

## Introduction

The cover of this book and Fig. 1.1 show the imposing figure of His Highness Dambadas Ramachandra Tondaiman Bahadur (1829–1886) who ruled the South Indian princely state Pudukkottai from 1839 until his death.<sup>1</sup> We see the raja, a seasoned quinquagenarian potentate, clad in a typical Indian royal outfit, the long, richly embroidered overcoat, the ornate crown, the sword, cane, and fine jewelry—all-in-all a sight familiar to students of British India from many paintings and photographs.<sup>2</sup> The South Indian locale is also depicted rather unambiguously by the temple tower (Tam. *kōpuram*) in the background. At first glance, this seems to be a rather stereotypical image of what the British used to call a “native ruler.” On closer scrutiny, however, the image is complicated by a small detail: the book the king is holding up with his left hand. It bears on its spine three words, all of them proper names, all of them far from innocent signifiers: Homer, *Iliad*, London. What is Homer’s *Iliad* doing in a small kingdom in nineteenth-century South India? Why is the book there? The portrait was painted in December 1879, and by that time book printing had already spread widely throughout Southern India. Local rulers and landlords had a long-standing tradition as patrons of the arts, and as the new medium was gaining ground, they often sponsored the expensive printing process. At one level, then, the raja is here portrayed as a typical patron, a lover of arts and letters, a generous donor who embraces a new cultural medium. The newness of the book as a medium, even as a commodity, is important in this context, and it is connected to the remaining question: why Homer’s *Iliad* out of all possible texts?

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1. For more on the kingdom of Pudukkottai and Ramachandra Tondaiman, see the monographs by Dirks (1987) and Waghorne (1994), which both have further portraits (including photographs) of this much-depicted ruler. See also Chapter 3.

2. Compare for instance the portraits found in Bayly (1990) or Worswick/Embree (1976).

If the book, the physical object, is already a clear, unmistakable sign of Western-style modernity, London as its place of publication and the identification of the text serve to underscore the message. In other words, it is hard not to read this portrait as a striking allegory of Empire, or more precisely, of the cultural effects sparked by the colonial encounter. Here we see an Indian king embracing not only Western literature but the very pinnacle of Western cultural traditions, the West's "classic" foundations. The raja as bibliophile is presented to us as simultaneously Western, modern,<sup>3</sup> and well-read, perhaps we may say enlightened. For, if the heroic tale of the *Iliad* was appropriate reading for any *Western* ruler, it demonstrates beyond doubt that the Raja of Pudukkottai was a man of style, literary gusto, and classical education. Now, if I have uncovered the allegory successfully, there is of course another question which immediately suggests itself: Why would the Raja of Pudukkottai want to be portrayed like this? The long answer to this question is a story of many cultural transformations taking place in nineteenth-century South India—and this story is the subject of this book.

From our distance as spectators of the twenty-first century it is impossible to tell whether Raja Ramachandra himself suggested the precise details of his portrait. It is likely that the artist who painted the king influenced the decision, for the artist was none other than Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906), one of India's most celebrated modern painters.<sup>4</sup> Varma was an expert painter of Indian royalty who always crafted the composition of his paintings with great care. Note, for instance, how here the brightness of the flower bouquet directs our attention to focus on the book—a good reason to assume that the

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3. I follow Stuart Blackburn in my use of the terms "modern" and "modernity" in this book to refer "broadly to that condition which a diverse range of changes, from rationality and hygiene to the novel, were thought to create [in India], often in imitation of European models but always as a break with 'tradition,' a set of beliefs and practices, including language and literature, thought to represent authentic Indian culture" (2003: 3). Analogously, texts, practices, etc., existing before or not affected by these changes will be referred to as "pre-modern" or "traditional." The expression "colonial modernity" links these changes explicitly to the colonial situation. Outside of my literary-historical use of these terms, there is a considerable body of literature discussing the implication of using the terms "modernity" and "modern" in the Indian context. Here I can only mention the discussions by Washbrook (1997; 1998) and van der Veer (1998), Chakrabarty (2002, esp. in the introduction), Menon (2004), and the special issue on "Multiple Modernities" of the journal *Daedalus* (Winter 2000).

4. On Ravi Varma see Mitter (1994, ch. 5), Guha Thakurta (1986), Arunima (2003), Neumayer/Schelberger (2005) and the beautiful, lavishly illustrated volume by Parsram Mangharam (2003).

painting's symbolism was at least in part carefully calculated. While Varma portrayed several men and women with books in their hands or on tables following a general Western fashion of his times, this is the only painting I have seen in which we find a classical Western literary text in such a prominent position, i.e., in the hand of an Indian ruler.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the allegory of Raja Ramachandra, or India embracing classical Western culture, seems indeed unique amongst Varma's paintings. Now, if this painting points to the story of South India's cultural transformations, Ravi Varma's life and all his art, which India's Viceroy Lord Curzon saw as "a happy blend of Western technique and Indian subject" (Mitter 1994: 180), could also be examined as an example of how Indian cultural traditions were transformed under colonial influence. For the purposes of this book, however, we need to remain in the realm of words rather than colours. The year of 1879, the year in which Ravi Varma painted the ruler of Pudukkottai, is no insignificant moment in the literary histories of either the British colonizers or colonized South India. In this year, the religious reformer and famous editor of classical Tamil texts Ārumuka Nāvalar (b. 1822) passed away, as did, far away in Britain, George William MacArthur Reynolds (b. 1814), the forgotten popular novelist whose long-running serialized novel *The Mysteries of London* (1844) was avidly read all over India and influenced the development of many modern Indian literatures. Fellow novelist Sir Henry Rider Haggard (1856–1925), known for his adventure novel *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), was at the time involved in the Anglo-Zulu war, an event that altered perceptions of the British Empire at home and abroad. While Józef Konrad Korzeniowski (1857–1924), better known as Joseph Conrad, was still learning the English language which he would later so profoundly enrich with his writings, Edward Morgan Forster (d. 1970) was born. His novel *A Passage to India* (1924) influenced the destinies of many who thought about India in the West. In September of 1879,

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5. In Mangharam's (2003) catalogue of Varma's paintings we find eleven portraits that include books. The portrait that comes closest in composition to Raja Ramachandra's is the one of Maharaja Sayajirao III of Baroda at his Investiture dated 1882 (Mangharam 2003: 146), which includes a copy of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, thus forming a rather different sort of imperial allegory. Sir T. Madhava Rao, the Dewan of Baroda, is painted with various volumes of administrative reports by his side (153), while the Englishman P. S. Melville, an agent to the Governor General, stands next to "Scott's Poetical Works" and a volume labeled "Shakespere [sic]" among others (155). Maharani Lakshmi Bayi of Travancore is depicted in 1883 with two interesting titles: *Near Rome or Europe Described* and *The Young Ladies' Book* (85; see also Neumayer/Schelberger 2005: 301).

the celebrated Tamil politician and social reformer Ī. Vī. Rāmacāmi Nāyakkar (better known as “E.V.R.” or “Periyar,” d. 1973) was born. Still in the same *annus mirabilis*, several months before a man named Thomas Alva Edison invented the electric lightbulb, a man named Māyūram Vētanāyakam Piḷḷai (1826–1889) invented the Tamil novel. While much has already been written about the former invention, the latter takes up a good part of the following discussion. However, the story of how the Tamil novel emerged cannot be told without also telling the story of the raja’s new books: of how traditional systems of literary production—in which poet-scholars were patronized by religious institutions, landowners, and local kings—gradually declined; of how textual practices, genres, styles, poetics, themes, tastes, and audiences changed; and of the role literature played in the politics of social reform, gender, and nationalism—in short, by telling the larger story of nineteenth-century Tamil literary culture. The aim of this book, then, is to examine how a literature was transformed under colonial influence. Before we look at the particular case of Tamil literary culture, the terms “literature” and “colonialism,” heavily overdetermined as they are, require further reflection.

### Colonizing the Realm of Words: Literature and Colonialism

Scholars have for some time pointed to the importance of texts in general and literary texts in particular for “colonial” enterprises around the world and at various times.<sup>6</sup> As Elleke Boehmer (2005: 14) has emphasized, “empire was in itself, at least in part, a textual exercise” depending on a wealth of writings, such as official reports, admin-

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6. I use quotation marks here to suggest that “colonialism” itself is not a straightforward and undisputed term that could be used without further qualification. Skeptical of large-scale generalizations rather common in the field of Postcolonial Studies, I would like to emphasize the trivial but often neglected problem that “colonialism,” the “colonial encounter,” etc., did not mean the same thing everywhere and at all times. In the remainder of this book, then, the terms “colonial,” “colonialism,” etc., will be used without quotation marks to refer to colonial India during the period examined here, the nineteenth century, unless indicated otherwise (as for instance in the present section and in the Epilogue where somewhat broader claims are made). For a critique of the concept of and the historiography employing the term “colonialism,” see Washbrook (2004). Cooper/Stoler (1997) as well as Dodson (2007) have also emphasized the complexity of “colonialism” and cautioned against using the term indiscriminately for historically diverse processes. See also Osterhammel (1997) for an attempt to disambiguate the terminology.

istrative papers, newspapers, political treatises, pamphlets, diaries, popular verse, letters, etc. Ania Loomba specifies that “literary texts [. . .] encode the tensions, complexities and nuances within colonial cultures. [. . .] Literature written on both sides of the colonial divide often absorbs, appropriates and inscribes aspects of the ‘other’ culture, creating new genres, ideas and identities in the process” (1998: 70). In other words, the transformations must be seen as mutual; colonial encounters transform both the literature of the colonizer and the literature of the colonized. Drawing on the terminology suggested by Mary Louise Pratt (1992) in her study on travel writing, Loomba further explains that “[l]iterature is an important ‘contact zone,’ to use Mary Louise Pratt’s term, where ‘transculturation’ takes place in all its complexity” (1998: 70). For Pratt, ‘contact zones’ are “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often as highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (1992: 4) or spaces “in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (6). “Transculturation,” then, refers to the mutually transformative processes happening in this “contact zone.”<sup>7</sup> Pratt elaborates that a

“contact” perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized [. . .] not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power. (7)

Viewing literature as a “contact zone” allows us to examine how colonialism affected practices centered around the production and consumption of what we call “literary” texts on both sides of the colonizer/colonized divide without forgetting that such a divide was never fixed and given but historically shifting, therefore requiring our critical analysis. As we shall see in the discussion below, negotiations within this contact zone of literature could reach very far. They could reformulate both literary “form” (genres, styles) and “content” (themes, ideas), as well as thinking about texts in terms of aesthetics or poetics.

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7. In a similar sense, Daniel Jeyaraj uses the term “inculturation” (*Inkulturation*) in his study of the Danish Halle Mission in eighteenth-century South India (see Jeyaraj 1996).

These complex processes of queries, adjustments, and reformulations taking place within the contact zone of literature are what I would like to refer to with the shorthand expression “colonization of literature.”

Proceeding from the insight that colonial interaction obviously affected the literature of the colonizer, a large number of critical studies have examined this literature—British literature in particular.<sup>8</sup> Notably the works of a number of ‘colonialist’ writers, such as the above-mentioned Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster or Henry Rider Haggard (and we have to add Rudyard Kipling, 1865–1936) have received extended and repeated critical attention.<sup>9</sup> Their works are now part of a veritable canon of colonial, or colonialist, writing that haunts departments of English and Comparative Literature. Furthermore, we also possess a better understanding of those English authors who did not explicitly respond to imperial developments, but who “participated in the representation of British global power mainly by taking it for granted” (Boehmer 2005: 24). Indeed, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has cautioned, “it should not be possible, in principle, to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England’s social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English” (1999: 113). Edward Said, focusing more specifically on the novel, has highlighted that “imperialism and the novel fortified each other to such a degree that it is impossible [. . .] to read one without in some way dealing with the other” (1994: 84). While in his work Said offers an important argument about the history of the novel in *Western* literature, we may look beyond the novel’s history in the West and note that it was precisely during the colonial encounter that Indian authors produced what they called ‘novels’ in various Indian languages. We will return to this point in Chapter 5.

While the transformations of the colonizers’ literatures have attracted considerable attention (with still no end in sight), the literatures of the colonized have not fared equally well.<sup>10</sup> As far as I can see,

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8. This literature is too vast to allow the citation of individual works here. For a good overview see Boehmer (2005) and the short but very informative chapter by Theo D’haen (2002).

9. I use the term “colonialist” in Elleke Boehmer’s sense to refer to literature “which was specifically concerned with colonial expansion. On the whole it was literature by and for colonizing Europeans about non-European lands dominated by them” (2005: 3).

10. One of the few studies to examine both the literatures of the colonizer and of the colonized, the reception of English literature in India, and the representation of India in English literature, in conjunction is Trivedi (1993). From a different angle, Joshi (2002) studies both the reception of novels from England and the writing of novels in English in colonial India.

this observation is true for colonial South and Southeast Asia as well as Africa and possibly for other areas too. As Rosinka Chaudhuri has observed in 2002, "Postcolonial studies, following Said's *Orientalism*, [...] has still not adequately articulated the response of the 'East' in its encounter with the forces of colonization" (2002: 9). Already in the 1980s, Aijaz Ahmad had criticized Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), a foundational text for the field of Postcolonial Studies, of ignoring the responses and perspectives of the colonized:

A notable feature of *Orientalism* is that it examines the history of Western textualities about the non-West quite in isolation from how these textualities might have been received, accepted, modified, challenged, overthrown or reproduced by the intelligentsias of the colonized countries: not as an undifferentiated mass but as situated social agents impelled by our own conflicts, contradictions, distinct social and political locations, of class, gender, region, religious affiliation, and so on—hence a peculiar disjuncture in the architecture of the book. (Ahmad 1992: 172)

While I agree with Laurie J. Sears that this was somewhat inadequate as a critique of Said's particular project and its achievements,<sup>11</sup> it is intriguing that, as Rosinka Chaudhuri remarks, despite this critique much work after Said has "continued in the same vein, emphasizing the deconstruction of Western colonialist discourse rather than the complexities in the situation of the colonized" (2002: 9). The problem with this approach is not only that it presents merely one side of the coin. More importantly, by systematically ignoring the side of the colonized it runs the risk of reiterating and cementing the very Western cultural hegemony it professes to call into question. To say this more explicitly: The question of how literatures were colonized, through mutual processes of transculturation, cannot be answered by

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11. Sears writes: "Said clearly states that his purpose is to show how the Orient has been produced in European and American texts. Had Said's *Orientalism* not focused on European discourses, it is doubtful whether it would have received the attention that it did. In effect, his work presents a clear challenge to Asians and Middle Easterners, and those who write about them with empathy, to explore the reception of and resistance to the discursive formations of Orientalism" (1996: 14, fn. 31). Also, in the 1970s when Said was writing his book, still so little was known about non-Western literatures in the West that it would simply not have been possible for a single author to produce a study with the level of insight of *Orientalism* while doing equal justice to the literatures of colonizer and colonized. It is, in fact, still doubtful whether such a project could be undertaken even now, three decades after Said.



examining merely the literature of the colonizer. This might seem a trivial observation indeed, but very few critics so far seem to have realized it. The few attempts that have been made to explore the literatures of colonial India have focused on Indian writing *in English* rather than on writing in the many indigenous Indian languages.<sup>12</sup> Again, we find a number of much-discussed, ‘canonical’ authors, in particular Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004), R. K. Narayan (1906–2001), and Raja Rao (1908–2006), who have come to represent the voices of the colonized in literature departments in the West. In contrast, the rich literatures produced in the colonized countries in many different languages other than English still remain largely unexplored, one might say marginalized. This is again particularly true for India. The largest amount of work on non-English colonial Indian writing has been done on Bengali, notably on the works of Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838–1894), Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824–1873), and Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941).<sup>13</sup> This body of work is followed by a few studies on colonial North India,<sup>14</sup> while the South—with its major languages Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam—has only just begun to receive due attention.<sup>15</sup>

Given that many postcolonial critics originally set out precisely to query or destabilize the hegemony of the center and the agency

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12. On Indian writing in English, see the recent surveys by Mehrotra (2003) and Rege (2004) and the literature cited there. Chaudhuri (2002) is an illuminating study of English poetry written in colonial Bengal.

13. While there exists a considerable secondary literature in Bengali, I only point to the more recent among the studies in English: Kaviraj (1995), Chatterjee (1995), Roy (1995), Banerjee (1998), Sarkar (2001), Raychaudhuri (2002), Bhattacharya (2005), and Ghosh (2006) and the literature cited there.

14. Important monographs in English, some of which focus not on literature proper but on language history and politics or book history, include King (1994), Dalmia (1997) and Orsini (2002) for Hindi materials, Russell (1972), Pritchett (1994), and Stark (2007) for Urdu, Naregal (2001) for Marathi, Dwyer (2001) for Gujarati, Mohapatra (1997) for Oriya, and Pinto (2007) for print in Goa. Bhatia (2004) discusses theater in colonial North India.

15. On Telugu see Leonard (1970), Sai Prasad (1991), Schmitthenner (2001), Vijayasree (2002), Mantena (2002; 2005), Mitchell (2005; 2009), Rajagopal (2004; 2005), Katten (2005), and Velcheru Narayana Rao’s introduction and afterword in Apparao (2007). On Malayalam, see Panikkar (1996), Arunima (1997; 2004), Menon (1997; 2002; 2004), Kumar (2002), and the essays in Ravindran (2001). On Kannada, see Padikkal (1993; 2002), Ramachandran (2001), and Amur (2001). Significantly, Stuart Blackburn’s and Vasudha Dalmia’s recent volume on nineteenth-century Indian literatures contains only four (out of fourteen) essays which deal with South Indian materials (two essays on Tamil, one on Telugu, and one on Malayalam). See Blackburn/Dalmia (2004).



of the colonizer, this is a somewhat peculiar development. Though avowing time and again that the “Empire” is writing back and that Western critics should take literary production in the “Third World” more seriously, what has happened is predominantly a large-scale amplification of the colonizer’s writing, of the center, not the periphery. In circles of endless introspection, the colonial center continues to look at its own navel. If the “provincialization” of Europe, and, one might add, of North America—the renewal of European and North American thought “from and for the margins” which Dipesh Chakrabarty (2001: 16) has called for—is an ideal to aspire to or at least a caveat to heed in critical inquiry in the twenty-first century, the study of literature under colonialism does not so far appear to show much interest in this approach.<sup>16</sup> As Ania Loomba observed already a decade ago:

[Our contemporary] globality is often reduced to discussions of literatures written or translated into English, reminding us that in many ways postcolonial studies is simply a reworking of the older concepts of “Commonwealth literatures” or “Third World literatures.” But even these literatures cannot be adequately discussed outside of the difficult interplay between their local and global contexts, an awareness that is all too often erased as we celebrate the hybridity or polyphony or magic realism of these texts! (1998: 257)

Thus, what we need as scholars of non-Western literatures as well as Comparative Literature is quite simply a more sustained shift of emphasis. We need to examine the literatures produced in the colonized languages more systematically and with both greater depth and breadth. We need to study the individual colonized literary cultures in India, Southeast Asia, or Africa in much greater detail, paying attention to their own complex histories before, during, and after colonial contact. To determine how indigenous literary cultures fared in the colonial contact zone, we need to be prepared to engage with them with the same amount and finesse of close reading that we have applied to Western colonial texts. The present book attempts a small step in that direction by studying the transformation of literary

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16. There are, of course, exceptions, such as the work of Patrick Colm Hogan (e.g., 2000a; 2000b; 2004) who has striven for over a decade to enrich Western academic debates on literature with non-Western categories, examples, and approaches.

practices under colonialism through a particular detailed case study, that of Tamil literature.

As such, the present study may be viewed as a contribution to very recent debates raised by those scholars who attempt to explore the phenomenon of colonialism in India through an analysis of the transformation of indigenous cultural practices under its impact. Theoretically and methodologically, attempts to explore the colonial transformations of cultural practices have been nourished by the ever-increasing body of secondary literature that is devoted to identifying ways in which “colonial knowledge” was constructed—“those forms and bodies of knowledge that enabled European colonizers to achieve domination over their colonized subjects around the globe” in Phillip Wagoner’s words (2003: 783).<sup>17</sup> If one works from this definition, the diverse indigenous cultural practices, such as elite and folk literature, music, dance, and so on can, of course, not easily be subsumed under the label ‘colonial knowledge.’ But there are ways in which they intersect with and inform the epistemological strategies employed to construct this knowledge, for instance when the nature and quality of indigenous literary production was debated in antiquarian concerns to recover Indian history, or in the debate about the Dravidian family of languages, as Thomas R. Trautmann has shown (1999a; 1999b; 2006). More specifically, as I will discuss further below, the interest of missionaries and colonial officials in the Tamil language and literature was certainly part of the larger process of colonial

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17. The literature which explores the construction of “colonial knowledge” in India is copious, so that merely a few important studies can be cited here. These may be classified, following Phillip Wagoner (2003) into two broad categories: The first category which largely subscribes to the view that the role played by the colonized subjects in the production of “colonial knowledge” was negligible, and which Wagoner labels “postcolonialist,” consists of a number of influential works which have helped us to see that European colonial conquest depended not exclusively on military, economic or political power, but to a decisive extent also on the power of knowledge. These are among others: Said (1978), Inden (1986; 1990), Cohn (1987; 1992; 1996), Dirks (1989; 1993; 2001), Metcalf (1994), and Viswanathan (1989). The second category, which has grown out of the first and which Wagoner calls “collaborationist,” insists that indigenous agents contributed actively to the process of knowledge formation. This position has emerged notably through the following works: Irschick (1994), Bayly (1999), Trautmann (1999a; 1999b; 2006; 2009), Peabody (2001; 2003), Pinch (1999), Eaton (2000), and Tavakoli-Targhi (2001). Specific “cultural technologies of rule,” as Dirks (2001: 9) has called them, have also been addressed in numerous studies: On the census, see Cohn (1987, ch. 10) and Appadurai (1993). The geographical survey is discussed in Edney (1990), while public health regulations are treated in Arnold (1986; 1993), and colonial anthropology in Dirks (1997). Architecture and town planning form the subject of Oldenberg (1984) and Dossal (1991).

knowledge production on India in general. In recent scholarship on colonial constructions of knowledge, the occupation with language and literature has been viewed in relation to similar disciplines, e.g., geography and ethnology.<sup>18</sup> Establishing these disciplines was one of the essential mechanisms through which colonial domination operated. Domination through science meant an attempt to control the bewildering, alien variety of peoples, languages, and behavior patterns which the colonizers initially found on the Indian soil. As Veena Naregal has argued, scientific classification was “the cognitive predilection that the European mind had developed for responding to the unfamiliar” (2001: 44). While it may not be a specifically European strategy, the colonial classificatory program was certainly far-reaching, highly systematic, and potentially all-encompassing. Much of the administrative labor during the nineteenth century centred around researching into and documenting law codes and regulations, mapping the geographical dimensions of the empire, counting its people, determining races, castes, religions, languages, and so on. All these activities were “appropriation techniques” applied in order to come to terms with and ultimately control Europe’s alien ‘Other.’

Thus, the colonial situation provided a specific background for the development of Tamil literary activities as the activities of the colonized. A study such as the present one, which attempts to recover indigenous cultural practices under the impact of colonialism, will by definition tend to amplify the voices of the colonized, and will show the *agency* on the part of indigenous groups. It will serve to demonstrate that Indians were not simply ‘helpless’ subaltern victims who were forced to surrender to an external cultural hegemony, but that indigenous agendas were fashioned and re-fashioned in a situation of cross-cultural dialogue.<sup>19</sup> In such an insistence on indigenous agency, it will become clear that not only colonial knowledge in a strict sense of the term, but also cultural practices were reformulated “through a complex form of collaboration between colonizers and colonized, and an attendant process of epistemic confrontation and adjustment between European and indigenous knowledge systems” (Wagoner 2003: 783). It is no secret that the colonial encounter affected Indian

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18. See e.g., Naregal (2001: 45).

19. In using the term “dialogue” here, which partially rests on Irschick (1994), I certainly do not wish to explain away the violent and exploitative side of colonialism. But unlike Sanjay Subrahmanyam, who considers the term altogether inappropriate (2001, ch. 1), I do think that it helps to explain *some* of the complex and varied cultural interactions between India and the West.

literatures, music, dance, and other cultural forms. But it did so not in a unidirectional way by simply imposing European norms and standards onto existing ones. Neither does a simplistic dichotomous model of “Western impact” and “indigenous response” capture the full historical reality.<sup>20</sup> As becomes apparent when one actually confronts the cultural artifacts—the texts, songs, paintings produced during the colonial period—the situation was much more complex than this, and it is these complex inter- and intra-cultural processes of multifaceted, multilateral “epistemic confrontation and adjustment” that the present study is concerned with.

One further clarification is perhaps required, when one speaks about confrontations between “European and indigenous knowledge systems.” As David Washbrook has emphasized, “European culture never became entirely synonymous with *British* colonial rule” (2004: 493, emphasis added). From the sixteenth century onward, the European presence in South India comprised Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, French and Germans, so that not all “Europeans” were British. Washbrook rightly points out that “[e]ngaging with European knowledge, therefore, did not have the immediate effect of implying subordination to colonial authority” (*ibid.*). We will have to bear this in mind, when we try to address the question to what extent and in what ways Indian authors and intellectuals engaged with European ideas. The fact that those ideas were not *eo ipso* perceived as the ideas of the colonial oppressors, and that the ‘West’ was not automatically “British,” accounts for the openmindedness with which some social reformers and authors assessed and responded to Western knowledge.

### Tamil Literature in Nineteenth-Century South India

Another clarification concerns the historical period examined here. I am using the term ‘nineteenth century’ to refer loosely to the period under discussion rather than as a strict delimitation. The one hundred years between 1800 and 1900 are merely the *focus period* for what follows, and I will have to transgress these temporal boundaries occasionally, as cultural phenomena more often than not refuse to conform to the constraints of artificial time limits. I wish to emphasize that it is first of all merely the time period in which most of the texts, people, and events discussed here are located. My aim is not to try to establish a specific “epoch” within the history of Tamil literature, which could

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20. See e.g., Das (1991).

be posited (in a more or less essentialist way) as something internally coherent, clearly circumscribed, and monolithic. The reason for this caution is that, given our current knowledge of nineteenth-century Tamil texts, we are simply not (yet) in a position to say which (or if any) factors may ultimately produce such internal coherence.<sup>21</sup> Also, strictly speaking, the colonization of Tamil literature in the sense elaborated above did of course not simply stop at the turn of the century. For a comprehensive view, one would have to include the period from 1900 up to India's Independence in 1947. However, given the enormous literary production during that period and given how little research has been done on it so far, I could not do more than allude to a few trends and developments at the end of Chapter 5 and in the Epilogue. Doing full justice to this period would require a separate monograph.

The next clarification of the subtitle of this book, the one concerning the expression "Tamil literature," will require some more consideration, as the term disguises somewhat its own linguistic, aesthetic, geographical, and socio-political dimensions. The present study focuses on South India, or, more specifically, on the Tamil-speaking areas of what was during the nineteenth century the Madras Presidency. Although occasionally Sri Lankan scholars and authors are mentioned, I have had to exclude for reasons of space a detailed discussion of the literature(s) produced not only in Sri Lanka, but notably in Singapore and Malaysia where a rapidly increasing literary production in Tamil started during the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> From a linguistic point of view, the term "Tamil" may seem clear enough, but we should bear in mind that no language lives in isolation or as a single, monolithic entity. There were, in fact, many "Tamils" during the period discussed here. The idiom used by the first novelists, for instance, was a heavily sanskritized Tamil, which was newly fashioned to be capable of expressing modern Western ideas and concepts. The missionaries, too, struggled to create a language that would reach the

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21. See, however, the recent volume on nineteenth-century Indian literatures edited by Stuart Blackburn and Vasudha Dalmia which, in the editors' words, "attempts to look at the colonial century as a whole, as an historical period in its own right" (2004: 8).

22. On nineteenth-century Tamil literature in Sri Lanka, see Kaṇapatip Piḷḷai (1967), Celvarācaṅ (1967), Vithiananthan (1969), Vimalachandra (1969), Young/Jebanesan (1995), Civaliṅkarājā/Civaliṅkarājā (2000), and the literature cited there. Most of what is available on Tamil literature in Malaysia focuses on the twentieth century, see Dhandayudham (1973), Venugopal (1999), and Irāmaiyā (1978). Singapore Tamil literature is discussed in Tiṅṅappan (1993) and Tiṅṅappan/Civakumāraṅ (2003).

masses, but still convey Christian ideas with appropriate accuracy.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, English found its way into the Tamil language, not only through new lexical items, but also at the level of syntax, when sentences first “thought” in English were formulated in Tamil. In trying to capture the contemporary spoken language of the city of Madras and elsewhere, nineteenth-century playwrights often used not only individual English terms, but entire phrases in their Tamil plays.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the Madras Presidency was clearly a multiethnic and multilingual environment. In colonial Madras city speakers of Tamil, Telugu, Hindustani, Persian, Gujarati, and Marathi, as well as Armenian, Portuguese, and English lived side by side, and “society was accustomed to a multiplicity of ‘tongues,’ ” as David Washbrook observes (1991: 180).<sup>25</sup> At the court of the Maratha rulers in Thanjavur, scholars and poets composed works in Telugu, Sanskrit, Tamil, and Marathi.<sup>26</sup> Entire genres, such as the *kuṛavañci*, were borrowed from one language by another or developed simultaneously, and we also find genres and individual texts which employ more than one language.<sup>27</sup>

Having thus qualified the term ‘Tamil,’ we are left with the question of what “literature” is supposed to refer to. This question is important, since the present study does not cover the entire spectrum of texts that would (ideally) be included in a conventional handbook

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23. Writing in 1900, the missionary and Professor of Tamil George U. Pope observed: “There exists now much of what is called Christian Tamil, a dialect created by the Danish missionaries of Tranquebar; enriched by generations of Tanjore, German, and other missionaries; modified, purified, and *refrigerated* by the Swiss Rhenius and the very composite Tinnevely school; expanded and harmonized by Englishmen, amongst whom Bower (a Eurasian) was foremost in his day; and, finally, waiting now for the touch of some heaven-born genius among the Tamil community to make it as sweet and effective as any language on earth, living or dead” (1995: xii, original emphasis).

24. See e.g., the social plays *Ṭampāccāri vilācam* (c. 1867) by Caitāpuram Kācivicuvanāta Mutaliyār (?1806–1871) and *Piratāpa Cantira vilācam* (1877) by Pa.Va. Irāmacāmi Rāju (1852–1897).

25. For South India as a multilingual environment, see Washbrook (1991). Washbrook has also pointed out that certain languages became associated with particular functions: “Persian, Marathi and Telugu were ubiquitous languages of state; ‘Hindustani’ the *lingua franca* of war; Gujarati, Armenian and Telugu were languages of commerce” (2004: 495).

26. See the discussion of the Thanjavur Maratha court in Chapter 3.

27. The “language question” became politically important during the late colonial period, when extended debates over the coining of technical and scientific terms for educational purposes took place in connection with the non-brahmin movement. These debates have been examined by Venkatachalapathy (1995). For the nexus between the Tamil language and formulations of Tamil identity, see also Ramaswamy (1997).

on Tamil literary history. In what follows, I have had to focus on what we may term *elite* literary production, excluding those texts which could variously be labeled “folk,” “non-elite,” or “popular” literature. The main reason for my choice to focus on elite literature is that, unlike the popular literature of this period, it has not yet received the attention it deserves. Nineteenth-century Tamil literature as a whole has only comparatively recently begun to interest scholars.<sup>28</sup> And while Stuart Blackburn and A. R. Venkatachalapathy have discussed popular and particularly ‘oral’ texts,<sup>29</sup> the compositions of the *pulavars*, the traditionally educated pre-modern Tamil literary scholars-cum-poets, have not yet been critically examined. The works of the modern authors, and particularly the early Tamil novels, have so far only been treated rather superficially. Furthermore, my focus on elite literary production has also meant that, with few exceptions, I had to pass by most of the non-Hindu literature, i.e., works produced by Christian and Muslim authors.<sup>30</sup>

### How to Ignore a Century of Literary Production

Why is it that, as I observe in the Preface, nineteenth-century Tamil literature has only very recently begun to receive due scholarly attention? The lack of interest is quite remarkable, for anyone who bothers immediately finds a great wealth of sources, both literary and non-literary. Many of the printed books, pamphlets, journals, and magazines are still available in libraries around the world, while the colonial archive, the extensive volume of records of British colonial knowledge, may be used to complement our reading of the literary sources. Additional materials may occasionally be found in private archives and family collections, so that the problem for the literary historian becomes this very overabundance of sources, while specialists of earlier periods generally bemoan the dearth of sources in their field. This *embarras de choix* is, however, not the main reason for the

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28. A remarkable exception is Mayilai Cīni Vēṅkaṭaċāmi’s pioneering monograph published as early as 1962 which is outdated in parts, but—in its wide scope—has not yet been superseded. The work by Civakāmi (1994) primarily provides (valuable) lists of works and authors, while only the introduction contains some historical-analytical observations.

29. See Venkatachalapathy (1999) and Blackburn (2003; 2004).

30. For a short of overview of Christian Tamil literature, see Rajarigam (1958). On the Tamil works produced by Muslim poets and authors, see Shu’ayb (1993) and Tschacher (2001; 2002) and the literature cited there. For a general background on Christians and Muslims in nineteenth-century South India, see Bayly (1989).



widespread scholarly aversion to study nineteenth-century texts. The main reason may be seen in the fact that literary historians have generally considered the nineteenth century to be merely a “transitional” period, which lacks true poetic originality or literary innovation.<sup>31</sup> As Stuart Blackburn observes,

as the high-tide of colonialism, the nineteenth century is generally viewed with suspicion, as a time of decline and loss, its literature uninspired, lacking the splendour of the courtly cultures that preceded it, as well as the dynamism of the nationalism that followed. [. . .] Dismissal of nineteenth-century literature as transitional is certainly well established in Tamil literary studies. (1998: 157)

While the earliest modern works, such as the first novels or stage plays, are usually found to be lacking in “maturity,”<sup>32</sup> the earlier verse compositions of the pulavars are maligned as unnecessarily difficult, “artificial,” “prurient,” and “decadent.” The latter prejudice may be regarded as a direct continuation of British colonial diatribes against “vernacular” literary production. This colonial critique of Tamil literature, sparked initially by European colonial administrators but quickly imbibed and disseminated by Indian intellectuals, will be discussed in Chapter 4. Suffice it here to say that around mid-nineteenth century, an increasing number of essays, colonial reports, newspaper articles, etc. began to criticize the existing body of Tamil literature—i.e., nearly two millennia of literary production—for being immoral, superstitious, unrealistic, repetitive, unoriginal, and useless poetry as opposed to useful prose. What the American Methodist minister Rev. Peter Percival (1803–1882), who as Professor of Vernacular Literature at the Presidency College in Madras had dedicated his life to the study of Tamil, wrote in 1854 is symptomatic of this critique. While in his wide-ranging survey of Indian culture, *The Land of the Veda*, Percival had many good things to say about “the Hindus” and about the Tamil language in particular, he finds himself pressed for words to describe the character of Tamil literature:

Even the beautiful story of Nala and Damyanti [sic], that in the hand of India’s illustrious dramatic bard is so inimitable, and free from objection as it exists in its original form [in

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31. Characteristically, in his *Introduction to Tamil Literature* the historian N. Subrahmanian titles his chapter on the literature of the nineteenth century “The Age of Experimentation and Transition” (1981). Kamil Zvelebil also speaks of “the transition period of the second half of the 19th cent.” (1975: 5).

32. For such critiques of the early novels, see the discussion in Chapter 5.

the Skt. *Mahābhārata*], has been so interlarded with poetic license and licentiousness, that on expurgating one of its versions [probably the *Naiṭatam*] for the use of a select class, I was obliged to expunge upwards of five hundred out of eleven hundred stanzas. It is not meant that the Hindus are exclusive in this sort of taste; the dramatists and novelists of Europe, even of England, furnish evidence to the contrary. But the Hindu exceeds the Westerns in his utter transgression of all bounds of decency. No conception can be formed of some of the productions of the Hindus; they are grossly extravagant in the fertility of licentiousness. Gross obscenity, dark superstition, an extravagant and horrible marvellousness with frequent references to idolatry, form the principal ingredients of that seasoning which renders the popular literature of the Hindus palatable to the taste of the public. (1854: 122)

Percival's utter discomfiture is evident here. He seems indeed unable to form any "conception" and almost appears traumatized when in his search for an adequate description he repeats key terms of hyperbole: "gross," "extravagant," as well as "licentiousness." A clash of Indian and European epistemes, of what Gayatri Spivak (1999), drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, has called "epistemic violence" becomes apparent in his words.

We still find observations as dismissive as Percival's at the beginning of the twentieth century expressed by both Europeans and Indians.<sup>33</sup> But the initial wholesale dismissal of Tamil literature began

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33. The French scholar Julien Vinson (1843–1926), like Percival a professor of Tamil (in Paris), in the introduction to his *Manuel de la langue tamoule* published in 1903, dismisses not only nineteenth-century works, but Tamil literature in its entirety: "[L]a littérature tamoule est secondaire. A part peut-être les recueils de sentences morales, il n'est pas un poème de quelque importance dont une traduction complète puisse être lue sans fatigue par des Européens. Les descriptions y sont diffuses, monotones, pleines de mauvais goût et d'exagérations choquantes, conformes d'ailleurs à un type uniforme donné. Les poèmes d'amour ne sont pas plus variés, et les poèmes de guerre se ressemblent tous; ce sont proprement jeux d'esprit, des amplifications de rhétorique sur une formule générale et sur un canevas minutieusement réglé" [Tamil literature is secondary. With the exception perhaps of the collections of moral adages, there is no poem of some importance whose full translation could be read without tedium by Europeans. The descriptions we find there are diffuse, monotonous, full of bad taste and shocking exaggerations, and they follow a given uniform type. The love poems are not very varied, and the war poems all resemble each other. They are actually witticisms, rhetorical amplifications of a general formula and on a canvas that is strictly regulated even in its details.] (1986: XLIVf). For another example, see the quotation from Srinivasa Aiyangar's monograph *Tamil Studies* (published in 1914) which I have prefixed to Chapter 2 (Srinivasa Aiyangar 1982: 183).

to be revised during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, when the recovery and nationalist reassessment of the earliest known Tamil texts, the *Caṅkam* poems, served to rehabilitate a part of classical Tamil literature as a valuable heritage. I will return to this point in the next section. Further revaluations in the 1940s and 50s, notably in the immensely popular historical novels by Ra. Kuruṣṇamūrtti 'Kalki' (1899–1954) which glorified a South Indian and particularly Tamil Cōla past, pushed the threshold of respectability, even veneration, further toward the present.<sup>34</sup> Yet, this rehabilitation and revaluation ended somewhere shortly after the period of the medieval Cōlas, the last dynasty thought to testify to a glorious past that was quintessentially Tamil. Consequently, the period from approximately the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries remained—and for some scholars still remains today—the “dark period” of Tamil literature, a period of decadence and decline for which the old accusations of immorality and uselessness have not yet been dispelled. Thus, the eminent literary historian Mu. Arunachalam writes of the *viṛaliviṭuttu*, a popular genre of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which I will discuss below in Chapter 3:

This poem, by introducing the *viṛali*, a woman singer-cum-dancer to the patron, who was in those days a petty chief of the degenerate times, seeks to pander to his amorous nature. These patrons were mostly uneducated, uncultured rustic men, to whom only the vulgar, the sensuous and the bizarre had the greatest appeal. Their morals were not high and hence even a little gifted poet, unless he was spiritually inclined, could not help pandering to the tastes of such men. (1974: 249)

Though Percival wrote over a century earlier, we still seem to hear his startled ghost speaking through Arunachalam's statement and condemning the courtly literature of the period as “vulgar,” “sensuous,” and “bizarre.” In a similar vein, the well-known literary historian

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34. In *Pārttipaṇ kaṇavu* (“Parthiban's Dream,” serialised between 1941 and 1943) and *Civakāmiyiṅ capataṁ* (“Shivakami's Vow,” 1944–1948), Kalki evoked the grandeur of the ancient South Indian Pallava dynasty of the seventh century. His bestselling novel *Ponṇiyiṅ Celvaṅ* (“Ponni's Darling”), a majestic historical romance, glorifies the Cōla kings of the tenth century. It was serialised between October 1950 and May 1954 and subsequently published in five volumes. *Pārttipaṇ kaṇavu*, *Civakāmiyiṅ capataṁ*, and *Ponṇiyiṅ Celvaṅ* are all available in English translation (see Venkataraman 2003, Kalki 2008, and Karthik Narayanan 1999–2003). On Kalki, see also Ramnarayan (2006).

Mu. Varadarajan writes as late as 1988 about nineteenth-century Tamil literature:

The literature of this period is full of the frigid conceits and the pedantic exercises of the grammarians, and the simplicity, the directness and the restraint characteristic of the early literature are now lost. Most of the poets of this age seem imitative and repetitive not only in their narrations but also in their descriptions. Taste in poetry has become sophisticated and poets are judged by the jingle of their alliteration and the acrobatics of their metre. We come across with really talented writers capable of original productions but they are only a very few. Even the works of these eminent poets evince a childish delight in riotous imaginations and hyperbolic utterances. There is, in many works of this period, not so much of art as of artificiality, and, therefore, many of these works have fallen into oblivion. (1988: 52)

Excoriating remarks such as these may be found everywhere in the existing scholarship on Tamil literature. One of the aims of the present book, then, is to dispel the myth of the nineteenth century as a “dark period” in Tamil literary history.

### A Century of Cultural Change

In fact, I would argue that the nineteenth century must be considered a period of paramount importance within the historical development of Tamil literature and Tamil culture in general for a number of reasons. First of all, as both Stuart Blackburn and A. R. Venkatachalapathy have demonstrated in their recent research, the nineteenth century saw the advances of the printing press and its mass products, such as newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, and books.<sup>35</sup> The role that the various uses of print played in contemporary society can hardly be overestimated. As Blackburn has pointed out,

print increased literacy, multiplied the copies and widened the distribution of traditional texts, reached new audiences with new types of information, encouraged new literary

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35. See Venkatachalapathy (1994a) and Blackburn (2001; 2003; 2004).

forms; [. . .] through all these innovations, print facilitated public debate on everything from vernacular education to child marriage and nationalism. (2003: 12)

Already before mid-century, we find the first Tamil authors of printed books, the first classical Tamil texts in print, the first Tamil publishers, and commercial publishing (*ibid.*, 6). During the second half of the nineteenth century, Tamil society witnessed a sudden rise and quick growth of newspapers, journals, and magazines. Amongst them are the well-known English language newspaper *The Hindu* and its Tamil counterpart *Cūṭēcamittiraṇ*, both founded by Ka. Cuppiramaṇiyam (better known as G. Subramania Iyer, 1855–1916). Many of these journals and newspapers targeted at the urban metropolis of Madras, but a number of papers were also available in the mofussil, the hinterland, like *Jaṇavinōṭiṇi*, *Tiṇavarttamāṇi*, or *Ñāṇapāṇu*.<sup>36</sup> These new media were indeed the vehicles for “public debate on everything.”<sup>37</sup> They contributed to the emergence of a new public sphere in which debates on contemporary socio-political issues could take place. Among these debates we find e.g., the “modernization” of Tamil language and literature; the uses of English, religious, and inter-caste tensions; the question of the social position of women—women’s education, child marriage, widow re-marriage, and the abolition of widow-burning (or *sati*)—as well as (re-)formulations of Tamil identity and nascent nationalism.<sup>38</sup>

While the development of Tamil journalism depended on the printing press, it also helped to fashion a “modern” Tamil prose. In the final decades of the century, prose was increasingly used for literary

36. For a history of Tamil journals and journalism, see Samy (2000), Campantan (1987), and Caktivēl (1997).

37. On the role of the press as a vehicle of public debates in the Madras Presidency, see Sadasivan (1974, esp. pp. 60–67).

38. Based on the classic study by Habermas (1991), the notion of the “public sphere” has been discussed for the Indian context by Naregal (2001) and Orsini (2002) among others. Christopher A. Bayly has postulated what he calls an “information revolution,” which consisted in the “creation of new, knowledgeable institutions: the army, the political services, the revenue, legal and educational establishments” and the “emergence of an attenuated sphere of public debate in which European expatriate ideologues and a handful of Indian spokesmen attempted to critique government and society through the press and public meeting” (1999: 143). The development of public opinion in the Madras Presidency is traced by Sadasivan (1974) and Raman (1999). The literature on the genesis of Tamil nationalism is considerable; see in particular Suntharalingam (1974), Kuruṣṇan (1984), Rajendran (1994), Pandian (1994), Ravindiran (1996), Rōsel (1997), Vaitheespara (1999), and Blackburn (2003, ch. 5).