

### Libraries for the Community: a Preliminary Study of Tamil Collections in Estates, Temples and Associations

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**Abstrak:** Artikel ini membicarakan tentang pengujudan perpustakaan di ladang-ladang, kuil-kuil dan persatuan-persatuan yang mempunyai koleksi buku-buku Tamil. Walaupun orang-orang Tamil menetap di Malaysia mereka masih menggunakan Bahasa Tamil sebagai lingua-franca mereka. Buruh-buruh India yang berbahasa ibunda Tamil telah mengumpulkan buku-buku, dan majalah-majalah Tamil dan menempatkannya di suatu tempat supaya ianya boleh dibaca di kala mereka mempunyai masa lapang. Cuma 60% daripada estet-estet ini mempunyai suatu tempat ataupun 'perpustakaan' untuk menempatkan buku-buku ini. Begitu juga kuil-kuil dan persatuan-persatuan Tamil yang mengambil inisiatif untuk mengumpulkan bahan-bahan berbahasa Tamil untuk kegunaan pengunjung dan ahli-ahlinya. Langkah-langkah yang manfaat dan serius harus diambil untuk mengkaji penubuhan dan pemeliharaan koleksi ini di Malaysia.

**Abstract:** This article discusses the establishment of 'libraries' in estates, temples and associations. Tamils in Malaysia have kept the Tamil language a living one with an active and flourishing literary tradition. They have collected Tamil books and periodicals and stored them in their 'Libraries'. Of the Estate Libraries, only 60% have a proper 'library', while the same fate is faced by the temples and associations, which have taken the initiative to collect Tamil materials for the use of the devotees and public. Steps have to be taken in Malaysia to survey these establishments and to preserve these collections.

The presence of Indians in the Malay Peninsula dates back to 1500 B.C., when Indian traders had business contacts in Malaya usually referred to as 'Swarna Bumi' meaning 'land of wealth'. Later, from the 19th century onwards, Indian immigration to the Malay Peninsula arose primarily because of the demand for cheap labour to cater for the expanding rubber industry. The British used the 'Kangany' method whereby the kangani (overseer or headman) used his influence to move families away from their homeland towards Malaya. This created a migration of families rather than individuals, a factor of great significance in the settlement process of the Indian community in Malaysia. Tamil-speaking Indians comprised about 80% of this group.

Settlement in another country did not dampen the Tamilians' love for their mother tongue. Teachers from Tamil Nadu (South India) were brought in to teach and keep the Tamil language a living one with an active and flourishing literary tradition.

Meanwhile, educated Indians (including non-Tamilians), inspired by the great Tamil poet, 'Bharathiyar' who urged every human being to read and to establish libraries wherever they stayed, tried to collect and preserve materials thus paving the way to the setting up of Tamil collections in this country. Basically these collections are to be found in estates, temples and associations.

#### Estate Libraries

There are about 1,300 estates throughout the country. Although 60%-65% of these estates have managed to maintain a small collection of Tamil materials in the form of magazines, story-books, newspapers, etc., most of them do not have a library in the true sense of the word. The place assigned to keep these materials have multiple usage. They are used as day-care centres or creches for the estate children while the parents are out at work during the

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day-time. In the evenings, these places have to function as community centres for meetings and social functions. The University of Malaya Tamil Language Society's Students Service Project known as 'Estate Project' started its services in the academic year of 1973/74. The purpose of the Estate Project was to create an awareness amongst the Tamil students of the real-life living conditions of these workers in the estate. These students stayed in the estates with their 'foster parents' for about a month. During this time they helped the estate people in whatever way they could. Two of their objectives were to make the estate people realize the importance of education, and to help the children in their studies; and to establish reading places or libraries for the estates.

This 'Estate Project' has played an important role in establishing a reading habit among the rural estate folk. The University students also made donations in the form of books and money to set up these estate 'libraries' on a small scale. Unfortunately the collections are not well maintained and replenished regularly.

### Hindu Temple Libraries

The majority of the Indians in Malaysia are Hindus while the rest are Christians and Muslims. The Hindu proportion of the Indian population in Malaysia is 81.2%. The table below shows the percentage of Indian community by religion.

Religious Group	Percentage
Hindus	81.2
Christian	8.4
Muslim	6.7
Buddhist	0.5
No religion	0.1
Others	3.1
Source: 1970 Population Census of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Department of Statistics, 1970.	

There is a large number of Hindu temples in Malaysia. Hundreds of them can be found all over the country, the large ones being concentrated in urban areas. There is no proper organization or body to monitor their establishment. The 'Maha Mariamman Temple' in Kuala Lumpur is considered

to be the most important temple. However, it does not possess any 'directory' or 'list' of existing temples in the country. The large temples usually have their annual festival known as 'Kumbabishegam' and in conjunction with this, their newsletter entitled 'Kumbabishega Malar' is published. In addition, the smaller temples too produce cyclostyled publications of devotional literature for their devotees, who live around the temple. This devotional literature is distributed freely for their immediate use. There is a need for the temple committee or associations to collect these publications for preservation.

The material is usually of poor quality, fragile and flimsy and hence unless collected systematically as soon as they are published, could forever be lost to society. Because of problems associated with collecting this type of material, the University of Malaya Library possesses only one or two of this kind of publications in its collection. The large temples have libraries which house their own collections but unfortunately these are not accessible to the public, being restricted to their patrons only.

### Societies and Association Libraries

There are a number of Indian organizations in Malaysia which were formed to look after the needs of the Indian community. Some of these organizations have small collections which are open to their members and to the public. These include the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) library at its headquarters in Kuala Lumpur; Arulnerithirukkuttam, Saiva Siddhanta Mantram, Rudra Devi Samaj and the Divine Life Society which are religious organizations and other small libraries.

MIC publishes and keeps annual reports, statistics and many other pamphlets relating to the Indians in Malaysia. The other organizations which are mainly religious in nature, tend to collect materials solely pertaining to Hindu religion published either abroad or locally. These organizations also from time to time publish paperback editions about the practice of Hinduism in everyday life and other relevant themes.

In addition to societies and associations, there are two Tamil public libraries worth mentioning here. The 'Muthamil Padippakam' in Sentul is one of the most prominent and is one of the country's oldest