

**CHAPTER - VII**

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The beginnings of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century witnessed the emergence of social reform movements in South Travancore. In the early phase of the reform movements, the Christian missionaries raised the banner of revolt against the oppressive order, mainly the Nayar aristocrats who established their dominance in government offices and social systems. Evidently the Vellalas of South Travancore also joined hands with the Nayars and persecuted the lower communities. Emboldened by the teachings of the L.M.S., missionaries and Vaikundaswamigal<sup>1</sup> the untouchable communities of South Travancore challenged the slave labour, dress restrictions and denial of temple entry rights. A feeling of self-respect guided in the outcaste communities who' organised the movement for social justice, equality and self respect. Through oppressive systems the Nayars attempted to suppress the reform spirit that originated among the traditional outcaste communities of South Travancore.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ponnuru., Vaikunda Swamigal Valvum Valikattalum, (Tamil), New Delhi, 1983, p.60. With the coming of Vaikundaswamigal, a new sect of Hinduism had appeared as a curious phenomenon in the religious history of South Travancore. He was born in a Nadar family in 1808 A.D, at Samithoppu, a village 5 miles north west of Kanyakumari. He started his meditation in 1833 and completed a penance of 4 years. He appealed his followers to live in unity, fearlessness and with good faith. At the age of forty three he died at Ampalapathi on Monday 3 June 1851.
  2. Report on Slavery, 1841, p. 152.

In the feudal society of Travancore slavery was officially recognised. The government and the temples owned slaves. Churches as well as the rich caste Hindu landlords also owned them. Below the Nadars and the Ezhavas, even more degraded and oppressed, were the several slave castes that formed the lowest Sudras of the Travancore society. The slave caste had once been a free people. It was the feudal nature of society that the strange laws of land ownership, the agrarian economy, the division of labour and the caste system that ushered in slavery which remained a bleeding wound in the body politic of Travancore till the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

The anarchic and unsettled state of affairs that prevailed in Travancore, in the early society helped the landlords to grab more land and compelled the weaker sections to surrender the lands in their possessions and to accept the position of servile labourers. The chera-chola confrontation of the 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D let loose the new socio-economic forces.<sup>4</sup> The Nambudiri Brahmin who were at the apex of the social structure and functioned as trustees of temples misappropriated numerous temple properties and endowments and enjoyed the income derived from them.<sup>5</sup> This led eventually to the abnormal accumulation of a land and

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3. Joy Gnanadason, **A Forgotten History**, Madras, 1994, p. 28.

4. Nagam Aiya, V., Travancore State Manual, Vol. II, Trivandrum, 1906, p. 276.

5. Sreedhara Menon, A., Kerala District Gazetteer, Trivandrum, 1965, p. 273.

wealth in their hands. At the same time the properties owned by several ordinary tenants were transferred by them to the control of individual Brahmin landlords and temple managements and the properties so transferred became Brahmaswoms, and Devaswoms which by convention enjoyed immunity from forcible occupation and devastation at the hand of the enemy force.<sup>6</sup>

### **Jenmi – Kudiyan Relations**

The social system of this state led to the rise of Jenmi system in Travancore. It became the exclusive privilege of the caste Hindu Brahmins and Nayars to be Jenmies and lower caste men could never buy or own land and rise to the status of Jenmies. Power and prosperity were the unchallenged monopoly of the Jenmies. The lower castes who were given the land on lease or were employed as labourers for the cultivation of the lands, the kudiyan could be evicted at will. This system brought about an economy which exploited the tenants at the bottom and gave to those at the top, the Jenmies tremendous economic, political and social power.<sup>7</sup> It generated a large number of unprotected people who had no option but to work in the fields of the Jenmies and to do all the dirty menial jobs. The rigid rules of caste with triple social evils of untouchability, unapproachability and unseablity denied them the choice of any other

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6. **Ibid.**, p. 203.

7. Nagam Aiya, V., op. cit., Vol. II, p. 278.

work. All the tasks of importance were shared by the Brahmins and the Nayers. It was the division of labour that finally led to slavery causing sensible decline in the moral nature and character of the people. Thousands of agricultural labourers became agricultural slaves attached to the soil and were brought and sold like cattles. Slavery in Travancore became hereditary. Unlike in other parts of India where it existed, once born to a slave family remained a slave all through life, passing down this ignominy to his or her posterity. **Dharma Bhoomi** the land of charity had become the land of **Adharma** the home of slavery.<sup>8</sup>

## Slavery

The missionaries developed conflicting attitude towards the social tyranny of Travancore state and condemned the humiliating feudal vestige, the institution of slavery. They represented the Maharaja to enact compassionate reform measures for the liberation of the servile workers.<sup>9</sup> After several stages of agitations by the missionaries and pleas by the reform bodies, the Maharaja issued his first antislavery proclamation on 14 October 1853 and thereby granted emancipation to children born of all government slaves after 15 September 1853.<sup>10</sup> The further proclamations issued on 24 June 1855 completely abolished slavery in Travancore.

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8. Report on Slavery, 1841, p. 153.

9. Kusuman, K.K., **Slavery in Travancore**, Madras, 1989, pp. 101-103.

10. English Records, Trivandrum Secretariat, Cover File No.286, copy of the Proclamation abolishing Slavery, 15 September 1853.

The emancipation statutes of the Travancore Maharaja were not taken serious by the Nayars of South Travancore. A kind of aggreastic slavery still continued in the South Travancore society. Especially the failure of the government to adopt subsequent ameliorative measures compelled the slave community to lead a dependent life on the land owning communities. This helped continuation of the servile system in another form with the same severity and cruelty. As a result the Sambhavar outcastes of South Travancore became converts to alien faith and sought the status of non-Hindus. On becoming non-Hindus they were exempted from all social obligations and restrictions. Yet the Nayar landlords of South Travancore continued the system of social disability and persecuted the servile community.

In the Thovalai taluk, Thazhakudi was a famous village where large caste Hindu Nayar landlords commanded servile services of the former slave community of Sambhavar.<sup>11</sup> When a landlord started ploughing the paddy-fields on an auspicious day, he ordered all the slaves to render their services. Madathy, a slave caste woman living in the village, due to her advanced state of pregnancy failed to report duty in the field.<sup>12</sup> It is reported being starved, sick and weak she could hardly move around.

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11. Joy Gnanadason, **op.cit.**, p.17.

12. **Ibid.**

Naked, starving children with matted hair and filthy clothes tugged at her for food as she lay crumpled on the floor in the corner of her hovel between fatigue and semi-consciousness.<sup>13</sup> But the landlord sent his slaves to take her to the field. Then she was yoked to a plough along with a buffalo and to pull the plough to the utter horror of everyone. It resulted in her death.<sup>14</sup> In fact this gory incident was one of the many acts of inhuman cruelty meted out to the low caste slaves by their Nayar landlords in South Travancore. The encouragement given by the Salvation Army to the Sambhavar community further aggravated the persecution of the lower communities. Thus the Nayars even in the end of the 19th century practised slavery and dehumanised the lower communities.

### **Upper Cloth Movement**

In the early nineteenth century European ideals of life and manners began to take root among the people. Orthodox views regarding the frame work of society had slowly began to give way to new and liberal ideas of the brotherhood of man.<sup>15</sup> Encouraged by the orders of Munro dated 7 Edavam 989, (1813) the Nadar women began to wear the upper cloth along with the jacket.<sup>16</sup> The caste hindus could not compromise

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13. Report of the Travancore District Committee for 1881, Thittuvilai mission District, p. 23.

14. **Ibid.**

15. Report on Slavery 1841, p.153.

16. Sreedhara Menon, A., **Kerala District Gazetteers**, Trivandrum, pp. 227-228.

with this violation of a deep rooted custom. However the first agitation, for the upper cloth right started in 1822 when the Nayars in Kalkulam mocked, abused and ill-treated the Nadar females who appeared in public with decent dress with upper cloths and jackets worn by them were torn.<sup>17</sup> Soon the Nadar got a favourable decree from the Padmanabhapuram Court in 1823,<sup>18</sup> which confirmed the proclamation of Munro. Having felt annoyed, the Nayars resumed persecution and subsequently the royal proclamation of 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 1829 prohibited the use of upper cloth by Nadar women.<sup>19</sup> Even after the prohibition the Nadar women moved out wearing the upper cloth. Hence the upper cloth riot continued from 1828 to 1830 with severe persecution.<sup>20</sup> It was more intense in the Neyyoor mission district. It was made a regular practice for the Nayars to gather at market places to assault the Nadar women. The administration sent troops to suppress the rebellion under the command of captain Daby. However with the coming of Vaikundaswarny and a subsequent reformation spirit in the minds of Hindu Nadars, the movement for upper cloth right assumed a new dimension.<sup>21</sup> A conflicting atmosphere was created by the developments during the first decade of the later 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>22</sup> The edict of 1851 deprived the

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17. Agur, C.M., **Church History of Travancore**, Madras, 1903, p. 98.

18. Kareem, C.K., Kerala under Haider Ali and Tippu Sultan, Cochin, 1973, p. 179.

19. Agur, C.M., **op.cit.**, Appendix - XVIII, p.18.

20. Yesudhas, R.N., British Policy in Travancore, Trivandrum, 1977, p. 178.

21. John Jacob, A., **A History of London Missionary Society in South Travancore**, Trivandrum, 1990, p. 50.

22. Ponnur, R., **Vaikundaswami and Social Reform Movement**, Unpublished, M.Phil, Dissertation, Madurai, 1980, p. 75.

Christians of the status and privileges that they enjoyed and subjected them to serious disadvantages.<sup>23</sup> It sanctioned the resistance of the caste Hindus. However a new era of persecution and severity began when Madhava Rao became the Dewan.<sup>24</sup> Having observed the conflicting sentiments prevailed between the Nadars and the Nayers on 27<sup>th</sup> December 1858, he issued a proclamation "requiring the Shanars to adhere to the usage hitherto observed by their women of not covering the body with an upper cloth like the Sudra women".<sup>25</sup> This supplied fuel to the fire of hostility and resulted in serious violence. Soon it spread violently to all parts of South Travancore and from 25<sup>th</sup> December 1850 onwards Christian Nadars were molested throughout Neyyoor and Parassala mission districts.<sup>26</sup> In January 1859 riots broke out in Trivandrum, Santhapuram, Nagercoil and Kottar.<sup>27</sup> In all these places women were assaulted. Soon the Hindu and Christian Nadars retaliated against the caste Hindu women.<sup>28</sup> The revolt which lasted for five months ended with a proclamation on 26 July 1859 allowing Nadar women to

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23. Moody, J.N., The Chief Secretary to Government, Fort St. George, dated 17<sup>th</sup> January 1853, Cover file No. 215 of 1853, pp. 36-38.

24. Yesudas, R.N., **British Policy in Travancore (1805-1859)**, Trivandrum, 1977, p. 45.

25. English Records, Trivandrum Cover File No.2115, 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1859, p. 14.

26. **Ibid.**, 12<sup>th</sup> February 1859, p. 18.

27. **Ibid.**, 21<sup>st</sup> January 1859, pp. 16-18.

28. **Ibid.**, p. 18.

cover their bosoms in any manner. In the continuous operation of the conflict Nayar mass uprising formed a distinct phase. They let loose a new wave of persecution at the aggressive social status occupied by Nadars of South Travancore. The uprisings led to the direct collision with Nadars.

Indications of the general ill feeling of the Nayars towards the Nadars became more marked by the end of 1858. A Christian Nadar woman was assaulted in the public market at Neyyattinkara and her jacket was torn by a group of Nayars.<sup>29</sup> Though the case was proved in the court the offender was let off with a little fine in order to prevent recurrence of similar crimes. The Nayars opened a new phase of confrontation with the Nadars when the royal proclamation was read in the court of Travancore by the Governor Lord Harris. In the continuous agitation of twenty days in the Parassala Mission District three chapels and three smaller places of worship were set on fire.<sup>30</sup> In the Neyyoor mission district the Nayars began to rob and ill-treat many of the poorer classes. They sided with the officials to inflict infiltration upon **Gurupatham**, the Catechist and his family.<sup>31</sup> The Nayar uprising became more serious

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29. Mateer, S., **The Land of Charity**, London, John Snow, 1871, p. 293.

30. Messiah, L.A. (ed.), **Abbe Memorial London Missionary Pastorate Church, Platinum Jubilee Souvenir**, Parasala, 1775, pp. 2-3.

31. Oliver, P., **Home Church Irenepuram CSI**, Centenary Jubilee Souvenir, 1970, p. 13.

when it burst out in Nanjilnad. Here the Vellalas joined with the Nayars in perpetuating the atrocity on the Nadars.<sup>32</sup> On 4<sup>th</sup> January more than 200 Nayars with a group of Vellalas of Thazhakudy entered the houses of Nadars with clubs and knives. They attacked the inhabitants, stripped off the jackets of the women, torn the cloths and cruelly beat and kicked them.<sup>33</sup> Fearing subsequent attacks, the Nadars fled from the village on 7<sup>th</sup> January. Another Nayar mob gathering of about 500 entered Kumarapuram during day time. They searched the house of the Christian catechists, and chased the Nadars.<sup>34</sup> soon the violent mob made forcible entry in to the homes of the Nadars, broke and pillaged the furniture and molested the defenseless women.<sup>35</sup>

In the violent outrage brokeout in December 1858 and January 1859 the Nadars suffered untold miseries. The violence ignited out of the Nadar's assumption of the right to wear upper cloth, soon became a movement for destruction of the property of Nadars in South Travancore. Hence this Nayar-Nadar confrontation actually laid a ground for the violent reaction of the Nadars and for a final fight against the lawless acts of their powerful enemies.

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32. English Records Cover File Mo. 2115 Letter of Missionaries, LMS, F.Baylis to the Resident, pp. 44-48.
33. Yesudhas, R.N., **A People's Revolt in Travancore, Document**, No XIII, pp. 196-198.
34. Mateer.S., **op.cit.**, p. 302.
35. George, D.H., **Kumari Mavatta Pennurimai Porattam**, (Tamil), Marthandam, 1982, p. 92.

In fact the upper cloth agitation by the Nadars of South Travancore represented the reaction of a pioneer depressed community against the social restrictions and humiliations meted out to the lower communities. Hence the agitation was primarily against the Nayars, who were the real vanguard of the exclusive social systems and caste Hindu privileges. In several places of South Travancore, the Nadars faced the virulent Nayar conservatives who opposed modernization process in South Travancore. It gave rise to subsequent social movements and mobilizations for the social equality and identity of the lower communities.

### **Agrarian Reforms and Temple Entry Movement**

After the upper cloth agitations, there was an era of agrarian reforms in Travancore society that consolidated the economic position of the Nayars of South Travancore. As **Kudiyans**, they came to enjoy permanent tenancy rights and asserted their position, as noble patrons of the land. Subsequently they attempted reorganisation of their family management based on patrilineal system and established status for individuals. Yet they wanted to perpetuate the system of social inequality by prohibiting the lower communities from entering the temples.<sup>36</sup> The depressed communities of South Travancore demanded the right of temple

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36. *"The temples occupied a highly conspicuous place in the life of the Hindus"*. Sobhanan, B., **"Temple Entry Movement in Kerala"**, Journal of Kerala Studies, Vol. XII, part 1-4, p.195.

entry in order to boost their social status and cultural identity. Thus what was inevitable was, the movement for right of temple entry in the Travancore state. Originally the temple entry movement was started' in Travancore State with Vaikkam Satyagraha in 1924. The Ezhavas, who formed the major non-caste Hindu community launched the movement.<sup>37</sup> Their Organisation known as SNDP drew the attention of the government and demanded the removal of **tindal palakas** (the prohibition boards) placed near the temples.<sup>38</sup> At this juncture, the Nayar Service Society and Harijan Seva Sangh recommended the government for the granting of temple entry right to the non-caste Hindus.<sup>39</sup> When the Satyagraha movement became vigorous, the government as a compromise settlement declared the opening of roads on three sides of the Vaikkam temple.<sup>40</sup> But the lower communities were not permitted to have a glance of the deity in the **Garbagraha**.

In continuation of the Vaikkam Satyagraha the temple entry movement was started in South Travancore with the historical Suchindram Satyagraha. This was aimed at securing the right to walk along the roads surrounding the Siva temple at Suchindram. The Satyagraha commenced

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37. Ravindran, T.K, **Vaikkam Satyagraha and Gandhi**, Trichur, 1975, pp. 102-103.  
 38. Ravindran, T.K., **Asan and Social Revolution in Kerala**, Trivandrum, 1971, p. 69.  
 39. Basthurai, S., Suchindram Satyagraha, an Unpublished M.Phil Dissertation, M.K. University, Madurai, p. 95.  
 40. English Records, Trivandrum Secretariat, File No. D.Dis. 1478.

on 19 February 1926 -under the leadership of M. Subramonia Pillai, M.E. Naidu, H. Perumal Panikkar, P.C. Thanumalaya Perumal and Gandhidas.<sup>41</sup> The Nayars of Suchindram and its suburbs took keen interest to suppress the Satyagraha movement.

In collaboration with the conservative Vellala group they started what was known as anti-satyagraha. They took all precaution to thwart the movement. They put up barricades on the roads leading to the temple.

The satyagrahis sat on the roads where they were prevented from going ahead. The anti-satyagrahis had enjoyed the support of the police officials and government servants. Prohibitory orders had been issued by the District magistrate to the leaders.<sup>42</sup> All forcible attempts of the satyagrahis to enter the prohibited road were prevented by the police. The anti-satyagrahis with the support of the government prohibited M.E.Naidu, the leader of the movement from making public speeches or taking part in public meetings or entering specified areas.<sup>43</sup>

Following the arrival of Gandhi into the area and his negotiations with the government the latter promised that the roads at Suchindram would be opened to the **avarnas** within a month after

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41. **Ibid.**, Letter dated 21<sup>st</sup> January 1926.

42. Travancore Legislative Council Proceedings, Vol. IX, p. 6.

43. Sobhanan, B., **Temple Entry Movement in Kerala**, Journal of Kerala Studies, Vol. XII, Part 1-4, p. 203.

stopping the satyagraha. But the strong pro-savarna attitude of the government and opposition of the orthodox **savarnas** made the government to ignore the promise given to the satyagrahis. Therefore on 12 May 1926 again satyagraha was resumed.<sup>44</sup> The satyagrahis challenged the government restrictions and continued the agitation with vigour. They faced the lathi-charge and proceeded towards the temples that spread alarm and terror in every direction of Suchindram. Hard pressed by the agitations the ruling sovereign on the 8 November 1932 appointed a committee, known as 'Temple Entry Enquiry Committee for the purpose of examining the question of temple entry.'<sup>45</sup>

The committee was the representative body of orthodox pandits, educated gentlemen with advanced view and representative of the communities to whom temple entry had not been granted.<sup>46</sup> The president of the committee V.S.Subramoniya Aiyar published the report on "January 1974 with the suggestion for a partial removal of restrictions and recommendations for throwing open all public roads and buildings to every community irrespective of caste, creed and colour."<sup>47</sup> It touched only the fringe of the problem and the main disability, still remained.

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44. Menon, P.K.K., **The History of Freedom Movement in Kerala**, Vol. II, Trivandrum, 1972, pp. 300-301.

45. Ramachandran, P., **M.E. Naidu and Suchindram Satyagraha**, Nagercoil, 1975, pp. 14-15. ,

46. Report of the Temple Entry Enquiry Committee, p. 1.

47. Proceedings of the Travancore Sri Moolam Assembly, Vol. VII, Trivandrum, 1937, p. 713.

Though the appointment of a temple entry enquiry committee struck a hope of confidence in the circle of the satyagrahis the outcome aggravated the agitation. Throughout the state the satyagrahis contemplated to enter all roads, tanks and wells and satroms which were thrown open to the caste hindus and non-hindus but not to non-caste hindus.<sup>48</sup> In order to nullify the attempts of the satyagrahis, the government gave orders to throw open forty roads in the Travancore state to all classes of people.<sup>49</sup> A conference of Devaswom Commissioner, Maramat Engineer, Chief Engineers, etc. was held and it resolved that those public roads, wells, tanks, satroms maintained out of public fund should be immediately thrown open to all the people but those which were maintained out of Devaswom funds would be closed to thenon-caste hindus.<sup>50</sup>

The enlightened sovereign Sri Chitra Thirunal reexamined the whole question in the light of the external truths embodied in the vedas and the upanishads. The enlightened public opinion and the pulse of the caste Hindus were also towards the grant of temple entry right to the **avarnas**. However a final approach was effected with the historic proclamation on 12 November 1936.<sup>51</sup> The temple entry proclamation by

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48. English Records, Trivandrum, Confidential section, C.S. File No. 1365, Telegram, private secretary to Maharaja of Travancore, Trivandrum, 20 March 1936.

49. **Ibid.**, 21 May 1936.

50. **Ibid.**, 26 May 1936.

51. The Temple Entry Proclamation Memorial Souvenir, Trivandrum, 1942, p. 1.

the sublimity of its conception the loftness of its ideals and the" magnitude of its effects, occupies a unique place in the history of social and religious reform in India.<sup>52</sup> The proclamation introduced revolutionary changes in the Hindu society by destroying the last prestige of discrimination against two million human beings.<sup>53</sup> It is an epoch making manifestation of unparalleled beneficence. It is an act of justice to the submerged hindus in the state and the Magna Carta of a resurrected Hinduism purified, ennobled and equipped to prosper and conquer.<sup>54</sup>

The proclamation created a healthy and vigorous spiritual life and helped the advancement of the various castes and classes among the Hindus.<sup>55</sup> With the proclamation the suffering section found a remedy to many disabilities. It sanctioned temple entry right, road entry right and common rights to enter all public wells tanks, satroms and rooms.<sup>56</sup>

The Nayar Service Society and other Hindu Mission began to reconvert those who flow from Hindu fold. As agrarian tenants the reconverted depressed class coolies were preferentially treated by the

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52. Travancore Administration Report 1936-37, Trivandrum, p. 7.

53. **Ibid.**, p. 126.

54. **Ibid.**, p. 134.

55. Sreedhara Menon, A., **Kerala District Gazetteer**, p. 274.

56. English Records, Trivandrum, Confidential C.S.File No.1383, Letter from Chief Secretary to the Police Commissioner, Trivandrum, 26 May 1937.

Hindu landlords<sup>57</sup> The out caste Parayas and Pulayas gained the right to stand along with Brahmin before the sanctum sanctorum of the Hindu temples. It struck a period of bleak to the missionaries of Travancore. Further the proclamation radiated a fusion of sub castes which in turn fostered inter-marriages of different castes. It ushered in the birth of a new era of equality and freedom.<sup>58</sup>

The Nayar organisation supported the cause of the **avarnas** in North Travancore during the Vaikkam Satyagraha days. The different socio-economic situations in South Travancore made the Nayars to adopt anti-satyagraha movement. Their strong association with orthodox vellala groups might have perhaps the reason for the indifferent attitude of the Nayars towards the temple entry movement of South Travancore. The economic consideration also influenced the Nayars to develop anti-satyagraha movement. In pre-temple entry era, the Nayars had exclusive control over the temple lands as tenants. But after temple entry right the avarna had also come to possess the natural rights over temple properties. Developing apprehension against this the Nayars of South Travancore played the role of the anti-satyagrahis in the temple entry movement.

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57. English Records, Trivandrum, Confidential, C.S. File No. 1383, Trivandrum, 8 March 1937.

58. **Ibid.**