

**CLOTHING, CASTE, AND THE POLITICS OF DIGNITY:  
RE-READING THE UPPER CLOTH REVOLT THROUGH THE  
RADICAL THOUGHT OF B. R. AMBEDKAR  
AND E. V. RAMASAMY (PERIYAR)**

*Anji A. \**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19633522>

ABSTRACT

*The Upper Cloth Revolt (commonly known as the Thol Seelai Porattam) in the princely state of Travancore during the nineteenth century stands as a powerful yet under-theorized episode in the history of anti-caste and gender resistance in South Asia. This paper argues that the revolt must be understood not as a localized dispute over dress codes but as a radical assertion of dignity, bodily autonomy, and social equality by marginalized women, particularly from the Nadar community. By situating this movement within the intellectual frameworks of B. R. Ambedkar and E. V. Ramasamy, the paper demonstrates how the politics of clothing functioned as an instrument of caste domination and how resistance to it anticipated later critiques of Brahminical patriarchy. Drawing on historical accounts and critical theory, the study foregrounds the revolt as a foundational moment in the genealogy of social justice movements in India.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Upper Cloth Revolt, Caste and Gender Oppression, Social Dignity, Ambedkarite Thought, Periyarist Ideology.*

---

\* **Dr. Anji A.,** Teaching Faculty, Department and Research Centre for Women's Studies, Karnatak University.

---

## Introduction

Histories of social reform in India have often privileged elite-led movements while marginalizing subaltern struggles that challenged everyday practices of domination. The Upper Cloth Revolt, which unfolded in nineteenth-century Travancore, disrupts such historiography by centering the agency of oppressed women who contested the denial of a basic marker of dignity: the right to clothe their bodies. At stake in this conflict was not merely sartorial freedom but the legitimacy of a social order structured by graded inequality. The prohibition imposed on lower-caste women against covering their upper bodies was embedded in a larger regime of caste discipline that regulated visibility, space, and embodiment. This paper approaches the revolt as a site where caste and gender intersected in particularly violent ways. To interpret its broader significance, the analysis draws on the theoretical insights of Ambedkar and Periyar, whose critiques of caste, religion, and patriarchy provide a robust framework for understanding the politics of humiliation and resistance.

## Historical Context and Social Regulation

In the rigidly stratified society of Travancore, caste hierarchy was not an abstract principle but a lived reality inscribed onto the body. Social codes dictated not only occupation and spatial mobility but also modes of dress. Women from marginalized communities, especially the Nadar caste, were prohibited from wearing upper garments in the presence of dominant castes. This enforced semi-nudity was a visible marker of subordination, ensuring that caste difference remained publicly legible. The denial of clothing must be understood as a deliberate technology of power. It reduced women to objects of surveillance and humiliation while reinforcing the moral authority of upper castes. Such practices were sustained through both customary law and coercive violence. Any attempt to transgress these norms invited retaliation, including physical assault and social boycott. By the early nineteenth century, changing socio-economic conditions, missionary interventions, and emerging forms of collective consciousness enabled sections of the Nadar community to challenge these restrictions. Women began to wear upper cloths as an assertion of dignity, thereby transforming an everyday act

into a political statement. The resulting confrontations exposed the fragility of caste authority when faced with organized resistance.

### **Review of Literature**

The work of B. R. Ambedkar in *Annihilation of Caste* provides a foundational critique of caste as a system of graded inequality sustained through social practices and cultural norms. Ambedkar's analysis is crucial for understanding how humiliation and exclusion are embedded in everyday life, including practices regulating dress and bodily autonomy. Robert L. Hardgrave Jr. in *The Nadars of Tamil Nadu* (1969) offers a detailed historical account of the socio-economic transformation of the Nadar community, including their struggles against caste restrictions in Travancore. His work situates the Upper Cloth Revolt within broader processes of mobility, resistance, and identity formation among marginalized communities. Nicholas B. Dirks in *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (2001) examines how colonialism reshaped caste structures and reinforced social hierarchies through administrative and cultural practices. Dirks' framework helps contextualize the Upper Cloth Revolt within the intersection of colonial governance and traditional caste oppression.

### **Research Gap**

While existing scholarship has documented the historical events and socio-economic context of the Upper Cloth Revolt, there is a limited theoretical engagement with the movement as a site of intersectional resistance, particularly in relation to caste, gender, and bodily autonomy. Moreover, the revolt has rarely been systematically analyzed through the combined ideological frameworks of Ambedkarite and Periyarist thought. This gap restricts a deeper understanding of the revolt as not merely a social reform movement but as a radical assertion of dignity and equality within the broader discourse of anti-caste resistance.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- To critically examine the Upper Cloth Revolt as a struggle for dignity and resistance against caste- and gender-based oppression.
- To analyze the movement through the theoretical perspectives

of B. R. Ambedkar and E. V. Ramasamy.

- To explore the intersection of caste, gender, and bodily autonomy in shaping subaltern resistance in colonial South India.

### **The Revolt as a Politics of Dignity**

To reduce the Upper Cloth Revolt to a question of dress is to overlook its deeper political meaning. Clothing, in this context, functioned as a symbolic language through which power was communicated and contested. The prohibition on upper garments was not about modesty but about hierarchy; it encoded the message that certain bodies were inherently inferior and unworthy of respect. The act of wearing an upper cloth thus became a radical claim to equality. It challenged the visual grammar of caste by refusing to display subordination. In doing so, the women who participated in the revolt redefined the boundaries of the political. Their struggle foregrounded the body as a site of resistance, anticipating later feminist critiques that link bodily autonomy with broader questions of justice. This politics of dignity resonates strongly with Ambedkar's insistence that social reform must begin with the annihilation of practices that degrade human beings. For Ambedkar, caste operates through everyday humiliations that normalize inequality. The Upper Cloth Revolt can be read as an early confrontation with such normalized violence.

### **Ambedkar: Caste, Humiliation, and the Ethics of Equality**

The analytical framework developed by B. R. Ambedkar offers a powerful lens through which to reinterpret the revolt. In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar conceptualizes caste as a system of graded inequality sustained by social and religious sanction. Crucially, he emphasizes that caste persists not only through economic exploitation but through the systematic production of humiliation. The enforced dress codes of Travancore exemplify this mechanism. By denying lower-caste women the right to cover their bodies, the social order rendered them perpetually visible as inferior. Ambedkar's critique helps us see that such practices are not incidental but constitutive of caste power. Furthermore, Ambedkar's writings on women underscore the gendered dimensions of caste oppression. He argued that control over women's bodies is central to the reproduction of caste hierarchy. The Upper Cloth Revolt, led

by women who defied such control, can therefore be understood as a direct challenge to the logic of caste reproduction. Ambedkar's emphasis on dignity as a non-negotiable human right also illuminates the ethical stakes of the revolt. The demand for the right to wear an upper cloth was, at its core, a demand to be recognized as fully human.

### **Periyar: Self-Respect, Rationalism, and the Rejection of Social Hierarchy**

The thought of E. V. Ramasamy, though historically later, provides an equally compelling framework for interpreting the revolt. Periyar's Self-Respect Movement sought to dismantle caste hierarchy by attacking its ideological foundations, particularly the authority of religion and tradition. Central to Periyar's philosophy was the concept of self-respect-the idea that individuals must refuse to internalize the inferiority imposed upon them. The women who participated in the Upper Cloth Revolt embodied this principle long before it was articulated in organized form. By choosing to wear upper garments despite violent opposition, they asserted their self-worth against a system designed to deny it. Periyar also foregrounded the importance of women's liberation in any project of social transformation. He critiqued patriarchal norms that confined women to subordinate roles and emphasized their role as agents of change. The revolt, led by marginalized women, aligns closely with this vision. Moreover, Periyar's rationalist critique of customs exposes the arbitrariness of dress codes rooted in caste ideology. What was presented as tradition was, in fact, a mechanism of domination. The rejection of such customs, as seen in the revolt, represents a move toward a more egalitarian social order.

### **Caste, Gender, and the Body: An Intersectional Analysis**

The Upper Cloth Revolt highlights the intersection of caste and gender in structuring social oppression. Lower-caste women occupied a uniquely vulnerable position, subjected to both caste-based degradation and patriarchal control. Their bodies became sites where these forms of power converged. An intersectional analysis reveals that the denial of upper garments was not simply a gender issue or a caste issue but a combination of both. It was precisely because these women belonged to marginalized castes

that their bodies could be regulated in such a dehumanizing manner. At the same time, it was their gender that made the regulation of their bodies a particularly potent symbol of control. Ambedkar and Periyar, in different ways, recognized this intersection. Ambedkar's advocacy for women's rights within the framework of social justice and Periyar's emphasis on women's emancipation both point to the necessity of addressing multiple axes of oppression simultaneously.

### **Resistance, Reform, and Aftermath**

The sustained resistance of marginalized communities eventually compelled the Travancore state to issue proclamations in the mid-nineteenth century granting limited rights to wear upper garments. However, these concessions were carefully calibrated to preserve caste distinctions, allowing lower-caste women to cover themselves only in ways that did not resemble upper-caste styles. This partial victory underscores the limitations of reform within a deeply hierarchical society. While the revolt succeeded in challenging the most visible forms of humiliation, it did not dismantle the underlying structure of caste. Nevertheless, it marked a significant shift in the balance of power, demonstrating that even entrenched systems can be contested through collective action. The legacy of the revolt extends beyond its immediate context. It contributed to the emergence of a political consciousness among marginalized communities and laid the groundwork for later anti-caste movements. When read alongside the ideas of Ambedkar and Periyar, it becomes clear that the struggle for dignity in Travancore was part of a broader historical trajectory toward social justice.

### **Conclusion**

The Upper Cloth Revolt must be recognized as a “determinative” moment in the history of resistance to caste and gender oppression in India. It reveals how everyday practices, such as dress, can serve as powerful instruments of domination and equally powerful sites of resistance. By foregrounding the agency of marginalized women, the revolt challenges dominant narratives that overlook subaltern contributions to social change. Interpreting this movement through the frameworks of Ambedkar and Periyar allows for a deeper understanding of its significance. Their critiques of caste, patriarchy, and social hierarchy illuminate the structural

conditions that made such a revolt necessary and meaningful. Ultimately, the struggle for the right to wear an upper cloth was a struggle for recognition, dignity, and equality-values that remain central to contemporary debates on social justice.

### **References:**

1. Ambedkar, B. R. (1936). Annihilation of Caste.
2. Ambedkar, B. R. (1947). States and Minorities.
3. Ramasamy, E. V. (Periyar). Collected Works and Speeches.
4. Hardgrave, R. L. (1969). The Nadars of Tamil Nadu.
5. Jeffrey, R. (1976). The Decline of Nair Dominance.
6. Dirks, N. (2001). Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India.
7. Government of Travancore. (1859). Proclamation Records.