

In Need of Translation: An Analysis of Sri Lankan Tamil Dalit Literature

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I. Introduction

The caste or *varna* system in India has segregated thousands of Dalits from mainstream culture and condemned them to a subhuman and debased existence. After centuries of suppression, Dalits are struggling for emancipation by joining the liberation movement originally spear-headed by Dadasaheb B. R. Ambedkar. Dr. Ambedkar shaped the tradition of revolutionary thinking for almost an entire generation of Dalits, and the literary manifestation of this social awareness is Dalit literature. Dalit literature not only reveals the angst of being Dalit in a caste-driven society but also simultaneously records a revolutionary discourse which challenges the hegemonic caste. The burgeoning of Dalit literature began in Maharashtra during the 1960s. The literary movement spread to other languages like Gujarati, Kannada, Telugu, and Tamil.

However, the appearance of Dalit literature in Tamil is a very recent phenomenon. Originating in Maharashtra, Dalit literature took nearly three decades to make a mark on the literary map of Tamil Nadu province in India. Nevertheless, the sudden growth of Tamil Dalit literature in the 1990s has led to a corpus of novels, short stories, poems, and autobiographies. The general impetus of these writings is to expose the agonized and marginalized existence of Dalits. However, Dalit literature is not merely a literature of protest, lamentation, and frustration, since the various contexts and heterogeneous experiences of the Dalit communities it describes makes it a rich source of Dalit culture, tradition, and language. As a counter movement against dominant discourses, Tamil Dalit literature provides a space for the assertion of Dalit identity and selfhood.

While Tamil Dalits are discriminated against by the dominant castes, it is growing increasingly important not to make generalizations about

the problems they face. The Tamil Dalit community is not monolithic by any means, and there are castes within it that are stratified hierarchically. Among Tamil Dalit communities, the problems faced by Sri Lankan Tamil Dalit communities are markedly different from other Tamil Dalit communities because of the group's geopolitical context. While the Sri Lankan political scene is dominated by the Tamil–Sinhalese conflict, the hierarchy and discrimination that is prevalent within Tamil communities between castes is almost subjugated and gets very little attention. This article discusses the problems faced by Sri Lankan Tamil Dalits through an analysis of some Tamil Dalit literary works by Sri Lankan writers.

II. Sri Lankan Tamil Dalit literature

In Tamil Nadu, Dalit politics and literature became popular in the 1990s after the Ambedkar centenary celebrations. However, in Sri Lanka, Dalit politics became a distinct presence from the 1950s onward. Sri Lankan Tamil society is caste-structured, and the dominant castes are the Tamil *Saiva Vellalars*, who enjoy a superior status akin to the *Brahmins* in Tamil Nadu. The *Nalavars*, *Pallars*, *Parayars*, *Vannan*, and *Ambattan*, grouped together under the term *Panchamar*¹ are the “untouchable” communities that work for the *Saiva Vellalars* (upper-caste Hindus). Starting in the 1950s, certain groups began to put up major opposition against the discriminatory practices of the Tamil *Saiva Vellalars*, and literature played a very important role in raising awareness about the plight of Dalits among Sri Lankan Tamils. The experiences of untouchables as documented in Sri Lankan Tamil Dalit literature are similar to Dalit experiences in Tamil Nadu.

Though Dalit politics and literature became prominent in Sri Lanka in the 1950s, Tamil literary works focusing on the problems of untouchables were written as early as the 1920s. *Neelakandan Allathu Oru Sathi Vellalan* was written by Jdaikaadar in 1925 and is regarded as the first novel that discusses caste discrimination in Sri Lanka. A similar trend was followed in novels written by Tamil writers like Muthuthambipillai, Nallaya, Muthathambi Sellaya, and Selvanayagam. In almost all of these novels, Gandhian principles and notions of caste are very influential (Velsamy vii–viii). In the 1950s Dalit politics

became a force to be reckoned with in Sri Lanka, and the works of writers like K. Daniel, Dominic Jeeva, and Thenniyan exposed the evils of casteism that prevailed in Sri Lankan Tamil society.

III. The Works of K. Daniel: Precursor to Tamil Dalit Literature

Considered as the forerunner of contemporary Tamil Dalit literature, K. Daniel was a *Panchamar* (Dalit) who adhered to a Marxist ideology. Like Gail Omvedt, he strongly believed that caste and class were inseparable in Hindu society. A political activist and writer, Daniel participated and organized numerous protests in Sri Lanka against casteism throughout the 1950s. He believed that the social reform movements organized by Gandhi and Dravidar Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu did not bring about substantial and meaningful changes in the lives of Dalits, and he emphasized that a distinct Dalit political movement was essential to protest against casteism. For many movements politics and literature are inseparable, and literature was the platform from which writers could launch their struggles against caste structures. Daniel considered literature not a source of aesthetic pleasure, but a tool to bring about radical changes in society. He writes,

From the beginning of mankind up until today, human existence has been an endless struggle. A literature which is indifferent to this struggle is not real literature. These human struggles are taken up in my novels. The struggle will continue until the working class overthrows the dominant forces in society. Until then, writers like me will continue to wage this war through our literature. (*Munnuraigal* 1095; author's translation)

Daniel's novels *Panchamar*, *Govindan*, *Adimaigal*, *Kanal*, *Panchakonnangal*, and *Thaneer* are called the *Panchamar* novels, since they are based on the struggles of the *Panchamar* communities in Sri Lanka. In his foreword to *K. Daniel Padaippugal–Thoguthi Onru*, Po. Velsamy observes that most Tamil Dalit works are autobiographical and written as first person narratives. However, in Daniel's novels the experiences of Dalits unfold through plot and characterization (Velsamy viii). Daniel has written that he does not believe in writing a "story with a hero and

heroine, a linear plot and a perfect ending” (*Munnuraigal* 1087). He states that the characters in his novels are representatives of a particular community, and adds,

I belong to the *Panchamar* community. From my childhood, I have experienced the problems of growing up as a *Panchamar*. I have cried when my people suffered, and was happy when they experienced trivial success. My novels are based on these experiences. I believe in giving back what I have taken from my people. (*Munnuraigal* 1082; author’s translation)

IV. *Panchakonangal*—Seeds of Revolt

Daniel’s book *Panchakonangal*, meaning “Five Perspectives,” highlights the conflict between the Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. The Tamil liberation movement began in Sri Lanka in the late 1970s to fight Sinhalese domination. Daniel writes,

People voiced their protest, saying that “lands are seized, higher education is denied, Tamils are denied higher posts in the government, Tamils are treated as untouchables.” They demanded a separate land of their own, pointing out the discrimination practised by the government.... the *Panchamars* in this land are denied all these things by the upper-caste Tamils. (*Munnuraigal* 1107; author’s translation)

Daniel observes that in response to this paradoxical situation, there emerged five kinds of perspectives among Sri Lankan Tamils. There were Tamils who preferred to continue to suppress the *Panchamars* and were not willing to give up the status of superiority that they enjoyed as upper castes. There was a second group of Tamils who pretended to believe in the Tamil liberation movement, but who joined it for their own selfish ends. This group hoped that if the Tamils captured political power there would be security for them and their property. A third group of Tamils was reluctant to oppose the Sinhalese government directly, and relied on the youth liberation movement to establish a Tamil nation. Another group of Tamils, namely the *Panchamar* community, longed to be freed from slavery through the Tamil liberation movement. There was also a

group that believed they could bring together all Tamils, irrespective of caste and class, and form a separate Tamil *Ealam*. While observing the different perspectives of the Tamil uprising in Sri Lanka, Daniel also questions the status of *Panchamars* in the movement. It is obvious that the movement is led by the upper-caste youth with the *Panchamars* having very few roles to play.

The novel exposes the revolutionary ideas that were gaining ground in the *Panchamar* communities. For instance, the *Panchamars* working on wealthy Illaya Thambi's lands decide not to work if they are not paid higher wages. They work in unison to thwart the efforts of Illaya Thambi to bring people from other villages to work in the fields. Although the novel exposes the determination and courage of *Panchamars* protesting against their *Saiva Vellala* landlords, it also underlines the double oppression that *Panchamars* suffer as both Tamils and untouchables.

Panchakonangal also brings to light the dichotomy that exists in the Tamil–Sinhalese conflict. Two characters, Kitinan and Subbar, are moderates who long for social change and struggle to eradicate caste discrimination in the village. They strongly believe that casteism is a major obstacle to uniting the Tamils of Sri Lanka, and that any revolution against the Sinhalese is possible only if caste differences are removed. Conversely, youngsters like Subbar's nephew Chandran and his friend Markandan are influenced by the Tamil liberation movement and try to bring all the Tamils together to fight in the hope of forming a Tamil nation. They believe that only armed attacks will overthrow the Sinhalese government.

Daniel's *Panchakonangal* interrogates how genuine the Tamil liberation movement in Sri Lanka is. While fighting for Tamils to have equal status with the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, the movement's leadership remains silent about the caste discrimination that is still prevalent in Sri Lankan Tamil society. In *Panchakonangal*, Daniel points out that unless casteism is removed, the liberation of Tamils in Sri Lanka would not only be meaningless but also remain a distant dream.

V. *Thaneer*—The Struggle For Water

The settings for most of Daniel's works is agrarian society, where the *Panchamar* communities made up of the *Nalavan*, *Pallan*, and *Parayars*

work on the lands of the *Saiva Vellalars*. The untouchable communities are dependent on their landlords not only for their livelihood but also for their basic survival needs, like water. The *Panchamar* communities in Yazhpanam are forbidden from taking water from the public wells. Members of the community have to walk for more than six kilometres every day and wait for the people from dominant castes to give them two or three pots of water. Daniel's *Thaneer* ["water"] reveals the plight of the *Panchamar* communities that are forced to be dependent on their *Vellala* landlords for water. The novel poignantly portrays the suffering the *Panchamars* endure while trying to meet their daily requirements for water. The *Vellalars* ruthlessly exploit this situation and exercise complete control over the lives of the *Panchamars* as a result.

The *Panchamar* communities in the novel are permitted to draw water from the well of the local landlord, Siannappa Nayinar. This well is situated in the Nayinar's garden, which is more than two kilometres from the *Panchamar* quarter. The women must walk through the fields to reach the well and wait for the Nayinar's wife, the Nayinathi, to distribute the water. She is accompanied by her servant, who draws the water and gives two pots of it to each family. Any act of defiance immediately results in the denial of water supply.

Thaneer exposes the hierarchy that is prevalent within the *Panchamar* castes. While all the *Panchamar* communities are regarded as untouchable by the *Vellalars*, they are not all considered equal to each other, with each group belonging to a specific level in the caste hierarchy. The *Vellalars* are keen to maintain this divisive hierarchy which fosters discrimination within the *Panchamar* communities because it dissuades the untouchable castes from uniting and demanding better treatment. In *Thaneer*, Daniel illustrates these divisions with the experiences of Sinann. The *Nalavars* are considered superior to the *Parayars* and are not permitted to enter the households of the lower caste. Sinann belongs to the *Nalavar* community, but Mathan from the *Parayar* community helps him to get a job as a cleaner in a hospital. He invites Sinann to his home and the young man stays there for four days. In the hospital, Subbar, who belongs to the *Odavi* community (which is superior to the *Panchamar* but inferior to the *Vellalars*), warns Sinann that associating with Mathan might lead to caste violations, so Sinann stops going to

Mathan's house. But, the issue does not end there; it takes a serious turn when Sinann's fiancée Selli goes to get water from the Nayinar's well. The Nayinathi not only denies water to Selli but also insults her mother by accusing her of being a woman of loose morals. Selli is furious and dares to voice her protest without thinking about the consequences. The Nayinathi immediately grabs her long hair and orders her servant Sellappan to cut it off. All the women are denied their quota of water for the day. As the narrator comments, "There was no water for all the families in the *cheri* that day. No water to cook. They tried to use the water that was left in the vessels" (*Thaneer* 1005; author's translation). They secretly try to draw water from the Nayinar's well in the night. When the Nayinar becomes aware of this, he sets fire to their huts, and the *Panchamars* lose their homes.

Lack of access to drinking water becomes a major problem for the whole community. There are people from other castes willing to give them water, but when they try to do so, the *Vellalars* in the village throw dead cattle and human excrement into their wells. The *Panchamars* come together to construct a well of their own. Acquiring land to construct the well on is difficult. Almost all the property in the village belongs to the *Vellalars*. However, Pambidi Singi, a woman who belongs to the *Odavi* community, donates her land to the *Panchamars*. Her generous act is considered a threat to the power of the upper castes, so she is murdered by them, and her body is found the next day. But before her death (and likely because she was aware that she could be murdered), Pambidi Singi wrote a will stating clearly that the land belongs to the *Panchamars* and should be used for constructing the well. This enables the *Panchamars* to thwart the upper castes' intention of taking legal action against the well's construction. Digging the well is difficult but all the *Panchamar* castes join in the effort, forgetting their differences to work toward a common goal. Mathan is very hopeful that the well would be functioning by the anniversary of Pambidi Singi's death. His wish comes true, and all of them wait for that day to taste the water, after it is offered to gods. However, on the day of worship, Mathan is found dead near the well. They find the words "Poison" written on the well in blood. The *Vellalars* had poisoned the well, rendering the *Panchamar's* efforts to find water futile. In the author's words, *Thaneer* reveals "the suffering, misery, fury

and efforts that *Panchamars* have faced for over one hundred years to get water in Yazhpanam” (*Thaneer* 1116; author’s translation).

VI. *Adimagal*—Perpetual Subjugation

Daniel’s *Adimagal* exposes the exemplary dedication and sincerity of the *Panchamars* toward their upper caste masters. This novel takes us through the life of Kanthan, who has been serving Velupillai Kamakar (a *Vellalar*) for more than three decades. Velupillai’s son-in-law Suriyar leads a very extravagant life and exhausts all his family’s wealth. He suddenly absconds and leaves his relatives behind in a state of penury. When they are forced to sell their house to pay off his debts, Kanthan intervenes and buys the house with money that he had long and carefully saved and gives it to Kannama, Velupillai’s granddaughter. His dedication to his master’s family reaches a zenith with this act, while he continues to live in the hut in the backyard of the house.

Kanthan continued to be the same old Kanthan. He did not change in the course of time. He continued to work for the masters, bathe in the *Paravar* Pond, eat food from Velupillai’s house in the same old palm leaf, drink water in coconut shells, and live in the hut left by Ithini. The same dust-laden life.... It was from this dust-filled life that Kanthan had saved enough money to buy the house in the auction sale. (*Adimagal* 542; author’s translation)

Velupillai’s granddaughter Kannama is very grateful to Kanthan and starts calling him Kanthan mama (or “uncle”). To show her respect, she serves him food on a plate and coffee in a cup. Nevertheless, Kanthan’s devotion and respect toward his master’s family remains unaffected, and his manner of living remains the same. Meanwhile, Kannama falls in love with Karunai, son of Chandran, a landlord in the village. Kannama insists that Karunai’s family asks Kanthan’s consent for the marriage. Chandran’s family considers her requirement an insult to their honour and dignity, but they are forced to give in to the wishes of their son. Chandran invites Kanthan to discuss the marriage. Kanthan suspects that Karunai is the son of Suriyar (Velupillai’s profligate and absent son-

in-law) and Chandran's wife, and says that he will not give his consent to the marriage. The next day he is murdered because he knows the truth of Karunai's parentage.

Adimaigal also gives us a clear picture of the vulnerability and exploitation of *Panchamar* women. It exposes the predicament of *Panchamar* women who suffer double oppression as both *Panchamars* and women. Kanthan's mother Selvi was asked to breastfeed the Nayinar's child, since the Nayinathi was sick. She is required to wash her breasts with hot water before feeding the baby.

In the morning when Selvi came, Ithini would be ready with hot water. Selvi goes to the verandah at the back of the house and removes her blouse. Ithini would slowly pour water and Selvi would wash her breasts gently and neatly. With that, her son's spittle was washed away, and she could now feed the Nayinar's son. She feeds the baby without any spite, without any intention of retaining milk for her own baby. When she returns home, she does not clean her breasts. Her son can suck on her breasts with the baby Nayinar's spittle on them. (448; author's translation)

The country doctor who attends the Nayinathi warns that the person feeding the child should avoid sexual relations. Selvi is forced to promise her master that she will avoid sexual relations with her husband. She is asked to keep this promise a secret from everyone, including her husband. This leads to a lot of misunderstandings between her and her husband, and as a result, her husband suspects that she is having an illicit relationship with her landlady's brother. Even so, Selvi is unable to reveal the promise she made to her master's family. Believing the worst, her husband gets drunk and commits suicide. Grieving and full of guilt, Selvi jumps into the well and ends her own life soon after.

The novel does not end with Kanthan's murder. After Kanthan's funeral, the *Panchamars* throw stones at Chandran's house in retaliation for their acts. The novel ends on a positive note with the uprising of the *Panchamars*, who emerge stronger over the years and overthrow the dominant castes in the future.

VII. Sri Lankan Tamil Dalit Short Stories

Thenniyan and Devadasan's short stories "Veliyil Ellam Pesalam" and "Asal" lay bare the fact that the customs and conventions of caste society continue to prevail, in spite of the general notion that Tamil nationalism movements have reduced or destroyed casteism in Sri Lanka. Thenniyan's "Veliyil Ellam Pesalam" ("Everything Can Be Spoken Outside") is the story of two *Panchamar* brothers who want to buy a house for their widowed sister. The elder brother had travelled abroad and returned to his hometown with considerable wealth. To discuss the price of the house that they plan to buy, the brothers visit the owner, a *Vellalar*. At first the *Vellalar* treats them respectfully, believing them to be upper caste. But when he learns that they belong to the *Panchamar* caste, his behaviour and tone changes considerably. As they are leaving, he tells them to stand outside the house if they plan to visit him again. He insists that any negotiations regarding the price of the house must take place outside his own home.

In Devadasan's short story "Asal," ("The Real"), Sivarasan loses his job when his employer finds out that he belongs to the *Panchamar* caste. Sivarasan works in France and has a reputation as a very intelligent and dedicated manager. But his life takes a turn for the worse when his friend Gunam, a Sri Lankan Tamil, finds out that he is from the *Panchamar* caste. He loses not only his friendship but also his job. "Asal" reveals the caste bias that is ingrained and still prevalent even among the Tamil diaspora.

VIII. The Need for English Translations

In the present context of Sri Lanka, where the focus is on the Sinhalese–Tamil conflict, these works reveal the hierarchy prevalent within Sri Lankan Tamil communities. Most importantly, some of the literary works highlight the intra-Tamil strife that remains almost subdued in present-day Sri Lanka because of the conflict with the Sinhalese. Reading Sri Lankan Tamil Dalit literature thus offers significant insights on the inner workings of Sri Lankan Tamil society. However, it should be pointed out that this important literature is rarely read by anyone outside the Tamil audience.

Although there is a corpus of Sri Lankan Tamil Dalit literature, most of these works are in Tamil and have yet to be translated into English.

The number of Tamil Dalit writers and their literary output has increased in recent years. However, with the exception of literary works of writers like Bama, Imayam, and Sivakami, English translations of the works of other Tamil Dalit writers are very rarely available.

In this context, it is relevant to discuss the impact globalization has on the production and publication of literature from marginalized communities like Dalits. Aijaz Ahmed observes that the impact of globalization on cultural production has resulted in the commodification of culture. Culture begins to function like capital when it is caught in the web of market pricing and advertising. When cultural products become a saleable commodity, there is an increasing demand for rural and ethnic cultural experiences in the global market (Ahmed 105–06). Consequently, when Third World authenticity is sold for First World consumption, stereotypes are created and sustained for this global market (Tripathi 17).

Highlighting this “culture of select tradition” Ravikumar points out that literature about an individual’s pain and suffering has gained a global market and that publishers have shown a keen interest in translating and publishing Dalit autobiographies, which are mostly narratives of victimization and suffering. While English translations provide global spaces for Dalit voices, the prioritization of translating and marketing Dalit literary narratives which underline the theme of victimization has made Dalit literature formulaic (Ravikumar 7–9).

Azhagarasan observes that in the 1990s the theme of Dalit victimhood was dominant in Tamil Dalit literature. However, in recent years writers like Rajkumar, Sugirtharani, Soe Dharmam, and Gunasekarn have produced works which have caused a remarkable shift in the canon of Dalit literature away from stories of victimization to stories of empowerment (Azhagarasan xxii). It is imperative that the publishing industry focuses on translating these literary works which have moved away from the themes of suffering and victimization. The various contexts and heterogeneous experiences of Dalit communities make their literary works a rich source of Dalit culture, tradition, and language. Heterogeneous Dalit cultures have resulted in multifarious plots and characters. To reach global audiences, literary works such as Sri Lankan Tamil Dalit literature must be translated into English.

Note

1 The social structure of caste in India is rooted in the *Varna* system which segregates the Hindu society hierarchically into four *Varnas*, namely, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. The Panchamars or ‘untouchables’ (present-day Dalits) are placed below the category of Shudras and exist outside the four-fold *Varna* system. The ideology of caste is based on the notions of purity and pollution. The Panchamars were considered the lowest in the society, and apart from serving the upper caste landlords they were assigned common duties like removing dead cattle and cleaning drainage, and played a pivotal role in death and funeral ceremonies. Due to the nature of their work they were considered “untouchables” and lived in the fringes of the village. Denied access to mainstream society, their very sight was believed to cause pollution. “Untouchables” were expected to tie an earthen pot round their neck so that their sputum did not fall to the ground and pollute the atmosphere.

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