

Archival balancing on the cross-cultural predominance of the Nadars of reorganised 1956 to form the larger part of the Kerala state

Dr. Vigimole P S
vigimolestephen@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Abstract body

Nadars are the original inhabitants of the belonging to a Dravidian race. Today a significant population of the Nadars abides in the southern part of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The Nadars belonged to the highest division of the lowest or lowest of the middle class; poor but not paupers, rude and unlettered, but by many degrees removed from a savage state. They were degraded to the status of mere 'tillers of the soil' and became the victims of several social disabilities and restrictions. So their social status was determined as outcasts and untouchables and forced them to be the victims of a series of arbitrary and exorbitant taxes. They got enlightenment only after the coming of western education and Christianity. Nadar saree is one of the dominant communities settled in the southern part of Kerala and Tamil Nādu, occupies a vital role in the cross-cultural realms of south India. The Nadars were known by different names in different places till 1921 such as Shanar, Shatrar, Shantore, Nadazhvar, etc. On 7th July 1921, the term Nadar was recognised and accepted by the British government means, 'lord of the land or owners of lands. As per the census of 1891, there were 322 divisions and subdivisions among the Nadar. Shannan and Nadar remained the most popular and widely known. Shannan or Shantror seems to have been the earliest name, which means a learned or a noble scholar. In the ancient time, they ruled the country and were known as a 'ruling race'. But consequently, their rule was overthrown by later waves of Dravidians.

KEYWORDS

Shanar, Shatrar, Shantore, Nadazhvar, Shanar, Jaggery, Oozhium service, Dravidian race

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Nadars or the Shannars are the original inhabitants of India, belonging to the Dravidian race. There are different theories regarding the origin of the Nadars. They claimed a 'divine origin.' Robert Caldwell believes that the Nadars were emigrants from the north coast of Ceylon which is Sri Lanka now. Tamil literature reveals that they migrated from North India. The majority of the Nadars are present in the southern parts of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The Nadars believed that they were the descendants of Chola, Chera, and Pandya rulers and they styled themselves as 'Kshatriyas.' But after they migrated to the south, their social status degraded. The high caste Hindus of Travancore considered them as one of the polluting classes. Even the government imposed heavy taxes and socially suppressed them. Even though the social condition of the early Nadars was pathetic and backward, they were hard-working and industrious. They cultivated the Palmyra tree and the juice of which they boiled into a coarse sugar known as jaggery. They supplied Palmyra leaves for writing purposes. The social order obtained in Travancore at the beginning of the 19th century was feudal in character and outline. The most interesting factor in the feudal social structure was the division of society in terms of caste. The caste system in all its severity and rigidity divided the Hindu society into diverse groups mutually hating and cooperating degrades each other. It was caste that decided the nature of the social relationship of the individuals. Its principles made the major section of the people mere slaves of the dominant or privileged classes. In Travancore, the Brahmins and the Nairs formed the privileged classes or the caste Hindus. Excommunication from their caste is considered worse than death. Those who were excommunicated became untouchables. As social leaders, the Nairs or Sudras were below the Brahmins, and they enjoyed many privileges. The Nair was expected to cut down instantly the Ezhavas. They were half-polluting castes and lived just outside the main villages in their habitations. They were classed among the outcastes. In south Travancore, the Nadars formed a majority and their social condition was pathetic and miserable.

The Nadars were described by Robert Caldwell as, 'belonging to the highest division of the lowest classes or lowest of the middle class; Poor but not paupers, rude and unlettered, but by many degrees removed from a savage state'. They were forbidden to approach within a specified polluting distance. They were a degraded community suffering for generations from oppression. William Tobias Ringeltaube, the first protestant missionary in Travancore, writes of his first impression of this community; 'the Shannars are a set of people more robust than other Indians, very dark in complexion, their features completely European, their ears

protracted to the shoulders by mighty ornaments of lead. Their habits are extremely simple and they quarrel in some avaricious and deceitful ways. The Nadars were dirty, ignorant, and of wild appearance. The most important feature of their character was downright indolence. Robert Caldwell says, 'they cannot bear to make experiments or calculate possibilities of advantage; they cannot bear the trouble of thinking. It is their custom to idle away half their time, to do their work in a clumsy, wasteful manner, to be contented with the trade and position of life with which their ancestors were content to be always in debt, and to live from hand to mouth'. The social condition of the Nadars was deplorable at the beginning of the 19th century. To mark their degradation their women were forbidden to wear any clothing above the waist. They were not allowed to carry umbrellas, use roads, wear shoes and golden ornaments, carry pots of water on their hip, build houses above one storey in height, milk cows or even use the ordinary language of the country. They were obliged to render Oozhiyam service to the government and the privileged classes.

The Nadars were reduced to the status of mere tillers of the soil and become the victims of several social disabilities and restrictions. They were treated as outcasts and untouchables. They became the victims of a series of arbitrary and exorbitant taxes. Their movement through public highways and near temples was forbidden. The fundamental rights like construction of good houses, use of proper cloth, ornaments, and ceremonious feasts were denied to them. After hard work throughout the day, they returned in the evening fatigued and hungry to their huts to boil their rice and eat it with salt and pepper. At night they slept generally on the floor. They rarely bathed or washed their bodies. They purchased clothes during harvest time and used them till they tore to pieces. Thus, the actual sons of the soil were reduced to absolute poverty and hunger. On festive occasions, thousands of Brahmins were freely fed at the cost of the poor peasants supplied by paddy, rice, vegetables, fruits, plantain leaves, milk products, coconut gram, jaggery, sugar, and molasses salt, oil, and firewood. Barbosa also states that, if the peasants did not change their way the Nair might kill them without penalty. The enormities committed by the upper castes were such that the lower castes feared them like Chickens at the sight of the Kite. Abbe Dubois recorded, 'the state of bondage is at its worst along the coast of Malabar, as are several customs peculiar to the country. The reason is that Malabar owing to its position has generally escaped the invasions and revolutions which have so often devastated the rest of India and has thus managed to preserve unaltered many ancient institutions which in other parts have fallen into disuse'. According to Ward and Conner, 'their name relates to everything, revolting, shunned as if infested with the plague, the higher classes view their presence with a mixture of alarm and indignation and even towns and markets would be considered as defiled by their approach.

The caste Hindu domination created great degradation, causing intellectual, cultural, and economic stagnation for centuries. The unprivileged or oppressed class of the population which composed the Nadars was kept by them in perennial subservience, poverty, and ignorance. They were systematically excluded from all positions of power and were subjected to exploitation and humiliation. The social condition of the Nadars was deplorable at the beginning of the 19th century. To make their degradation their women were forbidden to wear any clothing above the waist. They were not allowed to carry umbrellas, use roads, wear shoes and golden ornaments, carry pots of water on their hip, build houses above one story in height, milk cows or even use the ordinary language of the country. Under the impact of the Kundra proclamation of Veluthampi Dalawa of Travancore, the bureaucracy composed of Namboothiri-Nair combine, indulged in extortionate practices in their dealings with the low castes especially the Nadars among whom the LMS missionaries undertook proselytizing activities with the support of the British Resident Col. Macauley. The custom of the land demanded them to make voluntary contributions to the landlords on all ceremonial occasions and even during funeral obsequies. The officers of the state were very corrupt, dishonest, and selfish and utilised every opportunity to oppress the Averno population including the Nadars. The result was that there was a series of inquisition and vexatious taxes and cesses numbering 317, imposed on the underprivileged sections of the society especially the Nadars which counted for their economic deterioration and the ultimate failure.

Against this feudal tyranny, painful oppression, and provocative deprivations, there was little resistance in the beginning. The demoralised nature of the slave working classes barred any act of deviation because they could well understand the regrettable consequences of such an act. Existing customs, the legal laws sacerdotal recognition of such customs, and the common beliefs, practices, and ideology of the land made them an integral part of this Hindu society and pressurized to content themselves with their deplorable life. Caste segregation and human discrimination continued to create major hurdles in the progress of the Nadars. Further poverty, illiteracy, and ignorance put a stumbling block to their cohesive efforts for protests. Lack of ideology and collective leadership seriously dissuaded them. Hence overall they remained contented with their distressing life, believed to have been ascribed by divine dispensation. The distinguishing feature of their religion was the direct worship of demons. Demonism, Caldwell says, in one shape or another may be said to rule the Shannars with undisputed authority. Those demons were known colloquially as 'Pey', 'Putham', and 'Pichachu'. The character of the demons was believed to be invariably composed of malignity and hatred towards mankind. To those demons they built no temples. The architectural tribute generally made in their honour was that of a

pyramid of mud, plastered and whitewashed, with the figure of a devil in front, and containing some half a dozen idols of demons. Many of these figures were representations of Bhadrakali, the tutelary deity of the community. Animal sacrifices and dancing were presented to the Gods on special occasions to secure their favour. The person appointed to offer a sacrificed offer sacrifice to the devil was styled as the ‘devil was styled as the ‘devil dancer. Devil dancing was generally held at the night. At the end of the dance, the devil dancer was much venerated by those assembled who generally worshipped him like a deity.

Justice was administered according to the caste norms. Very severe punishments were usually inflicted on criminals. Simple imprisonment was not so much resorted to but practiced cruel torture to force a confession, mutilation, implement, and other minor offenses. Death punishment was common. Heavy fines and confiscation of property have also resorted to legal suits that were tried according to old customs. No lengthy proceedings were required to obtain the final verdict. In obscure cases, the Raja consulted the Brahmins. Dubious chases in which no proof was available were decided through the instrumentation of solemn oaths. Those extraordinary oaths resembled the trials of the ordeal that existed in ancient Europe. In the early decades of the 19th century when the missionaries landed in this territory, they were surprised to see this beautiful state, where a self-seeking minority oppressed a large hard-working majority. The code of law was framed without any sense of justice and the masses were groaning in bondage. The history of the liberation of the unprivileged masses started with the activities of the missionaries of the London Mission Society.

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