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The Saiva Dravida Nation:
Maraimalai Adigal and the Transformation of the
Nation-Religion-Language Framework
A Summary of Doctoral Thesis

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Basic Outline of my Research: Problems and Hypotheses

On March 6, 2018, senior BJP leader H Raja tweeted that the statue of the iconic Tamil nationalist EV Ramaswami Naicker (commonly known as Periyar) would be razed down in Tamil Nadu, following the razing down of a statue of communist revolutionary Vladimir Lenin in the state of Tripura. The situation quickly escalated following that tweet. All the major political parties of Tamil Nadu, including the largest one, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (Dravidian Progress Federation) demanded action against the senior BJP leader by the central government (Sivakumar, 2018). Hours later, in the town of Vellore in Tamil Nadu, a BJP secretary and some of his relatives stoned a Periyar statue (India Today, 2018). The next day four men from an organization known as the Dravida Viduthalai Kazhagam (Dravidian Freedom Organization) cut the sacred threads of some Brahmins in Mylapore (Kannan, 2018). These incidents serve illustrate of the emotional impact of the Dravidian nationalist movement on the politics and people of Tamil Nadu even today, over a century after it began. The political parties of Tamil Nadu still emphasize Tamil national pride, and EV Ramaswami Naicker is still revered as an icon by a large section of the Tamil Nadu populace. During this emotional time in both Tamil Nadu and Indian politics, it is worth examining the intellectual framework of Tamil nationalism and the cluster of ideas that went into building that framework.

Various freedom and independence movements arose in India during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Most of these movements promoted some or other idea of nationalism, usually revolving around ethnic or religious identity. One such nationalist movement which arose in India during the twentieth century was the Dravidian movement. It aimed to create a separate Tamil state during the first half of the twentieth century. A rationalist, anti-brahmin ideology would emerge as the defining feature of this movement. Brahmins were considered a foreign element in the Tamil nation, who have corrupted it with their Hindu religion, Sanskrit language, and caste system. Although this movement began in the early twentieth century, and became well known and popular during that time, the intellectual beginnings of this nationalism go back to the late nineteenth century, to certain intellectuals who were followers of the Saiva Siddhanta tradition in Tamil Nadu[1]. These intellectuals weren't explicitly propagating nationalism, but were instead calling for a religious and cultural revival. These Saivite

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[1] VAITHEESPARA, Ravi. **Maraimalai Atigal and the Genealogy of the Tamilian Creed**. 2009, n° 14, p. 45.

intellectuals began to recast Saiva Siddhanta as a Tamil religion, the religion of the Tamil nation. In this reformulation, Saiva Siddhanta became the quintessential religion of Tamil Nadu[2]. Shiva was reinterpreted as the primary Tamil deity, making Saiva Siddhanta a sort of Tamil Monotheism in the hands of these Saivite nationalists[3]. In the process, many of the traditional guru traditions in Tamil Nadu such as the Kanchi Paramacharya tradition were rejected as foreign, Aryan elements in Tamil Nadu society. In addition, the entire corpus of Puranas and Itihasas, as well as Sanskrit rituals were derided as Aryan and false[4]. In contrast, Tamil bhakti poetry and songs directed towards Shiva and Murugan were considered part of Tamil culture. Within the Tamil religion of the Saivite nationalists, Vishnu and his avatars become Aryan gods who have no place in Saiva Siddhanta[5]. By the second decade of the twentieth century, this Neo-Shaivite revivalism had given way to a politicized, rationalist Dravidian movement that sought to completely remove Brahmin influence on Tamil culture as well as Hinduism (which it saw as a Brahmanical religion) from Tamil Nadu. By the late 1930s, the Dravidian nationalists began demanding a separate sovereign state for the Tamil speaking people. One common thread that united both the neo-Shaivites and the Tamil rationalists was their opposition to what they saw as Brahmanical traditions and Brahmin influence in Tamil Nadu.

Another common thread throughout the various phases of Tamil nationalism was the emphasis on language purity. For example, Maraimalai Adigal, a prominent Saivite nationalist, was alarmed by the fact that Sanskrit words, and words from other Indian languages were getting mixed with Tamil.

Statement of the Research Problem

The central problem this paper will tackle is how did the Tamil Saivite nationalists understand the concepts of nation and religion and how did they relate these concepts to one another and to language. This problem can be further subdivided into parts. Firstly, what was religion to these Saivite intellectuals? More specifically, how did they conceptualize Saiva Siddhanta as a religion. Secondly, how did the Saivite nationalists understand the idea of nation? What makes Tamil speakers into a nation? Why didn't they consider Brahmins as a part of the Tamil nation?

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[2] *Ibid.*, p. 46.

[3] BERGUNDER, Michael, FRESE, Heiko et SCHRÖDER, Ulrike (dir.). **Ritual, caste, and religion in colonial South India**. Halle : [Wiesbaden] : Verlag der Franckeschen Stiftungen ; Harrassowitz in Kommission, 2010, p. 39. (Neue Hallesche Berichte ; n° Bd. 9). ISBN 978-3-447-06377-7.

[4] ADIGAL, Maraimalai. **Maraimalaiyam - 29**. 2ᵉ éd. Chennai : Tamilmann Pathipagam, 2015, p. 215.

[5] ADIGAL, Maraimalai. **Maraimalaiyam - 33**. 2ᵉ éd. Chennai : Tamilmann Pathipagam, 2015, p. 147.

Thirdly, how did the Tamil Saivite nationalists link religion and nation? What makes Saiva Siddhanta a Tamil religion? Why didn't the Tamil nationalists see other traditions that have been practiced in Tamil Nadu for centuries, as Tamil religions? Finally, how did the Tamil nationalists link both religion and nation to language? Why did they want a pure Tamil divested of Sanskrit words?

My Hypothesis: The Cultural Migration and Distortion of Ideas

Prior to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, there seems to have been no nationalist movement in either India or Tamil Nadu. Indeed, the idea of a nation itself seems to have been introduced by Europeans into India[6]. In the paper *Liberal Political Theory and the Cultural Migration of Ideas: The Case of Secularism in India*,(2011), Jakob De Roover points out that all cultures have their commonplace ideas. A topos is a particular kind of commonplace idea that has been developed into a theory or hypothesis by a thinker. A collection of such topos is called topoi. An important feature of topoi is that they are not isolated ideas but a cluster of interrelated ideas[7]. Jakob De Roover also points that when the topoi of one culture migrates to another culture, these migrating topoi are interpreted using the topoi of the culture they migrate to. When this happens, there is bound to be some distortion of the migrating topoi, because the native culture lacks the conceptual framework to make sense of these ideas[8].

Nation is one such idea that is an example of a topos in Western culture. So is religion. Many European thinkers linked religion and nation together along with language. It is the framework of Christian theology that gives coherence to the ideas of nation and religion and allows thinkers to link them together along with language to form a concept triad[9]. To put it another way, the concepts of nation and religion are part of the topoi of Christian theology. My hypothesis is that when the concept triad of nation-religion-language migrates to Tamil Nadu, it is bound to get distorted because the people of Tamil Nadu lack the background Christian theological framework to make sense of this concept triad. I propose that this is indeed the case.

Structure of the Paper

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[6] IRSCHICK, Eugene. **Politics and Social Conflict in South India- The Non-Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916-1929**. 1re éd. London : University of California Press, 1969, p. xiii. ISBN 69-31595.

[7] DE ROOVER, Jakob, CLAERHOUT, Sarah et BALAGANGADHARA, S. N. **Liberal Political Theory and the Cultural Migration of Ideas: The Case of Secularism in India**. *Political Theory* [en ligne]. Octobre 2011, Vol. 39, n° 5, p. 578. DOI 10.1177/0090591711413545.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 583.

[9] KEPPENS, Marianne, ROOVER, Jakob De et KEPPENS, Marianne. **Orientalism and the Puzzle of the Aryan Invasion Theory**. *Pragmata: Journal of Human Sciences*. 2014, Vol. 2, n° 2, p. 2-3.

My paper contains a total of five chapters divided into two parts. The first part contains the first two chapters, while the second part contains the next three chapters. The first part examines the nature of the framework that allowed European intellectuals to link Nation, Religion, and language. It then looks at how the Europeans studied India through this conceptual lens.

The first chapter of my paper is about how the concept triad of nation-religion-language developed within European culture, specifically looking at the framework that allowed philosophers and theologians to postulate an inextricable link between the three. I trace the origins of the concept triad back to writings of the early Church fathers and the Tower of Babel account. The event at Babel was seen as the fracturing of one humanity speaking a common language into multiple nations each with their own tongue. However, nations were not only identified on the basis of their language but also religion. The fracture of one language into many languages also represents the fracture of the original revelation of God into idolatry and false religion. I briefly trace the history of European theologians trying to recover and recreate the language spoken in the Garden of Eden. These theologians thought that access to the primordial language of humanity would provide them access to the uncorrupted revelation of God. I then specifically analyse the writings of Johann Herder, since he was one of the first intellectuals of the early modern period to write in detail about the concept of nation and its relationship with religion and language. It becomes clear that it is Christian theology that provides the conceptual framework that inextricably links together the idea of nation with religion and language. Without this framework in the background the concept triad would fall apart.

The second chapter looks at how European orientalists tried to understand India by applying the nation-religion-language framework onto the people they encountered in India. This chapter examines how the discovery of the relationship between Sanskrit and the European languages led to the idea of an ancestral Aryan nation from which both Europeans and Indians are supposedly descended from. The Brahmins of India were thought to be the direct descendants of an Indian variant of the Aryan race or nation. The concept of the Aryan nation is coherent only if one relates nation to language and religion. The Indo-Aryans are a people because they follow an ancient Vedic religion, the predecessor to Hinduism and they share a common language, Sanskrit, which the Europeans saw as the sacred language of the Hindu religion. Hence, why many orientalists referred to the Indo-Aryans as the Vedic people or the Hindu nation.

The second part of my paper comprises the meat of my arguments. In this section, I once again raise the questions and problems that I raised at the beginning of this essay and put forward a hypothesis that answers these questions and problems that I raise. The third chapter is about the development of the idea of a Dravidian nation. The discovery of a South Indian or Dravidian language family in the nineteenth century, separate from the Indo-European language family, led to the theory of a Dravidian or South Indian nation. These Dravidians were thought to be the indigenous population of India who were subjugated and absorbed into the caste system of the Aryan nation (who were thought to be foreign invaders) as the lower castes. The fourth chapter gives a brief historical overview of the political and intellectual beginnings of Dravidian nationalism and separatism. During the late nineteenth century, many non-brahmin Tamil speakers in the Madras presidency began to see themselves as a separate nation from the rest of India with their own unique religion. This was the intellectual beginnings of what would later flower into the Dravidian nationalist movement. Many of these non-brahmin intellectuals were followers of Saivism, specifically the Saiva Siddhanta tradition. They claimed that Saiva Siddhanta was the original religion of the Tamil nation, and rejected any tradition connected to the Sanskrit language and Brahmins as foreign and Aryan. The fifth chapter specifically focuses on the writings of the Tamil Saivite ideologue Maraimalai Adigal, one of the most prominent intellectuals of that time period. This paper raises the following key questions regarding the intellectual foundations of Tamil Saivite nationalism: How did Maraimalai Adigal understand the concepts of nation and religion? How did he connect each of these concepts to each other and language? Finally, how did his understanding and interrelation of these concepts differ from that of the Europeans? The last question is the most important one. If Adigal's understanding of these concepts is fundamentally different than that of European intellectuals, then it shows that these Tamil intellectuals were using a completely different conceptual framework than the one used by European intellectuals to understand the various groups and practices encountered in Tamil Nadu. This means studying the manner in which the Tamil intellectuals connected the concepts of nation and religion with each other and language will give us an insight into the cultural framework they were operating under. Understanding the native cultural framework in turn, will allow us to view the social structure of Tamil Nadu society through the lens of this framework.

Results/Conclusion of the Research

Maraimalai Adigal's writings on nation and religion, and the manner in which he relates the two together and to language, shows a fundamental distortion of the European conceptions of nation and language. Adigal maps the concepts of religion and nation onto native cultural concepts he is familiar with; matham and jati[10].

Unlike the Semitic religions, mathams are not a set of laws and teachings gifted by God to humanity, but man made traditions that are supposed to take the follower of that matham towards a particular goal or end state. In the majority of the Indian traditions, this end state is usually some form of happiness. In traditions such as Saivism and Vaishnavism, the experiential state called bhakti is the means through which this happiness is attained. This fundamental difference between the two phenomena (matham and religion) is also demonstrated by comparing the European intellectuals and Maraimalai Adigal's views on the role of language in preserving religion.

Adigal puts great stress on the importance of preserving Tamil in its pure classical form without any loan words from Sanskrit or other Indian languages. But his reasoning behind doing so was completely different from European theologians . For example, the Kabbalist Abulafia lamented the corruption of the original Hebrew because he thought of it as the sacred proto-language whose conventions had been established between God and the prophets. He feared that the corruption of the original Hebrew meant the corruption of the original revelation of God. For many European theologians it was religion that provided the foundation for the political constitution, ethics and laws of a nation (). The corruption of one's national language meant the corruption of the pillars of nationhood. Adigal on the other hand emphasizes the preservation of classical Tamil because it is the language of classical Tamil poetry including Saivite bhakti poetry. Since bhakti is an experiential state that is evoked through certain emotions, and the Tamil bhakti poetry is designed to stimulate such emotions, the grammar and phonetic structure of classical Tamil plays an important role in conveying the various emotional states associated with the experience of bhakti.

Maraimalai Adigal also mapped the concept of nation onto jati. Although my research doesn't delve into the structure and function of jatis in India, we can safely say that they are a social grouping (along with kulla and kutumpa) whose members follow a specific set of

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[10] Commonly translated as religion and caste respectively

practices. It is important to keep in mind that belonging to a jati is a fine grained affair. One is not obligated to follow any practice in order to be a Brahmin. No single tradition or practice is the monopoly of one caste. At the same time certain traditions are more closely identified with a certain jati than other traditions. Each jati has its own unique set of rituals and practices that differentiate it from other jatis. These practices cover various social domains, including food habits, festival celebrations, marriage rituals as well as specific matham practices. Although no matham was restricted to a particular jati, certain jatis became strongly associated with a particular matham because a large proportion of members of that jati were followers of that matham and certain guru lineages are linked to specific jatis.

I wish to end this conclusion by briefly summarizing the process by which Maraimalai Adigal mapped the concept of nation onto jati. In his attempt to portray Saivism, specifically Saiva Siddhanta as the religion of the Tamil people, Adigal is confronted with the fact that Tamil Nadu is made up of numerous mathas as well as numerous jatis, who don't see themselves as one Tamil nation. However, because Maraimalai Adigal equated the term religion to matham, and since many Saiva Vellalas were well known for their adherence to Saiva traditions including Saiva Siddhanta, he describes Saiva Siddhanta as the Vellala matham. In Adigal's account, the Saiva Vellalas become not merely one of many jatis that litter the landscape of Tamil Nadu, but the original inhabitants of Tamil Nadu from whom the original Tamil religion originated. The Tamil word Vellalar comes from the root word Vellanmai, which means farming. Based on this etymology, Maraimalai Adigal claims that the Vellalas were once farmers. Adigal writes that agriculture is a precondition for any civilization, and hence Vellalas were the progenitors of the Tamil civlilization (). From the initial population Vellalas or agriculturists, arose the Kings, intellectuals, business and tradespeople, the social classes as defined by the Tamil text Tolkappiyam.

It was from these Saiva Vellalas that all the other jatis of Tamil Nadu emerged, thus making them the original Tamil people. In Adigal's eyes this makes the Tamil nation synonymous with the Vellala jati. Thus, in the process of describing the Tamil matham as the Vellalar matham, Adigal transforms the meaning of the term nation as well, by mapping it onto the concept of jati.

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