



François Gros (photo : DR/EFEO).

François GROS
(1933–2021)

Born in Lyon on 17th December 1933 and deceased on 24th of April 2021, François Gros has been described as having “for much of his life been the principal standard-bearer for Tamil Studies in France”. This characterization is found in the Preface by R.E. Asher (1926–2022) to *South-Indian Horizons*, a Felicitation Volume¹ offered to François Gros in 2004 on the occasion of his 70th birthday. Besides a preface, two forewords and forty-one contributions by his colleagues and admirers, that 2004 volume contains, under the subtitle “Ma vie sans moi”,² a “Notice Biographique” written by François

1. *South-Indian Horizons: Felicitation volume for François Gros on the occasion of his 70th birthday*, Jean-Luc Chevillard & Eva Wilden (eds.), Pondichéry, Institut Français de Pondichéry, 2004, p. xiv; new edition on line: <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.ifp.7481>.

2. *South-Indian Horizons*, pp. xvii–xx.

Gros himself. There he describes his formative years, his “engagement” at the Institut Français de Pondichéry (IFP) by Jean Filliozat in 1963, his becoming a member of the École française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO) in 1967 until 1977, the year he became simultaneously a “directeur d’études à l’École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE)” and also the director of the EFEO. This responsibility remained his for twelve years until 1989. He also briefly mentions those of his publications which he considered, retrospectively, as the most significant.

A few years later, in 2009, a collection of his “major essays”, which had originally been written in French, was made available for the first time in translation, with occasional adjustments, to the “English speaking scholarly world”. They appeared under the title *Deep Rivers: Selected Writings on Tamil Literature*.³ That volume contains three sections: Classical Tamil (280 pages for 9 essays); Contemporary Tamil (168 pages for 7 essays); Occasional Papers (62 pages for 6 items). These sections are preceded by a 24-page original essay, “Reflections”,⁴ dedicated “to the memory of Armand Minard (1906–1998)”, in which François Gros explains his choice of essays.

The duality of the domain François Gros explored, both in his teaching of Classical Tamil at the EPHE and in his writings, which covered, sometimes with the collaboration of others, a much larger linguistic spectrum than Classical Tamil, as for instance when he translated contemporary Tamil writers into French, is possibly best expressed by the title of an article, “Négociier avec le passé”. This appeared in a volume edited in 2006 by M. Kannan and Carlos Mena: *Negotiations with the Past: Classical Tamil in Contemporary Tamil*. The article starts with a quotation from a song by Léo Ferré, “Monsieur mon Passé, // Voulez-vous passer. // J’ai comme une envie // D’oublier ma vie...”. As to the emotions that individual readers may feel when reading this 2006 article, occasionally provocative, that doubtless depends on the degree of their own investment, as students or as teachers, in the study of what we can call the third component of the Tamil triglossia, namely Classical Tamil (செந்தமிழ் [*centamiḷ*]), a language nowadays mastered only by a very small minority of modern Tamil speakers, although every educated Tamil speaker is at least diglossic. François Gros himself was primarily renowned in India for his mastery of Classical Tamil, for which he was awarded in 2008–2009 a presidential award called *Kuraḷ Pīṭam* by the government of India. Indeed, the first thing to be mentioned in his obituary in *The Times of India* was that he had translated into French the *Paripāṭal*,⁵ which is one of the Eight anthologies, an important component of the ancient corpus of texts known as Sangam literature, that literature being named after the legend of the three Sangam-s (three academies).⁶

3. *Deep Rivers: Selected Writings on Tamil Literature*, Pondichéry, Institut Français de Pondichéry, 2009; new edition on line: <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.ifp.3464>.

4. *Deep Rivers*, pp. xv–xxxviii; <https://books.openedition.org/ifp/3506>.

5. *Le Paripāṭal. Introduction, traduction et notes*, Pondichéry, Institut Français de Pondichéry (Publications de l’Institut Français d’Indologie 35), 1968.

6. The obituary in *The Times of India* was authored by Mr. K.R.A. Narasiah, who lives in Chennai and has published several books, notably *கடல் வழி வணிகம்* about maritime trade in Tamil Nadu (Chennai, Palaniappa Brothers, 2005).

Institutionally, François Gros has always paid great attention to the preservation of harmonious relationships between the various institutions that make up French Academia. This can be seen when he explains in the 2004 “Notice Biographique” that when he became the director of the EFEO in 1977, he also became “Responsable scientifique de la section d’Indologie” of the IFP, for the sake of “préserver la synergie originelle”, between the IFP created in 1954 by Jean Filliozat and the EFEO.⁷ The same preoccupation with preserving harmony, this time between the departments of one institution, is seen in a text that he declaimed in 2005, “Golden Jubilee: the future of Indology in Pondicherry”,⁸ where François Gros opines that “An absurd dichotomy has finally managed to differentiate between Indology and the social sciences” arguing slightly later that “the social sciences library was originally put together from the Indology one, which was obviously diversified enough for that”, and insisting later that “tradition and modernity are not opposed”.⁹

As far as traditional Tamil scholarship is concerned, Tamil students should be grateful to François Gros for having had the insight to recruit at the EFEO’s Pondicherry Centre the great Tamil specialist T.V. Gopal Iyer, alias TVG (1926–2007),¹⁰ after that scholar’s retirement. In doing so, he was continuing a tradition started at the time of Jean Filliozat, when scholars such as V.M. Subramanya Ayyar (1905–1981), a disciple of U.V. Swaminatha Aiyar (1855–1942), were recruited at the French Institute of Pondicherry. The tradition is continued even today, as attested by the presence of Indra Manuel, initially recruited at the EFEO Centre by Eva Wilden. One may suspect that T.V. Gopal Iyer was expressing his gratitude to François Gros by his choice of topic in the 2004 Felicitation volume, because his brief article, “The Victory in Human Life”,¹¹ is a brief evocation of the topic of வாக்கை [*vākai*], which is one of the Seven *tiṇai*-s of the *Puram* genre of Tamil Literature, dealt with by several *sūtra*-s of the 2nd chapter of the 3rd book of the *Tolkāppiyam*, the most ancient treatise codifying Classical Tamil poetry. *Vākai* is the name of a plant and of its flower, but, in the “langage des fleurs” typical of Tamil Poetical convention, it is used for referring to the topic of eulogy, which the *Tolkāppiyam sūtra* chosen by T.V. Gopal Iyer divides into two groups of nine *tuṇai*-s “themes” each. Leaving aside the eulogy of *maṟam* “military valour”, which is what the first group of nine themes covers, T.V. Gopal Iyer concentrates on the second group of nine themes (lines 14–24), which are types of eulogies falling under *aṟam* (Sanskrit: *dharma*), as conceived by the poets whose eloquence the *Tolkāppiyam* codifies. On the basis of the reading chosen by T.V. Gopal Iyer for one of the nine themes, *kaṭṭi nūtta pāli nāṇum* (*Tolkāppiyam* 76n, line 16), it is clear that he is following the commentator called Naccinārkkinīyar, who

7. *South-Indian Horizons*, p. xviii.

8. *Deep Rivers*, pp. 487–498; <https://books.openedition.org/ifp/3581>.

9. *Id.*, p. 492.

10. See his obituary in the *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* 94, 2007, pp. 9–12.

11. *South-Indian Horizons*, pp. 643–645; <https://books.openedition.org/ifp/7951>.

sees this *turai* as dealing with meritoriously “abdicating the throne” for the sake of someone else, as is done for instance by Bharata in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. (The other commentator, Ḹampūraṇar, has a completely different reading and a completely different interpretation.)

As a final remark, one may observe that one element in the announcement that appeared in *The Times of India* shortly after the death of François Gros fittingly falls simultaneously under two of the types of eulogy evoked by T.V. Gopal Iyer in his short article, one being “*poruḷoṭu puṇarnta pakkam*”¹² and the other one being “*aruḷoṭu puṇarnta akarci*”.¹³ We are indeed informed by that article that François Gros “created a large corpus of Tamil printed material, creating a unique collection of nearly 10,000 volumes that he has donated to the University of Toronto”. We are further informed that “According to professor Srilata Raman of the university [of Toronto,] these rare works will be made available to scholars online once the cataloguing is complete.” Three years later, the promise is in the process of becoming a reality, as will be clear to anyone who connects to the URL https://archive.org/details/university_of_toronto and who searches the metadata for the string “From the collection of François Gros”. This is how a scholar of breadth and vision will be remembered.

Jean-Luc CHEVILLARD

12. T.V. Gopal Iyer comments: “The trustees of public endowments should perform actions in the right ways to raise the financial position of those endowments so that they may be useful to the future generations also.”

13. T.V. Gopal Iyer comments: “as we grow in life, the attachment we have for our kith and kin should get extended to all human beings and other living beings.”