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From Pulavar to Professor:
Politics and the Professionalization
of Tamil Pandits

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Abstract

This paper traces the changing status of Tamil *pulavars*, or *pandits*, in colonial Tamilnadu. *Pulavars* first encountered colonial modernity through the College of Fort St George, where civil servants were trained in Indian languages. Following Macaulay's 'Minute on Education' of 1835, the policy of imparting Western education undermined the status of language teachers. Hierarchizing languages as 'classical' and 'vernacular' further impacted the professionalization of Tamil teachers. *Pulavars* received substantially lower salaries, and could not hold administrative posts. Seen as symbols of a lost world, the carriers of a hidebound tradition, and therefore impediments to modernity, they were objects of ridicule. However, orientalist scholarship empowered the Tamil language, contributing to the formation of a new identity based on language, 'race', and caste: Tamil, Dravidian, and non-Brahmin. Tamil teachers were mobilized by this movement for a new identity – a key moment being the anti-Hindu agitation (1937-39) – which enhanced their social status.

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From *Pulavar* to Professor:

Politics and the Professionalization of Tamil *Pandits*

U.V. Swaminatha Iyer (1855–1942), the great Tamil scholar who edited and published Tamil classical texts, notes a red-letter day in his incomplete but nevertheless detailed autobiography: Thursday, the 12th of February 1880,¹ when he was presented with the opportunity to step inside a modern school building for the first time in his life. He was then 25.

In his youth, Swaminatha Iyer had been trained by *pandits* or *pulavars* in various parts of the Thanjavur delta, and tutored by the great versifier-scholar of the nineteenth century, Mahavidwan Meenakshisundaram Pillai (1815–1876), before becoming absorbed into his life at the famed Saivite monastery, Thiruvavaduthurai matam. Here he lived a contented life, teaching *thambirans* (novitiates), hobnobbing with the ascetics and the pontiff, and composing occasional verses.

But on 12 February 1880, C. Thyagaraja Chettiar, another student of Meenakshisundaram Pillai, and head Tamil *pandit* at Kumbakonam College² (a highly respected institution in the Tamil districts of Madras Presidency), approached Swaminatha Iyer with an offer of a *panditship*. Thyagara Chettiar had made a similar offer seven years previously, suggesting that Swaminatha Iyer come to the newly-established Kumbakonam Native High School as a teacher, but had been unsuccessful. This time, however, Thyagaraja Chettiar wanted Swaminatha Iyer to step into his own shoes, urging him:

Do not heed their [the potentates of the monastery] words. Just say ‘Goodbye’ and leave the matam and come with me. Even if you labour hard in this monastery all your life your position can rise no further. The fifty rupees you earn in a year here will be your monthly salary in the college. Here you have to shout at the top of your voice from dawn to dusk. But, in the college, you won’t have to teach for more than four hours a day. You’ll have two weekly holidays as well.³

Swaminatha Iyer began to waver. In the end, Thyagaraja Chettiar convinced him, and tricked the pontiff into relieving Swaminatha Iyer of his duties. A day later, Swaminatha Iyer left for Kumbakonam armed with the pontiff’s testimonial and a letter of recommendation addressed to the principal of Kumbakonam College. The rest, as the cliché goes, is literary history. Swaminatha Iyer served for the next thirty-nine years as Tamil *pandit*, first at Kumbakonam,

and, from 1903 at the Presidency College. During these years he would be recognized as the most distinguished and accomplished Tamil scholar, winning honours that most Tamil *pandits* could scarcely imagine.

But how typical is his case?

To understand the more usual experiences of Tamil *pandits* in the late nineteenth century, this paper looks at the transition from the status of early colonial Tamil *pandits* as learned monks in religious monasteries or similar settings, to their employment in colonial institutions. It maps their low status in the colonial educational hierarchy, showing how Tamil *pulavars* were seen as pedants and out-of-step with modernity, and often caricatured or mocked for their supposed irrelevance.⁴ This representation became deeply entrenched and was reinforced by Tamil scholars who wished to modernize the language. But from the early twentieth century, oriental scholarship on comparative philology, together with a new print capitalism that oversaw the publication of Tamil classics, combined with an upsurge in identity politics to empower Tamil *pandits*. Tamil '*pulavars*' and '*pandithars*' (a name resented by scholars, as it could also be used for barbers who performed unpopular social tasks) contested the inferior status given to Tamil, and played a lead role in the popular anti-Hindi agitation of 1937-39 to garner a high place in Tamil culture.

Tamil Teachers in Early Colonial Times

The earliest engagement of Tamil *pulavars* with Western knowledge took place in the College of Fort St George.⁵ Founded in Madras in 1812, this College trained British junior civil servants in Indian languages, but closed in 1854 after the training shifted to Haileybury. The College's central figure was Francis Whyte Ellis (1777–1819) who first formulated the theory of the Dravidian family of languages that shaped much of modern politics in Tamilnadu and, as we shall see, impacted the life of Tamil *pulavars*. *Pulavars*, also known as *pandits*, were employed at the College during these years, where they were referred to as headmasters.⁶ Like U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, before joining the College, these Tamil *pandits* were trained in traditional schools, especially in Saivite monasteries, and some, such as Kottaiyur Sivakolundu Desikar who worked at the court of Raja Serfoji II of Thanjavur, had also been employed in the courts of local *zamindars* and petty chieftains. But the record is entirely silent on how these *pulavars* engaged with orientalist scholarship of the West. Despite its employment of *pandits*, the College of Fort St George arguably made no lasting impact on the professionalization of Tamil teachers.

It is only from the 1840s, with the establishment of the precursors of the Madras University and the Madras Presidency College, and the creation of a Directorate of Public Instruction (DPI), that we begin to know something about the changing status of Tamil *pandits* and the professionalization of Tamil teaching. Prior to the establishment of schools on Western lines, the broad contours of Tamil education can be summarized as follows. Children studied in *thinnai* schools. (The *thinnai* was a raised platform adjoining the outer front wall of a house, meant for the men of the house to relax and to entertain visitors. The village school functioned on the *thinnai* of the schoolmaster's house, and thus the name, *thinnai pallikkoodam* or school.) The Monitorial System was in practice (which came to be called the Madras System of education⁷), where the master taught the senior students who in turn taught the younger ones. Basic literacy and numeracy formed the core curriculum, while the syllabus comprised didactic texts with religious overtones, if not content. Effectively, these schools were little more than primary schools, with the schoolmaster paid for by the village and the parents, but some students went on to higher learning.⁸

Traditionally, such students would seek out individual teachers in the vicinity of their home in order to acquire higher knowledge and skills. Such teachers were often experts in specific texts, but a scholar who had mastered a text or a set of texts was not often familiar with, let alone well versed in, other texts. Sectarianism was rife, and the scholars might be affiliated to religious monasteries or local potentates. If *pulavars* read texts outside their sect, they did not impart them to their students, and if they did, it was only as polemical refutation (*parabakkam* or *parapaksham*). There was a considerable overlap in disciplines, as students read literary, religious and philosophical texts. In fact, before the impact of Western epistemology, traditional knowledge was seen as a whole: for example, the Saiva canon of hymns, Thevaram, was literature, philosophy, theology, logic, and religion all rolled into one. The students in turn became teachers affiliating themselves with religious monasteries and courts of *zamindars* and chiefs, who acted as their patrons.

It was from this universe of *pulavars* that the new form of education system introduced by the British drew its Tamil teachers.⁹

Pandits in Colonial Schools

Nirad Chaudhuri commented in relation to *pandits* in other parts of India that ‘British rule brought a modern means of earning a living within the reach of ... *pandits*.’¹⁰ How true is this in relation to Tamil *pandits*? To explore this question, we first need to turn to the history of education in Madras Presidency.¹¹

In the early 1830s Thomas Munro, the governor of Madras, constituted a board to organize a system of public instruction. The idea was to establish two principal schools in each district and one ‘inferior’ school in each *taluk* (administrative sub-division of a district). This board, which existed for two years, established fourteen district schools and 81 taluk schools. In 1836 the scheme was pronounced a failure and all such schools were abolished. In 1841, in the presidency capital of Madras city, a high school was established with senior (collegiate) and junior (school) departments. Twelve years later, in 1853, this school was ‘considered sufficiently advanced to justify the organization of a Collegiate department’. The resulting department came to be called Presidency College. Even though Madras University was not formally constituted until 1857, this college, with power to function as a board of general education, was referred to as the University.¹² The University of Madras, along with the Universities of Calcutta and Bombay, was an examining and affiliating body which prescribed the curriculum and awarded degrees. Meanwhile, in 1853, provincial schools were established in Madras. All in all, it was a narrow system with a small network of fledgling institutions which grew slowly and steadily over the decades.

By this time, following Macaulay’s ‘Minute of Education’ of 1835, written at the request of the Governor-General of India, the study of vernacular language had been reduced to being one small part of a larger curriculum that included ‘a good knowledge of Arithmetic, elements of geometry and algebra; fair knowledge of General geography and leading facts of history of India and Britain; outlines of astronomy and political education’.¹³ Language training now went from being at the heart of education to being only a minor aspect of the syllabus.

One manifestation of this loss of status for languages was that Tamil teachers were not designated as teachers or masters (in schools) or as lecturers or professors in the colleges. With the adoption of English and Western forms of knowledge, Tamil was subsumed under the category of the ‘vernacular’ (on which more below) and thus placed on the back foot, although whether education was to be carried out in English or in the vernacular continued to be a subject of debate. Tamil teachers were categorized first as moonshees/munshis (until about the 1880s)

and later as *pandits*. They also received substantially lower pay compared to other teachers (see below).

The education system of Madras Presidency, like that of other parts of British India, relied on monitoring by inspectors, reflecting a similar development in the police department which came into existence at about the same time. School and college inspectors were appointed from among the senior principals, and were thus at the top of the education hierarchy, exercising powers through annual visits and subsequent reports submitted to the DPI, the umbrella body running the system. These reports could make or break not only individual careers but the functioning of the institution itself, especially if it relied on government funds like grants-in-aid schools. However, their level of detail also makes them an extremely rich source for historians, as they provide interesting evidence of the status of vernacular teaching and teachers.

What was wrong with *Pandits*?

In the nineteenth century, the school inspectors were almost all exclusively Europeans, with just a couple of Indians. Even in the twentieth century, Europeans dominated the Madras Educational Service (MES) from which the inspectors were drawn. The inspectors' reports, written in a paternalistic tone, always tended to be critical of schools, colleges, Indian teachers, and students; praise, when expressed, was patronizing. These reports were set in the discourse of material and moral progress of an oriental society under the rule of a superior Western power.

While the DPI and its inspectors were quite critical of all segments of the education system, the sharpest criticism was reserved for vernacular teachers. 'The inefficiency of the Vernacular instruction is a very serious evil,' asserted the DPI's Director in 1857 – a view and a tone that did not change for nearly a century.¹⁴ Seventy years later, in 1927 the DPI was still saying 'The vernaculars are still largely in the hands of *pandits* of the old-fashioned type.'¹⁵ One inspector, reporting on the Kumbakonam Provincial School at the time of the great revolt, wrote fatalistically:

[T]here are as yet many defects to be remedied, especially in the Vernacular Department; but the difficulties to be encountered are so formidable, that time alone, with a determined adherence to the principles which have been enunciated on the subject of Vernacular Education, can be expected to overcome them.¹⁶

What was the specific complaint of the administrators? '[Vernacular education] has been hitherto entrusted to persons of the Pundit class, some of whom possess considerable attainments in their own language, but who, as a rule, appear to be singularly deficient in the power of imparting knowledge to others,' wrote one inspector.¹⁷ Another conceded that (in relation to Kumbakonam College) 'Moonshees as a body [are] competent ... to guide intelligent and well trained pupils to an idiomatic knowledge of the Vernacular.' But they were 'utterly unfit for the ordinary work of tuition. They have no system or what they have is bad. Moreover, with however good intentions they cannot get over their old prejudices.'¹⁸

Another inspector categorically asserted that 'the great body of Native Munshis are not efficient teachers, though they may be well read men.'¹⁹ Rev. Peter Percival, an Orientalist, holding the professorship of vernacular languages in the Presidency College, observed that the *pandits* are 'exclusively trained in the old principles of Hindu scholarship' and, presumably as a corollary, 'unacquainted with the best methods of governing and teaching.'²⁰ He hoped, however, that 'in time, a course of studies in Indian classical and vernacular combined with a sound course in English and history teaching up to a degree will produce a class of teachers who will be able to reform the classical and vernacular teaching in schools and colleges'.²¹

In effect, colonial administrators were blaming language teachers for their inability to lift the students out of the morass of outdated knowledge to a level of modern knowledge. They wrung their hands that 'there is little hope therefore of any radical improvement', unless and

until we are supplied with a new race of Vernacular teachers trained in our own systems. [I]n our higher schools it will be desirable to appoint one Moonshee, thoroughly acquainted with the Vernacular authors, but to entrust the Vernacular instruction generally to teachers who have been trained in English institutions.²²

The situation according to them was so bad that A.J. Arbuthnot, the head of the DPI, even contemplated, as early as in 1853, that

the duty of teaching the Vernacular languages should ... be entrusted to the teachers by whom the instruction in the other branches taught in the Schools is conducted, and that the *Pandit* class of teachers should be gradually got rid of.²³

This obviously impractical idea shows the desperation of colonial officials about the state of vernacular education.²⁴

Not only were teaching methods out-of-date, the curriculum taught by the *pulavars* was seen to be outdated, traditional, and antediluvian. In the view of the administrators, ‘There is, strictly speaking, no prose literature, the poetical vocabulary is almost as far removed from the ordinary speaking and writing, as if it were another language.’²⁵ The fact that everything was in verse form encouraged rote learning and therefore it was seen as a real obstacle to the accumulation of modern knowledge, and to modernity itself.

By the 1850s, institutions known as Normal Schools had been founded to train (non-language) teachers for Anglo-Vernacular and Vernacular Schools. But these schools made no impact on Tamil language teaching primarily because the *pulavars* did not possess education of ‘the new kind’, and held no degrees, diplomas, or certificates. The administration tried to introduce new methods to certify Tamil teachers but this process took over half a century to be put in place and was not complete until a century after our story ends (see below).

‘Just a *Pandit*’

The lack of formal educational certificates went hand and hand with low salaries for Tamil *pandits*, which further lowered the status of vernacular teachers. The education system in Madras Presidency was very hierarchical, and this was starkly reflected in the salary structure. In 1870 the head of the DPI’s salary was Rs 2,000 p.m., a very high sum indeed; the principal of the Presidency College received Rs 1,250, and an inspector of schools was paid Rs. 1,000.²⁶ But while the principal of Kumbakonam College received a monthly salary of Rs 750, even the famed scholar Thyagaraja Chettiar earning only a monthly salary of only Rs 50 as a Tamil pandit at the time of his retirement in 1880, after fifteen years of distinguished service. Even this amount compared favourably with the salary received by other teachers in Kumbakonam: the first Tamil master earned Rs 30, and the second Rs 15 per month.²⁷

Apart from being low, salaries were also not uniform across the presidency, and varied from institution to institution.²⁸ Kumbakonam, in fact, ranked quite high. In 1898, when Maraimalai Adigal was first appointed in another high-ranked institution, the Madras Christian College, he received a monthly salary of Rs 25. Vai.Mu. Sadagoparamanujachari, in 1903, was receiving a monthly salary of Rs 25 at C.S.M. College with an annual increment of Rs 2–2 ½ reaching a maximum of Rs 35.²⁹ The real picture is revealed in the less prestigious schools, where salaries were abysmal. In Cuddalore the Tamil headmaster was paid Rs 10 per month and the Tamil second master Rs 8.³⁰

The government was not unaware of this situation but was far from keen on increasing the emoluments. Even in 1906, the government was saying that

[The salaries] are undoubtedly low and imply as a necessary correlative a low standard of attainments on the part of the teachers. At the same time, it is difficult to see how any material and general improvement can be effected without a very large expenditure which must inevitably fall on public funds. ... An increase of only one rupee per month per teacher means an annual expenditure of Rs 3 ½ lakh rupees, and 2–3 times this would be necessary to make the post even moderately attractive.³¹

This situation, the government claimed, had improved somewhat by the time of World War I and the government patted itself on its back that, 'The teachers of the classical and vernacular languages appear to have undergone some improvement... the improvement in the pundits' salaries in schools under public management will make it possible to introduce men of broader views and more rational methods than the learned men of old.'³² This was however an overstatement as the lot of Tamil teachers achieved some parity only in 1949.

The humiliating and impoverished situation of Tamil teachers, who were designated '*pandits*' rather than regular teachers, was worsened by comparisons to other teaching professionals, who nearly always earned more than they did. This was certainly the case for English teachers and, more importantly, Sanskrit teachers. (The struggle of Tamil to be recognized as equal with Sanskrit was long and we shall turn to it later.) For instance, the professor of vernacular literature at the Presidency College received a salary of Rs 500 per month because he was European. Other professors were paid between Rs 500 and 750 per month.³³

Tamil *pandits* had no power in the school hierarchy and had limited responsibilities. Throughout the colonial period, *pandits* could not become headmasters. Without holding any administrative position, they could also not become inspectors or even deputy inspectors of schools. They could not compete for positions in the Senate and other bodies in the university, nor could they be appointed as hall superintendents for conducting examinations or as chief examiners, positions which all came with considerable authority and (monetary) perquisites.³⁴

Thus, the low social status of Tamil teachers was confirmed by this combination of a lack of formal educational qualifications, low and unequal salaries, and the fact that they were not able to hold positions of authority. In addition, in many people's eyes they still belonged to an outdated world of scholarship and pedagogy.

An incident from Poondi Aranganatha Mudaliar's life illustrates this tellingly. In the 1870s, Aranganatha Mudaliar worked for some time in Kumbakonam College as a professor of mathematics. As a man deeply interested in Tamil he befriended Thyagaraja Chettiar, spent

long hours talking to him, and even visited his home frequently. A colleague reproached him: pointing out that Thyagaraja Chettiar was ‘just a *pandit*’ (*‘verum pandithar’*) and advising him not to indulge the friendship. The fact that a furious Aranganatha Mudaliar reprimanded the man for his unsolicited advice is a different matter.³⁵

The word ‘*pandit*’ descended almost into a word of abuse. And as the immensely popular writer Kalki R. Krishnamurthy said, ‘In those days when the word “Tamil *Pandit*” was mentioned Ammaiyappa Pillai of *Kamalambal Charitiram* [a well-known book featuring a pedantic, comical fictional teacher mocked by pupils and other teachers alike³⁶] came immediately to mind. Within the literati Tamil *pandits* were repressed, depressed, untouchable and un-see-able classes.’³⁷

Language Politics

Vernacular: The Status of a House Slave

The low status of *pandits* was exacerbated by the inferior position accorded to the Tamil language itself. English being the master language, its study was the path to progress and material development. Students and their parents therefore showed little interest in studying Tamil.

‘Hindu pupils usually shew little liking for their vernacular language, and neglect its study whenever they can do so with impunity. This will doubtless be remedied as soon as a body of efficient teachers has been raised up.’³⁸ One headmaster reported that his ‘Moonshees tell me that the boys do not make so much progress in Tamil as they do in English. They seem to generally entertain the idea that their future prospects depend much more upon their successful cultivation of English studies than upon their knowledge of Tamil.’³⁹

Noting the ‘apathy of the Natives on the subject of vernacular education’, A.J. Arbuthnot, the head of the DPI, underlined ‘the desire for what they designate as an English education is intense and daily becoming more so’, adding ‘[t]hey were anxious to have English schools established, in the hope, which each man cherishes, that some member of his family will be thereby enabled to procure employment in some office under government’. He also ruefully observed that this ‘mania for learning a smattering of English’ was not just restricted to populous towns but villages as well.⁴⁰

Students consequently performed rather poorly in Tamil examinations, and just got through the examinations with the minimum marks required for a pass. The distinguished Oxford orientalist, G.U. Pope, who served as Tamil examiner for the Madras University, ‘complained that the study of Tamil Grammar is neglected by the students in general and

observed that very few are able to scan'.⁴¹ Tamil teachers were, and are, notorious for being parsimonious, marking every little spelling mistake and *sandhi* error in red and proportionately deducting marks, and were probably, therefore, not popular among students.

But most importantly, the Tamil *pandit* was an object of ridicule. 'In schools and colleges of those days Tamil was ridiculed. It was common for students to ridicule Tamil *pandits*. Unable to bear this mocking, it was usual for Tamil *pandits* to burst out in anger. Most Tamil *pandits* were given [derisive] nicknames by students.'⁴² Students often played pranks in the classroom, and questioned old poems with 'stereotypical' oriental content. Headmasters complained that Tamil *pandits* could not manage the class and maintain order, which, as Krishna Kumar has reminded us, was the prime duty of the education system and its 'meek dictators'.⁴³ The theme of how they earned the respect of students – in a way that is often reminiscent of E.R. Braithwaite's *To Sir, With Love* – is a recurring trope in the autobiographies of many Tamil scholars.⁴⁴

In sum, the comments of V. Bhashyam Aiyangar, a distinguished lawyer and a Senate member of Madras University apply to the social status of all language teachers, not only Sanskrit, and perhaps especially to Tamil:

The highly educated Sanscrit *Pandit*, though he may be superior to such eminent Orientalists as Monier Williams and Max Muller, does not, if it should ever be his lot to appear before an official in respect of some revenue matter, or as a witness, or a suitor, receives at the hands of such an official even one hundredth of the attention or courtesy that a young graduate or an undergraduate of our universities secures ... [I]n the eyes of the official class, the best masters of Oriental Literature and Philosophy in India are nobodies, because they have not got a smattering of English education.⁴⁵

Sanskrit vs Tamil

If Tamil as 'vernacular' was the house slave to the master language of English it also suffered in relation to Sanskrit, which, from the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, had displaced Persian and came to be called a classical language. One reason for the preferential treatment of Sanskrit compared to Tamil was the pro-Sanskrit bias of the Brahmin elite who dominated the Senate.⁴⁶ Sanskrit was given pride of place while vernacular languages languished. This had a long history.⁴⁷

In 1865, there was a successful proposal, implemented in 1868, to institute a professorship in Sanskrit at the Presidency College. The professorship was intended to have a broad mandate:

[T]o deliver a course of lectures annually for the benefit of students in other Colleges and Schools, and the public in general; ... to devote time to examining and editing Sanskrit works, In asking for a European Sanskrit Scholar, and not a Sanskrit *Pandit*, what is wanted is not a teacher merely practically acquainted with the language, but a gentleman of trained intellect, who will take a philosophical view of Sanskrit, and from having been engaged in philological pursuits ... be competent to found a new school of Sanskrit students. Doubtless after some time it will no longer be requisite to look to Europe for a teacher of the kind required.⁴⁸

Similarly, in the 1880s, when there was a proposal to extend the powers of the three universities to grant honorary doctoral degrees, V. Bashyam Aiyangar argued (against the British point of view) that ‘the university should also encourage and recognize the interests of higher culture of an indigenous kind in what remains of the old but very valuable and splendid Indian literature, philosophy and science’. Contending that education was now exclusively European and that it ignored the Sanskrit scholar, he continued ‘Men who have laboured all their life in the study of Sanscrit lore, and whose minds are the most cultivated among the Hindu races, form an important link in the chain of the educated and teaching agency of this country’.⁴⁹

This was a view shared by many intellectuals of the time. Sanskrit was seen as the bedrock of the Indian’s culture, a status denied to Tamil. For example, there was no professorship in Tamil (a situation that prevailed in Madras University until 1946), although as we have seen, the professorship in Sanskrit was established as early as in 1868 at Presidency College and in 1914 at the University.⁵⁰ Instead a position called a professor of vernacular literature was created—a post reserved for Europeans, who, however, knew little of the vernacular languages. Not surprisingly, there were difficulties in filling the chair,⁵¹ and when the first appointee, one Joyes, died in 1878, the post was abolished and the position reverted back to that of a Superintendent of Vernacular Studies (surely a strange designation for an academic position) and filled by a native scholar, a Tamil translator at the DPI who was put under the Curator of Government Books and whose job was to correct proofs of various Tamil books that passed through the press.⁵²

Not only Tamil, but the term ‘vernacular’ itself was viewed as indicative of a lesser form of learning. In 1870–71, the education department began to distinguish between Indian languages as classical or vernacular. Sanskrit was designated as a classical language and Tamil was listed under the vernacular. While there is no record that speakers of Telugu, and other languages, found anything amiss in this classification, Tamil scholars greatly resented it,⁵³ a resentment that grew in the late nineteenth century and took on strong political overtones.

The designation of languages as classical and vernacular also had a direct impact on teaching and status. The study of vernacular languages, which in practical terms was little more than an exercise in composition, was an optional subject, both in the First Examination (F.A.)⁵⁴ and B.A. examinations, and there were those who sought to abolish it entirely. On the other hand, the study of a classical language—Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Sanskrit, or Arabic—was compulsory; and the choice usually fell on Sanskrit. Moreover, only two hours a week were assigned even for the two years of intermediate study of Tamil composition.⁵⁵

There was a constant tussle between the Madras Government and the Senate of the Madras University on the place of vernacular language. Thankfully, the government, in contrast to the powerful senate of the University, did not favour the abolition of vernaculars at collegiate level. There was no place for a compulsory study of the vernacular in the university prospectus of 1906, but the government considered it imperative that the students should not be given any inducement to put aside the study of their mother tongue, and accordingly inserted vernacular composition as a compulsory part of the exam.⁵⁶ In 1909, the University appointed a Senate committee which recommended the dropping of the study of vernaculars in the intermediate examination. Due to the huge uproar it caused, the government refused to accept the report and another committee was constituted in the same year. Consequently, vernacular composition was retained. Moreover, it needs to be noted that in the University context, the Tamil language was never treated separately, and was always clubbed together with other ‘oriental’ languages and designated as a vernacular.

Following amendments to the University Act, Madras University became a research institution in the early 1910s, and professorships were instituted for various disciplines, including Dravidian philology. But there was no position for Tamil. Instead, in 1914 four university readers were sanctioned for the philology of Indian languages. None was found suitable for the university professorship in Dravidian philology. Ultimately one reader for Tamil was appointed, an appointment that was renewed only for a year, and abolished after 1917.⁵⁷ A year later the senate rejected a proposal to appoint lecturers in Dravidian languages.⁵⁸

It was not until 1941 that the term ‘vernacular’ to denote modern Indian languages was formally abolished by the Government of Madras ‘in view of the growing feeling, in certain quarters, against use of the term’,⁵⁹ and it was only in 2004 that the Government of India declared Tamil a classical language by executive fiat.⁶⁰

Training Tamil Teachers

In this situation, it is no surprise that Tamil *pandits* were not trained systematically. It was a vicious circle. The low salaries of Tamil *pandits* were attributed to their lack of possessing certified, formal qualifications, but they could not obtain these qualifications due to the fact that Tamil was seen as an inferior language by training institutions.

In the nineteenth century appointments at educational institutions were made based on testimonials provided by other traditional scholars. But frequent changes in government policy, and consequent changes in school structure and appointment policy, impacted the lives of teachers. The attitude of school managements was also cause for concern. At one school the chairman of the school committee decided against appointing any Tamil *pandit* at all, preferring instead a Shastri (the name for a traditional Sanskrit *pandit*) with an M.A. in Sanskrit who doubled up as a Tamil teacher.⁶¹ It was only with the introduction of a diarchic system, following the Montague-Chelmsford reforms, that schools coming under elected District Boards streamlined appointments, qualifications, and emoluments. Even then there was considerable variation across districts, as these boards were autonomous.

Given the context of a lack of a system to assess Tamil *pandits*, the government tried to put in place a system whereby the qualifications of *pandits* could be certified. In 1897-98, the DPI, David Duncan, wanted to start an oriental division in the university—which could have served such a purpose—but at that time, neither university nor government approved his proposal to set honours and proficiency examinations in the oriental, classical, and vernacular languages.⁶²

However, by the first years of the twentieth century, the newly established Madurai Tamil Sangam, a body of Tamil scholars, had instituted graded examinations titled Pravesa Panditham (preliminary), Bala Panditham (junior), and Panditham (full *pandit*). The University contemplated the recognition of such studies as an ‘Oriental Title’ – as distinct from a degree, diploma, licence or certificate.⁶³ The intention was to encourage the study of oriental languages and literature on indigenous lines, and to introduce among *pandits* ‘the more critical methods of European orientalist’.⁶⁴

The long process of recognition of the Titles for Oriental Learning, or Oriental Titles as they were more generally known, began with the Senate of the Madras University considering the proposal in 1906 and appointing a committee to draft regulations. In 1909 the regulations were approved by the university, although the government took a year to give its approval. The first batch of students sat for the examinations in 1915.⁶⁵

The regulations established a system of education parallel with, but separate from, that carried on under other regulations. Candidates were to receive instruction for four years in an approved institution and were also required to attend any special courses of lectures the syndicate could institute for the purpose. Thus was established a separate system of titles or distinction for purely oriental learning which continued for a more than three-quarters of a century with various changes in content and nomenclature.

But Tamil continued to be discriminated. There was no separate Vidwan⁶⁶ title of study for Tamil. Instead the candidate was expected to study either two Dravidian languages, or pass the Sanskrit examination in lieu of a Dravidian language.⁶⁷ Vidwans in Tamil were to learn Sanskrit as a subsidiary language,⁶⁸ so that the options open to a prospective Tamil Vidwan candidate were either Sanskrit and a Dravidian language; Sanskrit and Oriya; or any two Dravidian languages.⁶⁹ Thus a Tamil *pandit* needed to study another Dravidian language or Sanskrit (hence the sobriquet *samapradhana vidwan*, ‘one with equal proficiency in two languages’.) This caused great resentment as not only was it onerous and discriminatory, it also gave a superior position to Sanskrit. Moreover, the choice of specialization for Sanskrit vidwans—philosophy, logic, grammar, literature, etc.—was denied to Tamil *pandits*.⁷⁰ A Tamil *Pandits’* conference at Trichinopoly protested

This conference is of the opinion that it is a great injustice and an inherent insult to the Tamil language that while for Oriental Title degree Sanskrit and Arabic have been individually allotted degrees, an equal if not more independent and classical language is not given an equal place in the curriculum... rules imposing the study of another vernacular or Sanskrit on candidates taking up Tamil would tend to discourage them.⁷¹

This situation was somewhat remedied only in 1926 when Tamil was permitted as a separate optional group for Oriental Title.⁷² Following this, there was regular demand for the creation of B.A. and M.A. degrees in Tamil,⁷³ but it was not until 1934 that even a B.A. Honours course in Tamil was introduced. That the credit for it went to Annamalai University and not the Madras University is an irony. There were other irritants as well. Tamil Vidwan diploma holders were

not permitted to wear convocation robes like graduates, a situation that changed only in the 1960s.⁷⁴

The system of qualifying and certifying for the Vidwan title which enabled the awardees to become teachers, introduced in 1917, took a while to take root, and even ten years after its introduction, the government rued that '[t]he vernaculars are still largely in the hands of *pandits* of the old-fashioned type. Qualifications were prescribed last year for this class of teachers but up to now no pundit with these qualifications have been appointed'.⁷⁵

The changing methods of qualification and assessment of Tamil *pandits* had a great impact on serving teachers; the rules and regulations varied from school to school, especially those aided by the government in some form, so that appointments, promotions, salary scales, etc. had constantly to be renegotiated.

Let us take the case of two eminent Tamil scholars who were affected. In 1932, E.M. Subramania Pillai, at that time a head Tamil pandit, in a Board High School in Nanguneri, wrote to a friend as below:

I am trying to appear for the Intermediate examination in March 1933. I am looking for certain exemptions. I had sent an application in this regard on 2 Aug 1929 but the syndicate [of the Madras University] rejected it. I have now sent a revision petition. I (i) am an S.S.L.C. 'eligible' (ii) possess Pandits' Training Certificate, and (iii) have 18 years of service. Despite these qualifications I am being denied exemption on the grounds that I am not an S.S.L.C. Trained teacher Can you please speak in person to Dr A. Lakshmanasamy Mudaliar or Mr Sivaramasethu Pillai or any other member of the Syndicate to help me?⁷⁶

That a scholar of standing (who played a leading role in the coining of Tamil technical and scientific terms) with no less than eighteen years of service was reduced to writing such a letter seeking exemption from a few requirements for a mere intermediate examination is indeed pitiable.

The case of R. Venkatachalam Pillai, Senior Professor of Tamil, Rajah's College, Thiruvaiyaru (Trivadi), is even more distressing. His 'humble petition' to the President Tanjore West District Board bears extensive quotation:

I learn ... that I do not possess any qualification whatever for the office I hold and that I may be required to qualify myself within a given time....

The Government has recognized the fact that eminent pandits of established reputation famous for their learning in traditional lore should be outside the operation of rules governing the Educational qualification of Tamil Pandits. If representations are made about my eminence and scholarship in the field of Tamil learning I am quite sure that Government would rank me with such pandits and may not raise this question at all.

Twenty years ago, I was the Headmaster & Pandit in an Oriental Institution at Konapet which prepares students for Pandita examinations of the Madura Tamil Sangam which is by far a stiffer Examination than the Oriental Title Vidwan Examinations. Having held that place with distinction for some years, I became the Head Tamil Pandit in the St. Peter's High School, Tanjore. As I was holding the appointment long prior to 1926, I was not affected by the rules regulating the Educational qualifications which came into effect only in 1926. From there I was drafted to the Rajah's College, Trivadi, when the place of a senior Pandit fell vacant in 1932. It has to be noted here that the authorities of these three institutions sought my services even without an application on my part, solely on account of my merits and erudition. Ever since I was appointed in the Trivadi College, the most important and difficult subjects were entrusted to me and the results of the public examinations justify my claims to the rank of eminent scholars.

The Oriental Vidwan Test is a very poor qualification for Senior Professors who have to prepare pupils for the Vidwan Examinations. The Madras & Annamalai Universities have been employing as Lecturers, Professors, etc., those who do not possess any Examination qualifications. The authorities of the Tanjore District Board who were well aware of this fact and of my reputation in the Tamil world offered me a permanent place on Rs 60-3-90, and I accepted the offer after resigning my permanent place as Head Tamil Pandit in a High School.

My name was borne in the list of Pandits fit to be examiners of the Oriental Title Examinations in the Madras & Annamalai Universities for several years and last year the Madras University has appointed me as a member of the Board of Examiners for Oriental Title Examinations.

It would be sheer injustice to hold that a scholar of repute, holding responsible positions for at least 20 years and that one who had been found good enough by university bodies to be examiner for the Oriental Title Examination should be held unsuitable for the

place he holds, on the flimsy and doubtful ground that he has not passed the Examination tests.

It is also unreasonable to oblige a scholar who is bordering on 50 and who is to retire in a few more years to sit for an Examination. ...

I therefore pray that you may be pleased to make necessary representations to Government and persuade them to recognize my merits and rank me as an eminent pandit of established repute and to uphold my present rank of seniority as the 3rd in the college.⁷⁷

That senior scholars with significant contributions to scholarship had to plead for concessions and exemptions speaks of the plight of Tamil *pandits*. Such humiliation left a deep mark on their psyche.

Training Institutions

One of the problems was the lack of adequate institutions for preparing students for taking the *Vidwan* examination. Madras University, for example, was basically an examining body, not a teaching institution.

Initially, the Madurai Tamil ‘Sangam’ (assembly of scholars) was the only institution that trained candidates for the Tamil *Vidwan* title. It was a difficult task to get Madras University’s recognition for this purpose and involved depositing a huge amount of money – as much as Rs 25,000 – with the university; even renowned Sangams, such as the Karanthai Tamil, had to struggle hard.⁷⁸

A *Vidwan* course in Tamil was introduced at Rajah’s College, Thiruvaiyaru only after the efforts of a prominent politician, A.T. Panneerselvam.⁷⁹ However, Tamil students were discriminated against and treated shabbily in comparison with Sanskrit students at this college.

By the early 1940s, Tamil colleges had been established in Tirupati, Mayilam, Thiruvaiyaru, Karanthai (Thanjavur), Melai Sivapuri and Annamalai Nagar.⁸⁰ One college that had some standing was Sri Minakshi Tamil College, started by Raja Annamalai Chettiar in Chidambaram in 1924. U.V. Swaminatha Iyer served as its principal for some years. It is an important institution in the history of Tamil teaching as it later became the nucleus for the Annamalai University, an institution that played a key role in the enhancement of the status of Tamil.

Following the establishment of a separate Andhra University in 1926 to serve the cause of the Telugu-speaking regions – and by extension the Telugu language – of the Madras Presidency, there were consistent demands for the creation of a Tamil university along similar lines. This did not materialize, but, in 1929, Annamalai University was established in its place. This was welcomed by Tamil scholars and enthusiasts at large.

Annamalai University gave an exalted status to Tamil. For the first time it appointed a Professor in Tamil when Madras University had only one readership and no separate department in the subject. Soon, by establishing three streams in Tamil—research, teaching and the arts—there were three professorships. A B.A. honours programme in Tamil was started in 1931. Soon the first PhDs in Tamil were awarded. A. Chidambaranatha Chettiar was awarded a PhD for his study on Tamil prosody in 1943.⁸¹ The Senate of Annamalai University, in March 1939, proposed the teaching of all disciplines, especially the sciences, in Tamil.

While the university did much for Tamil its powers were limited. For instance, Annamalai University had to seek permission from the government for the recognition of the Bala Panditha and Panditha exams, conducted by Madurai Tamil Sangam, and Bala Panditham of Arya-Dravida Bashabhivridhi Sangam of Jaffna, as conferring the same eligibility as Pravesa Parikshai for admission to a Vidwan course. This shows the limited autonomy that the University had in these matters.⁸²

Importantly all these victories were won only with great struggle. Tamil scholars, Tamil organizations, and non-Brahmin organizations agitated in the public sphere and put pressure on the government to make the University yield to their demands. Tamil teachers began to organize themselves and make general demands in the larger cause of Tamil, apart from their own material and employment-related demands. Their demands gained much force after the non-Brahmin Justice Party took office under dyarchy with education as a transferred subject. Records show that there was considerable criticism that Annamalai University had reneged on its promises and failed to meet expectations. Tamil *pulavars* had expected the Annamalai University to be a Tamil university which would impart and further knowledge in all disciplines in Tamil and also conduct all its day-to-day business in Tamil. In terms of social profile, they expected it to be a non-Brahmin institution. These expectations could not be met. The general tone of criticism was that Brahmins, especially during V.S. Srinivasa Sastri's Vice-Chancellorship, had taken control over the university, and were a stumbling block in the path of progress.⁸³

To understand the situation, we need to turn to politics.

Pandits and Politics

Tamil *Pulavars* and Nationalism

Tamil *pulavars* traditionally tended to keep their distance from politics and often expressed loyalty to the government and the Crown in ingratiating terms. Given their low salaries, they could ill-afford to antagonize those in authority. There were strict penalties, including loss of employment, for involvement in nationalist political activity. The Madras educational code was strict in this regard: a condition of grant-in-aid was that the school/college remain unconnected with political organization or movement and that the manager, teacher or students take no part in political agitation. Teachers of aided institutions were free to ‘occupy themselves in moderation’ only with public movements ‘untinged with disloyalty.’⁸⁴

In this situation, *pulavars*, rather than pen songs in praise of Mother India and the nation, preferred to compose songs blessing the British ‘King-Emperor’. For example, at times of *darbars*, the government could be flooded with eulogies composed by *pulavars*; on the occasion of the 1911 Coronation *darbar* in particular, U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, Pinnathur Narayanaswamy Iyer, Poovai Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, Virudhai Sivagnana Yogi,⁸⁵ Asalambikai Ammal and others all wrote poems in praise of King/Emperor Edward VII.⁸⁶ Even Maraimalai Adigal, who had translated *Vande Mataram* into Tamil, and composed a sonnet (in English) on the nationalist leader Surendranath Banerjea during the *swadeshi* movement, participated in the *darbar* celebrations in Pallavaram, where he lived.⁸⁷ Other forms of panegyric, some verging on the extreme, were not uncommon.⁸⁸ The outpouring of loyalty of Tamil *pandits* was such that, at the time of the Coronation *darbar*, *Nallasiriyam* (literally, ‘the good teacher’), a monthly journal devoted to teachers, complained that ‘there was no limit to the verses in praise of the King’ submitted by contributors!⁸⁹

In this general context of cloying loyalty, the fact that any *pulavars* expressed nationalist sentiments at all is noteworthy. Mention has already been made of Maraimalai Adigal’s attempts at patriotic versifying. In 1905, two traditional scholars, M.R. Kandasamy Kavirayar⁹⁰ and A. Shanmugham Pillai wrote verses on Mother India in the scholarly monthly, *Viveka Bhanu*. Subramania Bharati, the great nationalist poet, noticed it immediately. Calling it ‘a sign of the times’, he observed cheekily that *pandits* who usually occupied themselves with hair-splitting debates on the difference between *anmozhithogai* and *aagu-peyar* (two tricky grammatical categories) were now writing on *swadeshi*; he credited it to the new spirit of the times and the grace of Mother India.⁹¹ Similarly, when, in the literary review, *Sentamil*, M. Raghavaiyanagar wrote an essay on heroic mothers in ancient Tamil country with a veiled

subtext of nationalism, Bharati wrote a personal letter to him, where he remarked, ‘I do not venture to praise your scholarship. For that’s well known to the outside world. I only pay my respects to the new flame of “Swadeshi spirit” that is now glowing in your pure heart’.⁹²

Apart from these isolated expressions of *swadeshi*, one important exception to loyalism was Thiru.Vi. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar. A traditional Tamil scholar steeped in Tamil literature and Saiva religion, Thiru.Vi.Ka. had begun his career as a Tamil *pandit* in the Wesleyan School in Chennai. Inspired by the speeches of Bipin Chandra Pal, in 1907, on the Marina Beach, he gave up his job and turned to politics. He later became a leader of workers’ movements and a politician.

Orientalism and Tamil Identity Politics

Even as Indian nationalism largely bypassed Tamil *pandits*, another political process was brewing. We know how the orientalist moment in India—from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries—produced knowledge about India and its ancient past. The paradigmatic works in this tradition, from William Jones to Max Mueller, constructed an Indian past based on a glorious (Vedic) antiquity. The Sanskrit language was seen as the fount of all that was Indian. The newly emergent discipline of comparative philology traced the roots of Sanskrit to a common Indo-Aryan/European family of languages. The Senate of Madras University and a dominant strand of Indian nationalists were steeped in this ideology.

There is another side to this Sanskrit-centred construction of knowledge of Indian society—the challenge posed to it in the south. In 1816, Francis Whyte Ellis, mentioned earlier in this article as colonial administrator and founder of the College of Fort St George (the Madras School of Orientalism, as Trautmann called it), argued that the languages of south India were not Indo-Aryan but instead formed a distinct family of languages.⁹³ This argument found its scholarly elaboration in Robert Caldwell’s *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian Family of Languages* (1856). In this work, which has had a profound influence on Tamil intellectuals from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day, Caldwell argued that Tamil, along with Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam and Tulu belonged to a family of languages which he designated as Dravidian as opposed to (Indo-)Aryan/Sanskrit. Further, Sanskrit had, according to Caldwell, exerted a baneful influence on these languages by the admixture of its vocabulary. Caldwell contended that, especially in the case of Tamil, this could easily be remedied and Tamil could function without further reliance on Sanskrit, an argument that dominated language ideology in Tamilnadu subsequently.

In a few decades after Caldwell’s philological work, the Tamil literary canon underwent

a dramatic change as the result of what has been called the ‘rediscovery’ of a corpus of literature from the beginning of the Christian era.⁹⁴ Termed Sangam literature, these texts were meticulously retrieved, edited and published by a group of scholar-editors—notably C.W. Damodaram Pillai and U.V. Swaminatha Iyer—in the late nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century. These texts, portraying an ancient society in transition from a tribal to a sedentary agricultural social formation, were seized on by Tamil intellectuals to portray an alternative history of the Tamils. Glorifying love and war, the literature was seen to embody the real genius of the Tamil people, contradicting the Vedic/Aryan understanding of India’s past said to be characterized by religion and inscribed differences based on birth. Instead, the downfall of the glorious Tamil society was linked to the advent of Aryan/Brahmins/Sanskrit, terms which were used almost synonymously.

Literary rediscovery fed into notions about the glory of Tamil and antipathy towards Brahmins and Sanskrit in colonial Tamil society. In a context where Brahmins and upper-caste non-Brahmins were pitched against each other not only in civil society but also in the struggle for political power, the battle came to be waged on different planes. In the Tamil scholarly world, although historically Brahmins had a significant presence, non-Brahmin upper castes predominated. This was so even in the College of Fort St George,⁹⁵ and was at variance with other literary cultures of Indian where Brahmins predominated. The tensions outlined above found newer expressions, and became institutionalized with the introduction and operation of caste-based reservations from the 1920s which helped non-Brahmins to undermine the preferential treatment received by Brahmins. This divide informed much of the politics discussed in this section.

By the late nineteenth century, a group of non-Brahmin Tamil scholars such as P. Sundaram Pillai, V. Kanakasabhai Pillai, and J.M. Nallaswami Pillai, drawing on the philological works of Caldwell, Miron Winslow and G.U. Pope, and the literary texts being edited by Damodaram Pillai and Swaminatha Iyer, began to construct new versions of history, effectively displacing Sanskrit and Brahmins and replacing them with Tamil and Vellalars to conjure up a vision of a glorious and independent Tamil past. This greatly impressed the Tamil *pandits* who added intellectual ammunition by editing and publishing more ancient literary texts. Their key contribution was the elaboration of these ideas, imparting forgotten knowledge to successive generations of students by disseminating it through books and through public speaking. By the turn of the twentieth century, however, this meant that fault lines had emerged between Brahmins and non-Brahmins in the world of scholarship.

An important fallout of this identity politics was the importance and salience that Tamil

and Tamil *pandits* began to enjoy. As Tamil became politicized through this process and exciting scholarship emerged, the prestige of Tamil increased. From the late nineteenth century, Tamil associations were formed in many high schools and colleges. Even if these were short-lived, they enhanced the standing of Tamil teachers. Often, prominent Tamil scholars who also happened to be persons of social repute—such as lawyers—were invited to deliver lectures. Swaminatha Iyer’s correspondence contains numerous letters from Tamil teachers extending invitations to him to preside over and deliver lectures.⁹⁶

In 1906, Swaminatha Iyer was given the Mahamahopadhyaya title, until then reserved only for Sanskrit scholars. The formation of academies such as the Madurai Tamil Sangam (1901) and the Karanthai Tamil Sangam (1913) with their own scholarly monthly reviews, *Sentamil* (1903) and *Tamil Pozhil* (1925) respectively, and the establishment of a publishing company with limited capital, The South India Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society (1920) which published Tamil literary works extensively and exclusively, and its monthly review *Sentamil Selvi* (1923), added to the prestige of Tamil, as did the *Tamilian Antiquary* (1907–1914). The world of Tamil soon also began to attract people from Western educated backgrounds.

For a few decades of the early twentieth century, the Tamil academic field was dominated by lawyers who had good B.A. and B.L. degrees. Many of them were fluent in English, and steeped in Western orientalist scholarship. The All India Oriental Conference held in Madras in December 1924, chaired by renowned Sanskrit and philosophy scholar Ganganath Jha, gave a new fillip to scholarship. The massive project of publishing the Madras University’s *Tamil Lexicon* came under the charge of S. Vaiyapuri Pillai, a lawyer, who edited it on the historical principles of the OED. Despite the controversies it provoked the lexicon was a landmark, and arguably the first of its kind for any Indian language. From the late 1920s Thiruppanandal Muth, the Saiva monastery, initiated a prize of Rs 1,000 for any student coming first in the Tamil Vidwan examination of the University of Madras. In 1936, the *muth* put this award on a sure footing by creating an endowment in memory of King George V.⁹⁷

The increasing prominence of the Tamil language and the growing visibility of Tamil pulavars in the public sphere had its repercussions. There was a resurgence of caricatures of the Tamil teacher. Va.Ra., the editor of the modern Tamil literary journal *Manikodi*, was savage in mocking them. Pudumaippithan wrote a famous caricature of a Tamil teacher, Thirukkural Kumaresa Pillai. A noteworthy figure who made it a vocation to run down Tamil *pandits* was T.K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliar, who championed the religiously oriented Kamba Ramayanam, at the expense of the classical literature venerated by Tamil *pandits*. A

particularly popular instance is that of the Tamil teacher in the AVM movie *Sabapathy* (1941), played by the irrepressible comedian K. Sarangapany.

Thi.Ja. Ranganathan's comment says a lot about the tension between Tamil pulavars and contemporary writers: 'In those days there was no love lost between us [contemporary writers] and Tamil *pandits*. We feared that, were we to run into them, they might fault us on this or that grammatical nicety. In their perception we knew no Tamil. What is learnt at one's mother's lap is not real Tamil, but what is locked up in a safe is'.⁹⁸

But overall, the 1920s and 30s were a good time to be a Tamil scholar. The politics of the time enhanced their prestige.

Towards Intellectual Dominance

A key moment in the rising prominence of Tamil *pandits* from the late 1920s, was when non-Brahmin politics manifested in the form of the Self-Respect Movement under the leadership of Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, which, despite its criticisms of Tamil *pandits*,⁹⁹ drew extensively from the ideology of the Tamil renaissance. As contributors to and formulators of this ideology, Tamil scholars, most of whom were non-Brahmins and were followers of the Saiva religion, developed a strong relationship with the Self-Respect Movement which was also often marked by tension and conflict.

At the time of its inception the Self-Respect Movement launched a strong critique of Brahmin religion and caste.¹⁰⁰ By 1927 it had moved toward criticising Saivism as part of its critique of Brahminism and Hinduism. The Saivite reaction, articulated by Tamil scholars, was vociferous, expressed through the press and through resolutions in their gatherings. While the Self-Respect Movement was a radical movement, Tamil scholars tended to be conservative. Yet at key moments, when Tamil scholars articulated their intellectual position in relation to Tamil culture and literature – which was at variance with those enunciated by Brahmin scholars – the Self-Respect Movement tended to side with them. Let us now flag a few such intellectual debates which are important for their intrinsic content but also for propelling Tamil scholars into the public sphere and enhancing their prestige.

The most prominent intellectual strand of the new scholarship inflected by politics was the rise of the Thani Tamil Iyakkam or the Pure Tamil Movement. Though traditionally dated to 1916 and credited to the contribution of Maraimalai Adigal, it was a strand that had its roots in the late nineteenth century. At the heart of the movement was the belief that the Tamil language had been sullied by the influence of alien languages, especially Sanskrit. One result of this, it was argued, was the splitting of the language into the other Dravidian languages such

as Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam. If this was not halted, Tamil would cease to exist. To arrest this trend and restore the glory (and purity) of Tamil, the purging of all non-Tamil words from the language was advocated. This movement had a strong impact and its influence can be felt even in contemporary times.¹⁰¹ Tamil *pandits* not only articulated this ideology but also practised it, fashioning a modern language heavily drawing from Tamil roots.¹⁰²

During the 1930s there was a debate on how to coin technical and scientific terms in Tamil. While the all-India trend was to adopt a uniform Sanskrit-based terminology there was great resistance to doing so in Tamil. Through an intellectual vigorous and robust debate Tamil scholars were able to establish that coining technical terms should be based on Tamil roots.¹⁰³

In 1935, Maraimalai Adigal's book of essays, *Arivurai Kothu*, was prescribed as a textbook for intermediate examinations of the University of Madras. Nationalist journals raised a cry that one particular essay, on Tamils and Westerners, was an affront to nationalist sentiment as it spoke highly of the West at the expense of Tamils and demanded the withdrawal of the book from the university syllabus. The Self-Respect movement hastened to the defence of Maraimalai Adigal. *Kudi Arasu*, *Pakutharivu* and *Justice* published editorials and articles justifying Adigal's position and his constructive critique.¹⁰⁴ A Self-Respect journal *Pakutharivu* compared Maraimalai Adigal with Swaminatha Iyer, who was a Brahmin, and drew attention to the disproportionate share of respect and fame the latter had enjoyed.¹⁰⁵ The essence of the Self-Respect argument was that Adigal was being made the target of attack because he was an erudite non-Brahmin scholar, which the Brahmins could not stomach.

In the following year, there was a debate on the nature of marriage in ancient Tamil society. Non-Brahmin scholars, especially S. Somasundara Bharati, argued that ancient Tamils had their own indigenous system of marriage while Brahmin scholars, represented by M. Raghavaiyengar used a sutra from the ancient Tamil grammatical text, *Tholkappiyam*, to assert that marriage in Tamilnadu began with the advent of Brahmin priests.

This argument was taken forward a few years later, in July 1939, at the Tamil Marriage Conference, which advocated a return to the ancient Tamil practice of marriage based on love, and called for an end to Brahmins officiating as priests and the use of Sanskrit. Simple marriages, in the presence of elders, by the tying of the *thali* (the ritual wedding chain) were to be the basis of the Tamil system of marriage.¹⁰⁶

In 1940, Tamil scholars organized the Tamilar Samaya Manadu (Conference of Tamil Religion) where it was argued that pre-Aryan Tamil society was a Vellalar civilization and Saivism was its religion, while caste distinctions based on birth, rituals and priesthood were Aryan/Brahmin accretions. Furthermore, it was argued, some of the best elements of Aryan-

Brahminism were actually the product of Tamil genius appropriated from the Tamil religion of Saivism.¹⁰⁷ From this understanding colonial Hindu laws were condemned for their Aryan bias.¹⁰⁸

Tamil meetings were so numerous during this time that the respected N.M. Venkatasamy Nattar, in a private letter, expressed great satisfaction that campaigns for the development of Tamil were taking place all over the Tamil country.¹⁰⁹

In 1941, Swaminatha Iyer, in a radio talk, gave expression to his view on what constituted Tamil tradition ('Tamil Marabu'). This was met with a scathing response from K.A.P. Viswanatham who questioned the foundations of his premises, arguing that it was a Brahmin apology.¹¹⁰ While the substance of these arguments requires a separate intellectual treatment, the fact that even a great scholar of Swaminatha Iyer's standing could be questioned publicly in abrasive terms was an indication of the animated nature of the Tamil sphere and the confidence of Tamil *pandits*.

But the most important moment in this story is the anti-Hindi agitation of 1937–39.¹¹¹ In 1937, shortly after forming the government in Madras Presidency, the premier C. Rajagopalachari (Rajaji) introduced compulsory Hindi in schools. This was seen as a brazen act of imposition of a foreign language, to the detriment of Tamil language and culture. The Self-Respect movement launched a major agitation calling for the repeal of the new rules. Tamil scholars played a significant role in this agitation without fear of government action, organizing and conducting a number of meetings and processions all over the Tamil country to condemn Rajaji's move.

In Tirunelveli an association called Tamil Pathukappu Kazhagam (Tamil Protection Association) was formed for fighting against compulsory Hindi, which was joined by doyens of the Tamil scholarly world such as M.V. Nellaiyappa Pillai, M.S. Purnalingam Pillai, Punnaivananatha Mudaliar, K. Appadurai and V. Thiruvarangam Pillai.¹¹² The association published a number of pamphlets and tracts, and 15,000 copies of Maraimalai Adigal's English tract 'Why Hindi should not be made the lingua franca of India' were printed and distributed free by the Self-Respect Movement.¹¹³

Tamil scholars also joined with the Self-Respect Movement and participated in rallies, meetings, conferences and demonstrations organized by it in opposition to Hindi. Periyar, Ponnambalanar, K.M. Balasubramaniam, C.N. Annadurai and K.A.P. Viswanatham spoke at the Third Self-Respect Conference in Thuraiyar, in August 1937,¹¹⁴ while in Madras, S. Somasundara Bharati, C.N. Annadurai and K.M. Balasubramaniam spoke at an anti-Hindi meeting.¹¹⁵ Other scholars addressed the Third Salem District Self-Respect Conference in

October 1937,¹¹⁶ while S. Somasundara Bharati went on an extended lecture tour of Tamilnadu calling for the repeal of compulsory Hindi.¹¹⁷ The Karanthai Tamil Sangam was especially harsh in its criticism of the premier, which was a particularly bold stance considering how vulnerable Tamil *pandits* were. *Tamil Pozhil*, criticized the Congress government which prided itself on ahimsa, satyagraha, freedom of speech and action, etc. for brutally suppressing the Anti-Hindi agitation. One scholar, K. Vellaivaranam, wrote a poem, in the form of the messenger poem, addressed to Rajagopalachari called *Venkozhi Uyitha Kakkai Vidu Thuthu* – a particularly sharp attack on the premier. Two teachers, Marai. Thirunavukkarasu, the son of Maraimalai Adigal, and C. Ilakkuvanar even underwent imprisonment. These are only a few examples of the active participation of Tamil scholars.

In short, Tamil *pandits* played a major role in the agitation against Hindi, which needs to be explored in greater detail. Overall, the various intellectual debates that were fought out during the 1930s and the popular mass struggle of the anti-Hindi agitation made a deep impact on Tamil teachers: they shed their defensiveness, gained self-confidence, articulated their views in public and became public figures and public intellectuals.

Rising Status

By the 1920s, the word ‘pandit’ or ‘*pandithar*’ was greatly resented by Tamil teachers. Given that the words *Pandit* and *Vidwan* were of Sanskrit origin, Tamil scholars preferred to call themselves ‘Pulavar’.¹¹⁸ A. Muthusivan, of Alagappa College, once said that it was easy to kill him – all one had to do was to call him a ‘*pandit*’ three times and he would die that very moment. Resistance to being classed as a *pandit* was also seen in many teachers’ refusal to wear the traditional *pandit* dress of a conspicuous white *vetti* (dhoti) and the use of only an upper cloth to cover the torso, sometimes with a dark overcoat and usually with a turban. Many Tamil teachers began to change their attire, taking to wearing shirts and kurtas usually of handloom rather than khaddar. Some, such as A. Muthusivan, started wearing suits, and M. Varadarajan took to wearing a sherwani. Eventually, in the 1950s, the title of ‘Vidwan’ awarded for success in oriental studies was replaced by ‘Pulavar’.

Tamil *pulavars* showed great alacrity in organizing themselves. For instance, G. Devaneyya Pavanar, then at the Bishop Heber High School, Trichy wrote to V. Thiruvarangam Pillai:

We have now established a Trichy Tamil Pulavar Association, and under its aegis we are planning the Third Madras Presidency Tamil Pulavar conference, and efforts are

afoot... How many ever isolated meetings we organize at various places that will not send a strong message. It will be powerful only if all pulavars get together unitedly and struggle.¹¹⁹

In the 1930s associations of Tamil teachers were established in various parts of Tamilnadu. A Tamil *Pandit* Association of Thanjavur district was established in May 1937. A similar association followed in Tirunelveli district. Tamil Vidwan Sangam, Chennai was established in February 1943. These associations met periodically, expressed their concerns, passed resolutions, and petitioned the government.¹²⁰ While some of their concerns have been noted above, let us take another look at some of them.

In 1926, the Karanthai Tamil Sangam protested against the decisions of the educational council of the Thanjavur District Board to place *pandits* who had passed the *Pandit*, *Bala Pandit* and *Pravesa Pandit* in the rank of secondary grade, elementary higher grade and elementary lower grade respectively. It argued that they be placed on the same footing as L.T. holders, F.A. passed and middle grade teachers.¹²¹

In 1929 the Karanthai Tamil Sangam protested against certain Madras University regulations, terming them irresponsible and intended to damage the development of Tamil. The primary bone of contention was the recommendation that any graduate could teach a vernacular language if it was his mother tongue, meaning that a graduate need not have formally studied the language he was to teach. Further, while the highest pay for a vernacular teacher was only Rs. 100, while English graduates 'who had lesser knowledge and training and did barely one-fifth or one-sixth of the work of *pandits* were fixed on a time scale between Rs. 150 and Rs. 200 is unfair and unjust', as the Sangam wrote. It demanded that *pandits* be paid on the same scale as lecturers and associate lecturers.¹²²

Low pay scales continued to be a sticking point. 'The plight of Tamil teachers is pitiable. Their salaries are very, very low but they have to put in a great amount of hard work. In most institutions they are treated shabbily by their higher-ups. Consequently, students despite their affection for the Tamil *pandits*, show scant respect... If Tamil teachers are given better salaries this situation could be remedied'.¹²³

Karanthai Tamil Sangam continued its demand that only Tamil *pandits* should teach Tamil. Further it demanded the institution of B.A. Hons. Course in Tamil, and that Tamil be made mandatory for B.Sc. classes as well.¹²⁴ Moreover, B.O.L. [Bachelor of Oriental Learning] could be acquired only through regular study in college¹²⁵ but only one such college existed for such study in Tamil (at Thiruvaiyaru) until the early 1940s. Therefore, the Tamil Board of

Studies proposed a transitory regulation whereby a Vidwan could appear for B.O.L. degree examination by first passing an intermediate exam.¹²⁶ There was also a demand that Tamil *pandits* in colleges should be designated professor and associate professor, as in other subjects.¹²⁷

As time progressed Tamil teachers were also emboldened to make bolder demands. In 1932 they demanded voting rights to elect members to academic bodies such as the University Senate.¹²⁸ In 1941, a Tamil literary conference even demanded that a Tamil *pandit* be included on the Board of Film Censors!¹²⁹

In the run up to independence, a provincial umbrella association of Tamil teachers was formed. At its conference in Chennai, the renowned Tamil scholars, M. Varadarajan and R.P. Sethu Pillai, gave enlightened addresses that confronted all issues.¹³⁰ All this put pressure on the government to heed their grievances.

By this time, in the 1946 elections, a new education minister, the enlightened T.S. Avinashilingam Chettiar, had taken over. Despite his known scorn for antediluvian *pandits*, he was committed to improving the lot of Tamil teachers. By 1949 ‘Government had improved the status and emoluments of language teachers in Government Colleges by creating a MES post in the languages in each of the first grade Arts and Training and by classifying *Pandits* and Munshis into two grades, viz., one and two. Grade one is the same as Assistant Lecturer’.¹³¹

In early 1947 the government introduced new scales for language teachers on a par with other teachers. Importantly, these new scales were to apply not only to teachers in government service but also those employed in local bodies such as district boards and under private management.¹³²

But this came with a catch. For the new scales to be operational, the *pandits* in secondary schools who were holders of oriental titles had to undergo secondary grade training. But as most of them did not hold an SSLC (school leaving certificate) they were barred from acquiring secondary grade training qualifications. They could of course undergo *pandits*’ training but facilities were limited. In middle schools, *pandits* and *munshis* who were holders of oriental titles and pre-1926 *pandits*,¹³³ had to be satisfied with a lower scale.¹³⁴

K. Anbazhagan, a Tamil tutor, at Pachaiyappa’s College (who later became a prominent leader of the Dravida Munnetra Kazaghham (DMK) political party, serving as education and finance minister, and is still referred to as ‘Perasiriyar’, ‘professor’) pointed out in a hard-hitting editorial that given the late introduction of the Vidwan title (only in 1929) and the fact that Tamil *pandits* usually did not acquire English or teacher training, the new scales would benefit only a minuscule minority. Additional rules that they needed to put in continuous

service of 15 years in the same school also put many at a disadvantage. In short, he argued for implementation of L.T. scales across the board. He pointed that the government acceded to the demands only because Tamil teachers could organise two state level conferences and demonstrate their bargaining power.¹³⁵

Despite the reservations there was little doubt that Tamil teachers gained immensely from these changes. But the irony was that the Congress government gained little from it, and the education minister Avinashilingam himself was far from popular with Tamil teachers. The attempt to reintroduce compulsory Hindi in schools in 1948 was one reason for this. Further, Avinashilingam's sarcastic remark, referring to the supposedly antediluvian nature of Tamil teachers, that they did not even know how to switch on an electric light, caused tension.

Tamil teachers generally tended to be steeped in identity politics, and were the primary ideologues of the DMK as it emerged as a formidable force in the 1950s. It is said, not without a strong element of truth, that every Tamil teacher was a DMK man. As one neutral observer remarked, 'Some have created a situation where anyone who speaks or writes pure Tamil is dubbed an atheist, an anti-Brahmin, and an opponent of India, Hindi and Congress....'¹³⁶ As K. Anbazhagan observed in the context of the anti-Hindi agitation in 1948, 'As most of the Tamil teachers are young men, reformist and progressive [read DMK], one begins to wonder if compulsory Hindi is being introduced to weaken them'.¹³⁷ These teachers and students played a significant role in the 1965 anti-Hindi agitation as well.

By 1956, one commentator was already writing of the low status of Tamil *pandits* in the past tense: 'Until a few years ago Tamil teachers were considered the lowest of the teaching class... It was common to see them being ridiculed in films and plays ...'¹³⁸

Towards a Conclusion

Krishna Kumar, one of the few scholars to have studied the status of teachers in colonial India, came to the following conclusion:

By keeping the schoolteacher's salary and status low, the colonial state ensured that its perception of valid knowledge would be faithfully transmitted to Indian children without the distortions that an intellectually alive teaching profession might force upon the system.¹³⁹

This is unobjectionable and largely true of teachers across colonial India. However Tamil teachers proved to be exceptional and rebelled against this situation. They confronted the

transition from a pre-colonial pedagogic system to a modern school system and worked it to their advantage. By investing heavily in the emerging new scholarship that underpinned the rise of identity politics Tamil *pulavars* made a mark in the Tamil public sphere. Here the contrast with Sanskrit *pandits* is striking.

Vasudha Dalmia has argued that in the course of the nineteenth century ‘Sanskrit Pandits suffered a general loss of authority’ as the final arbiter of knowledge and authority became the Western orientalist, despite the nationalist mobilization of indigenous scholarship. Dalmia further argued that the knowledge of pandits was valued only after it had been ‘processed through the filter of European knowledge’.¹⁴⁰

As we have demonstrated, this was not the case with Tamil *pandits*. No doubt Western orientalist such as Caldwell and Pope were celebrated. But the primary task of recovering and editing Tamil classical texts had been performed by Tamil *pandits*. Despite their debt to orientalist their work was original, and by taking up a big role in the Tamil public sphere they became cultural figures.

The buoyant mood of Tamil studies and Tamil *pandits* in the 1950s was in strong contrast to the mood of despondency among Sanskrit scholars. The report of the Sanskrit Commission, appointed by the government of India in 1956, reads like a requiem rather than as a route map for the revival of Sanskrit.¹⁴¹ In contrast, Tamil *pandits* in the 1950s were stars in the cultural world, and in the mid-1960s they played a significant role in politics by actively participating in the anti-Hindi agitation and inspiring generations of students. In 1966, when the Madurai University (later Madurai-Kamaraj University) was established, only the second state university of Tamilnadu, its first vice-chancellor was the Tamil scholar T.P. Meenakshisundaram. He was succeeded by another Tamil scholar – M. Varadarajan.

Notes and References

¹ U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, *En Charithiram*, Nagercoil: Kalachuvadu, 2017 [1950], 504–509.

The chapter is appropriately titled ‘Pudhiya Vazhvu’, ‘a new life.’

² Kumbakonam Provincial School formally opened in October 1855. In 1864 it was raised to a second grade college and B.A. classes began in 1867.

³ Swaminatha Iyer, *En Charithiram*, 506.

⁴ See, for example, the early Tamil novel, *Kamalambal Charithiram*, written in the 1890s, by B.R. Rajam Iyer, where the main character, Adusapatti Ammaiyappa Pillai, is a pandit mocked

by his schoolboy pupils for his pedantry and his over-enthusiasm for ‘oriental’ poetry. For an English translation of this novel see Stuart Blackburn (trans.), B.R. Rajam Aiyar, *The Fatal Rumour: A Nineteenth Century Indian Novel*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

⁵ Not as well-known as the College of Fort William, it is the subject of a brilliant monograph by Thomas Trautmann, *Languages and Nations: The Dravidian Proof in Colonial Madras*, Delhi: Yoda, 2006. Incidentally A.D. Campbell, who, as Bellary district collector documenting the indigenous school system, would write a famous letter—the lynchpin of Dharampal’s *The Beautiful Tree: Indigenous Indian Education in the Eighteenth Century* (Goa: Other India Press, 2000 [1983])—was trained in this College.

⁶ A.R. Venkatachalapathy, ‘Grammar, the Frame of Language: Tamil Pandits at the College of Fort St George’, in Thomas Trautmann (ed), *The Madras School of Orientalism*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009, 113–125.

⁷ Harvey Marriott, *Essay on the Madras System of Education. Its Powers; its application to Classical Schools and its Utility as an Instrument to form the Principles and Habits of Youth in the Higher Orders of Society*, London.: Taylor and Hessey, 1819.

⁸ See U.V. Swaminatha Iyer for a description of such a school system: ‘Pandaikalathu Pallikkoodangal’, *Swadesamitran* (Weekly), 16 August 1936; Reprinted in P. Saravanan (ed), U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, *Uyir Meetchi*, Nagercoil: Kalachuvadu, 2016, 333–54. For a modern analytical essay see Bhavani Raman, ‘Disciplining the Senses, Schooling the Mind: Inhabiting Virtue in the Tamil Tinnai School’, in Anand Pandian and Daud Ali (eds), *Ethical Life in South Asia*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010, 43-60; Sascha Ebeling, *Colonizing the Realm of Words: The Transformation of Tamil Literature in Nineteenth-Century South India*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2010, 37-55. For the world of Sanskrit pandits see Alex Michaels (ed), *The Pandit: Traditional Scholarship in India*, Delhi: Manohar, 2001.

⁹ For a reconstruction of the world of nineteenth-century Tamil pulavars, see Ebeling, *Colonizing the Realm of Words*, 33-164.

¹⁰ Nirad Chaudhuri, *The Intellectual in India*, New Delhi: Associated Publishing House, 1967, 2.

¹¹ *Annual Report on Public Instruction in the Madras Presidency, 1854-55*. Madras: Public Instruction Press (henceforth DPI Report).

¹² This name was discontinued only after the Court of Directors of the British East India Company objected to it on the grounds that ‘it no way corresponds with the institution’ of a University and suggested that it be called Presidency College on the lines of the Calcutta Presidency College. DPI report 1855-6.

¹³ *Selections from Educational Records of the Government of India, vol. 1, Educational Reports, 1859–71* [no editor], New Delhi: National Archives of India, 1960 (Report from Madras dated 27 October 1862).

¹⁴ DPI Report, 1856-57.

¹⁵ DPI Report, 1926-27.

¹⁶ DPI Report, 1856-57.

¹⁷ DPI Report, 1856-57.

¹⁸ DPI Report, 1856-57.

¹⁹ DPI Report, 1859-60.

²⁰ DPI Report, 1859-60.

²¹ DPI Report, 1906-07.

²² DPI Report, 1856-57.

²³ DPI Report, 1856-57. A.J. Arbuthnot: ‘Vernacular teaching in all the English schools has been necessarily entrusted to persons of the Pundit class, whose system of instruction is most defective. This is gradually being remedied, by requiring that the ordinary teacher shall master the vernacular language and entrusting to them the teaching of those languages in their respective classes....’ DPI Report, 1858-59.

²⁴ Arbuthnot ruefully noted that, he had advocated this view a few years earlier, and ‘the two years’ additional experience’ had only confirmed it. At one point he had even arranged for vernacular education to be conducted by the Tamil and Telugu Translators to Government, who were not really teachers. DPI Report, 1856-57.

²⁵ DPI Report, 1859-60.

²⁶ DPI Report, 1870-71.

²⁷ DPI Report, 1880-81.

²⁸ As late as 1932, different district boards gave different salaries. Trichy and Thanjavur were said to be the most liberal. *Tamil Pozhil*, 8 (5), August 1932.

²⁹ Vai. Mu. Sadagoparamaniyachari to U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, dated 13-10-1903. U.V. Swaminatha Iyer Papers, Dr U.V. Swaminatha Iyer Library, Chennai (henceforth UVS Paper).

³⁰ DPI Report, 1880-81. Primary teachers were paid even less; only between Rs 5 and 15 per month. Further, salaries stagnated. As late as 1932 most schools paid Rs 25-30 per month to Tamil teachers (*Tamil Pozhil*, 8 (5), August 1932).

³¹ DPI Report, 1906-07.

³² DPI Report, 1916-17.

³³ Maraimalai Adigal, an avid reader, with an insatiable thirst for reading and collecting books, pleaded with U.V. Swaminatha Iyer to send a copy of his edition of *Manimekalai*, promising to remit the price of the book, Rs 5 after he received his salary at the beginning of the next month. It is worth noting that *Manimekalai*, a book of about 600 pages, cost twenty per cent of a Tamil teacher's monthly salary. See his letter to Swaminatha Iyer, dated 5-8-1898, UVS Papers.

³⁴ Low salaries rankled in the minds of Tamil teachers, and as late as in 2000, the Tamil scholar Tamilannal recalled in a leader in the *Dinamani* the days when pandits received a pittance as salary. 'Thazhthuvarum Tamil Kalvi', *Dinamani*, 7 December 2000.

³⁵ 'Poondi Aranganatha Mudaliar' in P. Saravanan (ed), U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, *Dinginane: Vazhkai Varalattru Katturaikal*, Nagercoil: Kalachuvadu, 2016, 251-2.

³⁶ See note 4 above.

³⁷ *Kalki*, 10-8-1943.

³⁸ DPI Report, 1859-60.

³⁹ DPI Report, 1854-55.

⁴⁰ DPI Report, 1855-56.

⁴¹ DPI Report, 1878-79.

⁴² *Kalaimagal*, Vol. 7, 1935, 220.

⁴³ Krishna Kumar, *Political Agenda of Education: A Study of Colonialist and Nationalist Ideas*, New Delhi: Sage, 1991, 15.

⁴⁴ Swaminatha Iyer, 'Manakkal Vilaiyattukal', in P. Saravanan (ed), *Swaminatha Iyer, Nilavil Malarantha Mullai*, Nagercoil: Kalachuvadu, 2016, 130-60. These essays were originally published in *Kalaimagal* in 1936 and 1943.

⁴⁵ J.P. Naik (ed), *Selections of Educational Records of Government of India. Vol. 2: Development of University Education, 1860-87*, New Delhi: National Archives of India, 1963, 348.

⁴⁶ However, it should be borne in mind that Brahmin scholars such as V.G. Suriyanarayana Sastri and A. Madhaviah, strongly supported the compulsory study of Tamil. In fact, Sastri was arguably the earliest to make an intellectual case for Tamil as a classical language.

⁴⁷ The place of Tamil at Madras University and the politics behind this has been admirably dealt with in K. Nambi Arooran, *Tamil Renaissance and Dravidian Nationalism, 1905-1944*, Madurai: Koodal, 1980, 70-139. Arooran has relied extensively on the Madras Universities

annual calendars. My account is based on the even richer DPI reports.

⁴⁸ DPI Report, 1865–66.

⁴⁹ J.P. Naik (ed), *Selections of Educational Records*, 347.

⁵⁰ Annamalai University appointed the first professors in Tamil in 1930. The first full professor in Tamil at the Madras University was R.R. Sethu Pillai, appointed in 1946.

⁵¹ DPI Report, 1878-79.

⁵² DPI Report, 1878-79.

⁵³ In a conference in Tirunelveli, in June 1934 it was resolved that the term ‘vernacular’ be dropped and ‘mother tongue’ be used instead. See *Tamil Pozhil*, 10(2), May 1935.

⁵⁴ FA: First Examination in Arts was an intermediate course of study between matriculation and BA. It was first introduced in 1863-64.

⁵⁵ *Kalaimagal*, Vol. 7, 1935, 220.

⁵⁶ DPI Report, 1906-07

⁵⁷ DPI Report, 1913-14. Here it needs to be noted that Tamil was never treated separately – either it was considered as one among many vernacular languages and oriental languages, or later, as a Dravidian language. There was little response from Telugu, Malayalam or Kannada to the preferential treatment given to Sanskrit and the lower status accorded to them.

⁵⁸ DPI Report, 1918-19.

⁵⁹ G.O. No. 107, Education, 23 January 1941.

⁶⁰ For more on this, see A.R. Venkatachalapathy, ‘The “Classical” Language Issue,’ *Economic and Political Weekly*, 10 January 2009, 13-15.

⁶¹ C.P. Venkatrama Iyer to Swaminatha Iyer, dated 15-7-1926. UVS Papers.

⁶² DPI Report, 1897-98; 1898-99; 1899-1900.

⁶³ Teachers with only oriental titles (Pulavar or Vidwan) were appointed only as tutors in colleges (on significantly lower scales) and not as assistant professors (the science equivalent was demonstrators in the laboratories). If they acquired an M.A. degree later they were upgraded to an assistant professorship. The revised UGC scales implemented in 1986 created crisis as the UGC refused to treat oriental colleges as regular degree-teaching colleges. To circumvent this, for instance, Karanthai Pulavar Kalluri was renamed T.V. Umamaheswaran College of Arts and Sciences.

⁶⁴ DPI Report, 1911-12.

⁶⁵ DPI Report, 1909-10.

⁶⁶ Vidwan is a Sanskrit term meaning ‘scholar’. It was awarded as a certificate (‘oriental title’) to scholars who passed the required examination making them eligible to take up teaching

position.

⁶⁷ DPI Report, 1911-12.

⁶⁸ DPI Report, 1921-22.

⁶⁹ DPI Report, 1917-18.

⁷⁰ Karanthai Tamil Sangam demanded Tamil equivalents of the Sanskrit Siromani in the fields of grammar, literature, Siddhantam, Vendantam, medicine, astrology, etc.

⁷¹ See the report in the *Hindu*, 18 December 1918. This was a recurrent complaint. See report on Tamil Pandits' Conference, *Kumaran* (weekly), 22-4-1925.

⁷² In the same year, at an academic council meeting of Madras University, that C.R. Namasivaya Mudaliar proposed that for the title of Tamil Vidwan the study of Tamil alone was adequate without the need to study another vernacular or Sanskrit. Namasivaya Mudaliar to Swaminatha Iyer, dated 16-3-1926, UVS Papers. Also Somalay, *Valarum Tamil*, Chennai: Pari Nilayam, 1956, 343.

⁷³ For such a demand in a Tamil conference in Tirunelveli, in June 1934, see *Tamil Pozhil*, 10 (2), May 1935.

⁷⁴ See N.M. Venkatasamy Nattar's speech reported in *Tamil Pozhil*, 8(4), July 1932.

⁷⁵ DPI Report, 1926-27.

⁷⁶ E.M. Subramania Pillai to V. Thiruvarangam Pillai, dt. 2-7-1932. E.M. Subramania Pillai Papers, Maraimalai Adigal Library.

⁷⁷ A copy of this petition, written in May 1936, is among the UVS Papers.

⁷⁸ One furious Sangam wanted to know, when there were 17 oriental colleges for Sanskrit in the Presidency, why there were not at least two for Tamil. The Sangam, until it was able to get the necessary recognition, got over this difficult by making the students appear as private candidates; but this came with a hitch as the age eligibility for private candidates was higher, at 28 years! See notice of T.V. Umamaheswaram, *Tamil Pozhil*, 16 (1), April 1940. The Tamil Sangam had inaugurated the Vidwan course in April 1938 and year after year expanded it to Pulavar II, III & IV.

⁷⁹ *Tamil Pozhil*, 16 (2), May 1940. Also *Tamil Pozhil*, 15 (7), Oct. 1939,

⁸⁰ *Tamil Pozhil*, 18 (4), July 1942. However, it was contended that the exams from one college were not recognized by other colleges.

⁸¹ In 1930, P.S. Subrahmanya Sastri was awarded a PhD in Tamil by the University of Madras. See biographical note by P.N. Natarajan to the second edition of the published version of the thesis under the same title. P.S. Subrahmanya Sastri, *History of Grammatical Theories in Tamil and their relation to Grammatical Literature in Sanskrit*, Chennai: The

Kuppuswami Sastri Research Institute, 1997 [1934]. However, it should be noted that, even until the 1970s, acquiring a doctoral degree in Tamil was quite uncommon. Not only were the university rules cumbersome, the thesis had to be written only in English. The first person to acquire a PhD in Tamil by writing a dissertation in Tamil was T. Muthukannappar in the 1970s.

⁸² G.O. No. 2037, Education, 11-9-1939. [All G.O.s refer to government orders of the Government of Madras.]

⁸³ For such criticism of Annamalai University see *Tamil Pozhil*, 14 (10), Jan. 1939; December 1937.

⁸⁴ G.O. No. 71, Education (Confidential), 14-2-1900.

⁸⁵ A few years later Virudhai Sivagnana Yogi also took part in the birthday celebrations of Viceroy Lord Hardinge held at the district magistrate's office. *Swadesamitran*, 25 June 1913.

⁸⁶ *Swadesamitran*, 29 November 1911; 22 December 1911; 25 December 1911.

⁸⁷ *Swadesamitran*, 25 December 1911.

⁸⁸ C.R. Namasivaya Mudaliar, pandit at the S.P.G. High School, Vepery, Chennai composed a panegyric in a complicated prosodic form, a *kamalabandham* (a figure poem in the shape of a lotus flower) and forwarded his poem through the principal of his school. The Government found that the poem to be 'expensively illuminated and bound and may be considered a valuable present'. One official patronizingly observed 'I understand from those who are qualified to judge, such as the inspector of schools, that it is a clever and good bit of oriental verse and not unworthy of the occasion'. Finally, however, the government while appreciating 'the loyal spirit which prompted the Tamil poem' declined to send it to Buckingham Palace as it 'would be contrary to practice' (GO 1241, Public, 18-11-1911). However, it is said that his verses written on the occasion of King George's coronation were displayed at Whitehall. See Roya. Chockalingam's obituary of Namasivaya Mudaliar. *Ooliyan*, 9 August 1935.

⁸⁹ *Nallasiriyar*, vol. 8, no. 1, June 1912.

⁹⁰ Not incidentally, Kandaswamy Kavirayar had the slogan 'Vande Mataram' printed on his office stationery of his Viveka Bhanu Press.

⁹¹ *India*, 24 November 1906.

⁹² Letter dated 18 October 1907. In R.A. Padmanabhan (ed.), *Bharatiyin Kadithangal*, Nagercoil: Kalachuvadu, 2005 [1982], 27. Likewise, V.O. Chidambaram Pillai wrote a verse epistle to Raghavaiyengar when he wrote an essay on ancient industry – once again with a Swadeshi sub-text.

⁹³ Thomas Trautmann, *Languages and Nations: The Dravidian Proof in Colonial Madras*,

Delhi: Yoda, 2006. The relationship between orientalism and the rise of Tamil identity politics and the non-Brahmin movement is well covered. See Eugene F. Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict: The Non-Brahmin Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916–29*, Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1969; Arooran, *Tamil Renaissance and Dravidian Nationalism*; Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Passions of the Tongue, Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891–1970*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1997.

⁹⁴ See A.R. Venkatachalapathy, ‘*Enna Prayocanam: Constructing the Canon in Colonial Tamilnadu*’. *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 42(4), October-December 2005, 535–53. Also reprinted in A.R. Venkatachalapathy, *In Those Days There Was No Coffee: Writings in Cultural History*, New Delhi: Yoda, 2006.

⁹⁵ See Venkatachalapathy, ‘Grammar, the Frame of Language.’

⁹⁶ See for instance letter of V. Sadasivan, of S.P.G. High School, Trichy dated 14-3-1901, UVS papers.

⁹⁷ G.O. No. 2352, Education, 2-11-1936.

⁹⁸ ‘Aiyarai Kanden’, *Kalaimagal*, March 1948.

⁹⁹ See the bitter series of articles by P. Chidambaram Pillai on Tamil pandits in Periyar’s *Kudi Arasu*.

¹⁰⁰ See A.R. Venkatachalapathy, ‘Dravidian Movement and Saivites, 1927-44’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 8 April 1995, 761–8. Also reprinted in Venkatachalapathy, *In Those Days There Was No Coffee* and in Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar (eds), *Caste in Modern India: A Reader*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2014, vol. 1, 449–73.

¹⁰¹ With the passing of the Tamilnadu Official Language Act, 1956, and the formation of the DMK government in 1967, official language was drawn from classical and medieval Tamil. Arabic-Persian administrative terminology was eschewed, and terms from Chola inscriptions were deployed and have now taken root.

¹⁰² See two, largely critical, evaluation of the pure Tamil movement see K. Kailasapathy, ‘The Tamil Purist Movement: A Re-evaluation’, *Social Scientist*, 7 (10), May 1979, 23–51; Karthigesu Sivathamby, ‘The Politics of a Literary Style’, *Social Scientist*, 6 (8), 1978, 16–33.

¹⁰³ A.R. Venkatachalapathy, ‘Coining Words: Politics and Language in Late Colonial Tamilnadu’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East: South Asia Bulletin*, XV (2), 1995. Also reprinted in Vasant Kaiwar and Sucheta Mazumdar (eds), *Antinomies of Modernity: Essays on Race, Orient, Nation*, Durham: Duke Univeristy Press, 2003 and Venkatachalapathy, *In Those Days There Was No Coffee*.

¹⁰⁴ These articles were put together and published as a book by *Kudi Arasu*. See

Tamilnattavarum Melnattavarum Enra Katturaiyin Maruppukku Maruppu, Erode, 1935.

¹⁰⁵ *Pakutharivu*, September 1935.

¹⁰⁶ *Kumaran*, 27 July 1939. Also see M. Rajamanikkam's speech in *Tamil Pozhil*, Chithirai, Piramathi (April 1938); Also Parippakkam Kannappa Mudaliar, *Tamil Thirumanam*, Chennai: Kaduvankadu Somasundaram, 1953, written in conformity with the resolutions of the 1939 Tamil Marriage Conference. This system of marriage, referred to as Tamil Thirumanam (Tamil marriage) is still being practised today.

¹⁰⁷ See Maraimalai Adigal, *Vellalar Nagarigam*, Pallavaram, 1927; also his *Tamilar Matham*, Pallavaram, 1941; K. Subramania Pillai, *Tamilar Samayam*, Tirunelveli, 1940.

¹⁰⁸ *Kumaran*, 31 October 1940.

¹⁰⁹ N.M. Venkatasamy Nattar to V. Thiruverangam Pillai, dated Thanjavur, 14-12-1940. N.M. Venkatasamy Nattar Papers, Maraimalai Adigal Library.

¹¹⁰ K.A.P. Viswanatham, 'Edhu Tamil Marabu?' *Tamil Pozhil*, 17 (7), 17 (8); 17 (9), October, November, December, 1941.

¹¹¹ For an account of the anti-Hindi agitation, see Arooran, *Tamil Renaissance and Dravidian Nationalism*, 186–218.

¹¹² *Kudi Arasu*, 19 September 1937.

¹¹³ Maraimalai Adigal Diaries, 3 November 1937.

¹¹⁴ *Kudi Arasu*, 15 August 1937.

¹¹⁵ *Kudi Arasu*, 12 September 1937.

¹¹⁶ *Kudi Arasu*, 31 October 1937.

¹¹⁷ *Siddhantam*, October 1937.

¹¹⁸ In 1942, R. Venkatachalam Pillai demanded that the title 'Vidwan', a Sanskrit term be dropped and the Tamil word 'Pulavar' be adopted. A proposal to this effect was brought in the Annamalai University. (*Tamil Pozhil*, 18 (1), April 1942). This resolution was passed only thanks to the strong lobbying in the senate by A. Chidambaranatha Chettiar. *Tamil Pozhil*, 22 (4), July 1946.

¹¹⁹ G. Devaneyya Pavanar to V. Thiruvarangam Pillai, dated Trichy 23-10-1941. G. Devaneyya Pavanar Papers, Maraimalai Adigal Papers.

¹²⁰ *Tamil Pozhil*, 22 (8), November 1946. The Tamil Teachers' Association poured its woes in a similar set of resolutions (*Tamil Pozhil*, 22 (6), September 1946).

¹²¹ *Tamil Pozhil*, 1 (11-12), February–March 1926. L.T. holders, F.A. passed and middle grade teachers were existing categories of teachers. L.T. is Licentiate in Teaching, a training

programme for teachers which made them eligible for appointment as teachers. F.A. pass refers to those who had passed the intermediate. Middle grade was a lower position.

¹²² *Tamil Pozhil*, 5 (3), June 1929. Also see Uu.Sa. Venkatrama Iyer, Tamil Pandit, ‘Tamilarivu Kurainthiruppathen’, *Tamil Pozhil*, 5 (11–12), February–March 1930.

¹²³ Also see Namasivaya Mudaliar Presidential address at Trichy, Thanjavur, *Tamil Pozhil*, 8(5), August 1932. In 1932, the *Tamil Pozhil* reported that in most schools, Tamil teachers were paid Rs. 30 p.m. Some were paid even less at Rs. 25. This was in contrast to the Rs. 75 that English graduates earned. C.R. Namasivaya Mudaliar demanded pay parity between pandits and L.T.s The minimum expectation was Rs. 50 – Rs. 80 for head Tamil pandits and Rs. 40 – Rs. 60 for the second pandit. *Tamil Pozhil*, 8 (5), August 1932.

¹²⁴ *Tamil Pozhil*, 6 (3–5), June-August 1930.

¹²⁵ B.O.L. was offered by Annamalai University even until the 1960s. Though an undergraduate degree, it was usually listed after the M.A. when appended to names. M.A., B.O.L., Ph.D. was the usual order. There was a postgraduate degree called M.O.L. (Master of Oriental Learning) which, in 1966, was declared to be equivalent to an M.A. (G.O. No. 342, Education, 14 March 1966.)

¹²⁶ *Tamil Pozhil*, December 1939.

¹²⁷ *Tamil Pozhil*, 6 (3–5), June–August 1930.

¹²⁸ N.M. Venkatasamy Nattar’s speech, *Tamil Pozhil*, 8 (4), July 1932.

¹²⁹ *Tamil Pozhil*, 14 (11), February 1941.

¹³⁰ Tamilsiriyar Manadu, Chennai, 1–2, March 1947.

¹³¹ G.O. No. 2552, Education, 10 August 1949.

¹³² G.O. No. 975, Education, 10-5-1947.

¹³³ Those who had been appointed Pandits before the Oriental Title certification examinations had been instituted in 1926.

¹³⁴ G.O. No. 694, Education, 30-3-1948.

¹³⁵ *Pudu Vazhvu*, 1(3), March 1948.

¹³⁶ Somalay, *Valarum Tamil*, 1956, 116.

¹³⁷ *Pudu Vazhvu*, 16 July 1948. Of course there was a reaction to it. D. Pandian, later a communist leader, recalled that his teacher at Alagappa College, Karaikudi, A. Muthusivan, wherever opportunity presented itself, would condemn, in his classes, those who instigated divisive feelings in the name of rationalistic reading of Tamil literature. *Perasiriyar Muthusivan Ninaivu Malar*, Karaikudi: Alagappa College, 1956, 39.

¹³⁸ *Perasiriyar Muthusivan Ninaivu Malar*, 48.

¹³⁹ Krishna Kumar, *Political Agenda of Education: A Study of Colonialist and Nationalist Ideas*, (New Delhi: Sage), 1991, 15.

¹⁴⁰ Vasudha Dalmia, *Orienting India: European Knowledge Formation in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, Chap. 2 'Sanskrit Scholar and Pandits of the old school: The Benares College and the Constitution of Authority in the Late Nineteenth Century.' New Delhi: Three Essays, 2003, 48.

¹⁴¹ *Report of the Sanskrit Commission, 1956–57*, Delhi: Government of India, 1958.

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