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CONSTRUCTING THE BILDUNGSROMAN OF A COMMUNITY: A STUDY OF PRINTED PERSONAL INVITATIONS

Several studies have focussed attention on the origin and growth of the Indian print media as an off shoot of the British Colonisation. However, Tamil print media is unique in that it pre-dates the British era. Moreover, there has been a staggering variety of public and private uses of the Tamil print media. In addition to books, magazines, journals and newspapers, there is a rich history of the use of print as personal invitations, drama/ movie notices, greetings and pamphlets. These are available as 'single sheet' material in the collection housed at the Roja Muthiah Research Library, Chennai. These invitations effectively contest the notions of technological determinism and technological elitism. More importantly, they combine the public and the private spheres of life.

This study attempts to analyse a selection of 'single sheets,' which are all personal invitations. These invitations chart the growth of individuals from birth to death. For instance, there are invitations for naming a child, adopting a child, initiation into learning, sacred thread ceremony, puberty rites, wedding, pre-confinement ceremony, 60th, 70th and 80th birthdays, house warming and death. Together, these invitations constitute a bildungsroman or a narrative of growth into maturity. It is my contention that these single sheet invitations construct not only a private life narrative but also map the individual's progression in society and the social influence on personal lives.

Key words: bildungsroman, growth narrative, Tamil print media, single sheets, personal invitations, technological determinism, technological elitism

1. Introduction

Tamil Print is one of the oldest in India and dates back to 1577. The development of Tamil print media is marked by different colonial structures including the Portuguese, Danish, French and British. The developmental stages in Tamil print present a staggering variety of uses in pre-independence India. This variety problematises issues, such as "technological determinism" and implies a sophisticated understanding of the problems and potential of the medium. Further, it proves Raymond Williams' statement (against McLuhan's notion of "technological determinism") that "technologies have always been sought in the context of solving particular social needs." (Grossberg 49) The common individual's widespread use of technology contests the idea of technological elitism – that technology is available to and empowers only certain sections of society (Bhatia 36). For instance, there is a rich history of the use of print as personal invitations, drama/ movie notices, greetings and pamphlets. These novel

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uses of the print have made the media a part of the indigenous society (Kesavan 56).

One such collection is archived at the Roja Muthiah Research Library, Chennai. This library houses the collection of a single individual – Roja Muthiah of the Chettinadu region of Tamil Nadu. The collection includes over 100,000 items including books, journals, magazines and non-book items including drama/movie notices, pamphlets, personal invitations, tickets for performances and the like. Most of the non-book items are in the form of 'single sheets.' These micro-texts foreground creative and common uses of technology, which effectively interrogate the prevalent notion of technological elitism. In particular, the personal invitations included in the collection, map the life of individuals and their forays into the public sphere. To this extent, even an eclectic selection of personal invitations charts the progression of individuals from birth to growth to maturity and finally to death. It is my contention that as a collection, these personal invitations enable us to construct a bildungsroman of specific communities and social spheres of life.

2. Towards a Definition of a Bildungsroman

A Bildungsroman is usually defined as a narrative that traces the growth of an individual in psychological, social and moral respects from birth to maturity and/or death. It is also known as the novel of development, coming of age novel, apprenticeship novel and a novel of education. (Buckley vii) Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* and James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* are some well-known examples of bildungsroman.

The bildungsroman has several variants: *Entwicklungsroman* – chronicle of a youth's general growth, *Erziehungsroman* – youth's training and education and *Kunstlerroman* – youth's growth into an artist (Buckley 13). The bildungsroman is further categorised as German and British. The genre of bildungsroman is concerned with the growth of an individual and is often concerned with self-culture. "No man is an island" is a well known dictum. Hence, an individual's growth is influenced by social and cultural customs and practices that suggest ideal standards of living. Moreover, bildungsroman is also one of the most flexible literary forms that lends itself to variations. One variation that has been attempted in this paper is its function of creating a narrative of growth in/of a community. Tracing the growth of a community entails a contextualisation of the social hierarchy. In the sample invitations chosen for this study, there is an eclectic mix of castes and communities. What is interesting about the sample is

that there is a synergy as far as the use of print technology is concerned. Thus, even in a random sample spectrum such as the present study, we find the invitation to a Vaishya adoption ceremony, a Brahmin sacred thread ceremony and a Christian death notice. The pervasive use of the print media for personal invitations across castes and communities enables us to study the growth of a group, that is, an embodiment of individuals.

3. Analysis of the Sample Single Sheets
3.1. Invitations for an Adoption – Samples 1 & 2

This single sheet (Figure 1) combines the invitation for the adoption ceremonies of two children with an invitation to a music concert. The difference in the dates of adoption of the two children echoes the belief that it is inauspicious (and will attract the evil eye!) to hold celebrations for siblings together. There is an interesting spatial dimension in this sample. The function takes place at Kandramanikkam and the invitation is addressed to a resident in Pattamangalam. The two towns are adjoining towns! Traditionally, the invitation would have involved a personal visit.
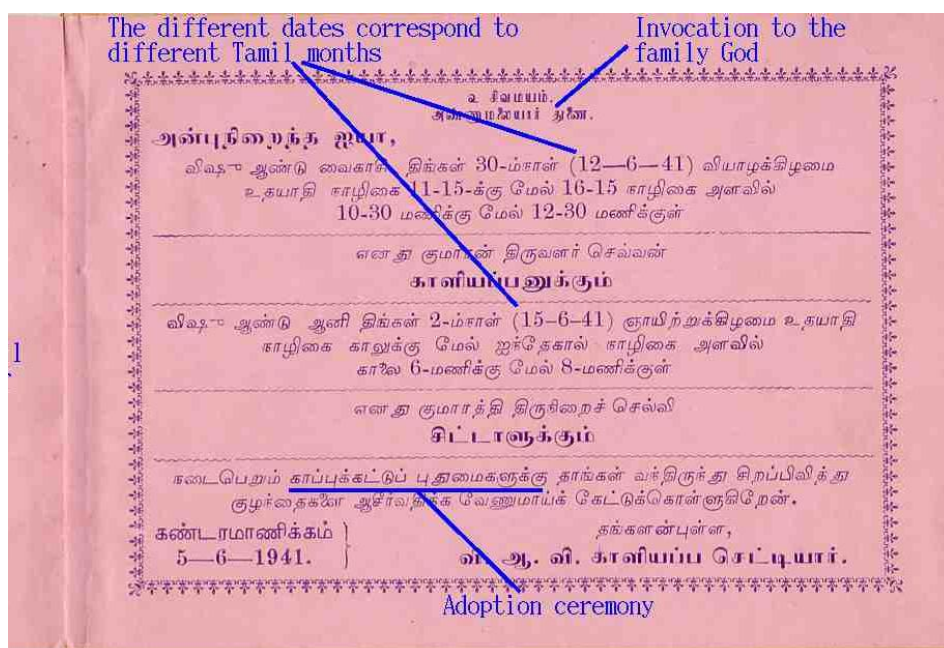

Figure 1

The invitation in Figure 2 presents an adoption of a young man (about 20-21 years old because he has a B.Com qualification!). The names in the invitation suggest that they belong to the prosperous and progressive Chettiar

(merchant/trader) community. The adoption of a male heir suggests a higher female – male ratio as well as the belief in a patrilineal heritage.
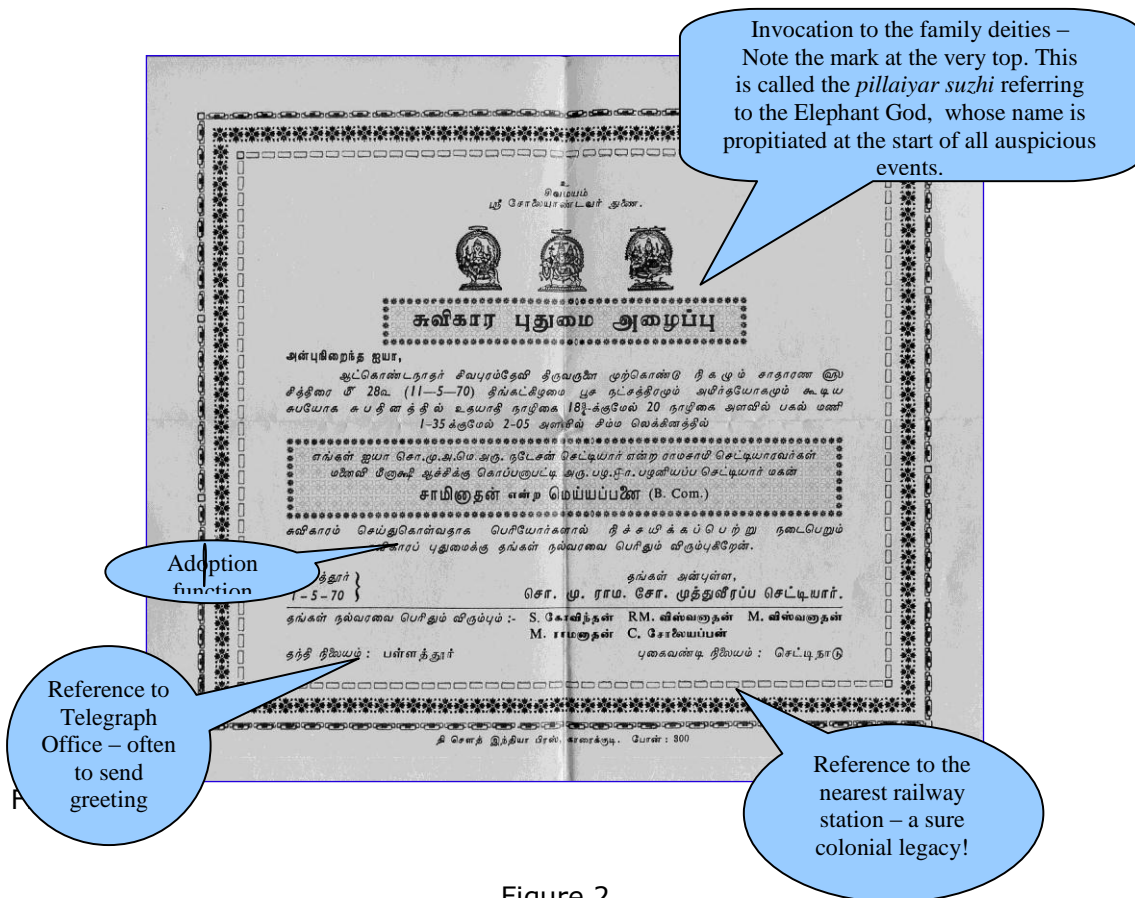

Figure 2

3.2. Invitation for a Sacred Thread Ceremony (Sample 3)

The Upanayanam or the sacred thread ceremony pertains specifically to the Brahmin community. In the Hindu Brahmanical belief, an individual passes through several stages or ashramas in life – student, householder, retirement and renunciation. The sacred thread ceremony is meant as an initiation rite, preceding the individual's departure to study under the tutelage of a guru or teacher. And the father of the boy becomes the first teacher.

In the invitation, there is a tracing of lineage through three generations. This contextualisation of an individual's lineage is often orally stated as part of the function itself. The invitation originates from the paternal and maternal grandfathers of the boys, confirming a joint family household. The language used in the invitation is highly Sanskritised.
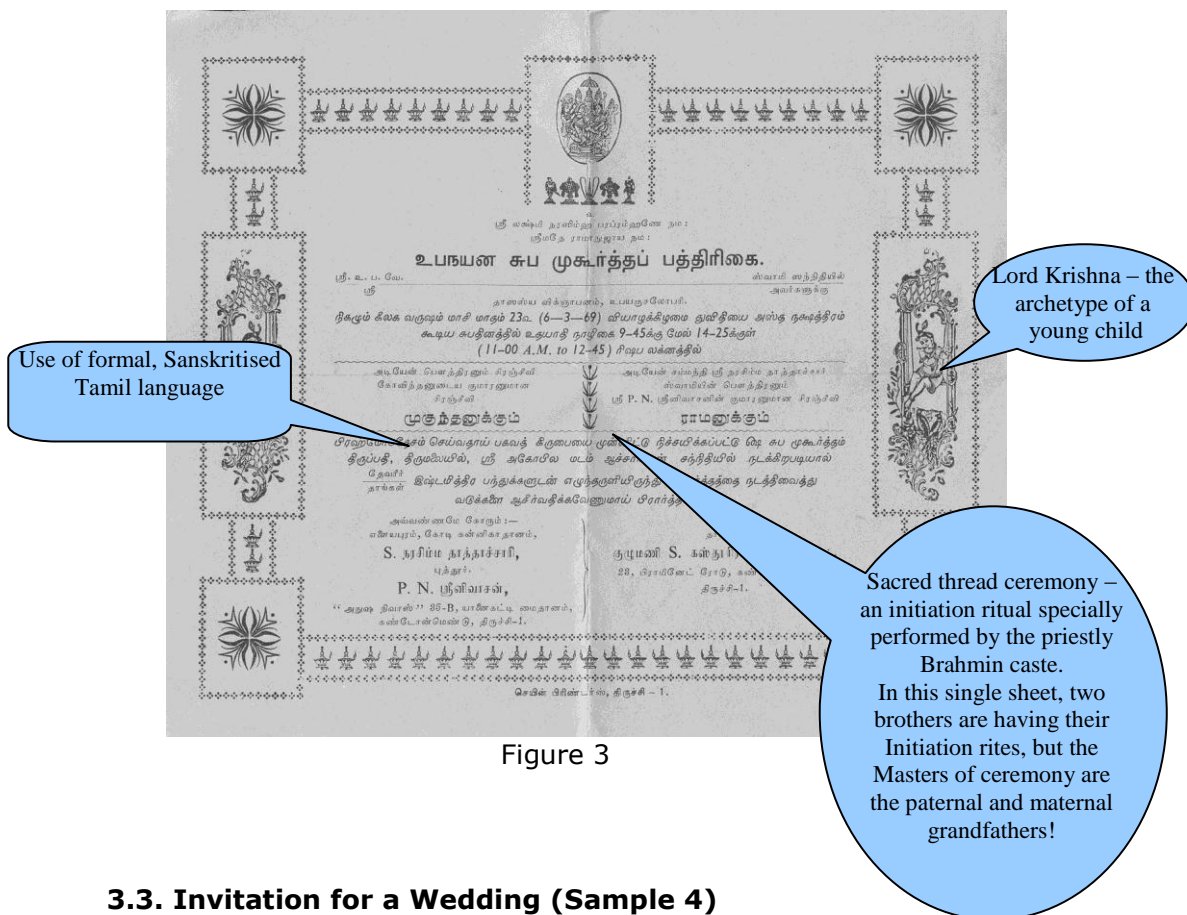
Figure 3

3.3. Invitation for a Wedding (Sample 4)

One of the early uses of print in the personal sphere is the printing of marriage invitations. Traditionally, the antecedents of the bride and groom are announced to the village during the betrothal ceremony, after the invocation of the family deities. A contract is also drawn up in the presence of the elders. This oral transaction has been codified in the conventional printed marriage invitation.

This is a wedding invitation, which presents a visually rich text. It is framed with pictures of different Gods, probably referring to the deities of the family and the community. For a wedding in Madurai, the universal referent is the celestial marriage of Shiva and Parvati as Somasundareswarar and Meenakshi. This divine wedding is the motif adorning the top portion of the invitation. The figures of Lakshmi and Saraswati, goddesses of wealth and wisdom mark the sides of the microtext. The middle portion traces and places the bride and groom in the context of their respective families. The invitation is usually a combination of pink and yellow with fonts in any colour except black, which is considered an inauspicious colour. Initially, the upper classes used printed invitation but soon it became prevalent among all classes and castes.
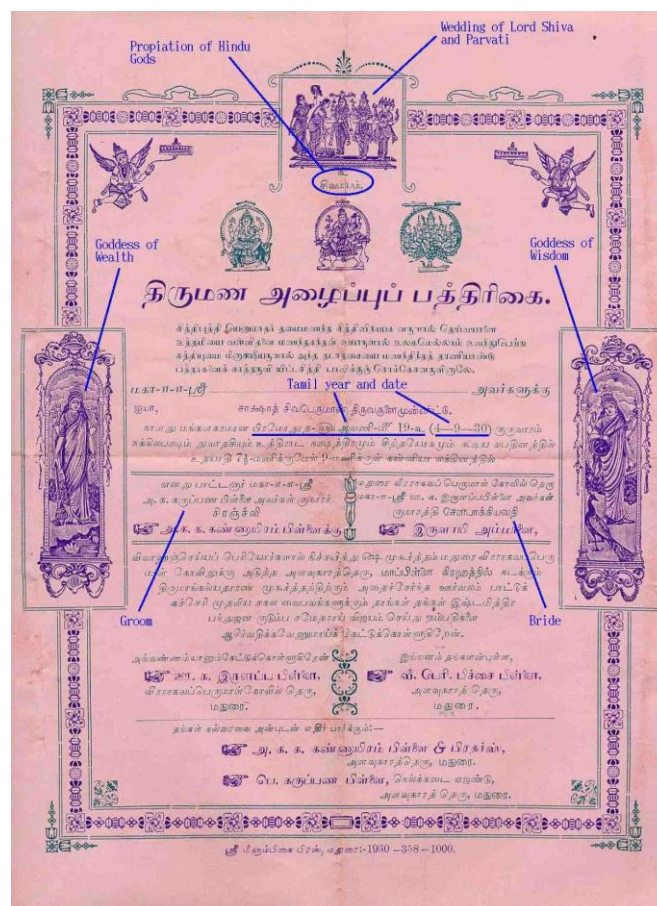
Figure 4

3.4. Invitation for a Bigamous Wedding (Sample 5)

Like all marriage invitations, this invitation also begins with an invocation to the family deity. The references to the date and time are according to the Tamil calendar. The interesting feature of the sample is the simultaneous invitation for the marriages of two brothers to two wives each. The bridegrooms are ruling zamindars and the brides come from matching backgrounds. Bigamy was prevalent but this is a rare occasion when it is done with public cognisance.
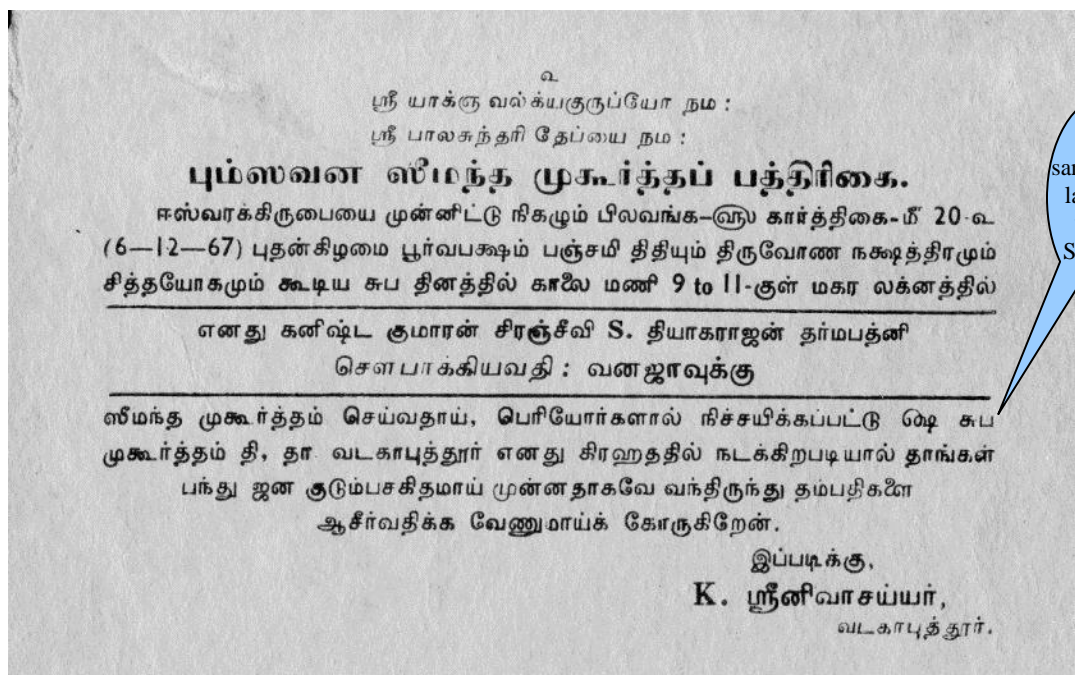

Figure 5

Another highlight is the tracing of the genealogies of the brides and grooms, which would have formed part of the official betrothal ceremony. The date of the weddings (30.01.1920) also offers an interesting insight. By the early twentieth century, child marriage and *sati (immolation of the wife in the funeral pyre of the deceased husband)* were already abolished, thanks to social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy. However, bigamy does not seem to have attracted a similar protest.

3.5. Invitation to a Pre-confinement Function (Sample 6)

The Seemantham or the pre-confinement function is performed in the husband's house before the wife goes to her parents' house for delivering the first child. In fact, the first born is called "seemantha putran/putri." The format follows the wedding invitation very closely. What is interesting is that the invitation is from the husband's father. This is so because the pre-confinement function is officiated by the husband's family. Further, even though the text markers such as the invocation, names and terminology point to a Brahmin function, the language is more neutral (toning down of the Brahmin lingo), keeping with the times. By the 1960s, the Dravidian movement and the Self-Respect movement had already articulated and registered their protest against Brahmin dominance. Parody of the Brahmin dialect was and still is a popular trope in media representations.

3.6. Invitation to a 80th Birthday Celebration (Sample 7)

The Sadabhisekam or the 80th Birthday function is usually performed by

Figure 6

Less sanskritised language than in Sample 3

the children for their father. Fittingly the invitation is from the son. Usually, there is a replication of the marriage ceremony and tying of the thali. However, keeping with the times (1970s), there is no mention of this function and there is a reception! Further, the name of the function *Sadhabishekam* (One who has witnessed a thousand moons) has been explained, probably because the younger generations would no longer understand traditional terminology.
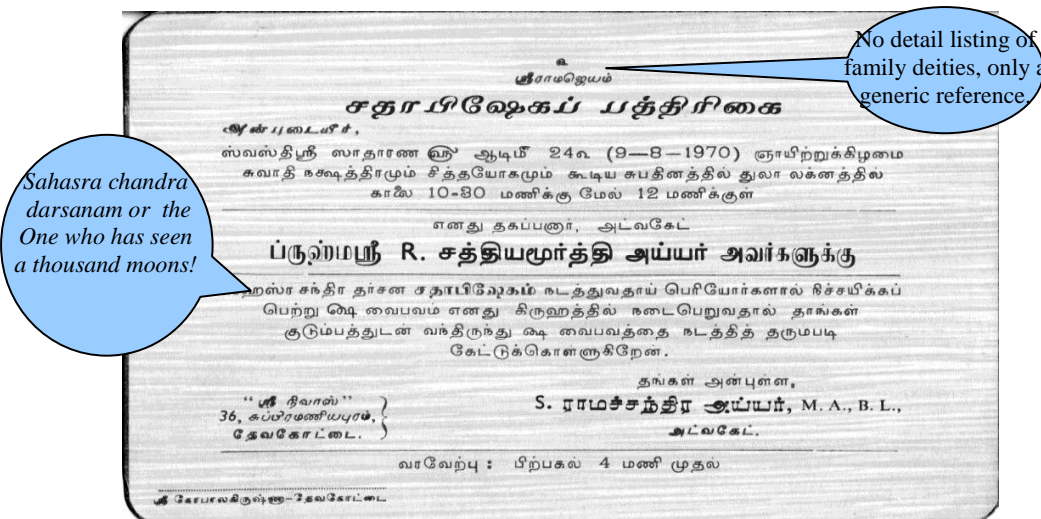

Figure 7

3.7. Invitation for a House Warming (Sample 8)

The acquisition of property marks the success of an individual in society. This invitation is different in that the invocation to the family deity forms the first sentence of the invitation. Usually it is at the top centre of the invitation. Further, following the contemporary trend, the house has been given a name. From the 1970s onwards, it has been fashionable to name the houses one acquires. Names of family deity, personal deity, ancestors, spouse and children have been popular choices. Also interesting is the fact that there have been diverging trends. Houses are named in vernacular terms – *illam, manai, veedu* or in foreign language terms – *cottage, villa, mansion.*
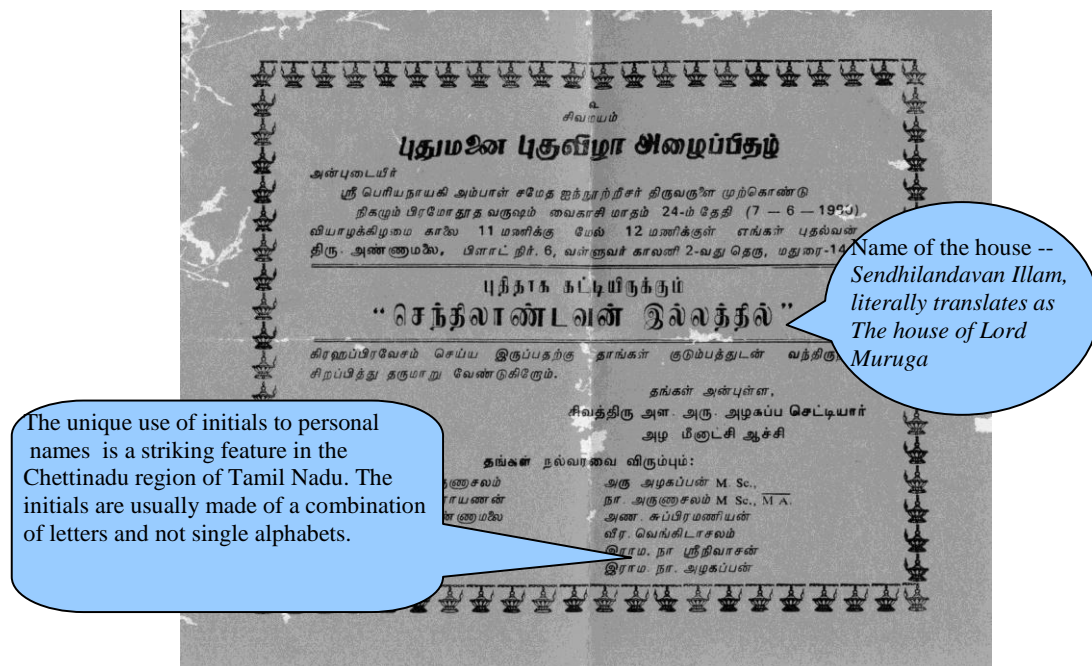
Figure 8

3.8. Invitation for a Condolence Meeting (Sample 9)

The death notice varies from a small item in the obituary column to large posters and hoardings. What is interesting about this sample is that it is a Christian Death notice and call for a condolence meeting but it includes a black mark on the left hand top corner, thus symbolising something inauspicious. This mark is used in the death notices of Hindus as well. It reveals an interesting aspect of the percolation of the technology through the social/communal strata. This death notice adopts not only a new technology but also the existing templates.

Another interesting aspect in this invitation is the names of family members, which combine Hindu and Christian names (*Jaya Paulraj, Clarence Balamirtham).* These provide instant indicators to the large scale religious conversions by the colonial Christian Missionaries.
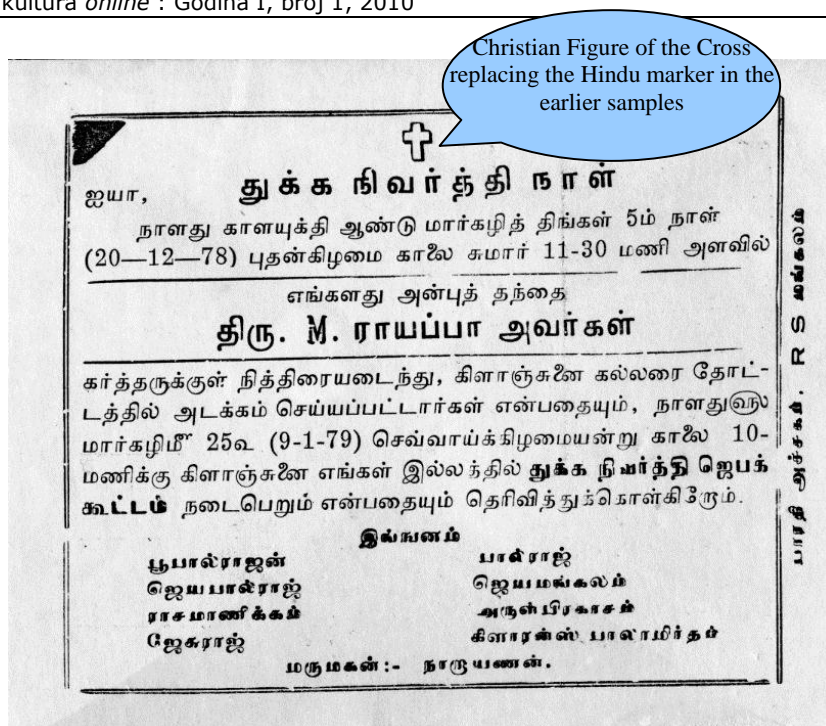
Figure 9

4. Conclusion

The samples of personal invitations analysed in this study trace the growth of an individual from birth through marriage to death. The eclectic nature of the selection is a deliberate choice to showcase similarities and differences in customs and beliefs within a community. A majority of the single sheets used in this paper refer to the Chettiar, a prosperous merchant community, given that the collector of this collection is a Chettiar. However, since the focus of the paper is to trace the growth of an individual from birth to death -- bildungsroman, there is no commentary on the socio-cultural references of any one community.

Personal invitations mark the sensitivity to and acceptance of the new technology across different strata of society. This certainly contests all theories of technological elitism. The innovations used in the invitations contest the popular notion of technological determinism. More importantly, these personal invitations enable a coalescing of the personal and the social.

As a specific selection, they trace the growth of an individual. As an eclectic selection, they throw light on different facets of social customs and beliefs. By juxtaposing the individual progress and the social evolution, these invitations simultaneously construct narratives of the self and the community. As George Steinmetz remarks, "Narratives vary in... their temporal inclusiveness or range. Some follow an individual from birth to... death, while others cover only sections of life span. Collective narratives may follow a nation." (3) The two

types of narratives discernible in Steinmetz' statement are the bildungsroman and social narratives.

By foregrounding the narrative aspect, these single sheet personal invitations "help to make experience intelligible, to crystallize personal identity, and to constitute and nurture community." (Hinchman) It is in this sense that the invitations create a bildungsroman of a larger community.

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NOTE

Apstrakt

POZIVNICE U ŠTAMPANIM MEDIJIMA NA TAMILSKOM JEZIKU KAO SVOJEVRSNI OBRAZOVNI ROMAN O ZAJEDNICI

Rad se bavi jednim specifičnim aspektom indijskih štampanih medija na tamilskom jeziku. U njegovom središtu je analiza raznih aspekata pozivnica, objava, čestitki, pamfleta i sličnih materijala koji su sastavni deo tamilske štampe i života lokalnog stanovništva. Ove vrste teksta posvećene su događajima kao što su rođenje ili usvajanje deteta, razni obredi vezani za početak puberteta, inicijaciju, venčanje, rođendane, useljenje ili smrt. Kada se napravi sinteza ovih događaja, ona podseća na obrazovni roman, priču o odrastanju i sticanju zrelosti. Autorka u radu pokazuje da ove kratke literarne forme ne pričaju samo priču o nečijem životu, već i daju širu sliku o napredovanju pojedinca u društvu, kao i o uticaju društva na život pojedinca, istovremeno pobijajući koncepte tehnološkog determinizma i elitizma.

Ključne reči: obrazovni roman, štampani mediji na tamilskom jeziku, privatne pozivnice, tehnološki determinizam, tehnološki elitizam