Chapter 5

THE WORLD OF POPULAR PUBLISHING

In the earlier part of this thesis, we have discussed the material basis of literary production in Tamilnadu from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1930s. Our discussion has centred around the forms of traditional patronage and its subsequent erosion. The passage to public patronage and sustenance through the market, we found, was marked by many problems, which were characteristic of the transitional phase in the Tamil book-trade. Against this background we also studied the emergence of the institutions of the author, the publisher and the printer. Our concerns throughout were with the world of elite publishing. Little was said about popular publishing. This chapter will seek to explore this little-known world, and integrate it into our overall hypothesis about Tamil book-publishing.

We shall seek entry into this more or less uncharted domain through the tantalizing bits of information gleaned mainly from elite sources. Firstly, an attempt to document the contempt that elite classes had for this stream of publishing will be made. The next section will deal with the term gujilee, which was commonly used to designate popular publishing. Based on a rich documentation of actual chapbooks and ballads, a reconstruction of this world will then be attempted, focusing both on production and diffusion. The final section will seek to establish the interaction between elite and popular publishing. The percolation of nationalism into popular consciousness, the relation of elite poets to popular publishing, the sanitization and appropriation of popular texts will be considered.
Emphasis here, will be placed on the incomplete nature of middle-class hegemony.

5.1 *Elite Contempt for Popular Literature*

Some of the earliest references to popular literature are to be found in the *Viveka Chintamani*, a journal run by the 'Agency for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge' founded in 1892, by some English-educated Brahmin intellectuals led by C.V. Viswanatha Iyer. It generally deplored the absence of 'useful knowledge' in the vernacular. Contrasting the once-glorious age of the Tamil language, it commented that contemporary Tamil books were full of chapbooks and ballads, describing them as 'thannane pattukal' (after the catchy rhythms in which they were set). The basic complaint; as a contributor - one Ve.Mosae Iyer put it, was that these songs and ballads instilled lust, vanity and other despicable qualities in the readers. Apart from using the generic term 'thannane pattukal' to refer to these chapbooks, he also specifically mentioned ballads like Kuttrala Kuravanji, Mukkoodal Pallu and Madanakamarajan Kathai, which, in his view, were full of lewd descriptions of women.

These are the earliest references, contemptuous or otherwise, available about popular literature. Gradually we get more and more of such comments. Details are embellished and criticism becomes sharper. In A. Madhaviah's 1898-novel *Padmavathy*

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1 *Viveka Chintamani*, 1(1) May 1892.
2 *ibid.*, 1(8), December 1892.
Charitiram, we find Narayanan and Gopu, two school-going young men, condemning women reading such popular ballads.3

Subramaniya Bharati, commenting on a chapbook on the Arbuthnot Bank Crash of 1906, said, "[This ballad] unlike other kummis [a popular ballad-form] is not full of blunders which are repulsive to scholars."4 Thus, by the turn of the century, popular songs and ballads were seen to be, apart from being morally suspect, full of flaws, blunders and grammatical errors, which the well-educated could not stand.

Thiru. Vi. Kaliyanasundara Mudaliar, the widely respected scholar and politician, made the most passionate plea against popular publishing, when he complained,

The writings of some late-lamented scholars are grieving in the hands of a few gujilee market publishers. To think of it, fills one's eyes with tears.5

The mention of gujilee, which we will consider in detail in the next section, is interesting, as it becomes a convenient shorthand to define what was good, 'genteel' and acceptable, and what was not.

Navasakti, the weekly run by Thiru. Vi. Ka., lamented

3 A. Madhaviah, Padmavathy Charitiram, Madras, 1978 (later ed.), p.56. Madhaviah wilfully distorts the names of the ballads as Kattappa Nayakkkan Kummi and Moolialankari Pattu, to caricature them and consequently make them abhorrent.
4 India, 17 November 1906.
that **gujilee** books and popular novels were becoming the order of the day.\(^6\) **Lakshmi** went one step further, when, writing a favourable review of V. Saminatha Sarma's nationalist play, based on Robert Bruce's life, thought it adequate to describe it as "not the sort of plays that are heaped up and sold cheap in the **gujilee**". It went on to describe how well the book was produced in "letters clear like pearls, on smooth paper and bound in quality calico, like foreign books",\(^7\) implicitly comparing it with the slipshod production considered typical of **gujilee** books.

Likewise, when S. Sachidanandam Pillai, a highly-respected Tamil Saivite scholar, in a personal communication to V. Thiruvarangam Pillai, founder of the Saiva Siddhanta Kazhagam, voiced the general complaint that Kazhagam editions were expensive, he replied, "To those who are used to buying **gujilee** books cheap for generations, it is not easy to buy superior books at a higher price."\(^8\) Such references to **gujilee** books could be multiplied.\(^9\)

The following account of T.K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliar, the connoisseur known for his refined tastes, of how he bought a copy of **Mukkoodal Pallu**, puts across in a sarcastic fashion, his contempt for **gujilee** books:

> How did the book look? .... If one wipes the dust, the

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6 Reprinted in **Lakshmi**, 2(4), November 1924
7 **Lakshmi**, 2(5), December 1924.
8 Sachidanandam Pillai to Thiruvarangam Pillai, dated 16 March 1922. Thiruvarangam Pillai's reply of 21 March 1922 has been jotted down on the reverse. *S. Sachidanandam Pillai Papers*.
9 See S. Murugappa's comment on Kambaramayanam editions in *Kamban Kavithai*, Madras, Piramathi (1939), p. 140.
whole wrapper would peel off. The spine and edges were of calico. An orthodox calico, that is, saffron calico. Actually it was a plain piece of saffron cloth! Calico is only a euphemism. If you open the cover, you will find a special kind of paper that will put to shame Dacca muslin. So soft. So flimsy. I turned the first page. And it tore away in the middle. But the most fantastic aspect of it all was the manner in which it had been printed. The 'editor' must have given the copy to the compositor-boy and said, "compose it as you like." The boy ravaged the vocabulary, grammar and prosody. Black ink was smeared on the pulp paper, and somehow it became a book. Not a single verse - not even a single line - could be seen in its true form. It was easier to solve a hundred crossword puzzles than reading this book.¹⁰

This passage puts the whole thing in a pithy manner, making clear all the attributes that made the gujilee books particularly deplorable to the elite.

If this disdainful attitude was shared by all sections of elite society, the colonial state differed little. In the 1930s, when the Registrar of Books was burdened with a huge library built up over the years through the mandatory submission of all printed books under the Registration of Books Act 1867, he suggested a detailed scheme for destruction of selected categories of books, to make his library less unwieldy. Not surprisingly, the popular books were the primary target. In his report to the Government of Madras, the Registrar wrote,

¹⁰ Preface to M. Arunachalam (ed.), Mukkoodal Pallu, Madras, 1949. The Preface was originally written as a review in Kalaimagal, March 1941 for the first edition published in 1940. The reference in the last line is to the controversial crossword puzzle contests conducted then in Ananda Vikatan.
As a rule the bazaar book, by which I mean publications sold in open places, in markets and on roads, in bad print, bad paper and bad get-up abounding in printing mistakes and expressed in vulgar language, may well be destroyed. They are a disgrace to any library. Such are, for instance, the ballad Songs in Tamil of Nallatanga, Alliyarasani, the Song of the Thief, etc....¹¹

Unfortunately for posterity, the government accepted this proposal, and a substantial part of this rare literature is lost.

5.2 Gujilee: From Place-name to Metaphor

The earliest reference to gujilee is in Winslow's Dictionary, published in 1862. Winslow defined kuchili as "an evening bazaar in a town."¹² The Tamil Lexicon, edited by Professor S. Vaiyapuri Pillai, obviously drawing from Winslow, defined it much in the same terms: "Evening bazaar". It further suggested that the word was derived from Urdu, and cited local usage as authority.¹³

While these dictionaries refer to the gujilee bazaar in general terms as an evening market, it was more specifically located in the Park Town area of Madras city, very near the Central Railway

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¹¹ G.O.No. 1349, Public (General), 19 October 1932.
Station. The streets surrounding the Kandaswamy Temple or Kanda Kottam were what was called the gujilee bazaar.\textsuperscript{14} The Tamil Lexicon is probably wrong when it suggests an Urdu origin to the word. Between Walltax Road (now, V.O.C. Road), adjoining the Central Station, and the Kandaswamy Temple, are a number of small lanes wherein lives a sizeable gujarati population.\textsuperscript{15} The gujaratis, in Tamil, are referred to variously as kucchilar, kuchiliyar, kuchariyar.\textsuperscript{16} These are but Tamilized forms of gujilee, the use of the sanskrit/\textit{grantha} 'j' being obviated by substituting 'ch'.

An 1895-chapbook on the Kandaswamy Temple annual festival provides concrete evidence to the fact that the gujilee market indeed derived its name from the gujaratis living in the locality. This chapbook, a \textit{valinadai patham}, a ballad set in the form of a couple going on a journey, usually to a religious centre, wherein the man points out various sights to his spouse, refers to the different shops in the vicinity of the Kandaswamy Temple. Some of the shops are specifically referred to as those of the kucchiliyars.\textsuperscript{17} It is, therefore, more or less certain that the gujilee market owed its name to the gujarati residents in the locality.

\textbf{Gujilee} market was then well-known for a variety of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} P.A. Pranatharthihara Sivan, \textit{Viyasa Manjari}, Madras, 1900: reprinted in \textit{Kumari Malar}, 25(9), December 1968.
\item \textsuperscript{15} See Dilip Kumar, \textit{Moongil Kuruthu}, Madras, 1985 for two very sensitive stories on gujarati life in this locality.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Tamil Lexicon, vol.2, part 2, 1927; Winslow, \textit{op.cit.}; N. Kathiraivel Pillai, \textit{Tamil Moli Akarathi}, 1906.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Chennai Kandaswamy Vedarpani Mahorchava Valinadai Patham, Madras, 1895.
\end{itemize}
goods and services, especially cheap ones. As a contemporary pilgrim-guidebook described it,

Gujilee bazaar - China bazaar street. In the evenings this street is very crowded, and sports a very festive look. Even those who have no wish to spend a paisa will want to buy from the innumerable shops selling textiles, enticing fruits, pictures, gold and silver ornaments, copper, brass and bronze utensils, perfumes, umbrellas, footwear, sticks, sweetmeats, books and other items. 18

The chapbook referred to earlier also lists similar things that could be purchased at this bazaar: cashewnuts, rice, betel leaves, thread, locks, lanterns and cane-items 19 (hence the name Rattan Bazaar). A contemporary compendium on frauds and cheats observed that many unscrupulous mail order businessmen passed off fountain pens, anklets, bracelets, clocks, etc. bought cheaply at the gujilee as quality goods. 20

Thus, the gujilee bazaar was an important market of those days, especially for inexpensive goods. Maraimalai Adigal would often visit this market, when he settled down in Madras after being appointed as a Tamil teacher in the Madras Christian College. He bought items like plates, vessels, combs, chimneys, paper, silver, etc. 21 Likewise, T.K. Chidambaramathu Mudaliar had actually gone

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19 Chennai Kandaswamy Vedarpani Mahorchava Valinadai Patham, Madras, 1895.
21 Diaries of Maraimalai Adigal, see entries dated 17 March 1898; 19 January 1899; 5 March 1899
to buy a lantern, when he chanced upon a copy of Mukkoodal Pallu. 22

But the gujilee was far from being an innocuous marketplace. It had its seamier side too. Contemporary accounts abound in references to the pickpockets and petty-thieves active in the bazaar. The pilgrim-guidebook that we cited earlier, cautioned the pilgrims: "Instead of gaping at the various sights, people should take care of their purses in their pockets and waists. In this place, there are any number of pickpockets." 23 Thillai Govindan of A. Madhaviah's novel of the same name, while strolling one evening in the gujilee bazaar near a second-hand bookstall, lost his purse containing over fifty rupees. 24 T. Chelvakesavaraya Mudaliar, in one of his short stories, writes of how pickpockets proved their mettle in the nearby People's Park, an extremely popular amusement park of the times, when they had no work at the gujilee. They were indeed adept in picking currency notes, coins tucked in the waist, embroidered upper garments and the necklaces of women. 25

So notorious was gujilee that it came to be called 'Thieving Bazaar.' It was left to A. Madhaviah to write to J.C. Molony, the Municipal Commissioner and his friend, that such a name did not do credit either to the police or the public. Consequently, Madhaviah writes, the place was again rechristened gujilee bazaar. 26

23 Mylai Pattabhiraman, op.cit.
Apart from its notoriety for thieving, the place was also known for its locksmiths. Maraimalai Adigal once had to seek the help of a locksmith when the original key of his almirah broke.\(^{27}\) Given the nature of their vocation, locksmiths had often to oblige not very scrupulous persons, which also added to the infamy of gujilee.

It is also likely that immoral traffic in women took place in the vicinity of gujilee. To this day, streetwalkers are often referred to colloquially as gujilee. Whatever be the source of this, "a fancy mark of mica worn on the forehead by women" came to be called as ‘gujilee pottu’.\(^{28}\) This fashionable pottu was so closely associated with immoral women, that when young girls took to wearing this, they were often chided or even abused by elders.\(^{29}\) The Tamil Lexicon itself defined it as thalukku pottu, thereby acknowledging the immoral overtones that the pottu had.\(^{30}\)

It was in such a milieu that the book market in the gujilee operated. From around the last decades of the nineteenth century to well up to the 1960s, there were a number of bookshops in the market, selling chapbooks, ballads and a whole range of popular reading materials. These were generally characterized by its poor quality of production and catered to the common folk. Kanakalingam, the hero of Vindhan’s 1951-novel, Palum Pavaiyum, works in one such bookshop, which mainly deals in panchangams and other such

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27 Diaries of Maraimalai Adigal, entry dated 23 May 1898.
prognostic literature. As part of a larger hegemonic project of the emerging middle class, these were looked down upon, and came to be designated as 'gujilee books' after the name of the locality in which they were extensively produced and disseminated. The none-too-complimentary aspects of the market-cheap goods, unscrupulous locksmiths, pickpockets and petty thieves and streetwalkers began to be attributed to the books themselves. The very term gujilee conjured up in the minds of people, at least of the middle class, a very reprehensible image. Ultimately, what was only a place-name ended up as a metaphor for a distinct kind of 'low' culture, the 'other' of respectable and honourable culture/publishing.

In many ways this is reminiscent of the Grub street of London, where a much similar process was at work. Nearer home, the 'Battala publications' of late-nineteenth-century Bengal offers an analogous case, deriving the name from the poorer quarters of north Calcutta where they were produced. As Sumanta Banerjee points out, "In respectable circles, the 'Battala books' .... were associated with dirty stories, spicy accounts of local scandals and poor print." 33

5.3 Ballads and Chapbooks

As we saw in the earlier section, gujilee was used to connote a certain class of publications. But these gujilee books were

by no means a homogeneous lot. In this section we shall seek to differentiate between two distinct classes of books and explore the range of reading material that they offered.

The catalogue of P.M. Raju Mudaliar and Sons, enables us to categorize popular literature as its publishers themselves saw it and presented to prospective buyers and readers. This lists over 900 books under the following heads: religion, story books, ammanai, vilasam, plays, keertanais, medicine, astrology, ‘one-anna books’, 9-paisa books, 6-paisa books, Muslim books, peria-eluthu (literally, ‘big-letter’) books and ‘newly’ printed books.

The category of religion consisted of a wide range of books giving paraphrases of classics like Kambaramayanam, Thiruvachagam, Thevaram, the various puranams and the works of the various iconoclastic siththars. Ammanai, Malai and Keerthanai, which were later designated as minor literary forms (Chitrilakkiyam) were ballad forms narrating popular stories. Nallathangal Kathai, Eniyettram, Alliarasani Malai, Nandanar Charithira Keerthanai and Rama Nataka Keerthanai were some of the more well-known books in these categories. Vilasam was a popular-drama form, dramatizing similar stories. The peria-eluthu books were publications set in big and easy type, targeted very specifically at a neo-literate audience. The medicinal books were mostly in the nature of materia-medicas, setting forth in detail the medicinal uses of various vegetables, fruit and herbs, apart from providing diagnosis and prognosis for a wide range of illnesses. Books of veterinary sciences also came under this

34 See Puli Pocket Diary 1909 published by the same firm. This diary provides, apart from other details, a detailed list of its publications.
head. Works of astrology dealt with the zodiac, omens, portents, dreams and the like. We shall call these books as ballads and distinguish them from the chapbooks of which we shall speak now.

The chapbook, though produced on more or less similar lines as the ballads, differed, apart from its shorter length, in one very crucial aspect: dissemination. These chapbooks were called orana (one anna) or araiana (half an anna) songbooks, after their price. These books were usually of 8 or 16 pages, in either demy 8vo/16vo or crown 8vo/16vo. These chapbooks too dealt with similar themes as the ballads referred to above.

The standard stock of the chapmen consisted of invocations to ‘minor’ and local dieties like Amman, lullabies, oppary (lamentation songs), valinadai chindu, kavadi chindu, thanga chindu, pura pattu, seval pattu, kummi, etc. The songs on dieties could be sold all through the year, but especially during specific annual festivals in honour of particular dieties. Lullabies and opparies, which were songs sung by women at the death of their near ones, always commanded a ready sale. Valinadai chindus, as we described earlier, were set in the manner of a couple on a tour, either to a temple or an entertainment centre, wherein the man pointed out and described in detail the various sights to his spouse. Kavadi chindus were songs sung ritually when pilgrims carried a palanquin-like kavadi on their shoulders, involving self-mortification, to the Murugan temple in fulfilment of a vow. Purapattu and valaiyal chindu were set as a conversation between two persons, usually women. Thanga chindu and kullathara chindu derived their names from the recurring refrain of thangame and kullathara in the songs. Aesal was a genre of sarcastic praise. Lavani
was set as a debate over whether Manmathan, the god of love, was indeed destroyed by Lord Sivan or was it only symbolic.

These songs could be religious, quasi-religious or secular. But all played an intimate part in the everyday life of the common folk. Morals and practical tips were also sought to be inculcated in the readers. There are numerous chapbooks cautioning against gambling, punting, participating in chit funds, patronizing whores, etc. Chapbooks like *Kaliyunga Chindu* (by Sirumanavoor Munisami Mudaliar), generally lamented the topsy-turvy nature of the world in 'modern times'. Another important kind of chapbook was to do with popular astrology. Texts like *Sahadeva Sasthiram* were a guide to reading omens and portents from sighting of birds, the ticking of lizards, etc. Predictions based on the exact time of the attainment of puberty were also provided in chapbooks like *Pendugal Jathakamennum Ruthu Nool Sasthiram*. Songs for occasions of marriages, especially to tease brides and bridegrooms, formed part of the stock. Songs on the horror of the mother-in-law, no doubt found ready buyers among young women.

But given the fact that they were only booklets, hawked at the crossroads and marketplaces, they tended to speak of topical and sensational news. As a contemporary critic observed:

Some train should meet with an accident somewhere; or somebody should commit a murder; or some woman should give birth to a monkey; or a child should be born with three heads; or some place should be gutted in a fire. Immediately these poets will compose a song. The lilt of the song and its word-order enthrall the common folk. Moreover, if the poet himself were to hawk the songs at the crossroads, who from among the common folk will
Thus sensational news formed the staple of hawkers, in their day-to-day business. Local scandals, murders, curious news items like the inauguration of novel locomotives, epidemics, no doubt interested the commonfolk, especially in the context of an age when mass media had not come into being. An interesting detail in Kalki's 1937-novel *Thiyaga Boomi*, highlights the topical nature of these songs. Sambu Sastri, an old, recluse, brahmin, is served the court summons in a sensational case on restitution of conjugal rights, and when he wonders what it is all about, the surprised ameena says, "Yes, sir! This case is a much talked about one! There is even a quarter anna songbook on it!"[^36]

Similarly, songs about murder were so popular that a separate genre called *kolai chindu* (chindu on murder) came into being.[^37] These songs narrated in detail, no doubt with embellishments, murders caused by cuckolded husbands, adulterous women, wayward men and violent thieves.[^38] A couple of chapbooks on social bandits like Jambulinga Nadar, Santhana Thevar, Kodukkuri Arumuga Padayachi also survive. With the mass phase of Indian nationalism, chapbooks with nationalist themes also began to form part of the stock-in-trade of the chapmen (see below 5.5.1).

[^35]: Suthanthira Sangu, 13 July 1933.
[^37]: The murder of Lakshmikantham (1944), a yellow-journalist, was extremely popular among chapmen and numerous popular booklets were published in the mid-1940s. A good book, taking into account the rich popular material, is waiting to be written on the Lakshmikantham Murder.
What distinguished the ballads from the chapbooks was essentially the mode of dissemination. Given the fact the ballads were larger and consequently more expensive also, they were rarely ever hawked around by pedlars. They were usually stocked in and sold from petty shops or spread by the roadside. As John Murdoch observed (and his office, the Christian Literature Society, was hardly a stone’s throw from gujilee bazaar), "In the evening about 25 book-hawkers may be seen at the bazaar, sitting behind their piles of books."^{39}

On the contrary, the chapbooks were usually disseminated by chapmen, who were often the authors themselves, at street corners and marketplaces. A contemporary observer even dubbed them, quite derisively, as "the songsters of the crossroads."^{40} The District Magistrate of Tirunelveli gives a clearer description:

What generally happens in such cases is this. Some hawkers who have a gift of street singing generally gather a crowd in street corners and begin to sing. The songs catch the mass and are repeated by them. There is a sale of the books to the crowd assembled.^{41}

Such street-singing would gather huge crowds, as it happened in Pudukkottai, late in the nineteenth century, when a muslim chapman was selling chapbooks at the crossroads, where a

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40 Suthanthira Sangu, 13 July 1933.
41 G.O.No. 58, Public (General), 10 January 1935.
lamp post stood. Mischievous little boys perched on it, and the then Dewan of Pudukkottai, A. Seshaiyar had to warn the chapman to take care of the lamp post. 42

It should also be emphasized that ballads and chapbooks were not two discrete categories, but there was quite a bit of overlap. As we saw earlier, chapbooks often dealt with topical and sensational issues. It may not have been possible to dispose off the whole print run of these chapbooks when the topics were still in the news. Interest in specific scandals and murders could not last for long. By the time the next event took place, the earlier incident was forgotten. Chapmen found an ingenious way of marketing such left over stock. A bunch of such dated chapbooks were bound together with a new title page. They were generally referred to as chillarai kovai or chillarai kattadam (literally, assorted miscellanies). There was hardly ever any thematic unity, and fitted into the description of a miscellany. 43 Sometimes thematic collections were also brought out, but they tended to be shorter ones, like 16 Desathathisaya Kolaikothu (a bunch of 16 murder-songs). Through this manner of putting together chapbooks, they became ballad-books, and were marketed as such.

In Madras, apart from the gujilee bazaar, the Moore

43 See, for instance, 100 puthagam adangiya noothana imbarasa korvai, ('New pleasurable assortment of 100 books'), Madras, 1929; 200 puthagam onrai chertha pala pattu chillarai kovai ('Assorted miscellany of various songs from 200 books'), Madras, 1926.
Market, Choolai and George Town were important centres of dissemination. Choolai was crucial to the popular literature circuit, especially the chapbooks, because it was a thickly populated working class locality.44 Choolai was surrounded by the Binny Mills, then the largest textile mills of south India, the Tram shed, the Central station and the Salt Cotaurs, where trucks were loaded and unloaded. No wonder, apart from being a major centre for chapbook and ballad production, it was also the haunt of hawking pedlars.45 The chapmen themselves came to be called ‘Choolai kavignars’ (Choolai-poets).46

In Madurai, Pudumantapam (‘The New Hall’) just across the Meenakshi Temple was another major centre of diffusion, especially for ballads. In the Pudumantapam, rows of bookstalls catered to the needs of the milling pilgrim crowds, especially from the nearby villages.47

In the rural areas, it was itinerant chapmen who carried reading material to the people. Weekly markets and temple and village festivals were occasions for marketing ballads and chapbooks.

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44 See Namathinthia Tholilalar Thalaivargalin Narpugal Prabalya Arputha Geetham, Madras, 1929, a chapbook which contains songs in praise of labour leaders like M. Singaravelu Chettiar, Adikesavalu Nayakar, V. Chakkarai Chettiar, B. Shiva Rao and T.P. Meenakhisundaram Pillai.

45 Interview with M. Babu, son of K.A. Madurai Mudaliar, a leading popular publisher of the inter-war period, aged 56 years, 2 June 1992.

46 Chandilyan, Porattangal, Madras, 1987, p.43.

47 Ki. Rajanarayanan writes about how his friend ‘Annachi’ Kandasami Chettiar, from Koilpatti over 150 kms from Madurai, bought a copy of Karaikkal Ammaiayar’s early medieval poems from Pudumantapam. Ki. Rajanarayanan Katturaigal, Sivagangai, 1991, p.188.
Kasim, with lullabies and opparies, toured the small towns and villages of Thenthirupperai, Aeral, Thiruchendur, Valliyoor, Palayamkottai of Tirunelveli district, and Nagore and Keelakkarai in Ramanathapuram district from the late 1940s well up to the early 1980s. 48 K.A. Gunasekaran writes of how people from his village of Keeranoor used to go to Ilayankudi town for the saturday market and buy chapbooks along with provisions. 49

Sellers of popular literature, especially of ballads, had a field day during major religious festivals. 50 Ekadesi, festival at Srirangam, Karthigai festival at Thiruvannamalai, Chithirai festival at Madurai, Theppam festival of Mylapore were times of hectic activity for them. P.S. Kumaraswamy Raja, recollecting his boyhood days during the 1910s gives a graphic description of the Adippoora Urchavam in Srivillipputtur, when scores of new stalls used to be set up. 51 During the twenty-day festival of rappathu pagalpathu during Vaikunda Ekadesi, popular publishers used to flock to Srirangam. Books were spread out at the Rangavilas Mandapam 52 and sold at fabulous discounts. This came to be known derisively as 'Srirangathu Pathivilai' ('Half rates of Srirangam'). 53 Apart from travelling salesmen during festival seasons, all major temple complexes had small bookstores.

48 Interview with M. Kasim, aged 70 years, on 7 November 1992.
50 Murdoch, op.cit., p. lxi.
52 Ananda Bodhini, December 1919.
5.4 **Authors and Publishers**

We know little more about the authors of the chapbooks except that they themselves peddled them. The question of authorship of ballads does not arise as virtually all of them were only the printed versions of pre-existing folklore. The chapbooks themselves provide us with the names of the authors, as they had the habit of affixing their signature lines in the songs. This, and the fact that, through the course of the song, the price of the chapbook was also woven in, provides unquestionable evidence that the chapbooks were indeed hawked by the authors themselves. In addition, we find quite a few chapmen promising second instalments of the song in question, which confirms the above view.54

Vijayapur Sabapathy Das, P. Rajagopal Naidu, T.V.R. Chinnaswamy Pillai of Tirumalai, Muthialupettai V.A. Thiyagaraja Chettiar, M.S. Sabjan, Pandit S. Pir Muhammed Rowthar, K.A. Madurai Mudaliar and Choolai Manicka Nayagar are some of the songsters whose names crop up often. Sirumanavoor Munisami Mudaliar seems to have been the doyen of these chapbook songsters authoring numerous songs.55 Choolai Manicka Nayagar made it a point always to introduce himself as Munisami Mudaliar’s disciple,

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54 See Janakiammal Sathi-Thaimaman Kolai; Kanniyaral Kaluthu Vettunda Chinnappan Kolai Chindu.

in the course of his chapbooks. Likewise, R.B.S. Mani proudly proclaimed himself the student of T.P. Krishnaswamy Pavalar, a renowned popular playwright of his times. Clearly, some of them were associated with the popular stage, as, in another instance, T.V.R. Chinnaswamy Pillai is referred to with the appellation, 'ayanpart'. Likewise, V.A. Thiagaraja Chettiar could be a playwright as he is referred to as upathiyayar/vathiyar.

The only songster about whom we have some amount of information is Nagai Saminathan. Born in a small village near Nagappattinam, he studied only up to the third standard. The poverty of his family pushed him into working for a provision store, until he got a small job in the Nagappattinam Railway Workshop at a daily wage of Rs. 0-5-4. He was sixteen then, and he would read the poems of the iconoclastic siththars, which were then available only in gujilee editions. He also picked up the art of singing lavani songs from a co-worker, until a more politically conscious foreman spotted him and introduced him to political literature of the Self-respect movement. Gradually, he joined the radical left faction of the movement and later went on to join the Communist Party. He composed a number of songs set in the chapbook tradition, but is chiefly remembered, if only in the Left, as the composer of the Tamil version of Eugene Pottier's Labour international song.

56 See many of Choolai Manicka Nayagar's chapbooks in 100 puthakam adangiyai..., Madras, 1929.
57 See, for instance, Nattin Nilamai Vilakkum Desabakti Geethangal, Madras, 1931. Also interview with R.B.S. Mani's son B. Ramanan, who continues to deal in second-hand books, 21 April 1993, Madras.
58 The details of Nagai Saminathan's life are drawn from the biographical appendix in Nagai Saminathan, Samadharma Geetham, Madras, 1987.
Nagai Saminathan's life illustrates the career of a popular songster, even if he was not exactly a very typical example. He had little education, picked up the art of composing songs from the popular tradition, and continued to write in the same manner, even though he moved toward radical politics. There must have been numerous other songsters like him. But few have survived the "enormous condescension of posterity". But the names of three of them have survived in a well-known saying.

Pichaikku Bhaskaradas
Perumaikku Sankaradas
Ichchaikku Muthusamy,

which means, Bhaskaradas' songs were sung even by beggars, Sankaradas' songs were respectable, while Udumalai Muthusamy Kavirayar wrote bawdy songs.

Apart from the fact that many songsters on many occasions printed and disseminated chapbooks, we know little else about the process of production. With regard to ballad-books we have even scantier information. But it is clear that author-cum-publishers alone could not have sustained the vast production of popular literature that existed. B. Ratna Nayagar & Sons, R.G. Pathy & Co.,

61 Beggars appear to have been important transmitters of popular songs. U.V. Swaminatha Iyer describes in detail, how, in the nineteenth century Chandrasekhara Kaviraja Pandithar recorded a brilliant venba from a wandering beggar. See U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, Nallurai Kovai, volume 4, Madras, 1952 (1 edition 1939), pp.130-136. He further mentions that beggars sang themmangu, vennila pattu and parapara kanni.
62 Sankaradas Swamigal is now acclaimed as the father of the Tamil stage for writing popular plays.
Choolai Manicka Nayagar, Sirumanavoor Munisami Mudaliar and K.A. Madurai Mudaliar seem to have been prominent names in popular publishing. But unfortunately, we have no account of them or their work. It is only during the 1920s and 1930s, when this stream of publishing came under the scrutiny of the colonial state for its handling of nationalist themes, do we get at least glimpses of behind-the-screen activities. Scores of chapbooks were proscribed, and on a couple of occasions, their authors, publishers and printers were proceeded against in the court of law. Such rare moments of colonial intervention provide insights into the process through which chapbooks were produced.

When the author and publisher of Bhagat Singh Keertanamrutham were prosecuted in 1931, it transpired that V. Nataraja Pillai had composed a number of songs on the death of Bhagat Singh, and sold it for a consideration of only Rs. 4. The petty bookstall-owner of Cuddalore who purchased it got 3,000 copies of it printed. The printer was an illiterate widow who owned a small press, managed by her brother. Since the author was also personally pushing the sales of the chapbook it is likely that he got a commission out of it. During the hearing, he confessed that he never meant to write anything seditious, and produced some of his earlier compositions in praise of the King Emperor and the Governor of Madras, as proof of this. 63

In the case of another chapbook on Bhagat Singh, it emerged that T.S. Kanakasabai of Tenpathi wrote and published

63 Judgement in C.C.No.11 of 1931 in the District Magistrate’s Court of South Arcot, in G.O. No. 1054, Public (General), Confidential, 12 October 1931.
4,000 copies of it. The chapbook was printed in a small press, and the press made only Rs. 4 from the entire transaction. Kanasabai pleaded that he wrote solely with a view to make some money, and swore that he had no seditious intentions. 64

In yet another case, the printer of a chapbook on Bhagat Singh happened to be a humble compositor in a local press who had opened a small press called 'Vedavalli Press'. As the Commissioner of Police remarked, he was "a man of no status." 65

The Commissioner of Police, Madras after his enquiries about the publication of Arrestu Pattu (containing songs about the arrest of Congress leaders), described the author K.T.R. Venugopal Das as "a professional writer of songs", and K.A. Madurai Mudaliar, its printer/publisher as "a petty book-seller." 66

Apart from the fact that the producers of chapbooks were smalltime publishers, they did not make their living solely on books. They dealt in a variety of things, much like the haberdashers of early

64 Judgement in C.C.No. 9 of 1931 in the District Magistrate's Court of South Arcot, in G.O. No. 1069, Public (General), Confidential, 8 August 1932.
65 G.O.No. 1041, Public (General), Confidential, 8 October 1931.
66 G.O.No. 2535, Public (General), Confidential, 29 December 1940.
modern Europe. For instance, P.M. Raju Mudaliar & Sons, described themselves as "Book and Medicine Sellers, Gold Gilded German Silver Jewellers, Rubber Stamp Makers, Publishers of Annual Diaries and General Commission Agents." Many of their chapbooks also advertised the products that were dealt by them. Choolai Manicka Nayagar regularly advertised hair oil, Japanese silk scarves, oil for turning grey hair black, antidote for scorpion bites and hair-removing soap available with him.

The variety of vocations they dabbled in shows that the producers of popular literature led a precarious existence. It must be remembered that chapbooks were sold cheap, sometimes as meagre as 3 paise each. It is not unlikely that the chapbooks earned them their daily bread, quite literally. Consequently they fiercely defended the right over their copies.

Most of the texts that they produced were not copyright material, and in any case copyright could not be enforced due to the tedious process of colonial judiciary. But they often claimed copyright over their publications. As Murdoch remarks, "A considerable number of native books now bear on their title pages,

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67 Puli Pocket Diary, 1909.
68 Arul Nadai Palani Andi Pandaram Pattu, Madras, 1927. Here is the advertisement copy from the back page. Time-tested! Well-known! Panacea! Ayyakantha Thiravakam. Friends, this wonder drug surprisingly cures a number of dreadful diseases. Thousands have used this and derived satisfaction. This is an inimitable drug which is an elixir for a body that has been weakened by disease and 'bad company'. This is prepared in the English-way. It is very pleasurable to eat this. Those with chronic cough will get surprising relief after just two doses... Grey hair will turn black ... Dropsy will be cured. Smarting of the eyes, and exhaustion of the limbs are relieved. It makes the face glow. Drives away fatigue. It's a good appetizer. It elevates the spirit. Strengthens the nerves. Infuses new blood into the body. Cures diseases caused by the imbalance of humours.
"Registered copyright'. This is always printed in English being considered more effective in that language. Sometimes it is expressed 'Rehistered', 'Coby right', 'Copy write', & c".69 The songsters also devised other means to defend their work. The usual device was to warn readers about the 'corrupt' versions sold by other vendors. For instance, the publisher of Navjavan Bharata Keerthanamrutham (1931), in a note to an elegy on Bhagat Singh's death, said,

In other books, this song is full of errors. For example, it is written Kaluthai aruthathale. Bhagat Singh was hanged and not beheaded. So we have corrected it to nerithathale. Moreover, we have corrected the alliterative forms and preambles in the right manner. Those who have memorized the earlier faulty version should now correct themselves.

An extra stanza was also added, which it was claimed, was not to be found in other songbooks.70 Likewise, Choolai Manicka Nayagar made it a point, in almost all his publications, to print a few lines cautioning against 'corrupt' editions, and editions which had not been published by his press.71

But such warnings and notices did not always have the desired effect, as competitors continued to publish the 'same' texts and make their living. More dire threats had then to be issued. One V.R. Elumalai Pillai put up the following verse in one of his

69 Murdoch, op.cit.,p.lxii.

70 For similar advertisements, see Bangalore Audhi Hindu Vinoda Sabha/ Periya Indira Sabha, Madras, 1900, outside wrapper.

71 See the chapbooks bound in 100 Puthagam adangiya....., Madras,1929.
If he has been begotten
by a chaste woman and a single man,
he will not think of pirating my book.
But if he has been born
to a widow associated with three hundred men
he will not hesitate to do so.

J. Purushottama Naidu avowed that anyone who pirated
his Gramaphone Swarasahitya Sangeetha Thirattu (4th volume,
Madras, 1930) was his concubine’s son. Likewise, the songster of
Angara Padukolai Alankara Chindu warned that, “They who print or
cause to get printed this book, may be considered my sons, or they
are despicable men who eat cows, or are impotent eunuchs.”

Such instances could be multiplied. They indicate not
only the desperation of the chapbook producers to hold on to their
livelihood, but also their world-view and the values they held.

5.5 **The Elite and the Popular: Some Aspects of Interaction**

Our discussion of popular literature, its production and
consumption, brings us to the vexed question of the relationship and
interaction between elite and popular culture. In this section we shall
seek to explore some aspects of the interaction, and set it in the
context of the hegemonic project of the Tamil middle class.

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72 Uppu Satyagraha Pattu, Madras, 1931.
73 Quoted in Aru. Marudathurai, op.cit., p.51
5.5.1 Nationalism and the Chapbooks

Firstly we shall detail the handling of nationalist themes in the chapbook, as an illustration of an elite ideology diffusing into the lower strata of culture and emphasize the vitality the latter possessed, which enabled it to appropriate elite culture.

From around the beginning of the non-cooperation movement in 1919, there began to flow a steady stream of chapbooks on nationalist leaders, non-cooperation, picketing, kaddar (khadi), temperance, etc. Gandhi was immensely popular among the songsters. Other leaders receiving attention were Motilal Nehru, C.R. Das, and in later days, Subhash Chandra Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru. When Bhagat Singh was martyred, numerous chapbooks were published, and his fame may even be said to have eclipsed the Mahatma's. As a colonial official remarked, "This adulation of Bhagat Singh is definitely objectionable". Similarly, songs were also composed when prominent Congress leaders were arrested. Arrestu pattu (Songs of Arrest) even became a distinct genre.

But, lest it be thought that it was a nationalism of the Congress party, a few caveats are in order. The nationalism of the chapbooks was a nationalism reworked by the songsters of the crossroads in harmony with popular mentalite. All the leaders

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74 For a list of chapbooks on Bhagat Singh, see Supa. Veerapandian, Bhagat Singhum India Arasiyalum, Madras, 1985.
75 G.O.No.910, Public (General), Confidential, 7 September 1931.
lionized in the chapbooks were portrayed as noble men akin to venerated saints, with little regard either to fact or to the specificities of each individual leader. A song on one nationalist leader could well hold good for another. Their elegies on Bhagat Singh could be prefaced by an invocation to the Mahatma.\(^{76}\) Take for instance, the **Mahatma Gandhi Kaddaranantha Pattu.**\(^{77}\) In it, the songster, Choolai Manicka Nayagar, claimed that khadi was the garment of Dadabhai Naoroji, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Swami Vivekananda (who were long dead before the introduction of khadi) and V.O. Chidambaram Pillai (who was opposed to the very concept of khadi). The songster made further claims.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Kaddar} & \text{ will solve the problem of childless parents;} \\
\text{Kaddar} & \text{ will condone sins committed;} \\
\text{Kaddar} & \text{ is close to the heart of chaste women;} \\
\text{Kaddar} & \text{ drives away all diseases;} \\
\text{Vedic-kaddar} & \text{ dispels all evils and sins;} \\
\text{O, women of Bharat buy kadhar, worn by our forebears.}
\end{align*}
\]

If this was the kind of nationalist songs that were hawked, the iconography used in the chapbooks are even more interesting. The picture of Gandhi in his turban (after his return from South Africa in 1915) was the one image often used to represent the Mahatma, even in the 1920s and 1930s well after he had discarded all that.\(^{78}\) We also find typemade blocks of Lord Krishna with his consorts in an elegy

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\(^{76}\) Bhagat Singh Thookku Alankaram, Mannargudi, 1931.

\(^{77}\) Madras, c.1929.

\(^{78}\) For some such pictures, see Mahatma Gandhi Thiyanam; Swarajya Bhavana Cheeman Pandit Jawaharlal Geethamum Swarajya Thilagamum;Sentamil Deseeya Geethangal.
in a chapbook on C.R. Das, we find a picture of Gandhi, flanked on the one side by Pillaiyar (Lord Ganesha) and Krishna, on the other, destroying Kali, the snake: and no image of C.R. Das himself.  

The advertisements published in the nationalist chapbooks are even more curious. Books like Kokkokam (a manual of sex), Mathimosa Kalanjiyam (a compendium on frauds), Aan Pen Marma Rahasyangal (on the secrets of man and woman), Nija Pulugan (funny stories about a prolific liar), etc. were frequently advertised in the nationalist chapbooks. Some even thought it fit to advertise 'Madana Sanjivi' thathu pushti lehyam, an aphrodisiac and an ointment for venereal diseases, apart from drugs for fungal infections and antidotes for scorpion-bites.

Both the elite nationalists and the colonial state were baffled by this mixture of rhyming songs, set to dramatic tunes, badly printed on flimsy paper, with incongruous and crude iconography, and 'immoral' advertisements. The colonial state, though it proscribed and forfeited scores of nationalist chapbooks hardly ever prosecuted the authors and publishers. As the Tamil Translator to the

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79 Bhagat Singh Thookku Alankaram, 1931.
80 Ceeyardas Sirappu Deseeya Geetham, Madras, 1919.
81 See, for instance, ibid.; Mahatma Sirappu enum Gandhi Pattu, 1931; Suyarajya Geetham, 1931; Motilal Pattu, 1931; Sardar Bhagat Singh Uyirvidutha Parithapa Geetham, 1931; Sentamil Deseeya Geethangal, 1931.
82 Mahatma Sirappu Enum Gandhi Pattu, part 1, Madras, 1931.
83 Suyarajya Geetham, part 1, Madras, 1937.
Government of Madras remarked about one such chapbook, "The names of the different authors are not known. .. No information is also available as to whether it is worthwhile prosecuting the authors of these petty songs". As another official remarked on a similar work, "The pamphlet is largely bunk and need not, I submit, be proscribed". There was no consistency in the government policy on nationalist chapbooks. This was quite understandable given the colonial state's lack of comprehension of even some of the elementary aspects of a chapbook as the following remark of the Tamil Translator testifies:

....The title of the book is 'Desiya Oonjal, Nalangu, Kaddar, Madhu Vilakku' and not 'Gandhi Adigal Viruppam Niraiveruga', which is only a prayer printed on the wrapper of the book.

This clearly reveals the difficulties in comprehending chapbooks from a perspective tuned to understand elite books. The title page of chapbooks looked so cluttered, with an array of titles, sub-titles, slogans, advertisements, decorative borders and incongruous typemade blocks that it bewildered the elite.

The nationalist chapbook came under the scrutiny of nationalists too, and their condemnation was no less damning than the colonial state's. As a contemporary observer remarked in the

84 G.O.No. 995, Public (General), Confidential, 19 July 1932. Emphasis added.
85 G.O.No. 1050, Public (General), Confidential, 10 October 1931.
86 G.O.No. 995, Public (General), Confidential, 19 July 1932.
87 Our awkward footnote references to popular literature in this chapter perhaps bears testimony to this.
People who are not qualified to write proper 'national songs' are composing basketfuls of national songs. A song when Motilal dies, a song when Desabandhu dies, a song on the [indentured labourers of] tea-estates: nationalist songs like this are legion. If these songsters do not describe that the national leader in question was born on such and such a year, such and such a date and died on such and such a date after achieving such and such things, their heads will burst. If they start a song with the word 'thungam', they have to continue to alliterate it with 'mangam', 'chengam', 'vangam' 'dangam', whether such words have any meaning or not ... Our national leaders and we should somehow escape from the danger of these 'poets of the crossroads'.

So then, this nationalism was not the high nationalism of Annual Congress meetings and the AICC, but the 'low' nationalism of the gujilée—a nationalism reworked by the songsters and chapmen. Their Gandhi had more in common with the Gandhi of the Gorakhpur peasants than with the Gandhi of Rajagopalachari or Satyamurty. Thus cultural diffusion from the top down could never be straight and simple, the elite dictating terms to the people: a tabula rasa on which anything could be impressed. If an elite ideology reached to the lowest echelons, it was through a process of appropriation by the lower classes which made that possible.

88 Suthanthira Sangu, 13 July 1933. For a similar critique of nationalist songs on the popular stage, see Aakkur Anandachari, Sriman S.G. Kittappa Charithiram, Senkottai, 1938 (1 ed. 1933), p. 107.
5.5.2 Appropriation and Sanitization of Popular Texts

5.5.2.1 Elite Poets and Popular Literature

As suggested in the previous section (5.5.1) the relationship between the elite and popular traditions was one of mutual interaction and not a one-way traffic. If the high nationalism of the Congress variety was reworked by the 'songsters of the crossroads', the elite tradition too picked up much from popular tradition. It is this phenomenon of the elite appropriating certain aspects from popular tradition which we shall be concerned with in this section.

Let us begin with Subramaniya Bharati who drew heavily on popular verse forms to express himself. A prosodic classification of his complete poems reveals this. Of the total of 2267 poems that his collected works consist of, no less than \( 794 \) are in the chindu, which we found earlier was the dominant verse-form used by the chapbooks and ballads. This works out to about 35% of his entire poetic output, and is the single verse-form employed most frequently by Bharati. As we mentioned earlier (see 5.1), he was not unfamiliar with popular literature and chapbooks and had commented, though only adversely, upon it. Bharati consciously drew upon popular ballads like Nandanar Charitira Keerthanai, arguably a 'classic' of the ballad-market, the song of the soothsayer, etc. Bharati's career coincides with the 'moment of departure' of nationalist discourse in

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90 Bhārati Padalgal: Aaivu Pathippu, Thanjavur, 1989, Appendix X.
India,\(^\text{91}\) and is best understood in this context. Bharati consciously used popular forms to rally subaltern classes for the nationalist project, and as he himself says in the dedication to his *Panchali Sabatham* (1912):

> Simple words; a simple style; an easily grasped rhythm; a lilt liked by the common people - anyone who writes an epic with these qualities today, will actually give a new life to our mother tongue. ... it should be easily comprehensible to all Tamil people who are familiar with book-reading if only for a year or two...\(^\text{92}\)

Bharati’s target is clear, and his above description is possibly the best one can give on the nature of popular literature and its consumers. Little attention has so far been devoted to the influence of the popular tradition on Bharati, and we are constrained to observe that researchers are on the wrong track when they seek (rural) folkloric inspiration for Bharati, though this is a welcome corrective to the earlier concern with Bharati’s debts to the classics. There is a good book waiting to be written on Bharati and the world of popular publishing.\(^\text{93}\)

Bharati was not alone in drawing from this tradition. Bharatidasan, who modelled himself on Bharati, wrote on similar

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93 It should be remembered that a number of Bharati’s poems were reprinted by chapmen. See, for instance, *Deseeya Oonjal, Nalangu, Kaddar, Madhu Vilakk*, Ambasamudiram, 1932.
lines, and his early works are best described as chapbooks. But Bharatidasan's later evolution took a different path. Harking back to a pre-aryan, classical Tamil past, he rejected the 'corrupt' urban folklore of the chapbook tradition, though he drew from the 'pure' and 'pristine' rural folklore.

The case of Namakkal Ramalingam Pillai presents a more interesting case. Popularly known as Namakkal Kavignar, he was the official Congress poet from the time of the Civil Disobedience movement until his death in 1972. As he expressly mentions in his autobiography, his ideas on poetry germinated on the songs of Sankaradas Swamigal, Udumalai Charabam Muthusamy Kavirayar and Santhanakrishna Naidu, who all wrote extensively for the popular stage, and were also often published by the gujilee. As he further remarks, "I could grasp the tunes of the stage-songs only because of the singers behind the screen. And I'd often write songs keeping Uraiyur Sahib's rhythm in mind." Namakkal Kavignar wrote a number of songs for S.G. Kittappa's plays, before he moved on to the nationalist stage. His songs were also reprinted in chapbooks. No wonder, a contemporary critic derisively remarked: "He has written a number of pandaram songs which will regale common folk. He does

94 See, for instance, Kaddar Rattinappattu, Pondicherry, 1930; Thondar Valinadaippattu, Pondicherry, 1930.
95 See, for instance, his songs in Isaiyamudlu, Pondicherry, 1952.
97 ibid., p.134.
98 See Mahatma Gandhi Kaddarananda Elappattu, Madras, 1929.
not possess any sublime poetic qualities." 99

Another instance of elite-popular interaction could be the case of T.P. Krishnaswamy Pavalar. Pavalar's father T. Ponnuswamy was a student of Sodasavathanam Subbaraya Chettiar, who was himself tutored by the famed Mahavidwan Meenakshisundaram Pillai. Pavalar studied Tamil under Ko. Vadivelu Chettiar, a leading traditional scholar at the turn of the century. Pavalar was very active in the popular stage, and wrote numerous plays and songs. 100 One of his students, R.B.S. Mani, was a leading chapbook publisher operating from Moore Market. In every publication of his, R.B.S. Mani proclaimed himself as a student of Krishnaswamy Pavalar. 101

Pulavar Kulandai offers the most elaborate case of elite appropriation of popular literature. Born in 1906, Kulandai did not attend regular school, and was more or less self-taught. Even in his boyhood he excelled in writing imitative songs. When hardly twenty years of age, he wrote chapbooks like Kanniyamman Chindu, Nallathambi Charkkarai Thalattu, Veerakumaraswamy Rathorochachindu/ Kavadi chindu/ Valinadai chindu. 102 From such 'lowly' beginnings, he acquired a remarkable scholarship not only in literature, but also in grammar and prosody. By the 1930s he was deeply influenced by the Dravidian movement. He wrote much verse, but the work that brought him fame, and proscription also, was the

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101 See, for instance, Nattin Nilamai Vilakkum Desabakti Geethangal, Madras, 1931.
102 Details of his early life are drawn from the biographical introduction in Kulandai, Iravana Kaviyam, Erode, 1971.
Iravana Kaviyam. It is a classic of the Dravidian movement, which stands Kambaramayanam on its head. The rich texture of the work, abounding in literary allusions, reveals his immense scholarship.

Our present concern is with two manuals of prosody that he authored. In Yappathikaram, first published in 1957, he devoted separate sections to describe kummi and chindu (the chapbook verse-forms par excellence), probably the first grammarian to do so in some detail.103 His Thodaiyathigaram dealt with chindu in even more detail. This 350-page book devotes no less than 70 pages to the elaboration of the grammar of chindu.104 Kulandai classified it into 27 types, and prescribed the norms regarding its composition, in terms of syllables, feet and metre. He also quoted from scores of chapbooks and ballads, which in itself presents a fantastic inventory of popular literature, to illustrate his prosodification of chindu: probably this is the only time any scholar deemed it fit to cite them as authorities.

In a deft manoeuvre to further appropriate and integrate these popular songs into the mainstream of Tamil classical literature, Kulandai highlighted features which, in his view, were common to both traditions. He wrote of oppari, quoting a passage from it:

This is a song sung by women, who are illiterate and have never touched a book in their lives. It is sung when someone close to their heart—father, mother or husband—dies. Look closely at the alliteration of this oppari or

alugani chindu, as it is called.\textsuperscript{105}

Or, of another popular song,

In this komali-pattu (the Song of the Buffoon) referred to as folk song, the alliteration far surpasses the alliteration of even a good literary work. How enjoyable this song is, to read!\textsuperscript{106}

5.5.2.2 Sanitizing Popular Texts

During the first part of this century, another process of appropriation was also at work. Elite scholars began to carefully select texts from the popular market, sanitize them, made them respectable and included them into the Tamil classical canon whose construction was nearing completion in the 1930s and 1940s. This attempt at sanitization came at the end of a process which started in the later part of the nineteenth century, when ancient Tamil texts, for long considered lost, were retrieved from palm-leaf manuscripts. The publication of these texts, as we saw in Chapter I, was a major preoccupation of scholars and publishers especially during the age of patronage. As this project neared its end, the need to complete the classical canon was deeply felt. U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, towards the end of his long career which had began in the age of patronage, started to devote more attention to ‘minor’ literature. There is evidence to suggest that, as a major part of his life work was complete, he should turn to ‘lesser’ works. As Sa. Kandiah Pillai of Kandarodai, Jaffna wrote to Swaminatha Iyer,

\textsuperscript{105} ibid., p.12.

\textsuperscript{106} ibid., p.265. Emphasis added.
... the works, of the siththars, unattended to by elderly scholars, are now carelessly printed by some and they abound in mistakes. There are many more which need to be searched for and printed. If even the Thirumandiram which is so well-preserved has so many distortions, need I say more about the uncared for siththar texts?\footnote{Kandiah Pillai to Swaminatha Iyer, dated 7 November 1931, \textit{U.V. Swaminatha Iyer Papers}.}

Swaminathar Iyer did indeed turn his attention to lesser works, though not that of Siththars. For instance, he obtained a copy of \textit{Thenthirupperai Makaranedumkulaikathar Pamalai}\footnote{Madras, 1939. See the editorial preface.} from a humble cook; he was impressed by the poetry but, finding its text ‘corrupt’, he acquired other versions and published a clean edition.


...Many of those who publish such texts and commentaries are more concerned with their business and profit-making, and less with aspects of language and spelling.

The commentaries written by some late-lamented scholars are in the clutches of the gujilee market publishers. In these days when Tamil scholarship and Tamil development are on the wane, one should be thankful to those who publish books without misprints...\footnote{Reprinted in \textit{Kumari Malar}, 33(10), January 1977.}

The Saiva Siddhanta Mahasamajam and the Saiva mutts of Dharumapuram, Thirupananthal and Thiruvavaduthurai, likewise
reprinted in neat editions the saiva classics of Thevaram, Thiruvachagam, Thirumandiram, etc. which were collectively called the Thirumurais. The editions of the Mahasamajam were not only cheap but also especially known for their meticulous editorship, exactitude in printing, apart from scholarly aids like indexes, glossaries, concordances and cross-references. A wide range of scholars, cutting across sectarian lines and personal jealousies, cooperated in these ventures.110

M. Arunachalam, who was for sometime associated with the Mahasamajam, edited and published Mukkoodal Pallu,111 Seekali Pallu etc. G. Alagirisamy published a neat edition of the ever-popular kavadi chindu of Annamalai Reddiar. S. Bavanandam Pillai brought out editions of ballads like Alliarasani Malai, Eniyettram, etc.

Many of these works were accommodated into the Tamil classical canon as chitrilakkiyam (literally, ‘minor literature’) - an appendix to perilakkiyam (great literature). This process is by no means complete, as newer texts are still being sanitized and published by the elite publishers, though not all have met with equal success.112

5.6 Silencing the Popular Press and the Incomplete Hegemony of the Middle Class

From the early 1940s, the popular press was slowly being

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110 See Siddhantam, 9 (3), March 1936.
111 It may be remembered that T.K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliar’s review of this book, which we have extensively quoted in the earlier sections, was an unconcealed attempt to invest the edition with authority and baptize it into the classical canon.
eroded. The rapid social and economic changes since World War II, the rise of the middle class and, more importantly, the growth of the mass media took its toll.

As Chandilyan, who later became an extremely popular pseudo-historical novelist, wrote about his early days as a journalist in the Tamil daily Swadesamitran in 1935, when he published sizzling news of crime and judicial proceedings in detail:

As cases like 'Kuppubai Rape case', 'Gramini Murder Case' were all conducted in Tamil, I was able to write about them more openly and in greater detail than the English dailies ... In those days, a poet of Choolai used to compose songs on such cases and sell it the same evening. As I reported every line, including the cross-examination, he was not left with much to do. 113

The birth and growth of Dina Thanthi was perhaps the single largest factor working against the existence of the chapbook. Its coarse and rustic style, and choice of topical and catchy news probably caught the fancy of the lower orders bred on the stock of chapbooks and ballads. Since it began publication in 1942, Dina Thanthi has had a phenomenal growth. As the Collector of Madurai reported in 1956, "The 'Dinathanthi' is a paper widely read, particularly by the lower ranks of the community because it contains sensational news and sexual stories." 114 That even a mass-produced daily had to draw on popular tradition to sustain itself goes to show not only its vitality, but also underscores the incomplete nature of

113 Chandilyan, Porattangal, Madras, 1987, p. 43.
114 G.O.No. 1783, Public (General-B), Secret, 17 May 1956.
middle-class hegemony. A significant chunk of the mass media, thus, seems to have functioned away from the hold of the middle class.

Even now popular literature is far from dead, though it has lost much of its former vigour. The chapbook tradition has metamorphosed into cinema songbooks, wherein the lyrics of popular cinema are reduced to print much in the same format as earlier chapbooks. Though they are not hawked, they are sold almost exclusively in petty shops selling betel-leaves and cigarettes. Ballads are still being written and performed. Recently, K.A. Gunasekaran has published the texts of a dozen such urban folk ballads composed between 1950 and 1980, one of which speaks of the Skylab incident! The firms of B. Rathna Nayagar & Sons, and Sri Srinivasa Press (of K.A. Madurai Mudaliar) are still functioning, though they are still not part of the mainstream. Few of the middle-class world are aware of their existence. They are content with reprinting odd titles from their backlist, and have their own, if narrow, channels of distribution. In the last two decades, the shops of Madurai Pudumantapam have ceased to deal in popular literature, and now sell educational books and stationery only.

The continued, if muted, existence of this tradition, along with the persistence of the popular mode of reading (for details see 7.3), exposes the incomplete nature of middle-class hegemony in

115 For Bharatidasan’s complaint about how the songbooks massacred his lyrics for the film ‘Balamani’ (1936?), see Manudam Pottru, Madras, 1984, pp.303-304.

Tamil society (see Chapter 2). Though middle-class intellectuals attempted to silence this tradition, by condemning it and even appropriating and sanitizing it, they have been largely unsuccessful. Another pointer to this is the fact, even the vitality of popular literature was tapped, not by the middle class, but by the Dina Thanthi, which was as much anathema to the elite as popular literature itself.