

# “Tamil Nadu in 2020: Tradition and Modernity Together”

A Vision Plan presented in 2007

by Eric Miller

Looking back from the present here in the year 2020, it is interesting to see how Tamil Nadu has come to be what it is today. Truly, Tamil Nadu has achieved a successful mix of tradition and modernity. Nine topics regarding how this has occurred are: 1) Videoconferencing; 2) Language Teaching and Learning Centre; 3) Words Projected on Large Screens as a Method of Instantaneous Translation; 4) Institute for the Translation of Tradition; 5) Urban Design of Shared Spaces; 6) Tribal Communities in the Mountains, Fishing Communities Beside the Sea, and Other Traditional Communities; 7) Cultural Tourism and Virtual Study-trips; 8) Education and the Deployment of Technology; 9) Tamil Equivalent of Bangra Music. After discussing these topics, this paper then considers one project to which most of these principles were applied: A Fishing Village near the Heart of Chennai that became a Cultural/Educational/Language Tourism Project.

## 1) Videoconferencing

Back in 2007, it dawned on the people of Tamil Nadu that videoconferencing would be a major new technology in human society. Videoconferencing -- also known as, video telephone, video calls, video chat, and video link -- enables participants to see, as well as to hear, each other. It can be done via the Internet, telephone lines, satellites, and other means. The Tamil people realised that videoconferencing was not a fad, that it would not go away, but rather that it would only develop and grow, and become increasingly more important and valuable to the life of a people and a place.

Thus, the wise people of Tamil Nadu decided to invest both private and public resources in building up their society's videoconference facilities. Browsing centres expanded their facilities to also offer videoconference options. Large rooms and auditoriums were equipped with the necessary technology, including large screens, to form "teletoriums" ("tele" is a Greek word for, "from a distance").

These teletoriums became available for use by university, school, business, medical, scientific, professional, civic, family, and other groups, as well as by individuals. Numerous cinema theatres and shopping mall lobbies also became videoconference-capable.

Tamil Nadu became one of the leading sites for "Virtual Study-trips" -- videoconference visits from school children around the world, to schools and museums in Tamil Nadu (more about this in section 7, Cultural Tourism and Virtual Study-trips).

Numerous videoconference fields were pioneered, including teaching via videoconference, counselling via videoconference, and medical diagnosis via videoconference.

It was found that videoconferences really come to life when conversation occurs. On the other hand, lectures delivered by videoconference were found to be very boring. The resulting emphasis on conversation led to a general revolution in teaching style by the teachers and professors of Tamil Nadu, involving the expanded use of "guided educational conversations".

Tamil Nadu's Call Centres were thus joined by an ever-growing number of Videoconference Centres (VCCs). The first topic taught at the VCCs was the Tamil language itself. Classical written Tamil was taught, along with less formal styles of written Tamil, and many dialects of spoken Tamil (people serving as language-practice partners in videoconferences did not have to have a great deal of academic training). Instruction was also given in Bharata Natyam dance, Carnatic music, and other performing arts, especially forms of

storytelling such as *Katha Kalak Chebam (Hari Katha, God Story)*, *Villupattu (Bow Song)*, and *Kathaiyum Pattum (Story and Song)*. The VCCs offered -- in addition to interactive instruction -- opportunities for performance of, and discussion about, these arts.

The market for these services included children in the Tamil diaspora and university students around the world. As people in all of the world's time zones needed to be catered to, these VCCs operated 24 hours a day. And as people in Tamil Nadu participated more and more in this 24-hour world -- for business, educational, and other purposes -- around-the-clock eating out and entertainment became increasingly possible in Tamil Nadu also.

It had long been recognised that Chennai is an education, technology, and arts capital of the world. But it is one thing to have such services ready, and it is quite another to be able to provide these services to clients around the world, with instant delivery, 24 hours a day. And so it was decided that many of Tamil Nadu's ancient and rich traditions could be capitalised upon by making them available by videoconference.

One of these traditions was cinema production. The infrastructure, facilities, and expertise (directors, composers, choreographers, playback singers, etc.) here for cinema production and post-production work were already being applied to the television industry.

Then, beginning around 2007, they also began to be applied to videoconferencing, where it was not a matter simply of entertaining members of the public, but rather of engaging them in artistic, intellectual, and educational relationships and experiences. Cinema people participated in videoconferencing both in terms of giving instruction in and discussing the cinematic arts, and also in terms of applying their production abilities to videoconferencing projects. It all began with some well-known Tamil cinema directors taking part in a series of videoconference discussions with Cinema Studies university students overseas.

It was also around that time that doctors at Chennai's Apollo Hospital first presented and discussed a surgery via videoconference. Educational ventures using videoconferencing were also just getting underway here. The Tamil Virtual University, based in the Tidel Park complex, played a leadership role.

Rehearsal centres became tele-rehearsal centres. Seminar centres became tele-seminar centres. Discos became tele-discos (more about this in section 9, Tamil Equivalent of Bangra Music).

Tamil Nadu's teletoriums featured small rooms for individual meetings, slightly larger rooms for groups, and large spaces (indoors and outdoors, some with moveable chairs) for crowds. These facilities were used for civic discussions, family reunions, education, artistic performances, and business events, including launches, announcements, and openings for products and services. Generally-speaking, these teletoriums came into existence, and have been maintained, as a combined venture of businesspeople, engineers, academics, people in the arts, civic leaders, spiritual leaders, and the Government.

Among the options were 1) low-cost, low-quality videoconferencing (over the regular Internet), 2) more expensive videoconferencing via dedicated ISDN lines (a type of telephone line) and specialized hardware, and 3) videoconferencing via Internet2. Internet2, a new generation of the Internet, was originally developed by universities in the USA, and by 2007 was being used in many places around the world ( [www.internet2.org](http://www.internet2.org) ). Internet2 enables multi-party near-broadcast-quality videoconferencing. Interesting and profitable collaborations formed between people at sites that were Internet2-capable.

All of this led to people discovering new ways of working via videoconference, as the technology enabled access to more employers, and to more customers.

People also developed videoconference systems in their homes and offices -- and video calls have also become possible on mobile telephones -- but Tamil Nadu's publicly-accessible teletoriums (including large screens, sub-titles in Tamil and other languages, and good audio) made a world of difference in moving the society forward together, and in helping to build up the economic, cultural, and civic life in her cities -- led by Chennai of course.

## 2) Language Teaching and Learning Centre

When Tamil people took stock of their heritage around 2007, they realised that one of their great strengths was their love for, and knowledge of, languages. Tamil, English, Hindi, Malayalam, Sanskrit, etc. -- all languages! Language in general. Thus, it was decided that a leading aspect of Tamil Nadu's identity would be that it would be an international centre for the study of languages, and for the teaching and learning of languages -- popular languages, as well as rare, endangered, and exotic ones.

Tamil Nadu came to be a place where many ancient and modern *methods* of teaching and learning (spoken and written) languages were discussed, practiced, combined, and developed. Countless types of computer software -- including for website-based activities, and for games -- were developed in this field. As learning languages also involves learning about the communities and the natural environments in which those languages were spoken, methods and technologies for these other aspects of education also advanced.

One traditional method of teaching and learning that was developed was the "lead-and-follow" method. In this method, the teacher's statement is repeated, improvised upon, or replied to, by the student. Sometimes the student is meant to join in and, together with the teacher, finish the statement.

Tamil people pioneered the use of this method in videoconference teaching -- taking care to be aware of, and to work around, the possible response-delay in one-side-of-the-globe-to-the-other videoconferences.

It turned out that youngsters of Tamil background who lived around the world, and who spoke just a little Tamil, constituted a very significant market for Tamil language videoconference lessons and practice. Through these activities, such young people have been able to experience aspects of traditional Tamil culture, and the most modern of communication technologies, at once -- and this has increased their interest and proficiency in both the ancient and the modern forms of communication.

### 3) Words Projected on Large Screens as a Method of Instantaneous Translation

Language can be a great barrier between people -- if there is no translation. Thus, when Tamil people began marketing Tamil Nadu as a language teaching and learning centre, and as a hub for teaching via videoconference, they also began to develop methods of instantaneous translation -- including the projecting of words onto screens. An advantage of this visual translation method is that one can still hear the rhythm and melody of the original, spoken language as one reads.

This projection of words was done for both performances and meetings, for events at which speakers and listeners were both physically-present, as well as for videoconferences. If the speaker was physically-present, the words appeared on a screen beside or behind him/her.

These projected words came in different colors, sizes, and fonts, and could appear at different places on the screen. The words could appear in more than one language at a time. All of this made the projected words an exciting and beautiful visual treat, an enjoyable part of the overall communication experience. This method of instantaneous translation was largely what made

“Language Tourism” possible (Language Tourism is the visiting of a people and place with an emphasis on learning about their language). Tamil Nadu has been a world leader in this form of tourism for many years now.

At first, it was mostly humans who did the instantaneous translating and the typing of the words that appeared on the large screens. In time, however, voice-recognition software has become very accurate, as have computer-generated methods of transliterating and translating language. Tamil Nadu’s work in these areas has proved to be very beneficial to its overall development of Information Technology.

#### 4) *Institute for the Translation of Tradition*

The historic founding of the annual Chennai Sangamum Thiruvizha (Chennai Gathering Festival) occurred in 2007. This Festival marked a new beginning of Tamil society’s work with traditional artists and communities, helping these bearers of tradition to more fully contribute to and participate in modernity.

Together the people of Tamil Nadu sought ways to update her folk art traditions, to make them useful to more people. For this purpose, an *Institute for the Translation of Tradition* was formed. (Such an Institute was, to the best of my knowledge, first suggested by Elihu Katz, in “Can Authentic Cultures Survive New Media?”, *Journal of Communication*, Special Section: “When Cultures Clash”, Spring 1977, pp. 112-21.)

One task of Tamil Nadu’s *Institute for the Translation of Tradition* was to help develop versions of folk arts that were independent of those folk arts’ community and religious roots, so that people unrelated to those communities and religions could fully enjoy and utilise these arts.

For, folk performance forms are wonderful methods of communication. Let us take, for example, forms of storytelling such as *Katha Kalak Chebam* (*Harikatha, God Stories*), *Villupattu* (*Bow Song*), and *Kathaiyum Pattum* (*Story*

*and Song*). Each involves 1) numerous styles of speaking and singing, 2) alternation between narration and dialogue, 3) interaction with audience members, and 4) referring to many authorities in the culture to add to the entertainment, educative, and persuasive abilities of the artist.

This last condition applies especially to *Katha Kalak Chebam*, in which a complex system must be adhered to in regard to referring to traditional commentators (poets, scholars, saints, pundits, etc.) according to what episode of an epic, such as the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*, is being narrated.

It was discovered that modified versions of these storytelling styles could be used to tell any story, convey any message, and teach any subject.

It was even realised that modern people -- in Tamil Nadu, and around the world -- could learn and benefit from *Oppari* (lament songs, stories, and poetry). *Oppari* shows ways to mourn -- to feel and express emotions of grief and loss -- and to share such emotions with one's community. Tamil people decided that these were useful abilities and traditions, and thus that they should be developed.

With the help of the *Institute for the Translation of Tradition*, Tamil Nadu's schools began to include teaching about, and teaching through, modified versions of the traditional methods of communication, performance, and production. The rest of the world looked on, and many others also adopted these methods with their own folk traditions.

##### 5) Urban Design of Shared Spaces

As much as was practical, the people of Tamil Nadu decided to keep as many public places as possible open to a mix of different types of people. In these places, people of Tamil Nadu could be present together as co-citizens. Chennai's great Marina Beach continues to serve as a symbol for this sharing

of space. For it was realised that segregation by economic class leads to intellectual and creative sterility, and weakens the social fabric.

Just as biological diversity in forest areas has been shown to be helpful, bringing rain, and helping the land to retain moisture, so it was realised that social diversity is helpful to society. It was recognised that the presence of many perspectives provides many ways to solve any problem that may arise, and also gives society many ways to pursue opportunities together.

In this way, the wonderful south Indian traditions of tolerance, appreciation of diversity, respect for self and others, and the peaceful co-existence of many religions and philosophies, continued and developed. It was decided to change the name of the “Slum Clearance Board” to the “Neighborhood Improvement Board”, as it was felt that “slum” is a not-very-positive word that may seem to objectify and dehumanize the people who live in the area.

Tamil Nadu led the way in arranging for childcare in the workplace, for parents who prefer to bring their children with them to work. Flexible work hours for many workers were arranged. Flexibility and diversity were the keywords of social development in Tamil Nadu. A key to this turned out to be the encouraging of conversation between people -- including between people of different, castes, races, colors, genders, socio-economic classes, and even nationalities. In this way, a healthy and lively civic life has been achieved.

Out of respect for local culture, Tamil Nadu’s globalised and transnational shopping malls have all come to utilise some local visual arts and artists. And it was agreed upon that ads 1) in shopping malls, 2) on outdoor boardings, and 3) on TV, should show dark-skinned people, as well as light-skinned people. Tamil TV and cinema followed this practice also. And the public requested that lettering on all boardings -- both shop signs, and advertisements -- appear in Tamil, with whatever other languages in addition.

## 6) Tribal Communities in the Mountains, Fishing Communities Beside the Sea, and Other Traditional Communities

Since ancient times, Tamil Nadu has been a place where nature -- from the sea to the mountains -- and the cultures of those places, have been protected and respected. After all, Kannagi, the heroine of the *Silappathikaram*, the *Epic of the Anklet*, was of the fish merchant community on the coast, in Poompuhar. She visited by walk all of the types of land and peoples of ancient Tamil Nadu. She was perhaps treated most cordially by tribal people in the mountains. Thus, the story illustrates the unity of the different social classes and geographical environments of Tamil Nadu.

Accordingly, in the years following 2007, a new Cultural/Educational/ Language Tourism route was developed: the "Kannagi Walk". Actually, most people now travel this route by bus -- from Poompuhar, to Madurai, to various locations and communities in the Western Ghats mountain range associated with Kannagi. Along the way, there is sight-seeing, talks, and performances -- all accompanied by projected translations in the language of the visitor.

Tribal peoples in the Western Ghats -- in the districts of Kanyakumari, Tirunelveli, Virudhunagar, Theni, Dindigal, Coimbatore, Nilgiris, Erode, Salem, Dharmapuri, and Krishnagiri -- have developed a circuit of Cultural/Educational/Language Tourism sites, so that visitors can go to one after the other. The emphasis on Language Tourism has enabled each group to explain about its unique dialect of Tamil, and about how its language describes, and is affected by, its natural environment. This sharing of traditional knowledge about the forest has contributed greatly to modern science, agriculture, and forestry. It has also led to an increase in Medical Tourism -- including in relation to Siddha practices, and tribal traditions of using medicinal plants.

The people of Tamil Nadu decided that the Western Ghats should serve as a laboratory and showcase for nature protection and "green" (sustainable and

minimally-damaging) development. As part of this effort, solar power has been promoted among the human communities throughout these mountains.

### 7) Cultural Tourism and Virtual Study-trips

While many people physically-visited the beautiful natural places of Tamil Nadu, others decided to do so via videoconference. Environmental advantages of this included that it used less petrol (for automotive travel), and involved fewer people physically entering forest and other natural areas.

Around 2007, “Virtual Study-trips” -- also known as “Virtual Field-trips” -- started becoming very common in USA and European schools. Such activity was an important part of what would in time come to be known as, the Interactive Classroom. Virtual Study-trips consist of students visiting a place by videoconference. University students, and any other people who just wanted to learn about other cultures, also come on such tele-visits.

Two types of Virtual Study-trip are: 1) Students at each videoconference site simply meet each other, and 2) Students at a videoconference site receive a lesson via videoconference, for which their school can be charged a fee.

Tamil Nadu determined that it should be a leading destination for both types of Virtual Study-trips. Tamil people realised that Tamil Nadu’s many traditional communities could provide colorful and interesting experiences for school children around the world. But videoconferencing involves more than just putting on a show. Actual human-to-human conversation must occur between the distant participants. Thus, individuals at Virtual Study-trip sites in Tamil Nadu were trained in how to lead educational conversations with students who were tele-visiting from schools in Tamil Nadu, as well as from overseas (speaking in a variety of languages; with the use of instantaneous onscreen translation when necessary).

Virtual Study-trips that involved distant students calling in to a Tamil museum (or community cultural centre), and receiving an educational lesson in conversational form, gave a good deal of employment to the people who worked at these museums and centres.

Tamil Nadu has become a leader in both the meeting-oriented, and the lesson-oriented, Virtual Study-trips. Many classrooms in Tamil Nadu have become Interactive Classrooms, and many students in Tamil Nadu now go on Virtual Study-trips on a daily basis. This meant that high-speed telecommunication facilities needed to be developed in rural areas, and indeed this has been achieved to a large degree.

#### 8) Education and the Deployment of Technology

Education in literacy is a key way to help poor people improve their conditions. In the past it had proved difficult to entice many people in oral-centric communities to learn to read and write. This difficulty was for-the-most-part overcome in the years following 2007, when Tamil educators began a sweeping initiative to use folk arts to teach people how to read and write (in various languages). In this way, starting with what people knew well -- the forms and content of local oral traditions -- it has become routine for people to be able to expand their abilities into reading and writing.

Many educational studies show that people learn best when they are active -- when they can discuss the material, repeat it, act it out, and retell it. This is known as participatory, active, and interactive learning, and the Tamil people have engaged in it wholeheartedly, both for physically-present education and for tele-education.

In the countryside, and in poor sections of cities, many Community Computer Internet Centres have opened. People have found ways at these facilities 1) to work, 2) to entertain and be entertained, 3) to learn and teach, and, 4) of course, to just communicate.

Internet “cottage industries” have developed, by which people can download material, work on it, and send it once it is finished. Such work now includes data processing, data entry, spoken and written translation, website design, and animation -- as well as live voice, and live voice-and-picture (videoconference) services. In other words, ways have been found for people to work -- constructively, interestingly, and productively -- from rural locations. This has led to the slowing -- and even to the reversing -- of the rush to the big cities, which has been a very good thing, as the cities had been on the verge of becoming too overcrowded.

Many people who were skilled in traditional crafts, have now been trained in new media. For example, sign and cut-out painters have been trained to do computer drawing, graphics, and animation.

Small, portable, inexpensive, Internet-connected computers -- modified mobile telephones, actually -- have also become widely available. These devices -- along with the facilities of the Community Computer Internet Centres -- have served to inspire and help Tamil children to learn to read and write. Education for these children has led to their being able to work in Information Technology, Education, Entertainment, Tourism, and other industries.

#### 9) Tamil Equivalent of Bangra Music

Performing, visual, and literary artists of Tamil Nadu decided to develop a common artistic style -- as a shared artistic and commercial venture. This began as a south Indian equivalent of Bangra music, which includes Punjabi folk music, and Bollywood cinema music.

“Tamil mix” music combined south Indian tribal, folk, popular, and Kollywood cinema music -- together with “world music” and “nightclub disco” sounds. This Tamil mix music included ancient Tamil work songs such as rowing

songs. It included quotes from the sen-Tamil of Thiruvalluvar. It included *Gnana Paattu* -- in Tamil and English. And *Rap* -- in English and Tamil.

Artists and craftspeople of all types, in all media -- theatre, dance, music, multi-media, painters, sculptors -- banded together to help develop this audio-video style, this loosely-organised set of aesthetic practices and processes. This style included 1) projecting translated words on large screens in accompaniment of live performances, so that audience members who could not understand the spoken and sung words, could read along in a language they could understand, and 2) videoconferencing at live events, with local and distant participants able to participate with electronic text, sound, and drawings.

In 2007, it was not allowed to play music and dance late at night in much of Tamil Nadu. But it was realised that much experimenting was going on around the world by DJs and musicians, who were mixing pre-recorded and live music for crowds of dancers. At such discos, live and pre-recorded video was often being projected onto large screens. Sometimes people could see images of themselves as they are dancing, mixed with other images. Sometimes computers were enabling aspects of the music to directly affect the projected visuals.

In those days, the Karaoke industry was booming in much of East Asia, but it was minor in India. Karaoke involves clients entertaining themselves and others by singing songs. Often the lyrics appear on a video screen, and are read by the singer. Sometimes the singer's live image is also placed on the screen. Karaoke practices utilize many cinematic techniques, such as superimposing foreground figures onto various backgrounds, and displaying subtitles in different languages. Karaoke has now become very popular in Tamil Nadu, in both entertainment and educational contexts.

In conjunction with the development of Tamil mix music, a number of Tamil discos added videoconference facilities and became tele-discos. The DJs became tele-DJs. A tele-DJ needed to see a video image of the people on

the distant dance floor, so as to be able to judge what music to play next. In this way, tele-DJs in Chennai transmitted music to tele-discos around the world. Of course, the music could also be a collaboration, coming from numerous sources.

In these tele-discos -- for the management, artists, craftspeople, and many members of the public -- the experience came to be largely about learning to use new audio-video software and interactive telecommunication, and about career-building. Part of the fun and glamour of attending a tele-disco involved participating in an intellectually stimulating technological and artistic experiment.

To overcome possible imperfections in inter-continental interactive telecommunication processes, one needed to be alert, and sensitive to the smallest cues from the distant parties. People tended to want to look their best in a videoconferencing environment: for one thing, they might be seen by perspective employers.

For these reasons, only good behavior came to be associated with the Tamil mix music and tele-disco scene. Non-alcoholic drinks -- such as fruit drinks (with sugar to the customer's taste), and vegetable drinks -- were developed. Dancing came to be recognised as being good for getting and staying in good physical condition, as well as for developing one's creativity. In sum, dancing to Tamil mix music in Tamil Nadu's tele-discos came to be seen as a healthy and intelligent activity.

#### A Fishing Village near the Heart of Chennai that became a Cultural/Educational/Language Tourism Project

Despite the rush toward modernity and globalisation, the people of Tamil Nadu -- and of Chennai in particular -- decided that they would not lose their souls. And that it is a smart business investment to protect, nurture, and publicly display certain traditions.

Thus, it was decided to make a “Living Museum” and a tele-teaching centre in one of the fishing villages near the centre of Chennai, near the Lighthouse. (A Living Museum is a museum that features objects that are still in everyday use, and which are explained by members of the community.) This project became a centre for the sea-fishing heritage of all of the coast of Tamil Nadu, India, and the entire Indian Ocean region. The project presented an opportunity to educate and entertain the Indian and international public about the sea, and about local sea-related cultures.

*The project includes:*

Outdoor Theatre -- featuring:

1) *The Sea Story*. A 35-minute musical-drama with folksongs, including rowing songs, lament songs, and lullabies, performed by members of the community and guest performers. Presented daily at 5pm.

2) *Storytelling by the Sea*. Led by community and guest storytellers. Presented on Saturday mornings.

Living Museum -- Exhibits and explanations about the boats (especially the kattumarams), nets, boat engines, and methods of catching and cooking the different types of fish.

Computer Centre (with Educational Video-Games, and Videoconferencing) -- Regarding Weather Reports and Sea Conditions, utilizing Satellite Photos. Animations and computer-video games illustrate 1) how waves, tides, currents, and storms form, 2) principles and mechanics of boat-building, and 3) how boats move through water. This Centre houses the project’s regular Virtual Study-trip facility, although the Outdoor Theatre is also videoconference-capable.

Gift Shop -- Offering seashells and seashell crafts; and sea- and sea-fishing-related paintings and photographs; books (fiction and non-fiction); audio and

video recordings; and computer-video games, screen-savers, and other items. All items can also be viewed and purchased via website.

Cafe -- A place to sit, sip a cool or hot drink (including traditional natural drinks), and enjoy the view of the ocean and the fishing boats.

My essay ends here, but two notes are added:

Note about dating systems: It is a wide-spread convention to date time from the birth of Jesus Christ. In this system, “AD” stands for “Anno Domini” (in Latin), which means “Year of the Lord”; and “BC” stands for “Before Christ”.

However, other dating systems are also possible. For example, time can be dated from when humanity (represented by the Russian man, Yuri Gagarin), first overcame the bounds of Earth’s gravity, entered Outer Space, and orbited the Earth. This occurred in 1961 AD. Thus, 2020 AD can also be thought of as, 59 AS. (AS stands for “After Space”; “BS” stands for “Before Space”.)

In terms of the Tamil calendar: 15 January 2020 -- the first day of the Pongal Festival in 2020 -- is the first day of the Tamil month, Thai, in the Tamil year, Vikari. Thus, 15 January 2020, is 1 Thai Vikari.

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