

MODERN TAMIL – SINCE THE 20TH CENTURY

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A brief survey of the generic growth of Tamil in the 20th and 21st century is attempted here. With all the awakening to rejuvenate Tamil in the sphere of science and technology, what more is to be done is also envisaged.

The growth and development of Tamil language in the 20th century was stupendous. Unlike the proliferation of poetry revolving around mythical, hagiographical and biographical subject matters of the 19th century, the Tamil language started enjoying a generic growth with themes diversified in the modern period. The prose and drama in Tamil grew along with poetry. The art of prose, though not new to Tamil, remained dormant all through the ages if not extinct. The impact of English in the British period on Tamil prose revived its growth not only in literary essays and commentaries but also in journals and magazines. The periodicals in their turn provided a solid base for the growth of prose and thereby novels and stories in Tamil.

Contribution of simple and short essays on day-to-day matters had been a developed art in the hands of Addison, Steele, Hazlitt, Macaulay, Chesterton, and Robert Lynd in English. Following them a number of Tamil scholars with pseudonyms such as *Makishnan*, *Thumilan* and *Nadodi* have contributed hundreds of light and humorous essays in Tamil periodicals. In their contribution of prose pieces, they have indirectly paved a way for even average literates to make similar attempts in prose to disseminate among the public what all they felt essential to share with others. Needless to say that prose is comparatively easier to write than poetry. No wonder therefore that the twentieth century can rightly be called an Age of prose. Periodicals played a vital role in the development of

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prose in Tamil. Relevant it is to recall that prose however in its style vary from one writer to another and from one period to another.

Prose in Tamil

The prose style among the writers deserves a separate study. One feature writer Soma Lakshmanan has done this chronologically to some extent in his *Valarum Thamizh*. This is roughly equivalent to Simon Casie chetty's *Tamil Plutarch* of yester years.

M. Arunachalam's earliest work on Tamil prose was subjected to a harsh criticism soon after its publication as it was prejudicial towards a few Tamil writers. Great scholars like Maraimalai Adigal, Pandithamani, K.Namasivaya Mudaliyar, V.G.S.Sastiriyar and N.M. Venkatasamy Nattar have maintained a chiseled prose style. Theirs were closely reasoned and evenly balanced sentences. Readable and significant were the qualities of the prose of U.V. Swaminatha Iyer and his disciple K.V. Jagannathan. What Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundara Mudaliyar wrote was exceptional with short sentences in intelligible style which is very highly spoken of. Thanthai Periyar's prose style is unique. Devoid of ornateness and artificiality, it is deep rooted, provocative but sometimes verbose. He wrote in plebian style and what he wrote was not far different from what he spoke.

From the mid-twentieth century onwards, the Tamil prose began to have a regeneration charged with passion and emotion in socio-political angle in the hands of C.N. Annadurai, popularly known as Anna and his cohorts such as Kalaignar Karunanithi. The contribution of Kalaignar in prose, poetry and drama goes about in volumes. His autobiography in five volumes is a synonym of the history of Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu. In the development of modern Tamil, his role is a saga of outstanding literary achievement. Alliteration, irony and satire were the hall marks in the speeches and writings of these veteran writers. The contemporary younger generations were so deeply swept by their emotional and rhetorical oratory that at one stage they were instrumental to lead them to political power. With all the credentials of freedom struggle and earlier sacrifices, the congress party was neither to unsaddle these Dravidian Master minds from power nor able to regain what they have lost to these leaders in politics. Such deep-rooted influence of the Dravidian leaders was due in no small measure to their outstanding elocution and comprehensive writing. No less was their role in disseminating their reformative policies with the help of dramas.

Worn out mythological plays were replaced by their social, political and historical dramas

Short stories, novels, dramas and poems began to proliferate from these champions of Tamil. Maraimalai Adigal, to begin with stood for an exclusive campaign to avoid Sanskrit in Tamil writing. He a good Sanskrit scholar is a different thing. One Swaminatha Desikar's statement that without Sanskrit, Tamil cannot function provoked the Adigal to champion the cause of pure Tamil. He tried to develop and to maintain chaste Tamil by scrupulously avoiding Sanskrit, terms. He carefully followed, Samuel Richardson to write a Tamil epistolary novel-*Kokilambal Kadithangal*. Ever since the earliest novel *Prathaba Mudaliyar Caritram* (1879) appeared, the genre of fiction has been steadily growing with all its various branches. Reputed writer Kalki Krishnamurthy (1899-1954) wrote a number of social and historical novels which are sold like hot-cakes even to-day in re-editions. Descriptive powers, readable style with historical details carry the reader back to envisage innumerable episodes of the ancient days of the Cholas in the pages of his voluminous novel *Ponniyin Selvan*. Kalki's style of writing is innovative, spontaneous and original with which no earlier prototype has been pointed out so far. Sandilyan has a large number of novels which are known for their gentle style and sexy portrayals. He proved himself eminently suitable for serialization of novels in periodicals. Periodicals such as *Amutha Surabi*, *Kalki*, *Kalaimagal* and *Ananda vikadan* have encouraged eminent novelists and short – story writers to contribute for the development of the genre. In the style and pattern of *Reader's Digest*, a Tamil monthly, *Manjari* is still in circulation. But its poor circulation is indicative of the lack of intellectual thirst among the Tamil reading public. Perhaps its articles of cerebral taste find it difficult to replace the sway and taste of light articles of feature magazines.

Detective novels are new to Tamil. Vaduvor Duraisamy Iyengar has adopted a number of detective fictions of English into Tamil. In the early thirties of the 20th century, Iyengar tried his hand in the translation of English plays. His poetical adaptation of Shakespeare's play *King Lear* in Tamil is not known to many of us. This scholarly attempt did not carry him through but once he switched on to detective novels, he became popular in the real sense of the term. J.R. Rangaraju and Tamilvanan are a few more of the detective novelists in Tamil.

Pudumaip Pithan (1906-1948) as a short story writer is very well remembered. About 110 stories are attributed to him. Voracious reading of English short stories has given him a foothold to write stories in Tamil. Guy de Maupassant is unquestionable source in a number of his short stories. His biographer T.M. Chidambara Raghunathan traces the origin of one of these short stories to a poem by Robert Browning. Even though Pudumaippithan's opinion is that adaptation is a literary theft but translation is acceptable, he himself was not able to free his thoughts and descriptions from adaptations. With a hundred and odd Tamil stories alone in a period of about two decades of professional writing, Pudumaippithan amassed an enduring name and fame which others were able to do in the long tenure of their lives. His stories are like capsules to satirise humbug life, rejuvenate progressive thinking and outspokenly criticize the accepted conventions of human society.

Morden Tamil Poetry

We can boldly assert that poetry in modern Tamil begins with Subramanya Bharathiyar. It is he who rescued Tamil poetry from the clutches of conventional pundits. They dogmatically clung to the age-old prosody to the themes outworn and die-hard. As a person imbued with a spirit of freedom and liberty, Bharathiyar made the Tamil poems readable by commoners with themes that are worldly-wise, patriotic, narrative and spiritual. Close perusal of his poems reveals that Bharathiyar is caught between liberal theism and a fervor of patriotism. Though not progressive in social reformation as warranted by his age, he was outspoken and frank in whatever he asserted.

The total sweep and impact of English, Bharathi too got himself subjected to. He kept himself in touch with English Romantic poets such as Shelley and Keats but also with American poets and thinkers such as Walt Whitman and Emerson. In fact Bharathi's famous poem '*Thayin Manikkodi Pareer*' is an adaptation of Walt Whitman's *A song at day break*. It is Bharathi who pioneered in Tamil, the introduction of free – verse *Vacana Kavithai* in 1920 following the footsteps of the American poet. Many of Bharathi's prose pieces occasionally contributed to contemporary periodicals bear ample evidence to suggest how far he was indebted to Anglo – American poets. This is not to decry their merits but to reveal that an interaction with alien literature enabled them to convey their thoughts and feelings in a manner and measure diversified.

Taking Bharathiyar as his proto-type, Bharathidasan provided himself bolder and more assertive in championing for example the cause of widow re-marriage and eradication of castes. In these respects he excels his master. In glorifying the ancientry of Tamil and in revealing a desire to develop it into various disciplines also, the disciple is in no way lesser than his mentor. His poems in four volumes enable us to visualize his ingenious depth and extended coverage. To begin with, Bharatidasan appears to have been devotional and theistic but after listening to a few lectures of Thanthai Periyar, he transformed himself to rationalism. He is so glorious an organ voice of Tamil land as to a University named after him.

Namakkal Kavignar, a poet with patriotic fervor and, Kavimani an objective and adorable are well-known among the Tamils. Kavimani has translated a number of poems from English poets such as William Blake. His partial translation of *Light of Asia* may be taken up in full, in the days to come to render the whole lot into Tamil. The three – lined *haiku* and its identical *suryu* of Japanese origin have not been relished with enthusiasm even though a number of modern poets including Tamilanban and Vairamuthu have popularized these avant garde poems of alien origin. Though well known as a lyricist of silver screen, Kannadasan is equally an extra-ordinary poet. Many of his poems are worthy of being rendered into English.

Controversy between traditional poetry and free verse, *puthuk-kavithai* continues to be raging. Devoid of mellifluous alliteration and rhyme, the free verse survives with its thought content only. A solid theme, sound – effect, sturdy language and provocative thought that are at times ironical and paranomasic are the vital constituents of conventional poetry. Those who are reluctant to subject themselves to these traditional regularities and prosodic rigidities resort to a short-cut route to write on contemporary topical matters with no trace of what Arnold's prescriptive high - seriousness in poetry. The fact of being lyricists makes a few prominent among the public. But poetry as a genre in these days has become popular in the literal sense of the term, be it traditional or *avant-garde*. But truly speaking the unassailable sterling qualities of the conventional poetry cannot be either assailed or uprooted. The novices and poetasters have to train themselves in the conventional poetry.

Dramas in Tamil

Origin of drama in Tamil continues to be a matter of discussion. Adiyarkunallar's commentary to *cilappathikaram* is indicative of the existence of dramas and dramaturgy in ancient Tamil Nadu. The reason for their total absence in subsequent ages is attributed either to Kalapra internugnum or to the animosity of the jains who reigned supreme in Tamil Nadu. Quite possible they may have annulled the whole lot of dramas. The inscriptional evidence of the enactment of dramas in the reign of King Raja Raja the great in the 10th century was more of hagiographical rather than of either entertaining or informative value. For all practical reasons, drama, in the full sense of term continues to be absent until Prof.Sundaram Pillai in the 19th cent took it upon himself to contribute a play *Manonmaniyam* meant more for closet-study than for enactment. Realizing the paucity of this genre Prof.V.G.Suryanarayana Sastri wrote a dramaturgy entitled *Nataka Iyal*. It deserves to be re-edited and reprinted.

Ever since, many scholars attempted to fill up the void by contributing dramas in Tamil. As there had been no prototype to follow and no example to emulate in Tamil, many of the pioneering Tamil dramatists followed Shakespeare. This English dramatist of the Elizabethan period was readily available for them to follow. But at the beginning, Shakespeare's dramas were given in Tamil as synoptic renderings from 1872 onwards until the beginning of the 20th century, almost all the dramas were the adaptations and translations of western playwrights. Along with Shakespeare, even Moliere and Ibsen were taken up by the vernacular dramatists.

Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar a pioneer of modern Tamil theatre wrote nearly 90 dramas in Tamil, a couple of dramas in Telugu and a few in English. He founded *Suguna vilasa sabha* in 1891 for promoting fine arts and culture. The Mudaliyar was a practicing lawyer and very well aware of the vibrancy of the freedom struggle of patriotic personalities. But yet he kept himself aloof and detached himself from the freedom struggle. Totally wedded to the cause of plays in Tamil, he translated five of Shakespeare's plays *Hamlet*, *As you like it*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Macbeth* and *Cymbeline*. He makes a mention in his autobiography that his drama *kalvar thalaivan* is the first tragedy ever written in Tamil. Pammal says that both in Tamil and Sanskrit, the concept of tragedy has never been conceived of. Traffic events may intersperse in the plays but

happiness at length will be the end of them. True it is that his *chandrahari* is the earliest burlesque in Tamil. He proudly informs in his life – history that he has written all the plays with a view to enable men, women of all ages and children to sit in the theatre and to see the plays without any inhibition. In other words, no obscenity or vulgarity either in the dialogue or in writing. Dearth of such a principled playwright or poet in the current age is not only shocking but indicates the way in which the modern world moves on in the field of fine - arts.

Pammal's contemporaries Sankara Das Swamigal and Nawab Rajamanickam and T.K.S. Brothers in modern days have contributed immensely to the development of Tamil theatre. Swamigal had been a veteran playwright and Nawab was well known for flamboyant scenes, lightings and make – up in dramas. But they confined themselves mostly to mythological plays was more a matter of taste among the public. Currently speaking the Tamil theatre is almost defunct due to the proliferation of TV serials and film – shows. A matter of deep regret is that most of the films nowadays exhibit scenes of violence, bloodshed, murder and assault. It is up to the film producers to say whether they resort to these unnatural scenes to divert the attention of the public from the videos and serials. Little did they realize that such a continuous exposure of horror and terror to young children and even adolescents would psychically render them harsh and inhuman. This is an area where the censor board and the governmental authorities have to be extremely vigilant to set right the shambles.

Contemporary Tamil dramas are found to be stereotyped comedies. The TV habit has become the order of the day especially after the free sets are distributed through the public distribution system. The dramas that are enacted in the TV are far from satisfactory. Almost all of them are slap stick comedies and pot boilers. The dramatists, if they deserve to be called as such, do not seem to have been concerned either about structure or theme. The dramas known as serials that are presented via the TV screen are more for earning through commercial advertisements and hence their length is immeasurable and their stories have no cogency. One is at a loss where it begins and where it ends. The public are gullible to subject themselves to this visual tomfoolery. Despite this setback to this genre, it is refreshing that Mr.Na.Muthusamy, with the help of Ford Foundation attempts to produce good dramas through his *koothuppattarai*.

When the popular modern drama goes thus in disarray, how can anybody think of a dramatist in the stature of Arthur Miller and Samuel Beckett? It is a

high time that scholars, thinkers, institutions, academies and fine arts societies should think of motivating the literati for relevant and meaningful dramatic works. Visual art has a magnetic power to attract masses and hence the intellectuals should not allow the plays to be handled by the commercial quacks only. It should be monitored and made use of, for the cause of benevolent things in society. Social relevance and entertainment values may also be added as further elements in these dramas.

Science and Technology in Tamil

What is lacking even now in modern Tamil is the dearth of books on science and technology. Poet Bharathi's clarion call for the works on science to be brought from all over the world has its relevance even to-day despite attempts sporadically made by intellectuals, institutions and the state government of Tamil Nadu. It may be recalled that concerted work of compiling the glossary of technical terms has been made as a prelude to write technical texts in Tamil as early as 1916. A comic irony it was that Rajaji started in English a *Journal of the Tamil Scientific terms* society in 1916. Tamil was made an official language of the state of Tamil Nadu in 1956. In the early sixties, Tamil was made medium of instruction in colleges of Tamil Nadu. The government organized a cell of authors drawn from colleges and made a hasty attempt to write science text – books in Tamil. Though it was not as successful as it was expected to be, it paved a way for further attempts. The Kalaikkathir Achagam published a set of Glossary of scientific terms in Tamil. The *Kalaikkathir* journal continues to publish readable articles on science and technology since the sixties of the last century. The Director of Tamil Development brought a volume of Administrative Terms in Tamil. It has undergone more than five editions with additions of new words and terms. The government sponsored *Dictionary of Technical Terms, Kalaiechol Agarathi* has come out in fourteen volumes. The task of applying this in Tamil medium books is to be done by the academic writers.

Mention may be made of the earliest efforts in bringing out Engineering Subjects in readable Tamil in the college Annuals and in booklets by the Coimbatore institute of Technology in Coimbatore. The credit of introducing computer-knowledge goes to Sujatha alias Rengarajan. *A Glossary of computer Terms* and about half a dozen journals on computer bear evidence of computer study in Tamil.

Glossary, Lexicon in Tamil

Glossary is a fund of technical words and their meanings to enable the budding authors of science and technology to choose words and phrases for their needs. If a particular author is not able to find a word in Tamil for a technical term, it is incumbent on him either to coin it or the make it out of the existing word elements in Tamil. New words, thus coined are bound to get into the glossary to prevent multiplicity of coinages in one and the same language. Hence the authoring of books on science and technology and the growth of glossary are inter-dependent. This is more so in the case of languages in developing countries. Hence more number of glossaries and special dictionaries are yet to be compiled in Tamil.

Dictionaries are the backbone of a language. They perpetuate the fund of vocabulary besides helping the learners to acquaint them with the words, old and new. Invariably in all the growing languages, dictionaries are bound to grow. Hence any active reader of a language has to necessarily replace his dictionary once in ten years at the most. In other words, dictionaries get outmoded in rich and developing languages.

Even though a cluster of synonyms to every word in a volume known as '*nigandu*' in Tamil roughly equivalent to Thesaurus was functioning it was replaced by more systematic dictionaries in the 19th century. Young learners were made to memorise *Nigandu* in olden days to increase their word – power. It was an Italian missionary Beschi alias Veerama Munivar who had been instrumental to the alphabetical dictionaries in Tamil. Vaiyapuri Pillai's *Tamil Lexicon* needs a revision. Around 25 to 30 percent of Sanskrit words, it contains. Typical Sanskrit words may be brought out separately in supplementary volume and the Tamil words in a series of volumes as usual. Nearly sixty years have gone by since the Madras University English Tamil Dictionary was published. A thorough revision and a lot of additions have to be made in it. The Crea's modern *Tamil Dictionary of Idioms* is a welcome addition to the growth of the language. In view of rendering science and Technology in Tamil, a large number of special subject – wise dictionaries are the need of the day.

What to do further for Dictionaries?

The project of the *Mono-lingual Tamil Dictionary* remains incomplete in Tamil University. With the help of the Human Resource Ministry, the work may be expedited and completed. In spite of an awareness of the ancient of Tamil

and a desire to elevate its status and growth, what is lacking in Tamil is the *Visual Dictionary*. Devoid of alphabetical list of words, the Visual Dictionary uses pictures to illustrate the meaning of words. It provides the names of items in the language of the Dictionary along with the pictures be a man or animal or machine. This is also known as picture dictionary or authentic pictorial lexicon. The picture Dictionaries are often organized by topic instead of being an alphabetic list of words.

One more dictionary which may better be attempted in Tamil is *Reverse Dictionary*. It is organized in a non- alphabetical order. It provides the user with information that would be difficult to obtain from a traditional alphabetical Dictionary. It is organized by concepts, phrases or the definition of words. This *Reverse Dictionary* helps us to find a word by its definition only. These dictionaries have become practical with the advent of computerized information storage and retrieval systems. The aim of all these dictionaries is to help the readers and literate speakers to increase their word power and also to indicate the ever growing fund of word – power in the language.

Encyclopaedias are a set a books providing information about all areas of knowledge or about different areas of one particular subject, usually arranged in an alphabetical order. The earliest encyclopaedia in Tamil known as *Abidhana chintamani* was published in 1910. The compiler, a Tamil Pandit in Pachaiyappa Institutions Mr. A. Singaravelu Mudaliyar worked on this project for over twenty years. As a resident of Madras, he sought the help of many well wishers and friends to publish his encyclopaedia. None came forward but having heard of his predicament, Mr. Pandithurai Thevar of Madurai Tamil Sangam offered his help to get the volume printed. It was a laudable and pioneering attempt. But it lacked matters of science and technology as the compiler was only a scholar with literary proficiency. Nearly five decades after that came a comprehensive *Tamil Encyclopaedia*, sponsored by Tamil Development Society when Mr. Avinasilingam chettiar was Education Minister in the state of Tamil Nadu. A revised edition will be a timely job.

The Orient Longmans published a *Children's Encyclopaedia* in ten volumes. It proved to be a good incentive for young learners to read with enormous number of colourful photos and in the preparation of Science Encyclopaedias. Even before we go into the merits or otherwise of these encyclopaedias, what is of utmost importance is to make attempts to produce science and technical

encyclopaedias in the pattern of McGraw Hill *Encyclopaedia of science and Technology*. In view of imparting engineering subjects in Tamil medium, the development of Tamil in all these aspects is all the more essential.

A Blue Print for Future of alien Tamils

Tamil has been made to be recognized as a classical language by the union Govt. of India. The State Govt. of Tamil Nadu deserves appreciation for securing such recognition and also for the effect of obtaining a sumptuous grant for a separate institute for classical Tamil at Chennai. The Institute for classical Tamil, in its turn is bound to render the ancient Tamil works in other languages mainly English and also to globally disseminate the essence and ancientness of Tamil language and its literature.

The present government of Tamil Nadu has been endeavoring to highlight the glory and eminence of Tamil civilization and culture by means of helping and arranging world Tamil conferences. Efforts are so sincere, methodical and systematic as to ascribe to it a pompous and flamboyant colour. Be that as it may, what is equally or more essential is to recognize and perpetuate the identity of the very race of Tamils which is fastly submerging in various countries abroad.

During the British period hundred thousand Tamils were taken as indentured laborers to South Pacific units such as Fiji islands, South American Countries like Guyana, Indian Ocean islands such as Mauritius and Re-union. Also to Burma, South Africa and a few more British colonies. The third generation of Tamils is thus living abroad in all these places. Excepting the memory of their ancient mother – land they have gradually lost every thing of their identity. The rural Gods like Kaliamman, Mariamman and Kamatchi they have taken along and enshrined them in their respective destinations. Customs and manners too, they have preserved but their language, namely the Tamil, their mother-tongue is gradually vanishing. It is in this gap the state Govt. should get in to fill up the void. In the federal set up of our multi-lingual country, one cannot expect the Govt. at the center will do this timely service for the sake of overseas Tamils. The Govt. of India is recognizing and fostering the growth of Hindi among all non – resident Indians. The first thing the state Govt. to do is to revive among them the language and its culture of their ancient land to provide with them and a connecting link at academic and cultural level. This will go a long way to make them cherish the memory of their forefather's land besides a pleasantry and happiness of having a link with their roots.

The onus of supporting the migrant Tamils academically and culturally is left with the State Government of Tamil Nadu only. The State Government may think in terms of creating a portfolio for overseas Tamils without offending any constitutional restraint.

Creating an academic, cultural and linguistic link with overseas Tamils will be an appreciable service. Instead of leaving it to the central Govt. which is bound to govern pan – Indian languages, the State Government of Tamil Nadu may very well think about the development of Tamils as well as Tamilians who live abroad since a few generations past.
