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Re-Ethnogenesis

The Quest for a Dravidian Identity among the Tamils of India

Jacob Pandian

1. Introduction

In this paper I present data on how the Tamils of India have historically revived, reinvented, and reformulated their distinctive cultural or ethnic identity, and I examine the ancient Tamil literary tradition and the ancient symbols that acquired meaning and significance in the 19th and 20th centuries. In an essay on the invention or creation of ethnic heritage, Singer (1962) describes and discusses the factors that promote the emergence or origin of ethnic group identity and refers to such a process as "ethnogenesis." I suggest that the term re-ethnogenesis may be applied to identify the processes of reviving, reformulating, reemphasizing, and reinventing ethnic heritage. Every generation rediscovers, reinvents, or reinterprets its past in order to make the past meaningful and congruent to conceptualize contemporary experiences of group identity, and it is reasonable to suggest that humans engage in an ongoing process of re-ethnogenesis in relation to shifts in economic/political power and the emergence of new conceptual boundaries that distinguish the differences between and among the groups.

Barth (1969), De Vos (1975), and other anthropologists have pointed out that there would be no need for individuals to define or delineate ethnic boundaries unless interactions between and among the groups result in schisms and contrasting arrangements, and that these differentiations promote diversity in linguistic, religious, or "racial" characteristics or symbols of ethnicity or ethnic heritage which, in turn, are used as vehicles to conceptualize ethnic identities or boundaries. In a recent anthropological discourse on ethnic group identity, Erikson (1993: 12) offers the following pertinent comments on the formation and maintenance of ethnic boundaries:

When cultural differences regularly make a difference in interaction between members of groups, the social relationship has an ethnic element. Ethnicity refers both to aspects of gain and loss in interaction, and to aspects of meaning in the creation of identity. In this way it has a political, organisational aspect as well as a symbolic one. Ethnic groups tend to have myths of common origin and they nearly always have ideologies encouraging