Being ‘Hindu’ and Being ‘Secular’
Tamil ‘Secularism’ and Caste Politics

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For over two decades there has been speculation in Tamil Nadu that the Hindu right would be taking over more and more of the state’s political space. Despite a few minor developments, that has not happened. This is not so much due to the rationalism propagated by the non-brahmin Dravidar Kazhagam or parties such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. It is due to their long-standing propaganda against the caste-based discrimination within Hinduism (which led to a positive representation of Islam and Muslims) and the specific style of ideological compromises made by the DMK on rationalism and atheism which have given rise to a form of Hindu religiosity among the non-brahmin Hindus in the state which is self-critical and tolerant.

Transcendent ideals in politics – convictions – are, precisely, refusal to allow history and contingency to contour the existing dimensions possibilities of political life. In this sense, they constitute repudiations of politics, even as they masquerade as its source of redemption. Indeed, we might say that the insistence on the importance of transcendent ideals in politics paradoxically affirms rather than challenges a figuring of the political domain as relentlessly amoral. It places the idealist actor at a distance from politics...

– Wendy Brown

1 Introduction

From the beginning of the 1990s, there have been scholarly speculations in Tamil Nadu that the Hindu right would expand its hold in the state. Occasional communal clashes, the spread of the Maharashtra-style Vinayaka festival from Chennai to other towns, and the Hindu right activists taking to urban dalits and women, have been offered as the reasons for such a prognosis. On a larger canvass, it has been argued by these scholars – I am one among them – that the ideological decline of the Dravidian parties such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in particular, their compromise on rationalism, atheism and anti-brahminism has opened up a political space for the Hindu right.

Such speculations have so far turned out to be instances of the “pessimism of the intellect”. The fact remains that the Hindu right is yet to find any meaningful political space in Tamil Nadu. While electoral data will bear this out, let me offer two instances of visits by high-profile all-India leaders of the Hindu right to Tamil Nadu during the early 2000s, as an illustration. In 2003, Praveen Togadia, the president of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), visited the southern city of Madurai to commemorate the birth and death anniversaries of Muthuramalinga Thevar, unquestionably the most popular leader of the backward caste Thevars and the founder of the Forward Bloc in Tamil Nadu. In a city of about 12 lakh population, the organisers could gather not more than 50 people to listen to Togadia. They had to scurry around to find more people to attend the meeting but with little success. Similarly, on 2 May 2001, the all-India leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Jana Krishnamurti, a Tamil himself, came to Madurai, a smaller town, to campaign for the local BJP candidate and the Tamil Nadu state president of the BJP, Kripairiti. A public meeting was planned for him near the town bus station. There were not many people to listen to him. So he was taken to the neighbourhood where the weekly market is located. On a small dais, a few local BJP leaders were seen sitting with
hardly anyone to listen to them. From his car Krishnamurthi gauged the unwelcome situation and called off the meeting. Significantly, the DMK was in political alliance with the BJP during the 2001 elections. Neither the popularity of the late Muthuramalinga Thevar nor the mass base of the DMK could ensure a respectable attendance at these meetings. These are indeed exceptional instances. Yet, they say something about the level of popular support that is being enjoyed or not enjoyed by the Hindu right in the state.

It is my contention in this paper that it is not so much the rationalism propagated by the non-brahmin Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) headed by the iconoclastic E V Ramasamy or parties such as the DMK, that is the reason for the people of Tamil Nadu distancing themselves from the Hindu right. Instead, I argue that their long-standing propaganda against the caste-based discrimination within Hinduism (which led to a positive representation of Islam and Muslims) and the specific style of ideological compromises made by the DMK on rationalism and atheism (which opened up a space for talking of religion in terms of what it ought to be rather than what it is) have given rise to a form of Hindu religiosity among the non-brahmin Hindus in the state that is self-critical and tolerant. In arguing so, I revise some of my own earlier arguments about the Hindu right and the Dravidian movement.

I begin this paper by broadly outlining the location of Islam and Muslims in the critique of Hinduism developed by the Dravidian movement in its different incarnations. Then I move on to analyse how the ideological “compromise” of the DMK on rationalism and atheism resulted in a relatively tolerant form of religious disposition among the non-brahmin Hindus in Tamil Nadu. I take this argument further in the fourth section of the paper by providing an account of the preaching and practices of Thavathiru Kundrakudi Adigalar, an important religious leader who headed the Kundrakudi-Thiruvannamalai Adheenam, a Saivite mutt of great prominence and wealth. I conclude with how the Hindu right, in this overall context of such tolerant Hindu religiosity and the incorporation of Muslims under the Tamil identity, is forced in Tamil Nadu to partake in the political language of the Dravidian movement which is antithetical to the ultra-nationalist pan-Indian ideology of Hindutva.

2 Dravidian Movement and Islam

Following the Partition in 1947, the local units of the Muslim League were forced to shut down in the communally-divided north India. However, the League, now renamed as the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), found a home in Tamil-speaking south India. Its president was a Tamil Muslim, M Mohammed Ismail. When Ismail summoned the Indian League delegates to meet in Madras on 10 March 1948, only 30 of the 147 attended and those too were mostly from the south: “Uttar Pradesh, the historic home of the party, was practically unrepresented and so it was that the centre of the League’s activity shifted halfway across the subcontinent.” This shift from the north to the south by the IUML was, to a large measure, facilitated by the ideological climate in the Tamil region wherein the non-brahmin Dravidian movement treated both Islam and the Muslims as its allies in its fight against caste-based inequalities within Hinduism.

The ideological stance taken by the non-brahmin Self-Respect Movement founded by E V Ramasamy in the 1920s on Islam went a long way in including the Tamil-speaking Muslims under the non-brahmin/Tamil identity. Ramasamy took the Tamil Muslims to be the former dalits who courted Islam to escape the caste oppression central to Hinduism. He also advocated the conversion of dalits to Islam as a means of overcoming untouchability. Being a rationalist, he criticised the Islamic practices of purdah, Muslim priesthood, and pilgrimages. Instead, “the sayings of the Prophet...about the pursuit of knowledge and the use of reason were often cited to impress on Tamil Muslims the importance of rationality” and the Self-Respect Movement viewed Islam as superior to caste-ridden Hinduism. The absence of untouchability and idol worship, the ideology of equality, the practices of monotheism, divorce and widow remarriage were repeatedly cited to assert the superiority of Islam over Hinduism.

As an instance of Ramasamy’s stance on Islam, let me quote a speech, addressing the railway workers at Tiruchirapalli on 18 March 1947. He said, “Islam is the Arabic term for peace, humility, and dedication. Islam means brotherhood, and that is all...it is a religion having...one God, worship of a formless God, and peace, unity, mutual humility, devotion and fraternity.” Such positive representation of Islam was a result of comparison with Hinduism. Elaborating on the relative merits of Islam, he noted elsewhere,

In Islam...there is no brahmin (high caste) or Shudras (low caste) or Panchaman (least caste). In other words, Islam is founded on the principle of one god and one caste, that is, one family and one divinity. It could also be said that such a principle belongs to and needed for the Dravidians. The so-called Hindu (Aryan) religion is based on many gods and many castes...Through this arrangement of many gods-many castes, the Aryans (the Brahmins) get good benefits and privileges. The Dravidians on the other hand, find only ruin, degradation and obstacle to human rights. It is for this reason the Islamic principle is very odious to the brahmans. For the Dravidians on the contrary, Islam is opportune for the removal of degradation and achievement of welfare. Therefore, the brahmans, the Aryans are constrained to hate Islam.

Not abandoning his atheism, he still found in Islam a measure of freedom from the oppressions of brahminical Hinduism. He declared, “I am not an agent of Islam nor do I preach Islam. This is the truth, real truth...But in order to kill the devilish, dangerous and cruel snake of brahminism and Hinduism or at least to escape from the effects of its poison, this is the antidote.” In short, given the caste-based inequalities within Hinduism, Islam was, in the Self-Respect Movement’s representation, a religious ideal and a weapon against the degradation of lower caste Hindus.

Such positive representation of Islam in the public domain by the Self-Respect Movement drew the Tamil Muslims closer to it. Though wary of the atheism and socialism propagated by the Self-Respect Movement, the Tamil Muslim ideologues broadly courted the Dravidianist reading of Islam to present it...
as the “natural” religion. A case in point is A K Abdul Hameed Baqawi’s *Iyarkkai Matham* (Natural Religion) which was translated into Urdu and English. Published in 1930, it “demonstrated that Islam provided the blueprint for an ideal social order, economic structure, and political system. It showed how all the good characteristics of other religions and those of socialism were available in Islam”.

In keeping with the Dravidianist reading of Islam and Hinduism, *Iyarkkai Matham* treated the category of “Hindu” as severely fragmented and even confusing. It too, like the Self-Respect Movement, claimed that the dalits would not achieve freedom as long as they called themselves Hindus and invited them to join Islam.

There were other Muslim ideologues such as P Daud Shah, the editor of *Darul Islam*, who even more radically identified with the ideology of the Dravidian movement: “He had a six-point agenda which comprised the following: the end of *purahit* rule; the use of Tamil...as the medium for understanding their religion, Islam; the education of all Muslims in Tamil; the teaching of English and Tamil to all Muslim women to help them secure their rights; and the avoidance of Brahminical positions on ‘national’ matters.” He also laboured hard to make Tamil the liturgical language of Islam in the Tamil region.

While Ramasamy was a regular presence at the Prophet’s birth anniversary celebrations organised by the Muslims, Muslims joined hands with the Self-Respect Movement on many occasions. Perhaps the most telling instance was the anti-Hindi agitation of the 1930s launched by the Self-Respect Movement against the introduction of Hindi in schools by the Congress ministry headed by C Rajagopalachari. The Muslims’ participation in the anti-Hindi agitation was quite widespread. As J B P More records,

> Muslims participated extensively in the agitation. In Madras, Kalifullah presided over a meeting held to protest against the introduction of compulsory Hindi in schools and also the repressive policy of the government. At Dindigul...Janab Tanga Meeran led an army of people against Hindi...At the meeting that followed, the secretary of Madurai town Muslim League accused the Congress of introducing Hindi into Tamilnadu to destroy Tamil. The Madurai district Muslim league organized a grand anti-Hindi March. In Vellore in North Arcot district, a Tamil Protectors’ March was planned. Many more protest meetings and marches were organised by Muslims in various parts with the cooperation of the Self-Respecters.

The local Urdu press also objected to the propagation of Hindi.

Given the stigma of Partition, the IUML could identify itself neither with the Dravidar Kazhagam (which was the new name for the Self-Respect Movement) nor with the DMK, an offshoot of the Dravidian movement, in the immediate post-independence period. Both of them preached secession from the Indian union. Given this political constraint, the League collaborated with the Congress throughout the 1950s. However, it was never a happy experience for the League. In 1951, as a prelude to the first general election, the League approached the Congress for an electoral pact. However, the Congress high command in Delhi rejected the League’s request. In the same year, the local Congress unit entered into a pact with the League to fight the municipal election. But, once again, the party high command repudiated the pact. In 1956, the League split on the question of whether it should join hands with the Congress or not. It was suspected that the local Congress unit engineered the split. In 1957, the Congress asked the League candidates to fight the election as Congress candidates. In other words, the League would not have an independent electoral and political identity. The negotiations, not unexpectedly, broke down as Ismail thought that the demand of the Congress was tantamount to dissolution of the League.

Things changed for the League in the 1960s. With the DMK giving up the demand for secession in the early 1960s, the League turned to the DMK. The coming together of the DMK and the League was mutually beneficial. In any case, though the Muslim League kept away from the DMK during the 1950s, a sizeable number of Muslims joined the DMK during this period and “(b) by 1961, even a cursory survey of DMK office-bearers shows that there was a significant Muslim presence among them”.

The major outcome of this collaboration between the non-brahmin Dravidian movement and the Muslims is found in a slogan which Tamil Muslims continue to use till today *Islam engal vazhi, inba Tamil engal moshi* (Islam is our path, sweet Tamil is our language). As Abdul Fakhri rightly argues, “Muslims in Tamil Nadu perceived themselves as Dravidians and Tamils, and defined themselves as ‘minority’ communities only infrequently”.

### 3 The DMK and Religion

The incorporation of the Muslims as part of the broad identity of the non-brahmin Tamils is supplemented by a form of non-brahmin Hindu religiosity, calibrated by the long-standing campaign against brahminical privileges in Hinduism, which, to a certain extent, was self-critical and tolerant. It is the softening of the stance on rationalism and atheism by the DMK in the 1950s which both aligned it with and, at the same time, facilitated such religious disposition.

In an interview given soon after he became the chief minister of Tamil Nadu in 1967, C N Annadurai, the founder of the DMK, noted: “I was always pleading for real faith in God”. Drawing on his own engagement with the question of theism and atheism, he continued,

> ...I wrote the script for *Swargavasal*, a film which proved quite popular in Tamilnad. In this, I discussed the theme of atheism and theism. I have drawn the conclusion which I felt was reasonable that reliance on too many gods and rituals was not necessary for faith in God. I said true faith in God is to have faith in fellow human beings... Of course, I am a rationalist who wants to end unreason and blind faith in the people. But genuine belief and true faith in God should be there amongst the people so that it helps them to become more and more aware and conscious of their duties and responsibilities to their fellow human beings.

Importantly, such a position on religion, i.e., what religious faith ought to be rather than what it is was being advanced by the DMK leadership from the 1950s onwards. For instance, in a speech delivered during the early 1950s, Annadurai noted:

> We want a God who asks of us only our love. We refuse to have anything to do with gods which want us to give them palaces, priests to...
serve as their middlemen, wives, mistresses and costly jewels and festivals... If only God were to address the people directly, he would say ‘How foolish you are, I created the world... Above all, I gave you intelligence with which to differentiate between right and wrong... All I want is that you should love the poor and downtrodden and try to improve their lot.25

The reasons for this ideological transformation of the DMK from being a party propagating atheism and rationalism to one defining what is true faith in god, is, at least in part, due to the logic of electoral politics. Amidst an electorate which is predominantly composed of believers, atheism may not be a workable ideological plank. In other words, the DMK has to align itself with the pre-existing Tamil common sense. The so-called “Salem Incident” and its aftermath offer us a glimpse of this connection. During January 1971, the DMK organised a “Superstition Eradication Conference” at Salem. In the course of the conference, several posters depicting the so-called obscurities of Hindu mythologies were taken out in a procession.26 During the procession, an effigy of the Hindu Vaishnavee god Rama was beaten with chappals and set aflame in public.

The vociferous Democratic Front, comprising the Old Congress (the so-called Syndicate) and its allies, used the event to evoke pan-Hindu and anti-DMK sympathies. It printed thousands of leaflets carrying photographs of the posters of the DMK procession with the following message: “These are the photos of the anti-god procession held in Salem under the protection of the DMK government. Should we still trust the atheist DMK? Must we cast our sacred votes for them?”. With the 1971 state assembly elections around the corner, the DMK came out with an immediate rebuttal. Party functionaries including M Karunanidhi himself repeated at public meeting after public meeting, that they were a party of believers, a position that the party took from the 1950s onwards. The spirit of the DMK’s campaign was reported thus:

There will never again be any unseemly controversy as to whether the ruling DMK believes in god or not... this particular issue is fully and finally settled, and there need be no more any doubts over this... Chief Minister Karunanidhi and the DMK party treasurer and popular matinee idol M G Ramachandran have been assuring the Tamil people that they are not non-believers. They have been asserting in every one of their election meetings that it was wrong to condemn them as atheists. The DMK quickly followed this up by issuing thousands of posters and newspaper advertisements claiming that it was only during the DMK rule of the state, neither gave up his rationalism nor in- flicted the faith of the devotees. He said, “Whatever might be my views on religion, I am not against others believing in the emergence of the idols. But in this case, according to a geologist, there was no evidence of an explosion of the earth...” He further added, “The essence of the writings and the teachings of Adi Sankara and Swami Vivekananda is that religion should not deceive the people... If deliberately a Vinayaka is planted in a place and people are asked to believe it as automatic emergence, it will be a blot on Hinduism”.29 Thus, invoking science and religiosity at once, he justified the removal of the idol.

DMK’s Critique of Religion

If the DMK courted certain forms of religiosity as enabling, the non-brahmin Hindu devotees too courted some parts of the DMK’s critique of religion. Let me cite two instances in this regard from Charles Ryerson’s important but much neglected book. He writes, “A wealthy Zamindar of the old order surprised me by saying, ‘You know, there is great deal of DMK in all of us. After all, why should only the Brahmin have certain religious privileges?’ Ryerson’s encounter with a non-brahmin merchant is equally instructive. When Ryerson asked him whether he is a Hindu, he replied,

You can say I am one or not. Gods are poetic symbols of ideas. Murugan, sitting on the mountain with his spear and peacock is the symbol of nature. Brahma symbolizes creation, Siva destruction and Vishnu preservation. But the Brahmin priests and other religious leaders get rid of the poetry. There is virtually no temple to brahma in India. Why? Because brahma is the symbol of creativity. The Brahmins and other religious leaders want no creativity. Creativity is a threat to them. They want unquestioning acceptance of the structure... they do not want creativity or birth of new ideas.30

The position of these two religious interlocutors is akin to that of the DMK’s position on religion. The similarity of the positions will be clear from the following two statements by Karunanidhi which, in a certain sense, summarised the DMK’s position on religion: (1) “…at no time had the DMK been a party of atheists, but it would not allow exploitation in the name of God”. (2) “The real issue is not whether the DMK accepted God but whether it conducted itself in a manner acceptable to God.”

It is not only that the politics of the Dravidian movement, in various ways, reinvented the religiosity of non-brahmin Hindu...
devotees as self-critical and tolerant, but such religiosity also
found institutional acceptance in Tamil Nadu, endorsed by
non-brahmin Hindu religious leaders. I will illustrate this by
journeying through the life of Kundrakudi Adigalar.

4 Life of a Hindu Preacher

Clad in saffron and sporting a flowing beard, Sri Deivasigam-
ani Arunachala Desikar (1925-95), popularly known as Kun-
drakudi Adigalar, headed the Kundrakudi-Thiruvannamalai
Adheenam for over four decades. When he died in 1995, his
death was mourned by a wide spectrum of people in Tamil
Nadu, including a large number of atheists and religious
minorities. As we shall see, for him, religion signified a cele-
bration of the human will and spirited engagement with this-
worldly inequalities – a form of religiosity that the D MK has
embraced for its own reasons.

When he became the 45th head of the Kundrakudi-
Thiruvannamalai Adheenam in 1952, Tamil Nadu was swept
by Ramasamy's atheistic propaganda. The Saivite orthodoxy
looked to Adigal to counter Ramasamy. Arul Neri Thiruk-
ootam, then a forum of the Saivite orthodoxy, mobilised
Adigal's consummate debating skill in an attempt to regain
the ground already lost to the atheistic Ramasamy. This
phase of antagonism between Ramasamy and Adigal did
not last long.

In 1955, both of them met and their early conflict gave way
to years of active collaboration. Adigal relinquished neither
the saffron nor his Saivism, but declared, "I am doing what-
ever is possible for me towards destroying caste and caste
system as well as towards social reform. I am neither scared
nor worried about anyone's opposition. I am waiting to partici-
pate fully in Periyar's anti-caste agitations." Soon, caste and
untouchability became recurring themes in the pattimandrams
(publicly staged debates) organised by him. In 1970, when the
DMK government brought in the Archakas Act, a legislation
permitting any Hindu, irrespective of his caste, to become a
temple priest, it was met with stiff opposition from the Tamil
brahmin orthodoxy. Adigal distanced himself from the cam-
paign against the Act and Theiviga Peravai, an association of
Saivite mutts of which Adigal was the most prominent and ac-
tive member, extended its full support to it. His life-long strug-
gle against the caste system made him rather critical of ortho-
dox Hinduism. In 1983, participating in a conference of the
heads of Hindu religious mutts, he asked,

Has any head of the mutts who talks of Hindu unity, ever tried to ap-
point a Hindu from any oppressed caste as the head of the mutt?...If a
member of the oppressed caste converts to Christianity, he can become
a cardinal; he can become a priest. The situation is different in Hindu-
ism. Have you at least allowed the oppressed to read the Vedas?

The finest moment of Adigal's privileging the wider social
concerns over narrow Saivism was perhaps in 1971. As we have
already seen, the Superstition Eradication Conference or-
ganised by the D MK in that year led to a bitter controversy. Adigal
intervened in the controversy, but on the side of the atheists.
He issued a brief public statement in which he minced no
words about where his sympathies were: "Today theism stands
for the welfare of the upper castes; and atheism stands for the
welfare of the majority of the Tamil people."

Adigal was deeply committed to the cause of the Tamil lan-
guage which was in keeping with the age-old Saivite tradition
in Tamil Nadu and the D MK. In 1965, in the thick of the anti-
Hindi agitation, he led a procession in Kundrakudi against the
imposition of Hindi and courted arrest. It was the same spirit
which inspired him to turn down the invitation by the Dikshi-
tars, to enter the sanctum sanctorum of the famous Chidamb-
aram temple in 1983. He publicly resented the "archanas" in
the temple being conducted in Sanskrit which most devotees
did not understand. In fact, it is well known that the D MK
government encouraged Tamil archanas in temples.

Like the D MK, he combined science and religiosity with ease.
His passion for science took its manifestation in the rural
reconstruction programmes which he launched in Kundrakudi
and the neighbouring villages in 1977. Inspired by Chinese
communes, he worked hard to turn Kundrakudi and other vil-
lages in its neighbourhood into self-sufficient communities by
utilising local resources and by taking science and technology
to the people through village planning forums. With the help
of the expertise of scientists from the Central Electro-Chemical
laboratory at Karaikudi, he recast the resource-use pattern
in these villages and established a situation of near full
employment. The "Kundrakudi pattern" has come to be part of the
vocabulary of rural development. In 1992, the Ministry for
Science and Technology presented Adigal with the national
award for popularising scientific attitude among the people.
As V C Kulanthsaisamy, the former vice chancellor of the Indira
Gandhi National Open University, remarked, “To our know-
ledge, the only religious leader to have received the national
award for popularising science and scientific attitude among
the people is Adigal”. While a picture of Lenin hung on his
wall, he used to tell of Marx thus:

The philosophers before Marx wrote of what the world was and what
the world is. No philosopher has said of what the world should be and
what changes are needed. Not only do we have the right to think about
how the world should be and to change it, but it is our duty. That is
Marx's philosophy.

During the last phase of his life, he spent a substantial amount
of time and energy, despite failing health, towards bringing har-
mony among different religious groups. While he displayed tre-
mendous courage in visiting the communal riot-affected Kanya-
kumari district in 1982, he unequivocally condemned the demo-
lition of the Babri Masjid. He willingly participated in every
effort made even by small groups, towards communal peace. It
is not surprising that a large number of Muslims participated in
his funeral without any apprehension about the much larger
number of non-brahmin Hindus who were present.

Adigal's societal concerns and this-worldly religiosity is per-
haps nowhere more explicit than in a resolution passed by the
Arul Neri Thirukootam under his headship in Tiruchirapalli
in 1982. The general body of the organisation endorsed its
faith in god and proceeded to resolve that it “should treat
organisations like Dravidar Kazhagam, which are involved in
the abolution of untouchability and caste, and communist
movements, which are involved in establishing a poverty-less society, as allies; and brahminism and its organisations, which insist that caste difference, poverty and destitution are results of karma, as foes..." Thus for him, religion, atheism, and communism could be partners in envisioning a world of equality. If Adigal could get such a resolution passed, spirituality for him meant something different from what it is normally believed to be. As he put it, “A lot of them believe that spirituality depends on renunciation. It is a mistake. Hating the world is not spirituality. Understanding the world, living in it, and progressing along with the world, is spirituality.”

It was the proponents of the Hindu right, the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu J Jayalalithaa and Jayendra Saraswati, the Sankaracharya of Kanchi mutt who chose not to condole his death.

5 Dilemmas of the Hindu Right
The incorporation of the Muslims under the broad Tamil identity and the non-brahmin Tamil identity being marked by forms of self-critical and tolerant religiosity, the Hindu right’s agenda of producing a pan-Hindu identity has not met with much success in Tamil Nadu. Its desperation is evident in the fact that it is constantly trying to usurp the Tamil identity as its own but with hardly any success. I will conclude this paper with an account of the efforts made by the BJP to present itself as regional and treat the Tamil identity as Hindu.

In 2000, L Ganesan, the general secretary of the Tamil Nadu unit of the BJP, appealed to Murali Manohar Joshi, the then union minister for human resource development, to declare Tamil as a classical language and accord it the status of an official language of the Indian Union. He also wanted the year 2000 to be declared as the year of the Tamil language. Ganesan’s appeal, which shares a close kinship with the language of the Dravidian parties, in particular the DMK, is not an idiosyncratic moment in the career of the BJP in Tamil Nadu. From the late 1990s onwards, the BJP has been using every occasion to declare its love for Tamil. The BJP’s national executive committee meeting held in Madras in 1999 is a case in point. While the venue was named after the ancient Tamil poet of unrivalled fame, Thiruvalluvar, the meeting hall was named after Subramania Bharati, a modern Tamil poet. One hundred couplets from Thirukural, authored by Thiruvalluvar, were translated into English and Hindi and displayed at the venue.

The choice of Subramania Bharati is of no surprise. He had been so versatile a poet that his writings have something for everyone. Thanks to its sheer pliability, his poems have been selectively appropriated by the Hindu right and the communists at once. Above all, he was an uncompromising nationalist. But the story of Thiruvalluvar and Thirukural is different. Written at a time when nations and nationalism were not even remotely on the horizon, Thirukural espoused a “transnational” universalism. In the hands of ideologues of the Dravidian movement, it metamorphosed during the 20th century, into a secular text of Tamilness. Though the Saivites battled the Dravidian ideologues to appropriate Thiruvalluvar as their own, it is the latter who prevailed at the end of the day.

Post-1967, when the DMK came to power, Thiruvalluvar and Thirukural were memorialised as the official icons of Tamil secularism. I may also mention here that Kundraadi Adigalar was instrumental in distributing printed copies of the Thirukural at the graduation ceremonies of the Madras University.

Burdened by this history, the BJP had to work hard to appropriate Thiruvalluvar. For instance, when Karunanidhi, as the then chief minister of Tamil Nadu, unveiled a 133-feet statue of Thiruvalluvar at the confluence of the three seas at Kanyakumari in January 2000, L Ganesan broke into an emotive speech: “Let us speak in Tamil; let us take the pledge that we shall write our names in pure Tamil. Even foreigners are learning Tamil. Our lack of interest in Tamil is regrettable.” He also promised the audience that the union government would get the statue of Thiruvalluvar at Bangalore, which could not be unveiled in the face of opposition from Kannada hardliners, unveiled.

Let me now turn to another instance of the BJP trying to court a Tamil identity, i.e., the contentious order by the Tamil Nadu government which decreed that Tamil or the mother tongue of the child, would be the medium of instruction in primary schools from 2000-01 onwards. Though the Madras High Court struck down the Government Order, it had many defenders. The state unit of the BJP was one of them. Ganesan declared, “This is a bold step taken by the Tamil Nadu government to save the age-old Tamil...this is not merely a language issue but an issue of self-respect. Whatever be the opposition to the government order, we shall stand by the order.” He assured the Tamil Nadu government that if Tamil was made the medium of instruction even in colleges, the BJP would endorse it.

For those who doubt the intentions of the BJP’s love for Tamil, Ganesan had his own stock of personal stories. Writing in Kumudam, a popular Tamil weekly, he said,

In my younger days, we used to have competitions about who could speak in Tamil without using English words. It was in the 1960s. We had an organisation named Vivekanandar Peravai. Mostly medical college students and intern doctors were its members. We all would go round the Bragatheesvarar temple (in Thanjavur). Till we left the temple complex, we had to talk in Tamil without using English words. It would take about 45 minutes. If anyone used English words, we would keep count of them. Whoever had used the largest number of English words should buy peanuts for the rest.

According to him, he did not compromise his love for Tamil even after becoming an employee of the state revenue department: “I used to put my signature in Tamil. When an officer expressed his reluctance to give my salary because my signature was in Tamil, I told him to keep the money and walked away. My friends yelled at me and called me crazy. Despite all their reprimands, I wrote only in Tamil.” He also noted that he conducted elocution competitions in Tamil among the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (rss) cadres after he joined the outfit.

While all these moves are a sign of the desperation of the Hindu right, they have fail to yield much political dividends. This is because the Hindu right is not able to align the regional Hinduisms of the DMK variety with its pan-Indian vision. The region asserts itself whenever any effort is made to align it with the national, thwarting the pan-Indian imagination of the Hindu right. Let me illustrate this claim by citing an
instance. In 1998, the Hindu Protection Force, a Hindu right organisation, sought legal intervention against Tamil ‘archanas’ in temple claiming that “Devanagari is supposed to be the language of communication with gods”. It is obviously a move to align local Hinduism with the pan-Indian one. There were widespread protests in Tamil Nadu against the minuscule Hindu Protection Force. Supporting the Hindu Protection Force, the Hindu Munnani, another Hindu right organisation, claimed that the language of worship was a matter to be decided by the Hindu devotees alone. Responding to the Hindu Munnani, the Tamil Desiya iyakkam, a proto-Tamil nationalist organisation, set up ballot boxes in important temples throughout Tamil Nadu. The voting was secret and the devotees used printed ballot papers to express their preferences. The vote was overwhelmingly more than 90% in favour of Tamil “archanas” in temples, a preference which is at once that of the DMK and Kandraduki Adigal.

In a manner of concluding, one may say that the specific political history of Tamil Nadu during the past several decades has produced a common sense wherein the othering of the Muslim against the non-brahmin Hindu is relatively a difficult possibility at least, as of now. Alongside, the DMK has endorsed a form of a non-brahmin Hindu religiosity which transcends the opposition between rationality and religion and places its emphasis on the role of both of religion and rationality in expanding human freedom and equality. These historical coordinates and outcomes have so far stood against the Hindu right in the state which is deeply religious. Secularism may claim itself to be a universal idea; yet “its” local manifestations alone will tell us what political work it does and how.

NOTES
1 Wendy Brown, Politics Out of History (Prince-
2 For instance, see Anandhi S, Contending Identi-
3 Ibid, pp 51-54.
4 Signifi  cantly, as in the case of the Hindu Right,
5 John Wright Jr, “The Muslim League in South India
7 Dikshitars are a sub-sect of the Saivite brahmins
8 ibid, p 13.
9 Wright Jr, “The Muslim League in South India
10 Wright Jr, “The Muslim League in South India
11 ibid, p 56.
12 S Anandhi, “A Rebel in Saffron”, Economic & Polit-
13 Fakhri, Dravidian Sahibs and Brahmin Mus-
14 ibid, p 70.
15 ibid, p 68.
16 JB P More, The Political Evolution of Muslims in
17 Foundry report for the Second Half of May
18 Wright Jr, “The Muslim League in South India
19 D K Sami, “Women, Hindutva and Brahminism:
20 Fakhri, Dravidian Sahibs and Brahmin Mus-
21 ibid, p 72.
22 ibid, p 137.
23 K S Ramanujam, The Big Change: The Success
24 ibid, pp 250-51.
25 Charles Ryerson, Regionalism and Religion: The
26 ibid, p 179.
27 K S Ramanujam, Challenge and Response: An
28 Ryerson, Regionalism and Religion, pp 177-78.
29 Often, this overcoming of the opposition be-
30 Ryerson, Regionalism and Religion, pp 195-96.
31 Ryerson, Regionalism and Religion, p 195-96.
32 Mr Naicker, a confi rmed non-believer, an open
33 This section is mostly drawn from M S S Pandian
34 In a manner of speaking, this is similar to the
35 Dikshitaras are a sub-sect of the Saivite brahmins
36 It will be a grave mistake to equate the popular
37 It is important not to absolutise what I term as
38 Charles Ryerson, Regionalism and Religion,
40 It may be recalled here that M Karunanidhi,
41 Lord Ram as a fi gment of human imagination.