

IN CONVERSATION

# 'A moment from another world'

Learning language and literature is as formative as learning calculus, says author and philologist Whitney Cox

■ BY A.R. VENKATACHALAPATHY

Whitney Cox, author of *Politics, Kingship and Poetry in Medieval South India: Moonset on Sunrise Mountain* and *Modes of Philology in Medieval South India*, and now Chair of the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations (SALC) at the University of Chicago, was in Chennai recently. Excerpts from a conversation with A.R. Venkatachalapathy.

SALC recently celebrated its golden jubilee. How do you assess its contribution to a larger understanding of India?

■ What is distinctive of SALC is its combination of the rigorous study of multiple languages with openness to a wide range of disciplines. History, literary theory, philosophy, the study of religion, film studies, gender studies, translation theory: the list of disciplines with which we participate sounds like a list of the major fields of humanistic scholarship as such. We have been very successful in replicating this model; scholars trained at Chicago are a mainstay of South Asian or Indian studies programmes worldwide.

SALC has had a special relationship with Tamil. The renowned Tamil scholar T.P. Meenakshisundaram (TPM) was its earliest visiting faculty. The Chicago library acquired the collections of K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, and A.K. Ramanujan's reputation as the most celebrated translator of Tamil classics was made in SALC. What is their legacy today?

■ Thank you, first of all, for mentioning TPM: he's a figure whose connection to Chicago often goes unrecognised. The study of Tamil perfectly exemplifies the wider trends that I just mentioned. Both faculty and students set Tamil within a multilingual frame, and within different disciplines. My own interest is in Tamil and Sanskrit, and I tend to work across literary studies, history, and philology. My colleague Sascha Ebeling reads something like 10 languages; he is interested, among other things, in the global history of the novel.

Our students combine research in Tamil with Sanskrit, Malayalam,

Marathi, Kannada, even Latin and Italian. So Tamil is a microcosm of SALC's wider strengths.

You also mentioned Ramanujan. I revere Ramanujan, but I will admit to having a complicated relationship to his legacy. His style of translation – borrowed from English modernists like Pound and William Carlos Williams – was for a time very widely imitated by anyone in the field trying to produce 'literary' translations, including myself.

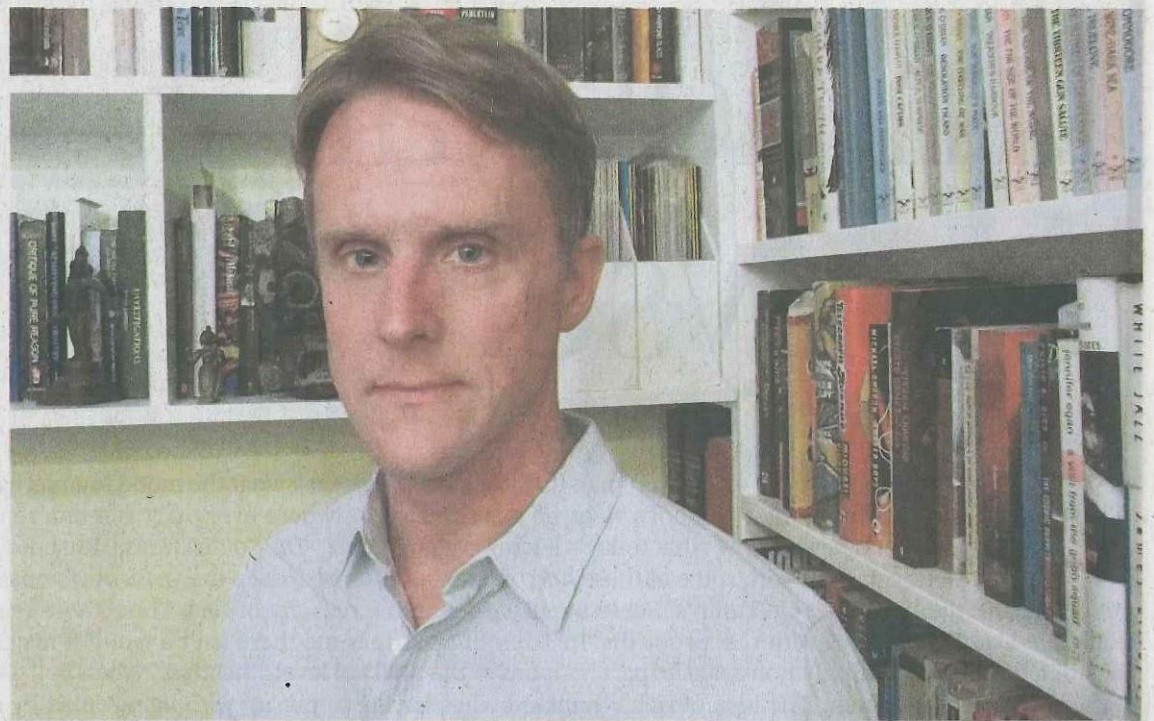
After a while, I reacted against this: what had been for AKR a way to solve certain problems in the translation of classical Tamil had ossified into just a stylistic flourish. All of this is to say that it is past time to have a serious reevaluation of his intellectual contribution. We should organise a conference!

**Understanding the way a Chola-period inscription fits into its context, or elucidating a Sanskrit *shloka* seems miraculous to me**

The humanities and social sciences are under relentless attack all over the world. How do you see the future of language and literary studies or – what you prefer to call – 'philology'? May I ask why we should study languages and literature at all?

■ I would begin by rejecting the premises on which these attacks are based, which generally begin from a caricature of the old 'two cultures' problem – that the humanities and the sciences are somehow incompatible.

This is usually joined with a crude



Across linguistic divides 'Much of my research work I do for the sheer intellectual pleasure it gives me.' SUZANNE COX

economism: if a subject isn't directly pushing up the GDP, it is 'useless'. I certainly don't think that everyone coming to university needs to be turned into a philologist – a professional, virtuoso reader – but I think that exposure to this way of thinking is as formative and as important as learning, say, calculus.

There is an important difference, however, in that the humanistic disciplines, philology chief among them, are necessarily bound up in ethical and political questions. I don't mean that there is a right or left political bias to the humanities.

Instead, in having to negotiate with the foundational fact of being a creature of and in language, we are forced up against ways of thinking different than our own, and we learn new things about others and ourselves.

I grew up in a typically American English-only context until my early 20s, when I began to learn Sanskrit and Tamil. This transformed my way of thinking about the world. To use a cliché, it changed my life.

Over the last few years Western scholars – especially Sheldon Pollock, who taught for many years in SALC – have been attacked for 'misrepresenting' India. How do you respond to such attacks?

■ Pollock is my teacher, and so I am a *pakshapatin*, a partisan, in these debates. I also haven't kept up on his critics' views, though I know them in outline. Much of this stems from Pollock's (and my) 'outsider' status to Indian culture. I think it is certainly possible to produce a credible account that says local knowledge or cultural embeddedness tells us significant things. But my sense is that at least the loudest fringe of Pollock's critics really just depends on an unexamined nativism, which I reject.

In Sanskrit we call this sort of unproductive criticism *vitandaa*. In their denunciation of possibility of knowledge, Pollock's noisiest critics resemble climate change sceptics.

In the last year you have published two books – one on Chola kingship

and another on philology in late medieval Tamil Nadu. You work on two Indian languages – Tamil and Sanskrit – and you plan to study another (Kannada) in the coming years. How has this extended your understanding of past societies and cultures?

■ As someone interested in texts, it's impossible for me to imagine how one could attempt to study the south Indian past without immersing oneself in these. Honestly, much of my research work I do for the sheer intellectual pleasure it gives me: understanding the way a Chola-period inscription fits into its context, or elucidating even a single Sanskrit *shloka* seems nearly miraculous to me: a rescued moment from another, past world.

As I said earlier, there are I think real ways that the study of language and of the past creates fuller human beings and better citizens. But it also is a source of constant excitement.

The writer is a Tamil historian and writer.