Caste in Tamil Nadu
A History of Nadar Censorship

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Representations have been made by some of the political parties of Tamil Nadu to have a particular chapter in an NCERT Class IX textbook removed; the chapter is being attacked for discussing the past of the influential Nadars as “untouchables” and for highlighting the role played by 19th century Christian missionaries in the community’s subsequent upward mobility. The present clamour for a censored caste history has a right-wing Hindu character to it. If memories of degradation are an enabling resource in producing alliances against continuing forms of oppression, in this instance erasure of such memories is what is being sought by an upwardly mobile caste.

Certain communities have denied social equality to the Nadar community. The Nadars have...from time to time asserted their claim to social status. But unfortunately they have attempted to maintain their claim for equality by seeking to prove that they were Kshatriyas... Such a method of establishing your status is very unfortunate. For, the moment you claim to be Kshatriyas, you recognise the validity of the caste system and reserve to yourself the right of treating certain other as being inferior to your own. I must...congratulate you on your spirit of tolerance which is evidenced by the amicable personal and social relationship which you have maintained with that portion of the community who have embraced Christianity. Keep up these social virtues at all costs.


This is a story of the Nadars, today an intermediate caste in Tamil Nadu, not heeding to the perspicacious advice given by Shanmugham Chetty in the 1920s. The present-day story may begin with the Tamil Nadu politicians’ enduring love for the school textbooks produced by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT).

In October 2012, S Ramadoss, the leader of the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), a party of the intermediate caste Vanniyars, issued a public statement in Chennai. The statement objected to a chapter on clothing in the Class IX history textbook of the NCERT. The part of the text which offended the sensibilities of Ramadoss recounts briefly how the Shanars, who are known today as Nadars, struggled against the Travancore state during the first half of the 19th century and earned the right for the Shanar women to cover their breasts in public. The book also refers to the contribution of Christian missionaries in the struggle.

Ramadoss claimed that the Nadars are the sons of the soil of south Tamil Nadu and objected to them being referred to as Shanars. Of course, there is no need for him to know that it was only in 1921 that the ministry headed by the non-brahmin Justice Party in the Madras Presidency substituted the term “Nadar” for “Shanar”. “Shanar” was official till then. Discounting the contribution of the protestant missionaries in the breast cloth revolt, Ramadoss finds in Vaikunda Swamy, an important Hindu Shanar social reformer, the source of Shanar women’s liberation.

The fact, however, is, when the Travancore state issued the first order on the right of Christian Shanar women to cover their breasts in 1812, Vaikunda Swamy was just four years old. When the final order, which allowed both the Christian and Hindu Shanar women to cover their breasts, was issued in 1859, he was dead for no less than eight years. Death of history may be the beginning of politics. Ramadoss wanted the life of Vaikunda Swamy to be included in textbooks produced by the state as well as the centre.

Political Representations

Ramadoss was joined by the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam leader J Jayalalithaa and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam chief M Karunanidhi. Jayalalithaa, in a letter to the prime minister, characterised the Nadars as the lofty descendants of the Tamil royal dynasties of the Cheras, the Cholas and the Pandyas and sought the removal of the lesson from the NCERT textbook. While her letter was silent on the extensively-documented role played by Christian missionaries in the social and economic mobility of the Nadars, it made sure to invoke Vaikunda Swamy: “The said text has neglected the struggles of Aiyya Vaikundar in the ‘upper cloth revolt’ and also his social reform”. No surprise here: “anti-conversion” was one of the favoured themes of Jayalalithaa in the past. Karunanidhi, who is supposed to have familial compulsions to take up the issue, listed a number of Nadar greats such as K Kamaraj, W P A Soundra Pandian, and K T K Tangamani, and registered his protest against the NCERT text. Consumed by narcissism, he could not resist adding
his own role in conferring a positive caste identity on the Nadars. If he was silent on Vaikunda Swamy, he was silent on the Christian missionaries as well.

Now it was time for the caste leaders to join the chorus. Sharad Kumar, an actor who heads an inconsequential political party, Samathuva Makkal Katchi (smk) and a Nadar himself, was hurt about, among other things, the text not talking about the sacrifices of Vaikunda Swamy. But he too was silent about the Christian missionaries. So was the case with the representation made by the Vaikunta Swamy Dharma Pracharana Sabha which claimed an exalted past for the Nadars.

To cut a long story short, there is more or less a consistent pattern in the representations against the ncert text. First, there was a refusal or an unease to come to terms with the untouchable past of the Nadars who are today both economically and professionally influential. Second, there is a reluctance to acknowledge the labour of Protestant Christian missionaries in the social mobility of the Shanars. Instead, it is Vaikunda Swamy who is being celebrated.

There are, of course, exceptions to this pattern. The representation made by the History Council of Kanyakumari District does recognise the contributions of Rev Charles Mead, Rev William Tobias Ringeltaube and other Christian missionaries to the breast cloth revolt. D Peter, the chairman of the Kanyakumari Institute of Development Studies, is even more candid. He found nothing wrong with the ncert text and added that if the text was deleted, “...it would become a great loss to the student community as well as an insult to the Protestant Christian Shanars of the South Travancore…”

Nadar Censorship: An Early Instance

Before engaging with the current demand by the Nadars and their political backers to withdraw the ncert text, it may be of some interest to take a look at the late 19th century when the Christian Nadars, as a consequence of their upward mobility, sought a history for themselves which would silence their degradation at the hands of the upper castes. The campaign led by a section of the Christian Nadars against Rev Robert Caldwell’s book *The Tinnevelly Shanars* (1849) is illustrative of such a trend.

Caldwell, a well-known scholar-missionary and the author of *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages*, worked among the Shanars of Tirunelveli district for about half a century. While his missionary labour established in the region a large community of Protestant Christians drawn from among the Shanars, his educational efforts, which resulted in a network of schools and colleges, made the community economically prosperous and socially acceptable. His commitment to the region and its people made him, during his last visit to England in 1883, to declare, “For Tinnevelly, I have lived, and for Tinnevelly, I am prepared to die”. Caldwell’s mortal remains lay interred at the altar of the Holy Trinity Church at Idayangudi, the first Christian village that he established in the region.

The very upward mobility which the Christian Shanars experienced due to the exertions of Caldwell, turned the Shanars against him. In 1883, Samuel Sargunar, a sub-registrar in the Chinglepet district, published a pamphlet, *Bishop Caldwell and the Tinnevelly Shanars*. It not only contested Caldwell’s description of the lowly social status of the Shanars, but also claimed a kshatriya status for them. A spate of petitions were sent to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and the archbishop of Canterbury seeking Caldwell’s removal from the Tirunelveli mission. Some demanded Caldwell to write a new text affirming the Shanars as kshatriyas. Y Gnanamuthoo Nadar, who described himself as “Antiquarian and Representative of the Shanar Race”, sent a series of petitions appealing to “various representatives of the British Government and the missionary ecclesiastical structure demanding that the British censure Caldwell and remove his offending book from circulation”. Caldwell withdrew the publication from circulation.

The Turn of the Hindu Nadars

It is not that the Hindu Nadars did not seek a kshatriya status in the late 19th century. They did. Yet, their present clamour for a censored caste history with an anti-Christian tilt has a right-wing Hindu character. In 1980, it was P Thanulingam, a Hindu Nadar from Kanyakumari district and a former Congressman, who along with Ramagopalan, a brahmin, formed the Hindu Munnai. Under their vituperative provocations, Tamil Nadu witnessed the first large-scale communal riot between the Christian fishermen and the Hindus in the coastal village of Mandai kadu. The present Tamil Nadu state bij President Pon Radhakrishnan is also a Hindu Nadar from the district. He was returned to the parliament from the Nagercoil Lok Sabha constituency, as a bij candidate, in 1999.

Such brahmin-Hindu Nadar alliance has, of late, evolved into forms of “intellectual collaboration”. A case in point is the South Indian Social History Research Institute (shri), run by S Ramachandran, a brahmin who happens to be an epigraphist with an unenviable skill in selectively interpreting inscriptions to assign higher varna pedigrees to castes which are traditionally deemed to be shudras. In the specific context of the present controversy about the ncert text, it is necessary to have a look at the widely circulating Tamil book *Thool Cillaik Kalakam: Therinatha Poikal, Theriyatha Unmaikal* (“Upper Cloth Revolt: Known Falsehoods and Unknown Truths”) authored by Ramachandran along with A Ganesan, a Hindu Nadar (who, according to Ramachandran, is the embodiment of Nadar “racial memory”). The book was published by the shri in 2010.

The book confers a kshatriya status on the Nadars and makes them “Sandror” (“people of noble qualities”) instead of “Shanar”. It targets the Christian missionaries, in particular Caldwell, and celebrates Vaikunda Swamy for, among other things, ensuring the Christian converts’ return to Hinduism. If Ramachandran’s is a barely veiled Hindutva project, its endorsement comes from those who openly espouse right-wing Hindu agenda. Aravindan Neelakandan, in a review of the book, claims it to be a model historical research and argues why figures like Vaikunda Swamy are important for the spiritual and social liberation of the Hindus. Neelakandan’s recent book, co-authored with Rajiv Malhotra of the Hindu fundamentalist Infinity Foundation
located in the US, is *Breaking India: Western Interventions in Dravidian and Dalit Faultlines*. If that does not tell it all, then one just needs to have a look at his *Hindutva: A Simplified Introduction*.

If memories of degradation are an enabling resource in producing alliances against continuing forms of oppression, erasure of such memories is what is being sought by the upwardly mobile castes. The Nadar case is no exception. Yet, not everything is lost. A section of the Christian Nadars, perhaps to the dismay of Samuel Sargunar and Gnanamuthoo Nadar, continues to acknowledge their untouchable past. For instance, Samuel Jayakumar, a theologian and a historian of Christianity in Tamil Nadu, in his book *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion: Historical Resources for a Contemporary Debate* (ISPCK, Delhi, 1999) equates the Shanars along with the Parayars as dalits in the past – with no discomfort at all.

**Notes**