



Clothing and conflicts: Dress-based social struggles in Travancore

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Abstract

The history of Travancore's dress-based struggles reveals the intersection of caste, gender, and identity in Kerala's social transformation. Dress was not merely a cultural choice but a regulated practice imposed by caste hierarchies, symbolizing dominance and subordination. This article interrogates the Channar Revolt, the legend of Nangeli, and the wider implications of clothing as a tool of protest and dignity. Using archival sources, oral traditions, and subaltern studies, demonstrates how marginalized communities converted attire into a medium of rebellion. By exploring case studies and analyzing the modalities of insurgent consciousness, this paper argues that clothing conflicts became turning points in reformist movements and nationalist history of Kerala.

Keywords: Travancore, upper cloth revolt, subaltern studies, caste, gender, kerala history, dress as resistance

Introduction

Travancore's rigid caste system made clothing a symbol of social identity. Marginalized sections of the society such as Nadars and Ezhavas were denied the right to wear upper garments, particularly women, whose bodies became symbols of caste discrimination. Clothing became a strife of humiliation and assertion, shaping the course of Kerala's reform movements.

The prohibition on certain forms of dress was not merely a matter of custom but a state-enforced regulation with legal proclamations, fines, and violent enforcement. Such restrictions created a visible hierarchy in everyday life, where attire immediately conveyed one's caste status. Missionaries and reformers regularly criticized these humiliating practices, yet it was the oppressed themselves—through acts of defiance and sacrifice—who transformed the politics of dress into a struggle for dignity.

By situating these conflicts within the broader discourse of social reform, gender justice, and subaltern agency, this study demonstrates that the history of dress in Travancore is not a peripheral issue but central to understanding Kerala's modern identity.

Sources and Methods

Sources: Royal proclamations (1813, 1822, 1829, 1859), missionary reports of the London Missionary Society, colonial records, oral narratives (e.g., Nangeli), and paintings (e.g., Raja Ravi Varma's depictions).

: Secondary works by A. Sreedhara Menon, Robin Jeffrey, and Bernard Cohn.

Methodology: Historical-analytical method, employing subaltern frameworks of resistance (Ranajit Guha's modalities of insurgency, negation, and solidarity).

Comparative Approach: Parallel analysis with similar dress-based restrictions in South Asian societies, situating Travancore within a larger discourse of caste and gender oppression.

Significance of the Study

This study highlights how social culture and everyday practices became deeply influenced Travancore's caste society. By focusing on clothing struggles, it demonstrates

how resistance was not only about economic rights or temple entry but about reclaiming dignity in the most visible aspects of social life. The findings emphasize the role of women and marginalized communities as active historical agents, challenging traditional narratives that prioritize elite reformers. It also contributes to subaltern studies by illustrating how small acts of defiance, like wearing a piece of cloth, could destabilize entrenched hierarchies and influence larger reform movements.

Case Studies

Nangeli's Protest

Nangeli, an Ezhava woman from Cherthala, is remembered in legend for resisting the humiliating mulakkaram (breast tax). When a tax collector demanded payment, she cut off her breasts and presented them on a plantain leaf before bleeding to death. While historians argue that mulakkaram was a gendered term for poll tax rather than a specific breast tax, the symbolism of the story cannot be ignored. Nangeli embodies the extremity of oppression and the desperation for dignity. Her protest is remembered as a martyrdom of bodily resistance, where the body became both the site of humiliation and the ultimate weapon of defiance.

Kiran's Story

Kiran, a young man from a marginalized caste, grew up in a village where traditional expectations dictated what he could wear. Ridiculed for adopting upper-caste styles, he persisted in dressing as an expression of individuality and dignity. His actions mirrored the nineteenth-century defiance of the Nadars, showing how clothing continues to serve as a marker of social resistance. His experience demonstrates the continuity of stigma and assertion, where modernity has not fully erased caste prejudices.

Anjali's Story

Anjali, from an upper-caste family, encountered the history of clothing struggles through her education. She began wearing attire traditionally associated with marginalized communities during festivals, symbolically breaking caste barriers. Though criticized by conservative relatives, her actions sparked dialogue about inclusivity. Anjali's case

shows how the privileged can consciously challenge inherited hierarchies through cultural choices, bridging historical divides.

Significance of the Study

Together, these stories illustrate the multi-layered nature of clothing struggles: Nangeli's sacrifice represents historical trauma, Kiran's defiance reflects contemporary caste tensions, and Anjali's inclusivity highlights possibilities of reconciliation. They show that clothing is not a superficial matter but a continuing dialogue between history, identity, and social justice.

Results and Discussion

Key Results

1. Dress codes in Travancore were symbols of social discrimination.
2. The Upper Cloth Revolt became one of South India's longest social agitations, linking clothing with dignity and human rights.
3. Missionary interventions and colonial administration indirectly facilitated resistance.
4. The 1859 proclamation partially dismantled caste-based dress restrictions, marking a major legal reform.
5. Reformers and nationalist leaders later transformed clothing into a political symbol of unity and equality.

Discussion

The struggles surrounding clothing expose how caste society operated not only through temples, land, and rituals but also through regulation of the body. The prohibition on upper garments for women of oppressed castes was meant to visually reinforce hierarchy, reducing them to perpetual servitude. The Channar Revolt transformed this everyday humiliation into an organized struggle.

The revolt must also be understood as a gendered rebellion, since women led the agitation. Their refusal to accept humiliation through bodily exposure asserted their agency in a patriarchal and caste-dominated society. Missionaries provided ideological and material support by introducing modest attire and schools, but the revolt was fundamentally a grassroots resistance.

Through the lens of subaltern studies, these struggles embody insurgent consciousness. The act of wearing "forbidden" garments was itself a radical political gesture, transforming the body into a site of resistance. Ranajit Guha's modalities—negation, insurgency, and solidarity—are clearly visible: women negated caste prescriptions, collective violence established insurgency, and education and Christianity provided solidarity.

Furthermore, the nationalist phase reframed dress within anti-colonial discourse. Khadi, promoted by Gandhi, became a unifying fabric across caste divides, reconfiguring clothing from a symbol of inequality to one of resistance. Yet, the memory of earlier struggles remained embedded in Kerala's reform movements. Leaders such as Ayyankali drew inspiration from these earlier defiant acts, linking questions of dress to broader struggles for access to roads, schools, and temples.

In the modern context, globalization and fashion have blurred many caste-specific boundaries, but subtle prejudices still persist. The continued symbolic weight of attire—whether in festivals, weddings, or politics—reminds

us that dress is never a neutral practice. Rather, it is part of an ongoing negotiation of identity, dignity, and power.

Conclusion

Travancore, one of the princely states of Kerala, was characterized by a rigid caste hierarchy. The social codes of clothing in Travancore were designed to visually reinforce the caste system. Upper castes, including the Nairs and Namboothiris, enjoyed the privilege of wearing finer fabrics, jewelry, and upper garments. On the other hand, lower castes such as the Nadars, Ezhavas, and Pulayas were denied these rights. Women from marginalized communities were particularly subjected to humiliating restrictions. They were expected to remain bare-breasted in the presence of upper-caste. Royal proclamations in 1829 and later in 1859 that granted women from marginalized communities the right to wear upper cloths. These proclamations marked a turning point in the social history of Travancore.

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