MIDS Working Paper No. 230

A Magic System?
Print Publics, Consumption, and Advertising in Modern Tamilnadu

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June 2018

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Rs. 25.00

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Once, in an early editorial notice in the *Swadesamitran*, the first Tamil daily, its editor G. Subramania Iyer, also one of the founding editors of the pre-eminent English daily of south India the *Hindu*, published a plea to its readers: he requested readers not to send either money or letters asking him to mail the products that were advertised in his paper! Advertisements, he explained, were placed by businesses that dealt in the advertised products, and the editor had nothing to do with them.

It is not uncommon to find such editorial disavowals in the Tamil press of the early twentieth century. Such notices point to the fact that advertising was very much a novelty in Tamil society barely a hundred years ago. This paper seeks to trace the history of print advertising in twentieth-century Tamilnadu in the context of an emerging public sphere, a fast-expanding culture of print, and the advancement of reprographic and reproductive print technology – all these playing out in the context of an economy characterised by large-scale imports, increasing factory production and ever-widening consumption. The history of advertising in India, much less of Tamilnadu, awaits its historian, though there have recently been some excellent essays.[1]

This paper sets out to sketch an outline of a history of print advertising in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Tamilnadu by piecing together tantalising bits of information gleaned from contemporary printed literature.

Acknowledgments: This paper was first presented at the international workshop on 'Politics, Spaces, and Social Relations of Consumption: Urban India in the 20th Century' at CeMIS, Goerg-August University, Gottingen. I am grateful to Bhaswati Bhattacharya for inviting me to the conference and the various participants for their encouraging comments. Subsequent versions have been presented at the University of Christchurch, Yale University, and the Madras Institute of Development Studies.

Handbills and Notices

The earliest print advertisements in the Tamil country can be traced to the *Madras Courier*, established in 1785 in the colonial city of Madras. It needs no stating that this tabloid-sized weekly was exclusively targeted at the European residents of the first modern city in India: *Madras Courier* carried advertisements of goods that arrived in ships from the metropole. Even though Tamil journalism had its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century, it was only at the fin de siècle that Tamil journalism can be said to have had some serious presence. By the last decade, *Swadesamitran*, the only major Tamil periodical (started in 1882 as a weekly, *Swadesamitran* became a tri-weekly in 1897, ultimately turning into a daily in 1899), had begun to have a dedicated audience and could be said to have created a semblance of 'public opinion'. Even by the early 1910s, well after the first wave of mass nationalism in the form of the Swadeshi movement, there were few popular Tamil periodicals – in fact there was only one daily – and they rarely sold more than a few thousand, if that. The most widely-read daily, the *Swadesamitran* sold barely 3,000 copies until the end of World War I. It was in this 'small world of [Tamil] journalism'[2] that advertisements had to take root.

In such a small world, when the public sphere was barely incipient, advertisements hardly made their presence in Tamil periodicals. It could be argued that periodicals were not the sole locus of advertisements. The definitions provided in Miron Winslow's *A Comprehensive Tamil and English Dictionary* (1862) and even the much later University of Madras's *Tamil Lexicon* (1912–36) of '*vilambaram*', the modern term for advertisement, attests to its still evolving and new meaning; by defining the term variously as 'advertisement, notice, publication, proclamation' without zeroing in on the newly acquired meaning indicates how tenuous this phenomenon still was.

From around the turn of the twentieth century, leaflets, handbills and broadsides – rather than advertisements in the periodical press – had begun to be used widely to advertise products. Interestingly such ephemera did not replace tom-toms and town criers but rather supplemented such kinds of direct canvassing. This form was especially used for advertising theatre performances. From about the 1890s,

இந்தியாவின் சிறந்த நடிகரும் தர்மசீலருமான
ஸ்ரீமான் C. கன்னய்யா அவர்கள் இயற்றிய கடைசி நாடகம்.

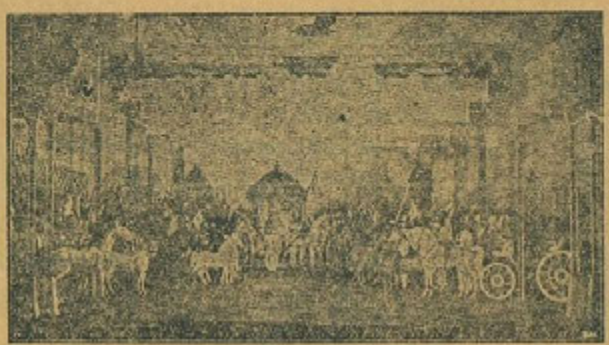
சென்னை திருவல்லிக்கேணி ஸ்ரீ பார்த்தசாரதி பெருமாளுக்கும் பிராட்டியாருக்கும் சத்னகிரீடம்திருவாபரணங்கள்செய்யஇக்நாடகக்கோர்வையின் சீசர் லாபமுழுவதும் வினியோகிக்கப்படும்.

1932வது செப்டெம்பர்மீ 24ஐமுதல்
ஒரு மாதம் வரையில் பிரதி தினமும் நடைபெறும்.

பிரதி சனி, செவ்வாய், வியாழக்கிழமைகளில் இரவு 9-மணிக்கும்
பிரதி ஞாயிறு, திங்கள், புதன், வெள்ளிக்கிழமைகளில்
மாலை 5-30 மணிக்கும் நடைபெறும்.

ஸி. கன்னய்யா கம்பெனி

மதுரை பெரிய தகரக்கொட்டகையில்



சகல வேதாகம, புராண, இதிகாச, சாஸ்திர சாராம்சமும்
கலியில் பகவத் அவதாரப் பிரதிநிதியுமாகிய

ஸ்ரீ மத் பகவத்கீதை

ஸ்ரீமத் பகவத் கீதையைப் படிப்பதும், கேட்பதும், நாடகமாய் நடிப்பதும் பார்ப்பதும் பாரதமக்களின் இன்றியமையாக்கடமை.

நான்கு வருஷங்களாய் சென்னையும் மதுரையும் இக்கம்பெனியார் இந்த கவின நாடகத்திற்காக தயாரித்தனர் என்பதும், சென்னையிலும், திருச்சியிலும், கும்பகோணத்திலும், திருநெல்வேலியிலும் தொடர்ச்சியாய்ஜனசரி நடிகப்பெற்றதை என்பதும், இந்நாடகத்தின் மேன்மையை நன்குவினக்கும்.

ஸ்ரீ மீனாம்பிகை பிரஸ், திருநெல்வேலி டவுன். காப்பி 50000

அமிர்தகாஞ்சனம் எல்லா வலிகளுக்கும் மருந்து

தினமும் பற்பலாயிரக்கணக்கானோர் வீடு டப்பி 1-க்கு 2½-அணு ஸ்ரீ திருஞ்ஞ தேவர் கம்பெனி P.T. மதுரை

A contemporary drama notice of the famed Kanniah Naidu Company.

especially with the growing popularity of touring Parsi theatre groups and its imitators, plays were staged in most towns of the Tamil country. Printed drama notices were used to advertise the staging of these plays, as these could be targeted at prospective spectators in habitations in the vicinity of makeshift theatres. The autobiography of the famous theatre personality T.K. Shanmugam provides many instances of such advertising.[3] A bullock cart with placards and canvasses pictorially depicting a few scenes from the play would go around town with an employee of the drama company announcing and advertising, often on a megaphone, the evening's play. Printed notices would be distributed as the cart, followed by a bunch of boisterous boys, made the rounds on the streets. Autobiographies and memoirs pertaining to those times attest to the fact that these drama notices were the earliest form of printed material that people of the times had access to.

C.A. Ayyamuthu, the Gandhian activist, recollects, how, as a young boy in Coimbatore in the first decades of the twentieth century, he would run after carts from which notices and leaflets were distributed to the sound of band music, and how he was thrilled by such reading material.[4] The Dravidian poet Bharatidasan writes of his excitement on seeing a notice for a gramophone record performance with the now-well-known picture (the HMV logo) of a dog sitting beside a huge funnel-shaped speaker and a turntable.[5] The nationalist poet Namakkal Ramalingam Pillai, as a schoolboy, was even more captivated by a drama notice – he began to copy out of it a picture during class hours and was punished for inattentiveness.[6] Often such drama notices became collector's items, and were probably the earliest collectibles before the days of widespread postal networks and the popularity of postage stamps. Roja Muthiah Chettiar, the antiquarian, collected hundreds of such drama notices, which are now housed in the library named for him in Chennai.

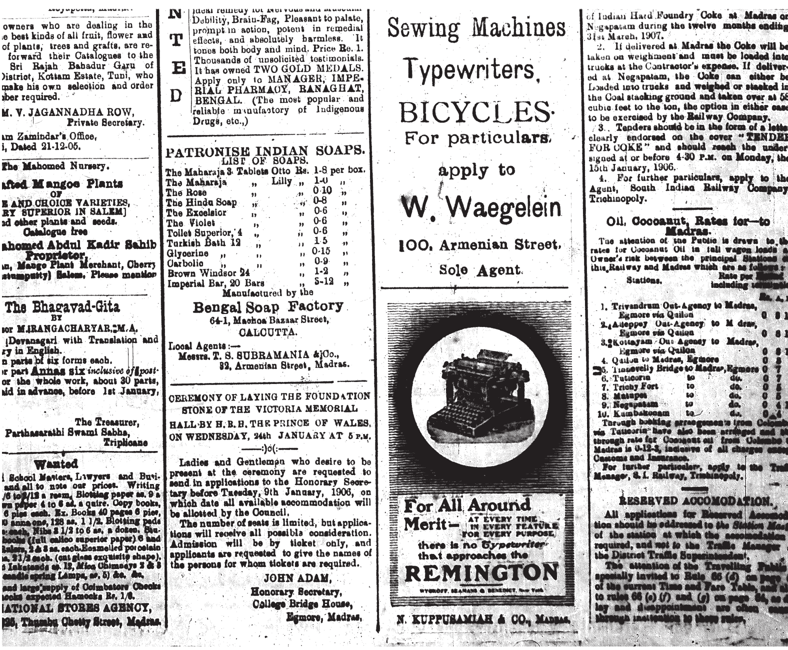
Despite the limited literacy of the times the drama notice was so popular that it became a widely used simile.[7] Anything that was distributed widely and freely, to this day, is said to be 'distributed like a drama notice'. The drama notice had distinctive features. Printed usually in black or blue ink, on coloured – very often in dull and not bright shades of green, pink, and yellow – manifold paper, they employed a variety of fonts, and wrong fonts and wrong points (printing terms that

have lost meaning with the use of word-processing software) were quite common. Arabesques, decorative lines and type-made blocks[8] were quite liberally employed. *Mathimosa Vilakkam*, a contemporary compendium of frauds, describes in detail how drama notices were often, to put it mildly, misleading.[9] Until even the early 1930s, before multicolour blocks became common, it was customary for Tamil periodicals to use the very same manifold paper for its wrappers. The Bharati scholar R.A. Padmanabhan, who joined *Ananda Vikatan* in 1933 as a sub-editor, recollects in his essay on *Ananda Vikatan*'s early days that its wrapper was printed on paper 'like a drama notice'.[10] The early *Kudi Arasu* of Periyar is still referred to as '*pachai kadiarasu*' after the green-coloured manifold paper that was used for its wrapper. Readers socialised early in their life to print through drama notices could seamlessly integrate with such magazines.

Such notices were employed not only for advertising theatre performances but also for a wide variety of household and other goods.

VPP, Value Payable Post

In the absence of histories of consumption and distribution structures we do not yet have a map of consumer products and the networks of retailing. But an impressionistic understanding based on a reading of contemporary writings and advertisements would indicate that such retailing structures were still elementary. In the city of Chennai, the arterial Mount Road was the centre of business and merchandise in the early part of the twentieth century. This business district largely catered to the European elite of the city. George Town (as Black Town, the native quarters next to the white Fort St George, was called after 1905), was a major market for Indians. As Pudumaippithan, the great Tamil short story writer, describes in a story of these times, 'There was neither electric train nor Meenambakkam airport. The civilization of concrete structures called Mambalam was still a swampland. And Tambaram was a distant region.'[11] If such was the state of Chennai, little need be said of the other parts of the Tamil land. Each town had a bazaar, and smaller towns and villages were served by weekly makeshift



owners who are dealing in the best kinds of all fruit, flower and of plants, trees and grafts, are re- forward their Catalogues to the Sri Rajah Bahadur Garu of District, Kottam Estate, Tuni, who make his own selection and order ber required.

M. V. JAGANNADHA ROW,
Private Secretary.

Zamindar's Office,
Dated 21-12-05.

The Mahomed Nursery.

Mangoe Plants
OF
AND CHOICE VARIETIES,
SUPERIOR IN SALEM]
other plants and seeds.
Catalogue free

Mahomed Abdul Kadir Sahib
Proprietor,
Mango Plant Merchant, Cherry
Salem, Please mention

The Bhagavad-Gita
BY
M. RANGACHARYAR, M.A.
[Devanagari with Translation and in English.
parts of six forms each.
part Annas six *inclusive of post-*
for the whole work, about 30 parts,
in advance, before 1st January,

The Treasurer,
Parthasarathi Swami Sabha,
Triplicane

Wanted
School Masters, Lawyers and Busi- and all to note our prices. Writing 6 to 2/12 a ream, Blotting paper as. 9 a paper 4 to 6 as. a quire. Copy books, 6 pies each. Ex. Books 40 pages 6 pies, anna one, 128 as. 1 1/2. Blotting pads each, Nibs 3 1/2 to 6 as. a dozen. (full calico superior paper) 6 and 2 & 3 as. each. Enamelled porcelain 31/2 each. (cut glass exquisite shape), Inkstands as. 12, Mica Chimneys 2 & 3 candle spring Lamps, as. 5) &c. &c.
and large supply of Coimbatore Checks expected Hamocks Rs. 1/8.
NATIONAL STORES AGENCY,
Thambu Chetty Street, Madras.

WANTED
ideal remedy for Nervous and Muscular Debility, Brain-Fag, Pleasant to palate, prompt in action, potent in remedial effects, and absolutely harmless. It tones both body and mind. Price Re. 1. Thousands of unsolicited testimonials. It has owned TWO GOLD MEDALS. Apply only to MANAGER, IMPERIAL PHARMACY, RANAGHAT, BENGAL. (The most popular and reliable manufactory of Indigenous Drugs, etc.,)

PATRONISE INDIAN SOAPS.
LIST OF SOAPS.

The Maharaja 3 Tablets	Otto	Rs. 1-8	per box.
The Maharaja	Lilly	1-0	"
The Rose	"	0-10	"
The Hindu Soap	"	0-8	"
The Excelsior	"	0-6	"
The Violet	"	0-6	"
Toilet Superior, 4	"	0-6	"
Turkish Bath 12	"	1-5	"
Glycerine	"	0-15	"
Carbolic	"	0-9	"
Brown Windsor 24	"	1-2	"
Imperial Bar, 20 Bars	"	3-12	"

Manufactured by the
Bengal Soap Factory
64-1, Machoa Bazaar Street,
CALCUTTA.

Local Agents:—
Messrs. T. S. SUBRAMANIA & Co.,
32, Armenian Street, Madras.

CEREMONY OF LAYING THE FOUNDATION STONE OF THE VICTORIA MEMORIAL HALL BY H. R. H. THE PRINCE OF WALES, ON WEDNESDAY, 24th JANUARY AT 5 P.M.

Ladies and Gentlemen who desire to be present at the ceremony are requested to send in applications to the Honorary Secretary before Tuesday, 9th January, 1906, on which date all available accommodation will be allotted by the Council.

The number of seats is limited, but applications will receive all possible consideration. Admission will be by ticket only, and applicants are requested to give the names of the persons for whom tickets are required.

JOHN ADAM,
Honorary Secretary,
College Bridge House,
Egmore, Madras.

Sewing Machines
Typewriters,
BICYCLES.
For particulars,
apply to
W. Waegelein
100, Armenian Street,
Sole Agent.

For All Around Merit— AT EVERY TIME, IN EVERY FEATURE, FOR EVERY PURPOSE,
there is no Typewriter that approaches the
REMINGTON

N. KUPPUSAMIAH & CO., MADRAS.

of Indian Hard Foundry Coke at Madras or Negapatam during the twelve months ending 31st March, 1907.

2. If delivered at Madras the Coke will be taken on weighment and must be loaded into trucks at the Contractor's expense. If delivered at Negapatam, the Coke can either be Loaded into trucks and weighed or stacked in the Coal stacking ground and taken over at 58 cubic feet to the ton, the option in either case to be exercised by the Railway Company.

3. Tenders should be in the form of a letter clearly endorsed on the cover "TENDER FOR COKE" and should reach the undersigned at or before 4-30 P.M. on Monday, the 15th January, 1906.

4. For further particulars, apply to the Agent, South Indian Railway Company, Trichinopoly.

Oil, Cocoanut, Rates for—to Madras.

The attention of the Public is drawn to the rates for Cocoanut Oil in full wagon loads at Owner's risk between the principal Stations on this Railway and Madras which are as follows:—

Stations.	Rs.	A.	P.
1. Trivandrum Out-Agency to Madras, Egmore via Quilon	0	8	11
2. Alleppey Out-Agency to Madras, Egmore via Quilon	0	8	10
3. Kottayam Out-Agency to Madras, Egmore via Quilon	0	8	11
4. Quilon to Madras, Egmore	0	8	2
5. Tinnevelly Bridge to Madras, Egmore	0	7	[illegible]
6. Tuticorin to do.	0	7	[illegible]
7. Trichy Fort to do.	0	5	[illegible]
8. Matupet to do.	0	5	[illegible]
9. Negapatam to do.	0	4	10
10. Kumbakonam to do.	0	4	7

Through booking arrangements from Colombo via Tuticorin have also been arranged and the through rate for Cocoanut oil from Colombo to Madras is 0-12-3, inclusive of all charges except Customs and Insurance.

For further particulars, apply to the Traffic Manager, S. I. Railway, Trichinopoly.

RESERVED ACCOMODATION.

All applications for Reserved Accomodation should be addressed to the Station Master of the station at which the accomodation is required, and not to the Traffic Manager or the District Traffic Superintendent.

The attention of the Travelling Public is specially invited to Rule 66 (d) on page of the current Time and Fare Table, and also to rules 66 (e) (f) and (g) on page 64, as delay and disappointment are often caused through inattention to these rules.

Classified advertisements. Newspapers usually carried them on the front page.

bazaars. Haruka Yanagisawa's revisionist account of consumption, which strongly demonstrates increased consumption in the inter-War period, however, is about goods – rice and oil and hosiery – that were not amenable to advertising.[12]

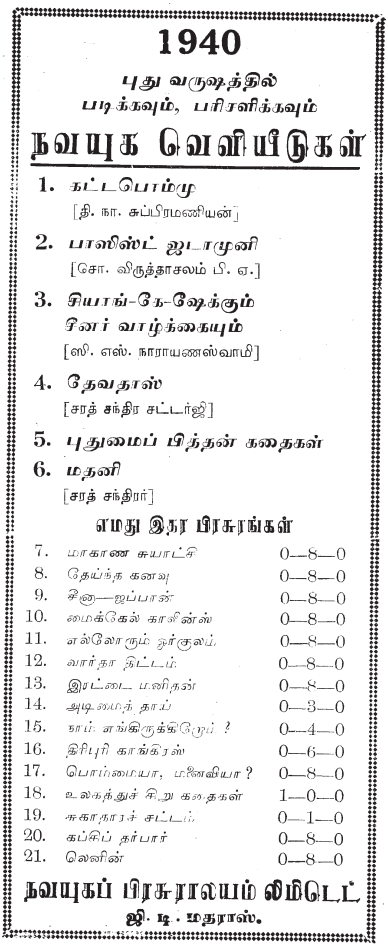
In such a situation the primary conduit for distribution and consumption of consumer goods was the postal system. Here's where the innovation called Value Payable Post (or Cash on Delivery System) – or VPP for short – was introduced by the postal department in 1877, nearly a quarter of a century after the introduction of a modern postal system in India.[13] Under this system, consumers could acquire products from sellers by sending a postcard requesting a product, and accept the product through mail by paying the money to the postman at the doorstep – much like what online retailers such as flipkart.com or amazon.com do these days. It was a combination of registered post and money order, and the buyer had to bear these costs. 'By this system

the Post Office not only undertakes to deliver a parcel, but also, for a small commission, to collect the cost of it from the addressee.'[14] In a context 'where there are few large firms outside the Presidency towns, the value-payable system has proved an inestimable convenience to the upcountry purchaser.'[15]

It is difficult to estimate the volume of commercial traffic in this system but one can assume that it was large both in volume and in proportion to total sales. In the words of an early historian of the Indian postal system, this system was 'so largely adopted by all retail traders', that it had 'diverted the whole of the light parcel traffic from the railways to the Post Office'.[16]

There is virtually no advertisement of the times which does not make a mention of the product's availability through VPP. 'Postage Extra' was a mandatory line figuring at the end of any advertisement copy, immediately following the marked price.

Not only established business houses and firms but small-time merchants also used this system to sell goods widely. This was also the time, as has been noted by scholars, of the 'arrival of relatively inexpensive imported items' into India.[17] In the 1920s, in Tamilnadu, a variety of goods, popularly referred to as '*shoppu saamaangal*' or 'shop goods', arrived by the shiploads from Japan and Britain, consisting of such imperishable consumer items as soaps, combs, mirrors, needles, beads, toys, play balls, etc.[18] These items were generally readily available in Chennai and other towns for retail sales, but in order to reach the mofussil areas, a new type of businessman emerged. These businessmen would print a catalogue of such items or take out advertisements in the press. Conceiving advertisements for mail-order business was a challenging task: for the advertisements to be successful, the copy had to be worded in such a way that buyers could make up their mind without actually seeing the product. A contemporary advertisement manual devoted a separate chapter for writing such advertisement copy.[19] Such manuals notwithstanding, catchy advertisement copies tended to be often misleading, with unreliable descriptions and images. On receiving specific orders, they sold these products through VPP.



One of the most successful of such mail-order businessmen was S.S. Vasan, who would later become a media baron (publisher of the hugely popular weekly *Ananda Vikatan*) and movie mogul (proprietor of Gemini Studios). Vasan used innovative methods to extend his business. Rather than sell individual items, he offered a package of 144 such items for a rupee![20] A typical example of a business firm that employed the modalities of VPP would be P.M. Raju Mudaliar & Sons who described themselves as 'Book and Medicine Sellers, Gold Gilded

German Silver Jewellers, Rubber Stamp Makers, Publishers of Annual Diaries and General Commission Agents'.[21]

Similarly, producers of chapbooks, who for the most part operated in the working-class neighbourhood of Choolai in Chennai, dealt with a variety of, often unrelated, objects. Chapbooks carried advertisements of products that were to be sold by mail order and VPP. For example, Choolai Manicka Nayagar, one of the more prominent dealers of chapbooks in the inter-War period, routinely advertised hair oil, Japanese silk scarves, oil for turning grey hair black, antidotes for scorpion bites, and soaps usable for depilation.[22]

Another familiar item was the cure-all tonic 'Minasara Rasam' (lit. 'electric fluid') – produced by Dr P. Varadarajulu Naidu, a prominent political leader of the early part of the twentieth century – a hugely successful product that kept the cash till ringing. As Sarah Hodges observes, 'health products had a disproportionately large place within emergent print advertising across ... Tamil south'.[23] This was especially so in relation to 'contraceptive products … [and] for books relating to birth control'.[24] A contemporary manual on advertising also made this point about advertising by spurious drug companies who employed it for prurient purposes.[25] From the work of Douglas Haynes we know that the Tamil country was not exceptional in this.[26] It has been observed that medical advertisements were 'the largest single source for newspaper revenues'.[27] Here is a typical example.

> Well Known! Panacea!
>
> Ayakkantha Thiravakam
>
> Friends, this wonder drug cures a surprising number of dreadful diseases. Thousands have used this to their satisfaction. This inimitable drug is an elixir for bodies weakened by disease and 'bad company'. It is prepared by the English method and is very pleasurable to the palate. Chronic coughs are alleviated with just two doses ... Grey hair turns black ... dropsy cured; smarting of the eyes and exhaustion of the limbs relieved. It makes faces glow, drives away fatigue. It's an appetizer. It elevates the spirit, strengthens the nerves, infuses new blood into the body, cures diseases caused by the imbalance of humours.

Considering the nature of the system itself, not surprisingly, VPP lent itself to abuses. A contemporary historian of the postal system observed: 'Like everything designed for the good of mankind, the Value-Payable Post is not an altogether unmixed blessing. … people have to buy articles without seeing them, and if they are disappointed in their purchases they are inclined to think that the Post Office is at fault and to demand their money back.'[28]

How the typical mail-order businessman worked, in the colourful description of *Mathimosa Vilakkam*, the great compendium on fraudsters, is as follows:

> People who don't possess a quarter anna coin, would assume names such as Raju & Company or Burt & Company or Thangavelu & Company, and somehow raise enough money to print a catalogue of at least ten formes [80 or 160 pp]. The catalogue would include a list of books, a list of silver and copper ornaments with descriptive details, a list of perfumes, a list of varieties of oils, a list of medicinal products, and *lehyams* [electuaries]. People who saw these catalogues would be tricked into believing that the company was trading in thousands of rupees' worth of commodities.[29]

These fraudsters, according to *Mathimosa Vilakkam*, bribed men in rival companies to steal their mailing lists, and mailed catalogues, printed in numbers such as 4,000 or 5,000, to such addresses – quite like how dotcoms and other online sellers and spamsters operate now. The catalogue would also include pictures, printed with blocks, *Mathimosa Vilakkam* adds, of fountain pens, bracelets, anklets, waistbands and watches. The catalogues always claimed that stocks were limited and that the great deals were only for a limited period. These catalogues claimed that they were trustworthy businessmen conducting their trade for a long time. But in reality, however, they would make a mixture of pulverised coconut shells, salt, dried ginger and areca nuts, fill them up in small tins, and paste fancy labels and pass them off as medicines and cures. Similarly, they would purchase 'masala oil' from some Muslim oil-mongers, add gingelly oil to it, and pass it off as medicinal oils. For a product that cost an anna, the listed price would be eight annas, and would charge extra for postage and packing. Some products they would buy from Gujilee Bazaar – or 'the thieving bazaar', the flea market of

நியூ ஏஷ்யாடிக்

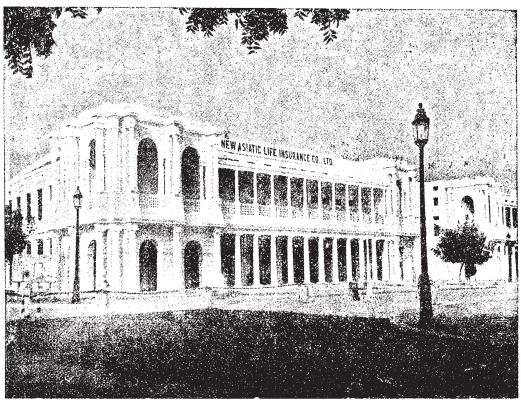
லைப் இன்ஷ்யூரன்ஸ்

பாலிஸியை விரும்புவது ஏன்?

குறைந்த பிரிமியம்; புதிய பலதிறப்பட்ட பாலிஸி திட்டங்கள்; பாலிஸி தொகை கொடுப்பதில் ஜரூரான நடவடிக்கை; கம்பெனியின் உயர்வான செல்வநிலை; வியாபாரத் துறையில் பிரக்யாதிபெற்ற **பிர்லா பிரதர்ஸ்** அவர்களின் திறமையான நிர்வாகம் இவைகள் காரணங்களில் ஒரு சில.

கீழ்க்கண்ட புள்ளி விவரங்களே நாளுக்கு நாள் இக்கம்பெனி உயர்வடைந்து வருவதற்குப் போதிய அத்தாட்சியாகும்.

1934-ல் பூர்த்தியான பாலிஸி தொகை	ரூ.	15,38,000
1935-ல்	,,	25,01,000
1936-ல்	,,	30,61,000
1937-ல்	,,	35,58,000



வருடப் பிரீமியங்களின் மேல் 2½% குறைவு — இது போனஸ் வருஷம்

பாலிஸிதாரராக இன்றே சேருங்கள்.

ஊக்கமும் செல்வாக்குமுள்ள ஏஜண்டுகள் நாடெங்கும் தேவை.

தாராளமான பரம்பரை ஏஜன்ஸி கமிஷன்

முழு விவரங்களுக்கு:

தலைமை ஆபீஸ்:
நியூ ஏஷ்யாடிக் பில்டிங்ஸ்
நியூ டில்லி.

பிராஞ்சு ஆபீஸ்:
ஏ. சுப்பையா, பிராஞ்சு மானேஜர்.
289, லிங்க செட்டித் தெரு, — ஜி. டி. மதராஸ்.

During the inter-War period insurance companies advertised extensively.

Chennai – and pass it off as new. And who fell for such tricks? The gullible people in the villages, and people working with white sahibs in the hill regions, who took pride in postmen coming looking for them calling out their names![30]

Mail-order businessmen adopted carpet-bombing strategies and distributed their catalogues widely. Advertising through catalogues was, therefore, a shot in the dark. Mail-order businessmen would send off catalogues to any address that they chanced to lay their hands on. Certain types of advertising material serving prurient interests was sent to college students as a group. The colonial state was particularly concerned at the practice of sending *en masse* pricelists of cures for impotence and venereal diseases addressed to students. It ordered the postal authorities to intercept and forward these to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), alongside seditious literature.[31] Mail-order business was a precarious business, and perhaps Vasan was an exception in being successful.

Sometimes these mail-order businessmen did not just send out catalogues; they even mailed articles themselves. 'Although strictly forbidden by the rules of the Post Office, the small trader sends out numbers of articles by value-payable post to persons who have not given any orders for them, trusting that some of them will be accepted by a confiding public, and, strange to say, he manages to do a certain amount of business in the way.'[32]

It hardly needs stating that cheating was a two-way process. If mail-order businessmen tricked their customers by short-changing them, the prospective consumers often put them to loss by refusing to accept goods: after all, ordering cost little more than a quarter anna postcard. 'Many people are quite ready to order things from shops which they hope to be able to pay for upon arrival, but, unfortunately for the firms that supply them, these hopes are often not fulfilled.'[33] Schoolboys were frequent malefactors who got a kick out of ordering expensive objects like watches and not taking delivery. It was estimated that about 20 per cent – a rather significant percentage – of value payable articles posted were refused by the addressees.[34]

A returned VPP article caused considerable loss to the company as the VPP charges had now to be borne by them, and the product also lost its sheen and crispy newness, in the process making it difficult to sell even in such a blind process as VPP. This was especially so for printed books. M.V. Ramanujachari, the legendary editor, had some strange experiences with his monumental edition of the Tamil translation of the Mahabharata, which he published in fascicules over a quarter century. Certain subscribers, who had patiently received 43 fascicules over 25 years through VPP, refused the penultimate fascicule when it appeared at their doorstep! The lament 'readers refused VPP packets' was something that can be read often in editorial prefaces and publishers' notes of the times.

As a contemporary manual of advertising observed, the unscrupulous nature of many mail-order businessmen had created a situation where a mood of general lack of confidence had developed.[35] The heyday of mail-order business through catalogues was the decade immediately following the World War I. The decline of mail-order business was paralleled by the rise of Tamil journalism, to which we now turn.

Advertising Comes of Age

As noted earlier, Tamil journalism was plagued by low circulation figures until well into the twentieth century. The leading vernacular journals in the Madras Presidency, in the mid-1870s, sold as little as a few hundred copies (*Dinavarthamani* sold 400 copies, and *Amirthavasini*, 180 copies).[36] By the late 1890s, the *Hindu* and the *Mail* both carried many pages of advertisement. *Swadesamitran*, the daily, was probably the earliest Tamil periodical to carry advertisements. As late as in 1928, an advertisement manual stated that a magazine with a circulation of 5,000 was 'excellent' from the point of view of advertising.[37]

By the beginning of the twentieth century advertisements began to be ubiquitous and prominent in the periodical press. The time of the Swadeshi movement with its emphasis on indigenous production and boycott of foreign goods marked a new beginning in advertising,

குரு மருந்துகள்

60 வருஷ அனுபோகமும் கீர்த்தியும் பெற்றது.

(1) 1872 

(2) 1900 

(3) 1930 

(3) 1935 

நாங்கள் அநேக தலைமுறையாய் ஆயுள்வேதம் சித்த வைத்திய சாஸ்திரத்தில் பெயர் பெற்றவர்கள்.

இப்போது மூன்று தலைமுறையாய் ஐரோப்பிய வைத்திய சாஸ்திரத்தை கலாசாலே போய் படித்து தேறி வைத்திய பட்டம் பெற்றிருக்கிறோம்

சகல வியாதிகளுக்கும் தேர்ந்து தெளிந்தெடுக்கப்பட்ட மருந்துகள் எங்களிடமிருக்கிறது.

கண்பர்களே! உங்கள் நாள்பட்ட வியாதிகளைப்பற்றி எங்களிடம் விபரமாய் தெரிவித்தால் **60** வருஷ அனுபோகமும் புகழும் பெற்ற மருந்துகளால் சுகம் பண்ணிக் கொடுக்கலாம்.

☞ **அடியிற் குறிப்பிடும் மருந்துகளைக் கவனிக்கவும்.**

(1) குரு டைஜெஸ்டால்—அது சொல்வதைக் கேளுங்கள். மகனே! மகளே! கன்முப் சாப்பிடு, எதையும் சாப்பிடு. அவைகளை ஜீரணம் பண்ணவும், அதிலுள்ள சத்துக்கள், ஜீவதாதுக்களை உங்கள் திரேகத்தில் சாறுசெய்வதும் யான் இருக்கின்றேன்—அஞ்சேல்! அஞ்சேல்!! கல்ல சுகத்தோடும், கல்ல பெலத்தோடும் இதனால் நீடிய ஆயுளுடனும் வாழலாம் என்பதற்கு சந்தேகமில்லை—யான் இருக்கிறேன்—அஞ்சேல். 24 டோஸ் புட்டி அணு **12**.

(2) குரு பல்போடி—பல் பொடிகளுக்கெல்லாம் அரசன். அணு **6**. அணு **2**. சைஸ்கள்.

(3) குரு தைலம்—சகல பரம்கள், அஞ்சனங்களுக்கெல்லாம் அரசன். அணு **10**.

(4) குரு சஞ்ஜீவி சூரணம்—ஸ்திரீகளின் சகல ரூதக வியாதிகளுக்கும் இதுவே மகா சஞ்ஜீவி. குழந்தை பாக்கியமுள்ள தாய்மாராகவும், சுகம் பெலன் உள்ளவர்களாகவும் இருப்பதே குரும்ப பாக்கியமாகும். புட்டி ரூ **3** & ரூ **4** சைஸ்கள்.

(5) குரு கஷ்யவன ரிஷி சித்த லேகியம்—பெலவீனப்பட்டவர்கள், வயதுக்குமுன் நரைத்தவர்களாகவர்கள், கிழவர்களுக்கும் இதுவே சஞ்ஜீவி. பௌவனத்தைக் கொடுக்கும், பாதுகாக்கும்; சுவாசாசய நரை, ஈரலுக்கு இதுவே கல்ல டானிக்கு. ரூ. **5 0-0**. 15 நாள் மருந்து ரூ **2 8 0**.

(The great Rejunuvator and Lung Tonic).

☞ **குழந்தைகளுக்கு குரு மருந்தே அரசன்.** ☜

1. குரு காலிக் சொட்டு மருந்து—பிரளி வயிற்றுவலி, சகல வயிற்றுவலிக்கும் அரசன். புட்டி அணு **12**
2. குரு அஸ்தி பஷ்பம்—நோயைப்பற்றி அதனல் எழும்பும் தோஷமாய் இருக்கிற சகல பிள்ளைகளுக்கும் ஏகசண்டது. ஆச்சரியமான குணம் காணலாம். ரூ. **2—0 - 0**.
3. குரு பாலர் வயிற்றோட்ட மருந்து—சகலவிதமான வயிற்றோட்டத்துக்கும் இது மகா சஞ்ஜீவி. டாக்டர்கள் புகழும் மருந்து. அணு **12**
4. குரு பாலர் டானிக்கு—டானிக்குகளுக்கெல்லாம் அரசன். ரூ. **1—4—0**.
5. குரு K சொட்டு மருந்து—சுக்குவான் இருமலுக்கு இதுவே மகாசஞ்ஜீவி—அரசன். ரூ. **1 - 0—0**.

☞ இன்னும் அநேக மருந்துகள் இருக்கிறது. எங்கள் குரு மருந்து கேட்லாக் புஸ்தகத்தைப் பார்க்கவும். எல்லா ஷாப்புகளிலும் கிடைக்கும்.

டாக்டர் ஏ. மதுரம்,

குரு மருந்துசாலே, திருச்சினுப்பள்ளி.

Proprietary medicines did brisk business through print advertisements.

especially in Bengal where Swadeshi enterprise made deep inroads. Though the Tamil south was somewhat behind, a British journalist visiting Chennai in mid-1907 commented, 'And now in Madras I found the Swadeshi movement very strong. "None but Swadeshi goods," "Buy our Nationalist cottons," "Try our Bande Mataram cigarettes," were the

most telling advertisements a shop could write up or insert in the native newspapers, which are particularly strong and excellent in Madras.'[38]

During this period there was a clear distinction between news pages and advertisement pages, as any modern historian who has worked with old newspapers as a source will recollect. Front and back pages were usually reserved for advertisements (hence the joke that even the Mahatma's assassination did not make it to the front page, especially in papers such as the *Hindu*). Early advertisements were usually set in columns with a modicum of pictorial depiction, evolving from the 'classified' kind. Firstly, the technology for reproducing images was limited. Many of the advertisements were content to use only minimum embellishments such as the hand, the arrow, the asterisk, NB, and floral designs, borders and arabesques. An innovation called 'the type-made block' – dispensed readymade by type foundries by casting a standard set of designs – was frequently used to give some variety to plain copy. No wonder, a contemporary manual for advertising noted that 'all ads should be printed in plain type and easily read; type so fanciful with such flourish that it is difficult for the most educated to decipher was to be avoided'.[39]

Advertisement rates that periodicals charged were not usually one-off, and one could take insertions for weeks and months – this indicates that advertising was relatively cheap. Periodicals would keep the advertisement matter 'standing' as it was called in publishing parlance, i.e., the typeset advertising matter would be left standing without being distributed and recomposed every time.[40] Relying completely on words often had unintended consequences. For the documentary film on Gandhi, in 1940, the producers took out a front-page ad. An upstart copywriter, instead of calling it simply a 'Documentary Film on Gandhi' as the director had asked him, phrased it as 'Mahatma Gandhi in Celluloid'. A few days later they received an order from a lawyer in a mofussil town: 'Please send me one dozen by V.P.P.'![41]

Given both technological and commercial limitations, often the only image that Tamil periodicals before World War I could afford was the stylised masthead and the logo. If serials were run, a block would be made as it could be used repeatedly issue after issue. English

Soaps were a sign of modernity, capturing consumer imagination.

newspapers such as the *Hindu*, targeted as it was towards the English-educated who had more purchasing power, used more images. Metal engraving was widely available at this time –Perumal Chetty & Sons, the owners of Hoe and Co. (a high quality printing press which also issued diaries used by the new middle-class intellectuals with a new sense of a private self), was known for its metal engravings – even though it was

Hair oil was another popular consumer product.

expensive. Only line blocks were therefore used. The technology of halftone blocks meant for reproducing photographs became available to Tamil periodicals only in the mid-1920s, and even then Tamil journals desisted from using them due to costs. The leader of the Dravidian movement, Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, notorious for his penny-pinching ways, is said to have advised sub-editors of *Kudi Arasu* to scratch old

blocks beyond recognition: the printing result would be smudged and the face unrecognisable, giving the impression to readers that blocks had indeed been used but only that the printing had been fouled up! That Periyar's tactic worked indicates that printing technology of the times was so inefficient that smudged pictures in newspapers were so common that readers could be fooled by such ruses. It is said that Periyar was once very angry to see that C.N. Annadurai's photograph had been printed in his daily, and was mollified only when he was told that the block was borrowed from another press, and no money had been spent on making a new one.[42]

By the mid-1930s multicolour blocks – three blocks would be used to print the three primary colours, cyan, magenta and yellow, to give the result of a colour picture – were beginning to be available. But they were so expensive that only special plates and backside wrappers of special supplements were printed using multicolour blocks. Costs were especially high because multicolour blocks yielded results only when printed on art paper, which added to the costs. Printing blocks were so expensive that even a major newspaper like *Dinamani* not only did not think it below its dignity to borrow them, once it even thanked the lenders in a box item, e.g. *Triveni*'s editor Ramakoteswara Rao.[43]

There was another aspect to technological limitation. Periyar, on his European tour of 1932, jotted down the following entry, when he was in Berlin.

> Saw the press where communist papers and books are printed. Looks like a huge factory. … Types are composed, imprinted on a board, molten lead is poured and the rolled plate is set on the machine and as the paper reels are put in contact, the printed sheets come out folded.[44]

Evidently Periyar was writing about a rotary machine. That to an editor and proprietor of a journal with a circulation of over 10,000 copies a rotary machine was a novelty speaks for the technological backwardness of the Tamil journalistic world.

In such a situation of expensive technology for reproduction of images, advertisements had to take extensive recourse to words. In a Pudumaippithan story, written in 1937, 'Oru Nal Kazhindathu' (A

Day Has Passed), Murugadasar is a poor author who lives in a small tenement in Triplicane, Chennai. His dream is to write a novel of epic proportions, but what he actually ends up doing for a livelihood is to write advertisement copy for imported goods for 'an advertising company'. In the ironic words of Pudumaippithan, 'rather than writing indelible portraits of adventurous heroes' Murugadasar is reduced 'to writing the sagas of a variety of imported goods dumped daily from abroad, from soya beans to candles'. For writing sagas on Tapasa Energizing Tablets, Lipton Tea and a variety of other beverages, the European owner paid him a princely salary of Rs 30 a month.[45]

Not many businessmen could afford even this small sum to hire a copywriter, not to speak of an advertising agency. To address this need, one P.P. Naidu came up with a useful handbook. Titled *Advertisement Writing Made Easy* (1913), it described itself as 'the first of its kind', and was addressed to 'progressive merchants', 'being a collection of over 3,000 meaty mottoes, headings, phrases, catch lines, introductions, etc. suitable for all business.' It is, however, better described as a collection of clichés, worn-out phrases, hackneyed and pedestrian lines. Nevertheless, it gives us an insight into the infancy of print advertising in colonial India.

This was in such a context that even Subramania Bharati, romanticist and idealist, when he wanted to publish his books in 40 volumes with a first print-run of 10,000 copies each he thought of advertising as a crucial component of his exercise. Sure that his books would be 'sold as easily and quickly as kerosene or boxes of matches', Bharati estimated that his publication plans would require Rs 20,000 as production costs and Rs 10,000 towards advertising expenses.[46] Despite his long experience in Tamil journalism and publishing, this grand scheme only shows how advertising was still not a well-understood system.

In this context, P.P. Naidu's foreword is illuminative. Stating that 'No business man of today can afford to neglect any opportunity to increase his knowledge of successful ways and means to conduct his business', he had 'a talk with the Merchants': 'As a business-creator, what is there better than advertising. Advertising is the most important thing in any business. It is the vital spark.' 'It is the systematic, persistent,

truthful effort that pays in advertising.' And he gave an example, 'It is the continuousness that has made each letter in the word pears worth what it is today.'[47]

Another advertisement manual of the times, a much longer work produced evidently by a more experienced professional, suggests that things had improved little in the 15 years after P.P. Naidu's guidebook. *Vilambara Virthi*, *Vilambara Yukti* (in English titled *Advertising: The Business Aid*) by R.N. Sivasambu is an extraordinarily comprehensive work. Published by one Modern Publicity Company from Madras – apparently an advertising agency owned and managed by the author himself – this manual of 154 pages (Royal 1/16 size) is actually a detailed primer. Though no David Ogilvy, the author explains in a clear and crisp language (bristling with literary allusions to boot) the rationale for advertising and provides do-it-yourself techniques of advertising. Interestingly, he also makes a strong case for hiring professionals for the job of advertising. The content and tone of the manual show that advertising in India/Tamilnadu was still so nascent that the very idea of advertising had to be advertised. Considering the pioneering nature of this manual let me provide a detailed summary of the contents.

Sivasambu, claiming to be a graduate of one Dixon Institute and an advertisement consultant with twenty years of experience in the field, stated that, from his eighteenth year, he had been avidly reading and following advertisements in magazines and books published from the West. As is often the case with any new work in colonial India, the author begins with a lament on the paucity of advertising manuals in the vernacular languages which he sets out to redress.

Firstly, Sivasambu sets out to explain the indispensable link between commerce and advertising in the Western world and how the art of advertising was a specialised course of study in the West. In contrast, in India, he bemoaned, advertising was still in its infancy: only firms with some connection to the West did any advertising at all.

The elementary nature of the questions that Sivasambu tried to answer attests to the fact that advertising in India was still in its swaddling clothes. He disabused his readers of the misconception that advertising increased costs. Rather, as anyone would now know, advertising

increased demand and led to increased sales and, consequently, profits. Counterintuitively, he also advised his businessmen readers that advertisement budgets be increased during periods of low sales: the analogy he employed was that of putting a convalescing patient on a high-nutrition diet. In short, advertising was a long haul and not meant for immediate results. Raising the question, 'What can advertising do?' he argued that it could even change or create new tastes. He cited the example of tea in the United States. He also pointed out how advertising for beedis was ridiculed initially.

The manual also had a clear sense of what in current advertising parlance would be called media planning. Sivasambu discussed the location, periodicity, and character of audience, etc. in relation to placing advertisements.

For Sivasambu, the periodical press was the prime vehicle for advertising, and it is to the growing organic link between print and advertising that we now turn. 'Advertisement is the oxygen of the press'[48] and, in Sivasambu's view, 'the relationship between print and advertising was intimate.'[49] Advertisements were a critical input in the widening world of journalism.

The inter-War period, despite the Great Depression, was the time when many things fell in place for advertising to entrench itself in Tamil society. First was the quantum leap in circulation figures of Tamil periodicals. As T.S. Chockalingam, the doyen of Tamil journalism, reflected contemporaneously in a set of insightful essays on its history, it was marked by three moments: public interest in reading news began seriously with World War I; the second moment was the time of Gandhian Satyagraha and Non-Cooperation from 1919; and the third was the momentous Civil Disobedience Movement beginning from 1930.[50] At this time a new innovation called the '*kalana pathirikkai*', or the quarter anna journal, began to be published. Published often as a biweekly, its catchy format, of eight pages in crown quarto, with a cartoon adorning the first page, with no separate wrappers, sold tens of thousands of copies; *Suthanthira Sangu* even claimed that it sold one hundred thousand copies. The 1930s saw the rise of *Ananda Vikatan*. In February 1928, Vasan acquired *Ananda Vikatan*, a tottering humour

magazine, and he adopted a new business tactic. He hit upon a successful mix of humour, fiction and cartoons with a dash of nationalism. Besides, he conducted crossword puzzle contests with fabulous prizes, which gave a boost to circulation, and by 1933 *Ananda Vikatan* was claiming sales of 50,000 copies. As David Arnold points out, in 1931, Madras presidency could boast of a hundred Tamil periodicals with a combined circulation of about 2.1 lakhs and over 50 English language newspapers with a combined circulation of a little less than hundred thousand copies.[51] As Chockalingam further pointed out, in 1943, 'The last ten years constitute an important phase in the history of [Tamil] journalism.' Adding that 'Never before had the press grown like this', he also forecast a bright future for the vernacular press, a hope that was not belied.[52]

In the words of Chockalingam, by the late 1930s, 'Without advertising revenue journalism simply cannot function.'[53] Drawing attention to the cost of producing a newspaper or newsmagazine, he explained that it was advertising revenue that made it possible for the cover price to be considerably lower than even the actual production costs.

In the early decades of the twentieth century a clear language divide got entrenched in print advertising. The bulk of the advertisements, especially of high-value products, went to the English language press. The *Madras Mail* and the *Hindu* cornered a lion's share of advertisements. Advertisements of low-value goods went to the Tamil press. The first rupture in this scene was made by Vasan and his *Ananda Vikatan*. If Vasan himself had cut his business teeth as a low-level advertising agent collecting advertisements and earning commission, in turn he hired T. Sadasivam (better known as the husband of the famed Carnatic musician, M.S. Subbulakshmi) as his advertising manager. Sometime in the 1930s, it is said, he launched an advertisement blitzkrieg in London newspapers about *Ananda Vikatan* and its circulation: directed at London-based firms and their advertising agencies, the advertisements asked if *Ananda Vikatan* was part of their media plan? The London firms and agencies in turn deflected this question to their Madras branches and advertising agents, and consequently, it is said, *Ananda Vikatan* was flooded with advertisements.[54]

Despite this optimism, and the growth of Tamil journalism, it was a poor cousin to its English counterpart. The pecking order, established quite early in the century, marked a clear divide between the products advertised in the English dailies such as the *Hindu* and the *Madras Mail* on the one hand and Tamil dailies such as the *Swadesamitran* on the other. This continued to hold until the time of the liberalisation of the Indian economy in the 1990s. As C.R. Srinivasan, editor of *Swadesamitran*, and nephew of *Hindu*'s editor A. Rangaswamy Iyengar, observed in 1949:

> It is foreign producers who are subsidizing [Indian] newspapers. For the purposes of their business they test the customs and habits of Indian people. Their first target is the class of Europeans who live a high life; next come the high status, English-educated Indians. The common people with their rising standards of living and wants come last. Accordingly, in the advertising world, the hierarchy is Anglo-Indian papers followed by Indian-owned English papers and lastly the vernacular papers.[55]

Chockalingam, too, pointed out the misconception that only readers of the English press had more purchasing power.[56] Averring to the difference between English and vernacular newspapers, he also pointed to the disproportionate share of advertising revenue that went to the English press while the Tamil press received only a fraction of it. He asserted: 'there is not a single vernacular paper in the Madras Presidency that can boast of a monthly advertising revenue of more than Rs 10,000.'[57]

This was also complicated by the fact that in the absence of professional advertising agencies the press relied on agents to canvass for advertisements on a commission basis. With no dedicated agents, more than one agent canvassed with the same clients and often undercut tariffs leading to uncertain and skewed revenues. This also compounded the practice of giving out unreliable circulation figures.

Editorials written at the beginning of a new year or of a new volume invariably made reference to the support of advertisers. By the mid-1930s *Ananda Vikatan*, *Dinamani*, and other journals were publishing special annual numbers with better content and a lot more advertisements. It was customary to even print an index of advertisers in such annual numbers. For instance, *Dinamani*'s annual number for

1937 carried over 70 pages of advertisements in a total of 232 pages. The *Dinamani*'s annual numbers were commercially so successful that Pudumaippithan, sub-editor in charge of the special numbers, was demanding extra pay considering that the proprietors were making so much money.[58] Even by 1928 Periyar's *Kudi Arasu* was devoting half of its pages to advertisements.[59]

As indicated earlier, by the 1930s there was easier availability of technology to produce images. Crucially missing until this moment were the right products for advertising. No doubt there were a number of products such as cosmetics (soap, soon became a symbol of modernity, and talcum powder was a product that cut deep into the market touching the lowest classes), beverages, biscuits, fans, pens, watches and gramophones that were being widely consumed. Advertisements for baby formula foods also made a big impact like those for Pears soap: in a 1934 story Pudumaippithan writes with wry sarcasm of poor children who played by the railway tracks squeezing in through the fences: 'Are they chubby Glaxo and Mellin's Food babies that they could not do so!'[60] The extensive use of a ghee substitute, the generic Dalda, also needs to be noted in this context. (Notwithstanding all these brand names, branding was still somewhat of a novelty. They tended to be exclusively promoted and trademarked by foreign firms.) Further, the 'contraceptive boom' – the marketing of contraceptive and gynaecological health products, apart from the general health merchandise – that Sarah Hodges mentions had its limitations.[61] Douglas Haynes has already referred to the extensive advertising taken out by insurance companies. Railway companies too were major advertisers. Railways, then in private hands, such as the Southern Indian Railway and the Madras and Southern Mahratta Railway companies launched advertisement blitzkriegs at the time of major festivals and fairs luring pilgrims. But all these products and services were no match to the incredible cultural and technological product: the cinema.

Enter the Talkies

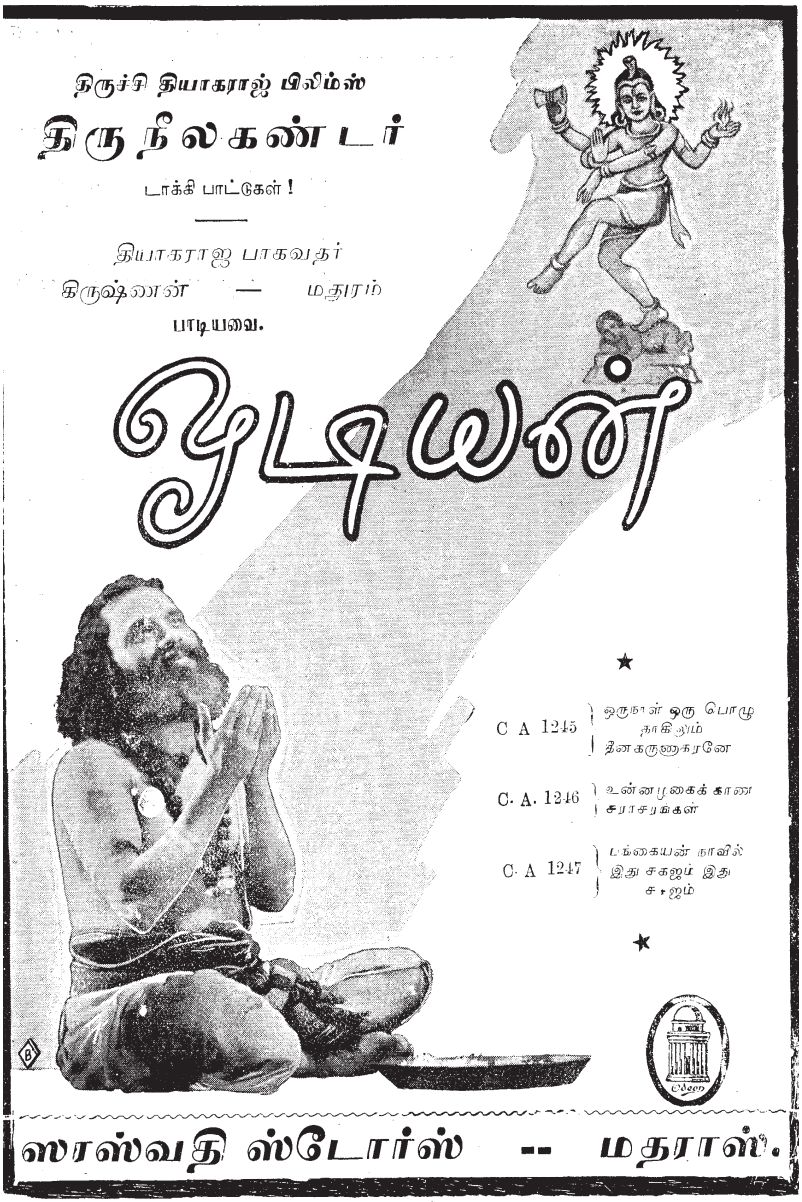
It was at this moment that the talkie was making big strides in Tamilnadu. The Tamil talkies, born in 1931, had made deep inroads into Tamil

society by the mid-1930s, and were reinforcing linguistic boundaries that the Tamil press was also shaping. Here was a product with a wide, if linguistically-bounded, potential that could at least theoretically encompass the entire Tamil populace, creating an imagined community.[62] The surfeit of advertisements for Tamil films from the mid-1930s is impossible to miss. Advertisements quite literally leapt from the pages at the front and back of periodicals and took irregular space. It was customary for filmmakers to take out special supplements in major dailies on the day of the release. And it was the usual practice to demand two pages of advertisement for a four-page supplement – surely a money-spinner.[63]

A.K. Chettiar, the pioneering documentary film-maker, engaged a Chennai firm, Premier Advertising Service, to work on the publicity of his film on Gandhi released in 1940.[64] Two lakh stamps with Gandhi's image were printed and distributed among school students, who proudly affixed them on their notebooks and textbooks. A beautiful two-colour calendar with Gandhi's picture was printed and given to commercial establishments. As Chettiar proudly recalled, even forty years later, he could still see the picture pasted on walls. Posters of different types and folders in art paper were printed apart from large photographs for display and many types of blocks for newspapers.[65]

Film advertisements required images to be successful, and with the high advertising revenues that they generated, the print media was happy to employ a thus-far expensive technology. It may be added that many film companies often provided blocks of the stills for the periodicals to use.[66] The 'music boom' – of gramophone records – that immediately preceded the 'talkies boom' prepared the ground for this.

By the end of the 1930s film producers were taking out special supplements in newspapers and magazines for advertising films. This not only extended the market for films but also greatly increased the viability and the profitability of the print media. This was also the time the gap between ideologically-oriented journals and the commercial press widened. Advertising revenue separated out the two; for example, Periyar's *Viduthalai*, the organ of the Dravidar Kazhagam, and *Dinamani*, the commercially run daily. For instance, in the 1930s, as the political



‘The Music Boom’: Film songs were cut as gramophone records.

pitch rose, Periyar cut down on the number of advertisements to find more space for party propaganda – something unthinkable for a commercial business-oriented publisher. As his printing machines had limited capacity, Periyar cut down advertising pages from 7-8 to 3-4 pages of his 16-page *Kudi Arasu*.[67] One need not add that Gandhi's journals never carried advertisements – he believed that they encouraged unnecessary consumption.

It was not long before film and consumer product advertising were married, leading to celebrity endorsement. Until this moment celebrity endorsement was exceptional: I have seen advertisements of a bangle-seller from Girgaon, Mumbai, at the height of the Swadeshi movement, advertise his products with a picture of V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, then in jail, and his exhortation 'to use only Swadeshi goods'.[68] By the 1920s, however, Gandhi's name was invoked extensively to market goods, including cigarettes, and obviously without permission! Khadi products were also extensively advertised. Tagore endorsed Cadbury's Bournvita. But celebrity endorsement was not common, if not actually exceptional, until cinema made inroads. By the late 1930s film stars were endorsing products. The most memorable ads were for Lux: In 1941, Lux signed on Leela Chitnis as the first Indian film actress to endorse the product. Tamil advertisements followed suit. The female star chosen for Lux – 'the Beauty Soap of the Stars' – was a recognition of rank.

By the 1930s advertisement was a cultural phenomenon, and Periyar termed the Congress leader S. Satyamurti's zealous publicity-seeking as akin to the carpet-bombing advertisements for Amrutanjan pain balm. Similarly, in the mid-1930s, he said that Nehru was being advertised widely like tea.[69] By this time, it was becoming common wisdom that 'newspaper advertising will always pay, and no scheme of publicity is complete without newspapers. The best paper always brings ample returns to its advertisers. Most of the local merchants' advertising money should go to newspapers. No other advertising medium is as desirable in all aspects. Some other kinds – booklets, folders, cards, letters, etc. are always effective – but as a usual thing they cost much more. Newspapers are read by everybody who is a possible customer of yours.'[70]

During and After the Second World War

During the War and its immediate aftermath, the Indian publishing industry and the press suffered. The government took over many newspapers, often on lease, to further war propaganda. The government also took out advertisements in newspapers. In a situation of widespread scarcity of goods there was little need for advertising. The government floated bonds to mop up savings, and even encouraged citizens to cut down on consumption. This was definitely not the time for advertisements. Moreover, newspapers suffered from acute shortage of paper. There was a moratorium on the launching of new periodicals, and even existing ones had to cut down on printed pages due to the system of paper quota.

But in the years immediately after Independence a new consciousness about the role of advertising and consumption was emerging in the Tamil public sphere. For instance, *Chinthanai*, a new literary journal, carried as many as four essays on advertising in a single year (1949). The crux of the essays was to explain to the reader the place of advertising not only in the publishing economy but in the larger production and consumption economy as well.

Thi.Ja. Ranganathan, a popular columnist, wrote what would ultimately become a cliché about advertising. Alluding to a popular Tamil saying about the impossibility of imprisoning the fragrance of the jasmine flower, he stated that, in the modern world, even jasmine flowers needed advertisement.[71] A common refrain of these essays was the impressive if not breathtaking power of western advertisements.[72] We also notice that these essays display great reflection on the art of advertising.

In an easily discernable reference to Vasan's early days as a small-time merchant, Thi.Ji.Ra., then a cub journalist, recollected how he advised a disappointed Vasan to take out a full-page ad once rather than resort to classified insertions over weeks and months.[73] By this time, of course, advertisements had matured enough to have advertisement wars: two rival soap companies ran campaigns and counter-campaigns about the use of animal fat in their products.[74] Many of these essays debunked

Celebrity endorsement: Across the world Lux Soap hired film actresses.

the old-fashioned understanding that advertisements amounted to squandering money.[75] Explaining the capitalist logic behind extended reproduction, they demonstrated how large-scale production, increased sales and advertising were organically linked. There was unanimity on the point that advertising by itself would not succeed if the product was not good or if the marketing network was weak.[76] The point about not cluttering the ad copy with too many words can be read as a comment on the still rudimentary nature of Tamil advertisements.

A longish essay by C.R. Srinivasan, was perhaps the first to explain the conundrum of the cheap cover price of bulky newspapers to a lay audience: dramatically posing this problem, he explained to the readers how advertisements subsidised the newspapers for its readers.[77] In explaining the way the market worked, he also made clear how newspapers themselves worked according to market logic.

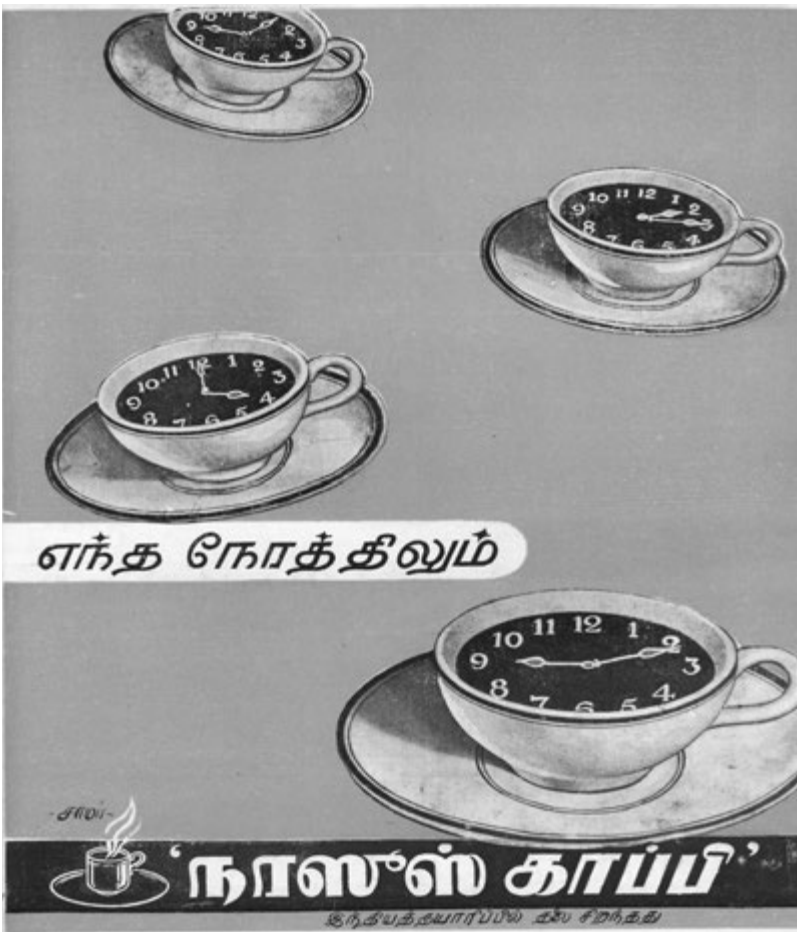
It was in this context that advertising agencies in the modern sense emerged. Advertising agents/agencies meant something very different well into the 1930s. The term then referred to agents who worked on behalf of a newspaper or magazine to meet prospective advertisers and canvas for advertisements, earning a commission in the process. Vasan had begun his career as an advertisement agent canvassing for Periyar's *Kudi Arasu* when he found out that the advertisement tariff was low.

This was to change after the War. Srinivasan refers to this explicitly: 'In the past few years a new class has emerged between advertisers and the newspapers. They make a living by bringing the two together' and added, 'I refer to the advertising agencies.'[78] Advertising agencies were 'not mere brokers', he asserted: 'It requires knowledge and experience to expertly spend the ad budget. They have expertise in producing ad copy; choosing the right media [media planning] and conducting "propaganda war".'[79]

In the post-Independence period Mumbai emerged as the undisputed advertising capital of India. The production of advertising was highly centralised. If, during the days of the Raj advertisement copy was imported along with the products, a similar centralised system operated in Mumbai as well. Creative departments were centred in Mumbai and advertisement copy was conceptualised and executed in

English – a practice that plagued Indian advertising with creative staff orienting their talents towards winning international awards rather than help sell products. This copy was translated into various Indian languages. Language translators were chosen from within Mumbai itself, for the sake of convenience.

An example of this was a middling sort of writer called Sura (not to be confused with the great modern Tamil writer and widely-translated author Sundara Ramawamy, often referred to as Sura). Sura, who began



Coffee was another product that captured consumer imagination.

writing short stories and reviews from his school days in the late 1930s, landed up with a clerical job in the Indian Railways, and in 1949 found himself in Mumbai. One day an old friend sought him out and invited him to moonlight for Lintas – every day he was to spend a few hours translating advertisement copy with more work farmed out for the weekend. As a government employee he was somewhat hesitant but soon the lure of making some extra bucks got the better of him. To escape possible departmental action, the work was done in the name of his wife, a common enough ruse adopted by public servants! Soon he found himself moonlighting for various advertising agencies such as A.S.P. (Advertising and Sales Promotion Service), Everest, Greens Advertising, etc. Sura continued with this work until 1963.[80]

One fallout of such unprofessional work amounting to hackwork was the poor quality of translated copy. Firstly, translators were cut off from the cultural milieu in which language functions. Especially in a situation where the language was transforming quite rapidly – as was the case with Tamil – translators were often out of synch with creative language. More importantly, the copy had often to please a manager who did not know the language (often the manager resorted to reverse translation to check the fidelity of the translation). Fidelity came at the cost of creativity, and even until the early 1980s Tamil translation copy was the butt of ridicule as translation was often awkward and unidiomatic. The reality of segmented markets with different cultural mores dawned on advertising professionals very late. (Horlicks had a big market in the South, and advertisements specially designed to this market were late in coming.) But these processes were played out in a context of a small economy. No wonder the Press Commission, in 1953, estimated the advertisement industry at only Rs 50 million of which Rs 35 million went to the print media.[81]

Writing the long history of advertising in twentieth-century India requires further work, and it is hampered by the lack of access to sources such as the archives of advertising agencies.

Concluding Remarks: A Magic System?

In a chapter intended for *The Long Revolution* but published later separately, Raymond Williams called advertising the magic system. Written as early as in the late 1950s, Williams described advertising as 'a highly organized and professional system of magical inducements and satisfactions, functionally very similar to magical system in simpler societies, but rather strangely coexistent with a highly developed scientific technology'.[82] Tracing its evolution from the simple announcement of shopkeepers to being a part of capitalist business organisation, Williams provided a critique of how advertisement was making man the user into man the consumer.[83] Was print advertising in colonial Tamilnadu a magic system?

Given the narrow economy, a still evolving transport network and limited purchasing power, consumption in Tamilnadu was restricted. In the absence of a network of retail outlets, well into the 1920s, mail-order business was the largest conduit for consumer goods. This business received a fillip with the dumping of low-cost goods in India by Japan. The nascent state of advertising was reflective of the limited consumption that characterised this economy. While pre-modern forms of advertising such as tom-toms were still prevalent even in the early twentieth century, print advertising was dominant, and remained unchallenged even when the radio began to make tentative beginnings in the 1930s. From simple forms of print advertising such as handbills and notices, advertisements began to dominate the periodical press from after the World War I. By the 1930s, in the high noon of nationalism, with a quantum leap in circulation figures of periodical press, advertising subsidised newspapers and magazines and was its mainstay. New mass-consumed products such as tea, coffee, soaps, etc. and services such as insurance demanded extensive advertising, and overtook advertisements for what has been described as 'contraceptive commercialism'. However, it was the advent of talkies that extended the use of print advertising. This moment coincided with the availability of better reproduction technologies such as multicolour block printing. But the periodical press was deeply divided on language lines: English papers received a disproportionate share of ad revenue while the vernacular press was a

poor cousin. Well until Independence professional advertising was in its infancy, and there were few firms that specialised in advertising. The politico-economic changes after 1947 significantly altered the field and professional advertising witnessed a bigger growth.

Notes

1 See especially the essays by Abigail McGowan, Douglas Haynes and Harminder Kaur in Douglas Haynes, Abigail McGowan, Tirthankar Roy and Haruka Yanagisawa (eds). 2010. *Towards a History of Consumption in South Asia*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. David Arnold. 2013. *Everyday Technology: Machines and the Making of India's Modernity*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, deals with advertising inter alia. Vikram Doctor and Anvar Alikhan have sketched a fascinating long-term history of advertising in India: '*Kyo Na Aazmaye:* The Indian Advertising Century' (revised post-publication draft provided by Vikram Doctor; the author could not recollect where the paper was first published). William Mazzerella's admirable ethnography of advertising devotes barely two passages to the history of advertising in India. He indicates that, by the time of his writing at the beginning of the new millennium, Indian advertising was 'already eighty years old'; he gives the name of B. Dattaram and Co. as the first advertising agency in India, and states that there was a veritable boom in the 1920s. William Mazzarella. 2003. *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India*. Durham: Duke University Press, p. 12.

2 I draw this phrase from Uma Das Gupta. 1977. 'The Indian Press 1870–1880: A Small World of Journalism', Modern Asian Studies, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 213–35

3 Avvai T.K. Shanmugam. 1972. *Enathu Nataka Valkai*. Chennai: Vanathi Pathippagam.

4 C.A. Ayyamuthu. 1973. *Enathu Ninaivugal*. Chennai: Vanathi Pathippagam, p. 99.

5 *Puduvai Murasu*, 25 May 1931, reprinted in Bharatidasan. 1984. *Manudam Pottru*, Chennai: Poompuhar Pathippagam, p. 89.

6 Namakkal Ramalingam Pillai. 1977. *En Kathai* (1944, rpnt. Chennai: Palaniappa Bros.), pp. 44–6.

7 In an earlier work I have discussed how literacy was not indispensable for the consumption of reading material. See A.R. Venkatachalapathy. 2012. *The Province of the Book: Scholars, Scribes, and Scribblers in Colonial Tamilnadu*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, chap. 7, 'Reading Practices and Modes of Reading'.

8 See A.R. Venkatachalapathy. 1999. 'Art in the Type Foundry', *Nunkalai*, March an outline of the cultural uses of type-made blocks.

9 See my 'Street-Smart in Chennai: The City in Popular Imagination' in A.R. Venkatachalapathy. 2006. *In Those Days There was No Coffee: Writings in Cultural History*, New Delhi: Yoda Press for an analysis of *Mathimosa Vilakkam*.

10 R.A. Padmanabhan. 1980. 'Vikatan Aramba Kalam', *Vikatan Ponvizha Malar*.

11 A.R. Venkatachalapathy (ed.). 2000. *Pudumaippithan Kathaigal*, Nagercoil: Kalachuvadu Pathippagam, p. 481.

12 Haruka Yanagisawa, 'Growth of Small-scale Industries and Changes in Consumption Patterns in South India, 1910s–50s' in Douglas Haynes et al. (eds), *Towards a History of Consumption*.

13 Geoffrey Clarke. 1921. *The Post Office of India and Its Story*. London: John Lane the Bodley Head, p. 40.

14 Ibid., p. 51.

15 Ibid., p. 51.

16 Ibid., p. 50.

17 Sarah Hodges. 2008. *Contraception, Colonialism and Commerce: Birth Control in South India*, 1920–1940. Aldershot: Ashgate, p. 106.

18 Sunda. 1976. *Ponniyin Puthalvar*. Chennai: Vanathi Pathippagam, p. 200.

19 R.N. Sivasambu. 1928. *Vilambara Virthi*, *Vilambara Yukti*. Chennai: Modern Publicity Company, chap. VI, pp. 26–32.

20 Sunda, *Ponniyin Puthalvar*, p. 200.

21 *Puli Pocket Diary 1909*.

22 A*rul Nadai Palani Andi Pandaram Pattu*. Chennai, 1927.

23 Hodges, *Contraception, Colonialism and Commerce*, p. 108.

24 Ibid., p. 105.

25 Sivasambu, *Vilambara Virthi*, pp. 7–8. No wonder, the author remarked, Gandhi refused to carry any advertisements in his *Young India*.

26 Douglas Haynes, 'Creating the Consumer?: Advertising, Capitalism, and the Middle Class in Urban Western India, 1914–40' in Douglas Haynes et al. (eds), *Towards a History of Consumption*.

27 David Arnold, *Everyday Technology*, p. 124.

28 Clarke, *The Post Office*, p. 51.

29 Doosi Rajagopala Bhoopathy. 1929. *Mathimosa Vilakkam*. Chennai: Ananda Bodhini, pp. 128–9.

30 Ibid., p. 131.

31 G.O. no. 1273, Judicial (Confidential), 25 August 1910.

32 Clarke, *The Post Office*, p. 52.

33 Ibid., p. 52.

34 Ibid., p. 52.

35 Sivasambu, *Vilambara Virthi*, p. 30.

36 Dasgupta, 'The Indian Press 1870–1880.'

37 Sivasambu, *Vilambara Virthi*, p. 47.

38 Henry Nevinson. 1908. *The New Spirit in India*. London: Harper & Brothers, pp. 122–3.

39 P.P. Naidu. 1913. *Advertisement Writing Made Easy*. Bombay, p. 4.

40 This could have disastrous consequences on occasion, as when, in the *Bande Mataram*, the standing matter fell off the stone at the time of printing, and Aurobindo Ghosh had to quickly compose in large type, filling up the whole page, an apology for leaving a page blank. Some ingenious printing foremen however would repeat a page in such unforeseen circumstances, and only a careful reader could make out that something was amiss.

41 A.R. Venkatachalapathy (ed.). 2006. A.K. Chettiar, *In the Tracks of the Mahatma: The Making of a Documentary*. Delhi: Orient Longman, pp. 106–107.

42 Rama. Aranganal. 1988. *Ninaivukal*. Chennai Nakkeeran Pathippagam, pp. 82–3. As late as in the early 1980s, when I was taking my first baby steps in the Tamil publishing world, I remember that borrowing blocks was quite common; if my memory is right making blocks cost about Rs 3 per square inch then.

43 *Dinamani* Annual Number, 1937, p. 210.

44 V. Anaimuthu (ed.). 1998. *Periyarin Ayalnattu Payana Kurippukal*. Chennai: Chinthanailayan.

45 Venkatachalapathy (ed.), *Pudumaippithan Kathaikal*, pp. 375–84.

46 R.A. Padmanabhan (ed.). 2005. *Bharatiyin Kadithangal*. Nagercoil: Kalachuvadu Pathippagam, p. 83.

47 Naidu, *Advertisement Writing*, pp. 1–2.

48 Sivasambu, *Vilambara Virthi,* p. 51.

49 Ibid., p. 116.

50 T.S. Chockalingam. 1943. *Enathu Rajinama*. Chennai: Kamala Prachuralayam, p. 18.

51 Arnold, *Everyday Technology*, p. 122.

52 Chockalingam, *Enathu Rajinama*, p. 18.

53 Ibid., p. 24.

54 This is part of oral lore, and is mentioned in various tributes to S.S. Vasan; I've been unable to trace the advertisements in London papers.

55 C.R. Srinivasan, 'Pathirikaiyin Vyabagamum Vilambaramum', *Chinthanai*, January 1949.

56 Chockalingam, *Enathu Rajinama*, p. 26.

57 Ibid., p. 24.

58 See my 'Aandananum Aandalum: Puthumaippithan Pathippitha Dinamani Malarkal', in *Ilavarasiyam in Ilavarisiyam* (Ira. Ilavarasu Festschrift), 2003.

59 Kudi Arasu, 23 December 1928.

60 Venkatachalapathy, *Pudumaippithan Kathaigal*, p. 67.

61 *Hodges, Contraception, Colonialism and Commerce.* The extent of the boom is authenticated by how perturbed the state was by 'indelicate and indecent advertisements [which] lower the tone of the public press'. The government wrote confidentially to some journals persuading them to desist from advertising aphrodisiacs and the like. In fact, an official of the education department actually took the trouble to cut out such advertisements ('out of curiosity', as he put it) from respected dailies like the *Hindu* and the *Madras Standard*, and wondered if the government should provide them patronage. See A.R. Venkatachalapathy. 2012. *The Province of the Book: Scholars, Scribes, and Scribblers in Colonial Tamilnadu*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, chap. 6 for more on the colonial state's policy towards morality.

62 For an analysis of how Tamil cinema came into its own in the 1930s see Stephen Putnam Hughes. 2010. 'What is Tamil about Tamil Cinema?'. *South Asian Popular Culture*, Vol. 8, No. 3, October, 213–29

63 Venkatachalapathy (ed.), A.K. Chettiar, *In the Tracks of the Mahatma*, p. 109.

64 This is one of the few explicit references I have ever found to advertising agencies in Tamilnadu. A cursory survey of advertisements in the 1930s periodicals did not reveal ad agency signatures.

65 Venkatachalapathy (ed.), A.K. Chettiar, *In the Tracks of the Mahatma*, p. 106.

66 As late as in the early 1960s a popular magazine devoting many pages to cinema, *Naradar*, exhorted film companies to provide blocks for it use!

67 *Kudi Arasu,* 23 December 1928, editorial note.

68 *Swadesamitran*, October 1909.

69 *Kudi Arasu*, 22 March 1936.

70 Naidu, *Advertisement Writing Made Easy*, p. 4.

71 Thi.Ja.Ra. 1953. 'Vilambara Vithai', in idem, *Pozhuthupokku*. Chennai: Kalaimagal Karialayam, (I ed. 1942), p. 174.

72 Ibid., p. 175.

73 Ibid., p. 175.

74 Ibid., pp. 173–4.

75 R.M.K. Viswanathan mentioned in an interview of how his grandfather, the founder of the RMKV textile shop in Tirunelveli, was averse to the idea of advertising. Conservative businessmen were wary that advertisements would attract unnecessary attention, especially 'the evil eye'.

76 S. Natarajan, '*Vilambara Kalai*', *Chinthanai,* Feb. 1949.

77 C.R. Srinivasan, 'Pathirikaiyin Vyabagamum Vilambaramum', *Chinthanai*, January, 1949.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

80 Sura. 1990. *Ezhuthum Nanum*. Chennai: Mahakavi Pathippagam, pp. 42–9.

81 Cited in Vikram Doctor and Anvar Alikhan, '*Kyo Na Aazmaye*: The Indian Advertising Century'

82 Raymond Williams, 1980. *Problems in Materialism and Culture*. London: New Left Books, p. 185.

83 Ibid., pp. 184–6.

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