

Maraimalai Atigal and the Genealogy of the Tamilian Creed

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Contrary to later day perceptions, the Tamil-Saivite movement of the early 1900s played a major role in preparing the groundwork for the mobilisation by the radical self-respect movement of the Tamil vernacular public. Led by Maraimalai Atigal who recast, secularised and rationalised earlier forms of Saivism and Saiva-Siddhanta, the movement helped frame a new language of Tamil modernity and nationalism.

In the year 1928, Maraimalai Atigal penned a rather shrill and anxiously worded essay entitled “Caiva Camayathin Nerukkadiyana Nilai”¹ (The difficult and alarming state facing Saivism), warning of developments that posed a very grave threat to Saivism. The developments that Atigal was referring to were of course those posed by the emergence of E V Ramasamy’s (EVR) “rationalist” and “atheist” self-respect movement (SRM), which by now was no longer content to direct its ire solely against Brahmanism and caste but was beginning to turn its deadly iconoclasm on Tamil Saivism itself – to the very sacred marrow of Tamil culture – as the author would have it. Though the essay may be dismissed as just another from the desk of an anxious Saivite, what is remarkable about it is the sense of outrage and self-righteous indignation it conveys – one that stemmed no doubt from the author’s clear sense of horror at being suddenly and unexpectedly let down by the “self-respecters” – who, according to the author, were not only attacking the very foundation of their own movement but, more importantly, the very source of their own reformist moral and ethical vision.

There is then a deep sense of disquiet in the article as if the author was suddenly finding himself having to cry “foul”!² Among the arguments he presents in the article, what is perhaps most striking is his contention that if the self-respecters only cared to research and find “true” Saivism, they would find no contradiction between their reformist and radical vision and that of “true” Saivism. What Atigal appeared to be suggesting is that he saw no essential contradiction between what the SRM was calling for and what he, as the major proponent and propagandist of Saivism, had been fighting for all along.³

While it is easy to see in this episode, as many scholars have already done, the transition or supersession from what had been up to this point an essentially conservative and elite-led Tamil/Saivite revivalist project to one that gave rise to a much more radical and broad-based Tamil/Dravidian nationalist movement, there are certainly deeper questions behind this easy assumption of disjuncture or supersession that needs revisiting.⁴ What is then assumed, which this episode supposedly illustrates, is that the emergence of the SRM by the late 1920s was an entirely novel and distinct phase in the trajectory of the Tamil/Dravidian nationalist movement whereby the earlier more conservative and elite character of the Tamil/Saivite revival movement is superseded by the more radical and iconoclastic SRM led by Ramasamy. Perhaps more importantly, these scholars tend to suggest or at the very least imply that not only had the movement fundamentally changed but that from this point on, the earlier Tamil/Saivite

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revivalist current was pushed to the very margins of the movement. This current's rather conservative and elitist ideology was discredited, while the introduction of a new ideology broadened the appeal of the movement significantly and brought into the fold many social groups from the under-classes/castes.⁵

Saiva Siddhanta Revival: Unexamined

Beginning to emerge as we are from under the powerful shadow cast by the Dravidian movement on the scholarship of the period, it is imperative that we move beyond viewing the Tamil-Saivite movement as a distinct if not inconsequential early phase that was later completely eclipsed or transformed by the entry of Periyar and the SRM as contemporary scholars have often portrayed – but rather as laying an important groundwork for what followed.⁶ Symptomatic of this scholarly trend to conceptualise the Tamil/Dravidian movement as consisting of distinct phases has been a tendency to either ignore or downplay the earlier religio-cultural basis of the movement and to focus instead on the more radical and populist phase of the movement and restrict any explorations of its earlier history to its more “secular” antecedents. Thus the limited scholarly attention that has been devoted to the early roots of the Tamil/Dravidian movement has largely focused on looking at how Tamil language and history had been recast in opposition to Sanskrit as is evident from the numerous works that have been devoted to the “pure” Tamil movement. This, then, leaves the role that the Saivite and Saiva Siddhanta revival movements played in the Tamil/Dravidian nationalist movement for the most part unexamined.

One of the arguments put forward here is that this tendency to see the emergence of the “rationalist” and “secular” SRM as signalling a disjuncture or distinct phase fails to discern the complex relationships and underlying unities between the two phases of the Tamil/Dravidian nationalist movement. It also fails to take into account how the recasting of Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta played an essential role in the ideological and discursive formation of Tamil/Dravidian nationalism. It is this scholarly lacuna that I intend to attempt to explore in this paper by looking specifically at the work and writings of Maraimalai Atigal.

Although there were a great many individuals who contributed in laying the intellectual foundation for the Tamil/Saivite revivalist project, it is widely conceded that Maraimalai Atigal played a pioneering and key role in crafting its intellectual and discursive framework particularly through the Tamil medium.⁷ This paper will focus on exploring how Atigal recast and reinterpreted Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta as the quintessential Tamil religion. I argue that it is precisely through this redeployment of Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta that Atigal came to, in some sense, rationalise and “secularise” Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta and in the process frame a language of Tamil modernity and nationalism that ended up serving to displace and translate the Saiva and Saiva Siddhanta heritage on to a new conception of Tamil culture, history and language that had emptied much of its earlier ritualistic and doctrinal focus. This process of “secularisation” was a natural product of Atigal's redeployment and redefinition of the Saivite tradition with its emphasis on

literature, history and language so that the weight and meaning of the Saivite heritage was displaced on to Tamil history, culture and language.

Atigal's Recasting

To understand Atigal's recasting of Saivism it may be helpful here to briefly compare his deployment of Saivism with that of the radical 19th century Saivite figure Ramalingar Swamigal (1823-1874) who lived only a generation before him.⁸ Atigal's recasting of Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta was both similar and distinct from that of Ramalingar.⁹ The most striking difference was that Ramalingar's religiosity was clearly more practice-oriented and centred on disciplining the body and mind through fairly rigorous routines of self-abnegation and devotional practices whereas Atigal's appears to have focused more on an intellectual exploration and explication of Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta. Furthermore, though Ramalingar was critical of the excessive casteism, and ritualism of the more Brahmanical and Sanskritic traditions, he did not single out Brahmins or Brahmanism for critique as Atigal did, nor did he seek to fashion a discursive or ideological framework for Tamil/Dravidian nationalism. Despite his praise and encouragement of Tamil, Ramalingar did not reject Brahmins or the Sanskritic tradition but was quite comfortable working within a religio-cultural milieu that gave pride of place to the Sanskritic-Vedic heritage like many contemporary religious and literary figures of his time in the Tamil region – a point which Raj Gautaman has highlighted in his excellent work on Ramalingar.¹⁰ Thus a comparison with Ramalingar at one level, provides a useful entry point to help one to understand the kind of changes that may have produced Atigal and his redeployment of Saivism only a generation later. At the very least it may suggest ways to better theorise the kind of changes that produced figures like Atigal.

It is fairly apparent that Ramalingar, like many of his contemporaries, was clearly inhabiting a world where the imprints of a more medieval religio-cultural world had not been as thoroughly supplanted by the changes wrought by the British colonial and missionary impact – as was clearly the case during Atigal's time. U V Swaminatha Aiyer's autobiography¹¹ certainly brings out this aspect of the religio-cultural world of the Tamil region of the late 18th century right up until at least the 1860s. Iyer depicts this as a world where the traditional religious institutions such as the various Saivite maths (*matams*) still held great sway in terms of language and literary training. Even the culture of multilingualism had not entirely faded along with a literary and religious culture that continued to give pride of place to Sanskrit and the Vedic heritage. Furthermore, ethnic identities had not crystallised as strongly around particular monolithic vernacular identities as one begins to see by the 20th century. Thus it is clear that as we move from Ramalingar to Maraimalai Atigal, one can see a shift to a cultural politics that was focused on the development of an identity and subject formation that was centred on a sole vernacular “mother tongue” – a shift that Atigal helped crucially in bringing about.¹²

A Broader Conceptualisation

A helpful way to conceptualise such changes – changes which engendered and enabled Atigal's understanding and deployment

of Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta for his Tamil/Dravidian project is offered in the writings on religious change by Talal Asad and following him David Scott.¹³ Asad's focus on tracing historical changes in religious practices where he suggests different disciplinary practices and technologies for the "production of truth" in different historical periods is quite illuminating. Particularly useful is his broad conceptualisation of changes in "faith" practices from the medieval to the modern period where he suggests that the culture of medieval European Christianity which he believes was rooted in various social and disciplinary practices centred on disciplining the body (practices of pain and penance) gives way by the time of the reformation to an understanding of "religion" as above all a set of doctrines or belief system whose truth value subsequently gets opened up for debate in the emerging public sphere through the new "rationalities" thrown up by enlightenment and post-enlightenment thought. Asad then locates the contemporary understanding of religion as a transcendent and unchanging "essence" – something that is transhistorical and universal – to the impact of post-reformation history and its global spread through European expansion and colonialism. What I would like to argue here is that Atigal's understanding and deployment of Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta certainly signals a new understanding of Saivite practices as "religion"; one that matches Asad's conceptualisation of post-reformation understanding of religion.

One can perhaps then conceptualise the transition to Atigal's interpretation and understanding of Saivism as quite distinct not just from what Ramalingar's understanding but further removed from what had been practised in the Saivite maths of the 18th century.¹⁴ Atigal's interpretation and understanding of Saivism appears to have been very much influenced by what Scott depicts as typical of the new "rationalities" associated with "second empire colonialism" – where orientalist and Christian missionary discourses plays a crucial role.¹⁵ It is then hardly surprising that Atigal's central preoccupation had been to propagate the "truth" of Saivism through his recourse to these orientalist and missionary sources and its accompanying disciplines of reason, history and science. Asad's conceptualisation here also helps us to understand how Atigal's use of "enlightenment reason" and science did not so much help to "secularise" Saivism but rather served to displace its meaning onto Tamil language and history.

Saiva Siddhanta as *Tamilar Matam* (Tamilian Creed)

The recasting of Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta was then conducted through the new rationalities and the newly created public sphere and print culture that had emerged as a result of the colonial and missionary intervention. It was aimed at a broader and geographically diverse Tamil and English-speaking, reading public. The relationship that these revivalists maintained with the "traditional" institutions of Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta was at best complex and ambivalent. One can for the sake of clarity, delineate Atigal's own efforts at recasting Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta as centring on at least two significant though related interpretive moves. The first was on reversing the subordinate position of the Tamil language, literature and tradition in relation to the Sanskrit language and tradition with aid of the

newly rediscovered corpus of ancient Tamil literature as well as Christian missionary and orientalist scholarship. The second was on recasting Tamil Saivism especially in relation to and in contradistinction with what was then cast as the normative pan-Indian Hindu tradition loosely described as Brahmanical Hinduism whose doctrinal basis was generally identified with *Advaita Vedanta* – which Atigal often referred to derisively as *Mayavada*.

Deploying Tamil and Reversing the Status of Sanskrit

It was Atigal's expertise, particularly in the newly recovered corpus of ancient Tamil literary works, that had enabled him to join the select group of late 19th century pioneer Saiva Siddhanta revivalists, especially featuring Somasundara Nayakar. Atigal had first proved his mettle by cleverly defending Nayakar's interpretation of Saivism against his Vedantic opponents with his mastery of the newly rediscovered oldest Tamil work on grammar and poetics – the *Tholkappiam*. Thus Atigal had received his early training fighting on the side of the Saivites in the heated battles between the Vedantists, Saivites and the Vaishnavites that was gaining momentum by the latter part of the 19th century in the pages of the Tamil vernacular journals.¹⁶ The relative status of the Tamil language in relation to Sanskrit was crucial in these battles between the Vedantists and the Tamil Saivites.¹⁷ Valorising Tamil and substantiating a separate Tamil genealogy for Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta was seen as crucial by these early revivalists as they feared that Tamil-Saivism would simply be subsumed under the broader umbrella of an ascendant Brahmanical Hinduism – albeit as a minor variant of the pan-Indian Vedic and agamic Sanskrit tradition. The argument of the opponents was that even the existing body of theological and doctrinal works on Saiva Siddhanta in Tamil was simply a derivative of the pan-Indian Saivism based as it was on the Sanskrit Vedic and agamic tradition. It is against this background that one can understand the tremendous efforts Atigal expends in reversing the status of the Tamil language and tradition in relation to the Aryan-Sanskrit language and tradition with the aid of the newly recovered ancient Tamil literary corpus and the Christian missionary and orientalist scholarship. Atigal was not merely content with this but went on to rewrite the history of India so that now it was to the Tamil's and to the Tamil language that India owed the entirety of its high culture including Saivism. Atigal's major intervention as far as Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta goes was to give it not merely a strong Tamil genealogy but to infuse and inflect his interpretation of Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta with a literary and historical reading of it. He was able for example to identify for example an unchanging Tamil "essence" in Tamil literary history which he identified with Saivism and Tamil culture. An illustrative example of this is his work entitled "*Palanthamil Kolkaiyai Caiva Samayam*" (Saivism is essentially the way of the ancient Tamils).

Tamil Caivam in Relation to Brahmanism

Atigal's second major effort was directed towards recasting of Saivism in relation to and in contradistinction to Brahmanism. This involved at least two significant interpretive moves. One

was to construct a purely Tamil (non-Brahmin) origin and history for Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta – to present them as quintessentially a Tamilian product utilising both the newly recovered ancient Tamil literary corpus and western orientalist, historical, archaeological sources. In doing this he was in effect carrying forward the efforts of missionary figures such as G U Pope. Pope had put forward such a position much earlier in the introduction to his translation of the important Saivite work, *Thiruvacagam*. He had asserted:

The Caiva Siddhanta system is the most elaborate, influential, and undoubtedly the most valuable of all the religions of India. It is peculiarly the South Indian, and Tamil religion...Caivism is the old pre-historic religion of South India, essentially existing from Pre-Aryan times, and holds sway over the hearts of the Tamil people.¹⁸

What Atigal was engaged in was to confirm and consolidate Pope's line of argument through marshalling even more archaeological, historical sources from the writings of other western scholars in addition to the evidence he could draw from his own mastery of early Tamil literary sources.

The second aspect of this recasting was to read Tamil-Saivism as fundamentally at variance with the ascendant pan-Indian Brahmanical Hinduism and Vedanta – specifically targeting the “idealist” tradition of Vedanta as well as the excessive ritualism and casteism of Brahmanical Hinduism.¹⁹ Atigal was able to utilise a long list of Christian theological and western liberal scholars opposed to what was considered the idealist strands of Indian philosophy – which had become identified by the late 19th century, with Brahmanical Hinduism and especially with neo-Vedanta as its most sophisticated expression. Atigal's project then was directed at critiquing this “idealistic monism” of Vedanta and make the case for what he termed the “theistic pluralism” of Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta. It was a project that enabled Atigal to have many western scholars as backers.²⁰ In fact much of his recasting of Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta takes the form of a polemical attack on Vedanta and Brahmanical Hinduism. For example, writing long before the advent of the SRM in a lecture entitled “The Social Aspects of Saiva Siddhanta” Atigal sought to underline Saiva Siddhanta's recognition of the “reality of this world” and hence its potential for social reform in contrast to neo-Vedanta:

...It would not do to say with some of our extreme idealists that we the individuals souls...are so many sparks emitted by the blazing Divine fire...(or) we are that one pure, effulgent and indivisible spirit which involved itself in ignorance...by losing sight of its own real nature and identifying...with...Maya;...with the quasi Vedantists that all kinds of knowledge we possess...are false...No doubt it is all very nice to indulge ourselves in such an imaginative flight...but this momentary elevation of mind though airy and insubstantial gets itself after all weighed down to this earth by the necessities of our mundane existence...No philosopher, however idealistic...in expounding his favourite theory of illusion, can withstand the formidable attack of misery, poverty and disease...Instead of attempting to understand our real position in the struggle of life and trying our best to remove the evils and misery... it is of no use to talk glibly of everything as unreal or one and boast ourselves as stainless and sinless spirit of bright and pure intelligence.²¹

It is evident that Atigal here is drawing from many of the Christian and liberal critiques of Vedanta and Brahmanism of the time.

The fact that the critique is aimed specifically at Brahmins and Brahmanism is clear as he continues:

But strange it is that the very persons who uphold the theory of illusion or the unreality of the world are those who are the foremost in multiplying ceremonies and endless varieties of rites....strange it is that the very teachers who try their utmost to prove the unity of things are those who create interminable distinctions of caste, are those who hinder most heartlessly all our efforts to become united....Do they display all the splendours of their speech in the actions of their daily life? No, certainly not. We are even struck with wonder...when we see before our eyes the very same Idealists who speak about the unreality of the world working hard with unabated greed and ambition to accumulate money either by foul means or fair.²²

It is, then, such imperatives that help explain Atigal's recasting of Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta shorn off its more traditional agamic and ritualistic aspects that was as equally constrained by caste rules as the Brahminical tradition.²³ What is instead attempted in Atigal's recasting of the Tamil-Saivite and Saiva Siddhanta tradition is an attempt to forge a close connection between the more rational and secular spirit of the corpus of ancient Tamil literature such as the *Tholkappiam*, the *Thirukkural*, the Bhakti corpus and the Saivite and Saiva Siddhanta tradition.

Mastering the Tamil Vernacular Public

If Atigal's efforts at reinterpretation and recasting Tamil and Saivism through his numerous writings were remarkably brilliant interpretive moves in their own right, what made these ideas gain a certain level of popularity among the Tamil vernacular public were Atigal's ceaseless efforts to gain mastery of the Tamil vernacular public. Atigal had risen to prominence as the closest disciple of Somasundara Nayakar who was without doubt the greatest Saiva Siddhanta revivalist of the late 19th century in Tamil Nadu. Atigal's rise to prominence is clearly linked to his efforts to take the leadership of the Tamil-Saivite revivalist movement after the death of Nayakar and in essence to take Nayakar's mantle.²⁴ This served as a prelude to Atigal's founding of the much more prestigious and popular pan-Tamil Saiva Siddhanta umbrella organisation two years later in 1905 called the Saiva Siddhanta Maha Samasam (SSMS) (Great Association of Saiva Siddhanta).²⁵ The SSMS was clearly aimed at attracting a broader Tamil-Saivite educated public which at this time meant mostly emerging English educated members drawn from the dominant non-bahmin Tamil castes as well as some traditionally oriented Tamil-Saivite pundits. The novelty of its interventions and its debt to Christianity was certainly noted by some contemporaries including certain Christian missionaries.²⁶ While it sought patronage from a wide network of more traditional non-Brahmin

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elites including local zamindars and “little-kings” and heads of Tamil-Saivite matams, its primary constituency was clearly the emerging English educated members of the dominant non-Brahmin Tamil castes such as the Vellalars and Chettys.²⁷ Atigal’s role and leadership in such ventures as well as his numerous writings and publications ensured that by the second decade of the 20th century, Atigal had become an iconic figurehead for a broad-based Tamil-Saivite revival movement consisting of a significant number of scholars and activists, who though differing on finer points with Atigal, broadly agreed with and ardently espoused Atigal’s recast perspective on Tamil and Saiva Siddhanta. Atigal’s partnership with one of his most ardent early lay-patron and follower, the Tirunelveli Saivite, V Thiruvaramangam Pillai, the formation by the latter of the joint stock company, the Tirunelveli South India Saiva Siddhanta Kalaham, the establishment of the important Tamil-Saivite journal *Centamil Selvi* were important milestones in this story of Tamil-Saivite revival that had begun with Nayakar and blossomed under the shadow of Atigal by the mid-1920s.²⁸ The fact that Atigal’s recast Saivism was resisted from its inception from a segment of Saivites often described as the “conservative-Saivites” certainly attest to the boldness and novelty of its venture.²⁹

Radicalising and Nationalising Saiva Siddhanta

These different strategies of recasting of Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta together coalesced in Atigal’s hands then to produce a reading that was sharply different from its more medieval focus on ritual-action and practice. The emphasis was more on identifying an unchanging Tamil-Saivite essence that could be seen from the earliest Tamil works to the Tamil Bhakti corpus that encompassed widely differing texts such as the *Tholkappiam*, the *Thirukkural* or Manickavacagar’s hymns. Atigal clearly aimed to construct an inclusive Tamil nationalist discourse – especially that could encompass all non-Brahmin Tamils – which was clearly part of Atigal’s as well as his follower’s Tamil nationalist project and agenda. Shorn of its more ritualistic focus, Tamil Saivism in the hands of Atigal then came to resemble the much more iconoclastic dogma that Ramalingar Swamigal came to espouse in his later years – so much so that in inaugurating his own Saivite math (*matam*) and order, Atigal crafted its name after the name Ramalingar had used for his organisation. Atigal had named it the *Samarasa Sanmarga Nilayam* after Ramalingar’s which was called *Samarasan Veda Sanmarga Sangam* (society for pure truth and universal selfhood).³⁰ Not surprisingly Atigal had dropped the word “Veda” from Ramalingar’s original title. Among the goals of Atigal’s order were many of the radical reforms that had been proposed by Ramalingar. In the inaugural announcement of the new order which appeared in Atigal’s Tamil journal *Jnanacagam*, Atigal had written:

The philosophy and practices acceptable to all castes and all religions, ‘Sivakarunyam’ (Saivite compassion) and *Samarasa Sanmargam* (universal brotherhood) was emphasised and preached in later years by Ramalinga Swamigal. It is to spread these two philosophies everywhere, emphasised by Ramalinga Swami and to gather its followers that this order has been founded in the very name given by Ramalinga Swami, *Samarasa Sanmarga Nilayam*. This order’s founding guru is saint Tiruvalluvar and its latter day guru is Ramalinga Swami.³¹

Here, Saiva Siddhanta has been transformed from its much more ritualistic focus to a reformist church that could equally embrace the Jaina-inspired *Thirukkural* as well as the iconoclastic vision of the late Ramalingar Swamigal. The list of reforms that Atigal espoused for his order is also revealing in this regard. Among the list of items on the agenda were requests for funds for setting up of a huge library and printing press in the premises as well as calls for funds for setting up a Tamil university. Atigal had by this time accumulated a vast collection of predominantly English books which was to be an integral part of the collection. Atigal was also careful to acknowledge the generous patronage he received from important and wealthy figures constituting some of the elite and middle sections of the non-Brahmin Tamils in the inaugural announcement. Subsequent anniversaries of the founding of the Atigal’s math and Order were also celebrated quite lavishly as conventions or gathering and as forums for carrying out reforms within the Tamil/Saivite community. The pamphlet released at the 20th anniversary of the math which by this time had been renamed with a “pure” Tamil name of *Pothunilak Kalaham* (common association) is quite revealing in this regard. Again in setting out its goals and objectives the pamphlet reads much like a manifesto of Tamil nationalism. It begins by asserting:

The Tamil people of Tamil Nadu without following the sagely advice of their own Tamil sages, but following the *puranic* stories that came later are split into numerous castes, religions, habits and ways. They are now found strongly disunited and confused, having forgotten completely the ways of love and grace of their Tamil ancestors and without education or an investigative spirit...³²

Among the list of reform resolutions proposed and passed without opposition were proposals that call for reforms in almost every aspect of Tamil religious, social, cultural and family life. They addressed such issues as caste discrimination in temples, call for Saivite maths to sponsor Tamil and Saivism and to train members of all castes to perform the essential rituals, and the use of Tamil as opposed to Sanskrit in temple worship and rituals as well as the promotion of mixed caste marriages and widow remarriages.³³ In terms of reforms related to the Tamil language, the proposals included urging the “Chetty Nadu” “king” Annamalai Chettiar to give primacy to Tamil language at Annamalai University; to urge the Madras University not only to give primacy to the Tamil language at the university, but in all educational institutions throughout Tamil Nadu as well as to make Tamil a sole subject for the Bachelor of Arts programme at Madras University and all other universities and colleges in Tamil Nadu. A substantial segment of the announcement was also devoted to acknowledging the generous donations contributed by³⁴ the various heads of Saivite matams, zamindars and other significant donors from wealthy middle class backgrounds. The list of donors not only confirms the elite class background of Atigal’s sponsors but also the less known transnational dimension of his patronage network. Many patrons came from as far as Ceylon and Malaya. It was such themes and concerns that formed the basis of many of Atigal’s writings on Tamil, Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta. They find their clearest articulation in Atigal’s penultimate work on Tamil and Saiva Siddhanta entitled *Tamilar Matam*³⁵ (Tamilian Creed) which doubles up both as a Tamil nationalist manifesto

and a "Tamil Bible" where Tamils are not only offered a revised history of India in which they are the progenitors of the great ancient Indian civilisation but are also offered a guide book for the present based on their newly recovered glorious literary past.³⁶

Concluding Remarks

Given the tremendous work that had been put towards transforming and in a sense "secularising" Tamil-Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta tradition as a discursive platform for a reformist non-Brahmin Tamil community it is hardly surprising that Atigal and his supporters reacted with such outrage at the sudden attack launched by the SRM on the ideology and movement. One could also argue that without this elaborate effort at crafting a nationalist imaginary out of the Tamil-Saivite past it would have been challenging for the SRM or for that matter the Dravidian political parties that followed to so easily mobilise a "Tamil-vernacular" public. It is against this background that we need to read the

statement by one of Atigal's ardent followers in response to the SRM's attack on Atigal:

That the best parts of the SRM is derived from the blessed offering of the wise philosophical father Maraimalai Atigal is known to all Tamilians. If those who do propaganda work based on these blessed offerings are not grateful to its holy founder, their efforts would be as vain as the rain that falls on the sea.³⁷

The point here is not so much to insist on the similarity of the two movements or deny the revolutionary nature of the movement led by E V Ramasamy or even deny the fact that the SRM dramatically broadened the social base of the movement – but to interrogate more closely the possible continuities that lie beneath the revolutionary breach made by the "self-respecters" to the Tamil-Saivite revival movement. This exercise can be justified for no other reason than to interrogate and correctly assess both the radical possibilities of the movement began by E V Ramasamy and its possible limitations.

NOTES

- 1 The essay first appeared in the Tamil-Saivite journal *Senthamil Selvi*, 1928-29, Vol 6, pp 526-35. It was later published as a collection of essays titled *Uraimanik Kovai*. See, Maraimalai Atigalar, *Uraimanik Kovai*, Madras: The South India Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society, Tinnevely, 1983, pp 138-67.
- 2 It stemmed from the feeling that Atigal and his supporters felt that a movement that drew its main inspiration from their work was now betraying and abusing them. In the words of a contemporary Saiva Siddhanta revivalist, the Self-Respecters were "behaving like a man who after watering and caring for a tree then turns around and slices the roots of that very same tree". Cited in Venkatachalapathy, *Thiravida Iyakkamum*. p 19. Originally from an article by Alagiri Naidu in the journal *Sivanesan*, Vol 6, No 2, Sept-Oct 1932 (my translation).
- 3 In fact, he goes on to argue that they, the "self-respecters", have a greater chance of joining the cause of Saivism than those (conservative Saivites) falsely claiming to be the "true" Saivites – who were not only mired in caste and other evils but had no real clue as to the "real" philosophy and truths of Saivism.
- 4 Venkatachalapathy who had dealt with this subject earlier (the relationship between the Saivites and the Self-respect Movement) has been the one to perhaps most strongly present this episode as disjuncture or what he would term "supersession" by the self-respect movement of the Saivite movement. Written largely against the charge that the self-respect movement was a Vellalar-led movement Venkatachalapathy has gone to great lengths to depict the Saivite and the self-respect movement as entirely distinct movements. See, A R Venkatachalapathy, *Thiravida Iyakkamum Vellalarum* (Dravidian movement and the Vellalars) Madras: South Asia Books, 1994, p 17. It is not surprising that many progressive scholars have taken a similar position to highlight the radicalism and revolutionary nature of the movement led by E V Ramasamy and to deflect the common criticism that the entire movement was a "fanatical" movement led by the non-Brahmin elites. See for example, V Geetha and S V Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar*. Calcutta: Samya, 1999; M S S Pandian, "Notes on the Transformation of Dravidian Ideology – Tamil Nadu C 1900-1940, Seminar Paper on "Ethnicity and Nation Building", Centre for South and South East Asian Studies, University of Madras, (March 1994), 21-23; M S S Pandian, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil Political*

Present, New Delhi, Permanent Black, 2007. One notable exception has been the work of Sumathi Ramaswami, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1970*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997. However, despite her focus on the early religio-cultural basis of the movement, her central focus, however, appears to be in demonstrating the development of what she terms "Tamilpparru" (devotion to Tamil).

5 Ibid, p 45.

6 The paper also suggests that we need to interrogate the fact that the limited scholarship we have on the modern Saivite revivalist movement in Tamil Nadu has largely been undertaken from the perspective or vantage point of the self-respect movement. It has unfortunately led to a tendency to read the Saivite revivalist movement and its internal dynamics and conflicts as stemming directly in response to the self-respect movement. It leads to such easy claims that much of the impulse for reforms within the Saivite movement came largely in response to the self-respect

movement. Not only does this tend to ignore the radical potential within the movement as exemplified in the case of Ramalingar's use of the more Siddhar progenitors of the movement but perhaps more importantly fails to take into account the tremendous impact that colonial Christianity had made on the Saivite revivalist movement.

7 His central role was in providing a radical re-interpretation of Tamil language, history, Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta. In fact, one could argue that it was this radical recasting of Tamil language, history, Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta that was crucial in framing the contours of the Tamil/Dravidian nationalist project. Though there are a number of works that have looked at Atigal's role they have generally tended to focus on his role in recasting Tamil language and history and especially in his role as the father of the pure Tamil movement. Less attention has naturally been paid to the ways in which Atigal recast Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta for this Dravidian and Tamil nationalist project.

Review of Labour

Forthcoming (May 30, 2009)

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- 8 Ramalingar, popularly known as Vallalar in the Tamil country, began as a fairly conventional Saivite but in his later phase became an extremely radical spiritual figure who became well known for his social reformist views and for his extremely compassionate spirit. An excellent recent work on Ramalingar is by Raj Gautaman, *Kannudi Valakkam Ellam Mannudi Pochu...! C Ramalingam., 1823-1874*, Chennai: Thamilini, 2001.
- 9 The struggle between them over Ramalingar's hymns came to be known as the *Arutpa-Marutpa* struggle as Navalar could not accept Ramalingar's hymns on the same level as the work of the canonised Saivite saints. Atigal had not only defended the religious hymns of Ramalingar publicly early in his career against the successor of the more conservative wing of the Saivites, Arumuga Navalar – but was also clearly inspired by Ramalingar.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 U V Swaminatha Aiyar, *En Carritram (My Story)* Madras: U V Swaminatha Aiyar Library, 1982.
- 12 See for example the collection of essays in the IESHR special issued devoted to "Language, Genre and Historical Imagination in South India", *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Volume XLII, No 4, Oct-Dec 2005. Almost all the authors in the volume pose a sharp disjuncture between the modern and the pre-modern in terms of linguistic or ethnic identity. Though the similarities between Ramalingar and Atigal may lead one to view them in the same light it is imperative that one also note some of the more important differences. For example, though it is not difficult to discern that Atigal was quite inspired by Ramalingar's radicalism and humanism, so much so that he integrated many of his radical and reformist initiatives, it is important to note that this radicalism was interpreted and projected by Atigal as a return to the essential Tamil self – shorn of the corrupting influences of later Aryan accretions. Thus Atigal utilised this radicalism to both make his Dravidian project more inclusive and also to argue and project this radicalism as the inherent and unique property of the non-Brahmin Tamil civilisation. Ramalingar's radical vision by contrast was more universalist and lacked any concern with mobilising along purely ethnic lines.
- 13 See, especially, Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993 and David Scott, *Formations of Ritual: Colonial and Anthropological Discourses on the Sinhala Yaktovil*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.
- 14 Richard Davis' work illustrates well the traditional focus of Saiva Siddhanta on ritualism and practice. See, Richard H Davis, *Worshipping Siva in Medieval India: Ritual in an Oscillating Universe*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000.
- 15 Scott, *Formations*, p 146.
- 16 For example, Nayakar and Atigal often published in the Tamil/Saivite journal *Nagai Neelosanai* based in city of Nagapattinam in response to articles published by journals advocating a neo-Vedantistic or Vaishnavite position. One of the most hotly debated questions at this time was over the question of image worship that had been initially sparked by local adherents of the Brahmo and Arya Samajists in Madras. They reveal that these debates conducted in the vernacular journals were already responding to the religious and intellectual currents set off by the colonial and especially orientalist and Christian missionary impact.
- 17 Contesting the place of Brahmanical Hinduism in the Tamil region based as it was on an Indo-Aryan Sanskrit genealogy, a counter-discourse based on a rereading of Tamil language, religion and history was vital for reversing this hegemony.
- 18 G U Pope, *Tiruvachakam*.
- 19 What Atigal meant by "neo-Vedanta" was the then ascendant Brahmanical school of Hinduism that was based on the teaching of the medieval Hindu philosopher Sankara known as *Advaita Vedanta* (non-duality) which claimed that god and self are the world and one (Non-Dual) and the perception of their difference was in fact only apparent and unreal. The Tamil Saiva Siddhanta tradition, on the other hand, fell closer to the *Visishta Advaita* (Qualified Non-Dualist) school which gave the self and the world a greater sense of reality and difference. Atigal then saw in ancient Tamil writings and the principles and philosophy of Tamil-Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta a spirit and philosophy that was not only quite at variance with neo-Vedanta but also one that was based on the "reality" of life and the world.
- 20 Atigal had a range of western scholars and Christian missionaries who wrote approvingly of his work and also those he admired greatly such as the American philosopher William James. The Oxford professor F C S Schiller had written a foreword to his work on Saiva Siddhanta as a form of practical knowledge.
- 21 Pandit R S Vedachalam, *The Social Aspects of Saiva Siddhanta*, an address delivered at the Fourth Saiva Siddhanta Conference held at Trichinopoly, on the 29-31 Dec 1909, Madras: Vivekananda Press, 1910, pp 1-3.
- 22 Ibid, p 2.
- 23 I would like to thank T Ganesan and T N Ramachandran for confirming and pointing out this transformation of Saiva Siddhanta by figures such as Atigal.
- 24 His efforts to centralise and coordinate the work of all the various Saivite and Saiva Siddhanta organisations under the roof of Nayakar's former organisation now reconstituted as an umbrella organisation the Vedamoktha Saiva Siddhanta Sabha in the year 1902 was the initial foundation for these efforts.
- 25 Also known as the Saiva Siddhanta Conference, it became a grand annual function that attracted most of the prominent Saiva Siddhanta revivalists and Tamil elites from south India and Sri Lanka.
- 26 An interesting long review of the conference by the missionary, H W Schomerus, a scholar of Saiva Siddhanta and member of the local Leipzig Lutheran Mission, provides a useful window into how the new Saiva Siddhanta organisation was perceived by the larger public at the time. While describing the conference gathering, Schomerus had noted: "the large hall was packed to its utmost capacity...Brahmins were scarcely to be seen, no wonder since the Saiva Siddhanta has been from the beginning chiefly the philosophy of the Sudras." Schomerus went on to claim that when the missionaries present at the conference thanked the president for the courtesy extended to them, the president had replied: "On the contrary, it is we that should offer thanks to you, for it is none other but you missionaries that have caused this revival." Reflecting on the events of the conference, Schomerus wryly observed of the Saivites: "They endeavour to revive their religion in opposition to Christianity, but one sees they try to do it with the aid of thoughts and ideas derived from Christianity, which of course they will disclaim, but which is nevertheless a fact...Particularly the leaders are strongly influenced by Christian mysticism, as I had occasion to learn from talks with them, and from their writings." In the final section of his review of the conference, Schomerus explained the missionary stance towards the Saiva Siddhanta revival movement. He wrote, "we can only be glad of this revival" since, "it stirs up religious interest..." because it "combats the ever spreading atheism and the Vedantic monism and it strives to remove many an abuse; because this movement is a proof for the power of Christianity in the Tamil country; and chiefly because it will end in showing that Hinduism also in its best branches is not able to satisfy..." Emphasising this theme, he continued, "It is true, this movement sets its face against Christianity, but not less against the harmful monistic Vedantism. We can therefore, look at Saiva Siddhanta not only as an enemy, but also in a certain sense, as an ally." H W Schomerus, "The Saiva Siddhanta Conference at Trichinopoly", *Siddhanta Deepka*, Vol X, June 1910, No 12, pp 509-13.
- 27 See Thirunavukkarasu, *Maraimalai Atigal*, p 56.
- 28 This role of V Thiruvarangam Pillai (d 1944), the partnership between him and Atigal and the establishment of Saiva Siddhanta Kalaham in 1920, the launching of the Tamil-Saivite journal, *Centamil Selvi* in 1922 were hugely important to the revival and certainly merits further attention. See, Ravindiran Vaitheespara, "Caste, Hybridity and the Construction of Cultural Identity in Colonial India: Maraimalai Atigal (1876-1950) and the Intellectual Genealogy of Dravidian Nationalism", PhD, Dissertation, University of Toronto, 1999.
- 29 Atigal's career was certainly beset by a series of incidents where his work was severely criticised by a host of Tamil and Saivite scholars. There were at least two such incidents where it ended up in the courts. Many such criticisms were published in rival journals or as booklets.
- 30 The names of Ramalinga's order and their English translation is from Zvelebil. See Zvelebil, *Lexicon of Tamil Literature*, p 262. The reading of Ramalinga's order itself has been open to interpretation and has reflected the interests of the writers rather than Ramalinga's own vision. There has been a tendency to present him as similar to the mystical figures of the modern period in India such as Ramakrishna who are presented as proponents of neo-Vedanta.
- 31 Cited in Arasu, *Maraimalaiyadikal Valvum Panium*. Madras: Appar Achakam, 1974, pp 45-47. (Originally from *Jnanacagam*, Vol 6, No 1&2) (my translation).
- 32 This article entitled "*Pothunilaik Kalagham*", was probably first published announcing the 20th year celebration of his order in *Jnanacagam*. It is republished as part of a collection of essays by Maraimalai Atigal. See *Maraimalaiyadigal, Uraimanik Kovai* (Collection of Commentaries). Madras: The South India Saiva Siddhanta Works, 1983, p 1.
- 33 The proceedings of the convention including the reforms passed were published in 1937 in preparation for the 26th year celebration of the order. It is titled *Pothunilaik Kalagha Arikai* (The Notice of Pothunilaik Kalagham). It was first published as a pamphlet.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Maraimalai Atigal, *Tamilar Matam* (Tamilian Creed), Madras: SISSW, 1941 (first edition).
- 36 Atigal's own English translation of the title to his work *Tamilar Matam*, as Tamilian Creed instead of Tamilian Religion is quite revealing. His works on Saiva Siddhanta include, *Saivasidhanta Gnana Botham (1906)*, *Cathivetrumaiyum Policaiivarum (1911)*, *Kadavul Nilaiaku Marana Kolkai-kal Caiva Aka (1923)*, *Palanthamil Kolkaiye Caiva Camayam (1930)*, *Saiva Siddhanta as a Philosophy of Practical Knowledge (1940)*, *Tamilar Matam (1941)*.
- 37 He had also added "The Saivite religion does not at all contradict the objectives of the self-respect movement: The self-respect movement arose to liberate the Tamil people from the clutches of Brahmanism. The Saivite religion has the same objective; The self-respecters do not like the Aryan Brahmins. Similarly, the Saivites do not like them one bit; The self-respecters want to liberate the oppressed castes. The Saivites underlying objective is the same; The self-respecters feel that the Tamils should not have caste divisions among them, similarly the Saivite religion also earnestly urges the same. Why then disgrace and blame the Saivite religion and its hallowed Saivite saints?" Cited in Venkatachalapathy, *Tiravida Iyakkamum*. pp 20-21. Originally from article by M Balsubramania Mudaliar, *Siddhantam*, June 1928.