

## Identity Consciousness in the Coastal Regions of Southern Tamil Nadu

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**Abstract:** The aim of the paper is to focus on the redistribution of social orders through identity consciousness of the traditional lower strata of the society during 20th century. Status groups in a conservative society will never compromise with a low position than traditionally ascribed and they strive by all means to improve their existing status. The research methodology adopted is a combination of analytical, historical and sociological. The sources both primary and secondary. The primary sources include archival sources, epigraphical evidences, native newspapers reports and government reports both published and unpublished. The secondary sources include books, journals and newspapers.

**Keywords:** social orders, archival sources, epigraphical evidences, journals

### INTRODUCTION:

The relationship between economic development and social change is mutually complementary. Traditional economy was subsistence-oriented and integrated with the caste system. But, the nineteenth century situation altered the trend in Tamil Nadu. The economic development which began in the country continued to perpetuate in the twentieth century leading to increasing income earning activities. In the due course of process the traditional working classes achieved economic freedom. As there is an overlap between economic freedom and social justice the new situation promoted conditions conducive for the rise of the exploited sections in the social fabric of Tamil Nadu. Among them the Nadars were the first to establish their identity as a group which distributed the social balance. Naturally it confronted with the social pride and dominant identity of the Traditional Classes like Nairs, Vellalas and Namboodri landlords.

Nadars are predominant in the south Indian districts of Tuticorin, Kanyakumari, Tirunelveli and Virudhunagar. The rise of the Nadars owes much to the initiative and keen interest taken by the Protestant missionaries.

Scientific cultivation techniques and implements were introduced by the missionaries to enhance production essential for market economy. Occupational shift was encouraged and many Nadars became traders. The 1860s and 1870s were prosperous years for the coffee trading Nadars of South Travancore. The profits earned from business were invested on land. Vocational training in lace-making and embroidery also contributed to a shift in the

traditional occupation. It became a source of monetary gains to Christian Nadars. Estate employment in European plantations was yet another source of regular income. In 1904 about 5000 coolies were employed in the estates [1]. Among them a substantial number were southern districts Nadars especially from Nagercoil, Thittuvilai and Neyyoor etc. In 1860 the Public Works Department (PWD) was created. It generated more employment and thousands of coolie workers were given the benefit of cash wages. Labour demand increased in the closing years of the nineteenth century and also continued to be in peak form in the 1920s. As a correlative effect wages increased and it improved the economic status of the labouring classes. The depression effect had created a temporary set-back in the 1930s, but in the 1940s war service recruitment compensated the trend. Moreover labour migration from Tirunelveli to Ceylon created scarcity of palmyra climbers. It led to the situation that favoured seasonal migration of Nadar tappers to Tirunelveli. As the tapping season in Tirunelveli followed that of South Travancore the Nadar climbers of the region could engage in birth places. It increased the number of annual work days which in turn enhanced their income level [2].

The irrigation projects commissioned since 1906 had thoroughly revolutionised the regional labour market. Area under irrigated cultivation increased threefold and it further enhanced the labour demand. Peak agricultural season faced labour-shortages and it led to rise in wage level. Seasonal factors and crop selection also interacted with the trend. Villagers from the western parts of the Travancore district migrated to East for harvesting operations [3]. After Travancore

cropping season starts in the west and thus the agrestic labourers could be employed in both the places one by one. The kind wages earned from harvesting was sufficient for their familial requirements. Since employment outside traditional sector was paid in cash wages the labourers could save them the accrual of which became their capital base. To cope with the situation, reforms became necessary. The Pattom Proclamation of 1865 created a land value of 1.5 Crores[4]. The Nair tenants who were the immediate beneficiaries of the reform attempted to realise the value of land. The Nair Regulation of 1925 also created similar situation. In both cases the Nadars were the greatest beneficiaries. They invested their surplus capital on lands which earned them the status of landlords. Trade was one of the avenues where the Nadars invested their surplus income from land source. Since the expansion of irrigation the reign witnessed diversification of economic activity. Marketing centres and periodical fairs increased, and by 1940 there were twelve markets and a score of bi-weekly and evening fairs were organised. The 1961 census estimate depicts still further increase reaching a total of thirty one. Some of these marketing places developed into urban centres and in 1950 their number rose to twenty [5]. In all these centres there were vast scope for trade and business. The Nadars entered the fray and reinvested their surplus income on business.

The western education became a symbol of both status and economic assent in the society. The Nadars realised the economic value of western education from the beginning. By 1827 they began to realise the benefits of western education in terms of material prosperity [6]. The patronising interest of the residents favoured the recruitment of educated christians in government services. In the twentieth century the material progress of the Nadars promoted further educational activities. The separation of Revenue Department from Dewasom Department in 1922 removed the objection to the lower classes entering executive services [7]. The situation favoured the entry of Nadars into the executive services which offered them higher status and source of power. Professionals like doctors, engineers, lawyers and professors emerged from among the community giving it an enhanced prestige. Increasing group consciousness was the characteristic feature of the twentieth century. The social movements and case associates which had surfaced in the late nineteenth century stimulated the group consciousness of the Nadars. The all Travancore Nadar Association and its local branches like the Nanchilnadu Nadar Sangam provided the basis for unity and solidarity. In 1938 they passed a resolution demanding substitution of the derogatory term 'Nadan' for more honorific 'Nadar'[8]. Wealth offered the Nadars an affluent social life manifested in their lifestyle, dress, food habits and ornamentation. Wealth

had a bigger say in the social position and by 1920 it had affected the intergroup relations of Travancore society [9]. The distribution of economic gains depends substantially on the supply of educational opportunities [10]. The Nadars were receptive to western education, and the merits that it conferred provided those new bases of power and status with the change in the established social position, it became difficult to fix the social rights and roles of different communities [11].

Mukkuvar, a social group primarily belongs to fishermen's community living in the coastal districts of Kerala and South Tamil Nadu and also known as Moger, Marakala, Bestha, Meenagara etc. The social status of Mukkuva traditionally dependent relation with merchants and lenders and were subjected to the tyranny and rapacity of the later till the arrival of the Portuguese [12]. The Portuguese contact and egalitarian preachings of the missionaries influenced their reference group behaviour. The situation generated strain in the social system manifested in the form of clashes with Nadars in 1572, 1584 and 1604. The establishment of British administrative control over Travancore came as a blessing to the growing aspirants of the Mukkuvas. Col.Munro was successful in persuading Rani Parvathi Bai to relax some of the sanctions imposed on the fishermen. Taxes on fishing nets, sheds and marriages were repealed. British concept of rule of law and parity in the law courts provided an ideological base to the aspirants of the Mukkuvas. The abolition of slavery, revocation of prescription on dress and similar other social reforms had indirect influence on the community. But, the vicious circle of poverty, dependence and exploitation continued to hamper the progress of the community. In the twentieth century social awareness and group interest nurtured the formation of caste associations. Around 1917 the elites among the Mukkuvas formed the 'Arasar Sangam'. The objectives and programmes of the organisation were focused through the newspaper *Arasargula Arvalan*, *Munnetra Thiravukol* and *Travancore Tribune* came later to strengthen the awareness-building work. But, all became an easy prey to the trickery of the social superiors. After a lapse of time *Meenavar Sangam* surfaced, and in 1943 it had established 32 branches. Many more fishermen's organisations sprang up subsequently, and among them the *Latin Christian Mahasabha* and *Coastal Christian Union* were significant on achievement basis. The Nair Service Society and *Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam* were taken as models for the organisation, while the Protestant Christians were taken as the reference group [13]. These initiatives against sustained exploitation and ascriptive social roles and position radically altered the thought pattern of the community.

Technological development, global demand for certain fish species and foreign exchange reserve

needs created a situation favourable for fisheries development in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The government, in co-ordination with FAO (Food and Agricultural Organisation) and numerous other donor agencies, devised strategies to boost fisheries development. The core of the programme was aimed at providing the necessary input for fish harvesting, introduction of new and efficient technologies, incremental support systems to acquire fishing assets and relieving them from the clutches of middlemen [14]. The non-governmental organisations also took active interest in the developmental programmes of the coastal villages. These progressive steps ultimately led to economic freedom, enhanced income and better living standard of the fishermen. The Mukkuvas also evince remarkable interest in learning. Their Christian affiliation denied them the concessional packages offered by the Government [15]. The Catholic Church to which they associated did nothing substantial in the past. But, with the liberalisation and extension programmes of the Government of Tamil Nadu since 1956, increasing wealth and growing awareness of the merits of education, their learning interest has greatly improved. Mass media and communication supplemented formal education. Education and communication enlightened them, induced their skill and motivation and heightened the level of aspirations. Social protests and organised agitations of the community are largely a product of educational development among them. Economic gains and the freedom it conferred on the Mukkuvas affected the customary relations with the traditional higher classes of the society. The higher income and enlightened offered by education improved the quality of their life. Identity consciousness developed and their preference for more prestige values accorded them social recognition. These developments challenged the Feudal domination over Mukkuvas. Today, they were better organised due to the intervention of NGOs and caste associations which inculcate in them the spirit of protest against oppressions [16]. Some of them are in trade and business.

The Dalits were formerly soil serfs and agrestic workers. The feudal society treated them like any other asset. Feudal rights and the obligation system conferred their masters with tyrannical powers and rapacious authority over them. But, the political intervention of the East India Company in the region and institutionalisation of western legal system, institutions and ideologies influenced the situation. Slavery abolition and anti-serf legislation had tremendous psychological impact on the Dalits. These emancipatory measures awakened them and encouraged Dalit Movements [17]. Christianity came as an extraneous support system. They were increasingly associated them with the Protestant Church and some of them were elevated to the status of native priests and

other church officials. Later, when the Salvation Army and Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission (MELIM) entered the region, they were keen in establishing their respective identities by strengthening the socio-economic bases of the Dalits. Among the two, the Salvation Army is intrinsically related with the progress of Dalits in the region. Missionaries provided them education and it relieved them from the false conscious stage [18]. To free them from economic bondage the MELIM assisted them in getting government waste lands. The secondary benefit of missionary involvement benefited the Hindu section of the Dalits also. To them the Christian Dalits became the frame of reference for their social advancement.

Increasing group-solidarity created by caste associations encouraged their deviant behaviour against the assertive dominance of social superiors. The Travancore Cherumar Sangam, Travancore Sambavar Sangam, Travancore Ancient and Dravidian Races League, South Travancore Sambavar Sangam and its renamed version, the Nanchilnadu Sambavar Sangam were the Dalit organisations which exerted profound influence on the community[19]. *Sambavar Nesan* and *Sambavar Deepika* were the newspapers which instilled awareness in them. Poikayil Yohannan's Prathyksha Kaksha Daiva Sabha and Ayyan Kali's Sadhu Paripalana Snagam had deep impacts on the Dalit organisations in the region. To relieve the community from the depressed mind-set, caste-pride was infused by tracing their image to the great Tamil scholars Thiruvalluvar and Avvaiyar. Due to these organised efforts group-solidarity was fairly achieved. Caste Hindu attitude towards the Dalits witnessed a remarkable change. This can be inferred from the fact that not only their right to form caste associations was recognised but even the Brahmins like T.Sadasiva Iyer, Judge of Madras High Court and Seshagiri Iyer, retired judge of the same court agreed to officiate as patrons of the Dalit Organisations. Compensatory education and the merit that accrued out of it in the form of white collar jobs granted the community a new identity. The high labour demand and wage increase since the 1920s, discussed earlier, also benefitted the Dalits. In the process they came slowly out of economic bondage and some of them became owners of small plots. The temple entry movement and the temple entry proclamation of 1936 offered them token freedom from civil disabilities. In 1956 the untouchability bill was passed by the government of India. It provided the Dalits protection from social disabilities and caste-based discriminations [20].

The above situations have radically altered the traditional relations of them with the higher strata of the society. Economic betterment and restoration of social rights have activated the deviant behaviour of the Dalits toward the ruling classes. They disputed traditions

which ascribed them low status. Their deviance found unchecked as the Feudal lords had become incapable of executing deviant control mechanism. The Dalits today are more assertive of their freedom and rights. In a way it has weakened the symbols of traditional social superiors identity. The post-independence political situation also drastically cut the bases of their power and influence.

The relationship between society, polity and economic development is reciprocal and mutually complementary. Traditional political power centred on Nair and Vellala elites who were either nearer to the ruling families or participants of the political decision-making process. The vast majority of the population including the Nadars were politically alienated. Protest against political inequality began to surface with the arrival of Protestant missionaries. The missionary press did the job of imparting political knowledge to their followers through their writings on selective themes exposing administrative laxity, corruption and official rapacity [21]. The village councils set up by the missionaries initiated the beginning of grass root level leadership formation. The enlightened sovereigns of Travancore had clear social vision and political foresight. In 1888 Sri Mulam Tirunal Maharaja installed the State Legislative Council, first of its kind in the Princely States [22]. Subsequently, the Sri Mulam Popular Assembly (SMPA) and the Sri Chitra State Council were created in 1904 and 1919 respectively. Later, in 1921 the council was reformed and entrusted with more powers and increasing functions. Raja Balarama Varma went ahead of his predecessors by instituting the village panchayats in 1925. These legislative and local government experiments fairly accommodated the political interests of the Nadars, Dalits and other depressed classes. Democratic India added more scope for the extension of political equality to the marginalised social groups. It stirred their political consciousness and disputed the traditional bases of political authority. This goes in agreement with Mannheim who writes, "When the stage of democratisation has been reached the techniques of thinking and the ideas of the lower strata are for the first time in a position to confront the ideas of the dominant strata"[23]. Universal franchise and electoral politics, characteristic of the post-independence political situation, tilted the power equilibrium in favour of the numerically stronger Nadars. Even the fishermen gained access to political power and established their identity when Mrs. Lourdammal Simon [24] was given a birth in the Kamaraj Ministry in 1957. Their influence in the local government as Chairman and Councillors of the Colachel Municipality supplemented their political status.

#### CONCLUSION:

The rise of the Nadars and other lower classes in the pinnacle of political power turned upside down the traditional power equilibrium. Redistribution of social products had incremental effects which further supplemented the domineering political interests of the erstwhile marginalised Nadars and Mukkuvas. It should be remembered here that both these caste identities were for ages subordinated their interests to the ruling class dominance. Nadars were tenants as well as labourers, and naturally depended substantially on the landlords. In case of Mukkuvas the power and dominant symbols of the higher stratum eroded even into their personal life. But, the 20<sup>th</sup> century socio-economic situation and political developments not only extended rights to these lower groups but also provided them the base for political ascendancy. The break-down of economic dependence on the traditional higher classes and extension of horizontal casties offered the depressed classes a new socio-political symbol.

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