

The Dravidian Race in Tamil Social Thought

Subjects: [Ethnic Studies](#) | [Religion](#)

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In the closing decades of the 19th century, a wide range of Tamil authors and public speakers in colonial India became acutely interested in the notion of a Dravidian “race”. This conception of a Dravidian race, rooted in European racial and philological scholarship on the peoples of South India, became an important symbol of Tamil cultural, religious, and social autonomy in colonial and post-colonial Tamil thought, art, politics, and literature.

Dravidian nationalism

Tamil nationalism

Tamil

South India

race in South India

Self-Respect Movement

Periyar

Iyothee Thass

1. Introduction

“The words “Dravidian” and “Dravidians” are not new products of our imagination.... If you want this to become good and clear to you, go flip through the textbook on the history of the Hindu nation read in our country’s schools today. No matter which textbook you pick up, the terms “Dravidian” and “Dravidians” will be on the front page, and their history will be written out. After this, flip to the second page and the titles “Aryan” and “Aryans” will be given, and their history will be given-whether correctly or not. So, that is to say that although I and others have newly taken them up today, the terms “Dravidian” and “Aryan” that were imparted to you in your childhood, as well as the findings of research on the true things that happened a great time ago, are nothing new. Because of this, they are the ABCs of the history of our land ^[1].

—E.V. “Periyar” Ramasamy, “Who are the Dravidians?”

As the famous Tamil South Indian social reformist E.V. “Periyar” ^[2] Ramasamy argues above, the terms “Dravidian” and “Aryan” ^[3] have long occupied a central space in Tamil public thought. Since the late 19th century, a wide range of important non-Brahmin Tamil social, political, religious, and cultural movements and thinkers have used the terms “Dravidian” and “Aryan” to describe two contrasting currents in Tamil civilizational history. In this broad body of discourse, “Dravidian” denotes the social and cultural values native to the Tamil country ^[4], while “Aryan” denotes Brahmanical Hinduism, the Sanskrit language, Brahmin caste privilege, and other “foreign” accretions to Tamil society. Although different Tamil movements and thinkers envision ancient “Dravidian” society in sometimes radically different ways, these movements and thinkers share a core set of assumptions about the relationship between the ancient “Dravidian” Tamil past, the Tamil sociopolitical present, and the aspirational Tamil future. These assumptions can be summarized as follows: Whereas Tamil South India was once home to a prosperous and socially equitable Dravidian society, Dravidian civilization gradually decayed under the influence of Aryan ideas

and people arriving from North India. The once egalitarian, right-minded, and purely Dravidian Tamil society fell under the yoke of Brahmanical caste hierarchy, superstitious, and unjust Brahmanical religious ideals, and foreign Sanskrit literary and linguistic aesthetics. By rejecting these “Aryan” values and consciously returning to the ethics of ancient “Dravidian” civilization, the Tamil society of the present day can redress major social ills, including caste discrimination, untouchability, the oppression of women, economic injustice, and the erasure or debilitation of Tamil culture and the Tamil language in an ethnically plural Indian nation.

Contemporary Tamil usage of the terms “Dravidian” and “Aryan” developed in the 19th century through extended dialogue with Western thought on racial peoplehood. As in other European colonies across the colonial world, the administrators of British India systematically promoted contemporary Western scholarship as the sole source of objective knowledge about the human societies of the world. Accordingly, as Periyar describes above, Indian school children were exposed from youth to Western racial scholarship of this era, which used the terms “Dravidian” and “Aryan” to label two major racial-linguistic groups in ancient South Asian history. Western scholars identified the Aryans as ancient racial relatives of the white races of Europe and attributed the emergence of complex culture and thought in South Asian history to the ancient migration of this Aryan race into South Asia. Most Western scholars conceived of Dravidians as a dark-skinned, savage race native to South Asia that was subjugated or displaced by the immigrating Aryan people. Although the indigenous Dravidians initially fell to the incoming Aryan settlers, many generations of life among the Dravidians led to the gradual degeneration of the Aryan racial lineage and higher Indic civilization.

Non-Brahmin Tamil thinkers’ usage of the terms “Aryan” and “Dravidian” keeps the structure of this Aryan invasion narrative intact, while reversing the moral valence of the dominant Western recension of the story. Instead of crediting the Aryans with introducing high culture to South Asia, Tamil versions argue that it was the Aryans who corrupted an initially prosperous Dravidian society. This position builds on an important work of scholarship by the Scottish missionary Robert Caldwell, which suggests that the ancient Dravidians were a literate, self-sufficient society before the arrival of the Aryans. Tamil authors of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were transparent about the influences they took from colonial sources: Tamil scholars and activists frequently cited Western scholarship about the racial history of South Asia to advance arguments about ancient Tamil civilization and Tamil sociocultural identity [5]. Although Tamil thought and rhetoric of the subsequent decades relied far less on citations from colonial scholarship, major structural features of earlier stages of Tamil discourse on the Dravidian past remained in place.

Many works of scholarship on modern Tamil society have used analytics such as caste politics and ethnolinguistic nationalism to analyze Tamil discourse on Dravidian identity and the ancient Dravidian past. While this scholarship offers many critical insights into the processes that shape public Tamil usage of the terms “Dravidian” and “Aryan”, focusing specifically on the history of “Dravidian” race talk in Tamil public thought allows us to attend to how the terms “Dravidian” and “Aryan” came to denote various dimensions of public social, cultural, and religious identity. Colonial thought on the Aryan and Dravidian races proved particularly well-suited for these non-Brahmin Tamil thinkers’ reformist projects because it could be used to describe meaningful alignments of sociocultural power and privilege in the colonial Tamil country. After Indian independence, the terms “Aryan” and “Dravidian” remained

useful terms to describe important alignments of Tamil social and cultural politics, both within the Tamil country and in a multiethnic Indian nation demographically and politically dominated by North India.

2. Genealogy, Philology, and the Aryans

Before they became mainstays of Tamil public discourse on Tamil identity, the terms “Aryan” and “Dravidian” played a central structural role in Western thought on South Asian linguistic, racial, and civilizational history. Although Tamil reinterpretations of these terms make many important changes to their original colonial meanings, modern Tamil usage of the terms “Dravidian” and “Aryan” incorporates important conceptual features from the Western scholastic conversations in which the terms first emerged.

Around the turn of the 19th century, the English philologist William Jones presented a set of findings that both introduced the concept of an Aryan race to Western thought and inaugurated the Western academic discipline of comparative philology. In a famous 1786 address to the Asiatic Society of Calcutta, Jones described a set of grammatical and lexical similarities he had identified between Sanskrit, the language of classical Hindu texts, and the classical European languages of Ancient Greek and Latin. Jones argued that Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin showed too many similarities to each other for these similarities to have occurred by accident. Rather, Jones argued, Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin must all derive from a common, ancient linguistic ancestor. In fact, Jones went on to argue that a staggering number of notable European and Near Eastern languages can be grouped together into this “Indo-European” language family due to similarities in their core vocabulary and syntax ^[6].

Although much of William Jones’s work deals with philological data like comparative word lists and phonological rules, Jones’s interest in charting linguistic descent was not strictly philological. Rather, from the beginning, Jones approached linguistic descent as a way to study the ancient movement and dispersal of ethnic peoples. While Jones fiercely contested many of the ethnological conclusions presented in 15th- and 16th-century Christian genealogies of nations, he shared these works’ starting assumption that the histories of all the ethnic peoples of the contemporary world begin with the dispersal of peoples recorded in Chapter 10 of the Bible’s Book of Genesis ^[7]. Jones presented his own philological project as an objective, scientific approach to the same question of human origins that Christian genealogies of nations also explored using less reliable methods ^[8]. Jones argued that the historical expansions and fissures of ancient language families that philological study discovered were direct records of the ancient migrations and fissures of discrete ethnolinguistic peoples. Accordingly, Jones interpreted the linguistic similarities he discovered among Indo-European languages as an indication that the modern speakers of these languages descended from a single Indo-European *ethnic people*.

Given Jones’s assumption that linguistic history records the history of discrete ethnolinguistic peoples, Jones’s discovery of an indisputable linguistic link between Europe and distant regions of Asia presented a major problem to European self-understanding. Generally speaking, the rapid European colonial expansion of the 18th and 19th centuries greatly incentivized European thinkers to find systematic ways to differentiate white Europeans from the non-European peoples their colonial missions encountered. Jones’s findings, however, established that Europeans shared some component of their ancient history with a large category of Indo-European peoples that could not be

categorized as European by any meaningful measure. The relationship between white Europeans' ancient ancestors and these non-Western peoples became a critical piece in Western attempts to unify the ethnic groups of the world into a single world history.

Jones's "Indo-Aryan" language family became a pivotal piece of Western attempts to connect the history of white Europeans to the Indo-European linguistic regions of South Asia. Jones's Indo-Aryan language family consists of two branches that correspond to two related ancestor languages, Sanskrit and Old Persian. Importantly, both Sanskrit and Ancient Persian are languages associated with major bodies of ancient sacred literature: Sanskrit is the language of the Brahmanical Hindu textual canon, while Old Persian and its descendant languages are the languages of the Zoroastrian textual tradition. Jones named the Indo-Aryan language family for a term, *ārya* ("high-born"), that appears in both the Hindu Vedas and Zoroastrian Avestas.

3. Indology and the Aryan Invasion Theory

Unsurprisingly, Jones's discovery of the Indo-European language family had profound implications on European approaches to studying South Asian history. Jones's work highlighted Sanskrit-language Hindu texts as uniquely important documents to not only the history of South Asia, but also to the history of European civilization. The putative Indo-European link between ancient European thought and ancient Hindu texts fascinated both specialist scholars of South Asia and non-specialist European thinkers. While some Western scholars of South Asia, such as the influential English historian James Mill, argued that Sanskrit-language Hindu scripture contained nothing worthwhile to say about Aryan racial history ^[9], other important Western scholars argued that core ideas and concepts in the Vedas, Upanishads, and other ancient Sanskrit-language Hindu texts derive from the same Aryan civilizational legacy that culminated in Western civilization.

The early 19th century saw the emergence of a new Western scholarly discipline, Indology, specifically dedicated to the translation and interpretation of Sanskrit-language Hindu texts. Indologists considered the Sanskrit-language Brahmanical Hindu canon to be a distillation of the fundamental social, cultural, and religious values of Indic society. While not all Western scholars and British colonial administrators took this type of text-based approach to studying contemporary South Asian society, Indological scholarship on Brahmanical literature deeply influenced both Western thought on South Asian society and British approaches to governing the colonized Hindu societies of British India.

Indological scholarship greatly built out Western thought on the Aryan race's role in ancient South Asian history. Indologists like Max Müller and H.T. Colebrooke expanded on Jones's contentions that (a) the writers of the Vedas belonged to an "Aryan" people and (b) that ancient Hindu scriptures recorded information about actual events in South Asian history. Indologists seized on a series of passages in the Rg Veda that describe an interaction between people described using the words *ārya* (literally, "high-born") and *dāsa* ^[10]. Indologists read these passages to say that a distinct racial people known as the *ārya* moved into a region and encountered another racial group called the *dāsa* already living there. Although the *dāsa* took up arms against the *ārya*, the *ārya* were able to vanquish the *dāsa* and take dominion of their lands.

This interpretation generated what became popularly known in Western thought as the Aryan Invasion Theory. The Aryan Invasion Theory uses this clash between the ancient “Aryans” and their *dāsa* opponents to describe the broader process of Aryan expansion into South Asia. The Aryan Invasion Theory posits that an Aryan race, descended from the ancient Indo-Europeans, entered South Asia across the Hindu Kush and conquered and absorbed a stratum of racial peoples already settled in South Asia. Although the ancient Aryans were able to extend their influence across the Indian Subcontinent, centuries of cultural and genealogical intermixture with non-Aryan races led to the gradual decline of Aryan civilization. Indologists and other Western observers used this theory to argue the Hindu Indians of the present, while culturally rooted in the vestiges of the Aryan tradition, had lost their connection to the original Aryan civilizational legacy that produced these works.

The Aryan Invasion Theory aligns in multiple important ways with 19th-century Western thought on racial difference. On one hand, the Aryan Invasion Theory approaches Indic history through the model of racial descent, a staple of Western thought on race in both William Jones’s work and preceding Christian genealogies of nations. The Aryan Invasion Theory uses the influence of non-Aryan races to explain how the Indo-Aryans became disconnected from the font of Aryan thought that produced the great classical societies of Europe. The Aryan Invasion Theory also integrates the concept of racial descent with developing Western notions about civilization and human social evolution. The racial-evolutionary distinction between the Aryans and the non-Aryan inhabitants of prehistoric South Asia is an essential piece of colonial recensions of the Aryan Invasion Theory. Western scholars presented ancient non-Aryan peoples not only as ethnically different from the Aryans, but also far less intellectually and culturally dynamic than their Aryan counterparts. The heuristic of Aryan vs. non-Aryan became a major interpretive lens in Western investigations of South Asian social and cultural life. For instance, the British ethnographer H.H. Risley used the racial binary of Aryan and Dravidian to structure his official censuses of the administrative regions of British India ^[11]. Risley used anthropometry and other pseudo-scientific measurements to attempt to establish the proportion of Dravidian and Aryan features demonstrated by each demographic group in a given region. Risley argued that racial differences were the ultimate basis of social segregation in Indian life. While this conclusion contradicts the Indological position that caste derives from the rules and concepts recorded in Sanskrit-language Hindu scripture, it retains the conceptual connection between Aryan racial identity and civilizational or social elevation.

Indological scholarship also imparted new social and political privileges on the Brahmin caste communities of British India. Indologists read Brahmanical social codes like the Laws of Manu as universal codes of conduct in Hindu society, and presented them to colonial British administrators as the basis for colonial Indian law. Although Brahmanical customs had long been deeply integrated into social life across South Asia, the institutionalization of textual Brahmanical social codes gave Brahmanical social law unprecedented political and social reach. Indological scholarship also dismissed or disregarded modes of Hindu practice that did not have recognizable parallels in Brahmanical Hindu literature. This further amplified the Brahmin community’s customary religious authority by undercutting potential competitors.

4. Robert Caldwell and the Dravidians

Western scholars' preeminent interest in the Aryans left little space for the study of the non-Aryan races in South Asian history. The Dravidians, like other "native" South Asian races like the Turanians and Lemurians, first appeared in Western scholarship as a foil to Aryan history. Whereas Indologists described the ancient Aryans as virile, independent, and intellectually sophisticated, they characterized the native races of South Asia as feminine, passive, savage, and fundamentally primitive. Descriptions of Dravidian religion and society often did not center on empirical historical or linguistic data, but rather on the ways that Dravidians resemble primitive societies in other parts of the world. These descriptions often integrate concepts like fetishism and totemism, developed in the works of Western scholars like E.B. Tylor and Émile Durkheim to describe modes of thinking common to "primitive" peoples across the modern world ^[12].

The 1841 work by Scottish missionary Robert Caldwell, *A comparative grammar of the Dravidian, or South-Indian family of languages*, broke conspicuously with this Western scholarly trend ^[13]. Rather than defining the ancient "Dravidians" through their opposition to the Aryan race, Caldwell's *Comparative grammar* uses comparative philology to argue that the contemporary spoken languages of South India descend from a single common "Dravidian" ancestor. Parallel to William Jones's assumptions about the Indo-European languages and peoples, Caldwell argued that these linguistic links reflect the common origins of the Dravidian peoples of South India. While Caldwell does not unseat the Aryans from their customary place of racial supremacy in Western accounts of South Asian history, he does argue that the ancient Dravidians had reached a modest level of civilizational accomplishment before the arrival of Aryans from North India. Caldwell reaches this conclusion by analyzing the proto-Dravidian vocabulary terms he was able to reconstruct from philological comparison. While there were no Dravidian root-words for complex concepts like "soul", "reason", or "memory", Caldwell argued, there were Dravidian root-words for more practical concepts like "agriculture", "weaving", and "warfare" ^[14]. Although it was not until the arrival of the Brahmins (i.e., Aryans) from the north that the ancient Dravidians became acquainted with more advanced forms of thought, it was also apparent to Caldwell that the ancient Dravidians were not the beastly race depicted in mainstream Indological scholarship.

5. Modern Tamil Interpretations of Dravidian History

By the late 19th century, literate Tamil audiences had become exposed to the work of Caldwell and other Western scholars of Indic racial history. Several sociopolitical factors influenced how Tamil thinkers and movements of the colonial era approached Western thought on the Aryans and Dravidians. First, colonial administrative policy dramatically favored the Brahmin caste communities of the Madras Presidency, the colonial administrative unit into which the Tamil country was classified. Although Brahmins accounted for just over three percent of the population of the state in 1912, they occupied a majority of seats at various levels of colonial legislature and judiciary ^[15]. Moreover, colonial social codes systematically deferred to Brahmanical texts and customs, including Brahmin demands for caste-segregated streetcars, water tanks, and roadways ^[16]. In colonial Madras Presidency schools and universities, the Sanskrit language and Brahmanical Hindu texts received dramatically more funding than South Indian vernacular languages did, reflecting the colonial valuation of the "Aryan" source language over subsequent Indic vernaculars.

A second important impetus for Tamil thinkers' interest in the Dravidian Tamil past was the rediscovery and reprinting of a number of ancient Tamil literary texts. This project, spearheaded by C. Damodaram Pillai and U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, exposed literate Tamil audiences to Tamil texts that offered a notably different picture of Tamil antiquity than was implied in Indological scholarship. Whereas classical texts from the Sangam period of Tamil literature show relatively little direct influence from Brahmanical Hinduism and the Sanskritic literary tradition, later Tamil literature incorporates far more Sanskrit loanwords and references to the broader Brahmanical tradition ^[17]. The gradual Sanskritization of Tamil literature through history powerfully substantiates the core assertion of Dravidian-centered readings of Tamil history: the oldest Tamil texts document a Tamil society relatively absent of Brahmanical caste ^[18] or purity distinctions. The gods venerated in ancient Tamil texts, as well as the traditions of worship surrounding these gods, differ from the chief figures in the Brahmanical pantheon.

Interest in the Tamil literary past extended to many corners of Tamil society. As Sumathi Ramaswamy has argued, the phenomenon of "Tamil devotion" (*tamilpaṛu*) is a major feature of Tamil modernity that transcends any specific political orientation ^[19]. While it is true that people of many different social and political positions have been devotees of the Tamil language, it is also true that interest in the Tamil language has been especially associated with non-Brahmin caste communities and political movements. Outside of famous Brahmin Tamil enthusiasts like Subramania "Bharathiyar" Bharati and C. "Rajaji" Rajagopalachariar, many other Brahmins of the colonial-era Madras Presidency sought to emphasize the Aryan roots of the Brahmin community and distinguish Tamil Brahmins from the non-Aryan Tamil culture surrounding them ^[20]. The Brahmin communities of the Madras Presidency actively promoted the study of Sanskrit and Brahmanical Hindu texts, both by starting religious organizations and by lobbying the colonial government for more classes and faculty dedicated to the study of these topics in public schools and universities ^[21]. In contrast, non-Brahmin political movements like the Justice Party advocated for the expansion of the colonial educational infrastructure devoted to the study of Dravidian languages and literature.

5.1. Vellala Neo-Saiva Historiography

The first Tamil thinkers to present systematic reinterpretations of colonial scholarship on the Dravidian racial past were Neo-Saiva Hindu reformists from the Vellala caste community ^[22]. Although not Brahmins, Vellalas historically have enjoyed considerable political and cultural power in Tamil history. In Sangam-era texts, Vellalas are described as the ruling social group of Tamil society. Vellalas remained powerful agricultural landowners in the lowlands of the Tamil country through the beginning of the British colonial era. Vellalas also have traditionally served as priests and cantors of the Saiva Siddhanta sect of Tamil devotional (i.e., *bhakti*) Hinduism, an influential religious tradition in parts of the Tamil heartland.

In the closing decades of the 19th century, a group of Vellala neo-Saiva reformist scholars, speakers, and authors began to argue that the Saiva Siddhanta tradition alone is representative of the religious life of the ancient Tamil people. These figures argued that the worship of the god Siva originated in the Tamil country, and spread from there to other parts of the Hindu world. Whereas ancient Tamil worship of Siva was direct and monotheistic, they argued, the Aryans brought with them a contorted religious system that overtook ancient Tamil religious society

with polytheism and intellectual sophistry. Arguments like these abounded in articles printed in the neo-Saiva periodicals founded near the turn of the century, such as J.M. Nallaswamy Pillai's *Siddhanta Deepika, or the Light of Truth*.

Although the Saiva Siddhanta religious system was a major focus of neo-Saiva work, not all works of Neo-Saiva historiography were explicitly or exclusively religious in nature. Neo-Saiva authors also intensively investigated historical references in ancient Sanskrit and Tamil texts in order to substantiate their arguments about ancient Tamil history and civilization. Although these scholars frequently cited Indological scholarship and other Western sources, they also readily challenged Western conclusions about Tamil, Dravidian, and Aryan history. A preeminent priority of neo-Saiva writings was to prove the civilizational worth of ancient Dravidian Tamil society and refute the Indological conception that the Aryans were the sole progenitors of high civilization in South Asia. While neo-Saiva authors were not alone in attempting to prove the historical merits of ancient Tamil civilization, this point held particular weight in the context of the neo-Saiva religious reform project. Establishing the merits of ancient Tamil civilization empowered neo-Saiva authors to argue that Aryan interference had estranged Tamil society from its ancient religious moorings.

The scholarly tone and structure of many neo-Saiva sources made these texts easy to integrate into mainstream Tamil scholarly conversations about Tamil antiquity. In both Neo-Saiva publications like *Siddhanta Deepika* and secular scholarly compilations like *The Tamilian Antiquary*, Neo-Saiva texts and ostensibly secular works of historical scholarship appear side by side. The intermixture of explicitly theological arguments and more secular investigations of Tamil history greatly facilitated the circulation of Neo-Saiva perspectives on the Dravidian past to other groups with different ideological and political commitments. By the turn of the 20th century, Dravidian-centered readings of Tamil history were no longer exclusive to neo-Saiva thinkers. Supporters of the burgeoning “Non-Brahmin” political movement also took on the terms “Aryan” and “Dravidian” as descriptions of the Brahmin and non-Brahmin communities’ respective cultural politics.

5.2. Iyothee Thass and Adi Dravida Buddhism

Like Neo-Saiva reformists, Iyothee Thass and his Dravida Mahajana Sabha, active in the first decades of the 20th century, presented the Dravidian Tamil past as a period of moral and social rectitude. However, Iyothee Thass and his religious community had a dramatically different social subjectivity from Vellala-caste Neo-Saiva reformists. Thass’s movement ministered to the Paraiyar community, a caste community considered untouchable by customary social codes. Thass’s chief argument was that today’s “Paraiyars” were once the moral leaders of an ancient, Buddhist Tamil society. Whereas these moral leaders earned their place through their devotion to moral righteousness, Aryans arriving from the North usurped this position by linking religious leadership to membership in the Brahmin caste. While other segments of ancient Tamil society acceded to Brahmin domination and became subsidiary castes in the Brahmanical caste hierarchy, the ancestors of the Paraiyars refused to accept Brahmin authority. As a result, the Paraiyars were expelled from Hindu caste society and relegated to a position of servitude.

Thass argued that the Paraiyars of his day should reject the Paraiyar label as a Brahmin imposition. Instead, his community should embrace its historical identity as Adi Dravida—the “First Dravidians”. Thass wrote prolifically about ancient Tamil literature and Buddhist scripture. In his *Adi Vedam* (“The Original Veda”), a text that Thass’s community treated as canon, Thass presents a detailed history of the Buddhist Dravidian past that references both Sangam-era Tamil sources and classic works of Buddhist literature in both Tamil and Pali. Thass analyzes these sources to excavate the Buddhist moral core of ancient Tamil civilization. Thass printed his written texts in his newspaper, *(Oru Paisat) Tamiḷaṇ* ^[23], along with regular columns offering legal, moral, and political advice or answering reader questions. Chapters of Thass’s Dravida Mahajana Sabha also regularly distributed food to the poor and held religious and social programming for the community ^[24].

Outside of Adi Dravida spaces, Thass sought to secure broader public recognition of Adi Dravidas as an independent community in Tamil society. Thass officially petitioned the Madras Presidency government for his community to be counted as Adi Dravida Buddhists, rather than “untouchable” Hindus. Thass saw this not only as a symbolic dissociation from caste oppression, but also an important change in legal status. As Buddhists, Adi Dravidas could no longer theoretically be governed by colonial social codes applicable to Hindus. These social codes institutionalized pieces of Brahmanical purity codes that prohibited Paraiyars and other Dalit communities of the Tamil country from accessing certain pathways, water tanks, and other pieces of public land across the Tamil country.

At its peak, Thass’s movement had chapters in urban areas across the Tamil country, as well as in Durban, South Africa; Rangoon, Burma; and the Kolar Gold Fields of Karnataka. Although Thass’s movement grew rapidly, Thass’s death in 1914 was a major blow to the organization, and after several decades, Thass’s movement was absorbed into other social reform organizations. Although the Dravida Mahajana Sabha was relatively short-lived, Thass’s thought succeeded at introducing the term “Adi Dravida” into common Tamil parlance as a term for “Dalit”. Moreover, Thass and associated thinkers like Rettamalai Srinivasan influenced subsequent anti-caste thinkers and activists like E.V. “Periyar” Ramasamy and perhaps even the famous Marathi Dalit thinker and activist B.R. Ambedkar, who himself led a mass Dalit conversion to Buddhism several months before his death ^[25].

5.3. E.V. “Periyar” Ramasamy’s Self-Respect Movement and Dravidar Kazhagam

By the late 1920s, Iyothee Thass’s movement had been predominantly absorbed into the Self-Respect Movement (Tamil *suyamariyāḍai iyakkam*), another Tamil social movement that fiercely attacked Brahmanical caste and Brahmanical Hinduism. In contrast to Thass’s movement, which almost exclusively ministered to the Paraiyar community, the Self-Respect Movement enjoyed broad popularity within a number of non-Brahmin caste communities, as well as segments of the Christian and Muslim communities of the Tamil country. The charismatic leader and founder of the Self-Respect Movement, E.V. “Periyar” Ramasamy, hailed from a privileged-caste, non-Brahmin family, and got his start as an organizer with the Indian National Congress’s Non-Cooperation Movement. Eventually, Ramasamy became disillusioned with what he saw as the Indian National Congress’s failure to confront the issue of caste discrimination, and split off to form his own social movement. Over the course of the 1920s and 30s, Ramasamy’s “Self-Respect Movement” became a major ideological and cultural voice in Tamil society. In

addition to regularly publishing essays and articles in official newspapers like *Kudi Arasu* and *Revolt*, Ramasamy became famous for his public speeches, which Tamil audiences found both entertaining and provocative. The Self-Respect Movement also staged Tamil folk-style dramas to circulate the self-respect ideology in rural Tamil villages. The Self-Respect Movement staged a number of high-profile symbolic protests, including the public burning of Brahmanical texts like the Laws of Manu, the defacing of government-mandated Hindi-language signage in Tamil railway stations, and the boycotting of Tamil restaurants that referred to themselves as “Brahmin cafés” [26]. Ramasamy hoped that these protests would galvanize broader Tamil (and Dravidian) resistance to Brahmanical domination in everyday Tamil life. Outside of these symbolic protest actions, the Self-Respect Movement also advocated a range of everyday reforms to Tamil social life. One of the most prominent of these reforms was the simple “Self-Respect marriage” ceremony the Self-Respect Movement promoted as an alternative to ornate customary Hindu wedding ceremonies that traditionally use Brahmin priests as officiants, feature Brahmanical rituals, and recite portions of Sanskrit-language texts. Self-Respect Movement newspapers printed the names of couples who had recently had self-respect marriages. Ramasamy also encouraged people to abandon caste names, which had customarily been used as surnames in the Tamil country. At a Self-Respect Conference in 1929, Ramasamy publicly renounced his own caste name, Naicker, which he had previously used in his publications and public life.

In the late 1930s, Ramasamy assumed control of the Justice Party, a non-Brahmin Tamil political party, and rebranded it as the “Dravidar Kazhagam” (“Dravidian Association”), a non-electoral social organization. In opposition to the Indian National Congress’s plan for a single independent nation of India, Ramasamy and the Dravidar Kazhagam campaigned the British government for a separate Dravidian nation, Dravida Nadu, that would include Tamil Nadu, Andhra, Karnataka, and Kerala, the four South Indian ethnic regions where Dravidian languages are majority languages. Ramasamy described the independent Dravidian nation as a place where Dravidians would be totally free from Aryan and North Indian political influence, allowing for the holistic reform of Dravidian society and public life. Although Dravida Nadu theoretically included all of “Dravidian” South India, the Dravidar Kazhagam did not gain major support outside of the Tamil country, and the British government ignored the Dravidar Kazhagam’s demands when drafting its plans for Indian independence in 1947. Ramasamy continued to write and speak prolifically until days before his death in 1973, and his thought is still considered canonical in anti-caste intellectual movements both within and outside the Tamil country.

Unlike Neo-Saivas and Thass’s Adi Dravida Movement, Ramasamy’s vision of ancient Dravidian society does not affiliate itself with any particular religious tradition. Rather, Ramasamy’s thought hinges on scientific rationalism (Tamil *paguttarivu*), an idea that he openly borrowed from Western rationalist thinkers like Bertrand Russell. Ramasamy argued that the ancient Dravidians were originally a practical, rational people unburdened by superstitious religious thinking. The ancient Aryans introduced the superstitious, irrational Brahmanical Hindu religious system to the Dravidian South in order to fool the Dravidians into ceding control of their society to the Aryan newcomers. The Brahmanical system classified all Dravidians as *sudras*, the lowest of the four castes of the Brahmanical Hindu system [27]. In the present-day, Tamilians (and Dravidians) can only achieve the social prosperity of the modern world if they cast off this degraded state and regain their “self-respect” (Tamil *suyamariyāḍai*) as Dravidians. In the self-respect phase of Ramasamy’s ideology, Ramasamy focused most of his

critiques on the Brahmanical tradition itself, analyzing Brahmanical texts to illustrate their deleterious impacts on the Dravidian Tamil people. In his later thought, associated with the Dravidar Kazhagam, Ramasamy focused more critique on the Indian National Congress's Indian nationalism, which he saw as a veiled form of North Indian Brahmanism and a new way of guaranteeing Aryan political, cultural, and social supremacy in the Dravidian South.

Ramasamy's understanding of the categories of Aryan and Dravidian was deeply intersectional. Ramasamy and his movements connected the complex of Brahmanical Hinduism not only to caste hierarchy, but also to gender discrimination, economic injustice, and cultural and linguistic bias towards the Aryan North. The Self-Respect Movement agitated for all of these causes as part of its campaign to restore Tamil "self-respect". On the gender front, the Self-Respect Movement persistently emphasized the importance of maintaining equality of labor in the Tamil family, and provided pivotal support for the Devadasi Abolition Act, a piece of legislation that outlawed the traditional institution of employing "devadasis", temple courtesans, at many Hindu temples. Women like Nilavathi Ramasubramaniam and Kunjitham Gurusami were active voices in the Self-Respect Movement who regularly addressed the public and authored articles for Self-Respect publications [28]. On the economic front, in the 1930s Self-Respect publications began engaging more explicitly with the question of labor, printing Marxist economic critiques that led the British Indian government to imprison Ramasamy and his brother briefly on several occasions. Ramasamy presented Brahmin priests as economic exploiters of the Tamil people through the customary Brahmanical ritual services they undertake, and openly connected this type of economic oppression to other systems of economic oppression in the colonial Madras Presidency. On the cultural and linguistic front, the Self-Respect Movement was one of the chief movements that organized protests in the late 1930s against the Indian national government's institution of required Hindi-language instruction in Madras Presidency schools. These protests, which also often included Neo-Saiva pro-Tamil demonstrators, were disruptive enough that the official government policy was overturned. Although Ramasamy and his organizations campaigned against Hindi imposition, Ramasamy also warned that advocacy for the Tamil language should not eclipse the work for social reform in other dimensions of Tamil life.

5.4. The Dravidian Munnetra Kazhagam and "Dravidian" Tamil Nationalism

E.V. "Periyar" Ramasamy himself never ran for official public office. Other Tamil thinkers, however, used Periyar's thought to frame a distinctly Tamil nationalist discursive model of Tamil politics. Although this style of political discourse maintains rhetorical commitments to attacking Brahmanical Hindu orthodoxy and North Indian imperialism, the policy records of "Dravidian" parties have not always been notably anti-Brahmanical or even anti-caste in policy. In fact, several major figures of "Dravidian" Tamil politics, including M.G. Ramachandran (commonly, "M.G.R.") and Jayalalitha have been Brahmin themselves, and both the DMK and the ADMK, the two "Dravidian parties" that dominate contemporary Tamil regional politics, have entered electoral alliances with the BJP, the Hindu nationalist political party currently in control of the Indian national government.

In the 1950s, the screenwriter M. Karunanidhi and orator and politician C.N. Annadurai became leading ideologues and public faces of the DMK (Tamil *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam*, "Dravidian Progress Party"). Karunanidhi and Annadurai presented the DMK as a political application of Ramasamy's social thought, even though Ramasamy

himself repudiated the movement as insufficiently focused on social issues. While Karunanidhi and Annadurai continued to speak to the importance of counteracting Brahmanical forces in Tamil society, they foregrounded the issue of the protection of the Tamil language and Tamil regional culture. In the 1960s, Karunanidhi wrote the screenplay for the hit movie *Parasakthi*, a movie that features multiple emotional monologues about the Tamil language and its importance to the Tamil homeland. The movie's success further amplified the DMK's platform and bolstered Karunanidhi's profile as a Tamil public figure. Mass Tamil protests in 1967 against a national proposal to make Hindi the official national language of India carried the DMK and M. Karunanidhi to success in the 1967 Tamil Nadu election cycle. The DMK remained in control of the Tamil Nadu state government until the 1980s, when the popular screen actor M.G. Ramachandran split off to form his own political party, the ADMK. Like the DMK, the ADMK explicitly presents itself as an heir to Periyar's tradition of social critique. Although the ADMK is somewhat more socially and politically conservative than the DMK, the parties' political ideologies and strategies are broadly similar to each other. As Bernard Bate has argued ^[29], these two parties have collectively established a distinctive "Dravidian aesthetic" of Tamil political speech to which other Tamil political parties also conform. This aesthetic uses linguistic register and allusions to styles and works of Tamil literature to evoke a sense of shared Dravidian cultural identity from otherwise socioculturally diverse audiences.

5.5. The VCK and Dravidian Dalit Liberation

Although the policy record of mainstream Dravidian parties of Tamil electoral politics has not always aligned with its rhetoric ^[30], Dravidian rhetoric remains a popular tool for subaltern communities to challenge systems of oppression and anchor socially and culturally reformist activist platforms. The VCK (Tamil *Viduthalai Ciruthaigal Katchi*; "Liberation Panther Party"), a Tamil Dalit political party and activist organization descended from the Dalit Panther organization of Maharashtra, exemplifies a more socially critical contemporary approach to the symbology of Aryanism and the Dravidian Tamil past. The VCK and its central orator and ideologue, Tholkappiyan Thirumavalavan, present the defense of Tamil culture and the Tamil language as a fundamental piece of Tamil Dalit liberation. This culturally and linguistically rooted approach to Dalit liberation differs from mainstream, "Ambedkarite" ^[31] Dalit political philosophy, which prioritizes building Dalit solidarity across ethnolinguistic regions and deemphasizes cultural and linguistic differences among Dalit communities. Although the VCK identifies itself as an Ambedkarite group and supports the goal of maximizing Dalit political and social power India-wide, Thirumavalavan and the VCK argue that true Dalit liberation in the Tamil country must include the affirmation of Tamil cultural and linguistic autonomy.

Several Dalit activists and scholars based outside of the Tamil country have critiqued the VCK's cultural and linguistic Tamil nationalism as an unnecessary distraction from the overarching goal of Dalit liberation ^[32]. By painting Dalit liberation and the protection of the Tamil language and culture as separate issues, however, these critics fail to account for the central ideological role that Tamil linguistic and cultural identity play in Thirumavalavan and the VCK's thought. Rather than bifurcating Dalit identity from other regionally specific forms of ethnic and linguistic identity, Thirumavalavan and the VCK connect ethnicity to caste in a way that fits into a well-established "Dravidian" model of Tamil social critique. In many of his speeches and written articles ^[33], Thirumavalavan presents Tamil Dalits as the indigenous people of the Tamil land and the preservers of ancient Tamil words and

cultural traditions. Thirumavalavan argues that the influx of “Aryanism” disrupted Tamil society by vaunting Sanskrit over Tamil, establishing Brahmanical caste hierarchy, and presenting Dalits and other Tamilians as inferior people in their own land. In present-day Tamil society, Thirumavalavan argues, Dalits are both the people with the closest linguistic and cultural connection to pre-Aryan Tamil antiquity and the people most oppressed by Brahmanical Hindu customs [34]. Hindu nationalism therefore constitutes both a social and a cultural threat to Tamil Dalit communities, since it invests power in the Brahmanical Hindu texts and institutions that both scorn Dalits as outcastes and scorn Tamil as a “low language” relative to Sanskrit [35].

Tamil nationalism, Thirumavalavan argues, is a uniquely powerful tool to resist the cultural, social, and intellectual arms of Hindu nationalism all at once. However, parallel to how Tamil activist thinkers like Thass and Periyar offer socially and culturally critical conceptions of “Dravidian” Tamil identity, Thirumavalavan argues that any “Tamil nationalism” that lacks the commitment to annihilating caste is Tamil nationalism in name only. Thirumavalavan argues that the purportedly Tamil nationalist politics of the DMK, ADMK, and other mainstream Tamil political parties not only ignore the political needs of Tamil Dalit communities, but also fail to confront the root of the Hindu nationalist threat to Tamil cultural, linguistic, and political autonomy in contemporary India [36]. For Thirumavalavan and the VCK, only a holistic counter-attack against Hindu nationalism will be able to wrest control of Tamil society away from Aryanism and back to its egalitarian roots in ancient Dravidian Tamil society.

In step with this line of rhetoric, the VCK has hosted a number of high-profile events centered on Tamil linguistic and cultural pride. These events present indigenous Tamil culture as a casteless alternative to Sanskritic Hindu culture [37]. Thirumavalavan and the VCK have presided over multiple mass name-changing events, in which attendees with Sanskrit-derived names receive official government name-change forms and step-by-step guidance to help change their legal names to names derived from Tamil. Thirumavalavan and the VCK present these name-change ceremonies as symbolic rejections of Brahmanical power in Tamil society. In 2014, in the wake of an Indian Supreme Court ruling banning the traditional Tamil bull-taming custom of *jallikaṭṭu*, Thirumavalavan and the VCK organized a “caste-less *jallikaṭṭu*” to protest both the Indian government ruling and the customary exploitation of Dalit labor through the *jallikaṭṭu* tradition [38]. While other Dalit groups supported the *jallikaṭṭu* ban because it resolved the labor issues surrounding *jallikaṭṭu*, Thirumavalavan and the VCK argued that national encroachment on Tamil cultural life represents a significant threat to Dalits, as well as other Tamil people [39].

References

1. Quote from (Ramasamy 1948).
2. “Periyar”, a Tamil honorific term meaning “great one”, is the name by which E. V. Ramasamy is most popularly known.
3. Tamil tirāviṭa(m) and ārya(m).

4. I use the term “Tamil country” in this article as a loose translation for the Tamil word *tamiḷagam*, a traditional formulation of the Tamil land that stretches from Tirupati in the north to Kanyakumari in the south. This verbiage remains consistent across changes in other administrative labels (e.g., Madras Presidency, Tamil Nadu) labeling this region.
5. Cf. Ramaswamy (2004) for a complex analysis of the relationship between Tamil-language academia and the Western academic tradition during the British colonial era.
6. Although Jones’s work popularized the concept of Indo-European language family in mainstream Western thought, Jones was not the first to observe similarities between the languages that would come to form Jones’s Indo-European language family. In the 16th century, the Urdu textual critic Khān-i Ārzu identified similarities between Sanskrit and Persian. The French scholar Père Coeurdoux observed similarities between Sanskrit and Latin early in the 17th century.
7. For a more detailed discussion of the connections between Jones’s work and Christian genealogies of nations, cf. (Trautmann 2006, pp. 40–55).
8. Cf. (Trautmann 2006, pp. 10–11).
9. (Trautmann 2006, p. 119).
10. cf. Bryant, *The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture*, pp. 59–63.
11. cf. (Risley 1891, pp. i–ii).
12. For example, see (Elmore 1912), in which Elmore presents Dravidian religion as a topic many Western scholars considered unworthy of extended study.
13. As Thomas Trautmann has noted in *The Dravidian Proof*, the British administrator Thomas Whyte Ellis published work suggesting the existence of a “Dravidian” family of languages some thirty years prior to Caldwell. Ellis’s early death prevented him from presenting as extended of a work as Caldwell’s, and it is Caldwell’s work that was widely circulated as proof of the “Dravidian” family of languages.
14. Caldwell, *A comparative grammar of the Dravidian, or South-Indian family of languages*, p. 118.
15. (Irschick 1969, p. 14).
16. For a thorough discussion of this process in the colonial administration of Madras Presidency, cf. Rupa Viswanath’s *The Pariah Problem*.
17. David Shulman has argued in *Tamil: A Biography* that Sanskrit exerted an influence on Tamil even in the earliest periods of the Tamil literary record. While this may be true, it is also true that Tamil audiences were struck by the relative absence of Sanskrit and Brahmanical Hinduism in these early texts. As A.R. Venkatachalapathy has argued (cf. Venkatachalapathy 2006, pp. 89–100) the mainstream Tamil literary canon itself changed significantly after the rediscovery and widespread distribution of Sangam texts.

18. Although Brahmanical caste is mostly absent from Sangam-era Tamil literature, there are references to what might be interpreted as social strata in Tamil society. However, the names for these strata (e.g., *saṇṇōr*, “elevated”) are common adjectives and do not map clearly onto Brahmanical caste categories. Cf. (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1995, p. 119).
19. Cf. (Ramaswamy 1997).
20. Cf. (Pandian 2007, pp. 50–59).
21. Cf. (Pandian 2007, pp. 31–45).
22. For an excellent study of this tradition and its impact on Tamil cultural and social thought, see Vaithees’s (2015).
23. Although Thass’s newspaper eventually became known simply as “Tamiḷan” (“Tamilian”), its original title included the one-paisa price of the newsletter, a low price intended to be affordable to even poor members of the Paraiyar community.
24. For more on the specific activities of Thass’s organizations, see Aloysius’s (2015, chap. 3–5).
25. Cf. (Aloysius 2015, pp. 220–29) for a more detailed discussion of these paths of influence.
26. Orthodox Brahmanical purity codes mandate that Brahmins only eat food prepared by Brahmin cooks and only eat among other Brahmins. Restaurants that marketed themselves as Brahmin-suitable would presumably observe both of these strictures.
27. Per the Laws of Manu and other social codes of the śāstric era of Hindu literature, Dalits constitute a fifth category outside and below these four caste groups.
28. Cf. (Bate 2009).
29. Cf. (Bate 2009).
30. Cf. Harriss, “Whatever Happened to Cultural Nationalism in Tamil Nadu? A Reading of Current Events and the Recent Literature on Tamil Politics” and Thirumavalavan, “The Real Faces of the Dravidian Parties” in (Thirumaavalavan [sic] 2003, pp. 97–100).
31. Ambedkarite Dalit liberation thought is based on the work of the seminal Dalit thinker, activist, and author B.R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar’s thought emphasizes the common social experience shared by Dalits across all parts of the Hindu world. Ambedkar dedicated his intellectual and activist careers to bolstering Dalit political power on the Indian national stage.
32. Cf. the introductions to translated compilations of Thirumavalavan’s own works, in which both Ram Puniyani (Uproot Hindutva, xv) and Gail Omvedt (Talisman, xx–xxiii) criticize the regional particularism of Dravidian-centered critiques of caste like Thirumavalavan’s. Omvedt’s introduction, while somewhat more literate in the dynamic Tamil discourse on the topic, ultimately sides with pan-Indian ways of framing Tamil Dalit identity.

33. Cf. the compilations *Talisman* and *Uproot Hindutva*, which contain a number of translations of Thirumavalavan's speeches and newspaper columns, respectively.
34. Cf. "Rebel!" in (Thirumaavalavan [sic] 2004, pp. 10–20).
35. Cf. "We Will Worship Through Tamil," in (Thirumaavalavan [sic] 2004, pp. 117–27).
36. Cf. "The Real Faces of the Dravidian Parties" in (Thirumaavalavan [sic] 2003, pp. 97–100).
37. Cf. "Change of Name: Not Just a Retrieval of Language, but of History" in (Thirumaavalavan [sic] 2003, pp. 157–64), and "We Will Worship Tamil! We Will Worship Through Tamil!" in (Thirumaavalavan [sic] 2004, pp. 117–27).
38. Although the bulls that participate in *jallikaṭṭu* are usually owned by people from high-status castes, Dalit agricultural workers are the ones customarily assigned to the intensive and low-paying work of raising the animals. Dalit workers' responsibility to raise these calves from youth bars them from pursuing education or higher-paying jobs in other industries.
39. (The Hindu 2015).

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