

# **The Emergence of the Public in Nineteenth Century Tamil Nadu**

Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
award of the Degree of

**Master of Philosophy**

**Bhavani Raman**



Centre for Historical Studies  
School of Social Sciences  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi - 110 067

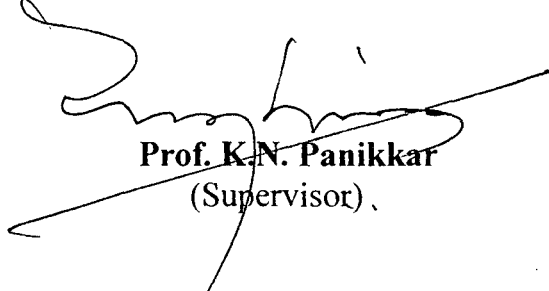
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### Certificate

Certified that the Dissertation entitled "**Emergence of the Public in Nineteenth Century Tamil Nadu**", by **Bhavani Raman** in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the **Degree of Master of Philosophy** is her original work to the best of our knowledge and may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

  
**Prof. Muzaffar Alam**  
(Chairperson)

  
**Prof. K.N. Panikkar**  
(Supervisor)

### **Note on Transliteration**

The system of Tamil transliteration in this dissertation does not follow that of the Madras University Tamil Lexicon. Conventional English spellings have been used for proper names and for terms such as bhakti, Nadar and Brahman.

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## Acknowledgements

This dissertation project would not have been possible but for the help and encouragement of many people. I would like to thank the Staff and the librarians of the Tamil Nadu State Archives in Chennai, the United Theological Library and Archives in Bangalore, the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, the Jawaharlal Nehru University Library and the DSA Library at the Centre for Historical Studies in JNU, New Delhi.

I am grateful to Professor K N Pannikar for supervising this dissertation with sympathy and for allowing me enough space to explore. Immense thanks are also due to Professor Majid H Siddiqi and Professor Sabyasachi Bhattacharya for supervising what were two exciting and useful seminar papers and sharing their interest for historical research. Many of their insights were particularly brought home to me at the stage of writing. Professor Neeladri Bhattacharya's encouragement and suggestions were valuable. In Chennai, I benefited greatly from the discussions with V Geeta, and Minakshi Menon whose re-assurance did a lot for morale.

Most of the ideas for this dissertation emerged out of conversations with Deborah Sutton and Aparna Balachandran. I owe them both a lot, particularly Aparna, for making these past two years intellectually exciting and for demonstrating that research is about team work and friendship.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for much hand holding. Their unstinting and unquestioning support was crucial in more ways than they can possibly know.

## Introduction

The problematic space occupied by modern Tamil politics in the nation - state discourse from the late nineteenth century onwards has proved to be a fertile ground for re-thinking the ideologies of caste, ethnicity and nationalism. The process of change is often seen as a shift from traditional kingly ritual to the 'modern' consciousness of a 'western influenced' intelligentsia who organised voluntary 'western derived' associations and expressed ideas of self rule or self respect.

Most extant studies on the South Indian politics for instance, focus on the emergence of public opinion and the growth of associations powering the ideological movements in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Associations like the Madras Native Association, Madras Mahajana Sabha, literary societies and reading rooms often acted as a base for the formation of local elite structures in the later half of the nineteenth century in Tamil Nadu.<sup>1</sup> In such an analysis, the simultaneous and often connected interest in the encounter between tradition and modernity, the colonial state and customary practice, 'western' and 'indigenous' culture and religion, orthodoxy and social reform were seen as synonymous and, at times, without differentiation.

This can, of course, be attributed to the very nature of nineteenth century evidence which seem to express a complex inter-penetration of religious culture,

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<sup>1</sup> The frequently cited work is R Suntharalingam, *Politics and Nationalist Awakening in Tamil Nadu 1860-1947*, Tucson, 1988.

customary practice and politics. However, it can also be attributed to the traditional mode of analysis of many studies. While engaging with ideas of 'public opinion' or 'public men', the predominant approach was till recently, to set such social transformations within the exclusive frameworks of the 'history of ideas' and 'the history of organisations'. In such analyses, social participation, mobility and change were seen through what were seen as the main actors -the missionaries, the English educated male intelligentsia and of course the institutions of the Colonial State

In the past decade scholars have begun to use the concept of the 'Public Arena' as an alternative way of accommodating the complex web of social networks communication and the expression of new ideas. Given the interest in discourse analysis, the Public Arena has been found to be an attractive window to look at the context of discourse, to go beyond the contents of the debate to see who was talking, where and how.

#### **The Arena defined: European considerations of the 'public'**

Questions of new sociability and the emergence of the 'public' has been greatly influenced by Habermas' influential theories about the public sphere. The academic debates around his formulations which burden the word are too complex and wide ranging to enter into at this juncture. However it may be useful to quickly (albeit superficially) state his most influential definitions of the Public sphere and some of the prominent ways in which it has been extended and critiqued by historians interested in nineteenth century Europe.

Habermas' formulation of the Public Sphere was specific to the time and space of 18th and early nineteenth century Europe. His oft quoted definition runs thus- 'By "the public sphere" we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens ....citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted manner ... about matters of general interest. ...We speak of Public Debate when ...discussion deals with objects connected to the activity of the state.'<sup>2</sup>

Scholars such as Geoff Eley point out that this definition remains historically unfulfilled limited as it was to the bourgeoisie. Later the universal implementation of informed and rational communication stood denied. According to Eley, the Public Sphere presumed a transformation of social relations. The emergence of the public sphere signified a change from feudalism to capitalism- marked by an urban culture, locally organised public life, a new infrastructure of communication like print, local societies and centres of sociability like coffee houses. It was symbolic of the self aspiration of the bourgeoisie who brought with them the traffic in goods and news, and resided in discussion and exchange. Eley argues that one common thread that runs through studies influenced by Habermas is the shared emphasis on the emergence of voluntary associations. He, however, asserts that Habermas's theories can be extended and critiqued from the following

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<sup>2</sup> See Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Mass., 1992, p.43, This is often cited. Such as in Geoff Eley, 'Nations, Publics and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century', in Craig Calhoun (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Mass., 1995, p289.



fields. First, reasoned debate was available to the non-bourgeoisie in Europe itself. Secondly, if the focus of the public sphere is the infrastructure of social communication then it would be limiting to look at only the influence of the press and educated layers alone. Moreover, apart from the obvious critique of Habermas' gender blindness, Eley also points out that within some areas of Europe, the public sphere was a result of the influence of the French revolution. In other words, it was possible for the public sphere to emerge as a result of stimulation from outside. Most importantly he argues that it is important to acknowledge the competition between diverse 'publics' to be as constitutive of the public sphere as 'reasoned debate'. The public sphere was the structural setting where cultural contest and negotiation took place.<sup>3</sup>

### **Studies of the Public in South Asia.**

In the introduction to a special issue on the 'public' in South Asia, Sandra Freitag states that the public signifies a search for the expression of power beyond institutions and argues for the need to confront the eurocentrism in most extant models of the public sphere.<sup>4</sup> According to Freitag, the colonial public was distinct in every sense- public opinion, space, communication, collective activities- primarily because the notion of the citizen was very different. Characteristic of this colonial public was the importance of the urban centre as a stage, the use of certain and speech forms for Public Discourse and the significance of religious activities

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<sup>3</sup> See Geoff Eley, Nations, Publics and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century, in Craig Calhoun (ed.), (1995), pp 289- 309.

<sup>4</sup> Sandria Freitag, 'Introduction', *South Asia*, Vol. XIV, No 1, 1991.

as they often served as vehicles of political principles. Freitag argues that the last emerged as a consequence of the colonial clamp down. She also points out that while there were changes in the nature of public utterances- they were context sensitive- there was also new appropriation that took place where normative codes and 'doctrinal dispute were conducted outside- in the public. Thus the Public arena can be seen as a popular arena where people could act. At the same time, scholars theorising on the public point to a disjunction between the elite and the popular spheres of action. Many argue that from a 'shared' public the elite and the middle class began to withdraw towards the late nineteenth century. It is unclear because of the paucity of studies whether this is applicable to the period which forms the subject of this dissertation. It is however important to consider that there were elements of shared belief and ceremony that cut across social classes . Consequently, it would be erroneous to assume that 'elite withdrawal from Popular arenas' was uniform or even complete in the early nineteenth century.

### **Exploring aspects of the public arena in South Asian Historiography**

Eley points out that unaware of the theories of Habermas, many pioneering studies of eighteenth century British popular politics and society critically appraised what we now refer to as public sphere. Similarly numerous studies on nineteenth century South Asia seem to refer to various aspects of the Public arena in the Colonial period. It may be useful to perhaps recast some of these postulations as markers of the process through which South Asian publics

emerged. Again, it is important to note that there are very few such texts available for the pre 1880s period for Madras Presidency.

A characteristic approach of the late 1960s and early 1970s was the development of institutions and organisations. Rich in empirical data these texts emphasise the rise of a largely urban educated middle class under colonial which began to start organisations in the 'liberal mode' to express their ideas of reform<sup>5</sup>. Some texts like those of David Kopf attempt to link Colonial institutions like the Fort William College to the rise of the middle class intelligentsia- who were alienated from British culture as they were from their roots. It was this mixed up mediator who Kopf argues put forth a complex worldview of social reform and later, nationalism. While valuable, this inadequately explains the spread of new ideologies and restricts its analysis to the upper class- caste of South Asian society.

The second 'traditional' unit of analysis has been the work of specific intellectuals, of 'public men', active in the public arena. The range of material available and number of studies is inexhaustible. While these studies were mainly about upper caste men, of late, there have been explorations of lower caste radicals

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<sup>5</sup> For Maharashtra, Christine Dobbin, *Urban Leadership in Western India: Politics and communities in Bombay City 1840- 1885*, Bombay, 1972. For south India, V.Suntharalingam, *Politics and Nationalist Awakening in Tamil Nadu 1860- 1947*, Tucson, 1988. For Bengal, David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal renaissance: The dynamics of Indian modernization 1773-1835*, Calcutta, 1969. That these works were important landmarks in the historiography of nineteenth century South Asia and have been extensively and quite correctly cited by later scholars is accepted without hesitation.

and consciousness like that of Jotiba Phule, Iyothidassar, and on women Pandita Ramabai for the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

The third well documented aspect of the public arena is 'public religiosity' and changes in the nineteenth century under British administration. Apart from the many studies on religious administration under colonial rule<sup>7</sup>, this had also been studied in terms of the movements of social - religious reform and dialogue. In South India, there has been a lot of work on the missionary 'driven' reform particularly of caste inequality.<sup>8</sup> More recent departures have ensued - particularly for the Punjab where work on the formation of Sikh identity in the nineteenth century has seen it as a part of a complex web of interaction between the

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<sup>6</sup> See Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste Conflict and Ideology. Mahatma Jotirao Phule and low caste protest in nineteenth century western India*, Cambridge, 1988. There are classic studies for twentieth century South India by Eugene Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in Tamilnad*, Berkeley, 1969; K Nambi Arooran, *Tamil Renaissance and Dravidian Nationalism 1905- 1940*, Madurai, 1986 and recently V Geetha and SV Rajadorai, *Towards a Non Brahman Millennium*, Madras, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Arjun Appadorai, *Worship and Conflict in Colonial Rule. A south Indian case*, Cambridge, 1981. Carol Breckenridge, 'From Protector to Litigant - changing relations between Hindu temples and the raja of Ramnad', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 1977, pp75-106 as examples of studies on the administration of 'Hinduism' and Temples.

<sup>8</sup> South India is particularly rich in church based missionary history of Christianity particularly the works of R F Frykenberg, 'The impact of conversion and social reforms in south India during the late Company period', in CH Philips and MD Wainwright, *Indian Society and the beginning of Modernization c.1830-1850*, London, 1976, pp187-243.; Duncan Foresstor, *Caste and Christianity. Attitude and Policy on caste of Anglo-saxon Protestant Missions in India*, London, 1980; and Lionel Caplan, 'Caste and castelessness among south Christians', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, N S. 14, 1980, pp213- 238. There has been an attempt to look at religious dialogue and debate by RF Frykenberg and G A Oddie, the latter notably in *Hindus and Christians in South-East Asia*, Delhi, 1992; *Religion in South Asia : religious conversion and revival movements in South Asia in medieval and modern times*, Delhi, 1977, and 'Anti - Missionary feeling and Hindu resistance in Madras : the Hindu preaching and tract societies : c 1886 -91', in F Clothely (ed.) *Images of Man : Religion and historical processes in South Asia*, Madras, 1982, pp . 217- 243. Again, the focus is on the latter half of the nineteenth century rather than earlier decades.

missionaries, popular culture and the rising middle class intellectual in the public arena.<sup>9</sup>

Avril Powell's very important analysis of religious debate between Muslims and Christians in North India tries to understand the change in the manner of the *munazara* tradition as it came out in the public of the street corner, robust and aggressively fought with pamphlets and bazaar gossip.<sup>10</sup> She argues that the shift from its courtly roots to the world of the street thanks to Missionary - Muslim encounters led to its ultimate disintegration. Largely based on Urdu and Persian sources, Powell's study is valuable in that she cohesively links the tradition's pre-British past to the theological debates of the mid nineteenth century in cities like Agra and Delhi. The intriguing connections between the debates and popular discourse, in the transmission of these ideas is however subordinate to her interest in the arguments put forth by the chief protagonists, both Muslim and missionary.<sup>11</sup> Newer studies like Bayly's 'Empire and Information' explore some links between the message and medium. While Bayly locates an 'indigenous' public sphere in the shared ecumene of the late Mughal period, he does argue that the knowledge of the 'worthies' and later of the Colonial institutions and actors penetrated and was actively debated and negotiated and at times resisted by the largely unlettered section of the population. Messages were carried through gossip, transmission

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<sup>9</sup> Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries. Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*, Delhi, 1994.

<sup>10</sup> Avril Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India*, Richmond, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> There are other recent studies which follow the same approach as Powell. See in particular the Articles in Kenneth Jones (ed.) *Religious Controversy in British India; Dialogues in South Asian Languages*, Albany, 1992.

specialists and a host of social communication networks. He further argues that towards the third decade of the nineteenth century the rigidity of Colonial institutions and the expulsion of age old information transmitters from the 'knowledge loop' created a gap between the State and society - and an alienated middling order.<sup>12</sup>

The other major impetus for the study of the Public has come from the largely American 'ethno-historical' approach. These studies taking from Cohn's analysis of ceremonial representation in Colonial India, focus on the idea of the ceremonial public which saw the participation of different social groups in public often royal -derived ritual. The view of the shifts in popular politics, public religiosity and community identity is seen as mediated by disputes of honour and riots in Urban 'theatres' .<sup>13</sup> This model has now begun to widen, producing for instance, the argument of Douglas Haynes, who posits the importance of 'indigenous' rhetoric and ritual as a key element in the formation of urban elite public culture.

There has been a tremendous output of work on new institutions of the nineteenth century like the press and the law courts by a number of scholars who have examined the manner in which both these colonial institutions penetrated the South Asian Society.<sup>14</sup> While there has been a danger of reading these new

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<sup>12</sup> C A Bayly, *Information and Empire, Intelligence gathering and social communication in India 1780-1870*, Cambridge, 1996, see particularly chapter 5 and 6.

<sup>13</sup> The most influential work is that of Sandra Freitag especially, *Collective Action and Community. Public arenas and the emergence of communalism in north India*, Berkeley, 1989.

<sup>14</sup> With specific reference to the public and the law courts see Pamela Price , 'Acting in Public versus forming a Public: conflict processing and political mobilization in the nineteenth century south India', *South Asia*, Vol. XIV, No. 1, 1991, pp 91-121.

institutions as causal characters in themselves, there has also been some analysis of the importance of popular literacy and dissemination of print through other channels of social communication.<sup>15</sup> Further, and related to the processes of print culture and in part critically engaging with the notion of the 'imagined community', a fair amount of research has been done on the formation of regional languages and 'linguistic identities' in the public arena.<sup>16</sup>

The above fairly cursory survey of work which can be termed as constitutive of the aspects of the public sphere cover a range of possibilities in issues and debates. It will be noticed however that research on the construction of the public arena in the first half of the nineteenth century is relatively sparse and on early nineteenth century Tamil Nadu, even more so. The existing literature on the region for this period bears a few chapters as 'background' or is written in terms of secular and religious organisational history.<sup>17</sup>

In most studies there are a few key assumptions that bear further examination. These include - a tendency to see the emergence of the middle class as an uncontested product of Macaulayan policy alone. Two, the assumption is that

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<sup>15</sup> See references in Rosalind O'Hanlon and C. A. Bayly; also see Kunal Chakravarti, 'Introduction: Modes of Communication in a literate civilisation', and other articles in a special issue on literacy and communication in *Studies in History*, Vol. 10, No. 1(n.s.), 1994, pp 171-181. There is of course a well established historiographical tradition which has engaged in the study of literacy and orality in for Europe. See particularly the articles in the journal *Past and Present*.

<sup>16</sup> See CD King, *One language, Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in the Nineteenth Century*, Bombay, 1994; Articles in K Jones, *Religious Controversy in British India*. Among recent contributions on linguistic and regional identities on Tamil is Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue. Language devotion in Tamil India 1891-1970*, Berkeley, 1997. But these movements are not the subject of the early nineteenth century with which this dissertation is concerned.

<sup>17</sup> Since the equivalent of the Bengal renaissance in Tamil Nadu, the Tamil renaissance is said to be a product of the late nineteenth century very little is also known about the overriding intellectual ideas or any kind of 'public consciousness' for the earlier decades.

political culture filtered down from the colonial Metropolitan to the mofussil. Third, that debate on issues of a local nature do not classify as being constitutive of a public sphere since they were rarely on matters of general interest. Lastly, that popular and the elite worlds were mutually sealed off.

It is clear that there were many urban centres with lively literati, and public debate in the Tamil region well before the British establishment of Madras.<sup>18</sup> Unlike Calcutta or Bombay, settlements like Madras did not boast of an upper caste Bhadralog till the mid Nineteenth century. Indeed it has been argued that the city resembled a shanty town in the early decades . Apart from pockets of the relatively well off Dubashes most of the inhabitants served the Fort as weavers and boatmen.

Second, the records indicate that many members of the lower orders were active participants in negotiating with each other and the East India Company on the civic and customary practice<sup>19</sup>. The idea of custom constituted an important terrain of negotiation between social groups and with the Company and was often used to assert rights and privileges. The policy of the Company in turn fluctuated according to context. So it is possible to explore the emergence of the public as constituted by contest and conflict.

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<sup>18</sup> See below, Chapter 1.

<sup>19</sup> The Public Indexes indicate that groups like the outcast Paraiyars were especially articulate and active petitioners. For a detailed analysis of Paraiyar petitions, see Aparna Balachandran, *Caste, Community and Identity. The Paraiyars in the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Century Madras Presidency*, Unpublished Mphil Dissertation, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 1999.



### **The proposed study**

The proposed study seeks to explore some changing forms of sociability through an analysis of what can be termed loosely as 'Hindu - Christian' encounters in Madras Presidency in the first half of the nineteenth century. These encounters encompassed a wide variety of forms- from affrays to public debates , a variety of issues from conversions to the distribution of tracts and a variety of social groups both upper and lower castes. This study hopes to analyse some of these themes to trace some kinds of associativeness that emerged in the region at that time.

If the first two decades saw Madras largely as a shanty town the situation became different in the next few decades. From the 1820s and the 1830s thanks to new players like the missionaries, and new immigrants diverse institutions like missionary schools and tract societies proliferated in the city. It is possible to argue that as a result of these new forms of associativeness and evangelical preaching in the region , the church came out of the isolated mission station into the primary streets of Tamil towns to actively address a 'non -Christian' audience. Simultaneously, in the eyes of the inhabitants, the Company was seen as supporting missionary activities. While this was in itself not new, there were many petitions and letters sent to the Company criticising its intervention in local disputes such as the erection of school rooms or the pulling of Temple Rathas.

These issues of conflicting assertions of rights manifested themselves in different ways. By the 1830s and the 1840s local Chettiar merchants set up institutions like the Pachaiappa's College and the Hindu Literary Society; disputes

on Churches led to petitions; tracts and counter arguments and at times affrays; some upper caste organised themselves into shadowy anti-missionary societies like the Vibhuti Sangam; and more public ones like the Sadur Vedanta Sabha which published pamphlets and held satirical Christian rituals. In 1846, many hundred individuals held meetings under the banner of the 'Hindu' community and led by their 'chairman' Latchmanarasoo Chetty, sent the famous 'Hindu Memorial' to the Government.

It is important to note , however, that these critical engagements with religious ideas were not restricted to the upper orders of Tamil Society. It is possible to argue that men like Muttukutty who started the Vaikunda Swamy cult in the 1830s and Alagappa Nadan, a nadar soothsayer, also comprised a strand of missionary encounter , resulting in fairly distinct lower caste voices which were simultaneously implicated in a larger public exchange of handbills, notices and in court trials of the mid nineteenth century.

It is also crucial to consider that while the study uses 'Hindu- Christian' religious encounters as a site to explore new sociability , it acknowledges that the dialogue between religion was part of an older tradition. In South India , unlike the north, Christian communities preceded the arrival of missionaries by several centuries. The Jesuits and the Catholics had a long tradition of public debates in the region with Brahmans and other local religious spokesmen in towns like Madurai as far back as the early decades of the seventeenth century, well before the of British trading dominance. The question that arises then is, what was the nature of the boundaries between religious communities in the nineteenth century? How

significant was religiosity in the public arena - given the growing importance of the politics of representation and colonial restrictions on citizenship in the nineteenth century?

There are numerous studies on the traditional tangled triangle between the main actors of the nineteenth century - the Company, the missionary and the community. But recent work also cautions us against accepting mono-causal, or monolithic answers to the age old questions. Consequently we can argue that there was slippage in community boundaries, that there was a place for individuality in the public, that pre colonial public arenas were rich with debate, that there were attempts made in the princely courts to adapt to changing mores - to 'modernise' through press. Indeed, it is within this broader frame work that the dissertation seeks to examine the warp and weft of associativeness.

The dissertation consists of five chapters and focuses on the structures of mobilisation of social groups, the restructuring of sacred sites in urban space, and the rise of assemblies that cut across caste panchayats. Chapter one provides an overview of the social processes in place in the Tamil region in the eighteenth century. The next three chapters explore the emergence of different types of sociability. Chapter two, examines the importance of tract societies and public preaching in changing public discourse. Chapter three, analyses the petitions submitted on church disputes as a way of plotting the re- structuring of religious space in the public arena. Chapter four, charts the processes by which the monster 'Hindu' memorial emerged as a key element in the public arena in the mid - nineteenth century and attempts to look at its wider impact on the Tamil public. An

important attempt in the dissertation is to explore the extent to which what the 'popular' arenas were mobilised and affected by these new elements. Thus the last chapter tries to trace the interpenetration between the elite and popular groups by examining certain instances of popular public religiosity in the first half of the nineteenth century in the region.

### **Sources**

The sources for this study are mostly culled from the collections of the Tamil Nadu Archives, Chennai and the United Theological College Archives, Bangalore. Most of the records cited are from the Public, Revenue, Board of Revenue, and Judicial Departments of the East Indian Company records in the Fort St George. The study also uses missionary pamphlets and handbills in Tamil, the proceedings of institutions like the Madras Religious Tract Society and the Madras School Book Society, Missionary accounts and biographies and journals like the Church Missionary Record.

## Chapter I

### **From Warrior Polity to Company Rule : The Eighteenth Century in the Tamil Region**

The ecological division of the Coromandel coast and its hinterland loosely referred to as the Tamil country forms a useful base for understanding its political economy. Many scholars point out that ecological zones created a core area of rice cultivating great temple structures supporting the empires such as that of the Cholas, surrounded by a semi-arid zone cultivation area and further afield 'frontier' areas ( in places like Tirunelveli ) where pastoral, nomadic clansman ruled over fort like towns till well into the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century<sup>1</sup>. However as this and the subsequent chapters illustrate, these structures clearly were inter-penetrative in the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, there was tremendous dynamism in the fabric of the Tamil region present well before the Company rule established itself in the early years of the nineteenth century.

The story of Tamil Country Politics in the eighteenth century should rightfully begin a century and a half earlier with the fall of the Vijayanagar empire in 1565. The battle of Talikotta saw Vijaynagar lose to the Bahaminid kingdom . In the ensuing tumult, parts of the area came under the control of Bijapur and Golkonda. The three families of Telegu Nayakas who established themselves in the Tamil country in the 1520s now rose to dominance and established their courts at Senji, Madurai and Tanjavur respectively, leaving a range of military chiefs called

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<sup>1</sup> David Ludden, *Peasant History in South India*, Delhi, 1985, Chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> The early nineteenth century saw vast ecological changes to the landscape substantially along with social political changes re-drawing the contours of the Tamil countryside.

*palaiyakarars* controlling *palaiyams* further south, in the frontier regions of Tirunelveli.<sup>3</sup> Of the three kingdoms, Madurai outlived the other two lasting up to the 1730s. The Senji Nayakas were captured in 1640s by Bijapur and then the region passed on to Mughal and Maratha derivative potentates. The Tanjavur line was brought to an end by a combined force of Madurai, Maratha and Maravar incursions in the 1670s.<sup>4</sup> With the breakdown of the Mughal Empire after the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, the political balance changed again. The northern region- the Karnatak (Carnatic) Panghayat emerged around the Arcot region, Tanjavur became a Maratha principality. This period was fraught with competition, though the Carnatic Nawabiyat dominated the area, extracting *peshkash* from Tanjavur and the *palaiyakarars*.

As far back as the late 1680s, a whole range of European fortified establishments were established down the Coromandel coast not seen elsewhere in the Mughal empire. The Portuguese were the first, soon followed by the French, the Dutch, the Danes and the British. The most important ports were the Dutch at Pulicat, Nagapattinam and Tranquebar (the last two in the region under the Tanjavur Marathas), the English Fort St George at Madras and Fort St David at Devanampattinam (Kadalur). The French operated in Pondicherry, Porto-Novo, San Thome, Karaikkal, and Nagore. These powers were always on the look out for sympathisers in the princely courts buying into courtiers, agents and news writers. They also had ceremonial relations with these courts visiting and being visited and

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<sup>3</sup> Dharma Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India. Agricultural labour in the Madras Presidency during the nineteenth century*, Delhi reprint 1992, p 6.

<sup>4</sup> S Subrahmanyam, V Rao and D Schulman; *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in Nayaka period Tamilnadu*, Delhi, 1992, p36.

exchanging gifts. For instance, during the collection of *peshkash* in 1701 from the Marathas of Tanjavur- Da'ud Khan visited the English at St David and Madras; French at Pondicherry, and the Dutch at Sadraspatnam.<sup>5</sup> There is also a sustained process of gifts being sent to the courts by the Europeans. The Dutch led by not only corresponding with Krishnaji Pandit , their ally in Arcot, but also by gifting Persian horses to the Nawab and Sri Lankan elephants to the Maratha court.

The eighteenth century saw the political fortunes of these trading companies fluctuating wildly. Initially, it was the Dutch who found favour with the Princes and the English who were treated with hostility; the Portuguese were in the middle ground and the French fairly weak. By the end of the eighteenth century however, the British were well near the most superior western power in the region. The princely courts were either destroyed or a shadow of their former selves. The Prince of Arcot shifted base to Chepauk in Madras in the 1780s. He was literally 'pensioned' off by the early years of the nineteenth Century. Tipu Sultan was forced to cede half his territory in 1792 and died in 1799. In the same year the Tanjavur kingdom was sold to the English. The southern region thus came under the direct rule of the British except for five small satellite states.

The political chaos of the region, the waning fortunes of the princely kingdoms and the ascendance of the Company's powers in the region have been well recorded. It is only in the past few years that the theme of chaos being replaced by *Pax Britannia* has given way to nuanced studies of the complex processes that were a part and consequence of the political transformation from the

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<sup>5</sup> M Alam and S Subrahmanyam; 'Exploring the Hinterland: Trade and Politics in the Arcot Nizamat (1700-1732)', in L Subramaniam and R MUKherjee (ed.); *Politics and Trade in the Indian Ocean World*, Delhi, 1998, p126.

rule of the courts to the Company. Beginning with trade and the social groups connected with it, studies now address diverse issues including the changing structures of polity ( such as the little kingdom, or the role of gifts), the position of traditional authority like temples, the rise of new occupation groups and the role of new urban centres like Madras. It is important to see these processes as the background against which we can view the religious encounter and forms of new sociability in the following century. Therefore, by way of introduction, this chapter will attempt to present some of these issues. It will particularly address the issue of the ethnic and religious plurality of the social fabric of the area in the late medieval and early modern period.

It is important to note that that social groups were not monolith and 'flat' as many books on the nineteenth century have us believe. The Tamil region was also not the bedrock of Temple centred high 'Hinduism' intruded and solely disrupted by missionary influx in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. There was a lot of dynamism and multiple trajectories and tension among the various communities that inhabited the country.

### **Social diversity in the Tamil region**

Arguing that an overemphasis on inscriptional evidence Schulman et al point out that the Nayaka reign saw the assertion of a warrior heroism asserting a new self confident sudra kingship.<sup>6</sup> The Nayakas brought with them the Telegu warrior groups particularly the 'Vadugas'. These 'northerners' changed the political landscape for they enhanced the power of the dry zone warrior groups.

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<sup>6</sup> Schulman et al (1992) pp57-112.



The Nayaka regime and that of its *palaikkarar* successors in the eighteenth century depended on their armies manned by Kallars and Maravar tribesman with whom these regimes has close links indicating a rich web of exchange between pastoral and more settled regimes.

To finance their army, the Nayakas required cash and so had to focus on commerce by attracting merchants, artisans, money lenders and the like. Thus there were new specialists to be seen in the Tamil country including Kannada and Telegu weaving groups , patnulkarans from Saurashtra , specialist agriculturists like the Reddis and Kammas, and the moving inland of toddy tappers like the Shanars.<sup>7</sup>

Not surprisingly, Nayaka kingship was imbued with a strong sense of individual agency . There was no real dependence on Brahmans, 'genealogy' or ascriptive status. State polity emphasised money, mobility, over-lordship. Their peripatetic nature made them focus not on links with land but shrines of deities. In eulogising the self made man<sup>8</sup>, it is possible to infer that Nayakan polity was multi-pronged and brought with it new immigrants.

The eighteenth century Arcot panghayat also saw a cosmopolitan court culture, consisting of Iranians, Bundelas, Shekhawats, and Khatris . The Court poet of Da'ud Khan was a Saraswat Brahmin Munshi Jaswant Rai whose ancestors were from the north west.<sup>9</sup> He composed a Persian chronicle called the *Saiyid Nama*.<sup>10</sup> The court was able to attract poets, scholars and sufis partly as a result of

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<sup>7</sup> Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings. Muslims and Christians in south Indian society 1700-1900*, Cambridge 1992, pp23-5.

<sup>8</sup> Schulman et al (1992) pp53-6.

<sup>9</sup> Subrahmanyam and Alam , (1998) pp136-7.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Bayly, (1992) p153. The Khatris lost favour from the third decade of the early eighteenth century.

disruption of patronage at other deccan courts and the north. Thus for instance in 1725, the Bijapuri Qadiri Sufi Saiyid Shah Abdul Lateef (1656-1736) took up residence at Vellore. Later under the Wallajahis the composition of the court changed but the the influx of immigrants continued.<sup>11</sup> The new Urdu speaking groups under the Wallajahi lineage included a fresh influx of service people- Muslim jurists, mystics and literary men as well soldiers. This gentry had close links with sufi institutions and founded many shrines etc.<sup>12</sup>

Specialist castes were also quite powerful in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The coast, for instance, was the home of *Maraikkayar* traders from the early medieval period who practiced Islam. Thus the ports of Pulicat, Kilakkarai, Kayalpatnam contained significant Muslim population who carried horses, stone gems, pearls, chanks to South East Asia in the early seventeenth century. The routes were modified in the eighteenth century with Nagore and Jaffna becoming important centres of textile trade.<sup>13</sup> There was also a growing Muslim population inland . These groups such as the Labbai (who were mostly weavers) following trade routes and patronage of economic activities settled in Madurai, Tenkasi, Sengi, Nellore etc.

Further South, the Paravas, a specialist caste of divers, became fairly powerful. As crucial players in the great pearl fishery expeditions in the gulf of Mannar right through the late medieval and early modern period they were soon incorporated into the patronage networks of the Ramnad kingdom. They were thus

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp153-4 .

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p155.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp78-80.



sought after by princes and Company servants alike.<sup>14</sup> There were other such groups such as the toddy tapping Shanars (who converted in the nineteenth century to Protestant Christianity); Kallar and Maravar tribesmen (whose kin structures were clan based till well into the eighteenth century)<sup>15</sup>. These groups were not upper caste agriculturists and indeed professed different styles and paths of worship; but who none the less assumed positions of power as they were incorporated into networks of patronage.

Most of the groups discussed above had strong links with warrior chiefdoms. The Tenkasi Labbai centre came up largely due to the links with the Sökkampatti zamindars who were Maravar clansmen. The *Maraiyakars* set up base in Madras to link with the East India Company.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, these specialist groups often boasted of powerful 'big men' who also functioned as 'little kings'

Citakki was one such big man in the Kilakkarai area active between AD 1650-1715. Around him came up a Muslim court with literati, Sufi mystics and religious patronage and a flowering of Arabic Tamil texts.<sup>17</sup> Mudali Pillai Maraiyyakar was another big man who received his title from the Nayak of Madurai and traded with the Dutch autonomously<sup>18</sup> His 'post' continued well into the eighteenth century.<sup>19</sup> There was also a powerful Parava Christian *Jati Talaivan*

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp322-343.

<sup>15</sup> Susan Bayly argues that their religious affiliation was fluid, based around a warrior cult and cites various instances of cross-boundary worship which deified kuladavatas, pirs, christian saints, and amman shrines.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p89.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p86.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p80.

<sup>19</sup> Note the use of the title Mudali Pillai- showing a link with the Raghupati Nayak rather than the Mughal or the successor state of Arcot. So it is possible to argue against a pan regional Muslim consciousness in the region. In fact Bayly argues that it was after the Nawab of Arcot settled his court at Madras and firmly under the British, that he made any self conscious attempts to link himself to a wider more standardised notion of Islamic piety. It was then that the patronage of high Islam began with sending the staircase to Mecca etc. Even then, there was no attempt to link with the southern Muslim traders.

or caste head who had the trappings of a little king. His title, 'Vikrama Aditya Pandyan' was also derived from the Nayaka vocabulary and he was the possessor of real power.<sup>20</sup> So not only did polities compete to patronise these groups but the groups themselves were active agents in taking advantage of opportunities for advancement.

### **Towns in the eighteenth century**

Under the Nayakas , new towns gained importance as centres of consumption. The sources refer to many places which were not the site of great temples but which saw the erection of very strong forts. Among the prominent fortified centres which flourished through most of the seventeenth century were Velur, Tiruchirapalli, Senji, and Arni. Older towns like Tanjavur were written about as much for their military like character as sites of pilgrimage. Apart from these towns which boasted of a cosmopolitan soldiery, the Nayakas also encouraged the growth of market towns or *pettais* and *shantais* [*cantai*]. *Palayams* were also widely constructed . These were small urban centres with specialist cultivators, traders and artisans operating under the patronage of small Vaduga, Maravar, Kallar, Telugu chieftains. These centres grew into market towns reminiscent of the 'ganj' building activities of the eighteenth century Gangetic heartland.<sup>21</sup>

By the 1720s Sa'adatullah Khan had begun to extend Velur and Senji by building ganjs like Sa'adatnagar, Fattahnagar and Sa'adatpattnam.<sup>22</sup> The Nawabs

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<sup>20</sup> Susan Bayly ,(1992), p326.

<sup>21</sup> Schulman, et al (1992), pp82-92.

<sup>22</sup> Susan Bayly, (1992), pp152-3.

also tried to build the towns of Covelong as Sa'adat Bandar to attract British and Portuguese merchants. The Dutch and the English were unhappy because they saw it as competition.<sup>23</sup> The Nawab clearly tried to compete with Madras because 'the hat wearers had become arrogant and even Mylapore had tremendous problems caught as it was between the Dutch Pulicat, the English Madras, and the Portuguese control on San Thome.'<sup>24</sup>

Da'ud Khan would contact the companies during the collection of *peshkash* from the Marathas of Tanjavur<sup>25</sup>. In 1701-2 he visited the English at St David; French at Pondicherry, the Dutch at Sadraspatnam and English at Madras. Through all this he was consistently based at Mylapore ( Sao Tome). Numerous Pathan merchants -Indo Afghans from Bijapur lived in Mylapore and were encouraged to settle there by Da'ud Khan. He kept taxes low at the port and even established a mint there. There was thus an attempt to compete with Madras. Unfortunately, the Sa'adat Bandar project was doomed by the older colonial trading towns already present.

In the 1690s, Arcot was a minor fortress and 'way station' and was built up as the court of the Nawab. Senji and Velur were the other centres of relatively higher prestige at the dawn of the eighteenth century and it has been argued that Arcot was set up as a new centre rather than continuing with older prestigious centres.<sup>26</sup> Under the Wallajahs, the town developed as a beautifully laid out princely capital attracting a rich and distinguished literati from other centres in the Deccan.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp147-8.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp148-9.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p126.

<sup>26</sup> Subrahmanyam and Alam, (1998), pp121-2.

The situation changed in the second half of the eighteenth century. With the ascendancy of the East India Company, a political presence in Madras was essential. Therefore under Anwaruddin Khan the Wallajahs began to shift their munificence to Madras. Prince Anwar built the Masjid -o-anwari in Madras in the 1740s. A few decades later Mahfuz Khan built a Masjid -Masjid Ma'mur in Angappa Nayaka Street in what is now George Town in 1784. In fact, the court shifted entirely to Chempak in Triplicane area by 1766. From then on began what some scholars term as the patronage of high Islam.<sup>27</sup> [Again these attempts were short lived as with the Nawab being pensioned off in 1799 and the setting up the Arabic college by the East India Company in 1812, breaking patronage networks]

Madras was bought from the local Nayaka in 1639. Till mid eighteenth century the Company was busy buying land to expand. In the mean time, from about 1720 we see the establishment of new settlements as well. Colletpettai was founded in 1720 as an exclusive inhabitation of weavers and painters. Chintadripettai was also set up in 1734 for the same though later it boasted of a diverse occupations<sup>28</sup> and Royapuram in 1799 as a settlement of Christian boatmen<sup>29</sup>. Susan Nield's study of Madras shows that the new city attracted a vast service crowd of labourers, skilled artisans and petty tradesmen as well as big merchants and Dubashes. Peddanaikapet was largely peopled by the 'clean castes' particularly the Vellalars who resided in the Salay or Mint street. Muthialpet was much more cosmopolitan with Gujarati Sowcars, Telegu Komatis some Europeans,

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<sup>27</sup> Susan Bayly, (1992), p156, p223, p229.

<sup>28</sup> Patrick A Roche, 'Caste and British Merchant Government in Madras 1639-1749', *Indian Economic Social History Review*, V12, No 1, 1975, pp385-6, pp396-7.

<sup>29</sup> S Nield, 'Colonial Urbanism: The development of Madras City in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', *Modern Asian Studies*, V13, No2, 1979, p 228.

Armenians and Maraikkar traders<sup>30</sup>. If George Town was cosmopolitan, Triplicane housed the Nawab and his courtiers after 1768. On the whole, Madras was a mix of caste streets, sacred sites and markets.<sup>31</sup> By 1800, with the rising fortunes of the East India Company, the city is said to have grown to vie with Calcutta and Bombay as the 'first city' of the sub continent with an estimated population of 250,000.<sup>32</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century its population had tripled to 720,000.<sup>33</sup>

### **The sacred and political landscape**

Stein's study indicates that temple building was on the rise in the Nayaka period the largest expansion occurring between 1650- 1750.<sup>34</sup> Apart from these new temples, studies also show that many existing temples were expanded. In this context, Schulman, Rao and Subrahmanyam's argument is quite interesting. They say that it is possible that there was a relative shift in the importance of different deities with the predominance of lesser deities like new *amman* shrines. They also indicate that the great temples were no longer exclusively supported by the royal houses alone but a range of local donors. This implies that temple patronage under the Nayakas was on the decline. So the new temples were being built by less conspicuous donors.

Further, two interesting issues can be discerned: One, while the largesse of the great temple complexes of Tirupati, Kanchi, Srirangam and Chidambaram

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp235-8.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp232-233.

<sup>32</sup> R Suntharalingam, *Politics and Nationalist Awakening in South India, 1852-1891*, p.24.

<sup>33</sup> *Proceedings of the Missionary conference at Ootacamund*, Vepery, 1858, p37.

<sup>34</sup> Burton Stein, *Peasant, State and Society in medieval South India*, Delhi, 1980, pp456-9; Schulman (1992), p88.

continued to grow, there was a noted rise of warrior cults and traditions. Tirumalai Nayaka for example expanded the Minakshi Sundareshwar temple in madurai. He also restructures the annual festival of the marriage of Minakshi and Sundareashwar to co-incide with the vaishantivite Alagar temple festival in the city. More than integrating two contentious traditions, this act is interesting because it went against texts and also indicated the Madurai king's desire to control the accompanying fair.<sup>35</sup>

Two, it is also apparent that the Nayakas widened the range of donative activities to include other faiths. They gave grants to Catholic churches in Nagapattinam, and the Nagore Sufi shrine.<sup>36</sup> Often, the lines between high and low Hinduism were blurred for this was a period of large scale mobility , of pastoral clansman being settled; of peripatetic warlords. All these made the religious system fairly elastic as it was pulled and stretched in different directions. Kuladeva temples became important . A new Brahman literati was attracted to towns courts. The landscape was dotted with powerful shrines, mutts, gurus who belonged to different faiths.

Third, through the eighteenth century, there were a range of big men competing for legitimacy by patronising the construction of temples. The case of Madras is particularly striking. While the Company purchased territory that included sacred centres like the Triplicane Sri Parthasarathy Temple and Mylapore Kapaleshwar Temple, the seventeenth and eighteenth century saw numerous temples being constructed in the new city. Nagga Battan the Company powder

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<sup>35</sup> See Dennis Hudson, 'Siva, Minaksi, Visnu. Reflections on a popular myth in Madurai', *Indian Economic Social History Review*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 1977.

<sup>36</sup> Schulman,et al, (1992), p88-90



maker and Beri Thimmanna built the Chinnakesava Temple in 1646. The end of the seventeenth century saw the Ekambereshwara Temple being built by Alaganatha Pillai. The early eighteenth century saw the Beri Chettis building the Kandaswami Temple.<sup>37</sup> Mattison Mines argues that these new temples were 'caste temples' reflecting the new importance of the head man. He also suggests that these big men established temples not as a symbol of the displacement of kingly authority by the Company as Dirks and Appadorai state, but to establish their 'public reputation'. He points out that the number of merchants competing for big manship had increased, and gradually through the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century one can observe the merchants losing their political power but simultaneously increasing their public patronage activities.<sup>38</sup>

In the eighteenth century most polities derived their power from patronage and associating themselves with local sacred landscape of muslim pirs and fakirs. And very often religious boundaries were crossed.<sup>39</sup> Pudukkottai patronised several muslim shrines.<sup>40</sup> The Tanjavur Marathas were particular about linking with the *Maraikkars* and the sufi shrine of Nagore. Partab Singh (AD1739 - 63) is said to have built one of the five great minars at the shrine.<sup>41</sup> The Nagapatinam Dutch patronised the Nagore shrine. The Nawab and the Tanjavur court gave grants to the

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<sup>37</sup> Patrick A Roche,( 1975), p395.

<sup>38</sup> Mattison Mines, *Public faces and Private Voices. Community and individuality in south India*, Berkeley, 1996, pp97-100.

<sup>39</sup> This is particularly significant to note because of the attempt to project backwards the feeling of communal animosity both by contemporary historians of today. The petitions of the early nineteenth century which complained about Muslim raids were focused on Tipu Sultan and not really on the Nawab of Arcot. So the articulation of an all-encompassing Muslim identity has to be viewed with some caution.

<sup>40</sup> Susan Bayly,(1992) p86.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p90, pp217-9.

churches in Tirunelveli. In the eighteenth century, Trichy was the recipient not only of Nawabi patronage to pir shrines but to temples. Mohammad Ali Wallajah in the 1760s gave generous donations to Tirupati, Srirangam and other south Indian temples.<sup>42</sup> One of the obvious reasons for supporting sacred monuments in Temple towns was to appeal to the specialists who lived there. It was also an acknowledgement of the importance of the great temples in endowing legitimacy to the rulers whatever their sect.

There were of course, exceptions. In 1707 the muslim inhabitants of Madras did not want to pay tax for temple shrines and threatened to desert the city and withdraw to San Thome (which was under the Portuguese).<sup>43</sup> Second, Not all acts of building was a result of patronage and Public funds were set up to build coutries and other public buildings. There is evidence of subscription lists being issued in the late eighteenth century to maintain and built temples, to collect money for the patriotic funds, the wall tax campaign and the building of the Kotwal bazaar in 1803-4.<sup>44</sup>

### **Religious traditions in pre nineteenth century Tamil Country**

We have seen from the preceding sections that eighteenth century south India was a region of religious dynamism and fluidity . Local traditions venerating cults backed by assertive warrior tradition re-structured the central place of big Temple towns and enabled a variety of worshipping communities to emerge. Scholars argue that local 'Christian' groups were active long before the rise of non-

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp161.165.

<sup>43</sup> *Madras Tercentenary Volume*, Madras, 1939, p.358.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p350.

Catholic congregations. This was partly due to the presence of Christianity from the earliest time and partly due to the transmission of the Christian tradition.<sup>45</sup>

Recent studies on the transmission of Tamil Christianity show that from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, the tradition spread through informal networks of trade, pilgrimage, rather than through doctrinal texts bringing in its wake a network of cult shrines and 'gurus'. This did not mean that persons attached to these institutions were members of formal congregations of European churches. Though there is evidence of upper castes like Vellalars and later Brahmans converting to Christianity, a substantial proportion of these converts were of low caste origin primarily Paravas and Mukuvas. Christian 'gurus' were also of varied origin. These included European missionaries as well as locals and some low castes Paraiyars as early as 1710. For instance Even when a cult came up around the Pillaimar (a Vellalar) in Tadampatti the followers were mainly Paraiyan.<sup>46</sup>

Again like Islam, it was the coastal traders who spread the word. For instance, a Vellalar caste family history records that in 1700 the family came in contact with itinerant Parava traders. They then established Xavier as their family deity, and built a family shrine. Studies indicated that similar small scale shrines were built all over the hinterland. Thus it is possible to argue that there was already a rich tradition of Christianity well before the missionaries started their work in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.<sup>47</sup>

Many studies also indicate that Christian traditions spread in this manner

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<sup>45</sup> R. Frykenberg, 'The impact of conversion and social reform in South India', in CH Philips and MD Wainright (ed.), *Indian Society and beginning of Modernisation 1830-50*, London, 1976, p191.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p385.

<sup>47</sup> Susan Bayly, (1992) p379-84

were strengthened by the acculturative techniques of the Catholics. In the sixteenth century itself there were conversions by the Portuguese which was rough and ready. The following centuries saw the arrival of important missionaries such as Robert de Nobili (1577-1656), Beschi (1680-1747); Ziegelbaug ( 1683-1719) and Fabricus ( 1740-9) all of whom appealed to the locals in a context sensitive manner different from the later Protestant efforts of the nineteenth century.

It has been argued that while Portuguese brought with them the idea of a limiting *pirangi kulam* as a new corporate identity, missionaries like Robert de Nobili side stepped it.<sup>48</sup> Nobili, also known as *Tatvabodhachari* was based in the Madurai region and proclaimed himself as a twice- born kshatriya from Rome eating vegetarian food, wearing the sacred thread and the clothes of a sanyasi and spreading the word of the *Esur Veda*.<sup>49</sup> He also built the formal vocabulary of Tamil Christianity by coining terms such the *vedam* for the gospel. Nobili also created a group of Pantarswamis local converts who were organised to deal with the lower ranking shudra converts.<sup>50</sup>

In the eighteenth century, Beschi or *Viramuni* was very well known for his scriptural knowledge and his writings in Tamil particularly the *Tembavani* and his commentaries on the *Tirukural*. His manners passed more than a passing resemblance to the then current ways of local god men. He travelled for instance, like local non Christian gurus complete with a palankeen and peacock feathers.<sup>51</sup>

Among the early proselytisers it was the Lutherans who were the first to

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp388-9.

<sup>49</sup> ER Bairlein, *The land of the Tamils and its Missions, from the German by JB Gribble*, Delhi Reprint 1995, First edition 1875.,p114

<sup>50</sup> Susan Bayly, (1992), p393

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

introduce what became the norm of the nineteenth century. The German Lutherans came to Tranquebar under the orders of the King of Denmark in the seventeenth century but really became active in the early decades of the eighteenth century when Ziegelbaug returned in 1707. Under his direction schools, churches, and a printing press were established. Under Benjamin Schultz (who was the next important Lutheran missionary who came to Tranquebar in 1719) the Lutherans moved to Madras 1726, in Black town and established a school teaching Tamil to children. Fabricus came in 1742 introduced the first Tamil Bible and the Tamil hymns.<sup>52</sup> Between 1745-60 thanks to the Anglo-French war they fled to Pulicat. And it was only in 1749 when the English recaptured the Madras, the congregation at Vepery was established.<sup>53</sup>

Another crucial factor which helped in the forming of Christian traditions in the region was the patronage networks of the 'little kings'. This was very similar what is termed today as the case of Muslim and Hindu shrines. Nobili was the court guru of the courts in the Salem region.<sup>54</sup> His Pandarswamis went on long tours and converted many in the Kallar, Uaiyar, Nayaka strongholds in the mid seventeenth century. A few years before his death, Beschi was honoured by Chanda Sahib who titled him as 'Ismathee Sanyasi' presented him with a palankeen and an inam grant. By the 1690s, the Sethupatis of Ramnad established themselves as the patrons of the miracle working St James shrine at Suranam. Later, around the 1730s the Sethupathi wrote to Tranquebar asking for Christian teachers and endowing a village for their support.<sup>55</sup> Kallar chiefs often invoked the

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<sup>52</sup> ER Bairlein, (1875), p141-2.

<sup>53</sup> *Madras Tercentenary Volume* 1939, Growth of the city, pp.343-5.

<sup>54</sup> Susan Bayly, p392.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

name of Christ. Palaiyakkarars chiefs of Sokampatti, Talaiyankottai of maravar origin, and patrons of the shrines in Sendamankulam. The Ettiapuram raja pledged to protect the area Christians.<sup>56</sup>

We also hear of a mix of social classes who profess the faith. If Nobili's disciples were upper caste - mainly Brahmans<sup>57</sup>, in the southern courts there is evidence of some converts under the teachings of a Sathianathan (a non-brahman) in 1729. Around the same time a soldier of the raja of Ramnad introduced his new faith to the Sivagangai court. There is also the instance of Rajanaiken a Roman catholic, a Parayar and a subordinate officer in the Tanjavur army who read the 'Palm leaves which the catechists gave him' and converted at the turn of the nineteenth century.<sup>58</sup> By the 1770s there is evidence of the migration of self professed Christian Vellalars moving to Tirunelveli from Tiruchirapalli. It was in the last two decades of the eighteenth century that the size of the non-Catholic groups grew in the Tirunelveli region.<sup>59</sup>

It is also important to consider that a fairly well established tradition of religious debate existed thanks in part, to the efforts of these missionaries. Nobili had extensive dialogue with the Brahmans of Madurai on customs, religious practice and theological doctrine. In 1608 there was a big debate between Nobili and the Brahman Sivadharmas on Shaivism attended by hundreds of listeners. His debate with a Valluvar ( a non Brahman Savant- priest) was conducted in front of the latter's 2000 followers.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p395-6

<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, Nobili's uppercaste bias created problems. The Paravas of Madurai as early as 1610 tried to fight the claims of elevated caste rank of the new converts.

<sup>58</sup> E R Bairlein, (1875), p183

<sup>59</sup> Frykenberg, (1976) p192.

<sup>60</sup> Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India- from the beginning to AD 1707*, Cambridge, 1982, p 286- 287, p294.

The forgoing overview of pre-colonial polity established the various social groups, sacred traditions and political entities active in the eighteenth century. In this frame, the East India Company emerges as a player having to compete with rival trading and political establishments for favourable trading terms and skilled labour. The next two sections will attempt to look at the new occupation driven social classes which emerged under Company influence. They will also address some transformations that were visible particularly in the new urban centres in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as the East India Company emerged as a source of paramount political dominance in the region.

### **Social groups under the Company**

The Dubashes were very much an eighteenth century institution that came to an end with the consolidation of political rule in the early 1800s. They were in personal service to the British as interpreters, translators, secretaries and importantly mediators especially with the princely courts. By 1800 the Dubash's job had been broken up into task related positions such as accountant secretary etc bringing an end to a 'Dubashi' era notorious for intrigues and embezzlement.

The post of the Dubash became very quickly the preserve of families. They began to acquire power as revenue farmers and included Mudaliars, Kanakapillai and Brahmans. We also have evidence of a low caste Parava Christian Dubash serving the Dutch but this seems to have been more the exception than the rule. After the 1750 - when the power of the Indian merchant was severely curtailed the Dubash filled in as money lender etc.

Dubashes were neither from rich trading backgrounds nor were they poor self made men. Yadava Dubash Ananda Ranga Pillai 's family were merchants. In a rare instance Pachaippa a relatively low caste Agamundariyars became a self made Dubash. He received the patronage of Narayana Pillai , was educated by him, inducted into the dubashi class who then served at the courts of Tanjavur and Arcot. His legacy funded many charitable institutions in the early nineteenth century.

While it would be logical to establish a connection between the scribal service class of the Telegu, Maratha Brahmans of the Carnatic and Tanjavur courts we find in fact they were not so numerous in the Dubashes group in the company establishments. Most Dubashes tended to be Vellalar, Yadavas or Kanikapillais. The Dubashes's intimate knowledge of the country made them indispensable. As did their Tamil identity (as opposed to the Telegu identity of most of the traders). They also served military officials and helped mediate with the court. like Narayana Pillai who helped the East Indian Company communicate with the Tanjavur court.

Dubashi ties cut across caste. Some of them tried to become caste heads. Religious gifting became very important especially as *dharmakartas* of temples. As the earlier discussion of Temple patronage indicates, many of the temples of the eighteenth century in madras were constructed by the Dubashes in their attempt to establish public reputations as 'big men'

Indian merchants were the second power group. We have instance of Colla Singhana Chetty setting up the vegetable market in 1804. As a group, they were badly hit by the economic downsizing and deliberate company policy in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century.



Arasaratnam argues that the above two trends at the expense of the Indian merchants pushed the power of the weavers caste heads up directly. In fact the service sector was a very vibrant section of Madras presidency . The growing European population of Madras required a range of services. The late 1700s saw a high demand and wages being available for traders artisans and the like. Vanniyars and Paraiyars migrated in large numbers to find work as wage labourers. Skilled worker like potters, bricklayers, carpenters, ironsmiths, palankeen bearers, boatmen. There were also special hamlets of potters, brick makers, itinerant traders, fishermen, herdsman, saltworkers, palm tree workers, leather workers, immigrant agriculturists, muslim bazaarmen, and Indian christian labourers.<sup>61</sup> All formed the lively section of the town till well into the second decade of the nineteenth century, giving it a more plebian outlook than is otherwise imagined.<sup>62</sup>

It is therefore that clear the early nineteenth century was in some senses saw the beginning of a new socio-political matrix where all these groups Dubashes, merchants, traders, service classes, as well as communities of specialists like the Paravas, Maraikkarars had to re- structure themselves.

The actual break has been dated by scholars like David Washbrook to the 1820s. The system of military fiscalism had unravelled, and as it did, there was a separation of capital and the institutions of the state which was also accompanied by bureaucratisation. The means of the Dubash and the Indian merchant reduced. 'Peasantisation' occurred as court systems wound down and those displaced back to the land as it was the only sustaining base. This period saw the expansion of

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p228.

<sup>62</sup> Susan Nield Basu, (1979), p224.

infrastructure , clearing of forested tracts. Nomads got increasingly settled and with diminishing mobility peasant production became more important.<sup>63</sup> The socially and economically secure and dominant magnate class need to spend on public cultural activities was greatly reduced.<sup>64</sup>

Religious centres were being devolved ( re-structured) Temple and court towns shrank. A case in point is the bureaucratisation of the temple in the early nineteenth century. Appadorai's study indicated that while the EIC participated in rituals , temples were not fundamental for expansion in the way that they were for earlier polities. So they did not participate in the exchange of honours, and the dharmakartas became important mediators between the temple and the State. On the other hand the day to day intervention in the temple functioning but withdrew from settling/ arbitration of disputes between participants. This meant that the functions of the State were essentially fragmented. So while the day to day power of the church warden grew his wider powers were curtailed.<sup>65</sup>

This transformation was accompanied on the whole sub continent with a series of conflicts. There were numerous going on in the society by way of religious movements. The missionaries therefore entered a dynamic society. The influence of course with the Christians changed the complexion of social interaction. It is with the latter interaction that my dissertation will engage with.

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<sup>63</sup> David Washbrook, 'Progress and problems: South Asian Economic and social history C 1720-1860', *Modern Asian Studies*, V 21, no 1, 1988, pp57-96.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Arjun Appadorai, *Worship and Conflict under Colonial Rule. A south Indian case*, Cambridge, 1981, Chapter 4.

## Chapter II

### Public Preaching and Tract Societies 1800- 1860

The first half of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of new associations for the transmission of ideas and the mobilisation of opinion. Apart from schools other institutions like tract societies and itinerant tours were hall marks of the new missionary style. This chapter seeks to examine this process, to ask if the early nineteenth century saw some kind of print culture and if it did, how it meshed with other forms of public communication such as public preaching. It will also seek to analyse if these new 'styles' re-structured the forms of dialogue and indeed the issues of debate between self-described religious communities.

Many studies have noted that the public use of writing in disputes was not unknown in the eighteenth century Tamil country. The warrior polities of the pre-Company regimes not only produced court literati from different scribal communities<sup>1</sup>, but also witnessed the use of notices and handbills in caste disputes as far back as 1716<sup>2</sup>. As far back as the seventeenth century, on being faced with the boycott of Brahman converts Missionary Nobili is said to have written a Tamil manifesto on an *olai*, a palm leaf and nailed it outside the church.<sup>3</sup> Printed tracts had

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Bayly notes in passing that the literati of the Arcot court were embroiled in a shia - sunni debate conducted through letters in the 1790s. See Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings, Muslims and Christians in South India 1700-1900*, Cambridge, 1989, p140.

<sup>2</sup> Kanaklatha Mukund, 'Caste conflict in South India in Early Colonial Port Cities 1650 -1800', *Studies in History*, No 11(1), 1995, p21.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India, The beginning to AD 1707*, Cambridge, 1992, p288.

also begun to be circulated, albeit sparsely . In 1716 Ziegalbaug the Lutheran Missionary circulated some pamphlets on 'heathenism'.<sup>4</sup>

Organised tract societies appeared much later. Following the Vellore mutiny in 1806 the East India Company prohibited missionaries from running subscription based newsletters and establish bible associations till the 1820s.<sup>5</sup> Further, it was only after 1835 that the inhabitants themselves could own presses and publish independently<sup>6</sup>. This means that there are not only very few examples of early print available to us but also that they are mostly produced by presses under Company or Missionary patronage.

Bayly argues that the absence of lithography before the 1830s and 1840s were perhaps due to politics because Indian rulers feared that the press would threaten their authority. Royal authority was already too fragile to support this further dissemination of ridicule. This in turn, he states, implies that there was a highly rich information order in place and printing was not required till society itself had changed under colonial rule.<sup>7</sup> However, evidence from the Tanjavur Court indicates

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<sup>4</sup> John Murdoch, *Classified Catalogue of Tamil Christian Literature at the End of the nineteenth Century*, Madras, 1901, p.3.

<sup>5</sup> James Hough, *The History of Christianity of India*, London, 1845, vol.4, p 60. Apart from this we know that the company continued to watch its soldiers and keep them isolated from the circuit of religious debate in the Public Arena. In fact, missionary George Pettit notes in his account of the Tirunelveli mission that as late as the 1820s, Mr Rhenius (a missionary in the region in the 1820s) had tried to extend his labours to the native regiment by distributing some tracts to and through them. The Fort adjunct forbade him to do continue. In George Pettit, *The Tinnevelly Mission of the CMS*, London, 1851, pp. 5-16.

<sup>6</sup> Dennis Hudson, 'Aramuga Navalar- Hindu Renaissance among the Tamils', in Kenneth Jones (ed.), *Religion and Conflict in South Asia*, SUNY, Albany, 1992, p28

<sup>7</sup> C A Bayly, *Empire and Information. Intelligence gathering and social communication in India. 1780-1870*, Cambridge, 1996, pp199-200.

that Royalty did patronise printing presses. The Raja of Tanjavur is said to have published Sanskrit and Marathi text books and pachangs or almanacs for local schools in 1805 from a palace establishment called the *Navavidya Kalanidhi*.<sup>8</sup>

It must be acknowledged that missionary sources tend to exaggerate the significance of tracts and their circulation. However it may be possible to explore the mode of distribution and use it to engage with the ideas of the shifting power of the written word. Certain questions can then be explored. How were the activities of the missionaries contested? Did it have an impact on the relations of power? What was the 'native' participation in institutions such as preaching and the writing of tracts? For instance, did tract societies, distribution, preaching and the presence of new forms of polemical material create a new form of sociability, re-structure power relations in public arenas by prioritising the culture of writing and literacy?

This chapter consists of three sections. The first explores tract societies and tracts and the second looks at its inter-penetration with lectures. This section will focus particularly on the forms of missionary preaching. The last section will explore some of the connections between the circulation of missionary material and the public articulation of anti-missionary opinion by focussing on the spread of the Bible.

While the SPCK mission press was set up in 1799 in Madras it was in 1805 that pamphlets of a religious nature first began to be regularly published and that too

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<sup>8</sup> *Indian Antiquary*, Volume 1, 1872, pp193-4

in English.<sup>9</sup> Again while the Madras Mission of the LMS established The Madras Bible and Tract Association by 1810, missionaries claimed there was a shortage of Bibles and tracts in the Southern regions of the sub-continent well into the second decade of the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> The Madras Religious Tract Society was established in 1818. Heavily supported by the parent society in London, it began to publish and distribute tracts widely and by 1832 it had distributed 41,658 Tamil tracts.<sup>11</sup> By the mid - nineteenth century, the tract society in Madras received 1,81,150 copies in Tamil and distributed 1,37,536 of them. In comparison, it only received 24,757 copies in English and distributed 13,722.<sup>12</sup>

### **Tamil Tract Societies**

In the early nineteenth century, a fair amount of missionary print, preaching and teaching was done in the local language- in this region predominantly in Tamil. "It is vain to try to Christianise India through the medium of the English language, and vain to spread the gospel in any language other than the vernacular among the masses. These languages are venerable and have a deep hold, many are highly polished and may be moulded to embrace almost any circle of thought though they are at present polluted and distorted by the influence of heathenism..... may be

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<sup>9</sup> James Hough, (1845), Volume 4, p151.

<sup>10</sup> *Proceedings of the South India Missionary Conference held at Ooty, April 19 - May 5, Madras SPCK, Vepery, 1858, 32*; James Hough, *The History of Christianity*, Vol 4, p252.

<sup>11</sup> *14th Report for 1832 Madras Religious Tract Society*, Vepery 1833, p 36.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p56.

purified to convey the knowledge both religious and secular."<sup>13</sup> For the Madras Mission of the LMS, vernacular languages were very important. Thus, in Pursewaukam in 1831, it was English services that were discontinued because it was inconvenient to have both languages in the same place.<sup>14</sup> Again the CMS prioritised vernaculars rather than English.<sup>15</sup> By 1856, the Madras Board of American Missionaries Press switched over to publish only in Tamil.<sup>16</sup> There was also an attempt to produce a uniform Tamil scripture. Thus translation was very important for missionaries and by the same token, for the tract societies

There are well known instances also of local participation in the process. In Palayamcottai, for instance, a Native Tract Society, with local contribution was established in 1822. Missionary accounts noted the participation of non-Christians in its work and annual meetings.<sup>17</sup> The Mayaveram Tract Association was formed in 1832. Again, 1000 inhabitants attended the Neyoor Tract Society meeting in 1830s<sup>18</sup> and the SPG report noted that the Tamils from Nazareth collected Rs 5000 towards pamphlet production and distribution.<sup>19</sup>

There is also evidence of locals writing tracts. One Purusurama Mudaliar, of Wallajahpettah composed a tract which, a missionary claimed, was quite good. In

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<sup>13</sup> *Proceedings of the South India Missionary Conference held at Ooty, April 19- May 5, Madras SPCK. Vepery, 1858, p175.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p33.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p54.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p49.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p67.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

the tract he set forth the benevolent design of the people of Europe in sending his countrymen (whom he proved were buried in ignorance and superstition). The Christians were the teachers of truth, and this truth he had discovered by reading tracts.<sup>20</sup> An old Tamil schoolmaster wrote a tract on the importance of education which was immensely popular with the women in Coimbatore in the 1830s.<sup>21</sup> While the quarrel between the Abbe Dubois and James Hough is seen as an important example of the quarrel between the Roman catholic and the Protestant churches<sup>22</sup>, the dialogue with non-Christian Tamil which was really interesting in which Tamil Christians like Vedanayaka Shastrier, and the more humble catechist participated<sup>23</sup>.

Among the different tracts that were published were dialogues, expositions from the scripture, exhortations against idolatry and other 'unchristian' practices. Often these tracts cited evidence from extant sacred literature- the popular iconoclastic poetry of the siddhars, the verses of Avvaiyar and so on. While there was a focus on using local literature there was often a twist such as spelling books for schools based on scriptural examples. Another such instance was the missionary interest in the Almanac.

In 1836 the Jaffna Tract society sent a Tamil almanac to the mainland and 250 copies of it were distributed.<sup>24</sup> While the lack of funds prevented it from being

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<sup>20</sup> *Madras Religious Tract Society Proceedings*, 1832, p14.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p54.

<sup>22</sup> Frykenberg, (1976),p199.

<sup>23</sup> The records of the missionaries often note the composition of tracts by local catechists. Important names include Catechist Samuel and Devasagayam. They were mostly active in the Tirunelveli region. See in *Church Missionary Record*.

<sup>24</sup> *Madras Religious Tract Society*,1837, p8.



republished immediately, by 1840 a Tamil calendar was being composed and sold by the Tract Society. This was printed from the Jaffna publication and was considerably abridged. It contained 'not only the ephemeris, with the astronomical and astrological calculations of the native almanacs, accompanied by an exposure of the absurdity of the latter, but a brief clear explanation of the Ten Commandments on the same leaf and opposite page of the ephemeris.' The calendar proved to be very popular for the calculations leading the Missionaries to hope that at least then it would be 'read and deliver natives from superstition and the clutches of the Brahman'.<sup>25</sup> The missionary report claimed that such almanacs paved the way for truth from the bible rather than purely religious tracts that were not as popular. Instead there was a need felt for tracts with a picture such as an eclipse, planetary system hemisphere.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, a similar process is observed in Maharashtra in the 1840s.<sup>27</sup>

### **Reaching the audience- sites for preaching**

'In the early stages when a mission enters a new field, and is unable to speak fluently in the native language, or where access to people is difficult, or where the object of their labours is viewed with suspicion, Vernacular schools are a cheap way of disarming prejudice and diffuse knowledge of Christ even when the schoolmasters are heathen.'<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p3.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p5.

<sup>27</sup> Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and ideology. Mahatma Jotirao Phule and low caste protest in nineteenth century western India*, Cambridge, 1988, p77.

<sup>28</sup> *Proceedings*, 1858, p175.

Given this sentiment it is easy to understand why the early nineteenth century saw a veritable boom of missionary organised schools beginning from the 1790s. Vernacular day schools were established for the poor and Anglo-vernacular for the upper orders were the most successful. There were strict attempts not to use 'heathen' books, Christian hymns were taught and the paucity of Christian teachers was lamented.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, many non-Christian masters were employed to impart secular education but were constantly supervised.<sup>30</sup>

While there were very few conversions the dissemination of Christian knowledge was very wide. It can also be argued that the paucity of Tamil Christian schoolmasters may indicate that educated native Christians were fewer in number. This made the preaching, particularly itinerant preaching crucial to the transmission of the ideology of Christianity and an important channel of dialogue between the missionaries and the non-Christian public. While schoolrooms were crucial institutions of transmission, it must be noted that they were crucial physical spaces used for preaching, tract distribution and as reading rooms once the classes for the day were over.

The following excerpt from a missionary report of the CMS indicates how Schoolrooms served a variety of purposes.' Besides regular service ...we have every week at Madras three meetings in our schoolrooms, chiefly for the purpose of imparting Christian instruction to the Heathen. We begin the meetings by singing a Hymn, which is the means of bringing the Heathen together; then we proceed to read and expound on a portion off the scriptures; and we conclude with a prayer to God

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p180.

<sup>30</sup> *Proceedings of the Religious Tract Society*, 1838, p34.

for his blessing upon the instructions, which have been imparted. After the meeting is concluded, we have usually an opportunity to converse with the people ... these meetings also furnish us with an opportunity to distribute tracts to those who know how to read.<sup>31</sup>

There are other similar examples available. The Madras Mission of the LMS preached the gospel in Schoolrooms.<sup>32</sup> The Madras Board of American Missionaries held open sabbath services in their schools.<sup>33</sup> Some reports noted that the Nagercoil school of the CMS was an important site to transmit tracts to non-Christians.<sup>34</sup> In fact, from the late 1830s, schoolrooms became the centre of heated disputes between the missionaries and local inhabitants who protested against the propagation of the gospel through them. The example of the Salay Street dispute is one such example and will be analysed in greater detail in the next chapter.

What is clearly indicated is that preaching was of crucial importance to the exchange of ideas in the public arena.<sup>35</sup> Itinerant preaching was important because it was a powerful means of transmission despite few direct conversions.<sup>36</sup> It is also important to note that preaching allowed the missionaries to address the mass of lower castes, which was not literate. As the Madras Mission LMS noted the higher classes did not attend public preaching.<sup>37</sup>

The American missionary Reverend Scudder for instance argued that public

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<sup>31</sup> *Church Missionary Record*, October 1831, p224.

<sup>32</sup> *Proceedings of the conference*, p32.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p40.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p56.

<sup>35</sup> Public speeches in street meetings were not a new development. See C A Bayly, (1996), p202.

<sup>36</sup> *Proceedings*, p149.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp34-5.

preaching in Tamil was adapted to cities and when thronged streets were a problem, *zayats* could be constructed. The Free Church of Scotland in Triplicane he pointed out preached in the market street where the best and most interesting audiences were to be found.<sup>38</sup>

### **Public preaching in the city**

By the 1850s, preaching was carried out in every big town and in every main street in the Tamil region. The CMS report of the period record that public preaching was widespread. 'Preaching to the heathens is carried out in every thoroughfare of this great city with no intermission including regular school visits, weekly meeting at the stables on Mount Road, boatmen meetings at North and South beach, and efforts to meet the scavengers. 80-90 horse keepers listen to the preachers every week.. South beach is another fruitful site employing a reader and schoolmaster. All classes of society are addressed cart depot, sheep markets, jails, hospitals, the house of industry, and private families all were visited by the Native agents.<sup>39</sup> The preaching stations visited weekly include - the leper hospital, Monegar Choultry, South Beach, Taylor's stables, Waller's stables, emigration depot, bandy depot and scavenger's depot.<sup>40</sup> A CMS report noted that it Madras branch, held meetings to instruct Heathens and Roman Catholics at Machee garden and the Paracherry.<sup>41</sup> Both

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p152.

<sup>39</sup> *Madras Religious Tract Society Report*, 1853,p53.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p 54.

<sup>41</sup> The settlement of the outcastes.

reportedly well attended and followed by tract distribution.<sup>42</sup>

The American Missionaries focussed on bazaars where they built Zayats to proclaim the gospel. Copied from their Missionary activities in Burma, the Zayat was a room built near the principle market of the town. Here with a catechist missionaries like Reverend Scudder would spend an hour, morning and afternoon, for six days a week, speaking to considerable numbers. The audience was admitted by companies into the room, after being examined to ascertain whether they could read. After an address they were given tracts to read. As many cart drivers etc. attended these sessions the tracts were distributed to distant parts of the country. At the zayat in the church compound in Chintadripettah, for instance, one afternoon a week was occupied in preaching and in the distribution of books, for several years.<sup>43</sup>

Another important site of public address and preaching were the local festivals and fairs. Missionaries, accompanied by local catechists and readers and assistants, addressed the vast crowds and distributed handbills and tracts. That this was a fairly systematic enterprise can be gauged from the reports sent in and the few examples of Tamil handbills that survived which were expressly written for the audience at these gatherings. The Bathing Festival at Mayavaram was particularly important. People gathered from all over the region - places like Madras, Kanchipuram Pondicherry, Tiruchirapalli, Nagore. At these gatherings readers read and explained many tracts.<sup>44</sup> Missionaries also built taneer pandals (water tents) on

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<sup>42</sup> *Church Missionary Record*, 1833, p45.

<sup>43</sup> *Proceedings of the Missionary conference*, op cit., p 60.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p 8.

important pilgrimage routes such as the one built on the public road from Travancore to Trichendur to preach and distribute tracts.

### **Method of Preaching**

The extensive debate on public preaching in the vernacular in the missionary conference of 1858 discussed the merits of different methods of preaching used by the different groups in the south India. The general consensus was that preaching had to be done mainly on the itinerating system to allow persons of every caste to have the opportunity to hear the gospel again and again.<sup>45</sup> The distinct impression again is the eagerness to address a popular audience which would be unavailable in schools. The missionaries were also aware that it had to be flexible and adapt to the character of local conditions- there could not be any set rule on the method of preaching other than a few guidelines. The Tirunelveli model was cited in terms of effectiveness as worthy of emulation.

The itinerant establishment of the Tirunelveli mission consisted of four Europeans, and forty native catechists, half of whom spoke English. Some of them were funded by local subscription funds.

The general modus operation was as follows. A tent was pitched. with the catechist's assistance and the missionary then visited the neighbouring villages. The superior native catechists at times assisted by a helper. Most visits were paid singly, to preach in the morning and in the evening. This was done to cover more ground.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p144.

The only time they took companions was due to ill health, to train a novice or if they feared opposition.<sup>46</sup>

There was no oral preparation because the circumstances of each speech was so unique and different. They also invariably met with objections which it was difficult to avoid answering at once. The preachers did find it useful for to prepare a few stock responses and illustrations to handle current objections. There is evidence that the missionaries used institutions to gather and train native agents in a certain amount of theological knowledge. While the success rate was dubious, it can be argued that the idea of transmitting knowledge in this manner of systematic pedagogy was new and powerful.

That it was met with equally powerful opposition is also clearly evident. Accounts bemoan of the troubles of the preacher -'Condemned by the worldly, unappreciated by a sensual nation, who attribute false motives as the ground of endurance and perseverance, frequently wounded by their bitter aspersions, shocked by their obscenities, and pierced through by hideous blasphemes, pressed by shrewd objections, annoyed by plausible sophistries, and embarrassed by knotty questions, stoned and beaten yet he perseveres.'<sup>47</sup>

This system depended heavily on local 'native helpers'. They served as translators, companions, and establishment workers like cooks. Many of them were Christian though some ( a few school masters and in one case a grass cutter) were

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp144-5.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p154.

not. It is important to note that many of the members of the establishment were of low caste. They included lascars, cooks, water boys, horse keepers and grass cutters. These travelling bands were more or less self-sufficient though they relied on local coolies and bandies to carry their belongings and the villagers for food and access to water.<sup>48</sup> Other forms of support came from 'Native' teachers- acquainted with sermons, itinerating and preaching. Larger stations had catechists who taught elementary knowledge to as yet unbaptised adults. An important member of the establishment was the Reader. The Reader was a humbler class of native assistant, who although not very educated was able to read the bible to those assembled.<sup>49</sup> The education of these three persons was of great importance for the system to work. For it was felt that their education had to be superior so that when questioned their knowledge would stand above cavilling and they would win respect for the church.<sup>50</sup>

Significantly, there was also an attempt made by the missionaries to prohibit the access of these low caste helpers to English education. This was done in order to maintain their 'army' of devoted preachers and workers. 'For the lower orders we must work in the vernacular, the higher classes will be tempted by English education to shift to other occupations.... Therefore English should not be encouraged in some orders of Native agents.'<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp147-8.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p162.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p163.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p164.



### **The inter- penetration of tracts and public preaching.**

The chapter has so far discussed the parallel trends of tract societies and public preaching in Madras Presidency in the first half of the nineteenth century. This section will argue that these activities were considerably dependent on each other. In most cases these activities took place simultaneously.

In Tiruchirapalli for instance Tamil tracts were given to catechists, school masters, congregation members, and two readers who were employed in reading and conversing with the natives. They read them aloud in order to arrest the attention of those who would pass by. In conversations they would often find a way of introducing tracts to be read as an illustration of one or the topic under discussion.<sup>52</sup>

In another account of preaching in Madras, a missionary recounted his experience at the Evening bazaar opposite the Esplanade. He ingratiated himself with a tradesman who allowed him to sit in the verandah of his house.' I at once made most of the opportunity to read to him and the others from the precious book in hand. I began to expound on what I had read and exhorted them to believe in the bible. The reaction was full of goodwill.'<sup>53</sup>

Not all experiences were so pleasant. At Royapuram for instance, there was some preaching once a week at the house of a native merchant in the midst of the Roman Catholics by the American missionaries. The Catholics attempted to prevent this and 'made a great noise with drums and native instruments, miscalled musicals: burnt noisome things, in the verandah of an adjacent house, throwing dry chillies into

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p9.

<sup>53</sup> *Church Missionary Record*, November 1848, p156.

the fire ... threw stones into the room and at length burnt down the building.<sup>54</sup> But the missionaries persevered and rebuilt the room.

At another time the missionaries pitched a tent outside the walls of the town. 'At one time we preached and distributed books for about a fortnight in such a tent. One day the people mobbed us, and when we had company brought it down on our heads. We got police protection being once or twice pelted with stones'<sup>55</sup>.

### **The circulation of tracts**

Despite the apparent lack of success in tract induced conversion and the overwhelming illiteracy of the population why did tract and missionary societies flood the region with pamphlets. One reason of course that it was , as we have seen above, an important component of preaching activities which were aimed to reach a mass audience. The second reason was that they saw that the tract could go where the missionary could not- into zenanas; it could be read in private by men who were ashamed to do so in public; it could be read out to members of a community and to families by young students and other member of the audience. It was thus important that tract circulation be planned carefully and the tracts themselves engage with local lives. In turn, missionary reports were filled with accounts of a thirsty audience clamouring for tracts in the markets, in churches, accosting priests on their travels etc. It was felt that it was important to sell rather than distribute gratis for the latter bred contempt.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> *Proceedings of the Missionary conference*, pp47-8.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.,p227.

It is possible to argue that wide range of people were familiar with the Christian tenets because of the tracts. For instance, potential converts in Tirunelveli feared the Zamindar ire. He had told the catechist 'that your Vedam is very good but it must not be in my territory ' as the swamy he complained was not being fed anymore.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps this implies that the tracts were quite effective in transmitting information about the faith. In another instance, a weaver in Cuddapah collected tracts but being illiterate got others to read them out to him.<sup>58</sup>

#### **Survey of Tract reading and distribution**

There is some amount of information that can be gleaned on reading practices. A circular sent around in 1841 to all mission stations asking the following questions- How large a reading population were the missionaries able to access? How many tracts were distributed? Were they destroyed or carefully preserved? Which publications were popular? What were the suggested improvements? Was the language and subject matter relatively easy to understand?

The answers were varied. In Royapettah a fairly large reading population was reported. Where as in St Thome , tracts were distributed only to those who could read and as a result not many were distributed. At the festival of St Thome many Hindus and Muslims came for tracts and were examined to on their ability to read.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p6.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.,pp56-7.

In Madurai tracts were distributed in many schools, at three reading rooms, where catechists were stationed, at mission house and on the main streets.

On the other hand it was reported that some publications were occasionally destroyed at Nellore.<sup>60</sup> In Coimbatore however, tracts were preserved for years and a small reading library was formed in the houses of local inhabitants<sup>61</sup>. In Combaconam, The Tamil calendars were very popular as was the tract *Gyanasaram* written by Rhenius.<sup>62</sup>

Distribution occurred at all places where the principle inhabitants collected to renew their annual revenue settlement with the collector, and at annual fairs. In Madurai two book stalls were set up at the main gates of the city. A man was stationed in each at forenoon to read, distribute tracts and sell school books. The stall also addressed custom from travellers from outside the town. It was able to distribute 12,000 tracts etc. annually.<sup>63</sup>

Many suggestions for improvement also poured in. Some wanted the society to publish the more popular tracts in small form as they could then be placed in the turbans and in the fold of the cloth which is done often to read them at leisure or in secret.<sup>64</sup> There was also the suggestion that tracts be written on the nature of schoolbooks countering something to be valued by the natives irrespective of religious instruction. Two such tracts- one a spelling lesson the other which included the sayings of Avvaiyar were very successful .

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.,p59.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp54-5.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.,p62.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.,p55.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.,pp54-5.

### The 'Curious Native'

There was, as scholars have shown, a very alive tradition of debate and discussion in the sub continent between missionaries and locals well before the 1820s and the distribution of printed tracts. In 1804 Raghaviah, an English educated Tamil Brahman, engaged in a detailed correspondence of a refutation of Hinduism during a debate in the Fort William College in Calcutta.<sup>65</sup> Jmmapamam Pillai, completed his *Hindu Shastrayin Vedanta Villakam* ('An exposition on Hindu Shastra philosophy') in 1801.<sup>66</sup>

Missionary accounts were inherently contradictory about the nature of the response of the audience to the dialogue initiated by tracts and preaching. So while on the one hand, the Hindu mind is not used to criticism<sup>67</sup>, knowledge of shastras were important. For it was 'by no means often that we have to argue with them and they possess more than a smattering knowledge themselves'<sup>68</sup>... ..they also know the gospel through the tract and vernacular preaching.<sup>69</sup> The question that arises then is whether this audience can be seen as unified response to missionary activities.

Again, while there is case for the printed word constructing a standardised level of linguistic knowledge and theological debate, it is doubtful whether this resulted in a monolith 'imagined community'. Tracts in fact addressed different

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<sup>65</sup> C A Bayly, (1996), p213.

<sup>66</sup> Dennis Hudson, 'Arumuga Navalar and the Hindu renaissance among the Tamils', in Jones (ed) *Religious Controversy in British India. Dialogues in South Asian languages*, Albany, 1992, p246.

<sup>67</sup> *Proceedings of the Missionary Conference*.p11.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*,p149.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*,p151

groups in different ways and languages. Distribution and even public addresses were audience specific and obviously determined by religious purpose. The tract society published pamphlets to address different audiences such as Muslim, Catholics, Hindus and their own congregation , for special occasions, targeting special practices.. Some were specially written for Christians to improve their Christian knowledge and practice.<sup>70</sup> Others were dialogues with 'gurus' of different non-Christian religions. It also evoked varying responses. The Catholics for instance were active opponents often burning tracts in an organised way and calling themselves 'sathiavedakarren' (the true vedam followers)<sup>71</sup>; 'Hindus' were more ( the missionaries argued) induced into dialogue; the Muslims were the most disinterested.

What was however interesting was the response to missionary produced school books. The missionaries wanted to introduce school books which were strictly Christian in content. The aim was to supplant the 'use of immoral tales and songs' in schools. This created a series of disputes. In 1833 the Church Missionary Record reported that the local inhabitants would not read Christian books, nor permit their children to attend a Christian school but that these prejudices were fading.<sup>72</sup>: By 1841 there was an active move to seek the restoration of the books.

The last section will analyse the dispute over this issue which became a part of the larger mobilisation of local opinion on the bible and missionary activity in general in the early years of the 1840s.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.,p9.

<sup>71</sup> *Report of the Madras Religious Tract Society*, 1848, p 20.

<sup>72</sup> *Church Missionary Record*, 1833, p47.

### **The Bible controversy- transmission of the book and its impact**

By the 1820s, many missionary societies had begun flooding the region with pamphlets and bibles and used the 'book' extensively to preach to the 'heathen'. The bible was also used in missionary schools as shown by the following account by James Hough, the chaplain of the Tirunelveli station.<sup>73</sup> In a school that mainly catered to 'respectable' inhabitants, Hough noted in 1820 that his students learnt reading, writing, arithmetic and elements of English grammar. Among other texts, the books used were the New Testament and Sellon's History of the Bible.. Hough noted that while the choice could 'alarm the prejudices of the people', their fears had been dispelled gradually. The students who included Muslims, Gujaratis, elite non - Brahmans and Brahmans were the offspring of respectable inhabitants, native subordinates of the Company and army men. Thus, there are indications that a collective learning at institutions had begun outside traditional schools. Hough further noted that the boys took pains to procure Tamil translations of these books to read at home and few left without begging to take away these books. He felt that the Bible could only influence these future officers of the State for the better. Of course, it is possible that he was ingratiating himself to the Company. What is clear however, is that he under- estimated the unease of the 'respectable' inhabitants. Along with the new churches, 'the book' came to be widely identified as a symbol of missionary conversion and power in the early nineteenth century.

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<sup>73</sup> Public Cons, 7 Feb.1820, V546, TNA.

In 1828, petitioners from Tirunelveli complained that the 'European Missionaries having come to the country, sent teachers to the villages, and by means of the books they have cunningly made and printed and their exercising various contrivances' converted the low caste people many of whom were slaves. The petitioners claimed that these converts thinking the Honourable Company had come in the charge of the missionaries, became bold and turned to the religion of Christ.'<sup>74</sup>

Matters boiled over in the 1840s when a full fledged controversy erupted on whether the bible was to be introduced as a textbook in government schools.<sup>75</sup> Angry memorialists protested against the State patronage of biblical knowledge in public examinations which favoured the selection of Christians rather than meritorious students. This engagement with the rules of the State went beyond an orthodox Hindu reaction. It was not so much the disruption of custom that was crucial to the criticism but the partisan employment of native officers within which the knowledge of Christian theology was inscribed. The State itself was divided on the issue and often claimed misrepresentation. This was also criticised by men like Chamier, member of the Council, who asked for transparency so that the State was not seen as a 'vehicle of the book'.<sup>76</sup>

Many scholars have noted that the fear of the Bible was rampant among the upper classes and the most of the missionary converts in the region were lower caste. However, an 1820 Tamil petition from the Christian inhabitants of Pursewalkam a settlement in Madras, cautions any generalised statements about the homogeneity of

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<sup>74</sup> Judicial Cons, 2 September 1828, TNA.

<sup>75</sup> Public Cons, there are many references right through 1846-7, TNA.

<sup>76</sup> Public Cons, 23 February, 1847, no 40, TNA.



the native Christian community, the uniform spread of the book or indeed the Company policy of patronising these ventures or permitting the native Christians 'to have their way'.<sup>77</sup> The Pursewalkam Christians who identified themselves neither as missionary converts nor as separatists from missionary societies, petitioned the Company for permission to pray together and publish their own Tamil Bible. They claimed 'to read and compare the sacred text with itself ...deriving all knowledge of the Christian religion from the Bible itself.' Since their theological views differed from the missionary societies, they complained of having to face hardship and censure. Therefore, though poor and few in number they wanted to print their Tamil book of prayers for the benefit of their family and friends. On investigation, they turned out to be a group of Unitarians led by a former butler, William Robbers or Vellala Mooraparathoo as he signed himself.<sup>78</sup> The Company felt that if permission was granted to publish the book it would be considered by 'the lower classes as an authority for the opinions they profess and may attract converts'. If ignored, they would remain what they were now - a fringe sect. Evidently what was allowed into the public arena was sought to be constantly controlled. Thus, small groups and the State were aware of the potency of print and of the impact of Company patronage of the 'book' long before the large scale penetration of print culture which occurred in the later nineteenth century . It is also apparent that there were attempts made by people other than the elite to express and publicise their doctrines long before 1835 when the Company allowed the first native presses.

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<sup>77</sup> Public Cons, 7 July, 1820, no 12, TNA.

<sup>78</sup> Public Cons, 1 August, 1820, no 37-38, TNA.

From the above discussion it is possible to argue as this chapter has done, that the penetration of printed tracts was a fairly complex process. It included as much the arena of the spoken word as it did the written. By the same token it addressed an audience that was wider than the upper caste literate layer of society it has traditionally been seen to address.

### Chapter III

#### Re-Structuring Sacred Space: Disputes Over Church Building 1800-1850

This chapter seeks to use church disputes to analyse the ways in which new kinds of missionary activity contributed to the re-structuring of public space, associativeness and perhaps a new sociability. The dispute over the building of Protestant churches was perhaps a prominent character of the first half of the nineteenth century in the Tamil area. It was different from the earlier long standing dispute about sacred sites - like San Thome- where there were rival traditions of worship- contentious myths about divinity.<sup>1</sup> This was a straightforward attempt to argue for the exclusive rights to urban space crucially mediated by the East India Company and forms of 'legal' recourse such as the process of petitioning.

The chapter argues that the new attempts made by Protestant missionary organizations to build churches and the disputes that surrounded them assumes significance in plotting the trajectory of new sociability. Church building became quite widespread from about the end of the second decade of the nineteenth century. What was new was not the church itself but the manner in which it was erected- and the place chosen as the site. This chapter argues that they were now begun to be built in stone, and often sought to be built in crowded main thoroughfares - in neighborhoods which were not exclusively Christian ( unlike earlier) - so were not exclusively for the service of the converted congregation.

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See Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings. Muslims and Christians in south Indian society, 1700-1900*, Cambridge, 1992, pp58-86.

Instead the churches became sites of public preaching and lectures, they often doubled as school rooms and housed a reading room etc. that was open to non Christians. The church was thus becoming a player in the public arena and despite internal convulsions, allowed lower castes access to prayer halls.

Quite naturally, there was a reaction of fear and aggression among the local inhabitants. Many studies have pointed out that the social composition of these protesting disputants were upper caste land holding elite<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps these disputes need to be seen in the changing context of Temples administration. In the nineteenth century Temples became increasingly bureaucratised and it may be possible to speculate that this re-orientation had two consequences. One, it represented the decreasing significance of the temples in the circulation of resource unlike previous epochs. Two, it simultaneously highlighted the power of the lay patron who were usually of the Vellalar and Chettiar caste<sup>3</sup>. We note that the lay patron was a very important player in temple related disputes.<sup>4</sup> They now were active petitioners in temple related litigation and were key actors rather than the priests themselves. Given that there was a perceptible new vulnerability in the protection of temples ( due to the shifting Company policy towards temples), the erection of churches with what was feared as tacit State support was seen with disfavour by these groups. Thus these protests became important markers then, of a new kind of public religiosity .

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<sup>2</sup> R F Frykenberg, 'The impact of conversion and social reforms in south India during the late Company period', in CH Philips and MD Wainwright, *Indian Society and the beginning of Modernization c.1830-1850*, London, 1975, pp87-243.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Pffaffenberger, 'Caste in Tamil Culture, The religious foundations of Sudra domination in Tamil Sri Lanka', in *Foreign and Comparative Studies, South Asian series No 7*, Maxwell School of citizenship and Public affairs, Syracuse, 1982.

<sup>4</sup> Carol Breckenridge, 'From Protector to litigant: Changing relations between the hindu temples and the Raja of Ramnad', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol 14, No1, 1977.

This chapter also seeks to understand these negotiations as not merely the protection of 'hollow crowns' or symbolic honors ( which is what most studies for this period emphasise)<sup>5</sup>. There is evidence to show that very real battles over traditional space were being fought at the same time ( such as the fight over churches) by the same participants. Thus this chapter, on the one hand, tries to explore beyond the 'symbolic honour' problematic and on the other hand, the treating of church disputes as merely missionary induced orthodox backlash<sup>6</sup>. To do so, it becomes important to highlight the texts of the petitions submitted and the activities of the participants in the disputes - to try and forge links church disputes and other quarrels in the region. Lastly it will try and plot the shaping of this new discourse on inter-religious contentious tradition in the 1820s- 1840s, to analyse how it was determined by Company policy regarding temples, religious disputes, petitions, analyses of custom, law and legality.

In other words the chapter will attempt to suggest that analysing disputes surrounding the building of churches can be one possible way of charting early public associativeness. At the same time it seeks to problematise the notion of a monolith 'Hindu' reaction to missionary activity. The first part of the chapter explores the narratives of the various disputes to show how the crises in social norms brought about by the perceived fear of the Missionary and the Company's own shifting policy of patronage. It will chart the formation of new collectivities which arose to counter these 'fears'. This will be followed by a section analysing

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Bayly (1992) for muslim and christian shrines and Appadorai's definitive and oft cited work on the litigation around the Sri Parthasarathy temple in *Worship and Conflict in Colonial Rule*, Cambridge, 1981.

<sup>6</sup> R F Frykenberg, (1975), p.210.

the significant role of churches ( from these disputes) The chapter ends with an attempt to read these disputes as highlighted by the perceived changes in the Temple administration system and the role of the Company therein. It will attempt to understand how these disputes were a crucial facet of a wider attempt by certain groups of society to assert new solidarities.

### **The Company and Missionary complaints in the first two decades of the nineteenth century**

There is some evidence to note that the Government was interested in the state of Christianity in the Presidency much before the Charter Acts of 1813 and 1833. For instance, as early as 1806, as the Governor of Madras, Lord Bentick, considered by historians to be representative of the 'new' Utilitarian temperament<sup>7</sup>, issued a minute on Christianity<sup>8</sup>. The minute stated the lack of 'General knowledge about different sects of the churches of Christ on the west coast' which were 'interesting objects of research' and came 'peculiarly within the description of information required by Court of Directors'. Bentick articulated his own vision 'Our first wish must be to see the followers of Mohmedans and Brahmanism embrace Christianity. Adherence to this or that Church is secondary. I add that this great population require that all Christian sects live in charity and with each other and mutually support each other.'

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<sup>7</sup> Eric Stokes, *English Utilitarians in India*, Delhi, 1960, p 4.

<sup>8</sup> Public Cons, 27 June 1806, V 313, TNA.

For the most part however till the 1820s, the Company did perceive itself as a neutral arbitrator of religious controversy. The records of the Fort St. George show that there were any number of missionary complaints of 'native obstruction and impudence' especially during 'heathen' festivals which the Company did not really encourage. For instance, in 1810, Rev Pohle wrote in to complain that there were rumours that the Brahmans of Tiruchirapalli had formally applied to the Government to oppose and close missionary church and schools. The annoyed missionary wrote, 'I'm sorry to say that they're never satisfied though favoured with having their solicitations granted. For some time since they went with their dead idols without permission to do so, cut trees shading the church, had the impudence through agents to have the church open. And me to stand in my official garments at the gate while they passed by with their idols. Accusing them of having 'no regard for public good, no established worship of the true god, no schools to instruct the poor peoples children, no resolution to make men wise and happy' he feared that the occupation of the barracks hinder the activities of his church.'<sup>9</sup> Interestingly he also argued that such concessions were not asked of the Company by the Roman Catholics or the Muslims.

### **The Munnarswamy Kovil Street Dispute, 1817**

The inhabitants of Madras sent in a petition to the Fort St George Government about the erection of a new church in Munnarswamy Kovil Street.<sup>10</sup> They argued that it was going to come up on street solely occupied by caste Hindus and would disturb their religious ceremonies compelling them to quit their

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<sup>9</sup> Public Cons, 20 November 1811, V 375, TNA.

<sup>10</sup> Public Cons, 30 October 1817, V449, no 67, TNA.

inhabitation. They stated that there was a temple directly in front of the proposed site of the church and this would entail a future breach of peace; that lower castes would be allowed to enter street and 'defile its environment'; that Christian churches were usually built in areas not inhabited by Hindus. The Government felt that as great alarm was being felt about the fear of local conversion to Christianity (however unfounded) it was imperative that they be re-assured.<sup>11</sup> Following this letter, orders were given that the building of the disputed church be suspended.<sup>12</sup>

The stalling of the church building was objected to by the missionaries. Rev. Thompson wrote in an address in the 'allegations' contained in the petition<sup>13</sup>. The range of arguments employed bear some detail examination. He first objected to the idea that the street on which the church was to be built was one exclusively inhabited by Hindus. Second, that the name of the street was not commonly known as Munnarswamy Koil Street but Aucharappan Street and thereby accused the petitioners of imputing something sacred to the street. The street was in fact a 'free street' used by people of all communities. He also asserted that the church was being built for the native Protestants and not 'foreigners' - the group using the church was obviously familiar with the 'manners and customs of the Locals' and would desist from impinging on their rights. He thus felt that the fears about the disruption of temple ceremonies was unfounded. Churches of a similar nature had been built in the immediate vicinity of temples in places like Tanjavur and Tiruchirapalli without causing any outrage. The threat to withdraw from habitation,

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<sup>11</sup> Public Cons, 12 November 1817, V450, no 34, TNA.

<sup>12</sup> Public Cons, 12 November 1817, V 450, no 35, TNA.

<sup>13</sup> Thompson's argument culled from Public Cons, 23 December 1817, V 451, no 39, TNA.



he argued, was also not serious as nothing like had happened near any other kind of church building.

The problem, he argued was caused by two prominent 'natives'. 'Several Natives of consequence who were applied to for signatures disapproved and refused to sign...of those who did many were not induced by community of feeling but personal loyalty.'<sup>14</sup> One of the prime actors was the chief Dubash of Ellis.<sup>15</sup> Besides, he cited evidence that caste Hindus were not averse to the missionary exercise and some had in fact donated money for the building. Missionary Thompson also counter argued that if their plea was refused 'native Christians' would feel slighted. The native Christians who also sent a petition with 101 signatures supported this argument and stated that building houses of worship were not against the shastras.<sup>16</sup>

The objective behind building the church was to disseminate Christian knowledge to local converts. In a subscription letter circulated to build the church, the CMS argued 'The most important knowledge imparted is the knowledge of Christian religion. In order that not only children and youth but also adults have the opportunity to understand the word of god and the doctrines of the Christian Churches, as well as for the sake of natives of black town and its immediate vicinity, who though nominally Christian, are, from want of instruction grossly ignorant of Christianity, it has been resolved to build it in Black town- a church in which divine service practised, sermons delivered and sacraments administered in

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> This is an interesting accusation and continues the creation of a larger reputation of dubashes being trouble makers in the early nineteenth century.

<sup>16</sup> On more on the term Heathen see below.

Native language.<sup>17</sup> Appaswamy points out also that it was towards the end of the second decade of the nineteenth century that huge churches of stone began to be built all over the presidency replacing modest prayer halls which were at times mere thatch for local congregations.<sup>18</sup>

It is also significant that missionaries complained that local disrespect had arisen due to this church dispute for other mission related activities. Some non-Christian locals had begun to threaten the local school master - 'that if he brought any more school textbooks they would get the Superintendent of Police to stop him'.<sup>19</sup> This points to the different ways in which church disputes were significant in the public arena for it was clear that the churches doubled as school rooms as well. This period saw a growing missionary presence in places like present day George Town through school rooms and reading rooms. These places also functioned as temporary chapels where services were conducted a few times every week.<sup>20</sup> We have seen in the previous chapter these places also hosted regular prayer meetings, where non-Christian audiences were addressed and tracts distributed.

Thus a picture of a resurgence of church power was seen with unease by local gentry and its prevention became a rallying cry. Interestingly, in this dispute, the fort St George government did not allow the missionaries to continue building at the site. Instead, the organisation was offered an alternative site and was also given monetary help by the Government.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Public Cons, 23 December 1817, V 451, no 39, TNA.

<sup>18</sup> P Appaswamy, *History of the Tinnevelly Mission*, Palayamcotta, 1925, p 95.

<sup>19</sup> Public Cons, 23 December 1817, V 451, no 39, TNA.

<sup>20</sup> There are extensive accounts of this in the *Church Missionary Record*.

<sup>21</sup> Hough, (1851), Vol 5, p 334. Also correspondence in the Public Cons, TNA for 1817- 1820

It is also apparent that a conciliatory note adopted by both the Company and the Reverend Thompson during the negotiation. Both sides confessed a desire to avoid disturbing the inhabitants. As will be argued this attitude was short lived . This dispute of Salay Street indicates that by the late 1830s the equations between the missionaries, the Company government and the local inhabitants had changed.

### **The Salay Street dispute 1839**

The dispute over the Salay street church actually began in 1834 when Reverend Drew of the LMS purchased land in Salay Street, an arterial road in George Town, for a school. The Salay Street was also called mint street and was the traditional strong hold of agriculturist Vellalas.<sup>22</sup> When local inhabitants protested that they feared the school was merely a cover for encouraging religious conversion, the Company overruled their objections of the inhabitants stating that no group's religious rights would be affected.<sup>23</sup>

Soon after, Rev. Drew decided to build a church at the site setting off a series of protests. The Streets residents argued that the road was inhabited by caste men of the Right and Left hand caste and was not therefore a public -caste neutral street. The Church and its low caste converts they claimed would pollute the area. They also complained that the school which they had tried to stall before was a front for 'religious conversion' and that the public preaching done on the street outside the proposed site created tremendous tension. In their own words-

'Ever since the school was open, Mr. Drew made it his business to attend personally or to

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<sup>22</sup> Susan Nield (1979), p227 and Mattison Mines (1996), p95.

<sup>23</sup> Public Cons, 22 April, 1834, V 620, no. 27- 31, TNA.

depute other native converts near the pretended school twice a week and continue to bother leading passengers and neighbours in a most provocative manner with his religious discourses, despising the Hindu religion and to persuade them to receive several tracts of a contemptible nature. He now continues to collect materials to erect a substantial building, introduce native converts and causing mortal grief to our community. We have strong objections to any kind of building. The Salay Street is a principal public street of the Hindus with no Christians. The Inmates of Mr Drew's building while on the Terrace will have a full command of the sights of the apartments of Hindus used for cooking and eating. He will introduce outcastes in the Streets and interfere with religious processions. We have enjoyed the British Government's protection but the Missionaries instead of adhering to the benevolent intentions of the ruling authorities constantly violate them. To provoke us by intruding into our Street under the pretence of establishing schools for the benefit of the Hindu community and thus pollute us.

In conclusion we beg to state that the object of Mr. Drew to open the School is to propagate Christian religion, not to spread education to Hindus and as Christian books are introduced, none of us have sent in our children.... We don't require schools of missionaries on our streets.... immediate stop to the building.<sup>24</sup>

The next petition was signed by a hundred and sixty nine persons. This petition stated that 'the erection of a house for a missionary to live in is repugnant to our established laws, privileges, religion laws manners and customs and in result of the lordship deciding in favour of Rev Drew the only alternative for us is to remove our habitation from that Street rather than risk losing our religion and custom....'<sup>25</sup> The claim of 'mamool' or customary practices and the threat to remove from habitation was echoed the arguments of the Munnarswamy Temple dispute. In fact the threat of withdrawal of habitation as a common bargaining tool by protesting groups in the previous century has been extensively documented

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<sup>24</sup> Public Cons, 4 Jan, 1839, V 680, No 56-57, TNA.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

particularly during the Left and Right Hand Caste disputes.<sup>26</sup> What is interesting in the Salay Street case is that petitioners cited the 1817 dispute in detail as a precedent worthy of emulation. This direct self expressed 'lineage; to the negotiation is a very significant marker of this new kind of mobilisation against the building of Protestant Churches.<sup>27</sup>

Reverend Drew's own counter-arguments were somewhat like those of Thompson twenty two years ago. Thus he argued that the street was in fact a multi-caste one and that the schoolroom was an institution for the emancipation of the inhabitants. However it was crucially different in its non- conciliatory tone. It is clear from his letters to the Fort St George Government that the site was clearly chosen because it was in the heart of town and would enable the Reverend to communicate with all classes of people and to preach the gospel.

'I wish to be among people, live in a house known by them so that they can come without difficulty. No opposition will stop me, I will do nothing needlessly to offend them. Opposition to be expected but will die down. Many towns have different castes living on the same streets for instance in Bangalore. Black Town is full of East Indians and Europeans. Salay Street has Gujaratis, East Indians and the mint. When I built the School and they protested, the Government ignored them and it subsided. My assistants and I addressed the people in a most public manner in subjects connected with the Christian religion and I believe that if the Government does not interfere, opposition will die.'<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Kanaklatha Mukund, 'Caste conflict in South India in early colonial port cities 1650-1800', *Studies in History*, Vol 11, No1, 1995. Also the Mattison Mines (1996), Chapter 3; and Sandra Freitag notes a similar negotiation in Benares in the early nineteenth century See S Freitag, *Collective action and Community*. 1993, p68.

<sup>27</sup> Its tempting to argue here that Protestant churches were not associated with myths of sacred power like San Thome or temples. Even relatively new Temples in George Town were given mythic 'sacred associations'. The Protestant church was a player in completely different guise.

<sup>28</sup> Public Cons, 4 January, 1839, V 680, no 56-57; 29 June, V700, no 7-8, TNA.

Work stalled even though Government believed that the building did not infringe upon the rights of inhabitants. The Company was in dilemma. To support the church could cause a riot, lack of interference could have acted as a deterrent and discourage the inhabitants from further protest. Eventually, the Company decided to ignore the issue, hoping it would die a natural death. It did. With unforeseen consequences.

The controversy highlights many interesting issues. First, that the upper caste non- Brahman petitioning included a range of arguments about custom, public culture and social norms all of which were according to the Salay Street inhabitants was threatened by the missionaries, and the State patronage of Rev Drew and a lower caste 'public'. It was against these terms that the protesters sought to define themselves as 'respectable' inhabitants.

Second, that the expression of grievance was couched in terms of rights and privileges and the perceived duties of the State. At the same time older forms of expressing displeasure were also used - such as the threat of withdrawing their residence.

Third, it is apparent that by the end of the 1830s, the strategy of locating churches in crowded thoroughfares meant that the institutional apparatus of the church of the missionaries, along with schoolrooms, reading rooms specifically geared to addressed to non- Christian audiences emerged as important sites of public culture and negotiation. The church was no longer the anchor of its congregation alone. It was now a part of a slowly emerging fabric that threw up new questions, new 'associativeness' in the region. This was a perceptible shift from the earlier decades of the century.

How crucial were these disputes to the re - structuring of the public arena? It is possible to argue that the Salay Street disputants formed the core constituent of anti- missionary organisations like the Sadur Veda Siddhanta Sabai. This group, which also called itself the Salay Street society was particularly active in disseminating anti - missionary ideology in Madras in the early 1840s. It is also evident that it is difficult to term these activities as symbolising the creation of a monolith upper- caste anti missionary 'Hindu' community identity. While it is possible to see that old collectivities like Left and Right hand Caste disputes were on the decline through the nineteenth century, there was at times a startling overlap between these quarrels and the 'new' church disputes. A particularly striking case was a set of disputes in Tirunelveli in 1850.

### **The dispute in Tirunelveli, 1850**

Scholars have often observed that Tirunelveli, an untamed 'warrior' region in the pre- Company period , was particularly disturbed by religious and caste quarrels in the early nineteenth century. It was here that the missionaries met with the most success and the most opposition often leading to arson and rioting. So it is not surprising that the following disputes occurred in this district.

In 1850, petitioners from Thatchamoolleeveeramartandanulloor in Punjal taluk in Tirunelveli complained to the Company government against the activities of the CMS in their settlement.<sup>29</sup> They complained that the Church Missionary

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<sup>29</sup> Judicial Cons, 18 February 1850 , V 580, no 17-20, TNA.

Society missionaries had erected a bungalow close to their temples. While the villagers had been on good terms with them, the arrival of Missionary Hobbs had changed the things for the worse. In 1846, the missionary demolished a part of the Temple compound and opened a new passage of entry into the mission house. On complaining to the authorities, instead of redress, the petitioners complained that they were made to pay a fine. Three years later, in 1849, the missionary put a stop to the playing of music during the monthly festival of the temple and wrote a letter to the magistrate who directed the Village Police Officer to inquire and found the petitioners innocent.

The inhabitants also alleged that the missionary encroached upon the flower garden and a ground which was common property and erected churches and schools. Apart from this, they accused the missionary of prohibiting their marriage and funeral processions from customary route on the road where the Church was situated. On August 1850, the inhabitants were stopped from celebrating the temple festival in the customary manner. Leading a mob of 60 men Rev Hobbs allegedly threatened them with violence and in bad language. The petitioners alleged, moreover, that the missionary had caused his people to dirty the temple and contaminate the water of a common well. Interestingly the petitioners were Mudaliars and the Temple they asserted was being violated was that of the village goddess.

On investigation, the collector Mr Bird, found Reverend Hobb's interference imprudent. He was consequently told of his indiscretion and the collector wrote to the Government advising that the matter be closed. If the



petitioners were still injured they could approach the Civil tribunal for redress. This was a typical case of the ryots of Tamil country to have decided to unite their left and right hand caste affiliations against the perceived incursions of the missionary. But as the caste dispute between the Nayaka and the Cammalar in the same district at the same time prove, the caste affiliation were far from a decline.<sup>30</sup>

In this set of disputes in 1850 Veeragoo Naick head of the Right Hand Nayak caste in Streevaikoondum submitted a memorial to the Court of Directors complaining that the Collector had prohibited their caste from using Palankeens in the celebration of marriages. The quarrel based on the argument of *mamool* or custom was fairly typical that of an Honours dispute. Thus, the Nayaks cited written precedents, the state of custom under the Nawab of Arcot, legal precedents from 1803- 1847 which prevented the Left Hand Goldsmiths from using the palanquin etc. The Kammalar Goldsmiths on the other hand, presented their evidence which proved that they were allowed to use the palanquin. The course of the dispute saw the use of a variety of forums which included decrees issued at caste panchayats as far away as Kanchipuram in 1770 to define the distribution of markers of public status such as palanquins.<sup>31</sup>

Eventually the government supported the Nayak position. Again, like the dispute over the church the Collector stated that if the parties had problems they could apply for redress with the local civil court. Matters continued to be tense with Kammalar objection at times being expressed with violence. The dispute also

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<sup>30</sup> Judicial Cons, 5 June 1849, No 39, V 557, no 1-3, TNA.

<sup>31</sup> Decree issued in Kanchipuram in May 1770 which stated that the Paraiyar could use the white umbrella,, The Kammalar on horseback on the street where they lived , the Pallar could use the Red umbrella on ceremonial occasions etc. Judicial Cons, 17 July 1849, V552, no 22, TNA.

went to the zillah court. Finally the government issued a strict notice warning the castes against any breach of peace and preventing the Left Hand Caste from using the palanquin.

This was clearly a caste dispute very much typical of the Left Hand Right hand quarrels of the earlier period. It is significant that they occurred at the same time as the 1850 dispute, and it is tempting to argue that both the disputes involved the participation of the same group of people (upper caste non Brahmins). This common 'class' of petitioners and actors point to the multiple level of ascriptive categories that were in place simultaneously in the early nineteenth century. While it can be loosely termed as an upper caste attempt to control the public arena, this 'petitioning public' must also be seen in the context of the widespread church building; an increasingly bureaucratised temple administration system and the crucial role played by Company policy towards the arbitration of disputes.

### **Temples and Churches from the 1820s**

Paul Appasamy notes that the late 1830s saw a big upsurge in church building. The number of prayer houses and churches rose from 172 in 1839 to 247 in 1847 in Tirunelveli. It spoke of the increasing amounts of money available for the organisations and according to Appaswamy was representative of the zeal of converts to exhibit the stability and dignity of the Christian religion before the 'heathen'.<sup>32</sup> There was also apparently some kind of competition between the

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<sup>32</sup> Paul Appasamy *The Centenary History of the CMS Tinnevely*, Pallamcottah, 1923, p95.

places of worship with the Palayamcottai steeple being bigger than the surrounding Temples. By the late 1830s various local Church building funds were also active. These were largely subscription driven and soon multiplied in many districts of Tirunelveli.<sup>33</sup>

Correspondingly we note that Temple Administration in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw many shifts in Company policy. Appadorai argues that the characteristic feature of early Temple administration under the Company was the initial dependence on the native intermediaries rather than a direct interaction with the sectarian leaders or traditional groups. In the later eighteenth and early nineteenth periods, they depended on their own expanding bureaucratic apparatus. The English merchants also reversed the traditional relationship between the royal patron and the temple. Unlike their predecessors, the British were reluctant to intervene in long standing local conflict but expanded their day to day involvement of the Temple administration. This is also attested in missionary accounts where the Company is criticised for participating in daily temple ritual - endowing money for the lighting of lamps, for instance.

Appadorai notes that the powerful actors were the native merchants and the Dubashis who controlled the temple as part of their broker offices in the colonial economy and dated back to the third quarter of the seventeenth century. With the growth of the bureaucratic centre of English rule these big men often found themselves constrained. In 1796, the collection and distribution of Temple revenues was centralised<sup>34</sup>. By the mid 1820s, Appadorai points out that Temples

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p97-98.

<sup>34</sup> Appadorai, (1981), p114.

had lost most of their autonomy thanks to the regulation of 1817. The temples by then lacked self sufficiency and the complaints to the Company made it begin to resume control. At the same time, ideologically, the protection of Temples was translated to mean the protection of law. Besides by 1832, the temple lost its economic autonomy and was dependent on British revenue handouts. This paradoxical position led to certain shifts in Temple politics such as the exacerbation of sectional conflict. The wish to protect the Temple had resulted in the East India Company getting more control of the Temple. The consequent negotiation which arose from the British attempt to fix and codify local custom led to the formalising of sectarian affiliations.

We can perhaps argue that in 1830s and 1840s the shifts in position of the *Dharmakartas* of the temples contributed to their involvement in the politics of public religiosity. It is also seen that it was in these very decades that disputes over Protestant Churches became widespread. We also note that these churches were being built in urban thoroughfares and were the site of public preaching and school rooms .

It is also worth considering that these churches were not associated with popular myths of sacred magical or even healing powers like other religious traditions like Catholic, Islamic or Hindu shrines.<sup>35</sup> Clearly then, the Protestant church 'incursion' was of a completely different order into the public arena and in the process totally restructured the power equations surround religious sites of

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<sup>35</sup> Susan Bayly work is concentrated on this sacredity ,she and Mosse attempt to use this to forge links of shared worship cutting across communities in the Tamil region. See Susan Bayly, (1992); David Mosse, *Caste, Christianity and Hinduism: a Study of Social Organisation and religion in rural Ramnad*, Unpublished PhD diss, Oxford, 1986.

worship. Thus it is not very surprising to find the principal castes of the Tamil region fighting pitched battles not only among themselves but also the missionaries in the street and in the courts. How far can these developments be seen as the emergence of a self described 'Hindu' solidarity?

### **From 'Heathen' to 'Hindu'**

We can contend here that the government's role in 'legitimising' the use of the word Hindu cannot be denied. For instance one of the interesting sidelights of 1850 dispute between missionary Hobbs was that the government took umbrage at the use of the word 'heathen' to describe the non- Christian petitioners<sup>36</sup>. It severely reprimanded the Acting Collector, for using this term and in fact transferred him. It held 'it to be self evident and notorious, whatever may be urged to the contrary , that the term 'Heathen' must be considered by our native subjects to be wholly unfit , to be introduced into public and official documents, under any circumstances whatever and that it was peculiarly necessary that the Acting Collector of Tirunelveli, should have scrupulously refrained from indulging in any such indication of his personal opinions . ... expression "Heathen" to be in a District, in which so much ill will and violence had been formerly excited by disputes of a similar kind to those referred to him lately.

I am therefore obliged under a strong sense of duty however disagreeable it may be to purpose that Mr. C I Bird be immediately removed from his present appointment. In addition to the conclusive reason, I also cannot consider his report on the petitions to be satisfactory. I hold that his assumption of the motives of the

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<sup>36</sup> Minute, Judicial Cons, 12 December 1851, V592, No 3-5, TNA.

petitioners in handing --- than they felt grievously oppressed and his observations that its not clear that Mr. Hobbs acquired land without owners permission'.-should not be accepted in explanation. <sup>37</sup>

The above statement highlights the inherent tension in the Company policy towards arbitration of the religious disputes and indicates its responsibility in structuring the use of terms such as heathen and Hindu as well as defining the boundaries of public religiosity. The importance of the local inhabitants in this process can not be denied. The next chapter explores this issue in some depth.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter IV

### Towards a 'Hindu' Public? The Hindu Memorial and the 1840s

"...the British empire in India is chiefly maintained by the fidelity and allegiance of the Hindu community..... Your memorialists have used plain language because they are not asking for a favour but for justice and they are aware that the interests of the company are not less involved in the granting of their petition than their own."<sup>1</sup>

It was with this remarkably strongly worded conclusion that a memorial was submitted to the Company's government in October 1846. It was the culmination of a '*Mahamand*' held in Madras a few weeks earlier, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of the same month. The assembled group of 500 men comprising largely of the Chettiar and Mudaliar community - the mercantile elite of Madras and under the chairmanship of Lakshmanarasoo Chettiar the proprietor of the '*Crescent*'. described themselves as representing the interests of the 'Hindu' community.

The Hindu memorial, as it was called, was a culmination of a series of controversies that rocked the city and its hinterland. It was put up to represent the feelings of an irate public and was one in a remarkable series of similar addresses that flooded the East India Company with complaints and strictures. The memorial took issue with the education practice of the government, its administration responsibility towards the management of temple funds and the opposition to the Lex loci act. Most importantly it criticised the Governments policies towards the "Hindu Community". It spoke out severely against missionary activities that were suspected to be behind this and the missionary sympathisers among the Company's

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<sup>1</sup> Public Cons, 27 Oct 1846, V 802, no 34A-B, TNA.

employees who aided and abetted the church establishment in its attempt to Christianise the country.

It is of course possible to see the process of the 'Hindu' memorial as a 'Hindu meeting of a new kind' where men of different castes came together for an overtly political purpose. Here wider policy was debated, in a manner that spoke of a more than passing knowledge of a modern political protest meeting under the leadership of a new Hindu leader.<sup>2</sup> Who were these memorialists attempting to represent? What does the language used, the issues discussed and the process of memorialising itself reveal about the changes in the public arena? Did it in fact represent the creation of a "Hindu" public outraged by missionary activities as some scholars have uncritically assumed?

Pointing out the crucial construction of the word 'Hindu', scholars argue that it was a recent nomenclature rarely used as self description in the pre-modern period.<sup>3</sup> The word 'Hindu' was used in a territorial sense in most early South Asian texts regardless of sectarian affiliation. It has also been asserted that the period of the late enlightenment and the ensuing codification of 'classic' religious texts contributed to the 'modern' vocabulary of the nineteenth century that included the word Hindu<sup>4</sup>. Gradually this word came to be adopted as a term of self description. Thapar argues that 'identities were segmented in the pre-modern era; that 'the notions of community was not absent but were multiple identified by

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<sup>2</sup> R Suntharalingam, *Politics and Nationalist Awakening in South India, 1852- 1891*, University of Arizona Press, Tuscon, 1974, p41.

<sup>3</sup> R E Frykenberg, 'The emergence of modern 'Hinduism' as a concept and as institution : a reappraisal with special reference to South India' in G D Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke (ed), *Hinduism Reconsidered*, Manohar, Delhi, 1991, p30.

<sup>4</sup> The most succinct over view of how the Europeans created Hinduism in their own image is seen PJ Marshall, *British discovery of Hinduism in the eighteenth century*, Cambridge, 1970.



language , caste occupation and sect.’<sup>5</sup> This was not to suggest that the relationship between communities was peaceful. In fact, the perception that groups subscribing to Hindu and Islamic symbols had of each other, was not in terms of a monolithic religion but in terms of distinct and disparate caste and sects along a social continuum.<sup>6</sup>

The idea of a central community that owed its vocabulary to the eighteenth century codification was accompanied by a ‘modern assertion of upper caste Aryanism which self consciously excluded that polluting lower levels. The idea of a centralised community was a departure from religious sects. It encouraged monotheism, the authority of ecclesiastically organised missionaries and the importance of conversion. This process is of course a useful text -book model. However, it is not really true of the actors of the public sphere in the 1840s in south India where there was a mix of some of these elements, but where there was also a participation of lower castes and a complex set of new cults.

Frykenberg argues that there were two broad processes involved - one within the ambit of the state where the East India Company fashioned itself on its predecessors adopted a Hindu idiom, participated in temple administration, employed Brahmins and other upper castes as bureaucrats. This strengthened the syndication of “Hinduism” especially when this largely upper caste audience felt insecure as government policy changed and the Company withdrew from temples. This was accompanied by a controversy about the Bible being used as a text- book in national schools.<sup>7</sup> Two, outside the ambit of the State , there was a growth of

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<sup>5</sup> Romila Thapar, ‘Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern search for Hindu Identity’, *Modern Asian Studies*, V 23, No 2, 1989, p 222.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p226.

<sup>7</sup> Frykenberg, (1991), p45.

institutions which were established to counter missionary propaganda.

The Hindu memorial was not merely a knee jerk reaction to missionary incursion nor was it the first political expression by an incipient middle class. Crucially, the definition of Hindu was closely linked with the ability to state collective opinion through the petition process and an influential press. It involved the establishment of new institutions and forms of new kinds of public 'associativeness'. Most importantly, it was an example of an emerging discourse which sought to debate and define boundaries of religious identity. It is noteworthy that the politics of self-description were funnelled through religious representation in the nineteenth century. It was therefore a crucial element of discussion and was often debated in terms of good governance, public address, civil liberties and rights.

### **The New Players**

The 1830s saw the gradual assertion of upper caste anti missionary activity. As we saw the Salay Street controversy was a key moment when a group of Vellalars organised themselves into setting up a series of petitions to negotiate the erection of missionary institutions in their street. The interesting rhetoric was the one about caste, privacy and pollution. We have also argued that the missionaries, while they entered a diverse and vibrant social fabric, changed the field of social relations. This is because they tried to enforce a new 'public' through school and churches. This created dissent in their own congregations and saw a great deal of opposition from outside. The 1830s thus, also saw the establishment of a series of institutions that were set up to form schools and colleges. The Hindu Literary Society being one of the earliest. Again in the 1830s, strongly worded petitions

supported education institutions started by the government.<sup>8</sup> By the 1840s public men like Lutchmanarasoo Chettiar and Srinivasa Pillay had assumed prominence-become active newspaper men and so on.

The 1830s also saw the emergence of a number of shadowy anti missionary organisations which were more secretive than the Hindu Literary Society. These groups were often the key aggressors in the Hindu - Christian encounters in the 1840s. The two most prominent ones were the Salay Street Society or the Sadurveda Siddhanta Sabhay ( the Society of the Four Vedas) and the Vibhuti Sangam ( The Sacred Ash Society).

#### **The Salay Street Society.**

It is possible that this society emerged in Madras in the late thirties out of the dispute against the church in 1839 discussed previously<sup>9</sup>. Mostly its adherents were vellalars who lived and met on the street (also called Mint street)<sup>10</sup>.

They held a mock Christian service, Substituted their *puranas* for the Bible. gave an exposition of their Slogans and their stories, arguing against Christianity and preaching in public. They conducted a doxology and benediction in imitation of those used in the Christian Church introduced the names of the trinity instead. They also got up numerous petitions to the government.

They commenced a series of publications in Tamil poetry, burlesquing Christianity and exhorting Hindus to be steadfast in their own religion and often engaged in rival pamphleteering with the missionaries. For instance, one

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<sup>8</sup> Suntharalingam, (1974) ,pp33-9.

<sup>9</sup> Public Cons, 5 February, 1839, no 18, TNA.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Nield Basu, 'The development of Madras City in the eighteenth and nineteenth century', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 13, no2, 1979,p225.

publication complained against two tracts in Tamil - one by a missionary and other by a native Christian Tanjavur Poet Vedanayaka Shastriar. The former attacked the moral character of the persons in the Hindu triad. The latter, in the "*Blind Way*", set out a selection of 'absurd and wicked slogans from heathen books, with pithy comments'. The society according to Pettit in their publications, allegorised Shiva as possessing a beautiful and flourishing province, richly cultivated in the best of grain, but which now had at length suffered at the hands of Christianity, which trampled down the cultivator with his two horns (the *Hindu triad* and the *Blind way* !) to the great annoyance of Shiva and his followers. Now, argued the publication, Shiva had raised up a band of firm hearts with which to drive out the intruders.

The Salay Street Society is also reported to have published a newspaper called *Tesabhimany* in which details of anti missionary activity- especially petitions and texts were published. The Tirunelveli petition for instance was published in this paper. This petition argued that "the plunders highway robbers, demolishing of deities and other acts of wicked injustice carried on by the missionaries., who have for sometime been strolling about in this province teaching the Christian Veda and by the ever wicked Maravars, Kallars, Shanars Parairs and Pallars and other low caste mobs which they have got into their possession"<sup>11</sup>. Clearly then, the Salay Street Society was one which had strong upper caste sympathies. Though we don't really have information on key members the records yield the name Umapathy Mudaliar as one leader. Besides the petition on the Salay Street Church Dispute enumerates about 50 names almost uniformly of Mudaliar and Chettiar caste.

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<sup>11</sup> G. Pettit, *The Tinnevely Missionary of the Church Missionary Society*, 1851, p251. *Church Missionary Record*, November 1842, p151.

## The Vibhuti Sangam

Further south, in the district of Tirunelveli, missionary accounts began to note the existence of an irate group of men called the Vibhuti Sangam. While it is unclear how this group was started Frykenberg surmises that it was formed as early as the 1820s in reaction to missionary activity among the Shanar/ Nadars and advocated forcible re- conversion and subordination of these newly converted Christians. George Pettit however traces it to a later period that is, to the 1840s.

According to his version, upper caste Hindus held meetings of a secret nature fearing the overthrow of their religion by missionaries<sup>12</sup>. Moreover the East India Company withdrew from temples in 1842 and the Hindus who had always contested anti -idolatry speeches with the contention that the Company controlled temples began to feel uneasy. In Meignanapooram district missionary accounts of 1841 record that with rumours of the government severing its connection with Temples, the ‘ respectable’ sections of society began to organise a system of opposition. There were meetings held to petition the government ( the petition by now was a clearly established mode of representation in the public arena) on the issue. It was from this process the sources claim that the Vibhuti Sangam was organised.<sup>13</sup>

In 1841, the Nattaty Landholder and other Shanar landholders and about 300 people went to Trichendur. There, they held a council with the Brahmans to discuss ways to arrest the spread of Christianity. ‘The Brahmans and the Shudras began to meet and began to hatch plans to effect anti Christian violence’ .<sup>14</sup> They started an organised campaign of petition and constituted themselves as the Society

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<sup>12</sup> Pettit, (1851) p251-70

<sup>13</sup> *Church Missionary Record*, November, 1842, p258

<sup>14</sup> Pettit (1851) p268

for the Resistance to the Gospel ( an inversion of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel). It was also called the Vibhuti Sangam. Thus from Pettit's account it is possible to surmise that the group included the participation of lower classes as well.

While there is a dearth of information on the practices of the Sangam various contemporary accounts record that every member of the society had to swear an oath of allegiance to Shiva upon sacred ashes, to their old religion and customs and swear to bring an end to Christianity.<sup>15</sup> In many of the outrages the key act of forcible re-conversion occurred when the aggressors rubbed sacred ash on the forehead of the converts forcing them to take a oath of apostasy.<sup>16</sup> This was accompanied by plunder and arson where the converts' houses and churches were razed to the ground.<sup>17</sup>

In 1845, at the town of Yeral a huge mob made the converts pay a fine, and rubbed the foreheads with ashes. Next, they attacked the settlement of Nazareth where the prayer house was destroyed and plundered by a mob of 5000 men. Rumours flew thick and fast about the missionaries, for instance, that the government had issued orders to five castes prohibiting them from converting to Christianity.<sup>18</sup>

While it is unclear the extent to which the Vibhuti Sangam was responsible for the Yeral incident, the missionaries held the Sangam responsible for the physical outrages against Christians in Panneiveli and Nulloor 1841-42. The

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<sup>15</sup> The allegiance to Shiva is interesting. The supporters of the Vibhuti Sangam and the Salay street society probably included many Vellalars who were Shiva worshippers. The Saiva Siddhanta movement which also began in the mid nineteenth century was largely Vellalar based. As were reform movements such as the one begun by Ramalingar Swamiyar.

<sup>16</sup> The symbolic importance of the sacred ash is worth noting. There are numerous instances of apostates and heretics announcing their dissension from church congregation by rubbing sacred ash. This is widespread marker of 'heathenism' seen across both Protestant and Roman Catholic congregations.

<sup>17</sup> *Church Missionary Record*, November 1842, p258.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p252.

missionaries alleged that Alagappa Nauden, a Nadar headman and soothsayer, from Panneivilei and a key player was supported by the Vibhuti Sangam and the Salay Street Society.<sup>19</sup> When the Christians of Panneivilei and Narakarakudiyiruppu tried to enlarge a prayer hall his goons pulled it down. He is also said to have forced a relative, a catechist, to rub ashes over himself. On his arrest, some petitions alleged that he fled to Madras where he received help from Umapathy Mudaliar of the SadurVeda Siddhanta Sabhay and Lutchmanarsoo Chettiar. Clearly then, there were links between the metropolitan public sphere of Madras and its mofussil hinterland, between the process of petition and affrays, between upper caste and lower caste big men.<sup>20</sup>

Thus by the mid 1840s the air was thick with suspicion and affray, allegations and counter allegations. The clashes between congregations and others, and the incidents of conversion in Madras grabbed headlines. Moreover, government policy shifts, particularly on temples, created an atmosphere of unease among certain sections of the population. These were evident in some of the rumours that spread in the region. Missionary sources noted a rumour that spread in 1841 in Tirunelveli district that a *Vedalalam* (a great devil) was going to come from the north in order to destroy the people. He was supposed to have been enraged against the Company, because they destroyed another Vedalam and carried away six thousand pagodas which they had under joint guardianship. By destroying innumerable people he intended to injure the income of the honourable Company to his satisfaction. In order to preserve themselves, people strung

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<sup>19</sup> Petit, (1851), pp187-9.

<sup>20</sup> The big thing to remember is that the Christians were persecuted in different way particularly their lower caste members by local landlords. The records speak of persecution by local zamindars. See in particular, *Church Missionary Record*, November 1842, p255.

garlands of margosa leaves over their houses. Interestingly, this particular belief was subscribed to by both Hindu and Muslims in Tirunelveli.<sup>21</sup>

### **Critiquing the State: The issues addressed by the memorial of 1846 -7**

The 'Hindu' memorial of October 1846 can be read as mainly criticising the East India Company's patronage and abetting of missionary activity to the detriment of its non-Christians ('Hindu') subjects.<sup>22</sup> What were the issues that the memorialists thought were an infringement on their civil and religious interests as the 'Hindu' community? The memorialists basically identified four main issues - education, the *lex loci act*, the covert and overt support of the state to the missionaries and the aggression of the missionaries themselves.

The memorialists argued State run examinations for public employment, particularly under Governor Marquis of Tweeddale, required candidates to know biblical history and was structured in a way that went against students of the University of Madras.. This they claimed was a way of discriminating against non-Christians.

'The Madras University was set up to enable all who wished to qualify for state service and public employment. However Tweeddale looked on it differently, squashed the scale of tests, appointed a council of education ( composed of general patronisers of the missionaries) and formed a series of qualifications lower than those proposed by the University; introduced Latin and Greek not taught in the University. The object thus was to favour Christian students in other public or subscription schools.<sup>23</sup>

The council of education set questions related to the Christian religion, it's superiority and

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<sup>21</sup> *Church Missionary Record* November 1841, p258. There were many rumours prevalent at this time, Indeed were used both to express dissent and mobilise people. Rumour and gossip has been scarcely worked on in modern south Indian history.

<sup>22</sup> Public Cons, 27 Oct 1846, V 802, no 34A-B, TNA.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



influence. They know that the study of religion in any kind and in any manner is excluded from the University and it's introduction would offend the Hindus. The questions could not be answered by the Hindus without provoking disputes and turning the examination Hall into an arena for theological controversy.<sup>24</sup>

Other evidence of partisanship in employment and education included Government official patronage of missionary led college of science and the lack of government run English schools. The memorial also listed some other issues of Company Policy which the memorialists found disturbing. These included the Lex Loci act which favoured converts. The patronage of Missionary Journals like *Native Herald* which was subscribed to by numerous Company servants both civil and military. Overt patronage of missionary activities which included presiding over annual meetings of missionary societies, throwing open the Court house of Chingleput for the use of missionaries with the judges and public officers being present and public business being brought to a stand still for three days.

They alleged that a district like Tirunelveli had long been noted as the emporium of missionarism, flourishing under the auspices of the public servants of the Company. In 1845 a serious breach of peace occurred in Nulloor where the Missionaries said they were being persecuted. On such a complaint the partial collector committed many innocents to jail. He was so partial that he was censured by the court of Sudr Adawlut and Foujdary Adawlut. Then when 115 inhabitants submitted a petition of complaint they were not redressed properly. The proceeding

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<sup>24</sup> The list of questions which offended the memorialists included the following – 'Why do Christians attach importance to the sacred history of the Bible? On account of its superior authority or because of the greater importance of its matter? Is the Bible more ancient than any other extant book of history? Is it more or less valuable than subsequent history and why? Is the argument desirable that from history for or against religious establishment? Qs on English Revolution- was it justified by their own revolution? Was the British rule providential and what does it say about Indian character?' Public Cons, 27 October 1846, V 802, no 34 A-B, TNA

trials argued the memorialists, illustrated perjury on the part of the Christians. The missionaries fearing reprisal waited upon the Marquis of Tweedale to petition him. In the ensuing tussle between the government and the court, Judge Lewis was unfairly dismissed. The memorialists demanded that the courts be restored to its accustomed channel and that all its proceedings be opened to the public.

The memorialists also took deep offence at missionary activities. These included Rajagopauls public address in Kanchipuram against idolatry where he was purported to have exclaimed to his audience

Have you not been sufficiently punished for your idolatry before? What did the Mohemmadans do in India and in the city as instruments of God's anger against idolatry? They destroyed your idols, pillaged your temples, carried off your wealth and spread desolation. And does not the coming of the British with a new Govt and a new religion subversive of your own your present down trodden condition your ignorance, your poverty and your misery , do not all this all these demonstrate that God is angry with you?

They also complained that this speech was published by the Rev Mr Anderson in the 'Native Herald' for February 1846, a journal, which they claimed was devoted to converting the Hindus into Christians.

### **The Memorial on the Bible 1847**

A second big memorial sent by the self described 'Hindu' community of Madras. A huge furore ensued when the council of education proposed introducing the Bible as a class text book. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of May , a meeting was held in Black Town on the issue, under the chairmanship of Aroonachallum Mudaliar where

resolutions were passed and the resulting memorial was submitted to the government<sup>25</sup>.

It stated that the Hindu community was aware that the Honourable court had disapproved of the introduction of the Bible as a class book into the national schools. However, the object of the memorialists was to obtain from the head court a clear expression of its sentiments regarding the protection of the religion of the country from the improper interference of missionary operations.

The meeting passed the resolution that the introduction of Bible into national schools could have no other object than the conversion of native youth. To effect the above, the meeting proposed to remonstrate with the Honourable Court. The members who were active at the meeting included- Aroonachellum Mudaliar ( chairman), V Appasawmy Mudaliar, A Vardappah Chetty, V Moothavcoomarappah Mudaliar, C Iyasawmy Mudaliar, J Sabahpathy Mudaliar, R Buchia Chetty, Sadasiva Tahoor, G Lutchmanarasoo Chetty, L Venkatakistnamah Naidoo. The Bible memorial attracted correspondence from other towns such as Cuddalore as well.

### **Divided Opinions in the 'Hindu' Community and the Company**

Were these memorials considered uncontested representatives of an emerging 'Hindu' public? Obviously, they were opposed by counter petitions from missionaries and the government. However, more interesting for our purpose, the records indicate counter petitions from the persons belonging to the same social group as the memorialists. Using these documents, it may be possible to assert that

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<sup>25</sup> Public Cons, May 1847, V 810, no 31-32, TNA.

it would be an exaggeration indeed to assume that there was neat correspondence between ideology and social base. Public debate went much deeper.

In the petition filed by V Thandavaraya Mudaliar the principle Sudr Ameen of Chinglepet,<sup>26</sup> he protested that the Chinglepet court house was not opened for public examination at the cost of public duty. That numerous employees of those courts sent their children to the school. He accused the memorial of false representation rather than representing the opinions of 'educated Hindoos' who from education were 'competent to form an opinion on the subject.' The memorial he argued was the partisan work of the 'Natives and Europeans connected with the *Crescent* Newspaper' and some Tamil newspapers published in Madras. Obviously his opinion found favour with the officials of the government though it must be admitted that again there was a division in that quarter with Lord Chamier finding no merit in the Sudr Ameen's letter.

The second set of evidence is a series of petitions filed in Tirunelveli by a Paroongcoodum Ramaswamy Pillai<sup>27</sup> of Sree Vykundam, an Agent who claimed to represent Hindu inhabitants of Tirunelveli.<sup>28</sup>

Pillai criticised the legitimacy of the Memorial on the following grounds. He argued that Lutchmanarasimha Chetty and other Hindus of Madras were instigated by Mr Lewis, the suspended judge of the Sudr court. Moreover, the Madras group was affluent and did not consider the poverty of others who couldn't pay for the education of their children and could only afford missionary free

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<sup>26</sup> Public Cons, 15 June 1847, V811, no 52, TNA.

<sup>27</sup> Public Cons, 10 August 1847, V814, No 20-22, , TNA.

<sup>28</sup> Sree Vaikundam was also the district which sent in very strong anti- missionary petitions against Rev Hobbs in 1850 . This dispute has been discussed in a previous chapter.

schools. Besides he stated that the Madras group were merchants and employees of the Madras Presidency while people like himself were revenue paying cultivators and therefore entitled to differing opinions. This clearly points to the fractures between the metropole and moffusil inhabitants.

Contradicting Chetty, Pillai argued that it was the missionaries who had been under attack. He accused Chetty of conniving with Alagappa Nauden. According to Pillai's account, in November 1845, Alagappa Nauden and Narasimyam Pillay and others of Kadoyem assembled large crowds, attacked and plundered the missionaries. The magistrate arrested the offenders. Nauden and Pillay evaded the warrant and came to Madras with the loot and got protection from Soobarayaloo Nayaka, the Sheristadar of the Sudr Adawlut ; Umapathy Mudaliar and others of the Sadur Vedanta Siddhanta Sabay ; Sungaralingam Pillay Vakeel to Mr. Poluch of Pallamcottah and Lutchmannarasoo Chetty.<sup>29</sup> Through these persons the two instigated Mr Lewis to release the prisoners on the basis of a false petition. The Madras government suspended Lewis, who in turn sent for Lutchmannarasoo Chetty; the sheristadar; Viswanada Mudaliar the translator and Umapathy Mudaliar of the Sadur Veda Siddhanta Sabay and persuaded them to send a memorial to the Honourable Court. Accordingly, they assembled a *Mahanadoo* on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October 1846 contrary to rules and despatched a 'fraudulent memorial' on the 12<sup>th</sup> of May 1847. This memorial was also published in the newspapers. Pillai demanded that they be punished, that the two presses owned by the group be abolished and the Sabay be dissolved, and the Sudr Court official be dismissed.

Pillai also stated that there was no case for the Sadur Veda Siddhanta

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<sup>29</sup> Judicial Cons, 18 January 1848, V 531, no 17-18, TNA.

Sabhay to speak at the mahamand . The mahamand itself was not widely attended. Besides the Hindus would never become unanimous. The problems between different sects had created difficulties in the functioning of different temples - the Chinna Kesava temple, Cesava Perumal temple in Black Town, the Sivahan church on the east side of Kistnasawmy of Pavalacoor and Streeveeragavasawmy in Terooloor. There was thus, he concluded an imperative need for the government to resume the management of temples

Pillay's account is remarkable not just for its criticism of the Hindu Memorials as representative of the Hindu community, but also because it paints a rich picture of the complex web of the new sociability of the 1840s. A web that included upper and lower caste participants and involved mobilisation and organisation at various levels of legitimacy. It underlines the importance of the sphere of print and the process of memorialising. He and the co signatories submitted a series of petitions which were sent to Bengal. The 'facts' were presented to public newspapers. 305 people signed the petition.<sup>30</sup> While Pillay was deemed respectable it was thought that the signatories were in doubt because they couldn't be verified<sup>31</sup>.

If the Hindu memorial was debated by the different inhabitants , it was also hotly debated in Government circles. Its critics argued that the memorialists were in error and misinformed; the exercise a misrepresentation of the views and measures of the Government. It was felt that for as long as the proceedings of the government were inaccessible to the public they could have no more correct

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<sup>30</sup> Public Cons, 26 October, 1847, V 817, no 17, TNA.

<sup>31</sup> Judicial Cons., 27November 1846, V 517, no 14, TNA.

sources of information than what the public press put out leading to misunderstanding.

On the other hand the memorialist's criticism were accepted as valid by officials like Chamier. He argued that the 'Hindus can hardly have govt protection when the Roman Catholic churches and mosques are rebuilt but look on indifferently at the desecration of Hindu temples'.<sup>32</sup>

### **The Process of Petitioning in the Public Arena**

The Hindu memorial of 1846, can in one sense, be immediately placed in the context of the growing alarm at the increasingly active and aggressive Missionary activity and the fear that it was being patronised by the Company servants officially and privately. It is also true that the memorialists had alleged links with the Salay Street Society and men wanted by the courts at Tirunelveli for atrocities against Christians<sup>33</sup>. At another level however the memorial forms an interesting site through which it is possible to view the manner in which the public arena was sought to be controlled by the actors, by the criticism of Public policy a new vocabulary of civil and religious boundaries, of governance, and rights was being forged.

The memorialists for instance, took umbrage at the patronage of biblical knowledge by the supposedly neutral State- which turned the examination hall into an arena for theological controversy. It objected to State spaces which were 'Public' and non sectarian like courts to becoming examination Halls for

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<sup>32</sup> Public Cons., 26 October, 1847, V817, no 17, TNA.

<sup>33</sup> This was alleged by one Ramaswamy Pillay in his petitions to the Government.

missionary run schools. In all these cases there was perhaps, a clear attempt to define the bounds of the State's neutrality (that the Company itself had assumed this level of legitimacy is worth noting) - to define what was acceptable civic norm and what was not.

The memorial is also an interesting example of the process of negotiation through the petitioning process, the growing importance of print culture in the creation and construction of the notion of the public and the imagined community therein such as the that of the 'Hindu'. The memorial is also an example of debate on protest public aggression in print. In many ways thus it can stand as an example of a fledging 'Public Sphere'. Thus there were protests about public speeches made by Rajahgopual, its subsequent publication in missionary journals (which in turn was critiqued for being read by an audience of government servants). In subsequent memorials evidence was cited from newspapers. (Chettiar cited the article on Rajagopaul's speech appearing in writing in p60 of the *Native Herald* of February 1845). We know that the memorial itself was publicised in the Tamil newspapers of the region. Incidentally, Lakmanrasoo Chettiar was a newspaper man himself. Madras got to hear of the Tirunelveli riots through the newspapers. The memorial itself evoked response from towns like Cuddalore and Chinglepet from copies of the memorial which were circulated in Tamil. This clearly points to the growing power and legitimacy of the published word in a society where literacy was negligible.<sup>34</sup> The accusation and evidence is based on print. It is an argument that does not arise from face to face local interaction. It does self consciously

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<sup>34</sup> As discussed in an earlier chapter the power of published material was in no small measure due to the tremendous power of the public meeting, preaching and speaking at public spaces in the region in the early nineteenth century.



affect a position of collective interest and common good.

Again the process of memorialising as an attempt to establish the truth and as an authentic mode of representation is interesting. In the 1846 memorial the memorialists argued that the Text was the result of a huge public meeting convened under the chairmanship of Lakshmsnarasoo Chettiar. They stated that

‘This memorial would have been far more numerous signed than it is had it not been partly that a fear of incurring the displeasure of their employees had deterred the large body of native public servants from subscribing to it’

The memorialists were subsequently accused of fraud and falsehood- the handiwork of a few men with vested interests.

In another instance a Bible petition from Cuddalore demanded that the government be transparent in its policy. ‘since the introduction of the Bible affects our religious feelings, we are desirous of correct information of the authorities’<sup>35</sup>. Several of the signatories signed in Tamil and therefore were presumed to be ignorant of English. The government felt that the address was irregular as it was on a subject that could not have come legitimately under cognisance of the reading public. The government claimed that it had no immediate plans to issue orders on the topics discussed and no ulterior motives either regarding religious sensibilities.

The next memorial sent by the original Madras group retaliated in the following manner. It included the extract of the minutes of the meeting giving specific details about the venue and time. Thus we know that the memorial on the Bible being used as a class textbook was produced at a meeting held in P Appaswamy Pillay’s house in Vuztha Moothiappen Street in Black Town at 6 in

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<sup>35</sup> Public Cons, 23 March, 1847, V808, no 52, TNA.

the evening on the 12<sup>th</sup> of May 1847. The memorial was very clearly written in the form of resolutions which were proposed and voted on by the members assembled. It was signed first by the unanimously nominated chairman C Aroonachellum Mudaliar. The memorialists stated that the address was read out and carried unanimously. To avoid accusations of fraud that were made against the previous memorial, (that it was signed by out of ignorance), the memorial was now published in double columns in English and Tamil and circulated for signature . It was read out and adopted as well and records of the process were kept. The memorial was then forwarded thorough the ‘proper channels’ that is through the chairman of the meeting.

From the preceding section of this chapter it is evident that Hindu Memorial can be read as a more complex text than a reaction to missionary activity. While the contribution of mission institutions can not be denied, the memorial bespeaks of a new ethos that was motored by new level of debates on rights and new forms of communication. The printing press, the newspaper, preaching, the new sites of the church, reading room, schools all became sites of public discourse and debate restructuring the public arena in the Tamil region. To ascribe new techniques of social communication to “western impact’ or missionary initiative alone is insufficient to address the specific trajectory of the idiom of modernity that was being constructed in early nineteenth century South India.

Having said this, it is also important to observe that this development did not flow along text book examples of modern ‘syndicated’ Hinduism. Nor will it be accurate to see this movement as one that froze traditions to create monolith identities that were exclusively upper-class leaving the contours of popular

religious practice unaltered. It has been possible to surmise that the arena of print penetrated far beyond the educated sections of society , that new institutions like schools and churches restructured social relationships. Though the Hindu memorial was admittedly largely upper caste supported we also note that lower caste men like Alagappa Naudan were key players. There are also varied examples of popular engagements with missionary activity, with doctrinaire Christianity, led by both upper and lower caste religious sect and cult leaders. These cults espoused reform and new ways of worship , produced a range of institutions. Some of these cults discussed in the next chapter stand as striking examples of a dynamic religious practice that tried to come to grips with the tremendous transition that overcame social relationships in the first half of the nineteenth century.

## Chapter V

### **Heretics, Reformers and Cults: Popular Engagement with Religion in the Public Arena**

The discussion has so far has explored the new forms of associativeness and their interaction with public religiosity in the early nineteenth century in the Tamil region. The previous chapters have noted the role of new institutions, the emergence of polemical debates through the printed and the spoken word, the use of new channels of transmission and negotiation ( like public meetings and petitions) which contributed to the encounter and dialogue between missionary organisations and local inhabitants.

The previous section may lead one to assume that agency was largely with the elite section of metropolitan society and that non - elite participation in new kinds of institutions and organisation was negligible. This chapter poses as a caveat to such an assumption. It seeks to document and analyse four instances of popular religiosity where the broad participation of the lower castes can be discerned. To do so, the chapter will attempt to illustrate the blurring between the elite and popular groups and their practices by understanding the multitude ways in which the written word, the new kinds of institutions and public petitions were absorbed and translated by different 'religious' cult movements.

The chapter is therefore not a definitive account of religious cult practices nor does it address complex anthropological issues of popular religiosity. It attempts to plot the alternate ways by which new publics were being forged or fragmented , straddling the fault lines of 'elite and popular' or 'literate' and 'oral'. The cases described below can perhaps be read as evidence of a public arena with

vibrant religious debates , of shifting boundaries of community that caution against unilinear arguments of the textual codification of religious tradition and more importantly the seemingly ever widening gap between a middle class public and social religiosity and popular religious practice in the first half of the nineteenth century.

### **Church Dispute at Royapuram**

*Lower caste engagement with conversion and the public arena in Royapuram, Madras*

This section centres around a long standing dispute in the settlement of Catholic boatmen in Royapuram just north of Fort St George. Royapuram was laid out by the East India Company in 1799 on some cleared ground just north of the Black Town as a community of Christian boatmen serving the Company boat establishment.<sup>1</sup> The original land of the community was acquired by the Company to build the southern ramparts of the Fort St George during Mr. Labernay's war against Madras in the mid eighteenth century. The Company allotted them new ground and built a new village called 'Chapaccum'( Kilpauk) where the boat people lived till the end of the century. Since the boatmen found it difficult to go to the beach (the new settlement was inland) the Government granted them land north of the town in Royapuram.

The Royapuram community was ridden with conflict in the early nineteenth century . These disputes can serve as a window offering us a glimpse of social

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Nield, 'Colonial urbanism: The Development of Madras City in the eighteenth and nineteenth Centuries', *Modern Asian Studies*, V13, No 2, 1979, p228.

transition where the protagonists were low caste Christians engaging in a complex debate over self described boundaries. It is significant, as this chapter will try and portray, that there was an active exchange of ideas in a vibrant public arena of lower echelons of Tamil society in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

### **The Community and Church United- Policing the Boundary; the Problem of the Heretic Royappan**

In the summer of 1802 an aghast secretary to the Fort St George government noted that there were a number of converts to ‘the new revolutionary principle of atheism’ and insubordination propagated by a ‘fanatic’ Roy Pilly.<sup>2</sup> The trouble began when the boat people complained to the parson that one of their caste men Royappan was teaching the young boys of the settlement to disobey the church and their parents.

In an angry petition they accused him of authoring a book called ‘The Dancing Tragedy’ which was filled with ‘diabolical principles contrary to the Christian religion’. Royappan allegedly read this work out to his friends and companions . He claimed that it was composed with utmost ‘holiness’. He made five copies of the book so that it could be spread everywhere and bring Christianity to an end. Along with his followers Royappan also held public meeting in the settlement to spread their ideas. At these meetings they claimed that there was no god, that the only way to heaven was to disobey parents, that Christianity was introduced by the despicable whites<sup>3</sup> and most alarmingly, that the saviour was a

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<sup>2</sup> Public Cons., 11 June 1802, V265, no 45, TNA.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly the petition records Royappan as saying that the whites were ‘mean and defiled pariahs’.

thief. The ultimate blasphemy the complainants claimed was when, in the meeting, Royappan announced that the Holy Trinity had no shape other than a man's private parts and one of his party would undress himself!

On hearing about this book, the petition recounted that the parson sent for Royappan and caused him to bring the book to be tried by 'four Christian poets'. The trial naturally found the book full of errors and accordingly the parson ordered a general assembly in the Church yard which our protagonist, Royappan did not attend ('by his stubbornness'). In the light of his misdemeanours, which included abusing the padre (when services were held) in Chepauk (Kilpauk), not baptising his child, not burying its corpse in the burial ground, refusing to perform penance for his sins, rubbing himself with ashes, the assembly committed him to the local *Palaiyakarrar* custody as a lunatic till he came to his senses and surrendered his writings. The East India Company, naturally perturbed by the underlying seditiousness of the entire episode, supported this measure heartily.

The twist in the tale was added by Muthu, Royappan's wife who also sent in a petition in vain. Pleading for her husband's release, she accused his adversaries of misrepresenting his Tamil verses and flogging him. The real trouble she claimed was that the couple had returned to their *original* (emphasis added) religion of Shaivism having only recently converted to Catholicism- a move opposed by the other members of the community and the priest.

This episode illustrates the fairly complicated way in which the group of Catholic boat people engaged in the arena through the written word. Royappan's seditious writings were an pivot around which his heretic public preaching was centred. We are also offered a rich view of the defined nature of community

boundaries and the manner in which they were maintained by the institution of the church along with the East India Company's tacit support. However as the next disturbance in the settlement indicates, the boat people were also able to maintain their independent identity of their shrine and did not accept the overlordship of the Mylapore establishment unprotestingly. In this case they were able to use their own importance in Company activities and the hostility between the Fort St George Government and the Mylapore establishment (which was Portuguese owned till the 1800s) to try and negotiate a advantageous control over the local Royapuram shrine.

#### **The Church and Community Divided- The Policing of Accounts; the Problem of the Church Funds**

The Dispute over the Royapuram Church was conducted primarily by petitioning the Fort St George authorities.<sup>4</sup> With the shift to Royapuram the boat people built a new church in 1800 solely at their own expense.<sup>5</sup> It appears that apart from the monthly collection from the boat people the church also received arevenues from the bazaars and (like temples) lent money from its funds to boat maistries. They continued an old agreement signed in 1798 between the vicar and the boat maistries (employed by the Company and residing in Chepauk) submitting to the authority of the priest to manage the church funds. They agreed to hand over a daily rate per boat per month to defray the expenses of the church at Chepauk. Not surprisingly it was this church's funds that were at the centre of the dispute between the Parson and the congregation.

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<sup>4</sup> This section has pieced together using the following documents- Public Cons, 9 September 1806, V 316, p6381, TNA; 31 August 1806, V315, TNA; Public Cons, 13 April, 1810, V 368, TNA.

<sup>5</sup> Public Cons. , 9 Sept, 1806. V316, p6831, TNA



Trouble began in 1806 when the congregation demanded that their vicar exhibit his accounts to scrutiny by the boat maistries appointees. In 1806 Lambert left Madras without any account of the funds therefore the boatmen felt that it should be under a responsible person. The boatmen wanted the church funds arising from the Boatman's labour to be placed in government securities to earn interest so that they could build a bigger church. According to the outraged Padre, the dispute began when he demanded the payment of their debts and accounts due to the church. On hearing of his complaint to the boat pay office, Manitam, one of the ringleaders, along with the others began holding assemblies nearly every night and twice threatened the vicar with revolt in the village. The vicar wrote to the Company that he was not obliged to be subjected to financial scrutiny by the head of castes, that he did not appropriate any of it for his private use and that the boat maistry's document showing the agreement of his predecessor to scrutiny was false. The Company was inclined to favour the Boat people.

From 1806 to 1810, it appears that the church functioned in relative autonomy from the Bishopric at Mylapore. In fact, the congregation sent for some priest from the town church who was paid a fee to hold divine service at the church. On Christmas eve in 1810, the caste head waited on the Reverend Superior of the church to order a priest for the service for the day on payment of fees. The senior vicar offered personally to make all the arrangements and perform the service himself. At this the maistries replied that since it was not his duty or the custom to do so, they wouldn't allow it. The furious vicar pushed the maistries by the neck and threatened to flog them. The maistries then petitioned the Company stating that 'we and the Europeans of this place can not agree together because

they do not know the usage and manners of the Malabars'<sup>6</sup>. They further argued that 'Though we are Roman Catholic we are quite different . The church in Black Town is Portuguese but ours is a Malabari one. It is very impossible that a Malabar man very rich to be superintendent of the Portuguese people's church and a most respectable Portuguese man or a Malabar man of other cast to a church of a quite different Malabar caste.....we beg that a Malabar Christian be appointed for our church'.<sup>7</sup>

While this was not granted for there were none available, the Company ordered the maistries to manage the funds along with the parson according to the regulations formulated by the assembly of the community's representatives. The East India Company's support of the maistries indicates that the written precedent (of 1798 which clearly established the superiority of the parson's position) was bypassed when the need arose.

The striking animus and rhetoric of difference between the congregation and the padre is worth noting. The claim of an autonomous Malabar Christian space is highlighted when we consider the views expressed by the padre (who was Portuguese). He refused to render accounts to 'heads of caste nominees' because he was superior to them. He refuted the idea that that the four syndics should be appointed by the boatmen. If it were allowed, he felt, that the boatmen would appoint men from their own caste.

'The boatmen ,my lord, are ill bred and from ignorance arrogating for themselves the most unjustifiable authority, extremely litigious and with respect to

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

caste very inferior and allow them autonomy was dangerous.’ Further, he argued that it was well known ‘that they pay little or indeed no attention to their superiors’.<sup>8</sup> It was this language of power from the Catholic establishment that the boatmen addressed.

The evident hostility between the padre and the congregation, the Mylapore establishment and the British government and ecclesiastical order<sup>9</sup> should not lead to the description of the Boatmen as a unified group. Apart from the Royappan episode, we do have evidence to show that there factions lead by two principle boat owners. Interestingly there is some evidence to show that some of these owners signed themselves as Mudaliars.

The Disputes in Royapuram paint a fairly striking picture of the dynamism of community solidarity . In an arena seemingly uniform and monolithic with caste based general assemblies, there were strong examples of difference and conflict about religious practices and rights. Important in these actions were not only the Boat people who emerge as agents in their own right with articulate opinions and negotiation skills, but the company (whose structure facilitated this autonomy) , and the Church..

It is also evident that boundaries were transgressed and restructured in fairly defined realms. The church was a new shrine and it derived it power not from the deity but the fact that the boatmen built it with the wages of their own labour. Again it was the church’s role in the circulation of resources that made its administration such a bone of contention. The written word was the site of dispute

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> The Reverend wanted to know why a similar scrutiny was not demanded of the Protestant Reverend Kerr who received the earnings from Sunday hire.

in the Royappan episode and the quarrels and complaints were conducted in the form of petitions to the government of Fort St George. Changes were sought and autonomy asserted ( as done by the boat maistries ) in the name of customary practice. At times customary practice was deliberately overturned (as was done by Royappan) to assert a new expression of dissent. The disputes of Royapuram Catholics can be said to have been staged in the now familiar arenas of the church, the written word and customary practice.

### **The Cult of Srivaikunda Swamy**

#### *Restructuring popular practice in the Southern Tamil Region*

This section analyses certain aspects of the cult of Vaikundaswamy which was very popular in the areas of Southern Travancore and Tirunelveli from about the 1830s. This cult was primarily dominant among the Nadar group in Southern Tamil Nadu though there is evidence that other groups were followers of Vaikunda Swamy. A classic example of 'Popular cult' example wherein its founder Vaikunda Swamy was said to be endowed with mystical healing powers, the movement striking in its assertion of lower caste consciousness and its attempt to establish new association. In many ways it took from the new range of associativeness that were characteristic of the early nineteenth century and were in part missionary led. recently, the movement has begun to attract the attention of scholars as representative of alternative engagement with colonial authority.<sup>10</sup>

The story of the cult necessarily follows from the biography of its founder . Most of the information is from hagiographic sources published in the early

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<sup>10</sup> M S S Pandian , 'Meanings of 'colonialism' and 'nationalism' . An essay on Vaikunda Swamy cult', *Studies in History*, V 8, No 2, n.s. ,1992, pp. 167-185. Many of the themes explored in the this section are based on his work.

twentieth century and from hostile missionary sources<sup>11</sup>. Thus it is possible that our picture of Vaikundar Swamy follows the contours of the well established archetype heretic reformer. We know that he was born in Sasthankoilvilai eight miles south east of Nagercoil<sup>12</sup>. Called Mudicudum Perumal by his pauper parents Ponnumadan and Veyilal he was renamed Muttukutty because Perumal was a name used by caste Hindus alone<sup>13</sup>. He was educated in a local school and missionary sources note that he studied Tamil sacred texts and seems to have also read the bible<sup>14</sup>.

As a young man Muttukutty went on a pilgrimage to the Murugan temple at Trichendur to cure his ailments.<sup>15</sup> He is said to have had a vision and announced that Lord Vishnu had given birth to him as Sri Vaikundar and deputed him as a messiah for the downtrodden.<sup>16</sup> He came to be known as a miracle worker and as his fame spread he pronounced himself as an incarnation of *Narayanan* as people believed that he would take them to Vaikundam or Vishnu's abode.<sup>17</sup> He also appealed to the lower caste to unite for the beginning of the reign of Dharma.<sup>18</sup> Over a period of time he became famous as a faith healer and lived in Amalapati

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<sup>11</sup> The available sources are scattered- consisting mainly of Missionary reports of the London Missionary Society, the memoirs of Missionaries like George Pettit, and the texts of the founder Vaikundar's teachings which were published only in the mid twentieth century. There are also two extremely useful articles on which this section is based - MSS Pandian(1992)and P Sarveswaran, 'Sri Vaikunda Svamikal- a forgotten social reformer of Kerala', *Journal of Kerala Studies*, V 7, (1-4), March - December , 1980, pp 1-10

<sup>12</sup> G Pettit, *The Tinnevelly Mission of the CMS*, London, 1851, p256.

<sup>13</sup> Sarveswaran, (1980), p3.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p4.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p2.

<sup>16</sup> We have already seen that Trichendur was a shrine of immense power, and was an important temple town. (The Vibhuti Sangam held its meetings here). So it is significant that Muttukutty had his vision at Trichendur.

<sup>17</sup> Sarveswaran, (1980) p6

<sup>18</sup> Ibid,.

near Sothavilai. In 1821, there were upwards of 1200 converts in these places - in Tamaraikulam in Kanyakumari district.<sup>19</sup>

Sri Vaikudarswamy's ideas soon ran into trouble with the Travancore royalty particularly Swati Tirunal (AD 1829- 1849). This was primarily because they were harshly criticised by him for excessive taxation of the poor. At the urging of the established elite Nairs, the state of Travancore instituted an enquiry against him. Missionary sources claim that it was because he began to teach sedition 'declaring that the man was born who would put an end to the rule of the East India Company' that the collector pressured the Raja of Travancore to apprehend him.<sup>20</sup> In any case, on the basis of the enquiry, Muttukutty was arrested. The hagiographic accounts record Vaikundarswamy as surviving terrible ordeals by the strength of his magical powers. Interestingly, the king ordered him to address only people of his own caste - which he refused. Quite obviously the movement was creating a new level of horizontal solidarity. Eventually, his immense popularity forced the Travancore Court to release him in March 1839. Sri Vaikundar then returned to the Nagercoil area where he continued to live and preach his ideas. He died on 21 Vaikasi 1026, ( 1851 AD). After his death a shrine was erected over his samadhi and the settlement renamed Swamitoppu<sup>21</sup>.

### **Practice and Reform : The Creation of an Alternative 'Public' ?**

Sri Vaikundar was a trenchant critic of established social relationships and religious practice. After his revelation at Trichendur, Sri Vaikundar protested

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<sup>19</sup> P Sarveswaran, (1980), p7.

<sup>20</sup> Pettit,(1851) p280

<sup>21</sup> P Sarveswaran (1980), p3

against the system of prayer in the Murugan temple which discriminated against low (unclean) castes. Some studies argue that he openly criticised upper caste domination in Travancore (which is why he was arrested) and called for a broad lower caste unity<sup>22</sup>.

Vaikundar's engagement with popular tradition is also clear from his attempts to forge new practices, many of which were being advocated by missionary organisations. Thus he prevented his followers from participating in ceremonial rituals such as offering donations, carrying the *kavadi*, *Arattu* etc. He also came out strongly against *Pei* worship claiming that he had burnt all devils; condemned idol worship; and opposed animal sacrifice.<sup>23</sup> He was also against the clothing restrictions on Nadars, and ordered that they wear turbans, upper cloth, shoulder cloth. This created problems with caste Hindus then who clashed and there were some incidents when the cloth was torn off the women.<sup>24</sup>

In many ways the followers of Sri Vaikundarswamy followed alternate practices to the rituals in the area. For instance Sri Vaikundar observed Sunday as a special day and conducted a morning and evening service. The service consisted of singing and dancing. He used consecrated water as a cure. The followers were also ten precepts in imitation of the commandments. A well was dug called the *Muntikinaru* in front of the temple at swami toppu. It was open to all people irrespective of caste. In fact there is evidence that followers from different social

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p5.

<sup>24</sup> This is an interesting corollary to the movement started by the missionaries to clothe Nadar women in the 1830s called the 'Breast cloth Controversy'. For more details on this in the Southern Travancore and Kanyakumari areas see Robert Hardgrave, 'The Breast Cloth Controversy: Caste consciousness and social change in Southern Travancore', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, V 5, No 2, 1968, p 171-188; MSS Pandian, 'Meanings of 'colonialism' and 'nationalism'. An essay on Vaikunda Swamy cult', *Studies in History*, V 8, No 2, n.s., 1992, pp167-185.

groups ritually dine together cooking the food with water from the sacred well.

The followers were also given an unifying symbol in the form of a saffron and white flag hoisted on his birthday. It was popularly known as the *Anbukodi* (the flag of love) and his group was self-described as the *Anbukodi makkal*, (the people of the flag of love).<sup>25</sup>

While many of these bore visible similarity with some kinds of worship encouraged of the Christian missionaries they should be seen as acts of translation (and opposition) rather than transplantation of Christian practice as missionary sources are wont to do. While to read this movement as a 'nativist' reaction as some scholars have done is inadequate<sup>26</sup>, on the other hand the forging of new forms of associativeness are highlighted through an analysis of some of the channels of transmission through which the cult spread. Crucially, since his worship addressed and attracted people from other social groups other than the Nadars, it may be possible to see these practices as constituting a new public arena where extant sectarian boundaries were opposed and altered.

### **Transmission of Vaikundar's Message**

Though Vaikundar was literate there is no evidence of his preaching published or bound into manuscripts and distributed till well into the twentieth century. The dissemination thus, was largely oral though there are references to

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<sup>25</sup> The use of the flag was a very important symbol of corporate identity and assertion right through the late medieval and early modern period in the region. For instance there were many left and right hand caste quarrels on issues such as the insignia and colour of 'caste' flags. For more details see Kanaklatha Mukund, 'Caste conflict in South India in Early Colonial Port Cities 1650- 1800', *Studies in History*, V 11, No1, 1995.

<sup>26</sup> R. Frykenberg, 'The impact of conversion and social reforms in India', in Philips and Wainwright (ed.), *Indian society and the beginning of Modernization c 1830-1850*, London, 1976, p242, refers to the Muttukutty movement as a nativist reaction as does as Robert Hardgrave, *Nadars of Tamil Nadu: The political culture of a community in change*, Berkeley, 1969, p42.



him dictating his doctrines to his disciple Sahadevan who recorded everything on to *olai* leaves . Apart from his reputation as a charismatic healer, the phenomenal growth of the movement can be attributed to the new institutions and methods that he established all over the Southern Tamil region to spread his teachings .

The most important institution around which the cult was centred was the *Nilai Tankal*. These were small temples dedicated to Narayana or Vishnu where rituals were spare and puja performed by devotees after taking a ritual bath thrice a day. People from different communities offered mass prayers together in these temples - almost like a Protestant congregation. Two or three festivals were held annually when apart from religious discourses, there was entertainment and mass scale poor feeding.<sup>27</sup>

The *Nilai Tankals* assumed their significance in other respects as well. They became service centres - giving shelter to the destitute, supplying food, extending spiritual confidence, and curing diseases and at times were used as school rooms.<sup>28</sup> Nilal Tankals were found all over South Travancore and Tirunelveli. In Kanyakumari district several were established in Vagai Villai Pancalingramum, Lipuram, Kalukulam etc. Interestingly while these Tankals were open to all castes there is some evidence that each caste often had exclusive Tankals for their use.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Sarveswaran, (1980), p9.

<sup>28</sup> Again comparisons can be drawn with churches. It must be noted the public feeding was done by the Ramalingar swami followers as well towards the late nineteenth century.

<sup>29</sup> According to Sarveswaran, Dalits had their Nilai tankals at Narikkulam, Sundarapuram, Kanikkars in Manolodai, Alvars at Variur, Chettiyars at Kottaram, Panikkars at Cennganur, Also low caste People formed them in Ramanaad, Madurai and Tirunelveli.

Vaikunda Swamy founded an organisation called Samathuva Samajam or the 'Society of Equality' to transmit his ideas. He also seems to have had a band of itinerant preachers who travelled all over the southern districts. Though by most accounts they held meetings, we do have the instance of one of the disciples pretending to be the avatar of *Hanuman* in a village near Courtrallum.<sup>30</sup> His five important disciples were Sivanandi Myladi ( Dharma siddhar), Pandarum of Kailasapuram ( Bhiman siddhar), Arjunan of Pillayarkudirruppu ( Arjunan siddhar), Subbiah of Colaccal (Nahular siddhar) and Hari Gopalan of Tamaraiikulam (Sahadevan siddhar). The titles taken after the Pandavas is of some significance, as is the title 'siddhar' which referred to the long standing tradition of iconoclastic mystics dating to the early medieval period.<sup>31</sup> This clearly indicates that not just an alternative to missionary tradition but an attempt to use the motifs of a wide range of sects. Srivaikundar had a vision of Vishnu in Trichendur which was a shivite shrine. His Nilai Tankals were dedicated to both; his disciples were named in the Siddhar tradition and yet one of disciples claimed himself an avataram of *Hanuman*.

### **Missionary Criticism**

It is quite clear from the missionary sources that they did not take very kindly to the Sri Vaikunda Swamy cult preaching even though they claimed he took a lot from Christian practice and belief.<sup>32</sup> This is most clearly brought out by the

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<sup>30</sup> Pettit, (1851), p275.

<sup>31</sup> For more on the Siddhar tradition, see K Meenakshi, 'The Siddhas of Tamil Nadu. A voice of dissent', in R Champakalakshmi and S Gopal (ed.), *Tradition, Dissent and Ideology. Essays in honour of Romila Thapar*, Delhi, 1996, pp441-450.

<sup>32</sup> Pettit in fact claimed that Muttukutty's work helped the church spread the gospel. Pettit, pp282-94.

kind of handbills that were in circulation in the area right into the late nineteenth century.

In a Tamil handbill entitled the worship of Muttukutty, the American missionaries condemned the path espoused by the sectarian leader. The handbill was published in the 1870s and noted that the cult had grown like wildfire in the southern region. The handbill is a striking example of bazaar gossip and earthy reasoning used to argue in the public arena . As it recreates some of the atmosphere of the contentious traditions of that time, it is worth reproducing below.

**'The Worship of Muttukutty**  
A criticism of the path of Muttukutty

In this country are many paths. Many new ones come up often. For example, some years ago a person called Muttukutty died and was worshipped as the divine. His upadesam spread like wildfire in South Travancore. It seems a wonder. I will tell you his life in a few words.

He was born in Kottarada. He led a dissolute life and went to Trichendur. There he fainted. He saw himself as an avataram of Vishnu and took on the garb of a pandaram ( priest- non brahman) To beguile people he began to perform miracles and borrowed from the teachings of Christ . He got many women to his side . Many of his wives and children are still alive. All his wives gave him love potions which made him a dissolute wreck. How can he then be a Vishnu Avataram? The shastras say that the tenth avatar will be a horse. HE did not come as a horse. Are the shatras false or is he a fraud?

What were his evil teachings? At his shrine , men and women mix in worship without shame or restraint. This shameful action can not be described. Is this how God is worshipped? The wise men are disturbed and wonder how such a man can be seen as a devata.

When God takes human form - as an avataram there should be a larger objective in mind. What is his objective? He has only shown the way of lust greed and robbery. How can he be a divine mind when he did not even know he was being given love potions by his wife! Can we believe that he is the all knowing lord?

Now a temple has been built over the samadhi. An annual festival conducted in his name. This is how temples to Krishan and Subramaniam originally built - as memorial to dead relatives and have slowly become the great centres of worship. If we see that a shrine is built in the recent past for a man of ill repute, is it any wonder that great temples have come up to worship Krishna and festivals conducted for those who lived centuries ago? Take heed! Listen only to the deeds of the only son of God- Jesus Christ.

Born to a virgin, immaculately conceived, listen to his words and deeds. He taught us the way to a good life and to prove his divinity did many miracles. He taught us humility, peace and self constraint through his own perfect example. Finally he was crucified for our sake buried and on the third day rose from the dead to an eternal life. These things that the Satguru has to teach us. If we place your faith in the Divine Christ- it is your good fortune.<sup>33</sup>

The text is significant because it shows the two traditions looking for adherents in somewhat similar ways. The miracle powers of one (that is Christ) were eulogised at the denigration of the other. The missionary argument was therefore somewhat imbued with an ambiguity towards popular practices so as to appeal to a wide audience. The most interesting point is that this was obviously a battle that wove high and low 'Hinduism' together in rhetoric, used the earthy language of the bazaar to publish in popular pamphlets and make speeches. Again like the incidents at Royapuram, it is an example of the forming of a richly debated religiosity that saw the active participation of the lower orders of Tamil society.

## **The Ramalingar Movement**

### *'Bhakti' in a new public arena*

The chapter so far has discussed examples of religious debate in the public

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<sup>33</sup> Personal translation of Tamil handbill 11, *Tirunelveli Tract And Book Society*, Nagercoil, 1878, UTC Archives. I am grateful to Mrs Saraswathi Gowrishankar for assistance with the translation.

arena which saw an active participation by the lower orders. This section will discuss the life and influence of Ramalingar swami or *Vallalar* , a Shaivite mystic who is often compared to Ramakrishna Paramhansa. Considered the last of the great Tamil bhakti saints, Ramalingar attracted a largely Vellalar audience and became an icon in the eyes of the Self Respecters of the twentieth century. The movement is an interesting one for it forms an interesting contrast to the 'high' tradition oriented orthodox Tamil Saiva Siddhanta literati<sup>34</sup>. Though his followers were mostly upper caste, and became popular in the second half of the nineteenth century, many of the principles of his movement had a lot in common with cults like that of Sri Vaikundaswamy .

Ramalingar was born in 1823 to parents Ramapillai and Cinnammai, at Marudur near Chidambaram.<sup>35</sup> A devotee of the Chidambaram Natarajar he saw himself a son of God (albeit in a different way from Vaikunda swamy). In *Samaraja Sutta Canmarga Jatia Perunvinappam* ( which he wrote) he says that he was a divine child , born and brought up by the divine lord. His father died when he was six and his brother Sabapati Pillai subsequently brought him up and taught him. Ramalingar was also taught by the Kanchipuram Vidwan Sabapati Mudaliar. Thus he didn't get any formal schooling.

Vallalar is said to have started singing his own compositions to God from the age of Twelve. His reputation as a devout poet was matched by his reputation as a erudite Tamil scholar. In fact he spent many years teaching students grammar

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<sup>34</sup> The most famous being the case of Aramuga Navalar. See Dennis Hudson, 'Aramuga Navalar and the Tamil Renaissance', in K Jones (ed) *Religious conflict in South Asia*, Albany, 1992, pp-24- 54.

<sup>35</sup> This section is mostly based on *The Encyclopaedia of Tamil* , (in 10 Volumes), V 1, Introductory articles, Institute of Asian Studies, Madras, 1990, pp441-450.

along with religious discourse, and writing commentaries in and around Madras. In 1858, at the age of thirty five, after an extensive tour of Temples he left the city to settle in the house of Venkata Reddiyar at Karunkuli near Chidambaram. He spent twelve years of his life there. In the course of his preaching for reforms in agamic tradition Ramalingar incurred the wrath of the orthodox Saiva Siddhantist which even led to litigation. As his popularity grew he established a variety of institutions to propagate his belief, such as a printing press, a school etc. His activities in Madras formed the basis for Satya Taruma Salai, A poor feeding institution, and the Samaraja Sanmarga Sangam. He eventually died in Mudalur.

Ramalingar swami's life bears the marking of iconic sainthood. He was credited with divine power - attaining Samadhi ( his followers claim he went inside a room and his body was never found). His Samadhi is now an important site of pilgrimage. Equally interesting however was his participation in the public arena through the establishment of new institutions. The most important and successful being the publication of books and commentaries. His publications include Olivilotukkam, a work on Saiva siddhanta in 1851; a commentary on Tondaimandala Jatakam published in 1855; a Gnostic work called Gyanadipikai published in 1857, Prose like Manumarai Kanta Vacakam in 1854, and several commentaries on Tamil sacred literature. Clearly, the movement was one which took publishing seriously . To some extent it can be explained by presence of the largely Vellalar following which was perhaps more literate than the low castes.

The Ramalingar movement grew in popularity and along with it, new institutions were established to propagate the principles of the sanmargam. A Salai was formed to feed the hungry; there was a school; a sabai to address new modes

of worship and ideas of universal brother hood and Sivakarunyam ( love for Shiva) among the masses. The Sangam was established in Vadulur in 1865. Its ideals were that there was only one god, manifested in the form of light , minor deities should not be worshipped, funerary rites should not be performed animal food should be avoided, and the poor should be fed. The sangam published his works and ran the other institutions. The Sattiya Veda Taruma Salai was a free feeding house of the poor and played an important role in making the sanmargam popular. The Sabai was formed in 1872 in Vadalur as the Uttara Nana Citambaram to provide a universal mode of worship. It advocated the worship of light. The schools which were open to all castes and opened in the 1860s taught English, Tamil and Sanskrit<sup>36</sup>. Ramalingar also tried to start an magazine called the *Sanmarga Viveka Virudi*. Though these activities were not very successful , the attempt at institutional building is worth noting.

Some religious movements of the nineteenth century were in fact more directly continuous of earlier times. The Eight Letter Veda society was one such prominent example.

Missionary accounts refer to the Eight Letter Veda Society as active in the Ettiyapuram area around 1842. 'A respectable Shanar claimed it was the reform of the idolatrous Hindus' because it rejected the public worship of idols<sup>37</sup>. Turnbull's memoir<sup>38</sup> yields some additional information on the society. Turnbull describes them as a 'curious sect in the Southern province. Their symbol was an octagonal

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<sup>36</sup> Sources argue that they were not very successful because people were more attracted to his miraculous powers.

<sup>37</sup> P Appasamy, *History of the Tinnevely Mission*, Palayamcottah, 1925, pp280-1.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Turnbull, *Geographical And Statistical Memoir of Tirunelveli*, , Revenue Sundries No. 38, 1828,p 7.

figure on each side of the first letter of their prayers. The original founder was Timmapirngar, a native of Sukulapuram near Delhi who came to Madurai in the reign of Mutualagherrier Nayaka of the family of the Tirumala Naick in AD1667. The system was called the Ettattitivedam and Skitipuru of the Perria Perattiar. The votaries believed that the Goddess would grant offspring to barren women and cure all kinds of diseases and they honoured the Goddess with rituals conducted by a Geatu Dassari.<sup>39</sup>

The group celebrated its festival annually in two places - the eighteenth day of Chitrai corresponding to the 29<sup>th</sup> April at Chettiapett in Pinchamal Taluk and on the 5<sup>th</sup> day of Iyr corresponding to 16<sup>th</sup> Jan at Kallugumalli in Ettiapuram. On these two days, pollution taboos were transgressed and the devotees appeared 'not to regard pollution or any act of defilement which on ordinary occasions would cause abhorrence'<sup>40</sup>. Some kind of inter dining also took place without any regard caste distinctions with 'Paraiyars as welcome as the Brahmans to participate in the same morsel and drink out of the same vessel'<sup>41</sup>.

From the cases discussed so far, it is apparent that there were attempts cutting across caste and community to reformulate and re define existing religious practice in the public arena in the first half of the nineteenth century in the Tamil region. This process was in some ways shaped by the new structures of associativeness like the printing press, schools, and meeting halls; and new actors like missionary organisations and the East India Company. At the same time it is

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p7.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p8.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.



important to note that these movements were also a part of a longer continuum of heretic traditions in Tamil society. Vaikundar was clearly a kind of millennial movement and his vocabulary was a pastiche of different traditions including that of the iconoclastic Siddhars. Ramalingar swami saw himself as the disciple of Nyanasambandar and his cult was seen as belonging to the tradition of Tamil bhakti, a medieval tradition. The Eight Letter Veda Society was less organised and more esoteric than the others. What is clear however, is that there does seem to have been an interpenetration of the what is often seen as 'elite' and 'popular' forms of transmission and associativeness, making for a vibrant and contentious public debate on religious and community boundaries.

## Conclusion

This dissertation has attempted to address some current concerns on the debate on the Public arena in nineteenth century south Asia. Chapter one tries to analyse the complex interaction between eighteenth century politics and religious traditions. It plots the manner in which the East India Company and the missionaries came in as side players and gradually become repositories of power in the Tamil country.

The dissertation then goes on to discuss the different ways in which the public arena was structured in the first half of the nineteenth century. Chapter two explores the relationship between tracts, tract distribution and public preaching in the transmission of Christian knowledge in the region. The next chapter looks at the significance of Church disputes in structuring everyday politics. Chapter four discusses the mobilization for and the production of the Hindu Memorial, arguably the first 'modern' political critique of the state in South India. My final chapter argues that the interaction between the colonial state, missionaries and institutions like petitions, new prayer halls and public meeting were an important part of the fabric of popular religious practice.

The dissertation therefore asks whether the notion of the public can be effectively used to understand the 'defining' of religious boundaries; the interpenetration of the elite and the popular worlds; the spoken and written word. Most importantly, it tries to argue for the crucial role of the early nineteenth century in the understanding of 'modern' Tamil politics.

Studies of local action and collective ceremony have tended to uncritically accept the definitions of self ascribed religious boundaries. This

dissertation has attempted to problematize such a notion by exploring alternative sites of religious associativeness through which the public was constituted. For instance, it argues that the new Protestant Church restructured sacred space by addressing non-Christian audiences through a stringent critique of local customary practice using a variety of transmission techniques.

Recent scholarship on the codification of religious tradition indicates the variety of ways in which the imagined Hindu community was constructed. One widely accepted argument is to posit the role of print and the production of texts as an important factor. It is also often argued that these notions were driven by upper caste elite- the new intelligentsia open to 'western ideas'. Clearly this is problematic. The dissertation indicates that there was a dissemination of ideas beyond the literate groups and that often these groups had strong notions of religious identities. Moreover even within the 'elite' sphere there were strong fractures between groups on what it was to be Hindu and there were varied responses to missionary activities from riots to setting up rival printing presses.

This dissertation emphasizes the importance of 1830s and 40s as water marks in the formation of the Tamil public arena in the nineteenth century. It implies that very process of conflict and negotiation through which the public was constituted makes for a re-examination of later developments like the 'Tamil Renaissance'. In fact, the dissertation underlines the need for more research on early nineteenth century Tamil Nadu. Much more needs to be known about the proliferation of print, petition and other forms of social communication and the nature of public debate to conclusively answer some of the question posed by this study.

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