Historically, religious orders functioned with their sectarian identities and were in competition with each other for influencing the society with their religious philosophies. Even though caste was one of the contenders for articulation of identities, it was generally subsumed under their sectarian identities. Colonialism was a sharp break with the past and the religious orders had to transcend the boundaries of their articulation in their attempts to reorient themselves with the new situation. Language, caste, religion, and nationality coalesced in new ways to release a fresh set of identities for the religious orders to contend with. The result was a dilemma of identity for the religious orders. This chapter will try to understand how the religious orders negotiated with the dilemma through an articulation which included their main areas of concerns like endowment lands, temple administration, language, religious conversion, and administration of the mutts.

The most significant function of the mutts was to propagate their religious philosophy among the lay. Historically, the mutts tried to achieve this purpose through two principal means – material and spiritual. The mutts provided several material benefits to the masses along with their religious philosophy. The primary way of distributing material benefits was
by providing various services like food, shelter, education and medicine to various sections of the society. Moreover, the mutts exercised considerable control over temples. Taking into account the fact that temples were multi-functional and an important element in the redistribution of economic resources other than providing spiritual fulfilment to the larger public, the mutts’ role in the society was pivotal. To fulfil both these objectives, the mutts needed control over resources which would be regular and considerable. The principal function of the mutts, namely propagation of religious philosophy was considerably affected by their control over land resources. Other than these reasons, resources were also essential for the survival and sustenance of the mutts.

This control over land brought about a significant relationship between the religious orders and the state. The most significant donor of lands to the religious institutions happened to be the various rulers of the region. Let us see some of the endowments of Thiruvavaduthurai Adheenam. Most of the endowments were granted by various rulers for the services and specific ritual in the temples under the Thiruvavaduthurai Adheenam. Others were for the upkeep, maintenance, and festivals in the religious orders and its branches. The Order has a total of seventy-nine copperplates inscriptions, mentioning these various grants. In 1500 A.D., Manavarman Veera Pandian, the Pandiya king had granted the village Pillairayal for a festival in Thiruperundurai temple (which is under the control of the Order).
In 1516 A.D., another chieftain, Ponnambala Thondaimaanar had granted a village to the Avudaaiyar temple (again under the control of the Order) on the occasion of his birthday. Another grant had been made to the Thiruperundurai temple during 1526 A.D. In 1731 A.D., a village (Manalmel Kodi) was granted to the Order by Arunachala Vanangaamudith Thondaimaan. Again, another village (Azhungiyendhal) had been granted to the Order in 1741 A.D. by Muthu Vanangaamudith Thondaimaanar for feeding Saiva devotees in the Order (Thondaimaanars were probably chieftains under Chola and Pandiya kingdoms who later ruled over small areas like Pudukkottai and Aranthangi in the Tamil speaking regions).

The Sethupathi kings of Ramanathapuram were also major benefactors of the Thiruvavaduthurai Order. A perusal of the fourteen copperplates in the Order mentioning Sethupathi kings, would tell us that they granted several villages and lands to the Order and the temples maintained by the Order. According to the plates, these grants were made from 1661 A.D. to 1782 A.D. Apart from the rulers, traders and other guilds had also granted endowments for temple and the Order’s various services.¹

Baker writes that during the early twentieth century, the Thiruvavaduthurai Order owned around twenty-five thousand acres in Thirunelveli district, around one thousand acres of land in Madurai and

another three thousand acres of land in Thanjavur district and the total annual income of the Order was calculated to be around two lakhs of rupees. Dharmapuram Mutt had owned around two thousand and five hundred acres of land in Thanjavur district and another twelve thousand and five hundred acres in other places. The Vaanamaamalai Mutt’s annual income was around sixty-six thousand rupees, and also owned a coffee estate. The large number of branch mutts which were far flung all over India also owned properties.2

The huge property owned by some of these mutts were the result of a large number of land and other grants made by various rulers and followers of the mutt over a period of several centuries. It is obvious that land constituted one of the main sources of income to the mutts. However, not all the mutts were so hugely wealthy. There were still some mutts which barely managed to survive. But most of the traditional mutts had huge property, both in land and through other sources like donations during the Gurupoosai (Commemoration of Founder’s Memory). The produce of the land or village has two main shares – one that belongs to the state as tax and the other that belongs to the cultivator. Melvaram or the higher share was that which had been enjoyed by those with control

2 Christopher J. Baker and David Washbrook, South India: Political Institutions and Political Change, 1880-1940, Delhi, 1975, pp.69-70.
over locality', obviously the local notable or chieftain or the king or the
state and the cultivator's as Kudivaram.\(^3\)

**RELIGIOUS ORDERS AND STATE AND AUTHORITY**

What significance does the control over land has for the identity
dilemma experienced by the religious orders? The answer to this question
would be sought in the examination certain issues dear to the religious
orders: land revenue and tenurial problems with regard to the endowment
lands, temple disputes, religious practices and religion and the mutt
administration.

**Endowment Lands and the State**

The interpretation of the endowment led to many controversies
during British rule and also subsequently, when the endowments were
sought to be brought under state control. During the early nineteenth
century, the British government started systematically expanding its control
over religious institutions in the region and the logic was that it was
essential for 'both state's security and income, and for society's welfare'. In
1817 A.D. the East India Company assumed supervisory powers over the
religious institutions\(^4\). The religious institutions in the Madras Presidency
brought huge revenue to the state coffers. During that time, the Board of
Revenue (BOR) was constituted to take charge of collection of revenue in

\(^3\) Burton Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India*, New Delhi, 1994,
pp.167-68.

the Presidency. The BOR realised that the religious institutions in the Presidency could be a major source of income to the Company and so brought the religious institutions under the supervisory control of the East India Company.

The Company slowly assumed responsibility of collecting the revenue due to the religious institutions and started appropriating a part of it for itself as 'its share'. In 1817, this was formalised through Madras Regulation Act VII of 1817 and the main object of the regulation was "to see to that the incomes from the endowments, both religious and charitable, were appropriated for the purposes for which they were endowed." However, it was made clear that the idea was not to interfere in the internal management of the institutions, but basically to ensure that the funds were appropriated for which they were endowed. By 1830s, nearly 7600 Hindu institutions were under the control of the Madras Government. Despite coming under increasing strain in this matter the mutts took time to react to the situation. Krishnamachari of Sri Vaishnava Sri told this researcher that the mutts were slow in responding to the situation at hand, notwithstanding the fact that these developments were of central importance to them.

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Personal interview with Krishnamachari, Srirangam, December 1999.
However, involvement of the Company in these affairs did not go unquestioned. The interference of the state in the administration of religious institutions was construed by the Christian missionaries as approval and patronage to an idolatry and pagan religion.

The growing resentment among the missionaries regarding the activities of the government vis-à-vis Hindu religious institutions led to the abandonment of the policy by the East India Company. This was stoutly resisted by the BOR and despite the resistance, the government proceeded to cede all administrative control of the religious institutions by 1841 A.D. Under this arrangement, the endowments of religious orders were left under the control of the Orders themselves.9

The resistance of the BOR was not surprising, for it affected the Company's revenue and also the agricultural productivity of the endowment lands. For instance, in 1837 A.D. the BOR calculated a loss of nearly eighty thousand rupees, if control of religious institutions was ceded by the Board.10 However, it was agreed that the government would withdraw from explicitly 'religious' matters and would also recognise the hereditary trustees (those who were not appointed by the state). Religious institutions under the control of non-hereditary trustees were handed over to local notables or village panchayats or newly formed committees.11

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10 Ibid. p.22.
11 Ibid. p.24.
Temples' land holdings were administered by BOR throughout the nineteenth century and its view was that the land grants to the temple only constituted the *melvaram* grants and not the *kudivaram* rights. The BOR's contention was that when a ruler grants a land to the religious institutions, only the *melvaram* was granted and the actual cultivators retained the *kudivaram*. Many of the temple grants were in the name of private parties—priests and ritual functionaries—who were responsible for the realisation of the grant. However, when the party concerned did not perform the duties attached to the grant, the grant ceased to exist and the land was reverted back to the cultivator/the party which held the *kudivaram* rights.

Thus, whenever there was a failure on the part of the *inamdar* (the party on whose name the grant has been made) to uphold the guarantees of the grant, the grant ceased to exist and the cultivator was granted a ryotwari patta—and the temple lost all hold upon the lands and the state started collecting the *melvaram* tax, leaving the temple in limbo. Even when the *melvaram* was compensated to the temple in the form of an allowance, temples stood to lose, as the land per se was an important form of wealth for the temples. Presler observes the consequences,

...the temple, of course, was the loser on all this. All the other parties involved seemed to gain. The Kudivaramdars won outright land rights, the state's revenues increased and its jurisdiction over land was safeguarded, and the BOR traditions of land administration were preserved.\(^\text{12}\)

\(^\text{12}\) *Ibid.*, p.82.
Throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries temple lands were lost because of the BOR's interpretation of imams and the fact that the inamdar realised that the non-application of the terms of the inam/grant would give them full control of the land. This affected the religious orders in three different ways: it resulted in a significant loss of revenue for the religious orders as well as a complete loss of land as a form of wealth. More importantly the loss of control over land adversely affected influence and control in local society.

The Legislative Assembly of the Madras Presidency created a central authority to administer the religious institutions of the state called the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (Administration) Department (HR&CE) through the Act I of 1925. Mercifully, for the religious institutions of the region, the view of HR&CE regarding temple's land was different: "Any land, or income from land, associated either with a temple, or with a temple servant, is owned by the temple, and is owned permanently."\textsuperscript{13}

The temples' lands were in desperate need for protection and the Hindu Religious Endowment (HR&CE) Board tried its best to provide that protection. After acrimonious exchanges between HR&CE and BOR, Act XI of 1934 was passed which stated,

\begin{quote}
Any exchange, gift, sale or mortgage and any lease for a term exceeding five years, of the whole or any portion of any inam granted for the performance
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p.76.
of a charity or service connected with a math or temple, and made, confirmed or recognized by the British Government, shall be null and void.\textsuperscript{14}

However, the responsibility of implementing the above act was with BOR rather than HR&CE and no wonder, given the scenario of loss of revenue to the state, the BOR did precious little. When pressed for action, the BOR took refuge in the ambiguity of the phrasage of the Act, which failed to distinguish between the inams granted in the name of a person – who was responsible for the maintenance of that particular service for which the inam has been granted – and the imams granted in the name of the temples or religious orders or deities.

In 1942, the court upheld the BOR interpretation that the grants in the name of the deity were not covered by the Act. However, the legislation of 1951, corrected the perceived mistake and declared that the religious inams constituted both melvaram and kudivaram rights. The new government of independent India continued the legacy of its predecessor with regard to the land controlled by the religious institutions.

The subsequent land reforms in independent India posed a greater threat to income derived from the temple lands and threatened the resource base of the religious orders. While the HR&CE Board had to go along with the land reform measures taken by the Government of India, it did protest against the 1973,

\textsuperscript{14} G.O. 390-91 Law (legislative) 22 October 1934, quoted in Presler, 1987, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 84.
Tamil Nadu Cultivating Tenants (Right to Purchase Land Owners’ Rights) Act, which required landlords to sell land to those tenants who desired to purchase the land they cultivated. Tenants had a choice of purchase arrangements: either pay twelve times the land’s ‘fair rent’ in twelve annual instalments or pay nine times the ‘fair rent’ in one lump instalment. The temple land was given exemption for the first fifteen acres.15

The ‘fair rent’ is the amount that the tenant annually pays to the temple or the owner of the land. Since most temples and religious orders had more than fifteen acres, the Act adversely affected the resources of the religious institutions as they were forced to sell off the surplus above the maximum ceiling to the cultivators on ‘unfavourable terms’. To gain ownership of the land, all that the tenants had to do was to pay the annual rent for the next twelve years, which in any case he would have paid as fair rent.

Endowment Lands and Tenurial Problems

The other aspect that affects the resources of religious orders is the tenurial conditions of the land. The share from lands rented by the religious orders was twenty five percent of the total produce and the

remaining seventy five percent went to the cultivator.\textsuperscript{16} Krishnamoorthy in his \textit{History of Thiruvaduthurai Adheenam} makes the following points regarding the resources of religious orders; first, mutt lands are encroached upon on a large scale which leads to long term litigations and loss of income to the Orders.\textsuperscript{17} Second, the rents due from the land are seldom paid regularly. Third, the rents due from houses built on mutt lands are meagre and irregular, and finally, unlike olden times, hardly any endowments are made by rulers and the common public.\textsuperscript{18}

The respondents interviewed confirmed many of these very same points. Murali of Vaanamaamalai Mutt pointed out that even though the government control over the administration of religious orders is limited to auditing of the annual accounts and receipt of a share as 'contribution' from the total income of mutt, the returns from the temple lands are meagre and the government has failed to ensure the proper receipt of dues and other incomes due to the temple. Thus, when the temple lands went out of the administrative control of the religious institutions, it resulted in a huge loss of revenue to the institutions. Not only that, the influence of the religious orders stood drastically reduced when they lost control of the lands.

\textsuperscript{16} Krishnamoorthy, 1999, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 204.
\textsuperscript{17} Hardly any information came by from mutt authorities regarding the nature and extent of encroachment.
\textsuperscript{18} Krishnamoorthy, 1999 \textit{op. cit.}, p. 204-5.
Settlement of Temple Disputes

Another issue closely related to the previous one and of crucial importance to the mutts, which witnessed significant changes was the authority to resolve temple disputes. After furious attempts by the BOR, another legislation was enacted in 1863 A.D. (Religious Endowments Act of 1963, Act XX of 1963), in which the BOR ceded some of its powers to the 'local committees' (which were elected); and the 'non-hereditary' temples and the 'hereditary' temples were freed from direct outside control. However, the hereditary temples were brought under the jurisdiction of the courts, in case of disputes. Presler writes that the 'courts' authority was focussed on problems expected to occur in the 'hereditary temples'.\(^{19}\) For example, in case of disputed hereditary succession, the court could, on appeal, appoint an interim manager until the disputants had settled their rights in a regular civil suit. But the court’s actual jurisdiction was broader and included non-hereditary temples also.\(^{20}\)

This possibly encroached upon the power of pontiffs, who would have been the natural choice to solve the disputes.\(^{21}\) Such erosion of powers was steady throughout this period and was a part of the differentiation of institutions, and progress of the modernisation of the state and society.

\(^{19}\) Hereditary temples were temples in which the temple managers were not nominated but occupied the post hereditarily. Non-hereditary temple were temples in which the ‘trustees’ were nominated/appointed by the government.


\(^{21}\) It has to be understood, only when the pontiffs themselves were part of the disputes, it was taken to the ruler.
Further refinements were made to state’s religious policy in which a new and important section was added to the Civil Procedure Code which empowered the Attorney-General to initiate court proceedings with respect to both hereditary and non-hereditary temples, to prevent mismanagement. Then, the Court was empowered to settle the dispute with a scheme, which “prescribed in detail the way in which the temple is administered. It could specify the respective duties and privileges of different functionaries, the uses to which temple funds were to be put, and even the kind of rituals to be conducted.”\(^\text{22}\) It is clearly seen from these developments, that the powers of the heads of the religious orders who were supposed to administer the temples was steadily eroding and the state was encroaching upon previously unchartered territories.

**Religious Practices**

The religious orders are important institutions which disseminate Agamas, for which purpose they have established several *Paatasalas*. Agamas are ritual guides which provide the details of liturgy, temple construction etc. Naturally, the religious orders expected the respective *Agamas* to be followed in the temples. The HR&CE view was that the temple ‘priests are scandalously ignorant’.\(^\text{23}\) In 1970, the HR&CE proposed that priests should be trained and proper certificates should be distributed. The HR&CE hereby sought to provides its own definition of religious culture. Presler writes that the functioning of the HR&CE,

\(^{22}\) Presler, 1987, *op. cit*, p.25.  

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(C)learly threatened... (the)local autonomy and identity. Diversity – in temple organization, traditions and practices – was being rejected, in favour of centralization and uniformity. The immense differences among temples were to be subsumed under a few classifications and categories. 24

Religious Conversion

During the early 1980s, Tamil Nadu was rocked by a series of communal conflicts, a hitherto unknown factor in the history of the state. The main issue behind the clashes were a series of well-publicised conversions from Hinduism. It is important to note the inter-linkages between caste and religion in Tamil Nadu. The socio-religious reform measures both from within and outside the state structure led to rise in the consciousness among the lower sections of the society and the period witnessed increasing assertion by them. The issue became an important concern for the various religious leaders in the state. Speaking generally about conversions, Andavan Mutt’s pontiff said,

In India, we have accepted many religions and India is a country of plural faiths, it is a garland of different flowers. A Christian should be allowed to be a true Christian and a Muslim should be allowed to be a true Muslim. But one should never convert. The great Christian head Pope has said that nobody can prevent conversions – such an attitude is unfortunate. And today conversion takes place because of many reasons and we are unable to prevent them. And conversion takes place because others have not been able to render service to the society as the Christians are doing... It is true that we have been unable to match them and I have no answer if you ask me why. 25

Generally speaking about conversions, the head of Thiruvavaduthurai Adheenam remarked,

The time has come for religious orders to come out of their seclusion and mix with people and do service to them. The very name Christianity reminds one

24 Ibid., p.32.
of service to the people. And it is only through service that we can propagate Saivism. Christian leaders go out and meet the people. If there is a problem for Christian, the Fathers come out and fight for their rights. Muslim Imams raise their voices for Muslims. So, why should Hindu religious orders remain aloof? Service to the people is service to God. That is why we come out and mix with people and fight for their rights. Specifically, we place more interest on the welfare of Dalits.... The main reason for conversion is untouchability...and it should be completely eradicated. It is unnecessary for Hindus to convert.26

Kundrakudi Adigalar's views on conversion were strikingly similar to that of other religious leaders. Adigalar, speaking about his views on conversion observed,

...today, in India, people of many faiths reside. Under the circumstances, it is inevitable that India should be a secular country and the state to follow secularism...religious conflict, in the end, is always about power and domination...to treat people like cattle and inducing them with various sops and converting them to other faiths to increase their numbers and domination...such a licence should not be there for any religion. If such an attitude continues, it would be disastrous for India's communal amity...it would pave the way for destructive religious conflicts that afflicted many countries in history.27

Kundrakudi Adigalar, who has long expressed the view that the religious orders and their heads should work more closely with the people took this opportunity to put his words into action. He was one of the few religious leaders to intervene in the bloody inter-religious/caste conflict in Ramanathapuram district in 1981. Actually, the conflict was ignited by a minor skirmish between a few non-Brahmans and Dalits and soon spread to many villages in the Ramanathapuram district. The Dalits converted in large numbers to Islam and soon the problem assumed communal dimensions. Arson, murder, and destruction of property were reported

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from the districts. True to his notion of an activist role for a pontiff, Adigalar rushed to Ramanathapuram to bring peace to the district. He requested the new converts to revert back to their parent religion:

We understand that certain Muslim friends are trying to convert people using the recent and accidental misunderstandings within the Hindu society. This is deplorable. Our Muslim friends should not allow the mutual good faith and friendly relations that exist between the two communities to be affected.  

Addressing the neo-converts, he requested them not to lose faith in Hindu tradition and culture. Hindu religion has not oppressed them: “there have been measures taken in the past and efforts would also be made in the future. Conversion would bring a great and adverse change in their socio-economic condition.” He personally visited the affected villages, participated in the religious rituals of the Dalits to bring them confidence. Such an active involvement by the head of a religious order was unparalleled and was in sharp contrast with the secluded existence of many of the heads of the Orders. Again, in February 1982, when violent Hindu–Christian conflicts broke out in Kanyakumari district over a skirmish at the Bhagavathi Amman Festival, Adigalar toured the district extensively and held talks with Christian leaders to bring about peace.

**Mutt Administration**

The administration of religious institutions by HR&CE posed problems to the religious orders in several ways. For instance, during the
early eighties, the government threatened to intervene in the administration of the mutts. In this context, the HR&CE minister made the following points:

1. Large-scale complaints were received regarding the administration of Mutts

2. Government was seized with the matter of succession in Mutts and whether the Matadhipathi is entitled to nominate his successor or whether there are any criteria like qualification norms/rituals for selection.

3. Appointment of Auditor to audit the accounts.30

The temples and religious orders under the administrative control of the State face ‘constant threats of harassment’ from the latter and need political patronage to negotiate such instances. The seventies and eighties saw many instances of problems cropping up between the religious orders and State. For example, in 1974, the head of the Sriperumbudoor Vaishnavite mutt, Ethiraja Jeeyar had to go to the court, when the HR&CE commissioner dismissed the Jeeyar’s application for appointment as the religious dharmakartha (Trustee) of Sri Adhikesava Perumal temple and some other shrines of Sri perumbudoor.31 Again, in 1975, the district Thasildar of Kumbakonam, froze the paddy stocks of Kanchi Kamakoti mutt on the grounds that the levy of 700 bags of paddy for some mutt lands were not paid to the Civil supplies Department. The amount of levy was regarded as unreasonable and the district Collector had to intervene on

behalf of the mutt. Again, in 1980, the Thiruvavuduthurai Adheenam was received a show case notice by the Tamil Nadu government, when the head of order obtained a stay, for the appointment of an administrative officer to look after the affairs of the Mutt. The government alleged that financial irregularities to the tune of Rs.81 lakhs were found in audit of the temple accounts. The government also alleged that irregularities are committed in the appointment of a successor to the religious order.32

The above narration evidences that the religious orders began to face increasing challenges from the changing socio-political contours of the society. The mutts perceived increasing threats of marginalisation in such a scenario. This required reorientation on the part of the religious orders to retain their relevance and influence in the society. This necessitated interaction between the religious orders and the state and the constant need of the religious orders to have political networks and space to negotiate such issues. But, what was the reaction of the religious orders? Was it characterised by aloofness or did they become active in the political arena to safeguard their interests?

**Religious Orders And The Political Arena**

Historically, the religious orders have played an influential role in the political arena. Throughout the middle centuries of the second millennium, the heads of various religious orders entered into a complex exchange

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32 *The Hindu, 12 August, 1980. Also Dinamani, 12 August, 1980.*
relationship with the political authority. With their vast influence in their respective localities, they secured legitimacy for the ruling class and received material resources in return.\(^{33}\)

There are also many instances when the religious orders have mediated in political conflicts. For instance, in the seventeenth century when a conflict broke between the then Madurai ruler Mutuveerappa Nayakkar and his cousin Jevandhiappa Nayakkar, it was the Thiruvavaduthurai Adheenam which brought about a truce between them. In return, the Madurai ruler Mutuveerappa Nayakkar endowed many villages and land for the Adheenam. More importantly, he also helped them establish a number of branches of the mutt in several places.\(^{34}\)

Notwithstanding, this active engagement with the ‘political’, the attitude of the various mutts changed with the advent of the colonial state and its successor. This was basically due to the changed character of the modern state, which was becoming more powerful and penetrative. The following statements emanating from various religious orders is quite illustrative of their idea on this subject.

When the Pontiff of Sri Andavan Mutt, Srirangam was asked about greater participation of the religious orders in the political arena, he bluntly said,

"Easier said than done. We have many duties on a day to day basis and it is difficult to reach out to the people. There are interference from politicians...and if we get involved, it might very well receive political colour. But we can guide the politicians to avoid bloody conflicts (emphasis mine)."  

One respondent, Murali, a staunch Tengalai Vaishnavite and a follower of Vaanamaamalai Mutt asked pointedly,

"Why should mutt interact with the general public, unless they are shishyas/followers of the mutt? It is not a temple, which is open to public...only the religiously minded, a staunch Vaishnavite who wants to safeguard the tradition or a scholar might visit the mutt. Otherwise there is no reason for others to visit the mutt."

Actually, such a view was at least not isolated. Many in Tamil Nadu believed that matadhipathis should remain aloof and isolated from the active world of politics. On the other hand, there are also those who believe that such aloofness from the society and politics is not desirable in the present context. Kannaiyyan, a Tamil Scholar, who is interested in the affairs of religious orders remarked,

"Political leaders are treated like 'Untouchables' by our religious leaders. The contacts between political leaders and Hindu religious leaders are far lesser than their Christian counterparts. Even when it happens, the initiative is taken by the political leaders. But there should be greater interaction between them - for the protection of Hindu community - especially in the present context of conversion, the rising numbers of minorities and its dangers to the Hindu community. And our religious leaders are oblivious to such a scenario."

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35 Personal interview with Andavan Swamigal, op. cit.
36 Personal interview with Murali, Srirangam, December 2000.
Corroborating the above statement of Kannaiyyan is the attitude of certain religious orders who after the steady expansion of State and the threats posed by the State to their survival and the huge loss of revenue faced by them on account of land reforms, had consistently tried to negotiate with the State and political forces to create a space for themselves. Even as early as 1920, the religious orders were accommodating the political forces in order to achieve this end. Christopher Baker writes about the influence of religious order during that time...

...P.S. Sivaswami Aiyar fought election to the All-India Legislative Assembly from Tanjore in 1920... he thought it was necessary to pay a personal visit to the maths of Tiruvavaduthurai and Tirupandanandal. He won the support of these matadhipathis and even arranged to hold his campaign meetings with the local gentry in the premises of Tiruvavaduthurai math.39

The above statements show that at best the attitude of the mutts regarding involvement in the political arena was ambivalent. When the religious orders were grappling with such issues, Tamil Nadu witnessed the ascendancy of the Dravidian Movement, which was characterised by strong reformist tendencies. This movement relentlessly attacked the caste system of Hinduism and the inequality it perpetuated. In its efforts to confront inequality the Dravidian Movement championed the cause of socio-religious reforms and tried to construct an overarching collective identity based on Tamil language. By late 1960s, one of the Dravidian Parties, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) assumed power in the state resulting in the more vigorous implementation of their agenda. It is in

this context that attempt of the religious orders to engage the state has to be understood.

We have already seen in the previous chapter the promotion of Tamil as the language of liturgy in temples. Invariably such measures fall very much into the domain of religious orders compelling them to react. At the same time religious orders were making their first efforts to engage the political structure. An important element in this interactive process was the creation of the Deiveega Peravai, an association of the heads of various religious orders in the state. The significance of the Peravai can be gleaned from the fact that this was the principle arena of interaction between the religious orders and the state during the heydays of the Dravidian Movement.

CO-OPERATION AMONG RELIGIOUS ORDERS: THE DEIVEEGA PERAVAI

The first effort to unite the pontiffs of various religious orders was made in 1966 and the resultant institution was the ‘Deiveega Peravai’ (literally, Divine Assembly). The main force behind the formation of Deiveega Peravai was Thavathiru Kundrakudi Adigalar, the popular and controversial religious head of the Thiruvannamalai Kundrakudi Adheenam. The main aim of the Peravai was to produce a unified Hindu opinion regarding contentious issues that can be presented to the government for suitable action.
In its annual report for 1966, the HR&CE welcoming the establishment of Peravai as one of its 'landmark' activities remarked:

The Peravai was constituted for conducting and propagation of such religious activities in Madras State, as would help the Hindu masses to appreciate the greatness of the religion and strengthen their faith in Hindu religion and enable them to lead the Hindu way of life in accordance with the Hindu Dharma and Ethics... This has been acclaimed by the public and the press as a great and successful landmark in the activities of the Department.  

The Peravai was formed with the pontiffs of fifteen most prestigious Orders – all except one (the Nanjangoodu Sri Raghavendra Swamigal religious order in Karnataka – which in any case had numerous branches in Tamil Nadu) – were from Tamil Nadu. The other fourteen participating orders were: Thiruvavaduthurai Adheenam, Dharmapuram Adheenam, Kanchi Kamakoti Mutt, Vaanamaamalai Mutt, Thirupanandal Kasi Mutt, Madurai Thirugnana Sambandar Adheenam, Kundrakudi Adheenam, Chennai Vysarpadi Mutt, Kanchi Thondaimandala Saiva Adheenam, Mayilam Bommapuram Adheenam, Thiruvannamalai Esaniya Mutt, Perur Veerasaiva Adheenam, Kovai Sravanaparam Adheenam, and Thirupadhiri Puliyoor Gnaniyaar Swamigal Mutt. Regarding the origin of the Peravai, Presler notes that,

The original idea of the Peravai was that all the prominent mutadhipathis - about fifty of them – would work closely to propagate and revitalize Hinduism. This proved a vain hope, however, as the organisation floundered on the traditional jealousies and sectarian rivalries among these spiritual leaders.  

42 Presler, 1987, _op. cit., _p. 120.
The first head of the Deiveega Peravai was the pontiff of the Dharmapuram religious order. However, the most influential members were the Kanchi Kamakoti Pontiff popularly known as 'Periyavaal' and the head of the Kundrakudi Adheenam, known as 'Kundrakudi Adigalar'. Initially, the Peravai had only modest ambitions, and did not espouse the formation of a separate non-state body for the administration of religious institutions. It should only be seen as the first effort of the religious orders to converge on a single platform. Eventually, in the fag end of 1969, Kundrakudi Adigalar took over as the head of the organisation. A short digression about Kundrakudi Adigalar would not be out of place here, considering that Adigalar was a dominant personality influencing the activities of the Peravai. Moreover, he was the principal element in the interaction of the Dravidian Movement with the religious orders, significantly affecting the religious discourse which took place in Tamil Nadu in this period.

Kundrakudi Adigalar, among all the pontiffs, was some kind of a rebel, known for his open anti-caste views, socialist leanings and shared a rather close relation with the Dravidian movement, especially with the atheist EVR. It is said that he had a photograph of Karl Marx hung at the reception of the Order and once visited Soviet Union to speak about the close association between Saivism and Socialism.

The Deiveega Peravai entered its dynamic phase under the stewardship of Kundrakudi Adigalar. Representation to Dalits was given, multiple branches of the institution were opened in various districts and they propagated against untouchability, religious antagonism, and undertook renovation and cleaning of temples. As part of these activities, publications were brought out and mini-conferences were held in various places.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p.75.} However, the Peravai was still heavily dependent upon the HR&CE Board, as many of its functionaries were drawn from the Board. The dependence was more pronounced in the case of financing the activities of the Peravai. The main source of income was from 'Collection from Temples' (meaning donation from temples) and this was done by the Peravai's Secretary, who was a HR&CE official. Presler observes that 'collection' was one of the major duties of the Secretary. Often, he used his position as a HR&CE official to cajole or threaten trustees into making a donation.

The link between the state and the Deiveega Peravai was so intimate that Kundrakudi Adigalar described the Peravai as 'quasi-government'.\footnote{Presler,1987, \textit{op.cit.}, p.121.} However, when the government support to the Peravai was formally withdrawn in 1976, the Peravai became dormant, emphasising the importance of state in the activities and sustenance of the Deiveega Peravai. In its life span, the Deiveega Peravai was seldom a unified house.
There were many contentious issues which prevented the religious orders from projecting a unified stance.

**Issue of Caste and Religion**

Even in its heydays, the Deiveega Peravai was plagued by controversies, as in the case of temple entry issue. In October 1969, EVR declared that its cadres would enter the sanctum sanctorum of major temples to redeem the self-respect of the non-Brahmans. As a consequence, the Tamil Nadu government (DMK) passed a bill in 1970 to open the temple priesthood to ‘qualified’ persons irrespective of caste and birth. It has to be understood that the social practice in the major temples of Tamil Nadu is to have only ‘Brahman Priests’, and the position was hereditary. To change this, was one of the objectives of Deiveega Peravai, which had proposed that formal educational training in religious scriptures and rituals for priesthood should be for given for ‘all the candidates’. However, the Peravai did not specify whether this “all candidates” would mean ‘members from all castes’ or only ‘those who are traditionally eligible for priesthood’. This ambiguity immediately led to a controversy.

Sri Jayendra Saraswathi, who is at present the pontiff of Kanchi Kamakoti Mutt and was then the ‘nominated successor’ to the ‘Periyaval’ had difference of opinion with Kundrakudi Adigalar on this issue. He requested Kundrakudi Adigalar to oppose the Bill in his capacity as head of the Deiveega Peravai. The request was promptly rejected by the Adigalar
on the grounds that the Bill would ensure a progressive, caste-free society. He made it clear that he was personally in support of the Bill, which was not surprising, given his radical views in many such issues. Kanchi Jayendra Saraswathi accused the Peravai of becoming a ‘hand-maiden’ of the DMK government and declared that he himself would personally arrange for the training of priests from all castes. Accordingly, he arranged for priestly training for members of all castes, mainly Dalits, for conducting worship in village temples consisting of village Gods and Goddesses. In any case, Brahmans had never been priests of village temples and the village priests are non-Brahmans. Adigalar declared the whole training as a farce and challenged Jayendra Saraswathi to employ these priests in temples like Madurai Meenakshi Amman temple, if he is sincere.46

Kundrakudi Adigalar was a member of the Upper House in Tamil Nadu Assembly and with his support, the Bill, which would have enabled members of all castes to become priests in all the temples, was passed in the Tamil Nadu Assembly in 1970. The Bill was challenged in the Supreme Court of India. The Supreme Court of India gave a complex ruling, that while the hereditary succession of priests would not be accepted, the religious prescription of who should be a priest has to be respected – a case of non-interference in religious affairs. However, the religious prescriptions of Agamas declare that only persons following certain traditions and born of ‘certain priests’ are competent to perform priestly

This ensured that temples where Brahmans were priests can continue to do so, despite the new law. The ruling was such that the *status quo* could be maintained.

**Peravai and the State**

Other activities of Deiveega Peravai gave further indications of the differences between the different religious orders and their leaders. The differences came out sharply regarding the finances of the Peravai. As the resources of the Peravai, was collected from the temples of Tamil Nadu, Kundrakudi Adigalar felt that such collection could be formalised through a legislation passed in the Assembly. Such a legislation was in fact passed in the Assembly in November 1975. However, both the Kanchi Acharya Jayendra Saraswathi and the Pontiff of the Madurai Adheenam objected to such legislation. Kanchi Acharya declared at the State Conference of Peravai in January 1976, that the finances required for the running of the Peravai would be given by the various mutts in the state. He said that his main objection to the legislation was that it makes the Peravai, a wing of the state. And this was exactly what Kundrakudi Adigalar wanted the Peravai to be. He argued that as Peravai’s President, “he was in an unusually good position to advice the government and direct attention to religious concerns.”

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147
Power Relations Between Mutts

Though the Deiveega Peravai was the first instance of the various religious orders coming together under a unified forum, the activities and the agenda of the Peravai were at the root of the problems of disunity among the religious orders. The patronage given to the Peravai by the state ensured that those who were controlling the Peravai could dictate the agenda. This shift in the balance of power among the religious orders was contested and resisted by those who were traditionally regarded as the custodians of religious culture in Tamil Nadu. As such, Kanchi Kamakoti mutt is the most popular and most influential religious order in Tamil Nadu. Being a Brahman matadhipathi, the Brahman religious orders were naturally under the compulsion to represent and reflect Brahman concerns. It was found that both in the hereditary priesthood issue and later in the language of the liturgy issue, the views of Kundrakudi Adigalar ran contrary to the views of Brahman religious orders. With Kundrakudi Adigalar as the head of the Peravai, the Brahman religious order did not take it kindly to find their influence and voice suddenly facing a competition. Presler observes that,

Tamil Nadu governments have always been sensitive to the views on public policy held by the orthodox Brahman matadhipathis, especially the views of the Kanchi Sankaracharya of Kamakoti Peetam. But Kundrakudi Adigalar may have extended the boundaries of legitimate advising. The government's patronage went formally and publicly to Kundrakudi, the Peravai was referred to as an authority in religious policy, and both were elevated to unprecedented prestige in modern Tamil politics. 49

49 Ibid., p.130-1.
The differences of opinion among the various religious orders were discernable. One HR&CE commissioner lamented that the lack of unity among the religious orders:

I approached the maths individually. They all resisted, except for the Dharmapuram Adheenam....The problem was the inter-relations among the maths themselves Dharmapuram will not have anything to do Thiruvavaduthurai, who will not in turn anything to do with Kundrakudi, who in turn doesn't get along with the Madurai Adheenam, and so forth.\(^{50}\)

This should be located in the history and culture of the region, where throughout the preceding centuries the various philosophies espoused by the orders competed with each other claiming supremacy over the other. This factor and the prestige and status they carried in the society prevented certain Orders from interacting with others in an equal plane on a common forum. For instance, when the Kundrakudi order was in financial dire straits in the early decades of the twentieth century, it was derogatorily called as “Thagara Kuvalai Madam” (Thagara Kuvalai literally means ‘tin-mug’ indicating the lack of sufficient material resources with this mutt).\(^{51}\)

Attitudes on Political Involvement

The diverse nature of the members, the reformist zeal of Kundrakudi Adigalar and the more orthodox views of the Kanchi Acharya, soon ensured that once they took up more serious issues than ‘propagation of religion’, conflicts and differences would ensue. Not only the Kanchi Acharya, but

\(^{50}\) Ibid., p.120.  
also, other non-Brahman Orders had their own reservations about Kundrakudi Adigalar. Adi Muruga Vel, the poet of Thiruvavaduthurai Salva Order told this researcher,

the basic interest of any Order is religion. It should be realised, however, that religion is not something divorced from society. Life is two fold: Worldly and Divine. If divine life is the core interest of religious orders, the worldly life belongs to politics and individuals. State is concerned with the well being of citizens and this concern is not devoid of ethics. It is for the Orders to inject this ethical/moral content into day-to-day life of the individuals. This is true about the past and present activities of Adheenams. However, Kundrakudi Adigalar is slightly different in this regard. He took more than an active interest in politics - he is a bit of revolutionary. It almost seemed that religion was secondary to him. 52

Such was the opinion of most of the religious orders. The important factor in the rise of Kundrakudi Adigalar and his profile is the way he used the political forces to radically reshape the functioning of religious orders, at least in the Order, which he headed. No doubt, state support was an important aspect in his rise, but his activities provided wider opportunities for influencing and using state policy. While his activities did not meet with the approval of many religions leaders, he made a case for influencing state policy regarding reforms in Hindu religious institutions. Hitherto the religious orders had only marginal influence in the state policy because of the caste and sectarian differences among them.

**Peravai and Religious Reforms**

Kundrakudi Adigalar’s proximity to the Dravidian parties, the fact that many of his views on reform nearly coincided with that of the Dravidian parties, and his radical views on tradition were enough grounds

52 Personal interview with Adi Muruga Vel, Trichy, November 1999.
for suspicion for other religious orders. For example, his views on
hereditary priesthood and the Agamic prescriptions for temple worship
were as different from the traditional view point as any:

Agamas were not written during the same period. There are contradictions in
them. So, whenever, there is a contradiction, it is better to accept the Bhakti
poets and the ways of worship that flow from them. What do they indicate?
They indicate that people from all castes and varnas worshipped in Tamil
temples... even animals and birds seemed to have worshipped in temples. So
everybody, irrespective of caste can enter the sanctum sanctorum to perform
Puja. 53

For the orthodox religious leaders, this preference of Bhakti saints
over Agamas was clearly unacceptable. Bhakti saints were revered, and
even today, their songs are sung in temples, but when it comes to ritual,
Agamas are clearly preferred over other forms of worship. This can be
attested by the number of Agamic schools established by the various
religious orders.

Kundrakudi Adigalar had envisaged a lot for the Peravai, which
would address concerns that go beyond caste and sectarian interests. For
him, the Peravai had to be structured in such a way that it would represent
the Hindu voice in the society. The Peravai spoke about ‘promoting
associational life of Hindus’ and Kundrakudi Adigalar wanted the
organisation to be modelled on the Jesuit Order. “A full time sanyasi would
be attached to each temple to conduct common worship, look after the
ceremonies of Hindu families, and take care of Hindus generally.” 54

53 Ibid.
This is a modern understanding of what an ascetic should be doing and, of course explicitly modelled upon the Christian ecclesiastical organisations and was a radical break with the past. Given the conducive political atmosphere, Kundrakudi Adigalar wanted to bring in large-scale reforms in the religious life of the Tamil people. He was functioning in an intensely complex situation, with the Dravidian parties relentlessly attacking Hindu religions, its caste structure and the perceived domination of the Brahmans in religious life. At any rate, both the State and Central governments were bringing in various social reform measures, which were fundamentally altering the social structure of the society; and Kundrakudi’s voice was a call for reform from inside the Hindu religious structure.

In Adigalar’s understanding the sectarian and caste differences among Hindu religious leaders were denying the possibility of a unified Hindu voice, which would dictate the nature, extent and speed of the reforms. Apart from the Ramakrishna Mutt, there are very few religious institutions in the country that would transcend the caste barriers. All the mutts in Tamil Nadu are caste based – the Kundrakudi Adheenam, the Thiruvavaduthurai Adheenam, the Dharmapuram Adheenam, the Kasi Mutt, and the Madurai Thiru Gnana Sambandar Adheenam belong to the Saiva Vellala caste; Perur Adheenam belongs to the Vellala Gounder caste; Andavan Swamigal Mutt, Sri Ranga Narayana Jeeyar Adheenam, Vaanamaamalai Mutt are Iyengar Mutts; and the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam
belongs to the Smarthas. The last four are Brahman mutts, while the rest are non-Brahman mutts.

In hindsight, his activities met with indifferent success. The organisation, which he founded to unite the diverse Hindu Orders in one platform, went into oblivion and till date there is no unanimous voice among the orders on any issue. There may be many reasons on why his efforts failed to bring about any radical change, as far as co-operation among the Orders are concerned. First of all, his ideals and policies were a sharp break with the past, making it difficult for other Orders to jump in the bandwagon. His close association with political leaders, his election to the Upper House of the Tamil Nadu Assembly, his penchant for expressing his admiration for Marx and socialism, the radical re-interpretation of tradition virtually made his worldview almost mirror the views of the Dravidian Movement. At best, in an atmosphere of dwindling resources and marginalised existence, his intervention in the society represented the new ways in which religious orders sought to reassert their importance in the society and made them a force to contend with.

Even though Kundrakudi Adigalar created new spaces for dialogue with the State, his programme closed any space that was existent for Brahman religious orders. Taking into account, Kundrakudi Adigalar’s agenda for religious reform, it was considerably difficult for the other orders to find common ground with Adigalar, especially the Brahmin
Orders. In each of the issues he raised, uncompromising reformist tone dominated over any possible room for co-operation. The cleavages of the Hindu society cannot, but reflect in the workings of religious orders.

Despite the indifferent success of Deiveega Peravai, what it achieved was to bring socio-religious reforms in the discourse of religious orders. It is very much evident in the regular articulation of the interests of the lower sections of the society by various religious orders. For example, the Pontiff of the Thiruvavaduthurai Adheenam visits the residential areas of Adi-Dravidas (Dalits) and offers his blessings to them. Among the Brahman mutts, the Thirukoviloor Vaishanavaite Mutt, has recently initiated five thousand Adi Dravidas into Sri Vaishnavism. The Order is a Tengalai school, the school which is known as a 'more inclusive' school among Vaishnavism.55

All this has become possible because of the ideological orientation of the Tamil Nadu government. Dravidian movement, after a long and arduous struggle had won the political battle in Tamil Nadu and at long last, the shift of balance in the socio-political context was reflected transparently in the cultural atmosphere of Tamil Nadu. Dravidian politics, with its emphasis on non-Brahman mobilisation, and stress on Tamil language, was seeping through the Tamil cultural matrix in an explicit fashion.

55 Dinamani Deepavali Malar 2000, p.47.
The shift in balance started in the early twentieth century with the formation of the Justice Party. Later, the ascendance of the Dravidian Parties during the middle of twentieth century released new energy in the cultural domain of Tamil Nadu. The undeniable influence of Kundrakudi Adigalar in the corridors of power, during the later part of 1960s and right through 1970s, would not have been possible without a conducive political atmosphere. While Kundrakudi Adigalar used the conducive political atmosphere to make the voice of religious orders heard, especially, the non-Brahman Orders, he set a personal example in actively participating in the affairs of the society. He was consistently seeking and creating space with diverse religious forces to bring about, what he perceived, as the ideal balance between religion, society, and politics.

While Dravidian politics is usually located in its non-Brahman character and atheism, it definitely had an impact upon the religious side too, as reflected in the activities of the Peravai and the rise of Kundrakudi Adigalar. How crucial the state support had been in the rise of non-Brahman interests in the religious side was made obvious in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the Peravai went into oblivion, with the withdrawal of state support.

The problem with the first efforts of the religious orders to co-ordinate their activities was when the “Deiveega Peravai’ wanted to project a particular variety of Hinduism with an emphasis of social reform, very
much influenced by the Dravidian Parties’ notion of how the society should be organised. Such ‘Hinduism’ failed to take into account the plurality of religious philosophies and practices. Difference was sought to be obliterated and a homogenous and reformed version of Hinduism was projected through the Deiveega Peravai.

The failure of the Deiveega Peravai, despite active state support has to be placed in a broader sociological context. The attempt of the Dravidian Movement was to project a socio-cultural identity based on language and non-Brahmanism. Such an attempt usually involves reinterpretation of history and reorientation of culture. In the case of religious orders, the socio-religious reform agenda of the Dravidian Movement had different portends. While certain mutts were able to identify with this reform agenda, others were not able to do so. The reason in both cases can be found in the historical and cultural matrix. This prevented the various mutts from presenting a unified picture, though for the first time, the religious orders converged on a single platform. Subsequently also, the religious orders got opportunities to come together and voice their common concerns. This space for them was offered by the advent of the Hindutva forces in Tamil Nadu. The succeeding section deliberates on the dialectics between the religious orders and the Hindutva movement and the ensuing dilemmas of identity.
RELIGIOUS ORDERS AND THE HINDUTVA MOVEMENT

From the 1980 onwards, the political atmosphere began to change and Dravidian Movement, after being firmly entrenched in power, started slowly blunting its sharp attack upon Brahmanism. C.J. Fuller writes that the long campaign against Brahmins,

by the non-Brahmin Dravidian movement, which started with the publication of the non-Brahmin Manifesto in 1916, has been successful and partly because of that success, in the rhetoric and policies of the DMK and AIADMK, anti-Brahmanism has declined in importance since the 1970's.56

This was also the period of rise of Dalit and Adi-Dravida movements which had started to challenge the non-Brahmans from below57. We have already mentioned about the incidents of conversion in Thirunelveli district, a period in which large scale conversions to Islam and Christianity took place in Tamil Nadu district. Moin Shakir reports that at least 2,873 persons converted to Islam between February and September 198158. This period proved to be the ripe time for Hindutva forces to expand and make their presence felt in the region. Hindu Munnani (Hindu Front), an allied organisation of the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), with its notion of protection of Hindu community was founded in 1980, and rapidly expanded its activity in Tamil Nadu.

57 Ibid.
One of the basic philosophies of Hindu Munnani is the belief that "from the Himalayas to Kanyakumari, it is one nation, one people and one culture (Bharat is not a subcontinent, is not multi-cultural, the Aryan Dravidian race theory is a fraud." Of course, the sharp distinction between the ideology of Hindu Munnani and the Dravidian movement is apparent. Dravidian Movement believes that the non-Brahman population of Tamil Nadu constitute a separate race distinct from the Brahmans, who were supposed to be Aryan migrants from North India. Also, most Hindu communal Organisations insist on the homogeneity of culture in the subcontinent, where as Dravidian movement, insisted on the autonomy of Dravidian culture.

Apart from Hindu Munnani, the Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP) was also expanding its activities in Tamil Nadu. Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP) is a strong votary of Hindutva, a cultural conception of India as Hindu nation. The five components of Hindu nation, according to M.S. Golwalkar, is Geography (Territory), Race, Religion, Culture and Language. The Dravidian parties and some Saiva religious orders have strong opinion with what they regard as Northern languages (Hindi and Sanskrit) and an imposition of these languages upon the Tamil people.

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60 M. S. Golwalkar, We or Our Nation Defined, Nagpur, 1947.
The large scale conversions and the resultant violence provided an opportunity for these organisations to bring into focus a unified Hindu community in a society sharply polarised by the Dravidian Movement. However, a mere expansion of the activities without co-opting the various religious forces within the Hindu-fold could not be expected to succeed. Before going into the analysis of the dialectics of interplay between the religious orders and the Hindutva forces, it would be better to have a closer look at the various methods used by the VHP to bring the religious orders into an over all Hindu identity kit.

The Hindu Temple Protection Committee

As shown above in the beginning of the chapter, one of the main concerns for the religious orders has been the administration of Hindu Temples by the State in Tamil Nadu. The Hindu Temple Protection Committee, another front which has close links with RSS, has been raising various issues in Tamil Nadu regarding the administration of temples. It is on this issue, that the Hindu, communal organisations in Tamil Nadu and the religious orders found common ground for negotiation and accommodation. In 1993, the Hindu Temple Protection Committee brought out a booklet which listed the main objectives of the committee as follows:

1. The administration of Hindu temples in Tamil Nadu should be brought under the control of an autonomous body.

2. To foster a close relation between the people and the temple.

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3. To make the temples divine place, a centre which can propagate religion, communal amity and social service.

4. To prevent the temple property from being exploited by selfish people and passions of other religions.

5. To prevent the temples from becoming a market place

6. To make the temple accounts public and place them for public scrutiny.

7. To oppose any action which denigrated religion, temple and Gods.

8. To propagate religion among slum dwellers

9. To ensure proper returns from the temple properties.

10. To exempt temple lands from laws of socialist type and

11. To the upliftment of temple employees.62

It was also during this period that the Kanchi Kamakoti religious order's head Jayendra Saraswathi demanded that the Hindu temples' administration be handed over to an autonomous board. He questioned the propriety of a secular state, administering religious institutions. He also pointed out that the churches and mosques are in the control of their religious leaders.63

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63 Ibid., p.11.
Association of Village Temple Priests (AVTP)

The Viswa Hindu Parishad, in its bid to expand its base in Tamil Nadu had started mobilising the priests of village temples. The village temples in Tamil Nadu usually hail from non-Brahman castes. The attempt was one among the several steps that organisations like Viswa Hindu Parishad and Hindu Munnani are taking in Tamil Nadu to form a united Hindu community.

The VHP started mobilising the village priests in 1990 and held the Association of Village Temple Priests Conference in 1995. The conference came out with the following resolutions:

1. The monthly financial assistance given to Ulemas should be given to village temple priests
2. Sufficient funds should be allocated to the renovation of village temples
3. Free Electricity should be supplied to village temples
4. An autonomous body should be constituted for the administration of temples
5. Sufficient lands around the temple should be fenced and given patta.
6. Houses should be built for village temple priests and...
7. In case, any village temple priests deceases, his family should be given financial assistance of Rs. 30,000.⁶⁴

The heads of various religious orders have started participating in such associations. For example, the Grama Koil Poosarigal Peravai, the Association of Village Temple priests (AVTP) explicitly identifies the Kanchi Kamakoti Guru as the spiritual Guru of the movement. The conference at Trichy was inaugurated by the pontiff of the Srirangam Andavan Ashramam, the Vadagalai Vaishnavite Mutt. The Kanchi Kamakoti head Jayendra Saraswathi also participated in the function.

What was interesting in the resolutions passed, was that while many of the resolutions directly related to the interests of village temple priests, the one demanding an autonomous body for the administration of religious institution in Tamil Nadu, had little relevance to village temples which are not under the control of the administrative ambit of the State. It has to be read as a part of VHP’s strategy to accommodate the religious orders interests. Also, the invitation and attendance of the heads of religious orders of different religious ideologies in one platform can be used to integrate the Hindu community, bringing within its ambit the lower castes also, whose temples have been of little interest to religious orders. The AVTP went on to organise three more conferences – the second one was held at Madras in 1996, strategically timed just before the Assembly

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elections in Tamil Nadu. The third conference was held in Trichy during April 1998.

The state conference of AVTP was held in Madurai on March 10\textsuperscript{th} and 11\textsuperscript{th}, 2001. Apart from the standard demands including the formation of an autonomous body with leading religious figures for the administration of Hindu religious institutions, an additional demand for the constitution of a separate board for the welfare of the village priests and village folk artists was included. The conference demanded that training institutions to be opened for training village temple priests in rituals to be conducted in village temples.

The conference also included a publication of a list of Tamil ritual songs to be recited during the conduct of puja in village temples. Many of the rituals that included are explicitly Brahmanical religious practices, thereby including the pet Hindutva Project of integrating various cultural forms and worship into the overall Hindu cultural and religious sphere. Even while not attaching importance to the Tamil language and compromising on this issue, the activities and programmes of Hindutva forces include an unmistakable homogenisation of Hindu community under a religious umbrella.

The presence of the heads of different religious orders at various conferences attests to the mobilisation strategy of the VHP and the
seemingly growing success of the Hindutva movement in Tamil Nadu. There are two issues which come from the participation of the heads of the religious orders in AVTP conferences: First, Religious orders, historically had nothing to do with Village temples and priests. Second, the AVTP formally brings the village priests under the leadership of the heads of religious orders. However, even while participating in the conferences, the different heads of the orders had different concerns and reasons. First one is the growing concern among the religious orders about conversion activities of Christians and Muslims. Secondly, the orders need political space to operate and influence the state.

**Association of Hindu Ascetics of Tamil Nadu (AHAT).**

Apart from organising the AVTP, the VHP is also active in organising the various ascetics of Tamil Nadu, including religious orders of different sects under a platform called Tamizhaga Hindu Thuraviyar Peravai (Association of Hindu Ascetics of Tamil Nadu) (hereafter AHAT).

Unlike, the AVTP, where the office bearers included VHP personnel, AHAT was exclusively constituted by ascetics of Tamil Nadu, with VHP providing organisational infrastructure and facilities. The researcher attended Erode district council meeting held by AHAT on 21 and 22\textsuperscript{nd} December, 2000. The State president of the AHAT is the head of the Perur religious order Santhalinga Ramaswamy Adigalar. At the district general council meeting of the AHAT, following resolutions were passed.
1. The general council requested the building of Ram temple in Ayodhya to be expedited and

2. To participate in large numbers for the Akila Bharatha Thuraviyar Peravai (All India Ascetics Association).  

The meeting urged the State to form an autonomous body for the administration of the temples. In the meanwhile, the meeting requested the State to appoint religious leaders and ascetics on temple committees. Importantly, the meeting requested the government to allot the now unused Deiveega Peravai building to be given to the AHAT as its head quarters. The points of salience in the resolutions are the requests to stop the auction of cows donated to the temple and to stop the conversion activities of World Vision in Southern districts of Tamil Nadu.

The Association of Hindu Ascetics in Tamil Nadu, not only includes the heads of the religious orders, but also independent ascetics who do not have any institutional back up and the heads of the neo-religious orders mushrooming in Tamil Nadu. After the Deiveega Peravai experiment, AHAT provides for the first time, an inclusive platform for the religious leaders of Tamil Nadu. However, there are individual, contextual and historical factors that work both ways for the VHP and as well as religious orders not only within the framework of AHAT, but also with regard to the general religio-political context in Tamil Nadu.

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65 Personal Interview with Anonymous VHP functionary, Erode, December 2000.
The core ideology of the Hindutva Movement is the creation of a Hindu Rashtra – a Hindu nation where the interests of ‘Hindus’ would take precedence over members of other faiths. However, the internal cleavages of this ‘Hindu’ society ‘resists’ the creation of such a nation. One of the ways in which the Hindutva forces try to overcome such a situation is to homogenise the various cultural symbols of different sections of the Hindu society. The articulations of such interests take the form of projection and protection of Hindu practices and cultural symbols. The attempt to bring the heads of various religious orders and the village priests together should be read as one such attempt by the Hindutva forces.

Even when the Hindutva forces entered Tamil Nadu, in 1980s, they came with a clear conception of a Hindu brotherhood transcending the internal differences among the ‘Hindu’ society:

The Hindu organisations, namely, the RSS, the VHP, and the Hindu Munnani joined hands with Arya Samaj and the Temple Protection Committee to form the Hindu Unity Centre.

As a first step the Centre got the ‘blessings of Hindu religious leaders’ like Dharmapuri (sic) Aadeenam, Madurai Aadeenam and Kanchi Sankaracharya. It began numerous padyatras, conferences and people contact programmes. On 14 July 1981 it held a Hindu Unity Conference at Meenakshipuram attended by many ‘religious leaders’, who declared at the conference: We, the religious heads assembled today at Meenakshipuram solemnly declare that our Vedas and Shastras have not mentioned untouchability in any form, anywhere but have propounded only complete brotherhood.... We therefore ardently appeal to all our Hindu brethren to individually and collectively throw out these evils lock, stock and barrel, and strive to ensure equality and fraternity among all sections of our Hindu people (emphases mine).66

The Hindutva project revolves around the creation of a Hindu brotherhood and Hindu nation. This project for a collective Hindu identity – which is the ideology of Hindutva is sought to be achieved through the mobilization of religious orders of different sects – has three kinds of impeding factors: power, context and history.

**Power Relations**

Rivalry and status-maintenance among the religious orders has already been discussed in the context of Deiveega Peravai. Such problems continue to exist in the programmes of Hindutva to project a unified Hindu Identity. During the Erode AHAT, VHP functionary confided that there were great problems in seating arrangements, as the heads of the religious orders who felt that they deserved higher status, refused to share the same dais which placed them on an equal pedestal. The pontiff of the Andavan Ashram conceded that,

> ...there is no unity among matathipathis and so where is the question of combing forces...see they can join together for publicity, but would never cooperate among one another to achieve a common goal. Every body has a big ego.

Fuller notes,

Sri Vaishanawa Brahmins more usually recognize the authority of their own ascetic monks, such as the Jeer of Ahobilam but none of them is as prominent as the Kanchipuram Sankaracharya. During the twentieth century, the power and influence of the Kanchipuram Sankaracharyas have steadily grown.

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67 Personal Interview with Anonymous VHP functionary, *op. cit.*
68 Personal Interview with Andavan Swamigal, *op. cit.*
69 Fuller, *op. cit.*, p.48.
When Murali, the respondent from Vaanamaamalai mutt was asked why the Vaishnavite religious orders do not participate as frequently as other religious orders in functions of VHP/RSS, he bluntly replied,

How can we trust RSS/VHP? They depend on Kanchi Sankaracharya too much for all their functions, the important invitee happens to be the Sankaracharya.... Do they invite Vaishnavite matadhipathis or do they give as much importance to us?  

So, any project has to take into account the individuals, even while concentrating on the institutional level, to incorporate diverse forces into any unified platform.

**Contextual and Historical Factors**

The nature of response of religious orders to various issues has varied according to the contexts in which the issue is articulated. Religious orders in their interaction with other orders, with the society and usage of political space, have been sensitive to the contexts in which the interaction takes place. Even while unifying on platforms like the ones offered by the Deiveega Peravai before and the Hindutva forces presently, the response of the religious orders has to be calibrated and take into account the core ideological concerns. That is why, religious orders while using the Hindutva forces, have also been uncompromising, at best evasive, when it comes to their core philosophical and ideological concerns.

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70 Personal Interview with Murali, *op. cit.*
Like in the example of the use of language in worship, religious orders like Perur Adheenam and Kundrakudi Adheenam have not diluted their position. Even while accommodating issues, in which their position has been indifferent. Perur Adheenam and Kundrakudi Adheenam, till today, have been insisting on the exclusive use of Tamil as language of liturgy in religious institutions and even in domestic setting. This goes directly against the views of Hindutva forces, which regard Sanskrit as the fountain head of Indian civilisation. Such uncompromising positions by some religious orders have forced the VHP/RSS/Hindu Munnani to accommodate the interests of these religious orders in their project to constitute a unified Hindu community with one culture and one religion.

Saiva religious orders have also never been comfortable with label 'Hindu', which, for them, represents subordination to Brahmanical forces and Sanskrit. During the Erode conference of AHAT at Erode, one VHP functionary showed various photographs taken during the meeting. One of the photographs showed the heads of various religious orders and other ascetics posing in front of a big banner with bold letters, VHP welcomes “Hindu Ascetics (Hindu Thuraviyar Varuga Varuga – Ena VHP Varaverkiradu). When the researcher asked for the photograph the functionary politely declined conceding that publication and distribution of this photograph would not be welcome to some of the religious heads assembled for the meeting. While the VHP wants to project the Hindu identity of the religious heads, they, even while accommodating with VHP's
Ayodhya and other agenda, were not ready to give up their Tamil Saiva identity. In every interaction between the religious heads and the Hindutva forces, there is negotiation and accommodation. Thiruvavuduthurai Adheenam has brought out a pamphlet called “Saiva Samaya Villakam”, (Explanation of Saiva religion). The Pamphlet after describing sixteen aspects of Saiva religion, at the end of pamphlet has a single line appendage: “Saiva religion cannot be contained within the word Hindu religion.” For them, the word Saiva, includes and goes beyond the word Hindu. Pulavar Adi Muruga Vel described this feature as follows:

While other religious systems may reject Saivism and Saivites, Saivites would accept them. This is because, Saiva Siddhantha encompasses Vaishnavism. All religious systems delve deep into metaphysical thought and analysis, and the doctrines and beliefs are based on that analysis. While other religions stop at certain stage, Saiva Siddhantha has gone beyond them and understood them. (He gave an analogy) I am an old man and have crossed youth and middle age. So I accept and understand my son’s youthful activities, but he would be unable to comprehend my nature and activities. It is only Saiva Siddhantha which has delved deep into the grammar and structure of Tamil, for Tamil reflects Saiva Siddhantha philosophy. So, a pure Saiva Siddhanthin is always a Tamilian.  

So, while Saiva religious orders might tolerate the label ‘Hindu’, depending upon the context, it is clearly seen from such assertions that Tamil identity remains the core feature of the Saiva orders.

The Hindutva platforms, even while raising important points of contention for religious orders, includes aspects that are likely to be contested by the religious orders: For example, the ritual songs and training for village temple priests indicate a standardisation of village

71 Personal Interview with Adi Muruga Vel, op. cit.
temple worship, which has rich variety and varies from region to region. Such standardization, while helping to homogenise the village temple worship practices, would also help their incorporation into high-caste Brahmanical Hinduism which the Hindutva forces project as the salient features of Hindu culture in India. We have already seen that the non-Brahman religious orders have historically resisted Brahmanical forms of Hinduism, especially in the issue of language. While religious orders like Perur Adheenam and Kundrakudi Adheenam have insisted upon the exclusive use of Tamil, preferably pure Tamil, the ritual songs, provided by the AVTP, supposed to be used by the village temple priests are replete with Sanskrit words. Also, in the training courses conducted by AVTP for village priests, Brahmanical practices like Pranayama are taught to the village temple priests.

Religious orders, as we have seen have major interest in temples. They have drawn upon the temples, for their status and influence in the society. So, control of temples remains high on the agenda for religious orders. Since, the encroachment of State upon the administration of temples, religious orders have strove to regain the control and have a say in their administration.

Since the 1990s the Hindutva forces have consistently demanded that the administration of the temples be handed over to an autonomous body consisting of religious leaders. This has struck the right chord among
many a religious order in Tamil Nadu. For, the VHP and RSS, uniting the various religious orders under the Hindu banner, would pave the way for the construction of a master Hindu collective identity and so they call upon the fact that Christian and Islamic religious institutions are controlled by their respective religious leaders. However, for the religious orders, control of temples is a historical legacy. So, depending upon their history and contextual factors, various religious orders have reacted to such a demand favourably or with indifference. The response of the religious orders can be divided into two patterns: Those who firmly support the constitution of an autonomous body and those who are either equivocal or indifferent to the demand. The major raison de etre of Vaishnavite religious orders are the administration of temples. Saivite orders have administered temples, apart from being seminaries and institutions of language promotion and preservation. Advaita orders have never been associated with temples historically.

However, the reaction to the demand for an autonomous board is more complex and has not proceeded exactly on historical basis. Saivite orders have whole-heartedly supported the demand along with the Advaita order, whereas the Vaishnavite orders have been indifferent to the demand. The major reason for the varying orders is the calculation about the consequences of such a demand.
One Vaishnavite respondent openly expressed the fear, that such an autonomous body would be hijacked by the Kanchi Kamakoti Pontiff who has been the most vocal in his demands. The growing influence of Kanchi Sankaracharya Jayendra Saraswathi, many Vaishnavites feel would obliterate the Vaishnavite voices and control over issues with which they closely identify. The domination of any individual in the control of religious institutions would interfere in the sectarian interests of that particular temple. He alleged that once during the Kumbhabhishekam of the famous Tiruvanaikoil Akilandaeswari temple, the Kanchi Sankaracharya insisted that the rituals be conducted using Vedic mantras, rather than the Agamic practice, as is the tradition. He said that the issue had to be sorted out through a court ruling. They feel that only the State can act as a neutral arbiter.

As the following narration would tell us, even though Vaishnavites realise the advantages of an autonomous board, the context where a rival sectarian leader could emerge powerful, had to be taken into consideration. Krishnaswamy, a follower of the Sriranga Narayana Jeeyar Adheenam, Srirangam (religious order belonging to Tengalai school) summed up the dilemma of the Vaishnavite orders:

The demand for autonomous body has both advantages and disadvantages. If we have an autonomous board, nobody can interfere in religious rituals and ceremonies...usages cannot be changed. Under State control, the government appointees sometime turn out to be ignorant of local usages and customs and sometimes even atheists are appointed. Today trustees are not dedicated and so political interference becomes easy. The government has not been able to ensure proper returns from the leased properties. The temple lands yield only insufficient income.
But the autonomous board that is being demanded, will they be able to ensure proper receipts of resources from properties? What about sectarian rivalry? Can they ensure that there would be no prejudice on the basis of sectarian feelings?

Advaitins/Smarthas have no relation to the temple and so Kanchi Sankaracharya has no business to demand an autonomous board. But because of his worldly popularity, he would come to dominate it. RSS/VHP in Tamil Nadu are dominated by Smarthas (The Important leaders like RVBS Manian in Hindutva forces are smarthas, the same subsection of Brahmins to which Kanchi Kamakoti mutt belongs) and again they would support the Acharya. That's why Vaishnavites are against it.  

So, the preservation of sectarian identity becomes more important here, in contrast, to the opposition to 'conversions', where it is the Hindu identity that is being articulated. So, while the Hindutva forces would be able to enlist the support of Vaishnavite orders to oppose 'conversion', Hindutva forces however would not be able to project a 'Hindu identity' for the demand of an autonomous body with the help of the platforms that they have created in the form of AVTP and AHAT. For the main constituents and force behind the Associations articulate a different cultural marker than what the Hindutva forces would desire.

When the pontiff of Andavan Ashramam was asked, he gave an evasive answer, but with enough indications that he would prefer the State control to continue:

HR&CE has done and is doing its duty. There are both shortcomings and advantages. Especially, recently they are doing lot of renovation work in temples. That is welcome. The major short coming is the recovery of finances due to religious institutions. And that is the fault of politicians rather than HR&CE officials. There might have been the odd erring official but it is no reflection on the department. Black sheeps are there in every department.  

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72 Personal Interview with Krishnaswamy, Srirangam, November 1999.
73 Personal Interview with Andavan Swamigal, op. cit.
How do we understand the reluctance, on the part of Vaishnavite religious orders to reject the control of the state? Temples have been the major source of resource for religious orders and especially so, for Vaishnavite religious orders, which were controlling almost all the major Vaishnavite temples in Tamil Nadu. The answer has to be seen on how the religious orders have responded to the overall changes that have taken place over a period of hundred years in Tamil Nadu.

Vaishnavism considers one hundred and eight temple centres spread all over the subcontinent, as sacred sites of Vaishnavism. They are called Divya Desams and traditionally, the head of Vaishnavite orders tour all these places to propagate Vaishnavism. With modern modes of transport available, such tours have become easier to conduct than in previous times. Also, over this period Tamil Sri Vaishnava Brahmins have spread all over the country and have occupied wealthy positions in the society. As we have already seen, Vaishnavism regards ‘Acharya’ as an important vehicle for salvation and the Tamil Sri Vaishnavas settled outside Tamil Nadu look forward to the visit of the Acharya, who since the degeneration of the institution of Suyamacharya Purushas, happen to be the heads of Vaishnavite religious orders. Also, religious orders have spread their temple network by construction of new temples in important places like Delhi and Bombay. Andavan Ashramam, the Vadagalai order has temples both in Bombay and Delhi among other places. The pontiffs undertake all-India tours every few years.
On one such occasion in the year 2000, the researcher spent one week with the Vaanamaamalai orders’ head, Kaliyan Vaanamaamalai Jeeyar in Delhi. The daily routine of the Jeeyar was as follows: In the morning, after the completion of Puja, the Jeeyar would receive visitors who come to seek his blessings and in the late afternoon, he would visit his followers’ houses and accept Padha puja (ceremonial washing and worship of Acharya’s feet) and from there he visited temples to give ‘upanyas’ (a kind of discourse in which some famous epic or Vaishnava Sutras would be explained).

The conduct of the Padha Puja is usually followed by ‘Padha Kannikai’ – offering to the feet of the Acharya). Most of the houses he visited were houses of upper class professionals and industrialists. The offering always happened to be huge sum of money or expensive jewellery to be dedicated to the temple. In the one week, the researcher found that the tour was a major fund raising campaign. Such long tours have definitely emerged as one of the alternatives for Vaishnavite religious orders in the mobilisation of resources. The majority of the donors were surprisingly North Indians – mainly Gujarati businessmen.

The pontiff had used the tours to induct many followers from non-Tamil groups and thus has increased the clientele base all over India and it has helped the religious order in the expansion of its activities, reach and influence. The fact that the pontiff is a Sanskrit scholar and fluent in Hindi
has helped in the expansion. This is in contrast to Saiva religious orders whose philosophy, Saiva Siddhantha places such a huge emphasis on Tamil and if we recall the phrase of Thiruvavaduthurai Adheenam poet Adi Muruga Vel that ‘all Saiva Siddhantins are necessarily Tamilians’, then we can place the contrast in proper historical context.

The Sri Vaishnava Tamil Brahmins living outside Tamil Nadu have great attachment to their religious orders, as they identify with their acharya based on community, that is ‘Sri Vaishnava Brahmin’ called Iyengars. So, the capacity of the religious order to expand its activities is based not only on the enterprise of the heads, but also the spread and reach of the clientele and the nature of relation the particular sect demands between the head and the follower.

So, when dealing with issues like control of religious institutions by an autonomous board, Vaishnavite orders take into consideration other factors like the likely impact and nature of influence the board can wield. When the assessment was that the control would be with leaders, other than their own, they have less reasons to support such measures, despite the fact that they have no problems with the VHP’s project of ‘one Hindu community’ based on the ideals of Sanskritic Hinduism.

The Saivite orders on the other hand have less reason to co-operate with Hindutva forces, but other factors come into play here. Orders like
Thiruvavaduthurai, though supportive of the demand for autonomous board, are not as demonstrative as the Perur Vira Saiva Order of Santhalinga Adigalar. However, for the Saiva orders with their range of activities generally circumscribed within Tamil Nadu need the political platform of VHP and RSS, as it increases the influence of the orders in the regional context. Also, Saivite orders, with their sheer numerical superiority, (Saivite orders in Tamil Nadu far outnumber orders of other sects) can hope to control the autonomous board. Sokkalingam, a Tamil scholar and follower of Perur Adheenam put the support of Saiva Adheenams in following terms:

Even recently, in AHAT conference, the Saiva Adheenams spoke about the need for autonomous board. The demand is justified for financial reasons. The government is lending temple Hundi collections to other Departments of the State and thereby depriving the temples of their rightful resource. Of course, the question of language...is there. The Dravidian legacy gives importance to language but denies God where as the VHP/RSS accept religion, but are ambivalent regarding Tamil. But it is better to approach VHP and RSS than rely on those who deny God. It is important to make the VHP and RSS understand the importance of Tamil, as a language of worship.

So, for Saiva orders, negotiation and adaptation determines the nature of their interaction with Hindutva forces. The Kanchi Kamakoti religious order has few ideological or contextual contradictions in their interaction with Hindutva forces. With their all-India profile, Sanskritic base and influence with political forces, Kamakoti order naturally aspires for leadership among religious orders. Advaita Mutts never had the same nature of relation with temples as the Saivite and Vaishnavite orders had.

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So, the platforms of VHP and other Hindutva forces, AVTP and AHAT, give them scope to increase their areas of influence.

The chapter has approached the problem of 'collective identity' through the contextualisation of the historical relation between land and religious institutions. The complex relationship that the religious institutions shared with the land underwent a change with the intervention of colonial state and the subsequent inheritance of that legacy by the Indian state. There are also other issues involved like the growing encroachment of the state upon the domain of religious orders. This presented a fresh set of scenarios for the religious orders to contend with. With the growing emphasis on social reforms, the Dravidian movement presented new opportunities to the religious orders to reorient themselves to retain their relevance and influence. Later, the Hindutva forces ushered in another set of opportunities to the religious orders. Both these opportunities came in the context of attempts to construct a new collective identity, one based on language and social-religious reform and the other in the context of submerging internal differences in the religious domain and building a unified Hindu identity. We have argued that the attempts are doomed to fail because of the complex power relations that exist among the orders and other historical, cultural and contextual factors.