

## **Chapter - VIII**

### **FIGHT FOR EQUAL RIGHTS**

The educational and social services rendered by the Protestant Christian Missionaries among the oppressed community of South Travancore opened the eyes of various communities. In the persecutions that were followed in Kalkulam, Vilavancode, Eraniel and other places of the southern part of Travancore, the Hindus, Muslims, and the Roman Christians united together and fought against the Protestant Christians. Backed by the Brahmins the Nairs stood in the foremost. The Christians especially the Nadar protestants rose up and fought to break the yoke of bondage imposed on them to achieve equal rights and social identity.

#### **8.1 Problem of Upper Cloth**

The most spectacular social movement in Travancore in the early decades of the nineteenth century was the fight of the backward women to secure the right to cover the upper part of their body. There was a barbarious custom of prohibiting the women of lower strata of society to cover their bosoms. The high caste Hindus regarded it as an insult to see a low caste

women appear before them covering their upper part<sup>1</sup>. Except, the Namboodiri Brahmins all other castes had their caste rules. These caste rules determined the mode of dressing for each caste. According to those caste rules the women were totally banned from covering their bosoms. This was a serious problem in the social life of the people<sup>2</sup>. The educational programme and consequent attempt on social awakening by the Protestant missionaries made the people understand the shameful social practice that the backward classes and other low castes were forced to follow.

The people began to feel that they were illtreated and humiliated in the society. At the same time the high caste women enjoyed the privilege of covering the upper part of their body<sup>3</sup>. The women of the oppressed class felt that they were banned from covering their body due to caste discrimination<sup>4</sup>.

### **8.1.1 Col. Munro's Regulations**

The People were waiting for better days to dawn. At that time Rev. Mead Mrs. Mead Rev. Mault and Mrs. Mault worked to eradicate the social evil. The missionaries found that nearly seventy percent of the women did not cover the upper part of the body. In Malayalee dominated places like

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<sup>1</sup> Nagam Aiya, *op.cit.*, Vol.II, p.252.

<sup>2</sup> Malladi Subbamma, *Women Tradition and author*, New Delhi, 1905, p.5.

<sup>3</sup> John, A., Jacob, *op.cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Neyyatinkara the depressed class women were permitted to dress like the women of high caste. This Practice evoked contempt in the minds of the missionaries and the people alike. They wanted to eradicate this abominable social evil. So they made a representation to Col.Munroe. Consequently Col.Munroe issued an order in 1812 permitting the Ezhava and the Nadar women converts to Christianity to cover their bosom like the women of civilized countries<sup>5</sup>. Subsequently in 1814 Col.Munroe issued an order to the same effect<sup>6</sup>. Eventhough he issued an order they did not permit the depressed class women fully to wear upper cloth. They began to clamour for equality like the privileged classes. Seeing the order the lady missionaries began to act. They devised a loose jacket called the Kupayam<sup>7</sup> instead of Tholcheelai<sup>8</sup>. The high caste women wore upper cloth, the missionaries felt that the low class women also had the right to wear upper cloth. Hence they advised the depressed class women too to wear (Tholcheelai). The Meads and the Maults who were the advocates of the Movement started a lace Industry at Nagercoil in 1820 and subsequently it spread to Martandam, Neyyoor and Santhapuram. The Missionaries obtained permission from

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<sup>5</sup> Order from Colonel, J., Munro, Resident, Dewan to the Sarvadicariacar of trvandrum and Neyyatinkara Taluq, 19<sup>th</sup> Dhanoo, 988 (1812).

<sup>6</sup> Order from Colonel, J., Munro, Resident Dewan to Tiroomagumpidicha Pillai of Neyyatinkara Taluq, 10<sup>th</sup> Virchigam, 989 (1814).

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Mateer, *op.cit.*, p.278.

<sup>8</sup> Report of the London Missionary Society, 1818, p.9.

Dewan Sankara Narayan using the orders of Col.Munro<sup>9</sup> to wear upper cloth. By this time the upper cloth campaign was started vigorously. The depressed class women began to wear upper cloth or Tholcheelai. This paved the way for the outbreak of the First upper cloth Revolt in 1822.

### **8.1.2 The Revolt of 1822**

When the Nayars and their supporters saw the low caste women wearing upper cloth, they felt that their longstanding customs and caste distinctions lost their validity. Hence they rose in revolt in many places of Travancore mostly at Kalkulam and Eraniel. The Christian women who went to market were laughed at and their cloths were stripped off. The Nadar and other Christian converts felt that they were insulted and hurt by the high caste. The Christians were insulted and disturbed at their own churches at various Christian centres in Travancore. Rev.Mead who looked at the breach of human rights made a complaint to Col.Newel, the Resident of Travancore. Col.Newel, inturn ordered for an enquiry<sup>10</sup>.

Hearing this the high caste Hindus prepared a complaint and filed it against the Nadar Christians in the court. In the petition they made false accusations that the Nadar Christians were not paying tax for wearing upper cloth. They complained that their behavior and attitude were gross violation

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<sup>9</sup> Letter from Rev.Mead and other missionaries to Dewan Sankaranarayanan, September, 1821, pp.1-3.

<sup>10</sup> Agur, C.M., *op.cit.*, pp. 799- 800.

of ancient customs and practices. They obtained a decree favouring their contention<sup>11</sup>. Rev. Mead, the reformer missionary, was unhappy. He made an appeal to the government against this decree<sup>12</sup>. The court requested Rev.Mead for a report. The missionary reported that the Nadar and other caste women who embraced Christianity were badly treated by the high caste Hindus. They were not allowed to go freely to fairs and festivals. Considering the report of Rev. Mead, the court passed a decree in 1823 in favour of the Christian women wearing upper cloth<sup>13</sup>. Thus the fight for equal right of Rev. Mead was a success. The laws against wearing upper cloth were stopped a while. Mead tried to prove that all were equal before law. But the fruits of hard work could not be enjoyed by the people. A more serious problem was awaiting for the missionaries and the Christians.

### **8.1.3 The Second upper cloth Revolt**

The second upper cloth revolt started when Lord William Bentick was the Governor General of India. He issued an order that the East India company officers should not interfere in the internal administration of the states under the control of the British East India Company. The Christian Missionaries were very much worried about the policy of non- intervention.

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<sup>11</sup> Court decrees, Padmanabhapuram 1922.

<sup>12</sup> John A. Jacob, *op.cit.*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>13</sup> Substance of the decree of the court of padmanabhapuram relating to upper cloth. Docket No.177-715, vaikasi, 99M.E.(1823)

The missionaries felt that they could not bring the inhuman activities of the high caste Hindus to the notice of the Resident. The atrocities of the High caste Hindus went on without check.

The state officials were jubilant over the policy of non- intervention. But to their disappointment and dismay Rev.Charles Mead was appointed Judge in the Nagercoil Court. The Nayer leaders started the struggle at Kalkulam and Eraniel taluks. The Christians who were dressed neatly and attended the church service were frightened. The Christian women who went to markets fairs and festivals were assaulted. Thus a fresh struggle started.

In the year 1828, a struggle burst out at Attoor, Kannanoor, Thirparappu, Arumanai, Udayar Vilai and Pulippanam in Kalkulam taluks of South Travancore<sup>14</sup>. The revenue official were behind the trouble. They in collaboration with the Pidagaikars, plotted against the Christians. Christian Churches were burnt or razed to the ground. Christians were caught, thrashed and nailed<sup>15</sup>. They came round and round with bows and arrows, sticks and guns and spread fear in the Christian areas. The Christians were branded as terrorists and traitors, and every movement of the Christians was watched.<sup>16</sup>At Kalkulam Taluk a number of Christians suffered. A band of

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<sup>14</sup> Letter from Rev. Mead to captain Cibald officer commanding stationed at Udayagiri No.1-3.

<sup>15</sup> Peter, D., and Ivy peter, *Liberation of the oppressed A continuous struggle*, p.23.

<sup>16</sup> Summary of the complaints lodged at the padmanabapuram cutchery January, 1829.

Nayars from Attoor and other places terrorized the Christians. They even went to the extent of placing their lives and property under threat<sup>17</sup>.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1828 large number of Nayars armed with guns and sticks assembled at Attoor, at Nanjilnad the Pidagaikars<sup>18</sup>, mostly Vellalas started their atrocities. They caused lot of damages to the Christians. They even threatened to destroy the bungalow of the Resident.<sup>19</sup> The Nadar Christians were tortured. The Christians were prevented from attending Sunday services.<sup>20</sup> The riot became more serious. The Madras government feeling very sad, sent captain Cibald who helped Rev. Mead. Further, under the orders of colonel Morrison, the Resident despatched a section of European troops from Trivandrum to be stationed at south Travancore. At the same time fifteenth Regiment of the Madras presidency marched as far as Aramboly. Because of these developments the Nayars were frightened.<sup>21</sup>

The missionaries sent a petition to the Dewan and the Maharja and also to the Madras government. In that petition they reported that many Christians were tortured. The lots of the women were still worse. The

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<sup>17</sup> Letter from Rev. Mead to captain cibald officer community stationed udayagiri, No. 1-13.

<sup>18</sup> The pidagaikars were village leaders of South Travancore. They exercised more authority over the southern districts than the government and their council called the National council of pidagaikars.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Rev. Mead to captain Cibald officer commanding stationed at vdayagiri, 1828.

<sup>20</sup> Peter. D., *Years of Challenge, Charles Mead*, P. 834.

<sup>21</sup> Directorate of State Archives, Trivandrum, Neetu, Volume 20, P.94.

Resident directed Dewan Venkata Rao to conduct an enquiry into the matters.

Dewan Venkata Rao Conducted an enquiry and issued an order in February 1829<sup>22</sup>. According to that order those who were converted to Christiauity were allowed to wear kupayam, a loose jacket. At the same time they were not permitted to dress like the high caste women.<sup>23</sup>

Finally on the report of the Dewan a proclamation was issued by H.H. Parvathi Bai on 3.2.1829. According to that proclamation Christians were allowed to work on all days except Sundays. The law also permitted that any subject to embrace any religion as they liked but they should get permission from the Government to build churches or schools. It also forbade the Christians to send petitions to any alien officers without respecting the local officials.<sup>24</sup> The missionaries were not happy with the order of 1829. Rev. Mead felt that the proclamation was an order to nullify the growth of Christianity. The order did not bring any relief to the Christians. Hence the missionaries thought that relief measures should be given to them in this hour of distress<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Agur, C.M., *op.cit.*, pp. 838-839.

<sup>23</sup> Translation of the order of Dewan Venkata Rao

<sup>24</sup> Yesudhas, R.N., *The Uppercloth Revolt*, PP.125-126.

<sup>25</sup> Peter, D., and Ivy peter, *Liberation of the oppressed, a Continuous struggle*, p.25.

#### 8.1.4 The Third Revolt (1855-1859)

The government order of 1829 did not find an amicable solution to the problem of upper cloth. In spite of the problems, Christian converts were growing in number, and many educational institutions and churches were built all over Travancore. By the order of 1829 the Christian women were directed to wear upper cloth. Other caste people grew jealous of it. It was highly insulting to the caste Hindus. Hence they were waiting for fresh opportunities<sup>26</sup>.

The year 1857 was very significant. The Sepoys rose in revolt against the British due to socio - economic and religious disparity. After the revolt was quelled, the British Government took possession of the country through the East India Company. To this effect in 1858, Queen Victoria issued a proclamation. The proclamation read that the British had given up the plan of annexing the state. The power and status of the princes would be respected and would not interfere in the local administrations, customs and conventions and practices of the Indians.<sup>27</sup> This made the high caste people jubilant. They questioned the missionaries, set fire to the churches and razed the schools of the missionaries to the ground. The Nadars unitedly opposed it. They found it difficult to deal with the Nayers because the government officials backed them. Within twenty days 18 churches and 8 schools in

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<sup>26</sup> John A. Jacob, *op.cit.*, P. 66 (Tamil)

<sup>27</sup> Sathianathieyar, R., *Political and cultural history of India*, Madras, 1952, pp. 426- 427

Parasala areas were set on fire.<sup>28</sup> At Neyyoor also there was a riot. The missionaries met resident Cullen and Maharaja and appealed them to interfere. Mr. Cullen who was the Resident at Trivandrum as the representative of the British Queen came to the conclusion that the missionaries had admitted women into Christianity with blouse only but without sari over the shoulders. Though it was the principle of the missionaries to have blouse and petticoat as the dress for women, they knew that no one would become a Christian if they insisted on the removal of the sari over the shoulder. The Missionaries who were afraid of the atrocities of the high caste people, hoped to have the sari on the shoulder removed by the orders of the Government<sup>29</sup>.

In order to relieve the Nadars who were tortured Rev. Cox and other missionaries complained to the Madras Government against Krishna Rao and many pamphlete were published. An English newspaper published from Madras published the atrocities. Rev.Cox also wrote to the Viceroy in Delhi. The Viceroy accepted the complaint and in turn wrote to the Madras Governor to set up an Enquiry Committee.<sup>30</sup> However, the Madras Government did not take immediate action. No enquiry Committee was formed till 1858. There were serious troubles regarding wearing of sari over the shoulder in many places. On January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1859 at Thalakudy there was a

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<sup>28</sup> Yesudhas, R.N., *The uppercloth Revolt*, p. 147.

<sup>29</sup> Annual Report of the L.M. S. 1860, p.9.

<sup>30</sup> Robert L., Hardgrave, *The Nadars of Tamil Nadu*, Bombay, 1969, p. 63.

struggle. The Christians at Aramboli and Chembonvilai met with the same fate.

Following this there were disturbances at Kottar and Kalkulam. The rioters tore to pieces, the saris worn by the high caste women and drove them away. At Kotar, the Catholics played a major role. Soon after this incident, the highcaste people gathered strength and set fire to the houses of the fish folk at Kottar. At night, they set fire to the only mission house there<sup>31</sup>.

Seeing the seriousness of the fight, the Government officials got the reinforcements of the Nair Brigade. They imprisoned some men belonging to the Nadar caste. Those who escaped arrest and sought asylum elsewhere were not spared. Their names were written on a stone and planted them in public places. The Government publicly announced by tom tom that the Government would suitably reward those persons who found them or informed about their hide outs<sup>32</sup>.

The youngsters in many villages were determined to punish the highcaste people who accompanied the Government officials. Many escaped to the adjoining Tirunelveli. A rumour was spread that the Vellalas of Nanchilnad planned to destroy the Kalcoil. But nothing untoward happened.

The last two weeks in December 1859 was a period of extreme anxiety for the Nadars. In February 1859 the missionaries submitted a memorandum. No favourable orders were issued. Hence, they submitted

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Hardgrave, *op.cit.*, p.63.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

petition to His Excellency Charles Trevelyan, Governor of Madras<sup>33</sup>. He advised the Travancore Government to look into the matter immediately; But it had no effect, and the Government intensified the atrocities. But the Governor was receiving letters regularly with full details from the missionaries as well as from other Europeans. They displeased the Governor and he sent a strong letter to the Travancore Government through Major Tracy, the assistant Resident who was at Madras. The contents were, "if you cannot quell this atrocity with your police, the respect of the women will be safeguarded at the point of the gun with our military force. This may be considered as the last warning"<sup>34</sup>.

The news regarding the last warning by the Governor spread throughout Travancore. Fearing further calamities from the English troops the high caste people, hesitated to continue the riot. The Nadars felt sorry that the troops did not enter into the villages where high caste people lived. The missionaries were satisfied that no further destruction took place.

On 26.07.1859 His Highness Uthiram Thirunal Marthanda Varma Maharaja (1857 – 1860) made the following Proclamation "Nadar women can cover the upper parts of their body above the hip in any respectable way

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<sup>33</sup> Yesudhas, R.N., *The uppercloth Revolt*, p. 152

<sup>34</sup> Velu Pillai, T.K., *op.cit.*, vol. IV, p. 586.

they wish; but they cannot wear sari over the shoulder like the high caste women"<sup>35</sup>.

The Nadar leaders who were fooled by this Proclamation met with another shock. It was the letter of 19.08.1859 from Secretary of the Indian Government approving the above Proclamation. The gist of it was as follows: "We feel from the present action of the Travancore Government that no further riot will take place, from your letter of 07.06.1859 accompanied by details: We understand that the Travancore Maharaja has agreed to remove all objections regarding the covering of the upper part of the body by the Nadar women; but there is a restriction that they should not dress like the high caste women"<sup>36</sup>. Though this restriction is contrary to the one you accepted, and as you think that it gives you satisfaction, it is good that you accept it. We hope that the benefits that you expect will turn up"<sup>37</sup>.

This Proclamation did not in the least differ from the Proclamation of 1812 made by Colonel Munro, the Resident and Dewan and the subsequent Proclamations of the next fifty years. Moreover the proclamation of His Highness Uthiram Thirunal Maharaja which was endorsed by the Secretary of the Indian Government in his letter "As you think that it gives you satisfaction, it is good that you accept it"<sup>38</sup>. This makes it clear that the

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<sup>35</sup> Proclamation of H.H.Maharaja Uthiram Thirunal Marthandavarma Maharaja, dtd. 26.07.185.

<sup>36</sup> Letter from the Dewan to the Resident, 17 May, 1859.

<sup>37</sup> Nagam Aiya, V., *op.cit.*, Vol.I, p.531.

<sup>38</sup> Letter from the Dewan to the Secretary to Government of India, 20 June, 1859.

Proclamation was made only after consultation with the Government officials and the Missionaries. Further, we can easily guess what benefits they accepted to appear, as mentioned in the letter to the Secretary of the Indian Government. That the missionaries hoped that the Christian women could be compelled to remove the sari over shoulder. If the Hindu Nadar women refused to remove the sari over the shoulder, they would be severely beaten up and put in prison by the Government officials with the help of the high caste people. They would approach the Missionaries just as it had happened during the past. With the recommendations of the missionaries these prisoners could be released, and baptized and added to the Christian fold was their expectation. Another benefit was that no harm would be caused to either Christians or non-Christians. Further it was a false hope that the entire Nadar community could be brought under Christianity, if the missionaries the Government officials and the high caste stood united and worked for it.

The oppressed class declared that they were ready to discard the blouse but they would never remove the sari over the shoulder since they considered it as a shame. The missionaries could not think of any other solution. They knew fully well that if they followed the advice of the Resident Mr. Cullan to prevent women who wore sari over the shoulder from entering into Churches, they would have to close down all their establishments. Everybody strove to establish that it was Resident Cullan

who was solely responsible for the unbearable torture of the Nadars and the removing of the mission establishments in the third upper cloth riot and made him the scapegoat. On hearing this Resident Cullen honorably resigned his job<sup>39</sup>.

Dewan Madhava Rao who managed according to circumstances during the third riot, impressed upon the Government officials and high caste Hindus the danger that would befall the Travancore state if another riot was to take place. The advice of the Dewan had its effect. The power mongers and the missionaries praised him. As a result Her Majesty Queen Victoria the Empress of India conferred on Dewan Madhava Rao the grand title K.C.S.I.I. for his ability in ruling the state. He was known as Sir T. Madhava Rao. He retired in 1872 with a pension of Rs.1,000/- per month which no other Dewan enjoyed till then. He was sent by the Indian Government as Dewan to other States like Indore and Baroda which suffered due to maladministration. Moreover, the public made a bronze statue of him and installed it opposite to the Secretariat in Trivandrum.

The riots regarding the upper cloth movement evoked considerable sympathy among the leaders of Nair community who were known as Sudras. They began to feel that their women having the upper part of their body bare was a sign of barbarism six years after the Proclamation that the Nadar women should not wear sari over the shoulder, during the reign of His

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<sup>39</sup> Copies of Official Papers, Minute by the President, dated May 7, 1859.

Highness Ayilyam Thirunal Maharaj. In 1865 the Nair leaders had the following Proclamation announced officially.

"The custom of the Nair women removing their top dress before the Namboothiris, high officials or while going to Temples or Palace shall not continue the same custom hereafter, as we do not consider it proper. They shall wear the top dress while going to Temples, the Palace and other places. Government officials shall not restrict this in any manner"<sup>40</sup>.

The Government Proclamation as well as the earnest wish of the Brahmins did not come into force immediately. The hesitancy to give up the traditional customs was not the only reason, since the Nambudri Brahmins and the Royal family members considered it a disgrace when Nair women covered the upper part of the body before them<sup>41</sup>. Even during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after India attained independence, Nair women servants in the Cochin Maharaja's Palace had to fight for and achieve their rights by offering satyagraha against the Royal orders that they should leave bare the upper half of the body, and this was published in the newspapers. Even those who wrote after India's Independence regarding this riot have failed to mention that Nair women had the upper half of their body bare. This brought to an end the obnoxious practice that were in force in

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<sup>40</sup> Rev.Mateer, *Land of Charity*, p.61.

<sup>41</sup> Letter from the secretary of state for India to the madras Government, Dated 9<sup>th</sup> August 1859.

Travancore for decades. Yet another problem was awaiting the attention of the low castes.

## 8.2 Struggle for Temple Entry

In Travancore most of the temples were constructed by the early kings. These temples were considered to be in possession of Brahmanical deities. Most of the temples were meant for Lord Shiva and Vishnu. The low caste people were not allowed to enter into the inner portions of the temple whereas the Brahmins and the Nairs had the right to enter into the garbhagraha or the Sanctum Sanctorum of the temples because they considered themselves to be the priestly class<sup>42</sup>. In temples, there were regular scales of distance beyond which certain castes must remain at a distance for worship of the gods in the temples. For fear of pollution of the temples they should keep certain distance. No I have must come within 325 feet of the curtain wall of the temple of Guruvayur<sup>43</sup>. The same was applied to the road leading the Suchindram temple<sup>44</sup>. This irritated the low castes. So they wanted to fight for the temple entry. The spread of English education and the improvements made in their basic facilities inspired the non-caste Hindus to demand for the legitimate status within the fold of

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<sup>42</sup> Durate Barbosa, *An Account of the countries Boarding on the Indian Ocean and their Inhabitants*, London, 1918, p.79.

<sup>43</sup> Hutton, J.H., *op.cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>44</sup> Ravindran, T.K., *Eight Furlongs of Freedom*, p. 39.

Hinduism<sup>45</sup>. Thus a movement was started in Travancore by the non-caste Hindus to secure entry into the temple and freedom of worship.

### **8.2.1 The Revolts**

As the Hindus felt that they were not given permission to enter into the temples they were deeply contemplating upon the right to enter into the temples. The first riot took place at Kumarakoil situated 15 kilometers north west of Nagercoil. At Kumarakoil a portion of the people were Nadars and the rest were Krishnavakkar<sup>46</sup>. This temple was dedicated to Lord Subramania. It was usual custom among the Hindu devotees of high caste to walk on fire and claim divine power. But other Hindus who belonged to the backward classes were not permitted to perform the fire walk as high caste Hindus did. Due to the wealth and education that the backward classes gained by the social reforms of the reformers and the enlightenment that they received from the Christian missionaries began to feel that the worship of God was denied to them. They did not feel to compromise with such an intolerable system. So nearly 12000 Nadars under the leadership of one Vellayan Nadar a local president determined to enter into the temple. As the high caste people they performed prayers and poojas jumped into a large fire pit and came out unscathed. The caste Hindus especially the Nairs and

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<sup>45</sup> Immanuel, M., *The Dravidian Lineages, A Socio-Historical study: The Nadars through the ages*, Nagercoil, 2002, pp.319-332.

<sup>46</sup> Gazetteer of India, Tamil Nadu State, Kanyakumari District, 1995, p.1180.

Brahmins resisted their entry and it led to a open fight in which more than 150 people died<sup>47</sup>. This incident was a pioneer movement in Travancore against the abnoxious practice. After seeing the socio-economic and educational progress of the non-caste Hindus, the high caste people wanted to put an end to this. They reported the matter to the Maharaja.

### **8.2.2 Krishna Rao's Edict**

The Government contemplated upon it. Krishna Rao, the Dewan of Maharaja Uthram Thirunal Marthanda Varma, issued an edict in 1857. The edict prohibited the non-caste Hindus and the Christian converts from using the temple roads near the temples and road used by the high caste people. It directed the people to use the roads and paths assigned to the low castes<sup>48</sup>. The edict further deteriorated the situation. The non-caste Hindus felt that the Nairs and other high caste people were the main obstacle to their progress. They approached the missionaries to find a solution. The missionaries brought the matter to the notice of the Government of Madras<sup>49</sup>. Even then an immediate solution was not at sight. The low castes felt that all these things took place under the instigation of Krishna Rao. They brought it

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<sup>47</sup> Dr.Thankappan, T., *The Struggle for social equality*. The Nadars of Travancore, The Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society, Vol.83, Bangalore 1992, pp.1-7.

<sup>48</sup> Cover File No.215, English Records, Kerala Secretariat, Trivandrum.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

to the notice of the missionaries. The missionaries brought the disabilities and consequent sufferings of the people to the Madras Government<sup>50</sup>.

When situation was embroiling like this at Thickenamcode another incident took place. On 10<sup>th</sup> March 1857, the Nadars carried the ashes of a deceased person to the nearby sea. The procession went on peacefully. In the procession, the people blew conches and beat drums. This was objected to by the other castes. Following this there was a scuffle in which 18 persons were injured<sup>51</sup>. Following this, at Panjalingapuram in Agasteeswaram Taluk, William Lee, a missionary of the L.M.S., who was passing through the road at Panjalingapuram was prevented and assaulted.

This incident was brought to the notice of the Raja. The Raja on his part taking into consideration the intervention of the Madras government issued an order<sup>52</sup>. The Madras government further directed the Resident to advise the king and the Dewan to furnish full information regarding disability and oppression. The resident reported that "that low caste people were not permitted to use roads near the temples of high castes. They were not permitted to enter courts and public offices. They were not permitted in

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<sup>50</sup> The Memorials of the Missionaries of the L.M.S. Missionaries to Sir, C.E. Trevelyan, 18<sup>th</sup> July, 1859, Political Proceedings, Vol.III, p.123.

<sup>51</sup> Letter of T. Madava Row, Dewan to Cullens, 1<sup>st</sup> April 1859, Political Proceedings, Vol.III, p.108.

<sup>52</sup> "The street of all lowns are the property, not of any particular caste, but of the whole community and that everyman irrespective of his caste or religion has the right to the full use of them, provided that he does not obstruct or domicile to others when using them" G.O. by Ellis, the Chief Secretary to Government Sept, 1969, Political Proceedings, Vol.III, p.453.

schools. Above all public services were denied in schools<sup>53</sup>. After analysing the report the Madras Government ordered to the Travancore Government to remove all obstacles for equal rights to the low castes<sup>54</sup>.

### **8.2.3 The 1884 order and after**

Dewan Ramaiyengar issued a circular order permitting all classes of people to use temple roads when religious processions were taken out<sup>55</sup>. Yet the missionaries and the people were not satisfied. They wanted complete freedom and insisted on the abolition of all religious and caste prejudices. The missionaries sent several petitions to the Madras government<sup>56</sup>. In spite of the Government order, in places in and around Suchindram, the low caste Christians, called the Salvation Army people were not permitted to use umbrellas and wear turbans while walking along the streets of high caste people. Violation of this attracted punishments. They were not permitted to use even carts and horses<sup>57</sup>.

This was not the only incident. There were other problems in the other parts of Travancore. In temples like Guruvayur and other places, entry into the temples was strictly prohibited. This created contempt and hatred

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<sup>53</sup> Political proceedings, Vol.IV, 173.

<sup>54</sup> Government order, dated 23 April 1870, p.8.

<sup>55</sup> G.O.No.925, 8<sup>th</sup> December, 1837.

<sup>56</sup> Joint petition from the Missionaries, dated 1893.

<sup>57</sup> Cover File No.1627 dated 1893.

among the people. They were ready to rise in revolt. It was during this the Vaikam Satyagraha was started by the leading citizens.

#### **8.2.4 Vaikkam Satyagraha**

The Vaikkam Satyagraha was a major struggle of the Temple Entry Movement not only in Kerala but throughout the other parts of Travancore. Its aim was to get the right to the approach roads of the Vaikkam Temple to the Avarnas of the Hindu community. The important leaders of this movement were T.K.Madhavan, Mannath Padmanabhan and K.Kelappan<sup>58</sup>. Mahatma Gandhi also visited Travancore in 1925 to encourage the Vaikkam Satyagraha<sup>59</sup>. Narayana Guru also gave support to this movement and gave Rs.1000 as gift. E.V.Ramaswamy Naicker from Tamil Nadu also participated in this Satyagraha and went to jail thrice for this purpose. So he got the title "Vaikkam Veerar" (Hero of Vaikkam)<sup>60</sup>. Due to the all these efforts of the leaders, the Vaikkam Temple roads were formally opened to all Hindus irrespective of caste<sup>61</sup>. But this concession was not extended to the Avarnas in the case of other Temples in Travancore, and hence the movement for getting all the Temple roads to be opened for the Avarnas were organized in many centers like Ambalapuzha, Suchindrum etc.

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<sup>58</sup> Ravindran, T.K., *Eight Furlongs of Freedom*, New Delhi, 1975, pp.51-52.

<sup>59</sup> Ravindran, T.K., *Vaikkam Satyagraha and Gandhi*, Trichur, 1975, p.58.

<sup>60</sup> Dr.Ivy Peter and Dr.D.Peter, *Liberation of the oppressed*, pp. - 168-169.

<sup>61</sup> File No.D.Dis, 783/785 General Department, English Records, Kerala Secretariat, Trivandrum.

### 8.2.5 Suchindram Satyagraha

Suchindram is a pilgrim centre situated on the southern bank of the Palayar. It is situated at a distance of eight miles to north-west of Kanyakumari<sup>62</sup>. Suchindram is an enchanting village surrounded by the vast expanse of paddy fields, coconut groves, tanks and ponds, River Palayar and its channels and the delightful flower gardens added to the beauty of the place. Strictly speaking Suchindram means the place where "Indra" attained Suchi or purification<sup>63</sup>. In Suchindram the Trimurtis Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva were together worshipped for the first time. But the earliest name of the Temple was the shrine of Konnai Adimathar (Siva)<sup>64</sup>. Later the Temple was called Suyampulingam of Trinity, and was built in the Dravidian style and contains numerous inscriptions of great archaeological importance. In this Temple, the restrictions prescribed in the agamas were most meticulously observed. The Nambudiri Priest alone was allowed into the Garbhagraha for poojas<sup>65</sup>. A member of the Vattapalli Mattan is permitted to go upto the portico of the Garbharaha. The so called higher castes among the non-

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<sup>62</sup> Velupillai, T.K., *op.cit.*, Vol.IV., p.646.

<sup>63</sup> Padmanabhan, A., "*Suchindram Temple*", *Ashrapandana Mahakumbhabhisheka vizha Malar*, Nagercoil, 1984, p.56.

<sup>64</sup> John A.Jacob, A., *op.cit.*

<sup>65</sup> Sreedhara Mennon, A., *A Survey of Kerala History*, Madaras, 1996, p.160.

Brahmins like the Vellalas, Nairs and Chettis were permitted into the Ardha Mandapa and the Tirucurras Mandapa to the back of the Garbhagraha<sup>66</sup>.

The Vairavis, Chaliyars, Pottters, and Oil Mongers were allowed entrance within the precincts of the Temple upto the Dhavajastamba, but not beyond<sup>67</sup>. The Ezhavas, the washermen and barbers were admitted into the streets but not into the Temple. The Nadars, Pulayas, Parayas, Pallans, and the Kuravas were strictly prohibited from entering the streets of Suchindram<sup>68</sup>.

Theru marachan bamboo screens were used for preventing the entry of the untouchables into the streets where the high caste people resided<sup>69</sup>. These restrictions imposed on the low caste people for centuries, attracted the attention of the leaders, and they fought for their just rights to enter the temples and temple roads.

In January 1926 a Satyagraha campaign was organized at the Suchindram temple in South Travancore for gaining the right of entry into the temple roads<sup>70</sup>. Early attempts of the outcastes to cross the street ended in severe opposition and persecution. Satyagrahis who entered into the prohibited areas of the Suchindram Temple were strongly oppressed by the

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<sup>66</sup> Pillai, K.K., *The Suchindram Temple*, Madras, 1953, p.265.

<sup>67</sup> Ramachandran, P., Naidu M.E., *Suchindram Satyagraha*, Nagercoil, 1976, p.2.

<sup>68</sup> Report of the Temple Entry Committee, Trivandrum, 1934, p.8.

<sup>69</sup> Abdul Razzak, *Nesamony Oru Charitra Thiruppam* (Tamil), Nagercoil, 1998, p.10.

<sup>70</sup> File No.D.Dis 1475, 1926 Judicial P.D.E.R.Kerala Secretariat, Trivandrum.

caste Hindus<sup>71</sup>. Led by M.E.Naidu, the Satyagraha continued for about a month and it was withdrawn on receiving assurances from the Government<sup>72</sup>.

On account of the pressure exerted by a few orthodox Hindus the government did not respond positively. On October, 1927, Gandhiji visited Travancore again and held discussions with the Dewan and tried to seek a peaceful settlement of the Suchindram Satyagraha; but no possible solution could be found<sup>73</sup>.

Erode Venkatappa Ramaswamy Naicker one of the socio-religious reformers of Tamil Nadu in the 20<sup>th</sup> century opposed the suppression of low caste people in the name of religion. He participated in the Vaikkam Satyagraha for the cause of Avarnas. When he heard about the Suchindram Satyagraha, he participated in this movement<sup>74</sup>.

The campaign was resumed at Suchindram in May 1930, and Gandhi Raman Pillai became the leader, and was arrested because his followers entered the prohibited areas of Suchindram Temple and sentenced to one year rigorous imprisonment<sup>75</sup>.

The problem of untouchables became a matter of concern to the Congress leaders also. In a conference of the Indian National Congress held

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<sup>71</sup> File No.62/1926, Confidential Section, English Records, Kerala Secretariat, Trivandrum.

<sup>72</sup> Mahadev Desai, *The Epic of Travancore*, Ahmedabad, 1937, pp.22-23.

<sup>73</sup> Daniel, D., *op.cit.*, p. 25-26.

<sup>74</sup> File No.D.Dis 1475, 1926 Judicial Department, English Records, Kerala Secretariat, Trivandrum.

<sup>75</sup> Menon, P.K., *The History of the Freedom Movement in Kerala (1885-1938)*, Vol. III, Trivandrum, 1972.

at Bombay on 25 September 1932, they passed the following resolution "..... Hereforth amongst Hindus no one shall be regarded as untouchable by reason of his birth ..... that it shall be the duty of all Hindu leaders to secure every legitimate and peaceful means as early as removal of social disabilities now imposed by custom upon the so called untouchable classes including the bar in respect of admission to Temples<sup>76</sup>.

The Suchindram Satyagraha and the pressing demand for the right of temple entry for the lower castes both from the right thinking men of the higher castes and the lower forced the Government to enquiry. The Committee with, Subramania Aiyer, the Retired Dewan of Travancore, as the President was announced by the Government of Travancore on 8<sup>th</sup> November 1932<sup>77</sup>. The total members of the Committee were nine and it included two low caste people also. The Committee submitted its report on 11 January 1934 and it stated that all the people, irrespective of caste, had the right to use public roads, wells, ponds and inns. But a Proclamation for Temple entry was not mentioned in this report, and so the temple entry was opposed by caste Hindus vehemently<sup>78</sup>.

Since they had no right to enter temples, most of the Ezhavas and Nadars wanted to join Christianity<sup>79</sup>. Sir, C.P.Ramaswamy, Iyer the Dewan

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<sup>76</sup> Pattabhi Sitaramayya, *History of the Indian National Congress* (1885 – 1935), Vol.I, Bombay, 1969, p.536.

<sup>77</sup> File No.D.Dis, 648, 25 November 1932, English Records Kerala Secretariat Trivandrum.

<sup>78</sup> Report of the Temple Entry Enquiry Committee, Trivandrum, 1934, p.80.

<sup>79</sup> Gladstone, J.W., *op.cit.*

of Travancore realized the critical situation of the Hindu religion and came forward to issue a Proclamation on this matter.

### **8.2.6 The Proclamation of 1936**

As already pointed out the Report of the Temple Entry Enquiry Committee impressed upon the Government about the need for throwing open the temples, roads, chatrams, wells and tanks to all irrespective of caste. Moreover, the mounting pressure from the reformists led to the promulgation of the historic Temple Entry Proclamation. On 12<sup>th</sup> November 1936, at the instance of C.P.Ramaswamy Iyer, the Dewan of Travancore, Maharajah Sri. Chitrai Thirunal issued the proclamation on his 25<sup>th</sup> birth day. The text of the proclamation is as follows: "Profoundly convinced of the truth and validity of our religion, believing that it is based on divine guidance and all comprehending toleration, for centuries, adapted itself to the Hindu subjects should by consolations and solace of the Hindu faith, we have decided and hereby declare, ordain and command, that subject to such rules and conditions as may be laid down and imposed by us for preserving their proper atmosphere and maintaining their rituals and observances, there should henceforth be no restriction placed on any Hindu by birth or religion on entering or worshipping at the temples controlled by us and our

Government<sup>80</sup>. The proclamation laid down clear cut rules for the low caste for entry into the temples<sup>81</sup>.

The rules provided for the observance and maintenance of the customs and usages relating to worship and ceremonies obtaining in temples. They specified the classes of persons who should not enter the temples. Persons who were not Hindus, those who were under pollution due to birth or death in their families, drunken or insane persons, women at certain times, professional beggars, persons, suffering from contagious diseases were not to enter the temple. Taking meat into the temple, smoking within the premises, carrying cloth umbrella and kerosene lamp and such practices would be disallowed<sup>82</sup>. The Chief Devaswom officer was vested with powers to grant or withhold permission depending on customs and traditions. The authority should prevail until the problem set aside by a higher authority. The Chief officer had powers to pass orders for arrest against those who violated the rules. If anyone contravened the rules or committed any offence which required purificatory ceremonies, he would be punished by a Magistrate<sup>83</sup>. In matters regarding clarification or interpretation of any of those rules the decision of the Dewan shall be final. The rules prescribed in general terms,

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<sup>80</sup> Sekhar, G.P., *Speeches and messages of Highness Sri Bala Rama Varma, Maharaja of Travancore*, p.134.

<sup>81</sup> The Regulations and Proclamations of Travancore 1112 M.E. Vol.IX, p.3.

<sup>82</sup> Regulations and Proclamations of Travancore, 1112 ME., Vol. IX., p.3.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

the dress of the worshippers and the objects which they were prohibited from carrying into the temples.

The proclamation occupied a unique place in the socio-religious life of Travancore because of "the sublimity of its conception, the loftiness of its ideals and the magnitude of its effects"<sup>84</sup>. It is rightly stated "no act of reform of any ruler in India has so far stirred the hearts, roused the enthusiasm or evoked the gratitude of the people to the extent that this momentous proclamation has done"<sup>85</sup>. Mahatma Gandhi said, "I verily believe that when all else of Travancore is forgotten, that one act of the Maharaja, the proclamation, will be remembered by future generations with gratitude"<sup>86</sup>. To him the proclamation was a miracle of modern times. He also congratulated the Travancore Durbar and its advisers for the magnanimous act on their part. According to C.Rajagopalachari it was "easily the most non-violent and bloodless revolution in the history of man in recent years"<sup>87</sup>. According to Sardar Vallabhai Patel, the Maharaja's Proclamation was the greatest of the achievements of Gandhiji with regard to the eradication of untouchability. The Temple-Entry Proclamation is to be viewed from several angles not only as a Hindu act, not only as an Indian

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<sup>84</sup> The temple Entry Proclamation Memorial Souvenir, 1942, p.1.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Souvenir on the Occasion of the Shastiabda Poorthy of Our Patron Sree Padmanabha Dasa Sri Chirtra Tirunal Ramavarma, 4<sup>th</sup> November 1972, Sri Triunal Sangeetha Sabha, Trivandrum, P.Nil.

<sup>87</sup> The Temple Entry Proclamation Memorial Souvenir, 1942, p.2.

act, but as an act of the liberation and sublimation of humanity<sup>88</sup>. T.K. Velu Pillai characterised the proclamation as the "Spiritual Magna Carta of Travancore"<sup>89</sup>. The proclamation was "applauded as a charter of religious liberty, and as a document of first-rate importance in the annals not only of Travancore, but of Hinduism. It marked a milestone in the progress of the backward communities. All walks of life were thrown open to them as freely as the higher castes<sup>90</sup>. In commemorating the Temple Entry Proclamation, a set of stamps numbering four with different denominations namely three chuckrams, one chackram and eight cash, twelve cash and six cash was issued in 1937. Thus, the depressed classes of Travancore obtained equal right and self respect. The people of Travancore will remember it for years to come.

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<sup>88</sup> Souvenir on the Occasion of the Shastiabda Poorthy of Our Patron Sree Padmanabha Dasa Sri Chitra Tirunal Ramavarma, 4<sup>th</sup> November 1972, Sri Tirunal Sangeetha Sabha, Trivandrum, p.Nil.

<sup>89</sup> Vellu Pillai, T.K., *op.cit.*, P.251.

<sup>90</sup> Rao, M.S.A., *op.cit.*, p.63.