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How a textbook department opened new avenues for literature in translation

The TNTBESC is committed to promoting cross-cultural understanding, and expanding Tamil literature's reach worldwide.

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International publishers and their Indian counterparts sign MoUs in the presence of Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin at the first Chennai International Book Fair on January 18, 2023. | Photo Credit: M. VEDHAN

When M. Karunanidhi made Tamil mandatory for government colleges during his first stint as Chief Minister in the late 1960s, teachers and students faced a challenge: the

lack of Tamil textbooks. To address this, the Tamil Nadu Textbook Society embarked on the translation of 875 books into Tamil between 1970 and 1978—an average of 100 books per year. This initiative sparked a revolution in the Tamil publishing industry.

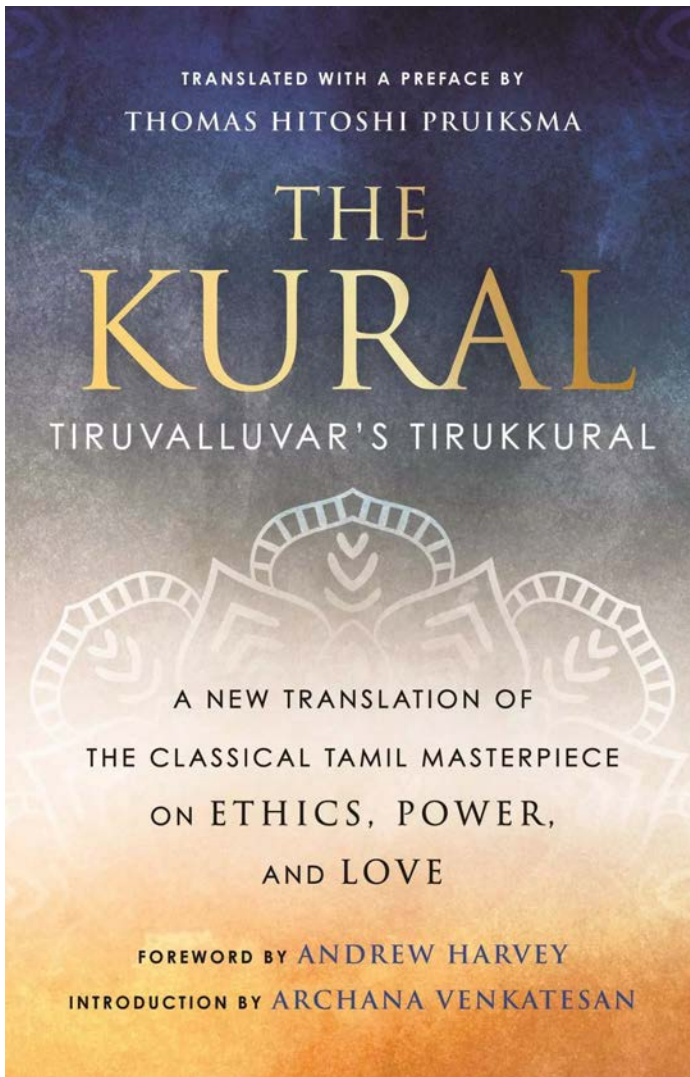
According to T. Sankara Saravanan, Deputy Director (Translation) at the Tamil Nadu Textbook and Educational Services Corporation (TNTBESC), the State-driven translation initiatives from 1970 to 1978 were “one of the greatest achievements of Kalaignar Karunanidhi”. Saravanan stated that the books translated by the TNTBESC cover various fields of study, including politics, governance, literature, and education.

In 2001, the formation of the Tamil Virtual Academy (TVA), a Chennai-based distance education institution providing Internet-based educational resources, led to the digitisation and uploading of the 875 books and literary works on the TVA website under the initiative of T. Udhayachandran. This move proved beneficial to individuals preparing for the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) examination in Tamil. The TNTBESC reintroduced these books on popular demand in 2017.

Bridging languages

Another significant development occurred when the State government issued an order mandating government colleges that follow the Tamil medium to purchase these books using 10 per cent of their allocated funds. This policy change has boosted sales and generated profits for the Corporation. Saravanan said: “We have sold the books for over Rs.1 crore, which is three times the commercial value.”

Responding to the growing public demand for printed copies of Tamil books translated into English, the TNTBESC sought the assistance of the prominent editor Mini Krishnan. Krishnan joined the project in 2018, and discussions ensued regarding various printing models, including a joint publishing plan with several independent publishers. In 2021, the project expanded under the name “Thisaidhorum Dravidam”,



focusing on translations within Dravidian languages, such as from Tamil into Malayalam, Telugu, Kannada, and more.

The TNTBESC has also republished books translated into English, including former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister C.N. Annadurai's biography *Maaperum Tamil Kanavu*, originally published by *The Hindu* and translated as *A Grand Tamil Dream*, as well as Robert Hardgrave's *The Dravidian Movement* (first published in 1965).

The Tamil Nadu government is the first and only State government to undertake such translation initiatives with the goal of spreading literature beyond linguistic

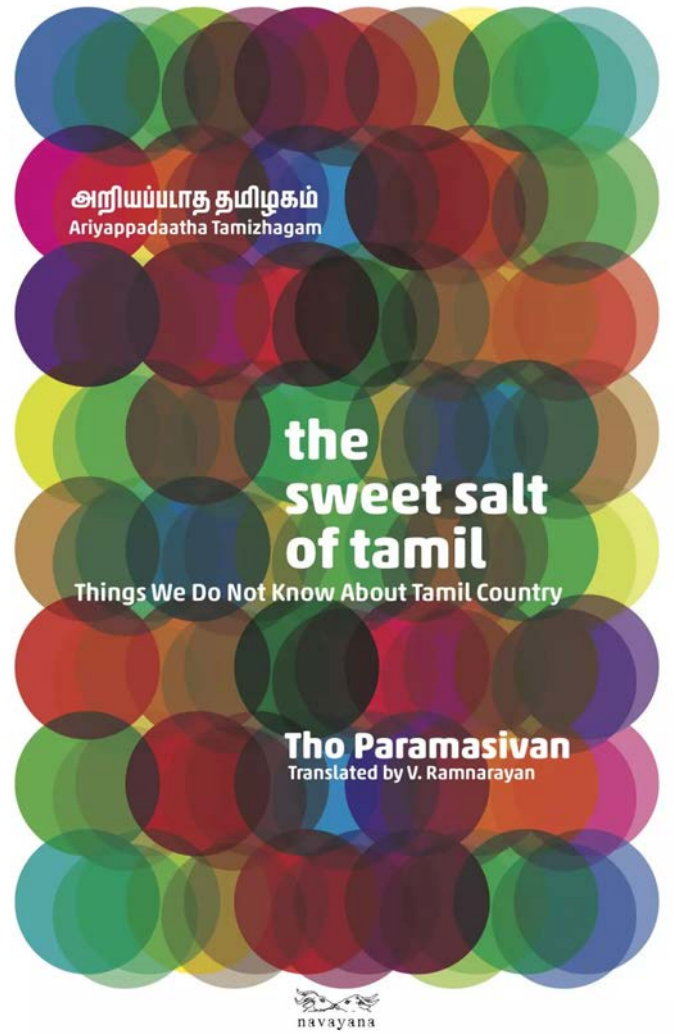
barriers. Saravanan emphasised the reciprocal translation process in place, along with collaborations with publishers from different States. He explained: "If we translate three Odia language books into Tamil, they (publishers in Odia) will translate three Tamil language books into Odia."

In recent years, the TNTBESC has expanded its efforts to promote award-winning Tamil fiction and non-fiction through co-publishing deals with major publishing houses such as HarperCollins India, Niyogi Books, Oxford University Press, Penguin Random House, Ratna Books, and Vitasta Publishing. (For an overview of the programme's first two phases, please see [Co-publishing venture ...](#) and [Translation initiative...](#))

An act of revival

The third phase of the project focuses on translating and reviving books that received critical acclaim upon publication but are no longer in circulation. The books published in this phase include: American scholar Thomas Hitoshi Pruiksma's *The Kural (Tiruvalluvar's Tirukkural): A new translation of the classical Tamil masterpiece on*

ethics, power and love; The Sweet Salt of Tamil: Things We Do Not Know about Tamil Country by Tho. Paramasivan, translated by V. Ramnarayan; *By the Sea* by Vannanilavan, translated by G. Geetha; *The Sound of Waves* by Kalki translated by Gowri Ramnarayan; *The Stomach that Chewed Hunger and other stories* by Bama, translated by Ahana Lakshmi; *An Order from the Sky and Other Stories* by Iyamam, translated by Vasantha Surya; *Ashokamitran's Chennai* translated by K.S. Subramanian; and *Gandhi's Travels in Tamil Nadu* by A. Ramasamy, translated by P.C. Ramakrishna.

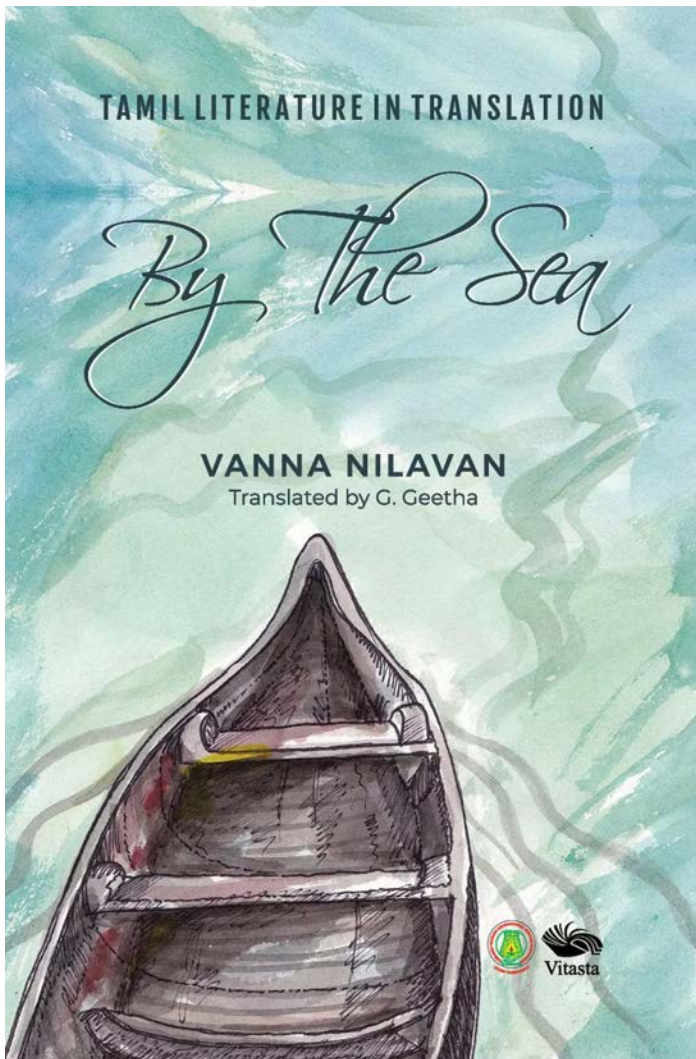


The TNTBESC's ultimate goal is to develop a comprehensive list of literary translations from Tamil that embodies the language's ethos and resonates with readers regardless of language and cultural barriers.

Speaking to *Frontline*, A.R. Venkatachalapathy, renowned historian, Tamil author, and translator, talked about the significance of the translation projects. Commending the Tamil Nadu government's novel effort, he said: "It is indeed a very welcome initiative. So far, only classical literature has been predominantly translated. Tamil contemporary modern literature is being translated for the first time."

Venkatachalapathy acknowledged the State government's collaboration with established publishers as a positive step, recognising that the State lacks the independent expertise to undertake such a project. He commended Mini Krishnan for her efficient leadership in spearheading the project, stating that it wouldn't have come this far without her expertise and experience. Noting that Tamil is a unique language in which writers have been consistently producing works for the past 2,000 years, and

yet have not received adequate attention, he stated: “This project showcases the continuity of Tamil literary tradition.”



Going global

In September 2022, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin launched the Tamil Parappurai Kazhagam (Taking Tamil to the World) initiative. Implemented by the TVA, this programme, which aims to impart Tamil to non-resident Tamils the world over, will work in collaboration with Tamil Sangams in various countries. The Chief Minister announced that 25,000 students in 25 countries and 20 States would benefit from the first level of the programme. He added that the TVA would be responsible for expanding coverage in different countries.

Through this initiative, the TNTBESC aims to increase the exposure of Tamil literature and culture worldwide, including among Tamils who may not be able to read the language. As a government organisation, it plans to promote these books through public libraries, academic research, and events. By translating these acclaimed works, the TNTBESC hopes to reach a broader audience, and foster cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.

Looking ahead

As for the TNTBESC’s future plans, Saravanan said that preparations were under way for the second edition of the Chennai International Book Fair (CIBF), organised jointly by the TNTBESC, the Directorate of Public Libraries, and the Booksellers and Publishers Association of South India, in January 2024. He said the corporation looks forward to acquiring the rights to translate many international literary works into Tamil and expressed confidence that the TNTBESC’s literary translation projects would continue to expand in the coming years.

