



The Light of Knowledge: Literacy Activism and the Politics of Writing in South India (Expertise: Cultures and Technologies of Knowledge)

By Francis Cody

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Since the early 1990s hundreds of thousands of Tamil villagers in southern India have participated in literacy lessons, science demonstrations, and other events designed to transform them into active citizens with access to state power. These efforts to spread enlightenment among the oppressed are part of a movement known as the Arivoli Iyakkam (the Enlightenment Movement), considered to be among the most successful mass literacy movements in recent history. In *The Light of Knowledge*, Francis Cody's ethnography of the Arivoli Iyakkam highlights the paradoxes inherent in such movements that seek to emancipate people through literacy when literacy is a power-laden social practice in its own right.

The Light of Knowledge is set primarily in the rural district of Pudukkottai in Tamil Nadu, and it is about activism among laboring women from marginalized castes who have been particularly active as learners and volunteers in the movement. In their endeavors to remake the Tamil countryside through literacy activism, workers in the movement found that their own understanding of the politics of writing and Enlightenment was often transformed as they encountered vastly different notions of language and imaginations of social order. Indeed, while activists of the movement successfully mobilized large numbers of rural women, they did so through logics that often pushed against the very Enlightenment rationality they hoped to foster. Offering a rare behind-the-scenes look at an increasingly important area of social and political activism, *The Light of Knowledge* brings tools of linguistic anthropology to engage with critical social theories of the postcolonial state.

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Editorial Review

Review

"*The Light of Knowledge* is a work of linguistic anthropology that makes crucial contributions to the study of literacy and language ideologies. It is also a broadly ranging work of social theory that will be of interest to students and scholars of the postcolonial state and neoliberal governmentality in South Asia and beyond, and of activism and social movements more generally. Although it presents a critique of the pedagogy of literacy in the Arivoli Iyakkam, this book does not stop there. Rather, it holds out the hope that though the content of literacy lessons may be flawed, it is the process of rethinking the lessons and the process of mobilization itself—the reflexivity, social networks, and forms of relationship engendered by the movement, in short, all those things that remain unwritten—that make a difference."—Amanda Weidman, *Anthropological Quarterly* (Summer 2014)

"Cody effectively documents the nuances of literacy activism. This is more than a history or overview of a movement; rather, it is a demonstration of the activist's methodology and of how activism incorporates multiple themes such as policy and governance, knowledge, media and movements."—Chris Speldewinde, *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* (February 2016)

"In *The Light of Knowledge*, Francis Cody moves away from the conventional modes of literacy studies and situates an ethnography of literacy activism within a broader anthropological framework that allows for new approaches and fresh questions."—Ritty Lukose, New York University, author of *Liberalization's Children: Gender, Youth and Consumer Citizenship in Globalizing India*

About the Author

Francis Cody is Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology and the Asian Institute at the University of Toronto.

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