

English translation of Tamil speech presentation by Azhagiya Pandiyan at the Tamil Language Council's Launch of its 20th Anniversary Commemorative Publication

11am, Sunday, 5 September 2021, The POD, National Library Building

Greetings to Minister Mr S Iswaran, the executive committee of the Tamil Language Council, and all sponsors.

I am delighted to briefly share with you the story of how the commemorative publication entitled '*Our Journey*' came to be.

To understand the depth of work and the passion that went into the book, we have to go back about two years into the past.

When Mr S Manogaran, Chairman of the Tamil Language Council, first mooted the idea of celebrating the council reaching 20 years of age, no one had any doubt that it was a good idea.

I had three emotions when Mr Manogaran asked me to form a small team to lead the development of the commemorative book. I was initially stunned, after which I was a little scared, and finally felt a little joy. *Stunned, Scared, Joyous.*

The reason for feeling stunned is that when the journey of an organisation or movement is a long one, it is easy to craft its history into a nice story. However, the journey of the Tamil Language Council had a history of only 20 years. So I asked myself, "how am I going to tell a nice story out of this short history"?

Next was the fear... publishing a book is no easy task. I know this from experience. I was working in radio broadcasting during the early years of the Tamil Language Council. I focused and poured myself into producing research programmes that embraced history because I loved history very much.

As a result of that effort, I had the experience of developing two books entitled '*Today in History*' and '*The Sky is the Limit*'. Both these books were written without any intention of being published. The efforts undertaken were made without fully understanding how much labour was required. If I had known, I may very well have not undertaken such an endeavour. The reason for my fear was that I expected the commemorative book to require such a huge effort.

After the feelings of being stunned and scared, I experienced joy as well. The underlying reason for my initial two feelings was also the cause of my third feeling – History. From an early age, I had a great love for reading about history and wondering about those who have walked before us. That is why my first two books were based on history. The joy that history would be at the forefront of this third attempt as well somewhat helped subdue the feelings of being stunned and having fear.

Yet, it is also true that in the initial days I stumbled without knowing where to start and where to end. During my first meeting with fellow members Tamilvani Muthu and Ashwinii Selvaraj, we were unable to arrive at anything concrete. That was almost two years ago.

However, there are three main reasons why this endeavour has been successful:

One... the editorial consultant that we selected to lead the project.

Two... the translator who beautifully translated the story that had been researched and written in English into Tamil.

Three..., the designer who designed this book complete with Tamil elements in spite of not knowing the Tamil language.

I will introduce these three persons later.

I mentioned earlier that 20 years is a short period of time. We were initially hesitant on how we could develop an interesting story with that. However, that short period was in fact a blessing in disguise. How so?

Most of those who were involved with the growth of the Tamil Language Council over the past 20 years are still with us. We realised that if we spoke with them, we would be able to capture true historical testimony – that is, their first-hand account. Hence, we decided that we would meet them in person and obtain their oral history. In addition, we also decided to look through past documents and conduct research.

However, there was a problem in the midst of this effort. The pandemic environment due to COVID-19 not only delayed our work by several months, it also presented the challenge of conducting interviews in person. Undeterred though, we decided to conduct these interviews online instead.

The research team for the book – whom I shall introduce to you shortly – conducted a total of 38 interviews through Zoom. Each interview lasted an average of two hours. They then compiled information on the events and quotes spanning the past 20 years..

It was also a challenge to conduct research at the library. Libraries were closed at the height of COVID-19 restrictions. Even when they were reopened later, the condition that visitors were only allowed to stay for an hour further complicated the researchers' task.

Under these circumstances, the researchers visited the eleventh floor of this building several times and spent many hours conducting their research.

As the study revealed many rare facts and interesting information, we decided to not only focus on the 20-year history, but also include the story of how the Tamil language thrived in Singapore.

After some discussion, we decided to lay the foundation for this commemorative book across four pillars. Those pillars are as follows:

**The Pioneering Efforts -
Tamil Language in Singapore:
The Early Years**

**The Partnerships Forged -
Tamil Language Council
and our Partners**

**The Programmes Organised -
Highlights over the Years**

**The Path Forward -
A Dialogue with Chairman,
Tamil Language Council**

As the research was thorough, many rare pearls of information were gathered by the researchers who drove into the research. Those pearls have helped to multiply the splendour of this commemorative book manifold. Let me share with you just a couple of examples.

It is a well-known historical fact that Umar Pulavar Tamil Language School was established in 1946 by the Kadayanallur Muslim League in Singapore. Funds were raised from its members to formalise the school. Mr A N Maideen, who was its secretary at the time, shares his experience of going house-to-house together with other members of the league, to raise funds

At the first house, we spoke with a kachang puteh seller⁵. After hearing of our plans for the school, he decided to donate his entire sales proceeds for the day, amounting to \$2.75 in coins. All of us in the committee was deeply moved by his love for Tamil and his magnanimity to promote the learning of Tamil language⁶.

We were touched by this rare story. Such stories proudly reveal the truth that a great number of ordinary Tamils have stood behind the Tamil language for it to survive and thrive in this country.

Next, here are some rare photos that have never been seen before.

Look at the photo that I am going to show you now. This is a black-and-white photograph taken in 1949. Only the colour of the photograph is black and white. But the stories it tells are like the colours of the rainbow. They say "*a picture is worth a thousand words*". This picture speaks a thousand colourful words. These are the children of Tamil labourers at a rubber plantation. If you look closely, you may notice that all of them are females. This photograph underscores that even plantation workers at the time realised the importance of education and the importance of women's education.



It may very well be a Tamil language class being conducted. Look at the eyes of those little girls. They are eyes that are paying full attention to the teacher without the slightest distraction. Children these days are only able to focus like that on computer screens and smart phones.

A point to note here is that this image is not in the National Archives of Singapore. The photograph is owned by the National Archives and Records Administration of the USA. This serves as evidence of how deeply and widely the team has conducted their research. At this juncture, we owe a debt of gratitude to Ms Rita Goh of the National Heritage Board for acquiring the rights to use this image from the organisation after several attempts.

Thank you so much Rita for relentlessly trying and getting us permission from the National Archives and Records Administration of USA to use this amazing, stunning picture! And not forgetting the thousands of email exchanges, Skype calls and WhatsApp messages we have had over the course of this book publication. Your quick responses and immediate actions have made this journey that much smoother. Thank You.

Another photograph that similarly creates awe was taken about 140 years ago. A picture that shows Methodist Mission Anglo Tamil School students and teachers lined up together. A picture that makes one view history with mouth agape. There are many more such pearls that are included in this publication.



மெத்தடிஸ்ட் மிஷன் ஆங்கிலோ தமிழ்ப் பள்ளி (1880).
படம்: சிங்கப்பூர் தேசிய ஆவணக் காப்பகம்

Thus far, we have seen the contribution of the publication development team. Next is the translator who translated the story written in English beautifully into Tamil. Her contribution is also very important.

When I worked at Tamil Murasu, among those who worked as sub editors, she was the one who had the ability to write beautifully. She had the talent to tell a beautiful story even out of ordinary news. She is currently working as a freelancer. Hence, I nominated her when we needed a translator for this publication. The importance of that decision would have been realised by those who were tasked to vet her translation, including Mr R Anbarasu, the secretary of our Tamil Language Council.

Translation is an art. She stands out in the midst of many who simply string words that are synonymous in the English language and translate exactly as it is written according to English grammar – without even considering that there is specific grammatical syntax for the Tamil language. The reason is that she understands the English source and then translates it accordingly into Tamil, instead of looking at it word-for-word. Alternatively, she does the translation in an innovative way. When done in this manner, the translation is further enhanced.

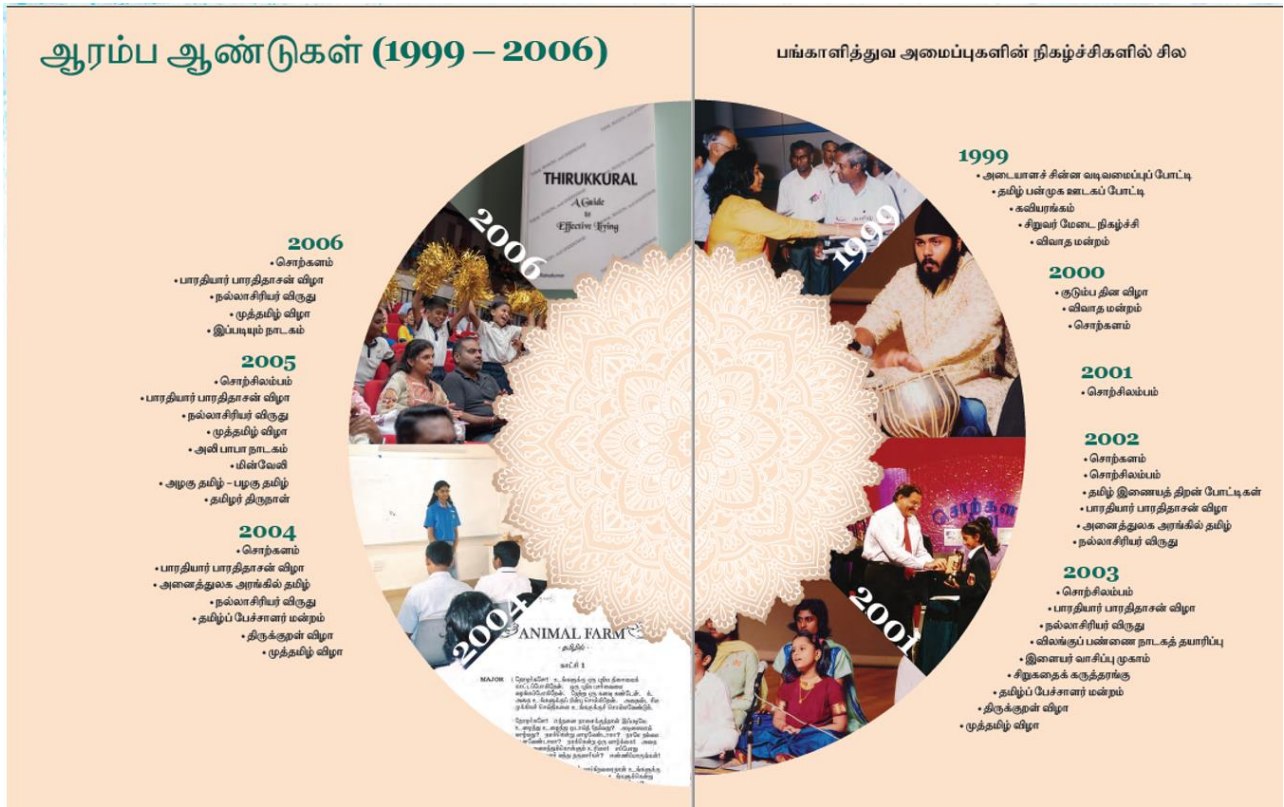
I have a selfish motive in nominating her for this task as well. If someone else had translated it, I would not have survived editing the work. When I read her translation, I had nothing to edit instead. That is the sign of good translation. Do read it yourselves later. You will realise how superior the translation is.

Finally, the design of this publication. I have seen many commemorative books. This publication certainly stands out. The reason for that are the design elements contained therein. They were created by the only non-Tamil who was part of the publication development team that created this book.

He carefully chose everything from the symbols to the colours. He recommended beautiful fonts even though he did not know the language.

He also made all the minor changes we suggested without losing patience.

In particular, we usually see the table of contents presented as a list. The photos are almost always the same size as well. However, he took a different approach. For example, for the third pillar (The Programmes Launched), he considered how to present the events that have taken place as part of the Tamil Language Festival and created this time wheel.



See how unique it is. The circular shape could also refer to the cyclic nature of time. The events of each year are listed in a circular format. It is easy to look at and understand as well.

I should mention one more thing. I related that he did not know Tamil. However, after looking at the Tamil fonts closely for almost three months, he began to understand some of the words. We would even tease him that he would have learnt to speak Tamil by the time the book was published. Once, when we had finished the editing and sent it to him, he checked everything again and circled two specific words and asked if these two words should be together as a single word. We were stunned. He had immersed himself in this endeavour so deeply.

Well, I have explained the three main reasons for the success of this book. Now for some statistics.

The total work put in for the development of this publication was about 1,300 hours.

There were 38 interviews that were conducted online.

48 partner organisations participated in the publication.

Along with the two photographs that you saw earlier, there were 223 photographs used in this publication.

Due to the in-depth research conducted, 108 quotes are featured in this publication.

We have looked at the statistics. Now is the time to introduce those who breathed life into these statistics.

Firstly, Mrs Prasanna was the Editorial Consultant of this commemorative book. She has accepted our invitation and is present here today. She assumed overall responsibility for the concept, research, design, and printing of this publication. She has even worked day and night over the past month.

Interestingly, about 20 years ago, I launched my first book '*Today in History*' in an innovative way. It was much talked about. It was this same Prasanna together with another friend, Kalaichelvi, who came up with all the ideas for the release.

Twenty years later, her contribution to the release of this publication has been significant as well.

Prakash and Divya proved to be assets in her research efforts.

The translator was Shiva. The one who amazed us with the design work was Stanley Chek.

These five are the real heroes. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the other four members could not be invited here. Prasanna has come here to represent everyone. I ask that you express our gratitude to them with your hearty applause.



பிரசன்னா



பிரகாஷ்



திவ்யா



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ஸ்டான்லி செக்

Apart from these persons, Dashini, who contributed during the initial period, is also present today. My heartfelt thanks to her and to Bairavi who followed after her.

My thanks to Manogaran, Chairman of the Tamil Language Council, for giving me this opportunity, and to Mr Anbarasu who worked closely with me for the Tamil version.

I have told you about the story of our journey. Now, it is your responsibility to read and enjoy the story yourselves.

Thank you.