

## **Writing Tamil History: Post National Perspectives**

*Ponnampalam Ragupathy*

Can anything be called Tamil History? What do we mean by Tamil History? Why should it be named Tamil History? For whom should it be written and for what purpose? These are questions anyone would naturally ask when we talk about Tamil History.

I don't need to elaborate here, the subjectivity and objectivity of what we understand as the discipline of history today; how it is viewed as a product of 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalism and the contemporary ideas that challenge and deconstruct history.

We ridicule myth as unscientific and insist on scientific history. But, what we see in reality is that myths are more powerful than historical facts. It is a known secret that history, when ultimately reaches the masses, becomes a 'scientific myth' invented by the elite to impose upon others.

What was that inner aspiration that has so far impelled the writing of Tamil History? Obviously, the concept of Tamil History stems from the ethno-linguistic nationalist model of South Asia. The modern Tamil historiography which originated from the colonial Orientalists was continued by the nationalists.

The main forces and counter forces that were involved in this historiographical game were colonialism, orientalism, Indian nationalism, Dravidian/Tamil nationalism, religio-caste nationalism such as Brahmanism and the other competing ethno-linguistic nationalisms i.e., the Sinhala-Buddhist, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam etc. The mainstream Tamil historiography could never go beyond this vicious configuration. Perhaps, the need was never felt.

No doubt, the salient feature of this historiographical strategy of competing identities was establishing the antiquity. The Tamil historiography got obsessed with this strategy because antiquity was a strong point for it in the ethno-linguistic model. Why and how antiquity got involved with nationalism is an interesting area of investigation but it is not within the purview of this paper.

Our concern here is how Tamil historiography should adjust itself to changed realities. What should be the theme and what are the strategies? There is a two fold agenda. One is that Tamil historiography should help the Tamils to evolve congenial ways of life in our times. The other is exploring its universality i.e., to what extent it can inspire the postmodern world of today.

In fact, both are interlinked. What can bring prosperity to Tamils today is not conventional nationalism but to what extent they participate in the global economy; to what extent they control at least a small fraction of world's capital, human resources etc. and to what extent they inspire world culture. Achieving them depends on evolving a suitable contemporary Tamil culture that is presentable globally. Tamil historiography needs to be orientated to this task.

What could be the strategies? Being an identity based on a classical language, can we follow the historiographical models designed for similar formations? The Graeco-Roman history is still acclaimed as inspiring the world of literature, statecraft and trade.

It is true that more than two millennia of human experience is recorded in Tamil language. Sankam literature and Bakti literature still enjoy a global appeal. But, Tamil is a living tradition unlike classical Greek and Latin. We can't stop at the classical contributions of Tamils to humanity.

An important contemporary phenomenon is the Tamil diaspora which had gone beyond the conventional national boundaries. Even though it has a two hundred years history, the Tamil historiography never got geared to meet this situation where heritage is de-linked from geography. The boundaries of the Tamil community of the past need to be widened, keeping the present scenario in mind.

As part of the discussion on strategies, we cite a few examples of issues that may be highlighted in writing post national Tamil history.

1. The maritime history, trade history and diaspora history of Tamils, highlighting the global outlook and global interaction.
2. The secularity of Tamil culture that it was associated with all the major religions of the world, right from their formative days. Tamil served a medium for all of them.
3. Professional history of the Tamils in arts crafts and sciences.
4. History of Tamil Ideas: Intellectual, folk, gender and environmental.

What are the likely impediments in implementing a programme of post national history?

1. The Tamil elite is yet to understand the prospects of removing the tag of conventional nationalism from history .We wonder whether nationalism ever ended for the Tamil elite and ever began for the remaining Tamils. The elite of the Tamil diaspora is no exception to this.
2. It is interesting to note that all early and original works on the history of Tamils are in English and it remains the same to this day. There is a double standard in writing Tamil history. What is written in English is different from what is written in Tamil. The Tamil version is never accredited as standard history, most of the times because of its own drawbacks. In reality, writing Tamil history is still not in the hands of Tamils, thanks to neo orientalis.
3. Social sciences, especially a discipline like history, should look beyond the existing social plane, if it has to lead the society to progress. But, what is expected by the power groups which control knowledge in various ways is that the discipline should

buttress the existing social plane and norms. This is like putting the bullocks behind the cart.

Do we have any native genius in the Tamil writings that show light on these historiographical issues? I can think of only one person – Puthumaippiththan alias Viruthasalam (1906-1948) whose birth centenary falls on this year. Sometimes, creative writers come out with better insight into historiography than historians. To the long list of masterpieces of Tamil writings, if anything could be added in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was the poetry of Bharathy and short stories of Puthumaippiththan.

I would suggest that anyone who wishes to conceive a new Tamil historiography, from the native Tamil point of view should read Puthumaippiththan for inspiration.

This genius of a writer, who was a student of history, not only transcended nationalism and other ideologies, but also foresaw many of the social theories that came up academically much later. He is yet to be rediscovered.

There is a particular reason why I chose to read this paper at this conference. A greater responsibility lies on the elite of the Tamil diaspora in this regard, than their counterparts in India or Sri Lanka. It is they who can go beyond constraints of nationalism, in conceiving a conducive, Tamil historiography to cater to the needs of wider Tamil identity. I don't hope much on the Orientalists either because, this need not to be in their agenda.

I am aware of a possible comment that whether this paper deconstructs Tamil national history or redefines it. Perhaps, it is both. Territory need not be overruled but the focus should be on culture. To what extent history helps to mould the contemporary Tamil culture is more important than what one chooses to write as Tamil History.

I wish to end this presentation with two citations, a recent one and an ancient one. K.Indrapala thus dedicated his latest publication, 'The Evolution of an Ethnic Identity' (2005):

'To the innocents who lost their lives as a direct consequence of misinterpretations of history'

The Sankam anthology Puranaanooru comes out with this little poetry:

*Naadaakenro kaadaakenro  
Avalaakenro misaiyaakenro  
Evvazhi nallavar aadavar  
Avvazhi nallai vaazhiya nilane.*

Whether countryside or forest land,  
Whether lowlands or highlands,  
Where ever people are good,  
There, the land is also good.