

**David Dean Shulman. *Tamil: A Biography*. pp. 416.  
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Massachusetts, and London 2016, ISBN 978-0674059924. \$ 35 /  
£ 28.95 / € 31.50.—Reviewed by Olga Vecherina  
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### **An Encyclopedia of Tamilness**

The book under review examines a broad range of subjects related to the cultural history of Tamil language, starting from the first mentions of Tamil and the earliest available written evidence right to the present time. In an interview, which appeared soon after the book was published, Shulman, clarifying the use of the word ‘biography’ in the title, explains, “It is more like a cultural biography, cultural history of Tamil as a kind of world in its own right. I call it biography because I think of Tamil as a living being” (Panneerselvan 2017). Apparently, the book was conceived by an editor at Harvard University Press, Sharmila Sen, who, as Shulman tells us,

had this idea that HUP should publish a series of books about what she called world languages, that is to say, really major languages. And she was very clear that Tamil was truly one of the world’s greatest languages, like Greek or Chinese or Arabic or Hebrew (ibid.).

Shulman, as the prospective author, was fully aware of the difficulties attending the idea of writing a book on Tamil, with its numerous fiercely disputed and provocative issues that might need to be discussed. Nevertheless, he tells his interlocutor that he decided to take up the challenge and adds,

I agreed to do it and I struggled with it and after a while I came to enjoy it a lot because it was an opportunity to read everything that has been written about Tamil, and to read in Tamil, to read things, read new things and it was a great opportunity in that sense. The more I got into it, the happier I was (ibid.).

One cannot but agree with his editor, Sharmila Sen, that David Shulman was the right person to write such an unusual, well-researched and thorough study as this. We know David Shulman as a pre-eminent Indologist, a cultural anthropologist, a literary critic, a Hebrew poet, and a peace activist. He is the Rene Lang Professor of Humanistic Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a member of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities. Although Shulman's academic interests were always wide-ranging and diverse, Tamil language and its poetic treasures have been the constant subject of his studies for decades, starting with his PhD dissertation, "The Mythology of the Tamil Śaiva Talapurāṇam", at SOAS (1972–1976), to the present monograph addressed to those who love Tamil language in its various manifestations. He was awarded the highest honor, the Israel Prize for Religious Studies, "for his breakthrough research into the literature and culture of Southern India" (Haaretz 2016).

Tamil language is one of the most ancient<sup>1</sup> classical languages that has survived to this day and as of now is spoken by more than 80 million people in India, Sri Lanka, Singapore, and some other countries on all the continents. Tamil has a vast and highly diverse literary

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<sup>1</sup> We can find some Tamil words in the Bible (p. 20–21).

heritage ranging from the love and war poetry to mystical hymns and normative grammars composed in the last two thousand years. In his book, Shulman opts for a chronological way of presenting the extensive material. However, within the traditional chronology, the primary selection of subject matter is influenced by author's subjective preferences. The narrative is organized as a series of lectures based on the *kṛiti* format, or the typical musical composition in the Carnatic style. So, instead of chapters, we dive into "a certain set of patterns and melodies" (p. x). Thus conceived, the narrative performance opens with *ālāpana* (the introduction) and is followed by *pallavi* and *anupallavi* (the refrains); after that come the three *caranam* (the final and longest *rāga* verses) or essays on different topics with a time frame spanning the period from the times of the Cōlas to the age of Tamil modernity; the culmination is brought about in *rāgamālikā* and concluding words are presented in *tillāṇā*, which comes at the very end of the story.

One can view "Tamil. A Biography" as the third part of an imaginary cultural trilogy which includes Shulman's two previous books, "Spring. Heat. Rains: A South Indian Diary" (2008, "an exquisitely sensuous love letter to South India"), and "More than Real: The History of the Imagination in South India" (2012), all three works "tempered by a deep pathos and love for his subject" (Richardsen 2017). In the book under review, Shulman tells two different but closely interwoven stories. One is about the evolution of Tamil modes of speaking, singing, and thinking. The other describes the development of major expressive themes and the essential concepts of the Tamilness (*uyir, unarvu, akam, puram, vāymoli*) from a broad historical perspective. Through all the glimpses of modernity, a kind of special pleasure is found in the opportunity to hear the author's voice, "gently humorous, frequently lyrical, and wearing great learning very lightly," as Whitney Cox puts it in his review of the book. He further adds, "the book's prose admirably summons up what it might be like to listen to a series of lectures by a gifted teacher" (Cox 2017). The style of storytelling chosen by the author is very distinct and highly subjective. If one's main aim were merely to pass an exam, one would need to turn to a regular textbook

and refer to classic works, for example, of K. Zvelebil (1992) or other well-known authors. Shulman's study, though very informative and extremely readable, presents personal take on the subject. That is why any criticism of Shulman's book is problematic and probably out of tune (see a very critical review written by Tieken 2016, unpublished).

### Classical poetic tradition

In the first, introductory chapter, "Beginnings. Ālāpana", Shulman highlights the role of Tamil as "a body of knowledge" and a language that serves a successful and vibrant south Indian civilization as a powerful and sophisticated tool of self-reflection. The great Vedic sage Agastya is the founding figure of the period of the Tamil *caṅkams* (the literary academies) and their legend. He is the first grammarian and the putative author of *Akattiyam* (the first, nonextant Tamil grammar) and the most famous sage among the several great Tamil language builders. Talking about the story of the three ancient Tamil *caṅkams*, their members and authors in detail, Shulman stresses the paucity of evidence on their existence while at the same time underlines their importance for Tamil culture. The so-called "Tamil collection" of Sangam literature is an extensive corpus of works preserved in *Ēṭṭuttōkai* ("The Eight Anthologies") and *Pattup-  
pāṭṭu* ("The Ten Songs"), together with the *Tōlkāppiyam* grammar ("The Old Composition"). Shulman offers two different—internal and external—visions of the origin of Tamil language, grammar, and poetry as complementary forms so that the modern reader might better understand the development of Tamil literary tradition.

In the second chapter, "First Budding: Tamil from the Inside. Pallavi", the author considers *akam* ('in-ness', or love poetry) and *puram* ('out-ness', or war poems) as the main subjects of poetic grammar. Together with a series of five main *tiṇai* (the category) named after five specific landscapes, they form the semiotic map of the Tamil Nadu. Exploring the conditions for evolution of the Tamil society as proposed by R. Champakalakshmi (1996) and K. S. Sivathambi (1998) in their studies, the author emphasizes a healthy tension between two

dominant social structures that can be traced from the beginning of the first millennium CE right up to the present day. So, two, somewhat different, state structures were formed by the middle of the millennium. The Pallava dynasty was located in the north, with its capital at Kanchipuram. In contrast, the Pāṇḍya state was situated in the far south, with its capital at Madurai, and its history based on the mythic genealogy of the early Pāṇḍya kings. Viewed through such a mythic lens, the God Śiva was depicted as “an accomplished poet himself” and the real founder of the dynasty, “whose family priest was Agastya” (p. 85).

In the second section of the chapter, the two great medieval poems, the *Maṇimekalai* and the *Cilappatikāram*, are examined as a complex, united, and composite picture of a colorful social panorama, “like a mirror (...) reflecting (...) the five landscapes of pure and impure Tamil.” Thus, they unify the Tamil landscape’s main elements with “gods and humans following their duty and practicing virtue, wealth, and love” (p. 103). Moreover, in the second part of the millennium, the flourishing Tamil poetry was structured, redacted, and equipped with authoritative commentaries and grammars. Some significant results of this mature tradition were finalized in the famous commentary to *Iraiyāṇār Akapporu!* (“The Grammar of Stolen Love”) ascribed to Nakkīraṇār.

The third chapter, “Second Budding. The Musical Self. Anupallavi,” is devoted to a radically new period which “has altered the old *akam* paradigm” (p. 107). The two parallel devotional *bhakti* movements that flourished in the middle of the millennium focused on Śiva and Viṣṇu. They are traditionally traced to Sangam *Paripāṭal* and its divine heroes, Tirumāl and Cevvēl, who were merged in popular imagination with Viṣṇu and Skanda. Shulman insists that the tone of the *Paripāṭal* hymns is relatively restrained when compared to the two new genres of *bhakti* hymns, focused either on Śiva or Viṣṇu. They both came about through intimate connections with particular shrines, individualized deities, and idiosyncratic local rituals and festivals (113). Thus, “Tamil devotionalism (...) provided a conceptual and metaphysical basis for the mainstream social order” (p. 121). In these two parallel streams, says Shulman, God himself finds his devotees, and only

after that, they began singing being near him, “united by the mother tongue”(p. 122).

Both the canonization and the ‘scriptualization’ formed a highly specific Tamil textual model. The standardization, organization, and recording of the texts began in the late Pallava times. However, the process was completed only in the late Cōḷa period. Shulman examines the Śrīvaiṣṇava model, considering it the first to establish “one form of cosmopolitan Tamil” (p. 123). Speaking about the Śaivas efforts to compile the Canon on the base of *patikam* 39 of Cuntarar, the author stresses the co-optation of Śiva himself into these activities in the striking contrast with the North Indian understanding of writing as a polluting and dirty business. Then he compares these incredibly individual voices of medieval devotees to another Pallava phenomenon of personal and vital pictorial portraying in the Ādivarāha cave at Mahabalipuram. In this successful and vibrant period not only had the “two Tamil Vedas” (p. 148) been fixed in their visible, musical, and oral form, but the most beautiful script, Pallava Grantha, also appeared and influenced their written records.

To conclude, Shulman demonstrates how the familiar concept of the Tamilness united the Sanskritic Pallava North and the Tamil-centric Pāṇḍya South, both speaking Tamil, singing Tamil, writing and engraving Tamil, etc. Two different but classical grammars, one by Daṇḍin and the other based on Sangam poetry, balanced each other and both enriched further the explosive development during the great Cōḷa empire.

### **From Empire to Modernity**

In the fourth chapter, “The Imperial Moment, Truth, and Sound. Caraṇam 1”, Shulman considers the early-to-middle Cōḷa period as a moment of systemic change based on a proliferation of “several competing canons of Tamil literature” (p. 184). The new imperial program restructured the cultural ecology and widened the boundaries of Tamil society by including different social strata, their representatives using refined

Tamil for their purposes and claims. Tamil became an ‘imperial’ and universal language spoken from Sri Lanka to southern China (p. 193). Although the question of whether Cōḷa’s kingdom was an empire in the true sense of the term has not been resolved and the debates continue, its splendor and the vast transregional expansion of the Tamil language are beyond doubt. The author emphasizes the existence of hundreds of Cōḷa temples as the most crucial feature of the new landscape, with thousands of temple inscriptions and the new universe of “erudite discourse in Tamil, Prakrit, and Sanskrit” (p. 153) developed in numerous narratives composed by temple poets. He then compares the highly innovative texts of the three great authors of this period, namely Cayaṅkōṅṭār, Ōṭṭakkūttar, and Kamban, with the remarkable Cōḷa bronzes, and demonstrates the engagement of both (the texts and the bronzes) with Śakta metaphysics and Tantric ideas. Identifying the two groups of intellectuals as the literati of the court and the erudite connected with the *mutts*, he concentrates on the figures of Cekkīlār and Kamban, and their connection with the goddess Kālī. He discusses also Tamil Jain poets who were very active in the early Cōḷa period, one of them being Tiruttakkatēvar, whose *Cīvaka-cintāmaṇi* (“Jīvaka the Wishing-Stone”) is possibly the best single work among the *kathā* narratives that were mostly produced in the cities and read by people at large. *Cīvaka-cintāmaṇi*’s archaic, scholarly, and at the same time highly erotic discourse offered its listeners a wide range of knowledge across a number of fields and demands massive erudition from modern readers.

The fifth chapter, “Republic of Syllables. Caraṇam 2”, focuses on the period of the development of Tamil under the Vijayanagara kings, a period marked by “complex, ornate, sophisticated and erudite” poems that “require an audience no less learned than their author if they are to be understood and enjoyed” (p. 201). Monasteries (*mutts*) became the primary production centers turning out highly skilled poets, grammarians, and commentators, such as *Kāḷamekappulavar* (Black Cloud). Shulman also discusses the conservative tradition of outstanding commentators, Perācīriyar to Naccīṅārkkīṅiyar among others, who systematized and clarified previous Tamil poetic practices. However, mostly,

his special subject of interest is the unique and powerful symbiotic mix of Tamil and Sanskrit called *maṇi-pravālam* ('rubies and coral') and used mainly for Śrīvaiṣṇava and Jain commentaries. Examining this phenomenon, Shulman notes its different stylistic and grammatical features and other variations, referring also to Tamil's unique role in Kerala. Sanskrit-in-Tamil and Tamil-in-Sanskrit formed the homogenous blending of two languages reflected later in numerous works of the late medieval poets. The poets and the multilingual literati have created together a "Republic of Syllables" which was "based on shared axioms of phonematic efficacy and the grammars of sound and sense implicit in then-current metalinguistic and metapoetic theories." These theories were then "embodied and reformulated in a new series of grammatical texts" (p. 236).

The sixth chapter, "A Tamil Modernity. Caraṇam 3", offers a brief overview of the Tamil modernity that was a period of co-existence and mutual flourishing of the Islamic and the Tamil Śaiva literati, using simultaneously several different languages. Moreover, Shulman clearly argues that the road to modernism leads "through the rich and diverse spectrum of Tantric praxis and teaching" (p. 271). Thus, the author gives a concise but comprehensive presentation of a highly hermetic and almost unstudied world of Tamil Tantra of the period when all the major Śiva temples became radically 'Tantrified' and involved in strong and complex interactions with the Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta system (p. 272). Shulman foregrounds the notion of Tamil language as a "full-fledged deity, situated in the core of the speaker's inner self" to be the main feature of the period. This world of Tantric principles, Tantric masters, and Tantra-in-temples and in-courts were the main drivers creating a new reality of "audible and visible texts" (p. 283).

In the concluding chapter of his multidimensional narrative, "Beyond the Merely Modern. Rāgamālikā", Shulman asserts that 'the Republic of Syllables' came to an end in 1956 with the borders of the states redrawn to achieve linguistic homogeneity.<sup>2</sup> He

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<sup>2</sup> Before the States Reorganisation Act (1956), Madras State included the present day Tamil Nadu, two territories located now in Andhra State, the Malabar



considers this event to have “had the effect of reducing what was once a normative polyglossia” and notes the “structural and socio-linguistic continuity with the classical and medieval past”, stressing that the central role of grammar and significant themes and concepts (*uyir, unarvu, akam, puram, vāymoli*) are still alive (p. 317).

To whom is this monograph addressed? The author himself doubts if there might be “any reader who manages to read the whole book” (p. x), but one may safely assume that the book will be an enormously useful and thought-provoking reading for those who begin to study Tamil or love Tamil culture and want to learn more about its main features as envisaged by one of the leading scholars in the field. Nobody might pass the Tamil Literature Exam by reading the book but everybody who reads it will undoubtedly partake in a tremendous intellectual pleasure.

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region of Kerala, and part of South Canara. It was finally renamed Tamil Nadu in 1969.

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