Chapter 7

READING PRACTICES AND MODES OF READING
IN COLONIAL TAMILNADU

In the first part of our study, our concerns were centred around the material basis of literary production in Tamilnadu. Against this background, we studied the rise of the agencies involved in this production. An attempt to integrate the world of popular publishing into a larger study of Tamil book-publishing was then made. The penultimate chapter analysed the role of the colonial state: the immediate political reality in which the cultural sphere of publishing functioned. One important figure missing so far in our picture is the reader - the consumer for whom the book was produced. In this chapter we shall bring in the reader by attempting to chart reading practices and modes of reading in colonial Tamilnadu. For this exploration we shall draw on the insights of the new cultural history.¹

7.1 The Traditional Mode of Reading

Until the turn of the twentieth century, reading practices were largely determined by the limited availability of printed materials.² Though the first Tamil book (in fact, any book in an Indian language) was printed in, as early as 1578, only with the

¹ Especially the studies of Roger Chartier on print culture in early modern France (See Bibliography). Also see Introduction, 0.1.
² For instance, see Madras Public Consultations, Vol. 619, dated 22 February 1834, pp. 514-28 for the high subscription tariff and restrictive rules and regulations of the Madras Hindoo Literary Society for borrowing books.
socio-economic transformation effected by colonialism and the loosening of administrative restrictions on Indians owning printing presses, did books begin to get produced in significant numbers.

An incident narrated by U.V. Swaminatha Iyer bears further testimony to the sense of surprise initially evoked by the printed book. One day, in the 1870s, Swaminatha Iyer, was reading some verses from a printed copy of Kambaramayanam along with some fellow-students at the Thiruvavaduthurai Adheenam. Just then, Ambalavana Desikar, an old-fashioned scholar and a teacher of Mahavidwan Meenatchisundaram Pillai, happened to pass by them. He enquired about the book in their hands. On hearing that it was a copy of Kambaramayanam, he exclaimed with surprise, "Have they made a book [he used the English term] of it, too!" This exclamation in turn surprised the students, who could barely control their laughter at the simple old man's naivety. This anecdote reveals not only the novelty of the book to an older generation but also the beginnings of its penetration into the new generation. Having been socialized to print, the young students had begun to take printed books for granted and could not but mock at older scholars brought up on palmleaf manuscripts.

Even in the latter part of the nineteenth century, palmleaf manuscripts and printed books existed side by side. Mylai Seenī, Venkatasami’s observation, that printed books did not displace

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4 No wonder, one Brahmo Samajist rued that young men were being misled by the baseless allegations of Christian missionaries contained in “clearly printed tracts”. Thattuva Bodhini, 1(1), May 1864, Editorial.
palmleaf manuscripts overnight\(^5\) should put to rest any technological
determinist argument. Given the fact that palmleaf manuscripts and
printed matter could not be consumed in the same mode, conflicts
arose. In fact, traditional scholars often ridiculed new scholars who
fumbled with palmleaf manuscripts unable to decipher it fluently.
C.W. Damodaram Pillai, refuting criticisms of his editions, derisively
referred to his critics as "scholars of the printed book who know not
how to hold or read palmleaf manuscripts".\(^6\) Likewise U.V.
Swaminatha Iyer writes that his teacher Meenatchisundaram Pillai
rarely ever wrote on paper but preferred to dictate to his students.\(^7\) It
is said that Dandapani Swamigal too, rarely if ever, wrote on paper
and preferred to use cadjan leaves,\(^8\) while Ramalinga Swamigal, even
when he used paper, used the orthography meant for palmleaves.\(^9\) But
this was a passing generation. The new breed of students and scholars
was pretty uncomfortable with palmleaves, and as even U.V.
Swaminatha Iyer admits, he could read out from a palmleaf
manuscript only in a faltering style, when his teacher
Meenatchisundaram Pillai asked him to read from the
Thiruvidaimarudur Ula.\(^10\) It was years before he acquired proficiency
in reading manuscripts, which he used to edit classics.

Printed books also caused conflicts in the authority of
texts. On one occasion, in the early 1870s, U.V. Swaminatha Iyer was
\(^6\) Tholkappiyam-Porulathikaram-Nacchinarkkiniyar Urai, Madras, 1885, Preface.
\(^8\) Interview with T. Kovendhan, the editor of some of Dandapani Swamigal's works, 21
\(^9\) See the facsimile edition of Arutperunjothi Agaval, edited by Ooran Adigal, Vadaloor,
1970.
reciting a poem from Sivaparakasa Swamigal. As the recitation progressed, his teacher Meenatchisundaram Pillai corrected him on one count. When Swaminatha Iyer asserted boyishly that he was only following the printed version, there was a stunned silence on the part of the observers around, as a young man had dared to contradict a scholar of Meenatchisundaram Pillai's stature, that too, on the authority of mere print. Meenatchisundaram Pillai broke the ice by instructing Swaminatha Iyer, "Print does not validate everything. People who are not proficient in the language may print anything." ¹¹

Similarly, on another occasion, Meenatchisundaram Pillai was giving classes on Periya Puranam. As a student read out from the printed book, he annotated allusions and provided glosses. When the class had progressed to the story of Kannappa Nayānar, he stopped, observing that some verses were missing in the printed version. He then went in and fetched a palmleaf manuscript, and as he had said, five verses were indeed missing in print, much to the awe of his students. ¹²

Though exceptional scholars like Meenatchisundaram Pillai could often dazzle students and others by such display, they were only fighting a losing battle by clinging on to a traditional mode of reading and its attendant reading practices, which placed a premium on memory and learning by rote. Even geniuses had limits. And this was exposed by print. Before the advent of print, only a

limited number of texts could be acquired for study or reference as locating and copying them were usually unrewarding exercises, particularly because their owners rarely ever permitted outsiders to take a look at them.\textsuperscript{13} With the coming of the book, a much larger number of standard copies of various texts began to be more widely available, and few traditional scholars could keep pace with it.

The limits of the traditional mode of reading is highlighted by some anecdotes in the life of Meenatchisundaram Pillai. As a teacher, he was in the habit of testing new students by asking them to recite some verses. On one occasion, a new recruit from Tirunelveli surprised Meenatchisundaram Pillai with a verse he had never heard of. On enquiry he learnt that the verse was from Thirikudarasappa Kavirayar's \textit{Thirukkuttrala Puranam}.\textsuperscript{14} On another occasion Subbu Bharati surprised him with songs from \textit{Kuttrala Kuravanji}, composed by the same author.\textsuperscript{15} These two works, especially the latter, is now considered a classic and not only forms part of school curriculum but has also been popularized as a dance-drama. And to think that Meenatchisundaram Pillai was ignorant of it! Similarly, he had never read Mambala Kavirayar, his contemporary, until he was accosted with a printed copy of his verses, when on a visit to Pondicherry in 1867.\textsuperscript{16} Print, and the availability of a wider range of texts was beginning to seriously erode the authority of even outstanding scholars, whose admirable erudition

\textsuperscript{13} For an interesting anecdote about how one of Meenatchisundaram Pillai’s student tricked the zealous owner of Sivadarumotharam into parting with it for a few days, see U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, \textit{Sri Meenatchisundaram Pillai - avargalin Charithiram}, Vol. I, pp. 208-215.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{ibid.}, Vol. I, p. 154.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{ibid.}, Vol. I, p. 215.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{ibid.}, Vol. I, p. 299.
was based on an earlier mode of reading.

Thus, during the age of patronage, though printed books began to be more easily available, no major change in reading practices took place. Prior to the penetration of print, the very concept of private reading did not exist. Given the physical aspect of palmleaf manuscripts, not to speak of their limited social accessibility, special efforts had to be taken to read them. Palmleaf manuscripts had to be carefully handled in order to prevent further damage to it. Sometimes lecterns had to be used to provide support. Substances like turmeric had to be applied on the surface of the palmleaves to make the writing visible. More importantly, the orthography meant for palmleaf manuscripts constituted a major determinant of the mode of reading. Especially because dots could not be used (as they would damage the leaves), a single character could be read in more than one way. Letters, words, lines, verses, commentaries, glosses and quotations followed one another without a moment of breathing space. As a result, deciphering the text demanded a high level of scholarship, knowledge of prosody and the possession of a vast vocabulary (students being expected to learn traditional lexicons in verse-form, called nigandus, by heart).  

The text had actually to be read out aloud in order even to make out verses from the accompanying commentary, not to speak of comprehending their meaning. Reading by rote or memorization was a corollary to this mode of reading. Such consumption of texts could not be usually done in private. There were more or less specifically defined arenas for reading. Students read under the

tutelage of teachers. Arangettram, of which we wrote at length earlier (see 1.3.1), was another arena, where compositions were ritually premiered to a devout audience. Discourses on religious occasions, fairs and festivals stood on a similar footing as arangetram. The consumption of texts in these arenas, as is evident, was aural, the audience listening attentively.

This kind of aural consumption set hermeneutic limitations as the interpretation was mediated by teachers, scholars and performers, apart from scholarly aids like nigandus and scholastic and religious commentaries. But the relatively easier availability of printed texts, posed a serious threat to such narrow hermeneutics. The very availability of a text in multiple copies of the same standard without any inconsistency was what underpinned the subversive potential of print. Apart from the fact that texts (in the form of printed books), could be conveniently carried on one's person, the text itself had undergone quite dramatic changes in the process of printing. The very transcription of the text from the palmleaf to the printed page in itself meant a major interpretation. Print, for good or for ill, not only made one definite reading of the manuscript, but also fixed the text.\(^\text{18}\)

The introduction of punctuation, credited to Arumuga Navalar\(^\text{19}\) made it possible to scan the line silently, and even glance through the pages, a virtual impossibility in the case of palmleaf manuscripts. As one contemporary guide to punctuation stated,

\(^\text{18}\) No wonder, the Tamil scholar T.T. Kanakasundaram Pillai commented on the imminent publication of an important classic: "To think that Chilappadikaram will be available in printed form shortly, obviating the need to cry over cadjan leaves, gives me unutterable joy". Letter to U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, dated 3 June 1890, U.V.S. Papers.

\(^\text{19}\) V.G. Suriyanarayana Sastri, Tamil Mozhiyin Varalaru, Madras, 1903, pp. 124-5.
[Punctuation marks] are signs used to add clarity to sentences and verses ... If punctuation marks are properly learnt and used in the right contexts, sentences and verses may not only be better understood but will also be more elegant ... Rules [for punctuation] are not to be found in any Tamil grammar - Nanool, Thonnool or Tholkappiyam. Therefore, it has become necessary to list the various marks and their appropriate uses.20

While the handiness of the printed volume made it possible for readers to consume the book alone, the changed format of the text, ushered in by print, enabled them to scan the line without having to read out aloud. Thus, the book, in its physical aspect, was ready by the end of the nineteenth century to be read silently. What was now required was a literary genre suited to such a mode of silent reading and a class that had the mental equipment / sensibility and the leisure to consume it. Thus, the transition that we spoke of in Chapter 2, a transition not only in terms of the shift from patronage to the market, but also a transition between two modes of reading. The rise of the novel and the emergence of the middle class led to the rise of the silent mode of reading in Tamil society.

7.2 The Silent Mode of Reading

As we saw in Chapter 3, the novel made inroads into Tamil society, and became the art form par excellence of the middle class. This middle class, especially its younger generation, had been educated in modern schools and was thus not new to print, having already been socialized to print, at least to a limited extent, through textbooks. But their curiosity in reading materials was often aroused

20 Vasaga Kurigal, Madras, 1908 (2nd ed.), Preface.
by sundry non-educational matter. Printed advertisement notices, especially of plays which were extremely popular in the early part of this century, probably provided the first extra-curricular reading material for young students.

C.A. Ayyamuthu recollects, how, as a young boy in Coimbatore, he used to run after the carts from which notices and leaflets were distributed to the sound of band music, and how he was thrilled by such reading material. Similarly, Bharatidasan writes about his excitement on seeing a notice for a gramaphone-record performance with the now well-known picture (logo of HMV) of a dog sitting beside a huge funnel-shaped speaker and a turn-table. Namakkal Ramalingam Pillai was even more captivated by a drama-notice that he began to copy out a picture from it during class-hours and was punished by his teacher for his inattentiveness.

This, then, was the generation which was drawn to the novel, which, as we saw earlier (Chapter 3) was growing phenomenally from the 1910s. We had also considered in some detail, the nature of these novels: they were written in a popular style with action, thrill, suspense and titillation thrown in in ample measure. This heady mix had its own attraction for the new readers. As Ka. Naa. Subramaniam recollected a few decades later: "In the two years [1921-23] I spent at my grandpa’s, I must have read three or four hundred novels - at least that is my impression. If someone asks,
'Were there so many novels in those days', I'd say, 'Yes, I think so'. Clearly, contemporary readers perceived a surfeit of novels, and felt an urge to read them all.

But, given the nature of the novels and the disciplinarian attitude of parents and elders to such reading materials, the young readers had to resort to surreptitious methods to circumvent such moral policing. In such a situation, even the possession of the forbidden novels, usually in demy octavo, printed on cheap newsprint and plain colour wrappers with the title handset on letterpress, was cause for some inner pride. Once a novel was acquired, it had to be consumed quickly and away from the watchful eyes of elders. Solitude combined with both the necessity and the urge to read fast, contributed greatly to reading in silence, by the quick scanning of the printed works. 'Kalki' R. Krishnamurty, as a young boy, read J.R. Rangaraju’s Rajambal with an oil lamp and would go to sleep only in the small hours of the night. Similarly, he once read Natesa Sastri's Thikkattra Iru Kulandaigal foregoing even his lunch. As Ka. Naa. Subramaniam recollected, reading J.R. Rangaraju made one unmindful of sleep, thirst and hunger.

This absorption into reading led to a complete identification with the characters and the events in the novel, which in turn was predicated on reading in silence and in solitude. As Kalki

24 Muthal Ainthu Tamil Novelgal, Madras, 1957, p. iii.
remarked:

How startled we were when Rajambal was murdered! And when Govindan brought her back alive, at the end of the story, how happy we were! If an election had been held then, and Detective Gopalan and Lokamanya Tilak had both contested it, I’d have certainly voted for Govindan.29

Similar was the experience of Ki. Savithiri Ammal. As a young girl, when she read Natesa Sastrī’s Thikkattīra Iru Kulandaigal, she identified herself completely with the two lost children, Radha and Alamū, and experienced all their adventures and tribulations. So completely was she absorbed in the story of A. Madhaviah’s Padmavathy Charithiram, that she felt a great urge to go to Triplicane (then a suburb of Madras) and meet Padmavathy and Narayanan, the lead personae in the novel.30

Such belief in the real-life nature of the novels indicate a new type of relationship developing between the book and the reader, perhaps for the first time in Tamil society. The personae that the readers encountered in the novels were not the supernatural or out-of-the-world beings of earlier ballads and epics, but ‘real’ people in flesh and blood, whose experience was much nearer to the reality around the readers. The novels that portrayed this reality, not surprisingly, became the dominant art form of the middle class. As ‘Kumidhini’ declared:

30 ‘Nan Paditha Muthal Kathaigal’, Bharatamani, Sep. 1944.
For various reasons, my world is small. But books are one of the greatest wonders of the world. More than half of my life's happiness has come from books.  

Thus, books read in silence expanded the mental universe and life-experience of the readers. Ka. Naa. Subramaniam has also indicated that these novels, especially those of Vaduvoor Duraiswamy Iyengar, brim with subtle titillatory suggestions designed to excite adolescent fantasies. Kalki's confession, in a rare moment of indiscretion, provides further evidence on this score:

Some time ago, I chanced to read a couple of recent Tamil novels. Oh, I cannot express my horror. Before I could get past a few pages, I felt as though I was rolling in the gutter. Well, even if one rolls in the gutter, one can cleanse oneself with soap. But the filth that dirties the mind is not cleansed as easily. Only after a few nights' sleep did I feel sufficiently clean.

If even an avowedly Gandhian writer could feel sexually disturbed by the novels, need we say more about adolescent readers who might not have felt any need to feel guilty and probably even willingly indulged in giving free rein to their fantasies. Such fantasies, were then, part of the experience yielded by silent reading.

Thus, with the arrival of the novel on the Tamil cultural scene, the silent mode of reading had emerged as a distinct, if not dominant, mode of reading. This is highlighted by the contrasting

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33 Ananda Vikatan, 10 June 1933. Emphasis added.
reading practices of the old and new generations. While Ka. Naa. Subramaniam read out aloud from the Bhagavatham to his grandmother, he slipped out to read novels alone, and in silence.\textsuperscript{34} Similarly Pammal Sambanda Mudaliar used to read out religious works to his ageing mother.\textsuperscript{35} The case of the grandmothers of Indira Parthasarathy and Sujatha are even more interesting. They listened to the novels of Arani Kuppuswamy Mudaliar, Vaduvoor Duraiswamy Iyengar and Vai. Mu. Kothainayaki Ammal as they were read out by their grandsons.\textsuperscript{36} Apart from the fact that this is an inversion of the grandma’s tale: the grandmothers being at the receiving end of stories with the advancement of print culture, the case of the grandmothers of Sujatha and Indira Parthasarathy suggest that the literary genre (here, the novel) by itself did not determine the mode of reading. As Roger Chartier has argued, the same reading materials could be ‘appropriated’ for differentiated and plural uses.\textsuperscript{37}

Closely associated with the rise of the silent mode of reading was reading as a leisure time activity. N.R. Sreedharan, B.A., the hero of Kalki’s \textit{Thiyaga Bhoomi}, relaxes over a Charles Garvis-novel, lying in bed and fantasizing about his future wife.\textsuperscript{38} Or, as Kumidhini portrayed the ideal setting for reading:

\textit{Monsoons. This is the season I like the most. One cannot

\begin{itemize}
\item[38] Kalki, \textit{Thiyaga Bhoomi}, Madras, 1988, p.23 (later ed.).
\end{itemize}
go out anywhere. There would be few household chores to attend to. No visitor is likely to come and disturb our peace. On such occasions, I sit beside the book-shelves through the day. 39

Thus, there was a close association between being alone, and reading in silence at leisure. Only a person like 'Padmasani', married to a professor, with two school-going children, could have the leisure to read so many novels and other books and yet remember them. 40 Similar was the case of the novelist 'Kiruthika', the wife of a high-ranking I.C.S. officer, who found ample time to indulge in extensive reading. 41 Perhaps, the contemporary criticism of women reading novels (see 3.3) can also be read as a criticism of reading as a leisure-time practice.

Very quickly, the habit of reading when on a train-journey caught on. A contemporary travelogue found many persons reading fiction as they travelled on a train. 42 Another observer found a few passengers glancing through books and lost in thought, unmindful of the gossip of fellow-travellers. 43 T.K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliar found some passengers even more relaxed, as they smoked cigarettes while reading Kalki's stories. 44

40 'Remembered Books', Indian Review, Nov. 1946.
43 Ananda Guna Bodhini, 15 June 1926, reproduced in ibid., p. 73.
44 Preface to Kalki, Kanayaliyin Kanavu, Madras, 1938.
Even by the 1920s, Higginbothams, a major European-owned bookselling firm based in Madras city, had a wide network of outlets (which survives to this day) at most railway stations. Later in the day, Swadesamitran joined the fray. Ka.Naa. Subramaniam\(^{45}\) recollects having bought novels at the Thanjavur Railway Station, while Chandilyan\(^{46}\) claims to have made effective use of the Swadesamitran bookshops to quickly sell off his first collection of short stories. Though reading on a train-journey does qualify as a leisure-time cultural practice, it can hardly compare with its European counterpart. Indian trains were cramped and notorious for their discomforts: not the ideal setting for relaxed reading.

Reading as a leisure-time practice also meant that it was extensive and desultory, unlike in the earlier mode of reading, which was often intensive (especially with the limited availability of books) and concentrated, involving the exertion of mental faculties towards memorizing. Kumudhini admitted that as a young girl she read a book in its entirety, but as she grew old she read only the prefaces to the books.\(^{47}\) As R.K. Narayan, then an aspiring author living in Madras, observed:

> Let none conclude ... that I am a voracious reader. It is not necessary, ..., to get lost in the contents of a book. My main delight I derive by turning a page of a journal here, passing on to something else next, and making a mental note to read such and such an article at a later

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\(^{45}\) Ilakkiya Chathanaiyalargal, Chidambaram, 1985, p.189.

\(^{46}\) Porattangal, Madras, 1987, p.54.

\(^{47}\) Ananda Vikatan, 1 Sep. 1932.
date; but I regret to confess that I have seldom done so. By the time I am back there again a new issue of a journal is on the table or the note has gone out of my mind ... Browsing over the pages of a book here and a book there ... is a pleasure ... 48

This then, is the testament of a reader produced by the silent mode of reading. Such reading came to be practised by an increasing tribe of middle-class readers, and as a perceptive observer remarked:

...... A new trend is growing presently in the dailies, weeklies and monthlies being published in Tamil. Only "light" matters are given importance as though to suggest that periodicals are intended for spending leisure time and for relaxation. 49

No wonder A. Subramania Bharati identified these readers (especially, of novels) as "a whole lot of butlers who know not how to spend their free time, lazy men whiling their time away at choultries, unemployed loafers, jobless women, menstruating women with nothing worthwhile to do in their ritual seclusion, shopkeepers without business and others of their ilk." 50

The newly-acquired zeal of middle-class readers to possess books, whether they were fully read or not, was another phenomenon which accompanied the reading practices attendant to the silent mode of reading. Maraimalai Adigal, as he arranged and

rearranged his books on the shelves, indulged in self-admiration: "I have really a very wonderful selection of best books on every subject of Philosophy, and the valuable books are many; it is a source of genuine intellectual pleasure to have in one’s possession so many admirable books."\(^51\) This despite the fact that his "wife is not in good terms with me on account of the money I spend in buying books." But, as he added, "What am I to do! I have an unusual craving for buying new books."\(^52\)

The craving for acquiring books was by no means unusual to Maraimalai Adigal, if we are to go by the thoughts that crossed Kumudhini’s mind as she surveyed her book-shelves:

There are all kinds of books on the shelves. I cannot even figure out how they reached here. I have not read quite a few of them. It is also doubtful if I will ever read them. The almirah is full. Only if some of the books are cleared can space be found for new additions. But I have no heart to part with them. I don’t know which ones to discard.\(^53\)

Considering that some middle-class readers often bought books for no better reason than the fact that they were cheap,\(^54\) no wonder they faced such dilemmas. So possessive were they that parting with their prized collections was traumatic. When Deenadayalu, the hero of Natesa Sastrī’s novel (1902) of the same name, in a moment of pressing financial need, is forced to sell off all

\(^{51}\) Diary of Maraimalai Adigal, entry dated 30 Sep. 1914.

\(^{52}\) ibid., entry dated 8 December 1906. Also see article by V. NarayanaIyiar, M.A., B.L., in Tamilar Nesan, Dec. 1918.


\(^{54}\) ibid.,
his books for Rs. 400, he does so "like selling off children during times of famine." 55

Visiting libraries perhaps provided vicarious satiation for not only the readers' appetite but also the desire to possess books. No wonder, a contemporary reader confessed that he hung about libraries unashamedly and "trespass[ed] into any place that proclaims itself to be a free reading room and library".

The faint aroma of gum and calico that hangs about a library is as the fragrance of incense to me. I think the most beautiful sight is the gilt-edged backs of a row of books on a shelf. The alley between two well-stocked shelves in a hall fills me with the same delight as passing through a silent avenue of trees. The colour of a binding-cloth and its smooth texture gives me the same pleasure as touching a flower at its stalk. 56

By the 1920s and 30s, with the spread of the silent mode of reading among the middle classes, there was an increasing demand for and access to books. The Madras Library Association was founded in 1928 to foster the library movement in the Madras Presidency. It was this movement which nurtured S.R. Ranganathan, the founder of the Colon Classification system. Some of the consistent demands of the movement was for increased public spending on libraries, a wider network of public libraries, and free and easy access to all people. 57

57 Contemporary periodicals teem with articles about the library movement. For some of them see Bharati, June-July 1932; Kumaran, Nov. 1923 & 18 January 1934; Suthanthira Sangu, 20 July 1933; Bharatamani, 17 Feb. 1939. The Hindu Speaks: On Libraries, Madras, 1992 is a useful volume which reproduces many of the articles published in the Hindu on the library movement.
This period also saw the spawning of many 'libraries', which were only public forums doubling as reading rooms, established by the self-respect movement and the nationalist movement.

With the spread of extensive reading, book reviews became a staple part of the diet offered by the periodical press. Quite a few articles drew attention to the poor quality and often misleading nature of the book reviews. Pudumaippithan, in his characteristic style, warned that such reviews would only end up disappointing enthusiastic readers and ultimately kill the growing reading habit.58 Parallel to this criticism was the stigma attached to borrowing books instead of buying them, as it was felt that it was harming the book trade as a whole. There are any number of humorous write-ups on this growing habit of borrowing books.59

By the end of the period under study, silent reading had become a dominant mode, and in fact even attempts were made to codify it. S. Satyamurty, the conservative Congress leader, while in prison during 1941, wrote a series of letters to his daughter, Lakshmi. They are homilies, pontificating on various aspects of middle-class life and culture. Of these at least three letters are devoted to books and reading practices. Firstly, Satyamurty prescribed the right manner of reading:

There are certain ways of proper reading. You should habituate yourself to them. You must read in the right

posture. To read in a sitting position is the best. When we are lazy, we occasionally read lying down. It is not advisable to do so; it is bad for the eyes. We should also ensure that adequate light is available when reading. At night we should read in electric light ... There should also not be too much light.  

Coming to the reading materials themselves, Satyamurty suggested a mix of great literature consisting of the Indian epics, Shakespeare, Kamban, Tulasidas, the English romantic poets, Kalidas, Valmiki, Bhavabhuti and others. Novels were to be read only "on trains or when there is no other work to do or to relax the mind." Apart from training in the classics, he advocated the study of psychology, history, religion, geography and the sciences. He also suggested the right approach to a study of these disciplines:  

It is not possible to attain expertise in all these subjects. Nor is it necessary. It is enough if you do a preliminary study and have a general understanding of them. If you do so, you will be able to follow newspapers and magazines in an intelligent and serious fashion.

In addition, Satyamurty suggested regular visits to libraries and the use of notebooks to jot down notes while studying. His advice on the use of dictionary, to be kept by the side

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62 ibid., letter dated 9 June 1941, pp. 54-5.
63 ibid., letter dated 9 June 1941, pp. 54-5.
64 ibid., letter dated 28 July 1941, p. 245.
65 ibid., letter dated 29 July 1941, p. 250.
while reading\textsuperscript{66}, is also interesting because, in the earlier mode of reading, students were expected to learn nigandus by rote before proceeding to tackle literary texts.

The reading practices codified by Satyamurty were indeed novel in Tamil society, in marked contrast to the earlier mode of reading with its emphasis on intensive and exhaustive study, especially in just one field. The new mode of reading involved consuming reading materials in solitude and in silence, by scanning the lines on the printed page. Mostly a leisure time activity of the emerging middle class, it also fashioned a new sensibility in tune with changing times and the changing needs of this class. The following description of the book aptly sums up what it meant to this class:

\textit{... Books are silent teachers; they act as consoling friends in our worries; they are philosophers when we are in a confused state due to critical situations; they are beacon lights showing us the nature of the world; they are cenotaphs of the past; mirrors of the present and prophets of the future.}\textsuperscript{67}

7.3 \textit{Modes of Reading and the Incomplete Hegemony of the Middle Class}

The silent mode of reading was, then, par excellence the mode of reading of the rising middle class. But, as we underlined in earlier chapters (2, 3 & 5), this middle class, being a product of colonialism, was congenitally weak. Though it harboured hegemonic aspirations, it was never able to achieve hegemony over Tamil

\textsuperscript{66} ibid., letter dated 28 July 1941, p. 247. For a humorous article on reading the dictionary, see T.J. Ranganathan, \textit{Požhuthupokku}, Madras, 1953 (1 ed. 1942).

\textsuperscript{67} V. Govindan, 'Puthagamum Vithagamum', \textit{Sakti}, March 1941.
society. In 5.5, we briefly considered some aspects of this failed hegemony vis-à-vis popular publishing. The inability of the middle class to impose its mode of reading upon the lower classes of society, which we shall demonstrate in this section, is yet another sign of the failure of its hegemonic project.

The consumption of popular literature (for details see Chapter 5) was in marked contrast to the modes of reading (especially silent reading) adopted to consume elite literature. The audience for popular literature was wide, and was not restricted to the buyers alone unlike elite books which had to be possessed, at least for a while, in order to be consumed. As we saw earlier (see 5.3), a whole range of people could listen to the songsters as they were about their shopping in the marketplace or as they approached the crossroads. Crowds would gather around the songsters as they sang. It is difficult to assess the experience of the crowd but the songs must have really enthralled them, if they could hold together a fluid crowd. Some, who got so involved with the songs, would actually start weeping when an exceptionally poignant situation was dealt with in the song. The crowds would generally get thinner after the song was over and the actual sale of chapbooks began. The dispersion would be complete when the chapman moved to the next convenient point to start his performance all over again.

Given the location of the marketplace and the crossroads, and their environs, it were the lower orders who were the predominant

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68 Interview with M. Babu, 2 June 1992, Madras.
consumers of the chapbook. Perhaps, the reach of the ballads was a bit restricted, usually consumed in group readings (see below). Curious little boys, running on an errand for their mothers, were some of the few to cut across class lines and consume street literature. 69

The survival of the chapbooks itself has a story to tell. No book collection of any contemporary scholar or elite personality that we have had the opportunity to peruse, seems to possess chapbooks or ballads. It is only a few antiquaries who have saved some for posterity. The surviving chapbook are not individual booklets, but compiled chillarai kovais, indicating that the chapbooks bought by the common folk were little more than ephemeral. It is a difficult task to reconstruct the experience of the common reader, while it appears that if the elite ever read popular literature it was either to condemn it (see 5.1) or for its novelty. When Th. Ja. Ra(nganathan) wrote, "from my boyhood days, I have read many kinds of books on my own accord, without anybody's compulsion or suggestion - from Alliarasani Malai and Kavadi Chindu to Nalavenba and Thiruvaimoli,"70 he was only bragging about his wide interests, which reached down to the 'lowest' rungs of literature.

Very rarely do we find common readers in possession of books in normal times. After the beginnings of the mass phase of the nationalist movement, the customary examination of passengers on the way back from abroad, especially Ceylon, was intensified. A more thorough examination of their baggage seems to have been made, and

69 Interview with R. Muthukumarasamy, 56 years, on 15 June 1991, Madras. He recollected, in vivid detail, how as a little boy he used to stand in the crowd listening to the songs. The Mannady intersection and the Armenian street crossing, both in George Town, Madras were important nodal prints even as late as the early 1940s.

70 Eppadi Eluthinen, Madurai, 1943, p.61.
it is then we get documentary evidence of common folk with books on their person. Through the 1920s and 1930s we come across numerous instances of passengers apprehended in the possession of proscribed literature, and virtually all of them were chapbooks on nationalist themes, like *Mahatma Gandhi Arrestu Pattu*, *Deseeya Geetha Thirattu* and elegies on Bhagat Singh. Nationalist chapbooks were only a small fragment of the repertoire of popular literature, but in the absence of similar data on other classes of chapbook, we will have to generalize based on this class of chapbook.

Danushkodi was an important point on the sea-route to Ceylon. People on their way back from earning a livelihood in the tea, coffee and rubber estates of Ceylon, and the less unfortunate ones employed in odd jobs in the service sector, thronged to Danushkodi. During the 1920s and 1930s the Inspector of Customs often came across proscribed literature in their baggage, and promptly forfeited them. This was reported to the Government of Madras, and enquiries about the persons found in possession of such literature were made by the District Magistrates of their native districts. It is these reports on the social and political background of such persons that throw some light on popular readers.

In July 1932, five persons coming from Ceylon were found possessing proscribed chapbooks like *Congress Pattu*, *Deseeya Geetha Thirattu*, *Gandhi Dhiyanam*, *Mahatma Gandhi Mahimai* and *Kallukkadai Mariyal*. They were all coolies in the Kandy estates, and at least one of them was an Adi-dravida (dalit) and another a Odda (a working-class caste with the traditional occupation of digging wells). Much to the surprise of the District Superintendent of Police, who conducted the enquiries, not one of them was literate or had any
political antecedents - "not politically inclined," "nothing against their character", as expressed in the 'prose of counter-insurgency'. In yet another classic case of colonialism denying subjecthood to the lower orders among the colonized, blamed

the maistries and kanganes in the several estates of Kandy who used to dabble in politics are selling the objectionable and unauthorized leaflets to their illiterate coolies at a high price and make a good profit out of the collections. The coolies who are all illiterate buy these book not out of choice but on pressure. 71

What is being crucially missed here is the fact that consuming a popular text was not contingent on the ability to read alone: there could exist other modes of 'reading' which may not require 'literacy', as we shall see.

Apart from the indentured labourers of the estates, we also find men with petty jobs apprehended by customs officials for possessing proscribed literature. There was one S.M.N. Maraicar and his brother, from Nagore, who "eke[d] out their livelihood by selling caps worn by Muhammedans in Africa". "[Their] monthly earnings may roughly be estimated at 20-25 Rs."72 Twenty-three-year old

71 G.O.No. 1145, Public (General), Confidential, 2 September 1932. Here it may not be out of place to mention some chapbooks which portray in poignant detail, the plight of indentured labourers in overseas plantations. See Desamakkalai nasappaduthum Theyilai Thottapattu; Adimaigalin Arivuvilakka Theyilaippattu; Rubber Thottapattu, Madras, c.1929.
72 G.O.No. 1202, Public (General), 20 September 1932.
Muthuswami "was a barber by caste and profession." So was Palani who was caught with two chapbooks on Bhagat Singh. Veerannan was a servant in a tile factory at Nogombo, and Sanmugam of Tirunelveli, worked in a blacksmith’s forge in Colombo. A. Narayanan was the son of a mason who worked in a hotel, and Sreenivasa Asari was employed in a smithy. A.R. Kannusamy was a petty accountant with a Nattukkotai Chettiar firm, and lived "with his widowed sister who lived by selling cakes and doing work in Chetty houses."

None of these persons who were nabbed in possession of proscribed literature seem to have had any education worth mentioning in the enquiry reports of the district officials. Only on one occasion that we have come across, the Joint Magistrate of Ramnad thought it fit to note that C. Vellachami had "studied third standard. Can read and write Tamil."

When U.V. Swaminatha Iyer was a teacher in the Kumbakonam Government College in the 1880s, he saw the humble Brahmin cook of one of his students reading a popular book as he waited for his master to partake food.

73 ibid.
74 G.O.No. 1242, Public (General), Confidential, 24 September 1932.
75 G.O.No. 1582, Public (General), Confidential, 8 December 1932.
76 Letter No. 108, Public (General), Confidential, 30 January 1933.
77 G.O.No. 1145, Public (General), Confidential, 2 September 1932.
78 ibid.
This then was the social background of the consumers of chapbooks and other popular literature. They were people from the lower orders of society: coolies, cap-sellers, barbers, cooks and petty employees, with hardly a smattering of literacy in the conventional sense.

Similarly, the knowledge of ballads seems to have been quite widespread at the popular level. As Suddananda Bharati reminisced about his younger days in Sivagangai at the turn of this century, even small peasants who could barely read were able to recite *Alliarasani Malai*, *Pulanthiran Kalavu Malai*, *Eluthariyum Perumal Ammanai*, etc.

Knowledge of these ballads stemmed mostly from group readings. Such readings often took place, especially during ritual occasions like funerals. As no other activity could take place until the pall was removed, ballads like *Karimedu Karuvayan* were recited to keep the mourners occupied or, if it was night, awake. Texts like *Chithira Puthira Nayanar Kathai*, *Vali Motcham* and *Vaikunta Ammanai* were recited to expedite the death of those terminally ill. Here is a description of one such event in an oral-history novel of Ki. Rajanarayanan:

Everyone sat around [the dying] Annarappa Kounder. The hurricane lantern was cleaned and the wick raised. Balarama Naicker, who stood watching with other men,

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80 Engal Ur, Madras, 1957, p.136. Suddananda Bharati's article was originally published in *Kalaimagal* between 1942 and 1944.

81 I am grateful to Professor A. Sivasubramanian, the folklorist, for providing me with this information.
was summoned and asked to recite Chithira Puthira Nayanar Kathai. 82

Ballads were recited or sung, and not read out. To read out 'like prose' was improper and even demeaning. In an incident, in another of Rajanarayanan's oral-history novels, a town-educated boy is the butt of ridicule, who, unable to recite in a sing-song manner, reads out flatly like prose. The boy's grandmother is so disappointed with him that she stops indulging him. 83

If men dominated such ritual occasions, women had their own reading circles when the menfolk were away. Here is a description of one such reading session,

There was a lectern shaped like 'X'. Nachiaramma would place a heavy tome of Kambaramayanam in paraphrase, with the other women seated around her. She would sing at the top of her voice and as she recited, all the women would start shedding tears. Nachiaramma would wipe away her tears and continue to recite the paraphrase in a choked voice. All the while [they would] wipe their eyes and blow their noses. 84

Such joint readings bred a sense of gender solidarity among the women, who often identified their problems in an oppressive patriarchal world with the plight of characters like Sita or Nallathangal whom they encountered in the ballads.

They were simple women like Sankaranarayanavadivu, who participated in such reading sessions. Widowed early in life and with education only up to the second standard, she read a number of peria eluthu books bought for her by her brother-in-law (elder sister’s husband). In Madhaviah’s 1898-novel too, we find Savithiri, along with her friends, reading similar ballads. So it is not surprising to find many chapbooks directly addressed to women.

Thus, the popular mode of consuming literature - reading out aloud, usually in groups, unfettered by the lack of literacy, was in marked contrast to the mode of reading adopted by the middle class. As our footnote references to this section show, much of our evidence is drawn from the 1920s and 30s, when the silent mode of reading was gaining ascendance. The popular mode of reading was far from being displaced by the new phenomenon. If anything it was spreading even further in domains over which the middle class had little, if any influence, with the growth of the daily press. Si. Pa. Adithan, the shrewd entrepreneur and founder of the Dina Thanthi, the largest-selling Tamil daily, made the following observation on its inaugural day (in 1942):

Even today you can see this in the villages: parents might not be literate, [but] they listen to their literate children read out stories from Mahabharatam and Ramayanam. In days to come they will also start listening to newspapers being read out.

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85 Interview with Sankranarayanavadivu, aged 71, Kombukkarapottal, Srivaikuntam taluk, V.O.C. district, on 6 November 1992
86 A. Madhaviah, ibid.
87 See, for instance, Purushanudan Pirananvitta Pathivirathaigal Chindu, Madras, c. 1929.
Adithan’s prophetic forecast was right on target. In Ki. Rajanarayanan’s oral-history novel, we find that, by the beginning of World War II, newspapers have reached the village of Gopalla, and in the evenings, all the villagers sit on the pial of Nunnakonda Nayakkar’s house as the local teacher reads out the paper aloud in his "bell-like" voice. Similarly, at about the same time, the toddy-tappers of Kanyakumari in Hepzibah Jesudasan’s Putham Veedu slowly learn to read out newspapers and follow the affairs of the outside world. As we noted in 5.5, the sensational news items and stories in Dina Thanthi were especially targeted at such a neo-literate, or even, non literate audience. Even today, this situation has far from changed. Dina Thanthi is a standard presence in every teashop and saloon, even in urban areas, where they are often read out aloud to others and news discussed.

Thus, Tamil society presented a picture of plurality and differentiated uses of printed materials well up to the end of our period of study.

90 Madras, 1964, p. 47.