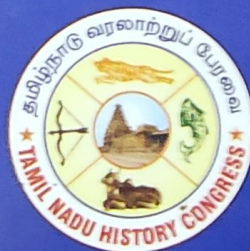


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## Nadars and Self Respect Movement in Colonial Era

M.Vijaya Shanthi\*

### Introduction

The Nadars of Tamil Nadu are a legendary mercantile community. Despite their enviable rise in Tamil society, their past is shrouded in myth. However, now the archival evidence which goes to show the economic empowerment of Nadars led to their social and political development. In Hindu caste hierarchy, especially in ancient Tamil Nadu, the Sandran caste undoubtedly occupied a higher place. Nadan, meaning ruler of a country or village or one who lives in the country is a title of the Shanars who further call themselves Nadans in preference to Shanans.<sup>1</sup> The tendency to use the term 'Nadar' is a bigoted perception of history. The hereditary occupation of many of the sub-sects of the Nadar caste was teaching of martial arts, and even a layman belonging to the southern districts of Tamil Nadu<sup>2</sup> knows this. In this situation, surrounded by all the Nadar communities equipped with powers of the administrative system, the Nadars were reduced to a down-trodden condition depending upon the palm juice for their livelihood, and it had been left to fight for their very existence<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, it was in such a lamentable condition, conversion of Nadars, to Christianity took place. The Upper Garment Movement, the Kshatriya Movement, the Temple Entry Movement and the Self-Respect Movement were given a political colour by the Nadar community.

### Search for Identity

Despite their material progress, the Nadars did not improve their social status for some time. Encouraged by improved economic position, they desired to occupy a due status in society. Further, the concept of social equality came to the propaganda through the Western system of education, which helped them in their search for social identity. While certain sections sought advancement through conversion to Christianity, the majority of them endeavoured to improve their status within the Hindu fold. They were not allowed to enter the courts of justice and temples.<sup>4</sup> The Nadars were prohibited from the use of public roads, bridges, wells and caste Hindu villages<sup>5</sup>, and they could not dine with others.<sup>6</sup> They were not allowed to carry pots on the hip. These grievances were making the ground ready for revolt.

The works of Missionaries raised their social status.<sup>7</sup> The Hindu Nadars also started imitating the Christian Nadars. The teachings of Muthukutty Swamigal (1801-1851), a socio-religious reformer from South Travancore region, had a powerful impact on them. He stirred the minds of the people to claim their rights and privileges and wanted to inculcate the spirit of social equality among the members of the Nadar community.<sup>8</sup> At this juncture, a Nadar woman was assaulted, and her blouse was torn in November 1858.<sup>9</sup>

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