INTRODUCTION

0.1 Some Historiographical Considerations

The history of the book, especially in the Indian context, has for long been the preserve of antiquaries and bibliographers. Invariably, their concerns have centered on the origins of printing, missionary contributions to its growth, and its impact on education, etc. As a result, they have got bogged down in debates on which was the first Indian language book to be printed, and where, who is to take credit for it, where were the types cast and the like.

A.K. Priolkar’s work\(^1\) was one of the first of this kind. Based on a meticulous documentation, it studied early printing in India with special reference to the role of Christian missionaries and the East India Company. J. Mangamma\(^2\) did something similar for Telugu books with emphasis on the role of Company agencies like the Text Book Society. B.S. Kesavan’s History of Printing and Publishing in India,\(^3\) despite its bulk, lacks an overall argument, content to use the contribution-to-printing-and-publishing approach. The most useful aspect of Kesavan’s work, which is otherwise marred by many factual errors, is the rich visual material it provides in terms of facsimiles of early, and not easily accessible, imprints.

---

3 2 Vols., Delhi, 1985-8.
Unfortunately, Katherine Diehl’s *Early Indian Imprints* is only a bibliography.

Though sharing many of the pitfalls of the above historiography, we have found the work of Tamil scholars more useful. Mylai Seen. Venkatasamy’s history of nineteenth-century Tamil literature is structured like a medieval work of Tamil grammar, and as such precludes an overarching argument. Nevertheless, it provides penetrating insights into cultural practices of the time which historians can ignore only at their own peril. Venkatasamy marshalls a wide range of evidence on the penetration of print culture into Tamil society in the nineteenth century and provides detailed accounts of print’s impact on orthography, schooling, hermeneutics, religious debates and the Tamil literary world. His early teachers and peers were men of letters active in the age of patronage, and as a result, Venkatasamy offers a sensitive, if sympathetic, portrayal of the nineteenth-century Tamil cultural sphere. In our view, any serious work on any aspect of Tamil history and society, will have to nourish itself on the silent springs of the unpretentious scholarship of the likes of Seen. Venkatasamy. Our debt to his work is acknowledged in the footnotes. Ma. Su. Sambandam though adopting the, by now familiar, contribution-approach, is also sensitive to contemporary cultural debates of which he provides a partisan’s view. Ma. Su. Sambandam is an advocate of the same movement (generally referred to as the

---


Tamil ‘renaissance’) to which Mylai Seeni. Venkatasamy subscribed. But he comes in a much later, more politicized phase of the movement, and therefore, is quick to an adversary’s fault. Consequently, keeping track of his hobby-horses and pet-hates not only makes for interesting reading but also highlights a certain trend in Tamil intellectual history. Sabapathy Kulendaran\(^7\) provides a very definitive account of the history of the Tamil Bible, in the background of the development of printing.

A major shortcoming of extant scholarship, which we have summarized above, is the emphasis on ‘printing’ and not ‘publishing’. In fact, the two terms are often used synonymously, while it is ‘printing’ that is being talked about. It is crucial to disentangle these two terms because of their implications. Simply put, ‘printing’ is a technology while ‘publishing’ is a wider social practice of far reaching import. ‘Printing’, by underscoring the technological aspect, tends to relegate to the background, the historical role performed by the book, which, at the end of the technical process of multiplication, apart from becoming a commodity involved in economic exchange, is a cultural object, a vehicle of ideas, an element in social and intellectual conflict.\(^8\)

The limelight on ‘printing’ has a long history. Francis Bacon referred to the invention of printing press, along with that of gunpowder and compass, as of revolutionary significance. This was unfortunate, in a sense, as many historians began to treat the printing

---

7 Tamil Kiristhava Vedagamathin Varalaru, Bangalore, 1967. For a recent work which provides more analytical detail, see Sarojini Packiamuthu, Viviliyamum Tamilum, Madras, 1990.

press as an autonomous agent, independent of the social and historical context in which it operates. This is nowhere more evident than in the studies on the Tamil 'renaissance'. In this historiography, the technology of print helped 'discover', in the late nineteenth century, a number of ancient classics, which led to the Tamil 'renaissance', which in turn is credited (discredited in another stream of scholarship) with begetting the non-brahmin movement, fuelling cultural nationalism and inciting identity-politics.

This proposition explains little, if anything, and further begs numerous questions. Why, for instance, if the first Tamil book was printed in as early as 1578, it was not until the late nineteenth century, that Tamil books began to be available in any significant numbers? Why did no indigenous Tamil literary producer resort to print until at least the early 1800s? Why the urgency to preserve ancient classics in print was felt only in the nineteenth century and not in the sixteenth? Why C.W. Damodaram Pillai, the nineteenth century scholar-editor, had to hunt (without complete success) for palmleaf manuscript-copies of the grammatical text Ilakkana Vilakkam, which had been written after the arrival of printing press to Tranquebar?

Antiquarian interest, strongly fuelled by a fascination for the printed word, is largely to blame for the limited interest this scholarship holds for social historians. The credit for shifting the concerns of the history of the book away from antiquaries must go to

the historians of French publishing. Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin set the trend with a broad-gauged approach, studying the book in the context of the Reformation and the Renaissance. Since then French historians, borrowing from economic history, have used quantitative methods to study the book both as an economic object and as a cultural sign. This has further shifted focus from the great-works-theory of intellectual history to a wider understanding of reading and writing practices of a whole society.

Contrary to his present interest in the study of 'the symbolic element in history', Robert Darnton's earlier works were written from the perspective of a social history of ideas. Through a publishing history of the *Encyclopaedia*, he sought to study how the great intellectual movement, the Enlightenment, spread through society, how far did it reach, and how deeply did it penetrate? Fixing the book-trade in the social and economic systems of pre-revolutionary Europe, he asked if the material basis of literature and the technology of its production have much bearing on its content and spread? Darnton's conclusions were contrary to the Annales formulation that the Enlightenment did not upset the long term, deep-running currents of traditional culture. Darnton then extended his work, from the perspective of what could be termed an intellectual history from below, in a series of fascinating studies on the literary underground of the Old Regime. From the vantage point of Grub

Street, he found that the Enlightenment had indeed penetrated the lower echelons of French society. It was not the high-Enlightenment of Voltaire and Rousseau, but a more down-to-earth phenomenon - an Enlightenment reworked and modified by the hacks of Grub Street, who were actually failed philosophes. This view of the underworld of publishing further widened the scope of the history of the book.

But, by the late 1970s and the early 1980s, social history was coming in for increasing attack, both from the structuralists and from the culturalists. The latter felt extremely uncomfortable with the (Annales') formulation that culture was a third level which derived from the more deep-seated economic and social spheres. In a sense, it was also a critique of a certain version of Marxism which emphasized the deterministic nature of the material base over culture which was seen to be part of the superstructure. This critique was not altogether new. E.P. Thompson, writing from well within the Marxist social history tradition, quoting R.S. Sharma's "Without production no history," added in characteristic style "Without culture, no production". The practitioners of the new cultural history have extended this argument to the limit by asserting that -

... our understanding of [cultural] practices which serve to organize economic activity and which create ties among individuals must not be limited to their material ends or their social effects alone. All practices are "cultural" as well as social or economic, since they translate into action the many ways in which humans give meaning

14 Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, Harmondsworth, 1984, Conclusion.
15 'Folklore, Anthropology and Social History', *The Indian Historical Review*, 3(2), January 1977, p.264.
to their world. All history, therefore - whether economic, social or religious - requires the study of systems of representation and the acts the systems generate.\textsuperscript{16}

This disciplinarian breakthrough has led to interesting results, especially with reference to the history of the book. Darnton forsook "grubbing at the archives" and went on excursions into the alien territory of past mentalités, through a series of arresting studies on some episodes in French cultural history, ranging from a bizarre massacre of cats to police dossiers on authors.\textsuperscript{17} Roger Chartier, by concentrating on reading practices and differentiated uses and plural appropriations of the same books by different groups, questioned the social-history understanding of popular culture. Through his studies on the cultural uses of print in early modern France, Chartier attacked the presupposition that exclusive relationships existed between specific cultural forms and particular social groups as well as the notion of pure and homogenous cultures existing in society.\textsuperscript{18} As of now, Chartier's researches constitute the frontier in the history of the book.\textsuperscript{19}

The history of the book can no more be an antiquarian pursuit and has perforce to address questions raised by current historical thinking. In this study, we shall adopt a more or less social history approach which has gained from insights provided by cultural history. This awkward marriage of sorts between, what is often seen as, two antagonistic approaches is dictated by the specific

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} R. Chartier, \textit{The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France}, Princeton, 1987, p. 11.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Darnton, \textit{The Great Cat Massacre}, Harmondsworth, 1984.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Chartier, \textit{op.cit.}
\item \textsuperscript{19} See Bibliography for a detailed list of Chartier’s publications in English.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Tamil/Indian context. In the west, the book played out its multifarious roles in the context of capitalist transformation with all its attendant developments. As part of this larger phenomenon, as Benedict Anderson has suggested, book-publishing was one of the earliest forms of capitalist enterprise, and as he has further stressed, the explosive interaction between capitalism, print technology and linguistic diversity was the basis for ‘imagining’ nations, an overtly political manifestation of capitalist transformation.  

The Indian context is vastly different from the western situation as economic transformation was effected under colonial aegis. Though the Indian economy was slowly getting integrated into the world market, an organic development of the economy on capitalist lines did not take place. The stunted transformation could only breed a middle class, which was congenitally weak, and thus, did not possess the hegemonizing vitality that characterized the western bourgeoisie. To add to its natal deficiencies, the Indian middle class was also torn between the pulls of a nation-in-the making and a triumphant west. Its bilingualism further complicated the issue, especially for the world of letters. On the whole, the Indian middle class could not sustain a full-fledged capitalism.

In such a context, with a weak middle class in a colonial society, what happens to the cultural sphere of publishing? What sustained, materially and ideologically, publishing in colonial

---


Tamilnadu? Why was the passage from patronage to the market tortuous? What cultural forms ushered Tamil publishing into the market? When and how did the institutions of author, publisher and printer emerge? Were popular publishing and popular reading practices silenced by mainstream middle-class publishing? These are some of the questions we shall seek to answer in this study.

0.2 Sources

Works of history are often dictated by their sources. E.H. Carr once remarked that a historian is made of his sources.

Our study, apart from Chapter 6 (concerning the colonial state), is based almost entirely on a wide variety of non-governmental sources. This is as should be, because the questions that we pose hardly concerned the bureaucracy that generated the voluminous records now housed in the Tamilnadu Archives. A wide range of periodicals were used to cull data on the world of letters. Articles, advertisements and book reviews were especially useful in this regard. The private papers of a number of Tamil scholars yielded a rich harvest of information. The papers of U.V. Swaminatha Iyer and Maraimalai Adigal need to be singled out for mention. In his long life spanning a good part of two centuries, U.V. Swaminatha Iyer handled a mammoth correspondence. With the meticulousness that is the hallmark of his editions, he also seems to have preserved every scrap of paper he received. Additionally, he seems to have gone out of the way to collect the letters of his master and other contemporaries. The result is a breathtaking collection consisting of thousands of letters. Similarly, the papers of Maraimalai Adigal, though weak in correspondence, is more than adequately compensated by the
One major repository that needs singular mention is the archive of the Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society Ltd. (or Kazhagam, as it is generally known). The first Tamil publishing house with a corporate organization (established in 1920), Kazhagam has been closely associated with the spread of the Tamil classics and, in its long life, has shared in the vicissitudes of Tamil publishing. Fortunately, V. Subbiah Pillai, the co-founder, had preserved for posterity the correspondence received by the company from Tamil scholars. The outcome is an amazing collection of tens of thousands of letters, exclusive of statutory documents like annual reports and balance sheets. The Maraimalai Adigal Library, which functions under the aegis of this company, houses a wealth of printed and other materials (including thousands of pre-1900 imprints, rare letters, etc.) collected under the expert guidance of R. Muthukumarasamy, its librarian and arguably the most knowledgeable Tamil bibliophile. Given the nature of the archive, especially the letters of Tamil scholars, few, if any, scholars could have unrestricted access to it. It is hoped that the rare opportunity provided to the present scholar has been put to good use.

Biographies, autobiographies, memoirs and such similar literature have also been extensively used. The autobiographical writings of U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, running into a couple of thousand pages, have been indispensable for our study, as also the editorial prefaces of C.W. Damodaram Pillai. The physical aspect of the books

---

published during the period under study, as distinct from their content, has also yielded data. Contemporary works of fiction have also been consulted and interesting data gleaned from them.

The surviving book collections of Tamil scholars like U.V.Swaminatha Iyer, Maraimalai Adigal, T.K.Chidambaranatha Mudaliar, C.K.Subramania Mudaliar and S.Vaiyapuri Pillai were surveyed to get a feel of the mental universe of contemporary readers.

Following Tawney's advice to historians to wear heavy boots, a physical survey of the book markets in the various towns of Tamilnadu was made to get a sense of diffusion patterns. Fieldwork was especially useful for the reconstruction of the world of popular publishing. Over 400 chapbooks, ballads and such other popular reading materials were located and, consequently, Chapter 5 offers, perhaps, the only account of any length on Tamil popular publishing.

At this point, in a standard note on sources, it is customary to refer to interviews. I am not sure if I want to do that. I would, instead, like to stress that, in one sense, this is an insider's account of the world of Tamil publishing and letters. As author, editor, translator, proof-reader, and even, publisher, I have been part of this world for the last decade or so. Authors who have never seen a royalty cheque in their life, publishers who complain about poor rates of return on investment, printers who never meet deadlines, pressmen and composing women looking forward to saturday afternoons for their wages people the world I have lived and grown-up in. It seemed pointless to conduct formal interviews with them; and even when I did try, the interviews usually drifted to the latest gossip in the trade. Insights gained and information gathered when reading
proofs, despite the deafening noise of old cylinder machines, or discussing manuscripts or haggling over printing charges have been more useful. I am conscious of having picked the minds of many of those involved in Tamil publishing. My debts to some of them are more fully acknowledged in the Preface.

0.3 The Chapters

Our thesis is set forth in seven chapters, exclusive of this introduction and a conclusion.

Chapter I argues that the basis of book-publishing in the later half of the nineteenth century was the patronage of pre- and early colonial social classes, which was being eroded by the transformation taking place in Tamil society in the later part of the century.

An attempt was made to reach out to the market and the people, but a period of transition intervened, when literary producers were caught in the dilemmas of transition. Pulled between the old-world charm of patronage and the prospects of a market, theirs was a traumatic experience. This argument of Chapter 2, is made through case studies of Subramania Bharati and M.V. Ramanujachari.

In Chapter 3, it is argued that, only with the emergence of the novel as the art form par excellence of the middle class, was the break with the age of patronage complete, and Tamil publishing fully ventured into the market.

In this background, the emergence of the categories of
authors, publishers and printers is traced in Chapter 4. It is demonstrated that these categories were never really distinct, specialized or professional as publishing did not organically grow as an enterprise out of a larger social and economic transformation, due to the colonial presence.

Chapter 5 reconstructs the world of popular publishing and suggests that, despite some interaction with the elite, it was a more or less distinct and autonomous domain which the middle class could not hegemonize.

The penultimate chapter studies the role of the colonial state with reference to book publishing. It is suggested that the state was marginal, if not epiphenomenal, to the world of Tamil publishing. Its legislative interventions are seen as knee-jerk reactions to agitative political movements, which in any case were ineffective due to the weak administrative structure.

The last chapter attempts to study reading practices and modes of reading in colonial Tamilnadu. After detailing the cultural practices surrounding the book over the entire period of our study, it argues that, while the new (silent) mode of reading did emerge as the cultural marker of the middle class, it could not displace earlier modes of reading. Tamil society presented a picture of plurality with differentiated uses of cultural materials.

The brief conclusion summarizes some of the major findings of the study.