

**Redefining Identity:  
Changing Contours of Language and Religion  
in Tamil Nadu Politics**

**Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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## DECLARATION

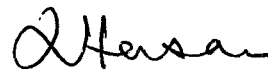
I hereby declare that the Dissertation entitled **Redefining Identity: Changing Contours Of Language And Religion In Tamil Nadu Politics** submitted by me, **R. Bravin**, *Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi*, for the award of the degree of **Master Of Philosophy** is my original work and has not been submitted in part or in full for any other degree or diploma in any other university.

  
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This may be placed before the examiners for the evaluation for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy**.

  
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*R.Bravin*

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## Introduction

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In recent years, the question of caste and religion has once again been prominently repositioned in the Indian national political agenda. Discourses centered around the issues of *Mandal* and *Mandir*, have manifested the problematic area of secularism. Through these two categories of 'Indian Gate Keepers',<sup>1</sup> academic have debated the secular nature of the Indian State. The publication of the Mandal Commission Report and V.P.Singh's decision to implement the recommendation of the Mandal Commission introduced quotas for 'backward castes' popularly known as Other Backward Classes (OBC). These reservations for recruitment to central and state government jobs and to all universities has raised serious questions about the role of caste consciousness and the secular nature of the Indian society and polity. Further, caste has become the ghost hovering over many contemporary discussions about nationhood, citizenship and modernity.

Parallely, the emergence of Hindu fundamentalism, right-wing politics and communalism across India, which threatened to divide the secular state through the politics of hatred and homogenization, centered around the issue of the *Mandir*. The communal strife created by the Ayodhya temple movement, which serves to redefine the country in a majoritarian mode, made its appearance on the political stage through the category of religion. Despite the pressing and also much discussed dangers posed by the Sangh Parivar, it is necessary to remember the role played by the controversy over Mandal in generating the political consensus that made Hindu fundamentalism more acceptable. It was in the wake of the politicization of caste over Mandal that the

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the term 'Indian Gate Keepers' to refer to the ontological categories of caste and religion is used by Arjun Appadurai and other post-colonial scholars.

call for Hindu unity over caste division began to be made by the political leaders of the BJP. Caste and religion acted as a catalyst for the BJP to capture power at the centre in the late nineties. The lack of a clear majority in favour of the BJP led to the formation of a coalition government in which the Dravidian parties forged alliances with it. This alliance raised a large number of significant questions, it seemed puzzling how the distinctive content of Dravidian politics was transfigured to make it compatible with the Hindutva ideology, that is, how the Dravidian movement with its characteristic opposition to both Brahminical and North Indian hegemony could align with the BJP was a baffling matter.

At this juncture it becomes imperative to revisit the question of Dravidian identity, since here we see a peculiarly interesting case of an identity formation based on resistance to a dominant hegemonic Brahminical order and yet in recent times, an identity fractured and threatened by the communal divisions rife in the rest of the country. At what point and how does this identity that pitted itself against a hegemonic *Other*, get co-opted and appropriated by the dominant Hindutva forces is the main thrust of my study. The purpose of this study can be justified by the increasing relevance of analyzing the web of relationships that form between politics and religion in the South Asian context, particularly India. The shifting trajectories of politics at the regional level reflect on politics at a pan-Indian level, but, conversely the nuances of regional politics also indicate how this shift towards a Hindutva ideology has become possible in varied contexts.

Recent studies and debates in the academia evince that apart from the grand narrative of nationalism, the omnipotent imagined community of the nation, there

were other social imaginations equally real, if not as visible. As Bipan Chandra argues, there were substantial sections within Indian society which had little concern for what has been described as the central contradiction of this period: the contradiction between the 'coloniser' and the 'colonised'.<sup>2</sup>

Nationalist historiography was premised on what can be called a sort of apriori assumption of the category of the nation, and an ideological privileging of this category, discounting, if not treating with cursory hastiness all alternative social imaginations. Alternatively, more recently historians have tried to explain the caste-Hindu hegemony of the freedom movement, either as a failure of mobilization or as a manifestation of the passivity of the subalterns.<sup>3</sup>

Some recent path-breaking studies have gone a long way in retrieving the long-suppressed lost social imaginations - imaginations that were lost because they were written off by history, and are now being recovered. Such studies include interpretations of the Namasudras of Bengal<sup>4</sup>, Jyotirao Phule movement in Maharashtra<sup>5</sup> and the non-Brahmin movement or the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu. These studies show the various above mentioned social groupings operating in a power matrix quite distinct from the restrictive binaries of the coloniser/colonized,

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<sup>2</sup> Bipan Chandra, *et al*, *India's Struggle for Independence*, New Delhi, Penguin, 1989, p.22-23.

<sup>3</sup> Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies*, Vol. 3, OUP, New Delhi, 1984, p. 278.

<sup>4</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal 1872-1947*, Surrey, Curzon, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> In recent years some of the good works on this subject are:

Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low-Caste Protest in Nineteenth Century Western India*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Eleanor Zelliot, 'Learning the Use of Political Means: The Mahars of Maharashtra' in Rajni Kothari, ed., *Caste in Indian Politics*, New Delhi, Orient Longman, 1973.

Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, New Delhi, Sage, 1994.

outside this binary emerges a new perception of colonial rule and sometimes distinct and even opposed modalities of imagining themselves.

Several scholars have tried to study the Dravidian movement as an instance of an alternative social imagination. The movement defined itself in terms of the construction of a Dravidian identity, that was separate from, and an alternative to, the dominant 'national' identity. This Dravidian identity was premised on an opposition to the Brahminical order and the 'classical' legacy of the Sanskrit language. The richness and antiquity of the Tamil language was used as a basis to construct this unique Dravidian identity. In its opposition to caste-Hindu hegemony and to Brahminical ideology, it defined itself as a movement of the non-Brahmin castes vis-à-vis an Aryan Other.

One of the earliest studies attempted in 1965 is by Robert L. Hardgrave Jr., which tries to show that 'it is the agent of traditionalisation which has given rise to the growth of cultural nationalism.' By 'traditionalisation', he implies 'Tamilisation', 'which entails the forms and processes of modern government which become culturally acceptable, psychologically satisfactory and politically meaningful to the people.'<sup>6</sup> The main emphasis of his argument shows that 'traditionalisation' is not necessarily opposed to modern forms of governance; on the contrary, values and structures of traditional society can be used for traditionalisation by transposing them to larger political structures and community. His chief concern is the 'transformation of primordial sentiments' to the new democratic and political processes, thereby making them comprehensible to large masses of the politically illiterate. The problem

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<sup>6</sup> Robert L. Hardgrave, *The Dravidian Movement*, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1965, p. 4-7.



with Hardgrave's approach to the study of the movement is that it misses the element of protest involved in the construction of the Dravidian identity. It also ignores the social changes affected within the existing society and its complex interfaces and encounters with an imposed polity.

Eugene F. Irschick, a historian, attempted a comprehensive study of the early phase of the movement, the purpose of which was to throw light on the competition for power among the elite groups, their strategies of mobilization, and how this process of political integration takes place in modern India. He argues that 'the friction that existed between Brahmin and non-Brahmin is a typical by-product of the demand for more political, economic and educational privilege by any backward group.'<sup>7</sup> The passing of the old order and the establishment of modern society are bound to undermine relations based on ascription and the position in society that those ascriptive rights imply. The development of the non-Brahmin was one of the ways in which this transformation manifested itself in modern India.'<sup>8</sup>

Marguerite Ross Barnett's analysis of the post-independence phase of the movement, and the rise of the DMK, attempts to understand the movement as a project of cultural nationalism. She argues that 'Tamil nationalism is not territorial but cultural nationalism. The cultural nationalists see the nation as inherent in the group of people who possess certain cultural characteristics.'<sup>9</sup> She concludes that an

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<sup>7</sup> Eugene Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non Brahmin Movement and Tamil Separatism 1916-1929*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1969.

<sup>8</sup> Irschick is part of the Cambridge school of historians which also includes David Washbrook and Christopher Baker. These historians focused on the encounters that occur within colonialism and on the influence of class on such encounters, the competition between the elites and the structures of a colonial society.

<sup>9</sup> Marguerite Ross Barnett, *Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1976.

analysis of the Dravidian movement would necessarily entail a new understanding of what constitutes political identity.

This study examines the recent debates about the shifting process of the Dravidian identity. It highlights how at a contextual point the Dravidian identity has co-opted with varied elements of communal forces. In order to enumerate this I have surveyed the current debates around this issue which have been acknowledged in the course of the arguments.

The first chapter provides a useful point of entry into the problem of the constitution of Dravidian identity. Here I have tried to delineate the course of the Dravidian movement from its beginnings in the pre-independence period until the shift that occurred with the rise of the DMK after independence. Although the studies quoted above prove useful as a basis for a historical analysis of the movement, my motive in looking at the movement's genesis is not to attempt a mere chronological narration of its course, but to trace the many beginnings that are responsible for the constitution of the *essence* of Dravidian identity. The focus of the chapter lies in identifying the shifting notions of political identity from the Justice Party's notion, which was defined as primarily electoral representation, to Periyar's assertion of the need to displace the dominant cultural hegemony. With the emergence of Periyar in Tamil Nadu's political arena one can clearly see that any substantive political change can be brought about only by acting in the cultural realm.

In the second chapter, which looks at the rise of the DMK to power, I argue that Periyar's project of cultural transformation gave way to the DMK's construction

of a parallel Tamil culture that unconsciously uses majority cultural and religious symbols to express a unifying Tamil identity. Cinema and language are the two major sites in which this construction of a parallel culture and mythology is most evident.

The third chapter is an attempt to understand the political shift that occurred in the nineties through an analysis of certain events and the state's response to them. The first of these is a controversy surrounding an instance of religious conversion in Meenakshipuram, which saw the emergence of Hindu revivalist organizations in Tamil Nadu and the shift among certain sections of the Dravidian movement towards a common political ground. The second event is a communal clash in Kanyakumari district and the government's response in the form of the report of a commission of inquiry. The language used in the report betrays certain perceptual biases that show how the discursive shift within Dravidian politics was already well under way during the early eighties.

The emergence of a virulent Tamil Hindutva and its origins in the growth of the *Vinayaka Chaturthi* processions in Madras and other towns is another significant event that I have tried to explain in this chapter. The conscious transformation of a small private festival into a massive and well-orchestrated public exhibition of the symbols of Hindu revivalism is the most visible instance of this formalization of the discourse of Hindutva within Tamil politics. This also enables us to understand the culmination of this paradigm shift which was the formal political alliances between the Dravidian parties and the Hindu nationalist BJP.

The current political situation, with the spread of Hindu revivalism and communalism on a pan-Indian level and their rapid rise in Tamil Nadu's politics, has created a need to understand what kinds of political and cultural action enabled such a rise. The policies of the two major Dravidian parties during the last twenty years, and the parallel political growth of the Hindutva forces all over India, led to the appropriation of the political space of Tamil Nadu by the ideologies of Hindu revivalism. I have avoided a revisionist argument which would seek to deconstruct the movement and deny it its progressive elements. Rather, my concern here is to identify the shifts in the use of certain symbols and mobilization strategies by the movement that made it possible for the Hindutva forces to occupy and appropriate the domains of cultural and political action in Tamil Nadu.

The paradigm shift that has occurred within the Dravidian movement can be attributed to various factors. This study attempts to understand the shift through identifying the changes in cultural practices, both in terms of broad changes in the sites of Cinema and language and also, in terms of specific events in recent history through which this shift is made visible.

## Chapter I

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### Beginnings of the Social Protest and the Construction of Dravidian Identity: 1916 – 1948.

The Dravidian movement,<sup>1</sup> which emerged in the Madras Province in early twentieth century, generated a confrontational discourse of political identity pitted against the Brahmins. The movement articulated a non-Brahmin consciousness by challenging Brahminical hegemony in the public domain. In this process, the grand narrative of Indian nationalism viewed as a project of Brahminical hegemony was challenged. The existing hierarchies in terms of the structural inequalities of social experience, which predates *colonialism*, get radically transformed by the new generative political matrix of the colonial state. The Dravidian identity in this period seems to be a complex one arising out of the crisscrossing of varied significations of caste, race, language and *Tamil nationalism*. The complex way in which this identity is synergized is to be understood in the context of a tripartite structure where the major division between the colonial state and the community is further complicated by contradictions inherent within the matrix of the existing community. The resistance articulated against the colonial state which expresses itself in dominant modalities of nationalism is also seen as a Brahminical hegemonic project, and a different social imagination grows around the strengthening and consolidation of the Dravidian identity. The main thrust of this chapter is to trace the beginnings of the Dravidian movement in the pre-independence

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<sup>1</sup> The Dravidian movement has also been called the non-Brahmin movement by scholars in its emerging stages.

period upto the formation of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in 1949, thereby delineating the character and the nuances of an alternative social imagination.

I shall study the social matrix of the Dravidian movement through an understanding of four major factors which I identify as key components of this political matrix. First, any study like this would be inadequate without understanding the conflicting and also the corroborative nature of the encounter between the colonial state of the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century and the existing socio-political relations of the native community. Second, I try to explain how the materiality of discourse is acted upon and transformed in the urban space as public arena. Thirdly, the role of the missionaries cannot be discounted and is in fact of major importance because their discourse went a long way in constructing the Dravidian civilizational historiography. Lastly, the role of *print* in helping people imagine themselves as a community with a distinctive consciousness and a powerful medium for the popularization of Tamil as a vernacular in the forging of the Dravidian identity.

The second section of this chapter deals with the two major phases of the movement in this period. The formation of The South Indian Liberal Federation popularly known as the Justice Party in 1916 and its representational politics till 1925, betrays its elitist nature in this phase. In the later period (1925-1948) we shall study the consolidation of this movement with the emergence of E.V.Ramaswamy Naicker (Periyar) and his radicalization of the articulation of Dravidian identity. His Self-Respect Movement is an attempt to express this identity so as to conjoin resistances to

Brahminical hegemony in both the political and cultural domain. The discourses of the movement evince a remarkable propensity towards secularization of Tamil society.

**Modern social imaginaries<sup>2</sup>:**

(a) Colonial State and Community relations

Madras Province of British India was one of the most extensive and certainly the most artificial of all the British Provinces in India. Its administrative and formal political unity masked enormous linguistic and cultural diversities. Many regional economies of Madras Presidency with their own settlement patterns, crops, marketing arrangements and agricultural seasons, naturally produced a variety of regional social and political structures.<sup>3</sup> The social and the cultural differences of the valleys, the plains and the hills are manifested significantly in varying degrees of modern development. It is generally agreed by scholars that Tamil society, especially the rural society, was caste ridden and the question of caste affected most areas of social relations. Anthropologists have long commented on the peculiarity of the caste system in Tamil Nadu, where the absence of representative Kshatriya and Vaishya castes makes for a tripartite social structure consisting of Brahmins at the apex of the society, followed by Shudras (non-Brahmins) and Adi-Dravidas (untouchables). The caste system tended to be more extreme and rigid than the northern structures, with a greater degree of separation between Brahmins and others. In Anil Seal's study of the emergence of nationalist activity in India, he observed that, "In much of South India the gulf between Brahmins and rest of the

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<sup>2</sup> The title of the subsection derives from an understanding of the four factors shaping the political matrix through the use modern categories like nation, rights, print and the notion of the modern state.

<sup>3</sup> David Washbrook, *The Emergence of Provincial Politics: The Madras Presidency, 1870-1920*, New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 1976, p. 11.

communities were so wide and the natural antipathies so bitter, that society here was divided at least as effectively by caste as elsewhere it was divided by religion.”<sup>4</sup> Later studies departing from this tradition exposed various social and political structures at the local level, thereby going beyond the straitjacket binary of the Brahmin and the non-Brahmins and identify power interplays at very micro levels. Specificities such as temple affiliations, village identities and Right and Left Hand castes in early colonial South India greatly undermined the distinctive contexts which go unheeded in studies with a strictly binary approach.<sup>5</sup>

The two academic trajectories moving apart in different directions provoke us to address the complex question of the ideological basis of Non- Brahmin movement. Despite much heterogeneity among the non- Brahmin castes what made it possible for them to come together on a common ideological ground? The political Non- Brahmin identity has at least partly been a curiously ambiguous identity. It was a product partly

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<sup>4</sup> Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, 1968, p. 168. This view was later developed by Eugene Irschick in his work, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non – Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916- 1929*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1969, (p. 5 -6), and shared by Lloyd and Susan Rudolph in their work, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1967 (p. 76-77). Robert L. Hardgrave Jr.’s work, *Dravidian Movement*, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1965 (p. 11) explicitly highlighted the chasm between the Brahmins and the Others.

<sup>5</sup> Arjun Appadurai’s study on temple affiliations in Tamil Nadu titled *Worship and Conflict under Colonial Rule: A South Indian Case*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969, shows the specific cultural-political configurations that develop around the power node of the temple, which often subsume caste hierarchies thereby shaping politics in a completely different way. Extensive anthropological literatures have dealt with the formation of village identities in Tamil Nadu explaining them with a wealth of local detail. Nicholas Dirks’ work on Pudukottai titled, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987 and Andre Betelie’s book, *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Pattern of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1966 highlights the social and political nuances of the Cauvery Delta region. An account of Right and Left Hand caste divisions in early colonial South India which had virtually disappeared by late nineteenth century is given by Neil Brimnes in, *Constructing the Colonial Encounter: Right and Left Hand Caste in Early Colonial South India*, Surrey, Curzon Publishers, 1999. It emphasizes the dynamism and fluidity of social relations in Tamil Nadu.



of the colonial encounter and the coloniser's ethnographic project of quantification, which made the dynamic fluid social relations freeze into rigid categories. At another level, the assertion of identity was rooted in inequalities of social relations that already existed in the society. The *locus classicus* of this quantification project of the colonial state is Bernard Cohn's essay "The Census and Objectification in South Asia", where he shows that the Indian census, rather than being a passive instrument of data gathering, creates, by its practical logic and form, a new sense of category-identity in India, which in turn creates the conditions for new strategies of mobility, status politics, and electoral struggle in India.<sup>6</sup> Cohn's study of a covert political principle which determines quantification exposes the pretense of value neutrality of such projects. This dimension of Cohn's work was further developed by scholars like Ranajit Guha, Arjun Appadurai and others.<sup>7</sup> More recently, Nicholas Dirks' book *Castes of Mind*, also argues in the manner of Cohn "to put the matter in bold relief, after 1857, anthropologists supplanted history as the principal colonial modality of knowledge and rule. By the late nineteenth century, as I will go on to show, the colonial state in India can be characterized as the ethnographic state."<sup>8</sup> Only a careful and tentative mapping of the changing and shifting relations between the community and the state provides a clue to the modern social imaginary, the terrain on which categories of caste are reconstructed and reconfigured.

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<sup>6</sup> Bernard Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia', in *An Anthropologist among Historians and other Essays*, New Delhi, OUP, 1987.

<sup>7</sup> For similar studies refer to Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies*, New York, OUP, 1988; and Arjun Appadurai's essay, 'Number in the Colonial Imagination', in Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer, eds., *Orientalism and the Post Colonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993, p. 314-339.

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 43.

(b) Urban- Public Arena

The British presence in the south, centred around Madras, began originally as Fort St. George. Madras grew into a city of 250,000 by 1800. Urbanization is one of the major factors for the growth of the population. In the first half of the nineteenth century the colonial administration had played a large part in attracting people to towns, to work in and around the bureaucracy, law courts and schools.<sup>9</sup> Government was omnipresent in the life of colonial South India. With the advancement of modern education the Brahmins were the first to be exposed to the influence of westernization. The literary tradition of the Brahmin gave him the initial advantage in western education, and with the command over the English language he entered the colonial administration through colonial governmentality. Though the Brahmins constituted only a little over three percent of the total population of the Madras Presidency, their control over the Madras administration in terms of high paid jobs with substantial bureaucratic authority was almost monopolistic.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, the other non-Brahmin castes like the Nairs from Kerala, Vellalas and Mudaliars from Tamil Nadu, Reddys and Naidus from the Andhra region, rose from marginality, working against their initial handicap, now recipients of western education, entered the processes of colonial governance. The steep rise in literacy- in English, Telugu, Tamil and Malayalam- among the important non- Brahmin

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<sup>9</sup> David Washbrook, *The Emergence of Provincial Politics: The Madras Presidency, 1870-1920*, New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 1976, p. 100.

<sup>10</sup> For details, see R. Suntharalingam, *Politics and Nationalist Awakening in South India, 1852-1891*, Jaipur and Delhi, Rawat Publications, 1980, p. 123; Nambi K. Arooran, *Tamil Renaissance and Dravidian Nationalism, 1905-1944*, Madurai, Koodal Publishers, 1980, p. 38; Eugene Irshick, *Politics and Social Conflicts in South India: The Non-Brahmin Movement and Tamil Separatism 1916-1929*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1969, p. 13-14, 42.

caste Hindus between 1901 and 1921, suggests a central reason for their entrance into Madras politics (Madras Governance) during this period.<sup>11</sup>

Sandra B. Freitag tracing the emergence of communalism in North India argues, “New conceptions of state – community relations, and alternative symbolic expression of restructured urban relations: these provided the early nineteenth century contexts for the development of communalism. For communalism to develop, however, new meaning had to be infused into collective action.”<sup>12</sup> She also identifies that the Dravidian movement as a phenomenon emerged from the deepening Brahmin - non-Brahmin schism affected by the restructured relations in the urban space.<sup>13</sup> In the urban space of Madras, social relations altered drastically as the Brahmin, entered the process of governance. The other castes were doubly marginalized, both by existing hierarchies in the society and the power the Brahmin wielded through the colonial structures of authority. In the new milieu of encounters and appropriations, an imposed polity meant that the Brahmin could wrench political power out of it, without forsaking his traditional social position of privilege, i.e., the Brahmin’s stubborn refusal to submit to the secularizing effects of modernity. The restructured urban relations, therefore, created common grounds of discrimination and deprivation, which enabled diverse and scattered non- Brahmin groups to come together against a Brahminical hegemony. Furthermore, the divisive agenda of the British imperial state was premised on the political engineering of differences. These differences are reinforced in the

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<sup>11</sup> Eugene Irshick, *Politics and Social Conflicts in South India: The Non-Brahmin Movement and Tamil Separatism 1916-1929*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1969, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> Sandra B. Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India*, New Delhi, OUP, 1990, p. 85.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 287.

representational mode of government, based sociologically or more correctly ethnographically on communities and interests with particular individuals representing those communities.

Whereas, in the domain of politics English proved to be for the Brahmins the instrument of power, his privilege vis-à-vis social relations were still upheld through his command over Sanskrit. The Sanskrit revival in Madras presidency through Theosophical institutions is valorized by the Brahmins in inferiorising Tamil. The Brahmins claimed that the Tamil language as well as the literature was mere derivation of Sanskrit language and literature, an argument which goes back at least to Subramania Dikshitar of the seventeenth century.<sup>14</sup> M.S.S. Pandian argues that, “The Brahmin exercise hegemony in the political society through the authority structures of the colonial state and in the ‘civil society’ through his caste location, in negotiating power in each of these spheres, he privileged English and Sanskrit. Sanskrit was further deployed as a sign of his superiority and his refusal to identify with the Tamil community, or in other words, the Brahmins by valorizing Sanskrit, located the centre of his cultural universe outside the Tamil speaking area.”<sup>15</sup> This led the non-Brahmins to develop a collective identity. For that, the new meaning had to be infused in collective action. The new meaning they derived was from the missionary orientalist scholarship, which constructed Tamil past and Tamil superior identity.

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<sup>14</sup> K. Thirumaran, *Thani Tamil Iyakkam*, Trichy, Mathuram, 1992. (In Tamil).

<sup>15</sup> M. S. S. Pandian, ‘Towards National-Popular: Notes on Self-Respecters Tamil’, *EPW*, December 21, 1996, p. 3323 - 3329.

### (c) Missionary and Philological Enterprises

As in the cultural discovery of various colonial ways of life, missionary activity also sought to reconstruct a past for the Tamil language. Roberto Di Nobili (1577-1656), the first in a series of remarkable Jesuit missionaries, probably the first European to learn both Tamil and Sanskrit. But it was Constantius Beschi who epitomized the quality and direction of missionary linguistic enterprise in the Tamil areas. His work on Tamil grammar was especially important in that he was the first European to describe the traditional division between what are known as the chaste and the vulgar or colloquial styles of Tamil. The Dravidianist politicians always acknowledged and appreciated his endeavor in drawing on the varied resources of the language and creating for it a superior and continuous tradition.

The missionary who looms large over any discussion on the Tamil language is one Rev. Robert Caldwell (1819-1891) who came to India in 1838 as a non - conformist missionary but after a few years, he switched allegiance to the Church of England and worked for the Anglican society for the propagation of gospel.<sup>16</sup> Caldwell thought and wrote extensively on the question of conversion. When Caldwell died in 1891, he was recognized not only for his extraordinary success in building up the Tinnevely Mission Enterprise but also for his impressive scholarly writing, including ethnographic work on certain caste groups in the South, a detailed history of Southern India, and a path breaking philological work on the history and structure of Dravidian languages, titled *A*

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<sup>16</sup> The most useful and interesting short biography of Caldwell in Tamil, Ra. Pi. Setupillai, *Kalutvel Aiyar Saritum*, (Biography of Caldwell), Tirunelveli, Hilal Press, 1936.

*Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages*, first published in 1856.

Caldwell's first major publication was on ethnographic work on the toddy tappers caste of Shannars (Nadars) and in 1849 he published a book entitled the *Tinnevelly Shannars*. He argued that one of the principal reasons for the large number of converts among this community to Christianity was that they were not under the sway of Brahminical religion, an argument he felt was supported by the claim of the authentic and autonomous racial identity of Shannars as the original Dravidians. He developed a complex sociology of religion in southern India, organized fundamentally around the idea of caste differences. It earned him considerable repute but annoyed the English educated Shannars, who disliked his ascribing a non - Aryan origin to their group.<sup>17</sup>

In his later work *Comparative Grammar* Caldwell's predicated many of his earlier assertions in a systematic historical and linguistic manner. He also formulated certain theories about origins and nature of Tamil Dravidian culture. Caldwell's argument was made through a combination of historical speculation and philological conjecture. He argues not only the antiquity and autonomy of the Dravidian culture but that the Tamil language, "The most highly cultivated *ab intra* of all Dravidian idioms, can dispense with its Sanskrit, if need be and not only stand alone but flourish without its aid."<sup>18</sup> Caldwell's articulation of the racial and historical of the Aryan – Dravidian

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<sup>17</sup> Eugene Irshick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non-Brahmin Movement and Tamil Separatism 1916-1929*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1969, p. 276- 279.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Caldwell, *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages*, II edition, revised, London, Trubner, 1875, p. 49.

divide was, in fact perhaps the first European valorization of the Dravidian caste category specifically in racial terms.

Caldwell's core ideas were appropriated by the Dravidian politicians in the beginning of the twentieth century. His central concerns with language as well as antipathy towards the Brahmins were the major sources for the imaginary processes of the Dravidian movement. These processes were further enabled by the power of print to bring the non-Brahmins together on a common ideological ground.

(d) Print:

By now, it is part of the academic common sense that nations in their search for legitimacy, interpret and upsurge remote past as their own. As Benedict Anderson says in his book *Imagined Community*, if nation-states are widely conceded to be new and historical, the nations to which they give political expression always doom out of an immemorial past and that image of antiquity is central to the subjective idea of the nation.<sup>19</sup> He further argues that, in practice almost all forms of community are imagined in some sense. He has emphasized the way certain modernist innovations such as 'print capitalism' allow national community to be imagined from the start.

The press played a complementary role in the imaginary process of Dravidian identity. The print culture was a hybrid culture put in place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by sundry European missions and colonial establishments, it then

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<sup>19</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1983, p. 19.

bloomed prodigiously after 1835 with the legalization of Indian ownership of presses. From around 1812, the College of Fort St. George in Madras, with its coterie of British administrator-scholars and their Tamil speaking subordinates, began to publish Tamil grammars, editions of ancient literary works, prose translations and commentaries and so on.<sup>20</sup> Sumathi Ramaswamy argues that, "Print helped in the standardization and homogenization of Tamil and granted it a visible continuity with an ancient remote past that is resurrected."<sup>21</sup> It ushered a new discursive style, modes of punctuation and syntax, genres of literature, transformation of script and new ways of relating to the language as something seen and read, rather than merely heard. In this sense, the Tamil community was at its core a print community, a network of Tamil speakers who were also readers and consumers of the language, 'connected through print.'<sup>22</sup>

The last decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a quickening of the tide of anti- Brahmin anger and sections of the vernacular press in Madras were openly critical of Brahmin virtues. The Tamil weekly, *Oru Paisa Tamizhan* (Tamilan), published from 1907, carried out unrelenting and systematic attack on Brahmin attitudes to reform, and their quoting of the Swadeshi ideal.<sup>23</sup> The Adi-Dravida intellectuals like Iyothee Das and Masilamani characterized Dravidian fraternity comprising of all non- Brahmin castes. Most Adi-Dravida intellectuals of this time were at one with Iyothee Das in his criticisms of caste and Brahminism. Their emancipatory project of Pariah identity of

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<sup>20</sup> Kamil Zvelebil, *Companion Studies to History of Tamil Literature*, Leiden, Brill, 1992, p.159- 164.

<sup>21</sup> Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891- 1917*, New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1998, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, p. 47-49.

<sup>23</sup> V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai, *Towards A Non- Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Das to Periyar*, Calcutta, Samya, 1998, p.8



Adi-Dravidas were centred around the Buddhist past, with Dravidian identity as a core comprising of all Non-Brahmins and Adi-Dravidas. The Dravidian movement in its nascent stage used print as a tool for the imaginary process to construct a Dravidian identity by publishing various journals like *Dravidan*, *Justice* and Periyar's *Kudi Arasu*. Its aim was to spread among the reading masses an awareness about the unique historical and social content of the Dravidian identity.

All these four social modern imaginary factors contributed to construct or to imagine a Dravidian identity in a confrontational context. What did this identity mean to those who were formulating it? Sociologically speaking, non-Brahmin is a genus that includes all castes, high or low, in the *Varna-Jati* complex, which defer from the Brahmin in sacral matters. When it comes to the political imaginary it is a consciously constructed 'ideological community' that value equality, mutuality and Self-Respect. Non-Brahminism in this sense was a phenomenon which straddled several realms: from the existential to the ontological, and from the political to the epistemological.<sup>24</sup> The power and appeal of this political and cultural ideology can only be grasped through the confrontational context set against the Other, i.e., the Brahmins. Non-Brahmanism in this sense is an 'experienced truth' as well as an imaginative response to the historical 'truth' of ones condition of being. This shared experience created a congenial ground for the construction of a collective self based on an ideology of protest that would subsume the inchoate class distinction within the group and set it against the Other. The following sub-sections tries to show the beginning of the Dravidian movement, and its

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p. xiii

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transformative phase of popular imagination, which spearheaded the formation of the Self-Respect Movement.

### **Justice Party: A New Political Awakening 1916-1925**

The publication of the Non-Brahmin Manifesto on December 20<sup>th</sup> 1916, by some thirty non-Brahmin political leaders in Madras Presidency reflected the emergence of a new political discourse. It appeared in both *The Hindu* and in *New India*, the popular English newspaper in Madras. The Manifesto began “The time has come when an attempt should be made to define the attitude of several non-Brahmin Indian communities in this Presidency towards what is called the ‘Indian Home Rule Movement’, and also to indicate certain facts with respect to their present position.”<sup>25</sup> The immensity of this statement had different ramifications. ‘The time has come’, signified the paradigmatic shift and the new operational field of a new discourse on Dravidian identity. ‘To define the attitude’ was an endeavor to construct an identity based on an ‘ideological community’ that would submerge all the differences within the group and to project the commonality among the groups by contrasting with the ‘Other’. The ‘present position’ raised the question of representation in the public domain. The first phase of the Dravidian movement highlighted the politics of representation as a primary tool for the construction of the Dravidian identity.

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<sup>25</sup> For further details, see the Non-Brahmin Manifesto in Appendix I, Eugene Irshick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non-Brahmin Movement and Tamil Separatism 1916-1929*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1969, p. 358-367.

The Non-Brahmin Manifesto generated great debate in the Madras political terrain. The Brahmins and Mrs. Annie Beasant of the Home Rule were highly critical of the divisive potential of the Manifesto. Under the leadership of people like Dr. C. Natesa Mudaliar<sup>26</sup>, Dr. T.M. Nair<sup>27</sup> and P. Tyagaraja Chetti<sup>28</sup>, on November 20<sup>th</sup> 1916, a meeting was organized at Victoria Public Hall in Madras City. The intention of the meeting was to form a joint stock company, 'South Indian People's Association Ltd.', with the aim of promoting journals in English, Telegu and Tamil for the purpose, of consolidating the Dravidian identity through the medium of print. The event subsequently took on a more dramatic turn with the publication of the Non-Brahmin Manifesto and the formation of the South Indian Liberal Federation more popularly known as the Justice Party emerged in 1917.<sup>29</sup> The emergence of the Justice Party can also be explained partly as a reaction to Anne Beasant's alliance with Brahmins in her Home Rule League, around the questions of advancement of non-Brahmin interests in the public and government domains. The importance of the Justice Party at this stage can be accounted for, in terms of its emphasis on representational politics.

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<sup>26</sup> The chief author of the Manifesto and the secretary of Madras Dravidian Association (founded in 1912). A Vellala medical student, Mudaliar began collecting funds for the establishment of a hostel in Madras city for non-Brahmin youths who came to the city for higher studies. It eventually materialized in June 1916 with the establishment of Dravidian Association Hostel.

<sup>27</sup> A prominent doctor from Kerala's non-Brahmin Nair community, who had considerable influence in the Malabar region. He attended and actively participated in Congress sessions from 1890 onwards.

<sup>28</sup> He belonged to a highly influential business community, Telugu Beri Chetti. An industrialist who had been a member of the Madras Corporation and was its first non-official president, was at complete loggerheads with Nair over major issues.

<sup>29</sup> The South India Liberal Federation (SILF) got its name, Justice Party due to the popularity of its English journal Justice. There are two opinions prevalent regarding its formation. One argues that the formation of the Joint Stock Company is itself the beginning of the party. The other view considers the August 1917 announcement which created SILF as a parallel political organization for the upliftment of non-Brahmins, to be the correct date of the Party's foundation.

### **Politics of representation:**

The birth of the Justice Party could be said to be the founding moment of the Dravidian Movement. Its activities included organizing conferences to mobilize opinion around the assertion of a non-Brahmin ideology. The Justice Party evolved its ideological framework articulating historically a Dravidian civilizational distinctiveness and defining the contours of an identity in its opposition to an *Aryan-Brahminical Other*. P. Tyagaraja Chetti addressing a conference in Madras declared “The genius of Dravidian civilization does not recognize the difference between man and man by birth. The leaders of Dravidian thought, Thiruvalluvar, Avvai, Cumar, do not claim to be born from the brain of the godhead... it is the Aryans who have introduced this birth distinction which they have elaborated into the system of *varnashrama dharma* with its concomitant evils.”<sup>30</sup>

Language was another major issue in the political articulation of the Dravidian identity. Tamil as the living language of the people asserted its claim to a history as ancient as any other knowledge of classical importance namely Sanskrit which was promoted by the Brahmins. Tamil also pitted itself against English as a language, which began to signify the enhanced power of those who mastered the language of the colonizers. Besides the language question, the Justice Party also laid emphasis on the need for education and advocated reservation for the Adi-Dravidas and other Depressed Classes in other government aided institutions. In a resolution, the confederation called for a fusion of all non-Brahmin castes including Muslims and Christians. Various

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<sup>30</sup> V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai, *Towards A Non- Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Das to Periyar*, Calcutta, Samya, 1998, p. 128.

legislations were urged for the removal of untouchability and all kinds of restrictions, which prevent the Adi-Dravidas and other depressed classes from access to public wells and tanks.

The colonial state had the longest history of caste based preferential policies introduced as far back as 1885 for the lower castes, despite which the preponderance of Brahmins continued in colonial institutions. Militating discursively against this Brahmin dominance, the Justice Party provided an organizational impetus for the development of legislative interventions to address issues of social justice and access to power. The Justice Party achieved its greatest success through its role in the two communal Government Order (G.O.), which provided reservations for the depressed castes<sup>31</sup>. The Justice Party was remarkably successful during Gandhi's Non-cooperation Movement by a stubborn disavowal of the movement, entering electoral politics and capturing power in the Madras Legislative Council. It used its position in power to give non-Brahmins a greater proportion of government jobs. In spite of its initial success the Justice Party's popularity had been waning in the years that followed.

This brief description seems to bring out two major trajectories which moved simultaneously in the early history of the Justice Party. One major trajectory evolved through a non-Brahmin ideological underpinning of Dravidian identity which encompassed various castes and religion. Alongside this was their representational politics which was eventually to lose popularity because it worked to secure another kind

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<sup>31</sup> For more on Communal Government Orders, see Appendix 2 and 3, in Eugene Irshick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non-Brahmin Movement and Tamil Separatism 1916-1929*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1969, p.368- 372.

of hegemony—that of the dominant non-Brahmin castes. It became clear that The Justice Party's leaders were less committed to the support of Adi-Dravidas and the more backward non-Brahmin castes. This contradiction between ideological discursivity, their politics of electoral representation and their constitutional collaboration with the British explain their eventual failure in 1925.

Despite its failure, the early history of the Justice Party is significant in this, that it showed the potential for greater consolidation of non-Brahminism as an ideology and paved the way for the entry of Periyar in the political scene. The year 1925 is a landmark in Tamil history because it shows a break and marks the point at which the trajectories begin to shift. The importance of Periyar lies in his realization that the failure of the Justice Party was largely due to the fact that though its emphasis was on representational politics, representation in the strict political domain could not ensure changes on a day to day experiential level among the depressed classes. The sphere of politics and the sphere of culture are not compartmentalized, they interact, conflict and coalesce with each other, forming complex relations where the political is affected by the cultural and social learning. The Gramscian idea of hegemony includes both coercion and consent. The cultural domain is therefore the domain where consent is manufactured.<sup>32</sup> Whether Periyar had read Gramsci or not hardly matters, because the ways in which he radicalized the content of Dravidian identity shows that he certainly understood the notion of cultural hegemony and the important task of challenging it. The ensuing subchapter deals in this

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<sup>32</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, Madras, Orient Longman Publishers, 1996. For Cultural hegemony, see p. 3- 14, and 245.

aspect of cultural assertion and the project of displacing dominant cultural hegemonies which happened with the advent of Periyar and his Self-Respect Movement.

### **Periyar and the Self-Respect Movement (1925-1948):**

Periyar, a title meaning “Great Man” that was conferred on him by many Tamilians during the political struggles, was born E.V.Ramaswamy Naicker in 1879. Periyar had joined the Congress shortly after the Satyagraha of 1919, and rose quickly to be the secretary and subsequently the President of the Tamil Nadu Congress in 1923. He became a crucial figure in the mobilization of political agitation in the Non-Cooperation Movement. Periyar was drawn to the struggles of the Non-Cooperation campaign chiefly because he felt inspired by Gandhi. As he went to remark in later years, until the advent of Gandhi, Congress had remained an exclusive preserve of the educated upper classes and professionals such as lawyers.<sup>33</sup> Periyar’s commitment to the Gandhian cause of Khadi, prohibition, and the abolition of untouchability and his energetic organizing of funds, men and events to secure these objectives were extraordinary. The Gandhian reform activity of Temple Entry Programme for the untouchables led Periyar to participate in the campaign in Vaikkam, which earned him the title *Vaikkam Veerar* (Vaikkam Hero). His sensitivity to the problems of non-Brahmins (especially untouchables) began to make him unpopular among the Brahmin elite. He antagonized them further by protesting when a Congress school instituted segregated eating facilities

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<sup>33</sup> V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai, *Towards A Non- Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Das to Periyar*, Calcutta, Samya, 1998, p. 283.

for Brahmins and non-Brahmins.<sup>34</sup> While this controversy raged, Periyar further demanded that positions on municipal councils be reserved for non-Brahmins. This attempt was unsuccessful and after it was thwarted he resigned from the Congress denouncing it as a vehicle for Brahmin domination. His dramatic exit was only the prologue to his clarion call “no God; no religion; no Gandhi; no Congress; and no Brahmins.”<sup>35</sup> He established the Self-Respect Movement in 1926, an organization to deconstruct the received practices of faith, culture and custom.

He had two main targets of attack; religion and caste were both seen as institutions legitimizing Brahminical hegemony. He viewed Hinduism as a web of deceit designed to maintain the supremacy of the Brahmins whom he linked with North Indian Sankritic culture used to oppress non-Brahmins. First in the line of attack was Hindu mythology, which he read against the grain to expose the contradictions which were concealed but held the texts together. *Manudharma* according to him, the deceiving crafty instrument invented by the upper caste as forms of Brahmin hegemony, not only legitimized the oppression of lower caste and women but also invalidated the possibility of overarching inequality.<sup>36</sup> The *Ithihasams* and *Puranams* were critiqued from the rationalist view point and condemned as irrational and inimical to morals and social justice. The *Ramayana* turned out to be one of the first targets. Treating it as a historical account, he denounced the actions of the gods as obscene, stupid and immoral, and

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<sup>34</sup> Eugene Irshick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non-Brahmin Movement and Tamil Separatism 1916-1929*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1969, p. 270.

<sup>35</sup> For a critical study on Periyar, especially from an anthropological perspective, see Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 257- 265.

<sup>36</sup> V. Anaimuthu, *Periyar: Ee Ve Ra Sinthanaigal, Vol II*, Trichirapalli, Chindanaiyalan Press, 1974. (in Tamil)



advocated atheism instead.<sup>37</sup> In place of traditional Hindu rituals, he substituted community based *Self-Respect ceremonies*, the most famous of which was the *Self-Respect marriage*, at which Vedic rites were omitted and an elder of the community or one of the leaders of the Self-Respect movement presided.<sup>38</sup> His conceptualization of Hinduism expanded the terrain of political contest and it also conferred political agency on different subordinate groups. According to him, the foremost thing an active political subject required was the realization of his/her self-respect. He believed that no one could speak for and represent the oppressed themselves.

Political activism and opposition to Brahminical Hinduism led Periyar to espouse an increasingly separatist direction for Tamils. The Self-Respect Movement's attempt to counter Brahminism was premised on providing an alternative identity to oppressed groups, which would not only constitute self - identity but also the collective identity. When in 1937 under the Government of India Act of 1935 Congress accepted office in Madras under the Chief Ministership of C. Rajagopalachari, a bill was introduced in the Madras legislature that would make Hindi a compulsory subject in all the provincial schools. Periyar interpreted it as an offensive attempt to impose a Sanskritic-Hindi- North Indian culture upon South India. In prison for a time because of his vociferous critique of the Congress on the subject of Hindi and what he saw as an Aryan conspiracy, he increasingly advocated the creation of a separate Tamil Nadu. In December 1938, whilst still in prison, Periyar was elected the president of the almost defunct Justice Party, shaping it to his Self-Respect concern. In 1944 Periyar established

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<sup>37</sup> Paula Richman, 'E.V. Ramasami's Reading of the Ramayana', in Paula Richman, (Ed) *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, Delhi, OUP, 1992, p. 175-201.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p. 177.

the Dravidar Kazhagam<sup>39</sup> (DK), which had as its central aim the establishment of a separate Dravidian nation.

This kind of an interpretation of Hindu myths and Indian epics may be seen as being tantamount to a full blown articulation of a secular rationalist mind fed on enlightenment universals. Several scholars have read him as an atheist, debunking religion in its entirety. I think a more nuanced understanding of his articulations is required. The Self-Respect Movement on its part sought to forge a collective identity encompassing different religions and various depressed castes, to challenge primarily the existence of Brahminical dominance. In this way Periyar provided the condition for a new cultural and linguistic assertiveness among Tamil Muslims. This certainly had far reaching implications for the Hindu-Muslim unity in Tamil Nadu and for the Muslims who played a crucial role in strengthening Dravidian and Tamil identity.<sup>40</sup>

He argued that, "India was not a nation but a mere museum of castes, religions, languages and gods."<sup>41</sup> A dominant nationalism seemed to him to be "An atavistic desire to endow the Hindu past on a more durable and contemporary process."<sup>42</sup> Periyar constantly reassured that the Self-Respect Movement would not oppose religion per se if the latter emphasized equality and right of citizenship for every human being across

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<sup>39</sup> Dravidar Kazhagam was also the name of an earlier organization founded by Adi-Dravida intellectuals in 1882. These intellectuals were already engaged with the interpretation of Tamil cultural history and religion in terms of an anti-Brahmin, Buddhist framework. For further details see, G. Aloysius, *Nationalism Without A Nation in India*, Delhi, OUP, 1997, p. 55-65.

<sup>40</sup> J.B. P. More, 'Tamil Muslims and Non-Brahmin Atheists: 1925- 1940', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 27 (1), 1993, p. 83- 103.

<sup>41</sup> V. Annaimuthu, *Periyar Ee Ve Ra Sinthanikal*, Vol. II, Trichurapalli, Chintaniyalar Kazhagam, 1974, p. 273.

<sup>42</sup> V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non- Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Das to Periyar*, Calcutta, Samya, 1998, p. 320.

caste, class and gender.<sup>43</sup> His articulation of the nation seems to pivot around the notion of equal citizenship. His differences with Indian Nationalism lay in his suspicion that the latter would eventually inherit a nation with its existing social, cultural and political inequalities, even if the British were ousted. Periyar demands special attention in any contemporary understanding of the Dravidian movement, because his suspicion seems to anticipate a section of the progressive academia's recent disenchantment with Nationalism. He envisaged nation as a space which could ensure equality and freedom to its citizens in the entire range of socio-political realm. For him the nation is yet to be born with full possibilities of equality in all spheres, it is not an idea which would ossify atavistic essentialist identities and legitimate hegemony, but a nation of citizens whose identities though contingent can still accommodate themselves within it. M. S. S. Pandian's observation "E. V. Ramaswamy's concept of nation denied its origin in the classical Indian/ Tamil past and envisaged it fully in the anticipatory. Further it constantly violated the certitude about boundaries, identities, agents of change, and went beyond the territoriality of the nation,"<sup>44</sup> reinforces my argument. Periyar was radical in his advocacy of a substantive citizenship which entails substantive changes and restructuring of power relations as against the nominal citizenship he perceived being offered by Indian Nationalism.<sup>45</sup>

A re-reading of the Self-Respect marriages he popularized across caste distinctions, show him as someone addressing the question of gender oppression.

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<sup>43</sup> Annaimuthu, op. cit., p. 276.

<sup>44</sup> M. S. S. Pandian, 'Denationalising the Past: Nation in E.V. Ramasami's Political Discourse', *EPW*, 28 (42), October, 1993, p.2282- 2287.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, p.2282.

Brahmin priests were strictly excluded from marriage ceremonies not only because they were Brahmins but also because he viewed Brahminism as offering no escape from patriarchal structures. Self-Respect marriages would, he thought, provide a more conducive space for women to express their agency. His understanding of the Dravidian identity, while providing a collective basis for its formation, was not blind to the reality of women as oppressed. Even within the Dravidian identity, he acknowledged the subaltern position of women and urged them to come together as agents. Hence, self-identity and political agency for women could only be constituted by women themselves.<sup>46</sup>

The anti-Hindi agitation was a political agitation to counter the imposition of Hindi as a unifying language of Indian nationalism. He pitted Tamil against Hindi and saw the dominance of Hindi as the forceful imposition of a language on a people whose culture and history have been constituted in a completely different tongue. During this agitation a large number of anti-Hindi pamphlets spoke of a connection between caste, language and the degrading Brahminical rituals of Sanskritic Hinduism. The Self-Respect movement's politics around Sanskrit and Tamil was marked by new ways of interrogating and reconstituting pre-existing relations of authority and subordination in Tamil society. It held out possibilities for forging a broad historic block with an agenda of reordering the society on a democratic basis. This is central to any national popular project aiming at overcoming the disarticulation between the nation and the people.<sup>47</sup> His

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<sup>46</sup> S. Anandhi, 'Women's Question in the Dravidian Movement, 1925- 1948', *Social Scientist*, 19 (5-6, May- June), 1991, p.24- 42.

<sup>47</sup> M.S.S. Pandian, 'Towards National Popular Will: Notes on Self-Respect's Tamil', *EPW*, December 21, 1996, p. 3323- 3329.

project was at odds with Indian nationalism on these several grounds. His disillusionment with Indian nationalism was pushed to an extreme in his demand for a separate Dravidian nation. With India's independence, a nation emerged brushing under its huge carpet numerous contradictions, and though it was an achievement in its own right, for Periyar it was the 'day of mourning'.<sup>48</sup>

The narrative that we have tried to briefly outline in this entire chapter has shown the shifts in the ideological nuances of the articulation of the Dravidian identity in its two earlier phases. We have also tried to account for the factors which mark out their different contexts. In 1948, following the assassination of Gandhi, Periyar wrote in his obituary that though he condemned his murder as reprehensible he also noted that Godse was no isolated bigot neither was he a madman, rather he was a manifestation of the germ of that very Hindu nationalism that lay latent at the heart of the Gandhian ideology pushed to its limits, and which had grown out of proportion.<sup>49</sup> It is imperative that the prophetic nature of this obituary is remarked today when the communal forces have raised their ugly heads in Tamil Nadu, desperately trying to tear its secular fabric apart, even the parties which inherit Periyar's legacy are now being co-opted by these forces. The following two chapters are an attempt to understand these shifting trajectories.

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<sup>48</sup> Periyar's call to refrain from Independence day celebrations by displaying black badges, however, was not received enthusiastically by the masses in general.

<sup>49</sup> Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 263.

### Constitutional Politics and the Poetics of Language<sup>1</sup> (1949-1977)

*“We the Dravidians have been emphasizing that we should not be under the British rule ever since 1939. Even at a time, when the country was in ferment with anti-hindi agitation, in the Madras Conference, we demanded complete freedom and autonomy for us. For years, it has been our endeavour and our cherished wish also, that we should be free from foreign yoke. But today, after abolishing alien rule, the Congress is trying to impose Aryan domination. We oppose the Congress solely on this ground.”*

*C.N. Annadurai.<sup>2</sup>*

The previous chapter has brought to us some understanding of the formation of the Dravidian movement and its transitory phase of radicalizing the Dravidian identity by Periyar. India's Independence changed the political context of the Dravidian movement. Periyar declared August 15 as a day of mourning. Nevertheless, it would be untrue to say that Periyar's declaration reflected opinions at all levels of Tamil society. The Congress was still a party with considerable mass base support. Even within the Dravidian movement, conflicting opinions emerged about the significance of Indian Independence for the Tamil-speaking people. C.N. Annadurai, who was later to become the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, argued that in the post-independence context, Dravidian identity had to redefine itself by offering a stubborn resistance to the Aryan-North Indian-Hindi hegemony sought to be imposed by the Congress. However, this growing undercurrent of differences around certain key issues surfaced and finally led to a split in the Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) following Periyar's decision to marry a young girl in order to find a safe and reliable 'heir' for the movement. A

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<sup>1</sup> I have borrowed this term Poetics of Language from Sumathi Ramaswamy who uses it to illustrate the politicization of Tamil language. She maintains that once a language acquires political connotation, it can be called 'Poetics', instead of politics. Sumathi Ramaswami, *Passions of The Tongue: The Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1970*, New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Dravida Nadu, August 1947 – quoted in Marguerite Ross Barnett's *Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 68.

large number of leaders left the Dravidar Kazhagam to form their new party, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam<sup>3</sup> (DMK), on September 17, 1949.

In this chapter, we shall briefly outline the politics of the Congress in Tamil Nadu and then discuss the new expression of the Dravidian identity in the changed context by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), its mobilization strategies and its eventual capture of political power in 1967. The DMK further split in 1972, which led the matinee idol M. G. Ramachandran, popularly known as MGR, to come to power in 1977. In the changed context of the post-independence period, it is the question of language that comes to the forefront in the articulation of Dravidian identity. It is around the language question that the Dravidian identity is defined; the Tamil language represents an entire way of life pitted against a different way of life and culture as represented by Hindi. This articulation of Dravidian identity, however, sidelined many primary contradictions existing within the Tamil speaking society. Bernard Cohn observes that, “ When one gets behind the identification with the language *per se*.....it is apparent that it is literature, religion and political history that are being called upon.”<sup>4</sup> The following pages are an attempt to see how and when the seed of communalism was sown within the articulation of a Dravidian identity which was later to manifest itself in the riots of the 1980s, and subsequently the Hindutva forces gaining momentum in Tamil Nadu.

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<sup>3</sup> Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam literally translated in English would mean the Dravida Progressive Front.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Cohn, *Regions Subjective and Objective, Regions and Regionalism in South Asian Studies: an explanatory study* edited by Robert I. Crane, Durham, Duke University Press, 1967, p. 221.

## **Tryst with Destiny: Nation in the Making**

Nehru's historic speech in the Parliament, on the eve of Independence spelled out his vision of the nation building process in the post independence period. It was primarily premised around three major objectives. His major emphasis was on the unity and integrity of the nation through democracy and citizenship, ensuring economic development through state intervention and finally, the idea of non-alignment to protect the nation's political sovereignty. Even after independence, the Congress continued to enjoy the popular support of the masses. It had great appeal among the masses in whose imagination the Congress provided a pioneering force to the entire nationalist struggle.

The initial phase of the Tamil Nadu Congress has no distinguishing feature to mark it out as different from the Home Rule.<sup>5</sup> But the entry of Gandhi into the political arena transformed to some extent the *modus operandi* of the Congress. Despite this, the Congress constituted mainly of the Brahmins and other upper non-Brahmin castes. It was also primarily an urban and elite platform.<sup>6</sup> In 1919- 1923, the party was deeply divided along ideological and factional lines.<sup>7</sup> This is the period when the Justice party came to power. The Congress seemed unable to respond effectively to the alternative imagination of Dravidian identity pushed forth by the Justice party. By mid-1930's, however, the Justice party was in rapid decline and the landslide victory of the Congress in the 1937 provincial elections marked both, the virtual extinction of the Justice party, and the triumph of the Congress party as a broad based and relatively cohesive coalition of diverse political interests. From 1937

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<sup>5</sup> Marguerite Ross Barnett, *Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*, Princeton, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> David Arnold, *Congress in Tamil Nadu*, New Delhi, Manohar, 1977, p. 78-82.



onwards, the party commanded a powerful organization, experienced in both agitational and electoral techniques, and was firmly established as the region's dominant party.

The Congress party took office in the old Madras Presidency in 1946 under T. Prakasam. Mr. O.P. Ramaswami Reddy and K. Kumaraswami Raja were to become the Chief Ministers of Tamil Nadu, in 1947 and 1949 respectively. Mr. Kamaraj Nadar, popularly known as the 'king maker' because of his role in choosing leaders, later became the Chief Minister in 1954. Mr. Kamaraj, the president of Tamil Nadu Congress from 1944 to 1953, was from a low caste Nadar community. His image went a long way in displacing the predominance of the Brahmins in the Congress leadership. Periyar constantly supported Kamaraj through out his tenure as the Chief Minister, arguing that in the wake of social reforms initiated by Kamaraj, it was possible to support the Congress. In his view, the Brahmin Congress had been transformed into the Kamaraj Congress.<sup>8</sup> The Congress became a very different organization, reflecting the importance of the Tamilness, although it retained its all-India concerns and connections under Kamaraj.

Within the political matrix of Tamil Nadu, the Congress faced a tough opposition from the DMK on the question of language. The persistent efforts of Congress-led state governments to introduce instruction in Hindi in the first two decades following Independence, were occasioned by the mandate of the constitution to switch, by 1965, to Hindi as a national language as well as the government's sole official language. This context of conflicting claims to Hindi or Tamil as the marker

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<sup>8</sup> Marguerite Ross Barnett, *Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, p. 80.

of the Tamilian's identity provided a fertile ground for the emergence of the DMK, which pitted Tamil against Hindi, which was to them a sign and instrument of North Indian domination.

### **The DMK and the Electoral Politics**

As already mentioned in the introduction, widening cracks already began to appear in the Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) around the question of Indian independence. Annadurai disagreed with Periyar's declaration of the Indian Independence Day as a day of mourning, for him it was a step forward in the direction of emancipation and the project of the Dravidian movement. Unlike Periyar, who aimed at operating primarily in the cultural domain to effect social changes and considered that the time was not yet ripe for participation in electoral politics, Annadurai advocated participation in democratic electoral processes for the capture of power, to further the agenda of social reform.

Annadurai rose to prominence during the anti-Hindi agitation of 1937 and impressed by his superior oratory and rhetorical skills, Periyar invited him to edit his newspapers *Kudi Arasu* and *Viduthalai*. He came to the political centre stage during the Salem conference of the Justice Party in 1944, where he addressed his fellow members asking them to renounce British titles and surnames that were caste markers. He also proposed that the Justice Party should be renamed the Dravidar Kazhagam.<sup>9</sup> In 1949, when he left the D.K. to form the D.M.K, 75% of the members denounced Periyar's Party under Annadurai's leadership. This can be understood as a reaction to

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<sup>9</sup> Marguerite Ross Barnett, *Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 65-66.

the autocratic functioning of the D.K., which was confirmed by Periyar's decision to appoint his newly married wife arbitrarily as the treasurer.

The founding of the new party did not entail any significant ideological shift. Nevertheless, it was significant in its ensuring the principle of intra-party democracy. Interestingly, however, the office of the President was never occupied by any member of the DMK, in the hope that one day Periyar would lead them again in their endeavour. In the first general election in 1952, the DMK abstained from participating in electoral politics because it was fully aware that its organizational structures were not yet firmly setup. Despite this decision, it was to actively support the candidates who were explicitly committed to the cause of Dravidanadu (Tamil country).

In 1953, the DMK launched their first major agitation to oppose the Tamil Nadu Congress Government's decision to introduce an educational system in which children would attend school half a day and work at their father occupation half a day.<sup>10</sup> The DMK severely attacked this policy, suspicious of its casteist overtones. They interpreted this Congress decision as a legitimization of hereditary traditional occupations, where one could not change one's vocation and was bound by caste.

In 1956, the DMK formally and publicly decided to enter electoral competition. The decision was taken at a conference held in Madras city attended by over more than 50,000 party members. Candidates were chosen for their abilities as party propagandists. Often the caste of the candidate was not strategically consistent

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<sup>10</sup> DMK's agitation is popularly known as Three corner agitation. Whereas the education plan is popularly known as Rajaji Plan which was introduced by then Education Minister C. Subramanian. Quoted in Marguerite Ross Barnett, *Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 79.

with caste majorities in constituencies or the caste of the other probable candidates.<sup>11</sup> Primarily the election campaign was focussed on social reform and the demand for a separate Dravidanadu. Even though they faired badly in the 1956 elections, it was a lesson well learnt for all elections they were to fight in the future.

Entry into electoral politics naturally compelled certain negotiations in the ideological domain. Their defeat in 1956 was a clear sign that the radical agenda of a separate Dravidanadu could not gather popular support. Even their progressive agenda of social reform had to suffer compromises because it was often incompatible with the logic of vote bank politics. The vocal sentiment of anti- Brahmin in the early phase of the movement was subtly replaced by anti-Brahmanism. Electoral politics demanded that the attack was against an ideology and not against a community.

The idea of a separate nation, Dravidanadu, has also undergone major change. Even before independence, the Congress leadership had been critical of what they thought of as narrow parochial loyalties to caste, linguistic groups and region. After independence, this concern increased and was one reason for the reluctance of the central government to sanction linguistic states reorganization until 1956.<sup>12</sup> The completion of state reorganization into linguistic areas enhanced the fear of national dis-integration. This concern led to a 1961 Chief Ministers Conference, one decision of which was to prohibit secessionist demands by political parties. The sixteenth amendment of the Indian Constitution, passed in 1963, was an immediate response to the Chinese aggression by the Indian state. Curtailing freedom of speech was a euphemism for suppressing dissenting and secessionist voices. Even before this

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p.92.

<sup>12</sup> W. H. Morris-Jones, *The Government and Politics in India*, London, Hutchinson University Library, 1964.

amendment was passed, as far back as 1961, in the D.M.K agenda the question of the separate state was of mere symbolic significance. During the 1962 election campaign, the DMK claimed to be an egalitarian party and used the 1960 anti-Hindi agitation to substantiate its claim to be the true protector of Tamil, promoted changing the state name to Tamil Nadu, and changing the language of intra-state administration from English to Tamil. Despite the Congress electoral onslaught against the DMK, a significant result of the 1962 election was the spread of DMK influence and electoral support. During the election campaigning, film stars were used for propaganda purposes throughout Tamil Nadu. However, the relative importance of issues, the heroic image, personalities, Tamil Nationalism, linguistic politics and radical ideology differed in various districts.<sup>13</sup> However, in general, the use of film stars, linguistic politics, Tamil Nationalism and the heroic image loomed large. The results of this election reflected the emergence of DMK as stronger than ever by capturing 27% of popular votes.

In 1963, the DMK officially announced that Tamil Nadu was to be an integral part of the Indian Union and demanded greater autonomy for the state within the constitutional framework. By 1964, Annadurai was putting forward a very moderate view of the DMK's notions of political reform. After officially giving up Dravidanadu, DMK concentrated more than ever on the politics of state autonomy.

The DMK had always been identified with Tamil *renaissance* and rightly so, since many of its leaders were instrumental in popularizing 'pure' Tamil and in stimulating interest in Tamil literature. The DMK has among its adherents many

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<sup>13</sup> Marguerite Ross Barnett, *Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 125.

members of the Tamil literary and scholarly communities. Part of the widespread DMK appeal to the youth is its identification with the Tamil language. The process works both ways; the DMK is involved with Tamil because of the high proportion of young Tamil savants among its adherents, and it attracts them because of this linguistic stand. The DMK has constantly been involved in, and has politically exploited its Tamil literary and artistic contributions.

In accordance with the provisions of Article 313 of the Indian constitution, Hindi replaced English as the official language of the Indian Union on January 26, 1965, Republic Day. The DMK decided to observe this Republic Day as a day of mourning by flying black flags from party offices and homes of party leaders. On the same day, a DMK adherent committed suicide by self-immolation calling his action “a protest against the imposition of Hindi and a sacrifice at the altar of Tamil”.<sup>14</sup> Within a month, four other DMK supporters burned themselves to death and two poisoned themselves to protest against Hindi. The anti-Hindi ‘martyrs’ became the objects of widespread admiration among the student community. The impact of the anti-Hindi agitation provided the backdrop for the 1967 elections.

The election results elevated the DMK from the major opposition party to the ruling party. The DMK had 138 seats whereas the Congress could muster only 47 seats. The entire Congress cabinet was defeated and perhaps the greatest humiliation was the defeat of Kamaraj Nadar in a Nadar dominated Virudhunagar constituency, by a 28 year old DMK student leader.<sup>15</sup> The DMK supremo, C.N. Annadurai, was elected as the Chief Minister.

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<sup>14</sup> Marguerite Ross Barnett, *Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 131.

<sup>15</sup> Srinivasan was a key student leader in the 1965 anti-Hindi agitation. He is also one of the prominent members in DMK labour unions.

Writing on the DMK activities has customarily focussed on the activity of major politicians and on the movement support in urban areas.<sup>16</sup> The recent study by Narendra Subramanian considered this phase as an 'assertive populism', where the DMK build a broad based coalition and captured power.<sup>17</sup> The DMK set out to attract a wider audience at a propitious time. An important section of young recruits to the DMK were lower-income, lower-status village and urban dwellers. However, consistently the most active disseminators of propaganda in vital rural areas tended to be high school and college youths who had an easy access to the DMK newspapers, books, orators and drama in the towns where they received their education. Upon newly entering high school or attending colleges, the sons of dominant caste families from villages proved to be responsive to the creative propaganda of the DMK orators. Their capacity to fire the imagination of the youths resulted in the recruitment of volunteers who widely propagated the DMK 'principles' and became local leaders and members of the growing organization.<sup>18</sup>

The DMK, after acceding to power, pursued policies of *Tamilness* in the construction of Tamil identity. Among the DMK government's very first actions was to put up a giant sign, appropriately illuminated with neon lights, on the ramparts of the secretariat building in Madras, which read in pure Tamil, *Tamilaka Aracu Talaimaic Ceyalakam*, i.e., head offices of the government of Tamil Nadu. Annadurai's most specific anti-Hindu action was his government banning portraits of

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<sup>16</sup> For the urban areas see Lloyd Rudolph, 'Urban Life and Populist Radicalism: Dravidian Politics in Madras,' *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 20, p. 283-297. Barnett extensively covered the political participation of 1967 of the rural area in *Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*, p. 147-153.

<sup>17</sup> Narendra Subramanian, *Ethnicity and Populist Mobilization: Political Parties, Citizens and Democracy in South India*, New Delhi, OUP, 1999, p. 191-204.

<sup>18</sup> Pamela Price, 'Revolution and Rank in Tamil Nationalism,' *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 55, no.2, May 1996, p. 359-383.

gods and goddesses in schools and government offices, replaced by those of Tamil poet Tiruvalluvar. The sudden demise of Annadurai paved the way for Karunanidhi to become the Chief Minister in 1969. He appointed the Rajamannar committee to investigate necessary measures to augment the resources of the State and to secure the utmost autonomy of the State without prejudice to the integrity of the country. This highlighted the perception among the DMK leaders, who began to view the question of regional autonomy within a centre- state framework. Consequently, it manifested in the growing alignment that the DMK began to pursue with the Congress, in electoral politics. In 1972, the movie actor-politician M.G. Ramachandran (MGR), disillusioned with the functioning of the party, decided to float a new party which he christened as Anna Dravida Munnetra Kalazham (ADMK), which came to power in 1977.

### **The DMK and the poetics of Language**

In 1965, the government at the centre was to constitutionally declare Hindi as the national language of the Indian state. It is in the context of this imposition of an alien language on the Tamil people that DMK started its political agitation around the question of language. The question of language, however, was not an entirely new issue, even in the earlier phase of the movement language inhabited a major space in the Dravidian conceptual domain. But the post 1965 thrust on language began to acquire political resonance. This can be understood by the fact that the DMK was already in the arena of electoral politics and therefore the anti-Hindi agitation was not merely an ideological articulation but also a strategy for political mobilization. This clearly evinces that language is no longer just a cultural marker of the Tamil people, it



has been dragged out of its strictly cultural sphere to occupy a prime position in the domain of politics.

Language as a cultural marker is in the process of being politicized and this politicization of language occurs within a certain defined ideological framework. It is interesting to delve into the metaphors by which the 'Tamilness' of the Tamil language is constructed. The iconic representation of the language embodied in the form of a goddess coalesce with the metaphors of divinity, virginity, benevolence and motherhood to standardize the language through discursive construction. *Tamilttay* (Tamil mother) thus is yet another classic example of the objectification of women as a thing "to be appropriated, possessed, and exchanged in the social relations of cooperation and competition among men."<sup>19</sup> Sumati Ramaswami argues in a similar vein about the gendered nature of the Tamil language. She observes, "Tamil devotees are able to breathe so much life and inject so much passion into practicing *Tamilpatru* because Tamil to them is more than an intangible abstraction. Instead, embodied in the figure of *Tamilttay*, it is near and dear being- their personal Goddess, their devoted mother, even their beloved mother- who commands their veneration and adulation and deserves their love and loyalty."<sup>20</sup> She further points out *Tamilttay* doesn't have a singular persona and this is how fundamentally a network of patriarchal discourses conducted largely by men, solves the problem of having a female figure enshrined at the very heart of its enterprise.<sup>21</sup> Though this kind of studies provide tremendous insight into the way various structures of patriarchy are perpetuated in Tamil society, we shall not deal much with this aspect as the focus of the study lies elsewhere.

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<sup>19</sup> Patricia Uberoi, 'Feminine Identity and National Ethos in Indian Calendar Art', *EPW*, 27 (17), 1990, p. 41-48.

<sup>20</sup> Sumati Ramaswami, *Passions of the Tongue: The Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1970*, New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1998, p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 79-80.

My argument is that as the discursive construction of the Tamil language continued, its iconic *Tamilttay* began to resemble more and more the popular representations of Hindu deities. And the contradiction lies in this attempt to unite the people through an imagination of a shared Tamil, the figure of *Tamilttay* approximates a vague but exclusivist Hindu symbol. This popular iconic representation is a process of mythification, wherein the creation of Goddess implies creating for her an ancient but continuous past. Now the metaphors describing her fall comfortably into place. Tamil valorized as a language of classical antiquity and the virgin image of the *Tamilttay* conflate to create the sense of an ahistorical and atemporal language immuned to impurities, and inherited in its pure classical form. This ahistorization happens only at the expense of denying that language is also locally and historically contingent.

The emergence of Tamil as a vernacular is a process of standardization, which does violence to the multiple, and the varied ways it was spoken as a living language by different communities of Tamil Nadu. Thus, the communal undercurrent that lay hidden beneath the construction of Tamil is clearly shown by the *Tamilttay*, who closely resembles popular iconic representation of a Hindu Goddess. It is interesting to note that many voices that spoke about the devotion to the *Tamilttay* cut across religion and caste. The obvious question that arises by extension is that how was mobilization around the figure of the *Tamilttay* possible despite her stark resemblance to popular Hindu iconography. At this point Sumathi Ramaswamy's argument comes in handy. The feminization of the Tamil language creates an imagination of the business of protecting Tamil as a very masculine project. *Tamilttay*, the mother, the

beloved or the goddess needs male protection to prevent her abuse, violation, and destruction. The anti- Hindi riots in Tamil Nadu where people went to the extent of immolating themselves and even consuming poison in the name of defending the Tamil language were also in a certain sense, defending their mother or beloved or goddess. A popular imagination grows around the figure of the *Tamilttay* and differences seem subsumed in a magical space, where patriarchy's social learning of a constructed masculine protective instinct merges in an almost over-zealous manner in their devotion to the *Tamilttay*.

When the DMK came to power, they went to the extent of constructing temples and building statues of the *Tamilttay*, but the cultural categories used in her construction, including the architectural features of the temples were that of Hinduism. This strategy of mobilization, around a figure shaped on exclusivist religious-cultural categories, subtly alienated those who were not part of a majoritarian Hinduism. Here again we notice a clear shift from the professed secular politics of the Dravidian movement.

### **Poetics of Image: The Celluloid Imagination of the Dravidian Identity**

The chief objective of this section is to see how cinema played a major role in consolidating a certain political consciousness, and how it is used by the DMK as an instrument of political mobilization. This phenomenon is a very interesting one where the 'reel' projects images potent enough to affect changes in the *realpolitik*, and a *real* political consciousness is manufactured. More interesting is the question, what accounts for the success of cinema as an important medium of political message in

Tamil Nadu. Firstly, cinema was the “first performance centre in which all the Tamils sat under the same roof. The basis of seating is not on the basis of hierarchic position of the patron but essentially on his purchasing power.”<sup>22</sup> Here we witness a clear secularizing potential in the space of the cinema hall. This phenomenon is markedly different from the spectacle of folk performances where the audience or spectators are still spatially distributed in accordance with social hierarchies, i.e., the higher castes are closer to the location of the spectacle while the lower castes are further away from it. The subaltern, seated meekly behind the upper caste audience watches the spectacle and grasps its meaning, gazing upon it through a filter coloured with the inequalities of his lived experience. Whereas, in the cinema hall these inequalities vanish, at least, in terms of seating arrangements, and act as great ‘social equalizers.’<sup>23</sup> The subaltern audience is thrown into a temporary relief, and seated in the secularized space of the modern cinema, the unexpected and strange process of mixing the *real* and the *reel* begins.

The popularity of cinema can also be attributed to the continuities between the narrative structures of heroic ballads with that of the films. For instance, the identifiable motif of the brave hero of the heroic ballads championing the cause of the downtrodden recurs in the cinematic narratives. But the identifiable hero is reshaped and reconfigured with great subtlety on the celluloid. The hero modeled closely on the protagonist of the heroic ballads rises above local colours to embody a politically defined ideological content. Unlike the heroes of local narratives who rebelled against discernible oppressions of their lived experience at a local community level, the hero

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<sup>22</sup> Sivathambi Karthigesu, *Tamil Film as a Medium of Political Communication*, Madras, 1981, p. 18-19.

<sup>23</sup> M.S.S.Pandian, *The Image Trap*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1992, p. 77.

of the motion picture has been metamorphosed into some kind of a standardized Tamil speaking Dravidian who articulates grievances against the Hindi- North Indian- Congress hegemony.<sup>24</sup> He has clearly transcended the local to shape his actions and rhetoric to a political agenda, in other words, operating within the clear-cut ideological framework of the DMK. The audience, in awe of the hero in the cinema, is often also in awe of the political leader addressing rallies with as much felicity as he delivers his dialogue in the movie.

The use of cinema as a medium for spreading political message was not new in Tamil Nadu. Even in the pre-independence period, films often had a content aimed at inspiring nationalist fervor and enthusiasm. The use of certain standardized symbols of mainstream nationalism, for instance the spinning wheel, could easily be linked to Gandhi and his ideology by an associative sensibility trained on nationalist discourses.<sup>25</sup> However, in this period, cinema was essentially an urban phenomenon, and therefore severely restricted in terms of viewership and impact. With Independence and its attendant development of rural electrification, cinemas began to crop up in every little town and village. As Hardgrave points out, "Virtually no village in Tamil Nadu is so isolated as to be beyond the reach of the film. Even the poorest rural areas are served by thatched touring cinemas which have served to break the communication barriers of the modern world and opened the villagers to new attitudes and patterns of behaviour."<sup>26</sup> This spreading reach of cinema was conducive to the DMK's strategy of exploiting it as a popular cultural medium for political mobilization.

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p. 59-64.

<sup>25</sup> Theodore Bhaskaran, *The Message Bearers: The Nationalist Politics and the Entertainment Media in South India*, Madras, Cre-A, 1981, p. 33.

<sup>26</sup> Robert L. Hardgrave and Anthony C. Neidhart, 'Films and Political Consciousness in Tamil Nadu', *EPW*, Jan. 11, 1975, p. 27-35.

One has to keep in mind that the DMK and its leaders, though now they formed a separate party, inherited Periyar's understanding of the need for political interventions in the cultural domain. Periyar and the other leaders had already popularized theatre as a medium of expressing their political articulations, thereby acting upon the cultural sphere. Most leaders of the DMK were people associated with either the theatre or the cinema. To cite only a few examples, C.N. Annadurai, the founder-leader of DMK and K. Karunanidhi were both professional scriptwriters and among others, were a number of film stars, including K. R. Ramaswamy, S.S. Rajendran and Sivaji Ganesan and the popular cultural icon, M. G. Ramachandran (MGR). '*Nalla Thambi*' (Good Brother, 1948) and *Velaikarai* (Servant Maid, 1949), both scripted by Annadurai, advocated the principles of prohibition, cooperative farming and the abolition of Zamindari.<sup>27</sup>

The MGR phenomenon really began after another popular actor defected from the DMK to join the Congress in 1961. The celluloid representations of the characters played by MGR always dovetailed with DMK's ideological content. He was to be represented always as a subaltern character – a fisherman, angler, rickshaw puller or a farmer. Even in films, where he is portrayed as a character from a rich and landed class, his altruistic aims mitigate the scorn of being a rich man. Most of his films show a message-oriented theme for direct political propaganda. In some other films, action unfolds before the backdrop of the DMK party's symbol. The technique of inserting real footages, for instance brief interviews of the scriptwriters who were also the political leaders, or documentary footages of party meetings, were also powerful

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<sup>27</sup> Robert L. Hardgrave, 'Politics and the Film in Tamil Nadu: The Stars and the DMK', *Asian Survey*, 13 March, p.288- 305.

mobilization strategies. The use of bright colours on the screen reflected the colours of subalternity, invoking local cultural memories of local deities dressed in gaudy colours.<sup>28</sup>

How were the resources of popular imagination, growing around the figure of MGR, organized and mobilized for political purposes? In the tradition of small temples built by local communities for their local ballad heroes, temples began to be constructed for MGR - the charismatic hero of the celluloid. His followers organized themselves into fan clubs at various levels, and these became the prime sites of political recruitment and mobilization for the DMK. Duncan Forrester points out, "The cinemas are the temples of new religion, and the most popular by far of the deities worshipped in these new shrines is M.G. Ramachandran."<sup>29</sup> The fan clubs also organized ritual ceremonies marking either the premier or a long run of his films. Their significance, as derived first from their role as a crucial grassroots network, and from the propaganda value of the social services they perform, which operationalized their philanthropic image.<sup>30</sup> Dense discursivity grew around MGR, a process of mythification in which short biographies were distributed by the fan clubs at very cheap prices. These biographies told the story of a self-made man's rise from penury to fame much in the vein in which characters played by him were delineated on the celluloid. More and more discourses constructed the real man, the man off the screen to resemble the characters he portrayed on the screen. The line dividing the real and the reel began to blur and in popular imagination, the hero and the politician freely

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<sup>28</sup> M.S.S.Pandian, *The Image Trap*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1992, p. 99.

<sup>29</sup> Duncan Forrester, 'Factions and Filmstars: Tamil Nadu politics since 1971', *Asian Survey*, 16, p. 283-296.

<sup>30</sup> Sara Dickey, 'Politics of Adulation: Cinema and the production of politicians in South India', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 52, Number 2, May 1993, p. 342-372.

flowed into one another as MGR began to be constructed in their minds as the prototypical hero of their ballads and cinema.

One can note a major shift in the trajectory which defines the Dravidian identity. As cinema became inextricably linked to the cultural fabric across Tamil Nadu, a new popular culture emerged. MGR promoted by the DMK became a cultural icon and several popular cult practices evolved around his persona, temples were constructed in his name, a group of devotees organized an *Idaya deivam MGR bhaktargal kuzhu (God of Our Heart MGR Devotees Association)*. Some of these cult practices like going on pilgrimages or fasts undertaken for the well-being of MGR led to the re-emergence of a kind of popular Hinduism. I do not wish to argue that a revival of popular Hinduism was part of a conscious agenda pursued by the DMK or the later AIADMK. The purpose on the other hand is to note that such practices and cultural phenomena were legitimized at certain levels, first by the DMK as a movement, subsequently by the DMK as the ruling party and finally reached its culmination in the MGR regime. This continued legitimation, which can be translated as a mobilization strategy, meant that the DMK in power had to depart considerably from its atheist articulation of a secularized Dravidian identity in the early 1940s. From Periyar's radical slogan, *no God no Religion* the definition of the Dravidian identity changed to Annadurai's dubious statement *one God one Religion*. Annadurai in a debate around the question of legalizing the self-respect marriages as he stated, "I would quote Vivekananda who has said a true Hindu would not admit of caste."<sup>31</sup> This statement clearly shows the working of a pan Indian imagination in the construction of a Hindu religious identity. To quote Vivekananda is to move outside

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Charles Ryerson's *Regionalism and Religion: The Tamil Renaissance and Popular Hinduism*, Madras, The Christian Literature Society, 1988, p.121.



the pale of one's cultural history to seek sanction for a cultural action premised on Dravidian ideology.

In a massive protest rally against the DMK rule in November 1972, MGR asked his women supporters not to participate in the rally. As M.S.S. Pandian notes, "Instead he asked the believers among them to go to the temples to the statue of C. N. Annadurai and offer prayers so that the authoritarianism and oppression would end in Tamil Nadu."<sup>32</sup> Twin processes of deification operating both in the religious and political domain lead to a blurring of the demarcation between the two. A web of complex relations entangled the political and religious, thereby injecting a communal tone to the political expression of the Dravidian movement. It is by locating these contradictions within discourses constituting the movement, that we can explain the shifting trajectory of politics from the early days of the DMK to the present political climate of Tamil Nadu dominated by DMK and AIADMK.

The changed political context following the entry of the DMK into electoral politics with its demands of political mobilizations raised certain problems. Mobilization had to be organized around certain ideas or images, and these often resulted in being appropriated by a majoritarian Hindu imagination, which created the space for the bloody communal riots of the future. This shift has to be understood as paving the way for a series of incidents and events, which I will describe in the following chapter.

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<sup>32</sup> M.S.S. Pandian, *The Image Trap*, New Delhi, Sage publications, 1992, p.131.

## Chapter III

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### Shifting Contours of Dravidian Identity: Lifting the Religious Veil (1978 to 2000)

The 'Hinduisation' of the Dravidian movement can be understood as a by-product of its use of exclusivist cultural and religious symbols in its political articulation. These processes continued under the rule of M.G. Ramachandran well into the early 1980's. The questions of identity during this period shifted from Dravidian-Aryan opposition to an opposition of the religious majority against the minority. This discursive shift was eventually formalized in the alliances between the AIADMK, and later the DMK, with the Hindu nationalist BJP in the central government in the 1990's.

To understand this shift, one would have to look at certain symbolic events that occurred in the early eighties, and which led to the emergence of new kinds of religious identity in Tamil Nadu. An analysis of these events within the broader context of M.G. Ramachandran's rule, and his government's responses to them, would enable us to identify the startling resemblance of the language of the Hindutva forces with that of the official discourses constituting these events.

#### **AIADMK in Power: 1977-1987**

In the previous chapter, we have seen a conscious political engineering of the MGR phenomenon through the processes of deification and the adoption of various populist strategies of mobilization. Although the MGR phenomenon greatly benefited the DMK as a party, the cult of the MGR persona transcended the boundaries of party politics and created for itself its own unique subculture. Several DMK leaders were

aware of this conscious deification of the MGR persona. During DMK public meetings, the speeches of other leaders tended to be disturbed when large sections of the crowd stirred upon MGR's arrival or left after his departure. Looking at this phenomenon, Annadurai decreed that MGR should always be the last speaker at public meetings. Despite his growing popular appeal, MGR never challenged Annadurai for the party leadership. However, when Annadurai died in 1969 the leadership passed to Karunanidhi, with whom MGR had many differences. Eventually, in 1972, MGR was suspended from the party's primary membership for violating discipline and publicly airing charges of corruption against his own party colleagues. On 17<sup>th</sup> October, 1972, he launched his own party, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)<sup>1</sup>. The party recruited over a million members within the first two months of its existence and won every by-election conducted from 1973 until its coming to power in 1977.<sup>2</sup> In terms of ideology and policies, the AIADMK continued to follow the same ideas as the original Dravidian movement. The AIADMK differentiated itself from the DMK only by stressing on its more inclusive philosophy, and MGR indicated that he had never favoured anti-Brahminism and that the AIADMK would oppose ethnic exclusion on the grounds of caste or language. Further, he disavowed secessionism, which he promised to repress were he to come to power, as well as strident autonomism.

MGR came to power following the elections of 1977 and ruled as the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu until his death in 1987. In spite of the fact that he had set himself up as a subaltern messiah in his film roles, the policies that his party

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<sup>1</sup> The party was originally christened the Anna DMK (ADMK). Due to the danger that regional parties might be banned during the national emergency in 1975, the name was changed to the All India Anna DMK (AIADMK).

<sup>2</sup> Narendra Subramanian, *Ethnicity and Populist Mobilisation: Political Parties, Citizens and Democracy in South India*, Delhi, OUP, 1999, p.262.

followed while in government were widely criticized as being anti-poor. "Tamil Nadu under MGR's governance, raised most of its public revenue from the poor and the middle classes. During 1975 to 1985, revenue drawn from sales tax, which fell by and large on the consumer products used by the middle classes, counted for about 60% of the total tax revenue of the state. However, the poor contributed to the state exchequer quite heavily in terms of excise revenue."<sup>3</sup> His government also acquired the reputation of being a ruthless and oppressive regime. During the late 1980's, the press throughout India carried horrifying reports of how the Tamil Nadu police were combing the North Arcot and Dharmapuri districts in northern Tamil Nadu and hunting down the activists belonging to the CPI (ML). The most shocking of these instances were the lockup deaths in the state during his rule. Apart from this, the media too was under severe attack.

MGR's paralytic stroke in 1984 revealed the true extent of the power of his personality cult in Tamil Nadu. Several people attempted immolation or cut off their limbs as offerings to various deities to pray for their leader's recovery. According to an estimate, of the 79,000 roadside temples in Tamil Nadu, 27,000 sprung up during MGR's illness.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike the atheism and rationalism espoused by other leaders of the Dravidian movement, MGR was openly religious and consciously contributed to the deification of his own persona during his rule. He was also favourably disposed towards Hindu revivalist organizations such as the RSS or the VHP, since he did not consider them a threat to his political power. MGR even stated that the RSS had as much of a right to

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<sup>3</sup> S. Guhan, 'State Finances in Tamil Nadu: 1960-85: A Review of Trends And Policies', Madras Institute of Development Studies, Madras; quoted in M.S.S. Pandian: *The Image Trap*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1992, p.21.

<sup>4</sup> *Junior Vikadan*, 4<sup>th</sup> October 1989.

promote Hindu interests as the Muslim League had to promote Muslim interests.<sup>5</sup> The following pages would attempt to unravel the basis for this conjunction of the Dravidian movement with Hindu revivalism.

Hindu revivalist organizations such as the RSS had already gained a foothold in Tamil Nadu, because of their association with the construction of a monument of Swami Vivekananda in Kanyakumari in the early 1960's. The RSS' vision of a pan-Hindu identity owed a lot to Vivekananda's ideas of Hindu unity. The monument, which was to be built on a rock where Vivekananda had meditated, therefore acquired the status of a shrine related to the revivalist ideology of the RSS. However, it came into prominence during the 1980's following a controversy over religious conversions in Meenakshipuram in 1981. The Hindu Munnani was another similar revivalist organization formed at the wake of the Meenakshipuram conversions along with other communal organizations like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Jan Kalyan, Jan Jagran, the Tamil Nadu Hindu Temple Protection Committee and the Asthiga Samaj. But the significance of the Hindu Munnani was that several of its local leaders and large sections of its followers were drawn from powerful backward castes such as Thevars and Nadars.<sup>6</sup> According to Ramagopalan, the president of the Munnani, the objectives of the organization are "to protect the rights and welfare of Hindu society, to unify Hindus, to remove untouchability and casteism, to revitalize Hinduism, and finally to create a Hindu vote bank."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Indian Express*, 13<sup>th</sup> June, 1982

<sup>6</sup> M.S.S. Pandian, 'From Exclusion to Inclusion: Brahminism's New Face in Tamil Nadu', *EPW*, September 1-8, 1990, p.1938-1939.

<sup>7</sup> *Aside*, 31<sup>st</sup> December, 1989.

The rest of this chapter would attempt to understand the emergence and legitimization of Hindu revivalist ideologies within the Dravidian movement through a brief analysis of three symbolic events during this period. The first of these events is the controversy following religious conversions in Meenakshipuram in 1981. This was followed in 1982 with the Hindu-Christian riots in Kanyakumari district. Finally, we will look at the ultimate public manifestations of the Hindu revivalist ideology in the form of the Vinayaka Chaturthi processions throughout Tamil Nadu in the 1990's.

### **The Meenakshipuram Conversion Controversy, 1981.**

Meenakshipuram is a village in Tenkasi taluk in the western part of Tirunelveli district in southern Tamil Nadu. In 1980, it consisted of 300 households of whom 280 were Dalits of the Pallar caste and the rest belonged to the dominant Maravar caste.<sup>8</sup> The land around Meenakshipuram belonged to a Hindu temple trust and was cultivated mainly by Maravar and Dalit tenants from Meenakshipuram and surrounding villages. In 1969, the tenants formed a cooperative society under Maravar control but it split in 1980 when the Dalits formed their own association. The Maravars regarded this as a challenge to their traditional dominance and the already tense relations between the two castes deteriorated rapidly. This dispute led to considerable police harassment, including the booking of false cases against the Dalits. In the face of this harassment by the Maravars and the police, a group of Dalits decided to convert to Islam. The conversions were conducted on 19<sup>th</sup> February, 1981, by the Isha-Athul Islam Sabha (IIS), a Muslim organization based in the district

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<sup>8</sup> *Census of India, 1981.*

headquarters in Tirunelveli, that also provided support to the converts.<sup>9</sup> There were several extensive studies of the circumstances surrounding the conversions.<sup>10</sup> These conversions were also widely covered by the national media. Meenakshipuram became a rallying point for the Hindu revivalist organizations. The RSS General Secretary declared the Meenakshipuram conversions as the main concern of his organization and of the entire Hindu society.<sup>11</sup> At the national level, the main new organization to emerge was the Virat Hindu Samaj (VHS) founded and led by the former Education minister and Vedic scholar Karan Singh. In response to the conversions, he convened in September the Hindu Unity Conference in New Delhi with participation of over 60 Hindu organizations, which decided to come together under the umbrella of the VHS for the aim of preventing conversions.<sup>12</sup> The Hindu Munnani had been formed as a new organization friendly to the RSS largely because of the relative insignificance of the RSS in Tamil Nadu, a legacy of the Dravidian movement's opposition to the Brahminical ideology of the RSS. The controversy created by the conversions and the subsequent propaganda by the Munnani about the threat to Hindu unity because of the conversions served to establish the Munnani and other revivalist organizations within the mainstream political discourse in Tamil Nadu as the representative of the Hindus. The AIADMK government's response to the controversy shared the Munnani's interpretation of the events as a threat to the Hindu religion. The underlying factors of caste-oppression and harassment that led to the conversions were largely ignored in the official version of the events, which spoke in a language similar to that of the Hindu Munnani and the RSS. This coming together of

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<sup>9</sup> Mumtaz Ali Khan, *Mass Conversions of Meenakshipuram: A Sociological Inquiry*, Madras, Christian Literature Society, 1983.

<sup>10</sup> These studies included inquiries by the Home Ministry, by the Parliamentary Committee on the Welfare of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and by the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

<sup>11</sup> *Indian Express*, 3 January, 1982.

<sup>12</sup> *India Today*, 15-30 November, 1981.

the AIADMK and the Hindu revivalist organization to speak in a common voice around the issue of conversions would be repeated in subsequent instances, most strikingly in the form of the Judicial Commission's report set up to inquire into the Hindu-Christian riots in Kanyakumari the following year.

### **Communal riots in Kanyakumari district, 1982.**

Kanyakumari district lies in the southwestern part of the Indian peninsula. It was originally part of the state of Travancore, although the district comprised a Tamil-speaking majority. After 1951, a popular consensus emerged among the people of Kanyakumari to press for a merger of the district with the then Madras state. In 1956, as part of the State Linguistic Reorganization Act, the district was merged with the state of Tamil Nadu. The emergence of Christianity in Kanyakumari district dates back to the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century when the Portuguese converted the Parava fishermen community. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Protestant missionaries converted the Nadar community to Christianity. Kanyakumari also holds a significant place in Hindu mythology and it owes its name to Kanyakumari Amman, a local deity who is believed to have been an incarnation of goddess Parvati.

In March 1982, a major communal clash between the Hindus and Christians shook most of the district. The clashes were sparked off by an incident that took place in the coastal village of Mandaikadu during a Hindu festival on 1 March. Allegations of the playing of loud music, and the harassment of female Hindu pilgrims by the Christian fishermen community of a nearby village, led to a violent altercation between the police and the fishermen that left six Christians dead and eleven injured.



This sparked off riots across the district which continued for the next 15 days. The riots were widely covered and commented upon in the national media. The Sankaracharya of Kanchi, Jayendra Saraswathi, stated, "Kashmir and Kanyakumari were hallowed Hindu pilgrim centres, the Hindu population in these areas was in a minority."<sup>13</sup> The local AIADMK MLA, Muthukrishnan, commenting on the riots, said, "The number of pilgrims visiting Mandaikadu had fallen steeply."<sup>14</sup> The wide coverage in the media led to a greater visibility for the Hindu revivalist organizations in the public sphere. In the state Assembly, the Opposition demanded an adjournment to debate the police firing and the subsequent events forcing the Chief Minister to promise to visit the district. While he was visiting the riot-affected areas, the Chief Minister distributed money to the victims. In one particular instance, Mrs. Christinal, widow of Amirthayya who was killed in the police firing, declined to accept it saying she was more interested in getting justice. After visiting the riot-affected areas, the Chief Minister announced the setting up of a judicial commission headed by a retired judge to investigate the riots. The Commission, appointed on 22<sup>nd</sup> March, 1982, was headed by retired High Court Justice B. Venugopal and it submitted its report in September 1985.<sup>15</sup>

The report starts by referring to the appointment of the Commission. In the very first paragraph, in its description of Kanyakumari, the report mentions the presence of "innumerable Hindu temples and Mary churches," which it says reflects

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<sup>13</sup> *The Hindu*, 13 March, 1982.

<sup>14</sup> *The Hindu*, 8 March, 1982.

<sup>15</sup> The Commission's recommendations were accepted and it was published in the Government gazette no. 916, dated 29 September 1986. It comprises 274 pages divided into three sections. The first deals with the appointment of the Commission, the causes for the tensions and the police firing and steps to prevent it in the future. The second section raises three questions: what happened, why it happened, and how it can be avoided; and contains its recommendations. The third section deals with the function of the Commission, places visited, intermediary report, affidavits and complaints.

the secular fabric of the Indian nation. It then goes on to say “In India one has the freedom to practice different religious ideas, just as ultimately different rivers come to meet in the sea, so also different religious rituals lead to the same God. Hinduism accepts this philosophy whereas the other religions do not reflect this philosophy.”<sup>16</sup>

In this way, the report starts by conflating the two different notions of the secular Indian nation and of the Hindu religion into a single idea. Further, it explains the rise of Christianity in Kanyakumari as occurring due to Muslim oppression and the subsequent conversion of the Parava fishermen community.<sup>17</sup>

The report goes on to narrate how the temples of Kanyakumari also find mention in the Hindu epics and the *Puranas*. Even though the churches have existed together with the temples, there had not been any communal clash thus far. “Hindus used to go to the church, inter-religious marriage within the same Nadar community also occurred.”<sup>18</sup>

In its introduction to the recent history of Kanyakumari the report notes that the riots were not a sudden occurrence but the culmination of several minor incidents over the years, beginning with the construction of a Vivekananda memorial in 1963. This led to Christian fishermen erecting a cross on the same rock. This issue was finally settled by government intervention.

The report then quotes the census reports of 1980, which showed an increase in the numbers of the Christian population, which became the majority in the district.

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<sup>16</sup> The report of the Commission of Inquiry, p.1.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p.1.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p.3

It says, "In any region, when a minority community becomes the majority, they become more violent, rebellious and defiant. In this way, Kanyakumari is not an exception. The poor and illiterate Christian fishermen community has started supporting the cause of Christianity."<sup>19</sup>

The report also cites a recent RSS conference as one of the other reasons of the riot. This was the 'Hindu Unity and Resurgence Conference', held on February 13-14, 1982, in Nagercoil. Thus, the increase in the numbers of the Christian population and the propaganda of the RSS conference are held to be the causes for the riot.

It is against this backdrop that the report attempts to identify the causes for the police firing and the subsequent clashes. The report concluded, that it was the playing of music over loudspeakers from both the church and the temple, which led to the police firing in Mandaikadu where six Christian fishermen died and eleven were injured. Moreover, it further says, "*This may look surprising, but this is true...*"<sup>20</sup>

The Commission's report further explains the political background to the riots in the following way: In neighbouring Kerala, the close links between the church and the CPI (M) led to the RSS trying to engineer a clash between the Hindus and Christians in Kanyakumari in order to counter what it saw as a hegemonic church-CPI (M) link. The report also concluded that it was the propaganda by the RSS, which contributed to the intensely communal atmosphere in the district. The report identifies the Christian clergy as having a hegemonic control over the largely illiterate

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p. 231.

fishermen community in the region. According to the report, the reasons behind the riots are mainly socio-economic in nature. It says that an improvement in the socio-economic condition of the region would prevent further occurrences of such violence. While it is true that socio-economic problems do play a role in engendering communal violence, a closer reading of the report reveals certain biases and undercurrents that are not always apparent in the first reading.

For our purposes, it would be interesting to note the recommendations of the Commission, which are included in Section 1. This section begins with the following statement, “In the Indian context, communal violence or communal tensions are the words that are common in North India, which reflect the Hindu-Muslim conflict; whereas the incidents in Kanyakumari cannot be classified as communal violence.”<sup>21</sup> It further says, “what happened in Kanyakumari is basically a socio-economic problem that reflects the fight for dominance between two religious groups.” It continues with its casual references to communal violence in North India by saying that “it is a normal feature of life in North India where people are used to communal violence. But in the Dravidian culture and customs of Tamil Nadu, there is no space for communal violence.”<sup>22</sup>

The major recommendations of the report concerned the following broad issues:

i) *The Question of Conversion*: The report begins by saying, “We are not saying that the minority community has to live by the wishes of the majority. But, the minority

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p.141.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 141.

community's future security, safety, rights, special rights all depend on the majority Hindu community's good wishes, trust and sympathy. If this is lost, no law can protect them."<sup>23</sup> It further says it was because the minority community's leaders lost this trust of the majority that the clashes took place. In the Commission's opinion, it was the issue of conversions that destabilized the social and cultural relations in the region and which led to the creation of tensions between the two communities. It quotes Mahatma Gandhi to say, "If I had the power to enact laws, I would enact a law to ban all conversions, because conversions change all customs, language, food habits and the cultural aspects." The report says that in Kanyakumari district, Christianity and its socio-cultural manifestations created tensions among the Hindus. It further goes on to say that although the minority community has to coexist peacefully with the majority community, the priests of the Christian minority are not allowing them to live peacefully with Hindu majority.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, it recommends the enactment of a strict law to ban all religious conversions.

ii) *Uniform Civil Code*: The Commission recommended the enactment of a uniform civil code as the only solution to the problem of inter-religious conflicts.<sup>25</sup> It quotes several High Court judgements to support its call for such a law.

iii) *RSS*: The RSS is mentioned in a section called General Recommendations. The report says that the RSS operates in different regions under different names. In Kanyakumari district, it functions as the *Indu United Munnani* (Hindu United Front), which shares the same ideas, philosophy and approaches as the RSS. It identifies the RSS as a major force that spreads communal hatred in the region. However, it does

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 147-148.

not advocate a ban on such organizations since it believes that “history shows that whenever we ban this organization, it comes back rejuvenated.”<sup>26</sup> Instead, it believes that secular institutions have to counter the RSS propaganda by spreading the versions of Hinduism that stress its more inclusive aspects. It says that under the influence of Hinduism, Indian Christianity also has acquired a more ‘Hindu’ form.<sup>27</sup> It recommends that ‘the government has to propagate the message that the RSS’ ideology and philosophy have no place in the Dravidian culture’.

While the report is the result of a judicial inquiry into the Kanyakumari riots, it has to be understood against the backdrop of the Meenakshipuram conversions the previous year and the shift in the language of Tamil politics from an Aryan-Dravidian opposition to the construction of a religious majority and minorities. A close reading of the report would bring to light certain latent biases and undercurrents that are not always apparent. The report starts by quoting census figures to support its claim that one of the reasons for the riots was the rise in the numbers of the Christian population in Kanyakumari. It argues that when a minority community becomes a majority, it inevitably turns violent. Apart from the fact that this highly prejudiced statement constructs majorities and minorities in strictly religious terms, it also sets the tone for the later statements in the report, which strikingly echo the language and arguments of the RSS and the Hindu Munnani. The shift in the discourse of what constitutes Tamil identity can be observed here. Identity is no longer constructed on the basis of a shared language, but on the basis of a religious opposition. The Tamil/Dravidian identity is being replaced here by that of the ‘Hindu’ majority constructed in opposition to the ‘Muslim’ or ‘Christian’ minority. While it sees the rise in numbers

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 159.

of the Christian population as a reason for the clashes, it also agrees that there were no recent instances of religious conversions in the district.<sup>28</sup> By classifying a religious minority as inherently violent, in what appears to be a neutral statement, it constructs the image of the Hindu majority as essentially peaceful and casts the Christian population in the role of a provocateur.<sup>29</sup>

The report's assertion that any religious minority will be safe and secure only if it lives according to the wishes of the majority echoes almost verbatim the RSS' stated belief that the safety of the minorities depends on the 'goodwill of the majority'. It also appears to justify the actions and philosophy of the RSS by classifying them as simply reactions of a passive majority to the violent actions of a minority. This legitimization of the RSS continues with the report's lack of support for any ban on the organization. Although it justifies its stance by saying that a ban only serves to rejuvenate the RSS, it believes that the RSS should be countered through the propaganda of other secular institutions. In this way, it shares MGR's belief that the RSS was a legitimate representative of the Hindus. The RSS is sought to be countered, not through rational or legal means, but through the propagation of what the report calls the more inclusive and tolerant aspects of Hinduism. It also seeks to appropriate the religious beliefs and philosophies of non-Hindus under the hegemonic fold of Hinduism. It justifies this stance by pointing to the 'Indianisation' of the Church, which it confuses with a 'Hinduisation' of Christianity. This stance not only conflates 'Indian' and 'Hindu' into a single identity, but also reflects the Hindu revivalist notion of Indian citizenship and rights that are dependent on following the

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 231.

'Hindu' faith. All religious minorities are thus sought to be brought under the fold of a greater Hindu/Indian hegemony.

The report strongly states that the RSS and similar organizations have no place in the Dravidian culture. At first, this statement appears to echo the idea of an atheist rationalism propagated by the Dravidian movement. However, its appeal to a more 'tolerant and inclusive Hinduism' that is opposed to the RSS' Brahminical ideology sets up this 'Dravidian culture' as the repository of that form of tolerant Hinduism. This leads us to the conclusion that what the report means by the words 'Dravidian culture' is not the rationalism of the Dravidian movement, but a kind of traditionalist revivalism similar to the RSS' Brahminical revivalist ideology. This is further borne out in the report's assertion that communal violence is a 'North Indian phenomenon' that is confined to violence between the Hindus and Muslims, and is alien to the South. This follows from its earlier statements of Dravidian culture as representing a different kind of Hinduism. It also serves to conveniently justify its assertion that the incidents in Kanyakumari cannot be called communal violence. This frees the Commission from addressing the underlying socio-economic factors that led to the riots.

In its categorization of communal violence as a North Indian phenomenon that was hitherto unknown in the South, the report appears to echo the older constructions of a uniquely Dravidian identity that is in opposition to a North Indian Aryan-Brahmin identity. Encountering the emergence of newer forms of communal violence and tensions in Tamil Nadu, the report explains these being largely fuelled by the rise of the RSS and its consequent propaganda of a Brahminical revivalism. However, to



understand the rise of the RSS in terms of both numbers and influence, it is necessary to isolate and pinpoint the specific ways in which its emergence was facilitated, and the factors that were immediately responsible for its growing legitimization in Tamil Nadu. I would argue that the rise of the RSS can be seen as a consequence of the processes of mobilization in the later phase of Dravidian politics, during the rule of MGR. The deification of the leaders, the valorisation of quasi-religious symbols that were associated with the party, such as pilgrimages, shrines and the cult of leader-worship, coupled with MGR's legitimization of the RSS and other religious organizations : all these combined to create a space for the discourse of religious revivalism within the sphere of mainstream politics. While the use of religious metaphors by the Dravidian movement might not have been intended as overt calls for religious mobilization, their growing legitimacy was used as a tool by Hindu revivalist organizations to legitimize their own ideologies, which also depended on similar devices for mass mobilization. The rise of the discourse of religion within the public sphere and the consequent growth of the organizations that propagated Hindu revivalism such as the RSS and the Hindu Munnani can be observed most visibly today in the Vinayaka Chaturthi processions in the towns and cities across Tamil Nadu. These processions, apart from being highly provocative in their choice of routes and in their public displays of triumphalist Hindu revivalism, also serve as spectacular visual texts that demonstrate and interpret the ideology of the RSS and the Munnani.

### ***Vinayaka Chaturthi and the Emergence of a Tamil Hindutva.***

On September 9, 1970, in the early hours of the morning, a loud explosion was heard in Tyagaraya Nagar, a strong Brahmin residential area of Madras city. Investigations revealed a small Vinayaka (Ganesh) idol lying in a puddle of water. The site rapidly turned into a shrine and the Kanchi Sankaracharya claimed it as a *swayambhu* or self-created idol.<sup>30</sup> Commenting on this, the then chief minister, Karunanidhi said that, “Whatever might be my views on religion, I am not against others believing in the emergence of idols. But in this case, according to a geologist, there was no evidence of an explosion of the earth.”<sup>31</sup> Periyar referred to this incident and said that Madras was a city of fools to hold such beliefs.<sup>32</sup> Further investigations revealed that the explosion and the subsequent events were part of a plot to prevent the imminent construction of a mosque on the same site.<sup>33</sup> A procession was organized against the removal of the idol by the Veera Sakti Vinayaka Seva Sangh. The procession consisted of idols carried in trucks followed by people chanting bhajans.

The rise of the RSS in the intervening years saw the appropriation of the Vinayaka procession to further the cause of Hindu revivalism and its Brahminical ideology. Finally, in the early 1980’s, the Vinayaka procession turned into a celebration of the RSS and the Munnani’s ideologies. What was earlier a local and private festival of the god Vinayaka was now turned into a massive public spectacle of Hindu revivalism. The public nature of the rituals and the participation of large numbers of people in the processions that were taken out at the end of the festival

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<sup>30</sup> M.S.S. Pandian, ‘Death in a ‘City of Fools’, *EPW*, October 24-31, 1992, p. 2352-2353.

<sup>31</sup> *The Indian Express*, 29 September, 1970.

<sup>32</sup> *The Indian Express*, 27 September, 1970.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Ryerson, *Regionalism and Religion: The Tamil Renaissance and Popular Hinduism*, Madras, Christian Literature Society, 1988, p. 165.

served to make the festival into an assertion of 'Hindu pride' and the RSS' belief of the unity of all Hindus.

"The notion of public ritual has to do with the idea that time and space are bounded through sanctification and are therefore endowed with special meaning. Space and time are made social through complex and deliberate enactments, representations and actions."<sup>34</sup> The RSS and the Munnani appropriated the Vinayaka processions largely because of their need for a public platform for the exhibition and propagation of their ideology. The Vinayaka processions are planned in advance to go through all the important public spaces of the cities and towns and also to act as provocative displays of strength by passing through minority areas or in front of mosques or churches. The processions are deliberate imitations of similar processions in Maharashtra. The idols are all huge (sometimes up to 30 ft. in height) and painted in garish colours. The processions are planned in such a way that numerous small local processions slowly and noisily proceed towards the main thoroughfares where they converge with the main procession and then flow as one massive and mobile public enactment towards the site where the idols are immersed.

The *Vinayaka Chaturthi* is an annual festival that falls in the month of August or September. Until the 1980's, however, it was celebrated either as a household festival or within Vinayaka temples and shrines. In 1983, a group of activists belonging to the Hindu Munnani, the RSS and the BJP installed a Ganesh idol in Thyagaraya Nagar, and then took the idol in a procession for immersion in a temple

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<sup>34</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, New York, Basic Books Inc., 1973, p. 142.

tank.<sup>35</sup> Over the years, as the Munnani and the RSS grew in strength, the procession metamorphosed into a huge spectacle involving thousands of idols. It spread throughout Madras and its suburbs and into the other towns and villages all across Tamil Nadu. It finally reached such a scale that the president of the Hindu Munnani was able to declare in 1995 that, “immersion processions would take place in every panchayat district in Tamil Nadu.”<sup>36</sup> The appropriation of the festival and the procession by the Hindu revivalist organization was evident since the active initiators of the public celebrations in every area were local Hindu Munnani or RSS activists, and the main processions were led by the leaders of these organizations. The Munnani makes special efforts to celebrate the festival most ostentatiously in those districts where Hindus are in a minority, such as Tirunelveli, Tuticorin and Kanyakumari in the far south.<sup>37</sup>

The transformation of the festival from a small-scale local celebration into such massive displays of strength is most evident in the form of the idols used in the procession. Until the 1980's, the festival was celebrated in homes with idols of around one foot in height. The idols now installed for the public celebrations range from a minimum of 10 feet to even 30 feet in height. The sheer size of the idols, coupled with the scale of the processions, serves both to create a huge impact in the minds of the participants and spectators and to act as a symbol of provocation when the procession passes through minority-dominated areas. In the late 1990's, the government passed an order regulating the size of the idols to 18 feet, not as an effort to decrease the inevitable tensions during the procession, but as a practical consideration since the

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<sup>35</sup> C.J. Fuller, 'The 'Vinayaka Chaturthi' Festival and Hindutva in Tamil Nadu', *EPW*, May 12, 2001, p. 1607-1616.

<sup>36</sup> *The Hindu*, June 28, 1995.

<sup>37</sup> C.J. Fuller, 'The 'Vinayaka Chaturthi' Festival and Hindutva in Tamil Nadu', *EPW*, May 12, 2001, p.1609

new flyovers in Madras required the height to be lowered so that the processions could pass underneath. This attempt at government regulation also served to normalize the festival and legitimize its existence within the social and religious spheres of everyday life in Tamil Nadu.

The form of the idol itself has gone through several transformations. In the early years of the procession, Vinayaka was depicted in traditional ways such as standing or sitting on lotus flower, with his traditional vehicle, a rat, sitting at the base of the idol. However, in recent years, as the procession gained legitimacy and support, the political and ideological bases underlying the celebrations have become more visible and explicit. By the late 1990's Vinayaka was being represented in the form of other Hindu gods such as Venkateswara or Hanuman. The traditional image of the rat gradually disappeared from the idols as it proved to be unpopular. Some idols even depicted Vinayaka as Atal Bihari Vajpayee or Subhas Chandra Bose. In the aftermath of the conflict between India and Pakistan in Kargil in 1999, the most popular idols of that year depicted Vinayaka in Indian Army uniform standing with a gun and a flag in the heights of Kargil. The victory of the Indian Army in the Kargil conflict was hailed by the Hindu revivalists as an assertion of Hindu pride and strength. While some argued that the 'Kargil Vinayaka' idols were merely a reflection of a harmless desire for novelty, the transformation of the festival was complete: from a household festival to a ritual public enactment of the RSS' ideals of a united Hindu nation.

The management of public spaces to maximize the impact of the celebration is another crucial aspect of the festival and its attendant processions. The idols are installed in decorated pandals that are built in neighbourhood public spaces, in the

empty spaces next to temples, large houses, shops, or even at important road junctions. The pandals are decorated with the saffron flags of the Munnani and the RSS. In certain areas, the idols are deliberately installed close to other places of worship such as churches or mosques. The larger pandals are guarded round the clock by the state police. The pandals are also equipped with loudspeakers that play popular film songs interspersed with hymns. The playing of loud music in the vicinity of mosques during prayer times is a usual occurrence, which then leads to tensions which have to be dealt with by the police. Brief rituals of worship are held at certain times of the day. Near the larger pandals, other cultural events are also organized. In some instances, there were idols installed by the local DMK and AIADMK party branches.<sup>38</sup>

Another important aspect of the festival lies in the Hindu Munnani's deliberate efforts to popularize the celebration in rural Tamil Nadu, in order to promote the festival as a collective expression of a unified Hindu identity. The actual immersion of the idols is largely a casual affair with the idols being tipped or pushed over into the water, into either the sea or numerous rivers and tanks in the cities and across the countryside. Rather than the immersion, however, it is the very act of the procession that remains the central focus of the whole celebration. Although the procession is witnessed on its way by large crowds of men, women and children, the active participants throughout the length of the procession are almost always young men. This makes the procession a stereotypical masculine display of aggression and mock violence, which takes the form of men drenching each other with coloured water or staging mock fights as part of the procession. A significant minority are also drunk

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<sup>38</sup> C.J. Fuller, 'The 'Vinayaka Chaturthi' Festival and Hindutva in Tamil Nadu', *EPW*, May 12, 2001, p. 1612.

before they join the procession.<sup>39</sup> While there may be rare instances of some women joining the procession in certain areas, it remains by and large a male space. To attract more women to the celebrations, without disturbing the patriarchal roots of the celebration, the Munnani has, in recent years, also begun organizing separate ‘feminine’ rituals for women, such as the *tiruvilakku puja* or ‘holy lamp worship’.<sup>40</sup> The Hindu Munnani also issues instructions about the correct slogans to be shouted as the procession winds its way through the streets. Most slogans are calls for Hindu unity and include chants like ‘This country is a Hindu country’, ‘It is the Hindu people’s own country’ and even the Hindi ‘*Bharatmata ki jai*’ (‘Victory to Mother India’). All the slogans are intended to be unambiguous assertions of Hindu strength and to act as calls of provocation towards Muslims and Christians – they are shouted most vigourously whenever the processions pass other non-Hindu places of worship.<sup>41</sup>

The message of the slogans is repeated in the numerous public meetings addressed by the Munnani leaders, where they call for the Hindus, and hence the nation, to ‘rise up’ and to ‘hold up their heads’. However, the Munnani takes its inspiration, not so much from the North Indian Ayodhya temple movement, but from the Shiv Sena’s involvement in the Ganesh processions in Pune and Mumbai. Most Munnani supporters are familiar with the story of Bal Gangadhar Tilak’s invention and popularization of the festival in the 1890’s. Apart from Tilak, the Maratha ruler Shivaji is also a familiar icon to them.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 1611.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, p. 1612.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, p. 1611.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, p. 1613.

The Munnani sees the festival as a tool to construct a category of the 'Hindu' that can incorporate people from various class and caste backgrounds. To overcome the Dalit opposition and indifference to the public celebrations, it has made special efforts in recent years to include Dalits as part of the procession. These efforts have included the donation of Vinayaka idols to Dalit groups and having Dalits lead the processions and play other token roles within the celebrations. This fulfills the festival's purpose of acting as a visible exhibition of the construction of a Hindu unity. The Vinayaka Chaturthi procession has played a pivotal role in the normalization and legitimization of the discourses of a virulent Hindutva within the mainstream political space of Tamil Nadu earlier dominated by the Dravidian movement.

### **Politics in Tamil Nadu in the 1990's**

After MGR's death in 1987, the AIADMK split into two factions, one headed by MGR's wife Janaki Ramachandran and the other headed by Jayalalitha. In the elections of 1989, the DMK was voted back into power after 13 years, with Karunanidhi as the Chief Minister. The sixth state-level conference of the DMK in February 1990, saw a revival of the iconoclastic rationalism and anti-Brahminism of the earlier Dravidian movement. It saw attacks by various speakers on Brahmins, religious faith and polytheism. These attacks were responses to the increasing strength of Brahminical forces in Tamil Nadu, which were eating into the traditional support base of the DMK. The emergence of the Jayalalitha faction of the AIADMK as the second largest party legitimized her claim to be the leader of the 'real' AIADMK. Another development in this period was the emergence of a Vanniar caste-based party



called the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), which rose to dominate in the northern districts.

The rise of the Hindu revivalist groups in Tamil Nadu can be explained in terms of new strategies that Brahminical groups used to overcome the setbacks to Brahminism that occurred during the heyday of the Dravidian movement. Traditionally Brahminism survived through the process of exclusion of other castes from what were supposed to be superior spaces. However, these strategies lost their relevance with the advances made by other caste groups due to the Dravidian movement, largely independent of Brahmin hegemony. In order to reclaim a space in the social hierarchy that they saw as rightfully theirs, the Brahminical groups began to rely on a strategy of inclusion. The emergence of the Hindu revivalist organizations gave them the perfect opportunity to construct visions of a new pan-Hindu identity, which would include all castes under its hegemonic fold, with the Brahmins of course in positions of leadership. In this strategy of Brahminism the conflict is no longer between the Brahmins and non-Brahmins as it was in the past but between the Hindus under Brahmin leadership and the minorities.<sup>43</sup>

In the elections that followed the dismissal of the DMK government in 1991, the AIADMK was voted to power and Jayalalitha became the first woman chief minister of Tamil Nadu, and the first Brahmin chief minister in the state since 1950. In the press conference following her victory, when asked what she felt about a Brahmin becoming chief minister, she said it was due to "a natural process of

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<sup>43</sup> M.S.S. Pandian, 'From Exclusion to Inclusion: Brahminism's New Face in Tamil Nadu', *EPW*, September 1-8, 1990, p.1938-1939.

evolution.”<sup>44</sup> The DMK’s defeat was considered the end of Dravidianism in Tamil Nadu.<sup>45</sup> The reasons cited for this were not only the rise of the AIADMK but also the emergence of other new caste-based parties such as the PMK.

The PMK is a party of the powerful Vanniar caste, whose members were earlier a major support base of the DMK. The PMK shot into prominence following a week-long rasta-roko agitation by the Vanniars in 1987 to demand a 20% reservation in government jobs exclusively for them. It was during the agitation that relations between the Vanniars and the DMK became strained and the Vanniars deserted the DMK en masse to form a new party in 1989, under the leadership of S. Ramadoss. “The PMK observes that ethnic nationalism and ethnic rights are obstructed by the progress of Indian Hindu nationalism promoted by the BJP, Hindu Munnani and the VHP. The spirit of free thinking for the assertion of ethnic nationalism is necessitated by the intrusion of multi-national corporations. With these corporations, the upper-caste industrial hegemony is working on the Indian social and economic setup, opines the PMK. The PMK urges the doing away of the political hegemony of the Brahmin and Bania in the Indian social life.”<sup>46</sup> By securing 5.8% of the vote in the elections of 1989, the PMK acquired the status of a recognized political party. In its manifesto the PMK declared that a Dalit would be appointed as the chief minister, and that the office of chief minister would rotate annually between members of different backward castes. Ramadass characterized Karunanidhi as a traitor of the Dravidian movement. Here we observe two parallel developments: the rise of Hindu revivalist organizations

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<sup>44</sup> *The Hindu*, July 13, 1991.

<sup>45</sup> M.S.S. Pandian, V.Geetha, S.V.Rajadurai and V.Suresh, Ambrose Pinto and other leading Tamil political theorists, in various writings classified the DMK’s defeat as the end of the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu.

<sup>46</sup> S. Ramadoss, *Tamilar Vaalvurumai Maanadu Sirappu Malar* (Tamil Self-Determination Conference: Special issue), Madras, Pattali Publications, 1992.

and the Brahminical forces in the AIADMK on the one hand, and on the other, the emergence of a new non-Brahmin caste-based party in the form of the PMK.

The victory of Jayalalitha was interpreted as the rise of the Brahminical and Hindu revivalist forces in Tamil Nadu. This interpretation was based, not on the fact that Jayalalitha was herself a Brahmin, but on the Brahminical policies that her government subsequently initiated. She inaugurated a massive temple renovation fund to protect and renovate Hindu temples, contributed Rs.1,00,008 (an auspicious number in the Hindu faith) to the fund, established state funds for an institution of Vedic learning and created special funds for the *kumbhabhisekham* rituals in temples in which she also personally participated in her official capacity. Finally, her open support to the Ayodhya temple movement led by the Hindu nationalist forces seemed to be the logical culmination of her Brahminical ideology and policies.

The elections of 1996 saw the defeat of Jayalalitha and the AIADMK. This defeat was ascribed not to her Brahminical ideology but to poor governance and allegations of corruptions against her. When the DMK came to power in 1996, they found that the Brahminism of the AIADMK had become normalized within the political space in the state. They could no longer afford to remain committed to an anti-Brahmin ideology, which they had attempted to revive in 1989. The decline of the ideology of the Dravidian movement, which was apparent during Jayalalitha's period in office, had paved the way for the emergence of new caste-based parties and their assertion of Dalit identity. Apart from the PMK, these parties included the Puthia Tamizhagam (PT) headed by Krishnaswami and the Vidudalai Siruthai headed by Tirumavalavan. The original anti-Brahminism of the Dravidian movement

represented by the old DMK had disintegrated and been reappropriated by the new caste-based parties. The Dravidian identity espoused by the Dravidian movement no longer existed nor was any need felt for it. It had been replaced by various caste-identities that the newer parties represented. All possible vote banks in the state belonged to one or another of these new groupings. This meant that both the DMK and the AIADMK had no choice but to appeal to largely the same support bases, which comprised the middle castes/classes to garner votes.

Another development in this period was the political emergence of the Hindu nationalist forces in Tamil Nadu. In the 1996 assembly elections, the first BJP MLA was elected to the state assembly from Kanyakumari district. The BJP also performed impressively in many constituencies. This was evidence in the political sphere of the process of social and cultural normalization of the Hindutva ideology that had been occurring through the early 1990's, as we have seen earlier in the chapter.

The fact that Hindutva was now a normal and acceptable feature in Tamil Nadu politics meant that both major Dravidian parties could contemplate alliances with the BJP in the central government. The AIADMK lent its support to the BJP-led government in 1998, and when it withdrew support, the DMK stepped in the next year. The two Dravidian parties have little choice but to support any Hindu nationalist government at the centre, since the replacement of the Aryan-Dravidian, North-South, Brahmin-non Brahmin and Tamil-Hindi oppositions with a homogenized pan-Indian Hindu identity, has made it almost inevitable that the DMK and the AIADMK have to necessarily align with Hindu nationalist forces in order to retain their political power bases in Tamil Nadu.

The most visible and ironic reflection of this shift is probably at the level of campaign symbols. The posters and cutouts of Periyar, the original symbol of the entire Dravidian movement have now been replaced with those of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, L.K. Advani and other symbols of Hindutva for purposes of political mobilization. This is a reflection of the new discourse that has come to dominate the Tamil polity. The language and philosophy of the Dravidian movement is now being gradually but effectively replaced by the rhetoric of a newly normative Hindutva ideology.

## Conclusion

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*“Kanyakumari communal violence...85 girls and 60 boys, from the fishing villages, had been stranded at Nagercoil, where they had gone to school.”*

*-The Hindu, March 13, 1982.*

Every work needs to be accounted for, in a certain sense, by a personal impulse from which it, at least partly, derives. No political articulation makes sense without being aware of the author's location in a specific cultural, social and political context. Problems exist, questions arise, problematics are formulated, argued and addressed, several books read, digested, half-digested and pile up to ninety-odd typed pages enclosed in a well-bound book. From within this complex academic paraphernalia and its implied compulsion to write, one little catholic boy stranded on a boat for five days during the communal violence in Kanyakumari, rises from the anonymity of being one of the '60 boys' from the news item above, to speak, to assert himself. What he felt then were the first pangs of separation from his parents for five long and traumatic days, the insecurities of being alone without family.<sup>1</sup> Now after twenty years he looks back again, still puzzled to find out the truth - what happened in Kanyakumari in 1982 and why? What are 'caste', 'religion' and 'language'? How is his identity negotiated through these categories?

The communal violence in Kanyakumari district in 1982 was, for me, an early indication of the fact that 'Tamil' did not adequately explain either my political or my social experience. Looking at this now, from an objective academic standpoint, the

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<sup>1</sup> In 1982, when the communal violence in Mandaikadu spread through the rest of Kanyakumari district, I was in school in Nagercoil town. The notions of religion, of community and of caste broke into my consciousness that day when my friends and I were told that we couldn't go home to our villages because the roads were blocked. The five days that we stayed, stranded on a boat in Nagercoil, were filled with news and rumours of the violence in our villages.

riots were a sign of the paradigm shift that was beginning to take place within Tamil Nadu politics. This study has been an effort to trace this shift through an analysis of cultural and political practice in Tamil Nadu in the past two decades.

In an attempt to account for the present political climate in Tamil Nadu, scholars have approached the problems inherent in the Dravidian movement itself, in three major ways. One of these takes the form of a Dalit critique of the Dravidian movement as a non-Brahmin upper-caste hegemony. This critique also questions the basis of the construction of the idea of a 'Tamil nation' This group of Dalit intellectuals, called the Pondicherry group focuses on the deconstruction of the cultural constructions of the Dravidian movement and the creation of new, ahistorical categories of Dalit identity, outside the confines of the Dravidian cultural constructs.

Another group of scholars attempts to define the Dravidian movement in religious terms: seeing it as the assertion of an essential Tamil identity based on the Saivite religious revivalism among the land-owning *Vellala* caste in the late nineteenth century. These two schools of thought however ignore the progressive and secularizing potential of the Dravidian movement. In response to these, a third school seeks to understand the Dravidian movement as a process of shifting trajectories. This study too is a similar attempt.

These trajectories can be traced through the changes in the movement since the formation of the Justice Party in 1916 and its articulation of the non-Brahmin consciousness within the framework of political representation. The emergence of Periyar and his Self Respect Movement in 1925 drastically changed the terms of

debate in the political sphere. The Dravidian movement at this stage became a process of the assertion of a uniquely Dravidian Tamil identity through new forms of cultural and political expression. This identity was premised on an opposition to the hegemony of Brahminical ideology. It was also an attempt at creating spaces for the articulation of new forms for the expression of a Tamil identity.

The post-Independence Dravidian movement defined itself in terms of opposition to the North Indian-Hindi-Aryan hegemony of the new Indian nation-state. Their participation in the electoral politics of Tamil Nadu state, necessitated changes in terms of strategies of political mobilization and shifts in ideology. The split within the DMK and the rise to power of MGR led to the powerful personality cult that would come to dominate Tamil Nadu politics until MGR's death in 1987. In the nineties, the gradual rightward shift in the two major Dravidian parties ultimately culminated in the formal political alliance between them and the BJP since 1998.

This study has also attempted to understand this shift through the analysis of specific instances such as the controversy surrounding the religious conversions in Meenakshipuram and the spread of forms of public display of the symbols of Hindutva in the form of the *Vinayaka Chaturthi* procession. What at first seemed an inexplicable contradiction – the formal alliance of the political representatives of the Dravidian movement with those of the Hindu revivalist-North Indian-Aryan-Brahmin forces represented by the RSS, the Hindu Munnani and the BJP – can now be understood as the logical end of this process of shifts in trajectories since the past twenty years. This study thus aims to be part of the attempts to identify this shift through its traces in the cultural and political spheres. While there are certainly other



aspects to this process, such as those of political economy, the new dynamics of caste movements and other changes in social and political structures and contexts, they would be outside the scope of this study. What has been attempted here is an interpretation of the observable instances of these shifts in the cultural domain. The forces of Hindutva and the ideological hegemony of Brahminism operate mainly through the manipulation of cultural practice and it is on these grounds that any effective opposition to them can be articulated. This study also attempts to form part of the efforts for the formulation of such an intervention.

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