



Orient BlackSwan

# The Radiance of Tamil

Politics, Language, Media

edited by

Constantine V. Nakassis | Francis Cody | E. Annamalai



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THE RADIANCE OF TAMIL: POLITICS, LANGUAGE, MEDIA

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*Dedicated to Bernard Bate (1960–2016)*





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## PREFACE

In a promotional documentary, Professor Milton Friedman, acclaimed and extremely conservative economist, asserted that the University of Chicago is a very special place for scholars. Is it a special place for Tamil Studies? This book, *The Radiance of Tamil*, is an argument to answer that question affirmatively. The Chicago Tamil Forum of the University has been an intellectual club since its formation in 2014, debating the ideas presented in the sixteen chapters of this book, and many others, as they relate to Tamil.

There is no separate department of Tamil at the University of Chicago; but Tamil is and has been present in many departments of the University, from those in the human sciences to those in the health sciences, where one or more professors are engaged in research that includes some aspect of Tamil language, literature, culture, society, politics, media, music, history and the things that happen in the Tamil region. This spread is uncommon in any university outside Tamil Nadu. Scholars who work on South Asia, from across all these departments, gather periodically under the umbrella of the Committee on Southern Asian Studies to promote the study of South Asia, of which Tamil is a part. There is a dedicated department for the study of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, where Tamil texts figure along with the texts of other languages, with the goal of understanding the history and composition of South Asian civilisations. As a language taught, Tamil is one of more than fifty languages offered at the University for undergraduate and graduate students. They study Tamil from scratch to the advanced level, spoken and written, the modern everyday language and the ancient and medieval literary and epigraphic language. Tamil at the University is a language to be learnt and is a subject of doctoral research and beyond for any student who wants to specialise in it. Spread over many departments, Tamil research is multi-dimensional at the University.

The multi-dimensionality of the study of Tamil is indicated by the sixteen chapters in this book, which come from a score of disciplines. The contributors of the chapters come from a dozen institutions around the world. The chapters together constitute the radiance of Tamil. The many dimensions of Tamil they address, classified under three areas—politics,

language and media—do not cover its full radiance, of course, but they are critical to its brightness.

Modern Tamil, as Part I of the book shows, cannot be imagined without reference to political identity and the political ideology built around it. The crux of the ideology is that the Tamil nation is built on the distinctiveness of the Tamil language and literature. Oration and poetry are the two forms of the verbal art that have been used to build Tamil nationalism. These two initiate the Tamil public into political modernity. Subramania Bharati, both as a poet and as an orator, played a critical role in building Tamil nationalism in its formative period (as discussed by Bernard Bate in the first chapter), when it was projected as an integral part of Indian nationalism, reflecting a central tension in Tamil nationalism in relationship to the Indian nation of which it is a part and yet from which it also stands apart.

That Tamil society was casteless in the past, and will be in the future, is another component of Tamil nationalistic ideology, and one not without its own tensions (as discussed by Karthick Ram Manoharan in his chapter). Indeed, in the present, caste remains a factor in Tamil society and has taken on a new role in electoral politics. Professors Lloyd and Susan Rudolph in the Department of Political Science and Professors McKim Marriott, Bernard Cohn and Ralph Nicholas in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago—as well as their many students (Marguerite Barnett, Robert Hardgrave Jr, Nicholas Dirks, Arjun Appadurai, Diane Mines, E. Valentine Daniel, Margaret Trawick, among others)—laid the foundation for the study of the Indian political system and caste system, respectively. The chapters in Part I of the book represent the next level of these longstanding initiatives, combining the insights of this earlier work in political science and anthropology about India with new, and critical, innovations in the study of politics and society.

The interplay of the political identity and political ideology of the Tamil people, as based on language as well as on caste, manifests in Tamil politics (as can be seen in Francis Cody's chapter). Political ideology is subsumed under political identity in certain contexts and eclipses it in other contexts. Both of them inculcate pride—Tamil pride and caste pride respectively, and they may coexist in a person. Caste pride safeguards caste boundaries (and thus caste 'purity'), to be maintained in the personal imagination of self, if not in social interaction, in both the public domain and in the private domain of marriage (as Perundevi Srinivasan discusses in her chapter). Caste purity is comparable to language purity that must be preserved in order to

express Tamil nationalism and, indeed, is perhaps one contingent historical condition of it (as hinted at in Davesh Soneji's chapter). This notion of caste purity, however, defeats the idea of a casteless Tamil society as envisaged by cultural nationalism, leaving another unresolved tension at the heart of modern political and everyday Tamil life.

These thoughts may cross the minds of readers when going through the chapters in Part I of the volume.

The mention of a fresh look at classical Tamil literature with a global aesthetic perspective and English translations of this literature to communicate Tamil aesthetics to others will bring up the names of A.K. Ramanujan and Norman Cutler, as well as Kamil Zvelebil and David Shulman, visiting faculty at the University of Chicago—and, on the linguistics side, their many students: James Lindholm, K. Paramasivam, Harold Schiffman, Sanford Steever, Vijayarani Fedson and E. Annamalai, among others. The chapters in Part II reveal a different perspective: one seen through the lens of grammar, one that is focused on words and their evocations. These rays of light discuss words as they are approached by nationalists, poets, lexicographers and translators. Words are not just meaningful units of language but also cultural icons that carry cultural, and religious, imagery. Nationalists want words for communication to be native and not to deviate from the rules of grammar relating to spelling and *sandhi*. Poets and orators pay attention to the sounds of words and their effects. They play with words; verbal play in poetry includes making sounds and words themselves recur to enhance the aesthetic value of poems (as evidenced in David Shulman's chapter), and of Tamil itself. Not compromising the meaning while increasing aural pleasure is the mark of successful poets and public speakers of Tamil.

Words carry a cultural and religious load from history, and this is a challenge to (and sometimes one created by) a non-native person who writes a Tamil poem (as shown by Govindarajan Navaneethkrishnan in his chapter). This presents a different kind of challenge to translators of poetry. There was no translation, in the current sense of fidelity to the source word, in the pre-colonial period; it was trans-creation, as the chapters by Torsten Tschacher and Whitney Cox show. Words are metamorphosed semantically even when they are transferred as such in the target language. The ideology of lexical purism is not congenial to the craft of translating poetry. The choice between the native and non-native in a poem is a matter of creating an image in the minds of readers rather than the referential meaning of the words in the source language. Poets who trans-create may conceive as synonyms

the equivalent words across languages with connotations. For them, as for Tamil traditions of lexicography (as Srilata Raman shows in her chapter), synonyms are not monolingualistic. Dictionaries of Tamil record its lexical wealth for the contemporary generation as well as the succeeding generations. Their content and organisation reflect the needs of the generation of their users. Conceptually organised *nikaṇṭus* reflect the cognitive organisation of the world, including the celestial world, by Tamil speakers and the need to create texts in consonance with it, while alphabetically organised dictionaries (*akarāti*) reflect the need to decode such texts for secular purposes. The two types of dictionaries in the history of Tamil underpin different language ideologies. Dictionaries do become markers of cultural nationalism by virtue of their lexical wealth. It is no accident that monumental dictionaries of languages are compiled at the time of celebrating a language's sovereignty. Tamil is no exception.

The chapters on language and literature may nudge Tamil readers to think about creativity in Tamil, particularly about words in Tamil, in new ways.

Besides being a political institution and a representation of texts, Tamil is also a medium of performance for the multitudes. While research on this aspect of Tamil culture does not have a long pedigree at the University of Chicago (though Milton Singer did once pronounce in print a future, but unrealised, project of his on film and other cultural media in Tamil Nadu), it is a significant area of study today. The chapters in Part III of this volume illustrate the interest in this aspect of Tamil. Like much of the literary representation of Tamil, there is also a double articulation of the Tamil and the Other in performance. In literature, the Other for the most part is Prakrit/Sanskrit and English/European. There might be tension between the elements of the double articulation sometimes and harmony between the two at some other times. Shakespearean plays in Tamil, in translation or adaptation (as in Sascha Ebeling's chapter), have examples of both. The resolution of the tension by creating a new Tamil reduces the distance of it from harmony. Similar is the tension between literary and spoken Tamil in oration, as in fiction. The performance media of Tamil move beyond the verbal to the iconic value of the performers and the texts they produce to be heard and seen (or unseen; see Anna Lise Seastrand's chapter). The performer does not stop at being seen as an actor or singer but becomes the meta-representation of the ideology that Tamil stands for (as shown in the chapters by Amanda Weidman, Rajan Kurai Krishnan and S.V. Srinivas).

The sixteen chapters in the book in some way relate Tamil in the traditional concept of having three aspects: *iyal*, *icai* and *nāṭakam*. Tamil is *muttamil* 'three-pronged Tamil'. The first is the natural existence of Tamil in the endeavour for communication and persuasion (to which the chapters indirectly add the social construction of the society speaking variants of Tamil), the second is aesthetic embellishment through aural means (to which the chapters add an ideological ringing that constructing Tamil echoes) and the third is the emotions conveyed in, and absorbed by experiencing, the performance of Tamil, produced verbally or visually.

Enjoy.

E. Annamalai  
5 November 2023  
Nashua, NH  
USA





## INTRODUCTION

### **The Radiance of Tamil**

*Constantine V. Nakassis and Francis Cody*

This volume, *The Radiance of Tamil*, gathers together sixteen papers from the first ten years of the Chicago Tamil Forum, an annual workshop begun in 2014 at the University of Chicago. These ten years have seen the presentation of seventy-five scholarly papers and one film screening, spanning the disciplines of linguistics, sociology, anthropology, history, political science, film studies, art history, religious studies, philology and comparative literature. (See the list of workshops provided at the end of the volume.) In this introduction, we provide a broader look at the role of scholarship on Tamil in generating concepts in the humanities and social sciences, followed by a short history of the intellectual project of the Chicago Tamil Forum; together, these provide a frame for the contributions of the volume as a whole, and provide the reader a guide for how to explore the volume, which we sketch out in the conclusion.

### **The Interdisciplinary Significance of Tamil (Or, Why This Volume Is of Interest for the Non-Tamil Studies Scholar)**

It has been observed that different regions, cultures and languages afford different kinds of theoretical approaches and sensibilities, thereby illuminating problems of more general significance from their particular vantage. In this, Tamil is exemplary. The history of modern Tamil language and culture has raised profound questions about how communities are formed and organised, how literary imaginaries engage with multiplicity in language and how media technologies articulate with modern political and social projects. One of the reasons scholarship on Tamil has had an outsized impact on some of the most important theoretical work happening in humanities and social sciences might well have to do with the analytical tools bequeathed to modern scholarship by the Tamil tradition itself.

In his Preface, Professor E. Annamalai astutely draws on this tradition as a means to approach this volume, in particular, on the three-fold division of

Tamil, or *muttamiḷ*: into *iyal* (language of poetry or prose), *icai* (musicality, resonance and the power of sound) and *nāṭakam* (dramatic performance). While one might take this to mean that this volume deals with literature, aesthetics and performance, the Tamil categories have a different and wider set of active connotations and associations. For example, the concept of *icai* also calls forth the notions of agreement, being in tune with, and harmony, while the theory of emotions evoked in *nāṭakam* points to complex questions about the relationships among aesthetic experience, affect and the philosophical question of potentiality. A whole universe of knowledge-making is opened up by following the interpretive paths these associations suggest. Long ago, the polymath poet, linguist, translator and scholar of folklore A.K. Ramanujan taught that metonymy is a primary organising trope in Tamil thought (see Ramanujan 1985, 1999), leading later researchers, like Bernard Bate (2009), to explore how classical grammars might be used to explain the rhetorical power of political speech in the Dravidian movement, a regionalist, social justice movement that championed a Tamil language and people independent of North Indian, Brahminical domination precisely by melding the aesthetics laid out in these grammars with European modes of orating (see Bate, in this volume). A novel approach in Anglophone linguistic anthropology and a postcolonial political people-making (i.e., Dravidianism) were both thereby enabled by an intellectual tradition well over a millennium in the making. In a related vein, Sumathi Ramaswamy (1997) developed an historical analysis critical of theories of modern postcolonial nationalism through the Tamil cultural concept of *parru* (devotion). Similarly, much theoretical mileage had been made by exploring the possibilities of thinking cultural productions, from film to diasporic poetry, through the Sangam-era classification of literary landscapes, or *tiṇai*, well before the recent ecological turn in the humanities (e.g., Cheran 2008). The centrality of Tamil to wider scholarly questions can also be found in other empirical and theoretical domains; one can point to the importance of Tamil concepts of relationality and personhood in anthropological theories of kinship (i.e., the typological category of 'Dravidian kinship'; see Trautmann 1981; Daniel 1984; Trawick 1992), but also caste, exchange and social inequality (in cultural structuralism [Dumont 1970(1966), 1986(1957)], in agrarian studies [Gough 1981; Ludden 1985] and ethnohistory [Dirks 1987]), just as Tamil has been of importance in typological and comparative historical linguistics (Caldwell 1875[1856]) and linguistic pragmatics (Levinson 1977; Brown and Levinson 1987).

But whereas older scholarship produced in North American and European institutions might have taken an epistemological stance of distance from Tamil political worlds, more recent research has aligned itself more closely in the questions it asks with the egalitarian thrust of so much political thinking in Tamil. Indeed, the deep imbrication of performance traditions and Dravidianist politics is another zone of Tamil practice and imagination that has been incredibly generative of scholarship. Whether re-thinking processes of community mobilisation, drawing on the utopian dimensions of anti-caste thought, or analysing connections among gender, voice and image, the sheer ingenuity of Tamil political thought has energised generations of scholars, within (e.g., Geetha and Rajadurai 1998; Rajangam 2016a) and outside (e.g., Chatterjee 2020) of Tamil Studies proper.

Other examples of the generativity of Tamil as a historical site for probing questions of general theoretical significance could surely be cited and reviewed here; our general point, however, is that the radiance of Tamil shines far further than the borders of Tamilagam (Tamil lands) or Tamil Studies. The essays in this volume and the workshop from which they emerge exemplify this, touching on a range of the above-mentioned issues, from the constitution of political communities and social inequality, the historical dynamics of colonialism and modernity, and the political work of language and gender ideologies to the nature of linguistic and cultural translation, the workings of mass media, relations among the word, image and sound, and much more.

### **A Short History of the Chicago Tamil Forum**

The University of Chicago has long been a vibrant place for the study of Tamil and its wider significances, with groundbreaking scholarship on Tamil language, culture and history carried forth by faculty and students across the humanities and social sciences, a fact detailed by Professor Annamalai in his Preface. In the 2010s, a new scholarly configuration and concentration of scholars focused on the Tamil-speaking world emerged at the University, with Sascha Ebeling, E. Annamalai and Whitney Cox in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations and Constantine V. Nakassis in the Department of Anthropology. Missing, however, was a common place for faculty and students to share their work and discuss the works of others as regards Tamil. In order to build such a space, in 2011 the faculty began a monthly lunch-time meeting for graduate students, post-doctoral fellows and faculty on campus to present their research about Tamil language and

culture. We called it the ‘Tamil Studies Working Group’ and organised it on the model of the wider Workshop System at the University of Chicago.<sup>1</sup>

In May 2014, we expanded the scale of the group, holding a two-and-a-half-day meeting. This inaugural workshop featured a public keynote by the late Bernard Bate, followed by two days of workshopping seven papers by University of Chicago faculty and colleagues invited from other universities. Each paper was assigned a discussant from among the other presenters, creating a set of crisscrossing exchanges of ideas across the two-plus days. This was a pilot meeting of sorts, a test to see if such a model of scholarly discussion could be viable and what it might produce for and beyond Tamil Studies. It gave rise to an intense series of conversations that built from paper to paper and spilled out of the paper sessions into convivial meals and back again. As Bate observed on the occasion, it was amazing not to have to explain the historical or social context or linguistic content of one’s work but simply go straight to the empirical and theoretical issues at hand. At the end of that initial workshop, we had a roundtable to assess the workshop and its future. Bate suggested that we call the group ‘The Chicago Tamil Forum.’ It stuck.

The Chicago Tamil Forum workshop has been held annually since, convoking interdisciplinary scholars of the Tamil-speaking world, and beyond, and providing a venue for them to get detailed, sustained feedback on their research, while providing the same for others. While each meeting is focused on a particular theme, just as important is cultivating a conversation that lasts across the workshops. To that end, invited scholars have returned over multiple years to present their evolving works, something that has added another layer of common ground to an ever-evolving and growing conversation, indeed, community of scholars. This is reflected in the ways that themes of the workshops and their papers have bled and blurred into each other over the years, creating tapestries of ideas, dialogues and collaborations among the participants.

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<sup>1</sup> Workshops at the University of Chicago are thematically based, interdisciplinary meetings that typically convene once a month or so over the academic year. Presenters pre-circulate a written work-in-progress, which members of the group read in advance of the meeting. At the meeting, a discussant presents a short oral commentary—in which they raise questions, make critical observations, and suggest further lines of inquiry—and then the group collectively discusses the work for the rest of the ninety-minute meeting, over snacks and drinks. Such workshops have been an incredibly generative and vibrant space at the University for academic community and new ideas.

The downside to such intensive, intimate meetings is that they require and practices small numbers of participants. While many of the papers of the Chicago Tamil Forum have been published, individually and as part of books that emerged chapter by chapter through the Forum (e.g., Bate 2021; Weidman 2021; Cody 2023; Nakassis 2023), from the outset we have tried to find ways to open up these intimate conversations to wider publics. Over the years we have uploaded, as possible, redacted versions of workshop papers as *Working Papers of the Chicago Tamil Forum* (hosted at <https://chicagotamilforum.uchicago.edu/>). Yet this effort has been ad hoc and additive, rather than systematic and summative. With a decade behind us, we have decided to take stock and see, from where we stand today, where we have been—and to share it with you.

### Reading *The Radiance of Tamil*

Each of the three parts of the book features an introduction that offers overviews of the chapters of that part, individually and as a group. Each is authored by a scholar—Francis Cody (Part I), E. Annamalai (Part II) and Swarnavel Eswaran (Part III)—who has been a recurrent, central participant of the Forum over the years. Each, thus, brings their own unique insights and experience of the swirl of ideas that the Forum has created in the last decade. The reader should consult these introductions as a way to explore the specific contents of individual chapters, as well as the particular synergies that emerge across the chapters within each part. As such, in this introduction we do not review the contents of the chapters of the book. Instead, we offer reflections on how the intellectual project of the Chicago Tamil Forum discussed above is reflected in the organisation of the volume as a whole. The reader additionally has available the Preface and Afterword to the volume, by E. Annamalai and Amanda Weidman, respectively, which also offer their own global reflections and insights on the volume in its entirety based on their multi-year participation in the Forum.

The workshop themes over the years have been wide-ranging and diverse. They have, however, consistently returned to a number of key concerns of the wider group and they form the three parts of the book: Part I: Politics and Power; Part II: Language and Literature; and Part III: Media and Mediation. Taken separately, each part tackles the central problematics that run through this volume: respectively, to understand the Tamil language and people as a site and reflexive object of (post)colonial political action (Part I), to explore

the Tamil language as a linguistic medium of social life (Part II) and, finally, to situate Tamil within a wider media landscape and set of aesthetic sensibilities and practices (Part III). Taken together, these three parts put forward the proposition that Tamil is more than a language or a people; it is a network of modes of performance, traversing and translating distinct domains of aesthetic and social life and constituting itself in particular times and places in familiar and naturalised forms: as a language and people; in particular texts, genres and registers (such as pre-modern poetry, modern political oratory or the postmillennial mass film); and through various media (song, stage, painting, cinema, etc.).

But rather than taking these thematics as discrete and separate from each other, or even as summative parts of a whole, we can also read these themes as entangled and enmeshed, evolving like interwoven motifs in a musical fugue across the pages that follow, repeated and changed, contrapuntal at one moment, in synchronised harmony at the next. This is reflected in the overlapping concerns within and across the three sections, as well as the multiple connections across the chapters of the different sections. Let us offer a few examples of such connections to give a sense of the volume's interlaced intellectual contents.

As noted above, Part I is a meditation on Tamil as a site of the political, in the linked senses of politics *in* the Tamil-speaking world (e.g., of caste or the law or social justice movements) and the politics *of* Tamil (i.e., the emergence of a Tamil political modernity). In doing so, the chapters of Part I also offer reflections and insights on the political constitution of *language* and *media* as such, the thematics of Parts II and III, respectively. Hence, for example, the historical emergence of political oratory and the Dravidian movement's aesthetics of language, as discussed by Bernard Bate, find resonance and are picked up in Rajan Kurai Krishnan's and Amanda Weidman's chapters in Part III, which discuss Tamil screen and singing stars, respectively, and how they too participated in the gendered constitution of a 'Tamil people' (a theme also touched upon by Davesh Soneji's chapter); likewise, the chapters by E. Annamalai and Srilata Raman in Part II explore the language ideologies of Tamil active in the political modernity detailed by Bate, Krishnan and Weidman, just as Govindarajan Navaneethakrishnan's discussion of colonial British appropriations of Tamil literary traditions echo Bate's discussion of Tamil appropriations of Protestant homiletic traditions. Similarly, Bate's and Cody's discussions of the reflexive mediatisation of politics of community (in Cody's case, in relationship to the law) resonate with concerns of media circulation in the chapters of Part III.

In like manner, the essays of Part II—while focused on questions of linguistic form, literary poetics, translation and contact between Tamil and other languages (Sanskrit, Arabic, English)—exemplify themes of media and mediation, the focus of Part III. In these chapters, the Tamil language is revealed to be not just a denotational code for referring-and-predicating but also a critical medium of social life in its aesthetic, ethical and political modalities; more specifically, a medium of *translating* intersecting worlds: between the Tamil literary tradition and Christian colonial modernity (Govindarajan), the Sanskrit cosmopolis (Whitney Cox, David Shulman, Raman) and transnational ‘Arabic’ literature (Torsten Tschacher).

The chapters in the final section envelop and fold into themselves issues from Parts I and II, where themes developed from the analysis of politics or literature find their expression on stage, on screen and in paintings. In Part III, we see how the politics of language (Bate, Annamalai), caste (Karthick Ram Manoharan, Soneji) and gender (Perundevi Srinivasan) discussed in Parts I and II take shape and sound on the film screen and in film songs (Weidman, Krishnan, S.V. Srinivas). We further see how the linguistic translations and poetic forms discussed in Part II themselves find expression in diverse media. Sascha Ebeling shows how the medium and institution of the theatrical stage in colonial Tamil Nadu was itself already formed through the nexus of inter-linguistic translation between the English of Shakespeare and Tamil, while Anna Lise Seastrand explores how medieval temple painting in Tamil Nadu enacted inter-medial translations of text, ritual and image, where the literary motifs and narratives in Part II find themselves depicted in visual form. Across these three parts, in short, emerge integrated pictures—moving pictures, as it were—of the dynamic life of Tamil, of a political, linguistic and media landscape illuminated by its radiance.

Many more thematic connections between the chapters and parts of the book could be elaborated, as discussed in the Preface, Afterword and section introductions. The reader will no doubt find even more. But the point is that, like our discussions over the last decade in the Chicago Tamil Forum—which have been a structured but emergent set of overlapping conversations, all anchored in Tamil but about much more—this volume is organised, and should be read, in similar fashion: as an entwined fabric of threads and voices stretching and in dialogue across its textured surface. We are happy to invite you into this dialogue and to weave your voice into its future folds.



I

POLITICS AND POWER  
(Post)Colonialism, Caste, Modernity







## INTRODUCTION TO PART I

### Modern Political Communities beyond Enumeration

*Francis Cody*

There is a common story that many of us tell when teaching undergraduate students about how colonialism shaped political modernity in the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere. Drawing on the path-breaking work of scholars like Bernard Cohn, Benedict Anderson and Sudipta Kaviraj, we explain how different people's sense of belonging to wider collectivities must have been quite different in the precolonial period when compared to mass mediated and homogenising forms of attachment like modern nationalism. Making this point, Kaviraj (2010: 193–95) draws a powerful distinction between the overlapping 'fuzzy' communities that existed before colonial modernity—'fuzzy' because their limits were not easily territorialised and because of the context-sensitivity of their significance in daily practice—and 'enumerated' communities that can be listed in colonial and national censuses, and that can be represented visually as discrete sovereign polities delimited by neat lines on a map. In absorbing broadly Herderian ideas about a natural correspondence tying people, language and place into a neat bundle, nationalism at once objectifies these aspects of political life while also providing grounds for affective ties to these newly imagined but purportedly primordial things. Indeed, the story of the construction of the Tamil people can be told through this narrative frame: where colonial institutions like the school of philology that flourished at the College of Fort St. George could provide intellectual grounds for conceiving of Tamils as a Dravidian people with a culture, language, land and heritage that are distinct and proper to their nationality (Trautmann 2006). A parallel narrative has been told about the modernity of caste in Tamil Nadu: where 'the ethnographic state' solidified this institution by dehistoricising its power dynamics while hypostasising ritual hierarchy as its governing principle through Orientalist scholarship, coupled with colonial technologies of governmentality which mapped caste onto European conceptions of racial difference (Dirks 2001).

For many of us invested in Tamil history as a place to think with and from, these stories—as plausible as they are at one level of generality and as effective as they are in denaturalising putatively primordial forms of community identification—have never exhausted the possibilities of understanding political belonging. Thinking about people’s modern attachments to the Tamil language, for example, scholars have reached for other concepts, like *parru* or devotion (Ramaswamy 1997). The generic story of modern postcolonial nationalism could not capture that particular gendered affective relation to Tamil. Nor do these stories about the modernity of nation and caste quite get us to an adequate appreciation of the deep and creative re-envisioning of a world beyond Brahminism represented by the radical anti-caste, charismatic social movements that set the stage for later Dravidianist electoral politics (Geetha and Rajadurai 1998; Rajangam 2016a). It is not that narratives of enumeration and colonial objectification are untrue. It is just that so much remains unaccounted for and unacknowledged, so much that is of vital importance for understanding our political present. At a time when the legacies of modern mobilisation around language and the revolt against Brahminism appear so critical to resisting Hindu nationalism, and at the very same moment when violent reassertions of caste dominance appear to eat away at the democratising potential of Tamil politics, the search for different vocabularies of power is more crucial than ever. The following chapters, comprising Part I of *The Radiance of Tamil*, provide some clues to how we might go about this essential task.

### Poetics of Articulation

The first two chapters—by Bernard Bate and Karthick Ram Manoharan—pick up on scholarship that seeks to better appreciate how inherited forms of thinking, acting and being might orient themselves to the promises of a democracy still to come, or what Karl Marx famously called ‘the poetry of the future’. Where these two chapters move beyond the Marxian formulation is in their interest in a Tamil inheritance, all too often constrained by ideas about the ‘regional’ or the particular, as a force propelling politics towards this open future. In his chapter on C. Subramania Bharati, Bernard Bate focuses on the role of poetics and the very ‘palpability’ of language as agencies in making modern subjects of politics in a distinctively Tamil idiom. Bharati’s revolutionary poetry was so new that it defied existing laws on treason in the colonial criminal code, while at the same time, the very medium of sung

poetry escaped surveillance procedures or technologies designed to capture and prosecute printed language that could be accused of sedition. And while the commissioner of police eventually prohibited the very act of playing music in public political processions in Madras, acts of open defiance by Bharati and his fellow nationalists became a context in which a wholly new democratic power could articulate itself through old poetic media such as the devotional *bhajan*. The stealth nationalism articulated through this poetic form in which Bharati situates himself as a *gopi*, yearning for Krishna as figure for the nation, was nevertheless threatening enough for the colonial government to force him into exile, where he continued to animate the nationalist movement as a spectral presence through his poetry.

In Karthick Ram Manoharan's reading of Periyar's thinking through the question of Sudra politics, we see how the great reformer was acutely aware of the modernist logics of majority and minority populations inaugurated by colonial practices of enumeration. However, Periyar was equally concerned with, and critical of, the fact that the very category of 'Sudra', which had such mobilising potential in the context of the politics of the numerical majority, was also an imposition of the very Brahminism he opposed. A tactical actor in the service of anti-caste politics, Periyar even went so far as to remind intermediate castes that they were, in fact, considered *only* 'Sudras' when they aspired to position themselves above Dalits. Ultimately, any political identity that sought to reach beyond caste towards a common humanity would have to transcend the very Brahminism that non-Brahminism had set itself in opposition to, if only as a negative assertion. It was the more universal vision of the 'Dravidian', pointing to deep and shared heritage of a different sort, that could serve this purpose of reaching towards an as yet unknown society beyond the logics of 'Sudras' or 'Brahminism'. The Dravidian imagination was good to work with, not simply because it was thought to be ancient, but because it had no caste.

### Sex, Gender and the Publicity of Caste

The next three chapters in Part I speak to a point made by Veena Das three decades earlier in her classic text, *Critical Events*. Finding fault with how communities contesting state violence tend to reproduce many of the governmental logics the state has used in perpetrating its violence, Das argues that 'the community also colonizes the life-world of the individual that same way as the state colonizes the life-world of the community' (1995:

16). Without necessarily having to cite it, each chapter in Part I engages with and extends this insight by asking new questions about the centrality of sexuality and gender in modern articulations of caste power.

In Davesh Soneji's rendering of the political origins of the *icai vēḷāḷar* as a modern caste, we once again encounter the forces of enumeration requiring a radically heterogeneous group to homogenise itself in the context of an emerging non-Brahmin politics. But this was not just a public-facing exercise in self-presentation. Personal lives were remade as the intimate turned political. The production of a modern caste that can make claims on a dignity that was long-denied required corollary claims to patrilineal inheritance and caste-endogamous marriage for women. Institutionalised concubinage and, crucially, public performances of music and dance by women of the newly reimagined *icai vēḷāḷar* caste would have to be discarded for the demands of community. Soneji writes evocatively about the 'suspended subjectivities engendered by the emergence of the category of "*icai vēḷāḷar*" among women for whom the glare of public scrutiny meant an end to artistry, or at least its submergence in the name of respectability. The modernity of caste, here, takes on gendered and affective dimensions previously underexplored but incredibly pertinent to the contemporary policing of sexuality discussed in the last two chapters of Part I, both of which deal with more recent events.

Perundevi Srinivasan's terrifying account of love, 'honour' and death in the Kongu region brings to the fore another emotion impinging on individual lives: public hate. The 2015 murder of a young Dalit engineering student named Gokulraj at the hands of a caste chauvinist because he was thought to be in a relationship with a Gounder woman was shocking. At the same time, this murder, which like others had been framed as a suicide resulting from 'love failure', was illustrative of an emergent wave of public hatred for those who are suspected of breaking the requirement for women from dominant castes to maintain caste 'honour' through strict proprietorial claims over their sexuality. The accusation that Dalits engage in 'love drama', to fool dominant caste women into relations, has its parallel in the fear mongering around 'love jihad', and both bring the logics of circulation typical of rumour into a now digitalised world with extremely violent consequences. Srinivasan's investigative work with some of the bravest journalists and activists documenting the field of twenty-first century caste dominance is a stark reminder that the metamorphoses of caste under conditions of late-modernity extend well beyond logics of

governmentality into the worlds of sovereign violence, with women's bodies placed at the centre of the contest.

The final chapter, by Francis Cody, picks up questions of how legal publicity not only serves as a medium to police women's sexuality in the name of community, but also how the law itself is a dangerous public good when used by Dalits who seek to engage with it to claim public justice. Ethnography of legal reporting in the High Court of Madras demonstrates that, just as the law is mediatised in becoming one news item among others, the much-vaunted majesty of the law sits in a remarkably ambivalent relationship to the fact of this mediatisation. Cody examines a case where a young woman was publicly shamed in court and accused of causing a riot because she pursued an inter-communal relationship out of wedlock and another where a high court justice took to legal publicity to fight casteism in the high court only to find himself in contempt of court. In both cases, we learn that high court justices require the publicity provided by news media to make their judgements and comments known to the world and they exert power through this circulation of their image and discourse. At the same time, they are made vulnerable to the vicissitudes of public opinion on these very same grounds. Public expressions of caste, gender and community are doubly mediated in this process, both by the law and by the journalists who report on it.

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Taken together, all of the contributions to Part I of *The Radiance of Tamil* show new paths for thinking about the modernity of political communities. They examine how the modern politics of community shape people's lives through negotiations with the historical fact of colonial and postcolonial enumeration and objectification. These chapters examine the very processes of mediation that are, at the same time, processes of continuous objectification enabling the emergence of new political publics: some promising a society that is open and as yet unknown in contrast to those that insist on violently operationalising social difference.



## SWADESHI BHARATI

### Protestant Textuality and the Poetics of Tamil Political Modernity

*Bernard Bate\**

What we have been trying to show is that art is an integral part of the social structure, a component that interacts with all the others and is itself mutable since both the domain of art and its relationship to the other constituents of the social structure are in constant dialectical flux. What we stand for is not the separation of art but the autonomy of the aesthetic function.

– Roman Jakobson, ‘What is Poetry?’ (1987)

And he said, ‘Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature.’

– Mark 16:15

This chapter explores the relationship between linguistic and political modernity in the political verbal art of Tamil’s greatest modern poet, Subramania Bharati (1882–1921). Bharati’s poems and oratory embody a universalising semeiotic introduced by Protestant missionaries and imbricated with the singular aesthetics of South India to produce a culturally contingent Tamil politics. More than that, Bharati was one of the key agents of that synthesis. This chapter demonstrates the strong relationship among poetic language, oratory and the emergence of the modern mass-political in a consideration of Bharati’s verbal art and a singularly Tamil modern.

While the relationship between print and the formation of large-scale modern social imaginaries such as the nation, the public sphere and the people

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has been broadly theorised, this work considers the emergence of homiletic oratory as a complementary problem. This is particularly important in a place like India where the nation—or sub-national ethnolinguistic territories—was formed among largely illiterate populations. The independence movement and post-nationalist democratic politics were, at their heart, oratorical. Without oratory there would have been no Tamil public sphere, no Tamil people (as such), no Dravidian nationalist movement, no modern political practice—at least nothing resembling what twentieth-century Tamil politics became, however we might want to define it.

What we broadly call the poetic was central to the formation of modern social imaginaries in two ways corresponding to two senses of the term. The world, the Tamil world—the world that could be named Tamil in the modern sense of a people, a polity, a trans-historical ethnolinguistic community inhabiting a place called *Tamilagam*—was structured, in key respects, by the first aspect of the poetic. And that structure was given life, palpability, singularity and power by the second. The first was, like printing, a foreign import first brought over by missionaries; the second was born of Tamil soil wherein songs have come from far away, to be sure, but have a singularity of rhythm and melody and image and feeling peculiar to the Tamil lands. The first is the poetic function of language, the second is poesy itself.

Roman Jakobson's (1960) poetic function of language—what he also, later, called *poeticity* (1987: 378)—is that aspect of every utterance that calls attention to the form of the message, the parallelisms (in rhyme, metre, image) that define poetry as a special form of language. An example would be the opening lines of Subramania Bharati's ode to Swadeshi industry and the inspiration of merchant mariners such as his friend V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, founder of the Swadeshi Steamship Navigation Company. The strong phonic and metrical parallelisms in these two lines indicate even to a non-Tamil speaker that this is another kind of language:

*Velli panimalaiyin mitulāvuvōm*  
*Aḍi mēlaik kaḍal mulutum kappal viḍuvōm.*

We'll stride the silver snowcapped mountain ranges  
 And send our ships across the (three) great oceans.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Author's translation.

The formal elements in this example point to the fact that this utterance is 'poetry', or that at least they are special kinds of language that stand apart from what we think of as 'ordinary language' (though, to be sure, the difference between them is hardly hard and fast). It is this difference that adds a kind of fundamental frame around an utterance which stipulates a particular meaning, not denotationally but in terms of what kind of communicative form the utterance takes. It is the poetic function of an utterance that tells us that a poem is a poem.

More generally, the poetic function stipulates what genre or register any utterance may belong to. The phrase 'Dearly Beloved', for instance, contains a stipulating function that indexes the utterance as the beginning of a homily—and in the process regimented the immediate spatiotemporal and social order into a peculiar genre of interaction. In the anthropology of language, the poetic function has been described under terms such as framing (Goffman 1974) or metapragmatics (Silverstein 1976, 1993), a regimenting function of language that, in practice, draws a relationship between words and actions, denotationality and interaction. More broadly, metapragmatic (i.e., poetic) functions of language stipulate the emergence of social structural being-in-time through the regimentation of actors, agency, space and time—what we call, following Bakhtin (1981), *chronotopes*. Such regimentation occurs constantly throughout any communicative process. Consider the chronotopic phase-shifts in social order that occur before and at the onset of an oratorical event of some kind, say a lecture (Goffman 1981b). The lecturer or organiser calls the event to 'order' and quite abruptly who speaks and who attends shift dramatically into a new mode of becoming, the socio-temporal qualities of which are well understood by all those involved. It is the poetic function of language that provides that stipulating, framing effect between one sociochronotope and another.

The case of Tamil oratory presents something new in this very familiar scenario insofar as oratory emerges as an entirely new form of discursive interaction throughout the nineteenth and into the early decades of the twentieth century—most certainly in political action. What is odd in the case of Tamil (and other contexts) is that there was nothing resembling homiletic oratory—at least among higher-status people—until the advent of the Protestant sermon and its uptake in non-Protestant contexts. And it was the utilisation of that form which, from the middle of the nineteenth century until the first two decades of the twentieth, eventually became vernacular political oratory in Tamil-speaking lands. In this respect, the poetic function

of language is an engine of world-building (Warner 2002) in both the micro- and macro-historical senses: it stipulates the sociochronotopes people embody at any particular moment in the ritual of oratorical performance and audition and, over the long term, produces entirely new modes of becoming in new models of communication action.

I link this new model of communicative action to the coming of Protestant missionaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Protestants brought with them textualities that involved a new epistemisation of language (i.e., ideologies of language functionality), new modes of the embodiment of knowledge (in books, tracts and sermons) and new social relations of textual production (in particular, the universalisation of the text, the mandate that high-value texts be available to all regardless of status or social category). These textualities tracked the production of new kinds of communicative institutions and practices that would enable Tamil-speaking people to become Tamil People. In other words, I draw a direct link between the textualities introduced by Protestants and the formation of the large-scale modern social imaginary of a transhistorical people grounded in an ethnolinguistic identity—a peculiarity of modern political order.

One essence of modern semiotic ideology is that signs must be carriers of fixed and stable meanings: a sign must have a single referent, must have a single sense regardless of who speaks to whom or in which context. Signs must be transparent, clear, not obfuscated through liturgical languages that the audience does not know. And, following on this, a sign must be universalisable into any social context, among any group of people, at any time or place; it is the Protestant's ethical imperative to broadcast the Word of God to the world at large. Such an imperative has long linked Protestant forms of universal interpellation to the formation of modern social imaginaries (such as 'the people') in what has been called 'informational revolutions' (Bayly 1993, 1996; Frykenberg 1999). That is, the process by which information transmission and reproduction in India was transformed from kin- and caste-based systems to systems that basically universalised texts by interpellating generalised publics (as it were). Protestants encountered a world in which the social relations of the textual production were highly restricted in terms of person, space and time. From time immemorial, high-value texts had been animated—brought to life in practice—only in the most restricted contexts, only among those men whose caste and training qualified them to animate—or enjoy the benefits of animation—in times and places set aside for their recital. Protestants confronted such textualities with righteous vigour, and

their efforts were not in vain. For by the middle of the nineteenth century, schools, presses and sermonising had been widely taken up by non-Christian agents such as Arumuga Navalar and others (Bate 2005, 2010; Grafe 1999; Hudson 1992a, 1992b, 1994; Pandian 2007; Young and Jebanesan 1995) in the epistemisation of entirely new modes of religiosity that we call Religion (Asad 1993; King 1999; Daniel 2002) and, some decades later, into new modes of agency and political subjectivity we call Politics (Bate 2012, 2013).

This semeiosically stripped-down and universalising textuality, I would argue, lies at the basis of the communicative production of a new kind of political subjectivity at the heart of modern revolutionary, and more broadly democratic, politics. Here I follow Michael Walzer's identification of the post-Calvinist saint as the archetype of a new political man: the citizen who approached the world as an agent of ethical reform, who evaluated the society as a whole, who expressed outrage at the current moral and political order, and who demanded that all men within it—not only princes, not merely priests—be responsible for its reform (Walzer 1965: 1). Each man would be equal to another in the eyes of God, no caste or estate would have a privileged role to play in the great work of Reform in which all are called to participate. For Walzer, it was the activity of such new men 'who played as important a part in the formation of the modern state as did the sovereign power of princes... What Calvinists said of the saint, other men would later say of the citizen: the same sense of civic virtue, of discipline and duty, lies behind the two names' (ibid.: 2).

The political men we discuss in this chapter who brought revolutionary oratory to the people of Tamil Nadu, I would argue, are direct descendants of these saints. That new mode of communicative practice laid down through the poetic function of language, over time, brand new kinds of entities in interaction (e.g., the people), ritually instantiated chronotopes of national time and space, and a new agency to be mastered by the vernacular politician. The emergence of their oratory—and its associated universalisation of the call to the political to everyone—had a material structuring effect on social order.

The second use of the poetic is closer to more conventional notions of the term, what we here call *poesy*: the relationship language draws among sound, myth, emotion and the imagination, what we might broadly call the aesthetics of language. Jakobson called this the 'palpability of language,' 'when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named' (1987: 378). We include in *poesy* the formal arrangement of language, parallelisms and metres, analogical tropes such as metaphor, contiguity tropes

such as synecdoche, and modal tropes like irony or sarcasm. Needless to say, poesy has long occupied a central concern in philosophies of language going back to Aristotle. However, anthropologies of language (Friedrich 1979, 1986, 1991, 2006; Fernandez 1986, 1991; cf. also Tyler 1978; Strecker and Tyler 2009) posit a much more powerful role for poesy, those elements of language that structure the mind and move the heart, that draw connections between disparate domains of life, link macrocosms and microcosms in ritual or politics, and ultimately massively affect the individual imagination and move people to action. In this way, too, the poetic is world-building.

Here I hold up the poet, songwriter, orator and activist C. Subramania Bharati as a vital agent of this poesy. It is difficult to overstate just how important he is in the Tamil world: his songs are still sung; his image is ubiquitous in Tamil Nadu; children compete in poetry and essay competitions on themes taken from his poems. He is *the* greatest Tamil poet of the twentieth century and national poet of the Tamil people. He was an agent of poetic world-building in the first, structuring, sense, too: he was among the first generation of vernacular, nationalist orators in what has been called the first truly modern political movement in India, the Swadeshi movement of 1905–1908. Bharati was a poetic engine of the modern Tamil world insofar as he sung the hearts of people through his poesy and, through his oratory, interpellated them as a new kind of agency in the world, the people themselves. Through both the metapragmatics of the poetic function and the palpability of his poesy, Bharati linked a large-scale modern social imaginary of a unified Tamil people stretching back in time to a vivid past and forward to a future of independence and freedom, a sociochronotopic imaginary characteristic of the modern nation state.

Bharati's new language would not be spun of whole cloth. In perfect accord with his wider ideologies and passions—and as a very icon of universal interpellation—Bharati eschewed the high forms of cultural production available only to a small literary elite and embraced folk language, song and metres. In particular, he deployed and borrowed from non-specialist forms of devotional singing known as *bhajans*, and a folk dance and song form called *kummi*, among other forms. Though he spectacularly renounced signs of his own Brahminical privilege—for instance, he sported a moustache and sat down to eat with non-Brahmins—he embraced these two forms, which were quite common within Brahmin families at the time. In this way, his language perfectly models some of the odd contradictions of and intimate connections between linguistic and political modernity: they are new but built with old

forms that index cultural continuity through time; they involve signs that are transparent, intelligible to vast numbers of people and are thus fit for universal interpellation; they are produced by elite agents who articulate them as elements of the folk.

In this chapter I interrogate the relationship between poetic language in both senses, as oratory and as the emergence of the mass-political, with a consideration of Bharati and a singularly Tamil modern. I will focus on two events separated by a little over a decade, a set of speeches by Bharati and his compatriots and two of his songs. The first event involved a procession, music and a large public meeting on Marina Beach in Madras on 9 March 1908. It was during this time that Bharati wrote some of his most famous nationalist songs in a simple Tamil set to folk metres and melodies perfect for interpellating the new political agency of the Tamil people. The second event involved a sighting of Bharati eleven years later at a crossroads not far from Marina during a procession of fervent political actors moving towards the first great Satyagraha of the Madras Presidency, on 6 April 1919. By that time Bharati had been broken off politics through exile and opium addiction; and yet the enigmatic poet was sighted dancing in and out of events associated with the political form that he had helped to establish. On 6 April a prominent reporter and activist documented a wondrous encounter with Bharati in which the poet sang a song and danced and merged with God in the process. That this performance may have been imagined, perhaps even dreamt, makes no difference to the importance of Bharati's role in the formation of the Tamil modern.

### **Bharati and the New Spirit**

A profoundly precocious child, Subramania was given the honorific due a poet, 'Bharati', by a council of learned men under the Raja at Ettiyapuram in 1894(?) when he was just a boy of twelve.

An index of his youthful passion, talent and democratic impulses comes from a memory passed through the family of Arjun Appadurai and recorded in a transcribed interview with his father, S. Appadurai Aiyar, by Carol Breckenridge. Arjun's paternal grandfather was a court Brahmin at Ettiyapuram, where his reputation did no honour to the family. His dissolute life ended early, and his wife and son were left destitute in the *agraharam* of Sivalaperi, a dry, dusty town near Tirunelveli with few charms and fewer prospects.

S.A. Aiyar remembers that, as a small boy, sometime in the first decade of the twentieth century, he met Bharati, his father's cousin, while he and his

mother were visiting Tirunelveli. Arjun's father hitched a ride with Bharati back to Sivalaperi on an oxcart. The driver asked the poet to sing a song, and Bharati improvised a new song on the spot, singing of driving in an oxcart to the town of Sivalaperi: *Sivalaperi kaṇḍēnē!* (I beheld Sivalaperi!) Two elements of this story struck Arjun as revealing of the character and life of Bharati. First, there is something remarkable about this young quasi-aristocrat willing to sing a song at the request of a humble oxcart driver. Likewise, he had no aristocratic snobbishness or hesitation regarding the topic for his poem. He was willing to thematise as 'humble and trivial and dusty a place as Sivalaperi' in the same tones, even the same words, as those *pirabantam* singers who sang of great gods such as the lord of Tiruvalikeni, where Bharati lived during his days in Madras: *Tiruvallikeni kaṇḍēnē!* The story speaks not only of Bharati's gifts as a poet, but also of his inherent democratic leanings, egalitarianism and goodwill. These traits are very much apparent in his later work, in his songs and in his overall dealings with his fellow beings.

Arjun was unsure when this story took place but it was probably during the period of Bharati's most politically active days, 1904–1908. After some time as a tutor for the Raja, he worked for a few months at the Sethupathi School in Madurai in 1904, where he was discovered by the leading journalist and Congressman of the day, G. Subramania Iyer, who brought him to Madras, where he worked for the moderate nationalist daily, *Swadesamitran*. Within a year Bharati would begin his own paper, *India*, which took a more aggressively nationalist position.

Bharati came to political consciousness as a young nationalist at the outset of the Swadeshi movement, a period described at the time as the 'New Spirit of India.' The Swadeshi movement was born of a conjuncture of the 1905 partition of Bengal and the emergence of a division within the Indian National Congress between two groups: the moderates who called for continued cooperation and civil political engagement with the British authorities and the nationalists (sometimes called the extremists) who advocated a much more confrontational stance towards the Raj and an accelerated path towards self-rule, or *Swaraj*. Many of the key diacritics of the Indian independence movement were born during this short-lived movement, including economic swadeshim which involved the boycott of foreign (*piradeshi*) goods and the promotion of Indian-made (or *swadeshi*) goods, in particular clothing and national education, or schools and colleges run not by the government but by Indians.

And perhaps the most profound invention of the period was the use of vernacular languages and the eschewal of foreign ones in political meetings.

For nearly the first time, especially in the Madras Presidency, political leaders systematically addressed non-elite audiences in vernacular—or *swadeshi*—languages, consciously interpellating a new Indian political public. (The interpellation was only partly effective, as we shall see.) Economic and educational swadeshimism, in other words, would be paralleled by a linguistic swadeshimism. When G. Subramania Iyer began to speak in Tamil during one of the meetings in 1907, he was interrupted by the audience imploring him to speak in English (as he was known as one of the most eloquent English orators of India at the time). He replied with the following admonition:

Gentlemen. The subject which I am going to deal with is Swadeshi and Swaraj. As the subject relates to these, it will not be consistent with our principles to lecture in a foreign tongue. Since most of the audience are not conversant with English and all of you know Tamil. I request you all to listen to it carefully.<sup>2</sup>

At least from the point of view of the leaders (if not from the point of view of common folk) there was a clear linkage between linguistic and political modernity.

The Swadeshi movement in Madras was led by very young members of upper castes and not by established political elites. Basically a Brahmin-led movement, it was almost exclusively Hindu, with some Christian (and virtually no Muslim) participation. The low status and inexperience of these activists were a frequent target of derision of both the authorities and established elites. Often, the activists were young men, students or student-aged, with no titles, no honours and no record of engagement with the government or Congress.<sup>3</sup> They were upstarts who, from the perspective of both official India as well as established Indian society, did not understand how politics was conducted,

<sup>2</sup> GO 923, 4 July 1908, Judicial, Confidential, cf. 'Enclosure I' (CID No. 563, 24-6-08), 5.

<sup>3</sup> See Subramania Bharati's article, 'Sober Madras,' published in *India*, 2 March 1907 (Viswanathan 1998, 2: 458–60), for a discussion of the *Madras Times*'s charge that the speakers in a recent public meeting lacked the 'appropriate status' (*takka antaṣṭu*) necessary to carry on an august discussion on the political matters of the day. The *Madras Times*, Bharati reported, also wrote that the audience was composed of 'little boys' (*siṟu kuḷantaikal*). Bharati disagreed with that characterisation and suggested that the reporter, Rao Bahadur N.S. Rajagopalachariyar, get his eyes checked as soon as possible.

who one needed to know and to whom one needed to speak. The meetings that they conducted were also composed of very young people, students in the case of Bharati's meetings on Marina Beach, or 'coolies, farmers and labourers' as in the case of meetings in the bazaars of Madras and of provincial towns such as Madurai or in the villages of the Andhra deltas, which were actively stumped by young 'swadeshi preachers'.

Such places, like these beaches and bazaars, were indexes of the speakers' lack of status. Proper gentlemen of cities and towns spoke highly cultivated English in halls, such as Pachaiyappa's Hall or Victoria Public Hall in Madras, or Victoria Edward Hall in Madurai. A public hall was a socially controlled space where people of a certain class could gather and discuss, in English, the important matters of the day. A hall, in Indian terms, was an interior, a place of ritual and social coherence. A bazaar or beach, on the other hand, was the ultimate space of mixing, of discourse and commerce among people who were very, very different from each other (Chakrabarty 1991; Kaviraj 1992). They were, probably, the closest thing to a 'public space' in colonial India, public in the sense of being 'free and open to all without prejudice' (although Dalits were excluded). And such places were the first sites of vernacular public oratory, first in Protestant sermons, later in political oratory (see Scudder 1865; cf. Bate 2010). And that 'publicness' was a part of its vulgarity, another index of the low status of those who would speak there.

### On the Beach

For a little over a year in 1907 and 1908, there was a vast expansion of meetings and processions, and the *New Spirit of India* was in full efflorescence in Madras. Bharati and small group of young men formed several organisations, most prominently the Chennai Jana Sangam (the Madras People's Society) as the expression of the nationalist/extremist cause as well as a counterweight to the venerable Madras Mahajana Sabai (the Madras Gentlemen's Society). Bharati's speeches, at least, were accompanied by nationalist songs and poems, many of which would become standard in coming decades of the independence movement (Go. Kesavan 1991: 79).

The processions and meeting of 9 March 1908 were held to celebrate the release from jail of Bipin Chandra Pal, a prominent Bengali Swadeshi activist.

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<sup>4</sup> 'History Sheet of Ethiraj Surendranath Arya', Criminal Investigation Department (CID) Madras, 21.5.09.

Police reports claim that about 8,000 people attended,<sup>4</sup> a crowd made larger, claimed the acting secretary to the Government of Madras, due to a football match played by Presidency College students on the beach that day.<sup>5</sup>

There were multiple processions, at least one with music, from ‘all over to the city’ to the foreshore of the South Beach, that part of the Marina opposite Presidency College. An index of how strange the vernacular political oration was at this time is that, despite his prominence and importance, we have very few vernacular transcriptions of Bharati’s speeches—most were English translations done by the police. The sub-inspector who made the translation/transcription noted that Bharati ‘spoke in Tamil’, and his transcript contains several parenthetical clarifications and ironic bracketing of terms with quotation marks:<sup>6</sup>

A public meeting was held on the foreshore of the South Beach, Triplicane on the evening of 9 March 1908 in connection with the release of Bipin Chandra Pal. One of the speakers Subramani Barati spoke in Tamil as follows:-

When will this thirst for freedom be quenched. When will these fetters of ignorance be removed. Oh Lord that caused the great war of Mahabaratha. Are Plague and Famine intended only to your devoted. Are strangers to prosper while we suffer. Oh Lord of the universe and protector of the good. Is it not your principle to shield the innocent and the suffering! Have you forgotten about the patient suffering?

He further said:-

Gentlemen, you have daily seen and heard of people being sent to jail and released therefrom but you never troubled yourself about them. But why have you all assembled here today? You have not come here for honoring a Maharaja or another with grand titles. But it is to celebrate the release of Bepin Chandra Pal today. We have been drawn together here not on account of Pal’s character. But we have met here because on account of the faith we have in Swaraj (or on account of the love we have in our country) we are toiling for the welfare of our country. Pal had such views and experienced the troubles that arose from them. All of us too should suffer, according to our might for our principles of swaraj and love of our country.

<sup>5</sup> Demi-Official Letter (DO), dt. 12.3.08, Atkinson to Bradley, Tamil Nadu Archives (TNA), Government Order (GO) 1729, 29.12.08, Judicial Confidential.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Enclosure I’ [CID No. 563, 24-06-08], GO 923, Jud.Confl., 4.7.08.

The police report noted that the speech was 'very vehement and was received with applause and approbation by the audience.' Bharati then sang the song indicated above, what we now know as '*Enru taniyum inta sutantira tāgam*' (When will this thirst for freedom be quenched?), a fateful song that would become standard fare during India's independence movement.

Bharati's speech and song were echoed by G. Subramania Iyer.<sup>7</sup> Subramania Iyer's speech began with a *longue durée* history of India, a land that was prosperous for thousands of years and had a civilisation while 'other nations were barbarians and were living in forests.' India's wealth and education were such that other nations travelled to India to learn of them and partake of its prosperity. But India's fortunes changed, 'as everything under the sun has to experience the vicissitudes of fortune.'

Whenever the country was reduced to such a state, there had appeared great men or mahatmas who had risen above considerations of self and endured all sorts of troubles, reformed the country (the state) and raised it to the level of prosperity. During the reign of the Hindu Rajas, many sages or maharishis appeared and sacrificing their personal welfare worked for the good of the country. Then followed Manu and Manthatha and others who ruled for the welfare of the people. Then came Ramachandra (an incarnation of God) who put down the 'Mlechas' and removed all the difficulties from the way of the people. Before the Muhammadan conquest Buddha reformed the country when it was in need of reform. It was followed by Sankarachariar, Ramanujachariar and Maduachariar who by their religious discourse and preaching introduced order into the society. When the people were afflicted with Muhammadan oppression Sivaji came to the front, overcame the Muhammadans and ruled the country as Hindu Rajas of old.

He then acknowledges that India has again come to a point in time where it has been laid low, and he suggests that Bipin Chandra Pal is another mahatma who has been appointed by God to be 'a new force' to raise up the people of India. 'Moreover,' he continued,

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<sup>7</sup> It is unclear whether G. Subramania Iyer immediately followed Bharati or whether the latter's speech was followed by Ethiraj Surendranath Arya (as stated in 'History Sheet of Ethiraj Surendranath Arya,' CID Reports 1908–1909, vol. 5). Iyer, as the highest-status person in attendance, was probably the final speaker of the evening.

The men who did good to the country till now were not High Court Judges or men with titles or those that drive a pair but only those that had sacrificed the pleasures of the world and had suffered privations and troubles for the way of the people...<sup>8</sup>

Both Bharati's and G. Subramania Iyer's speeches model a Protestant appeal to faith, faith in their country and faith in Swaraj, that is, faith in a generalisable principle of social and political reform. Bharati also holds up Bipin Chandra Pal as an exemplar of suffering as he was true to his faith: 'Pal had such views and experienced troubles that arose from them.' As a preacher extols his flock to follow the example of Christ, so too does Bharati exhort his audience to follow the example of Pal: 'all of us, too, should suffer...we should all join and work (or fight) for our principles of Swadeshi and Swaraj'.

But just as Pal is placed in the position of a suffering God and an exemplar of social and spiritual action, so too is he cast in Subramania Iyer's speech as an incarnation of God. Only in this speech, God is Vishnu or, to be more specific, an avatar of Vishnu who appears as a saviour when mankind falls into dark times; like Krishna of the *Bhagavad Gita*, who asserted his own status as an avatar of Vishnu born to protect the human race from ignorance and evil. And Subramania Iyer takes it a step further by placing Pal as an avatar within a historical, linear time frame that includes lawgivers, *bhakti* saints, Gautama Buddha and the Maratha warrior Sivaji. Subramania Iyer concludes, 'When we consider [Pal's] actions of the last four or five years, it cannot but be said that he appears as though he was reincarnated and has inherited new force' (see Viswanathan 1998, 3: 301–303).

Both speeches are fully within the Protestant modern, the first in the rhetorical and aesthetic sense of appealing to the soul, to the sacrifices of self on behalf of faith and a larger purpose; the second as a well-structured oration that casts Hindu ethics and heterogeneous dense time into an ethic that remains constant over the *longue durée* of homogenous historical time—sometimes called modern time, the time of nations, the time of capital (Chatterjee 2004). And, of course, the speech is universalisable—or nearly so given the last few restrictions placed upon who might be in an evening audience composed of upper-caste men on the beach. From the point of view of the speakers, these speeches were addressed to all Indians, even though

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<sup>8</sup> See Viswanathan (1998, 3: 301–303) for a complete transcript of this speech.

Dalits, Muslims and women would not necessarily be considered members of the Swadeshi public by most of the activists.

### The Tamil Modern

No doubt the take-up of the modern form of the sermon, complete with themes universalisable to a general public—that is, to a modern social imaginary—qualifies this event as one among so many around the globe which newly interpellated the people as a new kind of entity, a new collectivity made up of what Sudipta Kaviraj (1997: 90) has called ‘zero-degree individuals’, those quintessentially modern beings free from the restricting bonds of social categories such as caste.

At least in theory.

But is that all? What of the Tamil modern? What makes this a Tamil event rather than merely an expression of a universal (read: European) political modernity? Is the Tamilness of this event reducible only to the Tamil spoken? Is Tamil, then, only a kind of linguistic icon of the idea that modernity was simply translated into new lands, a European form that carries with it European senses and imaginations?

To counter that idea, we turn to the music and poesy accompanying the procession and the song that Bharati sung that day. Here lay its power, a power to which the authorities were not insensitive. Bharati’s group, the Chennai Jana Sangam, had petitioned the Commissioner of Police H.F. Wilkieson, Esq., to process with music, but the latter had refused to do so ‘for obvious reasons’.

Wilkieson was certain that these meetings represented a grave threat to the Raj. In a letter to Mr J.N. Atkinson, Acting Chief Secretary to the Government of Madras, he wrote that the ‘spirit of lawlessness exemplified... on the 9th’ when speakers ‘openly defied the law’ was not merely a one-off event but a far more ominous and larger trend:

That afternoon, many bazaarmen in Triplicane closed their shops ostensibly in honour of Bipan Pal’s release, but I have little doubt that it was really a sign of the times: I think it would be a good thing if he could stop the local agitators speaking in public. Though what they say may not be very serious still their words are understood by the ignorant mob as purely anti-British.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> DO, dt. 16.3.08, TNA, GO 1729, 29.12.08, Jud.Confl.

The open violation of the law which particularly outraged Wilkieson was the playing of music during the procession after he had expressly refused to give permission for it. A High Court *vakil* (advocate, lawyer), Tirumala Chari, BA, BL, the secretary of the Chennai Jana Sangam, had appeared before him a few days before the event to request permission to process with fireworks and music. 'The Sangam,' Wilkieson quipped, 'is in no sense a musical society.'<sup>10</sup> 'For obvious reasons I refused to grant a license.'<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, and in violation of Wilkieson's refusal, some members of the procession did have music.

On 9th March 1908 all the processions started from different parts of the city and proceeded towards the South Beach where a public meeting was convened. The processions were orderly till they reached the Victoria Hostel where music was commenced and used till they reached the South Beach...

After the procession met on the foreshore of the South Beach two of the speakers named Subramania Bharathy and Ethiaraj Surendranath Arya in the course of their speeches said that in defiance of the Commissioner's orders they used music and that the audience should take an oath that they must be within the legal bounds of law as far as it did not interfere [unclear] natural rights but when it did so they must infringe the same and break [unclear]

The musicians who played the music are liable to be [unclear] under the City Police Act. If they state before the court that they played the [unclear] their own accord without being engaged either by the organizers of the procession or by the aforesaid two speakers, it will be difficult [unclear] the persons who really abetted the commission of the [unclear] City Police Act. Unsuccessful prosecution would merely make martyrs of the [unclear] positively insignificant men.<sup>12</sup>

Despite Wilkieson's alarm and calls for prosecution, officers at Fort St. George, at the advice of the Advocate General, P. Sivaswamy Aiyar, were unable to bring Bharati or Arya to book as they did not yet have the legal tools to prosecute these speeches. The form of the speeches was simply so new that laws had not been written to deal with them; neither did they have surveillance

<sup>10</sup> DO, dt. 14.3.08, TNA, GO 1729, 29.12.08, Jud.Confl.

<sup>11</sup> DO, dt. 12.3.08, Wilkieson to Atkinson, TNA, GO 1729, 29.12.08, Jud.Confl.

<sup>12</sup> DO, dt. 12.3.08, TNA, GO 1729, 29.12.08, Jud.Confl.

procedures or recording technologies (in this case, shorthand) that would enable them to prove charges of sedition under existing law—laws devised to monitor, record and prosecute *printed* instances of sedition.

It is worth paying attention to the fact that Bharati and Arya vehemently objected to being denied permission to play and sing music in procession. A common theme in both their speeches that day was the insistence that a ban on singing constituted violations of their 'natural rights'. Bharati asserted that

We are prepared to obey the laws framed by foreigners but not always. We will not submit to those laws the moment those foreigners frame laws which are hostile to our 'natural rights'. In conformity with the above declaration though, the Commissioner of Police prohibited the playing of music today, since such an order was opposed to our principles, we ignored that order and conducted the procession with music playing. So we should all join and work (or fight) for our principles of Swadeshi and Swaraj.<sup>13</sup>

The deployment of the Enlightenment concept of natural rights masks something singular to their attachment to the music. For it is in the music and poesy of the event that the Tamil modern inheres.

The song Bharati sung, it turns out, became a famous one. Though first published just a few days before in Bharati's paper, *India*,<sup>14</sup> it was sung for decades during the freedom struggle, in public meetings from at least the late 1920s.<sup>15</sup> It was so famous by 1944 that when the great poet Namakkal Kaviñar V. Ramalingam Pillai published his autobiography, he provided therein a long discussion of when he first heard of the song and whether the printed versions available were missing verses first sung during Swadeshi meetings in 1907–1908 (Viswanathan 1998, 3: 123–26).<sup>16</sup> Indeed, it was this song that first drew police attention to Bharati:

<sup>13</sup> 'Enclosure I' [CID No. 563, 24-06-08], GO 923, Jud. Confl., 4.7.08.

<sup>14</sup> Viswanathan (1998, 3: 121) writes that the poem was first printed in Bharati's *India* on 7 March 1908, just two days before it was first sung on the beach.

<sup>15</sup> The independence and, later, labour activist Madurai Mayanthi Bharati (1917–2015) recalled to me singing the song in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

<sup>16</sup> Viswanathan (1998, 3: 123–26) believes that V. Ramaswami Iyengar (Va. Ra.) and Namakkal Kaviñar V. Ramalingam Pillai's memories are at fault and that there were no other verses.

Bharati first drew the attention of the police because he sang songs which imparted a striving for liberty within patriotic sermons, in meetings intended to create a passion for liberty among the illiterate people. The police faced many struggles to take action against Bharati for his sermons on liberty. (Viswanathan 1998, 3: 126)

Bharati titled it, 'Sri Krishna Stottiram', or 'Psalm to Sri Krishna'. In translation it reads (Viswanathan 1998: 121):

When will our thirst for freedom be quenched?  
 When will our love for slavery die out?  
 When will the chains on our mothers' wrists be broken?  
 When will our afflictions (tinnal) end?  
 O, Lord of the Mahabharata!  
 O, Protector of Aryas!  
 Is it not by you alone that we are victorious?  
 Is it right that your true devotees should languish without your aide?

Should famine and disease be the fate of your devoted?  
 For whom else are the good things of this world?  
 Will you forsake those who have sought your refuge?  
 Will a mother cast away her own children?  
 Is it not yours to soothe our fears?  
 O, Noble Lord! Have you forsaken us?  
 O, Slayer of evil Rakshasas!  
 O, Crescent Jewel of Warriors? O, Lord of the Aryas!

Of the many, many things about this song, I will mention two elements: the key signature, or *rāgam*, of the song, and the discursive form in which such a song might be sung.

*Rāgams* are something like keys in Western music and have associated with them, at least theoretically, specific sets of emotions or feelings: *rasa*. Bharati specified that the song was sung in *kamās*, a *rāgam* sometimes described as 'tuneful' or 'folksy'. Many of the nationalist songs that Bharati composed were set to familiar tunes often expressly considered 'folksy' (*nāṭṭuppura meṭṭu*), at least from the point of view of twentieth-century music specialists (Bharati 1986). *Kamās* is often the *rāgam* of shorter, lighter tunes (*kritis*, *tukkadas*), which conclude concerts on an upbeat or happy note. The *rasa*, or feeling, associated with this *rāgam* is said to be *srīngara*, or the erotic, which gives it a somewhat playful feeling. Eroticism and longing are certainly appropriate in a

song for Krishna. But why would such a song be an appropriate accompaniment for a speech on Swadeshi?

And this is the second thing to be said about this piece, the discursive form: Bharati was borrowing from another new form in early twentieth-century Madras, the *bhajan*.<sup>17</sup> *Bhajans* are home-, temple- or even street-based worship sessions involving singing devotional—or *bhakti*—songs to their deities, in particular the beautiful lord Krishna, and his consort Radha, set amidst scenes of the old stories, the *purāṇas*. Among the most common of these scenes is Krishna's teasing and forsaking of the cowherds, the young women who pine for his love.

Though in practice *bhajans* were restricted to Brahmins, at least ideologically they cut across caste, sect and lineage divisions among higher-caste organisations. Again, ideally, their practitioners saw themselves as engaging in a universalising discourse—like the public meetings—that was probably a great deal more restricted than the ideology held. For instance, they were almost always male-only events (at least among the adults).

A major theme in *bhajans*, especially those involving Krishna, was the erotic longing of Radha, or more commonly, the *gopis*, the cowgirls, who longed for his embrace. Men singing these songs cast themselves in the role of the *gopis*, each hoping to be Krishna's lover. In one song taken from the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, Krishna grants each of them their hearts' desire and dances with all of them simultaneously. But Krishna is mercurial, fickle, difficult to pin down. He often fails to do what he says, to show up for the secret meeting arranged with his lover. And Bharati actually composed a cycle of songs about how Kannan—as both male and female lover, Kannan *and* Kannamma—fails to meet for agreed-upon trysts.

You told me to wait there,  
On the other side of the river,  
In the southern-most corner  
of the Chenbaga garden,  
that you would come there  
with your friend in the pale moon light.

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<sup>17</sup> This particular form of *bhajan* was introduced as another form of cultural modernity in the early twentieth century and has been traced back to Maratha King Serfoji II's court in Tanjavur (late eighteenth, early nineteenth century) along with a whole host of other early-modern communicative forms—not least being the *kathakalakshebam* textual discourses and *Harikathā* theatre (Peterson 2011).

You lied, Kannamma! My heart is broken.  
And I see images of you everywhere I look.<sup>18</sup>

In Bharati's discourse, this same feeling of longing is now cast in a nationalist idiom, an idiom clearly understood and taken up by nationalists over the course of the freedom movement and later, in postcolonial democratic politics. And, like so many powerful poetic images, this one, too, is polysemous, refracting several possible senses at once: on the one hand, Krishna is the mercurial god who may or may not grant our boons and fulfill our longings. At the same time, while Bharati plays the role of a *gopi*, a pining girl waiting for her fickle lover, Krishna is also cast as the Leviathan, the people who could, if only they willed it so, break the shackles of British rule in a day—indeed, such a call to action by 300 million people was a part of most of the speeches (for which we have records) during this day, 9 March 1908, throughout the Presidency. It was a democratic movement Bharati longed to lead, if only they would rise up and exert the power they had in their hands.

As it turned out, Krishna would fail him.

### The Apotheosis of Subramania Bharati

On the day Bharati sang this song, events elsewhere in the Madras Presidency provoked a crackdown that would bring the Swadeshi movement to an end; for the moment. In particular, Bharati's friend and colleague in the Chennai Jana Sangam, V.O. Chidambaram Pillai (V.O.C.), along with his charismatic companion Subramania Siva, violated a ban on holding a meeting to celebrate Pal's release in Tutukudi, and they were arrested a few days later. Their arrest sparked an uprising, a police firing that resulted in four deaths and several dozen wounded, and the burning and gutting of the district magistrate's office. Over the next few months, young leaders of the Swadeshi movement across the land were rounded up and charged with sedition. The authorities even went so far as to arrest the venerable G. Subramania Iyer, a shocking turn of events which led to a general outcry among prominent citizens and his rather speedy release upon signing a document promising not to print seditious sentiments in his paper (he did not have to admit that he had done so). A few of the younger men begged for leniency and forgiveness for their youthful transgressions, had letters written on their behalves by elders within

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<sup>18</sup> Author's translation.

their communities promising to take responsibility for them, and in some cases the charges were dismissed at the cost of the young men's humiliation. Others received the full brunt of British outrage: V.O.C. and Subramania Siva were given life sentences of rigorous imprisonment (hard labour), later reduced to five years, of which they served every day.

Bharati was never charged for sedition as the authorities failed to move quickly enough against his violation of the ban on music. But fearing for his freedom, he fled to French-governed Pondicherry, where he would remain in bitter exile until 1918.

And it was indeed bitter. Despite many letters written by him to newspapers and to British officials, he was never certain that he would not be arrested should he return to Madras. And though he continued to publish *India* for a few years, Bharati's exile in Pondicherry ultimately broke him, in many ways. Unable to engage in steady newspaper work, he and his family were reduced to poverty. They often went hungry. He also took to opium which, at least from his friend V.O.C.'s account, was a habit that fundamentally transformed him. He continued to write brilliant poems, many beloved to this day. But most of these would be *bhakti pāṭṭu*, devotional songs. He would never write political songs again.

Political uses of *bhakti*, of course, have long been noted in the descriptions of the Indian political (Guha 1997; for Tamil, see Bate 2009). And though he would not engage in formal politics when he finally returned to the Madras Presidency in 1918, there were several reports of him showing up at various kinds of meetings at which he sang devotional songs. Two intelligence reports mention him at labour meetings, some of which would prove to be among the most influential in the development of the mass-political in Tamil lands. For these were the meetings that expressly addressed the working man and woman—that called them to the political, 'to persuade them into speech and action', as one labour leader put it (Wadia 1921; Bate 2013). These were the latter-day incarnations of those meetings convened by V.O.C. and Subramania Siva on the beach of Tuttukudi during those forty days of oratorical incandescence just prior to their arrests in 1908; or the Telugu Swadeshi meetings of working men and women—coolies—addressed at Madras's Moore Market by Ethiraj Surendranath Arya. So, while Bharati had an uncanny ability for showing up at what would become the most important political events of the day, his songs were strictly devotional, not pointedly political like his earlier *swadesha gītāṅkaḷ* (national songs). Ironically, he appeared at political events as a non-political actor.

One of the final reports of these strange apparitions comes in the famous memoir by newspaperman, editor of the nationalist paper *Desabhaktan* and labour activist Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundaram (2003 [1944]: 236–37). There he recounts a sighting of Bharati in a procession on the way to the single largest public meeting ever held in Madras on 6 April 1919. It was the first great Satyagraha of the Madras Presidency, a political meeting *par excellence*, a form that would become the very archetype of Indian political action throughout the independence movement and on into postcolonial democratic politics; the essence of the Indian mass-political. Reports by nationalists, opposition newspapers and the police all agreed some 100,000 people showed up that day. And the stages were set up on the very same spot—on Marina Beach, across from Presidency College—where Bharati and his comrades gave their speeches and sang their songs eleven years before.

Bharati did not speak, of course. But he did sing. Thiru. Vi. Ka. describes how *bhajan* groups came singing and dancing their way to the beach—just as they had eleven years before to celebrate the release from jail of Bipin Chandra Pal, only on this great day the crowds were ten to twelve times larger. Thiru. Vi. Ka. joined in with a group that passed their newspaper office, and they made their way towards the beach, singing and dancing along with everyone else. In the afternoon, after they passed the meeting place of a major devotional group (Sri Balasubramania Bhakta Jana Sabai) in Royapettah, a few blocks away from the beach, Thiru. Vi. Ka. noticed that ‘at some point or another Subramania Bharati had joined the procession’: ‘As soon as he appeared, our ears were enslaved to his song. I asked Bharati to sing. The great Tamilian began singing the song, “*Muruga, Muruga...*” (ibid.).

Let me break from this description to speak of this song. This is another hymn, a short song, a folksy *rāgam* called *nāṭṭukurin̄ci*. It is almost certainly composed as a *bhajan*, a simple tune with a simple idea, which enables a group of non-specialists to embody the devotional mood in music and song. Again, the song is sung to the beautiful young god Murugan, the son of Siva, a hunter and warrior—and like Krishna, a god of passion. Unlike Krishna, however, Murugan is not so unreliable. The first stanza (*pallavi*) of this tune:

Muruga, Muruga, Muruga!

You come riding a peacock  
With your bright spear you come

And you give us your goodness, worthiness, and praise  
 Your penances, your divinity, your quality, your renown,  
 Muruga, Muruga, Muruga!

Let us return to Thiru. Vi. Ka.'s description:

The song—a Tamil song—a Murugan song sweeter than honey—stirred the Murugan in the picture to start moving. It appeared as though the form in the portrait came surging out. The devotees' bodies began to sweat and shake; some fainted; some fell down; everyone was enraptured in joy. And Bharatiyar became the figure in the painting. I saw with my eyes and my heart the true unity of the song and the image in the portrait. Then, after a little while, Bharatiyar took his leave and left us. (Kalyanasundaram 2003[1944]: 236–37)

What are we to make of this description? Was it merely the collective effervescence of the moment? Here the quintessential Tamil deity, Murugan, the son of Siva, seems to be awakened from his merely representational avatar in a framed print and merges with the poet who, more than anyone, spoke to the Tamil people. Here, too, is an image of a deity to whom Tamils all over the world perform awesome, trance-inducing austerities in order to become the peacock vehicle of the god. From Jaffna to Malaysia, they dance for hours on end with a palanquin festooned with peacock feathers upon their shoulders. Or they swing above a crowd from hooks piercing the muscles in their backs as their wives and children dance below them. Their austerities that day had been to sing and dance for miles along the streets in the midday sun near the height of the Tamil summer as Bharati danced the god.

The dream-like quality of this description is not merely an expression of the creative force of Thiru. Vi. Ka. This event occurred only a few months after Bharati was released from jail after his nearly ten-year exile in Pondicherry. Bharati had been residing in southern Tamil Nadu in his wife's village and was keeping a low profile. He was not engaging in active politics; he would never again engage in politics. His political contributions had already been written and would be sung for the remainder of the twentieth century in his songs celebrating India, Tamil Nadu and freedom.

And as for 6 April 1919, scholars of Bharati believe that Bharati was not in Madras on the day of the great Satyagraha. What does it mean, if anything, whether Bharati danced the god that day or Thiru. Vi. Ka. dreamed it?

I do not know. But it is clear that these kinds of austerities, passions and poesy would be a part of the formation of the Tamil modern from the beginning of mass politics. Ranajit Guha (1973) argues that such shows of enthusiasm in the political realm were elements of elite demonstration of their own legitimacy in the face of British rule. That may be true. But it is also the case that such enthusiasm cannot be reduced to the mere machinations and intentions of elite political will; it was the modality in which the political—the modern mass-political—would be danced, sung and imagined. Dreamed or not, Thiru. Vi. Ka.'s account offers a truth about Bharati and Tamil political modernity.

## Conclusion

We might conclude with the speculation that Bharati is one of an entire class of beings around the world during this period. My guess is that the first nationalist orators around the world were disproportionately creative verbal artists, poets, playwrights.

This is no accident in two respects. First, structurally speaking, homiletic oratory vies with print as the mass medium *par excellence* for the enunciation—and metapragmatic stipulation—of nationalist time, space and belonging, that is, the sociochronotopes of the nation. And even if there were oratorical traditions prior to missionisation, Protestant forms of textuality appear to have displaced those earlier communicative modes in the formation of modern nationalist oratory all over the world.

In opposition to print which (major theory asserts) was spread via capitalist means of production (Habermas 1991[1962]; Anderson 2006[1983]), modern oratory spread in South Asia (and far more broadly) largely through motivations of the heart, in appeals to the imagination, in promises of salvation, in the reconciliation of God and man and the reconciliation of man and man in the universalisation of the concept of natural or human rights. Creative verbal artists, young, iconoclastic and beautiful, would stand at the forefront of this process. And poets, I imagine, would have been prominent among this new class of actors.

Second, it is no accident that it would be poets who would affect these revolutions as poets brought to oratory a poesy that would contain within its codes the very essences of the truths and beauties felt by the people from whom they arose and to whom they spoke. The poet, young and idealistic, dares to use a new language to speak a people into being.

Combining orator and poet in one person combined both kinds of poetic world-building that concern me in this chapter: Jakobson's poetic function (1960) and his notion of poesy (1987), the palpability of language, that aspect of language which draws relationships between mythology and the music of language. The first aspect stipulates the form of communicative action being instantiated, the kind of activity being engaged in and the kinds of participants engaging in that activity. The new agency born in this new communicative structure, the Tamil homiletic oration, the secularised avatar of the Protestant sermon, involved the ability to interpellate an entirely new entity, a generalised public, 'zero-degree individuals' (Kaviraj 1997: 90) devoid of class or caste, all Indian—the modern political subject (with all the elisions and erasures such a social imaginary involves). In other words, through the metapragmatic stipulation of a new mode of speaking, the modern political actor—the vernacular politician—and the modern social imaginary of national citizenship are instantiated.

The second aspect of poetic world-building, poesy, is not generally understood as having structuring effects. We might include under this heading not only poetry but rhetoric as well, the tools of the Sophists so despised by the Platonists, and yet the fundamental elements of political practice in modern polities. We might think that while metapragmatics—the poetic function—has a social structuring effect, it is poesy that provides what we might think of as the embodied ground of that transformation. The Protestant sermon might offer a new communicative mode of agency and action that would become the form of modern Tamil politics, but it would be given body by the rhythms, melodies and images inherent within a Tamil *longue durée*. It is through these poetic processes that people's imaginations are set afire in national passion. And my guess is that worldwide it was poets who disproportionately invoked this passion.



## IS THIS A SUDRA CRITIQUE?

### Periyar and the Intermediate Castes

*Karthick Ram Manoharan\**

#### Introduction

When Kancha Ilaiah published his controversial book *Why I Am Not a Hindu* (1996), he subtitled it *A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*. Ilaiah's output in contributing to this 'critique' has been quite prolific, the most recent being the co-edited volume *The Sudras: Visions for a New Path* (Ilaiah and Karuppusamy 2021). But why use a Sudra critique when Ilaiah himself identifies that the concept of 'Sudra' is derogatory in the Brahminical vocabulary and that 'It does not communicate a feeling of self-respect and political assertion' (1996: vii)? For political purposes, Ilaiah prefers the term 'Dalitbahujan', building on the concept introduced by Kanshi Ram, the founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party, and defines it as 'people and castes who form the exploited and suppressed majority' (1996: ix). The 'Sudra' concept is used as a critique of Brahminical ideals so as to arrive at a Dalitbahujan politics. The Sudras, 'the numerous productive castes which have historically built the material basis of our civilization, yet have been marginalized in terms of the power and knowledge-sharing-arrangement in the Brahminical order' (2021: n.p.), were, however, limited in their conceptual understanding as their political action was restricted to securing representation and because they

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did not have adequate self-consciousness of the caste system and the need for Dalitbahujan unity.

Ilaiah frequently cites Jyotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar as being crucial to the development of his Sudra critique. He also refers to Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (Periyar hereafter) as an important Dalitbahujan thinker. Indeed, as far as Tamil Nadu is concerned, it is Periyar who made a 'Sudra critique' of Brahminism popular and acceptable in the public sphere, though it is more commonly known as non-Brahmin or Dravidian politics. This chapter looks at the interrelations between these concepts as used by Periyar and his approach to the intermediate castes, who form the bulk of the population in Tamil Nadu and who are understood to be Sudras. It will explore Periyar's positioning of Sudra identity as being imposed upon the majority of Tamils, for which he holds Brahminism responsible. However, Periyar reviled the attempts by intermediate castes to position themselves as superior to the Dalits, and he also used the Sudra label to chastise them, claiming that being a *Panchamar*, that is, one outside the caste system, was more honourable than being a Sudra. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the limitations of a Sudra critique.

### 'Sudra' as *Varṇa* and Caste(s)

It is worth considering some empirical realities before we proceed further. It is now commonly understood in the academia that it is *jāti* and not *varṇa* that is practised in Indian society at large. This, however, does not make the *varṇa* model irrelevant. While there are thousands of *jāti* groups and it is at this level that 'caste injunctions on marriage, occupation and social relations are conducted', these castes nevertheless 'draw their ideological rationale of purity–pollution, endogamy, commensality, and so forth, from the *varṇa* model' (Gupta 2000: 199). Many *jātis*, for example, claim affiliation to a particular *varṇa*; moreover, *jātis* that are placed lower in the *varṇa* order often lay claim to a higher *varṇa* status. For instance, Jats in Punjab and Reddys in Andhra Pradesh are considered to be Sudras, yet today lay claim to be of the Kshatriya *varṇa* (Ilaiah thus calls them neo-Kshatriyas). The idea of Sudras as fallen warrior communities was proposed much earlier by Phule and Ambedkar. In Ambedkar's hypothesis, the Sudras were an Aryan community who were fallen Kshatriyas owing to a long conflict with Brahmins (1990: 11–12). His predecessor Phule saw Sudras as persecuted Kshatriyas. According to him, Brahmins sustained their domination by dividing the oppressed castes

and deepening the antagonisms among them and, further, 'All the shudras belonged to the same fraternity' (2008: 19–20).

But as a sociological category (and a political category, which I will address in the course of the chapter), the term 'Sudra' can be extremely confusing. M.N. Srinivas notes that the Sudra category overlooks the fact of the lack of commonalities among the 'non-Brahminical castes' and that the category Sudra 'spans such a wide structural and cultural gulf that its sociological utility is very limited' (1962: 65). Srinivas, of course, does not consider that categories that do not have sociological utility might have political utility. However, he does make the useful observation that lack of clarity in hierarchy for such castes enables them to make claims of higher status in that 'Each caste tries to prove that it is equal to a "superior" caste and superior to its "equals"' (1962: 66).

This is not a novel observation, though. As early as 1888, a superintendent of police of Tinnevely (now Tirunelveli) reported that 'Everywhere the lower castes are asserting themselves, while still denying the caste below them the right which they themselves newly claim' (Hardgrave, Jr. 2018 [1969]: 110). The colonial period was a time ripe for the formation of several caste associations which made several claims to histories of the past, and the resources of the present (ibid.: 199). The confusing claims of Tamil *jātis* identified as Sudras raise the question of whether greater attention in analysis should be given to what they identify themselves as, than what they are identified as.

In the commonsensical understanding, Sudras are equated with the administrative category of Other Backward Classes (OBCs, which include categories like Most Backward Castes, MBCs). This is still misleading as communities like the Saiva Vellalar Pillais of Tamil Nadu, who are technically Sudras, come under the general category. Nevertheless, OBCs form the bulk of the Sudras and 'represent about half of the Indian population, but they have occupied a subaltern position so far' (Jaffrelot 2000: 86). It is worth remembering that the administrative category of OBCs was created after the consideration of several socio-economic factors of backwardness. Note that they are called 'class' while the 'Scheduled Caste' (SC) category has a clear mention of caste, and it covers castes that historically suffered and continue to suffer different forms of untouchability.

The concreteness around the SC category facilitated the emergence of a pan-Indian Dalit identity and intellectual conversations, even if Dalit politics has actually been localised in practice and also hosts various internal tensions (Geetha 2014). The vagueness and ambiguities around the Sudra-OBC-

intermediate caste question result not only in their politics being localised but also in the absence of pan-Indian intellectual debates on this/these identity/identities. One of the reasons for the paucity of such debates perhaps is the minimal representation of OBC academics in central universities in India, which is worse than the representation of academics from SC communities (Kumar 2018). Likewise, social scientist Yogendra Yadav claims that there is a reluctance to conduct a caste census as it may reveal ‘the very large numbers of OBCs’ and also that their plight is, on some measures, ‘worse off than the top layer of the SC communities’ (Yadav 2021). Further explorations in this line might be insightful to both empirical and theoretical studies on how caste as a system is exclusionary and oppressive not just for Dalits but for OBCs as well.

Some academics have claimed that the divide between Dalits and *all* other castes, ‘between the hereditarily landless labour that produced the surplus and everyone else’, is the most significant social division in Tamil Nadu and India (Viswanath 2023: 39–40). A broader approach to political economy, as advanced by Pranab Bardhan, for example, might instead identify three dominant proprietary classes in India, that is, the industrial capitalist class, the rich farmers and professionals including white-collar workers—bureaucrats or academics, for instance (1998: 40–53). It is not ‘everyone else’ who is disproportionately represented here, but the privileged sections of society, as Bardhan notes: ‘Brahmins and other upper castes’ (ibid.: 52). Mobilising a cross-caste alliance around the ‘Dravidian’ in Tamil Nadu or the ‘Bahujan’ in Uttar Pradesh might not have produced all the desired results of a progressive political agenda (on presentist terms or even on the terms of those movements themselves); yet, such alliances, and the movements that produced them, did aim to produce a united (not uniform) political bloc of the oppressed castes, Dalits and OBCs so as to challenge these privileged sections. To highlight instead the divide between Dalits and ‘everyone else’, including the underprivileged among the OBCs, not only cuts off the possibility of solidarity among the many castes who do not have access to power, but also contributes to what Ambedkar eloquently and famously termed the ‘division of labourers’.

In Tamil Nadu, however, the situation for OBCs has been better than in other regions in India, for which Dravidian parties can take considerable credit. A recent work on Tamil Nadu’s political economy—aptly titled *The Dravidian Model* (Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar 2021)—explains that the populist policies pursued by the Dravidian parties that have been in power

in the state brought about an inclusive model of development that led to significant socio-economic mobility for OBCs and SCs (cf. Viswanath 2023: 42n21). The authors also argue that Periyar's politics of Self-Respect played a crucial role in shaping the unique politics of the state.

However we evaluate Dravidianism's economic successes or failures in achieving its own stated goals of social justice, what I hope to convey in the course of this chapter is that Periyar's substantial understanding of casteism enabled him to develop a nuanced perspective that was well aware of local realities and the several internal contradictions among castes, while not losing sight of the critique of the Brahminical system. A mechanistic understanding of casteism looks at Dalits as the only victims of casteism, oppressed by all those above them, where physical violence and explicit acts of discrimination are the only criteria to categorise victim identities. On the other hand, a substantial understanding of casteism looks at Dalits as the most oppressed by casteism, but not the *only* oppressed of casteism, and understands the degraded social, political and economic status of both Dalits and the intermediate castes to be an interlinked problem. In this way, while not downplaying the vexed question of Dravidianism's relationship to the ongoing oppression of Dalits, what is needed is an account not only of the actual historical outcomes of Dravidianism, but also of the *possible* horizons that thinkers like Periyar did and continue to open for progressive thought and political alliances aimed towards social justice.

In this chapter, then, I use the term 'intermediate castes' to refer to the OBCs, in that they technically occupy a middle position between the general category and the SC category. But this is also not a fully accurate categorisation. We must remember that while in Tamil Nadu those said to belong to the Sudra castes largely come under the OBCs, as alluded to already above, there are also minority castes like the Saiva Pillais, Saiva Mudaliyars and Nattukottai Chettiyars who are in the general category. It is precisely such elite communities that initially spearheaded the non-Brahmin movement and comprised the core leadership of the Justice Party. However, Periyar's arrival accelerated the plebeianisation of the movement, much to the consternation of the non-Brahmin elites, and led to the eventual dissolution of the Justice Party. Periyar identified the non-Brahmin non-Dalit castes as Sudras, and tended to take the side of the intermediate castes over the elite non-Brahmin (and Brahmin) castes. Contrary to allegations by critics that Periyar saw the non-Brahmin category as an unproblematic whole, Periyar was acutely sensitive to the deep fault lines within this category, as we will see.

It is common to see OBCs referred to as ‘caste Hindus’ in Tamil Nadu, especially in relation to Dalits. Ilaiah claims that this is a trap for OBCs as it denies the oppression they face while including them within the Hindu fold (1996: viii), not to mention that it effaces the religious heterogeneity of this category (beyond state categorisations). For one, the terminology of ‘caste Hindus’ homogenises an extremely diverse conglomeration—Tamil Nadu has 252 castes in the OBC category, inclusive of MBCs and denotified communities. Second, it assumes a commonality of social and/or political interests when no such thing has existed historically. To give a few examples, in his remarkable study of the Nadars, Robert Hardgrave, Jr. captured the intense conflict in southern Tamil Nadu between the Nadars and the Maravars, who considered the Nadars a lower caste and sought to thwart their attempts at securing social mobility. In the Sivakasi riots of 1899, several Nadars were killed by a Maravar mob, but the Nadars also fought back and defended their locality and their right to assert themselves (Hardgrave, Jr. 2018 [1969]: 109–20). In Erode in western Tamil Nadu, the powerful landowning Kongu Vellalars looked down on the ‘warrior merchant’ caste Kaikkolars and this led to conflicts in the early parts of the twentieth century, especially when the latter laid equal claims to temples (Mines 1984: 39–40). The Vanniyars, who fashioned themselves as Kshatriyas from the 1870s, claimed that they had been historically subjugated by the Vellalars (Gough 1981: 301). Other examples could be similarly produced. What is key here is that Periyar’s critique identified all of these communities as Sudras and, urging them to abandon ‘Sanskritisation’ (to anachronistically but aptly use Srinivas’s term), encouraged them to *build* common cause with one another *and* with Dalits so as to dismantle the caste system that both oppressed them and pitted them against each other. ‘Dravidian’ was the broad platform under which they could unite.

### From Dravidians to Sudras

In Tamil Nadu, it is common to hear the claim that the Aryan–Dravidian conflict is more than two millennia old, beginning with the invasion of the Aryans, who brought with them caste and religious bigotry, and who were opposed by the native Dravidians, who were egalitarian and proto-rationalist. This narrative is part of the rhetoric of many a politician and public intellectual in Tamil Nadu who swears by Dravidianism. However, these should be seen as modern discursive strategies and not primarily, if

at all, historical facts. If all nationalisms read histories anachronistically, social justice movements that contest hegemonic nationalisms also tend to do so. B.R. Ambedkar read Indian history as a conflict between Buddhism and Brahminism, where the former was egalitarian and the latter was caste-hierarchical. The initiators of Dravidian politics saw its history as a conflict between a regressive Aryan-Sanskrit-Brahmin culture and a progressive Dravidian-Tamil-non-Brahmin culture.

While there was a consciousness among the pre-colonial, pre-modern Tamil literati on the difference between Tamil and Sanskrit (Paramasivan 2023: 26), there was no *politics* of Dravidian-Tamil resistance or even opposition to Aryan-Sanskrit in these periods. 'Dravidian' had different connotations in pre-modern times. There is a vague reference in the *Manu Smriti* to Dravidians as a degraded ruling class. By contrast, consider the much later *Saundarya Lahari*, which uses 'Dravidian child' to refer to a devout poet (who, some claim, is Adi Shankara). The term Dravidian finds no mention in ancient Tamil works. The Dravidian *politics* that we know today is distinctively modern, and arose as a response to discourses of nation and caste that were predominant in the colonial period (Pandian 2007; Bate 2021).

The colonial encounter was crucial in shaping Dravidian political consciousness. Missionaries like G.U. Pope translated secular and religious texts of ancient and medieval Tamil Nadu. Orientalist scholars like Francis Whyte Ellis produced works arguing for the separateness of the Dravidian family of languages from the Aryan. But the most important work that went into shaping the Dravidian political imagination was the publication of Robert Caldwell's *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages* in 1856. Caldwell's book grafts the name of a linguistic family (Dravidian) onto an emerging racial differentiation (Dravidian vs. Aryan) in the colonial period, and further identifies the Brahmin as Aryan and as an outsider to Dravidian society. The intellectual impact of these scholars cannot be overlooked and literature attests to the same (Dirks 2001; Trautmann 2006; Pandian 2007).

The Saivite movement in nineteenth-century Tamil Nadu played an important role in the cultivation of a Tamil consciousness, which was a cultural predecessor to the Dravidian movement. A key figure of this movement was Ramalinga Swamikal, more popularly known as Vallalar, whose thoughts influenced Tamil cultural-spiritual assertion and socio-religious reformation. A recent work by Srilata Raman (2022) notes the long influence of Vallalar's concepts on Dravidian and Dalit thinkers who succeeded him. For a good

part of the nineteenth century, there was a criticism of caste, Aryanism and Brahmin claims to superiority from Saivite and Buddhist positions. Some of the important thinkers articulating these positions were Manonmaniam Sundaram Pillai, Maraimalai Adigal, Somasundara Nayakar, Kaivolyasamiyar, Lakshmi Narasu, Iyothee Thass and others. It was, however, the Hindu Free Thought Union, followed by the Madras Secular Society, that greatly foregrounded secular, rationalist and atheist criticisms of religion. Athipakkam Venkatachala Nayakar played an important role in these debates, and one could argue that he was a predecessor both in time and thought to the iconoclastic Periyar. One commonality among many of these thinkers, Saivites, Buddhists, agnostics and atheists alike, was their usage of the term 'Dravidian' as different from and opposed to 'Aryan'.

What was 'Dravidian' to these thinkers?<sup>1</sup> It connoted the region of South India, the supposedly indigenous people of India who were non-Brahmin South Indians, a people who were originally casteless and could/should return to castelessness through a new approach to religion (including through a rejection of religion per se). The Dravidian region and its people had a uniqueness, they averred, which had been suppressed by Aryan-Sanskrit-Brahmin influence. These intellectuals were largely drawn from elite non-Brahmin communities like the Vellalars and mobile Dalit communities like the Paraiyars. Geetha and Rajadurai (1993) document what we would today call Dalit intellectuals who worked in the closing decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> These Dalit intellectuals 'accepted the characterisation of non-Brahmins as Dravidians' and sought to make common cause with Sudra communities (Geetha and Rajadurai 1993: 2098). It is significant to note that intellectuals from the Paraiyar community saw themselves as Adidravidars, the first Dravidians.

Tamil society did not have the traditional *varṇa* order per se—and this observation can be made for the other South Indian states as well. Colonial

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<sup>1</sup> There were other minor 'non-Brahmin' intellectual trajectories in this period that did not gain much traction. For instance, one Savaririoyan (2004 [1907]: 1–28) claimed that Tamils were of the 'Bharata race' and that they were of Caucasian stock while Thamby Pillai (2004 [1907]: 29–53) claimed that Tamils, Malayalis and Kannadigas were the solar and lunar races of India and that the word 'Arya' itself was Dravidian in origin.

<sup>2</sup> Geetha and Rajadurai (1993) add M. Masilamani to their list of Dalit intellectuals of the nineteenth century. Other sources identify Masilamani as a Mudaliyar.

knowledge, informed by native elites, instead assumed a tripartite social division between the Brahmins, Sudras and untouchables. As regards identification, it was generally clear who the Brahmins were and who the untouchable communities were. As noted above, the Sudra category, however, was very ambiguous, mainly because it was an elitist colonial imposition exogenous to the heterogeneous, localised and contentious social order it attempted to rationalise, which is why, of course, many of the castes that were categorised as such did not identify so. It is assumed that Sudras in Tamil Nadu are all the non-Brahmin non-Dalit castes (comprising caste groups doing diverse occupations such as the Vanniyars, Kallars, Vellalars, Sengunthars, Konars, Vannars and Chettiyars). Yet, as noted above, there were communities like the Nadars, who were formerly considered unseeable, who were able to achieve great social and economic mobility in the colonial period and sought to identify with a higher *varna*. In a period of colonial categorisation that heavily depended on the Hindu *varna* order to understand and define diverse communities, castes like the Nadars, Maravars, Vanniyars wanted to identify as Kshatriyas, the Chettiyars as Vaishyas, and the most socially forward among the non-Brahmin groups, the Vellalars, responded to their *sat-sudra* (clean Sudra) status by claiming that they were superior to Brahmins.

While the Brahmins made ample use of the colonial period, missionary education and modern institutions to cement their social and political significance, spaces were opened up for the non-Brahmins as well to contest this and put forth their own narratives on nation and identity. Barnett (1976: 23) argues that it was largely the urbanised non-Brahmins who were most emotionally triggered by the Sudra label while the rural-agrarian castes like Vanniyars, who had no direct relationship with Brahmins, were not troubled much by the same (*ibid.*: 62). Irrespective of their emotional responses, the urbanised non-Brahmins turned their identity to a political concept, and linked it to being Dravidian. Periyar amped up the rhetoric by popularising a Sudra critique.

### **We, the Sudras?**

From the start of the Self-Respect movement, Periyar uses the term 'non-Brahmin' to refer to not just those who were not Brahmins, but more specifically to those who, according to him, were oppressed or degraded by Brahmins. To him, the several communities divided as castes, the untouchable

and unseeable castes, Christians, Muslims and Anglo-Indians were also non-Brahmins (Ramasamy 2011a: 22). Used loosely, 'non-Brahmin' might make no political sense, as a Brazilian, Ugandan, Japanese or German are all technically non-Brahmins. But the specific usage in Tamil Nadu that was popularised after the publication of the *Non-Brahmin Manifesto* in 1917 gave this term concrete political value in that it signalled a certain locally salient stance (and not just an essentialised or homogenised identity category), namely, an opposition to Brahmin hegemony. While the Justice Party was usually reluctant to address divisions within the non-Brahmin community, Periyar openly acknowledged the divisions within and did not try to use the non-Brahmin identity as an easy suturing of conflicts. Likewise, while considering the Dalit castes a crucial part of the non-Brahmin identity, he was alert to their specific interests and also argued that they needed proportional representation much more than the other non-Brahmin castes (Ramasamy 2011a: 25).

While Periyar liberally used the term non-Brahmin (*pārpaṇarallāttōr*) from the 1920s to the 1940s, he would turn a critical eye towards this term in 1950. At a speech at Chengalpet in March 1950 (Ramasamy 2011c: 180–86), he recounted that the Dravidian movement was earlier active through the Justice Party, which was also known as the Non-Brahmin Party, whose aim was to secure proportional representation for non-Brahmins in jobs and administrative posts. But the name 'non-Brahmin' did not give dignity to the people, he says, as it was still a derivative of the Brahmin label. Periyar's perspective was that as a people who are the natives of the land, who were once its rulers, who were now reduced to Sudrahood and untouchability, he prefers the usage of the term 'Dravidian' to describe the lot as it conveys opposition to Aryanism.

In an article on the abolition of untouchability, Periyar argues that while Sudras may be ritually above the Paraiyars, they are nevertheless in a much more degraded position. Periyar makes the hyperbolic claim that, according to the Hindu *śāstras*, the Sudras are bastards and sons of prostitutes (Ramasamy 2011a: 37). Brahminical deceit created the four *varṇas* and the several divisions of castes. Claiming that Brahmins destroyed the egalitarian thought of the Siddhars, the Buddha and the Jains, he subversively reads the creationist myth of the four *varṇas* to implicate the ancient Brahmins (*ibid.*: 44–46). The Brahmins encountered a group of warriors, who questioned the superiority of the Brahmins, and they were bestowed the title of Kshatriyas, with the promise that Kshatriyas accept that Brahmins were superior to

all others. When the wealthy mercantile community questioned their superiority, the Brahmins bestowed them the title of Vaishyas, again on the same condition of acceptance. These two groups were also given the privilege of wearing the sacred thread. With knowledge, political power and wealth on their side, the Brahmins then categorised the remaining majority of the country as Sudras and untouchables.

To Periyar, the untouchable castes were closer to the idea of Self-Respect since they were outside the *varṇa* order. He saw them, thus, as naturally inclined towards Self-Respect thinking. On the other hand, Sudras, who sought pride in their superior position to the untouchable castes, *consented* to be sons of the concubines of Brahmins (ibid.: 111): ‘Though the majority of the non-Brahmins tend to be submissive to the Brahmins and think foolishly that it is fine that we are the sons of prostitutes of the Brahmins as long as we are superior to the Paraiyars, we (the Dravidar Kazhagam) are trying our best to change things’ (ibid.: 119). Periyar was clear that the Sudras had to fight alongside the Paraiyars and other untouchable castes if at all they could free themselves from the ignominy of caste (ibid.: 231). To counter caste, preaching alone would not be enough—a social revolution and progressive laws were also necessary (ibid.: 261).

Periyar laments that ‘We do not bear the identity of Dravidians. We do not bear the identity of Tamils. We only have the identities of sudras, untouchables, fourth caste, fifth caste’ (Ramasamy 2011b: 95). He accuses Brahmins of sloganeering ‘down with imperialism’, while continuing to discriminate against Sudras and maintaining caste distinctions (ibid.: 96–97). Yet, he also says that as long as untouchability exists against the Adidraavidars, Dravidians will continue to face discrimination from Aryans (ibid.: 97). In an article titled ‘Dravidians are not Hindus’ in *Viduthalai* in 1941, Periyar says that Dravidians were natives of India, who built great civilisations and cultures, before they were defeated by the Aryans and reduced culturally to the state of Sudras and untouchables and economically impoverished (ibid.: 132–33). The Dravidians were all Sudras which in Aryan law, according to Periyar’s reading, meant the children of the prostitutes and concubines of Brahmins, or they were untouchables (Ramasamy 2011c: 132). He claimed that this degradation would continue as long as Dravidians called themselves Hindus: ‘As long as we are Hindus, our birth-based inferior status will not go. To be a Hindu means to subscribe to caste hierarchy. Hinduism means the Brahmin is superior and the rest are his slaves’ (Ramasamy 2011b: 133).

In a short article dated 1 May 1941, Periyar distinguishes Dravidians from Aryans and claims that the differences between them are irreconcilable (ibid.: 141–43). Here, again, he asserts that Dravidians were the natives of India and the Aryans were invaders. Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam were Dravidian languages. Hindi and Sanskrit were Aryan languages. Dravidians were without caste differences and worshipped one god. The Aryans brought in the caste system and many gods. The cultures and social practices between them were different. But these two entities could remain together only if the Dravidians accepted the superiority of the Aryan-Brahmins and contended to remain as inferior Sudras. In another article written on the same day, Periyar makes similar arguments, except here he replaces ‘Dravidian’ with ‘Tamil’ (ibid.: 145–48). Tamils, the natives of Tamil Nadu, were an ancient people who lived in harmony, without caste differences. But with the arrival and the hegemony of the Aryans, the Tamils were reduced to being Sudras and untouchables. Religion, gods and the caste system prevented Tamils from attaining self-respect. A person with self-respect would not consent to live as a slave, to be ill-treated or exploited by others. Therefore, Periyar declares that his key aim is to bring self-respect to Tamils:

The struggle for social rights is the revolution that we are making. We have decided to accomplish this revolution neither through an armed struggle nor the cowardly tactics of *ahimsa*. We desire to kindle a consciousness among the Tamils, to unite them by making them aware of their current state that is devoid of self-respect. We aim to bring a revolution by uniting the people against social degradations. (ibid.: 148)

Caste prevented the progress of Tamils. Without abolishing caste, Tamils could not become human beings. To Periyar, it was because of the caste system that Tamils were deprived of proper education, social rights, wealth and representation in politics and political power (ibid.: 153–54). Again, framing the issue not as a substantive (linguistic, social or racial) identity but an ongoing political stance, he writes: ‘They who do not seek to annihilate caste are not Tamils. They are merely Tamils in body’ (ibid.: 154). He argues that after several efforts to secure rights and reforms, his movement was compelled to raise the slogan of ‘Tamil Nadu for Tamils’ since such a state could lead to the erasure of the caste system (ibid.: 155). To Periyar, the ruling class was inspired by the *varṇa* order based on the *Manu Smṛiti*, and thus Dravidians had to fight against the imposition of this order in their land (ibid.: 167–68).

### Caste Empowerment Is Not Caste Annihilation

For all this, Periyar was not averse to criticising the intermediate castes for internalising the *varṇa* order. He calls out the Acharis for naming themselves Vishwabrahmins; the Komutti Chettiyars for naming themselves Aryavaishyas; the Nagarathu, Vellan and Vaaniya Chettiyars for considering themselves Vaishyas; and the Vanniyars, Nadars, Sengunthars and Naickers for fashioning themselves as Kshatriyas. He says: 'all of this will only hold the Aryan-Brahmin as a high caste and accept that the rest are all low castes, other than that, will there be any benefit for your communities?' (ibid.: 176). He says that these communities have no problem in considering the Brahmin to be above them but would like to establish their superiority over other Tamil communities. As a result, it had become impossible for Tamils to consider themselves a nation (ibid.: 177). He wanted the caste associations of Brahmins and intermediate castes to be banned (while he defended Dalit associations). He lamented that the numerous caste associations of the intermediate castes prevented Dravidian unity (Ramasamy 2011c: 189). For Tamils or Indians to be a nation, they had to reject such ritual hierarchies and be united. The goal is for Dravidians to remove the indignities that had been heaped upon them from the time of birth.

Taking a leaf from Aristotle's book, Periyar says that man is a social animal, but the Hindu religion divides society and legitimises social hierarchies (Ramasamy 2011b: 191). While the divisions in North India were on religious lines (Hindu–Muslim), in South India, the divisions between Brahmin and Sudra were crucial. Responding to Savarkar's claim that Muslims were to be opposed because of their aggression, Periyar says that if that were the case, then there was more reason to oppose Hindus because of their aggression towards and the inferiorisation of Dravidians (ibid.: 194). Periyar calls for the unity of non-Brahmins and Muslims to resist Hindu aggression. He further claims that the only reason the Tamils were categorised as Hindus was to differentiate them from and pitch them against Muslims, but within Hinduism, they were marked as Sudras and Panchamas (ibid.: 227–28).

However, Periyar did not believe that mere representation of non-Brahmins in places of power would end their social degradation. Referring to the powerful positions held by P.T. Rajan, Kumarasamy Reddy, A.P. Patro, Ramasamy Mudaliar and Muthiah Chettiyar, he remarks that despite their

positions, they could do little for the improvement of the majority of society, nor could they remove the ignominy of Sudrahood in society (ibid.: 197). He accuses these 'Sudras' in power of being unable to confront Brahminism and of subscribing to Brahminical culture and practices. He criticises Tamils who attain a position of power for looking down on those below them as 'lower castes', for imitating Brahmins and for treating the poor as Sudras (ibid.: 236). More specifically, he says, "The Dravidian Movement will fight against whoever oppresses the untouchable castes' (Ramasamy 2011c: 72). While arguing that the untouchable castes are part of the Dravidian community, he acknowledges that among Dravidians themselves there are those with caste arrogance. Hence, he says:

The Dravidian Movement's main aim is to make into reality the idea that in this country the differences of Paraiyar, Brahmin, upper caste, lower caste, sudra, panchama, are all totally destroyed, and all belong to the same nation and the same society. (ibid.: 73)

He adds that irrespective of whether the untouchable castes join the Dravidar Kazhagam or not, they have the right to claim the benefits of the party's efforts (ibid.: 75). Such explicit overtures by Periyar towards Dalits contradict the claims by academics like Narendra Subramaniam (1999: 105) that Periyar's conception of the Dravidian 'contains at its centre the Tamil-speaking Shudra of Tamil Nadu' while Dalits found themselves in an outer layer. As I have argued in an earlier paper (Manoharan 2020), while fighting for the political rights of the non-Brahmin bloc as a whole, Periyar was attentive to and vocally stood by the particular struggles of Dalits, even if it offended the intermediate castes who comprised the overwhelming majority in Tamil Nadu.

Periyar recognised certain basic political and socio-economic safeguards for Dalits and advocated the same. In conflicts between Dalits and intermediate castes, he stood on the side of the former, whom he saw as those most oppressed by Brahminism. He was of the opinion that those from the untouchable castes were in greater need of communal representation than the non-Brahmin Sudra castes (*Kudi Arasu*, 8 November 1925). He believed that not only Brahmins, but intermediate castes also behaved in a foul manner towards Dalits and were complicit in their oppression. Addressing the 'non-Brahmin people who think of themselves as upper castes', he said that they would not be able to get rid of the caste ignominy they faced unless and until they worked

with the untouchable castes to help the latter get rid of theirs (Ramasamy 2006: 44–45).

Throughout his political career, Periyar criticised the intermediate castes for their notions of superiority over Dalits; he argued that this was more unjust than the casteism of Brahmins, even as he held the latter to be responsible for the caste ideology (*Kudi Arasu*, 9 December 1928). While he said that the Dravidar Kazhagam fought for all non-Brahmins, he knew that the non-Brahmin upper castes, even though they were seen as Sudras by Brahmins, ill-treated those lower than them (Ramasamy 2011c: 124). He claims that, compared to other castes, it was the Adidraavidars who attended his meeting in large numbers. ‘The Adidraavidars mostly know that Dravidar Kazhagam works for the welfare of the working people, and not for the plump and lazy Brahmins or the landlords who are their stooges’ (ibid.: 124). In several of his speeches addressing Sudras, he repeatedly stressed that Dalit emancipation was central to the emancipation of the entire non-Brahmin community. To Periyar, the Dravidian project was fundamentally incomplete without freedom and equality for the lowest of the castes.

To Periyar, even the elite non-Brahmin castes like the Mudaliyars, Chettiyars and Telugu Nayakkars were Sudras. The ‘Dravidian’ identity was meant to be an identity of dignity and self-respect for the supposedly indigenous people of South India, those derogatorily referred to as Sudras and Panchamas (ibid.: 94). On another occasion, he says that the castes adopted names like Mudaliyar, Gounder and Nayakkar so as to hide their Sudra status (ibid.: 243). This might appear as a blind spot in Periyar’s perspective in that he was mapping elite non-Brahmin castes like the Mudaliyars and Chettiyars, who occupied powerful positions in the government and the bureaucracy, along with subaltern intermediate castes like the Vanniyars, Vannars, Nadars and Thevars, as Sudras. His point, however, was that despite their powerful positions, these elite communities were ritually Sudras and worse, they did nothing to challenge their ritual status or ameliorate the conditions of the other communities that were lower than them (ibid.: 95–97).

In another article, he criticises the elite Vellalar communities such as the Mudaliyars for considering themselves *sat-sudras* (clean Sudras) and placing themselves above the intermediate castes such as the Maravars, Kallars, Kammavars and Idaiyars, noting that this only strengthens the superior position of Brahmins (ibid.: 224–26). He criticises these communities for consenting to be Sudras, and for not adopting egalitarian politics. He says: ‘Instead of getting in power, or betraying our ideals and falling at the feet of

our enemies for the sake of power, we should stand on the side of the common people and apply pressure on those in power' (ibid.: 97). Power, to Periyar, not only corrupted the Sudra, but also Brahminised them.

In a satirical dialogue between a teacher and student penned by Periyar (ibid.: 213–16), the teacher asks how to identify a Sudra, and the student replies that the Sudra is one who is content with his Sudra status and seeks to serve the Brahmin without caring for his own degraded status, without self-respect. The Sudra has fully internalised Brahminism and believes in his own inferiority. Forget confronting the Brahmin, the Sudra celebrates him. The Sudra does not help those of his own class, but goes out of his way to promote the welfare of Brahmins. No matter how wealthy or influential a Sudra is, he considers the Brahmin to be superior to him.

Periyar believed that Aryanism was intent on attacking him and his party not so much because of his attacks on Hinduism as because of his asking, 'Why should we be sudras?' (ibid.: 109). In a speech in December 1947, he said that the *varṇa* order and the Hindu religion consigned all the working people to being Sudras (ibid.: 113). He saw the caste order as unchanging for 2000 years, in that those who were Brahmins, Sudras and untouchables 2000 years ago continued to be so today (ibid.: 150). This is an ahistorical reading, of course, but its tone is rhetorical. Periyar's point was to question, 'For how long will we remain Sudras in this world?' He asks the people to reject or change the religion and state that made them Sudras (ibid.: 153–54). Responding to communists who foregrounded class over caste, he questions why the rich Annamalai Chettiyar was still a Sudra and the highly educated Ambedkar still an untouchable (ibid.: 156). He argues that before the rich are overthrown, we need to overthrow the priestly class, the gods, the *mutts* and religions (ibid.: 179), for all of these worked together to prevent the advancement of Sudras. But then, most Sudras were unaware of this. The task of the Dravidar Kazhagam was to make the Sudras conscious of their own oppression, their position within the hierarchy of oppression and, additionally, their complicity in the system of oppression.

### Periyar's Critique and Its Limitations

Periyar often uses the terms Sudra, Tamil, non-Brahmin and Dravidian interchangeably and this might seem confusing and inconsistent. But each of these terms is used by him for specific purposes in specific contexts. To Periyar, all non-Brahmin non-Dalit castes of Tamil Nadu were Sudras. The

Sudras and the untouchable castes taken together were the native Tamils. They were also Dravidians, but 'Dravidian' meant much more than a term signifying language, nativity, ethnicity or nationality—it was a position of opposition to Aryan-Brahminical values. He acknowledged that elite non-Brahmin castes such as the Chettiyars and Mudaliyars did not share his zeal for egalitarian thought and were content to remain *sat-sudras*. The Sudras were divided into several castes and each fought for a place within Brahminism and was content to be above the Dalits. Periyar, however, felt that the Dalit castes were closer to the ideals of the Self-Respect movement as they were out of the *varṇa* order, had not bought into Brahminical values and did not accommodate themselves within the Brahminical system. The Sudra, on the other hand, was devoid of self-respect. The symbolic presence of the Brahmin rendered the intermediate Tamil castes as Sudras. The non-Brahmin Sudra was ontologically related to the Brahmin.

Frantz Fanon rejected the identity politics of Negritude that was based only on the lived experiences of Black people and their histories of suffering in favour of a broader African politics. His endorsement of the Algerian identity is based on its affirmative potential in envisioning an existence independent of the French. The past does not validate the politics of the present. The present has to create an affirmative politics of the future. 'I have not the right to become mired by the determinations of the past,' Fanon writes (2008: 179). Periyar's Sudra, however, was determined purely by the past. The Sudra of the present was in his inferior social state owing to a straight succession of events from 2000 years back when the Sanskrit scriptures were composed and the Brahmins, generation after generation, prevented any move to achieve social equality. In a sense, the history of the Sudra as seen by Periyar is the history of defeat by deceit. A key reason why several aspirational intermediate castes in Tamil Nadu categorically *refuse* to associate with the Sudra identity is because of its strong negative connotations. Periyar did not use nationalism to mobilise them, and his rationalism was seen as too radical to be subscribed to.

A.N. Sattanathan, chairman of the first Tamil Nadu Backward Classes Commission, who hailed from an economically poor Vanniyar background, dubbed the Justice Party 'a closely knit elite of rich people from the higher echelons of society' and accused them of indifference to the depressed classes (1982: 7), while crediting Periyar's Self-Respect movement for transforming the outlook of all non-Brahmins and giving them a sense of worth (*ibid.*: 21). He also quite pertinently said, '*Which* Sudra would rule is the question one should try to answer now' (*ibid.*: 25, emphasis added). In the decade when

Sattanathan raised this question, there were criticisms and political reactions against both the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam for favouring only the upwardly mobile non-Brahmin castes. In the late 1980s, the Vanniyars, mobilised by the Vanniyar Sangam, took part in violent protests to demand compartmentalised reservations, criticised the Dravidian parties for underrepresenting them and attempted, with limited success, to have an independent political formation through the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK). While Sattanathan self-identified as a Sudra, PMK leaders and supporters preferred to call themselves Kshatriyas.

Periyar and Kancha Ilaiah both use the label 'Sudra' quite liberally and often, quite polemically. They map diverse communities with different social and political interests under this label and tend to, at least implicitly, assume a commonality. As Barnett (1976) presciently noted, the 'Sudra' label had an affective resonance with urban elite non-Brahmin castes, but not with agrarian, peasant castes. And if challenging and rejecting the *varna* framework was the goal, was it necessary to foreground an identity from within that framework? Could one not find the vocabulary of liberation outside of that system of oppression?

Periyar never attempted to valorise the Sudra identity. He used it as a double critique: one, to incriminate Brahmins for consigning the majority of the population to a lower status for generations; two, to remind the intermediate castes of their lower status compared to Brahmins (and thus their oppression by them) and to rubbish their claims of superiority over Dalits. Being a Sudra was something to be ashamed of and any Self-Respecter ought to struggle against the same. He called on the intermediate castes to leave their attachments to their caste identities and join hands with Dalits in a common struggle against the caste system itself. But even in his own time, his message was not easily digested by the intermediate castes.

The obvious reading is that of Sanskritisation, but it can also be seen as attempts by these communities to defy the status ascribed to them and their aspirations for a prominent social role. The ill-effect, as noted by Periyar, however, was not only that this strengthened Brahminism. It also wedged a divide between such castes and the rest. The repercussions of such ritual claims can be seen in contemporary Tamil Nadu, where over two dozen castes lay claim to be descendants of Tamil monarchs, while simultaneously claiming superiority over other subaltern castes. And this is a trend among some SCs as well. Prominent leaders among the Devendra Kula Vellalars, besides being critical of Dravidian politics, also reject the Dalit identity, and lay claim to

martial, royal pasts. Gross notes how this community's 'mythico-histories rhetorically refuse the victimization that powerfully shapes Dalit political mobilization in many parts of the subcontinent' (2022: 1791).

To Periyar, 'Dravidian' was a sort of a palliative and aspirational future. Though he claims its roots are in Tamil history and signifies a conflict with Aryanism, it is very much a modern political term. But in Periyar's own view, the ancientness of a thing did not justify its persistence—it had to be validated by the egalitarian politics of the future. Within the framework of a national democracy, which Carl Schmitt calls an actual democracy, there are, according to Schmitt, two requirements: homogeneity and the eradication of heterogeneity (Schmitt 1985: 9). One could say that the desire for *actual* homogeneity in a caste-hierarchical society is desirable, given that it would erase differences of caste. As Aloysius (1997) notes in his remarkable work on Indian nationalism, the political nationalism that sought to annihilate caste differences and bring a nation into being was sidelined in favour of a cultural nationalism that retained caste differences and privileges. But what Aloysius terms political nationalism is not the same as Schmitt's conception of homogeneity. It is closer to Mouffe's idea of 'commonality', the concern being 'how to envisage a form of commonality strong enough to institute a "demos" but nevertheless compatible with certain forms of pluralism' (Mouffe 1999: 50).

Periyar's 'Dravidian' offers such an option for a 'commonality' to emerge between the intermediate castes and Dalits. As 'Dravidians', the former (but re-formed) 'Sudras' and 'Panchamas' can remove their stigmas and fight for greater common rights that transcend the invidious divisions between them, without necessarily being asked to sacrifice their interests for immediate political gains. In principle, Periyar's 'Dravidian' was also open to others willing to join the cause of Self-Respect and social justice. It is precisely this possibility of openness, if not always in actual fact, that makes it open to attack from Hindutva, as well as from Tamil nativist and caste-chauvinist groups who take a more closed approach to the question of identity.



## BIRTHING A CASTE

### The Gendered Political Origins of the *Icai Vēlālar* in Modern Tamil Nadu

*Davesh Soneji*

#### Introduction

In 1990, Muthuvel Karunanidhi (1924–2018), the son of Thirukkuvalai Anjugam Ammal and then chief minister of Tamil Nadu, created one of the hallmark social programmes of his political career, the ‘Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammal Ninaivu Marriage Assistance Scheme’. Named after Muvalur Ramamirthammal (1883–1962), one of Periyar’s most outspoken female followers from the former ‘*devadāsī*’ community, the programme was established to ‘provide assistance to poor parents in getting their daughters married and to promote the educational status of poor girls.’ The marriage programme continues to be a cornerstone of the DMK social welfare agenda, and today consists of two sub-schemes, the first of which provides ‘Rs.25,000 + 8 grams gold...for making Thirumangalyam (marriage cord or *tāli*)’ and a second that provides ‘Rs.50,000 + 8 grams gold...for making Thirumangalyam.’<sup>1</sup> The marriage scheme named after Ramamirthammal has since grown to include similar schemes aimed at women in the categories of ‘widows’, ‘poor widows’, ‘orphan girls’ and a final one named after Muthulakshmi Reddy entitled ‘inter-caste marriage’ scheme.<sup>2</sup> The tethering of marriage schemes to the names of two women from the former ‘*devadāsī*’ community by Karunanidhi indexes a deeper history of the DMK’s own socio-

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://cdn.s3waas.gov.in/s3f9b902fc3289af4dd08de5d1de54ff68f/uploads/2018/07/2018071874.pdf> (accessed on 28 April 2025).

<sup>2</sup> A YouTube video provided by the Tamil Nadu eGovernance programme enables citizens to learn how to access these funding opportunities. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUGk4GBogAM> (accessed on 10 August 2025).

political genealogy and the Dravidian movement's links to the complex history of 'devadāsī reform' in modern Tamil Nadu. Marriage and conjugal sexuality were posited as the sole solution to the social 'problem' of *devadāsīs* by the vast range of actors who participated in the reform debates, from Gandhi to Muthulakshmi Reddy to Periyar and others.

In this chapter, I reflect on this complex genealogy by tracing the emergence of the modern caste category known as *icai vēḷāḷar* ('cultivator of music'), a new socio-political formation that emerged in the shadow of *devadāsī* reform. The self-conscious invention and public proclamation of the '*icai vēḷāḷar* caste' had at its centre three major goals. The first was to assert and mobilise a fixed, uniform identity for an otherwise heterogeneous social group in the context of emergent non-Brahmin politics. The second was to lobby for the abolition of the *devadāsī* lifestyle for women in the community and thereby restore patterns of patrilineal inheritance. The third was to actively arrange and enforce caste-endogamous marriages for women within the newly formed *icai vēḷāḷar* caste group.

Women themselves, of course, remained largely absent from these deliberations, except a few such as Muvalur Ramamirthammal. The idea of 'birthing a caste', indexed in the title of this chapter, draws from these last two points. In their new roles as the invisible mothers of '*icai vēḷāḷar*' sons, many women were locked into caste-endogamous marriages that placed tremendous value on reproductive female sexuality and Tamil nationalist ideals of motherhood. The political careers of C.N. Annadurai (1909–1969), founder of the DMK, and his successor Mu. Karunanidhi, for example—both sons of women from former '*devadāsī*' communities—were enabled through this distinctly local, modern, self-fashioning. This chapter demonstrates the ways in which Tamil non-Brahmin modernity—as a radical moral and social reformation—could only be actualised through the highly gendered, vernacular process of caste-reinvention.

Central to this narrative is the emergence of the '*icai vēḷāḷar* caste association (*caṅkam*)'. For the most part, the many studies of caste associations in India have focused, rightly so, on issues of identity, political change and the realignment of *jāti* groups within the larger caste formations represented by these associations (e.g., Rudolph and Rudolph 1960; Rudolph 1965; Kidder 1974; Arnold et al. 1976; Carroll 1978). Some of the earliest of these studies, such as Lloyd Rudolph's 'The Modernity of Tradition' (1965) and Robert Hardgrave, Jr.'s *The Nadars of Tamilnad* (2018[1969]), simply argued that caste associations 'gave expression to the changing consciousness,

culture and identity' of a group, and that they 'pressed for recognition and legitimisation' from upper-caste groups. Others saw caste associations as effective vehicles for the mobilisation of political influence ('political interest groups,' as sociologist F.G. Bailey [1963: 107–108] once called them). Later, works such as Baker and Washbrook's *South India: Political Institutions and Political Change* (1975) critiqued the assumption of homogeneity within caste groups that underscored many of the earlier studies, focusing instead on the multiple, sometimes dissenting, voices that constituted these 'caste clusters' (Karve 1961). No doubt, all of these points are relevant when it comes to the *icai vēḷāḷar* associations that are the focus of my essay; however, I focus on a piece of the puzzle that has been left out of these discussions: *gender*. As I hope to demonstrate, the activities of *icai vēḷāḷar* caste associations—including the project of what early sociologists and anthropologists described as 'social elevation'—were markers of a Tamil modernity that was undeniably gendered. In particular, the social and political aspirations of individuals involved in *icai vēḷāḷar* associations could only be fully realised by men in these groups. Modernity, as it came to be articulated in this highly local context, could not accommodate the social realities of women in this community. The system of institutionalised concubinage, public performances of music and dance, and the ritual of initiation (*poṭṭukkattūtal*) were cast as archaic signs that stood in contrast to the new sexual and moral economy represented by the discursive flows of a distinctly gendered political modernity.

### A Note on Naming, Logophobia, Stigma

Since around 2020, a lot of generative controversy has been reignited with reference to the name and status of '*devadāsīs*'. A large part of this has to do with renewed, social media-driven discussions around the performing arts and the politics of caste articulated by contemporary artists from the community like Nrithya Pillai. Nrithya is a descendant of hereditary performers who rejects the term '*devadāsī*', often used pejoratively (or patronisingly) to refer to women like her and her female ancestors by upper-caste performers, academics and cultural commentators (Pillai 2022). On the one hand, the Sanskrit term '*devadāsī*', which only came into use in the nineteenth century, carries with it the deep burden of stigma that was amplified by over one hundred years of vociferous social reform aimed at the community. On the other hand, it is clear that the social status of the community was always ambiguous and women, in particular, bore varying degrees of stigma for their

entanglement with the institution of concubinage. Contemporary public deliberations on naming and logocentric practices of exclusion, such as those articulated by Nrithya, thus inevitably take us into a much older and deeper history of the community.

Prior to 1927, in Tamil-speaking South India professional women artists and their male relatives (who were sometimes musicians and dance-masters in their troupes) were often considered part of an amorphous and ill-defined group sometimes called *mēḷakkāra-jāti* ('sub-caste of performers in troupes'). The heterogeneity of this group was remarkable. The men were often musicians who played the *nāgasvaram* in temples and at private social gatherings. A complex internal hierarchy existed among these male performers. Those who performed at upper-caste temples and events were usually professionals, while another group of semi-professional artists performed at the temples of local Tamil village deities and were often simultaneously barbers, a profession marked by a degree of stigma in Tamil Nadu.<sup>3</sup> Prior to the early decades of the twentieth century, women in this community were known to outsiders by a range of opaque and sometimes pejorative vernacular names—including *tāci/tēvaṭṭiyāl* ('slave' or 'slave of god' in Tamil, Figure 3.1), *sūle* ('whore', from Kannada in Tanjavuri Marathi), *bōgam* ('pleasure woman' in Telugu)—that indexed their always-already ambiguous social status. These names themselves were feared and were the subjects of logophobic practices of exclusion, but at the same time were the objects of constant semantic overhaul and circuitous redefinition. Under colonial surveillance, the so-called dancing girl castes became increasingly known by the singular Sanskrit term '*devadāsī*', a term that carried with it a history of European Orientalist ideas about the dancers of South India being 'temple prostitutes' or 'brides of the Hindu gods', and that also posited temple-based (and not courtly) origins for their arts.<sup>4</sup> This term was reified by upper-caste

<sup>3</sup> On the history and politics of *nāgasvaram* artists in modern South India, see the pathbreaking work of Terada (1992, 2000, 2008a, 2008b) and more recently Tallotte (2023). On the complex hierarchies within the *mēḷakkārar* community and the link to the barber profession, see Soneji (2012: 145–50).

<sup>4</sup> For more on the absence of the term '*devadāsī*' in the precolonial Tamil historical record, see Orr (2000); on European representations of traditional dancers, see Leucci (2005, 2009) and Bor (2007); on the impact of American Orientalism and globalism on the making of modern Bharatanāṭyam, see Erdman (1987, 1996); Mattson (2004); Jost (2011); Krishnan (2019); Kowal (2020).



Figure 3.1: 'Hindoo Dancing Girl'. The Tamil inscription, authored by a man named T. Vardapillay, reads '*tamiḷ tēvaṭiyāl*'. *Seventy-two Specimens of Castes in India*, Madurai, 1837. Courtesy, the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University (Nkp24 837p).

Indian reformers and nationalists who were suddenly embarrassed by the supposed 'immorality' of these women, and wanted to distance themselves and their families from the social practice of institutionalised concubinage that these women and their offspring represented.

### Touchability 'on the Spectrum': Sexuality, Concubinage and the Tamil 'Dancing Girl Caste' before Reform

In 1902, the Superintendent of Census Operations, W. Francis, presented *The Census of India, 1901* to the Government of Madras. In it, perhaps for the first time, we see the *mēḷakkārar* community taxonomically identified with a larger group of 'śūdra' labourers who are collectively known as 'Group V' or 'Sudras who habitually employ Brahmins as purohitas and whose touch pollutes to a slight degree'. In this list are a number of local Tamil and Telugu names for groups who eventually were subsumed under the Sanskrit umbrella-term 'devadāsī' by the beginning of the *devadāsī* reform debates: *dāsī*, *mēḷakkārar*, *bōgam*, *nāgavāsulu* and *sāni* (Figure 3.2).

Francis's 1901 census data alerts us to several issues around the pre-reform status of this community. First, mixed-caste identities were at its core; because most women in this community performed the sexual labour of concubinage for men from a range of upper-caste groups, especially Brahmins, their children were definitively *not* born of caste-endogamy. The questionable status of such children had, of course, entered the legal record long before the 1901 census. Legal historian Kunal Parker (1998) has discussed the ways in which Anglo-Indian courts dealt with the ambiguity of caste in these communities. Descriptions of what some colonial observers and judges called the 'looseness' of caste among 'dancing girls' relied on two major factors: (i) the fact that marriage was absent in these communities; and (ii) customs such as the adoption of girls (that had no basis in *śāstric* texts) were seen as an abhorrent mimesis of the 'normative' Hindu practice of adopting sons, and such customs were systematically dismissed as illegitimate after the establishment of the Indian Penal Code in 1860.<sup>5</sup> Parker notes that after 1860,

<sup>5</sup> The heterogeneity of women who were 'brought' or 'bought' into cultures of concubinage in colonial South India is bewildering. For example, during the period of the last ruler of Tanjore Sivaji II, his seraglio housed forty-two women (including professional dancers). The list of women includes a number of Maratha women, but also Christian and *ayyāṅkār* Brahmin women (Soneji 2012: 34–35).

GROUP V.			
<i>Súdras who habitually employ Bráhmans as puróhīts and whose touch pollutes to a slight degree—</i>			
		Agamudaiyan ...	317,877
		Ándi ... ..	87,545
		Dási ... ..	6,862
		Kaikólan ... ..	346,762
		Malaimán ... ..	55,640
		Maravan ... ..	338,703
		Mēlakkāran ... ..	10,727
		Nattamán ... ..	151,276
		Náttán ... ..	11,985
Tamil ... ..		Óc'chan ... ..	4,105
		Palli ... ..	2,554,316
		Pánán ... ..	3,517
		Púluvan ... ..	6,240
		Sénaikkudaiyán ... ..	39,336
		Sudarmán ... ..	40,592
		Súdra ... ..	1,064
		Valuvádi ... ..	5,632
		Vániyan ... ..	171,138
		Agaru ... ..	1,285
		Aiyarakam ... ..	18,260
		Arakala ... ..	698
		Bógam ... ..	24,217
		Gándla ... ..	34,560
		Gavara ... ..	55,529
		Janappan ... ..	82,362
		Jetti ... ..	1,484
Telugu ... ..		Karnabattu ... ..	11,279
		Majjulu ... ..	11,215
		Nagarálu ... ..	15,191
		Nágavásulu ... ..	24,446
		Neyyala ... ..	10,793
		Perike ... ..	22,732
		Sálápu ... ..	1,068
		Sále ... ..	325,912
		Sáni ... ..	3,900
		Telaga ... ..	382,677

Figure 3.2: The inclusion of 'dancing-girl castes' (*dási*, *mēlakkāran*, *bógam*, *nāgavāsulu*, *sāni*) in colonial census data under the rubric of 'Sudras...whose touch pollutes to a slight degree' (Francis 1902: 137).

'When temple dancing girls sought to represent themselves as a "caste" in order to win legal recognition for their customs, therefore, their representations were made against a background in which their ambiguous status as a "caste" was recognized, interpreted and judged' (Parker 1998: 591–92).

At the same time that individual legal cases attempted to frame women from these communities as 'professional prostitutes' (e.g., *Chinna Ummayi v. Tegarai Chetti* 1876), some legal commentators went to great lengths to separate 'Dancing Girls' from 'prostitutes not belonging to (the) Dancing Girls' community', as we see in an 1892 compilation by Judge C. Ramachendrier of Nellore. In this tome, Ramachendrier insists that even though these categories are separate at one level, they are united in their legal standing as 'outcastes' per Hindu law:

Prostitutes who do not belong to the community of dancing girls consist chiefly of married women, who rejecting, and being rejected by their husbands, lead immoral lives, widows who openly follow prostitution, and unmarried women who desert their parents and live in concubinage and the issues of them all in the degraded condition... *These prostitutes, as are the dancing girls, (are) beyond the pale of the Hindu caste system. They are all outcastes or persons of no caste, and the ordinary rules of succession do not apply to them.* (Ramachendrier 1892: 12, emphasis added)

Ramachendrier's work provided the basis for many of the legal pronouncements on 'Deva Dasis' made by Thurston in *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (1909), an entry that became *the* primary citational signpost for nearly all English-language writing on this subject until as late as the 1970s. Ramachendrier's invocation of the 'outcaste' nature of the 'dancing girl' community is significant for two reasons. First, it points to the increased intrusion of *śāstric* references into late colonial Anglo-Hindu law. Yet the idea that *pratiloma* ('against the grain') marriages give rise to 'outcaste' offspring was actually at odds with the established social practice of institutionalised concubinage for 'dancing girls' that was prevalent and visible throughout the Madras Presidency at this time. For the most part, the children born of these relationships were definitively *not* considered 'outcastes', and if they married, usually practised caste-endogamous marriages and participated in lifecycle rituals shared across a large swathe of non-Brahmin groups (Soneji 2012). Second, and perhaps more importantly, Ramachendrier's comment points to a major shift in the ways in which upper-caste elites such as himself now desired to represent the

caste status of women from these communities. At the end of the nineteenth century, especially in the Kaveri river delta region, and certainly in Madras city, the majority of women from the 'dancing girl community' were tied to relationships of concubinage with Brahmin, Chettiar or Vellalar (*vēḷāḷar*) men. But in the works of individuals like Ramachendrier, we see how significant it was for male elites to distance themselves from these women and the consequences of the hitherto celebrated ideology of masculine virility and male sexual prestige that was at the heart of the institution of concubinage (*cinna vītu*). Rarely in Ramachendrier's 80-page tome do we hear anything about the men who were the fathers of the so-called bastards he references in the title of his work, and certainly absolutely nothing at all about the fathers of the offspring of the 'dancing girls'. The bureaucratic and civic power held by Brahmin legal professionals in colonial Madras enabled them to define and redefine their relationships with 'dancing girl' women in public, to opt in and out of proximity to these women. These options were not available to the women subjects of these legal deliberations themselves.

This takes us to the second point illustrated by Francis's census entry, namely, questions of touchability, intimacy and affective relationships between upper-caste men and 'Śūdra [women] whose touch pollutes to a slight degree'. For in the relation of concubinage, we have an exceptional collapsing of the categories Aniket Jaaware calls the 'form' and 'content' of touch (Jaaware 2018: 21). The 'form' (i.e., intimate Brahmin–Śūdra bodily contact) is mitigated by the semantic 'content' of this touch, namely, the symbolic power represented by upper-caste sexual control of the female body. Touch, bound to the everydayness of sexual intimacy, is polluting only 'to a slight degree'. Francis's classification thus dramatises colonial understandings of a much older problem and brings into sharp relief its upper-caste logics.

To be sure, the question of the precise *caste location* of the 'dancing girl community' was a significant question for colonial observers. And given the later emergence of the category of '*icai vēḷāḷar*', it is important to note that the informal alignment of sons of *devadāsīs* and *naṭṭuvanārs* with *vēḷāḷars* and *mutaliyārs*—that is, the idea that they could plug themselves into the meta-category of '*vēḷāḷar*'—goes much further back into the nineteenth century. In 1871, British anthropologist Charles Gover wrote a book entitled *The Folk-Songs of Southern India*. In the preface he discusses the social organisation of music in the Tamil-speaking regions and talks of *naṭṭuvans* 'recently' taking on the surname *mutaliyār*, and therefore being 'absorbed', as he puts it, under the category of *vēḷāḷar*:

Formerly they were rigorously shut out of the Hindu body politic, yet as their mothers, they were not despised or treated as outcastes. ... In modern times the English law has made a vast difference in their condition. If the mother be well-to-do and can give her son a good education, she tacks the caste title 'Moodelliar' after his name and sends him away from the place of his birth to a district where his antecedents are not known. In his new position none can deny that he is a Vellala. If he becomes rich none would wish to refuse him the privilege. Choosing the daughter of some poor Vellala who finds it prudent to ask no questions, he marries into his assumed caste ... In this way the sons of the temple women are constantly absorbed. Formerly such things could not be done. The Nattuvan found himself an outsider, civilly treated it is true, but yet without a privilege and almost without a right. (Gover 1871: xv–xvi)

While it is significant that the reform interventions of 1927 formalised and politicised these identifications, pre-reform attempts to publicly align this community with *vēḷāḷar* status through practices of naming and marriage certainly existed. For the remainder of the chapter, I turn to these debates in order to chart both the earliest emergence of the category of *icai vēḷāḷar*, and to think about political entanglements that enable this category to thrive as a *bona fide* (if not central) presence in modern Tamil politics.

### Re-casteing in the Vernacular: Tamil Genealogies of Caste in Print

While the issue of the 'dancing girl caste' and all its complexities in the colonial English-language archive have been the focus of much scholarly work, the early Tamil print sphere is also a space where these debates were being staged. Tamil texts on caste are mechanisms that attempt to 'fix' otherwise unstable and fluid local *jāti* categories, often attempting to link them to the *varṇa* order. In this regard, as in the colonial archive, courtesans and their dance-masters are always linked to *Śūdra varṇa* status. A classic example comes from *Cātinūl* ('The Book of *Jāti*s', Figure 3.3) attributed to the Tamil scholar Kamalai Nāṇappirakācar of Tiruvarur who lived in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. The text was edited and published in 1875 by Toṇṭai maṅṭalam Maṅṭalai Cantiracēkara Nāṭṭar and Tiruvallikkēṅi Caṅmuka Kirāmaṅi of Madras. The text aims to classify a number of local *jāti* groups under the *śāstric* framework of *anuloma* ('with the grain, legitimate') and *pratiloma* ('against the grain, illegitimate') alliances between men and

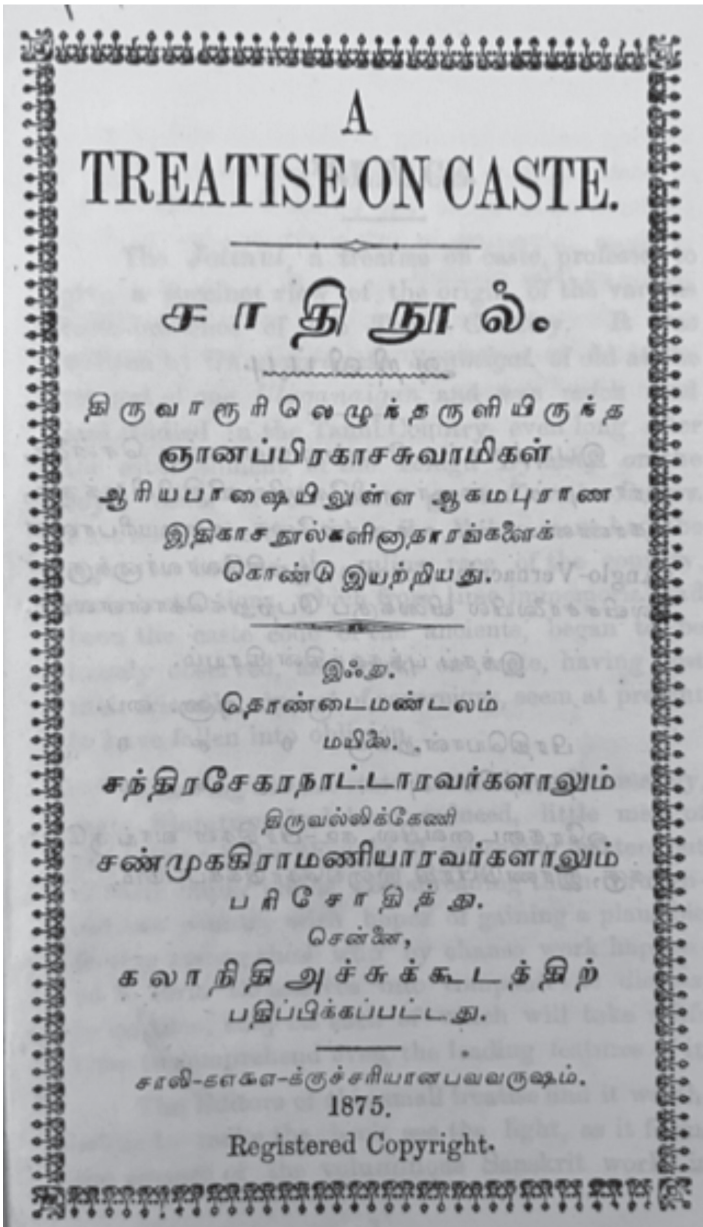


Figure 3.3: *Cātinūl: A Treatise on Caste* attributed to Kamalai Nāṇappirakācar, published in Madras in 1875. © British Library Board, pTam.B.2292.

women of varying *varṇas*.<sup>6</sup> One of the entries in *Cātinūl* is the *jāti* called *kaikkōḷar-naṭṭuvar* ('weaver-*naṭṭuvanār*'), for, in northern Tamil Nadu, it was not uncommon for women from the *kaikkōḷar* weaver community to be identified as courtesans, and their male offspring often became professional *naṭṭuvanārs*.<sup>7</sup> *Cātinūl* classifies *kaikkōḷar-naṭṭuvar* as an *anuloma*-origin *jāti*, for it arises from unions in which dominant-caste men have sexual relations with women from a lower (almost always *śūdra*) *varṇa*. Classifications such as these are found in a number of Tamil works from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as well, in which local, often ambiguous *jātis* are 'matched' with *varṇa* groupings, and their origins explained through mechanisms such as *anuloma/pratiloma* relations.<sup>8</sup>

One of the major impulses behind such '*varṇa*-matching' processes undoubtedly has to do with anxieties around the increasing visibility of *varṇa*

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<sup>6</sup> For more on the use of the Dharmaśāstric categories of *anuloma* and *pratiloma* in modern legal contexts in India and their relationship to the politics of both caste-endogamous and inter-caste marriage, see Mandal (2022).

<sup>7</sup> The identification of *kaikkōḷars* with the courtesan-*naṭṭuvanār* community, or more specifically the idea that *kaikkōḷar* families 'always gave one of their daughters to become *devadasis*' is an idea that has been cited time and time again, from Thurston's *Caste and Tribes of Southern India* to more recent work on the community (see Soneji 2012: 237). Yet, attempts to identify courtesans and *naṭṭuvanārs* with extant caste formations were also met with resistance during the time of the *devadasi* reform debates. For these groups, the idea of 'caste honour' was at stake when courtesans and the institution of concubinage in particular were yoked to their communities. The most illustrative example, noted by S. Anandhi, is that of the *ceṅkuntars*, another weaver caste, who, like the *kaikkōḷars*, were, by the late nineteenth century, becoming identified as one of the communities channelling girls and women into the courtesan lifestyle. In 1927, the editor of the *Ceṅkuntamittiran* weekly (a magazine for the *ceṅkuntar* community) announced, that 'the brave men and women of Sengundar community should safeguard the caste honour against the *devadasis*' attempts to identify themselves with our caste. Unless we wake up, our sacred caste's honour will be even lower than that of the *devadasis*' (Anandhi 1991: 741).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the *Varuṇa Cintāmaṇi* ('Wish-Fulfilling Gem of *Varṇas*') written by Kaṇakacapai Piḷḷai and published in 1925. This text, in contrast to the texts cited earlier, attempts to claim *vaiśya* status for *vēḷāḷars* (Vijayakumar forthcoming). All these vernacular works demonstrate the slippery, contentious and often oppositional forces at work in the naming and classification of local *jāti* groups under *varṇa* categories in modern South India.

groupings under colonial practices of data collection around caste identities in South India (Dirks 2001). Another important aspect of the assertion of *varṇa* has to do with the increasing presence of *vēlāḷar* groups in the cultural sphere towards the end of the nineteenth century. As we have already seen in the example from Charles Gover above, and as Praveen Vijayakumar (forthcoming) has argued in a recent essay, by the end of the nineteenth century, the courtesan-*nattuvanār* community was increasingly attempting to identify with the ‘*vēlāḷar* meta-caste’, more than three decades before the term ‘*icai vēlāḷar*’ was first deployed. Vijayakumar cites the example of Pacuvantaṇai Kaṅkaimuttu Pillai (1837–1920), a *nattuvanār* who wrote a monumental text of music and dance compositions in Tamil in 1898 entitled *Naṭanāti Vāttiya Raṅcanam* (‘The Pleasing [Sounds of] Dancing and Instrumental Music’). Vijayakumar demonstrates how, by using the surname ‘Pillai’, by seeking patronage of Saiva *ātīnams* (and invoking the philosophy of Tamil Saiva Siddhānta) and by positing dance as the exclusive preserve of the ‘*śūdra* women of *takṣiṇatēcam* or South India’, Kaṅkaimuttu Pillai effectively constituted his community as part of a distinctly elite, public Tamil Saivism and, by extension, as *Saiva vēlāḷar*. Examples such as the *Naṭanāti Vāttiya Raṅcanam* show us how in the vernacular realm, the issue of the reinvention of caste identity for the courtesan-*nattuvanār* community was a long and complex process with a ‘prehistory’ that forces us to look much further back than the invention of the term ‘*icai vēlāḷar*’ in the 1920s.

### Reform as a New Genesis: The Making of *Icai Vēlāḷar* Caste Associations in Early Twentieth-Century Madras

The emergence of the category of *icai vēlāḷar* is tightly intertwined with the first legal interventions around the issue of ‘dancing girls’ made in the Madras Presidency by Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy (1886–1968). Reddy’s mother Chandrammal was related to the family of Sivarama Nattuvanar (1879–1945), the last resident (*āsthāna*) dance-master of the Pudukkottai court. Reddy’s father, S. Narayanaswami Ayyar, was a *smārta* Brahmin who was the principal of the Maharaja’s College in Pudukkottai. Reddy was the first female medical graduate in the country, earning her degree from the Madras Medical College in 1912. In April 1914, she married Dr T. Sundara Reddy, whose family was deeply involved with the Justice Party. In addition to continuing with her medical practice, Reddy was the first female Indian legislator prior to independence, deeply involved with the project of Gandhian nationalism, and

was also a prominent member of the All-India Women's Conference. During her tenure as a member of the Madras Legislative Assembly, Reddy voiced opinions on a number of issues related to gender and sexuality, including the age of consent, the suppression of brothels, female education, women in the police, medical aid for women and, of course, the prohibition of '*devadāsī*' practices. Many scholars have described Reddy's contribution to first-wave Indian feminism, and it is clear that her investment in issues related to 'social purity', birth control and eugenics bears important resemblances to the work undertaken by feminists in the early twentieth-century metropole (see, Anandhi 1997, 2008; Natarajan 1997; Whitehead 1998; Kannabiran and Kannabiran 2003).

In 1927, Reddy first proposed an amendment to the Madras Hindu Religious Endowments Act of 1926 that would give hereditary '*inām* lands' (the tax-free *māniyam* lands that some women received for their affiliations with temples) over to women without any further obligation for the women to perform dance or music in the temple or dedicate girls as '*devadāsīs*' in this context. In cases where these women received a portion of the revenue from the land (e.g., in the case of cultivated land), they would continue to receive this for the span of their lifetime, after which it would be given over to temple authorities. This was passed as the 'Act V of 1929'. For those who might not be familiar with the genealogy of '*devadāsī* reform' in Madras, this intervention, Act V, pre-dates Reddy's 1930 bill, entitled 'A Bill to Prevent the Dedication of Women to Hindu Temples', which eventually led to the now-famous Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947.

The promise of Act V of 1929 to enfranchise lands in the name of women performers caused considerable uproar. Men who wanted to lay claim to a portion of the lands could not have them enfranchised since the amendment only applied to women. *Inām* deeds were instantly rewritten so that men now became registered property holders, and in some cases *inām* deeds were suddenly 'lost' by families or temple administrators. Reddy also received a number of letters from men who challenged her decision to enfranchise land only in the name of women from these communities.<sup>9</sup> The Devadasi

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<sup>9</sup> In some cases, it was unclear whether *devadāsīs* were entitled to the *inām* lands or to a portion of the revenue generated from it. In many of these cases, *devadāsīs* petitioned *inām* commissioners to re-examine their original land tenure deeds (see, e.g., Muthulakshmi Reddy Papers (Nehru Memorial Library) (MRP), subfile 11 [Part II], 275–76).

and Kalavantula Samskaranam Association of Bezwada Taluk, for example, expressed its concern over the gendered implications of the enfranchisement of the *ināms*:

It has been the constant custom of the males as well as the females of this association to hold the Inam lands granted to them in lieu of the services in the temples which they jointly, with strict mutual aid, turned out, without fail. Accordingly, both sexes had equal rights to the Inam lands. But on observing the recent circular of the Honorable Inam Commissioner to enfranchise only those lands that are directly in the possession and enjoyment of the *females only*, all of us turned pessimistic over the future success in the reform of the said association.<sup>10</sup>

This argument, of course, has a legacy—men from these communities continue to vie for *inām* lands well into the twenty-first century. In Madras High Court cases as late as 2018, the contemporary legal record preserves imprints of the early-twentieth-century events we have been discussing here.

Reddy's 1927 proposal also elicited a range of responses from women in these communities, including a vast number of protest letters and memos. The best known of these come from an English document entitled *A Memorandum Submitted on Behalf of the Madras Presidency Devadasi Association* (1928), addressed to C.P. Ramaswami Iyer, Law Member, Government of Madras. The memo is signed by eight members of the 'Madras Presidency Devadāsī Association', whose members included prominent *devadāsīs* of the city, including the famous vocalist Bangalore Nagaratnammal (1878–1952). It is based on earlier documents written in Tamil by individual women like T. Duraikkannu, a famous dancer, and is also followed by a number of replicas from nearly all the Tamil-speaking regions of the Presidency, from as far south as the Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari districts. These protest letters and this memo bear an incredible uniformity not only in form but also in content. They critique the identification of '*devadāsīs*' with sex workers and are couched in the language of nation and religion, arguing, ultimately, that there *are* possibilities for professional dancing women and their offspring to inhabit the spaces of nationalist modernity.

It is in the wake of this initial agitation between 1927 and 1930 that we see some of the earliest mention of '*icai vēlāḷar*' associations, with letterhead of letters to Reddy bearing variations on the name '*icai vēlāḷar*

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<sup>10</sup> MRP, subfile 11 (part II), 239.

*caṅkam*.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps one of the earliest documentable instances comes from a letter written by Muvalur Ramamirtham, an ardent supporter of Reddy who was central in shaping Periyar's understanding of the lives of hereditary women performers.<sup>12</sup> She also attempted to make public narratives about the lives of these women, and authored the Tamil novel *Tāsikaḷ Mōcavaḷai* (1936), upheld by some historians as a 'radical' text. In reality, the novel borrows most of its representations of professional dancing women from an earlier poem, *Tāsikal Vēṣam, Mainarkaḷ Mōcam*, by the Muslim poet Muhammad Yusuf, published in Kumbakonam in 1930, with the difference that in *Tāsikaḷ Mōcavaḷai* the courtesan protagonists realise the error of their ways and join the emergent anti-*devadāsī* movement. Ramamirthammal

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<sup>11</sup> In the Telugu-speaking context too, we have a parallel agrarian caste, *balija*, that hereditary musicians sought identification with. There, names like *nāyudu* were appended in order to enable identification with the *balija jāti*. In this context, too, the forging of the first *saṃskaraṇa* or 'reform' organisations was almost entirely the initiative of men in the community, who at first deployed the title *kalāvantulu*, as we see in the titles of a large number of reform associations that Reddy herself keeps a list of in her files, and as we see in the official documents that list the executive committees of such organisations. Later, as these organisations gained traction and success, the term *kalāvantulu* was abandoned, largely because it, like the term *gaṇikā*, was read as gendered. Therefore, unlike *icai vēḷāḷar*, the term *sūrya balija* ('balijas of the solar dynasty') only came into popular usage in the post 1950s period, when the Andhra Pradesh state government passed an important amendment to the 1947 Madras Devadasis Act (Soneji 2012). It is imperative that we understand that this debate was still ongoing until the very end of the twentieth century in Andhra. In the 1990s, as non-hereditary upper-caste dancers were busy trying once again to reinvent and re-cast the dance of *kalāvantulu* women, within the community there was another controversy brewing, this time about the persistence of language like *kalāvantulu* and *gaṇikā* in official government documents. In a Government Order from July 1994, men from the community petitioned the Andhra Pradesh government to remove these terms from the common list of names of OBC communities, and to replace them with the 'respectable' title *sūrya balija* (G.O. Ms. No. 20, July 19, 1994). This document and other similar recent government orders have been uploaded to the website of the Suryabalija Foundation, an organisation founded in 2015 by Suresh Kumar Yanamadala (<https://www.suryabalija.org/news.php>; accessed on 28 May 2025).

<sup>12</sup> For Periyar's views on *devadāsī* abolition, see Srilata (2002, 2003); Soneji (2012).

campaigned vociferously for the marriage of women from the community following the recommendations of Muthulakshmi Reddy (Soneji 2012: 139–42). Nevertheless, on 13 October 1927, Ramamirthammal wrote a detailed letter to Reddy criticising the ‘shameless and dishonorable’ protests of the women of the Madras Presidency Devadasi Association, promising Reddy to help her secure marriages for young women from within the community. This letter is written on the letterhead of the ‘Third Tanjavur Jilla Isai Vēļāļar Conference’ (*tañcai jillā 3-vatu icai vēļāļar makānātu*).

From 1927 onwards, *icai vēļāļars* claimed their links to music in a move that provided them with a niche occupation as the hereditary keepers of music traditions that as early as the 1920s were already understood as ‘respectable’. As early as 1911, mixed-caste (although undoubtedly Brahmin-dominated) associations for the study of music were formed throughout South India, the most famous being the Tanjore ‘Sangeetha Vidya Mahajana Sangam’ in 1913, led by the Protestant musicologist Abraham Pandither (Pandither 1917). These all-male associations did not recognise courtesans as legitimate professional musicians largely because professionalism in music could not be separated from public forms of respectability that upper-caste men such as *ayyars* and *ayyanākārs* now adopted. So the same men who just years earlier would have commended themselves for personal and artistic associations with courtesans, and necessarily had intimate relationships with them, fashioned themselves as the inheritors of ‘respectable’, that is to say, ‘classical’, music.

For men in the community who were artists, the forging of *icai vēļāļar* identity disassociated them from their links to the *maruttuvar*-barber community and enabled their participation—as ‘authentic’ performing artists from the past—in the emergent urban reinvention of ‘classical’ dance and music in Madras in the late 1930s. These were, for example, the famous ‘Pillais’ who became the famous Bharatanatyam gurus of the 1940s and 1950s.

Men not only rallied support for reform but also repudiated the protests from organisations such as the Madras Devadasi Association. A letter printed on the letterhead of the Kadalur (Tanjore District) Icai Velala Cañkam, for example, dramatises the anger and frustrations of men from *devadāsī* communities who reacted immediately to *devadāsī* protest documents such as *The Humble Memorial of Devadasis of the Madras Presidency*. ‘Unable to tolerate the atrocities committed by women of this community,’ the letter opens, ‘the merciful Lord bade the goddess Mahālakṣmī herself to incarnate as

Dr. Muthulakshmi to redeem these women and ensure they live a respectable life.’ The tone of the writing becomes increasingly vicious, and mocks the women who mounted resistance to abolition:

Having heard of our support to this bill, some in the Cennai Uruttirakaṇikaiyar Caṅkam have opposed this bill and have described us as ‘selfish’ individuals who have clamped down like an axe on our own clan. In this way, they have revealed their greatness! It is pathetic to know that their intention is to wear the *poṭṭu* under the pretext of serving the god only to satisfy the sexual lust of the so-called aristocratic devotees of the temple.

The biting letter continues with some insulting advice to the women who do not affirm to the politics of reform:

[We] suggest that in the first place you oppose and reject the bill. Thereafter, you can compile a list of the dignitaries who visit your homes [for sex], and after their death, construct a temple with their images installed. Since it is important to worship these images, you may want to stage a protest demanding the allocation of funds collected through land tax for this project over the next ten years. We wish you success in securing these funds from the government. By the way, we return to you the two epithets—‘selfish people’ and ‘harmful traitors of the clan’—that you have conferred upon us because of our support of this bill.

May you delight in stringing these epithets to both sides of the emblem of prostitution (*poṭṭu*) worn by your women, just as married women string beads to both sides of their *tāli*.<sup>13</sup>

This passage clearly illustrates the public recovery of conservative attitudes towards women that were held by segments of this community. The final blow comes with the cynical call for these women to embrace marriage. The text insults the women by calling the *poṭṭu* an ‘emblem of prostitution’ (*vipacāra*) and juxtaposing this with the ‘respectable’ *tāli* worn by married women. Discourses of shame and stigma for women were perpetuated from within the community as well, and ultimately, marriage within the community for women, like the promises of respectability, remained unattainable.

The future of men in the community was imagined through participation in a new, modern, non-Brahmin public sphere. As Amrit Srinivasan shows,

<sup>13</sup> MRP, subfile 11 (part III), 442–43.

the gradual disappearance of the 'mēḷakkārar' and 'tāci' categories from official census statistics by the second decade of the twentieth century points to 'the first stage of their absorption into broader political communities organized around new, shared identities of non-Brahmin, Backward, or Dravidian status' (Srinivasan 1984: 112). Non-Brahmin assertion in the Tamil- and Telugu-speaking regions radically transformed the political landscape, forging 'a new public which brought together the realm of the everyday and the politics of inferiorized identities' (Pandian 2007: 211). Notice, then, that around the time Periyar formed *Cuya Mariyātai Iyakkam* in 1925, a great deal of social ferment was already beginning in the courtesan-nattuvanār community.

The sedimentation of the term *icai vēḷāḷar* in the bureaucratic machinery of modern Tamil Nadu is of course the result of the rise of *icai vēḷāḷar* men in the political landscape, especially during the mass mobilisation period of the Dravidian movement in the mid-twentieth century. In the early 1930s, immediately following the debates around the 1927 bill, some men from courtesan-nattuvanār backgrounds such as the poet V. Ramalingam Pillai (1888–1972) supported the Congress presence in the Madras Presidency (Irschick 1986: 215), but things changed drastically with the emergence of the Dravida Kazhagam (Association of Dravidians; DK) in 1944. As the work of Irschick (1986) and others has demonstrated, incredibly large numbers of men from the *icai vēḷāḷar* community joined the DK. But just five years later, C.N. Annadurai (1909–1969) split from the DK and formed the DMK. Annadurai was born to a hereditary woman performer named Bangaru Ammal, whose family had links to the Varadarāja Perumāl temple in Kanchipuram. In 1967, he became the first non-Congress chief minister of Tamil Nadu and was also one of the earliest political figures to communicate electoral propaganda through the medium of cinema and scripted three major Tamil films.

By the late 1940s, *icai vēḷāḷar* men moved into the realm of cinema largely as writers and producers, at a time when women from these communities were becoming less visible as public performers; while such women were the earliest female actors of the South Indian cinema, increasingly they were displaced due to the increasing dominance of Tamil and Telugu-speaking Brahmin women in the field (Krishnan 2019). Throughout his political career, Annadurai's morality was questioned because of his mother, even as his eloquent oratory and often misogynistic public persona appealed to a new generation. As V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai point out, 'Annadurai was erudite, intelligent and had a way with words, and his inexorably gendered discourse, which, even when it spoke of women's freedom, objectified them as creatures of beauty and

desire, proved alluring' (1998: 511). Annadurai represents one of the earliest successes of the restoration of patriliney in courtesan-*nattuvanār* communities. His rise to political stardom *despite* his origins in the community signals the successful incorporation of the *icai vēlālar jāti*—as a 'modern' caste group with 'normative' gender roles—into the public sphere. The victory of Annadurai's successor, Mu. Karunanidhi in the 1971, 1989, 1996 and 2006 elections, as well as his posthumous persistence as a cultural icon parallel the steady disappearance of *icai vēlālar* women from the public life of modern India.<sup>14</sup>

### The Ubiquity of Caste-endogamous Marriage and *Icai Vēlālar* Caste Associations Today

*Icai vēlālar* caste associations are still very much alive today, especially as *icai vēlālars* increasingly strive to make their OBC status prominent in local contexts. For example, the Thalamai Isai Vellalar Sangam, an organisation based in Chennai, provides awards and certificates bearing the image of Karunanidhi and publishes a monthly Tamil journal, *Icaivēlālar Muracu* (Victory Drum of the *Icai Vēlālars*, Figure 3.4a). The journal emphasises the social, cultural and political achievements of members of the *icai vēlālar* caste and devotes a sizeable portion of each issue to matrimonial advertisements. The organisation is clearly aligned politically with the DMK and Karunanidhi's image figures prominently in nearly every

<sup>14</sup> The muddy, uneven articulations of modern selfhood through naming in these communities are further abetted by the fact that it is only *after* the 1970s that the term *icai vēlālar* is used in the Tamil diaspora. Take, for example, the case of the colonial Straits Settlements, specifically Malaysia. As I have already mentioned, prior to the 1930s, men from Tamil courtesan communities also often took on the occupational title *ampattān* (barber), and thus in Indian census data, we see the category of 'barber-musician' referring to men who played the *nāgasvaram*. But in census data from the Straits Settlements, the terms *mēlakkārar* and *tāci* are absent. Around the same time that the newly invented caste title *icai vēlālar* begins to circulate in India, in the Straits Settlements, this community is absorbed into a larger caste group that regroups as '*maruttuvar*', consisting largely of Tamil-speaking *pillais* and Telugu *nāyudus*. The 'Maruthuvar Sangam of Penang', made up only of barbers, was established in 1926 with a certain Haridass Pillai as its first president, and is the oldest known caste association in the Straits Settlements. Today, in the spirit of middle-class aspirations, it has morphed into the 'Penang Hairdressers Association' (Soneji 2017a).

issue. The same organisation also publishes another magazine, *Apūrva Rākam* (Unparalleled *Rāga*, Figure 3.4b), focused on achievements in the fields of music (and marginally dance). Unlike *Icaivēḷāḷar Muracu*, *Apūrva Rākam* does not claim to be exclusively for members of the *icai vēḷāḷar* community. It carries articles on ‘mainstream’, upper-caste musical events and performers, but juxtaposes these with notices about performances by *icai vēḷāḷar* artists. The charismatic leader of the Thalamai Isai Vellalar Sangam was the late Vazhuvoor Ravi, a trained *mirutaṅkam* artist, a staunch supporter of the DMK and Karunanidhi’s son and political heir, M.K. Stalin. Vazhuvoor Ravi often voiced his disdain for the Modi government on social media and founded his own *sabhā*, ‘Sri Rāgam Fine Arts’ in Mandaveli, Chennai, in the 1990s. In December 2020, Ravi also filed a petition on behalf of the Sangam to the Tamil Nadu state government demanding Covid-19 relief packages of



Figure 3.4a: The magazine *Icaivēḷāḷar Muracu* run by the Thalamai Isai Vellalar Sangam, Chennai.



Figure 3.4b: The magazine *Apūrva Rākam* run by the Thalamai Isai Vellalar Sangam, Chennai.

Rs 10,000 for all ‘Traditional Mangala Isai Musicians’ (*nāgasvaram* and *tavil* artists) for at least three months.

Around the year 2010, the domain *isaivelalar.com* was claimed by a group called Isaivellaler Murpokku Nalasangam (‘Association of Progressive *Icai Vēlālars*’), which has since become defunct. The description of the organisation on the website began as follows:

Isaivellaler Murpokku Nalasangam, a nonpolitical association for the development of our community, was started in the year 1999. We the members of the Isaivellaler Community have launched this organization with a view to *uniting our community and facilitate Horoscope exchange, Educational and Career development within the community circle.* Needless to say, we also aim to rejuvenate those hoary art forms that used to be the mainstay of our community. Our first ambition was why

we Isaivelalers had not made any effort earlier to unite ourselves through 'Internet' and [have] our collective voice heard. With this in view we present to you 'isaivelalar.com', our Isaivellaler Murpokku Nalasangam site. We want this site to bring about unity in our community. Every Isaivellaler can contribute to our site. We want your contributions also to develop our community. After all, this is your community site and you are responsible for its success.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike the Thalamai Isai Vellalar Sangam, this organisation did not explicitly foreground political allegiances, allowing its members, who included some of the most prominent percussionists in South Indian music today, to slip if they desired into the AIADMK–BJP political matrix that is supported by most Brahmin musicians in contemporary Chennai. Today, this organisation has a new website, which is locked and only open to members, though they also run a Facebook page entitled 'Isai Vellalar Community'. Many of these pages have links to another website, <https://mangalaisaimatrimony.com>, which is full of success stories of largely caste-endogamous marriages and advertisements for '543 grooms and 430 brides'. While matrimonial ads are a common feature of nearly all caste groups in India today, for the *icai vēlāḷars* it bears a special kind of weight, for it harks back to the centrality of marriage during the reform debates, and even today, there is a restless anxiety around quick and early marriages for young women in this community (Soneji 2012).

## Conclusion

This essay has focused on the attempt by one community to radically refashion its inherited profession and identity in an attempt to reach out to the political possibilities represented by the emergence of non-Brahmin politics in early-twentieth-century Tamil Nadu. For these *icai vēlāḷars*, morality and modernity were intimately linked; participation in the political realm depended upon shedding links to morally dubious practices such as concubinage and rituals like *poṭṭukaṭṭūtal*. While links to ideas about citizenship, the civil order and the homogenising mechanisms of the state undoubtedly undergird the ideological dimensions of this modernity, its modes, ethics and key actors are fixed to the 'problem' of women's morality

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.isaivelalar.com/aboutus.htm> (accessed on 1 December 2009); emphasis added.

in inextricable ways. Beyond that, the story of the gendered emergence of the *icai vēḷāḷar* also provides a concrete example of how the conjugal ideal is incessantly upheld in the nation's multiple imaginaries. Many *icai vēḷāḷar* women—particularly those who were active performers—were rendered publicly invisible after they settled into caste-endogamous conjugal life. The interruptions, unevenness and incompleteness that characterised reform live on not only through the postcolonial politics of the community's caste associations, but also through the lives of women within the community who often continue to occupy the suspended subjectivities engendered by the emergence of the category of '*icai vēḷāḷar*'.



## WHEN LOVE MEETS DEATH

### 'Honour', Violence and Inter-caste Marriages in Tamil Nadu

*Perundevi Srinivasan\**

#### Introduction

On 24 June 2015, the decapitated body of a young man was found on a railway track near Pallipalayam village, approximately 10 miles from Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu. The victim, identified as Gokulraj, belonged to the Paraiyar caste, a Scheduled Caste group, and was a twenty-two-year-old engineering graduate from nearby Omalur in Salem district. Post-mortem reports confirmed that he had suffered multiple injuries prior to his death. Yuvaraj, the founder of Dheeran Chinnamalai Peravai, an organisation associated with the Gounder caste, was involved in the murder (Janardhanan 2015).<sup>1</sup> Gokulraj was abducted by Yuvaraj and his accomplices when they found him with Swathi, a woman from the Gounder caste, at the Siva-Ardhanariswarar temple in Tiruchengode. The entire incident was captured by the temple's CCTV camera, providing crucial evidence for the police later on. Gokulraj was taken to a secluded location, where he was murdered, and his body was disposed of on the railway track.

The violence faced by Scheduled Caste men involved in relationships with women from intermediate caste groups is not a new phenomenon in Tamil Nadu. Two years prior to Gokulraj's murder, in July 2013, the mutilated body of Ilavarasan, a Paraiyar young man, was discovered near a railway track

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<sup>1</sup> On 2 June 2023, the Madras High Court upheld the life sentence without remission for Yuvaraj and seven other convicts in this case. See Imranullah (2023).

in Dharmapuri district in northern Tamil Nadu.<sup>2</sup> In March 2016, Sankar, a twenty-two-year-old man belonging to Pallar, a Scheduled Caste group, was fatally stabbed in broad daylight by paid killers in Udumalpet. Sankar's 'mistake' was his marriage to his college-mate Kausalya of the Piranmalai Kallar caste.<sup>3</sup>

According to a news report, which cites A. Kathir, executive director of Evidence, a Madurai-based non-governmental organisation (NGO) doing phenomenal work in support of Scheduled Caste victims of violence, a staggering 185 incidents of 'honour killings' were officially recorded in Tamil Nadu in the five years leading up to 2019 (Thomas 2019; also Venkat 2017).<sup>4</sup> Kathir notes that despite this high count, only a few cases, like the Kausalya–Sankar case, gained significant media attention. As mentioned by Kathir in the news report, the former Chief Minister O. Panneerselvam even denied the occurrence of 'honour killings' in the state during an Assembly session, insisting that legislation on the matter was unnecessary. Additionally, Kathir observes that in 2016, when the Supreme Court requested a status report on 'honour killings', only 22 states responded, excluding Tamil Nadu. Kathir further elaborates on the patterns surrounding these killings elsewhere (see Sivarajah 2016). He explains that grooms from the Scheduled Caste group are frequently the targets, while in cases where the bride belongs to a Scheduled Caste, the usual approach is to forcefully separate the couple and caution the girl against maintaining contact with her partner.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> After marrying Divya, a Vanniyar caste woman, nineteen-year-old Ilavarasan faced turmoil. Divya's refusal to return home, as decreed by an extra-judicial caste panchayat conducted by some local Vanniyar men, allegedly led to her father's suicide. In the aftermath, three Dalit colonies in Ilavarasan's native village were ransacked and set ablaze. During a court hearing, Divya disowned Ilavarasan and went back to her mother's house. Tragically, a week later, Ilavarasan's lifeless body was discovered on a railway track, accompanied by a 'suicide' note. See Bhagat (2013).

<sup>3</sup> Kausalya, who also suffered severe injuries in this gruesome attack, apparently planned by her parental family, survived it. See Kumar (2016).

<sup>4</sup> The numbers include killings of both Scheduled Caste (SC) men and intermediate caste women. I have not seen any specific and reliable caste-based statistics regarding honour killings in the state.

<sup>5</sup> There are instances of Dalit women being killed for being involved with men from intermediate castes. Perumal Murugan's (2013) novel *Pūkkuli* ('The Pyre') portrays the murder of an Arunthathiyar woman for marrying a Gounder man in

Against the backdrop of the violence experienced by Scheduled Caste men and their non-Scheduled Caste women partners from intermediate caste groups, my objective is to examine the socio-cultural discourses surrounding 'honour' and resistance to inter-caste marriages and relationships, which legitimate this violence. My study centres on Gounder caste families residing in and around Salem and Erode, near Gokulraj's hometown, and is primarily based on research conducted immediately following his tragic murder. It is important to note that such instances of violence extend beyond the Gounder caste. The killings of Ilavarasan and Sankar demonstrate violence against Scheduled Caste men by other castes like Vanniyaars and Thevars. Violence can also occur within Scheduled Caste groups when caste boundaries are transgressed in romantic relationships or marriages. An alleged incident involving Ajithkumar, a Paraiyar man, being killed for marrying a Pallar girl underscores the need to explore dynamics within and among diverse caste groups, including the Scheduled Castes (see Rajasekaran 2020). These areas remain uncharted territories in this study, but they present opportunities for future research, and suggest the salience of 'honour' in the analysis of inter-caste violence across a diversity of castes.

This chapter draws from diverse sources, including public talks, mythologies, media representations, social media posts, online newspapers and magazines, in addition to observations and conversations from my ethnographic field research. The fieldwork focused on three main sites within the Kongu region: Tiruchengode, Erode and Vellakoil. Tiruchengode was where Gokulraj was kidnapped. Erode was selected due to its proximity to Tiruchengode and Pallipalayam, where Gokulraj's body was found. Vellakoil was chosen for its similarity to Tiruchengode as a small town dominated by the Gounder caste group. The fieldwork unfolded in two phases, in July 2015 and from March to April 2018. During my stay in Tamil Nadu, the tragic killing of Gokulraj occurred, igniting discussions among the progressive literary circles in which I actively participate. Together with fellow writers Devibharathi and Kavitha Muralidharan, I visited Omalur, Tiruchengode, Erode and Vellakoil, engaging in exchanges with local residents of various castes, Dalit and dominant, and gaining valuable insights. A connecting thread of my interlocutors has been their awareness about specific examples of inter-caste marriages involving Gounder and

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the 1980s. But some of my interlocutors agreed with Kathir that killing Scheduled Caste women in such cases is less common than killing Scheduled Caste men.

Scheduled Caste people. They provided invaluable details about the nature of resistance, ostracism and aggression faced by such couples. I used less structured interviews to facilitate openness and to allow for the emergence of unforeseen angles from which to understand these violent practices. I maintained contact with my interlocutors from the Kongu region even after returning to Chennai, and in 2018 I revisited Erode, Tiruchengode and Namakkal for further conversations.

### *Kauravam* ('Honour') and *Kauravak Kolai* ('Honour Killing')

The use of 'honour killing' (in English and Tamil) and its culture-specific implications have sparked extensive debates from diverse perspectives. While it is not possible to cover the entirety of these debates here, I briefly outline a few key perspectives. Scholars have argued that the usage of this term essentialises certain cultures and communities associated with this particular form of violence, depicting them as either non-modern or insufficiently modern. As noted by Uma Chakravarti (2005: 309), the phrase is often linked to the perceived uniqueness of Asian cultures, characterised by irrational communities and archaic patriarchal practices that resist modernisation. According to Lila Abu-Lughod (2013: 114), this usage attributes the 'cause of criminal violence' to 'culture' or 'tradition', leading to the stigmatisation of entire cultures and communities, rather than focusing on specific acts of violence. Inderpal Grewal (2014: 165) argues that the term embodies a 'geopolitics of colonialism and race', exclusively linking certain cultures with patriarchy while implying that others have moved past it. Furthermore, it finds support in academic discourse, social science research, including anthropology, and has a viable currency in 'multiple media, scholarly, and NGO circuits' (ibid.: 164). While these are important critiques of the implications of using honour exclusively to define 'backward' peoples and cultures, I nevertheless maintain that examining honour in understanding the particular incidents under investigation here is essential; the language of honour, after all, is specifically used by my interlocutors to describe forms of social disciplining widely used in their caste communities.

Another line of critique, specifically of the term 'honour killing', points out that the term tends to gloss over a multitude of dynamics underlying the violence. The 'excuse of honour' is used to cover heterogeneous reasons, such as 'land disputes and old enmities', which lead to murder (Shah-Davis 2011: 191). Similarly male-centered economic interests such as the right to

inheritance appear to contribute to this violence, as seen in the Jat community in Haryana (Chowdhry 2007). Diverse circumstances, including property claims, the crisis of masculinity, class interests, globalisation, increased media coverage and NGO interest, and disparate issues such as 'the struggles around quotas for Dalits and OBCs' and 'the crisis in agriculture' can all be encompassed under the term 'honour' (Grewal 2014: 177).

Again, I find the critique of the loose application of 'honour killing' valuable but my own interest is in how the terms and discourses of honour, deployed by dominant communities themselves, provide ordinary people with what they consider legitimate reasons for their social response to inter-caste marriages. While I agree that heterogeneous socio-cultural and economic dynamics can be rallied under 'honour', this study focuses instead on understanding the contemporary currency and nuances of the usage of '*kauravam*' (honour) among intermediate caste groups in Tamil Nadu.<sup>6</sup> Prima facie, it is important to point out that the usage '*kauravak kolai*', referring to murder in the context of inter-caste marriage or inter-caste love, is recent. It has emerged and gained popularity in Tamil Nadu over only the past fifteen years, beginning in the late 2000s, with the work of NGOs, especially Evidence.<sup>7</sup>

While some Gounder caste organisations have internalised this term, Gounder people rarely use it.<sup>8</sup> And yet, at the same time, they frequently

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<sup>6</sup> The Tamil term *kauravam* derives from the Sanskrit *gaurava*, meaning 'heaviness', indicating 'greatness'. Even though 'honour' has been used for the Tamil term *mariyātai* (Price 1996) and for *mānam* (Mines 2005) in scholarship, 'honour' is commonly used for *kauravam* by bilingual Tamil-English speakers and in media in Tamil Nadu.

<sup>7</sup> Kathir, the founder of Evidence, has observed that his organisation has started employing this term following its international usage for over a decade now and that this term functions as a useful strategy for drawing the larger international civil community's attention towards this violence (Facebook note, 8 July 2015). In recent years, leaders and members of the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (Liberation Panthers Party) have been particularly prominent among political parties in using the term *cātiyānavak kolai* ('caste arrogance killing') to describe these incidents—a usage that has gained traction in both media and progressive circles.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, Pongalur Manikandan, the leader of the Kongu Velala Gounderkal Peravai, used the term 'honour killing' in his statement (1 April 2014) to condemn the murder of a Gounder woman by her own family for marrying a Scheduled Caste man. See <https://www.facebook.com/mani.pongalur/posts/699891800051846> (accessed on 6 May 2017).

invoked the notion of 'honour', as if it were an essential trait of the Gounder caste, when they discussed inter-caste marriages or romantic relationships. At first glance, such invocations of 'honour' may prompt familiar interpretations, associating it with 'patriarchy' that seeks to 'maintain male authority over women' (Gupte 2013) or seeks to guarantee the 'purity of male seed' (Dube 1986; Chowdhry 2010).<sup>9</sup> While I acknowledge the careful inquiry into the notion of honour in these studies, they inadvertently uphold an essentialist understanding of dichotomous sexes, as if these categories are expressions of the inviolable and inherent nature of the self. By contrast, I consider that within the context of inter-caste marriage, 'honour' functions as a discursive strategy to reinforce mandatory kinship practices that regulate sexualities within a 'compulsory hetero-sexual' (Butler 2004) matrix. This matrix, which operates through clan exogamy and caste endogamy, perpetually works towards reiterating and producing the phantasmatic culture of the Gounder caste group. By 'culture', I do not intend to mean any essential or static or homogeneous entity; rather, I employ this term heuristically, as suggested by Butler (*ibid.*: 123–24), as a 'placeholder for a past position' and its accompanying embedded power relations between caste groups situated on the hierarchical ladder of castes, such as the Gounders and Scheduled Castes. Furthermore, the adjective 'phantasmatic' draws attention to the 'conceit of a culture as a self-sustaining and self-replicating totality', which naturalises heterosexuality and normative sexual difference (*ibid.*: 124), within its 'placeholder' role.

The enactment of the kinship practices of the Gounder caste group is at times disrupted by inter-caste marriage and love affairs. Especially when Gounder women engage in relationships with Scheduled Caste men, the caste group may resort to violence to set right such disruption. As we shall discuss later, irrespective of the presence of violence, these kinship practices are reinforced through discursive mediation, occurring in public and private spaces. Within this realm of discursive mediation, framed by the notion of

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<sup>9</sup> For an examination of gender ideology drawing upon the agricultural metaphors of 'male seed' and 'female earth/field', see Dube (1986) and Chowdhry (2010). Building upon these studies, Gupte (2023) emphasises the notion of 'patriarchal honour' and its role in justifying the control exerted over women. It is necessary, however, to focus on understanding the workings of the heterosexual matrix in the production of the 'culture' of intermediate caste groups, and the unfair construction of male subjectivities of other castes, which serves as a source of sustenance for such workings.

'honour' as an inherent trait of the caste group, any deviation from mandatory kinship practices is portrayed as a direct assault on the very fabric of the caste's 'culture'. Moreover, in this discursive realm, Scheduled Caste male subject positions are constituted negatively and stereotypically to uphold the 'limit' of caste endogamy, betraying a regressive interventionist agenda at work.

### Conversations: 'Honour', Love and 'Love Drama'

In late July 2015, Kavitha, Devibharathi and I discussed visiting Omalur to meet Gokulraj's family, deeply disturbed by the news of his murder. At that time, a video circulated on social media where Gokulraj, referring to someone as younger brother (*tambi*) despite having only an elder brother (*anna*) in his nuclear family, claimed he was taking his own life due to a failed love affair. This raised suspicions that he was coerced by his abductors to make the recording. After we arrived in Erode, I was introduced to M, who recently married a close friend of mine.<sup>10</sup> M belongs to a 'service caste' of barbers, considered one of the most backward castes in Tamil Nadu, and has been living in Vellakoil, near Erode, for more than three decades. Our instant connection stemmed from our mutual interest in modern literature. M shared the tragic tale of her sister K, who died by suicide nine years ago. K was in love with a Gounder man. Initially, he promised to marry her but later rejected her due to their caste differences. Overwhelmed with despair, K ended her life. The man, haunted by guilt, suffered mental health issues and visited their home, asking for K's sari. He claimed to have seen her wearing it, waiting for him by the roadside. Eventually, after a brief period of recovery, he was found dead in his car under mysterious circumstances.

The incident involving M's sister's love affair and subsequent suicide illustrates the violent consequences of transgressing social boundaries and defying caste norms. As we continued our conversation, delving into the killing of Gokulraj, M informed us that such incidents were not isolated occurrences in the Kongu region. She recounted how aggression even towards Scheduled Caste young men who were merely 'looking at' Gounder girls is commonplace and 'nothing new' in the region. She said: 'A Dalit youth was attacked yesterday in Vellakoil because he stood regularly near a house

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<sup>10</sup> I have assigned pseudonyms to interlocutors who preferred anonymity or expressed discomfort with public disclosure of their names or identities.

of Gounders to “look at” their girl. Four men beat him up. I saw that and nobody went and rescued him.<sup>11</sup>

M’s narration of the tragic attack on the young man made me think: Do Scheduled Caste men frequently visit Gounder households in the Kongu region with the explicit purpose of ‘looking at’ Gounder women? This question was further prompted by a comparable occurrence, reported in Tirunur village, Chengalpattu district, in a study on ‘competing masculinities’ (Anandhi et al. 2002). The study explores how rapid economic changes redefine masculinities, challenge upper-caste dominance and intersect with the entry of women into the industrial workforce. In the study, it is argued that ‘[o]ne of the important ways in which the dalit youths assert their new masculine selfhood’ involves exerting ‘control over public spaces in the village’ and engaging in ‘public display of violence of varying degrees, ranging from petty quarrels to sexual harassment of upper caste women’ (ibid.: 4401).<sup>12</sup> The study also presents a statement made by an elderly Scheduled Caste man, according to which, young Scheduled Caste men purposefully wander the streets of upper-caste Mudaliyars, harrassing the Mudaliyar women. It observes that if anybody objects to it, the young men resort to physical aggression, taking pride in instilling fear among the Mudaliyar men and women.

My interlocutors in the Kongu region some two decades later, however, presented a contrasting picture. Among Scheduled Caste group members in the area, such behaviour is neither observed nor prevalent. M herself noted during a subsequent conversation that although ‘Dalit youths might look at Gounder girls in colleges’, she has ‘never heard of instances of eve-teasing by them in Gounders’ localities’. To quote the words of N.S., a professor and an Arunthathiyar from Namakkal: ‘Our men are shy and they won’t usually go to the Gounder streets to tease or look at women of their households. Even Paraiyar youth will not do those. Such acts are not generally possible in the

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<sup>11</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from primary research materials are in Tamil and are my translation.

<sup>12</sup> Referring to ‘some casual vicious conclusions’ of this study by Anandhi et al., C. Lakshmanan, in his rebuttal essay (2004), draws attention to the ‘casual use of the concept of “hegemonic” and “subordinate” masculinities’ as well as the reductive ‘binaries’ such as that of ‘dalits and non-dalits’ and ‘women and men’ in it. In my view, such construction of binaries facilitates ‘homogenizing typologies’, and conflates the social authority and power with ‘particular social agents’ (Beasley 2012), without considering the operation of the powerful undercurrent of heterosexual norms.

prominent Kongu belt, nor would Gounders permit or bear these.' Perumal Murugan, a renowned writer from Tiruchengode, also asserted that there is no chance for a Scheduled Caste man, whether from the Paraiyar, Pallar or Arunthathiyar community, to enter Gounder neighbourhoods, let alone wander with the intention of looking at Gounder women. He emphasised that 'if Dalit youths visit their areas even a few times, they would face rough interrogation from the Gounders living there.'

The distinct inter-caste dynamics between Gounders and Scheduled Castes in the Kongu region are further elaborated by the accounts of A.N. and others, who observed the continued expectation of respectful address from Scheduled Caste individuals by Gounders. A.N., a middle-aged Gounder man in Vellakoil near Erode, is a colleague of M's and was introduced by her. A.N. expressed his firm opposition to 'inter-caste marriage'. A rationale he provided was that Gounders could not maintain a marital relationship with Dalits, who themselves asserted the huge social gap between the two communities by referring to Gounder homes as *araṇmanai* ('palace'), and Gounder men as *esamānka* ('master') and *rājānka* ('king') even today. A.N. also reflected on the connection between '*kauravam*' and 'caste' when he discussed the feasibility of inter-caste marriages involving Scheduled Caste individuals. He emphasised that 'honour was embedded' in their 'genes' and asserted that Gounders would not tolerate 'their women being taken away'. In a later conversation, M ridiculed such a conception by retorting, 'What is *kauravam*, after all? It is just caste (*cāti*) *kauravam*.'

M also shared with me how Gounders are referred to by 'service' castes and Scheduled Castes in and around Erode: 'If we visit a Gounder's household to see a newborn, we call it "*cinna esamān*" ('little master') or "*cinna āttā*" ('little mother'). But a Gounder child can use "*vāṭā pōṭā*" with even an old man from our castes, even if he is 60 or 70' (i.e., they can use a singular imperative mood—*vā* ('come'), *pō* ('go')—with a disrespectful, masculine address term—*ṭā*). I learned from her that in the mourning rituals of Gounders, there exists a practice where Scheduled Caste persons, specifically Arunthathiyars, are expected to hold the feet of Gounder men when they visit to offer condolences.

For Pon, an inhabitant of Vellodu near Erode and a Nadar caste man, respectful addresses of Gounders, 'regardless of age, by Scheduled Caste persons is a way of 'observing *kauravam*' in 'day-to-day interactions'. Connecting this with 'upper-strata caste feelings', Pon remarked that such feelings are more evident in 'marriages'. When I interjected, suggesting that '*kauravam*' may have other meanings like professional prestige as well, he simply responded,

'But caste strikes us on the face here', by which he meant that the sphere of marriage is a privileged site for the performance of caste honour.

Many others with whom I spoke frequently used the term 'honour', and upon my inquiry, further explicated it. For instance, V, a male journalist in Tiruchengode, stated, 'Honour means lifestyle and economics. It is the way of living handed down to us by our ancestors, a way of living that spans generations.' A local AIADMK party councillor, who was part of the conversation, interrupted him with more direct comments on inter-caste marriage, saying, 'Why did they divide us into different castes? We raise our daughters. Don't we know how to arrange their marriages?' Both V and the councillor belong to the Gounder caste. During my conversation with V, he touched upon the differences in 'lifestyles and economics' between 'Gounders and Dalits', as he referred to Gokulraj. When I asked him why the girl's side would object to Gokulraj, an engineering graduate with tremendous job opportunities, he contested: 'Madam, he had five arrear papers in B.E. He is not a good student as you and others think.' As we were leaving his office, V was giving us a send-off. At that time, he told me in a near-whisper:

V: Gokulraj did not have a good character. He had affairs with several women.

PS: How did you know that?

V: He was running a video game centre. Women used to visit it. He had saved the phone numbers of some women. He has also talked with them for hours as the mobile records show.

PS: Who told you about this?

V: The police told me. Even a local evening newspaper carried reports about his character.

However, later on, Devibharathi informed me that no newspaper had actually published such a report and that the information provided by V was fabricated.

In Vellakoil, during conversations with local shopkeepers and farmers from the Gounder caste, topics such as 'genes' and 'lifestyle' and 'financial status' arose. First, when I questioned the emphasis on honour in the Gounder caste, Ramkumar, a farmer from a nearby village, stated, 'Every caste has its special gene.' Rajkumar, a shopkeeper, nodded, 'We have abolished untouchability, but why should we accept inter-caste marriage?' Arjunan, also from Ramkumar's village, chimed in, saying, 'Can a Gounder do business like a Chettiyar? They

are the business community.' He also opposed inter-caste marriage, believing it pits one caste against another.

When I inquired about their awareness of Gokulraj's murder, Ramkumar and others initially denied any knowledge of such incidents. As the conversation progressed, I brought up the topic again. Arjunan remarked that in their village 'a Gounder girl married a Dalit boy and eloped'. He added that 'Dalit caste leaders demanded money [from the parents] just to see their [Gounder] girl'. On my remark that killing may not be a solution, considering that their own daughters may desire Scheduled Caste partners, Arjunan questioned the origins of their daughters' desires, asking, 'Why does she desire? Do we educate her for this? She shouldn't have such desires. She has her family, her parents who raised her. How many relatives does she have?' Ramkumar nodded in agreement, emphasising, 'She cannot live with them. Dalit culture will not suit her....We drop our daughters in our cars at their schools. Have you seen a Dalit's house? They may not even have folding chairs. How can our daughters live there?' I continued:

PS: Will you accept it if your daughter loves a poor Gounder man?

Ramkumar: Even in our caste, we look for men of good status and character. If she loves someone from our caste, we accept it because we have no other option.

Arjunan expressed concern about the breaking of their agricultural system due to the collapse of the caste structure. According to him, Arunthathiyars and Nadars, who are essential for farming, now 'aspire to be of a higher caste and avoid work'. He complained that they had abandoned agriculture and left for textile factories in Tiruppur. He added, 'There was mutual support among castes before. We measured and provided (*koṭuttōm*) grains to Matari (Arunthathiyar caste people). We supported (*ātarittōm*) barbers. We gave them an important place. Nobody needs anyone's support now.' Ramkumar questioned why they left agriculture for foreign-owned profiteering cloth manufacturing firms.

Whether ongoing economic changes, including forces of industrialisation and globalisation, have adversely affected the inter-caste dynamics between Gounders, who have historically been land-owning castes, and Scheduled Castes, who traditionally worked in their fields, and whether this has influenced the anxieties surrounding inter-caste marriages, requires careful

documentation and warrants thorough analysis. Here, my aim is simply to shed light on differing perspectives regarding the concerns raised by interlocutors from Vellakoil about the decline in agriculture. N.S., belonging to the Arunthathiyar caste group, countered their complaint:

In Tiruchengode, Namakkal and Erode region, a large number of North Indians, particularly those from Bihar, have been working in the fields for more than ten years now. If you go to villages like Pilikkalpalayam, you can see them work in sugarcane fields now. They work for lower wages compared to us, even accepting 100 rupees per day. Dalits from this region refuse to work for such meagre pay. Actually, we suffer due to this competition. The notion that the breakdown of agriculture is due to us leaving the farmlands is false.

The author Perumal Murugan made astute remarks regarding the Kongu context, asserting:

It is incorrect to argue that Gounders, as the traditional landowners of the region, solely rely on agriculture and face difficulties due to Dalits leaving their lands. Even before Dalits shifted away from agriculture, Gounders diversified into various industries such as lorry transport, truck bodybuilding and borewell rig businesses. They have even established successful borewell rig businesses internationally. Educational institutions also thrive as a business for them. Importantly, when Gounders transitioned to other industries, many Dalit individuals who previously worked for them also made similar shifts. If a Gounder started a lorry business, it is highly likely that Dalit individuals would be employed as drivers and cleaners.

During my fieldwork, I had valuable conversations with M.I., a young woman from the Gounder caste who operates a medical clinic in Tiruchengode. According to M.I., when 'a Gounder woman marries a Dalit man', it is seen as a 'loss of honour'. She also discussed gender discrimination in inter-caste marriages, saying, 'If a Gounder man marries a Dalit woman, it may not be a big issue. They believe he will eventually leave her and return to his parents' house. Parents use various tactics to separate them too. However, if a Gounder woman marries a Dalit man, it is seen as a grave insult.' M.I. also noted a growing trend among Gounder men of seeking brides from Kerala, possibly due to the single-child norm with a preference for boys, adopted in the past

thirty years, which has resulted in a smaller number of young women of marriageable age. Reflecting on this 'double standard' among Gounders, M.I. also referred to a particular economic factor. She pointed out that 'after the Hindu Succession Act in 1989, women gained legal rights to inherit ancestral property', and there is a fear that if a woman marries outside the caste, her share in the property may go to another caste. However, M.I. pointed out, even if a woman marries within the Gounder caste, she is not given an equal share. Additionally, it is a common practice in the region for the family to have the daughter relinquish her property rights (*eluti vañkutaḷ*) before her wedding.

M.I.'s insights raise some intriguing questions. One of them is whether the challenge arising from caste endogamy, particularly the dearth of brides (as a result of the single-child norm), compels Gounder men to stick to caste identity and 'honour' to such an extent that they resort to violence against Scheduled Caste men.<sup>13</sup> Further, does the Hindu Succession (Tamil Nadu Amendment) Act of 1989 drive some Gounder men to resort to aggression against Scheduled Caste individuals to protect their property? Given the emphasis on wealth and property within the Gounder caste, are affluent Scheduled Caste men readily accepted as potential grooms? In my subsequent conversation with M.I. during the second phase of my fieldwork, she provided valuable perspectives on these questions:

Love marriages are frowned upon within the Gounder caste. When seeking a marriage alliance within the caste, priority is given to men with property. If a Gounder girl falls in love with a man from another Backward or Other Backward Caste, say Cengunta Mutaliyar, castes with which the Gounder caste typically has a transactional relationship (*puḷaṅkum cāti*), they might accept it if the man has property. However, a Dalit man is not an option at all. Not that every love affair involving a Scheduled Caste man ends in murder. But the couple is certainly subjected to excommunication and ostracism. Not just the couple, even the father undergoes a visible transformation after such an incident, becoming weak and fragile. The entire family is buried beneath the earth.

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<sup>13</sup> Perumal Murugan stated, "The scarcity of brides and sourcing them from Kerala does not justify violence against inter-caste marriages with Dalits. In the 1990s, with the rise of medical scan centres, many people opted for abortion if they found out the foetus was female. They can't blame Dalits for their problems, as inter-caste marriages between Gounder girls and Dalits are rare. Leaders of casteist outfits exploit instances of Kerala brides merely for political gain."

Relatives never see them in the same light again. Yes, if a girl elopes with her Dalit lover, technically she can claim her share of the property, but in practice, it is rarely done. Claiming her share would have more severe consequences. But these concerns are secondary. The attitude is 'you are inferior, we treated you like dogs. How dare you seek my daughter?'

I have included lengthy excerpts from my conversations to establish a broad framework for interpretation. In our conversations, 'honour' has multiple facets. It figures as a 'feeling', as part of an inalienable 'physiology', as a marker of day-to-day social interactions and as a valuable relic of ancestors. Yet, wherever it appears, it is always also embedded in caste identity; and in the discourse of marriage, it always veers towards an urgent 'preoccupation' with caste endogamy, especially as concerning Gounder women. It is worth noting the verbs used by the Gounders, such as 'providing', 'supporting' and 'giving', in relation to Dalits, which recall and reify hierarchical caste relationships based on land and agriculture. As observed by Stalin Rajangam (2016b: 13), even though changes in agricultural production methods, lifestyles and the arrival of new technologies have occurred along with globalisation, the intermediate castes view these changes with a sense of anger, perceiving that they have helped local Dalits progress while degrading their own status.

In our conversations, too, while some interlocutors referred to the crisis in agriculture, they did not address the factors of this crisis in their own terms (for e.g., as due to economics or migration patterns). Rather, it was by reference to caste endogamy. That is, the crisis of agriculture was spoken about in an idiom of resentment linked to the breaking of the caste hierarchy in relationship to the inter-caste marriage of dominant (Gounder) caste women.

The inextricable relationship between 'honour' and caste endogamy is reinforced by social media posts as well. For instance, a Facebook post by Dheeran Saravanan Gurusamy Gounder on 7 February 2016, addressed to Gounder women, announced, 'Whether you love boys of our caste or not, that is your personal matter. ... But if you love boys from any other caste, we will always oppose it. Because it is not your personal issue. It is an issue of our *inam* (caste) and honour.'<sup>14</sup> The publicly shared post also featured a photo of Yuvaraj, as it emphasised that inter-caste love is a question of caste

<sup>14</sup> See [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid02UnfxCpJTQBZjjGdsE8LoF9UFfEbxnuAH8kJ8sEpbDGsUjnfK9rk2Ssz29Ve9vxmlz&id=100009294701741](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02UnfxCpJTQBZjjGdsE8LoF9UFfEbxnuAH8kJ8sEpbDGsUjnfK9rk2Ssz29Ve9vxmlz&id=100009294701741) (accessed on 1 August 2025).

'honour'. Similarly, consider a second Facebook post, titled 'Kauravam', shared by Karthikeyan Gounder on 15 March 2016:

...these Dalit extremists, rather than loving women from their own caste, indulge in clandestine love drama<sup>15</sup> with backward-caste women, and consider this an achievement. Backward caste people, who have been living with honour for a long time, even in poverty, and who aspire to live with dignity, cannot accept this. When a father sees a man from a caste whose members have grazed his cattle, who used to wrap their towels around their hips on seeing him, and who received food from him obediently, putting his hand around the hip of his daughter—whom her father protected as the apple of his eye for eighteen years, valuing her more than his own life—and with the protection of the police takes her away, then the father, who is good-for-nothing, would either die out of fear for his dignity or take the life of the Dalit youth. This is a reflection of the honourable life he lived.<sup>16</sup>

Both posts use 'honour' to enforce caste endogamy by controlling female sexualities and desires. The second Facebook post explicitly states that members of 'Backward Castes' with 'honour' and 'dignity' cannot accept relationships between women from their caste and Scheduled Caste men. By portraying the father as 'helpless' against the powerful state (represented by the 'police'), the post depicts the murder of a Scheduled Caste youth as the only alternative to the father's potential suicide. The first post draws a distinction between a Gounder woman's love within her own caste and her love outside the caste, framing the former as a personal matter and the latter as a caste issue. The female sexuality that may find its own trajectory in the form of love is thus targeted for casteist regulation. In the second post, female sexual agency is completely denied within the fictive scene of the 'love drama.' The description of the Scheduled Caste man 'putting his hand around the hip of his daughter' foregrounds female sexuality but only in the context of its appropriation by the Scheduled Caste youth.

To understand the significance of the interrelated discourses of caste endogamy and female sexuality, it is important to briefly discuss the marriage-

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<sup>15</sup> *Nāṭakak kātāl* or 'love drama' is a phrase used by S. Ramadoss, the founder-leader of Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK). I discuss this term later in the chapter.

<sup>16</sup> See <https://www.facebook.com/karthikeyan.karthi.5243817/posts/685167858290352> (accessed on 6 May 2017).

related kinship practices of Gounders. Traditionally, Gounders observe not only caste endogamy but also endogamy within a sub-caste and its kindred groups (*vakaiyarā*).<sup>17</sup> Unlike in states like West Bengal, Tamil Nadu follows a system where the 'units of hierarchy (caste, subcaste, kindred) act as wholes toward each other,' and there is a preference for arranging marriages within one's sub-caste and kindred groups (Fruzzetti et al. 1992: 15). Of all, while caste endogamy is regarded most important, transcending sub-caste and kindred-group boundaries in marriage practices 'are not taken lightly even today' (as M put it), although such transgressions do not end up in violence. Additionally, Gounders follow clan (*kūṭṭam*) exogamy in their marriage alliances (Beck 1972: 221).<sup>18</sup>

The Gounder clans are patrilineal. Perumal Murugan informed me that since the 1980s and the 1990s, the notion of *urimaippen* (ibid.: 237–38)—a female relative on whom a man exercises his privilege to marry—has almost disappeared. These days, only clan exogamy is observed, and members of a clan are called '*paṅkāḷikaḷ*'. The children born out of a marital union are identified by the father's clan, and for males this identity is for life. Each clan is believed to have descended from a male ancestor, such as Chellan or Venduvan. Clan exogamy is strictly followed by the Gounders, and marrying within one's own clan is considered 'incestuous'. Gounder clan exogamy is reinforced through specific marriage practices, such as the pre-wedding ritual known as '*parisam celuttal*'. During this ritual, the groom's family presents a symbolic amount of money (typically Rs 37.5 or Rs 17.75) in a turmeric-stained cloth to the bride's family. Through *parisam celuttal*, involving the exchange of money between both families, the woman is considered to be transferred from her father's patrilineal clan to her husband's. The woman, after marriage, accompanies her husband to the temple of his clan deity for the ritual offering of food (*paṭaiyal*). Through this ritual, a shift in the

<sup>17</sup> For instance, Sentalai Gounder and Pala Gounder are some sub-castes, while Nattar and Kaniyalar are a few kindred groups within a sub-caste.

<sup>18</sup> Similar norms of clan exogamy and caste/sub-caste endogamy are observed in other caste groups as well. For example, among the Scheduled Caste of Paraiyars, endogamy is practised within sub-castes, while clan group exogamy, based on the worship of specific deities, is followed within the sub-caste. Marrying within the same clan is considered 'incestuous'. The arguments presented in this chapter regarding the construction of a phantasmatic 'culture' through marriage practices are relevant not only to Gounders but also to other castes.

woman's clan deity from her father's to her husband's is signalled, completing the woman's integration into her husband's clan.

Critiquing how the universal law of incest taboo 'prefigured' the European 'racist project' in reproducing a phantasmatic 'pure culture', Judith Butler (2004: 121–22) observes that such reproduction is not merely premised on exogamy, but, more importantly, it is also governed by a 'limit' inherent to this exogamy. While the taboo mandates that 'marriage must be outside the clan', there is a prohibition on 'miscegenation' so that marriage does not take place 'outside a certain racial self-understanding or racial commonality' (ibid.: 122). In the Tamil context of the Gounder caste, while exogamy founded on the incest taboo allows for an 'exchange of women' (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 51) among patrilineal clans, endogamy with respect to caste, sub-caste and kindred groups, all circumscribe this exchange. Within this 'limit', a phantasmatic 'pure culture' and 'cultural identity' of the caste, sub-caste and kindred group is perpetually reproduced through the norms of a 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Butler 2004: 121–22). When the 'limit' of this exchange is ruptured through the inter-caste marriage of a Gounder woman, it is thus considered a tangible violation of the 'culture'. The violation is perceived with greater severity when the 'limit' of the endogamous broader caste group is crossed, than when those of the sub-caste and kindred groups are violated.

### **Contestatory Practices and Dalit Male Subject Positions**

The mandatory marriage practices underscoring Gounder kinship are not left uncontested by members of the Gounder caste. Alternate practices, challenging the kinship norms of exogamy and endogamy, have emerged on the Kongu scene, especially with the spread of co-educational institutions and female participation in the job market. As already discussed, when such contestatory practices through inter-caste love or marriage involve a Gounder woman, not only do the couple face vehement opposition and violence, but the woman's parents also endure insults and retribution. As some interlocutors informed me, when Gounder women fall in love transcending caste, their parents are accused of bringing them up improperly. At least four middle-aged women from Gounder caste, whom I met in Vellakoil, said that it is especially the mother who gets blamed if her daughter loves or marries a non-Gounder man. The women also confirmed that the caste community would shun the whole family. M, who joined the conversation in Vellakoil, told me that her parents would never be invited

to temple festivals or weddings or ear-piercing ceremonies in their village if she 'eloped' with a man from another caste.

Rupa, a 23-year-old software engineer from the Gounder caste in Erode, recalled how her parents and relatives often remind her that a girl who marries a non-Gounder man would be spoken ill of in the community for four generations. However, an elderly Gounder woman in Vellakoil provided a slightly different perspective: 'Even within the same caste, people here don't readily accept [romantic] love. When a woman loves, it is even more unaccepted. They will nip it in the bud.' There is an inherent threat in acknowledging female desire as such, because it amounts to letting the door wide open for the female desire to follow its own trajectory (beyond caste). The spectre of daughters' love constantly threatens caste endogamy.

Several Facebook posts were found allegedly originating from individuals claiming to be Gounder men and/or groups that defame Gounder women who marry outside their caste (also see discussion above for examples). Notably, a Facebook group called 'Association of Kongu Country's Karala Vamsa Gounders who Chase Down the Road and Hack Cakkili Dogs Wanting to Love a Gounder Woman' (translated name) actively opposed inter-caste marriages involving Gounder women. They even exposed the names and locations of Gounder women married to Scheduled Caste men to draw attention to them. Eventually, due to user reports, the group was deactivated in 2016.

Besides explicit threats and, at times, even acts of violence, occasionally some members of the Gounder caste group employ discursive mediation as a significant means of reinforcing the mandatory kinship practices. This mediation occurs within households and public spaces, including political party meetings, caste gatherings and virtual platforms. Specifically targeting young Gounder women, this discursive mediation constructs stereotypical subject positions of males of other castes. I will limit this discussion to pointing out how Scheduled Caste male subjectivity figures in the discursive mediation. Rupa, whom I mentioned earlier, shared her family's discussions on inter-caste marriages:

At home, my parents, aunts and sisters often discuss such news. They comment on incidents where a girl from our caste fell in love with a Dalit man and how they were separated. They also talk about cases where girls who eloped with Dalit men were abandoned after the money and jewellery they took with them were spent (by their Dalit spouses). In our region, it

is a common practice to take girls to *mantiravātis* (practitioners of magic) in order to make them forget their Dalit lovers and correct their path.

Rupa also mentioned that such incidents of violence are openly discussed in the living room, so that the girls could not avoid overhearing them and would be influenced to ‘follow the proper path’. She said it is common for female cousins within an extended family to share ‘love narratives’ of Gounder girls with Scheduled Caste boys that they have heard in their towns, along with the associated ‘sufferings’ these couples experienced. These narratives circulate to discourage potential love affairs with Scheduled Caste men.

The discourse of ‘lack of character’ shapes the constitution of the Scheduled Caste male subject positions, which contrasts with (and echoes) the ‘lack of upbringing’ in the case of the intermediate caste female subject positions discussed above. As part of my earlier research on Tamil practices of worshipping the goddess *Māriyamman*, I encountered a common mythological narrative from the Kongu region, which portrays the deity as an orphan, lacking a proper upbringing, while her husband, a Paraiyar man, is portrayed as incestuous, lustful and unintelligent (Srinivasan 2009). While the narrative aims to produce the goddess’s body as the ‘social body’, it simultaneously produces the Scheduled Caste man’s body as an abject body through the ‘exclusionary practices of caste order’ (ibid.: 338–39). This longstanding mythological narrative demonstrates that there are active cultural repertoires for the more recent discourses at work in the construction of the subject positions of Scheduled Caste males.

An illustrative example of this can be seen in the statement made by S. Ramadoss, the founder and leader of the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), a political party representing the Vanniyars, regarding Scheduled Caste young men. In 2012, a few months before Ilavarasan’s death and just after the Dharmapuri violence, Ramadoss tried to forge a grand alliance of all ‘intermediate’ caste groups, including Gounders, and held multiple meetings to rally them against Scheduled Caste groups. *The Hindu* reported his statement, in which he ‘accused Dalit youth of fomenting social tension by filing false complaints under the law and ensnaring girls from other castes with bogus professions of love’ and asserted that ‘[t]hey wear jeans, T-shirts and fancy sunglasses to lure girls from other communities.’<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See Kolappan (2012). Also see Santhanam and Yamunan (2016). Santhanam and Yamunan describe the attempt by the PMK to forge ‘a larger non-Dalit, OBC [Other Backward Caste] alliance against inter-caste marriages’.

Ramadoss and the PMK propelled the term 'love drama' to the forefront, instigating its swift dissemination among various intermediate caste groups.<sup>20</sup> While it is not feasible to engage in an exploration of the similarities between Ramadoss's rhetoric and the fear-mongering strategies employed by the right-wing Hindutva movement through the concept of 'love jihad' here, it is evident that significant parallels exist. Furthermore, the rhetoric of Ramadoss has had far-reaching consequences beyond the Vanniyar caste. Notably, as observed by Evidence Kathir (see Aravind 2016), it strengthened Yuvaraj's audacity, thereby further emboldening those responsible for Sankar's murder.

The twin rhetorical strands in Ramadoss's speech, namely the alleged 'characterlessness' and 'false love' of Scheduled Caste men, were frequently present in discussions surrounding Gokulraj's killing as well. Scheduled Caste men 'demanding money from the girl's parents', 'behaving inappropriately with the girls in public', 'engaging in clandestine love drama' and 'lacking education skills' are common leitmotifs that we witness in the discursive mediation advanced by the Gounder caste.

In the stereotypical constitution of Scheduled Caste male subject positions, social media is also powerfully deployed. For instance, the 'Notice against Inter-caste Marriage', circulated by some Gounder caste members publicly and on social media, describes how women who deceive their parents and marry men of other castes make their parents shrink in front of police officers, fall at the feet of their [Scheduled Caste] lovers and cause others to mock them.<sup>21</sup> The 'Notice' emphasises that the inter-caste marriage of a Gounder woman makes a 'living sacrifice' of all the 'honour' and 'respect' that the family has hitherto maintained for generations, renders her parents' lives meaningless and even abets their suicide. Furthermore, the 'Notice' alludes to Scheduled Caste men as those who pursue Gounder women solely for property, land and money, and warns the women of possible mistreatment, abandonment and torture after marriage.

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<sup>20</sup> Mohan (2016) observes how the term 'love drama', popularised by Ramadoss, has gained significant currency among young Vanniyar men.

<sup>21</sup> For instance, see [https://kongumarrriage.blogspot.com/2013/11/blog-post\\_19.html](https://kongumarrriage.blogspot.com/2013/11/blog-post_19.html) (accessed on 6 June 2025); <https://www.facebook.com/konguvellagounderdesam/photos/a.153202651867543/204884086699399/?type=3> (accessed on 6 June 2025).

The discursive mediation of the Gounder caste group, thus, does not simply locate Scheduled Caste men at the bottom of the stratified caste scheme; rather, Scheduled Caste male subject positions are perpetually founded upon an arbitrary assemblage of despicable human traits in implicit contrast to Gounders. When ‘honour’ figures in this mediation, it is invoked strategically—as if it were an essential trait of the Gounder caste group—to reiterate that any violation of mandatory kinship marriage practices goes against the ‘culture’ of the caste. Alternate practices of inter-caste marriage and inter-caste love threaten to expose the arbitrariness of kinship practices and thereby show that the domain of the caste-group’s ‘culture’ is, after all, incoherent and contestable, and thus in perpetual need of violent reiteration.

Such contestations also extend to public sphere discourse, wherein strong responses to the unfair construction of Scheduled Caste subjectivities have been enunciated. A most significant counter-discourse came from the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (Liberation Panthers Party) (VCK) leader Thol. Thirumavalavan at a public meeting:

These people lack dignity (*mānam*), they lack shame. ... What they think is dignity is nothing but the ‘woman matter’. He is jealous that she [the intermediate caste woman] does not look at him. He is fair-complexioned, sports a moustache, wears a well-ironed shirt, costing a thousand rupees, and puts on a perfume worth several thousand rupees. She does not turn toward him [the dominant-caste man]. Instead she sees a poor Paraiyar, a Cakkili, or a Pallar, who lives in a hut and is lower-caste. So, you [the dominant-caste man] can see how little you are worth. The woman herself tells you your worth. ‘You are good for nothing. You have no stuff. Even if he [a Scheduled Caste man] suffers in poverty, he has stuff and grandeur.’ If you have dignity, you should hang yourself and die. But what does he [the dominant-caste man] do instead? ‘Even if you have spent ten months there, come back. I will wipe it. I will wash it. Let us live as man and wife.’<sup>22</sup>

Thirumavalavan’s discursive mediation of inter-caste marriage launches Scheduled Caste male subjectivities in an affirmative manner as it deconstructs *mānam*, a notion similar to *kauravam*, as nothing but the intermediate caste’s

<sup>22</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dvdsb0dT2f8> (accessed on 6 May 2017).

obsession with the 'woman matter'. At the same time, Thirumavalavan takes a dig at intermediate caste men and their masculinity, who have been inciting and engaging in violence against women of their own castes and their Scheduled Caste spouses.

As a reputed leader of Scheduled Caste groups, his voice has a broader appeal for Tamil society, and empathising with this voice of support is much needed. Yet it must also be noted how the woman figures in his speech in her familiar/familial position as a container, washed and wiped, or requiring washing and wiping. The time frame of ten months that he refers to in his speech also recalls the average duration of pregnancy, and the imagery of the female receptacle of the male semen is hard to ignore.

This shows that alternate practices in the form of inter-caste marriages, even if they disrupt the mandatory kinship practices of intermediary caste groups to certain extent, do not necessarily contest the 'naturalist' foundation of the practices, namely, the fantasy about the heteronormative family underscoring kinship. It is certain that practices that contest heterosexual arrangements and practices are prevalent in the Tamil milieu and unearthing them could go a long way in unsettling such fantasies. This, indeed, would be a more worthwhile feminist project.



## LAW AT LARGE

### Notes on the Public Mediation of Community in the Juridical Field

*Francis Cody\**

#### Introduction

It began with fictionalised sex and ended with a resurrection. In between, the Tamil novelist, Perumal Murugan declared himself dead as a writer. His award-winning novel *Māthorubāgan* had already been published for years and translated into English as *One Part Woman* when some Hindu nationalist and caste-affiliated groups objected violently to the book. This tale of a childless couple's difficult search for the social recognition that comes only with progeny draws on deeply researched oral lore and it is set during the colonial period. *Māthorubāgan*—a local name for Lord Siva as half-man and half-woman—drew the ire of some readers because it depicts consensual, extramarital and inter-caste sexual relations that were known to have once taken place on the eighteenth day of the festival of the Arthanareeswarar temple in Tiruchengode. In the book, the loving wife reluctantly takes part in this celebration where the gods mingle with humans for one night in hopes of ending her isolation by giving birth to a *sāmi kodutha pillai* (god-given child), the name given to those conceived in this manner. But memories of the ritually sanctioned mésalliances enabling these divine blessings are now largely ignored, or purposefully repressed in a contemporary imagination more focused on the problem of women's chastity in maintaining religious and caste boundaries.

Perumal Murugan hails from the western part of the Tamil country known as Kongu Nadu, where the story is set. Apart from his established

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fame in literary circles, the author was also a Tamil professor and critic of caste hierarchy as well as abuses in the factory-style poultry farms that now dominate the landscape. Perumal Murugan's novel thus provided the pretext for an orchestrated campaign of pious outrage against him and his book, on the grounds that he had tarnished the reputation of women belonging to the dominant Gounder or Kongu Vellalar caste (also see Srinivasan, this volume). In December 2014, Gounder associations organised book burnings and threatened the author and his family with the aid of the Hindu Munnani, a religious nationalist group keen to strengthen their presence in the region (Biswas 2015). Fearing a 'law and order problem', a local district revenue officer took the unusual step of forcing Perumal Murugan to sign an official document promising to withdraw the book, even after he had already issued an apology and agreed to remove the offending passages (Swaminathan 2015). Already a major news event in India, people were even more shocked by what came next: the distraught author wrote a message on his Facebook page declaring his demise as a writer, who 'is no god, so will not rise from the dead'. This was followed by the declaration that 'hereafter only the humble teacher P. Murugan will live' (quoted in Biswas 2015). His post went on to ask that his publishers no longer sell any of his books and that he be left alone. This violent assault on creativity was covered across the globe, in *The New York Times* (Sehgal 2018), *The Guardian* (Doshi 2016) and countless other news outlets, as a sign of growing intolerance in India.

Life was returned to Perumal Murugan, however unexpectedly, through the magical words of a judge. Responding to a criminal case against the author that was brought to the Madras High Court, Chief Justice Sanjay Kaul wrote a 150-page judgement that many consider to be a piece of literature in its own right.<sup>1</sup> In defending Perumal Murugan's creative expression, the judgement begins by delving into the history of censorship from the days of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. After going through the specific merits of the case before the court and dismissing any crime that is alleged to have occurred, the judgement then moves back into the domain of broader socio-historical commentary, noting the 'rising phenomenon of extrajudicial, casteist and religious forces dictating the creativity of authors and writers.' The judgement

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<sup>1</sup> *Murugan vs. Tamil Nadu*, 2015 (WP nos. 1215 and 20375) bundled a number of criminal claims against the author, who was defended by his publisher, Kalachuvadu, the People's Union for Civil Liberties and the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association.

also contrasts contemporary popular morality with the more flexible norms of sex outside of wedlock in classical Indian religious traditions, that 'truly reflect the liberal ethos, uncorrupted by the Victorian English philosophy, which came to dominate post the British invasion of India.' This lengthy and erudite meditation on art, sex and religion then ends with the most quotable piece of legal prose in recent memory. The final line of the judgement exhorts in bold letters, 'Let the author be resurrected to what he is best at. Write.' It was reproduced in all news outlets the following day, and quickly prompted a public reply from a grateful Perumal Murugan, who wrote that the judge's words had given him great happiness, comforting 'a heart that had shrunk itself and had wilted. I am trying to prop up myself holding on to the light of the last lines of the judgment' (Doshi 2016).

The story of Perumal Murugan, his death as a writer and his resurrection through the words of Chief Justice Kaul presents the law in the image of a benevolent authority, sitting above the narrow-mindedness of those who refuse to grant creativity its space of free play or who fail to understand the truly 'liberal ethos' of Indian religions prior to colonialism. In sharp contrast to the instrumentalised abuse of legal statutes in so many cases involving the press, the law appears transcendent. Judges might be thought to epitomise the ethics of enlightened distance necessary for the law to apply impartially to all. And yet, the social force of the Perumal Murugan judgement made itself felt through public circulation of parts of the text that have no legal binding. The frequently quoted extracts consist wholly of *obiter dicta*, things said by way of argument, as opposed to the *ratio decidendi*, the reason for the decision that sets a compulsory standard for other courts to follow within a jurisdiction. What freed the author to write was not simply a decision in a criminal case but Justice Kaul speaking to the world by means of a legal judgement that was itself already deeply enmeshed with the world it was addressing. We can see furthermore how the public life of law is sustained not only by the judgement itself, which relatively few will read, but also by the way in which the law is invoked, portrayed and narrativised in print journalism and on television.<sup>2</sup> When 'jurisprudence steps off its elitist pedestal' (Goodrich 2017: 3), it enters the domain of the popular ethical and political imagination. The law is addressed to and frequently cited in the world at large well beyond the

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<sup>2</sup> My argument owes much to conversations with Lawrence Liang, whose work on the intersections of law and film remains a cornerstone of this approach (e.g., Liang 2011).

obligatory chain of the *ratio decidendi* in arguing cases, to support or contest various ethical and political projects, exerting force in, and mediated by, wider social fields defined by dynamics of mass publicity.<sup>3</sup>

Thinking with and beyond Weber's (1978) well-known argument about inherent incongruities between the substance of popular justice and the rationalised form of legal procedure, this chapter extends our analysis of this broader force of law by examining judicial address and its mediation by news-consuming publics. While the Indian higher judiciary aspires to a self-image as a unified power sitting atop a deeply fractured postcolonial society, the news media have ensured that the law's tentacles spread deeply into the recesses of everyday life and considerations of justice through the circulation of its discourse. Adopting a stance that addresses the public from afar, judicial discourse employs what Bourdieu (1987: 820) noted as 'a rhetoric of autonomy, neutrality, and universality', delineating a juridical field that nevertheless seeks to intervene in the society from which it stands aloof as an idealised set of representations and norms. In considering the role of the court as a political actor, then, my interest is in the tension at play between the ethics and aesthetics of distance required to maintain this institution's appearance of majesty and impartiality, on one hand, and the pull of public address and narrative from which the judiciary draws its language and exerts its broader force well beyond the letter of the law, on the other.

In a brilliant anthropological reading of the 'semiotic excess' of judicial discourse beyond the narrow confines of the immediate decision, Veena Das (1995: 109) demonstrates how judgements can serve as a gambit for establishing a juridical-state monopoly on authorising legitimate forms of collective identity and behaviour. Extending these insights into the narrative and event-making quality of the law, I ask how the very mediation of judicial discourse by publics that constitutes the court's authority in society at large beyond the strict letter of the law also opens the judiciary to vulnerabilities on the very same grounds of mass publicity. To the degree that judges are concerned with maintaining an image of distance that is both 'ascetic and aristocratic' (Bourdieu 1987: 830), they are indeed radically dependent on a form of public recognition that must be assiduously maintained. Not unlike political leaders, judges are deeply concerned with maintaining their

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<sup>3</sup> Justice Kaul had already contributed to the latter discourse as a judge in Bombay in a well-known judgement where he defended M.F. Husain against threats from Hindu fundamentalists who objected to his paintings of goddesses.

reputations and prestige. In the words of senior lawyer and scholar Rajeev Dhavan (2008: 78), 'the majesty of the law is very much bound up in how it is perceived .... If this is taken away, the law and its custodians will be de-mythologized. Their mask would disappear. Court proceedings would be like any other meeting—and all the less convincing for being so.' This is a symbolic order that is furthermore subject to the vagaries of a sometimes raucous news media, eliciting accusations of contempt of court when breached. In this respect, the law of contempt which criminalises 'scandalising a judge' before the public is to the judiciary what criminal defamation is to political leaders. And the law can similarly blur the line between the reputation of a particular judge and broader concerns about the prestige of the court and of the law itself.

Judges must take into account quite seriously the wider effects and uptake of their arguments in such a context, as their counterparts in the field of mass politics clearly do. As the former Delhi High Court Justice A.P. Shah once remarked when I told him about my research, 'I know many judges who can't have their morning coffee without first reading about themselves in the newspaper.'<sup>4</sup> How this reading feeds back into their judgements and observations is a worthwhile question to ask, though beyond the scope of this chapter. What follows is a set of interpretations of public records in the form of higher court judgements and news media representations, read through the lens of those legal reporters who did the work of mediating the law for public consumption and interpretation.

### Distributions of Law

A prominent statue stands in the centre of the graceful Indo-Saracenic buildings that make up the Madras High Court complex. It depicts the law giver and model judge, Manu Needhi Cholan, popularly known as *Ellālan*, or 'Ruler of the Boundary'. Sculpted from dark stone in the neo-Dravidian style of the late twentieth century, the statue stakes claim to a Tamil vision of justice amid its colonial-era institutional surroundings. Unlike his Roman counterpart *Justitia*, who is found in many courts with her eyes blindfolded holding a scale in one hand and a sword in the other, this great Chola king's eyes are large and wide open. He carries a sceptre. The legend depicted by the sculpture has it that the king kept a giant bell that anyone could ring to

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<sup>4</sup> At the *Hindu Lit for Life* Lecture, 28 October 2017.

report an injustice. One day, a cow rang the bell, demanding action against the king's only son, Prince Veedhivandagan, who was said to have crushed her calf under the wheel of his chariot. Upon hearing the cow's complaint, the sovereign demanded that his own heir be put to death in the very same manner. The prince's body is thus shown at the base of the sculpture being crushed under a chariot wheel, opposite another wheel which sits upon the dead calf.

Manu Needhi's parable of justice differs from the abstract principle of distanced impartiality imagined in the form of sightless *Justitia*. His justice is transcendent because it spares no one, including royal kin. But it is also profoundly entangled with what is seen and heard in the world. This administration of law draws ethical force precisely from the recognition that princes and cows are otherwise differentially placed in the hierarchical order of things. The functions of law-maker and law-preserver are not clearly delineated here, nor are they applied blindly or according to a procedure set from without. In proceedings at the Madras High Court, where I would regularly spend time with reporters, justice was certainly not always as equitable as the legend of Manu Needhi would demand. His image nevertheless provides an apt entry point into some of the conflicting tensions at play in the often-dramatic cases that are decided in this complex, where worldly considerations of representing and safeguarding the diverse populace of Tamil Nadu vie with more abstract claims made on behalf of the universal principles of law. As in other higher courts in India, this bench of over fifty justices carries a great deal of political weight as agents of what is often termed an 'activist judiciary'. I had seen the statue before beginning my work on journalism and written about the story it depicts in some earlier work I had done on petitioning (Cody 2013: 176). It began to take on new meaning, however, when I realised just how much events at the Madras High Court dominated the news cycle—and how political this judiciary can be, acting as sovereigns at times.

### **Producing the Body for Public Consumption**

One story looming large in talk among reporters at the High Court when I arrived in June 2017 began when a young man named Shameel Ahmed died shortly after being admitted to the Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital, just down the road from us. I first heard about this from the journalists I was following in court. His death was recorded as a small item in

the newspapers because Shameel had been taken into custody for questioning a few hundred kilometres away at the Pallikonda police station near the Andhra Pradesh border, ten days earlier. After four days of interrogation in the police station, Shameel was released and returned home but was immediately admitted to the hospital in nearby Vellore for severe internal injuries, before being transferred to Chennai where he died (Murthi 2015). Most news reports left it at that, and television largely ignored the story.

What later became clear is that the married Muslim youth, the father of a young child, was alleged to have run away with a 23-year-old woman named P. Pavithra, who was also married and a mother. The two had worked together in a shoe-leather factory away from their respective homes and they had known each other for about one year. When Pavithra left home after a quarrel with her husband, a man by the name of Palani, he proceeded to file a petition for a writ of *habeas corpus*, a recourse demanding the production of her body in court and normally associated with the tradition of civil liberties to be used against unlawful detention (*The News Minute* 2015). Here, as in many cases when women choose to leave home in pursuit of relationships deemed undesirable by their family, the writ was used to demand that the police find someone who was said to be 'missing'. This use of *habeas corpus* effectively turns a civil right protecting people from the police into a search warrant empowering the police to apprehend the body.<sup>5</sup> In the words of Giorgio Agamben, '*Corpus is a two-faced being, the bearer both of subjection to sovereign power and of individual liberties*' (1998: 125; emphasis in the original). As he notes, *corpus* is the means by which a body is 'detained and exhibited' before a public (*ibid.*). That Pavithra belonged to a Dalit community—thus doubly reduced to her body both as woman and as Dalit—was never mentioned in the mainstream news but was widely known and discussed among reporters and many others I talked to about the story.

What appeared to everyone as a case of death resulting from police torture would have remained a relatively minor news event to be handled by city reporters under normal circumstances. Custodial deaths are unfortunately fairly common and media houses rarely have the appetite for public confrontation with a police force they rely on a great deal for their news gathering. But the story gained traction because Pavithra could still not be

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<sup>5</sup> Pratiksha Baxi (2006) as well as Ponni Arasu and Priya Thangarajah (2012) have demonstrated how the protection of *habeas* has been used to track down women in marriages of choice and queer relationships.

located by the police, and violence had begun to erupt in Shameel's hometown of Ambur. It turns out that Shameel was not the first young man to have been tortured to death by law enforcement in this manner and people had lost patience with an unresponsive police force and government. Leaders of the Ambur community led by Shameel's father-in-law—the district head of the Indian Thouheed Jamaat, a Muslim social service organisation—had already been protesting his disappearance after they failed in their attempts to contact the inspector of police responsible for his detention. After news of his death circulated, first through WhatsApp and Facebook, and then through the mainstream Tamil media, protest turned into riot. Most of the crowd's anger was directed at the police and their vehicles, but a state-run liquor shop, public buses and a few other stores were also severely damaged. A number of policemen and women were injured, and around 200 Muslims in the town were picked up for questioning. Many were allowed to return home after investigations, but ninety-five people remained in prison for over a week after the violence. Martin Premraj, the police inspector responsible for Shameel's torture, was suspended *in absentia* after the riot. Common local knowledge in Ambur had it that the same inspector had also been in charge during the killing of another Muslim youth in police custody two years before. He had been missing since 27 June, the day after Shameel died in Chennai (*The News Minute* 2015). It was only because of his suspension that the English-language media started to cover the story more closely.

Meanwhile, Pavithra, who was last seen by her family in late May, was still in hiding. Although she had visited Shameel in Erode after leaving her husband, according to a documentary later aired on *Thanthi TV* news, he asked her to return to Ambur, knowing the potential for violence that he would face should they be seen, a Muslim man and Hindu woman together out of wedlock.<sup>6</sup> No one knew where she was. All the while, Ambur was simmering with tension under the application of section 144 of the colonial-era Indian Penal Code, prohibiting public gatherings of any sort. Hindu nationalists, led by BJP politician Vanathi Srinivasan, had worked hard to emphasise the communal aspects of the Ambur violence (Balasubramanian 2015). The Hindu right had accused the Indian Thouheed Jamaat of systematically organising violence against the state, using Shameel's death as a pretext, as part of a general strategy to mobilise Hindu support in this region against

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<sup>6</sup> *Thanthi TV, Ambur Kalavaram Uruvana Kathai* ('Story of the Origins of the Ambur Riots'). See also, Human Rights Advocacy and Research Foundation (2015).

the sizeable minority Muslim community (ibid.). General media coverage of the violence involving thousands and the massive police repression that followed appeared distant from the perspective of readers in metropolitan Chennai, however. Stories were somewhat limited in the city's newspapers and television, with the exception of the daily newspaper *Dinamalar*, known to be more sympathetic to Hindu nationalist politics. By that point, I was following events very closely and clipping everything I could find in the newspapers. But several news editors I spoke with that week played down the importance of the story by explaining to me that it was the BJP that was trying to make it bigger than it was for political gain.

Then, on a Saturday night over one week after Shameel had passed away, I received a phone call from a legal reporter named Shekhar I had become friendly with: 'Frank. Did you hear? They found Pavithra by tracing her friend's cell [phone]. She's been living in a women's hostel here in Chennai all along! Look at your Chennai High Court Reporters Group WhatsApp. Come to court on Monday.' While Pavithra had gone to Erode to meet with Shameel after leaving home and shortly before he was tortured, the police discovered that instead of returning to her village near Ambur, as he had asked her to, she had moved to Chennai in an effort to escape her family. A photograph of Pavithra being escorted to the police station was on the front cover of every paper the following morning. She had been remanded to the Vellore police, who had been charged with finding her, and they were told by the local judge to produce her before the Madras High Court. Already commanding the centre of the usually slow Sunday news cycle, the stage was set for an even bigger media event. All attention would be focused on Pavithra's hearing that Monday at the Madras High Court, where she would be produced before the judges, the media and her family, having broken no law whatsoever, but as a body summoned before the public by writ of *habeas corpus*.

The court grounds were full of onlookers when I arrived, as if some sort of festival were taking place. Amid the dust and crowds, most could barely see the police van carrying Pavithra when it rolled up to the building. A throng of camerapersons and photojournalists descended upon the scene, chasing the police as they escorted her up the stairs. I made my way to the press room where older print journalists were sitting checking their emails and updating their editors on their cellphones. Most journalists made their way upstairs to the packed courtroom, nevertheless, to witness the encounter with the judges, although some stayed behind waiting for reports from junior colleagues who did not mind getting caught in the scrum.

In court, Pavithra was told to stand next to an appointed government lawyer before the Justices S. Tamilvanan and C.T. Selvam while her husband Palani looked on, holding their five-year-old daughter. They were surrounded by her parents and a sea of spectators. The proceedings began when the judges asked, speaking in Tamil throughout, whether Palani was, in fact, her lawful husband and about the facts of the case.

‘Did anyone take you away from home unlawfully against your will?’<sup>7</sup>

Pavithra responded, ‘No.’ After answering a few initial questions, Pavithra told them simply that she would accept returning to her parents’ house, and expressed her desire to leave her husband. It was in the course of this rather routine line of questioning that the advocate and president of the Advocates Association, Paul Kanagaraj, who was standing in the front row of onlookers despite having no official role in the proceedings, interjected, to the surprise of many: ‘The Ambur riot arose only as a result of the ongoing investigation into this woman’s disappearance!’

The judges responded that they had read the news, and then proceeded to aggressively question Pavithra in Tamil (translation mine):

Shameel Ahmed was married. You were also married. You had a husband and a child. Then what? Now this youth has died and his family has been harmed as well. It’s only because of these problems that religious and caste riots are breaking out. Even unmarried men and women, if they belong to different religions, can only be married under the Special Marriages Act. But here, both are married and with children. When this is the case, how can they get married?

In response, Pavithra tried to assert her rights, simply stating, ‘I want a divorce from my husband.’

This statement of intent prompted a reply by the judge that would come to define the courtroom encounter. The judge replied tersely, ‘Is divorce something that is available for sale at the corner shop? Something that can be bought with cash? A divorce is something you must file for in another court, you think you can get one just like that?’ The government lawyer, Thambidurai then added, ‘50 lakhs worth of property and vehicles were destroyed in the

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<sup>7</sup> See *Dinamalar* (2015) for the discussion that follows, including the remarks of the judges and Paul Kanagaraj.

Ambur riot. The investigations about the riot are still ongoing.' To which Paul Kanagaraj elaborated what he took to be a legal dilemma:

The high court should not consider this as an ordinary *habeas corpus* case. This is because there are no clear laws to deal with problems connected to a man and a woman who are already married living together. Therefore, in light of the unusual problems that have arisen in this rare case it is important to develop some guidelines about how police should proceed under such conditions.

The judges inquired about where Pavithra was currently living and asked again whether she would return to her parents' house, when Kanagaraj again emphasised the danger of the situation and recommended that she be given police protection as more untoward incidents might occur. After consultations among the judges, Pavithra was eventually told to return to the women's hostel in Ambattur, where she would be under police security, until the case was to be finally adjourned three weeks later, on 23 July, at which point she would return home to her parents. The 'homology between masculinist and state power', to borrow from Wendy Brown's (1995: 178) apt phrasing, could not be clearer. Pavithra was finally escorted to a room in the courthouse to fill out some paperwork, before she was to be returned to the hostel by the police.

Later in the day, once the hearing was over, I walked outside the court corridors and saw Paul Kanagaraj, surrounded by other lawyers wearing their black robes, giving a press statement to a large group of television journalists, repeating what he had said and what had occurred in the courtroom. Because video cameras and other mechanical recording devices were not allowed inside the court, this impromptu press conference by the president of the Advocates Association and an interview with the government lawyer involved were the primary materials presented on the evening news shows to provide an account of what happened. It was only that evening that I saw, along with the wider television viewership, how Pavithra had covered her head and face with a purple *dupatta* (scarf) while being brought in and escorted out of the courtroom by her handlers.

The image of the young woman bent over a desk, following the proceedings with her face covered, reduced to a body without a visage, became the predominant visual impression of the events that day. But greater indignity

was yet to come in print. The following day, the *Times of India's* headline read, 'Woman, whose disappearance caused Ambur violence, produced before Madras HC' (Subramani 2015). *Dinathanthi* (2015) had the same, in Tamil, revelling in the details of the judicial encounter. *The Deccan Chronicle* went with 'Divorce not sold in shops: Judge' (Arul and Dhasarathy 2015), a headline that was repeated in *Dinakaran* and many other Tamil dailies and weeklies, also proving to be attractive ticker material for the 24-hour news stations. *Dinamalar* (2015) had provided the most detailed line-by-line verbatim transcript of the courtroom interaction, upon which I have based the passages above. *Dinamalar* added a twist by coupling the story of Pavithra's public shaming and the ersatz legal problems her behaviour was accused of raising with an article about how the police were also investigating whether she had converted to Islam, once again playing to fears among Hindu chauvinists. *The Hindu* (2015a) alone avoided the sensationalism of other papers and television, focusing instead on tensions in Ambur itself and refraining from focusing on the judges' statements.

In addition to the lack of respect accorded to Pavithra, which I return to in a moment, what is remarkable about the judges' comments as these were solidified and circulated through this news coverage is the absolute lack of concern with the custodial murder of Shameel Ahmed at the hands of police inspector Martin Premraj. The apparently much more serious problem of a woman's compromised marital chastity across religious lines took centre stage, obscuring what everyone privately knew to be social violence against Muslims. When hierarchies within hierarchies are transgressed in this manner, however, violence appears as a quasi-natural occurrence to many, obscuring its political character. Pavithra's unapologetic consent in breaking the 'sexual contract' (Pateman 1988) became the centre of a scandal without legal basis, demanding supplementary action. With some exceptions, notably the popular weekly *Ananda Vikatan* (2015) which was more critical of the role of the police, the mainstream press found this to be a perfectly sensible exercise in publicly shaming Pavithra for the violence she had been accused of causing. It was, in fact, the Hindu-right Twitter-sphere and online media that lauded *Dinamalar* for how they had been covering the story, perversely recognising the problem of communal violence at the centre of events other papers ignored. While sharing in the misogyny that formed a common ground between Hindu nationalism and mainstream news reporting, they derided these other media outlets for being 'soft' on minorities. News coverage of the words and images from court, on the whole, appears to have appealed to what editors construed

as a popular sense of substantive justice that the law itself could not provide for a number of news consumers.<sup>8</sup>

Pavithra's *habeas corpus* hearing, like all of the courtroom judgements and proceedings described in this chapter, can be read as an assertion of juridical sovereignty. From a formal legal perspective, the hearing should have closed with her negative answer to the question of whether she had been abducted against her will. But this was, in fact, only the beginning of an exemplary pedagogical performance delineating 'margins within the state' beyond the strict contents of the law, where Pavithra was 'taught the difference between membership and belonging' (Das and Poole 2004: 17). Her purported misdeed had become a problem for the law, raising questions about her capacity to belong and inciting discourse in lieu of a non-existent legal remedy. The assertion of sovereign power, backed by the might of the law, was maintained although the claim made by the judges was that they have no jurisdiction over her demand for a divorce and, as the advocate Paul Kanagaraj argued in court, that there is no law to deal with the wider problems allegedly raised by Pavithra's disappearance. As Justin Richland (2013: 224) notes in his analysis of language and jurisdiction, 'even when legal actors decide that the legal institution they enact (through language) has no authority to act, the force, authority, and legitimacy of that legal institution is nonetheless being enacted'. If Justice Kaul's Perumal Murugan judgement addressed a wider societal struggle over creative expression in terms of transcendent rights in this otherwise mundane case, judicial address spoke to the world through the very words renouncing its jurisdiction over Pavithra's demand for a divorce. The former case performed expansions of the court's reach, while the latter enacted a sort of punitive constriction by Justices S. Tamilvanan and C.T. Selvam. This 'speaking the law' (the Anglicisation of the Latin *juris-diction*, as noted by Richland [2013]) enacts the sovereignty of the court and the state it represents while making available textual materials for social sanction well outside the purview of the law in the very same gesture.

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<sup>8</sup> When I later (20 July 2019, *Times of India* Office, Chennai) confronted Subramani about his headline in the *Times of India*, he admitted that the headline was misleading insofar as it followed the narrative line of making Pavithra the cause of the Ambur riots; but he defended the rest of his article and the fact that the judge's words about divorce were in the main text and did not serve as a headline as it did in other papers.

All the cases I have described here asserted and grounded legal authority in large measure through the mediation of normative news-consuming publics beyond the courtroom. Unlike the judgement in the Perumal Murugan case, however, where the written statements of the high court justices were widely cited in the news coverage, in Pavithra's case it was the verbal interaction with Pavithra herself that provided the content for most of the reportage. Whereas written judgements are explicitly addressed both to the parties directly concerned and to the wider world, in Pavithra's hearing the widely quoted words of the judges were directed specifically to her. But while the judicial address was directed at the person standing before the judges in the strict linguistic sense, in the wider social sense the juridical text was there to be picked up by all who were in the courtroom, and furthermore disseminated as news for public consumption through the media of print, digital circulation and television. These absent addressees could then act as citational vectors in the distribution of legal power beyond the law in a narrative that framed Pavithra as a voiceless but deadly agent in provoking a communal riot. A number of news websites continued to discuss this widely publicised encounter between Pavithra and the force of law in the following days and weeks. Her final hearing made for a small item in some newspapers, as a sort of coda to the drama that had culminated in her *habeas corpus* hearing. For some in the press, however, the story was not quite finished.

### 'Mischief Committed by the Newspaper'?

Selvakumar looked worried when I entered the pressroom at court that afternoon. It was a few weeks after Pavithra's hearing. This legal reporter for the Tamil daily that had recently been started by *The Hindu* was consulting with his colleagues when he glanced up at me with the unmistakable expression of fear in his eyes. He and his fellow journalists were gathered around a piece of paper. It was a legal notice issued from the high court judges who had heard Pavithra's case, threatening Selvakumar's newspaper with charges of contempt of court. Section 2(c) defines criminal contempt 'as the publication (whether by words, spoken or written, or by signs, or by visible representation, or otherwise) of any matter or the doing of any other act whatsoever which scandalises or tends to scandalise, or lowers or tends to lower the authority of, any court'. The alleged infraction was not a matter of simply obeying the word of the court as the subject of a judgement. Instead, this was an order concerning the court's public image and how judges' words had been depicted

in the press. In effect, this accusation of contempt is a special kind of criminal defamation charge.

When I joined the huddle of journalists to ask what the matter was, they explained that it was not Selvakumar's reporting on the case that had landed the paper in trouble; it was rather a special supplement in the Tamil *Hindu* newspaper containing opinions about observations made in court and the language used by judges in Pavithra's hearing (*The Hindu* 2015b). Noting the debate that had emerged on social media in the days following the courtroom drama, the Tamil *Hindu* opinion pages had asked five women, writers and intellectuals, to comment on the proceedings. Apart from the oft-quoted judicial response about commodities and corner-shops to Pavithra's demand for a divorce, the paper also took up a related issue that was being discussed in the left-liberal end of the social media world: in the transcripts of the proceedings published in newspapers, the judges were reported to have been using the informal, singular (*orumai*) second-person pronoun in Tamil (*nī*) when addressing Pavithra in court, as opposed to the respectful plural 'you' (*nīṅka!*) that would have been expected in an official public interaction. Commonly used to assert gender and caste hierarchies in everyday speech—both of which were at play in the context of the court hearing—this pronoun usage was argued to be offensive by a number of the respondents. For example, Rajini, a lawyer commenting in the paper, asked,

Is addressing someone using the disrespectful 'nī' ('you' singular) or 'un' ('your' singular) appropriate? First of all, at age twenty-three, Pavithra is a major. During a *habeas corpus* hearing, no one has the right to tell her 'you (singular) go there, you (singular) come here'. It's against Pavithra's basic human rights. (*The Hindu* 2015b)

Similar opinions were shared by the celebrated writer Salma, who argued that Pavithra knew very well that she would not be granted a divorce on the spot (*ibid.*). Other women lawyers and activists complemented these criticisms in the same article.

The contempt of court notice given to Selvakumar was taken up *suo moto* by the bench, that is, by the judges themselves upon reading the newspaper. It was addressed to N. Ram, the publisher, and his brother N. Ravi as editor-in-chief of the newspaper, requiring a response within four weeks. It read:

Having gone through the report and the interview published in 'The Hindu-Tamil edition' dated 13/07/2015, we are of the view that there

are prima facie material [*sic*] to treat the same as contempt committed by the newspaper. We are of the view that it is the mischief committed by the newspaper misguiding the people. We are respecting all the persons, especially woman [*sic*] attending the Court. It is seen that the interview given by certain persons would show, as if the Courts are not respecting woman, which is totally false and irresponsible statement against Courts.

I accompanied Selvakumar to the photocopying stand across the street from the court complex, where he made copies for his colleagues and one for me, after I had assured him that I would not be publishing about the notice until years later. The legal journalists at court that day were also asked to refrain from publishing news about this notice in an effort to avoid further confrontation with the judges by amplifying their accusations and drawing more attention to the criticisms published by the *Tamil Hindu*.

In this particular case, it appeared to be in no one's interest to allow this attempt to silence the press to itself be made into a news event by the newspaper. The Tamil edition of *The Hindu* was a relatively new paper, and most reporters and their editors cherished good relations with high court judges too much to jeopardise them over what many nevertheless considered to be an abusive accusation meant to keep them in line. In the end, based on advice from their legal team, the paper printed a small apology that very few readers would have noticed. But this gesture appears to have satisfied the bench enough for them to drop the charge of contempt against the paper. Like many criminal defamation cases, this threat by the court to pursue charges of contempt against a newspaper drew little, if any, public attention. It was best dealt with silently, as a non-event.

### **To Maintain a 'Top Most Image of the Judiciary'**

Charges of contempt of court can, however, become big media events, such as those comprising the distressing case of Justice C.S. Karnan. In 2015, Justice Karnan threatened fellow Madras High Court judges with contempt of court charges and was eventually jailed himself on the same charges which were brought against him by the Supreme Court of India in Delhi. Already in 2011, shortly after being called to join the Madras High Court, Justice Karnan, who is Dalit, made news by writing to the National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC), accusing his fellow judges of treating him poorly because of his caste background, specifically saying that he had been touched inappropriately by the shoes of another judge as a sign of disrespect while

other judges smiled (*Times of India* 2017b). The already noteworthy allegation became big news as a result of a press conference he held. Justice Karnan had broken with the tradition of strict public separation between sitting justices and news media, even if many are aware that judges sometimes give quotes to the press in more private settings. The accusations of casteism were made in public and *to* and *for* the mass public. Journalists I spoke to after the press conference were enthusiastic about its event-making capacity, which would put their legal reporting on the front page, while also expressing a hint of worry that things appeared to be going too far. 'I don't think he should have spoken like that about respected judges' was an opinion that several in the legal reporters' group shared with me in conversation. The press also appears to have an investment in maintaining a majestic image of the court.

Accusing judges of the Madras High Court of systematic discrimination against Dalit judges, Justice Karnan called these incidents 'a black mark on Indian judiciary' before the gathering of journalists he had invited to his chambers for the purpose.<sup>9</sup> The press conference itself had become an historic event in the annals of legal reporting. But it was only the beginning of a larger campaign to direct mass attention to the problems of inequality and inside-dealing plaguing the higher judiciary in India, according to Justice Karnan. Public condemnations of caste prejudice were then followed by complaints about the cases that were brought before his bench, eventually leading to unspecified charges of corruption against the highest level of the judiciary. At one point, the judge burst uninvited into an ongoing hearing being overseen by other judges concerning a piece of public interest litigation about how judges were appointed to cases. In one of the great halls of the Madras High Court, Justice Karnan claimed before the court and before the press that he was being belittled by being assigned cases that were not commensurate to his status and skills, despite that fact that the high court is supposed to assign cases to its judges based on a rotating roster system (Prasad 2017).

Justice Karnan then continued to appeal directly to the public through news media, initiating *suo motu* stay orders to halt the chief justice's attempt to interview new judges for possible assignment to the court. He would eventually threaten the chief justice of the Madras High Court with contempt of court hearings when Justice Karnan's stay was reversed by him (*ibid.*). Seeking a way out of a difficult and very public legal battle with a judge from an oppressed community whose accusations were plausible but not substantiated,

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<sup>9</sup> See Subramani (2011).

the Supreme Court of India eventually transferred Justice Karnan to another bench on the Calcutta High Court. This transfer order too was stayed by Justice Karnan, who wished to remain in Chennai to pursue his allegations in the Madras High Court. But his attempt to use his powers as a judge to stop his own transfer was dismissed under the principle of *'nemo iudex in causa sua'* (no one shall judge in their own case) as his story was taking up more and more space as a national news event across media outlets. 'You have insulted me in the general public consisting of a population of 120 crores in India due to lack of legal knowledge,' declared the rebel judge in his response to the Supreme Court.<sup>10</sup> This is a serious accusation that again invokes the image of the judiciary before the eyes of the nation, reiterating his earlier argument that it was the court that was *in contempt of itself*. Karnan was situated both *within* the judiciary, as a sitting judge claiming contempt of court, and *without*, as one whose powers are curtailed by the same law of contempt as interpreted by peers he had deemed 'corrupt', thus motivating his appeal to public opinion. In insulting him, the justice argued that the court was lowering its own image on the national stage,<sup>11</sup> and it was on this very stage that he was determined to take the battle forward.

What was termed Justice Karnan's 'populist sensationalism' (Chakraburttu 2017) had engendered a wide debate in the legal world and beyond, as experts and audiences worked to understand the entanglements of caste and the paradoxes of legal bureaucratic structure. A widely recognised problem in a field long dominated by upper castes, especially Brahmins, had taken on new dimensions as the judge leading the charge against discrimination appeared to have little respect for the basic standards of legal bureaucracy and procedure, even if he was zealous in his use of the law. For example, Justice Karnan wrote a letter directly to the prime minister of India in which he detailed his charges of corruption and even sexual assault on the premises of the Madras High Court. He urged the leader to take action in an effort to 'save the Top Most image of the judiciary', and went further to call on 'all political parties of India to extend their fullest cooperation in maintaining an impeccable image at all

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Supreme Court of India *Suo Moto Contempt Petition no. 1 of 2017*, against Hon'ble Shree Justice C.S. Karanam. See <https://judicialreforms.org/justice-karnan-contempt-detailed-judgement/> (accessed in April 2022).

<sup>11</sup> See Supreme Court of India *Suo Moto Contempt Petition no. 1 of 2017*, against Hon'ble Justice C.S. Karnan.

times.<sup>12</sup> Writing to the prime minister and addressing the public as he also pursued legal avenues that were performed as much for their display value as they were in hope of seeking official remedy, the rebel judge had clearly instrumentalised the law as a medium for news-making. He had done so against the judiciary itself, and not as a pure outsider, giving the news-reading public the impression of the Indian higher judiciary exploding from within before their very eyes. Many newspaper readers I discussed this case with as it was unfolding took the judge to be unsound of mind and interpreted his direct appeals to the public and unusual legal acrobatics to have made a mockery of an otherwise respected, if imperfect, judiciary.

This public attack on the courts, in turn, attracted the charge of contempt of court against Justice Karnan himself, this time, levelled by a bench of seven senior justices of the Supreme Court of India. When he initially failed to attend the Supreme Court, the judge was issued a bailable arrest warrant. Justice Karnan responded by filing a legal notice demanding legal compensation from the Supreme Court for not letting him work and for distress, at which point the judge was apprehended by the police (Mahapatra 2017). In the contempt hearings that followed, he stood accused of ‘scandalising’ the judiciary and was found to be guilty. The Supreme Court judgement frequently makes reference to the breach of having spoken directly to the public by means of the news media in his attempts to bypass what he alleged was a corrupt higher court system. In the words of the authors of the judgement on contempt of court against Justice Karnan, ‘His public utterances turned the judicial system into a laughingstock. The local media, unmindful of the damage it was causing to the judicial institution, merrily rode the Karnan wave. Even the foreign media had its dig at the Indian judiciary.’<sup>13</sup> The accusation of producing a scandal here extends beyond Justice Karnan’s actions to include those reporting on his statements and legal tactics, even if no media outlet was specifically charged with a similar crime in this case. That his accusations had become an international news story, however, was particularly troubling: ‘The BBC also reported on the issue.’<sup>14</sup> The wave that they collectively ‘rode’ is

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted on page 17 of Contempt petition: <https://judicialreforms.org/justice-karnan-contempt-detailed-judgement/> (accessed in April 2022).

<sup>13</sup> See Supreme Court of India *Suo Moto Contempt Petition no. 1 of 2017*, against Hon’ble Justice C.S. Karnan.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

what had caused real damage to the authority of the court, but it was Justice Karnan who would face the most direct repercussions. He was sentenced to six months of imprisonment for levelling ‘obnoxious allegations’ that were also ‘malicious and defamatory’ against thirty-three of his colleagues while he ‘shielded himself from actions, by trumpeting his position, as belonging to an under-privileged caste.’<sup>15</sup> In the judgement, Justice Karnan was furthermore restrained from speaking in public until he had served his time in prison.

Justice Karnan’s case appeared as a catastrophe that had spun out of control, as several commentators argued in the press. For example, Kaleeswaram Raj, writing in *The Week*, notes, ‘Karnan in Mahabharata, after all, is a tragic character. The modern episode of Justice Karnan also is a judicial tragedy’ (Raj 2017).<sup>16</sup> Part of terming this escalation of events a tragedy is to acknowledge the degree to which the agency of the actors involved in this drama was deeply mediated by publics and institutions well outside of the law’s official purview, even if overdetermined by the law’s public presence. Many saw the judge as a sharp mind who was destroyed in the public eye by his own thirst for public recognition and as someone who was treated differently than he would have been otherwise because of his caste. Some noted that when retired Justice Markanday Katju was charged with contempt of court for a social media post around the same time, he was treated with a great deal more respect both among judges and in news reporting. And as Suraj Yengde argues in his important book, *Caste Matters* (2019), casteism both within the judiciary and in the public sphere also explains the contrast between the treatment of Justice Karnan meted out by the press and the high public regard for four Supreme Court judges who held the first ever such press conference just months later in front of the court, denouncing irregularities in their own court.

On a fundamental level, we are faced with a social drama unfolding around discrimination and a higher judiciary that is either unwilling or unable to address it. A long-standing silence had been broken. But because of the manner in which the rebel judge’s accusations of caste-based malice were publicised and the cloud of suspicion hanging over the judge’s motivations and his sanity, serious allegations of casteism were never seriously investigated.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Like the mythical son of Surya, whom he is named after, Justice Karnan “burns from the karma” of his harsh words’ despite being recognised as ‘a good man’ (Hiltebeitel 2011: 758).

The Supreme Court issued orders for a psychiatric evaluation of Justice Karnan (*Times of India* 2017a), instead of looking into the charges he made against his fellow high court judges when he claimed to be distressed. The evaluation was taken by Justice Karnan as ‘an illegal insult to a Dalit judge’ (BBC.com 2017), when he issued a legal travel ban on the Supreme Court judges from a makeshift court he had established in his home office before his arrest. At another level, then, there is the tragedy of deep personal attachment to something claiming universality that is perhaps ultimately harmful to the socially vulnerable (see Berlant 2011). While pursuing justice in the face of perceived caste discrimination, Justice Karnan was seemingly obsessed with using the law against its official guardians even if he had to do so outside of the court, and with legal remedy more broadly as a response to injustice. But he was ultimately rejected by the law and the state it represents. In Begoña Aretxaga’s (2003: 405) insightful formulation, insofar as ‘law ... has come to represent the sovereign power of the state ... the intense affect of this power ... has the capacity to drive people mad, madness that comes from being “oversaturated with law”’ [citing Berlant 1991]. Justice Karnan’s passionate, reckless recourse to the court of public opinion through his own legal actions must be understood in the context of this awesome power that appears everywhere, structuring the very field of public opinion itself while claiming to stand aloof. Appeal to the public had failed the judge too. In these events, we can see more clearly how the judges’ desire to read about themselves in the morning paper before coffee is part of a media dynamic of feedback loops that can take unexpected, devastating, even maddening turns.

### **Conclusion: Hazards of Juridical Publicity**

We have travelled a long way from the majestic image of transcendent law invoked in the opening of this chapter in the Perumal Murugan judgement. In the very same courtroom halls where right-wing publicity stunts like banning books set the stage for liberal triumph, a judge might publicly shame a young woman who had broken no law or bear the social embarrassment of having a fellow judge barge into proceedings, every move happening before the public eye. All newsworthy and spectacular in their own ways, these stories also point to some underlying forces structuring the dynamics of juridical publicity while, at the same time, opening themselves to a broader set of questions having to do with problems of sovereignty and the vicissitudes of public representation.

First, the normative fantasy of the hermit judge, whose lonely interpretation of the law locates itself outside of politics or broader social pressures so as to ensure impartiality, appears more difficult to sustain than ever. As the language of law continues to dominate the news cycle, the pressures of mass mediation on legal reasoning are becoming more apparent. We need only read the numerous discussions of news media in legal judgements and observations as evidence of how judges are reflexive about the fact of mass circulation of juridical discourse. While there is a long tradition of the higher judiciary using its uniquely authoritative position to comment on and intervene in the world at large from the courtroom pulpit in India, the proliferation of news media technologies and formats is also changing the quality of judicial address. If judges had addressed the world largely through their written judgements, which are often adorned with a rich literary textuality as in the Perumal Murugan judgement, contemporary media logics demand more contained, easily circulatable texts and sensationalist affect. The moralist denouncement of Pavithra by comparing her request for a divorce to shopping provided just such a textual form. Even Justice Kaul's thoughtful prose in defence of the liberalism inherent in Indian traditions was easily reduced to a soundbite demanding that the author be resurrected. It was written in bold as if to call out to less diligent reporters that this was the 'take-home' point. To be a successful judge in such an environment is to be media-savvy, it appears, and to pay attention to one's public image.

The second, more abstract, point to draw from these cases of legal spectacle has to do with what Webb Keane (1997) once called 'the hazards of representation' and the question of law as the public face of state sovereignty. That the law and juridical discourse are frequently cited across contexts far from official origins would appear, on the surface, to present a problem for state power as understood through the lens of unified sovereignty. Lack of control over representations of the law might seem to be a weakness. However, we owe to Veena Das the insight that, in the life of the state, this very 'iterability becomes a sign not of vulnerability, but a mode of circulation through which power is produced', such that the legal discourse can penetrate into people's lives 'and yet remain distant and elusive' (2007: 178). We might recall in this context how Justice Kaul's words served not only to liberate Perumal Murugan but also to project an image of legal authority over 'Indian tradition' from afar. It is the same pervasiveness of judicial discourse and its citation across contexts that allowed the casual observations made regarding Pavithra to concretise and legitimate a narrative that pins communal harmony back to

the problem of a woman's chastity. Shameel's death at the hands of police was rendered irrelevant in the public circulation of this case, as if the state bore no responsibility for the riot. So, it is not because of the iterability of law that the state is made weak or vulnerable.

Yet the vulnerability of the power of the judiciary that results from its dependence on mass publicity has to do with an aspect of circulation not examined in Das's work. Taking a perspective that brings questions of interaction and popular sovereignty to the fore, we can better appreciate how the quasi-sacred majesty of the law requires recognition from the very people in whose name the law acts. When such recognition is not properly put on display, public representations of the law, and of judges in particular, are subject to accusations of contempt, as when the Tamil *Hindu* published observations that a judge had been disrespectful or when Justice Karnan accused his fellow judges in public, precisely in order to 'save the Top Most image of the judiciary', as he put it. Charges of contempt and 'scandalising' the judiciary can themselves lower the estimation of the court in the eyes of the public when carried out with excessive force or when proving that the much-vaunted majesty of the court is, in fact, fragile. Legal sovereignty is thus vulnerable, not simply because it is on display in public but also because it demands from the very media of publicity a form of acknowledgement and forum for displaying its power that can easily be withheld. To the degree that legal journalism owes allegiance both to logics of print or televisual capitalism and to the people it is addressing as a public, the requirement that the majesty of the judiciary be formally recognised might not always be met to the satisfaction of the judges who also form a small and separate segment of this otherwise amorphous mass.



## II

# LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

## Poesis, Translation, Ideology







## INTRODUCTION TO PART II

### On the Values of Language

*E. Annamalai*

For communicators of ordinary language as well as for creators of poetic language, words convey the language; not so much the abstract grammar. The chapters in Part II of *The Radiance of Tamil* are about words in Tamil—its expressions and turns of phrases—and they show that words do much more than just referring.

One of the other things that words do is to bear particular values that are attached to them, often grounded in and by some language ideology. One ideology of language, derived usually from the political imperatives of the elite, is to mark some words as ‘good’ and others as ‘bad’ to adhere to ‘linguistic correctness’, which is defined by an ideologically-based value system of language. It uses extra-linguistic concepts such as colloquialism or purism. The former is typically associated with the lack of behavioural refinement of the speaker or writer and the latter with the notion of political commitment to protecting language sovereignty. In his chapter, ‘Good Tamil: What Makes It Good and Why?’, E. Annamalai discusses the ideas that play into defining ‘good Tamil’ (*nalla tamil*), especially for students, teachers and editors, as well as for the social agents and institutions that should promote good Tamil. Situating such an ideology within the political history of modern Tamil nationalism and linguistic purism, this chapter argues that such an ideology of the property of goodness of Tamil, while expedient in certain ways, has also limited the creativity of the Tamil language and its speakers and writers, hampering the many ways in which language can be evaluated, valued and used. This explains why creative writers do not favour ‘good Tamil’ in their fiction.

Another non-referential property of words is that they carry the historical load of the politics, culture and religion of the linguistic community, from the past to their contemporary cognition. Yet this historical baggage may interfere with the interpretation of a text that uses those words, and lead to controversies about the meaning of the text. Govindarajan Navaneethakrishnan’s chapter,

'Meaning as Rescuer: Colonising the Coloniser, the Tamil Way', looks at this problem and the way it becomes accentuated when a non-Tamil writer—the colonial scholar-administrator Francis Whyte Ellis (1777–1819)—with a different cultural and religious background, innovatively composes a poem in the Saivite Tamil tradition. Govindarajan situates this case as one of a colonial writer appropriating the idiom of the colonised and, in turn, being incorporated and re-appropriated by the Tamil tradition. While Ellis's poem created something of a stir in his time (including questioning the credibility of Ellis's Christian faith or citing it as evidence of the coloniser's conversion to the religions of the colonised people), a commentary on, and defence of, Ellis's text by his friend and teacher, Muttuccāmiṭṭai, aimed to re-signify the text so as to rescue it from the historical load of its words and meanings. By doing so, Ellis is incorporated within a wider, non-sectarian Tamil poetic tradition. Govindarajan describes this as an 'inverse colonisation', where the coloniser is in turn colonised by the colonised through an act of homage and defence.

It is well recognised that words are experienced by language users as having the value of beauty, mostly in their sound structure. Poets exploit this aesthetic feature of language, typically by making collocations of words, and employing words at the right place in a text. Placement of words in a sentence is very important in poetic texts, contributing to their aesthetic value. In his chapter 'Cinnattampip Pulavar's *Kalvalaiyantāti*', David Shulman discusses the prosodic phenomenon of repeating a word without being repetitive (*maṭakku*), where each occurrence of the word is coded with different meanings. Focusing on the *maṭakku* in the virtuosic poem, *Kalvalaiyantāti* by Villavarāyar Cinnattampi Pulavar (1716–1780), Shulman shows, with relish and delight, how even more complex poetic operations are at play, such as when decoding meaning in *maṭakku* depends on segmenting the same word-sequence differently. These techniques may be verbal games, but they are games with the purpose of increasing the pleasure of discovering multiple possibilities to make meaning. Kinds of verbal games may be unique to a particular language or a set of languages (as word repetition is used in poetry in Tamil, Sanskrit and other literary languages of India). They may also be unique to particular periods in the history of literature of a language. For example, the inner meaning of the words of Nature to refer discreetly to human behaviour (*ullurai*) is unique to the *akam* poems of the Sangam period, but not *maṭakku* that proliferates in *pirapantams* of the late medieval period. Unfolding these poetic, linguistic and historical

complexities, Shulman's analysis highlights both the singular and the universal in Tamil aesthetics.

Connecting the rhythm of words to the emotion conveyed by the text is another use of words. Kampan, the twelfth-century Chola-era Tamil poet, is a master in exploiting this property, as Whitney Cox shows in his chapter 'Crossing the Godāvāri: Poetics, Translation and Transformation in the *Kamparāmāyaṇam*'. Connecting textual rhythm to readerly affect is a property of words that is most difficult to bring across in interlingual translation, as Cox explores through reflections on both his own translation of Kampan's *Rāmāyaṇa* and on Kampan himself as a sort of translator. Yet, in doing so, Cox shows how loanwords that have the same phonological form (*tatsamas*) in the source and target language (Sanskrit and Tamil, respectively) make Kampan's *Rāmāyaṇa* less a translation than, as Cox puts it, 'a complex and comprehensive triangulation between two linguistic systems.' This is all the more so with 'the wider set of poetic resources present within each of these, and the literary history of both.' Translation in this view becomes a *synthesis* between the literary texts of two languages rather than a transplant of meaning across 'codes'.

In a similar vein, in his chapter, 'Rendering the Word of God,' Torsten Tschacher argues that the term 'translation' is a problematic labelling of early modern Islamic Tamil literature in relationship to its Arabic sources. The synthesis mentioned above with reference to *Rāmāyaṇa* is similarly evidenced in Islamic texts in Tamil as well, which draw from both Islamic mythology and theological formulations as well as local Tamil traditions. On the one hand, the 'Arabic words, concepts, images and stories are reimaged through the familiar vocabularies of courtly Tamil literature,' as Tschacher points out; while, simultaneously, the Islamic poets of Tamil are conscious about grounding their work in the Arabic tradition. On the other hand, Tamil translations of Arabic words in the texts function simultaneously as commentaries on those very texts, blurring and 'obliterating' in the process the very categories of 'translation' and 'commentary'. When poets use Arabic words themselves in their Tamil works, they treat them as synonyms of Tamil words, that is, as alternate terms within the 'same' poetic universe, a view which reflects the *nikaṇṭu* tradition in Tamil, a topic taken up Srilata Raman in the final chapter, 'Shifting Worlds: The Obsolescence of the *Nikaṇṭus* in the Tamil Literary Tradition'.

As Raman details, *nikaṇṭus*—roughly, thematic word lists used in Tamil poetic compositions from the medieval period—differ from the *akarāti* of the

modern period. They differ not just in how each arranges words (thematically by meaning, in the case of the *nikaṇṭu*, or formally by spelling in the case of the *akarāti*) but in their *conceptualisation* as well. Conceptually, the *nikaṇṭu* captures the world in the way the language speakers organise it perceptually, offering up a template for poets to explore that world through words. By contrast, the *akarāti* captures the lexical constituents of the language, treating language less as a means of aesthetic worlding than as an object dissectible into units of sense and reference. The former is to help create poetic texts, and the latter to help read any text. Both kinds, Raman shows, indicate the difference in historical development in recording the lexical wealth of the language, just as both represent the different ways of learning how to compose and read literature. The model of lexical recording in both reveals the underlying lexicographic theory as well, the idea which resides in Cox's and Tschacher's chapters as well. For the *nikaṇṭu*, the loans are synonyms of the native words; for the *akarāti*, the loans indicate the linguistic origin of the word or erasure of the boundary by their widespread use in contemporary times. Not simply comparing these two different types of lexical tools, Raman traces the displacement of the *nikaṇṭu*, and the literary world it anchored, by the *akarāti* underpinned by modern ideologies and institutions of language. To show this, in the latter part of the chapter, Raman follows the career of the famous scholar and editor of ancient and medieval Tamil manuscripts, U. Vē. Cāminātaiyar. He was trained in the traditions of the *nikaṇṭus* when he began his career in the world of traditional Tamil scholarship and was ushered, as a college professor, into the secular literary and linguistic world of nineteenth-century Tamil modernity. The literary manuscripts he edited brought to visibility a large number of Tamil words hidden in the texts; he himself compiled them in appendices of the edited texts in *akarāti* format, and glossed them in his commentaries on the texts.

Together, these chapters offer a wide variety of perspectives on Tamil words beyond their primary referential function; they contain new insights about the use of words by communicators, poets, 'translators' and lexicographers, revealing the rays of brilliance in the radiance of Tamil language and literature.



## GOOD TAMIL

### What Makes It Good and Why?

*E. Annamalai\**

#### Good Tamil

Tamil is well-known for being decorated with a rich array of attributes, like the attributes of an endearing woman, by poets from the earliest (Krishnan 1984: 79, 98, 134, 158) to modern times. They include attributes such as 'evergreen', 'virgin', 'fertile' and 'sweet' among others. They are not just aesthetic but also ideological. One new attribute in the modern period is *nalla*, 'good', which is evaluative and ideological. Its formal variant is *narramil*, and it is historically earlier. It needs historical research to see if this attribute (*nal-*) is also evaluative and ideological like its modern correlation (see below). My sense is that the older attribute is non-restrictive and so is not contrasting the noun without it.

The core meaning of the word is 'good', which is an attitudinal term reflecting an evaluation and covers a range of positive cultural perceptions about Tamil as a language. A simple demonstration of the range of cultural perceptions of this term is that it is indexed differently as an adjective and as an adverb when it is used in reference to Tamil: *ava nalla/nallā tamil pēsurā*, 'She speaks good Tamil/Tamil well'. As an adjective, the term refers to an attribute of the Tamil language, which is the imagined cultural norm of the language. As an adverb, the term refers to an attribute of the speaker of Tamil, which is her proximity to the ideal native speaker and her flow of language. As Francis Cody pointed out during a discussion on this essay, referring to Bernard Bate's fluency of Tamil, it indexes for native Tamil speakers the in-group identity. The adjective *nalla* exhibits a range of

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cultural perceptions of ‘goodness’: *nalla vācanai*, ‘desirable fragrance’; *nalla vittu*, ‘house with desirable qualities such as layout, amenities’; *nalla caṅu*, ‘death that comes without long suffering’; *nalla peṇ*, ‘woman with desirable qualities that satisfy cultural norms (such as domesticity and a light skin colour, in the cultural context of marriage)’; *nalla niṛam*, ‘desirable light skin’; *nalla nēram*, ‘desirable time for getting good results’; *nalla eṇṇam*, ‘beneficial thoughts’; *nalla katai*, ‘enjoyable, well-laid out story’; *nalla vilai*, ‘appreciable price’; *nalla pāl*, ‘milk that is its ideal (without dilution)’; *nalla veyil*, ‘excess of normally experienced sunshine’; *nalla karuppu*, ‘excess of normally found black colour (of skin)’; *nalleṇṇey*, ‘sesame seed oil (the prototype of oils because of its many health benefits)’; *nalla pāmpu*, ‘cobra (the prototype of cobras because of its frightful quality)’.

It will be seen that the meaning of *nalla* covers three attributes: desirable (by the cultural norm), exceeding the (experienced) norm and norm-defining (i.e., prototypical). The common feature by which these attributes are defined is the meaning of ‘norm, normal’.<sup>1</sup> The idea of norm is shared culturally by the linguistic community. The antonym of *nalla* is not *keṭṭa*, ‘bad’, in most of its combinations with nouns given above. When the noun is the language Tamil, the opposite is *koccai-t tamil*, ‘raw/coarse Tamil’, not *keṭṭa tamil*, ‘bad/rotten Tamil’, which refers to the Tamil of obscene expression. The opposition is clear between *nalla vārttai*, ‘words of advice, praise, good prediction’, and *keṭṭa vārttai*, ‘words of obscenity’.

### Good is Being Normative

The first attestation of *nalla* with *tamiḷ* in the form of *narramiḷ* is in *Purraṇānuru* (50:10, cited in Krishnan 1984: 78). The attribute is derived by grammatical commentators from *nanmai*, ‘benefit’. The *Puram* poem points to the fact that a well-rounded knowledge of Tamil proved beneficial (to the poet) in that the king did not punish him with his sword for violating court norms by sleeping on the royal drum.<sup>2</sup> The king’s beneficial act is motivated

<sup>1</sup> *Nalla* is used in the sense of a prototype (of languages) with reference to Tamil by Sattur Sekaran (1992), a freelance researcher set to prove that Tamil is the mother and proto-language of all the languages of the world. The title of his book in Tamil, *Nalla Tamiḷai marakkalāmā?* is a rhetorical question that translates to: ‘Can we forget the good Tamil?’

<sup>2</sup> The poem is about a king who fanned a poet who was sleeping on the royal

by the poet's mastery of the beneficial Tamil. The meaning of *nanmai* as 'benefit' is a specification of the word's generic meaning, 'goodness'. This meaning is found in the modern Tamil word for good governance, *nallāt̃ci*, 'beneficial, benefit giving rule'. Another specification of the meaning of the word *nalla*, as pointed out earlier, is 'norm'. When these two specifications are collated, *nalla* gives the meaning of a 'norm that is beneficial'. This is the sense in which *nalla* in *nalla tamīl* is used by traditional Tamil scholars of the modern period. It refers to the normative use of Tamil which is beneficial to the language in maintaining its authenticity and continuity over time; it is beneficial to the speakers of Tamil as well in making them exceptional by virtue of the above qualities of their language.

In reference to the idea of a norm, *nalla tamīl* is a close cousin of *centamīl*, 'well-made (as in *cemmai*, 'perfection') Tamil' or straight (as in *cenkōl*, 'sceptre'), which is in contrast with *koṭuntamīl* or *koccai-t tamīl*, 'deviant or raw Tamil'. *Centamīl* too is a *nalla tamīl* but it also has ancient grammatical features and lexical forms very different from those of contemporary Tamil; in other words, *nalla tamīl* is a simpler version of *centamīl* that has non-preference for features and forms and selective acceptance of historically evolved new features and forms. The traditional grammar of *centamīl* is valid for *nalla tamīl* with minor extensions of that grammar. *Nalla tamīl* does not require regrammaticalisation of Tamil. Succinctly, it is the modernised *centamīl*.

## Pure Tamil

Two other attributes of Tamil, *tūya*, 'pure', and *tani*, 'standalone', are modern ones associated with a social, political and linguistic movement that began in the 1930s to eschew the loanwords, predominantly the words of Sanskrit origin, from the Tamil language (Annamalai 2011: 19–40). This was a movement to purify Tamil and to show that it is autonomous. It was incorporated with the non-Brahmin political movement that sought social, political and economic justice for the majority of the population. It became coterminous with the Dravidian movement for political autonomy, which made Tamil nationalism its linchpin. The linguistic purism movement succeeded in finding a place for the

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drum after walking a long distance to reach the palace to seek gifts from the king in appreciation of his poetic skills in Tamil. Disrespecting the royal drum by using it as a bed is an offence, but the king, instead of punishing the poet, helps him get good rest on the drum. This is because the offender is a master of Tamil that benefits all.

written Tamil of the public domain in the language policy of the government. Though *tani-t tamil*, 'autonomous Tamil', was conceptually expansive so as to exclude loans from all languages, the focus was on Sanskrit; though it was inclusive of all components of the language, the focus was on the lexicon. The idea of *tani-t tamil* can be differentiated from the idea of *nalla tamil*: the former has as its primary focus the lexicon (the words of foreign origin that are retained from the past and the words of new knowledge, products and experience that are coined or translated [from English]), and the grammar (of colloquial Tamil) is its ideological extension; the latter has grammar as its primary focus and the lexicon is a component of it. The former is closely aligned with the political ideology of autonomy whereas the latter is closely aligned with the cultural ideology of normativity.

The campaign for *nalla tamil*, 'good Tamil', is a late companion to the pure Tamil movement. It was self-evident to the campaigners that pure Tamil is good Tamil. Some authors of books on what the good Tamil is (Mascarenhas and Dakshinamurthy 2005; Devaneyya Pavanar 2000 [1940]) give native Tamil equivalents for the Sanskrit (and English) words used in Tamil. Good Tamil does not ignore grammatical purity over lexical purity in practice. Grammatical purity is a compromise between the grammars of the old literary language and of the contemporary formal language that is heavily weighted in favour of the former. Contemporary formal Tamil (used in formal social situations) is contrasted with colloquial Tamil, which is devalued as a language generated in violation of the grammar of *centamil*. This grammatical purism is stringent with regard to word spellings, including the inflected words in Tamil, a language with a rich morphology. The spelling of words includes *sandhi* in word combinations and sequences.

### Good is Meta

The advocates of good Tamil can be said to be the progeny of the pure Tamil movement and they are drawn from Tamil scholars in colleges and universities; the teachers of Tamil in schools are the implementors of *nalla tamil*, though it is meant to be adopted by the entire literate Tamil community including those in the media, print and digital. Politically, these advocates subscribe to Tamil nationalism. Inclusion of grammatical authenticity to define good Tamil inevitably goes beyond the language to the metalanguage. This metalanguage is the one codified in the grammatical treatises of the past, as mentioned

above. The good Tamil of the present is anchored in the past at the ground level and at the meta level.

It then is natural that the definition of good (*nalla*) with regard to Tamil for these scholars (Suddhananda Bharati 1964 [1943]; Parantamanar 2012 [1955]; Paramasivanandam 1961) is 'being faultless' grammatically. This fits with the meaning 'norm, normative' of *nalla* described above. Normative grammars that prescribe language use are found in languages with a written history. The special characteristic in the case of Tamil is more than about the style of language: it is to define modern Tamil itself. It defines what Tamil is and makes all differences in usage inauthentic. Furthermore, any deviance (called *valu* in the old grammars or *pilai* in contemporary grammars) from the metalanguage of the past is considered to be a fault. *Nannūl*, the fourteenth-century treatise, is taken to be the universal representative of the metalanguage of the past, present and future. Its authority comes from the shared belief that this grammatical work follows the earliest grammar of Tamil, *Tolkāppiyam* of the pre-Common Era, unlike some other medieval grammatical treatises, such as *Vīracōliyam*. This dependence on ancient and medieval grammars is driven by the ideology that the Tamil language is unchanging; it remains a virgin, as expressed in the phrase *kanni-t tamil*. This ideology is not entirely non-cognisant of the changes that have taken place in Tamil in its history of more than 2,000 years. But the changes must be sanctioned by a grammatical treatise of the past. *Nannūl* accommodates some changes in the language from the time of *Tolkāppiyam*. Such a sanction is conditioned by the change having been attested to in poetic literature. Other kinds of writings such as inscriptions do not have this status. Since poets were acknowledged as scholars (*pulavar*), this is suggestive of scholarly control of Tamil.

### Grammar as the Frame

Grammatical treatises of the past had limited scope in that they considered grammar to be a necessary aid to interpret literature. The grammar of Tamil and the language of poetic literature were thus mutually binding. With this delimitation, the old grammars do not cover all the usages of Tamil. Contemporary grammars, on the other hand, are not limited to the poetic literature and its scholarly commentaries. There is prose, literary and non-literary; there are multidimensional media. The grammatical descriptions of good Tamil of the modern period grudgingly accept some of the grammatical

(mostly morphological) structures of modern Tamil that are not dealt with in the old grammars. They thus get included in the description of good Tamil by default. The grammatical structures and lexical forms that are specifically excluded from good Tamil are those described in old grammars, but have deviated from them since their times. They are perceived and identified as 'corruption', not as evolutionary change.

The prime factors that define good Tamil in spelling include integrity of the alphabet (avoiding new letters, including the old *grantha* letters used in inscriptions) and of spelling (avoiding representation of colloquial pronunciation found in inscriptions) and preservation of external *sandhi* restricted to the doubling of the stop consonants (non-adherence to this *sandhi* rule is called *orruṇṇ pilai*, 'consonant error').<sup>3</sup> With regard to grammar, the following are included in good Tamil: maintenance of the distinction between neuter singular and plural in verb agreement, distinction between the negation of existence and identity and disallowance of certain syntactic structures (such as the cleft sentence, where the sentential subject is in neuter and the predicate is human). There are other exclusions as well. The prescribed linguistic characteristics of good Tamil are manifestations of an ideology, and so show variability in their insistence among the advocates of it.

### The Context for Promoting Good Tamil

The context for the advocacy of good Tamil is the new role envisaged for Tamil after Independence in 1947 and after the redrawing of the boundary of the state, with Tamil as the dominant language. Tamil was thereafter made the official language of the state in 1956. The more specific context is the formal state education system and the teaching of Tamil formally to anyone from the general population. Students who come to school with a mastery and familiarity of colloquial Tamil need to be kept within the boundaries of the ideology of good Tamil. The advocacy, however, is a continuing crusade, as recent new as well as reprints of old publications on the subject of good Tamil show. There has been a spurt in these publications

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<sup>3</sup> Other rules of external *sandhi*, for example, changing one sound/letter to another, are relaxed. *Pāl kuṭam*, 'milk pot', is accepted as good Tamil, relaxing the old rule that would require the word to be *pārkuṭam*. But *pālkkuṭam* is unacceptable in good Tamil. Addition of a stop consonant before words that begin with stop consonants is also relaxed with regard to all environments that require this *sandhi*.

since classical language status was accorded to Tamil by the Government of India in 2004 (Mascarenhas and Dakshinamurthy 2005; Naina Muhammed 2013; Parantamanar 2012 [1955]; Nannan 2015).<sup>4</sup> Devaneyya Pavanar (2000 [1940], 1965) belongs to this list though the title of the book does not have the attribute *nalla* for Tamil, but has *iyal*, 'natural', referring to prose. This book is meant for high-school students and is graded to match the school curriculum.

Tamil has acquired new powers and opportunities, and new adversaries in the view of the advocates of good Tamil. The new powers include the availability of state resources to shape the language; the new opportunities include the spread of literacy and expansion of formal school and college education, the popular expansion of the print media and the elevation of science as the quintessence of knowledge; the adversaries of Tamil include the promotion of Hindi at the national level and the clout of English at the global level. The creative appeal of spoken Tamil in fiction was also a threat as was the emergence of alternative grammars written by scholars trained in modern linguistics. This was the political and social environment for the cultural need that was felt to ensure the promotion of good Tamil.

### The Ideology of Good Tamil

The ideology of good Tamil is culturally produced and is politically conscious. Parantamanar (2012 [1955]: vii), who was a professor of Tamil at Thiagaraja College, Madurai, and whose book was first serialised in the newspaper *Tamil Nāṭu*, believes that editors of Tamil newspapers and magazines, authors of children's books, publishers and printers, and clerks in the government need a manual like his (which he calls a 'ready reference book') to write Tamil without faults. Paramasivanandam (1961: 3), who was a professor of Tamil at Pachaiyappā's College, Chennai, claims, in the introduction to his book, which was first serialised in the magazine *Amutacurapi*, that language, by implication Tamil, is more than a tool of communication that is pliable to suit this purpose and it is the life itself to be lived by tradition (*marapu*).

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<sup>4</sup> Nannan's two-volume book, which has more than 1,900 pages, has run into its fourth printing. He had a series on writing good Tamil on Makkal Television and a series of evening public lectures on the same subject. He has written more than ten books on good Tamil. These statistics indicate the missionary zeal of the advocates of good Tamil.

Suddhananda Bharati (1964 [1943]: 6), a nationalist poet and a spiritual teacher, says that the lute and the flute are sweet, and for them to be sweet, their players must know the rules of music; similarly, Tamil is sweet and for it to remain sweet, its players must know the rules of grammar.<sup>5</sup> The grammar is viewed by these scholars as embodying the tradition and nature of Tamil, which is the *centamil*, 'straight Tamil', of poetry.

Good Tamil is focused on grammatical continuity and on avoiding grammatical breaks, as mentioned above. The grammatical rules of good Tamil are presented in modern prose for easy comprehension rather than in verse (in *śūtra* style), as they were meant for common people. There was also a desire for good Tamil to be simple to be accepted by its new users. It was a challenge to balance the old grammar with easy comprehension. This was solved basically by defining simplicity of language, not in terms of bringing its grammar closer to the grammar of the spoken language that was becoming standardised through education and cinema, but by preferring shorter sentences and accepting punctuation marks and the like. Relaxing the rules of *sandhi* across words mentioned above was also to meet the need of simplicity. This extended to the lexicon also by relaxing the norms defining the purity of words. Parantamanar (2012 [1955]: 29), for example, admits in good Tamil common loanwords from Sanskrit and English. He calls this allowance the middle path (*naṭu vaḷi*). Not all advocates of good Tamil gave this allowance, resulting in a range of linguistic characteristics that define good Tamil.

### Anxiety about Tamil

Paramasivanandam (1961: 15) recognises the social change that Tamil has moved from the hands of scholars (his word: *pulavar*) to ordinary people (his words: *cātarana manitan*). He cautions his readers not to imagine that the good Tamil he advocates is the high literary Tamil; the time of writing incomprehensible prose is gone; what is needed is a simple Tamil (*eḷiya tamil*) that everyone understands; ordinary people, who have no passion for Tamil (*moli-p parru*) nor any interest in language study, should be able to speak or write Tamil without making errors when they want to express themselves for their everyday needs in life. Parantamanar (2012 [1955]: 18) says that good Tamil is meant for those who write in the media and write

<sup>5</sup> The original title of Bharati's book published in 1943 was *Iniya tamil ilakkannam*, which can mean both 'Grammar of Sweet Tamil' and 'Grammar for Sweet Tamil'.

creative fiction; they should be able to write Tamil that does not have faults without having to memorise the rules stipulated by the old grammatical treatises; there are simpler ways to acquire good Tamil—i.e., the rules of grammar to write it—through books like his.

Good Tamil for these scholars aims at including the common man who needs enabling tools to practise it. They admit that the traditional grammatical treatises keep away the common people from grammar and conclude that this is the reason for making errors in Tamil. Hence, they want to make traditional grammar palatable and comprehensible to ordinary writers of Tamil. They, however, never consider the possibility of writing a new grammar based on the empirical data of contemporary Tamil and are contemptuous of any such grammar that could be written by a linguist.<sup>6</sup> The simplified grammar thus retains the content and organisation of the traditional grammars, including for the most part the illustrative examples given in them. Some (Mascarenhas and Dakshinamurthy 2005; Paramasivanandam 1961) include a section on the prosody and poetics of ancient and medieval poetry that are considered inappropriate for modern poetry. The goal is not to simplify the written language for fluency but to simplify the language of the grammar for easier comprehension. This involves simplifying the medium of the metalanguage in order to conserve the goodness of the actual language.

### Protecting Tamil

The conflation of the opportunities and threats mentioned above merged the ideology of the development of Tamil with the ideology of the protection of Tamil. The acceptance of *nalla tamil* by the Tamil community is a marker of Tamil love (*tamil-k katal*). The ideology of love of the language is intrinsically tied to the ideology of protection of the language (*tamil-k kaval*). There are cultural associations and activism around the agenda of protecting Tamil (*pātukāppu*). Tamil is to be protected not just from loss but also from corruptive influences such as dilution of its grammar and infection of its vocabulary, like the protective relationship between mother and child.

This conflation of ideologies in shaping the perception of the advocates of good Tamil helps to understand the ideological alignment of the advocacy of good Tamil with the resistance to the rise of Hindi as the official language of

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<sup>6</sup> Suddhananda Bharati (1964 [1943]) is somewhat different in giving passages written in modern Tamil to illustrate grammatical points.

the Union (in the 1960s) and with the demand for the elimination of Hindi from the language curriculum, with the resistance to English as a medium of instruction and to mixing English in Tamil speech and with the dismissal of spoken Tamil as corrupt and lazy. The fuelling force in the correlation of opportunities and threats is the ideology of the exceptionalism of Tamil, which is constituted by the belief in Tamil antiquity (i.e., no language is older than Tamil) and virginity (i.e., no other language has remained immaculate and immutable) (Schiffman 1966: 177–78). What is the ‘ideology’ of Tamil for the analysts from the outside is the ‘theory’ of Tamil for the insiders, which explains Tamil in the sense of what is included and what is excluded axiomatically. For the analysts, ‘ideologies about language, linguistic ideologies,’ following Silverstein (1979: 193), ‘are any set of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use’; these are theories articulated by language practitioners. The grammatical and lexical structure of good Tamil advocated by its practitioners is based on the ideologies of Tamil mentioned above. And, importantly, the good grammar advocated is proof of the validity of this ideology and of this theory. Language ideology and language grammar thus mutually reinforce each other. Any displacement of the ancient grammar of good Tamil in the contemporary period will invalidate the Tamil ideology on which it is based and hence must be resisted. The passion for Tamil is to do with its goodness. Even unlettered Tamil speakers who sacrifice their life literally out of passion for Tamil (Ramaswamy 1997: 1) do it for this Tamil of their ideological imagination, not for the ordinary Tamil they speak every day.

The intertwined relationship between perceived Tamil development and Tamil protection defines the nature of its central role in cultural politics and its appropriation of a large share of the political economy of Tamil Nadu. The ideology conflating development and protection serves as the ‘interpretive filter in the relationship of language and society’ (Woodlard and Schieffelin 1994: 62). This relationship is through the love of Tamil, which, among other things, is expressed by mastering good Tamil. Doing any good to this Tamil, be it creating literature in it, teaching it to the natives and outsiders, fighting a political battle for its sake, is doing service (*tonṭu*) to Tamil out of love. It is a love that obligates the lover to protect the loved one from any perceived sacrilege, embracing the ideology of protection (*kāval*).

Another manifestation of love of Tamil is the admiration for good Tamil. Political orations coded in this Tamil attract crowds in spite of their partial comprehension of it because good Tamil evokes admiration for the orators

for their 'spectacular literacy' (Bate 2009: 28). But it is not admiration of good Tamil in its use in all contexts. When the same good Tamil is used in conversational language, for example, it indexes anachronism; it stereotypes the speaker in social films as an oddity. This shows that good Tamil is not a universal cultural linguistic entity irrespective of the ideology behind it that is universal in the community.

### **Limitations of Good Tamil**

Good Tamil has captured school education, which uses textbooks in this Tamil and tests students' linguistic competence in it. Schools are the sites for training generations of students in good Tamil. This is the case with literacy textbooks for adults also. This is now challenged (Cody 2013), and the struggle between the good Tamil representing the elite and the living Tamil representing the common folks is going on.

The Tamil in the popular print media is not fully committed to good Tamil; it has many errors from the point of view of good Tamil (even when sloppy proofreading is discounted). There is an increasing amount of use of colloquial Tamil, which violates the rules of grammar that good Tamil advocates, in domains with minimal editorial control such as discussion groups on the net, social networks and online reader comments on newspaper and magazine articles (even when impulsive and sloppy writing is discounted). At the same time, there are efforts to sanitise this Tamil. The same digital technology that makes possible writing Tamil for public consumption without editorial intervention is used by the advocates of good Tamil to provide a forum for its propagation and for the condemnation of the other Tamil. This technology is used by these advocates to automatically edit out deviations (largely loanwords) from good Tamil from freelance entries on content creation sites such as Wikipedia. A linguistic culture war goes on in the cyber world, though it is hard to argue that those who do not write in good Tamil culturally reject it.

Protection of Tamil goes beyond external threats at the political level, but has a cultural consequence in knowledge production. The advocates of good Tamil have the power derived from state support to moderate the language of science, social and physical. Scientists are inhibited by the belief that they are not competent enough in good Tamil to write on science. More generally, public intellectuals hesitate to write in Tamil about the issues they are concerned with. The cultural consensus is that any intellectual content

in Tamil should be written by persons competent in good Tamil irrespective of the level of their competence in the subject they write about.

What makes Tamil good are the ideologically driven properties of its grammar and lexicon. They are needed to protect Tamil from the grammatical changes evolved in it and from the influences of other languages in contact with it in the past and in the present. Its desired autonomous existence excludes colloquial Tamil from impacting good Tamil. It provides Tamil a continuity with the past that is imagined to be unbroken and thus its authenticity is equated with immutability. But its practice in non-institutional settings such as in creative literature, communication by the public (as in mass media and online) and entertainment activities (including comedy and caricatures) moves away from the ideological good Tamil. This dichotomy is probably the natural state of any language ideology, and it is true of the ideology of Tamil also.



## CINNATTAMPI PULAVAR'S *KALVAḶAIYANTĀTI*

David Shulman\*

This essay studies the *Kalvaḷaiyantāti*, a once highly popular composition—in its own way, a minor masterpiece—composed in the eighteenth century in the Jaffna area by a virtuoso poet named Villavarāyar Cinnattampi at the well-known site of Kalvaḷai, today Sandilipay, sadly notorious for a massacre of Tamil civilians in the early stages of the civil war. Situated close to Jaffna city, Kalvaḷai is home to an old Gaṇapati temple that inspired our poet's work. Cinnattampi (1716–80) was the son of Mutaliyār Nākanātar Villavarāyar, who was commissioned by the Dutch to produce a compendium of Tamil customary law, the *Teca-vaḷa-mālai*. The poet studied with an exacting Tamil poet known as Kuḷankaitampirān and is supposed to have begun composing poetry in Tamil as a seven-year-old boy. There are stories, still current, about his astonishing ability to improvise verses from an early age. He is also supposed to have solved, while still a child, a difficult line in the *Kamparāmāyaṇam* that no one else could interpret correctly. The family claimed descent from the medieval Tamil kings of Jaffna.<sup>1</sup>

The *Kalvaḷaiyantāti* is a work of 102 intricate verses in a style and form typical of the so-called *cirṟ'ilakkiyam* or 'Short Genres' of late-medieval and early-modern Tamil. It should, however, be seen against the backdrop of Tamil literary creativity in early modern Jaffna and Batticaloa, a remarkable story still waiting to be told. Cinnattampi was a contemporary of the great Jaffna poet Varata Paṇṭitar, whose large-scale poems are rich in intertextual resonance with the work we will be examining.

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<sup>1</sup> See the publisher's introduction to *Kalvaḷaiyantāti*, 3–5; Zvelebil (1995: 153–54).

Why should we be interested in a poem that may appear to us today as arcane, overly configured, often impenetrable (at first glance), a display of linguistic and metrical prowess that seems and sounds remote from the kind of expressive and imaginative drives that we naturally look for in great art? This last sentence is long and tedious, and a satisfactory answer to it runs the danger of being equally tiresome. But I think it should be possible to say something intelligible by way of an answer, in an exploratory and experimental mode, aligned in some way to the experimental quality of the Tamil text itself. With this goal in mind, I will offer a reading of a few verses.

Here is the technical information you need in order to read any of those verses. Our text is an *antāti*—that is, the final syllables of each verse are repeated in part or in full as the initial syllables of the following verse; and the very last verse ends in syllables that appear at the start of verse 1, so that the entire work, like earlier, prestigious precedents in Tamil, has a circular, thus infinite, structure. One could go on reading it forever, never exiting its charmed circle. Along with the *antāti* element, all the poems of the work, with the exception of the two invocation verses, are thick with the figure of *yamaka* or *maṭakku*—the precise recurrence of whole chunks of text, and in particular the opening metrical foot (*cīr*) that is reproduced verbatim, sometimes with bits or all of the second foot as well, at the start of each of the four lines of the poem, though each such recurrence means something different.<sup>2</sup> In other words, we have in verse after verse strings of sounds that exactly replicate each other while changing their meanings. This makes *maṭakku-yamaka* into a kind of horizontal ‘bitextuality’, *śleṣa*, the figure of sound-cum-sense that Yigal Bronner (2010) has so brilliantly studied. More on this below. In addition, the first invocation is defined by the figure *tiripu*: here, the opening foot is repeated in all four lines with only a change in the first syllable. It looks and sounds like this:

tār kōṇṭa pū mallikaic cekkaiyir rumpi cālap pampun  
 cīr kōṇṭa Kalvalaiyantāti pāṭat tirai kaṭal cūl  
 pār kōṇṭa pall uyirkk’ ānanta mummatam pāyūn kumpak  
 kār kōṇṭa kampak kaḷi yānai munninru kāppatuve<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> On *maṭakku* in pre-modern and early-modern Tamil poetry, see Clare and Shulman (2023).

<sup>3</sup> All verses cited are from Cinnattampip Pulavar (1964).

Stand before me and watch over me,  
 elephant god tethered to a post,  
 your temples flowing with musth that gives joy  
 to all that breathes on earth,  
 so that I may sing you a fine *antāti*,  
 a garland humming with bees  
 in a bed of blossoming jasmine,  
 here, in Kalvaḷai.<sup>4</sup>

You can immediately see the *tiripu* in the rhyming metric feet that begin each line. There are more complicated forms of this device, but even a simple example like this introduces a charming musicality at the start of the poem, whose name—*Kalvaḷaiyantāti*—the author announces to us, or rather to the god, his prime listener. The poet is confident of his prowess: he asserts in the *cirappuppāyiram* preface preceding the invocation that his *antāti* should count as a book of the ancient Caṅkam (*iṇiya murcaṅkattu nūl eṇa*). I think we can agree that the invocation verse is, indeed, rich in aural textures, especially varied and repeated *monai* alliteration (dense recurrence, in particular, of *k* and *p*); and we also have the configured identification of the poem itself with the fresh garland to be offered to the god, Gaṇapati (who may, in fact, be decked with such a garland already, set in a bed of jasmine). In short, we are off to a good start. Gaṇapati is here, by synecdoche, a full-fledged elephant and, as such, he naturally can be tied to a pole—probably the loving hearts of his devotees, as the anonymous modern commentator suggests.

The second invocation has the standard *ētukai* head-rhyme that, as often in Tamil poems, builds up to a crescendo at the start of the final line:

*ōnrāy* irucuṭar muttōli' *nānmaraiy* otum aintāy  
*nanrāyav* āraṅkam yāvukkuṅ kārāṇa nātaṇumāy  
*ninrāy* niṅ Kalvaḷaiyantāti pāṭav eṅ *nēṅcakattup*  
*pōnrāv* aruḷ purivāy yāṇai mā mukap puṅkavaṅ

Being one,  
 two lights,  
 three processes,  
 four Vedas,

<sup>4</sup> All translations from Tamil are by the author unless otherwise stated.

the celebrated five,  
six fine Vedic sciences:

being all these, being the lord  
who is the cause of all there is,  
you abide here,  
god with the elephant's head.  
Grant your undying  
goodness  
inside my heart  
so I can sing *your* poem.

He cannot help himself: this poet likes puzzles, riddles and word-games shaped by purely sonic effects, with their concomitant semantic loads. The god of Kalvaḷai is, first, the one and only one; then the sun and the moon; the cosmic processes of creation, maintenance and destruction; the four Vedas; the five elements; the six Vedāṅgas and then, since the list has to end somewhere, the source of everything else that exists. Or rather, he continuously *becomes* all of the above. There is a stable quality about him, although he seems to be in constant movement. Being or becoming all this, he stands or abides in his temple. The poet needs his help if he is to complete the *antāti*, so he prays that the god give him *aruḷ*, 'goodness', by entering his heart; and this *aruḷ* must never die—*pōnrā*, the adjective that starts the final line, condensing into itself all the previous rhyming elements including the immediately preceding one about standing and abiding (*ninrāy*). Incidentally, note that Cinnattampi wants the god to know that the poem about to be sung belongs, *a priori*, to him, the god.

So much for the beginning. All the following hundred verses begin with *maṭakku/yamaka* sequences, some limited to the first metrical foot of each line, others (a majority) spilling over to include the second metrical foot as well, and always extending the sonic effect by further *monai* alliteration. As a result, each of these poems is at once a riddle waiting to be decoded, a phonoaesthetic *tour de force*, an exercise in compounded figuration and a complex statement about the nature and aspects of the god at Kalvaḷai and about the poet's own subtle relations with him. In addition, there is something to be said about the overall impression one gets from reading this work and, above all, about the expressive purposes served by the constant play of *maṭakku*, literally a 'folding' of sounds and meanings into one another in a dense

poetic texture. As we can see in this verse, that texture inevitably includes cosmological and metaphysical suggestion.

The typological grammar of *maṭakku* folding in Tamil already existed in full in the Chola-period *Taṇṭiyalaṅkāram* and the *Yāpp'arunkalam*.<sup>5</sup> Taṇṭi, the author of the *Taṇṭiyalaṅkāram*, tells us that *maṭakku* can come in the initial, middle or final position, and that further combinations are possible (first and middle position with final, and so on—or, for that matter, at any point in the poem). Extreme forms include the *maṭakku* repetition of whole lines in half of the verse or in the verse in its entirety (all four lines phonetically identical, but each distinct in meaning). One also finds verses in which only a single consonant is used throughout; this, too, is 'folding'. We thus have folds upon folds and folds within folds, to the very limit of what can be packed into metrical syllabic verse. One could also say that *maṭakku* verses tend to fold back upon or into themselves, 'indensifying' almost beyond what language is usually thought capable of expressing. But 'folding' can also reverse its inward direction so as to 'exfold' in experimental modes, both sonic and semantic, as we shall see. *Maṭakku* regularly exceeds its own normative grammar; indeed, that is perhaps the logic that powers its poetic purpose. The figure itself becomes or embodies the linguistic reality it has seemingly configured.

Taṇṭi offers many exemplary verses, some of them of great beauty. Further elaborations of the typology are found in later poetic grammars such as Vaitṭiyanāta Tecikar's sixteenth-century *Ilakkaṇa-viḷakkam*. The types and sub-types are of interest, as are the poetic examples, but for present purposes I limit myself to sampling what we find in a few verses of our text. It should be obvious that *maṭakku* verses are not really amenable to translation except in some more or less mechanical, which is to say hyposemanticised, way.

Let us begin at the beginning, with verse 1 (following the invocations):

*kaṛpaka nāṭar patin̄catakkann̄an̄ ēṅkann̄an̄ rōluṅ*  
*kaṛp̄aka vaṅciy itakkann̄an̄ ranta muk̄kann̄an̄ an̄riṛ-*  
*kaṛ paka vel ēri ve' tuṅaivan̄ kalvalaippati vāl*  
*kaṛpaka nan̄ n̄ilal cerntār karukkarai kaṅṭavare*

He's the one worshipped by the gods (who live near the wishing trees in heaven), by Indra of the thousand eyes and by eight-eyed Brahmā.

<sup>5</sup> The former work has been studied by Monius (2000); Chevillard (forthcoming); Clare and Shulman (2023).

He's the three-eyed son of the god with the vine-like lady of virtue in the left side of his body. He's the companion of the god (*veḷ*) who threw his spear and cleft open Mount Kraunca [= Murukan]. Those who find shelter in the shade of Kalpaka Vināyaka who lives in Kalvaḷai have seen the farther shore of the ocean of births.

I know, the prose paraphrase sounds rather awful. No one could even guess that a magical symphonic composition underlies it. But suppose we tried to mimic at least a little of the phonic effect:

The gods serve him.  
 Even Brahmā, even Indra, never swerve  
 from him. Murukan is his friend, who with verve  
 cast his spear at that rocky mountain. Those who come  
 to be with him in Kalvaḷai will surely find  
 the cool freedom  
 they deserve.

Let's face it, English just cannot do what Tamil can. English rhyme does not allow for the kind of sustained playfulness, repetition and continuous verbal surgery and reconstitution that lie at the base of any Tamil *maṭakku* verse. But we still can describe and maybe explain in English what is going on in this verse, which may not be among Ciṅṅattampī's most lyrical experiments but is nonetheless skillfully put together and fun to read. I have to hope that the explication will not kill the poem.

The 'folding' is conspicuously but not exclusively focused on the first metrical foot, with its three syllables—*kaṛ pa ka*. The poet reverts to them at the start of every line, but of course their meaning shifts each time. In line *a* we have the auspicious opening word *kaṛpaka* < *kalpaka*, the name of the trees that grant every wish. They are planted in heaven, so the beings who live in that world can be called *kaṛpaka nāṭar*, 'kalpaka-land people'. Line *b* starts with Umā, the 'vine' (*vañci*) whose innerness (*akam*) is all modesty, restraint and good sense, the feminine virtue of *kaṛpu*. Between line *b* and line *c* there is complex enjambment—the semantic units spilling over the metrical break—and thus we find the rocky mountain, *kal*, named after the *anril* bird whose Sanskrit name is Krauñca (so we have to translate the Tamil term back into Sanskrit to get the meaning); this mountain cracked open, *paka*, when Murukan threw his spear at it, killing the demon inside it. Finally, line *d* takes us back to *kaṛpaka* as a single modifier, like in line *a*, but this time it

is a proper name: Gaṇapati at Kalvaḷai is called Kalpaka Vināyaka, because he, like the *kalpaka* trees in heaven, fulfills all wishes.

Stay with me for another few moments. The verse is beginning to make sense beyond the verbal game the poet is playing. Notice that there is an internal movement carried forward by these *maṭakku* rhymes: we began in the distant heaven of the gods, and by the end, after a very short progression, we find ourselves in Kalvaḷai village at the feet of its god who is at least as good as, but actually much better than, all those other gods. In fact, Kalvaḷai itself is superior to that faraway heaven. Anyone who knows what is best for him would prefer to be right here near the Jaffna coast than in some theoretically upgraded slot in the sky surrounded by the familiar but not really useful deities who have to live there. The point to notice is that this rather impressive conclusion has been articulated entirely by the linguistic folding, without too much effort, within the confines of a short poem. Syllabic repetition can convey, without further figuration, a suggested meaning or meanings. The verse begins ostensibly at some high external point in the cosmos that turns out by the end to be rather low in relation to our village with its palm trees and paddy fields, so in effect the arc of the utterance is upwards, though this upward movement circles back to bring us home (again) on earth. This is, on first reading, folding as moving towards exfolding.

That upward-bearing arc contains, however, other vectors such as Lord Śiva's vertical split into left and right segments and the flight of Murukan's spear that similarly cleaves the demon's mountain. We can take this as one stable rule of *maṭakku* poetry. It nearly always seems to be moving in several directions, more or less simultaneously. Simultaneity is the temporal mode that allows, or requires, multi-directionality. Usually, as I have already said, there will be multiple folds, or bulges, or depressions, or tangles, or intersecting parabolas, emerging in the space internal to a single verse, all of them generated by simple linguistic means. Once again: here is a world of folds within folds, possibly an infinite series of continuous compression in all the relevant dimensions, spatial, temporal, cognitive-perceptual and, of course, sonic-linguistic.

But now it turns out that we have only traced the most superficial layer of this one slight poem. The initial folds very rapidly open up into further *yamaka*-repetitions, for example, the four *kaṇṇans* of the first two lines. Three of these are related to eyes that are located where eyes are meant to be, in the head; but the first instance, Indra's thousand eyes, are spread all over

his body, as we know from the story of Ahalyā in the *Rāmāyaṇa*<sup>6</sup> and also from a pregnant reference to it in the famous story of Nakkīrar's debate with Śiva—in the guise of a poet—in the Caṅkam academy at Madurai.<sup>7</sup> I will not elaborate on the intertextual references here, but I cannot help but point out that they take us into interesting spins of their own within the wider arc we have already defined; in particular, the traditional narrative explaining the origin of Tamil poetry is now part of this hypersemantic, sonic-generated verse. It is as if the poet has subtly positioned himself within the long line of great Tamil poets, perhaps, indeed, as the most skillful of them all. The fourth *kaṇ*, by the way, is not an eye but a locative suffix, a suggestion of interiority, unless we want to read line *b* as opening with a long phrase describing Śiva's left eye as belonging to the *kaṛp' aka vañci*, or vine, who is his wife, a *rūpaka* or embodied metaphor. *Maṭakku* verses are dense, but it is best not to over-interpret them, if possible. Notice, however, the simple counting riddles that we saw in the invocation.

That should be enough for this one verse. Already we can list certain dependable features of the technique. One can produce *maṭakku* segments by re-segmentation, that is, through simple *sandhi* alterations, as Yigal Bronner (2010: 213–16 and *passim*) has shown at length (*kaṛpaka* becomes *kaṛp' aka* and *kal paka*); by complex enjambment, overriding the metrical breaks; by various lexical displacements (Tamil to Sanskrit and vice versa, or the marshaling of arcane lexemes); by *tadbhava* formations that mask the original form of a word or syllable; by subtle encoding, including inventive extensions of grammatical categories (such as *ākupeyar*, transferred meaning); and by other helpful grammatical means (vocatives, archaic morphemes), and so on. Normally, these folds carry some mode of suggestion or oblique reference. Another regular feature, present in verse 1, is what could be called semantic wavering, as when the initial *kaṛpaka* < *kalpaka*, a name-tag somewhat eroded by convention, recurs as the proper name of the poem's addressee,

<sup>6</sup> Ahalyā, the wife of the sage Gautama, was seduced by Indra, king of the gods; Gautama, upon discovering this betrayal, cursed Indra to be disfigured by a thousand vaginas, which then turned into eyes—hence Indra's name as 'Thousand-Eyes'.

<sup>7</sup> Nakkīrar, the president of the third and final Academy of Tamil Language and Literature, found fault with a poem composed by Lord Śiva; insulted, the god opened his fiery third eye, on his forehead, thus burning the stubborn academic. But Nakkīrar, on the verge of incineration, insisted that even if Śiva had a thousand eyes like Indra, 'a mistake remains a mistake'.

thus stemming the erosion. Stated simply, *karpaka* becomes meaningful in a new and more lively way by the time we reach the fourth folding. We will see another, even stronger example of this feature in a moment.

These building blocks of *mataḷku* are well known and widely distributed in Tamil poetry even in non-*yamaka* verses. A typological list will not tell us what we most want to know—for example, why it is that Tamil poets want to produce such effects, apart from showing off their proficiency and generating lovely sounds. Let's move on.

*taṇan taṇan tanti marupp' anna mātar tarai virumpu-  
ta' nanta nantan tikaḷ taṇṭurai toru' mēṇ caṅcarikan  
taṇantaṇantantimiy ēṇ kalvaḷaiyaṇ caṅkakkulaikkā-  
ta' nantan an tantam ḍṇrāṇ ēṇru' nēṅcan taṇil unṇume* (6)

To extinguish your desire  
for money, for land, and for women, their breasts  
like an elephant's tusk, think always  
in your heart  
of the son of Lord Śiva with his earring of conch,  
think of his single tusk, this lord  
of Kalvaḷai where as you go down to the sea  
rich with shells, bees gently hum.  
You can hear them now:  
*tanantanantantimi.*

The folding has expanded to six initial syllables in each line, joining the first metrical foot to at least part of the second. *Taṇantaṇantanti*: we can decipher these syllables—in the first line, we have *taṇan* (< Skt. *dhana* followed by Skt. *stana*); in the second line, the final syllable of the verbal noun *virumpuṭa* connects to the infinitive *nanta*, to perish; in the fourth line, there is the last syllable of *kulaikkātaṇ*, the god with the earring (of conch, *caṅkam*) and his son, *nantaṇ* (< Skt. *nanda*[*na*]). Not only are these solutions a little more difficult than in the previous verse we read, they are also virtually impossible to pronounce as separate words, and even to represent them as word units, as I have, instead of the metrical units that Tamil has preferred for at least the last two centuries, is a stretch. In fact, in contrast to a diagnostic feature of classical Tamil poetry in recitation—that is, the regular contrapuntal interplay of metre and syntax (or metre and semantics)—a poem like this can probably only be sung according to the metrical units, with 'meaning' lagging somewhere

behind. The reciter and the listener or reader are actually driven into the music; they will have to work hard to disentangle the bitextual meanings hidden inside the sounds.

And what about the third line? Here, this sonic sequence means only itself, a straight onomatopoeia meant to call up to ear and mind the buzzing of bees, though it also sounds rather like a series of drumbeats heightened or echoed by further dental alliteration in three out of the four lines.

Like many poems in this *antāti*, including the invocation we read, this one focuses on singularity or oneness—that one famous tusk. Nonetheless, we have two tusks mentioned in the verse, along with two conch shells. With the help of the lexical resources that Sanskrit provides, Tamil *tanam* can clearly mean quite a few different things. A fortunate set of coincidences? Perhaps not. Complex enjambment twice scrambles the syntax here, as a good folding should. But in a way we do not need to go so far this time in making sense of what we have heard. The most salient feature of the poem is the direct reference to sound itself as the latent meaning of the *maṭakku*.

Can we paraphrase the deeper expressivity of this poem? Maybe we could say something like ‘Kalvaḷai is throbbing or humming with music, a natural music with its own natural rhythms that one can hear whenever one goes down to the sea, and that is also resonant with the internal rhythms of this deity and the movement that animates his every moment.’ Like any paraphrase, this one destroys the actual content that it attempts to represent. One might add, however, that this musical reality is so strong, and probably also so subtle, that it drowns out all our usual obsessions and cravings. So instead of ‘think’ or ‘think of’ in the translation I have given, it would undoubtedly be better to say: ‘Listen. Hear that music. Attune your ears to it, because if you take its rhythm into your body, it will save your life.’ I think we are getting a little closer to what this verse actually means, if ‘means’ is the word we are looking for. On another level, it means as it sounds. And on yet another level, perhaps the most crucial of them all, the sound patterns sung sequentially may be said to effectively constitute the god in the presence of the singer and the listener, a process I have elsewhere called ‘auralization’ (Shulman 2014), the sonic counterpart to the more common notion of visualisation.

In a few moments we can attempt a wider and more general formulation of what is going on in this composition. Since the exercise we are attempting is itself a little demanding, this might be a good place to recall that when, on a fateful day in October 1880, the young, overly self-assured scholar U. Vē. Cāmināiyar was asked by Ramacuvami Mutaliyar what important Tamil

books he had studied, Cāminātaiyar first began to list short but astonishingly dense and erudite works like our *antāti* (Cāminātaiyar 1982: 528–34). There must be a good reason why they were so beloved—why, in fact, they were considered the acme of Tamil literary production. Here again is the question with which we began. But first, let us enlarge our sample just a little.

*cint' ā maṇi tēnral anri' nilāp pakai cēyyav aṇi*  
*cintā maṇi mulai vāṭṭinaḷ elu cēkam aḷanta*  
*cint' ām aṇi tuḷavan reṭu kalvalaic cēyyav aruṭ-*  
*cintāmaṇi varak kāṇom payotarac cēll iname (17)*

The ocean, a cow's bell, the southern wind, the *anril* bird, the moon—  
 all these are her enemies. No wonder our girl  
 of the perfect breasts is fading away, her beauty  
 spoiled. Listen, you clouds heavy with rain:  
 we've seen no sign that the bright jewel  
 of Kalvalai, the one who fulfills all wishes,  
 the one sought by the Dwarf adorned with *tulasi*  
 who measured the world,  
 will ever come.

As I type out these texts, I am wondering if you are beginning to find something strange and beautiful in them, something compelling in ways that are not so easy to articulate. At some point the business of decoding and resegmenting falls away, and one's attention is drawn to some other aspect or quality hidden in the syllables. The decoding also becomes easier with practice. Let me just say, by way of explicating this verse, that the *maṭakku* fold keeps foregrounding the *cintāmaṇi* jewel that gives whatever one asks for. What we hear, four times, is the name of that jewel. Of course, the first three instances need to be resegmented: *cintu ā maṇi* (ocean, cow's bell...) in the first line; *aṇi cintā maṇi (mulai)*, the jewel-like breasts losing their loveliness, in the second line; *cint' ām aṇi (tuḷavan)*, the *tulasi*-bearer who is a dwarf (a rare meaning of *cintu*!) in the third line. Notice that the folding stretches into the second metrical foot, as in our previous example.

The other element that requires a few words is the nature of the vignette we are seeing, or the conversation we are overhearing. Someone is addressing a line of clouds; but who is speaking? And why speak to clouds? The second question is easy enough to answer. We cannot help but remember a certain cloud that (or rather *who*) was sent on a lover's mission by a *yakṣa* exiled in

South India. So Kālidāsa lives on in this verse as, we can assume, does the template of the messenger poem. We do not get to hear the message, but we can imagine what it might say: something like, ‘Tell him to hurry up already! She’s wasting away. Everything makes her very survival precarious—the ringing of a cow’s bell, the roaring of the ocean, the wind, the moonlight .... She is tortured by all of them, each alone and all together. She may not last much longer.’ So this must be a love-poem, indeed one set in some remnant of the old *akam* poetic grammar with its landscapes of longing. No single landscape is clearly marked by the old *karu* indicators, but I think it is a safe bet that, given where Kalvaḷai is, this must be something like a *nēyṭal* seashore poem of impatient, indeed unbearable and quite hopeless waiting. The modern commentator plausibly tells us that the speakers are the girlfriends of the Caṅkam-style *talaivi* heroine; they are very worried about their friend.

And who is the *talaivaṇ* who gives no sign of coming? Clearly, he must be the Kalvaḷai god, the one who fulfills all wishes. So, even if we do have some recycled *akam* format (and the messenger-poem template overlapping with it), it does not fit either the ancient *akattiṇai* poetics or, more to the point, the expanded and refashioned *akam* grammar of the medieval *bhakti* genres such as *kovai*. In the latter, the true subject of the poem, the real *talaivaṇ* or hero, always the god or king or patron, is mentioned only obliquely and thus kept rigorously distinct from the human lover (*kiḷavit talaivaṇ*) who is internal to the poetic lovers’ drama. Only in the very late (Nāyaka-period and after) Short Genres do the two subjects coalesce, as they have here. The far-reaching consequences of this fusion have been discussed elsewhere by several scholars (see Narayana Rao et al. 1992).

There are some curious semantic features of the verse; for example, the apparent redundancy in the final apostrophe to the clouds, which are both *payodhara* (from Sanskrit) and *cēl*, another unusual Tamil lexeme. The clouds apparently speak both Sanskrit and Tamil, as any good cloud should. *Payodhara*, however, also means ‘breasts’, the main attribute of the young girl called up in the second line and, for that matter, in a long set of other verses in our *antāti*. Anyway, these clouds are holding in their rain, just as the god is holding back his love, or his generosity, the attribute implicit in his name both in this verse and in verse 1, examined earlier. I think it is of interest that tiny *akam*-style insets are sprinkled throughout Cinnattampi’s work, not in any special sequence, as if the transition from straightforward praise of the deity to his cameo appearance in an old-style love poem were completely natural,

indeed axiomatic, no explanations needed. However, a verse like this really makes sense only when we follow through the several radical revisions that the ancient *akam* grammar underwent in the course of, say, a millennium or so of aesthetic experimentation by Tamil poets. Jennifer Clare (2011, forthcoming) has discussed some powerful examples from the Chola-period *Yāpp'arunkalam* and its commentary, as well as the *Taṇṭiyalaṅkāram*.

So there is some non-trivial dimension of suggestiveness built into this slight verse. But where is the suggestion situated? Very probably, in the syllabic, recurrent musical sounds. These sounds do carry a semantic load, as I have tried to show. That load, however, can be accessed only by the continuous processes of fragmentation and recombination, or ambiguation and repeated disambiguation, as in all the other verses of our book. Sounds shimmer, break apart and recombine, momentarily, in the listener's mind. They resist stable reference, which, given what is at stake here, would be merely boring. Very remarkably, this business of quivering and teasing culminates in the final *cintāmaṇi*, in line four, a reference to the one who gives no sign of coming. Suddenly, at the point of greatest tension in the poem, this word actually means itself. Of course, even this natural denotation—clearly an achievement in the *maṭakku*-informed world—is in fact a semantic displacement, an instance of *lakṣaṇā* or indirect (transferred) reference. Gaṇapati is not, literally, a wish-giving jewel, or any other kind of jewel. He is a god. You have to clear away the blockage inherent to the operation of any form of *lakṣaṇā* in order to get to the implied, non-literal meaning, as the Sanskrit theoreticians of this kind of utterance have made clear. To understand the specific usage here, or in Tamil generally, one should read E. Annamalai's (1990) brilliant paper on *ākupēyar*. As in the case of the bilingual clouds, a fascinating Tamil–Sanskrit overlapping is unfolding, almost nonchalantly, in this verse.

In a field made up of many folds in which certain sonic sequences appear to be the only stable elements, there will be occasional moments when a word refers, first, to its natural meaning and, second, to itself as a verbal token. Such moments tend to look like fleeting attempts at coalescence, an indensified integration of the various potential meanings that have been tried out, and set aside, on the way. Thus *cintāmaṇi* might actually mean *cintāmaṇi* in the two senses I have just mentioned. Hearing the poem read out loud, one feels a certain psychic relief when the fourth line begins. On the other hand, this kind of semantic and phonic self-coincidence may well be the ultimate displacement.

Allow me one final example. It is hard to choose. The verses tend towards ever greater complexity and ever richer tonality as the *antāti* progresses. Here is the final verse, 100:

*kaṇa kantara niṛa' māl cāpan tirtt'ituṅ kāraṇav eṅ  
ka'nakan tara neñciṛ ronru puṅ mālai kai kōlvai cēṅ ko-  
kanakan taru malar kovai cēy nāruṅ kavinum anro  
kanakan taraḷa maṇi māṭak kalvaḷai karpakame*

You, the only cause, you who freed Māl,  
dark as a raincloud, from his curse:  
accept from me, take into your hands,  
this poor garland that arose in my heart, hard  
as a rocky mountain. Isn't it true  
that even the string on which golden lotuses  
are strung has some sort of beauty?  
Can't it be true, Wishing Tree in Kalvaḷai  
with its tall buildings of pearl, sapphire,  
and gold?

You can see that this final verse takes us back to the wishing tree, *karpakam*, with which we began, thus tying together the entire *antāti* as a single, circular garland. Here, too, as in the previous example, the final line is made up of words with natural reference; no need to decipher, dissolve, recompose. The book has turned to liquid gold, the exact opposite of the stony heart that somehow managed to create it. The *maṭakku* still depends on folding one line into another through enjambment and on various *sandhi* effects; and, like so many others, it binds together the first two metrical feet in each line, even as their verbal components slip and slide apart. (What if 'hard' and 'heart' were near-homonyms in English, and not by chance?) We have a tremendous crescendo of velar plosives in the final two lines: an avalanche of *k*-s and allophones of *k*, as if meant to wake up the god one last time. But, interestingly, there is nothing bitextual, as far as I can see, in the rhetorical question the poet asks this god or in the implicit but transparent simile (which could be variably classed as an 'example', *dr̥ṣṭānta*, or a compressed riddle-like *samāsokti*). The rhetorical question has an obvious answer. Still, it generates another question just for us. In this text, what exactly equals the flowers, and what is the fibre string that holds them together and thus makes a literary work?

Suppose we want to keep sound and sense relatively distinct, as the poeticians sometimes do. Maybe the sense—the meanings, the ideas, the perceptions articulated, mostly indirectly, throughout a hundred verses—is what constitutes the flowers; and the sounds, in their shifting and recurring patterns, would thus be the string. Many people, including linguists, think that meaning rides, so to speak, on sounds, which may or may not be defined as arbitrary. Even Bhartṛhari, the great philosopher of language in Sanskrit, says that, among other ways he has of speaking about language. Sometimes Plato, too, opts for this view, though the *Cratylus*, perhaps his most penetrating discussion of language, tends towards the opposite pole (far-reaching iconicity of sounds). To stay with Cinnattampi, it does seem as if he wants the god at Kalvaḷai to understand some verbal message that he is offering him, like the silent message entrusted to the clouds in the *akam* verse above. But what if that message is, in fact, in the first instance, the sound patterns themselves, which would then be the flowers, and the whole long set of possible discursive meanings, decodable and amenable to paraphrase in one degree or another, would be the string, with its somewhat surprising but far from negligible claims to a certain beauty of its own?

But, you will say, how could that possibly be the case? We spend our whole lives translating and grappling with meaning, specifically the meaning embodied in words.

I will tell you how. Here are four ways (among others) of understanding the kind of bitextual word-play or syllable-play that we see in any *yamaka/maṭakku* text.

First, we have a strong theory spelled out by Yigal Bronner (2010) among other readings of bitextual poetry. Bronner shows again and again how *śleṣa*, whether on the level of a single word-token or in an entire, sustained bitextual composition telling two or more stories simultaneously, can establish a latent affinity between the two registers of meaning brought into the poetic space. The Sanskrit *Rāghava-pāṇḍavīya* and the Telugu *Rāghava-pāṇḍavīyam* tell us, in the exact same sounds, the stories of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. We have bitextual works that, read from the beginning to the end, tell one story and, read from the end to the beginning, tell another. All such works are *tours de force*, at least partly in the sense that you have to force the syllables to mean what you want them to mean and thus to entice the listener to hear what she is meant to hear—the consistent doubling, on multiple levels, together with the strong sonic resonances. But more often than not, the poets do manage to conjure up the suggestion of an innate, interesting affinity, which

may, of course, indeed probably must, include many areas of contrast. The suggestiveness of *śleṣa* texts, through resegmentation, homophony and other linguistic means, tends dependably towards generating this kind of complex double perception.

Second, Jennifer Clare, departing from Daṇḍin/Taṇṭi, the *Viracoliyam* and the *Yāpp'aruṅkalam*, has given us a powerful formulation of bitextual practices in second-millennium Tamil works. Stated somewhat minimally: 'the Tamil tradition, from its earliest engagement with what came to be known as *kāvya* in many South Asian literary cultures, privileged the capacity of sound to invert, undermine and thoroughly make crooked the relationship between words and meaning' (Clare 2017: 113). Polysemic sound, Clare says, 'destabilises' meaning and casts the reader or listener back on to the surface of the poem, where several distinct cognitive and affective processes can come into play. What I have called natural reference is denaturalised. Meaning itself may be problematised—deliberately ambiguated. Sound assumes a new and decisive role. We have seen something of such operations in the few verses we studied above.

Third, we need to take into account the possibility that language itself can be conceived, particularly in heightened situations of use, as a domain of overdetermined effects. Even if there do exist accidental, arbitrary or purely symbolic features within language, we will also find vast stretches of speech seen to be iconic, non-symbolic and effectual. In South India, already in the *Tōlkāppiyam*, and by no means only in Tamil, such effective, charmed, highly potent linguistic usages are part of the toolbox of an accomplished poet. By medieval times, the poet skilled in the art of combining syllables (based on the principle of *pōruttam*, harmonic consonance, between sound and world) can bless, curse, kill, revive the dead, bring prosperity or its opposite. We see this in the *Pāṭṭi'iyal* handbooks as well as in prevalent praxis by poets such as Kāḷamekappulavar; also in the theoretical and literary works of the Andhra *alaṅkāra* school. 'Folding' is driven at least in part by this way of thinking about sounds. There are, however, many potential levels of usage, if 'levels' is the word we need. Non-accidental homophony need not be magical. It must, however, be musical. In a recent essay on the Telugu *Vasu-caritramu*, I have tried to show something of what this might mean, in cultural-historical terms, for late-medieval *prabandha* texts from the south (Shulman 2019).

Fourth, and to my mind the most important: there may be room for a more radical view. Let us go back to the image that emerged from the final verse of the *antāti*—the string and the flowers. Where does beauty lie? What

is a beautiful sentence trying to say? Sometimes, as we have seen, it appears to say what it means. Such cases are rare in late pre-modern Tamil. In verse 100, the final line both says what it means and says, with some measure of surprise, that it is now ready to say what it means. The statement itself is part of the folding and unfolding that goes on without end within the *antāti*'s charmed circularity. As such, it, too, may be undermined or displaced.

'Folding' is serious business, both as a figure of sound and as a more generalised intra-linguistic activity. Through sonic repetition, the verse, with all its sounds, is turned back on itself—not once but over and over. Each fold expands the available space and at the same time makes the poem more dense. As we have seen, indensification of this intensity easily boggles the mind. Reference recedes in the face of cognitive excess. That result was present, as possibility, as *telos*, from the start.

The sounds turn in upon themselves and pass through themselves, throwing off, at every fold, potential meanings that have the merit, at the very least, of resonating—literally—with other such meanings that are carried by these same sounds. Cumulating, infolding further, these meanings cannot but suggest one another, though it is possible that such suggestion could be classed as semantic detritus, a by-product of continuous folds in space and time and mind. Folding means, in practice, that unstable quiver that makes sounds separate, dissolve and re-combine. Among the possibilities inherent in the ongoing quiver is momentary self-coalescence of sonic token with conventional meaning, waiting to unfold in various (sometimes underdetermined, at other times overdetermined) ways. At base, however, all pre-semantic sound, like the inaudible buzz or the bird-song that Bhartṛhari mentions, goes through the same processes of breaking up into units—we can call them words—that then tend to flow into one another again, with fuzzy edges where they meet. Hence the need for such elaborate *sandhi* rules.

The Tamil grammarians and poetics have not, in so far as I have been able to see, attempted to theorise *maṭakku* or *tiripu* or their allied forms in the terms I have set out. Nor should we expect them to. However, this vision of language in the world calls out for grammaticalisation, given the patterned regularities that we see in every literary example of the figure. What would a reference grammar of *maṭakku* look like? It would, undoubtedly, leave room for decoding: ground zero of a *maṭakku* text. No reader would forego this ascetic pleasure. You hear the verse, you understand maybe a third of it at first hearing and the resultant tension in the mind sends you rushing to the commentary or the dictionary or your memory in order to resolve the evident

puzzles, the traps put in place by the author. You cannot go farther without accomplishing this task. A good reader is programmed, so to speak, for flexible and resilient semanticity. Indeed, without intelligible meaning there would be no need for *maṭakku* works in the first place. A mridangam solo would suffice.

But decoding, in such works, goes beyond verbal meanings per se. Something else is always being said. Occasionally, we can paraphrase what this might be, as I have tried to do with one or two of the verses above. One reads the verse as a whole, a few times, before even beginning to think about such a paraphrase; and one knows in advance that the paraphrase cannot exhaust what the verse is saying to us. That knowledge is part of the grammar and should be stated explicitly in it. As Constantine V. Nakassis has suggested, we are dealing with ‘patterns that exceed the units that comprise them.’<sup>8</sup>

One might say that indeterminate meanings arising out of the endless folding and re-folding comprise an available field of potential suggestion, out of which a selection is made any time a good reader addresses a given verse. Some of these meanings are certain to be weightier than others. Any fold will open up new points of departure arising from juxtaposition, superimposition or—the notion I would prefer—overlapping. The latter term has the virtue of preserving the relative autonomy of each such point of intersection; there is no mechanical repetition at work in any *maṭakku* poem. Each ‘repetition’ is distinctive, indeed unique. However, some may be more complex, or deeper, more resonant, than others. A *maṭakku* work has sudden dips of density, accessible to observation and analysis.

Now think again of the *akam*-style inset that we saw in verse 17 above. In the old grammars, the *tiṇai* landscapes, keyed to stages in the prototypical love relationship, were meant to suggest processes internal to the persons active in a love poem—mostly states of separation, conflict and longing. But in our *antāti*, when we get an *akam* poem, it is the *tiṇai* system of landscape signifiers itself, in some reduced and residual form, that is being suggested, not, except in a minor way, the standard contents of the old systemic categories. Sound, repeating, folding inwards, suggests the existence of a now largely redundant grammar, just as many of the folds entail the residual survival of old lexicalised and grammaticalised tokens (especially obscure meanings of still active words). This is a grammar of potential speech turning back to its pre-articulate source.

If one reads the poems over many times, listening carefully, one reaches a point where sound and sense are no longer reified entities, distinct from one

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<sup>8</sup> Personal communication, 28 May 2017.

another. They are shifting aspects of a relational field, and as such, mutually constitutive. Processes of denotation occupy, at best, the margins of this field. We have seen images of externality—a stone mountain, for example—encompassing interiority (the *akam* zone of feeling and perception), just as interiority easily reaches up to encompass the heavens or, indeed, the entire cosmos.<sup>9</sup> The relevant cosmos, however, is firmly located in Kalvaḷai with its paddy fields and its god who comes into being when the poem is sung.

A good *maṭakku* verse ‘means’ how it sounds and sends us back to those sounds. I know this must seem strange. But suppose we were dealing with a musical text that repeatedly folded and unfolded a particular melodic phrase or scalar progression, sometimes overlapping the notes of a dominant *rāga* with those of a latent or hidden *rāga*. This, in fact, happens all the time in Karnatic music. Overlapping (*vivādi*) notes, by the way, can be silent, heard only by their absence. In any case, the composition we are hearing may well depend upon a characteristic melodic phrase, including its absent or hidden parts. We were already on the edge of such a notion when we discovered the onomatopoeia that was part—actually, the main part—of the *maṭakku* verse with its buzzing bees and elusive, unspecified drums.

Such a string of sounds lives inside the poem, which continually brings it to the surface and charges it with overlapping bits of meaning, old and new, in what looks like an experimental mode. If this description is correct, then our grammar might even have its own version of what the ancient grammarians called *ullurāiy uvamam*, the ‘simile that lives inside’ (though they did not mean simile in the sense we usually do). What is meant is not comparison but a potential, unexpected meeting of something known with something unknown, yet not quite unrelated, to borrow a phrase from T. M. Krishna.<sup>10</sup> There is always an element of surprise. Indeed, *maṭakku* regularly generates wonder; for example, at the discovery that such identical yet differential sound-chunks exist and can combine with one another to produce something beautiful, like the visualisation, auralisation or tangible embodiment of divinity. This is as good a place as any to stop folding and unfolding, for now.

<sup>9</sup> Again, my thanks to Constantine V. Nakassis.

<sup>10</sup> Demonstration-lecture at the Israel Academy of Arts and Sciences, January 2017.



## MEANING AS RESCUER

### Colonising the Coloniser, the Tamil Way

Govindarajan Navaneethakrishnan\*

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I approach an afterlife of a Tamil *bhakti* poem composed by a prominent English colonial administrator based in colonial Madras Presidency during the first half of the nineteenth century. The poem was the subject of a series of controversies immediately upon its appearance in print; some defamed its composer and questioned the credibility of his faith in his own religion. The poem was slandered and seen as evidence of the coloniser's conversion to the colonised's religion. Intriguingly, and by contrast, the poem was commented upon by a native Tamilian scholar, restoring the fame of the composer and rescuing the poem from the charge of verbal absurdities. The poem in question was entitled *Taravukkoccakakkalippā*. Its disparaged author is the celebrated Francis Whyte Ellis (1777–1819), who at the time served as the collector of Ramnad. The untitled commentary was written by Muttuccāmiṭṭai (?–1840), Ellis's close friend and a Tamil teacher at Fort St. George College. As *Taravukkoccakakkalippā* is comprised of five stanzas written in Tamil in praise of Lord Śiva, it was later hailed as *Namacivāyappāṭṭu*.

The poem, the controversy surrounding it, and Muttuccāmiṭṭai's response to this controversy supply the central theme of this chapter. In what follows, I ask: What happens when a coloniser *mimics* the colonised? In answering this question, I argue that the coloniser's Tamil text is a delineation of inverse colonisation, and the commentary is an act of epistemological

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honouring given by a colonised subject to a coloniser's text. I also contend that the text and the commentary is an *inverse pairing* in the colonial semiosis and in the Tamil literary relation as well, and in doing so it envisages an anomalous colonial discourse, the colonisation of coloniser by the colonised.

### The Poem: A Small History

In his *Tamil Plutarch* (1859), the earliest surviving English account of Tamil literary works and authors, Simon Casie Chitty, after introducing some of the major works of the famous Tamil poet and scholar Muttuccāmpillai, has the following to say about him:

Besides the two works noticed above, he wrote a commentary on Mr. ELLIS' stanzas, called *Taravu Kochchagakalippa* (தரவுகொச்சக்கலிப்பா); this he did in order to refute an idea which was prevalent amongst the Hindus that Mr. ELLIS, having ended each of his stanzas with the words *Namasivaya*, he had therefore become a convert to their religion; By proving that these words were never intended to represent the pentagrammaton, but only to convey the meaning 'reverence to the only God'.<sup>1</sup> (Chitty 1859: 56)

Translating it to Tamil and extensively expanding the *Tamil Plutarch* after 27 years, Arnold Sadasivam Pillai made clear the name of the group who had made the assertion that Ellis was converted to 'their' religion. It was the Saivites who made the accusation, said Arnold. He sarcastically labelled the whole incident *Ūrārulariyāpavātam*. We infer from Chitty's account that it was not an accusation by a specific group (he mentions no name), but the poem was displayed as evidence of the power of their own religion (whoever they were). But in the words of Arnold Sadasivam Pillai, it was a calumny (*apavātam*). He exceeds his source text and says that the arguments of Saivites amounted to tittle-tattle (*uḷaral*). He labels the Saivites as *ūrār*, people living in *ūr*, and thus makes the accusation a universal one against all Saivites. He adds that Muttuccāmpillai had given a proper refutation by writing a commentary to the negative arguments (*etirkkūrru*) of the Saivites (Arnold 1994: 243).

Arnold seems to be pointing to the polemical writings of the Saivites of that time. The Saivites took an active role in condemning heretical texts during the nineteenth century (Paramasivan 2014: 119–22). The well-known polemics

<sup>1</sup> All translations from Tamil are mine unless otherwise stated.

written by Saivites against the *aruṭpā* (divine) songs of Thiruvartuprakasa Vallalār, alias Chidambaram Ramalingam (1823–1874), which denigrated them as *maruṭpā* (songs with error), is worth mentioning in this regard (Caravaṇan 2001: 40–43). While none of the Saivite texts condemning Ellis’s poem have survived, from these accounts of the two earliest literary historians of Tamil, we can infer three distinct moments within a complex colonial event: (i) Francis Whyte Ellis composed a Tamil poem resembling a Saiva poem; (ii) it was accused of a specific religious commitment, as evidence of the power of this religious sect (Saivism); (iii) and a commentary on it was written by a native named Muttuccāmiṭṭai to refute this accusation. Neither author specified how many poems were written by Ellis, or when and where they were published. Neither the poem nor the commentary has been quoted as evidence.

We infer from one Singarapelavanderam Pillay that Ellis had written only one Tamil poem and that it had five stanzas. He gives all five stanzas of Ellis’s poem as *Taravukkocakakkalippā* (Singarapelavanderam Pillay 1859: 112). Taking a cue from him we find all the five stanzas in the 1819 edition of Ellis’s commentary on the *Tirukkuraḷ*. It was posthumously published (Ellis died in 1819) and had no front page. Each stanza of the printed poem ends with *namacivāya*, the sacred mantra of Saivites. He quotes his own poem in his commentary for the tenth couplet of the first chapter (*kaṭavulvālttu*, The Praise of God) of the *Tirukkuraḷ* (Figure 8.1). Ellis also translated his poem into English. Neither the Tamil poem nor the translation appears to have been published in any other books or in the existing colonial magazines. He did not inscribe his name in it. It is also clear from reading his *Tirukkuraḷ* commentary that it was Ellis’s custom to give the title or the author’s name of the poem that he quotes from. Ellis’s silence shows his *avaiyaṭakkam* (‘expression of humility before the audience’). Ellis’s commentary has been republished twice, once in 1844 by the American Mission press and again in 1955 by Madras University but excluding all the grammatical notes. Controversy would have surfaced after the wide circulation of the 1819 edition.

Like Ellis’s poem, Muttuccāmiṭṭai’s commentary also has an eventful publication history. In 1843, Appāvupillai published a small volume of the uncollected poems of Vīramāmunivar, alias Constantine Joseph Beschi (1680–1747). He included Muttuccāmiṭṭai’s commentary in it without any context (Figures 8.2 and 8.3). In 1936, the same Appāvupillai edition was reprinted as a facsimile (Figure 8.4).

தரவுக்கொக்கக்கலிப்பா

நீனநீயுமலையிலொநீனமணியாரபேரகடவிய  
 எனறுரைபபாரநமபுயரோயிவருகுநதஞ்சமுண்டு  
 வினவீரமதினமலரநதிநமலரோயெனூடசேதிப்ப  
 முனறெயவமவிடடெனபேனமுறையொனறைய நமசிவாய

மனனூடுவானூடுமவிதாசாரொலவெரும  
 எனனூதவண்டமவைவிவறதுணாமபவையிரும  
 கனனூடடிநகானூதமனமாடடிநகண்டபரம  
 நனனூமவிவணவணங்கியென்பவரோ நமசிவாய

சிறநிறைவநிலவுவகுடசிநியோரினிதுபொருளில்  
 உறநிறையவாதுவரோவல்லமையும்கிழ்ச்சியுள்ள  
 பறநிறைவனீடுகிறையவாகாரயேயாகதினூற  
 செறநிறைவிடடுடடிநிறையசெசாரியேனே நமசிவாய

வாயமையொனநுமாயயொனநுமவாருளதிலவேழநியாய  
 சீயெல்லொடுமலொசீநினனூனிலொபபொருளமீலகை  
 சீயெல்லேயிருளேசீயுயரசிசீயாழம  
 வாயொனநிடடுலகெவாமவணகருவெ நமசிவாய

யமனவருககாகைமபொநியுமியாதல்கையபபொநுகரமைச்  
 கமதவிவணபபொனமுனமலரநதசருவகுயிருமலரடவகி  
 மலத்தில்திரதுனிகேரவவலியினுறகுவிநதயரக  
 வமருணத்திலமாநலுகவேமைநதாடு நமசிவாய

Figure 8.1: Francis Whyte Ellis's *Taravukkoccakakkalippā* in the 1819 edition of his *Tirukkural* (p. 37).

The Poem

Ellis titled the poem as *Taravukkoccakakkalippā* presumably following the Tamil Saivite literary tradition of labelling poems by metrics. Such practice emphasised the metrical uniqueness as well as the poet's ability in composing using such a metre. For example, many songs of Appar in the *Tēvāram* corpus

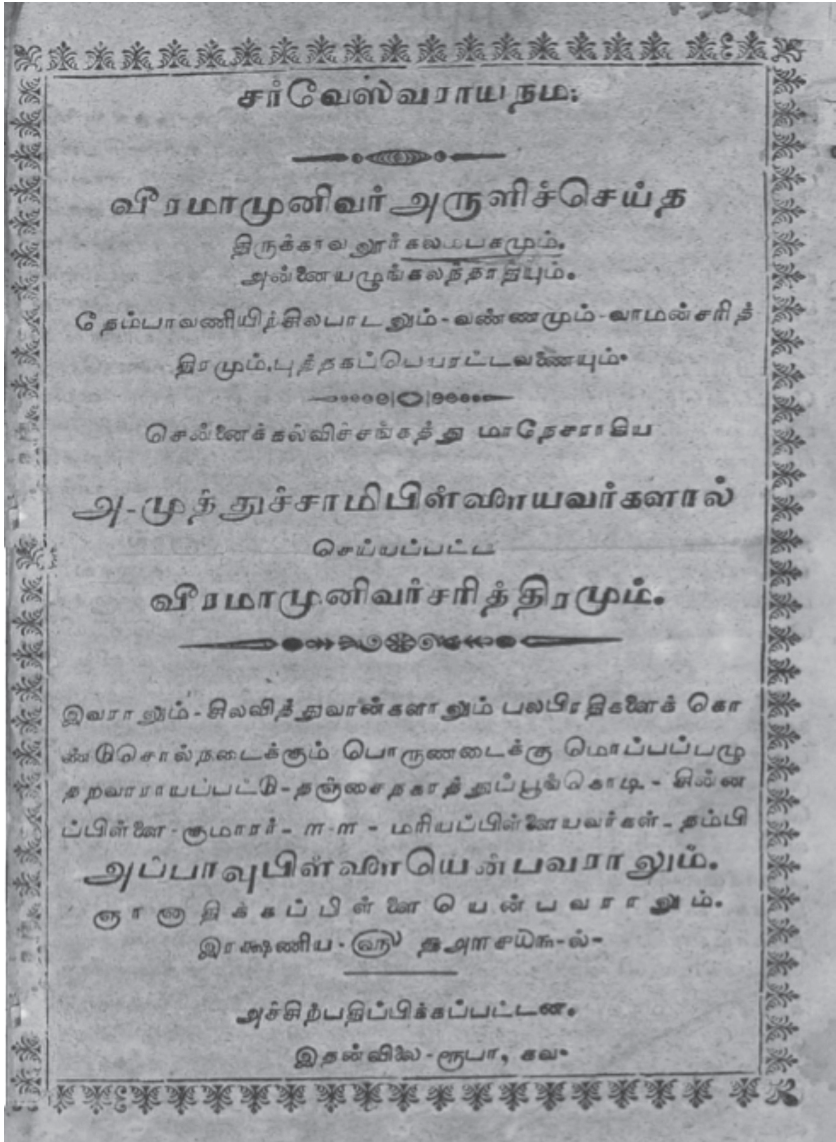


Figure 8.2: Appāvupillai's 1843 edition of Muttuccāmiṭṭai's commentary (p. 1).

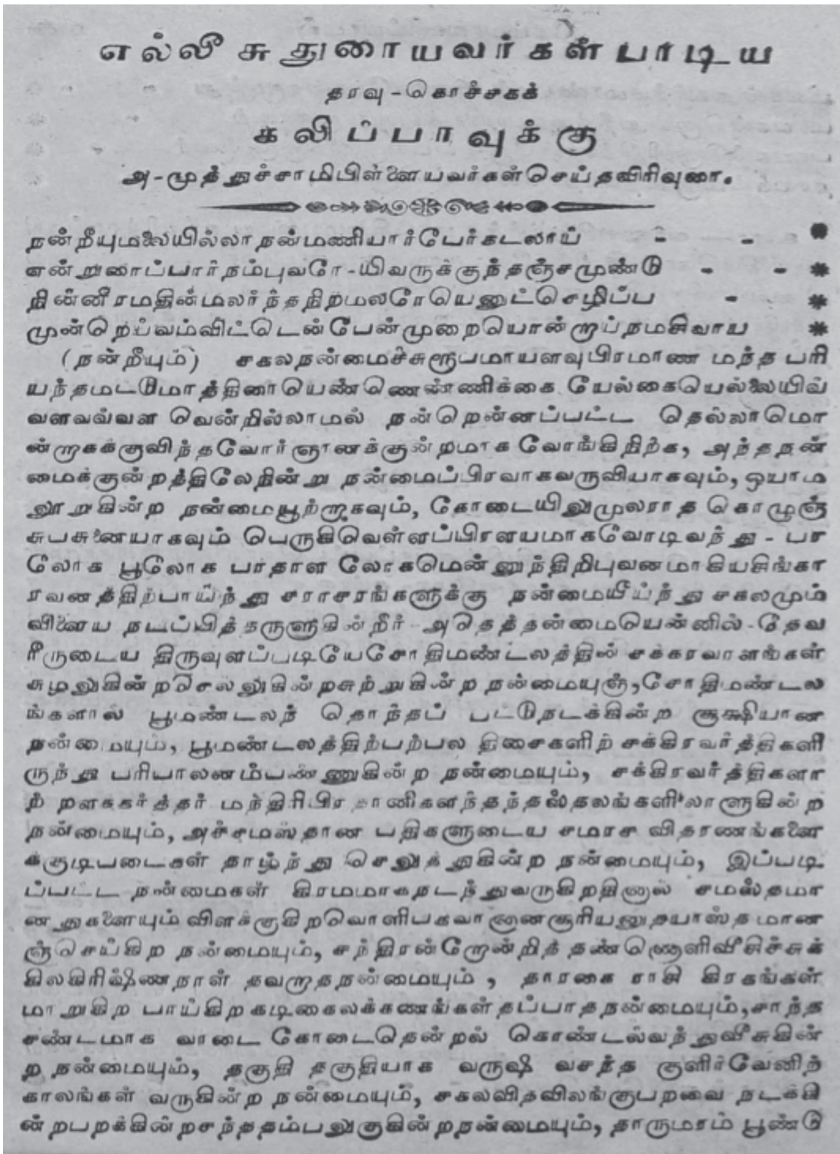


Figure 8.3: Muttuccāmiṭṭai's commentary in Appāvupillai's 1843 edition (p. 30).

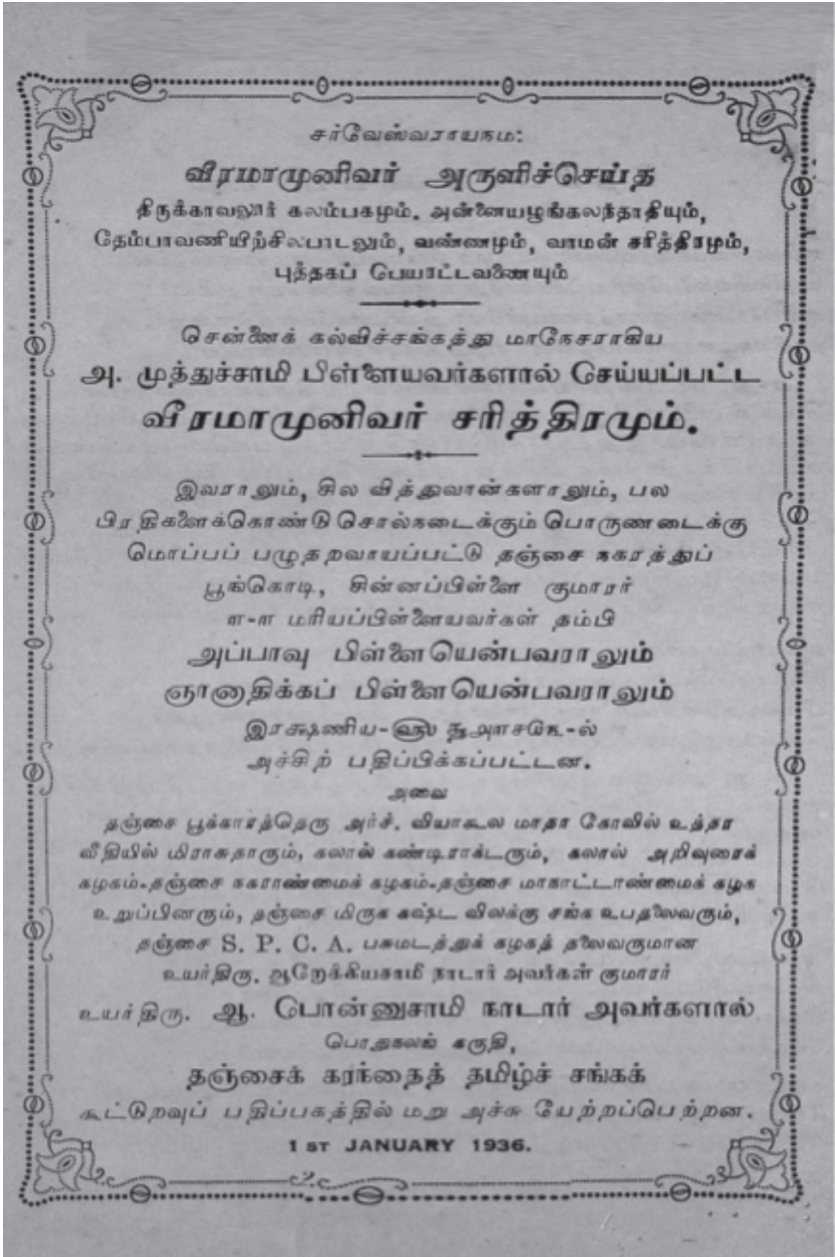


Figure 8.4: Muttuccāmpillai's commentary, 1936 edition (facsimile) (first page).

are named as *Tiruttāṅṅakam* following the metre.<sup>2</sup> He is admirably called as *Tāṅṅakavēntar* accentuating his ability in composing poems in the tough *Tāṅṅakam* metre. *Kalippā* is considered as a suitable metre to praise God. In Tamil Vaishnavism, the Alvars most widely used the *kalippā* metre. *Kalippā* seems flexible enough to compose poems in *aṭiyārpāvānai* (impersonating as devotee). Ellis had elaborately discussed the characteristic feature of *kalippā* in his Tamil metrical grammar.

The subject matter of the poem is very simple and explicit; all five stanzas talk about the importance of the mantra *namacivāya*. In the first stanza, Ellis says Lord Śiva is the giver of all benefits. He is like a waveless ocean and the one who does not abandon those who believe in him. His grace is like a flower blossoming in (his) heart. Moreover, it is self-referential. He says, '(Hereafter) I will stop worshiping other deities and say your name *namacivāya* with devotion.' In the second stanza, he concentrates on the *Nirkuṅṅam*, or the ineffable aspect of the god. Lord Śiva is invisible to all mortals, immortals and all other beings. Everyone should worship him from a distance, saying in one voice '*namacivāya*'. In the third stanza, he compares Śiva with all earthly kings. Lord Śiva is not like earthly impotent kings who enforce their subjects to pay tribute. He is the truly beloved king who requests no tribute. Referring to himself, Ellis says, 'I pay tribute to him, saying *namacivāya* by pouring my soul.' In the fourth stanza, he talks about the all-pervading nature of Śiva. He is light, darkness, height and depth. Without him, there is nothing in the world. In an authorial voice he demands, 'Let the whole world praise him exclaiming *namacivāya*.' In the fifth and the last stanza, he comments on the uncertainty of human life. The five sense organs are useless when death approaches. The blossom of the soul will fade away. And it will get agitated like a water drop trembling on a lotus leaf. He finds a way to pacify the war within the body saying, 'one (or all) should chant "*namacivāya*".'

I will take the first verse followed by his own translation for a brief discussion (Ellis 1819: 37–38):

நன்றீயுமலையில்லாநன்மணியார்பேர்கடலாய்  
என்றுரைப்பார்நம்புவரே—யிவருக்குந்தஞ்சமுண்டு  
நின்னீரமதின்மலர்ந்தவிறமலரேயெனுட்செழிப்ப  
முன்றெய்வம்விட்டென்பேன்முறையொன்றாய்நமசிவாய

<sup>2</sup> For *Tēvāram* citations, see <http://www.thevaaram.org/ta/index.php> (accessed on 2 May 2022).

[*Nanriyumalaiyillānaṅmaṇiyārpērkaṭalāy  
enruraippārnampuvarē—yivarukkuntañcamuṅṭu  
ninnīramatiṅmalarntavīramalarēyenuṭṭelippa  
munreyvamvitteṅpēnmurāiyonrāyṅnamacivāya*]

Thou, who vouchsafest all good, art a waveless sea abounding in precious jewels,  
And the refuge of those who thus believe in thee;  
As the beautiful, full-blown flower of thy grace flourisheth in my soul,  
I quit all other deities and say with entire devotion—reverence to the only God!

*Namacivāya* is the sacred mantra for Saivites. It is also considered as the name of Śiva. In *Tēvāram* the *patikam* ('unit of ten stanzas') ending with *namacivāya* are commonly called *namacivāyapatikam*. There are four such *patikams* in the *Tēvāram* corpus. Two were authored by Tīruñāṅcampantar (seventh century CE), one by Appar (seventh century CE) and the other by Cuntarar (ninth century CE). Only one of Tīruñāṅcampantar's two *patikams* ends with *namacivāya*. Campantar is credited with the authorship of singing *namacivāyapatikam*. In English translation, the first stanza of his *namacivāya* ending *patikam* runs like this:

It is the name of my god *namacivāya*,  
The true meaning of the four *Vedas*  
Will lead those who chant  
With love and compassionate  
With tears flowing profusely  
To the path of righteousness (3:49).

Given the style and content of Ellis's stanza, it seems that he modelled his poem on the *Tēvāram*. If he had written ten songs, he might have kept the title *namacivāyapatikam*. This stanza has three components: the praise, the mute possession of God, and the verbal surrender of the devotee. Of course, praising God is a recurrent theme in all Tamil *bhakti* poems. In Ellis, eulogising moves back and forth from God's inanimate feature (*alaiyillānaṅmaṇiyārpērkaṭalāy* and *ninnīramatiṅmalarntavīramalarēy*) to God's animate feature (*tañcamalittal*). Proclaiming God to be a refuge for all beings is commonplace in Tamil Saivite songs. Appar sings the following *patikam* when he is being persecuted:

He is the one who recites the famous *Vedas*,  
 Lives in the light-filled celestial world.  
 His feet are like gold and beautiful:  
 Keep them in mind  
 Fold your hands, and pray  
 Even if you're tied to a stone pillar and thrown into the sea  
*namacivāya* will be a good companion.  
 It will save you (4:11).

These lines are echoed in Ellis's 'And the refuge of those who thus believe in thee' (*nampuvārē-yivarukkuntañcamuṅṭu*). An individual's experiences are portrayed as universal in most Tamil *bhakti* poems. To rephrase it in the words of Vološinov (1973: 89), every Tamil *bhakti* poem sings the 'I-experience' of the individual devotee (the poet) with God in the guise of 'we-experience'. Ellis adopts a similar strategy in his poem.

Most of the eulogisation in Tamil *bhakti* poems ensues from a commitment to God. In the Saivite tradition, the commitment comes when the devotee is taken over by the God. The mute collaboration initiated by the God (Lord Śiva) turns an ordinary man or other religious person into a Saivite devotee. Ellis represents himself as Śiva's devotee from another faith (*munreyvamviṭṭenpēn*), who thus registers himself as a witness to such a collaboration (*unaruleṇṇuḷ celippa*). Since chanting the name of God enacts a form of verbal surrender, saying *namacivāya* with devotion (*muraiyonrāy<sub>n</sub>namacivāya*) is the external manifestation of *bhakti* and the proof of conversion. Ellis follows the traditional method of narrating the self of Tamil *nāyanmār* in this poem. In one of his *patikams*, Cuntarar adds his own life history:

Oh! Good ascetic!  
 Who has arisen in the temple called 'Tiruppāṅṭikkotumūṭi' in Karaiyur  
 The glorious land of worship of the learned.  
 I have enshrined in my mind your sacred feet  
 They are my companion—no others  
 I became a human being  
 I attained the state where I will not be born again  
 Even if I forget you  
 My tongue uninterruptedly  
 Will continue to say *namacivāya* (7:48).

All three *nāyanmārs*, along with Ellis, glorify *namacivāya* as possessing a transcendental significance. *Namacivāya* will help elude danger of one who

chants it in this human birth. These *patikams* require chanting with great reverence. They highlight bodily action (*meyppātu*) in order to demonstrate the deferential respect to God. The total surrendering of oneself to the name itself will help to evade the difficulties in life. It even overcomes *Sam̐sāra*, the condition of being born again and again. Ellis's poem, we may say, is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres (Barthes 1977b: 146) of Tamil Saivite culture.

### The Commentary

Muttuccāmiṇṇai's commentary is elaborate. It runs to two pages in print for each stanza. He concentrates on what Eco (1992: 25) calls the intention of the text, essentially ignoring the intention of its author.

His reading thus works to weaken the intention of the interpreter 'who beats the text into a shape which will serve for his purpose' (ibid.), which in turn he does. Muttuccāmiṇṇai partially follows Tamil commentarial procedure of *kaṇṇalittuuraittal*, giving word by word meaning to a poem. It is one of the evaluative methods in doing commentary and is popularly called *patavurai* (*patam*, 'word', plus *urai*, 'commentary'). *Kaṇṇalittuuraittal* is usually followed by an elaborate discussion called *viḷakkavurai* on the status of words in the poem, their disuniting, arranging and rearranging to make comprehensible meaning, its context, the other commentators' opinions (contemporaries and the predecessors) and refutations, et cetera. Muttuccāmiṇṇai's commentary lacks a *viḷakkavurai*; instead, he extensively discusses each word in the *patavurai*, seemingly rendering unnecessary a separate *viḷakkavurai*.

In doing so, he disidentifies (Muñoz 1998: 12) the Tamil poem with Saivism in four ways. I will briefly discuss how he does so in the first stanza. First, rather than offering a one-to-one word meaning, he piles up numerous words to gloss each word in the poem. To put it another way, he strings together numerous signifiers in an orderly fashion rather than giving a monovocal signification to every given sign. These stacked signifiers that are indexed to every word in the poem disequilibrate the signification of the word. For example, the first word in the first stanza *nanriyum* has two lexical items, corresponding to its *cīr* (metrical unit): *nanru* (benefit, goodness) and *iyum* (will give, bestow). The meaning, according to a canonical reading, is straightforward: '[It] will bestow benefits'. The poem is composed in such

a way that the last word is implicitly tied with every word in the poem. One should add the last word *namacivāya* to *nanrīyum* to get ‘*namacivāya* will bestow benefits’.

But Muttuccāmiṭṭai gives fourteen meanings for this short phrase, with each meaning segueing into the next. I will list a few.

All [those are called] benefits [are] assembled as one and stand erect as a hill. It is called the Hill of Wisdom. It has no limits and boundaries. [You = Śiva] stand at the top of this hill. Flowing like a waterfall [you are] bestowing goodness, dripping benefits relentlessly. Drying not even in summer, [you are] like an auspicious pond. Like a flood (*vellam*), [you] flow and fertilizes all three worlds with benefits. According to [your] order, the *cakkaravālam* (the entire universe) rotates, goes, and circles. (Appāvupillai 1843: 30)

Muttuccāmiṭṭai thus destabilises the signification of the Saivite sign and insists that we read another (and another and another...) signification into it, thus creating a web of affinities. He endows words with undecidabilities. *Nanrīyum* no longer has the Tamil Saiva Siddhantic meaning of individual liberation, rebirth-less status, et cetera (Mahadevan 1955: 6). He deliberately disjoins the name *namacivāya* with *nanrīyum* and catalogues countless benefits of an imagined omnipresent being.

Second, he seeks to foreclose further speculations about Saivite interpretation. For example, the second line of the stanza ‘*alaiyillānanmaniyārperkaṭalāy*’ gets the following commentary:

He is like a waveless ocean. He is an endless ocean of grace. He, like a pure, graceful ocean with sacred jewels, exceeds the limits of [previously] enumerated aspects of six and eight qualities (*kuṇṇkaḷ*) and has infinite godly aspects. (Appāvupillai 1843: 31)

Rather than list all eight qualities, as enumerated in Tamil Saiva Siddhanta, he only mentions six: independence (*taṇvayattanātal*), omnipresence (*eṇkumviyāpakānātal*), freedom from embodiment (*uṭampilanātal*), boundless benevolence (*ellānalāmumulaṇātal*), beginninglessness, eternity (*mutalilanātal*) and, being the first cause, the source of all beings (*evarrirkumkāraṇaṇātal*). Further, he first gives plausible interpretations of words (*alaiyillānam*, *maniyār* and *perkaṭal*) and then invests them with a surfeit of theologically grounded

meaning. In doing this, he invokes in his reader an inability to find certain further meanings by his massive deployment of signifiers, that is, he blocks certain interpretations.

Third, he ambiguates the signs. The last word *namacivāya* in Muttuccāmiṭṭai's commentary is: 'I pay obeisance to you now, the only god who stands forever.' He thus recodes *namacivāya*. Ellis is very clear in understanding that the two words *nama* and *civāya* denote the name of Lord Śiva. He translates the word instead of transliterating it to provide Western audiences with the literal meaning. He further adds a small note of the compound *namacivāya*:

The compound here translated 'reverence to the only God' is composed of two Sanskrit words, *namah* adoration, reverence and 'seva ya the 4th case of 'siva, which, as is exemplified in many of the preceding extracts, is used, not merely as the designation of the third person of the Hindu triad, but as the peculiar name of the Deity. The Whole, *namāśivāya*, is called the *pañcāśvara*, pentagrammaton, and its mystic signification is amply explained in the *Agmas*. (Ellis 1819: 37–38)

If any Saivite reads the poem, he will immediately deduce that *namacivāya* is Lord Śiva (or, in the terms of Peirce [1906: 505], the immediate interpretant, for any Saivite the sign *namacivāya* is Lord Śiva himself). The traditional referentiality of an insider prohibits other meanings. But Muttuccāmiṭṭai decategorises the sign and liberates it from its intrinsic meaning using Ellis's translation as his cue. The commentary pronounces what Derrida (1997: 112) calls the 'suspension of vocative absolute', in order to dissociate the proper name from its intuitive meaning that was established in usage.

Fourth, he uses Tamil Christian registers as an interpretive framework and thus resignifies the poem to resemble a Tamil Christian poem. He does this for the whole poem. For the line *munreyvamvittenpēnmuraironrāy*, for example, he comments as follows:

Because of my ignorance I prayed to other gods. Now I quit those gods. I will come to you. With deep devotion I will only surrender to you. I will pay obeisance saying *ātiparā* (the origin), *anātiparā* (the endless), *anantātiparā* (the indefinite), *cupamparaparā* (giver of pleasure). By chanting [like this], I search for you with desire (*ācaiyāltēti*), mingle with you in love (*anpinālkūti*), sing in joy (*ānantamāyppāti*), praise (*vāltti*), bend, applaud, pray (*vanānkippōrrippukalntutolutu*),

extol (*tōttarittu*), and do worship with oblation. (*arcittuārātikkinrēn*)  
(Appāvupillai 1843: 31)

The bracketed terms are transliterated names of gods used by Tamil Christian theologians to denote God in Christian prayers (Tiliander 1974). By using a Christian speech register, Muttuccāmi implicitly suggests resemblances between Siva and the Christian Lord, transforming the poem into an empty text that invites the reader to fill with their own meaning. He intentionally ambiguates the words, collapses the traditional Saivite referentiality and converts it into a simple, non-religious Tamil poem without any religious overtones.

In general, his commentary does not lead to a certain meaning or conclusion but to a vast lexical field of Tamil. The meaning production is posed not from within the Tamil Saivite textual practice or in the Saivite philosophical practice but from *within* the ensembles of a more general (non-denominational) Tamil poetics. He disidentifies the poem by investing it with a new life (Muñoz 1998: 12), and does so to refute the critical uptakes of Ellis's poem.

### Colonising the Coloniser

Ellis's *Namacivāya* poem and the commentary written by Muttuccāmiṭṭai cannot be easily overlooked as simply another example of the 'author-commentator relationship' that always occurs in the Tamil literary tradition. In the Tamil tradition, both the author and the commentator are from within the same tradition. The author represents the past and the commentator represents the present. So, every commentary tries to accommodate the past in the present *within* a particular tradition. Here, in the case of Ellis and Muttuccāmiṭṭai, however, this relationship is undermined. It is an interaction between two people from two different lands. The original author (Ellis) did not belong to any of the Tamil scholarly lineages that preceded him; he is not from within and is new to it. He represents the West. But the commentator comes from within the Tamil tradition. He represents the native tradition. Further, the author and the commentator worked together and knew each other well, operating within the same temporal envelope. Muttuccāmiṭṭai's commentary in a way represents intersubjective time (Fabian 2014: 30), even though the author was dead.

There is something else that is important to note at this point. The relationship between Ellis and Muttuccāmiṭṭai was one that did not often happen between natives and foreigners in colonial times. Yet here it

did happen. A foreigner intervened within the Tamil tradition and a native subsequently framed the terms of this intervention (by responding to other native framings of it). A text written by a European/foreigner/coloniser/Englishman has been authorised by a non-European/native/colonised/Tamilian. In rephrasing the terms of postcolonial theory, it was an odd interplay between coloniser and colonised. In short, the coloniser 'pretends to be colonised' and the colonised protects and authorises the coloniser himself. We must search for an answer to this anomalous mimicking and authorising with a very unsophisticated question: what happens when a coloniser mimics a colonised in the Tamil land?

Mimicry is a key discourse in postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory tries to find an answer to the question of what happens when a colonised imitates the coloniser, and it always reads this question from left (colonised) to right (coloniser). Speaking about mimicry, Frantz Fanon (1963), for example, says that besides the business/colonial relationship, there is also another unhealthy relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. He observes that the colonised/native is not even acknowledged as a human being by the colonisers. As a result, the man who was colonised begins to see his own nativity as a major obstacle to him. The grand awe-inspiring images that the colonisers create about themselves among the colonised haunt the colonised and the colonised man marvels at those majestic awe-inspiring images. These images begin to deeply ingrain themselves in his mind. He begins to believe that he will gain value only if he becomes like the coloniser. The colonised begins to yearn for the recognition of the coloniser, looks for a way to achieve it and finds a way to do so. So, Fanon contends, the colonised starts to act like a coloniser. This is the moment, Fanon argues, when the annihilation of the self-identity of the colonised starts. He affirms that the colonised wants to become white or to disappear (Fanon 1963: 158–59).

Homi Bhabha (1994) rereads this concept of mimicry. Rather than seeing it as a willed destruction of the self-identity of the colonised, Bhabha sees mimicry as a threat to the colony. Suppose a native speaks English like an Englishman. He behaves like that Englishman. According to Fanon, this 'imitation' is the destruction of the identity of the natives, a fading away of his inherent authenticity. But for Bhabha, it is an event that shatters the very foundations of the colonisers (here, British) and their powers. It erodes the very roots of the colony. The reason he is an Englishman is that he speaks English. This Englishness is what sets him apart from the natives. Now, when

that language is spoken by the colonised, the English colonial identity is itself in danger of extinction (Bhabha 1994: 85–92).

On the one hand, by reading Fanon, we can see how the language of the colonised is destroyed when the language of the coloniser is spoken by the colonised. On the other hand, by reading Bhabha, we surmise that the coloniser's own language, the reason of his being a coloniser, goes away from him. Here, the Indian who looks like, but is never quite, an Englishman emerges. That is why the colonisers do not like the colonised 'mimicking' them. Both theorists concentrate on the destruction on both sides centring around the coloniser and mimicry of him by the colonised.

The case of Ellis and Muttuccārippillai, however, requires us to read from right (coloniser) to left (colonised). And this, I propose, suggests that there were two stages of colonisation that happened in Tamil land. First, the colonisation of the *maṇ* (soil), which I call colonisation proper. Second, the colonisation of the *akam*, or the self-knowledge of Tamils, which I call internalisation. In both cases, and crucially, this process is a reciprocal one. Valentine Daniel (1984: 79–94) excavates the anthropology of Tamil by trying to understand the cultural concept of *ūr*. Every *ūr* within the Tamil territory has its own *kuṇam* (quality), an unseen force. The *maṇ* (soil) is the embodiment of *kuṇam*. It varies with every *ūr*. The *kuṇam* of the *maṇ* of a particular *ūr* affects and indeed constitutes the person who lives there. If a person from a different *ūr* with different *kuṇam* affected by its own soil starts to live in another *ūr*, then his *kuṇam* gets changed in accordance with the soil of the new *ūr*. The *maṇ* (soil) of the new *ūr* affects and replaces his old *kuṇam*. The *maṇ* does the colonisation. It colonises the person without his consciousness. If a person shows stinginess (*ecciltanāṁ* or *kañcattanāṁ*), it is because of his *ūr*. If he evinces gullibility (*kēnattanāṁ*), the reason falls on the *ūr* (Daniel 1984: 89–93). Colonising makes the colonised subject display the *kuṇam* of that place. The *kuṇam* of Tamil land, thus, subjugates and authorises an alien subject to live in it.

Adhering to *Tolkāppiyam*, I will name the alien subject as *purapporuḷ*. *Tolkāppiyam* divides the Tamil world into *akam* and *puram*. *Akam* or *akapporuḷ* is interior and invisible. *Puram* or *purapporuḷ* is exterior and includes all visible material objects of the Tamil world. *Akam* and *puram* are two sides of a coin. *Puram* stands outside ready to be taken by the *akam*. In turn, *akam* requires *puram* to exist. *Akam* collects suitable *purapporuḷ* to define itself. Ellis, an alien/European with an initially different *kuṇam*, after coming to the Tamil world, becomes affected by the *maṇ*, thereby becoming a *purapporuḷ* in it.

But *kunam* has also another characteristic. It speaks itself through language (ibid.: 81). Literally, *kunam* possesses, manifests itself and speaks through the subject. The Tamil language has its own 'in-ness' (Shulman 2016: 94) which exhibits itself through the *kunam*-subjugated *purapporul*. We infer from another colonial administrator Arthur Coke Burnell (1840–82) that Ellis acted like a Tamilian by wearing Tamil clothing (Burnell 1878: 35). The physical exhibition of *purapporul*, however, though it supports this reading, is not our concern here.

Ellis's text is, I will designate, an inheritor text (in the terms of the *Nannūl*, it is a *vaḷinūl* following a *mutalnūl*). In Tamil literary tradition, an inheritor text locates itself *intertextually* in a lineage. It respects and credits its predecessor and emulates it to confirm its own presence and its predecessor simultaneously. So, an inheritor text is a 'mimicked text', mimicking the tradition from within. Here, imitation establishes the scholarship (and in turn scholarship establishes the 'imitation').

But there is also perhaps a danger in imitation, distinct from that identified in Fanon and Bhabha. For from one point of view (the Western one), imitation may undermine its own recognition. It loses its originality and becomes a subordinate text to its antecedent text. Yet it is precisely this errant second-ness that begets sacredness into the fold of Tamil-Saivite textual economy. A *vaḷinūl* is no longer viewed simply as a subordinate text but itself may become 'one of the respectful texts' in Tamil Saivite lineage (if there is a next-text to take it up, imitate it and comment on it). From this point of view, because of its conscious intertextuality, Ellis's poem *becomes* a Saivite poem in Tamil Saivite lineage in its imitation of the tradition (and crucially, as I note below, in its uptake by Muttuccāmpipiḷḷai). Ellis's is a mimic text, mimicking the tradition from outside. It is a coloniser's poem that impersonates the colonised's style, content and unreproducible 'aura' (Benjamin 2008: 23). The in-ness made a *purapporul* (Ellis) compose a poem not in English but in Tamil and located it in a Tamil lineage. In-ness has spoken through the *purapporul*. This first colonisation makes efficient and keeps the *purapporul* in waiting for the internalisation.

When an alien *purapporul* becomes a Tamil *purapporul*, it is ready to be taken by the *akam*. How does *akam* incorporate a *purapporul*? Daniel categorises Tamil knowledge as double-edged, in that the knowledge about the other, or object knowledge, is but an extension of self-knowledge. Self-knowledge tries to acquire object knowledge in two modes. The first mode of acquisition is, he terms, *inaippālarital*; the second mode is *pakuppālarital*. The

former seeks to find the commonalities between the self and the other, the latter seeks to distinguish the self from the other. If the self-knowledge finds any familiarity in the object knowledge, then we have no object knowledge but self-knowledge alone. Object knowledge becomes the extension of self-knowledge (Daniel 1984: 234). *Ṇaippālarital* internalises the other.

I call Muttuccāmiṇṇai's commentary a reliant (or satellite or dependent) text (*cārpunūl*). *Cārpunūl* arises only if there is *vaḷinūl* without which it does not exist. It is an epistemological honouring of its predecessors. *Cārpunūl* always authorises both *mutalnūl* and *vaḷinūl*. Muttuccāmiṇṇai de-religionises the inheritor text (Tamil poem) by disaggregating the signified from the signifiers, empties them and re-Tamilises the text to (retro)fit into the Tamil textual lineage. Though it does not alter the signifier, it does eliminate certain of its signified (those that license certain [Saivite] uptakes of it) and produces empty signifiers. Contrary to the Tamil tradition, Muttuccāmiṇṇai's reliant text can be seen as disagreeing with the inheritor text. But that disagreement nevertheless internalises the text. His *Ṇaippālarivu* transmutes the *purapporuḷ* as an empty signifier and makes it invite as many signified as one can discern, but with an inherent social fact (Saussure 2011: 113). In a way, the colonised disidentifies the Tamil poem of his coloniser to negotiate the textual economy of the whole Tamil literary tradition. It authorises the Tamil poem of a foreigner as a *Tamil* poem. He internalised or recolonised the coloniser. When Ellis as *purapporuḷ* was investigated by the Saivite *pakuppālarivu* to distinguish the other from the self, Muttuccāmiṇṇai's *Ṇaippālarivu* finds the familiarities, accommodates and transforms the alien *purapporuḷ* as familiar *purapporuḷ* suited for everyone.

## Conclusion

The legacy of Ellis's poem prompts us to reconsider the typical colonial categories. By acquiring the Tamil language, Ellis colonised it, but when he created a conventional Tamil poem, the language conquered Ellis. He and the poem were turned into possessions. Similar to the coloniser, the colonised made Ellis and his poetry into something to be owned. Even if it occurred at an epistemic level in Tamil orientalism, this inverse colonisation forces us to rethink the universal categories of colonisation and encourages us to consider its regional characteristics. *Regional* colonialisms, as this chapter shows, are discernible through local textual practices because they arise from them.



## CROSSING THE GODĀVARI

### Poetics, Translation and Transformation in the *Kamparāmāyaṇam*

Whitney Cox

#### Introduction

In a recent essay (Cox 2022), I ventured some brief conjectures about what lessons we might take from reading Kampan's version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*: a bit mischievously, I described Kampan's Tamil 'as a kind of Sanskrit'. I certainly would not deny Kampan's status as the most gifted of Tamil poets, or to claim that his masterpiece was in any way derivative or inauthentic. Instead, as I argued, the *Kamparāmāyaṇam* 'enacts an argument about the kind of thing it is...[sliding] along the scale of intensity that marks out the continuum that we may call "Tamil", with the language of everyday life marking one end of the continuum, and a rigorously formal, lyrical register marking the other' (Cox 2022: 171–72). The latter pole constitutes the special case of what I meant by Kampan's Tamil-as-Sanskrit.

I pursue these intuitions in greater detail in this chapter, drawing on my ongoing work of translation of the *Kamparāmāyaṇam*'s third long division, the *Āraṇiyakāṇṭam*, or 'Book of the Forest'.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, I have found a useful

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<sup>1</sup> My translation is part of a collective effort to translate the entire *Kamparāmāyaṇam* into English for the first time, to appear from Penguin India. This *kāṇṭam* also has had a fine previous English rendering (Hart and Heifetz 1988), notable for a valuable introduction (1988: 1–37). Otherwise, Kampan has been underserved by Indological scholarship in English (e.g., Zvelebil 1973: 207–17; Shulman 1978, 1979a, 1979b;

entry point into the question of Kampan's language to lie in considering the ways in which we might call Kampan a translator, and his *Rāmāyaṇam* a work of translation.

Highly intelligent people like Harish Trivedi (2006) and John Cort (2015) have argued that there was no such thing as translation in pre-modern India (also see Tschacher, this volume). This has occasioned a number of responses, for instance, Francesca Orsini's (2020: 51–53) sharp reply to Trivedi. This question of translation's generic and epistemic status must, moreover, be situated in the wider scholarship on South Asian literary multilingualism and on interlingual practices of filiation and distinction.<sup>2</sup> In light of such work, I will simply assert there are certainly works from pre-modern India that we may reasonably class as translations. But it must be conceded that there is no regnant pre-modern *theory* of translation, despite the incredibly theory-laden nature of early Indian systems of knowledge, and very little seeming awareness that any such theory might be necessary. We do possess some evidence of local efforts that reflect, if inchoately, on the act of bringing something—a narrative, an idea, a verbal string—from one discrete linguistic code into another. There is, for instance, the self-reflexive account appended to the conclusion of the Telugu poet Śrīnātha's fifteenth-century *Śṛīṅāranaiṣadhamu*, on its relation to its predecessor text, Śrīharṣa's Sanskrit *Naiṣadhacarita* (see Narayana Rao and Shulman 2012: 53). Yet, all of the terms invoked in Śrīnātha's auto-theory of translation—*rasa* and *bhava* (affect and emotion), *abhiprāya* (authorial intent), *aucitya* (propriety)—are drawn from Sanskrit, specifically from *ālankārasāstra*, the discipline of poetics and literary theory. The engagement with this tradition, however, is superficial. All this 'theory' really amounts to is the wholesale borrowing of a ready-to-hand vocabulary, without delving into the complexities of any of its terms: the referent of every one of these terms was controversial among Sanskrit *ālaṃkārikas*.

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and the eccentric analysis of S.A. Srinivasan [1984: 168–217]); Wentworth (2022) includes a state-of-the-art introduction to the poem, including attention to major works of Tamil language scholarship (ix–xlvii).

<sup>2</sup> The most influential of these has been Pollock's (2006) model of imitative cosmopolitan vernacularity; Ollett's (2017: 3–16, 171–181 *et passim*) theorisation of the pre-modern 'language order' and Fisher's (2018, 2019) scholarship on the circulation and recreation of texts in the multilingual early modern South *inter alia* have added conceptual and empirical complexity to Pollock's model.

Translation, obviously enough, is difficult, and its practice is controversial, and literary translation especially so; but in early South Asia there seems to be no serious sustained reflection on this problem. More to the point, evidence of what we could describe as the practice of literary translation from pre-modern India is anomalous. This anomaly has largely to do with Sanskrit and its relationship to other South Asian languages, in particular, to the availability and legibility of Sanskrit vocabulary in most Indian literary vernaculars. Sanskrit lexemes, in the form of *tatsama* borrowings—words that are phonetically unchanged from their Sanskrit stem form—are ubiquitous throughout the vernacular literary record, a fact which complicates and undermines the conditions under which one might elaborate a theory of translation based on the discrete nature of target and source languages.<sup>3</sup>

Here, Tamil presents an anomaly. While it is the South Asian literary language with the longest and most richly documented history of interaction with Sanskrit, in its poetic form Tamil is notably resistant to such *tatsama* graftings: indeed, the orthographic norms imposed by Tamil versification appear purpose-built to disrupt the very possibility of such borrowing. Despite the evident role that the knowledge systems of the Sanskrit cosmopolis played in Tamil learned traditions, much of the machinery of Tamil poetry—metrics, genres, figures of speech, *topoi*, to name just a few—is distinctive. Looking back at literary history from our own twenty-first century vantage point, it is tempting to see this maintenance of distinction to be a deliberate one, boundary work meant to protect the pristine nature of the Dravidian language from Indo-Aryan linguistic and poetic incursions.

The inherited view is that the *Kamparāmāyaṇam* can be unproblematically considered a translation, and a translation of a particular text, Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*. And there is good reason for this consensus—Kampan̄ says as much himself, in the introduction to his long poem:

*tevapāṭaiyiṅ ik katai cēytavar*  
*mūvarāṇṇavar tammulū' muntiya*  
*nāvināṇ uraiyiṅ paṭi nāṅ ramilp-*  
*pāvināl it' uṇarttiya paṅp' aro (1.10)*

<sup>3</sup> Something similar can be said of the place of Arabic and Persian in texts of the South Asian Islamicate world. See d'Hubert (2018) on the complex interbraiding of Sanskritic and Persianate filiations in Middle Bangla; in the case of Tamil, see Tschacher (2019) and in this volume. For the (significantly dissimilar) case of Sanskrit as a source language for translations into Persian, see Truschke (2016); Kotler (2023).

Three men have rendered this story  
 into Sanskrit, the language of the gods.  
 That I can convey this in Tamil verse is solely due  
 to following the words of the true poet,  
 the first and greatest of these.<sup>4</sup>

The first-person reference here is striking, and it is anomalous in the opening of a Tamil work, as a *ciṛappupāyiram* is meant to be composed by someone else in honour of the work that it begins. As a result, we should at least entertain the idea that this verse is not from the hand of the historical Kampan. But still, the fact that the *pāyiram* puts these words in Kampan's mouth is itself germane, and these words state there are three *Rāmakathā*-s in Sanskrit, and that he follows the earliest of these.

Modern commentators on the poem (e.g., Gopalakrishnamachariyar, the anonymous editorial collective responsible for the U. Vē. Cāminātaiyar Library edition), presumably following a shared tradition of oral teaching, state that these three poets in the 'language of the gods' are Vālmiki, Vasiṣṭha (/Vaciṭṭar) and Bodhāyana (/Potāyaṇar). The second of these might possibly refer to the text that now usually goes by the title *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, as this work is sometimes called the *Vāsiṣṭharāmāyaṇa* (Mainkar 1977). I am unaware of any *Rāmāyaṇa* ascribed to Bodhāyana, otherwise a mythic figure to whom Brahminical works of the ancient past can be ascribed. So I am inclined to reject this interpretation. While it is not only plausible but obvious that Kampan knew the Vālmiki *Rāmāyaṇa*, he claims here to have known two other accounts of Rāma's legend in Sanskrit. This opens a whole speculative can of

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<sup>4</sup> Here and throughout this essay, I follow the numbering of the U. Vē. Cāminātaiyar Library (UVS Library) edition of the text. The reader should note that my presentation of transliterated Tamil verse differs from that used by some other scholars. Following Marr (1985) and Shulman (2016), I mark the short ě and ǫ instead of their long counterparts. Rather than marking metrical units (i.e., *ciṛ* boundaries), I divide words when doing so does not require dissolving the *sandhi*, marking both the ellision of *kurriyal ukaram* and the coalescence of two nasals with a single inverted comma when these occur between words (as in *paṇṇ' aro* and *tammuḷu' muntiya*, respectively), and presenting nominal compounds (*tōkai*) in undivided form. This latter practice involves a degree of interpretative judgement, touching on larger questions about Kampan's poetic style, as I discuss in the essay. All translations from Tamil and Sanskrit are mine unless otherwise stated. Finally, in my translations and in the text of the essay, I give proper names in their Sanskrit forms.

worms: among many possibilities, Kampan may have meant, for instance, the *Raghuvamśa* of Kālidāsa or Abhinanda's *Rāmacarita* or Bhaṭṭi's *Rāvaṇavadha*, better known as the *Bhaṭṭikāvya*.<sup>5</sup>

But whatever this list might comprise, Kampan is clearly not telling the truth here. Much of the burden of this essay will be devoted to establishing how, even in a single episode in his enormous poem, Kampan worked over a body of prior texts, both literary and literary-theoretical, and composed in both Sanskrit and Tamil. Briefly put, Kampan's project in the *Irāmāvatāram* (as the poet himself entitled it) was to effect a synthesis between these two different literatures, using their systems of formal poetics as his principal tools. The Tamil-lover's claim about Kampan—that he is far more sophisticated than Vālmiki, his putative archaic Sanskrit source—is, simply, objectively correct. But it misses the point: Kampan clearly absorbed much of what was best in the mature Sanskrit *kāvya* produced in the centuries intervening between the composition of the monumental Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa* and his own era. And this inheritance is clearly, often self-consciously, indexed to Kampan's understanding of earlier works of literary theory and formal poetics. Indeed, as we shall see, his poem even evinces elements of the syntactic and grammatical structure of the mature *kāvya* style, alloyed with the antecedent tradition of Tamil poetry and poetics.

So to think of this work as a translation requires us to put pressure on our ready-to-hand notion of what a translation is. The *Kamparāmāyaṇam* is not simply the transposition of a message into another denotative code (a wordy, but hopefully accurate baseline sense of 'translation'). Instead, it represents a complex and comprehensive triangulation between two linguistic systems, the wider set of poetic resources present within each of these, and the literary history of both.<sup>6</sup>

In what follows, I demonstrate how this triangulation worked in the language of a particular episode from the *Āraṇiyakāṅṭam*, the *Cūrppaṇakaippaṭalam*, Kampan's version of the mutilation of the *rākṣasi* *Sūrpaṇakhā*, the fifth of the twelve episodes (*paṭalaṅka!*) into which Kampan divides the

<sup>5</sup> See Wentworth (2022: 282n6) for a similar list of possibilities; he includes the *Campūrāmāyaṇa* attributed to Bhoja, which, however, I suspect to be a later work by a different author, and so likely unavailable to Kampan (following Warder 1992: 175; Ollett 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Although greatly differing in particulars, much of Saussy's (2017, 2022) recent reflections on translation have been influential on my thinking here.

*Āraṇīyakāṇṭam* (vv. 3.220–361). Throughout this crucial and controversial episode, we witness Kampan's effort at drawing upon and self-consciously reframing both Sanskrit and Tamil poetic theories. Kampan's work must be considered in light of a literary-historical conjuncture to which Shulman has drawn attention, a moment where '[p]oetics breaks out of the ancient framework' of the earliest theories of the language of the classical Caṅkam anthologies and 'reorients itself...follow[ing] the method of Daṇḍin, the Pallava-period author of the foundational Sanskrit work, the *Kāvyaḍarśa*' (Shulman 2016: 182, cf. 209–13). In Kampan's hands, this is less a competition, one model imposed over the other, than a fusion of these two antecedent traditions in the service of their joint transcendence. That is, in drawing upon the narrative topoi of the Caṅkam, or from the system of the *alaṃkāras* ultimately deriving from Daṇḍin's *Kāvyaḍarśa*, Kampan sought to enact a novel theory of poetics, and the story of Śūrpaṅkhā provides him with an elaborate test-case for this theory.

Following Shulman, I largely confine myself to tracing the figural poetics set out in Daṇḍin's treatise, with an eye on that work's reworking in Tamil, the *Taṇṭiyalaṅkāram*, composed very close to Kampan's own time.<sup>7</sup> I also draw on the earliest independent Tamil treatise on the taxonomy of situations in an idealised love-affair, the *Iṭaiyaṅār Akappōru!* and especially on its commentary by Nakkīraṅār, composed in the Pāṇṭiyaṅ south close in time to Daṇḍin's career in the Pallava north of the Tamil country. But while I adopt these works as useful guidelines for my reading of Kampan, I do not wish to reduce the aims of this interpretation to just the work of learned source hunting. Instead, I understand these to be instances of the sort of raw material from which the poet worked, but also as trace evidence of a wider domain of poetics.

As a reflection on literary language, 'poetics' can be understood broadly—as the tacit dispositions and presuppositions that govern acts of both literary creation and the cultivation of literary taste—or narrowly, as a discipline—the typologisation, analysis, evaluation and regimentation of verbal art. I take this restricted sense as the starting, but not the end point, of my reading of the *Kamparāmāyaṅam*. I do so because patterns of explicit filiation and adaptation

<sup>7</sup> While lacking a more specific setting in time, most scholars (Arunachalam 2005b: 83–84; Monius 2000; Clare and Shulman 2023) assign the *Taṇṭiyalaṅkāram* to the twelfth century, while I follow Wentworth in locating Kampan's active life in the final decades of the same century (cf. Wentworth 2022: xxvi–xxvii, xxxv–xxxvi).

are documentable, and so falsifiable. But in documenting these, I wish to open up wider questions of what we might call Kampan's implicit poetics, and to suggest that his long poem is an effort to embody a tacit theory of literary possibility that exceeds any of the models that were available to him. Such a tacit poetics ultimately infringes upon more than just the making and appreciation of literary art, extending into norms of gendered power, and the limits and possibilities of representation. Here, Kampan especially demands our attention, as even a reading of the poetics of his language at its most formal shows that he wrote not just as a mannered, academic exercise in the demonstration of great wit and learning. Kampan, as the possessor of what I unblushingly call genius, was able to exceed the limitations of both traditions of which he was inheritor, creatively turn them back on themselves, and in so doing creating something new, and to move past the limits of his own poetic, ethical and indeed historical world.

### Setting the Scene

The *Cūrppaṇakaippaṭalam* opens with a bang, manufactured by the explosive juxtaposition of the Sanskritic and Tamil poles of its author's poetics:

*puviyinukk' aṇiyāy ānra pōruṭantu pulattir' āki  
 aviyakat turāikaṭāṅkiy aintiṇai nēriy aḷāvic  
 cēviy urat tēḷintu taṅṇ' ēnn' ḍukkamun taḷuvic cānror  
 kaviy eṇak kiṭanta kotāvāriyinai vīrar kaṅṭār (3.220)*

Those heroes saw the Godavari, like the verses of noble poets—  
 an ornament of the earth, yielding up great riches,  
 possessing fields. Its banks removed the sweltering heat,  
 finding its paths through the five different landscapes,  
 wonderfully limpid, the mercy of its coolness a virtue.

Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa are well into their forest exile: the brothers have already slain the *rākṣasa* Virādha, they have befriended the forest *ṛṣi*s, have witnessed the final liberation of Śarabhaṅga, and met with Agastya and the enormous eagle-king Jaṭāyu. This verse marks a further point in their journey; it is explicitly about the moment when they first enter South India. Although I have not drawn attention to this in my translation, this verse depends on *śleṣa* (Skt.) or *cileṭai* (Ta.), punning or paronomasia. Although such paronomasia

can occur in any natural language, its controlled use is paradigmatic of the mature style of Sanskrit *kāvya* (Bronner 2010). Any knowledgeable reader or hearer of Tamil literature would immediately realise something is afoot here with the reference to ‘the five different landscapes’ or *aiṅṅinai*, which tells the reader to look for an extra level of meaning. For the Godāvari to seem, in some way, to be like poetry, every phrase has to bring river and poem closer into alignment. Some of these are obvious enough even in translation to any reader familiar with Tamil literary conventions: *turai*, ‘banks’ or ‘ghats’, also means ‘themes’ in Caṅkam poetics; *aviyaka-*, qualifying *turai*, and translated here as ‘removing sweltering heat’ can be resegmented as *avi akatturai* (‘inner themes that are well-developed’). *Nēri*, finally, may be an emblem of this whole process, as it is the Tamil equivalent of Skt. *mārga*, itself a key term in the *kāvya* discourse on the literary styles (see, e.g., *Taṅṅiyalaṅkāram* 1.13). So here is a staged fusion of classical Tamil keywords with distinctive techniques and terms of art drawn from Sanskrit *kāvya*, above all, the use of *śleṣa* itself. While the Godāvari is far to the north of the Tamil country, Kampan here figures it as demarcating a border, and thus its crossing marks a moment of conceptual cross-pollination between the Sanskritic north and the Tamil south and their poetic possibilities.

Following this programmatic bitextual opening, Kampan turns to a pair of descriptive verses on the Godāvari:

*vaṅṅuraikamalaccēvvivāṅṅmukam pōliya vācam*  
*uṅṅuraikuvalaiyōṅṅkaṅ ṅruṅṅkura nokkiy ūliṅ*  
*tēṅṅiraikkarattiṅṅ vārit tirumalar tūvic cēlvark*  
*kaṅṅ’ aṅṅ paṅṅivat’ ēṅṅap pōlintat’ ak kaṅṅavulāru* (3.221)

That marvelous river, it seemed,  
 caught sight of them and paid homage.  
 With its brightening face of bee-swarmed lotuses,  
 the river gazed at them with shining eyes  
 that were fragrant nelumbos,  
 and worshipped their feet with an outpouring of blossoms  
 born by the hands of its clear waves, one after the next.

*ēḷuvuruṅṅātālāriṅṅ iraittirait teṅṅkiy eṅṅkip*  
*paḷuva nāṅṅkuvalaiccevvikkaṅṅpaṅṅi parantu cora*  
*vaḷuvilāvāymaimaintar vaṅṅatturai varutta’ nokki*  
*aḷuvatu mōttatāl av valaṅṅku’ nīrāru manno* (3.222)

And sighing and sobbing, over and over  
 with a love that welled up within,  
 from its thick crowd of bright day-lily eyes  
 an unbroken flood of tears streamed out—  
 Surely that river, with its slow-moving waters,  
 weeps at the sight of the forest hardships  
 of those unfailingly truthful princes.

These verses depend on what in Sanskrit is called an *utprekṣā*, an ‘envisioning’, where some entity—generally inanimate or non-rational, a ‘thing’—is figured as performing an action characteristic of something else, often a human agent. By Kampan’s time, this figure had been theorised in Tamil under the name *tan̄kuripperram*, ‘the imposition of another’s characteristics’ (*Taṅṅiyalaṅkāram* 2.55≈ *Kāvyaḍarśa* 2.221). But the translational logic here works at a deeper level than the formal figures of speech: it is present at the level of lexis and syntax. Since the *Tōlkāppiyam*, Tamil grammar has permitted certain types of compounds (*tōkai*, or *tōkuti*), but Tamil verse typically lacks anything like the exuberant proliferation of these in Sanskrit *kāvya*. Notably, then, Kampan composes here in a way that closely maps onto the Sanskrit compositional mode of *samāsavṛtti*, especially in the two long phrases in the opening half of 3.221. In these cases, we find a logic of juxtaposition that domesticates the Sanskrit *rūpakasamāsa* (metaphor-compound) into the unfamiliar terrain of Tamil, which possesses other grammatical means of marking apposition or equation.

The second of these verses is equally reliant on heavy compounding. But the innocuous word with which it ends, *manno* (‘surely’ in the translation), is even more significant. This is a part of the repertoire of what are traditionally called *iṭaicōlkaḷ*, the syntactic and affect-marking particles that are an endemic feature of the classical language of the Caṅkam anthologies. The sense of these classical particles is in many cases uncertain: V.S. Rajam (1992) and Eva Wilden (2018) have both discussed these, often to differing interpretative ends. What they certainly are not is meaningless, despite the white flag of philological surrender (‘*acaic cōl*’) regularly waved by modern editors and commentators. *Manno* is one such source of controversy: following Wilden (2018: 57, 173–77), we may say that *man* on its own conveys certainty, paradoxically coloured by the interrogation conveyed by the clitic *-o*, or by its plangent quality; Rajam (1992: 425–28) offers a long list of possible nuances.

Readers of Sanskrit will recall that the *utprekṣā* is signalled by a stereotyped set of words, including particles, clitics and frozen finite verbs, as in the list given by Daṇḍin:

*manye śaṅke dhruvaṃ prāyo nūnam ity evamādibhiḥ |  
utprekṣā vyajyate śabdair ivaśabdo 'pi tādṛśaḥ || 2.234*

The *utprekṣā* is signalled by the use of such words as *manye* ('I think'), *śaṅke* ('I suspect'), *dhruvaṃ* ('definitely'), *prāyaḥ* ('mostly'), *nūnam* ('surely'); so too the word *iva* ('as').<sup>8</sup>

Kampan here repurposes the old particle *manno*—as a piece of Caṅkam 'legacy code'—for the very specific ends of his verse's *utprekṣā*, using it as a ready-to-hand calque of these Sanskrit *utprekṣādyotakas* ('indicators of an envisioning'). This finds support in the parallel use of *manno*—along with *māto* and *manre*, two other Caṅkam relics—in an earlier passage from the *Pālākāṅṭam* (1.922–933, the *varaikkāṭcippaṭalam*).<sup>9</sup> In short, Kampan's overt and virtuosic fusion of these two different systems of poetics—the *tiṅai* schema of classical Tamil and the exuberant catalogue of figures descending from Daṇḍin's early Sanskrit treatise—makes these opening verses as much about this fusion as they are about their descriptive content.

The Śūrpaṅakhā episode in the Vālmiki *Rāmāyaṇa* (3.16–17)—recall, Kampan's professed source—is brief to the point of being telegraphic, and rendered as unambiguously comic. The hideous *rākṣasī* approaches Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, who toy with her cruelly but in a way that is intelligible to the moral universe of the epic: she is a *rākṣasa*, an enemy. When Śūrpaṅakhā lunges at Sītā, Rāma has had enough, and tells Lakṣmaṇa to disfigure her. Lakṣmaṇa obliges, and cuts off her nose and ears (*Rāmāyaṇa* 3.17.20cd-21). By contrast, Kampan's version is extensive and intense: as Shulman (1979b: 12) noted years ago, in this episode 'what is ambiguous and partly veiled in Vālmiki becomes boldly ambivalent and complex in Kampan', above all else

<sup>8</sup> In its parallel passage, the *Taṅṭiyalaṅkāram* only explicitly gives *anna* and *pol* (both functional equivalents to Sanskrit *iva*), while leaving the possible set of such words open (2.56: *anna pol ēnum avai mutalākiya / cōṅṅilai viḷakkun torrumum uṭaitte*).

<sup>9</sup> Each of these enacts a complex of several distinct figures, meriting detailed study in their own right, but in which I find *utprekṣā/tarkuripperram* to be the dominant element.

as it relates to the two female figures at the heart of the story, Śūrpaṅakhā and Sītā.

Sītā has only been a minor presence in the narrative up to this point in the *Āraṇiyakāṇṭam*. The opening on the section saw her briefly kidnapped by the *rākṣasa* Virādha, but from that point onwards she has played the role of a silent outlooker. Now she appears more fully in the narrative in a riverside idyll with Rāma. This paired description of Rāma and Sītā establishes a set of themes that the following verses will contrapuntally develop:

*nālaṅkōṇaḷinappalli nayanāṅkaḷ amaiya nemi-  
vālaṅkaḷ uraiva kaṅṭu maṅkai taṅ kōṅkai nokka  
niḷaṅkōḷcilaiyoṅ marr' an nerīlai nēṭiya nampī  
tolīṅkaṇayanam vaittāḷ cutarmanittataṅkaḷ kaṅṭāḷ* (3.223)

His eyes fell upon a bed of lotuses set on their stalks  
and saw a pair of red ducks nesting there,  
and Rama of the longbow turned his gaze onto  
the breasts of his lady.  
Then it was that gem of a girl's turn  
to set her eyes on the shoulders of her man,  
with a glance at the river's banks,  
twinkling with dark gemstones.

*otiyam ḍtuṅkak kāṅṭav uttamaṅ ulaiyaḷ ākum  
cītai taṅ naṭaiyai nokkic cīriyat' or muruval cēytāṅ  
māt' avatāṅnum āṅṭu vantu nīr uṅṭu miḷum  
potaka' naṭappa nokkip putiyat' or muruval pūttāḷ* (3.224)

He saw a goose wandering by, and great Rama  
looked at Sita as she walked just ahead,  
and gave a slight, sly smile.  
And she, too, saw the walk of a fine tusker,  
as it came back from a drink of the river,  
and her face blossomed in a smile of her own.

*villiyarratakkavīraṅ vīṅku' nīrārrir pāṅkar  
vallikaṅṭaṅkaḷ kaṅṭāṅ maṅkai taṅ maruṅkunokka  
ēḷliyaṅkuvalaikkāṅatt' itaiy itai malarntu ninra  
alliyaṅkamalaṅ kaṅṭāḷ aṅṅaraṅ vaṭivaṅ kaṅṭāḷ* (3.225)

Rama, his strong hand skilled in the bow,  
 saw the swaying creepers that grew  
 on the banks of that river in spate and he saw the waist  
 of his woman, who herself looked at the bright-petaled red lillies  
 that blossomed here and there in the midst of a cluster  
 of lotuses as dark as midnight,  
 and saw only the body of her husband.

Kampan describes here how Rāma and Sītā's intertwining gazes play over each other's bodies, and look suggestively at features in the landscape which Indic poets in general had long used when speaking of male and female beauty. Instead of using these commonplaces as standards of comparison (i.e., 'Rāma's shoulders are like a dark riverbank'), Kampan leaves the equation between each pair of features unstated, and has their sequential mention—and the pleasure they arouse in Rāma and Sītā—do the work of comparison implicitly. The figure here is thus likely *tulyayogitā* ('combining equals'), where juxtaposition implies similitude. But this does not exhaust the effect here: in this quiet, gently humorous moment, Kampan shows the couple's shared mental lives of comfortably domesticated eroticism. In terms of the older theory of *akam* poetry, this is the domain of *karpu* ('married love' as well as 'chastity', 'women's virtue') versus *kaḷavu* ('theft' or clandestine love). It is *kaḷavu*, illicit, often forbidden love, filled with excitement but also with the risk of disaster and heartbreak, that is the great theme of the Caṅkam love poets, and the chief intellectual object of the early works of theory. Bear this in mind.

### Enter Śūrpaṅkhā

Following immediately upon this opening riverbank idyll, Kampan gets his narrative underway in earnest:

*anaiyat'or tanmaiyanā varuvinirārin pānkarp  
 paṅitarutēyvappaṅcavaṭiy eṅnum paruvaccolait  
 taniy iṭam atānai naṅṅit tampiyār camaikkap paṭṭa  
 iniya pūncālaiy ēyiy iruntānan irāman ip pāl (3.226)*

That's what it was like along  
 the splashing waters of that river.  
 Rāma approached a solitary spot nearby,

in the cool grove called Panchavati, ever in bloom.  
 His younger brother had already built for him there  
 a lovely flower-covered hut.  
 He settled in there. It was then

*nīlamāmaṇiṇirānirutarventānai*  
*mūlanācam pēra muṭikku' munpināl*  
*melaināl uyirōṭum pīrantu tān vilai*  
*kālam ornt' uṭanurāi kaṭiyanoyanāl* (3.227)

that *she* drew near. To ensure the utter destruction  
 of the sapphire-skinned *Rākṣasa* king,  
 she had been born, ages ago,  
 at the instant of his conception:  
 a congenital, lethal disease  
 that had awaited the very moment for its fruition.

The transition here is augmented by enjambment—*ip pāl*, the final words of 3.226, construe with what follows, while the finite verb *ēytināl*, ‘she drew near’, only occurs three verses later. The metre also shifts between these two verses (from *arucīrācīriyaviruttam* to *nārcīrkaliviruttam*, both common carrying metres in the poem), and this is a means that medieval Tamil poets have at their disposal to signal a transition in the narrative.<sup>10</sup> The effect of the two together is thus highly marked: like a simultaneous change in tempo and key signature in Kampan’s soundtrack.

In calling Śūrpaṅkhā *uṭanurāi kaṭiyanoy*, ‘a congenital, lethal disease’, Kampan introduces a central theme to this episode: her role in Rāvaṇa’s destruction, and the destruction of the *rākṣasa* kingdom, is something preordained, even unwilling. In framing this as pathology—Śūrpaṅkhā as an inborn cancerous excrescence of Rāvaṇa—Kampan is working outside the domains of the usual notions of poetic propriety in either tradition he looks back on. The effect is a queasy, uncomfortable one, which he returns to repeatedly throughout the episode.

The narrative abruptly shifts into Śūrpaṅkhā’s perspective: as soon as she sees Rāma, she is simply overwhelmed—he is the most desirable man in the

<sup>10</sup> Here, I am indebted to Dakshayani (1979), a meticulous study of Kampan’s metrical habits; see also Hart and Heifetz (1988: 11–16).

universe. Over a long block of sixteen verses (3.231–247), she goes through a conventional—though elegant and verbally surprising—repertoire of his possible identity or of things to compare his physique and appearance with: Śiva has four arms, Kāma does not have a body, his face lacks the moon’s disfiguring mark, et cetera. While these are all pan-Indic topoi, Kampan remounts them here in a rendition of the *aiyam* (‘doubt’), which forms the second phase, after *kāṭci*, ‘first sight’ in the taxonomy of *kaḷavu* or clandestine love in classical Tamil poetics (as described in Nakkīraṅār’s comments on *Irāiyānār Akappōruḷ, cūttiram* 2, p. 36). As the narrative momentum of the passage resumes, Kampan resumes an external narrative voice, looking in on Śūrpaṅakhā from outside:

*nittamum vānamuṅ kuṟuka neṅc’ iṭaiḱ  
kottav aṅṅ’ uṅarv’ iṭaiḱ kuḷittu miḱ kōḷa  
ettavum pariviṅ ḍṅr’ ikaḷāṅ pōruḷ  
kāttavaṅ pukal’ eṅat teyuṅkarpināḷ! (3.245)*

Her heart was overwhelmed by a passion  
that beggared both oceans and heavens:  
it swelled up and drowned her reason within itself.  
Her woman’s virtue crumbled,  
like the renown of a miser who hordes up his wealth,  
refusing to give even a little bit  
once he has already been praised.

Centring this verse around a simile of an ungenerous patron, with deep resonance with the classical *puram* repertoire, Kampan explicitly and fatefully frames Śūrpaṅakhā as *teyuṅkarpināḷ*, one whose ‘woman’s virtue has crumbled’, again thematising the classical distinction between the two types of love—*kaḷavu*, represented here, versus *karpu* in the earlier erotic exchange between Rāma and Sītā.

Śūrpaṅakhā then assumes the form of a ravishingly beautiful woman and approaches Rāma. In this version, she meets him all alone—Lakṣmaṇa only enters the story later—and while dazzled by her beauty, he proceeds to make polite conversation with her. Śūrpaṅakhā immediately confesses to Rāma that she is a *rākṣasī*, the sister of King Rāvaṇa, though she hastens to say that she has renounced her heritage and devoted herself to *dharma* (3.259–3.260). Rāma listens with polite interest, thinking to himself that something seems

wrong about the whole situation: women, after all, cannot be trusted (3.263<sup>11</sup>). He asks what he can do for her. She replies:

*tām uru kāmattanmai tāṅkaḷey uraiṅpat’ ēṅpat’  
ām ēṅalāvat’ anṅāl aruṅkulamakalirkk’ ammā  
em urum uyirrkku novēṅ ēṅ cēykeṅ yārum illeṅ  
kāman ēṅr’ ōruvaṅ cēyyum vaṅmaiyaik kāttiy ēṅrāl (3.264)*

Girls from good families aren’t allowed to say ‘Yes’—to say what they really desire. It’s just so awful!  
I worry for my life, overwhelmed by this strange feeling.  
What can I do? I don’t have anyone of my own.  
You must protect me from all the wicked things  
that are being done to me by a single enemy,  
named Love.

*ceṅ ura niṅṅtu miṅṅtu cēvvari citari vēver’  
eṅ ura miḷirntu nāṅāvitam puraṅṅ’ irāṅṅa vāṅkaṅ-  
pūṅiyalkōṅkaiyaṅṅāl am mōḷi pukaloṅṅum  
nāṅilaḷ aiyaṅṅyāṅṅallaḷum allaḷ ēṅrāṅ (3.265)*

With that, she held his gaze. She didn’t look away.  
Her two eyes were bloodshot with passion,  
beautiful in many ways, they trembled and pulsed  
over and over, each jet-black pupil a spearpoint.  
Her breasts bore tracings of gold.  
‘She has no modesty’, Rama thought,  
‘She’s pathetic. There’s no good in her at all.’

Keeping these opinions to himself, Rāma mildly raises an objection:

*nintaṅaiyarakki nitinilaiyilāl vinai marr’ ēṅṅi  
vantanaḷ ākum ēṅre vaḷḷalu’ maṅattuḷ kōṅṅāṅ  
cuntari maṅattir’k’ ōṅṅa tōṅmaiyaṅ ruṅiv’ irr’ anṅāl  
aṅṅaṅarpāvai nī yāṅ aracil vantaṅ ēṅrāṅ (3.268)*

‘This hateful *rākṣasī* has no virtue at all.  
She must have come here planning some scheme.’

<sup>11</sup> *artar’k’ ōvvā / nanṅutaṅmakalir cintai nanṅēriṅ pālav alla*, ‘For all their beauty, women’s minds are tough to fathom: they have nothing to do with the path of the good’.

Rama—usually so generous—held this thought in his mind,  
 as he spoke to her again: ‘Beautiful woman,  
 we lack the resolve that has since ancient times been  
 necessary for a marriage. After all, you’re a brahman’s daughter  
 and I come from a royal family.’

Kampan can lend remarkable clarity to direct discourse: even with metre and *ētukai*, these exchanges suggest what it might have been like listening to a regular—if elegant—spoken Tamil of the twelfth century. But this verse also contains an interesting difficulty, one which is significant to the larger effect of this passage. This concerns the word *tuṇivu*, translated as ‘resolve’. The noun’s semantics are largely cognitive: the *Tamil Lexicon* (s.v.) lists ‘belief, confidence, or certitude’ among its principal meanings (University of Madras 1936). But it is also yet another term of art in the system of *akappōru!* poetics; it is the phase following upon the topos of *aiyam*, which Kampan had reworked into Śūrpaṅakhā’s inner monologue on Rāma’s beauty. This then becomes an ironic and reflexive self-annotation on Kampan’s part, checking off the next item on the list, as it were, in his inherited typology of *kaḷavu* or ‘stolen love’ (Nakkīraṅār, *op. cit.*, 37).<sup>12</sup>

### Light and Darkness

Śūrpaṅakhā assures Rāma that their liaison would not only be possible, but also welcome: after all, there are some Kshatriyas in her family tree, too. At this point, the tone of the episode begins to darken. Despite the fact that Rāma has never shown a glimmer of humour earlier in the poem, Kampan describes how Rāma ‘was a dark raincloud flecked with the silver of the laughter he could barely contain: He decided to have some fun with her’ (3.270 ... *akatt’urunaikaiyiṅ vēllaik / kurutt’ ēlukinra nilakkōṅtal unṭāṭṭāi kōṅṭān*). He begins to feign interest: perhaps they could marry, but only if she were given away to him by her brothers, Rāvaṇa and Kubera. Śūrpaṅakhā

<sup>12</sup> Nakkīraṅār is inconsistent in his terminology, referring to this stage as alternately *teral* (‘clarity’) or *tuṇivu*. Nakkīraṅār even raises in the voice of his objector that problem that this sequence *aiyam-tuṇivu* would fall into the domain of *kaikkilai* or mismatched love, which falls outside of the scope of *akam* poetry. Kampan’s likely awareness of this theoretical dispute may have supplied the motive for him, as the fundamental mismatch between Rāma and Śūrpaṅakhā can be established through the second-order language of poetic theory (cf. Cox 2022: 173).

replies that they could join together right away, and then square things with her family later, suggesting that they wed through the marriage rite of mutual loving consent (3.273 *kāntarppam*, from Sanskrit *gāndharva*).<sup>13</sup>

The whole episode takes a turn into the absurd, as Śūrpaṅakhā even tries appealing to Rāma's ambitions—if he joined her family, he would have Rāvaṇa's strength behind him, and Kubera's wealth to bankroll any campaigns. Rāma is at this point barely able to contain his laughter, until finally it gets to be too much, and a brilliant smile breaks out on his face. So brilliant, in fact, that it gives off a flash that is visible throughout the entire universe (3.276). This prompts Sītā to come out of the *parṇaśālā* to see what had happened:

*ūn* *cuṭav* *uṇāṅkupelvāy* *uṇarv* *iliy* *uruvinārum*  
*vāncutarccotivēllam* *vant' iṭai* *vayaṅka* *nokki*  
*mīncutar* *viṇṇu'* *maṇṇum* *virinta* *porarakkar* *ennum*  
*kān* *cuṭa* *mulaitta* *karpin* *kanaliyaik* *kaṇṇir* *kaṇṭā!* (3.277)

Śūrpaṅakhā's flesh burned. She stood, gaping, her mouth  
growing dry, her consciousness stolen away.  
She looked on as the flood of stars that lights up the night sky  
took on human form and stood there, glittering,  
between them. Right there before her eyes,  
she saw her as a flame of woman's virtue,  
spread throughout the earth and the star-brightened heavens,  
kindled to set ablaze the forest that was the warlike race of *rākṣasas*.

In this breathtaking verse, the patterns of Sanskrit-derived figuration that we have been tracking remain present, but in a transformed way. The underlying figure is another instance of *utprekṣā* or *tanṅkuripperram*. Recall that this typically involves some observer (often the poet) seeing something 'out there' in the world of the poem and envisioning it as performing an action typical of something else; more often than not this is an inanimate or non-rational

<sup>13</sup> On the eight types of marriage (*aṣṭavivāha*) in late Vedic and classical Sanskrit sources, see Jamison (1996); on their remounting in Tamil, see Wilden (2013, 2021). None of the sources examined by Wilden use the orthography *kāntarppam* for Skt. *gāndharva*. Did Kampan perhaps wish to suggest a (spurious) connection with *kāndarpa*, 'relating to Kāmadeva'? This *taddhita* derivative, though transparent in its meaning and attested in Böhtlingk and Roth's (1855) and (following them) Monier-Williams' (1970) dictionary, seems otherwise unattested.

thing envisioned to act with human intents and abilities. Here, the observer is Śūrpaṅakhā, Sītā is observed, and she is seen as two non-human entities: a galactic swirl of star and a raging forest fire. This falls within the logic of the *utprekṣā*, but it is off-centre or imbalanced. If we were to restate this in prose—say, ‘Sītā is a radiant beauty’, based on the shared property of the *upamānas* (stars, fire)—we would miss the point entirely.

By Kampan’s time, *alaṅkāraśāstra* theorists had searchingly examined the cognitive mechanisms at work in the figure, and found there to be an act of *adhyavasāya* or ‘determination’ at the heart of the *utprekṣā*. Simplifying matters considerably, and taking the twelfth-century Kashmirian Ruyyaka as representative, *adhyavasāya* occurs when the thing being described—the ‘target’ of the figure—is completely overwhelmed by the imputation of what is being imposed, the figure’s source; in the case of *utprekṣā*, this is centred upon process, on an action proper to the source being projected onto the target.<sup>14</sup> It is a figure centred on the workings of the mind, but here Śūrpaṅakhā is figured performing the work of the *utprekṣā* while being devoid (the converb *ili*) of *uṅarvu*, ‘consciousness’, as at once rational and affective (‘intuitive feeling and knowing’, in Shulman’s [2016: 167] perceptive gloss). She is therefore precisely incapable of the sort of cognitive determination that the figure would require, of seeing through ‘the imposition of something’s marks’ (the literal meaning of *tan̄kuripperram*). The implication is, I think, that for a moment Śūrpaṅakhā sees Sītā *as she in fact is*, an embodied, luminous divine presence entered into the world in the service of the gods’ culling of the *rākṣasas*.

In the crucial phrase at the verse’s end, where Sītā is described as a *karpin kaṇal*, ‘a flame of woman’s virtue’, Kampan explicitly recalls his *karpu-kalavu* theme while also embedding an allusion to Kaṅṅaki’s apotheosis at the climax of the *Cilappatikāram*.<sup>15</sup> In the confrontation that follows, this subtext

<sup>14</sup> *Alaṅkārasarvasva*, *sūtra* 22: *adhyavasāye vyāpāraprādhānye utprekṣā*, ‘When there is a determination, and process predominates, there is envisioning’ and *ad loc.* *viṣayanigaraṇenābhedapratipattir viṣayiṇo ’dhyavasāyah*, ‘the determination of the source is the awareness of nondifference through the swallowing up of the target’. For a wider discussion placing Ruyyaka’s own presentation in a line of development back to the earlier theorist Vāmana and his adaptation of the language of the Buddhist epistemologist Dharmottara, see Bronner (2016: 114–18); for further reflections on the potential Ruyyaka’s theory of *utprekṣā*, see Cox and Sharma (2024).

<sup>15</sup> Compare, for instance, the culminating *veṅṅpā* of *Cilappatikāram* 21 (p. 488): *pōrpuvalutiṅṅun tan̄ pūvaiyaru’ māḷikaiyūm / virpoliyūṅcēṅaiyu’ māvēlamuṅ—karp̄p̄*

becomes text: Śūrpaṅakhā accuses Sītā herself of being a *rākṣasi* and ‘a little thief’ (*kaḷvi* 3.287), while Rāma finds her speech to be ‘the words of a thief’ (*kaḷla vācakaṅkaḷ*, 3.288), both of these directly indexing the language of *kaḷavu* or ‘stolen love’. Rāma then angrily tells Śūrpaṅakhā to leave, and turns back into the *parṇasālā*, trailed by Sītā, ‘like a scudding cloud trailed by its lightning’ (3.288 *minṇōṭtu tōṭarntu cēllum mekam pol*), in what I find to be yet another allusion, to the *Meghadūta*.

Śūrpaṅakhā departs for the night, seemingly to Mount Meru. Once again, her consciousness swallows up the whole of the poet’s attention: over nineteen dense, hyperbolic verses (3.289–3.307), she is shown to suffer the tortures of love-sickness, to think about the depths of her own desire and to hallucinate Rāma’s image, over and over. So moonlight and the breeze from Mount Malaya both cause her excruciating pain (3.293, 3.294); she tries to cool herself with snow, only to have her super-heated breasts make it boil away, ‘like ghee on a sun-baked rock’ (3.297). Meanwhile, her thoughts move from the sort of ‘as-if’ seeing of the *utprekṣā*, to the wild errors of *bhrāntimat*,<sup>16</sup> and onwards into madness.

The reader’s structures of expectation have been primed by the verbal texture of what has proceeded: Śūrpaṅakhā is fully set in the role of the lovelorn Caṅkam *talaivi* in the throes of the pains of *kaḷavu*. Her evil nature is never in doubt, and her instrumental role in the larger scheme of the eradication of the *rākṣasas* is repeatedly made very clear. Nevertheless, in Kampan’s presentation of her inner life, we are made to understand that Śūrpaṅakhā is genuinely, passionately in love with Rāma.

It is this act of grafting, of reading the inherited story through the lens of classical Tamil literary values, that makes the story’s preordained conclusion so shocking. When Śūrpaṅakhā returns to Pañcavaṭi the next morning, Kampan tells us that Rāma has gone off to do his *sandhyopāsanam*. We read:

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*uṇṇat / tittaru vēṅkūṭar rēyvakkāṭavūlarum / māttuvattān maraintār marru*, ‘As the glorious Valuti [= Pāṇṭiyaṅ], his wives, his palace, his armies glistening with bows, his horse and his elephant were consumed by woman’s virtue, the heavenly gods in all their might disappeared from Madurai, seized by the flames.’ U. Vē. Cā. (*Cilappatikāram* of Iḷaṅkovaṭikaḷ 1978: 488) notes that this verse is not universally attested.

<sup>16</sup>‘Erring’, the poetic representation of confusion, a figure unknown to Daṇḍin, and so undefined by the *Taṇṭiyalaṅkāram*, but among one of the most productive figures in the usage of Indic poets of the second millennium.

*taniy iruntanaḷ camaintat' eṅkarutt' eṅat tālvurr'  
iniy inrunt' eṅakk' eṅṇuvat' ill' eṅav eṅṇāt  
tuniy irunta vanmanattinaṭokaiyaiy tōṭarntāḷ  
kaniyirumpoḷil kāt' ayal iruntavan kaṅṭāṅ (3.310)*

First she thought, 'She's all alone: my idea was perfect!  
and then, 'Why am I standing here waiting? There's no need for another  
thought'.

To one side, that woman, her mind full of hatred; on the other,  
Sita, lovely as a peacock. Standing watch nearby in that fruit-filled grove,  
Lakṣmaṇa saw them both.

*nilla ṭiy eṅak kaṭukinan peṅṇ' eṅa ninaittāṅ  
vill' eṭāt' aval viṅkēriy ām eṅa virinta  
cillalotiyaic cikk' ura ceṅkaiyāṅ parri  
ōllaiy irtt' utaitt' oḷikilarcurreuvāḷ uruvi (3.311)*

'You, girl! Stop right there!'

He left his bow behind—she was just a woman, after all.  
Instead, he tangled his strong hand in her sparse braid,  
as it spread out like a leaping flame, and all at once  
he threw her down, kicked her, and drew his curved, shining blade—

*ūkkit tāṅki viṅ patarvēṅ eṅr' urutt' eḷuvāḷai  
nūkki nōytiṅil vēyt' ilaiyel eṅa nuvalā  
mūkkuṅ kātum vēmmuraṅmulaikkakaṅkaḷum uraiyāl  
pokkip pokkiya ciṅattōṭum purikulal vittāṅ (3.312)*

She tried to struggle free, to push him aside and leap away skyward:  
she raged and tried to rise, but he scornfully pushed her back down.  
'NO MORE TROUBLE OUT OF YOU!' he said, as he cut off  
her nose, her ears, and the hot, hard nipples of her breasts,  
one after the other. And so he cut off his anger, too,  
and he let go of her braid, where he'd grabbed her.

From this point on, the story of Śūrpaṅakhā descends into horror. The  
unsettling sense of her as something terrible and disgusting—as 'a congenital,  
lethal disease'—has been present in the story all along, but now the horror  
comes to the surface, with Śūrpaṅakhā as its victim. Again, Kampan does  
not in the least waver in his view that she is innately evil, and that she is just

a small element in a larger cosmic scheme to rid the universe of Rāvaṇa. And yet, we the readers, and of course Kampan as the poet, have spent so much time seeing through her eyes, looking upon Rāma and Sītā and feeling intense desire and physical suffering, that what happens is shocking:

*uyarum viṇṇītai maṇṇītai viluṅ kiṭant' ulaikkum  
 ayaruṅ kai kulaitt' alam arum ār uyir corum  
 pēyarum pēṅ pīranti yāṅ paṭṭa paḷiy ēṅap pitarrum  
 tuyarum aṅci muṅ rōṭarnt' ilāt tōlkuṭip pīrantā!* (3.316)

She leapt into the sky, she plunged to the ground, but the pain was still there,  
 cutting through it all. She fainted, worrying her hands as her mind reeled,  
 and as her precious life seeped away, drop by drop.  
 She had been born in a family so ancient that Sorrow itself feared  
 opposing them,  
 but as she came to, she raved, 'What a curse that I was born as a woman!'

*ōrrum mūkkinaiy ulaiy uruṭiy ēṅav uyirkkum  
 ērruṅ kaiyiṅai nilattiṅil iṅaittaṅkōṅkai  
 parrīp pārkku' mēy verkkun tanparuvaran mayakkāl  
 curruṅṅuṅ poyc corinīr cōri tara corum* (3.317)

She stuck her nose back on her face, but her breaths through it  
 burned like a forge's flames. She pounded her fists on the ground.  
 Taking each of her big breasts in her hands, she saw what they had  
 become.  
 Her body burned. She stumbled in circles through the fog of her pain,  
 then suddenly broke out in a run, dripping goutts of fresh blood as she  
 went.

These verses and those that follow—as she calls out to the absent gods and her kinsfolk, and as she meets with Rāma and tries again to seduce him despite her injuries—make for tough reading. This is not least because there is a strain of the comic throughout, even while Kampan's narratorial voice is unblinking at the scene's gore. After the elaborate set-up of the play of *kaḷavu* and *karpu* tropes, with all their classical and moralising associations, Kampan reverses himself, and luxuriates in images of gendered violence, of blood-soaked agony visited upon a woman's body precisely because it is a desiring body. When we consider that the language of *kaḷavu* and of

*kaikkilāi*, that is, mismatched love doomed to go wrong, had for centuries been explored as a way to conceptualise the devotee's longing for god—when we consider Kampan as the foremost inheritor of Nammālvār—this inversion becomes utterly shocking.

### Conclusions: Through Translation, beyond Translation

Despite this shock, it is important to bear in mind Kampan's cool intelligence, the way that he plots his story as one of reworked trope and theme, so as to appreciate how careful and deliberate a decision this inversion was. From examining these few verses of Kampan's immense version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, it is evident that he sought to accomplish much more than to move the denotative message of a text from one language into another. It is thus difficult to sustain the claim that the *Irāmāvatāram* is a 'translation' of Vālmiki's epic, in our ordinary sense of the word. Kampan wrote within a context where the immense riches of Sanskrit and Tamil could both be cherished without any diminution of the other, and so in one point of view he was able to seamlessly tack between the two, confident in his ability to draw on either. In alloying the precious metal of both languages, he produced something new, a poetic electrum.

Such a view is certainly appealing, but it undersells the extent of Kampan's achievement. He was not simply a brilliant bricoleur, building up his massive poem out of the materials that an omnivorous curiosity provided him. Kampan's version of the Śūrpaṅkhā episode shows him actively struggling with his inheritances from Tamil and Sanskrit. The poetic envisioning (*utprekṣā* or *tarkuripperram*) had been one of the central devices available to the *kāvya* poet, and a topic of enduring fascination for centuries of critics, theorists and philosophers of language. And in Śūrpaṅkhā's vision of Sītā, Kampan detonates the *utprekṣā* from within, transforming a celebration of irreality into a vision of bedrock ontological truth. The poetry of stolen love had been the mainstay of the classical anthologies, and the stuff of the greatest Ālvār poets' visions of the soul's relation to God. In full awareness of this, Kampan turned its topoi into the major waypoints of his narrative: Śūrpaṅkhā is unquestionably deeply in love with Rāma, just as much as Āṅṅāḷ or Nammālvār's *talaivi* were in love with their own intermittently cruel and indifferent Viṣṇu. She was evil by nature, and ultimately just a single moving part in the elaborate cosmic machinery of Rāma's incarnation, but her *kaḷavu*, that peak of emotional intensity that Tamil poets returned to again and again, goes unquestioned.

Kampan was not a theologian, nor was he an allegorist. Nor was he in any way a feminist *avant la lettre*. But in his focus on the bloody wrack left in the wake of Lakṣmaṇa's stunningly casual act of mutilation, I see more than just an uncanny portrait of gendered violence. Just visible in the background of the gory scene, we can catch glimpses of all the many ways that Indic poets, writing in Sanskrit and Tamil and every other language, visited their imaginings on women's bodies: the bangles slipping from emaciated arms, the whip-thin bodies tortured by the weight of their breasts, the scratches from thorn-trees in the wilderness figured as the scratching nails of rough lovers. Kampan does not reject any of these commonplaces—on the contrary, he uses these and so many others with predictable gusto. But by taking the story of Rāma as a vantage point from which to investigate the long, entangled history of verbal art, he not only gave us his masterpiece but also showed a way to look at the past, his and our own.

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## RENDERING THE WORD OF GOD

*Torsten Tschacher*

### Introduction

Translation lies at the heart of Muslim literature in Tamil. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, in verse after verse, Arabic words, concepts, images and stories are reimagined through the familiar vocabularies of courtly Tamil literature. Text after text claims to be rooted in an Arabic, or occasionally Persian, source, painstakingly explained by a religious scholar and faithfully transposed into literary Tamil by an obliging poet. And in so doing, by following established conventions and continuously alluding to tales left untold in their own poems, Tamil Muslim poets also hinted that words, images and stories were just traces of a greater, ultimate reality to which all the dogmas, practices and memories of Muslims related. And far from hiding that their understanding of that ultimate reality originated beyond the confines of the Tamil language, Muslim poets actively highlighted their grounding in the Arabic tradition that had seen the most recent and complete revelation of the truth in the mundane lives of mankind. Not only did they reveal their Arabic sources, but they also made liberal use of Arabic vocabulary and phrases in their Tamil verses, and praised those who made literal translations or ‘commentaries’ (*urai*) of Arabic texts on the basis of which Tamil poetry could be created.

But *translation* is also a problematic term, what it is understood to be differing from scholar to scholar. Even when speaking specifically about ‘textual’ translation, a wide array of practices have been identified and discussed under the label (Pym 2022: 86–90; cf. Ricci 2011: 61–65). As Pym (2022: 92) notes, there is a ‘risk of dissipation’ in these approaches, the danger that the net of translation is cast wider and wider to include more and more practices, only to arrive at a point where the term explains everything and therefore, paradoxically, nothing. Thus, when I identify translation as lying at the heart of Islamic Tamil literature, I am specifically referring to

the common sense notion of practices that involve recreating a text in one language through the medium of another language. But this is only one half of the story, since each such act of translation was conceptualised by Muslims in Tamil in a manner that, in one way or another, subverts the most defining feature of this notion of 'translation proper', namely, that textual translation is interlingual, involving two different languages (cf. Jakobson 1959: 233). In this manner, considering 'translation' in Islamic Tamil literature also serves to limit dissipation and to consider how far talking about translation in this and similar cases is helpful at all.

My argument proceeds in three stages. I begin at the lowest unit of translation, the word. Considering theories of word-classes in the Tamil tradition of grammar and the use of Arabic words and their Tamil 'translations' in Islamic poetry, I argue that Muslim poets in Tamil did not conceptualise a stark difference between Arabic 'loanwords' and Tamil 'translations', but basically related Arabic to Tamil words as a kind of synonym, something I will refer to as the *nikanṭu*-principle. Based on this treatment of Arabic terms as basically synonymous with their Tamil translation, I turn to the actual practice of translation from Arabic into Tamil. Using the virtual 'replaceability' of Arabic with Tamil terms, Muslim authors did create a body of literal translations that appear to assume an almost perfect level of equivalence between Arabic original and Tamil translation. In the final section, I discuss the conceptualisation of different practices of translation by Muslim Tamil authors. Literal phrase-by-phrase translations were commonly identified as *urai*, 'commentary'. Since they translated only at the level of lexicon and morphology, however, they lacked the poetic qualities required of 'true' literature or *ilakkiyam*. Consequently, transforming any Arabic text into a work of Tamil literature required more far-reaching 'translations' of poetic elements and functions, resulting in texts which appear as rather different from the texts they purportedly translated. Behind the conceptual distinction between different genres of 'translation' in Tamil lies a particular conceptualisation of language, the difference between individual languages, and Truth, a conceptualisation which ultimately subverts expectations about translation and translatability.

### **Between Loanwords and Synonyms: Placing Arabic in the *Nikanṭu*-World**

The presence of vocabulary from Arabic and other languages connected to Islam in the Tamil poetry of Muslim authors is one of the most frequently

mentioned aspects of Muslim textual culture in Tamil, and has been a cause of both anxiety and celebration by commentators. For some, such 'foreign' vocabulary represented nothing less than an 'infiltration' of Tamil, evoking an image of words threatening Tamil in the disruptive service of a sinister outside power (Arunachalam 1974: 282; Sivathamby 1986: 27). For others, Arabic words constituted a religious requirement, predicated on the alleged inadequacy of Tamil to express Islamic concepts, a requirement that voluntarily or involuntarily led to the violation of the norms of Tamil poetry (Uwise 1976: 357; Aptur-Rahim 1980: 23; Mahroof 1993: 177; More 2004: 44–46). More recently, the 'polyglossia' of Muslim-authored texts has received favourable treatment for their skill in incorporating Arabic and Persian into Tamil, something that has even been hailed by David Shulman as a trait of a Tamil 'modernity' *avant la lettre* (Shulman 2016: 258–69; cf. Richman 1997: 212).

Despite these differences, a number of assumptions appear to be shared by all commentators. First, there is an underlying notion that words represent the 'original' language from which they derive in a Tamil text. For note that only if an Arabic word continues to be 'Arabic' when used in a Tamil poem is it possible for the word to threaten the integrity of 'Tamil' or to imbue it with a quality of 'polyglossia'. At the heart of this assumption lies the idea that languages can be neatly and stably distinguished on the basis of vocabulary (cf. Derrida 1985: 173–75). The second shared assumption is that authors were conscious of the fact that these words were not normally part of the Tamil language, but of another idiom, since only under this condition could they be manipulated by authors as expressions of religious identity, poetic versatility or theological scrupulousness. And third, the adoption of Arabic (or Persian and Urdu) loanwords constitutes a process separate from, if not directly opposed to, the simultaneous process of using Tamil and Sanskrit vocabulary to label aspects of Islam. Precisely because the latter process is understood as a practice of translation, the untranslated Arabic word is not generally understood as participating in that process.

The unifying thread across these assumptions is the concept of the 'loanword'. As the term suggests, a 'loanword' is a word that one language has borrowed, taken 'on loan', from another language. Strictly speaking, the 'loanword' does not belong to the borrowing language, but to the language that loaned it. The fact of 'loaning' suggests that there is a reason for the act of borrowing, usually some kind of deficit in the borrowing language. And finally, insofar as the borrowing is done for a reason, it is conscious: the deficit of one language is consciously filled through the surplus of another. However,

while the idea of the ‘loanword’ is fundamental to ‘translation’—precisely because it acts as a sort of boundary marker separating translation from borrowing, but also translatability from untranslatability—traditional Tamil thinking on grammar had no concept equivalent to the Western notion of the ‘loanword’. Rather than categorising words through binaries of ‘native’ and ‘foreign’, Tamil grammarians employed various schemes that divided vocabulary into four distinct categories. Such four-fold divisions of words have a long history in South Asian traditions of grammar, going back at least to Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra* in the third or fourth century CE (see Pollock 2006: 93). The earliest Tamil treatment of the matter is found in the *Collatikāram* of the *Tolkāppiyam*, probably composed not much later than the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, and certainly prior to the eleventh century. The passage forms the basis of further elaborations of the scheme in Tamil:

*iyarcol* [‘natural words’], *tiricol* [‘changed words’], *ticaiccol* [‘regional words’], and *vaṭacol* [‘northern words’], all these are the words to be obtained in poetry. Among them, *iyarcol* are the words that signify in accordance with the custom of the country of refined Tamil, without deviating from their meaning. The term *tiricol* is of two kinds, it is said: different words that indicate one meaning, and one word indicating different meanings. The term *ticaiccol* are those [words] that pertain to the twelve countries connected to the [country of] refined Tamil. The term *vaṭacol* [refers to] a word made up of sounds other than the northern sounds [i.e. the sounds found in Sanskrit and Prakrit, but not in Tamil]. They do not exclude those [words] that harmonize, even if they come in changed form. (*Tolkāppiyam Collatikāram* 397–402)<sup>1</sup>

We need not concern ourselves here with the *iyarcol* and the somewhat puzzling category of *tiricol*, as neither have any bearing for our understanding of ‘loanwords’ in Tamil and have never been discussed in these terms. More important are the categories of *ticaiccol* and *vaṭacol* (Chevallard 2008: 21–51). There is general agreement that the term *ticaiccol* in *Tolkāppiyam* refers to words originating in twelve regions located in modern-day Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Consequently, the category *ticaiccol* might be understood in this context as referring to something like ‘dialectal words’ (see Chevallard 2008: 22–33; Subrahmanya Sastri 1945: 248). By contrast, the category that most unambiguously seems to refer to a variety of ‘loanwords’ would be

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

*vaṭacol*, or ‘northern words’ (i.e., Sanskrit and, possibly, Prakrit vocabulary; Sanjeevi 1972: 3–11). However, this is not really what the category is about. A *vaṭacol* is a word used in Tamil that ‘harmonises with’ or ‘resembles’ (*iyaintaṇṇa*) Sanskrit words. The difference seems to be slight, but it has an important implication: a *vaṭacol* is not a Sanskrit word, but a peculiar kind of Tamil word that is virtually identical to a Sanskrit one, that is, it is not ‘foreign’ per se (see Subrahmanya Sastri 1945: 249). Therefore, a *vaṭacol* can not only be used without qualification in Tamil poetry, it can actually be identical in meaning to an *iyarcol* in the world of the *nikaṇṭu*-treatises: the *iyarcol* ‘*muḷari*’ (lotus) is identical in meaning to the *vaṭacol* ‘*kamalam*’ (*Cēntaṇ Tivākaram* 4.235). Indeed, the explanation of the term *vaṭacol* in *Tolkāppiyam* suggests that if a word contains those ‘northern sounds’ that are not found in Tamil, and therefore requires a substitution of these sounds with those found in Tamil, it does not qualify as a *vaṭacol*, even if it is of a Sanskrit origin.

But what about ‘loanwords’ from languages other than Sanskrit and Prakrit? How do they fit into this system? In order to understand this, one needs to consider subsequent developments in the classification of Tamil vocabulary as exemplified by Pavaṇanti Muṇivar’s *Nannūḷ*, the Tamil grammar most commonly mentioned by Muslim authors. While, by and large, *Nannūḷ* followed *Tolkāppiyam* closely in its categorisation and definition of types of words (*Nannūḷ* 269–73/270–74),<sup>2</sup> there is one notable extension of the scheme with regard to the term *ticaiccol*:

It is said that *ticaiccol* are those [words] that pertain to the twelve countries connected to the [country of] refined Tamil and to the eighteen countries apart from the Tamil [country]. (*Nannūḷ* 272/273)

Pavaṇanti’s extension of the definition of *ticaiccol* to include words connected to the eighteen countries has to be seen against the backdrop of the development of literary vernaculars in the region. While Kannada and Telugu grammarians had begun to draw on the resources of Sanskrit grammatical discourse for their own purposes, in contrast to *Tolkāppiyam*, they did not invert the Sanskrit categories but rather fit their own vernaculars into the existing Sanskrit scheme, usually within the category of the *deśi* or ‘local’ (Pollock 2006: 374–

<sup>2</sup> There are slight differences in the numbering of *sūtras* between the commentaries of Mayilainātar and Civaṇāṇa Muṇivar; in the following, the first number quoted refers to the former, and the second to the latter.

75; Ollett 2017: 165). By connecting the languages of the eighteen countries to the category of *ticaicol* (minus Tamil, for Tamil was already accounted for by *iyarcol*, *tiricol* and the first part of the definition of *ticaicol*), Pavaṇanti integrated new ways of thinking about the location of the vernacular into the framework established by *Tolkāppiyam*. Yet in doing so, he inadvertently paved the way for Muslim poets of later centuries. For beginning in the late-first millennium CE, lists of the ‘eighteen countries’ regularly included a land called *cōṇakam* (e.g., *Cēntaṇ Tivākaram* 12.162).<sup>3</sup> Derived from the Prakrit *jonaka*, ‘pertaining to Ionia’, the term could in principle refer to any region to the west of India. In practice, it became so closely associated with the Middle East that *cōṇakan* means ‘Muslim (person)’ in modern Tamil. Thus, the extension of the concept of *ticaicol* in *Nannūl* effectively permitted the use of Arabic (as well as Persian or Turkish) vocabulary in Tamil poetry. Furthermore, I believe that, like the *vaṭacol*, these words were not conceived of as ‘foreign’ or ‘loaned’, but rather as proper Tamil words resembling the words of other languages (Tschacher 2019: 90–93).

But if the ‘Arabic loanwords’ in Muslim Tamil poetry were, in a way, not really Arabic, but a specific kind of Tamil words, what does this imply for the way they relate to other words used in Tamil poetry? As mentioned above, most discussions of Arabic loanwords in Tamil proceed from an assumption of dissimilarity: Arabic words were ‘borrowed’ because Tamil ‘lacked’ precise equivalents to express Islamic concepts. This notion of dissimilarity, or non-equivalence, as I discuss below, also pervades discussions surrounding the ‘translation of Islam’ into South Asian languages more generally. What is surprising about such debates is that they run directly counter to the empirical evidence, for even a cursory glance at extant Muslim poetry in Tamil demonstrates that like its Sanskrit counterpart, Arabic vocabulary was easily inserted into existing networks of synonymous expressions. These expressions were collected in specialised dictionaries or thesauri, known as *nikaṇṭu* (< Skt. *nighaṇṭu*), which were memorised by aspiring poets, as verbal versatility demonstrated poetic skill. The integration of Arabic words into the chains of equivalence established by the *nikaṇṭus* identified these words as synonyms of already established Tamil and Sanskrit vocabulary, something

<sup>3</sup> The earliest reference to the propriety of using *cōṇakam*-words in Tamil poetry comes from Peruntēvaṇār’s late-eleventh century commentary on verse 59 of Puttamittiraṇār’s *Viracōḷiyam*; Mayilainātar’s commentary on *Nannūl* 272 similarly mentions *cōṇakam* (Chevillard 2008: 36n37).

I refer to as the *nikaṇṭu*-principle (Tschacher 2019: 93–94). Consider the following passage from Umaruṇṇupulavar’s *Cirāppurāṇam*:

*tūyavaṇ uraiṇṇa-k kēṭṭa col marāt’ eluntu taṅkaḷ  
kāyamum maṇamum vākkum kalant’ onrāy makilvu poṅki  
nēyam urriṭa-p paṇintu nirainirai-k kaikaḷ ēnti  
vāyiṇil pukaḷntu pōrri malakkukaḷ vaṇakkam ceytār*

*vāṇavar ceyyum anta vaṇakkattiṇ murai ceyyāmal  
pōnatanāl ajācīl porai nīrai arivu pōkki  
īṇavaṇ kuṇattan āyi lakunattum munivum perrē  
āṇa vamp’ ipulic’ ennum peyarum perr’ alaintu pōṇāṇ (Cīrāppurāṇam  
1.4.15–16)*

As the Pure One spoke, the angels [A. *malak*] rose, not rejecting what they had heard, united their body, heart, and speech, bowed joyously and with love in rows after rows, hands held aloft, praised and glorified [him] with [their] mouths, and worshipped [him]. Azāzīl, because he left without performing that rite of worship that the celestials did, wasted [his] strength, splendour, and knowledge, became of debased character, obtained curses [A. *la’na*] and wrath, received that useless name of Iblīs, and roamed about.

These verses describe a scene central to Islamic notions of the creation of humanity and the origins of evil. God has just created Adam, and now orders the angels to prostrate before the father of humanity. The angels obey, save one: blinded by pride, ‘Azāzīl refuses to bow to Adam in the original act of rebellion against his creator, and thereby falls from God’s grace and turns into the accursed Iblīs, the Devil. The main actors of the scene are the angels, labelled in one of the verses by the Arabic term *malak*. In the second verse, however, Umaruṇṇupulavar refers to the angels by the Tamil word *vāṇavar*, ‘celestials’. It is clear that both terms are meant to refer to the same beings, and therefore, I think it is safe to assume that Umaruṇṇupulavar considered the terms as referentially synonymous. Here, however, lies the interesting aspect of this passage. For the term *vāṇavar* was not coined spontaneously by Umaruṇṇupulavar, but was a ‘generic term’ for a particular class of supernatural beings, the *devas* or ‘gods’ (T. *tēvar* < Skt. *deva*).<sup>4</sup> Nor was Umaruṇṇupulavar

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Cēntaṇ Tivākaram* 1.28: *vāṇavar... tēvarkaḷ potu-p peyar*, ‘vāṇavar...is a generic term for the *tēvars*’. Umaruṇṇupulavar explicitly refers to the angels with the term *tēvar* in *Cīrāppurāṇam* 2.3.15.

the first Muslim to translate the angels as *devas*. In fact, the translation, or even identification, of the two classes of supernatural beings is common to Islamic Tamil literature as a whole. The term *vāṇavar* already occurs in the preface to the first Islamic poem, the *Āyiramacalā* (*Kaṭavuḷvālttu* 24), and in the course of the following three centuries, Muslim authors employed nearly every term that the *nikanṭu*-collections offered for the *devas* in reference to the angels. Furthermore, the ‘translation’ of the Arabic *malak* into the Sanskrit-Tamil *tēvar* enabled further transfers of knowledge. Thus, a common term employed for the *devas* in Tamil poetry was *imaiyōr*, ‘the unblinking ones’, a trait commonly identified with the *devas* in Indic knowledge traditions. Consequently, the labelling of the angels as *imaiyōr* in a Muslim context suggests that the Muslim angels, like their Hindu counterparts, indeed do not blink (e.g., *Tiruppukal* 72). The boundaries between Muslim angels and Hindu *devas* are not simply blurred, but largely obliterated, as individual angels came to be identified with individual *devas*, most strikingly seen in the identification of the archangel Isrāfil, who will blow the trumpet at the end of times, with Kālan, the ‘god’ of time and death, in the *Āyiramacalā* (933–48; see Tschacher 2022: 58–59).

Yet that commonly known facts about the *devas* could be considered Islamic knowledge will likely not go uncontested. Discussions surrounding the utilisation of vernacular terminology to translate Arabic concepts in southern Asia have invariably focused, in one way or the other, on the question of discontinuity between Arabic and vernacular vocabulary. The use of local terminology in Islamic Tamil texts has been discussed in terms of their ‘meanings as understood in Hindu writings’ or as being ‘in the Hindu mode’ (Narayanan 2000: 91; Shulman 2002: 96). On the other hand, Arabic words may be considered problematic for the integrity of Tamil poetry, but they are generally considered to have the same semantic content as they would have if they were found in an Arabic text. The manner in which scholarship has dealt with the problem of ‘untranslatability’ in vernacular Islamic texts is, however, challenged by these very texts. This forces us to reconsider the way we approach the question of translation—translation, this time, not of individual words, but of entire texts.

### Replacing Words: Translation between Arabic and Tamil

*hādhibi risalah mukhtaṣirah [sic] fi bayān mā lā budda minhu li-al-mukallaf  
min al-i’tiqād al-sanī wa-al-amal al-ṣāliḥ al-murḍī. alaftuhā multaqaṭatan*

*min kutiba al-a'immah al-'izām dhawī al-fakhr al-jallī... wa-mutarjamatan bi-lisān al-arwī tas'hīlan 'alā man lam yahṣun bi-al-lisān al-'arabī.*

This is a concise missive concerning the explanation of what is doubtlessly from Him regarding what is enjoined from among the sublime doctrines and the pleasing pious acts. I composed it as a collection from what has been written by the noble imams who possess clear fame, ...and as a translation in the Tamil tongue, a facilitation for those who are not well-versed in the Arabic tongue.<sup>5</sup>

We are fortunate that among the limited number of Islamic prose texts in Tamil predating the nineteenth century is a short treatise entitled *'Izām al-fawā'id fī niẓām al-'aqā'id*, 'The Useful Majesties Concerning the System of Doctrines', probably composed in 1730/31 CE (1143 AH). Its topic, popularity and authorship make *'Izām al-fawā'id* central to our current argument. The treatise deals not with an obscure issue of law or theology, but with the foundational doctrines of Islam as they were understood by a local early-eighteenth-century religious scholar. It seems to have been rather popular: our oldest surviving witness was written before August 1778, not in India, but in Indonesia. Another manuscript, probably about a century younger, belonged to a resident of Nagore and shows signs of use by both male and female readers. At least three editions of the text were printed before 1920.<sup>6</sup> The popularity of the text is directly connected to the author, identified as Maḥmūd Naynā of Parangipettai, who was a disciple of Shaykh Ṣadaqatullāh (1632–1703), the most important Muslim scholar of the Tamil country during the period and whom local memory also connects to Tamil poets: Maḥmūd is said to have taught Umaruppulavar the biography of the Prophet at the orders of his teacher Ṣadaqatullāh (Aptur-Rahīm 1980: 47, 414). But most importantly for our discussion, *'Izām al-fawā'id* was originally composed

<sup>5</sup> This passage is edited on the basis of two manuscripts and a nineteenth-century lithograph. The manuscripts are Leiden University Library (LUL) OR-7368, folios 5v-6r, completed on 5 Sha'bān 1192 AH (29 August 1778 CE), probably in Batavia, and a late-nineteenth or early-twentieth century manuscript from Nagore in a private collection (Ma.Na.), folios 88v-89r. The lithographic version is found in Ḥusayn 1891/1892: part 3, 2–3 (Arabic text in the margins). While the manuscripts are vocalised, the lithograph does not indicate vowels.

<sup>6</sup> The earliest dates to 1309 AH (1891/1892 CE); Ḥusayn 1891/1892: part 3; two further editions in 1908 and 1911 are listed in More (2004: 268, 276).

in Arabic and then translated into Tamil by the author himself, giving us a unique glimpse into the way a Muslim religious scholar of the eighteenth century understood translation between Arabic and Tamil.

As far as the visual organisation and representation of Maḥmūd's translation is concerned, *'Izām al-fawā'id* is a fairly typical example in an Islamicate as well as a Sanskritic context. The translation is a running or alternating one: every Arabic phrase is followed by the Tamil translation.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, as far as possible, the difference between Arabic and Tamil was highlighted in manuscripts and printed editions by the use of red ink for Arabic, by 'overlining' Arabic passages, or by writing the Arabic passages larger or in bold font. The presence of the Arabic original on the same page as the Tamil translation and its visual highlighting simultaneously sacralised the Arabic as the source of religious knowledge, while lending authority to the Tamil translation as grounded in that source (see Ricci 2011: 181; Zadeh 2012: 265–66).

But how did Maḥmūd proceed in translating his Arabic text? The first thing that is striking is that his translation is nothing short of literal. That means that, in most cases, it is possible to clearly identify which word or even morpheme in the Arabic text is translated by which morpheme of the Tamil text. Consider Maḥmūd's rendering of the passage I just quoted at the outset of the section:

*atāvatu oru curukkamāna risālatu mēlāna i'tiqādil ninrum poruntappatta ṣāliḥāna 'amalil ninrum mukallafukku bālighmāy pulli ullavanāy<sup>8</sup> vēṅṅiyatāy irukkum eṇṇattakka naṭapaṭiyai virivittu pēcukīratilāy irukkum. itai kōrvai ceytēn vēruṭaiya pāravāṅkalāna imāmukaluṭaiya kitābil ninrum purakkīyettatākavum [sic; read: porukkīyettatākavum] ... 'arabupācai ariyātavanukku lēcāka vēṅṅi ariwi pācai koṇṭu urai ceyyappattatākavum kōrvai ceytēn. (LUL OR-7368, folios 5v-6r; Ma.Na., folios 88v-89r; Husayn 1891/1892: part 3, 2–3)*

Therefore, this is a concise missive [A. *risāla*] which speaks elaborately of the acts worthy to be thought of as being enjoined profoundly [A. *bālighmāy*] by the One Who Inheres in the Dot, for the enjoined

<sup>7</sup> Regarding the Islamicate context, see Zadeh (2012: 17). For phrase-by-phrase translations in Sanskritic contexts, see d'Hubert (2018: 220–21).

<sup>8</sup> The peculiar phrase *bālighmāy pulli ullavanāy* is only found in LUL OR-7368, folio 5v, but since it obviously renders the Arabic phrase *lā budda minhu*, it was retained.

[matters] from the sublime doctrines [A. *i'tiqād*] and the appropriate, pious [A. *ṣāliḥ*] acts [A. *'amal*]. I collected this as a selection from the books [A. *kitāb*] of the noble imams of distinction ...and I collected it as a commentary through the Tamil [A. *ariwi*] language, that it may be easy for one who does not know the Arabic language.<sup>9</sup>

This passage exemplifies many of the traits typical of so-called Arabic–Tamil prose. Tamil words are often spelled in accordance with colloquial pronunciations, somewhat hidden by my normalising transcription. Arabic words abound in the text, with little indication of why some words are retained and others are translated. The impact of Arabic on the language of the translation is plainly visible. Certain Tamil case-endings are almost mechanically used to render specific elements of the Arabic sentence, such as the dative suffix *-ukku* for the Arabic preposition *li* (*mukallafukku* < *li-al-mukallaḥ*). The basically reverse syntax of both languages has led to the doubling of the phrase *kōrvai ceytēn*, ‘I made collection’, once at the beginning of the sentence, where the original Arabic phrase *allaftu*, ‘I composed’, is found, and once at the end of the sentence, where it would belong in Tamil. Sometimes, the phrasing seems tortuous as a result of rendering every element in the original Arabic sentence. Looking at this passage, some of the twentieth-century criticisms of such prose become immediately understandable (Tschacher 2018: 24–25).

For our purposes, what is striking about the Tamil ‘translation’ of *‘Izām al-fawā'id* is the degree to which it rendered the Arabic text literally, phrase by phrase, word by word, morpheme by morpheme, into Tamil. The choices Maḥmūd made in translating his own Arabic text into Tamil appear sometimes in striking contradiction to the assumptions scholarship has made about translating Islamic discourse from Arabic into a southern Asian vernacular, that is, that translations would either thoroughly localise Islamic discourse and avoid all Arabic terms, or that they would retain only those Arabic terms deemed untranslatable. But while Maḥmūd’s translation retains many Arabic words from the original text, it is difficult to deduce a pattern that would explain why certain words were kept in Arabic. Thus, the phrase *al-'amal al-ṣāliḥ al-murḍī*, ‘pleasing, pious act’ is translated as *poruntappatta ṣāliḥāna 'amal*.

<sup>9</sup> As there exists no agreed-upon standard of transliterating Tamil in Arabic script, I have generally followed the basic rules of the transliteration of the Tamil script, though I have kept some of the more colloquial spellings intact and noted the ‘standard’ form in square brackets.

Both *ʿamal* and *ṣāliḥ* are kept in their Arabic forms, though the latter's function as an adjective is clarified through the addition of the suffix *-āna*. But *murḍī* is rendered with a Tamil word, *poruntappaṭṭa*, 'agreeable'. In this instance, it might be argued that the author expected his audience to know the meaning of *ʿamal* and *ṣāliḥ*, but not of *murḍī*, but this explanation hardly covers all instances of Arabic terms retained in the text. To make matters worse, sometimes the text appears to translate one Arabic word using another, exemplified by the translation of *lā budda*, 'doubtless', with *bālighmāy*, 'profoundly' (< A. *bāligh*, 'profound, to the greatest extent'). Finally, there are instances where the Tamil translation appears to be 'prior' to the Arabic text it translates, where a reader ignorant of the Tamil translation might misconstrue the meaning of the Arabic. For example, towards the end of the preface, Maḥmūd asks God to grant benefits 'to the Qur'an reciter, the reciter, and all the people who listen' (...*li-al-muqrī wa-al-qārī wa sā'ir abl al-istimā*'; LUL OR-7368, folio 6r; Ma.Na., folio 90r). Yet according to the Tamil translation, the benefits are 'for those who cause the recitation, those who recite, and those who will listen to and convey this missive' (*inta risālavai oṭuvippārukkum oṭuvārukkum atai kēṭṭu arivippārukkum...*; LUL OR-7368, folio 6r; Ma.Na., folio 90r). The Tamil translation clarifies that the Arabic word *muqrī*, commonly used to refer to a Qur'an reciter, is here to be understood in its literal meaning as a causative, as 'someone causing to recite', revealing the statement to be an Arabic adaptation of the common Indic practice of stating the benefits accrued from reciting or listening to a book (T. *nūrpayan*, Skt. *phalaśruti*).

Perhaps the most common manner to explain the retention of Arabic words in a vernacular text has been to assert the untranslatability of the Arabic term in question. According to this line of reasoning, an Arabic word was not translated because the translator considers it too far removed from any possible translation in the target language. Rather than risking a misunderstanding on account of the audience, they therefore simply retain the Arabic term, signalling to their readers that the Arabic term carries important meaning not easily conveyable in the target language. Ronit Ricci (2011: 164) has posited that there exists a 'tendency toward untranslatability' in the *Āyiramacalā*, calling attention to the many Arabic terms in the text, as well as in the Malay and Javanese texts that she investigated, that were left untranslated. But would we actually discern a 'translation' of such an untranslatable word? In the passage from the *Cirāppurāṇam* concerning Satan's rebellion that was quoted above, the Arabic *malak* and its Tamil 'translation' *vāṇavar* occurred in close proximity, suggesting their translatability. But it is obvious that even

when terms such as *vāṇavar* occur with reference to the angels without an accompanying Arabic term, they still act in a way as ‘translations’ of the Arabic word *malak*.

There is actually little evidence that Tamil authors recognised any restrictions on translating even the most central texts and tenets of Islam, or at least, to put it somewhat more precisely, on explicating their meaning. This is exemplified by the Muslim creed, the *shahāda* or *kalima*: *lā ilāha illā llāh Muḥammadun rasūl Allāh*, ‘there is no deity but God, [and] Muḥammad is God’s messenger’. While Ricci (2011: 164) notes that this phrase is only quoted, but not translated, in *Āyiramacalā* 254, translations of the *shahāda* do occur in literary as well as theological texts. Already the second extant Islamic Tamil text, Ālippulavar’s *Mikurācumālai*, contains not one, but two translations of the *shahāda*. In *Mikurācumālai* 3, the creed is given as ‘The First is a single matter... [and] radiant Muhammad is God’s messenger’, while in *Mikurācumālai* 720, it is rendered even more precisely as ‘God is One and Muhammad, who is close [to him], is his messenger’ (*āti oru poruḷ ulat’.../ cōti mukammat’ irai taṅ tūtar...; Mikurācumālai* 3; ...*Allā oruvan enrum/ tunru Mukammat’ avan tūtar enrum...; Mikurācumālai* 720).<sup>10</sup> Unsurprisingly, the creed is also translated in *Izām al-fawā’id*, where it appears as ‘truly, lordship belongs to none but God the Exalted and truly, Prophet Muhammad is the messenger of God the Exalted’ (*uṇṇaiyāka nāyakattanam oruvarukkum illai Allāh ta’ālāvukku oliya enrum uṇṇaiyāka Muḥammad nabī Allāh ta’ālāvutaiya tūtāṅkar enrum*; LUL OR-7368, folio 7r; Ma.Na., folio 92v).

This discussion illuminates several important facets. First, even the most innocuous looking Tamil words may actually be intended as translations of Arabic terms, even if they are not accompanied by that term. This means it is problematic to assume that a single usage of an Arabic word indicates that this word was retained in that specific instance because it was considered untranslatable. Second, translations of terms, certainly those of central concepts, are not limited to single texts or even genres, but occur across different genres of Islamic texts in Tamil throughout the early-modern and into the colonial and postcolonial periods. We are not dealing with the contingent decisions of specific authors on how to translate, thus, but with equivalences long established and accepted by authors and audiences alike. Third, there is no indication that any Arabic term or statement was considered

<sup>10</sup> The additional qualifications of Muhammad as ‘radiant’ and ‘close [to God]’, which make both translations appear somewhat inexact, were inserted to maintain rhyme.

in principle untranslatable. The choice to retain an Arabic term in Tamil discourse can therefore not simply be reduced to religious compunctions about its untranslatability. And finally, and probably most controversially, as far as can be told, Tamil translations appear to have precisely the same meaning as the Arabic terms they translate. This latter statement should not be misunderstood as saying that terms like *dīn* and *mārkkam*, or *malak* and *tēvar*, are total equivalents of each other, a notion that has long been considered misleading (Bell 1991: 6; Stewart 2001: 278). Rather, they are used in the same manner within Islamic Tamil textual culture, for, as Wittgenstein (1958: §43) argued, ‘the meaning of a word is its use in the language’. Both creators of this textual culture and its audience appear to have understood certain Arabic phrases as meaning the same as certain Tamil phrases, and therefore, that these phrases were exchangeable as far as semantic meaning was concerned. To be used with the same meaning, however, does *not* imply that phrases also were pragmatically equivalent for liturgic and ritual purposes; the translations of the *shahāda* considered above could certainly not stand in for the *shahāda* in ritual affirmations of the Muslim faith. This distinction between meaning and other kinds of use of a text leads us to a final question to be considered: how, precisely, did Tamil Muslim authors in the early modern period conceptualise ‘translation’, and ultimately, ‘language’ itself?

### Commentaries and Restatements: Conceptualising Translation from Arabic to Tamil

A useful starting point is again provided by Maḥmūd’s *‘Izām al-fawā’id*. In the passage quoted above, Maḥmūd calls his Tamil text a *mutarjamah* in Arabic. A feminine passive participle derived from the root *t-r-j-m*, the most common translation of the word nowadays would be ‘something translated’. But prior to the nineteenth century, the term could also refer to ‘something explained’ (Shamma 2022a: 3–4). Zadeh (2012: 14, 116) has pointed out how translation and exegesis were, in their own way, ‘solutions to the problem of divine speech in the realm of human language’. In other words, both explaining the Qur’an and translating it involved substituting divine speech with words and phrases that differed from the original text, no matter whether these words were in Arabic or in any other language. In this context, ‘delineating translations and commentaries into distinct ontological and juridical categories’ (ibid.: 116) is a futile exercise. How Maḥmūd understood the Arabic term *mutarjamah* is clarified by his Tamil gloss, *urai ceyyappaṭṭatu*, ‘something

explained' or 'something commented upon'. In other terms, what Maḥmūd highlighted was not his crossing of a linguistic boundary but an act of exegesis. His Tamil 'translation' explained the Arabic text to someone whose knowledge of Arabic was insufficient to decode the Arabic text. Nor was Maḥmūd alone in choosing this translation: in the late-nineteenth century, it was still general practice among Muslim prose-writers to translate the Arabic root *t-r-j-m* by versions of the Tamil *urai cey-*, 'to comment' (Tschacher 2011: 32–33). Yet by translating the Arabic verb *tarjamah* into Tamil as *urai cey-*, Tamil scholars not only blurred the dividing line between 'commentary' and 'translation', but obliterated it. Rather than focusing on the interlinguality between Arabic and Tamil, which is highlighted by the term 'translation', Maḥmūd focused on the pragmatic use of literal translation as a means of explaining a text, even if in another language.

This is not to say that, by identifying his Tamil 'translation' as a 'commentary', Maḥmūd denied the very difference between the two languages. In some ways, the label *mutarjamah/urai* gestures towards something similar to the visual representation of the Arabic and Tamil texts on the page of a book: the Tamil 'commentary' is forever visually subordinate to the Arabic 'original'. Yet, at the same time, this subordination is not the result of the text's interlinguality, but simply that of a commentary to the original. I am not claiming, thus, that linguistic hierarchies are not at play here. After all, Maḥmūd could have chosen to simply write an original Tamil text in the first place and skip the Arabic. By rendering an Arabic original, the Tamil translation comes to share in the authority of, and is authorised by, the language of scripture. The linguistic difference of Tamil from Arabic does not limit its capacity to convey the meaning of the original. As Weinberger (2013: 30) claimed: 'A translation is not inferior to the original; it is only inferior to other translations, written or not yet written', and by the same token *'Izām al-fawā'id* is not inferior to the original; it may only be inferior to other commentaries, no matter what language they are written in. In the relentless sequentiality of phrasing, where Tamil explanation follows Arabic proposition without fail, there is no space for doubting Tamil's capacity to explain an Arabic text by systematically replacing Arabic signifiers with Tamil ones. This includes not only Maḥmūd's own texts, but also his quotations from other Arabic texts, most notably the Qur'an and Hadith.

Yet if apparently any word or phrase from Arabic could be 'commented on' through Tamil vocabulary, does that mean that just any aspect of an Arabic text could be thus rendered? As it turns out, there were aspects of

the Arabic language which were not easily reproduced in Tamil, or at least not in the way we might have expected. As an *urai* or ‘commentary’, a Tamil translation of the type represented by *‘Izām al-fawā’id* was only capable of glossing semantic meaning. By that token, what could not be transported were elements outside the domain of meaning. This is most starkly seen in the few cases where Maḥmūd quotes Arabic poetry, mostly by Ibn ‘Arabī, in the text, and then renders these poems in semantically proper but rather uninspired commentarial prose (see Tschacher 2019: 94–95). So if the Muslim translation-as-commentary had any weakness, it was precisely that as an *urai* it was neither supposed to constitute nor was it capable of constituting poetry. This required a different kind of text, namely those that came under the category of *ilakkīyam* or ‘literature’. And many of these texts actually acknowledge their indebtedness to the more pedestrian translations represented by the *urai* (Tschacher 2011: 30). In simple terms, translation was therefore at the root of the Islamic Tamil literary tradition. But since literal translation, as ‘commentary’, could not be literary, it required re-composition. But the matter is not quite as straightforward, for we could similarly claim that Tamil commentaries of Arabic texts do not constitute translation at all, since, from the perspective of their authors, the fact that they explained a text in one language through the medium of another was unconnected to their status as an *urai*. Paradoxically, while phrase-by-phrase ‘commentary-translations’ as exemplified by texts like *‘Izām al-fawā’id* appear closer to an everyday understanding of translation in English, they were not conceptualised as an interlingual activity in Tamil textual culture. Yet what about the poems that claimed to have been composed on the basis of such Tamil ‘explanations’ or Arabic texts? How far does it make sense to speak of them as ‘translations’? That is, if the kind of ‘translations’ represented by *‘Izām al-fawā’id* are called ‘commentaries’, is there a term that identifies ‘literary translation’ as such?

While space does not allow me to fully explore this issue, looking at a candidate term in the Tamil tradition such as *molīpeyarttu* (Trivedi 2006: 114–15; Ricci 2011: 56; Wilden 2015: 96–97) shows that, while seemingly equivalent to modern notions of translation across linguistic boundaries, this term does not seem to have distinguished ‘translation’ of particular kinds of texts and instead indicates how relatively unimportant the interlingual aspect of ‘translation’ appears in Tamil conceptualisation. What is emphasised is not the crossing of language boundaries, but the unity of the ‘meaning’ (*T. poru!*) transported from telling to telling, an idea that seems to have fitted

well with Arabic conceptions of *ma'ná* as the 'meaning' or 'mental content' of specific vocal forms that could be changed in translation (on *ma'ná* and translation, see Key 2018: 148–52). In the South Asian context this was precisely a technique of exegesis and commentary, in which one word could be exchanged for a synonym with the same meaning.

Underlying this conceptualisation of 'translation' was an idea of 'meaning' which existed outside the linguistic forms in which it was produced. 'Languages' were composed of similar building blocks ranging from the sounds of a language to poetic embellishments, or rather, only those entities which possessed all these blocks were 'complete' languages. While these differed from each other, they formed functional equivalents, which enabled the shifting of 'meaning' from one linguistic context to the other. This firmly logocentric view of meaning is underlined by a somewhat instrumentalist attitude to language: in contrast to the expression of 'translating into English', which corresponds to the notion of transfer between languages in which a text is located, Tamil texts of the early-modern period prefer a phrase in the instrumental, to express something 'through the Tamil language' (*ariwi pācai koṇṭu*), as Maḥmūd put it in *'Izām al-fawā'id* (see, e.g., *Apūṣakamāmālai* 18; *Mikurācumālai* 16–17; *Tirumaṇakkāṭci* 1.29; for examples from Hindu texts, see *Citamparapurāṇam* 1.15; *Tiruccentūrttalapurāṇam* 2.16; *Tiruppūvaṇapurāṇam*, *Avaiyatakkaṁ* 1). Languages are media through which a particular subject or meaning gets expressed, but depending on the language as well as the purpose of that expression, different rules have to be followed in expressing the subject.

But how does this model of Arabic and Tamil as specific but commensurate systems of grammar that are absolutely equal with regard to their constituent elements tally with the exalted position of Arabic as the authoritative language of scripture? The answer to this question lies, I believe, in Islamic theological models concerning the relationship of scripture and language. A number of theologians of the dominant Ash'arī and Māturīdī schools developed the notion that the Qur'an was eternal, but did not exist in any specific human language, since all human languages, including Arabic, existed in time. According to their ideas, God's eternal scripture could be revealed in different languages, as it had been in the 'scriptures of the former people' (*zūbur al-awwālīna*, Qur'an 26.196) or the 'former scriptures' (*suḥuf al-ūlā*; Qur'an 87.18) (Zadeh 2012: 114–15). Arabic's authority in this model derived not primarily from the language's linguistic superiority, but from the fact that it was the language of the final, superior revelation to Muhammad, the only one that remained unchanged by human intervention. While many Muslim scholars accepted

that Arabic was indeed superior to other languages (cf. Zadeh 2012: 191–205), this claim is muted in Tamil texts at best, especially when one compares the exuberant praise the Tamil language received for its excellence. At the same time, the polylinguistic character of earlier revelation is borne out in Islamic Tamil literature (e.g., *Kōṭṭāru Nāṇiyārcākipu*, *Nānatōttiram*, *Pāyiram* 9). The inimitability (A. *ījāz*) of the Qur’an made Qur’anic Arabic superior, but for the very same reason, it was only the divine Qur’an that was inimitable, not the human language of Arabic—after all, the Arabs themselves had been unable to imitate the Qur’an. Human-authored Arabic texts were another matter. God’s word, the ‘Pre-Text of the Islamic Revelation’, as Ahmed (2016: 346–47) calls it, was beyond human language. The Pre-Text is an uncanny reminder that what Tamil Muslims were composing was in their eyes an engagement with a universal Truth valid for all humanity. It was that Truth that Tamil Muslims were translating into their texts, for which the historically contingent idiom of Arabic served as a mediating agent.

## Conclusion

Focusing on the manner in which scholars and poets of the early-modern period rendered Arabic into Tamil, we are faced with a paradox. On the one hand, we encounter a bewildering array of interlingual engagements: Arabic terms and phrases are effortlessly expressed through a highly conventionalised Tamil vocabulary, while Tamil eloquence is enriched by the addition of Arabic words; Arabic texts are given meaning through Tamil commentaries; and the world-making of Arabic literature is transposed into the *imaginaire* of Tamil poetry. Where earlier scholarship assumed a translation wasteland lie fertile stretches of creative transpositions between both languages. To consider these transpositions and engagements to constitute varieties of translation can help us to enrich our understanding of communication and expressivity, as well as dispel the persistent image of Islam as a religion that resists translation. Tamil authors certainly did not consider Islam as a religion inexpressible in their own language. Rather, in bringing both idioms into communication, they reinterpreted the conceptual worlds of both Islam and Tamil in surprising ways. Like other ‘translation moments’ in the history of Islam, like Abbasid-period translation from Greek into Arabic or the Mughal-period translation from Sanskrit to Persian (Nair 2020; Shamma 2022b: 304–19), Tamil authors permitted translation to inform their understandings of both sides in the translation. And what Islamic Tamil

literature may lack against Abbasid or Mughal translations in philosophic systematicity, it more than makes up for by the poetic brilliance of its vision.

But this chapter has also suggested the pitfalls of treating every act of interlingual engagement as 'translation'. The prime argument against this extension are Tamil conceptualisations themselves. From the perspective of Muslim Tamil authors, none of the activities they engaged in was primarily defined through interlinguality: words were not primarily 'Arabic' or 'Tamil', but synonyms, referents to particular meanings that could, if the rules of language allowed for it, be put to use in several linguistic contexts; a Tamil commentary of an Arabic text was in principle the same as an Arabic commentary of the same text; and a Tamil restatement of an Arabic story was ultimately just one more telling, no matter the language. To label all these activities as 'translations' runs the risk of misleadingly projecting our own assumptions about languages and the ways they relate into other places and times, while at the same time extending the reach of English by enriching it with 'other' notions of 'translation'. We universalise the 'Western' by localising the 'non-Western'. Understanding Tamil engagements with Arabic not as 'translation', but as acts of exegesis, re-articulation and creativity, reveals Muslim Tamil authors as reflexive searchers for truth rather than as prisoners of language hierarchies and dichotomies. Taking the 'untranslatability of translation' (Ricci 2011: 31) seriously must entail questioning the very usefulness of the concept and exploring what our notions of linguistic difference and (un)translatability might be missing.

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## SHIFTING WORLDS

### The Obsolescence of the *Nikaṇṭus* in the Tamil Literary Tradition

*Srilata Raman\**

#### Introduction

The first part of this chapter discusses the *nikaṇṭus* (or, thematic word lists), the words they give us and the kind of Tamil they seem to naturalise. To illustrate the structure and the contents of a *nikaṇṭu*, I focus on the possibly sixteenth-century *Cūṭāmaṇi nikaṇṭu*, which had also become the most popular work for memorisation by poets in the centuries after its composition. I conclude this section by talking about the *nikaṇṭu* as a literary document in its own right and how it offered the poet not just a range of vocabulary but also an entry into an imaginative landscape which curates a religious world, linking the transcendent and the immanent together through the paraphernalia of the cosmos.

In the second part of this chapter, I discuss the changing scope of employment for a professional poet of the *nikaṇṭus* in the last decades of the nineteenth century, tracing the transformation of one of the most famous of them all, U. Vē. Cāminātaiyar, from poet laureate in a Śaivite monastery to Tamil teacher in a government college. I show how this change of profession can be usefully considered in tandem with the gradual displacement of the *nikaṇṭu* by the dictionary or *akarāti*, and how this displacement must

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be understood against the backdrop of a rising linguistic nationalism and formations of the Tamil Secular in colonial and postcolonial South India.

### Part One: The *Cūṭāmaṇi Nikaṇṭu*

Studies of the history of Tamil lexicography do not lack the basic collation and descriptive accounts of pre-modern lexicographical works, nor do they refrain from theorising, tentatively, about their historical evolution. Thus, particular mention must be made of two excellent brief studies: Vaiyapuri Pillai's (1982) general survey in his *Introduction to the Madras Tamil Lexicon* and Mu. Arunachalam's (2005a) chapter in his *Tamiḷ illakiya varalāru* ('History of Tamil Literature'). Nevertheless, there is to date no detailed study of several of the authoritative *nikaṇṭu* works that emerged between approximately the ninth and the sixteenth centuries, or their second efflorescence between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries in the Tamil country. Further, there is no study of them as literary documents and I suggest, here, that they are indeed fascinating and even beautiful literary documents that contain important cultural insights into pre-modern Tamil society.<sup>1</sup>

Particularly influential and significant for the development of the *nikaṇṭu* tradition was the trio of works, the *Cēntaṇ tivākaram* (c. ninth century), the *Piṅkaḷaṅtai* (c. twelfth–thirteenth century) and the *Cūṭāmaṇi nikaṇṭu* (c. sixteenth century), each indebted to the next successively in terms of their historical chronology, based on internal citational evidence.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I focus specifically on the last of these works, the *Cūṭāmaṇi nikaṇṭu*, composed by the Jaina author Maṅṭalapuruṭar, which had become the work most used in the curriculum of Tamil poets in the centuries after its composition.

What genre of work are we dealing with when we speak of the *nikaṇṭu*? The name is misleading. The word *nikaṇṭu* in Tamil stems from the Sanskrit *nighaṇṭu* (aspirated voiced consonant), a word that might or might not be a Middle Indic derivation from the Sanskrit word for 'decomposition' (*nirgrantha*) (Vogel 2015: 11n1). The Sanskrit genre, as Vogel (2015) explains,

<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the contents of the three *nikaṇṭus*, see Vaiyapuri Pillai (1982); Caṅmukam Pillai (1982); Mātaiyaṅ (2015).

<sup>2</sup> Thus, the *cirappuppāyiram* of the *Cūṭāmaṇi nikaṇṭu* explicitly refers to both the *Tivākaram* and the *Piṅkaḷa nikaṇṭu* and how it has built upon them. For detailed analysis of the *Tivākaram* as the model for all remaining *nikaṇṭus*, see Arunachalam (2005a: 63–174).

was restricted to Vedic word lists and, indeed, this is how we understand them from the time of Yāska's *Nirukta*. Such a work was to be sharply distinguished from the classical dictionaries which emerged after them and came to be called *kośas* or 'treasuries.' Apart from the fact that the categories of words which would be included in the Vedic *nighaṅṭus* were much wider than in the classical *kośas* (the latter restricted themselves to nouns and indeclinables while the former listed all parts of speech; *ibid.*: 303), the two were composed for very different purposes: the former 'served as teaching aids in the interpretation of scripture, while the *kośas* were primarily to help poets in composition, being an integral part of their education' (*ibid.*: 12).

Arunachalam (2005a: 64–65) suggests that, to the best of his knowledge, the classical *nikaṅṭus* self-referentially called themselves works about adjectives and adverbs (*uricol*) rather than *nikaṅṭus*, a word that first comes into vogue only with the *Cūṭāmaṇi* which refers to itself as one.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the earliest works of this kind, the *Cēntaṇ tīvākaram* and the *Piṅkalaṅtai* do not refer to themselves as *nikaṅṭus*, though they came to be regarded as such by the later grammatical tradition. The *Tivākaram* in its invocatory verse (*kāppu*) simply refers to itself as a compilation (*tokuti*). The *Nannūl* (c. twelfth century), the grammatical work considered most authoritative after the *Tolkāppiyam* (composed some time in the first centuries of the Common Era), and the first commentary on it by Mayilanātar refer to these works as 'books which deal with residual words' (*uricol paṇuval*). The use of the word *nikaṅṭu* for this type of text only came into vogue with the *Cūṭāmaṇi*.

Further, in its categorisation of words the *Cēntaṇ tīvākaram* also seems to follow, broadly and implicitly, the Sanskrit lexicographical paradigm well known from the *Amarakośa*, first listing words that relate to higher sentient beings and then those for lower sentient and insentient beings and things. The *Amarakośa*, composed in poetic metres and consisting of 1,500 verses, consists of three large sections (*kāṇḍas*), each with several chapters (*vargas*) within them. The three *kāṇḍas* are *Svargādikāṇḍa*, *Bhūmyādikāṇḍa* and *Sāmānyakāṇḍa*. Varying editions of the text differ on the number of chapters in the first *kāṇḍa* but tend to be consistent regarding the next two (Birwé 1972: 384). The following topics are dealt with sequentially in the first *kāṇḍa*: heaven (*svarga*), sky (*vyoman*), the quarters (*dis*), time (*kāla*), thought (*dhī*), sound (*śabdādi*), dance (*nāṭya*), the nether world and the

<sup>3</sup> Up to the present, however, a synonym of *kośa* in South India is *nighaṅṭu* (also spelt *nighaṅṭa*, *nighaṅṭi*, *nirghaṅṭa*, *nirghaṅṭu*).

serpents (*pātālabhogin*), hell (*naraka*) and water (*vāri*). The second *kāṇḍa* consists of word lists on: earth (*pṛthvī/bhūmi*), towns (*pura*), mountains (*śaila*), forests and herbs (*vanauśadhi*), animals (*siṃhādi*), man (*manuṣya*) and the four *varṇas* (*brahman*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya* and *śūdra*). The final *kāṇḍa* consists of five chapters on adjectives (*viśeṣanighna*), miscellaneous words (*saṃkīrṇa*), homonyms (*nānārtha*) and indeclinables (*avyaya*), closing with a section on gender (*liṅgādisaṃgraha*). As Vogel (2015: 22) points out, the *Amarakośa* is mainly a synonymic dictionary in which articles are grouped according to their classificatory affinities. This model of categorisation is also faithfully followed in the *Cūṭāmaṇi nikaṇṭu*, in which the number of words listed has almost doubled from that of the *Cēntaṇ tivākaram*, to 14,700 words. Listed here are the twelve sections (*tokuti*) of the *Cūṭāmaṇi nikaṇṭu*:

- Gods (*teyvam*)
- People (*makkaḷ*)
- Animals (*vilāṅku*)
- Trees and plants (*maram*)
- Place (*iṭam*)
- Things (*palporuḷ*)
- Forms of things made by human hand (*ceyarkai vaṭivam*)
- Qualities (*paṇpu*)
- Verbs/Actions (*ceyal*)
- Sound (*oli*)
- Polysemic words (*oru cor pala poruṭ peyar*)
- Group names (*pala poruṭ kūṭṭattu oru peyar*)

Nevertheless, from their inception, Tamil works also had their own unique genealogy, indebted to the Tamil grammatical tradition. Thus, the *Cēntaṇ tivākaram* contains at its core a list of 120 words called *uriccol* to be found in Book 2, Chapter 8 of the foundational grammatical work of classical Tamil, the *Tolkāppiyam*. This section of the *Tolkāppiyam* has been called the first lexicographical attempt in Tamil. The *Cēntaṇ tivākaram* incorporates this core list into its 9,500 words.

### The World-Word of the *Cūṭāmaṇi Nikaṇṭu*

What strikes us immediately about a *nikaṇṭu* is the semantic proliferation, the plethora or even excess of words that it offers us within each category, as well as, paradoxically, the delimitation of the words within each category. Why so many words and yet why only these words in a particular category?

Why stop with them? Let me give you three examples from the *Cūtāmaṇi nikaṇṭu* to illustrate.

The very first section, 'Aggregation of the names of the deities', (*teyvap peyar tokuti*) lists approximately 133 categories, beginning with thirty-three deities arranged in order from the higher gods to ghosts (*pēy*). The list of main gods begins, appropriately enough considering the sectarian affiliation of the author, with the Jina (*arukan*) and, indeed, the *Cūtāmaṇi nikaṇṭu* lists ninety-six names for the Jina, the most for any high being or god. This is followed by Śiva (*Civan*), Baladeva (*Palatēvan*), Viṣṇu (*Ari*), Brahma (*Piraman*), Buddha (*Puttan*), etc., down to the goddesses, where Umā and Durgā and Kālī are listed separately. Within this list, though, we have the insertion of the name for women who invite the wrath of the Goddess upon enemies (*kāliy ēval ceeyum makal*), though this might logically belong to the next section on the names of humans. Yet the first aggregation of the names of gods, we come to see, is an expansive category. It also includes names for the elements: sky, wind, fire, water (but not earth); then the sun and moon, the twelve zodiacal signs, the twenty-seven constellations (*nakṣatras*) and the stars. Time is brought in: there is a detailed listing of time units, the names of times of the day, the divisions of the month and a section on the units of cosmic time, such as the time of Brahma. This 'Aggregation of the names of the deities' finally ends with the names for rain (ranging from torrents to drizzles), hailstones, thunder and lightning, and the twenty-three names for that stock image evoked in Tamil poetry, the cloud (particularly the beloved rain cloud), concluding in a note of cheer with the name of the rainbow (*vānavil*), also called the bow of the god Indra *intiratanu* (< *Indradhanuṣ*). So, here, we seem to have an enumeration that includes the gods, all beings between gods and humans (but not humans), the cosmos as a creation of the gods, the time and the elements, while stopping short of the earth, which, below the heavens, is seen as the insentient habitat of the (non-divine) sentient (*Ārumuka Nāvalar* 2009: 10–33).

Sometimes the *Cūtāmaṇi* gives us a word list that, once scrutinised carefully, reveals a clear pattern. Consider the words relating to food, which remain interestingly stable in all three of the *nikaṇṭus* over several centuries. These are: *aṭicil*, *pōnakam*, *mūral*, *amalai*, *ayiṇi*, *pommal*, *maṭai*, *micai*, *uṇā*, *puḷukkal*, *valki*, *pālitam*, *annam*, *patam*, *mitavai*, *pāttu*, *turru*, *uṇṭi*, *conri*, *punkam*, *caru*, *acanam*, *uṇ*, *kūl*, *ōtanam* and *pukā* (*ibid.*: 125). The broadest category is that of cooked food: *ayiṇi*, *micai*, *uṇā*, *valki*, *patam*, *uṇṭi*, *acanam*, *uṇ* and *pukā* (the last of which might be the broadest category since it refers to the food of both humans and animals). More specifically, many of the words denote not just any

edible thing that is cooked, but specifically boiled rice. Boiled rice is seen as synonymous with cooked food both in the extended meaning of *micai* and *valki* above; additionally, however, it is also the meaning of the listed terms *aṭicil*, *pōṇakam*, *mūral*, *pommāl*, *maṭai*, *pulukkāl*, *pāḷitam*, *patam*, *mitavai*, *ōtaṇam*, or, in other words, the majority of the words in the list. Cooked food does not, primarily, mean cooked wheat, or barley or millet, but very specifically cooked rice. At the same time, there is a third category which refers to the consistency of the food, from solids such as cooked rice (those mentioned above) to thick porridge and thick gruel (*mitavai*, *kūḷ*) to thin gruel (*pāḷitam*). Food that is not just food but also an oblation to the gods (*caru*) is added to the list. Hence, what we have is a word list that paints a picture of what the author of the *nikaṇṭu* saw as the normative idea of cooked food, cooked rice, suitable to the Tamil region, and that frames and is framed by the word list in an implicit coherence, which is for us to discern.

Sometimes the *Cūtāmaṇi* has an initial verse in a section that tells us something about the reasoning behind the listing. Thus, at the beginning of the seventh chapter, an 'Aggregation of names for forms of things made by human hand' (*ceyaṛkai vaṭivup peyart tokuti*), the author tells us that these refer to things flawlessly made from clay, wood, animal skins and yarn (*maṇ maraṅkaḷ tammil paḷutaru tōlin nūliṛ paṛpala vitaṅkaḷāka vaḷu urātu iṭum ceyaṛkai vaṭivu*). This section is particularly insightful in showing us what were considered the important or common objects to list either in terms of poetic convention or when the *nikaṇṭu* was composed. A great portion consists of the names for various weapons: list upon list for bows, arrows, spears as well as what one uses in war planks, the names of the equipage for horses, etc.; then the jewels worn on different parts of the body, pieces of attire, names of boxes, of the water pot, drums and musical instruments, chariots, beds and swings, ladders and mats, thread, ropes, equipment for play such as balls, names for garments and for flags flown in public spaces (*vītiyirkaṭṭiyakoṭi*). The section concludes, after seventy-six verses, with the word for tightening a piece of cloth around oneself (*tarral*). So, we come to see that this is not just about listing man-made objects but also words that refer to what we do with these objects.

Let me give one more example of the logic of the listing in the text through describing the ninth chapter. In the 'Aggregation of the verbs/names of action' (*ceyalppariyap-peyarttokuti*), 'action' is understood in the widest possible sense, not just to cover 'work' (in the sense of an activity that one might do

for a livelihood though this is prominent) but all that one does as a human when one is in motion. These 'actions' range, therefore, from professions to rites of passage, festivals, the names of games played by girls, the names for eating, charitable giving, writing, making love, embracing and even for dying, which is also seen as an action. All that can be enumerated between living and dying—such as poking, yawning, throwing, waving, burying, jumping, warring, dancing, pushing someone or throwing something away—finds a place in this section.

Each section of the *Cūṭāmaṇi* contains, in similar copious detail, categories of the human and the non-human, ending with the final two sections on assonances (*etukai*) particularly important for poets learning to rhyme.

Beyond its denotational content, what can one say about the language of a *nikanṭu*? Let us begin by examining a few lists of words, where the italicised terms are Indo-Aryan loanwords, either from Sanskrit or Prakrit.<sup>4</sup> From chapter one:

Śiva: *Caṅkaraṇ*, *Iraiyōṇ*, *Cambu*, *Catācivaṇ*, *Pēyoṭāṭi*, *Aravaṇintamūrṭti*, *Purāntakaṇ*, *Pūtanātaṇ*, *Kaṅkaivēṇiyaṇ*, *Kaṅkāḷaṇ*, *Kaṭukkaiyaṅkaṇṇicūṭi*, *Maṅkaiyōrpākaṇ*, *Muṇṇōṇ*, *Makēccuvaraṇ*, *Vāmatēvaṇ*, *Nilakaṇṭaṇ*, *Mātēvaṇ*, *Nirmalaṇ*, *Kuṇṇravilli*, *Cūlapāṇiyaṇ*, *Īcāṇaṇ*, *Pacupati*, *Cuṭalaiyāṭi*, *Kālakālaṇ*, *Kapāli*, *Uruttiraṇ*, *Kailaiyāḷi*, *Ālamarkkaṭavuḷ*, *Nittaṇ*, *Aimmukaṇ*, *Paracupāṇi*, *Antivaṇṇaṇ*, *Mukkaṇṇaṇ*, *Alalāṭi*, *Pāṇṭaraṅkaṇ*, *Cantiracēkaraṇ*, *Āṇantaṇ*, *Anantaṇ*, *Āti*, *Tantiyurikkōṇ*, *Nampaṇ*, *Tarparaṇ*, *Niraṇintōṇ*, *Nanti*, *Īccuvaraṇ*, *Ērūrntōṇ*, *Nakkaṇ*, *Ņāṇamūrṭti*, *Varaṇ*, *Maṇaimutali*, *Īcaṇ*, *Māṇiṭamēnti*, *Cōti*, *Piramaṇ*, *Māṅkariyōṇ*, *Tāṇu*, *Piṅcakaṇ*, *Piṅākapaṇi*, *Paramaṇ*, *Eṅṭōḷaṇ*, *Parkkaṇ*, *Pavaṇ*, *Yōki*, *Pakavāṇ*, *Ēkaṇ*, *Araṇ*, *Umāpati*

From chapter two:

Girl: *arivai*, *aṅṅaṇai*, *maṭantai*, *āṭavaḷ*, *āṭṭi*, *māyōḷ*, *curikuḷal*, *makaṭu*, *kāntai*, *cuntari*, *vaṅṅitai*, *mātu*, *terivai*, *māṅṅiṇi*, *nallāl*, *ciṅumi*, *taiyaḷ*, *nāri*, *piriyai*, *kārikai*, *aṅṅaṅku*, *piṅā*, *peṅṭu*, *pētai*

<sup>4</sup> The complex issue of what constitutes *tatsama* and *tadbhava* words in the context of Tamil has to also be seen in terms of how Sanskrit words, or *vaṭacol*, were perceived as a category within the classical Tamil grammatical tradition, beginning with the *Tolkāppiyam*. For a brief overview of this, see Chevillard (2013).

Body: uṭal, uṟuppu, aṅgam, yākkai, uyirnilai, tēkam, kāyam, caṭalam, mūrttam, mey, tāvaram, taṇu, ātāram, kaṭam, putai, puṇarppu, cāttiram, pūṭci, ākam, pūṭikam, carīram, puṟkalam

From chapter four:

Pepper: kaṟi, marīcam, kāyam, kaliṇai, kōḷakam, tiraṅkal, miriyal  
 Clusters of flowers: tottu, maṅcari, tuṇar, iṇar, kulai  
 To commiserate in astonishment: Annō, Antō, Ā, Ō, Attō, Accō, Aiyō,  
 Ennē, Enru, Evan

Yet while the lists contain many Indo-Aryan loanwords, this marking out of the words is deceptive and must also be immediately dissolved, for such a clear-cut linguistic division is not intrinsic to the text. Rather, the text is a flow, a seamless movement from one word to another without any explicit acknowledgement of anything other than a single language and, therefore, without any indication that this could also be seen (with our modern eyes) as a multilingual text.

That this is not the only way a toolkit for poetry needed to be constructed can be grasped through a fruitful comparison with a similar genre of texts that developed in North India around the same time as the *Cūṭāmaṇi*. As Francesca Orsini and Samira Sheikh (2014) have pointed out in their insightful volume, the ‘linguistic economy’ of North India in the fifteenth century was characterised by ‘multiple diglossias’ with a wide circulation of the ‘high’ languages of Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit, as well as a general spoken vernacular of Hindavi and the use of multiple scripts to express these languages. It was in this multilingual environment that a certain kind of Persian dictionary emerged. These dictionaries, called *farhangs*, had sections on rhyme, synonyms and antonyms and were meant to be used as aids both in the composition and appreciation of poetry. Indeed, as Stefano Pello tells us, ‘It is a well-known fact that Persian lexicography was born as an ancillary discipline to poetry and maintained this characteristic for a long time’ (2014: 173). These *farhangs* deliberately included and explained non-Persian words (i.e., what were seen as Turkic and Indian words) to accommodate the burgeoning vocabulary of the Persianate world of the North Indian sultanates. Consider one entry from the *Adāt-al-fuṣalā* of Qazi Badr al-Din Muhammad Dihlawi, compiled in 1419:

*Robāh-i Turkī* [= porcupine]: with *vāv-i farsī*, it is the name of a crawler that has very sharp and long quills like a grown spindle on its back.

When a dog follows it, it scatters its quills. The quills leap out from its back and injure the dog like arrows. Arabs call it *qatfad*, Indians [*abl-i Hind*] *sih* [*seh*], and in the language of the Deccan they call it *sārsag*. (Koromat 2014: 151)

What we have here is the explicit acknowledgement of different languages and the *farhang* as a mediating dictionary-cum-encyclopediac resource for the Persian poet in pre-modern India. We have a Persian lemma, with Arabic and Hindavi words named and used and explained as linguistic equivalents.

It is when we take such an example from the North Indian environment that we realise that something else is happening in the unexplained seamless movement from Tamil to non-Tamil within the *Cūṭāmaṇi*. This can best be understood by looking, briefly, at a grammatical approach that begins with the *Tolkāppiyam* and is endorsed in the important commentaries on the text between the tenth and seventeenth centuries. At the very beginning of the *Tolkāppiyam*, in its Introduction (*cirappu pāyiram*), the Tamil language names itself as the language of that good world that is circumscribed by the hills of Vēnkaṭam to the north (part of current day southern Andhra Pradesh but in premodernity called Toṅṭaināṭu) and Kumari or Cape Comorin to the south (*vaṭavēnkaṭam tenkumari āyitai tamil kūrūm nal ulakattu vaḷaṅkum...*). Language that lies outside this boundary is seen as extrinsic to Tamil as its 'Other'. In *Colatikāram*—the second book of the *Tolkāppiyam*, which is concerned with morphology, semantics and syntax—we have significant statements on how to deal with these other languages. In the section on 'Residual words' (*ecca iyal*), the first verse deals with four kinds of words suitable for poetry; one of them is *vaṭacol* or northern words. Regarding their use in Tamil, the *Tolkāppiyam* (verse 884) says:

*vaṭacol kiḷavi vaṭayeluttu orii  
eluttoṭu puṇarnta col ākumē.*

The words of the northern language, shedding the northern letters/sounds, become words that conjoin with [Tamil] letters/sounds (my translation).

Though the word *vaṭacol* comes to be interpreted as referring to Sanskrit, also called *Āriyam*, from the earliest commentary on the *Tolkāppiyam* of Ḍampūraṇar, it is sufficiently ambiguous not to exclude the Prakṛits or, for that matter, any language north of the northern boundaries of the Tamil land. The issue of what is meant by *vaṭacol* or northern language has been dealt with

at length by those who study the Tamil grammatical tradition (e.g., Wilden 2009; Chevillard 2013; Monius 2013). But it appears to me that they have not given much consideration to what this implies not for the definitions of a language but for language use. We must observe that the grammatical tradition took an entirely pragmatic and capacious view, as expressed in this verse, that once the script is discarded and the phonetics of a word adapted to Tamil, then that word is, for all purposes, Tamil, and fit for Tamil poetry.

In his brilliant study of the emergence of Latin literature as a result of extensive translation from the Greek, Denis Feeney (2016) draws our attention to an issue that has come to be underappreciated in our times. In seeing translated books everywhere around us, and in using the word 'translation' expansively to refer to cultural translation and discursive strategies, we sometimes forget what a special and arduous undertaking it is to carry over an entire textual work from one language to another. Feeney directs our attention to the strangeness of translation as a literary activity and highlights that translation is 'neither a necessary nor a constant feature of cultural interpenetration; translation does not automatically follow even from extensive bilingual or multilingual interaction' (2016: 19). Bi- or multilinguality can emerge and function even without bi-literacy but rather as a result of constant—and often oral—interpretation and prolonged language sharing. And the pragmatics of and understanding of this process is what, I would suggest, underlies the theorisation about what constitutes 'Tamil' in the *Tolkāppiyam*. It is in this context of language sharing that we must place the word-world of the *Cūṭāmaṇi*. Reflecting such language sharing, the *Cūṭāmaṇi* should be understood as a compilation of synonyms, homonyms, and so on; that is, as a thesaurus.

Hüllen (2004) has pointed out that the purpose of a dictionary is to give a word followed by its many significations (semasiological). The purpose of a thesaurus is, by contrast, the opposite: it presupposes the idea of something, the concept, and then finds the words that most fittingly express it (onomasiological). This same principle is at work in the *Cūṭāmaṇi*. The main intention of the thesaurus is one of utility—to ease the task of a person who engages with words as a person whose profession is words. This was also no less true of the *nikaṇṭus*. What the *nikaṇṭus* offered was, as we also noted above about the *kośas*, a treasury of words. Once this treasury was memorised by the poet, then the treasury of words metamorphosed into something within them. It became an entire, rich and intricate *word-world*—one which presented an ordered cosmos beginning with the gods and going down to mud. This

word-world was, simultaneously, distinctly Tamil, in its professions, people, gods, flora and fauna, its animals, its kinship names, houses and furniture right down to the exclamations of surprise. And once mastered, it could be accessed from the recesses of one's mind to weave one's verses. Ultimate mastery was illustrated by extempore compositions because the poet who garnered admiration was quick witted, an *ācukavi*, able to conjure up a verse to suit each and every occasion where he was present.

Yet, this word-world—taken for granted until the middle of the nineteenth century—came to an end by the end of that tumultuous century. Many factors contributed to its ending, among them the decline of what has been theorised as an 'economy of praise'. As Leslie Kurke (1991) for early Greek literature, and Normal Cutler (2003) and Sascha Ebeling (2010) for Tamil literary production have shown, poetry in pre-modernity was generated within a world where praise and gift-giving formed part of a system of symbolic and real capital, relying on the existence of munificent patrons, on the one hand, and those who cultivated poetry for a living, on the other. The end of such an economy of praise, accelerated by the decline of patronage, and the emergence of a print and research culture, imperiled the *nikaṇṭu*. Such changes must be understood not as impersonal, historical processes but as ways of being, and as such instantiated in the lives of those who lived through and were rendered irrelevant or transformed by these transitions and ruptures. One autobiography that gives us a vivid, first-person account of these changes was that of U. Vē. Cāminātaiyar (1855–1942), better known simply as U. Vē. Cā, the 'discoverer' of classical Tamil literature in the nineteenth century and revered as the 'grandfather of Tamil', who himself embodied both the cause and the effect of these transformations.

## **Part Two: U. Vē. Cā's Story, the Changing Fate of the Poet and the Movement from *Nikaṇṭu* to *Akarāti***

The extraordinary autobiography of U. Vē. Cā (Cāminātaiyar 1950), titled 'My Story' (*En Carittiram*), may be mined for the different things it tells us about the historical transition between the years 1855 and 1942. It may be read as an idealised ethnographic document, acute in its details, about an ordered village life, and ways of living, in the colonial period. It may be read as a fine, mellifluous example of Tamil prose, worthy of being regarded as a classic of early-twentieth-century Tamil non-fiction. It can be read as the Tamil equivalent of a lexicon of poets and musicians, containing as it does

vignettes of several of the most significant musicians and literary figures of his time. And it can also be read, as I choose to read it, as a Tamil picaresque memoir and coming-of-age story—of a boy who sets out on a journey spurred by his love of Tamil, reaching shores he had not anticipated when he set out, and who, in doing so, encounters, learns and interiorises the *nikanṭu*.

When we follow the thread of the *nikanṭu* in ‘My Story’, we come upon the two short anecdotes. In the first (Cāminātaiyar 1950: 114), we learn that at a young age U. Vē. Cā first studied with the inspirational Tamil teacher Caṭ akōpa Aiyānkār. He tells us that this included not only extremely popular minor devotional works, the *pirapantams*, but also the entire twelve sections of the *Cūṭāmaṇi nikanṭu*. In the next, and only other explicit reference to the *nikanṭu* in the autobiography, the young U. Vē. Cā finally reaches his longed-for goal: to become a pupil of the great Tamil scholar Miṇāṭcicutaram Piḷḷai. In chapter 27, his father brings him to Māyūram, where the latter is currently residing, and entreats Miṇāṭcicutaram Piḷḷai to take his son on as his pupil. Miṇāṭcicutaram Piḷḷai questions the boy about what he has studied and with whom. Then he begins to test him, first, by asking him to recite some verse from popular works, after which this anecdote follows:

‘Have you memorized the *nikanṭu*’, he asked. As I said, ‘I have memorized all twelve sections’; he had me recite, repeatedly, some of the verses and said, ‘Learning the *nikanṭu* by heart is a good thing, indeed. The habit of memorizing it has vanished these days. No one listens if one tells them to do so.’ (Cāminātaiyar 1950: 230; translation mine)

It is after this that Miṇāṭcicutaram Piḷḷai accepts the boy as his pupil.

Even though direct references to the *Cūṭāmaṇi* fade from the rest of the autobiography, the mastery of words that its ingestion implies forms the background to the insistent and copious single verses which U. Vē. Cā himself composes and quotes in his life story. This work of versifying is very prominent in the first half of the book. The entirety of chapter 77, for instance, has verse citations that show how he composed verses to commemorate both public events and the most mundane of occasions to delight his companions at the monastery where he lived with his teacher. Here, the word-world of the *Cūṭāmaṇi* still serves a workman-like purpose, its usefulness evident in the daily business of his life. But this changes with dramatic speed once he moves from Tiruvāṭuṭuṟai to become a Tamil pandit at the Kumbakonam Arts College. His interview there is a clear indication of the approaching change.

A close look at the crucial moments of the interview process and its implications highlights this change.

U. Vē. Cā is being considered for the position at the behest and insistence of one Tiyaṅkarāca Ceṅṅiyār, the current incumbent who is retiring and who wishes to secure the position for him. Before he is to be interviewed by the college principal, Tiyaṅkarāca Ceṅṅiyār is determined to win over other colleagues to the cause, and has them come to test U. Vē. Cā's Tamil prowess. He gathers together around a hundred Tamil books, places them before the gathered collegium and asks each of them to pick up any book and test U. Vē. Cā on it. The testing commences and proceeds to everybody's delight and satisfaction. At this point, a new topic is introduced:

Then, Ceṅṅiyār saying, 'He is also in the habit of composing new verses of his own', asked me to recite some of my own compositions, which I did. Srinivāsa Aiyar said, 'We need only pay attention to whether he has the vigour to teach lessons. We need not pay attention to whether he has the skill to compose poetry.' (Cāminātaiyar 1950: 678)

Nevertheless, the collegium eventually goes on to decide to test U. Vē. Cā's poetic skills and has him compose a praise verse on Ceṅṅiyār, extempore, in a notoriously difficult metre, the *ārucir kaḷineṅilaṅi ācīriyaviruttam*. This he succeeds in doing brilliantly within five minutes and wins their whole-hearted support for his candidacy. After this we see, in the remainder of 'My Story', his own poetic compositions are reserved for specific private moments: either for epistolary correspondence with a literary friend, where both of them take delight in writing versified letters to each other as an expression of affection (e.g., Cāminātaiyar 1950: 856); at the death of his life-long supporter Cuppiramaṅiya Tēcikar, head of the Tiruvāvaṅṅurāi monastery (ibid.: 864–66); or the composition of a set of devotional verses to Murugan, when he is feeling emotionally distressed (ibid.: 897).

Thus, it becomes clear to us that the innocuous remark of Srinivāsa Aiyar when he is selected to become a teacher—'we need not know if he has the skill to compose poetry'—becomes, in some sense prophetic: What is the use of the word-world and the poetry after he has moved into the world of a teacher who does not need to be a poet, or a research scholar who does not need to be either? The professionalisation of the category of the educator within the colonial context through the creation of new institutions such as the colleges and English-medium schools marks a decisive transition in U.

Vē. Cā's own financial prospects and leads, as he himself acknowledges, to fame, if not fortune. But it also marks the transition of a high literary Tamil poetry from a cultural space that was demarcated by public rituals of recitation to a world of private connoisseurship—where it becomes a shared language within a circle of friends—and, eventually, within his own lifetime, to an anachronism. Ultimately, the autobiography marks the transformation of the poet to a teacher to a research scholar; and, hence, also the transformation of the linguistic tools that define each of these ways of being. This is also a shift from orality to words on the printed page, and can be understood in terms of the way in which the *nikaṇṭu* and its word-world gives way to the *akarāti*, or the dictionary.

### From *Nikaṇṭu* to *Akarāti*

The genealogy of the *akarāti* is far older than that of the nineteenth century. Its use of the alphabetical style of listing words manifests itself first in the mid-eighteenth century already, in late *nikaṇṭus* such as the *Potikai nikaṇṭu* of Cuvāmināta Kavirāyar. This shift from word-lists that were created for memorisation to thinking about words for reference, nevertheless, finds its first major landmark in the *Caturakarāti* of the Italian Jesuit, Tamil scholar Constanzo Beschi. The *Caturakarāti*, first printed in 1824, does away decisively with the versification of the *nikaṇṭus* and follows the alphabetical form (Vaiyapuri Pillai 1982: xxxvi). The other great innovation of Beschi is stated in his Introduction (*munṇurai*). Beschi speaks of the rationale for his work, which he says he composed after having thoroughly studied the main *nikaṇṭus* and their commentaries:

*irutiyaḱa, mikap pala vārtaikaḱa vaṭamoiyiliruntu koṇṭuvarap-paṭṭṭalamaiyāl, vaṭamoinūḱalaḱai nuṭṭamāka āyntu, terceyalākapa pukunta tavaṛuḱalaḱai unmai oḱuṅḱukku ēṛkat tiruttavum, atē (vaṭamoli) karuvulakattiliruntu iyaṅṅra aḱavu mikap pala coṛkaḱalaḱi eṭukkavum, ataṅṅāl intat tamilḱ karuvulattai vaḱampeṛaḱ ceyyavum muyaṅṅrullēṅ.* (Beschi 1979: xvii)

Finally, since many words have been brought into [the *nikaṇṭus*] from the Northern language, I studied carefully the Northern works, corrected the inadvertent mistakes that had crept in, in accordance with their proper usage, and by removing, to the extent possible, several (Sanskrit) words from that treasure house (*karuvulaku*), I have made an effort, through this, to let flourish the treasure house of Tamil (my translation).

Why should this shift from the *nikañtu* to the *akarāti* at all be of interest to us? Because this shift is also a part of those historical conditions that led to the formation of the Tamil Secular. By *secular* I mean, those ‘behaviours, knowledges and sensibilities in modern life’ (Asad 2003: 25) that lead to change in practices; and by the *Tamil Secular* I mean those concepts that arose within the Tamil context to create ideas about the world that made twentieth-century Tamil language and literature very different from that of the nineteenth. The *nikañtu*, as mentioned earlier, offered the person who dealt with words a religious and cosmic vision that embraced both gods and humans in a hierarchy of descent. The displacement of the *nikañtu* by the dictionary effected a linguistic cleavage of the world of the gods from the world of humans. Words were now understood entirely through their relationship to other words and, increasingly, as members of families of languages in the world of humans. Thus, the word-world of the *nikañtu* was sundered through its re-ordering within the dictionary. Tamil’s divinity is what had once enabled it to express this vision, and after the cleavage its sacredness had to be abandoned or reimagined within the conditions of modernity. Furthermore, it was not just the word-world but also the nature of the language that was sundered. With the emergence of a dictionary there is also a drive towards essentialising ‘Tamil’ the language, giving it, implicitly if not explicitly, a monolingually ordered framework. Finally, the move to the dictionary is also linked to the project of comprehensively recording language so as to invoke an imagined Tamil nation. The emergence of the dictionary in the nineteenth century as the preferred repository of the language of the ‘Tamil people’ was not an isolated phenomenon. It was reflective of the lexicographical enterprise evident on a global scale where the creation of a national dictionary for a language was a crucial step in the creation of a nation.

Two examples suffice. It is no mere coincidence, as Volker Harm (2019) shows, that the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* of the Brothers Grimm starts to be compiled in 1838, around the time when the first moves were made towards those processes which led to German unification in the 1870s. Indeed, Jacob Grimm says in his preface to the first edition: ‘What is the purpose of the dictionary? It should establish a shrine to the language, keep all its treasures intact, and hold the entrance open for everyone. The collected goods grow like the honeycomb and become a sublime monument for the folk whose past and present are tied up with it’ (quoted in Harm 2019: 89n2). Or let us take *The Scottish National Dictionary* that came out between 1808 and 1825. Walter Scott, the beloved author and inventor of the Scottish historical novel, strongly

supported its compilation, calling it an ‘important national task’ which would showcase ‘the rich literary past and official language of a formerly independent nation’ (quoted in Rennie 2019: 114). The *Madras Tamil Lexicon* on which work started in 1905, and which remains the primary reference dictionary for Tamil Studies today, was conceived of as fostering ‘the study and development of the language and consequently of vernacular literature’ and, hence, ‘has the revival and development of the country as its object’ (1982, vol. 1: iv). Even while this might just be seen as a platitude or the expression of certain elevated and patriotic sentiments, there runs through such observations the implicit awareness that lexicography, the creation of dictionaries and the project of willing into being a nation are closely interlinked.

Finally, the emergence and consolidation of Tamil linguistic nationalism in the early twentieth century has been shown to be undergirded by a cultural process that spans histories (including literary histories), epigraphy, race theories, antiquarian studies, philology, the poetics of language devotion and the language of oratory (e.g., Bate 2005, 2009; Ramaswamy 1997; Sivathamby 1986). But a nationalism which is predicated on the love for a language cannot be fully theorised without an examination of a transformation in the lexicographical process, the change in Tamil education that it produced, and the sentiments, emotions and losses that coalesce around these transformations. This is why we need to look into the transition from the *nikaṇṭu* to the *akarāti*, and the parallel transition from a poetry of praise to a poetry that was able to free itself, if it so chose, from the constraints of both patrons and the classical metres.

And yet, in all this, we must also be wary of hunting for simple mono-causal explanations or functionalist theories for why Tamil language and Tamil literature change in modernity. Perhaps more affective or even whimsical reasons exist. Consider a poem from the *Puraṇānūru* by the *Caṅkam* poet Kapilar praising his patron, the chieftain Pāri (my translation):

*pāri pāriy enru palav ētti*  
*oruvār pukaḷvar cennāp pulavar*  
*pāriy oruvanum allan*  
*māriyum unṭi iṇṭu ulaku purappatuvē (Puraṇānūru, 107)*

‘Pāri, Pāri’ they praise much,  
 acclaiming him,  
 the smooth-tongued poets.

But Pāri is not alone here  
 preserving the world.  
 There is also rain.

The poem cleverly both praises and expresses its impatience with praise through an ironic disavowal of it. Perhaps, we might fancifully conjecture that it took entire centuries since this poem was composed for the poetry of praise to cease to be and for the *nikaṇṭu*s to cease to be used; and perhaps, too, this happened because poets were finally weary of praising.

The anonymous editors of the 1978 edition of the *Piṅkaḷaṅṭai ennum Piṅkaḷa nikaṇṭu*, forlornly state in their introduction:

Those who wished to attain literary expertise by studying works of grammar and literature had to first learn, without mistakes, the *nikaṇṭu* works. This definitive rule had existed among the old teachers. . . . The old teachers' principle that one must teach literature only to those students who obtained practice in grammar after having studied the *nikaṇṭu* did not waver even a little. Once it happened that, in the Tamil country, universities and schools spread in a new way, the old ways (*paḷaṅkāla muraḷai*) were fundamentally broken. (1978: 1; my translation)

As the arc of U. Vē. Cā's life shows, it is not just the old ways that changed but also old word-worlds and poets with them. With the passing of the *nikaṇṭu* into an obsolete canon of learning, pedagogy and erudition, some books and some words also ceased to be part of the living life of literature and came to be, at the most, sources of antiquarian delight within the Tamil literary tradition.



### III

## MEDIA AND MEDIATION Voice, Stage, Screen







## INTRODUCTION TO PART III

### Sensorial Images and Sound and Murals

*Swarnavel Eswaran*

This section focuses on images and sound and the sensorial beyond the looks, dialogue and song; those of smell and touch. Of course, Tamil runs through as a cohering thread that holds the essays together through the changing equations and shifting significance of their objects of focus: for Srinivas's essay, the star, Rajinikanth, in a regional blockbuster; for Weidman, the centrality of the voice of the iconic playback singer T.M. Soundararajan; for Krishnan, the complex duopoly of the reigning stars of the 1950s and 1960s, MGR and Sivaji Ganesan; for Ebeling, the pre-eminence of a Shakespearean translator/playwright, Pammal Sambandam; and for Seastrand, the sensorium evoked by ancient temple murals. The idea of the rhetorical and the devotional, as discussed by Tamilologists like the late Bernard Bate and David Shulman, provides space for the essays to argue for the Tamil people's specificity as creators and producers, ideologues and politicians, and artists and audiences/devotees. If Ebeling points to the transnational influences of Shakespeare in the works of playwright Pammal, Srinivas sheds light on the uniqueness of the regional 'blockbuster'—a category or mode, like many of the genres of cinema, borrowed from the West. Shakespeare has a rich legacy in Tamil cinema. For instance, another star who haunts this section, Sivaji Ganesan, has mouthed the lines of Othello and Hamlet in films ranging from *Anbu* (Love, dir. M. Natesan, 1953) and *Ratha Thilagam* (Mark of Blood, dir. Dada Mirasi, 1963) to *Rajapart Rangadurai* (dir. P. Madhavan, 1973). At the same time, Weidman points to the centrality of songs in Tamil films, wherein Soundararajan emoted for Sivaji, taking into account the specificity of the voice of the actor known for his excess. Sivaji could then take the cue and extend and expand through his unparalleled ability to improvise and his penchant for histrionics. Nevertheless, Soundararajan's versatility as a playback singer was not restricted to Sivaji alone. He could do the same for many stars during the era, including the most popular MGR. Here, we must note the departure of Tamil cinema from Hindi during the same period. Though the legendary

Mohammad Rafi sang for the trinity of the corresponding golden era of the 1950s and the 1960s—Dilip Kumar, Dev Anand and Raj Kapoor—Rafi's voice is most associated with Dilip Kumar, just as Kishore Kumar's recalls the unique gestures and moves of Dev Anand and Mukesh's that of Raj Kapoor. Also, Rafi sang for the three of them only earlier in their career.

Soundararajan is, therefore, unparalleled in Indian cinema's history, except for K.J. Yesudas in Malayalam cinema to some extent, for singing for its lead stars for over three decades. Additionally, Weidman's delineation of Soundararajan's voice as that of Dravidian cinema resonates with Krishnan's essay on the binary of MGR and Sivaji's stardom in the backdrop of the writing of Kalaiñar Karunanidhi, particularly in films that were the provenance and entrenchment of their stardom, *Manthirikumari* (Minister's Daughter, dir. Ellis R. Dungan, 1950) and *Malaikallan* (The Mountain Thief, dir. Sriramulu Naidu, 1954) in the case of MGR and *Parasakthi* (Goddess, dir. Krishnan-Panju, 1952) and *Manohara* (dir. L.V. Prasad, 1954) for Sivaji. Krishnan's intervention argues for the investment of Dravidian ideologues not in the sub-nationalism or succession of Tamil Nadu as an independent state of Dravidians (Dravidanadu) but fighting for the autonomy of Tamils in a federalist dispensation or a federation of states. Krishnan draws attention to the paradoxical consequences of MGR, the leader of the splinter group and ADMK, renaming his party as AIADMK (All India Anna DMK) for political expediency, mainly due to the Emergency, and being subsumed by the nation owing to his success in electoral politics and alliances. Simultaneously, Sivaji, who changed his allegiance to the National Congress Party, was a failure in politics but was ultimately memorialised by the DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam/Federation for the Progress of Dravidians).

*Manohara*, a milestone in Sivaji's career, is a loose adaptation of Pammal's translation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* both for the stage and screen. Ebeling explicates the history of Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar's preoccupation with theatre from a young age and his conflict with the folk form of *küttu* as lacking the finesse to suit his taste as a young man belonging to a privileged caste/class. This illuminates for us the other spectre that haunts these essays: caste, which morphs into class. Srinivas (2009) has theorised the mass film, which prefigures his meditations on the regional blockbuster. The mass film, which caters to the masses, resonates with *küttu* when it is appropriated through the extrapolation of its essential components like comedy, which traverses from the universe of mythos to contemporary social issues, the asides to the audiences, in this case, the mass hero's direct address to the people outside

the diegesis, and the juxtaposition of songs and narratives, often tangentially, among others. The mass and class binary, perhaps, is quintessential to the reading of the duopoly of male stars that dominated Tamil cinema of the last century. Think of the binary of M.K. Thyagaraja Bagavathar, the romantic star, mouthing Shakespeare's lines, translated by Elangovan, in *Ambikapathy* (dir. Ellis R. Dungan, 1937), and P.U. Chinnappa, the singing-action star (*Uthama Puthiran* [Noble Son], dir. T.R. Sundaram, 1940). Later, during the 1950s and the 1960s, Sivaji and MGR carried on the legacy of class and mass heroes, inherited by Kamal Haasan and Rajinikanth from the 1970s onwards. Though the borders were blurred, as Krishnan points out, only the 1990s and the onslaught of globalisation and the drive to increasingly capitalise on the cultural capital of the stars led to the dissolution of the boundaries as to who qualified as a significant star: in this period, all stars—mass and class—had to draw mass audiences. Srinivas informs us of the status of the star in Tamil cinema during the period of the regional blockbuster, which is an extension of the mass film, before the current obsession with pan-Indian cinema. One could argue that Tamil cinema was always looking to expand its market, particularly towards the north, for instance, S.S. Vaasan and his Gemini Studios' *Chandralekha* (1948). Vaasan's Hindi version, which was dubbed, also had segments shot in Hindi for the pan-Indian audience, particularly the songs. Similarly, Ebeling draws our attention to the challenges of translation and adaptation and Pammal's awareness of a pan-Indian (Tamil) audience, but credits him for his fidelity and finesse in the literary as well as rhythmic translation (since they were written for performing on stage) of Shakespeare.

The singularity of rhythms and gestures, particularly of Rajinikanth, is called into question in the times of the digital era and the regional blockbuster where, as discussed in Srinivas's chapter, the star who was conditioned by a particular idiom of performance (for instance, Rajinikanth's signature gesture with his finger or his kinetic style in throwing a cigarette into his mouth or placing the eye-glass on his face) now lends his persona to digital recycling, as exemplified by Rajinikanth's 2010 film *Enthiran* ('The Robot'). 2.0 (2018), the sequel to *Enthiran*, both directed by S. Shankar, further expands on the digital environment through its focus on cell phones (towers) and ecology for its content and the digital multiplication of the robotic-hero figure for its form, especially during the climactic moment. Srinivas importantly points to the changes in distribution and exhibition as well, both because of digital technology and fan expectations as well as because of the pragmatic need to cater to audiences beyond Tamil Nadu. This, in particular, Srinivas shows,

has affected traditional stardom, predicted on an organic star body and its related body language. Nonetheless, Srinivas notes that digital proliferation reconstitutes star power, mainly through the activities of fans, rather than diluting it.

If we trace the trajectory of these essays, beginning with the contemporary regional blockbuster (Srinivas), travelling back to the 1950s–1960s studio system, with the sound and image of a playback singer (Weidman) and the stars they animated (Krishnan), and further back to the theatrical origins of key films, and thus to translations of Shakespeare in the 1930s–1940s (Ebeling), we arrive at the temple as a space where the Tamil populace honed their sensorium for perceiving complex signifiers, the topic Seastrand's chapter showcases. The murals Seastrand discusses are presented from unusual angles, through fading images and letters and the 'troubled visibility of inscriptions' on age-old stone walls, recalling the flickering carbon arc and images in the touring theatres of my youth, seated right at the edges of visibility. Seastrand reads through *pradakṣiṇa* or circumambulation, the kinetics of desire as propelling the artist/scholar in their creation/inscription and the devotee/researcher in their understanding. Seastrand's 'motivated reading' proposes that understanding art, particularly images and texts, is not about finding a single, ideal viewing spot, like in Renaissance perspective. Instead, it emphasises the active process of meaning-making through physical movement and the effort to comprehend. This approach acknowledges the challenges of limited visibility, considering how the function, legibility and intended audience of art contribute to its interpretation, moving beyond a static, perfectly clear view. Seastrand thus deconstructs reading or reception, and further complicates it by the sensorium of touch and smell, ubiquitous in any temple premises. Indeed, if Hindi/Indian popular cinema is the temple of desire, as scholars like Mishra (2002) claimed, then the haptics surrounding cinema have a long lineage. The visual icon, often absent in the image at the temple, is accessible through the hymn, just as the invisible kinetics of desire on screen, through the lyrics and the choreographed song/dance. Drawing our attention to the context of text, place and image and its significance for viewers, Seastrand informs us of the visual icon in the panel image of the paintings in the temple, of Narasimha—'a form of the god as half-man half-lion'—who is accessible only through the hymns of Alvar. Arguing for how 'one must account for the performances, smells, and sounds experienced by the mobile spectator of the murals and reader of its texts', Seastrand leads us to murals in areas of performances like songs and dances reflecting the aesthetics in

such enclosures/spaces, associated with significant sensory rituals. Thus, the murals showcase the sensorial immersion of the deity and the devotee, mainly through the mobile and motivated *pradakṣiṇa* the author guides us through.

Like touch and smell, sound also has had to fight a long battle against the predominance of image when it comes to scholarship on cinema. But things are changing, as we can see the importance attributed to sound in the essays here. Weidman's essay is a case in point, concluding with a discussion of the song *Pāṭṭum nānē pāvamum nāne* from *Thiruvilaiyadal* (The Divine Game, dir. A.P. Nagarajan, 1965) and convincingly arguing 'for the central role of playback itself in creating the hero', when we hear the reflexive Tamil line sung by Soundararajan: 'this song will shut the mouth of anyone who comes to compete with me'. Focusing on a critical moment when, during a pause in the song, there is a montage of freezes on the screen, and then as Lord Siva (Sivaji Ganesan) sings again, the frozen trees, birds and waves come back to life, Weidman argues for how the voice of the playback singer is instrumental in making the world (freeze as well as) move, and later enables the materialisation of the actor Sivaji in multiple roles as several instrumentalists. More importantly, Weidman posits Soundararajan's voice as enabling the multiplication and enhancement of the cultural capital of the star on screen. Reflexively, every instrument responds to the playback singer's voice, which is organised metonymically, each Sivaji displacing the earlier one, with instruments like veena, mridangam and flute. The centrality of the playback singer, who remains the irreplaceable axis, and his voice cannot be foregrounded more effectively.

Similarly, there is a treasure trove of complex layers of sound and images and beyond to be recovered in the essays here. Krishnan offers insight into the alliterative and rhythmic finesse of Annadurai and Karunanidhi in his rearticulation of Bernard Bate's rhetor–multitude frame for understanding the centrality of Tamil as sound/spoken to engage audiences; Ebeling notes how Pammal decided on '*Amalātityan*, a title that sounded somewhat like the original' *Hamlet*, and how he carefully used Tamil names to sound like the original in his painstaking translations. More importantly, he draws attention to the conscious layer of caste in the 'transposition of Shakespeare's characters into the Tamil social milieu': Sir Oliver Mar-Text resurfaces as Marthanda Iyer, a Saiva Brahmin, while the shepherds Corin and Silvius are reimaged as Nanda Konan and Selva Konan, of the 'shepherd' caste. In the context of *Sivaji* (dir. S. Shankar, 2007) and *Chandramukhi* (dir. P. Vasu, 2005), Srinivas notes the movement between the past and present images, which enables

'even depicting the "death" of Rajinikanth characters, if only to disavow that possibility', a possibility which has become, in later Rajinikanth films (such as *Kaala* [dir. Pa. Ranjith, 2018]), even more of a reality. All such recent blockbusters, rather than catering to the regular tropes of Rajinikanth's films, take liberties with his image and thus, to adapt Srinivas's words (describing *Sivaji*), work wonderfully as extended commentaries on Rajinikanth's stardom.

Indeed, there is much in this anthology of essays by eminent scholars for astute readers to decipher and appreciate.



## PĀṬṬUKKU ORU TALAIVAR

### Making a Dravidian Voice

*Amanda Weidman\**

#### Introduction

In May 2013, throngs of people gathered in the streets of Chennai and belted out songs in an outpouring of grief at the death of the renowned and prolific playback singer T.M. Soundararajan (1923–2013). The Tamil newspaper *Tinatanti* ran a banner headline and devoted the first three pages to news of Soundararajan's passing, featuring condolences from politicians and film personalities. The extraordinary performative power of his voice, one article suggested, was such that hearing it could make 'a coward turn brave, a sannyasi feel the pangs of desire, a heart of stone melt' (*Tinatanti* 2013: 13).

Rising in the mid-1950s from a varied group of male singers in a contested field of vocal masculinity, Soundararajan (hereafter TMS) would become the reigning male singing voice in Tamil cinema for nearly three decades, from the early 1950s to the early 1980s. His dominance is unmatched by any other male singer in Tamil cinema since, nor does it have a parallel among male singers in other Indian film industries. Most remarkably, TMS served as the sole singing voice for both hero-actors Sivaji Ganesan and M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) at the height of their careers, even as the rivalry between the two intensified. As these actors assumed a particular form of stardom that developed into political power in the later part of the 1960s, and as Tamil cinema began more and more to revolve around their stardom, TMS's voice became ubiquitous,

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singing for them as well as many other male actors of the period. He was prized for his versatility, his ability to convey a variety of emotions through his singing and his ‘manly’ voice. In tributes paid after his death, TMS was spoken of as ‘*Tamiḷukku perumai sērttavar*’, the ‘one who brought pride to Tamil’ (ibid.), and in the words of lyricist Vairamuthu (2013), a ‘*Tirāvita kural*’, a ‘Dravidian voice’.

In this chapter, I explore two sets of questions in relation to TMS’s remarkable career. The first concerns what linguistic anthropologists have termed *enregisterment*, the process by which combinations of signs (including but not limited to language) come to function as a ‘register’, a mode of expression readily recognised by a community of speakers as indexical of particular characterological attributes or categories of space, time and persona (Gal 2013: 33–34). Combining this linguistic anthropological notion of a (speech) register with the musical sense of register—a combination of pitch and timbral characteristics that constitute a particular ‘sound’—I ask how the sonic aspects of the voice are given meaning; more specifically: How did TMS’s voice get endowed with the affective power to stand for a ‘Dravidian’ identity? To address this question, I examine how ideals of the masculine singing voice shifted between the 1930s, when singing actors were predominant, and the 1950s, when TMS began to find opportunity and fame as a playback singer. As I show, this involved a regimentation of vocal sound along more strictly gendered lines, in contrast to the wider field of possibilities that had previously existed for the male voice. In the 1950s, leaving behind the varied and ornate vocal aesthetics of a generation of Tamil singing actors, and simultaneously rejecting the Bombay-influenced ‘Hindi’ style, TMS would construct his own middle-range, non-virtuosic style as a new masculine voice, a normative ‘everyman’ style that would come to be enregistered through its constant use in films and its application to many different actors and characters.

The second set of questions addresses the role of playback singing, and the new representational economy of voice and body, speech and song that it created, in constructing the storied political potency of Tamil cinema and its hero-stars. I use the term ‘representational economy’ following Webb Keane’s formulation which, in focusing on the ways different semiotic resources are used in a given situation, encourages us to attend to the ‘dynamic interconnections among different modes of signification at play within a particular historical and social formation’ (2003: 410). From the 1950s onwards, the speaking voices of the male stars of Tamil cinema were central to their stardom, but unlike the male singing stars of the 1940s, these actors did not sing; a new

representational economy was inaugurated in which their singing voices were instead provided by male playback singers. What was the role of the singer in relation to the fame and political power of these hero-stars? How is it that, in a very particular twist of the representational economy, the rival star personae of MGR and Sivaji were able to be combined in TMS's singing voice? The shift from singing actors to playback in the 1940s and 1950s, of course, occurred alongside the rise of the new Dravidianist political dispensation. The full realisation of Dravidianist political power depended on the divisions of labour that playback set up, not only between the onscreen body of the actor and the offscreen singing voice, but, perhaps even more importantly, between the act of speaking (done by the actor) and the act of singing (done by the playback singer). Both of these, as I will show, became important, and complementary, facets of the project of creating a 'Dravidian voice'.

### Music, Language and Ethnolinguistic Nationalism

Intertwined political and cultural developments in the Tamil context in the early to middle decades of the twentieth century provide a critical backdrop to my discussion of the enregisterment of TMS's voice. A new imaginary based on the idea of Tamil not just as a language but as an ethnolinguistic identity (cf. Mitchell 2009) was enabled first by the 'discovery' of Tamil's classicism and the emergence of the sacralised figure of 'Mother Tamil' (Lakshmi 1990; Ramaswamy 1997), and then by the non-Brahmin movement that mobilised the category 'Dravidian' to describe Tamils as ethnically, culturally and racially distinct from North Indian and Brahmin 'Aryans' (Trautmann 2006). The assertion of regional identity in opposition to central dominance culminated in the rise to power and eventual electoral victory of a new political party, the DMK (*Tirāvita Munnera Kalakam* or Dravidian Progress Federation) in the late 1960s.

Developments in the domains of language and music in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, the years that TMS was rising to prominence as a singer, made this new imaginary palpable. As Bernard Bate showed, the rise of the DMK to political power marked a larger communicative shift: a change in the way politicians spoke. DMK politicians developed a new oratorical style that became a powerful vehicle for their charismatic form of political campaigning. A kind of 'spectacular literacy' (Bate 2009: 3), it used lexical, grammatical and tropic elements from ancient Tamil to construct a voice for political leaders. It was described as *centamil*,

or 'refined Tamil', in contrast to *koccaittamil*, the 'vulgar' or 'common' speech of the people. *Centamil* was used by DMK politicians not only to distinguish themselves from the Indian National Congress but also to signify a utopian return to Dravidian antiquity (ibid.: 17). With its numerous references to 'Mother Tamil', this new oratorical style figured language as essentially feminine, a beautiful and powerful object that needed to be guarded by the men who were its speakers (ibid.: 169).

An equally important cultural development was the emergence of the *Tamil Icai* (Tamil Music) movement. Launched in 1929, the movement initially was undertaken to redress the predominance of Telugu and Sanskrit, rather than Tamil, compositions in classical Karnatic concerts (Subramaniam 2004; Weidman 2005). In the 1930s and 1940s, the Tamil Icai movement constructed itself as a voice for non-Brahmin interests in reclaiming a musical tradition that was perceived as having been taken over by Brahmins in the twentieth century. These appeals, however, did not find support in the Brahmin-dominated musical institutions of Madras, which stressed the importance of '*nātam*' or pure sound over the understanding of words (Subramaniam 2007). Consequently, much of the creative energy of the Tamil Icai movement, and its appeal to emotional connection through language, found an outlet in Tamil film songs. In film songs, listeners were primed to hear and appreciate a singer's diction, something perhaps akin to that quality that Barthes (1977a) famously called the 'grain of the voice', where melody brings out the voluptuousness of language's sound-signifiers and the singer's body is made present, or palpable, in the song. Cinema, rather than the classical concert stage, became the site where Tamil as an ethnolinguistic identity could be represented in song.

### Cinepolitics and Playback

TMS's rise was intertwined with a third key cultural development that took place in the cinema of the 1950–1970s: the emergence of a particular kind of male stardom which took the form of representing constituencies. Scholars of South Indian cinema history have called this phenomenon, in which a virtual political community is forged between a star and his fan following, 'cinepolitics' (Prasad 2014) or 'cinematic populism' (Srinivas 2013), to promote recognition of it as a durable structure that generates specific forms of affect and political potential. Exploring the factors that brought South Indian hero-actors such as M.G. Ramachandran in the Tamil context, and N.T. Rama Rao in the

Telugu context, to political power, and positioned others such as Kannada star Rajkumar in readiness to assume it, Prasad suggests that a combination of political conditions—the reorganisation of states along linguistic lines and the assertion of regional identity and autonomy—and shifts within the narrative structure of the South Indian cinema industries, particularly the turn from mythological to ‘social’ subjects, and the increasing dominance of the hero-protagonist over all other characters, were crucial to the emergence of full-blown cinepolitics (see Prasad 2014: 36–37).

An adequate explanation of the cinepolitical phenomenon, as both Prasad and Srinivas suggest, cannot be confined simply to a reading of the films themselves. Rather, it requires attention to the way the star’s persona exceeded and transcended his role in any particular film (ibid.: 57). Most crucial in this respect was the hero’s assumption of a representative position: *speaking for* Tamil ethnolinguistic identity, articulating the political identity and will of Tamils. The hero did this partly by protecting those things that were Tamil or that were taken to stand for the purity of Tamil culture—language and women—both in his onscreen roles and in his offscreen life. But most importantly, the hero could not give himself to languages other than his declared mother tongue. Linguistic exclusivity was central to the hero-star even as major female stars of the era appeared in movies made in all South Indian languages as well as (sometimes) Hindi. As Prasad suggests, while female stars functioned as ‘exchangeable objects,’ ‘male stars were to commit themselves to exclusive linguistic representation, and thereby to the elaboration of a national identity’ (ibid.: 106).

Expanding Srinivas’s and Prasad’s insights, I argue that playback singing was central to the cultivation of the cinepolitical potential of the hero-star’s persona. Unlike the male stars of the 1930s and 1940s, the stars who emerged in the 1950s acted and spoke, but did not sing (or dance, for that matter). The playback system afforded a focus on the male actor’s speaking voice by delegating singing to playback singers. By assigning speaking and singing to two separate people, it accentuated the distinct forms of address that each entailed, differentiated by the type of language they used as well as by their production format (Goffman 1981). The hero-star’s speech addressed the people as ‘Tamil people’ and invoked collectivities such as ‘society’ or ‘*nāṭu*’ using *mēṭaittamil*, the high-flown, classicised register of political oratory. It was complemented by his singing, which constituted a different register, one that markedly did not use the refined literary speech of political oratory or other signs of classicism, but was rather meant to evoke the ‘common’ speech and

shared folk song of the people (cf. Srinivas 2009: 269, 290–91). While the hero's speech, combined with visuals of his face, became a sign of interiority and of an 'articulate, agentive self', song—even before playback's division of labour made it literally true—was understood as shared aural public culture (Krishnan 2014: 227–28).

Yet the division of labour also created a sum that was greater than its parts, as the playback voice and the playback singer's own star text became part of the hero-star's persona. Playback singing enabled a form of public life and celebrity for men that was predicated on the male singer's identification with the actor, in contrast to the stringent efforts by female singers to differentiate themselves from actresses. And while female playback voices, as I have shown elsewhere (Weidman 2021), were differentiated along lines of morality and respectability, male singers were evaluated in terms of ethnolinguistic belonging. The prominent female playback singers of TMS's time sang in many languages, to the point that their own ethnolinguistic identity was often obscured and became irrelevant as their careers progressed. In contrast, TMS started as an unknown singer of Saurashtrian Brahmin background and fashioned himself into a singer who, like the hero-stars for whom he sang, was defined by his exclusive participation in the Tamil film industry. Although TMS himself was not positioned to become a politician in the same way as Sivaji or MGR, his star text and the affective charge of his voice played a central role in consolidating their cinopolitical power.

### Redefining Vocal Masculinity

A contested field of vocal masculinity took shape in the field of Tamil cultural production in the first half of the twentieth century, as earlier traditions of stage, drama and devotional singing were absorbed into the new medial context of cinema, and as Tamil cinema worked to differentiate itself from Bombay cinema. The male voice came to be defined and differentiated, particularly in the two decades between the advent of sound in cinema and TMS's rise to popularity in the early 1950s, in terms of an opposition between so-called 'Tamil' singers and so-called 'Hindi' singers. 'Tamilness' was thought to inhere in the high-pitched, powerfully projected voices of those who had honed their skills singing on stage without a microphone, a style that was brought into films by singing actors in the 1930s and 1940s. High range, crisp articulation and virtuosic mastery of *brigas*, the fast-moving passages that Karnatic music employs, were identified with the 'Bhagavatar' style embodied

by singing actors like S.G. Kittappa, M.K. Thyagaraja Bhagavatar, and T.R. Mahalingam. Meanwhile, another set of singers active in the Tamil and Telugu film industries—Ghantasala, A.M. Rajah, P.B. Srinivas—embodied what had come to be called the ‘Hindi’ style: a soft, slow, lower-pitched, romantic style influenced by male singers such as Mohammed Rafi, Kishore Kumar and Mukesh, who were dominating the Hindi film industry at the time. Ghantasala, Rajah and Srinivas had all trained with the microphone and had come to playback singing through radio and recording companies, rather than from the stage.

Adding to these competing pressures on the male voice was the increased value beginning to be accorded to ‘actors’ over ‘*sangita vidwans*’ by the late 1940s. The unification of body and singing voice encapsulated in the ‘Bhagavatar’ persona had to be deliberately shed by a new generation of actor-heroes who came up in the 1950s, including Tamil actors Sivaji Ganesan and M.G. Ramachandran, Kannada actor Rajkumar and Telugu actor N.T. Rama Rao (Prasad 2014: 95, 123–25). Male singers also had to work to shed the Bhagavatar image and its associated sound in order to get opportunities as playback singers. The first male playback singers in Tamil films—including M.M. Mariyappa and Trichy Loganathan, who went directly from singing on stage to singing playback in the late 1940s, as well as C.S. Jayaraman and V.N. Sundaram, who went from boys’ companies to cinema acting in the mid-1930s and switched to singing playback in the early 1950s—had to lay aside their extensive Karnatic music training and the voice culture they had developed on stage. Though advertisements for the early films Jayaraman acted in mentioned him as ‘Kittappa’s avatar’, his style later changed from high-pitched belting to a lower-pitched voice suited to the microphone (Vamanan 1999: 83–86). And Sundaram, who was used to bringing out *rāga bhava* (the emotion and distinctive character of particular *ragas*) in his singing, had to make an effort to sing in a more light-music style (ibid.: 105).

TMS entered this field of contested vocal masculinity as an unknown singer in the mid-1940s. Although he would eventually leave behind his Karnatic music training and successfully mediate between the competing ideals of ‘Tamil’ and ‘Hindi’ styles, initially he struggled for recognition. Born in 1922 into a Saurashtrian family in Madurai, the young Soundararajan studied Sanskrit and the Vedas at the wish of his father Meenakshi Iyengar, the chief priest of Varadaraja Perumal temple. He accompanied his father in singing *bhajans* and studied Karnatic music, making his debut Karnatic performance in Madurai in 1945 (Vamanan 2002: 33–36). In that same

year, realising he could not earn a living as a 'vidwan' singing *bhajans* and the occasional concert, Soundararajan sought opportunity in the field of cinema. Before leaving to try his chances at Royal Talkies in Coimbatore, he had his top knot cut off and, as a sign of his devotion to Murugan, changed the *vaṭakalai nāmam* on his forehead, the Vaishnavite symbol his father and grandfather had worn, to the horizontal lines of *vibūti* (sacred ash) that signify Saivism (ibid.: 77–83). These were important moments of self-fashioning through which he shed both his Brahminical and his non-Tamil heritage.

However, Soundararajan initially struggled to make a place for himself in the cinema world. Though he had originally sought to emulate M.K. Thyagaraja Bhagavata, his voice was naturally lower-pitched and he could not sing the *brigas* that were the mark of a 'Tamil' singer's virtuosity. Directors complained of the '*piciru*' (roughness) in his voice. He attempted to emulate the 'Hindi' style for a few years in the early 1950s in the hopes of moving beyond the beggar and peasant roles in which he was cast (ibid.: 111–16). Finally, in Madras, at AVM Studio, Soundararajan caught a break that would prove to be the tipping point in his career. Meyappa Chettiar and Sudarshan, his music director, were looking for someone who could sing loudly and forcefully and were positively struck by the '*nāṭṭupura vacanaī*' (whiff of folk) in Soundararajan's voice, which they found to be an attractive element distinguishing it both from earlier 'Bhagavata' singers and from Hindi-style singers (ibid.: 138). TMS was initially hired at AVM Studio to sing for comedy songs, and by the mid-1950s began to sing for the new hero-actors of the day, MGR and Sivaji.

### 'A 100% Tamil' Singer

Although he identified himself with the singing actor aesthetic through the projected quality of his voice, TMS also differentiated himself from singers trained in Karnatic music. As he gained status in the film world, TMS began to assert his own identity as a singer, asking music directors to lower the pitch of songs and maintaining that his voice was a '*kārve*' (long note) voice rather than a '*briga*' voice. In an interview with Radio Ceylon in 1979, he spoke of his lack of formal training (disavowing his own study of Karnatic music) and instead emphasised his skill in mimicry, his own '*iyarkaiyāna arivu*' (natural knowledge) as opposed to Karnatic training.

Whereas in the 1930s and 1940s the virtuosic performance of *brigas* at a high pitch was a prized sonic embodiment of heroic masculinity, by the later

1950s TMS's unadorned 'kārve' voice had come to signify masculine strength. During the recording of the famous song 'Kāyāta kānakatē' for the remake of *Sri Valli*, TMS told the music director, G. Ramanathan, that he was concerned that his voice would not shine for audiences who had heard singing actor T.R. Mahalingam's *briga*-ful six-and-a-half-minute rendering of the song in the original movie from 1945. 'No,' said Ramanathan. 'He has put it in a grand style with *brigas*. But *you* will sing it with a majestic [*kampīramāna*] *kārve*. You don't know the power of your own voice' (ibid.: 290).<sup>1</sup>

By emphasising naturalness over virtuosic training, TMS tapped into a strong current of populism. Essential to the 'everyman' persona that TMS's voice projected was a perceived simplicity, a quality embodied in vocal style by an absence of ornaments. The ringing tones of TMS's unadorned voice were often described with the word 'vellī' (ringing; literally, silvery or metallic). This timbral quality, along with the non-virtuosity of the voice, was perceived as suitable for a genre of song which was coming into newfound prominence. Initially called *manacāṭci pāṭalka!* (songs of conscience), these songs pointed out the injustices and suffering in the world, and were often sung by auxiliary male characters: beggars, peasants and *sādhus*.<sup>2</sup> In the 1960s, as hero-stars rather than side characters began to sing them, this type of song would solidify into a genre—*tattuva pāṭalka!*, or 'philosophical songs'—that presented the secular, rationalist outlook of the hero. The articulation of *tattuvam* (philosophy) through *tattuva pāṭalka!*, authored by lyricists who were prominent, well-known personalities, was a key way in which Dravidian politics inserted itself into film songs. These songs came to be almost exclusively animated by TMS's singing voice.

*Tattuva pāṭalka!* were a distinctly gendered form, defined aurally by the solo, unadorned male voice singing a simple vocal line that was presented as a forthright expression of the hero's thoughts and his essential humanity.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> TMS himself emphasised the gendered contrast between his voice and that of M.K. Thyagaraja Bhagavatar. In an interview on All India Radio in 1997, TMS said that Bhagavatar's voice was a '*stāyi cārīram*', an upper-register 'ladies' voice. 'I have kept that voice but added weight,' he said, 'and therefore it was able to sound with the full *ganam*' (*Avaruṭaiya cārīrattai veccikīṭṭu weightaiyum poṭṭiṭṭēn. Anta weight atanāle full kanaanayattōṭu kēṭka muṭṭiṇcatu*). See <http://www.tmsounderarajan.org/TMSFan.html> (accessed on 21 May 2025).

<sup>2</sup> In the 1940s, these were called *sādhu [sātu] pāṭtu* and were sung by P.G. Venkatesan, known as the 'Southern Saigal' (Vamanan 2002: 226).

<sup>3</sup> In the 1950s, the lyrics of many of these songs, which questioned feudalism and

Minimalist melodic lines reinforced the idea of spontaneity and naturalness. For example, in ‘Vanta nāl mutal’ (*Bhavamanippu*, 1961), many lines of the song use only alternation between two unadorned notes; the only background music is the hero’s own whistling and humming. The reverberant sound quality of the voice in these songs gave the impression of a singular, unmediated voice ringing forth in a public space, an impression that was reinforced visually by picturisations that located the hero in public, open spaces, often alone (common in Sivaji songs) or as a singular man among a crowd of people (common in MGR songs).

*Tattuva pātalkaḷ* addressed questions of life, death, fate and injustice, locating the characters who sang them as ‘*Tamiḷans*’—defined by ethnolinguistic identity, but outside of ties of kin, caste or religious community—who interpellated an audience of similarly unspecified members of a general Tamil public, unlike *bhakti* songs or love songs, which located the singer/character within spiritual or emotional relationships. *Tattuva pātalkaḷ* presented impersonal, seemingly universal questions and truths, making use of Tamil’s grammatical capacity to construct sentences without stated subjects. The lyrics of these songs never used the simple first-person pronoun *nān*; rather, they used *nām*—a plural pronoun that includes speaker and addressee, and that by extension establishes their membership in a common collectivity—for instance, as in the song ‘Pōnāl pōkaṭṭum pōṭā’ (sung by Sivaji’s character in *Palum Pazhamum*, 1961).

<i>pōnāl pōkaṭṭum pōṭā</i>	whatever happens, let it go
<i>inta pūmiyil nilaiyai vāḷntavar yāraṭā</i>	who is the creator of the situation on this earth?
<i>vantatu teriyum pōvatu eṅkē</i>	we know those who come but where
<i>vācal namakkē teriyātu...</i>	they go you and I have no idea...
<i>Vantavar ellām taṅkivittāl inta</i>	if everyone who came stayed
<i>Maṅṅil namakkē iṭam etu</i>	where on earth would the place for you and me be?
<i>vāḷkkai enpatu viyāparam</i>	life is a business
<i>varum jananam enpatu varavāku</i>	the next generation will be the profit
<i>atil maranam enpatu selavākum</i>	their deaths will be the expenditure

the anguish of the poor, were written by Pattukottai Kalyanasundaram (1930–59), a poet and lyricist who came to be known as ‘*Makkaḷ kaviṅar*’, ‘the people’s poet’. In the 1960s, lyricist Kannadasan was a major composer of *tattuva pātalkaḷ*.

Translatable as ‘you and I’, the use of *nām* creates a distinctive form of addressivity that transcends the diegesis, speaking to the film’s audiences as much as the characters within the story. It is a generalised address to equals that performatively brings into being a collectivity or public for whom the hero speaks.

MGR’s *tattuva pāṭalkal!* tended more towards political awakening and the articulation of Tamil/Dravidian identity. They had a didactic, hortatory quality, and were often addressed within the diegesis to male comrades. For instance, ‘Tūnkātē tampi tūnkātē’ [Don’t sleep, younger brother] (*Nadodi Mannan*, 1958) advises comrades to wake up and shed their laziness, to not be like those who simply complain of bad luck. In ‘Accam enpatu maṭamaiyaṭā’ (*Mannadi Mannan*, 1960), MGR’s character attaches the informal particle ‘ṭā’ to the ends of the words as if the singer is addressing a younger brother or male friend and by extension a general community of Tamils who can similarly be addressed informally as younger brothers. Otherwise there are no pronouns to deictically anchor the words; they are simply free-floating, aphoristic pronouncements in tenseless noun–noun formation, a ‘nomic’ calibration that links the singular moment of utterance to timeless, universal truths (Silverstein 1993: 52).

*accam enpatu maṭamaiyaṭā*  
*añcāmai tirāvitar uṭamaiyaṭā*

fear is foolishness  
bravery is the wealth of the  
Dravidian

*āṟilum sāvu nūṟṟilum sāvu*  
*tāyakam kāpāṟru kaṭamaiyaṭā*

one may die at 60 or 100  
to protect the motherland is one’s  
duty

Beginning with a slow, *viruttam*-like rendition of this refrain that hits its high note on ‘*tirāvitar*’ (Dravidian), the song also exemplified TMS’s selective use of high pitch. Unlike the Bhagavatar singers who were confined to high registers, TMS was vocally mobile, comfortable in a middle range but able to go higher. Within this context, high pitch was resignified, no longer suggesting devotional fervour or classical virtuosity, but rather masculine assertiveness and political will. Ascending into higher register intensified the importance of the words being sung. It became a hallmark of TMS’s style for songs in which the hero was asserting his will and power.<sup>4</sup> What had simply been

<sup>4</sup> Vamanan states that in *Enga Vittu Pillai*, there were two MGRs, ‘different as night and day’, but TMS sang for both. For the song ‘Nān ānai iṭṭāl’, he used high pitch to

the unmarked, default mode of singing for the Tamil Bhagavatars became a selectively used, and therefore highly charged, affectively powerful signifier of 'Tamilness'.

These 'philosophical' songs were written to stand alone, to be detachable from the film; the songs were considered to utter timeless, secular-rational, universal truths that did not need to be connected to their picturisation or to the films' stories. In a sense, then, such songs belonged as much to the author and animator behind the screen as to the body on screen. The placement of the songs at or near the beginning of the films also contributed to the sense of their being not really 'in', but apart from, and larger than, the film. 'Accam enpatu maṭamaiyaṭā', for instance, came on as the credits for *Mannadi Mannan* rolled, with TMS's voice sounding even before MGR's image is seen on screen.

The cumulative effect of all these aural, visual and lyrical characteristics, as well as the sense of their separability from the film narrative, was to place *tattuva pāṭalkaḷ* in a different category from other songs and from 'singing' as such. They broke from conventions of singing defined by classical virtuosity and the usual subject positions, *bhakti* or love, associated with classical and film songs until then. Thus, although these were indeed songs, they placed the singer/character in a subject position that was more akin to that of a speaker than a singer: one who, within the Dravidianist paradigm that had emerged in the 1950s, could represent Tamils in a political sense. In their aphoristic sparseness, they were a kind of sung companion to and contrast to the hero's lengthy monologues, the eloquent rebukes of societal injustice delivered in the *centamiḷ* oratorical style that had become famous with Sivaji's courtroom performance in *Parasakti* (1952).<sup>5</sup>

Prior to TMS, the only singer who had approached the status of representing Tamilness was K.B. Sunderambal, but she did so by specialising: by conjuring a specific type that was a composite of mythical female characters

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sound authoritative. TMS was comfortable at 3 *kattai* (equivalent to E), but he was able to go up to 4.5, or 5 (equivalent to F# or G). The music composer M.S. Visvanathan used this capacity. They would start the songs at high pitch and then it would go to the more comfortable pitch. All the political songs would be this way (Vamanan 2002: 333–34). Even late into the 1970s, after TMS's popularity had waned and MGR began using other male playback singers such as S.P. Balasubramaniam and K.J. Yesudas, he retained TMS to sing his political songs (*ibid.*: 381), up to his last film in 1979.

<sup>5</sup> Both the *tattuva pāṭalkaḷ* and the courtroom monologues were sold independently as LPs and later on cassette in the 1960–1980s.

such as the poet-saint Auvaiyyar and *Tamiḷttāy*, the personified form of the Tamil language. TMS, on the other hand, achieved his representative status by taking on the voices of both MGR's heroic leaders and Sivaji's everymen. Rather than specialising, he quite literally became the singing voice of nearly every male character in Tamil cinema. And, in turn, he came to be considered a '100% Tamil' singer. The fact that he had been born a Saurashtrian Brahmin and had grown up singing like a Bhagavatar was not an impediment to this. In fact, it was part of the appeal of his voice, for what mattered was precisely the transformation: the fact that he had been born something else and re-made himself as Tamil.

### Doubling, Star Power and Politics

The blurring of the line between singing and acting/speaking was apparent in TMS's own description of his work as not simply singing but 'acting with the voice'. He wrote about the singer's role in creating the effect and power of the filmic image and action in an article entitled 'Pinnaniyin Poruppu' (The Playback Singer's Responsibility) in 1967, maintaining that 'in the victory of the actor, there is a share for the playback singer'. Describing the famous song scene in *Enga Vittu Pillai* (1965) in which the brave version of MGR, wielding a whip, saves the cowardly version of MGR from a beating by the villain, TMS wrote that the playback singer's voice, more than the dialogue or the onscreen image, had the capacity to make people feel the hero's courage. As he wrote in Tamil (my translation):

Say, in a film, the hero, to save his country, to instill courage in his army, speaks to them, shouting with feeling. The courageous army advances. In the background, musical instruments roar. This flood of musical sound pours feeling into men's hearts. But the roar is not enough. Words imbued with courage need to be heard in their ears. Look! The hero sings: 'Tāyakam nāmatu tāyakam...' [Motherland, our motherland]. Belting this out, we will rise up in bravery. There is a special quality of bravery [*vīram*] in the word 'Tamiḷan'. ... These words give courage to the actors and quicken their pace.... The playback singer's song will immerse the people in a flood of happiness; it will make them clap loudly. This is where the playback singer's skill matters. (*Pēcum Paṭam* 1967: 75–76)

TMS suggested that the playback singer's voice, in fact, did not just complete the effect of what was presented on screen; it spoke directly to the actors in

the profilmic moment of shooting the scene, and to the audience watching the film, bringing them both to life. This was a form of presence that partook of and helped shape what was on screen, but also, crucially, exceeded the screen.

In particular, TMS's uncanny ability to sing convincingly for both Sivaji and MGR, whose own voices, personae and styles were so different, was constantly remarked upon. 'Because of TMS's skill as an actor, he knows how the actor will sing in this scene, where he will move, and he will show this in his singing. Knowing how each one needs to sing, he will cultivate the suitable voice for each' (*Pēcum Paṭam* 1981: 68). Both TMS and those who wrote about him emphasised the bodily communication between actor and singer: 'When acting, however Sivaji stands, that is how TMS stands singing in the studio' (ibid.: 71). While TMS imitated Sivaji's voice, Sivaji's body acted out the emotions and gestures implied in TMS's voice. TMS described this as a remarkably intimate process of singer and actor inhabiting each other's bodies:

There are some actors who will hear the song on the set and, just like speaking dialogue, simply move their lips. But Sivaji—he only acts after listening well to the song and understanding the scene. If I sing in my uppermost register [*uccastayi*], you will see the veins in his neck bulging out in the scene. Whatever changes happen in my body, he is such a genius actor that he can show it on screen. (ibid.: 71–72)

The star power of MGR and Sivaji accrued to TMS, but it travelled both ways. The concentration of both their personae in TMS's singular voice generated a power which he could amplify and transfer back to them and to others for whom he sang. Stories from TMS's biography show the intimate but tense relationship TMS had with these actors, particularly MGR—a constant jockeying for status and power.<sup>6</sup> It was precisely this 'double role' (arguably

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<sup>6</sup> Vamanan, TMS's biographer, said that important personages in the industry like TMS and M.S. Viswanathan expected everyone to fall at their feet and to call them '*annai*' (older brother). He also recalled that there was often tension between MGR and TMS because TMS was singing for Sivaji as well. He reported:

TMS described an incident, in Vahini Studio, where MGR was standing in the midst of three actresses. They were trying to get a role in his films. TMS came in, greeted MGR (respectfully, as '*annai*') and MGR said, 'TMS *sār*. *Uḷḷe pō, ivaiṅkaḷai anupicchiṭṭu varēn*' (TMS sir, go inside, I'll finish with them and come). TMS got insulted, and said, '*Inta kai tān vaṅaiṅkiyatu*' (These are the

the longest-lasting and most spectacular double role of all in Tamil cinema) that not only granted his voice ubiquity, but gave him the capacity to maintain his independence from these hero-stars and appear to stay above the fray of politics. The power of his voice was indeed political, but only insofar as he himself apparently seemed to stay above politics.

Even while singing for both MGR and Sivaji, TMS worked to construct a star text for himself that would be independent. After his tensions with MGR mounted, TMS turned to devotional music as a way to distance himself, recording albums of devotional songs with HMV and building up his extra-filmic persona as a devotee of the Tamil god Murugan (Vamanan 2002: 339–40). At the height of his playback singing career, in the 1960s, TMS himself also starred and sang in films that reinforced his devotional image, including *Pattinathar* (1962), a remake of the 1936 film that had starred Dhandapani Desikar, the story of a millionaire who renounces his wealth and transforms into a saint, and *Arunagirinathar* (1964), the story of a debauchee who is saved and becomes a devotee of Murugan.

Even as a constant output of films like *Madurai Veeran* (1956), *Nadodi Mannan* (1958) and *Mannadi Mannan* (1960) cemented the association between DMK party writers' and speakers' idolisation of Tamil political dynasties of the past, MGR's swashbuckling appearance onscreen, and the ringing tones of TMS's voice, TMS himself refused to join the DMK. Outwardly, he said that he was unable to join any party that belittled the Hindu religion, but perhaps he also recognised that his power lay in appearing to transcend politics. When DMK politician K.R. Ramaswamy, at the behest of party leader C.N. Annadurai, came to ask TMS to join the DMK, he is reported to have refused, saying 'While I am singing songs, there cannot be any kind of political party for me' (Vamanan 2002: 301).

## Conclusion

The representational economy described here—not just the outsourcing of singing, but the outsourcing of singing to a single male voice—was not merely an incidental fact of industrial pressures or competition. Nor was it simply attributable to TMS's own personal strategising. It was, rather, an industrial-aesthetic formation that emerged alongside the tight connection

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hands which have always respectfully greeted you). Like that, a prestige issue was there between them. (personal communication with the author, May 2013)

that developed between Tamil cinema and Dravidian politics in the 1950s and 1960s. TMS was fashioned into a *'Tirāvita kural'* by encompassing the different and rival screen representatives of Dravidian political power and Tamil ethnolinguistic identity—M.G. Ramachandran and Sivaji Ganesan—in his own singular voice.

The period from the early 1950s to the late 1970s—the years of TMS's rise and dominance—was one of massive social transformation in South India. During this time, the people of Tamil Nadu were brought to a new understanding of themselves as Tamils and as political subjects. As Rajan Kurai Krishnan (2014; also, this volume) has suggested, the rival hero-stars embodied the twin processes of individuation and the building of collective identity at the heart of this process of political subjectification. Their complementary opposition was constitutive of the new political dispensation: 'MGR was the transcendental signifier of Tamil sovereignty and Sivaji was the interiorized enunciatory subject. In order to constitute the modern political subject, they had to operate together as complementary forces' (Krishnan 2014: 239; also see this volume). Their rival personae constituted an 'assemblage of power' (Krishnan 2014: 240) that was held together by TMS's voice. In fact, TMS's vocal presence, his clout as a member of the fraternity of hero-stars, scriptwriters, lyricists and music directors who rose together in the 1950s and 1960s, depended on his not being identified with either MGR or Sivaji, but with both.

The idea of a 'Dravidian voice' is, of course, a retrospectively given title. No such construct or ideal yet existed in the 1950s and 1960s. What did come into being in these years, however, was a voice that claimed the middle space within a contested domain of vocal masculinity, populated by the already competing styles of the 'chaste' Tamil singers, the Bhagavatars, and the 'soft' Hindi singers. Inhering in the perceived 'Dravidian'ness of TMS's voice was a redefinition of vocal masculinity. As I have described, this redefinition happened at the sonic level of pitch or register, as well as style. Both the high, strident voices of 'Tamil' singers and the low, soft voices of the 'Hindi' singers were equally rejected for being insufficiently masculine. TMS's middle range was fashioned as normative, but it was also his flexibility (he could go low or high if needed) that enabled his voice to be heard as suitable for nearly any Tamil man. The plain, unadorned quality of TMS's *'kārve'* voice was taken as the quintessential expression of masculine strength: a 'man voice', as TMS fans among my interlocutors put it.

This redefinition of vocal ideals gained resonance and traction because it was also a symbolic reassertion of masculinity, made in relation to the poetic conventions and performative realisation of Dravidian political power. As Bernard Bate (2009, 2021; also this volume) showed, the Dravidianist political paradigm was derived from the performative space of oratory and other communicative practices where various gendered positions and orientations to classicism and Tamilness could be enacted and thereby produced. Following Bate's insights, we see that TMS's ability to voice the common man, iconically embodied in his unadorned 'kārve' voice, was positioned in complementary opposition to both Karnatic classical singing and classicised *centamiḷ* oratory, both in their own ways imbued with feminised signs of power and dominated, respectively, by Brahmin and non-Brahmin elites. The plain, unadorned quality of TMS's singing voice and its hint of 'picirū' or 'roughness' evoked unspecified subaltern class and caste connotations that contrasted with the 'spectacular literacy' cultivated by canonical Dravidianist political orators (cf. Bate 2009: 164–81). In this sense, it was a revival of imagery and tropes of masculine strength and bravery (*vīram*) that had been prominent in earlier decades of the Dravidian movement, but that became overshadowed in the 1950s and 1960s by an emphasis on the capacity of male orators to produce feminised 'chaste' literary speech (Rangaswamy 2004).<sup>7</sup> If, as Bate suggests, Dravidianist political orators fashioned a voice that was imagined to be suitable for leaders of high status speaking to the multitudes, TMS's voice could be heard as representing the voice of the people: a 'Tirāvita kural' (Dravidian voice).

The formal poetic similarity of the epithets conferred on TMS—*Pāṭakar tilakam*, the pride of singers—to MGR's *Makkaḷ tilakam* (pride of the people) and Sivaji's *Naṭikar tilakam* (pride of actors) placed him in a class alongside the hero-stars. A tribute poem to TMS written in the early 2000s hailed him as 'Pāttukku oru talaivar'—'A leader for all song'—a title that echoes *Puraṭci talaivar* (revolutionary leader), the title MGR was given after he became chief minister of Tamil Nadu.<sup>8</sup> The word *talaivar*, with its strong connotations of

<sup>7</sup> Rangaswamy (2004) discusses the trope of the body, particularly the wounded but strong masculine body, as a foundation of Dravidian identity politics in the 1930–1960s.

<sup>8</sup> The poem, by Sri Lankan radio personality Yazh Sudakar, is available online at <http://tms-songs.blogspot.com/> (accessed on 16 May 2025).

political leadership, political representation and fan following, places TMS firmly within the space of cinepolitics, despite the fact that he never became a politician in a literal sense.<sup>9</sup>

TMS achieved this cinepolitical stature in close proximity to politics, but appearing to be outside of it, and using an affectively powerful modality—singing—that was constructed as a non-political, ‘natural’ act. The power of his voice was created by the ambiguities afforded by playback’s representational economy, the suggestive connections and leakages between the ‘I’ of the onscreen character, the ‘I’ of the actor and the ‘I’ of the offscreen, but nevertheless known and therefore present, singer. Many songs ceased to be only about the character or star, referring also to the singer himself. The song ‘Pāṭṭum nānē pāvamum nānē’ (*Tiruvilayadal*, 1965) exemplifies the status and dominance TMS had achieved by the mid-1960s. The song marshalled the technical capacities of cinema and the affordances of playback to present the singing voice as the lifeforce of the onscreen image. At the beginning of the song, actor Sivaji Ganesan, who has materialised as Lord Siva, awakens from slumber, literally brought to life by his own (that is, TMS’s) voice, which sings:

<i>Pāṭṭum nānē pāvamum nānē</i>	I am both the song and the expression
<i>Pāṭṭum unmai nān pāṭavaittēnē</i>	I’m the one who has made you sing.

Though within the story, Siva is addressing a rival singer whom his devotee/disciple will defeat in competition, TMS’s voice can also be understood as addressing the actor Sivaji, quite literally directing his movements. The voice goes on to claim credit for all the life and movement on earth.

<i>Acaiyum porulil icaiyum nānē</i>	I am the music in moving things
<i>Āṭum kalaiyil nāyakan nānē</i>	I am the hero in the art of dance
<i>Etilum iyaṅkum iyakkam nānē</i>	I am the movement in everything that moves
<i>En icai ninṅāl aṭaṅkum ulakē</i>	If my music stops, the world grinds to a halt.

<sup>9</sup> This, indeed, is Prasad’s point about cinepolitics: that it depends on a particular kind of relation between the film star and his publics, one of representation in the political sense; cinema becomes a space of virtual political community that ‘operates independently of, and need not necessarily culminate in, party politics’ (2014: 7).

Here, the music stops, and for a moment the moving images on the screen freeze. Only when the voice returns do the trees again sway, the birds fly, the waves crash. Not only does TMS's voice make the world move, in the next minute it also materialises multiple Sivajis on screen, who play in concert with each other as the song reaches a rhythmic climax. In an obvious reference to the dominance TMS himself had achieved, the aesthetic redefinition his voice had effected and the central role of playback itself in creating the hero, the voice sings '*pāṭavantavanin pāṭum vāyai ini mūṭa vanta (pāṭṭum)*': '(this song) will shut the mouth of anyone who comes to compete with me.'



## SIGNIFYING TAMIL

### DMK Rhetoric, Cinema and the Double Articulation of Sovereignty

*Rajan Kurai Krishnan*

#### Introduction

A question, a prompt: what does it mean to ask, with and after Bernard Bate (2009), how we can further probe the significance of the double register of the devotee–icon and the rhetor–multitude relations, which he so meticulously traced in the political speeches of modern Tamil Nadu in general and in the speech of one orator, Kavitha, who died prematurely but has been immortalised in Bate’s work, in particular? Does it entail retaining the enigma of the new rhetoric of politics, a form of *centamil* as he characterised it, to seek to probe it in the hope of drawing more from the phenomenon for the anthropological understanding of language and politics? Is it not a way to keep the work of a lifetime alive for the thoughtful analyses of future scholarship?

To undertake a task in that direction, I link Bate’s observations to my own work on the use of rhetoric in Tamil cinema by the leaders of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), in the hope of tracking the complexity of the process in which the enunciatory potential developed by rhetoricians linked to the Dravidian movement, and the DMK in particular, led not only to many a process of subject formation but also to the techniques of self, needed to navigate the socio-psychic avalanche of capitalist modernity. In doing so, I show that the sovereign interiority of the Tamil self finds articulation alongside the sovereignty claimed for the Indian nation state through the manifestation of a virtual domain of sovereignty that constituted the Dravidian-Tamil people as the locus of self-rule within a federal imagination of the Indian nation. In other words, I highlight how the rhetoric of the DMK created an alternative to the discourse of nationalism; rather than lead to claims of a sovereign nation state, this rhetoric constructed the people as Dravidian-

Tamil, whose claim to sovereign interiority formed the bedrock of a federalist imagination as a rider to Indian nationalism. In this analysis, I differ from all readings of the DMK mobilisation and its rhetoric as Tamil nationalist or sub-nationalist or as a phenomenon antithetical to Indian nationalism. Instead, I argue that the DMK imagination was always *federalist*, be this of a South Indian federation of four linguistic communities called Dravida Nadu, or of the larger federation of the Indian Union, or even of a global federation. The strength of the sovereign interiority was such that it emphasised self-rule rather than sovereignty as opposed to an external force.<sup>1</sup>

Bate's (2009: 50) formulation of the rhetor–multitude relationship is a helpful point of departure for such a mapping of the political process. This relationship comprises, in Bate's study of Tamil oratory, a mode of enunciation where the devotee (holding his or her self in allegiance to another) and the rhetor (exhorting others) come together, or, in simple terms, where the devotional and rhetorical are combined in the same speech. For example, in Kavitha's speech, Bate tracks two addressees, one the crowd in front of her and the other her leader, the icon, Kalaaignar Karunanidhi. Bate suggests that the newness of the rhetorical mode that enunciates this relationship of rhetor–multitude, of a person addressing a multitude to persuade the latter to take the speaker's point of view, coexists both with neo-classical Dravidianism that makes the famous 'invention of tradition' and an actually experienced continuity with antiquity or the past. Hence, what is new is combined with the betokened past and actually existing genealogical traits. While these glosses are important, this chapter seeks to read the two modes of rhetoric in Tamil, what I designate as a *double articulation*, in a paradigmatic relationship to the vectors of the making of modern political subjectivity that combines the singularly interiorised experience of devotion and the public function of rhetor–multitude. In the concluding lines of his analysis of Kavitha's love, Bate (*ibid.*: 163) says: 'We see here, then, a double audience, and a double rhetoric, one that combines the traditional Western rhetorical function of offering a stylistically pleasing oration to "persuade" an immediate audience to one's point of view, and the more peculiarly Tamil devotional model of discourse, whose "function" is to instantiate a fruitful

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<sup>1</sup> One implication of this, which I do not further explore in this chapter, is that while Tamil Nadu did not become a sovereign nation state, the Union of India can ill afford to be a unitary state as some right-wing imagination of Hindu Rashtra posits, since the idea of India is resolutely federal.

interactivity between suppliant and powerful being'. While in his discussion Bate uses devotion as a gloss of love, and both together as instantiations of *bhakti*, or the 'devotional love' of the devotee for their deity (e.g., *ibid.*: 120), it may be useful to add another crucial term to describe such disposition of the self: *parru*, a term close to allegiance, which Sumathi Ramaswamy (1997) also glosses as devotion in her work.

Ramaswamy has helpfully detailed that Tamil was indeed mobilised by Indianism and Dravidianism. It is not without significance, then, that Bate, when discussing the antiquity of *bhakti*, marks it as pan-Indian: 'Like Madurai, like Tamil itself, Kavitha's love is an ancient thing, one that has been cultivated in every prayer to every god and goddess in the Tamil world—probably across India—for thousands of years' (Bate 2009: xvii). Apparently, somewhere in the deep historical recesses of the 'ontologies' of selfhood, this overlap of Dravidian and Indian appears unavoidable. Shulman's (2016) dazzlingly rich 'biography' of Tamil language, of course, elaborately marks these deep connections between Sanskrit and Tamil and briefly remarks on the agonism of Tamil with Sanskrit in the context of twentieth-century politics.

It is in this *long durée* cohabitation, bountiful exchange and simmering agonism—between Sanskrit and Tamil, Brahminism (coded Aryan) and non-Brahminism (coded Dravidian), Vedic theological precepts/puranic lore and non-Vedic pietist, theogonic and devotional practices—that the rich civilisational ground was formed which constituted the Dravidianism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While Dravidian-Tamil collective interiority is spectacularly singular, it is not fully segregable from the rest of India.<sup>2</sup> Given this historical backdrop, signifying Tamil as distinct is thus

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<sup>2</sup> Here we can briefly mention two conditions that underwrite this deep relation at the level of the 'real', the 'actual' and the 'virtual', and which make this double articulation possible. The first condition is that a non-Brahmin plebeian identity is not restricted to Tamil Nadu. It is pan-Indian. Even if the divide between Brahmin and non-Brahmin has not been mobilised as an internal frontier in other states, non-Brahmin caste consolidation is the bedrock of state-level parties in many states. Hence, the concept of Dravidian India has the potential to become an alternative social imaginary of the whole of India. The second condition is more local: Tamil has been strongly imbued with Brahminical devotionism and while Tamil Saivism and Tamil Vaishnavism have had a distinct non-Sanskrit and non-Aryan provenance, they are also conjoined with a pan-Indian Hindu puranic and epic narrative tapestry. So, too, for Tamil Jainism and Tamil Buddhism. If the pre-eminent Tamil classic, the twelfth-century rendition of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Ramavataram* by Kamban is a good example

also to locate sovereignty differently. My interest is in seeing not only how a conception of double articulation of sovereignty may help us to understand how Tamil came to be signified through DMK rhetoric, but also what we can infer about the processes of subject formation (discourse of political communication, rhetor–multitude) and the techniques of the self (modes of allegiance) in the context of the development of modern political rationality.

In what follows, I set out to explain how the construction of a people as Dravidian-Tamil could avoid being ensnared in the discourse of Tamil nationalism that would have culminated in the demand of a sovereign Tamil nation state and instead enunciate an autonomy seeking the dispensation of self-rule within a federal India. This replaces nationalist imagination with federalist imagination, despite, or rather, *because of*, the powerful collective interiority of the Dravidian-Tamil self. I describe this process with the help of certain analytical rubrics. The foremost is the characterisation of the double articulation as that of the ‘form of content’ and ‘form of expression’ by Deleuze and Guattari (1998). I see how this worked in the domain of the ‘actual’, that of political mobilisation or imbuing the social with the political, and in the domain of the ‘real’, a site of law, that is, as a materialisation of the ruling dispensation as a sovereign split between the Union government of India and the state government of Tamil Nadu. In order to explain the variance in these two domains—of the sovereign collective interiority of a Dravidian-Tamil people and the exterior sovereignty of the Indian state—I explore the virtual domain of cinema, where significance and subjectification produce what I call after Deleuze and Guattari *the faciality machine*, which I attribute to the combined star images of M.G. Ramachandran and Sivaji Ganesan, which I then map back onto the formations of the political.<sup>3</sup>

In the domain of the actual, the ‘form of content’ comprised the non-Brahmin caste constituencies who sought to rally against both the hegemonic role of Brahmins in the social order and their domination in sites of governance. The ‘form of expression’ was Tamilness or simply allegiance to Tamil. I explain this as the populist reason of the DMK using Laclau’s (2005) gloss or populist reason as consisting of an internal frontier that describes the plebeian political aspiration of overcoming the rich and powerful, with

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for the Hindu semiotic weave, earlier classics like *Silapatthikaram* and *Manimekhalai* speak to Jain and Buddhist connections.

<sup>3</sup> For a fuller exposition of how Sivaji and MGR constituted the faciality machine, see Krishnan (2014).

the Tamil language functioning as what Laclau calls the 'empty signifier' that stands for the mythical totality of the polity. This is reversed when it comes to the domain of the real—that is, the location of the sovereign—insofar as a Tamil totality is granted statehood only by being subordinated to the power consolidation at the level of the Union government of India. It can be persuasively argued that the DMK's deployment of populist reason has clearly succeeded in constructing a Dravidian-Tamil people as exemplified by the two main Dravidian parties together commanding a very substantial vote share in the last fifty-two years since 1973, marginalising the presence of national parties and left parties.<sup>4</sup> This has resulted in a distinctive developmental trajectory that has combined the increase in gross domestic product (GDP) with appreciable indices of human development (Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar 2021). How is it, then, that the people of Tamil Nadu find their citizenly identity as Indian agreeable?

### People, Nation State and the Political

The modern political rationality of the liberal state consists of the twin axes of individuation and totalisation, as Foucault (1982) succinctly described in his seminal essay 'The Subject and Power'. As bearer of rights, the individual is a free agent, sovereign in his private domain, and the collective of such individuals who freely contract to form a state makes a sovereign nation state. This process of the making of the liberal state is conjoined by another process in which the collective is imagined as a nation or a people. The sequence in which the two processes of historical materialisation of the collective as an entity or nation and that of individuation leading to citizenship occur may not be the same for all societies and can variously overlap, mix and be hybridised. This is sufficiently amplified in Partha Chatterjee's (1993) response to Benedict Anderson (2006[1983]) where, simply framed, Chatterjee posits that all nations are imagined but each in its own way. In other words, that the nation can be imagined at all is inalienable from the possibility that it can imagine itself *differently*. It is in the formal condition of difference in the act of imagination (and not in the product of imagination) that the soul of the nation is articulated. This I would call the first condition of modernity.

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed exposition of the idea of the construction of Dravidian-Tamil people using the gloss offered by Laclau for populist reason, see Krishnan et al. (2022).

Hardt and Negri (2000) track two moments in the development of what they call modernity. The first is the modernity of renaissance humanism and the second is the modernity of enlightenment. Though not fully temporally segregated (after all, Spinoza came after Descartes), the two modernities differ in their political axes as republican and democratic. The first premised itself on the immanent collective will of humans but the second produced the transcendent individuation and juridical sovereignty of the nation state. The coexistence of both axes is the second condition of modernity.

A third condition of modernity describes the division of nature and culture, as beautifully explicated by Bruno Latour (2002). Though he describes his idea of the constitution of modernity as a failed attempt (hence his claim, 'we have never been modern'), much of what has produced the political common sense of the twentieth century is the divide between what he calls mononaturalism and multiculturalism. This aspect is crucial in cementing the public–private divide where all the angst about the mononaturalist ontology could be quartered in the private to release multiculturalist humanism for political consolidation and history. This can only be tracked through the historical ontology of subjecthood, as Ian Hacking (2004) has shown.

In synthesising the three conditions one can posit that the humanist impulse of modernity is premised on the sovereign free will of a collective of singularities and the democratic containment of such a will which disperses sovereignty to individuated members—a conversion of the singular into the individual—who then constitute a contractual collective in the form of a state (a will to be controlled by themselves), or legislator-subjects, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari (1998). The combination then produces a double articulation of sovereignty as, on the one hand, that of the enunciatory subject and, on the other hand, that of the nation state. These are, thus, not polarities existing in a cultural vacuum but frames of the historical formation of the political in the social. It is my surmise that the uneven patterns of overlap of the double articulation are the sources of formal conditions of difference in the way political collectives/nations are imagined. In a recent work, Partha Chatterjee (2021) has presented the idea that India is a people's federation, in the sense that people severally constituted in the many regions of India have federated to be the nation of India.

In other words, in a multilingual state like India, it is possible that the constitution of the people may happen at the level of linguistic states, while liberal state formation may happen at the level of the Union government,

which encompasses the whole of the multilingual nation. This has several important consequences. One is that the very formation of the political as a contest among agonistic forces rests on this division of the citizen–state combinatorial axis and various forms of collective enunciation of interiorities as peoples (*viz.*, the Tamil people, the Kannada people, etc.). This formation of the political, then, is clearly located in the states of India. At the level of the Union government, there is only politics as a structure of power. Yet, as electoral democracy in the last seventy-three years since 1952 has led to the maturation of the political, the formation of the Union government is itself decided at state-level political formations.

While the historical time span of Tamil Nadu going through these processes of modernisation is far shorter than the European case, it is all the more densely complicated. The complication is due to the historical overlap of European presence and later colonial rule in the subcontinent with the emergence of the vectors of modernity discussed above. In the European instance, the role played by print and print culture in the spread of ideas and the genesis of public sphere has been repeatedly narrativised. Introduced by Europeans, the development of print culture and print capitalism was tardy in the many linguistic regions of India due to widespread illiteracy. In Tamil Nadu, it was the advent of print culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that consolidated what is characterised as a Tamil renaissance by Nambi Arooran (1980).

In analysing this flowering of the Tamil print culture and public sphere, Ramaswamy (1997) has coherently mapped the intricate patterns created by Indianism and Dravidianism interacting with the devotionism and classicism associated with Tamil renaissance from late nineteenth century to the 1960s, the moment the Dravidian party DMK came to power in the state. It is precisely the combinations of Indianism and Dravidianism that I try to characterise as double articulations of sovereignty in Tamil. The difference in my redrawing the map is the ambitious attempt to abstract the two tendencies rather than distribute them to individual actors who, anyway, refuse to stay put in an assigned location, either as Indianist or Dravidianist. Hence, the two tendencies seem to be the very core of subject formation.

It has been remarked by many that the moment of Tamil being identified with non-Brahmin and the politics of Self-Respect in the state occurred when C. Rajagopalachari, a prominent leader of the Indian National Congress (hereafter, Congress), became the head of Madras Presidency under a diarchy in 1937. Rajagopalachari created the historical moment by introducing Hindi

in schools, which led to successive waves of protest that brought disparate groups, movements and individuals under one rubric of Tamil protection, thereby resignifying Tamil forever. This is also the moment when the transitive categories, as Pandian (2007) called them, of Brahmin–Sanskrit/Hindi–Aryan/North India came to occupy the oppositional position for non-Brahmin–Tamil–Dravidian/South India. As Shulman (2016: 311) has pointed out, resentment sure had a key role to play; one can say that the resentment Brahmins had for Sudras and Dalits was close to reaching the character of apartheid. The systematic hatred structured as untouchability and exclusion instituted by Brahmins is now often forgotten by scholars and the charge of ‘Brahmin hatred’ is laid against the non-Brahmin movement. The segregation of dining spaces in hotels and restaurants for Brahmins, including railway canteens where non-Brahmins were not allowed to enter, is symbolic of the exclusionary tendency. Brahmin self-exclusion as a domain of ethnic and cultural privilege became the very linchpin of caste hierarchy as it came to be understood in colonial modernity. The whole system of graded inequality drew its strength from Brahmin exclusionary practices and palpable Brahmin resentment for non-Brahmins as ‘Sudra’ or ‘Panchama’.

When the Justice Party was founded to check the rising influence of the Brahmin in the colonial public sphere, the Congress sought to counter the move by inviting the dynamic municipal chairman of the trade-centre township Erode, Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, to the non-Brahmin wing of the Congress. Periyar galvanised the grassroots mobilisation of the Congress for six years, from 1919 to 1925, before quitting, disgruntled about the Congress hesitation to espouse the cause of proportionate representation in public offices (among other reasons), which the non-Brahmins demanded. Thus, in 1925, was born the most dynamic movement building under the rubric of Self-Respect led by Periyar. In this movement, Periyar emphasised the notion of a Dravidian people. Periyar was keenly aware of the Brahmin investment in Tamil, which is why he preferred to rally people as Dravidians; he believed that Brahmins, who were the first to appropriate the Orientalist identification of them as Aryans, would not come forward to claim Dravidian identity.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> However, Brahmins had earlier associated themselves with the term Dravidian as a geographical identity, not as a racial identity. As Pandian (2007) has shown, the Brahmin self-identification as Aryan, spawned by Orientalist scholarship, played no insignificant part in the semantic shift that occurred in the non-Brahmin movement and in the refashioning of Brahmin identity in the colonial period.

The purpose of the above two narrations—one of global processes of modernity and the other of the Tamil historical response—is to think how to characterise the transitional phase of this historical process in Tamil Nadu. The right way, to my mind, is to characterise Periyar—who I see as the central figure in this transformation—as an immanent humanist, a renaissance spirit and a republican. He belongs to the first moment of modernity described by Hardt and Negri (2000). Like Gandhi, who he carefully analysed and absorbed, Periyar was also not a champion of civil society, citizenship, party organisation or electoral politics. Periyar was a publicist and a self-styled propagandist of the egalitarian and reasonable values of Promethean humanism. His crucial role in creating a mass base for Dravidian politics consisted in his concept of ‘self-respect’ (*cuyamariyātai*) which strongly called for human freedom and an egalitarian society. He found the self-exclusive elitism of Brahmins, a combination of priestly class ritual authority and ascendancy in the colonial bureaucracy with secular authority, a major signpost of a hierarchically divided society and graded inequality that meant unfreedom for the Sudras, Dalits and women. From the moment he left the Congress in 1925, he relentlessly campaigned against Brahmin hegemony as well as domination, transforming and expanding the historical block of non-Brahmins.

In terms of political theory, the reason to consolidate non-Brahmin as a block must be located in the inherent inegalitarian subject position the Brahmin claimed as twice-born. They were collaborating with the British in occupying the spaces of modern institutions and citizenship practices while simultaneously erecting a ‘private sphere’ as the domain of tradition and sovereignty of the self. Pandian’s (2002) close reading of Sivasamy Iyer’s life serves as a good example. However, the private domain of ritual exclusion kept spilling onto the public space, for e.g., refusing to dine in company of others, which led to the explosive Cheranmadavi *gurukulam* controversy that rocked the Congress in the mid-1920s (Pazha Athiyaman 2013).

Hence, for the articulation of renaissance immanent humanism it was necessary to challenge the inegalitarian social presence of the Brahmin, which was growing in prominence in both ritual and secular domains of public spaces in a sort of mutual reinforcement. Ritual purity was transforming into exclusivity in public spaces, further delimiting access to those down the caste hierarchy, as demonstrated by the temple entry struggles brought to the fore by the Vaikom struggle (Pazha Athiyaman 2020). However, for the development of popular politics or populist reason, to frame it in the categories of Laclau (2005), two further operations became necessary. One

is the development of an internal frontier and, thus subsequently, a logic of difference and equivalence combining to produce the 'empty signifier'. Let me take a moment to outline this operation of populist reason to see how the Tamil case fits into it, explaining much of Dravidian movement. In parsing Laclau, I use my own phrases and descriptions but follow the larger outline of his thought.

There are many constituencies in society that have grievances. These grievances and injuries are often specific to that constituency and hence constituted by differences from each other. Populist reason demands that some logic of equivalence is found among the grievances felt and injuries suffered. This combination produces a signifier that Laclau describes as 'empty' in the sense that each constituency can fill the space with their own imagination of redressal. The Obama presidential campaign slogan in 2008, 'Yes We Can' is perhaps an ideal example. It is actually 'Yes we can' with an empty signifier attached, which made other candidates, including Hillary Clinton, ask, 'Yes we can WHAT?' But it allowed each segment of society to imagine its own content of what can be achieved together. However, Laclau makes it clear that the whole of society cannot produce such an empty signifier. Rather, there should be an internal frontier, where from one side disparate groups—in particular, of the plebeians—find an equivalential logic among their differences that can be set against the section on the other side of the frontier—be they the 'rulers', the 'rich' or whoever.

Periyar, aided by multiple genealogies from the *longue durée* history of *nastic/avaidic* (i.e., non-Vedic) traditions, and the contemporary work of publicists like Sundaram Pillai, Athippakkam Venkatachalam, Iyothee Thass and the Justice Party, in identifying the Brahmin as the exemplary embodiment of inegalitarian social presence, created an internal frontier between Brahmin and non-Brahmin on the popular turf. When the various, and heterogeneous, non-Brahmin and Dalit castes came together, they still needed a signifier that would not just refer to the internal frontier in purely negative and specific terms, as *non-Brahmin*, but would have sufficiently capacious emptiness to imagine a positive range of redressals that were needed. I assert that 'Tamil' came to take the place of the empty signifier. One recent instance I can give to substantiate this claim would be the attempts of leaders such as Ramadoss and Thirumavalavan in the first decade of the twenty-first century. When Ramadoss, the leader of a Vanniyar caste party in the northern districts, and Thol. Thirumavalavan of the Dalit Panthers, mobilising a section of Dalits subjugated by the Vanniyaars, tried

to come together briefly to create a new social block, they again used Tamil as the key signifier of unity.

Since Periyar was not yoked fully to the idea of either a sovereign nation state or citizenship training, but was rather imbued with the spirit of renaissance humanism, his Self-Respect movement was not limited to non-Brahminism even if it did promote it as the precondition for a new social order. Periyar clearly stated many times that the vision of his work was not limited to fighting a minuscule section of society but to demolish the whole hierarchical and inequalitarian structure and build a new society from the shambles. However, when the transitive categories of Brahmin–Aryan–Hindi became operational, the Brahmin–non-Brahmin divide became the internal frontier available to receive Tamil as the empty signifier. It was left for C.N. Annadurai—one of Periyar’s lieutenants—and his party, the DMK, founded in 1949, to work on the internal frontier and develop the empty signifier fully into populist reason to capture power in the state of Tamil Nadu in 1967. Hence, the birth of the DMK rhetoric to signify Tamil anew, as a source of subject formation and a deft weaving of the techniques of the self in the process, forged a double articulation *a la* Kavitha.

### Double Articulation of Sovereignty as Tamil Self and Indian Subject

In the expansive speculative thrust of the second chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1998) describe double articulation as the condition of whatever is. The most rudimentary form of double articulation is that of ‘particle-sign’. Particle-signs need to be understood as a linking of a ‘form of content’ and a ‘form of expression’. In the slow bifurcation and autonomy of the two, epistatic formations multiply the para strata and lead to multiple re-formations. In other words, as sign parts (as Deleuze and Guattari [1998] also call them), particle-signs spiral from the so-called natural world into the cultural world, mixing and giving birth to novel formations. The moment when the bifurcation of form of content and expression makes possible the birth of the signifier, a sort of sign without particles, the redundancy that occurs becomes the fulcrum of semiotic regimes including language. The redundancy of the signifier is given the name ‘faciality’. In the ‘faciality machine’, the double articulation takes the form of signifi-ance and subjectification. In a signifying regime, a privileged, *sovereign* central point—Deleuze and Guattari (1998) call it God/King—acts as a fulcrum from where the spiral of signifiers re-imparting signifieds pans out. In the post-signifying

regime, the central point becomes the enunciatory subject, leaving the spiral of signification centred around God/King and recoiling itself as the subject of the statement, thereby creating the legislator subject of modern political rationality. It is this conception of the birth of the post-signifying regime that finds elaboration in Hardt and Negri (2000) that we saw above.

The process of transition from signifying regime to post-signifying regime can be very uneven and lead to many different combinations. It is in the mutations of semiotic regimes that the faciality machines become active. I return to the faciality machine in the third section and now attend to the question of double articulation in the Tamil instance.

We saw that despite the earlier ideational articulations followed by the formation of the civil society-driven South Indian Liberal Federation (also known as the Justice Party) and its rule during the diarchy, it was Periyar's Self-Respect movement that performed the grassroots mobilisation of the non-Brahmin-identity-bearing constituencies as a historical bloc. We also noted that the imposition of Hindi in the state by the C. Rajagopalachari-led Congress government in 1938 provided the historical opportunity for various constituencies to come together under the sign Tamil. We reasoned it as the Self-Respect movement's mobilisation turning into the internal frontier of Brahmin versus non-Brahmin and Tamil, through the combination of the logics of difference (various caste groups in the caste hierarchy) and equivalence (of inferiorisation to some other caste hampering self-respect), as the empty signifier Tamil for the sustenance of the political collective.

In any simple operation of the historical process outlined above, Tamil should have been the kernel of sovereignty and whatever the particulate that constituted the non-Brahmin self should have become the content of subject formation. In other words, the movement for a sovereign Tamil state should have gained ground. While a Marxist economic base–structure logic may find reasons for why such a mobilisation would have historically failed, what we are now left to reckon with is the fact that there was no mass movement for a separate sovereign state in the first place, despite the extraordinary mobilisation achieved for Tamil and the flaring of 'passions of the tongue,' as Ramaswamy (1997) has described it, prompted by the acts of self-immolation of DMK cadres for the sake of language.

Even the DMK, which officially kept Dravida Nadu or the sovereign Dravidian republic as the ultimate political aspiration until 1963, started participating in elections from very early on and built a party structure fully in consonance with the democratic principles of building political

organisation with inner-party elections. In other words, the DMK, like any other liberal political party, was built on the postcolonial ground provided by the Indian nation state, thus implicitly validating the Indian state as its political horizon. An organisation bent on a separate sovereign Tamil nation state would have adopted a more confrontational path than the liberal democratic electoral path.

In the meantime, Periyar and his Dravidar Kazhagam (DK; from which the DMK branched out) started supporting Kamaraj of the Indian National Congress since Kamaraj, as a non-Brahmin, ended the rule of the Brahmin C. Rajagopalachari. From 1954 to 1967, Periyar was aligned with Kamaraj *against* the DMK, while continuing to critique the Indian nation state and the casteist hegemony he alleged was underwriting the nation, as well as the superstitions associated with the Hindu way of life.<sup>6</sup> However, in effect, he too was operating on the ground provided by the postcolonial nation state. What can be derived from these processes is that Tamil, signifier of the substantial collective of non-Brahmins, was not becoming the real signifiante component of the faciality machine or the sign of sovereignty of the state. It is necessary to explore the reasons for this.

Following the insight offered by Pandian (2007), what I think of as an explanation, is the *transitivity* of Tamil as signifier. It should be born in mind that the whole process of Tamil renaissance was initiated and took place under colonial governance. Since citizenship training, civil society formation and the state were under a colonial dispensation, subject formation had to be housed in the anti-colonial private space of the invented or genealogically acquired tradition. English as an official language and the language of jurisprudence clearly marked the divide. It was the necessary condition of colonial difference. In its core, subject formation had to differentiate itself from colonial modernity, which was also Western modernity, so that it could produce its own structure of signifiante (i.e., the sovereign collective). The primacy of formative thrust here is on the private sphere of the putative citizen of the new sovereign state. Hence, Tamil, actually the site of public collective sovereignty, had to become transitive to stand for the *private* sphere of the individual self. The fact that Iyothee Thass (1845–1914), a formidable Dalit-Buddhist intellectual of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, called his journal *Thamizhan*

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<sup>6</sup> See Venkatachalapathy (2018a) for a detailed sketch of the situation of the DK and DMK differing with each other but sharing a certain ideational ground, famously fashioned as a 'double-barrelled gun'.

(marking the personhood after language) in the first decade of the twentieth century is sufficient to show that Tamil had to be interiorised into the subject formation. Though it is called Tamil Nadu (*nāḍu* meaning ‘country’, a sign of exterior topography), it is more intimately Tamil *akam* (*akam* standing for the interior). I propose that this interiorisation of the sign Tamil to compensate for the very embeddedness of the public sphere in colonial modernity left the space of public sovereignty ambivalent, allowing for the anti-colonial Indian nation state to be the historical complement of the sovereign Tamil subject. The double articulation took the form of the Tamil subject and Indian state, finally finding reconciliation in the idea of autonomous statehood for Tamils. Hence, for example, the DMK slogan ‘Maanila Suyatchi, Madhiyil Koottatchi’ (Self-Rule for the States, Federalism at the Centre), with which it came to power in 1967. Since then, the DMK has continued to rule the state alternating with its splinter party, the All India Anna DMK (AIADMK), which was formed by the inimitable MGR. In the next section, I argue that it is in the use of DMK rhetoric in cinema and the star duo of MGR and Sivaji that the double articulation of Tamil sovereignty stands fully revealed in the form of the faciality machine (Krishnan 2014).

### The MGR–Sivaji Faciality Machine and the Double Articulation of Sovereignty

It is necessary to understand the nature of DMK rhetoric. Alliteration, rhyme and rhythm created sound patterns that extolled the very language that was being used. It is primarily the self-conscious signification of Tamil as such for the masses, a sort of medium as the message. While Bate focused on *mēḍaittamil*, (or ‘stage Tamil’), it should be quickly noted that the DMK’s rhetoric was widely used in the print literature of the movement, magazines, newspapers and pamphlets, which, as has been popularly recollected, were read aloud in small gatherings of people in villages, tea shops, barber shops and the youth associations in towns. It is good to see a sample sentence from the pages of *Dravida Nadu* (11 February, 1951), written by Annadurai. The alliterative sound of *ma* recurring frequently creates a musical quality to the reading:

*maṇam* vīcum *mallikait* tōṭṭam *mārrānūṭaiyatu enru* terintātāl *uṇṭāna*  
*maṇa* ericcalaip *pōkkik kōlla mānnārcāmi oruvan*, *malakkuviyalai*  
*kaṇṭupitittu*, *vāri vāri vīcinānām mallikait tōṭṭattilē*, *maṇam keṭum enru*.

*āṇāl vīcappattatu uramākivittatu tōttattukku. atupōla vacaimāri polintu varukīrārkal.*

On finding that the garden of fragrant jasmine belongs to the other person, one Mannarsamy, in order to heal his heartburn, found a pile of faeces and threw it into the garden, thinking that the fragrance would fade. However, what was thrown became a fertiliser for the garden. Likewise, the abuses that being showered (on us—by the Congress).<sup>7</sup>

Both Annadurai and Karunanidhi eloquently defended this rhetorical style. While Annadurai responded to the charge of contrivance with the question, ‘Is there a need to paint the parrot green?’, Karunanidhi explained that the affective use of sound in language is intricately linked to the motor capacity of the body. The rhetorical fashion was not only used in political stages or in print; it was most famously used in plays that were invariably performed at party conferences and in films scripted by Annadurai and Karunanidhi, which became the normative style of dialogue for the next three decades (until the mid-1970s).

I will provide an example from *Velaikari* (1949), one of the first hit films with dialogues by Annadurai. Advertisements for the film quoted a line from the hero’s argument in court:

*Vēṣamaṇiyāta vētānti,  
mōṭi ceyyāta mātu,  
jōṭi illāta māṭappurā,  
cēṭi illāta rājakumāri irukka muṭiyātām!*

The godman without deceit, the woman without the ability to entice, the pigeon without its pair, the princess without maids cannot be seen!<sup>8</sup>

We have two sets of alliterative sounds: *Vē* and *vē* in the first phrase, *m* and *m* in the second phrase. The presence of the suffix *āta* in all the phrases creates a rhyming pattern. More importantly, the *ti* ending in the second, third and fourth phrases (*mōṭi*, *jōṭi*, *cēṭi*) gives the sentence the power of a chant. Such powers of articulation endowed the hero with the singularity required to

<sup>7</sup> Author’s translation.

<sup>8</sup> Author’s translation.

overcome his enemies and transform society. *Velaikari* was a successful play before the producer picked it up for the film adaptation.

Karunanidhi's success as script and dialogue writer far exceeded that of Annadurai. Two stars emerged by acting in films that he wrote scripts and dialogues for: M.G. Ramachandran and Sivaji Ganesan.

MGR became popular with *Mantthiri Kumari* (1950) and further consolidated his position with *Malaikallan* (1954). Sivaji Ganesan debuted in the quintessential DMK film *Parasakthi* (1952), the dialogues of which are firmly etched in popular memory, and consolidated his stardom with *Manohara* (1954). The stupendous success of all these four films owed much to Karunanidhi's script and dialogues. Beginning in 1952, when *Parasakthi* was released, and until 1977, when MGR became chief minister of Tamil Nadu, the star duo of MGR–Sivaji dominated the Tamil screen, having the whole industry revolve around them. Their popularity throughout the state was immense and their competition for the commercial success of their films acute.

While both became stars in the films scripted by Karunanidhi, aligning them naturally to the DMK, MGR fully integrated with the party while Sivaji Ganesan became estranged from the party and gradually aligned himself with the Congress, particularly owing allegiance to Kamaraj. From the 1960s, it became a regular practice to have both stars campaign during the elections, MGR for the DMK and Sivaji for the Congress. This yielded starkly different results. While both drew crowds, DMK was on the winning curve and Congress was losing ground. Later, it became very clear that while in the film industry they competed closely with each other, on the political turf Sivaji was no match for MGR. Given the equally devoted fan network that both had, the asymmetry in political success is surprising.

The usual explanation provided is that MGR catered to subaltern masses, thus enjoying a wider fan base, while Sivaji catered to middle-class sensibilities, resulting in a narrower fan base. During my fieldwork in the years 2005–2007, I could conclusively ascertain from the one-time avid fans of both stars that this was *not* the case. Rather, it usually followed the following pattern: if the husband liked one actor, the wife liked the other; if the elder brother liked one, the younger brother liked the other, and so on. These stars provided a complementary pair with which fans in complementary social relations could align. Hence, to provide another example: when I was in school during the last phase of the MGR–Sivaji era, I was a fan of Sivaji and my closest friend was a

fan of MGR. And while both individuals in any pair would watch the films of *both* stars, it was nevertheless important for each to declare whose fan they were.

In order to understand how this complementarity worked, while the political dividends sharply varied, we need to understand the difference in the composition of the stars. Sivaji, from his very first film, came to be celebrated for his histrionics and excellent delivery of dialogues in Tamil. Sivaji's fame rested on character portraiture; he was known as *Gunachithra Nadigar*, meaning the Character Portraying Actor. MGR, by contrast, was known for the agility of body and style; his initial fame and success rested on the chain of swashbuckler roles he played. MGR came to be known as *Puratchi Nadigar*, meaning the Revolutionary Actor, perhaps drawn from his vigilante roles. The title was later transformed into *Puratchi Thalaivar*, or the Revolutionary Leader, which is how most of his party speakers referred to him.

I developed a quick test during my fieldwork. I would ask interlocutors the names of characters played by Sivaji Ganesan. They would quickly come up with a long list: Veerapandia Kattabomman, Kappalottiya Thamizhan V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, Raja Raja Cholan, Barrister Rajnikanth, Mottar Sundaram Pillai, Gunasekaran, Manohara, etc. When I followed that with the same question for MGR, people would go blank, trying hard to recall the names of the characters played by him in his most popular hits. The point was that whatever their names might have been, MGR always played *himself* as character. Sivaji lent his interiority to characters.

If we recall our discussion of the faciality machine, we can see that it primarily combines the axis of signifiante and the axis of subjectification. One works on the plane of collective sovereignty and the other on the plane of interiorised subjectivity. Deleuze and Guattari (1998) describe faciality as the combination of a white wall (of signifiante) and black holes (of subjectivity), or totalisation and individuation, as Foucault (1982) described it. It is my surmise that MGR and Sivaji produced the faciality machine of Tamil popular modernity. MGR provided the white wall of signifiante on the axis of sovereignty, which helped achieve tremendous political success; since Sivaji was on the axis of subjectification, his capacity for Tamil dialogue delivery only added to the sovereign mobilisation of MGR, leaving Sivaji to be content with his success in films.

There is a more complicated twist here, however. If the sovereign combination was of the Tamil self and the Indian state, Sivaji Ganesan, who

filled the interior space and spoke Tamil dialogues with emotional depth, should have been the politically successful one, standing with the nationalist Congress party. But he was an abject failure. MGR, by contrast, who operated on the exterior plane of collectivity but was with the DMK, should not have succeeded since it was the wrong combination of unrealised sovereignty; yet he was an unmatched political success. We can perhaps explain this as a split in sovereignty between the Central and state governments. I like to think of it as a more fascinating double reversal. The interiorised collective Tamil self is also a source of atomisation of the individual, returning the immanence of the collective to the transcendence of citizenship that tethers it to the nation state—the Sivaji oeuvre; simultaneously, the exteriorised collective latches on the sovereign locus, foregoing the self-rule of the construction of the people to which process it owes its evolution—the figure of MGR. Hence, the double reversal creates an antinomy in which the double articulation of sovereignty is located. Table 14.1 summarises this thesis. We will keep two rows for the double articulation: form of expression and form of content. We will keep three columns for actual (social reality), virtual (cinematic epistrata) and real (sovereign or power configuration—legal apparatuses of governance).

<i>Articulation</i>	<i>Actual</i>	<i>Virtual</i>	<i>Real</i>
Form of Expression	Tamizhan	Significance MGR	Governance of Tamil Nadu
Form of Content	Non-Brahmin Self	Subjectification Sivaji	Encompassment with the Indian State

Table 14.1: The double articulation of Tamil sovereignty (with the reversal at the level of the virtual).

Source: Author.

The faciality machine in the virtual domain performs an inversion which mediates between the actual and real in such a way that the double articulation is sustained in the socio-political body without a schism. This has many fascinating ramifications for understanding the Tamil distinction in prioritising personhood over sovereignty in the renaissance mode of immanent humanism. In order to do that let us consider a few more facts relating to Sivaji and MGR.

Sivaji not only aligned with the Congress but also played two important anti-colonial icons of the state: the eighteenth-century Polygar Veerapandiya Kattabomman and V.O. Chidambaram Pillai. Kattabomman defied British (East India Company) attempts to collect tax, resulting in repeated battles, and was finally defeated by the British and hanged in 1799. The eponymous film was released in 1959 and Sivaji played Kattabomman with great aplomb. The dialogue he delivers when confronted by the British collector Jackson is part of the folklore of the state. Two years later, Sivaji acted in the biopic *Kappalottiya Thamizhan* ('The Tamil who Ran a Shipping Company') about the Congress leader V.O. Chidambaram Pillai (V.O.C.), who launched an Indian shipping corporation to confront the trade hegemony of the British. In the film, when V.O.C. goes to meet the British collector, the collector hallucinates for a moment that V.O.C. is Kattabomman. Of course, the audience knew both are Sivaji Ganesan. The virtual images in these films inscribe Sivaji as the very embodiment of Indian nationalism. As one can anticipate by now, there is a twist in the story.

Sivaji Ganesan died in 2001, when Karunanidhi, the leader of the DMK, was out of power. When Karunanidhi became the chief minister again in 2006, he decided to install a statue of Sivaji at a prominent junction in Chennai. A locale adjoining the Marina beach was chosen, but public interest litigations, citing hindrance to traffic, were filed, appealing the court to direct the state government to relocate the statue. Informally, the reason appeared to be that the statue would stand at a short distance from the statue of Mahatma Gandhi and might obscure the great leader's statue. There was palpable tension as the day set for unveiling the statue approached, with cases pending in the court following a stay order. The stay was lifted in time and a grand function was organised to unveil the statue. In an emotional outburst at the public event, Karunanidhi claimed that he would not have lived to see the scheduled unveiling of the statue cancelled.

MGR, who played a key role in the electoral victories of the DMK in 1967 and 1971, parted company with Karunanidhi in 1972. As we noted, he launched the splinter party, initially called the Anna DMK (ADMK) named after Annadurai, referred to mostly as Anna in Tamil. Significantly, during the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi, he renamed his party the All India Anna DMK (AIADMK). He was awarded the highest civilian honour of the Indian state, the Bharat Ratna, posthumously in 1988. In these ways, MGR was absorbed by the Indian state while Sivaji is memorialised by the DMK. The virtual is rewired to the real.

## Conclusion

Let me return to the question of 'devotion' and the 'rhetor–multitude' that we began with from Bate. By now it is clear that devotion is in the interior domain of the self, on the subjectification axis. The rhetor–multitude, by contrast, operates on the axis of signifiante, that of the collective sovereignty. In combining both in their speech, Kavitha and other orators simultaneously recover their singular humanist particulate and a transcendental claim of sovereignty. Bate is right in calling this devotion love. It is in a loving devotion and allegiance to something, for example, a leader, a language or a people, that the enunciatory voice of the rhetor–multitude can find the source of authentication.

The proposition becomes clearer if devotion is not seen as abjection or subjection but instead if we see how, through the act of devotion, the self finds its own free operational space. The narcissistic self can only enunciate itself as the subject of statements, the vacuous, self-referential 'I' that Deleuze and Guattari's (1998) *A Thousand Plateaus* meticulously unpacks. The devout self, on the other hand, can always recover sovereignty from the clutches of collectivity to enable a singularity and thus find a line of flight beyond signifiante. In other words, to find someone/something worthy of devotion is not the forfeiture of the freedom of self. Rather, it is here that the first inklings of freedom may begin as singularly human. The secret of holding the personhood or self as the true site of sovereignty is where political freedom also may begin to make sense, as Gandhi, Periyar and the neo-Buddhist Ambedkar would readily agree. I conclude with a line from Nietzsche:

The invention of gods, heroes, and overmen of all kinds, as well as near-men and undermen, dwarfs, fairies, centaurs, satyrs, demons, and devils was the inestimable preliminary exercise for the jurisdiction of the egoism and sovereignty of the individual: the freedom that one conceded to a god in his relation to other gods—one eventually also granted to oneself in relation to laws, customs, and neighbors. (Nietzsche 2001: 128)

Viewed thus, Kavitha's love and life should make enormous sense.



## THE MANY SHAKESPEARES OF RAO BAHADUR PAMMAL SAMBANDA MUDALIYAR

### Shakespeare in Colonial South India and the History of Modern Tamil Drama

*Sascha Ebeling\**

To the memory of  
Venkat Swaminathan (1933–2015),  
writer, inspiring critic  
and translator of Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar

#### Introduction

The case of Rao Bahadur Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar (1873–1964; Figure 15.1) is an extraordinary one for the cultural historian to study, not only because he was an extraordinary individual in his many capacities (as a playwright, actor, director, producer, lawyer, judge, public intellectual, pioneer of early Tamil film, etc.), but also since he produced an extraordinary amount of reflections on his life and activities, a set of writings which stands today as a monument to Tamil culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, next to the autobiographical writings of other great Tamil intellectuals such as U. Vē. Cāminātaiyar (1855–1942).

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Figure 15.1: The young Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar (c. 1890s).

Source: Author's collection.

This chapter examines Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar's contribution to the history of Tamil drama. We will enter his work from the perspective of his translations or adaptations of Shakespeare plays, which, as we shall see, were central to his development as a playwright, actor and performance theorist. I address a series of questions: Why did he become interested in Tamil

drama in the first place? Why did he translate or adapt Shakespeare plays as opposed to other Western plays? And the related question of Shakespeare as a cultural signifier in colonial India: What did Shakespeare mean to Tamil audiences at the time? I then look at the texts of his Shakespeare adaptations and his views on translation and adaptation. In summing up, I address the question of what his engagement with Shakespeare meant for him personally, and finally, what precisely constituted his contribution to the history of Tamil drama.<sup>1</sup>

### From ‘Chronic Indigestion’ to the Tamil Stage: How Sambanda Mudaliyar Discovered His Love for the Theatre

In 1891, eighteen-year-old Sambanda Mudaliyar (henceforth, Sambandam) founded an amateur theatre group in Madras named Suguna Vilasa Sabha (or ‘Society for Wholesome Stage Plays’) with the declared aims of ‘(1) The study and cultivation of the Histrionic art. (2) The raising of the standard of the present Indian Stage. (3) The improvement of Vernacular Dramatic Literature. (4) The helping of charitable institutions’ (*The Suguna Vilasa Sabha Illustrated Souvenir* 1928: n.p.). The group hoped to achieve these aims ‘by following among other means (a) the representation of dramas on the stage, (b) the formation of a library of dramatic works, [and] (c) affording encouragement for the production of original dramatic works in the vernacular’ (ibid.: 3). In the same year, Sambandam also wrote his first play titled *Puṣpavalli*. What led up to this?

The story of Sambandam and Tamil drama is also the story of Sambandam and Shakespeare. It begins in the late 1870s and early 1880s, when Sambandam was still a young boy. He was born on 1 February 1873 as Thirugnanasambandar, the fourth son of Vijayaranga Mudaliyar (1 March 1830–26 May 1895) and his second wife Manickavelu Ammal (d. 10 September 1891), in Pammal, today a suburb in the southwest of Chennai.<sup>2</sup> Sambandam’s father Vijayaranga Mudaliyar worked initially as a

<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth discussion of Sambanda Mudaliyar’s original play *Tācippen* (The Dancing Girl), see Soneji (2021); for further details on his autobiographical writing, Venkatachalapathy (2018b). Together with Soneji and Venkatachalapathy, I am currently preparing a monograph-length study on Sambanda Mudaliyar.

<sup>2</sup> The biographical sketch given in this and the following paragraph is based on Sambanda Mudaliyar’s memoirs (1932).

Tamil teacher at the University of Madras, then as the deputy inspector of schools in Madurai district, and finally as assistant inspector of schools in Madras. Vijayaranga Mudaliyar was a highly respected member of society and dignitary who held various public positions in the School Books and Vernacular Literature Society and in the Senate of Madras University, and he also served on the Board of Examiners for Tamil at Madras University for many years. In 1872 he obtained Siva *dikṣa* from the Thirugnanasambandar monastery (*maṭam*) in Madurai. Since Sambandam was born shortly after that, he was named Thirugnanasambandar.

Sambandam was first educated in the traditional *tinṇaiippalli*. In 1880, he was sent to the Hindu Proprietary School on Broadway. In 1882, he was sent to Govinda Naidu Primary School, a branch school of Pachaiyappa College. He later became a student at Pachaiyappa College, and then Presidency College. After graduating with a B.A. degree in 1893, Sambandam decided to become a lawyer and thus began to study law. In 1897, he obtained his B.L. degree and became an apprentice at the office of the solicitor James Short in Madras. In July of 1898, he began to work as a *vakeel* (lawyer) at the Madras High Court. After twenty-five years in the legal profession, Sambandam was promoted to the position of judge at the Small Case Court at age fifty-one, but at that time he was only four years away from his retirement, which he took at the customary age of fifty-five at the end of January 1928. His retirement gave him more time, over three decades, to focus on theatre, writing and philanthropic work, and to also become involved in the burgeoning film industry in Madras. In 1959, he was awarded the Padma Bhushan, India's highest civilian award, for his cultural activities. He died at the age of ninety-one on 24 September 1964.

The main source for reconstructing the history of Sambandam's lifelong interest in drama, both Tamil and English, is his extensive memoir *Nāṭaka mēṭai niṇaiivukaḷ* (literally, 'Recollections from the Theatre Stage', with the English title 'Over 40 Years before the Footlights') which was first serialised from 1 July 1930 onwards in the weekly edition of the newspaper *Swadesamitran* and then published in book form in 1932 (Sambanda Mudaliyar 1932; repr. Sambanda Mudaliyar 1998). We learn from his memoir that for the young boy, as for many others of his generation, English and Tamil theatre belonged to quite different socio-cultural worlds. While Sambandam enjoyed watching English plays staged by college students in Madras, he resented traditional Tamil theatre. Sambandam's exposure to English plays began when his father took him to the Old College in Nungambakkam where Europeans staged

English plays—a special treat the young boy enjoyed immensely. Sambandam also recalls the thrills of exploring his father’s library of English books. Since his father had worked as a Tamil teacher and as an inspector of schools (a job which included publishing textbooks in Tamil), he had accumulated a library of about 2,000 volumes in both Tamil and English. Other publishers also regularly sent him their books. Thus, Sambandam first began reading Shakespeare already as a young boy: ‘True,’ he recalls, ‘there were many words and phrases whose meaning I could not understand, but I was able to grasp the broad story-line’ (Sambanda Mudaliyar 1996: 28).<sup>3</sup> In his memoir, he vividly recalls the great impact his first encounter with *Macbeth* made on him:

I was reading the prose renderings of the plays of Shakespeare by Charles Lamb. It was the tragedy of *Macbeth*, and when I first read the part in which Duncan is assassinated, I was in my father’s study on the first floor of the house, all alone at my father’s table. Leaving the book open I ran to my mother in fright, my heart pounding with heavy beats. (ibid.)

Another way in which English literature became significant was the encouragement Sambandam and his fellow students received at school. It was customary in the colonial education system not only to have students write interpretive essays on English literary works, but also to hold competitions in poetry recitation at the school’s anniversary celebrations. The boys who performed well were given medals and money as prizes. Finally, Sambandam recalls watching Shakespeare plays staged in English by college students when he was a teenager.

In contrast to this early fascination with English theatre, his appreciation for Tamil drama was something that developed gradually over several years, and, in fact, against considerable odds. Sambandam explains that while there was a theatre shed near the house he grew up in, where traditional Tamil *kūttu* performers put on their shows, he would never have dreamed of going to see any of their performances. On seeing the performers (*kūttāṭṭikāḷ*), he claims that ‘[t]heir costumes, make-up, and the way they conducted themselves

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<sup>3</sup> Translations are mine unless stated otherwise. When possible, I have also drawn on the very fine excerpts that the late Venkat Swaminathan translated from Sambandam’s memoir *Nāṭaka mēṭai niṇaivukaḷ* (Sambanda Mudaliyar 1996, 1997). When I have modified Swaminathan’s translations to be closer to the original text, this has been noted.

had all instilled in me only a sense of aversion' (Sambanda Mudaliyar 1996: 25). One of his cousins who loved watching Tamil plays always wanted Sambandam to come along, but he was unable to overcome his 'aversion'. At the root of this aversion was, of course, a common bias at the time according to which the higher castes and educated classes stigmatised traditional Tamil drama and its performers as crude and unsavoury (Seizer 2005).

On the other hand, the young Sambandam did develop a taste for Tamil myths and legends, the stories on which stage plays were normally based. As he recounts, his appreciation for Tamil drama began with puranic stories, and also with a sensitive digestive tract:

I firmly believe that the prime cause that set off the whole chain of events leading finally to my emergence as a Tamil playwright was the fact that in my childhood I was suffering from chronic indigestion. ... Till I was nine years or so of age, I was not able to digest what I ate and I always vomited after dinner. To make me forget the feeling of nausea and thus prevent my tendency to vomit, my mother used to tell me stories while feeding me at night. (Sambanda Mudaliyar 1996: 25, translation modified)

Those stories were episodes from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Skandapurāṇa*, the *Periya Purāṇam* and the *Tiruvilaiyātarapurāṇam*. The event that finally turned it all around was the visit to Madras of Maharajarajashri Dharmavaram Ramakrishnamacharyulu (1853–1912), a lawyer from Bellary who was also a playwright who had founded a drama group in 1886. In June 1891, Ramakrishnamacharyulu brought his drama group named Sarasa Vinodhini Sabha ('Society for Pleasant Entertainment') to Madras to stage four or five Telugu plays in Victoria Public Hall. One of Sambandam's elder brothers had gone to see one of the plays and returned home full of praise. Consequently, Sambandam's interest was piqued. The next day, one of his father's friends brought Ramakrishnamacharyulu to their house, and Sambandam recalls how the playwright was wearing a young man's brocaded turban, a fashion choice for which he was getting too old. The playwright invited Sambandam's father and his sons to his performance that night, and they decided to go. That performance became a deeply transformative event for the young Sambandam:

From the time we entered the hall, for a duration of nearly five hours till the first play was over, I did not take my eyes off the stage. ... Did

I not say earlier that I was contemptuous of all the street performers of the day who went round in their gaudy, unseemly make-up? That night, the costumes worn by the all the actors were beautiful; there was nothing unseemly about them. The female costumes were so fetching that I mistook the actors for real women. ... When we returned home and I stretched out on my bed, I lay awake till the early hours of dawn. In my mind I again and again went over what I had seen on that stage—all the characters and the way they had performed—with wonder and excitement. That night an intense desire was born in me that, like them, I would also act in a theatre company. That very night, I firmly resolved within myself that following the footsteps of the famous father figure of Telugu theatre, Krishnamachariar, just as he founded a theatre company to stage Telugu plays, I would also establish a theatre company to stage Tamil plays and I would act in them. (Sambanda Mudaliyar 1996: 29–30, translation modified)

That fateful night, Sambandam realised that it was possible for members of the higher castes and the educated elite to act in plays for the love of theatre and that plays in the vernacular did not necessarily have to clash with his notions of what theatre should be—notions that had so far been nourished by watching Shakespeare plays. Thus, Tamil theatre, or rather a new type of Tamil theatre that would be performed by amateur actors and modelled



A Group of Actors of the S. V. Sabha in 1895.

Figure 15.2: Actors of the Suguna Vilasa Sabha, 1895 (*The Suguna Vilasa Sabha Illustrated Souvenir* 1928: n.p.).

on Western drama, became Sambandam's lifelong passion. Together with a group of friends and fellow drama enthusiasts, he founded the Suguna Vilasa Sabha on 1 July 1891 (Figure 15.2).

Dissatisfied with the existing dramatic literature in Tamil,<sup>4</sup> he also wrote his first play *Puṣpavalli* that same year, which was loosely modelled on a play he had seen performed at the Madras Chengankadai grounds by a professional company, Govindaswami Rao's Manamohana Nataka Sabha. Implementing his particular ideas about what precisely Tamil theatre should be was not always easy and often met with resistance on the part of the actors and others involved. Sambandam recalls, for instance, how he was unable to stop a group of actors from using the traditional cymbals to accompany their performance, a custom that annoyed Sambandam because he found the loud clinking sounds unpleasant and also thought that the noise made it difficult to understand the actors properly. Since the actors insisted on using the cymbals, one day he simply stole them and hid them in his house to make his point.

In the fifteen plays Sambandam wrote during the first decade of the Suguna Vilasa Sabha's existence, between 1891 and 1901, the influence of his knowledge of Shakespeare is visible in many different ways, such as the construction of the plots, the borrowing of individual scenes (such as the famous balcony scene of *Romeo and Juliet* used in *Puṣpavalli*) and the construction of individual characters, such as the good fairy Kinnaran in *Narkula Teyvam* (The Good Fairy, 1899) who is reminiscent of Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It was only after this period, however, that Sambandam seriously considered the possibility of actually translating a Shakespeare play into Tamil. By that time, there already existed a tradition of three decades of presenting Shakespeare in Tamil versions.

### The Wider Context of Early Tamil Shakespeare Translations (c. 1870–1920) and Shakespeare as a Cultural Signifier in Colonial India

As with other Indian languages, translations and adaptations of Shakespeare plays were the first modern literary translations in Tamil. What one might call the 'newly emerging field of Shakespeare translation' for the first time applied in Tamil different approaches to translation and set adaptations, and

<sup>4</sup> He mentions by name T.T. Appavu Pillai's play *Periya intirā capā* (see Soneji [2017b]), Kasiviswanatha Mudaliyar's *Ṭampācāri vilācam* (see Ebeling [forthcoming]) and *Ariccantira vilācam*.

prose retellings against translations proper, in the sense of faithful renderings of the English text. It also produced a fair amount of theoretical reflection on translation in the prefaces and introductions written by translators. Between 1870 and 1900, we see in Tamil the entire range of possibilities of translation, from simple prose summaries of a play to recreations or adaptations to versions that attempt to render the English text with philological precision and with footnotes containing cultural explanations. Many of these versions, and in particular the prose retellings, were meant as reading material for schools and colleges; only a few were meant for actual performances on stage. Theatre scholar Poonam Trivedi has counted no fewer than ninety-one Tamil versions of Shakespeare's plays published between 1870 and 1920, while she records only nineteen during the period from 1921 to 1945 (Trivedi and Bartholomeusz 2005: 16).<sup>5</sup> Some of those early versions were abbreviated prose retellings of the plays, often modelled on the English book *Tales from Shakespeare* published in 1807 by Charles and Mary Lamb, originally meant as a children's book but remaining close to Shakespeare's original language. Typical examples of these prose versions are Pandit S.M. Natesa Sastri's *Vayōlā carittiram* ('The History of Viola'), a short prose version of *Twelfth Night* published in Coimbatore in 1892; his *Tannuyiraiṅ pōla manṅuyirai ninai*, a fifteen-page summary of *Measure for Measure* which was first published in the magazine *Janavinōtini* in 1893 and later also separately sold as a book; *Ṣēkspiyaṅ nāṭakaṅkaḷ. 1. Oṭellō or Shakespeare for Tamil Homes, No. I, Othello* published in 1902 by A. Madhaviah (1872–1925), otherwise famous as an early Tamil novelist, who in 1918 also published a full adaptation of *Othello* as *Utālayaṅ eṅkīra korṅkaic ciṅkaḷavaṅ*; and *Ṣēkspiyaṅ nāṭakakkataikaḷ mūṅru* (Three stories from Shakespeare Plays: Merchant of Venice, Hamlet, King Lear) published in 1914 (and in a second edition in 1920) by K. Venkatarama Aiyar from Kumbakonam.

At the other end of the spectrum of 'faithfulness' to the original texts, we find Tamil translations preserving the formal features of a stage play and translating all or most of the original text. The first such full-scale translation of a Shakespeare play into Tamil was V. Viswanatha Pillai's translation of *The Merchant of Venice* published in 1870 as *Vēṅṅis varṭṭakaṅ*. This was

<sup>5</sup> Since no reliable comprehensive bibliography of Tamil Shakespeare translations exists, and several texts are certainly still awaiting their rediscovery in the archives, the precise numbers should be treated with caution. The overall tendency, however, of a smaller number of translations during the later period seems likely.

followed by another translation of the *Merchant* as *Veniṣ viyāpāri* published in 1874 by Venugopalachariar. Among these versions, S. Narayanaswamy Ayyar's translation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—rendered with a literal neologism as *Naṭuvēnirkaṇavu* (paralleling terms such as *ilavēnil*)—stands out as the most scholarly or, one might say, philologically aware. Narayanaswamy Ayyar's translation presents a close prose version of the original text, including the division into acts and scenes and stage directions. It also includes an explanatory introduction and numerous footnotes throughout the text explaining cultural matters unfamiliar to a Tamil reader. At the same time, the translation is not a full version as it simplifies or omits several passages that contain expressions that would have required more detailed explanations. For instance, the last three lines of Theseus' opening address to Hippolyta—'she lingers my desires, / Like to a step-dame or a dowager / Long withering out a young man's revenue'—are rendered in Tamil without the simile as *atanāl namatu ācai niraivērunālum tānki tānki mella varukinratu*, lit. 'Thus, the day when my desire will be fulfilled arrives slowly, merely limping along' (Ṣekspiyaṟ 1894: 1). Moreover, certain scenes are abridged, perhaps because they were not considered central to the plot.

Besides such omissions, however, the Tamil version remains close to the original text of the play. In his English preface, Narayanaswamy Ayyar explains that the idea to attempt to translate the entirety of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was born when in 1892 the principal of Kumbakonam College J.H. Stone asked him, as one of the college's Tamil pandits, to prepare a short prose summary of the play in Tamil that might be read out to the audience before Stone's students performed the play in English. The encouragement Narayanaswamy Ayyar received led him 'to attempt a regular translation of the play, in a style, as I would fain hope it is, removed from learned pedantry on the one hand, and ignorant vulgarity on the other. In the humble language of Quince, my intent has been to give my countrymen some *delight*' (ibid.: i). And indeed, insofar as we can judge nineteenth-century Tamil prose style, Narayanaswamy Ayyar's language is clear and flows quite naturally, yielding a translation that can be read with ease and pleasure and that could also be performed, although we have no record of it ever being used for a performance. Since Narayanaswamy Ayyar thanks none other than the famous Tamil scholar U. Vē. Cāminātaiyaṟ, who was then his colleague as a Tamil pandit at Kumbakonam College, for his 'valuable suggestions in the course of my translation' (ibid.), one imagines the conversations the two learned scholars might have had about translation, philological

precision and the explanation of cultural details. *Naṭuvēṇirkāṇavu* was first published in instalments in the Madras Tamil monthly *Vivēkacintāmaṇi* in 1892 and 1893, where it appeared together with instalments of one of the earliest Tamil novels, B.R. Rajam Iyer's *Āpattukkiṭamāna apavātam allatu Kamalāmpāl carittiram* ('The Fatal Rumour or The History of Kamalambal'), and advertisements for U. Vē. Cāminātaiyar's editions of classical Tamil texts. It was then published in book form in 1893 and in a second edition in 1894 which also became the prescribed text for the 1895 F.A. (Fellow of Arts) degree exams. Clearly, entertainment was thus combined with the usefulness of a didactic text that could serve in the education system.

A third category of Shakespeare versions during this early period consists of texts such as T.R. Sarasalochana Chettiar's 1897 play *Caracāṅki*, an adaptation of *Cymbeline*. In his introduction to the play, Sarasalochana Chettiar's friend Dandayudapani Iyer characterises the work thus:

Sarasangi, now presented to the public, is a humble contribution to the Tamil dramatic literature, which is now in the process of formation. It differs from the existing ones in its language, in that it is not original, in the sense that its plot is borrowed. It is in fact Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* that has passed through the alembic of oriental imagination. Sarasangi is original in many other respects and shows what world of poetic ideas the young author has at his command. (Caracalōcana Ceṭṭi 1955[1897]: xv)

Here we note the concern to foster modern Tamil drama, an agenda that was also among the goals of the earliest translators. As Venugopalachariar remarks in his translation of *The Merchant of Venice*, he wanted 'to help the Hindu Pandit in seeing a great difference between the verisimilitude of the English drama as represented by Shakespeare and the unreality of the Hindu drama as a whole' (quoted in Chellappan 1999: 150). Venugopalachariar's view of the 'unreality of the Hindu drama as a whole', expressed in 1874, very much reflects the upper-class ideology that stigmatised traditional Tamil drama into which Sambandam was born. Like Venugopalachariar, about a decade and a half later Sambandam also considered Shakespeare's plays important models for the reform of Tamil drama.

The reform of Tamil drama was, of course, part and parcel of the wider transformation of India's vernacular languages and literatures, a project that united British colonial officials, Western missionaries and Western-educated Indian intellectuals in their opinion. According to this view, India's linguistic and literary traditions were found to be bound to both difficult poetic form

and fanciful mythological content and thus ill-equipped for the expression in prose of 'modern' Western ideas and a quickly changing life.<sup>6</sup> What this meant for the case of translating Shakespeare was expressed by S.V. Srinivasa Aiyar B.A. in his 1908 translation of *Romeo and Juliet* as *Ramyānum jolitaiyum* thus:

Of late there has been a natural tendency on the part of educated Indians to express in their mother-tongue, many of the beautiful ideas they find in the English language. This attempt is no doubt beset with almost insuperable difficulties. First and foremost comes the inefficiency of the South Indian Vernaculars to serve as a vehicle for Western Ideas. The Tamil language though a living one does not exhibit any signs of life or growth and one is almost tempted to think that the rigor mortis has set in... To render into this language the spirit of a Shakespearean play is not an easy task. For instance, the pre-matrimonial love and courtship, the bride's freedom of choice, the free intercourse of men and women in public feasts and dances, the greeting of women by men with kisses in public, the liberty of the fair sex and the equality of the sexes are strange and perhaps in some cases repulsive to the modern Hindu mind. (Şekspiyar 1908b: ii)

In other words, in addition to the challenge of working with the 'inefficient' medium of a vernacular language, there was also the challenge of new ideas that might be considered 'repulsive to the modern Hindu mind'. Any translation or adaptation of Shakespeare's works into Tamil was thus *eo ipso* tied to the larger debates about social transformation of the time, both with regard to language and literature and with regard to what one might call new modes of being-in-the-world as a 'modern' Indian person.

While some might have found ideas in Shakespeare's plays 'repulsive', others were fascinated by the windows on social and cultural difference these texts offered. In fact, this fascination was one of the reasons for the popularity of Shakespeare's plays and the importance of Shakespeare as a cultural signifier in colonial India.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, Shakespeare formed an integral part of the canon of texts used in the colonial education system. Everyone educated in that system was thus deeply familiar with Shakespeare,

<sup>6</sup> For the debates around linguistic and literary reform and the larger context of nineteenth-century Tamil literature, see Ebeling (2010).

<sup>7</sup> Useful overviews are given in Trivedi and Bartholomeusz (2005) and Thakur (2020).

and, in many ways, the ability to not be alienated or disgusted by his works but to truly appreciate them was considered 'the crowning reward of the discipline of learning the English language' (Muliylil 1964: 5). There was, however, also a deeper sense in which the hitherto unknown cultural worlds represented in Shakespeare's plays stimulated Indian readers. G. Muliylil has aptly summarised this epistemic encounter:

The conditions under which Shakespeare wrote are in many ways similar to the historical moment of our encounter with the west. When the British took over the administration our culture was as fossilised, as decadent as that of the Middle Ages. For us the impact of the west was as exhilarating as the Renaissance in Europe—indeed it was a rebirth of learning. We too stood between two worlds, one dying and the other waiting to be born. We too could feel with Donne, that a new philosophy called all in doubt. Our old world was spent, everything was in pieces, all coherence gone. Shakespeare in a sense educated us for this new world. The immobile units of our social system were stirred by new winds of thought. ... The idea of individual responsibility, the impulse to rebel against destiny would prepare us for the new world of industrial and scientific changes. ... The study of characters like Hamlet, Othello and Lear and Macbeth, products of the free society, prepared us for the battles ahead of us. ... We faced the potentialities of human nature, the reality of personal suffering, the terrors of loneliness for the individual, the sense of mystery within areas of life that are inexplicable. (ibid.: 7–8)

This hermeneutic of civilisational comparison, according to which Shakespeare was taken as a signifier of Western culture and token of Western progress, was explicitly taught to students of the colonial education system. At the time, no one made this point more clearly and emphatically than Rev. William Miller (1838–1923), the principal and founder of Madras Christian College, who taught Shakespeare's plays over several decades and eventually collected his thoughts in a series of published lectures indicatively titled *Shakespeare's King Lear and Indian Politics* or *Hamlet and the Waste of Life*. In his lecture on *King Lear*, Miller explains his conviction that a serious study of Shakespeare's plays is essential for the progress of Indian moral character and the progress of India as a country:

I hope that the little volume ... will be welcome ... to all who take an intelligent interest in the healthy progress of the Indian community. It

may be of considerable value as a help to those who feel their need of help in dealing with some problems upon the right solution of which the well-being of this country in coming years will to a large extent depend. ... I claim no credit but that of making an honest attempt to show how [Shakespeare's] great thoughts may serve the permanent needs of men and the present needs of India. (Miller 1900: i–ii)

To illustrate Miller's interpretive approach, we may quote the lesson on social and cultural reform he draws from *King Lear*. The play should impress upon his young Indian readers, Miller explains, the idea that cultural change and social reform require their own time to unfold and that they must not be forced to happen too quickly:

Those who see, as Lear saw in his kingdom, that the time has come when India must be ruled on principles different from the principles that have been supreme till now—those who rightly see that India needs to be transformed into an organism far more self-directed, and affording far more scope for individual energy, are not to suppose that no condition of society is healthy or satisfactory except the most fully developed that is exemplified anywhere in the world. It is slowly, it is only when generations have gone by, that the transformation effected by Albany and Edgar brings round the age of Cymbeline. ... Those who desire that, in matters of government, India should be even as Britain, are not to be disappointed when it grows clear to them that there can be a full consummation of their hopes only in a distant future. Every step on the way to that consummation, if only it fits the time, will be beautiful and healthy. (ibid.: 103ff.)

Miller finally argues that 'the first broad and fundamental principle that is disclosed by applying the thoughts of Shakespeare in "King Lear" to the political and social condition of this great land' is that India's 'progress' can only be made when society at large develops a sense of dedication to the common good. He sums up his exegesis of *King Lear*:

the transition from the first stage of civilized society to that which ought to develop out of it, can be safely made only when that public spirit, that postponement of self to the common good, that devotion to the great ends that society subserves which Shakespeare sets forth as "love", has place and power in the every-day machinery of the community. (ibid.: 109)

Miller's other lectures then went on to explore how Shakespeare's plays could help his Indian students develop a new social-minded character or a new individuality based on a shared social vision.

Against this context of didactic and social-reformatory readings of Shakespeare in which it had become impossible to separate the bard's plays from colonial social reform, it is not surprising that the Suguna Vilasa Sabha established as one of its goals the help of charitable institutions. This objective was pursued chiefly through extensive financial support which included over the years the 'Indian Famine Relief Fund', the 'Plague Relief Fund', the 'Colombo Anti-Tuberculosis Fund', the 'Chennapuri Annadhana Samajam' (a society for distributing food to the poor) and the 'Depressed Classes Mission Society'. It also included paying for a portrait of Queen Victoria to be hung in Victoria Public Hall in Madras, the Suguna Vilasa Sabha's major performance venue.

### 'Resuscitating' the 'Indian Stage': Sambanda Mudaliyar's Shakespeares

During his career, Sambandam produced five full versions of Shakespeare plays that were published in book form—*Virumpiya vitamē* (As You Like It, 1902), *Vāṇīpura vaṇikaṇ* (The Merchant of Venice, 1903), *Amalātityaṇ* (Hamlet, 1908), *Makapati* (Macbeth, 1910) and *Cimhalanātaṇ* (Cymbeline, 1914)—and also adapted the Falstaff parts of *King Henry IV Part I* as *Kōṇēri aracakumaraṇ* (Prince Koneri, 1913). Unlike the prose versions discussed above that were meant for reading and as teaching materials, Sambandam's adaptations were written for performance on stage by his own drama group. They were also driven by a kind of philological awareness about the difficulties of translation and a desire to produce the most sophisticated Tamil versions of Shakespeare. In what follows, I turn again to his memoir *Nāṭaka mēṭai niṇaiivukaḷ* to reconstruct the history of Sambandam as a translator of Shakespeare. Sambandam's professional engagement with Shakespeare's plays began in 1901, when one day his friend and fellow Suguna Vilasa Sabha member A. Vaman Pai taunted him saying that he could play any role, but not Hamlet. Sambandam, who had by then already spent a decade as an actor in the Sabha, was both hurt in his pride and intrigued by the challenge. He went home and began to read *Hamlet*, and he realised the difficulties of the play. He was convinced that the role of Hamlet was particularly difficult because it 'abounds in possibilities for an actor to show all of his acting skills' (Sambanda Mudaliyar 1998: 298). To illustrate this point, Sambandam draws on traditional Indian aesthetic theory of *rasa*:

Any play would afford a main character opportunities to display one or two *rasas* as essential expressions of that role. Some plays may give scope for *hasya-rasa* [the comic], some for the *rasa* of *karuna* [the tragic], while some others may have scope for *shringara-rasa* [the erotic]. ... But it is only this one role [of Hamlet] that affords the opportunity to demonstrate all the various *rasas*. Put succinctly, anyone who plays this role to satisfaction can take on any role. (Sambanda Mudaliyar 1997: 27, translation modified)

Since he regarded the role of Hamlet as an actor's touchstone, and given Vaman Pai's challenge to him, he began to translate the play, giving it the Tamil title *Amalātityan*, a title that sounded somewhat like the original. He was, however, immediately dissatisfied with what he was able to do. His dissatisfaction was based on his scepticism towards the viability of translation in the first place:

Translating anything from one language into another is not a simple matter. In addition, there is not the slightest connection between English and the Dravidian languages. Furthermore, every language has its own style and idiom. It is difficult to turn that style and idiom into those of another language. When even translating an ordinary English passage into Tamil is so difficult, I am convinced that it is entirely impossible to translate the plays of Shakespeare who is world famous as a *makānāṭṭakakkavi* [great dramatic poet/playwright].<sup>8</sup> (Sambanda Mudaliyar 1998: 257)

As he continued to agonise over his translation, his friend and fellow Sabha actor C. Rangavadivelu suggested that he might hone his skills by beginning with a simpler Shakespeare play. Sambandam thus turned to the comedy *As You Like It*. 'Even though this was a simpler play than *Hamlet*,' he observes, 'it took me about five months to complete the version' (*ibid.*: 259). Since the Sabha did not want to perform the entire play, he initially only translated a few scenes. The remainder was finished a few years later for the publication of the play in book form. In his translation, he left out the character Hymen because he thought it was an interpolation, and he also 'omitted to translate a few lines which would be considered obscene according to present-day

<sup>8</sup> Throughout his book, Sambandam refers to Shakespeare respectfully as *makānāṭṭakakkavi* or as *makākavi*, 'great poet', an epithet often used for Kalidasa.

thoughts and ideas, not during Shakespeare's time' (Şekspiyar 1912: 2). When the text was printed, he decided not to call it a 'translation' (*molipeyarppu*) but rather a Tamil 'version' or 'adaptation' (*tamiḷ amaippu*). He did so for two reasons: 'First of all, I am convinced that it is an impossible thing to adequately translate the plays of Shakespeare Makānāṭṭakakkavi into any other language. Secondly, I have changed the names of characters, rivers and cities into Tamil names' (Sambanda Mudaliyar 1998: 259). He decided to change the names because he feared his audience would laugh at the sound of unfamiliar names. Instead, he used Indian names with a similar sound, and sometimes with a similar meaning. Thus, Amiens and Jaques became Hemanathan and Jeganathan, Le Beau became Lavanyan, William became Villiyan, Rosalind was Rajivachi and Celia was renamed Suseelai. Since Indian names at the time were clearly legible as markers of caste, renaming entailed a transposition of Shakespeare's characters into the Tamil social milieu. When Sambandam renders Sir Oliver Mar-Text as Marthanda Iyer, with Iyer indicating a Saiva Brahmin, and the shepherds Corin and Silvius as Nanda Konan and Selva Konan, with Konan as an Idaiyar or 'shepherd' caste suffix, we can see that he carried out this transposition very consciously.

*Virumpiya vitamē* was first performed in Victoria Public Hall on 8 March 1902 and was attended by a large audience. In 1904 it was also performed open air in the garden of the Mylapore Club. This success led Sambandam to take up another Shakespeare play, while still struggling with *Hamlet*. During the second half of 1903 he rendered *The Merchant of Venice* as *Vāṇīpura vaṇikan*, which premiered in Victoria Public Hall on 3 October 1903. In 1905, the Suguna Vilasa Sabha celebrated Shakespeare's birthday for the first time, an event that became a tradition to be continued during the following years. The Sabha rented Victoria Public Hall for an entire week and performed *The Merchant of Venice* in Sambandam's Tamil version, *Othello* in English, and *All's Well that Ends Well* in a Telugu translation.

The year 1905 was also to become the remarkable year in which Sambandam finally finished his version of *Hamlet* and began to rehearse it with the Sabha. Once he had finished a full draft, he took the play to his old friend V.V. Srinivasa Iyengar whom he had admired, even envied, since their school days for his superior knowledge of Tamil. Over a period of six months, Sambandam would read out the play to his friend and note the corrections he suggested. He first read a line or sentence from the original and then his Tamil translation. Whenever he was not satisfied, Srinivasa Iyengar would interrupt his friend: 'Hey you scoundrel (*jeṣṭai*)! What on earth is this? This is not right.



Rao Bahadur P. Sambandam,  
as Amaladitya (Hamlet.)

Figure 15.3: Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar as Hamlet (*The Suguna Vilasa Sabha Illustrated Souvenir* 1928: n.p.).

Read it again!’ (Sambanda Mudaliyar 1998: 300). In this way, they would sometimes cover a page or two, but in the case of difficult passages only a line or sentence per day. After finishing the revisions, in July of 1905, Sambandam demanded that the Sabha concentrate exclusively on rehearsing *Amalātityaṅ*. While he thus conducted the rehearsals over the following six months, often exhausting his actors with his demand for perfection, he studied all the critical literature on *Hamlet* he could find to prepare himself for his performance of the role of Hamlet: ‘I read almost all the books that were available on *Hamlet* in the libraries of Madras. In particular, I studied whatever critical works were available on the character of Hamlet. Moreover, I read what famous actors had written about how they played this role and took notes in a notebook’ (ibid.: 308–9). While he thus studied what actors like Edmund Kean (1787–1833), John Philip Kemble (1757–1823), Sir Henry Irving (1838–1905), Richard Burbage (1567–1619), Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree (1852–1917), Edwin Booth (1833–1893), Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson (1853–1937) and Sir Francis Robert Benson (1858–1939) had to say about playing Hamlet, for his own performance he also had to figure out the question—hotly debated in Shakespeare scholarship—of whether Hamlet really turns mad or only acts as if he had turned mad. In his memoir, Sambandam explains why he decided on the latter and performed the role accordingly (ibid.: 309–10) (Figure 15.3).

The premiere of *Amalātityaṅ* finally took place in Victoria Public Hall on 27 February 1906. Sambandam was nervous that evening as he had never been before:

My first fear was what the audience might think about my translation into Tamil of what was the best of all of Shakespeare Mahanatakakavi’s plays. Secondly, if even the actors who were most famous for playing the role of Hamlet had not been able to fully satisfy those with critical insight, how was I going to satisfy the learned men in the audience? The third fear was whether the actors ... were going to play well or not. ... Even when I had taken my B.A. and B.L. degree exams I had not been that worried. (Sambanda Mudaliyar 1998: 317)

Overall, the performance went as well as it could have. Scene after scene received resounding applause from the overflowing auditorium, including the famous nunnery scene when *Amalātityaṅ* meets Apalai (Ophelia) for the first time, delivering his famous monologue ‘To be or not to be..’, rendered by Sambandam ingeniously in Tamil as: *iruppatō irappatō*.... Apalai was played by

C. Rangavadelu, whose performance 'won the hearts of the spectators' (ibid.: 322), especially when Apalai appeared as a madwoman, dressed all in white and singing crazily to herself, a scene that made dignitary Sir Subramania Aiyar sitting in the first row exclaim 'Splendid! Magnificent!' as he wiped his tears. When Apalai's dead body was lowered into the grave, all the ladies in the audience wept. For his part, Sambandam felt that he botched the burial-ground scene, because he was too giddy from all the applause before. But he realised what was going on and concluded his performance with composure. None of that seems to have mattered much to the excited audience. After such a great success, his friend Vaman Pai had to admit that he had lost his bet, saying in English: 'Sambandam, hats off to you! I salute you! You won, I lost!' (Sambanda Mudaliyar 1997: 39).

When in 1908 Sambandam published his *Amalātityaṅ* in book form, he was still apologetic about his endeavour. In his English preface, he writes:

I owe an apology to the public for venturing to consider Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' capable of adaptation and by me and into Tamil. In making the attempt I had only two objects mainly in view. The first was, that I may help to render accessible in however crude a form the treasures and beauties of Shakespeare to my sisters and brothers of the Tamil land who do not possess the knowledge of English to study and appreciate the original. In the second place, as one who has devoted the best years of his life to an endeavour to resuscitate and elevate the Indian Stage, I was prompted by the hope that such adaptations will serve to exalt the dramatic ideals current in the country. ... Though I have always endeavoured my best to translate as literally as conditions permitted, I have not hesitated to sacrifice literalness in the rendering to what I conceived to be the reproduction of the real sense or force of the original. I have also tried to render the names of persons and places, allusions and allegories and puns and proverbial sayings so as to suit the Tamil garb of the rendering. (Şekspiyar 1908a: English preface, n.p.)

These remarks nicely sum up his motives for his translations: to make Shakespeare's plays accessible to a Tamil audience while at the same time 'resuscitating' Tamil drama and improving 'the dramatic ideals current in the country'.

His remarks further shed light on his practice as a translator. His commitment to rendering 'the real sense or force of the original' while trying to remain as literal as possible demonstrates a spirit quite similar to

A.K. Ramanujan's tenet: 'Let poetry win without allowing scholarship to lose' (Ramanujan 1985: 297).

Sambandam's qualms about the translation process also demonstrate something important in the history of literary translation into Tamil. The fact that he and others (such as Narayanaswamy Ayyar) valued fidelity to the original shows that a 'faithful' translation was not a later development but something that mattered from the very beginning. These early literary translations make it clear that at least some of the early translators took their task extremely seriously, with the aim of producing sophisticated versions from the original texts.

Ideas about the value of literary translation current at the time and about the particular merits of Sambandam's version of *Hamlet* can also be gleaned from the English introduction to *Amalātīyaṅ* written by Sambandam's school friend V.V. Srinivasa Iyengar, dated 25 October 1908. Iyengar begins by assessing the value of a translation in comparison with an author's original writing, arguing that 'an unpretentious translation may be a more valuable contribution to a literature and language than a whole library of worthless original productions, so called' (Ṣekspiyaṅ 1908a: i). He further explains that a translation is not just meant for readers who are unfamiliar with the original, but that good translations enhance the pleasure and understanding of readers who know the original text well:

As it is to the person who has seen the original of the subject of the painting that the painting speaks most eloquently, so is it that a good translation appeals most, not to a person who has never read the original but to him that has perused it a hundred times and lovingly dwelt on each word and phrase and on the thousand points of light and shade, of subtle suggestion and inexplicable charm. (ibid.: ii–iii)

Indeed, Srinivasa Iyengar elaborates that the translation of a text brings out nuances of the original that a reader of merely the latter might not be able to see. The translator is thus not just a better a reader of a text. He also allows others to become better readers. In making that point, Iyengar also illustrates what particular textual nuances he was mindful of while he was working with his friend on the revision of his translation:

A sense of the difficulties that had to be encountered, and the measure of success achieved, of the countless rejections made and the selection that prevailed, of the significance attaching to forms of expression, succession

of sounds, or any given order of words or ideas, of any differences in the resultant impressions and also the differences if any in the means by which the resultant impressions are produced,—these are only a few of a large number, that can be mentioned, of the aspects of a translation which enable us to perceive beauties in the original which will not be perceptible on ever so close and critical a study of the original alone. (ibid.: iii)

In Iyengar’s effusively high estimation, Sambandam’s *Amalātityaṅ* was not only a successful rendering that set new standards for the practice of literary translation into Tamil as an art, but it was also a new contribution to modern Tamil literature that extended Tamil’s capacity as a modern language (ibid.: v). A reader today would tend to agree with Iyengar’s opinion. *Amalātityaṅ* does indeed demonstrate Sambandam’s extraordinary ability as a literary translator, his nuanced understanding of the original, fine attention to detail and his versatility and stylistic finesse when finding equivalents in Tamil. A brief example may serve to illustrate this. This is the beginning of Hamlet’s monologue ‘To be or not to be...’, first in Shakespeare’s original, then in Sambandam’s translation and then in a literal translation back into English.

To be, or not to be—that is the question:  
 Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
 And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep—  
 No more—and by a sleep to say we end  
 The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
 That flesh is heir to—‘tis a consummation  
 Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep—  
 To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there’s the rub;  
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
 Must give us pause. ...  
 Thus conscience does make cowards <of us all,> (III.1, 65–91)

*Iruppatō, irappatō, itām kēlvi:—Tauṣṭiyamāna turatirṣṭam nammi teyyum kavaṅkaḷaiyum kaṅkaḷaiyum tūya manattuṭaṅ poruppatō, allatu kaṭ aliṅ tiraikaḷena vantaṭṭum kaṣṭaṅkaḷuṭaṅ manrāṭi muṭippatō? Irappatu?—Uraṅkuvatu?—Avvalavē! Appaṭi uraṅkuvatiṅāl manat tuyaraṅkaḷaiyum utaluṭaṅ piranta eṅṅutarṅkariya iyarṅkaiyil unṭām tunpaṅkaḷaiyum,*

*ellāmvittolikinrō menkīra immuṭivu ellōrum āvalōṭu virumpat takkatē!*  
*Uyir turappatu—uraṅkuvatu—uraṅkuvatu! Oru vēlai kaṇavu kāṅpatō?*  
*Hā! Atō irukkīratu kaṣṭam. Nām, ivvuṭalākiya pācattai nikkīyavutaṅ,*  
*uyir turatta lennum urakkattil, ennenna kaṇavu kāṅpōmō enpatē nammai*  
*nitānikkac ceykīratu. ... Nammuṭaiya neṅcamē ivvāru nammaiellām*  
*naṭuṅkurac ceykīratu. (Ṣekspiyar 1908a: 71)*

(To be or to die, that is the question: whether to bear with a pure mind the slings and arrows evil misfortune launches at us, or to end the difficulties that come like waves of the ocean by fighting them? To die? To sleep? Enough! In this way, to say that we end by sleeping all the grievances of the heart and the innumerable troubles that are naturally born with the body, this is a conclusion fit to be greatly desired by all! To give up life, to sleep, to sleep! Perhaps to dream? Ah! There is the difficulty. Whatever dream we see in that sleep of death, as soon as we have left the snare of this body, must give us pause. ... It is our heart/conscience that makes us all tremble with fear.)

We can see that Sambandam's translation is geared towards the literal meaning of the original. It is also attentive to the sounds and rhythms of the original by using alliterations, assonances and consonances in Tamil, and by respecting the length of the original phrases and sentences. The result is limber, mellifluous prose. Sanskrit expressions such as *tauṣṭiyamāna turatirṣṭam* may sound laboured or *recherché* to today's reader, but such expressions were quite common in the Tamil prose of the time. Moreover, when the image of the body as a 'mortal coil' is rendered in Tamil by a reference to the Hindu Saivite concept of the body as a 'snare' or 'shackle' (*pācam*) to the soul, the translator recurs to a trope that most of his educated Hindu readers would have readily recognised. Similarly, when he translates 'conscience' as *neṅcam*, he draws on the common trope in pre-modern religious Tamil literature of addressing one's own heart (*neṅcam*) in soliloquy. Clearly, thus, when viewed from the point of view of its original audience and even from a later perspective, Sambandam's *Amalātityaṅ* can be counted as a translation of *Hamlet* that is stylistically both clear and elegant and nuanced in terms of content.

Ending his introduction on a humorous note, Srinivasa Iyengar, who worked for many years as a high court judge, pronounced his verdict that, since Sambandam had 'as the result it would seem of long pre-meditation and design, trespassed far beyond the original limits of [the Tamil] language and literature,' he should be punished and 'condemned for the rest of the natural

term of his life, which we pray might be very long, to the rigorous task of translating and adapting into Tamil, all the remaining plays of Shakespeare' (ibid.: v).

## Conclusion

One might say that there were many Shakespeares in Sambandam's life, in the sense of multiple influences throughout his education and career. From an early age, he read, watched, and learned to appreciate Shakespeare plays. Those plays affected his taste and sense of what a theatre play should be. He also learnt practical aspects of acting by studying Shakespeare actors. Based on his appreciation for Shakespeare plays, he developed a new form of Tamil theatre that catered to the demands and tastes of his fellow members of the English-educated elite in colonial South India. Venkat Swaminathan has credited Sambandam with introducing several new features to Tamil theatre: 'a definitive script' and

a time-limit for performances, an end to all on-the-spot improvisation which was the rule of the time and valued as bearing the personal stamp of the artist, a gradual elimination of songs, authentic and appropriate costumes, scenic arrangements and sets relevant to the story, an end to the entries and exits of the *vidushaka* at will, etc. (Sambanda Mudaliyar 1996: 25)

When Swaminathan refers to those elements as 'anachronisms and incongruities carried over from the folk-theatre practices of the day' (ibid.), he adopts the perspective of the elite audiences at the time. This draws our attention to the fact that the history of what we might call 'modern Tamil drama' must be examined, among other factors, also from the perspective of caste and social class. Playwrights like Sambandam developed a form of Tamil drama that was deemed suitable for the higher and middle classes that constituted the educated colonial elite. A quick glance at the member list of the Suguna Vilasa Sabha provided in *The Suguna Vilasa Sabha Illustrated Souvenir* of 1928 demonstrates that all were either Brahmins (Aiyars and Aiyengars) or belonged to the higher non-Brahmin castes. The educated elite had its particular tastes and preferences with regard to theatre performances that varied considerably from other forms of theatre prevalent at the time.

To properly assess Sambandam's contribution to the larger history of modern Tamil drama, then, one needs to dwell on the historical context

of Tamil performance in which Sambandam began to produce his plays. Unfortunately, that history largely remains to be written. Such a history would include traditional performance forms like *terukkūttu* and *icai nāṭakam*, the tradition of performances at royal courts that included genres such as the *virālivitūtūtu*, *kuravañci* or *noṅṅināṭakam*, as well as the plays performed by the touring Parsi actors.<sup>9</sup> Such a history would also have to take into account that the emergence of modern Tamil drama happened in tandem with other types of ‘modernisation’, such as the emergence of the novel, the establishment of printing presses and a market for books, the development of Tamil prose as a new medium and the development of a sort of public sphere aided by a burgeoning press in which social issues came to be debated. As we can see from the philanthropic goals of the Suguna Vilasa Sabha and its development over time into an important social club, theatre was about much more than merely theatre.

Such a wider history would help us develop a more nuanced understanding than simply referring to Sambandam as the ‘father of modern Tamil theatre’, as the critical literature often does. Purely in terms of chronology, there are other playwrights to consider. Scholars have variously suggested the play *Maṅṅmaṅṅiyam* (1891) by P. Sundaram Pillai (1855–97) or *Piratāpaccantira vilācam* (1877) by P.V. Ramaswamy Raju (1852–97) as the first modern Tamil play.<sup>10</sup> One might, however, mention an even earlier candidate. The play *Ṭampācāri vilācam*, composed sometime during the 1850s by Kasiviswanatha Mudaliyar (1806–71), might qualify as the first modern Tamil drama in the sense that it addresses an issue of contemporary social critique, the role of devadasis in society (Ebeling forthcoming).

Of course, an answer to the question of which text should be counted as the ‘first modern Tamil drama’ entirely depends on how we define each term in that phrase. If we take as our yardstick the fact that a play does not deal with puranic stories (as so many plays did) but rather with contemporary social reality, we might settle on *Ṭampācāri vilācam*. If we take an adherence to the Western form of acts and scenes as the main criterion, we might settle on

<sup>9</sup> For a first orientation on these different traditions, see Perumal (1981); de Bruin (1999, 2001); Seizer (2005); Hansen (2021).

<sup>10</sup> Considering *Maṅṅmaṅṅiyam* the first modern Tamil play is quite common throughout standard literary histories; see, for example, Zvelebil (1992: 166). The case for *Piratāpaccantira vilācam* as the ‘first Tamil play’ has been made by Indira Parthasarathy (2016).

*Piratāpaccantira vilācam*. But if we are looking for plays that entirely abandon the inclusion of songs and use prose instead of verse, we arrive at the plays written by Sambandam, including his Shakespeare translations. At any rate, the case of Sambandam's development as a playwright, actor and impresario makes it clear that the 'birth' of modern Tamil drama is better viewed as a gradual process than something that happened overnight with one particular play. In whatever way we decide to tell the story of modern Tamil drama, Rao Bahadur Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar's contributions—and not least his Shakespeare translations—will occupy a crucial chapter.



## MOTIVATED READING

## Text and Image in the Expanded Temple

*Anna Lise Seastrand\**

## Introduction

Temples of the Tamil region have long attracted the interest of epigraphists who study the inscriptions carved into the walls of the temples. Since the colonial period, governments both local and national have published volume upon volume on documentation, as rubbings, translations, or even just summaries of the content of the inscriptions written in Tamil and other languages, such as Telugu, Sanskrit, Kannada, and Marathi. Such inscriptions reveal the names of patrons, rulers, artisans, and other elites. They give dates and place names, and record transactions. They extol the virtues of kings. As such, they are an indispensable resource for historians of Tamil history. But while generations of scholars have recorded the rock-cut inscriptions found on the walls of southeast Indian temples, a more recent turn to the study of materiality has refocused attention on the medium, context and legibility of the inscriptions themselves. Emerging from an art historical perspective, I show that the study of murals can methodologically enrich a reading of inscriptions, no matter their medium. I argue that the images and texts that adorn temple walls, both carved in stone and painted in murals, may be best understood within a larger matrix of aesthetic experience that neither reduces them to their materiality nor removes them from a contextually specific reading.

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A general turn in scholarship toward a history of the senses may in many ways seem familiar to those who work on materials related to the South Indian temple, for which considerations of ritual movement, touch, sound and especially vision (*darśan*) have been central. Art historical scholarship on architecture and sculpture, the foundational subjects of South Indian art historiography, has increasingly turned to a contextual approach that sees sculpture, ritual and narrative mutually informing one another within the architectural matrix of the temple (e.g., Branfoot 2007; Venkatesan et al. 2015; Kaimal 2020). This chapter focuses on two other media, mural painting and rock-cut inscriptions, but similarly understands them to be most fully meaningful when considered in relation to their broader notional and sensorial contexts. What makes murals and inscriptions similar to one another—and distinct from sculpture—is that despite their material differences, both appear as integral to the structure itself, inseparable from the floors, pillars, walls and ceilings that are the foundational surfaces on which paintings and inscriptions are located and which compose the structure of the temple. As such, both media are in the curious position of being quite literally a part of the structure of sacred space, even as, because of this fact, they recede into the background of a space visually punctuated by sculpture and animated by ritual. And so, despite their historiographic status as wallflowers, this chapter pursues the idea that both inscriptions and murals structure the experience of a sacred space that is bounded by the physical structure in which they inhere.

South Indian mural paintings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are typically composed of alternating registers of text and image, and found on the walls and ceilings of circumambulatory passageways that lead to and encircle temple sancta. As such, they are not isolated aesthetic objects *in* the temple, but are an important part of the experience by viewers in motion *through* the temple. Nevertheless, the question of whether any human visitor would have looked at the murals is one that haunts their study—they are in the dark, on the ceiling and craning one's neck to look at them for an extended period is uncomfortable. And while Tamil and Telugu label and donor inscriptions are an integral part of the murals, these painted inscriptions are difficult to read, full of orthographical aberrations and mostly convey narrative information or labels, rather than the facts of dates and places that historians delight in—the sort of information found in rock-cut inscriptions on the walls of southeast Indian temples.

The granite walls of temples in southeastern India were routinely covered with text carved into their surfaces. These lithic inscriptions not only named

donors, but also served as repositories of public records concerning issues such as land ownership, the construction of water and irrigation works, taxes and the payment of people for labour from agriculture to dance. Yet reading these lengthy inscriptions is nearly impossible without careful study, access to ladders, rubbings or estampages. The troubled visibility of inscriptions has not deterred generations of scholars from documenting southern India's ample epigraphic record, producing volumes of transcriptions, translations and abridgements of rock-cut and copper plate inscriptions. Transposed from wall to printed book, the rock-cut inscriptions have entered into historical accounts as evidence for interpretation that ignores the materiality, placement and legibility of the originals. Meanwhile, narrative paintings and their inscriptions are dismissed as merely decorative in function, mostly illegible anyway, or not even meant to be read by human eyes. Each of these, I think, deserves attention as a critique of murals in particular, and of monuments and their adornments more broadly. This chapter takes up each of these issues (viz., function, legibility and audience) in order to argue that the asymmetry between the number of murals that survive, the obvious resources expended to create them and their peripheral presence in scholarship reflect modern epistemological and artistic assumptions that occlude an historically percipient vision of the past.

Focusing on Tamil murals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, I understand viewing as imbricated in wider intellectual, devotional and aesthetic contexts of the early modern period. Methodologically, this means understanding visual media alongside literary texts as diverse as courtly poetry, histories of sacred sites and pilgrimage literatures, and in conjunction with the particular form of mobile viewing that architectural and urban form facilitate as *pradakṣiṇa*. The cyclical nature of time, ritual and narrative links action to text and to the recursive nature of viewing paintings in the temple. While present conditions of the temple, both material and socio-cultural, may be useful to historical interpretation, this essay takes for granted that the human and material infrastructure of the temple, broadly understood, changes over time.<sup>1</sup> Thus, rather than thinking through the static paradigm

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<sup>1</sup> Art history has increasingly looked to anthropological methods, and so one might be tempted to look to the contemporary temple for evidence of how people of the past would have understood or related to it. But such an inclination must be tempered by awareness of the real distance between the present and the past. While the contemporary temple remains the context for multisensorial experience, it is

of *structure* for understanding murals and inscriptions, this essay offers a 'motivated' understanding of temple murals. *Motive* is the compelling desire, idea, emotion that impels a person to act in a certain way. It is the sense of reason for action, basis for argument or prompting. As the more familiar *motif*, it is the salient feature or dominant idea of a work; it is a theme, subject or image. Mural paintings and inscriptions, *motifs* of images and texts, *motivate* movement in the temple and *motivate* particular kinds of reading. The problem this chapter addresses, in short, is how to square an idea of 'motivated reading', as both movement and sense-making in relation to the themes of images and inscriptions, with the limited visibility of those very same images and inscriptions—the problems of function, legibility and audience.

### Function

The function of mural paintings produced in the so-called Nāyaka period (1500–1800 CE) in southeastern India is intimately related to developments in temple architecture and the changing patterns of ritual and festival that attended them. The South Indian temple of the preceding centuries consists of a walled and roofed sanctum usually approached from a small hall, within a walled compound. The compound was accessed through a gateway tower. Though its scale is remarkable and it was formally innovative, the Rājarājeśvara temple at Tanjavur, founded in 1010 CE, is typical in its basic form and eminently legible because of its size. While ritual worship included circumambulation, a central axis is privileged. The route of entry is unidirectional: one enters and leaves through the single gateway on the eastern side of the complex. This temple is further famed for its inscriptions, which run conspicuously along the base moulding and describe the patron, expense and labourers who worked at the temple (Figure 16.1).<sup>2</sup> Although such inscriptions have been described as constituting something akin to an 'open air archive' (Soundara Rajan 1980: 283), in truth, one would not be

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evident that music, dance, textiles and paintings are not as important today as they were in the early modern period.

<sup>2</sup> A summary of the inscriptions throughout the complex may be found in Michell et al. (2010: 176–79). Of interest for our study of the relation of movement to inscription is that the inscriptions describing the foundation of the temple begin on the north side of the plinth and continue onto the west, making the progress of reading it one of counter-clockwise ambulation.



Figure 16.1: West face of the Rājarājeśvara Temple, Tanjavur, Tamil Nadu. Inscriptions are located along the smooth foundation stones in the course above head-level of the people in the photograph.

Source: Author.

able to see these without scaffolding or ladder. They are visible, but hardly legible to the devotee involved in the ritual of circumambulation.

In the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries, rituals of circumambulation combined with new architectural forms to produce an innovative temple structure that both accommodates and compels movement through the temple. The so-called expanded temple is constructed in a striking set of concentric passages and walls that converge on the central shrines—facilitating a mode of worship in which circumambulation, *pradakṣiṇa*, is fundamental. One enters the complex from any of the four cardinal directions (though the east is preferred) and moves through the temple in any number of ways, though usually progressing clockwise around each shrine within the complex. The Mīnākṣī-Cuntarēśvarar temple in Madurai is a good example of the form because it makes clear the structural logic of the ‘expanded temple’, with its many halls and routes of circulation. This expansive, layered form is also reflected in the plan of the surrounding city, which is arrayed in

concentric rings around the temple, in a plan that ideally mirrors the form of the temple. The temple and city are living spaces in which circulation is fundamentally important. The deities reside at the centre of the temple, but move through the temple with their devotees, and circumscribe their domain in procession outside and around the temple; yet, access *to* and *into* the temple and surrounding settlement was structured by religious affiliation, caste and gender (Champakalakshmi 1993; Branfoot 2007: chapter 3). The movement that architectural form both accommodates and compels is, in other words, representational; movement of both deities and people demarcates and creates the sacred place and hierarchies of space.

The further significance of the architectural and urban form of the early modern period is its isomorphism with the form and viewing experience of mural paintings, which further suggest the synaesthetic experience of pilgrimage as movement *to* and *around* the focus of one's reverence. Two cycles of murals that adorn the ceiling and walls of the first and last temples in a network of nine interconnected temples in southeastern Tamil Nadu, Srivaikuntam (Śrīvaikuṇṭam) and Alwarthirunagari (Ālvārtirunakari), demonstrate these relationships. At both, registers of narrative painting alternate with registers of label inscriptions on the ceiling, while iconic images of Vishnu at the 108 sites sacred to him, known as the *divya deśas*, are depicted on the walls. The narratives proceed in clockwise *pradakṣiṇa* order around the sanctums of lord Vishnu and saint Nammālvār at the respective temples.

At the Vaikuṇṭanātar Perumāḷ temple at Śrīvaikuṇṭam, the ceiling murals narrate episodes from the life of Krishna, while the better-preserved wall paintings are icons of Vishnu at different temples, arranged as a series of individual panels with label inscriptions in both Telugu and Tamil languages and scripts (Figure 16.2). The iconography of the images is taken from the forms of the deities in residence at those temples, from the geography of the sites and from devotional poems that praise them. Figure 16.3 is a representation of the temple at Tiruvaṭṭāru, a temple on an island in the region of *malai nāḍu*, in present-day Tamil Nadu. The island is depicted within a watery border filled with fish, crabs and turtles. Vishnu is accompanied by Bhu and Sri Devi; Brahma sits atop the lotus that rises from his navel. Below the serpent couch on which he rests—here Vishnu reclines on the serpent Ananta—are two *rishis*, conspicuous with their crowns of dreadlocks and rudraskha *mālas*, making offerings of flowers to the god. The Tamil and Telugu inscriptions at the top of the panel identify Vishnu first by the place to which he belongs, Tiruvaṭṭāru, and then by his name there, Adikesava Perumal



Figure 16.2: Detail of west wall of circumambulatory passage, Śrī Vaikuṅṭanātar Perumāḷ Temple, Śrīvaikuṅṭam, Tamil Nadu.

Source: Author.

(Ātikēcava Perumāḷ). This panel is set among a series of iconic images in two rows. Those to the left and right of Tiruvaṅṭāru depict temples in *malai nāḍu*, present-day Kerala. Tiruvittuvakōṭu is on the left and Tiruvāṅvantūr on the right. Again, the inscriptions identify the paintings first by place name and then by the name of Vishnu; in both paintings Vishnu is shown standing, as he is in the sanctums of those two temples. The panels further to the left and right are grouped geographically, as are those in the upper register that depict temples from *cola nāḍu*, the region around the Kaveri river that today is in the centre-east of Tamil Nadu.

In the murals of the nearby temple at Ālvārtirunakari, the painting of Tiruvaṅṭāru remains only as a fragment, but what remains is strikingly similar to that at Śrīvaikuṅṭam, both in the river running across the top of the composition, and the panel's geographic situation between the temples of Tiruvittuvakōṭu and Tiruvāṅvantūr, which also remain only as label fragments. The murals at Ālvārtirunakari are found in the circumambulatory passage around the saint Nammālvār's shrine. Nammālvār is one of the twelve saints who authored poems praising Vishnu and the sites sacred to him. His text of



Figure 16.3: Representation of the Ātikēcava Perumāḷ Temple at Tiruvattāru, Śrī Vaikuṅṭanātar Perumāḷ Temple, Śrīvaikuṅṭam, Tamil Nadu.

Source: Author.

1,000 verses, *Tiruvāymoli*, is considered scripture in the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition. The narrative ceiling paintings show the transmission of scripture from Vishnu to Nammālvār and to all of the teachers venerated in the tradition, all of whom are mentioned in the bilingual inscriptions that accompany them. Throughout, teaching and transmission of texts are emphasised upon by the repeated images of exactly those activities. Students and teachers hold palm leaf manuscripts, some of which are themselves labelled. The paintings thus serve two functions: in addition to *representing* the composition of poetic scripture and its transmission, they *actually* transmit this history to the devotee. Ritual and devotional practice are closely connected to the form and content of the paintings.



Figure **16.4**: Representation of the Arimēya Viṇṇakaram Atinātar Temple, Ālvārtirunakari, Tamil Nadu.

*Source*: Author.

That viewers would be prepared to perceive and interpret the relationship of text, place and image is suggested by another panel image at Ālvārtirunakari (Figure 16.4) that depicts the Vishnu temple at Arimēya Viṇṇakaram. The temple icon at Arimēya Viṇṇakaram is an anthropomorphic seated figure of Krishna, who goes by the name of Kuṭamāṭu Kūttan. The festival devotional

icon is Gopāla, another name of Krishna. However, neither the main temple icon nor the festival icon is shown in the painting. In this example, interestingly, the visual icon of the place is not based on what the devotee might actually see at the temple but a form of the god as half-man half-lion (Narasimha) described in the devotional poem written by the saint Tirumaṅkai Āḷvār. Arimēya Viṅṅakaram is praised *only* in the hymns of Tirumaṅkai, and belongs to a set of eleven temples located around the single village of Nāṅkūr and praised by this saint.

Tirumaṅkai's poems are especially notable for elevating the name of the abstract form of Vishnu as Nārāyaṇa over the particular form (*arca*) the god takes in the temple (Venkatesan 2017); in this poem, however, it is Tirumaṅkai's evocation of the particular vision of the deity and scent of the sacred site that makes it so compelling. Tirumaṅkai's poem on Arimēya Viṅṅakaram lists numerous avatars of Vishnu at this site. One stanza states that this is the place where Vishnu took the form of Narasimha to protect his devotee, Prahlada. The stanza (*patikam*) particularly highlights the fragrant flowers—lotus, jasmine, champak and others—that grow around the temple. The stanza reads:

This is the place where on that day he took the steadfast form of Narasimha and bestowed grace on the son of Hiraṇyakaśipu, who possessed great boons, by tearing apart Hiraṇyakaśipu with his undiminishing sharp nails

Arimēya Viṅṅakaram is where Narasimha lives, in the middle of a fragrant garden of jasmine, red water lilies, with beautiful golden champak, sweet-smelling with white champaka flowers, and the fragrance of boiling sugarcane

Dear heart, worship there.<sup>3</sup>

The variety of flowers depicted in the painting resonates with the olfactory emphasis of the poem itself, as well as the unexpected form of Vishnu. Although not an uncommon decorative device in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the artist has hung the arch in which the god is seated with three varieties of white flower chains, at the end of which hang red and

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<sup>3</sup> The poem is the fourth in the decad composed on Arimēya Viṅṅakaram by Tirumaṅkai Āḷvār (*pasuram* #1241) and is included in the *Periya Moli* of the *Nālāyira Divya Prabbandam*. This loose and clunky translation is my own; I am grateful to Samuel Sudhanandha and Archana Venkatesan for reading it.

white lotuses, as well as a long yellow flower that resembles champak. The relationship of place to painting is not one of mimetic representation, and the connection of image to poem is not simply one of illustration. Indeed, the other stanzas of this decad on Arimēya Viṅṅakaram honour other forms of Vishnu. The point here is that the paintings, like the poems to which they necessarily refer, operate within a context that expects multisensory perception. All of the Vaishnava saints composed sensorially rich poems that direct their reader to consider taste, smell and vision. Like poems, murals create an 'immersive and interdependent sensory world in which god is experienced' (Venkatesan 2017: 297n7). The murals are intertextual and part of a multisensory experience of ambulatory worship.

The poems, explicitly and implicitly through emphasis on place, suggest that a mental pilgrimage to the homes of the lord is equal to physical pilgrimage to the shrines (Peterson 1982: 80). It is, after all, the *heart* that is told to 'worship there'. Moreover, the organisation of the paintings, in which the sites are grouped according to region, further reinforces the idea of a pilgrimage from one region to the next. The iconic images allow the worshipper the benefit of pilgrimage to all the sites sacred to the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, and praised in the poems, as he circumambulates the single shrine of Nammālvār. Honouring a place, deity or person through circumambulation is conceptually and kinaesthetically consonant with pilgrimage (Narayanan 1994: 129). Pilgrimage requires going to, and going around, a place, tracing a form resonant with the concentric structure of the temple. It does not require of the viewer that he stop and consider each painting, or that he know every verse to which it nods. Rather, it is the set of images that one perceives that is aesthetically and conceptually important. These paintings not only depict all the places sacred to Vishnu, but do so in a way that makes it possible to perform pilgrimage to all the places within this single space, so that the 'dear heart' might worship there.

At both temples, the murals enframe the god and the saint both discursively and geographically. The paintings that depict the places sacred to Vishnu are arranged according to region, so that as one honours the deity or saint at the centre of one's circumambulation, the devotee might also pass through each of the places beloved of god. In both cases, he is the one to which the narratives on the ceiling refer; he resides within the sacred landscape arranged around him, which was itself established and promoted through devotional poetry written by Nammālvār and other exemplary poet-saints. The paintings, in concert with their viewers' ritual circumambulatory engagement of the space,

situate the figures physically and conceptually at the centre of the Śrīvaiṣṇava world in which they are already understood to be of central importance. At Śrīvaikuṅṭam, the place-paintings are arranged according to region, but separately, so that multiple trips around the sanctum are required to properly ‘visit’ a region, first in the lower register, and then in the upper (or vice versa). In South Indian temples, the devotee is regularly expected to circumambulate the shrine not just once but multiple times. Thus, ritual expectation aligns with the paintings’ *motivation* to perform ritual that maps—visually, textually and kinaesthetically—onto devotional pilgrimage.

A motivated reading of these paintings is thus related to practices of reading and recitation particular to Śrīvaiṣṇavism, one in which iconographic and narrative motifs shape an understanding of movement through space. Just like the devotee would invoke the names of Vishnu and the *ācāryas* when beginning a recitation, the murals at Āḷvārtirunakari depict first Vishnu and then the *ācāryas*. Where the devotee would know the poems related to the places sacred to Vishnu, the paintings eschew iconographic mimesis in favour of the intertextuality of painting and poem: the poems motivate a reading of the image. Finally, the geographic disposition of the paintings sets in motion the devotees’ virtual pilgrimage to all of the sites praised in devotional poetry and arranged in regions that one might visit them.

## Legibility

The function of mural paintings, with their label inscriptions, is to situate the god or saint within the both the figurative and literal devotional landscape. Like the form of the temple, and the village or city in which it is a part, the paintings encircle and enframe the god or saint both notionally and physically. And yet, it would be misleading to claim that it is easy to read these images. Without the ability to read the label inscriptions, would one recognise the sites or the subtlety of an iconography developed in poetry rather than in the physical features of the site? Who but the most learned might connect poetic imagery to geographic iconography? And, in the midst of movement, both devotional and ritual, it may seem unlikely that one would pause to contemplate these images at all.

These problems of visibility and function (legibility) disappear when the images are presented in glossy books or in the super-human clarity of digital or virtual space. In this, they are not so different from the inscriptions on temple walls represented in collections such as *South Indian Inscriptions*. Isolated from

their physical matrices, images and texts present themselves unencumbered by their materiality and free from the bonds of context. This isolation through reproduction brings the murals more in line with Western-style paintings, generally isolated in panels or canvas. Through publication, murals often become 'paintings'—single images extracted from the whole—for which iconography or modes of narration are major preoccupations. The expectation that one lingers on a single scene or iconographic moment when viewing and making sense of murals is true even in the long tradition of Christian mural painting, which, like southeast Indian murals, cover vast architectural surfaces that are not limited to panel or canvas. In an early defence of pictorial art in Christian churches, Pope Gregory the Great (590–604) argued that images in churches were to be 'read' by the illiterate in order that they might 'see in it what they ought to do'; pictures belonged in churches to 'instruct the minds of the ignorant'. And, specifically with regard to pictures on walls, Pope Gregory argued that, 'Pictures are used in churches so that those who are ignorant of letters may at least read by seeing on the walls what they cannot read in books' (quoted in Duggan 2005: 63). Such an interpretation of the function of images depends on their assumed legibility and the role of the individual viewer in interpreting the didactic image.

The assumption of a beholder contemplating an image that is made to function as a didactic device has no doubt influenced the way in which the discipline of art history has approached its subjects. But if one agrees that perhaps a different mode of viewing might obtain in the southeast Indian context, where might we look to historicise it? One possible way to explain the legibility and function of temple murals would be to look to allied traditions of image-making in southern India, such as painted *kalamkari* cloths or scroll paintings. Produced in the same period and regions that we find murals, composed of alternating registers of text and images, and combining narrative and iconic forms, the *kalamkari* produced on the southeastern coast of India are a closely related art form. Dallapiccola (2015: 10) has shown that at least some *kalamkari* were intended to support oral performances of the narratives they depict. The evidence that at least some *kalamkari* were performed opens the possibility that the same could be true of murals, which are strikingly similar in all but the media in which they are made. Yet, there is no evidence, historical or contemporary, that this was the case. Indeed, one can hardly imagine groups of people crowded around a performer in the restricted space of the circumambulatory paths in which paintings are located. For these reasons, it seems far more likely that the murals in southeast Indian

temples were not the site of narrative or poetic performance before groups of people, even if viewers might discuss what they see before them, or be led by a knowledgeable person through the space.

In southern India, some murals are eminently legible. They are found roughly at eye level, are large and clear, and brightly painted. They are accompanied by inscriptions that make their content even more explicit, even if that content is most fully meaningful when understood intertextually. Some murals, however, are found in dark hallways, obscured from vision within the interior of a shrine cella, the interior of a gateway tower (*gopuram*) or on the ceiling. They are in the dark, far away and physically painful to observe for an extended period of time. Such difficulties, compounded by the fact that the murals have received scant attention from scholars, have led some to ask whether the paintings were actually intended for a divine audience, rather than for human eyes. This is consistent with scholarship on donative inscriptions in Indian Buddhist contexts, where it is understood that names placed where no one might read them hope for divine merit, not a human audience (see, e.g., Schopen 1996). There is, however, something quite different about murals in the southeast Indian context. First, despite the difficulties mentioned above, many of them are highly legible. Were these also 'meant' to be enjoyed primarily by God? If so, do we discount the ways in which human viewers might see, interact with or make sense of the images? Second, as noted at the outset of the chapter, murals are rather like rock-cut inscriptions insofar as they occupy similar spaces on the temple, and are integral to the architectural structure and space it creates. If inscriptions—even and especially ones that are almost impossible to discern—are worthy of dedicated study, why have murals languished in obscurity?

## Audience

In considering the audience whom murals and inscriptions on temples intend to address, we return to the problem set forth at the outset of this essay: that scholarship treats images and texts—their legibility and audiences—so differently. As an art historian, I am mystified by South Indian temple inscriptions for two reasons. First, centuries of scholarly labour have been devoted to reading what is nearly impossible to read—and would have been for almost any visitor to the temples. How do we square the wealth of information in the inscriptions with the impossibility of their close inspection? I propose that we need a different model of viewership—one that accounts both for

the ‘ideal’ viewer who reads, sponsors or makes the work (this ideal viewer is often collapsed into the pseudonym of ‘patron’), as well as the casual viewer—or what Francesco De Angelis (2014: 113) calls the ‘worthy’ viewer—one who ‘live[s] up to the challenge [the work] presents...’ I suggest that one way to think about inscriptions (and thereby to think about other forms of adornment on temple walls) is to consider what effect the textualised surface of the architecture produces on the beholder-devotee—a worthy viewer, if not an ideal viewer.

While inscriptions cut into the walls of the temple are found on both the interior and exterior surfaces, many of the most beautiful are on the exterior walls. There are famous examples, such as the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram, the subject of study by Padma Kaimal (2016, 2020), who argues that the poem that tells the history of the establishment of the temple clings like a ‘tight film’ to the basement moulding, from where it would be read aloud in counter-clockwise order, and was meant to be heard only by the initiated and viewed in conjunction with the iconic sculptures on the temple wall above the inscription. It would have been a task to read the inscription, so tightly does it follow the undulations of the architecture. The wonderful interplay of text and image that Kaimal has pioneered for reading the Kailasanatha temple is a way of understanding text and image as ‘working very closely together but not in unison, each picking out separate but coordinated rhythmic steps while the two media periodically peel apart and wrap back together’ (2016: 161). The inscriptions at the Kailasanatha temple are exquisitely beautiful, written in fine calligraphy and complemented by the inscription of the patron’s titles (*birudas*) thrice-over in the wall of the courtyard facing into the temple. Most inscriptions on South Indian temples—including that poem at Kailasanatha—record the history of the temple, donations, adjudications and payments—information we might think of as more properly archival than devotional, apotropaic or even laudatory. Perhaps this is one reason that inscriptions, though they are actually *more* difficult to decipher than murals, seem to take priority in preservation and documentation efforts.

Beautiful or simply workmanlike, however, inscriptions tend to be reduced to their content, as, and for, the archive into which they are translated, copied and consigned. As decades of scholarship have demonstrated, the temple was, in so many ways, centrally important in southeast Indian political, economic, social and religious life. Therefore, it is all the more striking when one stops to consider the materiality of the inscriptions instead of

focusing on their documentary content. As Lawrence Keppie has noted in his study of Roman inscriptions,

The texts of inscriptions are frequently presented in books as neat lines of typescript. This gives a doubly false impression, firstly of a uniformity in script and lettering, and also of easy legibility, to produce a sanitized version of the text, which deprives it of much that would be interesting. The most important fact to remember about any Roman inscription is that it is inscribed *on* something. The text may easily not be the only decoration on the stone. (1991: 10–11)

In this, Keppie's observations are most germane to thinking about South Indian inscriptions. Volume after volume of recorded inscriptions sets their irregularities into neat lines, rendering invisible the materiality of the text, and obviating an analysis like Kaimal's cited above, in which text is understood in its relationship to architecture and sculpture. Like reprinted images of murals, the published inscriptions amplify inscriptions' legibility beyond what would ever have been possible. Although text is itself legible on the temple, its content is almost always obscure; conversely, copies—manuscript, printed, stamped—of the content obscure the materiality of the text. From the perspective of the temple viewer-beholder, one suspects that engraving barely-legible notices of gifts, transactions or decrees hardly indicates that one was expected to regularly read or consult them (Michell et al. 2010: 23). By focusing on the content of inscriptions, we risk confusing visibility with legibility.

In the lived experience of these temples, the inscriptions are visible and yet largely unseen. This is true not only of single-patron temples like the Kanchipuram Kailasanatha temple that Kaimal so beautifully interpreted, or the cumulative form of the Tanjavur Rājarājeśvara temple, where the inscription of the history of the temple neatly wraps around the basement moulding, and subsequent inscriptions adorn virtually every other structure in the temple. It is also true of more modest structures, where successive inscriptions over the walls have yielded a patchwork of inscriptions on the architectural surfaces. In all of these, there is tension between the text's visibility and legibility. If we can expect that people of the past possessed no greater ocular powers than we do today, how do we make sense of the surfeit of information that is present but largely unseen? Here, I think, aesthetic considerations may help guide us.

Given that inscriptions on temples are actually *more* difficult to decipher than murals, it is curious that they seem to take priority in preservation and

documentation efforts. Noboru Karashima et al. (2011) have argued that the rate of inscription on temple architecture and copper plates markedly declined beginning around 1600 CE, a moment coeval with the proliferation and development of portrait sculpture and mural painting. The increasing visibility of temple portrait sculptures after the decline in inscriptional activity has been understood as a shift in commemorative conventions, and portraits have thus received moderate attention for their historical value (Hurpré 1995; Lefèvre 2011). The historical value of such portraits is, to my mind, highly uncertain.<sup>4</sup> Murals, on the other hand, have been largely ignored, despite the fact that they are, in many instances, composed of equal parts text and image, both picturing and directly stating their patronage and meaning. Scholars have taken virtually no interest in recording the painted epigraphs that proliferated when rock-cut inscriptions allegedly declined after the seventeenth century in southeast Indian temples. Text is, moreover, a major concern in the content of the murals, not just in their form: images of manuscripts proliferate in early modern pictures.

The problem of visibility when considering audience suggests two rather more famous examples of visual media carefully executed but never available for meticulous viewing until they became a staple of art historical study in the modern period, Athens's Parthenon frieze and Trajan's Column in Rome. The narrative figures of both, and the finesse and detail of the sculpting, were never fully ascertained by those who visited them. Clemente Marconi argues that for the Greeks, this was because the frieze was for the Gods, not mere mortal viewers. And it was the gods who were 'supposed to gaze upon the beautiful images but also take delight in them and feel pleasure' (2009: 173). Such an analysis shares with South Asian art historical studies of names and adornment a turn to the divine viewer, and divine reward in the form of merit, as described above. Marconi argues that resistance to the idea that such art is made only for divine pleasure is only the result of the 'shortcomings of a traditional art history that has identified itself with the regime of full visibility' (ibid.). Yet the notion that such works are explained only or fully

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<sup>4</sup> 'Portraits' are assigned identities based on tradition, hearsay or assumptions. Sometimes they are identified by the name of the patron who donated the building in which they are situated, but often there is more than one figure in such buildings, and portrait sculptures were often made long after the purported subject was deceased (Seastrand 2018).

by a divine audience fails to fully account for the aesthetic response of human viewers, even if they are only partial viewers. Unsatisfactory, too, is Paul Veyne's competing claim that viewers' response to the ancient works might merely be impressionistic—as if '...simply seeing it, everyone felt that the space was occupied by a strong power using a language that was not heard but passed, like the wind, over one's head, offering a discourse that was only generally understood' (quoted in De Angelis 2014: 93). One could equally apply such an explanation to the superfluity of inscriptions and adornments in pre-modern South Asian religious structures, often described as 'decadent' or 'excessive'—especially in the case of South Indian temple architecture, wherein the density of adornment is perceived to make it overwhelming for the human spectator. Instead, I argue that the somatic experience of sacred space is imbricated with an aesthetic experience of its adornment that is not fully appreciated either when understood as exclusively for a deity's enjoyment or when it is like a passing breeze, nebulous and impossible to define.

Rejecting both a divine-only model of viewership and one that operates only impressionistically, Francesco De Angelis (2014) argues, in short, that we give both makers and viewers some credit. Writing about Trajan's Column, he proposes that the reduced visibility of the column's frieze was 'an integral component of the viewing process as envisaged by the planners of the monument' (De Angelis 2014: 89). In other words, Roman sculptors, like South Indian painters and epigraphers, were unconcerned with a 'regime of full visibility', and to analyse their works does not mean that we neglect the fullness of the works for a shrug of the shoulders that they were not 'intended' to be seen anyway. De Angelis writes, 'Monuments like the Column do not call so much for *ideal* viewers as for *worthy* viewers. ... the Column invites the beholder to live up to the challenge that it presents, in every sense. In this regard, it is not a problem that rarely, if ever, was the Column subject to close scrutiny. On the contrary, this condition allowed for viewers to be ranked, as it were, according to their responses' (ibid.: 113). This hierarchy of viewing was linked to Roman social and political hierarchies—and for a study of the South Indian temple, we might add sectarian, caste and gender identities to our consideration of the ways in which different people viewed the works—or were excluded from viewing. Particularly in light of the rich intertextuality of South Indian murals, the *ideal* viewer may be divine, or may be human, but would need to be one practised in ritual and steeped in literature. But what of the *worthy* viewer?

## Image and Text

It is, perhaps, easier to consider that narrative images of murals were intended for ‘ideal’ and non-human viewers than it is to imagine that records of tax collection or even promise of cows to provide for oil lamps were likewise limited to the ideal reader.<sup>5</sup> After all, appreciation of narrative, the beautiful forms of the images and their affective potential are all easily accepted pleasures; and why would the god of the temple, who enjoys beautiful flowers, sweet fragrance, the cooling water of a *vasanta maṅṭapa* or the pleasure of a swing in the evening with his consort, also not relish the beauty of the interior of the temple? Moreover, since there are real obstacles to human viewing in some cases, such as the paintings’ location on the ceiling and in the dark, the limiting of analysis to the ‘ideal viewers’ makes a certain amount of sense. Yet, we would do well to consider the more complex model of viewership De Angelis proposes, one which allows us to account for both the most knowledgeable viewers, as well as those whose apprehension may be more limited both because of prior knowledge (or lack thereof) and because of the physical conditions of viewing.

The shift to ‘expanded’ temple complexes under Vijayanagara and Nāyaka-period patronage, in which we find vast mural cycles, produced new spaces that accommodated new forms of practice. Within the temple, larger spaces and routes of procession accommodated groups of people who would hear the recitation of texts and participate in festivals that in turn strengthened sectarian, social and political identities (see Dutta 2010). Such spaces also served as staging areas for the exchange of honour between deity and devotee, whether king, minister, merchant or member of a monastery. The construction of permanent kitchens, granaries and storerooms reflected a new emphasis on food in this period, wherein feeding the deity as well as producing food for distribution to newly cultivated pilgrims became central (Breckenridge 1986: 28–31). The cultivation of sectarian identities, pilgrimage and sacred landscapes, nurtured along with the composition of site histories (*talapurāṇams*) in this period, are all of a piece with the significant resources expended on mural painting. As the devotee moves through the temple, he traverses a painted history of the site, sect or life stories of the deities and saints. Alternatively, where dance performances, the recitation of devotional

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<sup>5</sup> However, the divine commands written on temple walls suggest that inscriptions, too, were a matter of concern for deities (Orr 2020).

poetry or expositions on theology are held, murals' content mirrors the subjects taken up in the media of speech, poetry and dance. One must account for the performances, smells and sounds experienced by the mobile spectator of the murals and reader of its texts in order to more fully understand their function. The *worthy* viewer may not be the *ideal, all-knowing* viewer, but he participates in the stories, places, lineages and festivals that give rise both to the character of the site and the identification of the communities who participate.

Mural paintings ask us to think of art imbricated in a larger matrix of aesthetic experience. Murals' images and texts engage the viewer in motion, revealing their content gradually across space and through time. One does not stop to contemplate the work—a mode of viewing so natural in the museum-trained beholding of our own moment. Rather, murals motivate a kinaesthetic mode of apprehension of their narratives and the places extolled in story and poem. Mural paintings and inscriptions, in concert with their viewers' ritual engagement of the space, create and remind the devotee of the discursive and sacred geographic space in which the deity participates and resides. This is a model for beholding that does not rely only on 'regimes of visibility'. It is unnecessary to posit that either texts or images were produced only for God, in the same way that Trajan's Column, visible yet unavailable for seeing, was present for those who beheld it.

By way of conclusion, let us return to the cycle of murals at Śrīvaikuṇṭam, where each of the 108 places sacred to Vishnu is depicted in a series of paintings, laid out in two registers, and covering the walls of the circumambulatory path around the god's shrine (Figure 16.5). *Vaikuṇṭa* is the name of Vishnu's heaven; here, the lord of the heaven (*Vaikuṇṭanātar*) stands at the centre of the sites sacred to him. Yet, it is unlikely—nay, impossible—that any single viewer would stop to study each inscription or identify each panel of the god and goddesses. Although each of the sites is labelled, and each is different, the visual similarity of the long series of reclining, seated and standing images of Vishnu placed within a grid formation gives way to the *seriality* of the sites. The sacred landscape of the Tamil country as a cumulative landscape is most powerfully conceived in the minds of those who connect and construct the landscape through story, ritual and pilgrimage. Images such as these speak in a collective voice, and in the abstract; the individual panels do not address themselves to their viewer as unique examples, but as part of a whole. As in most collectives, it is possible for the sensitive auditor to pick out individual voices, to revel in a harmony, to admire the acoustic architecture that makes



Figure 16.5: View of west wall of circumambulatory passage, Śrī Vaiṅṅaṅātar Perumāḷ Temple, Śrīvaikuṅṅam, Tamil Nadu.

Source: Author.

such sound possible. The metaphor is apt not only for the kinds of viewing that murals seem to expect, but also for inscriptions that similarly cover and inhere in temple walls.

Rock-cut inscriptions and mural paintings ask us to think of sequential art as imbricated in a larger matrix of aesthetic experience. The kinaesthetic mode of apprehension of text, narratives and places extolled in both is fundamental to their reception and function. The inscriptions and painted images literally and notionally frame the devotional icons in temple sancta as belonging to a particular space and place. Place is experienced in motion and conceived in relation to other places—as concept, rather than as particular. The imagery is not just representational, but also constitutive: the devotee participates in the stories, places, lineages and festivals that give rise both to the character of the site and the identification of the communities who participate. When we shift focus in the temple from seeing the divine (or divine seeing) to viewers as participants in the discursive, somatic and aesthetic formation of space and place, the interconnection between text, narrative art, movement and haptic experience begins to reveal itself—at least, perhaps, to the worthy reader.



## AFTERWORD

### From the Saṅgam to the Forum

*Amanda Weidman*

As David Shulman writes in his monumental biography of Tamil, Tamil is ‘more than a language’. Tamil is ‘a body of knowledge...intrinsic to an ancient culture and sensibility’, but also the ‘vibrant mother tongue’ of tens of millions of modern-day speakers spread throughout South India and a global diaspora (2016: 2). Like any language, it is not just an abstract set of grammatical forms and rules; Tamil is also everything that has been spoken, written, sung and performed in it. The scholars and poets who gathered together in the Tamil Sangam era well recognised the radiant, generative quality of language that linked the entirety of its past with a future-oriented field of possibility. They proposed the tripartite division of Tamil, which emphasised the inseparability of language ‘itself’ from what it had been, and might be, used to produce: *iyal*, the ‘natural’ literary language; *icai*, the music and sonic experiences afforded by the language; and *nāṭakam*, the dramatic narratives and imagery enlivened through performance.

The three thematic sections of this collection, as Annamalai suggests in his Preface, echo the Sangam-era divisions of Tamil, *iyal*, *icai* and *nāṭakam*; yet there is an important difference. Somewhere along the *longue durée* from the third century BCE to our times, indeed quite recently as much scholarship indicates, Tamil shifted from being a medium of political, literary, poetic and dramatic expression in a heteroglossic, fluidly multilingual world, to being a ‘language’, bounded and marked off from other languages; from there, it was not long before Tamil, placed first within a racialised colonial schema that gave rise to the distinction between ‘Aryans’ and ‘Dravidians’, and then used as a basis for drawing state lines within a newly independent nation, became a field of politics, centring around ethnolinguistic nationalism. Tamil, as an ethnolinguistic and political identity, became just as important as Tamil as a language, and indeed spawned new forms of language and linguistic practice.

And so, in this volume, each of the three Sangam categories has been transformed to address this central fact of Tamil as a field of politics: not

just politics in the sense of parties, elections and representation, but politics in the sense of contestations over resources, over belonging and over what is considered good, right and proper. The Sangam category *iyal* has expanded here from being concerned with the words and grammar of literary language to consider the modes of address and forms of publicity and persuasion, labelling and naming, that have constituted the basis of politics and power, and, in turn, the gendered and casteed exclusions upon which a modern 'non-Brahmin' Tamil public sphere was predicated. *Icai*, the poetic and material/sonic qualities of the language, has been reformulated here as a discussion of the tension between a modern language ideology that seeks to contain, purify, systematise and protect Tamil, and the poetic, compositional and translational practices that have exceeded the constraints of this ideology. *Nāṭakam*, dramatic performance, has been refigured to account for the radical performativity of medial forms and their constitutive role in the consolidation of different political dispensations, as stage, screen and temple wall alike become spaces for the production and enactment of subjectivities and orientations to Tamil.

What a pleasure it is to have been a part of these wonderful gatherings, and to re-encounter this work from the Chicago Tamil Forum's first ten years. In conversation, these essays present a wealth of new information and new theorisations, pushing beyond the foundational categories of colonialism and postcoloniality; troubling the ideological foundations of non-Brahmin, Dravidian and Tamil ethnolinguistic imaginaries; and crossing the usually strictly drawn line between the 'modern' and the 'pre-modern' to bring new insights. Yes, indeed, Tamil is more than a language, and these essays, together, are much more than the sum of their parts.



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### **'Politics of Media, Media of Politics', 19–21 May 2016 (organised by Constantine V. Nakassis)**

*Memorial Session*: Remembering John Bernard Bate (1960–2016)

*Film screening*: *Nagappattinam: Waves from the Deep*, directed by Swarnavel Eswaran

*Workshop papers*:

E. Annamalai, 'Mediations in Tamil: The Limits of Power'.

Indira Arumugam, 'Fraught Gifts: Ritual and Electoral Transactions and Political  
Value in Village Tamil Nadu'. Published in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (2019)  
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Published in *Brought to Life by the Voice* (2021, University of California Press).

### **'Poesis/Politics of Language and Place in Tamilagam', 25–27 May 2017 (organised by Constantine V. Nakassis and Francis Cody)**

*Keynote*: Michael Silverstein, 'Poesis, Power, and Politics'.

*Workshop papers*:

Francis Cody, 'Defamation Law and the Political Body'. Published in *The News Event*  
(2023, University of Chicago Press).

Mythri Jegathesan, 'Coolie Landscapes: The Pragmatics of Community'.

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(organised by Constantine V. Nakassis and Francis Cody)**

*Keynote:* William Mazzarella, '52 Seconds: The Time of Prior Commitment'.

*Workshop papers:*

- Francis Cody, 'Media Involution'.
- Stephen Hughes, 'Social Sense and Embodied Sensibility: Towards a Historical Phenomenology of Film Going'. Published in *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History* (2019, Routledge).
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- Bhavani Raman, 'Calling the Other Shore: Tamil Studies and Decolonization'. Published in *Belonging in the Bay of Bengal* (2017, Bloomsbury).
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- Amanda Weidman, "'Pāṭṭukku Oru Tālaivar": Making a Dravidian Voice'. Published in *Brought to Life by the Voice* (2021, University of California Press) and *this volume*.

**'Never Alone: The Linguistic Ecologies of Tamil', 23–25 May 2019  
(organised by Constantine V. Nakassis and E. Annamalai)**

*Keynote:* Srilata Raman, 'The Language of Christians and Christian-Tamil: The Peculiar Journey of the 17th-century Saivite Poet Tayumanavar'.

*Workshop papers:*

E. Annamalai, 'கொங்குதேர் வாழ்க்கை: Cross Pollination of Ideas and Imagination'. Whitney Cox, 'Before Maṇipravālam: Notes on the Linguistic Ecology of a Medieval Brahmadeyam'.

Sonia Das, 'View from the Streets: The Interdiscursive Ethnohistory of French-Tamil Transliteration'. Published in *Signs and Society* (2020) 8 (1): 125–54.

Christina Davis, 'Trilingual Blunders: Signboards, Social Media, and Transnational Sri Lankan Tamil Publics'. Published in *Signs and Society* (2020) 8 (1): 93–124.

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Srilata Raman, 'Useless Words: The Obsolescence of the *Nikaṇṭus* in the Tamil Literary Tradition'. Published in *this volume*.

Torsten Tschacher, 'Rendering the Word of God'. Published in *this volume*.

**'Tamil Images', 9–10 October 2020 (online) (organised by Constantine V. Nakassis and Sumathi Ramaswamy)**

Swarnavel Eswaran, 'The Tamil Image in Cinema: Production, Reception, and Technology'.

Lalitha Gopalan, 'Tamil New Wave Cinemas'. Published in *Cinemas Dark and Slow in India* (2022, Palgrave).

Zoé Headley, 'Beyond the Portrait: Investigating the Latent Archive of Commercial Studio Photography (Tamil Nadu, 1880–1980)'.

Lisa Owen, 'Icon/ic Jain Landscapes in Early Medieval Tamil Nadu'.

Indira Peterson, 'Representing "Tamil" Communities in Tanjore Company Paintings: Indigenous and Intersecting Ethnographies'.

Anna Lise Seastrand, 'Staging Kingship: Time, Presence, Media'.

**'Caste and Community in Modern Tamilagam', 13–15 May 2021 (online) (organised by Constantine V. Nakassis and Francis Cody)**

*Keynote:* Francis Cody, 'Law at Large: Notes on the Public Mediation of Community in the Juridical Field'. Published in *The News Event* (2023, University of Chicago Press) and *this volume*.

*Workshop papers:*

Pranathi Diwakar, 'Musical Politics: Caste, Urban Segregation, and Boundary-Making in Chennai'. Published in *Social Forces* (2023) 101 (4): 1834–55.

Tori Gross, 'Constructing a Caste in the Past: Revisionist Histories and Competitive Authority in South India'. Published in *Modern Asian Studies* (2022) 56 (6): 1774–1812.

Radha Kumar, 'Policing, Community, and Capitalism in 20th-Century India.'

Karthick Ram Manoharan, 'Is this a Sudra Critique? Periyar and the Intermediate Castes'. Published in *Economic & Political Weekly* (2022) 57 (44–45) and *this volume*.

Éléonore Rimbault, 'On the Production of Circus Life and Its Image by Tamil Media Industries.'

Davesh Soneji, 'Birthing a Caste: The Gendered Political Origins of the *Icai Vēlāḷar* in Modern Tamil Nadu'. Published in *this volume*.

### **'Social Meaning and Pragmatics in Tamil Discourse', 12–13 May 2022 (organised by Constantine V. Nakassis and E. Annamalai)**

*Keynote:* Suresh Canagarajah, 'Deconstructing Linguistics from South Asia: Practices in Search of a Theory.'

*Workshop papers:*

E. Annamalai, 'What Do You Think of What You Say: Speaker Perceptions of Propositions in Tamil.'

Sanford Steever, 'Discourse and Narrative in the Structure of Tamil Grammar'. Published in *Working Papers of the Chicago Tamil Forum* (<https://chicagotamilforum.uchicago.edu/>).

Christina Davis, 'Teaching the Other Official Language: Spoken Tamil Standardization in Postwar Sri Lanka.'

Govindarajan Navaneethakrishnan, 'Meaning as Rescuer: Colonizing the Colonizer, the Tamil Way'. Published in *this volume*.

Swarnavel Eswaran and Constantine V. Nakassis, 'Doubled Meaning'. Published in *For the Love of Tamil: Essays in Honor of E. Annamalai* (2025, Naples: UniOr Press).

### **'Translation', 4–5 May 2023 (organised by Whitney Cox)**

*Keynote:* Martha Ann Selby, 'Rhetorical Modes and Emotional Formation in an Old Tamil Anthology.'

*Workshop papers:*

Preetha Mani, 'Sound Effect: The Poetics of Spoken Language in Tamil New Poetry.'

Shiv Subrahmaniam, 'The Place of Interpretation in Translation.'

- Whitney Cox, 'Crossing the Godāvāri: Thoughts on translation and the *Kamparāmāyaṇam*'. Published in *this volume*.
- A.R. Venkatachalapathy, 'The Invention of Tamil Translation in the 1930s.'
- Sascha Ebeling, 'The Literatures of the World in Tamil Translation: Some Notes towards a History'. Published in *Book Culture in Tamil: Essays in Memory of CreA Ramakrishnan* (2021, Cre-A).
- E. Annamalai, 'The Human in Translation'.

## PHOTOS FROM THE CHICAGO TAMIL FORUM WORKSHOPS



Chicago Tamil Forum 2016: V. Rajesh, E. Annamalai, Perundevi Srinivasan, S.V. Srinivas, Swarnavel Eswaran, Constantine V. Nakassis, Indira Arumugam, Amanda Weidman



Chicago Tamil Forum 2017, Haskell Hall 101: Martha Selby, Francis Cody, Susan Seizer, David Shulman, Vijayarani Fedson, Rajan Kurai Krishnan, Constantine V. Nakassis



Chicago Tamil Forum 2017: Sumathi Ramaswamy, Mythri Jegathesan, E. Annamalai



Chicago Tamil Forum 2018, Haskell Hall 101: Kajri Jain, Constantine V. Nakassis, Amanda Weidman, Ritika Kaushik, Malarvizhi Jayanthi, Shubham Shivang, Karthikeyan Damodaran, Francis Cody, Stephen Hughes, E. Annamalai



Chicago Tamil Forum 2018: Karthikeyan Damodaran, Kajri Jain, Bhavani Raman, E. Annamalai, Stephen Hughes, Francis Cody



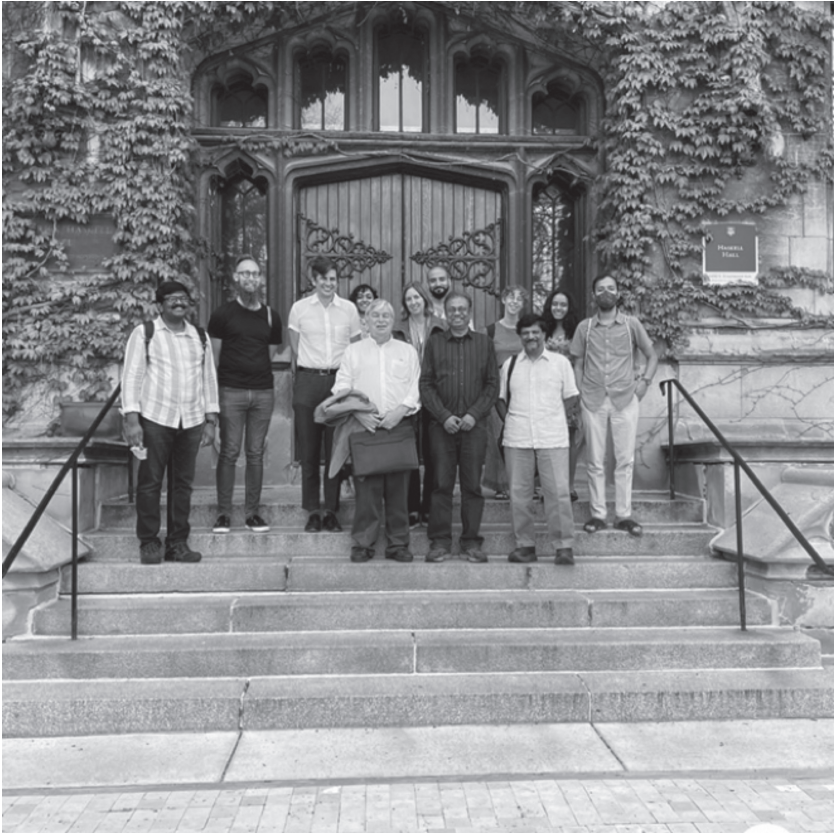
Chicago Tamil Forum 2019, Haskell Hall; front row: Christina Davis, Sonia Das, E. Annamalai, Srilata Raman, Margherita Trento, Vijayarani Fedson; back row: Torsten Tschacher, Jackson Cyril, Sascha Ebeling, Constantine V. Nakassis, Shubham Shivang, Whitney Cox, Preetha Mani



Chicago Tamil Forum 2019: Preetha Mani, Shubham Shivang, Whitney Cox, E. Annamalai



Chicago Tamil Forum 2020, online: Zoé Headley, Constantine V. Nakassis, Lalitha Gopalan, Indira Peterson, Lisa Owen, Eléonore Rimbault, Shweta Swaminathan, Harini Kumar, Tori Gross, Anna Lise Seastrand, Sascha Ebeling, Shubham Shivang, Pranathi Diwakar, Swarnavel Eswaran, E. Annamalai, Apoorva Malarvannan



Chicago Tamil Forum 2022, Haskell Hall; front row: Sandy Seever, Swarnavel Eswaran, Suresh Canagarajah; back row: Govindarajan Navaneethkrishnan, Andrew Ollett, Constantine V. Nakassis, Shweta Swaminathan, Christina Davis, Aditya Harchand, Eléonore Rimbault, Apoorva Malarvannan, Shubham Shivang



Chicago Tamil Forum 2023; front row: Ihsanul Ihtisam Chappangan, A.R. Venkatachalapathy, Martha Ann Selby; middle row: Constantine V. Nakassis, Aditya Harchand, E. Annamalai, Whitney Cox, Shiv Subrahmaniam; back row: Preetha Mani, Govindarajan Navaneethakrishnan, Sascha Ebeling, Jackson Cyril, Gowri Ramnarayan



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