

Universalism as a Political Theology: Tamil Saivism, Neo-Saivism and Dravidian Movement

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Abstract

Tamil Saivism broadly consists of two doctrines: the dualistic, *Bhakti* Brahmanism, and the monistic, *Cittar* tradition. The monistic enlightenment philosophy of the *Cittar* tradition advocates the self-criticality/rationality of an individual in search of the ultimate truth of the cosmos. Since the Medieval period, *Bhakti* Brahmanism has been deeply rooted in Tamil society by controlling the temples. It aggrandizes the concepts of purity-pollution, *Varna-jati*, Sanskritisation, and patriarchy. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, the neo-Saivites strived to revive Tamil Saivism from Brahmanism by creating a “Tamil Religion” which had to be secular, non-Brahmanical, non-Sanskrit, and anti-caste based on the Universalistic appeal of the *Cittar* tradition. For more than a century, the Dravidian Movement has been working towards de-Brahmanisation of the religious sphere. The de-Brahmanisation began with the Statehood of temples and their properties by the Justice Party in the British Raj. In independent India, DMK extended it by making Tamil along with Sanskrit as a liturgical language, and priesthood was opened to non-Brahmins. The Dravidian Movement kept religion outside the political sphere, but its social justice policy revolved around the Universalistic philosophy. It viewed God as one and also regarded that god can be seen in a poor’s smile. Presently, the DMK government has opened the priesthood to women and proposed to establish an international centre for Vallalar, a 19th-century *Cittar*, to propagate his teaching of Universalism. The Universalistic political theology of the Dravidian movement has resulted in social harmony coupled with egalitarianism.

Keywords: Tamil Saivism, Dravidian Movement, Universalism

Tamil folk religious traditions and Tamil Saivism form the two poles of the Tamil religious axial. Both capture the physical and metaphysical lives of the Tamil people, respectively. Folk religious traditions are all-pervasive in Tamil life by playing a dominant role in their life cycle ceremonies. Tamil folk tradition goes back to prehistoric times, where the customs and traditions revolve around the people's emotions. Folk religious tradition is mainly demonolatry, nature worship, and ancestor worship accompanied by bloody animal sacrifice and a follow-on communal feast. The scope of this writing is limited to Tamil Saivism, and it traces the theological base for the Dravidian movement.

Tamil Saivism/Saiva Siddhanta is a complex religious theology. It is a concoction of various philosophical and ritualistic traditions - Vedic, Sanskritic/Brahmanical agamic, Tamil *bhakti* and monistic orders like Tamil *Siddha*. Tamil Saivism, at its best, can be perceived through *Tirumantiram*, a cardinal Tamil *Saivite* literary work written by *Tirumular*, a mystic, poet and philosopher. *Tirumantiram* is considered the fountainhead of Tamil Saivism's *Bhakti* and *Siddha* traditions. *Saiva bhakti* is a

pluralistic doctrine oriented towards dualism (God and Soul are different), while *Siddha* tradition stresses monism (God and Soul are the same). *Saiva bhakti* literary works are grouped as hymns and narrative texts, while the *Siddha* literary works are predominantly philosophical texts (Zvelebil, 1973, p. 200).

Saiva bhakti plays an essential role in Tamil people's religious, social, and cultural life. To a great extent, contemporary Tamil culture is still based on the *bhakti* movement of medieval times. S. Vaiyapuri Pillai speaks of *bhakti* as a “bloodless revolution”, an ideological reaction against the stabilisation of Brahmanical class-society in Tamil Nadu between the 7th-10th Centuries A.D. (Pillai, 1988, p. 100). *Bhakti* is a personal and emotional approach to God; the contact of the *bhakta* with god occurs outside the Brahmanical machineries of specialised/privileged institutions, knowledge of sacred texts, and rituals.

Zvelebil describes *Siddhars* as, poet-philosophers, astronomers, alchemists, mystics, healers, and who claim that they have achieved certain psycho-kinetic powers and other capabilities in the sphere of parapsychological phenomena (Zvelebil, 1973, p. 218). Zvelebil discusses three features typical for almost all *Siddhars* as a body of thinkers. First, *Siddha* opposed the idol-worship in temples. *Siddhars* valued the body as the temple of God and as a fit instrument for the soul in search of God. Second, in contrast to *bhakti* which emphasises devotion to God, the *siddha* emphasises *nanam* (knowledge), yoga practice, character, moral behaviour, and right conduct. Third, almost all *Siddhars* protested against caste and casteism; they denied religious practices and beliefs of Brahmanism.

During the 19th-century colonial period, a pan-India spirit of reformation of the Hindu religion prevailed. The Hindu mobilisation emerged as an ideological reaction to European domination and gave birth to what came to be known as ‘neo-Hinduism’ (Jaffrelot, 2009, p. 7). In Tamil Nadu, the reformation of Hinduism/Tamil *Saivism* began in the mid-19th century as a reaction to the colonial administration and Christian missionaries. Ramalinga Adigal (1823-1874), popularly called Vallalar, was a 19th-century iconoclastic Tamil religious figure who tried to preserve the monistic aspect of Tamil *Saivism* from its dualistic *bhakti* and Brahmanical ritualism. Vallalar charted new territory for *Saivism* in Tamil modernity, aiming to be more universalistic and monistic, which goes beyond the traditional *Saiva bhakti*. In his concluding years, he completely departed from the traditional *Saiva bhakti* to start a separate religious order, *Samarasa Suddha Sanmarga Sathiya Sangam* (Society for Pure Truth in Universal Self-hood), in 1872. The organisation propagates his central teachings of *sivakarunyam* (universal compassion) and *sathvicharam* (enquiry of our self and state of god). It works towards caste annihilation and poverty-hunger abolition. His ‘Saivite Universalism’ resonated with other modern reformists like Ram Mohan Roy and Swami Vivekananda. Vallalar’s Saivite-Universalism helped later thinkers formulate Dravidian/Tamil nationalism.

Maraimalai Adigal (1876-1950), a contemporary of Sarvarkar, strived to forge a Dravidian/Tamil nationalism which is ‘secular’ and ‘non-Brahmanical’ in nature. For his nationalistic project, Adigal wanted to recast Tamil *Saivism* as the religion of the Tamil people. He tried rationalising and “secularising” *Saivism* and eliminating its medieval Brahmanical ritualistic and *bhakti* doctrinal focus. In his “secularisation” process, Adigal emphasised Saivite heritage with Tamil history, culture, and language. In his Tamil *Saivism* recasting project, Adigal focused on two significant aspects. First, reversing the subordinate position of the Tamil language, literature, and tradition with the Sanskrit

language and tradition with the aid of colonial and missionary Orientalist philological works (Vaithees, 2015, p. 31). The second aspect of his Saivism recasting project is setting a contradicting relation between Tamil Saivism and Brahmanical Hinduism (Vaitheespara, 2009, p. 48). Adigal underscored that Tamil Saivism's recognition of the "reality of this world" (Universalistic Monism) had the potential for social reform, which neo-Vedantic Hinduism lacked.

The formation of the South Indian Liberal Federation (Justice Party) in 1916 was the starting point of the Dravidian movement. Under the 1919 Montagu-Chelmsford reform of diarchal administration, Justice Party took part in the presidential governance through direct election and formed ministerships during 1920-26 and 1930-34. The Justice party championed the social justice of non-Brahmin Tamils in colonial India. One of its pioneering reforms was the statehood of the temple and its properties, thereby ending Brahmanical hegemony in the religious sphere. In 1923, Madras Hindu Religious Endowments Act was passed by Madras Presidency, and subsequently, the Government constituted 'The Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (HR&CE) Board'. The creation of the board was an antecedent move towards the de-Brahmanisation/de-Sanskritisation of Tamil Saivism. In independent India, the board was modified as a department in 1960, and it controls more than 36000 temples.

In the 1940s, the Justice Party came under the leadership of Periyar E V Ramaswamy and his Self Respect Movement (SRM). Periyar transformed the Justice Party into a social organisation *Dravidar Kazhagam* and withdrew it from electoral politics. Periyar's SRM transformed Adigal's conception of Dravidian/Tamil nationalism into a populist movement. Periyar discredited the elitist ideology of Tamil Saivite revivalism and introduced rationalism, atheism, and secularism ideologies which attracted large subaltern social groups - women, Sudras, and Dalits which turned into a populist force (Vaitheespara, 2009, p. 46).

The atheistic detour of Tamil/Dravidian nationalism ceased with the coming of *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (DMK) in the Tamil political arena of Independent India. The DMK used SRM's subalterns and Muslim mobilisation under broader non-Brahmin Tamil identity and supplemented it with a form of non-Brahmin Tamil religiosity for its electoral gains. Since the 1950s, the DMK softened its stance on rationalism and atheism; meantime, it put forth a religious disposition of self-critical and tolerance. In 1967, C N Annadurai (Anna), the founder of DMK, noted: "I was always pleading for real faith in God", and "One Humanity One God" was made as DMK motto (Ramanujam, 1967, p. 250).

"It is in the smile of the poor; we see God." a *Manikkavacakar* - *bhakti* poet-saint quote is another often repeated rhetoric of Anna towards welfare and social justice policies. Anna's religious stance resonated with *Siddhar Tirumular*'s monism, Vallalar's Saivite-Universalism, and Adigal's rational-secular Tamil religion. M Karunanidhi, Anna's successor, followed the same stance on religion. Non-Brahmin religious leaders endorsed the Dravidian movement's reinvented religiosity of self-critical and tolerance. In 1970, when the DMK government brought in Archakas Act, legislation validating any Hindu, irrespective of caste, could become a temple priest, faced strong opposition from the Brahmins.

The high socioeconomic indicators of Tamil Nadu can be attributed to the pro-poor welfare policies of the Dravidian Movement, which is based on the religiosity of universalism, monism, and secularism. In 2021, DMK under M K Stalin, after forming the government in Tamil Nadu is, striving to strengthen the Dravidian Movement's distinct religiosity against the *Hindutva* pan-India homogenisation process. In

this regard, some of the temple reforms undertaken are: appointing non-brahmin priests, opening priesthood for women, underpinning Tamil *archanas* (liturgy) in many *Tirukovils* (temples), and overhauling the administration of the HR&CE department. It has also proposed establishing the Vallalar International centre, which aims to honour and propagate his teachings of compassion, charity, and divine practices.

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