

## **Tamil literature to be digitised**

### **Move will give the public easy and full access to the Tamil literary heritage of Singapore**

***Eve Yap***

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In the course of moving house several times, veteran poet K.T.M. Iqbal figures he has misplaced a couple of his books - and has had to borrow them when he wanted to read them.

One of the missing titles, Annai (which means mother in Tamil) is a collection of the lyrics of some 50 Tamil children's songs, which was broadcast on radio in the late 1970s and 1980s.

Another was one he penned himself - his first anthology of poems on nature, love and family, called Flowers Of The Heart and published in 1975.

Iqbal, 73, realised they were missing only when a literature graduate student from India asked him for his collection of works to write a thesis some years ago.

"I wasn't careful about keeping my books when I moved. So I had to borrow these titles from a friend to lend to the graduate student," he says.

Also, when friends asked to borrow his books, he had to photocopy them, he adds.

Such hassles will be a thing of the past when his and other Tamil writers' works are digitised under the Tamil Digital Heritage Project.

It was launched on Saturday at the Asian Civilisations Museum by Mr S. Iswaran, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office and 2nd Minister for Home Affairs and Ministry of Trade and Industry.

Mr Iswaran called on Tamil authors to "readily give their consent" for the community-driven digitisation effort.

Mr Arun Mahizhnan, chief coordinator of the Tamil Digital Heritage Group, says that although Tamil books have been published here since the late 1800s, their availability is "woefully limited".

He says: "With the exception of the National Library Board, there is no place in Singapore where the public can get easy and full access to the Tamil literary heritage of more than a century."

Also, there is "not a single Tamil publisher or bookshop with a modest selection of Singapore Tamil literary works", adds Mr Arun, who is also the Institute of Policy Studies' special research adviser.

The Tamil Digital Heritage Group is partnering the National Library Board to digitise the board's collection of Tamil literary works, giving people here and abroad easy access to them, he says.

The National Library Board says it has more than 500 titles of literary works by Tamil Singaporean or Singapore permanent residents. They include authors such as Iqbal, M. Elangkannan and Singai Mukilan.

The works earmarked for digitisation are those published between 1965 and 2015, the years Singapore gained independence and its 50th anniversary.

The digitised collection will be presented as the Indian community's gift to the nation in 2015.

The project is supported by agencies such as the National Heritage Board and the National Arts Council.

St Hilda's Primary School pupil Adithya Srinivasan, who was at the launch, says the e-book effort is "fantastic". Says the 12-year-old: "It will be easier for us to find on our computers or smartphones the old books and those by famous authors that we cannot even find in the stores."