



V. Ravi Vaithees, *Religion, Caste, and Nation in South India: Maraimalai Adigal, the Neo-Saivite Movement, and Tamil Nationalism 1876-1950*

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In *Religion, Caste, and Nation in South India*, V. Ravi Vaithees explores the religious roots of Tamil nationalism and the Dravidian movement through a critical examination of the life and career of Maraimalai Adigal (1876–1950), whose life not only intersected with the pioneer figures in the neo-Saivite and Dravidian movement but also who played a central role in consolidating the intellectual and cultural foundation for non-Brahmin Tamil nationalism and the Dravidian movement. The book advances the argument that it was the anti-Aryan, anti-Brahmin character of Tamil nationalism and the Dravidian movement to the Neo-Saivite movement that was firmly grounded in ancient Tamil and bhakti poetry and Tamil Saiva Siddhanta tradition (14). In highlighting the neo-Saivite revival that played a significant role in shaping the character of Tamil nationalism and the Dravidian movement, Vaithees at a larger lever questions the “logocentric” assumptions of cultural solidarity across heterogeneous people and invites his readers to appreciate the role of religion at the grassroots level.

The book is organized into an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. Through the introduction, the author provides the framework for the entire work demonstrating how anti-Aryan and anti-Vedantic imperatives informed the reimagining and reconstruction of a non-Brahmin Tamil nationalism. The first chapter, “Framing the Neo-Saivites Revival in Tamil Nadu,” situates the neo-Saivite movement within its historical context discussing the various responses, intellectual, sociocultural, and religious, to the colonial impact and impacts of European Orientalists and Missionaries. Through the discussion of the life and contributions of various pioneers, it becomes obvious that there are two key intellectual developments that shaped and paved the way for the neo-Saivite revival movement: the philological researches of South Indian languages emphasizing the primacy of the Tamil language counter to Sanskrit and Indo-Aryan languages; and that Tamil Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta was the unique product of the Tamil Dravidians and not as an integral part of the Pan-Indian Hindu tradition (26-7). Importantly, it was the work and writings of early neo-Saivite pioneers that shaped the neo-Saivite revival, and the person who interacted

with these figures and contributed towards the Saiva Siddhanta revival in the colonial public sphere was Maramalai Adigal.

Chapter two, “Maramalai Adigal and the Naveenar (Modernist) Saivite Revival in Tamil Nadu,” closely examines the life and career of Adigal to reconstruct the Tamil neo-Saivite movement and to assert the central role Adigal played in forming the non-Brahmin Tamil nationalism and early Dravidian movement. In his inspirational essay, *Tamil Nattavarum Melnattavarum* (Tamils and the Westerners), Adigal critiques Brahmins and Brahmanical Hinduism. Apart from this, he was influenced by Christian theological works, especially of Cardinal Newman, which proved useful for Adigal’s reinterpretation of Saiva Siddhanta.

Chapter three, “Theorizing the Naveenar Saivite Revival: Reinscribing Religion as Nation,” analyzes and theorizes the strategies with which Adigal’s revival reinforced non-Brahmin Tamil religion and the formation of Tamil nationalism grounded in Saivism. The Naveenar and their Saivite contemporaries corroborates three things: first, the Saivite contemporaries were witness to the emergence of a movement from within their midst and influenced to some extent by the mid-1920s; second, the contemporaries understood these Naveenar’s to represent a distorted Saiva tradition, not the “authentic” tradition; third, it reveals the strategies and methods through which Naveenar’s reconfigured and re-inscribed Saivism as Tamil nation with its own language, history, and in their re-imagination and redefining Tamilness as non-Brahmin, and in that process excluding the Tamil Brahmin (224).

Chapter four, “Forging a Tamil Nation: The Politics of Language, Race, Caste, and Gender,” demonstrates how language, literature, and literary history was central to Adigal’s reimagination, reconstruction, and historicization of the Tamil and his articulation of neo-Saivite movement as a “secular” non-Brahmin Tamil nationalism. Vaithees observes that Adigal’s neo-Saivite movement had three objectives: conflating Tamil with Saivism and Tamil literature with Saiva literature; his reading ancient Tamil literature enabled him to reconstruct and historicize the Tamil and Saivite past; and he capitalizes on ancient Tamil literature as the ground for radically regenerating Tamil nationalism. These objectives transpired in his vision of caste, gender, and race in Tamil society as he envisioned a casteless society that was congruent with the progressive European thinkers of his days and promoted by mystical figures of Tamil-Saivite and Siddha traditions.

Despite the ambivalence in Adigal’s vision of caste, gender, and race, he aspired to counter the extremely divisive hierarchical caste and gender discrimination in Tamil society of his time. Precisely, then, Adigal’s reconfiguration, reinterpretation, and articulation of Tamil nation drawing from different literary sources was revolutionary. The concluding chapter, “The Promise and Legacies of Non-Brahmin Tamil Nationalism,” Vaithees confirms that Adigal’s reimagining and reconstructing of Tamil national consciousness was deeply steeped in Tamil Saivism and ancient Tamil literary tradition rather than in line with neo-Vedantic Hinduism. It becomes apparent from Adigal’s life and contribution that the template for Tamil modernity was based on Christian missionary critique of Brahmanism and caste society. This study does not only present the layers of influences of European and Tamil thinkers that shaped the neo-Saivite movement, but also informs the new discourse on Tamil Language, literature, and literary history interspersed with neo-Saivite movement poses an ongoing challenge to the Dravidian movement.

Religion, Caste, and Nation in South India is a serious scholarly work that significantly contributes towards a historical understanding of the formation of the powerful non-Brahmin Tamil nationalism that plays a significant role in the cultural politics of the region. Vaithees inclusion of diverse literary sources and attention to details makes the volume a useful resource. Though the focus of the volume is the life and works of Maramalai Adigal, the study succeeds in providing insight into larger milieu concerning the construction of non-Brahmin Tamil nationalism and the neo-Saivite movement.

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