CHAPTER V

FIGHT FOR EQUAL RIGHTS

The Christian missionaries enlightened the people through their social activities. They educated the people about the cruel social customs, conventions and practices that were prevalent in South Travancore during the 19th century. Among all these the obnoxious practices and taxes, the barbarous custom of prohibiting and preventing the low caste women of the society to cover the upper part of their body with a piece of cloth. This became a spectacular social movement during the first half of the 19th century and it was called the Upper Cloth Revolt.¹

5.1 The Problem of Upper Cloth

Travancore was a land of female degradation. After the arrival of Brahmins to South India, several rules and regulations imposed on women.

These rules and regulations were very severe in Travancore.²

The problem of the low caste women was that they were not permitted to wear upper cloth. They wore only a piece of coarse cloth called mundu stretching from waist to knees exposing their breasts.³ Nair women also could not cover their bosoms in front of the Namboodiries. The breast of women was bared as a symbol of respect to those of higher castes. Thus in Travancore society the women of all castes suffered a lot. Fundamental rights were denied to them.⁴ They lived in seclusion too and considered to be an object of enjoyment. The early missionaries like Rigeltaube, Rev. Mead, Mrs. Mead, Rev. Mault and Mrs. Mault showed keen interest in women education.⁵ It not only lit their intellectual light but brought to their notice, the obnoxious social practice. The people began to realize that they were humiliated and illtreated in the society by preventing them from using upper cloth. But at the same time the high caste women enjoyed the privilege of covering the upper part of their body. The women of the low caste began to feel that they were banned from covering their body, due to the caste

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⁴ Ivy Peter and Peter, D., *Samaya Thondarkalum Samudhaya Marumalaichiyum (Tamil)*, Nagercoil, 1999, p.149.
discrimination. Because strict caste rules were framed during those days to determine the mode of dressing.

A Christian missionary of the London Missionary Society found that nearly seventy percent of the women left the upper part of their body uncovered. Further in places around Neyyatinkara, where the Malayalees did not cover the upper part of their body under the garb of civilization just as the women of higher rank. This evoked contempt in the minds of missionaries. They contemplated upon, how best this shameful mode of dressing could be improved.

The missionaries understood that the women of the lower caste were treated far below the dignity of human being. They wanted to eradicate this abominable social evil. Hence, they made a representation to the Government especially to the Resident Col. Munro.

Col. Munro continuously induced Rani to issue a decree in favour of low caste women. The Rani of Travancore was very much interested in introducing liberal reforms.

Consequently in 1812 Col. Munro issued an order permitting, the Ezhava and the Nadar women converts to Christianity to cover the upper part

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of their body as the Christians of other countries do. Subsequently in 1814, during the reign of Rani Gowri Lakshmibai Col. Munro, issued another order to the same effect. This added the strength of the Christian women. Yet it did not permit them to wear upper cloth in the manner of the caste Hindus or the upper caste.

At once the order was issued the lady missionaries decided to prepare a suitable upper cloth for the Christian women. Lady missionaries such as, Mrs. Mead, Mrs. Mault, Mrs. Miller and Mrs. Thompson, devised a loose jacket called the ‘Kuppayam’. According to the custom, the high caste women were allowed to wear upper cloths upon their shoulders. But the Christian women were not permitted to wear that piece of cloth called the “Thol Cheelai”. The intolerant lady missionaries advised the Christian women and others to wear “Thol Cheelai”.

As the Nadars and other backward class began to wear upper cloth, there was much need for that. At that time Mead, the advocate of the movement started lace industry at Nagercoil in 1820, and subsequently it spread to Marthandam, Neyyoor and Santhapuaram, The slave girls were

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8 Order from Colonel J., Munro, Resident Dewan to the Sarvadikariakar of Triavandrum and Neyyattinkara Taluk, 19th Dhanoo, 988 (1813).
9 Order from Colonel J. Munro, Resident Dewan to Tiroomagumpidicha Pillai of Neyyatinkara Taluk, 10th Virchigam, 989 (1814).
admitted in these institutions and they were advised, stimulated and instigated to use upper cloth. The missionaries, obtained further permission from Dewan Sankaranarayan citing the previous orders of Col. Munro. Thus, the upper cloth campaign was started vigorously and the Nadar and other backward women started to wear upper cloth or ‘Thol Cheelai’ in addition to the jacket like the high caste ladies. This paved the way for the first upper cloth revolt in 1822.

5.2 The Revolt of 1822

According to the orders of the Dewan the Christian converts began to use upper cloth. The concessions that the Christians received from the Dewan were distasteful to the caste Hindus and they became intolerable. In addition the Nadars who embraced Christianity with the help of the Protestant Missionaries obtained relaxation of oozhiam service too from the government. Hence, the Nadars and other backward communities refused to oblige with the invitation or order to do oozhiam service.

Finding that their long standing customs and caste distinctions losing their validity, the Nairs of Kalkulam and Eraniel taluks of South Travancore

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12 Letter from Rev. Mead and other missionaries to Dewan Sankaranarayanan, September 1821, pp.1-3.
13 Order from Col. Munro, Resident Dewan to the Sarvadikariakar of Trivandrum and Neyyatinkara Taluk, 19th Dhanoo, 988 (1813).
14 Royal proclamation connected with compulsory duties, Margali, 991 (1816).
rose in revolt against the Nadar women. They decided to teach a lesson to the ladies those who put the upper cloth like their ladies. The Christian women who went to the market with kuppayam or Thol cheelai were bullied by them and striped off their upper cloths and jackets. The Christian converts felt that they were insulted and hurt by this incident. The Mohammedans also joined with them saying the blouse was their religious dress and attacked the Christians wherever possible.

Once, while a service was being conducted in Kottanvilai Church near Mandaikadu, a group of Nairs went there and asked for subscription towards a Hindu festival. When it was refused, they took some Christians before an engineer, tied them to a tree, beat them to collect toddy from Palmarah trees, and were asked to pay tax. During this time Rev. Mead was in charge of the mission station and the missionary activities. Since the Nadar Christians were prohibited from using public courts, Rev. Mead complained about it to the Padmanabapuram court. The Christian judges of Nagercoil and Padmanabapuram were directed to make an enquiry and report on the matter of ill-treatment in the Southern regions as represented by Rev. Mead. But the Padmanabapuram court was reluctant to take any action over this incident, Rev. Mead made a complaint to Col. Newell, the Resident of Travancore. Col. Newell ordered for an immediate enquiry.  

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Meanwhile feeling something fishy, the Nairs prepared a complaint and filed against the Nadar Christians in the court. In the petition, they complained that, the Nadar Christians were not paying tax for wearing upper cloth. They again complained that it was a gross violation of the ancient customs and practices. As a result a decree was passed to this effect. But Rev. Mead and his Christian followers could not accept the decree. They felt that they were once again left to the wicked. Mead too was not happy with the order and he appealed to the government against this decree. By the order of the Resident, the court received the matter and asked Rev. Mead for a report. The reformer missionary reported that the Nadar and other caste women who have embraced Christianity were treated with a heavy hand by the Nairs when they go to the churches, the fairs and local festivals. Because they were directed to wear decent dress acceptable to Christianity by the missionaries. The court considering the report of Rev. Mead passed a decree in 1823 in favour of the Christian women to wear upper cloth.

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17 *Court decrees, Padmanabapuram, 1922.*
19 The decree of the Padmanabapuram court read as follows. “As there was a proclamation allowing the Christians to wear upper cloth, then the court writing to Rev. Mead to enquires, if these people were Christians and if the religion required them to wear upper cloth for the sake of decency, when they go to the fairs, markets and other places and that, they were instructed to do so and it aught to be so ordered agreeably to Christianity. Substance of the decree of the court of Padmanabapuram relating to upper cloth dress worn by Christian women.
Thus the social reform programme of Rev. Mead was a success. The unjust and wicked laws were stopped for the time being. He tried to prove that all are equal before law. But the fruits of the hard work could not be fully enjoyed by the people. Before long the worst was awaiting to gear up the missionaries and people to throw heart and soul for the sake of the same matter.

5.3 The Revolt of 1829

The second revolt took place when Lord William Bentick assumed power as the Governor General of India. He followed the non-intervention policy and ordered that the East India Company officers should not interfere in the internal administration of the States. The Christian Missionaries and the propagandists were much pained by the non-intervention policy. The missionaries could not bring the inhuman attitudes of Travancore government to the notice of the Resident who was the representative of the Company at Madras. Hence, the atrocities committed against women continued.20

Lord William Bentick’s policy of non-intervention in the internal administration of States encouraged the State officials and the Nair leaders who effectively took part in the struggle against Christians in Vilavancode, Kalkulan and Eranial Taluks. The Mohamadens also joined hands with them

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20 *Nittu*, Vol.78, Directorate of State Archives, p.278.
and tore off the saris of Nadar women. They frightened the Christians while going to Church on Sundays dressed neatly. They tore the books of children who went to Christian Schools.

The Christian women felt jubilant over the court order of 1823. They began to use upper garments boldly and moved to market places church and fairs. But the Nairs and the other caste Hindus could not digest the concessions granted to the Christian ladies. They decided to assault those who violated their wishes and thus a fresh struggle started.

In the year 1828, a struggle burst out at Attoor, Knnanoor, Thirparappu, Arumanai, Udayar Vilai and Pulippanam in Kalkulam taluk of South Travancore. Under the leadership of Easwara Pillai, the Revenue Inspector of those places, in collusion with Pidagaikars, plotted against the Christians. Christian churches were burnt or razed to the ground. Christians were got, thrashed and jailed. They came round and round with bows and arrows, sticks and guns spread fear in the Christian areas. The Christians were branded as terrorists and traitors and every movement of the Christians were

21 Letter from Rev. Mead to Captain Cibald, Officer commanding stationed at Udayagiri No. 1-3

22 Peter, D. and Ivy peter, Liberation of the Oppressed A Continuous Struggle, op.cit., p.23.
At Kalkulam Taluk a number of Christians suffered. Kesava Pillai, Neelakanda Pillai, and Madevan Pillai of Attoor locality terrorized the Christians. They even went to the extent of placing their lives and property under threat.

The *Pidagaikars* at Nanchilnadu were more powerful. They were the chief organizers of the plot against the Christian converts. By their direction a large number of Nairs armed with guns, swords and sticks assembled at Attoor on 23 December 1828, and burnt down the Attoor church and the houses of the Christians. The consumable articles such as paddy, Jaggery, clothing, ornaments were destroyed. Attoor school master and some other people were tied at the hind legs of elephants and dragged them to Thuckalay. They even went to the extent of threatening to destroy the bungalow of Col. Mecaulay, the Resident.

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23 *Summary of the Complaints lodged at the Padmanabapuram cutchery*, January, 1829


25 The pidagaikars were village leaders of South Travancore. They exercised more authority over the Southern districts than the government and their land council called the Naleonal council of Pidagaikars.

26 Augur, C.M., *op.cit.*, p.847

27 *Letter from Rev. Mead to Captain Cibald officer commanding stationed at Udayagiri*, No.1-3.
Even though, the Christians were exempted from oozhiyam services on Sundays they were caught and compelled to perform oozhiyam service on Sundays in order to prevent them from attending Sunday worship. A Christian from Kannanoor refused to do oozhiyam service on Sunday. But the Nairs, caught him and forced to carry coconut leaves to padmanabapuram on Sunday 21 December 1826. Noticing that, a Nadar by name Esakimadan a convert to Christianity became intolerant, collected few likeminded people and relieved the Christian loaded with cocanut leaves. The same leaves were loaded on the head of a Nair and transported back to Kannanoor Church. The Nairs when heard of this incident were shocked and they could not tolerate. They wanted to take vengeance.

In an attempt to punish the Nadar Christians who were responsible for the incident, some Nairs assembled two miles away from Kannanoor church planned to attack the Christians with sticks, swords, guns and other weapons. Fearing the consequences, the Christians left their houses. The Nairs, plundered and destroyed the houses of the Christians. The Kannanoor church was burnt. Then the Nairs went round the village with deadly weapons and shouted against the Missionaries. Wherever they went, they destroyed the

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29 *Ibid.*. p.158.
churches and attacked schools. They beat the Christians severely. Even they threatened the servant of Rev. Charles Mead who went to buy bread. At Vilavancode Taluk, Nairs prevented the Nadars who went to the church. One Packianathan of Kanjiracode threatened to burn his house. Women who went with jackets were bullied and their jackets were stripped off. All these things happened at the instigation of Nattalam Pahuthi Provarticar.

They convicted one Raman Pillai of Mekkode, who donated lands for building Mission bungalows at Neyyoor and imprisoned him at Quilon for seven years. On January 3, 1829 they plotted to kill Rev. Charles Mead who was staying at Mandaikkad. His friend Captain Cibald who was staying at Udayagiri Fort, on hearing about this news came with his troops to put a stop to the plot and took the family of Rev. Mead to Udayagiri fort and protected them.

The Vellalas who lived in Thovalai and Agasteeswaram taluks also oppressed the Christian population. The Vellalas of Boothapandi collected a group of men and attacked, the Christians of Thittuvilai. A school teacher and some others were dragged out side and were put into Boothapandi chatram jail. Some of them out of agony and pain confessed that they were not

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Christians. Those who recanted were released and others were tortured. In this hour of trials the Muslims and the Catholics did not raise their thumb because they hated the growth of Protestantism.

This agitation lasted for many months therefore Charles Mead and Mault sent petition to Resident Col. Morrison to protect the Christians from the outrages of high caste people. The Madras government feeling very sad sent Captain Cibbald who helped Rev. Mead made suitable arrangements for the protection of Christians. Further, Colonel Morrison, ordered to sent a section of the European troops from Trivandrum to places in South Travancore, where riots took place. Moreover, the 15th Regiment of the Madras Presidency infantry marched as far as Aramboly through the Southern region. Though the battalion did not harm anybody, the Nairs were terribly frightened at this, and the riots stopped at the appearance of these troops but many suffered in prison.\(^34\)

Petitions regarding the tortures of the prisoners were sent by the missionaries to the Dewan and the Maharaja, and also to the Madras Government. The resident directed Dewan Venkata Rao to conduct an enquiry in the villages. As per the directions Dewan Venkata Rao conducted an


\(^{34}\) *Nittu*, Vol.20, Directorate of State Archives, Trivandrum, p.94.
enquiry accordingly an order was issued in February, 1829.35 “As it is not reasonable on the part of Shanar women to wear cloths over their breast, such custom being prohibited they are required to abstain in future from covering the upper part of their body”. According to that order women who embraced Christianity were allowed to wear Kuppayam, a loose jacket. But they were prohibited from dressing like the high caste women. Those who embraced Christianity were exempted from oozhiam service on Sunday.36

However the caste Hindus did not stop their activities. Finally on the report of the Dewan a proclamation was issued by Her Highness Parvathi Bai that “The Nadar” women who lived in the taluks of Eraniel, Kalkulam and Vilavancode were wearing upper cloth over the shoulder which was against the law and order of this Government. They refused to do bonded labour, and from now on they shall not wear cloth over their shoulders. Instead of wearing cloth over the shoulder they were advised to wear blouse as per the Proclamation made on 23.05.1829. According to that proclamation Christians were allowed to work on all days except Sundays. The law also permitted any subject to embrace any religion as they like; 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 native officials.  

The order of 1829 was not a happy augur to the people of South Travancore. Rev. Charles Mead who fought for the equal rights of the Christians and other lowcastes was not happy over that. He felt that the proclamation was an order to nullify the growth of Christianity. Moreover the order did not bring any relief to the Christians. Those who languished in the jails due to false cases were still languishing in the jails. Some of them were subjected to serious diseases. The families of those who arrested were in starvation. Relief measures were not taken. What ever relief they get, that was only from the Christian Missionaries. Considering the plight of the converts to Christianity, Rev. Mead had to fight for long time and the people had to wage a final war to get relieved from the obnoxious practice.

5.4 The Revolt of 1855-1859

The government order of 1829 did not find a solution to the problem of upper cloth and the growth of Christianity. Inspite of all these troubles and turmoils ups and downs the Christian converts were improving in all directions. Educational institutions were setup in places attached to all the

37 Yesudhas, R.N., The Upper Cloth Revolt, Trivandrum, pp.125-126.
38 Peter, D. and Ivy Peter, Liberation of the oppressed, a continuous Struggle, op.cit., p.25.
churches. This enabled the Christians to change their habits customs and manners.

The Report of 1850 clearly states that in South Travancore there were seven Mission Districts. The total number of missionaries were Nine. There were 210 Churches and 16,889 Christians. The teachers and the Catechists worked in the churches increased to 394. In the second half of the 19th century, the Christians felt that they were relieved from the bondage due to an announcement made by the government in 1829. Hence they refused to do oozhiam services to temples. In due course, the Christian women were again instructed to wear upper cloth as the caste Hindu women. The Muslims and the caste Hindus grew jealous of the free movement of Christian women with covering their bosoms. They condemned the low caste women for violating the order of 1829 and forced the government to interfere in this matter.

While situation was embroiling like this, the sepoys who worked under the British rose in revolt in 1857 in Barrackpur and Meerat region due to religious, social and economic disparity between them and the British sepoys who were working in the same capacity. The discontented Indian Maharajas agreed to take the leadership of the Revolt. Hence British government had to

concentrate much in this matter. The British were on the verge of leaving the country. Consequently, due to the sudden action of British army the mutineers could not succeed and the revolt was quelled by the British.\footnote{Venkatesan, G., \textit{History of Indian Freedom Struggle}, Rajapalayam, 2010, pp.41-47.} But this revolt was considered as a great landmark in the history of British colonialism in India.

After the revolt Indian Administration was brought under the direct control of British queen. The rule of English East India company came to an end. To this effect in 1858, Queen Victoria issued a Proclamation. The proclamation said that the British had given up their plan of annexing the state. She declared that the power and status of the princes would be respected, and the British Government would not interfere in the internal administration, customs, conventions and practices of the Indians.\footnote{Nagam Aiya, V., \textit{Travancore State Manual}, Vol.III, Trivandrum, p.114.} This made the high caste people jubilant. They began to question, the work of the missionaries and set fire to the Churches, and schools of the Christians. They tore the upper cloth of the Nadar woman. The situation became worse than before.\footnote{Samuel Matteer, \textit{op.cit.}, p.23.}

The Nadars unitedly opposed them and skirmishes took place where the high caste people lived in groups. They find it difficult to fight against the
Nairs because the Government officials backed them. The Nadars were driven to the extent of approaching Nadar villages which were along the sea coast from Kanyakumari to Thengapattanam, as they stood untied. Yet the inhuman persecution continued.

One man by name Perumal who embraced Christianity was beaten and tortured till he bleed, and a top official ridiculed him saying that he considered it suitable so that many Christian will deny Christianity. In another place an assistant pastor by name Arulanandam was tortured and his moustache was pulled out. One Devasahayam who refused to work in a Temple was imprisoned along with his wife and children, and he died in the prison. After six days his wife and children were cut into pieces. Within twenty days, eighteen Churches and eight schools in Parasala area were set on fire.

At Neyyoor area a big tree belonging to a Catechist by name Gurupatham was cut down without permission, and when the Catechist’s son questioned this, he was beaten up severely. When his parents came to his rescue they were also beaten up till they became unconscious. On December 25th some persons from Kallankuzhi were called for Government labour, being Christmas day they refused. They were tortured by the officials. Two weeks

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45 Yesudhas, R.N., A People’s Revolt in Travancore, Trivandrum, 1975, p.147.
46 Ibid., p.42.
later in the Neyyoor market, the Eranial Police and a few others assaulted the women who wore sari over the shoulder. They plundered money, jewels and other articles of trade belonging to some Nadars, bound them up and put them in prison. Later when they entered the Christian villages as a group, the rioters beat everybody whom they came across. The Peishkar of Padmanabhapuram, heard about this rioting, and sent Government servants to stop it. But he did not punish the Christians. Thus he helped the Christians. The Missionaries met Resident Cullen and the Maharaja and appealed them to interfere. Consequently, orders were passed by denouncing the riot, and a Nayar regiment was sent to Neyyoor to quell the riot.

Mr. Cullen, who was the Resident at Trivandrum as the representative of the British Queen came to the conclusion that if the missionaries had admitted women into Christianity with blouse only but without the 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 higher caste people, hoped to have the sari on the shoulder removed by orders of the Government.

However they were aware that if they crossed the limit all that they invested in this land would go waste, and so they met the Government officers often.\footnote{Yesudhas, R.N., \textit{The People’s Revolt in Travancore}, \textit{op.cit.}, p.82.}

In an attempt to get relief for the Nadars who were being tortured, Rev. Cox and other missionaries complained to the Madras Government against Dewan Krishna Rao and Resident Cullen. In addition to distributing many pamphlets to win the good will of the public, he published in detail in an English newspaper published from Madras all the atrocities that were happening here. He also wrote to the Viceroy in Delhi, and the Viceroy accepted the complaint and in turn wrote to the Madras Governor to set up an enquiry committee.\footnote{Robert L. Hardgrave, \textit{The Nadars of Tamil Nadu}, Bombay, 1969, p.63.} However, the Madras Government did not take any immediate action and no enquiry committee was formed till the end of 1858. In the meantime Dewan Madhavarao who had seen all the implications of the riot over the wearing of sari over the shoulder decided was able to satisfy the British and Travancore Government.

The trouble regarding the wearing of sari over the shoulders that occurred in some areas in the Kalkulam and Vilavancode taluks from 1810-1829 did not raise its head till 1858 in the Agastheeswaram and Thovalai taluks. There were many reasons for this. There was no Nair on that area to become involved in the riot regarding the wearing of sari over the shoulder.
Moreover Tamil women who have their body above the hip bare were considered to be naked and were not allowed to move in the villages. Women of all castes from Harijians to Brahmins went about minding the business only after wearing saris was insisted upon. It could be said that the people of this area as well as in the Tirunelveli District where Palmyrah trees were in abundance enabled them to live amicably together. Thousands of Palmyrah climbers worked here for sixth months during the season, and for the next six months in Pandiya Nadu.

Though the Vellalas of Nanchilnadu were not worried about the sari over the shoulder, they worried about the abolition of slavery. Moreover they were taken a back when the Nadar Catechists were dressed in the same way like the Brahmins and wore turbans; they bore the title “Ayyar”, their religious book was named the “Bible” and instructors were known as Teachers which was the title given to Brahmin Gurus. They were afraid that the caste system would be turned upside down and the Nadars will be given training and made to rule the country. So when opportunity arose, they strove hard to drive out Christianity from the country. As a first step the Vellalas of Nanchilnadu without much difficulty set fire to the houses and destroyed the small huts of Nadars who lived in the outskirt of big villages. On 4\textsuperscript{th} January 1859 in the village of Tazhakudy nearly 200 Vellalas came with knives and spears and attacked the Christians and beat them up severely and tore the dresses of the
women.\textsuperscript{51} They tried to set fire to the houses of the Catechists and the Christians.\textsuperscript{52} The people fled and hide themselves for three weeks. After three days nearly 500 persons came to Kumarapuram along with officers and tried to catch the hidden Christians and Catechists; but they escaped. Another Catechist who happened to come there was beaten up and imprisoned, and then entered the houses of Christians and plunder their belongings. The Christians at Arambozhi and Chembonvilai villages met with the same fate.\textsuperscript{53} On the next Sunday, the high caste people entered the Church in the village of Kattuputhoor and drove out the Catechists and others, tore to pieces their religious books, locked the Church and went away with the key. After a few days at Thittuvilai village they burnt the houses of many Nadars. On 29\textsuperscript{th} January a Church near Nagercoil was set on fire too. On 25\textsuperscript{th} January 1859 when the people gathered for Sunday worship in the Church at Kulattuvilai in the Santhapuram circle, some men sent by an officer caught hold of the Catechist, beat him up. On 30\textsuperscript{th} January in the Jamestown circle they burnt a Church and three houses of the Nadars. On the whole nine Churches and eight

\textsuperscript{51} English Records, Report of the Dewan to the Resident of Travancore, dated February 12, 1859.

\textsuperscript{52} Samuel Matteer, \textit{op.cit.}, p.302.

\textsuperscript{53} Letter from Rev. James Russel to the Resident of Travancore (Refer R.N. Yesudhas, \textit{People Revolt in Travancore}, Dramatic No.XXIII).
schools and a number of houses were destroyed. In many villages the Christians fled to safe places.\textsuperscript{54}

Peishkar Sankunni Menon was not satisfied with this. In addition to transferring many Nair officers to this place, he himself shifted his residence to Nagercoil to watch the movements of Nadar Christians.\textsuperscript{55} At his instigation the Vellalas along with the officers, moved with sticks in their hands tore the Nadar women’s saris over the shoulders on their way to shops, markets etc. Other officers also went around Nanchilnadu encouraging the revenue officers and Vellalas to do harm to the Nadars.

An elderly woman from Elanthaiadivilai was carrying in a basket, jaggery, coconut and drumsticks to the Mahathanapuram market through Kottaram. At Kottaram a small group was engaged in tearing the saris over the shoulder of Nadar women. One among the group pushed down the sari from her shoulder, and in the action her “THALI” or Wedding Chain, was snatched and she fell down. Considering this as a very bad omen she dropped her basket, showered mud and dust on the group and returned home.\textsuperscript{56} She wanted to complaint the matter to Vethamonickam Nadar; the village head man, but he was not there. Such acts of wanton mischief were causing anger

\textsuperscript{54} Yesudhas, R.N., \textit{The People’s Revolt, op.cit.}, p.108.
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Chandrodayam Mahakaviyam}, Malayalam, pp.45-46.
\textsuperscript{56} To remind this incidents even now the market is called Thaliaruthan Chantahi means a market where thali or the wedding chain was snatched.
among the Nadars. Consequently, the four sons of Vethamonickam Nadar along with some of their cousins rushed to Kottaram like wounded tigers with stones in their hands. Finding that no one was at Kottaram Junction, these youngsters entered the houses of the officers and man-hundled them, and tore the saris over the shoulder of the women in their houses. Though their parents would have considered this as a cruel act, this was indeed a beginning to check the riots regarding the tearing of the upper cloth. This created unrest throughout the land and the Nadar youths in every village got prepared to fight against their tormenters.57

Soon there was a big commotion in the market at Kottar. Under the leadership of a senior Church worker, a large body of Nadars entered the market at Kalkulam and Kottar. They tore to pieces the saris worn by high caste women and drove away all those who tried to stop them. The majority of those who took part in this connection were Catholics. After the crowd disbursed, the high caste people set fire to the houses of the Catholic fisher folk who lived close to the fish market. From there the high caste people gathered in the night and set fire to a lonely Mission bungalow nearby.

Seeing the turn that the fight had taken, the Government officials got the reinforcements of the Nair Brigade. They imprisoned Vethamonickam

Nadar of Mukilankudy and some of his nephews whom they could lay hands on. The names of 23 persons who had played a leading part in these riots and later were in hiding and their names were inscribed on stones and planted in junctions. Further it was publicly announced by tom-tom that the Government would suitably reward those persons who found them. It was published in the newspaper that one such stone was found in 1952 by the Travancore Archeological Department. But that stone has not yet been deciphered fully and added to the archaeological series.

At this juncture Mr. K. Kumaraswamy Nadar of Pottaiyadi village decided to send the persons who involved in the riot into Pandiyanadu. It was an annual feature for Mr. K. Kumaraswamy Nadar to get the palmyrah climbers from Pandiyanadu and engage them during the season here, and similarly to send to the Mirasdars there hundreds of palmyrah climbers from here during the season there. Moreover as the treasurer of the “Anti Upper Cloth Movement” he along with its leader Vethamanickam Nadar used to go to Pandiyanadu for collection of dues. Moreover the ancestors of both Kumaraswamy and Vedamanickam Nadar had come from Pandiyanadu and settled here. This relationship with the Nadars of Pandiyanadu continues to exist even today. The responsibility of taking to Pandiyanadu those persons

who got involved in the sari over shoulder riots, and whom the Government wanted to imprison or kill them fell on his shoulders.

Though the youngsters in many villages were determined to resist the high caste people, who accompanied the Government officials, the common people were afraid of them. Many families shifted their residence to Pandiyanadu. Amidst all these, the Vellalas spread the rumour that they would raze to the ground the famous Christian Church (kalkovil) at Nagercoil. Not only the Christians; but the Hindus and Catholic Nadars took this as a challenge, and they patrolled the Nagercoil area round-the-clock well armed; but nobody dared to do any harm and acts of vandalism.

The last two weeks in December 1859 was a period of extreme anxiety for the Nadars. During this period missionaries continuously forced the government to issue favourable orders. In February 1859 a memorandum was submitted to the Maharaja by the missionaries, and favourable orders were issued.\(^5^9\) Another petition was submitted to His Excellency Charles Trevellyan, Governor of Madras.\(^6^0\) He advised the Travancore Government to look into the matter immediately. But it had no effect. The Government intensified the atrocities. But the Governor was receiving letters regularly with

\(^{59}\) Memorandum submitted to Maharaja and to Charles Trevelyan, Governor of Madras, February 1859.

\(^{60}\) Yesudhas, R.N., *The People’s Revolt in Travancore*, *op.cit.*, p.152.
full details from the missionaries as well as from other Europeans. These displeased the Governor and he sent a strong letter to the Travancore Government through Major Tracy, the assistant Resident when he visited 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”.

After recovering this letter, Dewan Madhava Rao hastened to South Travancore, while camping at Kanyakumari he saw the suffering of the villagers on account of water scarcity. He arranged for the digging of wells at Government expenses in a Nadar village and named it Madhavapuram and his name engraved on a stone and fixed on the protective wall of the well. This was the first time in the history of Travancore that such a work was executed at Government expenses in a hamlet where the low castes lived. This was done to earn the goodwill of the Nadars. The Dewan invited all the Nadar leaders in and around Kanyakumari asked them two questions. i) Do your women wear sari over the shoulder?  ii) Does the law of this land permit women to wear sari over the shoulder?

The news regarding the last warning by the Governor spread throughout South Travancore. Fearing further consequences have to face the

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61 Charles Travellyan, Governor of Madras, Letter to Major Tracy, 7th February 1859, p.122.
high caste people, hesitated to continue the riot. Since the Nadars wore sari the troops did not enter the villages where high caste people lived. The missionaries were satisfied that no further destruction would be done to the Churches and schools that they had built. 62 Meanwhile, 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.” 63 This concession was accepted by the Governor as a temporary measure.

As a result His Highness Uthram Thirunal Marthanda Varma Maharaja (1857-1860) made the following Proclamation on 26.07.1858. “Nadar women can cover the upper parts of their body above the hip in any respectable way they wish; but they cannot wear sari over the shoulder like the high caste women.” 64 This restriction created discontentment among the Nadars.

63 *Letter from the Dewan of Travancore to the Resident* dated 17th May 1859, Copies of official papers, p.45.
It was the letter of 19.08.1859 from the 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”.

This Proclamation did not in the least differ from the Proclamation of 1814 made by Colnol Munro, the Resident and Dewan and the subsequent Proclamations of the next fifty years. Moreover, the Proclamation of His Highness Uthram 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”. This makes it clear that the Proclamation was made only after consultation between the Government officials and the Missionaries. 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

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65 Letter from Secretary of the Indian Government to the Dewan dated 19.08.1859.
66 Nagam Aiya, V., op.cit., p.531.
of the high caste people. They would approach the Missionaries just as it had happened during the previous half a century. With the recommendations of the missionaries these prisoners could be released, and baptized and added to the Christian fold was their expectation. It was false hope that the entire Nadar community could be brought under Christianity.

The Nadar people said that as before they might discard the blouse; but 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 proclamation of 1858 and 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 removing the missions establishment in the third upper cloth riot made him the scapegoat. On hearing this Resident Cullen honorably resigned his job.67

Normally the Nadars were not afraid of the advertisements. They expected another big riot on the sari over shoulder issue. In case such a riot erupted, they anticipated the English troops to come and quell it and to take over the Travancore Maharaja’s rule and bring the State under their direct

67 Copies of official Papers, Minute by the President, dated May 7, 1859.
rule. Then only the Christians would be free from the unjust officials and high caste Hindus.

The officials and the high caste Hindus also feared that the British would rule the State with the help of the Nadars who were being trained by the missionaries, and hence they did not want to create any riot and planned to cope up with the existing situation.

At this juncture, the missionaries demanded better legislation from the Travancore government. 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, and the advice had its effect. An order was passed by the government in 1865. It allowed all low caste women in Travancore to wear upper cloth. The power mongers and the missionaries praised him. As a result her Majesty Queen Victoria the Empress of India conferred on Dewan Madhava Rao and praised him for his ability in ruling the state. He retired in 1872 with a pension of Rs.1000/- 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.
According to another one proclamation the government declared that “The custom of the Nair women removing their top dress before the Nampoodiries, 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.”

The government Proclamation as well as the earnest wish of the Nairs did not come into force immediately. The hesitancy to give up the traditional customs had a reason, since the Nampoodiri Brahmins and the Royal family members considered it a disgrace when Nair women covered the upper part of their body before them. It was reported in the newspapers that even during the middle of the 20th century, after India attained independence, Nair women servants in the Cochin Maharaja’s Palace had to fight and achieve their rights by offering Satyagraha against the Royal orders that they should leave bare the upper half of the body. Nadar women who fought for their upper cloth in those days stressed that Nadar women should not like high caste Nair women wear sari over shoulder. There was no one to ask, “why don’t the high caste Nair women wear sari over shoulder?”.

69 *Letter from the Secretary of State for India to the Madras Government*, dated 9th August 1859.
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. Inspite of great odds and many restrictions, Nadar women began dreaming like Nair women and finally the Maharaja permitted the Nadar women to wear descent dress like the Nair women and issued orders to that effect. Thus the Nadar Christians won the battle for equal rights. The women of Avarnas as a whole got relief. Thus one battle was won. Yet another battle was on the anvil for the backward classes.