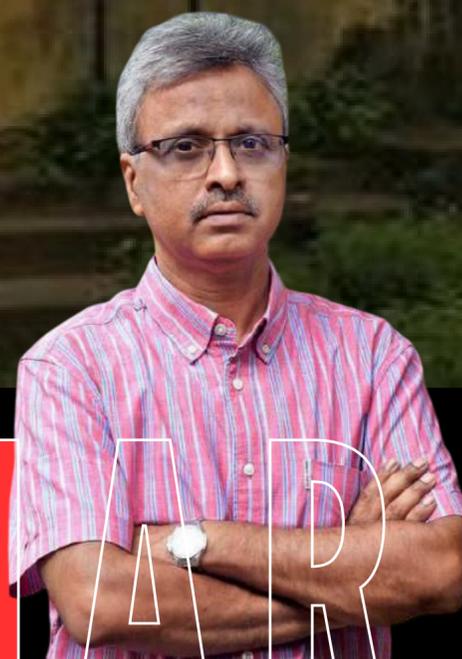


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ADISESHIAH AUDITORIUM, MIDS

# MEEK DICTATORS?

## Professionalization of Tamil Teachers in Colonial India



Krishna Kumar, the doyen of the history of education, described teachers as 'meek dictators.' Despite the enormous literature on the history of education in colonial India—on policy; the creation of educational institutions, the rise in literacy and the emergence of an intelligentsia, and other related themes—little scholarship exists on the creation of a professional class of teachers. This talk, drawing from a larger study of the politics of Tamil language, focuses on the professionalization of Tamil teachers.

Following Macaulay's 'Minute on Education' of 1835, the policy of imparting Western education undermined the status of language teachers. Hierarchizing languages as 'classical' and 'vernacular' further impacted the professionalization of Tamil teachers. Pulavars received substantially lower salaries, and could not hold administrative posts. Seen as symbols of a lost world, the carriers of a hidebound tradition, and therefore impediments to modernity, they were objects of ridicule. However, orientalist scholarship empowered the Tamil language, contributing to the formation of a new identity based on language, 'race', and caste: Tamil, Dravidian, and non-Brahmin. Tamil teachers were mobilized by this movement for a new identity—a key moment being the anti-Hindi agitation (1937–39)—which enhanced their social status.

**Prof Chalapathy** has taught at universities in Tirunelveli, Chennai, Singapore and Chicago, and has held research assignments in Paris, Cambridge, London, and Harvard. He has published widely on the social, cultural and intellectual history of colonial Tamilnadu. His research interests converge at the intersection of history and literature, and his research focuses on the early history of nationalism, the social history of Dravidian movement, caste politics, politics of language, and literary cultures. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award (2024) for his book *Tirunelveli Ezhuchiyum VOC-yum 1908*.

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