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
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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, Agasteeswararam, Kalkulam and Vilavancode.

As in other parts of the country, the Brahmans 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 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 women 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 to cut off one of her breasts and present it to them⁴. As a result several generations were reared and brought up without any education.

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 fined⁵. 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 down⁶. 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 Ranees 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 so⁷. The use of upper cloth was absolutely forbidden. Christians were ordered to respect the ancient caste customs.

Third upper cloth Riot 1855-1859
Inspite 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 garments⁸. 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 whoever 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 peace. 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 entreat the latter to adopt measures to stop the persecution. 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 fire stand on such an occasion.

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 Maharaja 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 do them proper, with the simple restriction that they do not imitate the same mode of dress that appertains to the higher castes.” 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 castes.”

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 Maharaja, with regard to the need for better legislation. Granting perfect freedom to the lower castes in the matter of dress. This pressure made the Travancore government to issue fresh legislations in 1865, granting this right to all the lower castes. Thus the upper cloth affray undoubtedly served as the initial catalyst to increase community consciousness and brought about the awareness and solidarity of an integrated culture.

REFERENCES

1. Kanyakumari District which was part of Travancore was merged with Tamilnadu in consequence of the Reorganization of states in 1956.
7. Substance of decree of the court of Padmanabhapuram relating to the upper cloth worn by Christian women, Vakeel No. 177 dated 7th Vykaani, 998 (1823).
9. Proclamation of Her Highness the Ranee dated the 23rd Tyemokaram, 1004, Corresponding with 3rd February 1929, English Records.
12. Petition of the missionaries to the King of Travancore dated 7th-2-1859, copies of official papers, pp. 19.