The Literary Management of Multilingualism in Postcolonial India: The Sahitya Akademi and the Case of Tamil New Poetry

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Abstract

This chapter explores a tension in postcolonial Indian literature between the monolingual form of the nation and the multilingual tendencies of the linguistic regions through a comparison between the Sahitya Akademi's (India’s national academy of letters) activities and Tamil putukkavitai (new poetry) writing. By promoting translation and constructing a Sanskrit literary past, the Akademi used literature to manage multilingualism and make it compatible with the monolingualism intrinsic to the nation. Putukkavitai writing, by contrast, epitomizes the challenge of linguistic regionalism to national integration, offering a view of Indian multilingualism in less hierarchical terms than those expressed in Akademi discourses. To understand Tamil literature as Indian literature, the chapter proposes, requires taking the monolingual dimensions of the region into greater account. Tracing Tamil new poets’ engagement with new poetry in other Indian languages in the magazine Eḻuttu, the chapter argues that Indian multilingualism is built on shared experiences of linguistic alienation.

Keywords: modernism, national language, Dravidianism, ethnolinguistic nationalism, Sangam poetry, tradition, literary comparison, C. S. Chellappa, Ka. Naa. Subramanyam, C. Kanakasabapathy

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language question—which emerged in the 1930s at the peak of anticolonial resistance—and the persistence of this issue in political and cultural debates following Independence (1947) evidence the intense struggle that Indian political leaders and intellectuals underwent to meet the requirement of monolingualism so crucial to the establishment of the new nation. These debates led to the formation of India’s linguistic states—a process that began in 1956 and continues to unfold today. This outcome has meant that in the Indian context, unlike in the West, the language—biology—territory triangulation is constitutive of the region—more than of the nation. The postcolonial Indian state is shaped by a tension between the monolingual form of the nation and the multilingual tendencies represented by diverse linguistic regions, which are themselves linguistically diverse and fraught with internal contestation. Cross-regional multilingual networks—some emergent, some longer standing—that developed and continue to evolve beyond the purview of governmental regulation fray this tension, even as the tension itself remains taut.

This chapter explores this tension through a comparison of monolingual and multilingual pressures as they played out in literature during the 1950s and 1960s, when the national-language question was at a new height. By the late colonial era, Indian intellectuals had already come to view literature as one—if not the most—crucial field through which to build the cultural cohesion across languages that was necessary for national integration. The formation of the Progressive Writers’ Association (PWA) in 1936, which garnered wide support from political leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi, offers a quintessential example of how an idea of a multilingual canon of Indian literature was provisionally built under the auspices of English and mobilized toward nation building.¹ The postcolonial government’s establishment of the Sahitya Akademi (India’s national academy of letters) carried this literary project forward, conceiving of English as a link language through which to realize the first prime minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru’s vision of “unity in diversity.” Almost immediately, and perhaps not surprisingly, regional-language writers expressed resistance to the Sahitya Akademi’s top-down, arm’s-length approach to assembling a national canon. At the same time, the emergence of “new poetry” trends across multiple Indian literary fields during this period suggests that a pan-Indian, multilingual literary conversation did develop, even though tentatively.

In the first part of this chapter, I examine how the Sahitya Akademi transformed literature into a means for managing Indian multilingualism and making it compatible with the monolingualism intrinsic to the form of the nation. The Akademi’s promotion of translations between regional Indian languages and English, I show, enabled the institution to support the development of regional languages, while simultaneously making them intelligible within a global monolingual paradigm dominated by English. The Akademi’s emphasis on literary history worked in tandem with translation to provide a noncontroversial discursive terrain for accommodating diverse regional understandings of literature beneath the broadly classifiable rubric of Indian literature with roots in ancient Sanskrit.

In the second section, I turn to the case of putukkavittai, or new poetry, in Tamil, to offer inroads into how we might understand the Indian multilingual landscape in messier and less hierarchical terms than those expressed in the Sahitya Akademi’s discourses. Tamil is a Dravidian language spoken in southeastern India with a literary tradition dating back to the Sangam era, circa 100 BCE to 300 CE. The era derives its name from the literary gathering of poets and the corpus they produced during this time. Following Tamil pandits¹ “rediscovery” of Sangam literature in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Tamil ethnolinguistic nationalists constructed a narrative of the Tamil people’s autonomy, superiority, and resistance to Sanskritic (Aryan, Brahmin) culture’s imposition from the north.² Since the 1930s, violent language protests against the imposition of Hindi and the dominance of English—as well as calls for the secession of Tamil Nadu from the Indian nation—have continued to wrack the region. For this reason, I view Tamil as epitomizing the challenge of linguistic regionalism to Indian national integration. To put this problematic in literary terms: to understand Tamil literature as Indian literature requires envisioning a different kind of multilingual Indian literature, one that takes the monolingual dimensions of the region into greater
account. Tracing Tamil new poets’ engagement with new poets in other Indian languages in the now canonical little magazine Eḻuttu, I offer a view of Indian multilingualism as a landscape built on the experience of linguistic alienation.

**Literary History and the Thesis of Translatability**

Fierce disputes following independence over whether Hindi or English should become India’s national language spurred Prime Minister Nehru to establish the Sahitya Akademi in 1954. The Akademi took a multi-pronged approach to the language question, including the promotion of Hindi and the use of the Devanagari script, an emphasis on the shared cultural roots of all Indian languages, and the creation of institutional venues for dialogue among various Indian literatures. Its initial primary purpose was to mitigate the distance between English, Hindi, and other Indian languages during the fifteen-year grace period (until 1965) that Nehru had implemented to allow Hindi to become further integrated at the regional level before assuming its mantle as the national language. Following Independence, the postcolonial Indian state therefore maintained a strong grounding in English, which the Sahitya Akademi both supported and subverted through its various activities.

Translation into English was an essential tool for each of these ventures and part of the Sahitya Akademi’s central mission. As S. Radhakrishnan—first Vice-President of India and of the Akademi—wrote in his 1962 essay “A Writer’s Role in National Integration,” the “Sahitya Akademi is doing its best as far as linguistic controversies are concerned. It is bringing writers together, bringing the peoples together by its translations” (Radhakrishnan, “A Writer’s” 25). The Sahitya Akademi based its concept of Indian literature upon a thesis of translatability: this was the utopian idea that attributed coherence to Indian literature on the grounds of perfect translatability between the various Indian languages. If a single language were to be instituted across the multilingual Indian nation, then it had to be one in which other Indian languages and literatures could be easily and accurately expressed.

Yet, numerous articles addressing the function and practice of translation in Indian Literature, the Akademi’s literary journal, demonstrated an anxiety about whether this translatability was attainable. During the 1950s and 1960s, the journal’s contributors repeatedly stressed the need for increased translations, better translations, and more open-minded approaches to translation. For example, discussing Indian publishing trends in 1962, C. R. Banerji mourned that “the number of translations from one modern Indian language to another is discouraging” (55). He concluded that “Indian publications are quite inadequate for nation-building purposes. … We do not have a sufficient number of authors, [and] translators” (58). Similarly, Nehru—who served as the Akademi’s first President—inaugurated a debate in Indian Literature in 1963 on “Creative Writing in the Present Crisis,” in which he appealed to writers to accept translation:

> To think that a language is crushed or suppressed by another language, is not quite correct. It is enriched by another language. So also our languages will be enriched the more they get into touch with each other and it is the Sahitya Akademi’s function to get them into touch with each other and to some extent get them into touch with foreign languages too, by translations.

(Nehru, “Creative” 67)

From the Sahitya Akademi’s perspective, translation lay at the heart of creating Indian literature. Until unmitigated translation between Indian languages could be achieved, Indian literature would remain an incomplete canon. Encyclopedic studies—such as the magisterial Sahitya Akademi histories of Indian literature orchestrated by Sisir Kumar Das and K. M. George—complement this aggregative project by collecting “adjacent but discrete histories of India’s major language-literatures” (Ahmad 234–244). These
studies list literary trends and canonical texts from major Indian languages, making them intelligible to one another and to readers in the English language. Therefore, we might think of Das’s and George’s literary histories as acts of translation in themselves.

The thesis of translatability, despite its utopian intent of fostering linguistic diversity, reinforces the privileged position of the English language in the Indian literary sphere. It perpetuates a form of what Yasemin Yildiz has called “the monolingual paradigm,” which emerged in the late 18th century. “According to this paradigm,” Yildiz argues, “individuals and social formations are imagined to possess one ‘true’ language only, their ‘mother tongue,’ and through this possession to be organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture, and nation” (2). The idea of Indian literature is slightly different because it is built on the premise that although individuals possess different “regional” mother tongues that are not English, they share a common linguistic and civilizational background. Nonetheless, the translatable thesis upholds a monolingual paradigm because it proposes that all Indian literatures are discrete, yet uniformly substitutable for one another. Together, they form a culturally bounded entity, which offers an original and authentic contribution to the world republic of letters. Multilingualism, in the case of modern Indian literatures, “has been and continues to be refracted through the monolingual paradigm” (Yildiz 3-4), which presumes the possibility of a unified linguistic frame. The Sahitya Akademi’s activities show that translation is largely unidirectional, moving from other Indian languages into English. English serves as a language of unification, linking regional Indian languages to the nation and world, just as Nehru envisioned (Khilnani 154–156).

Alongside its emphasis on translation, the Sahitya Akademi took pains to demonstrate regional Indian literatures’ shared Sanskrit roots. One of the first projects that the Akademi initiated was to publish book-length literary histories of all the major Indian languages. In 1954—the year of the Akademi’s inception—its first secretary, Krishna Kripalani, appended a “Note on the Proposed Histories of Literature” to the institution’s Annual Report. He declared that

> differences in language and script have tended to cloud the basic unity of Indian literature as a whole. ... In order to illustrate the cultural unity of India, it may be desirable to stress the kinship of one language and literature with the others and discuss the interaction of mutual influence. ... The debt to Sanskrit language and literature will no doubt be acknowledged by all.

(Sahitya Akademi, appendix 6, 20–21)

The literary history series was envisioned to demonstrate a Sanskrit past upon which modern Indian unity was built. In his forward to the History of Bengali Literature—the first of the series, published in 1960—Nehru argued for the essential Indianness of India’s diverse languages, on the basis of their historical participation in a shared aesthetic and intellectual environment:

> One of the principal functions of the Sahitya Akademi is to encourage all these great languages of India and to bring them closer to each other. Their roots and inspirations have been much the same and the mental climate in which they have grown up have been similar. ... It may, therefore, be said that each of these languages is not merely a part of India, but essentially a language of India, representing the thought and culture and development of this country in its manifold forms.

(Nehru, “Foreword” v).

Through its literary historical endeavors, the Akademi traced a narrative of multilingual commonality from the precolonial past to the postcolonial present. It encouraged research in Sanskrit to illustrate how the language continued to interact with more modern Indian languages and literatures and inspire “fellowship, togetherness, [and the] reconciliation of peoples” (Radhakrishnan, “Key-Note” 1). The rehabilitation of Sanskrit as a contemporary literature was just one of many projects that the Akademi introduced to develop
a national literature. It commissioned translations of canonical regional texts into English and other Indian languages; funded writing workshops; ran regional, national, and international seminars and symposia; and instituted travel grants, scholarships, and other literary awards. Establishing its own publishing house, the Akademi compiled translated anthologies, conference papers, and national bibliographies of Indian literature, as well as “Who’s Who” lists of Indian writers across regions. It also launched journals in English, Sanskrit, and later Hindi to foster a national literary space. These activities were simultaneously literary-historical and critical in function, and they allowed the Akademi to install a robust armature for constructing a present-day, pan-Indian canon rooted in the Sanskritic past.\(^6\)

Repurposing Sanskritic concepts for its project of unification, the Akademi also developed a national vision of literary purpose, wherein the writer possessed extraordinary access to truth:

> We have a saying that all kavya [literary composition] is for visva sreyas, for the good of the world. The literary artist has not merely to reflect the world, he has to redeem the world. He has not merely to portray the experience he has, but he has to recreate that experience. He has to enter into solitude, glimpse the vision of truth, bring it down to earth, clothe it with emotions, carve it into words. That is the purpose of literature.

(\text{Radhakrishnan, “Speech” 4})

The Akademi’s definition of literature, based on the writer’s “intensity of experience” and ability to “express his or her ideas in clear and shining words, [and] in penetrating expressions,” joined a realist emphasis on authentic experience with modernist notions of writerly isolation and originality (\text{Radhakrishnan, “Key-Note” 2–3}). Sanskrit terminology lent this understanding a universalizing air of classical—if also Hindu—authority:

> Literature is a sacred instrument and through the proper use of it we can combat the forces of ignorance and prejudice and foster national unity and world community. Literature must voice the past, reflect the present and mould the future. Inspired language, tejomayi vāk, will help readers to develop a humane and liberal outlook on life, to understand the world in which they live, to understand themselves and plan sensibly for their future.

(\text{Radhakrishnan, “Foreword” v})

The Sanskritic past charged Indian literature with ethical and aesthetic inspirations, fashioning a pan-Indian readership that cohered around an essentially Indian—yet also modern and liberal humanist—literary project. Within this framework, the ancient past folded directly into the postcolonial present, erasing all hints of colonial intervention.

Through its literary historical endeavors, the Sahitya Akademi constructed a metaliterary discourse that sought to dispose audiences to read texts through the lens of “unity in diversity.” These enterprises were conjoined by a compulsion to produce a common literary and linguistic lineage separate from western influence. The Akademi’s aim was to create a national-scale community of readers joined by their mutual genealogical inheritance of Sanskrit language and literary sentiment, which were carved out of writerly exceptionality and civic responsibility. This monolingual sensibility helped the Akademi orient readers toward a modern, English-medium, Indian future by translating diverse regional-scale literary trends into a national ethos shaped by “unity,” “truth,” and “experience.”
Indian writers across the subcontinent resented the Sahitya Akademi’s representations of their regional literary histories and contested the institution’s heavy-handed management of literary multilingualism. For example, behind-the-scenes discussions reveal Hindi and Tamil writers’ extreme dissatisfaction with the Sahitya Akademi’s representations of their regional literary activities in its journal and their attempts to reclaim their literary historical narratives in national literary space, often unsuccessfully. A frustration with the Sahitya Akademi led many regional writers to disregard—if not entirely dissociate from—the institution’s endeavors and to seek out other venues for literary production and dissemination. The Akademi, in turn, viewed these writers’ oppositional stance as an impediment to the central government’s goal of creating “one literature, though written in many languages” (Mani, Idea 103–107).

In this context, the rise of new poetry movements across multiple Indian literary spheres provides an opportunity for exploring how pan-Indian, multilingual literary conversations may have developed and evolved at a tangent to the central government’s literary orchestrations in the post-Independence period. In almost all major Indian languages—Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu—some form of “new poetry” emerged during the mid-20th century. As in the case of Tamil, each of these regional new poetry trends emerged out of literary debates that were as localized as they were intra- and international. This meant that the conditions propelling the various new poetry trends—and the specific literary strategies and themes that these trends emphasized—were diverse and inconsistent. As Amiya Dev writes,

> If the movementprayogvad[experimentalism] in Hindi poetry was largely a reaction to the movementpragativad[progressivism], then we might expect a similar conjunct in other Indian languages. But that might not have been the case in most Indian languages. In some there might not have been anypragati–prayogsituation to start with. In one at least, my own Bengali, where a lot ofpragatiland a lot ofprayogwere recorded, there was no historical structure as such ofprayogin reaction topragati.Not only that, but some of the best progressives were also the most experimentalists.

(Dev 325)

The variability of motivations and trends among Indian literary spheres leads Dev to argue that in a context wherein multilingualism and multiliterariness prevail, literary history must emerge “from below ... [and be] a centripetal historiography where the emphasis is not on the neatness of the design, but on the inclusiveness of the material” (Dev 326). He cautions us to rely on literary historical rubrics only insofar as they aid in drawing out genuine similarities, in contrast to artificially imposing interconnections from above. Broadly speaking, new poets across Indian languages professed an affinity with the Anglo-American poetic modernism of Pound, Eliot, and Yeats; a focus on the present and individual interiority; the use of symbolism, imagism, blank verse, and free verse; a grappling with the mechanization and atomization of life; and a sense of disillusionment with postcolonial modernity. However, while these attributes provide a basis for what we might consider to be an overarching genre of Indian new poetry, I want to emphasize that the differences between the various poetry movements—and reasons that Indian writers chose the label “new poetry” to describe their heterogenous and sometimes asynchronous endeavors—should be explored in much more depth than research and space allow for here. My hope is that this chapter’s preliminary examination of Tamil new poetry can serve as a modest starting place for more nuanced future consideration.
In Bombay Modern, Anjali Nerlekar has documented how rich, multilingual exchanges—and the shared materiality of print—shaped post-Independence poetic developments across English and Marathi, some of which can be characterized as representative of new poetry, or navakāvyā, as it was called in Marathi. Her work stands in contrast to authoritative literary histories of Indian literature like Das’s and George’s, which minimally, if at all, elaborate cross-linguistic interactions across poetry in Indian languages, even as they presume them. Is it possible that official literary historical accounts of Indian literature may have given precedence to the monolingual disposition of the region—the inclusion of which constituted the very form of the Indian multilingual nation—over cross-regional conversations, which threatened to exceed or erase the perceived boundaries of the region? The Tamil case may offer clues toward understanding why these national literary histories shy away from probing the kind of multilingualism that Nerlekar brings to light. It shows how the dissolution of the region’s integrity may have weighed as heavily on some regional-language writers as on comparatists writing from the national center, despite their shared commitment to national integration because, in postcolonial India, the nation could not maintain integrity without the regions, and vice versa. This is why, as I demonstrate below, Tamil writers’ deliberate choice to define their work as putukkavitai (new poetry) simultaneously embodies contradictory desires to champion the cultural camaraderie and cohesion of the nation, on one hand, and to highlight the literary uniqueness of the Tamil language and region, on the other. To call their poetry putukkavitai both was and was not an act of translation.

Countering the position of Tamil ethnolinguistic nationalists—who sought to return Tamil to its classical Sangam past by ridding Tamil language and literature of English or Sanskrit influences—modernist Tamil writers welcomed outside influences, celebrated the influence of translation, and conceptualized modern Tamil literature as a break from the classical Tamil past. Beginning in the 1930s—just as the national-language question came to the fore across the subcontinent—they envisioned an alternative path for Tamil that was based on its engagement with contemporary Indian and world literature. Writing within a highly charged, anti-Brahmin atmosphere, these writers—who were themselves mostly Brahmin or upper-caste—had been driven out of the Tamil political arena dominated by questions of caste. They took refuge in the realm of literature, which provided a space where they could freely wield Tamil, a language to which they could arguably (at least according to Tamil linguistic nationalists) stake no claim.

The post-Independence Tamil writers who launched putukkavitai writing in the literary magazine Ēḻuttu (1959–1970) inherited this uniquely monolingual literary arena, which was shaped by a Tamil ethnolinguistic nationalism that had already fully demonized Hindi—and, to a large extent, also English—by the late colonial era. Debates from the 1930s onward demonstrate that Tamil activists felt that Hindi’s oppression of Tamil culture was just one component of the larger threat that Indian multilingualism posed to drown out the Tamil language. For example, in 1940, the poet, scholar, and language activist T. K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliyar (or T. K. C., as he was known) wrote passionately in the popular magazine Ānaṇṭa Viṅkaṭai about Tamilians’ profound experiences of loss due to their inability to comprehend or communicate in Hindi (Chidambaranatha Mudaliyar, Itayi). T. K. C.’s essays show that a core concern driving Tamil linguistic activism was a fear of being alienated from or dispossessed of one’s own Tamil language. Criticizing the Carnatic music establishment for composing lyrics in Telugu and Sanskritized Tamil, he argued that understanding the true meaning of words lies in not dictionary training, but rather the emotional registers of the mother tongue in which native speakers were steeped from birth and to which they therefore had special access, particularly with regard to that language’s aural dimensions. He also rejected the imposition of English and Hindi, calling those Tamilians provincial who did not demand that the world beyond the Tamil-speaking region be presented to them in their own language (Chidambaranatha Mudaliyar, “Cāṅkitamum” 144–149). For T. K. C. and others, a firm grounding in ancient Sangam poetics—combined with an attunement to the presence of Tamil in everyday contemporary life—was the prophylactic that could prevent the diminishing of Tamilians’ intimacy with their language.
Writers linked with the magazine *Eḻuttu* countered this Dravidianist narrative by developing a spoken-language poetics that embraced informal and intra-linguistic language uses and rejected the reified literary language and conventions of Sangam. When C. S. Chellappa, the founder and editor of *Eḻuttu*, announced the debut of Tamil new poetry (*putukkavittai*) in 1962, he reclaimed poetry as a genre of modern literature by defining it as the marker of a new literary era, thereby announcing new poetry’s cosmopolitan distance from the classical Tamil past:

At first glance, one might ask, “is this poetry?” A second question then arises: “what makes it new?” In truth, I didn’t take up the phrase [new poetry] because I’m in agreement with it at heart. I desired to call it simply poetry. But following the [historical] divisions we make for convenience’s sake between Sangam poetry, the Bhakti movement, and the era of epics, it’s useful to name the transformation that appears in poetry following Bharati as “*putukkavittai*” [new poetry]. While Bharati translated the term “new poetry” that was used in post-1910 England and America into Tamil as “*putukkavittai*,” today [it describes] a new literary turn that begets unique and unprecedented form.

(Chellappa, “Nuḷaivācal” 2)

Chellappa made this declaration in the introduction to his edited volume *Putukkuralkal (New Voices)*, a collection of poems that he culled from those that he had published during the first three years of *Eḻuttu*. The *Putukkuralkal* anthology and *Eḻuttu* magazine now hold canonical positions in literary historical accounts of modern Tamil poetry, but at the time of their publication, criticisms of *putukkavitai* aesthetics and poems were extensive and ruthless. “Our [poetic] efforts have been indiscriminately ridiculed [with names like]: ‘crunched up, crooked prose,’ ‘vegetable biryani,’ and ‘a hybrid, sterile mule,’” Chellappa himself noted in an editorial in 1962 (Chellappa, “Putiya” 214). The above passage has a measured tone, as if anticipating and curbing these criticisms. Even as Chellappa insisted on the necessity of the moniker “new”—in this way, claiming a singular position for the genre—he situated *putukkavitai* writing within an exalted Tamil literary lineage and emphasized its autochthonous emergence in contrast to accusations of its foreign importation. “The purpose of this Introduction,” he wrote, “is to illustrate how [the new voices in this anthology] follow in the rich two-thousand-year tradition [from Sangam poetry to the 20th-century poet Subramania Bharati] and advance it” (Chellappa, “Nuḷaivācal” 1). While Bharati had brought new content, emotions, and verse patterns into Tamil during the 1910s and 1920s, *putukkavitai*—Chellappa underscored—revolutionized Tamil because it deviated from convention altogether.

Chellappa’s initial framing of *putukkavitai* was therefore an understanding of modern poetry as completely divorced from the Sangam past, even though it ensued from the same literary history. Ka. Naa. Subramanyam “Mayan’s” poem “Paramparai” (“Tradition”), appearing in the June 1959 issue of *Eḻuttu*, expresses this fraught, ironic disposition toward Tamil literary tradition:

![Poem](https://example.com/paramparai.png)
“Paramparai”—a term meaning “tradition” as well as “lineage”—articulates a keen awareness of classicists’ disapproval of the bold disrespect that putukkavitai writers expressed for ancient Tamil culture.
and the literary canon representing it. At the same time, the poem aggrandizes that very audacity. The poet knowingly, amusedly, accepts his damnation, offering himself as a martyr for society’s betterment. This becomes especially evident in the last stanza’s lines “Though I offer my wares, / so many people / forego them,” which reference the famous verse “kaṭai viritṭi, kolvārillai” (“I spread my wares, but no one was there to accept them”) by the 19th-century poet-saint Ramalinga Swamigal “Vallalar.”

Vallalar’s verse encapsulates the plight of the devotional poet, whose spiritual insight goes unappreciated. An itinerant who critiqued caste hierarchy from society’s margins, Vallalar was later claimed by both Tamil Saivite devotionalists and secular Dravidian nationalists. Mayan’s poet identifies with Vallalar’s outcaste position and plays on the hypocritical 20th-century reception of his poetry, which overlooked Vallalar’s popular and accessible style while exalting a classical Tamil poetic register. Tradition, the poem seems to be arguing, is simultaneously more and less than what Tamil nationalists across the varied camps proclaimed it to be.

Surprisingly, the new-poetry debates published in Eḻuttu over the course of the magazine’s twelve-year run illustrate a shift in this view of tradition from the scornful rejection expressed in Mayan’s poem to, by the late 1960s, full acceptance. Why would Tamil new poets have reversed their understanding of tradition, especially when it was precisely their distance from Sangam that brought them into conversation with the modernist endeavors of new poets in other Indian languages? Unlike Tamil, most Indian literary traditions maintained a favorable connection with the Sanskrit past valorized by the Sahitya Akademi, and many also professed linguistic and cultural affinities with Hindi. No major Indian language other than Tamil could claim a classical past utterly disconnected from Indo-Aryan linguistic inheritance. The modernist strategy of renewing tradition that other Indian new-poetry trends utilized therefore presented Tamil new poets with the uniquely paradoxical consequence of delinking them from pan-Indian literary heritage were they to embrace Sangam roots. Early putukkavitai writing—between 1959, when Chellappa launched Eḻuttu, and 1962, when he published the Putukkuralkal anthology—possesses a provisional spirit that attempts to mitigate this paradox, as evidenced by attempts, like Chellappa’s and Mayan’s above, to emphasize the putukkavitai’s newness instead of applying the terms of Tamil literary convention. Soon afterwards, however, Eḻuttu essays made a concerted effort to revisit Sangam poetics and conjoin them with putukkavitai techniques and aims.

This effort began when Chellappa—alongside his examination of the formal strategies and thematic content of Tamil new poetry—recruited C. Kanakasabapathy, a Tamil professor at Aracinar College in Chennai, to write regular essays in Eḻuttu about classical poetry. Kanakasabapathy’s in-depth discussions of Sangam terminology suggest that he took it as his responsibility to train the writers who published in Eḻuttu, as much as Eḻuttu readers, in ancient literary aesthetics. This makes sense because, while putukkavitai writers and readers were certainly aware of public-sphere discussions about the significance of Sangam texts, they had read little of this poetry itself, which had thus far been accessible only to Tamil pandits. Despite claiming a break from the Sangam past, Tamil new poets did not know the poetry from which they sought to distance themselves. The almost immediate backlash of Tamil classicists against putukkavitai writers’ cursory dismissal of Sangam tradition led Chellappa to seek ways of educating himself and his peers in what constituted Sangam. This education could help them tap into the signifying power that Sangam aesthetics held in the post–Independence Tamil region, make their poetry more universally appealing across literary factions, and construct a more robust response to putukkavitai critics.

Kanakasabapathy shared the Eḻuttu writers’ modernist stance, and his essays present a reinterpretation of Sangam through their modernist vocabulary. Take, for example, some of his titles, which applied keywords buzzing in their conversations—such as “new,” ”newness,” “image,” “imagism,” “content,” “form,” and “description”—to Sangam poems: “Putuppārvaiyil Pajaīya Tamīj Kavitai” (“Traditional Poetry in a New Light”), “Caṅkakāḷap Paṭiṃpaṅkai” (“Imagery in the Sangam Era”), and “Caṅkak Kavitaiyil Varṇapaḷittīṭaṅ” (“Techniques of Description in Sangam Poetry”). His first essay in Eḻuttu, published in March 1963, outlines an intricate literary history from Sangam times to the Tamil present, detailing how
ensuing literary trends deviated from their canonical predecessors. The conventions that contemporary Tamil traditionalists viewed as unchanging were, he argued, continuously overturned by new movements, which developed their own literary content, strategies, and forms. The essay emphasized the novelty of Sangam and its use of spoken language and even compared Sangam imagery to T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” and Ezra Pound’s “Cantos.” Disregarding Sangam conventions of meter and rhyme, Kanakasabapathy put the ancient poetic corpus in terms that Tamil new poets would welcome. At the same time, he conceptualized the modernist notion of “newness” as a long-standing component of Tamil aesthetics (Kanakasapapathy, “Iṟай”). His readings of Sangam literature alongside modernism anticipated Chellappa’s excited introduction of A. K. Ramanujan in 1967 and his subsequent praise of The Interior Landscape, Ramanujan’s translation of Sangam poetry into English:

We wish to introduce someone to Eḻuttu readers: A. K. Ramanujan. He is from Mysore, his mother tongue Kannada. But we must call him a Tamilian since he is familiar with Tamil literature and has investigated the excellent qualities of Sangam literature. (Chellappa, “Tamilppan!” 4)

Last month Ramanujan participated in two gatherings of writers at the Eḻuttu publishing house … [where] in-depth conversation about the translation of putukkavitai poetry took place. … Ramanujan elaborated on his experiences of translating Sangam poetry. He shared some of the issues he faced [when translating] and presented a few examples from his translations. His talk was quite notable. (Chellappa, “Kurippukal” 21)

As with Kanakasabapathy’s academic rereadings of Sangam, Chellappa viewed Ramanujan’s rendering of Sangam poetry in English—and discussions of his process of translation with putukkavitai poets—in light of Tamil modernist aesthetics. I view Kanakasabapathy’s interpretations as well as Ramanujan’s interactions with putukkavitai writers and his translation of Sangam poetry as enabling Tamil modernism’s return to tradition, a return that was hard won in the wake of the Dravidanist co-optation of poetry as a genre emphatically classical in orientation. The influence of Eliot’s view of the past (as the poet’s historical consciousness of the “living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written”) and Pound’s exhortation to “make it new” (by considering past traditions in the context of the present moment) have meant that the renewal of tradition has become a taken-for-granted aesthetic feature of modernisms generally. How tradition gets renewed, under what circumstances, and for what reasons are often, as a result, unexplored questions. But, as Geeta Kapur famously observed, the regeneration of tradition has decidedly political motivations and outcomes in postcolonial contexts: “Historically invented in the process of decolonization, tradition is governed by a national ideology of difference. … Once independence has been gained, nationalism itself poses ontological questions: what is at stake in being Indian?” (Kapur 277). At stake, I argued earlier in this chapter, was cultural cohesion, in response to which the Sahitya Akademi offered the Sanskritic past as a preeminent modernist signifier. The retroactive renewal of tradition in Tamil modernism illustrates, by contrast, that post-Independence Indian multilingualism spurred contradictory affiliations toward region and nation, which exceeded the scope of this solution. Tradition simultaneously aligned putukkavitai writing with and distanced it from other Indian new-poetry endeavors.

**Multilingual Alienation**

In May 1964—when Nehru died, throwing the future of English as an official language of the nation into question—Kanakasabapathy wrote a long essay in Eḻuttu on the Sangam corpus’s perspective on language. Making a move that would likely have troubled Tamil activists, he argued that Sangam poetry reveals that the language of poetry is not one that a poet could own:
A poet does not take the language (of his poetry) to be his own [contam: an object that one possesses, or a person of familial relation]. His language is the language we all speak at home and in the streets. But the poet’s unique task is to reveal that our spoken language doesn’t generally fit within a particular structure. ... Poetry possesses a loose continuity with spoken language that cannot be contained.

Kanakasabapathy further explained,

Sangam poetry emerged in Tamil more than two thousand years ago. My aim is to present, for a moment, a few apparent characteristics that illustrate what the language of the Sangam poets was like and how it was new. I wish to demonstrate the way [Sangam poetry’s] beauty, through [its uses of] everyday language and imagery, flickers before us like radioactivity.

(Kanakasabapathy, "Carikak Kavikal<in" 91)

The term Kanakasabapathy uses (“everyday language”) is maṉita moḻi, the language of everyday human interaction in contrast to the high literary register of language associated with the Sangam corpus. What he found new about Sangam poetry was the proximity of the poet’s language to those around them and the way this language flitted from the grasp of even the most skilled poet’s mastery of metrical and thematic convention. This is why the Sangam poet could not possess language—a condition that, for Kanakasabapathy, resonated with putukkavitai poets’ present circumstances. Soon afterwards, in March 1965—following a violent anti-Hindi agitation that had taken place three months earlier in the Tamil-speaking south and just as the national-language question went up for vote—Chellappa wrote the first and only essay engaging explicitly with politics in Eḻuttu, an otherwise self-consciously literary magazine throughout its run. The editorial made a direct and impassioned argument for retaining English at the central level, describing how a decision to install Hindi as the sole national language would greatly impact Tamil writers, who possessed no spoken—let alone literary—knowledge of Hindi. Tamil, he argued, would be more profoundly affected than any other Indian language because of its disconnection from Hindi. He furthermore proclaimed that Hindi would impede modern Tamil’s growth, which had been until now more deeply imbricated with English (Chellappa, “Intiya”).

I read these two essays—Kanakasapathy’s about how the poet does not possess poetic language and Chellappa’s, which articulates for the first time the modernist Tamil Brahmin writer’s claim to Tamil language—as reflective of putukkavitai writing’s changing perspective on the question of language. They demonstrate how this Tamil literary trend came to develop a modernist aesthetic around new poets’ embracing of their own linguistic alienation. To wield poetic Tamil was now, contradictorily, to possess Tamil through an acceptance of the impossibility of possessing classical Tamil—to, in other words, understand one’s connection to the Sangam past through its novelty in the present, rather than as a consequence of genealogical or cultural inheritance. Reading Sangam poetry as a modernist corpus enabled putukkavitai writers to reclaim the resources of Tamil language and culture that had always been theirs to use. This strategy, in turn, opened putukkavitai writers to questions of translation, comparison, and identification with new poetry in other Indian languages. Putukkavitai writers’ engagement with Ramanujan is one example of this opening, and other examples in Eḻuttu abound. In the waning years of the magazine, Venkat Swaminathan—a Tamil author and critic based in Delhi—began writing on Hindi literature, documenting resonances between Hindi and Tamil new poetry that were caused by their shared estrangement in language because of the mediation of English. “Is the aesthetic of new poetry across Indian languages constituted by a failure of translation?” he seems to ask. Let me tentatively suggest that the exploration of new poetry in other Indian languages that emerged in Eḻuttu in the latter half of the 1960s was made possible because of a historical shift in the question of national language: the political stagnation of the movement to install Hindi at the central government level post-1965 provided Tamil new poets with an opportunity to mobilize their “outsider” relationship to Tamil toward the modernist renewal of tradition.
To be an outsider to one’s own language was now, possibly, the common experience across Indian literary spheres of giving up hope that one’s language could ever be pure, unified, or universally understood. I offer the case of putukkavita writing as a means for conceptualizing a fuller picture of Indian multilingualism that accounts for the profound and differing impacts that the monolingual orientation of the region had on Indian writers. Rather than the Sahitya Akademi’s governmental picture of Indian multilingualism—as a landscape formed of distinct, atomized languages all related to Sanskrit—the Indian literary field may be constituted by multilingual alienation.
Works Cited


**Notes**

1. For more on the PWA, see Gopal; and Jalil.
2. For more on this rediscovery, see Rajesh; Venkatachalapathy; and Zvelebil.
3. This section is drawn from Chapters 1 and 3 of my recent book (Mani, *Idea*).
Yildiz’s focus is on Europe. But Aamir Mufti has shown that the philological revolution—which gave rise to the monolingual paradigm—was made possible by the orientalist encounter with the “East.” Through this encounter, Mufti writes, “a concept of world as an assemblage of ‘nations’” was articulated for the first time (35).

These activities continue in the present, sustaining the Akademi’s mission to produce and maintain a national canon, even though they are also often disputed and disregarded.

See, for example, descriptions of these movements in Indian languages provided in George vol. 1; and Das, Struggle for Freedom.

According to K. Nambi Arooran, the perception that contemporary Tamil language and music emerged directly from Sangam aesthetics became increasingly accepted during the 1940s. Nambi Arooran discusses the key figures who contributed to constructing this perception and argues that the “revival and popularization of Tamil songs in South Indian classical music performances” was the last stage of a Tamil Renaissance that consolidated Dravidian nationalism (Nambi Arooran 252–265).

I elaborate this poetics in Mani, “Sound.”

All translations from Tamil in this chapter are my own.

I thank Kannan M. for pointing me to Vallalar’s verse and his feedback on my translation of Mayan’s poem.

On Vallalar’s work, life, and reception, see Raman.

See, for example, Goulding.


See, for example, Swaminathan.