
COLONIALISM AND THE VERNACULAR LITERATURE: A case study of Tamil Fictions (1879 – 1928)

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ABSTRACT :

The British Government in India and its introduction and patronization of English education marked a change in the Indian soil. It was witnessed that, "... many graduates have a greater desire to distinguish themselves in the field of English literature ...because it brings them greater glory and greater honour and perhaps higher emoluments."¹ The language, English while slowly had been occupying the space of Indian vernacular literature, the hearts of the Tamil lovers were disappointed due to their madness of Tamils in supporting English education and its culture. This brought a new era to protect the spading vernacular literature from the shades of the Western domination. This paper brings forth the condition of Tamil literature, the state of the Tamils, importance to English in Tamil society, necessity of protecting one's mother tongue and patriotism.

KEYWORDS : Lord Macaulay's , educational system , promotion of European literature and science.

INTRODUCTION :

Lord Macaulay's report not only laid the foundation for a changed educational system in India but also introduced a new approach to Indian customs.² It was Lord William Bentinck who had asserted that the great object of the British government should be the promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India...³ It had been further stated that knowledge of English and science should be imparted through the medium of English to the native population.⁴ This brought down the decline of the vernacular literature due to the British educational system. Further Tamil language was in poetical form and not in prose form in those years. The Collector of North Arcot reported, "...in the common village schools..., the class books are poetical works, so the study of which seldom or never extends beyond the mere repeating of the verses... little arithmetic but education is never carried beyond these points."⁵ It was estimated, after remaining in the schools for 7 or 8 years the boys have learned nothing else but to read and write in an imperfect manner...⁶ Vedanayagam Pillai was the first Tamil writer to realize the dearth of prose works in Tamil.⁷ It is to infer that the spreading of English education undermined the influence of the vernacular literature. As a reason the Tamil writers sensed that the western education was responsible for the lessening of the identity of the Indians and their mother tongues. This also helped to stimulate the process of nationalism.

The Committee of Public Instruction, formed to reform the educational systems in India laid great emphasis upon the necessity of securing the sympathy and co-operation of the Indians. "... every measure must as much as possible be divested of the odium of innovation and be such as to induce the people to go along with the government in its undertaking."⁸ The terms of the resolution of Governors of the vernacular languages as medium of instruction in any of the government schools ... the principle of employing government funds for English education to the exclusion of the vernacular education was distinctly laid down.⁹ Lord Elphinstone encouraged the Europeans to look for native co-operation and confidence, by aligning with the most influential and responsible natives...¹⁰ In 1857, Universities were established in Madras, Calcutta and Bombay to impart higher education mainly through English. Morris in his *History of India* had written that, "there is much in the Hindu character for an Englishman to admire if only he honestly

makes an attempt to discover, with which he can sympathize trust or he must differ, and we sincerely trust that bonds of sympathy between the two races be drawn closer.”¹¹ The British tried to build the co-operation of the natives as it was beneficial for a smooth administration. These developments pushed the people to accept the English education to gain more wealth in the British shadow. Every Indian had thought that English education would get them a Government appointment.

Vedanayagam Pillai, the first Tamil fiction writer, in his work *Pirataba Mudaliyar Charitiram*, spoke through one of the characters Ganambal that, our people could not understand the court proceedings as it was in English.¹² It was because majority of 19th century natives were illiterates. In this fiction the author strongly criticizes the excuse that English terms had no Tamil equivalents and at the same time he had appealed for more research in Tamil.¹³ V.A. Goplakrishna Aiyar in his fiction explained through one Gunaseelan, “the attention bestowed upon Tamil language and Tamil literature is fast decreasing... they (Tamils) begin to think it as very degrading to converse in Tamil is, to say the least of it, a deadly sin as they could only boast the foreign language.”¹⁴ In the same fiction, V.G. Suryanarayana Sastri in its introduction opined, there was more number of English fictions emerging throughout the country than Tamil fictions.¹⁵ But it was during the late 1920's we found a good number of fictions emerged in Tamil literature in supporting the national movement openly and criticizing the British Government with the entry of Gandhi.

C.V. Swaminatha Aiyar in his preface had recorded that at the close of the 19th century, Tamils were interested in learning English and reading English books as they believed that that would secure a job in the British regime.¹⁶ This had the thinking that their entry into the service of the British Government would bring them a fresh getup in the society. He felt, this shows the bad precedent of the Indians and the country. In nutshell the author wanted the protection of the mother tongue Tamil to save the Tamil society. The blind faith shown by the people in learning English not only replaced the mother tongue Tamil for English but also helped to a very large extent to popularize the British rule in India. This act of the Indians thwarted the origin of nationalism too.

In Duraisamy's fiction there was a conversation between one Selvaraj Mudaliyar who had returned from Singapore after 20 years and Sundarasan about the condition of education of their time and the respect to the language Tamil. Selvaraj Mudaliyar was explaining that only because of the alien language the vernacular literature lost its importance and its esteemed value. And also he had stated that there was no respect to teachers too.¹⁷ Sundaresan criticized that the people were leaving our sweet Tamil but spend their time for learning an alien language. The people, who didn't know to write their name in English correctly, were proud of declaring themselves well versed in English.¹⁸ Our people were proud of not being familiar in their mother tongue; the author pours out that these people had “no faith in nation as well in their language.”¹⁹ He insisted by saying that the ancient form of our education had disappearing. In those periods the teachers were much respected. But the modern education adversely brought down the respect for teachers. Indian society was tradition oriented and was much thoughtful in following them. Secondly the losing importance of the mother tongue also accelerated the differences between the modernists and sentimentalists. This division affected the nationality.

Our people failed to understand from the aliens their honour for their mother tongue even thousands of miles away.²⁰ But in India the people forsook their mother tongue in their own soil. The learned, who knew the importance of the education, had to be blamed for pitching our nation into slavery.²¹ The madness to acquire English and imitating the English was responsible to bring a form of slavery in India under the British. *Kalambal Charitiram* of Rajam Aiyar pictured the respect given to English as well as to the English educated natives.²² Duraisamy, in his fiction *Gandiyin Unmai Seedan* while exhibiting the spreading of western culture in India explained through a character Alamelu, ‘it was because of foreign language and their culture, our country became a slave country.’²³ Indian society was shown mad after the British government for anything and everything in Indian soil. Bharathi wrote his poems for the social emancipation of the Tamils from the servitude under the British. The British rule was said to superior in all respects and the society had blindly accepted the might of British rules. Alamelu advised, “the family girls to become the soldiers to save our country, as their men became despoiled because of the alien culture.”²⁴

Duraisamy explained, 'the poor as well the illiterates were joining the people who were accustomed to the western culture and language because of their wealth and education.'²⁵ Devakunjariammal wrote, "This became the custom of our land, even the poor desire to educate their children in English by selling even their entire property."²⁶ English was not only patronized by the rich but also by the poor and illiterates in a very large extent. This illustrates the nature of the Indian society to acquire English. The author further insisted that we could live proudly by learning our rich variety of handicrafts than mad to possess English.²⁷ One should realise that our Indian handicrafts which were famous from ancient time lost its glory, fame and patronage due to the British interference. The British administration which was concerned more on revenue exported all raw materials and imported finished goods. This policy of the English crippled the Indian handicrafts industry. So the Indian handicrafts suffered due to higher prices of the raw materials supplied, the introduction of spinning mills in India and also their incompetence in competing the British goods in the Indian market. Because of these our glorious handicrafts began to suffer. The natives in a very large extent entered into the British market for the foreign goods and dressed like the English and started to accustom their culture. These plights of the Indians made Devakunjariammal to call the people to support the suffering handicrafts industry and its dependents from dying.

Western culture attracted Indians and its cities were its witnesses. T.P. Krishnasamy Pavalalar pointed out in his fiction *Gandhiyin Unmai Seedan*, the defects of the foreign culture. In this fiction an accountant explains to the Zamindar about the city Indirapuri, "this place is the best place for spending the time happily, undoubted to say a rich will become a pauper. This city I think will stand number one in western culture. My last opinion is the expenditure in this city will be more than the income."²⁸ In Panaiappa Chetty's fiction, *Manivasagan*, one Sivarampillai's drunkard servant sings the national song which mocked the negligence of the country's medicine, using of perfume (Hoko scent), and also criticized the custom of 'shaking hands' by our womenfolk.²⁹

In this state of Tamil society and the language there emerged a sect of people to fulfill the ambition of Tamil lovers and started writing prose, which imparted a new impetus to Tamil writings. The insistence on Tamil was aimed to protect it from disappearing under the influence of English. The cry was not totally against the English but pointed at the Tamils for the negligence of their mother tongue Tamil. This negligence itself could cause the loss of Tamil identity and the spirit of oneness. "My purpose of writing this work of fiction," Vedanayagam Pillai wrote, "is to supply the want of prose works in Tamil also to give a practical illustration of the maxims on morality contained in my former works."³⁰ He felt, this pitiable state would not have arisen if there were enough prose works in Tamil.

The cry to save the mother tongue Tamil gradually extended in imparting patriotism. The genesis of nationalism began to hammer the hearts of the Indians. In the fiction *Piremakalavadyam*, the author S.V. Gurusamy Sarma created a character Berman who emotionally poured out to one Kalavathy, "is it good for our language to die when we live? Are we the mean persons to the aliens? Why don't we have patriotism as they have?"³¹ "If we do not preserve our books, we will lose everything; then there will be nothing to show that we are the patriots."³² He urged the necessity of protecting the mother tongue Tamil and thus brought in patriotism. Further he spoke, "The mother tongue is the only useful language for better communication. The people have the fame as long as they have their own language and asked to preserve the language of North as well as South."³³ He blamed the rich, the kings and other ruling classes were responsible for not promoting our language. Further he stated that certain self-centred Indian classes had submitted mostly to British and mortgaged our people, language and country. "We should never permit the aliens to destroy our language or to give a chance to be blamed for this."³⁴ This part of the fiction was critical in exhibiting the very importance given to English during the British administration as well the negligence of the Indians. It was counselled to support comprehensively the Indian vernacular literature in total against the spreading of English. The influence of the English had decreased the prestige of the Indian languages, culture and identity of the natives. The leading people in our society expect a few, madly wandering after the ruling government. Their subordinates as well their dependents no doubt followed the same. This also affected the emergence of the spirit of nationalism. The patriots need to preserve their mother tongue first than getting into the movement. He further spoke, "Even though we are imprisoned, we are made slaves, we are

treated cruelly, losing our mother tongue is like giving up one's life.... Breman while saying this emotionally touched, he stopped as he couldn't continue further and wept as a real patriot."³⁵ The author induced a message indirectly that the prime duty of a patriot was nothing but preserving their mother tongue as one's first step to save his or her nation. V. Gopalakrishna Aiyar pointed out in his preface that 'a rising band of lovers of Tamil literature and language advocating her cause and working honestly for her revival.'³⁶ In Panaiappa Chetty's fiction *Ganthimathi*, one Kalyanasundaram addresses on the birth day celebrations of Mahatma Gandhi in Miller's College³⁷ about the present condition of our country, where he spoke, he was pained to see about our country's fall into an unrecoverable state. The author expressed openly the condition of the Madras Presidency during 1920's by codifying the importance of the Congress programmes for the welfare of the nation. The fictions dared to give importance of Tamil. He stressed that the peaceful day would be dawn, only in being proud of One's country and One's language. He told that we get a peaceful life only when we say with real valour and faith, "My country, My language."³⁸ In the fiction *Manivasagan*, Panaiappa Chetty declared his purpose of writing, as to instill a sense of patriotism and an importance of the Tamil books in the country's development.³⁹

Close of the 19th century, the writings in Tamil marked an epoch of supreme importance in the history of Tamil literature and national movement. This was the period when the prose works in Tamil started appearing. V. Rajagopala Aiyangar in 1910 brought to record that "the vernacular literature had received a fresh impetus during this time"⁴⁰ These Tamil fiction writers exhibited the very nature and policies of the British India Government in their writings directly as well indirectly. The fictionists showed much pain on the condition of protecting one's mother tongue and especially Tamil. The writings pointed out at the learned and in turn criticised their responsibility for a pitiable state of the Tamil country. The prose writings in Tamil put in flames the submission of the native people to the English. Not only vernacular literatures were given a fillip, but also the concept of pride and nationalism began to gather momentum in course of time.

¹ V.G. Suryanarayana Sastri, *Kalavathi Oru Puthiya Tamil Natakam*, Madras, 1898 (see the introduction of T. Ramakrishnan)

² Selections from the Records of the Madras Government No. II Papers relating to Public Instructions, Madras, 1853, p.27

³ *Ibid.*, see appendix N

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Vedanayagam Pillai, *Pirataba Mudaliyar Charitiram*, Madras, 1879.

⁸ Selections from the Records of the Madras Government No. II, pp.7-8

⁹ *Ibid.* pp.27-28

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.41

¹¹ *Report of the Committee for the Revision of English, Telegu and Tamil School Books in the Madras Presidency*

¹² Vedanayagam Pillai, *Pirataba Mudaliyar Charitiram* p.28

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ V.A. Gopalakrishna Aiyar, Gunaseelan, Madras, 1900.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Subbaya Aiyar (ed.) *Ganthimathi*, (Viveka Chintamani Tamil Fiction Series), Madras, 1902.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² P. R. Rajam Aiyar, *Kamalambal Charitiram* (1853), Madras, 1957, p.82

²³ V. Duraisamy, p.225

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.226-232

²⁶ P.G. Sundararajan and S. Siva Padmasundaram, *Tamil Fiction*, Madras, 1977, p.76

²⁷ V.Duraisamy, p.209

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ S. PanaippaChetty, *Manivasagan*, 1928, pp.87-88

³⁰ Vedanayagam Pillai, p.31

³¹ S.V. GurusamySarma, *Piremakalavadyam* (1898), Madras, 1980, p.152

³² *Ibid.*, p.153

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Madras Christian College also known as Miller's College.

³⁸ S.PanaippaChetty, *Gandhimathi* (1927), Madras, 1929, pp.212-213.

³⁹ PanaippaChetty, *Manivasagan*,

⁴⁰ V. RajagopalaAiyangar