



COLONIAL INTERVENTION AND IT'S IMPACTS ON DRESSING IN TRAVANCORE

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ABSTRACT

The colonial intervention in Travancore is an epoch making event in the history of Travancore is concerned. While passing through the historicity of Travancore, especially while analysing the dressing of the peoples of Travancore, one can see that the caste discriminations and humiliations were well reflected on their dressings. The utmost cruelties were faced by the lower castes and women on the matter of the same. The upper castes used this unequal dressing patterns on the basis of castes was as the tool for oppression and subjugation.

The situation came to change after the arrival of Europeans particularly from the colonial intervention. The changes were happened from the early part of the 19th Century onwards. The period also shows the emergence of Christian Missionaries in Travancore. They promoted the conversion and they give English education to its peoples. So after receiving it, they realized and fought for their freedom to dressing. It leads to the emergence of agitations in Travancore such as the Channar Agitation or Upper Cloth Agitation, etc. So finally the Royal Proclamations were declared in which all the peoples have the right to wear dresses on the choices of them and not on the basis of castes. So the colonial intervention in Travancore changed the dressing momentum in Travancore.

Keywords: *caste hierarchy, colonial intervention, humiliation, oppression, subjugation*

INTRODUCTION

Dress is one of the basic needs of human beings and it is the chief index to analyse the standard of the living of the people in every society. Dress covers our body, keeps them warm and protects our body from hot and cold. Generally dressing is influenced by climate, caste, social status, religion, occupation, gender, modesty, etc. But here in Travancore, castes and religions were the main yardsticks to determine the dressing pattern of the people. So the two sections of the society such as the upper castes and lower castes were distinct on their dressings. The upper castes used dress as a main tool for oppression and subjugation over the lower castes. The arrival of Europeans in Travancore brought numerous changes into Travancore including its dressings. Coat, suit, pants, t-shirts, gown, etc. emerged in Travancore due to the European influence. So can see that how the colonial intervention affected the dressing in Travancore.

Travancore, one of the Model States under British rule was situated on the southernmost part of the Indian subcontinent had enriched with an appreciable source of history. It was one of the most efficient Princely States



under the efficient rule of Travancore Royal Family from 1729 to 1949. Travancore is also known by the names of 'Venad', VanchiDesam and Thiru-Adi-Desam.¹ Dress is one of the basic needs of human beings and it protects the human body from hot and cold. While analysing the condition of the dressing pattern of the people of Travancore, it was affected by too many factors. Before the modern period, the condition of the dressing pattern in Travancore was in very pathetic one. The society was mainly divided into two types such as the *savarnas* or the upper castes and the *avarnas* or the lower castes. The *savarna-avarna* classifications were well reflected on their dressing patterns as well.

The upper castes had enjoyed all the social benefits were as the lower castes faced suppressions from the higher castes and rulers. The lower castes were restricted from all the major rights which including the right to wear dresses in a proper manner. The upper castes had the right to wear white colour clothes. They also used to wear upper clothes. *Thorthu* was the main dress item, which was worn by the lower castes. They did not had the right to wear an upper cloth including women. The Dalits and other lower castes were barred from wearing proper clothes let alone white clothes. Under such circumstances, the insistence on white clothes is significant as it subverted the symbolic order.²

So can see that while analysing the historicity of the dressing pattern of Travancore, the upper castes were humiliated to the lower castes on the matter of their dressings. Humiliation involves disrespecting and demeaning others, damaging their self-respect, and causing them moral hurt and pain.³ The caste dominances were the common situation in Travancore before the modern period. So caste determines every incidents in the society as well as caste was the main yardsticks to determine one's dress-code in the Travancore society. In the context of world history, the humiliation was affected on the matters of race, colour, creed, etc. while in the context of Travancore, humiliation was affected on the matter of caste, which was the leading factor in the society.

So the socially dead situation was existed in Travancore on those particular periods and its reflection was also affected in the dressing pattern of the people in Travancore especially among the weaker sections of the society like the lower castes and women. They had no right to wear the upper cloth. Both male and female were in half naked form. In the case of the women, it was one of the greatest challenge to their dignity and womanhood. But at the same time there existed the system that even the women in Travancore were ardently believed that it was their right to be half-naked and treated it as the part of morality. If one lady violate the system the family members itself take actions against her. So because of ignorance they were cruelly exploited in Travancore.

The *Nayar* ladies uncover their breasts when they entering in the temples and during procession. It was a caste manner in Travancore. Once a lady reached in front of the Rani of Attingal with covering her breasts. Then Rani ordered to cut off her breasts.⁴ The symbol of caste system and power relations were expressed through the dressing pattern.⁵



The colonial intervention in Travancore can make a change in the existing system in Travancore. Their arrival affected the socio-economic, political and cultural changes in Travancore. This change was happened from the early parts of the 19th Century that was the period, which witnessed the arrival of Christian Missionaries, promotion of English education, etc. in Travancore. William Thobias Ringeltaube was the first priest who entered in Travancore for the activities of London Missionary Society. He established the first church at Myladi in Nagarcoil in 1806. He then established too many churches in Travancore and also promote the people for conversion to Christianity. The lower castes doing the *uzhiyam* or the forced labour system which cannot provide any remuneration. These forced labours were mainly situated in the Districts of Thirunelveli, Ramanadu, and Madura of Tamil Nadu and in the Taluks of Thovala, Agastheeswaram, Kalkkulam, Vilavancode and Neyyattinkara of Travancore. The lower castes of Travancore like the *Pulayas*, *Kuravars*, *Pariahs* and *Channars* were the major *uzhiyam* labours and they attracted to Christianity and they also joined with London Missionary Society.⁶ The Church Missionary Society was situated in the central part of Travancore were as there was not an intensive type of conversions happened in it.

The L.M.S. can reset the life and condition of the converted people. They gave instructions to these people that they should attend churches in every Sundays as well as they should wear the upper clothes as like that of the other Christian ladies worn. This order also had some socio-economic problems because the system of *uzhiyam* was occurred in every days of a week. But attending the churches on Sundays by these lower caste people leads to the opposition of the landlords over them. The upper clothes worn by the converted *Channar* ladies was also provoked the *jennies*.⁷ The society and government argued that it is the violation of manners by the lower castes with the help of Christianity.

The *savarnajennies* then attacked the *Channar* ladies on public paths and markets and they perished the dresses of these ladies. The situation goes on to more worsen and it immediately leads to an agitation in Travancore. The Missionary approached the government for find out a solution. The *Diwan* Munro declared a Proclamation in 1814, in which the *Channar* ladies who accepted Christianity had the right to wear jackets for covering their breast. But the *savarnaNayarjennies* disobeyed this Proclamation and they again and again attacked these converters on the matter of using upper clothes.

The *Channar* agitation was an eye-opener to numerous agitations in all parts of Travancore because after the English education and after attaining Christianity, the people began to know how they were exploited by the caste Hindus and the rulers. At first, the lower castes had no right to wear the upper cloth or they can't even imitate the dressing style and pattern of that of the *savarnas* do.

The Christian Missionaries influenced the Travancore government through the British government of Madras. The activities by the Christian Missionaries in Travancore well promoted the textile trade and textile industry in Travancore. As an influence of British administration, the Travancore government gave some rights to the converted Christians in the next few years. Firstly they introduced that the converted Christians were restricted from *uzhiyam* system in Sundays. In 1829, Travancore government accepted the Proclamation of 1814 that the



converted *Channar* ladies had the right to wear upper clothes. These Proclamations speeded the conversion of the lower castes into Christianity. After the agitation in 1829, there occurred lots of reforms among the Hindu-*Nadar* community. With the assistance of the Missionaries, Muthukutti, otherwise known as Vaikundaswami made numerous reforms in there and it awakened the people. He himself describe as the incarnation of Lord Vishnu and started the *SamathwaSamajam*, an organization. He advocates that the lower castes didn't work in the fields of *jenmies* without remuneration and the lower caste should wear the dress as like that of the upper castes. His egalitarian thoughts awakened the weaker sections of the society.⁸

The L.M.S. utilized these opportunities and then they think about education is the only solution leads to the empowerment of the people. The educated people can easily understood what is right and what is wrong. The Missionaries think English education is much more effected one to the Travancoreans. So they gave English education to the people especially the sons of the converted peoples. Then the Churches were transformed into schools. The Missionaries also promoted and trained the occupations of spinning, weaving, etc. to its people. So the lower castes had attained massive mental supports from the Missionaries. It will improves their courage and confidence into a new level. These converted Christians had attained almost all rights like that of the upper castes Hindus had enjoyed in the earlier days. Now they had the right to wear dress, right to walk, right to speech, etc. and it also shows the role and significance of Missionaries as well as Christianity in Travancore.

The Christian Missionaries were emerged in the early part of the 19th Century as a reaction against the age-old inequalities in Travancore. It also influenced the Travancore administration as well. In 1859 a Proclamation was introduced which declared that the *Channar* ladies had the right to wear jackets as like that of the converted *Channar* ladies worn. Another Proclamation was introduced in 1865 which declares the *Ezhavas* and other castes had the right to wear upper clothes like of the *Channar* ladies worn. All these were the evidences of the influences of Christianity on the administration and dressing of Travancore.⁹

Actually the Britishers were the business or profit motives. The Industrial Revolution in Europe brings over production of dress items. So they tried to sell their dress items in the Afro-Asian countries including Travancore. But here in Travancore, the dressing right was vested on the hands of upper castes only. So they promoted the lower castes to using dresses in properly. Firstly, the textile merchants of Travancore freely gave necessary dress items to the Missionaries. Later, the Missionaries started to sell their finished clothes to the Travancoreans from their homeland.

So dressing pattern and the colonial intervention in Travancore was inseparable because the dressing pattern in Travancore is always obliged to the colonial intervention. The Missionary activities and the introduction of the western education brings an all-round reform in the whole phase and factors of Travancore especially the dressing pattern of Travancore. The socio-cultural outlook of Travancore is loyal to the activities of the colonial intervention and the activities of the Missionaries.



Even though the Britishers reached here with profit motive and they done numerous positive impacts upon the Travancore society as like even though the real intention of the Missionaries was to spread their religion, they realised that the progress of Travancore society is only possible through English education, even they wondered after seeing the situation existed in the society of Travancore because which was filled with numerous evil practices based on caste system and the important among was the discrimination in the case of dressing of the people. The unequal society based on caste hierarchy was so cruel to women and the lower castes.

The Missionaries gave the moral support to the natives and so many lower castes converted into Christianity because it was so liberal and the people enjoyed full freedom in it. They had no restriction in anything, can wear any dress, etc. So naturally a number of lower castes especially from *Channars* and *Ezhavas* converted to Christianity. The educated natives also acted as social reformers because they realized the exploitative system and strategy of the rulers and the upper castes. It brings numerous impacts among the society. The Britishers established plenty of schools and even their churches were acted as schools in earlier days. In the earlier days, the lower castes treated the denial of dressing as their moral right. Kunjiraman. C.V., a literary person attested that her wife wore a jacket, then her mother attacked and quarrelled to her because she wore the jackets as like that of the Muslims.¹⁰ But after attaining English education and after conversion, they realised the disadvantages and humiliation faced by them up to that period. So there emerged numerous protests and unrest. The *Channar* Agitation was such types of one and its impact was very effective and far reached one.

The upper castes always wanted a space in everywhere as they are privileged. So they always suppressed the lower castes and the lower castes had no right to even imitate the dressing pattern of the *savarnas*. The rulers also were the ardent supporters of the same. Then they made proclamation in regarding with the dressing rights of the lower castes had also some strategically movements because the majority of the population in Travancore were belonged to the lower caste Hindus. But because of the caste rigidity and exploitation, numerous Hindus converted to Christianity. Travancore, one of the Hindu State can't afford the situation because it will reduce the strength of Hinduism in Travancore. So they gave permission to cover their upper part and also gave temple entry.

CONCLUSION

Here in Travancore, the dressing pattern indicates the caste hierarchy of the society. In the pre-modern period, the condition of the lower castes was in very pathetic one. Only the upper castes had the right to wear dresses in a proper manner. The lower castes do not had the right to wear upper clothes including women. The *savarnas* or the upper castes oppressed the lower castes in every manner. So they were neglected over lower castes from right to wear dresses in properly. But the condition was changed in the modern period, when the colonial intervention brought the changes in Travancore. The arrival of Europeans, conversion of the lower castes into Christianity, role of Christian Missionaries, Western education, protests and agitations, relentless struggles by the socio-religious reformers all happened in the modern period and it resulted in dress as a right of the people of Travancore rather than a caste discrimination. So the role of colonial intervention in the field of dressing



pattern of the Travancoreans was valuable and it acted as the landmark in the modernization of Travancore in a systematic manner.

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