The Responses of Tamils to Their Study by Westerners 1608-1908

Dennis Hudson

Smith College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol13/iss13/14

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
The Responses of Tamils to their Study by Westerners 1600-1908

Dennis Hudson

In January 1968, shortly after the Dravidian Progress Party came to power, the city of Madras celebrated its Tamil heritage through numerous scholarly and popular events. One was the unveiling on Marina Beach of ten statues portraying people important to Tamil culture over the past 2,000 years. Three were of Christian missionary scholars from the West. The Party proudly stated with these statues that Western scholars have played an important role in Tamil culture, especially in the “Dravidian movement” of which it is a political expression.

Since the end of the 19th century, the Dravidian movement has sought to define a cultural identity for south India distinct from that of the north, partly in response to Western scholarship on the Tamils. The idea, for example, of a Dravidian people of the south distinct in origin and culture from the Aryan people of the north is an adaptation of a Western scholarly study of south Indian languages to indigenous Tamil traditions. This response is only one of many. What follows is a sketch of such responses over a period of three centuries, a complex story that deserves fuller treatment.

As we begin, the reader should note that Indians who think and speak in Tamil represent only one of the 14 official language groups in India. Their responses are not necessarily those of members of other language groups, such as the speakers of Hindi, Bengali, Punjabi, Marathi, or Malayalam. The Tamils inhabit the northern portion of Sri Lanka and the southeastern segment of the subcontinent now comprising the state of Tamil Nadu and southeastern portions of Kerala. They use “Tamil” to refer to their language, to their culture, and to themselves as people belonging to a specific region. The responses we will consider come exclusively from men who lived in that region between 1600 and
1908 who were generally intellectuals and religious leaders belonging to the higher castes. With at least one important exception, most were Vellalas and Brahmans.

**Responses to missionary scholars 1600-1820**

The earliest evidence of Tamil response to study by Westerners appears in the writings of missionaries who were also scholars, and these are responses to men studying their language and culture in order to make converts. Since the proselytizers kept the records, our information is biased. Serious Western study of Tamil began about 1547 with the Portuguese Jesuit, Henrique Henriques (d. 1600), who worked among fishermen. He translated several books into Tamil, but his major work was *The History of the Saints* of 1586, which Tamils of the interior turned into poems and plays. By the time he died in 1600, a Portuguese letter reports, Henriques was revered as a sadhu by Muslims and Hindus:

> At Punicali (Ponnaikayal) . . . they consider their oath most solemn and binding when they swear by Father Anriques. Moreover, on the day he died all the Muslims of the neighbouring village of Patanam (Kayalpatnam) fasted, the Hindus also of the neighbouring place fasted two days and closed all their shops and bazars [sic] to express their grief over the death of the good and holy man. So great was the respect and consideration everyone had concerning his holiness.

Henriques illustrates an unambiguous Tamil response in the early period of study by Westerners: Europeans who proved themselves to be learned and who were, according to Hindu norms, genuinely ascetic in their style of life, were allowed to study Hindu doctrine and to teach their own.

We see this clearly in writings of the Italian Jesuit, Roberto De Nobili (1577-1656) and of the German Lutheran, Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg (1683-1719). De Nobili in Madurai, for example, was examined publically and privately by Hindus to see whether he held the appropriate social rank in Europe, possessed sufficient learning, and maintained a style of life proper for the study of Sanskrit, Veda, and Dharma. He passed and spent years in Madurai and its environs as a severely ascetic and learned sadhu, studying Indian languages and Hindu literature and gathering his own disciples, many of them Brahmans. He respected the distinctions in Dharma between the socially pure and impure, a fact crucial to his acceptance. Hindus saw him as different from the "Parangi" or "Franks" and let him work within the limits of their own customs. Similarly, once Ziegenbalg had made it clear to Tamils that he was not like the "degenerate" Danes and Germans of the colony at Tranquebar, he had little difficulty in finding scholars to teach him sacred Tamil books. But though pious, he was no ascetic and did not respect the Hindu distinction between the high-castes and Untouchables. Outside the colony he met resistance from high caste Hindus.

There were limits to Hindu acceptance. Whenever they perceived scholars
As Others See It

as denigrating Dharma or attempting to change it, Hindu leaders resisted them, sometimes violently. During a period of struggle between Vijayanagara and European powers, De Nobili spent the year 1640-1641 in prison. In that charged context, the Hindu ruler probably saw De Nobili less as a sadhu than as a European, encouraged to do so because De Nobili’s assistants had begun the practice of one and the same man serving both Brahman and Untouchable converts, blurring crucial Dharmic distinctions. Politics, not scholarship, it seems, landed him in jail.  

Similarly, though the Mughals would not oppose his work, Ziegenbalg thought, the Hindu king of Tanjore did. No European could move freely in his kingdom without an expensive license, and he had imprisoned and killed Portuguese priests who had tried. Moreover, Ziegenbalg would have to pay ten times what other “White People” pay, a Brahman warned him, because ever since you came to these Countries, you are . . . always scolding at our Pagods, blaspheming our Gods, and cursing our Religious Ceremonies as Superstitious Errors and Idolatry.

As long as Western colonial rule had not shaken the social basis of their classical ideology, Dharma remained of absolute value to Hindus. Ziegenbalg’s writings show that one way or another Hindus appealed to their concept of a multiplex and timeless Dharma as the basis of their religious disagreements with him. A Brahman, for example, explained the differences between Hindus and Christians as based in God’s own enjoyment of diversity:

All differences arise only because God revealed himself a little differently among the white people in Europe than here in East India among the black Tamils. And one should regard this as the playing of God who would make one happy in one way and another happy in another way.

A learned sadhu, not a Brahman, argued on the basis of the antiquity of Dharma and its veneration:

Their religion is the oldest in the world, he said, was believed by their ancestors and many thousands of kings and cultured people. If it were false, would not one of them have reformed it? Would God allow their religion to continue for so long if it were false?

At times Hindus told Ziegenbalg they preferred to be in hell with their ancestors and nation than in heaven without them, an intriguing response. The allusion is probably to the Mahabharata story of Yudhishtira, the son of Dharma and a righteous king. At the end of the epic, in absolute faithfulness to Dharma, Yudhishtira chooses to be with his righteous brothers in hell rather than with his unrighteous enemies in heaven. Perhaps by alluding to the story the respondents stated their own view of the Europeans of the colonies: They had wealth, military power, and material abundance, but they treated Hindus badly and behaved among themselves wretchedly, like ignorant people who never think about God
or the afterlife. Colonial “heaven” was not for them. Perhaps they also expressed a hope. Yudhishtira believed that Dharma protects the one who protects it, and he did after all get to heaven with his brothers and resided there alongside his former enemies. Did these respondents, too, trust that Dharma would vindicate them at the end of the present age when, as one Hindu said, “all things will be put to rights again, and all the Nations of the World shall be in the same Opinion. . . .”? A century later, the Abbe DuBois (1770-1848) of France reported this affirmation of Dharma as typical of those Hindus who watched the Europeans of the colonies from a distance.

Regarding the Tamil Muslims, Ziegenbalg perceived them as a relatively prosperous trading community that felt secure with Mughal power near by. He found their leaders completely impervious to his religious ideas, suffering, he thought, from an “intolerable and silly pride”:

The Mahometan-Moors are far greater Enemies to the Christian Religion than the Heathens themselves. They often visit me, as I do them; but they will seldom listen to any Reason, firmly believing their own Religion to be of the greatest Extent of all, as having possessed no less than almost Three Parts of the Universe.

Reading his reports of their conversations, one can see that Ziegenbalg’s own ignorance of Islam and arrogance towards it—typical of European scholarship of his time—elicited hostility from Muslims and an effort by them to educate him through Tamil translations of their writings. For whatever reason, however, Muslims played little part in subsequent responses of Tamils to their study by Westerners.

Responses to government, academic and missionary scholars 1706-1860

Tamils who worked in the colonies with European scholars responded differently, at least so the available evidence suggests. In the 18th and early 19th centuries these men transmitted Tamil knowledge to the Europeans and some European knowledge to the Tamils, and they felt positively towards the work of their employers. It is not surprising that these early responses come not from Hindus but from Christians.

Maridas Pillai (1723-1790), a Vellala Catholic who worked in French Pondicherry, was probably the most sophisticated of these scholars in the 18th century. Among other things, he taught Tamil astronomy to a French astronomer, provided French travellers with information about Tamil religious practices, and translated the Bhagavata Purana from Tamil into French. His aim was to make Tamil lore available to Westerners, not to change it, and he did so with great success.

At the same time in Ceylon, Philip de Mielho (1723-1790), a Tamil Protestant from a family long attached to the staff of the Dutch governors, assisted the government in various scholarly tasks. Noteworthy is the critical independence
with which he responded to early efforts by Westerners to develop a Tamil literature for the general public. The issue was Bible translation. The Dutch administration assigned him to review the Tamil translation of the New Testament by Ziegenbalg and his German successors at Tranquebar and De Melho attacked it severely. He found fault with its poor spelling, use of foreign words, erroneous translations, frequent interpretations, and lack of style appropriate to the subject. When the Tranquebar missionaries replied that his own translation of the same texts was too "high" for common understanding, his rejoinder was that the words they found difficult were actually pure Tamil words, "unintelligible to none but to such as understand no other than lame and bastard Tamil."21 De Melho had raised a continuing issue in Tamil letters: What is the standard of good Tamil prose? When an author addresses a general audience rather than the traditional elite, what style of Tamil should he use—the literary dialect of regional elites such as the Vellalas of Jaffna? Or the dialects of the nonliterate population? Or something created especially for the purpose? It will be a century before a Tamil Hindu takes up the issue, Bible translation again the starting point.

What Maridas Pillai and Philip de Melho did for the French and Dutch in the 18th century, others did for the British in the early 19th century.22 The interest of British scholars in Tamil literature proved crucial to its survival and later development. For example, Colin Mackenzie (1753-1821) and F. W. Ellis (d. 1819) collected numerous palm leaf books. Mackenzie's collection became the basis of the Government Oriental Manuscripts Library in Madras, while Ellis' collection included the highly significant Tamil works of the Italian Jesuit, Constanzo Beschi (1680-1747).23

Like De Nobili before him, Beschi had been ascetic and learned and Hindus had allowed him to study Tamil literature deeply. He wrote in it fluently, composed grammars, and developed a new form of Tamil dictionary. Tamil scholars have accepted his changes in the language, have applauded his poetry, and now memorialize his contributions with a statue on Marina Beach. Without the interest of the early 19th century British scholars, however, Beschi may never have attained this status.

In these British efforts, however, the crucial tasks were carried out by their Tamil assistants and teachers. They were the ones who found the palm leaf books in temples, courts and homes; they were the ones who researched them and commented on them; they were the ones who taught them to the British scholars; they were the ones who edited them for publication. They valued this British interest and some, at least, adopted the critical methods of their employers.

In the recovery of Beschi's work, for example, Ellis' Tamil teacher, Vidwan Swaminatha Pillai, a Vellala Catholic from Pondichery, wrote a Tamil biography of Beschi in 1798 using materials he had collected.24 Twenty years later, another Vellala Catholic from Pondicherry, A. Muttusami Pillai (d. 1840), who had studied English and Latin in addition to Tamil, Telegu and Sanskrit, made a tour for Ellis and A. D. Campbell to collect more of Beschi's works. In 1822 he published his own Tamil biography of the Jesuit, using his predecessor's manuscripts.25
When Muttusami Pillai wrote his biography of Beschi, he was Manager of the College at Fort St. George. In that publication he not only commended his British employers for their interest in Tamil, he went further and likened the College to the fabled Tamil College at Madurai. According to legend, thousands of poets had gathered over centuries in Madurai and under Pandyan patronage had produced an enormous quantity of sublime Tamil poetry. When the Pandyan dynasty declined, the poetry began to disappear. Muttusami Pillai claimed it was British scholars who saved it:

[Our] vernacular languages creeping...as the vine without its support, would have rapidly degenerated, and sunk into a state of rudeness, had not the distinguished individuals (Ellis and Campbell), by their unremitting exertions, and the zealous co-operation of their colleagues, succeeded in establishing the Madras College, and thrown around it the light of their talents.26

In his mind, the British had now replaced the Pandyans as guardians of Tamil. Later in the century, another Christian scholar responded in the same manner, but with greater impact. Simon Casie Chitty (1807-1860) was probably the first Tamil “Orientalist.”27 He worked for the British government in Ceylon and in his scholarship adopted the assumptions, methods, and questions of Western scholars and addressed them to his own Tamil heritage. Casie Chitty, a member of the Asiatic Society, published many scholarly studies between 1831 and 1859, all save one in English. The Tamil Plutarch of 1859 was his major achievement, an alphabetically arranged anthology and discussion of Indian and Ceylonese Tamil poets from the beginning to the present.28

Casie Chitty influenced European and Tamil scholars, and later Tamil ideologues, by using Western scholarly methods to explicate indigenous Tamil traditions.29 He assumed that Hindu myths can be made into plausible history. For example, he analyzed the story of Agastya, a sage said by tradition to have brought Tamil language and civilization from the Aryan north to the south at the direction of Shiva. Writing at a time prior to the Dravidian movement, Casie Chitty concluded that the story tells of Agastya’s “civilizing the people of the south and rendering them equal to the people of the north in point of civilization.”30 Implied, of course, is the awareness that northern “Aryans” look down on southern peoples as culturally inferior. A century later, writing after the Dravidian movement had taken political shape, the influential historian K. A. Nilakanta Sastri refined Casie Chitty’s analysis and made the antagonism between northerners and southerners explicit: Agastya symbolizes Aryan culture and his disciple Tolkappiyana symbolizes Tamil culture. They cursed each other because of a woman. “This silly legend,” he says, “represents the last phase of a controversy, longstanding, significant, and by no means near its end even in our own time.”31

Casie Chitty, like Muttuswami Pillai, used the myth of the Madurai College as history. Pandyan patronage of the poets, he said, had extended from the 9th century B.C. to the 14th century A.D., but the vast literature it produced was
almost entirely destroyed by “the Muhammadan hordes” from the north, “for those ruthless fanatics amongst other outrages ransacked all the libraries in the country.” The British, however, brought “auspicious days.” Because of their schools and presses, “remnants of the ancient Native literature” were being rescued; because of European books, journals and newspapers, modern Tamil was being enriched. Casie Chitty blamed Muslims for the decline in Tamil letters and glorified the Christian British for its rescue. He let Hindu Tamils off easily, treating them as passive participants in the activities of others. But in fact, as we shall see, much Tamil literature was lost due to Hindu neglect, some of it quite deliberate.

In contrast to these two enthusiasts, a Vellala Christian, or ex-Christian, named Jnanapanam Pillai rejected the study of India by Westerners along with their religion and politics. It is likely that Jnanapanam Pillai had worked under missionary scholars, for he had been born and raised in Tranquebar, had some connection with the Lutheran mission, was scholarly, and knew German well. But he had become a Shaiva and responded to Western study at the beginning of the 19th century in a way that many Hindus would at its end: He was antagonistic towards Europeans and Brahmans, but enthusiastic about Shaivism as the truly Tamil way of life. By Shaivism he meant the theological and ritual school of Shaiva Siddhanta in which Tamil non-Brahmans, especially Vellalas, play a leading role. In 1801 he completed a Tamil manuscript of 175 pages, now in the British Museum, entitled, “The Explanation of the Hindus’ Vedanta,” largely an exposition of a Shaiva Siddhanta text. But in the preface he makes some significant comments, outlined by an unknown reader in English. The notes reveal his opinions:

Foreigners take a wrong view of the Hindu system. . . . India the fountain of arts and science. . . . Europeans have failed by introducing their own customs; Europeans insist on trifles. . . . No Kali Yuga. . . . Brahmanical caste exclusiveness; they claim the lone right to the Vedas; the intolerable pride of the Brahmans. . . .

Two years later Jnanapanam Pillai was hung by the British as a spy.

It is noteworthy that four Christians and one ex-Christian provide the earliest responses to Western study we get directly from the respondents and not through the reports of Europeans, and that the writing of the hostile ex-Christian seems to have survived only by chance. This does not mean, of course, that no Hindu scholar working for Westerners responded in writing in the 18th and early 19th centuries; but if their works were not printed they are difficult if not impossible to find now; and if they were printed, they were printed by mission or government presses that would not disseminate views they thought erroneous or dangerous. Jnanapanam Pillai’s manuscript and execution, however, show that such views did exist at the beginning of the 19th century, probably in direct continuity with antagonistic views of earlier centuries and of the later 19th century.

Indeed, most of the Tamil scholars who worked under European scholars were Hindus, for example the Tamil editors and writers under the Dutch in Jaffna.
in the early 18th century, and the early staff of the College at Fort St. George. When, in 1835, the British finally made the printing press available for Indian ownership, Hindu responses to Western study began to appear in print. There were two kinds.

One Hindu response was to strengthen the Hindu culture of the educated in those places where the social basis of Dharma was eroding, specifically in Madras, by transferring Hindu literature from palm leaf to printed book. These scholars printed and disseminated familiar and valued texts, not ancient and obscure ones, sometimes with their own commentaries. This was the approach, for example, of Ramanuja Kavirayar (d. 1853), an eminent Tamil scholar, probably a Vellala, not attached to the Company but a teacher of various European students of note. Ramanuja Kavirayar established one of the earliest Hindu printing presses in Madras and organized what may be the first Tamil literary society. Scholars such as he intended to foster traditional interpretations, not critical study. That would come later, itself a response to Westerners’ study.

The other kind of Hindu response was to dispute with Christians in print. For example, about 1840 a Tamil attack on the Bible appeared entitled *Misunderstanding of Veda*, written by Ponnambala Swami of Madras. A rejoinder then appeared, *Contempt for the Misunderstanding of Veda*, attributed to A. Muttsami Pillai, but possibly written by the head Tamil teacher of the College of Fort St. George, Tandavaraya Mudaliyar. This may have been the first dispute in Tamil between Hindus and Christians in which the Hindus were able to use the printing press that had long been used against them by Christians. Inter­estingly, all three disputants were probably Vellalas, the class from which most disputants of both religions would come throughout the century.

**Responses in the Hindu-Christian disputes 1830-1867**

An important ingredient in these disputes was the study of Tamil religion and culture by Westerners. Many Hindus, and some Christians, of the second generation of Tamils living under British rule, found specific studies by Westerners deeply offensive and responded accordingly. The responses of two men are of special significance: Arumuga Navalar (1822-1879), a Vellala Hindu of Jaffna, and Arumanayagam or Sattampillai (1823-1918), a Nadar Christian of Tinnevelly District. Navalar and Sattampillai developed their ideas in the context of disputes that linked Jaffna and Madras with the southern Tinnevelly District. Events in one place affected those in the others as the Tamil literature of dispute circulated and grew, nourished by the establishment of Hindu and Christian printing presses in each locale.

For example, in 1828 in Jaffna, missionary teachers in the American Missionary Seminary at Batticotta decided to teach the *Kanta Puranam* in the school. This text, the Tamil version of a portion of the Sanskrit *Skanda Purana*, is sacred to Shaivas for it relates the story of the son of Shiva and is replete with esoteric meaning. The fact that it was studied in the hostile environment of a Christian school angered many Jaffna Hindus and they composed and distributed anti-Christian tracts in response. Shortly thereafter in Madras, Hindus organized the
Association for the Philosophy of the Four Vedas to counter Christian conversions, and in addition to anti-Christian tracts, printed petitions from Hindus to the Government, published a Tamil newspaper, and edited Tamil books for Hindu education. By 1841 these Madras Hindus had some connection with a relatively violent Hindu group in Tinnevelly District that had formed in response to the conversions of many members of the lower castes, especially Nadars. Known as the Society for the Resistance of the Gospel and as the Vibhuti Sangam, its members physically assaulted Tamil adherents of the Christian missions until stopped by the Government in 1846.

During these years, Arumuga Navalar studied English in the Wesleyan Mission school in Jaffna where he stayed on as a teacher of Tamil and English and as advisor to the translator of the Bible, Peter Percival. Navalar wrote his first public response to missionary study when he was 19 in letters he wrote to the Tamil and English Christian periodical, The Morning Star. Demonstrating a detailed knowledge of the Bible, he voiced the argument against the missionaries he would effectively use later: The Bible itself shows that the religion of Israel and of Jesus is substantially the same as Shaivism.

Five years later, in 1846, he consolidated his response by teaching a group of young Hindu men about Shaivism, hoping through education to keep them from converting. The following year he addressed a wider audience through a Friday evening lecture series at a temple, turning his response towards the reform of Shaivism. He taught that Shaivism is based on the Agamas and criticized the rituals of those priests, the Vaidikas, who perform rites that violate them. His response to Westerners had now become threefold: direct dispute with missionaries, education of Shaivas, and reform of Shaivism.

In 1848, Arumuga Navalar began a Shaiva school modelled after those of the Christians. Since he had no Hindu curriculum, he decided to write and print his own and with financial help bought a press in Madras which he set up in Jaffna. Two years later he was launched on a lifetime of writing; and Kamil Zvelebil notes that his writings, “actually meant the origin of modern Tamil prose-style.” They also meant new modes and contexts for teaching Shaivism because he replaced the monastery and the guru-disciple relationship with the parochial boy’s school, and he unlocked the palm leaf books of the elite for the literate public at large: He wrote essays on the ways to live as a Shaiva, instructions in the ways to worship as a Shaiva, and a catechism on what to believe as a Shaiva; he turned the great poetic Puranas, including the Kanta Puranam of earlier dispute, into clear and faithful prose epics; he edited for scholars superbly exact editions of Tamil classics, Shaiva treatises and poems with his own commentaries, and grammars. And he printed all these books on paper so that, regardless of religion or caste, anyone with the requisite money and literacy could have them if they wanted. Since Lord Shiva himself was the first teacher of Tamil, Navalar said, Tamil culture and Shaivism are the same, and the devotees of Vishnu he included among Shaivas. Even though Shiva had also taught Sanskrit, Tamil culture is superior because it is based on the Agamas and infused with the Tamil poems of the Shaiva and Vaishnava saints, the “Dravida Veda.” Through his saints, Shiva blesses all Tamils—from Brahmans to Untouchables—with special grace.

Published by BYU ScholarsArchive, 1985
Nevertheless, Vellalas comprised Navalar’s immediate audience, a class of castes ranked as Shudras in the terms of Dharma but as just below Brahmans in the terms of Tamil society. He taught an Agamic refinement of caste categories that served them as a basis for rejecting the authority of Brahmans. Shudras, he explained, are divided between the “pure” and the “impure,” the former being those who maintain the vegetarian style of life prescribed by the Agamas. “Pure” Shudras are, in fact, equal to “twice-born” Vaishyas of Dharma. On the other hand, Brahmans who only know Vedic ritual and not its meaning are equal to “once-born” Shudras; for example, the Vaidika Brahmans who serve many Shaiva temples and the Smartas who follow the misguided Shankara. A “pure” Vellala is ritually superior to them. Navalar does not mean all Brahmans, however, for he reserves the highest status in Dharma for that Brahman who knows both the Veda and its meaning, which means Shaiva Brahmans who follow the Agamas. But they are not a large group. The consequence of his line of thought is to make “pure” Vellalas the leaders of Tamil culture.

Meanwhile, a flare-up of Hindu-Christian disputes in Jaffna elicited several tracts from him, the most significant being the 72-page booklet, Abolition of the Abuse of Shaivism, published in 1854 and widely circulated. Of its two parts, the first is addressed to Shaivas and explains how Christian missionaries are the enemies of Shiva and describes an offensive strategy against them. The second and main part is addressed to the enemy. Developing the thought of his youthful “letters to the editor,” he cleverly cites chapter and verse of the Bible to justify the worship of Shiva. Tamil Hindu culture, Torah, and Jesus’ teachings, he argues, are actually in accord so that by affirming Tamil religion one affirms the Bible. To be Shaiva is in fact to be Biblical. As one missionary admitted, “a great effect was thus produced in favour of Sivaism and against Christianity. . . .”

Navalar’s booklet also affected the second man we shall consider, Sattampillai. Arumanayagam, commonly called Sattampillai, “The Schoolmonitor,” lived in Madras in the early 1850s. He was a Christian Nadar from Tinnevelly District who had left his job in a mission school after a dispute with the missionaries. In Madras he read a booklet written by a missionary about his own caste, and, judging from the way he subsequently responded to it, he also read Arumuga Navalar’s Abolition of the Abuse of Shaivism. The caste study was Robert Caldwell’s The Tinnevelly Shanars: A Sketch of Their Religion and Their Moral Condition and Characteristics, as a Caste, published in 1849. Caldwell intended the booklet for Englishmen, to explain the difficulties missionaries in Tinnevelly faced with the converts from the Nadar or Shanar caste who formed the majority of new Christians.

Three of Caldwell’s ideas seemed to have impressed Sattampillai the most. First, Caldwell suggested that although most Shanars were at the time very low-caste toddy tappers, in ancient times they may have been warriors. That identity would give them a function and status in ancient Tamil society analogous to the position of Kshatriyas in the four classes of Dharma. Second, he said the Shanar warrior tradition was anti-Aryan and anti-Brahman and was expressed in an annual festival in which the story of the Ramayana was revised to make Ravana,
not Rama, the hero. Third, Caldwell depicted Shanar culture as religiously, morally, and intellectually bleak.

Sattampillai’s response to Caldwell was to return to Tinnevelly District in 1857 and create a schism among the Christian Shanars. The schismatics, Caldwell reported, “in their zeal for caste and Hindu nationality . . . rejected from their system everything which appeared to them to savour of a European origin.” Sattampillai’s method of expressing his castemen’s identity as Christian Nadar Tamils suggests that he was persuaded by Arumuga Navalar’s harmonization of Moses, Jesus, and Shiva. While they remained Christian, he made them more Hindu and more Jewish. He founded the Hindu Church of the Lord Jesus and developed a liturgy that included elements of all three traditions. And he assumed for himself the title of Rabbi.

This interesting cultic development may not be of lasting significance in itself, but it vividly illustrates the issue of identity for the Nadars which Caldwell’s study provoked, an issue that has proved to be of lasting significance. Sattampillai wrote an unpublished refutation of Caldwell and began a long series of Nadar attempts, both Christian and Hindu, to persuade the Tamil public that they in fact were Kshatriyas, a status that made them higher than the Vellalas and, in fact, the highest caste of all Tamils. Brahmans, they argued, were really Aryan foreigners. The Nadars produced some 40 books, pamphlets and periodicals over the next 75 years arguing this warrior identity. This line of thought, obviously, was unappealing to Vellalas, not to mention Brahmins, and conflict between members of the two groups increased as the century came to a close.

It is noteworthy that Arumuga Navalar and Sattampillai both responded to missionary scholars by affirming the old ideology of Dharma and its social hierarchy—though they disagreed over the ranking order—and by rejecting the status of Brahmans as innately the supreme class, also an old idea. Ideologues of the developing Dravidian movement took up themes from both of them. In 1886 Shaiva Vellalas established a Shaiva Siddhanta Association and held numerous meetings in towns throughout Madras Presidency, propagating Arumuga Navalar’s teaching on the superiority of Agama and “Dravida Veda” over the Sanskrit Veda of the Brahmans, and the social ideas which that superiority implies. At the same time they taught the anti-Brahmanism of Sattampillai and others through a revised version of the story of Rama derived, apparently, from Nadar tradition: The Dravidian culture of Ravana is superior to the Aryan culture of Rama, and the Aryans in the south today are the Brahmans.

Fortuitously for the Dravidian movement, in 1900 the eminent missionary scholar G. U. Pope (1820-1907) published at Oxford his monumental translation and study of the Tiruvacakam, an important text in the “Dravida Veda.” In the preface he confirmed the value of Shaivism for Tamils in a way that would have pleased Arumuga Navalar: “. . . Saivism is the real religion of the South of India, and of North Ceylon; and the Saiva Siddhanta philosophy has, and deserves to have, far more influence than any other.” Not surprisingly, Pope, like Beschi before him, became a cultural hero and is memorialized by his own statue on Marina Beach.
Three responses remain to be considered, two of them entangled in the movements just discussed. One is the acceptance of a "Dravidian" identity by many Tamils and one is the recovery of ancient Tamil poetry which strengthened that identity. The third is a religious philosopher's career of interpreting Hinduism to the West.

Robert Caldwell followed up his controversial study of the Shanars with an immensely scholarly study published in 1856, *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian Family of Languages*, followed in 1875 by a more influential revised version. The book was a major contribution to Orientalist scholarship and so pleased the leaders of the Dravidian movement that Caldwell's statue now stands on Marina Beach along with those of Beschi and Pope. Caldwell had provided what appeared to be an "outside" scientific confirmation of traditional ideas and feelings about the independence of Tamil and its equality with Sanskrit, although this had not been his intention. Tamil leaders believed that he had proven the existence of a family of languages he called Dravidian, distinct in origin and nature from the Indo-Aryan languages, and that he had shown Tamil to be the one most fully developed and the one most independent of Sanskrit. Non-Brahman Tamil scholars incorporated this evidence into a developing ideology antipathetic to "Aryan" civilization. 55

At the same time, a movement in the 1880s to recover the lost classical Tamil literature of the legendary Madurai College provided an "inside" confirmation of this interpretation of Caldwell's work. This movement was itself partly a continuation of the editorial work done by Arumuga Navalar and partly a response to the study of Tamil literature in a "Western" institution, the University of Madras. Arumuga Navalar's work of locating palm leaf copies of classical Tamil works and publishing them in authoritative editions was carried on after his death by C. W. Damodharam Pillai (1832-1901), a Vellala from Jaffna. 56 He was born a Christian, studied Tamil with his father and others, and studied English at a mission school until 1852. While teaching in a Jaffna school he published a commentary on a Tamil Shaiva poem, his first publication and an indication of Shaiva leanings that were probably due in part to Arumuga Navalar's apologetics. Peter Percival, the missionary Navalar had once assisted, hired Damodharam Pillai as an editor of the Tamil weekly he published in Madras, *Tinavarttamani*. Damodharam Pillai moved to Madras and in addition to his editorship taught Tamil at the Government College. In 1857 he passed the B. A. examination of the University of Madras—the first examination and with only one other candidate—and received an appointment in the accounting division of the Government Office of Transportation where he remained until retirement in 1882. 57

At some point, Damodharam Pillai had become a Shaiva and in 1867 joined the Hindu-Christian literary dispute with a learned book of 182 pages, *The Greatness Shatavism*, that provoked considerable response. 58 Nine years later he founded a Shaiva school on Arumuga Navalar's lines in his home village in Jaffna.
When Navalar died in 1879, he resolved to take up his work of editing and publishing Tamil classics. Damodharam Pillai launched his publication of Tamil texts in scholarly editions with a treatise on grammar in 1881, the fruit of years of private scholarship in Madras. Though he followed in Navalar's footsteps, and at times published Navalar's unpublished editions, Damodharam Pillai went well beyond him in the scholarship of recovering the Tamil past.

In the recovery and publishing of ancient Tamil literature, a noted man of Tamil letters has written, Arumuga Navalar broke the ground and Damodharam Pillai built the walls. But the person who put on the roof and made the work into a temple was U. V. Swaminatha Iyer (1855-1942). His goals were similar to Damodharam Pillai's, but of different origins.

Swaminatha Iyer grew up as a Smarta Brahman in the former Hindu kingdom of Tanjore and there, in the context of the Vellala-led Tamil Shaivism of the monasteries, became one of the best trained students of Tamil literature of his generation. Some aspects of Tamil literature were unknown to him, however, because monastic leaders for several generations had refused to teach or discuss ancient non-Hindu Tamil works, a neglect that nearly meant their disappearance. In Jaffna, however, some of these works were known and by 1848 a British scholar in Madras had printed a specimen of one of them, the tenth century Jaina epic, *The Cintamani of Jivaka*. Twenty years later, in 1868, the Eurasian Christian scholar Henry Bower, who had studied the epic with a Tamil Jaina scholar and who now had the assistance of a Vellala scholar, a recent Christian convert, published its first chapter with his explanatory comments. The University put this first chapter on its syllabus for the B.A. degree for 1870. Nevertheless, in Tanjore District, Swaminatha Iyer had never heard of *The Cintamani of Jivaka*.

A Vellala Hindu who had been a student at the University served to bridge the gap between Swaminatha Iyer and H. Bower’s study of the epic, between Madras and Tanjore. When Ramaswami Mudaliyar (1852-1892) read the published first chapter of *The Cintamani* for his degree, he fell in love with its beauty, and after years of searching, purchased a copy of the epic from a private library of palm leaf books. Moving from district to district as a Government Judge, he searched for a Tamil scholar to teach him the rest of it, but none could understand more than what Bower had already explained. Finally, in 1880, he came to Kumbhakonam where Swaminatha Iyer was teaching and upon meeting him asked if he knew the three ancient Tamil epics: “Have you read *The Cintamani*? Have you read *Manimekhalai*? Have you read *Cilappatikaram*?” Swaminatha Iyer was stunned; he thought he knew all of Tamil literature but he knew nothing about those works. Ramaswami Mudaliyar gave him his own copy of *The Cintamani* to study. Driven by curiosity, Swaminatha Iyer began to ask around about the epic and was given a copy kept at the nearby Shaiva monastery, a copy that in fact had been transcribed by his own teacher—his teacher had copied it but had never even mentioned the text to his most brilliant student.

When he proceeded to study these two copies of *The Chintamani*, Swaminatha Iyer confronted problems the solution to which laid the basis of his scholarship for the next 60 years. First, he needed to understand Jaina tradition.
in order to interpret it correctly. The opening verse itself made no sense to him. Learning there were Tamil Jains in Kumbhakonam, he visited them and found, to his astonishment, that they studied the epic regularly with Jaina teachers and had done so for generations. His Jaina studies began the historical and cultural research that informed his subsequent books, essays, and articles. Second, he needed to resolve discrepancies between the two copies, and so he searched for palm leaf books in neglected libraries throughout Tamil Nadu and compared them. This began his life-long effort to publish reliable editions. Finally, allusions to other unknown poems and the use of uncited quotes by The Cintamani’s commentator drove him to search again through neglected libraries for forgotten poems. He uncovered new texts and made major discoveries of forgotten works from the fabled Madurai College, poems known today as “Sangam” literature. In 1887, seven years after Ramaswami Mudaliyar had asked him that question, Swaminatha Iyer published for the first time the complete text of The Cintamani of Jivaka with its commentary and his notes, the first of his many elaborately edited works.

Swaminatha Iyer had now joined Damodharam Pillai in the task of exhuming buried poetry, the evidence that Tamil literature stretched back to the beginning of the Christian era. Ideologues who had used Caldwell’s study were now able to use their steady stream of publications as well in fashioning the idea of Dravidian cultural independence.

The introduction of Swaminatha Iyer to the recovery of ancient literature illustrates the web of scholarly and cultural interaction that had developed in Tamil Nadu since British rule began. Ramaswami Mudaliyar, a Vellala Hindu who had studied his own literary heritage in a Western academy, albeit in Madras, and had used a Tamil text published by a Christian Eurasian—who himself relied on the scholarship of a Tamil Jaina and a Vellala Christian—had asked the question, What does The Cintamani of Jivaka mean? The answer came from a brilliant scholar outside that “Western” context who was deeply immersed in traditional literature but whose teachers had intentionally prevented him from asking the question himself. When the two met and Ramaswami Mudaliyar posed his question, Swaminatha Iyer’s response was a rebirth in Tamil literature. It is noteworthy that in this instance, Ramaswami Mudaliyar played the role of the Western scholar studying Tamil literature: By 1880 the dynamics of “Western” study and Tamil response had become internal to Tamil culture itself.

There is, finally, the response of another Smarta Brahman to consider, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1898-1975), the philosopher and former President of India. Radhakrishnan lived in the context of Dharma his first eight years, but during the next twelve studied in Christian mission schools. When he was 17 and a student at Madras Christian College, he chose philosophy as his field, apparently to work out his response to the interpretations his missionary teachers gave of Hindu thought. In 1908 Radhakrishnan published the first three of his many books and articles that addressed his version of Shankara’s Advaita Vedanta to Western scholars and to cosmopolitan Hindus. One was his Master’s thesis, The Ethics of the Vedanta and Its Metaphysical Presupposition. Two were articles,
As Others See It

"Karma and Free-Will" and "Indian Philosophy—The Vedas and the Six Systems."

At a later time, one did not easily identify Radhakrishnan as a Tamil, so cosmopolitan had he become in his life and thought, yet one always knew he was a Brahman. His response to the study of India by Westerners in Madras was to remain clearly Hindu and Brahman while detaching himself from his specific Tamil context. In his scholarship and public life, Radhakrishnan was as distant from Tamil as Swaminatha Iyer was involved. The former's response was to become universal, the latter's to remain particular, yet both were Smarta Brahmans.

These two Brahmans elicit a question that the Dravidian movement has made a political issue: What is it to be Tamil? As we have seen, when the question was put by Western scholars over the past three centuries, the answers Tamils gave depended on their context. The earliest was that it means to be part of unchanging Dharma and separate from the "unclean" world of the questioner. At the same time, however, there were Tamils like the Jainas whose Dharma infused their Tamil world but was not synonymous with it and there were Muslims whose Shari'a reshaped Tamil culture to its own contours.

When the British established their government in Madras and Jaffna, the context for everyone began to shift. Urban growth and population movements produced new centers of political, economic and intellectual influence, and new groupings of people who were no longer tied to traditional institutions. Unchanging Dharma was now changing, the ranking of its hierarchy was in dispute, sometimes violently, and studies by Westerners were often the catalysts. Some Tamils believed British scholarship was rescuing their literature and changing it for the good while others believed it was corrupting their Shaiva way of life.

Gradually British rule pulled Madras and Jaffna into an all-India context where "Madrasis" were grouped along with "Bengalis," "Punjabis," and "Marathis." In this context an ancient Tamil self-consciousness towards "northerners" emerged in a new guise. Classical Tamil literature, for example, had portrayed Tamil dynasties as linked to Aryan dynasties in the north but different from them, and high-caste Tamils probably never had appreciated the low status assigned to them in Sanskrit texts on Dharma. Thanks to the interpretation of Caldwell by modern Tamils, this self-consciousness was now pride, a pride based in the belief that they are the preeminent members of a vast Dravidian population in the south that, though "suppressed" by the Aryans from the north, possesses a heritage stretching back into the middle of the first millennium B.C. With the discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization, Dravidian origins, they believe, stretch back even further, antedating the Aryans themselves.

Today, Tamil politicians who advocate this Dravidian ideology generally include all groups as Tamil whose mother tongue is Tamil, whether they are Hindu, Muslim, or Christian, or whether they are Vellala, Nadar, or Untouchable. An ambiguity remains, however, regarding the Brahmans. Are they Tamils who are Brahmans, or are they Aryan foreigners of long residence among Tamils? Tamil Brahmans themselves handle their identity variously, as seen in the contrasting approaches of Swaminatha Iyer and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. Nev-
ertheless, as the statues on Marina Beach of Beschi, Caldwell, and Pope testify, the varied positions that Tamils today take on the issue of being Tamil in modernizing India have developed to no small degree out of responses their predecessors made to their study by Westerners.
Notes


2. For a history of the organized political expressions of the movement since 1917, see Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr., *The Dravidian Movement* (Bombay, 1965).

3. The final version of this study is indebted to the Fulbright Program in Madras which enabled me to explore Tamil libraries in 1983-84, and to the support Smith college gives to faculty scholarship. In earlier versions I have benefited especially from the comments of Irene Eber of Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and also from those of A.L. Babb, John B. Carman, Donna R. Divine, Steven M. Goldstein and Susan Lewandowski.


5. Quoted by Georg Schurhammer in his Preface to *The Flos Sanctorum*, xi.


17. See his discussions with Muslims in *Thirty Four Conferences*, chapters 2, 3, 7, 18, 19, 22, 28, 34; and his description of them in *An Account*, pp. 31-37.


33. Listed as “Indu-Jatiyarin Vedanta Vilakkam,” No. 11740, Department of Oriental Printed Books and Manuscripts, British Museum, London. All information about him is gleaned from notes on this MS and a letter appended to it.

34. See Casie Chitty, *The Tamil Plutarch*, p. 89; and S. Vithiananthan in *Tamil Studies Abroad*, pp. 157-158.


37. In Tamil the titles are “Veta vikarpa” and “Veta vikarpa tikkaram” respectively. See Chengalvaraya Pillai, History of the Tamil Prose Literature (Madras, 1966 [1904]), p. 59; and Casie Chitty, The Tamil Plutarch, pp. 55-56.


42. See Hudson, Krishna Pillai, pp. 133-180.

43. The following is based on Navalar nurrantu malar 1979 (Navalar Centenary Souvenir 1979) ed. K. Kailacapati (Colombo and Kottavil, 1979), pp. 299-304, and two biographies: Ve. Kanakarattina, Arumukanavalcarittiram (Jaffna, 1982, reprinted 1968), and T. Kailaca Pillai, Arumukanavalcarittiram (Cennapattanam [Madras], 1918).

44. See his letter dated 10th Oct. 1842 in Supplement to the Morning Star, III, No. 2 (January 26, 1843), pp. 21-23.


46. Reprinted in 1868 and 1890 and under the pseudonym Shaivaprapakhasamama Jiyar. I have used Caivaappirakacacama Jiyar, Civa tusana parikaram (Madras, 1868).


51. Quoted by Hardgrave, The Nadars of Tamilnad, pp. 76-77.


53. In 1946 the story was published as an epic, but was impounded in 1948 and printed again only in 1971: Pulavar Kulantai, Iravana Kaciqram [The Epic of Ravana] (Irotu [Erode], 1971). In the meantime, the politician E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker kept the story alive with The Ramayana: A True Reading (Madras, 1959), cited by Hardgrave, The Dravidian Movement, pp. 29-30.


56. See T. A. Rajaruthnam Pillai, The Life of Rao Bahadur C. W. Tamotharam Pillai, B.A., B.L., F. M. U. (The well known Tamil Scholar) in Tamil (Madras, 1934); and Manonmani Camukatagas, "Navalarum Tamotarpillaiyumi" (Navalar and Daimdhar Pillai), Navalar nurrantumular malar 1979, pp. 130-140.

57. The other candidate for the B.A., also successful, was his Christian casteman from Jaffna, D. Carrol Vishwanathan Pillai. In this same year, his rejoinder to Arumuga Navalar's Abolition of the Abuse of Shaivism was published, Brilliant Lamp [Cuppiratipam] (Jaffna, 1857), 60 pp. But he later retracted it in a public ceremony and became a Shaiva. See Kannakarttiyan, Arumukanavalar carittiram, p. 36; note; and Murdoco, Classified Catalogue, p. 21.

58. Coiva makattuvaam. The title page gives the following information in Tamil: The Greatness of Shaivism: This is the explanation of the difference between the Shaiva and the Christian religions, Written by a learned scholar at the request of many Shaiva benefactors in the city of Madras. Printed at the River of News Press, 1867. Various scholars identify the author as Damodharam Pillai, e.g., Ki. Kanecaiyer, Ilanattu-t tamilppulavvar caritam [The History of Tamil Scholars in Sri Lanka], 1939 [place of publication not given], p. 69.


60. See U. Ve. Caminataiyar, En carittiram [curukkam] [My Life Story (Abridged)], Cennai [Madras], 1958; and Dennis Hudson, "Renaissance in the Life of Saminata Aiyar, a Tamil Scholar," Comparative Civilizations Review, No. 7 (Fall 1981), pp. 54-71.


62. The Chintamani. First Book, called Namagal llambam; with the commentary of Nachinarkiynayar . . ., by Rev. H. Bower, with the assistance of E. Muttaiya Pillai (Madras, 1868), pp. iii-iv. For information on E. Muttaiya Pillai, see Hudson, Krishna Pillai, chapters II, VII, XIII.


64. See Irschick, Politics and Social Conflict, pp. 281-282; and Ma. Iracamanikkaran [Rajamanickkam Pillai or Manickkam Pillai], Irupatam nurrantum Tamil urainatai valarce [The Development of Tamil Prose in the Twentieth Century], (Cennai [Madras], 1978), pp. 116, 196-197.

65. Five years later, while teaching philosophy at Presidency College in Madras, he published an article in Tamil, probably his only one: "Vetantamum mayavatamum" [Vedanta and the Doctrine of Maya], Citttam [Siddhantam: Journal of the Shaiva Siddhanta Association], V (1917), pp. 159-163. See two autobiographical statements: one in S. Radhakrishnan, Selected Writings on Philosophy, Religion and Culture (New York, 1970), pp. 35-65; the other in The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, ed. P. A. Schilpp (New York, 1952), pp. 5-82; also 846-862.


68. For example, *The Laws of Manu*, X. 22, classifies the Dravidas as descendants of Kshatriyas who did not fulfill their Vedic duties and were thus excluded from rituals. Then in X. 44 the text says that because Dravidas did not perform the rites nor consult Brahmans, they gradually sank to the status of Shudras. See *The Laws of Manu*, tr. G. Buehler (Sacred Books of the East, XXV, Oxford, 1886), pp. 406, 412.