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**Notes on the transformation of `Dravidian Ideology:  
Tamil Nadu, c.1900-1940**

by  
**M.S.S. Pandian**

**Madras Institute of Development Studies**  
79, Second Main Road, Gandhi Nagar  
Adyar, Chennai 600 020

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**Author's Name and Institutional Affiliation :**

M.S.S. Pandian  
Madras Institute of Development Studies,  
79, Second Main Road,  
Gandhinagar, Adyar,  
Madras 600 020,  
India.

**Abstract of Paper**

The existing scholarship on the Dravidian Movement traces its ideological genesis to "a tiny group of highly educated and capable Vellalas." Proceeding further, it also characterises these intellectual protagonists of the 'Dravidian' ideology as follows: "They remained an elite with no popular base, with no desire to be involved with the masses. Their stress on the past glories, the suspicion of the outsider, their abstract commitment to the people, made them populists like the Russian Narodniks of the nineteenth century."

While one broadly agrees with this reading of the Dravidian Movement's beginnings, one simultaneously runs into problems in understanding the specific ways in which this ideology of the elite was appropriated and transformed for a socially radical agenda by the Self Respect Movement in the 1920s and the 1930s. Here one is left with either terse unexplained statements or meta-generalisations which are hardly illuminating.

Against this background, the present paper analyses in broad outlines how the early formulations of the 'Dravidian' ideology developed by the Vellala elite were transformed by the SelfRespect Movement into "a new arsenal with which the ruling elite was attacked."

## **Notes on the transformation of 'Dravidian' Ideology :**

**Tamilnadu, c.1900-1940**

### **Introduction**

The existing scholarship on the Dravidian Movement traces its ideological genesis to "a tiny group of highly educated and capable Vellalas"<sup>1</sup> such as P.Sundaram Pillai, J.M.Nallaswami Pillai, V.Kanakasabhai and Maraimalai Adigal. Proceeding further, it also characterises these intellectual protagonists of the 'Dravidian' Ideology as follows: "They remained an elite with no popular base, with no desire to be involved with the masses. Their stress on the past glories, the suspicion of the outsider, their abstract commitment to the people, made them populists like the Russian Narodniks of the nineteenth century" (Srinivasan, 1987: 17, 21).<sup>2</sup>

While one broadly agrees with this reading of the Dravidian Movement's beginning, one simultaneously runs into problems in understanding the specific ways in which this ideology of the elite was appropriated and transformed for a socially radical agenda by the Self Respect Movement in the 1920s and the 1930s.<sup>3</sup> Here one is left with either terse unexplained statements or meta-generalisation which are hardly illuminating. For instance, Srinivasan (1987:1), in accounting for the changes witnessed by the Dravidian Movement, merely states the following: "The development was initially ideological which later transformed itself into a mass movement. In the interregnum, an involved elite tried to transform part of the ideology into a programme of action but mainly in elite institutions like the University. The third stage is contemporary with the second interregnum stage where the newly formed Justice Party gives the institutional base that it lacked. Later the movement slipped from the elite and the initiative passed on to a new leadership in the person of E V R[amasamy] which followed totally unprecedented styles and adopted a populist stance considerably different from the early ones to which the province was used." In such sweeping generalisations, not only that unanalysed expressions like "unprecedented style" and "populist stance" await detailed exploration, but also their adequacy as explanations need further probing.

Against this background, the present paper analyses in broad outlines how the early formulations of the 'Dravidian' ideology developed by the Vellala elite were transformed by the Self Respect Movement into "a new arsenal with which the ruling elite was attacked." The first section of the paper outlines the context in which the early versions of the 'Dravidian' ideology got formulated. The second section details the contours of this ideology through a reading of Maraimalai Adigal's writings and looks at the limitations of this ideology as a possible basis for a broad-based radical politics. The third section deals with the conflict between the Salvite Vellalas and the Self-Respecters; and the final section analyses the specific ways in which the Self Respect Movement transformed the Salvite version of the 'Dravidian' ideology so that it could now meet the needs of a radical agenda meant for the politics of the subalterns.

The early 'Dravidian' ideology was developed and refined in a socio-political milieu which exhibited, among others, three important features. They were: (1) The near monopoly over the public administration of Madras Presidency exercised by the English educated Brahmins; (2) Their privileging of Sanskrit as their own distinct cultural marker and the simultaneous inferiorisation of Tamil culture/identity by them; and (3) The efflorescence of a kind of Orientalist scholarship which offered a picture of glorious Tamil/Dravidian past/identity as distinct from Sanskrit/Aryan past/identity. The interaction among these distinct but closely related aspects during the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, constituted the context for the Vellala-inspired 'Dravidian' ideology.

Let us begin with an account of the Brahmin's control over the Madras administration. Referring to the late 19th century Madras Presidency, Suntharalingam (1980:123) notes, "A feature of administrative recruitment [in Madras Presidency] was the preponderance of the Brahmins... In 1886 the Brahmins held 42 per cent of all posts in the Madras Government carrying a monthly salary of over Rs.10. Brahmin domination was even more marked at the higher level of the Uncovenanted Service: Of the 349 elite posts in the executive and judicial lines in 1886, no less than 202 (or 58 per cent) were in Brahmin hands. In certain special departments, Brahmin representation was just as preponderant. In the Registration Department, for example, 217 out of 365 officers were Brahmins..." This trend continued with increased vigour through the early 20th century. Comparing the distribution of government jobs across different castes between 1896 and 1912, Arooran (1980:38) has shown that, "...the non-Brahmin Hindus had lost ground over the years 1896-1912, while the Brahmins had considerably increased their position."<sup>4</sup> One has to remember here, the Brahmins constituted only a little over three per cent of the total population in the Presidency.

What was at issue was not merely the Brahmin's excessive colonisation of the colonial structures of authority; but, more importantly, his stubborn refusal to constitute a modern subjectivity for himself in the new context: "The upper castes, especially the Brahmins found that their intelligence and application brought them rich rewards but at the same time did not entail any obligation which would run counter to their traditional ways of living. They could live comfortably in two worlds, the secularised, modernised atmosphere of their places of work which did not affect their everyday domestic and social life. The law along with teaching and the civil service were professions which they could well adopt and yet not infringe their caste or ritual prohibitions" (Srinivasan, 1970:184). This Janus-faced existence of the Brahmin basically meant that he now combined his pre-existing hegemony in the 'civil society' exercised always through caste and religion, with his new found authority in the colonial 'political society' - each spilling into the other.<sup>5</sup> This tightly-woven configuration of power in the hands of the Brahmin, which straddled both the 'private' and the 'public' domains, so to speak, was a legitimate moment of anxiety for others; and it came out in all its sharpness during the controversy surrounding the elevation of Muthuswamy Iyer to a judgeship at the Madras High Court.<sup>6</sup> When "A Dravidian Correspondent", contesting the appointment of Iyer, argued in the columns of *Madras Mail* (5 September 1878) that the Brahmin was "least fitted of all castes to deal fairly with the masses...since he considers himself as a god and all others as Milechas" (Suntharalingam, 1980:153), he was not only questioning the appointment *per se* but also the new coalescence of different domains of authority in the Brahmin under colonialism.<sup>7</sup>

Intimately linked to the hegemonic location of the Brahmin both in the civil and the political societies, was his bilinguality. This bilinguality was unique and was distinguished by its contempt for Tamil, the language of the ordinary, and its simultaneous enthusiasm for English and Sanskrit, both languages of distance and exclusion and hence power: "They spoke a colloquial Tamil Brahmin dialect, a slang, at home; and impeccable English in office and from on public fora; they praised Sanskrit and learnt enough to make a local show of it. They disdained to speak in their mother tongue on public occasions and never felt ashamed to admit that they could not express themselves sufficiently well in Tamil. Some of them became noted great orators in English but none of them could speak a single sentence in Tamil without using a high percentage of English words or loading it with a still higher percentage of Sanskrit. They know the Sanskrit lore, became soaked in Western intellectual tradition but remained totally ignorant of Tamil literary or cultural traditions" (Subramanian, 1989:94). The reason for this particular kind of Brahmin bilinguality is not far to seek. While English facilitated his access to and authority in the colonial 'political society', Sanskrit, which was celebrated as *Devā Bhashā* or the language of the celestials, reinforced his hegemony in the 'civil society'.

Here, what is important for our purpose is the context of Sanskrit revival in Madras Presidency and the manner in which it was valorised by the Brahmins in inferiorising Tamil. While Orientalist scholarship by Max Muller and others conferred unprecedented respectability on Sanskrit and essentialised it as the

sign of Indian-ness, the Theosophical Movement in the Madras Presidency offered an institutional framework for its promotion. Theosophical Society started Sanskrit schools in Madras city as well as in other parts of the Presidency such as Madurai, Bellary, Nellore, Vizianagaram, Trichinopoly and Guntur; and in founding the Adyar Oriental Library, it attempted a "national Sanskrit movement" (Suntharalingam, 1980:303). What began under Col.H S Olcott in the late 19th century, continued with new vigour under Annie Besant through the early 20th century (Arooran, 1980:46), and earned her the dubious appellation "Irish Brahmani."

In this milieu, the Brahmins claimed that Tamil language as well as Tamil literature were mere derivatives of Sanskrit language and literature, an argument which goes back at least to Subramania Diksitar of the 17th century (Thirumaran, 1992:80). Evidence on the Brahmin's contempt for Tamil is voluminous; and for the sake of brevity, I will cite here only the instances of two prominent figures of Madras Presidency, V.Krishnaswamy Aiyar and P.S.Sivasamy Aiyar. Krishnaswamy Aiyar's public life was indeed eventful and he was one of the most prominent beneficiaries of the colonial rule: he was lecturer of law in Madras Law College, Judge for a brief period, member of Madras Mahajana Sabha, Madras Provincial Congress Committee, Madras University Syndicate, Madras Legislative Council and the Executive Council of Governor of Madras, and one of the founders of Madras Law Journal and Madras Vakil's Association. One may also note here that his love for Tamil was endorsed by none other than U V Saminatha Aiyar himself (Saminatha Aiyar, 1991: 110-19). Then his love for Tamil was only secondary. Not only that he argued for devanagari as the common script for all Indian languages, but also claimed, "Sanskrit is the parent of all Indian literature including Tamil; for much that is claimed in Tamil as original is indebted to conceptions which are entirely to be found in the field of Sanskrit literature (Indian Review, January 1911 and April 1910). In keeping with this stance, he liberally endowed the Mylapore Sanskrit College with the sum of Rs.40000 besides site and building costing about Rs.60000" (Indian Review, March 1913). Like Krishnaswamy Aiyar, P.S.Sivasamy Aiyar's location in the Madras public life as well as his desire for Sanskrit were equally prominent. In the course of his convocation address to the Madras University in 1914, Sivasamy Aiyar lent his able oratory for the cause of Sanskrit thus:

If, in the opinion of the most cultivated and thoughtful mind of Europe, the classics have an important place in a scheme of liberal culture, is it too much for claim a place of at least equal prominence to Sanskrit, a language which for flexibility as an instrument of thought and for vocal charm may challenge comparison with any in the world, and can boast of literature containing precious treasures of thought, imagination, beauty and wisdom. As the language which enshrines the highest ideas of Indo-aryan civilization, as the language in which the highest achievements of the Hindu mind in the region of philosophic speculation and religion have been recorded, as the language to which most of what is in the vernacular literatures of India owes its inspiration, and as the language in which the ordinances that regulate our social life and institutions to this day have been written, a knowledge of it is an essential element of culture to every Hindu...." (New India, 19 November 1914: emphasis mine).

This pro-Sanskritic discursive formation informed the Brahmin's efforts to marginalise Tamil in the Madras University (by such means as characterising it as 'vernacular' as opposed to Sanskrit as 'classical', and making the study of Sanskrit compulsory for those wanting to study Tamil) and to oppose singing of Tamil songs in Carnatic music concerts (Arooran, 1980:chapters 4 and 10).<sup>8</sup>

The arguments so far may be summed up thus: the Brahmin exercised his 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 Brahmin, by valorising Sanskrit, located the centre of his cultural universe outside the Tamil-speaking areas.<sup>9</sup>

Given this context of power configuration which was both political and cultural, a strand of Orientalist scholarship, which constructed a hoary Tamil past and invested the Tamil language with a distinct superior identity, came in as the basis for an empowering discourse for the relatively disempowered non-Brahmin Vellala elite. Though Peter Percival, Winslow, G U Pope and other Europeans were part of such scholarship, it was Robert Caldwell's *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Languages* published in 1856, which exercised a profound influence on the early 'Dravidian' ideology. Caldwell's main arguments are as follows:

He contested the stand taken by Sanskrit pandits that the Tamil language is but derived from the Sanskrit. A considerable bulk of the words in the language are non-Sanskritic. There is no question of there being any affinity between Sanskrit and these languages at all. The proportion of non-Sanskritic portions far outweighs the Sanskritic, the pronouns are entirely different and a listing of sixty most popular words in the language indicates no relation at all between Sanskrit and the Dravidian languages. In Tamil "few Brahmins have written anything worthy of preservation. the language has been cultivated and developed with immense zeal and success by native Tamilians; and the highest rank in Tamil literature which has been reached by a Brahmin is that of a commentator." He corrects the popular mistaken notion that the Tamil literature was an imitation of Sanskrit literature by pointing out that the most elevated of writings the *Kural* and the *Chintamani* are "independent of Sanskrit and original in design and execution". The *Ramayana* of Kambar is "greatly superior to the Sanskrit original of Valmiki" (Srinivasan, 1987:5).<sup>10</sup>

This reading of the Tamil language, culture and past was appropriated by the Vellala elite in negotiating their new found marginality.<sup>11</sup> We shall now turn to how exactly they did this.

## II

Though, as noted earlier, a number of Vellala elite scholars like P.Sundaram Pillai, V.Kanakasabhai, J.M.Nallaswami Pillai and Maraimalai Adigal contributed to the shaping of the early 'Dravidian' ideology, we shall, in deconstructing their discourse, concentrate only on the works of Maraimalai Adigal. The choice is deliberate as Maraimalai Adigal was the last of the Vellala ideologues of prominence who tried in vain to salvage their ideological construct from the unceremonious depredations of the iconoclastic E V Ramaswamy. Thus his career spanned both the elite and the non-elite phases of the 'Dravidian' ideology.

S.Vedachalam Pillai (1876-1950), who changed his name into Maraimalai Adigal, is well known for launching the *Tanl Tamil Iyakkam* (Tamil Purist Movement) in 1916 which battled Sanskritic accretions in Tamil language. In fact, the changing of his name was also part of his effort to divest Tamil of Sanskrit words.<sup>12</sup> As biographical details of him are recounted in a number of studies (for eg. Marai Tirunavukkarasu, 1959; Kailasapathy, 1979; and Sivathamby, 1979), we shall here touch upon only such aspects of his life which are important for our concern. Maraimalai Adigal was not only a scholar of Saivism, Tamil language and literature, but his proficiency in Sanskrit was such that he could translate Kalidasa's *Sakunthalam* into Tamil (Thirumaran, 1992:287). In addition, given his skill in English,<sup>13</sup> he had easy access to Western literature and scholarship - both Orientalist and otherwise. While his collection of books included Max Muller, Monier Williams, Herbert Spencer, Carlyle, Alexander Pope and Shelley, he corresponded with G U Pope and Julian Vinson (Venkatachalapathy, 1988). He combined all these scholarship in developing a rather neat version of 'Dravidian' ideology.<sup>14</sup>

Before we proceed to the specifics of this ideology, we need to outline, at least in brief, its epistemic foundations. Maraimalai Adigal pursued his project, to a great measure, within a Western/

Enlightenment framework: "He [his type of intellectuals] is ever free to think on life and life-struggles and no power can restrain his thought nor can hold it eternally captive. To this freedom of thinking, the spread of western education is contributing its mighty and accelerating influence and we, on our part must do our utmost to bring the people to think for themselves and examine their beliefs in the light of reason..." (Maraimalai Adigal, 1975a:11). He was not only enchanted with reason, but also its close cousin, history. As he wrote,

No doubt, beneath the legendary accounts of Puranas critics of trenchant intellect - such are rarely to be met with in this country, may detect facts of great value for studying the history of ancient people, but others, who are untrained in the critical and historical methods of looking at things and events, take every bit of them as so many literal truths (Ibid:9).

As part of his engagement with reason and history,<sup>15</sup> he also privileged a secular time over the sacred time; Take for example, his critique of the claim that puranas were authored by the divine being:

Sanskrit being the dead and not the spoken language understood by the people, the authors of the Puranas adopted it as the means best suited to their purpose and said in them all that was to be said in their own interest and to the great disadvantage of the people. And as if to give a finishing and successful stroke to their artifices, not only did they uniformly conceal their human authorship of the Puranas but they also attributed the composition of which invariably to Divine Beings such as Siva and Narayana. Being Divine utterances their contents were taught to be unquestionable under penalty of hell-fire to unbelievers...(Ibid:10)

Within such a broad framework, Maraimalai Adigal developed a specific sequencing of history which typologised occupations as signs of progress or otherwise.<sup>16</sup> Characterising hunting and nomadic cultures, he noted, "Before knowing [the techniques of] cultivation and understanding the ways of doing it well, people lived in great difficulty without enough food and proper clothing... One can directly observe even now the difficult state in which the hill people and the forest dwellers lead an uncivilized life of hunting" (Maraimalai Adigal, 1975b:4). Then, such a regime full of scarcity, hardship and other negative qualities of life, drew to a close as the Vellalas discovered and refined the modes of settled agriculture:

Only after the Vellalas had discovered cultivation, the hardship for food, clothing and housing came to an end; the murderous act of killing animals for food ceased; compassion and munificence, based on sharing the surplus harvest of paddy, pulses and other crops to the starving ones, thrived; kings... townships, wealth, education, happy life, and the worship of god, prospered...(Maraimalai Adigal, 1975b:5).

What is significant here is that settled agriculture pursued by the Vellalas not merely freed human beings from this-worldly hardships, but also cultivated their mind and gave rise to superior moral codes and behaviour. In the words of Adigal (1975b:2): "Cultivation is a strenuous job...To perform it well, one needs probing intelligence. That is why, those who do it have high intelligence and know the ways of using it. Because of this only, it has been said that compassion, intelligence and munificence are the age-old traits of the Vellalas." This was indeed a critically important move for Maraimalai Adigal. The recently systematised Saiva Siddhanta, which to him was the highest achievement of the Tamil mind,<sup>17</sup> had as one of its central tenets non-killing (read vegetarianism), and hence compassion and its corollary of munificence. In short, his sequencing of history developed an identity between the Vellala, his traditional occupation of cultivation and Saivism as the apotheosis of history or the civilizational progress of humanity.

From here, Maraimalai Adigal proceeded, now through a set of comparative studies, to assess the non-Vellalas in terms of his carefully worked out teleology; and he concluded that they were way behind the superior civilizational moment of the Vellalas. Let us first take up the case of "Aryan Brahmins" who were the most important target of Adigal's critique. Within his sequencing of history, the Aryan Brahmins remained uncivilised even as the Vellalas were building a civilization based on Agriculture: "In the olden days, when the Vellalas were performing agriculture and expanding civilization, Aryans were merely leading a hunting and pastoral life. That is why, cultivation had been condemned in the books authored by them and their followers. Moreover, the restriction that cultivation should not be performed by anyone from their own community could also be found in these books" (Ibid:5). In keeping with their uncivilized status, the religio-moral universe of the Aryan Brahmins had also remained unrefined. They worshipped minor deities such as Varuna and Indira, offered them intoxicating drinks, and persisted in "the performance of bloody sacrifices so much so that as time went on their conduct became more and more revolting to the delicate feelings of the humanitarian Vellalas" (Ibid:44; Maraimalai Adigal, 1975a:13). Even the constant efforts of the Vellalas to transform the Aryan Brahmins yielded no result. When they disrupted the Aryans' ceremonies of blood sacrifices, it angered them and consequently they labelled the Vellalas as 'rakshashas' and 'asuras'. Adigal argued, "Unparalleled Tamil Kings such as Ravan and Suran who disrupted the frenzied religious sacrifices of the Aryans were spoken of in abuse as monsters" (Maraimalai Adigal, 1975b:72).

If the Aryan Brahmins were uncivilized, how could they exercise near complete hegemony over the Tamil society? For Maraimalai Adigal, it was all achieved through processes of imitation and cooption; and he developed his arguments once again within the well chosen mode of 'historicism': "when the Aryan hordes came from the north-west of Punjab and poured forth into the interior, it was the ten Vellala kings then ruling in the north that stopped their advances... When, after a while, the intellectual section of the Aryan nomads found it impossible to get admission into the Tamilian territories by combating with their kings, they sought it by peaceful means and were thereafter accorded a cordial reception and admitted to a high rank in the Tamilian society" (Maraimalai Adigal, 1975a:12). In delineating the exact processes of this peaceful conquest, he argued,

So long as the Tamil kings and rich trading communities yielded to the wishes and devices of the Aryan priests and lavished their wealth on rituals, the latter pretended to treat them with utmost respect by designating them the Kshatriyas and Vaisyas, while in fact they were positing themselves openly at the zenith in the scale of castes and casting down others secretly much below. But from the moment the kings and nobles and others began to suspect the motives of the Aryan priests, these super parasites gave up their bloody sacrifices but devised other means to suck the wealth of Tamilians. At first they brought all the Tamils under the three denominations of Kshatriya, Valsya, and Sudra... In this design the Aryan priests succeeded so well, that the Tamilians whether kings or nobles rich or poor, learned or ignorant, all have become thoroughly slaves not only to the Aryan priests but also to all who have joined the Aryan fold and bear the name of Brahmin. After this the further work of vilifying the Tamils was made much easier, and all those who, in course of time, styled themselves Brahmins discovered it, ... to efface the three grades of distinctions into which their predecessors classed the Tamils and to put them all together under the generic term 'Sudra' which means but the contemptuous menials as a whole (Ibid: 13-14).

If the Brahmins succeeded in establishing their authority over the Vellala-centric Tamil society both by imitating the Vellalas (in matters such as non-killing) and by introducing the caste system, it was all done, he claimed, in a society whose original internal differentiation was based on a secular notion of occupations: "...in the Tamil country nobody will call himself a Sudra, or a Vaisya or a Kshatriya. The Tamils are either agriculturists or traders, artisans or labourers; every class of people follows a hereditary profession and calls themselves by the name of that profession" (Ibid:14).



This success of the Brahmin, however, did not mean that he had progressed in terms of civilizational norms. Maraimalai Adigal elaborated two sets of arguments, in defending such a reading. First of all, the social behaviour of the Brahmins based on their superior caste status did not cohere with compassion, an important cultural trait of progress (that is, Salvism). Though they had converted to non-killing, their claim to be compassionate remained a pretence: they would not ever offer even a little food or water to others arguing that it would pollute them; would not allow others to draw water from their wells; would not allow others to bathe in tanks where they bathe; would not allow the original Tamils of Pallars and Parayars even to come close to their settlements... (Maraimalai Adigal, 1975b:23-25). Not only that the Brahmin lacked compassion, but also maintained his old uncivilized ways of worshipping minor deities, that is, he did not seek salvation through the monotheistic Saivism: "Aryans haven't given up their minor deity worship till today... they are now even more deeply involved in [the worship of] minor deities and inferior human beings; apart from worshipping kings like Raman and Kannan, they hold on tenaciously to the dangerous idea that 'No god other than themselves; they themselves are god'" (Ibid:51-52). Thus separating the Brahmin's current status of power from any claim for his superiority, Maraimalai Adigal continued to maintain the temporal distance between the Vellala and the Brahmin in terms of his teleological scheme. In other words, the Brahmin was an usurper of power and the power that he exercised was illegitimate. Such a construction of the Self and the Other was indeed a discursive means for the disempowered Vellalas to contest the pervasive authority of the Brahmin in colonial Tamilnadu.

Let us now turn to Adigal's ideological construction about the non-Brahmin castes other than the Vellalas. Here, we have to first of all analyse the implications of his denial of caste system as indigenous to Tamil society. This specific reading of the Tamil past freed different caste groups from the cyclical sacred time which is central to Brahminical Hindu ideology. In other words, these caste groups need not any longer wait for rebirth to liberate them from their present position as Sudras. Significantly, Adigal also relocated them in a secular time by claiming occupations as the basis for the internal differentiation of the Tamil society. As occupations were not irrevocably tied to birth, now the Sudras could transform themselves by their own will through history.

All these looked as if Maraimalai Adigal had finally restored political agency to the subordinate non-Brahmins caste groups. But, it was not to be. His characterisation of occupations was indeed caste-like. If the Vellalas were kings, traders and cultivators, it was because of their historically advanced state; and, in contrast, if others were serving the Vellalas through different occupations, it was because of their historical insufficiency. As in the case of early Aryan Brahmins, the proof of the uncivilized status of other non-Brahmin castes was their lack of love and compassion as evident from their meat-eating and blood sacrifices to minor deities. Referring to their deities, Adigal, for instance, noted in contempt: "What are Pldari, Kurankuni, Yesaki, Madurai Veeran and the like? These are the spirits of those who indulged in evil deeds during their life time, shunned by kings and others, and died prematurely" (Maraimalai Adigal, 1979:36). Given this reasoning which was very much part of the teleology which he had developed, Maraimalai Adigal did not have any problem in writing that "It is the Vellalas who divided the other Tamils, who did not avoid killing, and went low in morals, into eighteen [occupational] groups to assist them in cultivation and to do other occupations useful to them" (Maraimalai Adigal, 1975b:11).

Then the relationship between the Vellala and his subordinates could not be the same as between the Brahmin and the others. After all, the Salvite Vellala was the epitome of compassion, which was the sign of his civilizational achievement. Maraimalai Adigal resolved the problem of relations of power between the Vellala and the others, simply by eliding it: "...with the lowly submitting themselves to their superiors [the Vellalas], and the superiors protecting the lowly, the ancient Tamils led a beautiful life of peace and order" (Ibid:38). Such foregrounding of a moral economy (instead of looking at the relations of power as such), was no doubt a move to salvage the Vellala (now in trouble). Adigal did not stop here, but proceeded to prove further the Vellala generosity. He claimed, the lowly was not eternally condemned to be so: "...by avoiding killing and non-vegetarian

food and by grounding themselves firmly in [high] morals one can become as elevated as the Vellala" (Ibid:22). In simple terms, this means two things: First, to put it little too drastically, history as a process fulfilled itself at the present of the Vellala and now on its only task was to convert others in his image. Secondly, the lower occupational groups could liberate themselves not on their own terms, but only by casting themselves in the mould of the Vellala. In short, by discounting and blocking all other possible trajectories of history, Maraimalai Adigal took away completely whatever little political agency that he seemed to have conferred on the subordinate castes by relocating them in a secular time!

To sum up, Maraimalai Adigal's particular sequencing of history and freezing it at the valorised present of the Saivite Vellala, and its deployment through comparative studies of caste groups, discursively dethroned the Brahmin and replaced him with the Vellala elite. But simultaneously, the very same sequencing of history denied subjecthood and political agency to the non-Brahmin castes below the Vellalas. The maximum Adigal could offer in terms of politics was some sort of Vellala paternalism towards lower castes; and he kept on arguing, "[Vellalas] should uplift people from other communities who are moving up [by adopting] Saivite morals, and make them part of their own community" (ibid:26). Inevitably, it remained as a mere dialogue among the quarrelsome Vellala elites and never went beyond. The subordinate non-Brahmin caste groups were yet to find their politics.

### III

Maraimalai Adigal, who confined his activities by and large to debates within the Salva Vellala elite, was for the first time drawn into a wider political arena with the arrival of the Self Respect Movement in the Tamil public sphere during the 1920s.<sup>18</sup> To begin with, the Movement attacked Vaishnavism by publishing trenchant criticisms of Ramayanam in the columns of *Kudl Arasu*. It was a campaign in which Saivite scholars like E.M.Subramania Pillai participated with much enthusiasm (Muthusamy, 1984: 7, 29-32, 34-40). As the official organ of the Self Respect Movement, *Kudl Arasu* (7 October 1928), would recount it later,

...when the Self Respect Movement condemned Brahmins and Brahminism, Vaishnavism and Vaishnavites, these Saivites jumped in joy and sang peans on the Self Respect Movement. Moreover, they even helped us when we attacked Sankarachariar and Brahmin domination.

Later, when we started exposing the Vaishnavite puranams, they helped us. Further, when we argued that there was no such thing as the Hindu religion and that what goes by the name of Hinduism is nothing but Brahminism, they even rallied evidence to prove it.

The Saivite enchantment with the Self Respect Movement was not to last long. The Movement's critique quickly expanded to include Saivism as part of its target. Venerated Saivite texts like *Periya Puranam* and *Thiruvilayadal Puranam*, as well as Saivite saints like Thirugnana Sambandar were its victims. For instance, one Meikandar argued in *Kudl Arasu* (26 August 1928), "Periya Puranam creates caste conflicts; Periya Puranam advocates caste differences; Periya Puranam portrays many acts inimical to one's self respect as devotion to god; Periya Puranam justifies murderous deeds as service to Saivism."

Maraimalai Adigal was enraged by the "atheistic vomittings" of E.V.Ramaswamy and characterised his anti-Saivite campaign as the "mischief of Vaishnavites". He, in the pages of *Sivanesan* (June-July 1928) claimed, "The leader of the Self Respect Movement is a Vaishnavite; his brother too, we came to understand, is a Vaishnavite who has converted many gullible Saivites to Vaishnavism. Their accomplices too are Vaishnavites. Moreover, not only are they Vaishnavites, they are also Telugu speakers." While the Balasubramania Baktha Janasabhai came out with a series of pamphlets in defence of Adigal and

contested "the calumnies heaped by the Self-respecters on the Saivite religion and its apostles", **Kudi Arasu** carried editorials and articles attacking Adigal. This war of words pushed Maraimalai Adigal even to think of a police complaint about the self respecters and their mischief! The situation was finally defused by the mediation of Thiru. V. Kalayanasundaram and K.A.P.Viswanatham. The personal reconciliation between Adigal and E V Ramasamy did not however lead the latter to change his ideological stance one bit. As he wrote, "...regarding the difference of opinion, how much ever [Maraimalai Adigal] is willing to compromise, we will not budge an inch from our views and principles, either for the sake of his or anybody else's friendship" (**Kudi Arasu**, 2 September 1928). It was indeed peace on E V Ramasamy's terms.

The polemics between the Saivites and the Self-respecters continued for over a decade, with occasional truces and sometimes even collaboration as during the anti-Hindi agitation of the late 1930s. While the moderates (such as Maraimalai Adigal, Thiru V Kalyanasundaram, Sachidanandam Pillai and M Balasubramania Mudaliar) and the reformists (such as S.Murugappa, V.O.Chidambaram Pillai, P.Chidambaram Pillai, P.Thirukoodasundaram Pillai and K.M.Balasubramaniam) attempted to change the ritual and caste practices of the Saivites in an effort to meet the challenge of the Self Respect Movement, the orthodox ones resisted such attempts, often unsuccessfully. At the end of it all, the Saivites were pushed to the margins of Tamil politics and their protestations turned out to be nothing more than inaudible whimpers.<sup>19</sup> In stark contrast, the Self Respect Movement emerged as an anti-elitist mass movement, with its ideology influencing, in varying degrees, the Tamil politics for decades to come. In short, if M.Balasubramania Mudaliar claimed, "The best parts of the Self Respect Movement are nothing but alms thrown by Maraimalai Adigal, the spiritual father; if they who got these alms and campaigned based on it, are thankless to the spiritual father, all their efforts will go waste..." (**Siddhantam**, June 1929), history proved him wrong.

The question remains, why did history favour the Self Respect Movement. To seek an answer, we need to explore the ideological foundations of the Movement and locate how it differed from the early 'Dravidian' ideology advanced by the Saivite elite.

#### IV

Similar to Maraimalai Adigal, E V Ramasamy too pursued his political project within an Enlightenment paradigm. His faith in reason and history is by now well documented. If he believed, "change is inevitable; nobody can stop it", he also believed "God and fate are the direct enemies of reason" (Aanaimuthu, 1974:1117, 1120).<sup>20</sup> Moreover, in the same manner as Adigal, he claimed that it was Aryan Brahmins who introduced caste system among the Tamils as a means to hegemonise them: "[E V Ramasamy] Naicker pointed out to the non-Brahmans that Manu, the chief Brahman law-giver, degraded the bulk of the population to a position of sudras, prevented them from accumulating wealth and advocated that their vocation should be to serve the Brahmins. In addition to such prejudicial codes, new rules and regulations were incorporated as and when Brahmins found it necessary to prevent other caste groups from challenging their status and privileges. As a result of such sectarian laws, a large segment of non-brahman society was degraded to an inferior position..." (Viswanathan, 1984:74-75).

Such similarities and continuities between Maraimalai Adigal and E V Ramasamy pale into insignificance, as we turn to the substantive differences which inscribed their approaches to politics. Let us begin with the different ways in which they employed the historical mode of reasoning for their respective political agendas. As we have noted earlier, Adigal used 'historicism' to mobilise a valorised Saivite Vellala past in opposition to the Brahmins claim to superiority; and he, given his Saivite agenda, stopped the process of history, as if on its tracks, to freeze it at the romanticised present of the Vellala. In sharp contrast, E V Ramasamy neither valorised the past nor set limits for the march of history.

While he viewed the past as an unending story of oppression and struggle against it, he condemned every move to resolve the current contradictions of the Tamil society by nostalgically retreating to a glorified past. He wrote, 'The unnecessary ancient principles of the Tamils...have become useful [only] for deceiving outsiders and plunging [oneself] into foolishness. It has become a duty of the rationalists that such talk [about ancient Tamil ideas] should not be evoked for any reform from now on.' He proceeded further: "If several of our 'Pandits' do not have rational thinking, it is because of the obscurantism of the ancient Tamil principles. **There is nothing at present to be achieved by the talk of ancient Tamils.** Therefore it is an important duty of the people not to give any place for [such] fraudulent speech..." (Aanaimuthu, 1974: II, 1251-52; emphasis mine). His overarching denouncement of the Tamil past spared neither the classical Tamil literature such as *Thirukural* and *Silapathikaram* nor the ancient Tamil rulers of the Cheras, the Cholas, and the Pandyas (Pandian, 1993). Equally important is his view that the telos of history and rationality was interminable, continuously invalidating the past, and disclosing newer avenues of freedom all through. He told his followers that the march of history and rationality would invalidate his own legacy:

What is known as rationality will keep changing. What we think today as fit for reason, may be rejected tomorrow as superstition. We ourselves will reject several things - even the sayings of those who are praised as great men. Similarly, the future generation may at a time say about me, "There was a [man] of irrational thinking called Ramasamy". That is natural; a sign of change; a sign of the times (Aanaimuthu, 1974: II, 1120).

Thus the course of rationality/history, for E V Ramasamy, is such that it does not offer a fixed goal, a fixed utopia - the search for freedom can only be an ever continuing endless search. In other words, casting the oppressed in the image of the idealised Vellala was no resolution and his conception of history was radically different from that of Maraimalai Adigal.

If E V Ramasamy placed emphasis on the future at the expense of any glorified version of the past and freed the course of history from the ossified Vellala ideal, his conception of disempowerment was also qualitatively different and significantly more inclusive in comparison to the early 'Dravidian' ideology. While Maraimalai Adigal and other Vellala elite scholars confined their critique of Brahminical Hinduism more or less exclusively to caste oppression (in an effort to erase their own Sudra identity),<sup>21</sup> this formed only one of the many planks of E V Ramasamy's critique. Though he, all through his life, campaigned against the Sudra identity of the non-Brahmin Tamils, he argued that Hinduism not merely gave its adherents a caste identity but also invested them with a range of other inferiorised identities. For instance, he claimed that if women and those who perform physical labour were encoded as inferiors, it was because of Hinduism itself. Tracing the link between Hinduism and the current devaluation of physical labour, he argued, "...You should realise that if all of you are workers, it is because you were all made into Sudras according to Varnashrama Dharma of Hindu religion. Let that pass. If workers are thought of as lowly people, it is because they [Sudras] were thought of as lowly people in Hindu religious dharma" (Aanaimuthu, 1974:II, 786). Similarly, referring to women, he noted,

What Hindu religion tells about women is that god created women at birth itself as prostitutes; so they should not be allowed to be free at any time; they should be controlled by the father at the childhood [and] by their sons during old age...

There is more such evidence in religious shastras. Their intention is nothing other than making women slaves of men (Ramasamy, 1984:84-85).<sup>22</sup>

This far reaching critique developed by E V Ramasamy established Hinduism as constituting multiple relations of power and not merely caste relations (as represented in the early 'Dravidian' ideology). In other words,

now the Movement could address a wide range of issues by problematising a number of inferiorised identities. The newly opened up terrains of conflict was what ensured the Self Respect Movement a basis for mass politics. Different subordinate social groups such as Adi Dravidas, Sudras, women and labouring poor could, thus, articulate their grievances through the Movement.

Not only that E V Ramasamy's conceptualisation of Hinduism expanded the terrain of political contest, but also conferred political agency on different subordinate groups by unfettering them from Vellala paternalism. In investing the victims of the past and the present with political agency, he elaborated and propagated the concept of 'Suyamariyathai' or self-respect. According to him, the foremost thing an active political subject required was the realisation of his/her self respect. Extending this concept to the sphere of political intervention, Ramasamy argued that it was the victims of inequity and freedom alone, who, through their active intervention in history, could ensure self emancipation. He believed that no one could speak for and represent the oppressed, but themselves. For example, he discounted men's participation in the movement for women's freedom and argued that only women, by appropriating political agency to themselves, could attain independence and equality: "Can rats ever get freedom because of cats? [Can] sheep and fowl ever get freedom because of foxes? [Can] Indian's wealth ever increase because of White men? [Can] non-Brahmins ever get equality because of Brahmins?..." (Ramasamy 1984:83-84). He repeated this line of argument to different subordinate social groups, whom he continuously addressed throughout his life as a political propagandist. Thus, his discourse proliferated with innumerable oppressors and oppressed, each changing into the other contextually and relationally: a Sudra male was the oppressed in relation to the Brahmin, but simultaneously he was an oppressor in relation to women or Adi Dravida. In short, the struggle for freedom through history was multiple, with porous boundaries, shifting identities and numerous agents of change. Its resolution lay beyond any simple binary like Brahmin vs. non-Brahmin. This politics based on multiple identities, by not privileging any single subject position, subverted the Saivite Vellalas' claim to be the sole arbiter of Tamil destiny. Now everyone of the oppressed could mediate politics on his/her own terms.

Thus, E V Ramasamy's concept of politics freed history from any notion of Saivite utopia, invoked a number of inferiorised identities and as a result expanded the realm of politics to include a range of oppressed groups, and, above all, invested them with active political agency. More importantly, it had the quality of being perennially contestatory: the telos of history and rationality were interminable and hence there could be no certitude about the finality of any political resolution. Struggle had to go on.

In short, the political discourse of E V Ramasamy stood in sharp contrast to the early 'Dravidan' ideology of the Vellala elite; and his break with them was substantial and qualitative. This is exactly what accounted for his success in mass politics, and not his "unprecedented styles" or "populist stance". If history stood on his side, he knew history would invalidate him sooner or later.

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#### Notes

1. Vellalas were a dominant landowning caste in the Tamil countryside, known for their strict adherence to a 'Brahminical' form of Saivism with vegetarianism as one of its key tenets. However, given their intimate links with cultivation, they were treated as Sudras within the fourfold division of caste system. In pre-colonial Tamilnadu, they drew their power from land control, access to bureaucracy especially at the village level, and strong alliance with Brahmins.

2. See also (Irschick, 1969 : Chapter 8; Kailasapathy, 1979; and Sivathamby, 1979).

Srinivasan (1970; and 1986) has also characterised other intellectuals of the late 19th and the early 20th century Tamilnadu, like Suryanarayana Sastry and V V S Aiyar, in a similar fashion.

3. The Self Respect Movement was launched by E V Ramasamy, after he broke ranks with the Indian National Congress. His active sojourn in the Congress came to an end in November 1925 when two of his resolutions seeking 'communal representation' (i.e. caste-based reservations in favour of the non-Brahmins) were disallowed in the Kancheepuram conference of the Tamilnadu Congress. Thereafter, he declared his political agenda to be "no god; no religion; no Congress; and no Brahmins". For accounts of the Self Respect Movement, see (Chidamparamar, 1983; Viswanathan, 1983; and Arooran, 1980: 152-251).
4. See also (Irschick, 1969: 13-16 and 42).
5. For an introduction to the Gramscian concepts of civil society and political society, see (Simon, 1988:67-71).
6. For details of the controversy, see (Suntharalingam, 1980:151-156).
7. Through a reductive mono-causal argument, it is often represented that the Dravidian Movement sought its political fulfilment merely in getting a share of government jobs for the non-Brahmins. Such an argument elides the important question of the configuration of power under colonialism and the location of the Brahmins in the same.
8. In the early 1940s, when Thandapani Desikar sang in Tamil during the Tiruvaiyaru music festival, the next singer, a Brahmin, refused to sing unless the dais was purified with water and cowdung. And of course, the dais was purified to facilitate his singing.

With the onset of Indian nationalism, the Brahmins could not shut out Tamil fully and they needed it for mass mobilisation. Here, as part of the pan-Indian imagination, their opposition was not so much to Sanskrit but to English. In fact, even Subramania Bharati, a moderniser of Tamil writing style with great passion for the language, recommended Sanskrit as the source for coining new words in Tamil (Nuhuman, 1985:158).

9. This fact of the Brahmins' refusal to identify themselves with the Tamil cultural universe (even before the arrival of the Dravidian Movement) is important for any critique of the current claim that their dispersal all over India and elsewhere is due to 'persecution' by the Dravidian Movement. As a recent account puts it,

The anti-Brahmin movement has made its consequence felt largely in the ... spheres of education and employment, where massive reservation of places for 'backward' classes and tribes by the Dravidian parties in power has kept Brahmins out of state-run educational institutions, bureaucratic jobs and political appointments. A significant diaspora of Brahmins has occurred with the migration of the community to other states in the country as well as to countries in the west... Since education and administration have been the traditional, and virtually monopolistic, preserves of the Brahmin community, there is now a severe diminution in its social role and functioning. At the same time Brahmin priesthood is no longer attended with divine sanction or political influence; Brahmin priests are now only poorly paid performers of temple rituals and private worship in a few households. There is a significant decrease in the number of Brahmin men who opt for the priesthood, and consequently in the numbers of traditional Sanskrit institutions for the teaching of the 'Vedas', or religious texts" (Sunder Rajan, 1993: 79-80).

At one level, in denying the Dravidian movement's self-definition as non-Brahmin movement and in characterising it as anti-Brahmin, the above account anchors itself firmly within a discursive formation privileged by the Brahmins. At another level, it reduces Sanskrit merely as the Brahmins' means to learn Vedas and thus silences its function as a sign of their pan-Indian/anti-Tamil desire. (see also, footnote 7).

On how the metropolitan elites have appropriated words like 'exile' and 'diaspora' inscribed with "centuries of pain and dispossession", as part of their self-definition, see (Ahmad, 1993: 85).

10. See also, (Irschick, 1969:277-280; Kallasapathy, 1979:24-26; and Sivathamby, 1979:25-29)
11. This strand of Orientalist scholarship was ignored by the Brahmins, while they celebrated other strands with great enthusiasm. The selective appropriation of Orientalist studies by the Brahmins is generally not dealt with in the existing scholarship and awaits fuller exploration.
12. We shall refer to him in this paper as Maraimalai Adigal, as he is popularly known. Kailasapathy (1979), given his completely negative reading of the **Tanlamil Iyakkam**, contemptuously refers to him all through as Vedachalam. It is as if to deny Maraimalai Adigal his selfhood. Despite Adigal's elitist approach to language, his project as mediated by different phases of the Dravidian Movement, led to the coining and popularisation of a large number of pure Tamil words which are today part of the Tamil vocabulary (Thirumaran, 1992:Chapter 5).
13. His knowledge of English was good enough to translate Gray's 'Ode on Eaton College' into Tamil. See (Venkatachalapathy, 1988:17)
14. The account of Maraimalai Adigal's version of the Dravidian' ideology, which I present in the succeeding paragraphs, is based on his **Vellalar Nagarigam**, published first in 1923. It is not only one of his mature works, but also an extremely successful one. As he notes, "The first edition of this work was published in November, 1923 and 500 copies of it were sold within four years - a period too short for the sale of a Tamil book of this kind which, in contradistinction to the current fashion for a mixed kind of Tamil prose, is written in a scrupulously pure Tamil style..." (Maraimalai Adigal, 1975a:9)
15. Maraimalai Adigal occasionally floundered from his chosen epistemic path. For instance, explaining the destruction of early Tamil country (Kumari Nadu) by sea, he argued that it was due to divine wrath following the Tamils' excessive indulgence in earthly pleasures and wealth (Maraimalai Adigal, 1975b:68). After all, he, as a Saivite, had to defend the religious doctrines of Saivism!
16. Arguments developed in this section on how time was used as a distancing device owe a great deal to Fabian (1983).
17. During the Pallava period, the landed Vellala elites developed, an overlap between Saivism and Tamil. This was achieved through the Bhakti literature of the Nayanmars and was meant to constitute a broad based historic block with the vellalas at the leadership, so as to contest the well-entrenched authority of the hegemonic trading class. The trading class was mainly of Jains who promoted Sanskrit and Prakrit. Saivism acquired the trappings of a philosophical system, i.e., Saiva Siddhantam, during the Chola period when vellalas were already a hegemonic class. For a brilliant analysis see (Kailasapathy, 1991: 81-193).
18. Maraimalai Adigal was so detached from mass politics that he, in fact, dissuaded his sons from entering politics (Venkatachalapathy, 1988: 69-70 and 74).
19. For a detailed and exhaustively documented account of the ideological tussle between the Saivites and the Self Respecters, see (Venkatachalapathy, nd; and 1990). I have drawn most of the material in this section from his account which he has generously permitted me to use.

20. For a fuller account, see (Pandian, 1993).
21. One of the reasons which spurred Maraimalai Adigal to publish **Vellalar Nagarigam** was that the Nattukottai Chettiars derided the Vellalas as Sudras, and, in contrast, characterised themselves as Vaisyas (Maraimalai Adigal, 1975b: 6). In fact, the Vellalas had been contesting their Sudra identity from as early as 1871 (Thurston and Rangachari, 1975:366-7).
22. The issue of women's freedom from patriarchy was a life long engagement for E V Ramasamy. For details, see (Anandhi, 1991 and 1992; and Pickering, 1993).

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