The Light of Knowledge
Cody, Francis

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Introduction

1. “Arivoli Iyakkam” would be translated literally as “the Light of Knowledge movement,” although the word “Arivoli” is now commonly used to refer to Enlightenment rationality in Tamil cultural studies.

2. Historical accounts of Soviet and Chinese mass-literacy movements can be found in Clark (2000) and Peterson (1997), respectively.

3. It was as a result of a Total Literacy Campaign that took place in 1991–92, and of repeated efforts to organize literacy classes in villages since that time, that Pudukkottai’s female literacy rate rose from 44.2% to 60.9% according to the 2001 Census of India. The 2011 census suggests a 73.8% female literacy rate across the state of Tamil Nadu, with 80.3% overall. The current rural female literacy is estimated at 65.5%. Since its inception over twenty years ago, over thirty thousand volunteers have worked for the movement in the rural district of Pudukkottai alone. During the period of my research, in 2002–4, some five thousand recently trained activists were conducting literacy lessons for women while running four hundred village libraries and reading rooms across the district.

4. India had already begun to liberalize its economy from an import-substitution-based, centrally planned mixed economy by opening markets and reducing protective tariffs under Rajiv Gandhi’s leadership in the mid-1980s. It was only after a balance-of-payments crisis in 1991, however, that the rural credit system was completely overhauled as part of a larger structural adjustment plan. Financial sector reforms have been introduced since then in an attempt
to transform credit institutions, leading to an emphasis on microfinance (Kalpana 2005; Lalitha and Nagarajan 2000). See also Deepak Nayyar (1996) for a macroeconomic overview of shifts in development policy under liberalization.

5. Partha Chatterjee (1993) and Sudipta Kaviraj (2010) have argued that the Nehruvian state asserted its legitimacy as the bearer of modernity through development projects that often were at odds with the very principals of democracy.

6. The early 1990s also marks the universalization of Panchayati Raj (decentralized democracy). The findings of Heller (2005) and Tanabe (2007) have given reason for hope that the general devolution of state power has in fact opened new spaces for what Tanabe calls “vernacular democracy.” Corbridge et al. (2005) remain more equivocal in their studies of local governance in northern and eastern India.

7. As James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta (2002) have argued, it is not always easy to distinguish between state projects and social mobilization in the sphere of “civil society” in an era when some of the most important development work is being done by GONGOs—government organized nongovernmental organizations.

8. See Arturo Escobar (1995) and Akhil Gupta (1998) for classic accounts of how the discourse of development has portrayed a good part of the globe as “behind” and needing to “catch up” with the industrialized North; Ashis Nandy (2003) on how development requires a sacrifice of the present for the sake of the future; and Tania Li (2007) on continuities in development ideology from the colonial to the postcolonial.


10. Benedict Anderson (1991), Elizabeth Povinelli (2006), Charles Taylor (2004), and Michael Warner (2002) are among the social theorists who have sought to theorize the sort of “stranger sociality” first enabled by writing that sits at the core of modern understandings of national citizenship.

11. Maurice Bloch argues that it is within the paradigm of Enlightenment that “systems of communication are therefore to be judged in terms of their transparency,” that is, in terms of writing’s capacity to circumvent forms of social mediation (1998, 166). Both Goody (1977, 1986) and Lévi-Strauss (1973) are writing within this paradigm of Enlightenment insofar as they are both concerned with the question of the relation between writing and transparency. Jacques Derrida’s (1976) classic critique of Lévi-Strauss elaborates this argument concerning the role of transparency in the anthropologist’s fear of the written word. See Akhil Gupta (2012, 192–95) for an overview of this debate and its significance for the study of literacy and democracy in India.

12. Voter turnouts in recent elections are, in fact, consistently higher in constituencies with lower average rates of literacy in India (Yadav 2000).

13. Places where the Arivoli Iyakkam was a strong movement with widespread involvement at the grass roots include Virudunagar, Sivagangai, Tirunelveli, and Pudukkottai districts, and the Union Territory of Pondicherry. The neighboring state of Kerala was also a strong center for this type of literacy and science activism.

14. These people are what Steven Feierman (1990) calls “peasant intellectuals” whose livelihood often still depends on agriculture, or what Gramsci (1971, 14) would call “rural-type intellectuals.”

15. In the words of Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, we stand in a “differential distance to the necessity immanent to the universe under examination” (1992, 41).

Krishna Kumar’s (1993b) critique of the mass-literacy programs used the Pudukkottai Arivoli Iyakkam as a case to argue that these movements extended the penetration of the market economy. The journalist P. Sainath’s (1996) best-selling *Everybody Loves a Good Drought: Stories from India’s Poorest Districts* made Pudukkottai famous across India through its descriptions of the Arivoli Iyakkam. A number of other reports and critical essays have appeared on similar National Literacy Mission efforts across India (e.g., Agnihotri 1994; Kumar and Sankaran 2002; Mukherjee 2003; Rao 1993; Saxena 1992, 1993).

1. On Being a “Thumbprint”

1. The thumbprint as a means of identifying criminals and policing populations was first developed in colonial Calcutta (Sengoopta 2003). In the southern Tamil-speaking region, males from certain castes deemed “criminal” under the Madras Presidency Criminal Tribes Act of 1911, such as the Piramalai Kallars, were systematically fingerprinted and even restricted to their villages (Pandian 2009). It is in part because of these histories of colonial policing and population control that using one’s thumbprint to document even attestation to a statement such as a petition carries with it an air of lowliness and criminality.

2. As when Rajnikanth’s character in the hit film *Annamalai* (1992) is referred to by the villains as a “kainattu” [thumbprint] while signing away his family’s land. A similar usage can be found in Hindi, as when Jonathan Parry discusses how the son of an uneducated steel worker derisively called his father “stupid and ignorant, how he had done nothing for his children, how he was ‘nothing but a thumb-impression man!’ (*angutha-chhap admi*)” (2004, 292).

3. I have placed the term “ceṭrī,” the Dalit hamlet that sits outside the main upper-caste settlement, in quotation marks because of its derogatory connotations in contemporary Tamil. In Kovilpatti, where my fieldwork was conducted, elders from the upper castes would still refer to the local Paraiyar settlement as the “ceṭrī,” whereas younger residents of the main settlement would refer to it as the “colony.” Dalits themselves would simply call it their “ūṟ” or refer to it by name as Katrampatti Colony. No one called it by its official government name of Indira Gandhi Nagar. See Diane Mines’s (2005) ethnography for a detailed account of contests over naming in Tirunelveli district.

4. There is plenty of evidence that such views may not be shared by Dalit agricultural laborers themselves. See Kapadia (1995) for a critique of Moffat’s (1979) emphasis on consensus.

5. Part of the all-India Public Distribution System (PDS).

6. This is an office established as a government order under M. G. Ramachandran’s chief ministership in 1980, consolidating the three older hereditary offices of accountant, security guard, and tax collector into one post, though popularly still referred to by the older term of “kanakkappillai.”

7. Below poverty line (BPL) status was granted to any household making less than 24,200 rupees per year at the time of my research in 2002–4. Most households in Kovilpatti qualified at the time.

8. This claim is quite suspect given all the evidence pointing toward widespread support for Hindu nationalist politics among the highly educated middle classes (Hansen 1999).


10. According to a communiqué issued by the CPI(M) in Kerala, Parameswaran was expelled for his “open rejection of Marxism-Leninism and the fundamental tenets of the party” (*Hindu*, Feb. 16, 2004).

11. Note the execution of a very Nehruvian ideal of developmental pedagogy in the name of modernization: "Simple science experiments, peeps into the microscope, and an explanation of
the ordinary phenomenon of nature bring excitement in their train, and understanding of some of life’s processes, and a desire to experiment and find out instead of relying on set phrases and old formulae. Self-confidence and the co-operative spirit grow, and frustration, arising out of the miasma of the past, lessens” (Nehru, quoted in K. Kumar [2005, 188]).

12. Krishnamurthy’s vision of Arivoli’s function resembles Habermas’s (1989) normative ideal of a public sphere, although Krishnamurthy is probably drawing directly on his reading of Freire (1970) here, in theorizing Arivoli as a collective dialogue.

13. This is according to the TNSF leadership I have interviewed in Chennai.


16. In Karunanidhi’s text there is a footnote inserted here, attributing the line to Yeats’s “Easter 1916,” which ends, “Wherever green is worn, / Are changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born.”

17. Note that the translation is not the author’s own but is from Cemmalar (Red Blossom), the Communist Party of India (Marxist) literary magazine.

18. He was speaking about “national unity” here in the context of Hindu-Muslim communal violence in North India.

19. A vēṭī is a white, cloth wrap tied around the waist and worn by Tamil men, here taking significance as a sign of tradition and rural working-class status in opposition to “Westernized” and “middle-class” pants. Like pants, powdering one’s face with antiperspirant talcum here stands as the sign of a middle-class office worker as distinct from someone who works in the fields.

2. Feminizing Enlightenment

1. “Nearly 89 per cent of the non-literate women (in the targeted age group of 9–45 years) enrolled themselves in arivoli centres as against only 73 per cent for men” (Athrey and Chunkath 1996, 177).

2. These two successful experiments are recounted in detail in a book that became standard reading in syllabi on adult education around the world, cowritten by Chunkath and her colleague in the literacy movement, Venkatesh B. Athreya. The book was funded in part by UNESCO and it is titled Literacy and Empowerment (1996). The fame of Pudukkottai’s women collectors, activists, cyclists, workers, and learners was also spread by high-profile articles written in national newspapers, such as the Hindu, and in the best-selling nonfiction book about India’s poorest districts by the renowned journalist P. Sainath, Everybody Loves a Good Drought (1996).

3. It was in this period that the welfare-based women in development (WID) paradigm that had been formulated in response to the UN’s Decade for Women (1975–85) was starting to give way to new strategies among development professionals. What eventually came to be known as the gender and development (GAD) paradigm was framed as a critique of the earlier model, insofar as WID merely sought to extend existing development programs to women. GAD, by contrast, was meant to provide a gendered critique of top-down development planning itself, instead offering a model of participatory development as local “empowerment.” The new paradigm of giving NGOs access to state resources is what allowed literacy movements to become strong forces in the “ruralization of the women’s movement” (Mayaram 2002, 23).

4. What has been called the “NGOIZATION” of development coincided with a corresponding “NGOIZATION” of the political Left in India, away from political parties toward social movement politics (Kamat 2002).
5. The shift toward an emphasis on women’s empowerment and citizenship through literacy classes I am describing is not limited to India. Lila Abu-Lughod (2005, 63–69) describes a similar shift in Egypt, where women’s literacy classes were used to teach liberal models of citizenship. Laura Ahearn’s (2001, 162–71) work on textbooks used in adult literacy classes for women in Nepal of the mid-1990s reveals a similar emphasis on “self-sufficiency” in the service of national development. See Anna Robinson-Pant’s (2004) edited volume for critical accounts of similar programs in Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

6. Mary John notes that this new focus on the “importance” of women masks a “crucial shift in signification, such that these findings [on the centrality of women to economic reproduction] are no longer arguments about exploitation so much as proofs of efficiency” (1996, 3074).

7. Keith Baker (2001) draws specifically on French thought from the Enlightenment to track the history of the concept of society’s relation to that of “nature.” See also Mary Poovey’s (1998) analysis of how the concept of society was paired with the emergent abstraction and objectification of “human nature” in eighteenth-century English moral philosophy.

8. For instance, Susan Gal (2003) has shown how critiques of pornography imported from U.S. feminism into Hungarian academic circles can be interdiscursively aligned with Communist-era censorship, so as to render such critiques suspect by association.

9. Upon their first menstruation, young women are ritually secluded for seventeen days because they are filled with shakti, while also being polluted (tiṭṭu), potentially causing harm to anyone who comes near. See Kapadia (1995, 92–123) for a full description of puberty rituals similar to those one would find in contemporary Pudukkottai. By marking a woman’s entry into the state of fertility, this major life-cycle ritual also tends to mark a change in her relationship to boys and men. From that time onward, when menstruating, women must keep distance (tuṭṭam) from all other people because they are in a polluted state.

10. Camuṭṭam can also be used to refer to a religious community, such as Hindus, Christians, or Muslims, a category that jāti or āram is less likely to be used for.

11. I point readers to Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay’s (2005, 44–47) discussion of how “samaṭj” was reformulated as “society” in Bengal. Mukhopadhyay comes to this point through an ethnography of miscommunication between himself and contemporary Bengali villagers, turning on different visions of the semantic field and pragmatics of “samaṭj.” See also Gyan Prakash (2002) for a “Colonial Genealogy of Society,” in which he analyzes the contrast between “society” and “community” in the making of a specifically colonial governmentality that would render South Asian social institutions as “archaic failures.”

12. This song was written by Pralayan, a dramatist and poet affiliated with the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

13. I am indebted to Blake Wentworth for help in finding English approximations for these classical ideals that appear in aphoristic forms in a number of literary contexts.

14. Women’s empowerment in this idiom rests on a purification of nature from culture, premised on a nevertheless cultural distinction, leading theorists like Judith Butler (1990) to question the very sex/gender distinction.

15. Valentine Daniel’s (1984) semiotic approach to substance and personhood went a long way in reorienting the ethnoscological paradigm away from earlier obsessions with caste hierarchy, and toward a more open-ended theory of culture.

16. Muggeryam refers to progress in the sense of forward and upward motion, or “social uplift.” It is used this way, for example, in the name of the political party, the Tirāvīṭa Muggeryak Kaḷaḷkāḷam, or the Dravidian Progress Association (DMK).

17. Lakshmibai, the Rani (queen) of Jhansi in central India, played a leadership role in the Indian uprising of 1857 and was killed in the battle for Gwalior. According to legend, Jhansi Rani...
jumped off a cliff in order to escape British capture. She has since become a symbol of women’s role in the struggle for independence.

18. I only later found out that these women also belonged to the Velar caste whose traditional occupation was that of making pottery and votive clay horses to be sold as offerings given to the god Ayyanar at his temples.

19. During my fieldwork period the government of Tamil Nadu was offering subsidies and technical assistance for self-help groups to run wireless Internet centers in villages. Most of those who tried to start computer businesses through this scheme failed.

20. The educationalist L. S. Saraswathi (1995), who has written extensively about Pudukkottai’s Arivoli Iyakkam, has suggested that women’s kōlam-drawing skills, among other forms of “folk-math,” are based on cognitive skills that could be used in the service of planning literacy programs that are more responsive to what she terms “indigenous learning cultures.” Saraswathi, however, is equally interested in forms of folk math among men. Also recall how Murugan discussed kōlam along with women’s cooking skills in order to argue for women’s special sense of symmetry and their capacities to measure.

21. Neela, whose intellectual formation owes much to Bharathi’s poetry and to the leftist tradition that has since appropriated these poems, has recently been rethinking her relationship to Bharathi in light of her participation in feminist writers’ circles.

22. Published by the district literacy office as the Makaḷir Ariviḻi Iyakkam Kaiyēṭu (2004).

23. Early twenty-first-century political economic research projects on microcredit and self-help groups in India have found that the “associational” effects of collective savings in this movement have far outweighed any large-scale economic change made through loans. Access to credit through the self-help group’s collective account, not necessarily bank loans, is what made the biggest impact on the lives of women who formed such groups (Lalitha and Nagarajan 2000; Kumar and Varghese 2005). Most of the groups in the village where I did fieldwork never made it to the point of actually receiving a loan, but members did borrow from the collective savings fund.

24. The primary authors of the primer are development professionals with higher degrees in education who live in the city of Chennai. They wrote these learning materials in consultation with government development officers and NGO leaders from across the state of Tamil Nadu and from Pondicherry. These are the people who have been charged by the state with the task of translating government development plans into a specific pedagogical form.

25. I do not want to downplay economic incentives, but I want emphasize that such incentives are commonly interpreted through values that are not reducible to economic interest alone.


27. Examples of tāṇam in Tamil villages and elsewhere also include gifts made to Brahman priests on completion of rituals associated with death. Brahman priests have a larger capacity to “eat” the inauspiciousness of such gifts than other people (Mines 2005, 69–71; see also Parry 1994).

28. The now very widespread use of signatures might then be seen in terms of a primarily phatic literacy. This use of signature is primarily phatic in Jakobson’s sense of a linguistic event focused primarily on signaling the openness of a “contact” or channel (writing in this case) rather than on referring to an object or to other linguistic functions. Signatures in this context “communicate without sending or receiving information . . . to confirm the continued attention of an interlocutor” (1985 [1960], 152–53). It is the very fact of signing that is significant and communicative as a token of mutuality and the acknowledgment of a bind. I am indebted to Laura Brown for first pointing me toward this perspective on literacy.
3. Labors of Objectification

1. Sumathi Ramaswamy's (2003) work on the cartographic imagination demonstrates how such pedagogical uses of the globe in India date back to the colonial state's efforts to propagate a properly “modern” scientific rationality among “natives” and have precedents in the even earlier efforts of German missionaries in southern India.

2. In his most widely read book in southern India, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970), Freire quotes from the section on self-consciousness regarding lordship and bondage in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit, and then more extensively from Sartre’s writings on intentionality.

3. This detachable aspect of writing is what introduces an element of uncertainty into documentary practices, as has been argued by Veena Das (2004), for example, insofar as what she terms the “signature of the state” lends itself to forgery, unauthorized circulation, and effects that escape intention while extending networks of state power.

4. Linguistic anthropology has provided a compelling theory of “entextualization” to account for the ways in which large units of language appear to maintain textual integrity across contexts of usage through both oral and written channels (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Silverstein and Urban 1996).

5. See essays in Lankshear and McLaren’s (1993) edited volume, Critical Literacy: Politics, Praxis and the Postmodern, for a good introduction to applications of Freire’s model of education in a range of postcolonial and feminist literacy initiatives. Very similar educational experiments, motivated by comparable postcolonial nationalist concerns, have taken place, for example, in Brazil and lusophone Africa (Freire and Macedo 1987); in Nicaragua under the Sandinistas (Arnoy 1988; Weber 1981); in Castro’s Cuba (Kozol 1978); and more recently in the REFLECT programs in Uganda, Zambia, and Lesotho (Attwood, Castle, and Smythe 2004; Friedrich 2004).

6. Most of the Arivoli Iyakkam workers I knew who had read Freire had done so in translation, from photocopies that circulate through leftist activist networks. A new version of Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed, translated by Ira. Nataracan, was published as Othukappattavarkal Si Vithutaiyanga Kalsimugaai in 2008. This version has since become the standard in Tamil.

7. Daniel has noted similar forms of linguistic domination in the tea estates of Sri Lanka, where teachers from Jaffna teach Tamil through more classical varieties: “This dialect of Tamil, which is alien to the student, is called centamil(elegant or pure Tamil) by the teacher while he or she simultaneously brands the Tamil spoken by Estate Tamil students kotuntamil(coarse or corrupt Tamil)” (1996, 29). Such a “hegemonic culture of the standard” (Silverstein 1997) is, of course, very widespread and not limited to Tamil Nadu or India (see also Bourdieu 1991; Milroy and Milroy 1991). The dominance and superiority of a separate written standard, though, is perhaps more explicitly elaborated in Tamil pedagogies used in school than some other places.

8. In the National Literacy Mission literature this method is called the “Improved Pace and Content of Learning” method. The broad outlines of the method, which was designed to teach nonliterate how to read and write over the course of ten months, were developed through government collaboration with the BGVS, the state-recognized agency representing the all-India science movement. Primers were all designed locally by activists in the science movement, though there has been a good deal of standardization among the Arivoli Iyakkam literacy programs operating in different Tamil-speaking districts.

9. The document for registering land, which the man is holding, has been written on a piece of stamp paper worth five thousand rupees, more money than learners who labor as daily-wage workers might earn in an entire year.

10. It is not an accident that Ricoeur’s language of liberation through textual mediation should resemble that of Freire’s, given their common Left-Christian-phenomenological philosophical
world. The text (note its singularity) is not only a “model for culture,” as Ricoeur has famously argued, but also a tool for the cultivation of subjects, in a concept of culture that draws on tropes of civilization.

11. The word is the very medium that would most effectively separate subjects from objects in a fashion of modernization characterized by Bruno Latour (1993) as “purification.” See Webb Keane’s (2007) account of the Protestant roots of this particularly modern orientation to language and subjectivity in Indonesia.

12. Outside the context of literacy lessons, both men and women from Katrampatti would couch their claims to land in terms of hoping to use the land and irrigation resources of particular landowners by performing services for them. Such desires resonate with those articulated in the rural Tamil Dalit autobiography of Viramma, collected, edited, and translated by Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine as Une vie paria (1995).


14. Trawick argues that, in contrast to sociological understandings of the “great tradition” of Sanskritic Hinduism that would emphasize the Brahmanic origin of dominant cultural patterns in village India, Dalit “crying songs” allow for an alternative understanding of how cultural patterns are “communicated upward in the status hierarchy rather than downward, as seems usually to be the case” (1991, 297).

15. In his memoirs, the activist Tamilcelvan reports being asked the very same question when he tried to teach the first lessons from the primer (2004b, 23).

16. The letter A also marks the beginning of the great Tamil philosophical text, the Tirukkural, with the couplet, akara mutala eluttella ami pakavan mutar e ulaku (A begins the alphabet, And God, the primordial, the world).

17. The aricuvati is a teaching text that was traditionally used in Tamil village schools as a mnemonic device. Through recitation of this text, which appears as a religious devotional poem, students learned the alphasyllabary in an order that corresponded to the first syllables of every line in the poem. Older men in the villages of Kovilpatti and Katrampatti had learned to read by means of this text when they were children.

18. The Nangül (literally, “The Good Book”) is a Tamil grammar attributed to the sage Pavanandi and written in the eleventh century. It is the most frequently cited grammar text in modern Tamil schooling.

19. This order of emphasis is exactly what Krishna Kumar finds troubling about traditional Indian education in general. “In brief, this approach is characterized by the treatment of script as a complex package of information to be learned for its own sake. Children must learn the names of different letters and they must develop the ability to recognize them separately and as part of a word. . . . Reading is treated as an end product which the child must wait for, suspending the desire to find meaning in written material, especially to find meaning with which he or she can relate” (1993a, 105–6).

20. In an attempt to rescue an understanding of the mnemonic learning system meant to cultivate the powers of recollection and calculation from its transformation into “rote learning” in the colonial era, historical research suggests that both Christian missionaries and the early East India Company administration began a fundamental reordering of South Indian orientations to writing (Raman 2012).

21. Learners may well have seen attempts to teach normal spoken forms from people who had already mastered literary varieties as condescending. It is partly for this reason, I suspect, that it has been very difficult to produce educational texts more closely resembling everyday forms of language use among the poor in Tamil Nadu.

22. See Collins and Blot (2003) for a useful overview of the debates around technological determinism, the “new literacy studies,” and ideological approaches to literacy studies.
23. Roger Chartier’s (1994) work on early modern reading practices in Europe shows that this type of silent individual reading is a new phenomenon, and A. R. Venkatachalapathy’s (1994, 2012) work on the birth of silent reading in Tamil Nadu connects this practice to the rise of a middle class in the mid-twentieth century.

24. Michael Jackson’s critique of “the intellectualist tendency to regard body praxis as secondary to verbal praxis” (1983, 328) once again assumes that verbal praxis is not already embodied. See Dominic Boyer’s (2005a) argument about the place of professionalization in obscuring the role of the body in intellectual production.

4. Search for a Method

1. Stuart Blackburn’s (2003) research on the origins of Tamil print culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is worth noting in this context because folktales appear to be among the first texts to enter print. These were used in missionary activities and later in teaching the British Tamil at the College of Fort St. George in Madras.

2. It is clear from Constantine G. Beschi’s (1822 [1782], 1831 [1730]) early grammars that what is known as centamil¯ (refined or cultivated Tamil) has long been distinguished as a privileged register from koccaittami¯ (vulgar Tamil) or kotuntami¯ (broken Tamil). However, the exact form of the variety known as centamil¯ has changed over time. See Bate (2009) for a more detailed theoretical discussion of diglossia and heteroglossia in Tamil.

3. Roman Jakobson (2000) distinguishes among three types of translation, each of which would play a role in devising this literature: “(1) Intralingual translation or rewording is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language. (2) Interlingual translation or translation proper is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language. (3) Intersemiotic translation or transmutation is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems.”

4. See Annamalai (2007) for a good overview of the struggle to render distinct language varieties in written literature in Tamil, and Kailasapathy (1979) on early critiques of the Tamil nationalist purification efforts in the struggle to bring spoken language into writing.

5. A. R. Venkatachalapathy (1994, 2012) emphasizes the fact that vēcippu, the word now often used to refer to reading, used to refer to the act of reciting aloud, and he shows how this shift from reading aloud to reading silently developed with the rise of modern literature.

6. Fuller accounts of the history of the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association can be found in books published on the occasion of their statewide meetings, such as Panpāṭṭut Taḷaṭṭil Māṭṭuppāṭai Teṭi. The group officially changed its name to the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers and Artists Association in 2008, in an effort to incorporate performing and visual artists.

7. This passage is quoted almost verbatim in Panpāṭṭut Taḷaṭṭil Māṭṭuppāṭai Teṭi (2006, 6), published by the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association on the occasion of their tenth general meeting in Tiruvannamalai.

8. The writers of the All-India Progressive Writers Association who worked primarily in Urdu and Hindi also took inspiration from similar literary movements forming in Europe at the same time. Their manifesto demanding that creative literature be relentlessly critical of both traditional society and modern fascism was published in English by Sajjad Zaheer and Mulk Raj Anand in the journal Hans, printed in Varanasi (see Ahmed 2009; Gopal 2005).

9. The Communist Party of India split in 1964, leading to a division among artists associated with offshoot parties. Karthigesu Sivathamby (1978) provides a more ecumenical account of the role of realism in the Tamil progressive writers’ movement than that told by the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association, emphasizing earlier Left literary movements in Tamil, in addition to European precedents.
10. See the ethnographic monographs written by Stuart Blackburn (1988) and Diane Mines (2005) for accounts of gods who came about as a result of violence in Tamil village narratives, or what Blackburn (1986) elsewhere calls “Violation-Death-Deification-Revenge” story-types.

11. These pamphlets were prepared in 2002 by the education activist and scholar L. S. Saraswathi, who was among the first to study the Arivoli Iyakkam in Pudukkottai (see Saraswathi 2004).

12. See Margaret Trawick’s (1991) discussion of the trope of “placelessness” in Dalit song and narrative.

13. The ideal of nākariṅam refers to a certain civility, which the women of Katrampatti found surprisingly lacking in U.S. culture considering the relative freedom women there appeared to enjoy. See Karin Kapadia’s (1995, 66–67) ethnography for a discussion of this sense of civility in the context of marriage alliances, and Anand Pandian’s (2009) more extended account and interpretation of the virtues of “agrarian civility.”


15. In certain respects, this dynamic of what has been called “remediation” in search of a certain effect of transparency is similar to what we are learning from research on the ideological vicissitudes of computer technology in rural India (Mazzarella 2006, 2010). In rural Tamil Nadu, some of the very same people were involved in both literacy activism and the development of a rural computer infrastructure for low-cost wireless Internet.

16. Richard Bauman has been an important voice in this line of research, first focusing on Quaker language ideologies (Bauman 1983), and then shifting to work with Charles Briggs on language philosophy from Lock and Herder to later folklore movements (Bauman and Briggs 2003).

5. Subject to Citizenship

1. See Majid Siddiqi (2005) for an overview of this historiography.

2. We can tell from the Tamil scholar Rev. G. U. Pope’s training manuals for British officers stationed in the Tamil country from the 1850s and 1860s that, by the mid-nineteenth century, a distinct variety of written prose language had already been well established for petitions and other official correspondence. See chapters 5 and 6 of Pope’s (1982 [1905]) *Handbook of the Tamil Language: A Tamil Prose Reader*, “Magisterial Business: ‘Cutchery Tamil,’” and “Petitions and Official Correspondence” respectively, for examples of petitions collected in 1863.

3. Membership was determined through standardized examination (Chakrabarty and Bhattacharya 2003; Maheshwari 1994).

4. The DMK had just won control of the state legislature from Congress on the promises of a Dravidian nationalist populist platform. M. Karunanidhi, who had just taken over the position of chief minister of Tamil Nadu after the death of the party founder C. N. Annadurai in 1968, gave a government order formalizing and opening the petitioning process as the maṇgūṅu niṭṭṭuṅ (Petition Justice Plan).

5. I use the word “elite” here, noting that contemporary IAS officers are an educational elite, and that collectors may well come from relatively socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

6. Scheduled Caste is a census category used for the castes I refer to as “Dalit.” A number of special development programs are designed for this community in particular, and they are also given preferential treatment in government hiring through India’s affirmative action program.

7. It is also common to see people coming in with newspaper clippings if, for instance, their house had burned down or if they were struck by some other misfortune that made it into the local column. One man I saw talking to the petition writers insisted, against their advice, that the
petition be written on the very piece paper on which he had photocopied a news item relating to his problems.

8. I use the male gender for the professional scribes because they were all men. Arivoli volunteers, on the other hand, are men and women.

9. Laura Bear (2007) has noted how such performances of suffering entered into the very texts of petitions among railway workers in early twentieth-century Calcutta. See also Trawick’s description of Paraiyar “crying songs,” through which singers hope to “convince the listener of the singer’s intrinsic worth, and the fact that she has been wronged, perhaps by the listener himself” (1986, 302).

10. Women would generally be reluctant to say their husband’s names. Some women hesitate in responding to this question, but Muttammal did not.

11. See Parry’s discussion of how, when he sent his informant a registered letter in the name of “Somvaru Ram,” he had to go sign for it at the main post office, where he was put through the mill by the babus because, though his grandchildren had taught him ‘Somvaru,’ he could not manage the ‘Ram’ (2004, 291). See also James Scott’s (1998, 64–71) discussion of the development of surnames as a means of making populations “legible” to the state.

12. Again, this encounter might have been a little different in the details if the writer were a young man, but the same problems of making demands legible to the state would persist.

13. This information is based on an unpublished census and survey taken in June of 2003 by the Arivoli Continuing Education Programme. I participated in taking the census and, after analyzing the data, submitted a formal report to the collector in August of 2003.

14. Petitions can be written on any plain piece of paper. Some petitioners, however, will insist on having their petition written on official government stamp paper, which must be bought for an additional twenty rupees.

15. The Tamil Lexicon (1931) entries for man¯ u and vin¯ ṃappam both assert the religious origins of petitioning vocabulary.

16. See Irvine (1998) on how “the expression of deference is grammaticalized” across a number of languages and cases, and Levinson (1982) for the most systematic study of deferential pronoun usage in Tamil.

17. This form was also in common use in the petitions collected by Reverend Pope from 1863 and published in his prose reader in 1905.

18. The Cre-A contemporary Tamil dictionary (1992, 405) defines camukam, as it is more commonly spelled in petitions, as an archaic, increasingly rare form, meaning “presence (of a king, etc.).”

19. The Cre-A Tamil dictionary (1992, 170) has a rather lengthy definition of “ecemān”: “in villages, one who provides employment in his house or land, master.” It derives from the Sanskrit yajamāna, meaning “master of the sacrifice” (Monier-Williams 1920). This word is variously written in Tamil as “ekemān,” in many petitions written by unschooled writers; “ejemān,” using a more Sanskritic phonology; or “ecemān,” as in the standard Dravidianization of Sanskrit phonology expected of schooled literacy, though not commonly found in petitions. This lexical item is probably also related to the Greek hegemon, meaning “leader,” the root of the modern English word “hegemony.”

20. The darbār hall is a special room in a royal palace for public viewing of royalty. It is derived in part from Persiiane courtly traditions requiring that the king make himself visible and available to his court and subjects. The idea of a darbār was also significantly altered and reconstructed under a contradictory form of colonialism that Bernard Cohn (1987) and Nicholas Dirks (1993) convincingly argue sought to maintain India as a “feudal” order even while claiming to dismantle patrimonial authority in the name of modern governance. The effects of this contradictory project can be felt even now insofar as the collector occupies a dual relation to his citizen/subjects, as both royal patron and government servant.
21. The collector of Pudukkottai told me that he received between four hundred and five hundred petitions every week at Grievance Day, and that these numbers are much higher than those before the beginnings of literacy activism in the 1990s.

Epilogue

1. See William Mazzarella’s (2006, 2010) attention to the hyperbole surrounding information technology during this time. A number of Tamil literacy activists were similarly involved in establishing rural computer centers.

2. See the volume edited by Ray and Katzenstein (2005) for a compelling overview of these political changes and the rise of new social movements in India. Amita Baviskar’s (1995) ethnography of the social movement to halt the building of the Sardar Sarovar Dam also provides insight into the contradictions that emerged within the field of activism at this time.