The Fields of Toronto

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The field used to stay where it was. It was discrete: a village, a town, a time period. It did not move from one place to another, its temporality was fixed between a series of dates, beginnings and endings. It was the place and time an anthropologist went to, took notes, and came home again. The field certainly did not come back – or talk back. It did not yell at you. We were different, the places were different, the cultures different.

In my case the field began in southern India – Tamil Nadu and south Tamil Nadu at that. I worked there in the early to mid-1990s on sociocultural and historical elements of oratory, specifically what we might call the Dravidianist style of political oratory: avarkale, avarkale, avarkale. In further investigations into the history of oratory, the field shifted spatially about one hundred fifty miles southeast to Jaffna and temporarily about one hundred fifty years. A few months ago it shifted again ten thousand miles west to a May afternoon in Toronto.

I want to discuss the fluidity of the field – spatially, temporally, cognitively and politically – by telling a story about one of the least felicitous papers I ever delivered. The venue was the Toronto Tamil Studies Conference, one of the highest profile academic conferences the Tamil community in Canada had ever mounted. The conference gathered together several dozen scholars, mostly from North America, for three days of intensive discussion about Tamil literature, history, culture and society before a mixed audience of college students, university professors, independent scholars, and members of the general community. Overall it was very successful.

My talk was written quite hastily, based on research I had done the previous year in Jaffna, specifically based on a talk I gave in Jaffna almost exactly a year before the Toronto conference. I had spent about four months in Jaffna looking for archival material regarding nineteenth century Tamil sermons. I was particularly interested in what kind of social relations surrounded the delivery of sermons around 1847, the period in which the Champion Reformer of Hinduism, Arumuga Navalar (1821-1879), famously gave a sermon (piracangam) outside of the Christian context.

Navalar is a big deal in Jaffna, especially among the Saivite upper classes/castes, the Vellala in particular. Every school child knew him, like George Washington in the States, like Periyar E.V.Ramaswamy in Tamil Nadu. In some respects, he was more important than that. Navalar articulated a modern view of Saivism – it might even be said, tentatively, and disturbingly for many, who admire him, that he not only reformed Saivism, he created it. It is not to say that Saivism was not a vital realm of practice and thought, that Saiva Siddhanta, for instance, did not have a philosophical tradition that stretched back centuries. Rather, it is to claim that Saivite philosophy was neither a mass phenomenon nor did the vast majority of the people who worshiped Siva consider themselves first and foremost Saivites – and certainly did not consider themselves Hindus. This radical reduction of identity into a realm of belief and practice is what these days we call “religion.” The massively reductive phenomenologies of self and social order that characterize such claims – I am Hindu, I am Buddhist etc. – are some of the chief hallmarks of what we now call modernity. My interest in Navalar stemmed from my inquiry into the communicative and cognitive elements of his reformation/creation of Saivism and my sense that events in the relatively peripheral Jaffna in the middle of the nineteenth century played a disproportionately large role in the production of a peculiarly Tamil public sphere – and a peculiarly Tamil modernity.

Navalar’s reformation of Saivism was very much like Martin Luther’s reformation of Christianity some three hundred years earlier: both focused on language and communication in general. Like Luther, Navalar transformed the ways that people would come to understand and use texts. Sacred texts (i.e. the Bible, Kandapuram, Thevaram etc.) would no longer be restricted to the few, but would be openly available to all; they would no longer be couched in archaic languages that only some could understand, but would be written in a style that was contemporary, clear and accessible to a far wider range of people; and the institutions necessary to produce a population capable of textual up-take (i.e. schools and presses) would be established broadly. In Navalar scholar Darshan Ambalavanar’s terms, the texts would be universalized. And, as an intimate element of that universalization, he would start to do something quite new: he would begin to offer sermons in Saivism. Navalar encountered the sermon, like the other forms of communicative action he inaugurated, in the Protestant Christianity of the British and American missionaries who had been engaging in just such practices since approximately the second decade of the century. Navalar’s resemblance to Martin Luther is no accident: in essence, what had been a kandapuram kalachhaaram became a vethaakama kalachhaaram, a culture of the vernacular Bible even if what they read was still the story of Skanda.

Now, to suggest that The Champion Reformer of Hinduism, Arumuga Navalar, was anything other than a self-actualized genius (which, in some senses, he was), is profoundly offensive to a great many people. I had already encountered that sentiment in Jaffna when I first offered my paper in no less a venue than the Arumuga Navalar Memorial Hall in May of 2005. I thought that talk went fairly well: the students asked good challenging questions, a number of older intellectuals yelled at me, and a number of younger intellectuals yelled at the older ones. Good fun. And I felt rather confident in what I was saying, since it really couldn’t be denied when and upon what basis Navalar produced these institutions and
practices. Furthermore, I had discussed at length my ideas with some senior scholars that I admire very much – Christian, Saivite, and atheist – and they had offered their blessings on the thesis.

And so, how hard could the Toronto talk be? It was the end of a long semester, and I really didn’t have time to prepare the English version as carefully or as thoughtfully as I would have liked. Hence the talk was full of theoretical jargon, a kind of shorthand that might have gone over in a purely academic conference. And my experience in Jaffna had given me courage along with a good sense of what kind of objections I might face from the audience; I had my answers ready.

As expected, then, after my talk, one lovely older woman indignantly challenged my take on Na valar. She subtly and (I thought) effectively mocked some of my jargony pronouncements, but mostly defended the sui generis genius of Arumuga Na valar: ‘He brought Tamil literature to all the people,’ she said. I reiterated the basis of my thesis and ended with my complete agreement with her: he had, indeed, brought Tamil literature to all the people.

What happened next, however, I hadn’t anticipated. Why, one person asked, was I taking Na valar – and his primary text, the Kandapuram – as the emblem of Jaffna culture? Furthermore, how could I take Na valar as the paragon of the Sri Lankan Tamil? He’s a Jaffnaman – a Vellala Jaffnaman at that. With whom do I ally if I make the claim that Jaffna culture and society stand as the synecdoche of Tamil Sri Lanka? What of Trincomalee and Batticaloa, let alone Upcountry? Furthermore, Na valar was famously castist, a real Vellala chauvinist. By today’s standards, he was a bigot: a brilliant bigot, but a bigot nonetheless. If he denied Dalits’ access to temples and schools, how could he be said to ‘universalize’ Tamil texts? How could he have brought Tamil literature to ‘all the people’ if, in his view, Dalits were not even people?

Oh my. All I could do was agree, pathetically, as the oldsters in Jaffna and those who yelled at me in the audience; I had my answers ready. The field gets deeper and richer the more it is indexed, and consulted again as the ultimate archive. It can not be contained in our fieldnotes, processed and indexed, and consulted again as the ultimate archive. It does not stay where it was because it is not a fixed entity in time and place, but a construct based on our interactions, our training, our localities, our attachments, our tendencies to look for experts who can tell us what the meaning of it all might be. Our fields, then, need to be seen as shifty, fluid, and open to negotiation by people ten thousand miles away from the object. The senior scholar who nodded in approval at my thesis is a member of the field, as are the lovely older woman who challenged my language, the youngsters who yelled at me in Toronto. The field gets deeper and richer the more it includes us all, becoming a necessarily more nuanced index of human social life.

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At the very least, the presentation was rhetorically infelicitous, i.e., I had failed to pitch my talk to my audience, a fundamental oratorical error. At the Toronto airport heading home, I ran into Stanley Tambiah, among the most accomplished of senior scholars of Sri Lanka. He jocularly suggested – twice! – that I might have anticipated these critiques. Indeed. I especially might have anticipated the Dalit critique. And I might, too, have anticipated the opposition of people from the East and Upcountry to an assertion of Jaffna hegemony. In some places on the island calling someone a ‘Jaffnaman’ (yazhpaanaththaan) is equivalent to calling them a miser, a snob, a selfish bigot. And that does not even include the political oppositions that now divide Sri Lankan Tamils between (at least) two different nationalist factions. In the final analysis, what snookered me was Jaffna itself – the authentic field site, as it were, the ultimate archive. I had tested my thesis out in informal conversations with scholars at the university and formally in an address. There was only one Dalit scholar in Jaffna to critique what I had to say, but I never heard that critique: it seems that he was marginalized from the circles I was moving in (and at this point I can understand why – senior scholars in Jaffna do not appear to be nearly as sensitive to the Dalit critique of knowledge and history as their counterparts in India, insofar as their counterparts in India are sensitive to it. The debate continues...). The assertion of Jaffna as a kandapurana kalachcharam, as my senior colleagues had maintained for decades, was the assertion of upper-class Vellala culture as Jaffna culture itself. My training in Tamil Nadu and Chicago, furthermore, had sensitized me to hegemonic claims by Brahmins, not non-Brahmins. Ironically enough, my own Dravidianist biases, cultivated in the fields of Chicago, Madurai and Chennai, had blinded me even further to the socio-ideological flora and fauna of the fields of Toronto.

The field, then, appears neither bounded nor discrete. It can not be contained in our fieldnotes, processed and indexed, and consulted again as the ultimate archive. It does not stay where it was because it is not a fixed entity in time and place, but a construct based on our interactions, our training, our localities, our attachments, our tendencies to look for experts who can tell us what the meaning of it all might be. Our fields, then, need to be seen as shifty, fluid, and open to negotiation by people ten thousand miles away from the object. The senior scholar who nodded in approval at my thesis is a member of the field, as are the lovely older woman who challenged my language, the youngsters who yelled at me in Toronto. The field gets deeper and richer the more it includes us all, becoming a necessarily more nuanced index of human social life.