

# The Prevalence of Social Disabilities in Travancore: Exploring the Impact on Society

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**ABSTRACT:** In Travancore, India, evil practices and customs were prevalent, particularly against lower caste people. Upper castes, such as Brahmins and Nairs, enjoyed economic and social privileges, while lower castes, including Brahmin women, enjoyed greater liberty and participation in public assemblies. Unprivileged classes who embraced Christianity faced significant hardships, including being considered slaves, not being allowed to grow cows, run oil mills, or engage in trade. The Madras government criticized these views and ordered an inquiry to investigate the extent and nature of disabilities experienced by outcastes. In 1870, the Madras government demanded the Kerala government to remove all impediments experienced by the lower castes, allowing them to use public roads and perform business without prejudice to their caste and creed. However, the British government gradually leaned over the Raja of Kerala regarding the violation of human rights. The Travancore government faced restrictions on the rights of the liberated slaves, including access to public roads, courts, and schools. The British Residents' influence led to legal decisions to stamp out the filthy customs, which were often refused by the British East India Company authorities. The upper cloth revolt, which began in 1828, was the first liberation struggle in the world.

**KEYWORDS:** *Travancore, Social Disabilities, Brahmins, Christians, Hindu, LMS, Caste*

## Introduction

A lot of evil practices and customs existed in erstwhile Travancore. Most of them were against lower caste people and they were the ones who suffered the most. The low caste people were oppressed with the use of customs by the upper caste people or the *Savarnas*. This article deals with the impact of such customs on the society.

Casteism was a heinous custom that prevailed in Travancore. Social life was defined to each caste on the basis of caste system. Brahmins and Nairs were considered themselves as upper castes in the social pyramid. The Nairs enjoyed many economic and social privileges as a ruling class because Rajas of Travancore belonged to this class. The Nair community gave their brigade to king to fight against the rivals. Brahmins were related to Nairs through the sexual relation with Nair ladies through *Sambandham*.<sup>1</sup> The lust of the Brahmins and the way how the exploitation of lower caste women was for sexual purposes is revealed by this custom. However, Brahmin women led a secluded life,<sup>2</sup> Nair women enjoyed a large measure of liberty and mixed freely in public assemblies.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, land was given by Rajas to the Brahmins and they appointed Nair men as bailiffs to distribute it to the tenants. Hence, Nairs disliked the works of the missionaries as they challenged against such evil practices and social customs prevailed in South Travancore. Moreover, the outcastes were very loyal to the missionaries as they find safety under their wings.

The unprivileged classes who embraced Christianity suffered a lot under the upper classes in Travancore. As far as the privileged caste Hindus, all class and castes below them were considered as slaves. Such socially neglected classes had to perform various services such as guarding government properties, government forests etc., transportation of different goods from one place to another, *Oozhiam*-service without pay etc. The unprivileged were not entitled to grow cows and run oil mills.<sup>4</sup> To make any kind of trade was not allowed for them. They were not allowed to own tiled houses and wear shoes, gold ornaments or to hold even an umbrella. They were considered to be some sort of luxury. They were neither permitted to comb their hair, nor smear oil upon head. They were

not allowed to keep moustache. These lower classes had no right even to decorate their huts on marriage days or to acquire landed property or to own wheeled carriages or to use public courts and roads.<sup>5</sup> Only the privileged classes had the right to go to schools and join government offices.<sup>6</sup> When they were educated, the Nadars were not ready to do *oozhiam* service and to pay taxes. Those who neglected to do these services were severely punished through the court of law.<sup>7</sup>

Even though the Christian converts were granted certain privileges and enjoyed freedom to a certain extent they were not fully liberated from the yoke of feudal laws. The proclamation of the Rani on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1829 was a heavy blow to the activities of the missionaries and the converts. Soon after the establishment of the first Protestant Church at Mylaudy, the proclamation of Rani prevented the converts from breaking the yoke of ancient customs.<sup>8</sup> Apart from that, the converts should behave towards the privileged classes in a different way rather than their period of conversion. The situation became more severe when the edict of 1851 by Dewan Krishna Rao came out barring them to avail the privileges enjoyed by them as Christians.<sup>9</sup> According to this edict the converts were prohibited from using roads used by the high caste Hindus. They had to use the roads and ways assigned only for the low castes. Besides an Ezhava who embraces Christianity should cease to be an Ezhava.<sup>10</sup> They have to take a roundabout route to the fields. But even though Christianity negates the distance pollution<sup>11</sup> some converted Christians observed distance pollution in some places for some period as they observed in their ancestral religion.

A series of incidents can be brought to light in support of caste disabilities in South Travancore. Mrs. Mault, a lady missionary, narrated a touching incident of a small slave girl of about 11 years of age, who had no freedom from her master. Being exhausted due to hunger she ran away and reached the Boarding School of Mrs. Mault. After some relief, she told Mrs. Mault that she was a slave and owing to her master's heartless flogging, she had run away.<sup>12</sup> While continuing her studies in this school a morose looking man appeared and demanded his slave girl. However, Mrs. Mault tried to retain the girl there by offering her ransom money,

which he did not accept. He said: “I want not your money but my slave”, and walked away with her.<sup>13</sup> This gives us the clear panorama of the then situation.

The assault on Rev. William Lee, a missionary of the L.M.S in Kerala paved the way to make the government think towards the injustice to the unprivileged classes. When William Lee was passing through a road in Punjalingapuram, a village of Brahmins, he was prevented and was instructed to take another deviated route, as it was an exclusive road for the Brahmins. He respected their wishes so as not to ‘hurt the feelings of the people’. But, on his return journey, he passed through the Brahmin village since the other road was ‘very rough and troublesome’. He and his horse keeper, ‘a pariah’, were then assaulted.<sup>14</sup> The Madras government was of the opinion that the missionary could have avoided this incident. During the assault a Brahmin threw a copper-vessel at him, and beat his horse keeper with a rope. The bystanders assaulted him by throwing stones, which struck Mr. Lee, his horse keeper, and his pony. Nevertheless, they passed through the same street and re-joined at the other side of the village. But certain Catechists and others had gone round by the way Mr. Lee had declined to take. Mr. Lee returned on foot to the village again in search of a small leather bag lost by his horse-keeper in the melee. While he was ‘parleying with the people’ regarding his missing property he was struck by a Brahmin over the left cheekbone and some others struck him ‘over the head with sticks’.<sup>15</sup>

The Kerala government was reluctant to punish the Brahmins. But the offenders were just fined Rs 30 each.<sup>16</sup> The Kerala government’s view of this incident was that the *agraharam*<sup>17</sup> supposed to be private property, had been donated to the Brahmins. Therefore, the Brahmins of the village ‘were entitled to deny to the public the right of way through the main street of the village, until such right of way was declared by a Court of Law’. They also had the right to prevent their homes from being desecrated in ‘self-defence’.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, according to Madhava Rao, ‘it was the duty of Mr. Lee to avoid risk so probable a breach of peace’.<sup>19</sup> The Dewan also criticized the missionaries’ attitude in general and stated that: ‘Some of the missionary gentlemen would... seem to be under the impression that it

would be quite lawful for them to take upon themselves the enforcement of rights like that in question even to the extent of shooting down those that would resist such action'.<sup>20</sup>

However, the Madras government criticized these views and stated that in the Madras Presidency and other parts of Travancore, 'Men of all castes and nationalities' passed every day through 'streets exclusively inhabited by Brahmins' and approached their wells and pagodas. Accordingly the Resident ordered to His Highness that 'the public high streets of all towns are the property, not of any particular caste, but of the whole community, and that every man, be his caste or religion what it may, has a right to the full use of them'.<sup>21</sup> Besides, the Governor of Madras blamed Madava Rao for not having used the appropriate 'terms of respect and courtesy' to the missionaries.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, an enquiry was instituted to investigate the extent and nature of disabilities undergone the outcastes of South Travancore. This indicates that the British government is laying its upper hand gradually and slowly over the Raja of Kerala regarding the violation of human rights.

As directed by the Madras government the Resident asked the Dewan of Kerala to furnish the details regarding the extent of disabilities and oppressions towards the lowest castes in Travancore. The following are the four replies furnished by the Dewan.<sup>23</sup>

1. The lowest castes are not permitted to use the roads open to higher castes.
2. They are not permitted to enter and approach to a certain distance of courts and public offices.
3. They are not permitted to join government schools.
4. They are excluded from the public services.

From the perusal of the above report of the Resident, the Madras government was convinced that distance pollution was the root cause of all the disabilities.<sup>24</sup> The Madras government strictly demanded the Kerala government to take necessary steps for the removal of all impediments experienced by the lower castes. As such in April 1870 they were allowed to use public roads, to approach courts of justice and the public offices of

the state. They were also given right to perform business during prescribed business hours in the Kerala state without any prejudice to their caste and creed.<sup>25</sup> Even after the enforcement of such orders there existed the inequalities of caste and creed. The lowest castes were time and again not allowed to avail such freedom. Very often the government officials were reluctant to entertain these lower castes to enter courts and offices. The public roads used by the high castes were closed for the lowest castes. By the continuous entreaty of the Missionaries, the Kerala government issued a general circular allowing all classes of His Highness's subjects to use public roads irrespective of their creed and castes.<sup>26</sup> The government officers were strictly instructed to see that all such orders are seen adhered strictly and if any officer found otherwise, he should undergo the severest displeasure of the government. Even after the repeated circular of 21<sup>st</sup> July 1884 such disabilities of using the public roads continued. Besides the Nadars, Parayas, the Christians and even the Europeans were prohibited from using public roads when religious processions of the high castes were taken out. The Christians demanded total freedom without religious prejudices.

But the liberated slaves were not entitled to use public roads, to make use of public courts and offices and to get admitted to the public schools. Responding to the letters of the missionaries about such inhuman restrictions, the Madras government directed the Raja of Travancore to enable all people to have the right on public roads, courts and markets. Despite frequent requests by the missionaries the king of Kerala, Ayilyam Thirunal issued an order in 1870, which enabled all classes of people to use public roads, markets and courts.<sup>27</sup> Since the government officers did not adhere to the above circular, the reform did not have the desired result. It was due to the intervention of the Christian missionaries that the Dewan Raminger of King Visakam Thirunal, (with a comment of the Raja) issued an order on 21<sup>st</sup> July 1884 permitting all classes of people, irrespective of caste, creed or gender to use the courts, offices, public highways and market places.<sup>28</sup> This order had a little positive impact on the emancipation of the depressed class.

As the children belonging to the unprivileged classes were not entitled

to get admitted to government schools the missionaries came forward for the education of all classes of the people in the state. The Travancore government was forced to open their eyes towards the education of the backward classes by inaugurating separate schools for them. But the missionaries opposed this inequality by requesting the Raja to open the school run at the public expense to all neatly and decently dressed and well-behaved children irrespective of their caste and creed. Even though the government was favourable to the views of the missionaries; there arose another severe problem — The high caste Hindu students getting mingled with outcaste Hindu students.

The government was of the fear that if the outcastes were permitted to attend the school the high caste students would desert them. To overcome this the Resident resolved to provide education to the backward classes by the government in the grand-in-aid Code of 1894. The Code took its practical shape when funds were provided for grants to backward classes. The government stepped forward in 1904 by providing the entire cost of the primary education for the backward classes. Thus, once a subject beyond the dream to have education to the out castes especially women turned out to be a reality.

Among numerous caste restrictions prevailed in erstwhile Travancore, the breast-cloth restriction was certainly the most perplexing. In Travancore, 'the upper cloth' was allowed to be worn only by Nair and other high-caste women. Brahmin women had the right to cover their breast.<sup>29</sup> Cloaking the body using the *putappu*<sup>30</sup> and *olakkuda*<sup>31</sup> were obligatory for Antajanams<sup>32</sup> when they ventured out of their illam<sup>33</sup>. The Nadars and other lower castes such as the *Ezhavas*, *Parayas* and *Pulayas* were forbidden not only to wear the upper cloth but also to cover the upper part of their bodies.<sup>34</sup> Their women were compelled to keep the upper part of their bodies bare as a token of submission.<sup>35</sup> After the establishment of the London Missionary Society in Travancore, Colonel Munro, the Resident of Travancore in 1812 issued an order permitting "The women converted to Christianity to cover their bosoms as obtains among Christians in other countries...."<sup>36</sup> But this custom continued without any hurdles. The struggle for wearing upper-cloth first started



in Thukkalay, now a part of Tamilnadu, in the beginning of 1822 and it continued up to 1825.<sup>37</sup> To suppress the rebellion Col. Morison, the then Resident, sent troops from Trivandrum to the riot affected areas.<sup>38</sup> After continuous agitations and Proclamations the Travancore State, which later became part of Kerala, decide to issue a final Proclamation. Madhava Rao, the then Devan wrote to Cullen on 17<sup>th</sup> May 1859 regarding the proposed Proclamation: "His Highness now proposes to abolish all rules prohibiting the covering of the upper parts of the persons of Nadar women and to grant them perfect liberty to meet the requirements of decency any way they may deem proper, with the simple restriction that they do not imitate the same mode of dress that appertains to the higher caste."<sup>39</sup> However, the LMS missionaries were not satisfied with the proposed Proclamation and accordingly petitioned the Madras government on 18<sup>th</sup> July 1859.<sup>40</sup> The missionaries were not satisfied with the permission to wear upper-cloth to the women of the Nadar community only. Thus, after continuous struggle and strife, the Travancore government enacted a fresh legislation in 1865 gaining this right to all the lower castes.<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

Since the British Residents came to supersede Travancore, their influence was evident in all the realms of administration. As the Christian missionaries were Europeans, they had influence on the Residents. This nexus helped the Travancore government to take legal measures even with reluctance to eliminate the evil customs. The influence of the missionaries through the Residents, compelled Travancore government to take legal decisions to stamp out the filthy customs that prevailed there. The British East India Company authorities and Britain often refused to interfere with the customs that prevailed here as they gave priority to trade. However, since many of the Residents were Protestant Christians and were with mission vigour, heeded the missionaries' appeal.

None of the rights of the low caste people were granted by the government voluntarily. It was achieved through struggles, riots, grievances and missionary pressure. The British authorities understood from the letters and complaints of the missionaries that all disability is based on distance pollution. The freedom to use road, court and public offices was allowed



in Travancore by the mounting pressure of the British authorities.

The most heinous custom was the lack of freedom to wear upper cloth. This was an evil practice that destroyed the self-esteem of women belonging to the outcaste. The upper cloth agitation was a struggle against this evil practice. This struggle was the first liberation struggle in the world, led by women with the help of men in their own homes and with the support of Christian missionaries. After long years of armed struggle and persecution, the women of the lower caste got the freedom to wear whatever they wanted. The upper cloth revolt which started in 1828 lasted until it was sanctioned by Dewan T. Madhava Rao's final proclamation in 1865. *Ezhavas* and other subalterns were free to wear upper cloth from then on. Thus the freedom of all the low caste communities was achieved through struggle. The presence of the Avarnas in the Indian freedom struggle was reduced in a desperate attempt to break the shackles of immorality that bound them. If they were also independent, the colonization of British rule would not have prevailed here. Even if they were dominated, they could have been easily driven out with a combined effort.

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## Notes and References

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3. William Logan, *Malabar Manual*, Vol. 1, Government Press, Madras, 1951, p.135.
4. R.N. Yesudas, *The History of the London Missionary Society in Kerala 1806-1908*, Kerala Historical Society, TVM, 1980, p.199.
5. G.A. Ballard to the Acting Chief Secretary to Government, Fort at St. George dated Cochin, 9th March 1817, *Pol. Proc.*, 23rd April 1870, No. 23, pp.2-4.

6. R.N. Yesudas, *op.cit.*, Appendix ix, pp.311-313
7. *Circular Order of Col. Munro, Dewan dated 7th Edawam 989 (1814 A.D)*, NAI.
8. Proclamation is printed in R.N. Yesudas, *The History of the London Missionary Society in Kerala 1806-1908*, Kerala Historical Society, Appendix 1, pp.259-261.
9. *Christian Converts – Their Treatment in Travancore*, Cover File No. 215, Kerala State Archives (KSA), Tvm, pp.3-5.
10. *Ibid*, pp. 6-7.
11. *J.C. Hannington to Chief Secretary to Government*, Trivandrum, 24th November, G.O. No. 925, 8th December, Government of Madras, Political Proceedings (MPP), 1887
12. The Evangelical magazine and missionary chronicle, *Ibid.*, p.51.
13. *Letter from Mrs. Mault to the Foreign Secretary dated Nagercoil*, 2nd June 1830, *Ibid.*, Vol. III, New Series, December 1830, p.511.
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15. *Ibid*.
16. H. Newill to Ch. Sec.,22 Dec., No. 80, MPP, OIOC.1868
17. Land donated by the king to the Brahmins.
18. Madhava Rao to Resident, 5 Nov, MPP, OIOC,1868
19. *Ibid*.
20. *Ibid*.
21. G.O.No. 284, 11 Sep. 1869, MPP.
22. *Ibid*.
23. Order by R.S. Ellis, Chief Secretary to Government, 11 September, *Pol. Proc.*, 1869, Vol. III,1869, p.453.
24. *Ibid*, pp.2-3.
25. Order, dated 23 April 1870, *Ibid*, No. 23, p.8.
26. T. Madhava Rao to the Resident, dated Trivandrum, 29 January 1870, *Ibid*, pp.7-8.
27. Political proceedings, No.7, Acting Resident in Keralaand Cochin to the Chief Secretary to Government, Fort St. George, 9 May, MPP,1870
28. Official Papers, Circular of V. Ramienger, Dewan of Travancore, dated Trivandurm ,21 KSA ,July 1884, pp.45-46,
29. R.N. Yesudas, *The History of the London Missionary Society in Travancore 1806-1908*, Trivandrum, Kerala Historical Society, 1980, p.172.
30. *Putappu* means cloak
31. *Olakkuda* means palm leaf- umbrella.
32. *Antarjanams* means Brahmin ladies.
33. *Illams* means Brahmin houses.

34. Samuel Mateer, *The Land of Charity*, John Snow and Co, 1871, p.61
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38. C.M. Agur, *op.cit*, p.85.
39. Madhava Rao to Cullen, 17<sup>th</sup> May, No. 895, Madras Political Proceedings (MPP).1859
40. Memorial of the LMS in Travancore to Travelyan, 18<sup>th</sup> July 1859, MPP.
41. Samuel Mateer, *The Land of Charity*, *op.cit.*, p.305.