Śaiva religion and the performing arts in a Tamil Novel: Kalaimañi’s Tillàŋā Mōkaṇāmpāḷ

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I. Introduction: The Reconstruction of Tradition in a Tamil novel of the 1950’s

Tillàŋā Mōkaṇāmpāḷ (TM), a novel written by Kottamankalam Cuppu under the pseudonym “Kalaimañi” and serialized in the popular weekly magazine Āṅganta Vikaṭan in 1956-’57, captured the imagination of the Tamil public as few other novels had. Readers of Vikaṭan devotedly followed the thorny course charted in TM, of love and artistic competition between Mōkaṇāmpāḷ, a young devadāst dancer, and Caṅmukacuntaram, a player of the reed instrument known as nākasvaram, nātasvaram or nāyaṇam. The film version made by A.P. Nagarajan in 1968 was a tremendous success as well, attesting to the great affection in which Tamil audiences continued to hold Kalaimañi’s novel.

TM owes its popularity in part to its vivid, unforgettable characters. However, as signaled by the novel’s theme and the pseudonym (“gem of the arts”) the author assumed for this work, Kalaimañi’s goal was no less than to rewrite the history of the Tamil classical performing arts, and thereby to offer an imaginative reconstruction of the Tamil cultural past. This he would accomplish through a careful, loving portrayal of the world of the periya mēlam (nākasvaram instrumental ensemble) and catir (ciṅga mēlam, dance) performance traditions in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Tamilnadu, and of their Śaiva religious and temple milieux.1 TM’s phenomenal impact was largely due to Kalaimañi’s success in evoking for mid-twentieth century Tamil readers the glory of Tamil culture as it had been embodied in the artistic and religious traditions of a not-too-distant, sacred past. Elsewhere (Peterson 2002) I have explored at length the character, location, and implications of Kalaimañi’s reconstruction of Tamil traditions in the context of other such reconstructions that were in process in the early -mid-twentieth century. Here I will summarize TM’s plot and my principal arguments regarding Kalaimañi’s project, and present selected translations from the novel, accompanied by brief commentary.2 The translated excerpts pertain to Kalaimañi’s portrayal of Śaiva religious culture in the Tamil region and the artistic and ritual traditions of the temple of Śiva Tyāgarāja in Tiruvārur, major elements in the novel.

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1 Devadāst-s, female dancers employed by temples and courts, performed catir dance. The nākasvaram was played in temple ritual, weddings and other auspicious occasions, traditions that continue to the present time.

2 The translations offered here are part of my project of translating the entire novel. At this stage, these are tentative translations. The completed work will be more fully annotated.
The Plot of Tillānā Mōkaṇāmpāḷ

TM is set at some unspecified time during the colonial era, most likely in the early years of the 20th century, mainly in provincial and rural Tamilnadu. Caṃmukacuntaram of Cikkal (a town famed for a temple of Murukan), a young maestro of the nākasvaram, and the devadāst dancer Mōkaṇāmpāḷ of Tiruvārūr (a major sacred center in the Kaveri delta, renowned for its temple of Śiva Tyāgarāja), meet at the festival of Alakarkōyil, the temple of Viṣṇu near Madurai, where both artists have been invited to perform. They are attracted to each other, and each is impressed by the other’s artistic gifts. Mōkaṇā challenges Caṃmukam to play a Tillānā (a rhythmically intricate and challenging dance piece) on the pāri nāyāgam, a special type of nākasvaram that is played only by the hereditary mēlakkārars at the Tiruvārūr Tyāgarāja temple. This challenge is left dangling, until, by various coincidental circumstances, the two artists are thrown together in the context of performances in other places. The growing love between them is continually thwarted by the efforts of Mōkaṇā’s mother Vañivāmpāḷ to set up a liaison for her daughter with a rich zamindar. The zamindar in question is the recently-married Ciïkapuram “Minor”, who is manipulated by the cunning brahmin parasite “Cavaṭṭal” (humbug) Vaitti. The situation is further complicated by the threat posed by Nallūr Nākaliinkam, a crooked land-owner, who swears vengeance on Mōkaṇā and Caṃmukam, since Mōkaṇā has rejected his advances in favor of the penniless nākasvaram player.

The course of true love is smoothed by loving friends such as Paramāṇanta Paratēciyār, a benevolent and music-loving Śaiva ascetic, Caṃmukam’s friend, the actress, dancer and circus performer “Jiljil” Ramāmani, and Caṃmukam and Mōkaṇā’s band of loyal accompanists. The question of the challenge comes to a head. Caṃmukam goes to Tiruvārūr, and learns the esoteric technique of playing the pāri nāyāgam from the hereditary temple artist Cāmikkaṅnu Nātasvarakkārār. The mēlakkārar community objects to this breach of tradition, but Caṃmukam is allowed to play the instrument on a single occasion, the dance-nākasvaram contest at the Tiruvārūr temple, at which Mōkaṇā will dance to a difficult Tillānā composition Caṃmukam will have composed, and will play on the pāri nāyāgam. The contest results in Paramāṇanta Paratēciyār declaring a tie, and all are delighted with this outcome. The proud Caṃmukam admires Mōkaṇā’s performance so much that he confers on her the title “Tillānā” Mōkaṇāmpāḷ. These chapters are, in many ways, the high point of the novel.

The remainder of the novel concerns the continuing obstacles to the marriage of the lovers, partly caused by Caṃmukam’s doubts regarding Mōkaṇā’s fidelity, and partly by external factors, especially an invitation from the Maharaja of Madanpur to the two artists to go on a tour of Europe with him and a larger band of artists from all over India. Caṃmukam and Mōkaṇā are appalled by the philistine and mercenary atmosphere of the Maharaja’s enterprise, and they quit the ship in Colombo, from whence they are treated to the love and hospitality of Śaiva devotees and Tamil connoisseurs in Jaffna. After many more adventures, the couple is eventually married. Caṃmukam continues on a triumphant career, but Mōkaṇā’s dancing career is cut short after
the birth of a son, Tillainayakam. The entire narrative is presented as the reminiscences of Professor Tillainayakam, retold by the author-narrator.

Reimagining a sacred Tamil past

In the late 1950's TM's middle-class urban audience were consumers of Bharatanatyam dance and Karnatak music, the performing arts of the Madras concert stage, whose status as "classical traditions" had been negotiated and constructed over half a century, mainly by Madras-based brahmin intellectuals, and in some respects through brahmin-dominated academies (Allen 1997, and Subramanian1999). In contrast to these projects, in TM Kalaimani firmly locates the classical and the authentic in the earlier, temple-based catir and periya mélam cultures that had been the purview of hereditary non-brahmin artists, the devadās-s and the natkāsvaram players, who together formed the community of icai veḷḷālar (formerly known as mēlakkārars).3 By the mid-thirties and early forties, the mēlam performance culture, and devadās-s in particular, had been displaced by a culture of performance on the concert stage by non-hereditary (and largely brahmin) performance, with the city of Madras as its hub. Kalaimani's novel presents the art of the icai veḷḷālar as the sacred, authentic tradition that had been uprooted, desacralized and commercialized in the process of being moved to the Madras sabhā-s ('academies') and stage. Kalaimani suggests that the destruction of the artistic prerogatives of the icai veḷḷālar also narrowed the audience of the performing arts from the Tamil "masses" or "folk" to a minority urban elite. However, driven though it is by nostalgia for a lost world, TM is robust and positive in tone. Part elegy and requiem, part critique, the novel is, above all, a celebration of the culture of the icai veḷḷālar.

Kalaimani achieves his major goal of portraying the art of the mēlakkārars and the sacred authority of temple and devotional religion on the Tamil community through the novelistic device of thick description. Throughout the novel, he provides detailed histories and descriptions of the dance and natkāsvaram repertoires and of the provincial, courtly and temple settings of these arts in the pre-concert stage era. For example, TM opens with a detailed account of the festival of Aṭakar at Aṭakarköyil, including depictions of the festival rites, the folk dances and other performance forms and games that form part of a temple fair, and of the repertoire performed by Caṃmukam and Mōka in their respective recitals. The itinerant artists move from one temple town to another, travelling to some of the most famous shrines in Tamilnadu, including Madurai, Tiruvārur, Tiruvāiyūru, Cikkal, Tirunāḷūru and Chennai (Mayilāppūr). The focus is on the ancient Śiva shrines of Tanjavur and nearby districts in the Kaveri delta, celebrated by the Nāyaṉār authors of the Tēvāram hymns in the Pallava era, and brought to prominence under successive dynasties, beginning with the Cōḷa-s.4 In the narrative, discussions of the sacred lore and folk

3 On the heritage of the mēlakkārars, see Cuntaram 1990 and Cuntaram 1992.
4 On the sacred geography traced by the Tamil saint’s pilgrimages and hymns in the Kaveri delta, see Peterson 1989, pp. 12-14 and 146 -47.
traditions of each place are closely interwoven with detailed explanations of the practices, repertoire and techniques of the catir dance and periyâ melâm.

In Kalaimani’s portrayal, the traditional repertoire of hereditary performers is far richer and has a far greater compass than the modern, secular repertoire in the arts. In the Tillânâ−nadâskâram contest at Tiruvârûr (Chapters 56 and 57), for instance, Cânûkum and Mûkaâ cover the range of compositional genres and cultural forms in the repertoire, using ancient Tamil texts such as the Cilappattikâram, Cuntaramûrtti Nâyanâr’s Tëvâram hymns dedicated to Tiruvârûr, the devadâst repertoire of padam compositions, the special tâla-s and nâtâi-s (beat-cycles and rhythm patterns) employed in nàkasvaram and devadâst traditions. Karnatak classical music’s Tamil, Telugu and Sanskrit compositions are all encompassed in the capacious sweep of the two melâm traditions. Cânûkum and Mûkaâ trade in Telugu and Tamil pada-varõam-s, padam-s and jâvâi-s. Cânûkum’s grandest râga âlápâna (elaboration) and compositional performance at the Tiruvârûr temple festival (chapter 55) focuses on Muttuvârâ’s majestic Sanskrit composition dedicated to Subrahmanya / Murukâñ, “Sîr subrahmanyâya namaste”.

The world of the melâkkârârs arts is open and diverse in other ways as well. At the temple festivals classical compositions and râga-s rub shoulders with folk song and dance forms such as poyykâl kutirai, patti, and kummi. Cânûkum’s friendship with Jîjîl Ramâni is perhaps Kalaimani’s master-stroke in portraying the openness and “public” nature of the Tamil musical and dance traditions. When we first meet Ramâni she has moved from a failed career as a third-rate catir dancer to the popular drama stage, where she specializes in ‘Parsi’ song and dance and “kaila part” (‘robber part’, involving male impersonation and vigorous dancing). Throughout the novel, too, Kalaimani points out the ready accessibility of the temple arts, and especially nàkasvaram music, to huge publics in vast spaces. In the controversy surrounding the pârî nâyâyam, the icai vellâlar are portrayed as being mindful of tradition, but also open to innovation.

Until the publication of TM, which was his first novel, Kottamaïkalam Cuppu had devoted his life to Gandhian activism and the preservation and dissemination of Tamil folklore and literature. Cuppu’s Kàntît tâtît kataikâl (Stories about Mahatma Gandhi) for children appeared simultaneously with TM in Âyanta Vikâtâg. In 1956 Cuppu may well have been nostalgic for the Gandhian value of the pre-Independence era, but the cultural discourses evoked in TM are not entirely at ease with pan-Indian nationalism. Kalaimani rejects the homogenizing agendas of pan-Indian nationalism. Describing the richness and diversity of earlier artistic traditions, he offers a vision of a specifically Tamil “folk”, the rural masses, as the real custodians, transmitters and connoisseurs of these community-based traditions. However, Kalaimani’s “imagined Tamil community” (Anderson 1983) also differs from the Tamil communities imagined by movements that argued for a Tamil culture based on linguistic separateness.

The discourses of Kalaimani’s cultural reconstruction differ from both pan-Indian and regional nationalizing discourses precisely in arguing for a ‘whole’
past that was hetero- and poly-glot in its cultural affiliations, and that had been formed through a dialogism of folk and high culture, Tamil and other languages, and conservatism and innovation. As cultural historian, Kalaimani found in the novel the ideal form, both to imagine this polyglot, dialogic past for Tamil culture, and an expressive medium with which to represent it (Bakhtin 1981). The passages from TM presented here reflect the mix of didactic narrative and lively dialogue, philosophical discourse and “folksy” humor that characterizes Kalaimani’s style.

II Translations from Tillāṇā Mōkaṇāmpāḷ

In the translations that follow, I will highlight themes that Kalaimani employs in the construction of the Śaiva world of the Tamil arts in TM. I have already spoken of TM’s focus on the Śiva temples of the Kaveri delta region, rich in their association with the development of Śaivism in the Tamil region. A second theme is that of the Tēvāram hymns of the Pallava era saints Appar, Campantar and Cuntaramūrtti Nāyaṇār. Of central importance in TM’s ambience are the sacred and esoteric traditions surrounding the cult of Tyāgarāja and his temple at Tiruvārår. All of these aspects of Tamil Śaiva religion come together in the persona of the mysterious and ubiquitous figure of Paramāṇa Paratēciyar.

The spirit and sensibility of the Tēvāram hymns to Śiva permeates the novel. Many chapter headings are phrases from the Tēvāram, and specific hymns are invoked at critical moments in the plot. Kalaimani’s narrative directly connects the history of the Tamil arts with the sacred lore of Tiruvārår, embodied particularly in the lives of the Tēvāram saints Appar and Cuntarar. Mōkaṇā is directly linked with the illustrious lineage of dancers attached to the Tiruvārår temple. Of special relevance to her is the life of Paravai Nācciyār, a rattira kanikai dancer whose marriage to Cuntarar is a major legend of Tiruvārår (Ghose 233). The most important of the sacred associations of Tiruvārår, in addition to the cult of the Goddess Kamalāṃbā, is the esoteric doctrine of ajapā (unspoken) dance of Tyāgarāja, a mystic doctrine equal to that of the dance of Naṉarāja at Chidambaram. In essence, the ajapā dance is Śiva’s dance on Viśnu’s chest, in the rhythm and form of the life-breath flowing in and out of the body.5

Not only is the ajapā dance invoked at critical points in the novel, nāda (sound, as primal manifestation of reality) as embodied in Caṉmukam’s playing, and the dynamic of the universe, as embodied in Mōkaṇa’s dancing, and the entire action of the novel, are explicated as manifestations of Tyāgarāja’s ajapā-naṇaṇam.

The focus on Tiruvārår has manifold significance. It shifts the perceived locus of the origins of Karnataka music and Bharatanatyam ‘traditions’ from the Tanjavur court to the sacred shrine of Tiruvārår, and especially to the melakārars of that temple. It illuminates for the readers the historical role of Tiruvārår in the creation and preservation of their sacred musical tradition, not

only in the 7th-century hymns of the Nāyaṇārs, but also in the 18th-century kṛti or kṛttiyāṇi musical compositions of Tyāgarāja, Śyāma Śāstri and Mutusvāmī Dīkṣīṭar, the so-called “Trinity” of Karnatak music, all associated with Tiruvārur. Here, too, Kalaimani shifts the focus from the composer Tyāgarāja’s Telugu songs on Rāma to Dīkṣīṭar’s Sanskrit kṛti-s dedicated to Śiva Tyāgarāja, his consort Goddess Kamalāmbā and other deities of the Tiruvārur temple. In the chapters dealing with the pārī nāyam and the Tillāna contest, Kalaimani discusses at length the special traditions of the periya mēlam players of Tiruvārur, highlighting the highly articulated correlation of nākasvaram repertoire with the esoteric and public rituals and festivals of this shrine. There are several references to the mallāri, a rhythmically regulated way of playing rāga-s that is restricted to the periya mēlam and temple ritual, and that has its own special and complex versions in Tiruvārur (Cuntaram 1990, p.13 -15; Kersenboom 1987, p. 174, note 176).

A Śaiva renouncer by vocation, Paramāṇanta Paratēciyār is much more — connoisseur and master of music and the sacred arts, a healer in the cittar and herbalist traditions, and a practitioner of the esoteric yoga of the ajapa dance of Tyāgarāja in Tiruvārur. Beginning with the very first episode, when Mōkaṇā and her party are attacked by highway robbers, the mysterious ascetic appears in a timely manner and rescues Mōkaṇā and Caṇmukam from danger. It is he who judges the competition between Caṇmukam and Mōkaṇā in Tiruvārur. Paratēciyār’s most dramatic intervention comes at a critical point in the narrative. Immediately after the jubilant celebration of Caṇmukam and Mōkaṇā at the end of the Tillāna contest, Caṇmukam is seriously wounded by a dagger thrown by Nallūr Nākaliṅkam. Paratēciyār combats the infection of the wound with the help of meditation, prayer, and healing herbs; when all seems to be of little avail, he turns to Mōkaṇā and commands her to dance, thinking of the life-breath dance of Tyāgarāja, till Caṇmukam revives. Mōkaṇā dances, silently, meditating on the words of two hymns of the saint Appar from Tēvāram. Here and in other junctures in TM Paratēciyār is directly linked to the sacred hymns and healing miracles of the Nāyaṇār saint-authors, with whose presence shrines such as Tiruvārur have been saturated since the 7th century, when Appar, Campantar and Cuntarar sang their hymns as they travelled from one shrine to another in the Kaveri delta.

Chapter 45  The Pārī Nāyam

Caṇmukam’s visit was a surprise to Cāmikkanṭu Nātasaṅkarārar and his wife and children. Heads peeped at him from every corner of the house. Nātasaṅkarārar hastened to offer him hospitality. He brought him a glass of hot, rich milk flavored with saffron. Caṇmukam said, “No, thank you, I do not want any milk, but I am in great need of a favor from you. Please teach me to play the pārī nāyam. I wish to play it.”

Barring the lullaby, the first song that all of us in this land hear is the music of the nākasvaram. Scholars have long debated the name of the instrument, whether it is nātasvaram or nākacuram, and what the name might
Neither name appears in the classical Tamil texts, but today, the very pole that holds up the wedding canopy is planted only to the accompaniment of the nàkasvaram. There is no villager who has not heard the Bhåpàëam and Bilahari råga-s played at the temple at dawn. The nàkasvaram is universally celebrated as the instrument signifying auspiciousness.

There is a school of thought that claims that the nàkasvaram is nothing but the small and large vaìkiyam mentioned in old Tamil texts. The word ‘nàtasvaram’ does not appear in any old inscriptions, but an inscription of about 500 years ago, found near Kumpakôñam, has an image of the nàkasvaram carved on it. In any case, since the nàkasvaram itself is current today, we should put an end to our research.

Till recently, players used a nàkasvaram called timiri, an instrument that was slightly larger than the mukavãõai. Both the timiri and the mukavãõai were high-pitched instruments, and the instrument our Çaõmukam played was a timiri.

In those days, the tradition of the pàri nàyañam was restricted to Tiruvàrår. A group of musicians called nàyiñàr añiyàr had the right to play the pàri, an instrument of grand sound. Its rich tones would dive deep into the Kamalàlayam water-tank, and emerge to enchant the entire town.

The great vidvàn Càmikkaõõu Nàtasvarakkàrar was a member of the hereditary community of pàri musicians and an expert in the instrument. That is why Çaõmukam had come to him. When Çaõmukam said that he wanted to learn the pàri, Càmikkaõõu Nàtasvarakkàrar said, “Tampi, you are an expert in the timiri. Your imagination flourishes on that instrument. It will be very hard for you to give it up and learn the pàri.”

“I can learn it in ten days’ time!” said Çaõmukam.

“Tampi, I applaud your enthusiasm, but learning to play the pàri nàyañam is not as easy as you think. It needs a skilled hand.”

“One can’t learn any instrument without a skilled hand, aõõ¹, I am a perpetual student. You can teach me with confidence.”

“But you will have to master it!”

“With effort, one can master any art!”

“It is easy for instrumentalists to learn vocal music. Even though they play with their fingers, they constantly sing the svara notes, and their mind is concentrated on the notes, but a musician who has played one instrument cannot easily change over to another one, tampi’.

“You are an expert. If you would only make up your mind to teach me, I would gain the skill of hand”.

Kalaimani opts for “nàtasvaram”. In my translation I have used nàkasvaram, except in the name “Càmikkaõõu Nàtasvarakkàrar”

7 Younger brother.

8 Elder brother.
“Tampi, the pāri nākasvaram is not as easily learned as that! The keḻai and the cōṭi reed alone measure the length of the index finger. The instrument itself is a long one. Half the air that you blow into it will escape. On the timiri, the svara notes can be played within the space of two spans, but you will have to stretch your fingers much further to play them on the pāri. It will take a while to learn to do that, tampi.”

“Please don’t worry about these things. I am determined to learn it. I shall play it perfectly for you, even if the playing gives me chest pain!”

“How can that be, tampi? Kuppucāmi, the son of the old man in the corner house, studied with me for five years, but he still can’t play it well. He doesn’t know how bad his own playing is, and instead he is jealous of me for my skill in the pāri”.

“I think you are worried that I might ruin your good name.”

“No, tampi! Why, you hardly need to study further to call yourself a vidoṭam! But this is the pāri nāyagam. It is meant only for Tyāgarāja. It should never be played anywhere else. So I wonder why you would want to learn it”.

“Not to gain anything in particular, aŋṉē. I am involved in a wager, and I have given my word that I will play the pāri. Without having mastered the pāri, I can never again pick up my timiri. Self-respect is the most important thing in a man’s life. You must teach me!”

“When shall we begin?”

“Right now.”

“What? At midnight?”

“Yes.”

“Come, now! If I start playing now, Tyāgarāja will wake up, asking, ‘Why are you playing at this hour, Cāmikkaõõu? Let us wait till the morning. Shall I ask them to bring a bed for you?’”

“No.”

“Why, tampi?”

“Today I have come to your house as a student”.

“Śiva, Śiva, how can I let you sleep on the floor?”

“No harm done. I shall not sleep on a mat until I have played the pāri and fulfilled my pledge. I won’t use a pillow, either.”

“Nobody has shown such dedication, that is why I have not taught anyone. The townspeople say that I am a miser hoarding my learning.”

“Aiṭ, that is slander! Who would say such things about you?”

When Cāmikkanu said, “They say these things in the town, tampi. Allright, please go to bed. We will start the lessons in the morning!”, Ĉāmumu acquiesced.

His heart was filled with joy. All night long he dreamt that he was playing the pāri nāyagam, and that, unable to dance to his music, Mōkaṉā was crying, “Stop, stop! See how the blood is pooling in my feet!”
Chapter 48  There is neither victory nor defeat for the brave

Introduction: Determined to prevent Camukam and Mºka from meeting each other again through the Tillana contest, Vatti pays Kuppucami Nayaakkaraar, Càmikkaõõu Natasvarakkaraar’s jealous relative, to object to his teaching the pàri nàyaam to a musician who does not belong to the Tiruvãrår Nayiír Aniyàr community. The matter is to be decided at a public panchayat court convened by the trustees and officers of the Tiruvãrår temple, in the Têvàciriõa maõnõapam hall, famed as a meeting place of ritual officiants and the learned of Tiruvãrår as early as the time of Cuntaramårtti Nâyãr.

On that day the Para÷aivas, descendants of Tampiyappa Muññukkarar and players of the cuttamattaam and pa¤camukavàttiyam drums at the sanctum of Tyàgaràja, sat on one side of the T¹vàciriõa hall.9 Naññumuññu Nañaràcamårtti, the head of their group, wore the orthodox accoutrements of the sacred ash, rudràkùa beads and sacred thread.

On the other side sat the nayiír aniyàr community, to which Kuppucami Nàyãraar belonged. These were the hereditary temple servants who played the ekkàlam, tirucci- am, conch, vanka, karu, and the koñukoññi drum, as well as the pàri nàyaam, the drone, the tavil drum and the tãlam hand cymbals.10

The trustees and managers of Tiruvãrår temple, treasurers, the tituvår ritual singers of the T¹vàram, and the specialists in charge of the rakaciyam (mystery of the ajapà dance), ka×al kàõutal and other sacred rites, sat in front of the ràjatài hall.11 The temple women sat on the other side. Seniormost among them was Koõñi Ammaiyàr. A member of the patiyilàr temple ritual specialist community, she had the privilege of dancing in front of Tyàgaràja’s sanctum at the evening worship.12 These ladies begin dancing only after the age of forty. They dance to the music of accompanists, according to the injunctions of the àgama-s, dressed in white garments, wearing white flowers and white ornaments, and with their hair bound high in a knot on one side of the head. That lady sat on one side of the hall.

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9 Tampiyappa Muññukkarar, a contemporary and associate of the composer Muttusvàmi Dãkùitar, is credited with the organization of the ritual repertoire for the nãkasvaram at the Tiruvãrår temple. In TM Càmikkaõõu Natasvarakkàrar is said to be a member of the lineage of disciples of Tampiyappar. The pa¤camukavàttiyam, a five headed drum, is one of the special instruments played in Tiruvãrår temple ritual. For a detailed discussion of the priests and other ritual officiants at the Tiruvãrår Siva temple, as well as its institutional organization, see Ghose 1996, pp.199-252.

10 The ottu (drone), tavil drum and hand cymbals accompany the nãkasvaram.

11 At the concrete, ritual level, the rakaciyam is the mystery or secret of facilitating the performance of the ajapà dance by the Tyàgaràja icon in procession during the Pàñkuçì Ûttiram and Avudà festivals (Ghose 1996, p.125). Special ritualists know the technique of suspending the Tyàgaràja icon on a banana fibre cord, so that the icon moves to an extremely gentle rhythm, thus performing the ajapà dance. Ghose (1996, pp. 236 -8) states that this rakaciyam was the duty of a group called Vi×upperumar. It is possible that “ràjatài maõnõapam is a reference to the Ràjanàràyaõa maõnõapam hall.

The female temple servants who played the flute and vina through the window of the sanctum sat next to her. Other dasis, who performed rites such as waving the plate of auspicious lustration and showing the ritual hand gestures, sat nearby. Since the entire town had been invited, Mokanada and Vaivampal sat in the women’s section of the audience and watched the proceedings of the panchayat court.

Across from the mantlapam hall, among the out-of-town donors who had privileges at the temple, sat Mr. Cinkapuram Minor, and beside him, pretending complete ignorance of what was going on, sat Vaitti.

Among the members of the panchayat seated on the dais was Viti viñka nayin, the priest from the community of those who have the privilege of “touching the sacred body” of Tyagaraja. He wore diamond studs in his ears and a five-fold silk pattu veiti cloth around his waist. An upper cloth covered his chest, and his body was sumptuously adorned with shaiva ornaments. His lips constantly murmured “namacivya”, the five syllable mantra. Next to him sat Tiyakavinota Piramarayar. He too belonged to the priestly community. He wore sacred ash on his forehead, rudraksha bead earrings, and the gaurisankaram ornament around his neck. He was humming the raga Kalyani.

Crowned by a mass of matted hair, the tampiratt ascetic from the monastery of the royal endowment at the Tarumapuram Atinam monastic seat sat beside Piramarayar. Two assistant tampiratt sat behind him and waited on him.

Alliyakottai Atimaravata tecikar, the otuvur singer of hymns, was the fourth member of the panchayat. With every movement, he chanted, ‘Siva, tiruccirampalam’. The fifth member was the director of internal administration at the temple. He neither hummed nor chanted, but looked around every now and then with an air of self-importance.

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13 The temple women sang through this window, known as teyavacal (Tyakkar Kuravanti, English Introduction, p. 19).

14 The phrase ‘mappolatum tirumegi tayuvur’ (men who thrice daily touch the Lord’s sacred image) is already used for a special class of priests at Tiruvurti by Cuntaramurti Nayanar (Tvram 7. 39. 10, Peterson 1989, poem 270, p.335). According to Ghose (1996, p. 235-41), the Nayin are the karukkal priests, who actually perform the worship rites in the sanctum, while the Piramarayar (or Brahmarayar or Paramarayar) have the privilege of decorating the icon, but not of performing the worship. Both are Sivacaryas, brahmans who have been initiated into the Shaiva rites.

15 Veiti = veiti, cloth worn as lower garment by men.

16 The Tarumapuram Atinam, the Tamil Shaiva monastic seat situated in Tarumapuram near Mayavaram, is one of the most important centers of Shaiva (especially Shaiva Siddhanta) learning in the Kaveri delta. The tampiratt ascetic is the representative of the Panta Caaniti, the head of the Atinam. The Atinam oversees several temple endowments, including the ‘raja raajanga kattala’ (royal endowment).

17 On the otuvur singers and their performance of the Tivaam and other Tamil hymns during the worship rites in the Tamil Siva temples, see Peterson 1989, pp. 52-75.
Chapter 52  The flood that flowed from the heart

Introduction: Mºka−à is busy preparing for the Tillà−à contest, along with her dance teacher Muttukkumara Naññuva−àr and Varata−à, who accompanies her on the mirutankam drum. A strong man who devotes much time to physical exercise, Varada loves Mºka like an elder brother.

"What is going on, Varatà? It looks as if you have taken all the ashes from the stove to clean your teeth! A pot of yesterday’s rice is missing as well. What is going on here? How many times do you need to brush your teeth? And how much rice can you eat?" said Vañivàmpàë.

"Who’s got time to brush their teeth or to eat, ammà? I have no time for anything other than smearing paste on the mirutankam", Varata said, scraping the rice-pot.

Varata does not use cream of wheat on his drum. Instead of wheat, he smears the drum head with a paste of day-old rice and ashes. He believes that the paste keeps the drumhead soft, and helps it to make deep, muffled "kum" sounds. He would say, “When someone asks you to play, you shouldn’t have to run to the grocery shop. Day-old rice and ashes are available everywhere”.

For a whole week now, Mºka has not taken off her ankle-bells, and Varata has not touched his weights. As for the dance master, all he has had time for is to conduct Mºka’s dancing with his stick. The neighbors lamented, ‘One should not live next door to a tinsmith or a dancer’.

Nowadays Mºka is not interested in anything other than the contest; it is her sole preoccupation. She thinks only about it, she practices for it, she dances all the time. In the old days, on the day following a concert Vañivàmpàë would rub Mºka’s body down with oil, dress her hair with medicinal oil, make her drink herbal teas; but now there was no time for such remedies. Vañivàmpàë was worried about Mºka’s incessant dancing. Anxiously, she thought, “How can she dance like this, refusing to eat or drink? What if she falls ill? Why did this contest ever come up?” As if these worries were not enough, something that had happened that morning added to her anxiety.

It was her habit, every morning and evening, to gaze with reverence at the diamond necklace that she kept in the safe. When she tried to open the safe that morning, however, the lock seemed stuck. She could not turn the key. She called to Varata to come and help her, but Varata paid no heed, and kept on playing “tatiïkiõatºm”. Luckily, when she went to the front of the house to look for him, she saw a locksmith passing by and had him come in and repair the lock. It was because of her resentment at Varata’s not coming to her aid when she needed him that she had shouted at him for taking the pot of old rice.

“I say, Varatà, what good will come out of her dancing in this contest? Is she going to get any money out of it? Why don’t you talk to her?”

"Why me? When you are there, ammà, why ask me to talk to her?"

18 “pa×aiya câtam” or “pa×aiyatu”, day-old-rice, is commonly eaten with curds at breakfast or lunch.
19 Ammà = mother. A respectful form of address for women.
20 The necklace is a present from the Minor, to be given to Mºka. Vañivàmpàë is waiting for the right moment to broach the subject to her daughter.
“Does she treat me as her mother? She doesn’t even look at me these days!”

“She is a grown young woman. You need to handle her gently.”

“What do you mean, handle her gently? You can catch a cow if you let it go, but you can’t catch money if you let it go. Are you telling me that I should tell her to do just as she pleases and marry that Caõmukam?”

“O.K., don’t do anything. After all, the anupallavi of the song must follow the opening pallavi.21 If you don’t let her marry, her marriage will happen of its own accord!”

“How can it happen? You saw how that day at the panchayat he refused even to look at her! What does she gain from loving him?”

“Why, amma, did love happen because you and I told it to happen? It blossomed on its own, it will bear fruit on its own.”

“How will it bear fruit? It seems to have withered in the bud! Look, Varatà, you don’t know anything about the world. One should not be born as a dâst in this world. And if one is born as a dâst, one should be rich. If she has no money, no one will respect her. That Minor lad is a good liaison for her. He will visit her every now and then. And he won’t come empty-handed. He will give her a few thousands whenever he comes. She can keep dancing. And that’s good for you and the dance master as well, you will both draw a salary till the end of your days. Why don’t you people understand all this? If that nâyâgakârâng marries her, you will have to sing for your supper. Varatà, the welfare of this house is now in your hands. You alone can talk to her”.

“Amma, you may be her mother, but you don’t understand Môkañâ at all. She does not want wealth, all she wants is her art.”

“Hey, don’t you talk about art! If she were not as beautiful as she is, you may be sure that not a single fellow would come near her. Who cares for my daughter as much as I do? When I tell her to do something, it is her duty to do as I say!”

“If you were to ask her to drink castor oil, she would drink it, but if you ask her slip and fall, why would she do that? After all, she is a girl who is used to dancing to the tâla without taking a false step?22”

Chapter 55 The enchanting pâri nâyâñam

Introduction: The panchayat court has given permission to Caõmukam to perform on the pari nâyâñam at Tiruvârår temple on a designated day, the 13th day of the festival of Pankuni Uttiram, when the deity is taken out in procession as risapavâkañâr, the Lord who rides on the bull. The tillâna contest is scheduled to take place within the temple precincts after the procession has come to an end.

Beginning this chapter with a wonderful description of the Tiruvârår temple festival, Kalaimaõi rhapsodizes about Caõmukam’s performance of a Dikšîtar composition on the god Subrahmanya,

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21 Pallavi is the first segment of the the krti or krttañâi song in Karnatak music. It is followed by the anupallavi and one or more caraõam-s.

22 A dose of castor oil is given to induce or to help maintain regular bowel movements. Tâla (tâlam) here refers to the regular pattern of beats used in Indian dance and music.
following it with praise of his Tamil persona as Murukan. Only a portion of the author’s poem to Murukan and his connections with the Tamil language and culture has been translated here. The praise of Murukan is resumed in other segments of the novel, pertaining to the temple at Cikkal, and the pilgrimage shrine of Murukan in Katirkamam in Ilam (in Sri Lanka).

A prosperous land is the essential support for the arts. When man is entirely preoccupied with subsistence, life becomes a burden, and he is forever in search of a place to lay down his burden and rest. Since the fertile land of the Kaveri spares its citizens such cares, this is fertile soil for the arts as well.

The news that Cankumakam was going to play the nākasvaram and Mokaṉämpal was going to dance spread all over Tanjavur district, like the fragrance of a katampam string of mixed flowers. A week before the event, people were already busy planning their trip to Tiruvārār. The farm manager asked for a few days off, claiming that he had to perform the ancestral rites for his grandmother. His boss, the Mirasdar landowner, used the same pretext to get a court hearing postponed. The hired help at the farm followed suit, and asked the farm manager for leave. Today, they smiled at each other as they met on the road to Tiruvārār.

Carts drawn by hornless cattle raced with each other on the road. When children spotted the occasional pair of bullocks among these carts, they shouted: “There’s a bullock, there’s a bullock”.

The Mirasdar landowners of Māṇārkuṇṭi travelled to Tiruvārār in beautiful “carru” coaches. They exchanged courteous smiles, even though their diamond jewels vied with each other for status.

On that day in Tiruvārār you could see betel boxes in the shape of books, round boxes, flat ones, oval boxes, and every other kind of betel box. The old song goes, “Teeth are precious, sir, tillātē, / but the betel juice stain on the teeth / is gold itself, taṇṇātē.” Indeed, if we could calculate the cost of the betel leaf, areca nut and tobacco all those people consumed in Tiruvārār that day, we would know the cost of the golden stain that they had acquired for the silver coin of their teeth.

Some men complain that God has given beauty to women alone, that he has cheated men. But the very same men weave beautiful silk saris for women, saris with gold lace, and in every kind of pattern, from the tender mango to the jasmine bud. That day Tiruvārār was a sea of silk saris, each competing with the other.

Visitors from out of town lodged in every house in Tiruvārār. Wealthy men famed for their hospitality were busy ordering their servants to warm up water for the bath, and to make coffee, sweets and savories.

On that day Tiruvārār was pervaded by sandal paste, flowers, and music.

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23 “Carru” is probably a corruption of “chariot”.
24 Tillātē, taṇṇātē = nonsense syllables used in folk songs.
In a corner of the shore of the Kamalālayam tank at the temple, a karakam pot-dancer was dancing to the Simhanandana tāḷa. Since Tiruvārår is a town renowned for its crafts, with entire streets inhabited by craftsmen who make ornaments from paper and pith, the karakam dance of Tiruvārår was dazzling, graced by the splendor of the ornaments on the temple car, the street, and the entire town. Thousands of people watched the dance.

At another spot, the Māriyamma Köyil Pakkiri troupe of dummy horse dancers was dancing to the kiñukiññi drum band. The man who played the male rider was dressed up as King Serfoji of Tanjavur, the one who played the female rider was dressed as his queen, and they argued with each other.

Man:
I came to you after determining
the auspicious day, time and stars, ati,
I came after I had heard the soothsayers' predictions, ati.

Woman:
What do I care if you looked up the auspicious days,
or whether you came yesterday or some other day,
My eyes are weary, I am tired of waiting for you, O king!

Hearing this retort, the young men in the crowd broke into applause.

Elsewhere a bhajanai group was singing “Nañaràja, Nañaràja, beautiful dancer, Nañaràja”, to the accompaniment of hand-cymbals and the mirutaiykam drum. Wearing a crown of rudrākùa beads and strings of akka beads on his chest and arms, the leader of the group was himself dancing Nataraja’s dance.

At yet another spot, five or six people were seated on a dais, singing "Manmatha làvaõã" to the accompaniment of the ñ¹p and other instruments. When they sang, “How could we have cattle, and houses, and property, and sons-in-law, and daughters-in-law, if Manmatha had really been burned to ashes?” Manmatha, god of love, himself laughed from his hiding place.

In the midst of all this din, suddenly there was the sound of firecrackers exploding, announcing the beginning of risapavitkanam, the Lord’s procession on his bull mount. At once, the crowd ran to viţţa vācal, the temple gateway from which the procession would emerge.
The lamps at the temple are lit only with ney, clarified butter. In the old days, there was no dearth of dairy cattle in the Cōla land. Even then, however, we hear that the Śaiva saint and devotee Naminanti had a wick and lamp, but no ney for the lamp. He tried to borrow some ney from his Jain neighbor. The Jain refused to give the butter, and taunted Naminanti, saying, ‘What need does the god of light have for a lamp? And why ney? Can’t you light his lamp with water?’ Crying, “O God, I do not have ney, but I have my hands. Please accept my devotion itself as the butter”, he scooped up a handful of water from the Kamalālayam tank, and poured it into the lamp. It immediately turned into ney, and he lit the lamp with this clarified butter. The revered Nāvukkaracar (Appar) sang about this as follows:

“The jewel among devotees, the humble servant
of Ārār’s Lord who wears the sweet lotus garland,
Nampinanti made the oil lamps burn on water;
surely the whole world knows this miracle!”

But today, thanks to the arrangements made by the temple management, there was no need to resort to the water of the Kamalālayam tank. Ney had been brought in by the potful, and hundreds of torches were burning, fueled by clarified butter.

The Bullrider Lord went in procession around the temple street. The sight of the Lord seated on his silver bull mount was extraordinary. The smell of fresh coconut water, and the smell of camphor spread everywhere, and the sound of Cāmikkaṉṉu Nātasvarakkārār’s magical mallāri wafted above the fragrance. Walking next to him, like the love-god himself, was Cikkal Čāmukacuntaram, wearing a vetṭṭi cloth in the peacock-feather pattern, folded up to the knee, and a Banaras brocade shawl with a tender mango design for his upper cloth. A gold chain hung around his neck, fitted out with the Čāmuõóã÷varã pendant awarded to him by the Mysore Maharaja, and diamond rings glittered on his fingers. All who saw him wondered whether the love-god had given up his body in shame after seeing this handsome youth……

Cāmikkaṉṉu Nātasvarakkārār placed the pārṇavān in Čāmukam’s hands. “Tampi, please play”, he said with a smile. Čāmukam received the instrument and saluted Cāmikkaṉṉu. Mutturākku sounded the tavil drum. A parrot sang in the ‘pi pi’ sound that arose from the nākasvaram. As soon as they heard the sound of Čāmukam’s reed, thousands of people cried simultaneously, Āhā, here is Čāmukam!” Yes, that day there was a major change in the sound of the nākasvaram. That day was a milestone in the history of the nākasvaram. Čāmukam, who had played only the timiri, is playing the pārṇavānam today. That music — is it milk, or honey, or fruit juice? Are not all these things cloying in the end? With the touch of his fingers on the pārṇi instrument, Čāmukam, holder of the treasure of music, poured out uncloying, divine music for his audience.

“Salutations to Śrī Subrahmanya,

29 Appar, Tēvāram 4.103.2 (for a translation of the full text of this verse, see Peterson 1989, poem 263, p. 325).
Salutations to him who is handsome
like a thousand Manmatha-s,
he who is the refuge of the destitute." 30

The Kāmbōḍi rāga he played today surpassed the Sāveri rāga that he had played that day on the boat on the Kaveri river. Like Agastya who contained the entire ocean in a small pot, Čanmukam played a stunning Kāmbōḍi rāga in a mere four mūrccanai measures, and began to play Dīksīṭar’s composition. We may examine a thousand kṛttçaṇai compositions, but it would be hard to find even one kṛttçaṇai of this calibre.

Our hearts melt when we hear a devotee calling to Murukāṇ, calling out to him, saying “Kantā, Murukā, beloved Murukā!” Tamil people are enchanted when they hear someone singing the pillittamī poem to the child Murukāṇ, beginning with the words “Devotees who love him...” Murukāṇ is the god whom all of us celebrate as Kantaṇ, our own, the deity of each of our families. The Tamil language acquired renown by praising him. However many songs of praise there might be in the world, his praise alone is sacred, it is Tiruppukal, the sacred praise song.31

Chapter 62  Life sprouted, consciousness blossomed

Introduction: Wounded by the knife thrown by Nākaliikam, Čanmukam is fighting for his life. His accompanists (including Tarumaṇ, the drone player, and Mutturākku, the Tavil drum artist) sit vigil. When Mōkaṇārt learns about Čanmukam’s condition, she rushes over to Čanmukam’s lodgings, accompanied by Varataṇ and Muttukkumara Natturākaran, and a reluctant Vañivāmpāt. Vaitti and the Minor are present as well. Paramaṇanta Paratēciyār sets out to find a healing herb.

Paratēciyār, who had set out in search of the healing herb that could save Čanmukam’s life, was walking on the bank of the Ĭñampōkkki river. He searched for the herb in the green patches on the riverbank, but he did not find it. He was running out of time. He knew that the danger to Čanmukam’s life was increasing with every passing moment. All of a sudden, he had an idea. He looked up at the sun. There were still three and half to four hours till sunset. Quickly arriving at a decision, he set off on the Tanjavur Road. They say that horses gallop with the speed of the wind. Paratēciyār walked faster than the wind. Compassion is surely swifter than the wind! Trains ran between Tiruvāṟur and Tanjavur. There was no train at the time that he left Tiruvāṟur, and even if there had been one, he would not have boarded it. In those days, the Tanjavur train was known for its speed, but Paratēciyār walked with the swiftness of the child seeking its mother, the devotee seeking God, the hawk seeking prey.

Let us find out whither Paratēciyār was bound, and why, and what it was that was not to be found in Tiruvāṟur and that he sought elsewhere.

30 “Śri subrahmaṇyāya namaste” in the rāga Kāmbōḍi, a kṛti composition in Sanskrit by Muttusvāmi Dīksīṭar. Note that Kalaimani uses this composition as a context for his praise of Murukan and the Tamil language.

31 Tiruppukal is the title of the collection of Arunakirināṭar’s celebrated Tamil songs to Murukan.
No telegram in the world could have fetched the herb that he sought in Tanjavur, for in those days the herbs used in our healing systems were kept secret. In those days, people would not have known that kaiyātakarai is a code name for the herb karicilānkaññi. As for these days, no one can understand either name!……

“Attā, attā”, she called out. Then the thought came to her, “How can I call him attā? Why should I be the only one to hope that we might marry each other?”, and her heart grew bitter.32

She fought back her bitterness, and called out, “Sir, Sir Nakasvaram player!” but the necessity of having to use this form of address only added to her heartbreak. “Look here, sir, please open your eyes, please look at who has come to see you!” she cried, and gazed intently at him. At this, he opened his eyes once more.

She took the little basket from Varata’s hands. She took out two citron fruit, and lovingly peeled them. Saying, “Here, please eat some”, she tried to feed him a segment of the fruit.

He did not open his mouth. This reminded her of something else, and she was upset. She remembered how, just a few days back, Canmukam threw in the waste the grapes he had brought for her from Tanjavur. Deeply distressed, she thought: “God forbid that I too should be forced to throw away the fruit that I myself plucked for him, from the tree in our backyard!”

“Aiyō, alas, attā”, she cried involuntarily.

At that moment the door opened, and Paramāṇanta Paratēciyār walked in, asking, “What is the matter, amma?” His eyes were red. He was covered in red dust from top to toe. His legs were coated with red clay up to the knee. He who had been an ascetic in a white vēṭṭi was now dressed in a golden cloth. Clad in that ochre-red garment, he appeared to all of them like the ripe fruit of divine grace.

“Cāmi,33 You alone can save him, “Mōkaṇā implored, joining her palms in reverence, but Paratēciyār took Canmukam’s hand and checked his pulse, then fell into thought. Vaṭivāmpāḷ stood with arms crossed. Varata stared at him. Everyone crowded around him.

Mōkaṇā said: “Cāmi, how is he? I would gladly give my own life, if only you could save him!”

“Mōkaṇā, I am afraid he alone must suffer whatever is destined for him. What need is there to sacrifice your life?”

“It was on my account that he was stabbed. He does not have a single enemy in this world”. “Are you saying that you have enemies?”

“If only God had not made me beautiful, everyone would have been kind to me, too. If only I had not been born as a woman, everyone would have

32 “Attā” is the term by which a Tamil girl addresses the cross-cousin (father’s sister’s son) who has a right to marry her. The term is more generally used to address one’s husband.
33 Cāmi, cuvāmi = sir, lord, master. Term of great respect.
had compassion for me. Cursed female birth! Some enemy threw a knife at him, thinking that he could get me by killing him. I am the cause of all this. Thanks to him, I got the prizes of a title and a gold chain. Thanks to me, his prize is this knife-wound. Càmi, I will give my life for his. Save him, please save him!"

Mòkanà fell in supplication at Paratéciyàr’s feet, but he lifted her up.

“Child, it is not enough to carry learning in your feet, you need wisdom of the heart as well. A sure sense of rhythm in the hand is not enough, you need concentration of the mind. You are prattling, because you do not understand the true nature of things. Ammà, it is not for us to give or to take life. God is not so destitute that he needs to borrow your life to shore up Caõmukam, like a man borrowing milk from a neighbour to feed me. He alone is the creator, and he is the destroyer as well. If it is his will, he can revive even a corpse. Did he not once come to save Ciruttonțan? Pray to him, ammà!”

“Càmi, his body is so cold! Why does he not speak? Look, his eyes are open, but he does not see!”

Paratéciyàr said, “My child, I had thought that you would not come here. I had thought that I would have come back with the herb while his life still clung to him in the hope that he would get to see you, but you arrived here before me. Do misery and fortune announce themselves when they come? Yes, he might have seen you. He might have become one with God, happy to have seen you. Or, delighted with seeing you, he might yet revive, like a plant that has been watered. The doctor can give medicine, ammà, but he cannot give life.” At this, Vaṭivāmpāl spat out a curse.

“Is that all? Is medicine the only remedy that even this holy man can give? And here I have been thinking all this time that he is some kind of cittar, a holy man who can revive the dead with a touch of his hand! Chít, chít, and here I have wasted a whole bunch of bananas on this man!” she thought, then tightly crossed her arms across her breast in a posture of reverence, worried that it might be sinful to think such thoughts about a holy man.

“My child, wisdom consists of the ability to face both joy and sorrow. Learning is of no use to a person without equanimity. Trust in God, pray to him!” Paratéciyàr said. “Can someone bring me a matchbox?”

Tarumaŋ quickly fetched a matchbox.

Tarumaŋ, Varataŋ, Mutturǎku, even the Minor, looked intently at Paratéciyàr, wondering with what medicine he was about to treat Caõmukam, and wondering whether Caõmukam would live.

Paratéciyàr held two wicks made of twisted cloth in his hand. He had saturated the wicks with the juice of the healing plant that he had dug up in Tanjavur, mixing it with other substances. Lighting one of the wicks, he held it under Caõmukam’s nostrils. The wick began to smoke. He guided the smoke

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34 Paratéciyàr refers to the story (cited in the Tiruvâram and narrated in Cēkkilàr’s hagiography Periya purânaṉ) of the Ñiva saint Ciruttonțar, whom Ñiva tested by appearing as a holy man and demanding Ciruttonțar’s son for his meal. When Ciruttonțar showed the strength of his devotion by complying with his guest’s demand, Ñiva revived the son and rewarded the saint.
into Canmukam’s nose, along with each inbreath. Everyone’s eyes were trained on him. He had a worried look on his face. Some time went by.

“Cuvāmi, What can I do?”

“Praise God, ammā, pray to him. Let medicine be joined with mantra”.

“How shall I pray to him, cuvāmi, my mind is not in my control! What shall I do, cuvāmi?”

“Dance….dance! Pray for his grace with dancing. Dance with your heart focused on Śiva. I must sing to worship him, but you must worship him with dance. The Lord of Ārūr dances in the form of the life breath. Think of him and dance! With your dance, ask him to give life-breath back to Canmukam!”, Paratēciyār said, sorrowfully. Mokaṇā stood like a stone, uncomprehending.

“A fine place this is for dancing!”, Vaṭivāmpāḷ said.

“Vaṭivāmpā, give her permission to dance. A life will be saved if she will dance. Please show a little compassion, tell her to dance!”

“How can you say this, cuvāmi? How could she want to dance when that man is lying there like that? And how could I tell her to dance? Is it proper to dance in some stranger’s house? Are there no proprieties as to where a dancer may dance?”

“What greater stage could she dance on, ammā? The sanctum of love is greater even than the sanctum of God. Till yesterday your daughter danced at your command. But a daughter cannot dance at her mother’s command forever. Like all beings who dance to God’s command, there will come a time when she, too, will dance at another man’s will. You must realize the limits of a mother’s hold over her daughter”. Mokaṇā was overjoyed to hear this stern admonition.

“Varatā, run and fetch me my ankle-bells”, she cried, turning toward the place where Varatāṇ had been standing. But Varatāṇ was no longer there. In fact, he ran in from the door, and gave her the ankle-bells he held in his hands.

“How did you bring them so quickly?”

“I ran out even as cuvāmi was telling you to dance. I ran to the house and brought them. Dance, taikacci, little sister, dance!”

Everyone watched in awed silence, thinking, “What kind of spectacle is this? A man lies on his deathbed. A woman is dancing by his side. Can something like this happen in the world?” The room was pervaded by a strange fragrance. No one could tell whether it was the smell of incense, or of burning aloe sticks, or the fragrance of divinity. It was the fragrance of the smoke rising from that wick. Wisps of smoke spread over the room, like darkness. In the midst of the darkness Paramāṇanta Paratēciyār, a blaze of light, sat in the lotus posture, like Śiva in his form as Daksīnāmūrti the Teacher. A divine aura emanated from his face.

Mokaṇā looked at the wick that Paratēciyār held in his hand. The flame in that wick seemed to her to be the flame of life itself. “After all, is not life like a flame? Who is the one who saves it from being extinguished? Lord Śiva, save Canmukam’s life! Save the light that lights my life! Save my life from being enveloped by darkness!”
It illuminates the heart.
It dispels darkness.
It illumines speech
with its radiance.
It dwells within every soul,
it is seen by everyone,
It is the light of the knowing self,
the chant of “Hail Śiva”.

“You are the light in the heart, you are the light that rids the heart of sorrow, you are the light in speech, you are the light that shows the path, you are the object of sight; dwelling as light in the eye, you make the eye see. O Lord Śiva, brahmin who is the essence of the Veda, radiant immortal, O namaccivāyam, the saving chant of ‘Hail Śiva’, you alone are my refuge. O object of the namaccivāya mantra, you who saved Nāvukkaracar when he was bound to a rock and cast into the sea, save the lord of my heart!” — the song expressed all these tender feelings. Her body thrilled. Today her voice did not sing, her heart sang. The song had no rāga melody, but it was suffused with emotion.

Like a creeper buffeted by the monsoon wind seeking a tree for support, she sought her God. She danced with heartfelt emotion. She looked at Cānmuṇakam. She thought: “Who is greater, Death, who has come to take his life, or the Lord Śiva, whom I worship? Lord, how can Death appear, when his forehead is marked with your sacred ash?

He wears the sacred ash on his forehead
He is sumptuously adorned with white bones.
He moves swifter than the wind.
He has a third eye on his brow.
He kicked Death with his foot
wearing the ringing anklet.

Won’t you come to us, swifter than the wind, and save him? Is it not for the sake of giving us your grace that you bear a third eye?”

As she danced, silently singing these words again and again, “He kicked Death with his foot wearing the ringing anklet”, Mōkaṇā saw the Lord himself. She saw Lord Śiva kicking Death with his foot. She became entranced, possessed by  

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35 Appar (Tirunāvukkaracar), Tēvāram hymn 4.11.8, namaccivāyat tiruppatikam (the holy hymn of “hail, Śiva”). According to the hagiographical literature, Appar sang this hymn when his enemies bound him to a rock and cast him into the sea. The rock miraculously floated, and the saint emerged unharmed. See note 29 below.

36 Many of the phrases in this passage are direct quotations from Appar Tēvāram 4.11.1. When I sincerely worship the sweet golden feet / of the radiant immortal, / the brahmin who is the essence of the Veda, / even if I were to be bound to a rock / and cast into the sea, / the chant of “Hail, Śiva!” / would save me!” (Peterson 1989, poem 145, p. 218).

37 Quotation from Appar Tēvāram 6.242. 2, a hymn dedicated to Śiva in the Mūlattāṇam (Vaṃkāṇāṇṭar) shrine in Tiruvārür temple. Appar refers to the myth which narrates how Śiva rescued his devotee, the boy Mārkandeya, from death, by kicking Yama, god of death, on the chest when he came to take the boy away on the day appointed for his death. The myth is represented in the iconic form of Śiva as Kālāntaka or Kālasamhāramārti, and the event is said to have taken place in Tirukkaṭavur. See Peterson 1989, p. 342 and 347.
the Lord. She kept on dancing, as one possessed. “Jal jal”, the ankle bells rang out.

The smoke that has entered Čanmukam’s nostrils is slowly reviving his consciousness. There was a slight movement in his body. The life-substance awoke in him. His breath, which had been intermittent till then, began to flow in and out in an even rhythm. Life sprouted in him. Consciousness blossomed. He heard the ankle-bells ringing “kal kal”.

The mother knows the sound of her child’s footsteps. God knows the cry of his devotee. Čanmukam knew the ring of Mokaṇṭa’s ankle-bells. To him, this was not just the sound of ankle-bells, but ambrosia for the ears. Slowly he came back to life. As he gained consciousness, his body grew stronger. Čanmukam opened his eyes. He saw Paratēciyār sitting before him. It was like seeing God himself.

He saluted Paratēciyār with his eyes. He wiped his feet with his tears. Turning his gaze, he saw Mokaṇṭa dancing before him. His eyes saw her bringing her hands together in the aṅcali salutation. With his eyes he drank in the ambrosia of her love.

His tongue trembled. It was as if he was about to speak. Slowly the word ‘Mokaṇṭa’ came out of him. Crying, “attāy”, Mokaṇṭa ran to him.

“Say it once again, call my name once more!” she said, gazing at his face.

“Mokaṇṭa, feed him something with your hand”, said Paratēciyār.

“Cāmi, I have some citron fruit. May I give it to him?”

“Even if you were to feed him poison with your hand, it would be ambrosia to him. Why not a citron? Feed him,” Paratēciyār replied.

Weeping for joy, Mokaṇṭa fed him a segment of the fruit, and Čanmukam ate it with relish.

Tarumaṇ ran to Čanmukam, crying, “Tampi, have you come back to life?”

Paratēciyār restrained him, saying, “Don’t get too excited, Tarumā. There is some hope now, that is all. Don’t think that his life has been saved”. Then, turning to Mokaṇṭa, he said, “Mokaṇṭa, his consciousness is just returning. His delirium is abating. Now he needs to gain back the blood he lost. He needs to gain strength. Only then can we take him to Chennai tomorrow. You and I must sit vigil all night. Can you do that?”

“ What kind of a question is this? What would I want to do, other than this?”

“Then come, sit next to him. Whenever he wakes, you should give him some milk. I will keep the wick smoking through the night.

Pleading, “Cāmi, that is no mere wick, it is my whole life. Please don’t let it die out”, Mokaṇṭa sat down at Čanmukam’s bedside with a glass of milk.
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Casie Chitty, Simon, 1807-1860. The Tamil Plutarch : a summary account of the lives of the poets and poetesses of southern India and Ceylon from the earliest to the present times, with select specimens of their compositions New Delhi : Asian Educational Services, 1982.Â The religion and philosophy of Tevaram : with special reference to Nampi Arurar (Sundarar) 2nd ed. Madras : University of Madras, 1990.Â Pope, G.U Â tamil poetical anthology Naladiyar (The) or Four Hundred Quartrains in Tamil, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893. Pope, G.U Tamil heroic poems, 1st ed. Though the whole Tamil Â aiva canon is in metrical form, a distinctive terminology is used for individual components of the canon. The first seven TirumuâikesaYai are known as TÄ"vÄ"ram, the eighth comprises TiruvÄ"cakam and TirukkÄ"vaiyÄ"r. The ninth TirumuâikesaYai includes two texts TiruviçaippÄ and TiruppalÄ‘tä‘u and the Tirumantiram is known as the tenth TirumuâikesaYai. The term Tamil religions denotes the religious traditions and practices of Tamil-speaking people. Source for information on Tamil Religions: Encyclopedia of Religion dictionary.Â But by the mid-eighth century, Hindu devotionalism had taken a significant hold in Tamil country and the poets could afford to take a more accommodating attitude toward the declining Jain and Buddhist presence. Between the years 650 and 940 the twelve Vaiṣṇava poet-saints (ᾹḻvÄrs) wrote some four thousand verses, which were eventually canonized in the NÄliyira-divyaprabandham (The four thousand divine verses) edited in the tenth century by NÄthamuni, the first major ĀcÄrya, or sectarian teacher, of Vaiṣṇavaism. Religious Communities and the Arts: Arts in Society, Volume 13, No. 1 (1976). Images have been removed, to see them refer to the original published works. 1 Carter. the world at large; (2) if religion and art are to perform their function of mediating these. contemporary problems, they must establish a new relationship; (3) this end will be. accomplished by means of a new conceptual framework for the relation of art and religion, and. new art symbols that transcend the boundaries of the different religions. It is difficult to spell out in advance a complete program for harmonious cooperation. Tamil schools of personal religious devotion (bhakti) have long been important in Hinduism, being enshrined in a literature dating back to the 6th century ce. Buddhism and Jainism were widespread among the Tamil, and these religionsâ€™ literatures predate the early bhakti literature in the Tamil area. Although the present-day Tamil are mostly Hindus, there are Christians, Muslims, and Jains among them.Â The Tamil have a long history of achievement; sea travel, city life, and commerce seem to have developed early among them. Tamil trade with the ancient Greeks and Romans is verified by literary, linguistic, and archaeological evidence. The Tamil have the oldest cultivated Dravidian language, and their rich literary tradition extends back to the early Christian era.