

OPENING REMARKS BY MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS, MRS JOSEPHINE TEO, AT THE LAUNCH OF TAMIL CHOLAI, ON SATURDAY 16 APRIL 2022

CELEBRATING THE SPIRIT OF TAMIL CULTURE

Mr P Krishnan and our many local Tamil authors here today,
Colleagues and Friends.

Introduction

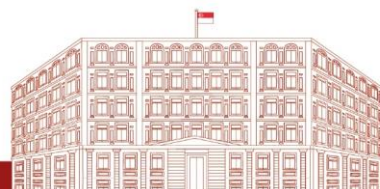
1. Good afternoon and *Iniya Puthaandu Nalvazhthukkal*.
2. Just two days ago, Tamils around the world welcomed the beginning of a new year. It is a most auspicious occasion, and I am delighted to be with all of you to launch Tamil Cholai, Singapore's largest Tamil literary collection of over 20,000 works.
3. There is a classic Tamil couplet from the classic *Thirukkural*, that is both meaningful and suitable for this occasion. It is likely to be familiar to many of you here. In English, it reads:

"Water will flow from a well in the sand in proportion to the depth to which it is dug, and knowledge will flow from a man in proportion to his learning."
4. This *Thirukkural* resonates with me, and I believe many others, in at least three ways:
 - a. One, it affirms the importance of lifelong learning.
 - b. Two, it suggests that we should learn widely, including from cultures other than our own; and
 - c. Three, it underscores the value of the institutions of learning in society, such as libraries.

I will touch on each of these aspects today.

Importance of lifelong learning

5. First, on lifelong learning. As the couplet says, the deeper a well is dug, the freer the streams of water will flow. Similarly, the more we learn and apply our knowledge, the wiser we get and the more we can contribute to our communities. Learning will always enrich our minds and spark our imagination. In good times,



learning provides us a greater sense of purpose and fulfilment, and in challenging times, it injects us with a sense of renewed optimism and possibilities.

6. Recent data from NLB suggest that many share this view and were keen to learn from the rich collections of the NLB. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, physical and digital book loans came up to 37.9 million, a 30% increase in 2021 compared to the year before. Despite difficulties in accessing physical libraries, our libraries were visited 11.5 million times in 2021, an increase by 26%. I was also heartened to hear that Tamil eBook loans more than doubled during this period from around 9,000 in 2020 to nearly 24,000 in 2021.

7. Clearly, the love for learning in general, and for Tamil literature in particular, has endured during these tough times. Kudos to my NLB colleagues and the volunteers, which adapted readily to the pandemic by building up its Tamil eBook collection, standing at 5,100 books today.

8. Building on these past efforts, today we launch Tamil Cholai. Tamil Cholai is Singapore's largest Tamil literary collection, of over 20,000 works. It includes Tamil classical texts, award-winning titles, and pieces by our own Singaporean authors. We hope that with its comprehensive collection of Tamil resources, Tamil Cholai will motivate all of you to keep learning in Tamil, and about Tamil culture.

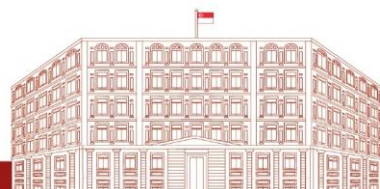
9. In fact, just from my visit today, I have gained new insights to life and culture, including from the classic *Thirukkural*. Being one of the earliest written records on ethics and morality, it offers life lessons we all can learn from.

Bridging cultures through literature

10. This brings me to my next point - on learning about other cultures.

11. The couplet that I just shared exemplifies the universal values that all of us, regardless of our backgrounds, can benefit from. But we would not be aware of the timeless philosophies, virtues, and lessons imbued within these couplets if not for their translations. It is, thus, truly exciting that Tamil Cholai has around 1,000 specially curated works in English, Chinese and Malay, and programmes for English speakers. This includes the collection of *Thirukkural*, which will offer translations in 17 languages, ranging from Mandarin and Japanese, to French and German. Now, all of us can understand and appreciate Tamil culture together.

12. Tamil Cholai is therefore important not just for the Tamil community. It will also be another step forward in strengthening Singapore's social cohesion – each community celebrating their own language and culture while learning about other cultures too.



Libraries as gateways to knowledge and culture

13. Finally, what does all this mean for NLB? To many Singaporeans, our libraries have always been more than just shelves of books. They are community hubs for social activities, and most importantly, gateways to knowledge and culture. They are places of inclusivity and champions of bilingualism - where intercultural understanding is promoted through our shared love for learning.

14. For our libraries to continue supporting the lifelong learning needs of Singaporeans and to effectively connect our communities, last year, the NLB rolled out LAB25, which stands for the Libraries and Archives Blueprint 2025.

15. In LAB25, we envision our libraries as a Learning Marketplace,

- a. Providing rich content and programmes,
- b. Allowing patrons – regardless of ages and backgrounds – to freely learn and partake in each other’s cultures;
- c. And connecting patrons with similar learning interests as safe and conducive social spaces
- d. For people to come together.

16. Through Tamil Cholai, we are already seeing LAB25 come to life. Tamil Cholai is the culmination of community efforts. It embodies the passion of our library programme partners, volunteers, writers, publishers, and community leaders who have tirelessly put this together.

17. This year, NLB is also working with the Centre for Singapore Tamil Culture to develop an online Encyclopedia on Singapore Tamils. This will be an invaluable record of Tamil life and history in Singapore, shedding light on our pioneers who have shaped Singapore’s identity and laid the foundation of contemporary Tamil culture. I hope and am confident that this will be well received by the community, and something the rest of Singapore society will benefit from.

18. Your efforts to preserve Singapore’s rich Tamil heritage have already been inspiring. In 2015, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Singapore’s independence, NLB had also worked with you to create a digital collection of 50 years of Tamil writing in Singapore. The Tamil Digital Heritage Collection is now an invaluable cultural legacy for future generations of Singaporeans and the larger Tamil diaspora.



Conclusion

19. To conclude, I would like to thank

- a. Mr Arun Mahizhnan and everyone who has helped to see through the implementation of Tamil Cholai, for your dedication towards this endeavour.
- b. Staff and students from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts for the beautiful murals that added to this experience!

20. The Tamil community in Singapore is significant far beyond its size, and long may this be so. Thank you once again for inviting me and let me wish you all again a very happy new year.

