Extended Abstract: Keynote Address

Mono-Theo-Lingualism:
Religion, Language and Identity in Colonial South Asia—The Case of Tamil-Saiva Identity and Tamil Nationalism

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This paper explores the construction of Tamil identity and nationalism with the aid of insight from recent theoretical studies of religion and nationalism. It seeks to do so through a detailed analysis of the life and career of Maraimalai Atikal (1876-1950), who is not only hailed as the father of the pure- Tamil movement but was a central figure in the construction and articulation of Tamil identity and nationalism in the modern period. Less known is the fact that Adigal was also a major Saiva Siddhanta revivalist and that his life and career began to grow and flourish early after being inducted early in his life to the Saiva Siddhanta revivalist movement by one of the greatest pioneer Saiva Siddhanta revivalist of the time, Somasundara Nayakar. It was with Nayakar's passing in 1901 that Adigal utilizing Nayakar's mantle became a great instrument in the propagation of Saivam and Tamil. As the principal architect of the Neo-Saivite movement, Atikal played a central role in building the intellectual and cultural foundation for Tamil identity construction and nationalism. A close and detailed examination of his life and career sheds a great deal of light in our understanding of the role that the revival of Saivism played in the construction and articulation of Tamil nationalism. In other words how the revival of a form of Tamil Saivism was intimately linked to the construction of form of Tamil nationalism. The roots of this Neo-Saivite revival can be traced to the religious battles that began around mid-19th century between various Hindu revivalists currents battling for supremacy in the Tamil region, namely between the Neo-Vedantists, Vaishnavites and the Saivites. The principal battle was between the Neo-Vedantists who advanced a reading of Tamil tradition that was clearly from an Advaita Vedanta perspective that privileged the Sanskritic Vedic corpus and the Neo-Saivites who privileged the Saiva Agamas and more locally grounded Tamil Saivite Bhakti sources. This also became a battle about how to interpret the corpus of vernacular religious literature in Tamil, whether through the existing Neo-Vedantic perspective that was ascendant or through a more

locally resonant tradition that privileged the Tamil language and literature over Sanksrit. It is this Neo-Saivite revivalist current that was in the forefront in deploying the Aryan-Dravidian ideology first enunciated by colonial and Christian missionary Orientalism and the new rationalities introduced by colonialism to construct a form of Anti-Aryan non-Brahmin Tamil nationalism. Thus this Neo-Saivite revival was a novel phenomena that clearly had colonial and Christian missionary provenance. It was a form of 'religion-making' to use the term coined by the scholar of Sikh Studies, Arvind Mandair-- that deployed a new understanding of religion that was heavily reliant on a colonial and Christian missionary understanding of religion. The Neo-Saivite construction of Saivism constructed Saivism as an exclusively Tamil religion with a unique history and nation.

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 Adigal came to in some sense rationalize and 'secularize' 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 'secularization' was a natural product of Adigal'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.

The recasting of Caivam 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 and reading public. It drew inspiration, support and finance from a wider transnational Tamil public especially from Sri Lanka and the Malayan Strait settlements. The relationship that these revivalists maintained with the 'traditional' institutions of Saivism and Saiva Sidhanta was at best complex and ambivalent. One can for the sake of clarity delineate Atikal's own efforts at recasting Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta as centering on at least two significant though related interpretive moves. The first was centred 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 centred on re-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 or Advaita Vedanta—which Atikal often referred to derisively as Mayavada.

It is precisely through this redeployment or re-inscription of Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta in the language and image of modern western Christian religions of the time, a process some scholars have called 'religion-making' that was crucial in constructing a unique history, language and people for the emerging Tamil nation. This process of endowing and identifying the Saivite tradition with a unique 'race', language and a historical past has been described as embodying and replicating the "mono-theolingualism" of the West--whereby previously multilingual, and polytheistic traditions were recast in the mould of the contemporary Western emphasis on a monotheistic and monolingual identity .

Thus opening up and problematizing the category 'religion' in the colonial South Asian context and awareness of how key-religious reformers/revivalists sought to translate their tradition in the language and discourse of modern Christian West in a process Mandair describes as 'religion-making' not only enables a deeper exploration of South Asian 'religious' traditions and how they were shaped selectively -- foregrounding in the process certain tendencies in the local Indic traditions while obscuring others, they also challenge earlier conceptualizations of the colonial cultural encounter that were often based on a monolithic conceptualization of South Asian religious traditions. Such theoretical moves towards a deeper exploration of 'religion' and 'religion-making' in South Asia by illuminating the complex religio-cultural debates and contestations that took place during the process of 'religion-making' in colonial South Asia offers up a more persuasive model for examining how the intellectual and cultural foundations for a diverse range of often contending subjectivities, ethno-nationalist and identitarian movements were formed at the same time as the emergence and consolidation of a pan-Indian Hindu nationalist ideological/discursive formation. Such an analysis also provides one of the clearest historical examples of the relationship between social struggles, religion and nationalism that has been suggested in recent writings on religion, modernity and nationalism (Talal Asad, 1993; David Scott, 1994; Peter Van der Veer, 2001; Catherine Hall, 2002; Arvind-Pal Mandair, 2009; Timothy Fitzgerald, 2009, 2011;).They specifically help us understand the role played by prominent 'religio-cultural brokers' in shaping nationalist and ethno-nationalist subjectivities and movements in South Asia.