

# TAMIL CULTURE

Its past

Its present

Its future

with special reference to

CEYLON

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TAMIL CULTURAL SOCIETY

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# DEVELOPMENT OF ART IN CEYLON

TEXT OF A LECTURE

delivered by

KALAI PULAVAR  
K. NAVARATNAM

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## TAMIL CULTURE

Its Past, Its Present  
and Its Future

யாமறிந்த மொழிகளிலே தமிழ் மொழிபோல்  
இனிதாவ தெங்கும் காணும்

“Tamil” means “sweetness,” and “Culture” has been defined as “sweetness and light.” “Tamil” and “Culture,” therefore, make a most graceful combination both in Language and in Life. It is this graceful combination that has brought us here this evening.

It was my privilege, Sir, three years ago, to address a meeting under your Chairmanship on the “*Characteristics of Tamil Culture*,” and I am grateful to you, for your continued kindness and your generous references to me. We may take this meeting as an indication of the growing devotedness to their culture that we find among all sections of the Tamil-speaking people, and as an earnest of goodwill towards the aims and purposes of the Tamil Cultural Society.

The Tamil Cultural Society has completed three years since its inception. If it is to be of greater service to the Tamil-speaking peoples, it should be our privilege to welcome to the Society more members from every walk of life. It is by the growth of organised action among the Tamil-speaking population that the Society may hope to realise what it has so elaborately planned. There was never a time in the history of this Island when concerted action was so vital to our existence as it is today. It is the aim of the Tamil Cultural Society to have an Island-wide membership of at least ten thousand people, all united in the furtherance of the cause of Tamil Culture, the Tamil Language, Tamil Literature and the Tamil Arts. This may seem an ambitious aim, but it is not beyond realisation, provided every Tamil-speaking citizen is conscious of his heritage, and of his duty to pass

on that heritage to the generations that will succeed him in this Island.

### What is Culture ?

Culture has been defined as a "way of life," as "sweetness and light", as "activity of thought and receptiveness to beauty and humane feeling." These brief definitions are sufficient to show the comprehensiveness and the indispensability of culture, for one must have a way of life, and that way of life should be combined with sweetness and light, with activity of thought, and with beauty and humane feeling.

Tamil Culture is nothing else but the Tamil way of life, a pattern of gracious living that has been formed during the centuries of Tamil history. It has been conditioned by the land, the climate, the language, the literature, the religions, the customs, the laws, the food, the games and toys of the Tamil people, by the palmyra palm, the gingelly oil, and the vegetables associated with them. Culture is a most elusive and at the same time an all-embracing term.

### The Antiquity of Tamil Culture in Ceylon

Tamil Culture has existed in this Island from time immemorial. All the weight of geological, anthropological, historical, literary and linguistic evidence point to the existence in Ceylon of a people with racial and cultural affinities with the inhabitants of South India.<sup>1</sup>

The *Mahavamsa* itself recognizes the existence of a civilized people living in cities at the time of the landing of Vijaya. The *Mahavamsa* too supposes a pre-Buddhist period in Ceylon when the religion of the people was Hindu. The story of Elara's reign, the statement,

"When he had thus overpowered thirty-two Damila Kings, Dutthagamani ruled over Lanka in single sovereignty,"

the rule of Tamil kings, the accounts of the Vaitulyan doctrine, and references to "Damiladevi," "the Chola people,"

"the further coast" and "the other coast," point to an ancient time when Tamil Culture and Sinhalese Culture existed side by side upon this Island.<sup>2</sup>

The relations of the Sinhalese Kings with Nagadipa, with the Chera, Chola, Pandya Kings of South India, their dynastic alliances, their embassies, their treaties, and even their wars and their intrigues, are evidence of a fraternal rivalry that existed between these neighbouring kingdoms. There is a tendency to exaggerate these wars and to portray these cultures as if they were perpetually in conflict. Such a portrayal is one of the dangers of history.<sup>3</sup>

The truth is, that to one well read in Ceylon and South Indian history, these conflicts seem like the internal conflicts of kindred peoples. The wars of the Tamils against the Sinhalese are not any more numerous or hostile than the wars among the Tamil kingdoms themselves.

At the time the Portuguese landed on this Island, there is ample evidence for the honoured place Tamil had at the Court of Kotte and for the Tamil schools that the Portuguese founded in the Western and North Western Provinces.<sup>4</sup>

When printing was introduced into this Island for the first time, the Dutch published books both in the Tamil and Sinhalese tongues. A copy of a Tamil book published in Colombo in 1754 by the Dutch Pastor Bronsveld, refers in its dedication to the Tamil language spoken within the greater area of this Island. (*Maxima cum hujus insulae parte Tamulice loquentem*).<sup>5</sup>

Robert Knox and the Dutch despatches speak of the Tamil townships and the Tamil-speaking people of the Kandyan Kingdom.

### Twin Cultures

The comparative study of the Tamil and Sinhalese languages, of the literatures and grammar in the two languages, of place-names, of the drama, the dance, the architecture, the sculpture peculiar to the two cultures of this Island reveal to what limits

they influenced each other. Anthropological surveys have shown the extent to which the common racial characteristics are shared by the populations that speak the two languages, and history testifies to the shifting of populations from one kingdom to another and to the sections of people that have changed one language for the other. The laws, the caste system, the patterns of social structure, reveal very many common elements. For the existence and inter-penetration of these cultures, there is no better evidence than a religious shrine like Kathirgamam held sacred by the Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims, located in the southernmost part of Ceylon, and the religious shrines of the Buddhists located in Nainativu, a northernmost outpost of the Island, held sacred also by Hindus.

The existence of two different religions did not always prevent the patronage that kings of one persuasion extended to the religion that was not theirs, did not prevent the patronage and employment of Saivaite Brahmins at the Sinhalese Courts; did not prevent marriage alliances of Sinhalese Kings with Tamil Saivaite Queens; did not prevent the teaching of Tamil along with Sinhalese, Pali and Sanskrit at the more famous pirivenas as testified by the *Gira Sandesa* (15th century).

கி ரி ல்	கொடூர்	சி	பெணர்	நான	நான	லு	சு
சு	த	கி	ல	பெ	கி	ல	சு
சு	த	கி	ல	பெ	கி	ல	சு
சு	த	கி	ல	பெ	கி	ல	சு

There was a time when Buddhism counted many Tamils among its followers, even in Ceylon, and Tamil Buddhist monks contributed in no small measure to the enrichment of Tamil literature and Pali literature. Viharas were established in the Tamil-speaking areas of Ceylon and South India, and Tamil monks came to teach as well as to learn in the Sinhalese kingdoms. It will always remain a source of pride to us that the greatest, if not the only classical epic of Theravada Buddhism exists in the Tamil language. The poetry of *Manimekhalai* (2nd cent. A.D.) has been forgotten by scholars because of its didactic and doctrinal appeal, but it remains one of the finest jewels of Tamil poetry with an abundance of quotable lines, like

“பரமமடக்கலும் பசிப்பினியறுக”  
 “மாதவர் கோண்பும் மடவார் கற்பும்”  
 காவலன் காவல் இன்றெனில் இன்றும்”

The *Virasoliyam*, a compendious Tamil grammar, was compiled in the 11th century by a Tamil Buddhist, Buddhimitrar. The origin of Tamil is attributed in this grammar to Avaloketisvara (Bhodisattva). This grammar seems to have influenced the Sinhalese grammar *Sidatsangarawa*. Among the more famous Tamil Buddhists that visited Ceylon on religious and cultural missions were Sangamitta (4th c.), Buddhadatta Mahathero (5th c.), Vajirabodhi (7th—8th c.), Anurudha (12th c.), Dharmakirti, author (?) of the *Culavamsa* (13 c.). Dignaga, Dharmapala of Nalanda, Bhodhidharman of China were three other illustrious Tamil exponents of Buddhism. \*

### The Tamil Language

The Tamil language has been spoken in this Island, it would seem, at least for the last three thousand years. The punch-marked coins of an early era point to connections that Ceylon may have had with Mohenjodaro and the Indus Valley civilisation. Tamil poetry composed in Ceylon has been included in the earliest Tamil Anthologies, and the Tamil spoken in Ceylon represents a pre-Pallava period with its ancient morphological and grammatical forms and its repertoire of words considered obsolete for centuries on the neighbouring continent.

A language is always a mirror of a people's genius.<sup>7</sup> The Tamil language has been spoken basically in its present form for the last two thousand years, and it continues even now to be the living language for thirty to forty million people—about thirty million people in India, more than two million people in Ceylon, nearly one million people in Malaya, Vietnam and Indonesia, and many thousands scattered over Fiji, Mauritius, Madagascar, Africa and even Trinidad and the Martinique Islands. Tamil is as much a classical language as Greek, Latin or Sanskrit, with this difference that while her ancient contemporaries have changed beyond recognition or been long regarded as “dead”, Tamil continues to be one of the most vigorous of modern languages, and perhaps offers the only example in history of an ancient clas-

sical tongue which has survived to this day and yet remains young as it was two thousand years ago.

The monumental Tamil-English Dictionary by Miron Winslow was commenced in Jaffna by Joseph Knight, assisted by Gabriel Tissera and Rev. Percival (two Ceylonese), and it is in the introduction to this Dictionary that Dr. Winslow has the oft-quoted passage :

"It is not perhaps extravagant to say that in its poetic form the Tamil is more polished and exact than the Greek, and, in both dialects with its borrowed treasures, more copious than the Latin. In its fullness and power, it more resembles English and German than any other language."

Dr. Slater said, "The Tamil language is extraordinary in its subtlety and sense of logic"; and W. Taylor observed earlier, "It is one of the most copious, refined and polished languages spoken by man."

Tamil speech as obtaining in Ceylon, and Tamil phonetics as obtaining especially in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, show a fidelity to the earliest Tamil grammars which the speech of South India does not—a clear indication of the development of Tamil in Ceylon unhampered by the extraneous influences to which South India was subject.

### Tamil Literature

Tamil Literature has made certain definite contributions to world thought and letters. Its love poetry and its inclusion of love poetry in its theory of poetics are indications of the humanistic approach to life that is characteristic of Tamil Culture. The love poetry of the Tamils is the product of a people among whom the finest ideals of courtship and wedlock had long been cherished. The ethical poetry of the Tamils has been the wonder of all foreigners who have studied it. The maxims of Thiruvalluvar or the *Tirukkural* is a book of which Dr. Albert Schweitzer has said :

"There hardly exists in the literature of the world a book which contains such lofty maxims."

And Dr. Pope observed :

"I have felt sometimes as if there must be a blessing in store for a people that delight so utterly in compositions thus remarkably expressive of a hunger and thirst after righteousness."

If English be the language of commerce, French the language of diplomacy, Italian the language of love, and German the language of philosophy, then Tamil is the language of devotion. The devotional poetry in Tamil is so great in bulk, and in depth and intensity of emotional fervour, that its continued study has given the language a certain aptitude for the expression of themes pertaining to mysticism and contemplation. The Nature Poetry of the Tamils is again the result of a people who lived intimately with Nature. No people, except perhaps the people of the Pacific Islands, have made so much use of flowers and plants in daily life for various purposes as the Tamils have done. The Tamils said it with flowers not only in love but also in warfare. The ancient Tamil warriors went to battle, their brows decked with garlands, and each strategic movement had its own symbolic flower.

The influence and vitality of Tamil Culture in Ceylon has been such that it has produced a Tamil literature of worth, of which there is indisputable evidence from the 13th century, and many a Ceylonese poet and scholar crossed the Straits and won fame and recognition in other lands where Tamil is spoken. The name of Arumuga Navalar is associated with a great revivalist movement in Tamil and Saivism; C. Y. Thamotherampillai was a pioneer editor of the classics which spear-headed the Tamil Renaissance; V. Kanagasabaipillai opened up a new horizon to many a foreigner with his "*The Tamils Eighteen Hundred years ago*"; N. Kathiravelpillai distinguished himself as a lexicographer; Cumaraswamy Pulavar was recognized as a scholar of outstanding merit; Swami Vipulananda occupied the Chair of Tamil at the Annamalai University, and Swami Gnana Prakasar established his reputation for comparative philology and for the history of the Tamil-speaking people. The records of some of the earlier Tamil writers of Ceylon have been included in the "*Tamil Plutarch*" compiled by Simon Casie-Chitty.<sup>11</sup>

Sinhalese sovereigns of various periods extended their patronage to Tamil poets, and the story is told of the forlorn Tamil bard that set out from Jaffna with his poem to the Court of Rajasingha at Kandy, to be told on the way that the last Tamil-speaking King of Ceylon had been taken captive.

### Ideals of Life

Tamil Literature was the result of the *Weltanschauung*, the world outlook of the Tamil-speaking peoples, and at the same time that literature kept alive the outlook and those ideals which shaped it. Imagination is a gift which has been associated with great commercial peoples, and no people in this part of the world were such skilful navigators or traders as the Tamils.

The sea ports of the then Tamil country, which included all the Malabar coast as well, were busy ports of call into which ships from the West sailed with their gold, lamps, wine and goblets, to return home laden with pepper and silks and cotton and ivory, and with the pearls of the Tamil seas. Teak from the Tamil country has been found in the ruins of Ur of the Chaldees, and peacocks and apes of the South were sold abroad as early as Solomon's time. Yavanar, or men of the Graeco-Roman world, established colonies and trading stations in the Tamil Kingdoms, and were even employed as engineers, body-guards, palace-guards, and city-guards in the service of Tamil Kings. <sup>12</sup>

In this trade and overseas expansion the ports of North Ceylon played a great part which is forgotten in the age of the steamship and the aeroplane. Kalpitiya, Mantote, Kayts, Elephant Pass, Trincomalie have a naval history that has yet to be studied from local and foreign records, including the Arab chronicles.

The Tamil Argonauts turned their eyes even more naturally towards the East and with them they carried their art and architecture, their religion, their language and their laws. It is agreed by most writers on Indian influences on South East Asia that the Tamil Kingdoms were among the earliest and the most active.

The author of the *Periplus* and Ptolemy speak of the ships that used to sail from the Eastern coasts of South India and

Ceylon to the land of gold (Malaya and Java), and Fa Hien refers to his voyage to Java, via Trincomalie. Having travelled lately through South East Asia, I have been able to follow the routes taken by the Tamil Argonauts and see the many lands where the Tamil-speaking people left behind the traces of their genius and culture. In the architecture of Champa and Cambodia, in the sculptures of the Museum of Tourane, in the Saiva Siddantha system of religion once followed in Indonesia and Indo-China, in the bronzes of Siam, may be seen the traces of Tamil influence. The Baratha Natyam has affinities with the dances of Cambodia and Bali; the Tamil sacred verses are recited by the Court Brahmins of Thailand at the Tamil feasts of Thirupavay and Thiruvempavai and during the coronation of their kings; certain tribes in Sumatra go under the Tamil names of Chera, Chola, Pandya and Pallava; and the temples of Dieng plateau, of Po-Nagar, of Mi-son (Vietnam), of Anghor Thom, show the influence of Tamil architecture. <sup>13</sup>

Islam was spread in the Malay Archipelago largely by Tamil-speaking people.

Because of their international outlook, trade and navigation, the Tamils eschewed insularity and developed a remarkable universality of outlook. Wendell Wilkie in *One World* begins his book with the statement, "In future our thinking must be worldwide." The Tamil poet anticipated him by a two thousand years when he said

யாதும் ஈரே யாவரும் கேளிர் !

"Every country is my country;  
Every man is my kinsman."

This sense of universality was instrumental in fashioning Tamil society after a broad and tolerant pattern. Albert Schweitzer in his *Indian Thought and its Development* shows exhaustively the optimistic, humanistic sense of life and life affirmation, the *joie de vivre*, that is characteristic of the Tamil attitude to life. He has also shown that three of the greatest philosophers of India, namely, Sankara, Ramanuja, Ramananda came from the South and were indebted to Tamil thought.



The happy warrior delineated by the Tamil classics is one who has a sense of honour and of chivalry, and who will rather die than turn his back upon a foe or an adverse circumstance. Honour, bravery and nobility (மௌனம்) required one to bear the marks and scars of battle on the bosom. The story is told of the Tamil matron that heard of her son who had fallen in battle. She hurried to the battlefield in distress lest he should have fallen in retreat, but was relieved and happy when she saw the wounds on his chest, the infallible sign that he had fallen facing the enemy.

The Tamil warrior was expected to cover himself with glory in the arts of war and of peace. Men were illustrious because they left a glorious name (புகழ்):—

“புகழொடு விளங்கிப் பூக்க  
கின் வேலே”

(Puram 21 ; 23).

காணமுயல் எய்தகம்பினில் யானை  
பிழைத்த வேல் எந்தல் இனிது.

(Kural, 772).

The ideal of tolerance, the will to live and let live, is well illustrated by the anthologies which include poems of every shade of religious and philosophic belief. It is further clear from the scenes in *Manimekhalai* of Tamil cities where philosophers of rival schools expounded their own doctrines from their respective booths, under their own flags—a two thousand-year old anticipation of Hyde Park Corner.

The tradition of Bakthi and the ideal of tolerance explain the fact that nearly every world religion can claim in Tamil a voluminous literature. Tamil Culture has been enriched by poetical works of Saivaites, of Vaishnavites, of Jains, of Buddhists, of Muslims, of Catholics, of Protestants. No other language in the world has been the vehicle of the epic poetry of so many different religions, not Latin, not Sanskrit.

As the ideal of the Philosopher—Statesman was outlined by the Greeks, as the Orator was delineated by the Latins, the

Courtier and Governor by the English, the Tamils conceived their educational ideal as the Complete Man, the Perfect Man (சான்றோன்) endowed with honour, greatness, culture, benevolence and grace.

Further, a life of altruistic love was recommended to every Tamil. It has been found that persons dedicated to service and love live longer than others, and probably it is the altruism of Tamil Culture

“தமக்கென வாழாப் பிறர்க்குரியானன்”  
“என் கடன் பணி செய்து கிடப்பதே”

that explains its long survival.

### Present State

When one examines the present state of the Tamil-speaking peoples and their fidelity to the ideals that moulded their culture one wonders if they have not lost a great deal of the virility and resource that characterized them of old. It is true they continue to live, to be theistic, and to have a love of the language and literature that nurtured them, but enterprise, initiative, creative activity and philosophic thought are necessary to them, if they are not to be noted for inertia and apathy. Some of their ancient contemporaries are no more; the Chams and the Khmers with whom they traded and who under their inspiration erected colossal monuments are themselves spent forces in the world of today. Unless we are alive to the needs for the conservation and transmission of this culture, it may well be that a few centuries hence we shall have precious little of this heritage left behind in the country of our birth.

1. As the basis and source of this apathy and inertia, I would point to the ignorance of the language, of the literature, of the arts, of the history, of the culture, that exists among our people today, especially among those sections that combine wealth and influence and a lop-sided Western education. Cultures disappear by those very causes by which they flourish, and the disappearance of the ideals that nourished Tamil Culture will eventually lead to the disappearance of Tamil Culture itself.

*They say the Lion and the Lizard keep  
The Courts where Jamshyd gloried  
and drank deep.*

During the last fifty years there has been a revival of interest in Tamil, and this revival must be attributed to the printing and popularising of the Tamil classics. But that revival in Ceylon will not be complete unless it reaches every section of the Tamil-speaking public, particularly those who establish the norms of appreciation and the standards of refinement.

2. The dearth of philosophic thought is, perhaps, the greatest drawback in the popularising of true values in Ceylon. In the spate of talk and oratory about our past glories, we run very dry concerning the problems that affect us in the domain of thought, concerning our beliefs, our code of right and wrong, our political creeds, our ideals of service, our national unity. Philosophy is not the peculiar business of the angels; it is human business, everybody's business.

The want of creative activity in writing and the Fine Arts that we remark today is mainly due to the lack of an interest in philosophic studies and in pure thought. The publishing houses are bringing out translations and adaptations of foreign works and commentaries on the ancient classics, but original works, works in Tamil that deserve translation into foreign tongues, books on the problems vital to man today are noticeably scarce.

3. A lack of originality is seen in the Tamil radio, the Tamil films, and the Tamil newspapers. It is also visible (or audible) in the platform oratory that is being developed in a manner so that the sense follows the sound; it is audible in the alien Tamil accent that is heard over Radio Ceylon; in the hybrid imitations that pass for Tamil dance, and in the poor norms of appreciation of Tamil music.<sup>14</sup>

4. The emphasis hitherto in the Tamil Renaissance has been on the study of literature. An equal emphasis is necessary today on the Fine Arts of the Tamils. We have not produced recently any great sculptor or any great painter. It is by a revival of these arts that we shall teach our people the art of life and the art

of gracious living. A very famous English writer on the Tamil dance wrote to me some time ago from Canada: "I would give anything to have a glimpse of a Pallava sculpture or a Chola bronze." It requires an aesthetic mind to be so moved by art.

I have no intention of continuing these observations because I see at the same time a few signs of an awaking of effective interest in our cultural heritage. But the question that agitates our minds today, the mind of every Tamil-speaking citizen be he Muslim or Hindu, Catholic or Protestant, or Buddhist, concerns the future of Tamil Culture in this country.

### Languages of Administration

The stagnation in Tamil Culture that has been noted before is not a little due to the want of State patronage during the last three or four hundred years. With the dawn of a new era in our national life, it is but legitimate for us to expect the State to extend the same measure of support to the development of the culture of the two major nationalities that form the Ceylonese nation.

(I follow A. L. Kroeber's definition of nation and nationality:

"Here are some contemporary cases of political nations that include two or more nationalities. Belgium is almost equally divided between Walloons speaking a French dialect in their homes and Flemings speaking a variant of Dutch. Switzerland is 72 per cent. German speaking, 21 per cent. French, 6 per cent. Italian, 1 per cent. Romansch. The Union of South Africa has a white population that is part English speaking and part Afrikaans or Dutch speaking, plus the racially distinct Bantu-Negro natives. India in 1947 set up house-keeping on its own, as two independent political nations with dozens of nationalities and languages.")<sup>15</sup>

In the formation and preservation of nationalities, language is by far the most objective factor. It is the free inter-communication of common speech that provides the consciousness of

kinship. Language is the rational and spiritual matrix in which a culture lives, moves and has its being. Hence the Tamil poets have consistently lost themselves in a mystical enthusiasm over the nature of the language, calling it the sweetest possible names :

செந்தமிழ், இன்றமிழ், வண்டமிழ், தண்டமிழ், அருந்தமிழ்,  
பசுந்தமிழ், செழுந்தமிழ், தீந்தமிழ், உயர்தமிழ், கோதில்தமிழ்,  
ஒண்டமிழ்.

The use of the Tamil language in the civil, educational and social life of this country is an absolute necessity if Tamil Culture is to survive. Today, Tamil is spoken in every part of Ceylon by over two million people ; it is indigenous to this Island ; its speakers constitute a major nationality ; its cultural influence in the nation is very much greater than may be gauged from the numerical strength of its speakers. Words are the living memorials in which are enshrined much of social and political history. The inner life of every people is stereotyped in their language, and retained there for the instruction of future generations. I could give you hundreds of Tamil words and terms, the disuse of which in administration would impoverish the Tamils in Ceylon in more ways than one. It is but a fundamental and human right that Tamil be one of the languages of administration all over the country so that the Tamil-speaking population may transact their business with Government in their own language, and consequently that their business is attended to by members of the Government service who have a minimum knowledge of the Tamil language.

There is a flagrant contradiction in the statements of those thinkers who would have Tamil as a medium of instruction in schools but not as a medium in administration. If there is equality of opportunity in this Island, it should be made compulsory for a Government servant to have a minimum knowledge of both languages so that he may serve in any part of the Island.

That two languages should function as languages of administration is nothing new in the history of multilingual or bilingual states. South Africa, Canada, Belgium, Switzerland have their own solutions to the language problems. When three nationalities,

four languages, and adherents of three religions have co-operated to build an exceptionally "national" nation in Switzerland, two languages in Ceylon should present no difficulties provided we are determined to preserve the unity of our nation and the territorial integrity of our country. The rule by majority as practised in homogenous states which have only one language, one nationality, one race, one religion, may not be exercised in countries with a plurality of cultures, nationalities, languages and religions. If the Swiss confederation has made concession to a language like Romansch which is spoken by only one per cent. of its population in one of its twenty-five Cantons, and to Italian spoken by six per cent. of its population in two of its Cantons, there must be an affinity between democracy and language that is worth learning.<sup>14</sup>

"In all these countries, Belgium, South Africa and Switzerland, none of the linguistic groups can be properly called a 'national minority,' as each has absolute equality of status with the majority group and its language is used by the state side by side with the language of the majority."—(N. Hans, *Comparative Education*, p. 50.).

In the interests of national stability and solidarity it might be useful for cultural leaders of bilingual and multilingual states to study the questions of national languages on an international plane. Such conferences would strengthen the claims of the Tamil language in Ceylon.

### Tamil at the University

If a language is to be the matrix of a flourishing and progressive culture, it is necessary that it be taught at a University level both as a language and as a medium. I am making no suggestion here with regard to the time when our national languages may be introduced into the University or about the preparation needed for its introduction. Nor am I minimising the importance of a high standard of English desirable at our Universities, but if we wish to develop our languages and our literatures for modern needs and the expression of modern thought, such a development is inconceivable without the national languages

becoming the medium in which our intelligentsia think and write, speak and teach. Even for the success of the national languages medium in the elementary and secondary schools, it would seem that a literature at a University level of thought is a prior requisite. So too it is a prior requisite for the progress of all technicalized means of mass communication like the press, the radio and the cinema. The history of the great Buddhist Universities and the Hindu Mutts of the neighbouring continent, as well as the history of Universities in other parts of the world, should convince us of the creative influence exercised by these institutions of higher learning in the transmission of language and culture and in the development of the mother-tongue.

The complaint of creative inactivity in Tamil letters and the barrenness of Tamil Art in the Ceylon of today is primarily due to the absence of a centre of Tamil thought and Tamil basic research. Our population and our need, would justify the founding of two more Universities, which would be mainly concerned with the development of the national languages. A University in the Northern or Eastern Province with a Tamil cultural emphasis and another in the South of Ceylon, heir to Totagamuwa, would meet the needs. Of the Wijaya Bahu Pirivena, Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam speaking at the Calcutta University Institute in 1916 said:

“ In the fifteenth century we had in Ceylon a splendid College of the University type in the Wijaya Bahu Pirivena at Totagamuwa in Galle District, presided over by Ceylon's greatest poet, Sri Rahula Sthawira. It was catholic in its aims and provided instruction for Buddhists and Hindus, clerical and lay, in all the knowledge of the time.” (*Eastern Ideals in Education in Studies and Translations.*)

To deny Tamil, equality of status and opportunity at the University or at the Universities of Ceylon, is to deny to the Tamil-speaking people that scholarship and opportunity for national service and cultural refinement which are the ends and aims of higher learning. A University

“ aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspiration, at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power and refining the intercourse of private life.”— (Cardinal Newman, *Idea of a University.*)

Are we to be denied these gifts of University life merely because a bilingual University is supposed to be a novel institution in our national experience? Bilingual Universities are no uncommon feature of bilingual and multilingual countries. They tend to set the tone and the example in tolerance, good understanding and co-operation for the rest of the country. And bilingualism at the University and in administration function on the understanding that on the part of the language groups there will be no linguistic or cultural imposition which involves the sacrifice of the mother-tongue.

The existence of the age-long cultures side by side should be looked upon as a source of fruitfulness and mutual benefits. Hence our Universities, schools, and adult educational agencies should provide opportunities for the study of the two national languages. Citizens should be encouraged to learn the other national language so that they may break the linguistic barrier in the interests of social harmony. In Ceylon, we possess already a linguistic environment favourable to the study of Sinhalese, Tamil and English, and as many citizens as possible should avail themselves of this opportunity to obtain a knowledge of the three languages, naturally, in varying degrees of proficiency.

#### Responsibility of the State

Thus far I have spoken of State patronage and of institutions for the promotion of Tamil Culture in Ceylon. The State may not relinquish its obligations in favour of private enterprise and initiative, nor may it attempt at consoling us with the assurance that “ Tamil will be taken care of in South India.” Our reply then would be: “ We are Ceylonese and the Tamil language belongs here in its own right, and even if Tamil *per impossibile* ceased to be the living language in other parts of the world, we shall

endeavour to make it continue to flourish in this Island reserve." An assurance of Tamil prosperity in South India would be similar to assuring the French-Swiss nationality that French need not be an official language in Switzerland because it is the official language across the border in France, or that the University of Lausanne is superfluous because there is a University in Paris, or to saying that the mother-tongue may be neglected in Australia because English is taught in the United States. The growth of Tamil in Ceylon has been independent, though that growth did always admit of influences from across the seas in the same manner as the other great language of this Island.

Nor is it accurate to say that the Tamils are so endowed with intelligence that they will learn the Sinhalese language and wield it with the facility of a mother-tongue even better than the Sinhalese themselves. This is a very unscientific conjecture entirely unsupported by facts. The Tamils can never acquire the same command of Sinhalese as those to whom Sinhalese is the mother-tongue, unless they are prepared to change their mother-tongue. There are very, very few people in the world who are able to think, speak and write two languages with the same equal facility.<sup>17</sup> And what guarantee is there that even if they sell their birthright, origins, religion, names and antecedents will not prevent discrimination should Government or society choose to discriminate against them?

### Some Ways and Means

There are ways and means by which individuals may promote Tamil Culture, either singly or in a body. It would not be wrong to say that the State and the Universities receive their tone and their standards also from the society which they represent, so that the higher the standards of society, the higher is the standard of cultural patronage by the State and of efficiency at the University. Here are some ways and means by which the objectives of a cultural revival may be achieved:

1. Active support should be given to associations dedicated to the study and promotion of *Tamiliana*.
2. Tamil society should set the highest standards in this revivalist and progressive movement. Awards

(cash, medals, books) should be offered for creative work and for translations.

3. Libraries and Museums should be established as means of adult education and films should be made of the Tamil heritage. The project of the Jaffna Library merits the support of the entire country.

4. A comprehensive Tamil-Sinhalese-English Dictionary and a Tamil Encyclopaedia for Ceylon should be compiled.

5. Basic research should be undertaken by cultural associations so that the significance and import of Tamil customs and habits and way of life may be popularised among the Tamil-speaking people.

6. Teachers of Tamil should be well-qualified and be lovers of Tamil literature that enjoy Tamil poetry in their leisure. A new orientation in the prescribing of books of study and in their teaching is necessary if Tamil children are to love their language and enjoy poetry and the Tamil Arts as the expression of life and experience, and wield their language for intelligent and effective citizenship.

The writing of poetry should receive especial attention, since poetry, more than any other Fine Art, is a powerful vehicle for the transmission of a people's ideals, history and language.

7. Tamil monuments in Ceylon should be better studied and preserved. If the State for some reason or other, has not hitherto prepared specialists in Tamil archaeology or Tamil history, it should be the duty of the Tamil Cultural Associations to request the State to do so. The University, the Department of Archaeology, the Public Museums should have scholars well versed in *Tamiliana*.

Scholarships may be offered to deserving students by the Tamil-speaking public.

8. Tamil studies should be made to show the points of contact and elements common with Sinhalese Culture so as to promote understanding and national solidarity.

9. The Tamil classics should be translated into Sinhalese and books in Tamil Culture be written in English and Sinhalese for the promotion of inter-nationality harmony.

10. The contribution in thought, in literature, in art made by the Tamil-speaking people should be made known through translations in the principal languages of Europe and Asia, because that contribution is part of the world's heritage. In the past, for political and religious reasons, Tamil studies had enthusiastic students in Portugal, Holland, France and England. In the future, it will be the duty of Tamils themselves to give their treasures to their fellowmen, and a few Tamil scholars at least should learn Hindi, Chinese, Japanese and Indonesian for this purpose.

11. Culture is dependent for its origin and its development on geography and on the land. Tamil Culture has had always an intimate communion with the land as is to be seen from the earliest Tamil poetry down to our own day. The tendency of people to flock to the towns should be arrested, for extreme urbanization and the consequent change means death to a culture such as ours. One cannot be opposed to change or to the absorbing of elements that are conducive to cultural progress. But the process of change should not involve the ceasing of a vital internal development. The Tamil-speaking people should co-operate in colonisation programmes and revive the agricultural bias of their social structure.

12. Every Tamil-speaking citizen should make his own contribution to this cultural movement, by study, by doing promotional work, and by material assistance. Many associations and authors fail to give of their best for want of adequate finances.

## Unto the Last

These, ladies and gentlemen, are some of the measures that we may adopt in order that we may reacquire our Culture for ourselves and our generation, and that we may leave it to those who follow us, richer and nobler, if possible, than we found it. There is no doubt that the task of nation-building is not a light one, and that the problems that beset us are many and varied. While other bilingual states are parts of continents and have large territories contiguous to them, Nature and history and a common patrimony intend us to be one nation in our Island home. Because Tamil is the mother-tongue also in other countries, no Tamil-speaking Ceylonese has ever ceased to think of this Island but as his home, his country and his motherland. For two thousand years and more, our two major nationalities have lived together, and there is no reason for not hoping that Sinhalese Culture will be a source of inspiration and strength to Tamil Culture and that Tamil Culture will be a source of inspiration and strength to Sinhalese Culture. The great Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam in a speech that inaugurated the national movement in this country saw the vision of a future Ceylon which because of progress and leadership would serve as a beacon light to the rest of Asia. Asia today throbs with the consciousness of a new hope and destiny, and within the frame-work of a new world, our country situated in the centre between East and West has the new opportunity to evolve a life of its own, her own democracy, by learning from the experience of other nations on either side of her but by solving her own problems in the manner best suited to her own national genius.

If I have ventured to suggest to you a few measures for the continued preservation and development of Tamil Culture, I have done so in the spirit of a student. The history that I have outlined, the language in which our mothers sang to us when rocking our cradles, the words that have become dear to us by traditional usage and the phrases that have become consecrated in our prayers at home or at common worship, the literature that has formed, nurtured and elevated us and offered us the ideals which we cherish, these are some of the factors that contributed to the Tamil-speaking peoples existing as a nationality upon this Island. One is not less a Ceylonese for being loyal to Tamil Culture or to Sinhalese Culture.

While it is true that a culture may not be created artificially, it is equally true that it is in the power of men to contribute to the causes and work at those conditions necessary for a flowering of culture, and it is also in the power of men to combat those intellectual errors and the emotional prejudices which stand in the way of such conditions. The survival and the continued growth of Tamil Culture is, therefore, in our hands.

It is selfless and noble to dedicate one's time and energies under God to one's Culture and one's Country. The Tamil sage implied that Tamil Culture is the dearest possession of the Tamil people for the preservation of which no sacrifice would be great enough, not even life itself:

பண்புடையார் பட்டுண்டு உலகம்  
அறிதின்மேல் மண்புக்கு மாய்வதுமன்



1. See Articles by Swami Gnana Prakasar in *Tamil Culture*, Vol. I. (1952) Nos. 1—4.
2. W. GEIGER, *The Mahavamsa*, p. 165 ; pp. 264f., Colombo 1950.
3. H. BUTTERFIELD, *History and Human Relations*, p. 158ff., London, 1951.
4. DE QUEYROZ, *The Temporal and Spiritual Conquest of Ceylon*, p. 241, Colombo, 1930 ; S. G. PERERA, *The Jesuits in Ceylon*, passim, Madras, 1942 ;

See G. SCHURHAMMER, *Ceylon sur zeit des konigs Bhuvanaka Balu und Franz Xavers*, 2 Vols ; Leipzig, 1928 ; and *Die Zeitgenossischen Quellen zur geschichte Portugiesisch-Asiens und seiner nachbarlander* 1538—1552, Leipzig, 1932 ; M. A. HEDWIG FITZLER, *Os tombos de Ceilao da seccao ultramarina da biblioteca nacional*, Lisbon, 1927 ; PIERIS-FITZLER, *Ceylon and Portugal*, Leipzig, 1927, fails to mention or translate the Tamil sentences in the letters from the Court of the King of Kotte, though reproducing in a frontispiece plate the Tamil writing which precedes the signature of the Sinhalese king.

5. *Catechismus*, Colombo, 1754 (Copy seen in the Museum Library of Djakarta).
6. On place names, see B. J. PERERA, *Some observations on the study of Sinhalese place names in The Ceylon Historical Journal*, Vol. II (1953) pp. 241—250 ; page 244 :

“Tamil place names are found mostly along the sea-coast and in the Anuradhapura, Chilaw and Puttalam districts. Though there are no native Tamils living along the sea-coast south of Colombo, the Tamil origin of most of the present inhabitants there is seen from the fairly large number of Tamil place names. The ‘ge’ names of these people too attest to their Tamil origin. The word *malai* meaning in Tamil ‘a mountain or hill’ is found in even the central parts of the island. They are come across in literature produced many centuries before the opening up of plantations and show that the Tamil element in the composition of the Sinhalese is far greater than is usually conceded. Ranmalaya, Kotmale and Gilimale are some of the examples.”

I am indebted to my colleague, Mr. K. Nesiah for the above reference.

C. E. GODAKUMBURA, in *Bull. of the School of Oriental and African Studies, The Dravidian Element in Sinhalese*, pp. 837—841, Vol. XI ; N. S. VENGADASAMY, *Tamil and Buddhism*, (Tamil) Madras, 1950.

7. A. N. WHITEHEAD, *Aims of Education*, New York, 1951: “Language is the incarnation of the mentality of the race that fashioned it.”
8. Quoted in Preface to Winslow's *Tamil-English Dictionary*, 1862.
9. A. SCHWEITZER, *Indian Thought and its Development*, pp. 200—205, London, 1936.

10. See M. WINSLOW, Preface to *Tamil-English Dictionary*; SRI KANTHA, *Terra Tamulica*, Colombo, 1910.
11. K. KANAPATHI PILLAI, *Ceylon's contribution to Tamil language and Literature in University of Ceylon Review*, Vol., VI, No. 4 (1948); Articles by K. P. RATNAM and K. K. NADARAJAH in the *Ceylon Tamil Festival Volume* (Tamil), Jaffna 1951.
12. See E. H. WARMINGTON, *The commerce between the Roman Empire and India*.
13. G. COEDES, *Les états Hindouïses*, Paris 1948.
14. BERYL DE ZOETE, *The Other Mind*, p. 14, London, 1933.
15. A. L. KROEBER, *Anthropology*, p. 226-227, New York, 1948.
16. Consult A. SIEGFRIED, *Switzerland, a democratic way of life*, London, 1950.
17. MARIO PEI, *The Story of Language*, New York, 1949, p. 104. "A trace of foreign accent is present in about 99% of cases where a person of one linguistic background tries to speak another tongue."

Page 191 :

"It has been fully established that a change in language on the part of an individual is attended by corresponding changes in gestures, facial expression, carriage, even humour and taboos. This is readily observable in the case of bilingual speakers when they pass from one language to the other".

Page 254 :

"Linguistic intolerance is manifested in the aversion to other languages than one's own. As a student of linguistic sociology puts it, 'To the naive monoglot, objects and ideas are identical with and inseparable from the particular words used to describe them in the one language he knows; hence he is inclined to consider speakers of other languages as something less than human, or at least foreign and hostile to the world of his own experience'".

On notions of culture I have been influenced by the books of Christopher Dawson and T. S. Eliot.

## TAMIL CULTURAL SOCIETY

### OBJECTS

The objects of the Society shall be to institute and promote the study, development and advancement of the Tamil language, literature, history, archaeology, arts, sciences and social conditions and culture of the Tamil speaking peoples in all aspects, and in the furtherance of these objects the Society shall be entitled :—

- (a) To co-operate, collaborate, or affiliate with organisations abroad and at home, promoting cultural ends;
- (b) To establish and maintain effective collaboration with Government, Governmental Agencies, professional groups or other organisations or individuals interested in similar aims;
- (c) To foster the promotion of Tamil Culture abroad and at home in all educational and cultural institutions including the University of Ceylon;
- (d) To promote and conduct scientific research, surveys, demonstrations, public lectures, recitals, conversational and study classes in the field of Tamil Culture;
- (e) To encourage the publication of books, booklets, monographs and periodicals concerned with Tamil Culture;
- (f) To provide information, counsel and assistance in the field of Tamil Culture and to make available more widely the cultural heritage of the Tamil speaking peoples;



- (g) To assist in developing an informed public opinion on matters relating to Tamil Culture;
- (h) To undertake such other duties and functions as may be deemed appropriate for the promotion of Tamil Culture.

#### MEMBERSHIP SUBSCRIPTION

*Ordinary Members :* Entrance Fee Rupees Five and First Year Subscription Rupees Ten; thereafter annually Rupees Ten.

*Life Membership :* Rupees One Hundred and Fifteen (Rs. 115) including Entrance Fee.

*Benefactors :* Rupees One Thousand and over.

*Ask for the Rules from :*

The Secretary,  
Tamil Cultural Society,  
156, Hultsdorp Street,  
Colombo 12.

Send copies of this booklet to  
your friends, to Tamil-speakers  
and non-Tamil speakers.

