

BOOK REVIEWS

E. Annamalai, C. T. Indra, Cristina Muru and T. Sriraman, eds. *Book Culture in Tamil: Essays in Memory of CreA Ramakrishnan* / க்ரியா ராமகிருஷ்ணன் நினைவுக் கட்டுரைகள். Chennai: Cre-A, 2021. 382 p. ISBN 978-81-954584-2-4. Price 795 Rs. Review by Margherita Trento.

Soon after the unexpected passing of Chennai-based intellectual and editor R. Ramakrishnan (1945–2020), better known as the founder of the CreA publishing house, his friends and colleagues E. Annamalai, C. T. Indra, Cristina Muru, and T. Sriraman brought out a fine volume of essays in English and Tamil, titled *Book culture in Tamil: Essays in Memory of CreA Ramakrishnan*. Beyond honoring the memory of Ramakrishnan, these essays explore facets of his work to draw a larger picture of the history, contradictions, and current challenges facing Tamil book culture. Tamil was the first Indian language to appear in print, and the printed book played a central role in the development of Tamil literary culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹ Still, this was by no means a linear story of cultural reawakening, as historian of the book B. S. Kesavan called it. First of all, books and manuscripts had long coexisted, their material aspects and modes of circulation influencing each other in many ways. Even when the printed book completely took over in the nineteenth century, Tamil book culture remained fraught with conflicts and negotiations in the linguistic, literary, social, and political spheres.

Take the pamphlet *Luttērīnattiyalpu*, for instance, written by the Jesuit Costanzo Giuseppe Beschi the 1730s against the Lutheran

missionaries who had just printed their Tamil translation of the Bible. It gives us what is probably the first account of the reaction of a Tamil learned man to the printed book. Beschi builds this short pamphlet as an epistolary exchange between himself and his good friend, the scholar-cum-poet (*pulavar*) Sathan. The antecedent to this exchange is that Sathan was presented with a copy of the Tamil Bible by a Lutheran. His first reaction was to marvel at and be mesmerized by the beauty of the book binding and the orderly disposition of the letters on the page. Curious about the spiritual wisdom allegedly contained in the book, Sathan asked someone to read the text out loud. However, as soon as he heard the (colloquial) form of Tamil in the Bible, he was suddenly angered. Who could think that such a low, vulgar register of the language could be called “Tamil”? Who dared to record it on paper? Livid, he threw the book away and wrote to Beschi asking for advice. This short episode portrays a very early stage in the history of book culture in Tamil, but it already contains in a nutshell many of the issues that the late S. Ramakrishnan explored and expertly navigated in the course of his life.

The first striking element is that books are objects, and their material form and beauty have an impact. The essays by Vincenzo Letta and Manivannan in the volume both explore the technical aspects of book-making, respectively design and illustrations, to which Ramakrishnan was always alert. Besides, the very cover of this collection of essays—a work by

¹ B. S. Kesavan, *History of Printing and Publishing in India: A Story of Cultural Re-awakening*, vol. 1, *South Indian Origins of Printing and its Efflorescence in Bengal* (Delhi: National Book Trust, 1985), 34.

Manivannan in earthy colors, with a beautiful black and white portrait—is a practical demonstration of the publishing care and style that characterize CreA, Ramakrishnan’s publishing enterprise. The second element is the question of Tamil, of its diglossia and its different registers, and of the long and complex history of their use in writing. In the seventeenth century, Sathan was offended by spoken Tamil being recorded on paper. In the twentieth century, the sometimes experimental, colloquial, or regional language in the novels published by Ramakrishnan still generated debates, as shown in the essays by Thanga Jayaraman, Imaiya, or Pavel Hons. And the third element is the long-term imbrication of language, literature, and books in the social, political, and spiritual life of the Tamil country, and the deep emotions they generate: all the essays in the volume touch upon this central node.

The volume dwells on these aspects of Tamil book culture, and on many more. It portrays the multifaceted personality of Ramakrishnan as a voracious reader, a publisher, and an editor and his contribution to the world of Tamil publishing, translation, and literature, while also offering a readable introduction to the long history and the present development of that world. In doing so, the book focuses on just one aspect of Ramakrishnan’s rich cultural contribution, which encompassed creative writing, theatre, and archival preservation. But all the editors of this volume seem to agree that it was through his publishing house, CreA, that Ramakrishnan left his deeper and longer-lasting mark in Tamil cultural life (p. 372). So, the book is divided into five main sections loosely related to the publishing activity of Ramakrishnan. Each section includes several articles in English or Tamil; and each article has an abstract in both languages. In this way, the main gist of all the essays is available to most readers from Tamil Nadu or interested in Tamil Nadu, who are likely to know at least one of the two languages. An English introduction by C. T. Indra, an afterward by E. Annamalai and

a remembrance by Cristina Muru complete the volume.

Besides the editors, fourteen scholars and writers contributed with essays. Let me note in passing how their willingness to write relatively quickly (the book was published in 2021, just one year after Ramakrishnan’s death) shows how important it was for everyone to produce a tangible appreciation of his contribution—and what better form than a book?

The first section of the volume focuses on dictionaries and serves as a reminder that perhaps CreA and Ramakrishnan’s most durable contribution to the world of the Tamil language is *CreA’s Dictionary of Contemporary Tamil*, now in its third edition. The essay by Gregory James begins by stating that “people do argue over words” (p. 68) and goes on to reassess the important role of lexicographers in describing as well as shaping a language (pp. 88–89). P. R. Subramaniyan, the chief editor of CreA, reflects on the way the CreA dictionary has evolved over its three editions, on the entries that have changed and those that have remained unchanged. Thanga Jayaraman proposes a fascinating analysis of words used in rural areas, of their almost systematic exclusion from contemporary written Tamil, and their inclusion in the third edition of the CreA dictionary. “What are the causes,” he asks (p. 103), “for contemporary written Tamil not assimilating words in rural areas while modernizing itself?” His essay takes the reader through several case-studies (words such as *kuṭiyāṇavaṇ* or *ūraka*), showing the sociopolitical implications of making a dictionary across divides such as rural and urban registers of the same language.

The second section of the book is dedicated to the practice of editing, which Ramakrishnan single-handedly pioneered in Tamil. The contributors to this section are one editor, Mini Krishnan, and two well-known Tamil writers and translators: Asai and Imaiya. It offers the reader an exploration of the work of a Tamil editor, a profession about which we

still say too little. Mini Krishnan analyzes the relationship and tensions between translators and editors in the Indian publishing market (with a few fascinating sample edits as an appendix, pp. 151–54). Imaiya and Asai both reflect on their own experience as writers, working with Ramakrishnan as an editor over the years. Both their essays include citations of sentences that he used to explain his work. For instance, Imaiya says, Ramakrishnan told him that “When writing, you should note down everything that comes to your mind; after you have finished writing, you can decide what is necessary and what is not necessary. You should act as though building a house: only after having built it can one decide what should and what should not go inside that house” (p. 179, my translation from Tamil). This simple but effective metaphor shows how Ramakrishnan used to encourage the writers with whom he worked and offer them advice about book-writing. It also points to the book as something that is slowly constructed over time, and to the editor’s role of helping to organize its content.

The section on design is equally educational about all the work that goes into making a book, as Vincenzo Letta shows. And much like for Sathan in the seventeenth century, CreA’s books were attractive to twentieth- and twenty-first century readers for their carefully thought-out covers and fonts. Manivannan gives some insights here into the story of his long, symbiotic association with Ramakrishnan to create the covers of CreA’s books. I will just mention one aspect of this work that appears particularly striking, namely font design. The cover for Omar Khayyam’s *Rubaiyat* (p. 211) shows well how Tamil script can be adapted to evoke other forms of writing, creating a beautiful effect between estrangement and familiarity.

The fourth section focuses on literature and its registers and connects in multiple ways with the section on dictionaries, which focused on language and its registers. David Shulman

explores the issue of speech and its use in literary genres, a phenomenon that dates back at least to the early modern period. Perundevi Srinivasan reflects on what is at present the most influential relationship Tamil finds itself in, which is the one with the English language; and Pavel Hons explores the frontier of regional literatures within Tamil itself. These authors, like many others in the volume, put at the heart of their work the relationship between language, literature, and sociopolitical life—a link explored at length in the work of E. Annamalai, *Social Dimensions of Modern Tamil*, which appears in many bibliographies in this volume.² These essays further show how literature is an arena of contention between different approaches to language and its aesthetics, both within the sphere of Tamil itself (between elite and marginal voices) and between Tamil and other languages and literary cultures.

The last section is on translation, and on the complex history through which other languages and literary traditions entered the world of Tamil. To throw light on “the extraordinary contribution of CreA: Publishers to enriching Tamil literature through world literature” (p. 278), Ebeling’s essay offers a historical overview of translation from European languages into Tamil, from the early missionary experiments in the eighteenth century to Shakespeare’s plays at the turn of the twentieth century. He concludes that “literary translations into Tamil should be considered as forming part of modern Tamil literary history” (p. 305). Sriram talks about his own pioneering experience as a translator from French. Meenakshi Hariharan, a translator of children’s books from Australian English into Tamil, offers several examples of the challenges and strategies for making the original cultural milieu accessible. The crucial and sometimes innovative role of translation, thematized by these three essays, is a thread

² Annamalai’s work was published by CreA in Chennai in 2011.

running through the entire volume. Tamil language and literature, we learn from all the essays, never developed in isolation—be that cultural isolation, or the isolation of the writer. To understand Tamil book culture, the student needs to grasp the multiple relationships through which it takes shape—that between different literary cultures, or between the writer and the editor, or again between the editor and the illustrator.

In conclusion, what emerges from reading the essays in this volume is the complexity of Tamil book culture, which is at the center of a net of relationship involving book craftsmanship, art, and illustration, as well as language, literature, and translation. Throughout his life, Ramakrishnan created bridges between all these dimensions. This volume shows his contributions while at the same time offering

an entry point to understand what it means to create a book, who are the multiple actors involved in the process, and ultimately what are the stakes. Perhaps the most important underlying theme is that in Tamil Nadu, but elsewhere too, language and culture form a crucial political arena, and a space where the voices of the marginal, dispossessed, outcast, and illiterate are still fighting and struggling to emerge. In short, the book is an important read for anyone who wishes to understand why we make printed books (even in the age of e-books and audio books), why we care about them, and how books have an important role to play in creating new, hopefully more alert and open-minded readers.

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