

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 7 : 2 February 2007

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

K. Karunakaran, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

AMAZING SURVIVAL, GREAT GROWTH – DIASPORA LITERATURE IN INDIAN TONGUES

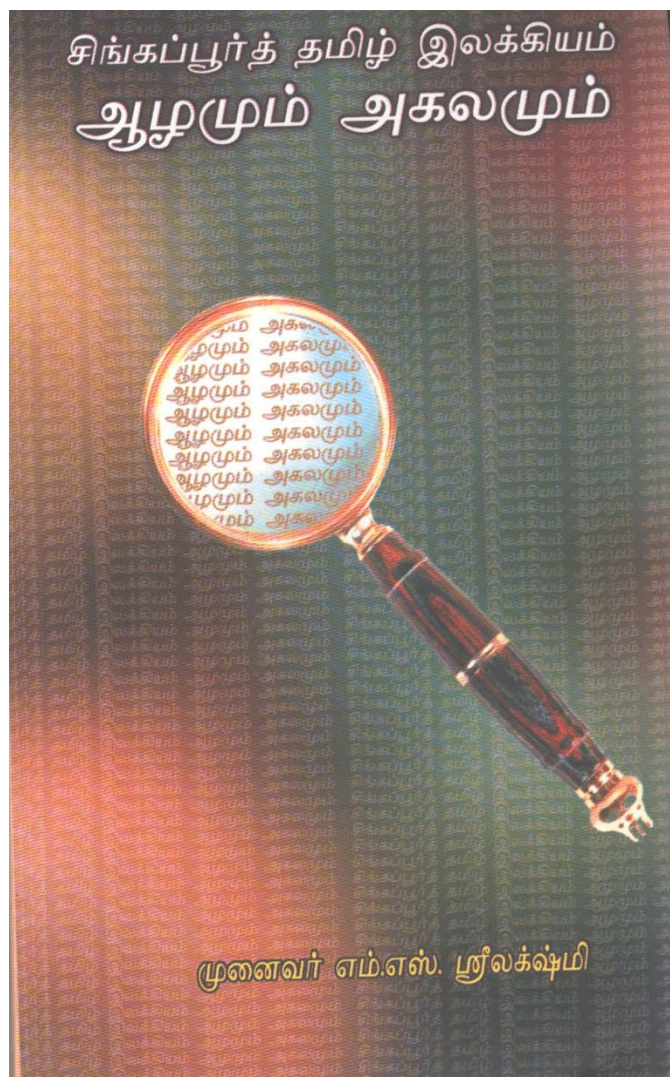
Sri Lakshmi's Record of Singapore Tamil Literature

M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

AMAZING SURVIVAL, GREAT GROWTH – DIASPORA LITERATURE IN INDIAN TONGUES

Sri Lakshmi's Record of Singapore Tamil Literature

M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.



A SEMINAL CONTRIBUTION FROM DR. SRI LAKSHMI



Dr. Sri Lakshmi

This article reviews a seminal contribution, documenting the origin, development and growth of Indian Diaspora Tamil Literature in Singapore. This is an excellent work by Dr. Sri Lakshmi, written in lucid Tamil based on her deep research and understanding of the processes of literature creation in Diaspora lands.

We have just begun to record, preserve, think over and admire the sagacity of the Indian pioneers in foreign lands who labored hard for their livelihood and struggled endlessly to maintain their identity in some form or the other.

MODERN INDIAN DIASPORA AND LITERATURE

In recent decades, many writers of Indian origin, writing fiction in English with Indian themes, have received much acclaim in the West. Their focus relates, in some manner, to the life and times of the Indian Diaspora of the twentieth century. They go back in their reminiscences to their roots and try their best to relate themselves to that identity.

But, hardly any one of these talented writers has written in their Indian tongues.

PROSPERITY AND RETENTION OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

That prosperity has nothing to do with the desire and determination to preserve one's own language is daily proved in the growing lack of interest among the modern Indian Diaspora in retaining Indian tongues even in their daily conversations. In fact, prosperity has blunted any desire or need to use their tongues!

Hindustani, Hindi-Urdu, Punjabi, Gujarati and Bengali ethnic groups have not succeeded much in retaining their literary traditions in foreign lands. They have become very successful in business, education, and professions, and contribute a lot to the construction of temples and other places of worship and charitable institutions. Bhojpuri folktales and folk songs still are alive in the Caribbean and in Mauritius.

A UNIQUE HISTORY OF MALAYA AND SINGAPORE TAMILS

Tamils in Malaysia and Singapore, for more than a century, have not only preserved their identity through the retention of their language, culture and religion, but also have successfully developed written literature of their own. Their Tamil roots have been nurtured by the political, literary and media developments in Tamilnadu and Tamil Eelam, but the original initiative was born of a belief that their language, culture and religions are an integral part of their very being. Literates among these early migrants were conscious of the distinct Tamil heritage, a heritage that they all understood as not depending upon Sanskrit for its growth, continuation and dissemination.

REPRESENTING THE ENTIRE TAMIL COMMUNITY

Despite the fact that early Singapore Tamil migrants predominantly came from one or two Tamil castes, the entire population was well represented by a variety of castes, and had a substantial number of Tamil Muslims. They came largely from a non-Brahmin background with a history of deep traditional Tamil learning and were cemented together by the common medium of Tamil. A good number of them came also from bilingual non-Brahmin Tamil castes whose contribution to the growth and spread of Tamil Bhakti literature has been stupendous. Significantly, Tamil castes including Muslims did not ever believe that it was against their religion or culture to cross the seas and earn their livelihood. In fact, their literature clearly encouraged them to cross the seas and make a living!

THE ORIGINS OF INDIAN DIASPORA IN “FOREIGN” LANDS

When did the movement of Indians as groups of people to foreign lands begin?

Modern movements may be related to the expansion of the British Colonial power beyond India. However, we should really look at the founding or the roots of Indian Diaspora in the historic conversion of Emperor Asoka to Buddhism. Asoka's missionary zeal encouraged daring and dedicated Buddhists to travel to many nations, establish their own community of monks and believers. It is not clear whether this missionary movement really enabled the movement of ordinary Indian people to foreign lands. However, political patronage must have resulted in a good number of families and professionals to travel as migrants to other nations.

THE GREAT CHOLA EMPIRE AND TAMIL DIASPORA

Later on, eleven-hundred years ago, we see very clearly a definite movement of large number of people from Tamilnadu and South India to Southeast Asian nations under the patronage of Later Chola Empire. We also see that the spread of Islam in Indonesia was originally through the South Indian channel. This tradition of moving from their homeland to foreign lands must have helped develop a favorable attitude toward crossing the seas and making their livelihood. The British Colonial needs re-activated the inherent desire to cross the seas and earning their livelihood, in modern times.

EARLY TRENDS IN MALAYA-SINGAPORE TAMIL LITERATURE

Dr. Sri Lakshmi's book under review is an excellent compilation of her articles presented in various international seminars. The book is divided into 12 well written chapters.

The first chapter is on a great Tamil scholar, considered to be a pioneer of Tamil literature in Malaya-Singapore: C. N. Sadasiva Pandit. The word *Pandit* here does not refer to any caste affiliation. It simply means a *vidwan*, in particular a Tamil vidwan, a person of great knowledge and understanding of Tamil.



Tamil Hindu Temple in Singapore, 1800s.

Early Tamil writers in Malaya and Singapore, following the trends in Tamilnadu and Tamil Eelam, chose to compose poetry, and not use prose for their literary composition. By the time Sadasiva Pandit wrote his poetry, Tamils have already settled down in Malaya and Singapore, and have built impressive places of worship for the gods, and Masjids for Islamic worship. His early Tamil work was on a Hindu god Murugan, typically described as the god of Tamils, with a tradition of worship and adoration for at least 1800 years among the Tamils. The poet did not fail to notice that they were worshipping this god in a land away from their traditional homeland, but at the same time he had enormous appreciation for Singapore and its multi-ethnic population. The book was printed in a print shop owned by a Tamil Muslim.



Nagore Darga Shrine of Tamil Muslims, 1830. “A Cultural Centre for Early Tamil Immigrants.”

Thus, began the journey of Singapore Tamil literature, with appreciation for their adopted land, even as the writers yearned for their homeland across the sea.



INDIAN NATIONAL ARMY MONUMENT IN SINGAPORE

Praise of the adopted land, the processes of adoption, problems faced, challenges overcome, and failures and poverty received pointed references in the literary works of the migrant Tamil literature in Malaya and Singapore. Identification and development of alternatives to sacred places of worship in Tamilnadu, Tamil Eelam, and India would play an important part of the description in creative literature. The goal was to transfer

the sanctity of the homeland in as many ways as possible to the persons, events, rituals, and places of worship in their adopted country.

Dr. Sri Lakshmi cites many verses in her chapters from the compositions of early Tamil writers of Malaya and Singapore. Well documented, but the readers would benefit greatly if she could give a paraphrase of the meanings of poems cited along with the citation of the poems. Suitable paraphrases will help the readers to immediately grasp the meaning of the verses she cites. Dr. Sri Lakshmi uses *kuDiye:RigaL* to refer to migrants. A better form with no pejorative sense will be *kuDiye:Riyo:r*.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS



Piercing the Tongue Ritual in Murugan Worship

Chapter 2 presents the description of four travelogue-like long poems in folk-like traditional poetry, written by early Singapore Tamil writers. One of these is a description of the horse races in Singapore. The work is full of information describing the lifestyles of various ethnic groups through the eyes of a Tamil worldview. These works are very important for a description and understanding of the social life of Singapore in 19th century. We see in these works a great appreciation of the Chinese entrepreneurship, British political power, British administration of justice, etc. The authors did not fail to point out the social evils of life in Singapore such as prostitution. In at least one of these travelogue-like compositions there is a severe criticism of the ill-treatment meted out the poor migrant labor from Tamilnadu.

Dr. Sri Lakshmi traces the origin, growth and development of Singapore Tamil literature as follows (Chapter 3):

1. Beginnings of Singapore Tamil literature as part of Malaya Tamil literature: 1887-1930.
2. The Period of Reformation: 1930-1942.
3. The Period of the Japanese Rule: 1942-1945
4. The Rise of the Awareness of Tamil Identity: 1946-1960.
5. The Period of Confusion/Directionlessness: 1961-1970.

6. The Period of Sound Establishment/Standardization: 1971-1979.
7. The Achievement of Recognition: 1981-1989.

Chapter 4 presents a description and critique of Singapore Tamil fiction after 1980s.

Chapter 5 presents a description and critique of the reflection of Tamil society in Singapore Tamil literature. There is an eager expectation (or insistence?) on the part of Dr. Sri Lakshmi that every Singapore Tamil novel or short story worth its name should focus on the social and individuals' problems relating to the social and economic issues faced by the Singapore Tamil society. It looks to me that she demands an explicit involvement of the creative writers in dealing with these issues in Tamil creative literature through appropriate choice of themes. While it is a welcome thing and a very desirable trait that we expect in creative writing, choice of themes, events, characters and the manner of telling the story could not be narrowly contained within the parameters of social issues. Even within Tamilnadu Tamil literature, the twists and turns taken by Jayakanthan in his writings is a good example how creative writers could differ from one another in their choice and treatment of stories: psychological, social, purely entertaining, simply a reflection of the emerging reading public that does not care for serious reading, etc. All these are legitimate parts of a well-rounded literature.



Tamil Hindu ritual, KaavaDi

Chapter 6 presents a discussion of the creative writings of Tamil women writers in Singapore. A very fine piece, indeed. The contribution of Tamil women writers does not seem to be any less than the contributions of men. Chapter 7 presents the development of children's literature in Tamil in Singapore. Chapter 8 investigates the growth and development of Tamil drama in Singapore. Chapter 9 focuses on the literature of travelogues, whereas chapter 9 is an interesting report on the award-winning authors of Tamil literature in Singapore. Chapter 11 is a review of the works of a great contemporary Tamil writer, Rm. Kannapiraan. Chapter 12 is a fitting tribute to the contributions of Chettiar community for the development, spread and retention of Tamil language, literature, culture and religious studies in Malaya and Singapore.

THE FUTURE AHEAD

Singapore is an island nation with great ethnic communities. The relationships between ethnic communities have not been fully exhausted in Singapore Tamil literature. As globalization spreads, Tamil literature in Singapore will begin to deal with these issues of ethnic relationships because more people from diverse ethnic backgrounds are drawn to work for corporations. Another issue that may have to be carefully dealt with is the relationship between native Singapore Tamils and the very recent migrant population from Tamilnadu and other parts of India.



A JOB WELL DONE, OR A DUTY WELL FULFILLED!

This book is a great contribution to the understanding of Tamil Diaspora and their contributions to Tamil literature. Although the writers have been greatly impacted by the literary trends in Tamilnadu and India, the way they have carefully and deliberately cultivated a literature that fits the life of Singapore Tamils is a shining example for the other Indian Diaspora communities to emulate. Tamils in Malaya and Singapore have disproved the general belief that migrants coming largely from less educated castes would be more interested in their survival through gaining economic independence than in their identity issues, least of all any interest in developing their own literature. They stand apart from the 20th century new Diaspora, in their determination to continue to preserve and further develop their language, culture, and religious pursuits.

Dr. Sir Lakshmi has done a great service to entire Indian Diaspora through this well-researched and well-documented critique.

M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.
Bethany College of Missions
6820 Auto Club Road, Suite C
Bloomington, MN 55438
U.S.A.
mthirumalai@comcast.net