

TEXTBOOK REGIMES

a feminist critique of nation and identity

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Introduction

V. Geetha

We began this study with a distinct sense of doing something novel – reading school textbooks as adults proved fascinating as well as disquieting. This creative unease, though, gave way to frustration as we sifted through Tamil and English language and social science texts for gender, caste and class details and references. We were appalled by what could only be termed an eloquent silence on crucial issues, such as the partition of India, for instance in the History texts; and by the indifference to issues of discrimination and power in the Civics books. As for gender, we had not expected the books to surprise us, yet we continued to be amazed at the manner in which the books constructed their intended reader – always already male, middle class and urban.

Mid-way into the study, it became clear to us, as it did to researchers from other States, that textbooks from diverse contexts were yet informed by a common pedagogic logic. They appeared to share a set of assumptions about knowledge, its function and purpose in post-independent India. Thus, all learning, it was clear, was to be linked to being a good citizen, rather to ‘being Indian’ in a particular sort of way. The complex relationship that fashions ‘Indian’ ness, in an everyday sense, that interplay between caste, class, gender and religious identities on the one hand, and between what is considered normatively ‘Indian’ and putatively ‘regional’ on the other is entirely outside the provenance of textbooks.

The Tamil Nadu books, especially those published by the state-owned Tamil Nadu Textbook Corporation, presented a paradoxical variation on the national theme: they paid their ritual obeisance to patriotism, but were equally mindful of ‘being Tamil’. We found this the case even with the English language textbooks – all of them carry a prefatory note which insists that the child’s right to the use of her mother tongue would in no way be compromised by her having to learn English; rather, English would be rendered useful to her in her Tamil context. Importantly, the History textbooks are less anxious about their ‘Tamil’ content: as with textbooks in other parts of India, they devote substantial space to happenings in the Indo-Gangetic plains and are content to uphold Tamil exceptionalism in the chapters devoted to the subject of the Tamil dynasties! Likewise with Geography: there is no acute sense of the complex relationship between physical landscape and civilization, nor do the books display a sense of place that is different from the standard obsession with land and crop use.

Unsurprisingly, Civics textbooks, like their counterparts in the rest of the country, with the possible exception of the NCERT textbooks were

indifferent to the details of our public and civic culture, beset as the latter is by subtle and overt practices of discrimination and exclusion, based on caste, gender and religion. It did not matter that the Tamil public sphere continues to resonate with debates and arguments about discrimination.

Textbooks published by private publishing houses are differently inflected. English language readers are much more committed to a culture that inheres in social class. Social class, in turn, is marked by lifestyle, and what is considered right and deferential speech. The Social Science textbooks appear to follow a conceptual logic similar to the one that is at work in the state-produced textbooks – History textbooks, for instance, assume the centrality of the Gangetic plains to Indian history.

This manner of ‘doing’ India, while ‘being’ Tamil, that is characteristic of all state-produced textbooks, we realized, was not substantially different in the methods it employed to argue its case for Tamil exceptionalism. That is, Tamil textbooks are not any more inclined towards unpacking the contexts and meanings which produce either ‘Tamilness’ or ‘Indian’ness. They are not particularly attentive to the play of caste and gender, region and religion in the content they present, nor do they suggest that ‘knowing’ involves asking questions about what has to be known. In other words, textbook knowledge appears as given and finished as it is in readers from other states.

This does not mean that the textbooks do not demonstrate their ‘difference’ – they do so in particular contexts. For instance, they are less obsessed with the civilisational notion of ‘Bharath Varsha’. Thus History textbooks are more warmly appreciative of Islam and its creed of brotherhood. The manner in which Tamil textbooks do ‘Tamilness’ is no less expansive – they proclaim a catholicity of intent, and attempt to reconcile all differences in the Tamil language which, then, is upheld as a measure of the culture’s open-ness. Environmental Science books for the lower primary classes adopt a more inclusive approach, which shows men and women being equally important in transactions at home and at work. This democratizing impulse is also present in the English language books – they are at pains to resort to ‘local colour’ and life!

These differences notwithstanding, the Tamil Nadu textbooks appear captive to a pedagogy that informs and directs textbook content elsewhere in the country. For one, the assumed reader, the addressee, is more often than not male. Examples that illustrate an idea are drawn largely from male social experiences. Protagonists in most stories are mostly men, and all history is the history of male-headed dynasties. Women, when they figure at all, are represented in conventional maternal roles or if exceptional, are powerful queens and

heroines. Such characterization, especially in the History textbooks appears consequent to a neglect of and disinterest in material history, and of social relations, whether of caste or production and labour. However this is not merely an absence – it suggests too that power and class, caste and gender identities as they appear in history and in society are entirely natural and appropriate.

Secondly, in all textbooks, and particularly so in the language readers, values and norms are affirmed in distinctly gendered ways, with conventional gender roles being taken for granted. This may also be seen as part of an overtly didactic intent that besets all language texts – when lessons are oriented towards preaching a moral or asserting a norm it is logical that what has been hoarily in place will continue to remain there. Thus, for instance, it is possible for textbooks to maintain an eloquent silence on the subject of caste and yet carry a mandatory message – all Tamil Nadu State textbooks do this – that proclaims untouchability to be a sin, crime and against the law.

Thirdly, while textbooks appear committed to ‘producing’ the good Indian, this desire is entirely formal – there is nothing of a pedagogic nature in the Civics textbooks to help a child negotiate citizenship and identity. The Tamil language readers do this tangentially, in their choice of lessons. But the Tamil pride they want to instill is powerfully normative and does not quite answer the demands of a caste ridden gendered society. The one instance on which all textbooks agree has to do with population: History textbooks, language readers, Environmental Science, Geography and Civics readers are convinced that this is an issue that children must know of, master and resolve!

Lastly, the textbooks appear caught in a time-warp – both in terms of content as well as intent. They hearken to the 1950s, the days of urgent nation-building, when patriotic pride and duty seemed of a part with the experience of living in a new nation. In the Tamil Nadu context, this has meant too that textbooks express a Tamilness that is combative – for this was the period when Dravidian politics challenged the given might and hegemony of the Indian National Congress. In a sense the textbooks exist as important contexts for the working out of this post-colonial paradox, which affirms the idea of India and yet wants to accommodate within it a sense of cultural and linguistic difference that is complete and beyond dispute. In turn, the difference that Tamil embodies is less a mark of its separateness and more a measure of its capacity to include and co-exist with the fact of India.

In the class 5 TNTC reader too we find a lesson on disability and sports. In spite of her polio-afflicted legs, a young woman participates in sporting events.

When disability is a gendered condition, we see that the so-called feminine qualities of sacrifice and selflessness are accentuated – as if to suggest that if the disabled are to elicit support and sympathy, they also have to be ‘good’ in an entirely female fashion.

Traditions of Tamilness: Looking Back and Forward

With Tamil language readers, it is difficult to entirely distinguish Tamilness as national pride from Tamilness as tradition. Yet, in some cases, these texts engage fairly explicitly with tradition: at one level, tradition is what is all around us, and needs only to be notated and marked as that which so easily constitutes our world and how we view it – tradition is thus custom, ritual and the world of the familiar. Further, when recalled and celebrated, tradition becomes re-constituted as heritage, as what we may rightfully claim for ourselves from the past. In other words, tradition is that which is worthwhile, and distinguished from the merely arcane/primitive past.

At other times tradition is claimed at the behest of what is understood to be the modern, or modernity – it is not always antithetical to the modern and in fact can be reconciled to it. The modern is also valuable in itself, for the promises of technological change and plenty that it promises, and the political and social good it upholds.

This perhaps is the only detail from its Self-respect past that contemporary Tamil society appears to have consistently retained: the Self-Respect Movement upheld the claims of rationality and science, technological progress and material plenty against those of the past, faith, custom, belief and destiny. It welcomed the modern and provided it with a local habitation in Tamil society. Thus, it is not surprising that the modern is welcome in the textbooks as well – not quite as science, though this is not entirely absent, rather it is reconstituted in terms of material and technological progress.

The Familiar as Tradition

In the early readers (classes 1–3), tradition exists more as custom and as pertaining to the world of familiar and habitual realities, and not really as recalled glory. Thus, in Lesson 4 in the class 1 Tamil reader, there is a visual of a weekly market, characteristic of rural and small town life and commerce (p.9). ‘Going to the market’ is a time-honoured ritual, celebrated in folklore and song. This representation of a familiar

10

பெண்ணே! உன்னால் முடியும்.....

A Woman Acheiver

Malathi Krishnamurthy from Karnataka lost the use of both her legs, having contracted polio at an early age. But she persisted in her efforts at taking part in competitive sports and won several medals and awards.

They say it is not easy to play with weak limbs. But Malathi has changed all that. She has won 110 gold medals in wheelchair races!



Pic. 5

மங்கையராய்ப் பிறப்பதற்கே நல்ல மாதவம் செய்திட வேண்டும் அம்மா" என்றார் கவிமணி. ஆம். இன்று பெண்ணாய்ப் பிறந்ததற்கு பெருமை படுகிறோம். புகழின் புகளில் ஏறி வெற்றிக்கொடியை நாட்டிக் காட்டுகின்றனர்! பெண்கள். சாதனைகளைக் குவிப்போம் என்று சவாலிடும் பெண்கள் அணி, அணியாய் வந்து கொண்டே இருக்கிறார்கள். இவர்களில் இந்தப் பெண்ணின் சாதனை மிகுந்த வியப்பை அளிக்கிறது.

சாதனைப் பெண்

ஜூலை 22, கர்நாடக மாநிலத்தைச் சேர்ந்த மாலதி கிருஷ்ணமூர்த்தி உடல் மனம் முற்றலர். போலியோ தாக்கியதால் இருகால்களும் செயலற்றுப் போன நிலை எவிறும் தளது விடா முயற்சியால் பல போட்டிகளில் பங்குப் பெற்று தங்கப் பதக்கங்களை அள்ளிக்குவித்தவர். அவருடைய சாதனை வாழ்க்கையை ஒரு செய்தி இசைக்குப் போட்டி எடுத்தார் நிரூப் ரெயன். அதைச் செய்தியாக்கி அவர் தன் இதழில் இவ்வாறு விவரித்துக் கூறுகிறார்.

கை கால்களில் வலிமை கொண்டோர்க்கே விளையாட்டில் வெற்றி எளிதல்ல என்பார். கால்களில் ஊனம் கொண்ட மாலதி அதையும் மாற்றி விட்டார். சக்கர நாற்காலி ஓட்டப் பந்தயப் போட்டிகளில் பங்கேற்று, நூற்றுப் பத்து தங்கப் பதக்கங்கள் குவிப்பு வியப்பு மேலிடுகிறதா! இது மட்டுமன்று!

reality also serves a pedagogic purpose: it teaches children to observe and relate images to their various contexts. (Pic 6).

Like the market, folklore and folk wisdom are part of the rural landscape, in a cultural and imaginative sense as well as in a sociological sense, and have since been constituted into legitimate popular tradition. It is not surprising that they figure as pedagogical details and devices in early Tamil readers. In the class 3 Tamil reader, riddles and songs are

associated with the traditional wisdom of grandmothers (pp. 14-16) and together they go to create a sense of the text's rooted-ness – this is self-conscious though, since the language of the riddles in the textbook is written Tamil and does not carry the imprint of distinctive local speech, as riddles usually do.

Tradition as Heritage

How does one own the past and pass it on? How are children to claim heritage? Readers from class 5 upwards, concerned as they are with realities that are less familiar and more abstract, address these concerns in diverse ways and often tacitly – through the details they choose to privilege and emphasise, while they tell a tale or argue an idea.

A lesson in the class 5 reader rejects the claims of the pre-historic past as heritage: imaged as children in different sorts of antique clothes standing with weapons from that time, the past they invoke is defined firmly as something that has been transcended (p.21). As in the very early readers, worthwhile tradition continues to reside in habitual custom and culture: a lesson on how to arrange an exhibition thus has images of children welcoming people in the traditional fashion, with sweets and rose-water, and conjures conventional ideals of domestic festivity (p. 19). But there are present other and more self-conscious reconstructions of the past as well. A lesson on Indian independence in the same reader features the Andaman prison, and constructs heroic nationalist suffering as a worthwhile legacy (pp. 65-67).

Then there are traditions that are clearly 'modern', that is, they are to be consciously (re) constructed as heritage. Annadurai's essay on Gandhi (see page 18) is a good example of a certain subversion of 'tradition' (of conventional readings of Gandhi as a modern day saint), as well as its reconstitution by the modern (Gandhi is a role model for the present). A lesson on E V Ramasami Periyar, in the class 10 reader (Lesson 6), also attempts a similar re-constitution of 'our heritage' through a re-definition of the modern (pp. 164-171). Whereas in the case of Annadurai, he radicalises – and modernizes – Gandhi, this essay tellingly domesticates Periyar. It is hagiographic in tone and thus ends up rendering him an icon. It talks of how Periyar resisted caste inequities – explained here as instances of upper caste cunning (the word 'brahmin' is avoided, though Periyar himself used it liberally) – and untouchability (his radical critique of caste and Brahminism are not mentioned, neither his rejection of faith, nor his espousal of atheism referred to). A lot of space is devoted to his Gandhian phase, which he himself later disavowed. Periyar's extraordinary modernist stance on the role of the state and his secularism are also not deemed important.

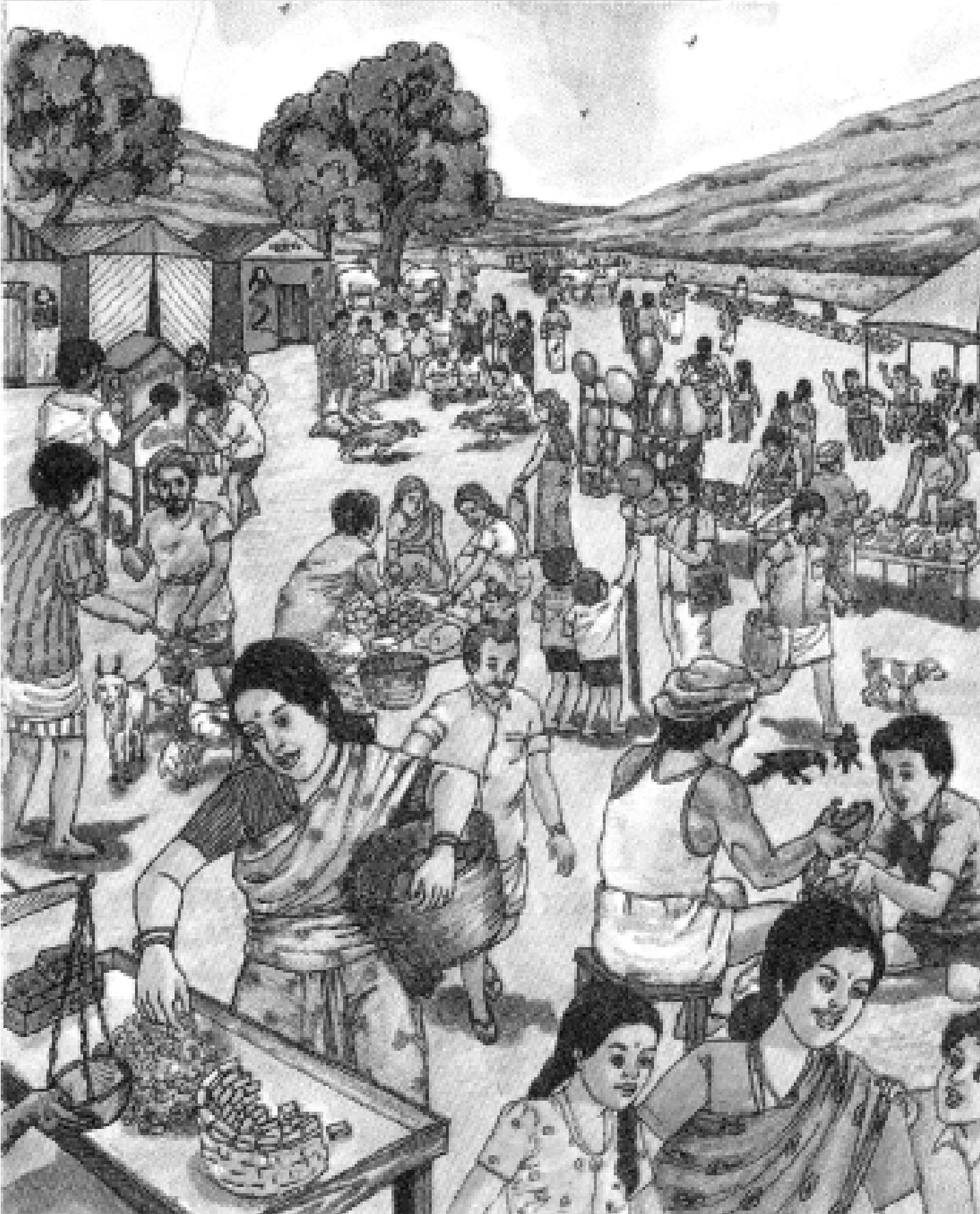
Another instance of 'domestication' has to do with the female poet, Avvaiyar (see page 10). In the class 10 reader the (ostensibly) fierce independence and intelligence of the Tamil bard is extolled through a

play about Avvaiyar's wisdom. Two rich men wonder if Avvaiyar is all that she is claimed to be, if she would not bend to power and pelf and money. They decide to request her to sing their praise, though they do not possess those qualities of munificence and valour which merit praise songs. She decides to teach them a lesson and does sing of them, but with so much irony and satire that their intentions are foiled (see earlier description). Significantly, Avvaiyar is allowed an existence on her own terms, but is never quite viewed as being 'female' (she is old and bent and it is her wisdom, rather than her 'femininity', that is privileged). It must be acknowledged though that there may be other reasons too as to why she features so regularly in textbooks. Perhaps because of her grandmotherly demeanour or that her verse is taught to children, or because she has been constructed as an enduring icon of the Tamil past, she has survived several decades of textbooks. Interestingly, though the DMK extolled the chaste Kannagi of the epic poem *Silappadigaram* as the quintessential Tamil heroine, the textbooks seldom refer to her, except when they feature extracts from the *Silappadigaram*.

Other adjuncts of a worthy heritage constitute a familiar list: Tamil literature and art are recalled in many lessons as constituting our wonderful past. A lesson in the class 7 reader represents Tamil epic literature and courteous decorous speech, especially its use of Kamban's *Ramayanam*) as legitimate tradition (this latter appears a function of both private good behaviour, as well as of desirable public rhetoric). Another instance of tradition is the re-telling in the same reader, through a play, of Tamil charity and munificence as well as Tamil (male) gallantry (Lesson 10: 142-151). The past is also culture, forms of music and dance: a class 7 lesson on *therukoothu*, a Tamil theatre form, widely popular and sensitive to context is privileged (pp.120-126). A child from the city arrives in a village and asks to see *therukoothu*, so his cousins accompany him to the performance (traditions are things that all city children ought to know of). The *therukoothu* performance described here is through the eyes of a city child. Significantly, the narrative notes quite primly that performances like this are said to be of civic use – the episode of Gandhi learning the importance of truth after watching *Harischandra* being performed is recalled. (Traditions have to be useful too!)

And of course the Tamil language is heritage too – and we seen how it is equally available to people of all faiths. In this context, it is worth examining in detail how this particular aspect of Tamil 'tradition' is actually constructed. Lesson 9 in the class 10 reader on the *Sirapuranam*, a Tamil verse narrative that tells the story of the Prophet Mohammed's life (see above), draws attention to the context of its production. Though making clear that this is a work deeply rooted in faith (the theological content of the poem was initially taught to the poet by an Islamic scholar, well-versed in the subject), the lesson addresses not faith, but the poet's love for the Tamil language that drove him to attempt the epic in the first place. We see thus how *Sirapuranam* becomes an index of the greatness of Tamil, while its Islamic content is left unaddressed.

4 எங்கள் ஊர்ச் சந்தை



Tamil Modernity

Indices of Modernity in these readers include material progress, the wonder of technology and institutions that promote either. We will examine these in detail shortly. Here, we shall pause to note a less familiar sense of the modern that is present in these textbooks – this has to do with the effort early Tamil readers make to be consciously ‘child-centred’ and draw on what is assumed to be ‘modern’ pedagogy. For example, ever since the decision was made to adopt the play way method for teaching Tamil at the primary level, textbooks have been replete with pedagogic devices (Pic 7). The Tamil reader for class 5, for instance, uses games, puzzles, etc. to teach civic behaviour and ‘modern’ politeness (‘be nice to your friends’, ‘don’t be selfish when you play’). This behaviour, which is after all the staple of child socialising homilies, is ‘modern’ in this sense as well – it is not overtly didactic, and relies as much on method as on its content; for another, it attempts to convey that we are, after all, living in a world, where all of this might yet be accomplished easily.

Sadly, though, modern pedagogy notwithstanding, the lessons continue to be uninspiring. For instance, the newspaper as an educational device is introduced in the class 5 reader and one expects children to be enabled to do a lot of creative things with it (Lesson 12: 72-75). But all they are asked to do is to note the following from the news items they ostensibly read: a dying girl donates her eyes, two girls save two young children from being drowned, an auto driver returns jewellery left behind in his vehicle, at a school celebration, there is talk of social harmony, the need to abolish untouchability, to not practice discrimination on the basis of caste and creed!

However, in two stories in the same reader, pedagogy achieves a measure of critical openness. Children are asked to actually respond to the way they end and suggest alternative endings. Both stories have trick endings and evoke interesting moral concerns. In the one instance a lion is ill-advised by his animal counsellors, and the child has to decide the lion’s future course of action (Lesson 13: 79-87). In the second instance, the tale ends with a riddle the child is expected to solve (Lesson 16: 103-111). But the texts themselves are not very well written and point to the manner in which the modern is inadequately present in these readers, even when it is assumed to be pertinent.

Modernity as Aspiration

The excitement over technology and progress in the readers appears to possess a perceptible class bias. In the class 1 reader and in others as well, there is an easy embracing of the techno-modern, especially the buying and consuming of mass manufactured objects. Thus, all the modern toys shown in the Class 1 text are shop toys – a tacit endorsement of consumerist spending, inducing what sociologists call ‘pester-power’

12 செய்திச் சோலை



நெஞ்சத்தை நெகிழ வைத்த மாணவி இராஜலட்சுமியின் நிறைவேறிய ஆசையும், நிறைவேறாத ஆசையும்!

திருவண்ணாமலை,
1998 அக்.10

திருவண்ணாமலையில் கூலித்தொழில் செய்பவர் திரு. சுப்பிரமணி. இவருடைய மகள் இராஜலட்சுமி. நகராட்சி மேல் நிலைப் பள்ளியில் பதினோராம் வகுப்புப் படித்து வந்தார்.

இராஜலட்சுமி தன்னுடைய தந்தைக்குச் சாப்பாடு எடுத்துக் கொண்டு மிதிவண்டியில் சென்றார். அப்போது

அவருக்குப் பின்னால் வந்த செங்கல் ஏற்றிய லாரி ஒன்று இராஜலட்சுமியின் மிதிவண்டி மீது மோதியது. இதனால் இராஜலட்சுமியின் இரண்டு கால்களும் நசுங்கின. இரத்தம் கொட்டியது. உயிருக்குப் போராடிய இராஜலட்சுமியை அருகிலிருந்தவர்கள் அரசு மருத்துவமனையில் சேர்த்தனர்.

இறந்து விடுவேன். எனது கண்களைப் பார்வையற்ற மாமன் மகளுக்குப் பொருத்துங்கள்," என்று கூறினார்; "நீங்கள் சண்டை போடாது ஒற்றுமையாய் இருங்கள்," என்றும் வேண்டினார்.

மேலும், சிகிச்சை செய்த மருத்துவரிடம் தனது படிப்புக்கு உதவிய மாவட்ட ஆட்சியர் அவர்களைக் கடைசியாகப் பார்க்க வேண்டும் என்று கூறினார்.

தகவல் அறிந்த ஆட்சியர் மருத்துவமனைக்கு விரைந்தார். ஆனால், அதற்குள் மாணவி இராஜலட்சுமியின் உயிர் பிரிந்து விட்டது.

மாணவியின் உடலைப் பார்த்த ஆட்சியர் கண்கலங்கினார்.

இராஜலட்சுமியின்

Mr Subramani is a casual labourer in the town of Tiruvannamalai. His daughter Rajalakshmi is in class 11 and studies at the municipal high school. ... One time, a lorry carrying bricks rammed into the bicycle she was riding. Both her legs were crushed, and bloodied. People around her carried her to the government hospital, where she lay fighting for her life. When her parents heard of this, they came to the hospital and were tearful and sad. She said, "I am going to die shortly. Please donate my eyes to my uncle's daughter who is blind. Don't quarrel with each other, and remain united."...

Pic. 8

narrative – she exists as part of the visual design, and to complete the ideal of family, but plays no role.) In another instance, the post office becomes a site of education – in the SSA reader for classes 3 and 4 (Lesson 3: 15-19).

The textbooks reflect an earlier sense of the modern as well: as signifying the possibility of endless mechanical achievement. In a class 5 lesson, we learn of the wonder of modern ships, the port, the use of complex anchors, of cranes etc (see above). In the same reader, we have a eulogy to the computer: what it is capable of, how it started out as a mathematical device and is today used widely, in engineering, medicine, and so on (Lesson 2: 5-11). What is striking is the dynamism of the machine: the narrative suggests that it is the machine that 'does', 'acts'

and so on. (We have noted above that Tamil society is remarkably open to technology and has seldom been alienated by it).

Interestingly, the exercise sections to these two lessons – on ships and computers – are not quite in keeping with the breathless celebration of the power of modern technology. The student is asked to write of other ‘work sites’, modelled on the description of a computer work site. These include: a poultry farm, a potter’s shed and a silkweaving factory (p.9)! Likewise, in an exercise appended to the lesson on ports and cranes, which is actually narrated to us by the sea itself, the student is asked to write of how it would feel to be an animal and know that your forest is being destroyed, how one’s pet might talk, how a bus driver, conductor, shop-keeper talks, etc (p.16). Pedagogically this might lead to interesting responses, but the social distance between the realities described in the lesson and those that are part of what students might actually be able to experience and write about is somewhat poignant.



Pic. 9

Significantly, unlike tradition, which is seldom contested, the historical modern is. Textbooks display a measured ambivalence to some of its expressions. Thus, in the class 5 reader, we find a debate on whether science lends itself to use or abuse (Lesson 9: 50-57). Abusive uses of science are seen to be present in the effects caused by scientific products such as fertilizers, pesticides, with the manner in which television takes away children’s play, with the spoliation of the earth. Uses of science are notated in terms of the products it yields for our use, whether in daily use, or in agriculture – in terms of the communication, science is praised for making possible the advent of television. It is significant that the resolution of the debate is left to the students themselves – suggesting further discussion is possible.

This theme is repeated elsewhere as well. In the Ariviyal Tamil Reader for class 1, pollution is cited as a crucial social problem: vehicles, smoke (from factories), cattle droppings, human excreta are designated as harmful waste and the solution is to plant more trees. Inchoate and yet informative, this lesson drives home the idea of pollution as a bad thing through the iterative use of the word for pollution: *maasu* (p. 2). In the class 3 Ariviyal Tamil reader, we are again told a story of pollution – a Disney-like pond, with creatures in it, is shown to be polluted, but the problem is addressed/resolved with the argument that if human action spoils the environment, human beings are receptive to non-human needs and can and do set things right (p. 24-29). Clearly representative of an urban environmentalist point of view, these lessons also separate the good from the bad in their invocations of the modern.

A different sort of separation is hinted at in a poem on Time (Lesson 6) in the class 5 reader. Since time is marked by the rhythms of the day, the poet wonders why a woman – to whom the poem is addressed – would want a clock (p. 32-35). There is a tacit identification here of women with nature, and therefore with something that is beyond the modern. She becomes the symbol of something eternal and persistent and which keeps at bay the anxieties of change. The poem also serves to caution women about desiring modern things – a theme that formed the staple of film songs in the 1950s. In such instances, gender becomes an important site for transacting the modern.

Interestingly, homilies on the modern are delivered to rather young learners, and as such, exist not as reasoned arguments, but as cautionary moral maxims – the historical modern thus appears almost fable-like, and marked by its icons, rather than by its actual forms of existence.

Transacting Tradition and Modernity

All Tamil readers work hard to render tradition meaningful – and, as noted earlier, Tamilness becomes the touchstone of everything worthwhile. Thus it imparts value to things which are new, and at the same time, it re-articulates the new in terms of the known. Tradition and modernity are thus present as conjoined twins – this is not only specific to the Tamil context, but is characteristic of the manner in which people in many parts of the Indian sub-continent, chose to relate to the past, at a time when it appeared a burden as well as a necessity. While the reconciling of past and present is commonly present in almost the whole of India, in the early modern period, the manner of this reconciling has been shaped by regional cultural histories.

Thus, on the one hand, the pan-Indian celebration of science and its virtues is present in these books – the claims of science are sought to be upheld against those of the pre-modern, primitive world. On the other hand, we have a characteristic Tamil gloss on the significance of science, as well as a distinctive mode of reconciling tradition and modernity.

To consider instances of the celebratory modern versus the to-be-discarded past: a lesson in the SSA Tamil reader for classes 3 & 4 which counsels adivasis to give up their ‘primitive’ ways and take to modern ways is a case in point. The adivasis’ so-called primitive nature is underscored by their clothes, by their readiness to sing and dance (images derived from movies), and their propensity to follow cruel customs, such as digging a spear into someone to cure them of an ailment (Pic 10). In a similar vein, in an improbable tale of shipwreck, discovery and culture, civilised rule is invoked as important to redeem those who lack culture and are therefore ‘primitive’ (class 5 reader - Lesson 16: 103-111). Just as the institutions of the welfare state – public health institutions – are considered an answer to the adivasis’ health problems, so are the protocols of rule and governance considered evidence of civilization.

The SSA reader for classes 3 and 4 also features a poem which affirms unequivocally the claims of the modern – but it works with a tacit division of the past into useful and useless parts and the latter are deemed worthy of sacrifice at the altar of the modern (Lesson 4: 92). Thus the poem meditates on whether it is right or wrong to endorse caste and religious differences – the question is purely rhetorical and we know the answer – and interestingly these differences are made to appear part of a past that is not quite modern, not what we need today. Like the primitive, the old is also to be shunned – but it is important to keep in mind that this is an oldness that is not part of legitimate tradition, which is after all praiseworthy.

A more straightforward and mundane sense of the modern as something that is constitutively opposed to tradition (though there is no overt preference of the one to the other) is the subject of a lesson on civic values in the class 7 reader (Lesson 5: 102-110). A woman, who resides in the city, accompanies her nephew from the village on his first day in the city and teaches him road rules and to read traffic signs. Familiar stereotypes of rural and urban worlds are invoked throughout – rural ignorance, urban complexity, rural informalism (for example, we are told buses stop and pick up passengers as and when they are hailed in village Tamil Nadu) and urban order (one has to wait at bus stops in the city), and so on.

The claims of the modern appear weakest when faced with the infinite possibilities contained in tradition – and it is in their rendering of the latter that Tamil textbooks represent a characteristic ‘Tamil’ resolution of the tradition-modernity opposition. In Ariviyal Tamil for class 1, modern scientific Tamil is viewed in a continuous line of development from the aphoristic Tamil of the traditional poet Avvai (we have referred to this above). The modern is rendered unexceptional and, more importantly, knowable through tradition. In the Ariviyal Tamil reader for class 3, tradition and modernity are linked in even more ingenious ways: a lesson on scientific discoveries discusses the uses of the latter. Italian inventor Guglielmo Marconi is called up for special praise and his genius affirmed, not in terms of his contribution, but in terms of a celebratory traditional praise-poem (p. 36).

A ‘balanced’ reconciliation of tradition to modernity works best in the narration of lives that are considered exemplary or worthy of narration for a young audience. For instance consider the life of Dr Gurusamy narrated in the class 7 reader (see page 17). He is a doctor, a modern-day philanthropist but also a believer – endows a temple, even as he encourages free food for children in schools. The message is clear: social conscientiousness, a scientific mind and religious belief are not necessarily antithetical to each other (Pic11). This reading of a life represents a balance between the outright rejection of tradition by men such as Periyar and its extolling by Tamil traditionalists – and this balance is secured in the name of a rather expansively-defined Tamil culture.

We have noted this in an earlier instance too, in the class 10 lesson on ancient Tamil poets, who were forerunners it seems, of modern science (we have referred to this above). A close reading of the essay indicates that science is validated since it can be 'read off' literature. Thus, what the essay considers as a scientific description of water pressure turns out to be a simile that is deployed to clarify an argument about the 'given'ness of destiny! In another instance, the essayist quotes a description of the qualities of crystals, but the purpose of this description is to play with notions of seeing, desire and mirroring (pp. 173-174). The essayist confuses the accuracy of poetry with its mandate: the Tamil epic poets were very good observers, but their skills were exercised not to comprehend and turn natural processes and resources to human advantage, but to create a setting, a mood and to expound a moral. In wilfully adapting their literary skills to his decidedly un-scientific arguments about science and tradition, the essayist does service to neither literature nor science – meanwhile, he scores a rhetorical victory in the cause of a putative Tamil culture!

The most thoughtful essay (Lesson 2) on the old and the new, the local and the foreign, tradition and modernity in these readers is by Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundaranar, a well-known early nationalist figure and supporter of the cause of Tamil identity. Written possibly in the 1930s, and reprinted in the class 10 reader, the essay discusses and debates

Pic. 10



the right choice of medium for modern learning (pp. 136-143). The claims of Tamil are first examined. It is extolled for its classical virtues, and also because it is the native tongue of hundreds of people (Tamil is classical and demotic, as we have noted earlier, for all concerned with its modern-day existence). English is examined next: English education is deemed important since English is the 'language of the world', and representative of everything modern. Besides, without the science that English brings (the author is careful, though, not to identify English with science, and makes it clear that it would be foolhardy to do this, since it is European cultures that have produced this Science and this is not a function of the English language as such), ancient Tamil truths cannot be revived for the future. In other words, to know and do Tamil better, English learning is necessary!

The author, like many Tamils of his time but unlike nationalist Tamils, sidesteps the question of Hindi as a national language neatly, and this allows him to hear the claims of English favourably! Besides, Periyar and others loyal to his politics had not really been opposed to English, associating it with the world of rationality and progress. Thus, for men like Thiru Vi. Ka., who were drawn to Indian nationalism as well as some of the ideals of the Dravidian movement, there existed compelling and clear reasons, specific to their place and time, to raise and resolve issues of tradition and modernity in a somewhat singular fashion.

This an interesting debate that still has resonances for language learning in a state where the issue is invariably contentious (see the chapter on English language readers). The class 10 lesson does not register its importance and relevance to the present context – the essay has probably been chosen for its espousal of the cause of education in one's native tongue, while retaining an open mind on the learning of English, an argument that is a favourite with moderate Tamil nationalists (and which is also a staple feature of arguments that explain the learning of English and which are present in English readers).

The Materiality of Tamilness

We have seen how notions of Tamilness are articulated in these readers – through definitions of worthwhile norms and virtue, proud heritage and culture. But we rarely see Tamilness in terms of lived lives – thus we know little or nothing about how Tamil people work, relate to each other and so on. In other words, Tamilness appears an entirely abstract ideal, at best located in literary texts and monuments and in impossibly ideal lives. This disinterest in materiality is characteristic of textbooks content as a whole – in almost all states and with respect to all textbooks except science and Geography readers, the material world is present in its most idealised forms. This elision of materiality is achieved not by completely ignoring the social worlds of labour, caste and gender, but by idealising them.

History and Identity: Some Tamil Debates

We will begin our examination of History textbooks in Tamil Nadu through a brief consideration of debates, which arose in the province of Madras in the early twentieth century. We will then go on to demonstrate how the textbooks taken for analysis reflect, or do not reflect, the concerns that have since engaged popular and scholarly historians.

From about the middle years of the nineteenth century, Tamil-speaking intellectuals in the Madras province displayed keen critical interest in their cultural past. Deemed Dravidian and exceptional by men as different in their intent as the administrator-scholar H. H. Risley and Bishop Caldwell, author of *A Comparative Grammar of Dravidian Languages*, their history appeared to embody a civilisational character that distinguished it from all things 'Aryan'. A series of developments, including the publishing of manuscripts of long-forgotten texts – from the last quarter of the nineteenth century – revealed an ancient heritage of verse and text, which confirmed these men in their beliefs that they were in possession of a past that owed very little to a 'northern' 'Aryan' culture; and which in fact could be said to predate the so-called Aryan invasion of the subcontinent (later on the intellectual heirs of these Victorian Tamil gentlemen would link their history to the Indus Valley cultures). During this period, the Dalit-Buddhist Iyothee Thass drew on this same corpus of texts and argued that the uniqueness of the Tamil past lay in the fact that it was Buddhist; a fact, he argued, this Buddhist part had been wilfully 'forgotten' by Brahmin ideologues and their princely supporters.

This pride in an antique past was expressed in and through exhortations to Tamil literary glory – the Tamil language was upheld as a bearer of a distinctive identity, as encapsulating a memory of a different past as well as the dream of a future that would fulfill that clearly utopian past (Iyothee Thass, in fact, engaged in a fascinating hermeneutical exercise, re-reading Tamil literary texts to make them yield him a 'hidden history' of Buddhism). By the early years of the twentieth century, when political liberalism informed civic debates, 'Tamilness' was aligned to other civilisational and cultural correlates. Tamils, it was argued, had originally created a caste-free society. They had built their life worlds on the basis of an ecological understanding of the universe and linked together labour, love and the natural world. Ancient Tamil Nadu had known no social divisions, rather it upheld an expansive tolerance and was fundamentally egalitarian. Caste, it was said, was a 'foreign' import brought into Tamil Nadu by 'Brahmin interlopers' from the 'Aryan North', whose cunning had seduced Tamil kings to assent to this repugnant social system.

The 1920s and 1930s, which witnessed the emergence of the radical anti-caste Self-Respect Movement saw a new civic culture emerge – it claimed

allegiance to a universal culture of equality, justice, dissent, rationalism and self-respect and asked Tamils to come together into a comradeship of equals, '*samadharma*', rather than '*manudharma*' would animate social and cultural existence. *Manudharma* was, as before, identified with the Sanskritic North but now Hinduism as such was criticised as well. These decades saw an eclipsing of older arguments about culture and history and the emergence of new, secular definitions of identity. The self-respecters were less interested in a nostalgic recovery of a lost past than in building a just society in the future. In fact, they held that the future could only exist as a negation of the past; it was to be utopian, radical and heir to a universal revolutionary tradition.

In the late 1930s, the utopian vision of the self-respecters and the more generalised pride over all things Tamil came together. The anti-Hindi agitations – directed against the compulsory learning of Hindi at the school-level – that erupted in 1937–38 upheld the claims of Tamil language and culture and directed public anger against the so-called Sanskritic-Hindi culture (this latter was defined as attempting to impose 'Brahmin-Bania' dominance on the 'Dravidian South'). This movement produced the demand for a sovereign 'Dravida Nadu' in the 1940s and led, among other things, to the formation of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in 1949.

This was an important moment for 'Tamilness'. The invocation of a Dravidian identity found its respondents in the Tamil country largely and the ideologues of the DMK soon set about reconstructing Tamilness by gathering past definitions into a seamless grand nationalist narrative about culture and language. Significantly, the Self-Respect Movement's rejection of national pride was overlooked and the leaders and ideologues of self-respect, including E. V. Ramasamy Periyar, were transmuted into veritable 'Dravidian' and 'Tamil' icons. Periyar's inclusive definition of 'Dravidianism', as a rejection of all that was 'Aryan' and linked to the inequities of caste, was now transformed to mean a generalised equality.

Importantly, the DMK's definitions of Tamilness drew their inspiration from revived literary pasts. Sangam poetry, especially the poems of love and war that are to be found in the two major anthologies of that period, the Jain text of the early Christian era the *Thirukural*, and the Tamil epic *Silappadigaram* were privileged as enunciating characteristic Tamil values. The heroism of ancient Tamil society was re-invented as an ideal for modern times – Tamils, rather Tamil men, were called upon to exhibit the same spirit of sacrifice and courage as had animated these heroes of old. They were also asked to be munificent like the kings of the past and as mindful of literature and literary figures. Kannagi, the heroine of the *Silappadigaram*, famed for her ennobling chastity, was upheld as the very epitome of *karpu* or female rectitude; in turn, *karpu* was understood to be the source of 'female power', capable of 'burning cities and causing rain to fall'. Kannagi's alter ego and competitor in love, Madhavi the courtesan, was praised as embodying the spirit of

Tamil music and dance. The *Thirukural* was invoked as a universal secular text whose ethics was as relevant in the present, as it had been in the past. Significantly, the *Thirukural* was also made to yield ethical prototypes: the chaste, gracious wife and the generous, heroic husband who is her lord, master and protector.

Clearly, all men and women were to be reconciled in Tamilness – in this putative oneness, caste and creed ceased to matter, for what mattered was ‘being Tamil’. Dalits and others were both Tamil; in fact, being Tamil together neutralised the stigma of untouchability, or so it was proclaimed. Christians and Muslims were what they were, not only by virtue of their faith but also by their fidelity to Tamilness. In every respect, then, Tamilness became the measure of equality and a marker of citizenship.

However, it is important to note that ‘being Tamil’ always meant different things for men and women – in fact this was one of the crucial conditions of Tamilness, that it defined and mandated different duties and ideals for women and men. For women, Tamilness meant, above all, adhering to the ideal of *karpu* and bearing brave Tamil sons; for men, it meant being loyal to the larger community and willing to suffer and sacrifice for it.

These notions were articulated through the pulpit and the platform, so to speak. They constituted the very stuff of fiction and poetry, provided themes for the cinema, were part of literary and political rhetoric – in short, they were present as commonsense and naturalised through a variety of verbal, ritual and political means. This is not to claim that they were not criticised or rejected. Most Tamil Brahmins did not identify with Tamilness. Then there were those who were uneasy with this recall of an ancient past and the celebration of what appeared to them to be arcane values. This group comprised critical scholars, liberal and left ideologues. Some of them engaged in sustained and serious efforts to study Tamilness and Tamil culture – both its caste and class biases, as well as the manner in which anti-Sanskritism and anti-Aryan themes disenabled a serious consideration of Tamil Jainism and Buddhism, which, after all, had come from the north and introduced Sanskrit and Pali themes into Tamil literature. Yet, these remained marginal efforts; for much of civil society, Tamilness appeared a given and a marker of a distinctive culture and history.

This celebration of Tamilness though was thoroughly cultural – and historians consider the DMK as articulating a cultural rather than a political nationalism. For one, the DMK, unlike Periyar, accepted the idea as well as the union of India and was content to demand greater autonomy for the states that constituted the Union. It never failed, though, to deploy a stirring rhetoric of Tamil national pride and honour to argue its case in parliament and with the government at the Centre, as well as with the Tamil people.

The chapters on the Aryans and later on the Rajputs reference violence against women – polygamy, forced widowhood, child marriage with respect to the first, and sati, jauhar, female foeticide with respect to the second. But these appear as admonitions issued by contemporary government orders and are not notated as historical instances of gender violence – which, clearly, is not possible within the narrative frame that constructs history in the textbooks, and which merely describes, observes but seldom explains and analyses. Also, there is no founded sense of gender relationships in time in these books – women’s lives, as we shall see, are brought in as sections that have to be tagged on to the main narrative.

Since war is not really ‘violent’ and since we are not told of the material effects of war, we are not allowed to see or imagine war as an instance of power and authority, or ideologies of rule and command, or of war as a clash of competing imperial interests, or of war as taking forward class objectives. In this sense, the narrative actively disenables discussion of social and political differences, or even ideological ones. Nor does it allow us to view social classes as political entities – since politics is all about kingship, social classes are not to be viewed within the purview of class politics or other sorts of contradictions that they are subject to and experience. In the sections that follow, we shall attempt to look at the details of material life, of class, ideology and gender as they figure in the textbooks – to demonstrate how the manner in which they are represented is also the measure of what is not being shown or what is being actively suppressed.

Representations of Material Life: Class, Caste and Gender

Since kingship is all and descriptions of dynastic rule exhausts the history of any particular era, economic and social histories remain untold – and untellable – tales. For instance, there is almost total absence of material history, of life, except in the chapters on early history – only in these chapters, do we get a sense of human beings of building a life doing things other than war.

For instance, in the descriptions of prehistoric life in the Explore History 6 Matric book, we see the human body for what it is, vulnerable to changes in the weather, to wild animals, and intent on defensive survival. The chapter references human beings wandering, hunting, keeping warm, learning the use of bark and cloth. In the lesson on Harappa, the body is invoked in descriptions of the great bath, in the fact of people wearing amulets, and we are told that the city perhaps declined due to the onset of an epidemic. (Some of these details figure in the TNTC Class 9 reader as well.) The Explore History 9 reader notes that the Harappan people loved dancing, refers to the figurine of the dancing girl. Elsewhere too, in discussions of Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Chinese and Greek civilisations, this reader refers to details of material

life. Thus, there are discussions of rites of the dead, with respect to Mesopotamia, Egypt and China, where the dead body was often buried with things a person was supposed to need in the after life. In the lessons on Greece, there are references to the Spartans, and the Spartan way of life, of how they laid great emphasis on physical strength, and how if a child was deigned weak, it was cast away and how only healthy children were allowed to survive. The Greeks are also described as great sportsmen and the Olympic Games is referred to.

The TNTC Class 6 reader considers Sangam life in the ancient Tamil country in material terms. Sangam people loved the good life: they appear to have been fond of food, music, dancing, fine clothes, jewellery, which both men and women wore – in short, a life of the body. (Interestingly, in all these descriptions of material life in early societies, clothing appears important, as if it is important to mark the march of civilisation by indicating how the primitive human body came to be clothed in ever more refined ways!)

In these details, we find an incipient relationship between nature and culture with geography and culture being explored, though not in a self-conscious sense. But this is limited only to the early period – as we progress in time, nature ceases to be an informing principle. In fact, in that crucial chapter on the importance of geography for history, nature becomes a resource, and is linked to the rise of royal power (in the reference to the Magadhan state). From then on, it ceases to be a historical player and becomes an object – unnoted, unacknowledged – of human action.

It can be said then that references to material life begin to disappear gradually as we come to dynastic history, and if they figure at all, they figure in descriptions of work, war or in terms of penal and administrative strictures governing the body – the people as agents of material life disappear. Thus, in the TNTC Class 9 textbook, we are told of harsh penal laws under the Mauryas (but are not provided with details); we are told of poverty in the Gupta period, but since we are also told in the very next sentence that people enjoyed a very high standard of living, this statement does not really make sense. Illness is discussed in the context of Kanishka's time, and the text references Sushruta. Other noticeable references to material life are to be found in the chapters on the Delhi Sultanate – Qutub-ud-din Aibak is described as having banned the consumption of tobacco and alcohol. Mohammed-bin-Tughlak's rule, marked as it was by the Sultan's caprice, caused a lot of everyday hardship to people's life, we are told. There are references to sati and *jauhar* in the chapter on the Rajputs and Rani Padmini is described as having committed *jauhar*.

The other references to material life that persist in the chapters dealing with imperial and dynastic rule in all the textbooks have to do with production, labour and trade on the one hand, and with what women

did on the other. References to production feature in discussions of the revenue administration, and whatever the period and the dynasty, the textbooks claim that the poor had a hard time, working, paying taxes and so on. Not surprisingly, the chapters on early History reference work and production in a more descriptive sense than later chapters do. In the Explore History 6 textbook, we are told that there were two classes in Harappan society, the upper classes, comprising the nobility, the merchants, etc., and the working lower classes. There is also a reference to how the city employed workers to clean its elaborate drainage system. The Explore History 9 reader also contains references to cleaning sewerage in Harrapa. In addition, it refers to slavery in Mesopotamia and Egypt and to farming in Egypt and other river valleys, including in China. All early civilisations and societies it appears were devoted to craft – non-agricultural work is subsumed into craftwork and in all these societies, craft specialisation marks labour and labour relations clearly: weaving, making jewellery, terracotta, sculpture, building monument, etc. being the most common trades.

In Aryan society too, labour appears as an instance of role specialisation – the Explore History 6 and the TNTC Class 9 books refer to chariot makers, farmers, leather workers, potters, teachers, copper smiths, weavers, carpenters, etc. We are told the commander-in-chief and the priest were important personages. *Varna* divisions are mentioned and considered occupational divisions but are not seen as particular variants of an earlier universal specialisation model. Rather, when we encounter *varna*, it is already an internally consistent system, which goes on to become more rigid as time goes by. Though the textbooks maintain that the Aryans introduced new agricultural practices, we are not told if these caused new labour practices to emerge: Aryans themselves are considered pastoralists, but nothing more is said about labour and production during this time.

We get our first sense of labour relations only in the Mauryan period, when we are told that rich farmers employed slaves (Explore History 6, but not in TNTC Class 9). But this detail remains just that, and we do not get a sense of production relationships in other times. Even though references are made to irrigation, to administration, road building, etc., we do not get a sense of the labour expended on these tasks, and neither does the labourer as a defined figure feature in these references to work. More generally, all labour is subsumed in idealised descriptions of craftwork, or service. Thus, work and craft are referred to in all periods, from hunting and gathering in pre-historic times to specialised craft functions that flourished with dynastic patronage. Weaving, metal work, sculptors, jewellers, soldiers, construction work, traders appear to have been common profession, from Harappan days to Mughal times. Preaching emerges as a profession with the Buddhists and Jains, though it is not marked as such, just as priesthood for the earlier periods is not work. Trade and craft guilds are referred to in Gupta times. Washermen, cobblers and ‘untouchables’ are referred to in the context of the appeal of Islam and Bhakthi. Significantly, warriors

and farmers are the only classes that appear to have agency – for instance, statements that warriors protested and so Alexander returned home, and that warriors suffered in Mohammed-bin-Tughlak’s Kumaon campaign.

In ancient Tamilakam, work is shown – to follow the lie of the land (Explore History 6). Thus, we are told of pastoralists and cattle-keepers; fishermen and salt-sellers; of farmers; of hill chieftains who hunted; and of traders and marauders from the desert lands. Detailed notes on trade are provided, especially trade with Rome and Greece. Greek as well as Roman sources are paraphrased, a list of goods traded provided and finds from archaeological digs near trade routes provided – also a list of important ports in the Tamil region. But in all this discussion of trade, neither merchants, nor middlemen, nor bazaar helpers or indeed anyone else, mentioned. Similar descriptions continue in lessons on the Pallavas, Pandyas and the Cholas – artisans though, are mentioned.

Explore History 9 is not very different, though its canvas is larger and it deals with the broad sweep of European history. Labour relations are discussed with reference to agriculture. A chapter on European feudalism refers to the low status that the serfs had to occupy; yet it was this rigid social order, it is pointed out, that guaranteed them food and protected them from the vagaries of war. The implications of this are also discussed: this unequal structure led to the concentration of authority in one place and exploitation. There is also an extended discussion of craft guilds, guildsmen and of their role in civic life, how they came to be the new intellectuals by taking to reading with the advent of the printing press (Significantly, discussion of craft seldom almost never dwells on the consciousness of the craftsman).

Labour figures in the chapter on the industrial revolution and in the chapter on socialism. Though the industrial revolution is said to have replaced the domestic system with the factory system, the manner in which means and relationships of production determined this change is not examined. The text separates its descriptions of factory and labour. In its descriptions of the industrial revolution, the text is enthused by notions of technological progress, but when it comes to explaining causes and effects, it adopts a more critical register, and concentrates on labour: how capitalism paid minimum wage to workers and brought in maximum profit for the capitalists.

The chapter on socialism refers to how it emerged in opposition to capitalism – the growth of trade unions, the emergence of resistance, associated with Babeuf, the Utopian socialists, Fourier, St Simon, Robert Owen, Blanqui, Marx, is noted. But this roll-call of names is not linked to the rise of the organised working class or the growth of socialist and communist parties. Labourers remain invisible – without trace of awareness or irony, the Communist Manifesto is referred to as a book that held that workers must end capitalism and establish socialism.

In the fleeting glimpses of work that we find in the Indian history textbooks, we find it linked to *varna* divisions – this is not sustained for all periods and is to be found only in chapters on the early period in history. We have already pointed out that caste (or *varna*) is a crucial determinant of worthwhile tradition and that textbooks maintain contradictory attitudes with respect to it. We also noted how – in Explore History 6 – *varna* is initially aligned to occupational differences and differentiated from caste, which fixes identity at birth. We also saw how the textbook is yet haunted by a casteist sense of differences – as is clear from its description of the Shudras. Shudras are seen as those who perform bodily labour (all the *varnas* are explained in their so-called ideal state). The TNNTC Class 6 book notes: Brahmins apparently were learned and given gifts by kings and Kshatriyas – usually gifts of land. The Vaisyas were agriculturalists and also great donors – for monasteries, rest houses and so on. Shudras we are told were manual labourers but attained grace through an exercise of bhakthi. (significantly, it is love of god that raises one in the eyes of the world, not the manner in which one works; likewise changes in human character appear more germane than changes in the conditions in which they live and labour.)

Clearly political history precedes all other histories, and references to social identities or ideas that are not immediately linked to notions of power and authority are not rendered visible in the textbooks. Gender, which ought to suffer a similar fate, though, fares differently. Women are not invisible so much as made visible in fairly defined ways.

For one, textbooks assume a conventional interest in the ‘status of women’. This is partly on account of an early colonial obsession with the treatment of women in Hindu society, which subsequently got written in historiography. Thus, nationalist historians, in order to refute the sweeping colonial indictment of the manner in which Hindu society had ostensibly treated its women, reported the existence of a ‘golden age’ of Hindu womanhood. Altekar’s work was significant in this respect, and various versions of it got written into textbooks. In this understanding, the ‘status of women’ was chiefly linked to their education and sometimes to their marital rights. More importantly, distinctive ‘feminine’ virtues were identified as ‘civilisationally’ valid and womanly demeanour came to represent cultural identity. We already referred to this in our observations on how textbooks understand Aryan patriarchy.

Not at all surprisingly, the Altekarian paradigm is reworked in the Tamil context, and to the same purpose. The TNNTC reader 6 for instance, praises women in the Sangam age for being good wives, mothers and for honouring their husbands. The textbook also makes it clear that social decorum required women to be hospitable, and men to be valorous. It goes on to note that some women were educated and even poets, and that generally women enjoyed a high social status, which gradually declined. This descriptive rhetoric persists in the lesson on the Pallavas as well. In Pallava times, it appears that upper caste women were enlightened, learned, made donations to temples and monasteries. Middle and lower

class women, though, we are told, had to work very hard and many of them were weavers and carders. Women in Pandya times appear to have been much like they were under the Pallavas – only they are assigned a greater range of tasks, including pottery, painting, and of course dance.

The TNNTC 9 reader contains much the same information, only it extends it to the Buddhist and Jaina period. It observes that women were preachers, nuns and members of the Buddhist Sanga. The textbook indicts Rajput society for not treating its women well; notes of Razia Sultana that her leadership qualities were despised and challenged. There is a tacit acknowledgment here that the status of women was historically and culturally determined, but this is not present as argument.

Chandragupta II

Chandragupta II was the next important Gupta ruler. He ruled from 380 to 412 AD. There is an interesting story about how Chandragupta became king. The story is told in a play called *Devichandraguptam* written by Vishakhadatta. Ramagupta became king after Samudragupta. The Sakas, who were ruling in some areas in Western India, defeated Ramagupta. Ramagupta agreed to lend his queen Dhruvadevi to the Sakas. His younger brother Chandragupta was very unhappy over this hurt to the Gupta family pride. So he dressed up like queen Dhruvadevi, visited the Saka ruler and killed him. Later, Chandragupta killed Ramagupta and married Dhruvadevi.

Chandragupta's daughter Prabhavathi married Rudrasena II, the ruler of the Vakataka kingdom in Central India. When Rudrasena died, his son was a minor. So, Prabhavati managed the affairs of the Vakataka kingdom with the help of an official sent by her father Chandragupta. Thus, Chandragupta had indirect control over the Vakataka kingdom. He crossed the Vakataka kingdom while he was going to Gujarat to defeat the Sakas there. He added the Saka territories on the west coast to his empire. The Guptas now became very rich. They could control the profitable sea trade with the Middle East.

Chandragupta called himself **Vikramaditya**. Kalidasa and Amarasimha were famous scholars in his court. It was in Chandragupta's time that the Chinese pilgrim Fa-hsien visited India (399-414 AD) and wrote a long and detailed account of our people.

Pic. 12

Secondly, royal marriages as well as the exchange of women appear as important details of political histories (in TNNTC 9). Thus we are told that the Magadhan kingdom was extended not only through war, but also through marriage: a wife brings in land as dowry. An incipient gender division of imperial roles is thus put in place: the king encourages war, while his wife through marriage adds to this property. The textbook also references an actual exchange of woman, though it does not notate it as

such. The instance of Queen Dhruvadevi who is 'gifted' by the Sakas and eventually 'redeemed' and married Chandragupta Vikramaditya to (Pic 12). More generally, royal marriages are mentioned as if they are important, but we are not always told why. Thus, Chandragupta Maurya is referred to as marrying a Shudra woman, though what this means or implies is not clear.

Thirdly, the caprice or intelligence or piety, as the case may be, of individual women is viewed germane to the very direction of historical development (Explore History 6 and TNNTC 9). Mahavira's and Siddhartha's mothers are referenced as important; Ashoka's mother is instrumental in his conversion; Sher Shah Suri's escape from his cruel stepmother is an important part of his imperial growth; the Mughal (woman) regent who governs in Akbar's name is noted as running a 'petticoat' government that eventually had to collapse; Nur Jehan's role in the fall of Jehangir is marked as important. In all these instances, the status of women as providers, procreators and sexual beings is taken for granted. There are other references to women: to daughters the mother goddess figurine from Harappa; the learned Gargi and Matihreyi; Sangamitra, Ashoka's daughter, who is sent to Sri Lanka; the courtesan Madhavi in the epic *Silappadigaram*; Mira, famed for her bhakthi ... However these individuals who were not wives or providers appear as exceptions, since their role is not examined in their various historical contexts.

The point is not merely that women are considered as historically important or useful only in their given roles, but that these roles are, themselves, understood and granted validity only in the context of political authority and power. Thus the details of women's lives – as wives and mothers – the sheer labour of nurture and reproduction are foreign to this narrative and clearly not considered germane to our sense of the past.

Conclusion

Though Tamil society witnessed vigorous and contentious debates about the past and the evolution of a historiographical framework that assumed the exceptional nature of Tamil culture and civilisation, History textbooks in Tamil Nadu do not reflect these debates. They appear captive to a model of history teaching and writing that assumes that the past is meaningful only if it can be seen as leading to and explaining the present, especially the modern Indian nation state. Thus all history is nationalist history which begins in the Indo-Gangetic plains, or ought to be viewed as such, with events in the past making sense only in the context of the imperatives of modern nationalism and its conceits: its faith in progress, its trust in secularism and a composite culture, its desire to own the past only in terms of its ostensible glory, its sense of its democratic character.