
ABSTRACT

Research Theme: Mapping the processes of transmission, recovery and reception of classical Tamil literature in late 19th and early 20th century colonial Madras Presidency

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My research question is on mapping the processes of transmission, recovery and reception of classical Tamil literature in late 19th and early 20th century colonial Madras Presidency. The 19th century in Indian history not only witnessed the consolidation of Colonialism but also the proliferation of print technology the implications of which were far reaching. With the proliferation of printing presses the regional languages and literatures got into print medium and this coupled with colonial knowledge forms created conditions for the possibility of consolidation of multiple identities among the colonized. The process of recovering the classical Tamil texts begun in early 19th century in the context of the college of Fort St George established primarily to train the arriving civil servants in the languages of South for the purposes of colonial administration. However the center of gravity soon shifted to Jaffna in Sri Lanka where the efforts were made to print the classical Tamil grammars and devotional hymns of bhakti saints by Arumuka Navalar in response to the activities of the Christian missionaries. The perception of the preservative aspect of print and the urge to democratize the recovered texts begin with Arumuka Navalar who seems to have understood these aspects from the Christian missionaries. Arumuka Navalar had a wide network with Tamil scholars in Tamilnadu and hence the trend set by him in the context of Jaffna soon begun to influence Tamilnadu. The rulers of native princely states and the traditional landed aristocracy actively patronized the Saiva religious institutions, which soon started actively facilitating the printing of classics by providing the copies of palm-leaf manuscripts. However the transmission of 'Tamil' literary culture was not confined only to the religious institutions. Outside the institutional context too the manuscript had a symbolic power and hence wealthy individuals and learned pundits were preserving it. I attempt to document the processes of transmission of Tamil classics by taking up case studies of few individuals in the context of outside the religious institutions. The network with these individuals created by scholars who printed the Tamil classics was crucial to understand the wider efforts in the process of recovering Tamil classics. The printing of Tamil classics was not a linear process. In a competitive colonial environment where the access to print technology was widely available to the native population across Tamil region from the mid-19th century onwards, the printing of classics was met with competition, contestation and resistance. The proliferation of printing presses across Tamil region created not only competition among the publishers but also among authors. The urge for fame and money drove the individuals to author works of literature and print the old texts.

The printed Tamil classics were soon put to rigorous textual criticism and the emergence of Tamil literary histories as new genre of practice amply demonstrate the case. There was a shift from the synchronic understanding of time and literature to the diachronic one. The Tamil literary histories attempted by number of individuals from the late 19th century were not free from the contemporary concerns of the day. The colonial knowledge forms and categories were transported to the historical past and literature was an active terrain of interpretation for this enterprise. The social tensions inherent in colonial society, which is a result of a drastic reorganization of colonial economic processes of 19th century, had a profound impact on the way literature was understood and received. Thus it was not only the recovery of Tamil classics but also the reception part of it was met with contestation. The contending social groups vied with each other and literature was one such terrain of contention. The emergence of national movement spearheaded by Indian National Congress also inaugurated the efforts to glorify the Indian past thereby laying foundation for the legitimate claim for nation. The Indian nationalists in the Tamil speaking region are not exception to this project. There

were attempts made to equate Sanskrit and Hinduism with Indian history and tradition, which did not go uncontested. The reactionary groups started their own movement countering the legitimacy of the national movement. The recovered and printed Tamil classics were a terrain of contestation and I shall attempt to read the politics involved in it. The research is thus divided at two levels. First, an attempt shall be made to understand the processes of transmission, recovery and printing of Tamil classical literature in late 19th and early 20th century colonial Tamilnadu. Second, an attempt shall be made to understand the reception of classical Tamil literature by various contending social groups in the colonial Tamilnadu.