

Christian Missions and Navalar Movement in Sri Lanka: A Re-reading

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This paper examines the development of the Navalar Movement and how the Christian missionaries and their works influenced and inspired Arumuga Navalar to be known widely as a leader of the native Saiva-Tamil people in the 19th century. For that, this study traces Arumuga Navalar's interaction with foreign missionaries and the native-Tamil Christians, especially the opportunities in which he was made to form and lead forward his non-institutionalized movement: Saiva-Tamil Movement in order to reawaken Saivism and also to revive Tamil language and culture in Sri Lanka and South India. Drawing extensively from literature and the Navalar's writings, the research critically analyzes the inculturation of Navalar and the activities of movement by applying the socio-cultural historical perspective to his journey of life in the hybrid ritualism. This approach provides the focus for the discussion with illustrative examples from the literature and reinterprets the rise and mission of Navalar and how the Movement grew out of the colonial encounter and how it evolved through the years. Further this study will be beneficial to researchers and scholars of Saivism and Christianity religious studies, social and cultural history of Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Arumuga Navalar, Saiva-Tamil Movement, missionaries, Saivism

Introduction

In the history of the world, 19th century is marked as a turning point. It was characterized by an integrated development in society, religion, aesthetics, culture, education, and so on. It is an important period of time also in the Sri Lankan history. It was marked by colonization and the elements of modernism associated with it, education in English medium, spread of the Protestant religion, and emergence of the middle class and a reformation of the local religions, language, and culture.

There had been a chain of wide spread agitation and protest against the Christians and their religion under the banner of safeguarding the local religio-linguistic-cultural traditions. Those who led such campaigns include ordinary Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus, some educated religious leaders and a group of intellectuals who were competent in the area of religion and language. There anti-Christian agitations were very active in the North of Sri Lanka and, in particular, in Jaffna. Among the protestors was "Sri-la-Sri" Arumuga Navalar whose real name was K. Arumugam Pillai (1822-1879) who portrayed himself as a guardian of the Saiva-Tamil heritage.

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Christian Missionaries in Jaffna-Sri Lanka

Though there had been some connection with the Christians in the early days, the institutionalized Christian religion was brought to Sri Lanka by the Portuguese. On arrival, they began to propagate Catholicism in Sri Lanka. Following the Portuguese were the Dutch colonizers who spread the Dutch Reformist religion. At the end of the 18 century with the arrival of the British in Sri Lanka, the different Protestants denominations such as London Mission, Church Mission, Wesleyan Mission, Baptist Mission, and the Presbyterian Mission were brought to Sri Lanka. Later the American church too came and began its missionary activities to this country.

Because of the religious freedom that was introduced during the British rule, the different western religions that had taken root in this soil began to function without any obstacle. So the propagation of the Christian religions went ahead in many parts of the country with the blessings of the British who by that time had established a kind of unitary rule in Sri Lanka.

The missionaries were largely active in Jaffna. There was a big competition between the Anglican and Wesleyan missionaries. Around the same time the American missionaries who had been permitted to carry out their activities only in Jaffna too were very active in their missionary endeavor. Impressed and attracted by these developments, Catholics too began to reform their undertakings giving them a new direction. Churches, schools, hospitals, and hostels began to increase in Jaffna. The common folk were seen changing their religion from one to another. This was partly because of religious convictions and partly because of selfish motives such as receiving good education, occupation, concession, prestige, and so on.

Christianity was absorbed into the infrastructure of the Jaffna society. Catholicism was popular mainly among those who were known as “low caste” people while protestant religion was popular among those who thought of themselves as belonging to the high castes. The locality of the Churches of these two main Christian groups bears witness to the said reality.

Arumuga Navalar in the Christian Context

Navalar was born and bred in the vicinity of the Jaffna town. The father of Navalar, Mr. Kandappillai had been an intellectual. He was competent in Portuguese, Dutch, and English languages. Such linguistic competence suggests that he could possibly have had some close connection with the Christian. Besides, without such a connection, the said language expertise would not have been required for him. This connection is the secret behind Navalar’s father’s success in staging a few Christian dramas whose scripts were written by him alone. According to S. Sellaiyapillai (1914, p. 32), Kandar Pillai was a competent dramatist who worked with that dramas like “Erodu Nadakam—(The Herod)” and “St. Nicholas Nadakam”. Thus, Navalar’s link with Christianity could be traced back to his father’s involvement with the Christians. Though the family members of Navalar were Hindus by religion, they valued and maintained their connection with the Christians. This made them send Navalar to a Christian school at the age of 12.

Navalar’s direct contact with Christianity began with his admission to the Jaffna Wesleyan Mission School (Methodist Mission School). Navalar’s family made him learn English and expected him to do a prestigious job. As a result, he established contact with Rev. Peter Perceval. Later he became a teacher at the Christian school where he was a student and taught English and Tamil to all including the Christians, and Rev.

Perceval. But, as Navalar expressed (Kailasapillai, 1919), he had being scolded and reprimanded by his brothers and other family members for resigning his job as a teacher at Wesleyan Mission School.

Navalar's linguistic expertise and his close relationship with Rev. Perceval won him the job of translating the bible into Tamil (but, Navalar does not make a mention anywhere that he was part of the translation team). A translation is complete only when the translated version perfectly reflects the original version. For this, competence in the language in which the original version is written is essential. A sound understanding of the language too is of an utmost importance. All these requirements were met in Navalar and therefore, Navalar was invited to be a part of the bible-translators' team. This step brought him into contact with the Anglican and American missionaries. Making Navalar an active member in the task of bible translation had its own impact on the Christian churches in varying degrees. This can be seen in the inter-religious undertakings of Navalar in his later days. In this connection S. Kulendran has the following to say:

... How can a non-Christian be employed to undertake such a Christian endeavor? Even if such an individual is entrusted with a similar task he needed to be guided properly. I would say that Rev. Perceval had not been prudent enough in handling Navalar. (1967, p. 147)

Whatever the comment of S. Kulendran is, we should remember that Navalar made use of the translating job as an opportunity to learn enough to carry forward his anti-Christian campaign. This as a necessary consequence would strengthen his defense of Hindu religion and traditions. During his work with Christian pastors, rulers, and the indigenous Christians, Navalar learned meticulously about each individual.

During this time of the history there was hardly any opposition or criticisms against Christianity. There were two reasons for this:

1. Christianity was spreading all over the world with authority.
2. Lack of knowledge in Christian theology and traditions.

However, there was enough division within Christianity itself. The different missions and denominations began to propose theologies of their own. They also criticized each other's theology. This, in fact, was considered as a kind of reformation within Christianity.

All of a sudden in the 19th century there was a break out of opposition and criticism against Christianity. These agitations arose from a group of Hindu intellectuals whose leader was Navalar.

Although Navalar had a sound knowledge in Christian theology and its traditions, initially he did not attempt to write anything against Christianity. However when Hinduism and its traditions came under attack, Navalar began his anti-Christian campaign in writing. He did this with two intentions:

1. Defending Hinduism.
2. Exposing the Hindu heritage and traditions.

Christian's attack against Hinduism was carried out through the publication of some books and pamphlets. The titles of some of those books are: *Kurudduvazhi (Blind way)*, *Natkodai (Offering)*, *Mummorthiladsanam (attributes of the Hindu triad -1844)* and *turaachara viruththaantham (Tale of Depravity)*. Themes of the pamphlets were: "Siva is not God", "Siva is devil", "Vedas are fabrication", "Hinduism is an evil way", "Hindus are atheists", and "Hindus are slaves of the devil". These insults against Hindus and their religion were countered by Navalar and his followers by a similar attack. They too published books and pamphlets against the Christian and their religion. *Supra bodham (Radiant Wisdom -1853)*, *Saiva dhooshanaparikaaram (The Abolition of the blasphemy of Shaivism -1854)* are among those books.

Navalar's movement called Christianity/Christians with many insulting names. It was branded as a pseudo-religion and as the religion of the cursed people (Navalar, 1956, p. 4). In the Tamil tradition, these phrases had a bad connotation.

When Christians called "Siva-ahamas" as fabrications, Navalar called the bible in the same way. In fact, this should be considered as an expression of the deep anger Navalar had towards Christianity. He was well aware that bible contained historical and reliable facts. Navalar began to equate "Siva-ahamams" with the bible. He strongly stated that there were authentic writings that outline the fundamental of Hinduism and its traditions. In that category he included Sruti and other associated Vedas and "ahamams". Moreover, he also included what is known as "Vedas of the Dravidians"—"Thevaram" and "Thiruvacakam" which were formulated by the famous religious teachers in Nayanmars. These were, in fact, only the interpretation of the Vedas (Navalar, 1956, p. 3). Navalar equated all these to the bible.

Christian Theology Under Question

Polytheism

Christians called Hinduism as polytheistic, ritualistic, and traditionalistic. Navalar counter-attacked these allegations instantly. He said, "You are accusing us of polytheistic worship; that we worship Siva, Ganesha, Murugan and Amman. You call us atheists too. You too are atheists and polytheists who worship Jehovah, Holy Spirit and Christ" (Navalar, 1956, p. 1). In fact, Navalar was well aware of the Christian Trinitarian concept of God.

Christian pastors also attacked the worship of Nayanmars by Hindus. Navalar defended this by stating that "Siva-ahamams" speak about worship of Nayanmars as equal to the worship of their gods and goddesses. Navalar also pointed out some examples in the bible which contain a similar message, such examples are:

1. Joshua worshipping the commander of the Army of Yahweh (Jos 2:14).
2. The instruction of Jesus to the people regarding the events that would take place at the last judgment (Matthew 25:40).
3. Abraham bowing to the ground in the presence of the three men who came to his house to tell that Sarah had conceived (Gen 18:2).

Worship of Idols

When Christian pastors attacked Hindus for worshipping idols and incensing them, Navalar attacked them saying they were ignorant. Further, he questioned the Christians as to how wheat could become body and wine blood. Navalar saw this as an act of idol worship.

Ritualism

Jesus Christ was against all unnecessary legalism and traditions. He broke all of them. Then, how come that there is still unnecessary traditions in Christianity? Why are the pastors silent about it? These were questions raised by Navalar. In fact, God commanded that traditions be kept (Ex. 12:14-17, Num. 10:8). Now if Christ was against the laws given by God, is he not revolting against God? After healing a leper Jesus told him to do what was prescribed in the Law of Moses. Why did he say that he was against traditions? Even after the time of Jesus, his followers were particular about laws and traditions. Why did Paul circumcise Timothy? (Act 16:3).

These were the chain of questions posed by Navalar regarding the position of rituals in Christianity. If we take all these questions and doubts together, we can make a few remarks:

1. Navalar's perspective on Christianity was mainly based on the accounts of the Old Testament.
2. Navalar's attack was primarily against the Protestant religion.
3. He held the position that Christianity should uphold the traditions of the Old Testament.

It seems that these criticisms of Navalar about the religion led the pastors to reflect, evaluate, rethink, and reform the Christian religion. This need would have been felt certainly; Navalar's criticisms were a source of inspiration for the Christians and certainly it was not a loss.

Criticisms Against Christians in General

Navalar did not use the term "Christian" in a unified sense to refer to all the Christians. Jaffna Christians were divided into sections by him. He distinguished between foreign Christians and indigenous Christians, Catholics and Protestants and low caste Christians and high-caste Christians.

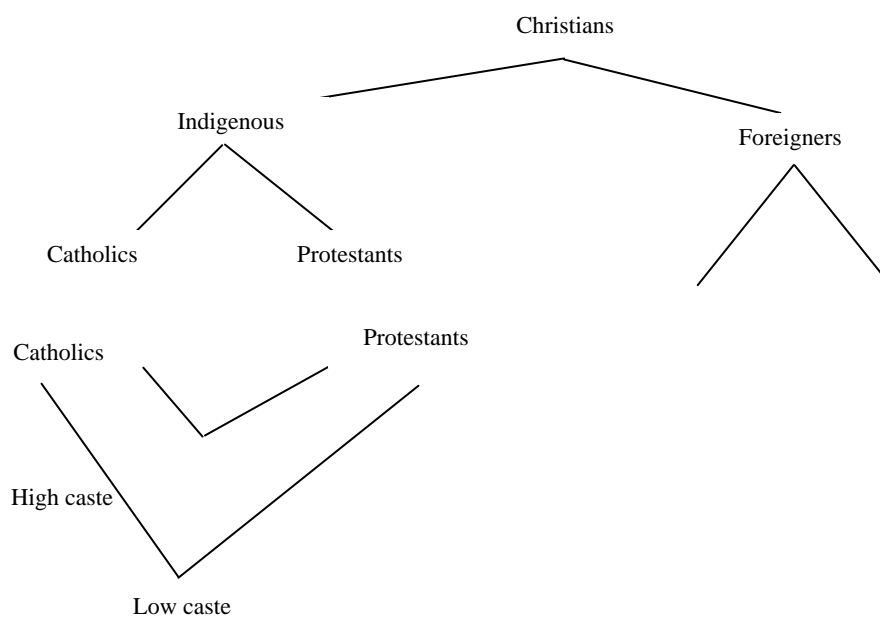


Figure 1. Types of Christians during the renaissance of Jaffna -19th Century.

Navalar's contact with the Catholics was not a notable one. There were a few reasons for this:

- During the time of Navalar, catholic missionaries were not as vibrant as the Protestant ministers in spreading the religion. Further, majority of the catholic clergy were indigenous.
- Catholic schools did not prevent the observance of Hindu religious rituals in the school. Navalar also thought that Catholics did not forcibly teach their religion to Hindu children (Navalar, 1956, p. 48).
- Majority of the faithful of the catholic religion were composed of the people of the coastal areas. They were once Hindus and later converted to Catholicism because of the Portuguese influence. Despite this, Navalar (1954, p. 20) always pointed out that: "... according to 'valaiveesinapadalam (a chapter)' of the 'thiruvilayadalpuranam (Purana of the Sacred Games of Siva)' God Siva has stated that he people of the coast are not worthy of partaking in Hindu rituals". C. D. Veluppillai's (1984, p. 22) writings confirm this position of Navalar.

- The catholic clergy of that time were not very impressive in giving theological interpretations. Further, according to Navalar their followers too were not in a position to absorb high theological inputs. Navalar (1954) said the following about the catholic clergy: “They knew neither Hinduism nor Catholicism. They are capable only to preach to the illiterate ‘parayar’, ‘nalavar’ and ‘pallar’ who can be bought with a single rice grain”.

Navalar associated all the said social inequalities and structures with Catholicism and marginalized it altogether. This “low opinion” of Navalar about Catholicism did not bother him much to agitate aggressively against Catholicism. He said neither good things nor bad things about Catholicism in a highly notable way.

Navalar’s Criticism/Condemnation on Protestant Christians

Against the Pastors

Navalar called the Protestant pastors with insulting names. He called them cursed, spineless, and traitors (Navalar, 1956, p. 4). He observed that the pastors were in Sri Lanka with selfish interests like a good occupation associated with plenty of funds. He came to his conclusion because the pastors were ignorant about Navalar’s anti-Christian campaign which shook Christian strongholds. In this connection he writes as follows:

in case this news reached the leaders of these missionaries overseas, they feared, they would be called back to their countries, thus, funds and luxurious life may be lost. Life in another country would not be like that of this country. So, the Christian missionaries wrote to their superiors as if everything was fine here with Christianity, which was not true. (Navalar, 1937, p. 45)

Navalar also reprimanded the kind of bias involved in Christian publications. He wrote:

When someone becomes a Christian it is published in newspaper with every single detail: the name, time and how! The person was said to be influenced by the Holy Spirit. But when someone comes back to Hinduism why don’t they publish that news also? (Navalar, 1937, p. 145)

When some students complained that they could not sit together with the low-caste students at school, those low-caste students were sacked from the school by the pastors. Navalar questioned such pastors: “you say that you want to get rid of caste structure in Jaffna. You want to sow the seeds of good Christianity. Can these selfish pastors do that Job?” Navalar had evidence to support that pastors were influenced by caste mentality.

Navalar was more supportive of British rulers than the pastors. He thought that the rulers were not a threat to Hinduism but the pastors were.

Indigenous Christian and Navalar

Theology of any religion without enough faithful is useless and such theology cannot grow. If theology is to grow, it has to be contextualized and the faithful should show respect towards it. This will ensure the continued existence of the religion. During the time of Navalar there were both genuine and “show-off” Christians in Jaffna. Navalar saw the latter group as harmful to the well-being of Christianity. Navalar was very critical of those Hindus who did not practice that religion in the way they should. He gave the same treatment to lethargic Christians too. He also criticized those Hindus who were embracing Christianity.

Those days the converts belonged to three categories:

1. Those who switch from Catholicism to Christian religion;
2. Those who switch from Dutch Reformist Church to Christian religion, and;
3. Those who switch from Hinduism to Christian religion.

Navalar was very much concerned about the conversion of the last category. The majority in this group belonged to the high-caste. This bothered Navalar. Navalar was of the opinion that those who converted themselves from Hinduism to Christianity did not know well the theology of Hinduism. He called them traitors of Siva. He believed that those people would be cursed by Siva. He suggested that it would be better for those people to perfect themselves in Christianity and forget about Hinduism (Navalar, 1954, p. 20). Navalar's unexpressed intention in saying this was to remind the Christians that they were supposed to follow Christian theology to the letter. The defense of his religion too was in the mind of Navalar.

Navalar's concern with Hindu religion was complemented with an equal concern about a high-caste-class. Navalar thought that taking cares of the high-cast people would help him to protect Hinduism from Christianity. He said: "If these people (high caste Vellaalers) really care about Hinduism and their caste let them follow their precepts and values to the full. Otherwise, let them join the Christians without polluting other Hindus and their priests" (Navalar, 1954, p. 20).

Navalar's comment reflects to some extent the kind of life led by the indigenous Christians in Jaffna. He also says that in Jaffna some of them had played double role, presenting themselves both as Christians and Hindus according to the situations (Navalar, 1937). Navalar quoted the following examples:

1. In the Church they share the Holy Communion, but at home they mark their foreheads with "vipoothi".
2. They bury the dead with the prayers of the pastor but later invite Hindu priests to offer "pooja".
3. Weddings are blessed both by the pastor and the Hindu priest (Ayyar).

Why did such things happen? Without failing Navalar investigated the reasons. He said:

The majority of the poor in this land knows well that Hinduism is the true religion. But they switch to Christianity with selfish interests. They are attracted by food, clothing, education, the teaching and preaching professions and the recommendation for better jobs. They also seek beautiful women who would bring them a good deal of dowry. So they convert themselves to Christianity. (Navalar, 1937, p. 40)

Can you expect a real faith in such people who change religion looking for fringe benefits? Such a drama of events is a reality even today. People change religion if they bring perks to them. There is "conversion" taking place within Christianity itself from denomination to denomination and Church to Church. In fact, there are all kinds of conversions today; Hindus becoming Catholics, Catholics into Mainline Churches, and finally people from all these categories moving into free Fundamentalist Churches. Are these conversions conviction-based? Or are they motivated by selfish interests? These questions needed to be answered.

Without a firm belief in the Christian religion, can any external activity make them real Christians? Navalar raised this question. However, it is good to remember that all questions and criticisms of Navalar regarding Christianity only led to a process of purification of the religion rather than damaging it.

It should not be denied that because of the campaigns led by Navalar many indigenous Christians became Hindus. This too is a step in the process of the said purification, how? As for Christianity having a few faithful people as members is far better than having thousands of unfaithful people. Only this can help the capture growth of the christen religion.

Navalar's criticisms and condemnations made the pastors to think about making Christianity better-suited for the Jaffna society of that time.

Findings and Conclusions

Navalar began his life with the missionaries. He was an insider. So he was well aware of the priorities and

activities of the Christian missionaries. Later he made use of whatever he learned from the missionaries to build and protect Hinduism. He used the models he learned from the missionaries to bring about reformation in Hinduism. In other words, whatever he learned was converted into action.

The pastors made use of education as means for propagating their religion; the motto of “education for all” was more for the propagation of the religion rather than giving education to all. Protestant religion is based on the word of God. For them the faith that comes after reading the bible is real and sound. This was their theology too.

Wherever there was a Church, there was a school too. This was so, because in order to learn the bible well a sound education was necessary. During the mid-19th century, that is, during the time of Navalar many people converted themselves into Christianity only after receiving education at Christian schools. The number of people who first converted themselves into Christianity before studying at Christian school was comparatively lower.

Education first, then knowledge, then entry into Christianity, then occupation followed by status. This was the pattern of events that was prevalent at that time. This made Christianity an easily accessible religion for the educated.

After a careful observation of this impressive methodology, Navalar also decided to follow the same pattern that is to use education as an effective means. In this regard, he started the “Vannarpannai Saivaprakasa Vidyasalai” in 1848, where many religious books and texts were taught. Hindu doctrines were taught. This resulted in the emergence of a group of quite educated individuals and another group of intellectually well-off individuals.

Those day pastors made use of the printing press to publish books and pamphlets in support of Christianity. Navalar copied this method too. He published books in support of Hinduism. He published also pamphlets condemning the Christian religion.

Pastors used preaching as yet another means to propagate their religion. Biblical concepts were explained to the people through sermons. Navalar was quick to copy sermonizing too. This mission started on December 31, 1847 at Vannarpannai Sivan Kovil. He explained to the people Saiva-ahamam and Saiva sittantham.

Such vigorous attempts of Navalar became a real challenge to Christianity. Kulendran has the following to say in this connection:

Christianity faced major setbacks which were never thought of in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Missionary endeavors failed considerably and the religion did not spread vibrantly, Navalar was the reason for this... In fact, he was made capable to do such things only by the Christians. (1967, p. 147)

For Hindus, Navalar is the reincarnation of God, as it were. But for the Christians, he is a dead enemy. Between these two extremes if someone considers Navalar from an objective point of view he can be seen as a person who has rendered commendable service to his religion and his ethnic group.

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