Sociological studies on 'identity' usually focus on the movements spearheading the assertion of particular identities. 'Dravidian Movement' was the movement for 'autonomous political identity'\(^1\) of Tamil Nadu and 'Khalistan Movement'\(^2\) fought for a similar identity for the Sikhs in Punjab, to quote two examples. In both the cases, the focus is on the construction of one master 'collective identity'. Major attention revolves around the role of the leaders and their strategies for influence and mobilisation in such studies. The other main focal point of these studies is the essentialist/instrumentalist nature of such identities. Naturally primordial markers like language, religion, caste and race emerge as the dominant motif around which contestations over identity are conducted.

The point of departure for our study from such studies is that the present work focuses not on one single master identity, but on the various identities that influence the cultural processes and developments. The other major difference is the analysis of one specific institution forming the focal point of the study. Apart from ethnographical, functionalist studies on religious orders, precious few are available by the way of analyses of religious orders as institutions involved in contestations over power and

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space. In this chapter, we will review some studies, which is of interest to us in the context of our study.

**Culture and Identity Construction**

Marguerite Ross Barnett’s book, *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*, addresses questions on the emergence, development and transformation of political identity in Tamil Nadu. The concept of 'Cultural Nationalism' forms the analytical tool through which the evolution of political identity in Tamil Nadu is traced. Ross argues that 'Cultural Nationalism', should be seen as 'one of a number of ideologies available for purposes of mobilisation to groups that seek greater power'. Interestingly, she regards 'political identity' as extremely malleable and the book inquires into the historical circumstances under which such an identity is formed and transformed over a period of time. She identifies a number of themes as central to the evolution of 'Tamil Nationalism' and its political identity – modernisation during colonial rule, perceptions of relative deprivation and oppression of non-Brahman social group by Brahmans, the role of political leaders and the fundamental structural transformations of caste-identity in Tamil Nadu.

If, for Barnett, 'Cultural Nationalism' is the dominant theme in the analysis of Dravidian Movement, Christopher Baker, Washbrook and most notably, Eugene Irschick concentrate on the networks of local elites and colonial rulers, which were the dominant modes of political action which
influenced the identity politics. They refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy and role of ‘caste identities’ in the flow of social developments. Such unbridled instrumentalism falls short of complete understanding of the dynamics and also does not take into account ‘the subjective meaning attached to the action by the actors’.

This is where Sumathi Ramaswamy’s work on ‘language devotion’, a concept that produced modern India’s one of the most powerful movements of linguistic resurgence and separatism, fills the gap. The work should be seen in conjunction with her work on the nature of attachment to language in the pre-modern period, in which she has argued that, in the case of Tamil, the language devotion before the advent of modernity, was more because of its perceived close association with ‘divine,’ rather than as a language spoken by the people and so possessed by them. The modern imagination of the language as the distinctive cultural marker of a ‘cultural community’ enables it to be appropriated for contestations over linguistic and national identity. In the book, Passions of the Tongue, she has situated the multiple discourses – which lie outside the master narrative of linguistic nationalism – by proposing a new analytical concept, ‘the language devotion’. She argues that language devotion allows the speakers of the language to imagine ‘Tamil’ in multiple ways – the divine

5 Ibid.
language, the classical language, (both imaginations compete with Sanskrit for the status), Indian Tamil (Tamil in the service of Indian nationalism) – and links these imaginations to their experience of colonial and post-colonial modernity.

Tamil, when it was eulogised, even in the pre-nineteenth century period, it was because of its capacity to perform miracles and its attachment with divine. However, with modernity, attachment to language was transformed into an 'imagined community\(^6\), which can be used for social and political mobilisation. While social science scholarship abounds with such studies, Sumathi Ramaswamy has advanced the argument and has expanded its horizons further – by arguing that 'such imagination' is never a single, master narrative, but multiple imaginations.

This is in some ways, similar to the argument we propose in our study. Articulation of an 'identity' even within a movement is never singular. Actors are always presented with multiple choices to choose from, depending upon the contingency, and such contingencies are presented both by past history and contemporary unfolding of events.

SOCIO-RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

In this connection, A.R. Venkatachalapathy’s article “Dravidian Movements and Saivites: 1927-44” is a useful reference point. Critiques of Dravidian Movement have argued that the genesis of Dravidian Movement should be traced to the revivalism of Saivite elites in the opening decades of the twentieth century. Justice Party, which is truly a party of non-Brahman elites, was the first to give political content to the non-Brahman movement, in the modern sense. And many of the leaders of Justice Party were Tamilians and devotees of Saiva Siddhantha religious system. Their outlook was traditional and generally conceded the legitimacy of the status and position of Brahmins in the social structure: "No one denies this old established tradition, the position of the Brahman as the highest and the most sacred of the Hindu castes, the nature of their ancient calling... without whose intervention and blessing, the soul cannot obtain salvation..."

We have to remember that the Justice Party was later taken over by EVR, who opposed every word that has been quoted above. He denied the contention that Brahmins rightfully occupied the highest and the most sacred position among Hindu castes. The Dravidian Movement in its more mature stages accommodated Brahmins and their interests, though

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8 Irschick, 1969, op. cit., p.252.
inconspicuously. However, disagreements did exist between the Saiva elite and the self-respecters (EVR's movement) on various issues and assumptions. While the Saivites gave a very sectarian interpretation of anti-Brahmanism, eulogising a pre-Aryan, Vellala dominated Tamil society, the self-respecters strand of anti-Brahmanism was revolutionary, with egalitarian and democratic view of ancient Tamil society, with no caste or religion.

However, such plural imaginations of history have given the Dravidian movement wide space to manoeuvre its positions according to contingencies and to allow wider participation in the movement. For example, during the middle decades of the nineteenth century, that is prior to the genesis of Dravidian Movement in Tamil speaking regions, Arumuga Navalar used Saivism to confront Christian missionaries. However, during the initial phases of the Dravidian movement, the same Saivism was used to confront and displace the Brahmans in the social order, (mainly with the use of 'Tamil' as native tongue of Saivites as opposed to 'Sanskrit' of Brahmans). The article by Dennis Hudson\(^\text{10}\) describes the activities of Christian missionaries in conversion and propagation of Christianity in Tamil speaking regions of Sri Lanka. He traces the opposition to the activities of Christian missionaries to Arumuga Navalar, regarded as the father of modern Tamil prose and staunch defender of Saivism. While he mainly used Tamil in his confrontations with Christian missionaries, he regarded

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“the Sanskrit and Tamil scriptures of Agamic Saivism purified popular and
puranic religion, elevated the ignorant, and inspired the literati.” The
popularisation of printing press enabled both Christian missionaries and
Saivites to conduct their disputes through the print medium and in
vernacular language. The chief arguments involved on both sides included
scathing attacks upon their respective religious philosophies. The important
aspect of the work for us is the tracing of expanding networks of religious
culture and institutions and the impact it had on the emerging ideologies of
nationalism in Tamil Country.

The institutions, both temple and religious orders are historical
institutions and have contributed significantly in influencing the nature of
cultural processes. Bhakti movements in Tamil speaking region had wide
ranging consequences; while significantly not altering the social structure,
it still had long-range cultural influences. At least in the devotional world,
caste differences were overlooked, and salvation was granted to all classes
of the people including the lowest.

Joseph O’ Connor’s study of Chaitanya Vaishnava movement of
Bengal in the sixteenth century focuses upon processes of change within
the Hindu tradition embracing religious and cultural dimensions. The

11 Ibid., p, 37.
12 For a dissenting view, see M.G.S. Naryanan and Veluthat Kesavan, “Bhakti Movement
13 See Joseph O’ Connor, Religious Movements and Social Structure: The Case of
Chaitanya’s Vaishnavas of Bengal, Shimla, 1993.
study's central interest is on a popular bhakti movement, Chaitanya's Vaishnava movement of the sixteenth century in Bengal and inquires into the changes brought about by the movement in the Hindu society of Bengal. It takes a comparative-historical approach and relates the regional movements of Hindu society to their respective regional contexts. It defines popular bhakti movements as those,

...widely shared upsurges of religious fervour within the Hindu religious tradition wherein by means of vernacular languages (though sometimes employing Sanskrit also), especially for devotional songs...men and women of emotional expressiveness and intense devotional conviction strove to experience and to share with others what they understood to be saving love of God.14

The paper also brings out the important differences on the impact of the bhakti movements on various regions of India like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Punjab and observes that there are differences in the conception of bhakti, as well as the social context in the different regions. For example, in Tamil, the bhakti movement was not only a movement of devotion and inclusion of masses in salvational endeavours, it also included significant opposition to both Buddhism and Jainism. However, O'Connor is careful to note that nowhere in the movement, there were fundamental challenges or changes to Hindu society in terms of rejection of Varnashrama Dharma or elimination of jati.

In the context of Chaitanya's movement in Bengal, at the popular level, the movement promises deliverance for all humans, including

14 Ibid.
women, Shudras and sinners, when they respond to the Grace of Chaitanya with devotional love. Also, there is not too much evidence to suggest that it led to a material or special uplift of the oppressed groups. However, O’ Connor observes that ‘there are numerous adjustments to and shifted emphases within the existing social order attributable to the pressure of bhakti’. He notes two factors as significant changes in the context of Bengal society: (i) there was a coalescence of an informal and loosely articulated network or alliance of the Vaishnava minorities among the bhadralok jatis and the bulk of the jatis of middle status, and (ii) there was the genesis of the unique jati Vaishnava group, self consciously lying outside the Varnsharama Dharma altogether.

**Syncretism: Tamil and Sanskrit**

The complex inter-linkages between Tamil and Sanskrit traditions, if they can be separated at all as two different streams (at least for analytical purposes), are the focus of studies on religious traditions and culture in South India. David Shulman’s *Tamil Temple Myths* undertakes a structuralist analysis of religious tradition in Tamil Nadu. Religious culture is a dialectic between a principle of power contributed by an archaic Tamil worldview and a principle of purity contributed by superimposed Brahmanical views. Shulman uses *Sthalapuranas* as the object of the study and argues that while the rhetoric of the puranas are closely related to Brahmanical views of purity, the persistently recurring motifs in the myths

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indicates a substratum of Tamil world views which could not be explained in terms of Brahmanical values by the authors of Puranic texts. He provides among many examples the myth of the marriage between Murugan and Valli: he argues that this popular myth is a thematic package through which Tamil culture could be explained as a dialectic of Tamil and Sanskritic elements. The division of the goddess into two brides, who oppose each other, where Valli, the second bride is representative of the Tamil traditions of power of dark and needs to be contained and the other bride representing Northern, Sanskritic features.

Charles Ryerson's work on 'regionalism and religion' draws upon the same argument. He calls the Tamil religious culture as 'regional Hinduism or Tamil Hinduism' – a synthesis of both indigenous Tamil and Aryan Sanskritic features. In a historical descriptive interpretation of contemporary religious culture, he argues that modernisation's chief legacy in Tamil Nadu is a curious admixture of anti-Brahmanism and age-old traditions. He rejects the positivistic atheistic and secularising notions of the Dravidian movement, but compares it with the bhakti devotionalism of earlier times, but more populist with an emphasis on equality. He argues that regionalism in Tamil Nadu is derived from this curious, syncretic religious culture.

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COLONIAL RULE AND RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

However, the present study, concentrates on institutions and identity – traced from a historical perspective. The work that comes closest to the study of institutions is Arjun Appadurai’s *Worship and Conflict Under Colonial Rule* \(^1\). Unlike this study, Appadurai’s work is an “ethnohistorical analysis of conflict in a single South Indian temple over a two hundred years period.” \(^2\) Appadurai’s concerns are more anthropological while this study is firmly within the realms of ‘macro-historical’ processes from a sociological viewpoint. Temple, being a religious institution is inalienably linked to religious orders: temples have in their vicinity their own religious orders and until very recently and even now, temples are under the control of heads of religious orders, the matadhipathis \(^3\). Therefore, the administration of temples and the impact of colonial rule upon them have central interest for us.

Appadurai’s study seeks to understand the relationship between the economic and political domains of South Asian society and South Asian ideas concerning issues like salvation, pollution, ritual and worship. Appadurai has tried to answer the questions from the vantage point of a temple and the developments in the temple in a diachronic analysis. He uses the Geertzean ideal of a lack of fit between the cultural and socio-structural systems to show how the incongruity is expressed in the

developments in a temple. He develops the dynamic social and cultural contexts of a South Indian temple, which involves ideas of redistribution of valued resources, royal authority and rituals that have remained unchanged in a socio-historical context over a period of two hundred years. However, the principles of temple control and management have undergone a change, in the sense of a fragmentation of key authoritarian relations, because of the introduction of British legal systems and consequently state-control of temples in post-independent India.

If Appadurai's book analyses the changes from the temple's viewpoint, Franklin Presler's *Religion Under Bureaucracy*\(^{20}\) analyses the complex linkages between state, religion, and politics in Tamil Nadu, especially in the background of secular notions of Indian State. The book mainly concentrates on the problems of state's temple policy in Tamil Nadu. Presler argues that the modern state's main characteristics of rationalisation, autonomy, differentiation and centralisation and internal co-ordination, when applied by the state itself to the administration of religious institutions, complexities and contradictions ensue. There are two aspects that are of interest in the study for us: (1) Presler argues that there are continuities between the nineteenth century pattern and the contemporary Tamil Nadu state and the role that religion-state link has played in contemporary political system, and (2) the research technique –

the combination of field interviews and historical material.21 It is identical to the technique we have used in this study.

ASCETICISM AND MONASTICISM

Most of the works and available literature on asceticism and monasticism are either historical works or ethnographical studies of ascetics and religious orders. Here, the difference between asceticism and monasticism has to be understood. Asceticism, basically involves renunciation of the world. The renouncer may or may not choose to live in society — Cenobiticism. In case, the renouncer chooses to keep himself in the society, (at least in Hindu traditions — women as renouncer — is rarely known), he may or may not join a monastic Order. That is, without actually, withdrawing/retiring from the society, preferably into the forest, he may become, what is called, 'a wandering monk'; 'itinerancy' has been one of the most prevalent forms of asceticism in India. The other, and sociologically, more interesting form of asceticism is the 'monastic order'. A monastic order is a proper socio-religious institution with an organisational structure, hierarchy of relations, allied institutions and organisations, branches and most importantly, property — lands and other kinds of wealth.

21 Ibid., p.15.
Robert Lewis Gross’s *The Sadhus of India: A Study of Hindu Asceticism* presents an ethnographic life style of Sadhus and Gross views ‘this life style’ as an alternative to the ‘rigid, hierarchical’ caste-ridden society. Basically, he tries to understand, ‘Why does a Sadhu become a Sadhu?’ He follows the case study technique to understand the inner life of Sadhus and how the Sadhus relate themselves to the sacred world as well as the society. One of the important contentions of Gross is that asceticism in India is characterised by ‘anti-structure’ as opposed to the ‘structure’ of the caste system. He makes the relation between the two, the cornerstone for the continuity of Indian civilisation. We believe that Gross takes a rather narrow view of Indian asceticism and does not do justice to the dynamism and range of Indian asceticism. Here, the arguments of Pinch’s study of *Peasants and Monks in British India* take a broader and more sophisticated view of Indian asceticism. It is more firmly grounded in the history of Indian asceticism. If Gross argues that “the obvious transformation in the character of Hindu asceticism has been in the gradual weakening of the sect structure and the organisation of monastic institutions” Pinch observes that modernity presented new ideological options for the Shudras through “access to personal dignity (to)...shudras...via the Vaishnava religious mainstream...” He observes that,

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...through the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and despite what were at times fractious internal differences of opinion, Ramanandi monks were not only willing to overlook social stigma in administering religious teachings and directing worship, but even welcomed shudras as equal members of the monastic community.26

This aspect, the accordance of Shudras as equal members of the monastic community has to be tested in our study with regards to Brahmanical monastic orders in Tamil Nadu. Since the study includes non-Brahman religious orders also, the attitude towards members of other castes would present us with fruitful insights.

The two studies present the two contrasts in the study of asceticism in India: ascetic as an individual renouncer, his life style, his psychology of renunciation and yet, how he fits into the 'ideal' of asceticism in India. The other, views monks — along with peasants — as shapers and movers of history, through their participation in the politics of identity, status and hierarchy, during the British period. Pinch’s Ramanandi ascetics worked for social equality whereas our study focuses more on cultural themes — identity and language. However, our present study shares the same understanding of Indian monasticism,

not as timeless and static (which is how Sadhus often represent the religious worlds) to which they belong', but as historically measurable, comprising competing social institutions organised around distinct religious and ideological principles and responsive to continually changing political circumstances and economic pressures.27

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26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., p.23.
Other relevant studies are the socio-anthropological studies of religious orders – how religious orders conduct their day-to-day affairs, the daily rituals, its socio-philosophical background and the way the religious orders mediate the religious life of the people. The study, a comparative study of two Vira Saiva monasteries\textsuperscript{28} is a study of Muruga Mutt in Chitra Durga near Mysore and Sri Siddaganga mutt near Tumkur (Both are in the state of Karnataka). Both mutts are Lingayat religious orders. Vira Saivism was propounded by Sri Basaveswara, more accurately, under his influence the philosophy of Vira Saivism crystallised and became a dynamic religious movement in the twelfth century.

The historical background of Vira Saiva religious orders is not very different from the Saiva Siddhantha religious orders of Tamil speaking regions. Both are primarily non-Brahman religious orders that at various times in history have questioned the sacral superiority of Brahmans. Caste orthodoxy has been opposed by Vira Saivism – during the course of its evolution, it “drew converts from a wide range of occupations, including washermen, barbers, weavers, oil pressers, various types of artisans.”\textsuperscript{29}

However, the history of Saiva Siddhantha religious orders clearly show that at no point of time in its history had the religious orders had anti-caste/casteless orientations. The religious orders have historically been headed by the high caste non-Brahman Vellala celibate renouncer.


One of the important observations, which Sadasivaiah has made regarding the Vira Saiva religious orders is the shift in emphasis that has taken place in the educational activities in the twentieth century. He writes, "the philanthropic resources of the society have been organised to spread secular education."\(^{30}\) He also points out the efforts made by the monks in the Order to get acquainted themselves in secular education and English. This is one aspect where Advaita Sankaracharya Mutt in Kanchi has taken definite steps. One of the prime reasons for the popularity and influence of Kanchi Sankaracharya throughout India has been his articulation and active interest in secular affairs. Sadasivaiah has also concentrated on the services rendered by the two monasteries, reinforcing the contention that religious orders have traditionally gained influence among the population through a variety of services offered. From education to medicine, religious orders have maintained a dynamic relationship with the society and have not solely depended upon propagation and recruitment to 'gain a foothold in the society'.

In the above pages, we have tried to review various works concerning the different aspects that are relevant to our work. Since our approach is to study religious orders in their shaping and changing of cultural processes, processes which are active in articulation and contestations of identity, we have tried to study the various factors that are

involved in the process. An active synthesis of the various factors – tradition, philosophy, religious movements, socio-political developments and history – forms the varied and multiple foci of identity construction projects. While it is impossible to analyse each factor in its entirety, it becomes prudent to keep the factors in contention for the analysis and evolution of any phenomenon. Sociological inquiry is necessarily selective – it privileges certain factors over others – in the analysis and explanation of the subject matter. However, the point is to logically explicate the reasons behind the choices– it forms the core of the methodological concerns of any study. In this study, we have tried to understand the role of religious orders in identity construction, the flexibility and adaptability they exhibit in order to survive and change and their roles, both as agents and products of history. The review has tried to capture the influence of various historical factors – religion, language, politics and culture – to name a few.