

The Fish-eyed Goddess Meets the Movie Star: An Eyewitness Account of the Fifth International Tamil Conference

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THE CITY OF MADURAI (1981) population: 817,562) is situated about 260 miles southwest of Madras, or about two-thirds of the way to Cape Comorin, the tip of the Indian subcontinent, where the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, and the Arabian Sea are said to come together under the watchful eye of the virgin goddess, Kanyā Kumari. From January 4 through January 10, 1981, Madurai made a bold gesture to reclaim its glorious past as the capital of Tamil culture by hosting the Fifth International Conference-Seminar of Tamil Studies.

Many of the event's detractors ("conference" does not do justice to the happenings of those seven days) expressed mild surprise that the organizers had at last managed to transform a plan, long on the drawing boards, into reality. The conference was twice announced and twice preempted by the higher callings of Indian democracy. The original date in January 1980 coincided with the Indian Parliamentary election in which Indira Gandhi and her followers reclaimed control of the Indian government. With resignation the organizers rescheduled the conference for June 1980, and once again their plans were foiled, this time by state assembly elections. But, ever determined, the organizers pressed on with a third attempt. Ultimately fortune, and M.G. Ramachandran, movie star and chief minister of Tamilnadu, the Indian state in which Madurai is located and where Tamil is the official language,¹ were on their side.

The penetration of the Tamil conference within and outside Tamilnadu can perhaps be gauged by a few personal impressions. In Delhi,

¹ According to the 1981 census, the population of Tamilnadu was 48,297,456. Since there are also Tamil speakers residing in Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Indonesia, the world's Tamil-speaking population probably exceeds 50 million.

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the first “port of call” on my journey south, the conference was a nonevent. This is not surprising. As most Tamils are acutely aware, the cultural distance separating the Indian capital from the Tamil “hinterland” is great.

My arrival in Madras placed me in *bona fide* Tamil country, even if I had not quite reached the ancient Tamil heartland. Madrasees take pride in the cosmopolitan character of their city. While the politics of Tamil nationalism certainly has made a significant impact upon the city, more often than not English takes first place as the prestige language, at least among the educated. While the native of Madurai or Tanjore may tell you that *his* Tamil is the most elegant or the closest to the grammatical ideal, the Madrasee would never even consider entering the competition. I have heard Madrasees refer to the language spoken in their city, almost with a touch of pride, as “gutter Tamil.” And those from other parts of the state who take more pride in the purity of their mother-tongue are likely to agree. He will also point out that Tamil, in fact, is *not* the mother-tongue for large numbers of the city’s residents. The most widely-spoken minority language is Telugu, the official language of Andhra Pradesh, the state that lies just 25 miles north of the city. Madras is also home for many other South Indians, speakers of Malayalam, Tulu, and Kannada, not to mention professionals and businessmen who have migrated to Madras from the north.

Nevertheless, Madras *is* the capital city of Tamilnadu, and Tamil does dominate all the other Indian languages spoken in the city. Signs are in Tamil or in English, rarely in any other language. The languages of instruction in schools, as well as the languages of public life in general, are Tamil and English; communication in other languages is confined to family or to small community circles. Madras may not take pride of place in the annals of Tamil cultural history, but in recent times it has become the center of cultural life in the region, if for no other reason than that the city has a large educated class which is willing to support cultural activity. Not only is Madras the hub of the very prolific Tamil publishing and film industries, it is virtually the only place where Tamil theater is available to the public on a regular basis; and it is *the* major center for music and dance for all of South India.

All this is merely to say that Madras’s cultural identity is complex and ambiguous. To describe Madras as a Tamil city would be to overlook its cosmopolitan flavor; but to ignore its strong ties with Tamil culture would also result in a distorted view of the city’s character. Perhaps this helps to account for my impression that Madrasees blew hot and cold on the subject of the Fifth International Tamil Conference. Also significant

is the fact that they could not claim the conference as their own show.

A few examples will help to illustrate the range of attitudes Madra-sees have toward the language of their state and toward organized efforts to promote its glory. It is my impression that the segment of Madras society which might be described as the most sophisticated, or at least the most closely allied in spirit and habit with Western intelligentsia, assumed a hands-off attitude toward the Tamil conference. For many, this took the form of a cynical view of the way the Tamilnadu government had more or less appropriated the conference and was playing it for all the political mileage it was worth. Furthermore, for these people the Tamil conference represented an attitude which they considered to be parochial and lacking in critical standards—a mentality from which they wished to dissociate themselves. Perhaps they even felt a little contemptuous of their compatriots who let themselves be carried away by all the fanfare. Some Madrasees went out of their way to emphasize that they had *no* plans to go to Madurai for the conference (or “fiasco” as some were inclined to think of it). This does not in any way imply that these people were necessarily alienated from their Tamil cultural heritage. Thus one critic I met, a publisher and book dealer, even saw himself as patron and promoter of the most promising, forward-looking trends in Tamil writing.

In sharp contrast was the response of the proprietor of a very different sort of publishing operation. This man, who deals in pamphlet editions of traditional verse ballads and popular devotional poetry, obviously had great respect for his language and its rich literary heritage, was proud that Tamil studies were developed and influential enough to inspire a major international conference, and was very pleased to make the acquaintance of one of the foreign delegates (a specially prized and much publicized class of participants at the conference). I left feeling that I had somehow done him an honor by visiting his establishment and would do honor to his culture by attending the conference. (Need I add that my conversation with the urbane critic of the conference was conducted in English, and I conversed with the enthusiast in Tamil?)

The third type of reaction to the conference was neither as enthusiastic as the second nor as negative as the first, and lacked the conviction of both. There were many people in Tamilnadu who seemed to feel that as long as the conference was a reality and was being subjected to a blitz of publicity from the media and state government agencies, they might as

² Madras played host to the Second International Tamil Conference in 1968.

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well go along for the ride. A spectacular event provides relief from the monotonous rhythms of daily life, and there are always plenty of people who are ready and willing to be entertained in this way. This is a fact of public life which the Tamilnadu government undoubtedly counted on in its management of the conference. While such people lacked firm conviction for the motives which underlay the Tamil conference, they nevertheless had no trouble working up some enthusiasm for it once it was a *fait accompli*.

The concomitant to this sort of attitude was curiosity about *my* interest, often combined with puzzlement and amusement. People are interested to learn that a foreigner would be willing to devote time and effort to study Tamil and even pursue Tamil studies as an academic profession, but they often are not quite capable of making the leap of imagination necessary to perceive *why* he or she should want to do this. It has always seemed to me that the flip side of the chauvinist attitude toward their linguistic and cultural identity, which has made the Tamils notorious in some circles, is an underlying lack of conviction about the significance of things Tamil in a global perspective. When they are straining to “make it” in the world by mastering English and Western ways, it seems to them very curious that a native of the culture they are trying so hard to emulate should turn around and pursue the study of Tamil, which, from a bread-and-butter point of view, seems to hold no promise. The irony implicit in this state of affairs is not lost on many Tamils I have met, both educated and uneducated, and they often comment upon it.

During my ten-day stay in Madras I sensed a certain awareness of the conference in the air, but it was only upon arrival in Madurai that I felt the “event” had begun to assert itself in earnest. At the airport, in a special lounge which had been set up under a woven palm-leaf canopy, I met conference representatives and was introduced to Justice S. Maharajan and his wife—fellow passengers who, like myself, had come to Madurai for the conference. Justice Maharajan, a retired member of the Madras High Court and author of several books on Tamil literary matters, was to be much in the public eye during the week to come. While waiting for my baggage, I chatted a little about my educational background, my research, and the paper I would be reading. In retrospect, what was most interesting about these few moments was the negotiation of language which ran as a subtle undercurrent beneath the stream of conversation. Everyone was extremely careful to avoid giving discomfort, while still giving credit where credit was due. Thus, as we conversed, we found ourselves switching back and forth, for the most

part gracefully, between Tamil and English. Though the others probably all speak English more fluently than I speak Tamil, I decided to set the tone by introducing myself in Tamil. As almost always in Madurai, my initial words in Tamil obviously pleased my listeners, who were more than glad to continue conversing in Tamil as long as I was willing and able. But at the same time, they wished to show me that they could speak English, and probably their motives were twofold: they wanted to put me at ease; they also wished to demonstrate that they, as modern, educated people, were perfectly capable of holding up their end of an English conversation. Just as I was careful to identify myself as not just any foreigner, but one of the rare breed who can communicate with Tamils in their own language, they wanted me to know that they were not provincials, but educated people who, because they had mastered English, were at ease with people from all over the world. Once we had set one another straight on this score, it did not much matter whose native language was used. This brief conversation in the airport set the pattern for the following week. Because I was, after all, a delegate at the Tamil conference, people were not particularly surprised that I had some knowledge of Tamil; but foreigners at the conference were never pressured to speak Tamil. The prevailing atmosphere was gracious and hospitable.

The widespread use of English at the Tamil conference was intended, at least in part, to put foreign participants at ease; but one could not fail to note the irony. English was not confined to casual conversation; quite to the contrary, at the “scholarly” portion of the conference, conducted at Madurai Kamaraj³ University, English was actually the dominant medium of communication. Of the 197 papers delivered, 141 were delivered in English. While almost 40 per cent of the over 800 delegates were technically classified as foreign delegates, in fact the majority of these were Tamils from Malaysia and Sri Lanka. The number of non-Tamil foreigners participating in the conference, mostly scholars from the United States, Europe, and Japan, probably came to no more than thirty or forty at the most. Flesh-and-blood testimonies to the international scope of Tamil scholarship, they were avidly pursued by the local press throughout the conference week. It is unlikely that it was merely a sense of hospitality which prompted so many of the delegates, many of them native speakers of Tamil, to write and deliver their papers in English. These people wished to be recognized as members of an international community of scholars, and the facts of

³ Kamaraj Nadar was perhaps Tamilnadu's best-known politician nationally.

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academic life dictate that one must demonstrate facility in an international scholarly language as a prerequisite to admission to this select set. In the Indian context that language is almost always English. Thus, the Tamil conference staked its claim to the status of *international* conference on the participation of Tamil scholars from outside India, and, ironically, on the use of English in its proceedings.

This state of affairs was not accepted happily by all. On the third day of the conference, a group of Malaysian and Sri Lankan delegates joined together and formally protested the widespread use of English at the expense of Tamil. As one might expect, the conference organizers took cover behind their policy of facilitating participation by the non-Tamil foreigners, who were often treated as the honored guests of the occasion. No one was so rude as to point out the sad truth that among foreign Tamil scholars there are no more than a handful who have mastered the Tamil language sufficiently to communicate successfully in an intellectual environment. As for the Malaysian and Sri Lankan Tamils, another motive no doubt overshadowed whatever need they may have felt to display their scholarly credentials in an international forum. Members of a minority linguistic community in their countries of residence, they probably looked upon the Tamil conference as an opportunity to lower their defenses a little and take a holiday in an atmosphere where, for once, Tamil would carry the day. While the conference suffered no dearth of rhetoric regarding the glories of Tamil, the all-too-obvious reliance upon English as a medium of communication could not but serve as an unwelcome reminder that the influence of Tamil in the wide world outside is actually very small.

There is also a more subtle issue at stake here. Intuitively one knows it is germane, but nevertheless it eludes precise definition. This involves the thorny problem of the interrelationship of language and ideas. In my view, the papers presented at the conference can be grouped in three categories: those originally conceived in Tamil and delivered in Tamil; those conceived in Tamil but delivered in English; and those conceived in English (and subsequently delivered in English).

As is the case for all the major Indian languages, a great deal of effort has been devoted over the past several decades to developing and enhancing the resources of the Tamil language to render it an adequate medium of expression in all reaches of modern life. For the most part, these efforts have concentrated upon the vocabulary of the language. In the areas of science, technology, and government in particular, all sorts of new terms have been coined to denote things and concepts which did not exist in India until prolonged contact with Western culture began to

effect significant changes in the lives of Indians. Tamil, of course, absorbed many words from other languages, especially English, and the Tamil spoken by the man on the street is invariably peppered with English words. In recent times, however, there has been a movement to purge the Tamil language of perceptible foreign influence, resulting in both the coinage of new terms and a substitution of "pure" Tamil words for English or even for Sanskrit words which have entered common usage. To take two simple examples, the word *pērunṭu*,⁴ which literally means "great conveyance," has been coined as a Tamil equivalent for English "bus," and Tamil *cittu*, literally "written note, chit," has been introduced as an equivalent for English "ticket." Nonetheless, virtually no one uses the Tamil neologism for bus, and "ticket" is still used at least as much as its Tamil equivalent. Tamilization has made some inroads in the vocabulary of government and administration, considerably less in the sciences. It is an interesting experience to hear a Tamil scientist reeling off long strings of English words in sentences structured by the rules of Tamil grammar.

The situation in the area of Tamil literary, cultural, and historical studies is somewhat different, however. There is a centuries-old tradition of Tamil scholarship which is by no means defunct. For those who are schooled in that tradition and who are thoroughly attuned to expressing themselves in its terms, the question of cultural and conceptual incongruity does not arise, at least as long as scholarly discourse is confined to a community of like minds. But Tamil scholarship has not remained unaffected by theories and methodologies with origins in the West; consequently, the language of Tamil scholarship has also undergone change to cope with new intellectual orientations. Such issues are actually far more subtle in a subject-area like Tamil studies than in the sciences, where whole bodies of knowledge and modes of thought have been newly introduced into the Indian environment. For the most part, the boundaries between "modern" and indigenous science are so clear, no one has any trouble separating one conceptual realm from the other. However, in the area of what we in the West would call humanistic studies, Indian scholars are often heirs to an intellectual inheritance derived from both indigenous and foreign sources. When the issue of conceptual orientation is grafted onto decisions pertaining to the medium of expression, the outlines of the problem can become very indistinct. Now we are not only talking about the words a language has in its

⁴ The transliteration system used here is that of the Madras University Tamil Lexicon, the most widely-accepted transliteration system for Tamil. However, not all proper names have been strictly transliterated.

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lexical repertoire to express particular concepts, but also about the ways a language combines these in meaningful strings to express a flow of ideas.

These, then, are some of the issues which came into play at the Tamil conference and which account for the ways presentations by scholars of varied intellectual backgrounds were received by their colleagues. It was fascinating to watch the interactions between orator and audience; to see what sorts of ideas provoked heated debate, elicited enthusiastic approval, or were merely received with indifference, and by which sectors of the audience. It quickly became clear that there were two groups of participants attuned to very different intellectual styles. Only occasionally were the two groups able to find common ground for satisfying intellectual exchange. To most of the foreign participants and to many of their Indian colleagues who are thoroughly at home in a Western academic environment, the problems which seemed to excite most interest among tradition-bound Tamil scholars must have seemed trivial, uninteresting, and nit-picking, and the arguments they brought to bear upon these problems sorely lacking in intellectual rigor. But I am equally certain that the intellectual games that the “moderns” like to indulge in seemed impressionistic, not true to their sources, and devoid of lasting value to the traditionalists. What one group perceives as “the heart of the matter” is just empty talk to the other. Nevertheless, a cordial atmosphere prevailed. Furthermore, many young Indian scholars, apparently disenchanted with the precedents set by their elders, and in search of models for their own work, listened to the presentations of the foreigners with particular interest.

According to the master plan of the organizers, Madurai Kamaraj University was the site of a “research conference,” which they called in Tamil *ārāycci karuttaraṅku* (a good example of a Tamil neologism coined to fit a conceptual slot borrowed from English). But the conference was by no means limited to this congregation of scholars. While delegates immersed themselves in the rarified atmosphere of Tamil scholarship on a campus located eight miles from Madurai city, the city was caught up in a conference of a very different kind, which the organizers called *potunilai karuttaraṅku* (“public conference”). The “research” and “public” conferences accounted for two parts of a three-pronged event, the last being devoted to the domain of public spectacle. Let us now shift our sights to the public and spectacular dimensions of the conference.

The public conference, held at the Madurai Racecourse grounds, was designed as a forum for bringing the Tamil man-in-the-street closer to his cultural heritage. Here Tamil men-of-letters were brought together

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to take part in what I shall call traditional literary entertainments; in this case there was no question of making adjustments to accommodate the concerns of Western scholarship. At the public conference, traditional Tamil oratory was allowed to shine in all its elegant, old-fashioned splendor. In cultural life, as in political life, the Tamils are natural orators, and over the years they have developed forms of cultural performance designed to display the rhetorical skills they prize. Among these is debate, an art form much in evidence at the public conference. Audiences at the racecourse grounds heard two types of debate. In one, called *paṭṭi maṇṭapam*, two or more teams argue for mutually contradictory assertions, usually pertaining to the Tamil classics and literary or philosophical evaluations. The savants who participated in the public conference matched their wits over the following points of contention: (1) Which is of greatest benefit to life in the world: scholarship, material prosperity, or happiness? (2) Which contributes most to the growth of literature: feeling, dramatic action, or moral content?

In another debate form, called *valakkāṭu manṇam*, two teams lock horns over a proposition which must be proved or disproved. The people of Madurai listened to learned arguments which centered on these issues: (1) Aesthetic sensibility was the most prominent quality in the life of Kōvalan (the hero of *Cilappatikāram*, an epic Tamil poem of the fourth or fifth century A.D.). (2) The most outstanding characteristic of Kambar's poetry is his knowledge of Tamil literary tradition. (Kambar, a poet of the twelfth century A.D. is best known as author of the Tamil version of the *Rāmāyana*, the story of the Hindu god-hero Rāma.)

In addition to debates, the public conference also featured round tables on topics of literary and cultural interest and a convocation of contemporary Tamil poets, including Kannadasan, a political figure and author of lyrics of innumerable film songs, whose fans turned out in droves for the occasion.⁵ I am told that at the public conference time was also set aside for a summary review of some of the research papers read at the university, so the public-at-large could benefit from the labors of their intellectual representatives.

In India, behind every great architect, painter, poet, musician, or dancer stands a patron, be he a prince, a landlord, or a wealthy merchant. For centuries, literature, the arts, and even religion have been maintained under an elaborate system of patronage whereby the achievements of the artist automatically enhance the social prestige of

⁵ Kannadasan died in a Chicago hospital on August 24, 1981. The occasion for his visit to the United States was an émigré version of the Tamil Conference held in Detroit the same month.

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the patron. The Tamil conference, itself a grand cultural performance, was as true to this tradition as the profusely sculpted towers of Madurai's great temple, home of Śiva and his fish-eyed consort, Mīnākṣī.⁶ The patrons who stood behind the architects of the Mīnākṣī-Cuntareśvarar⁷ temple were the Nayak rulers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The patron who supported and guided the efforts of the conference organizers was the state government of Tamilnadu, led by Chief Minister M.G. Ramachandran. Like the Nayak rulers of Madurai's past, MGR (as the popular chief minister is known to the public) and his party allies fully intended that the public should realize that their representatives liberally support Tamil culture.

The government brought its role as patron into public view in more ways than one. First of all, public events in India being what they are, the conference provided seemingly infinite occasions for ceremonial speeches: speeches of introduction, of felicitation, of gratitude, etc., trappings without which a public "function" could never be complete. Needless to say, government officials were prominent among the ranks of those chosen to do the honors. These ceremonial addresses ran the gamut from the relatively modest to the grandiloquent.

One of the most obvious examples of the latter was the inaugural ceremony—an entire evening's program in itself—capped by a lengthy speech delivered by MGR. It was by no means the only time the chief minister took the podium in the course of the conference week. There was not quite so much of this sort of thing at the university, but the scholarly conference also had its honorary speech-makers—some scholars, some public figures.

If the scheduled events of the conference provided a forum for a certain amount of public display, show—what in India is often referred to as *tamāsha*—was the be-all and end-all of the many ancillary conference events which filled the evening hours. Here again there was something for everyone. For the connoisseur there were performances of music, dance, and drama by some of Tamilnadu's leading artists. For others there was an exhibition geared to Tamil cultural themes (not unlike a county or state fair in its design and atmosphere), a sound-and-light show at the palace of Madurai's seventeenth-century Nayak ruler, Tirumala, and a much-touted film about the lost continent of Lemuria, thought by some to have been the home of the ancient Tamils or their ancestors until it was inundated by the Indian Ocean.⁸ In addition,

⁶ The goddess's eyes are said to resemble the shape of a small fish.

⁷ Cuntareśvarar, "the beautiful lord," is the name of Śiva's manifestation at Madurai.

⁸ The Lemuria theory is one of the more extreme manifestations of Tamil nationalist

various community groups and Madurai-based institutions, determined not to miss the action, held special functions of their own. The Waqf Board College, for one, played host to a full day of activities focussing on the Muslim contribution to Tamil culture. The Mīnākṣī temple, perhaps the most influential cultural institution in the city, also sponsored a number of special activities in honor of the conference. The conference organizers, however, were very careful to portray Tamil culture as a pan-religious, pan-communal phenomenon.

Complementary to this impressive schedule of events was the *alam-kāram* of Madurai—the ornamentation of the city on a heroic scale. Not only were the usual temporary welcome-arches erected, but five sculpted stone arches were built at the five major entrance points to the city, each of which, of course, had to be formally inaugurated. Furthermore, statues of prominent personages in Tamil cultural history appeared in many locales, and the city glittered at night, like a bejewelled Hindu bride, with strings of brilliant colored lights. Even nature was forced to cooperate with the organizers' determination to show off Madurai at her best. For weeks prior to the conference, the water of the Vaikai River, which flows through the city, was held at the dam located many miles upstream to ensure an adequate supply of water to fill the wide, but shallow river-bed during the week-long celebration.

A public show on this grand scale demands a really grand finale, and the conference organizers were well prepared. The featured program for the last day was a spectacular procession of floats depicting legendary characters and authors of Tamil literature, some of the giants of Tamil scholarship, and finally Mother Tamil herself. Interspersed among the floats were marching ranks of students, musicians, dancers and practitioners of various indigenous Tamil sports. The procession, viewed by no less a personage than the prime minister of India, circumambulated the city along the same route travelled by Lord Śiva and his fish-eyed consort during the annual temple festival for which Madurai is renowned, crossed the Vaikai, and finally came to rest at the racecourse where the concluding ceremonies took place. Here Mrs. Gandhi addressed the crowd, and later M.S. Subbulakshmi, perhaps the most

scholarship. According to this theory, an ancient Tamil race inhabited a land mass now submerged in the Indian Ocean and developed an advanced civilization there many thousands of years ago. The main stimulus for the theory is a well-known legend according to which three academies of Tamil letters flourished in ancient times under the patronage of the Pāṇṭiya king. It is said that the third and last of these academies was located at the present-day site of Madurai, while the other two were located in cities that successively were inundated by the sea.

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venerated classical singer in India, sang a program of classical songs and thus brought the conference to an auspicious close.

As the temple festivals which are legion in Tamilnadu usually build toward a climax, so it was with the Tamil conference. On the afternoon of the penultimate day, Madurai was inundated by a steady stream of buses arriving from all parts of the state. In the evening it looked as if every man, woman, and child in the city had taken to the street; they covered the pavements and jammed the bridges over the river. That night, many slept on the streets and on the grounds of public buildings, ready to compete for a view of the floats and the celebrities the following day. Even the Hindu gods rarely bring out a crowd of this magnitude.

MGR deserves credit for playing his cards well. Indira Gandhi was not eager to show too much enthusiasm for the Tamil conference, especially since in the parliamentary and state elections held during the preceding year her Congress (I) party was allied with Mr. Karunanidhi, MGR's political foe.⁹ (Karunanidhi and his party, the DMK, boycotted the conference.) But Mrs. Gandhi also knew that she could not ignore the conference altogether without provoking the ire of the Tamil populace. She therefore was compelled to give in at least a little to MGR's strategem and show herself to the Madurai crowd. She arrived in Madurai on the morning of the final conference day, rode in state from the airport to the city, addressed a meeting of Congress party workers, viewed the grand procession of floats in the afternoon, addressed the crowd, and left Madurai that same evening.

The presence of Mrs. Gandhi and of Subbulakshmi, an artist who "belongs to the nation," elevated the conference, at least in the minds of many participants, from the status of a regional event to an event of national importance. Mrs. Gandhi's participation assured news coverage throughout the nation, even if it was only to report the prime minister's speech before the Madurai crowd. In her speech, a gem of center-state diplomacy, Mrs. Gandhi was careful to praise the achievements of Tamil culture even as she subtly but pointedly attacked those who would see in the Tamil conference an opportunity to fan the flames of regional divisiveness. The theme of her speech could be summarized as "national unity in cultural diversity." Subbulakshmi's participation in the events of the final day was no less significant than the prime minister's. Herself a Tamil residing in Madras, Subbulakshmi is an artist of national, indeed

⁹ In Tamilnadu the two primary contenders for political power are the DMK led by Mr. Karunanidhi, a party with deep roots in twentieth-century Tamil nationalist politics, and MGR's AIADMK. Both are exclusively Tamil parties, and therefore end up playing coalition politics on the national level.

international reputation. In 1966 she received the rare honor of being invited to sing before the United Nations General Assembly. Just as Mrs. Gandhi's speech culminated a week of speeches by various public figures and expanded their context to a national one, so Subbulakshmi's concluding concert culminated a week of artistic performances.

Observers like myself could not help but be fascinated with the formal design of the Tamil conference. For those of us who had spent a fair amount of time in Tamilnadu, these happenings were very familiar; only the scale was amplified—more honored guests, more speeches, more elaborate decorations, a grander procession. Sometimes the conference seemed like a cross between a temple festival and a political rally blown up to enormous proportions. After several days, it was not clear to what extent Tamil scholarship was being honored and to what extent it was merely being used. The answer necessarily depends on one's vantage point.

No less noteworthy than the forms into which conference events were molded was the content of those events. The topics of the papers which attracted the most attention, the special events, the oratory, all add up to an extravagant assertion of Tamil pride. In scholarship this can be seen in the special emphasis on work which emphasizes the antiquity of Tamil and its possible links with other civilizations. At present, scholars are exploring the possibility of a historic relationship between the early Dravidians and the residents of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa, the ancient cities of the Indus Valley (in present-day Pakistan) which pre-date the arrival of Aryan peoples in India. Researchers investigating possible linguistic and cultural links between the Dravidians and the ancient Mesopotamians on the one hand, and the Japanese on the other, also found themselves in the limelight. In the arts, much attention was given to the performance of Tamil devotional hymns, originally composed during the seventh to ninth centuries A.D.; to *terukkūttu* or "street dance," a rustic dramatic art which includes song and dance; and to the classical dance form, *Bhārata Nāṭyam*, which is coming to be regarded by many as the Tamil art form *par excellence*. Finally, in politics, a domain of cultural activity which was supposed to play no officially sanctioned role in the conference but which made its presence felt all the same, orators took up the time-worn rallying cry against imposition of Hindi, the language of North India chosen as the official language of the Indian union but which has been vigorously resisted in the south, especially in Tamilnadu. Let us now take a closer look at some of these themes.

The official program for the research segment of the Tamil confer-

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ence lists titles for 197 papers on a wide variety of topics ranging from indigenous science to the history of Tamil printing and publishing. While the range of the papers is broad and their methodologies varied, the division of the research conference into plenary and seminar sessions provides a criterion for detecting any bias in the conference's planning. Since only three papers were read at each of the six plenary sessions, very few delegates could hope to share their research before the full gathering. The criteria used to select the eighteen papers given this honor seem to combine regard for the author and regard for his or her topic or conclusions. Since foreign scholars were, as a group, given star billing at the conference, it comes as no surprise that seven of the eighteen featured papers were presented by non-Tamils. It is also significant that seven of these papers deal with relationships between Tamil or the Dravidian linguistic/cultural complex as a whole and other languages or peoples. At the plenary sessions, delegates heard about phonological correspondences between Tamil and Japanese; Dravidian-Altaic relationships (the Altaic language family includes Turkish, Mongolian, and Korean, among others); the relationship between Elamite, an ancient Mesopotamian language, and Dravidian; Negro-Dravidian affinities; ancient Greece and South India; place-signs in the Indus Valley script; and the Harappan calendar. Of course, eleven other papers on very different topics were presented at the plenary sessions, but a vested interest of sorts—even if not a self-conscious one—is obviously at work here. As a group, these papers were not chosen for their potential appeal to a large, diverse audience, because some deal with very technical matters.

If this selection is in some sense a reflection of the contemporary Tamil psyche, it suggests that the Tamils are determined to prove to themselves and to others that their linguistic and cultural heritage compares favorably with the great civilizations of world history. Partly, this may stem from frustration because the world does not seem to give them their due recognition; the earliest Tamil poems, which date back 2,000 years, are genuine masterpieces, but outside Tamilnadu few students of literature are aware of their existence. Furthermore, though Tamil is not linguistically akin to Sanskrit and the languages of North India, Sanskritic culture has filtered into the land of the Tamils over the centuries, as it has throughout the subcontinent. In modern times, the Tamil populace, prompted by their political leaders, have reacted vehemently to what they perceive as northern cultural and economic imperialism. In the recent past, Tamilnadu has witnessed movements to purify the Tamil language of Sanskritic "pollution," to improve the lot of

the Tamil masses at the expense of the small but influential Brahmin segment of the population, who are sometimes seen as northern intruders (the Brahmin presence in Tamilnadu is as old as recorded history of the area), and to promote a decidedly non-Sanskritic, ancient Tamil culture. The sentiment which underlies such movements also supports all scholarly efforts to establish the antiquity of all things Tamil and to establish links between Tamil culture and other non-Aryan cultures. I think that by establishing ancient links between themselves and Japan, Africa, and Mesopotamia, the Tamils are somehow reassured that they do indeed occupy a position of critical importance in the historical and cultural map of the world. These findings are also reckoned as points scored in a contest with Indo-Aryan culture. Many are especially eager to prove that their Dravidian ancestors built the ancient Indus Valley cities. This would establish that the Dravidian presence on the Indian subcontinent pre-dates that of the Aryans; and in a land where Western-style notions of progress are a recent import, older is often equated with better. (To be fair, one should note that throughout India it is generally accepted that the occupants of the Indus Valley cities were Dravidians.)

I have already mentioned that Bhārata Nāṭyam, one of several schools of classical dance found in India, is beginning to establish itself in the minds of many as *the* representative Tamil art form. There is some reason for this, since Bhārata Nāṭyam flourishes on Tamil soil as nowhere else, within India or without. Historically, Bhārata Nāṭyam is identified with the art of female temple dancers, called *devadāsīs*, who performed before the deities in the great temples of Tamilnadu as early as a thousand years ago. Today, a few years of instruction in Bhārata Nāṭyam is considered *de rigueur* for the daughters of polite middle-class families. One would not ordinarily expect the history of an art form to become a political issue, but, all the same, perhaps the hottest controversy that arose at the research conference concerned the origin of Bhārata Nāṭyam. The paper in question, entitled “Bhārata Nāṭyam: The Dance Art of the Tamils,” was read by Sudharani Raghupati, a dancer who also takes a scholarly interest in Bhārata Nāṭyam. Present in the audience was Padma Subramaniam, a young dancer who is greatly admired as an artist and who has also established a reputation as a scholar of Indian dance. Subramaniam openly took issue with Raghupati’s conclusions, and the audience became involved in a heated debate. It was soon discovered that Subramaniam had also submitted a paper to the selection committee; it had been rejected, while Raghupati’s paper had been given a select time-slot in a plenary session. Apparently Subramaniam’s thesis, which

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cast doubt on the Tamil origin of Bhārata Nāṭyam, offended the powers that be, while Raghupati's claim that Bhārata Nāṭyam was the fruit of Tamil soil was just what they wanted to hear. In the end, however, Subramaniam was vindicated, for the whole affair was covered in the Madurai edition of the *Indian Express*, to the credit of the dancer-scholar whose views the organizers had not deemed worthy for public airing.

As this case shows, even the research segment of the conference was not free from ideological bias. Foreign participants generally did not have to worry about tailoring their work to fit the prevailing ideology: their very presence was an endorsement of the high status of Tamil studies, and thus they were insulated. But I did hear complaints that the criterion of selection which worked against Padma Subramaniam worked against others as well—in other words, that the work of Indian participants did not receive an impartial screening. This should come as no surprise: at least in certain subject-areas, scholarly opinion has been dogged by politics in Tamilnadu for much of this century.

The politics of Tamilnadu during the twentieth century, as fascinating as it is complex, has been the subject of numerous studies. In Tamil politics, we find a textbook case of how issues of language and cultural identity can become prime factors in the political process. I have already suggested that the hallmark of Tamil nationalism is vigorous opposition to linguistic and economic domination by the north. While no serious politician any longer argues that Tamilnadu should secede from the Indian union, the political rhetoric heard in Madurai during the conference week proved that language is far from a dead issue in the Tamil political scene. All politicians who hold the slightest hope of success in Tamilnadu are obliged to take a strong stand against Hindi imposition, a sentiment that was voiced openly and loudly at the many ancillary conference events. Indira Gandhi, after paying homage to the achievements of Tamil culture, assured the Madurai crowd that the central government has no intention of forcefully imposing Hindi upon India's non-Hindi-speaking peoples, but she tried to put her assurance in a perspective which minimized any tendency to view Tamilnadu as a special case.

The call for Tamil hegemony in all walks of Tamil life also came across in other small, sometimes amusing ways. The newspapers reported one speaker's call to young people to resist the encroachment of English in their lives. (English, far more commonly than Hindi, is a second language for Tamil speakers.) He urged them to use Tamil in whatever they do: if they sit down to write a love letter, let it be in Tamil. The Vice Chancellor of Madurai Kamaraj University called for a ban on

English nursery schools, where, he claims, tiny tots are taught to look upon their native tongue as inferior.

Apart from the figure of Mother Tamil—who in present-day Tamilnadu is not a really viable cultural symbol—perhaps the most representative emblem of the conference and of all that it stood for was the *Tirukkural*, a compendium of aphorisms on virtue in domestic and public life. While scholars generally favor the view that its author, Tiruvalluvar, was a Jain who lived sometime around the fifth century A.D., this work is ecumenical in spirit. Consequently, modern-day Tamils have adopted *Tirukkural* as the classical statement of Tamil cultural values. Its proponents never tire of extolling the mature wisdom packed into its terse couplets. Many are capable of discoursing upon a few lines of the *Kural* for hours. Others have devoted their efforts to ambitious *Kural* translation projects in their eagerness to see the splendor of its truth illuminate the world. It is no accident that the *Kural* has sometimes been referred to as “the Tamil Bible.”

One reason *Tirukkural* has been singled out for this sort of attention is precisely because it is not marked by any pronounced religious affiliation—unlike, say, Kamban’s much-praised *Rāmāyana*, an unmistakably Hindu work of literary art. This is a crucial requirement for the Tamil nationalist consciousness, which defines itself primarily along racial and linguistic lines, and avoids the equation of Tamil with any particular religious (i.e., communal) orientation. Tamil Hindus, Muslims, and Christians are Tamils one and all. (The picture is complicated, however, by the nationalists’ rejection of certain Sanskritic Hindu rituals which are identified with the Brahmins and “northern” domination.) *Tirukkural* is, therefore, seen as a product of the unsullied Tamil mind, a standard around which all true Tamils can rally.

During the week of the Tamil conference, talk of *Tirukkural* repeatedly surfaced as a *leitmotif*. Orators frequently harkened to its rare distinctions; it was cited as evidence for the Tamils’ claim to a place among the world’s great civilizations. It had a float all to itself in the grand procession of the final day. One speaker spoke for many of his brethren when he urged the prime minister to enact a bill which would establish *Tirukkural* as the national text of the Indian nation.

When all was said and done, many probably asked themselves if the extravaganza was worth the expense. Some felt sure that it was not, even before things got off the ground. Many gasped when the newspapers announced that the state government’s expenditure on the conference and related activities came to 120 million rupees. “If only such a sum

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were spent on really constructive projects to better the lives of Tamilnadu's people," they sighed.

Where are the tangible benefits? Madurai did at least receive a face-lift in preparation for the big event; roads were paved, buildings were painted, public latrines and two new hotels were built. The scholarly component is recorded in the published proceedings. But by and large this heroic outlay of financial resources leaves no discernible legacy except in the hearts and minds of the people who took part in this relatively brief explosion of excitement. The money went to food and lodging for hundreds of delegates and guests, a fleet of cars mobilized to ferry participants to the many conference venues, the massive ornamentation of the city, and other such ephemerae.

But perhaps it is not fair to look at the conference in this light. How many Westerners have sadly shaken their heads at the fabulous displays which are inseparable from the festivals observed by Hindu temples? Do the thousands upon thousands of devotees who gather to see Śiva and his bride parade through the streets of Madurai on their wedding day shake their heads and grumble over wasteful expenditure?

There may be a connection between the form assumed by the Tamil conference and Hindu festivals; but, still, the underlying motivations cannot be entirely the same. One cannot ignore the dominant theme of Tamil nationalism which ran throughout the whole affair. Motivated both by pride and probably also by latent insecurity, the conference was an announcement to the world that it must take notice of who the Tamils are and what they have achieved. Many decades ago, Subramania Bharati, the poet laureate of Tamil nationalism, spoke for the conference organizers when he wrote these lines:

It is no triumph to recite our ancient stories
secretly among ourselves;
our poetry will be truly glorious
only when men pay homage in foreign lands.

University of Chicago, U.S.A., May 1982