

# GENERATIONS



## **TRANSLATION INITIATIVE OF THE TAMIL NADU TEXTBOOK AND EDUCATIONAL SERVICES CORPORATION**

This is a project of the Tamil Nadu Textbook and Educational Services Corporation to identify and translate into English, Tamil literary works, that they might enhance the reach of Tamil antiquity, tradition and contemporaneity and enrich World Literature.

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# GENERATIONS

*Talaimuraikal*

**NEELA  
PADMANABHAN**

WINNER OF SAHITYA AKADEMI AWARD  
& SARASWATI SAMMAN

*Translated from the Tamil Original by*  
**Ka. Naa. Subramaniam**



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## Introduction

It is from these elements—story, people, and rhythm identified by E.M. Forster, that a good novel is put together. When the spirit of the “navarasas” (the classical Indian nine-fold quintessence of emotion) combine felicitously, you have an authentic Indian novel. *Talaimuraikal* (*Generations*) begins and ends on a note of peace and auspiciousness, and in between is a taste of the fullness of human experience. Not many modern Indian novels have achieved this balance.

*Generations* is a story of generational change and conflict and of how a boy grows up to take charge of a family which has loved its traditions not wisely, but too well. Neela Padmanabhan wrote it at the end of the 1960s, setting it some 25 years earlier. The many - branched plot, with big and little stories flowering on every twig, is rooted in the life of a single community—the Tamil speaking Chettis of Eraniyal town in the southernmost part of India, Kanyakumari District, on the border of modern Kerala. In the 1940s, this was still a part of the princely state of Malayalam-speaking Travancore (now southern Kerala). The Tamil that is spoken here has a Malayalam lilt and many Malayalam phrases and idioms, but the Chettis of the “Seven Towns”, as they call

themselves, think of themselves as Tamils, with a distinctive culture. The wider Malayali society does, however, impinge on the claustrophobic milieu of the migrant Chettis. It offers an escape valve for the rich and bored (as in the case of the young Koonangani, who takes a Nair mistress), or a haven to those who, like Kuttalam, are the victims of ostracism.

The novel is an original and fresh distilling of the indigenous tradition of orature, a distinct art form in this region with practitioners, such as the Brahmin Bhagavathars, the Oduvars or temple-reciters, and the Therukoothu (street theatre) players relating stories from the epics and the Puranas. Storytelling thrived within the family, with older members using ancestral history and legend to reinforce favoured attitudes and values.

This genre used, not the formal written Tamil, which is standardised, but oral Tamil, which varies from district to district and between castes and communities. In the book's many fine passages, Neela Padmanabhan raises this common speech of Eraniyal Chettis to the level of poetry, incorporating proverbs and idioms, humorous and witty anecdotes, and several kinds of folk songs, from droll nonsense rhymes to sonorous dirges. Because the writer has chosen the spoken form, his Tamil has escaped the tendency to pedantry and affectation observable in some forms of literary Tamil. Here the borrowings of the dialect from Malayalam and English are "tamilised" with an instinctive ear for the euphony peculiar to Tamil.

Though *Generations* is an intricate tale, it is simply told. The reader has a restful feeling of being in the hands of a

master, because its particularities are meticulously delineated against the background of language, myth, and ethnic consciousness. In the original, the effect is like being led into a cave where time and space have been compressed. Your pupils slowly expand to take in the surrounding frescoes, executed with pigments that you recognise immediately as taken from the earth that is common to all, although you may be from another part of it. Character after character comes alive for you, as you share the vision of the author-protagonist.

The theme is the dilemma of the individual who is faced with two needs—one, to cleave to a nurturing tradition, and another, to redress an injustice that receives sanction in that tradition. A third need—to make one's way independent of the tradition—remains suppressed till the end, when changed circumstances dislodge it and set it free, as the wind might loosen a seed stuck in a dry spot.

The novel describes the immiseration of a family and a caste, leading to migration. Family legends preserve the experience of uprooting and migrations within the southern country. These “little migrations over relatively smaller distances than those across the seas” disprove the stereotype of “unchanging India”. Many families, even in the relatively more stable South, have a history of having come from “somewhere else”, carrying with them an irreducible minimum of cultural baggage, which will affirm their distinct identity.

Young Diravi, descendant of a clan of small trader-farmers of the Chetti caste who had migrated from Tamil

Nadu to the princely state of Travancore centuries earlier, has imbibed throughout his childhood certain socialising values along with his grandmother's stories of a vanished glory.

When his parents decide to get their daughter, Nagammai, married into a wealthy family (so that she will always have "a fully belly"), Diravi comes face to face with another and less attractive face of tradition. It is the face of Papati, the grasping mother-in-law. It is the face of Sevantha Perumal, the son-in-law, who gets away with dismissing one wife to marry another. It is also the face of Unnamalai Aachi, the honoured grandmother, who deeply believes it is wrong for Nagu to be set free from her non-functional marriage to marry another man.

Is the double standard an inescapable result of the adherence to the age-old virtue of honour and chastity (*karpu*) on which the Chettis, like all true Tamils, are supposed to pride themselves? The question can only be articulated properly by one who has looked closely at the stuff of their lives—their livelihood, their beliefs and habits, customs and rites.

Suffering the insult of his sister's rejection, along with his parents and grandmother, Diravi becomes extraordinarily sensitive and observant.

The novel is peopled by dozens of characters, young and old, each of whom appears to Diravi to be a curiously dynamic natural creation. He discovers that it is not so much material circumstances, but a person's cast of mind that seems to really determine his or her behaviour. It is a wonder to him how his grandmother, Unnamalai Aachi's lifelong

widowhood and poverty have not soured her or depleted her energy. She is described in loving detail from her *vibhuti* (holy ash)-smeared forehead and her huge earlobes, with their dangling *paambadams* (large gold ear-ornaments in a cluster of geometric shapes, which are worn with pride by elderly women of the southern districts of Tamil Nadu) down to her “elephant leg” afflicted with filariasis. Not only does this redoubtable woman have a large and imposing nose that says “Here I am! Look at me!”, but she also has a palpable sense of the “soul” of her community. She works hard all day long, assists and advises everyone around her, tells stories to her grandchildren, and sleeps soundly, having delegated all her sorrows to God. Her cherished beliefs and her misgivings about new ways form a vantage point from which Diravi appraises life, and from which he must descend and eventually depart.

It is Unnamalai Aachi who tells of the glory of Chetti women who have been sacrificed for the sake of *karpū*, like the legendary Chetti sisters, whose cleverness cost them dearly. Their descendants are Diravi’s sisters—one, a fulfilled wife and mother, another, a *vaazhavetti* (lifeless, discarded wife); and a third girl-child, whose carefree childhood ends at puberty when she must recede into the *saappu* (the darkest corner of the house).

There are also regressive women like Papathi, Nagu’s rich mother-in-law, who has driven out her sick husband, and Thai, the wife who leaves her husband, because he has lost all his money. A poor man like Diravi’s father agonises over

having to make lavish gifts to his daughter's mother-in-law at every stage of her wedding, but puts up with it all for the sake of caste and family honour. But another poor man, Kuttalam, is driven to defy the community. He befriends men of other castes, thus threatening the caste cohesion so prized by these migrants. Some men grow in stature with suffering, like old Koonangani Paatta, when his wife and sons desert him; others lose their dignity, like the bankrupt and disgraced Kolappan.

### **The Centrality of Ceremony**

Chettis throw themselves into the observation of rites and ceremony, abandoning all caution and frugal instinct; in fact, all their other anxieties and concerns, as soon as any festive opportunity presents itself. It is believed that to hand back, when an auspicious moment is at hand, is to spurn Lakshmi, the Goddess of Fortune. Nagu is married off as soon as a wealthy bridegroom turns up for her, for a wedding is by definition an auspicious event.

Rites strengthen bonds and establish hierarchies of power; they give vent to creative as well as destructive energies. A ceremony initiates the bride Nagu into household tasks, another announces Salam's attainment of puberty, a third blesses Diravi's oldest sister, before she delivers her first child, a fourth orchestrates the rejoicing at the baby's first morsel of solid food. Sixteen days of ceremonies, punctuated by dirges, exorcise the grief felt by all at Unnamalai Aachi's death. Ceremonies weld the community together in the face of their special goddess,

Nagammai, after whom the luckless Nagu has been named. At the Oduparai festival, held once in 12 years, Diravi finds himself “seized by a strange ecstasy of devotion”. The reader can almost taste the special, sacred *kozhukattai* of rice-flour, fruit, coconut, and jaggery (“with not a drop of water added”), baked by the Chetti families in underground pits in the open field, where Goddess Nagammai has stood ever since the Chettis arrived here, fleeing from a king’s rage.

### **Diravi’s Awakening**

These and other fantastic and lyrical episodes in the collective consciousness of the Chettis are, for Diravi, a kind of continuous dream, from which he periodically jerks awake. At the end of the festival, after honouring the idol of *karpū*, comes the news that a widow has run off with her lover, and Diravi awakens once again to the implications of the double standard of sexual morality. The town council (the caste panchayat), which is supposed to guard the identity and the honour of the group, finds it convenient to please the rich Sevantha Perumal.

Unnamalai Aachi, grieved by Nagu’s situation, can get to sleep at night, because she simply “leaves it all to God”, but Diravi feels the need for meaningful action. Aware as he is of the complexities and contradictions, he never forgets that he is a cherished offshoot of his community. This gives him the credentials to diagnose and to attempt to heal its great sickness of spirit. His weak parents and his neighbours are “frogs-in-a-well”—they cannot help him. It is outside the

community, in the person of Moses, the Malayali Christian, that he finds some practical advice. When he begins to act on it, however, he is soon weighed down by a sense of doom. How calamity actually strikes, and brings not only an almost divine retribution in its wake, but also the possibility of freedom and peace, are masterfully told. The novel ends as it begins, with an obeisance to Singa Vinayaka, the tutelary deity of the Eraniyal Chettis.

Because Neela Padmanabhan does not wriggle away from Diravi's dilemma into the literary mode of subjective expressions, the novel stays on course. He does not squander his narrative resources, and every word, image, and anecdote has a bearing on Diravi's development. A work of great imaginative power, this is also a realistic story of how social change has sometimes taken place in India.

How Diravi prepares himself, consciously as well as unconsciously, to fight for what he judges to be his sister's interests, is a reflection of the actual struggle of gender justice that several progressive men have waged on behalf of women. That Nagu has not a word to say for herself throughout the novel is in itself an implicit statement of women's status. Some men have felt that injustice keenly. Though Diravi has no pretensions to become a crusader or a social reformer, he does become his sister's defender. Brotherly chivalry, a common theme in Indian fiction and cinema, is handled convincingly here, without a trace of sentimentalism.

Vasantha Surya

# One

The early dawn was cold with the Singa Vinayaka temple<sup>1</sup> tolled for the first puja of the day and the waves of sound, when they reached the long street stretching from east to west, had lost much of their volume and turbulence, retaining only their somewhat spiritual urgency.

The two rows of houses in the street facing each other were small and old-fashioned. True, there were signs of modernity in ungainly patches of colour, newly and thickly laid on. But modern conveniences like electricity had not touched the street at all.

At one end of the street, facing north, was an old, small house. It had a single wooden door blackened and infested with termites. Beyond the door was a passage bordered on both sides by raised verandahs—the verandah on your left as you entered being the smaller one. The big, broad verandah on the right was smeared with cowdung. Unnamalai Aachi<sup>2</sup> was lying on her side on the right verandah and woke up when the temple bells began to ring, saying as was her custom, “O Lord, Singa Vinayaka, my God,” mixing it with succeeding yawns, stretching her limbs, then sitting up and stretching her legs before her.

The first thing Unnamalai Aachi took care to see on waking up were the fronds of the coconut-palm rising against the lightening sky over the inner open quadrangle, though the palm was not yet clearly visible in the weak light of dawn. She believed that it was auspicious to see the palm fronds first thing in the morning. “Isn't the coconut tree the *karpaga*<sup>3</sup>—the all giving tree?”

Her legs were stiff with the cold and one of them was affected by elephantiasis—the gift of her baths in the river, Valli, in her younger days as she told all who would listen to her on the subject. The leg had grown bigger with each monthly succession of lymphatic fever. It was fair, bright and shiny, both because of the oil rubbed onto it and the natural colour of the woman herself. Unceasing work had made her strong and thickset, though, now, with age, she was losing weight. Her legs hurt all the time. On rising in the morning, she massaged her legs from toe to thigh with a skill and ease born of daily habit.

Aachi's adored grandson, Diravi, was trying to ward off the cold by curling up inside his blanket. He was lying on the same verandah as the old woman. “Paatti, is it already 5?” he asked, freeing only his mouth reluctantly from the enveloping blanket. “Yes...darling, get up. Children, get up and start reading your books.” The old woman paused in the massaging of her legs to say just this and renewed the exercise with greater vigour.

“Isn't it cold? Freezing cold? Don't you feel it Aachi?” asked the boy, Diraviam, expressing his reluctance to get up.

“Eh! Eh! This body has known the greatest cold of the world. You are young and tender, only just sprouting and you feel the cold more than I do.” She adjusted the blanket over her grandson where it had slipped a little. After that she resumed her massage.

She would continue massaging her legs for at least 15 minutes and then get up. Once on her feet, she continued working till she lay down to sleep at 11 or 12 or sometimes, even later. “My Lord Singa Vinayaka!” she would say and go to bed, stretching her limbs languidly.

Her hair was white and scanty. Her forehead, adorned with sacred ash, had a permanent discolouration, like smudges of ash. Her eyes were sunken, her lips dry and thin. Her nose with flaring nostrils rose majestically on her face. Smallpox marks pitted her face and her earrings were never still, except when she slept. This was the distinctive face that was Unnamalai Aachi. Diraviam was reminded of the shrunken pickled mango, whenever he saw Aachi’s face. “As long as I can remember, Aachi has been wearing these kinds of white clothes<sup>4</sup>. Why doesn’t she wear coloured clothes or, like Mother or sister, a blouse?” he used to ask himself, whenever he saw her bending over, doing some work or the other.

Beyond the passage was the courtyard. Beyond the courtyard in the house was a raised verandah, on which rose two wooden pillars worn thin by household members rubbing their backs on it to relieve their itching. On a mat on the verandah lay Diraviam’s father, Nagar Pillai. He woke