CONCLUSION

Our study of Tamil book-publishing from the mid-nineteenth century upto the outbreak of World War II throws one major aspect of colonial Tamilnadu into sharp relief: the weakness of the middle class and its incomplete hegemony over society.

In the later half of the nineteenth century, Tamil publishing was sustained by patronage, especially the traditional forms of patronage provided by pre-and early colonial social classes. By their very nature, these social classes, whose power was being eroded by the socio-economic transformation effected by colonialism in its industrial capitalist phase, could not provide sustenance to literary production for long.

But, on the other hand, given the stunted nature of economic transformation with no large scale industrial development, the Indian bourgeoisie was congenitally weak. The Tamil middle class was weaker even in comparison to the all India capitalist class. It did not possess the vitality, born out of organic links with the productive economy, that was the hallmark of the western bourgeoisie. The tortuous passage from patronage-publishing to the market was caused by this weak middle class, which as a reading public was not large,or at least cohesive enough to sustain the cultural practice of publishing through the market. Consequently, the emergence of the institutions of authors, publishers and printers, which should have organically emerged out of the play of economic forces in the market, was quite delayed. Even then, these institutions were of a stunted nature. Writing was not an economically viable source of livelihood for literary producers. If no professional
writers existed, neither did hacks. As for publishers, with the small print run, limited turnover and low profits that was to be the hallmark of Tamil publishing through the century, they had to rely on the more or less guaranteed returns of text book publishing to run their business. Moreover these publishers were small firms, and rarely ever were they organized on corporate lines. Printing presses, which catered to the needs of Tamil publishing, tended to be small, using modest technological equipment and employing poorly paid, semi-skilled workers.

The hegemonic project of the middle class was doomed to fail from the very beginning. Its efforts yielded limited success in so far as they were able to salvage the 'respectable' novel from the surfeit of popular novels, and make it the middle-class art form par excellence. But a vigorous sphere of popular publishing, in distinct opposition to mainstream middle-class publishing, survived by issuing a steady stream of lively literature, be they chapbooks, ballads or almanacs and medicinal books. Far from being cowed down by the crusade of the middle-class elite, popular publishing showed great ingenuity by appropriating and reworking even an elite ideology like nationalism. Even the advent of mass media could not fully suppress this alternate culture but had to heed it in order to thrive. Even in the consumption of literature, though the middle-class devised a new mode of reading, the silent one, it could not enforce this mode on society at large. The aural/popular mode of reading, too, survived, if not actually growing by adapting this mode to consume even the mass-produced papers.

Thus, the story of Tamil book publishing in colonial Tamilnadu was one of incomplete hegemony of the middle class. No
wonder C.N. Annadurai once observed:

Two books that sell the most in our society are: one, the almanac and the other, the railway timetable.¹

¹ C.N. Annadurai, Annavin Sorcheiyam, Madras, 1990, p. 20. This comment was made during the course of a speech on 'Libraries' in the late 1940s.