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Forging a Tamil caste:
Maraimalai Adigal (1876–1950) and the discourse
of caste and ritual in colonial Tamilnadu

Vedachalam Pillai (Tam. vētācalam piḷḷai), better known by his pure-Tamil name, Maraimalai Adigal (Tam. maṛaimalai aṭikaḷ, 1876–1950), was without doubt one of the most important ideologues of the Tamil / Saivite revivalist movement – a movement that went on to play a key role in shaping the Tamil / Dravidian movement that followed. Maraimalai's importance was not simply due to the fact that he was one of the earliest and most prolific crusaders of a novel brand of 'Dravidian' Tamil-Saivism, but also because his work and writings had an enormous influence in inspiring a whole generation of writers, activists and organizations for whom he was a central figure. Beginning to emerge, as we are, from under the powerful shadow cast by the Dravidian movement on the scholarship of the Dravidian movement it is imperative that we move beyond viewing the Tamil-Saivite movement as a distinct if not inconsequential phase, which was later completely eclipsed by the entry of E. V. Ramasami and the Self Respect Movement, as contemporary scholars have often portrayed it.¹ Rather, it laid important ground work for what followed. It is from such a perspective that I have argued elsewhere that Maraimalai's reinscribing of Tamil-Saivism – following Talal Asad's understanding of religion and modernity² – was central to his re-imagining and re-inscribing of Tamil Saivism as the Tamil nation, and his discourse on caste was an essential aspect of this broader secularizing process.

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 useful for understanding Maraimalai's recrafting of Saivism. Particularly useful is his broad conceptualization of changes in 'faith' practices, from the medieval to the modern, where he suggests that the culture of medieval European Christianity, which he believes was centered on various social and disciplinary practices centered 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

¹ See for example, Pandian 1994; Venkatachalapathy 1994.

² See, especially, Asad 1993.

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. I argue that Maraimalai's understanding and deployment of Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta (Tam. *caiva cittāntam*, Skt. *śaiva siddhānta*) as a form of Tamil nationalism certainly signals a new understanding of Saivite practices, one that matches Asad's conceptualization of post-reformation understanding of religion.³

Although best known simply as the father of the Pure Tamil Movement, it is important to note that this label often serves to mask the complex genealogy of Tamil / Saivites, such as Maraimalai, for whom Tamil consciousness and Tamil identity were inseparable from their commitment to a renewed brand of Tamil-Saivism. Maraimalai's practice and reinscription of Tamil-Saivism, then, was certainly different from that of his predecessors, such as Ramalinga Adigal (Tam. *irāmalinka aṭikaḷ*, 1823–1874).⁴ Most obviously, Maraimalai's re-visioning was very much inspired and influenced by certain strands of European and missionary Orientalist discourses that informed its anti-Brahmanism or Dravidianism. Put more simply, Maraimalai's revisioning was influenced by certain strands of what David Scott characterizes as the new European disciplinary and representational practices, typical of what he considers to be second empire colonialism.⁵

Not surprisingly, even such seemingly secular concerns as the question of caste hierarchy were central to Maraimalai's revisioning and reinscribing of Tamil Saivism, language and culture; it, therefore, makes its appearance in almost all of his writings. Before one considers how Maraimalai reimaged and re-negotiated the question of caste and caste hierarchy, it is imperative that we at least briefly rehearse the political and socio-cultural developments of his time, against which one needs to locate the impetus for much of his work and writings. As is now well known, by the late 19th century, the complex balance and accommodation between the Brahman and dominant non-Brahman elites in the Tamil region was clearly under strain. The underlying social conflict began to manifest itself not merely at the level of competition for 'loaves

³ See Vaitheespara 2009.

⁴ Although Ramalinga's revival beginning in mid-nineteenth century could itself be said to be influenced by new currents brought about by the colonial impact, it still operated very much within a vernacular public space less influenced by European Orientalist currents.

⁵ See Scott 1994: 146.

and fishes', but also, more importantly, at the level of 'culture'. The emerging pan-Indian nationalism was clearly founded upon a number of cultural movements that, for the most part, reimagined an 'Aryo-centric', neo-Brahmanical vision of India, which provided the 'ideology' for this hegemonic project. In the Tamil region, such a vision and ideology was closely associated with the Tamil Brahmins and, especially, the Smartha Brahmins who were considered the strongest adherents of the pan-Indian Sanskrit-Brahmanical tradition.

Though neo-Brahmanical revivalist movements were clearly ascendant at the time, there were other revivalist movements, which included Tamil-Vaishnavite revival movements as well as the much neglected Neo-Buddhist movement founded by C. Iyothē Thassar (Tam. k. ayoṭṭitācar, 1845–1914).⁶ Sharing some common ground with Maraimalai's movement was the Tamil-Saivite revival movement, which had begun earlier in neighboring Jaffna (Tam. yāḷppāṇam), and advocated a form of Tamil Saivite revival less hostile to the Sanskrit tradition. This more conservative stream of Saivite revival can be viewed as continuing a tradition of accommodation reached between the non-Brahman Saivites and the Brahman tradition by the sixteenth century.⁷ Such accommodation enabled the dominant non-Brahman Tamil caste, the Vellalars (Tam. veḷḷāḷar), to claim Sat Sudra (Tam. caṇcūttirar, "clean Sudra") status to distinguish and elevate themselves from the rest of the caste Tamils, who were all relegated to the Sudra (Skt. śūdra, Tam. cūttirar) category. This move enabled the Tamil Vellalars to lead and be heads of important Saiva Siddhanta monasteries (Tam. maṭam) in the region, which, by the early modern period, had gained reputations as important guardians and centers for the dissemination of Saiva Siddhanta and Tamil.⁸

Mostly referred to in the extant scholarship as the conservative Saivites, what distinguished them from Maraimalai and his followers was that they claimed, at least in theory, to embrace both the Vedic Sanskrit tradition and the tradition of the Saiva Agamas (Skt. āgama, Tam. ākamam) as equally important, just as they regarded Sanskrit and Tamil as equally divine languages; although it is difficult to deny, even here, that the Sanskrit tradition clearly held greater sway. Reflecting such accommodation, as well as the increasing sway of the Sanskrit tradition, was the highly Sanskritized form of Tamil that was quite prevalent by the early part of the 19th century called Manipravālam (Tam. maṇippiravāḷam, Skt. maṇipravāla). Clearly, by the late 19th century, such accommodation with the Sanskritic tradition was beginning to be seen, at least by a segment of

⁶ See, for example, the pioneering and excellent work: Aloysius 1998.

⁷ Prentiss 1996: 231–257.

⁸ Prentiss 1996: 231–257.

the non-Brahman intelligentsia, not so much as an accommodation but a gradual subversion and displacement of the original Tamil tradition. It is against such a socio-cultural background that we need to locate Maraimalai's work and writings.

To challenge and combat this rising hegemony of the Sanskrit-Brahmanical tradition, caste was an important vehicle for Maraimalai, just as it had been for his European missionary and indigenous predecessors.⁹ Caste, then, became the principal interpretive tool or explanatory device through which Aryan-Brahman hegemony and its alleged subversion of the Tamil tradition could be explained. It fell upon Atigal, who was fast becoming one of the most important and respected men of Tamil letters at the time, to further elaborate and fine tune what some of his predecessors, such as Reverend Robert Caldwell and Sundaram Pillai, had helped set in motion.¹⁰

Caste, then, informs or is an important subtext in most of Maraimalai's writings. The vast majority of his writings are devoted, not surprisingly, to reversing the claim of the Indo-Aryan or the Aryan-Brahman as the progenitor of the great Indian civilization and, instead, to claiming that honour for the Tamils or the Dravidians. Maraimalai relied particularly on his keen knowledge of ancient Tamil literary works to effect this reversal, using essentially a form of literary history to argue his case. His early commentaries on the ancient Tamil literary works, such as *Mullaipāṭṭu* and *Paṭṭiṇappālai*, both of which he published in book form, were used to present his arguments.¹¹ It was, however, the brilliant lecture, later published in book form, that he delivered at the fourth Madurai Tamil Sangam, in the year 1905, entitled *Paṇṭaikkāla-t-tamiḷarum āriyarum* (*Ancient Tamils and Aryans*) that really attracted a great deal of public attention, and brought him the reputation as a valiant champion of the non-Brahman Tamils against the 'Aryan-Brahmins'.¹² All the ingredients of his revised perspectives on Tamil and Indian civilization and history are already evident in this early essay. Although the arguments he offers are quite complex what is especially striking, even in this early essay, is the easy slippage between caste and nation in the work. Thus, the words Arya Jati (Tam. cāti, Skt jāti) are used often as a blanket term for all Indo-Aryans and the term Tamil Jati to mean all Tamils.¹³

⁹ The story of the Missionary-Orientalist genealogy of the Dravidian movement has been fairly well rehearsed in recent scholarship. See, for example, my earlier article on the subject, Vaitheespara 1999.

¹⁰ Vaitheespara 1999.

¹¹ See, for example, Maraimalai Adigal 1998.

¹² Maraimalai Adigal 1965.

¹³ Maraimalai Adigal 1965: 1–2.

If the vast majority of Maraimalai's writings on caste are either preoccupied with reversing the Indo-Aryan claim to superiority or simply condemning the evils of caste, Maraimalai also wrote a number of works where he offers a more systematic exposition of his views on the origins and evolution of caste. They are to be found in *Cātivērrumaiyum pōli caivarum (Caste Discrimination and False Saivites)*¹⁴ and *Tamiḷar nākarikam allatu vēḷāḷar nākarikam (Tamil Civilization or Vellalar Civilization)*¹⁵ and, to a lesser extent, in his last major work *Tamiḷar matam (Tamil Creed)*¹⁶. Maraimalai also returned to focus entirely on the subject of caste in his novel, *Kōkilāmpāl kaṭitāṅkaḷ*¹⁷, which depicts the precarious love affair between a former Brahman child-widow and a young Vellalar male against the background of determined opposition by members of the Brahman woman's family. Perhaps drawing from his own background as a child of an inter-caste marriage, Maraimalai manages to bring out, quite vividly, the every-day practices of caste discrimination set against the horrors and pathos of a caste-riven Tamil society, particularly as it gets played out in terms of family dynamics and gender relations, although, again, the predominant focus here is on the Brahman-Vellalar divide.

Taken together, it can be argued that Maraimalai's writings on caste sought to accomplish at least four major objectives. Firstly, reflecting his central preoccupation with displacing the Aryan-Brahman from the pinnacle of Tamil if not Indian society, Maraimalai sought to take back India from the Indo-Aryans and claim it as, essentially, a non-Brahman Tamil civilization. The central message is that it is to the non-Brahmin Tamils that we owe the high culture of India and not so much to the Indo-Aryan or Brahman. Secondly, Maraimalai sought to subvert the established order of the Varna (Skt. varṇa) hierarchy by dismissing as irrelevant or inappropriate the demeaning Sudra Varna category, to which all non-Brahman caste Tamils were assigned. Confirming this subversion of the established order even further, Maraimalai claimed for the Tamils the status as the originators of caste and offered up the system of caste as a peculiarly Tamil contribution to Indian society. Thirdly, Maraimalai re-fashioned and re-ordered the institution of caste in Tamil society on a new ethico-religious basis. Though positing the Tamil-Saivite Vellalar as the ideal counterpoint to the Aryan Brahman, he sought to subvert the Vellalar's ascriptive qualities and undermine the 'caste as essence' argument, so as to make the category Tamil-Vellalar much more broadly

¹⁴ Maraimalai Adigal 1957a.

¹⁵ Maraimalai Adigal 1975.

¹⁶ Maraimalai Adigal 1941.

¹⁷ Maraimalai Adigal 1957b.

inclusive. Fourthly, despite privileging the Tamil Vellalars in opposition to the Brahman, even as he sought to empty the 'Vellalar' of its ascriptive qualities, it is evident from his voluminous and passionate writings against the evils of caste that Maraimalai was primarily concerned with forging a unified 'Tamil-caste'. Despite privileging the agrarian-Vellalar as the natural ideal for his reimagined Tamil nation, it is important to note that he sought to open up membership into the Vellalar-fold to anyone who adhered to what he considered its ideals and ethics. The tremendous efforts that Maraimalai as well as his fellow activists expended on calling for reforms in temple administration, the administration of monasteries (Tam. *maṭam*) as well as in fashioning new 'pure-Tamil' or non-Brahman rituals that could be used by all Tamils without the use of 'Aryan-Brahman' priests for every day ritual practices such as marriage, death and puberty, also attest that Maraimalai's efforts were primarily aimed at forging a unified Tamil-caste that could resist and contest the alleged inroads and challenges posed by the Aryan-Brahmans.¹⁸

Reclaiming India: History of India as history of the Tamils

Subverting the practice of reading the origins of Indian history from the Vedic corpus and the arrival of Indo-Aryans, Maraimalai begins his history much earlier, based on what he regards as the much older Tamil works, the *Tolkāppiyam* and *Tirukkuraḷ*.¹⁹ They show the Tamils to have been a highly advanced civilization, spread as far north as the Himalayas and as far west as Afghanistan before the advent and arrival of small bands of 'uncivilized Indo-Aryans'. Given their small numbers, Maraimalai claims that they were easily subsumed within the larger Tamil / Dravidian population. In Maraimalai's phrasing, 'they were a small stream that joined the vast Dravidian ocean'.²⁰ People who pass off as Indians today, then, are the descendants of the admixture between the large population of Dravidians and the small bands of Aryans whom Maraimalai calls the Dravido-Aryans.²¹ Relying a great deal on the

¹⁸ It is, for example, evident from a cursory glance at the Tamil/Saivite journal, *Centamil Celvi*, founded and run by many of Maraimalai's supporters and fellow activists, that reforming and fashioning a unified non-Brahman Tamil Saivite community was a central goal for them. There were even calls made in the journal for a *tonṭar paṭai*, an army of devoted soldiers or workers for the cause.

¹⁹ Maraimalai makes this argument even in his early work, Maraimalai Adigal 1965: 3.

²⁰ Maraimalai Adigal 1941: 4.

²¹ Maraimalai Adigal 1941: 10. As for the case of existence of pure Aryans in India, Maraimalai was of the opinion that it is only in places such as Kashmir and segments of Rajputana that you find traces of pure Aryan stock.

selective use of contemporary European Orientalist, ethnological, philological and archeological works, Maraimalai offers what is essentially a racial and ethnological argument. Writing often in a rather polemical style and pointing to evidence from the early Vedic corpus, Maraimalai describes the incoming Aryans as uncivilized and prone to “living off the meat of wild buffaloes and goats” and sacrificing these dead animals to the numerous minor gods they worshipped. In an ironic reversal of extant accounts, Maraimalai describes these Aryan gods as resembling those that one can still find among the tribal peoples in India today, and as resembling the minor gods worshipped in Tamil regions by the lowest castes.²² Unlike the Aryans who had come from colder, more intemperate climates, which for Maraimalai explains their rude state of civilization, the Tamils like all peoples who inhabit the rich fertile lands close to the equator had evolved into a highly developed, wealthy and complex society based on settled agriculture. Agrarianism, consistent with the then current British colonial rhetoric equating civilization with Agrarianism, was for Maraimalai the hallmark of all great civilizations around the world.²³ For Adigal, developments consistent with a wealthy agrarian civilization led to the evolution of kingship and an army to protect the people and their wealth, and also gave rise to great philosophers to impart wise government and wisdom to the people.²⁴ It was because Tamils were naturally hospitable that they had welcomed the Aryans, and even tolerated their barbaric customs, and only slowly tried to educate them in their own more peaceful and reflective philosophies. Hence, the difference between the crude ramblings found in the early Vedic corpus and the later more reflective philosophies found in such works as the Upanishads, Sankhya, Yoga and even the Vedanta Sutras, which are essentially all creations of the Tamil philosophers. In this vein, Maraimalai asserted that if the early Vedas are Aryan, Vedanta, as it is reflected in the philosophy of the Upanishads, is a Tamil creation.²⁵ These were, after all, written by the Tamil sages in order to educate the uncivilized and barbaric Aryans. Even Buddhism and Jainism, for Maraimalai, were invented by Tamil kings to curb the countless animal sacrifices and flesh eating practices of the incoming Aryans. The old name for India, Bharatavarsha (Tam. pāratavaruṣam, Skt. bhāratavarṣa), was for Maraimalai derived from the name of the descendant of the great Tamil kings of ancient India, Bharatan, who had led a coalition of the

²² Maraimalai Adigal 1957a: 49.

²³ Maraimalai cites from Tilak's *Arctic Home of the Vedas* and HT Buckle's *History of Civilization* to make this argument. See Maraimalai Adigal 1957a: 6.

²⁴ Maraimalai Adigal 1957a: 50.

²⁵ He made such an assertion as early as 1905 in his lecture, *Paṇṭaikkāla-t-tamiḷarum āriyarum*. See, Maraimalai Adigal 1965: 45–47.

armies of ten Tamil kings to meet the incoming Aryans.²⁶ Thus, Maraimalai deftly reversed the conventional account of ancient Indian history, where the high culture of India is attributed to the Indo-Aryans, and claimed it instead for the Tamils. Also important to note here is that Maraimalai, in doing so, not only sought to reverse the conventional history of India but also to collapse the story of the ancient Tamils as Indian history into what is essentially Tamil history.

*Jettisoning the Sudra label
and reclaiming caste as a Tamil creation*

A persistent preoccupation in Maraimalai's writings is, of course, his attempt to jettison the Sudra label to which all non-Brahman caste Tamils were relegated. Like Sundaram Pillai before him, Maraimalai felt particularly aggrieved by this demeaning label. In order to subvert this categorization of the caste-Tamils as Sudras, Maraimalai chose three lines of attack. The first was to provide, in rather florid and insulting language, the offensive meanings given to the word Sudra in the standard prescriptive Sanskrit legal texts, such as 'slave' and 'son of a whore', and rhetorically invite his Vellalar readers to choose which they found to be the most appropriate for them. His second line of attack was to discredit the recourse that the Vellalars had taken in adopting the term Sat Sudra (clean Sudra) to distinguish and elevate themselves from the rest of the Sudra and non-Sudra Tamils.²⁷ Arguing that such a category as Sat Sudra is hardly known outside the Tamil region, especially in northern Sanskrit legal texts, Maraimalai argued that Manu would certainly have not cared to differentiate between the Sudras and Sat Sudras.²⁸ He argued that the

²⁶ Bharatan's ancestors were the great kings of India, according to Maraimalai. Since the Tamils were wise in government and had very able kings who were called Arasar by the Tamils, the Aryans misread this word as Asurar, but from the meaning given to this word in the Rig Veda as head or authority, it is plain to Maraimalai that the Aryans accepted these Tamil kings as their heads or leaders. The kings and their families were referred to as Arasinियar, which was modified according to the contemporary usage as Rajanyar. Here, it is evident that Maraimalai is providing kshatriya equivalence to the ancient Tamil kings. See, Maraimalai Adigal 1957a: 16–17.

²⁷ His most vitriolic writings were aimed at what he thought was this great insult. He was particularly outraged by the complacency of a contemporary Saiva Vellalar elite who, in his mind, despite being the great heirs of the architects and guardians of the highest civilization, had become so mired in ignorance to not even question this very insulting label. Taking recourse to the category of Sat Sudra to elevate themselves from the rest of the Tamil Sudras, by arguing that since they are vegetarian Saiva Vellalars they deserve to be put above the rest of the Tamil Sudras, hardly softened the insult.

²⁸ Maraimalai Adigal 1957a: 35.

fact that the term had been used in some Saiva Agamas is hardly any consolation since these were largely meant to be temple manuals, and only written a few hundred years earlier by temple priests in the South anxious over the patronage offered to the temples by wealthy Vellalars.²⁹ Finally, yoking his criticism of the Vellalars with his broader project for Tamil unity, he argued that it was only because these Vellalars were foolish enough to be misled by the Aryan Brahmans that they betrayed their own Tamil kith and kin, who had in the first place, through their hard work, made these Vellalars wealthy. It is in the same vein, Maraimalai argued, that instead of being grateful to these less fortunate Tamils the Vellalars, heeding the advice of Brahmans, had shown them nothing but contempt. He then again rhetorically posed the question, "Is it then small wonder that Lord Shiva had punished these Vellalars by getting the Brahmans to call them Sudras?"³⁰

Having managed to subvert the established order of the Varna hierarchy, particularly as it pertained to the depiction of caste-Tamils as Sudras, Maraimalai was still left with the task of explaining how caste originated and entered the Hindu body polity. Consistent with his argument that the Vellalar and agrarianism was the source of all civilization in India, including the development of the complex division of labour, it was only a small step for Maraimalai to suggest that the institution of caste too originated and was developed by the Tamil Vellalars.³¹ Maraimalai thus boldly asserted that it was the Tamil Vellalar king Manu who originated and introduced caste among the Dravido-Aryans, as a way to bring order and civilization to them.³² Thus, caste had originated as an effort by the

²⁹ Maraimalai Adigal 1957a: 35.

³⁰ The real reason for this state of ignorance by the once proud Vellalars was quite obvious. It was because they had fallen victim to the lies of those posing as Aryan Brahmans and had lavished their wealth and power according to their advice. However, what was even worse was that, in so doing, these Vellalars had abandoned the precious Tamil groups who had made them wealthy and powerful in the first place by their hard work, and begun to look on them with disdain and contempt. See Maraimalai Adigal 1957a: 37.

³¹ Not content to demonstrate that the Indo-Aryans, given their state of civilization, hardly required the necessary division of labour that had necessitated the system of caste, Maraimalai argued that there is no evidence of caste among the ancient Indo-Aryans. The only division that existed initially in the ancient period, according to Maraimalai, was over skin color between the incoming Aryans and the Tamils and hence the term Varna, which over time came to denote caste. Maraimalai Adigal 1957a: 41.

³² Maraimalai cites from Matsyapurana and other works to argue that Manu was indeed a Tamil Vellalar king who had sat in meditation in the hills of Southern India. However, he argued that caste is certainly not mentioned in the early Vedas and even if there is mention of caste in later works, such as the Upanishad and Mahabaratha, it mostly takes the form of referring to various professions or conduct of individuals rather than to any ascriptive hierarchies. How then did caste originate? If there is no evidence of caste in the initial

Tamils to bring order to the mixed populations of Dravido-Aryans and had not really been intended for the Tamils. Why, then, do we find caste among the Tamils? It is here in his innovative reading of the origin and evolution of caste among the Tamils that one can see Maraimalai attempting to ethnicise caste, to subordinate his reading of caste to his project for the Tamil nation. At this point, it is interesting to digress briefly to consider Dilip Menon's recent observation about the distinctiveness of caste dynamics in Southern India in his excellent essay on caste and communalism. Menon makes two observations about why the south was distinctive. First, the missionary intervention had the effect of democratizing and opening up a space for lower caste and untouchable voices to be heard in the public sphere, unlike in northern India, so that caste was central to discourses of various religio-cultural movements. Second, "there was a tendency to ethnicise caste and work towards an internal unity and solidarity accompanied by a rejection of caste Hindu practices", unlike in the north where there are "attempts at upward mobility followed by adoption of higher ritual practices."³³ What I find most compelling is Menon's perhaps more innovative suggestion that caste struggle is so closely imbricated with movements for religious or communal solidarity. His observation that there was a tendency to ethnicise caste makes perfect sense in the case of Maraimalai. It is clear that Maraimalai's discussion of caste was very much in the form of an immanent critique and in the service of his broader project of ethicizing caste in the Tamil region and subordinate to it. I would also suggest, without being overly reductionist, that the various Hindu sectarian struggles in nineteenth-century South India may be viewed as closely imbricated with caste competition and struggles. They were efforts to refashion and reorder social hierarchies in culturally meaningful ways. It is from such an angle that Maraimalai's writings on caste are best understood.

Forging a Tamil caste: Reordering Tamil castes

If Manu had introduced caste among the Dravido-Aryans in order to civilize them, left unexplained was how caste originated among the

period of the arrival of Indo-Aryans and only much later is there evidence of caste in its elaborate form found, it was then simple logic to claim it was the advanced civilization of the Tamils that was responsible for its origins and elaboration. The institution of caste was then originated by the Tamil Vellalar king Manu, who had written the work Manusmriti in his efforts to bring order and civilization to the mixed population of Dravido-Aryans. Maraimalai Adigal 1957a: 42.

³³ Menon 2006: 16.

Tamils in the first place and how one was to explain the contemporary caste order among the Tamils. Maraimalai was faced with a formidable task. He would have to come up with a counter narrative that would adequately explain the reality of contemporary caste order among the Tamils, while still maintaining the twin objective of subverting the dominant Brahmanical view of caste and, at the same time, providing a counter narrative that could potentially unite all Tamils under a new hegemonic bloc. The way Maraimalai negotiated this, though bordering on the fantastic in places, was, nevertheless, quite creative and brilliant. In his counter narrative of caste in the Tamil country, Maraimalai sought to posit the Saiva-Vellalar as the ideal counterpoint to the Aryan-Brahman. Yet, as a radical Saivite and a passionate critic of the caste order, he was compelled to empty the Saiva Vellalar caste category of its hierarchic and exclusionary aspects and, instead, posit it as a much more fluid moral and ethical ideal. In this reframed caste grouping, membership in the Saiva Vellalar caste category was in theory open to all and depended more on meeting the ideals of vegetarianism, cleanliness (now redefined as moral and ethical virtues in addition to physical cleanliness), as well as education and spiritual practice.

In Maraimalai's narrative, everything begins with the Tamil Vellalar's discovery of agriculture as a way of life, portrayed here very much as an act of transcendence from their earlier primitive mode of hunting and living off the flesh of animals. It is the wealth and comfort that accrue from such a lifestyle that not only led to the proliferation of specialized professions, which ultimately led to caste differentiation, but also to the cultivation of moral and ethical virtues, which ultimately became the decisive factor in caste differentiation. Thus, through agrarianism, Vellalars were the earliest discoverers of the virtue of non-killing and vegetarianism, which became the first principle of caste differentiation. Later, other virtues associated with this agrarian lifestyle followed, such as cleanliness, now recast as both mental and physical cleanliness, propensity towards cultivation of knowledge and education, and the worship of God, and also, interestingly, the good moral conduct of the women of a caste.³⁴

³⁴ Maraimalai's narrative of the origin of caste in Tamil society begins with the Tamil Vellalars and the rich agricultural Maruntham zones they inhabited. Adopting, again, an evolutionist paradigm for understanding social change among the Tamils, Maraimalai conceded that the very ancient Tamils lived mostly in forest and hill tracts and survived by hunting wild beasts with bows and arrows. It is in this period that Tamils began worshipping Lord Murugan and Valliammai as the gods of the hills. A more learned and wiser segment of this original population soon descended to the fertile river valleys, to plant crops and generally build a society around an agrarian culture. This segment, having discovered the benefits of settled agrarian culture and the wealth that came from it, also

As to caste differentiation in Tamil society, it is interesting that of the five caste groupings Maraimalai divides Tamil society into, the first three all emerge from the very same Vellalar stock that discovered agriculture. These evolved as a result of the professional differentiation such a wealthy and complex agrarian society required. Since the wealth generated by agriculture necessitated its protection, the institution of kingship and a warrior caste emerged to protect society and its wealth. Other institutions also emerged, such as temples, monasteries all of which required various professionals such as *antaṇar* (sages / ministers), priests (such as *āticaivar*), *caivakkurukkaḷ nampiyār*, *paṭṭar*, and all of whom came from various segments of the same Vellalar stock.³⁵ Thus, priests and officiants of temples who now claimed Aryan Brahman status were, in reality, what Maraimalai depicts as Vellalar-Brahmans. Most of the Brahmins in Tamilnadu today are understood as the descendants of these Vellalar Brahmins. A segment of these original Vellalars also went into trade and came to be called Chettiyars (Tam. *ceṭṭiyār*), but again, for Maraimalai, they were in reality of the same Vellalar stock. Maraimalai provided as evidence the fact that they still “give and take women among themselves” and interdine.³⁶

However, as Maraimalai goes down the Tamil caste order his arguments get much more convoluted and lack clarity. For example, the next tier in terms of caste hierarchy in Maraimalai’s narrative of caste in Tamil society, after his first three categories of *antaṇar* (ministers / priests), *aracar* (royalty and their families), and *vaṇikar* (traders), are a much more heterogeneous grouping who have been generally described as *kīlōr* (Inferiors) or *īlīntōr* (mean or disgraced people) as a result of their difficult life and poverty. Interestingly, Maraimalai includes, among this category, people of the original Vellalar stock who had first discovered agriculture, but who cultivate their own fields in contrast to the higher Vellalars who had it cultivated for them.³⁷ This category also includes, aside from those who did the various jobs demanded by the Vellalars, the eighteen non-Vellalar groups specializing in various crafts and trades.³⁸

began to abjure killing and meat eating. Thus, the first division among the Tamils was between those who practiced non-killing and vegetarianism and those who practiced killing and meat eating. This ethics of non-killing was discovered by the top layers of the Tamil society (Vaitheespara 2009: 31). The wealth that accrued from this settled agrarian way of life also led to the further development of society and the proliferation of various specialized professions. To guard and protect the society kingship, an army arose. Temples and matams were built requiring priests and heads of mutts and ministers with titles such as *antaṇar*, *āticaivar*, *caivakkurukkaḷ*, *nampiyār*, *paṭṭar*.

³⁵ Maraimalai Adigal 1957a: 49–50.

³⁶ Maraimalai Adigal 1957a: 52.

³⁷ Maraimalai Adigal 1957a: 52.

³⁸ Maraimalai Adigal 1957a: 52–53.

Important to note here is that Maraimalai, despite this attempt at a detailed explanation of the ranking of Tamil castes, also attempts at the same time to underline that hierarchies or gradation only evolved due to professional differentiation and as a result of lifestyle rather than due to physical essences or birth. Attempting, thus, to frame his system of ranking on the basis of profession and ethics rather than birth, he suggests, for example, that it was simply due to the fact that the Vellalar *antaṇar* (priests) could afford to follow all the four virtues that he had underlined, such as vegetarianism, that they came to be regarded as the highest; and the Parayar and Pallar (Tam. paḷḷar) caste sadly came to be regarded as the lowest since they could not follow these four virtues and, in addition, were in the habit of eating buffalo meat and beef aside from indulging in toddy (Tam. kaḷḷu). He went on to assert that, in future, such labels should only be based on people's profession and practice rather than simply due to their birth or ancestry.

This detailed attempt at an ethnological mapping of caste groupings in Tamil society was the exception rather than the rule. The major thrust of Maraimalai's work and writing on caste was to passionately argue against the practice of caste discrimination among the Tamils. Maraimalai, in fact, went to extraordinary lengths to argue against the practice of caste discrimination in many of his work and writings. He was particularly brilliant and persuasive in his efforts to provide his readers with detailed examples, culled from ancient and medieval Indian and Tamil literature, which not only pointed to evidence for caste mixing from the earliest of times, but also that some great writers and religious figures were a result of such unions. Much in the style of Ramalinga, who had founded his religious order on the principle of samarasa (Tam. camaracam) or equality, Maraimalai named the religious order that he founded the Samarasa Sanmarga Nilayam (Tam. camaraca caṇmārka nilaiyam), insisting that discrimination on the basis of caste will not be tolerated in his order. Thus, even his detailed efforts at accounting for caste in Tamil society need to be read against his efforts, in the same work, to forge caste unity among the non-Brahman Tamils. In the same work, Maraimalai makes a strong appeal to the Saiva-Vellalar to embrace, into their fold, people from all castes (including intermarrying and inter-dining), as long as they indicate their willingness to adopt his Saivite ideals, such as vegetarianism and cleanliness.³⁹ Even those who do not fully conform to these practices are to be embraced and slowly encouraged to do so.

Warning of grave dangers if caste practices go unchecked in Tamil and Indian society, he offers the case of the contemporary Moplah uprising in neighboring Kerala as a warning. If the Nambudri and Nayar landlords

³⁹ Maraimalai Adigal 1957a: 87.

had treated their own lower caste Hindu workers well, he asks, “Would they not have assisted when the Muslim peasants attacked and skinned many of them (Hindus) alive?” He answers his own question by stating, “If not for the British intervention Kerala would now be a Muslim country” and adding, if not for the British, India “would be a graveyard for the Hindus”.⁴⁰ If people continue to discriminate on the basis of caste and not help the lower orders, he warned, they would all eventually convert to Christianity, Islam or Buddhism and the “Hindu-race will disappear from India.”⁴¹ In a similar vein, he argues against the practice of denying entry into temples for the lowest castes in the Tamil region, stating that it is little wonder that so many of them have embraced Christianity and Islam in places such as Tirunelveli.⁴² In a sub-chapter entitled *Tēṇṇāṭṭu-t tirukōyilkaḷil tālnta vakuppār cilar viṭappaṭāmaiyaḷ nikaḷum tītu* (The evil of denying certain segments of the depressed castes in temples in South India), he wrote, “Is there a greater evil than the evil of considering a major segment of God’s created beings as ‘lower castes’ and denying them entry into precisely the abode where God resides?”⁴³ His passionate advocacy of love marriage, as opposed to arranged marriage, was yet another indication of his more radical views on caste. Linking caste practices with the control of women and sexuality in a section entitled, *Cātivēṛṛumaiyaḷ tamilmātar paṭum koṭum tunpaṅkaḷum avayrai oḷikkum vakaiyum* (The suffering of Tamil women due to caste practices and the ways to remove it), he carefully linked the oppression of Tamil women and their lack of freedom to the custom of arranged marriage on the basis of caste rather than on the basis of love. Going even further, he asserted that it is little wonder that children born to such oppressed and unfree women are born with little intelligence and strength and are of little use to society.⁴⁴

What remains a paradox, then, is why he sought, despite his great animus against the practice of caste and his warnings of the grave dangers it posed to Tamil and Indian society, to privilege the Vellalars, even if it was merely at a symbolic level. If he was particularly incensed by the caste arrogance and practices of a segment of the conservative Tamil Vellalars⁴⁵ – some of whom had clearly inspired him to write his major

⁴⁰ Maraimalai Adigal 1957a: 114.

⁴¹ Maraimalai Adigal 1957a: 114.

⁴² Maraimalai Adigal 1957a: 115.

⁴³ Maraimalai Adigal 1957a: 122.

⁴⁴ Maraimalai Adigal 1957a: 128.

⁴⁵ Maraimalai was particularly creative in his critique of the conservative segments of Saiva Vellalars. He utilized a range of techniques, including humor. Imitating the conversations of one such group, “We are thirty household people; We only eat and mix among these thirty households; We won’t go beyond and even wet our hands in another

work critiquing caste in the first place – why did Maraimalai privilege the Vellalars in his revamped narrative of caste in Tamil society or, for that matter, why did he equate Tamil civilization with Vellalar civilization as he did in his work *Tamiḷar nākarikam allatu vēḷāḷar nākarikam*? Maraimalai's foreword to a later work offers a clue to his reasoning. He mentions, as inspiration for writing the work on Vellalar Civilization (Tam. *vēḷāḷar nākarikam*), the tremendous reception his lectures on Tamil civilization had received not only in Jaffna, but also segments of the Tamil Diaspora communities in the Malayan Strait settlements⁴⁶. Given the reputation of Jaffna as a Vellalar stronghold with Vellalar numbers constituting almost half its population by the late nineteenth century, it is hardly surprising that Maraimalai's privileging of the Tamil Vellalar as a counterpoint to the Aryan Brahman earned him an enthusiastic reception there. Maraimalai lists, as the second major inspiration for writing the work, the controversy that had erupted over a Chettiyar (Tam. *ceṭṭiyār*) journal claiming that since Chettiyars have been referred to as Vaisyas (Skt. *vaiśya*) they should not intermarry with the Sudra Vellalars, and the fact that numerous people had approached Maraimalai to settle this dispute once and for all.⁴⁷ These reflections by Maraimalai certainly confirm that, by the 1920's, he had begun to be considered, if not the 'organic intellectual', as an important authority for a significant segment of the non-Brahman Tamil / Saivite community; consisting of many liberal Saiva Vellalalar, as well as a host of allied upwardly mobile non-Brahman castes determined to contest Aryan Brahman hegemony rather than the internal bickering among the leading non-Brahman Tamil castes. This obvious and real constituency, on which Maraimalai depended for most of his patronage, may have certainly acted as a constraint against Maraimalai's more radical and iconoclastic goals. His strategy of privileging the Vellalars, while at the same time broadening the category of Vellalar, may have been due to such circumstances and factors. It would then appear that Maraimalai's privileging of the Tamil Vellalars, despite his great animus against caste, was motivated not so much by a single factor but a host of factors and considerations. Given the long history of agrarian dominance exercised by the Vellalars in the Tamil region, in which the ideology of Tamil-Saivism played a central role and which is well reflected in the Tamil literary sources including the

household", he questioned "how such practices benefit them or others." Asserting that such Saivites, in fact, behave much more disgracefully than others, he wrote, "How many such Saivites are indulging themselves in brothels! How many such people secretly indulge in English whisky, fried mutton and eggs! And how many are spending their time gambling..." Maraimalai Adigal 1957a: 108–109.

⁴⁶ See Maraimalai Adigal 1957c: 14.

⁴⁷ Maraimalai Adigal 1957c: 14.

Tolkāppiyam and Saivite Bhakti literature, it would have been difficult for Maraimalai to have ignored the Vellalar altogether. Even his recourse to using agrarianism, as the hallmark of Tamil civilization and virtue, against the nomadic, meat eating Aryan-Brahman, was no doubt a result of his rather uncritical dependence on these early Tamil literary sources. Finally, as mentioned earlier, Maraimalai's more radical and iconoclastic goals may have been tempered and constrained by the pragmatic reality of his support base, consisting largely of upper caste non-Brahman elites. Despite this tepid and constrained reformism, what is perhaps more important to note is that Maraimalai's work and writings were able to introduce a novel language and grammar of reform within the fortress of Tamil / Saivite orthodoxy, which was unthinkable only a century earlier and which no doubt help lay the groundwork for the much more radical reforms that accompanied and followed Dravidianism's rise as a major political ideology. It is then small wonder that one of the poems published at Maraimalai's death which attempts to grasp the multiple facets of his contribution reads: "Saiva Siddhantists have lost their true leader ..."⁴⁸

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⁴⁸ *Centamiḷ Celvi* on the death of Maraimalai by one Mr. Aa, Muthukumarasamy Pillia of Thenkasi. See *Centamiḷ Celvi*, October 1950: 95. (Translated into English by author).

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