A Study in Tamil Biographies — Thamotharampillai and Navalar

by S. Ratnajeevan H. Hoole

The purpose of this article is to point out three general weaknesses in biographies by Tamils of Tamils and to call for better scholarship. The three weaknesses have to do with a tendency to i) boast of the subject, ii) make claims to greatness based on caste and iii) allow religious-nationalism to cloud the biographers' judgment. In particular, we shall take up biographies of C. W. Thamotharampillai1,2,3 for purposes of drawing conclusions and shall also make occasional references to biographies of Navalar.4,5 Thamotharampillai and Navalar are chosen because, first, much has been written about them of a propagandist nature that is totally inaccurate and needs urgently to be set right because it is taught to school children, and, secondly, this writer has a special interest in them6.

Before delving into the three characteristic weaknesses of Tamil biographies, we will briefly review the life of Cirupitty Wyravanathar Thamotharampillai, so that, as Karalasingham says1, younger Ceylonese Tamils may know of their heritage and the contributions this man from Jaffna has made to the language. Indeed, it may be said that Thamotharampillai, born on 12 September, 1832, has done more for the Tamil language than any other person from Sri Lanka and that to this date, a century after his death in 1901, his name commands immediate recognition among Tamil scholars anywhere. His contributions — mainly in ferreting out lost Tamil manuscripts through thorough searches including advertisements in the press, comparing the manuscripts found, and publishing them with a commentary — were extensive. The most significant among these was his publication of the Tholkapiyam — Chollathiharam and Porulathiharam on Tamil grammar, the oldest Tamil book in existence. Others include the Sangam works such as Kaliththohai and Ahanahnooru. It is a measure of tiny Jaffna’s role on the intellectual landscape of the time that the first two graduates of Madras University — of whom Thamotharampillai was one — were both from Jaffna and products of Batticotta Seminary, now Jaffna College. Thamotharampillai’s career took him from teacher in the services of the Christian missions, to editor of a church daily in India, to Head of the Tamil Department at Presidency College Madras to Accountant General of the Madras Treasury and finally to Judge, in which capacity he used his large earnings to continue his publication of

1 S. Karalasingham, Life of Rau Bahadur C. W. Thamotharampillai, Madras, 1993
2 கரலசிங்க, ராவ் பாகாதார் ச. வி. தமோதாரதம்பிள்ளை, மாத்ரா, 1993
3 விழார்வநதர் சிருப்பிடி, சூருவல் வளிமலைசாசனம் - கட்டிச்செய்வு, புலவராமம், சுண்ணகம், 1974.
5 சூருவல் வளிமலைசாசனம் சாபை, ஸ்ரீ ஸ்ரீ ஆருமாநவாலர் சாபை, கொழும்பு 7, 1979.
6 Thamotharampillai belonged to the Kingsbury family founded by this writer’s great-great-great-grandfather Cyrus Kingsbury, Thamotharampillai’s father. Besides, both Thamotharampillai in his publication work, and the Rev. Elijah Hoole — a Tamil Pandit from Point Pedro who founded the Hoole family — in revising the Tamil translation of the Bible under the Rev. Percival, worked intimately with Navalar.

All information here on Elijah Hoole is from File No. C. CE 071/1-12 on The Rev. Fr. Elijah Hoole, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham.
ancient Tamil manuscripts. He was guardian in India to Sir Ponnabalam Ramanathan and his elder brother Coomarasamy while they were studying there.

Thamotharampillai lived in a period in which Hinduism and Christianity were dynamically interacting, and Hinduism was redefining itself in the face of Christian missionary challenge, first in direct response, and then under Ram Mohan Roy’s Brahmo Samaj. It is a period that, in terms of present day Tamil identity, has much to teach us. And studies of great lives of that period such as Thamotharampillai’s, because we have more information of them than of others, are bound to be instructive.

Thamotharampillai, or Charles Winslow Kingsbury, the eldest son of Cyrus Kingsbury who was a first generation Christian, started studying Tamil under his father Cyrus. After finishing his college education in 1852 at Batticotta Seminary Thamotharampillai taught for some years under the mission and then proceeded to Madras to head a mission-run daily. There he converted to Saivism, and, wishing to keep his initials C. W., took on the name Cirupitty Wyravanathar Thamotharampillai. The reason for his conversion to Hinduism had to do with his caste-consciousness. One biographer says that his Christian background subjected him to teasing; Caste-conscious Jaffna Christians from that period who went to India felt some discomfort at being presumed to be “low-caste,” and assumed traditional Tamil or Hindu names, particularly with the suffix “pillai” and even converted (as did Thamotharampillai). His choice of new name, and his close association with Navalar (who addressed his “reforms” to Vellahlas and described people as “low-caste”) also tell us that Thamotharampillai was also caste-conscious.

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8 Said to be the first modern educational institution in Asia up to tertiary level. The reputation of the college may be measured by the statement of Sir Charles Trevelyan, Governor of Madras, that “he found no young men so useful to him in the administration of affairs as those trained in the college (Serninary) at Jaffna.” p. 140 of Mary and Margaret Leitch, *Seven years in Ceylon: Stories of Missionary Life*, American Tract Society, New York 1890 (Reprint by Navrang, New Delhi, 1993).
9 Such conversions upon going to India appear to have been common. For we find the missions arguing on this basis for greater funds from the US and England for increasing the in-take so as to permit their students to continue their studies at tertiary level without having to go to India. Out of every 20 completing English high school in Jaffna, only 2-3 found a place at Batticotta. The others had to go to India for college education. See Leitch and Leitch, 1890, p. 147.
10 Source: Thamotharampillai’s great-grand-daughter, Lila Solomon (nee Kadirgamar) of Australia.
11 It is interesting that names like Samuel and Kingsbury (and indeed, Hoole) are generally not considered Tamil when carried by Tamils, while Sanskrit names are. Although we may today be somewhat used to the latter, it was not always so. I know of one Dushyanthi and a Wijeyanathan whose grandmother even today finds their names a mouthful, saying Thusiyanthi and Visiyanathan to the horror of her grand-children. This process of continually adopting Sanskrit mores to rise higher in the caste order — a well documented process that sociologists call Sanskritisation — becomes ridiculous when names are commonly given without even knowing their meaning. Examples are “Shobana” (the beauty of a woman from the blooming of her body with sexual activity), and “Menaka” (the nymph who seduces men — the most famous of her stories concerns Sita’s father, King Devarata, who saw Menaka in the sky and ejaculated as he imagined union with her; and as his seed fell into a furrow on the earth, the earth conceived and gave birth to Sita, the furrow - Ramayana 1:65-66.)
Having said this about Thamotharampillai, we will now turn to the three general weaknesses of Tamil biographers. The first shortcoming concerns the unfortunate Tamil/Indian proclivity only to praise the subject of the biography. After all, it has been the Tamil/Indian tradition to mention only the good side of the subject, even to the point of exaggeration. This we see in old poetry where the poet’s patron, the king, is usually described as being descended from the Moon or the Sun, and his praises go on *ad nauseam*. It is because of this tendency that few of us know that Gandhi held forth in his newspaper, The Harijan, comparing the intelligence of the lower-castes with that of a cow. Similarly we find Ramanathan’s biographer waffling through Ramanathan’s and Coomarasamy’s having to quit Presidency College Madras following some scandals. In the same vein, all of Thamotharampillai’s biographers shower praises on him for his intellectual attainments, but no critical appraisal of Thamotharampillai the man is in evidence.

It is after all, one of the enjoyable points of reading a biography to see that even great men are in many ways very ordinary persons like ourselves. In this, Thamotharampillai was no exception. His daughter who had stayed behind in Vaddukodai with his Christian brother Appukutti Kingsbury had — on her own wishes — a Christian marriage arranged for her. Thamotharampillai had suddenly turned up from India and the daughter, fearing that the father would put a stop to her marriage, ran out through a hole in the back fence and eloped with her fiancé on a bullock-cart. Missing the daughter, Thamotharampillai started going through each room of the house looking for her, until he came to one room where his niece Sundaram Hemphill, was breast-feeding her child. He asked Sundaram where the daughter was, and getting the evasive reply that she must be somewhere about (CAA if vq; ifvq; JSK), he promptly assaulted her even as she was breast-feeding. Again, when The Rev. Canon S. S. Somasundaram, a Christian convert from a family closely associated with Thamotharampillai, rejected his ancestral privileges at Maviddapuram Kandaswamy Temple and got married to Ponnammah Hemphil, Thamotharampillai’s grand-niece, Thamotharampillai was doubly angry with Somasundaram for rejecting Hinduism as well as for marrying Ponnammah. Later when Somasundaram proceeded to Calcutta for his B.A., he was sent to his family friend and new in-law, Thamotharampillai’s house in Madras to stop-over. Unknown to Somasundaram, the railway to Calcutta from Madras had just begun the previous week, but it is said that Thamotharampillai hardly spoke to Somasundaram on that visit and

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*The Harijan*, Dec. 19, 1936: The context was the evangelization of the lower castes by the Rev. Dr. Mott. See Duncan Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, Curzon Press, London, 1980. p. 179: Gandhi’s attitude was perhaps betrayed when he advised a missionary to pray for the Harijans but not to try to convert them because they did not have [quoting Gandhi from the Harijan] “the mind and intelligence to understand what you talked ... would you preach the Gospel to a cow?” Gandhi makes it worse in a later issue by justifying this saying that it is no insult since he worships the cow. c.f. Gandhi’s statement quoted in *The Guardian* (Madras) of 7 Jan. 1937: “To approach the Palavas and Pariahs with their palsied hands and palsied intelligence is no Christianity.” Nonetheless, Gandhi did help the lower castes in the sense of one arguing: Dogs are dogs, but treat them kindly.

Vythilingam (p. 87) says the sons were recalled to Ceylon by their father. But it is said that they had no choice but to quit following an incident involving exams.

This writer’s great-grand mother.

Source: Sundaram Hemphil’s grandson, George D. Somasundaram, who formerly headed the Department of Mechanical Engineering, University of Ceylon, Colombo in the 1950s.
intentionally and pettily loaded him on the ship to Calcutta which was considered an arduous and tiring way of getting there. Somasundaram was deeply upset by this when he got to Calcutta and found out about the train\(^{18}\).

But Thamotharampillai also had his kind side. Much of this side of his personality reveals itself in his relationship with his son, Francis Kingsbury, Professor of Tamil at University College, Colombo (now the University of Colombo) and an intellectual giant in his own right, having produced numerous books in Tamil as well as English\(^{19}\). Stories abound of Thamotharampillai’s relationship with Francis; both were stubborn men who did not speak to each other since Francis’s refusal to officiate at Hindu rites following his mother’s death. When Thamotharampillai had Francis’s frontal hair shaved in the Hindu fashion, Francis went and had his entire head shaved. It is in this relationship that we see Thamotharampillai’s kind side. Although he had objections to Francis (something Karalasingham refuses to admit\(^{20}\) he felt a connection to Francis’s daughter (Catherine Katpaham Kingsbury) and had given a pair of bangles to her at birth with strict injunctions to Francis’s wife that she should not divulge that it was he who had made the gift — he feared that the bangles would be returned by the proud son. According to another story, when Francis became a Christian and walked out of the father’s house at 21 and started living with William Miller,\(^{21}\) a missionary in India, Thamotharampillai, to protect the “family honour”, had apparently sent Miller a monthly sum lest it be said that his son was living on charity. Francis was not told because it was assumed that he would walk out of Miller’s house too rather than accept his father’s largesse\(^{10}\).

Perhaps by the same Tamil tendency to exaggerate the subject’s greatness, Mr. Karalasingham also errs in saying that Thamotharampillai looked after his brothers’ education, found them jobs, and got them married. Appukutti for one was educated by the mission and employed by the mission as what the Americans called Native Professor of Mathematics at the Batticotta Seminary\(^{22}\). Thamotharampillai did try (not always successfully) to arrange marriages for the others, but always to Hindus against the family’s wishes. One example of his success, was to the ancestor of Punitham Tiruchelvam, Neelan Tiruchelvam’s mother — it is said that Thamotharampillai produced the tali from a drawer in his house and ordered the groom to tie it on his niece\(^{10}\).

The second drawback in Tamil biographies arises from the fact they are of Vellahlas by Vellahlas. It concerns the devious way in which caste is introduced. According to

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\(^{18}\) Source: Jeevamany Hoole, The Rev. Canon Somasundaram’s daughter.

\(^{19}\) Colombo, 1941, by his students on his demise.

\(^{20}\) But there is little doubt that Thamotharampillai was angry with Francis. As related by Benjamin Vijayayaratnam Kingsbury (Thamotharampillai’s nephew who went as Benjamin Kingsbury Vijaya in Malaya) to his daughter Gnanapoopathy Alfreds of Singapore, Thamotharampillai always had a gun at home saying it was for shooting Francis with should he chance to come home. He was especially angry because not only had Francis become a Christian, but he was also engaged in missionary activity. Thamotharampillai’s attitude towards Francis is also clear from his will. Karalasingham (Note 1) simply says that Francis was left out of it because he had enough money of his own. But — also as reported by Mrs. Alfreds, quoting Kingsbury Vijaya — the will stipulated that Francis or his Christian relatives could claim his extensive properties if they renounced Christianity and returned to Saivism. Kingsbury Vijaya had been asked to do this and claim the properties for his four daughters, but he politely declined.

\(^{21}\) It was after William Miller that Francis named his eldest son Willy Kingsbury.

\(^{22}\) He was one of the first graduates of the seminary. A Native Professor was paid approximately a third of what a married Foreign Professor was paid. p. 144 of Leitch and Leitch, 1890.
Karalasingham, “Thamotharampillai comes from an illustrious farming stock.” Another typical ploy used by biographers is the phrase “He was from an orthodox family.” What is meant is obvious. It is the phraseology of almost every upper-class Tamil for whom caste is important, but whose western veneer (which must be maintained at any cost as a sign of class status) prevents him from being direct. But in this case it is ironic in that the Vellahla heritage was rejected by Thamotharampillai’s father, Cyrus Kingsbury and probably also the Levins family that Thamotharampillai married twice into. In the early years of Christianity in Sri Lanka, the Christians were militantly against caste. For example, The Rt. Rev. Daniel Wilson, Bishop of Calcutta whose diocese included Ceylon, says in his pastoral letter of 5 July 1833: “The distinction of castes, then must be abandoned decidedly, immediately, finally; those who profess to belong to Christ must give this proof of their having really ‘put off,’ concerning their former conversation, ‘the old man,’ and having ‘put on the new man’ in Christ Jesus.” This policy on caste was enforced throughout his bishopric. Because Christian wives were considered important in upholding Christianity in the newly Christian homes, the missions’ boarding schools for girls were considered important in supplying Christian brides. We know from records that the earliest inmates at Uduvil were from the lower castes and poor (some were from such poor homes that they had been handed over to the missions by their parents). Others from the descriptions in old records were clearly of Koviah and Pandaram origin. That the students were, in terms of caste, a mixed bag is clear from i) objections of Vellahla parents to their child’s eating with the other children in the boarding, and ii) the school’s having to look after the student until a Christian marriage could be arranged for the student. It was only in 1826 that the America-Ceylon Mission took the controversial decision “that they would admit only girls of good caste ‘who have some property; such girls as would make suitable companions for the boys’ in Batticotta.” Cyrus Kingsbury, like many early

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23 It is widely known but rarely admitted within the Tamil community that even those claiming caste to be a later aberration in a once pure religion, would quietly set about dissuading their relatives from marrying outside their caste and carefully checking caste credentials in arranging marriages. Even the so-called Vellahla Christians do this. A well known example of this pretence to egalitarianism is the late Professor C. Suntheralingam who after involvement in an anti-caste Gandhian youth organisation, according to B. Pfaffenberger, came to be remembered as the “caste fanatic” in physically preventing the so-called low-castes from entering Maviddapuram temple. (“Fourth World Colonialism, Indigenous Minorities And Tamil Separatism in Sri Lanka,” Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1984; pp.18&21.


26 Sir James Emerson Tennent, Christianity in Ceylon, London: John Murray, 1850; p. 160. The Rev. Dr. D. T. Niles was one of the few persons to speak with pride in his sermon about the first Niles’s wife who was given by her poor mother to a missionary lady. In another case, a girl who sheltered at the mission house during a storm took bread and bananas from the missionary. The parents thereupon felt the girl was polluted and unfit for marriage and asked the missionary to look after her. See p. 118 of Leitch and Leitch, 1890.

27 The Koviah are household cooks ritually equal to the Vellahlas and probably the descendants of Sinhalese agriculturists captured in war. The Pandarams are temple cooks.

28 So great must have been the attendant financial burden that the decision was taken that “the girls must be induced to accept the first eligible offer [of marriage].” Harrison, 1925, p. 12.

29 Harrison, 1925, p. 12. The issue of property arose because the girls were married off by the mission with a dowry of 50 Rix Dollars. Note that The Church Missionary Society’s boarding school for girls at Nallur — later moved to Chundikuli — was not ready until 1842.
Christians of his time, took his bride from the Uduvil boarding during this time of transition. While we know nothing of Mrs. Cyrus Kingsbury's caste background, it is significant that some of the early non-Vellahla inmates of the boarding schools have disappeared into the so-called Christian Vellahla community, and indeed, a good number through reconversion into Hindu families "of illustrious farming stock" that need not be named here. The caste antecedents of Jaffna Christians are therefore subject to surmise and conjecture. But we have every reason to believe that Cyrus Kingsbury, like other Christians of his day, militantly rejected caste. Indeed therefore, it is the Kingsbury heritage to find greater dignity in being an out-caste (asangha) untouchable Christian than in the pitable spectacle of a Sudra Vellahla30 arguing for his high status in relation to others. Unlike what his biographers claim, an illustrious agricultural heritage is not the Kingsbury heritage, but rather one that Cyrus's son, C. W. Thamotharampillai chased after for himself31.

The third Tamil weakness of Tamil biographers is to allow their religio-national sensibilities to cloud their academic judgment. For instance, few of Arumuga Navalar's biographers, because of his position as a Saivite leader, mention his temper tantrums in assaulting Vaishnavites during debates13, his Vellahla bigotry in putting down those considered lower and so on. We may note that one biography commended to us by no less an authority than the late Professor Kanapathippillai in the foreword, tells us32 that the Bible was translated by Navalar (whereas it really involved the revision of a long-existing translation by a team of scholars including the Rev. Pandit Elijah Hoole, a team of which Navalar was but one under the Rev. Percival33) and that this translation was praised in India and put into use (whereas after 50 years of use only in Jaffna, it fell into disuse because it was deemed to lack the "excellences" of the Indian translation34). Another biographer constantly refers to the Bible written by Navalar  

30 Except for the Vellahlas themselves, all authorities agree that they are Sudra. For a complete listing of authorities who say the Vellahlas are Sudra, see S. R. H. Hoole, "The Tamils: The Problem of Identity and Religion," Indian Church History Review, Vol. XXXVI, No. 2, pp. 88-135, 1992.
31 The claims of today's Tamil Christians to caste-status have their parallels in similar claims by the descendants of the original Buddhists who rejected caste.
32 ṣāṭṭu, pp. 13-4; this propaganda is widely taught in schools.
33 See testimonials in File No. C. CE 071/1-12 on The Rev. Fr. Elijah Hoole, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham. Also Sir James Emerson Tennent (Christianity in Ceylon, London: John Murray, 1850; p. 174) makes clear that The Rev. P. Percival, "the best English Tamil scholar in Ceylon" was in charge of and engaged in "a revision of the Tamil Version of the Scriptures."
Likewise even men of distinction like Justice H. W. Tambiah and Professor S. Pathmanathan appear to be allowing their nationalism to cloud their objectivity in claiming Navalar to be the father of modern Tamil prose (whereas prose writing was first used on a large and consistent scale much earlier by the Christian missions in their translations of the Bible, tracts and stories). Even Professor K. Kailasapathy, who places Navalar among the great social reformers of the nineteenth century for his work in famine relief in 1876, appears to suffer from the same blind-spot when dealing with issues of religio-nationalism; for he seems not to be able to see that Navalar was only copying what the missions were already doing through their hospitals and work with the poor, and even that rather selectively; for Navalar distributed food only to Vellahlas and certainly not to those whom he called low-castes during the famine and teaches us in his 4th *Palar Padam* that *Cattiram* (gifts and alms) is to be given only to Brahmans and poor Vellahlas.

This tendency becomes obnoxious when Thamo tharampillai’s Christian heritage is brazenly ignored or played down, and all his biographers consistently ignore a major period of his life when he worked for the Church for evangelisation in Kopay at a Teacher’s Training College. Similarly Francis is called Alahasundram by all of Thamo tharampillai’s biographers, a name that was only used at home and never used by Francis in his numerous publications where he consistently went as Francis Kingsbury. Mr. Karalasingham, after using the name Alahasundram that few would recognize, at least concedes at the end of the book in a note that Alahasundram is no other than Francis Kingsbury. Other biographers simply refer to Francis as Alahasundram and say no more about him. One would think that it is a simple courtesy to use the name a man chose for himself — not to do so would be like one insisting on calling Thamo tharampillai “Charles Kingsbury”. Similarly, Thamo tharampillai’s first two wives and the wives of his three brothers, the five Levins sisters, are referred to by the unrecognizable name of Kalingarayar by Karalasingham; again a case of caste legitimization and trying to hide their Christian roots.

Could this playing down of the Christian connection be because it is felt that any hint of his Christian upbringing would, in the minds of the biographers, diminish his Tamilness? This thinking has its roots in the idea expressed by Professor Pathmanathan that “the Hindu

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36 H. W. Tambiah, p. ii of Note 5.
41 This writer’s mother addressed him as Alahuth-thatha.
42 In Karalasingham’s embarrassment of writing of negatives, there is only veiled reference to Francis’s trial at the Pasumali Church where he was priest, conducted by Dr. Larson, Principal of Bangalore Theological College and consequent defrocking of Francis for his view — developed during his tenure as British Army Chaplain in Mesopotamia in the early 1920s as a result of reading German thinkers — that Jesus was a man. It was subsequent to this that he joined the university in Colombo.
tradition, along with the Tamil language, forms the basis of Tamil identity\textsuperscript{43} as though if Thamotharampillai had been a Christian, he could not have been a Tamil\textsuperscript{44}. If this idea is to be believed, even Valluvar, most probably a Jain, would not be a Tamil! This same thinking appears to be echoed by Justice H. W. Tambiah, the Vice Chairman of the Navalar Commemoration Society, when he says\textsuperscript{35} that without Navalar, what he calls the Tamil “Race” (இல lanci) would have been destroyed, as though conversion to Christianity meant loss of Tamilness\textsuperscript{45}. The Tamils have moved from animism to Buddhism and Jainism to an aggressively proselytising Saivism that demanded conversion on pain of death and confiscation of property\textsuperscript{46} to now a more sober, Christianised, mono-theistic, monogamist and egalitarian Saivism that is even a little Victorian\textsuperscript{47}. Some Tamils are Christians or Muslims. The Tamil language has got Sanskritised, has absorbed a little Portuguese and Dutch, and is now getting thoroughly Anglicised especially in speech\textsuperscript{48}. But surely, the Tamils do survive as Tamils. Indeed, if at all the “Tamil Race” needed saving, one cannot help asking who saved it: Navalar who worked only for the Vellahlas and whose schools until recent years refused admission to those from the depressed castes? Or the missions that i) educated those like Navalar and Thamotharampillai, ii) discovered our literature for us, iii) worked for the abolition of slavery and undermined the caste-system, iv) opened the schools to the depressed, especially along the coastal belt, and v) advanced female education (let alone male education) from the abysmal state it was in when they arrived\textsuperscript{49}? The Vellahla answer to this is to be expected; but is it warranted by evidence? Perhaps it is time for Tamil scholarship to be less Vellahla-centric and examine why any Tamil of that period with some achievement was invariably a product of the missions. Christian missionaries have at times been identified with attitudes of racism and imperialism, but the evidence suggests that this was not generally so and that this was very much less true of the early missionaries who were at odds with the colonial administration and worked very much for the people at great risk to their own lives. It is perhaps time now, almost half a century after independence, to take a fresh and balanced look at their contributions.

\textsuperscript{43} S. Pathmanathan, (n.d.), p. 158 (Note 37)  
\textsuperscript{44} This has been dealt with at length in S. R. H. Hoole, 1992 - see Note 30 - in response to claims at several public meetings and the Saturday Review by N. Satyendra that Tamil and Saivism are one.  
\textsuperscript{45} It is indeed ironic that Justice Tambiah of all persons, whose then minor son at St. Thomas’s College chose Sinhalese as his second language over Tamil, should lament the death of the “Tamil Race.”  
\textsuperscript{46} R. C. Majumdar, “\textit{Ancient India}”, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1960; p. 428  
\textsuperscript{47} With Parvati even donning a blouse in recent years to address Victorian sensibilities.  
\textsuperscript{48} There appear to be parallels between how the Tamils absorbed Vedic Hinduism and Sanskrit a millennium ago, and what is happening with Christianity and English now. The Christian ideas of monotheism, monogamy and equality among men have a precarious acceptance in Hinduism now and, with English, the Tamils appear to be at a similar stage to Sanskrit when the learned Tamils threw in Sanskrit words liberally in their speech to prove a higher status. It remains to be seen if English would in time be as naturalised in Tamil as Sanskrit is.  
\textsuperscript{49} According to the missionary Mr. Meigs, writing in 1816, he could find only 2-3 girls in Jaffna (one in Alavetty, the second in Udupitty and the third whom he never saw) who could read and write. Parents refused to send a female child to school saying that learning to read “spoiled her modesty, endangered her chastity and rendered her insubordinate to the other sex” [Harrison, 1925 (Note 25); p. 4]. Sir James Emerson Tennent (\textit{Christianity in Ceylon}, London: John Murray, 1850; p. 156) tells us that the few who could read were Devadasis (temple prostitutes whose modesty and chastity would not have been of concern to the temple managers) who had been taught to read and write so as to enable them to transcribe temple music. It took long and patient efforts by the missions to have female education accepted.
Thus we see that the Tamils in writing biographies have a proclivity to inexactness and fuzziness, with a view to self-glorification, self-adulation, and self-congratulation. It is sad that even those best minds among us who have been trained, examined, and certified to be logical in our thinking, cannot overcome this tendency to self-promotion at the expense of truth. One wonders whether this has its roots in our culture that makes status and one-upmanship such an important thing in life — every Jaffna family, it is said, tries every means to claim a higher caste status, so much so that the proportion of Vellahlas has risen from 30% in 1790 when the Dutch conducted a census to roughly a half today\(^{50}\), and an unbelievable number of families claim to be descended from the Aryachakaravarthis of Nallur! These figures tie in with how the early so-called low-caste Christians disappeared into Vellahla Christian and indeed Hindu Vellahla families, and demonstrate that even Saivite claims to Vellahla status are as dubious and spurious as Christian ones\(^{51}\).

Although one would like to distance oneself from Lord Macaulay, one cannot but be reminded in this context of his now famous and acerbic minute about our “false history, false astronomy, false metaphysics,” during the great debate about whether Indians should be educated in English or the vernacular. Do we then dismiss Macaulay as a racist and go on as we are, or, do we reassess and correct ourselves so as to prove Macaulay wrong?

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\(^{51}\) No family in Jaffna can deny having mixed caste/race blood. It is an interesting fact that even families that consider themselves high-caste pride themselves in any light complexion and light eyes (gild=;fz;) that may run in the family without thinking of the origin. It is well documented that in Kerala, from where many Jaffna immigrants came (and at least a trace must surely remain in every Jaffna family), the Nambudri Brahmin exercised “The Right of the First Night” (*Jus Primae Noctis*) by taking the Sudra bride home to bed on the wedding night, up to the early years of this century. Here Sudra includes the Vellalahs - Note 30. Other reasons for light skin among Tamils are the immigrants from Persia and Arabia to Kerala through the centuries as well as Roman settlers in ancient times in Tamil Nadu and Kerala who have disappeared into the population. It is noted that in strict Hindu law, anyone of mixed caste is not half this and half that, but untouchable (*asangha*). Those Tamils who are of light skin or light eyes who do not wish to accept this explanation, must look to the Portuguese, Dutch and English for one. European colonialists did have children through Tamils (Portuguese mixture in an area around Changilithoppu and in some families is visibly evident from the blue and reddish brown eyes). This writer knows of one well-established Saivite family of “impeccable Vellahla credentials” that has a Dutch ancestor who is carefully hidden away. However, the extent of mixture remains to be investigated. But unfortunately, because of the status implications and because the very families that know will be those least likely to speak out, the subject will remain uninvestigated for some years.