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Mapping French - Tamil Transl(oc)ations

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If you say 'Tamil' to a French speaking person today, the first image that comes to his or her mind is that of the Tamil shops in the Faubourg Saint-Denis area in Paris that purvey spices, food items, clothes and fancy jewels, restaurants that serve *idlis*, *dosais*, *vadais* and vegetarian *thalis*, and outlets that sell music and video CDs at a throw away price. French television reports show images of folkloric Tamil rituals like fire-walking and 'Thaiposam Cavadee' in the French Caribbean, Réunion and Mauritius islands. But the nitty gritty of Tamil culture (Ganapathy-Doré 1993) and its interaction with French culture are matters of concern for public administrators, social workers, the police, judges, translators and specialists (Mouidiappanadin 1995). If you say 'French' to a Tamil speaking person, the images that he or she will conjure up are those of revolutionary ideals, artistic and literary avant-gardes, wines and luxury goods. People who live in Pondicherry might eventually refer to architectural experimentation with Tamil and French elements in Auroville. Scholars on both sides of the linguistic frontier have tried to go beyond the clichés and get across a more informed view of each other's language and culture.

This article tries to focus on the significant moments in the French-Tamil translations/transactions with a view to highlighting the two following arguments: 1. Unlike the translation activities in the British Indian territories, the translations in the French Indian territories were not strictly guided by the policy of the colonial government and remain voluntary. 2. Since major amount of translation of French to Tamil was done through English, this translation history raises questions relating to the a) nature of choice, b) mode of translation, c) complex relation between the source language (French) and mediating language (English) and the target language (Tamil). Here the 'function' of translation becomes more important than the 'correctness' and 'ethics' of translation. These two arguments taken together hint at how the postcolonial debate on India is most often guided by a critique of British colonialism and fails to capture the nuances of French colonialism.

While using the term 'postcolonial' to refer to the period, the paper distances itself from the idea of 'postcolonial translation' popularized by scholars like Harish Trivedi (Bassnett and Trivedi, 1999) in so far the French to Tamil translations gain significance not for the employment of any strategies, but for their translocations and their function in the Tamil context. Hence the objective of this article is to give an overall picture of the nature and function of translation instead of a micro-analysis. The survey (from colonial to postcolonial period) undertaken here helps us confirm that in terms of quality and quantity, translations from French to Tamil directly or via English are more common than the other way around. Such an approach helps us suggest that the translations of French texts mediated through English first during the nationalist struggle, then in the hay-days of literary modernism and the rise of Tamil Nationalism and finally during the rise of the feminist and dalit activism had become socially significant and had a much larger impact than the direct French to Tamil translations done with institutional support. The paper also touches upon the role of Tamils outside the Tamil region in this history of transactions between French and Tamil. To accomplish these intertwined arguments the paper follows a chronological pattern, tracing the function of French-Tamil translation from the times of French Orientalism through the rise of nationalism, modernism, and the activist mo(ve)ments of the postcolonial present.

The exchange between French and Tamil cultures was initiated thanks to the French East India Company on whose behalf François Martin bought Pondicherry in 1674. However, the pioneering work in cultural translation came from other Europeans. The first Tamil catechism issued by Portuguese Jesuits at Goa in 1577 was the first work ever to be printed in Indian script. The Bible was first translated into Tamil by Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, a German Pietist and printed in 1714 in the Danish colony of Tharangambadi (Shaw 2014). Interpreters like Veera Naicker (Gobalakichenane 1992) and Ananda Rangapoullé (Vinson 1894) who was the 'Dubash' of Joseph-François Dupleix had facilitated contact between the French and Tamil communities. Several French travellers of the 18th century went to the Tamil country and Pondicherry and explained Tamil manners and customs to the French public (Deleury 1991). Before the French Catholic priest Pierre Brigot of the Société des Missions set up a mission in Pondicherry in 1777, Jesuites from Italy like Robert Nobili and Constantine Joseph Beschi had already travelled to the Tamil country and mastered the Tamil language. Beschi (1680-1747) had even composed a Tamil epic called *Thembavani* on the Life of Saint Joseph. The French

missionaries held these works in great esteem. Les Missions étrangères de Paris holds in its archives the original versions of the unsurpassed works Louis Savinien Dupuis and Louis Musset who developed impressive bilingual dictionaries, French grammar manuals for Tamil speakers and bilingual conversation books. L'imprimerie de la mission in Pondicherry is still the place where French texts are laid out and printed. The Auroville Press set up in 1982 offers services in many languages including French.

In the UNESCO's collection of representative works appear only three books translated from Tamil into French (*Le roman de l'anneau* du Prince Ilango Adigal translated by Alain Danielou in 1990, *Le livre de l'amour de Tiruvalluvar* translated by François Gros in 1992 and *Viramma* translated by Jean-Luc and Josiane Racine in 1996) compared to the wider range of books translated from Sanskrit and Hindi into French. The first two books do not aim at challenging a Sanskrit-centric Orientalism such as what we see in the English translations of Thiruvalluvar by F.W. Ellis (1812) and G.U. Pope (1886). The third text, *Viramma* (co-authored by Viramma herself) seeks to challenge the strictly limited idea of 'dalit autobiography' circulated through the English translations of dalit texts.

The writings of the nationalist Tamil poet Bharati continues to shape the idea of modernism in Tamil. While scholars take pains to explore the nature of his contact with Western literature, particularly French, we do not have clear proof his Tamil translations of French texts. Just because he operated from the French-Indian territory, Pondicherry, and has acquaintance with the French, we cannot assume that he directly translated from the French to Tamil. The same argument applies to the arch-Modernist Pudumai Pithan and the leader of the Dravidian movement, Annadurai. It was only during the period of the little-magazine movement we get ample evidence of French to Tamil translations mediated through English. A brief analysis of the history of French to Tamil translations is given below to highlight the significant moments which facilitated the advent of Nationalism/regionalism and Modernism in Tamil literature.

In the early years of the 20th century, the revolutionary Tamil poet Bharati had exhorted the Tamils to translate treaties written by great minds from other countries into Tamil. He showed the way by translating the first two strophes of the French national anthem into Tamil. Literary magazines such as *Kandeeepam* published in the 1940s started publishing translations of short stories and novels from other languages. Some Tamil writers started translating and

adapting English, French, German and Russian novels into Tamil in the early years of the 20th century (See Annex. The list heavily relied on Murugesu Pandiyan's 2004 book on World Literature translated into Tamil). That the choice of works translated was mediated by English reading habits is clear from the popularity of authors like Alexandre Dumas and Jules Verne. Their adventure narratives held an appeal for Tamil readers and exercised an influence in the shaping of the novel genre in Tamil. Kalki Krishnamurthy's novels such as *Ponniyin Selvan* or *Sivagamiyin Sabadham* bear the imprint of French narrative techniques. This does not mean that the Tamil people who are known for their lyrical imagination and flair for the drama were not interested in poetry and theatre. But the major interest was for long prose narratives.

Most French writers were translated from English either by translators or authors who translated and adapted French works (especially the short stories of Maupassant) by way of learning the trade. Most of them did not come from the French speaking territory of Pondicherry or Karaikal. The titles of the translations, generally, show that the authors sometimes stick to the original, sometimes translate the English title and sometimes 'indigenize' it. The treatment of sexuality by French writers like Balzac, Flaubert, Maupassant and Zola was perceived as less hypocritical by Tamil readers who were used to Victorian prudishness on the one hand and the typical Tamil family loyalty which limited their individual freedom, on the other. The first ever French book to be directly translated from French into Tamil remains, however, Alexandre Dumas's *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* by N. C. Gopala Krishnapillai in 1914 under the title *Amarasimman*.

In the years before independence, French thought struck a chord with the Tamil yearning for dignity and freedom from oppression. Anthologies of world writers and abridged versions of famous novels were also seeing the day. French literature was one of the sources of growing Tamil cosmopolitan consciousness. Special attention was devoted to French Enlightenment philosophers such as Voltaire, Montesquieu and Rousseau. There were also multiple translations of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* or *Notre Dame de Paris*. They bear witness to the emotional identification of the Tamils with the poor and downtrodden depicted in Victor Hugo's novels. The pathos contained in his novels touched them more profoundly than Charles Dickens's novels.

C.N. Anndurai, the founder of the political party Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) who was to become the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu in 1967, published his translation of the

first strophe of 'La Marseillaise' as early as 1940. The 1952 translation of Emile Zola's biography from English to Tamil in two parts by the DMK leader S.P. Sittrarasu in 1952 was followed by C.N. Annadurai's passionate assessment of Zola's work in favour of the poor in 1959 under the title *Ezhai Pangalan*. DMK journals such as *Dravida Nadu*, *Mandram*, *Kanchi*, *Thenral*, *Ennam* continued to disseminate French thought and creative writing. Several translations of Zola's works were published in the 1960s. In the development and shaping of Tamil rationalist political movements, the influence of Zola and his world vision, if not considerable, was certainly, undeniable. The fact that Vaiko, founder and General Secretary of the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK) who was held in custody on charges of sedition by the Tamil Nadu police referred to Zola's 'J'accuse' to defend himself shows how ingrained Zola's ideas are in Tamil political consciousness.¹

Tamil publishing industry during the 1960s and 70s largely relied on private enterprise rather than government subsidy and institutional support. In the 1970s, the Tamil monthly *Prakgnai* published a translation of Camus's *Les Justes*. The attention shifted to absurdist philosophy thenceforth, prompted perhaps by the disillusionment with postcolonial governance. A stream of books directly translated from French with proper purchase of translation rights followed. V. Sriram, Madanacallian Shanmuganandam and T.S. Dakshinamurthy are some noteworthy translators. As V. Sriram had also published short essays on French directors like François Truffaut (1997), Robert Cartier Bresson (1998) and Louis Malle (1999), the French government had recognized his services to French culture by giving him a couple of awards, Chevalier dans l'ordre des palmes académiques and chevalier dans l'ordre des arts et lettres in 2002. Award winning Tamil Writer and translator Nagarathinam Krishna and his friend and academic Vengada Soupraya Nayagar deserve special mention in this paper for their translations of French and francophone writers into Tamil. Jagadesan Surya's M.Phil thesis submitted in 2015 to Jawarhal Nehru University, *A Critical Bibliography of Translations from French into Tamil during 1991-2010*, is a welcome addition to Tamil-French cross cultural studies.

While the French Embassy and the Alliance Française of Chennai extend their unfailing support to V. Sriram, Indian and Canadian universities seem to have given their encouragement to a group of academics comprising P. Kichenamourty, K. Madanagobalane, R. Venguattaramane and S. Pannirselvame who have translated Tamil short stories into French of

¹ <http://mdmk.org.in/article/mar09/i-accuse>, published by Vaiko on 4 July 2006. Accessed on July 25, 2015.

course, but more significantly French writers and Francophone Canadian writers into Tamil. Sharan Kumar Subramanian has devoted his doctoral thesis (2014) to a crucial review of these translations of Canadian francophone authors into Tamil.

Contemporary Tamil critics have turned to French theory as a way of maintaining a distance from the dogmas and orthodoxies of dominant Indian culture. How and why did they turn what has been termed as 'French theory' by François Cusset (Cusset 2005) is an interesting issue. In order to answer this question, one has to find out which French theories have been translated and how these theories have travelled to the Tamil publishing world. Tamil journals published in Tamil Nadu such as *Niraprigai*, *Ayvu*, *Padigal* and *Sidhaivu* explore French theories, while *Uyirnizhal*, a journal published by Sri Lankan Tamils led by Pradeepan Ravindran in France pays attention to French critical thought as well as literary and artistic creations and experimentations. Sometimes main stream journals like *Droit et cultures* publish in-depth articles about Tamil literature (Annousamy 2007).

Apart from Pierre Bourdieu's *Sur la télévision* (On Television) translated by Sriram in 2004, no French theoretician has been directly translated from French to English. The translations have been made from their English translations. The English translations of French theories were prescribed as part of research methodology in University curricula. On the one hand, the well-known Indian postcolonialist Gayatri Spivak was also the translator of Derrida might explain the importance given to French theories in Indian academia. It is an irony that despite being a translator of French theory, and an observer of the French trading post in Bengal, Chandranagore, Spivak failed to look into this unique nature of French colonial history. Introduction of French theoreticians started in the late 80s in Madras University and Pondicherry University. The fact that Roland Barthes's 'Death of the Author,' Michel Foucault's *Archeology of Knowledge* and Jacques Lacan's 'Of Structure as an Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to any Subject Whatever' feature in the M.A. English syllabus for the academic year (2008-2009) of Thiruvalluvar University² in Serkadu is just an example of how French literary theories have penetrated the Indian academic world. Mother Teresa Women's University in Kodaikanal made it a point to introduce French feminist theories to its students. R. Azhagarasan's Tamil translation (2009) of *Poststructuralism* by Catherine Belsey is an example of mediation between Tamil and French critical worlds via English. His book is part of the series of

² http://thiruvalluvaruniversity.ac.in/pdf/cbcs_syllabus/M.A.%20English.pdf. Accessed July 25, 2015.

translations of Oxford conceptual/critical thinking by Adyalam Publishers. Translated books on *Postmodernism* by authors Prem (who along with Ramesh claim themselves to be the Deleuze and Guattari of the Tamil Little-magazine circle), *Postcolonialism* by Mangai and *Critical Theory* by Sivakumar belong to the same series. Besides, the little magazines, especially those devoted to Dalit causes, were those that continued to offer French critical thought with a view to uplifting the minds of Tamil readers through English. There is a twofold purpose in the recourse to French theories by such magazines. These translations exercised a leveling influence between those who went to University and those who educate themselves by reading Tamil magazines. The most important translators of French critical theories into Tamil from English in the small magazines are D. Ravikumar, Nagarjunan and Sivakumar. The French theoreticians who have been translated into Tamil are: Antonin Arthaud, George Bataille, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Aimé Césaire, Jean-Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Claude Levi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, Christian Metz. The context of the 1990s provided a fertile ground for the dissemination of French critical theories. Nevertheless one point to be remembered about these translations is that in their enthusiasm to introduce French authors to Tamil readers, the translators and the journals do not respect copyright regulations. Apart from the transactions of theory, the 90s uprising in India with its focus on minority, gender and caste question was seen on par with the May 68 revolution of France. The comparison was not based on the modus operandi but in terms of its impact on the intellectual and public sphere (Susi Tharu, 2009).

From the available texts translated or adapted from French to Tamil which are more numerous than the works translated from Tamil to French, we could discern more curiosity, openness, interest and sustained effort on the part of Tamil authors, readers and publishers to keep abreast of the French literary scene as part of their cosmopolitan culture. This might have been facilitated by traditional forms of cultural exchange such as student exchange, book fairs, tourism and migration. The number of these translated works, however, confirms the colonial pattern of knowledge flow from the West to the East, showing that much remains to be done to right this uneven exchange. The fact that Francophone writing from Africa is less conspicuous in this corpus shows that the gaze is turned towards the West and North (France, Canada) rather than the South.

More than the blind pursuit of the passion for theory in an imitation of the West, the Tamil engagement with French theory shows the Tamil penchant for intellectual debate.

Besides, Dalit thinkers turn to alternative frameworks of thought to change the dominant way of looking and seeing. However, Tamils could be self-deprecatory as is shown by the fictitious interview with Jean-Claude Ivan Yarmola (*Oodagam* 1994) which laughs at Tamil pseudo intellectuals who run after visiting Western masters without checking their bonafides. Indeed Alain Sokal's article denouncing the intellectual mumbo-jumbo in France has been translated into Tamil.³

French publishers complain about the lack of trained translators. They sometimes resort to the easier way out, i.e., back translating Tamil works from their English versions. They are also afraid that the typical concerns of the Tamils may not be attractive to the French market. For some earlier and older migrants from Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry or Sri Lanka, the business of getting ahead in life is so tough that they do not have the leisure time to devote to translation into French of Tamil works by way of leaving a cultural legacy to their children. The Pondicherry families belonging to the 'renonçants'⁴ category take pride on their assimilation with the French. Their relationship to the French culture somewhat resembles that of the *pieds-noirs* from Algeria.

A glance at this complex history of French-Tamil translations/transactions also help us look at the nature of French colonization in the Tamil region. Unlike the transactions of British and Russian literatures, French-Tamil transaction is unique. In the case of the British the Colonial administration and Colonial educational policy promoted English literature in Indian languages. In the case of Russian literature, Indo-Russian relationships during the Nehruvian era played a crucial role. But in the case of French literature, there was no official policy of promoting of French literature in India before the politics of francophonie entered into play. The general consensus was that the exclusive use of French was needed only where native languages were too poor in linguistic resources. Otherwise French could coexist alongside native languages. The reception of French works by Tamils was thus voluntary. Indeed French works served as a counterpoint to the dominant English tastes. Hence their long standing impact. That is the reason why critics hesitate to use the anti-colonial rhetoric of postcolonialism while discussing Tamil French transactions. The fact that the French works created such an

³ Posted by Stefan Steinberg in the World Socialist Web Site on 1st July 2000..

⁴ According to the Décret du 18 septembre 1881 of the Third Republic, the natives could change their status from subject to citizens and choose a patronym for themselves and their heirs.

impact (through English) in both the French and British-Indian territories testify to the unique nature of French-Tamil transactions.

The time is perhaps ripe for a Tamil writer of French expression to emerge. Born to an Indian father and a Tunisian mother, Geetha Balvannanathan Prodhom, is experimenting in this direction by writing poems and short stories directly in French, while continuing to write in Arabic, English and Italian. The Mauritian writer of Tamil origin Sooriamoorthy Ramanujam is auto-publishing poetry in the French language.

The Sri Lankan community in France is, however, very active in the transmission of Tamil language and culture to the younger generation. Some of its members have established schools to teach Tamil and published bilingual dictionaries and glossaries (Sachchithanantham, 1997 & 2009). The Tamil speaking community in Canada seems to be engaged in politics⁵ as a mode of cultural translation rather than in translation proper of Tamil texts into French. The Tamil diaspora in the French Caribbean, Reunion Island and Mauritius (Ravi, 2014) are keen to discover their roots. But their knowledge of Tamil is not surefooted enough to undertake ambitious translations of major works. They rely on universities in France and in Tamil Nadu and the cooperation between them to write new chapters in the history of Tamil French connections.

The recent Cannes award to Jacques Audiard's movie *Dheepan* foregrounded the life of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in France. For the first time, the lead roles were played by Tamil actors Jesuthasan Antonythasan, Kalieaswari Srinivasan and Claudine Vinasithamby. In this French movie, Tamil language dialogues were subtitled in French. Indeed Sri Lankan Tamil writing about their displacement is a corpus that needs to be scrutinized in a separate study. Only K.P. Aravindan's poems have been translated into French by A. Murugaiyan in 2014. Thanks to globalization, French companies work in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry where French native speakers face the reality of Tamil language. Though English serves as lingua franca, doing business with Tamil people without showing a respect for their language is not easy in the Tamil context. But the paradox of globalization is such that the Lycée français in Pondicherry is offering courses in English. The overall picture one gets is, thus, one of an immense gap that will take decades to fill. We are not even close to the never accomplished transition that Sandro

⁵ Rathika Sitsabaiesan is the first person of Tamil origin to be elected to the Canadian parliament.

Mezzadra and Federico Rahola identify as defining the postcolonial condition (Mezzadra and Rahola, 2006).

Among the actors of cultural translation, literary journals and websites as well as associations need to be mentioned. The French language journals published in India such as *Rencontre avec l'Inde* (published by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations founded in 1950), *Synergies Inde* (since 2006), but also *Courrier de l'Unesco, Nouvelles de l'Inde* published by the Embassy of India in France, *La Nouvelle revue de l'Inde, Indes - La fenêtre sur l'Inde, sur le monde francophone* as well as scholarly journals such as *Hommes et migrations* and *Puruṣārtha*, disseminate information about Tamil language and culture (but not exclusively) among the French speaking public. Only *Trait de l'Union* published in Pondicherry and *Circle culturel des pondichériens* published in France are specially devoted to Tamil French cultural and linguistic exchange. The newsletter published by the consulting company Zen Development called *En Direct de Pondichéry* is a recent and welcome addition to this list. The Tamil journal published by the Catholic community in Pondicherry called *Sarvaviyabi* is reproduced in the electronic form in the Aumonerie tamoule indienne's website. Websites such as 'Appal Tamil' and 'Chassé-croisé: France-Inde' pay special attention to literature in translation.

The Indian Embassy in France lists 84 associations (non lucrative bodies under the 1901 French law). Among them there are 15 Tamil associations are devoted to the preservation and spreading of Tamil culture among the Tamil diaspora in France and among the French people. Annamalai University's distance learning centre in Paris has the legal status of an association. The associations give classes in Tamil, Karnatic music and Bharata Natyam. Associations and friendship groups such as France Tamil Sangam, Thiruvalluvar Kalai Kudam, Kambane Kajagam, Pondicherry Bharathi, Vanidhasan Muttamij, World Thiruvalluvar Peravai, International Movement for Tamil Culture and the recently founded Tolkappiar Mandram not only conduct monthly workshops on Kamban, Ramalinga, Thiruvalluvar etc. but also convene 'Kaviarangams' (forums for poetry), where poets rival each other in reciting poems on a particular topic.

In the present context of globalization, the nature of transaction between French and Tamil goes beyond translation of texts. Here too the nature French engagement with globalization and the Tamil diaspora seems to maintain a difference, when compared to other

European powers. We are thus able to witness the continuation of a unique tradition of French-Tamil transaction across times.

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