



ROLE OF MISSIONARIES IN UPPER CLOTH RIOT IN KANYAKUMARI DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

By strict conventions and rigid rules the women of the lower castes in Kanyakumari District were prohibited from covering their bosoms when they appeared before men of higher castes. The breast of women was bared as a symbol of respect to those of higher status. Due to the influence of liberal Christian ideas and the humanitarian activities of the missionaries, the new converts refused to perform the age old customs. It led to the upper cloth riots. With the efforts of the missionaries the government issued legislation and granted the right to wear upper cloth.

KEYWORDS

Upper cloth Riot,

Introduction :

Missionary efforts in Kanyakumari District started early in the nineteenth century. The present district of Kanyakumari, which earlier had formed the Padmanabapuram Division of the erstwhile princely state of Travancore¹. It comprises the four Tamil speaking taluks of Thovalai, Agasteeswaram, Kalkulam and Vilavancode.

As in other parts of the country, the Brahmins constituted the uppermost stratum of the caste hierarchy. Caste determined what one should adopt and which God's one should worship. The caste structure and its functioning in a society kept the majority of the people in a state of total subjugation to the minority in every aspects of social life.

Condition of women before the advent of the Missionaries

Women were considered inferior to men². It was even believed that girls who were taught the three R's namely reading, writing and arithmetic would become widows soon and widowhood was the bitterest misfortune a woman could ever think of in society³. The female education was entirely unknown and none of the women was able to read. It was never considered necessary to educate women for, as one of their proverb says "To educate a woman is like putting a torch in the hand of a monkey⁴. The social evils of untouchability played havoc on the lives of women⁵. Early marriage was the order of the day. A larger number of girls were, often in infancy dedicated to the service of temples as devadasis. The miseries of widows were manifold. They were not allowed to remarry. They were not permitted to wear ornaments. At night they slept on the floor, or a plaited coconut leaf or an old mat.

By strict conventions and rigid rules they were bidden to wear a coarse piece of cloth known as 'Mundu' extending from the waist to the knees leaving the breasts bare. Women were not allowed to see any men except the dearest members of their family. The low caste females required to carry the water pot only on the head, not on the hip or side. Among the many unjust burdensome taxes levied on the low caste was called a breast tax. The inhumanity and injustice in the collection and the nature of this tax was seen when an Ezhava lady, who was unable to bear the humiliation of the tax collectors, had to cut off one of her breasts and present it to them⁶.

These incidents proved that the people had to bear all these obstacles patiently. They looked up for a savior. It was during this time Christian missionaries came one after the other and began to teach the people about their oppression. The 25th of April 1806 was a remarkable day in the history of protes-

tant mission in Kanyakumari District. It was on that day that William Tobas Ringeltaube entered the Kanyakumari District through Aramboly Ghat. The missionaries believed that "By educating a boy you got an educated individual, but by educating a girl you get an educated family".

How ever with the advent of protestant missionaries in the region, the Christian women both rich and poor, felt bolder to do it. They began to wear a loose jacket designed by the lady missionaries. This was contrary to the established customs and hence tension mounted. The upper cloth riot developed in three stages.

First upper cloth riot 1822 to 1823

The Christians using upper cloth were ill treated in May 1822 in public places and on roads. Charles Mead, the missionary complained to the local court. The court inquired of Mead as to whether the wearing of upper cloth by Christian women was required by the Christian religion and on receiving an affirmative reply from Mead, the court decreed that the accused Christians had no reason to be fined⁷. This judgement relieved the Christians from illtreatment by the high castes for the time being.

Second upper cloth Riot 1827-1830

This time also the women were flogged in public bazaar for wearing upper cloth and their clothes were stripped publicly. They threatened the people going to attend Christian worship and forced them to render Ooliyam services. Chapels and schools were burnt down⁸. The missionaries took a serious view of the atrocities committed by the caste Hindus and made a representation to the Government. On 3rd February 1829, the Rane of Travancore made a proclamation. It afforded no relief to the Christians, which says that the women of the shanars have no authority to wear the upper cloth and are hereby prohibited from doing so⁹. The use of upper cloth was absolutely forbidden. Christians were ordered to respect the ancient caste customs.

Third upper cloth Riot 1855-1859

In spite of all these restrictions imposed upon them, the women under Christian instruction continued to dress in the manner of Nairs. The number of women wearing the upper cloth in public went on increasing. The missionaries were also humiliated and threatened and they had to keep guard at their residence. The sudras as before attacked women in the bazaars stripping them of their upper garments¹⁰. As a result serious rioting occurred and consequently the entire mission was in a state of disorganisation.

As soon as the disturbance was noticed the Dewan issued a

Public warning on 27th December 1858 to the effect that it was clearly wrong to violate ancient usage without authority and that whosoever did so in future would be severely punished. The sudras and the people of higher castes were not to do anything themselves against the shanars or to break the peace¹¹. Seeing in this proclamation of the Dewan a tangible proof of his partiality the missionaries petitioned to Utram Tirunal Maharajah for the cancellation of the Dewan's order. But the Dewan held that the Christians had no cause for complaint and that the only course open to the women was to observe the order of 1829. This serious situation called for government intervention. On 7th February 1859 the missionaries James Russel, John Abbs, John Cox, and Frederick Baylis petitioned to the Maharajah entreating the latter to adopt measures to stop the persecution¹². As no reply was received for this petition, the missionaries brought the matter to the notice of Sir Charles Trevelyan, the new Governor of Madras, who wrote to General Cullen, the Resident pointing out the unjust nature of the procedure adopted in reference to certain females of the lower class and that the whole world would cry upon us if we did not make a firm stand on such an occasion¹³.

Under such pressure from the British Government the Dewan held important consultations with the Maharajah and wrote the Resident on 17th May 1859, saying that "the Maharajah was prepared to modify the rules relating to the dress of the inferior castes and that he proposed to abolish all rules prohibiting the covering of the upper parts of the persons of shanar women and to grant them perfect liberty to meet the requirements of decency any way they deem proper, with the simple restriction that they do not imitate the same mode of dress that appertains to the higher castes¹⁴. This was accepted by the Madras Government.

Accordingly a proclamation was issued by the Maharajah on 26th July 1859 which ran as follows : "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 round with it as the Mukkavattikal (low caste fisher women) do or to their covering their bosoms in any manner. Whatever, but not like women of high castes¹⁵.

As the missionaries were not happy about the proposed proclamation of 26th July 1859, they petitioned to the Governor of Madras demanding full liberty for the Christians in the matter of dress and seeking exemption of all Europeans from liability to native law. The British authorities continued to express their desire to the Maharajah, with regard to the need for better legislation. Granting perfect freedom to the lower castes in the matter of dress¹⁶. This pressure made the Travancore government to issue fresh legislations in 1865, granting this right to all the lower castes. Thus the upper cloth affair undoubtedly served as the initial catalyst to increase community consciousness and brought about the awareness and solidarity of an integrated culture.

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