



NINETEENTH-CENTURY RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL REFORMS IN SHAPING TAMIL SOCIETY IN TAMIL NADU AND NORTHERN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

The nineteenth century marked a transformative period in the history of Tamil society in Tamil Nadu and Northern Sri Lanka, characterised by the emergence of religious and social reform movements that challenged entrenched systems of caste discrimination, gender inequality, and social exclusion. This study examines the role of these reform movements in shaping Tamil society by analysing their ideological foundations, reform strategies, and long-term social influence across both regions. Adopting a historical-comparative research design, the study draws upon primary sources, including religious texts, literary works, pamphlets, speeches, archival periodicals, and the writings of reformers, alongside secondary scholarship to examine the similarities and differences in the development of reform movements. The findings reveal that Tamil Nadu and Northern Sri Lanka shared comparable patterns of caste hierarchy, patriarchal traditions, and social exclusion despite their differing political, colonial, and religious contexts. Reform movements responded by promoting education, religious revival, cultural preservation, social equality, and the empowerment of marginalised communities. In Northern Sri Lanka, reformers such as Arumuka Navalar, C. W. Thamotharampillai, Sabapathy Navalar, and Ponnambalampillai focused primarily on Saivite revival, Tamil language, education, and the preservation of Tamil cultural identity. In Tamil Nadu, Ramalinga Adigalar, Vaikunda Swamikal, Iyothee Thass Pandithar, and Vedanayagam Pillai emphasised humanism, women's education, caste reform, and the upliftment of oppressed communities. Although these reformers adopted different strategies in their respective regional contexts, they shared the common objective of transforming discriminatory social structures through education, religious renewal, and moral reform. The study argues that nineteenth-century religious and social reforms laid the intellectual, cultural, and institutional foundations for subsequent reform movements and played a decisive role in shaping the evolution of modern Tamil society in both Tamil Nadu and Northern Sri Lanka. These findings underscore the enduring historical significance of these reform movements within the broader Tamil cultural sphere.

KEYWORDS: Superstitions, Traditionalism, Untouchability, Women's Liberation, Widow Marriage

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the nineteenth century, India, including present-day Tamil Nadu, and Sri Lanka, particularly its northern regions, were under British colonial rule, and although reformers sought to implement changes within this system, entrenched social inequalities and longstanding traditional practices substantially impeded progress. Tamil Nadu and Northern Sri Lanka were linked by a shared historical and cultural heritage, particularly through the Tamil language, which facilitated the transmission of social, cultural, and political developments. Consequently, Northern Sri Lankan Tamil society mirrored many challenges of Tamil Nadu, including superstition, rigid traditionalism, caste discrimination, untouchability, gender oppression, and the influence of Christian missionary activity, creating conditions of entrenched social stagnation in both regions.

In response to these challenges, several reformers and Saivite scholars emerged, seeking to awaken society and free it from these oppressive structures. In Northern Sri Lanka, scholars such as Arumuka Navalar, Sadasivampillai, Sabapathi Navalar, Ponnambalampillai, Swaminatha Iyer, Venkatachala Iyer, Kumarakarthikeya Iyer, and Thillainathapillai played a significant role in shaping religious and cultural reform. At the same time, in Tamil Nadu, reformers including Ramalinga Adigal, Iyothee Thass Pandithar, Vaikunda Swamigal, and Vedanayagam Pillai worked actively to bring about social change.

The reform movements of this period emerged from a broader tension between tradition and modernity. Reformers in both regions responded to the spread of Western education and Christianity while also attempting to address social evils such as superstition, caste oppression, and gender inequality. However, a clear difference can be seen in the nature of these reform efforts. The reformers of Northern Sri Lanka, especially Arumuka Navalar, can be described as traditionalist reformers, whose primary aim was to protect and strengthen Saivism and Tamil religious traditions. In contrast, the reformers of Tamil Nadu were more openly oriented toward social justice, focusing on equality and the transformation of oppressive social structures (Pushpalatha, 2023).

Although Arumuka Navalar shared common objectives with other Saivite scholars of Northern Sri Lanka particularly the preservation of Saivism and the Tamil language his methods, ideological position, and lasting influence set him apart (Rubavathanan, 2021). For this reason, his contributions are especially suited for a comparative study alongside the social reform movements of nineteenth-century Tamil Nadu.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, socio-religious reform movements in both Tamil Nadu and Northern Sri Lanka faced serious challenges. Reformers in these regions worked under constant resistance as they attempted to confront deeply rooted superstitions, rigid traditions, and the growing influence of Christian missionary activities. Despite the significance of these movements, a notable gap persists in the existing scholarship, as no comprehensive comparative study has been conducted examining the specific reform activities undertaken in these two regions.

Although a shared commitment to social and religious reform was evident among the reformers of Tamil Nadu and Northern Sri Lanka, significant differences were observed in their priorities and methods. Accordingly, this study examines these differences by focusing on Arumuka Navalar's emphasis on the preservation of Saivism and the promotion of the Tamil language, in contrast to the reform movements in Tamil Nadu, where greater priority was given to anti-caste struggles, the eradication of social superstitions, and the advancement of women's rights (Srilata, 2017).

Accordingly, this research is guided by two central questions: how did the reform strategies adopted in these two regions differ, and what lasting changes were brought about by these reform efforts within Tamil society as a whole?

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To identify the deeply rooted traditions and social superstitions that shaped the societies of Tamil Nadu and Northern Sri Lanka during the nineteenth century

2. To analyze the challenges faced by reformers in both regions as they pursued socio-religious reforms in the midst of strong social resistance and institutional opposition

3. To examine and compare the reform strategies adopted by contemporary reformers in the two regions, highlighting both the similarities and the differences in their approaches

4. To assess the long-term impact of these reform movements on the social structure and cultural development of Tamil communities in Tamil Nadu and Northern Sri Lanka in later periods

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a historical research design and employs descriptive, analytical, and comparative approaches to examine nineteenth-century socio-religious reform movements in the Tamil cultural region. It focuses on the reform initiatives of Arumuka Navalar in Northern Sri Lanka and Vaikunda Swamikal, Ramalinga Adikal, Vedanayagam Pillai, and Iyothey Thass Pandithar in Tamil Nadu. The study critically examines historically situated concepts such as caste hierarchy, untouchability, Varnashrama Dharma, and the Devadasi system by understanding them as social institutions shaped by power structures, religious authority, gender relations, and systems of social exclusion within their respective historical contexts. Although numerous reformers contributed to religious and social transformation during the nineteenth century, this study concentrates on selected individuals whose ideas and activities had a significant and enduring impact on Tamil society. These reformers were chosen because their movements represented diverse ideological perspectives and different approaches to addressing the social challenges of their time.

In Northern Sri Lanka, several figures, including Sadasivampillai, Sabapathy Navalar, Ponnambalampillai, Swaminatha Iyer, Venkatachala Iyer, Kumarakarthikeya Iyer, and Thillainathapillai, contributed to Saivite revival, Tamil literary development, educational advancement, and cultural preservation. However, Arumuka Navalar is selected as the central figure of this study due to the extensive

scope and lasting influence of his work. His contributions to Saivite revivalism, the establishment of educational institutions, preservation and publication of Tamil religious texts, and promotion of Tamil cultural identity made him a significant figure in shaping later Saivite and Tamil intellectual movements. Similarly, in Tamil Nadu, reformers such as Ramalinga Adikal, Vaikunda Swamikal, Iyothey Thass Pandithar, and Vedanayagam Pillai are examined because their reform ideas reflected different responses to nineteenth-century social inequalities, including caste discrimination, religious exclusion, gender restrictions, and limited access to education. While each reformer adopted distinct methods and ideological positions, their collective efforts demonstrate the broader movement from religious reform towards social justice and human emancipation. Their selection is therefore based not only on their individual contributions but also on the comparative value of their ideas in understanding multiple pathways of social change within the Tamil cultural sphere.

The comparative framework of this study examines the ideological foundations of these reform movements, their responses to caste-based inequalities and social exclusion, approaches to religious reform, educational initiatives, perspectives on gender-related issues, and their long-term influence on Tamil society. Through this comparative analysis, the study seeks to identify both shared concerns and significant differences among reform movements that emerged within a common cultural and historical context.

The study draws upon a range of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include the original writings of reformers, religious and literary works, contemporary pamphlets, speeches, newspapers, archival periodicals, official documents, and colonial records. Secondary sources comprise scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and existing historical research on nineteenth-century socio-religious movements. These sources are critically examined by considering their historical background, purpose, authorship, and relevance in order to develop a deeper understanding of the emergence, development, and social impact of nineteenth-century reform movements.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing scholarship on nineteenth-century socio-religious reform movements in the Tamil-speaking region has provided important insights into the lives, philosophies, and social engagements of individual reformers. However, a major gap remains in comparative historical studies that examine reform movements in Tamil Nadu and Northern Sri Lanka within their shared socio-cultural and colonial context. While scholars have extensively studied figures such as Arumuka Navalar, Ramalinga Adigalar, Vaikunda Swamikal, and Iyothey Thass Pandithar separately, limited attention has been given to comparing their ideological foundations, reform approaches, social objectives, and regional influences. Such a comparative perspective is necessary to understand how caste structures, religious authority, colonial modernity, language, and regional identities shaped different forms of social and religious transformation within Tamil society.

The nineteenth century represented a period of significant social and intellectual change in South Asia. Colonial rule introduced new forms of knowledge, modern education, print culture, administrative systems, and missionary interactions, creating new opportunities for debates on religion, caste, gender, and social practices. However, these developments did not result in a single pattern of modernisation. Instead, responses differed according to regional histories, social conditions, and cultural identities. Within this context, socio-religious reform movements emerged as complex responses that involved both challenges to existing inequalities and efforts to preserve religious and cultural traditions. Therefore, these movements should be understood not merely as religious reforms but also as engagements with wider structures of social power and inequality.

Kanagaratnam (2007) carried out a detailed study of Arumuka Navalar's life, intellectual contributions, development of Tamil prose, engagement with classical literary works such as Aathichoodi and Konraivendan, and his role in Saiva Siddhanta revival. This work contributes significantly to understanding Navalar's place in Tamil literary and religious history. However, its primary focus remains biographical and

intellectual, with limited discussion of the broader social realities of nineteenth-century Jaffna, including caste divisions, social exclusion, and the experiences of marginalised groups. A deeper analysis of Navalar's relationship with existing social structures is therefore required to understand both the progressive and conservative aspects of his reform activities.

Shanmugalingam (2025) conducted a critical examination of caste hierarchy, untouchability, and gender-based inequalities in Jaffna from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. The study highlights the influence of the Vellalar caste, colonial involvement in caste administration, women's socio-economic disadvantages, and resistance movements such as temple entry struggles. However, its focus is primarily on social inequalities and resistance rather than on the role of socio-religious reformers in responding to these conditions and shaping changing social values. Further investigation is needed into how reform movements contributed to the transformation or continuation of caste and gender relations in Tamil society.

Research on Ramalinga Adigalar has largely concentrated on his spiritual philosophy, devotional writings, and religious contributions. Desikan (1971) presented a chronological account of Adigalar's life and spiritual development, while Subbu Reddiar (2003) described his Arut-seyal and devotional literature. These studies provide valuable understanding of his religious influence but give comparatively less attention to his role as a social reformer who challenged caste exclusion and promoted humanitarian principles. As a result, his contribution to social transformation and resistance against structural inequalities remains comparatively underexplored.

In contrast, Krishnanathan (2005) examined Vaikunda Swamikal as a social reformer who challenged caste oppression and promoted equality among marginalised communities. The study highlights the formation of the Samathuva Sangam, opposition to untouchability, struggles for temple access, and the wider social aims of the Ayyavazhi movement. By presenting Vaikundar within a framework of social justice, the study demonstrates how religious movements could function

as platforms for questioning established social inequalities.

Similarly, Aloysius (1999) analysed Iyothē Thass Pandithar's socio-political ideas and his efforts to empower oppressed communities. The study discusses his advocacy of Samagasanam (equal seating), Samabosanam (communal dining), women's education, political representation, and Buddhist conversion as a form of resistance against caste discrimination. This scholarship provides significant insights into anti-caste thought and the relationship between religion and social emancipation. However, comparative studies linking these movements with reform traditions in Northern Sri Lanka remain limited.

Existing literature also reveals differences in the regional influence and social reach of reform movements. Arumuka Navalar's intellectual and religious influence extended beyond Northern Sri Lanka, particularly among Tamil communities in Tamil Nadu through his publications, educational initiatives, and Saiva revival activities. In contrast, reformers from Tamil Nadu, including Vaikunda Swamikal and Ramalinga Adigalar, appear to have had comparatively less influence on nineteenth-century Northern Sri Lankan Tamil society. This difference indicates that the spread of reform ideas was shaped not only by shared language and religious traditions but also by regional political conditions, caste structures, institutional networks, and patterns of intellectual exchange.

Concepts such as untouchability, Varnashrama Dharma, and the Devadasi system require careful examination within their specific historical contexts. Rather than viewing them as isolated cultural practices, they should be understood as interconnected social systems involving caste hierarchy, gender relations, religious authority, and mechanisms of power. Analysing these concepts provides a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by nineteenth-century reform movements and the complex ways reformers negotiated social change.

Although previous studies have significantly contributed to knowledge of individual reformers and regional movements, a systematic comparison

between Tamil Nadu and Northern Sri Lanka remains limited. Much of the existing scholarship follows descriptive or region-specific approaches, with less engagement with broader historical debates on colonialism, caste, religion, and social transformation. The application of theoretical perspectives such as colonial modernity, social power, caste formation, and marginalised voices offers an opportunity to examine these movements beyond individual biographies.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this research gap through a comparative socio-historical analysis of nineteenth-century socio-religious reform movements in Tamil Nadu and Northern Sri Lanka. It examines the ideological foundations, reform strategies, social objectives, and regional impacts of selected reformers while exploring the relationship between tradition, colonial modernity, caste structures, gender relations, and cultural identity. Through this approach, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how socio-religious movements shaped processes of social and cultural transformation within the Tamil world.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tamil Nadu during the Nineteenth Century

In the early 1800s, British colonial rule expanded across India, including Tamil Nadu, alongside the growing presence of Christian missionaries. Early resistance leaders like Khan Sahib, Puli Thevar, and Veerapandiya Kattabomman were defeated, but large uprisings such as the South Indian Rebellion and Vellore Mutiny continued. After these were suppressed, the British strengthened their control by building stronger administrative and legal systems to collect taxes and promoted Western education to support their colonial goals.

Despite this control, local conflicts persisted, and the economy declined. Traditional crafts suffered, and farming, which was the main source of livelihood, was negatively affected by colonial policies and changes in the economic system. Tamil society was structured by a hierarchical caste system influenced by Varnashrama Dharma, a traditional socio-religious framework that organised people according to status and occupation. Although its interpretations varied across historical contexts, it was often used to justify social divisions

and unequal access to religious, educational, and social privileges. Nineteenth-century reformers responded to these inequalities in different ways, reflecting wider debates on caste, religion, and social justice during the colonial period. The British initially supported these social divisions to keep order but later began to challenge some traditional practices. Women had few rights, and many laborers faced harsh exploitation similar to slavery. The Brahmin caste continued to hold power over religion, education, and politics, while traditional institutions kept these social hierarchies in place. This time period shows the complex mix of colonial rule, social inequality, and economic hardship, which led to future reform movements (Arunan, 1999).

Northern Sri Lanka in the 19th Century

The British occupation of the Maritime Provinces in 1796, followed by the annexation of the Kandyan Kingdom in 1815, marked a critical phase in the consolidation of colonial authority over Sri Lanka. In contrast to regions of South India, particularly Tamil Nadu where anti-colonial resistance was pronounced, Northern Sri Lanka experienced relative political quiescence despite exhibiting analogous socio-political conditions in the early nineteenth century. The transition of governance from the English East India Company to direct Crown rule centralized administrative control under appointed Governors, who reinforced their authority through selective codification and modification of the Thesavalamai customary law, in alliance with indigenous elites such as the Mudaliyars.

Colonial administration systematically perpetuated and institutionalized hierarchical social structures inherited from Portuguese and Dutch colonial regimes. Ordinance No. 10 of 1800 explicitly safeguarded the privileges of dominant high-caste groups, while judicial mechanisms entrenched caste-based inequalities, reproducing social stratification (Shanmugalingam, 2025). The local economy remained predominantly agrarian and maritime, with agriculture and fishing constituting the primary modes of subsistence. Within this socio-economic matrix, political, educational, and religious authority was monopolized by the Saiva Vellalar caste, especially

the Vellalars (Tennent, 1850), whereas numerically smaller and marginalized communities endured chronic poverty, limited literacy, and social exclusion.

The pervasive caste discrimination within Tamil society in Northern Sri Lanka manifested in practices such as untouchability, restrictions on temple access, and unequal norms surrounding seating and communal dining. Gender inequalities were embedded within social practices and institutions such as dowry and the Devadasi system. Although the Devadasi tradition was historically associated with temple service, artistic practices, and religious institutions, its social and cultural significance underwent considerable changes during the colonial period. The system became increasingly subject to debate in relation to women's status, social regulation, and exploitation. These debates formed part of wider nineteenth-century discussions on women's rights, morality, religion, and social reform. Furthermore, administrative practices within Saivite religious institutions contributed to the persistence of existing social hierarchies. While Western education and missionary efforts introduced new ideas and perspectives, strong conservative forces limited reforms, shaping the conditions that later contributed to the emergence of social movements.

The Rise of Socio-Religious Reform Movements in the 19th Century

By the early twentieth century, multiple socio-religious reform movements had emerged in both India and Sri Lanka, aimed at the modernization of religious practices and societal structures. However, the foundations of these movements were established much earlier. As early as the nineteenth century, a range of progressive individuals and reform initiatives had taken shape in Tamil Nadu and Northern Sri Lanka. These reformers represented diverse social strata, encompassing both privileged upper-caste groups and marginalized communities, thereby reflecting the heterogeneous social origins of reformist discourse during this period. Their efforts extended beyond the remediation of social inequalities, encompassing a strategic imperative to safeguard religious traditions amidst the expanding influence of competing religious ideologies. Within this context, reform initiatives led by Vaikunda Swamikal,

Ramalinga Adigalar, Vedanayagam Pillai, and Iyothee Thass Pandithar in Tamil Nadu were instrumental in contesting social injustices and advancing principles of social equality. Correspondingly, in Northern Sri Lanka, Arumuka Navalar and other Saivite intellectuals made significant contributions to the preservation of Saivism and the reinforcement of Tamil linguistic and cultural identity (Thirumurugan, 2016). Collectively, these developments elucidate a distinct regional divergence in reform priorities: Tamil Nadu's movements were predominantly oriented toward social reform and justice, whereas those in Northern Sri Lanka primarily focused on preserving Saivite religious identity and promoting Tamil cultural nationalism.

Socio-Religious Reform in Tamil Nadu

During the nineteenth century and the subsequent decades, socio-religious reform movements in Tamil Nadu primarily sought to challenge caste-based discrimination, particularly untouchability, a historically institutionalized form of social exclusion that restricted marginalized communities' access to public spaces, education, religious institutions, and broader social participation. Rather than treating untouchability as an isolated social practice, this study examines it as a manifestation of wider caste-based power relations and structural inequalities embedded within society. Reformers attempted to transform these oppressive structures by questioning rigid social customs, religious practices, and traditional hierarchies while emphasizing compassion as a fundamental principle guiding social and moral life (Dharmaraj, 2008:521). Their efforts therefore extended beyond religious reform and addressed multiple forms of social oppression experienced by marginalized communities at the grassroots level.

Vaikunda Swamigal

Vaikunda Swamigal emerged as a pioneering social reformer in nineteenth-century Tamil Nadu, actively challenging systemic oppression against marginalized communities. Born in 1803 in Samithoppu near Kanyakumari, he belonged to a socially disadvantaged group whose traditional occupation as toddy tappers subjected them to caste-based exclusion. His original name, Mudi Soodum Perumal (Lord wearing a

crown), was changed to Muthukutty under pressure from upper-caste elites (Sivavivekanandan, 2003).

Confronting pervasive social injustices, Vaikunda Swamigal aimed to establish a distinct social identity for the oppressed by founding the Samathuva Sangam (Association for Equality). He traveled extensively, advocating for social equality and condemning the hypocrisy of upper castes particularly during the Temple Entry Movement, when they accepted offerings from lower castes but denied them the right to worship (Anish and Shyla kumarai, 2022).

Symbolically and practically resisting caste barriers, he constructed the Muttiri Kinaru, a public well that welcomed all communities to draw water and share communal meals (Samabosanam). He promoted practices such as communal dining across caste lines, vegetarianism, personal hygiene, and the rejection of hierarchical norms. Importantly, he advocated for women's rights, encouraging lower-caste women to wear upper garments traditionally forbidden to them (Krishnanathan, 2005).

Known affectionately as "Ayya," Vaikunda Swamigal opposed caste discrimination, untouchability, Vedic orthodoxy, exploitative taxes, and mass Christian conversions. His teachings emphasized social unity, communal participation, and spiritual upliftment. The philosophical foundations of his movement are preserved in texts like the Akilathirattu Ammanai and Arul Nool. Through these efforts, he laid critical groundwork for social equality, significantly reshaping Tamil Nadu's social fabric.

Vaikunda Swamigal's reform movement can be interpreted as a challenge to caste-based social stratification and the ritual authority of dominant groups. His emphasis on equality, communal dining, and access to public resources represented an attempt to create alternative social spaces beyond traditional caste boundaries. Unlike reform initiatives that sought gradual modification of existing structures, his movement questioned the legitimacy of caste-based exclusion itself. Therefore, his contribution should be understood not merely as a religious movement but also as an early form of social protest against structural inequality.

Ramalinga Adigalar

Ramalinga Adigalar, born in 1823 in Maruthur near Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu, emerged as a seminal socio-religious reformer of the nineteenth century. Known by titles such as Arutprakasa Vallalar and Vadalur Vallalar, he was a spiritual visionary, author, orator, Siddha healer, and reform advocate committed to societal upliftment through both moral and practical reforms (Subbu Reddiar, 2003).

Orphaned of his father early, Adigalar's family moved to Chennai, but he eventually settled in Chidambaram in 1858 to pursue reform work. In 1865, he founded the Samarasa Suddha Sanmarga Sathiya Sangam, promoting equality and spiritual awakening. Two years later, he established the Sathya Dharma Sala in Vadalur, providing free daily meals to the poor without caste or religious distinction, a practice that continues to this day (Desikan, 1971). In 1872, he inaugurated the Sathya Gnana Sabhai (Hall of True Wisdom), emphasizing a spiritual philosophy beyond idols and ritual.

Adigalar challenged entrenched social and religious practices, critiquing caste discrimination, ritualism, sectarianism, and idol worship. His teachings emphasized that divinity is manifest in compassionate service, advocating universal love, harmony, and spiritual equality through the path of Samarasa Suddha Sanmarga (Dharmaraj, 2008). His spiritual hall's deliberate lack of idols symbolized a universal God transcending caste and ritual boundaries.

Deeply committed to social reform, Adigalar opposed superstition and gender oppression, championing women's education and empowerment. His Dharmashalas offered food, vernacular education, and philosophical guidance, while he promoted vegetarianism and ethical living. His prolific literary output includes over 6,000 devotional hymns compiled in the Thiruvirutpa, as well as prose works like Manumurai Kanda Vasagam and Jeeva Karunyam, alongside edited classical texts such as Thondaimandala Satakam and Ozhivilodukkam. While his vision was not universally embraced in his time, Ramalinga Adigalar's reforms laid enduring foundations for social, educational, and spiritual transformation within 19th century Tamil society.

Ramalinga Adigalar's reform philosophy demonstrates the intersection between spiritual transformation and social ethics. His concept of Jeeva Karunyam (compassion towards all living beings) challenged caste-based exclusion by redefining religious practice through humanitarian service. However, unlike later anti-caste movements that directly confronted Brahminical dominance, his approach remained primarily spiritual and ethical. This reflects the diversity of nineteenth-century reform strategies, ranging from religious universalism to explicit social emancipation.

Mayuram Vedanayagam Pillai

Mayuram Vedanayagam Pillai was a significant social reformer and literary figure in nineteenth-century Tamil Nadu, renowned for his pioneering contributions to Tamil literature. Born in 1826 into a Christian family in Thanjavur, he developed a profound attachment to the Tamil language early on, establishing himself as a gifted poet, writer, and essayist. His literary works combined artistic merit with incisive social critique, serving as a powerful platform for reformist ideas (Kalaimani, 2001).

Vedanayagam Pillai's poetry vividly portrayed the hardships endured by ordinary people, especially during famines, reflecting his deep empathy and social consciousness. Key works include Neethi Nool, Pen Kalvi, Penmathi Maalai, Sithanantha Sangiragam, Sarva Samaya Samarasa Keerthanaigal, Sugunasundari Charithiram, and the acclaimed novel Prathapa Mudaliar Charithiram. He was educated in both Tamil and English under Thyagaraja Pillai, he later served as a respected judge known for his integrity and wisdom.

As a Christian reformer, Vedanayagam Pillai championed progressive social ideals, especially women's rights. He tackled critical issues such as female education, child marriage, the dowry system, widow remarriage, and gender equality, while condemning oppressive practices like Sati and other social injustices. He advocated for religious harmony and challenged entrenched superstitions in society (Sascha, 2005). Through his literary and social activism, he emerged as one of the earliest Tamil writers to publicly advocate for women's

emancipation, leaving a lasting influence on Tamil literature and socio-religious reform movements in nineteenth-century Tamil Nadu.

Iyothée Thass Pandithar

Iyothée Thass Pandithar, born as Kathavarayan in Chennai in 1845, was a key social reformer in nineteenth-century Tamil Nadu dedicated to fighting caste discrimination and promoting social equality. Taking the name Iyothée Thass after his mentor, he was a scholar of Tamil literature, history, and sociology, and also practised Siddha medicine to serve his community. He is widely regarded as the first leader of the anti-caste movement in Tamil Nadu and a precursor to the Dravidian movement of the twentieth century (Kiruthika, 2022).

His activism focused on eradicating casteism and untouchability. He established the Sathipethamutra Dravida Mahajana Sabha, which worked to secure education, jobs, political representation, temple access, and equal rights in seating and communal dining (Samagasanam and Samabosanam) for marginalized groups. He coined the term “Adidravida” to unify these oppressed communities under one identity. Iyothée Thass Pandithar also advocated for women’s rights and early affirmative action, envisioning a society free of social barriers. His idea of Swaraj included both social and economic progress alongside political freedom (Santhanalakshmi, 2002).

Religious conversion played a significant role in his reform efforts. Facing caste-based oppression within Hinduism, he converted to Buddhism after visiting Sri Lanka and founded the South Indian Sakya Buddhist Society in Chennai. Through journals such as Dravida Pandiyan and Oru Paisa Thamizhan (later Thamizhan), and publications like Bogar Ezhunooru, Agathiyar Irunooru, and Buddharathu Athivedam, he promoted rationalism, women’s education, and challenged superstition. His influence extended beyond Tamil Nadu to Tamil communities in Malaysia, Australia, and South Africa, making him a foundational figure in the socio-cultural and educational upliftment of marginalized Tamils (Aloysius, 1999).

Religious and Social Reform in Northern Sri Lanka

During the nineteenth century, religious and social reform in Sri Lanka, including its northern regions, advanced at a notably slower and less extensive pace compared to developments in South India. The social structure in Northern Sri Lanka remained largely isolated both intellectually and culturally, thereby limiting the growth and impact of reform movements. Consequently, few reformers emerged with influence comparable to that of Arumuka Navalar. Nonetheless, the scholarly contributions of scholars such as Sathasivampillai, Sabapathy Navalar, Ponnambalampillai, Swaminatha Iyer, Venkatachala Iyer, Kumarakarthikeya Iyer, and Thillainathapillai adhered closely to the ideological framework and methodologies established by Navalar. It is essential to acknowledge that even Navalar’s reforms were embedded within a traditionalist context, reflecting the prevailing social and cultural norms of the period.

Arumuka Navalar

Arumuka Navalar was born in 1822 in Nallur, Jaffna, Sri Lanka, to Kanthapillai and Sivakami Ammaiyar. His birth name was Arumugam. He is recognized as one of the most important figures in preserving the Tamil language and Saivism in Eelam (Sri Lankan Tamil regions). Known for his skills as a speaker, editor, teacher, and writer, Navalar made significant contributions to Tamil prose and religious education in the nineteenth century.

The Thiruvavaduthurai Adheenam honored him with the title ‘Navalar,’ meaning ‘The Eloquent,’ in recognition of his scholarly achievements (Thirumurugan, 2016). While teaching at Jaffna Central College, he became skilled in English and Sanskrit, gaining respect as the ‘Fifth Kuravar,’ a great teacher of Saivism. To oppose the efforts of British colonial missionaries, Navalar conducted many lectures and published pamphlets to raise awareness about Saivism. He also founded Saivite schools to provide traditional education and started printing presses in Jaffna and Tamil Nadu to preserve and publish classical Tamil texts (Pakkiyam, 1970).

Navalar authored numerous works in simple prose to make them easier to understand for the general public. His educational contributions included foundational texts such as *Bala Paadam* (Parts 1–3), *Saiva Vina Vidai* (Parts 1-2), *Ilakkana Surukkam*, *Ilakkana Vina Vidai*, and *Ilangai Boomi Sasthiram*, which served as essential learning materials for students. To facilitate religious practice, Navalar produced prose versions of key sacred texts, including *Sivalaya Dharisana Vidhi*, *Chidambara Maanmiyam*, *Periya Purana Vasanam*, and *Kanda Purana Vasanam*. He also edited and published over seventy classical works, such as *Choodamani Nigandu*, *Nannool Viruthiyarai*, *Thirukkovaigar*, and the *Thirukkural* with *Parimelalhagar's* commentary (Kanagaratnam, 2007).

Moreover, Navalar contributed comprehensive scholarly interpretations of key texts by providing word-for-word translations (*Pathavurai*), summaries (*Pozhippurai*), and detailed commentaries (*Viruthiyarai*) for works such as *Aathichoodi*, *Konrai Vendhan*, *Thirumurugatrupadai*, *Saiva Samayaneri*, and the *Upanishads*. These interpretative endeavors played a vital role in preserving, clarifying, and disseminating Saivite knowledge, thereby facilitating its sustained transmission to successive generations.

Arumuka Navalar's reform activities reveal the complexity of nineteenth-century religious revival movements. While his educational initiatives, publication activities, and preservation of Tamil Saivite literature contributed significantly to Tamil cultural identity, his reform agenda was primarily oriented toward religious defence rather than restructuring social inequalities. From a critical perspective, Navalar represents a form of revivalist reform in which cultural preservation and religious identity became central objectives, even when caste hierarchies remained largely unchallenged.

Religious and Social Reforms - Comparative Study

Throughout the nineteenth century, British colonial influence extended over both Northern Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu, regions bound by geographic proximity, shared linguistic heritage, and cultural ties. Socio-religious reform movements in these areas developed either with tacit colonial support or independently. The British administration selectively endorsed

reforms that aligned with their broader goals of social progress, especially in education, while discouraging initiatives that directly challenged Christian missionary activities. As a result, educational and social reforms received colonial patronage, whereas movements resisting Christian proselytization encountered subtle institutional constraints, limiting their scope within the colonial framework.

Despite these shared colonial contexts, reform trajectories in Northern Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu diverged considerably in ideology and practice. In Northern Sri Lanka, reform efforts led by Arumuka Navalar and his contemporaries were principally concerned with the preservation and revitalization of Saivism and Tamil language and culture. Contrastingly, reformers in Tamil Nadu such as *Vaikunda Swamikal*, *Ramalinga Adigal*, *Iyothee Thass Pandithar*, and *Vedanayagam Pillai* embraced a broader social reform movement targeting entrenched caste hierarchies, untouchability, superstition, and gender inequality. While Tamil Nadu reformers pursued comprehensive social transformation, Navalar's initiatives centered largely on religious orthodoxy and linguistic revival, with limited engagement in progressive social change.

Navalar's contributions to Tamil literary works, Saivite education, and religious literature were foundational. He was bestowed the title "Navalar" (*The Eloquent*) by the *Thiruvavaduthurai Adheenam*, recognizing his scholarly excellence. With proficiency in English and Sanskrit, Navalar emerged as a key figure in Saivite revivalism, strategically countering the Christian missionary presence through public lectures, pamphlets, and the establishment of Saivite schools and printing presses in Jaffna and Tamil Nadu. His simplified prose adaptations of sacred texts such as *Sivalaya Dharisana Vidhi*, *Periya Purana Vasanam*, and *Kanda Purana Vasanam* made religious knowledge accessible to a wider audience. Navalar also authored foundational textbooks for students and edited over seventy classical Tamil works, including the *Thirukkural*, *Thirukkovaigar*, and *Nannool Viruthiyarai*, thereby institutionalizing Saivite education through establishments like the *Saivapirakasa Vidyalayam*.

Although, his conservative religious orientation, Navalar demonstrated humanitarian concern during the 1877 famine by organizing community soup kitchens (kanji-thotti), illustrating a compassionate dimension to his reform agenda (Thirumurugan, 2016). Nonetheless, critics argue that Navalar's reforms primarily served the interests of the educated elite and reinforced existing caste hierarchies by opposing practices such as temple entry, communal dining (Samabosanam), and equal seating (Samagasanam), thus limiting his commitment to social egalitarianism (Gunasingam, 2008).

In contrast, Tamil Nadu reformers advanced more inclusive and radical social platforms. Vaikunda Swamikal, emerging from a marginalized background, actively challenged caste oppression and superstitions, advocating for women's liberation and temple entry rights through his philosophy of "One Caste, One God" (Ondre Kulam Oruvane Devan). Ramalinga Adigal's reforms combined spiritual renewal with social compassion (Jivakarunya), promoting communal dining and equal seating as expressions of religious unity. He demonstrated his humanitarian commitment by founding the Sathya Dharma Sala to feed the poor (Sree, 1954).

Vedanayagam Pillai, a Christian reformer, employed literature as a tool to critique social practices such as child marriage, dowry, and Sati, and to promote women's education through works like Prathapa Mudaliar Charithiram and Woman Education (Kalaimani, 2001; Sascha, 2005). Similarly, Iyothee Thass Pandithar championed anti-caste ideologies, gender equality, and affirmative action, advancing Buddhism and fostering a collective identity for marginalized groups under the "Adidravida" movement precursors to later Dravidian social justice initiatives (Aloysius, 1999; Santhanalakshmi, 2002).

A comparative analysis depicts the ideological divergence between Northern Sri Lankan and Tamil Nadu reform movements. Tamil Nadu reformers emphasized social justice, caste abolition, and gender equality, challenging Brahminical dominance through heterodox religious frameworks. Conversely, Northern Sri Lankan reformers, particularly Navalar, adopted a conservative stance focused on maintaining religious

orthodoxy and preserving cultural heritage. Limited intellectual pluralism in Northern Sri Lanka resulted in reform initiatives that were largely defensive and prioritizing resistance to Christian proselytization rather than engaging with processes of social reform, structural reorganization, or the transformation of entrenched hierarchies and power relations.

While anti-caste leaders in India, like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Baba Padmanji, often came from upper-caste backgrounds, Northern Sri Lankan reformers struggled to mobilize the broader population. As a result, social hierarchies stayed rigid, and many educated elites returning from abroad did not challenge existing norms (Shanmugalingam, 2025). Progressive, reformist challenges to these structures only gained momentum in the early twentieth century.

Navalar's legacy is thus marked by his consolidation of religious knowledge and promotion of Tamil literacy within a conservative framework that reinforced social stratification. His opposition to Christian missionaries and critiques of progressive reformers like Ramalinga Adigal reveal his resistance to social egalitarianism. Though generally conservative, his educational and humanitarian work demonstrated reformist elements, unlike Tamil Nadu reformers who actively tackled social inequalities. Vaikunda Swamikal and Iyothee Thass Pandithar actively dismantled caste hegemony, while Ramalinga Adigal integrated spiritual reform with humanitarianism. Vedanayagam Pillai's literary advocacy significantly advanced women's rights and broader social reform.

The comparison between Tamil Nadu and Northern Sri Lanka demonstrates that nineteenth-century Tamil reform movements were shaped by different historical conditions. In Tamil Nadu, reform movements increasingly developed around questions of caste abolition, social equality, and gender justice, reflecting broader debates on social emancipation during colonial modernity. In contrast, Northern Sri Lankan reform movements were more closely associated with the preservation of Saivite identity and Tamil cultural continuity in response to missionary influence and colonial transformations. However, both trajectories

shared a common objective of responding to social change and redefining Tamil identity within a rapidly transforming colonial environment. Nineteenth-century reform movements in Northern Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu diverged sharply in both ideology and approach. Tamil Nadu's reformers laid important groundwork for twentieth-century social justice movements by addressing caste, gender, and social equality. Meanwhile, Navalar's contributions to Saivite revivalism and Tamil literacy remain foundational, albeit rooted in conservative preservation rather than radical social change. These contrasting trajectories reflect the distinct historical, cultural, and colonial contexts shaping reform in these interconnected yet divergent Tamil regions.

These reform movements can also be understood through the framework of colonial modernity, where encounters between indigenous traditions and Western education generated both reformist and revivalist responses. Colonial rule introduced new forms of knowledge, education, print culture, and administrative institutions that encouraged debates on religion, caste, gender, and social practices. However, these encounters did not produce a uniform process of modernization; rather, they resulted in diverse responses shaped by local histories, social positions, and cultural identities (Wong and Chakrabarty, 2001). While some reformers adopted emerging ideas of equality, rationality, and social justice, others sought to preserve and redefine religious and cultural traditions in response to colonial and missionary challenges (Khandelwal, 2003; Viswanathan, 1989).

The long-term socio-political implications of these reform movements are evident in their influence on later debates concerning caste equality, social justice, education, gender reform, Tamil identity formation, and cultural nationalism. While reform movements in Tamil Nadu contributed to the emergence of anti-caste and social justice ideologies, reform initiatives in Northern Sri Lanka played a significant role in strengthening Tamil linguistic, religious, and cultural identity. Examining these enduring legacies provides a deeper understanding of the historical significance and continuing influence of nineteenth-century reform movements on Tamil society. In this context, nineteenth-century reform movements in Tamil Nadu

and Northern Sri Lanka represented different pathways of social transformation, shaped by the interaction between colonial modernity, caste relations, religious identity, and Tamil cultural consciousness.

7. CONCLUSION

The nineteenth century marked a critical phase in the socio-religious reform of Tamil-speaking societies across regions, and in Northern Sri Lanka these efforts centered on preserving and institutionalizing Saivism and the Tamil language in response to colonial cultural pressures. Arumuka Navalar exemplified this conservative orientation by emphasizing scriptural authority, ritual discipline, and the reinforcement of existing social and religious norms, whereas reform movements in Tamil Nadu directly confronted structural inequalities such as caste hierarchy, untouchability, and social exclusion. Reformers including Vaikunda Swamikal, Ramalinga Adigal, Iyothee Thass Pandithar, and Vedanayagam Pillai advanced radical critiques that challenged entrenched social stratification and promoted ethical universalism and social equality, and these ideological differences shaped distinct historical legacies. Arumuka Navalar's efforts strengthened cultural continuity within Northern Sri Lankan Tamil society, while Tamil Nadu reformers laid the foundations for later progressive movements, most notably Periyar's Self-Respect Movement, thereby linking cultural preservation with the early phases of social transformation.

8. REFERENCES

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