

**HETERODOXY AND DISSENT IN TAMIL CULTURE:  
SITUATING THE CONTRIBUTION OF PERIYAR AND THE NON-  
BRAHMIN MOVEMENT OF TAMIL NADU**

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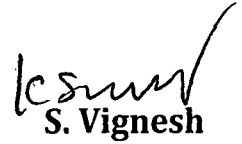
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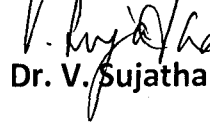
CERTIFICATE

This dissertation entitled "Heterodoxy and Dissent in Tamil Culture: Situating the Contribution of Periyar and the Non Brahmin Movement of Tamil Nadu" submitted for the partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the degree of **MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY** has not been previously submitted for the award of any other degree of this university or any other university and is my original work.

  
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We recommend that the dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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## **Chapter - I**

# **Introduction**

The non-Brahmin movement of Tamil Nadu has always been seen as a heterodoxy that broke with the orthodox, Hindu, Brahmanical order. But a cursory glance at the social history of the Tamil region will reveal that this is not so simple. The non Brahmin movement was not a sudden retaliation to a stable Hindu hegemony. Rather there have always been more than one religion in the region for several centuries and the dynasties supported one or the other. The official religion has been the orthodoxy against which a rebel movement merged. Thus during the 5th century A.D, Jainism has been the official religion in the Tamil region when Hinduism was the heterodoxy. The emergence of non Brahmin movement has to be viewed against the background of the dialectics of orthodoxy and heterodoxy in Tamil social history

Max Weber in his classic essays on the comparative sociology of religions stressed the role played by dissent and heterodoxy, not only from the vantage point of the doctrinal or organizational development of various religions, but from the vantage point of how different civilizations varied in dynamics of their innovative capacity<sup>1</sup>. Weber's thesis was that all great civilisations like the Chinese, Indian and that of ancient Judaism, incorporated organizational aspects of capitalism which sometimes surpassed those found in the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Yet it was only in Europe that a full fledged capitalist economic order actually developed. The key to this unique development, Weber believed was in Protestantism or more specifically certain aspects of the Protestant religion. The key factor in the religion that was conducive to capitalism is not the specific religious injunctions about proper behaviour in the economic field or the mere derivative of the theology which predominates in any given religion. Rather it is the general mode of religious and ethical orientation and the evaluation of a given theological tradition's premises concerning the cosmic order's relationship with social existence and the organization of social life that leads

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<sup>1</sup> Eissentadt, S. N. 1993. Heterodoxy and Dissent in India. Cambridge University Press. UK.

to a particular social formation. In simple terms one can say that religious principles are a kind of code, general orientation or deep structure which programs the social organization of any given society<sup>2</sup>. Although Weber's Protestant ethic deals with the economic sphere, his work in general, particularly his discussion of non-European civilizations and religions contains extremely important analysis. Weber's analysis indicates how there are religious codes, which reflect in the institutional setting of the society and various religious activities become the mechanisms and carriers of these codes, namely, the articulators of cultural or social models, all of which are also subject to external influences<sup>3</sup>. It is here that dissent and heterodoxy enter into Weber's discussion.

Weber identifies "orthodox" and "heterodox" movements as two types of carriers of the basic codes of a given civilization as well as indicators of possible changes in the nature of such codes. In his own supposition that would mean that heterodox groups are vitally important in shaping the institutional dynamics of civilizations<sup>4</sup>.

In the light of these ideas, it is pertinent to examine the Non-Brahmin movement in the Tamil region as heterodoxy in the dialectics of orthodoxy and heterodoxies that had been unfolding in this region and to identify its distinct features against the canvas of religious ferment and debate that characterised 20th century Madras Presidency. Also important is the class/caste background of the protagonists of various traditions and their dissenters in the public arena.

### **Research Problem**

This thesis seeks to examine and locate the Non-Brahmin movement in the context of a tradition of assent and dissent in Tamil culture, with specific attention to the contribution of Periyar, the key leader in the Non-Brahmin movement of Tamil Nadu. There have been

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<sup>2</sup> Rao, Vasudeva. 1979. Buddhism and Jainism in Tamil Country. Annamalai University.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 34

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p 67

several studies on the non-Brahmin movement and on Periyar. While historians of South India, especially, those from Europe tend to view the non-Brahmin movement as a consequence of the structural changes in the economy brought about during the colonial period, in which the Non-Brahminism became an instrument of challenging Brahmin hold over emerging opportunities. On the other hand, intellectual followers of Periyar like V. Geetha and Rajadurai give an insider's view based on the voice of the Non-Brahmin. There are also attempts such as that of M. S. S. Pandian to valorise the Non-Brahmin movement and make a virtue of all its ideologies. One of the aims of this thesis is to consider these positions and try to understand the significance of Periyar and the Non-Brahmin movement in balanced perspective.

One important question that needs to be examined is why is it of all the places in the country, a sustained atheistic movement emerged only in the Tamil region? How could this be possible in a society that was home to several religious orthodoxies? The question cannot be answered by looking at the Non-Brahmin movement in isolation. An understanding of the social history of the Tamil region and the socio-political debates of the emerging classes at that juncture is necessary to locate the Non-Brahmin movement, particularly its atheism. Accordingly it will be our aim to present briefly an overview of the socio-cultural history of the Tamil region in the beginning. Our objective is to locate the Non-Brahmin movement and Periyar against this background and bring out the shift from religion and culture to politics.

The thesis also examines the category of 'Non-Brahmin' as presented in writings on the subject because it is central to the movement. Lastly the thesis also tries to engage with emerging critiques of the Non-Brahmin movement from Dalit writers. It further traces the subversion and selective appropriation of the Non-Brahmin ideology and situates them in the context of contemporary Tamil Nadu. It is our hope that this will enable a more grounded understanding of the contribution of the Non-Brahmin movement and Periyar.



## **Methodology**

The thesis is based on secondary literature on the subject based on detailed library work. It is also based on a reading of Periyars' writings in Tamil from original sources and the study of the movement's pamphlets. The last sections of data on contemporary Tamil Nadu have been obtained from periodicals run by Dalit organisations.

The first chapter is an overview of socio-cultural history of the Tamils, the second one focuses on the emergence of the non Brahmin as a distinct category and the third one examines Periyar's work and ends with an appraisal of contemporary Tamil Nadu.

**Chapter - II**

**Locating the Non-Brahmin Movement in Tamil Nadu: An  
Overview of Traditions and Heterodoxies**

The south has given rise to three major Hindu religious philosophical schools, namely, Advaita Dvaita and Vishistadvaita. Tamil Nadu was home to host of religions like Jainism and Buddhism as well. Debates and conflicts over religion are therefore not alien to this land. Amidst this ferment of religious pluralism, the distinctness of the non-Brahmin movement lay in its debunking of religion and godhead thus foregrounding an atheistic social movement in the land that hosted several religions. The dialectic between the orthodoxy and heterodoxy in Tamil Nadu is fascinating and more so because it was not restricted to the conflicts between the official religion of the monarchy and its rival. It seems to have happened at various levels of social life and thought. In that it was manifest in the quotidian life and popular consciousness as well.

This is brought out by Eugene F. Irschick, in his article “conversations in Taragambadi” when he speaks about the early German missionaries in the Tamil region, in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>5</sup>. The missionaries believed that converting the local population would be an easy task; the missionaries did not expect opposition and strong criticism. When Ziegenbalg and his colleague Henrich Pleuschau<sup>6</sup> got to Tarangambadi they found that they had problems articulating what they were doing over and over again. Now they had to define themselves through exclusion. Though they had come with the presumption that their religion was morally superior to that of the local society, they were every where reminded that local people looked on them as hopelessly ignorant and unclean.

Ziegenbalg wrote, “Truly the Malabarians being witty and sagacious people, will needs to be managed with great deal of wisdom and circumspection<sup>7</sup>”

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<sup>5</sup> Irschick, F. Eugene. “Conversations in Tarangabadi: Caring for the Self in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century south india”. *Comparitive Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*. Vol 231&2(2003)

<sup>6</sup> Both Ziegenbalg and Pleuschau were among the early missionaries to South India

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p 261

“Our school master argued daily with us, and requires good reason and arguments for everything. We hope to bring him over to the Christian knowledge, but he is confident as yet, that one time or the other, we shall all turn Malabarians<sup>8</sup>”.

“Some individuals are more direct in their criticism of the missionaries, in March 14 1714, one local individual who appears to be a Tamil merchant stood up and said that the local residents thought themselves to happy and understanding people. Their society was well regulated. They didn’t require that the body and the soul needed. There fore they wondered why the Europeans criticized their religion<sup>9</sup>”.

According to Irschick, there was a grand pre-history to these remarks and what Zielbalg invoked in his discourse was the process of participation in knowledge production that had history of struggle within Tamil society<sup>10</sup>. Many different world views which co-existed, but there also existed a situation of conflict between them. For Irschick, this confirms Foucault’s observation that subjugated knowledges have “historical contents that have been buried and disguised”, by subjugated knowledges Irshick refers to They are a whole set of knowledge’s that have been disqualified in the past as inadequate to their task, as insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity. Foucault’s formulation points to a long historical process where knowledges compete to find a place in scientific or erudite knowledge<sup>11</sup>. But it is Norbert Elias who seems to reflect the dilemmas which Ziegenbalg faces. Norbert Elias also argues that here subjugated knowledge’s find this place in the society when they seem to reflect common every day requirements. Thus Ziegenbalg strategies in seeking to reach the local people (Tamils) to change their lives requires that he use words and phrases out of Tamil literature

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., P 263

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p264

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.,p268

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p 269

with which he was more familiar. He wanted to see the society from the inside, and his audience understood this adoption of Tamil words and reacted equally, thus provoking a mutiny of subjugated knowledge's that overtook and hit back at Zielbalg's own intentions<sup>12</sup>. The process of reaction and dissent thus seems to be happening at various levels and seem to have a long history.

This chapter is an attempt to sketch a broad overview of this dialectic of tradition and dissent in the history of the Tamil region in the light of which we could view the non-Brahmin movement in Tamil Nadu as heterodoxy.

### **Social, cultural and literary past of the Tamils**

Sangam literature not only has bulk of information on the social life of the Tamils<sup>13</sup>, its structure and thematic content also give insights into certain substantive concerns of this chapter. The earliest Tamil literature accessible currently is that of the Sangam period. The corpus comprises of about 2300 poems varying in length from four or five to well over eight hundred lines each. About hundreds of these poems are anonymous, and the rest are by 473 authors including some women. The poems were grouped in three schematic anthologies known as *Ettuthogai* (eight collections) and *Pattu Pattu* (ten idylls) and *Pathinenkizhkanakku* (eighteen minor works), the last is a collection of a later period.

At the end of each poem we find notes giving the authors name, the occasion for the poem and other details. Basically the Sangam Tamil literature is divided into two broad divisions in terms of substantive orientation, *Akam* (interior) depicting subjective reactions particularly

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<sup>12</sup> The sangam age is referred so because it comprised of three sangams which is known to have produced literature which reflects the social and cultural life of the Tamils.

<sup>13</sup>Sastri, Nilakanda. 1964. The Culture and History of the Tamils. Firma Publishers. Calcutta.

among lovers to amorous situations and recollections of them and *Puram* (exterior) portraying facts and events like war, social and political life<sup>14</sup>.

The collection called *Ettuthogai* consists of eight distinct pieces four each of Akam (the inside- romantic love) and Puram (outside- Bravery and courage). *Patupattu*, another collection, comprises of ten long poems. All except the first on lord Murugan, the rest are of relatively later date and deal with historical persons and situations, in terms of Puram aspects. It is important to note that this classification into Akam and Puram that animates Sangam literature emerges again after several centuries, though in different forms, in other *genres* of Tamil literature; for instance in Bhakthi literature of the tenth century<sup>15</sup>.

The poems in the Sangam age collection have a common structure by virtue of broad eco-cultural parameters known as *Tinai* which is the context of the narrative. The events depicted in the poem happen in various ecological settings and associated livelihoods that provide the cultural codes therein, namely, *kurinji* (mountainous regions, tribal life), *Mullai* (green forests in the plains – nomadic cattle herders), *Marutham* (cultivated fields), *Neithal* (sea – fishing), *Paalai* (desert and arid regions - plunder).

While a large part of Sangam literature has been lost, we glean from what remains, vivid pen pictures with the rare economy of words and the proportion of Sanskrit words is negligible. The Sangam literature is hence regarded as representing the essence of Tamil language. In the sphere of religion, the Sangam age exhibited a mixture of practices and beliefs of diverse origins that were held together side by side.

Subramanya (Murugan), son of Shiva was widely worshipped. At the same time, Buddhism and Jainism also found a footing in the land; the mention of Saravaks, lay followers of Jainism, and Jain monasteries in Madurai are evidences of Buddhist and Jain influences.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.,p88

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.,p95

While we speak of the major religions, the common people worshipped village deities, many of them demonic in character, with rites of their own. They followed ritual procedures including the sticking of margosa leaves on the roof, singing songs and applying collyrium and white mustard to the child for warding off the evil machinations of *Pey* (ghosts). The worship of primitive godlings with offerings of blood and toddy went on side by side with the performance of elaborate Vedic sacrifices and the worship of higher gods in temples with daily pujas and periodic festivals. Buddhist and Jains flourished in considerable numbers without let or hindrance in different parts of Tamil Nadu<sup>16</sup>. It seems that very different modes of worship and godhead were in vogue until about the fifth century AD.

### **Post Sangam period**

But some time after the close of the Sangam age and before the raise of the Pallavas and the Pandyas in the late sixth century, a great change came and people began to entertain fears about the whole land going into the hands of the Jains and Buddhists. This can be attributed to the time of Kalabhras. The Kalabhras ruled over the entire Tamil Nadu between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century displacing the ancient Pandya and Chola dynasties<sup>17</sup>. There are no clues and no clear evidence about the origins of Kalabhras, the popular belief was that the Kalabhras belonged to the Kannada region, later they might have migrated into Tamil Nadu<sup>18</sup>. Both Buddhism and Jainism which became dominant religions during the Kalabhra period, particularly Jain monks had preached Jainism and were also patronised by the Kalabhra rulers. Society under the Kalabhras showed remarkable difference from that of the Sangam age and those of the Kalabhra rule. The secular outlook of the Sangam age gave way to religious outlook of the Kalabhras. The period of Kalabhras was marked by the ascendancy of Buddhism, and probably also of Jainism, and was characterized by considerable literary activity in Tamil,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p 105

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p129

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p 130

that was different from Sangam forms<sup>19</sup>. Tamil literature during this period had also taken new forms and Tamil grammar had also undergone a few changes during this period. Many works such as were composed *Pathinenkizhkanakku* during this period.

This period whose characteristics extend up to A.D 850 was marked by an increasing inflow of Sanskrit influences and the ascendancy of Jainism in the literary field as in social life. Most of the didactical works composed early in this period, some of which still shared the characteristics of Sangam poetry, were grouped together under the description (*Pathinenkizhkanakku*).

The eighteen treaties in short metres, the third in the Sangam corpus of these the earliest and certainly the most celebrated is the *Thirukural* written by Tiruvalluvar, a work of 1330 distiches, grouped in decades 38 on *aram*(dharma), 70 on *porul*(artha) and the remaining 25 on *inbam* (kama). It is said that the author Tiruvalluvar was a Jain who was well versed with the works of Manu, kautilya and Vatsyayana, with which he syncretised Buddhist ethics.

The advent of Buddhism and Jainism saw decline of the themes - erotic love and bravery in war, which came to be viewed as a sign of decadence. The third corpus of Sangam age mentioned above was largely oriented to ethics and morality espoused by Buddhism. Thus the hedonistic tone of early Sangam literature gave way to the serious voice calling for ethical social life.

The five great epics of Tamil, namely, *Silappadhikaram*, *Manimekalai*, *Valiyapathy*, *Kundalakesi* , depicting five ornaments of the Goddess of Tamil and exemplifying Buddhist and Jaina principles adapted to the region through legends and stories, also emerged in this period. All the 5 epics of Tamil language have been written by either Jains or Buddhist

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p139



authors<sup>20</sup>. For instance, the *Silappadikaram* is a moving tale of a couple from merchant class, its scenes being laid in all the three kingdoms of the Tamil land. The author is *Illango adigal*, a prince turned monk. The invocation in this epic is not addressed to any god rather than to forces of nature like water, sun and so on. The other Buddhist epic *Manimekalai* written by *Sattanar* and is a continuation of the story of the *Silappadikaram*, where the offspring of an illegitimate union becomes a monk and alleviates hunger among the poorest and needy. Thus social and radical ethical themes permeate the epic literature in Tamil during this period.

### **Social class and religion in the Tamil region**

It has already been mentioned that during the Sangam age there were instances of Vedic rituals, which went in parallel with the common people who worshipped village deities but there are also few references to Buddhism and Jainism, like the mention of Saravaks or lay followers of Jainism<sup>21</sup>. But the appearance of Buddhism and Jainism in the Tamil region needs a more detailed analysis in the context of this dissertation.

The Buddhist and Jaina sects emerged and became powerful in northern India at a time when the first historical cities of India began their development in the eastern gangetic plain. The ancient merchant and warrior clans known to the Vedas appear here in an alliance in support of these traditions and within a society where commodity trade has begun to crucially influence the social matrix. There is strong evidence to suggest that the class alliance and social milieu that provided the material and social sustenance for Buddhism and Jainism in the north Indian environment were in crucial ways replicated in the south India as cities arose there<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> Rao, Vasudeva. 1979. Buddhism and Jainism in Tamil Country. Annamalai University. Madras.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p67

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p77

The following discussion outlines the social and material factors in south India which appear to have provided the instrument for heterodox influence in early Tamil Nadu particularly from 300 A.D. Historically evolution of cities and urban culture requires the development and alliance of two classes the merchant and the ruler. The fact that these two classes were primary support of Buddhist and Jaina philosophies makes it quite clear their interrelationship. So this interrelationship (Buddhism and Jainism) were in essence the necessary philosophical adjuncts to the formation of the first historical urban-centred societies in India<sup>23</sup>.

With the raise of cities came a set of normative values we see expressed in their Indian form in Buddhism and Jainism. This is not to say that, only city people could identify with these philosophies. In turning to Tamil Nadu this must be kept in mind, since the influences of Jainism and Buddhism clearly went further than the urban elite and it is in fact for this very reason, one can say that heterodox influence had a lasting effect in Tamil Nadu.

In discussing the adherents of Buddhism and Jainism in Tamil Nadu and the ramifications of the presence of the heterodoxies there, the period of the Kalabhra interregnum, as motioned above is an important reference point. It is in this period (4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century AD) when the Jainas and Buddhist appear to have reached the zenith of their power in Tamil Nadu. At the same time it must be remembered that this period was known as the time of instability and chaos, which could be political and social instability and is followed immediately by the raise of Bhakthi Movement which was heterodox in relation to the orthodoxy of Jainism and Buddhism which were the religion of the monarchs.

Though in the Tamil classical literature the Jainas, Buddhists Brahmins and indigenous sects are depicted as living in relative comity, it is evident that later this peaceful co-existence gave

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.,p86

way to pitched and some times, violent conflict. From the stories of the Bhakthi saints and other evidences it is obvious that the Buddhists were not a force of any proportion in Tamil Nadu after the Kalabhra interregnum. Only Nanasampantar among the Bhakthi saints made the Buddhist frequent targets. An indication of Jaina strength in the Tamil country is the frequent vehement denunciations of the Jainas to be found in the words of Saivas particularly<sup>24</sup>.

Nanacampanatar said that the Jainas, “practice villainy under the guise of penance. And it appears that the battle between the Jainas and the Bhakthi saints was particularly pitched. Tamil history however shows that the Jainas were gradually wiped out, though they persisted till medieval times, no doubt with strong outside support from Karnataka.

Thus Bhakthi saints managed to check the power of Buddhism and Jainism, but that did not mean that the Jainas gave up without a fight nor it is that their influence does not live after them. The battle between the Jains and Buddhist orthodoxy and the Hindu Heterodox saints, as has been demonstrated above, was in a sense, a battle of classes.

In the case of the peasantry and warriors these classes had traditional affiliations in Tamil culture. The peasantry occupied the *marutam* region (settled agriculture), the highly segmented Tamil culture which was seen in its most ancient typology to consist of five traditional regions, at that time of the Kalabhra interregnum was moving toward integration engendered by the tightening of the web of trade. This integration adumbrated in the words of the authors of Silappatikaram, Manimekalai and Tolkappiyam, was the catalyst for the clash of traditional views<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Yandell, Keith. 1991. Religion and Public Culture: Encounter and Identities in Modern South India. Curzon. U.K.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p77

It seems the expansion of the peasantry at the expense of the peoples of other regions in Tamil Nadu, was vastly accelerated by the advance of trade and maturation of trade links. The division and hostility between town and country grew. On the other hand, the merchants had a natural ally in certain warrior elements. Together they had combined to create urban centres in the Tamil region<sup>26</sup>. Other less civilized warrior elements would oppose the peasantry at any cost, for their advance spelled the end to their autonomy. Buddhism and Jainism perhaps were an unlikely ally, but the tradition of the warriors made them more acceptable and comprehensible than Brahminical systems.

The nomadic merchant and the warrior whose livelihood was characterised by autonomy are not inclined to fall before the deities of the land to beg for succour. The rhythms and traditions of their lives insisted that their own discipline and actions were paramount and they chose Jainism or Buddhism which pronounced that each days action accrued its due and that salvation was only to be gained by proper restraint upon that action. But on the other hand the life of the peasant was always at the mercy of elements beyond his control. What ever his efforts, it was only a proper amount of rain that could assure their fruition. He too sought to break the cycle of birth and rebirth, but his experience showed him that it could never be gained by his efforts alone. He found solace in the call of the deities of his land to rescue him.

For the peasantry asceticism is a denial of the very fruitfulness that sustains life. The wondrous ascetic might always be admired, but it was the god or goddess that was worshipped first by the peasant, not the realised being.

The Akam sentiment connected with the Marutam region is that of married sexuality. It was upon the Akam tradition that Bhakthi was primarily modelled. To the Tamil peasant it was the safe, assured relationship mirrored his yearning for settled constancy. Though the Tamil

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.,p80

warrior/king might be praised in peace, his glory comes in war. His constant struggle against the ever present enemy was the tension which provided him psychic sustenance. It was he who would leave love behind to fight for glory whether on the battle field or in the ascetic's cave of stone. The sacral aura he attained as king and warrior he retained as destroyer of past karma. The human struggle from this viewpoint was of the individual against the karmic forces which would overwhelm him if he did not do battle. Thus it is ironical that the Tamil warriors and their Buddhist and Jain allies were defeated on the plains of Tamil Nadu by peasants whose only weapon was the god in their hearts<sup>27</sup>.

It was also the distinctive feature of the Tamil saints which led to this transformation. The veneration of saints and sadhus, the worship of godmen and gurus has been a leitmotif in the religious and social life of India from the early times. A distinctive feature of the Tamil saints is that they do not fall into the general categorization of holy men as lone hermits or the Buddhist and Jain monks, renunciation was never part of their philosophy<sup>28</sup>. Thus they were not hermits who sought the wilderness to live a life of penance. Nor did they put forward "death to the world" as a panacea for sin or an answer to the human predicament<sup>29</sup>. In fact the poems of the Tamil saints repeatedly stress the inefficacy of penance, involving fasting and bodily mortifications; Deep love and genuine surrender are necessary to reach the feet of god. It is a unique characteristic of the Tamil Bhakti saints that the majority of them lived in society, acknowledging the common bonds of family life. It was these characteristics of the Bhakti saints which helped them overcome the orthodoxy of Jain and Buddhist faiths based on the ideal of ascetic renunciation imposed upon a reluctant populace.

### **The origins of Bhakti in Tamil Nadu**

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.,p55

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.,p63

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.,p43

An embryonic Bhakthi or devotional movement was gathering inspiration gradually from several sources, both the sacred and secular, northern as well as the southern, till the 5<sup>th</sup> century. In Tamil Nadu, however, it attained its characteristic identity through a transmutation of some strong Tamil social and literary Traditions.

The emergence of the Bhakthi movement in Tamil Nadu can be reduced to two important points. Firstly, the emergence and growth of Bhakthi in Tamil Nadu as a movement from the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD to the 10<sup>th</sup> followed a period of intense cultural confrontation and interaction of local and external factors and may be treated partly as a response to it. The nature of the response carried some elements of the earlier Tamil world view and literary tradition of life affirmation, cheer with admiration for heroic virtues of generosity and valour. As we saw, the Tamil literary tradition was dominated by a free poetic genre of romantic love, called Akam, and another of glorifying generous heroic patrons, called *atruppada*i under the puram genre. This was certainly distant from the ascetic philosophies of world negation of Jainism and Buddhism. The confrontation was not entirely “a free market of ideas’ since, during half of this period of confrontation to the 7<sup>th</sup> century, a part of Tamil Nadu was under the rule of Kalabhras who favoured Jainism<sup>30</sup>.and religious prosecution was not uncommon.

The Tamil saints who inaugurated and sustained the Bhakthi movement fashioned it by a conscious incorporation of life affirming codes and intensive emotional states bypassing both, the world negating theologies and the ritual laden religion.<sup>31</sup>.This process may be traced in, in three broad stages.

The first stage was one of absorbing and unifying Vedic and Tamil gods and worshipping them in clearly located temples. Here the Aryan legends blend with the Tamil tendency to locate a god especially in a beautiful hill temple or a structure on the plains.

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<sup>30</sup> Dehejia, Vidya. 1983. Slaves of the Lord, the Paths of the Tamil Saints. Manoharlal Publishers. New Delhi.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.,p 68

The second stage witnessed political disillusionment followed by political maturation in Tamil Nadu and its latter part coincided with the implicit realization in north India also of the failure of imperial conquest to unify India. The seeds of the Tamil Bhakthi cult were sown during this period by Karaikal Ammair and Tirumular. Tirumular's *moothe tiruppadigm*, an ecstatic description of the cosmic dance of shiva, is the first long poem in Hindu literature on the subject. The idea of Siva's ecstatic dance was later embodied in the concept of the Nataraja with a consort has become a key element in Tamil sculpture and imagery in the arts. In this work we can already see the transmutation of the popular activity of ecstatic dancing into a divine activity. Thus Tirumular propounded a religion of love and direct emotional content with the Lord in opposition to the mere control of the senses preached by Buddhism and Jainism thus preparing the way for the full and glorious efflorescence of Bhakthi under the Saivite *nayanmars* and Vaisnavite *alvars* in the third stage<sup>32</sup>.

### **The Alvars and Nayanmars**

The leading saint singers of Tamil Nadu flourished between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, though precise dates are still elusive and their lives and deeds were intertwined with the general socio-political renaissance of Tamil country. Their pilgrimages and poetic outpourings generated something like a participatory religious mass movement.

### **Social origins of Tamil saints**

Appar: Appar was born in a non Brahmin family, rose to prominence as a Jain scholar but gave up Jainism to become a Saivite saint singer. There is a internal and legendry evidence

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<sup>32</sup> Alvars and nyanmars were parts of the Bhakthi Movement in the post Kalabhra period and were instrumental in weaning away people from Buddhism and Jainism then.

that he was persecuted by the Pallava king Mahendra Varma under the influence of the Jains but Appar not only withstood the torment, he also converted the king to Saivism.<sup>33</sup>

Kanappan: “among the lovers of shiva whose life is depicted in the epic on the Nayanmars, Kanappan holds a unique place as an example of true bhakthi. This simple young hunter had been brought up in the forests and taught hunting and other skills necessary for survival in that wild environment. Kanappan knew nothing whatsoever of Brahminic traditional worship or of the rituals observed in the temples. When he first saw the Shiva linga in the forest it did not occur to him that there could be any objection to his walking in with his sandled feet, nor did he realise about the purity of offerings to the lord would be defiled if he tasted the pork before it is offered or if he carried the flowers in his own lock.. The officiating Brahmin priest was horrified by the unorthodox behaviour of the hunter devotee and realizing that this attitude was being condoned and the Non-Brahminical offerings accepted he protested to Shiva. The lord decided show the priest the intensity of the young hunter’s devotion and caused one eye of the Siva linga to bleed. Without a second thought Kannapan plucked out his eye with the sharp end of his arrow and placed it on the Shiva linga’s eye. When Siva caused his second eye to bleed, Kanappan tried to pluck out his second eye. Lord Siva intervened and showered his grace<sup>34</sup>.”

There are similar narratives of devotees from humble background achieving heights of Bhakti in the Vaishnavaita tradition as well.

*Tiruppan alvar*: Tiruppan alvar a devout worshipper of Vishnu, was born in a family of an untouchable caste and was denied access to the temple. He stood in the south bank of the river Cauvery gazing the Srirangam shrine of Vishnu and sang unceasingly. One morning the senior priest of the temple on his way to fetch holy water from Cauvery was annoyed to see

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<sup>33</sup> Vidys,1983:132

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.,p58



Tiruppan alvar on his way and in anger threw a stone that hurt his forehead. At once, Vishnu's idol in the temple started bleeding in the forehead; not knowing the reason the priests were in shock. The lord appeared in the dream of the priest to convey the message and the priest realising his mistake raised Thirupan Alwar on his shoulders and carried him to the temple<sup>35</sup>.

Quite a few of the medieval saints came from the underprivileged social classes, and were a part of the movement of protest against Jaina and Buddhist orthodoxy. A parallel tradition of dissent existed from the ancient time.

The fact is that what the orthodox tradition denied the Shudras was the privilege of Vedic study and ritual, not the possibility of spiritual knowledge which did not require any social sanction. Even the Brahmanas did not question the dissemination of spiritual message among the masses through the medium of wandering saints. What they jealously guarded was the privilege of reciting Vedic texts and performing Vedic ritual. The participation of the underprivileged in the spiritual life of the society under the leadership of wandering teachers, mendicants and poets independently of the Vedic Braminic tradition was probably not a new phenomenon in medieval times but a tendency continuing from the days of the Buddhists, through the Bhakthi saints and the Siddhas<sup>36</sup>.

It may be pertinent look at the rise of Bhakthi in a comparative perspective and ask why it took the shape first in Tamil Nadu during a particular period than any other part of India. The Bhakthi tradition derived its strength from certain unique cultural features of the Tamil region.

The elements of the Bhakti tradition in north India, namely hero worship with the concept of *avatara*, the wealth of Puranic legend and the Bhagavad Gita conception of Bhakthi did not

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.,p66

<sup>36</sup> Pande, Sushmita. 1989. Medieval Bhakthi Movement, Shankar Goyal Publishers. Meerut.



contain the erotic conventions Tamil Akam poetry which fused them to make Bhakthi the totally personal experience and universal phenomenon it became. The Tamil Akam technique and certain socio-historical conditions of cultural encounter in Tamil Nadu enabled men of god to apply eroticism to their own relation with the deity. What might have been considered a deviant mental transvestism was legitimised by accepted Akam conventions, without this combination and legitimation, this transformation might not have been sparked off<sup>37</sup>. Again the atruppadai tradition reinforced the Aham tradition and legitimised pilgrimage, and artistic worship of the deity with song and dance.

The next very important question is why this synthesis happened in Tamil Nadu during that particular period? Some romantic tradition was present in all folk literature in several regions of India. We have clear evidence of similar to Aham in Maharashtra country in a surviving work in local prakrit, called Gathas Ptasati (700 songs). These songs follow broadly the same conventions in regard to the evocative role of nature, the impersonality of the love experience and other similar features. Perhaps this tradition was not as deep -rooted in some other parts of India as in Tamil Nadu because of cultural restrictions against synthesising folk themes<sup>38</sup>. Sanskrit language was considered to be the language of superior literature and local folk literature was considered inferior. There was less motivation for the literary elite of these regions to use the folk idiom of eroticism, particularly in conjunction with Puranic stories or yoga. In the Tamil country however, there seems to have been no doubt about the inherent superiority of Tamil literature, even when north Indian influences were accepted after being suitably Tamilized.

Thus to sum up, traditions like mysticism or Bhakti that involve a highly personal relation with the deity cannot thrive under well organised religious establishment such as the church.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.,32

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.,44

The unorganized nature of Hinduism needed and supported such a personal relation, quite apart from the major socio-historical influences we have discussed. We may go further to add that, when a more rigid organization of temple worship in south India emerged after the period of Bhakthi efflorescence, the latter gave way to temple rituals while Bhakthi preserved its original ecstatic characteristics in its new home in north India. There was yet another tradition that we may rightly term heterodox- that of the Tamil the Siddhas, to which we turn.

### **The Tamil Siddhas**

The quest for immortality and freedom is a human quest. The ascetic philosophies, contemplative techniques and the mystical systems of India were directed towards gaining liberation of the self, even though they disagreed over the nature and status of the self, when and where it attains liberation and over the means of attaining it. The Tamil Siddhas were a represented a school of thought that relied on the individual's efforts for the attainment of liberation. Their characteristic attitudes come and find it out for yourself<sup>39</sup>.

Tamil Siddhas invented and developed the Tamil medical system known as the Siddha medicine. This medical system is little known in India with exceptions of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The bulk of the works of Siddha medicine is in Tamil language which is yet to be fully explored because of the secret symbolic language. The meaning of the word Siddha "*As verb it means to succeed or perfection as a common noun a siddha is realized perfected one*". *One who has attained dual goal of superhuman powers*"<sup>40</sup>. The Siddhas of the northern region namely the Maheswara Siddhas, Buddhist tantriks (maha siddhas), alchemist of medieval India(rasa siddhas) and Nath siddhas whose preoccupation was tantric practice and alchemy. The Tamil Siddhas shared these interests yet they were foremost critiques of Vedic rituals

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<sup>39</sup> Zimmerman, Marion. 1994. A short Introduction: The Tamil Siddhas and the Siddha Medicine of Tamil Nadu. Routledge. London.

<sup>40</sup> Ganapathy T. N. 1988. Philosophy of Tamil Siddhas. Indian Council of Philosophical Research. New Delhi.

and pioneers of a medical system that aimed at attaining immortality of the physical body. The main problem in the study of the Tamil Siddhas is the absence of reliable editions of Tamil poetry. The basic source of Tamil Siddha poetry and philosophy is in the spoken language of the people. This is a claim which other poetries or philosophies cannot make. What we have got as Siddha poetry was not originally a written one. It has been handed over from generation to generation in the form of oral transmission. In Tamil literature such oral transmission is called Vaymoli. This explains why in Siddha poetry there is looseness in construction, noticeable repetitions, inconsistent verses, and difference in emphasis on the same subject dealt with in various places. To facilitate oral transmission the Tamil Siddhas used only the common words spoken by the language by the people unpolished , crude, offensive , indecent , and colloquial expressions. This use of the common speech of the people produces a powerful effect whenever we read permanent and varied contributions to Tamil literature by bringing in the language of the folklore.

Although the Siddha poems are in the common language of the people, the meaning of the poems operates at two levels on the exoteric and the linguistic, the other the esoteric and the symbolical. The esoteric meaning is explained to and understood by the tested and the worthy. This paradox of language is the special difficulty which a researcher meets in understanding deciphering the Siddha thought. They challenged forcefully the validity of rituals and the basis of the caste system and launched a revolt against the corrupting religious aristocracy and network of priestocracy.

### **The philosophy of Tamil Siddhas**

Siddha philosophy cannot be made to fit into any “isms” or “ology” for it lacks a constant doctrinal referent. The songs of the Siddhas do not show any trace of collective thinking

neither is there any suggestion of preaching. One can discern certain common characteristics among the Siddhas which make them distinct from “learned” poets on the one hand and sectarian religious poets on the other<sup>41</sup>. To be a Siddha, sectarian affiliation is irrelevant. The Siddhas have no sacred city, no monastic organization, no religious instruments<sup>42</sup>. They are defined by their indifference to formal religion. Their philosophy is enlightenment as distinct from doctrine it is not a theoretical and formalist approach to problems. They make fun of logic and turn orthodox philosophy upside down in order to make it look absurd. They are the non-conformist, spiritual aspirants, yearning for a direct and natural approach to a more intense experience of absolute truth.

They rejected the very authority of scriptures as such because the value and the prestige of the scripture as such remained the privilege of the very few. To the Siddhas, scriptures were poor substitutes for personal experience, and as such it becomes useless in the ultimate analysis.

The Tamil Siddhas belonged to a nonconformist counter tradition. By counter tradition it does not mean that which opposes tradition but the tradition which opposes. The Siddhas challenged many accepted beliefs and practices of Hindu society and thought. They denounced idol and ritualistic worship and petitionary prayers as fetters holding back the soul from liberation.

In Tamil Nadu the Siddhas are identified with the alchemists, very often people confuse the analogy between the Siddha and the alchemist who is treated as a miracle man or a magician who turns base metals into gold, but just as the alchemist works on the base metals and turns them to gold, the Siddha is said to transmute his psycho physical life into free autonomous spirit. Thus the main difficulty in interpreting the Siddha philosophy is that it is an open

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.,p81

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.,p82

system, and the questions raised by them cannot be put in either or, nor can it be reduced to any one view.

### **The social concern of the Tamil Siddhas**

The Tamil Siddhas considered it a fallacy to regard mysticism as necessarily linked with the denial of the world and its welfare. Renunciation, detachment from society and formal asceticism are not the ways of the Siddhas. To be spiritual is not to be insensitive to the problems of the common man. Siddha spirituality does not require withdrawal from the world or organized movements or dogmas. The Siddhas were at peace with the world and were not socially closed and exclusive. Any definition of a genuine siddha should include the quality of identifying oneself with another in distress<sup>43</sup>.

To them, service and work begin one's own self-realization. As mentioned earlier the 'arupadai' is very powerful in the social philosophy of Tamil Siddhas. The concept has two aspects, the first aspect is in order to achieve self realization, and the Siddhas warn people not to take recourse towards scriptures, caste and pujas. To the Siddhas the cause of the prevalence of delusion in our lives is institutional rather than personal. Therefore they vehemently criticized certain type of social institutions.

The Tamil Siddhas have been vehemently critics of the Vedas and Puranas. Their yearning for a direct and natural approach to truth makes them treat the scriptures as obstacles on the path of spiritual practice. This scripture less view of the Tamil Siddhas forms the basis of their anti-theistic attitude. By anti-theism is meant not submitting oneself to the control of any temple, or church or any philosophy or scriptures.

Just as they do not recognise distinctions among various religions, the Tamil Siddhas also do not accept the various caste distinctions in society as well sacredotalism. "*Tirumular defines*

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.,p 184

*a Brahmin as one who has relinquished all desires and says that the sacred thread symbolises Vedanta and the tuft symbolises inana. A Brahmin who has not understood this and maintains only a superficial caste distinction is a fool. "sivanandhbodham another siddhar says the greatest caste is the caste of realizing siva in one's own self"<sup>44</sup>.*"

Another Siddhar verse asks if the stone idol that is decorated and worshipped as god will ever know what spiritual experience is much as the pot in which we cook will know the taste of the food cooked.

The Siddhas thought that institutionalized religion produces habits and customs which prevent one from being religiously alert. Formalities threaten to become more important than knowing one's own inner nature. The social concern of Tamil Siddhas is best exhibited in their system of medicine, which they believe brings spiritual health with wholeness, completeness, perfection. The Siddhas did face the wrath of the orthodoxy, By virtue of being a non conformist counter tradition dabbling in tantric practices. The Siddhas for their part taught tantra and yoga to the entire society irrespective castes.

The Siddhas were against all the aspects of orthodox Hindu tradition be it the religious and social institutions, rituals, scriptures. The Siddha movement unlike Bhakthi did not assimilate with the main stream. It has also been reported that the Saivites in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century sought after the Siddha poetry and destroyed them<sup>45</sup>. From the above cited examples and evidence we can clearly state that the Siddhars were severe on the orthodox Hindu traditions than the Bhakthi saints.

### **Consolidation of orthodoxy in Tamil Nadu: Post Bhakthi**

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.,p63

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.,p64

Medieval south India is often portrayed as the most “orthodox” of Hindu societies, a somewhat isolated corner of India where caste rules were rigidly applied, where the Brahmin could take his social pre-eminence for granted, where Sanskrit learning flourished and the Vedic rituals were performed while heretics, the survivors of the once powerful Buddhist and Jain communities, were cowed into silence, in short, a world where the Hindu Dharma, the most elusive of orders, came closest to mundane realization. This static and almost iconized picture served as a tool for the anti-Brahminical Tamil nationalists during the self respect and other non Brahmin movements, who needed a tool or symbol to oppose<sup>46</sup>.

Though it is true that that a self-conscious Hindu identity crystallized in south India and that a rather militant Hindu ideology became dominant in the area after a long struggle with the Buddhist and Jain traditions, the Brahmanical tradition was by no means a stable tradition. Rather several aspects of Hinduism in Tamil Nadu have been carried forward by a host of other caste groups as described earlier. The crystallisation of Hindu temple worship where several communities had a stake in temple organisation. reached its zenith during the Chola period (between late 9<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century AD).<sup>47</sup>

Clearly one of the creative stages in the evolution of the southern Hindu culture. The development of great devotional movements, the hymns of the Saiva nayanmars and Vaisnava alvars, the poet saints from various social classes already shaped the new forces of Hindu revitalisation<sup>48</sup>. Thus, in the hagiographies of the poet saints, as recorded, for example, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century Periapuranam, one sees the Bhakthi hero intervening again and again against the politically or socially powerful heretics in order to save the threatened Hindu community.

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<sup>46</sup> Eisenstaedt. 1993. Heterodoxy and Dissent in India. Cambridge University Press. U.K.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.,p12

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.,p18



The developments of the Chola period were later consolidated in various ways. One was the elaboration of philosophical traditions in which the ideology of devotion (bhakthi) was couched in terms of the orthodox Sanskrit Vedanta. Another was the recording of local myths, clustered around the temple cults<sup>49</sup>. These collections of myths constitute a rich corpus of texts in which the basic values and perceptions of post Chola Tamil Hinduism find a particularly trenchant expression; they also serve to illustrate some of the major tensions and problems found in south Indian Brahminical culture.

One of these temple myths the Tripura myth aptly describes the tension and how the myths help in restoring order threatened by the so called heretical sects, the Tripura myth is where Visnu takes an avatar of Buddha. The myth of the Buddha avatar is one of the classical explanations of the origin of heresy. Buddha avatar is one of the classical Hindu explanations of the origin of heresy, became attached in the Purana to the myth of Shiva's destruction of the Tripura (the triple city of the demons). Visnu corrupts the Tripura demons who are usually imbued with power derived from asceticism and sacrifices, with heretical Buddhist and Jain doctrines.

One wonders if this is not the most prevalent type of protest during the period in the south – the attempt to break free of the burden of the paradox and ambiguity by demanding immediate realization of the ultimate values of the tradition. To illustrate these possibilities we look at some verses of Pampatti Siddhar

“We will light a fire in the gaps between castes.

We will plant our staff in the market-place

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.,p25

Play in the cross roads

Forge ties with the worst families

We will prowl around asking questions<sup>50</sup>,

“The four Vedas,

The six kinds of Sastras

The Tantras and Puranas

The ramblings of angamas

And all other sorts of Vedic treatises

Are just empty books, so

Dance, o snake!<sup>51</sup>

The poet Pampatti Siddhar plainly rejects the artificial boundaries imposed by culture<sup>52</sup>, and hierarchy.

Thus these verses have served to illustrate some of the dominant features of Siddhar poetry; the rejection of Vedic authority, hostility to traditional ritual, caste and the concept of pollution; the thirst for immediate unlimited spiritual experience, which is felt to lie outside the boundaries of the orthodox order, the search for directness for simple, even deliberately vulgar language as opposed to ornate polished idiom of literary Tamil, and reliance upon inner truth and the individual vision.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.,p18

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.,p21

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.,p27

The basic point to be stressed here is that Siddhar revolt against the orthodoxy order is fuelled by the most cherished values of the Brahmin itself<sup>53</sup>. Protest has sprung out from the heart of the religion, not from its margins, in this instance it is not a matter of offering a new interpretation of reality at odds with the orthodox vision, but rather of insisting upon a more immediate application of the ideal sanctified by the very texts the protester will no longer read. From the vantage point of the tradition, it is the willingness to live with paradox, with the ambiguous, never ending dialectic of order and disorder, which marks the border between orthodoxy and dissent. The fact is that orthodoxy prefers the tension of living within borders while always looking beyond them while heterodoxies believe in immediate fulfilment of the believed ideals and hence the orthodoxy and its borders are constantly always open to attack.

This background of the dialectic of orthodoxy heterodoxy in the Tamil region is the framework in terms of which we locate new and engaging trends in 19-20<sup>th</sup> century non-Brahmin ideology. Radicalism, has always shared the ground with multiple religions in Tamil consciousness. The emergence of the non –Brahmin movement with an atheistic ideology is another landmark in this course.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.,p32

**Chapter - III**

**Emergence of the 'Non-Brahmin' as a Category: The Dravidian  
Movement**

We have been discussing how in the debate and conflict among religious traditions, several themes have emerged. The critique of ritualistic, institutional religion and social hierarchy was already entrenched in the writings of the Siddhar and wandering mendicants. While the official religion of the rulers continued to flourish and social hierarchies were perpetrated by the wealthy and landed castes, dissenting voices have existed side by side and made their presence felt.

In the eighteenth century, the social transformation triggered by the politics of colonial rule in the Tamil region brought caste groups into open contest over opportunities in public institutions ever more than before. The creation of universities and government jobs brought caste groups into the arena of public competition in which the Brahmin groups had an upper hand. It is under these circumstances that the birth of the category 'Non-Brahmin' has to be understood. The Non-Brahmin movement forged an alliance of a group called 'Non Brahmin' in opposition to the Brahmin who was seen as the embodiment of Hindu ritualism and hierarchy.

Unlike the Siddhars who challenged religion but espoused spirituality, the leaders of the Non-Brahmin movement attacked all aspects of what they referred to as Brahmanical Hinduism. Early critiques of Brahmanical Hinduism during the late 19th century like Iyothee Thoss and Maraimalai Adigal who advocated a more inclusive religion as an alternative to orthodox Hinduism could not consolidate political and social momentum, for social mobility.

Only a socio-political ideology, not alternative religion could give impetus to the Non-Brahmin movement. The attack on Brahmin domination coupled with ideas of social reform is what gave the movement a major push. By the twentieth century, with the advent of Periyar EVR Ramaswamy, a renowned leader of the Non-Brahmin movement, the ideology of the

Non-Brahmin movement went beyond the critique of rituals to debunk religion, advocating atheism as a principle. This chapter will give an account of these developments and the process of formulation of Periyar's ideas.

### **Colonialism and Identities**

Colonialism does not seem to be a mere backdrop but a key player in the story of the Non-Brahmin movement. First colonialism was many things at once violent in the name of civilizing, economically exploitive in the name of modernization. These contradictions showed the instability of the colonial project, and they did not help in the colonizers will to represent or contain the colonized<sup>54</sup>. But yet enframing the colonized into a set of categories and the constant reiteration of those categories did produce its own reality. The very need to engage with these categories reconstituted the ways in which the colonized thought of themselves and related to the wider world. Colonialism thus abetted and also provided the grounds for articulating and bringing into being new identities as much as it sought to freeze identities. National identity is perhaps the most obvious of these<sup>55</sup>. In short, the process of forging new identities necessarily opened up the possibility of questioning the naturalness of pre-existing ones. The emergence of the Non-Brahmin identity falls to this category.

### **Society in Colonial Tamil Nadu**

When the British government ended the East India Company's policy of restricting Christian missionary presence in its territories, the troubles of the missionaries were not gone; in fact it was the beginning of their troubles. Unclear about the response of natives whose plural modes of spirituality were not singularized as Hindu and unsure about their conversion, missionaries had to constantly battle frustration. The mood of frustration present during their

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<sup>54</sup> Pandian, M. S. S. 2008, Brahmin and Non-Brahmin. Permanent Black. New Delhi.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.,p39

missionary activities and their day to day encounters with the natives ranged from indifference to violence.

*“A few onlookers stopped by, the priest nodded to every one in a friendly manner, casting a genial look around, while the musicians rendered a full throated biblical hymn over the babble of the street. However as the missionary went on with his preaching a scuffle broke out: suddenly the audience woke up to the fact that the preacher was addressing them as sinners and that he was calling their gods names. When the public realized what he was saying, pandemonium broke out”<sup>56</sup>.*

There was multitude of ways in which the Christian missionaries engaged with Hinduism in their writings. Most missionaries systematically dealt with different gods of Hinduism along side hyper literal readings of native religious texts. Here also certain intellectually inclined projects by missionary scholars such as Caldwell and GU Pope. Robert Caldwell credited the Brahmins with civilizing Indians, but criticised the religious systems that he supposed the Brahmins introduced in the region. GU Pope translated the Saivite Tamil text *Thiruvacakam* into english and became a great defender of Saiva Sidhanta philosophy. Thus as Hinduism became a part of the missionary discourse as an object of debate into which the subject of caste was drawn:

*“The observance of caste is intrinsically connected with the Hindu religion. Therefore caste must be exterminated root and branch. That at least was the consensus that Anglo-Saxon protestant missions in India had reached by 1850. Treating caste as an impediment to both conversion and to the practice of Christian life, missionaries innovated various methods to ensure that both native clergy and their congregations were free from caste. The America Madura mission for instance wanted all to drink a cup of tea together with the untouchables.*

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 51

*Failing the test, 73 Christians including 38 catechists, were debarred from the lords table in 1847. In 1848 the Madras Missionary Conference asserted that nobody should be baptised unless he had eaten the food prepared by an untouchable<sup>57</sup>”.*

These debates and contestations around caste, which have been well documented, had variety of consequences. Upper caste converts, in an attempt to keep their identity separate from lower castes, claimed that caste was social and not religious. The lower castes, in contrast, tried to use the new opportunity to affirm new norms of equality. The question of caste also led to the formation of new churches free from established denominations. Missionaries had to deliberate upon the course of action and make compromises at various levels to manage the varying outcomes of their stance on caste because questions of social equality were probably never raised so vehemently in their proselytising missions even in Europe.

The Brahmin community in the region had now to reconstitute themselves in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, by responding to the dual demands of self hood by colonialism. The response of the Hindus and especially the Brahmin community against the missionaries were on many fronts. In 1881 the Hindu preaching society was founded and in 1887 Sivasankar Pandiah founded the Hindu Tract Society, in Madras.<sup>58</sup> During 1889, as part of the activities of these organizations Hindu preachers often countered Christian missionaries by preaching, singing distributing tracts against the Christian faith in the very places where missionaries preached. The Hindu tract society published more than 15,000 copies of a tract entitled ‘Is Jesus a god too?’ Some pointed out the absurdities by reading out the Bible<sup>59</sup>.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p76

<sup>58</sup> Rice, Henry. 1936. Native Life in South India: Being Sketches of the Social and Religious Characteristics of the Hindus. The Religious Tract Society. London.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.,p41



Others more interestingly used rationality as critique of Christianity and the Bible. There was a wide use of western rationalist thoughts, western rationalist literature had a wide circulation among Hindu groups in the Tamil speaking region, and Madras functioned as a sort of rationalist headquarters for the rest of the British India. These accounts indicate that it was by working within western rationalist conventions that Hindus could confront Christian criticism, driving missionaries into defensive postures and sometimes silencing the Bible teachers<sup>60</sup>. What the orthodox Hindus did not realise is that the rationalist literature could also simultaneously be the source of anxiety for the Hindus themselves.

What we can see here is that the late 18<sup>th</sup> century colonial India witnessed a gradual transformation of the society as the public sphere became heterogeneous, with numerous debates and ideas being discussed. The Hindu response to Christian missionaries in turn exteriorised and objectified their own religion. In other words, the use of rational arguments to counter Christian missionaries in turn opened space for the critique of orthodox Hinduism during the colonial and post independence Period.

How did these developments impact different sections of the people? Before we detail out the emergence of the Non-Brahmin ideology, we could briefly see how Partha Chatterjee conceptualised the Brahmin response to the demands of self hood posed by the colonial other. For Chatterjee, Brahminical Hinduism in essence consisted of Vedas, Sanskrit, religious texts like Ramayanam, Mahabharatham, Bhagavatham, Dharma Sastras and Smritis, and festivals like Sivarathri, Devi Puja, and Gokulashtami were seen to belong to the domain of culture/spirituality. Secondly, Brahmins expressed anxiety over the material domain only when it was perceived to contaminate the cultural. In other words, as long as the Brahmin's dharma was not affected, he could comfortably embrace the material domain and its benefits

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.,p44

brought in by colonialism<sup>61</sup>. Thus both the search for the Brahmin authenticity and its nationalization were firmly grounded in the domain of culture or spirituality.

### **Brahmins in Colonial Tamil Nadu**

Partha Chatterjee has argued that anti colonial nationalism marks out the domain of culture or spirituality as its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battles with the imperial power. He further notes that in the discourse of nationalism, the greater one's success in imitating western skills in the material domain the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one's own culture.

However, if we view the colonized and the national culture as singular, the success of dominant nationalism in carving out a domain of sovereignty over colonialism will at once emerge as the story of domination over varied sections of subaltern social groups within the emerging nation. In Chatterjee's view, the essence of national culture was thus based on the exclusion and inferiorization of lower castes and religious minorities. Alongside this colonial nationalism, the Tamil Brahmin community occupied the material domain as well. They courted modernity and justified their innate intelligence and culture; there existed the domain of culture, wherein they resisted modernity<sup>62</sup>. Most often this resistance in the domain of culture reinforced their traditional structures of authority, exercised through caste and religion. The valorisation of Brahminical culture, reconstituted under the demands of colonialism and inflected with new forms of knowledge such as orient list scholarship, as the culture of the nation which had to be defended against colonial modernity. Though this is a general account of Chatterjee, it does fit well for our understanding of nationalism and

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<sup>61</sup> Partha, Chatterjee. 1993. *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Oxford University Press. New Delhi.

<sup>62</sup>.*Ibid.*,P 28

Brahmins in colonial Tamil Nadu. But in Tamil Nadu, the elite Non-Brahmin challenged the hegemony of the Brahmins.

*“Criticizing the appointment of a member of the Brahmin community heading the high court of madras, a Dravidian correspondent argued in the columns of Madras Mail that the Brahmin was the least fitted of all castes to deal with the masses.... Since he considered himself god and all others mlechhas<sup>63</sup>.”*

The Brahmin's emergence in the colonial public sphere thus generated various discourses in the Tamil region. The colonial public sphere, even if restricted because of racial discrimination, gave rise to network of organizations and associations. At least this public sphere was accessible to all sections of the colonized, regardless of their ascriptive identities, the untouchable could now air his views and grievances as much as the Brahmin by publishing tracts and periodicals and setting up organizations. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the untouchables, Sudras, neo-Buddhists, Saivites and rationalists in the region were incited into speech and became publicly visible. Among them there were two major thinkers Iyoththe Thoss and Maraimalai Adigal. Iyoththe Thoss, an intellectual of hitherto untouchable Parayar community in Tamil Nadu attempted to overcome his demeaning Parayar identity by substituting it with neo Buddhist identity and Maraimalai Adigal was a prominent Saivite intellectual of the velallar community<sup>64</sup>. Both thinkers tried to refashion a new self hood for their respective communities by centralizing the figure of the Brahmin in their Works.

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid.,p186

<sup>64</sup> Pandian, 2008:103

### **The Voice of the Subaltern: Iyoothee Thoss (1845-1914).**

The early days of Iyoothee Thoss are shrouded in obscurity. A scholar of Tamil classical literature, a well known practitioner of siddha medicine, and a commentator on contemporary politics, he organized the Advaidananda Sabha in 1870 to oppose the activities of Christian missionaries and investigate into advaitic traditions as a way of contesting caste-based discrimination. His antipathy for Christian missionaries could have been because of the prevalence of caste exclusiveness in Christian congregations. In response to a suggestion by Srinivasa Raghava Iyengar, Inspector General of Registration, that conversion to Christianity and Islam would empower the dalits, he noted: 'in some of the Catholic churches separate seats are assigned for pariahs, and they are often despised as low caste men, their feelings are much wounded thereby.

Thus in 1891 he founded the Dravida Mahajan Sabha in Nilgiris and sought to convince the Indian National Congress to take up the issue of civic disabilities suffered by the untouchables<sup>65</sup>. The Indian National Congress refused to heed this request. In 1898 he went to Ceylon with the help of Theosophist Henry Olcott and embraced Buddhism. Returning from Colombo he organized, in the same year, the Sakya Buddhist Society of Madras. The activities of the society included religious meeting on Sundays, semi-public lectures on socio-religious issues by learned men of all the faiths and confessions and conversion of Buddhism. He was also instrumental in establishing a number of branch societies in other parts of the Tamil region.

Arguably the most important moment in the life of Iyoothee Thoss was the founding of the weekly magazine, 'Oru Paisa Tamilian', in 1907. The Magazine was published under his

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p 115

editorship till his death in 1914 and became a major vehicle for his diverse intellectual projects<sup>66</sup>. The reason for publishing this magazine was self-consciously pedagogic: ‘to teach justice, right path, and truthfulness to people who could not discriminate between the excellent, the mediocre and the bad. A substantial body of Thoss’ writings, including his reconstruction of the Tamil past commentaries on major literary texts such as the Thirukural, and opinion on contemporary politics, particularly on the Swadeshi movement, were published in his magazine<sup>67</sup>. Let us now see how Thoss constructed the Tamil Buddhist past and how the Parayar and Brahmins community figured in it. In a letter written in 1898 to Henry Olcott seeking his help to revive Buddhism in the Madras Presidency, Thoss gives us a glimpse of how he came to investigate Parayar history. The project had begun early in his life while trying to make sense of a common ritual practice within his community.

*“if those who are known as Brahmins enter the villages and streets occupied by our people, who were the original Dravidians, but now called Panchamas by Hindu high caste men, they are driven out of the place in the most disgraceful manner such is the hatred between the two classes of people ....I began to enquire the cause for such animosity between the two classes from the time I could think myself.”<sup>68</sup>*

Interestingly, two decades after Thoss had interpreted the custom of chasing away Brahmins from Parayar quarters as a sign of long standing antagonism between the Brahmins and original Dravidians, Vincent Smith, in his Oxford History of India used similar anthropological data to constitute the difference between “Aryans” and “Dravidians”. Thoss later claimed that he found the true past of the Parayars, a past that was of Buddhist. Thoss emphasized on the moral conduct as the foundation of Brahminhood and launched a powerful critique of Brahmins and Brahminism in his time. Simultaneously, he discursively produced

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.,p125

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.,P128

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.,P131

Parayars as the authentic Brahmins of the past. He refers to them as Buddha Brahmins; whose place had been usurped by the present day Brahmins. However Thoss emphasised on individual conduct simultaneously confined his politics to the limited realm of religion-cultural practices. The Buddhist associations established by Thoss flourished and conducted religious discourses in the northern parts of the Tamil region and in the Kolar area, where a large number of parayar migrants toiled in the gold fields.

But Thoss choice of functioning outside the realm of the popular and trying to make an ideal alternative constrained his movement from becoming Parayar political public. During the 1920's and 1930's, from among the followers of Thoss, "two distinct separate platforms were being set up for the discussions of religio-cultural questions on the one hand and socio political issues on the other. And in the 1930's, a new group of youngsters G. Annapurini, Rathinasabapathy, C.K Kuppusamy and others emerged who were primarily socio-political activists, with only marginal involvement in Buddhism". Such 'secular' mobilization of the Parayars which contested the power of the Brahmin in the domain of the political instead of in that of the religion-cultural, caused a confluence between them and the Non-Brahmin movement. As Aloysius argues, 'The mobilized mass under Thoss' Buddhism' became the foot soldiers of the Dravidian movement under the leadership of E.V. Ramaswamy. The self respect movement as we will see in detail later, propagated through a rationalist critique couched in every day Tamil as to how Hindu religious practices inferiorized lower castes, women, physical labourer, and Non-Sanskritic languages. In mobilizing these varied identities it formed a broad coalition of Non-Brahmins in particular those who were against Brahminical dominance<sup>69</sup>.

### **Maraimalai Adigal (1876-1950)**

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.,p133

Though there were many Vellala elite scholars like P. Sundaram Pillai, V. Kanakasabhai, J.M. Nallaswami Pillai, Maraimalai Adigal is well known for launching the Tani Tamil Iyakkam (Tamil purist movement) in 1916 which battled Sanskritic accretions in Tamil Language. In fact, he changed his name from the sanskritic 'Vedagiri' to its Tamil equivalent, Maraimalai. Maraimalai Adigal was not only a scholar of Saivism, Tamil language and literature, but his proficiency in Sanskrit was such that he could translate Kalidasa Sakuntalam into Tamil. In addition, given his skill in English, he had easy access to western literature and scholarship, both Orientalist and otherwise. Maraimalai Adigal pursued his project, to a great measure, within the western enlightenment framework: He believed that man is ever free to think on life and struggles and no power can restrain his thought. The spread of western education contributed to this freedom of thinking, and he thought he must do his best to make the people think for themselves and examine their beliefs in the light of reason and history.

“No, doubt, beneath the legendary accounts of Puranas critics of trenchant intellect - such are rarely to be met with in this country, may detect facts of great value for studying the history of ancient people, but others, who are untrained in the critical and historical methods of looking at things and events, take every bit of them as so many literal truths<sup>70</sup>.”

As part of his engagement with reason and history, he also privileged a secular time over the sacred time; note for example, his critique of the claim that Puranas were authored by the divine being:

“Sanskrit being a dead language, the authors of the Puranas adopted it as the means best suited to their purpose and said in them, all that was to be said in their own interest and to the

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<sup>70</sup> Pandian, M. S. S. 2004. Transformation of Dravidian Ideology 1916-1948, Social Scientist

great disadvantage of the people. And as if to give a finishing and successful stroke to their artifices, not only did they uniformly conceal their human authorship of the Puranas but they also attributed the composition of which invariably to divine beings such as Siva.<sup>71</sup>”

Adigal’s intellectual labour spawned a stylized and meticulously argued version of Dravidianism/Non-Brahminism by othering the Brahmin. The focus was primarily on one of the key texts of Adigal, *Vellalar Nagarigam* (Vellalar civilization), first published in 1923. This was one of his more mature works, written in the later phase of his life when he turned fully against Sanskrit, which he viewed as a vehicle for Brahminical dominance. This was also one of his most successful books; he proudly noted that ‘The first edition of this work was published in November 1923 and 500 copies of it were sold within four years, a period too short for the sale of a Tamil book of this kind, which in contradistinction to the current fashion for a mixed kind of Tamil prose, is written in a scrupulously pure Tamil style.

Significant within Adigal’s construction of history is his claim that settled agriculture pursued by Vellalars not only unfettered them from material hardship but also cultivated their minds and gave rise to a world of superior moral values. The cultivation of land and cultivation of the mind were intimately connected: cultivation is an exacting job to perform it well; one needs probing intelligence and know the ways of pursuing it<sup>72</sup>.

It has been said that compassion, intelligence and munificence are age-old traits of the Saiva Siddhanta (Philosophy of Saivism), which according to him was the highest achievement of the Tamil which mind, had as one of its tenets non-killing (vegetarianism), and hence its claim to compassion and thus Adigals sequencing of Tamil history developed an identity between the Vellalars, their traditional occupation of settled cultivation, and Saivism as the

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.,P 16

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.,p21



civilizational apotheosis of history<sup>73</sup>. One needs to bear in mind that the husband man as an ideal had a long presence in the pre-colonial Tamil region, as evident from literary representations. However it was Adigal's ingenuity to use this ideal to develop a critique of Non-Vellalars both Brahmins and others.

At the time of the 1871 census, the Vellalars contesting the colonial classification that they were Sudras, had sought the following self description: It is impossible to imagine that Vellalas, a race of agriculturalists and traders, should have had to render menial service to the three higher classes; for the very idea of service is revolting to the Vellala, whose profession teaches him perfect independence'. Though Maraimalai Adigal thought he had finally restored political agency to Non-Brahmin caste groups but that was not the case. His characterisation of occupations was caste like. If the Vellalas were kings, traders and cultivators, it was because of their historically advanced state and in contrast, if others were serving the vellalas through different occupations, it was because of their historical insufficiency. At the same time the lower occupational groups could liberate themselves not on their own terms, but only by casting themselves in the mould of the vellala<sup>74</sup>.

Both Thoss and Adigal were exemplars of old world intellectualism in the Tamil region where textualism and religious debate were in the modes of cultural intervention. These forms of textualism and debates were confined to the world of the scholarly, and relatively unavailable to subalterns. In other words we can say both Iyothee Thoss and Maraimalai Adigal launched their critiques of the Brahmin and his power primarily in the domain of culture.

Their critiques of the Brahmin alludes to a golden age, the conceit of the Brahmin and their selective borrowings from indigenous Tamils; but both the thinkers foreground another

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.,p29

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p37

hierarchy of values as way of defining one's true worth and fail to constitute wider political publics. In outlining these commonalities they had certain differences. While Thoss spoke for the most oppressed untouchables, Adigal celebrated the Vellalars, who constituted the upper crust of Non-Brahmins. But yet the commonalities are of greater significance here. They offer us an opportunity to reflect on one mode of engagement with the figure of the Brahmin in colonial Tamil Nadu. Foremost in this context, the transformation of the Brahmin into an object of discourse made it possible for Thoss and Adigal to contest their religio-cultural authority.

But though they were negating Brahminism, they recast their own ideals in more or less the image of the Brahmin; this is explicit in Thoss and less explicit in Adigal<sup>75</sup>. In other words the Brahminic ideal remained substantially intact even if the supposedly moral qualities of the ideal Brahmin had been freed from the Brahmin's body and relocated in the idealized Buddhist Parayar and the Saivite Vellalar. Thus in the discourses of Thoss and Adigal the Brahmin looms large as a figure of scorn and simultaneously as one whose ideal status is appropriated<sup>76</sup>.

In conclusion we can say that their ideals did not probably gain popular being limited to the spiritual and failed to engage substantially with the material consequences of subordination and uneven distribution of economic and political resources across castes. In this sense we can say that those ideologues of Thoss and Adigal were superseded by the Justice Party. By unshackling the Brahmin from the domain of the spiritual, cultural and relocating him in the domain of the material and political, the Justice Party spoke yet another language of the Brahmin.

### **The Concept of the 'Non-Brahmin'**

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<sup>75</sup> Pandian, 2008:41

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.,p47

The Non-Brahmin as a concept has come to occupy a political common sense in contemporary Tamil Nadu, in the sense that Tamil Nadu politics is embedded in the discourse of “Non-Brahmanism”<sup>77</sup>. It is however important to see how the concept of ‘Non Brahmin’ emerged and what its referents were.

The questions here are what is the basis of the category, ‘Non’ Brahmin and whether it is a residual taxonomy clubbing everyone other than Brahmins in one category. The seeds of the ideas of Non-Brahminism as we saw were sowed by Iyothee Thoss and Maraimalai Adigal, in whose work a Non Brahmin view of religion gets articulated. Oxford Historians on south India like David Wash Brook and Christopher Baker were of the opinion that the Non-Brahmin movement was shaped by the structural changes in the economy and transformations in the administrative complex of the colonial State. Both the authors view Non-Brahmanism in a historical context, shaped by the structural changes in the economy. Both men view Non-Brahmin dissent and anger over Brahminical exclusivity and arrogance as convenient fictions, invoked to mask the competitive jealousy and mistrust of Brahmins which elite Non-Brahmins entertained. For them Non-Brahminism is of elite Non-Brahmins frustrated with no collective conscience rather a formulation staking a claim for cultural and political power. Eugene Irschick’s account of the Non-Brahmin movement tries to grant Non-Brahmins their due but there seems to be a refusal to make the Non-Brahmin speak. Even Christopher and Wash Brook view Non-Brahmin dissent as arrogance and convenient fictions. Neither of them cares to record historical, political and social progress of Non-Brahmanism and thus fail to make the Non-Brahmin speak<sup>78</sup>. Hence the insider’s view of the Non-Brahmin Movement differs from that of western scholars. While Wash Brook and Christopher gives credence only to the structural changes in the economy, V. Geetha and Rajadurai in their work(1998) have taken a different view of the Non-Brahmin movement.

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<sup>77</sup> Geetha, V. and Rajadurai. 1998. Towards the Non-Brahmin Millennium. Samya Publication. Calcutta.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 43

They argue that Non-Brahminism could be understood through the structure of feeling it embodied in contrast to and in opposition to Brahmanism, a structure of feeling is never a mere ideological grid; it is intertwined by material life, with context and conjuncture. Yet it can never be reduced to either the material interests of the class or the consciousness of particular hegemonic social segments. A structure of feeling occupies a fundamentally unstable and fluid cultural space that which lies between experience and feeling and pain and language. Thus Non-Brahmanism in this sense is an experienced truth as well as an imaginative response to the historical truth of one's condition of being.

### **The Justice Party**

The closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a new anxiety among upwardly mobile landed groups about the power of the Brahmin in the Tamil region<sup>79</sup>. In the slowly evolving atmosphere of Non-Brahmin defiance the first institutionalized step was to address the material consequences of colonial education for various Non-Brahmin castes took the form of the Madras Dravidian Association. This association was founded in 1912 by C. Nadesa Mudaliar, a prominent public figure in Madras and a medical practitioner with huge popularity among slum dwellers<sup>80</sup>. The association established a number of branches in the city and organized public talks by Non-Brahmin intellectuals of the time. The Justice Party also organized "at home" function in which successful Non-Brahmin graduates were brought together and felicitated. In keeping with the agenda of encouraging Non-Brahmins to take advantage of colonial education, it founded a hostel named Dravidian Home for Non-Brahmin students who arrived in Madras to pursue their higher education. The very fact in calling the hostel Dravidian points to the assimilation of the ideas of the Madras School of Orientalism in the public discourses of the Tamil region.

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<sup>79</sup> Rajagopal, Indhu. 1985. *The Tyranny of Caste: The Non-Brahman Movement and the Political Development in South India*. Vikas Publishing House. New Delhi.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p62

Simultaneously it also, by contrast endorsed the Brahmin's description of himself as Aryan. If Aryan could substitute for Brahmin, then Dravidian could be the equivalent for the Non-Brahmin. These terminologies further had tremendous political consequences in the Tamil region.

Efforts such as the Madras Dravidian Association were however too minuscule to have a lasting effect, and were carried outside the formal domain of politics. The notion of self-help, which had a substantial impact in the Tamil region because of missionary discourse, was central to its agenda. In other words, it did not look at caste in relational terms and thus did not confront the question of power. Non-Brahmins were treated as if they were a self enclosed community. But things changed with the call for self-government or Indian Home Rule, by Anne Beasant in September 1916. Besant's theosophical society in the view of the Madras Dravidian Association functioned as a bastion of Brahminic Hinduism. Following its foot steps, the Home Rule Movement spoke a language of self government that refused to recognize caste and other differences within the nation making, presenting a homogenized Indian unmarked by other identities as key players within self-government. For instance the Memorandum of nineteen, a proposal for post war reforms inspired by the politics of the Home Rule Movement and presented to the Viceroy spoke of the position of Indians in India, the Indian mind, the youth of India and how the British bureaucracy was almost entirely Non-Indian in its composition and not responsible to the people of India. The nationalist promise and assertion of singularity, with its monotonous repetition of the Indian was broken only briefly by one reference to Muslims and how proportional representation had to be ensured for them. Opposing the home rulers, a number of prominent Non-Brahmin men met at a conference in Madras on 20<sup>th</sup> November 1916 and decided to start a company for publishing a newspaper advocating the cause of the Non-Brahmins community. The other part of the

initiative forming a political association, acquired the shape of the South Indian Liberal Federation.

The Justice Party concentrated its efforts towards gaining reservations for Non-Brahmins in the Madras legislature as well as in government jobs. The Justice Party was in power in the Madras presidency from 1921 to 1926 and after a break, it was once again returned to power in 1930. While in power it issued the first communal government order on September 1921 and the second one on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1922. Both these orders institutionalized reservation of government jobs for different categories of Non-Brahmins. The party also ensured the passing of the Hindu religious endowment act, under which committees of elected and partially nominated members from a variety of castes exercised control over temples. It authorized the use of temple funds for purposes such as sanitation, education, medical relief and water supply, it made efforts to integrate untouchable communities into the mainstream through educational reform. This brief reference of the Justice Party tells us that it conducted its politics in the formal domain of politics. Its manifestos, newspapers, representations to committees, elections, ministries, and law making were all signs of this. In keeping with the authorized conventions of this domain, the party also spoke a language sharply different from that of Iyothee Thoss and Maraimalai Adigal; the present, instead of the past, dominated its politics. The place of religion, culture, and interpretations of literary texts was overtaken by the issue of jobs, education etc.

### **The Role of Periyar in the Non-Brahmin Movement**

E.V. Ramasamy, the chief protagonist of the Non-Brahmin movement, was born in 1879 in Erode, a trading town in Tamil Nadu. His father, Venkatappa Naicker, began his life in poverty, working as a coolie and a store mason, but over time came to amass substantial

wealth through trade<sup>81</sup>. The young Ramasamy grew up in a domestic atmosphere of ever-present religiosity. His family lavished wealth on temples, gifted cows to Brahmins, patronized a steady stream of holy men who debated issues of religion at their home. At the age of 25 E.V. Ramasamy became a wandering sadhu, travelling to north India along with two Brahmins. As a sadhu he participated in translating religious discourses by his Brahmin compatriots at Hyderabad, visited places like Calcutta, Puri, and Benares, and finally worked in a Hindu religious mutt at Benares collecting leaves for the conduct of daily puja. After two years of his life here, he said he was exposed to the corrupt practices of Hindu religion; he was brought back to Erode by his father<sup>82</sup>.

His entry into the larger arena of nationalist politics began in 1917 when he joined the Madras Presidency Association which was the Non-Brahmin enclave within the Indian National Congress. He formally joined the Congress in 1920 and served as its President during 1920-1924, and as its Secretary during 1921 and 1922. However his time in the congress was rather fleeting a mere five years in active political career spanning over half a century. Though he participated in various activities of Congress, his main focus as a nationalist was the issue of caste based inequalities. He staged satyagrahas in front of the Mahadevar temple in Vaikom, seeking rights for lower castes to enter the temple streets. This earned him two jail terms and the honorary title "Vaikom veer" <sup>83</sup>. He also opposed the practice of separate dining arrangements for Brahmin and the Non-Brahmin students in Cheranmadevi Gurukulam. From the very year he joined the Congress, he sought communal representations for Non-Brahmins in the legislatures, only to find his proposals postponed, evaded or rejected by Congress.

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<sup>81</sup> Saraswathi, S.1994. Towards Self Respect: Periyar E. V. R. Madras Institute of Development Studies.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.,p 51

<sup>83</sup> Anaimuthu, V. 1974. Thoughts of Periyar. Thinkers Forum. Tiruchirapalli.

He finally broke ranks with Congress in November 1925 when two of his resolutions favouring 'communal representation' for Non-Brahmins were disallowed in the Kancheepuram Conference of the Tamil Nadu Congress. Thereafter he declared his political credo to be 'no god, no religion, no Gandhi, no Congress'. E.V.R misgivings about the place of subordinate caste groups in the future nation were strengthened by Gandhi's utterances during his visit to South India in 1927. Unmindful of the changed political climate and surrounded by Tamil Brahmin nationalists, Gandhi publicly declared,

*"Varna Shrama dharma is not an unmitigated evil but it is one of the foundations on which Hinduism is built and it defines man's mission on earth. He went on to describe Brahmins as the finest flowers of Hinduism and humanity, for a good measure adding that, I will do nothing to wither it. I know it is well able to take care of itself. It has weathered many a storm before now. Only let it not be said of Non Brahmins that they attempted to rob the flower of its fragrance and lustier"*<sup>84</sup>.

After the disillusionment with the Congress on the question of caste, Ramaswamy reevaluated his stance on the British Raj and found several things worthy of critical appropriation.

*"though we have lost much by being slaves of the British, we have also profited at least a little by being the slaves of the British, we have also profited at least little and realized ourselves as human beings"*<sup>85</sup>.

However, Ramasany's approval of the British was not unqualified. He claimed that unlike their own nation, the British in India did not make sufficient attempts to establish a full-fledged rule of human dharma, and followed Manu dharma to a considerable degree. He offered two sets of reasons for such differential politics practised by the British. According to

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<sup>84</sup> Saraswathi, 1994:11

<sup>85</sup> Diehl, Anta. 1978. Periyar E. V. Ramaswamy: A Study of a Personality in Contemporary South India. B. I. Publications. Mumbai.



Periyar the first set of reasons which disabled the British Raj from going all the way in affirming Manitha Dharama of humanism as he would call it, in India was the repeated instances of sustained Brahmin opposition to social reform initiatives such as the Devadasi Abolition Act, the Child Marriage Restraint Act, the Hindu Religious Endowment Act which were represented by them as excesses of British rule. The second set of reasons he gave implicated both British and Brahmins. He argued that British reluctance over Manitha Dharma was a result of their need for local collaborators, the Brahmins, to carry their rule in this country forever and to generously plunder the wealth of this country. In 1931, Periyar, toured Europe; he visited Berlin and Moscow and came in contact with the league against imperialism, and also visited London. In Moscow he visited anti religious museum and registered himself as a member of the anti religious propaganda office. Though Ramasamy had published a Tamil translation of the Communist Manifesto before his European tour, what he witnessed in the Soviet Union had a huge impact on him. When he returned to India in the year 1938 he was elected as the president of the Justice Party. When he was serving a prison sentence in 1944 he renamed the party as DK Dravidar Kazaham, which became his vehicle for socio-religious criticism until his death in 1973.

### **Periyar's idea of Hinduism**

To understand his views on Hinduism one needs to look at his idea of rationalism. Though he claimed his rationalism was a product of his own mind, he was quite knowledgeable about rationalist organizations in the west and had published translations of rationalist tracts from elsewhere in Tamil.<sup>86</sup> Setting up rationality and religion as oppositional, he also claimed that self-willed reason alone could restore the real worth of those enslaved by religion. For

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.,p81

Periyar self respect and rationality were necessary allies. The people addressed by Periyar were primarily Non-Brahmins. The Self Respect Movement wanted its followers to employ self willed rationality as a means to gain control over their lives. This is perhaps why Periyar's rationalism relentlessly ridiculed popular beliefs, practices and festivals of Non-Brahmins too, as part of this consistent rationalism. By critiquing the Manusmriti, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Ramayana. Periyar, showed that caste and hence the Brahmin as central to this essential Hinduism. It is this conception of Hinduism as essentially Brahminic which drew the attention of the movement to Sanskrit. When tracing the intimacy between Sanskrit, caste and Brahmin Hinduism, Ramaswamy wrote:

*"Let us have a look at the damage that has already been and will be done to us because of Tamil's association with Sanskrit. Let us take the problem of caste among us. If the word 'jati' is removed from Tamil language, is there any equivalent Tamil word for, it is clear that there was no caste system among our people in the ancient days, it emerged due to our association with the north. Similarly, words such as divas am, kalyanam , vaikundam swargam moksham, naragam , sloka, ....aren't they Sanskrit words? Are they Tamil words? Have we got enlightened because of these words? Or, have we lost our power of reasoning?"<sup>87</sup>*

Thus the self respect movement of Periyar inverted this subaltern reading of Sanskrit, his campaigns did succeed in creating a broad consensus among Non-Brahmins about the connectedness of Sanskrit to the Brahmin and caste based inequality. Thus the Self Respect Movement mobilized various sections of Non-Brahmins against Brahmin hegemony by fusing these critiques, the rationalist and the transitive. These two modes were brought together by representing Brahminic Hinduism as the source of the interiorized identity of Non-Brahmins, and claiming that the remedy lay in a rational critique of religion.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.,p51

The multitude of identities that the Brahmin could straddle was the basis on which Periyar rallied a number of inferiorized subaltern identities against him. These identities included those based on gender, occupation, language, and region. In other words, Ramasamy's project was to create a historic bloc of different interests that opposed the Brahmin.

A brief view of the different subaltern identities mobilized by the Self-Respect Movement against the identities of Brahmin is in place, at this juncture.

### *Gender*

For Periyar, Sanskrit as a sign of Hinduism and part of their self-making not only led to the degradation of lower castes, but also of woman. Here, he targeted for criticism Sanskritic marriage customs that reproduced women's subordination to men. Making the connection between words and how they constituted social relations he argued, "*Only with the arrival of words such as thara mukurtham and kanniga dhanam, our women had become puppets in the hands of their husbands. Only after, we ended up with such fathers who advise their daughters, who return after some quarrel with their husbands, that they had been gifted away to their husbands, and they belong to the husband's place. Can you find an equivalent word for kanniga dhanam in Tamil? Thiruvalluvar called it as vazhkkai thunai. It only means that the husband and wife are friends. What a vast difference in thought*<sup>88</sup>"

### *On physical labour*

Periyar also made an explicit connection between Brahminic Hinduism and the inferiorization of physical labour. Turning to the opposition between physical labour and mental labour he again showed that *Varnashrama Dharma* was its institutional foundation.

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<sup>88</sup> Anaimuthu, 1974:26

While referring to the devaluation of labour he said *“you should realize that if you all are labourers, it is because you were all designated as the sudras by the Varnashrama Dharma of Hinduism. Let that pass, if labourers were thought as lowly people according to Hindu religious dharma<sup>89</sup>”*.

When he urged his followers to celebrate May Day in 1936, this did not signify merely worker’s rights but was also an opposition to caste and religious indignities. *“I make an appeal that May day should be celebrated by holding public meetings in every place in Tamil Nadu, by pointing out the ignominy and cruelty experienced by us and by explaining that all people should secure equal opportunities in order that we Indians too may secure emancipation from communal and religious indignities in the social sphere and from economic tyranny.<sup>90</sup>”*

Thus the Self Respect Movement brought into play a variety of inferiorized identities into the public domain caste, gender, class, region, language and nation. The Self Respect Movement encompassed several identities.

*“ there are several movements in this country, it is said that the Congress party fights the imperialism of the British; the Justice Party, the political domination of the Brahmins; the Adi Dravida Party, the dominance of the caste Hindus; the Worker’s Party, the domination of the capitalists. Thus, the goal of each of these parties is to destroy one form of domination. But the party which opposes at once all forms of domination is the Self-Respect Movement, as long as different forms of domination persist in the fields of society, religion, economy and politics, this movement would stay, since it opposes different forms of domination, it is*

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<sup>89</sup>Ibid., p34

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p39

*evident that its opponents are many. The Brahmins, the upper castes, the rich, the religious, all are the enemy of this movement*<sup>91</sup>.”

Thus the very act of exercising power rendered them Brahminic. By constituting the essence of power as Brahminic, the movement tried to bring together a vector of varied interests based on inferiorized identities against the Brahmin, and against all that was Brahminic.

Thus we can say in conclusion that Periyar was qualitatively different from that of his predecessors, like Iyothee Thoss and Maraimalai Adigal. The difference was the new subaltern alliance against the orthodoxy. Periyar was known to reserve his scathing criticism for Tamil pundits like Adigal who had no link with the masses. He was against the interpretative tradition which Thoss and Adigal functioned. In the forthcoming chapters we would take a closer look at Periyar's ideas and later try to understand what the impact of the Non Brahmin assertion was.

It should also be noted that it is not that there haven't been any discussion on Brahmanism; we have shown in the previous chapter how discussions on this topic has been on for very long time. But these discussions were confined to the realm of religion in the pre colonial period; they were now taking place in the modern disenchanted public sphere inaugurated by colonialism. The authorized interpretative conventions and institutional practices of this new public sphere played a large part in shaping contours of such discussions, and the interpreters were from the public, ranging from untouchable intellectuals to Non-Brahmin nationalists to godless rationalists. Thus we can say that colonialism prepared the grounds for the

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.,p41

interpretative crises and possibilities. On the one aspect it facilitated the normalization of the Non-Brahmin identity in opposition to a resignified Brahmin identity.

## **Chapter - IV**

### **Periyar and the Formation of Tamil Identity**

To understand the political success of the Non-Brahmin movement and the role played by Periyar in evolving a distinct Non-Brahmin identity, one needs to look at the environment of nationalist discourse as an opposition to colonialism. In relation to an oppressive coloniser, nationalism was a powerful idea, but if we pluralize 'national community' and 'national culture', the obvious triumph of dominant nationalism over colonialism would at once appear as a story of domination over varied sections of the subaltern social groups within the nation.

The unpacking of a singular nationalism was the significant contribution of Periyar and his Dravidian movement. But his ideals as we mentioned earlier, differed from early Dravidian discourses of Adigal and Thoss, Periyar pursued his political project<sup>92</sup> through faith in reason and history. He believed, change that if change is inevitable, nobody can stop it, he also believed that 'god and fate' are the direct enemies of reason. Adigal used historicism to mobilise a valorised Saivite Vellala past in opposition to the Brahmins claim to superiority, and given his Saivite agenda, he stopped the process of history on its tracks to freeze it at the romanticised present of the Vellala, in sharp contrast, Periyar neither valorised the past nor set limits for the march of history<sup>93</sup>. Thus the course for rationality and history, for E.V. Ramaswamy, is such that it does not offer a fixed goal, a fixed utopia the search for freedom can only be an ever continuing endless search.

In other words casting the oppressed in the image of the idealised Vellala was no resolution and his conception of history was radically different from that of Maraimalai Adigal. If Periyar placed emphasis on the future at the expense of any glorified version of the past and freed the course of history from the fossilised Vellala ideal, his concept of disempowerment was also qualitatively different and significantly more inclusive in comparison to the early Dravidian ideology. While Maraimalai Adigal and other Vellala elite scholars confined their

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<sup>92</sup> Pandian, M. S. S. 1995. Transformation of Dravidian Ideology 1900-1940. Social Scientist. Vol. No8/9(May/June)

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.,p 15



critique of Brahminical Hinduism to caste oppression, for Periyar it was one of the many planks. Though all his life he campaigned against the Sudra identity, he also argued that Hinduism did not merely give its adherents a caste identity but also invested them with a range of other inferiorised identities<sup>94</sup>.

This critique developed by Periyar established Hinduism as constituting multiple relations of power and not merely caste relations. In other words, now the movement could address a wide range of issues by problematising a range of inferiorised identities<sup>95</sup>.

The newly opened up terrains of conflict ensured that the self respect movement prepared the basis for mass mobilisation of Non-Brahmins and not just one section. Different subordinate social groups such as Adidravidas, Sudras, women and labouring poor could thus articulate their grievances through the movement<sup>96</sup>. It also conferred political agency on different subordinate groups by freeing them from Vellala paternalism. In investing the victims of the past and the present with the political agency, he elaborated and propagated the concept of '*Suyamarathai*' or self respect.

Thus his discourse proliferated with innumerable oppressors and oppressed each changing into the other contextually and relationally; a Sudra male was the oppressed in relation to the Brahmin, but simultaneously he was an oppressor in relation to woman. In short the struggle for freedom through history projected itself as multiple, with porous boundaries, shifting identities and numerous agents of change. This politics based on multiple identities, by not privileging any single subject position, subverted the Saivaite Vellalas claim to be sole

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.,p 38

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.,p 43

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., p 52

arbiters of the Tamialians destiny. Now according to Periyar every one of the oppressed could mediate politics on his/ her own terms<sup>97</sup>.

In short, the political discourse of Periyar stood in sharp contrast to the early 'Dravidian' ideology of the Vellala elite and his break with them was substantial; his accounted for his success in mass politics.

### **Caste: Periyar, Gandhi and Ambedkar**

Periyar, a title meaning 'great man' that was conferred on him by many Tamils during the political struggles. In his early years he entered the nationalistic politics as an enthusiastic supporter of Gandhi and the Congress movement. In the year 1920 he was elected as the president of Tamil Nadu Congress. He took part in various activities of the Congress especially the one called the Vaikom Satyagraha. Temple entry movement had very important for Gandhi and Congress. Although Vaikom Satyagraha managed to bolster the spirits of the demoralised Congress, it did so at the cost of further communalizing local nationalist politics. It also had an unintended effect on Periyar, one of the heroes of Vaikom agitation, leaving the Satyagraha, on realising that though the systematic reform of Hindu institutions had become Congress' main ambition, that social reform under the Congress and Gandhi had very limited scope<sup>98</sup>. He quarrelled with Congress and Gandhi very soon after the Vaikom Satyagraha on the question of separate dining for Brahmin and Non-Brahmin students in a Congress sponsored school near Madras. The school was set up by V.V.S Aiyer with the aim of imparting traditional religious education in the larger context of a commitment to patriotism and social service. But after several complaints it became clear

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p 62

<sup>98</sup> Dirks, Nicholas. 2006. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Permanent Black. P.,256

that Iyer had arranged for separate dining facilities for several Brahmin students at the request of their parents. This controversy raged on and led to a great deal of bitterness on the part of Periyar and several of his principal associates. Periyar at this time attempted to support a resolution for communal resolution, Periyar met Gandhi in September 1927 in an encounter that resolved none of their differences. Periyar reportedly told Gandhi that he believed true freedom for India would only be achieved with the destruction of the Indian National Congress, Hinduism and the Congress. Gandhi disagreed on some of Periyar's main objections. It is after this particular incident that the Self Respect Movement came into being, though the party set itself a different task from the Justice Party, While the Justice Party had been principally concerned about the proportional representation, the Self Respect Movement advocated the overthrow of caste and instituted new forms of marriage and other ritual practices.

Ambedkar and Periyar had certain commonalities. They began their political careers advocating communal representation and were also in loggerheads with Gandhi. The issue of separate electorate for the Dalits became a serious issue, for which Gandhi protested and went on to fast. Even Nehru was opposed to Gandhi on this particular issue. Nehru expressed his great annoyance with Gandhi "for choosing a side-issue for his final sacrifice - just a question of electorate. What would be the result on our freedom movement? Would not the larger issues fade into the background, for the time being at least? And was not his action recognition, and in part an acceptance, of the Communal Award. After so much sacrifice and brave endeavour, was our movement to tail off into something insignificant?" Nehru's deep embarrassment is evident in his expressions like 'a side-issue', or 'something insignificant'. Nehru in fact describes the 'emotional crisis' and the bouts of 'anger and hopelessness' that

Gandhi's decision threw him into<sup>99</sup>. In the same passage, Nehru then goes on to say that he felt angry with Gandhi for "his religious and sentimental approach to a political question", leaving us in no doubt that what irked him was the 'irrationality' of Gandhian discourse.

Both (Periyar and Ambedkar) claimed the need for Non-Brahmins and depressed classes to attain rights and redress through proportional representation in the emerging electoral bodies of late colonial India. In this process they were required to fashion their political constituencies as minorities, accordingly deploying critiques of the majority while at the same time issuing a range of appeals to the majority for recognition betrayed the peculiarity of the language of the minority for the communities in question<sup>100</sup>.

Both Periyar and Ambedkar rejected the hegemonic claim of the majority community, even as both of these figures developed radically different political ideologies. Finally both Periyar and Ambedkar were both seen as anti-nationalist figures, though Ambedkar was more easily folded into the nationalist apparatus and became a key figure in the drafting of the Indian Constitution. Both figures split with the canonical nationalist cause centred on Gandhi's role in defining Indian nationalism<sup>101</sup>.

The year 1937 brought forth the moment of Dravidian nationalism: beginning with anti-Hindi agitation of 1937-39, this moment of critique spanned very nearly the whole of the fight over the communal award, and the events which followed in the wake of its announcement, provoked Periyar and others in the Self-Respect Movement to mount a direct and fierce attack against Gandhi. The following decade which witnessed the birth of the Dravida Kazham and

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<sup>99</sup> Nigam, Aditya. 1998. *Secularism, Modernity and Nation: An Epistemology of the Dalit Critique*. Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. New Delhi.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p 225

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p 265

the evolution of the Tamil alternative to a pan Indian nationalism. In this context the role of Tamil is very important<sup>102</sup>.

### **Language and the quest for Tamil community**

Two sorts of figures dominated the Tamil intellectual sphere in the early decades of twentieth century: the antiquarian and the publicist, each in their respective ways and in their chosen spheres, came to articulate a Tamil sensibility that was recognizably modern<sup>103</sup>.

Tamil antiquarians extolled the past but their relationship to this past was modern in its profound self-consciousness. Publicists in the Tamil country, of whatever political persuasion, attempted to bring to their invocations of a Tamil past a certain communicative worth and power and thereby indicated the strength of a language and culture lay in their ability to respond to, absorb and express contemporary concerns and anxieties.

The Self Respect Movement produced some of the Tamil country's best publicists, who sought to render the Tamil language simple, elegant and lively in its expressions. They were keenly aware of and sensitive to the strategic uses of history and literature. They sought to rescue from the antiquarian that sense of the past which had to be inscribed in discourses of Tamil literature and Tamil history, and redeem this mixture of nostalgia, reverence and awe by placing history within the evolutionary logic<sup>104</sup>. The self respecters understanding of language and its functions was based then on two related notions: One, that a language naturally grows and modernises over time, unless human agency intervened to arrest or retard this progress, and two, that a language naturally develops, grows and modernizes over a

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<sup>102</sup>Ibid., p268

<sup>103</sup> Geetha, V. and Rajadurai S. V. 1998. Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thoss to Periyar. Samya Publication. Calcutta. p.384

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p 412

period of time and the second was that language is therefore to be judged by its contemporary worth, communicative vigour, rationality and its power to express ideas and opinions which are useful to man kind.

Periyar and self respecters were very careful at all times to unlearn received wisdom. Guruswamy who was considered the scourge of the antiquarians of Tamil pundits, Saivites, and classicists conversant with Saivite scriptures could recite hundreds of verses from Kamban's Ramayanam and was familiar with elaborate interpretative modes and conventions adopted by those who sought to postulate on what they held to be the inner truth of scripture. But once Guruswamy turned a self respecter, he came to write a simple incisive and logical Tamil prose. He possessed the gift of parody and on many occasions produced brilliant and hilarious expositions of Puranic myths, responding to Tamil scholars and Saivites who had proclaimed the Self Respect Movement was destroying literary sensibilities and denying the value of aesthetics. Guruswamy observed that:

“How do westerners encourage the learning of their ancient texts? How do those who are considered Hindus develop their languages? In the west, if one were to discover a rare manuscript, they would at once seek to correct its errors and publish it after using modern critical methods. They would seek to separate truth and fiction and indicate where and for what reason the editors chose to disagree with the ideas expressed in the manuscript and all this through the notes and appendices. Further they would demonstrate how and why the author had written thus and not otherwise, how he was a product of his times and milieu<sup>105</sup>”.

Such a radical linguistic sensibility was cultivated in the course of the movement's various campaigns and, as the self respecters came to address vast number of people and ever wider range of issues, they enhanced the vocabulary of the Tamil language and rendered it flexible

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.,p., 426

and conceptually rich. During the days when socialist ideas and themes were spoken of and addressed in public forums and in the movement's journals, Tamil developed categories of thoughts and ideas which were entirely novel or if drawn from an existing repertoire of concepts, endowed with a certain analytical vigour.

The imposition of Hindi led to a newer formulation of the idea of pure Tamil. Periyar opposed attempts by congress men to promote Hindi as the national language even in the 1920's. Thus Hindi was to be opposed, not only because it was an alien tongue, but also because it was closely allied to Sanskrit and therefore corrupt at its very core. For the self respecters such invocations to unity and oneness seemed inexorably Brahminical in their intent, since they represented a refusal of difference, and it is not surprising that Periyar preferred Tamilians to learn English, which as he pointed out was a world language of commerce and science, the official language of the government of India and most important it was a language free of Brahmanism and its superstitions. As we can see it was the imposition of Hindi which led to Congress' undoing in Tamil Nadu.

### **Periyar Through His Works**

Periyar published several journals in Tamil to publicize his ideas. As mentioned earlier he started publishing Kudi Arasu (republic) in 1924. Besides he also published Purathchi (revolt), Pagthuarvu (rationalism). In 1970 the English monthly The Modern Rationalist was inaugurated by Periyar. He wrote a number of articles in Tamil journals and delivered many speeches in different parts of Tamil Nadu. These speeches too were printed in these journals. From these journals, which form part of an archival material in the library situated in Periyar Thindal, a series of volumes have already been published by the self respect propaganda institution.

The first chapter of the book collected works of Periyar titled, 'Genesis of my Self Respect Movement', Periyar has very clearly mentioned his life's mission and the aims of the Self Respect Movement in it:

"My mission was decided by me. I resolved to eradicate the evils of casteism. I decided to fight against god and superstition.....I started the self respect movement with the same motive. If my ambition is fulfilled the class hatred in society will cease<sup>106</sup>,"

Eradication of social evils, promotion of rationalism, and freeing the society from the shackles of superstitions and blind faith in god and religion were high on his agenda. Ensuring social justice for "Shudras" (Non-Brahmins) by way of reservations in educational institutions and in government jobs was an important objective for him. Periyar made it clear that such reservations should continue as long as castes exist.

### *Rationalism*

Periyar gave an important place to rationalism in his philosophy. One of the Tamil journals published by him was named Pagutharivu and he founded the rationalist forum in Tamil Nadu. In fact, Periyar gave an important place to rationalism in Self Respect Movement as being based on rationalism. In another chapter of collected works, titled 'Rationalist Thinking', which is a speech delivered by him in 1971 while inaugurating a Rationalist Association, Periyar says:

"We want the people to live as rational beings. We do not propagate anything unbelievable. We do not talk any thing based on god, children of gods, incarnations, religion, Shastras, and customs and so on. We talk of things to our sense of reasoning. All of you are endowed with

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<sup>106</sup> Veeramani, K. 2005. Collected Works of Periyar. The Periyar Self Respect Propaganda Institution. Chennai.



the same sense of rationalism. Think over what is right and acceptable to your reason in all matters we talk about”<sup>107</sup>

Thus according to Periyar, adoption of rationalist out look in society would have solved many problems. Nevertheless, people were prevented from adopting a rational outlook by those who claimed that what they were saying were “words of god”, and that they themselves were not ordinary human beings but “incarnations of god”, and so on. Such people, Periyar states actually wanted to impose their ideas on the society, and that is why they did not want people to think independently. Periyar emphasizes that the capacity of reasoning alone distinguishes human beings from other animals.

### *On god*

Periyar was very strongly opposed to the idea of godhead as well as idol worship. He has used strong language and strong agitational methods for expressing his opposition. In his later life, he used to start his public meetings by categorically asserting the non-existence of god.

Even Periyar’s last speech, delivered in Chennai (Madras) on 19<sup>th</sup> December 1973, the speech was titled Periyar’s declaration of war on Brahminism. In this speech Periyar has also enumerated the five principles of the self respect movement:

- 1) God must be abolished.
- 2) Religion must be abolished
- 3) Congress must be abolished
- 4) Gandhism must be abolished
- 5) Brahminism must be abolished.

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p239

In his speech Periyar comes down heavily on persons who propagate the idea of God, and claim that “god is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, shapeless etc. according to Periyar, these dishonest people talk in such a manner as if they have personally seen god.”

As an atheist, Periyar firmly states that the belief in god or gods is “detrimental to the welfare of the society.

“I confess that I am an atheist in a manner in which I am spoken of. Those who are afraid of atheism cannot achieve any thing equality, for example, cannot be propagated and maintained unless you are an atheist. Atheism is analogous to equality<sup>108</sup>.”

### *Religion*

Periyar was opposed to all religions. Abolishing religion was one of the most important aims of Self Respect Movement started by periyar. Because of his opposition to caste system, and because he worked in predominantly Hindu atmosphere he concentrated his attack on the Hindu religion.

In his, ‘Quintessence of Hindu Philosophy’, which is a speech delivered by him in 1947 at a function organized by the Philosophy Department of the Salem College, Periyar had emphasised the need for unfettered philosophical research on issues related to god and religion. In his speech, “Periyar discussed the view that religion is needed to connect human beings with god, and that it was created by divine persons for this purpose. According to periyar, God is believed to be all powerful, omnipresent and endowed with other supernatural powers. If it is really so, why should one need an intermediary to relate human beings with God?<sup>109</sup>,”

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p283

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p350

*Periyar and Marx on Religion:*

Marx's analysis and critique of religion is perhaps one of the most famous and most quoted by theists and anti-theists alike. According to Marx, religion is an expression of material realities and economic injustice. Thus the problems in religion are problems in society.

"Religion is not a disease, but merely a symptom. It is used by oppressors to make people feel better about the distress they experience due to being poor and exploited." And further Marx commented "religion is the opium of the masses". According to Marx, human beings create religion, because the world he inhabits is an inverted world. This perversion is described as consisting in loss of being, in suffering, lovelessness, soullessness and oppression. Religion blunts man's inclination to rebel and protest by projecting world of illusion where he can lead an ideal existence<sup>110</sup>." Marx had three primary reasons for disliking religion: firstly, he regards it as fundamentally irrational, complete negation of all that is dignified in a human being and lastly he sees religion as fundamentally hypocritical.

We see that Periyar was also scathing in his criticism of religion. Religion is accused of alienating human being, and devoid of social concern. There is a total repudiation of the transcendental in the acceptance of materialism. Both, Periyar and Karl Marx in criticising religion concentrate on its structure and functions in society, but at the same time one must be extremely cautious about comparing them. Periyar certainly used Marxist terminology, but he was aware that Marxist philosophy would not be fully suitable for the South Indian (Tamil) situation. He believed as he says:

"Rationalistic knowledge and self respect must come before economic equality. Economic communism does not suit our climate. The purohit must go before the capitalist, but

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<sup>110</sup> Kuppen, Sabestin. 1983. Marxian Atheism. Reliance Printers. Madras. P.15

communism will come". But he was oblivious to the fact that problem could arise from the landed Non-Brahmin interests.

### *Brahminism*

Periyar was uncompromisingly opposed to Brahminism. Eradication of caste system including untouchability was the most important aim of his Self-Respect Movement. Periyar worked for a casteless society based on the value of equality. He believed that this could be achieved only by abolition of Brahminism. Periyar quoted several passages from Manusmriti in order to substantiate his point. He focussed on passages, which had given all kinds of privileges to the Brahmins on the one hand, and degraded the Shudras in all possible way.

Periyar has shown that discrimination between Brahmins and Non-Brahmins and others begin from birth and naming ceremony itself. According to the Manusmriti, the name given to Brahmin should indicate virtue, whereas the name given to a Shudra should indicate lowliness. Further the word "das" (slave) should be added to the names of the Shudras as suffix.

Further the Manusmriti has given a degraded and inferior status to women as well. It says that even if the husband is morally degraded and devoid of knowledge and virtue, the wife must worship him as god. Women are not considered fit to be independent. She must remain under the control of her father in childhood, of husband in youth and son after the death of her husband. According to Periyar, it is important for the youth of India to know the injustice and cruelty embodied in the manu's code, so that they could get rid of its evil influences.

### *Women's Rights:*

Periyar was a champion of women's rights. In several self-respect conferences which he organised in Tamil Nadu, Periyar advocated equality of men and women and equal property rights for women. He encouraged and supported inter-caste marriages and widow remarriages. Periyar popularized 'Self Respect' marriages fixed only by mutual consent of the man and women concerned and were conducted without any Brahmin priest or religious rituals<sup>111</sup>.

According to Periyar, kindness, desire, love, lust, friendship, attraction and distaste of sex are private feelings of human beings. These should not be discussed or determined or imposed by any third person. Every one must have the freedom to settle these issues based on their taste, attitude and satisfaction. It is unnecessary and uncalled for anybody to interfere into the private affairs of the others.

Periyar expressed unorthodox views on chastity as well. According to him, the concept of chastity is used only for keeping women in bondage. If women are to get real freedom, says periyar, the practice of imposing chastity on women alone will have to be discarded. Chastity, then, will become a discipline "imposed by both men and women voluntarily on themselves". Periyar has opposed forced marriages, which compel women to live with persons whom they do not like. Similarly, Periyar has opposed religions and laws, which force women to put up with the brutal behaviour of husbands. As he says:

"The cruel religions and laws, which force women to put up with the brutal behaviour of the husbands for the sake of chastity, must die out. The wickedness of society, which in the name

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<sup>111</sup> Ramaswami, E. V. R. 1984. Penn Adimaiyanal. Periyar Thindal. Madras

of chastity forces women to suppress her real feelings of love and live with the man who has neither love nor kindness for her, should also go<sup>112</sup>”.

With regard to prostitution, Periyar believed it was used against the women. The concept that prostitution is a sin is applied only to women and not to men. In periyar’s view, if such discriminatory attitude to prostitution obstructs the movement for the liberation of women, it is the duty of public service minded persons to discard the very idea of prostitution. As he says:

“Like the word chastity the word prostitution also is given a wrong and damaging significance and is applied to women unnaturally with the ulterior motive of enslaving them. For a life of equality and independence the concepts associated with the words, ‘chastity’ and ‘prostitution’ is utterly irrelevant and unnecessary. They may be considered necessary for a contract between a man and a woman for living together. Even here restricting those words to woman alone is unnatural<sup>113</sup>”.

Thus, it is obvious to see that Periyar has supported a rational secular ethics based on the values of freedom, equality and justice. He has emphasized that moral rules must take into account the realities of human nature. The radical content of Periyar’s Self Respect Movement's approach to the women's question can be fully understood only when we compare it with other contemporary political movements.

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<sup>112</sup> Veeramani, 2005:286

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.,p 288

## **Women's Question: Two Approaches - The National Movement and the Self Respect Movement.**

The most important political movement which was contemporary to the Self Respect Movement was, of course, the nationalist movement. Partha Chatterjee has shown that the nationalist movement resolved the women's question by reworking and reaffirming the pre-existing patriarchal structure. The nationalists, while approving of imitating and incorporating the material culture of the west argued that adopting the west in aspects which were spiritual or anything other than the material sphere of western civilization would threaten the self-identity of the national culture itself<sup>114</sup>. As an extension of this position, they located home as the site to retain the 'inner spirituality of indigenous life' and women as the agents responsible for that. It was advocated that women could meet this responsibility of preserving the spiritual core of the national culture through 'chastity, self-sacrifice, submission, devotion, kindness, patience and the labour of love.' Only within this 'new patriarchy' the nationalist movement attempted all its reforms related to women<sup>115</sup>. As long as women demonstrated these so-called feminine/spiritual qualities, 'they could go to school, travel in public conveyance, watch public entertainment programmes and in time even take up employment outside home.' The nationalist movement mobilised women in the anti-colonial struggle - especially from 1920 onwards - only within the framework of this new patriarchy. The traditional feminine roles such as nurturing mother, obedient daughter, god-fearing chaste wife who would never defy the husband were extended to the public realm to expand women's participation outside. While Abadi Banu Begam had to appear in public platforms by presenting herself as a mother by invoking her maternal nickname 'Bi Amman', the

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<sup>114</sup> Bharadwaj, Anandhi. 1991. Women's Question in the Dravidian Movement 1925-1948. *Social Scientist*. Vol. No5/6(May-June).

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*,p34

Calcutta prostitutes' support to the Non-Cooperation Movement came under fire from the nationalist intelligentsia<sup>116</sup>. In illustrating how the nationalists in the Tamil-speaking areas addressed the women's question, one may begin with the views of Thiru.V. Kalyanasundaram, an activist in the national movement and a Tamil writer who enjoyed a pan-Tamil appeal despite his nationalist politics. In one of his earliest and a very popular book '*Penin Perumai*' ('Women's Pride', 1927), he defined femininity as encapsulating patience, endurance, sacrifice, selflessness, beauty and love, and essentialised femininity as motherhood. According to him, all women were created to be mothers and they should be worshipped since they were the procreators as well as the transmitters of moral values to the new generation of children. Opposing western-type of education, he suggested that girls should be provided with education that would ingrain in them traditional moral and religious values and train them such household duties as hushing and pounding of rice, tailoring etc. Muthulakshmi Reddi, another nationalist who took up the women's cause through her activities in the Women's India Association, is much remembered for her campaign against the Devadasi system. Significantly, her opposition to the Devadasi system stemmed from her view that it stood in the way of women being chaste wives<sup>117</sup>. Similarly, she held conservative views on the question of contraception - despite being a medical practitioner. She did not perceive the link between contraception and women's freedom and could only advocate - rather reluctantly - the Gandhian ideal of self-control or Brahmachariya as a means of contraception. Such tendencies were even more acute in the case of other nationalist leaders such as C. Rajagopalachari and S. Satyamurthy. When Muthulakshmi Reddy initiated the debate on Devadasi abolition, Rajagopalachari, as the President of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee refused to take up the issue for discussion. Satyamurthy on the other hand, went to the extent of claiming that the Devadasis represented national art and culture

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.,P46

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.,p35



and hence the system should be retained and every Devadasi should dedicate at least one girl to be a future Devadasi. In the same vein, he also vehemently opposed the Child-Marriage Restraint Act, on the ground that it would hurt the sentiments of the Hindus. Thus the nationalists failed to develop a critique of the institution of patriarchy and rather valorised patriarchy as a necessity.

It is only too evident that the position of the Self Respect Movement on the women's question was in sharp contrast to that of the nationalist movement. The institutions of patriarchy like family, marriage and chastity, which were defended by the nationalist movement, were called into question by Periyar and his followers. They programmatically attempted to challenge these institutions through means like Self Respect Marriages. In short while the nationalists preserved patriarchy the mobilising women for politics, the Self Respect Movement mobilised them to contest patriarchy. In saying this, however, one does not do imply that the spread of anti-patriarchal consciousness among the followers of the Self Respect Movement was even. It is indeed true that the movement quite clearly exhibited patriarchal consciousness in its functioning, especially during its later phase.

By contrast, Periyar's views on gender were radical. During the years that the Self-Respect Movement was in the ascendant, it conducted many Self-Respect marriages that were free from the rituals and orthodoxy of traditional Hindu weddings. A Self-Respect marriage required the man and woman to abide by each other's views, needs and concerns. The term *karpu* is an important one in Tamil and denotes chastity. In his writings in the Tamil journal *Kudi Arasu*, Periyar laid out his argument against *Karpu*. Tracing the etymology of the word, he argued that the term must have originally referred to qualities such as firmness, steadfastness and honesty. Early in human history, *Karpu* was probably considered a universal human quality that was believed to inhere in the human body prior to coitus; for after coitus the body becomes marked and comes to bear the trace of another. However, after

Vedic Hinduism entered the Tamil country, Karpu came to denote wifely chastity and was associated with and considered an index of pure wifeliness and absolute commitment to a wife's essential duties<sup>118</sup>.

Yet, argued Periyar, this did not mean that the Tamil language and culture were any less culpable with respect to women in this regard, as Tamil poets, time and again, had resorted to the rhetoric of Karpu in their works. Even Thiruvalluvar, the renowned Tamil moral philosopher of the first century BCE, was not averse to lyricising the quality of Karpu. He had written, "If a chaste woman who worships not god but her husband wills the heavens to rain, it will". Given the unequal world of the sexes that we inhabit today, Periyar concluded, women had been coerced and persuaded to accept their bondage, and consent to an idea that stifled their desire and distorted their very being.

Periyar's views on Karpu represented an implicit critique of masculinity. In an article titled "Masculinity Must Be Destroyed", he observed that the very term "masculinity" degraded women. As long as masculinity persisted as the hegemonic societal norm, women could not expect to be respected. He reasoned that men, whose selves were bound to and constituted by this norm, would continue to believe that courage and freedom inhered solely in the male subject. Further, society as a whole had come to accept this division of qualities into male and female as divinely ordained. Unless the category of masculinity and its obverse, femininity (which implied subservience), were destroyed, there would be no genuine freedom for women.

Periyar considered marriage the ultimate symbol of a woman's enslaved status, for it was marriage that thrust upon her the burden of motherhood. He often said that marriage, usually considered necessary for the propagation of the human species and for a good life, was in

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<sup>118</sup> Murthy, Satya. 1996. *Social Change and Political Discourse in India*. Oxford University Press. New Delhi.

reality a deception practiced on women, a conspiracy hatched very early in history to keep women submissive. Of whichever caste or class she was, the bond of marriage invariably rendered a woman the property and slave of her husband. Periyar characterised the entire existent ritual of marriage as an Aryan-Brahmin imposition on the Dravidian south.

Periyar saw Self-Respect marriages as a solution to liberation from Brahminical patriarchy. Moreover, since Self-Respect marriages were voluntary associations, Periyar insisted that they implicitly endorsed divorce. The chief virtue of Self-Respect marriages lay in the fact that they defined women as autonomous persons rather than as wives or potential mothers. Moreover, such marriages framed women as equal subjects, with equal rights to property and power within the household and outside of it. Periyar advocated birth control as an effective strategy to help women relieve themselves of the fear and responsibility of imposed motherhood. He pointed out that birth control afforded physically weak women a means out of the trauma of pregnancy<sup>119</sup>.

But as we shall see later, the most radical aspects of Periyar's thought was eschewed in the emerging ideas of the Dravidar Kazhagam which was essentially a party dominated by (landed and wealthy) men. Despite Periyar, the concept of the ideal Tamil woman as chaste and valorous was inserted into Dravidian discourse.

### **The Short Comings in Periyar's Discourse: The Dalit Question**

"The Periyar-led movement did open up spaces monopolised by Brahmins - temples and government jobs - to the larger intermediary castes." However," says Thol. Thirumavalavan, leader of Vidudalai Chiruthaigal (Liberation Panthers), "Periyar had no separate agenda for Dalits. The enthusiasm that Periyarites have even today for sanctum entry and in challenging

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<sup>119</sup> Anandhi, 1991:31

Shankaracharyas has not led Dalits into temples controlled by Non-Brahmins. Periyar's only success was in displacing Brahmin hegemony. On all other fronts—the battle against superstitions, for equality, atheism, rational humanism—he has failed.<sup>120</sup> "

As a severe critique of Brahminism, Periyar focussed on the duality - Brahmin and Non-Brahmin and consistently used this vocabulary. It was presumed that Non-Brahmins included Dalits and he was oblivious to the hierarchies among non Brahmin groups and the discrimination of Dalits by Non-Brahmins. Thus, the language of polar identities, Brahmin and Non-Brahmin, blocked the emergence of other inferiorized identities. This is exactly why emergent Dalit critiques of Non-Brahmin identity are important. In a sense, Non-Brahmin hegemony today bears a close resemblance to the "Brahminism" it replaced<sup>121</sup>, which is why it is important for its dominance to be the subject of scrutiny and critique.

The Dalit Voice of December 1984 published an editorial criticizing the politics of the Other Backward castes (OBCs) who have been mobilized under Non-Brahmin identity in Tamil Nadu. The editorial referred to the estrangement between the Dalits and OBCs in Tamil Nadu and noted: 'It is these OBCs who are the main oppressors of Dalits in Tamil Nadu. Dalits are furious with OBCs which is the back bone of Dravidar Kazhakam. Its leader Veeramani followers and successor of Periyar and his Dravidar Kazhagam, does not convene Dalit conferences nor does he support Dalit interests.' The dalit voice thus fissured the homogenized and singular Non-Brahmin identity by bringing other identities subjugated by it.

Veeramani's response to Dalit voice was an effort to rescript the antagonistic divide among Non-Brahmins as counterfeit where as the Brahmin-Non-Brahmin divide was authentic because it was based on the racial difference between Aryan-Dravidian. He argued that the

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<sup>120</sup> Anand. 2007. Iconoclast or Lost Idol? Social Scientist. Vol. No1/3(Jan-Feb).

<sup>121</sup> Rajadurai, and Geetha, V. 1995. D. M. K. Hegemony: Cultural Limits to Political Consensus. Samya. Calcutta.

Dravidar Kazhakam looks upon the Dravidian people as a whole and not in terms of particular caste or community<sup>122</sup>. Thus like the Brahmins of the colonial era who did not want the national identity to be fissured by internal hierarchies, the Dravidar kzhakam wanted to preserve the putative integrity of the Non-Brahman identity. The desire for wholeness and violence against those who question such imagined wholeness, are intimately connected.

In this version of the past from the Puranic age to the modern, a shared history of victimisation of various Non-Brahmin castes, including Dalits, is put forth, with the Brahmin constituted as the other. At another level it acknowledges the divisions among the Non-Brahmins only to deny their truth: they are not real but a result of a self interested conspiracy by Brahmins. Such a re-homogenized history of Non-Brahmin/Dravidian attempts to render illegitimate any independent articulation of Dalit identity and domesticates it as parts of Non-Brahmin identity have now become instruments of denial and revenge.

The only way out for the Dalits is to gain a sovereign identity and a separate political space in Tamil Nadu. Significantly, this form of critique reinforces the very same conceptual categories that helped normalize Non-Brahmin identity. Thus it is evident that the Brahmin and Non-Brahmin cannot remain a naturalized state. The future is unknown; the politics of becoming is at work again, promising us newer notions of diversity, justice and legitimacy.

### **From Heterodoxy to Orthodoxy: The Transformation of the Non-Brahmin Movement and Subversion of Periyar.**

To understand the present situation Tamil Nadu finds itself, one needs to understand the transformation of Periyar's ideology and beliefs. The circumstances under which the DMK was formed, and under which it sought to spread its appeal, led to an alternative interpretation

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<sup>122</sup> Pandian, M. S. S. 2007. Brahmin and Non Brahmin. Orient Longman. Chennai.

of Periyar's vision. A combination of factors led to a large section of Periyar-led Dravida Kazhagam (DK) members to break away and form the DMK in 1949. One reason for the split was that Periyar refused to participate in electoral politics, preferring to keep the DK as a social movement.

During its early days the DMK did follow Periyar's social reform policies, with their focus on atheism, and Non-Brahminism. Demands for an independent sovereign 'Dravida Nadu', were also voiced. The DMK also tried to evolve socialist ideas in this

Period.

However, once the DMK decided to enter electoral politics, it began to compromise on all these issues. The atheistic slogans were replaced with 'one caste, one god'. In 1971, the DMK openly disassociated itself from Periyar and his followers, who had launched a campaign in Salem to desecrate idols of Rama on the festival of Ramnavami. Likewise, the DMK also gradually gave up its demand for Dravida Nadu. This was because the notion of Dravida Nadu had become anachronistic; and despite its claim of having branches in the other three South Indian states, the DMK's influence was really confined to Tamil Nadu. In fact, the notion of Dravida Nadu as a political unit that would comprise the four southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala, was a fanciful one. If the aim was to achieve Dravida Nadu by uniting the peoples of the four states under the umbrella of a pan-Dravidian identity, then this was bound to fail. Each state has very different linguistic, historical and cultural traditions. The proponents of Dravida Nadu did not take this reality into account<sup>123</sup>.

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<sup>123</sup> Nigam, Aditya. 2006. *Secularism, Modernity, Nation: An Epistemology of Dalit Critique*.

Even as Periyar refused to accord the Tamil language a cultic value, and questioned the claims of Tamil enthusiasts about the trans-historical validity of Tamil classical literature, he articulated Tamilness and anti-Brahminism to mean a certain kind of rationalism.

This rationalism was grounded in his vision of a casteless Tamil society<sup>124</sup>. The legacy bequeathed by Periyar to the Dravidian movement was used (and abused) by his followers, particularly the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). The political life and culture in Tamil Nadu, according to some commentators, are now significantly marked by the ideology and practice of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). The DMK's hegemonic grip owes much to its rhetoric to 'Tamilness', which was constructed in part by notions of Maanam (honour) and valour. The concept of female chastity was posited and articulated within the confines of these notions, and reinforced by the media forms of popular culture. So much so that issues politically relevant to the Tamil people cannot be posed outside this hegemonic framework. The transformation of Dravidian politics under the DMK was nowhere felt as keenly as in the cultural realm; it was here that Periyar's ideology was distorted to serve populist interests. Periyar had articulated the concept of self-respect in order to define Dravidian/Tamil consciousness as a foil to Aryan/Brahmin dominance. This consciousness was accompanied by reform in specific practices such as widow remarriage, self-respect marriages, and anti-superstition campaigns. However, the DMK sought to project self-respect in a radically different way. They attempted to render this concept as essentially 'Tamil' in its origin, and constructed elaborate critiques of Aryan supremacy to this end. They aimed to demonstrate that the Dravidian past was inherently superior to the Aryan past, endowed as the former was with an inviolable sense of 'honour'. In other words, the medieval concept of Maanam was substituted for the secular notion of 'self-respect'<sup>125</sup>.

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.,37

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p49

DMK leader C.N. Annadurai, for instance, claimed in his 1948 book, 'Arya Mayai' (Aryan Deception) that the Aryans had never set foot south of the Vindhya Mountains. He also claimed that Tamil society before and after the Sangam age was secular in character, and that the only religions known to the Tamils were Buddhism and Jainism. However, the 'Golden Age' of the Tamils that Annadurai celebrated was not particularly egalitarian in the modern sense of the term. Puranaanooru, the Sangam text upon which Annadurai relied for his historical argument, indicates the existence of the four Varnas (castes), the presence of Brahmins, and several forms of rituals and worship in Tamil Nadu. DMK ideologues sought to project Maanam as the sole defining principle of Tamilness, and embedded this concept within a complex genealogy of texts.

This textual space was constituted out of three narratives:

Silappathikaram, Puranaanooru and Thirukkural, which were repeatedly invoked to provide legitimacy to the pronouncements of the DMK. Silappathikaram, written in the 2nd century AD by Jain saint Ilango Adigal, is a text that celebrates the powers of a chaste Tamil woman called Kannagi. Her husband Kovalan, an affluent merchant in the Chola kingdom, falls in love with a dancer called Madhavi and showers his wealth on her. A misunderstanding causes him to leave Madhavi and return to Kannagi. The couple then sets out for Madurai (in the Pandya kingdom) where Kovalan hopes to sell Kannagi's anklet and raise money for a livelihood. A goldsmith who offers to buy the anklet finds that it resembles the one he stole from the Pandya queen, and accuses Kovalan of theft. On hearing the false testimony, the Pandya king orders Kovalan's execution. Kannagi rushes to the king's court and proves Kovalan's innocence. Shocked by his own injustice, the Pandya king dies. Kannagi rips off her left breast and hurls it at the city of Madurai, which goes up in flames because of the power of her chastity. Kannagi then ascends to heaven. Later, upon hearing that the northern kings Kanaga and Vijaya had insulted Kannagi, Tamil culture and language, the Chera king



Chenkuttuvan leads a military expedition to the north, humbles the offenders and forces them to carry stones from the Himalayas to the Chera country. These stones were later sculpted into an image of Kannagi. DMK leader M.Karunanidhi, formerly a scriptwriter for the Tamil film industry, has repeatedly evoked the Kannagi story in his political speeches and writings. He also wrote a play and a film script based on the epic. However, in his version the characters of Kovalan and Madhavi have been reinterpreted. Kovalan now becomes a defender of Tamil culture and womanhood rather than one who moved away from his chaste wife. Madhavi represents Tamil culture, and Kovalan is portrayed as Madhavi's saviour, otherwise she would have succumbed to the predation of an old Greek merchant. Kovalan emerges in Karunanidhi's narrative as an ideal Tamil hero whose chaste wife waits and hopes for his return. Not only is Kovalan deemed worthy of his wife's chastity, but is also accorded a 'chivalric' image. As a man of true Tamil honour, he courts the 'other' woman in order to save her from a repugnant destiny.

The Kovalan-Kannagi-Madhavi story has since become an archetype that offers an ideal resolution to the complex claims of marriage and sexuality. It is through these set of relationships that a man's honour is mediated. The man's honour depends on his safeguarding one woman's chastity and recognising another's devotion. The honour of a woman depends primarily on the legitimacy her virtue acquires as a consequence of her relationship with a man. The Tamil's Maanam thus lies in the defence of a woman's purity. A woman's sexual purity in turn embodies an ideal Tamil society.

As a narrative, Silappathikaram served to bridge the present with the distant, mythical past. In Karunanidhi's version, there is a scene where Chenkuttuvan exhorts his courtiers to accompany him on the northern expedition to avenge the insults to Tamil culture and honour by the Aryan rulers. The Chera king appeals to the Tamil's innate sense of honour, and is willing to bury political differences with his Chola and Pandya rivals in order to forge a pan-

Tamil unity. The courtiers with these particular names .Aasaithambi, Chittrarasu, Nedunchezian, Arignar, Kalaignar, Kavignar, and Kalaivanar were also names of DMK functionaries. Aasaithambi is not just the name of Ilango, the poet-author of Silapathikaram, but also the name of a leading DMK figure at that time. The name of the Pandyan king, Nedunchezian, was also the name of one of the founders of the DMK<sup>126</sup>. Arignar, Kalaignar, Kavignar, and Kalaivaanar are generic Tamil names that refer to poets, scholars and artists, as well as the honorific titles of C.N. Annadurai, M. Karunanidhi, Annadassan (a well known lyricist and script writer, and a strong DMK supporter) and N.S. Krishnan (a stage and screen comedian and patron of the DMK), respectively. This allegorical transposition, eliding past and present, legitimised DMK leaders as true patrons and defenders of Tamil culture.

Thus the radicalism inherent in Periyar's views that neither projected a hoary Tamil past to construct a Tamil identity nor was charitable towards Tamil Literary tropes, was by passed and the emerging Dravidian parties consolidated their political power only through the binaries of Aryan and Dravidian. Nowhere is the subversion so blatant as in the Dalit and gender question.

### **Non-Brahmin Identity and Contemporary Tamil Nadu**

In culling out a Non-Brahmin front that could stake political, economic and cultural power in the Tamil region, the non Brahmin movement has indeed been successful. It has managed to consolidate its power by effecting a reservation of 69% for the Non -Brahmin sections and displacing Brahmins from the government and allied institutions.

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.,p51

In the year 1991, when Mani Shankar Iyer won on a congress ticket defeating his DMK rival Mr. Kalyanam in the Mayiladuthurai parliamentary constituency. He said,

*“The most significant of all, I a Brahmin by birth, contested from a constituency of Thanjavur district, the very citadel of the Dravidian movement, and became the first Brahmin in a generation to be elected from a Tamil Nadu constituency other than the Madras south<sup>127</sup>”.*

If the assertion of non Brahmin identity in 1916 evoked surprise, in 1991 a Brahmin's electoral victory in Tamil Nadu is equally surprising. But the political victory of the Dravidian parties was concomitant to the erosion of the social content of the Self Respect Movement which was their precursor. The Non-Brahmin movement certainly facilitated the ascendancy of the backward classes in the region in all walks of life and for the same reason marked the beginning of caste oppression of the Dalits under the rising OBCs.

In fact, Tamil Nadu is one of the states that has recorded high incidences of atrocities against Dalits, caste clashes continue to plague the state. Individual clashes lead to group clashes and they finally lead to murder, property damage and other forms of violence. Dalits are socially backward as well as weak despite their numbers. The SC population comes to 13.82 crores and the ST population to 6.77 crores representing 16.33 and 8% of the total population respectively. In Tamil Nadu the percentage of SC population is 19.18. On the all India map Tamil Nadu has the sixth biggest population of scheduled castes.

Yet gross forms of untouchability persist in the state; in many places tea shops follow ‘two tumbler system’ whereby the glasses used by Dalit's customers are segregated. Parents withdraw their children from a school because a Dalit is the head master and children are forced to forgo their noon-meal at school if the cook happens to be a Dalit.

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p 2044

The atrocities against Dalits have increased as per the data shown below. The number of incidents of crime against Dalits by others has been up since the seventies when the Dravidian parties rose to power.

<b>Recorded Crimes Against Dalits</b>													
<b>Year</b>	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
<b>Cases</b>	110	14	114	5	16	412	-	35	7	18	54	141	115
<b>Year</b>	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992
<b>Cases</b>	-	119	153	299	689	852	758	650	700	482	219	219	677
<b>Year</b>	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
<b>Cases</b>	682	698	738	733	702	678	589	654	645	742	NA	NA	NA

Since 1995, 250 people have been killed in caste clashes in the whole of Tamil Nadu, out of which 86 men and women were killed in the caste clashes in south Tamil Nadu alone where the SC groups have tried to assert themselves.

Cases registered under Prevention of Atrocities against SC/ST Act 1989 in Tamil Nadu						
Year	Reported	Convicted	Acquitted	Referred	Pending Trial	Under Investigation
2000	996	03	128	279	471	115

From 1990's onwards, Tamil Nadu has become the arena for recurring caste conflicts involving the Dalits/Adi Dravidas on the one side and backward castes like the Thevars and Vanniyars and, Nadars on the other. The conflicts started in the Northern part of the state in 1986, and in the next decade engulfed the southern part too.

The increase in the spurt of violence against Dalits has been marked by their increased assertion. As has been with other states, the Dalits in Tamil Nadu have long suffered from exploitative economic relationships. However, the government reservation policy and changes since the early 1990's have altered the economic relationship between the OBC's and the SC communities. The SC's have become less dependent on the OBCs for employment and have begun to assert themselves in the political arena and this is deeply resented by the OBC groups.

Several districts of south Tamil Nadu faced a civil war type of situation due to Thevar-Dalit clashes with the Dravidian parties supporting the backward castes. The situation is still volatile, even a small issue is capable of provoking big outbursts.

The following table is the kinds of issues on which violations have occurred shows that the caste ideologies are very much in place despite the self respect movement.

Tabulation of Dalits Rights Violation in Tamil Nadu in recent years				
No.	Date	Place/District	Causes	Victims
1.	14.3.1992	Kurinjakulam/ Tirunelveli	Entry into temple	4 Dalits murdered
3.	4.10.1992	Karanai/ Chengalpattu	Ambedkar's Statue installed	Ambedkar Statue removed, false case filed against dalits
4.	10.10.1992	Chengalpattu Collector office	Claim of Panchami land	2 dalit claimants shot
5	26.7.1993	Athiyur/Puduch erry	Theft case	Victim was raped
6.	11.11.1994	Ammanabakka m/	Temple entry	False case filed, dalits hurt
7.	31.8.1995	Kodiankulam/ Tutucorin	Police raid in search of arms	Destruction of household articles worth, 130 dalits killed
8.	5.4.1996	Tkallupatti/ Rajapalayam	Reaction to speech by Dr. Krisnaswamy party President (DKVF)	2 dalits murderd
9.	30.5.1997	Virudhunagar, Tirunelveli Chidambaram	Chain of clashes over naming Bus Transport after dalit leader Veeran	Buses damaged, continuous caste clashes in and around southern

			Sundaralingam	districts of Tamil Nadu
10.	13.6.1997	Meenambalpur am/ Madurai	Desecration of Dr. Ambedkar's Statue	Dalits injured
11.	13.6.1997	Valliyur/ Tirunelveli	Desecration of Dr. Ambedkar's Statue	Dalits arrested, tortured
12.	13.6.1997	Melvalavu/ Madurai	Dalits elected as Panchayat President	President and his fellowmen hacked to death
13.	26.7.1998	Vilakkanampoo di/ Tiruvalluvar	Sticking of handbill congratulating K.R. Narayanan, first Dalit President of India	Dalits severely beaten, not allowed to stick the bills

Tabulation of Dalits Rights Violation in Tamil Nadu in recent years				
No.	Date	Place/District	Causes	Victims
14.	19.11.1998	Tiruvalluvar/ Pudukottai	Separate tea tumblers for Dalits	No entry to tea stalls
15.	8.9.1998	Thali/Dharmapuri	Arrest of Kalpana and her husband	Kalpana raped in front of her husband in the police station
16.	28.1.1998	Tittakudi	Bus burning	6 Dalits arrested 18 year old molested by a group
17.	28.9.1998	Cuddalore	Forceful evacuation of Dalit from their own land	Land usurped
18.	1.12.1998	Ogalur/Perambalur	In search of arms	69 Dalits arrested
19.	26.2.1998	Gundupatti/ Palani	Boycotted Lok Sabha election/	32 dalits arrested, 3 women molested,

			demand of Health Centre	property worth 26 lakhs damaged
20.	26.2.1998	Dindigul	Desecration of Dr. Ambedkar's statue	124 dalits injured
21.	23.7.1999	Tirunelveli	Panchayat Election	11 dalits killed
22.	23.7.1999	Tirunelveli	Panchayat Election	426 injured
23.	5.9.1999	Thathakuppam/ Cuddalore	Panchayat Election	10 huts set ablaze
24.	23.7.1999	Tirunelveli	Monjolai tea estate strike	17 killed, 536 arrested
25.	26.5.2000	Puliangudi/cuddalore	Love affairs	Both burnt to death
26.	10.5.2001	Vandavasi/Tiruvannamalai district	Local election	Dalit property ransacked
27.	14.4.2001	Errampatti/Madurai dist	Desecration of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar's statue	Some Dalits injured

The conflict as presently played out is not directly between Brahmins and Dalits, it is between the other backward communities (OBCs) and Dalits. The government run by the Dravidian parties that rose to power by asserting themselves against Brahmin domination have not addressed this issue with any seriousness. In some parts of the state, Dalits are unable to contest in the panchayat elections because threats from the ruling Dravidian parties. Dalits are required to fight each and every inch for gaining their own liberty and freedom.

In contemporary Tamil Nadu Godmen share the podium with leaders of Dravidian parties; self consciously Non-Brahmanical religious cults hold sway and indicate that the non Brahmin has succeeded but not Periyar!





**Chapter-V**

**CONCLUSION**

The first chapter “Locating the Non-Brahman Movement in Tamil Nadu” frames the thesis in terms of the dialectic of orthodoxy and heterodoxy in the Social history of the Tamil region. The point was that not only orthodox traditions but heretical movements are vital and important in shaping the institutional dynamics of civilizations. Besides what is a heterodox movement in relation to an orthodoxy transforms into an orthodoxy under certain conditions; what civilisational changes this dialectic brings about is a complex but interesting question. The Tamil region seems to fit well as a field for the study of this dialectic. It was a world of multiple worldviews and conflicts. Buddhism, Jainism, Saivite and Vaishnavite Bhakti, and the Siddha tradition have found ground and have influenced the socio-cultural canvas of the region.

There has been a transmutation of religio-cultural themes from one genre of culture to another. Thus Bhakthi Movement was a transmutation of strong Tamil social and literary tradition of Akam poetry. Further the protagonists of various traditions like Jaina, Buddhist Bhakthi and Siddha have not necessarily Brahmins. Interestingly their social origins have been diverse and the bulk of the contributions have been made by saints from humble social origins. In Tamil context the status quo of orthodoxy and heterodoxy kept shifting and it was during the Kalabhra period that the rise of Bhakthi Movement and the consolidation of orthodox Hinduism occurred. One sees the bhakthi saints intervening and again and again against the powerful Buddhists and Jains.

It was during the Chola period, when orthodox Hinduism consolidated in various ways. One was the elaboration of philosophical traditions in which the ideology of devotion (bhakthi) was couched in terms of the orthodox Sanskritic Vedanta. Another was recording of local myths around the temple cults. While the temple cultures grew under the three great Tamil empires – Chera, Chola and Pandya, the powerful Siddha critique of institutionalised Hinduism and idol worship ran parallel to the orthodox tradition. Interestingly, the critique of

orthodox Hinduism advanced by the Self Respecters is not entirely new to the region which has seen several heretical socio-cultural initiatives fore grounded by different social classes.

The first chapter serves as a lens through which we could view the new and emerging trends in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century of radicalism and social assertion. The second chapter deals with the emergence of Non-Brahmin as a category. In the discourse of the protagonist of the movement the definition of Non-Brahmins is comprised of all the castes in the Varna Jati complex, which differs from the Brahmin in sacral matters, but they pointed out that politically the non Brahmin was identified, not only by the fact of his birth, but also his and her interest in and commitment to a politics of equality Non-Brahminism in this sense straddled several realms.

While the early 19<sup>th</sup> century opened the space for the untouchables, Sudras, neo-Buddhists, Saivites and rationalists in the region. Among them there were two major thinkers Iyoothee Thoss and Maraimalai Adigal. Even before the all encompassing category of Non-Brahmin was coined, Iyoothee Thoss advocated a separate space for the Dalits as Neo Buddhists and Maraimalai Adigal talked about the Saiva Vellala identity.

But their critique was limited to the spiritual, moral and cultural and failed to engage substantially with the material consequences of Brahmin power and how it resulted in an uneven distribution of economic and political resources. The Non-Brahminic view postulated by dalit thinkers like Iyoothee das was thus superseded by the formulation of Non-Brahmanism as a political ideology by the justice party and later the self respecters.

The justice party spoke another language by unshackling the domain of the material and political, and justice. Though the justice party The [Justice Party leaders] argued that their

challenge was solely towards the secular, political position which the Brahmins had attained. And not the spiritual role, what the Justice party really objected to was the political position of certain individuals *who happened to be Brahmins*.

Periyar on the other hand viewed the eradication of caste as his ultimate goal but unlike the justice party, he used politics to question both the spiritual and material consequences of the Brahmin power because he believed that the communal and the religious precede the economic. The multitude of identities that the Brahmin could straddle was the basis on which Periyar rallied a number of inferiorized subaltern identities against him.

In other words, Periyar's project was to create a historic bloc of different interests that opposed the Brahmin. Thus the first two chapters clearly show the shift from the conflicts within the religious sphere (Buddhists, Jains, Siddhas and orthodox Hinduism) towards a political critique of Hinduism. Colonialism also contributed towards this new critique which began to move slowly away from religion. The change could be seen and further the justice party took it towards politics and material aspects, while Periyar on the other hand wanted the eradication of all the symbols of oppression, and critiqued both political and sacral aspects of orthodox Hinduism.

The third chapter presents Periyar's views on caste and society in perspective by placing it alongside the views of Gandhi and Ambedkar, as well as those of the nationalists. This chapter also addresses the achievements and the short comings of Periyar's discourse. The most important achievement of Periyar was the transformation of the Non-Brahmin ideology into a concerted movement that took the Non-Brahmin/OBC's to take control of the Tamil region. Before Periyar it was Iyoothee Thoss and Maraimalai Adigal creating a space for the Non-Brahmin ideology, but since Iyoothee Thoss died in 1914, it was left to Adigal to continue with the project. His ideology was based on particular ordering of history and

freezing it at the valorised present of the Saivite Vellala, and its deployment through comparative studies of caste groups, discursively dethroning the Brahmin and replaced him with the Vellala elite. But simultaneously, the very same order of history denied subject-hood and political agency to the Non-Brahmin castes below the Vellalas. The maximum Adigal could offer in terms of politics was some sort of Vellala paternalism towards lower castes and he kept on arguing that Vellalas should uplift people from other communities who are moving up Saivite morals, and make them part of their own community. Inevitably, it remained as a mere dialogue among the quarrelsome Vellala elites and never went beyond. The subordinate Non-Brahmin caste groups were yet to find their politics. But it was Periyar who occupied this space, Periyar did not historicise or eulogise a glorious Tamil Past. His presentism and radicalism was quite non modern though he drew heavily from the Marxist and European radical thought.

According to Periyar Hinduism occupied multiple relations of power and not just caste relations. It proliferated numerous oppressors and oppressed. The Shudra male is the oppressed in relation to Brahmin and he himself is the oppressor when it comes to a woman. But still the movement's main plank was the Non-Brahmin movement. But the ambiguities in his discourse and his silence on the thorny relation between OBC and the Dalit within the category of the Non-Brahmin has, as we have seen, to a reproduction of similar hierarchies but even more violently than before. The legacy bequeathed by Periyar to the Dravidian movement was used (and abused) by his followers, particularly the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). The circumstances under which the DMK was formed, and under which it sought to spread its appeal, led to an alternative interpretation of Periyar's vision. A combination of factors led to a large section of Periyar-led Dravida Kazhagam (DK) members to break away and form the DMK in 1949 because Periyar refused to participate in electoral politics, preferring to keep the DK as a social movement.

During its early days the DMK did follow Periyar's social reform policies, with their focus on atheism, and Non-Brahminism. Demands for an independent sovereign 'Dravida Nadu' were also voiced. The DMK also tried to evolve socialist ideas in this period. However, once the DMK decided to enter electoral politics, it began to compromise on all these issues. The atheistic slogans were replaced with 'one caste, one god'. In 1971, the DMK openly disassociated itself from Periyar and his followers, who had launched a campaign in Salem to desecrate idols of Rama on the festival of Ramnavami.

The short comings of Periyar's approach can also be seen in the fact that while radicalism at the level of discourse on the gender question was not matched by any concerted effort to ensure women's participation in the Dravidian movement which remained a male dominated organisation. In due course when the social content of the ideology was eroded, the old Tamil ideals of chaste and subordinate woman was inserted into Dravidian discourse.

The polar identities Brahmin and Non-Brahmin, which has become the naturalized language politics in the region, blocked the emergence of an alternative in our case other inferiorized identities. Ironically the non Brahmin hegemony bears resemblance to the Brahminism it has replaced, in fact in a very violent manner for the OBC's do not want to concede to subaltern assertion as easily as the Brahmins did in the previous century. Hence the atrocities against Dalits have steadily increasing with the improvement in their lot and the sense of disillusionment among Dalits has led them to question the Non-Brahmin movement. The social movements of Periyar did open up spaces monopolized by Brahmins.

However had no separate agenda for Dalits. The enthusiasm Periyarites have today for sanctum entry and in challenging the Sankaracharyas is not shown in leading Dalits into temples controlled by Non-Brahmins. Periyar initiated the Dravidian movement to restore the self respect of the Non- Brahmins. He did succeed to some extent, but it is also a fact that in

his attempt to bring all the Dravidian sects under one banner was not a success. But the greatest success and achievement of Periyar is that he was able to bring about radical changes in the attitude of the people. For example, the scheduled caste students and the girls of Tamil Nadu would not have gone to school even today, if it were not for Periyar. "The situation has changed today. In admissions to medical colleges in the state, students from backward colleges, most backward classes, scheduled castes, and scheduled tribes get 73% of the seats in the open category. This situation has come about only because of Periyar."

But the failure of the movement to bring in Dalits has led to an emerging political constituency of the Dalits in Tamil Nadu which brings to the fore the critique of non Brahmin movement. Many Dalit critiques argue that the Dalits need to gain sovereign identity and a separate political space because it is already homogenized by non-Brahmin identity. The non-Brahmin's all encompassing claim to represent the Dravidian identity is thus challenged and the Dalits' turn to wage a battle against the orthodoxy of Non-Brahminism is emerging. Thus gripped by the fear of the new emergent subaltern forces, the remnants of the Dravidian movement are considering new re-descriptions of society as well as new political possibilities. Thus the categories Brahmin and non-Brahmin are not settled categories. The Non-Brahmin as a category is being questioned again and the questioning of this category (Non-Brahmin) by Dalit intellectuals has led to the fragmentation of the Dravidian politics. Non-Brahminism which had dominated the Tamil landscape and imagination in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, its hegemonisation over the other identities and this settled vocabulary is under siege. As heterodoxy against Brahmin orthodoxy it is a spent force and the Brahmins are politically muted in the region. But it remains to be seen whether its role as an orthodox party against the rising Dalit heterodoxy would result in violent clashes alone as it has been or also lead to fruitful changes in future. As mentioned in the beginning, not only the status quo, but also the dissenters constitute the calibre of a civilisation.



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