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The story of a Tamil Saint who studied Bible with one purpose – to defeat missionaries in their domain.
The story of a Crusader – #ArumugaNavalar.

If we think about why we are still Hindus today, enjoying an unbroken connection and continuity with our ancient past –

it is because of great people like this who stopped us from suffering wholesale deculturalisation and loss of spiritual traditions during the colonial era, on the same catastrophic scale as the natives of the Americas, Australasia and Africa. Many Hindus will have heard of Hindu

reformists and revivalists like Swami Dayananda, Swami Vivekananda and others credited with implementing important reform in Hindu society, instilling confidence amongst Hindus in their heritage and stemming the tide of conversions to other religions which occurred at an

alarmingly fast rate in the 19th and early 20th century of colonial rule.
There are other equally great figures who are less famous, but who deserve to be known and remembered. Among them is Arumuga Navalar (1822 – 1879) who is regarded as the “father” of modern day Tamil prose

and an architect of Hindu destiny in Eelam (Sri Lanka) is the most prominent member.
Arumuga was born in Nallur of the Jaffna peninsula in 1822 to Kandhar and Sivekamy. The fact that his father Kandhar was a Tamil poet meant that he became very well versed with Tamil literature

at a young age. At this time British rule was already well established in the area and like many other boys from well to do families he was placed in a Christian mission school to learn English.
After finishing his schooling at the missionary school, he was asked to continue at

the school as a teacher of Tamil and English, which he accepted, a little later on Peter Percival the school principal roped him in as one of his assistants in his task of translating the Bible and Christian prayers into Tamil. He was engaged in this work from 1840 to 1848 at

the end of which he was well acquainted with the Bible and the Christian doctrine.
In the meanwhile Christian missionary attacks on Hinduism were intensifying and anti Christian polemic was also being churned out by the Hindu Tamils as a response. Till now Navalar was more of a

mute spectator than an active participant in this whole drama, but this was soon about to change. According to his own admission, while he was at the mission school, he had studied the Bible and was sympathetic to it's doctrine for a while but had ultimately rejected it in favor

of his own heritage which shows that he was not some narrow minded bigot, but had the intellectual honesty to examine his opponents views thoroughly before commenting on them.

For during the period he was connected with them, he had not only learnt their ways and the tenets of

the Christian Religion in all its details, but also closely observed with great sorrow the harm they were inflicting on his own religion. Arumuga Navalar found that a large number of his countrymen were embracing Christianity, not on conviction, but owing to certain undesirable

influences brought to bear on them. After a connection of some years with the missionaries, he thought that it was time for him to dissociate himself from them and work for the amelioration of his countrymen. His country was not the little island of Jaffna. It was the land where

the Tamil language and the Tamil Religion – the Saiva Siddhanta were prevailing. It therefore lay between Pt. De Galle at the Southern extremity of Ceylon and the famous Venkadam – the modern Tirupathi, which is generally considered as the northern limit of the land of Tamil.

In September of 1842, there was a gathering of over 200 Hindus at the monastery of Jaffna's Shaiva temple where it was decided to establish a Veda and Agama school and the purchase of a printing press if possible, to publish educational materials and tracts refuting anti-Hindu

propaganda. The evidence available to us suggests that Navalar himself was part of these efforts, so this can be considered as part of his new beginning as a Hindu revivalist.
He soon began writing letters to the Morning Star (a bilingual monthly run by Christian missionaries)

defending the Shaiva position against missionary attacks, in this his primary approach was to draw parallels between the rituals mentioned in the Bible and the Shaiva rituals and ask the missionaries how only the Shaiva rituals could be wrong while the Christian one's right

despite so many similarities. In 1848 he quit working under Peter Percival and became immersed full time in his work of defending Hinduism. By this time he had also mastered Sanskrit, besides English and Tamil, as he needed to do so to study the ancient Hindu texts thoroughly.

Fully equipped as he was for his self-imposed task, he set his heart on preventing people from becoming converts to Christianity on insufficient knowledge. To attain the object he had in view, Navalar began with preaching the Saiva Siddhanta. Accustomed as he was to listen to

the trained eloquence of the missionaries, in course of time, he became a perfect master in the art of public speaking, and his lectures were effective particularly whenever he touched on the shortcomings of the Bible. One of his duties when he was employed under the

missionaries was to translate their Sacred books into Tamil & this opportunity gave him every facility to study every portion of it carefully, compare notes with his own religious tenets and jot down whatever he considered to be defective in that great system.
In 1846 he began

teaching Shaivism classes at night and early morning and successfully prevented conversions. In 1848 he founded a school known as “shaivaprakasa Vidyasala” (School Of Shaiva Splendor) in Vannarpannai and left Percival soon after despite offers of higher salary. He had also

decided not to marry and devote himself fulltime to defending and promoting Hinduism.
The school he established was modeled along the lines of the Protestant school he had studied in since he felt that the traditional Tamil schools were inadequate for facing the missionary

onslaught which he saw as shiva’s way of chastising the Tamils and awakening them to their own heritage. In July of 1849 he along with a former student named Sadashiva Pillai set out for Chennai (then known as Madras) to buy a printing press, on the way he met several leaders of

Shaiva Orthodoxy who were impressed by his knowledge and conferred on him the title of “Navalar” (learned) by which he is known to this day.
By 1850 he had managed to set up the printing press and began publishing religious texts and texts like Bala Patam (Children’s Lessons)

for the Shaiva school children. He also published several devotional poems directed toward the Goddess and Murugan, but his first main publication was the prose version of Sekkilar’s “Periya Puranam” (a 12th century poetic account of the lives of 63 Hindu saints and their deeds)

He published many other works, which would be too many to name here, but he also used the printing press to publish refute anti-Hindu polemic published by Christian missionaries. The most important work in this regard was his “shaiva-dusana-parihara” (The Abolition of the Abuse

of Shaivism), which was published in 1854. Suffice it to say, he continued to use the printing press and had an amazing rate of literary production, in his short life of 57 years he published nearly 97 Tamil works, 23 of which were his own works, some being commentaries and

others were his versions of books dealing with grammar, theology and other subjects which he thought Tamils should know. In his later years, he continued to work for the Shaiva revival and established another school at Chidambaram, in 1865 which has survived till today.

Although he is more well known for his anti missionary stance, his work was also directed against unethical practices he saw among Hindus, which he felt went against as the teachings of the Agamas. Due to these reform activities he also faced

significant opposition among certain

Hindus themselves, who did not like his efforts to reform their practices and ways of life. To put it simply, Arumuga Navalar created an awakening among Tamils and set the standards for modern day Tamil prose, what Swami Dayananda and his Arya Samaj had achieved in North India

in stemming conversions, Arumuga Navalar achieved in present day Tamil Nadu and Eelam, it is thanks to pioneers like him that the Tamils did not lose their religious identity and culture under the onslaught of British colonial imperialism and Christian missionary activity and

kept their cultural, linguistic & religious identity intact for many more years…
This halted with the advent of Soriyar.

Taken from @SwarajyaMag and from a lecture on Shaiva Siddanta.

#VANDEMATARAM