

## *Confronting Immoralities: Radical Humanism in Tamil Cittars Tradition*

### **I. Introduction**

Subramaniya Bharathi, a modern revolutionary Tamil poet and thinker, claimed ‘I am one of the Siddhas of this land.’ Likewise, the origin of the ideas of Ayothidasar and Periyar E.V. Ramasamy can be traced to the medieval literature composed by Cittars.<sup>1</sup> The Cittars, who were vocal critics and irritants to the established socio-religious intuitions and meaningless ritual practices, seem to have initiated a tradition of dissent in which the modern social thoughts have deeply been anchored. References to the eruption of dissenting voices from various fronts are numerous, but there is no serious attempt to examine the underlying relationships among these different howls of protests in medieval times and their continuity during the modern period. The medieval inscriptions extend a number of indications about protests staged by peasants, *devadsies*, lower castes such as *paraiyas*, landless labourers, etc against oppressive land taxes, the domination of brahmans and non-brahman landlords, local assemblies such as *nadu*, *sabha* and *ur*, the institution of temple and the state. Similarly, the literary compositions of Cittars show that they have gallantly used the dialogic space to express their resistance against the same issues. The dialogical engagement of Cittars was social as well as ideological. At the ideological sphere, they arduously challenged the ‘state religion’ and its institutional and ritual practices and at the same time, in the public domain, they were exemplary ‘leaders’ and spokesperson of the socially-disadvantaged groups. They not only lived among the hoi polloi, but also composed their songs in folk language.<sup>2</sup> M.S. Purnalingam Pillai writes: They are most popular works in Tamil and there is no pure Tamilian, educated or uneducated, who has not committed to memory at least a few stanzas from one or other of them’.<sup>3</sup> A sense of dualism can be deduced from these songs. That is, while the use of simple folk phrases had a wide appeal among the masses, each one of

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<sup>1</sup> D.Dharmarajan, ‘Samukappini: Cittar Marapilirunthu Oru Samukap Porali’ ( Social Ills: A Social Activist from Cittar Tradition), in collection of Seminar papers on ‘Siddhas of Tamil Nadu’ held in Folk Lore Department, St. Xavier College, Playamkottai, August-2006, p.p.41-66.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the use of common man language, these poems were composed in the metrical forms known as *cintu*, *kummi*, *kanni*, etc. These forms are still quite popular among the masses. K.Meenakshi, ‘The Siddhas of Tamil Nadu: A Voice of Dissent’ in R.Champakalakshmi and S.Gopal (eds), *Tradition, Dissent and Ideology*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1996, p.p.112-13.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Kamil Zevelible, *The Smile of Murugan*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1973, p.218.

them expressed an inner meaning targeting the upper class, expounding critically the folly of its ideological hold. The deviation from the existing formal literary practices, which at the time was an exclusive domain of a few 'saint poets' and the incorporation of peoples' language in their discourses itself seem to be a way of resistance.

The expositions of protest and resistance of Cittars are often studied as differences of opinion within the Bhakti tradition<sup>4</sup> or as an appendage of mystic movements which emerged in different parts of south Asia, for example, Sufism, Veera Saiva movement; Davos in China, etc.<sup>5</sup> Some have also attempted to study it as an endeavour to revive the glory of certain oppressed religions like Buddhism and Jainism.<sup>6</sup> However, I prefer to perceive it in terms of an *intellectual* as well as a dissent tradition of medieval South India that represented the collective consciousness of people at the lower stratum. In this sense, my characterization of Cittars differs from the prevalent tendency to name them as a group of tantric yogins, physicians, magicians, alchemist and even mad men. The intellectual tradition of Cittar can be distinguished from the medieval Bhakti, which began as an opposition to the vedic Brahmanism but in course of time itself got completely brahmanized and became the ideological tool of the state and a composite ruling class comprised of big landlords, traders and brahmans for legitimization of their power and status.

The Cittars were neither gelled into a group nor movement, nor did their ideas emerge as cohesive body of literature, nor did they live in a specific span of time. But the unifying factor is their interest and engagement with public issues and their radical advocacy for the alteration in existing cultural values and ideas, which were deeply embedded in Brahmanism. They were not attached to any institution of learning, nor did they establish

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<sup>4</sup> Glenn E.Yocum, 'Steever: *Civavakkiyar's* Abecedarium Naturae', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, no.114.3, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> K. Narayanan, *Cittar Thathuvam* (Philosophy of Siddhas), Tamil Pudhkalayam, Chennai, 1988; Pa.Seyaprakasam, 'Cittar Ilakkiyankal Kattum Samuka Muranpadukalum Thervukalai', (Social issues and solutions as they shown in Cittar lititures) in Collection of Seminar papers on 'Siddhas of Tamil Nadu' held in Folk Lore Department, St. Xavier College, Playamkottai, August-2006, p.43.

<sup>6</sup> N.Muthumohan, 'Indhiya Thathuvankalin Arasiyal' ( The Politics of Indian Philosophy), Kangu Publication, Chennai, 2005, p.61

any academic centres to teach and propagate their ideas, but their thoughts are rational and they possessed a scientific approach to alchemy, medicine, and body and mind. Since the modern Siddha Medicine owes its origin to Cittars, the knowledge has been handed down orally through their songs. In the same way, their radical thoughts were deeply permeated among the common people.

## **II. State, Ideology and Public Outcries: The Medieval South Indian Scenario**

The picture of society derived from the early classical Tamil literature and a few epigraphic sources shows a social formation governed by the ideology of heroism. Based mainly on pastoral-hunting mode subsistence, there had developed certain social norms, cultural practices, customs and a tradition in which heroism and loss of life were highly admired and attached to the prestige and status of a person. As is evident from the same category of sources, the dominant scenario of early social formation gradually withered away from the beginning of the first millennium AD. Heroic institutions began to disappear particularly in the plain regions which were under control of the category of *ventar* chiefs. The marked characteristics such as predatory raid, plunder, cattle raid, warfare, sharing food with commoners and even the kinship bond in production activity lost their grip.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, various occupational groups began to emerge. We come across references to brahman, *kollar*, *koyavar*, *thatchar*, *pulaithi* (washer women), weaver, *kuravar*, *parathaver*, *ayar*, *uzhavar*, *panar*, *porunar*, *parathai*, *koottar*, *kinaivar*, *parayar*, *kadampar*, *vanigar*, etc. Most of them evolved as castes during the later period. Evidences are also found with reference to slaves, worker and field labours (*adiyor*, *vinaiyor* and *kalamar* respectively).<sup>8</sup> The *umanar* purchased salt from *parathavar* and sold it for paddy—the internal trade in basic subsistence became significant. The phrase such as *pulayan*, *pulathi izhipirappalan*, *uyarnton*, etc, testify the existing social disparity

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<sup>7</sup> Political formation began to take new shape corresponding to the change in the basic subsistence, particularly in plain region which were under the *ventar* chiefs.

<sup>8</sup> Puram Nos. 212, 387; Kalittokai, No.88, Tolkkappiyam, Porul: 25. Also see, S.Sivasubramaniyan, *Tamizakathil Adimai Murai*, (Slave System in Tamilakam), Kalachuvadu Pathippakam, Chennai, 2005, pp.22-25.

based on occupation and birth.<sup>9</sup> Particularly, those who were engaged in funeral rituals and offered *uppilla pindam* (rice ball without salt) for the deceased were considered *izhipirappalan* (person from lower birth).<sup>10</sup> In one instance, a learned brahman (*nanmarai muthalvar*) conducted funeral rituals by reciting mantras and cutting the dead body into quarters by sword.<sup>11</sup> Here, the influx of vedic rituals with traditional practice is identical. Differentiation in terms of 'high-low and rich-poor' can also be incurred from Megalithic burial methods.<sup>12</sup> A part of early Tamilakam thereby began departure from its hold on traditional institutional practices.

The substantial changes in the methods of production, brought about favourable conditions for the emergence of a composite ruling class. A section of landholders gradually withdrew from the production activities and extended its political authority to control the means (of production). The expansion of brahmadeya in many cases seems to legitimize the political authority of ruler both at the central and local levels and can be seen as a means to bring already-developed agrarian zones into a state system.<sup>13</sup> The process of clearing forests and establishing peasant settlements went on upto the early modern period. The migrant peasants who were already acquainted with brahminical ideology and lived in a hierarchical social setup were able to easily subordinate the local tribes.<sup>14</sup> Constructing a temple and bringing a brahman family to the village were conventionally followed in such peasant settlements. This helped the peasants to ensure their supremacy in the newly-settled areas.<sup>15</sup> Even in the semi-tribal forests and hilly regions, supporting brahmans or adopting brahminical ideology helped the local military chiefs to maintain their social distance within their locality.

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<sup>9</sup> Puram. 82, 270, 287 and 289. The term *uyarnton* (high birth), is said to mean 'primarily to distance the brahmans from the folk'. But it seems that the category includes other people like traders, chiefs as well. See, Tol.Porul 31:1, 33:2.

<sup>10</sup> Puram. 74 and 93.

<sup>11</sup> Puram-93

<sup>12</sup> M.G.S.Narayanan, 'The Role of Peasants in the Early History of Tamilakam in South Indian', *Social Scientist*, Vol.16, No.9 (Sep.,1988), pp.17-34.

<sup>13</sup> However, Brahmadeyas are generally studied as a mechanism for expanding agriculture and bringing try regions to cultivation. R.Champakalakshmi, 'State and Economy: South India, Cira AD 400-1300,' in Romila Thapar (ed), *Recent Perspectives of Early Indian History*, Popular Prakasan, Bombay, 1995, p.272.

<sup>14</sup> This tendency can be observed in the highlands regions like Kongu, where large-scale migration of peasants happened during the Medieval period.

<sup>15</sup> This is from my own reading on a special category of sources in form of *kanipadalkal* (songs on land) and *samuthaya avanangal* (social documents) related to Kongu regions of highland Tamil Nadu. These sources provide valuable insight to understand village communities.

Yet another result of the agriculture-based social production is the development of exploitative institution of the ruling class, i.e., the state. The representatives of the state managed to legitimize their power through religious ideology. In general, the process of legitimization occurred in multiple ways which include establishment of state religion, state deities, state priesthood, state values-ideology, state myth and legend, state ritual and ceremony for investiture in office, veneration of state sacrifice etc., propaganda and celibacy.<sup>16</sup> In the case of South India, it was initiated by the Pallava state and later effectively followed by the Chola State. Particularly, the role of religious ideology attached with highly complicated brahminical rituals provided a gaining ground for the establishment of the Chola state. Therefore, instead of the cohesive forces, the stability of the Chola state relied more upon the ideological legitimization. The promotion of the *brahmadeya* settlements and the construction of monumental temples were the two processes which assisted the ideological legitimization of the Cholas. In addition, their closeness with brahmans and their institutions, bearing long titles and lineage attachment with imagined ancestors, initially convinced the local communities to accept the power of the Cholas. And in due course of time, the local chiefs began copying the Cholas' model of legitimization. Most of them started to use titles and donate ardently to brahmans and initiated temple constructions at local level. The network between central rulers and those of local level was operated through temple. The temple became a centre of both religion and administration. Rulers at the central level were able to uphold their power as long as they could remain as chief patrons and effectively manage the temple-centred network.

The purpose of the ruling class, which emerged at different levels of medieval socio-political system, was served by the emerging dominant ideology of Bhakti. In fact, the Bhakti movement in South India is itself considered to be a protest tradition against the orthodox Vedic Brahmanism and the caste based inequalities.<sup>17</sup> But it led to an

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<sup>16</sup> Conald V. Kurtz, 'Legitimation of Early Inchoate States', in Henri J.M. Claessen and S. Peter Skalnik (ed), *The Study of the State*, Mouton Publications, The Hague, 1981, p.185.

<sup>17</sup> Glenn E. Yocum, 'Shrines, Shamanism, and Love Poetry: Elements in the Emergence of Popular Tamil Bhakti', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol.41, no.1 1973, p.5. R.Champakalakshmi, 'From Devotion and Dissent to Dominance: The Bhakti of the Tamil Alvars and Nayanars' in R.Champakalakshmi and S.Gopal, *Tradition, Dissent and Ideology*, op.cit., p. 136.

inverse development of legitimizing the existing social inequalities and the caste hierarchy. The presence of brahmins with a set of complicated vedic rituals and the social stratification based on occupation and even on birth was highly evident in the heroic society. It is also same in case of *seramana* religion like Buddhism and Jainism. But the significant aspect is that they had not yet evolved as state apparatus or institutions of ruling class. Moreover, they did not penetrate much into the local people and alter the basic structure of the society. The brahmanism spread through the ideology of Bhakti, particularly by a group of wandering saints with the large-scale support of ‘non-brahman’ elites, was successfully able to incorporate the local folk elements with the vedic brahmanism giving birth to a new popular mode of religious expression. Composite features found in the ‘bhakti brahmanism’ in fact reflected the varied interest of the aforesaid composite ruling class. The incorporation or assimilation of secular traditional folk culture and institutions with vedic brahmanism happened to the extent of incorporating only certain popular elements with in the folk practices. The convergence resulted in two significant aspects. Firstly, the folk practices were given complicated meaning and interpretation in the line of vedic brahmanical texts. For example, the indigenous concept of ‘love’ between men and women, or among human beings had now taken shape of personal love between men and Supreme being ( god). Folk deities such as *murugan* and *mayon* were incorporated with the pantheon of vedic divinities giving a pan-Indian perspective. The folk tradition of herostone worship for ancestors gave base for the temple and the temple centred rituals.<sup>18</sup> Indigenous knowledge of music, dance, medicine, literature and even the system of courtesanship were developed as institutions and consequently became part of higher tradition. Secondly, since the bhakti brahmanism became an exclusive domain of non-brhamin elites, brahmins and state rulers, a section of non-brahmin masses was isolated from the mainstream. For instance, though religious ideology of Bhakti was propagated using the vernacular language as medium, the literary tenure of the language was beyond the understanding of common men, unintelligible to the masses. Since the indigenous practices were given complicated meanings and interpretations, they were also no longer accessible to the masses.

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<sup>18</sup> R.Champakalakshmi, ‘ From Devotion and Dissent to Dominance: The Bhakti of the Tamil Alvars and Nayanars’, op.cit., p. 138

Therefore, one has to be clear that though the ideology of bhakti emerged as a popular mode of religious expression of non-brahmin Tamils, it did not express the collective consciousness of the non-brahman folk as a whole.

As stated elsewhere, the temple became centre of all these new developments. More than a religious centre, it played multiple roles as administrative centre of the state and local chiefs, trade centre, settlement areas of brahmins, artisans, etc. Local administration was carried out through temple. All we know from inscriptional records of the medieval period is about land donation and tax payment to temple, exemption of taxes on the land given to temple and brahmins and transfer of land rights mostly among the members of above said composite ruling class. It is very clear that the political control of the state was possible only through the institution of temple. In fact, the direct revenue collection from people by the Chola state is still a subject of debate.<sup>19</sup> State intervention is often found as an administrative direction of local rulers to levy certain taxes and pay it to the temple. In sum, the temple was a symbolic representation of the state. Even at local level, the temple remained as an effective means for the landlords and wealthy traders to exercise their power and legitimize their authority. As a chief patron to the temple and the brahmins, they were in a way owners of the temples. The political power and kinship network of these local big shots is even said to have shaken the political stability of the state.<sup>20</sup> In case of Brahmins, their power, at least at the initial stage, was recognized not because of their landholding authority, but ‘ the identity of the brahmin rested on the construction as the central sacral figure in society’.<sup>21</sup> They were given land either for the purpose of ideological legitimization or due to the anxiety to get protection from the divine power. The spread of brahmanism ( through bhakti ideology) was more beneficial and of vital important to non-brahmin elites. In other words, the idea of brahmanism was

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<sup>19</sup> Burton Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1994, pp.311-317; Noboru Karashima, *History and Society in South India: The Cholas to Vijayanagar*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2004, p.13

<sup>20</sup> Kenneth Hall, *Trade and Statecraft in the Age of Colas*, Elmira, New York, 1978.

<sup>21</sup> Kumkum Roy, ‘Some Problems in Constructing Varna Identities in Early North India’ in Dev Nathan, *Tribe to Caste*, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla, 1997, p. 197.

taken up and used to strengthen the power and privileges of the landed and trading communities.<sup>22</sup>

Therefore, in the medieval South Indian context, any dissent movement concerning social changes and welfare of downtrodden was to be waged against the ideology of Bhakti brahmanism, the authority of temple, monopoly of landlords, traders and brahmans, the lavish and extravagant living of upper strata, caste oppression, tax burden, etc. Particularly, the temple and the brahmanism had been prime targets of attack since they represented the state and the state ideology respectively. Brahmins, who gave ideological justification for the caste/class oppression, were considered as the root for the all social troubles and thus became the subject of severe criticism. Despite the fact that the contemporary temple inscriptions were generally meant to register temple-oriented donations and land transaction, some references can still be gleaned with regard to public unrest and outcries. There had always been resistance and threat against the deeds and agreements made by members of ruling class. If records were inscribed, they generally began with certain Sanskrit phrases glorifying the local brahminical gods and the rulers and would end with a threatening statement assuring evil results in case of the agreement being disrespected. Phrases like *gangaikarail karam pasuvai konra pavam* and *ayiram briamanarai konra pavam* ( suffering as much as the sin of killing 1000 brahmans and *karam pasu* (she cows) at the bank of Ganga are mentioned in the inscriptions. Brahmana, cow, Gangai, etc., were projected as sacred objects and therefore needed to be respected. These sacred things were unintelligible, but what was basically intended was to create a fear among the ordinary folk. One cannot expect that a common man in the South could grasp or could have experienced the impact of killing a cow at Ganga's bank. In spite of all the projections, there were incidents of protests and public outcry.

Most of these public revolts were directed against brahmins, hegemony of *vellalar* landlords and tax oppression of rulers. Evidently, ordinary peasants had to suffer

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<sup>22</sup> R.Champakalakshmi, ' From Devotion and Dissent to Dominance: The Bhakti of the Tamil Alvars and Nayanars', op.cit., p.136.

with over-taxation particularly during the Chola period. In case of non-payment of taxes, inscription phrases allow the tax collectors to break the pots made of clay and to confiscate the one made of bronze ( *mankalam udaithum venkalam yeduthum*) from people. ‘Inscriptions provides evidences of movements refusing to pay taxes; of action for the reduction of taxes; of campaigns in opposition to certain taxes; of cultivators themselves fixing the tax’.<sup>23</sup> Refusal to sow, abandon the entire village uncultivated, taking shelter in another village, etc were certain other modes of protest from peasant side against over taxation. People of *paraya* caste revolted against oppressive landlords and brahmins for better emoluments. ‘As a result of this heroic struggle which encompassed 24 villages including Paganeri, Paraya people who were cruelly oppressed and denied human rights were able to wrest few rights from their oppressor’.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, *kammalas, kaikolars, idaiyrs, devardiyars*, etc., received some specific orders confirming their special social rights. A government order declared that there should not be any outrage against brahmans and *vellalar* landlords.<sup>25</sup> People committed self-immolation as a protest against land authority.<sup>26</sup> A dancing girl hanged herself from the temple tower claiming her right to cultivate in *jeevitha* land. A brahman house was set afire in a clash with regard to temple rights. A temple was demolished since its walls had an inscription, which denied the cultivation rights of some peasants.<sup>27</sup> With the fear of public revolt the main deity of a temple had to be shifted to other place during the time Rajaraja I. With their power and monopoly, the inscriptional documents were manipulated in favour of local *vellala* and brhamins. It is said that ‘the toiling people of the ‘right hand’ and the ‘left hand’ united in an assembly called to oppose this practice and decided not to cooperate in any way with brahmin and Vellala landlords and officials’.<sup>28</sup> All aforesaid references indicate that there were many forms of dissents which rose from different sections of society. Though most of them were isolated events and did not develop into a larger movement, they indicate that there had been a growing discontent among the

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<sup>23</sup> M.D.Rajkumar, ‘Struggle for Rights during Later Chola Period’, *Social Scientist*, vol.2, no.6/7, 1974, pp.29-30.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.31.

<sup>25</sup> M.D.Rajkumar, ‘Struggle for Rights during Later Chola Period’, op.cit., p.

<sup>26</sup> ibid, p.32

<sup>27</sup> ibid, p.33

<sup>28</sup> ibid, p.34

masses over the brahminical orthodoxy, state oppression and the monopoly of upper classes.

The purpose of the present essay is also to investigate how the Cittars tradition in South Indian can be linked with these contemporary social protests. Most of the Cittars, who were more vocal and radical opponents of this particular social context, lived during the later Chola period when the references to aforesaid public outcries were numerous. Can the Cittars be considered to have played a sort of intellectual role spearheading these public unrests? We do not come across any direct references to Cittars leading masses to protest. However, their radical poems were not their personal vendetta against brahmins and upper caste people; but they tried to expose the folly of the brahmanism and thus to awaken the people from their deep silence. Probably for this particular reason, the Cittars preferred to live with masses, and speak in folk language. Poems of Cittars had always two messages. The first was to deal with the ideology propagated and promoted by ruling class through temple-centered Bhakti, while the second was a call for people against such value system. The following section specifically focuses upon these two level of engagements.

### **III. Cittars: The Intellectual dissent and the Voice of the People**

There are many questions with regard to the tradition of Tamil Cittars that have been subject of scholarly discussion but yet remain unanswered. While a few scholars consider it as an alternative voice within the tradition of Bhakti, some other trace its origin to *seramana* religions of south and *nathar* tradition of North India.<sup>29</sup> There is also difference of opinion about the identity of Tirumular, who was undoubtedly a veteran scholar of those days. Tirumular has been listed one of the 63 *nayanmars* of Siva saints and his works have been incorporated with those of Siva *Siddhantha* ( philosophy of Bhakti tradition). The claim to bring Tirumular to Siva Tradition is often being contended arguing that he was the first Cittar of Cittar tradition.<sup>30</sup> In fact, the literary style and thought contents of Tirumular is quite similar to Siva Siddhantha literature, and unlike later Cittars, he was not vocal opponent of Bhakti and the temple-centred

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<sup>29</sup> N.Muthumokan, 'Indhiya Thathuvankalin Arasiyal' ( The Politics of Indian Philosophy), op.cit., p. 59

<sup>30</sup> Kamil Zvelebil, *The Smile of Murugan*, op.cit., p.225.

malpractices and oppression. However, still there are number of aspects that distinguish Tirumular with the rest of Saiva scholars. Probably, this is what connects him with the Cittars tradition.<sup>31</sup> It is also said that at the time of Tirumular ( he is dated in between 4<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> century AD), there was no need to fight with Bhakti since it was yet to develop as an ideological instrument of the ruling class. The prime concern of Tirumular was therefore to revivify the indigenous tradition in the context of growing encroachment of Vedic-puranic tradition.<sup>32</sup> There are also similar questions about Sivavakkhar, who was suppose to be a one of the radical thinkers of the Cittars tradition. It has been argued that Sivavakkhar was basically a Siva Saint then later became an opponent of the same tradition.<sup>33</sup> Finally, whether the Cittars were atheist is another generic question often found in the studies on Tamil Cittars.<sup>34</sup> We intent to keep these questions away from the discussion. It is because of not only that they do not fit into the scope of this inquiry, but also they are often because raised keeping the present political and social context in mind.

It is said there were 18 Cittars, including Tirumulara and Sivavakkhar, living in different periods from early medieval to the early modern. Most prominent among them are Tirumular, Sivavakkhar, Pattinattar, Pattiragiriyyar, Pampatticittar, Itakkattucittar, Akappeycittar, Kutampaicittar, Katuvelicittar and Alukuni or Alukanicittar.<sup>35</sup> Though Cittars have expressed an eclectic range of ideas which vary from one another, there are certain unifying factors that bring them into a single tradition. They are, according to Kamil Zvevleble, opposition to the formalities of life and religion, immoralities of priests and brahmins, the abuse of temple, denial of the religious practices and brhamanical beliefs, emphasis on the purity of character, use of a specific style of language, etc.<sup>36</sup> Till recent time, other than the writings of Tirumular, no work of other Cittars were collected and compiled. Rather it is stated that the works of Cittars were even destroyed

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<sup>31</sup> ibid

<sup>32</sup> Pa.Seyaprakasam, 'Cittar Ilakkiyankal Kattum Samuka Muranpadukalum Thervukalai', (Social issues and solutions as they shown in Cittar literatures), op.cit, p. 74.

<sup>33</sup> Glenn E.Yocum, 'Civavakkhar's Abecedarium Naturae', op.cit.

<sup>34</sup> K. Narayanan, *Cittar Thathuvam* (Philosophy of Siddhas), Tamil Pudhagalayam, Chennai, 1988, pp.23-24

<sup>35</sup> K.Meenakshi, 'The Siddhas of Tamil Nadu: A Voice of Dissent' , op.cit., p. 112

<sup>36</sup> Kamil Zevelible, *The Smile of Murugan*, op.cit. p.218.

by the ‘orthodox Hindus’ in Tamilanadu.<sup>37</sup> However, recently there has been a significant development in the compilation of the scattered texts of Cittars. Songs of a few Cittars have also been translated into English. As a result, they have been subjected to critical examination by scholars from different disciplines. The progressive thoughts of the radical tradition can be discussed evaluating their approaches to caste, religion, idol worship and meaningless rituals and ceremonies, economic inequality, politics, family life and women.

‘What I can do but laugh’—the sense of exasperation by Sivavakkiyar, the 9<sup>th</sup> century Cittar, was actually expressed after asking a number of questions. Is there any distinguishing mark in flesh or skin or bone? Do you find any difference when you sleep with *pariah* or brahman woman? You ate no venison, is not the thread on your bosom made of deerskin? You ate no mutton, do you not perform your sacrifices with sheep’s flesh? Do gods ever become stone?<sup>38</sup> In fact, these questions extend classical examples to the ideological paradigm in which the Tamil Cittar tradition was anchored. The caste differentiation had been a main concern and contention of all Cittars. They confronted the existing social values and regulations constructed by Brahmanism and propagated alternative values like caste versus non caste; caste inequality versus *onre kulam* (one humanity); inter-caste marriage versus intra caste marriage; vegetarianism versus non-vegetarianism; and brahman versus non-brahman.<sup>39</sup> For instance, Pampatti Cittar denounces caste and mobilize people by declaring ‘we will set fire to the caste-divisions, we will challenge the street division (based on caste) and we will have marital relation with untouchable families’.<sup>40</sup> When describing his austere life style, Pattinattar says ‘I dared to beg from families of all castes’.

It was strongly believed that the underlying causes for all societal problems and caste differentiation were brahmins, their virtually meaningless rituals, temple and idol

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid*, p.220

<sup>38</sup> Sivavakkiyar *patal*- 126 ( Translation by K. Meenakshi)

<sup>39</sup> Ve.Jayalakshmi, ‘Cittarrin Ethir Marapu Cintanikal,’ ( Dissent Thoughts of Cittar), in collection of Seminar papers on ‘Siddhas of Tamil Nadu’ held in Folk Lore Department, St. Xavier College, Playamkottai, August-2006, p.68

<sup>40</sup> Pampatti Cittar Padal- 123

worship and the influence of vedic and puranic elements. Despite differences in their style of language, personal beliefs and thought contents, all Cittars unanimously express the sense of anti-brahman, anti-veda, anti-temple rituals. They emphasized upon moral and rational values, disciplining one's own self, following the path of intellectuals rather than fake religious priest, adherence to reason and rationality rather than blind beliefs and rituals, etc. Sivavakkiyar calls the temple worshipers fools and says 'you do *puja* repeatedly, when the *puja* itself is within you'.<sup>41</sup> Here what implied is that perfect happiness lies within the 'self'. It is better to shape 'self' and develop moral thinking and humanist behaviour rather than worship to god and offer *puja*. In the same sense, he asks when 'god is within you, does the stone ever speak?'<sup>42</sup> and suggests 'Reciting the *Vedas* will be a waste in the world. Is it necessary to run to distant places to worship when *adinathan* is within us. Is there any need for cow worship or the *vedas*. Similarly, various songs of Sivavakkiyar severely attack the concept of purity according to *Veda*,<sup>43</sup> pollution and impurity propagated by Vedic rituals,<sup>44</sup> the idea of *karma*, transmigration and rebirth,<sup>45</sup> and idol worship.<sup>46</sup> Kaduveli Cittar has ridiculed the projection of Ganga and Kasi as sacred places.<sup>47</sup> To Pampatti Cittar, the Satur Veda, six categories of religious treaties, mantras, puranas, etc are just rubbish texts.<sup>48</sup> The songs of Kudhampai Cittar expose the depraved nature of vedic *academic* rituals and the brahmanical belief in ill-omens.<sup>49</sup>

As stated in the previous section, brahman, brahmanism, vedic rituals and temple all symbolized the authority of ruling class and the state. With the effort of Siva and Vaishnava religious preachers, Brahmanism had penetrated even into the lower strata of the society. It gave no chance for the development of rationalistic ideas, religious

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<sup>41</sup> Sivavakkiyar *patal*-35 (Translation by K.Meenakshi)

<sup>42</sup> Sivavakkiyar *patal*-497(Translation by K.Meenakshi)

<sup>43</sup> 'The Vedas you recite are spit, the mantras they contain are spit,... there is nothing anywhere in the world that is not spit' ; ' You say the water swirling in your mouth is spit, are not then the Vedas formed in your mouth also spit' (Sivavakkiyar *patal* –41, Translation by Glenn E.Yocum )

<sup>44</sup> 'Pollution: you bathe daily in fear of pollution; But pollution is nothing but coming to birth in congealed body' (Sivavakkiyar *patal* –447, Translation by Glenn E.Yocum)

<sup>45</sup> '..., And dead are never, never, never reborn' (Sivavakkiyar *patal* –48, Translation by Glenn E.Yocum).

<sup>46</sup> 'Thinking the rock planted in the ground is God, you circumambulate it, strewing it with fine flowers, muttering mantras. But friend, what is the use' (Sivavakkiyar *patal* –520, Translation by Glenn E.Yocum)

<sup>47</sup> Kaduveli Cittar *Patal*- 13

<sup>48</sup> Pampatti Cittar, *Patal*, 98

<sup>49</sup> Kudhampai Cittar *Patal*-22

tolerance and liberal thinking. There had been a continued religious rhetoric between brahmanism and other heterodox religions. Within brahmanism, the factions, Saivism and Vaishnavism had been fighting for ideological supremacy and patronage. Ultimately, Saivism somehow manage to win over the support of ruling the class. The temple remained as a centre of all religious activities for both these sects. Further, the temple also symbolized the power and authority of the ruling class. Therefore, the approach of Cittars towards temple and temple related rituals was not simply a theological respond to brahmanism, but also a strong protest against the oppression of the state and non-brahman ruling class. The more horrible face of brahmanism was exposed only when it was practised by non-brahman elites. The 'brahmanism' of non-brahman elites led to a rigid caste differentiation and it strengthened and legitimized the socioeconomic inequality. Therefore, in Cittar literature though we rarely find references to direct attacks on rulers and non-brahmin upper castes, the opposition to the aforesaid religious symbols was also meant to oppose these sections.

Nonetheless, the lavish life style, inhuman practices, hunger for power and money, lust for women and sex, and all other bodily desires of wealthy men in society were severely criticized. Invariably, all Cittars advocated strongly for virtuous conducts, modesty and truthfulness. Shaping a person's self was considered primary for social change more than anything else. Kaduveli Cittar, for instance, gave a call for people not to pretend, cheat, drink toddy, smoke Ganja, kill innocent beings, and read books which were not useful for living.<sup>50</sup> Pattinattar also stresses upon the same values in several songs.<sup>51</sup> He narrates the immoral characters of unwanted men in society: 'they go for unnecessary fighting and dispute, do more harm than good and help others also to do the same, they give nothing to poor, but waste their time and money to satisfy their lustful desires with prostitutes, ...' Since they are of no use for society, why should they live in this world?

From the perspective of women and gender, Cittars were not an exception; they too have expressed the patriarchal values of treating women as sexual objects. In fact, they

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<sup>50</sup> Kaduveli Cittar Patal-63

<sup>51</sup> Pattinattar Patal, Yekampamalai-123

have been criticized for their negative approach to women and family life. Some songs of Cittars go upto the extent of calling women in terms of ‘devil’ and ‘evil’ and blame them as the cause for all troubles. However, these expression need to be approached from the point of their emphasis upon ‘renouncing the desire to wealth and sex’ and of their stand to oppose elites and their waste the lavish life. In this sense, the Cittars were self-critics. They blame women out of their frustration for not being able to control their personal sexual desire. Pattinattar, for example, expresses his suffering: ‘the ghost may came in the disguise of women, caught hold of me, frightened by eyes, charmed by breasts, pushed me into the sore of pit snatched away my wisdom...’ He also says ‘budding breast would spoil my life, tender eyes would take my spirit,’<sup>52</sup> narrates how he ran like a stray street dog after harlots.<sup>53</sup> and finally advises to his heart not to long for the delight in women.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Phatragriyar expresses the sense of resentment with a question when he would overcome his desire of women folk who charm him with their eyes, hands and legs to forget everything.<sup>55</sup> Pampatti Cittar says that he is able to escape from portraying women as peacocks, koals, rubies, deer, honey, light, flowers, sweet, lightening, valuable, blossoms, etc.<sup>56</sup> Though similar examples are numerous in various of songs of Cittars,<sup>57</sup> there were several instances where Cittars had expressed great respect for women and their role in society. Sivavakkial stressed the human nature of having sex and family life. To Azhakuni Cittar, there was nothing in this world without women.<sup>58</sup>

Despite their vulgar attacks on the female body and sexuality, an element of dissent still can be presumed in their approach. This would become very clear once we understand the tendency towards gender and women prevalen in the early and medieval Tamil literatures. Right from the beginning of the classical period, we see there is an unusual emphasis upon women’s chastity and over-glorification of women’s beauty. The virtues of family women and harlots were categorized and women were forced to adhere to

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<sup>52</sup> Pattinattar Patal, Yekampamalai-18

<sup>53</sup> Pattinattar Patal- Kachithirukaval-7-70

<sup>54</sup> Pattinattar Patal, Kachithirukaval -65

<sup>55</sup> Phatragriyar Patal-9

<sup>56</sup> Pampatti Cittar Patal- 76

<sup>57</sup> Pampatti Cittar- 51-5, Pattinattar, Kachithirukaval, 7-70, Puranamalai-13, 80, etc

<sup>58</sup> Sivavakkial Patal-506 ; Azhakuni Cittar Patal- Valai Kumi- 77, 72

these. In classical Tamil literature, we come across several types of women: a woman runs her household upholding her chastity when her husband disappeared in the crowd of harlots for years; a woman waits patiently for her husband to come back from prostitutes and welcomes him happily when he comes back after a year long enjoyment with other women; a woman bears all humiliations and gossips when her husbands enjoying with other and so forth.<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, we also see suffering of harlots in the hands of their patron. They had to live life of insecurity looking for patron. Presumably, it had been an innate attitude to wealthy people to have a chaste wife at home and have several beautiful concubines outside. The over glorification of women's chastity and beauty in fact further helped the patriarchal society to reproduce the same social values. The tendency is very clear during the period of *cilappathikaram* and *manimekalai*. Here one sees the sufferings of the aforesaid two categories of women. Kannaki, an innocent wife, gained strength through her chastity and fought for her deceitful husband. From Madhavi and Manimekalai, we understand the dreadful life condition of courtesans and the problem they face if they want to come out of the state of being harlots. When Madhavi decided to become a nun after she was abandoned by her patron, she had to fight with society which expected her to be courtesan and look for other patrons. Manimekalai, who was brought up as nun and decided to lead that life was tortured by ruling princes who wanted to marry her. Medieval inscriptions and literatures attest how the courtesan life was institutionalized in terms of the *devadasi* system to serve the wealthy men attached to the temple. As cited in the previous section, a *devadasi* committed suicide due to her disagreements with her patron landlords.

It is in this context, Cittars seemed to have deviated from the existing literary tradition and protested the greedy desire of the wealthy people. The unnecessary glorification of women and their bodily beauty, which helped to reproduce the social values of patriarchal society, is clearly absent in Cittars' songs. They blamed themselves for their inability to control their desire and thus tried to come out from the existing social norms and values, which were for subordination, and exploitation of women. Enjoying life with courtesans was in a way a mark of status and power for wealthy men in society. Since

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<sup>59</sup> For example, *Akananuru*-176.

the upper stratum remained as model of emulation for the lower one, there was a need for intellectual role to question this system. However, one cannot justify the extreme steps taken by Cittars.

## **V. Human and Personhood: The Alternative Value System of Cittars**

The picture of human and personhood visualized by Cittars can be deduced from the discussion in the previous sections. Most of the alternative values proposed by Cittars seem to have emerged from their strong empathy towards people of lower castes and their everyday sufferings. The denial of temple and idol worship can also be interpreted in this line. When Sivavakkial says: What are temples? What are bathing tanks? Fools who worship in temples and tanks! Temples are in the mind, tanks are in the mind'<sup>60</sup>— he is not just ridiculing the core ideals of brahmanical tradition, but showing an alternative way to gain spiritual experience for the people whose entry into the temple premises was prohibited and use of the public tanks was treated in terms of pollution and impure. It is evident even the during the modern period, entry into temples and access to public tanks remained great challenge to the lower castes. Since most of the Cittars hailed from lower castes, they could have had more immediate knowledge about peoples sufferings in the temple centred social hierarchical system. The emphasis upon 'realizing mind', realizing the strength of one's own being than any Super Being, emerged specifically from this particular social context. Cittars are said to have mastered magical/supernatural power (*cittadal*).<sup>61</sup> This can also be interpreted as an attempt to show the power of human.

The concern over annihilating inhuman practices, specifically the caste/class differentiation were deeply imbedded in every aspect of Cittars's discourses. They countered the dominant ideology, which divided the society based on castes and religion by proposing 'one humanity and one god'. The denial of the belief in rebirth was also to deny caste based on birth.<sup>62</sup> They visualized a human freed from all social biases and

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<sup>60</sup> Sivavakkial Padal-

<sup>61</sup> K. Narayanan, *Cittar Thathuvam* (Philosophy of Siddhas), Tamil Pudahakalayam, Chennai, 1988, pp.40-47.

<sup>62</sup> T.N.Ganapathy, *The Philosophy of Tamil Siddhas*, Indian Council of Philosophical Research, New Delhi, 2004 ( second edition), p.195.

superstitious beliefs and campaigned for a spiritualism based on self-realization and decontaminating one's mind and attitudes. It was very rational and humane. To them, 'if the mind is in the right disposition, it is unnecessary to utter the *mandiram*'.<sup>63</sup> Since man himself is a god, himself a supreme being, the powerful person in society is the one who knows his strength, the power within him. Rather than religious scriptures, a knowledgeable person, a wise man can guide the humanity.<sup>64</sup> Their teachings were quite practicable as well as accessible to everyone in society. 'Siddhar in general believed that the world is real, not illusory. 'Liberation' (*mutti*)- in contrast to bhakti achieved through knowledge; it is a liberation from the idea of evil and pain. Suffering ceases as soon as one understands that it is exterior to self. It is destroyed by ignoring it as suffering. This true knowledge is obtained in entasis (*samadhi*) which is achieved by practice, by physiological yogi techniques'.<sup>65</sup>

Altogether, the medieval dissenters envisaged a new idea of humanism by magnifying the objective reality of 'human'. It seems that most of their progressive thoughts stem from their own personal experiences. Anyone who is really concerned about humanity and could heed the voice of people can certainly develop such social thoughts. It is argued that Cittars discourses were primarily a theological alternative to Bhakti. Similarly, some say, 'it was a cult of few mystics mainly concerned for the spiritual development of people, though it represented diverse ideas and opinions on socio-religious sentiments.'<sup>66</sup> But one cannot fully agree with these arguments. The ideological dogmas of Cittars have emerged out of their genuine concern for divergent social issues. Since most of social issues were either produced or justified by the dominant ideology, any dissenting voices against such issues will ultimately produce an alternative set of ideas. Presumably, there was hardly any interaction among the Cittars. They lived in different times and different places. Therefore, the radical ideas were neither consciously framed nor were they intended to have an organized movement. But these individual voices indicate certain

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<sup>63</sup> Agattiyar Padal-1

<sup>64</sup> T.N.Ganapathy, *The Philosophy of Tamil Siddhas*, op.cit, p.195

<sup>65</sup> Kamil Zvelebil, *The Smile of Murugan*, op.cit, p.228

<sup>66</sup> G.Rajagopal, *Beyond Bhakti: Steps Ahead*, B.R.Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 2007, p.103

social context and express certain common features. In fact, that is what unifies them into single platform.

The songs of Cittars were probably addressed to people rather than invoking an ideological dispute with the practitioners and preachers of Bhakti. The main target groups were those who were excluded from the Bhakti ideology or forced to accept their subordinated position within its domain. Liberating them from their deprived position was to make them to understand the irrational as well as illogical values expressed through Bhakti. Therefore, the nullification of brhamanical values were essentially messages to people, to kindle their mind and strengthen their confidence not to believe such values. Some of the songs for instance were composed in the form of collective voice—as people themselves speak against cast distinction and the institution of temple.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, one can perceive that there was a certain degree of mass mobilization, but in a limited sense. Most of the radical Cittars, whom we have referred to predominantly in this discussion, belonged to the period between the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Likewise, as discussed in previous sections, it was also a period when a number of spontaneous revolts emerged from various section of people. Though we do not have any direct evidences to consider the radical thoughts of Cittars were behind such revolts, references from different categories of sources convey that discontent prevailed against the ruling class and its ideological base. The songs of Cittars might have intended to represent this contemporary popular sentiment.

It is significant to note that Cittar operated at the time when brahmanism was in its peak with the collaborative support of the state and ruling class. In fact, any attempts to ridicule brahmans, brahmanical rituals, temple, etc was considered to be against the state and ruling class. Therefore, Cittars could have faced severe opposition from different fronts including the state. The social history of medieval South India is basically a history of caste formation, emulation and disputes. With the aim to control power and gain sociopolitical privileges, caste began to operate as mechanism for cooperation as

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<sup>67</sup> Pampatti Cittar Patal, Akaparru Neekal-12

well as separation.<sup>68</sup> Behavioural rules of each caste, interaction mechanism and the context in which they can be used are clearly defined and strictly followed.<sup>69</sup> In such a social scenario, any dissenting voice against caste and caste based social division was unwanted and needed to be crushed. One can therefore presume that a considerable section of the population was not in favour of Citters and their ideological propaganda. Though some Citters openly attacked brahminism and caste-based hierarchy, others had composed songs in double meanings. At the face, they had simple message to the people, while the underlying meaning was to attack those who propagated in favour of brahmanism. In this regard, Ganapathy rightly points out, ‘the Tamil Siddhas use a kind of secret language in which very often the highest is clothed in the form of lowest, the most sacred in the form of the most ordinary, the transcendent in the form of the most earthly and deepest knowledge in the form of the most grotesque paradoxes. It was not only a language for the initiates but a kind of shocktherapy which had become necessary on the account of the over-intellectualization of the religious and philosophical life of those times’.<sup>70</sup>

Towards the conclusion, the major arguments of the paper can be reiterated. It has been attempted here to study the significant role of intellectuals and the nature of many forms of dissent in medieval South India. First of all, the discussion has enabled us to trace the root of modern dissent and protest movements to the Middle Ages. Particularly in the context of South India, the non-brahman movement with the slogans of ‘anti-brahmin, anti-veda, and anti-rituals’ became a strong popular protest. The analysis on the radical songs of Citters indicates that how similar thoughts were raised against the religious ideology in the medieval period. They appear to be more radical since they were expressed at the time when the State and the religion were not separated. Secondly, the analysis of inscriptional references in Section II gives substantial clues about various isolated protests of the people against the state and ruling class. These incidents took place at the

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<sup>68</sup> Gerald D. Berreman, ‘Stratification, Pluralism and Interaction: A Comparative Analysis of Caste’, De Reuck and J. Knight (eds.), *Caste and Race Comparative Approaches*, Brown and Co, Boston, no.6, 1952, pp.45-73. Burton Benedict, ‘Stratification in Plural Society’, *American Anthropologist*, vol.64, pp.1235-1246

<sup>69</sup> Gerald D. Berreman, ‘Caste as Social Process’, *South Western Journal of Anthropology*, vol.22, no.4, 1967, p.363.

<sup>70</sup> T.N.Ganapathy, *The Philosophy of Tamil Siddhas*, op.cit, p.168

time when most of the radical Cittars propagating their message among the people. Finally, the nature and function of Cittars and their alternative value system stem from the deep concern over humanity. This in fact distinguishes them from several other socio-religious movements were emerged in other parts of medieval India. They kept themselves away from religious ideas and envisaged a scientific and rationalist human. They did not seek support from rulers or wealthy people. They lived with the poorest of the poor and represented their voices.