

10

**THE CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC
CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE TAMIL COMMUNITY
IN SRI LANKA**

Librarian

h
22/12/83

K. KAILASAPATHY

PUNITHAVATHY TIRUCHELVAM MEMORIAL LECTURE

1982

TAMIL WOMENS UNION, KALALAYA.

1. 10/10/10. 10/10/10. 10/10/10.
2. 10/10/10. 10/10/10. 10/10/10.
3. 10/10/10. 10/10/10. 10/10/10.

503-P

தேவ. தாலக. பிரிவு
மாநகர தாலக. சென்னை
வழங்கியமை.

The Cultural and Linguistic Consciousness of the Tamil Community in Sri Lanka.

My grateful thanks are due to the President and the office-bearers of the Sri Lanka Tamil Women's Union for the honour they have done me by asking me to deliver the first Punithavathy Tiruchelvam Memorial Lecture. I have chosen "The Cultural and Linguistic consciousness of the Tamil Community in Sri Lanka" as the theme of my lecture.

In describing the growth of cultural and linguistic consciousness of the Tamil community in Sri Lanka I am acutely aware of the intricate interaction of social, economic and political factors on language and culture and the very complicated bases from which such consciousness arises. However on this occasion I propose to limit the scope of my paper to the overtly cultural and linguistic aspects. Historically speaking it is well-known that the cultural and linguistic consciousness of the Tamils in this country has always been influenced by developments in India in general and South India in particular.

The fact of the matter is that events and trends in India did play an important part in shaping the cultural process from very early times. In so far as the Tamils are concerned the major events in India during the last hundred years or so have had their unmistakable impact on them. This applies to politics as much as to culture: the rise of the neo-Hindu movements-Arya Samaj, Brahma Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission-the founding of the Indian National Congress (1885), the 'Renaissance' in Bengal, the Swadeshi Movement (1906-1915), the different regional movements that arose in South India which eventually crystallized in the emergence of the Dravidian Nationalism, the agitations for the formation of Linguistic states are some of the more significant events that have contributed to the cultural and linguistic consciousness of the Sri Lankan Tamils.

Although there have been, and there continues to be, certain avowed socio-cultural differences between 'Sri Lankan Tamils' - who have been living in this country for centuries - and the 'Tamils of Indian Origin' - those who came here during the heyday of the plantations - both sections have shared the common characteristic of looking up to India in different degrees for cultural and spiritual sustenance. Language, religion, myth and history have doubtless contributed to the survival of this feature, which is deeply embeded in the consciousness of the average Tamil. Along with these may be considered the individual influences of personalities like Swami Vivekananda¹ (1863 - 1902), Mahatma Gandhi (1869 - 1948), both of whom visited Sri Lanka and especially Jaffna where they were accorded rousing welcome, and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877 - 1947) who also visited Jaffna on more than one occasion. (Special mention must be made of Coomaraswamy's address at the Jaffna Hindu College in 1906, in which he referred with pride to his Tamil ancestry² and having spoken highly of the Tamil language emphasized the need 'to preserve and protect the national ideals and Eastern Traditons.' The speeches of Vivekananda and Coomaraswamy were translated into Tamil and published almost immediately³.

It is generally accepted that in many Asian countries political nationalism was preceded by religious awakening that arose in response to Christian missionary activities. The point needs no elaboration. However what should be pointed out is that this religious awakening was, at least on the surface, of a dual nature. In their response to the proselytizing activities of the Christian churches, the indigenous religions reacted in two different ways: one section appeared to concede the necessity for reform in the traditional religions and thereby obliquely accommodated some of the stances of the Christian churches. This was pronounced among the English educated middleclass who were exposed to westernization. The other section was essentially revivalist in character and argued for upholding the traditional beliefs and practices. It is of course arguable, and rightly so, that the two trends were never mutually exclusive and the differences were more apparent than real. Both the reformers and the revivalists

came from the Hindu upper castes⁴, but while the former were not only English educated but also used that language for their livelihood and for acquiring social status, the latter were primarily traditional in their education and used their mother tongue for their livelihood and social communication. From this one may postulate another hypothesis: the religious awakening and the activities connected with it took place at two levels or planes. The reformists were, because of their broader vision and greater exposure to non traditional cultures, and higher social position in their society were prone to take a liberal and compromising position. Besides most of them wrote in English. (One may illustrate this by the writings of Sir Mutu Coomaraswamy, Sir, P. Ramathan and Sir P. Arunachalam all of whom took a keen interest in Hinduism and Indian philosophy and wrote in English. They translated from Tamil into English. In doing so they probably had a particular audience in mind - an audience to whom they wanted to prove the antiquity and greatness of their tradition).

In contrast, the revivalists were largely, and highly erudite in their mother tongue and wrote in it. Their audience was the local intelligentsia engaged in the professions and the self employed who were of respectable stock and generally landowners. In other words, the religious awakening and fervour can be seen at the larger national level and the local level each with their adherents and their followers. If one might use the term 'elites' to describe these people then a distinction can be drawn between the national and local elites⁵. Bearing in mind the fact that such a distinction is never mutually exclusive we may adopt it for our analysis.

The religious revival among the Hindus in Sri Lanka was largely due to the pioneering efforts of Arumuga Navalar (1822-1879). This is not the place to narrate in detail the crucial and seminal role played by him in kindling a consciousness among the Tamils in Sri Lanka (and South India) about their spiritual heritage. In many ways Navalar could be compared to Dayananda Saraswathi (1824-1883) who founded the Arya Samaj in North India. What Dayananda did for the Vedic religion in the North,

Navalar accomplished for the Saiva-Agamic faith in South India and Sri Lanka. Hailed as the father of modern Tamil prose, originator of public-speaking, the first non-Christian to write and publish Tamil text-books for primary and secondary schools, pioneer textual critic, an innovator in Grammar, and founder of Saiva schools, Navalar strode like a colossus the Hindu-Tamil world of his day Utilising the profound knowledge he had acquired while helping Rev. Peter Percival with the Tamil translation of the Bible. Navalar counter attacked the Christian missionaries who were publishing tracts ridiculing the Hindu gods and scriptures. He started publishing pungent pamphlets against the Christians and initiated a movement to win back those who had been converted to Christianity. (Here again one can see a parallel between Navalar and Dayananda Saraswathi whose concept of Shuddhi "reclamation or reconversion" helped to fortify the cracks in Hinduism). As a writer of polemics Navalar had few equals. He was followed in this by almost all his disciples, among whom the notable ones were Siva Sangara Pandithar (1829-1891), Senthinatha Iyer (1848-1924) & N. Kathiravel Pillai (1874-1907). The activities of Navalar led to the founding of the Saiva Paripalana Sabhai (Society for the Preservation of Saivism) in 1888, and the Jaffna Hindu High School in 1890 which was later renamed Hindu College. An editorial in the *Hindu Organ* (July 1899) makes the point clear.

"The idea of a College founded by the Hindus for the Hindus was conceived about thirty years ago by the late lamented Sri La Sri Arumuga Navalar Avergal, whose distinguished labours in the field of Saiva religion and literature mark an epoch in the history of Jaffna. Owing to want of co-operation which we are sorry to say, is a blot on our national character, the proposal made by Navalar fell through though he made a beginning and started a High School in Vannarponnai, which owing to the opposition of the Wesleyan Missionaries, the Government refused to register for grant. The idea conceived by Navalar was given practical shape to by the Sabhai, which in the year 1890 founded the Jaffna Hindu College."

The paramount role played by Navalar was not confined to religious and educational fields. No doubt they were unique and far reaching. But Navalar had a social outlook that went beyond that of any other Tamil religious reformer of his time. He had unhesitatingly thrown his weight behind the campaign against the Government Agent of Jaffna W. C. Twynam whose measures were extremely unpopular; He organized relief measures - providing meals for the needy during the severe famine in 1876; He was the force behind the founding of the Jaffna and Batticaloa Commercial and Agricultural Company Limited, whose prime purpose was to develop agriculture in the Trincomalee District; Just before his death he campaigned for the selection of P. Ramanathan as the Tamil Representative to the Ceylon Legislature in 1879. The vacancy was created by the death of Sir M. Coomaraswamy in May 1879. Convening a meeting of the prominent personalities in Jaffna, among whom were merchants, Public Notaries, Engineers, Village Headmen, Udayars and a Sub Magistrate, Navalar drew up a memorial to be sent to the Governor (Sir James R. Longden, K. C. M. G.) requesting that Mr. P. Ramanathan be appointed "a member of the Legislative Council to represent the interests of the community". Thus Navalar created the climate for Ramanathan to enter active politics and rise in the ladder of public life. Navalar was thus able to combine his interests in the religious field with practical actions that were vital to the community and mingle both socio-politics and religion. This was a major contribution to the subsequent cultural awakening among the Tamils.

But there was another aspect to this. Navalar it may be remembered spent several years in Madras in lecturing and publishing. But many others - C. W. Tamotaram Pillai (1832-1901), V. Kanagasabhai Pillai (1855-1906), T. Chellappah Pillai, T. A. Rajaruthnam Pillai, T. T. Kanagasundaram Pillai (1863-1922), T. Saravanamuthu Pillai, Sabapathy Navalar (1843-1903), A. Muthutamby Pillai, (1858-1917), N. Kathiravel Pillai (1874-1907) virtually spent their lives in South India holding positions in Government Service and publishing their works with a sense of dedication rarely,

seen in later times. They did visit Jaffna off and on and founded schools in their villages or helped others to find avenue for employment in Madras. Such close links between Jaffna and Madras was something new. No doubt there were connections between the two regions populated by people speaking a common language and cherishing a common cultural tradition. But the earlier links were sporadic and few and far between. Probably there were more traders, soldiers and adventurers than scholars and poets. The opportunities under the British rule to travel to India freely not only revived earlier bonds but also established new relationships that were different in quality. By living and working in the midst of the Tamils who were themselves experiencing tremendous changes, these scholars from Sri Lanka engaged in a two way traffic of ideas and movements that ushered in a new era. The scholars considered themselves part of the mainstream of Tamil culture and contributed to it as much as they received. In fact during the time of Navalar and about three decades after his death it was the 'Jaffna School' that dominated the literary scene in Madras. The late A. V. Subramania Ayyar (1900-1976) has rightly remarked that the most eminent Tamil scholar in the last quarter of 19th Century was perhaps C. W. Tamotaram Pillai. 'He belongs to the band of Jaffna Tamil scholars and is next in importance only to Arumuga Navalar, who exercised considerable influence over him and his literary work'.

In passing something may be said about Tamotaram Pillai whose hundred and fiftieth birth anniversary falls this year. Due to a number of factors, some of which were fortuitous and others, intrinsically historical, Jaffna came to be in the vanguard of the Tamil 'Renaissance'. By the 20s of the last Century, Jaffna had seen the establishment of Seminaries where systematic education was imparted at a very high level. From 1824 the Batticotta Seminary and the Wesleyan School in Jaffna, especially under the Principalship of Percival, provided the Ceylonese in general and the Jaffna Tamils in particular, higher education that was unique at that time in South India and Ceylon. It was therefore not

surprising that Sir Emerson Tennent, the sober and scholarly Colonial Secretary of Ceylon made the following observation in his *Christianity in Ceylon* (1850). He had visited both the Seminaries in Jaffna in 1848.

"The knowledge exhibited by the pupils was astonishing. And it is no exaggerated encomium to say that, in the course of instruction, and in the success of the system of communicating it, the collegiate institution of Batticotta is entitled to rank with many European Universities."

The Universities of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras were founded in 1857, three decades after these institutions were established. Under the circumstances it was no wonder that two of the products of Batticotta Seminary comfortably passed the first Bachelor of Arts degree examination of the University of Madras in 1857, without further Preparation: C. W. Tamotaram Pillai and Carroll Visuvanatha Pillai (1882 - 1880) earned a place for themselves as the first graduates of the Madras University.

It was the scientific and philosophic education which Tamotaram Pillai and others received in Jaffna that enabled them to blaze new trails and carry out investigations covering a vast range of subjects. It was also this sense of history and the spirit of inquiry that launched C. W. Tamotaram Pillai on his pioneering attempt at periodization of the history of Tamil literature and into textual criticism in which he was a path finder. In both the periodization of literary history and textual criticism he must have been influenced by Western methodology. One is tempted to imagine Tamotaram Pillai engrossed in a variorum Shakespeare, with its lines of text at the top of the page and multitude of surmises and conjectures at the bottom and contemplating on some classical Tamil text. Modern scholars are apt to wonder at the advanced theoretical and conceptual framework with which he carried out his critical work. I will go even further and say that not more than two persons after him have really improved on his rigorous methodology. It is interesting to compare one of U. V. Swaminatha Iyer's

1852-1942) editions full of aids for students and traditional explicatory material, with one of Tamotaram Pillai's containing a critical preface, explaining the method adopted in arriving at emendations. In an incidental remark as the present one it is impossible to describe in detail the multifarious aspects of the great savant. From about 1868 when he published under the guidance of Navalar Collatikaram - the second book of *Tolkaappiyam* - Tamotaram Pillai was one of the most prominent Tamil scholars in Madras until his death in 1901. There was hardly any Association or endeavour connected with Tamil literature and culture to which his advice and assistance were not sought. The South Indian Tamil Association formed in 1890 and the Dravidian Languages Association formed in 1899 had Tamotaram Pillai as a leading member. G. Subramania Iyer a the illustrious editor of the *Hindu*, Rao Bahadur P. Ranganada Mudaliar, Hon. A. Ramachandra Iyer, Sri T. Madhava Rao, Sri Savalai Ramasamy Mudaliar, Hon P. Chenchal Rao, the Zamindar of Uttumalai, Rao Sahib Salem Ramaswamy Mudaliar and the Dewan of Putukottai were among those who gave him moral and financial help in his single handed task. He spent his own earnings too in the service of Tamil. But finance was not the only problem he had to face. Pirate editions of his works worried him: a section of Tamil traditionalists both in Tamilnadu and Ceylon attacked him with a fury that was only matched by his stoical steadfastness; Bad health troubled him constantly. At times and especially following the deaths of Navalar and his eldest son Amirthalingam Pillai in 1889, he felt a sort of intellectual loneliness that was exacerbating. And yet these were not entirely his personal problems. They also reflected the times he lived in. No one reading the lengthy and (as time went on) polemical prefaces penned by Pillai can fail to notice his anguish. Such anguish was something new; so was the prose style that was so characteristic of him. The celebrated passage in the preface to his edition of *Kalitokai* (1887) in which he laments over the utter indifference shown by Tamils towards the palm leaf manuscripts is full of pathos and poignancy. - In it he referred to 'Deshabbimanan', love of country, 'natabhiwanam' - love of religion and

'Bhashabhinam' - love of language which became key phrases in the writings of many after him. S Suriyanarayana Sastriar (1870 - 1903) a protege of Pillai used these phrases in his essays with considerable effect. And above all, the writings of Tamotaram Pillai show us in bold relief all the manifestations of a person subject to intense cultural conflicts—religious, social and emotional. Tamotaram Pillai was perhaps the best example of the advent of the modern intellectual in the Tamil literary scene. 10 The purpose of my digression was to say something of Tamotaram Pillai whose contribution to the making of the modern movement has not been properly evaluated.

While the "Jaffna Scholars" were making their presence felt in South India—lecturing, teaching, debating, editing and publishing—they were also witnessing the nascent stirrings of the cultural nationalism in Tamilnadu. Although Navalar seems to have missed the impact of the publication of Bishop Caldwell's (1814-1891) *Comparative Grammar of Dravidian Languages* (1856; revised edition 1875) Tamotaram Pillai and others unmistakably show the influence of that work. I have elsewhere dealt with the subject and need not delve into it here. 11 Suffice to say that by theorising about the antiquity and independence of the Dravidian Languages, vis a vis Sanskrit and the Indo-Aryan Languages, Robert Caldwell "set in motion a train of ideas and movements whose repercussions and consequences went beyond the field of philology".

Ofcourse Caldwell was not entirely alone in postulating a hoary and glorious history for the Tamil language. There were other European Missionaries who put forward the Dravidian case. But it was Caldwell's *Comparative Grammar* that summed it all up. Already in the lengthy and controversial prefaces to the critical editions of ancient Tamil classics brought out by Tamotaram Pillai - *Virasoliyam* (1887) and *Kalitokai* (1887) we hear echoes of Caldwell's assertions about Dravidian and Tamil. But in fairness to Tamotaram Pillai it must be pointed out that he responded to Caldwell's hypothesis with considerable caution and circumspection. This

is evidenced by his sober remarks about Sanskrit and Tamil in the Preface to his critical edition of *Choolamani* (1889). Not only the classical works – both literary and grammatical – but also the medium of those creations had become an object of veneration. The modern linguistic consciousness of the Tamils can be traced to this period. The patron saint of the movement was ironically enough a Christian missionary.

By about the 1880s the Tamil elite both in South India and Sri Lanka had become quite enthused about their language, culture and history. The landmark was of course the publication of a verse play *Manonmaniyam* (1891) by P. Sundaram Pillai (1855 – 1897) who was Professor of Philosophy at the Trivancore University. In that celebrated work he had described Tamil as “Goddess”. The language had been declared divine and thereby sacrosanct. These events were taking place in South India with the full participation and contribution of Sri Lankan Tamils. An indication of the growing awareness of language and culture was the commencement of the publication of two journals; *Siddhanta Deepika* ‘The Light of Truth’ (1897 – 1913), and *The Tamilian Antiquary* (1907 – 1914). A recent researcher’s observation on the two journals clinches the point.

“The two journals cover roughly two decades – the period of the flowering of Tamil Renaissance. This period represents an awakened interest of Tamil scholars in Tamil language and literature benignly guided by the flair and persuasive enthusiasm of the European scholars..... These two journals have done yeoman service in creating in the minds of the Tamils an abiding interest in their Language and Literature, and in infusing a spirit of social confidence with regard to their literary and cultural heritage”.

What is pertinent here is the fact that Tamil scholars of Sri Lanka actively participated in the publication of the journals. The *Siddhanta Deepika* was edited by J. M. Nallaswami Pillai (1864 – 1920) and the *Tamilian Antiquary* was edited by Pandit D. Savariroya Pillai (1854 – 1923). The former was a District Magistrate and the latter a lecturer at

St. Joseph's College, Trichy. A perusal of the pages of the volumes of these journals will demonstrate both the quantity and quality of the contributions by Sri Lankan Tamils: P. Arunachalam, P. Ramanathan, S. W. Commaraswamy (1875 - 1936), A. Muthutamy Pillai (1858 - 1917), V. J. Tamby Pillai, T. Ponnambala Pillai and a few others seem to have been regular contributors to these journals. Arunachalam's translations appeared under the initials P. A. Nallaswami Pillai who was an ardent admirer of Navalar and cherished the writings of Sri Lankan Tamil scholars. Pandit Savariroya Pillai was encouraged by two well placed Tamils from Jaffna who held responsible posts: T. Ponnambalam Pillai was Commissioner of Excise in Travancore. His brother T. Chellapah Pillai was a Justice at Travancore. T. P. Masilamani Pillai was the son of the former who also wrote articles in the *Tamilian Antiquary*. On his retirement and return to Sri Lanka T. Chellapah Pillai was elected President of Saiva Paripalana Sabhai.¹²

The case of Pandit Savariroyan brings us to another point. Although the cultural awakening began as a Hindu movement and was predominantly led by Saiva scholars its character changed over the years. The prestige accorded to Christian missionary scholars, (Caldwell, Percival, Bower, Pope, Ellis) and the endeavours of scholars like Savariroyan brought the Christians into the mainstream. Furthermore with the shifting of focus from religion to language the importance hitherto attached to Saivism became less significant. (In fact, the active role played by local Christian scholars both in India and Sri Lanka, from the time of Savariroya Pillai - L. D. Swamikannu Pillai (1865 - 1925), Fr. S. Gnanapiragasar (1875 - 1947), Dr. T. Isaac Tambyah (1869 - 1941) and Rev. X. S. Thani Nayagam (1913 - 1980) - in the cause of Tamil has, at times, led to the allegation by some Hindus that the Christians have infiltrated the Tamil cultural movement.)¹³

The events mentioned above had without doubt their effect in Sri Lanka. The concern for the Tamil language was manifested in various ways. A number of societies and associations were formed for its protection and development, As may be expected Jaffna led the way. As early as 1898

a Tamil Academy was established in Jaffna by the efforts of T. Kailasapillai (1852 - 1939), nephew of Arumuga Navalar on whom had fallen the mantle of the great savant. He was supported by scholars like Kumaraswami Pulaver A. Muthuthambi Pillai and S. Saravanamuthu Pillai. It is interesting to note that Pandi Thurai Thevar (1867 - 1911) the Zamindar of Palavanantham, Ramnad District who founded the Madurai Tamil Sangam in 1901, was inspired by the Jaffna Tamil Academy. This trend gathered momentum during the next few decades and a number of associations were formed. Language oriented societies came into being: the North Ceylon Native Language Society (1921) and the North Ceylon Tamil Teachers Association (1925) may be cited as instances of this trend. The Jaffna Oriental Studies Society was constituted in 1921 to foster the study of Sanskrit and Tamil. It had the patronage of officials in the Department of Education. Some of these societies started publishing magazines and journals for furthering their causes. The Oriental Studies Society for instance launched a scholarly journal called *Kalanithi* which had a vogue among traditional scholars. The Kala Nilayam a Centre for literature and culture, founded in 1930 by the efforts of Kalaipulavar K. Navaratnam likewise published *Gnayiru* a quarterly journal of high quality. The Society did yeoman's service to the study and popularization of Tamil Classics. Regular lectures and discussions were conducted on cultural, literary and historical subjects.

Conferences and meetings were held to celebrate different aspects of Tamil language and literature: one such meeting was held at the Ridgeway Hall in Jaffna, in 1922, presided over by Hon. A. Kanagasabai. This was the first major literary conference in Jaffna and to befit the occasion leading personalities from Madras were invited. Among them were Dr. S. Krishnaswamy Iyengar (1871 - 1947) the historian, K. Subramania Pillai (1889 - 1945) a staunch Tamil revivalist, P. V. Manicka Naicker (1871 - 1931) a language enthusiast, and A. Madaviah (1874 - 1925) the novelist¹⁴. Sir Vaithilingam Duraiswamy presided over the proceedings of

the second day. T. A. Thuraiappa Pillai (1872 - 1929) who was the founder of Mahajana College and himself a poet and playwright took an active part in this conference.

Something should be said about the Youth Congress, also known as the Students' Congress that was active in Jaffna for a decade from the mid 1920s to the mid 1930s. Among the many seminal ideas propagated by the Youth Congress was the importance of the Tamil language - as a national language and the emphasis given to the concept of education through the medium of the mother tongue. At the first Congress itself (1924) a discussion was held in Tamil on 'The need for the revival of Tamil Literature'. Among the participants were Navaneetha Krishna Bharathi (1889 - 1952), Pandit V. R. Rajayanar (1899 - 1954) and S. Natesapillai (1895 - 1965). One of the resolutions passed at the first Congress was as follows: "That a prize, medal or some other form of inducement be offered by the Congress to anyone who does some original work for the revival of national literature, art or music". A practice was established to devote the second day of the Congress to national literature and culture, the proceedings being conducted entirely in Tamil. At the fourth annual sessions of the Congress held at Keerimalai in 1928, there were lectures on "Tamil our national heritage" and "The Tamil Renaissance". A noteworthy feature of these Congresses was the presence of eminent Indian personalities some of whom were also Tamil scholars: mention may be made of T. V. Kalyanasundaranar and S. Satyamurthy. Swami Vipulananda who had returned to Ceylon in 1924 as a monk of the Ramakrishna Order took an active part in the proceedings of the Congresses. In fact the Swami delivered the Presidential address at the sessions in 1928. What is to be observed in this connection is that as a result of the prominence given to Tamil language and literature in the programme of the Youth Congress the beginning of a fusion between politics and language began to manifest itself. Its implications became evident somewhat later. Needless to say the activities of the Congress gave a positive fillip to creativity in literature.¹⁵

The pattern of development seen in the case of the Tamil language was paralleled in the case of Saiva Siddhanta Philosophy, characterized as the indigenous religious thought of the Tamils. Following the early lead given by Navalar in restoring its prestige and strength numerous associations sprung in different parts to foster it. Reference has already been made to the Jaffna Saiva Paripalasa Sabha. In South India the Saiva Siddhanta Samajam was founded in 1905. Hitherto the Murts or Saiva monasteries were the sole custodians of Saiva religion and philosophy. But now laymen considered it their bounden duty to preserve them. The Samajam became the association par excellence for the propagation of Saiva Siddhanta and several prominent Tamils from Sri Lanka took a leading part in its activities: distinguished Sri Lankans were often invited to deliver lectures at the Samajam and also presided over its annual sessions. (Sir P. Ramanathan presided over the first annual conference of the Samajam.) J. M. Nallaswami Pillai was closely associated with the Samajam.

Sociologically speaking the linguistic and cultural awakening described above, was essentially that of the middle class Tamils with the upper middle class providing the leadership. The awakening which began in the religious sphere extended to the linguistic and literary fields. Basically it was a form of cultural self-assertion in the face of colonial domination. The point is that this cultural consciousness was limited in scope and in effect was designed to buttress the middle class values and aspirations and also provide that class with the necessary image for leadership. In concrete terms the cultural activities were confined to a few conspicuous areas: being backward looking in its orientation, the middle class sought to revive and cultivate certain features of the Tamil culture that had become part of the established order in the old society. Insofar as language was concerned, the zeal for Sen-Thamil, "Cultured Tamil" or "Classical Tamil" which for all practical purposes was moribund, (although Sir P. Ramanathan and his son-in-law and political successor S. Natesan created a vogue for speaking in the classical style) 16 was the basis for the founding of societies and

the holding of conferences. Bharata Natyam and Carnatic Music were the two forms that came to be considered the necessary artistic acquirements for a cultured Tamil girl. Both were extolled as "Tamilian arts and achievements" and soon became the pre-occupation of middle class Tamils. Bharata Natyam in particular had been resuscitated in the early twenties by the efforts of people like Bharata Iyer, Rukmani Devi Arundle (who soon founded the Kalakshetra, which has remained the outstanding Dance Academy in Madras) and G. Venkatachalam whose critical essays helped propagate the traditions and ideals of that dance form. During the 18th and 19th Centuries Bharata Natyam had become degraded, and called "nautch-dance" performed by courtesans and prostitutes. 17 While scholars and critics from G. Venkatachalam to the late Professor V. Raghavan (1908-1979) contributed immensely to the resurgence of Bharata Natyam, it was perhaps, in the writings of Ananda Coomaraswamy that the dance form found its greatest champion. Two of the earliest monographs of Coomaraswamy were *The Mirror of Gesture* (1917) and *The Dance of Shiva* (1918), both of which inspired almost all subsequent writers on Bharata Natyam. 18 Likewise Carnatic music had been brought from the court and temple to the concert hall and along with the dance form acclaimed as divine arts. Thus we see that Tamil language, Bharata Natyam and Carnatic music were deified and thereby denied of experimentation and innovation. It goes without saying that considerable affluence was the precondition for the cultivation of these arts and it was the upper classes that could afford it. As a result, popular arts suffered and became even more debased and deprived of any support. It is therefore not surprising that until the late 50s and early 60s hardly any significant movement arose for studying and cherishing the popular arts or what is often described as "folk arts". Needless to say the "ancient and divine arts" were carefully cushioned against any political intrusions, especially of any ideas tinged with social reform or change. To put it

differently, artistic forms which are periodically revitalized by the absorption of radical ideas and giving expression to them, were kept hermetically sealed by the upper middle class purely as status symbols and ethnic identities.

This was the nature of the linguistic and cultural consciousness of the Tamils till the 1950s. The most sensitive Tamil scholars and creative writers like the late A. Periyathambi Pillai (1899 - 1978), S. Somasundara Pulavar (1878 - 1953), M. Nallathambi Pulavar (1896-1951) and Thuraiappa Pillai always conceived Silhala and Tamil as two eyes or two sisters or two companions and invoked the image of a united and happy home. The reference to poets like Periyathambi Pillai and Nallathambi inevitably brings to mind Subramania Bharathi (1882 - 1921) whose centenary is being celebrated this year. Although Bharathi is one of the universalists of modern Indian literature his passionate poems on his mother tongue motherland and indigenous culture have generated linguistic consciousness among the Tamils in various ways. Bharathi's poetry is unique in that it combines two visions - the universal and the local. His deep concern for the local and the immediate includes such phenomena as language, culture, social evils and personal freedom. As a result, his influences too have varied with different sections of the people. While our poets like Thuraiappa Pillai, Periyathambi, Nallathambi and Somasundara Pulavar imbibed the broader - nationalist - aspects of Bharathi, there were others who more or less consciously limited themselves to his local vision. In other words they have overlooked the main course fashioned by Bharathi and taken to the by - paths. Today Bharathi stands out as an all Indian poet and has come to be cherished in many countries on the strength of his Lyricism and universalism. At the same time it must be admitted that he was also, in more than one sense one of the progenitors of Tamil nationalism. From the 1930s Bharathi's writings began to trickle down to Ceylon and scholars, creative writers, social reformers and eventually politicians responded to them. It is true that contemporary criticism lays increased emphasis on the social content of Bharathi's works. But as in Tamilnadu so in Sri Lanka too, Tamil nationalists have projected the poet as a champion of language.

Post-independent political developments ushered in new dimensions to the problems of language and culture. The disfranchisement of about nine lakhs of Tamils of Indian origin and the constant increase of Sinhalese seats in successive elections and other events increased the awareness of the Tamils as a national minority. It was not fortuitous that in 1952 the Tamil Cultural Society was formed in Colombo. Its programme included not only the propagation of the history and culture of the Tamils in Sri Lanka but also in other parts of the world. Some aspect of the cultural consciousness at this period merit attention: Although South India continued to be looked upon as the 'mainland' or as many Sri Lanka Tamils used to call it, their 'motherland', it was nevertheless gradually receding into the background. The past and present history of the Tamils in Sri Lanka were unavoidably becoming increasingly important and experientially immediate.¹⁹ Whatever common links and bonds there were, between the Tamils in Sri Lanka and South India, the two peoples were living under different Governments and facing different problems. The dialectal differences too were becoming more evident. Thus for the first time Sri Lankan Tamils began to manifest a keen interest in this land. No doubt the interest was mostly from the Tamil point of view; Questions such as when and from where did the Tamils come here? Are they autochthonous to the land? What is their relationship vis a vis the Sinhala people? What is their contribution to the culture and civilization of this country? These and other questions protruded to the forefront in their ever increasing frequency and intensity. It is true that in the preceding decades Mudaliyar C. Rasanayagam (1870 - 1940), Fr. Gnanapiragasar, A. Muthuhamby, K. Velupillai (1860 - 1944) and others had shown interest in the history of the Tamils. Their attempts were basically academic and amateurish in character. But in the fifties the historical writings were more than academic. There was an urgency and involvement in the quests. Professor K. Kanapathi Pillai (1903 - 1968) published his historical play *Samkili* (1956) which he prefaced with a "history of Tamils in Sri Lanka". This was followed by C. S. Navaratnam's *Tamils and Ceylon* (1958), and K. Navaratnam's (1898 - 1962)

Tamil Element in Ceylon Culture (1959). Nor was the interest confined to history. K. Navaratnam who was a devotee of Ananda Coomaraswamy and had popularized some of his books in Tamil, brought out in Tamil *The Development of Arts in Sri Lanka* (1954). This trend continued to grow with the voices becoming more shrill and the tone overtly polemical. Some of the academic writings of this period found an outlet in the journal *Tamil Culture* (1952 - 1966) which was being edited by a Sri Lankan - Xavier S. Thani Nayagam. It was printed and published in Madras. It carried academic articles like A. J. Wilson's "Cultural and Language Rights in the Multinational Society" (1953), Thani Nayagam's "Tamil Culture - its past, its present and its future with special reference to Ceylon" (1955), and also desultory pieces like W. Balendra's "Trincomalee Bronzes" (1953) and S. J. Gunasegaram's "Early Tamil Cultural Influences in South-East Asia" (1957). S. Natesapillai's "The Northern Kingdom" (1960), and "Glimpses of the Early History of Jaffna" were likewise meant for the general reader. H. W. Tambiah published his *The Law and Customs of the Tamils of Ceylon* (1954) probably responding to the prevalent milieu. A recent contribution to the subject is *Tamil Culture in Ceylon* by M. D. Reghavan. Generally speaking, the concept of Tamil culture was given a wider significance and interpretation. C. Sivaratnam's *The Tamils in Early Ceylon* (1964) reflects this tendency. By the mid sixties academic interest in the subject had developed sufficiently and a number of doctoral theses were produced. K. Indrapala's doctoral thesis "Dravidian Settlements in Ceylon and the Beginnings of the Kingdom of Jaffna" (1965) was followed by S. Pathmanathan's "The Kingdom of Jaffna" (1969) as a doctoral thesis. Indrapala's Tamil book *Dravidian Architecture in Ceylon* (1970) is another book dealing with the problem of cultural definition and identity. A few Western scholars too have written on these subjects during this period.

While discussing the political aspects of the language, something should be said about the impact of the anti-Hindi agitation that took place in Madras in 1937. The movement was essentially against the introduction of compulsory Hindi in

schools. But its ramifications were wider. At its height the anti-Hindi agitation drew support from all types of Tamil enthusiasts. One Civananta Adikal from Ceylon a disciple of Vedachalam was also in the forefront of the movement. Leading from one to the other the anti-Hindi movement eventually evolved into the demand for a separate Tamil Province or Dravidanad. All these were pregnant with consequences for the Sri Lankan who recalled the late fifties and sixties during their own agitations against the imposition of Sinhala.

Beginning from the late fifties and manifesting itself forcefully during the sixties was a new social phenomenon that had an immediate incandescence in the literary field. For the first time the literary and cultural movement touched the traditionally oppressed section of the Tamil people who had hitherto been beyond the pale. Both in South India and Sri Lanka, post Independence problems created the conditions for the emergence of a band of writers who came from the traditionally oppressed sections of Tamil society, that is, the lower castes. Many of them were attracted by Marxism and leftist organisations which provided them with a world view and the confidence to struggle against exploitation and articulate their thoughts and feelings freely. As might be expected, their level of literary education was somewhat weak. But they ushered in new experiences and visions into fiction, poetry and drama using hitherto unheard of dialects, idioms and expressions. They were indifferent to "correct" Tamil itself as taught by school teachers; pure Tamil was of no concern to them: they in fact openly despised it and ridiculed its proponents. To them linguistic restrictions or restraints were akin to social and political oppression and all such barriers had to be broken down. Harrison's general observation in a slightly different context seems applicable here.

Where language differences tend to coincide with class distinctions language conflict is apt to coincide accordingly with the lines of social conflict, greatly increasing it. And if the language of the lower classes is spoken by them at a time when they increase in

numbers, or when they gain a bigger share in political and economic power in the society, then the language quarrels will be part of a general process of their elevation in the society and of their gradual bid for increasing social power." 21

With this the linguistic consciousness would appear to have had its full run. Emanating from the upper classes it had touched the entire society in different ways. Although a general consciousness of language and culture was probably common to the entire community, its significance and importance was relative and felt differently by different social groups and classes. Furthermore, what were at the beginning purely sentimental and symbolic issues evolved into concrete problems vitally affecting the social, economic and political life of the people. The cultural nationalism of the Tamils is today at the cross roads. It is no more a mere question of linguistic and cultural identities. It is the basic question of Nationality. The present crisis has given a dominant role to the political question. To that extent problems related to Language, Religion, Literature, etc., have become subordinated to the primary issue. To put it another way, the whole thing has become integrated. In that sense the linguistic and cultural consciousness described earlier has reached new heights or reached its logical conclusion. Only a proper solution to the main contradiction can create the appropriate conditions so necessary for the further development of this consciousness in a positive and productive manner.

NOTES

1. On the significance of Swami Vivekananda's visit to Ceylon, see. K. Kailasapathy, "The Impact of Swami Vivekananda on Hinduism in Sri Lanka", Golden Jubilee Souvenir, Ramakrishna Mission, Sri Lanka Centre, 1980.
2. The fact that Coomaraswamy's father was a distinguished Tamil gave an added significance to his visit. Coomaraswamy himself referred in his speech to his father who in his day "was the leading Tamil of Ceylon"
3. A Muthuthambi Pillai was the translator and publisher.
4. Cf "The Brahma Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj, all of them catered for the upper classes." D. P. Mukerji *Sociology of Indian Culture*, Jaipur, 1979. p. 25.
5. It is of considerable interest that the educated section of the people were themselves conscious of their status as elites.

The *Hindu Organ* (3-2-1897) had this to say about the persons who had gathered to receive Swami Vivekananda in Jaffna. "It was found that about one hundred persons composed of the elite of the Hindu society were collected at upar anxiously awaiting the arrival of Swami Vivekananda on Sunday morning."

6. On Navalar see, K. Kailasapathy, "Arumuga Navalar; the Central Years (1834-1848)" *The Central*, Jaffna 1979.
7. *Tamil Studies*, Tirunelvely, 1970. p. 87
8. See K. Kailasapathy, "Arnold Sathasivam Pillai and Tamil Renaissance", *Jaffna College Miscellany*, the Centenary Number) Jaffna, 1981, pp. 81-87.
9. A. V. Subramania Aiyar's remark is apt: "Towards the close of the last century he become the doyen among the Tamil scholars, who held him in high esteem" *ibid*: p. 91; for a contemporary appreciation of him vide. *Siddhanta Deepika* (21-8-1897) p. 91. "But for his great energy and perseverance and untold self sacrifice, many a priceless work would long ago have been reduced to dust".

10. For a brief biography, see V. Muttucumaraswamy, C. W. Thamotharam Pillai. Jaffna, 1971.

11. K. Kailasapathy, "The Tamil Purist Movement: A Re-Evaluation", Social Scientist, Number 82, Triyandrum, 1979, pp. 23-51.

12. During Vivekananda's visit to Jaffna, it was Chellappa Pillai who received the Swami at the entrance to Jaffna Hindu College and conducted him to the dais and garlanded him. He also spoke. Vide Hindu Organ, (3-2-1897)

13. of "These minority groups, particularly Christians, are most vociferous in identifying with Tamil linguistic nationalism and have provided organizational leadership and vocal propagandist talents". S. Arasaratnam, "Nationalism in Sri Lanka and the Tamils" in Collective identities Nationalisms and protest in Modern Sri Lanka, edited by M. Roberts, Colombo, 1979. pp 504-519.

14. S. Vedachalam, better known as Maraimalai Adigal (1876-1950), the founder of the Tamil Purist Movement too visited Ceylon on a number of occasions. His influence was quite pervasive and contributed to the quickening of linguistic consciousness.

15. For a short history of the Youth Congress, see Santasilan Kadirgamar, "The Jaffna Youth Congress" in Handy Perinbanayagam - A Memorial Volume. Jaffna, 1980.

16. Natesan also wore the turban as part of the traditional Tamil attire. Leading personalities, perhaps beginning from Sir Muttu Coomaraswamy wore the turban. Natesan's father-in-law Sri P Ramanathan gave the turban an 'aristocratic' touch. Sir Kanthia Vaithianathan (1896-1965) was perhaps the last Tamil politician to wear it. It went out of fashion along with other changes in the socio-political life of the Tamils. This merits a sociological inquiry.

17. of Though in later days the Sadir unfortunately developed sensual characteristics which almost brought about the extinction of the art... the corruption that

nearly killed the art was not theirs alone but that of society in general and for that society must bear the responsibility" Rukmini Devi Arundale 'Bharata Natyam' in Indian Dance, New Delhi, 1955. p. 10-11.

18. It must be pointed out that Coomaraswamy's works inspired many non-Tamils as well. C.f. "The Dance of Siva was the first book of Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy's that I read. I was thrilled with it. I was then a student in England awaking to a national consciousness" Deva Surya Sena, "Ananda Coomaraswamy" in Homage to Kalayogi, edited by S. Durai Raja Singam, Kuantan, (Malaya), 1948. p. 6.
19. The Tamil Festival that took place at the Parameshvara College, Jaffna in 1951 may be said to symbolise this change. Tamil scholars of Sri Lanka, South and north India gathered in Jaffna to participate in the festival. Mr. S. Natesan took an active part in its organization which was inspired by the Madras Tamil Development Society. Subsequent International Tamil Conference grew out of this idea and experience. See, Senator Dr. S. Natesan Memorial Number, Chunnakam, 1966 p. 21.
20. On the anti-Hindi agitation see, K. Nambi Arooran, Tamil Renaissance and Dravidian Nationalism (1905-1944), Madurai 1980, pp. 186-218. (This book is a revised version of a ph D. dissertation submitted to the University of London in 1976.) For related data on the impact of the South Indian anti-Hindi agitation and the pure-Tamil movement on Sri Lankan Tamil scholars, also see K. Kailasapathy, 'Tamil Purist Movement - a Re-Evaluation.
21. Selig S. Harrison, The Most Dangerous Decades, Columbia University, 1957. p. 12r

On the anti-Hindi agitation see E. N. Srinivas Aiyangar, "The Anti-Hindi Agitation in Madras (1907-1908)", Madras 1909, pp. 182-183. This book is a revised version of a paper presentation submitted to the University of London in 1928. For related data on the impact of the 1907 agitation on Tamil education and the anti-Hindi movement on the Tamil Nadu school system see E. N. Srinivas Aiyangar, "The Anti-Hindi Agitation in Madras (1907-1908)", Madras 1909, pp. 182-183.

Colombia University, 1937-1938



முதலிய நாலாய் பரிசு
மாநகர தாலா செ
பாதிநாயகம்



12/9/1832

Printed at
NEW LEELA PRESS,
"Sinnadurai Building"
182, Messenger Street.
Colombo-12.