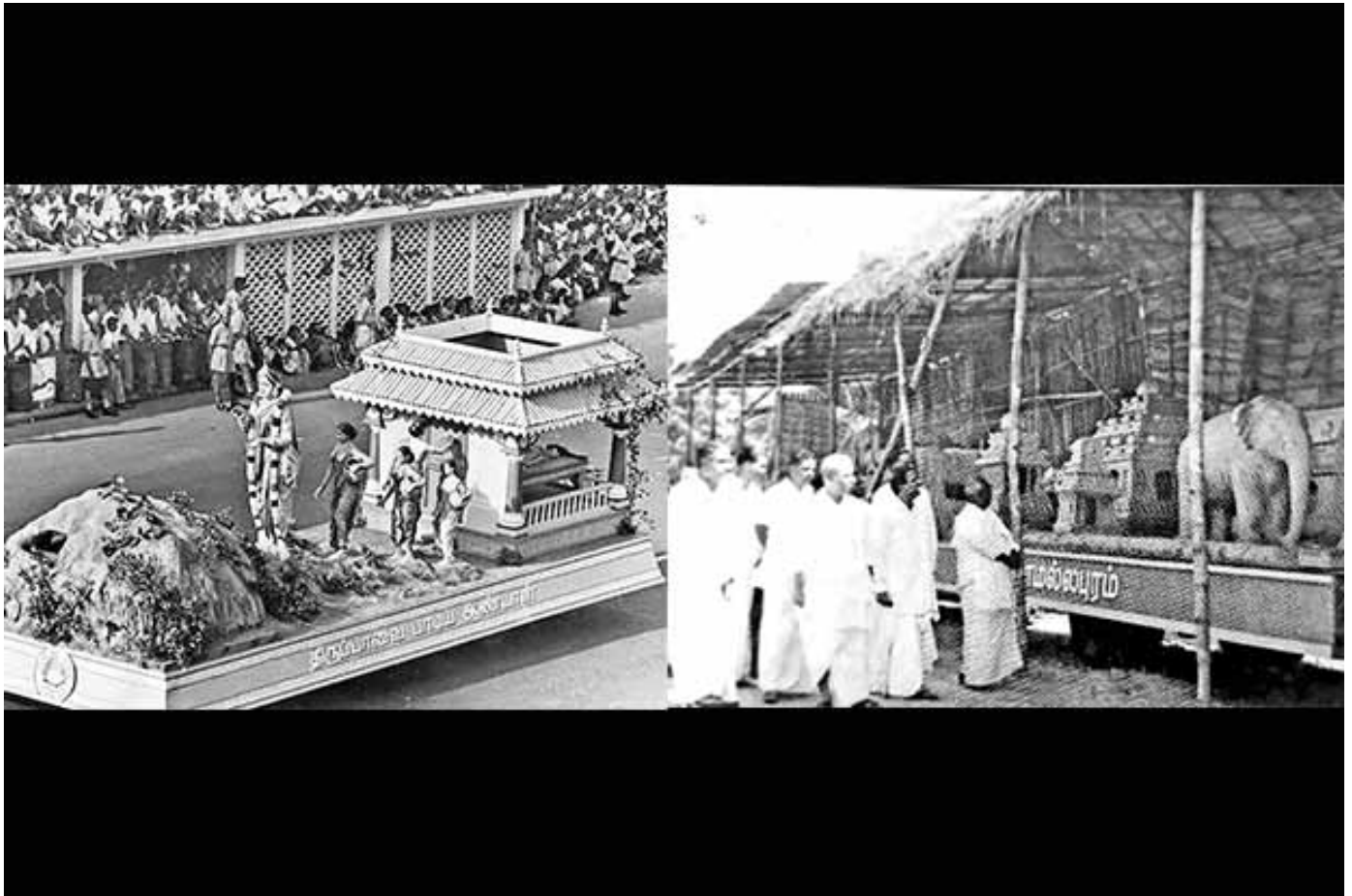


1968 International Tamil Conference: A celebration of culture, language - and DMK

In this series, we take a trip down memory lane, back to the Madras of the 1900s, as we unravel tales and secrets of the city through its most iconic personalities and episodes.



Photos from the second international Tamil conference held at Chennai in January 1968

Chennai:

While an intense pride in Tamil as a classical language had risen after independence, it was the anti Hindi imposition agitations that solidified the base for Dravidian parties. But when the First International Conference Seminar of Tamil Studies was held in Malaysia in 1966, it was presided over by a Congressman, the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M Bhaktavatsalam.

He invited delegates and observers participating in the conference to attend the second edition scheduled to be held in 1968 in Madras. Little did he know that his tenure won't last till then. Such was the impact of the historic change in the intervening period that the DMK came to power and relegated Congress to the margins of the State's political landscape ever since.

The second international conference held at the University of Madras in January 1968 was exclusively for scholars. But the State Government also arranged a more popular event, World Tamil Conference, aimed at a wider audience. It was run concurrently with the seminar, showcasing the art, culture and architecture of Tamil Nadu.

On January 2, the statues of 10 important figures, who played a key role in the growth of Tamil throughout history, were unveiled on the Marina facing the beach road. To signify the international stature of Tamil language, these also included foreign scholars besides the natives. Thus, British bishop Robert Caldwell, Canada born GU Pope and Italian priest Constanzo Beschi were immortalised in statues, which even their hometowns in the West may not have.

Among these historical figures was the statue of Kannagi, a fictional character. A widespread rumour at that time held that it was an actress who modelled for the statue. While Kambar statue vanished into the Anna memorial

compound a couple of years later, the rest of them still dot the Marina. Among those who had their statues installed only Bharathidasan came from the Dravidian movement.

Instead, the ruling party went a step ahead. On New Years day, just the day ahead of the unveiling of the 10 statues, a life-size statue was unveiled on the most visible location of Mount Road – the roundtana: that of the party founder and the then Chief Minister CN Annadurai. The statue was termed as a gift to the Tamil people by actor and DMK leader MG Ramachandran, who was garlanded by the then PWD minister M Karunanidhi. To avoid charges of self-aggrandisement, Anna was in Dalmiapuram near Tiruchy opening a housing colony on the day.

On January 3 afternoon, a cultural pageant consisting of a number of tableaux depicting scenes from Tamil history and literature, and interspersed with contingents of performing students moved in procession over a long route, starting at the island and making a circle back to it through Mount Road, Cathedral Road, Edward Elliot's Road, Marina and Band Practice Road.

A long line of lorries carried huge, colourful scenes from Tamil lore. The man chosen for the job was SS Vasam, who was popular for his huge cinema sets. A huge gathering was there to see the procession and Vasam shot a documentary in colour of it.

On that evening, President Zakir Husain gave the inaugural address and threw open the conference. There were almost 500 delegates from more than a dozen countries where the Tamil diaspora was entrenched, besides two from Argentina, three from Sweden and two from Finland.

The proceedings of the International Conference Seminar of Tamil Studies extended over six full days, and included nine plenary sessions during which papers were presented and discussed by distinguished international scholars in the field of Tamil and Indological studies.

Throughout the period of the conference, delegates were given opportunities to savour aspects of Tamil culture during each evening. Special performances of Tamil dramas and films, dance recitals, and concerts of instrumental and vocal music were presented. Plays by doyens like Shivaji Ganesan and TKS brothers were arranged. Among the programmes was 'Kaveri Thanthai Kalai Selvi', a dance drama by Jayalalitha and party.

An emblem was designed for the conference with the words of Kaniyan Poongunranar in Purananuru - yaadhum oore yaavarum kelir (to us all places are home, everyone our kin) – which truly represented the Tamil diaspora across the world.

After the conference, a special train carried participants on a tour of Tamil Nadu. For a week, the train wended its way through Chidambaram, Thanjavur, Tiruchy, Madurai and Kanniyakumari.

But looking back, it wasn't just a conference of Tamil experts; it was a show of strength by the Dravidian parties, which had braved lathis, lockups and bullets while being in the opposition for more than 30 years. Though the DMK magnanimously invited Bhaktavatsalam to participate as a host, it was a de facto celebration of the Dravidian victory in the polls of 1967.

A bulk of the preparatory work for the conference was done by Karunanidhi, which gave him a lot of publicity. When Anna died the next year, Karunanidhi's visibility in the conference aided him to gain the leadership of the party.

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