

# Roja Muthiah Research Library: A repository for Tamil Studies

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THE ORIGIN of Roja Muthiah Research Library dates back to the 1950s. Roja Muthiah, a signboard artist from Kottaiyur, a small town in southern Tamilnadu, began collecting books in the early 1950s as an inspiration for his signboard business known as Roja Arts. Soon he fell in love with the books and became a bibliophile himself. Over the years, Roja Muthiah scoured bookstalls all over Tamil Nadu for treasures until his library outgrew the space in his house. Until his premature death in 1992, Roja Muthiah could be found reading, compiling, and writing amidst heaps of books, clippings, journals, and artworks in his house. With the 'Library for Sale' news coming in from Dr C.S. Lakshmi, a visiting fellow at the University of Chicago then, Mr. James Nye, Prof. A. K. Ramanujan, Prof. Norman Cutler, Prof. Arjun Appadurai, and Prof. Ralph Nicholas from the University of Chicago (UoC) came together and decided to buy the collection. In 1994 the collection was purchased and setup in Chennai in the name of Roja Muthiah Research Library (<http://www.rmrl.in>). In 2004, a public trust named the Roja Muthiah Research Library Trust (RMRL) was formed to manage and take responsibility for the library. Up until early 2016, a Memorandum of Understanding between the two entities governed the collection. Now responsibility lies entirely with the RMRL Trust.

When the Library was moved to Chennai in 1994, it comprised about 100,000 items, which have grown to 350,000 in the past two decades. The collection spans over 200 years, the earliest item being a Tamil book titled *Gnanappattukalin Postakam*, published in 1797. The Library collection covers a wide spectrum of subjects such as classical and modern literature, literary criticism, indigenous medicine, religion and philosophy, folklore, material by and about women, metaphysics, Gandhian studies and numerous publications of historical value. RMRL has a rich collection of research material in popular culture such as cinema, theatre and the related culture of printed works. RMRL has around 2500 cinema song books and 2000 cinema posters. In addition to books and periodicals, the library collection also includes printed ephemera such as invitations of various kinds, cinema posters, clippings. Palm leaf manuscripts and gramophone records also form a part of the collection. Over the years, personal collections of A. K. Ramanujan, Lloyd and Susan Rudolphs, Milton Singer, Robert Hardgrave, Gift Siromoney, Mu. Arunachalam, Iravatham Mahadevan, T. P. Meenakshi Sundaram, Champakalakshmi have been added to the collection.

As a core activity, RMRL systematically started by preserving the collection through archival microfilming and digitization. So far the Library has preserved more than 1,500,000 pages of rare archival material, including both in digital format and in microfilm. RMRL has acquired the necessary equipment and preservation facilities. International best standards are being followed with regard to cataloguing and preservation.

RMRL provides reference services (at the A. K. Ramanujan Reading Room), with facilities such as a spacious reading room, online catalogue, microfilm reader and extensive reference collections, for its users coming from all parts of the world. RMRL contributes catalogue records to the South Asian Union Catalogue and Worldcat. Several books and research articles are being published using RMRL's collection.

A fully fledged conservation studio has been setup at RMRL recently with project funds from Navajbai Ratan Tata Trust for a major paper conservation project. Equipment, such as a nitrogen disinfecting system and leaf casting machine, has been set up to undertake the paper conservation programme. Processes such as disinfection, de-acidification, strengthening, stitching, and binding have been carried out to provide new life to rare and old printed materials.

In 2007, RMRL set up the Indus Research Centre (IRC) with the advice of Padma awardee Shri Iravatham Mahadevan. The IRC is an initiative to undertake scientific investigations into various aspects of Indus Valley civilization and its script. Dr Mahadevan served as the Honorary Consultant of the Centre till December 2011. Currently this position is served by Thiru R. Balakrishnan of the Indian Civil Services. Various workshops, seminars and exhibitions have been organized through this centre. Currently the centre is also involved in a Toponymic study of the Indus places. Several research papers have been published on behalf of the centre, and so too a newsletter called *The Bulletin of the Indus Research Centre*.

Digital restoration is a new area RMRL has ventured into recently. The experimental project carried out by RMRL for the digital restoration of the notebooks of mathematical genius Srinivasa Ramanujan turned out to be a great success. Recently, RMRL brought out a digitally restored reprint of the first edition of *Tirukkural*, a classical Tamil text, which was printed in 1812. As extension activities, RMRL has been holding a series of monthly lectures and organizing exhibitions to showcase various aspects of RMRL's collection on a regular basis with support from philanthropists: 'Gandhi in Tamilnadu', 'Early propagation of Tamil music', 'Nagarathar's contribution to Tamil publishing', 'Indus Civilization', 'High-West: Low-East – Dichotomy of Indus Cities: A Dravidian Paradigm', are some of the exhibitions that have been organized.

RMRL is now planning to archive oral histories by way of interviewing important people who were involved in major movements in India such as the Dravidian movement, Self Respect Movement, Anti Hindi Agitation, the Communist Movement and so on. The Library is also looking for support to undertake this work.

So far, RMRL's main sources of funding have been time-bound projects from institutions such as the Ford Foundation, Wellcome Trust for the History of Understanding Medicine, the British Library, Navajbai Ratan Tata Trust, The Music Academy, India Foundation for the Arts. RMRL is currently working towards raising a financial corpus to secure funds for its future activities. With two more years to hit the 25th Anniversary since it was institutionalized as the Roja Muthiah Research Library Trust, the Library is looking forward to many more things to accomplish.

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# East India Company Archives in Bangladesh

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DURING THE PERIOD of the East India Company's authority in Bengal, the Company stationed a 'Collector' in Rangpur (now in northern Bangladesh). The Collectors, of whom the most famous was Warren Hasting's envoy to Bhutan and Tibet, George Bogle (1746-81), were responsible for the Company's commercial relations across territory that stretched to the borders of Sikkim, Bhutan and Assam. Even though a selection of the Collectors' records were published between 1914 and 1927<sup>1</sup>, the collection has apparently never attracted scholars. Rangpur, a local archive in a remote district that has endured floods, famine and civil war, as it passed from the control of British colonial India to independent (East) Pakistan, before becoming part of Bangladesh in 1971, seemed to hold few attractions for scholars.

But browsing the entire collection of the hitherto-neglected Rangpur records promised to be of considerable value to my research on the history of Sikkim, for during the late 18th century the Rangpur Collector was the main source of political and commercial information about Sikkim, as well as Bhutan and Tibet. And Bangladesh is now not only open to scholars but – Islamic fundamentalism aside – increasingly stable and easily accessible, while the scholastic value of such regional archives is now widely recognised.

Thus I recently visited Bangladesh to enquire about this archive, thinking that even if nothing was left besides insect-eaten documents then at least I could inform other researchers of the situation there. In the Bangladesh capital, with assistance from Dhaka University professors, I began by enquiring about any other EIC archives, but the National Museum Library confirmed that all of the primary sources for the nation's history were now held at the National Archives of Bangladesh on Syed Mahbub Morshed Ave. All regional archives for the 1770s-1880s period were originally collected at the National Library in 1985-86 before being transferred to the custodianship of the National Archives in 2006. Among them were the early Rangpur District Records, and as only more recent records are now kept in Rangpur, I had at least discovered that there was little point in my travelling there. And indeed, the National Archives catalogue indicate that Rangpur District records for the period from July 1777 to March 1889 are part of their collection comprising 516 bound volumes of documents, volumes that would surely shed considerable light on many historical processes in the region.

But, Senior Archivist Mr. Elias Miah told me that, "we may not be able to provide all the relevant documents you need because these documents are not properly arranged yet and are in a process of arranging systematically". I had the chance to enter into the record room and what I saw confirmed that without additional manpower and funding there is little prospect of that process being completed in the near future. Scholars probably have some years to wait before the material is available. In the meantime their condition is worrying, the records are not well maintained and are scattered around the record room. I took some photographs and with just a handful of documents relevant to my work I returned to India.

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References

- 1 Walter K. Firminger (ed.), *Bengal District Records. Rangpur*, 5 vols., Bengal Secretariat Records-Room, Calcutta, 1914-1927.

Right: Drama notice. Aandal Thirukalyanam, Sri Ramanujar Vaibhavam, 1928

Below: Cinema pamphlet. Bhaktha Gowri

Far right: Cover page of Cinema Talkies, March 1936.

Images courtesy of RMRL.

