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The Oxford India Anthology of

Tamil  
Dalit Writing



edited by

Ravikumar and R. Azhagarasan



Covering over a century of writings (1890–2010),  
this anthology records the contests and dialogues of  
Dalits and their changing modes of representation.

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The Oxford India Anthology of **Tamil Dalit Writing**

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## The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing

Presenting the creative expressions of Tamil Dalits from the late nineteenth century to recent times—a period of over 100 years—this volume includes 78 selections and 41 writers covering poetry, fiction, drama, autobiography, biography, and archival and contemporary critical prose.

This volume demonstrates that Tamil Dalit writing read along with the developments recorded by Archaeology and Epigraphy opens up possibilities of tracing alternative histories of regions, languages, and cultures. Initially establishing itself as a literature of protest, with time Tamil Dalit writing went far beyond resistance. Moving away from generalization and categorization which had an impact on the form and content of Dalit literature and which frequently influenced the language and style of the writers, the present volume records how Tamil Dalit writers have challenged stereotypes. They not only weep, accuse, and abuse but also laugh, celebrate, and love.

Easily the most representative collection of Tamil Dalit writing in recent times, this volume will appeal to anybody who enjoys good writing as well as students and scholars of comparative literature, translation studies, human rights, caste studies; and Indian literature, especially Tamil writing, in translation.

**RAVIKUMAR**, activist-theoretician of the Dalit Movement, poet, columnist, translator, and former legislator, is editor of *Manarkeni*, a literary bi-monthly in Tamil, and co-founder of Navayana Publishing.

**R. AZHAGARASAN** teaches in the Department of English, University of Madras, India.

*Jacket painting: Life Cycle in lino-cut by R.B. Bhaskaran*



The low castes are caught in the Brahmanic-Hindu cultural mesh spread by the upper caste and are just too weak to free themselves and rise.

—Translated by S. Theodore Baskaran

## Arunthathiyars

### *Problems of Language, Race, and Caste Identity\**

Ra. Athiyaman

Chakkiliyar, Maadhigaa, Maadhaari, Pagadai, Thotti, Chemmaan—under these names Arunthathiyars have spread so widely that there is not a town in Tamil Nadu where they are not to be found. They are the working class involved in cleaning jobs, stitching chappals, as workers in agricultural fields, and so on. Everybody can see them in these above-mentioned jobs, working with no differentiation between men and women. Nowadays they can be seen working as porters, pulling handcarts, picking paper, and in construction works.

The language spoken by the majority of them in Tamil Nadu is Telugu. They also speak Kannada in a few places and Tamil in few other places.

Even though the language they speak is Telugu, they do not know either to read or write it. It remains the language that is only spoken at home. They speak to others only in Tamil. Their children go only to Tamil-medium schools.

That the people of this caste who are the Scheduled Caste are even worse off than the other 'Dalits' is a widely recognized fact.

Even the other divisions of the so-called downtrodden do not accept them or treat them as equals. Two causes are considered responsible for this:

1. They do the cleaning jobs that others do not venture to or refuse to do.
2. They eat the flesh of dead cattle.

\* Original title *Mozhi Adayalam, Ina Adayalam, Jati Adayalam: Arunthathiyars Ethirkollum Pirachanaikal*.



It is important to understand the meaning of the second cause—that they 'eat beef'. Nobody can eat beef when the animal is alive. Not just large cattle, any animal can be eaten only after it is dead. Therefore, they are subject to what is called 'untouchability'. (That now, with everybody eating it, beef has become very expensive is another matter.)

An important cause of their low status is that they do not have the option of good education.

After the Englishmen started ruling this country, it became possible for the Pariahs who were known as Adi Dravidas to be absorbed in the fields of education and medicine. Christianity also accepted them and helped them to grow. Because of this, they could get positions in the Church. If you look at their employment profile now, you will find them mostly in teaching or jobs in urban security systems.

In Tamil Nadu, most of the Pallars, also known as the 'Devendrakula Vellalar', are a little better off than that of the other downtrodden communities. These people who own small plots of agricultural land never experienced untouchability. They do not eat beef. Since they too have embraced Christianity to a degree, their opportunities for education and jobs have improved slightly.

The following causes can be cited for the low status of the Arunthathiyars:

1. They did not opt for religious conversion in big numbers.
2. The colloquial Telugu and Kannada that they speak.
3. Their eating beef and doing menial jobs.
4. Their complete lack of opportunity in education.

It is wrong for the dominant Telugu-speaking castes like the Naidus, Devaanga Chettiars, and Reddiars who control more than half the economic resources of the Tamil land and are in a position to crow over others to consider these hardworking Arunthathiyars who speak an impure dialect of Telugu as people of another language, immigrants, and a minority.

The Arunthathiyars, the sons of this soil, have been mentioned in history when the Vijayanagara empire attacked the Tamil region in the seventeenth century. In all the intervening centuries, from then till now, they have become living corpses by working for the same land and for the dominant castes of the same land.

The Tamils were the first settlers in the Indian subcontinent. When the dominant caste Tamilians mixed with the immigrants, the low caste Tamil people became separate and degraded. According to Ambedkar all

the downtrodden people of India have a common cultural background. Since the conclusion of Ambedkar concurs with the linguist Paavaanar, the matter needs an in-depth study.

Under these conditions when different national types changed into different castes as the locals and the immigrants intermixed, speaking an impure language can only be the result of ignorance. If today somebody should be identified as a pure Tamilian, only the downtrodden meet that description. That too, the Chakkiliyars in particular. Yes, they are indeed the ancient Tamilians!

They are the people who four centuries ago returned to Tamil Nadu from that part which became Telugu speaking, to become one with the dust of Tamil Nadu.

Though they speak Telugu, they do not know how to read or write. And because they speak Telugu they are excluded. It is the greatest cruelty to identify these people, who are entirely Tamilian as Telugu people. What is it but a plot to divide the working people?

Ezhil Elangovanin his article, 'The Arunthathiyars in the Seventeenth Century' says, 'Even though Arunthathiyars had come to Tamil Nadu during the rule of Viswanatha Nayaka in the sixteenth and King Tirumalai Nayaka in the seventeenth century, it was only in the seventeenth century that the Arunthathiyars came to be regarded as "Chakkiliyars". Just as the conflict between Right-hand and Left-hand\* castes led to a struggle between the Pariahs and the Pallars, conflict erupted between Pariahs and Chakkiliyars as the latter wore the red flowers, which was the symbol of the Left-hand castes.' This statement of Professor K.K. Pillai was endorsed by the Marxist scholar Ko. Kesavan in his book, *Samooka Viduthalaiyum Thalthappattorum* (The Untouchables and Social Liberation).

It is interesting to note that no reference to Chakkiliyars appeared in the division of Right-hand and Left-hand castes till sixteenth century. It began appearing only after the seventeenth century during the rule of King Thirumalai Nayaka in Tamil Nadu. Only if we pay attention to such facts, can we surely say that these people were branded as Chakkiliyars during the seventeenth century and not in the earlier history.

The Arunthathiyars now have to oppose the dominant Naidus who trapped them by merely accommodating them as 'Telugus' and

\* Scholars say that the 'Right-hand' refers to the natives of a particular region and 'Left-hand' to a migratory group. There were continuous conflicts between the two.



the dominant Tamilians who marginalized them as 'Telugus'. Since this kind of awareness will cause damage to the dominant Tamil and Telugu castes, today Arunthathiyars are maliciously constructed as 'alien' to the Tamil land. All these dominant castes in some way succumbed themselves to Brahminism. It is the Brahminical blood that runs through them. Even before the evolution of Telugu language, the language spoken by the forefathers of Arunthathiyars was Tamil that is why we urge the Arunthathiyars to call themselves 'Aathi Tamilar', meaning 'original Tamils'.

Let us unite with the Pallars, the Pariahs and the other marginalized Tamils, who like the Arunthathiyars toil in the Tamil land, and fight for the freedom of the Tamils along with that of Aadi Yamilar.

—Translated by Meera Rajagopalan

## Land Woman's Breath and Speech\*

P. Sivakami

The moment one is engrossed in subtly analysing the universe with its earth, planets, and the sky, one is lost in wonder. Among these, till date it is only the earth that has struck our intellect as a place for living organism to exist. Is the earth a supra life, begetting million of living organisms, or is it a mere globe? It keeps revolving because of the indwelling fire of life force. When we look at how it rejuvenates itself in the vibrations of its motion, how it creates myriad life-forms in the fusion of organic minerals, the earth gives the impression that it is a gigantic living being. Can we measure such a colossal force by the narrow term 'land'?

Although, today, the term 'land' is mentioned, it is taken as an area which has been made fertile by man for his living. Ancient Tamils did not reduce it like that. Linking *thinai*, that is the land which comprised the plants and other living organisms in that space of land with the sensibilities of the people, they had divided it into five thinais such as hill and the area surrounding it, forest and the area surrounding it, and

\* Original title *Nilam: Penkalin Moochum, Pechum*.



Assembly. His party got two seats in 2006 elections to the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly, including, Ravikumar, one of the editors of this anthology. In 2009, Thirumavalavan was elected to Parliament from the Chidambaram Lok Sabha constituency. His writings and speeches appeared in English translation as *Talisman* and *Uproot Hindutva* (2003).

SUDHAKAR KATHAK alias Sudhakar (1967–), named himself after the filmmaker Ritvik Kathak as Sudhakar Kathak. Of the 16 short stories he has written, *Varaivu* won the Katha award for the best Tamil short story in 1997. Another story, *Udavi* got the best short story award of Tamil daily, *Dinamani*. He works as Assistant Engineer in the Public Works Department, Cuddalore.

A. VINCENT RAJ (1972–) is a poet and social activist. He published a collection of poetry titled *Vazhipokkan* (1996) and established the human rights organization, Evidence in 2005. As a human rights activist, he has conducted a study of caste-based atrocities on Dalits in nearly 600 reserved panchayats, focusing on the problems of Dalits.

YAZHAN AADHI (1970–) is a poet and essayist. He has published the four poetry collections: *Isai Uthir Kaalam* (2003), *Sevipparai* (2004), *Nedun Thee* (2006), and *Kaspa* (2008). He is a regular contributor to the magazine *Dalit Murasu*.

KABILAN (1967–) is one of the popular lyricists in Tamil filmworld. He has done his research on the 'Slumsongs of Chennai' and his poetry collections include: *Aagaatha Arimugam*, *Theru Ooviyam*, and *Meipaadu*. After serving six years in Chennai passport office, he left to be a full-time lyricist. He was given the Tamil Nadu Government award for best lyric of the year in 2007. In addition, he secured the award of the Cirpi Arakkattalai in 2001 for his poetry collection, *Theru Ooviyam*.

RA. ATHIYAMAAN alias R. Subbarao (1952–) is an activist who served in the Youth Guidance Service and Tamil Nadu All Arunthathiyar Sangam Coordination in the 1980s. In 1994, he established the Adi Tamizhar Peravai, as part of the Dalit uprising of the 1990s, incorporating all those belong to Arunthathiyar community and by combining the ideas of Ambedkar and Periyar. He organized the first ever conference of those working as sweepers and scavengers in 2004. He conducted a rail blockade in protest against manual scavenging in the Railways in 2005. The petition he submitted to the Chief Minister Karunanidhi in 2006, claiming



Tamil origin for the Arunthathiyars (who are normally regarded as Telugu-speaking immigrants), gave way to the demand for separate reservation for Arunthathiyars. In 2008, the Tamil Nadu Government announced 3 per cent reservation for them as recommended by a judicial commission. He served in the Tamil Nadu Regional Passport Office.

K.T. GANDHIRAJAN, artist and art historian, has a Masters Degree in Art History and Aesthetics from Madurai Kamaraj University. Since 1995 he has been doing archaeological research and documentation of cave and temple mural paintings. He has participated in the discovery of twenty important pre-historic painting sites in Tamil Nadu and is involved in heritage awareness programmes.