

**THE POWER OF PRINT: TAMIL NEWSPAPERS IN  
MALAYA AND THE IMAGINING OF  
TAMIL CULTURAL IDENTITY, 1930-1940.**

**DINESH SATHISAN**  
*B.A. (Hons.), NUS*

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## SUMMARY

With very little works of scholarship focusing on Tamil communities in Malaya, and with the bulk of them reflecting a bias towards the histories of migrant plantation workers, this study departs from such a focus to explore an intellectual movement spearheaded by the Tamil press. This thesis analyses how Tamil newspapers published in Singapore and Malaysia imagined Tamil cultural identity during the 1930s, with print culture taking off in Southeast Asia, the Dravidian movement at its peak in India, a Tamil renaissance burgeoning and an intellectual undercurrent forming with discussions on racial origins and rights.

The study looks at the *Tamil Nesan*, *Munnetram* and *Tamil Murasu* as polygeneric texts. The analysis of these newspapers as ‘texts’ takes into account advertisements, editorial messages, letters written to the editors, pictures published as well as language used; the rhetorical devices including figures of speech, metaphors and allusions. Tamil newspapers published in Malaya shared several similarities and by fulfilling five aspects of the modern free press, they asserted to be manifestations of modernity, just as they were tools of modernisation. These papers also explicitly expressed that they were the spokespeople of the interests of Tamils in Malaya and saw themselves as didactic tools propagating individual and social reform through education, temperance, good hygiene habits among other things.

There existed in these newspapers, however, multiple levels of imagined spaces, distinctly marked by a constructed Brahmin-as-Aryan and Tamil-as-Dravidian-and-non-Brahmin divide. The *Nesan* saw Hinduism as an essential part of Tamilness, while the *Munnetram* and *Murasu* saw Hinduism, which they argued was

manipulated by the Brahmins to subordinate the Dravidians, as the biggest threat to Tamils. This thesis argues that there was no singular imagining of Tamil cultural identity during the 1930s, and geographic as well as ideological imaginations expressed through these papers printed in Malaya included a variety of national and sub-national imagined spaces; that is, the national being the *imaginaire* idealised by the *Nesan* alongside Congress in India and sub-national, that of the *Munnetram* and *Murasu* which mirrored the Dravidian Movement, espoused by E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker.

This study also examines the ‘textual communities’; the audiences whom these newspapers targeted and argues that print promoted oral culture and orality complemented print, since a large number of Tamils in Malaya were illiterate. Furthermore, the circuitous relationship between these newspapers as well as the voluntary organisations and associations such as the Tamils Reform Association and the Central Indian Association of Malaya helped further strengthen, spread and put into action the messages the papers propagated. The thesis also challenges Jürgen Habermas’ study on the public sphere and argues that Tamil newspapers in Malaya reflect that the underclass were crucial for the printing and spreading of ideas received via the newspapers, particularly through the channel of voluntary organisations. Furthermore, extra-national dimensions of Tamil newspapers in Malaya, such as extra-national journalistic networks and the inclusion of extra-national ideas and figures, played a significant role in fostering the imagining of a diasporic Tamil cultural identity.



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## NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

My transliteration follows the University of Madras Tamil Lexicon Scheme. For the sake of readability, I have not transliterated proper names of individuals (except when present in the titles of Tamil texts), deities, places, publishers and caste. The names of Tamil newspapers in this study have not been transliterated as well for the same reason. The *Nesan* for instance is spelt ‘Nesan’ and not ‘Nēcaṇ’ in this study.

The table below lists Tamil characters and their transliterated forms.

| Consonant | Transliteration | Vowels | Transliteration | Compound Form | Transliteration |
|-----------|-----------------|--------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|
| க         | k               | அ      | a               | க             | ka              |
| ங         | ṅ               | ஆ      | ā               | கா            | kā              |
| ங         | c               | இ      | i               | கி            | ki              |
| ஞ         | ñ               | ஈ      | ī               | கீ            | kī              |
| ட         | ṭ               | உ      | u               | கு            | ku              |
| ண்        | ṇ               | ஊ      | ū               | கூ            | kū              |
| த்        | t               | எ      | e               | கெ            | ke              |
| ந்        | n               | ஏ      | ē               | கே            | kē              |
| ப்        | p               | ஐ      | ai              | கை            | kai             |
| ம்        | m               | ஓ      | o               | கொ            | ko              |
| ய்        | y               | ஔ      | ō               | கோ            | kō              |
| ர்        | r               | ஔ      | au              | கௌ            | kau             |
| ல்        | l               |        |                 |               |                 |
| வ்        | v               |        |                 |               |                 |
| ழ்        | ḷ               |        |                 |               |                 |
| ள்        | ḷ               |        |                 |               |                 |
| ற்        | r               |        |                 |               |                 |
| ன்        | n               |        |                 |               |                 |
| ஐ         | j               |        |                 |               |                 |
| ஷ்        | ṣ               |        |                 |               |                 |
| ஸ         | s               |        |                 |               |                 |
| ஹ         | h               |        |                 |               |                 |
| க்ஷ       | kṣ              |        |                 |               |                 |

## ABBREVIATIONS AND SHORT FORMS USED IN THIS STUDY

### Newspapers

*Malayan Daily Express* – MDE in footnotes

*Kudi Arasu* – KA in footnotes

*Tamil Nesan* – Nesan; TN in footnotes

*Tamil Murasu* – Murasu, TM in footnotes

*The Straits Times* – TST in footnotes

### Institutions, Associations, Groups

ADA – Adi-Dravidar Association

CIAM – Central Indian Association of Malaya

HINDRAF – Hindu Rights Action Force

MIC – Malaysian Indian Congress

NAS – National Archive of Singapore

TRA – Tamils Reform Association

## CHAPTER I

### Setting the Scene

‘Four hundred million separate individual men and women, each differing from the other, each living in a private universe of thought and feeling.’

- Jawaharlal Nehru, 1946<sup>1</sup>

The term Diaspora is of Greek origin, meaning ‘to disperse’ and it later came to represent the Jewish communities living outside Palestine. Today the term has come to include immigrants, refugees and those in exile from varied ethnic and racial groups. A *Carikam* epic, the *Cilappatikāram*, recognised as Tamil classical literature written in the first Century, refers to the diaspora as the *pulam peyar makka!* — the ‘dispersed, the nomads or the migrants’.<sup>2</sup> This clearly points to the fact that Tamils started crossing the seas as early as this period or even before. In the nineteenth-century and after, most Tamils who came to Malaya from India to work were peasants from the lower caste groups and were considered ‘the most satisfactory type of labourer’ who was fit for ‘light, simple, repetitive tasks’ as they were ‘malleable, worked well under supervision, and was easily manageable’.<sup>3</sup> The period from 1921 to 1930 marked the heaviest period of Indian migration into Malaya, with an average of about 98,000 Indians arriving during that time.<sup>4</sup> Most of these labourers worked in crop plantations, specifically rubber, sugar and coffee.

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<sup>1</sup> Nehru to the question ‘Who is an Indian?’, *The Discovery of India* (Calcutta, 1946), p. 497.

<sup>2</sup> R. Cheran, ‘Citizens of Many Worlds: Theorizing Tamil DiasporiCity’, in R. Cheran et. al. (eds.), *History and Imagination: Tamil Culture in the Global Context* (Toronto: Tsar Publications, 2007), p. 152.

<sup>3</sup> Kernial Singh Sandhu, ‘The Coming of the Indians to Malaysia’, K. S. Sandhu and A. Mani (eds.), *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Press, 1993), p. 152.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155. Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 30.

Before 1870, most Indians in Malaya tended to live in the Straits Settlements of Singapore, Malacca and Penang. After that period, rapid movement all over Malaya was noted. Tamils concentrated chiefly in Negri Sembilan, Selangor and Perak and were mainly rubber plantation and railway workers. In 1931, the total Indian population was 624,009, of which 514,959 were Tamils. That year alone, 50,900 Indians resided in Singapore, of which 37,293 were Tamils and eighty percent of them Hindus.<sup>5</sup>

The other predominant South Indians who came to Malaya to work in the plantations were Telugus who were mainly in the Lower Perak rubber estates and in parts of Selangor, while Malayalees were in Lower Perak, Negri Sembilan, Johor Baru and Kuala Lumpur.<sup>6</sup> The educated Ceylon Tamils, despite coming from the 'same racial stock' as Tamils in South India, saw themselves as a separate community having migrated to Ceylon centuries ago and having distinct customary laws and spoken language due to the mixing of Malabar and Tamil culture in Jaffna.<sup>7</sup> These Ceylon Tamils, as well as the educated Malayalees who often worked for the civil service, were largely found in the urban centres of Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Ipoh where the Tamil Muslim community, who were mainly involved in business, thrived as well.<sup>8</sup> (See Appendix). Despite the long history Indians have had with Malaya, very little has been written about the community in general, particularly

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<sup>5</sup> C. A. Vlieland, *A Report on the 1931 Census of British Malaya*, p. 192, p. 105, p. 85. For 1940s figures, see Latiffa Khan, *Indians in Malaya, 1900-1945*. Unpublished M. A. Thesis (University of Hong Kong, 1963).

<sup>6</sup> M. V. del Tufo, *Malaya: A Report on the 1947 Census of Population* (London, 1948), pp. 79-81.

<sup>7</sup> R. Rajakrishnan, 'Social Change and Group Identity among the Sri Lankan Tamils', Sandhu and Mani (eds.), *Indians*, p. 542; Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Ceylon* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1964).

<sup>8</sup> R. Rajoo, 'World-View of the Indians with Regard to their Social Identity and Belonging in Malaya, c. 1900-57', Mohd. Taib Osman (ed.), *Malaysian World View* (Singapore, ISEAS: 1985), p. 164.

when compared to studies on Chinese and Malays. An analysis on writings about Indians and particularly Tamils in Malaya is *de rigueur* at this stage.

### **Literature Review and Methodology**

The corpus of literature available on Tamils in Malaysia today can be classified under three distinct categories: the first focusing on a general account of Indian migration to Malaya, the second focusing on the history of the Malaysian Indian Congress and Indians in the civil service and the third, where the bulk of the work has been done, focusing on the economic and socio-cultural aspects of the predominantly Tamil estate plantation workers.<sup>9</sup> Studies have been done on people who are at binary ends of the line in the state; Indian civil servants on the one end and economically backward plantation workers and labourers on the other. Very few works have focused on the significant role of a thriving Tamil press and the emergence of an intellectual movement within the Tamil community that purported to forge a cultural identity which was modelled along several revolutionary and controversial ideas and ideals.

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<sup>9</sup> Some important works are highlighted here due to word-limit constraints: For a general account on Indian migration, see Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement (1786 – 1957)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); George Netto, *Indians in Malaya: Historical Facts and Figures* (Singapore: George Netto, 1961); Usha Mahajani, *The role of Indian minorities in Burma and Malaya* (Bombay: Vora, 1960). For works on socio-economic conditions of Tamil estate workers, see N. J. Colletta, 'Malaysian Forgotten People: Education, Cultural Identity and Socio-Economic mobility Among South Indian Plantation Workers' in *Contributions to Asian Studies* 7 (1975) pp. 87-112; Rosemary Dillon, *People in Transition: A Case Study of Indian Squatters in Urban Malaysia: Responses to the Need for Shelter, Livelihood and their Forced Resettlement*. Unpublished PhD thesis (Australian National University: 1991); Dennis Earl Supernor, *Tamils in Malaysia: Problems in Socio-Economic Development for an Immigrant Minority Group*, PhD Thesis (Houston, Texas: Rice University, 1983)



Malaysian national historiography has selectively relegated Tamils to the margins of its history, with the dominant narrative revolving around what can be said to be a historical interaction between Malays and Chinese.<sup>10</sup> Authors who did focus on Indians in Malaya also reflected this bias towards larger themes and plantation workers. For example, Khoo Kay Kim's 1979 survey of Malaysian historiography argued that 'there is a great deal more written on Malaysian Indians than most people realise', failing to recognise however that several of the works he cites were written by historians from the 1930s and 1940s who saw Southeast Asia, *a la* George Coedès and R. C. Majumdar, as extensions of the Indian subcontinent.<sup>11</sup> Such studies deny the Indian diaspora in Malaya the element of local agency. The last piece of scholarship Khoo names in his long list focuses on, predictably, plantation workers.<sup>12</sup>

On the literature available targeting broader notions of Indian culture and identity, Sinnappah Arasaratnam's contribution to the field is plenty and highly valuable to this study. His *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore*, though at times more narrative than analytical, is crucial because of his utilisation of primary sources such as newspapers published both in India and Malaya, to discuss the changing positions and identities of Indians within specific historical contexts. By not essentialising the community, Arasaratnam made the book a point of departure for my research into one

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<sup>10</sup> See Khoo Kay Kim, 'Historiography of Peninsular Malaysia: Past and Present', John A. Lent and Kent Mulliner (ed.), *Malaysian Studies: Archaeology, Historiography, Geography, and Bibliography* (DeKalb, Illinois: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, 1985); Khoo Kay Kim, 'Recent Advances in the Study and Writing of Malaysian History', *Peninjau Sejarah*, 3, 1 (1968).

<sup>11</sup> George Coedès, *The Indianised States of Southeast Asia*, ed. Walter F. Vella, trans. Susan Brown Cowing (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1968); R. C. Majumdar, *Hindu Colonies in the Far East* (Calcutta, Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1963).

<sup>12</sup> Khoo Kay Kim, 'Recent Malaysian Historiography', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 13, 2 (1979).

aspect of Malayan Tamil history that has been under-explored.<sup>13</sup> For Arasaratnam, however, the newspapers were one of the many primary sources he used to discuss the Indian community; in the case of this thesis, the newspapers and specifically their role in acting as vehicles for an imagining of Tamil cultural identity become the principal focus.

Michael Stenson's *Class, Race and Colonialism in West Malaysia* has become highly relevant to this study as well, for he shows through a chronological study the ideas which were prevalent among the Indian community as well as the movements within the community in Malaya from 1907-1969. This excellent study also moves away from attempting to study the 'Indian community' as an analytical or organising concept which had led the author to delve on several specificities, that previously went unnoticed or glossed over, such as the role of Indian associations, institutions, labour strikes among other things.<sup>14</sup>

It must also be noted that recent works of scholarship focusing on Indians in Malaysia appears to have looked at, if not for the political and economic marginalisation of Tamil estate workers, the strong religious or Hindu links argued to be inseparable from Indian identity in contemporary Malaysia. Such studies, particularly focusing on religious assertion and fanaticism have become the trend of the late 1990s and today, particularly attributed to the revitalisation of Islam in Malaysia, which has possibly led to its religious minorities strongly associating their

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<sup>13</sup> Arasaratnam, *Indians*.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Stenson, *Class, Race and Colonialism in West Malaysia: The Indian Case* (University of Queensland Press, 1980).

ethnic identity in religious terms.<sup>15</sup> Andrew Willford's book argues that 'religion and ethnicity... simultaneously assert and signify Tamil Hindu identity', and my study will query if this was the case back in the 1930s as well.<sup>16</sup>

Very little has been written about Tamil print culture and the public sphere in Malaya, with all available works being short journal articles, working papers or theses. A good reference in the area of Tamil journalism in Malaya is an article by Rajeswary Ampalavanar in 1970, an expansion on a chapter on the same topic from her Masters thesis, which provides a survey of Tamil print materials that were published between 1920 and 1941. The papers themselves have failed to receive any in-depth analysis for content, form, structure and language.<sup>17</sup> Despite the lack of scholarship on the Tamil press in Malaya, S. Fakhri has argued that print culture in the region should be studied as 'identity markers' and 'identity negotiators' as anthropologists do with art.<sup>18</sup> This study aims to bring together what I see lacking in Ampalavanar's study and Fakhri's suggestion of looking at these papers as identity negotiators. Apart from looking at newspapers as 'cultural' objects which disseminated ideas that became

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<sup>15</sup> Virginia Hooker, 'Reconfiguring Malay and Islam in Contemporary Malaysia', Timothy P. Barnard (ed.), *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004), pp. 149-167.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Willford, *Cage of Freedom: Tamil Identity and Ethnic Fetish in Malaysia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007), p. 1; Willford "'Weapons of the Meek": Ecstatic Ritualism and Strategic Ecumenism among Tamil Hindus in Malaysia', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 9 (2002), pp. 247-280; Elizabeth Fuller Collins, *Pierced by Murugan's Lance: Ritual, Power and Moral Redemption among Malaysian Hindus* (Northern Illinois University Press, 1997); Alexandra Kent, *Divinity and Diversity: A Hindu Revitalization Movement in Malaysia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> Rajeswary Ampalavanar, 'Tamil Journalism and the Indian Community in Malaya, 1920-1941', *Journal of Tamil Studies*, 2, 2 (1970) pp 41-58. Also Ampalavanar, *Social and Political Developments in the Indian Community of Malaya, 1920-41*. Unpublished M. A. Thesis (University of Malaya, 1969). A History Honours Thesis focusing on the *Murasu* from 1935-74 is also available on the topic, focusing on a chronological evolution of the paper. Gunavalli A. Sundaraju, *The Tamil Murasu: The Evolution of a Local Tamil Newspaper 1935-1974*. Unpublished Honours Thesis (National University of Singapore, 1989).

<sup>18</sup> S. M. A. K. Fakhri, *Print Culture Amongst Tamils and Tamil Muslims in Southeast Asia, c. 1860 - 1960* Working Paper No. 167. (Chennai, India: Madras Institute of Development Studies, 2002).

crucial to the imagining of Tamil cultural identity, this thesis will look at the newspapers in analysis — namely the *Tamil Nesan*, *Munnetram* (Forward or Progress), and the *Tamil Murasu* — as ‘textual’ objects, in a similar way that Barbara Mittler does in her study of a Shanghai-printed Chinese newspaper, *Shenbao*, from 1872 to 1912.<sup>19</sup>

The newspaper is a polygeneric text and the study of these newspapers in analysis as ‘texts’ allows one to scrutinise advertisements, editorial messages, letters written to the editors, pictures which have been published as well as language; the rhetorical devices including figures of speech, metaphors and allusions. My own analysis of language in Tamil newspapers draws on Sumathi Ramaswamy’s study of Tamil language devotion in South India, which provides a good point of reference to understanding the ‘frenzy’ and ‘fanaticism’ that people expressed to safeguard *Tamiḥttāy* (Mother Tamil). Ramaswamy rightly distinguishes her proposed analytic of studying the Tamil language, *tamiḥpparu* (Tamil language devotion) from the singular metanarrative histories of European linguistic nationalism.<sup>20</sup>

### **Tamil Journalism and the Newspapers in Study**

Tamil, as well as Malay journalism in Malaya as William Roff explains, owes its origins to ‘locally born Indian Muslims in Singapore, or to be more exact, to the community known as “Jawi Peranakan”’. The community had formed an association in Singapore to open a print press and they started to print the Malay language weekly

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<sup>19</sup> Barbara Mittler, *A Newspaper for China? Power, Identity and Change in Shanghai’s News Media, 1872-1912* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1970* (California: Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1997), p. 1.

*Jawi Peranakan* in 1876.<sup>21</sup> The editor of this paper, Munshi Mohammed Syed bin Mohideen, was believed to have been the editor of the Tamil *Tankai Nesan*, which was published by the same group. E. W. Birch dates this paper to about 1876 though another weekly paper, *Singai Varthamani* was said to have been in circulation from about 1875 edited by another Indian-Muslim, C. K. Maqdoom Sahib.<sup>22</sup> In Tamil Nadu, it is said that the first regular newspaper, *Swadeshimitran* was started in 1882.<sup>23</sup> In 1887, a paper called *Singai Nesan* was started by Mahadun Saibu, which expressed concerns of the Tamil community was published and it stated that the *Tankai Nesan*, *Singai Varthamani* as well as another paper *Nyana Sooriyan* had become out-of-print by this time, clearly pointing to the short lifespan of twentieth century Tamil papers in Malaya.<sup>24</sup> It was not until 1921 when the Tamil press in Malaya started taking full form again, with the inception of the *Tamilaham* of which Narasimha Iyengar was an editor. The *Tamilaham*, as early as 1922 expressed nationalistic sentiments and had warned Indians against coming to Malaya to work in the rubber plantations.<sup>25</sup> Iyengar left the *Tamilaham* in mid-1924 to start the *Tamil Nesan*.

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<sup>21</sup> William Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> E. W. Birch, 'The Vernacular Press in the Straits', *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 4 (Dec 1879), p. 52; M. Krishnan, 'Malēciya Pattirikkai Ulakil Saṅkamaṇi: Ōr Āivu' (Sangamani in Malaysia's Tamil Newspaper World), *Proceedings of the Sixth International Seminar Conference of Tamil Studies* (Kuala Lumpur: International Association of Tamil Research, 1987), p. 151; Fakhri, 'Print Culture', p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Ampalavanar, 'Tamil', p. 42. The Tamil press in India had a very late start because of the late introduction of the printing press. See, K. K. Pillay, 'The History of the Tamil Press in India', S. P. Sen (ed.), *The Indian Press* (Calcutta: Institute of Historical Studies, 1967), pp. 84-92.

<sup>24</sup> V. T. Arasu, 'One Hundred Years of Tamil Newspapers in Singapore: An Overview', *Proceedings of the Seminar Conference on Tamil Language and Literature in Singapore* (University of Singapore: Tamil Language Society, 1978), p. 83.

<sup>25</sup> Norman Parmer, *Colonial Labour Policy and Administration: A History of Labour in the Rubber Plantation Industry in Malaya, c. 1910-1941* (New York: Published for the Association for Asian Studies, 1960), p. 64.

The *Nesan* was first published on 10 September 1924 and was started by Soundararajam Iyengar and Narasimha Iyengar as a weekly newspaper, with the former taking charge of the management of the paper, and the latter the editorial functions. Soundararajam passed away within a year of the paper's inception and Narasimha Iyengar (1890–1938) took charge of both the management and editorship of the paper. From March 1929, the paper was published twice a week, from January 1934 three times a week and from 20 February 1937, it became a daily.<sup>26</sup> Iyengar was born in Trichy, India in 1890 and left for Rangoon in 1915, finally arriving in Malaya in 1921. He passed away on 4 February 1938 and the paper was later edited by R. H. Nathan and Subramaniam Iyer.

In 1929, G. Sarangapany (1903-1974) entered the scene with the *Munnetram*, *Seerthirutham* and later, the *Tamil Murasu* in 1935. While the *Nesan* was published throughout the 1930s, the *Murasu* only started being printed from 6 July 1935, with Sarangapany as its editor, purely as a paper that propagated reforms which were carried out by the TRA. Despite its youth, the *Murasu* was considered to be the only contender to the *Nesan* since its advent.<sup>27</sup> Sarangapany came to Singapore in 1924, at age 21, and worked for an Indian-Muslim merchant as an accountant. His public spiritedness and passion for community service as well as his unhappiness over the dire state of the Malayan Tamil community, which he felt was in need of serious help, made him turn to journalism which he believed could act as an agent of reform and change.<sup>28</sup> In 1936 when the TRA decided to give up the paper citing financial losses

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<sup>26</sup> *TN Annual*, 1938.

<sup>27</sup> Ampalavanar, 'Tamil', p. 51

<sup>28</sup> M. Elias, *Tamilavel Cāraṅkapāni* (Tamilavel Sarangapany) (Tamil Nadu: Arivuchudar Pathipakam, 1997), pp. 44-46.

as reason, Sarangapany bought over the *Murasu* and was its sole proprietor and editor until his death. Sarangapany was not new to the field of journalism however, having been the sub-editor of the weekly *Munnetram* in 1929 and later becoming its editor in 1930. The *Munnetram* which was printed every Thursday from 16 January 1929 was printed until 1932. The other paper which he edited, the *Seerthirutham* (Reform), which is no where to be located today making it difficult for analysis, was printed as a monthly paper propagating social reform among the Tamil community in Malaya.<sup>29</sup> Since a monthly paper could not adequately fulfil the role of a reforming agent, Sarangapany initiated the *Murasu* as a weekly paper first, and within four months of its advent, it became a tri-weekly paper and was published on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays; and from 1 December 1937, it became a daily.

The *Nesan* and the *Murasu* were considered major newspapers, leading in terms of sales during the period in study and even continue to be printed today, making them credible sources to this study. In addition to the *Nesan* and *Murasu*, it is necessary to look at Sarangapany's *Munnetram* as a valuable source material to understand the kinds of messages which he had explicated through the paper during the early years of the 1930s before the *Murasu* was published. These newspapers in examination modelled closely along papers which were published in the Tamil South, focusing on several pertinent debates which were taking shape there and Tamil cultural identity in Malaya was imagined by these newspapers alongside these issues

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<sup>29</sup> Patricia Lim's international union list does not list where this paper is being held as well. P. Lim Pui Huen, *Singapore, Malaysian and Brunei Newspapers: An International Union List* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies: 1992), p. 52. My correspondence with Mr Krishnasamy, current President of the Singai Tamil Sangam (the TRA as it is called today) brought to my attention that the meeting minutes from this period and newspapers such as the *Seerthirutham* were no longer kept by the Association due to space constraints.

which had an immense stimulus and potency on the Tamil community here. Print facilitated and acted as conduits for the exchange of several ideologies which came to shape the editors' *imaginaire* of Tamil cultural identity among the diaspora in Malaya.

This study is divided into five chapters: an introduction, three main chapters and a conclusion. Chapters Two and Three follow a textual method of analysing the newspapers in question, with Chapter Two looking at the ways through which a similar vision of imagined cultural identity was promoted in Tamil newspapers during this period. Among several important issues facing the Tamil community, education was one which these newspapers had shared similar concerns about. A code was stipulated as early as 1923 that a school is built in an estate that had ten or more resident Indian children of school-going age, though such schools rarely materialised.<sup>30</sup> Any vernacular education was restricted to the primary level and this only changed for the better following the World War Two. By 1931, literacy rates were higher than the decade before, though as Ampalavanar points out, this was a result of the immigration of educated classes than the product of the education system in Malaya.<sup>31</sup>

Chapter Three delves into the debates, differences and the intellectual undercurrents that underpinned the *imaginaire* of the editors. The Indian community was never a homogenous group and particularly, the Tamil community had several factions. Educational differences aside, *jāti* or caste played an important role in further perpetuating pronounced sub-group consciousness and identifications. Firstly, there was a marked Brahmin, non-Brahmin division that existed within the Tamil

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<sup>30</sup> Arasaratnam, *Indians*, p. 178.

<sup>31</sup> Ampalavanar, 'Tamil', p. 41. See Table 5 in Appendix.



community in Malaya. Moreover, within non-Brahmins, there existed several caste groups who ranked themselves above one another and distinctions were established between them and Adi-Dravidians, who were deemed to come from a ritually ‘unclean’ caste.<sup>32</sup> Chapter Three will address the problems surrounding any generalised understanding of Tamilness as well as ways through which Tamil identity was imagined in marked racial terms.

The fourth chapter moves away from a textual study of the newspapers and examines the ‘textual communities’ — the consumers of the newspapers — which Natalie Davis and Roger Chartier demonstrate are indispensable in any examination of print culture in their study of early modern European print.<sup>33</sup> Since the majority of Tamils were illiterate, it can be argued that newspapers only targeted a minority. There was a need therefore that Tamil cultural identity that the newspapers imagined through the printed word, were disseminated by the TRA to the larger illiterate masses of people. While a detailed study on how the targeted audience read these newspapers and their responses to the ideas invoked would have to be dealt as a separate study, it is essential that any study of newspapers looks at the consumers, homeland networks, as well as the circuitous relationship, if present at all, between other institutions and associations, and the press. Chapter Four also takes into account

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<sup>32</sup> Ravindra Jain, ‘Race Relations, Ethnicity, Class and Culture: A Comparison of Indians in Trinidad and Malaysia’, N. Jayaram, *The Indian Diaspora: Dynamics of Migration* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004), p. 178.

<sup>33</sup> Roger Chartier, ‘Text, Reading and Printing’, Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Natalie Z. Davis, ‘Printing and the People’, C. Mukerji and M. Schudson (eds.), *Rethinking Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

oral historical sources, with which I aspired to excavate ‘cultural forms and processes by which individuals express their sense of themselves in history.’<sup>34</sup>

As Amitav Ghosh points out, the ‘imaginary relationship’ between the Indian diaspora and India has become one of the most creative sites for theoretical reflection in literature and social theory.<sup>35</sup> However as it appears, such an ‘imaginary relationship’ rooted in history and expressed through vernacular print journalism in Malaya has not received enough academic attention and this study hopes to fill, thought not in entirety, this gap. The idea of ‘imagining’ become relevant here because it was through this imagining of a culture — ‘an historically transmitted pattern of meanings’ in the words of Clifford Geertz — via the dominant role played by print journalism that the Tamil diaspora in Malaya defined its shared culture as well as coming to terms with the ideas of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’ Tamil in Malaya.<sup>36</sup> To this domain of imagining we now turn.

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<sup>34</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. ix.

<sup>35</sup> Amitav Ghosh, ‘The Diaspora in Indian Culture’, *Public Culture* 2 (1), 1989, pp. 73-8.

<sup>36</sup> Clifford Geertz, ‘Religion as a Cultural System’ in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books), p. 89. See also Stuart Hall’s theories on cultural identity among diaspora communities: ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, Jonathan Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture and Difference* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), pp. 222-225.

## CHAPTER II

### **Newspapers as Instruments of Reform and Change: Imagining the Tamil Diaspora as Modern**

*'A newspaper can be made to take the lead ... in the great movements of human thought and human civilization.'*<sup>1</sup>

Among works of scholarship focusing on the epistemology of knowledge during colonialism and the post-colonial critique of the ontological categories of colonialism, William Dalrymple's *White Mughals* focuses on how knowledge about India was conceived by the British even before they officially took control of the country in 1858. Dalrymple's analysis of British understandings on Hinduism appears highly telling of the policies they produced in India once they gained control. Many of these perceptions began in the late 1700s when there was 'a sudden explosion of interest in Hinduism', with Sir William Jones, the Justice of the new Supreme Court at Calcutta taking great pride in wearing local clothes, learning Sanskrit, which he felt was 'more perfect than Greek (and) more copious than Latin', and claiming that he was 'charmed with Krishna' as well as admired Rama.<sup>2</sup> The exoticisation of India continued, though in cycles, and can be noted even at present times. However, what is most crucial in Dalrymple's study on Jones' thoughts on Hinduism is when he points out that the Briton had perceived Hinduism as a rational religion, something which the British would come to deny subsequently as this chapter will elucidate. Jones mentioned that he held the 'doctrines of the Hindus concerning a future state to be

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<sup>1</sup> Shelley F. Fishkin, *From Fact to Fiction: Journalism and Imaginative Writing in America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> William Dalrymple, *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth Century India* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 32

incomparably more rational...and more likely do deter men from vice than the horrid opinions inculcated by the Christian'.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, how did Hinduism come to be seen as irrational by the British eventually and how can one understand the monochromy of the post-imperial imagination that arises as a result of an exoticisation of India making ideas pertaining to religion and spiritualism ineffaceable from the minds of most when trying to conceive India?

Colonial policies, ideas and writings on India and Indian culture are partly responsible for such perceptions. That aside, the fervent role of the mass media today — both the portrayal of India by the West as well as India's self-imposed sensationalising of its country and its culture — continue to, in the words of Edward Said in his study on how the Western media distorts perceptions on Islam and Muslims, ensconce an 'imaginary line between "us" and "them"'.<sup>4</sup> However, while this line is created because of a perceived understanding and association of Islam with violence and belligerence, in the case of India the line distinguishes between the exotic, superstitious, mystical and spiritual India and a materialistic and modern West. An understanding of this becomes fundamental before turning to analyse Tamil newspapers published in Malaya during the 1930s.

Popular perceptions of India resonate well with what Said argues about the Orient: 'the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West'.<sup>5</sup> Said's argument acknowledges the Orientalising process as a culmination of 'idea' as well as

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (First Vintage Books Edition, 1997), xlviii.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage, 1978), p. 5.

‘reality’ that the West has pulled together to exert a certain form of domination and control over the Orient, as well as recognises that the Orient becomes an active agent in absorbing and internalizing these ideas which have been used to control them. However the argument does not adequately consider how these very ideas at times become fundamental to the Orient to be employed as defence mechanisms to ‘other’ themselves from the West and thus, eventually (and unconsciously) becoming equally responsible for perpetuating and strengthening this Orientalising process. At least in the case of India, the Orientalising of the country should not be solely seen as a conscious, constructed project of the British and the West; Indians should take the blame as well.

The works of Orientalists — among others, the German Sanskritist Friedrich Max Müller and his study of Hindu philosophy, where he had tried his best to passionately argue that Indians were very honest, as well Lord Warren Hastings who felt that the *Bhagavadgita* contained several specimens of fine morality — has led to an understanding of Indian society as religiously and spiritually transcendent and hence Indians as blissfully unmaterialistic, highly superstitious and naturally irrational.<sup>6</sup> As Ranajit Guha argues, British dominance in India necessitated a form of distancing which could maintain ‘the autocracy set up and sustained in the East by the foremost democracy in the Western world’ and India’s alleged ‘obsession’ with religion, spirituality and mysticism did not challenge such an imperial intellectual distance; in fact, it supported such a distancing.<sup>7</sup> Britain was rational and India was

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<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Max Müller, *India: What Can It Teach Us?* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2000), p. 8; Said, *Orientalism*, p. 78.

<sup>7</sup> Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

not, and hence in need of help. Bernard Cohn explains in his anthropological study of India that efforts taken by Britain to help India — which involved, like the British in other colonies, enframing the people into a set of categories and constantly reiterating these categories — produced its own reality.<sup>8</sup> Such an act of ‘colonising the epistemological space’, a term Cohn goes on to discuss in a later book, continued to maintain the idea that Indian society was fraught with problems and needed Western civilisation to redeem it. Cohn, moreover, compels us to view this phenomenon from a two-pronged perspective; that Indians were not merely passive actors in this cultural project.<sup>9</sup> In an attempt to shape and strengthen an Indian identity by looking for sources of merit and honour in some forms of achievement vis-à-vis the imperial West, India held on to something which they knew no one could compete with — its religion and spiritual mysticism and a deep knowledge of these stemming from the Vedic ages — the very tool which the British used to condemn India. Religion, among other things, in the words of Partha Charterjee, became the Indians’ ‘own domain of sovereignty’.<sup>10</sup> Such convictions to religion and spirituality, only further perpetuated the general beliefs of the British that the Indians, in the words of James Mill, had taken only a ‘few of the earlier steps in the progress to civilisation’.<sup>11</sup>

The power of Western imaginings of India and its people, stemming from the colonial periods, continue to pervade any understanding of the country or its culture, giving very little space for concepts of rationality or reason to exist alongside

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<sup>8</sup> Bernard Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 5-11.

<sup>10</sup> Partha Chaterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments* (Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> James Mill, *The History of British India*, with notes and continuation by Horace Hayman Wilson (London, Routledge, 1997), pp. 225-226.

discussions on religion or spirituality. Dipesh Chakrabarty in his writing on enlightenment rationalism and the historiographies of India, mentions that scientific enquiry and rationalism stemming from the Enlightenment period entered India ‘as an antidote’ to Hinduism. He argues that Indian intellectuals who self-consciously regarded themselves as ‘modern’ saw knowledge coming from the West as ‘rational’ and were engaged in what he terms ‘colonial hyper-rationalism’ — the spirit of hostility between the rational and the emotional — vis-à-vis Hinduism that was both a ‘religion’ as well as ‘a bundle of superstitions’.<sup>12</sup> Such colonial hyper-rationalism is relevant to the study of Tamil newspapers published in Malaya in the 1930s.

A detailed analysis of Tamil newspapers published in Malaya clearly exemplifies Chakrabarty’s argument. There existed in Malaya Tamil newspaper editors who saw Hinduism as a ‘religion’ on the one hand, and Hinduism as ‘a bundle of superstitions’ on the other. Yet, both continued to be highly modern in nature, clearly defying colonial understanding and stereotypes on how Indians could never be modern. This chapter will analyse how papers published in Malaya; the *Nesan*, *Munnetram* and *Murasu* were in fact modern and imagined the Tamil diaspora in Malaya as people who should become modern. It will also look at how these newspaper editors wanted their publications to bring about progressive transformation in society as well as act as a forum for intellectual discussion and moral change. Moreover I will argue in this chapter that the term ‘modernity’ was not only defined in terms of colonial notions of modernity but also as something which stems out from

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<sup>12</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Radical Histories and Question of Enlightenment Rationalism: Some Recent Critiques of Subaltern Studies’, Vinayak Chaturvedi, *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (London, New York: Verso, 2000), p. 259-260; Sugata Bose, ‘Post-Colonial Histories of South Asia: Some Reflections’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 38, 1 (Jan, 2003), pp. 133-146.

active imaginings of historical extra-territorial cultural influences rooting from India, as a way to strongly reaffirm that India was a highly civilised nation and therefore Indians a highly civilised group of people. Tamil newspapers were therefore manifestations of modernisation just as they were instruments of modernisation in Malaya.

### **The Five Elements of the Modern Free Press**

Barbara Mittler, in her study of the Chinese newspaper *Shenbao* from 1872-1912, identifies five quintessential elements which are rudimentary to any modern free press: it has to be a 'department store of news', generate a 'general enlightenment' and 'progressive change', act as an 'independent mouthpiece of the public voice' and lastly, create and provide a 'forum for intellectual discussion and moral challenge.'<sup>13</sup> These categories cannot exist independent of analysis since we often notice the inevitable, but vital interstices where they meet and even intersect. Tamil newspapers published in Malaya very distinctly fulfilled all the above requirements of a modern free press. However, these five elements negate one important constituent which distinguishes Tamil newspapers printed in Malaya from *Shenbao*. Tamil newspapers in Malaya were perceived, and acted as, the protectors of the rights and status of the Tamil diaspora.<sup>14</sup> Without considering this crucial facet as the *raison d'être* of Tamil newspapers in Malaya, it becomes impossible to understand why and how they generated a general enlightenment, aspired to bring about progressive change as well as be an independent mouthpiece of the Tamil

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<sup>13</sup> Mittler, *A Newspaper for China?*, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> *TM*, 1/12/1939.



community since it was with the desire to strengthen, maintain and protect the rights of the Tamils in Malaya, particularly of estate labourers, that the newspapers engaged in the necessary tasks of promoting enlightenment and change. The newspapers were at the very least, an apparatus which reported events from around the world — such as the Japanese conquest of Manchuria, the atrocities of the dictators in Europe and the possibility of another massive world war — and hence, instantly satisfied the first requirement with its ability to gather and disseminate a broad range of news. The newspapers aspired to act as the ‘best educator’ (*Ciranta Ācān*),<sup>15</sup> and saw itself as a necessary guide to ensure the ‘country’s well-being and development’ and therefore its duties included the translation of rare foreign news and information into Tamil. The *Nesan* editors maintained that editors of Tamil newspapers who had the interest of the public at heart should attempt to do this in their papers.<sup>16</sup> In Malayan Tamil newspapers therefore, it was typical to find several articles from foreign newspapers which were translated in Tamil so that the Tamils in Malaya could educate and modernise themselves through being informed of world events.

The other four requirements of a free press were also reflected in Tamil newspapers in Malaya and represented a high level of modernity. The endeavour to remain independent and to be free of any governmental control becomes apparent from reading the editorials as well as the articles which were published in these papers. In an article which was published in the *Nesan* based on a speech given by the editor of the *Hindu* newspaper in India, it was clearly opined that with the interferences of government bodies, the ‘development of newspapers have suffered a

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<sup>15</sup> The term ‘*Ācān*’ in Tamil goes beyond the English understanding of a ‘teacher’ or ‘educator’, and is a term of great respect to a learned person.

<sup>16</sup> *TN*, 5/4/1933.

setback', though newspapers were trying very hard to overcome these obstacles to continue playing an essential role in the every day lives of people in society.<sup>17</sup> Tamil newspapers in Malaya raised questions which were highly political in nature, including their political status, labour rights, treatment by the British and the Malays and their economic backwardness.

Despite the seriousness of some of the political issues raised by the Tamil papers, the British in Malaya were more concerned with the Chinese press than the Malay or Indian presses. In India however, the vernacular press was closely monitored, often using interpreters to translate the contents of papers which reflected the general mood of the public and often bans, such as the Press Act of March 1878 were placed as a way of controlling public opinion. Even following the repeal of the Act shortly after it came to place, the British continued to closely monitor the press to ensure that public interests (or rather, British interests) were not compromised. Ramaswamy who published the *Kudi Arasu* in the Tamil South, for instance, and whose newspapers and ideas played a significant role among Tamils in Malaya, was jailed in December 1933 by the British for a fiery editorial he had published in his paper.<sup>18</sup> In Malaya, despite the fact that the '...“Nesan” (and) “Murasu”... (were) widely read by the estate population and therefore, have influence out of proportion to the actual number of copies issued', the British were least concerned with them during the 1930s.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> TN, 17/12/1932.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Mr Govindan, Head Librarian, Periyar Thidal Library, Chennai; K. Veeramani (ed.), *Collected Works of Periyar EVR* (Chennai: The Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution, 2005), p. 24.

<sup>19</sup> *Annual Report of the Agent of the Government of India in British Malaya*, 1940.

Editorial writers of Tamil newspapers in 1930s Malaya were neither ‘dwelling in “ivory towers” far above from the practicalities of everyday life’ nor were the editorials ‘the irrational drivel of a batch of witless hirelings’, as often criticised of press editorials.<sup>20</sup> The newspaper as an independent mouthpiece of public opinion was clearly expressed in these editorials and editors debated several of the most pressing issues or publicised several crucial ideas through the editorial section of their papers. Iyengar, in a 1932 *Nesan* editorial, wrote about the importance of improving the Tamil community and mentioned that the paper was doing everything it could to promote public opinion in Malaya. He explained:

‘Utilising the strength of the newspaper... we can garner strong public opinions. Our *Nesan* has been working hard from the beginning in trying to promote public opinion in Malaya and our readers are aware of this.’<sup>21</sup>

The *Murasu* too — vociferously claiming to offer ‘Latest News and Fearless Views’<sup>22</sup> — expressed the importance of readership and public support in its editorials and was sold at a low price so that it became accessible to more people:

‘The *Tamil Murasu*, which aims to be of voluntary public service to Tamils, has despite several problems, grown... Our wish is that every Tamil-reading person read the *Murasu*. As a result of this wish, we will sell 10 pages for only 3 cents...(The paper) aims to protect the status of all Tamils in Malaya...’<sup>23</sup>

Newspapers such as the *Munnetram* already knew the importance of the role of the newspapers in the Western world and their role in enabling a revolutionary change in

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<sup>20</sup> Kenneth Rystrom, *The Why, Who and How of the Editorial Page* (New York: Random House, 1983), p. 1. William C. Heine, ‘Many are Interested’, *The Masthead*, 27, 26 (Spring 1975).

<sup>21</sup> *TN*, 30/3/1932.

<sup>22</sup> This statement is often printed on the first page of the *Murasu*; *TM*, 25/6/1936.

<sup>23</sup> *TM*, 1/8/1936.

people's lives. In a guest article for the *Munnetram* in 1931 informing readers of the role of newspapers in Western countries and what Tamil people in Malaya could learn from them, as well as mentioning that poverty should not be a reason why people do not read the newspaper, Mr P. Ilakuminathan from Penang wrote:

‘Westerners who were (once) only day-dreaming about modernity, have developed *par excellence* today because of several thousand newspapers which are available in their countries. We see today, Westerners who may not have the money, but are willing to borrow from others to buy a newspaper... In Singapore, the only Tamil weekly paper, *Munnetram*, has for the last two years toiled hard for the general public, and is now in its third year of print. All Tamils should support (the newspaper) and it is every Tamil's duty to engage in activities which will lead to (his/her) further progress.’<sup>24</sup>

The three excerpts above from the three different Tamil newspapers published in Malaya clearly delineate that by the 1930s, there was a clear and common *imaginaire* construed by the editors: they understood the salience of the print medium in bringing about change, progress and modernity among Tamils in Malaya and hence actively promulgated the habit of reading newspapers as a way of familiarising oneself with world events. Editors of these papers also explicitly expressed that they were the spokespeople of the interests of the Tamil community in Malaya and that they worked for the diaspora's well being and was therefore, a *sine qua non* for the protection of the community's rights and welfare as well as the community's progress, both economic and moral. It is pertinent therefore, that an analysis be done on how these newspapers discussed the rights of the Tamil person in Malaya as well as their entitlements in an immigrant society so that we have a clearer comprehension of how

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<sup>24</sup> *Munnetram*, 15/1/1931.

Tamil newspapers aspired to be the voice of the Tamil community as well as the protectors of Tamil interests.

### **Independent Mouthpiece of the Public Voice: Protecting the Diaspora's Rights**

Both the *Nesan* and the *Murasu* were concerned about the status and the rights of the Tamil community in Malaya and Singapore and often discussed the urgent need of an upliftment of Tamils through social and economic transformations.<sup>25</sup> In what can be called a very important article published in 1931 titled 'The Future of Malayan Indians', the editor of the *Nesan*, Iyengar, discussed several pressing issues pertaining to the state of Indians, particularly ones from the Indian South. Among other things, he discussed the obstacles to Indian immigration to Malaya and pointed out that nationalistic fervour was becoming obvious in many countries, including Malaya:

'... the feeling that India is for Indians, Burma for Burmese, Ceylon for Ceylonese, Malaya for Malays is becoming prevalent these days. However, in every country, there exist alien races that have amassed wealth... and other rights through hard work... One cannot, just because of a circumstantial nationalistic fervour, chase these people out of the country because it is not fair.'<sup>26</sup>

He went on to justify his point by saying that while he did not condone foreigners living the good life at the expense of the locals, he called for the acceptance of aliens who were born in a country or have lived there for a long time. Often, the position of Tamils in Malaya was compared to non-Indians living in Malaya as way of

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<sup>25</sup> As early as 1929, Iyengar had criticised the *Kangany* system in Malaya, advocating voluntary immigration. *TN*, 30/1/1929.

<sup>26</sup> *TN*, 12/9/1931.

juxtaposing the better standards of living which the other migrant community enjoyed which Tamils did not. Iyengar had mentioned that while the Chinese community had come to Malaya to work just like Indians, they were better-off and hence respected more, treated better and therefore had more rights in Malaya. Comparisons were also made to Sikhs as well as the Ceylonese, whom Iyengar thought could continue living in Malaya without any problems whatsoever because of the nature of the jobs they had and this was done to show South Indians that their jobs were not indispensable and unless they protected and fought for their rights in Malaya, they could be easily uprooted and repatriated.<sup>27</sup> Most importantly, Iyengar pointed to the economic backwardness of the Indian labourers living in Malaya and particularly addressed the issue on land ownership, warning Indians that if they were not alert enough, they would have to face in Malaya the same problems they faced in India with the *Zamindars* (land owners). Here, he particularly hits out at the Land Reservations Enactment of 1913, which the British introduced for the betterment of the Malays since it was believed that if land was not reserved for them, the Chinese would possibly take over lands of Malay peasants.<sup>28</sup> He lamented:

‘At present, the Chinese have 12,000 acres of (farming) land, Indians 5,000 acres and Malays 650,000 acres... I don’t understand what our people find attractive about being farmers in Malaya. The Honourable Undang of Rembau has in the Paddy Farmer’s Committee Report recommended that all land on which paddy can grow should be kept

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<sup>27</sup> In the article, Iyengar stressed that although it was difficult to employ Punjabi Sikhs to be in the military and the police in Malaya, the British were willing to spend lots of money to bring them in. Likewise, although he did not state this in the article, the Ceylonese were generally better educated and took on civil service jobs, hence making them indispensable, unlike Tamil labourers.

<sup>28</sup> Gordon P. Means, ““Special Rights” as a Strategy of Development: The Case of Malaysia’, *Comparative Politics*, 5, 1 (October, 1972), p. 50.

aside as Malay Reservation Land. This is probably the denotation behind the principle “Malaya for Malays”<sup>29</sup>

The Land Reservation Enactment established the ‘legal category of people who were allowed to grow rice only and rubber only’ as well as tried to have a direct influence on the commercial value of the land.<sup>30</sup> However, that Indians, like Chinese, were given very little farming land should be understood beyond the stipulations of the Land Reservation Enactment. As Lim Teck Ghee argues, the reluctance to give Indians and Chinese paddy farming land was a political device which came in the form of ethnic division of labour; to keep the Chinese in the mines and the ‘hardworking, docile and less troublesome’ South Indians in the rubber plantations for this would ensure continual ‘Malay support for the British’.<sup>31</sup> It is probably because of limited rights to own lands, coupled with the effects of the Great Depression made the forceful repatriation of labourers back to India necessary since employers refused to agree with the introduction of minimum standard wage, that Iyengar warned that Indians should ‘take all efforts to ‘ensure that in future, (their) rights are taken care of’.<sup>32</sup> As late as 1939, he articulated that Indians only owned small rubber estates while the huge ones were in the hands of other races.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *TN*, 12/9/1931. On the vociferously nationalistic Undang of Rembau, see Mustapha Hussain, *Malay Nationalism Before UMNO: The Memoirs of Mustapha Hussain* (Malaysia: Utusan Publishers, 2005), pp. 116-117.

<sup>30</sup> Shamsul A. B., ‘A History of an Identity. An Identity of a History: The Idea and Practice of “Malayness” in Malaysia Reconsidered’, Barnard (ed.), *Contesting Malayness*, p. 141.

<sup>31</sup> P. Ramasamy, ‘Socio-Economic Transformation of Malaysian Indian Plantation Workers’, Sandhu and Mani, *Indian Communities*, p. 315; Lim Teck Ghee, *Peasants and their Agricultural Economy in Colonial Malaya, 1874-1941* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977), 186-88. For a discussion on rice cultivation and ethnic division of labour, see Paul Kratoska, ‘Rice Cultivation and the Ethnic Division of Labor in British Malaya’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 24, 2 (April, 1982), pp. 280-314.

<sup>32</sup> Parmer, *Colonial Labor*, p. 198; *TN*, 12/9/1931.

<sup>33</sup> *TN*, 20/4/1939.

The 1930s saw Malay nationalism reaching a zenith with the Malay press boldly championing Malay rights and when nationalists like Abdul Rahim Kajai were distinguishing *bona fide* Malays from Jawi Peranakans whom he termed *Darah Keturunan Keling* (DKK) and those of Arab ancestry who were labelled *Darah Keturunan Arab* (DKA).<sup>34</sup> The questioning of the slogan ‘Malaya for Malays’ by the *Nesan* which emerged within this context, appears time and again in the 1932 editorials, where Iyengar raises the belief in ‘Tanah Melayu’ (Malay Land) and laments that Malays have no regard for foreigners who were toiling hard in Malaya, particularly the ones who were born here and regarded Malaya as home.<sup>35</sup> In the editorial, it was pointed out that while ‘village Malays led a comfortable and easy life based on inherited property’ (*Cukavācikalāṇa Kampattu Malāikārarka*), it was Chinese and Indians who were mostly engaged in business and farming which contributed to the economic growth of Malaya and that it was these immigrants who ‘despite the tiger and mosquito bites’ were making rural Malaya urban.<sup>36</sup>

This vociferous nature of the *Nesan*, demanding social and economic rights and security for the Indian diaspora, got it into constant controversial duels with the nationalistic Malay newspaper *Majlis*. In a March 1932 edition of *Majlis*, the paper warned that it was beyond the concerns of the alien races in Malaya to question what the ‘rights of Malays were’; criticisms which Iyengar thought were ‘childish and ludicrous’.<sup>37</sup> To the concerns of Iyengar — that Indians had genuinely contributed to Malaya and that they deserve equal rights — an English paper, *Malayan Daily*

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<sup>34</sup> Anthony Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 170-171.

<sup>35</sup> *TN*, 20/4/1932, 4/5/1932.

<sup>36</sup> *TN*, 20/4/1932.

<sup>37</sup> *Majlis*, 14/3/1932, *TN*, 20/4/1932



*Express* accused Indians of being analogous to the ‘snake from the Aesop Fables’ and had poked fun at Iyengar suggesting that he take on the position of an estate manager due to his overt concerns over issues pertaining to labour rights and welfare.<sup>38</sup>

The newspapers as an ‘independent mouthpiece of the public voice’ did to a large extent fulfil that role, for which *Majlis* and *Malayan Daily Express* criticised them, by often publicising the position of the Indian labourers working in Malaya. Such direct identification with the causes of the labourers came through several forms: publishing letters from labourers who complained about their low standards of living and about the predicaments they faced in their work environments, offering recommendations to the employers on what they should do to ensure that these labourers were looked after, publishing speeches made by respectable visitors from India who discussed the plight of Indians toiling in Malaya as well as recommending very fervently that Indians stop coming to work in Malaya.<sup>39</sup> These issues were constantly reflected and debated upon in light of the effects of the Great Depression of 1929, which left tens of thousands of Indian labourers jobless because of the economic slump, forcing several to be repatriated.<sup>40</sup> The *Murasu*, for instance, in one of its editorials titled ‘The Decision to Stop Work’, criticised the inhumane nature of estate managers who reduced the salaries of labourers, which were already deemed abysmal, according to their whims and fancies. Based on letters written by labourers

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<sup>38</sup> *MDE*, 3/5/1932, *TN*, 4/5/1932.

<sup>39</sup> The *Nesan* ran an article titled ‘No more Indian labourers for Malaya’ which stated that there were too many jobless Indians here; *TN*, 10/6/1938, *TN*, 20/4/1939.

<sup>40</sup> In 1930, 151,735 South Indians left Malaya, including 77,761 repatriated labourers and 69,114 South Indians arrived in Malaya that year. The number of them who arrived in 1931 dropped to 19,692 and 101,347 departed Malaya, including 56,119 who were repatriated. N. E. Marjoribanks and A. T. Marakkayar, *Report on the Indian Labour Emigrating to Ceylon and Malaya* (India: Madras Government Press, 1917).

working at cigar factories in Kuala Lumpur and Klang, the editor, Sarangapany, explains the scenario and recommended the following:

‘For every 1000 cigars produced, labourers were paid \$1.50. The managers wished to pay \$1.40. The labourers were not agreeable to this and decided to strike. Within a week, the managers decided to reinstate their pay... By reducing the pay by 10 cents, the managers... are not going to become millionaires. However, we are unable to comprehend why then they would do such a thing. The reason is the (managers’) ostentatious spending habits. Instead of reducing the pay of the hardworking labourers, they should change some aspects of their everyday life’.<sup>41</sup>

The *Nesan* also went as far as publishing letters sent by labourers who were ill-treated in their estates. In a highly emotive letter written by someone in Lower Perak, it was mentioned that it was obvious that ‘Indians living in Malaya, particularly the Tamils were treated in a highly derogatory manner’ and the letter went on to describe the labourers’ protesting against long working hours, lack of proper lavatorial facilities, as well as the indifference of educated Indians who came to check on labour standards but knew nothing about the ‘problems of poor labourers’. The writer also insinuates that these educated Indians were colonial stooges who had no concerns whatsoever about the lives of their fellow countrymen.<sup>42</sup>

It must also be pointed out that these newspapers saw themselves as spokespeople of the diaspora because they had given up hope on the institutions which were formed to represent the Indian community. The *Nesan* lamented that there was no proper Indian representation in the ‘state councils, boards and

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<sup>41</sup> *TM*, 5/9/1936. From 1/8/1930, Indian and Chinese labour migration was stopped temporarily so as to not add to the growing unemployment in Malaya. In 1930, the daily wage of an Indian rubber tapper was 40-55 cents and it dropped to 30-50 cents in 1931 and to 26-47 cents in 1932. Figures cited in Parmer, *Colonial Labor*, p. 277.

<sup>42</sup> *TN*, 29/7/1933.

committees' and there was no chance of Indians getting civil service jobs.<sup>43</sup> The *Murasu* translated an article published in the periodical *Indian* printed in Kuala Lumpur, which criticised the Indian Association of Singapore for not having any capability in securing representational rights of Indians.<sup>44</sup> In a letter titled 'News for the Malayan Tamils' written to the *Murasu*, the writer mentioned that a group of representatives from India were arriving in Malaya to investigate on labour related issues and mentioned that Tamils born in Malaya should take up that opportunity to express their grievances to the representatives. Indian labourers had the 'Indian Immigration Committee and the Indian agent' to look after their welfare in Malaya, but Tamils who were 'born, bred, educated (and who) considered Malaya their motherland' had no institutions or associations to fight for their rights.<sup>45</sup>

By publishing these articles and letters, Tamil newspapers in Malaya fulfilled two main objectives. Firstly, they provided the fora to broadcast the public voice; the feelings of discontent, grievances and problems plaguing the diaspora in Malaya. Secondly, by addressing these issues persistently through the forms of articles, speeches, letters to the editor as well as in the editorials, these newspapers tried to show that the governmental institutions in place were not doing enough to help Indians and therefore successfully put the onus upon themselves to be instruments fighting for and protecting the diaspora's rights. It is due to this urgent need to be the 'voice' of the diaspora that these newspapers identified the problems and saw the pursuit of modernity as one way to overcome the obstacles the diaspora was facing. It is because of this — to elevate the status of the labourers and to break away the

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<sup>43</sup> *TN*, 12/9/1931.

<sup>44</sup> *TM*, 1/8/1936.

<sup>45</sup> *TM*, 5/12/1936.

stereotype that people had of them, particularly being called *Keling Busoh*,<sup>46</sup> as Iyengar himself had expressed in a speech that was published in the paper that it became very important for Indians in Malaya became modern.<sup>47</sup> This *imaginaire* of modernity was present in all Tamil newspapers in Malaya and we now look at how exactly the editors imagined ‘modernity’ and how they used their papers to promote ‘general enlightenment’ and ‘progressive change’ in both the individual person and society by large.

### **The Pursuit of Modernity: General Enlightenment and Progressive Change**

The project of modernity embarked upon by editors of Tamil newspapers was geared towards fulfilling fundamentally different motives, which the next chapter will discern. While Chapter Three will show in detail that the editors did not see eye to eye on this *imaginaire*, it is worth noting what ‘modern’ meant to these editors in 1930s Malaya and how they promoted this idea alongside the different trajectories of reform for which they used their newspapers as platforms. The *imaginaire* of modernity among the editors as well as who and what the modern Tamil person in Malaya should be was discussed in the newspapers in several forms. In Malaya, it can be noted from the newspapers that both Iyengar and Sarangapany believed that modernity came with, among other things, rationality which derived from Western models, specifically those stemming from Europe during the Enlightenment period,

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<sup>46</sup> Literally translated from Malay to mean ‘Smelly Keling’.

<sup>47</sup> *TN*, 17/11/1936.

perpetuating the belief that human reason could be used to combat ignorance and tyranny.<sup>48</sup>

One way which the mission of modernity was endorsed was through writings which were regularly published in all three papers that revolved around the duties and responsibilities of a Tamil person in Malaya (*Tamiḷarkaliṅ kaṭamai*), of which receiving education gained paramount priority.<sup>49</sup> The *Nesan* reported a speech given during the First All-Malaya Adi-Dravidar Conference held on 31 July 1932, at the Victoria Memorial Hall in Singapore, in which the state of the Tamil people and the duties (*kaṭamai*) they had to undertake to overcome their present conditions were delineated:

‘(We have had) enough spending thousands of years as slaves. Now, we have to endeavour to progress in life. (We should not see ourselves) as low caste people, resigned to fate, blaming sins committed in our past lives for our present low caste birth. (We should never ask ourselves) “How will we ever study? ... Why should our children study? What can we possibly do after studying (now)?”’<sup>50</sup>

In reports of such speeches, newspapers promoted the need to progress and become modern through education. One writer for the *Murasu*, a newspaper that was at the forefront of promoting education, under the *nom de plume* *Kiramavāci* (Villager) mentioned that in the West, ‘90 out of every 100’ people were educated and the ‘other 10 were taking every effort they could to educate themselves’ and therefore asked Tamils in Malaya to ‘change with the times’.<sup>51</sup> Such calls for greater self-education were important as the British contributed very little to Tamil schools

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<sup>48</sup> W. E. H. Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe*, Vol. 1 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1879).

<sup>49</sup> *TN*, 5/7/1933.

<sup>50</sup> *TN*, 10/8/1932.

<sup>51</sup> *TM*, 25/6/1936.

and made no provisions beyond primary school education. In addition, they did not promote education, especially in the plantations where the quality of such schools varied.<sup>52</sup> In July 1936, the newspaper published an article celebrating the opening of the Kamala Nehru Tamil School in Seletar, Singapore.<sup>53</sup> In the opening address at the event, the speaker had mentioned that it was ‘difficult for a Tamil school to remain in existence for more than a month or a year’ and this was because Indians ‘did not care much about their mother tongue’.<sup>54</sup> Here, the *Murasu*’s editor raises the issue to highlight the state of vernacular education in the plantations of Malaya as well as to foster Tamil language nationalism here, so that the diaspora continue to be bound together by Tamil.

Opinions from the public pertaining to the abysmal standards of primary education in Tamil and the need to rejuvenate the Tamil language in Malaya were published in these papers as well.<sup>55</sup> Particularly, the *Murasu* published a letter written by a reader from Seremban who criticised the ineffectiveness of primary level Tamil education the children were receiving. The reader felt very strongly that the basic education did not teach children anything useful which they could harness for their future well being nor did it teach them any skills and therefore needed a critical ‘reform’.<sup>56</sup> The word ‘reform’ (*Cīrtiruttam*) appears time and again in the newspapers such as the *Munnetram* and *Murasu* referring to the purging of old orders — very much seen as a creation by Brahmins through the doctrines of Hinduism as the

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<sup>52</sup> Leonard Andaya and Barbara Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 226-7.

<sup>53</sup> *TM*, 11/7/1936.

<sup>54</sup> *TM*, 11/7/1936.

following chapter will elucidate — and to make way for the new, which was defined as ‘modern’.

The *Nesan* too did its part in advocating the need for educational reforms for Tamil children in Malaya. In an article, based on a speech given by an Indian Government agent, Mr Sri S. S. Vengathachari on the opening of the Klang Road Tamil School in Kuala Lumpur, it claimed that in 1936, there were 524 government schools built for children of Indian labourers in the rubber estates and there were 74 schools outside these estates. The article pointed out that while no less than 5500 children attended these schools; in 1936 there were at least 65,000 Indian children who were of school-going age. The speaker mentioned that by 1938, up to 60 percent of Indian children had ‘no idea of the “scent” (*vācarai*) of education’.<sup>57</sup> Here, it becomes clear that both the editors of the main Tamil newspapers published in Malaya saw the significance of education for children and felt that there very little being done, both by the government as well as Tamils in Malaya, to provide education to school-going children.<sup>58</sup> As early as 1932, the First All-Malaya Adi-Dravidar Conference passed several resolutions for the betterment of the Indian people in Malaya, including the following which appealed for compulsory primary education:

‘The conference humbly requests that the Government make the provision that children above the age of seven are offered compulsory and free education and that children pursuing higher education be offered bursaries.’<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *TN*, 20/4/1939; *TM*, 12/1/1938.

<sup>56</sup> *TM*, 17/10/1936.

<sup>57</sup> *TN*, 7/5/1938. One website states, without citing sources that in ‘1938, there were 13 government, 511 estate and 23 mission Tamil primary schools in Malaya’. ‘Tamil Primary Schools in Malaysia: History and Development’, [http://www.yss98.com/03\\_service/2004/news/disp\\_ar.php?](http://www.yss98.com/03_service/2004/news/disp_ar.php?)

<sup>58</sup> *TN*, 20/4/1939.

<sup>59</sup> *TN*, 6/8/1932.

The newspapers were perceived as a didactic tool which could convey to Tamils the urgent necessity to educate their children. These newspapers also pushed for educational reforms, which they saw as the *sine qua non* for the creation of modern (*nākarīkam*), respectable (*mariyātai*) and more importantly dignified (*kaoravam*) Tamils living in Malaya.<sup>60</sup>

The newspaper as a didactic instrument, aiming to bring about general enlightenment and progressive change did not simply stop with the promotion of education. Particularly, these newspapers discussed the importance of the role of women in Malaya and women's rights. The *Nesan* for instance published an article encouraging women to play a larger role in society, though ironically still attributing the women to the idea of the divine:

‘How modern a society is can be judged from the status women have within that society... Women are just not society's mothers; they are the teachers of the society, problem solvers and paragons of morality. With their divine powers, animals can become humans and humans, saints.’<sup>61</sup>

The *Nesan* also stressed the importance of women receiving education and published a series of articles discussing how women around the world, such as Turkey, were becoming modern.<sup>62</sup> The *Murasu* also advocated women's rights by quoting in English that ‘the emancipation of (one's) country is closely linked with the emancipation of (one's) ladies’.<sup>63</sup> Further to these, modernity through progress was propagated by these papers by asking Tamils to give up alcohol consumption

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<sup>60</sup> The words *nākarīkam*, *mariyātai* and *kaoravam* appear often in these newspapers. *TN*, 12/9/1931.

<sup>61</sup> *TN*, 26/8/1931.

<sup>62</sup> *TN*, 4/10/1933, 4/5/1929.

<sup>63</sup> *TM*, 7/5/1936.



claiming that alcoholism was both an expensive habit and one that acted as a catalyst to committing heinous acts.<sup>64</sup> Curbing alcoholism aside, these papers also actively emphasised that the greatest impediment to becoming modern was superstitious beliefs which continued to hold people back from progressing.<sup>65</sup>

Moreover, as often noted in the *Nesan* in particular, modernity and progress were seen in terms of hygiene and cleanliness, which the other papers did not seem to touch upon. In an article titled 'The Poverty Problem of Indians', the writer who calls himself 'Indian', attacked the hygiene habits of labourers in Malaya and called for a reform in habits:

'Look at the Indians. Most of them don't take daily showers; they smell when you get close... Their hair has ticks and fleas... They don't keep their homes, streets and country clean.'<sup>66</sup>

'Indian' ends his piece by saying that Indians' claim that their bad health is due to the lack of food is baseless and points to their opprobrious hygiene standards for their poor physical condition. Such constant reiteration on the salience of proper hygiene habits through self vilification of one's own ethnic kind occur in the *Nesan* as a way of breaking away from the stereotype that Indians are dirty and hence uncivilised. Such subscriptions to the promulgation of proper hygiene habits, particularly stressing the virtues of cleanliness and sanitation resonate imperial notions of civilisation and modernity where the 'white man's burden' was 'brightening the dark

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<sup>64</sup> *TN* 4/7/1939, *TM* 7/1/1938.

<sup>65</sup> *TM* 10/12/1936, *TN*, 11/5/1929.

<sup>66</sup> *TN*, 9/1/1929.

corners of the world' through teaching the uncultured cleanliness.<sup>67</sup>

Individual progress aside, newspapers also aimed to reform and change societal problems which they felt were necessary for the promotion of individual progress. For instance, prostitution — deemed a great social evil — was discussed. The *Nesan* for instance provided a detailed description on how customers and prostitutes work, the use of children in the trade and the venereal diseases spread by prostitution. The article ends by calling for a ban of the trade and demands an improvement in the economic development of women so that they can be free from prostitution.<sup>68</sup> The *Nesan* also welcomed the legislation that was passed to protect women and children from prostitution.<sup>69</sup>

### **Boosting the Ego: Recovering the Modern Tamil from Early Histories**

When the *Nesan's* editor, Iyengar, was invited by the Hindu Association in Penang to talk on the topic 'The future of Indians in Malaya', he spent a large portion of his speech discussing early Indian histories which illustrated Indian superiority, civilisation and modernity. Iyengar mentioned that the relationship between India and the Malay Peninsula reached back some 2000 years because of trade and he also clearly pointed out that names like Melaka, Penang and Klang (which comes from the ancient Hindu kingdom of Kalinga) were names which were 'given by' the Indians to

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<sup>67</sup> The quote come from a Pears soap advertisement in *McClure's Magazine* in 1889, cited in Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (Routledge, 1995), p. 32.

<sup>68</sup> *TN*, 21/1/1931.

<sup>69</sup> *TN*, 24/1/1931.

Malayan cities. Iyengar also went deep into language analysis to prove his point that the Indians belonged to one of the world's oldest and greatest civilisations:

‘When one analyses the language of people in the Malay world, one will notice how many important words have their roots in Sanskrit and Tamil. From this, it becomes clear that these people were once Hindus. The words below are some examples: ... *rājā* (king), *pūmi* (earth), *swāmi* (god) ... *kuru* (teacher), *putra* (son), *putri* (daughter) are what if not for North Indian words? ... *cōlie* (labour, labourer), *mānga* (mango), *petti* (box, case), *thampi* (little brother or younger male) are what if not for Tamil words?<sup>70</sup> ... Lately, it was found out that near the city of Palembang, idols (used for worship) of the Trimurti... were excavated.’<sup>71</sup>

Through the constant reclaiming of the lost glorious, golden past, which was said to extend to contemporary times, Iyengar perpetuates the idea of a grandiose period of Hindu/Indian civilisation.<sup>72</sup> The *Murasu* too published articles which highlighted the far-reaching influences of Tamils, who were deemed the first ever in India to step out of their country to trade, very much due to their ‘excellent ship navigating skills’. It also explained that Tamils had sent trading missions to Asia, Egypt and Europe as early as the BC period and that their influences show up in Angkor Wat in Cambodia as well as Prambanan and Borobudur in Java.<sup>73</sup> The *Nesan* discussed the rich Indian influences at Angkor and published four pictures of the *Hari-Hara* to prove how early Indian influences have seeped into Southeast Asia.<sup>74</sup> Another article published in the *Nesan* stressed that civilisation and modernity came from Tamils and claimed that

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<sup>70</sup> For a detailed listing of words in Bahasa which have their origins in Tamil, see Celine W. M. Arokiasamy, *Tamil Influences in Malaysia, Indonesia and The Philippines* (Manila, The Philippines: Publisher Unknown, 2000).

<sup>71</sup> *TN*, 12/9/1931.

<sup>72</sup> On how Tamil nationalists imagined the lost Tamil homeland, see Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories: The Lost Land of Lemuria* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005), p. 131.

<sup>73</sup> *TM*, 8/9/1936.

<sup>74</sup> *TN*, 17/9/1932.

Tamil speaking Dravidian people had moved to Europe during very early times and that Western cultures had learnt several facets of modernity from them.<sup>75</sup>

While this thesis is not concerned over how accurate these pieces of information offered in the newspapers are, these articles and the points raised become crucial because it was commonplace to publish articles which fostered imaginings of historical extra-territorial Indian cultural influences which have spread all over the world.<sup>76</sup> Firstly, these pieces of information aimed to be educational. Secondly, such references to a golden period in history clearly promoted and instigated a sense of ethnic pride among the Tamil diaspora in Malaya, who possibly needed such mentions to boost their morale and self worth. The most striking lines of one such article, based on a speech given at the TRA in Penang questioned the state of Tamils in Malaya in a highly emotionally charged fashion:

‘...(Tamils) who once used to be make money from trade are now out in the streets helpless for a quarter ounce of porridge. (We) taught civilisation to the world but now we are called uncivilised. We have had relationships with early civilisations such as the Greeks and Romans, but today we are disparagingly called “Coolies” by Westerners’.<sup>77</sup>

The imaginings of Tamil identity as one that was modern, sophisticated and cultured possibly allowed the diaspora to feel proud that it had its ethnic roots in a civilisation that had a kaleidoscopic history. These articles also served a re-legitimising purpose, aimed at proclaiming to non-Indians that Indians were indeed a civilised group of people as well as served a hope-giving purpose which called for the Tamil person to reclaim what has been deemed lost.

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<sup>75</sup> *TN*, 13/1/1938.

<sup>76</sup> *TN*, 20/2/1932.

<sup>77</sup> *TM*, 8/9/1936.

It may appear thus far that editors of the newspapers in analysis saw eye-to-eye on several issues and that the *imaginaire* of modernity was an uncomplicated enterprise. The following chapter will go on to show, however, that these papers, in wanting to provide a ‘forum for intellectual discussion and moral challenge’, based their imaginings of Tamil cultural identity on certain political ideologies, religious beliefs and intellectual thoughts. Often, these came into contact with one another, clearly showing that there existed considerable tensions and debates within the newspapers’ imaginings of Tamilness in Malaya. To these tensions and debates we now turn.

### CHAPTER III

#### The Multiple Levels of Imagined Spaces: The Malayan Tamil Press and the Aryan-Dravidian Schism.

*'If you see a snake and a Brahmin in the road, kill the Brahmin first.'*<sup>1</sup>

*'No greater crime is known on earth than killing a Brahmin.'*<sup>2</sup>

In a 1936 article printed in the *Nesan* titled 'Why People Love and Read the *Tamil Nesan*', the following were stated: '(The paper has) theism and love at its basis. Slashes and defeats atheism. *Tamil Nesan* is like the god of death for fake movements like the Self-Respect Movement (*Cuyamariyātai Iyakkam*)'.<sup>3</sup> In the same year the *Murasu* published a highly emotive speech questioning the reasons leading to the lost glory of the Tamil civilisation:

'Recently, the Aryans' entry into India endangered our civilisation. They fused caste into their religion and termed us — Tamils who were once the paragon of civilisation — sons of courtesans (*Tāci Makaan*) and prostitute's people (*Vēci Makkaḷ*), through which, they enslaved us'.<sup>4</sup>

Upon first glance, the quotes may appear to be independent of one another. However both have something intrinsically in common; an idea which both papers could never agree upon, and this differentiation mirrored larger intellectual debates which were taking place in the Indian subcontinent during the 1930s. This chapter will explain the nature of these debates, particularly surrounding a constructed Brahmin-as-Aryan and

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<sup>1</sup> A famous saying in Tamil Nadu during the height of the Dravidian movement.

<sup>2</sup> Laws of Manu, viii. 381; quoted in J. M. Macfie, *Myths and Legends of India* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co, 2006), p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> *TN*, 11/8/1936.

<sup>4</sup> *TM*, 8/9/1936.

Tamil-as-Dravidian-and-non-Brahmin divide and how these ideological tensions were absorbed and reflected in Tamil newspapers in Malaya during the period in study.

### **The Politics of ‘Race’: The Aryans versus the Dravidians**

While the etymologies of the philological and racial categories of ‘Aryan’ and ‘Dravidian’ as well as the changing meanings of these terms in various historical contexts is extraneous to this thesis, a brief analysis of colonial understanding as well as the attendant Indian understanding of these terms will enable us to better grasp how editors of Tamil newspapers in Malaya absorbed these ideas to better their causes. India, the geographic entity we now understand it to be, was itself a physically constructed invention of the British, who in an attempt to transform the area into an ‘empire of knowledge’ used modern survey techniques to create a spatial image of its Empire.<sup>5</sup> This also involved the creation of territorial boundaries through the absorption of princely states, which all had to be mapped first — and maps epitomised European rationality — before it could be understood, since once understood as Matthew Edney argues, ‘those spaces become fair game for control and exploitation as *territory*’.<sup>6</sup> After this was achieved, as Bernard Cohn and Nicholas Dirks explain, India was further colonised through cultural technologies of rule which

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew H. Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765-1843* (University of Chicago Press, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Edney raises here the contradiction that was present in the European denial of Indian rationality: French and English officers in the eighteenth century sought to translate Indian astronomical findings for longitude into the European system so as to ‘appropriate Indian geographies for European geographical knowledge’, yet denying that early Indian astronomical observations were indeed rational and modern in nature. Edney, ‘Bringing India to Hand: Mapping an Empire, Denying Space’ in Felicity A. Nussbawn (ed.), *The Global Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore & London: John Hopkins University Press, 2003), pp. 74, 66.

among other things included the legalising of the caste system and introducing the system to the South, refiguring the Indian legal tradition and fabricating and transforming objects until they had new meanings.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the concept of caste, which in itself originated in the Aryan North, and which was legalised and made rigid in the South by the British, forcibly ranked (using craniometry to justify such categorisations) all the other small caste groups in the South beneath the Brahmins, which naturally led to social tensions. As a result, the names which were given to these low caste groups following the *Manu-dharma*, such as Sudra — ‘son of a prostitute’ — appeared even more demeaning and necessitated change.<sup>8</sup> One of the most significant categorical inventions among these was that of the ‘Aryan’ and ‘Dravidian’ distinctions, that even today becomes a *fait accompli* highly politicised distinction that continues in India. Just before India gained independence in 1947, Ramaswamy Naicker — father of the Dravidian Movement in South India and whose works and ideas are crucial to this study — protested for a separate South Indian state, Dravidistan, fearing that Aryan imperialism would replace British colonialism, and mentioned that ‘the Tamil country is for the Tamilian’.<sup>9</sup> These calls were further supported by the claim that Dravidians had, even before Aryan control and before the Christian era, attain a high standard of ‘economic, martial and literary’ culture.<sup>10</sup> The emergence of Dravidian identity and in a more precise case Tamil identity, as non-Aryan and non-Brahman stemmed from colonial understandings of Indian society.

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<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003); Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (New Delhi, Permanent Black, 2007); Cohn, *Colonialism*.

<sup>8</sup> Veeramani, *Collected Works*, p. 116. See ‘Dalits’ in Glossary.

<sup>9</sup> *KA*, 26/11/1939, 23/10/1938, 26/11/1939.

<sup>10</sup> Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1965), p. 6.



The categories, 'Brahman' and 'non-Brahman' were initially created as central categories based on philological and racial categories of Aryan and Dravidian by Robert Caldwell, a Scottish missionary in India. Caldwell was the first to propose that Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu and Kannada formed a Dravidian language family that was independent of Sanskritic elements. Nicholas Dirks argues that Caldwell's explanation for the 'racial and historical basis of the Aryan-Dravidian divide was perhaps the first European valorisation of the Dravidian category cast specifically in racial terms'.<sup>11</sup> Caldwell's theory departed distinctly from other British writing on Indians in the sense that unlike predominant British writing that used the Aryan theory of race to maintain that speakers of the Indo-European languages in India, Persia and Europe were of the same race and culture — which led to a disparagement of Dravidians as being inferior to the Aryans — he had honoured Dravidian civilisation. Such beliefs in primordialism, the 'assumed givens' of social existence as Clifford Geertz defines it, are in reality within the Indian context, constructed 'givens'.<sup>12</sup> Eugene Irschick has convincingly explained that the generally assumed Aryan conquest of the non-Brahman Dravidian South and the accompanying subjugation of Dravidians was an invention of evangelical Christian missionaries who despised Brahmans for not converting to Christianity.<sup>13</sup> David Washbrook and Christopher Baker see anti-Brahmanism as arising from perceived primordial as well

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<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Dirks, 'Recasting Tamil Society: The Politics of Caste and Race in Contemporary Southern India' in C. J. Fuller (ed.), *Caste Today* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 272.

<sup>12</sup> Clifford Geertz, 'The Interactive Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and the Civil Politics in the New States' in Geertz (ed.), *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa*, (New York: Free Press, 1963), pp. 107-113.

<sup>13</sup> Eugene Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

as politico-economic differences over a period of time.<sup>14</sup> Such constructed ‘givens’, which became reconfigured along the lines of caste distinctions in India, continued to justify the primordial reasoning behind Aryanism and Dravidianism.<sup>15</sup> Anti-Brahmanism in Malaya therefore, just as it was in India, should be seen as an ideology, and not purely a racial distinction, that was constantly being reinvented within specific historical contexts. It is within such a historical context of the 1930s, following Ramaswamy Naicker’s catalytic trip to Malaya in 1929, that I locate the imaginings of Tamil cultural identity in Malaya that were expressed through journalistic modes.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Anti-Brahmin Agenda in Tamil Nadu and Malaya**

Print journalism in India was primarily a Brahmin dominated industry which was also true for one of the most influential papers in Malaya, the *Nesan*. While expressing concerns on Indian labour issues and usually attacking the British for their attitudes towards Indian labourers as the earlier chapter has shown, the *Nesan* strongly maintained a pro-Congress and pro-Gandhian stand and was largely less anti-colonial until 1937, when Subramaniam Iyer and K. B. Subbiah joined the editorial board and in 1940 when R. H. Nathan came on board as well. These men professed very radical ideologies of social improvement and were highly critical of British policies towards Indian labourers in Malaya and went on to publish their own

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<sup>14</sup> David Washbrook and Chris Baker, *South India: Political Institutions and Political Change, 1880-1940* (The Macmillan Company of India Limited, 1975).

<sup>15</sup> See C. Hayavadana Rao, *Indian Caste System: A Study* (Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> For a good analysis on the construction of ‘Aryan’, see Thomas Trautmann, *Aryans and British India: New Perspectives on Indian Pasts* (Delhi: Yoda Press, 2004); Trautmann, *Languages and Nations: The Dravidian Proof in Colonial Madras* (Delhi: Yoda Press, 2006).

independent newspapers as well as write for other papers to publicise their cause, which they could not express through the *Nesan*.<sup>17</sup> Nathan for instance wrote the labour column for the *Tamil Kody*, a Malacca based publication from 1939 and Subramaniam Iyer went on to publish the highly radical *Jeyamani* from 1941.<sup>18</sup> While these papers are extremely crucial in that they set the stage for and played a highly imperative role in promoting anti-colonialism, post-war trade unionism in Malaya as well as labour strikes as this chapter will discuss further, they tended to be short-lived with some being difficult to locate today. Their influence were chiefly noted after the 1940s, make them unsuitable for use in this study.<sup>19</sup> The change in tone of the *Nesan* following the death of Iyengar however must be noted. Despite these radical minded editors, the *Nesan* continued to perpetuate conservatism, Congress-nationalism and was particularly religious following the death of Iyengar, just as it was before.

On the other end of the spectrum, Sarangapany represented journalists who came from a non-Brahmin background, hence breaking into a field that was once monopolised by the English and vernacular educated upper-class Brahmins. Sarangapany's idea of reform and change however distinctly varied from that undertaken by Iyengar in the sense that he promoted ideas which paralleled those emerging during the subcommunal Dravidian movement in India, which was spearheaded by Ramaswamy Naicker. Among these ideas was the Self-Respect

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<sup>17</sup> Stenson, *Class*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>18</sup> Ampalavanar, 'Tamil', p. 48.

<sup>19</sup> There is no known availability of the *Tamil Kody* today — although Ampalavanar refers to it in her article — and this makes it difficult to know what Nathan wrote in it. There is no mention of where the paper is kept in Patricia Lim's international union; p. 116. Nathan's brothers were said to have been social reformers themselves and published the *Bharata Mithran* from 1933-1934. While very few editions are available at the British Library, the copies I had access to clearly point to the strong pro-Congress and nationalistic fervour that was present in this paper. See for instance the discussion on Deepavali where the writer tells the story of a poor man who sells his children's gold jewellery to buy his wife a *Kadhi* saree. 5/10/1934.

Movement, which Ramaswamy founded in 1926 as a result of his perception that the Gandhian Congress Party was a tool of Brahmin domination. Ramaswamy had been a Congress member only to later realise that he had several differences in opinion on a number of issues with Gandhi. Among other things, Ramaswamy was unhappy that some Brahmin leaders at the Tamil Congress did not stop the practice of separate feeding of Brahmin and non-Brahmin children at a Congress-sponsored government school at Cheranmahadevi, which was run by a Brahmin leader.<sup>20</sup> Ramaswamy's departure from Congress in 1925 and the subsequent formation of the Self-Respect Movement in 1926 was predominantly aimed at exposing Brahmin tyranny within Congress, and as a platform to promote equal rights for the depressed castes, foster women's rights, advocate anti-Hindu sentiments as well as instil rationality among Dravidians.

Ramaswamy's idea of rationality was one which questioned and challenged Hinduism, claiming that that people were not born with any knowledge of god and that *de facto*, god did not exist and the fabrication of the concept of god a selfish creation of the Brahmins. Ramaswamy also went on to argue that the concept of god emerged at a time when men had very little general knowledge and when there was little scientific development whatsoever.<sup>21</sup> Particularly, Ramaswamy's criticism of god and Hinduism was partly based on his rationalist ideas that nothing which could be proven should be believed. More significantly however, Ramaswamy felt very strongly that Hinduism in particular was appropriated by Brahmins to discriminate

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<sup>20</sup> For a discussion on the differences in opinions between Gandhi and Ramaswamy, see Narendra Subramanian, *Ethnicity and Populist Mobilisation: Political Parties, Citizens and Democracy in South India* (Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 98–101; Anandhi S., 'Women's Questions in the Dravidian Movement c. 1925-1948', *Social Scientist* 19, 5/6 (May–June 1991), p. 39, n. 5.

<sup>21</sup> *KA*, 27/7/1929.

against Dravidians and subordinate them under the pretext of religion. As a result, Ramaswamy went on a personal crusade to tell people that the ‘Self-Respect Movement (came) to tell that god (was) common to all whether they were high or low caste people’.<sup>22</sup>

In almost every issue of the *Kudi Arasu* from 1929 to 1940 — the Tamil paper which Ramaswamy published in India propagating his revolutionary rationalist Self-Respect ideas — there were articles bashing Brahmins, Hinduism and Hindu gods. For example, in 1929, an article titled ‘Gods’ went into a meticulous criticism of one of the Hindu deities, Brahma. The writer described an anecdote from the *Purana* in which Brahma lost one of his five heads to Shiva’s anger for committing incest:

‘Brahma fell for his daughter Oorvasi and they both... succumbed to their lust... This news reached Shiva who then cut off the head of Brahma (I don’t know how anyone could venerate Brahma)’<sup>23</sup>

Ramaswamy himself continued to attack these ‘myths’ in his speeches as well as in the editorials of his newspaper. His ideologies naturally had a great impact on print journalism in Malaya because Sarangapany was a devout follower of his ideas. This was obvious in the paper he propagated, which mirrored what was published in the *Kudi Arasu* as well as aimed to carry out in Malaya what was being done as part of the Self-Respect Movement in the Tamil South.

Sarangapany began publishing the *Munnetram* solely to address social problems, instead of focusing on the political or economic rights of the Tamil diaspora in Malaya. The *Munnetram* was therefore more of a views-paper, than it was a newspaper because its primary goal was to promote reformist propaganda through

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> The sentence in parenthesis is in the original source. *KA*, 20/1/1929.

commentaries and opinion-editorials which Ramaswamy advocated in the homeland.<sup>24</sup> Sarangapany also started the *Murasu* in 1935 with similar motives, stating in the first issue that the newspaper would ‘publish news pertaining to the well being and improvement of Tamils’ and that it aspired to ‘remove anything and anyone who stood in the path of Tamils’ progress’.<sup>25</sup> The ‘anything and anyone’ in the above quote appears to be a palpable reference to Brahmins who, like Ramaswamy, Sarangapany saw as preservers of Hinduism and perpetuators of caste which subordinated Dravidians. This becomes even more lucid in an editorial of the *Murasu* in which the author clearly criticises the way other editors have used their newspapers for selfish reasons of preserving their religion and hence, their position in society:

‘There are many reasons to explain the low standards of Tamil newspapers (in Malaya). Among them, the chief issue would be the difference in principles. Brahmins who destroyed Tamils on all levels, are also destroying print journalism... Many writers who are not Brahmins are now flourishing...’<sup>26</sup>

These remarks were clearly aimed at the editors of the *Nesan*. The anti-Brahmin tone of the *Murasu* was also made very apparent in a 1938 editorial when Sarangapany wrote that the foremost task of the paper was to destroy Brahmin influences in politics, society and journalism.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Pillay, ‘The History of the Tamil Press’, p. 86. On the topic of Malay language views-papers in Malaya, see Mark Emmanuel, *Print as Pulpit*. Unpublished PhD Thesis (Australian National University, 2005), p. 49.

<sup>25</sup> Sundaraju, *The Tamil Murasu*, p. 11; *TM* 6/7/1935.

<sup>26</sup> *TM*, 1/8/1936.

<sup>27</sup> *TM*, 6/7/1938.

On the other hand, the strong religious fervour of the *Nesan* was clearly summed up in a 1936 editorial where it was mentioned that:

‘Religion is... not clothes which you can change out of. It is a belief true to life. It is an indispensable element in life. The man who renounces his religion is a man who has sold his soul to the Satan. A man with no religious belief is far worse than the wild tiger, bear and lion.’<sup>28</sup>

The *Nesan* also made it clear like Gandhi did that ‘religion and politics (were) inseparable’.<sup>29</sup> The particular reference to the renunciation of religion made by the *Nesan* came at a period when it was explicitly mentioned to the Harijans in India that the only way out of their problems was through the repudiation of Hinduism. Particularly, Ambedkar was promoting conversion to Buddhism while Ramaswamy was actively promulgating conversion to Islam for Harijans who were Hindus. Ramaswamy saw that there was no place in Hinduism for Harijans since ‘the Hindu religion (was) riled with superstitions and there (was) no place for love and unity’ and therefore felt that they would never be considered equal as long as Brahmins and the caste system remained in place. Islam he felt was ‘a fairly new... reformed religion’ that ‘probably suits all people in this world’.<sup>30</sup> In the same year where he had presided over the birthday celebrations of the Prophet in Erode, Ramaswamy gave an even more controversial and scathing remark on Hinduism and called for Muslims to embrace the depressed class under the wings of their religion:

‘In Islam, the freedom which women and untouchables are given does not exist in Hinduism... The Hindu religion goes back to stone-age and

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<sup>28</sup> *TN*, 20/3/1936.

<sup>29</sup> *TN*, 20/12/1933.

<sup>30</sup> *KA*, 24/8/1930; Ramaswamy Naicker, *Matamarramum Mata Veriyum* (Religious Conversions and Religious Fanaticism) (Chennai: Vidutalai Offset Printers, 1998).

till now, nothing has changed... Muslims have been charged with breaking the idols of Hindu gods and converting the people with a sword in one hand and the Qur'an in the other... If it is true, and if this Islamic dogma had persisted till today, India would have progressed... I am not sad at all about Muslims who had converted others with the sword and who demolished temples and broke (Hindu) idols...<sup>31</sup>

Such strong messages put forth to untouchables to embrace Islam to solve their problems of inequality within society echoed in several of the articles that were published in the *Kudi Arasu*.

The *Munnetram* and *Murasu* in Malaya, however, never openly called for conversions to Islam as a way of challenging Brahminism. While these papers followed several of the socio-cultural philosophies of Ramaswamy, Sarangapany mentioned that he would not follow the political ideas explicated by Ramaswamy because it was not appropriate to the Singapore context.<sup>32</sup> Conversions to Islam could be seen as political within the Malayan context because unlike India where Hindus were the majority — and hence conversion would be an open challenge to this majority group — in Malaya, conversions to Islam could only possibly cause a drift within the already small predominantly Hindu Tamil community. The *Munnetram* and *Murasu* therefore never called for conversions of the lower-caste people to Islam although it did publish articles on the subject based on speeches made by Ramaswamy in India.<sup>33</sup> Sarangapany's popularity among Tamil-Muslims in Malaya could also be noted from the invitations he received to be the guest speaker at the Prophet Muhammad's birthday celebrations, where he once spoke about the teachings

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<sup>31</sup> *KA*, 24/8/1930, 31/5/1931. For more on Muslim support for Ramaswamy, see J. B. P. More, *Muslim Identity, Print Culture and the Dravidian Factor in Tamil Nadu* (Delhi: Orient Longman, 2004), pp. 142-154.

<sup>32</sup> Elias, *Tamilavel*, pp. 167-171.

<sup>33</sup> *TM* 16/6/1936.



of the Prophet.<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, in an editorial that was totally scathing of the existing Indian agent in Malaya, Mr Mugunthan — whom the *Murasu* criticised for doing nothing about the welfare of labourers — it requested that India send an agent who was skilled and particularly one who was Tamil-Muslim.<sup>35</sup> This clearly points out that while the *Murasu* did not advocate religious conversions, it did downplay and criticise Hinduism at every opportunity. This often entailed a policy of advocating the eradication of caste and untouchability, and defining Tamil identity along non-Hindu, modern-rationalist delineations as advocated by Ramaswamy. Despite this, however, the *Nesan* was probably worried that the *Murasu*'s strong alignment with Ramaswamy's ideologies could possibly lead it to promote conversions to Islam among the lower-caste people causing the editors of the *Nesan* to publish several articles criticising religious conversions since this was actively taking place in India.<sup>36</sup>

Religious issues aside, the pro-Congress *Nesan* angered the Indian-Muslim community by being highly critical of the Muslim League and Muhammad Ali Jinnah.<sup>37</sup> A writer to the *Murasu*, calling himself 'Muslim Youth' labelled the *Nesan* a paper which knew nothing about the fundamentals of politics and claimed that its constant condescending remarks on Jinnah and the League had made many young Muslims' blood boil.<sup>38</sup> The *Murasu* therefore, like Ramaswamy in India, advocated the causes of the League and therefore, had a huge Tamil-Muslim following. This was also made very obvious in a speech made by Sarangapany during an anti-Hindi rally

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<sup>34</sup> *TM*, 6/6/1936.

<sup>35</sup> *TM*, 5/1/1937.

<sup>36</sup> *TN*, 31/12/1935, 17/11/1936, 7/2/1939. As early as 1929, the *Nesan* published an article titled 'Self-Respect Movement and Islam: What job does Ramaswamy have in Islam?', *TN*, 18/12/1929; also *KA*, 12/1/1936.

<sup>37</sup> *TN*, 14/6/1938.

<sup>38</sup> *TM*, 16/6/1938.

— an issue which will be dealt at length below — which was published in the *Murasu*, where the editor declared that ‘Hindi will be destroyed in Tamil Nadu’:

‘In Malaya, several anti-Hindi rallies have taken place. No pro-Hindi rally has taken place in any nook thus far... Hindi is a blind language (loud applause)... I strongly say that if Urdu was made the common language of India, it would help promote a sense of Hindu-Muslim unity (loud applause).’<sup>39</sup>

The above quote shows the inherent paradox in what the *Murasu* stood for. It was a custodian of the Tamil language and yet promoted Urdu instead of Hindi or Tamil as the common language of India. This could be read as an attempt to possibly expand on the support base of the *Murasu* and to get Muslims on its side.<sup>40</sup> This was also noted in India where Ramaswamy, who had claimed that god did not exist, appealed to the Hindu Harijans to convert to Islam.<sup>41</sup>

The pro-Gandhian *Nesan* which saw itself as the ‘the progenitor of a Hindu cultural revival on Malayan soil’ was therefore the antithesis of the pro-Ramaswamy, anti-Brahmin *Munnetram* and *Murasu*, and articles and editorial writings in these papers often criticised each others’ idealised model and the parties they represented.<sup>42</sup> The *Nesan* criticised one of Ramaswamy’s speeches on Self-Respect as being

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<sup>39</sup> *TM*, 13/1/1938.

<sup>40</sup> It should be pointed here that the *Desa Nesan* was published in the 1930s by a group of Indian-Muslims who felt that the *Nesan* did not express their grievances adequately. Moreover, a Tamil religious and literary magazine titled *Nur al-Islam*, was edited by an Indian-Muslim in Singapore called Sinna Vappu Maricar. Deliar Noer, *The Modernist Muslims Movement in Indonesia, 1900-1942* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1973).

<sup>41</sup> See ‘The State of the Untouchables: If We Want Real Equality, We Have to Find Solace in Islam’, *KA*, 31/5/1931. I questioned Dr Veeramani, President of the Dravidar Kalagam in Tamil Nadu about this inherent contradiction between Ramaswamy’s conviction in atheism and his calls for Harijans to convert to Islam instead of renouncing religion totally. I was told that Harijans could not be asked immediately to renounce Hinduism to become atheists for they needed a guiding principle to allow them to be treated as equal and Islam, a reformed religion promoting universal brotherhood, was the best alternative.

<sup>42</sup> *TN*, 11/7/1931; Ampalavanar, ‘Tamil’, p. 47.

‘Grotesque, Whimsical and (sic) incongruous in Conclave’ and mocked him for ‘Fleecing a Dead Horse’.<sup>43</sup> The paper even went on to say that it would stop wasting its time reporting news on Ramaswamy and his antics, though continued doing so.<sup>44</sup> The *Murasu* however was generally never rude to Gandhi; often respectfully calling him ‘Mahathma’, ‘Gandhiji’ or ‘Gandhi Aṭikaḷ’ — a term of respect given to Gandhi in Tamil — but it was largely critical of the Congress as a whole and particularly of Rajagopalachari (Rajaji), a highly successful lawyer of Brahmin origin who was Chief Minister of the Government of Madras from 1937 to 1940 and who was an advocate of Gandhian principles.<sup>45</sup> This was particularly heightened during the compulsory Hindi language education which Rajaji had initiated in the Indian South. Overall, the *Murasu* alluded to Brahmins in Congress and in other government jobs as ‘plagues’ that were ‘ravaging human societies’.<sup>46</sup> So how then did the *Murasu* propagate Ramaswamy’s Self-Respect ideals in Malaya? What exactly were some of these appropriated ideas and how did the *Murasu* promote them?

### **Self-Respect Marriages as an Anti-Brahmin Endeavour**

In 1929, Ramaswamy accepted an invitation to speak at an event in Southeast Asia, which has subsequently been described as having ‘a distinctive place in the history of Tamil people in Malaya’.<sup>47</sup> Apart from wanting to spread his ideas of Self-

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<sup>43</sup> These headlines were in English; *TN*, 16/12/1933.

<sup>44</sup> *TN*, 15/1/1930.

<sup>45</sup> *TM*, 1/10/1938, 1/2/1938, 1/10/1938; Nilkan Perumal, *Rajaji: A Biographical Study* (Calcutta: Maya Publications, 1949).

<sup>46</sup> *TM*, 1/2/1938.

<sup>47</sup> Thirunavakarasu, ‘The Good Periyar’s Visit Gave’ in a commemorative magazine published in Singapore following Ramaswamy’s second trip. V. Thirunavakarasu (guest editor), *Malēyāvil Periyār* (Periyar in Malaya) (Singapore: K. Pichaiyan, 1955), p. 9.

Respect, the other reason Ramaswamy went to Malaya was because of the influx of Brahmans into the country; ‘Brahmin hotels, Brahmin presses, Brahmin temples, Brahmin priests’ were cropping up in Malaya, which he believed would ravage the economic stability and challenge the intellectual well-being of Dravidians.<sup>48</sup>

While in Malaya, Ramaswamy took part in several conferences and one of the most important was the All-Malaya Tamils Conference (*Akila Malaya Tamiḷar Mānāṭu*) where some of the resolutions listed below were made, reflecting Self-Respect ideals. Among the resolutions were:

1. This conference opines that Tamil weddings should be conducted in a thrifty way and should be conducted in the mother tongue;
- ...  
2. This conference supports widow remarriage and asks that everyone in Tamil society will too. The Straits Settlements has made this legal, and we will petition the Federated Malay States to follow likewise;
- ...  
3. All Tamils in Malaya should, regardless of their country of origin, come together and embrace the Tamil language as one.<sup>49</sup>

It would also be of interest to note that when the *Nesan*'s editor, Iyengar, found out that Ramaswamy was coming to Malaya in December 1929, he wrote in his paper that Ramaswamy was an atheist and his arrival would create chaos in Malaya. Iyengar wanted the British to prevent Ramaswamy from disembarking at Penang. However, with the help of Sarangapany and A. S. Suppiah, one of the committee

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<sup>48</sup> K. Veeramani (ed.), *Malēciāvil Periyār* (Chennai : Periyar Self-Respect Propoganda Institute, 1989), p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22. Also *Munnetram*, 4/2/1932 where it was stated that in the Second All-Malaya Tamils Conference held in Penang, a resolution was passed to accept and advocate inter-caste and widow marriages.

members of the TRA, who had gone to Penang from Singapore to ensure that Ramaswamy entered Malaya safely, no serious setback arose.<sup>50</sup>

The resolutions listed above not only appeared in print, but also were made into reality with Sarangapany using his *Murasu* to enforce that Self-Respect ideals be put into practice in Malaya. Sarangapany fought for official recognition of Self-Respect marriages in Malaya and Singapore, and in 1930 the first Self-Respect marriage was held in Penang under Sarangapany's auspices.<sup>51</sup> The call for Self-Respect marriages aimed to allow people the freedom to restructure their own life around Self-Respect instead of being slaves to the rules prescribed by authoritative Brahminical tenets. Under this larger umbrella of Self-Respect marriages existed notions of widow remarriages and inter-caste marriages which were seen as avenues through which caste associations could be abolished. In this regard, '*kalappumarattāl jāti oḻiyum*' (intermarriage destroys caste) was one of the famous aphorisms that Ramaswamy preached during the movement.<sup>52</sup> Sarangapany mentioned that such reformed marriages were economical and 'gave women their due rights'.<sup>53</sup> The other salient objective of such marriages was to show the Brahmin priests, whose services were hitherto deemed indispensable in traditional Hindu marriage ceremonies, that they were unnecessary since even their Sanskritic-*mantras* were incomprehensible.

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<sup>50</sup> On this controversy, see Veeramani, *Malēciāvil Periyār*, p. 71; *TN*, 28/12/1929.

<sup>51</sup> *Viṭṭalai: Tamiḻavel Kō Cāraṅkapāni Nūraṅṅū Malar* (Vidutalai: K. Sarangapany 100<sup>th</sup> Year Publication) (Chennai: Vidutalai Offset Printers, 2003). Thanks to Dr Thinnappan for giving me access to this magazine, published to commemorate Sarangapany's contributions to Tamil. The article mentions that Sarangapany had fought for official recognition of Self-Respect marriages in Malaya.

<sup>52</sup> The second objective of Self-Respect marriages — that caste associations would disappear as a result of inter-caste marriages — never really achieved complete success at eradicating caste as Marguerite Barnett points out; *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 270; Sarah Hodge, 'Revolutionary Family Life and the Self-Respect Movement in Tamil South India, 1926-1949', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 39, 2 (2005), pp. 251-277, p. 261.

<sup>53</sup> *TM*, 23/7/1936, 22/10/1940.

Ramaswamy paralleled women's subjugation to colonial oppression and identified Brahmin dominance in religion, economics and politics as the subordinating force and all efforts were taken to dissociate Brahmin beliefs and practices from the daily lives of people.<sup>54</sup> On the one level, while Self-Respect marriages were created as part of an anti-Brahmin endeavour, on another level these marriages were also constructed on the basis of the scientific rationality in which Ramaswamy firmly believed. Traditional Hindu marriages were based on astronomy, numerology and horoscopes of both the bride and the groom and these were analysed by Brahmin priests to check if the couple were compatible in marriage. Self-Respecters, in contrast argued for marriages based purely on love since they prevented women from becoming unpaid servants and sexual slaves.<sup>55</sup>

The *Munnetram* and *Murasu* therefore advocated Self-Respect marriages by publishing articles which discussed where and when these marriages took place and under whose auspices as well as that of widow remarriages and inter-caste marriages and ran pictures of couples who got married the Self-Respect way (Figs. 1, 2, 3 and 4).<sup>56</sup> At times, wedding invitations of couples going through a Self-Respect marriage were published in these papers, requesting the attendance of the public to witness these marriages.<sup>57</sup> The printing of articles, pictures and invitations further espoused the social reformatory causes of the *Munnetram* and *Murasu* alongside the teachings of Ramaswamy in the Indian South. Moreover, the call for marriages to be held in a

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<sup>54</sup> Glynis George, "Four makes Society": Women's organisation, Dravidian Nationalism and Women's Interpretation of Caste, Gender and Change in South Asia', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (New Series), 36, 3 (Sep-Dec 2002), pp. 495-524, p. 498; E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker, *Suyamariyātai Kalyāṇam Ēṇ?* (Why Self-Respect Marriage?) (Chennai: Vidutalai Offset Printers, 2006).

<sup>55</sup> *Munnetram*, 7/7/1932; Hodge, 'Revolutionary Family Life', p. 261.

<sup>56</sup> *Munnetram*, 12/2/31, 18/6/31, 11/2/1932; *TM*, 5/9/36, 24/1/1938, 31/8/1938, 3/9/1936, 9/6/1936.

<sup>57</sup> *TM*, 1/12/1939.

thrifty, simple way and particularly in the Tamil language, instead of Sanskrit as early as 1930 in Malaya, provided the initial stirrings of what can be called the emergence of Tamil language nationalism seen here in the later half of that decade. The surfacing of compulsory Hindi language education in Tamil Nadu and the probability that Hindi may be made compulsory in Malaya too saw both the *Nesan* and *Murasu* devoting much space in their papers debating the issue.<sup>58</sup>



Figure 1: 'Reformed Couples': Pictures of a Couple who were Married under the Auspices of the Self-Respect Movement, *TM*, 30/6/1936.

<sup>58</sup> The possibility that Hindi could be taught in Malaya was expressed in a speech made by the Indian Agent, Mr S. S. Venkatachari during the opening of a Tamil school in Kuala Lumpur. *TN*, 7/5/1938.

## சீர்திருத்த திருமணம்



சிவசாமி — சேரமலிசை.

சென்ற 7-6-36ல் ஞாயிற்றுக்கிழமை இரவு 7-30 மணிக்கு கோவலம்புடி 2<sup>ம்</sup> கைல் சேரன் சேரம் "பெரியார் கிளவா"யில் திருவாசல் செ. மு. சேரமலிசை அவர்களும், தனாம் திருச்செங்கி மூ. சிவசாமி அவர்களும் அவர்களும் சீர்திருத்த முறையில் திருமண சம்பந்தம் தோழர் அ. பெ. பரமசிவம் அவர்கள் தலைமையில் கடைபிற்றது.

திருமணத்திற்கு உடனடியிலிருந்தும் வெளிப்பிரிவினருக்கும் ஏராளமான சிகேதா சிகேதிகள் சமூகமளித்தனர். முறையே திருமணம் யாபேயின் ஆசீர்வாதத்தால் செவ்விய கடைத்தேரியது.

முடிவில் வந்தவன் அன்பர் யாவரும் ஒருங்கு சேர்ந்து பத்தி போஜனம் முடித்து தாம்பூலம் நரித்து தந்தம் அன்பின் வெள்ளைய சன்மானங்களாகவும், பரிசுகளாகவும் காட்டினர். என ஒரு கிருபர் எழுதுகிறார்.

Figure 2: 'Reformed Marriage', TM, 21/1/1938.





Figure 3: 'Mixed Marriage'. *TM*, 9/6/1936.



Figure 4: A Reformed-Marriage Couple, *TM*, 6/12/1939.

### **The Politics Surrounding the Tamil-Hindi Language Mêlée**

Language, both in India and outside, has always been a contested terrain. In India, up to 56 languages existed, and were selectively displaced as a result of assimilationist policies, according to Ramaswamy. He further justified the call for a

separate Dravidistan (*Tiraviṭṭanāṭi*) as early as 1938, since there was apprehension that the Brahmin-dominated Congress would impose their Aryan cultural values and language upon the Dravidian masses.<sup>59</sup> The demand for a sovereign Dravidistan, backed by Ramaswamy and the Justice Party, was initially limited to the Tamil-speaking region but the idea later came to include the other Dravidian-language speaking states of Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.<sup>60</sup> To justify Dravidistan, Ramaswamy even supported Jinnah's cause for an independent Muslim nation, expecting the same support in return. In a 1940 article in the *Kudi Arasu*, Ramaswamy justified Jinnah's demand for a separate state because his 'call for a "Muslim India" and a "Hindu India"... (was) very natural (since)... Gandhi (was) bluntly claiming that India is a Hindu country...'.<sup>61</sup>

One crucial event that acted as the catalyst for the demand of Dravidistan was the introduction of compulsory Hindi in 1937 in 125 secondary schools in Tamil Nadu under the auspices of Rajaji.<sup>62</sup> Rajaji was seen as the paragon of Brahminism and therefore the binary opposite of Ramaswamy. Rajaji saw Sanskrit as necessary for 'cultural perfection' while Ramaswamy saw Sanskrit and Hindi as the 'older and younger brother' and hence belonging to the same language family that represented

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<sup>59</sup> *KA*, 31/3/1940; Ramaswamy's talk in Kollampaalayam on 19/9/1937, cited in V. Anaimuthu, *Periyār Ī. Vē. Rā. Cintanaikaḷ: Periyār Ī. Vē. Rāmacāmi Avarkaḷḷi Coṅṅṅoṅvukaḷum Kaṭṭuraikaḷum* (Periyar EVR's Thoughts: Periyar E. V. Ramasamy's Speeches and Essays) Vol. II (Theppakulam, Tiruchirapalli: Sinthanaiyalar Kalagam, 1974), p. 650.

<sup>60</sup> Romesh Thapar, *Change and Conflict in India* (Macmillan, 1978), p. 75. The Justice Party, which Ramaswamy headed in 1938 when it was at the verge of disintegration obtained majority in the Madras Presidency in the elections in December 1920 and went on to form its ministry later that month. K. Veeramani, *The History of the Struggle for Social Justice in Tamil Nadu* (Chennai: Viduthalai Offset Printers, 1998), p. 24. When Ramaswamy wrote in his newspaper on Dravidistan in 1939, he mentioned that the idea was not a recent phenomenon but Dr T. M. Nair and Theagaraya Peruman (Pitti Theagaraya Chetti), co-founders of the Justice Party, had thought of the same idea some twenty years ago in an attempt to save Dravidians from Aryans, *KA*, 17/12/1939, 28/4/1940, 7/7/1940, 25/8/1940.

<sup>61</sup> *KA*, 31/3/1940.

<sup>62</sup> Ramaswamy, *Passions*, p. 169.

Aryan imperialism which shook the foundations of the Tamil language and culture.<sup>63</sup> He also made it clear in the *Kudi Arasu* that Sanskrit, like Latin, was a dead language while Tamil a living one.<sup>64</sup> Naturally, the mandatory teaching of the language, which was seen as an explicit attempt at Aryan domination, turned most of non-Brahmins and Muslims in Tamil Nadu, who saw themselves as Tamil speakers and not Urdu/Hindustani speakers, against Congress.<sup>65</sup> The same too was noted in Malaya, with the Hindi debate causing several Muslims to take sides with the cause of the anti-Hindi Self-Respecters. The *Murasu* published a letter by a Muslim reader who mentioned the following:

‘I am an Indian (who) cannot read or write my own language Arabi, an Urdu language. I can read and write in my *mother tongue*, Tamil... Tamil, Urdu, English. If there is a community that will endanger these languages, I will take sides with the group that will wage a war against them.’<sup>66</sup>

The compulsory Hindi policy became an advantage to Ramaswamy’s cause in that he told the masses that the threat of Aryan imperialism was therefore very real and used it as a perfect excuse to demand for a separate state where one could have cultural and language independence, failing which, he warned that one had to be prepared to

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<sup>63</sup> S. Somasundara Bharati, *An Open Letter to the Hon. C. Rajagopalachariar B.A., B.L., Chief Minister of the Government of Madras* (1937), p. 11; cited in M. S. S. Pandian, *Brahmins and non-Brahmins* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007), p. 80; Ramaswamy’s talk on 12/2/1960 at the Chennai Law College organised by the Tamil Literary Society; *Tamiḷum Tamiḷ Ilakkiyaṅkaḷum* (Tamil and Tamil Literature) (Chennai: Dravida Achagam, 1960), p. 12. An article was also published in the *KA* in 1932 titled ‘Camaskiruta Caniyaṅ’ (Idiotic Sanskrit) whereby the newspaper pressed for repealing funds offered by the government for Sanskrit education in Tamil Nadu schools. *KA*, 17/1/1932.

<sup>64</sup> *KA*, 8/9/1940.

<sup>65</sup> J. B. P. More, ‘Tamil Muslims and non-Brahmin Atheists, 1925-1940’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (New Series), 27, 1 (Jan–June, 1993), pp. 83-104.

<sup>66</sup> My emphasis. *TM*, 1/7/1938.

mourn the loss of Tamil to the demoness Hindi.<sup>67</sup> While it must be mentioned here that the *Murasu* never supported or wrote about Ramaswamy's demand for a separate state, it discussed at length the issue on compulsory Hindi as well as the agitation against it both in Tamil Nadu and Malaya.

The promotion of anti-Hindi by the *Murasu* was made concurrently with the demand for an improvement in Tamil education in Malaya. While the *Murasu*, like the *Nesan*, had been voicing out the urgent need for Tamil schools in Malaya as Chapter Two has shown, Hindi agitation in India further gave credence to the *Murasu* as the preserver of the Tamil language since editors of the *Nesan* welcomed the compulsory learning of Hindi both in India and Malaya.<sup>68</sup> The *Murasu* as preserving and promoting Tamil vis-à-vis Brahmins whom it had argued had no passion or concern for Tamil was made in an editorial commentary in early 1938:

‘In this country, it is not feasible to expect rich Tamils to run Tamil schools. They have no concern whatsoever for Tamil. They are contented if their children live ostentatiously. During emergencies, they believe that performing prayers at temples would suffice. Therefore, there is no point trusting them’.<sup>69</sup>

The *Murasu* went on to suggest to temple Trustees that a plot of empty land in Singapore where the Perumal temple was sitting be used for a Tamil school. The terms ‘rich Tamils’ in the quote above could refer to two groups of people; the first being Ceylonese Tamils — English educated, upper middle class Tamils who held civil service jobs whom the *Murasu* was highly critical of at times — and second,

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<sup>67</sup> Ramaswamy's talk on 19/9/1937, published in Anaimuthu, *Cintaraika*, p. 650.

<sup>68</sup> *TM*, 1/9/1936.

<sup>69</sup> *TM*, 24/1/1938.

Brahmins.<sup>70</sup> Particularly, the mocking tone of the *Murasu* in saying that the ‘rich Tamils’ would go to temples during times of crisis and hope for the best to happen, appears to be a direct attack at Brahmins and their religiosity.

One other way through which the papers tried to portray themselves as preservers of Tamil was through series of poems they published. At the height of the anti-Hindi campaign in Malaya, the *Murasu* published a ‘Hindi Condemnation Anthem’ written in the form of poetry, which was said to have been sung by two children during an anti-Hindi meeting. The anthem alluded Hindi to an encroaching foreign figure that had come seeking refuge (*oṇṭavanta piṭṭāri*) but then had desired to take control over the local figure (*ūr piṭṭāri*), Tamil. The influence of one of Tamil Nadu’s celebrated nationalist poets, Subramania Bharati (1882-1921), becomes obvious in the first stanza of this anthem. Bharati wrote his famous poem, ‘Fear not!’ (*Accam Illai*) as a challenge to British colonial rule in India with the lines, ‘Fear not, Fear not, There is no fear!’ to instigate nationalistic sentiments among his fellow countrymen. In the anti-Hindi anthem published in the *Murasu*, the lines were tweaked to read ‘Unafraid, Unafraid, Nothing to be Afraid Of’ (*Añcavillai Añcavillai Añcaleppatillaiyē*) with regards to the coming of compulsory Hindi because they were confident that the idea would never materialise.<sup>71</sup> The subtle Bharati-influence shown in the anthem was one possible way through which the *Murasu* forged to align itself to Tamil language nationalism as espoused by Bharati himself, although as Sumathi Ramaswamy rightly points out, Bharati wrote his poems with an inclusivist imagining

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<sup>70</sup> For criticisms by the *Murasu* of the English-educated middle class, see its editorials, 5/9/1938, 13/1/1939.

<sup>71</sup> Arimathi Thennagan, *Bārati Kavitaika!* (Chennai: Ilakumi Nilayam, 2000), p. 96; *TM*, 11/1/1938.

of India, of which he wanted Tamils to be part of, unlike Dravidianists who imagined India in absolute Tamil terms.<sup>72</sup>

The *Nesan* in its attempts to claim the status of protector of Tamil often published the works of another famous devotional author and poet, Suddhananda Bharati (1897-1990). In 1935, it published one of Suddhananda Bharati's poems titled *Tamiḥtuṭippu* (Tamil Pulsation) which waxes lyrical about the beauty of Tamil, divinises it and calls for the worship of it (*Tamiḥaiyē Valḥpaṭa Vēṇṭum*).<sup>73</sup> In a poem that was written specially for the *Nesan* the following year, Suddhananda Bharati praises the *Nesan* for preserving the three Tamils (*Muttamiḥ*) — Tamil as the language of literary poetry and prose, music and drama — hence further giving weight to the *Nesan* as the paper which toiled to safeguard the language in a foreign land.<sup>74</sup> Tamil language nationalism reached its peak during this period in Tamil Nadu, particularly due to a Tamil renaissance, when hitherto forgotten Tamil classical *Carḥkam* literature was recovered from about 1850. The revival of ancient classical Tamil literature provided the platform for old Tamil literary works to be appreciated, revered even and they paved the way for the emergence of Tamil language nationalism.<sup>75</sup>

Despite both the *Nesan* and *Murasu* claiming control over protecting Tamil, the anti-Hindi agitation provided an avenue for the *Murasu* to further assert its cause as being pro-Tamil vis-à-vis the Brahmins who were in full support of Hindi.<sup>76</sup> The fact that the *Nesan* was promoting Hindi in Malaya only lent support to the *Murasu* as

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<sup>72</sup> Ramaswamy, *Passions*, pp. 47-48. It would be of interest to note that Bharati was a devout Hindu and had recommended Sanskrit as a source to coin new Tamil words.

<sup>73</sup> *TN*, 5/1/1935.

<sup>74</sup> *TN*, 22/12/1936.

<sup>75</sup> Kamil Zvelebil, *Companion Studies to the History of Tamil Literature* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), pp. 144-222.

<sup>76</sup> The *Nesan* reported the anti-Hindi agitation in Tamil Nadu in a highly negative light. *TN*, 5/12/1938, 8/12/1938.

the agent of conservator and guardian of Tamil. The *Murasu* therefore reported the meeting details of anti-Hindi committees in Malaya and resolutions passed during the meetings in various places in Malaya, such as Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Perak, Seremban, Batu Pahat and Penang.<sup>77</sup> Among other things, the paper reported that these committees were vehemently against compulsory Hindi in Tamil Nadu and urged the governments to make Tamil compulsory for all students there instead.<sup>78</sup> The *Murasu* also showed its support for the anti-Hindi strikes in India by publishing advertisements asking for donations from the diaspora in Malaya and went to the extent of listing the names of all the people who had donated for this cause (Figs. 5 and 6).<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> *TM*, 15/1/1938, 21/1/1938, 11/2/1938, 8/7/1938, 27/7/1938.

<sup>78</sup> *TM*, 11/2/1938.

<sup>79</sup> *TM*, 22/6/1938, 12/7/1938.



வினாயகம் 1

## ஹிந்தி கண்டனக் கூட்டம்

9-1-38உ ஞானித்தாக்கியுமை காலை 10 மணிக்கு இங்கப்பூரில் ஹிந்தி கண்டனக் கூட்டம் ஒன்று நடைபெறும். (கூடும் இடம் பின்னும் அறிவிக்கப்படும்.)

இக்கூட்டத்தில் ஹிந்தியை ஆதரித்துப் பேசுகிறவர்களுக்கு 30 சிம்ஸும் அனுமதிக்கப்படும்.

ஹிந்தியை ஆதரித்துப் பேச விரும்புகிறவர்கள் கீழ்க்கண்ட விவரத்திற்கு 6-1-38உ க்குள் தெரிவித்துவிட வேண்டுகோளைக் கேட்டுக்கொள்ளப்படுகிறது.

து. லெக்ஷ்மணன்  
வினாயக அதிகாரி.

கூடம் அனுமதிக்கப்படும் விவரம்:  
ஹிந்தி கண்டனக் கூட்டக் காரியநரிசி,  
1/8 ராஜ் ஞானி ஆரம், 71, இலிடி ரோட், இங்கப்பூர்.

Figure 5: 'Hindi Agitation Meeting': An Advertisement Announcing a Meeting to Debate the Pros and Cons of Hindi, *TM*, 1/1/1938.



people as butchering the language and therefore unqualified to speak on behalf of Tamil.<sup>80</sup> (Fig. 7) With regards to the Self-Respect Movement, Iyengar, during a talk at the ADA in Singapore, called the Movement a pit-hole and advised people not to fall into it. In the same article he also mentioned that it was ‘not intelligent’ to practice religious conversions.<sup>81</sup> The criticisms of the Self-Respect Movement were aplenty in the *Nesan*, which maintained that religion — particularly Hinduism — was vital to man.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, the *Nesan* took sides with Rajaji who claimed that he was Tamil, knew the beauty of the language and believed that Hindi will do no harm to the Tamil language (Fig. 8), and the *Nesan* called for Tamils in Malaya not to donate money to the causes of the anti-Hindi agitators in Tamil Nadu, accusing the Self-Respecters of using this as a pretext to ‘steal money’ from Tamils.<sup>83</sup>

### Re-analysing Deepavali, Taipūcam and Timiti

The zealous pro-Gandhian *Nesan* also advocated the use of *Kadhi* or white homespun cloth as advocated by Gandhi and particularly, advertisements promoting *Kadhi* were seen in the *Nesan* during the Deepavali periods (Fig. 9). In an article written by the editor telling Tamils in Malaya of their duties during Deepavali, the Gandhian patriotism of the *Nesan* becomes lucid:

‘Get your husbands to buy you *Kadhi* sarees this Deepavali. Make the Harijan children have an oil bath... and make them wear *Kadhi* clothes prepared by poor people of our *Pārata* country... Get rid of your

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<sup>80</sup> *TN*, 8/7/1938.

<sup>81</sup> *TN*, 17/11/1936.

<sup>82</sup> *TN*, 24/10/1936, 8/3/1930.

<sup>83</sup> *TN*, 25/7/1938. The *Nesan* taking sides with Rajaji and supporting compulsory Hindi in Malaya mirrored the happenings in Tamil Nadu where Brahmin-controlled Tamil press, such as the *Ananda Vikatan* defended compulsory Hindi in schools. See M. S. S. Pandian, *Brahmin*, p. 222.

desire to wear foreign clothes. Support your motherland... Wear *Kadhi* and join Gandhi's path. *Vanṭē Mātaram! Jai Mahatma Gandhi.*'<sup>84</sup>

The promulgation of *Kadhi* aside, an analysis of the words *Pārata*, *Vanṭē Mātaram* and *Jai* — words which are hardly or never at all seen in the *Murasu* during the decade in question — makes clear the highly nationalistic, anti-British tone of the *Nesan*.

On the other hand of the spectrum, the *Munnetram* and *Murasu* criticised the celebration of Deepavali and deemed it an Aryan festival that caused people to engage in bad social habits of alcohol consumption, gambling and unnecessary spending.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, the papers' criticism of Deepavali stems from an ideological difference on the comprehension of the beginnings of the festival. To the Self-Respecters, the Ramayana was more than just a literary epic. In their re-reading, as proliferated by Ramaswamy, Ravana (traditionally seen as the villain who kidnaps Rama's wife, Sita), was seen as the 'hero and beau-ideal of good Dravidian conduct' and 'Rama as a wicked and unjust Aryan' who was hypocritical (he ate meat though he was supposedly Brahmin) and a terrible husband (because he doubted the chastity of his wife).<sup>86</sup> Therefore, the term Deepavali, which celebrates Rama's killing of Ravana was read by the Self-Respecters as a celebration of Aryan subjugation and

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<sup>84</sup> *TN*, 30/9/1933. See also *TN*, 25/10/1939. *Bharatavarsha* (land of *Bharata*) was believed to be the original name of India. *Vanṭē Mātaram* or 'hail to the motherland' was the national cry for freedom from British oppression in India. 'Jai' translates to 'long live'.

<sup>85</sup> *TM*, 13/10/1938, 25/10/1939, 10/11/1939; *Munnetram*, 27/10/1932.

<sup>86</sup> *Hindu* (weekly ed.), 12/4/1928, cited in Eugene F. Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India*, p. 339. Barnett dates the earliest activities of burning the *Ramayana* to as early as 1922; *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*, p. 37; Paula Richman, 'E. V. Ramasami's Reading of the Ramayana' in Paula Richman (ed.), *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1991); E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker, *The Ramayana: A True Reading* (Chennai: Dravidar Kalagam Publications, 1959); Arivarasan, *Yār Inta Rāman?* (Who's This Rama?) (Chennai: Dravidar Kalagam Publications, 2003).

control over Dravidians, the *Munnetram* and *Murasu* stressed.<sup>87</sup> Here, the temporal metamorphosis of a common ‘visible’ into politically charged ‘invisibles’ becomes explicit.

The *Murasu*, through its editorials, also attempted to reform Tamil society by calling for Tamil Hindus to rationalise and not participate in what was seen as traditional non-Brahminical Hindu religious events such as *Taipūcam* and the carrying of the *Kāvaṭi* as a form of penance as well as *Tīmiti* (fire-walking) which were seen as forms of self inflicted torture; activities which it termed ‘barbarous’.<sup>88</sup> One editorial requested the Mariamman Temple in Singapore to be more transparent to the public with its finances.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, as early as 1932 during the First All-Malaya Dravidian Conference, a resolution was passed hoping that ‘under no circumstances should a person play the tom-tom or perform derogatory tasks like digging graves’, which were jobs allocated to people from the lowest castes.<sup>90</sup> These were all reforms which the *Munnetram* and *Murasu*, together with the associations which it supported or represented, as the following chapter will show, worked on promoting to bring about change within Tamil society in Malaya.

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<sup>87</sup> *Munnetram*, 27/10/1932.

<sup>88</sup> Arasaratnam, *Indian Festivals in Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: Department of Indian Studies, University of Malaya, 1966), p. 17; *TM*, 10/1/1938, 11/1/1938, 15/8/1938, 11/10/1938, 15/10/1938, 17/2/1940.

<sup>89</sup> *TM*, 20/10/1938.

<sup>90</sup> Arasaratnam, ‘Social and Political Ferment in the Malayan Indian Community 1945-1955’, in *Tamilnational.org*, <http://www.tamilnation.org/diaspora/malaysia/aroasaratnam.htm#Naicker>, p. 10. I thank Professor Barbara Andaya for pointing this article out to me. For a discussion of caste rivalries and South Indian music, see Yoshitaka Terada, ‘T. N. Rajaratnam Pillai and Caste Rivalry in South Indian Classical Music’ in *Ethnomusicology*, 44, 3 (Autumn, 2000), pp. 460-490.

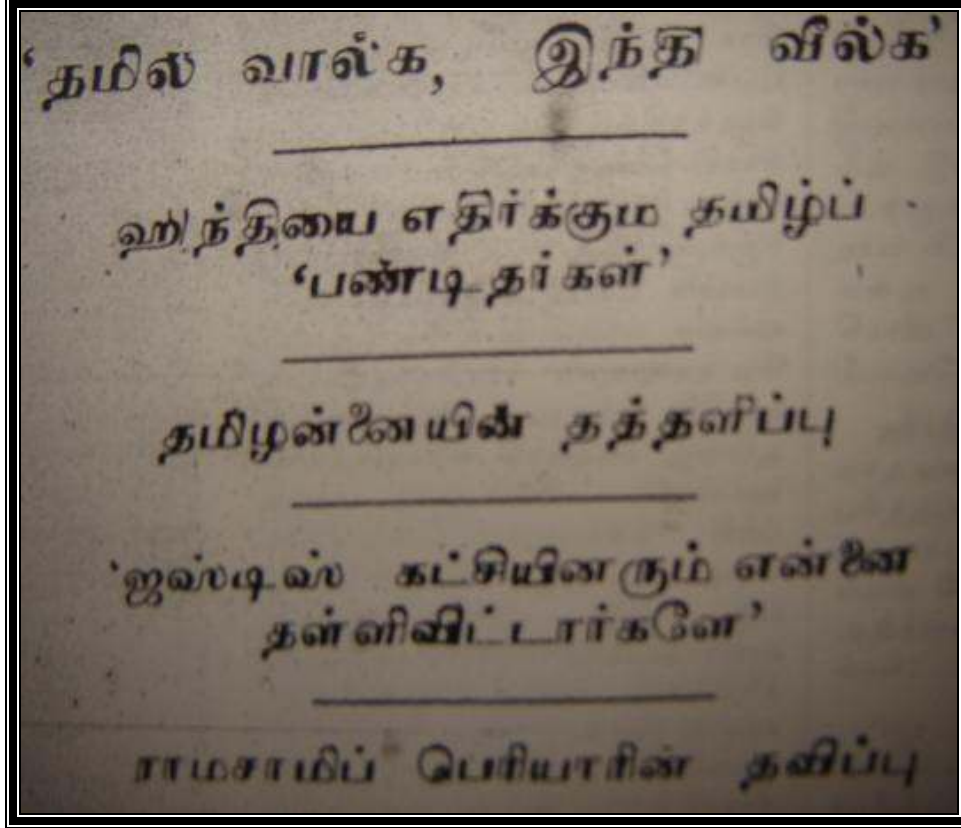


Figure 7: *Nesan* Poking Fun at Tamil Pundits by Misspelling Tamil Words, TN, 8/7/1938.

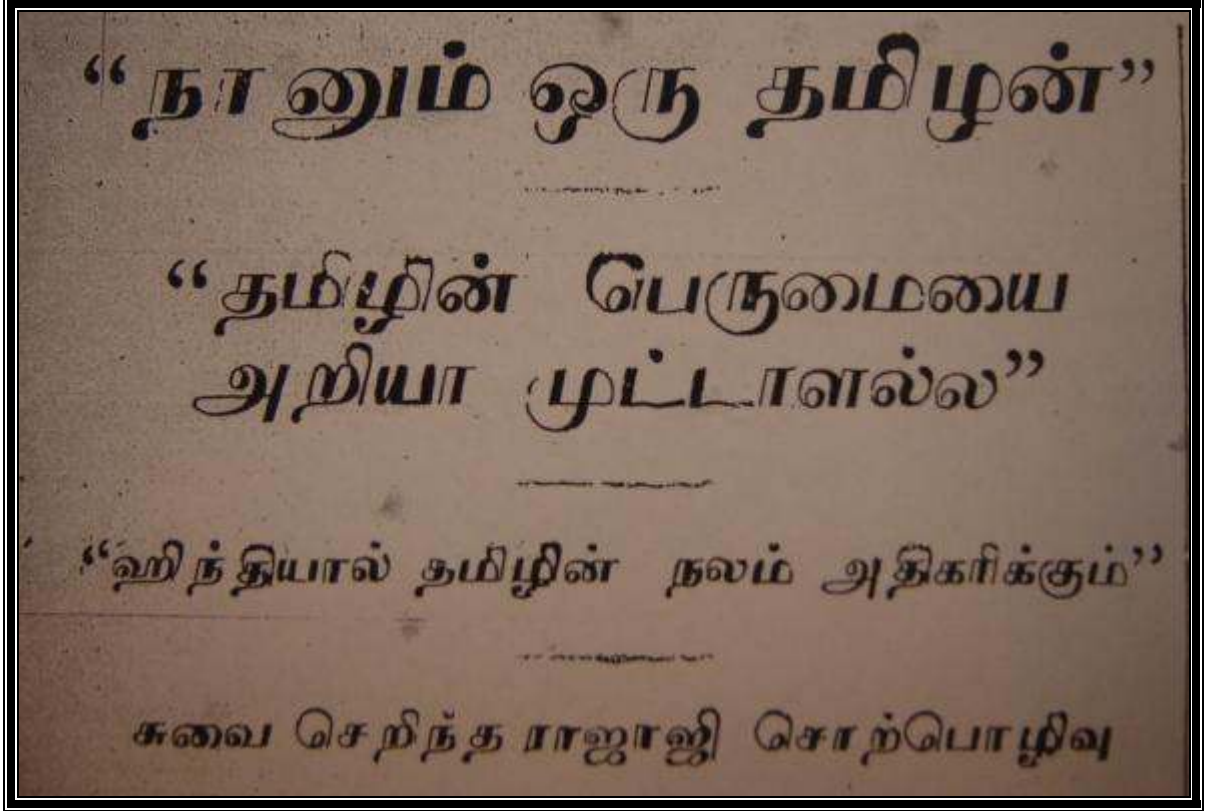


Figure 8: Rajaji Asserting that he is Tamil and that by Hindi, the Goodness of Tamil will Increase, TN, 2/7/1938.



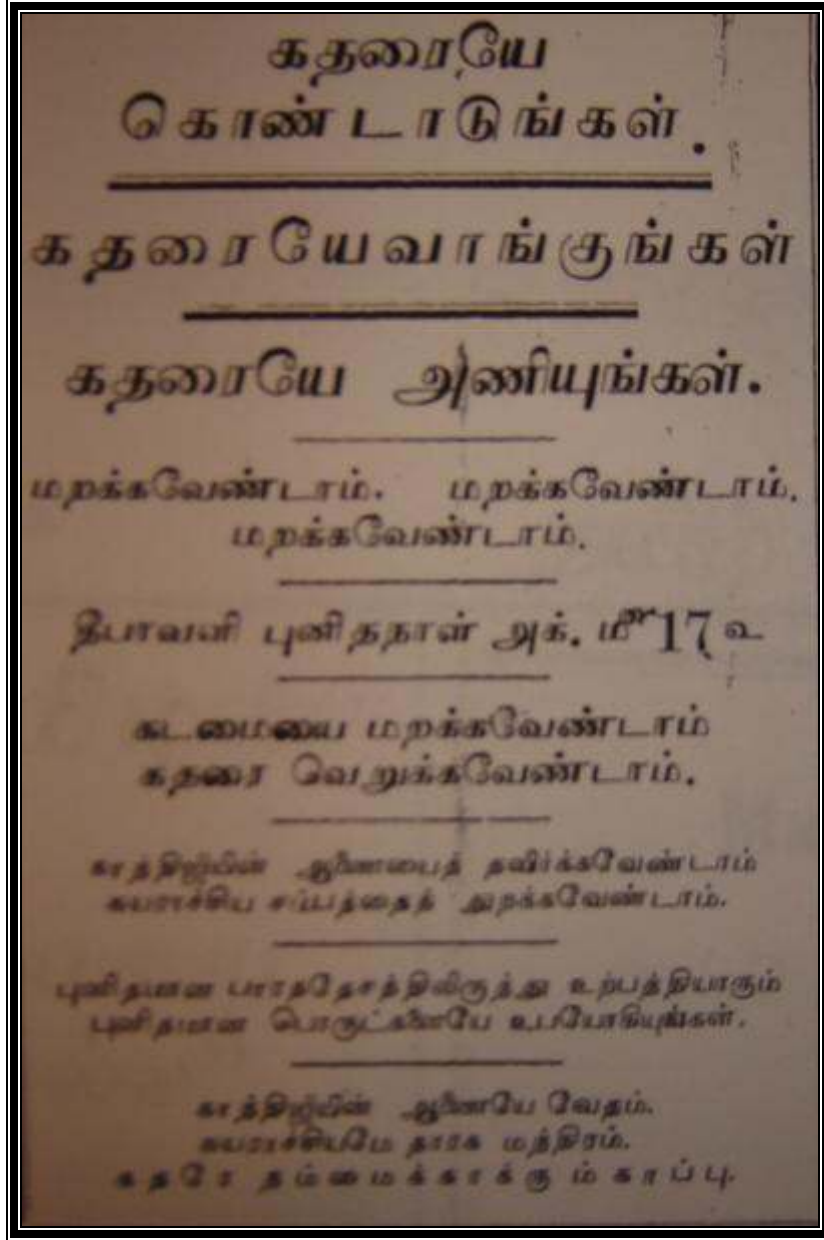


Figure 9: Advertisement in the *Nesan* Promoting *Kadhi* during Deepavali, TN, 7/10/1933.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>91</sup> The first few lines of the advertisement reads: 'Celebrate *Kadhi*, Buy *Kadhi*, Wear *Kadhi*, Don't Forget, Don't Forget, Don't Forget, Auspicious Deepavali Day Oct 17, Don't Forget your Duty; Don't Hate *Kadhi*'.





Figure 10: 'In Devotion, They Swung to the Peak of the Temple', *TM*, 4/11/1939.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Here, the *Murasu* criticises Brahmin priests for standing over the heads of the gods while conducting the temple consecration ceremony, questioning the basis of the reverence these priests have for the gods.



Figure 11: 'Act of Cruelty in Ambāl's (The Goddess's) *Sanctum Sanctorum*', *TM*, 4/11/1939.



Figure 12: 'Tīmiti Very Shiok! It is All Ambāl's Doings!', *TM*, 4/11/1939.



**Figure 13: 'Hey Shanmuga! (Lord Muruga) What Sins Did This Man Commit? To Carry So Many Pots', *TM*, 31/1/1940.**

### **The Necessity of Generalisations in Constructing the Self-Image**

During the 1930s, there was no singular imagining of Tamil cultural identity. It was one filled with complexities as reflected in Tamil newspapers in Malaya during this period. For one thing, there was no homogenous conception of Tamil identity,

and needless to say, of Indian identity during this period. A careful analysis of these papers in examination, I argue, show that geographic as well as ideological imaginations expressed through these papers printed in Malaya included a variety of national and sub-national imagined spaces; that is, the national being the *imaginaire* idealised by the *Nesan* and sub-national, that of the *Munnetram* and *Murasu*. R. Cheran rightly points this out in his study of diasporic Tamil identity, that territoriality is inadequate in defining Tamilness since transnational cultural and political beliefs and practices transcend rigid territorial boundaries.<sup>93</sup> Likewise, as Prasenjit Duara suggests in his study on Chinese nationalism, an understanding of the Chinese press requires that one thinks outside the national framework and concepts of nationalism, I argue that the Tamil newspapers in question be analysed beyond an understanding of collective Indian or Tamil nationalism, that in reality did not exist in the Malayan or Indian contexts during the 1930s.<sup>94</sup> Studying these papers compels us to acknowledge the need to think beyond national boundaries — *contra* Benedict Anderson’s influential writing on the print press as shaping ‘imagined national communities’ — since the word ‘national’ in the Tamil context of Malaya, presupposes a single national *imaginaire*.<sup>95</sup> In reality, there existed multiple levels of imagined spaces within the newspapers’ *imaginaire* of who the ideal Tamil in Malaya should be. Although several ideas were collectively agreed upon and advocated by the editors of the newspapers, the racial categorisations of Aryan and Dravidian — a concept introduced and strengthened by the British in India — appeared totally

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<sup>93</sup> R. Cheran, ‘Citizens of Many Worlds’, p. 154.

<sup>94</sup> Prasenjit Duara ‘Deconstructing the Chinese Nation’ in Jonathan Unger (ed.), *Chinese Nationalism* (Armonk, NY & London, M. E. Sharpe, 1996).

<sup>95</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

absorbed by the editor of the *Munnetram* and *Murasu*. Particularly, the classification of Brahmins-as-Aryan, as Ramaswamy propagated in Tamil Nadu, was perpetuated in Malaya in its fullest form and was entrenched in the writings found in these newspapers.<sup>96</sup>

Tamil identity during this period should be studied outside the ‘religious’ paradigm as well since often, colonial studies on Indian societies have led to the imposed understanding of them as religiously and spiritually transcendent. Such ideas appear *prima facie* valid since any present day understanding of Tamil identity in Malaysia and Singapore appears inevitably linked to religion, particularly Hinduism. Willford’s argument that the interplay of religion and ethnicity signify Tamil identity, may be the case today, although my research on newspapers imagining Tamil cultural identity in the 1930s, has proven otherwise. At least in the instance of the *Munnetram* and *Murasu* which took on strong anti-Hinduism positions, showing that the association of a Tamil identity with Hinduism appears much stronger today than it was during the 1930s.<sup>97</sup>

If the *Munnetram* and *Murasu* had conveniently categorised all Brahmins under the larger umbrella of Aryans, were the non-Brahmins therefore a homogenous group of people? Non-Brahmins — a term which Subrahmanian says is ‘a flabby fatuous term which would logically include furniture and cabbages’ — were not a homogenous group of people.<sup>98</sup> Among non-Brahmins, the highest caste group was the Vellalar who are said to be ‘stricter than the Brahmins in their religious

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<sup>96</sup> See the *Murasu* editorial which argues that Brahmins are Aryans, not Tamils; *TM*, 1/2/1938.

<sup>97</sup> Andrew Willford, *Cage of Freedom*.

<sup>98</sup> N. Subrahmanian, *The Brahmin in the Tamil Country* (Madurai: Ennes Publication, 1989), p. 139.



observances and adherences to ritual'.<sup>99</sup> Equally religious were the Chettiars, who belonged to a caste of money-lenders, traders and bankers and at least before the late 1930s, they were an exclusive group of their own with their own associations and temple networks.<sup>100</sup> Moreover and most interestingly, Ramaswamy himself acknowledged that the epics and myths which he associated with Brahminism were in fact not often of a product of Brahmins. A journalist points out that once, someone asked Ramaswamy: 'Aiya (Sir), the fellow who narrated the *Gita* was a Cowherd. The fellow who heard it was a *kshatriya*. The fellow who wrote the whole thing was a Shepherd. Where is the Brahmin in it?' Ramaswamy replied: 'I am not speaking to intellectuals like you. I am speaking to the masses who believe in myths spread by the Brahmins.'<sup>101</sup> Here, the convenient categorisation of Brahmins-as-Aryans becomes explicit. It would also be of interest to note that at one time, the *Munnetram* published a letter — an extremely detailed, animate and elucidating reply written by Mr V. A. Chandrarasan to the editor of the *Nesan*, Iyengar who had earlier criticised and insulted him for his views which he had expressed during a speech at the Selangor Doctors Association in December 1931 — which contradicted the Brahmins-as-Aryan theory Ramaswamy and Sarangapany were championing. Instead of writing the letter directly to the *Nesan*, which Chandrarasan termed a 'third-rate paper', he felt that the reply should be published in the *Munnetram*, 'the best reform newspaper in Malaya'. The writer argued that the Brahmins were indeed not Aryans and quotes

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<sup>99</sup> A. N. Sattanathan, *Plain Speaking: A Sudra's Story* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007), p. 192.

<sup>100</sup> Changes in legislature in land owning and money lending in the late 1930s which were deemed discriminatory led to Chettiars playing a more active role in Associations such as the CIAM, which aimed to represent the interests of all Indians in Malaya. See Chapter Four.

<sup>101</sup> Vaasanthi, *Cut-Outs, Caste and Cine Stars: The World of Tamil Politics* (Delhi: Viking by Penguin Books, 2006), p. 15. For a discussion on castes, see Rajoo, 'World-View', p. 150.

extensively, in English, Henry Noel Brailsford's article titled 'The Buried Cities of the Indus' which was published in the magazine *Manchester Guardian* in 1931:

'India possessed an elaborate urban civilisation 1400 years or more before Aryans arrived... *The Brahmans were not Aryans at all, but the magicians* of this earlier civilisation who rallied to the new comers, taught them letters and used their power to gain influence over the Kings and Chiefs.'<sup>102</sup>

The above clearly illustrates the complexities that existed surrounding the issue on whether Brahmins were Aryans and the fact that the *Munnetram* published the above article which was paradoxical to the position it often took on Brahmins clearly point to how the Brahmins-as-Aryan ideology was grossly generalised, often misinterpreted and absorbed wholesale in the same fashion imagined by Ramaswamy in India.

Within the Malayan context, the *Munnetram* and the *Murasu* saw such generalisations as necessary to fulfil a two-pronged goal in reforming Tamil society: the first was, to call for an expulsion of Aryan beliefs and stories from Hinduism, hence shaking the Brahminic hold on Hinduism; and, secondly, once the first motive had been successfully achieved, to question the very fundamental of the existence of god, so as to promote rational thinking, which could only occur if one 'remove(s) all "superstitious belief" that was based on religion or tradition'.<sup>103</sup> The only way to emancipate the downtrodden people from the hold of the Brahmins — whom Subrahmanian claims 'stood for classicism' — was to shake the fundamentals of that very classicism by denigrating *inter alia* the religion that was believed to have been

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<sup>102</sup> *Munnetram*, 24/3/1932. Italics present in source.

<sup>103</sup> Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr., *The Dravidian Movement* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1967), p. 26.



used to exploit Dravidians through the stratification of Tamil society.<sup>104</sup> However in the Malayan case, was the *Nesan* a fundamental Hindu paper resisting modifications within Hinduism and did it continue pushing forth caste distinctions the way the *Munnetram* and *Murasu* had portrayed it to be? Ampalavanar's argument that the *Nesan* catered largely to the English educated middle class and the *Murasu* the lower, further emphasises the above assumption.<sup>105</sup>

My analysis of the *Nesan* has proven that Ampalavanar too may have fallen into the indoctrinatory traps of the *Munnetram* and *Murasu* which had conveniently lumped the *Nesan* into the category of Aryan journalism so as to create a homogenous constructed imagining of the nemesis, and therefore accusing it of being anti-Dravidian. In reality, this was not the case. A detailed study of the *Nesan* elucidates its concerns with members of the lower class, the labourers, the uneducated and the untouchables. The *Nesan* also reported news on the Self-Respect Association Meetings, the ADA Meetings and listed the resolutions passed during these meetings, which proves that it did concur with most of what the *Munnetram* and *Murasu* propagated, although with the caveat that Hinduism was not to be blamed for these problems.<sup>106</sup> The *Nesan* had also went at length to educate people that nowhere in Hindu scriptures was it stated that one should discriminate against the Harijans.<sup>107</sup> In 1933, the *Nesan* had published an article advocating that temples allow untouchables inside.<sup>108</sup> Upon the passing of Iyengar, the All-Malayan ADA held a mourning

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<sup>104</sup> Subrahmanian, *The Brahmin*, p. 139.

<sup>105</sup> Ampalavanar, 'Tamil', pp. 52-53.

<sup>106</sup> See for instance, the *Nesan* reporting the First Adi-Dravidar Conference in Malaya, 10/8/1932 and the subsequent ones. *TN*, 8/7/1933, 12/7/1933, 1/2/1936.

<sup>107</sup> *TN*, 27/1/1938.

<sup>108</sup> *TN*, 11/2/1933.

ceremony within its Association premises for the editor, saying that his passing was a great loss to the Adi-Dravidians in Malaya and that he was a 'great friend' to the community.<sup>109</sup> A letter from a teacher in Johor expressing condolence called Iyengar a 'Tamil warrior' of a kind never to be seen in Malaya again.<sup>110</sup> Often, letters written to the editor by lower-caste labourers expressing their problems were published in the *Nesan*, which appeared to look at their grievances sympathetically.<sup>111</sup> That these labourers, from the lower-caste and lower-education groups wrote to the *Nesan* and the *Nesan* going to great lengths to discuss issues about their social and economic welfare and rights allow for one to clearly discern that the paper did not solely cater to a predominantly English-educated middle class as Ampalavanar had argued.

Moreover, her argument that unlike countries such as India and Ceylon where English educated middle-class people instilled with Western notions of reform had initiated change within society, in Malaya, vernacular educated lower middle class people had shown the 'first sign of reformist fervour' appears highly unjustifiable since the *Nesan*, *Munnetram* and *Murasu* had all exuded reformist fervour though they were positioned within different frameworks.<sup>112</sup> The *Nesan* strongly pushed for reform but maintained that reform was possible within the Hindu framework, which the *Munnetram* and *Murasu* were against. As early as 1929, the *Nesan* expressed reformist fervour in the areas of women's education, the need for proper hygiene and sanitisation, the evils of the *Kangany* system, grievances faced by workers in Malaya

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<sup>109</sup> *TN*, 22/2/1938.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> *TM*, 24/6/1933, 4/2/1936.

<sup>112</sup> Ampalavanar, 'Tamil', p. 53.

as well as the evils of untouchability.<sup>113</sup> Contrary to Max Weber’s argument that the Brahmins — ‘genteel intellectuals... (who) emphasise(d) the importance of being “Aryan”’ — the *Nesan* tried to prove the opposite, defining itself as staunchly Tamil.<sup>114</sup> Here the opprobrious Brahmins-as-Aryan imaginings of the *Munnetram* and *Murasu* have made these papers oblivious to the attempts taken by the *Nesan* to address the problems faced by the Adi-Dravidians as well as the people from the lower class groups in Malaya. The *Murasu* too failed to give coverage to two highly significant Acts which Rajaji had passed in 1939 — ‘The Removal of Civil Disabilities Act (Madras XXII) — that aimed to remove social and civil disabilities for the Harijans by allowing them to have access to public transport, wells, offices among other things but chose to specifically focus on his compulsory Hindi policy.

Analysing the stylistics of language here may also elucidate that the *Nesan* did not cater its paper to a certain section of Tamil society. Tamil is a diglossic language; where these exist two branches called High Tamil (*centamiḷ*) and Low Tamil (*koṭuntamiḷ*). In all three papers under analysis, the formal and modern literary *centamiḷ* was utilised; a form generally used in speech and writing, as opposed to the colloquial form of the language, *koṭuntamiḷ*, which is used in everyday speech.<sup>115</sup> This was also the case in the editorials where *centamiḷ* was noticed. Although the occasional usage of Sanskrit words were noted in the *Nesan*, these were rare and this could possibly have been an effect of the ‘pure Tamil’ movement (*taṇittamiḷiyakkam*)

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<sup>113</sup> *TN*, 4/5/1929, 9/1/1929, 30/1/1929, 30/1/1929, 6/2/1929, 7/12/1929, 25/5/1929.

<sup>114</sup> Max Weber, *The Religion of India* (New York: The Free Press, 1958), p. 151.

<sup>115</sup> Henry R. Hoisington, ‘Brief Notes on the Tamil Language’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 3 (1853), pp. 387-397; Francis Britto, *Diglossia: A Study of the Theory with Application to Tamil* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1986).

dated to 1916 that tried to rid Sanskrit words from Tamil.<sup>116</sup> A person who read the *Murasu* therefore would be able to read the *Nesan* with little or no problems in understanding what the paper was trying to put forth.

Agehananda Bharati's study on East African Asian identity points out that identity formation involves the self-image, which is the sum total of notions of a group of people and the alter-image, which is the sum total of notions about another group.<sup>117</sup> The *Munnetram* and *Murasu* therefore imagined its ideal Malayan Tamil self-image vis-à-vis the alter-image of Brahmins and not with the other South Indian communities such as Malayalees or Telugus who were living in Malaya.<sup>118</sup> It was also because of this that these papers had always been anti-Congress since Congress was seen as a fundamentally Hindu party. Tamil identity which Sarangapany's papers imagined was one that was therefore highly parochial in nature; one which tended to look at Tamil identity as exclusively non-Aryan and non-Brahmin and did not, at least during the decade of the 1930s, see Tamil identity as being part of a larger Indian diasporic identity within the Malayan context. The *Nesan* on the other hand despite being highly nationalistic and pro-Congress, saw Tamil identity as something that would be ensconced and rooted within a larger Indian identity in Malaya and it saw the problems facing the Indian community within a long-term context, and therefore foresaw these problems which became real especially following the Japanese Occupation when issues related to citizenship were constantly debated. Despite its

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<sup>116</sup> Ramaswamy, *Passions*, p. 145. The Brahmin dialect contains several Sanskrit words (*Maṇṇipiravāḷam*).

<sup>117</sup> Agehananda Bharati, 'Patterns of Identification among East African Asians', *Sociologist* 15 (1964), p. 129.

<sup>118</sup> The Malayalees for instance were largely English educated and worked in the white-collar services; Rajoo, 'World-View', p. 151.

heavy Congress leanings, the *Nesan* therefore did not see the Tamils in Malaya as transient immigrants but as those who will eventually make Malaya their home, which had led them to be critical of their land ownership rights amongst other things, which was discussed in the previous chapter. The *Murasu* did not see Tamils as long-term stayers in Malaya during the 1930s and this was made very clear in an editorial where it had mentioned that Tamils were here to work, save and bring back earnings to India.<sup>119</sup> This clearly points that the *Murasu's* parochial imaginings of Tamil identity was one that solely mirrored the intellectual and ideological currents in Tamil Nadu during that decade, and I argue that it saw Brahmins-as-Aryan imperialism the greater threat to Tamils than it saw British colonialism, which had led to its constant emphasis on Self-Respect ideals which aimed to challenge Brahmins and their religion which was believed to be subordinating Dravidians.

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<sup>119</sup> *TM*, 24/1/1938. This however changed in the 1950s when the *Murasu* called for Tamils to make Malaya their home; *TM*, 18/3/1950, 29/7/1954. S. Varathan, oral history interview, NAS, Accession 001000.

## CHAPTER IV

### Reading Outside the ‘Texts’: The Public Sphere, Associations and Homeland Networks.

*‘Kōvil Illā Ūril Kuṭiyirukka Vēnṭām’*  
(Don’t settle in a village where there is no temple.)<sup>1</sup>

*‘Temple people will hate us [sic]. They will abuse us.’<sup>2</sup>*

The second and third chapters have discussed in detail, using a textual methodology, how Tamil newspapers printed in Malaya during the 1930s negotiated and imagined the diasporic Tamil identity. Any study of the press, however, is incomplete without an analysis of ‘textual communities’; the audiences whom these newspapers targeted. Marshall McLuhan mentions that print technology destroyed the openness of oral cultures since print brought ‘lineality’, which meant that every experience could be recorded in print.<sup>3</sup> Tamils newspapers in Malaya however did not destroy oral culture but on the contrary promoted it. Oral culture complemented print. Particularly, considering the high illiteracy rates of Tamils in Malaya during the period in study, this chapter will show how the messages propagated by the press reached the masses. The chapter does not aim to measure the success of the *Nesan*, *Munnetram* and *Murasu* in making Tamils in Malaya staunch followers or believers of Dravidianism or Congress. Neither does it aim to show how audiences reacted to these messages, but rather how the editors aspired to use Associations set up in Malaya as extensions of their newspaper in further spreading messages to the public,

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<sup>1</sup> A popular Tamil axiom.

<sup>2</sup> Palanivelu Natesan, oral history interview, NAS, Accession 000588.

<sup>3</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of a Typographic Man* (New York: Mentor, 1969), p. 258.

particularly the illiterate majority. The chapter will also look at how networks established with presses in South Asia further helped these Malayan newspapers do everything they could to remain the sole medium through which the diaspora could stay in touch with the homeland.

Tamils in Malaya, for whom the papers were foremost published, remained the number one concern of the newspapers. In a 1938 editorial discussing the prices of newspapers available in Malaya, the *Murasu*, praising *The Straits Times* for reducing its price from ten cents to five, claimed that the paper reduced its cost so that it could be available to more people. It went on to say that in the newspaper world of Malaya, Tamil papers clinched the bottom spot since one had to ‘put on fake smiles, kowtow, and beg’ to ensure that the paper survives. That or the paper had to drop names like ‘Gandhi’ or ‘Nehru’ or words like ‘nationalism’ in order to sell its paper, the *Murasu* claimed in what appears to be a direct criticism of the *Nesan* and the tactics it utilised to gain readership. This editorial also mentioned that the *Murasu* did not have to resort to doing any of the above, and could still sell its paper at three cents in its altruistic attempt at reforming society.<sup>4</sup> The sale of the *Murasu* at such a low price was one way through which the paper ensured that more people read the paper; the first possible way through which its intended message could reach a wider public.

The *Murasu* sustained its run, despite selling the paper at a low cost in several ways. For one, Sarangapany engaged in other businesses to alleviate the high costs of

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<sup>4</sup> *TM*, 17/9/1938.

running the press.<sup>5</sup> Next, advertisements contributed to lowering the cost of the paper; with the editor calling for Tamils to advertise in the *Murasu* so as to help the paper to continue to perform its duties of reforming Tamil society.<sup>6</sup> The need to gain revenue from advertisements often led these papers, both the *Murasu* and *Nesan*, to print advertisementss which were against the messages they were propogating. It was commonplace therefore to find advertisements such as ones for *Tiger Beer* in both the *Nesan* and *Murasu* despite their strong opinions against alcoholism. (Figs. 14 and 15). Particularly interesting is the advertisement in the *Nesan* which shows men carrying crates of beer into what appears to be a house hosting a Hindu event, possibly a wedding, and the advertisement in the *Murasu* which shows a traditional, subservient Indian wife draped in her sari serving her husband alcohol. While initially appearing highly contradictory, these ads have to be understood as necessary for the long term sustenance of the papers as well as for ensuring that the costs of production were kept as low as possible so that the paper would be available to the public at a low price. These papers were however not averse to taking advertising money while undercutting their clients in editorial comments at the same time. Advertisements for films from India being screened in theatres in Malaya also made up the bulk of the advertisements in these papers in the late 1930s (Fig. 16).

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<sup>5</sup> I thank Arun Mahizhnan for sharing this information with me during the History Department Graduate Seminar Series where I presented part of this thesis on 12/3/2008.

<sup>6</sup> *TM*, 1/12/1939.



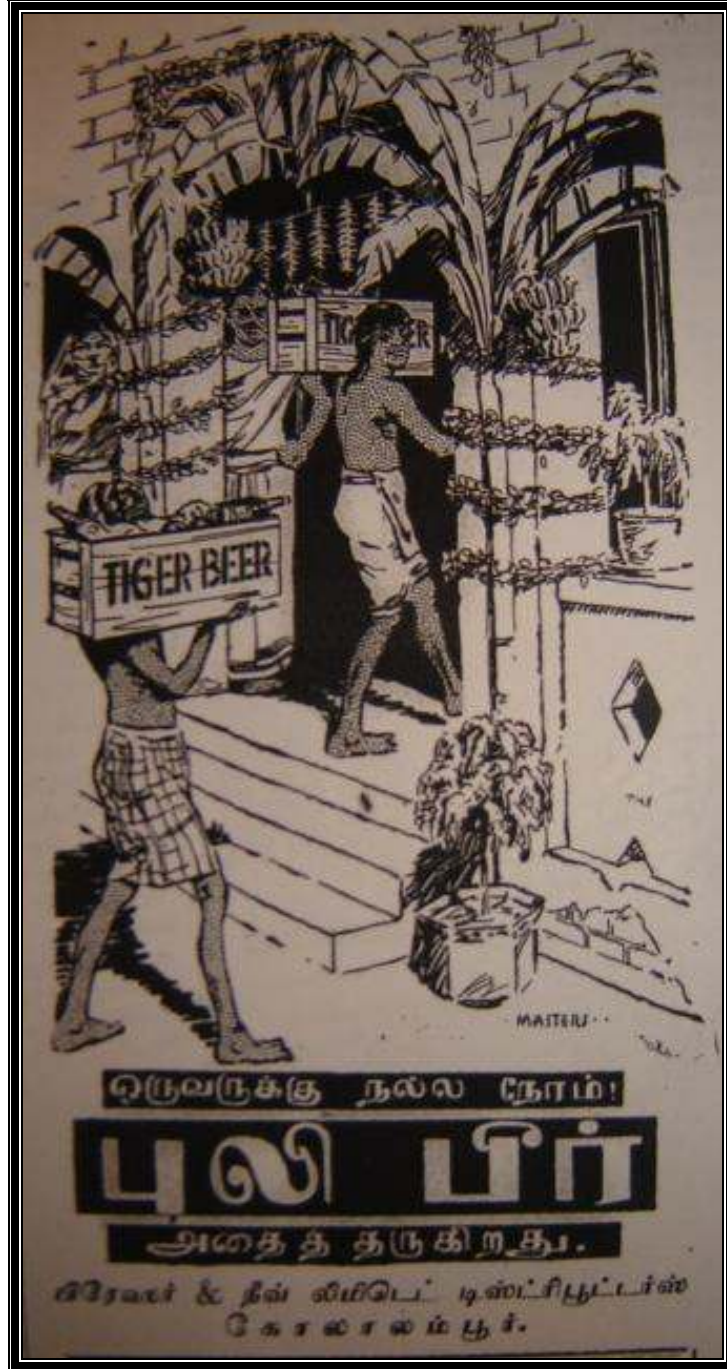


Figure 14: Tiger Beer Advertisement, TN, 21/12/1935.




The illustration depicts a woman in a sari sitting on a bench, holding a tray with a bottle of Tiger Beer. A man is seated next to her, looking at the bottle. The background shows a building with an archway. Below the illustration is a detailed drawing of a Tiger Beer bottle with a label that reads 'TIGER BEER' and 'LAGER BEER'. The text is in Tamil, promoting the beer's quality and availability.

முதல்தரமான புலி  
 மார்க் பிரையே  
 உபயோகியுங்கள்.  
 ஊக்கம் தரக்கூடியது  
 தேகா  
 ரோக்கியத்திற்கு  
 உயர்ந்தது.

ஏன் அப்படி? :-  
 பிரேசர் அண் நிவ்  
 சிடெட்,  
 சிகப்பூர்

Figure 15: Tiger Beer Advertisement, TM, 19/9/1938.

தென்விந்தியாளில் எல்லா முக்கிய ஊர்களிலும்  
காண்பிக்கப்பட்டு எல்லோராலும் புகழப்பட்ட



தென்பா வரிஷிக்கும்  
எம் கே நியாகராஜு  
பாகவதர்  
எம் ஸ்ரீ  
சந்தான லெக்சிமி

மாதலானேர் தங்களது முழுதிறமையுடன் நடித்துள்ள

**அம்பிகாபதி**

இன்றிரவு மால்பீராவில்  
காண்பிக்கப்படுகிறது  
தினசரி இரண்டு காணிகள் 6-00 மணிக்கு  
ஆயிரக்கணக்கானவர்கள் கண்டு  
மகிழ்ந்தது

Released By: SRI KANNABIRAN & Co., 15-B, Robinson Road, SINGAPORE.

Figure 16: Advertisement for the Movie 'Ambikāpati', TM, 27/10/1938.

Advertisements aside, how then were messages advocated by these newspapers spread to the illiterate public? Newspapers may have been a daily ritual — a kind of ‘mass ceremony’ that could have been a ‘substitute for morning prayers’ — but this was only possible if one could read.<sup>7</sup> A guest writer for *Munnetram* in 1931 mentions that newspapers published in Malaya not only remained in existence

<sup>7</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 39-40.

because of the rich who could read and afford to buy the paper, but also because of the poor who played a very important role in making the print of the paper possible.

He wrote that:

‘Among the wealthy people, the few who are worldly and compassionate, together with my brethren, who despite working several jobs, remain poor are the main reasons why the printing of several good newspapers in Malaya today has been made possible (and I can) say this from the top of the *gopura* (tower)’.<sup>8</sup>

The guest writer for the paper then goes on to compliment the role played by the *Munnetram* in striving to bring about change to the Tamil people of Malaya and by crediting the role played by the poor who ‘may not have received enough education to enjoy reading the paper’. He thus opens an avenue for thinking about the crucial role the poor, illiterate and underclass people may have played in making the publications of these newspapers possible.<sup>9</sup> Were they important because they physically worked with the printing of the paper? Were they important because they helped circulate and distribute these papers to shops and newsstands? Were they important because beyond doing all these, they promoted the ideas or believed in and practiced these ideas which were advocated by the papers such as the *Munnetram* or *Murasu*? The fact that Jürgen Habermas leaves out the spirit of the ‘underclass’ in the role of the print press is something worth analysing here.

Habermas’ work on the bourgeois public sphere in Europe does not sufficiently explain the nature of the Tamil print press in Malaya during the 1930s. Firstly his study negates the significant role played by working class people in the

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<sup>8</sup> *Munnetram*, 15/1/1931.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

promulgation of newspapers that were crucial to the development of the public sphere. Tamil newspapers in Malaya reflect that the working class were crucial for the printing and spreading of ideas received via the newspapers, particularly through the channel of the voluntary organisations. As Clifford Geertz has articulated with his ‘culture as system’ perspective, elite-privileged articulations of cultural identity only acknowledges and even mystifies those indirectly responsible for the production of such a culture.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, Habermas’ work does not analyse the extra-national dimensions of the public sphere and in the case of Tamil newspapers in Malaya, such extra-national journalistic networks and inclusion of extra-national ideas and figures which were published in an effort to forge a cultural identity must be acknowledged.<sup>11</sup> The importance of the underclass and the working class in promulgating ideas put forth by the newspapers will be analysed first.

### **Murasu, Homeland Networks and the TRA**

An understanding of the circuitous relationship between the *Munnetram*, *Murasu* and the TRA, which existed in states like Singapore, Malacca, Kuala Lumpur and Penang, become imperative at this point.<sup>12</sup> These newspapers published ideas which were then carried out by the TRA and several initiatives of the Association aiming to define Tamil cultural identity were given publicity by these newspapers in return. This of course mirrored developments in Tamil Nadu where Ramaswamy

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<sup>10</sup> Clifford Geertz et al., *Meaning and Order in Moroccan Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>11</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into the Category of Bourgeois Society*. Translated by T. Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> The TRA has its origins in the *Ahampadiyar Sangam* which was started in 1929; *Munnetram*, 3/3/1929.

Naicker had used the newspapers to propagate ideas which were carried out by the Justice Party and later the Dravidar Kalagam. Even though the *Murasu* actively reported events which took place in the All-Malayan Tamil Association and the All-Malayan Dravidar Association, the TRA remained its main organ through which it propagated reform messages. The *Murasu* started off as a publication of the TRA in Singapore and it aimed to represent Tamils, regardless of caste associations. Several joint ventures were noted between the *Munnetram*, *Murasu* and the TRA in Malaya, such as the organisation of Self-Respect marriages within the premises of the Association (Fig. 20), and this was further made possible since Sarangapany was one of the founders of the TRA in Singapore and had ‘devoted all his life for the Tamils Reform Association’, making it impossible to separate his newspapers from the TRA.<sup>13</sup> Ramaswamy was in Singapore when the TRA was started under his auspices on 21 April 1930 and he used every opportunity in Malaya to talk about his Self-Respect ideals. While addressing people present at the opening of the TRA in Singapore, Ramaswamy called for people to, among other things, give up alcohol and superstitious habits.

The first annual general meeting of the TRA was held on 28 April 1935, almost three years after its founding although it had eighteen working committee meetings, seven special meetings as well as a general meeting by this time. The association had 95 members and in an attempt to enrol more members, it reduced the

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<sup>13</sup> Kannusamy s/o Packirisamy, oral history interview, NAS, Accession 000081; The Singapore TRA was officially opened on 3 August 1930 on 20, Klang Lane and officially registered on 22 July 1932. For details, see Selviyan, *Cu. Te. Mōrtiyum Cīṅkapōr Tiraviṭar Kaḷakamum* (S. T. Moorthy and the Singapore Dravidian Association) (Chennai: Dravidar Kalagam Publications, 1999).

membership fees to one dollar from three.<sup>14</sup> By December 1940, the association had only 600 members; 18 females and forty overseas members.<sup>15</sup> Despite poor membership the association managed to run from the financial support of individual businessmen like A. C. Suppiah and O. Ramasamy Nadar.

From 1935, the Singapore TRA had formed several sub-committees so that reform messages its papers were advocating could reach a wider mass of people. A sports sub-committee was formed to train the young men who frequented the TRA so that they could represent the TRA in inter-club sports meets. Since older people were 'staunch', and saw the TRA as an 'atheist' association and hence resisted reform, the TRA targeted a younger crowd who were in their thirties and forties and sporting events appeared one way through which the young were made interested in the TRA.<sup>16</sup> Another crucial method through which the TRA aimed to spread its reform message was through the *Toṅṅar Paṭai* or the welfare sub-committee formed in 1935. The committee consisted of a group of volunteers who would provide services to the Association and the Tamil community. Through this, two goals were achieved. The first was to bring together Tamil youths, inculcating them with reform consciousness and getting them involved in voluntary work. The second goal was to get them involved in propaganda classes on reform so that they can be sent out for contact with the masses to discuss issues on thrift, superstitions, alcoholism, unwanted Hindu ceremonies and the like.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *TM*, 20/7/1935.

<sup>15</sup> *TM*, 17/2/1941.

<sup>16</sup> Natesan, oral history interview.

<sup>17</sup> Vasandakumari Nair, *Tamils Reform Association, Singapore (1932-61)*. Unpublished B. A. Honours Thesis (University of Singapore, 1972), p. 22.

To raise funds to sustain the TRA as well as to proliferate the messages to illiterate Tamils, drama performances were staged. A drama sub-committee formed by volunteers in 1935 aimed to spread reform messages through theatre which dramatised the evils of caste distinctions, superstitions, as well as untouchability. Dramas titled ‘Cukuṇa Cuntaram’ and ‘Kaori Caṅkar’ were performed in 1936 and 1937 respectively at the Alexandra Hall in North Bridge Road in Singapore. The former was on the evils of caste and the latter on the practice of much older men getting married to young girls, an issue the TRA wanted to change. Actors in these plays would finish their day jobs and will start rehearsing their roles in the TRA from about eight or nine and practice up to one in the morning.<sup>18</sup> The scriptwriter for these dramas, Mr Palanivelu Natesan, was an active member at the Singapore TRA, and was also its Treasurer for nineteen years from the 1930s. Mr Natesan, who only had primary-level education in India, worked as a ticketing clerk at the Singapore Traction Company earning forty dollars a month.<sup>19</sup> The *Murasu* also published the TRA’s statement of account for its dramas, possibly to project to the people its financial transparency and to gain their trust on how the Association was not misusing its funds.<sup>20</sup> The TRA also tried to be the gathering place for Tamils in the 1930s for it also hosted several events including the birthday celebrations of Ramaswamy Naicker, speeches of professors and scientists who Sarangany had invited from India, anti-Hindi language campaigns as well as played a crucial role in sourcing for donations to support the anti-Hindi agitation in Tamil Nadu with the

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<sup>18</sup> Natesan, oral history interview.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> *TM*, 5/12/1936.



support of the underclass who took sides with the cause.<sup>21</sup> Film screenings, such as ones titled *Āṅṭāl Ahāsā*, which ridiculed the worship of saints, such as the Saivite Saint Āṅṭāl, were also held at the TRA.<sup>22</sup> While the *Murasu* discussed the importance of education, the TRA participated in the running of some Tamil schools in Malaya and promoted adult classes.<sup>23</sup> In 1938 for instance, the TRA started a school with financial help from the Chettiar Community.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, while the *Murasu* published articles against the practice of carrying the *kāvaṭi* during Taipūcam, the TRA petitioned the Straits Settlement government to introduce legislation to ban such practices, claiming that the Madras government had done so, though the Straits Settlement government was not keen on interfering in the religious interests of people. It also petitioned the government on several issues such as increased Tamil representation in the Hindu Advisory Board as well as a Hindu Marriage Registration Law to safeguard the rights of women.<sup>25</sup> The demands of the TRA did not go unheard for the Civil Marriages Ordinance of 1940 was passed by the government.<sup>26</sup> It becomes clear that while the TRA wanted to be a purely social reform organisation, its petitions to the government calling for changes in legislation clearly show some of its early political initiatives.

Even though the *Murasu* had distanced itself from the political aspects of the Dravidian Movement in India — leaving out the discussion of, for instance a distinct

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<sup>21</sup> *TM*, 20/12/1939 for coverage on the birthday celebrations of Ramaswamy; Packirisamy, oral history interview.

<sup>22</sup> Ampalavanar, *Social and Political Developments*, p. 49.

<sup>23</sup> *TM*, 6/2/1937; Arasaratnam, 'Social Reform and Reformist Pressure Groups Among the Indians of Malaya and Singapore 1930-1955', *Journal of Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 40, II (1967), pp. 54-67, p. 66.

<sup>24</sup> *TM*, 16/5/1938.

<sup>25</sup> *TM*, 20/7/1935.

<sup>26</sup> *TM*, 1/4/1940.

Dravidistan which Ramaswamy had broached in Tamil Nadu during this period — the TRA in Singapore continued to subscribe Ramaswamy's newspapers, which discussed these issues, for its library. The Library Committee of the Singapore TRA was formed in 1935 in association with the opening of the TRA's library on 6 July 1933. In 1936, the library subscribed to 26 Tamil and 15 English newspapers, both local and from the Tamil South. This included the *Kudi Arasu*, *Viduthalai*, *Tamil Nadu* and *Tamilan*, most of which stressed Dravidianism, Self-Respect ideals and social reform, and this kept the locals aware of what was happening in Tamil Nadu. The library must have been highly popular since in October 1941 the TRA opened a second branch in Seletar.<sup>27</sup> Ramaswamy's brother, E. V. Krishnaswamy, visited Malaya to gather a readership for the *Kudi Arasu* and the *Murasu* republished several articles which appeared in the former as a way of strengthening its attachment to the roots of the Dravidian ideals it was propagating.<sup>28</sup> The *Murasu* also ran advertisements selling the *Kudi Arasu*, clearly pointing to the strong network that existed between the presses in India and Malaya during this period which allowed for newspapers from India to be readily available for sale and for reading in the libraries of the TRA.<sup>29</sup>

Such inter-press networks are also crucial because they further reinforce the initiatives undertaken by both groups, in Tamil Nadu and in Malaya. During the anti-Hindi agitation, the *Murasu* mentioned Tamil language patrons from Singapore, Johor Baru and Kuala Lumpur who had gone to Madras to take part in the anti-Hindi

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<sup>27</sup> Nair, *Tamils Reform Association*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>28</sup> *Malēya Tiraviṭṭa Kaṭakam*, Silver Anniversary Issue (13 June 1971), p. 153.

<sup>29</sup> *TM*, 15/9/1936.

strikes.<sup>30</sup> By the end of 1939, as many as 1271 anti-Hindi agitators were arrested and jailed and two of these Tamil ‘martyrs’ had died in prison. Rajaji’s resignation from politics in October 1939 coupled with fiery calls by Ramaswamy to do away with compulsory Hindi in Tamil Nadu led the central government to abolish Hindi in schools on 21 February 1940.<sup>31</sup> Following the victory of Ramaswamy against compulsory Hindi in Tamil Nadu, the TRA in Malaya organised small-scale functions celebrating the successful mission.<sup>32</sup> Full-page prints congratulating Ramaswamy as well as printing the numbers and names of Tamil martyrs arrested in Tamil Nadu for being involved in anti-Hindi protests became a highlight in the *Murasu* during this period. The *Kudi Arasu* and *Viduthalai* in turn published some of these congratulatory messages that were printed in the newspapers in Malaya and also reprinted several articles that appeared in Malayan newspapers such as the *Murasu* as a form of amplification and assertion that they had the support of the diasporic community in Southeast Asia which in turn provided further potency to the political and intellectual movement taking form in the Tamil South.<sup>33</sup>

### **Nesan, Homeland Networks and Indian Associations**

Just as the *Munnnetram* and *Murasu* promoted Dravidianism espoused by Ramaswamy Naicker, the *Nesan* promoted the cause of the Indian National Congress

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<sup>30</sup> *TM*, 17/8/1939.

<sup>31</sup> *KA*, 22/2/1940; *Viṭṭalai: Tantai Periyār 128-Ām Āṇḍu Pirantanā! Malar* (Freedom: Father Periyar 128<sup>th</sup> Year Birthday Commemorative Magazine), 2006, pp. 138-139.

<sup>32</sup> For instance, in *KA* (12/5/1940), it was published that in Malacca, such a celebratory event was held.

<sup>33</sup> Some of these articles that were reprinted were especially those published celebrating Ramaswamy’s ideas and achievements as well as speeches that were given in Malaya during celebrations held in honour of his birthday. Reports on such birthday celebrations held in Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Malacca were published in *KA* on 13/10/1940; 20/10/1940; 10/11/1940 respectively.

as a way to assert that the paper had the support of these great men (Figs. 23 and 24). By publishing messages from Gandhi and Nehru, the *Nesan* implicitly emphasised that it was the chosen paper through which Congress nationalists disseminated their ideas to the Indian diaspora in Malaya. Such strong associations with Congress further elevated the standing of the *Nesan* in Malaya, which also provided extensive coverage of the birthday celebrations of Gandhi and Nehru in Malaya. To further fortify networks with the homeland, the *Nesan* opened a branch office in Madras on 27 September 1936 and published an advertisement requesting that people patronise the services of the branch to advertise, read the *Nesan* or request help for ‘any other issue’ (Fig. 25). Through these homeland networks, Tamils in Malaya, in the words of Benedict Anderson, were ‘connected through print’ with people in Tamil Nadu.<sup>34</sup> Print facilitated and acted as conduits for the exchange of several ideologies which came to define Tamilness in Malaya. Homeland networks aside, the *Nesan* also rendered its support to Indian associations in Malaya which were pro-Congress in nature.

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<sup>34</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 47-49.



Figure 17: Advertisement in the *Murasu* on TRA's 'Cukuna Cuntaram', Picture from NAS.



Figure 18: Advertisement in the *Murasu* on TRA's 'Kaori Cañkar', Picture from NAS.

நீங்கள்  
கண்டதுண்டா?  
கேட்டதுண்டா  
நாடிநரைத்த தாத்தவிற்ரு  
தாரமானவள் படிப்பாட்டை!  
----- இன்றே, -----  
தமிழர் சீர்திருத்த சங்க நாடக சபையார்  
நடத்திக் காட்டப்போகும்

கௌரி | கிழமணக்  
ச | கொ  
ங் | அல்லது | டு  
க | மை  
ர்

எனும் நாடகத்தைப் பார்த்தும், கேட்டும்  
உனருங்கள்.

Figure 19: Advertisement in the *Murasu* on 'Kaori Caṅkar', Picture from NAS.







Figure 22: The Singapore TRA, Picture from NAS.



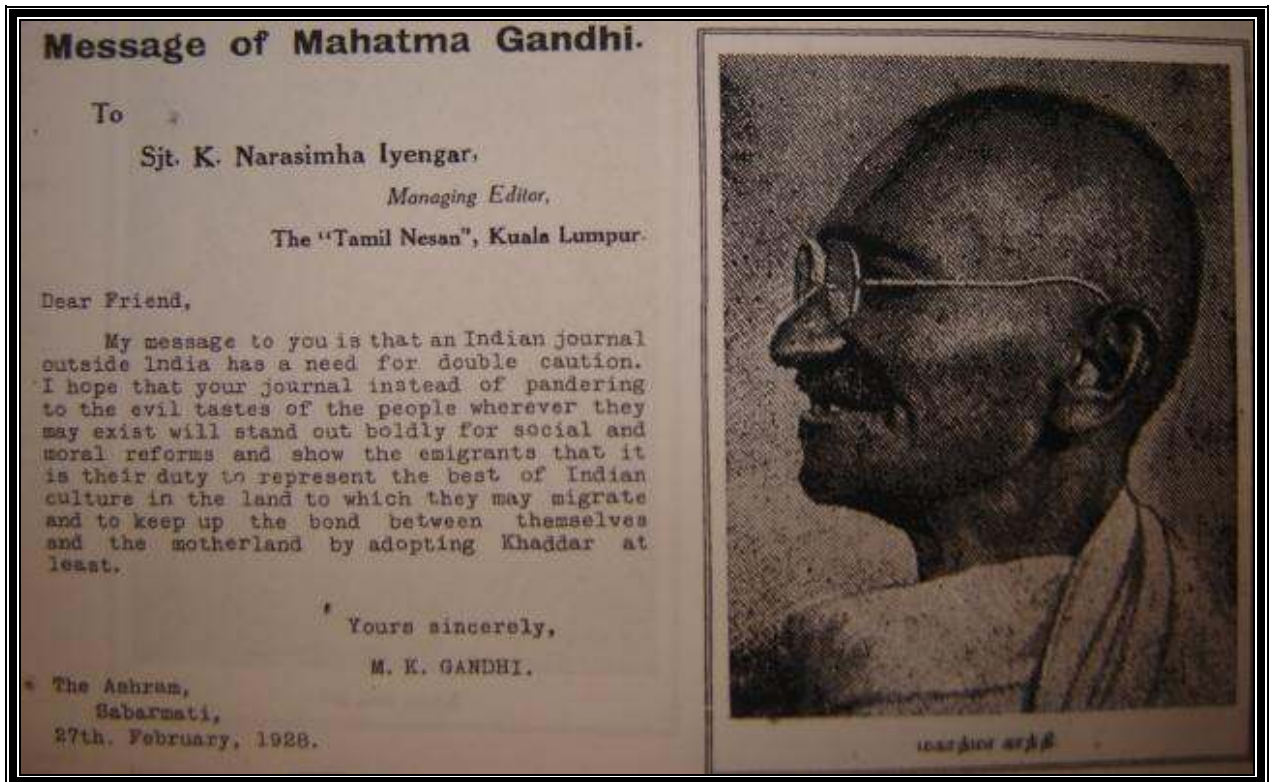


Figure 23: Gandhi's Message to Indians in Malaya through the *Nesan*, 22/12/1936.

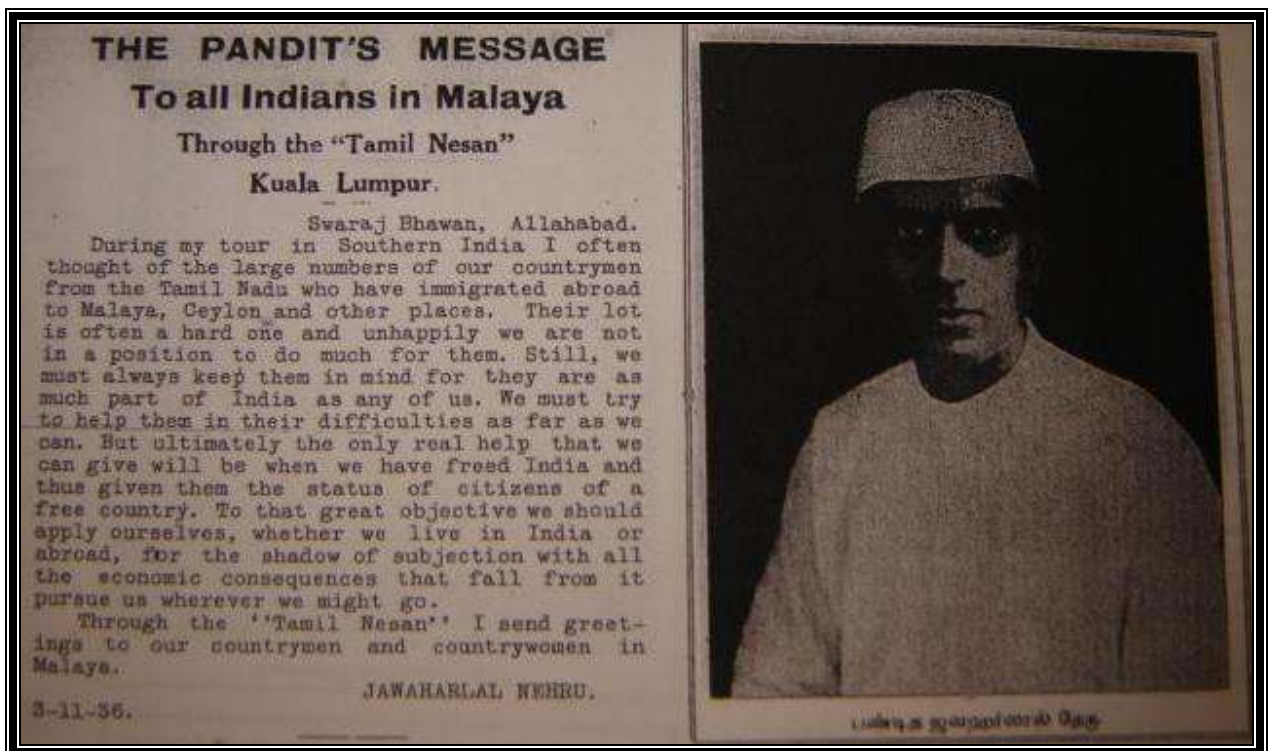


Figure 24: Nehru's Message to Indians in Malaya through the *Nesan*, 22/12/1936.

**தாய்நாடு செல்லுகிறீர்களா?**

அப்படியானால் நமது

**“தமிழ் நேசன்” கிளை ஆபீசுக்கு  
விஜயம் செய்யுங்கள்**

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வானமான வாசகர்களுடைய வேண்டுகோளுக்கிணங்கி  
 27—9—1936 முதல் சென்னையில் “தமிழ் நேசன்” கிளை  
 ஆபீசில் ஒன்று திறக்கப்பட்டுள்ளது. தாய்நாடு செல்லும்  
 தமது நண்பர்களைவரும் நம்முடைய சென்னை  
 ஆபீசுக்கு தயவுசெய்து விஜயம் செய்யுங்கள். அங்கு  
 தங்கள் சந்தாவை செலுத்தி ரசீது பெறலாம். விளம்  
 பரங்கள் கொடுக்கலாம். மற்றெந்த விஷயமானாலும்  
 ஏற்பாடு செய்து கொள்ளலாம். “தமிழ் நேசன்”  
 பத்திரிகையும் பார்வையிடலாம்.

**“தமிழ் நேசன்” இந்தியா ஆபீஸ்,**  
 27, நாசியங்குபரம்,  
 மவுண்ட் ரோடு, சென்னை.

Figure 25: Advertisement Promoting the Opening of the *Nesan* Branch in Chennai, TN, 15/10/1936.

Indian associations in Malaya have been around since the early 1900s beginning with the Ipoh Indian Association in 1904 which then led to the formation of several Indian Associations throughout the Peninsula. Several English educated Indians who wanted associations modelled after the English or Ceylonese counterparts began these Associations, which started off as mainly sports and

recreational clubs before they became engaged in politico-economic debates surrounding the Indian labour community in Malaya. Michael Stenson argues that these Indian Associations played a crucial role in the development of pan-Malayan political organisation for the community in the pre-War years.<sup>35</sup>

It must be noted that several caste-based associations were already in existence during this period, such as the Vellalar Associations, Nadar Paribalana Association, Chettiar Chambers of Commerce among several others, and many of these aimed at removing caste based occupations and raising the status of its members within the Indian community.<sup>36</sup> Which paper best represented the interests of the ADA had always appeared to be a bone of contention between the editors of the *Nesan* and the *Murasu*. The TRA had always extended its friendship to the ADA, like Ramaswamy had done in Tamil Nadu, much to the agony of the editors of the *Nesan* who felt that the Self-Respecters had little to do with Adi-Dravidians.<sup>37</sup> In the early 1930s, the ADA did not see the TRA as best representing its interests since its founder, K. M. Moorthy, was a staunch supporter of Gandhi and therefore mirrored his methods of elevating the status of the Harijans. In the later 1930s, the ADA orientated itself towards a Dravidian ideology espoused by the TRA. As discussed in the previous chapter, the *Nesan* went to great lengths to be the paper which represented the interests of the Adi-Dravidian community in Malaya and reported details of meetings held by the Association, which in 1936 was brought together

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<sup>35</sup> Stenson, *Class*, p. 43.

<sup>36</sup> *TN*, 1/3/1938; Ampalavanar, *Social and Political Developments*, p. 39; Arasaratnam, 'Aspects of Society and Cultural Life of Indians in Malaysia' in S. Takdir Alisjahbana et. al. (ed.), *The Cultural Problems of Malaysia in the Context of Southeast Asia* (Kuala Lumpur: The Malaysian Society of Orientalists, 1965), p. 102.

<sup>37</sup> *TN*, 16/12/1933.

under the All-Malaya ADA and reported that the Klang Sundararaja Perumal Temple had given in to the pressure put by the Association to allow Harijans into temple premises.<sup>38</sup> The Mariamman Temple in Penang followed suit in 1935.<sup>39</sup> While the ADA was not directly linked to the *Nesan* — the way the TRA was to the *Murasu* — by supporting the efforts undertaken by the Harijan community in Gandhian-style social reform, the paper further strengthened its social reform goals as well as the fact that despite being a Brahmin run paper, its interests lay among the lower castes.

Plans to develop a centralised Indian Association led to the formation of the CIAM in September 1936, whose leading members were from the English educated Malayalam community or were Brahmins instead of from the majority Tamil community. The CIAM, particularly following Nehru's visit to Malaya in May-June 1937, began showing strong pro-Congress nationalist leanings. Its fervent emphasis on labour and citizenship rights is reflected by the fact that the President, A. M. Soosay, had written the foreword for a book which described Indian labourers as 'sucked oranges' for whom Malaya had no more use. The book also criticised Malay ultra-nationalism as well as the presence of a 'colour-bar' and racial superiority with the blasé Europeans at the top.<sup>40</sup> Naturally, the *Nesan* was highly supportive of the CIAM and its initiatives. Subramaniam Iyer, K. B. Subbaiah and R. H. Nathan who were members of the editorial board of the *Nesan* played an important role in the paper following the death of Narasimha Iyengar in 1938. During his visit, Nehru noted the gulf between the educated Indian elite and the lower classes in Malay and

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<sup>38</sup> *TN*, 8/5/1932.

<sup>39</sup> *Annual Report of the Labour Department*, 1935, p. 49.

<sup>40</sup> K. A. Neelakanda Aiyer, *Indian Problems in Malaya: A Brief Survey in Relation to Emigration* (Kuala Lumpur: Indian Office, F.M.S., 1938), pp. 22, 91.

had requested that the former make an attempt to be more inclusive.<sup>41</sup> Subramaniam and Subbaiah had joined the paper in 1937 and Nathan in 1940. These men, seen as ultra-nationalists, began to believe that a more radical form of social uplift was needed for the Indian labourers in Malaya in order to safeguard their rights. Both Subramaniam and Nathan did not remain in the *Nesan* for long, leaving the paper in 1940 after taking sides with the young Indian printing workers of the *Nesan* who went on strike demanding better wages.<sup>42</sup> Nathan, who was a member of the CIAM, was said to have been especially influenced by a Socialist member of the All Indian Congress Committee, A. K. Gopalan who had come to Malaya in 1939 to garner support for trade unionism among the Indian labour community here.<sup>43</sup>

While the *Nesan* itself showed no sign of vehement reformist or socialist undertones following the death of Iyengar, the editors' involvement in the CIAM and their support of trade unions for the betterment of labour standards — the very issues the CIAM fought for — strengthened the circuitous relationship between the *Nesan* and the CIAM.<sup>44</sup> This is crucial to note because unlike the early years of the *Nesan*'s history where Iyengar had stayed away from any on-the-ground hard-line tactics of gathering masses to fight for their rights, solely relying on the paper as a means of raising awareness, this changed following his death. During this time, the necessity to move to the ground, beyond just relying on the newspaper to propagate messages

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<sup>41</sup> Ampalavanar, *Social and Political Developments*, p. 19. The Singapore Indian Association had from 1936 become more open to people from all walks of life — regardless of 'classes and creeds, masters and servants, capitalists and labourers, the rich and the poor' — and had welcomed labourers to be part of it. See speech by Y. K. Menon at the opening of the Kuala Langat Indian Association in 1940 in *The Indian*, 26/12/1940.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>43</sup> H. E. Wilson, *The Klang Strikes of 1941: Labour and Capital in Colonial Malaya. Research Notes and Discussion Paper No. 25* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1931), p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> R. H. Nathan was a member of the CIAM and was a close acquaintance of Y. S. Menon who was a founding member of the CIAM and his brother Y. K. Menon; Stenson, *Class*, p. 56.

such as labour rights, which the *Nesan* had been discussing since its launch became significantly *de rigueur*. While some of the key events which took place are outside the time period of this thesis, such as the Klang Strikes of February 1941, it must be acknowledged that Nathan was the leader behind these strikes as well as several smaller strikes in Klang from 1937. Nathan for instance was said to have prepared three Tamil pamphlets titled ‘Good Manners’, ‘Unity’ and ‘Liquor or Poison?’, which were to be handed free of charge to the labourers in Klang and was particularly active on the ground trying to influence labourers, apart from estate teachers and *Kanganies*, former recruiting agents, on the necessity for improved labour standards.<sup>45</sup> The CIAM was also directly involved in the Klang strikes of 1941 by giving legal aid to labourers who were made victims by their employers.<sup>46</sup> Nathan was seen as a ‘hero’ among the labourers and when he was accused of being a communist and arrested, several hundred Indian labourers had demonstrated outside the office of the Controller of Labour in Kuala Lumpur, demanding his release.<sup>47</sup>

### **Measuring Success: Complete Public Acceptance or Resistance?**

The TRA was the official propaganda appendage of the *Murasu* and the CIAM was the unofficial one of the *Nesan*, and the circuitous relationship between these associations and the papers, particularly in the later half of the 1930s, helped further strengthen, spread and put into action the messages each advocated. The fact that Congress strongly supported the CIAM further led the *Murasu* to see the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Stenson, *Industrial Conflict in Malaya: Prelude to the Communist Revolt of 1948* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 28-30.

<sup>47</sup> *Straits Times*, 14/7/1941.

association as unrepresentative of Tamils in Malaya which led to the *Murasu* to view the CIAM as, like they perceived Congress in India, an elitist association with no concern over Tamils or Tamil culture. Both the TRA and the CIAM had limited success, but both provided the platform for issues which became crucial to the Tamil diaspora following World War Two. This included the demands to be granted full citizenship, given ownership of land for farming and educational rights and successfully demanding that the government of India impose a ban on South Indian labour to Malaya unless there was an improvisation of wages and living conditions; a demand to which the government acceded.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the *Nesan* and the CIAM fought for the official provision of labour unions, something which the Malayan government prior to 1940 had believed they should 'strangle...at birth'.<sup>49</sup> While the CIAM may have exploited the labourers to demand unionisation, which were used as channels for the promotion of Indian nationalism as Wilson argues, intermittent small-scale striking which eventually culminated in the Klang strikes of 1941 provided opportunities to learn for both the labourers and professionals alike.<sup>50</sup> As Stenson pointed out, the strike was a timely reminder of the political and economic backwardness of the Indian community in Malaya.<sup>51</sup>

As Chapter Three had elucidated, despite the attempts made by the *Nesan* to reach out to masses from the lower castes, which the *Murasu* had entirely ignored since it saw the *Nesan* as the paragon of Brahmanism, the *Murasu* did the same with

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<sup>48</sup> Parmer, *Colonial Labor*, pp. 76-77. A Tamil Brahmin in the CIAM, K. A. Neelakandha Aiyer, who was Secretary of the Association in 1938, was at the forefront of these demands.

<sup>49</sup> Charles Gamba, *The Origins of Trade Unionism in Malaya: A Study in Colonial Labour Unrest* (Singapore: Donald Moore for Eastern University Press Ltd, 1962), p. 4; Stenson, *Class*, p. 51.

<sup>50</sup> Wilson, *Klang Strikes*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>51</sup> Stenson, *Class*, p. 70.

the CIAM despite the efforts undertaken by the association to fight for the rights of Indians in Malaya. Naturally, the TRA like the *Munnetram* and the *Murasu*, fought for reform within the confines of Tamil society while the CIAM, like the *Nesan*, espoused reforms keeping in mind the larger diasporic Indian community in Malaya. While it is impossible to analyse if Tamils exclusively belonged to one of these two camps (and it is not the aim of this study to inquire into this), it must be pointed out that the working and the underclass were swayed by some of the ideas raised by these newspapers and the associations. Habermas in his discussion on the third stage of the public sphere mentions that in a mass industrial society, there exists a movement ‘from a public critically reflecting on its culture to one that merely consumes it’ where the masses are described as being so malleable that they accept everything they hear without resistance.<sup>52</sup> My study of the Tamil press in Malaya has shown that that was not the case. There was resistance. Older Tamils, for instance, saw the TRA as an atheistic association and shunned it.<sup>53</sup> Tamils, who wanted to challenge Brahminical Hinduism that the *Munnetram* and *Murasu* together with the TRA called for, turned to non-Brahminical Hinduism, with the adoption and veneration of non-Brahminical cult deities such as the *Mariamman* and *Iyengar*.<sup>54</sup> This further perpetuated superstitions such as the need for animal sacrifice to appease these gods, which went against the beliefs of the *Murasu* and the TRA. As Robin Jeffrey, in his study of Indian newspapers, points out, the public sphere is like a public park; ‘a wide variety

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<sup>52</sup> Habermas, quoted in Arjun Appadurai and Carol A Breckenridge, ‘Public Modernity in India’ in Breckenridge (ed.), *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. 2.

<sup>53</sup> Natesan, oral history interview.

<sup>54</sup> For a detailed study of village deities in India, see Rev. Henry Whitehead, *The Village Gods of South India* (London: Oxford University Press, 1921). On the conceptual differences within the Hindu system, see Edward Harper (ed.), *Religion in South Asia* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964), pp. 1-20.



of people may frequent it'. It cannot be assumed however that everyone goes to this park with the same intention.<sup>55</sup> Likewise, attendance to programmes organised by the TRA or the CIAM did not automatically mean that the public believed in or followed what was being promoted by these groups.

Habermas' treatment of the public sphere as being coterminous with a community within the frameworks of a nation-state is also challenged by the Tamil public sphere in 1930s Malaya. For one, it was essentially transnational and it was not homogenous. The relationship the *Munnetram*, *Murasu* and the TRA had with the sub-national Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu as well as the relationship the *Nesan* and the CIAM had with Congress nationalists confirm the existence of several 'publics'.<sup>56</sup>

This Chapter has analysed how the circuitous relationship between the newspapers in study and the associations they were linked to helped spread the message they were advocating beyond the 'texts', so that the illiterate underclass could be kept informed, and reformed. The fact that these newspapers and the associations made attempts at spreading the messages to the underclass; putting up didactic dramas, having the *Toṅṅar Paṭai* talk to them about the importance of reform and mobilising labourers to demand for the provision of Unions clearly shows that both the newspapers and the associations acknowledged the significant role the

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<sup>55</sup> Robin Jeffrey, *India's Newspaper Revolution: Capitalism, Politics and the Indian-Language Press, 1977-99* (London: Hurst & Company, 2000), p. 16.

<sup>56</sup> Several scholars have been critical of Habermas' theory and have discussed the existence of several publics. See N. Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy' in C. Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), pp. 109-142; Catherine Squires, 'Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres', *Communication Theory*, 12, 4 (November 2002), pp 446-468.

underclass play and could play in redefining the Tamil public sphere and their cultural identity in Malaya.

## CHAPTER V

### Conclusion: Revisiting the Past in Contemporary Malaysia

‘...the newspaper is the teacher *par excellence* to anyone who wants to progress, the newspaper is the mother who feeds people with knowledge, the newspaper is the father who instils good values... the newspaper is a true friend...’  
- Ramaswamy Naicker, 1929<sup>57</sup>

In 1957, Ramaswamy Naicker sent a memo of thanks for the birthday celebrations that were conducted in Penang in light of his seventy-ninth birthday. In the memo, he wrote to Tamils who have made Malaya their home:

‘When I think of you, I venture to say that you are lucky. Unlike your brothers (in India), you live with freedom...’<sup>58</sup>

However, Ramaswamy may have been too quick with his comments, particularly considering the plight of Indian communities in Malaysia today. One of the Malay papers in the 1930s was said to have alluded immigrants in the country to carpenters: ‘If a carpenter is commissioned to build a house for someone, and is paid by the owner when the work is done, what right has the carpenter to live with the owner in the house that he did not own? He has already been paid, hasn’t he?’<sup>59</sup> Some seventy to eighty years later, similar Malay sentiments towards its ethnic minorities continue to be voiced out. The Kelantan Crown Prince Tengku Mohammas Faris mentions that ‘no one should question the special rights and privileges of the Malays because it is quid pro quo in return for providing citizenship to 2.7 million people of other races who joined the Malay Federation’. The UMNO-controlled *Utusan Melayu*, not

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<sup>57</sup> *KA*, 3/3/1929.

<sup>58</sup> *Tiraviṭṭa Tantai Periyār 79-Ām Āṇṭu Viṭṭa Ciṅṅṅu Malar* (Father of Dravidam Periyar’s 79th Year Celebration Souvenir) (Penang : Jothee & Company, 1958) , p. 7

<sup>59</sup> Hussain, *Malay Nationalism*, p. 124.

changing one bit from what it was in the 1930s, unsurprisingly backed these statements.<sup>60</sup> One Tamil newspaper in Malaysia today, the *Makkal Osai* (People's Voice), which focuses on ethnic Indian issues and which the government had accused of being critical of them, was banned, only to be later allowed to be published due to public outcry.<sup>61</sup> Here, the importance of the press in wanting to be the voice of the community and protector of their rights is not a recent phenomenon. It goes back to the early twentieth century, when the newspapers in study have done the same.

Malayan Tamil newspapers examined in this thesis, by fulfilling the five aspects of the modern free press, asserted that they were manifestations of modernity, just as they were tools of modernisation. Tamil cultural identity was imagined to be one that was civilised and modern (and has always been), respectable and dignified and editors of these papers saw the need for individual and social reform as necessary instruments for a re-blossoming of the modern Tamil in Malaya. Social upliftment of Tamils, the papers stressed, was achievable through education, eradicating superstitious habits, advocating women's rights, practicing temperance, and even learning proper hygiene habits.

However, in this *imaginaire* of the modern Tamil, there existed multiple levels of imagined spaces, distinctly marked by a constructed Brahmin-as-Aryan and Tamil-as-Dravidian-and-non-Brahmin divide. The *Nesan* saw Hinduism as an intrinsic element of Tamil cultural identity, while the *Munnetram* and *Murasu* saw Hinduism, which they argued was manipulated by the Brahmins to subordinate the Dravidians, as the biggest threat to Tamils. The alignment of the *Munnetram* and

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<sup>60</sup> *TST*, 16/4/2008.

<sup>61</sup> *TST*, 17/4/2008.

*Murasu* with the politico-ideological Dravidian Movement and the Self-Respect ideals espoused by Ramaswamy Naicker in Tamil Nadu proved its parochial imaginings of Tamil identity, by viewing Brahmins as the immediate threat. The *Nesan* on the other hand, being strong followers of Congress, had imagined the diasporic Tamil identity as something that would be embedded within a larger Indian identity in Malaya and it addressed the long-term issues facing the Indian community. These papers also force us to acknowledge the need to think beyond national boundaries, since there did not exist a single national *imaginaire*. The *Munnetram* and *Murasu* also challenge present understandings of Tamil identity in Malaysia as being fervently religious as well as colonial understandings of Indians as being religiously and spiritually transcendent since these papers fervently imagined Tamil cultural identity outside a religious framework.

The fact that several Malayan Tamils were illiterate meant that newspapers propagating reform had to rely on oral means to disseminate these messages. Instead of destroying oral culture, the *Munnetram* and *Murasu* promoted it and saw it as complementary to print. The circuitous relationship which these papers had with the TRA enabled it to further spread its reform messages, both through print and orality. The newspapers in analysis also challenge Habermas' leaving out of the underclass and the role they play in the development of the public sphere. The underclass in Malaya played a crucial role in printing and spreading of ideas received via the newspapers, particularly through the channel of the voluntary organisations. In the late 1930s, the *Nesan's* circuitous relationship with the CIAM, further echoed its support of trade unions for the betterment of labour standards. Here, the underclass

become crucial again since they made several strikes in the estates possible during this period, further strengthening the *Nesan's* and the CIAM's call for labour improvements. The relationship the *Munnetram*, *Murasu* and the TRA had with the sub-national Dravidian movement as well as the relationship the *Nesan* and the CIAM had with Congress nationalists also illustrate the transnational nature of the Tamil public sphere in Malaya.

The diasporic Tamil cultural identity, like the Tamil public sphere in Malaya in the 1930s, was not homogenous and was one that was highly complex with multiple spheres of imagining. Tamil identity as imagined by newspapers in Malaya had chosen their own points of references in their process of imagining and these became their identity markers. Despite several concerns shared by Tamil newspapers then and now, the imagining of 'becoming' Tamil in Malaya appeared more crucial in the context of the migrant culture of the 1930s, than 'being' Tamil today in the context of a sovereign Malaysian nation-state where Tamils are citizens. For one, the Brahmins-as-Aryans mentality has faded and appears no longer relevant. Secondly, the immediate threat to Tamilness now appears to be the highly Islamising 'Malay' Malaysia. While uncertain if R. H. Nathan or the CIAM were household names in Malaya in the 1930s and 1940s, it can be safely said however that HINDRAF today has become a household name, clearly pointing to how issues which were inadequately addressed some seventy years ago, have returned. We are revisiting history, and as the results from the Twelfth Malaysian General Election confirm, history is being challenged at the same time.

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## APPENDIX

### TABLE 1

#### INDIAN POPULATION IN MALAYA (1931, 1940)

| State/Settlement              | 1931           | 1940           |
|-------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Singapore                     | 51 019         | 60 207         |
| Penang                        | 58 020         | 32 115         |
| Malacca                       | 23 238         | 28 416         |
| <b>Straits Settlements</b>    | <b>132 277</b> | <b>149 729</b> |
| Perak                         | 159 152        | 196 945        |
| Selangor                      | 155 924        | 194 291        |
| Negri Sembilan                | 50 100         | 59 472         |
| Pahang                        | 14 820         | 17 321         |
| <b>Federated Malay States</b> | <b>379 996</b> | <b>468 029</b> |
| Johore                        | 51 038         | 58 622         |
| Kedah                         | 50 824         | 61 161         |
| Perlis                        | 966            | 1126           |
| Kelantan                      | 6752           | 7680           |
| Trengganu                     | 1371           | 1421           |
| Brunei                        | 377            | 1061           |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                  | <b>624 009</b> | <b>748 829</b> |

Source: Kernial Singh Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement (1786 – 1957)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 30-35; Latiffa Khan, *Indians in Malaya, 1900-1945*. Unpublished M.A. Thesis (University of Hong Kong, 1963)

**TABLE 2**  
**PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF INDIANS IN MALAYA BY STATE,**  
**1931 and 1947**

| STATE                 | 1931 (%) | 1947 (%) |
|-----------------------|----------|----------|
| <b>Singapore</b>      | 8.2      | 11.5     |
| <b>Penang</b>         | 8.5      | 9.5      |
| <b>Malacca</b>        | 3.7      | 3.3      |
| <b>Perak</b>          | 26.2     | 23.4     |
| <b>Selangor</b>       | 25.1     | 24.2     |
| <b>Negri Sembilan</b> | 8.1      | 6.4      |
| <b>Johore</b>         | 8.2      | 9.2      |
| <b>Kedah</b>          | 8.2      | 8.6      |
| <b>Perlis</b>         | 0.2      | 0.3      |
| <b>Pahang</b>         | 2.3      | 2.5      |
| <b>Kelantan</b>       | 1.1      | 0.8      |
| <b>Trengganu</b>      | 0.2      | 0.3      |
| <b>Total (%)</b>      | 100      | 100      |

Source: Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya*, p. 208

**TABLE 3****INDIAN POPULATION IN MALAYA BY SUB-GROUP, 1931**

| <b>Sub-Group</b>    | <b>Figure</b>  |
|---------------------|----------------|
| Tamil               | 514 959        |
| Telugu              | 32 541         |
| Malayali            | 35 125         |
| Punjabi etc         | 31 001         |
| United Province     | 1 898          |
| Bengal              | 1 833          |
| Burmese             | 1 160          |
| Bombay              | 1 388          |
| Bihar and Orissa    | 219            |
| Nepal               | 490            |
| Others/Unidentified | 3 395          |
| <b>TOTAL</b>        | <b>624 009</b> |

Source: C. A. Vlieland, *British Malaya (the Colony of the Straits Settlements and the Malay States under British protection, Namely the Federated States of Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang and the States of Johore, Kedah, Kelantan, Trengganu, Perlis and Brunei: A Report on the 1931 Census and on Certain Problems of Vital Statistics* (London: Crown Agents for the Colonies, 1932), p. 83.

**TABLE 4**  
**DISTRIBUTION OF TAMILS IN MALAYA, 1931**

| <b>State</b>                  | <b>Figure</b>  |
|-------------------------------|----------------|
| Singapore                     | 37 293         |
| Penang                        | 52 327         |
| Malacca                       | 20 205         |
| <b>Straits Settlements</b>    | <b>109 825</b> |
| Perak                         | 125 136        |
| Selangor                      | 140 008        |
| Negri Sembilan                | 41 431         |
| Pahang                        | 11 308         |
| <b>Federated Malay States</b> | <b>317 883</b> |
| Johore                        | 38 534         |
| Kedah                         | 43 007         |
| Kelantan                      | 3 862          |
| Trengganu                     | 642            |
| Perlis                        | 793            |
| Brunei                        | 119            |
| Unlocated                     | 294            |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                  | <b>514 959</b> |

Source: Vlieland, *A Report on the 1931 Census and on Certain Problems of Vital Statistics*, p. 85.

**TABLE 5**  
**LITERACY AMONG INDIANS IN MALAYA, 1931.**

|                    | <b>STRAITS<br/>SETTLEMENTS</b> | <b>FEDERATED<br/>MALAY<br/>STATES</b> | <b>JOHORE</b> | <b>KEDAH</b> | <b>KELANTAN</b> | <b>TRENGGANU</b> |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------|------------------|
| <b>Literates</b>   | 49,789                         | 92,974                                | 13,057        | 9,962        | 1,817           | 638              |
| <b>Illiterates</b> | 82,488                         | 2,87,022                              | 37,981        | 40,862       | 4,935           | 733              |

Source: Vlieland, *A Report on the 1931 Census and on Certain Problems of Vital Statistics* (London: Crown Agents for the Colonies, 1932), pp. 333, 339, 349, 350.

## GLOSSARY

**Adi-Dravidar** – Literally meaning ‘original natives of the Dravidian land’, a reformed term to call the untouchables and lower caste groups in India such as the Paraiyah, Pallar, Chakkili, Ambattan among several others who have been deemed outcastes in Hindu society. The term is said to have been coined by Ramaswamy Naicker.

**Aiya** - Sir

**Aiyar / Iyer / Iyengar** – Within the Brahmin community, there are two main sects; the Iyer and the Iyengar, who come from the same *gotra* (lineage or clan) though varied because of philosophical differences. The differences between these groups and the rivalry as often noted in India were not apparent among the Brahmins in Malaya during this period in examination. The Iyengars subscribe to the *Visishtadvaita* philosophy codified by Ramanuja while the Iyers recognise the *Advaita* philosophy propounded by Adi Shankara.

**Ambāl** – The goddess; Lord Shiva’s consort.

**Āntāl** – A devout female saint of Lord Shiva, who was at times worshipped. See Vidya Dehejia, *Antal and Her Path of Love: Poems of a Woman Saint from South India* (State University of New York Press, 1990).

**Bhagavad Gita** – Literally ‘the Lord’s Song’, which forms part of the Mahabharata, one of the greatest epics of India. The Gita is considered to be a significant Hindu holy text and compromised a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna. The dialogue raises issues of knowledge, action and devotion and Krishna ‘teaches the synthesis of all the three courses that are open to human beings’. See O. P. Ghai, *The Sterling Book of Bhagavad Gita* (New Dawn Press Group, 2005), pp. 13-14.

**Brahman** – Sacerdotal caste; the highest of four castes.

**Caṅkam (literature)** – or Sangam literature. The term sangam refers to ‘academy’ or ‘assembly’, which served as early institutions for poets and writers to publish their works. Also refers to the earliest writings in the Tamil language, which have been thought to have been produced in three *sangams*, dating back to 200 BCE and 200 CE. See Kamil Zvelebil, *The Smile of Murugan: On Tamil Literature of South India* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), pp. 49-50; George L Hart III, *The Poems of Ancient Tamil: Their Milieu and Their Sanskrit Counterparts* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

**Centamiḷ** - Straight/ Standard Tamil; an esteemed variety of Tamil that is ‘pure’ and ‘correct’.

**Chandala** – A fifth group, outside the four main caste groups. Chandalas were outcastes who were considered to be untouchables because of mixed-caste origins and because they perform unskilled, menial work.

**Chikkili** – A Tamil caste of leather workers.

**Chettiar** – Also known as the Natukottai Chettiers (a sub caste of the Chetti). Highly exclusive money lending clan, who were deeply involved in banking, businesses, trading, running shops. Originally from Chettinad in Tamil Nadu, India.

**Cīrtiruttam** – Or Seerthirutham, meaning reform. Sarangapany had published a newspaper with this title.

**Cuyamariyātai Iyakkam** – Self-Respect Movement.

**Dalits / Other Backward Castes** - In the emerging British classification system, ‘Backward Castes’ represented a mix of non-Brahmin lower and middle caste groups that were classified as ‘Sudras’. See Glynis George, “‘Four makes Society’”: Women’s organisation, Dravidian Nationalism and Women’s Intepretation of Caste, Gender and Change in South Asia’, in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (New Series), 36, 3 (Sep-Dec 2002), pp. 495-524, p. 499, n. 2. The backwards castes therefore should not be put under the same category as the Dalits. The Dalits largely encompassed of people who were pejoratively known as the untouchables. Often, the Dalits are also called the Harijans or the Sudras. For a discussion on this, see S. V. Rajadurai & V. Geetha, ‘A Response to John Harris’ in Andrew Wyatt & John Zavos (eds.), *Decentring the Indian Nation* (London: Frank Cass and Company Ltd, 2003), p. 120.

**Gita** – See ‘Bhagavad Gita’.

**Goundar** – A smaller sub-group of the Vellalar caste. See ‘Vellalar’.

**Hari-Hara** - composite image of Vishnu and Shiva. For details on iconology, see D. C. Bhattacharyya, *Iconology of Composite Images* (Munshiram Manoharlal, 1980).

**Harijans** – A reformed name given to an untouchable, meaning ‘people of God’. See ‘Dalits’. For a study of caste distinctions within the Harijan community, see Robert Deliege, ‘Replication and Consensus: Untouchability, Caste and Ideology in India’, *Man*, New Series, 27, 1 (March 1992), pp. 155-173.

**Jāti** – Caste.

**Kalappumaṇattāl jāti oḷiyum** – Intermarriage/ mixed-marriage destroys caste.

**Kaoravam** – Dignity, pride.

**Kangany** – A labourer, who due to higher caste or initiative he has shown at work, is given the responsibility by his employer to recruit more labourers from his village or neighbourhood. Often acted as the middlemen between the labourers he recruits and the employers.

**Kaṭamai** – Duty

**Kāvaṭi** - The *Kāvaṭi* (or Kavadi) is a large wooden decorated arch often adorned with peacock feathers and milk pots and often carried by devotees during Taipūcam as an act of penance, in honour of Muruga. See ‘Taipūcam’.

**Keling Busoh** – Malay for ‘Smelly Keling’. ‘Keling’ is a derivative of Kalinga, from where several Indians had come to work in Malaya and this became the common derogatory name for all Indians in Malaya and Singapore.

**Koṭuntamiḷ** - Literally ‘crooked Tamil’. A variety of less highly-esteemed way of speaking Tamil as compared to Centamiḷ.

**Kshatriya** – Literally means ‘protectors of the gentle people’; a military caste generally consisting of warriors and kings. They were second of four *varnas* and were only below the Brahmans.

**Maṇippiravāḷam** – Tamil prose characterised by heavy Sanskrit loan words. Tamil-speaking Brahmans tend to utilise *Maṇippiravāḷam*.

**Mariyātai** – Respect, respectable. For how this term was used and has evolved in South Indian politics and culture, see Pamela Rice, ‘Revolution and Rank in Tamil Nationalism’, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 55, 2 (May 1996), pp. 359-383.

**Maruthuvar** – A caste mainly made up of native physicians and barbers.

**Makkaḷ Cakti** – People power.

**Muttamiḷ** - The ‘three’ Tamils; Tamil as the language of literary poetry and prose, music and drama

**Nadar** – A caste of mainly toddy tappers; very low in the hierarchy.

**Nākarīkam** – Modern, Civilised.

**Pallar** – A caste of upwardly mobile agriculturalist.

**Paraiyah** – A term which has been taken to use in the English language, literally means an outcaste, usually referring to people who work in the field and house servants.



**Sangam** – Originally meaning ‘academy’ or ‘assembly’. Later came to be commonly defined as ‘Association’. See ‘Caṅkam (literature)’.

**Shanmuga** – Another name for ‘Muruga’, Shiva’s son. See ‘Taipūcam’.

**Sudra** – Pejoratively meaning ‘the son of a prostitute’. The last of four main castes, they were not outcastes (outcastes belonged to a fifth group called the Chandalas), but rather were the lowest in the caste system, comprising or artisans, mechanics and labourers obligated to serve higher castes.

**Taipūcam** – A traditional non-Brahminical Hindu ceremony, where devotees of Muruga (Lord Shiva’s son, also known as Skanda, Shanmuga, Vēla) carry the *Kāvai* as a form of penance. Muruga is the caste-deity of the Chettiars. Often, devotees are pierced with spears and hooks during the ceremony. For pictures of devotees in 1930s Malaya participating in the ceremony, see L. Elizabeth Lewis, ‘The Fire-Walking Hindus of Singapore’, *The National Geographic Magazine*, Washington, D.C., Vol. LIX, No. 4 (April 1931), pp. 513-22.

**Tamilpparru** – Tamil language devotion.

**Tamilaiyē Valipaṭa Vēṅṅum** – (one) must worship the Tamil language.

**Taṅittamil iyakkam** – ‘Pure Tamil’ Movement; referring to ridding Sanskrit words from the Tamil language, said to have started circa 1916.

**Tiraviṭanāṭu** – Dravidian land or Dravidistan, referring to an independent state which Ramaswamy Naicker wanted for the Dravidian people.

**Tīmiti** – literally ‘step on fire’, referring to the fire-walking ceremony. For pictures of devotees in 1930s Malaya participating in the ceremony, see L. Elizabeth Lewis, ‘The Fire-Walking Hindus of Singapore’, *The National Geographic Magazine*, Washington, D.C., Vol. LIX, No. 4 (April 1931), pp. 513-22.

**Tom-Tom** - The tom-tom is a round musical instrument usually played during funerals and only people from the lower-castes were given the task of playing this.

**Trimurti** – Literally the ‘three forms’; a concept in Hinduism referring to Brahma, the creator, Vishnu, the preserver and Shiva, the destroyer. See Benjamin Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India* (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1959), p. 26; Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972).

**Tuṭippu** - Tuṭippu could be translated to mean a few things, including ‘anxiety’ or ‘zest for life’, though in the context of this study, the word refers to the pulsation of the heart.

**Vācaṇai** – Scent, smell.

**Vaiśyas** – Mercantile community engaged in trade, including goldsmiths and gemstone merchants. The third of four main castes.

**Varna** – An indigenous proposal which explains how sections of population could be ‘identified and ranked’ as stipulated by the *Manu-dharma*. See Simon Charsley, “‘Untouchable’: What’s in a Name’, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 2, 1 (March 1996), pp. 1-23, p. 3. Privileges varied among the four main *varnas* and among other things, only Brahmans were permitted to ‘wear ornaments of high quality gold and silver’, the Kshatriyas ‘inferior quality precious metals’, the Vaiśyas brass and Sudras iron. See Oppi Untracht, *Traditional Jewelry of India* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), p. 42.

**Vellalar** – A cultivating / farming caste, known for their strict adherence to a Brahminical form of ‘Saivism’. See, M. S. S. Pandian, ‘Notes on the Transformation of “Dravidian” Ideology: Tamilnadu, c. 1900-1940’, *Social Scientist*, 22, 5/6 (May-June 1994), pp. 84-104, n.1. The Vellalars are also numerically strong. A smaller subgroup among them are the Goundars.