



Breaking Caste Bonds: The Nadar Community and the Fight for Equality in Travancore

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Abstract

Kerala has experienced discrimination and segregation based on factors such as caste, race, ethnicity, or social status making it crucial to recognize and dismantle these harmful practices to foster a truly inclusive and equitable society in Kerala. Bound by threads of oppression, the Nadar community rose against the cruel tapestry of caste hierarchy. The famous "breast cloth agitation," a scarlet stain upon their dignity, fuelled their fight for freedom. Women, their bodies the battleground, unfurled the banner of resistance, their voices weaving a symphony of dissent against immobility and injustice. This potent chorus of liberation echoed across Kerala, unfurling a tide of reform that threatened to unravel the very fabric of social inequity. However, it also acknowledges that over time, there have been significant efforts to dismantle or reform these systems. The title clearly outlines the chronological progression of events, starting with the Nadars and Channar Lahala. In the annals of Kerala's social history, the Channar Lahala stand as a pioneering moment, marking a watershed in the struggle for equality and the dismantling of oppressive social norms. The revolt that Nadar Christians initiated from 1822 to 1859, marked a symbolic act of defiance against the oppressive practice of upper caste monopolizing the right to wear upper cloth. Restive and unwilling to endure their plight silently, the resolute Nadar caste of Travancore took proactive measures by initiating a tranquil conversion movement to Christianity, strategically signalling their discontent with the high castes. The Channar riot encapsulated a vehement fight for the fundamental right of women to don clothing. The Channar Lahala uprising, a pivotal movement in Kerala's social history, significantly challenged the entrenched caste system and paved the way for the advancement of women's rights. Examining this narrative, the discourse scrutinizes the crucial role played by Christianity, the formidable leadership of women, and the profound repercussions stemming from this historic uprising.

Keywords: travancore, channarahala, Christian missionaries, nadar,janmi-kudiyam, kuppayam(jacket), Melmundu,(upper cloth) Vedamanikam, ringeltaube william tobias, robert caldwell, vaikunda swamy, rev charles mead, samuel mateer, catechist

Unravelling the Nadars' origins leads us to the Teri Palmyra forests of Tiruchendur, where Hardgrave believes their story began, "Beneath the teris, Nadars insist on the presence of a former kingdom's ruins, testament to its faded grandeur,"¹ providing a connection to a specific environment and geographical location. This connection offers a fascinating starting point for researching the Nadar community's historical migration and cultural practices, as it points to a significant relationship with the Teri Palmyra forests of Tiruchendur. Within the teris' domain, the Nadars had long established their residence, deriving sustenance as toddy tappers from the resilient Palmyra palm.² Nadar origins are attributed to diverse locales: the Cauvery region within Chola territory,

Madurai, and the southern expanse of Travancore.³ As the Nadars are predominantly found in Tamil Nadu, particularly in the southern districts like Tirunelveli, Thoothukudi, and Kanyakumari, the Teri palmyra forests of Tiruchendur within this state could indeed be their ancestral homeland. The Nadars,⁴ also known as Santors⁵ in Tamil and Channan in corrupted Malayalam, indeed have a rich and storied history that spans across the ages. The female is known as Shanatti⁶ or female Shanar, offering specific insight into gendered language within the community. The term "Nadan" refers to a ruler⁷ of a country or village, or someone who resides in a rural setting. The scholarly interpretation of the title varies significantly among erudite circles.⁸ This title is adopted by the Shanans, who prefer to identify themselves as Nadans rather than Shanans. This suggests a hierarchy within the Shanar community, with the Nadans occupying the highest social position.⁹ The titles Mukkundan and Servai are also found.¹⁰ It highlights their varied names across different languages and regions. Historical evidence suggests that they were venerated as deities according to the Amarak Puranam.¹¹ Ravana's prime minister Mahodara was a Shaunaun.¹² When Rama's army seized the prosperous northern districts, they permitted the Shanars to maintain their Palmyra groves undisturbed.¹³ These remarks shed light on the historical legal privileges wielded by the Nadans in South India. Possession of the disputed land would be awarded to the Nadan unless the opponent could provide evidence of purchase. Palm sap, a highly profitable product, is consumed fresh, fermented, or processed into sugar or spirits through distillation. Notably, distillation is not a practice followed by the Christian Nadars.¹⁴ Shanars have frequently been noted for their caste-specific abstinence from intoxicating beverages.¹⁵ Their ordinary occupation is the climbing of the Palmyra¹⁶ to tap the tree to collect the sap, and manufacture the palm sugar. Regarding Tirunelveli Shanars, Caldwell, based on his long experience with the Shanars, posited that the Shanars occupy an intermediary status between the Vellalers and the Pariar slaves.¹⁷ They can be broadly categorized as belonging to the upper echelon of the lower classes or the lower tier of the middle classes—impoverished, but not destitute.¹⁸ It's important to consider the colonial context under which Caldwell conducted his research. Colonial classifications of caste and social hierarchies often oversimplified complex social realities. While occupying an intermediary position, the Shanars could still face discrimination and limitations compared to higher castes, highlighting the limitations of such social systems. When the Christian Nadars as a consequence of their upward mobility sought a history for themselves which would silence their degradation at the hands of the upper castes.¹⁹ In 1874, they attempted to enter the Minakshi temple²⁰ in Madura unsuccessfully. Later, they seek permission for sacred thread use and wedding

palanquins. Claiming royal descent, they identify as Kshatriyas²¹ in legal papers, name schools Kshatriya academy, and mimic sacred thread ceremonies.²² They argue that "Shanan" should be called "Sanror," meaning "learned" or "noble," and that the Shanar community belongs to the Kshatriya caste.²³ Not until 1921 did the administration under the leadership of the Madras Presidency officially replace the term "Shanar" with "Nadar." The term "Shanar" remained in official use until that pivotal year.²⁴ The Shanans have a great objection to being called either Shanar or Marameri (tree climber) and much prefer Nadan.²⁵

The campaign was led by a section of the Christian Nadars against Rev Robert Caldwell's book *The Tinnevely Shanars*.²⁶ This desired history aimed to erase or downplay the past injustices and discrimination faced by the Nadars at the hands of higher castes. The campaign could be interpreted as a quest for self-representation. The Nadars, perhaps dissatisfied with historical portrayals by outsiders like Caldwell, might want to control their narrative and emphasize positive aspects of their history. The book likely documented the historical oppression of the Nadars, which contradicted the sanitized version of their past they sought to establish. Erasing past injustices might aim to avoid reliving those painful experiences and fostering resentment. However, ignoring historical realities can impede addressing systemic issues and achieving true justice. The Shanars, denizens of both South Travancore and Tinnevely,²⁷ (now Tirunelveli) share a common social stratum.²⁸ This suggests shared historical experiences, cultural practices, and perhaps similar challenges faced by the community across these geographical boundaries. In Thirunelveli among the Shanans of the south, the first convert from this class was a man of Kalankudiyiruppu some ten miles east of Sattankulam.²⁹ Receiving the name of David,³⁰ he was put to work in his native place and the conversion of Shanans, who now form the bulk of the Protestant community began on a large scale. Mudalur, the first town was established as a Christian settlement before 1800; and between 1800 and 1803 over five thousand Shanans in the South of Tiruchendur and Nanguneri taluks were admitted to Christianity. Notably, a substantial portion within each province has embraced Christianity, making it their faith of choice.³¹ Historical records suggest that Christian missionaries first arrived in Tinnevely, predating their arrival in South Travancore by several decades.³² This early introduction of Christianity likely had a significant impact on the religious landscape of the region.

Thomas Munro formerly Governor of Madras remarks he finds one man from Nadan possessed the kingly quality of an Ajanubahu.³³ The association of the Ajanubahu with royalty suggests that it was once seen as a sign of strength, health, and leadership qualities. Rev. S. Mateer claimed Shanans descended from Adi, a Pariah

woman. Adi taught them palm tree climbing and created protective medicine. This folklore extends to squirrels, who also enjoy immunity from falls.³⁴ The protective medicine adds folklore, hinting at a socio-historical context. Palm tree climbing, associated with risk and marginalized communities, symbolizes resilience and survival traditions

Despite their noble past, the glory of Nadars as Kings³⁵ and warriors seemed to have been buried under the sands of time, prompting a call for deep research. Formidable arguments necessitate unwavering dedication, discerning acumen, and, paramountly, an authentic passion for veracity.³⁶ It is proposed that investigating the puzzle of how their splendour as monarchs and warriors gradually succumbed to obscurity is an imperative focal point for research. The hereditary occupation involves cultivating and scaling the Palmyra palm and extracting its sap, which is then processed into a coarse form of sugar through boiling.³⁷ Owing to their involvement in toddy-related activities, the Nadars were barred from entering temples constructed by castes positioned hierarchically above them.³⁸ Nonetheless, scant evidence supports the notion that the Nadars were the progeny of later Pandya rulers. The conviction that the Nadars had once been the sovereigns of Tamil Nadu became entrenched as dogma within the Nadar community during the 19th century.³⁹ These claims are not baseless. In other words, there is evidence to support the claims. The customs and traditions observed by the Nelamaikkarars, along with the existence of archaeological remains beneath the Teri Palmyra forests of Tiruchendur and the ancient Pandyan capital city of Korkai,⁴⁰ where the Nadar population is concentrated, raises the possibility that they may very well be the direct descendants of the early Pandyas. The Shanans who are engaged in the Palmyra (*Borassus flabellifer*) forests in extracting the juice of the palm tree climb with marvellous activity and dexterity.⁴¹ The Palmyra palm (*Borassus flabellifer*)⁴² is known as Panei in Tamil and Pana in Malayalam. There is a proverb that, if you desire to climb trees, you must be born a Shanana.⁴³ A Palmyra climber scales 40-50 trees (40-50 feet tall) three times daily. Bishop Caldwell tells of a man on a Palmyra palm's stalk; it broke, but he landed safely on a leaf parachute. Woodpeckers are called Shanara Kurivi by birdcatchers because they climb trees like Shanans.⁴⁴ The excerpt highlights the extraordinary skill and association of the Shanar community with palm tree climbing in several ways, their skill is perceived as almost innate, almost like a birthright, the physically demanding nature of their work and the unique skill they possess, their presence of mind and ability to improvise even in dangerous situations.

The Shanars exclusively inhabit the southern districts of Travancore, spanning from the cape to Trivandrum. Some scholars assert that the Shanars, originally from Jaffna in Ceylon, established themselves in Tinnevely, with an additional group purportedly arriving via sea to the southern parts of Travancore.⁴⁵ The Shanar emigrants from Ceylon are Hindus not of the Brahmanical but of the Tamil or aboriginal race.⁴⁶ According to Hardgrave, the Nadars of Southern Travancore moved there from Tirunelveli in the 16th century. Most of them worked as Palmyra climbers, and some were also tenants under Nair or Vellalar landlords. The affluent Nadars, known as Nadans, considered themselves superior and had control over their lands, enjoying special privileges under the Raja. However, the climbers faced social challenges due to Travancore's strict caste system. The existence of Kalla or Pseudo Shanars as slaves of wealthy Shanars points to a history of internal oppression and power dynamics within the community.⁴⁷ The Shanars, an agrarian community, primarily functioned as sub-tenants under the dominion of Nairs or Sudras. Despite enduring oppression and degradation, they maintained a resilient connection to a dignified lineage, harbouring both intellectual potential and an intense ambition for securing influential roles in governance. The Shanars, collectively dissatisfied with their social standing, were inclined to expeditiously and substantially embrace Christianity in the early stages of the Christian mission, driven by this discontent.⁴⁸ In South Travancore, Shanar women were treated harshly. They weren't allowed to wear clothes above their waist, walk with shoes, or carry umbrellas. They couldn't wear gold jewellery or even speak the common language. They had to carry water on the ground, not on their hips, and could only build small houses. They were often forced to work for free or very little money, serving the Sudras and the government primitive superstitions, Shanars show loyalty, modesty, honesty, gratitude, and open-mindedness, contrasting with some Hindu classes. Their simpler beliefs, less captivating than Brahmins', may make them more receptive to gospel teachings.⁴⁹

Ayya Vaikundar: A Prophet of Change and Social Justice for the Nadar Community

Muthukutty (Ayya Vaikundar,⁵⁰ (1809–1851) Ayya Vaikundar, born into the Nadar community, boldly challenged the caste system, advocating equality and empowering his people for notable social and economic progress. Ayya Vaikundar established Ayyavazhi, offering alternative sacred spaces ("*Pathis*" and "*Nizhal Thankals*")⁵¹ to marginalized communities excluded from traditional temples. The creation of inclusive temples along these pathis sparked the Great Revolution, where devotees, disciples, and followers led a collective exemplary life. These shrines reject idol worship, featuring only a saffron-covered pedestal and a large mirror

behind it.⁵² Vaikunda Swamis formed Samatva Samaj⁵³ by uniting seventeen lower-caste groups within society. The initial challenge to the caste and religious system involved implementing Samapanti Bhojana.⁵⁴ Collecting from all castes, they cooked together and shared a common bowl. His sacred volumes spread through disciples, fostering spiritual awareness among oppressed communities. Ayya Vaikundar, revered as "Ayya," introduced Ayyavazhi, a simple yet profound path to connect with the divinity within each individual. During the time of the missionary of Ringeltaube William Tobias the tribe of Shanars was very numerous in Travancore.⁵⁵ The reality, however, is that when the Travancore state issued the initial decree granting Christian Shanar women the right to cover their breasts in 1812, Vaikunda Swamy was merely four years old. By the time the definitive order, permitting both Christian and Hindu Shanar women to cover their breasts, was issued in 1859, he had been deceased for a period exceeding eight years.⁵⁶ The "Sri Vaikunda Swamy cult" surfaced amid the Shanars of South Travancore in the 1830s, a time marred by organized repression targeted specifically at Shanar Christian converts. Despite the chronological incongruity, the passage steadfastly acknowledges Vaikunda Swamy's substantive contribution to the social movement, particularly his association with the upper cloth revolt in later phases.⁵⁷ The Hindu Nadar women also began to imitate the Christian Nadar women. This underscores the indomitable cohesion persisting within the Nadar community, unwavering even in the face of intricate religious distinctions. His concepts of "Samatva Samaj," "Samapanthi Bhojanam," "Pathikal," "Nizhal Tangal," etc., underscore the belief in equality for everyone. The influence of this man, who contributed ideas to the Renaissance, was initially confined to South Travancore and a few areas of the KKanyakumari district, particularly among the oppressed classes. As a result, his greatness took some time to reach the broader masses.

Seeds of Change: Christian Missionaries and the Nadar Community in Travancore

Untouchables nationwide and the Nadars of Travancore confronted brutal discrimination and social exclusion. Openly challenging oppressors through protests risked defeat and increased disadvantage.⁵⁸ Despite the risks, these groups maintained a strong desire for improvement in their living conditions and escape from the oppressive realities they faced. The aspirations of the Shanars, Pariahs, and similar groups extended beyond mere material advancement; they sought both social reform and an elevation in social status.⁵⁹ It was almost impossible to change this situation for the lower castes without external help.⁶⁰ At the same time, the upper castes did not want such a change.⁶¹ Amidst the Nadars, European missionaries did more than deliver a new religion's gospel; they offered the tantalizing prospect of secular salvation. This salvation promised liberation

from the age-old shackles of tradition that had bound the Nadars to social disadvantage and economic subservience. The London Missionary Society's initiatives in Southern Travancore sparked the initial flames of social reform within the Nadar community, igniting a movement that sought to cast off the oppressive weight of centuries. Past riots were ignited by seemingly trivial sparks, such as a man traversing a road, a woman's attire, or the act of entering a temple. To an uninitiated observer, the persistence of such antiquated customs in Travancore might appear mystifying, a relic of a bygone era. Among Protestant missionary efforts in southern India, the earliest large-scale, organized movements based on core principles of the faith began in Tirunelveli and later spread to South Travancore.⁶² In Tirunelveli, the Nadars played a major role in the early Protestant mass movements. The endeavours of Christian missionaries⁶³ have been instrumental in effecting myriad societal transformations in Kerala. Rev. William Tobias Ringeltaube born in 1770 at Scheidelwitz, near Brieg, in Prussia⁶⁴ (LMS missionary from Germany)⁶⁵ and Rev Charles Mead (England) were missionaries who played a significant role effort that led to the conversion of many Nadar people to Christianity.⁶⁶

In Travancore, the first converts to Christianity were not Nadars, but Sambavars,⁶⁷ then known as Pariahs. This detail challenges the narrative of Nadars being the sole driving force of Christian conversion in the region. It underscores the diversity of caste groups who embraced Christianity and the potential for different communities to be receptive to the faith's message. Vedamanikam, a remarkable Adi Dravida of the Sambavar caste,⁶⁸ (earlier name Maha Rasan, a Pariah caste)⁶⁹ was literate and owned land before embracing Christianity. Despite being denied the formal right to attend school, some individuals within the "untouchable" community achieved literacy independently. This reveals resilience and a strong thirst for knowledge, even against systemic barriers. The specific mention of Vedamanickam, the "pioneer convert in Travancore," serves as a concrete example of pre-existing literacy⁷⁰ among marginalized communities. His literacy played a role in his interaction with Christian missionaries and potentially contributed to his leadership within the early Christian community. His devotion to Hindu Gods led him on a pilgrimage.⁷¹ Vedamanikam's journey can be seen as a subtle act of rebellion against the caste system. By venturing into holy spaces despite his exclusion, he challenges the notion that spiritual experiences are exclusive to certain social groups. It is a spiritual longing that transcends mere rituals or societal expectations. This restriction, based on the discriminatory caste system, prevented him from participating in a traditional path to seeking God. Despite the denial, Vedamanikam remains resolute. He chooses to go on a pilgrimage, visiting the holy places of Hinduism. His pilgrimage is not just a physical

journey. He aims to get as close as possible to the sites where caste Hindus supposedly experienced illumination and divine favour. This signifies his desire to experience a similar connection, even if he cannot access the same spaces reserved for higher castes, but a dream redirected him. It is a turning point in Vedamanikam's spiritual journey, marked by both hardship and a potentially transformative experience. He persuades his nephew (Masillamani)⁷² to join him, showcasing the power of shared faith and the support it can offer during challenging times. They endure a long series of disappointments,⁷³ highlighting the challenges and uncertainties inherent in any spiritual path. They decide to visit the renowned temple at Chidambaram, signifying their continued trust in seeking spiritual guidance through established sites of worship. However, upon reaching the temple's outer courts, he receives a reward in the form of a "strange experience."⁷⁴ The nature of the experience is kept ambiguous, it could be a trance, a vision, or something else entirely. This vagueness adds to the mystical nature of the event and its potential significance. Regardless of the specific form, the experience offers a clear message - "return south where you will find enlightenment." Samuel Mateer⁷⁵ shares that once, Maharasan walked past the mission church in Tanjore. He stopped at the church door and listened to Rev. J.C. Kohloff delivering a sermon. Seeing him dressed as a religious pilgrim, Mr. Kohloff specifically spoke to him during the sermon. This caught the poor man's attention, and he stayed in Tanjore for several months. This marks a pivotal moment, redirecting Vedamanikam from his established path and hinting at a new possibility for spiritual fulfilment. After conversion Sambavar children were traditionally named after local deities or with words aimed at warding off envy, reflecting a concern for their protection. The name Vedamanikam suggests a historical awareness of the challenges faced by the marginalized Sambavar community.⁷⁶ He visits Christian relatives in Tanjore, hinting at a potential openness to new religious ideas. These relatives then direct him to the Mission at Tranquebar, suggesting their belief in the Mission's potential to fulfil Vedamanikam's spiritual yearning. At the Mission, Vedamanikam and his nephew receive instruction about Jesus. This exposure leads to their conviction and devotion to Christianity, marking a dramatic shift in their religious beliefs and practices. During their time at the Mission, they encounter Rev. William Tobias Ringeltaube, a young Prussian Lutheran by-training, missionary. This meeting becomes pivotal, as Ringeltaube is seeking a new field of labor. The convergence of Vedamanikam's search for enlightenment and Ringeltaube's need for a mission field suggests a potential mutually beneficial relationship. Vedamanikam's local knowledge and understanding of the cultural landscape could be invaluable for Ringeltaube's missionary efforts. Disappointed, he and his nephew

encountered Christianity in Tanjore, were baptized and returned to Mayiladi to spread Christian teachings.

Despite persecution, they influenced relatives to embrace Christianity. Vedamanikam, learning of a new missionary, invited Ringeltaube to Travancore during a visit to Tanjore.⁷⁷ They asked him to visit Travancore, and while he was thinking about it, they went back home. After facing some initial challenges, they managed to get several family members and neighbours interested in their message. They formed a group for learning and worship. The formation of this group indicates a possible change from converting individuals to a bigger movement of faith together. It shows how personal stories and shared beliefs can bring people together in religious communities. At first, they were unsure, but their efforts to connect with others and build a community might lead to more Christians in their area. Leaving Tranquebar in 1806, Ringeltaube established his headquarters in Palamcottah for the next three years. He travelled among Christian communities in Tinnevely and visited Mayiladi,⁷⁸ where around twenty people were baptized in the following year. In 1809, after concluding temporary responsibilities in Tinnevely, he moved to Travancore with permission to build chapels and schools. Col. C. Macaulay was then a British resident at the court of Travancore and proved a kind friend to Ringeltaube and his work.⁷⁹ It was during this period that Ringeltaube met Diwan Velu Thampi at Quilon to discuss the sanction of the church.⁸⁰ In a crucial communication between Reverend Mr Ringeltaube, the initiator of the London Mission in Travancore, and Dewan Velu Thamby in 1806, the former's attempt to establish the mission became strained. When queried about his faith by the Dewan, the Reverend obliquely referred to "Colonel Macaulay's religion," conspicuously sidestepping a coherent articulation of Christian fundamentals, including Jesus Christ's birth, miracles, crucifixion, and resurrection. Valu Thamby, visibly perplexed, disclaimed knowledge of such a religious doctrine.⁸¹ "Several scholars emphatically claim that Velu Thambi purposefully procrastinated in approving the church, greatly irking Colonel Macaulay."⁸² The Dewan refused permission stating that it went against the established customs of his land and soon enough the Hindu opposition rose in volume as Ringeltaube tried to force the issue. Vedamanikam became his chief catechist, (pastor, *upadeshi*) and from 1810, members of the Nadar caste began seeking baptism.⁸³ Vedamanikam,⁸⁴ a member of an existing Christian community in Travancore became Ringeltaube's chief catechist. The early Christian community have drawn most of its converts from the Sambavar caste, a traditionally marginalized group. However, it wasn't entirely restricted to them, attracting individuals from other caste backgrounds as well. Ringeltaube relied heavily on Vedamanickam's family for support. There is a close personal connection between

them or a recognition of Vedamanickam's family's influence and importance within the community. During the confrontation between the Dewan and the British in 1809, a party of Sudras, instigated by hatred and ignorance of Christianity, resolved to kill Vethamanikkam, charging him with having been the means of bringing the English into the country. The escalating tensions between the Dewan and the British Resident reached a breaking point in 1809, erupting into a full-blown anti-Christian insurrection. Fueled by fervent Hindu upper-caste nationalism, the insurgents ruthlessly annihilated the erstwhile abodes of Dutch Governors, brandishing firearms as they relentlessly targeted anything foreign.⁸⁵ Velu Thampi and the upper caste held that missionaries aimed to defile Hindu temples with crosses and Christian flags, enforce caste-blind intermarriages, and perpetrate unjust acts akin to Kaliyuga.⁸⁶ Their wrath spared nothing associated with the white men's religion and its local followers. The initial occurrence transpired in association with the uprising led by Dalawah Velu Thampy, compelling the Christians of Myladi to seek refuge in the hills, concealed within the confines of caves.⁸⁷ A friendly Sudra, however, informed the Christian teacher of the conspiracy against his life and advised him to flee. He escaped to the mountains and concealed himself for some time, returning to his house after the excitement had subsided.⁸⁸ The unyielding might of the British forces crushed the rebellion in Travancore, compelling Velu Thampi to take his own life to evade dishonour at the hands of relentless adversaries.⁸⁹ The Travancore Dewan feared large-scale conversions to Christianity by the British, suggesting that this could lead to British support and a threat to Hindu life and culture. Though initially hesitant, Ringeltaube baptized 400 Nadars in 1811, forming the backbone of the South Travancore and Tinnevely Christian communities.⁹⁰ He wrote I have now about 600 Christians in 1813.⁹¹ After 16 years of dedicated service in Travancore, William Tobias Ringeltaube resigned in 1816. Before leaving, he entrusted Vedamanikam,⁹² the chief catechist, with the mission's administration, until a successor could be appointed. He visited Madras then Colombo and Malacca, after which he disappeared and was never heard of again. Vedamanickam held the church together and was accepted by all its members as their leader. He maintained the unity and cohesion of the church. He acted as a unifying figure, keeping everything together and preventing fragmentation or internal conflicts. While William Tobias Ringeltaube's work in Travancore predates the Upper Cloth Revolt (1822-1859) by several years, his presence and influence did indirectly contribute to the movement in several ways. He established six or seven main mission stations with chapels, and five or six schools, and converted and prepared 900 individuals for baptism. Ringeltaube is considered the founder of the Christian mission in Travancore,⁹³ while Vedamanickam

rightfully earns the title of the "true architect of the Christian faith."⁹⁴ He played a more crucial and foundational role in establishing and shaping the early church. Numerous individuals from lower castes unequivocally regard Ringeltaube and Vedamanickam as their unwavering leaders. Following Ringeltaube's departure, the onus of the mission fell squarely on the shoulders of the catechist Vethamanickam for two years, during which he diligently discharged his responsibilities. Inheriting seven churches with 747 baptized members from the missionary, he led a team of twelve workers, including seven schoolmasters overseeing 188 boys across the churches. Amidst the typical challenges faced by missionaries, Vethamanickam, ably supported by his nephew Masillamony, his eldest son Devasagayam, his son-in-law Pakkianathen, and other family members, navigated the difficulties with fortitude and unwavering faithfulness.⁹⁵ His existing Christian knowledge and experience laid the groundwork, making him Ringeltaube's trusted catechist. His family's influence, particularly among marginalized Sambavars who formed the early community, hints at Vedamanickam's key role in mobilizing and shaping the church's initial foundation. While Ringeltaube's contributions shouldn't be ignored, he might have played a different, vital part in leadership or external relations. This revised understanding challenges traditional narratives but acknowledges the complex interplay of individuals in shaping the church's development. Ringeltaube's focus on establishing lasting worship and educational centres suggests a lasting impact on the region. His emphasis on education to spread Christianity and empower locals resulted in a notable increase in Christians in Travancore. This recognizes his pioneering role and lasting legacy in shaping the region's religious landscape. It suggests that their educational endeavours, alongside their religious activities, played a significant role in reviving and revitalizing Kerala's cultural and intellectual landscape. After the arrival of his successor Charles Mead⁹⁶ in 1817 spurred a massive influx of Nadars into Christianity, a trend that endured throughout the 19th century.⁹⁷ He quickly recognized the potential of Nagercoil as a mission centre and shifted the focus of the mission there. He established the Nagercoil Seminary in 1819, which became a central institution for training local pastors and teachers. He faced opposition from both the Hindu authorities and some sections of the Christian community. However, he persisted in his work and laid the foundation for a thriving Christian community in South Travancore. In 1828, Mead moved to Neyoor, where he established a new mission station. In 1851, after 35 years of service in Travancore, Mead returned to England.

Mr. Mead spent a long life in Travancore. These missionaries like their predecessor owed much to the kindness of the British resident, Colonel Munro.⁹⁸ He greatly favoured the mission and used his influence on its behalf.

Colonel Munro supported Mr Mead by getting grants for the missionaries' residence and 5,000 rupees to buy rice fields for education. This money has been used to support the English seminary since 1819. Colonel Munro also tried an experiment, making Mr Mead a civil Judge in Nagercoil,⁹⁹ as there were very few people in the area at that time who could take on such a responsibility.¹⁰⁰ Beyond allocating land within her territories for the missionaries, Her Highness also extended considerable financial support,¹⁰¹ such as a 5,000 rupee donation and a large bungalow in Nagercoil,¹⁰² fostering their missionary activities.¹⁰³ In this very year, Her Highness had, under the advice of Colonel Munro, sanctioned the erection of a large Protestant church at Alleppey and gave the teak timber,¹⁰⁴ required for the building, free of all charges, permitting at the same time the residence of the Rev. T. Norton at Alleppey as a Chaplain there.¹⁰⁵ The prohibition of *Oozhiyam*¹⁰⁶ service and the limitation of Sunday work represent noteworthy decrees from Her Highness's reign, contributing to changes in social practices and religious observance.¹⁰⁷ The years immediately succeeding were years of great prosperity for the mission. The missionaries' kindness attracted significant crowds, and these people recognized the Christian teachers as their most dependable and authentic friends.¹⁰⁸ The "lowest" castes, through their firsthand experience, have come to see the missionaries not as allies of their oppressors but as potential friends offering hope for both earthly and spiritual improvement.¹⁰⁹ In 1819 the foundation of the church at Nagercoil was laid and by 1820 about three thousand persons, mostly Shanars had placed themselves under instruction. In 1821, a mission was commenced at Quilon by the Rev. John Smith and in 1827 the Southern district was divided and a new station was opened at Neyoor. The converts during this time had benefited from the education and general protection of the mission and had so far risen in the social scale as to excite the jealousy of their neighbours. This was particularly the case with the women, many of whom had been trained and educated by the wives of the missionaries and contrary to the old rules for the lower castes, had ventured to decently clothe themselves above the waist. This innovation was made the occasion for threats and violence. Though initially a spark ignited by women's defiance, the Channar movement gained unstoppable momentum as men rallied alongside them, forming a united front against caste tyranny. From 1827 to 1830 many disturbances took place during which chapels and schools were burned and many of the converts were maltreated. Similar disturbances arose from the same cause nearly thirty years later in 1858-9, but Sir Charles Trevelyan, Governor of Madras, interfered and a proclamation was issued in July 1859 granting permission to women of the lower castes to wear a cloth over breast and shoulders.¹¹⁰ In the entire history of the Travancore mission, whenever noticeable

progress was made, the heathen's attention was drawn to it. This stirred up jealousy and hatred, leading to violent attempts to halt the spread of divine truth.¹¹¹ Christian converts, empowered by education and religion, challenged the traditional social order in Travancore. This progress stirred fear and resentment among other groups, leading to persecution of the rising Christian community. Fearful of losing power, Sudras actively participated in the persecution, while Brahmins remained behind the scenes.¹¹² The reasons for Sudras' active participation were manifold, including concerns about their social standing within the existing order and potential disruption to the established social hierarchy, along with various societal and political pressures.

Charting the Course from Channar Lahala

Christian missionaries combined religious outreach with efforts to improve the lives of marginalized communities through education, social programs, and economic development. As the 19th century dawned, fervent efforts unfolded to establish churches, schools, and medical clinics across the bustling market towns and serene coastal villages of southern Travancore, driven by a desire to spread the Christian faith and uplift the lives of local communities. Consequently, a substantial faction of the Channar community within those vicinities underwent conversion to Christianity. The Channar community in southern Kerala embraced Christianity not only in response to prevalent societal wrongs but also in anticipation of an alleviation of the profound sufferings and humiliations inflicted upon them by the upper castes. Under the control of Travancore rulers and the powerful Nair caste, the human rights landscape in 19th-century Travancore was bleak. Lower castes faced relentless exploitation, deprivation, and segregation, denied basic rights and dignity. They arrived at the understanding that a shift in their dismal circumstances could only materialize through a transformation in the mindset of the upper-caste communities. However, their situation saw minimal improvement, and the anguish they endured only intensified.

Among the various caste restrictions in Kerala, the prohibition against women wearing upper garments was particularly contentious. In the historical context of Travancore, women belonging to the lower castes were mandated against wearing any upper-body clothing.¹¹³ Middle-class females, including those from the Sudra caste, typically adorned a light cotton garment draped loosely across the chest and over one shoulder, referred to as the "upper cloth."¹¹⁴ However, in the presence of the royal family or individuals of elevated social status, and during salutations to such dignitaries, it was customary to not only wear the upper cloth but also adhere to the antiquated tradition of momentarily removing it as a sign of respect.¹¹⁵ In Travancore, the garment called

the upper cloth was exclusively reserved for Nayar and other high-caste women. It was a lightweight cotton cloth draped loosely across the chest and over one shoulder. Lower-caste communities, including the Shanars, Izhavas, and Pulayas, were prohibited from wearing upper garments and covering their upper bodies, a restriction that sparked numerous disturbances¹¹⁶ in the 19th century.

In Travancore, the formative years of the Nadar caste, a community perennially consigned to the margins, bear the scars of relentless discrimination and deprivation. Branded as "unclean," the Nadars¹¹⁷ were systematically deprived of even the most essentials—be it sustenance, water, or shelter. Subjugated to pervasive bias by the upper-caste Hindus, they valiantly endured centuries of oppression. Numerous historical verities substantiate viewing the Channar Rebellion as the inaugural salvo in the revolutionary trajectory, constituting the primary endeavour of Nadar Christians in Kerala to engender societal parity. Channar women in the adjacent Tirunelveli district also traditionally covered their bodies,¹¹⁸ thus prompting them to adopt garments like jackets. The missionary women designed a type of loose shirt for them and called it a jacket.

Colonel John Munro is renowned for his dynamic stewardship as the Diwan, steering Travancore towards progress and ushering in an era of enlightenment, breaking free from the shackles of the dark ages. Colonel Munro, the Resident and Diwan of Travancore, issued a decree concerning the privilege of women to clothe their chests.¹¹⁹ During the administration of Col Munro, a Circular order was issued permitting the women referred to, to cover their bodies with jackets (kuppayam) like the women of Syrian Christians, Mappilass, and others, but the Native Christian females would not have anything less than the apparel of the highest castes.¹²⁰ Authorities and individuals from her castes attempted to hinder the implementation of Diwan's directive. They also levied an accusation that the Christian Diwan was contravening Hindu religious customs and traditions. Recognizing this, the Diwan issued a subsequent order in 1813. The order aimed to promote the practice of women covering their upper part and strictly adhering to the law. It stipulates that Christian women are allowed to wear a kuppayam to cover their upper part and disguise themselves, and should face no hindrance in doing so.¹²¹ However, it was instructed that they should not imitate the Hindu women nor replicate their dressing style for the upper part like Shudra women. So, they took the liberty of appearing in public not only with the kuppayam already sanctioned but with an additional cloth or scarf over the shoulders as worn by the women of the higher castes.¹²² The Sudras perceived the adoption of their clothing by Nadar Christian women as an infringement on their social privilege and cultural identity. These pretensions of the Shanar convert women

were resented by the high-caste Nayers and other Sudras who took the law into their own hands and used violence against those who infringed long-standing customs and caste distinctions.¹²³ The Nairs perceived these occurrences as a direct affront to their sacrosanct social hegemony. But during fifteen years there were quarrels on various occasions between the parties.¹²⁴ Those who converted to Christianity from the Channar community were not acknowledged as Christians by the high-caste locals. Upper-caste Hindus hated missionaries.¹²⁵ In a grim parallel, a Syrian's brutal oppression of an escaped slave, the converted slave's attempt at reconciliation, bearing gifts to pacify his former master, resulted in immediate, ruthless beatings, scorching with hot ashes, and cruel confinement in a granary cellar.¹²⁶ While the Nayers faced the decline of their traditional privileges under British influence,¹²⁷ the Nadar community grappled with both challenges and opportunities along its complex path towards social reform and upward mobility. The changing social dynamics and the agency displayed by Nadar Christian women have made the Sudras feel a loss of control over their own social and cultural space, leading to resistance and attempts to reassert their traditional hierarchies.

Three pivotal riots in 1822, 1829, and 1858-59 in Kerala were sparked by the denial of clothing rights to lower castes. Leaders like Putathankutty Channan, Ishakki Channatti, Yesudian of Kallivillai and Aromanayagum¹²⁸ alongside mistreated women, spearheaded a courageous fight for equality. Their resilience ignited significant societal change. Putathankutty Channan and his wife Ishakki Channatti,¹²⁹ who had previously converted to Christianity, engaged in an altercation with their master, Madanpilla, (Ezhava Master)¹³⁰ which sparked the riot. These individuals underwent conversion, severing their ties with Madom Pillay's employer. Subsequently, Puthathan Cutty transitioned into the role of a Catechist under a Missionary, while his spouse adopted attire reminiscent of Madom Pillay's wife.¹³¹ The upper castes expressed concern that if the Channars adopted new clothing practices, it would become difficult to distinguish their caste affiliation. The Channar Rebellion, initiated in 1822, ignited a series of uprisings against the oppressive practice of upper caste men monopolizing the right to wear upper clothing in Kerala. "As early as 1822, a sartorial transformation among Christian women unfolded, inspired by the recommendations of missionary wives. Driven by a newfound emphasis on modesty, they began incorporating small jackets into their attire."¹³² Munro decreed that the Channar women should adopt the same attire as Christian and Muslim women in the region. The beginning of the Channar riots took place in Kalkulam and Erenial Taluks¹³³ in 1822 during the reign of Rani Gauri Parvathibai in Travancore. In 1822, individuals from the lower Nadar caste, attired in such well-dressed, arrived at the Kalkulam market,

whereupon a faction proceeded to forcefully dismantle the coat and jacket. Commencing at the Kalkulam market in 1822 and persisting until July 6, 1859, this rebellion traversed multiple stages of development.¹³⁴

While the initial objection centred on Christian women covering their upper bodies, the animosity soon escalated to broader attacks on the Christian community. This hostility manifested in the form of riots, targeted assaults, and destruction of property, highlighting the deep-seated tensions and prejudices that existed within the society.¹³⁵ The distorted and unjust treatment of Shanar Christians during an official inquiry into riots. Instead of holding the perpetrators accountable, the authorities targeted the victims, subjecting them to cruel punishments such as chaining, flogging, and imprisonment. This unjust treatment underscores the deep-rooted biases and prejudices against the Shanar Christian community.¹³⁶ A high-caste named Raman Tambi, who had shown amicable ties with missionaries by selling them land for a mission house in Neyyoor, faced false accusations. He endured seven years of imprisonment before securing release.¹³⁷ The Channar women approached the Christian missionaries, voicing their lamentations. They were persuaded through accounts detailing the agonies they endured at the hands of the higher castes. Routine assaults occurred, and Mr Mead, following persistent efforts, ultimately obtained a favourable decree from the magistrate at the Southern Court in Padmanabhapuram.¹³⁸

The court's ruling favoured the Channars' right to cover their upper bodies. The crux of the judgment asserted that upon embracing Christianity, Channans ceased to be classified as such. Consequently, they were entitled to the same privileges as Christians, including the legal right for Channatis who converted to Christianity to wear clothing.¹³⁹ Subsequently, Channar women resumed covering their upper body. Certain Channar Christian converts, in celebration of their legal victory, donned jackets crafted from finer fabrics, deviating from the traditional thick silk shirts. This departure from tradition displeased the high castes, leading them to take matters into their own hands. The higher caste refused to acknowledge the court's decision.

However, the Diwan issued an order prohibiting the Channars from concealing their upper bodies. This decision conflicted with the stance of the Governor of Madras, who supported the Channars' right to dress as they deemed fit. The favourable order as to women's dress made to Mr Mead in 1823 was cancelled"¹⁴⁰ This statement highlights the reversal of a previous ruling that allowed Christian women to cover their upper bodies. This reversal suggests an attempt to suppress the Christian community's newfound social freedoms.

Arur emerged as a crucial hub for the rebellion. On December 21, 1828, the Channars, followers of Christianity, were summoned for (work without wages) by the high castes.¹⁴¹ They were conscripted for a specific duty, assigned to transport coconut tree leaves by foot to feed the elephants in the Padmanabhapuram palace. Forced labor in which individuals from higher castes compel those from lower castes to perform tasks without compensation is a manifestation of persistent caste-based oppression. This practice underscores the enduring influence of the caste system, perpetuating an unjust hierarchy where individuals from higher castes exploit and coerce those from lower castes into labour without remuneration. Channar Christians from *Arur* engaged in the work of carrying bundles of coconut tree leaves from *Arur*. Another Christian Channar group intercepted them, obstructing their work and diverting them from their intended tasks. This group argued vehemently against the Channar Christians' participation, emphasizing that it amounted to nothing less than forced labour (*Oozhiyam* service was abolished earlier).¹⁴² Additionally, high-caste youths were mandated to transport the leaves of the tree back to Arur. This information spread across the entire country. High castes completely opposed the incident altogether. The following day, individuals from higher castes in locations such as Arur and Tiruvattar physically assaulted Christians in the surrounding areas. These assailants forcibly pulled and tore their Kuppayam, subjecting them to humiliation and insult. Christian missionary-operated churches often faced disruptions from high-caste individuals. A significant proportion of the attendees at these churches were Channar Christian children. Led by Revenue Inspector Shankarapillai, the privileged class expelled Channar children from educational institutions in 1828. The disruptive behaviour exhibited by high caste included actions such as tearing books, damaging jackets, and issuing threats to the lives of those present.¹⁴³ The residences of the Channas were engulfed in flames, leading the Channars to seek refuge in the forests to safeguard their lives. Upon receiving the information, Reverend Mead visited the site of the incident. During the night of January 3, 1829, high castes devised a plan to seize control of the bungalow where Reverend Mead was residing to cause harm to him. A multitude assembled in the vicinity of Missionary Mr Mead's abode, compelling the Udayagirikota military force to intervene, safeguarding his security.¹⁴⁴ Thus saved the life of this missionary. A significant crisis was prevented due to the intervention of the British Army, which advised Reverend Mead to relocate promptly. However, he declined to do so.

From 1827 to 1830, numerous disturbances occurred, resulting in the burning of chapels and schools, and severe maltreatment of converts.¹⁴⁵ In 1829, Rani Gauri Parvati Bai issued a decree stating that Channattis no longer

needed to wear upper garments. The proclamation emphasized that those who had embraced the Christian religion should abandon the use of upper cloth and, instead, opt for wearing a shirt (Kuppyam).¹⁴⁶ In this enactment it was laid down that the female Shanar converts were at liberty to cover their bosoms with a jacket, and a strict prohibition was laid down against their adopting high-caste Hindu costumes.¹⁴⁷

The regulations delineated in the circular directive of 1814 and the proclamation of 1829 remained identical, strategically devised to forestall clashes and uphold tranquillity amidst the conflicting factions.¹⁴⁸ The adherents of Hinduism and the Shanar converts, along with their respective proponents, unabashedly adopted adversarial stances in overt opposition to one another. The use of the upper cloth was strictly prohibited, mandating adherence to ancient caste customs. Channar Christians endured ongoing persecution, although the riots eventually ceased.

The renewed struggle for the right to wear a coat over the raukka(coat) highlighted the persistence of caste-based discrimination and the ongoing fight for social equality. Monrau's edict delineated that Raukka was permitted to don a distinct attire, excluding melmund—a dictum met with defiance by select Channattis. Subsequently, the insurgency proliferated anew, necessitating military intervention to impose legal compliance.¹⁴⁹ In 1833 C.E., a disturbance incited by the Shanars of south Travancore occurred, yet the riot was swiftly quelled without the need for military intervention.¹⁵⁰ In 1855, the Channas sought permission from the Madras government to wear the Melmund(turban), yet their plea went unanswered.

In 1810 two events of importance to the infant mission occurred. They were the retirement of Colonel Macaulay¹⁵¹ and the appointment of Colonel Munro and the accession to the throne of Travancore of H. H. Lakshmi Bai. From this date began the strenuous rule of Colonel Munro.¹⁵² Beginning as early as 1814, Christian women from the Nadar community actively petitioned the government, urging for permission to cover their breasts. This sought-after allowance aimed to adopt a practice that had hitherto been exclusive to high-caste women, notably the Nayars.¹⁵³ Speaking about the Missionary efforts Gordon says: “The construction of the church at Nagercoil commenced in 1819, and by 1820, approximately three thousand individuals, primarily from the Shanar community, had enrolled in religious instruction. The converts' newfound education, social status, and attire provoked resentment and violence from their neighbours. In 1848 a new station was opened at Paracha lay, (Parasala) some fifteen miles north of Neyoor.¹⁵⁴ The arrival of missionaries like Duthie and

Mateer (Duthie to Nagercoil and Samuel Mateer to Parey Chala, *Parasala*) represents a positive step towards addressing these issues and promoting social change.¹⁵⁵

Christian mission in Travancore another scholar writes. The second and third persecutions, in 1828-30 and 1856 respectively, were triggered by caste tensions arising from low-caste women adopting the practice of wearing upper garments, a custom reserved for higher castes. These persecutions involved bloodshed, destruction of property, and attacks on Christian homes and churches.¹⁵⁶ The missionaries exerted pressure on the Madras rulers and campaigned for justice. The governor raised the matter with Travancore resident Kalan. Kalan, not inclined towards Christian advocacy, believed in upholding local customs. Nevertheless, following the Governor's intervention, the Travancore government acknowledged the issue. At that time, Maharaja Utram Thirunal held the reins of power.

The commencement of the third phase of the Channar Rebellion occurred 36 years later, in 1859. During that period, Travancore was under the rule of Utram Tirunal Marthanda Varma Maha Raja. The uprising occurred when Christian Channattis, who had initially secured the right to wear a shirt (Kuppayam) through earlier struggles, began adding a mulmund along with the shirt (Kuppayam). In many places instead of loose jackets women began to wear vests and to dress in coloured clothes. The Hindu Nadar women followed the example of the Christian women.¹⁵⁷ In 1859, a substantial assault unfolded in Nagercoil led by an individual named Vaidyalingampilla against the Shanars. The court imposed a remarkably lenient penalty on Savarna, who had torn the blouse of a Channatti in Neyyatinkara.¹⁵⁸ The Channas refrained from an immediate retaliatory response with a vengeful mindset. Instead, they opted to seek justice through the court. Following the trial, the court imposed only a nominal fine on the culpable upper-class youth. However, upon leaving the court after paying the fine, he proceeded to tear another Channar woman's shirt and tossed it. This incident quickly escalated into a riot, starting initially in nearby areas like Arumanur and subsequently spreading throughout the southern regions. Their modus operandi involves tearing the rauka as well if they wear an upper garment. The riots intensified in Kotter. In Kumarapuram,¹⁵⁹ members of the high caste compelled some low-caste Shanars to strip naked and were then paraded on the road. The tumult extended its reach to numerous locations such as Chembanvila,¹⁶⁰ Aralummudu, Mailadi, and Anditop. A police sergeant in Parasala spearheaded the assault. Amid these instances of anarchic brutality, it was conspicuous that lower-ranking government officials and the police actively participated.¹⁶¹ Furthermore, the missionaries, being identified as the primary instigators behind

the introduction of Christianity into the region, faced explicit threats of assassination.¹⁶² When no definitive resolution was reached, the Shanars in Kottar mobilized under the Chinna Nadars and confronted violence from the upper caste.

In 1858, a renowned proclamation by the British sovereign declared the following: Neither the community nor the government should intervene in the religious and communal practices of other communities. All individuals are equal under the law. Both the higher castes and lower castes interpreted the directives in the aforementioned proclamation in distinct ways.¹⁶³ They regarded it as the tradition for Christian women to wear the ravuka and the second mund. They contended that Savarna had no authority to impede this practice. Savarnar declared that all castes below Shudra (Nair) should go without covering their upper bodies, citing it as a Hindu custom, and underscored that they had no right to resist this directive.¹⁶⁴ Savarnars believed that, despite individuals from lower castes embracing Christianity, they would still be considered low caste. They emphasized that the higher castes were responsible for protecting Hinduism and conducted themselves accordingly. Sir T. Madhavareyer, (Dewan Madava Row was Dewan of Travancore from 1858 to 1872)¹⁶⁵ who served as the Diwan of Travancore at that time, visited the areas affected by the riots. Channar Christian leaders approached the Dewan and presented a memorandum outlining their challenges. However, upon leaving after submitting the memorandum, these leaders were subjected to severe beatings by upper-class individuals and officials. In response, Christian missionaries who were informed about the incident intervened and urged the Dewan to take action against the perpetrators. However, the Diwan issued a proclamation stating that, while the Proclamation of 1829 was still in effect, it was explicitly stated that both Christian and Hindu Channar women should adhere to its rules.¹⁶⁶ Any requests for alterations from either group must be submitted to the government for consideration, with a requirement to await the decision. Importantly, the proclamation emphasized the necessity of avoiding any actions that could lead to a breach of public peace. The Channar leaders faced brutal beatings for peacefully presenting their grievances. This act of violence by upper-caste individuals and officials was a blatant display of power and a disregard for their concerns. The Diwan's response further amplified their disappointment. While acknowledging the Proclamation of 1829, he failed to address the immediate injustice they faced. His emphasis on maintaining peace seemed to prioritize the comfort of upper castes over addressing the Channar community's legitimate demands. This incident likely reinforced their sense of oppression and the futility of seeking justice through established channels.

Christian missionaries expressed dissatisfaction with the Diwan's declaration. They believed that the Diwan's actions demonstrated favouritism towards the upper-caste Hindus.¹⁶⁷ Dewan Madava Row was aided by deputy Peishcar Shungonny Menon at that time.¹⁶⁸ Consequently, they submitted a memorandum to the Viceroy and the Governor of Madras, apprising them of the situation. They further took the initiative to meet in person and formally present their petition. Meanwhile, an official from Padmanabhapuram arrived at Kaliyikavila. He asserted his authority and commenced a reprehensible act by tearing the ravukas, jacket (kuppayam) worn by the Nadars. He went on to state that the upper cloth, which had been abolished for channatis, was still being used, and therefore, they had no right to utilize the Kuppayam either. In light of these considerations, a stern public warning was issued on December 27th, emphasizing the imperative to adhere to established rules and usages. Any desire for change by any class of people was to be formally represented to the Sirkar, with a strict directive to await its decision.¹⁶⁹ He asserted that the Nadars had actively sought the cooperation of the Shanars residing in the Tinnevely district near our frontier.¹⁷⁰

High caste arrived at the scene, expressing his endorsement of the action. However, the Nadar caste opposed it. They emerged as a unified force, leading to a highly turbulent riot in Kaliyikavila and the surrounding areas. Six Christian churches were demolished in Parasala, while three churches and one church school were destroyed in Neyur. The disturbance was particularly intense in Kotor.¹⁷¹ Over 200 youths from the upper caste engaged in a riot in Nagercoil. Christians maintained vigilance around the church's day and night,¹⁷² preventing any harm to the churches in the area. The government deployed the Nair army to suppress the riots. In Kotor and the adjacent areas, the soldiers ruthlessly quelled the rioters.¹⁷³ The rebellion extended to places such as Aruvamozhi, Sembanvilie,¹⁷⁴ Arumanallur, Anditop, Tittuvilie,¹⁷⁵ Mailadi, Vadakankara, Kuzhithurai, and other locations. As of January 10, the uprising had disseminated to southern Travancore. The Channar Christians and their elders were apprehended and confined by the police. The missionaries who intervened faced discourteous treatment from both the police and other officials.

Astonishingly, the Nadars refrained from pursuing legal recourse in response to this egregious violation. If legal action was initiated, the elite perpetrators faced a paltry fine as their meagre punishment. Even after 36 years, this incident underscores the discriminatory attitude of the higher castes towards the Channattis. Consequently, the Nadars took matters into their own hands, implementing stringent measures to retaliate against those who dared to assault them. They adamantly upheld the decree that any hand desecrating their

upper body cloth and shirt would never again be raised with impunity. They commenced administering beatings, extending beyond mere retribution on the hands of the aggressors to include severe punishment on their legs. Intense clashes erupted in every locale where the shirt and top were ripped asunder. Both factions were entrenched in a relentless war, unwavering in their positions. As the rebellion surged to its zenith, military intervention was deployed to quell the disturbances. Yet, each suppression by the army in one location was met with a fiercer eruption of violence elsewhere. The Governor of Madras at that time, Lord Harris, instructed Kallan, the Resident General of Travancore, to gather accurate information about the uprising and promptly submit a comprehensive report. Kallan complied and provided a detailed report to the Madras Governor.

After examining the report, the Governor of Madras corresponded with the Travancore Resident, proposing the adoption of a somewhat lenient policy. This suggestion was put forth recognizing that the actions and controversies within the administration could have a substantial impact on the reputation of the British Government. In response, the Travancore government stated that the situation in Travancore differs from the administrative regions of Britain.¹⁷⁶ It was emphasized that there are numerous challenges in implementing essential reforms related to caste and religion. At this juncture, Lord Harris, the outgoing Governor of Madras, concluded his tenure, and the mantle of governance passed to Sir Charles Trevelyan. It was under his auspices that the matter was proffered for adjudication. The Governor-General of Madras wrote once more, using forceful language, to Kallan. Not only truth and justice, but all common human virtues are in favour of our position in this matter. If we do not address this situation earnestly, the entire civilized world will look down upon us.¹⁷⁷ Considering the remarkable fact that this form of popular oppression is taking place despite the proclamation issued by the Empress in 1858 with the explicit intention of granting freedom of thought and action to the Indian subjects, we find it imperative to intervene in this matter.¹⁷⁸ I prefer not to elaborate on the distress the queen might experience upon realizing that events are deviating from the promise of salvation made to women in her proclamation. Hence, it is your responsibility to convey to the King that the directives outlined in the Travancore Royal Proclamation of 1829 are not appropriate for contemporary times or a ruler embracing civilized values.¹⁷⁹

Recognizing the futility of a lasting resolution to the riots, Uthram Thirunal Maharaja found himself compelled to issue a proclamation permitting Channar women to wear both Kuppayam and Melmundu. The King's proclamation reflected a shrewd understanding of the prevailing circumstances, acknowledging the sentiments

of the people. While assuaging the Nadars, it incorporated a clause to mollify the upper castes, stipulating that Nadar women should refrain from adopting the attire akin to that of the upper caste women. Charles Trevelyan's Governor of Madras (brother-in-law of Lord Macaulay)¹⁸⁰ wrote thus, Travancore's restrictive social policies, such as those outlined in the circular order of May 1814 and the proclamation of February 34, 1829, are outdated and unbecoming of an enlightened ruler.¹⁸¹ The disturbances are largely blamed on General Cullen, the British Resident in Travancore from 1840 to 1860.¹⁸² Influenced by Brahman's contemporary times or for favourites, he adopted their views and saw no need for missionary work or Christian instruction for the poor. His nearly fifty-year uninterrupted stay in India completely immersed him in Hindu practices.¹⁸³ He was seen as favouring the upper castes and resistant to change, displaying a dismissive attitude toward the concerns of Christians. The international attention drawn to the persecution compelled authorities to take action.¹⁸⁴ While V Nagam Aiya points out that missionary accounts may be biased,¹⁸⁵ his assertion that low castes were not persecuted is contradicted by numerous historical records, eyewitness testimonies,¹⁸⁶ and Shanar's complaints. The pervasiveness of high-caste brutality against low-castes in Travancore is an undeniable historical fact, and Aiya's attempt to downplay this reality is both disingenuous and harmful. Taken together, this evidence leaves no doubt that high-caste brutality against low-castes was a systemic and pervasive problem in Travancore. V Nagam Aiya's attempt to deny this reality is not only historically inaccurate but also deeply insensitive to the suffering of generations of low-caste Travancoreans. Samuel Mateer, recognized in Kerala history as "Pulaya padre," earned his name through his supportive actions toward the low castes, implying that missionaries, in general, played a positive role in assisting marginalized communities. The deeply entrenched caste-based conflict was finally brought to a close by the intervention of Maharaja Uthram Tirunal and the British Government. These protests sparked a movement for comprehensive social and cultural reform that left an indelible mark on Kerala. The edict from the monarch resonated in the following manner:

"Since" as we have been informed of the grievance occasioned by the Proclamation of 23rd of Magaram 1004, on the subject of the upper cloth of shanar women, and it is our will and pleasure to treat all people, as far as we can, in such a manner as none shall feel aggrieved; we hereby proclaim that there is no objection to shanar women either putting on a jacket like the Christian Shanar women, or to Shanar women of all creeds dressing in coarse cloth, and tying themselves round with it as the Mukkavattigal (low caste fisherwomen) do or to their covering their bosoms in any manner whatever;¹⁸⁷ but not like women of high castes.¹⁸⁸

Uthram Thirunal Marthanda Varma 1847-1860, was the ruler then Sreedharamenon commented that the agitation of the Shanar Christian converts was indeed a struggle for social equality and justice.¹⁸⁹ A similar proclamation was in 1864 issued concerning the females of the Ezhava and all other inferior castes.¹⁹⁰ The Pulaya confronted this issue in 1915-16. Again, the Nair confronted the Pulayars.¹⁹¹ The germination of the Channar riots found its origins in the aspirations of converted Nadar women within Christianity, yearning to emulate the sartorial patterns of women belonging to the upper echelons of the caste hierarchy. The Nadar women started wearing upper-body clothing reserved for high-caste women, resulting in violent conflicts, including bloodshed, arson, and the destruction of Christian properties.¹⁹² Driven by a belief that European missionaries would offer them support¹⁹³ and guidance, vast numbers of individuals embraced Christianity in unprecedented numbers. As a result, churches and schools were inundated with individuals seeking to be registered as Christians.¹⁹⁴ This groundbreaking campaign centred on the demand to wear upper-body garments, specifically covering their chests. The conversion of Nadars to Christianity and their newfound freedom to wear upper-body attire inspired other low-caste communities in Kerala to challenge the unjust practice of denying women upper-body attire, which was seen as a symbol of upper-caste dominance. The Channar revolt boldly confronted the prevailing injustice by demanding the right to wear blouses.¹⁹⁵ The large-scale conversion of the Nadars to Christianity empowered them to actively challenge this discriminatory practice.

The Nadars' rebellion against unjust practices marked the beginning of a broader movement for social equality in Kerala. Their courageous actions inspired other low-caste communities, including the Ezhavas, to challenge the prevailing caste system. The foreign Christian missionaries seized the opportunity to execute a systematic and comprehensive conversion initiative targeting Hindus belonging to the low-caste and enslaved strata. Certain scholars contend that the Channar Revolt of December 1858 in South Travancore constituted a protest directed at the Christian missionaries' conversion initiatives.¹⁹⁶ From the latter part of the nineteenth century, the state increasingly focused on improving the plight of the lower castes, motivated partly by the government's perception that the conversion of the lowest castes to Christianity posed a substantial threat to the stability of the Hindu state.¹⁹⁷ Leaders such as Velayudha Panikkar, notwithstanding their higher caste status, actively aligned themselves with the plight of Channar women in the course of the Channar Revolt. Employing methods of resistance marked by violence, Panikkar gained notoriety for ruthlessly assaulting caste Hindus who subjected lower-caste women to abuse in public settings, thereby sternly asserting his commitment to the cause.

Thycaud Ayya Swamikal,¹⁹⁸ Sree Narayana Guru, Chattambi Swamikal, and Ayyankali, prominent leaders from the lower castes, played crucial roles in guiding their communities towards social and economic empowerment, helping them overcome entrenched socio-economic barriers and achieve progress without the need to convert to other religions.¹⁹⁹ Their mission wasn't just conversion; it was driven by benevolence and a love for mankind. Their goal was to liberate people from social inequality, poverty, and slavery, envisioning a world transformed into one free from these burdens.²⁰⁰

The conversion of many Nadars to Christianity played a significant role in the Channar Lahala uprising. Christianity provided Nadars with a new worldview that emphasized equality and human dignity, and it also gave them a sense of community and solidarity. In these pivotal revolts, one witnessed the Channar Lahala, navigating its trajectory towards Christianity, which suggests that the Channar Lahala a significant uprising against caste oppression in Kerala, India, was influenced by Christianity. These revolts were not solely driven by socioeconomic factors but also by religious ideologies and the pursuit of spiritual liberation. It's crucial to understand that the Channar Lahala is influenced by religion in a complicated way. Some people from these communities chose to follow Christianity but many others continued practicing their traditional Hindu beliefs. The main driving force behind these revolts was the quest for fairness and equal rights. While religious beliefs did play a role in shaping the identity and strategies of the movements, the core motivation was a shared desire for social justice and equality. In Travancore, the British authorities exhibited a more progressive stance, encouraging social reforms and advocating for the upliftment of lower castes. This shift in approach can be attributed to several factors, including the influence of Christian missionaries. The inefficient clerical administration of the conservative and macho government provided an opportunity for the missionaries to have some flexibility. Consequently, a surge of individuals from the lower echelons sought refuge with the missionaries, seeking both protection and conversion.²⁰¹ The British supported social reforms and upliftment of low castes in Travancore. This difference can be attributed to factors like the influence of Christian missionaries. Women played a prominent role in the Channar Lahala uprising, both as organizers and participants. They defied traditional gender norms by taking to the streets and demanding their rights. In Nagercoil, Nadars, once limited to toddy-related work, now embrace diverse occupations due to the Christian movement among them. They are pioneers in introducing new jobs in their villages.²⁰² Nadars, initially classified as Sudras, encountered educational discrimination, unable to attend schools.²⁰³ The Christian Nadar movement in Nagercoil

transformed this by becoming educational leaders. Descendants now actively build and sustain schools for all castes, aided by state grants. The Channar Lahala uprising had a profound impact on Kerala society. It led to the abolition of the practice of upper-caste men monopolizing the right to wear upper clothing, and it also contributed to the advancement of women's rights in the state. These historical nuances sketch a harrowing portrait of a community grappling for survival in a society that callously viewed them with disdain. While the Nadars eventually triumphed over these adversities, their early history serves as a stark testament to the abhorrent discrimination they endured.

Conclusion

The Nadars, with a stronghold in southern districts of Kerala and parts of Tirunelveli in Tamil Nadu, boast a robust history. Their unwavering dedication and work ethic are unparalleled. The *Maru Marakkal Samaram*, an upheaval centred on rights, symbolizes their protracted battle for the basic right to wear upper-body clothing in South Travancore. The Nadars of South Travancore displayed formidable resilience during nearly four decades of relentless protest, igniting a revolutionary social movement. Their collective resistance not only dismantled oppressive structures but also instigated profound societal reforms in the region. Christian missionaries, though not direct participants, played a crucial role by aligning with the underprivileged Nadars and actively endorsing their cause. The Channar Lahala, a decades-long struggle by Christian women, symbolizes a dark chapter in Kerala's history, epitomizing their relentless quest for the right to wear blouses. This saga illuminates the unwavering adherence to values by the Thiruvananthapuram monarchy and underscores the magnanimity of Christian missionaries. The despicable act orchestrated by the upper castes, wherein women's blouses were forcibly torn asunder, serves as a damning indictment of cultural vacuity and moral bankruptcy. The Channar Lahala emerges as a poignant chronicle of defenceless women challenging the oppressive rule of the Travancore monarchy, igniting the Shudra War—a conflict that would shame even the most depraved malefactors. The transformative societal shifts wrought by Christian missionaries, instrumental in the propagation of English education that catalyzed progressive movements in Kerala, constituted a veritable revolution across all domains. Neglecting to appreciate the work of Christian missionaries and their impact on knowledge and society reflects both moral irresponsibility and lack of wisdom. The inescapable conclusion arises from the grim realities that the caste system, entwined with the subjugation of low castes through slavery, triggered these fierce conflicts. It all began with the bold defiance of Shanar women rejecting the oppressive dress codes of the time.

Subsequently, Shanar men steadfastly refused to engage in *Oozhiyam*, sparking an active rebellion. Hindu Shanars forcefully joined the uprising, their resentment deepening due to the persistent involvement of Christian missionaries. The establishment of Protestant Christian churches became a decisive turning point, providing a platform for an unwavering pursuit of freedom across various aspects of life. The low castes expressed their gratitude towards missionaries by embracing the Christian faith, acknowledging the empowerment gained through these arduous struggles.

This conflict transcended mere societal discord; it was a profound social struggle pitting the privileged against the underprivileged classes. The Nadars' unwavering determination, coupled with the backing of Christian missionaries, symbolized a powerful force for change, ultimately paving the way for broader advancements in the region. In conclusion, the Nadars' enduring protest and the collaborative efforts of Christian missionaries fostered a dynamic paradigm shift, challenging entrenched social hierarchies and contributing to the overall progress and empowerment of marginalized communities in South Travancore. The Christian missions played a significant role in uniting the Nadar community and facilitating progress, but their influence might have also led to cultural assimilation or loss of traditional identity a balanced and nuanced one. By embracing a new religion, the Nadar community might have adopted aspects of Christian culture and practices, potentially leading to a gradual erosion of their customs and traditions. The educational institutions established by the missions might have emphasized knowledge and values, potentially neglecting or diminishing the importance of traditional Nadar knowledge and cultural practices. The issue revolves around differing perspectives on what is considered right or wrong in matters of clothing, particularly in the context of societal divisions. Some argue in favour of wearing upper clothing, while members of higher castes, such as the Nair's, assert that it is inappropriate for lower castes to wear certain types of clothing. This association of clothing with social status is a prevalent phenomenon in various societies and historically has been used to control and marginalize certain groups. The Nair claim the right to "discipline" the Nadars for wearing the specified clothing. This reflects a power imbalance where the higher caste seeks to enforce its views and maintain societal order based on its definition of propriety. This "disciplining" often manifests through various forms of discrimination and oppression. It reveals a troubling instance of caste-based discrimination and social control expressed through clothing. It raises questions about cultural appropriation, identity, and the right to self-expression within a hierarchical society. Missionaries have emerged as advocates for the rights and dignity of the lower castes,

aligning themselves with what they perceive as the just side of the debate. The involvement of missionaries reflects a broader narrative in which they support the rights of the lower castes. It encompasses widespread societal discontent and an intense yearning for transformative change. This upheaval represents a formidable challenge to deeply ingrained social frameworks. The Upper Cloth Revolt, deeply entrenched in issues of social strata and caste differentiations, signifies a localized and highly concentrated resistance against the pervasive discrimination rooted in caste-based hierarchies. The Upper Cloth Revolt allowed Nadars, to wear upper garments, symbolizing a step towards greater social freedom. This coincided with a significant increase in Christian conversions among Nadars. The Channar revolt against caste oppression, igniting a spark of defiance against upper-caste patriarchal tyranny, fuelled the burgeoning anti-caste movement in Kerala.

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