Transforming the Perceptions of Tamils' Antiquity: Evidence from Literature and Inscriptions

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Abstract

Besides excavations, evidence of Tamil antiquity is preserved in written records, such as literature, inscriptions, and palm leaf manuscripts in one form or the other. Efforts were made constantly to alter the perceptions of the past into new forms while contesting to foreign influences of many kinds. To synthesize the indigenous past from these textual sources, however, one must first have a deep understanding of them and apply appropriate inter-textual research methods. This often involves sifting through many pieces of evidence and distinguishing between foreign and native Tamil elements. In most cases, one can find a trajectory from one point in history to the other through changes that might have taken place gradually to change the indigenous perceptions to foreign. Without a sense of historiography and efforts to record history in the past, one is obligated to read in between lines and make connections where necessary. To cite an example, indigenous Tamil rituals have always been one of the significant pieces of evidence to trace Tamils' history and we find many forms of them through various means, including archeological, inscriptional, and literary. The term *tiruppatiyam viṇṇappañceytal* (cf. SII2 No. 65), is recorded in many Tamil inscriptions to denote Tamil's indigenous form of ritual in parallel to Sanskrit rituals during the medieval period. Subsequently, this term leads one to other related terms such as *kaḻañcu poṉ, taḷiccērip peṇṭir, ōtuvār, paṇṭāram, pūcāri* and so on and so forth to attribute to the dialogues of Tamils' antiquity. In Sangam literary texts we attest evidence of Tamil's rituals in the form of folk deities with special connotations of *vēlan veṟiyayar, veṟiyāṭṭam* (cf. Kuruntokai 53, 360), *vēlan ēttum veṟi* (Paripāṭal 5-15) and others. Thus, one is tempted to trace the trajectory and analyze the dialogues over the change of perceptions belonging to the ancient past to a newly introduced form of *tiruppatiyam viṇṇappañceytal* or *tiruppatiyam pāṭutal*. (see Renganathan 2021 for a detailed account of these terms and the later development of the concept of *Tamil Arccanai*). Thus, these terms and the cultural nuances associated with them become the *cultural clue* to trace the history of the Tamils. What is significant to note is that such terms form the consolidated pieces of evidence to be correlated with other evidence from literary and archeological evidence. Along these lines, this paper aims at capturing both cultural and literary evidence that can be treated as the base for tracing the history of the Tamils through change in perceptions. As for literary sources, it will be attempted how the imageries and artifacts as employed in Sangam period transitioned through the medieval and modern periods. Specifically, it examines the literary sources from the Sangam and medieval periods to explore how the use of the objects such as *Āḷi* and *ñāḻaṟ pū* reflect a shift from a secular to a religious perspective.

By using these inscriptional and literary evidence to track historical trajectories and the change in perceptions that occurred throughout, one can contribute to parallel research in the fields of archeology, numismatics, and other relevant fields by shedding light on the historical changes of the ancient past.

0. Introduction

To understand the antiquity of the Tamils, we must examine a number of different sources, including language, culture, literature, inscriptions, and customs. Recent archaeological evidence has pushed the history of the Tamils back several centuries before the Christian era. However, the earliest linguistic evidence comes from sources such as graffiti marks, inscriptions, coins and inscribed potshreds written in the Tamil-Brahmi script (Rajan and Yatheeskumar 2012, p. 194). Therefore, we must explore two main sources: Tamil society before the use of Brahmi scripts (preliterate society) and Tamil society after the use of Brahmi scripts (literate society). The oldest written sources lead us to examine evidence from epigraphical and inscriptional sources, which are commonly found on graffiti, coins, potsherds, cave inscriptions, and so on. Although these sources contain some basic information about the Tamils' way of life, one witnesses a large gap between what is found in highly sophisticated Sangam and later literature and what is observable in these preliminary sources, with very few texts presented. Thus, we are left with finding most of the antiquity related evidence from much of the transitions that may have taken place in linguistic, cultural, and literary forms that are extant from the Sangam era to predict the antiquity of the Tamils from the ancient past. Such evidence from observable inscriptional and literary sources can help us to predict the ways of life of the Tamils even earlier from the preliterate society. This paper examines transitions in Tamil literature from the Sangam to the medieval period and in medieval Tamil inscriptions, with the goal of using this evidence to better understand the history of the Tamils.

It is well-known that Tamils' way of life has always been intercultural and bilingual throughout the literate period. However, it has been challenging to identify what is indigenous to Tamil culture and what is borrowed and assimilated to. Without clearly distinguishing between the two, it would be difficult to understand the true form of Tamil antiquity.

1. Significance of the legendary animal *āḷi* and *ñāḻaṛ pū* in Sangam poems:

Along the lines of drawing inferences from poems, what we explore in this section are the two types of imageries, which include in them a reference to explicit comparison of two objects, one in relevance to the flower called *ñāḻaṛ pū* 'Cinnamon, *Cinnamomum*' and another with a

specific reference to a ferocious mythical animal called *Āḷi,* 'a legendary animal known for its hybrid forms and exceptional power'. Both of the instances have mentions in many Indian literatures including Tamil and Sanskrit. In Sanskrit the Tamil term *Āḷi* is referred to invariably as *yāḷi* or *vyāḷi*, where the initial 'y' and 'v' can be taken to represent a glide, rather than to be part of the word itself. What is particularly of interest here is that when studying how these objects are employed in Sangam and medieval Bhakti poems, the imageries that are depicted in them seem to differ from each other quite contrastingly, implying two different forms of imageries drawn from same object. While their references in Sangam poems offer an in-depth and absolute form of representation, the religious poems of the medieval period, on the other hand, appear to demonstrate a clear case of adaptation, with a relatively less intensity and fervor in their depictions. What is striking though is that these objects of comparison survived through generations, from one genre of literature to the other, but by exhibiting a clear disconnect between them as to how they are employed differently among the indigenous past and the later period.

1.1. Two diverse traditions of Tamil and their continuum in making imageries with identical objects:

Tamils' customs and traditions are differentiated primarily by two distinct phases of the past namely the ancient which is deeply secular and the medieval/modern which is flatteringly religious. Both traditions are particularly known for their resilient and refined literary productions with abundantly exquisite and appealing qualities of realistic and indigenous talents of many poets. While the objects of representations in the former type of poems relied heavily on kings (*araisan*), heroes (*talaivan*), heroines (*talaivi*), concubines (*parattai*), love life (*kātal vāḻkkai*), bardic personals (*viraliyarkaḷ*), the five landscapes (*aintiṇai*), and a host of others, the latter consumes within it the depiction and praise of gods, ways of worship, conducting rituals, ritual life and related many others. Invariably in both genres, one can appreciate the eminence of poems as enfolded on how they extend their world views, especially of the animals, plants, and other natural objects such as mountains, fountains, rivers and so on to the life of the humans by making suitable analogies. In the context of a discussion on the geniuses of the Sangam poets,

Hart assumes that the Tamil poets of the Sangam period had an in-depth knowledge and experience over writing their literary pieces. "Tamil poetry was composed by sophisticated poets who had written poems for much of their lives and who used a group of conventions that had been refined and made more sophisticated for many years." (Hart 1975, p. 180). This is particularly observable in the context of Tamils' antiquity in that knowledge production and talents can be attributed to Tamils in Sangam which is devoid of any foreign influence and that this circumstance needs to be taken into consideration in any research related to indigenous nature of Tamil and Tamils. With this background in mind, we now examine the following imagery of *ñāḻaṛ pū* 'Njalar flower' as employed in love poems of the Sangam period. We will see later how this object is transformed to a new perception in the medieval period.

1.2. The imagery of *ñāḻaṛ pū* and love life in Sangam period:

Engaging the nature to designate the love life can be perceived in many instances of the Sangam poems. One of them may be cited from how the use of *ñāḻaṛ* flower is employed in both Sangam as well as medieval poems. A set of ten songs under the title *ñāḻaṛ pāṭṭu* 'Ten songs of ñāḻal flower' in Aiṅkuṟuṉū, composed by Ammūvanār uses *ñāḻaṛ pū* and *ñāḻaṛ* tree as the objects of comparison to the hero and heroine's love life in a metaphorical context in that the stages of this flower, from budding, blossoming with fragrance and subsequently reaching to the stage of withering are symbolically correlated to the multiple moods of the lovers from their union, experiencing happiness, separation, and subsequently attaining the mood of desperation. These ten songs put forth to us an image where a parallel occurrence of both the plant's blossom and the love life of the hero and heroine are presented in a succinct manner. What is of particular significance in this imagery is that the poet not only observes the stages of the *ñāḻal* flowers in terms of their emitting fragrance and the breeze that permeates the fragrance, but also interprets them as they are the main cause for which each of the moods of the hero and heroine happen to occur in the first place. In this sense, what is to be presupposed is that the nature is the primary cause of the lives of people, and they cannot escape themselves from how the nature around them evolves. Thus, this type of intertwined depiction between nature and the human life

deserves special mention as to how the imageries can be considered very engaging and appealing.

To begin with, the fragrance of the *ñāḻal* flower and the breeze from it causes the love sickness to the heroine.

> எக்கர் ஞாழல் செருந்தியொடு கமழத்
> துவலைத் தண்துளி வீசிப்
> பயலை செய்தன பனிபடு துறையே.
>
> ekkar ñāḻaṟ ceruntiyoṭu kamaḻa
>
> tuvalait taṇṭuḷi vīcip
>
> payalai ceytana pani paṭu tuṟaiyē (Aing. 141)

> 'There exists
>
> the fragrance of *ñaḻar* flower with its blossoms
>
> a cold breeze with misty sprays
>
> instigates within me a feeling of love-sickness.'

ñāḻal tree that is grown in *neytal nilam* is associated here with heroine's desperate state of mind due to hero's separation. The terms *payalai cey* 'instigating love sickness' and *pacalai nōy* 'the syndrome of love sickness' are very common attributes throughout Sangam poems particularly referring to the mood of longing heroines for the arrival of the heroes. What is uncommon though, here, is that attributing to the permeating fragrance (*ceruntiyoṭu kamaḻa*) and subsequently the pollen that is emitting into the air (*tuvalait taṇṭuḷi vīci*) form the *ñaḻar* flower as the cause of love sickness of the heroine. Thus, a correlation between the nature and people's mood is purposely made by the poet as part of this imagery.

Subsequently, while the *ñāḻaṟ* tree continues to emit its cold and fragrant breeze along with the pollen, the bees are swarming around as attracted by the fragrance. The bees' explicit intention is to draw honey from the flower, but implicitly to acquire the pollen (*paṭucinai*) for the purpose of cross pollination. A symbolic connection is made deliberately to the hero's return to unite with the heroine for a physical union. However, with a sense of pleasant repulsion

(commonly called *ūṭal* in Tamil), the heroine pretends that she is unaware of his presence, and hence orders her eyes to be closed to deliberately ignore him.

எக்கர் ஞாழல் இறங்கு இணர்ப் படுசினைப்
புள்இறை கூரும் துறைவனை
உள்ளேன் தொழி படீஇயர்என் கண்ணே.

ekkar ñāḻal iṟaṅkiṇarp paṭucinaip

puḷḷiṟai kūrum tuṟaivanai

uḷḷēn toḻi paṭī iyar en kaṇṇē (Aing. 142).

'The ñāḻal tree emits the fine breeze,

the bees enjoy the breeze,

there happens the arrival of the hero.

However, my eyes are shut unaware of his presence!'

Bees swarming around the *ñāḻaṟ* flowers enticed by the fragrant breeze, on the one hand, and the hero returning to unite with the heroine, on the other hand, are the two parallels that the poet makes here.

Eventually, though, in the same *ekkar* region with *ñāḻaṟ* tree abundant with tiny leaves and big branches spread out like waves of ocean, the hero consummates his union with the heroine and gets rid of her love sickness permanently. They are together now happily ever after - *pacalai nīkkinan iniyē.* 'he removed the spots of love sickness from her body in a very satisfying manner'

எக்கர் ஞாழல் சிறியிலைப் பெருஞ்சினை
ஓதம் வாங்கும் துறைவன்
மாயோள் பசலை நீக்கினன் இனியே.

ekkar ñāḻaṟ ciṟiyilaip peruñcinai

ōtam vāṅkum tuṟaivan

māyōḷ pacalai nikkinan iniyē! (Aing. 145).

'In the midst of the ñā*l*al with tiny leaves

spread out like the vast ocean,

the hero removes the spots of love sickness!'

The beauty of the *ñā*l*al* flower, *ñā*l*al* tree, and their exquisite and attractive forms are thoroughly integrated symbolically to the extent of the heroine, her love sickness and subsequently her union with the hero. The *ñā*l*aṛ* flower becomes the point of reference for the poet to both establishing and correlating to two concurrent forms of lives namely the nature and human, a typical feature that one can always appreciate throughout in almost all of the poems of love in Sangam literature.

The spots of love sickness (*pacalai* 'love sickness') that the heroines develop on their body and subsequently their cure due to hero's union have been a common trait that one can always attest in many of the poems of love. Fascinatingly, here though, the tree with abundance of tiny leaves spread out in the sky like an ocean (*ciṛiyilaip peruñcinai* 'dense tree with plentiful tiny leaves') is used symbolically to appreciate the gorgeous and beautiful body of the heroine without any spots of love sickness at the beginning. Hero's rejoicing of the association with the heroine is correlated to the bees swarming around the *ñā*l*al* flowers (*paṭucinaip puḷḷiṛai kūrum* 'bees enjoying the fragrance of the flowers') consuming honey. Flowers without the bees swarming around and subsequently without any possibility of pollination is to be understood as an implication of the deserted heroine without her hero around. Being fallen sick with the spots of love sickness (*tuvalait taṇṭuḷi vīcip payalai ceytana* 'emitting the pollen on the air caused the love sickness') tends to be a scenario quite like flowers without the possibility of cross pollination. Flowers emitting fragrant pollen on the air is succinctly related to women flirting their heroes and it is no means an uncommon technique in any of the Sangam poems. (cf. Aham 234, 250, 360, Kali 33, 35, 40, Naṛṛ. 299, 311).

1.3. *ñāḻal* flower in the context of divine propositions and the continuum from secular to religious life:

A major twist in the way how the *ñāḻal* flower is referenced in medieval religious poems can be observed in several bhakti poems, but with the elements of devotion, devotee and god instead of love and love sickness. While the secular poems exploited the charm of this flower symbolizing the love life among lovers, the religious poems, on the other hand, make use of the same charm in the context of obtaining the grace of the gods. The aesthetic quality of the *ñāḻal* flowers and the popularity that it instituted among the readers through Sangam poems is now reverted to the divinity of gods, an object of utmost importance in medieval poems.

ஞாழல் கமழ் காழியுள் ஞானசம்பந்தன்
வேழம்பொரு தெண்ணீர் அதிகை வீரட்டானத்து
சூழும் கழலானை சொன்ன தமிழ்மாலை
வாழும் துணையாக நினைவார்வினை இலரே

ñāḻal kamaḻ kāḻiyuḷ ñāṉacampantaṉ

vēḻam poru teṇṇīr _atikai vīraṭṭāṉattuc

cūḻum kaḻalāṉaic coṉṉa tamiḻmālai,

vāḻum tuṇai_āka niṉaivār viṉai _ilarē. (Tēvārām 1.46.11)

'In the grove of ñāḻal flowers filled-in fragrance

the poet Sampantan adored the anklet Lord Śiva

in the shores of Vīraṭṭāṉam with his beautiful Tamil verses,

adoring these poems of Śiva, one attains no evils'

Bees consuming honey from *ñāḻal* flowers signifies the heroes enjoying the presence of their heroines, and in the same fervor, the poet Sampantam rejoicing the *ñāḻal* grove was able to adore the Lord with his delightful verses in Tamil. Thus, the circumstances of the imagery and the objects of comparison are quite unchanged in these two genres, but the objects referred to are

vastly different from one another. In other words, the metaphors are the same but the metaphorized objects are different with a parallel between human versus divine.

Similarly, a verse from Periyapurāṇam attempts further to illustrate that when the devoted devotees worship the Lord Śiva from a grove of *ñāḻal* flowers, their minds would be fully preoccupied as a sacred temple, where the god himself would be dwelling in.

மனைப் படப்பில் கடல்
கொழுந்து வளை சொரியும் கழிப் பாலை மழுங்கு நீங்கி
நனைச்சினை மென் குளிஞாழல்
பொழில் ஊடு வழி கொண்டு நண்ணும் போதில்
நினைப்பவர் தம் மனம் கோயில்
கொண்டு அருளும் அம்பலத்து நிருத்தனாரைத்
தினைத்தனையாம் பொழுது மறந்து
உய்வேனோ எனப் பாடி தில்லை சார்ந்தார்

maṉaip paṭappil kaṭal

koḻuntu vaḷai coriyum kaḻip pālai maḻuṅku nīṅki

naṉaicciṉai meṉ kuḷiñāḻal

poḻil ūṭu vaḻi koṇṭu naṇṇum pōṭil

niṉaippavar tam maṉam kōyil

koṇṭu aruḷum ampalattu niruttaṉārait

tiṉaittaṉaiyām poḻutu maṟantu

uyvēṉō eṉap pāṭi tillai cārntār (Periyapurāṇam 5.1.174)

'In contrast to the bushes of the ocean,

from the grove of the cool and radiant ñāḻal flowers

surrendering the Lord,

heart transforms to a temple with God in it,

the poet reached the Lord's place Thillai'

Identical references of *ñāḻal* flowers and their unique potentials of obtaining god's grace can be understood from a number of other medieval poems as well (Cf. Tēvārām 7.71.2, 6.71.5 etc.).

Even though the similarities here are striking as to how both genres employ the same simile in their poems, what is of more relevance here is that the purpose of these imageries are quite different in the sense that in the former love between hero and heroine is the point of object, whereas in the latter the devotion between God and devotee becomes the point of focus. However, the religious connotation seems, in many respects, to be an adaptation of what was very common and popular among the poets of Sangam literature. The symbolism as one can observe between the bees swarming the *ñāḻal* flowers and the heroes rejoicing the company of the heroines seems quite natural and spontaneous, whereas the latter analogy between the comfort of the *ñāḻal* flowers and obtaining the divine grace of gods seems very unnatural and purposeful without any spontaneity of expression of one's feelings. Especially, the implicit comparison of *ñāḻal* flowers as surrounded by bees to heroes rejoicing the comfort of the heroines is found to be making an authentic poetic imagery of pollination and sexual union, whereas enjoying the divine grace amidst the fragrant and beautiful *ñāḻal* grove seems to be an idea that may be farfetched while there is not any fundamental relevance between the two. In the former, the youth and the beauty of the heroines are very much appealed to the heroes, as much as how the bees are appealed to the sweet honey and fragrant pollen emitted from the flowers. In this respect, the reason why the medieval poems employ the identical similes as originally prevalent in Sangam poems but in a relatively unrelated tone of expression deserves further explanation. What is pertinent to mention in this context though is that there had been a continuity from Sangam toward medieval in terms of how the poets of medieval period were fully conformed to the intriguing similes and metaphors as used in Sangam poems, and hence might have fallen trapped by their fame to the extent of employing them in their works to suit to their own context.

1.4. The Imagery of *Āḻi* and its relevance to the two genres of Tamil literature:

In a similar note, what we present here is yet another explicit comparison of simile both in Sangam and in medieval poems with the same inquiry as to how they are found to be very

relevant in one context but not so quite appealing in the other. A close examination of the uses of the term *Āḷi* in many Sangam pomes indicates that it is represented as a symbol of braveness and strength to anything with supreme power with a sense of aggravation and restlessness in the state of mind. *Āḷi* is considered, imaginatively, to be a very powerful animal, more powerful than any other animal of the ancient period such as lion, elephant, and tigers. It's originally an amalgamation of both lion, tiger and elephant with trunk, short legs, and fierce eyes. Hence, it is believed to have possessed a hybrid form of these animals, such as with the faces of lion, elephant and tigers with harsh teeth and horn. Even though the history of this image is yet obscure, the artifact images of it are prevalent in the South Indian temples on the niches.

References to *Āḷi* can be found invariably both in *Aham* as well as in *Puṟam* poems despite its unique understanding as an object of braveness and valor. In the context of *Aham* poems, as in the following example, the heroine compares *Āḷi* to her hero, who possesses an extraordinary strength and power.

இடம் படுபு அறியா வலம் படு வேட்டத்து

வாள் வரி நடுங்கப் புகல்வந்து, ஆளி

உயர் நுதல் யானைப் புகர் முகத்து ஒற்றி,

வெண் கோடு புய்க்கும் தண் கமழ் சோலைப்

பெரு வரை அடுக்கத்து ஒரு வேல் ஏந்தி

தனியன் வருதல் அவனும் அஞ்சான்

iṭam paṭupu aṟiyā valampaṭu vēṭṭattu

vāḷvari naṭuṅkap pukalvantu āḷi

uyarnutal yāṉaip pukarmukattu oṟṟi

veṇkōṭu puykkum taṇkamaḻ cōlaip

peruvarai aṭukkattu oruvēl ēntit

taṉiyaṉ varutal avaṉum añcāṉ (Akam. 252:1-5)

'In the battle field of the scary land

emanating a sense of fear among all of the animals,

Āḷi enters and attacks on the face of the long tusked elephant.

In such a dreadful field abundant with fragrant neem flowers,

my hero will never fear to enter alone with just one sword.'

In this, rather an exaggerated note, what seems to be implied is that the animal *Āḷi* is although portrayed as the powerful and fierce animal, it can possess the skill even to attack on the face of the supposedly very powerful male elephant that has a long and sharp white tusk. Likewise, the hero can be possessed with an exceptional strength of even with more strength than this animal *Āḷi*. Besides portraying *Āḷi* for its extraordinary power and strength, it is also understood as an aggravated, restless, and disturbed animal, always attempting to appease its desire by destroying everything that it encounters. This is obvious from the following *Puṟam* poem, which implies the behavior of those who always tend to align themselves with unscrupulous people.

…

மீளி முன்பின் ஆளி போல,
உள்ளம் உள்அவிந்து அடங்காது வெள்ளென
நோவா தோன்வயின் திரங்கி
வாயா வன்கனிக்கு உலமரு வோரே.
…

mīḷi muṉpiṉ āḷi pōla

uḷḷam uḷavintu aṭaṅkātu veḷḷeṉa

nōvā tōṉvayiṉ tiraṅki

vāyā vaṉkaṉikku ulamaru vōrē. (Puṟam. 207)

Just as the *Āḷi* moves back and forth restlessly,

never satisfied, so too is the person.

who associates with those without virtue.

They are like someone who loves to eat unripe, tasteless fruit.

Those with unsatisfied and uncontained intent (*uḷḷam uḷ avintu aṭaṅkātu*) attempting to align themselves with the unscrupulous (*nōvātōṉ vayiṉ tiraṅki*) is nothing other than someone being very fond of unripe sour fruits (*vāyā vaṉkaṉikku*), instead of the readily available sweet ones

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(ulamaruvōrē), like the restless *Āḻi* (mīḻi muṉpiṉ āḻi pōla). Sangam poems of both *Akam* and *Puṟam* are known for their imageries depicting the contemporaneous society of this kind, especially for bringing the life of the past to the reader. Either in the case of developing a sense of fear, love, desperation, or expressing the hatred of the heroines abandoned by heroes, the ancient poets always had a clear strategy to adopt to an appropriate simile from the nature.

These two poems, as well as several other poems (see Akam. 252, 381 and Narrinai 207) that use the simile of *Āḻi*, suggest that there was a widely known mythical figure who was ferocious in nature and assumed to be more powerful than any other animal of the time, including lions, elephants, and tigers.

The fact that these poems all use the same simile suggests that this mythical figure was a common archetype in Tamil culture. It is possible that this figure was based on a real animal, but it is also possible that it was a purely mythical creature. Whatever its origins, the mythical figure of Ali seems to have been associated with strength, power, and ferocity. This is evident in the way that it is used in the poems to describe the beauty and power of the beloved.

The fact that this figure is still mentioned in poems from the medieval period suggests that it continued to be a popular archetype in Tamil culture. It is possible that this figure came to be associated with God himself, but it is also possible that it simply remained a popular symbol of strength and power.

As conceptualized by the Sangam poets, this figure is often used in the context of developing a sense of fear and ferocity, and it is portrayed in the later bhakti tradition with a face constituting both an elephant and a lion.

1.5. References of *Āḻi* in medieval Tamil poems and its purpose:

While Sangam poems describe this hybrid mythical animal as having extraordinary power, medieval poems attribute this animal to God Śiva, who is said to have excessive strength and power like *Āḻi*. This is evident in the Tirumantiram poem, where Tirumūlar compares Lord Śiva to *Āḻi*, a magnificent army that enters our hearts.

உருவிலி ஊனிலி ஊனம்ஒன்று இல்லி
திருவிலி தீதிலி தேவர்க்கும் தேவன்
பொருவிலி பூதப் படையுடை **யாளி**
மருவிலி வந்துஎன் மனம்புகுந் தானே.

uruvili ūṉili ūṉamoṉṟu ili

tiruvili tītili tēvarkkum tēvaṉ

poruvili pūtap paṭaiyuṭai **yāḷi**

maruvili vantueṉ maṉampukun tāṉē. (Tirumantiram. 2941).

'Formless, without a human body, and not handicapped either.

No sacrality nor with any negativity, being the Lord of the Lords.

without any enmity, Yāḷi with magnificent army.

the faultless came and entered into my heart.'

One also finds a similar analogy of attributing Śiva to *Āḷi* in Periyapurāṇam (cf. 229, 717 and 952), as a simile to the Lord (*āḷi ēṟu pōla ēkum aṇṇalār*), instead of a metaphor, in its depiction.

ஆளி ஏறு போல ஏகும் அண்ணலார் முன் எண்ணிலார்
மீளி வேடர் நீடு கூட்டம் மிக்கு மேல் எழுந்ததே

āḷi ēṟu pōla ēkum aṇṇalār muṉ eṇṇilār

mīḷi vēṭar nīṭu kūṭṭam mikku mēl eḻuntatē 3.3.68 (Peri. 717).

'In front of Lord Śiva (*aṇṇalār*), who is appalling, like āḷi,

gathered uncountable number of hunters in a long row.'

Manikkavasakar's Tēvāram also illustrates a similar simile as *Āḷi* attacking an elephant as *kuḻikaṇ kaḷiṟu verīiari yāḷi* '*Āḷi* quenched its anger by attacking an elephant that has a hollow eye'. The Sangam poems attribute the notion of being "unconquerable with overwhelming strength and power" to a mythical animal. However, medieval poems use this same notion to refer to the supreme and primordial Lord. This can be seen as a change of transition from a secular to a religious mode of perception, in which only God is seen as having such power and might.

Therefore, *Āḷi*, who was originally understood as a fierce and deadly killer animal within the context of Tamils' ancient past, came to be seen as a symbol of God himself in the medieval period. This is because God was seen as the ultimate source of power and strength, and *Āḷi* was seen as a manifestation of that power.

2. Rituals of the ancient past as evidence to Tamils' antiquity in the context of its transitioning to medieval rituals:

In this section, we discuss how ancient Tamil rituals transitioned to a new, non-Tamil method. We argue that this transition should be a focus of studies on Tamil antiquity, as it is more important to understand the indigenous method of ritual, now known as Tamil Arccanai, than the transitioned method. We show evidence from medieval inscriptions that the Pallavas and Cholas patronize both the Tamil method of rituals and the Sanskrit method concurrently during the medieval period, but at the later period the later became dominant and the former became less significant. Hence, a revival of worship method was proposed mainly to retain the antiquity of the Tamils prevalent from the past. Particularly, we emphasize that the transition from the clan worship variously termed as '*vēlan veṟiyāṭṭam*', '*cāmiyāti*' of the indigenous Tamils' way of worship transitioned to medieval worship method, variously termed as *tiruppatiyam viṇṇappañceytal* (cf. SII2 No. 65), *tiruppatiyam pāṭutal* and so on. Further, the two terms *Āryam pāṭuvār* and *Tamiḻ pāṭuvār* are recorded in inscriptions referring to those who recite poems from Sanskrit and Tamil respectively in temples (cf. SII Vol.2, No. 66-11). However, in the modern period, the medieval worship method which was instituted in contest with its Sanskrit counterpart is now revived as *Tamil Arccanai,* without any endorsement to the much earlier method of worship based on either '*vēlan veṟiyāṭṭam*' or '*vēlan veṟiyayar kaḷam*', even though such custom is still prevalent in the villages of Tamil Nadu.[1]

Despite the domination and recognition of a single elite group, the Tamil society had always been pluralistic in practicing religion and culture. Stein, for instance, notes three levels of ritual affiliations that existed in Tamil Nadu from the past.[2] The first level of religious activity includes domestic rituals pertaining to clan and place tutelaries, usually led by the non-brahman *Pujāris* also called *Paṇḍārams*; the second level involves pilgrims worshipping *Śivā* or *Viṣṇu* led

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[1] An earlier version of this section is published in Renganathan(2021) and this is reproduced here with suitable modifications to suit to the present discussion on "changes in perceptions from the Tamils' antiquity".
[2] Stein (1978, p.28) bases his descriptions based on Buchanan's report of 1800.

by Brahman priests, following strictly the *Āgamic* practices; and the third level is dominated by *guru* networks culminating in any of the premier temple centers in South India. It may be stated that the domestic rituals can be distinguished between two distinct textual patterns namely the one performed by *Pujāris,* who chant folk versions of Tamil poems ascribed to the clan gods *Vēlaṉ*, *Aiyaṉār*, *Māriyammaṉ* and *Maturai Vīraṉ*; and the other performed by *Paṇḍārams* and *Ōtuvārs,* mostly chanting Tamil religious poems chosen from one of the works of the sixty-three *Nāyanmars*. The former is predominantly attributed to bodily performances, like frenzied dance, fire walking, tongue piercing and others, which are generally performed when the devotee is in the state of trance with the accompanying folk songs and playing drums passionately. The latter type of worship, however, may be understood within a very formal circumstance when the Tamil literary poems are sung with melodious and coordinated music, yet appealing fervently to the religious mood of the Tamils.

The liturgical texts as employed for worship by *Paṇḍārams* are commonly chosen from the scriptures of medieval *Śaivā* saints.[3] The sixty three *Śaiva Nāyanmārs*, who lived during the medieval period between 5th and 10th century A.D., were in most part responsible for formulating a new mono-theistic ritual basis for Tamil religious nationalism.[4] Similar to what Stein observed, a distinction between the Brahmanic and the domestic ritual patterns is accounted for in Mandulbaum (1966: p.1174) as "transcendental" and "pragmatic" functions. Pragmatic functions are like what Stein categorizes as 'domestic rituals'. One of the crucial characteristics of the 'pragmatic function' is noted by Mandulbaum as 'being possessed' and 'speaking through the deity'. This unique behavior of 'possession by god' in Tamil religious tradition can be traced back to Sangam period, especially by the unique Tamil expression called *cāmi āṭi 'god dancer'*. In parallel, the poet saints of the medieval period expressed a relatively similar spiritual experience in par with their obsessive engagement with God through their textual encounters, and it is termed in Tamil poems as "*Āṭkoṇḍār*" (one who took over the body). One of the twelve *Vaiṣṇava* saints

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[3] Thurston (pp.45-46) – cited from Stein, Burton, *South Indian Temples: An Analytical Reconsideration.* Vikas Publishing House PVT LTD., 1978, p. 32.
[4] Periyapuranam composed by Sekkilar in 1100 A.D. provides the biographical sketches of all the sixty four Tamil Śaiva saints. The notable among them are Tirumūlar, *Māṇikkavāsakar*, Appar, Cuntarar and Campantar. The three *Śaiva* canons namely *Tirumantiram* by Tirumūlar, *Tiruvāsakam* by Māṇikkavāsakar, and *Tēvāram* by Appar, Cuntarar and Campatar along with the most recent 13th centry work of Meykkaṇḍār constitute, in general, the basis of the Tamil *Śaiva Siddāndā* tradition as developed during the Medieval period.

called Nammāḻvār who primarily composed his verses fervently expressing his love of God *Viṣṇu* in the deepest manner possible. It was he who first expresses his desires upon the Lord employing the Tamil term *Āṭkoṇḍār*, a state of mind constituted with a total control by the Lord. The 1,102 verses (called *Tiruvāymoḻi*[5] – meaning 'utterance of the holy/sacred') composed by *Nammāḻvār* somewhere during 880 to 930 A.D. (Ramanujan 1981: p. xi) are, like the other saints' works, believed to have been uttered by the Lord through *Nammāḻvār*. "Anyone who engulfs in his poems can immediately realize why the poems are at once philosophic and poetic, direct in feeling yet intricate in design, single-minded yet various in mood."[6] The name *Āḻvār* (lit. immersed ones) interacts with the Lord's joyful mood of sleeping in the ocean of milk with that of the saints' excessive enjoyment of the Lord's love; so does the term *bhakti*, a blissful state of the saints whose mind is totally filled with the love of the Lord. A. K. Ramanujan interprets this state of mind as the saints who are "taken over" by the love of God.[7]

Notably, the "indigenous" attributes of "possession by god" or "*Āṭkoṇḍār*", which does not form part of the characteristics of the Sanskrit mode of ritual system, but unique only to Tamil, legitimizes the argument for a separate worship method to be carried out in the Tamil language employing particularly the Tamil religious texts and folk songs - a different mode of approaching god through the Tamil textual traditions of *bhakti* and music, rather than the Sanskrit mode of ritual practice employing the *Āgamic* texts integrated with the *varna* form of worship. Strikingly, Mandalbaum who notes the practice of 'possession' as shaman's calling, observes that "being possessed" is not something with any hereditary feature.[8] Nor is this practice attributed to any specific caste group, instead to be attributed to a feature that is analogous to *Dravidians*, their clans and subsequently the folk beliefs surrounding them. In this sense, assuming the *varna* system, as Dumont notes, to be providing a universal model for worship throughout India[9] is questionable; especially if the 'model' has any implication over Hinduism in a religious sense. Furthermore, on

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[5] The term *tiru* means 'sacred' or 'divine'. It is common in Tamil that the names of places that have any historic relevance due to either by the visit of renowned saints or by their special mention in religious literatures; names of popular religious works; names of people with divine qualities etc., take this prefix to denote their sacred nature. The *Śaivā* saints celebrate 274 holy places and the *Vaiṣṇavās* celebrate a total of 108 places including *Vaikuṇḍam* 'the Heaven'. All the terrestrial places are usually called *pāṭal peṟṟa patikaṅkaḷ* or *pāṭal peṟṟa stalaṅgaḷ* 'places that received a mention in poems'.

[6] Ramanujan (1981, p. xi.)

[7] Ibid. (p. 83)

[8] Mandalbaum (1970, p. 412).

[9] Dumont (1980, p. 73).

the grounds that "communion with god" has no bearing for castes, it is reasonable to think that the division of caste system needs no association to religion, but only to profession, a concept that one can draw largely from *Sangam* texts which categorize the divisions of people by the exclusive term of *kuṭi*.

> tuṭiyaṉ pāṇaṉ paṟaiyaṉ kaṭampaṉ eṉṟu
> innāṉ kallatu kuṭiyum illai
> ….. (puṟam. 335).
> 'Warrior, singer, drummer and carpenter
>   are the best among all the divisions of people (*kuṭi*).

The behavior of "communion" with god, as Mauss notes in his work on 'body techniques', represents the divine potential of human body.[10] The human body, according to Mauss, is not to be viewed simply as the passive recipient of "cultural imprints", but to be viewed as the developable means for achieving a range of human objectives, from styles of physical movement, through modes of emotional being, to kinds of spiritual experience (e.g., mystical states, as in the case of 'possession' and 'take over'). The inability to enter into communion with god becomes a function of untaught bodies, according to Mauss.[11] The concept of possession, a fundamental notion of Tamil *bhakti* and its folk tradition is comparable to the idea of 'communion with god', a divine potential of human body. The idea of 'god' in the context of 'possession' may also be attributed to the world of 'spirits', normally termed in Tamil as '*āvi*'. Tamils also tend to comprehend the act of possession to the capture of human body by spirits with the unique expressions of '*āvi piḍiccirukku*' and '*cāmi piḍiccirukku*' meaning 'the spirit/deity detained (the body)', a phenomenon to be dealt within the perspective of Tamils' indigenous ritual practice from the ancient time until the present.

2.1. Music, the tradition of *Ōtuvārs* and the prying for an indigenous worship method:

Āḻvārs' texts are being passed on from generation to generation with much emphasis on music (*icai*) and mime (*avinayam*), and with less emphasis on poetry.[12] Both *Tiruvāymoḻi* and other similar Tamil religious texts are constantly sung in temples by the *Ōtuvārs*. It is often

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[10] Mauss (1979).
[11] Quoted from Asad (1993, p. 76).
[12] Ramanujan. (1981, p. 135)

believed that their performance of singing with rhythm and melody is more appealing and carrying the spirit than the meaning. Further, the idea of *antāti*[13] 'a Sanskrit term referring to end and beginning' that one can experience in *Āḻvārs*' poems facilitate recitation with an aesthetic appeal.

Another relevant point to be made in the context of A.K. Ramanujan's work on Tamil hymns is that his reference to "shifts" that took place during the *bhakti* period. According to him, both the *Vaiṣṇavā* (of *Āḻvārs*) and *Śaivā* (of *Nāyanmārs*) compositions during the *bhakti* period caused many shifts. "…from hearing to speaking; watching to dancing; a passive to an active mode; a religion and a poetry of the esoteric few to a religion and a poetry of anyone who can speak…. From the sacrificial-fire rituals (*yajñā* or *hōma*) to worship - *pūjā*[1]". Not to mention the fact that the ritual method of 'singing of the lord', 'dancing' and *pūjā*[1] are continued even until the present time in temples and other sacred places of Tamil Nadu keeping the shift alive for ever; same as *Āṇṭāl Tiruppāvai* rituals being performed with abundance of mysticism and devotional commitment.[14]

Whereas the *Āgamic* manuals became the basis for all the rituals conducted by the *Brahman* priests, the *Śaiva* textual canon called *Tēvāram* and the *Vaiṣṇavā* textual scripture called *Prabhandams*, no doubt, became the basis for the traditions of *Paṇṭāram* and *Ōtuvār*. According to Davis (1991), the Brahmin priests who perform the rituals claim that they have understood the Sanskrit *Āgamas* either directly from the *Āgamic* texts - composed either in Sanskrit or in Tamil Grantha - or from a long tradition of Gurus.[15] The same is true with the co-existing Tamil tradition where the saints' devotional experience was originally composed in the form of *bhakti* poems, and later transmitted orally through generations by *Paṇṭāram* and *Ōtuvārs*.

Thus, the authorship of the medieval saint poets is delivered by *Paṇḍārams* with a shift from 'composition' to 'recitation', without affecting the spirit that the texts transcended originally. This transformation became the foundation for the development of a new method of worship called

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[13] All of the Tiruvāymoli poems are sung in such a way that the last word of the poems become the first word in the subsequent poem – resulting a string of garland to offer to the Lord.

[14] See Renganathan (2014) for a detailed account of the Tamils' rituals performed exclusively based on the Vaiṣṇavā text of *Āṇṭāl's Tiruppāvai*.

[15] Davis (1991); Ishimatsu, op., cit.

'Tamil *arccanai*' as noted elsewhere. In fact, Ramaswamy states that this revivalism had its origin in 1920 A.D., from the then Tamil revivalist movement called neo-Saivites,[16] who in turn believe that this practice of using Tamil for divine worship, instead of Sanskrit, started during the times of Pallavas (ca. 6th to 9th century A.D.) and Cholas (ca. 9th to 11th century A.D.).

Therefore, the ritual practice of 'Tamil *arccanai*' as performed by *Paṇḍārams* and others by chanting the songs from the Tamil *bhakti* texts of *Tēvāram*, *Tiruvācakam* and *Tirumantiram*, on the one hand, and the Sanskrit rituals as performed by the Brahmin priests, or otherwise called "*Āryap paṭṭarkaḷ*" following strictly the rules of the *Āgama* scriptures, on the other hand, form the two legitimate groups contending each other over religious hegemony, domination, and power. However, it is evident from Fuller's account of these two competing traditions in Tamil Nadu that the practice of Tamil *Arccanai* had never been successfully implemented in any of the temples in Tamil Nadu, and that the *Brahman* priests who continued to conduct their worship in Sanskrit, disregarding the efforts of the government led by the Dravidian political party. (Fuller 2003, p. 116). In the trajectory from ancient folk traditions of rituals to the corresponding medieval practices one can also find relevance to the development of courtesan customs engaging in the characters such as *taḷiccērip peṇṭir*, *vēlattup peṇṭir, tēvar aṭiyārkaḷ* and others during the process of rituals.[17]

2.2. The tradition of chanting *Śaiva* hymns in *Śiva* temples of South India and evidence from stone inscriptions:

Chanting of the *Śaiva Tirumuṟai* hymns in temples as part of the rituals, is attested in many inscriptions from the Pallava period onwards and it substantiates the fact that the dialogue between the two contesting methods of religious exercises had been in vogue historically from the past.[18] Even though this tradition continued to exist from the period of composition of the *Śaiva* hymns by the sixty three Nāyanmārs and until the recent times, references to establishment of permanent grants by both the Pallava and Chola kings in inscriptions asserts the point that the Tamils' method

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[16] Ramaswamy, Sumathi (1992).

[17] See Ali 2007 and Orr 2000 for a detailed account of courtesan culture and the significance of these terms in medieval Tamilnadu.

[18] "Tirumuṟai otutaṟkuriya kōyil maṇṭapattukku viṭṭanivantam.."
'Offerings made to temples to chant Tirumuṟai hymns…' (SII. Vol. XII:231).

of ritualization with a community of hymnists took place merely by employing Tamil texts as well as the poet saints' expression of incessant affinity toward god. One of the inscriptions of Raja Rajendra Chola, for instance, records an order of the king to assign daily allowances of paddy to each of the forty-eight persons (*piṭārarkaḷ*), who engage in reciting the *Tiruppadiyam* 'Śaiva hymns of the sixty three N*āyanmārs'* and to the two persons who had to accompany others on drums in the Śiva temple of Thanjavur.

> *"...rājarāja tēvarkku yāṇṭu irupattoṉpatāvatu varai uṭaiyār rājarājīsvarasrī uṭaiyārkkut tiruppatiyam viṇṇappañceyya uṭaiyār rārājatēvar kuṭutta piṭārarkaḷ nāṟpatteṉmarum ivarkaḷilē nilaiyāy uṭukkai vācippāṉ oruvaṉum ivarkaḷilē koṭṭimattaḷam vācippāṉ oruvaṉum āka aimpatiṉmarukkuppērāl nicatam nellu mukkuṟuṇi...* (S.I.I. II No. 65).

> 'The twenty ninth regnal year king Rajaraja Devar's order is hereby given to
> perform Tiruppatiyam to Rajarajiisvarasri Udaiyar. All the forty-eight
> men (*piṭārarkaḷ*) who engage in Tiruppatiyam performance as well as the one who plays hand drum and
> the one who plays the stick drum in total of fifty people need to be offered with the three fourth of the
> measurement of paddy.'

The subsequent line in this inscription designates the command of the donor that this custom should continue to exist without halt in all of the generations to come and this donation should be issued to those who engage in this process; in case of lack of hymnists, according to the inscription, the heir of this tradition should be forced (*āḷiṭṭut tiruppatiyam viṇṇappañceyvittu*) to continue. On the account of any discontinuation of this lineage at any point, it is the utmost responsibility of those who manages (*niyāyattāre*) this ritual process to find an appropriate hymnist (*yogyarāyiruppār)* to pursue the tradition and dispense the donation accordingly.

> *"…ivarkaḷil cettārkkum aṉātēcam poṉārkkuntalaimāṟu avvavarkku aṭutta muṟai kaṭavār annelluppeṟṟut tiruppatiyam viṇṇappañceyyavum avvavarkku aṭutta muṟai kaṭavār tāntām yogyarī allātu viṭil yogyarāyiruppārai āḷiṭṭut tiruppatiyam viṇṇappañceyvittu annelluppeṟavum avvavarkku aṭutta muṟai kaṭavārinriyoḻiyil anta niyāyattāre yogyarāyiruppāraittiruppatiyam viṇṇappañceyya iṭṭu iṭṭa avaṉe avvavar peṟumpaṭi nellup peṟavum āka ippaṭi uṭaiyār srīrājarājatēvar tiruvāymoḻintaruḷiṉapaṭi kallil veṭṭiyatu."* (ibid.).

> 'Among these, aside from those who are dead and those who left the town, the
> subsequent generation of the people who engage in chanting of Tamil Śaivā
> hymns should be offered with the aforementioned amount of paddy. In case of

lack of subsequent generation who can engage themselves in this process, the people who are in-charge should attempt to appoint those who are capable of chanting hymns and offer them with this amount of paddy. This is the writing made on the stone by the order of Udaiyar Sri Raja Raja Tevar.'

Thus, the determined efforts of the kings of the medieval period, mostly to promote the use of Tamil religious texts, can be taken as evidence for the fact that the Tamil religious poems were authenticated to be legitimate for the Tamils' religious life. However, the kings patronized both the traditions consistently – Sanskrit and Tamil - and hence became responsible for the continued coexistence of the two competing ritual practices in parallel to each other from the medieval period onwards. This can be substantiated further with a reference from the inscription of the same king Rajarajatevar on the north wall of the Tiruppundurutti temple, Tanjore Taluk. This inscription which becomes part of a very long Meykkīrtti 'praise of the god' includes in it a mention for the prosperity of the two religious groups namely Tamil and Sanskrit along with those from other diverse regions, including kuccarar, āriyar, kōcalar, koṅkaṇar, vaccirar, kāciyar, cōṉakar and vantiyar.

"…nāl vētat tarumaṟaiyo raivveḻvi yāṟaṅkamuṭaṉ ciṟappa varuntamiḻu māriyamu maṟu camaiyat taṟa neṟiyun tiruntu maṉuneṟiyun tiṟampātu taḻaittōṅkak kuccararumāriyarum kōcalaruṅ koṅkaṇarum vacciraruṅ kāciyaru māttararu....rumaṉaruñ cōṉaka vantiyaru mutalāya virunila māmuṭi vēnta riṟaiñci niṉṟu tiṟaikāṭṭavum..." (S.I.I. V. No. 459:4).

'Let the four Vēdas prosper with all five types of fire rituals (Vēḷvi) in order; The precious Tamil along with Āryam and other religious doctrines as well as Manu's doctrine prosper without fail. Besides, the kings of kuccarars, āriyars, kōcalars, koṅkaṇars, vaccirars, kāciyars, cōṉakars and vantiyars who belong to two different regions should prosper as well with all richness.'

What one can postulate from this inscription, in particular, is that the religious rituals of diverse doctrines were treated equal during the medieval period without any contest over domination or

power. Thus, the challenges facing among the diverse belief systems must have occurred at a relatively later period, especially during the post-medieval and colonial period.

3. Concluding remarks

This paper discusses two examples of how the Tamils adapted their indigenous past to the borrowed tradition of Sanskrit. In the case of their literary sources, the Tamils adapted and gave new religious meaning to imageries from the Sangam era, which was originally created in a secular context. In ancient Tamil literature, the mythical animal *Āḷi* was seen as a ferocious and unconquerable symbol of a king's power over his enemies. However, in the medieval period, this perception changed, and the *Āḷi* came to be associated with God, who is more powerful than any human. Similarly, the *ñāḻar pū* was originally associated with the beauty and charm of heroes and heroines in Aham poetry. But in the medieval period, it came to be associated with God's abode, a completely new meaning that is different from its original significance in Tamil culture. Literary sources show that the Tamils changed their perception of their past when they adapted their literature to a religious context. A similar trend is shown in the religious rituals performed by the Tamils using Tamil literary works in a religious context. Medieval inscriptions show that kings patronized both Sanskrit and Tamil traditions equally. However, the Tamils' religious practices changed dramatically from clan-based *sāmiyāṭi* and *vēlan veṟiyāttam* rituals to *tiruppatiyam pāṭutal* and, in the modern period, to Tamil Arccanai. Thus, the antiquity of the past undergoes modifications throughout the history particularly because of the foreign interventions. To either resurrect the past or fully understand it, one must closely observe the constantly changing perceptions. Transformation of perceptions from the past attributing to the antiquity of the Tamils occurred or continued to occur, but as Karashima (2001) presumes that such transformation of perceptions is constantly whispering in the Tamil literature and inscriptions.

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