

Lutesong and Lament:
Giving Voice to a Generation

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An introductory note on the socio-historical backdrop of the writings that constitute *Lutesong and Laments*, Tamil writing from Sri Lanka edited by Chelva Kanaganayakam

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In my fifty years of involvement with Sri Lankan Tamil literature, this is an occasion unprecedented in its scope. This is the first time we have an anthology fully devoted to Sri Lankan Tamil literature.

I have not of course forgotten the work of Professor Ranjan Goonetilleke, the Penguin India publication of Sri Lankan writings, in which some of the Sri Lankan Tamil writings were included. The significance of Chelva Kanaganayakam's publication is that this is a collection of only Sri Lankan Tamil writings and it has been done in a manner designed to give the reader an idea of the chief concerns of the Tamil *littérateurs* in Sri Lanka in the last fifty years.

This anthology has another remarkable, and to me, a significant feature: the anthology has an introduction by a professor of English, who has earned for himself a name as a refuge for writers in exile. The introduction locates Sri Lankan Tamil writing within the contemporary Western literary aesthetics. This is surely without a parallel.

Chelva Kanaganayakam's delineation of the Sri Lankan writings reveals to us, the readers of the original Tamil writings, certain aspects of creativity which had been largely ignored in the socially oriented Tamil literary criticism of these writings. Reading Kanaganayakam, one is happy to see that in terms of creativity, the Sri Lankan Tamil writers have done well for themselves. Their writings show that in real qualitative terms, our best are not below the normal standards of contemporary international creativity. Until now, our writers were not spoken of in wide comparative literary terms. The South Indian Tamil writer has been spoken of in all-India terms, but such was never the lot of the Sri Lankan Tamil writer. Up till now.

The title of the anthology, *Lutesong and Lament*, is very apt. The term "lutesong" reminds us of the mythical origins of the Kingdom of Jaffna (it is said that the area, an arid region, was given away as a present along with an elephant, to a blind bard for his exquisite song); and the ensuing term "lament" sums up in one word, the dominant feature of these writings in the latter half of the twentieth century. These were laments against internal social oppression, external state excesses and of course, a lament for being rendered virtually homeless and in many cases, being reduced to the status of refugees in a foreign country.

Lutesong and Lament consists of forty-five creative pieces from thirty-three writers, translated from the original Tamil into English by seven translators. The translators have been quite successful in communicating to the reader in English, the *bhava* of the original writings. By and large, the subtle nuances and meanings of Sri Lankan Tamil culture have been quite adroitly conveyed. A truly cross-cultural communication has been realized.

The introduction reveals both the expertise and the felicity of the editor, the former in the manner he presents the writings to a largely non-Tamil reader, and the latter in the sensitivity he reveals in handling the original writing. Chelva Kanaganayakam combines within himself the dual role of a sensitive translator, and a critically perceptive editor.

While dealing with the poem on *Ahalikai* by Mahakavi and Sivasegaram, the editor speaks of fifty years of writing being brought within the scope of this anthology. But since Ilangayarkone's work (*A Silver Anklet*) has been included in this anthology, we would have to say that 'sixty years' of Tamil literature is represented here, since Ilangayarkone started working in early 1940s itself.

What we refer to as "Sri Lankan Tamil literature", is a very heterogeneous and complex one. First of all, it speaks about two communities, which consider themselves ethnically separate in the Sri Lankan context - the Tamils and the Muslims-both of which acknowledge Tamil as their mother tongue. In a country, where political motivations have run high in the last fifty years, this is an important fact, one which should not be overlooked. Secondly, it is also the literature of two different strands of Tamil life and culture joined within Sri Lanka, viz. the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Tamils of Indian descent, largely from the tea plantation; they are now referred to as the *Malaiakat Tamilar*.

In this note, I do not want to highlight the very substantive regional differences within the Sri Lankan Tamil community, which, in some case, would and did vary, e.g. between Batticaloa and Jaffna. But, ironically enough, thanks to the Sri Lankan government, much of the internal Tamil differences are no more, because of the almost "equitable" oppression and discrimination faced by the Tamils all over the island, from both the security forces and the state's bureaucratic apparatus.

Sri Lankan Tamil literature is thus a heterogeneous one with pluralistic voices. But as mentioned above, the experience of the post-1950's era of the last century has given a sense of homogeneity of experience – suffering has united them!

My role here is to place this last 50 years in some perspective in terms of Sri Lankan Tamil literary history.

Leaving out the pre-modern Tamil writings in Sri Lanka, I wish to make a reference to our response to British Colonialism since the 1830s, the time when the British decided to settle and administer this island as a Colonial power.

The initial but very definitive response was given form by Arumuga Navalar (1822-1879), who, concerned as he was with Protestant intrusions into the traditional social fabric of Jaffna, coupled Tamil with Saivism, that doctrinal variety of Hinduism held in esteem in Jaffna. By 1870's there was also a Muslim response to Colonialism in the island.

If the advent of the modern era can be calculated from around the last decades of the 19th century, literary modernism came into Sri Lanka around the 1930s and the first definitive expression of it was Subramaniya Bharati (1882-1921); he was the poet who placed Tamil on the highway of modernity and modernism. In the 1940s, with the establishment of the *Marumalarchi* group and the founding of a journal called *Bharati*, the new generation began to look to Bharati as its mentor.

The influences of the Indian freedom movement, the impact of the Jaffna Youth Congress, and the motivations brought in by the post-Donoughmore constitutional reform politics, slowly continued to make modern literature more dominant than the religion - bound traditional Sri Lankan Tamil literature. By the end of the 1940's, a polarization within Sri Lankan Tamil writing occurred.

On the one hand, there was the emergence of a Tamil consciousness drawing its inspiration largely, if not exclusively, from the Dravidian Movement of Tamil Nadu; on the other hand was a conscious "national" outlook, concentrating on life in Sri Lanka and the problems that confronted the people in their existence as Sri Lankans.

The latter kind of writing had within it 3 clear strands:

- (i) writings on the social deprivations and the oppression of Tamils of the depressed castes (especially in Jaffna).
- (ii) writings on the lives and problems of the plantation Tamils, the Muslims, etc., as an indivisible part of Sri Lankan Tamil writing.
- (iii) writings on Sinhala-Tamil togetherness to highlight the indigenous character of Sri Lankan Tamil writing (as opposed to the Tamil Nadu based writings published in the mass circulated journals of Tamil Nadu).

The polarization was sharp and the battles were bitter. But looking back now, almost four decades after the battle, we can see that amidst these literary debates and controversies, there grew a rich corpus of Tamil literature, that was Sri Lankan in terms of content, highlighting both the unity and diversity of Tamil experience in Sri Lanka. Seen against the background of what happened in the late 1970's and 1980's, it is clear that Sri Lankan Tamil literature in the 1980's took off from that base and has not deviated itself from that rich diversity.

Sri Lankan politics since 1972 has been different qualitatively and quantitatively. The rise of the militant youth movement radicalized the political consciousness of the Tamils, especially the youth. The response of the state and its security forces made the Tamil areas a battleground. The fallout was tragic. Amidst bombings, air raids and direct land attacks, thousands of people left their homes, becoming refugees overnight.

People fled their homes mainly for want of security and in those places where they could stay, they lived in constant fear. The entire Tamil region in the North-East of Sri Lanka, irrespective of regional differences, faced the same experience.

The 1980's in Sri Lankan history is a dark period and for the Sri Lankan Tamil it has been a tormenting one; it saw the virtual demise of that face of Sri Lanka that they had known, and the treacherous birth of a monster alter ego they never suspected.

As much as the Sinhala medium education had brought about a new generation of Sinhala youth, resentful of the Tamils, there arose among the Tamils a new generation, which did not have to step out of Jaffna, from Kindergarten to the University. The new University in Jaffna became a focal point. A new generation of writers with a sensitivity and experience which their seniors did not have, came into being.

Tamil literature in Sri Lanka entered a new phase. An anthology of poems entitled *Maranoththul Valvom* (1985) signaled the onset. The birth of the new era was nursed by some of the pre-1980 writer-poets like Nuhman, Murugaiyan and Jayapalan; it ushered in new poets like Cheran and Wijendran. Their tone was defiant. Cheran, writing on the burning of the public library, questioned:

“With arms folded behind your back,
For whom are you waiting?

Fire has writ large its message
On the clouds....”

This experience extended to Batticaloa, Mullaitivu and Mannar and there was a “standardization” of response. “War-time writing” and “writing for literature” became much-banded phrases.

The *genre* of short story too began to change. Ranjakumar, Uma Varatharajan and Tirukkivilur Kaviyuvan changed the contours of Sri Lankan Tamil short story.

The 1990's saw another major twist. The Tamil youth militants who at one stage had maintained fairly good relations with Muslims, began attacking and hurting their feelings. The Muslims of Batticaloa were estranged. Muslims in the North were expelled from their homes.

Amidst the continuance of the spirit of the 1980s, the 1990s saw the assertion of the Muslim grievances and some unforgettable literature sprang from that fold. Solaikkili, a Muslim *grama sevaka* brought in a hitherto unfamiliar language of poetry – the rich imagery in Tamil dialect of the Eastern province Muslims. The imagery was so unfamiliar that Murugaiyan, a great intellectual and an extremely good poet, criticized Solaikkili for his obscurity. A lot of new Muslim writers came into the scene, writing really enchanting poetry. Oddamavady Arafat, wrote good poetry, and today we have a host of young Muslim writers enriching Sri Lankan Tamil writing. S L M Haniffa, a senior writer, in his new *avatar* is writing very captivating fiction.

The 1990s also saw the birth of the new Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. First the youths, then their families and friends started migrating to the West. Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Canada, France, UK and Australia saw a large number of Tamil migrants. Among the migrant youth, there were two categories; one group which was running away from the security forces and administrative ill-treatment and the other group, which fled because of problems with fellow militants or militant groups.

When these people started writing, they wrote in the only language they could – Tamil. Thus was born the *genre* of “refugee writing”, euphemistically called *Pulam Peyar Elakkiyam* (migrant literature).

Fifteen years have passed, and today it constitutes a big corpus comprising poetry, short stories and novels. But a discerning look at their writings would show two phases – one which was very nostalgic about the life the migrants had to leave behind and its inherent charms, and the other, a more recent one

is the generation that is trying to come to terms with its status as refugee, seeing itself as “another black” group.

I see two poets – Aravinthan and Jayapalan – setting the pace for this change. Aravinthan, a refugee in Paris, sees himself as one of the autumn leaves, swept into a heap for disposal, and says, who could say which leaf is from which tree. He sees commonness with the black refugee migrants. His poem *In Front of the Library*, too brings out that feeling.

With the sincerity of expression, and the depth of the wound, Tamil poetry is truly becoming “international”, if not universal. And with writings of this nature, we are now knocking on the doors of the Hall of World Literature. Our sufferings have added a new dimension to our literature.

This diasporic spread is something new to Tamil. The Tamil literature of India has no similar experience. The Burmese experience is no parallel. Perhaps it will never have it too. But our experiences and the expressions of it from Americas to Australia, from towns close to the Arctic, to pockets in Italy, have added something new to Tamil literature. There can be a smile even in sadness! This is an experience completely new to Tamil literary tradition. Creative writers in Tamil Nadu are raving about this “new addition” to Tamil literature.

Lutesong and Lament has as its contents, only (short) stories and poems – more of the latter. We are yet to produce a novel, which could be regarded as a Tamil contribution to world fiction. Short stories yes, but novels not yet.

I think this volume would have been richer and perhaps more expressive of the “laments”, if one of the short plays of M. Shanmugalingam had been included.

In the post-1950s development of Tamil creative efforts in Sri Lanka, the development in the theatre, particularly the theatre in Jaffna, is quite remarkable. Theatre provided the only “public” outlet for our frustrations, travails and feelings of persecution. In 1984, a new theatre founded by M. Shanmugalingam, and assisted by his friends, dealt with the problems of the war-torn society. *Mann Sumantha Meniyar* was the beginning. The role theatre played was so strategic, very soon it began to be used as a therapy in dealing with traumatised war victims. Sithamparanathan was a pioneer in this effort.

Shanmugalingam’s *Entaiyum Taiyum* deals with the problem of children migrating to foreign countries, leaving their old parents behind. This play sensitively depicted this quietly happening human tragedy.

It is a pity that this development in theatre in the North is yet known to the Sinhala theatre world, which has declined a great deal from the days of Ediriweera Sarachchandra, Dayananda Gunawardene and Gunasena Galapathy.

To me, this anthology brings into sharp focus the informal chasm that divides the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Except for an occasional translation into Sinhalese, the Sinhala reader has not heard about most of these Tamil writings. Nuhman’s poem on the burning of the library was made available in Sinhala and was quoted even in the parliamentary debates. The Tamils too did not know what has been written on the war in Sinhala. Of course, some Tamils are familiar with films made by Prasanna Vithanage and the others. Otherwise, each community is blank about the other’s literary achievements and works.

It is indeed a sad commentary on the State of Sri Lanka that even after 54 years of independence, it has not produced a system by which the creative writings of one community can be translated and made available to the other community.

In this respect, the work of the *Sahitya Akademi* (Literary Academy) of India should be an eye-opener for Sri Lanka.

Lutesong and Lament, coming at a time when the white dove of peace is singing sweet notes over the island, is especially welcome. These stories and poems will reveal the futility of war and the enormous toll it extracts in human terms, from all concerned.

