

Dravidian studies in the Netherlands part 3 (1980s - present): The rise and fall of a discipline

The third and final installment of this series chronicles the most recent flourishing of Dravidian studies in the Netherlands. Yet, as an academic discipline, Dravidian studies has been allowed to wither, due to financial austerity and an alleged lack of practical interest. Has the time come for a new, far-sighted government policy?

Luba Zubkova

Kamil Zvelebil's contribution and Dutch Tamilists today

Professor Zvelebil's appointment at Utrecht University in 1976 was followed by a flourishing of literary research. Working on a scientific classification of a two millennia-old tradition of Tamil writing, Zvelebil produced two fundamental works both titled *Tamil Literature*. One is an exuberant reference book that presents factual material and external conditions of literary production up to 1750 (Zvelebil 1975). The other, covering the modern period, is based 'on the critical and evaluative approach ... Tamil literature is here classified principally not by time, but by specifically literary types of organization or structure'. (Zvelebil 1974:2) These works together with Zvelebil's inexhaustible enthusiasm inspired a handful of students and co-workers to carry out original research in Tamil literature and culture, within as well as outside formal academia.

Zvelebil's talented disciple Saskia C. Kersenboom explored the enigmatic and controversial tradition of Tamil temple dancers (*devadasis*) and its intimate links with Hindu tradition. She studied Sanskrit and Tamil sources and practiced the art of dance and music while living with a Hindu family; perceiving the tradition from within enabled her to formulate a concept of the *devadasi* as a *nityasumangali*, an ever-auspicious female (Kersenboom 1987).

Other research carried out under Zvelebil's guidance included Marina Muilwijk's work on minor literary genres in Tamil of the late mediaeval and early modern period (Muilwijk 1996). She made an inventory of literary forms known as *prabandhams* that had previously received little attention from scholars at home in Tamilnadu because they were classified as 'folk drama' and secondary to the traditional canon.

One should also mention Hanne M. de Bruin, a graduate of Leiden University, who presented research on a traditional form of rural musical theatre, *Kattaikkuttu* (De Bruin 1999). In addition to a number of articles defining this genre, she published a full translation of a Tamil folk drama, originally meant as a supplement to her doctoral thesis. Hanne and her husband, actor P. Rajagopal established in 1989 the cultural foundation Kalai Mandram to support the seriously threatened Kattaikkuttu theatre tradition; they are currently directing a youth folk-drama school in Kanchipuram, Tamilnadu.

It is noteworthy that these three female Tamilists chose their areas of interest from among the least known phenomena of folk culture, where literature serves the aims of performance arts and requires a great deal of field work. They also preferred a multi-disciplinary approach to a strictly philological one.

This tendency to draw anthropological, psychological or sociological data while analyzing literary texts reveals an important change taking place in Dutch Dravidology, following the latest developments in Oriental scholarship. Researchers of the post-modern period, insisting on the plurality of aesthetical values, are turning away from the high-brow Euro-centrism of the past, towards a closer relationship with the object of investigation.

The life of the Tamil text

Saskia Kersenboom deals with this change in a radical book *Word, Sound, Image: The Life of the Tamil Text* (Kersenboom 1995), and challenges the dominant parameters of philological research in classical Orientalism. She speculates on the traditional notion of *Muttamil* (three Tamil) defining the language as threefold: the spoken word, music and mimetic dance, and compares it with the Western culture of printed text. This definition implies that ancient Tamil poetry assumes its full scope only if simultaneously performed in the three expressive media. An interactive CD included with the book allows readers to see for themselves how multimedia can complement text-based studies.

Contemplating the aims of present-day Indological research, Kersenboom repeats the question asked by Tamil people wondering at the diligence of the Western scholars studying a foreign culture. She writes: 'What's the use? ... What do our painstaking efforts amount to? ... As a student I witnessed the grandeur of Philology and Literary Science in the examples set by Jan Gonda and Kamil Zvelebil. Classes in Sanskrit and Tamil with them were full of erudition, vision and inspiration that instilled

awe and excitement over the new horizons they were able to open up before our eyes. However, Philology-at-large seemed to create a puzzling sense of *vacuum*. When confronted for the first time, in 1975, with the lush South Indian reality, it dawned upon me that my uneasiness 'back home' might have something to do with our type of scholarship'. (Kersenboom 1995: XV).

An answer to this question might be that Dravidian studies bring us insight into the cultural modus and mentality of a people and are indispensable to building fair and fruitful international dialogue. The practical necessity of the discipline, however, still seems obscure not only to laymen in Tamilnadu, but also to policymakers 'back home'. As a result, none of these first class Dutch researchers have been able to pursue their chosen research in Tamil literature at university.

The end of Dravidology?

Once again, there was no room for Dravidian studies. When economic growth slowed in the early 1990s, the government began cutting public spending, including on education. As financially autonomous bodies, universities adapted by redistributing resources and giving up so-called 'least popular' areas of study. With changes in world politics, the former interest in the spiritual heritage of de-colonized India faded, and in 1987, the flourishing Orientalist center at Amsterdam University was abolished. The Indological department in Groningen was cut to a bare minimum, while the Utrecht team was thinned out and merged in 1991 with the Kern Institute at Leiden. There too administrative tactics remained the same: wait until lecturers retire and withdraw the vacancy.

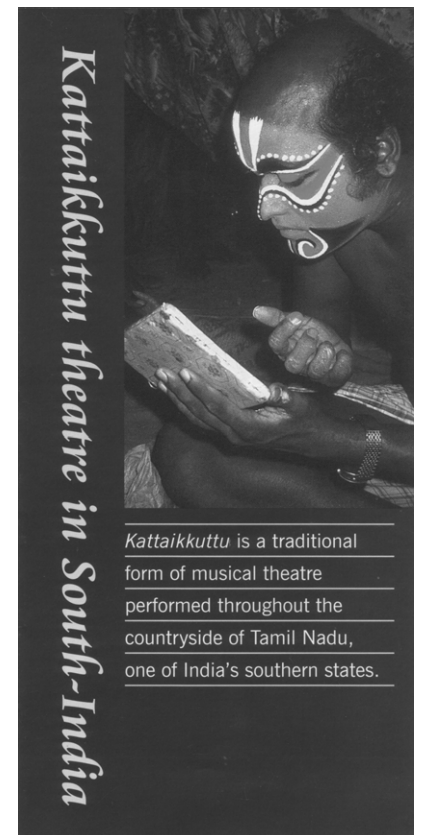
It is not difficult to foresee the future of a field so curtailed: less staff, less activity; discharged specialists change profession, those who stay keep a low profile. To avoid competition they tend to reject co-operation with 'outsiders' and send away even their own promising graduates.

Who can tell if this is just a temporary recession and not the end of a scientific discipline? There have already been two huge gaps in the history of Dravidology followed by a new start. But creative forces today are more dispersed than ever; there is no ongoing professional discussion, no cross-fertilization of ideas or debate... One can witness a growing gap between researchers, each of whom insists on the priority of his or her own point of view. The elimination of several Indological subjects has undermined the basis of Oriental studies as a whole. This is a great pity, while the usual argument that the Netherlands is too small to afford promotion of minor philological disciplines simply misses the point. A special commission appointed to advise the government on this problem condemned the destruction of the Orientalist center at Amsterdam University and criticized the current policy as short-sighted - so much so that it brings to mind the disastrous policies of the Cultural Revolution in China. The commission's report 'Baby Krishna' stated: 'In this way a small rich country in Europe has modeled its small cultural revolution on the sample of a big poor country in Asia and, moreover, to the detriment of the Asian cultures themselves'. (Baby Krishna 1991:22).

These words may be a bit harsh, or taken out of context. But the fact remains that Dravidian studies encompass cultural phenomena, essential to understanding ancient Indian civilization and the contemporary life of as many as 230 million people in South India, Sri Lanka and other countries. It should be feasible to create a center at a Dutch university where these studies can continue. Since universities acting independently neglect the least attended studies, a certain national policy ought to prevail, which should not be triggered by incidents caused by Tamil Tigers or by mass asylum seekers, but by more convincing long-term interests. A global trading nation should not have a blind spot for issues of such importance.

Fortunately, the knowledge gained is not wasted, and is largely being used in various non-academic activities to the satisfaction of the curious public. The examples are numerous: from the voluminous descriptions of temple architecture by Gerard Foekema and the translation of Tamil sangam poetry by Herman Tiekens to the socio-cultural experiments of composer Carlos Michans and a theatrical project dedicated to the 400-year jubilee of the VOC by the dance group Fiori di Folia.

In 1989 the former staff of the abolished Orientalist department in Amsterdam launched an independent Indological



The leaflet of Kalai Mandram foundation

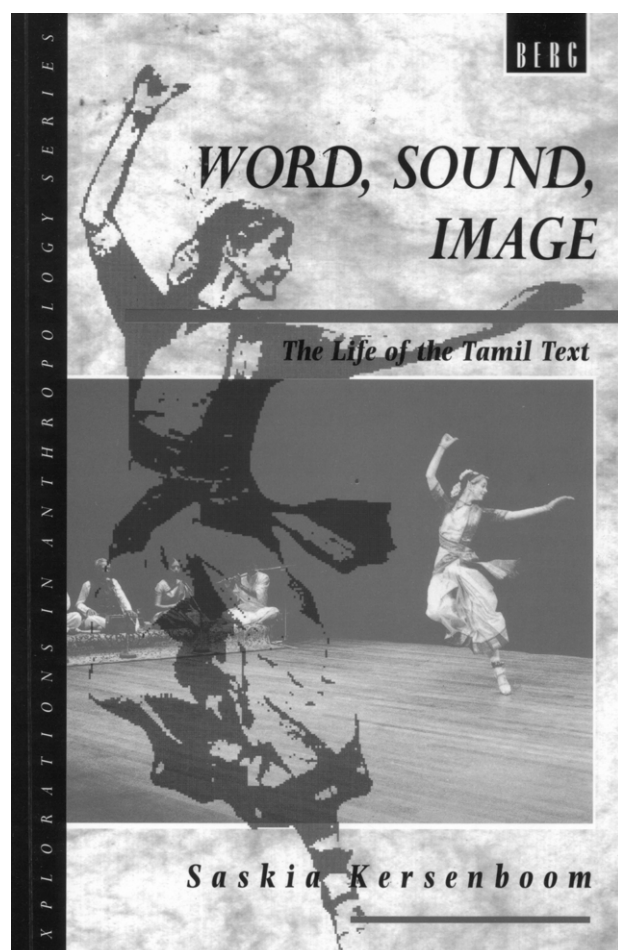
center (India Instituut, directed by Dick Plukker) flexible to the demands of the Dutch public and changes in Indian society. An educational and cultural foundation since 1995, it provides evening courses in Indian languages and cycles of lectures on subjects related to ancient history, religion and modern art.

In short, there are still possibilities for Dravidianists to apply their potential in a useful way. Even without institutionalized research facilities one may work as a free-lance or self-employed expert, following in the steps of Johan van Manen and other selfless gatherers of knowledge. However, in order to restore the prestige it once had in the outside world, Dravidian studies in the Netherlands is in need of a prescient national policy. <

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