

## Francois Gros | Explorations in classical Tamil

A once-in-a-generation scholar, Gros has built a special bond with the language and the country through his work



Gros says interest in classical languages is dipping across the world as English takes precedence. Photo: Sharp Image

**Pondicherry:** Throughout history, Tamil has evoked a strong and even evangelical fervour among its speakers: from the freedom fighter and poet **Subramania Bharati** to social reformer **Periyar**, and to his political descendant **M.K. Karunanidhi**, chief of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, who, in 2010, demanded that Tamil be made an official language of the government of India.

French scholar **François Édouard Stéphane Gros** may not be as much of a household name in Tamil Nadu as those three men, but he has done his bit for the Tamil language.

Despite his European origins, the 79-year-old has been immersed in Tamil literature for about half-a-century, a period of study that was rewarded last year by the President of India, who bestowed on him the Kural Peedam prize for exceptional contribution to Tamil literature by a foreigner.

In 2004, the government elevated Tamil to the status of a classical language, alongside Greek, Latin and Sanskrit. And since 2006, to

encourage research in classical Tamil, the government has been instituting awards for scholars. Among them, the Kural Peedam (literally pedestal for verses) is worth `5 lakh.

A series of unlikely twists of fate were responsible for Gros's career in the study of the South Indian language. Gros was born in 1933 in the French city of Lyon, also home to the writer, poet and aviator **Antoine de Saint-Exupéry**, author of *The Little Prince*.

"I've grown up reading his books, but unfortunately could not meet him as he died during the second world war when I was a boy," Gros says.

An only child, Gros grew up in a world filled with books thanks to the insatiable literary appetite of his engineer father, who encouraged Gros to continue his study of literature at Lyon University. "My father was a very cultured man," says Gros. "I am indebted to him for two things: the culture and the independence of mind, and I hope I've inherited both from him."

In University, Gros studied classical literature and linguistics, including French, Greek, Latin and Sanskrit, which sparked his interest in India.

After completing his MA, Gros was on track to become a French professor when his plans took a surprising turn. In 1954, guerilla groups in the French colony of Algeria began a series of attacks against the French, which would kick-start the Algerian war of independence. By 1957, when he was 24, Gros enlisted in the army.

"I was not a fighting man, but it was a compulsory enlisting," says Gros.

Gros's bad eyesight prevented him from joining the hundreds of thousands of French forces on the frontline in Algeria. Instead, he served as a non-combatant.

"I got by doing secretarial jobs and teaching in schools in Algeria," says the bespectacled professor, who speaks in halting but perfectly enunciated Tamil with a thick French accent.

"The experience was an inoculation against exoticism of all kinds and taught me to fight all forms of racism," he says. "After the experience in Algeria, I abhorred the idea of a quick tour of a country for the sake of a holiday and vacation. It was important for me to meet the people and know the culture. I did not want to ever behave as a tourist, because you miss the wonders and beauty of a country by doing so," says Gros.

### An acquired culture

That sentiment stayed with Gros over the years. On his return to France and the world of academia, he was introduced to **Pierre Meile**, a professor who taught Hindi and Tamil at the INALCO (National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations) in Paris. Meile invited Gros to study classical Hindi and Tamil on hearing about Gros's abiding fascination for India.

It was an unusual specialization, even then. Tamil, Sanskrit and Hindi have been part of the Oriental Studies programmes in France since the 19th century, but the number of people studying classical Indian languages each year were, and are still, in low-single digits.

Gros was almost the only one in his generation, says 60-year-old **Elisabeth Sethupathy**, Gros's student, who now heads the Tamil Department at INALCO.

"Prof. Gros's learning attitude has made him what he is: a very knowledgeable and cultured person not only in his own culture but in his acquired Tamil culture," says Sethupathy, a French national, who is married to a Sri Lankan Tamilian.

By the end of his career (he retired in 2002) Gros had become the director of South Indian Philology and History at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Études (school for higher studies) at the Sorbonne in Paris, but he says that the most satisfying time of his life was the 14 years he spent in Pondicherry between 1963 and 1977.

Tamil Nadu has long had a French connection thanks to the presence of the French East India Company and later the French missionary institutions, which were a vehicle for spreading the knowledge of India from the perspective of South India.

In 1955, a year after the last French territories were incorporated into the Union of India, **Jean Filliozat** established the French Institute of Pondicherry (IFP), to facilitate a continued exchange of the two cultures. Born in 1906, Filliozat was an author and physician, who had studied Indian medicine, as well Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan and Tamil. In 1963, Filliozat sent a 30-year-old Gros, who had studied Tamil grammar under him in Paris, to Pondicherry and randomly assigned a classical Tamil text called *Paripatal* for him to translate.

Gros's three-year study in Tamil in Paris had taught him to read and write the language and to understand a classical text, but it was not sufficient for him to be able to speak fluent Tamil or even read a Tamil newspaper, written in more ordinary vocabulary. That was knowledge that could only be got through experience, Gros said.

Sweating over the text that he had been assigned, Gros developed a deep connection with the language of *Paripatal*, an anthology of poems about various deities, the city of Madurai and the river Vaigai that runs through it.

### 'Paripatal' in his veins

For the young professor, it was the perfect initiation into Tamil and Tamil culture. The beauty of the language, the ways of the people and their gods were all captured in these set of poems, he says. After four years of study, he translated the anthology into French and had it published by IFP in 1968.

"If you pick my veins, you will find *Paripatal* oozing out of it," says Gros, in a meandering, circuitous monologue marked by occasionally peculiar phrasing. Tamil has become a part of who he is. "Tamil happened by chance. I don't want to be sentimental about it, but it is the language through which I experienced India."

Classical Tamil, which was written between 2nd and 10th century, has a corpus of eight major works like the *Paripatal*, and includes other classics like *Tevaram* (a collection of hymns to Shiva), poet **Thiruvalluvar's** *Thirukural* (1,330 couplets that deal with and advise on dealing with various aspects of life), and *Periyapuranam* (on the life of Shivites).

According to Gros, Tamil is a very sophisticated language; he says that the early proponents of Tamil literature were most probably bilingual and could speak Sanskrit too.

"If you see, whatever culture, social mores, ethics, religion that you could read in a Sanskrit text was available in Tamil literature," Gros says. For example, the *Periyapuranam's* counterpart in Sanskrit is the *Shivabhaktavilasa*.

Though there are far fewer classical Tamil texts than exist in French, Greek or Latin, Gros says it is the quality and not the quantity of works that makes Tamil as special a language as any of its European counterparts. "A classical language needs to have a level of quality such that it has a universal appeal when it is translated," says Gros.

Gros believes translations should be sacred. To remind him not to write any "nonsense" he wears a *Pavithram* ring on the ring finger of his right hand—his only piece of jewellery. Gros has never married, although while studying, he became engaged to a girl who was killed during a mountaineering adventure, an incident that he says was too traumatizing for him to get over. The *Pavithram* ring, which resembles a sailor's knot, is usually worn by priests in South India to remind them of their moral obligations.

Gros's obligations are complete fidelity to the text, he says. Translations can easily turn out to be traitors, which is why Gros does not like to paraphrase. "A literary translation should evoke two feelings in the reader—one, the reader should feel that he is missing something beautiful as he is not able to read the original, at the same time, the text should convey the beauty of the original," he explains. He worries that many of the old Tamil classics have been translated, without the intention to stay true to their true meanings.

### Staying contemporary

In his attempt to bring Tamil to a French audience, Gros has translated the complete *Paripatal* and selected parts of at least six classical texts, some of which were printed 40 years ago and are still in print. But unlike many purists, his interest does not only lie in classical language. He has also done a lot of work around contemporary Tamil. Gros and **M. Kannan**, a researcher in the Contemporary Tamil

Studies of the Indology Department, French Institute of Pondicherry, have translated an anthology of Sri Lankan Tamil short stories into French.

“Gros’s zeal for books and reading anything that is published in Tamil is incomparable,” Kannan says. “I have to compete with him. His constant search for books and knowledge is unimaginable. It is not just literature, it is history, philosophy, anthropology.”

According to Gros, few people still share this kind of zeal. Interest in classical languages is dipping across the world as English takes precedence, Gros says. The number of students studying Greek and Latin are minimal, and the figures for Tamil and Sanskrit are even lower.

“The only way you can sustain the interest in a language is by keeping it contemporary. It is not just Tamil, all languages are having the same fight. The creative activity you have in a language is essential for its vitality,” says the professor, who also has a keen interest in Dalit literature.

Gros cites writers such as Sujatha, a pseudonym for **S. Rangarajan**, an engineer by profession who wrote numerous short stories, novels and books on science, for playing a great role in keeping the language contemporary.

“He was one of the first writers who brought technology and the world of computers to popular Tamil literature,” Gros says, and Tamil needs many more such writers. “The French publishers will only consider something that is already translated into English. Tamilians who came to France from Pondicherry have abandoned their culture, and have done little to keep the culture alive.”

Moreover, Gros says even the French have obstinate faith in the universal nature of their language. “They have not really opened themselves to receiving Tamilians and including them in their French world,” he admits.

However, it’s not all gloom. Tamil may have a new lifeline, with the increasing diaspora of Sri Lankan Tamilians in Europe and the US. Also, institutes such as the IFP will play a big role in taking the East to the West and vice versa.

Gros is currently excited about the project he is working on with Kannan, which is to create a historical atlas of South India. “This will go into my list of favourite works,” he says.

Gros, who now devotes his time to reading and taking long walks on the beach, still has many texts in his desk waiting to be translated. These days, he is based in Lyon, but he still visits Tamil Nadu twice a year.

His library in France holds 45,000 books on India, Tamil and South India—he says that a philologist needs to “displace” at least 200 books a day as part of research. Gros himself gets through about 10 books in a week, but for him, he adds, a language cannot be contained in books—it lives on the tongue. Gros is fluent in French, Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, and Tamil; he also understands Hindi, Spanish and German. And has many more discoveries left to be made in the languages he knows.