10-1-1981

Renaissance in the Life of Saminata Aiyar: A Tamil Scholar

Dennis Hudson
Smith College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol7/iss7/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
RENAISSANCE IN THE LIFE OF SAMINATA AIYAR, A TAMIL SCHOLAR

Dennis Hudson

Rebirth in the languages and literatures of South Asia has occurred at various times, but the subject of study here is the one the subcontinent is now experiencing. As the many vernacular languages and literatures of South Asia respond to the modern world, they develop methods and styles to express a newly emerging self-consciousness shared by their speakers and readers. These developments, of course, are made by individuals whose own experiences of the world are in part experiences of renaissance. They gain a new awareness of themselves and their world through a re-evaluation of their past because of new intellectual forces at work in their present. In South Asia the re-evaluated past is often one that predates Muslim political rule. The new intellectual forces are those ideals and ideologies that derive from the institutions and technologies introduced through British political rule.

This study will focus on one man's experience in the last quarter of the 19th century. His own personal "rebirth" as a scholar of literature throws light on the question of exactly how those new intellectual forces have interacted with traditional cultures to produce the contemporary renaissance in South Asian languages. The language in question is Tamil.

Among the fourteen official vernacular languages of contemporary India, the southern language of Tamil is spoken by perhaps forty million people, and more if one includes northern Sri Lanka. Tamil includes many regional and caste dialects still searching for written expression, as well as an unbroken formal literary tradition stretching back for about two thousand years. It is in this formal written literary tradition that the renaissance is taking place, a complicated movement that includes processes begun in the 19th century.

One process is the shift from the handwritten palm leaf text to the printed book coinciding with a shift from literature composed in poetry to literature written in prose. In this printed material there is also a shift from stories and themes that take place in the traditional Hindu culture of Dharma to stories and themes that take place in a more historically self-conscious and critical framework. In the culture of Dharma, literature expresses the concerns and values of a finely tuned hierarchical
society based on the distinctions between the ritually pure and impure. Characters in stories and biographies tend to fit clearcut models and ideals, while the divine, human, and natural realms penetrate one another easily and naturally. They are components of the single order of Dharma.

In the framework of historical self-consciousness and criticism, however, a viewpoint encouraged by the institutions and ideologies of British rule, the world of Dharma is partially transcended through the rediscovery of an ancient past that is understood in historical terms, and through the assimilated values of the 19th century European intellectual culture. Under this influence Dharma tends to be broken apart into the categories of the divine, the human, and the natural and their interpenetration is no longer obvious.

As this transcendence of the world of Dharma takes place in Tamil literature, there is a gradual shift in the themes of the literature. At first the overwhelming subject matter of printed Tamil materials in the 19th century was that of the Dharma culture led by Hindu religious institutions. Gradually this dominance receded in favor of subject matters reflecting a variety of interests and concerns, some highly critical of the traditional Hindu perspectives. Along with this change has gone the shift from an elite audience of high-caste literati, to a mass multi-caste audience whose literacy increases with each generation.

The Tamil renaissance today is exemplified in Madras, for example, by the fact that the city's most modern institutions use symbols of Tamil Nadu's most ancient past. Maxims from a Tamil text on ethics of the fifth or sixth century are painted near the driver's seat of public buses. A statue of the heroine of a fifth century epic stands on the thoroughfare of Marina Beach near the University of Madras. Poems of ancient Tamil bards are standard subjects of college syllabi. The names of kings and heroes of the classical literature are the names of contemporary politicians.

The way in which modern institutions and the ancient past have come together in the Tamil renaissance is illustrated vividly in the life of one of the great scholars of the movement, U. V. Saminata Aiyar (1855-1942). He was one of three 19th century scholars responsible for initiating the recovery of the ancient past. As another noted, Tamil phrased it, Arumuka Navalar (1822-1879) broke the ground for publishing ancient "nill literature, C. V. Damodaram Pillai (1832-1901) built the walls, while Saminata Aiyar constructed the roof and made it a temple. Through Saminata Aiyar's autobiography, *En Caritttram* (My Life Story) we get a glimpse of the process of his "temple building".
It occurred until his forty-fourth year, 1899.* His own life was itself a renaissance. He lived the interaction of the culture of Dharma and the culture of historical and critical awareness, and held the two together by a constant focus on the ancient past. "He became Tamil," one scholar has written, "and Tamil became him. He was Tamil. Tamil was he."10

Saminata Aiyar began his literary career as a student in traditional Tanjore District, fully immersed in Hindu tradition. There the ideal life was the one lived according to models received through custom and literature (ilakkiyam). The goal was to experience one's self and one's world through finely chiseled models of Dharma and in turn to give expression to that experience in poetry by means of well articulated canons of style (ilakkakanam).11 In contrast to this beginning, Saminata Aiyar ended his life at the age of eighty-seven in the modernizing city of Madras with an honorary Ph.D., having served as a college teacher and administrator, having lectured widely, and having published ninety-three works.12 Among his publications are ancient epics and collections of poetry he recovered in their palm leaf forms, edited, explained in prose introductions, and saw through the press. There is also among his publications the first prose biography in Tamil,13 an eight hundred page life of his own teacher, a unique way at the time for a Tamil Hindu to express his guru bhakti. There are, as well, numerous essays on ancient Tamil society and culture: And there is his own unfinished autobiography, written in one hundred and twenty-two installments for the Tamil periodical Anandavikatan between 1940 and 1942. It is one of the earliest published autobiographies in Tamil.14

The autobiography, En carittiram, is itself a testimony to Saminata Aiyar's transcendence of the traditional world of Dharma where the relatively timeless culture of received models gives little encouragement to a literary expression of the unique qualities in one's own life.15 Significantly, however, while changing he remained very traditional. His main interest was always with the past, not with the present. All of his scholarly work served to recover the Tamil past.16 He lived his own personal life according to the orthopraxis of Smarta Brahmans. His own devotion to Siva he expressed in poetry composed strictly in accord with the canons of the past. He remained inside Dharma but with one foot stepping into historical criticism.

The autobiography gives us important insights into the particular shape his culture of Dharma had taken in the Tamil context, a shape somewhat different from other regions of India. As his caste name Aiyar indicates, Saminata Aiyar was a Smarta Brahman. His family heritage was music and his traditional occupation would have been that
of a vocal musician in the Carnatic discipline, or perhaps a Sanskrit scholar, or possibly even a priest serving other Brahmans. But early in life he acquired a burning interest in Tamil literature and was unable to flourish in any other subject. Giving in to his persistent interest, Saminata Aiyar’s father turned him over the best Tamil scholar of the region, and probably of his day, the poet Minakshisundaram Pillai.

This is where the peculiarities of Tamil culture come into play. Minakshisundaram Pillai was not a Brahman, but as his caste name Pillai indicates, a Vellala. The Vellalas are ranked high in the Tamil social hierarchy and have been the traditional bearers of the literary culture along with the Brahmans. But according to Vedic norms articulated in the Sanskrit texts on Dharma developed in the north, the Vellalas are ranked as Sudras, the lowest of the four classes that make up the hierarchy of Dharma. The fact that a Smarta Brahman father turned his son over to a teacher of a Sudra caste should alert us to a difference between society in the south and in the north. In many respects the Tamil renaissance is the assertion of political, cultural and literary leadership by the high-caste non-Brahmans, that is by Sudras, over against what they perceived as the traditional dominance of Brahmans and of Sanskrit. Among the leaders of the renaissance, non-Brahman caste titles such as Pillai, Mutaliyar, Chettiyar, predominate, but not exclusively. The Brahman titles of Aiyar and Aiyangar are also present; Saminata Aiyar himself illustrates the fact that the Tamil renaissance is not exclusively a non-Brahman affair even though aspects of it are anti-Brahman in nature.

Under the direction of his teacher, Saminata Aiyar’s education was thoroughly traditional. At the age of sixteen he entered into the period of *gurukulavacam*, living with the guru and his family along with other students. Much of his time was spent at the non-Brahman monastery of Tiruvavatuturai where Minakshisundaram Pillai served as a revered Tamil teacher to the sadhus and the abbot, the *mathadipati*. Saminata Aiyar was the only Brahman in this elite body of students and wherever he went with his teacher, arrangements had to be made for separately prepared food to preserve his ritual purity.

Within this context, Saminata Aiyar learned a vast body of Tamil literature that was almost entirely Hindu. Except for commentaries it was all poetry, covered the subjects of grammar, mythology, ethics and wisdom, and was preserved on palm leaf texts. He studied it by memorizing the texts and their detailed expositions by his teacher. And his teacher’s mode of life was itself part of his education, a model for him to imitate.
Saminata Aiyar’s outstanding scholarly abilities emerged over the next five years and Minakshisundaram Pillai chose him for special studies and to serve as his own scribe whenever he was hired by a village or temple to compose a narrative poem about the local deity. When he made such a composition, Minakshisundaram Pillai would draw upon earlier Sanskrit and Tamil texts and, following Tamil poetic canons, would compose verses in his mind that he would recite to Saminata Aiyar who would write them down in a palm leaf book. The relationship between the two represented over time the ideal of the relationship of a teacher and his disciple. Both were brilliant students of literature and both were devoted to each other.

When Minakshisundaram Pillai died in 1876, Saminata Aiyar was twenty-one years old and had already made a name for himself as a Tamil scholar. The abbot of the monastery at Tiruvavatuturai kept him on to replace his teacher as resident scholar and teacher. Saminata Aiyar stayed there four years, often travelling with the abbot on his trips to affiliated monasteries around Tamil Nadu. Many men of status and wealth came to respect him as a young scholar and he in turn learned the locale of important palm leaf book libraries, knowledge that would prove to be very useful later in his career.

The preservation of Tamil literature throughout the centuries depended on the copying and storing of palm leaf texts in libraries under the control of local rulers, of individual families of poets and scholars, or of the monasteries. By the middle of the 19th century these libraries had become badly neglected. Ancient poetic works that had been transmitted for over a thousand years were disappearing because the palm leaves of the books disintegrated from lack of care. When touched, some would crumble; some were eaten by insects; some were used by indifferent cooks as kindling for the kitchen fire; some were respectfully thrown away by immersion in water. Part of the reason for this loss was the social change that had occurred due to political instability in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, part was due to the rising status of English as a language of upward mobility and power, and part was due to intentional neglect by Hindu leaders themselves.

During the 18th century two leaders in the monastic system led by the monastery at Tiruvavatuturai actively discouraged the study and teaching of those Tamil texts that were not Hindu. This meant that by the middle of the 19th century, some of the most ancient Tamil works that were Jain and Buddhist were almost entirely forgotten. The library of the Tiruvavatuturai monastery itself contained a copy of the Jaina epic, Civaka cintamani, that Minakshisundaram Pillai had copied by hand.
but which he had never even mentioned to his most brilliant student. This book, along with two other ancient epics, the Jaina Cilappatikaram and the Buddhist Manimekalai, Saminata Aiyar had never even set eyes on even though he was perhaps the best educated man in Tamil literature of his generation. From a combination of religious bias and scholarly ignorance, these ancient works had effectively disappeared from the culture of Dharma.

They had not disappeared completely, however, and British rule provided a stimulus for their eventual recovery. The city of Madras, which had been developing around Fort St. George since the 17th century, was the center for the British administration of the Tamil region. In 1835 the Government removed the restriction of printing presses to Government and Christian missionary societies and allowed any Indian who could afford a press to have one. The Government established its own revenue collecting and governing system throughout the region, generating the growth of a class of Tamil bureaucratic officials, civil judges (munfs), and revenue officers (tahsildars), drawn from members of the high-caste elite.4 These men, educated in English, were often learned in Tamil and formed a bridge between the two cultures. By 1857 the Government had established the University of Madras, a development out of early 19th century British Indological interests, and the syllabus included the study and teaching of Tamil literature.

Through their collection and study of Tamil palm leaf texts, European scholars had come to know about the existence of these neglected Tamil classics. In 1868 the Rev. Henry Bower, a Eurasian, with the help of a Tamil Christian convert well educated in traditional lore, published a version of the first chapter of the Civaka cintamani from incomplete manuscripts that had been collected.5 In 1870 this portion of the 10th century Jaina epic became part of the Tamil poetry examination for the University’s B.A., a fact crucial to Saminata Aiyar’s scholarly life.

The crucial turning point in his life Saminata Aiyar described in one chapter of his autobiography which we shall now turn to. After having spent four years as Tamil teacher at the monastery, he received the appointment as Tamil teacher at the Government College in Kumbakonam, a center for British administration in Tanjore District not far from Tiruvannamalai. As he describes it in the chapter entitled “What’s the Use?”, the turning point came when he met the newly appointed civil judge, Ramasami Mutaliyar of Salem (1852–1892).6

When engaged by college work, I spent time during my leisure hours teaching students who came to the house. By that time Salem Ramasami Mutaliyar

https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol7/iss7/5
had been transferred from Ariyilur to Kumbhakonam as munsif. My good karma took me to him and because of his friendship, a new path opened up in my life. I was able to comprehend the full scope of Tamil literature. Without losing my joy in the sweetness I perceived in the Tamil of the antati, kalam-pakam, pillaitamil, ula, kovai, and other poems and puranas, I now joyfully fed on the sweetness inherent to the delightful Tamil lying concealed within graceful Tamil books of great age and value. And I received the boon of making the pleasure of this knowledge available to others.

Saminata Aiyar then explains the background of Ramasami Mutaliyar. He came from a zamindar landowner family and his father had been a revenue officer. He had received a good education in Tamil literature, in music and in Sanskrit, and was also well versed in English having studied in Madras. While a student at the Presidency College, affiliated with the University, Ramasami Mutaliyar studied Bower's edition of the first chapter of the Civaka cintamani and for the first time became aware of the existence of an ancient Tamil of great beauty. He wanted to learn more about the epic, but no one knew more than what Bower had already printed.

After college, Ramasami Mutaliyar became a civil judge and travelled in that office to various districts, all the while searching for someone who could teach him more about the text or who could provide him with a copy of the entire work. As he later told Saminata Aiyar,

"I have a great longing to read the Cintamani and other such ancient books, but in this region none of the scholars I met even know how to read them. Also the palm leaf texts are not available. I thought that copies might be found in the houses of poets living in the Tirunelveli area and mentioned this matter to my friend, E. Ramachandra Aiyar, a civil judge in Sri Vaikuntam. He inquired of everyone but found nothing.

"One day a man born in a family of poets that belonged to a lineage of scholars in a village near Sri Vaikuntam came [to my friend's court] as a witness in a litigation. When questioning him, my friend came to know that he belonged to a lineage of poets and that his ancestors had composed many texts. After finishing all the interrogations, the judge summoned the witness privately and asked if there were any palm leaf books in his house. As soon as he said "There are," he told him to please see if there is a copy of the Cintamani and to please give it to him. Since he was in a position of authority, his effort bore fruit. That poet brought him a copy of the Civaka cintamani. He paid Rs. 35 for it and sent it to me. This book is a paper copy made from it.

"Even after getting hold of it through so much trouble, I am not able to read it. When I studied in college only "Namakal ilampakam," the first chapter of it, was taught. A European had printed it. There was more English in it than..."
Tamil. I wanted to try to read the entire work and so wherever I went I questioned all the scholars there. All of them stopped right with the [usual] antais, pillaittamils and puranas and would go no farther. Therefore I became extremely weary."

When Ramasami Mutaliyar arrived in Kumbhkonam as the newly appointed civil judge, Saminata Aiyar did not call upon him until prompted to do so by instructions from the abbot of the Tiruvavataturai monastery. The new munsif was known to have a genuine knowledge of Tamil literature and the abbot wanted the two scholars to meet.

At first I had no desire to meet him. But because [the abbot] Subrahmany Desikar told me to go, I set out one day to see him. That was a Thursday (21-10-1880). I reached his residence and met him. I told him that I was located at the college and studied at the monastery. He talked with his face turned away from me, as if addressing someone else near by. It was clear he did not have much desire to talk with me. "It's because of his authority he's like this," I thought. "If he were a student of Tamil would he talk to me like this?"

"Who have you studied with?" he asked.

"I studied with the great scholar Minakshisundaram Pillai," I said.

I expected that as soon as he heard Sri Pillai's name he would show some enthusiasm. Even though he did not respect me for my own position, he might at least talk to me intelligently because of my relationship to Sri Pillai as his student. But he did not. He went on speaking in the same way as before.

"This man doesn't change at all when he hears Sri Pillai's name, yet he is supposed to be someone with pride in Tamil! It's all lies," I decided.

He did not stop asking questions. "What lessons did you study?" was the next question from him. "I may be able to impress him in the way I respond to this," I thought determinedly, and recited the list of books I had studied. "Kutantai antai, Maricai antai, Pukalur antai, Tiruvarankam antai, Alakar antai, Kampar antai, Mullai antai, Minakshiamnal pillaittamil, Muttukumaraswami pillaittamil, Akilantanayaki pillaittamil, Cekkilar pillaittamil, Tirukovaiyar, Tancaivanan koval..." I went on saying. In this manner I piled up twenty antais, twenty kalampakams, fifteen kovais, thirty pillaittamils, twenty ulas, and tutus. Yet his face showed not the slightest amazement.

"What's the use of studying all of this?" he suddenly said, interrupting in the middle. I was very perplexed. "He studied English and may have been deluded by it," I conjectured "and that's the reason he talks like this." I did not give up, however. I began the list of puranas.

"Tiruvilayatar puranam, Tirunakaikkaron puranam, Mayura puranam, Kanta puranam, Periya puranam, Kurrula puranam..."

Exactly as before, he remained like a statue of stone. "Naitatam, Parapulinka lilai, Civajñana potam, Civajñana cittiyar urai..." I said, reciting
book titles. I enumerated texts on grammar. Even then he was not satisfied.

"Damn!," I said to myself, "did I forget the most important of them all? If I had mentioned it right at the start, he might have been won over." Confidently I then said, "I have read the Ramayana of Kambar two or three times all the way through. And a few of its books I also studied under Sri Pillai."

"Alright, is that all there is?" Ramasami Mutaliyar asked. That made me very dissatisfied since I thought, "He even has this kind of disregard and disdain for Kambar's Ramayana!" What more is there to say after that? But he did not dismiss me. He asked more questions.

"It's fine that you have studied all of those recent books. But have you studied any of the old works?" I did not understand what he was asking about. "Is he thinking of the works Sri Pillai composed that I may have studied? Kanta puranam, Periya puranam, etc. are all old works, aren't they? Isn't Kambar's Ramayanam definitely an old work? Is he thinking of something else?" I wondered to myself.

"Many of those works I mentioned are old!" I claimed. Then when he asked, "Have you studied the works that are the basis of all of those?" I got the idea that he meant something in particular.

"I don't know what works you are talking about," I said.

"Have you studied Civaka cintamani? Have you studied Manimekalai? Have you studied Cilappatikaram?"

The works he mentioned I had not studied. My teacher himself had not studied them. I had not even laid eyes on the books. Nevertheless I arrogantly thought that he did not regard what I had said about the many books I had studied as important, and that he went on talking unnecessarily about some two or three works I had not read. "The books haven't been recovered. If they have, I know how to read them all," I said majestically.

Mutaliyar, who had been speaking casually, became alert and looked at me carefully. "I have a book. If I give it to you, will you study it and teach it to me?" he asked.

"There is no doubt about it. Certainly I will teach it," I said confidently. I had the audacity to think that given the power of my intellect and the power of my literary learning, I could read and understand anything.

"Alright, I have got hold of the Cintamani. You may study it. Please come here like this often," he said. I took leave of him and came away. When I thought about his manner at the time I went to meet him and of the words he spoke at the time I took leave of him, I realized that he was no ordinary man, but a man of profound knowledge and reflection.

The next Sunday I went to Ramuswami Mutaliyar. On that day he welcomed me very warmly. My longing to see the book he had mentioned was no greater than to see him. He gave me his paper copy of the Civaka cintamani. "Please study this. Then may we begin lessons?" he said. "We may, just as you say," I agreed. Then he began to tell me the story of how he had obtained that copy.
At the end of that story, which we have already considered, Ramaswami Mutaliyar went on to talk about the Civaka cintamani:

"It's a very splendid book. This is the epic that pointed the way for all the epic qualities of Kambar's Ramayana. If you will study it, make its meaning clear, and teach it, you will benefit yourself and I will be happy."

I listened to what Mutaliyar said very carefully. Even Sri Pillai, who had understood the full spread of Tamil works, had not studied the Cintamani. When I thought of that I felt some anxiety. "Will we find it easy to understand what this new work means?" Nevertheless, self-confidence re-emerged. "As long as it's a work not outside the realm of Tamil, so what? Will I have to get new training in Sanskrit or Telugu? Given my knowledge of Tamil texts, if I study and research it carefully, is it going to be unintelligible? Although I told him the many works I had studied, still he asked, "What's the use?" What is there in that book to cause such disregard? Let's see!"

"I will come later. As soon as I have studied this I will return," I said determinedly and, taking leave of Ramaswami Mutaliyar, I left.

I began to study the copy of the Civaka cintamani he had given me. It also contained the commentary by Naccinarkkiniyar. Other than that it is an epic about Civakan, I knew nothing about the story it tells or in what way it possesses excellence. Until then I thought I knew in some sense the full spread of Tamil works. But the Cintamani existed outside the extent of texts I had seen, and right at the start gave me a lesson in humility.

I picked the book up and sat down. The first verse of the Cintamani says, The imperishable joy from the praise of all the three worlds that have no end or beginning is the chief joy of him whom sadhus venerate saying, "He is the Glorious One, the bright treasure store of everlasting qualities." We meditate on his splendid feet, the First God of all gods. There is not one word in it I did not understand. Yet something new appeared in this stanza that was an invocation for the work. Neither the veneration of Vinayaka nor the invocation of Satakopar, common to the works I had studied, were in it. Those homages were not as a rule in Jaina epics and at first it seemed to me to be homage to a common deity. Only I did not know the meaning of the phrase, "worlds that have no end or beginning."

I studied the commentary. Naccinarkkiniyar in the beginning had written in detail about the grammar of the epic. Then followed such things as etymology. By that time there were in print the commentary by Ilampuranam on the Tolkappiyam's book about letters, Naccinarkkiniyar's commentary on the Tolkappiyam, and Cenavaraiyar's commentary on the Tolkappiyam's book about words. I had read them and therefore understood the facts in the Cintamani's commentary regarding the usage of letters and words. In the commentary on "muva mutala vulakamoru munrum" was written "All three worlds without end or beginning." I was used to hearing often the doctrine that the world possesses impermanence, so this idea was new to me. I went on read-
ing further. It became clear that it would be exhausting to keep on studying just that one copy.

That Saturday I went to Tiruvavatuturai as usual and explained to [the abbot] Subrahmanya Desikar everything that had happened since I met Ramaswami Mutaliyar. Desikar was very pleased to hear this. “It is very auspicious to associate with suitably learned gentlemen. You must teach him diligently. In the monastery there is a palm leaf manuscript of the Cintamani that Sri Pillai transcribed,” he said and graciously ordered that copy to be brought. Then he said, “Since you will be teaching Mutaliyar, you may come here on Saturdays and return on Sundays,” and gave me permission to leave.

Returning to Kumbhakonam, I studied the Cintamani, referring to both Sri Pillai’s copy and the copy given by Mutaliyar. In Mutaliyar’s copy there were only summaries of the verses. An explanatory gloss existed for only a few verses at the beginning. In Sri Pillai’s copy, however, there was an explanatory gloss for all the verses. “What advantage is there in leaving out the explanatory gloss and copying down only the summary? Are these two different commentaries?” I wondered. When thinking about it farther I saw that both were a single commentary. “But why are there two different kinds of copies?” That I did not understand.

The next day I went to Ramaswami Mutaliyar and began to teach him. “Namakal ilampakam” [the first chapter] had been a lesson for the B. A. examination in 1870. Mutaliyar, who had studied then, now and then told me the things he had learned while studying it. In the middle of my teaching there appeared the name “Kattiyankaran.” I did not know whether it was a person’s name. I read “Kattiyakkaran” [the buffoon]. Then Mutaliyar said, “I know only the story in “Namakal ilampakam,” but that word is surely “Kattiyankaran.” That is the name of one of the ministers of Caccantan. It is he who killed Caccantan.” Later came the name “Govindan” (Civaka cintamani, 187, commentary). I did not know whether that referred to Lord Krishna or to someone in the Cintamani. Mutaliyar did not know either. Similarly there were some other things that were not clear. I told him the things I did not understand and said we should ask qualified authorities. Mutaliyar agreed unhesitatingly, saying everything unclear should be explained. We asked all the various scholars who came while the two of us studied the Cintamani. Five months passed in this way.

Those things in the Cintamani we did not understand because it is a Jaina work I thought I might learn through Jainas. I approached Ramalinga Pandaram, who came to my house to study, and asked, “Are there any Jainas living in this area? Do you know if any of them are students?” “There are Jaina houses here on West Ramasami Temple Street,” he said. “They are all wealthy. Among them are students.” As soon as I heard that I immediately felt very strongly that I must go and meet them.

The next day, following my desire, Ramalinga Pandaram escorted me to the street where the Jainas resided. There he took me into the home of a man.
he knew named Chandranatha Chettiyar. Symbols of auspiciousness had been traced at the entrance to the house. On the door frame, festoons of mango leaves had been tied as auspicious decorations. We thought this seemed to be some sort of special day and went in. Many people were gathered there in a hall. Pointing out one gentleman in the hall, Ramalinga Pandaram said, “He is Sri Chandranatha Chettiyar,” and then introduced me to him.

“All these plantains and festoons have been tied up as decorations. What sort of festival is it?” I asked.

“Today the Cintamani has been completed. We are celebrating that festival.” he answered.

I thought to myself, “It’s the Cintamani we have come to ask about. He says the Cintamani has been completed. It looks as if a ceremonial recitation of the Cintamani is part of their tradition,” and then asked, “Have you been studying the Cintamani?”

“Yes. I have been listening; that gentleman has been teaching,” he said, indicating a man seated across from us. “His village is Vitur, which is in Tintivanam Taluk. He is very accomplished in Jaina treatises and commentaries in Tamil, Sanskrit and Prakrit. There is no one else like him. His revered name is Appasami Nayinar,” he explained. It seemed to me that he had come there just for my sake. I thought, “Just when we are longing to understand a certain subject we quite unexpectedly meet people learned in it. And some kind of festival connected with it takes place. Surely this is the gods’ doing.” I was exhilarated.

“How long has that gentleman been here?” I asked.

“This instruction has gone on for six months.”

I was distressed to think we had wasted these six months completely.

That noble man [Appasami Nayinar] was calm and soft-spoken. I told him that I also was studying the Cintamani. “Govindan’ appears in it. Whose name is that?” I asked.

He casually said, “The brother of Vijayai. Vijayai is Caccantan’s wife.” I asked about some other problems. He gave clear responses. I was confident that I had found the proper help for studying the Cintamani. Chandranatha Chettiyar also explained a few things and told the story in detail.

From that day, Chandranatha Chettiyar became my good friend. I learned that Jainas regard the Civaka cintamani as an excellent work to be recited ritually, and in the same way that we conduct a consecration for the ritual recitation of the Ramayana and other works, they also celebrate the completion of a text as soon as it is finished. Traditionally, commentary to the Cintamani has passed down orally among its students. That is what they teach. The commentary is noteworthy for its high mixture of technical terms related to doctrine, in the manner of Manipravalam. I delighted in hearing Chandranatha Chettiyar explain portions of it now and then.

Through conversations with Jaina friends I learned why there were two kinds of palm leaf copies. At first, it is said, Naccelarkkinlyar wrote one commentary on the Cintamani. Then, it is said, when he showed it to Jainas
Page Missing
There is always Chandranatha Chettiyar. But if it is from a different work, what could be done? The examples he uses for illustrations are not in any of the books I had studied. It seemed astonishing to me that these collected works he used illustratively might constitute an independent realm. “Couldn’t this man take the time to give the name of any work?” I often complained. Nevertheless, I did not forget the excellent quality of that great benefactor’s superb commentary. He explains a subject succinctly and whenever the matter is subtle, he writes a note for it beautifully. The meanings he writes for words are very artistic. The breadth of texts he knew, one would have to say, is like a great ocean. In the midst of so many excellent qualities, the two defects mentioned completely vanish.

More and more the research into the Cintamani that I had begun in order to teach Ramaswami Mutaliyar became for me a joyous way to spend time. Whether teaching at the college or at home, I passed the time absorbed in study of the Cintamani.

We had reached halfway into the [third chapter] “Kantaruvatattaiyar Ilampakam” of the Cintamani studies. At that time Mutaliyar resigned from his job and left with his family, thinking that he wanted to live without any social entanglements and that he might become an attorney in Madras. When he set out, he came to my house and said, “Now you know well the greatness of the Cintamani. You must be careful that one who studies this precious epic does not squander it. It is now up to you to gather together some copies and bring it out in print. A gift like that cannot be matched.” “I will do that as best I can,” I promised. He took leave and went away.

The remainder of Saminata Aiyar’s autobiography tells the story of his further work on the Civaka cintamani. The solutions to the problems he encountered in the text, as he tells them in this chapter, provided the foundation for his subsequent career as a scholar. His research in the book’s Jaina origin and context began his critical study of Tamil religion, culture and history, a study that informed the many learned introductions and notes to his later editions, and his many articles in Tamil periodicals.

The discrepancies he found between the two copies of the Cintamani, largely scribal errors, let him into the work of establishing critical editions. Through extensive travel during his weekends and college vacations, he gathered twenty-three copies of the epic, four of which were complete. After laborious collating, he determined the basic text to be printed. But the commentator’s use of quotes from works that he did not name and that Saminata Aiyar had not read drove him to search through more neglected palm leaf book libraries. In the Tiruvavatuturai monastery collection, for example, he found two anthologies of poems used by the commentator, Ettutokai and Pattupattu. While studying these he
discovered they were collections from the Sangam or Classical Period of Tamil literature and set them aside for later editing and publication. The more thorough he was as a scholar, the more ancient poetry he uncovered, and the more committed he became to publishing.

At first this scholarly work was supported privately. He used his own free time and his own money for travel until the expenses forced him to ask for help from known patrons of Tamil literature. A friend persuaded him to print a statement of purpose with a request for financial support and to distribute it. This elicited gifts from wealthy men living in traditional centers of Tamil learning, such as Kumbhakonam, Tanjore, Kotur and Tirunelveli, and from the more modern ones of Jaffna and Madras. Supporters were largely members of the elite landowning and bureaucratic families.

Supervising the printing of the *Ciniamani* was a formidable task, requiring Saminata Aiyar to commute by train between Kumbhakonam and Madras and to spend hours at solitary proof-reading. But his commitment and endurance, and one might add, the tolerance and support of his parents and wife, saw him through. In 1887, seven years after he had met Ramaswami Mutaliyar, Saminata Aiyar published the first complete text of the *Civaka cintamani*, together with the commentary by Naccinarkkiniyar, his own discussion of the manuscripts used, preface, history of the author, history of the commentator, summary of the story, several indices, and copious notes. The scholarly aspect of the Tamil renaissance was well launched. In 1891 appeared his edition of the *Pattupattu*, in 1892 *Cilappatikaram*, in 1894 *Purananuru*, in 1895 *Purapporul venpa malai*, and in 1898 *Manimekalai*. With the turn of the century, more texts appeared.

It seems that the crucial ingredient in the beginning of this aspect of the Tamil renaissance was a person who possessed deep scholarship and a dogged persistence to understand everything about his subject—and also a question. The question—What is the *Civaka cintamani*?—was the catalyst. As his experience with the epic illustrated, knowledge of the ancient past lay all around him in the 19th century Tamil world, in monastery libraries, in private libraries, in a community such as the Jainas. What the recovery of this knowledge required was a question about it asked by someone with the ability to answer it. Others earlier in the century had tried to publish the *Cintamani*, but no one succeeded for no one was learned enough in the traditional literature. But it is significant that for Saminata Aiyar, the question was raised for him by someone else, by a Tamil Hindu who had stepped far enough outside of the world of Dharma to study and participate in the institutions of British
rule where the Cintamani was studied, though imperfectly. He, however, could not answer the question by himself. The beginning required a Tamil Hindu educated in Madras to ask the question of a Tamil Hindu teaching in Kumbhakonam and in a Hindu monastery. The meeting of Saminata Aiyar and Ramaswami Mutaliyar aptly symbolizes the origins of this literary aspect of the Tamil renaissance.

Smith College

NOTES


6. I discuss this development in a paper prepared for the conference on "Mutual Perceptions: East and West" (Sept. 1-3, 1981) held at The Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton: "The Reaction and Response of Tamils to Their Study by Westerners 1608-1908."


13. Published in two parts, 1933 and 1934, each over 350 pages in length. A two part abridged version was published in 1965. Sri Minatcicuntaram Pillaiy-avarkul curittira-c curukkam (Madras: Dr. U. V. Swaminatha Iyer Library, 1976), p. i.


15. Autobiography was, however, a genre among Muslims in India. It increased among Hindus between 1832–1968 from a “mere trickle” to a “fast flowing river,” according to R. C. P. Sinha, largely because “the awareness of self once generated cannot be put out...” See Indian Autobiographies in English (New Delhi: S. Chand and Company, 1978), p. 84.


20. See Zvelebil, The Smile, p. 269. Saminata Aiyar studied the manuscript Bower had compiled from twenty texts and found it highly defective. See En carittiram, pp. 333, 371–372.

21. En carittiram, chapter 41, pp. 326–343. The following is my translation of the complete chapter except for portions of pp. 326–328 that I have summarized.

22. Of the 14th century, one of the great Tamil commentators. See Zvelebil, The Smile, p. 257.

23. The Tolkappiyam, an ancient treatise on grammar, divides itself between discussions of the use of letters or sounds, the use of words, and the subject matter of literature. See Zvelebil, The Smile, pp. 132–133.

24. Manipravalam, a Tamil-Sanskrit hybrid used especially by Sri Vaishnavas in their commentaries on the Tamil poems of their sacred text, The Four Thousand Divine Verses composed by the twelve Alvars. For a discussion of the language, see Zvelebil, The Smile, pp. 257–258.


27. Before Bower, Astavatanam Sabhapati and his teacher Kancipuram Sabhapati Mutaliyar had tried, the British scholars W. H. Drew and G. U. Pope had tried, another important leader of the Tamil renaissance; Arumuka Navalar of Nallur, Jaffna, had tried, and Saminata Aiyar's own teacher Minakshisundaram Pillai, together with Sodasavataram Supparaya Chettiyar, had tried. See *En carittiram*, pp. 369-371.