CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Tamil Nadu, during the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century emerged as one of the key sites in which there was intense struggle/contestations over collective identity. The dynamics of the contestations was felt at various levels: standardisation of Tamil language, the use of language in religion, the emerging pattern of interaction between religious institutions and the state, the impact of the expansion of state over previously uncharted territories, at the level of aspirations for a separate nationality and of course caste.

It also gave rise to one of the most powerful anti-Brahmanical movements in history, which sought to define the boundaries for a master cultural and socio-political identity for the people of the region. The study seeks to understand the dynamics of these cultural developments through a study of religious orders in Tamil Nadu, and their positions and shifting strategies vis-à-vis the above developments.

RELIGIOUS CULTURE AND MODERNITY

In the history of Tamil speaking region, religious orders have been one of the two powerful institutions of the society – the other being, temple. Both the institutions were/are hugely powerful movements of Bhakti, with enormous following, prestige and patronage. Throughout their history, temples and religious orders were given rich endowments – land,
money, and jewellery; they had important economic redistributive functions in the society and religious leaders of the Orders enjoyed vast powers.

However, nineteenth century India posed huge challenges to both the institutions. The expanding British state had started asserting the state's sovereignty and strove to bring within its focus the administrative control over all religious institutions. Religious policy of the state was calculated to build a comfortable support-base, by balancing between various influential social groups, which were affected by its policy.¹ All these fundamentally reshaped the religious culture of the region. While at one level, varying conceptions of religions and their relation with social groups emerged, at another level, the religious ideologies themselves were subjected to intense scrutiny. Fresh debates raged over language and religion, their inter-relation and their relation to various social groups.

The emerging print-technology and other attendant ideas of modernity in Tamil Nadu, initially led to the revival of religious texts. Tamil literature dates back to more than two thousand years. The earliest corpus of work extant – Sangam literature – is traditionally dated between the first century B.C. and third century A.D.² During the nineteenth century, there was no widespread knowledge of this rich heritage. Nor was there any awareness of the list of available Tamil works extant – from Sangam literature to the Modern period. It was due to the remarkable efforts of a

few Tamil scholars, most notably people like U.V. Saminatha Iyer, many works saw the light of the day. Many of these works were subsequently edited and printed by Saminatha Iyer himself.³

The revival of Tamil literature had powerful impact upon the emerging cultural discourse of the time. Periodisation and the exact antiquity of the texts raised considerable heat and controversy. The extent of Tamil's indebtedness, if at all there is any, to Sanskrit was another point of contention.⁴ It led to a stupendous upsurge of Tamil school of *Saiva Siddhantha* – a regional variant of Saivism. Celebration of Tamil religious texts formed the bedrock of the upsurge and throughout the nineteenth century in Tamil speaking regions, especially in Sri Lanka, this posed a serious and more or less successful challenge to Christian missionary attacks, which have for long been targeting the native religious traditions and practices.⁵

British rule and modernisation brought in severe conflicts between the elites of Tamil society, namely, Brahmans and higher-caste non-Brahmans.⁶ When Western modernity and researches in Tamil by

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missionaries and other scholars brought in concepts of linguistic and religious ethnicity, conflicts between the social groups intensified. It became important for all social groups to look for new cultural symbols, which could command loyalty of their respective members. As Bernard Cohn says, the symbols used were 'regional' in character and,

may be couched in linguistic terms... (and) when however, one gets behind the identification with the language per se and looks at the content of the particular set of symbols that make up the regional identification, it is apparent that it is literature, religion and political history that are being called upon.7

Literature and religion, the growth of historical consciousness were a powerful mix for the dynamic contestation of collective identities. Saiva Siddhantha was identified as Tamil religion and in 1886, a Saiva Siddhantha Sabha was founded to promote the idea.8 Outside this visible arena, religious orders were struggling to cope with the large-scale changes and faced increasing threats of marginalisation. The threat of secular control of religious institutions was hanging over the head and as other sites of legitimization emerged, religious orders withdrew further into the background. The initiatives taken by several prominent scholars of Tamil and religion were given institutional support by the religious orders. However, the religious orders had to be careful not to displease the state, which by then had emerged as the greatest threat to its survival and relevance.

7 Bernard Cohn, quoted in Ryerson, 1988, op.cit., p.60.
8 Ibid., p.61.
The other factor that needs to be considered here is the caste-base of religious orders. Most Saiva religious orders are headed by non-Brahmans, where as the majority of Vaishnava religious orders are exclusively Brahmancial. Advaita religious orders, of which the Kanchi Kamakoti Mutt in Tamil Nadu is the most famous, are Brahmancial, but headed by a different sub-caste from the Sri Vaishnava Brahmans, generally called Smarthas or Iyers. The philosophical orientation of the religious orders and the caste to which they belong, by and large, determine the nature of response to developments in the society. Ascriptive identities – based on language, religion and caste – also determined the nature of their inter-relationships.

**POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS**

If the religious arena was characterised by such developments, the political consciousness of Tamil Nadu was getting sharper. A clear linkage between language and caste/race was formed in the discourse of the Dravidian movement. Non-Brahmans were regarded as the ‘proper Tamilians’ and their ‘race’ was sought to be distinguished as ‘Dravidian’, supposedly different from the ‘Aryan Brahmans’. Later, Dravidian identity collapsed into Tamil identity, understandably, “because of the antiquity of the Tamil literary and cultural traditions and its independence of the Sanskrit tradition.”9 In other words, Dravidian identity was articulated more

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9 K. Sivathamby, *Understanding the Dravidian Movement: Problems and Perspectives*, Madras, 1995, p.35. In the initial stages of the movement, Dravidian race was supposed to include all the people except Brahmans from Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala.
forcefully in Tamil speaking regions rather than in non-Tamil regions of South India. Questions about Dravidian revivalism, the position of Dravidian culture vis-à-vis Indian culture, political autonomy, caste oppression and emancipation were central to the ideology of the Dravidian movement. The movement has various phases. Sivathamby identifies the following phases:

(1) 1856-1916: The year 1856 marks the popularisation of the word 'Dravidian', when Robert Caldwell's influential book, *A Comparative Grammar of Dravidian Languages*, was first published. Sivathamby argues that this period was the struggle for the very identity of Tamils as a cultural group, independent of Sanskrit.

(2) 1916-1925: 1916 was the year when the Dravidian consciousness takes institutional form, the beginning of Justice Party, a party of high caste non-Brahmans, a substantial portion of which were Tamil speakers and followers of Saiva Siddhantha philosophical system. It was during this period that Justice Party was in power.

(3) 1925-1944: The emergence of the self-respect movement (hereafter SRM) led by Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker (hereafter EVR). This was one of most active periods of EVR— a period characterised by virulent anti-caste, anti-god and anti-Hindi mobilisations. This was the period when the Dravidian identity shrunk into Tamil identity and the
influence of the movement was widely felt in Tamil speaking regions. Non-Brahman political leaders were on the ascendancy and had started dominating the public sphere, which hitherto had been peopled mostly by Brahmans in Tamil Nadu.

(4) 1944-1949: Justice Party merged with Eve’s SRM and Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) (Federation of Dravidians) was formed. Second-line leadership emerged in the movement, propagating Dravidianism ‘as a secular cultural concept and the sheet-anchor of the identity of Tamils.’

(5) 1949-1967: 1949 was the year when C.N. Annadurai forms the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (hereafter DMK) (Federation for the Progress of Dravidians) and takes the movement towards participation in electoral politics. The movement came to terms with India’s independence and Tamil Nadu’s position in the federal structure of the Indian state. The period witnessed the second wave of anti-Hindi movement.

(6) 1967-1972: In 1967, DMK assumed political power in Tamil Nadu. In 1972, the party split again and the Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
(hereafter ADMK), (Anna Federation for the Progress of Dravidians) was formed.\textsuperscript{10}

The above is a brief outline of the political history of Dravidian movement. Our interest in political history is confined to the way it was shaping public discourse on 'Tamil identity' in Tamil Nadu. 'Non-Brahman' is an omnibus term, a purely analytical construct (so is the term 'Brahman', if we consider the heterogeneity of groups subsumed under it). Yet in the political discourse of Tamil Nadu, it has evoked 'imaginings' of a pre-Aryan race, whose culture and civilisation was symbolised by Tamil, now corrupted by the Aryan-Sanskritic influence.\textsuperscript{11}

**DIVINE TAMIL: INTERFACE BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND RELIGION**

Once, the then Chief Minister Karunanidhi declared that, "if the right to perform the archana in Tamil is denied, Sanskrit considered as Devabasha (language of god), along with that god and religion also, will be driven out from Tamil Nadu to North India."\textsuperscript{12} Again, he declared, "if the gods in South India cannot tolerate Tamil archanas let the Gods move to North India."\textsuperscript{13} Perhaps these two statements, more than anything else,

\begin{itemize}
  \item\textsuperscript{11} EVR's conception of 'Dravidian' was more based on caste and race rather than language. Even though he conducted many anti-Hindi struggles, he viewed 'Dravidian' more in terms of caste and was not afraid to be critical of devotion to Tamil.
  \item\textsuperscript{12} Quoted in Presler, 1987, *op. cit.*, p.130.
  \item\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
reflect the contestation and struggle at the political level. It echoes the pet theory of the Dravidian movement that Brahmans are Aryans who migrated from North India with ‘their’ Sanskrit and subjugated the native Dravidians and ‘their’ Tamil. It is the right of the ‘native’ people to worship in ‘their’ mother tongue in their ‘mother-land’, which is asserted. The articulation here is modernity’s articulation:

In modern narratives of nationalism, the language of a nation assumes importance because it is the tongue of its citizens, the very essence of the people who speak it. Correspondingly, the power of the language appears to derive from the power exercised by that collective entity, ‘the people’ in the nation.14

While the political arena reflects the struggle between Tamil and Sanskrit in the context of aspirations for nationhood, in Tamil Nadu, the religious domain is not left far behind. Thavathiru Santhalinga Adigalar, Pontiff of the Perur Adheenam (Saiva religious order) writes,

Tamil has been ignored in our worship because of the dominance of outsiders (an obvious reference to Brahmans’ influence in the religious sphere – mine). How can we justify the slavish mentality of Tamilians for foreign language? Journals, with least consideration for the worship practices of our land practiced since Sangam period, have started writing that worship in Tamil region has always been conducted in Sanskrit (Northern language). One can worship god in any language. But it is not acceptable when guidelines are given not to perform/worship in our language in our temples.15

Both quotations reflect the same spirit, one in political terms and the other in religious terms. Both view the Tamil language as the rightful and exclusive possession of one group. Both envisage oppression and

subjugation by the 'cultural other'. The definition of the 'other', in terms of language was however modernity's contribution to India, through which both the speakers have defined 'socio-cultural' groups. However, in different areas of the sub-continent, people who otherwise have 'shared frameworks of meaning', have in fact spoken different languages, even while co-habitating for hundreds of years. Language, is one among many social markers, which defined social-groupings, in fact, it is more an expression of 'social-status'.

However, the conflict/competition between Sanskrit and Tamil, in Tamil speaking regions are not purely inventions of modernity. While the terms in which the competition is expressed is 'modern' and should be situated in the contestations over power, the competition itself has a recorded history of more than six hundred years.

While today, Saivites are more vocal in the demand for parity for Tamil as a divine language, the schism that took place in the Sri Vaishnava tradition around the fourteenth century was based, though not entirely, on the parity between Tamil and Sanskrit. The Naalayira Divya Prabandham, the devotional hymns of Vaishnava Bhakti saints was called by Ramanuja as 'Tamil Vedas'. He treated them on par with 'Sanskrit Vedas' and called both of them together as Ubaya Vedantha. It is even suggested that the widespread use of Manipravala (literally ruby with corals) – a peculiar

admixture of Sanskrit and Tamil – by Sri Vaishnavas was the consequence of the joint use of Tamil and Sanskrit by Ramanuja.\textsuperscript{17}

Even earlier, during Raja Raja I’s (the chola king) period, Tamil devotional hymns of the Saiva Bhakti Saints (\textit{Nayanmars}) were sung in temple worship.\textsuperscript{18} So, contemporary expressions of parity of Tamil with Sanskrit as ‘Deva Bhasha’ rested on strong historical grounds. However, what was new in the articulation was, (a) its connection with the people, and (b) their ‘possession’ of it exclusively. As Sumathi Ramaswami observes,

\begin{quote}
Prior to the nations’ birth, Tamil was valorised not because it ensured communication between its speakers, enabled the schooling of the citizenry, or facilitated the governance of the populace.... It was held in awe for its demonstrated ability to perform wondrous miracles and command the all-powerful Gods...\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

The competition is a historical legacy, but the terms of the competition are ‘modern’.

Both Brahman and non-Brahman religious orders in the Tamil speaking regions have been using both Tamil and Sanskrit. Even, the Saiva religious orders have been using Sanskrit for a long time. Like the Tengalai division of Sri Vaishnavism, it has also been insisting on the more liberal use of Tamil for liturgical purposes.

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\textsuperscript{17} N. Jagadeesan, \textit{History of Sri-Vaishnavism in The Tamil Country (Post- Ramanuja)}, Madurai, 1977, p.179.
\textsuperscript{19} Ramaswamy, 1997, op. cit., p.67.
\end{flushright}
This presents an ambiguous choice for Saiva Siddhantha religious orders, which as we have already noted, are non-Brahman headed mutts. At one level, the political context demanded the use of Tamil in exclusion to Sanskrit, while at another level, their own tradition demanded the use of both the languages. With the possible exception of Madurai Order and to a limited extent Kundrakudi Order, most of the other Saiva Siddhantha Orders have stayed clear of political controversy regarding Tamil nationality. On the more 'religious' concern of the choice of the liturgical language, our focus has been to analyse the position taken by various religious orders and the context of compulsions of such positions.

The richer religious orders like the Thiruvavaduthurai Adheenam, Dharmapuram Adheenam and Thirupanandal Kasi Mutt have brought out Tamil Saiva Siddhantha religious texts and widely distributed them among their networks. Now there is a thriving group of public speakers – mostly Tamil Pandits/Vidwans trained in the Tamil colleges run by the religious orders – who traverse the entire length and breadth of Tamil Nadu, delivering discourses on Tamil Thirumurai, the sacred Saiva Tamil Texts, day in and day out. The discourses, usually organised in the evenings, are generally called Thirumurai Thiru Koottam or Sivaneri Vazhipattuth Thiru Koottam. (can be loosely translated as the 'The Association/Group for Thirumurai (Saiva Canons) or as Group of Worshippers of Saiva norms).
These meetings have also served as the place where pressing religious and political issues were discussed informally. The major network of Tamil Saiva Orders is the string of Tamil colleges under their administration. Perur Adheenam, though a Vira Saiva Mutt, too has a Tamil college under its administration. The Tamil colleges serve two major functions: one of the recurring motifs of Saiva Orders is ‘Service to Tamil’. Publication of Tamil religious texts and administrating and funding Tamil colleges fall under this category. The main use of having the Order’s own colleges is that it brings out every year a large number of Tamil pandits, who spawn the region, spreading not only the philosophy of Saiva Siddhantha, but also generally helpful in the recruitment and influence for the Order. All these became important for the Orders, for it reinforces the notion that ‘Tamil is divine’ and ‘loved by god Shiva’.

From the beginning of bhakti period (between sixth and ninth centuries A.D.), Tamil literature took a turn towards religion. Generally, the Sangam literature is secular, life-affirming, depicting the social and cultural life of the people of the times. However, the use of Tamil to wean the society away from Buddhism and Jainism was the hallmark of bhakti period. It is also during this period the notion of ‘Divine Tamil’ came into prominence. During the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the main focus was on writing commentaries for the religious texts. Later

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20 Accurate data is not available on the number of candidates coming out of these colleges every year, but no doubt, the number is significant and most of them go on to become ‘public speakers’ using the vast network of ‘Saiva Siddhantha devotees’.
centuries are the period of *Sthalapuranas*, the legend of divine places, usually, the temples and the city/village that houses the temple.

It is only during the British period that Tamil language entered new arenas. Short stories, Drama and Prose made their genesis in Tamil during the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries (though not respectively). Dr. Caldwell, Ziegen Balg and Constantinople Beschi are some of the names that readily spring into mind while discussing the modernisation of Tamil language. It is through them that print technology came to Tamil, which enabled the religious texts to be printed on a large scale. Naturally, the audience was expanding all the time creating a ‘Tamil devotional community’ and generally, the resurgence of Tamil language served as a powerful instrument in the contestations over collective cultural identity.

However, identity is a dynamic concept, constantly shifting along with the context. This is not to suggest that identities are false or fabricated, but they are imagined, created along with the context. The study has tried to analyse the shifting emphasis of the religious orders in their response to these various developments and how the Orders have articulated one or more from the many identities – Saiva, Vaishnava, Hindu, Brahman/non-Brahman, Tamil, Indian, etc. – that float in the processual nature of cultural dynamics.
The concept of identity is central to theories of ethnicity and nationalism. Social science scholarship has widely differing views on ‘identity’—from extremely essentialist positions to purely instrumentalist explanations. However, in recent times, as Dipankar Gupta observes, “There is a growing body of opinion in contemporary scholarship which is of the view that identities are not permanently inscribed on our psyches but undergo context-related changes.”21 However, such a view should be explicated with examples before its acceptance as a verifiable general theory. Such a position would also be contested by the experiences of the subject, who would invariably insist on an essentialist justification for the articulation of his/her identity.22

Social sciences have long debated on the ‘naturalness’ of identity. Early anthropological literature, especially explaining and interpreting ‘other’ cultures has argued for the primordiality/naturalness of ascriptive identities based on language, caste, race, religion and the like. John Eade and Tim Allen points out that, “the anthropological focus on small localities or population groups have encouraged the implication that each community is characterised by a unique (social and cultural) essence.”23 In a plural and complex society like India, when such ‘essence’ is located in language, religion or caste, it leads to both analytical and conceptual

confusion. It is not surprising, for in India, caste and language and religious identities criss-cross each in complex patterns even in small geographical spaces. The primacy given to any one single identity largely ignores the context, in which that particular identity assumes salience.

In polyglot societies like India, the problem of identifying a culture with one language, and an identity based on that language are inherently risky. For, in the Indian traditions, multi-lingual experience is a living reality. Washbrook observes,

- the linguistic diversity frequently made Europeans wonder whether they were dealing with one society, or even one culture, in India, or with a series of self-contained and separate para-communities. Yet, unifying principles of cognition clearly existed, encompassing the variegations of speech and drawing them together into shared frameworks of meaning. Going back to the Prakrit tradition, dramatic works were constructed with the different characters speaking to a single audience in different languages, depending on their regional origins and social roles. Equally, religious inscriptions, recording endowments or celebrating great events, were often carved into the same stone or copperplate simultaneously in several different scripts. Certainly, ideas and values were broadly shared. But their transmission owed little to uniformities of language, and society was accustomed to a multiplicity of tongues.24

This rather lengthy quotation becomes essential, as this clearly brings out the complexities of identifying nationalities in the subcontinent based on language or religion and the problems encountered by movements fighting for separate nationalities in the subcontinent.

It is of cardinal importance to keep the levels of analysis distinct, in the context of identity. For example, at the level of primary relationships, principally, kinship, the identity may well be single, natural and given. But

at the level of a collectivity, there are multiple identities, each assuming salience in different contexts. This is exactly where the theories of ethnicity and nationalism run into difficulties, when based on purely essentialist interpretations. The concept of nation, for example, would require the services of 'a culture', with language, territory, religion, and race, all making a claim to be an inalienable and defining parameter of that culture and so nationality. So when a nation is sought to be defined in terms of any one or a combination of these parameters, it fails to satisfy the canons of universality and predictability. For, a collectivity with roughly the same combination of parameters emerges as a 'nation' in certain space and time, while in others, it fails to do so. For example, in most European countries, language was the dominant cultural motif in the emergence of separate nation-states. However, it has failed to hold good in the case of India. In the emergence of Bangladesh as a separate entity, it was the turn of religion to fail as the dominant cultural parameter for the emergence of a nation.

The same fallacy affects purely instrumentalist notions of identity. Instrumentalism argues that 'identities' are moulded by the conscious action of individuals, the process guided by a rational consideration of cost-benefit analysis on the part of the actors. More often than not, the role of elites assumes importance in instrumentalist analysis of construction of identity, where the elites influence their followers through judicious and
rational manipulation of political and ideological strategies.\textsuperscript{25} Instrumentalism is useful in explaining conscious decisions to change the identity – from one religion to another, from one caste to another. Such decisions are taken under distress, sense of deprivation and oppression and rationally calculated to maximise the material advantages, chances for status-mobility and to fight oppression.\textsuperscript{26} The urge to regain human dignity and honour are prime considerations in the neo-Buddhist movements in India.

The other aspect, one need to be sensitive about, in projects of identity construction, is the problem of 'boundary-maintenance'\textsuperscript{27} – the differentiation between 'outsiders' and 'insiders'. In the sense that, it reinforces the common logic that 'identities' assume significance only in relation to other 'putative identities'. Here again, the context continues to play a central role in determining the contours of boundary maintenance. In the non-Brahman movement in Tamil Nadu, the boundary is sought to be maintained by the omnibus non-Brahman community, with the principal 'other' being the 'Brahmans'. Here the internal differences of both the constructions are fudged and an over-arching non-Brahman or Brahman identity is pressed into service. However, in the Thevar-Dalit conflict in Southern Tamil Nadu, both located within the 'non-Brahman' identity-kit previously, it is the specific \textit{jati} identity that is articulated more forcefully.

\textsuperscript{25} J Eade and Tim Allen, 1999, \textit{op. cit.}, p.149.
\textsuperscript{26} This is not to suggest that such changes are always based on purely instrumental considerations and a change of faith never occurs for its own sake.
So, even when one is sensitive to boundary-maintenance between contending social groups, it needs to be contextualised. That is the location of the group within specific boundaries is dependent upon the context in which the group is defined.

This approach varies significantly from both primordialist/essentialist and instrumental analyses of identity. It views identities as 'fluid', made and unmade, in relational contexts. It locates 'identities' in the processes rather than as an essence or a quality of cultural groups. Differences are articulated in 'interaction' and 'interaction' takes place in particular contexts. Dipankar Gupta makes an important observation in the context of insider-outsider definition,

Not all renditions of the outsider are done within the framework of the nation-state. In some cases, the insider and the outsider are understood regionally, i.e., in the sub-national context, and the nation-state is not thematised. In such instances, then the situation is not yet properly ethnic in our view.\(^{28}\)

This assumes significance in the way the definition of 'Brahmans' as outsiders have faded in Tamil Nadu. While still occasional voices are heard about the status of Brahmans in Tamil Nadu, by and large, the discourse on the liturgical language was conducted on the basis of ancient practice and parity between Tamil and Sanskrit as divine languages.

When the identity is 'ethnised' they become 'imagined political community'\textsuperscript{29}. Anderson writes, "It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives they imagine of the communion."\textsuperscript{30} He further makes the point that "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined."\textsuperscript{31}

We have, in our study, argued that identities (i) are fluid, and malleable, (ii) depend on boundary-maintenance and so the existence of an 'outsider' or 'multiple outsiders', and (iii) should be located in relational contexts. We have not, so much concentrated on any one single identity, but on multiple identities floating in a cultural space and how they are appropriated for articulation-in-context. The cultural framework or 'shared frameworks of meaning' has to be located in history. We believe that such 'shared frameworks of meaning' play a significant role not only in the interaction between various social groups, but also in the making of any 'master national identity'. Numerous 'collective identities', each defined in a relational context, compete for space and power, making and unmaking each other in the process. Language and religion are the sites, where such numerous contestations take place, each bearing a central influence upon identities that eventually get politicised.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study tries to understand the political and socio-cultural developments of the past 150 years in Tamil speaking regions from the viewpoint of the religious orders. Throughout their history, religious orders have occupied an important role in the power structure of the society and had great influence upon the religious culture. However, with the emergence of modern state and alternate sources of legitimation of power and status, the economic function of religious institutions was largely reduced. When the economy was diversified, religious institutions are forced to adapt new strategies to avoid marginalisation. As Colonial India spawned new elites in the subcontinent and rapid cultural and socio-structural changes were ushered in, traditional institutions of power either became redundant or forced to adapt to the emerging situation. As temples have garnered all the attention of historians and sociologists, this study tries to bridge the gap in the understanding of the dynamics of identity construction in Tamil Nadu from the viewpoint of religious orders. The study covers the period from 1850 right up to the present times and focuses on select religious orders.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Religious orders are extraordinarily closed institutions, naturally so, because it is supposed to house religious recluses. Apart from Gururparamparas and scattered copper and stone inscriptions, which in most cases deal indirectly with the activities of religious orders, data is not
available uniformly for all periods of times in the history of religious orders. So to understand the role of religious orders in the history in its entirety would be difficult, though the wealth and influence associated with the Orders during different periods of time can be gauged with the available material.

Even in contemporary times, religious orders resemble Royal Courts and the head of the religious orders replicate the activities of kings. Thereby, an audience with him is always difficult to come by. While the religious order's position regarding various issues is available from other sources, it is still difficult to exactly understand the nuances of the position and the internal politics that determine them in view of the extreme secrecy and diffidence on the part of the interviewees.

**OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

Specifically, the study poses the following questions:

1. Historically, what is the role of religious orders in Tamil Nadu in formulating the religious culture?
2. How do different Orders vary in the ideological conception of religious culture in Tamil society?
3. In the contemporary situation, how do they view changes in culture and what are the shifting strategies involved in adapting and bringing about changes?
What is the role of religious orders in language resurgence and politics of collective identity?

**METHODODOLOGY**

The study follows a historical-analytical framework. An historical model of research in the case of religious orders would be inaccurate, as religious orders go a long time back in history and the role played by them in influencing the cultural processes have evolved through history. Also, as the study seeks to understand the role of religious orders in society, a comparative dimension is required to capture the changes that have taken place over time and only a historical study would fulfil the needs of explicating the shifting strategies. The logic of the time frame selected is as follows: It is believed that the mid-1800s constitute the 'liminal' period in the cultural history of Tamil Nadu, like many other regions in colonial India. It was during this period that old ideas were fading away and various socio-cultural groups and institutions were trying to come to terms with the new ideas of modernity and its attendant stir they created in the culture of Tamil speaking regions. Throughout the next one century, Tamil culture was in an animated and dynamic evolution, with competing forces working at sometimes, cross-purposes and sometimes, in co-operation. The traditional sectarian texts, myths, beliefs and rituals were responding to new challenges thrown up by modernity and exploding ethnic nationalisms, mobilisation of cultural identities and extraordinary activities in various spheres of the region. The focal points of the study are the role of religious
orders in the emerging dynamics, their activities and contestations both with each other and with the other spheres of the society in influencing the religious domain and cultural dynamics.

The primary data of the study has been collected through fieldwork in select religious orders, books, speeches, correspondence and activities, unstructured interviews with the people associated with the religious orders and observation. For historical background, secondary sources have been used.