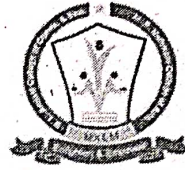


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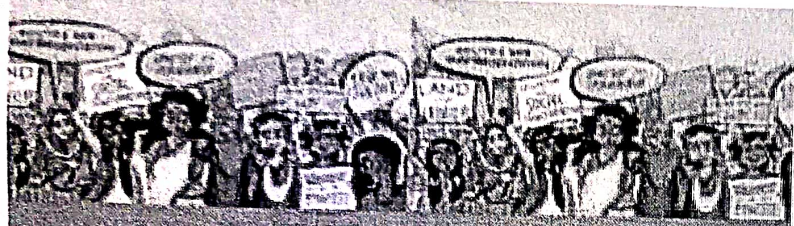
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**THE ROLE OF NADAR WOMENS IN SOCIO RELIGIOUS
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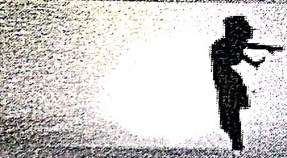
at the Online National Conference on
Dynamics of Women's Movement in India
Historical Legacy and Contemporary Challenges
On Monday 24th May 2021

Dr. Jitendra Aherkar
Ic. Principal
M. R. Nathwani College of Arts



**International Journal of
Multi disciplinary Research and Technology**
IJMRT ISSN:2582-7959
Peer Reviewed Journal

Impact factor 4.328



TARAN PUBLICATION

Register Office: 77, Vastol Nagar, Anand Nagar, Jaipur, India
Deals Office: 70, Old Vastol Nagar, Jaipur, India
Phone: 98291 15059



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Department of History
University of Mumbai
Mumbai, India

International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Technology
(IJMRT)

ISSN 2582-7359

Peer Reviewed Journal

Impact Factor 6.328

NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
“Dynamics of Women’s Movement in India: Historical Legacy and
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Keynote Address by

Prof.Kumkum Roy
Centre for Historical Studies,
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Edition: 2021

MRP: Rs 500/-

Publication Agency Address :

Registered Office: 79 Vashist Nagar, Ambala Cantt, Haryana, India.
Delhi Office: 70, Om Vihar Phase- 3 Uttam Nagar West, New Delhi- 110059

Website: www.ijmrtjournal.com

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The Role Of Nadar Women In Socio-Religious Reform Movement In Kerala

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores and analyses the role of Nadar women's in socio-religious reform movement in Kerala. Nadar is a Tamil and Kerala caste of India. Nadars are predominant in the districts of Kanyakumari, Thoothukudi, Tirunelveli, Virudhunagar and Thiruvananthapuram. Nadar women plays a vital role in the history of Kerala. The socio-economic development achieved by the Nadars in southern India has elicited academic interest. Nadars are classified and listed as an Other Backward Class by the governments of both Tamil Nadu and India. The Channar Lahala or Channar revolt, also called Maru Marakkal Samaram, refers to the fight from 1813 to 1859 of Nadar climber women in the present day Kanyakumari district of the Travancore kingdom of India for the right to wear upper-body clothes to cover their breasts. The Breast Tax was a tax imposed on the lower caste and untouchable Hindu women by the Kingdom of Travancore if they wanted to cover their breasts in public, until 1924. All this will be discussed in detail in the paper.

Key words: Channar revolt, Maru Marakkal Samaram, Channar Lahala

The Nadar community was not a single caste, but developed from an assortment of related subcastes, which in course of time came under the single banner Nadar. Nadar climbers were the largest subject of today's Nadar community. A few subsects of the Nadar community, such as the Nelamaikkarars, were traditionally wealthy landlords and money lenders. Historically, most Nadars were cultivators of palmyra trees and jaggery and a few were also involved in the toddy trade. Nadar climbers had faced discrimination from major upper castes in some regions.

In 19th century Travancore, baring of one's chest to higher status people was considered a sign of respect by both males and females. Thus, those of the lower status castes, such as the Nadar climbers and Ezhavas, had to bare their chest in the presence of members of the higher-ranked Nair caste, who in turn had to do so in the presence of the still higher ranked Nambudiri Brahmins. The Brahmins, being at the pinnacle of the Hindu ritual-ranking system known as varna, bared their chest only in the presence of a deity. Lower-caste women who wore clothes that covered their breasts had to pay a punitive breast tax to the state. Uneasy with their social status, a large number of Nadar climbers embraced Christianity, and started to wear "long cloths," strengthened by their new belief system, which offered equal rights to all men (and women). When many more Nadars turned to Christianity, many Nadar women started to wear the Nair breast cloth. The Nadar women successfully campaigned to be allowed to cover their breasts. In 1813, Colonel John Munro, British *dewan* in the Travancore court, issued an order granting permission to women converted to Christianity to wear upper cloth. The order was withdrawn when *pindakars*, members of the Raja's council,

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complained about this, arguing that this right would obliterate caste-differences, and lead to widespread pollution in the state.

In 1858, new violence broke out in several places in Travancore. On 26 July 1859, under pressure from Charles Trevelyan, the Madras Governor, the king of Travancore issued a proclamation proclaiming the right for all Nadar women to cover their breasts, either by wearing jackets, like the Christian Nadars, or tie coarse-cloth around their upper-body, like the *Mukkavattigal* (fisher-women). Yet they were still not allowed to cover their breasts in the style of the higher-class Nair women. This solution was not satisfactory to the missionaries, who regarded all men and women to be equal. Nadar women continued to ignore the restrictions, developing an upper-wear style that resembled the style of the higher-class Hindu women, but offended some Hindus as a provocation by the missionaries. The code was still discriminatory until 1915–1916, and the challenge was supported by *Ayyankali*. After the revolt, pamphlets appeared putting forth the claims of Kshatriya status of the Nadars. Members of the caste claimed the right to wear the sacred thread and to ride palanquins to wedding ceremonies. By 1891 at least 24,000 Nadars had given their caste to the census enumerator as being *kshatriya*.

The village-legend Nangeli is about a woman who lived in the early 19th century at *Cherthala* in the erstwhile princely state of Travancore in India and supposedly, cut off her breasts in an effort to protest against the caste-based breast tax. The village officer of Travancore, came to her home to survey her breasts and collect the breast tax. Nangeli revolted against the harassment; cutting off her breasts and presenting them to him in a *plantain leaf*. She died soon from loss of blood. According to local villagers, Nangeli's husband, Chirukandan, seeing her mutilated body was overcome by grief and jumped into her funeral *pyre* and committed suicide. Following the death of Nangeli, a series of people's movements were set off. Soon the place she lived had come to be called as *Mulachiparambu*. However, the story is not officially recognized in any of India's historical accounts and its authenticity is debatable. Manu Pillai argues that covering breasts was not the norm in Kerala's matrilineal society during Nangeli's life-span. Victorian standards of morality penetrated into the society decades later under British colonial influence, which led to subsequent class-struggles for the right to wear upper cloth. He believes Nangeli to have protested against an oppressive tax regime that was imposed upon all lower castes, which got appropriated with the passage of time, in pursuit of a different patriarchal fight for the preservation of female dignity.

The social and economic development achieved by the Nadars have evoked academic interest. According to N.S. Ramnath, of Forbes, the Nadars are a close knit, powerful community. The legend of the origin of the Nadars tell of the birth of seven sons; with the death of two, the remaining five father the separate divisions of the community. There were five major divisions among the Nadars. The Nadar community was not a single caste, but developed from an assortment of related subcastes and classes of different origins, which in course of time, came under the single banner Nadar. *Nadar climber* was the largest subset of today's Nadar community.

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