

Literary Studies and Language Studies in Tamil

Emeritus Prof. A. Sanmugadas

Department of Tamil, University of Jaffna

centhini@gmail.com

Abstract - This paper strives to present a historical view of Tamil studies in Sri Lanka in the context of commercialization of education, the deepening of a market-oriented mindset observed in the wider the society and the crisis in Humanities education. During the Anuradhapura period (65 CE – 993 CE), there were Tamil scholars and Tamil educational institutions active in Anuradhapura. Hisselle Dhammaratana Thera (1963) has written about Tamil teaching in the educational institutions belonging to both the Mahāyāna and Thēravāda sects. Tamil Studies have had a long presence in Sri Lanka, although they were centered around religious institutions in the early periods. When the University College was established in 1921, Tamil began to be taught as a subject at the tertiary level for the first time. At the start, two clergies, namely Professor Swamy Vipulananda, a Hindu sage, and Rev. Fr. C. W. Kinsbury, a Christian priest, contributed to lay a sound foundation for Tamil studies in Sri Lanka. Prof. K. Kanapathipillai, a student of both clergies, later joined them to strengthen Tamil Studies in this country. These three scholars are considered pioneers of Tamil studies in Sri Lanka. The Rev. Dr. Xavier S. Thaninayagam, a renowned Tamil scholar, though specialized in Education, was also at the University of Ceylon. It is noteworthy that the pioneers had both traditional and west-oriented training.

Keywords – *Tamiliology, University of Jaffna, Tradition, Curriculum, Employment*

Our role and functions

When the Jaffna Campus was opened by the Prime Minister Hon. Srimavo Bandaranayake in 1974, in her opening address, the Prime Minister said this higher learning institution will be a centre for Tamil and Hindu studies. In keeping with that guidance, in the Department of Tamil, we advised the postgraduate students to undertake their studies on the developments that had taken place in the Sri Lankan Tamil literary, grammatical and cultural scenes. Instead of going abroad, most of them registered themselves at Sri Lankan Universities and researched on topics that were considered nationally and regionally relevant. Two larger ideologies shaped the trajectories that Tamil

studies took at this point. One was the concept of Tamililology and the other was Marxist thought. They both influenced Tamil literary studies and research.

Expectations

While the University of Jaffna and other Universities with Tamil studies are striving to produce graduates with an orientation in Tamil, commercialization of education and the deepening of a market-oriented mindset observed in society have pushed Tamil studies to the margins. Students are encouraged to pursue job-oriented studies and at times they are advised to drop subjects like Tamil. But the print and electronic media need specialists with good theoretical and practical knowledge in Tamil language and literature. Individuals are expected to have personal and professional integrity with an awareness of ethical behaviour, self-discipline, and respect for other cultures, religions, individuals, and groups. The General and the Special Degree programmes in Tamil provide this training to students. There is always a market demand for graduate teachers of Tamil in schools.

Literary and Language Studies in Tamil

This paper intends to present a historical view of Tamil studies in Sri Lanka in the context of commercialization of education resulting in a market-oriented mindset of the larger society and of the crisis in Humanities education. Apart from promoting an educational system that can lead to the creation of an inclusive national culture, language and literary education should be encouraged and supported to create an inclusive society. Our society has to make its youth proficient in their mother tongue, heritage, and traditions. The Teachers' Training Colleges all over the country have been performing this noble function for many decades. Tamil Teachers' Training Colleges in the earlier times had traditional scholars as lecturers. We understand that Tamil Studies have had its presence in Sri Lanka from the Anuradhapura period. During the Anuradhapura period (65 A.D. – 993 A.D.), there were Tamil scholars and Tamil educational institutions active in Anuradhapura. Hisselle Dhammaratna Thero (1963) says “Educational institutions belonging to both [the] Mahāyāna and Thēravāda sects [were] teaching Tamil”.

Āchārya Dharmapāla Thera, while living in Anurādhapura, was engaged in the task of comparing the Sinhala commentaries of Piṭaka texts with the Tamil commentaries of those texts when publishing his own commentaries on them. It is possible that a traditional teaching/learning system was in place during this period.

It is unfortunate that we lost the traditional teaching/learning system that encouraged Tamil education in Sri Lanka with the closure of a number of Tamil Teachers' Training Colleges. But we are fortunate that the Ceylon University College which was inaugurated on the 24th of January 1921 helped Tamil studies (both traditional and modern) to prosper in Sri Lanka. The Faculties of Arts and Humanities in this country have had a long journey of hundred years. Tamil, with other subjects, has been a companion in this journey. At the start, two clergies, namely Professor Swamy Vipulananda, a Hindu sage, and the Rev. Fr. C.W. Kinsbury, a Christian priest, and Dr. K. Kanapathipillai contributed to lay a sound foundation for Tamil studies in Sri Lanka. We cannot miss the pioneering contribution of Swami Vipulananda who produced *Yaal Nool*, which to date stands as the only evaluative piece of research work on Tamil music. We should remember that Swami with his sound traditional scholarship also had a background in Physics, which none of the other Tamil scholars have had. K. Kanapathipillai was a student of the Rev. Fr. C.W. Kinsbury at the University College and Swami Vipulananda at Annamalai University and obtained a traditional Tamil title called 'Vidwan'. Later, he proceeded to the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London for his doctoral studies under Prof. L. Turner.

A fusion of traditional and modern learning and teaching shaped the scholarship and vision of Professor K. Kanapathipillai who introduced Dravidian Studies, Cultural Studies, Paleographic and Inscriptional Studies to the University system. At a time when there was no trained Tamil epigraphist to decipher, edit, and publish the many ancient Tamil inscriptions in Sri Lanka, Professor Kanapathipillai undertook this task and published articles on the Tamil inscriptions from Mankanai, Moragahawela, and Panduvasnuvara in the 1960 and 1962 issues of the *University of Ceylon Review*. He created a new interest in this field and inspired his students Professor K. Indrapala and Prof. S. Pathmanathan to continue this work after his retirement.

From the inception of the University College and up to the middle of the 20th century, the contribution made by academics to Tamil Studies falls under the following categories: (i) Language Study: Tolkappiyam, Dravidian Linguistics, (ii) Ancient and Medieval Literature, (iii) Modern Literature, (iv) History of Tamil Literature, (v) Paleography, and (vi) Culture.

The Rev. Fr. Prof. Thaninayagam was in the Department of Education, University of Ceylon, and later joined the University of Malaya. Like Swamy Vipulananda, he too had traditional and modern training. He contributed a lot

through his painstaking work to Tamil studies. His organizational ability to build up a Tamil awareness at the international level resulted in an International Association for Tamil Research (IATR) and a series of IATR Conferences/Seminars in Malaysia, Madras and Paris, and a reputed research journal *Tamil Culture*. Fr. Thaninayagam's efforts opened up new avenues in Tamil studies and young Tamil researchers Kailasapathy, Sivathamby and others from Sri Lanka benefitted from them. But they were also responsible to commence a new phase in Tamil studies. Prof. Nuhman (1992) in his article 'The University of Peradeniya and the Development of Tamil Literary Criticism in Sri Lanka' (Gunawardene (ed.) 1992: 185-198) points out that in the late sixties Marxism was the dominant ideology in the political and cultural fields in our country. This was reflected in the University too. Kailasapathy was a committed Marxist (of the Beijing School) and Sivathamby was a Marxist of the Moscow School. They were responsible for introducing new subjects like (1) History of Sri Lankan Tamil Literature, (2) Tamil Folklore, (3) Textual Criticism, (4) Tamil Drama and Theatre Arts, (5) Introduction to Linguistics and Tamil Grammar into the Tamil curriculum. There was a steady increase of students studying Tamil.

Due to the process of decentralization or regionalization of University education in our country and later the preference shown towards a job-oriented curriculum, Tamil studies was discouraged by some. New courses such as Planning, Technology, etc. were introduced and students were advised that those subjects would fetch them jobs and not subjects like Tamil. Although this propaganda led to a reduction in the number of students taking Tamil as a subject, it certainly could not stop Tamil studies and research in this country.

Why is Tamil studies discouraged at higher educational institutions? Is the reason given for such discouragement valid? Do those who discourage Tamil studies genuinely believe that Tamil studies do not belong to the group of job-oriented disciplines and academic programs? The print and electronic media need specialists with good theoretical and practical knowledge in Tamil language and literature. Individuals are expected to have personal and professional integrity with an awareness of ethical behaviour, self-discipline, and respect for other cultures, religions, individuals, and groups. The General and the Special Degree programmes in Tamil provide this training to students. There is always a market demand for graduate teachers of Tamil in schools.

However, due to various reasons, there was a gradual fall in the field of Tamil research. University of Jaffna, in the eighties, had a strong team of teachers

and researchers in the Department of Tamil. But unfortunately, after the untimely death of Prof. K. Kailasapathy, the following left or migrated from the Department of Tamil: Dr. M. A. Nuhman , Dr. Chitralega Maunaguru , Dr. E. Balasundaram, and Dr. N. Subramaniam. Prof. A. Veluppillai joined the Department, when he was appointed as a Professor of Tamil. But he too left the ground after some time. Only Prof. K. Sivathamby and I (Prof.A. Sanmugadas) were left behind.

During the Kailas-Sivathamby period, a number of research studies on Cankam literature were undertaken. Except the comparative studies of Cankam and Greek literature by Kailasapathy and Sivathamby and Cankam and Japanese literature by Sanmugadas and Manonmani, most of them were extensions of Professor Vithiananthan's study on Cankam literature (*Tamilar Calpu*). Nobody has so far ventured to study the aesthetic aspects of the oldest Tamil poetry (I understand that Prof. M.A. Nuhman has made a similar observation).

From 1983, a research study of the Tamil-Japanese relationship has been underway. Professor Susumu Ohno from Gakushuin University, Tokyo started this project. Professor Pon Kothandaraman (then Vice Chancellor, University of Madras), Dr. Manonmani Sanmugadas and Professor A. Sanmugadas joined this research project. A number of research papers and books on the Tamil-Japanese relationship have been published. Work in this area continues (London Museum is planning to open a Tamil-Japanese corner. In August 2022, a web-seminar is to be held to commemorate Prof. Susumu Ohno's 100th Birth Anniversary). The Japanese classical text Manyoshu, which consists of 4000 poems, is being compared with Cankam Anthologies consisting 2500 poems. Manonmani, who is proficient in the Japanese language, has translated 1000 Manyoshu poems into Tamil. This translation project has helped some researchers to undertake comparative studies of Manyoshu and Cankam Love poems (a Doctoral thesis at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, Dr. T. Ramya, a Master's dissertation at University of Jaffna, Mrs. SelvaAmbikai Nandakumaran, a doctoral research is at the finishing stage at the Central University of Tamilnadu). If Japanese language studies is promoted, this research could be taken forward . Manyoshu and Cankam poems have a number of commonalities that should be explored and researched.

I feel that it would be interesting to do a comparative study of Modern Tamil and Sinhala literatures. The Tamil novels, short stories and modern Tamil poetry from the North, East, the up-country and other regions of Sri Lanka could also be compared. Young staff members at the Universities of Peradeniya,

Jaffna, Eastern, South Eastern and Sabragamuwa are keen to take forward Tamil studies in Sri Lanka. When they see their names printed in the Volume, *Beyond Boundaries: One Hundred Years of Humanities and Social Sciences in Sri Lankan Universities*, I am sure, they will realize their responsibilities and duties towards Tamil Studies in the country and I hope I will live long to see the growth of Tamil studies through their contribution.

References

Ceylon University College. (1936) *Prospectus - 1936-37*. Colombo: The Ceylon Government Press.

Dharmadasa, K.N.O. (2017) 'Peradeniya academics of the early days and their contribution to Sinhala studies', *Social Affairs: A Journal for the Social Sciences*, 1(7), pp. 63-73.

Godakumbura, C.E. (1950) *Sinhalese literature*. Colombo.

Gunawardana, R.A.L.H. (ed). (1992) *More open than usual?* Peradeniya: University of Peradeniya.

Hisselle Dhammaratna Thero. (1963) *Sinhalaya Dravida Balapam* (Dravidian influence in Sinhala). Divulupitiya: Saraswathi Visvavidyalaya Privena.,

Karunatillake, W.S. (2002) *Tamil – Sinhala dictionary*. Colombo: Godage Publishers.

Maunaguru, S., Nuhman, M.A. and Maunaguru, S. (1979) *Irupathaam nootraandu Eelaththu Thamil ilakkiyam* (Sri Lankan Tamil literature in twentieth century). Colombo: Readers' Circle.

Sanmugadas, A. (1990) *Eelaththu thiranaaivu munnodi paeraasiriyan Vi Selvanaayakam avarkal* (Professor V.Chelvanayagam, A Pioneer of Tamil Literary and Metrical Criticism in Sri Lanka). Colombo: Colombo Tamil Sangam.

Turner, R. (1952) 'Lecture delivered before the Ceylon branch of the Royal Asiatic Society on Thursday the 24th of January, 1952', *The Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland*, New Series, 2(2), pp. 93-102.

Uwais, M.M. (1964) *Kiramappiralvu* (Translation of Martin Wickramasinghe's Novel, *Gamperaliya*), Colombo: Sri Lanka Sahitya Mandalaya.