pp.129ff.
119 Acting Resident in Travancore and Cochin to the Chief Secretary to Government, Fort St. George, 9 May 1870, Tamil Nadu Archives, Madras.
120 Official Papers, Circular of V. Ramiengar, Dewan of Travancore, dated July 21, 1884, Trivandrum, pp.45-46.
Suchindrum Temple Entry Movement

From time immemorial the caste controlled the destiny of man. The traditional caste system had the Brahmin at its apex. The Brahmins, who were in the upper strata of the society, occupied an eminent position. They became the elite administrative group in the Tamil society. In most of the cases they led a luxurious life and gave their lands to non-Brahmin tenants for lease or cultivated it with the help of the labourers. All socio-politico and religious activities were dominated by the Brahmins which were directly responsible for the aggravation of the caste system.\textsuperscript{121} Law had been in the hands of this dominant minority as an instrument of class domination and exploitation. Whereas the Nadars, the Pulayas and Parayas were classed as lower castes.\textsuperscript{122}

The depressed class people occupied the lowest rank in the social ladder. They were differently named as Panchamar, Untouchables, Adi-Dravidas and Harijans. The use of public wells, tanks and roads were prohibited to the depressed classes and were not allowed to approach the Hindu temples. In Tamil Nadu many of the significant temples were consecrated to the Brahmanical deities. They were open only to the upper caste Hindus. Suchindrum, once the headquarters of the Agasteeswaram taluk, had a large Brahmin population.\textsuperscript{123} There is a famous pagoda

\textsuperscript{123} Nagam Aiya, V., \textit{op.cit.}, Vol.III, p.98.
dedicated to Sthana Murti built in the Dravidian style and profusely carved with the figures of the Hindu Pantheon. As temples were not open to the lower castes, Sucindram temple too was not accessible to all classes of Hindu society.

The depressed classes were not only prohibited to enter the Sucindram temple but also to use the roads round it. They were debarred from walking through streets where the caste Hindus lived. Bamboo screens were put up at the entrance to all the main streets proclaiming the prohibition of entry to the forbidden classes. They were not allowed to go in processions of drive a carriage or go with open umbrellas in streets.\textsuperscript{124} The road leading from the eastern side of the Suchindrum village to Kakkad covering a distance of about a furlong and a half was maintained out of public funds for public benefit. Even then it was not accessible to the Pariahs of Kakkad on account of its proximity to the temple.\textsuperscript{125} Yesu Ratnam, a Salvationist was assaulted by the Sudras for having passed along a path intended only for caste Hindus.\textsuperscript{126}

**Progressive Ideas by the Missionaries**

During the British rule however, silent revolution was set in motion which brought about some basic changes in society due to the work of missionaries as well as Hindu reformers. The human minded

\textsuperscript{125} Speech of Sivathanu Pillai, Travancore Legislative Council Proceedings, Vol.VIII, p.679.
\textsuperscript{126} Cover File No.1627 dated 31.01.1893 (English Records, Kerala Government Secretariat, Trivandrum).
organisations, brought to some extent the neglected sections of the Tamil society to a level ground to compete with the people of other castes. The European Christian Missionaries laid the foundation for the upliftment of the depressed people. Though they were interested in evangelization, they attacked superstitious beliefs and the caste atrocities of those days. They created a new awareness among the outcaste groups about human rights, dignity and equality. The so-called “polluting castes” were inspired by these ideas and began to convert to Christianity, which promised self-respect to the subaltern groups.

Since the temple was an important factor in the economic and social activities of the Hindu Society, a denial of any opportunity to worship, created a space for agitation and confrontation. The question of worship in the temple was therefore, taken as a first challenge in the future course of action by the Nadars, Ezhavas and other depress classes resorted to satyagraha at Suchindrum road. The volunteers went in procession in large numbers with flags, singing song from Kottar to Suchindrum. They were opposed by Anti-Satyagrahas. Prohibitory orders had been served on the leaders by the District Magistrate. Even then an enthusiastic band of volunteers led by Muthuswamy marched towards temple premises on 30th January 1926.\(^\text{128}\)


\(^{128}\) *No. D. Dis. 1475 (Judicial) letter dated 30.01.1926 from the Inspector of Police Edalakudi to the Commissioner of Police.*
On 11 February 1926, a party of fifteen volunteers headed by Govindaraja Naidu arrived at Suchindrum. They came prepared to enter the street by force. The caste Hindus at Suchindrum rang the bell of perambalam and gave warning to the villagers. The police prevented their further progress.

**Legislative Measures**

Political compulsions regarding communal electorate compelled Justice Party to intensify the temple entry and anti-untouchability campaign through numerous bills. The Justice Party initiated temple entry resolution in 1932.129 At the same time, realizing the need for a legislative measure for temple entry persuaded by Rajagopalacharya, P. Subbarayan, the premier of Madras Presidency introduced in the Madras Legislative Council the Temple Entry Resolution (November 1932) as a prelude to future bill. It urged the government to recognize the strong and growing public feeling in the Hindu community to remove the disabilities of common worship at temples and also demanded the government to bring a legislation to open the temples to the depressed classes with regulations not affecting the prevailing order and cleanliness in temples as well as the performance of ceremonies according to the traditional convention of the temples.130 The resolution was accepted by the majority without dissent voice. Meanwhile M.C. Rajah, a member of

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the Central Legislative presented the untouchability Abolition Bill in December 1932.\(^{131}\)

In Travancore also the Government of Travancore realised the need to open all public roads, public tanks, public wells etc., to all communities. On 21 April 1934, a committee was appointed under the leadership of Rtd. Dewan V.S. Subramaniya Iyer composed of caste Hindus and two Harijan leaders to enquire into and report on the question of temple entry.\(^{132}\) The report pointed out that caste Hindus expressed strong feelings on favour of temple entry. It was because the caste Hindus developed a fear of becoming a minority on their own soil so they forced Dewan C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, on whose advice Maharaja Sri Chitra Tirunal, issued the historic Temple Entry Proclamation on 12 November 1936.\(^{133}\) According to this, the temples were opened to all Hindus irrespective of caste.\(^{134}\) It was an epoc making and red letter day in the history of Agasteeswaram taluk.

Thus the Christian Missionaries aroused the Hindu Conscience and sense of moral responsibility. The Temple Entry Proclamation was the fruit of missionary activity. The annual report of the CMS stated that "The Temple Entry Proclamation was striking testimony

\(^{132}\) Gladstone, *op.cit.*, p.413.
to the power of Christ. Even though it stopped Christian mass movements, surely Christianity contributed status to the Dalits.”\textsuperscript{135} Hence the Temple Entry Proclamation was hailed as a great victory for Hinduism was, in effect, possible only due to the leavening effect of Christianity.

**Abolition of Devadasy System**

The Devadasi form a unique class of employees was prevalent in the Temple of Suchindrum. Devadasi, as the designation implies, were those dedicated to the service of the Deva or deity of the temple. They dressed themselves in white cloth and wore the todu, the distinctive ear ornament of the Malayali women.\textsuperscript{136} The girl to be admitted to the rank of Devadhasi should not have attained puberty. Invariably the dedication took place soon after her sixth or ninth year of age. Then followed on an appointed day the celebration of the ‘talikettu’ or marriage of the girl with the deity. The girl was asked to take her seat in the inner sanctuary facing the deity and all the ceremonies of an orthodox Hindu marriage were regularly gone through. Finally, the priest, officiating on behalf of the deity; tied the tubi round the girl’s neck. They had to clean and sweep the temple, also to dance in front of the vahanan at the entrance to Nabalca sala. They also participated in the street procession when the ruling sovereign or members of the royal family visited the temple, they were to participate in their reception and were to be in attendance on them.

\textsuperscript{135} Sathianesan, *op.cit.*, pp.19-20.

\textsuperscript{136} Pillay, K.K., *The Sucindram Temple*, pp.279, 280.
during their entire period of stay. They were also obliged to proceed to Trivandrum, the capital of a state, for participation in the ceremony of Mahanavami. During the ten days of the festival, they were to sing and dance by turns.

It was remarkable that kings conferred titles of honour or talented Devadasi in recognition of their high attainments in singing and dancing. The title, ‘Rayar’ etymologically meant king or ruler, evidently indicative of the high rank occupied by the Devadasis.

Despite all this, it was idle to ignore the demoralization that invaded the ranks of the Devadasi in course of time. They were indulged in the unholy trade of prostitution. At Sucindram, tradition has it that several rich men of neighbouring villages maintained Devadasi as consorts.

The Travancore Government decided to prohibit Devadasi in order to put an end to the unholy trade of prostitution. In 1930 an epoch making law was passed and wisely this system was removed by the Regency of Her Highness. Setu Bai, the senior Rani. It was also laid down that men were to be substitute in place of Devadasi whenever vacancies arose.

Child Marriage and Widow Remarriage

Child-marriage and widow-remarriage were the two social
evils which captured the attention of the educated and progressive-minded people. In the ancient days child marriage was common for young children to be married at a very early age. One of the consequences of such marriages was early widowhood, due to the sudden demise of the “boy-husband”. In the Madras Presidency, child-marriage was common among the Brahmins. The Brahmins had their children married between the ages of six and seven which also, to a certain extent, accounted for the increase in the percentage of widows.\textsuperscript{141}

The census of 1891 for the Madras Presidency showed that the total number of married girls between one and nine years was 166,544 as against 167,466 of the census of 1881 and that those who became widows between one and four years were 988 and that those between four and nine years were 4147, making a total of 5135.\textsuperscript{142} Widows’ re-marriage could never be thought of in a country like India where a woman could marry only once. According to Hindu customs, a marriage is indissoluble even after the death of one’s husband. Severe restrictions were placed on widows who had lost their husbands lest should they go wrong, the most serious being the denial of the freedom to re-marry. Purananuru, a Sangam work points out the widows had to remain unadorned and get their head tonsured.\textsuperscript{143} If they did not do so, the hair had to be left uncombed. They

\textsuperscript{141} Paramarthalingom, C., \textit{op.cit.}, p.100.
\textsuperscript{143} Purananuru, verses 25, 248, 250, 261.
took only cooked rice and slept on the floor. They were required to
dress in white and let her forehead remain without kumkum. They did not
have the privilege of participating in any function, for their very presence
was considered an evil omen. Above all they had no legal right for her
deceased husband’s property.

The effort of the Christian Missionaries and the British rule
in India in the eighteenth century brought about changes in the Hindu laws.
The progressive measure which the British with the support of Christian
Missionaries and social reformers enacted was the suppression of child
marriage and enforced widowhood. On May 31, 1856 the “Widow Re-
marriage Reform Act XV of 1856” popularly known as the Widow Re-
Marriage Act XV of 1856 was passed which received the assent of Lord
Dalhousie, the Governor-General of India on July 25, 1856. According to
this Act, “No marriage should be declared illegal and that no issue should
be declared illegitimate on the ground that the woman had been previously
married or betrothed to another person, who was dead at the time of such
marriage”.

The Widow Re-Marriage Act marked a milestone in the
women’s march towards their emancipation. For the first time, the
Government accorded legal random to widow re-marriages. Widow re-

144 Ibid., verse 246.
147 Ibid., p.113.
marriage associations were established to spread the movement. In 1873 a Widow Re-Marriage Society was founded at Nagercoil by one Sesha Iyengar for promoting widow re-marriage. He set a precedent by getting his widowed daughter re-married.

The Formation of Social Reform Association at District Levels

Various branches of social reform associations were established in the Madras Presidency. A number of educated men enrolled themselves as members, pledging that they would educate the girls and women in their family and that they would not give their sister and daughter in marriage before they attained the age of ten. But it could be seen that the Widow Re-marriage movement which was taken up enthusiastically by its members in the initial stage, experienced a setback. However, in the subsequent period, with the growth of Christian Mission, education and public awakening, there took place “a corresponding increase the process of re-marriage and rehabilitation of widows.” Child marriage also gradually became unpopular especially from the beginning of the twentieth century.

Then at the dawn of the 19th century Christian Missionaries became the harbringers of social reform movement in Agasteeswaram taluk

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social evils and disabilities such as child marriage and enforced widowhood.

Hence it is crystal clear that the lower castes accepted Christianity neither for bread and butter nor for liberation from suppression. Because of their dedication and untiring efforts, people of the lower castes began to show a marked tendency to put away their old habits and adopt such other standards of life. Their activities brought mental solace and other earthly blessings to the lower castes.