

Tiruvilaiyāṭar purāṇam - “Games of the Lord”

(A special reference to the Lord’s Dance in Velliampalam)

en kaṭan paṇi ceytu kiṭappatē

My only duty in life is to offer my service to the Lord.

-Tirunāvukkaracar tēvāram 5-19-9.

1. Sanskrit purāṇās and Tamil purāṇam an Introduction:

The Sanskrit term *purāṇā* means, in its broader sense, 'belonging to ancient or olden times, ancient, old',¹ but in Tamil this word (purāṇam) is understood in a more narrower sense of "ancient tale or legend".² The *purāṇic* texts in Sanskrit cover a wide range of topics including philosophy, religion, fables, science, art etc³. Rocher, for example, notes that the *purāṇās* are important because they preserve, in an encyclopedic fashion, every possible aspect of Hindu culture and civilization⁴. He bases his opinion from a quote by Mitra.

"The purāṇās constitute the great store-house of ancient Indian knowledge. They are the records of every thing that in ancient times interested the people from the highest to the lowest. They treat alike of philosophy and theology, cosmology and chronology, history and fables, science and art. Nothing comes amiss to them; and every subject is treated in an easy colloquial style suited to the lowest capacity."⁵

¹ Monier-Williams, Monier 1899: Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Oxford.

² Tamil Lexicon lists the following for the entry 'purāṇām': ancient tale or legend; old, traditional history; sacred books ascribed to vyaṭsa, dealing with primary creation, secondary creation, genealogy of manus, kings, etc., one of arupattu-nalḷy-kalai , q.v.; 4. land granted for the exposition of the purāṇas in temples.

³ Shastri, 1995, p. xiv. states that the earlier purāṇās dealt in the characteristic topics of creation, re-creation, genealogies of gods, sages and kings, accounts of royal dynasties and the cosmic cycles respectively.

⁴ Rocher 1986, p. 12.

⁵ Rocher 1986, p. 12. Cf. Rajendralal Mitra: ed. Agni, Introduction p. 1.

An attempt is made in this paper to study the nature of Tamil *purāṇās* in general, with a closer look at one of the Tamil *purāṇās* namely *Tiruvilaiyāṭar purāṇam* composed by Parañcōti munivar .

"Tamil *purāṇās* flourished a very long period between ca. 1200 – 1750 A.D. The earliest – and, in many respect, the greatest – of all Tamil *purāṇās* was, however composed before that limit – around 1135 A.D.: Cekkilar's *tiruttoṅṭar purāṇam* 'The *purāṇā* of the Holy Devotees.'"⁶ Tamil *purāṇās* constitute only three types namely a) full or partial verse-renderings of the eighteen Sanskrit *mahā purāṇās*, b) hagiographic *purāṇās* and c) *śtala purāṇās*, Ta. *talapurāṇām*, dealing with the story of individual shrines.⁷

There are four major *purāṇās* in Tamil that deserve mention in particular, mainly due to their wide popularity among Tamil scholars. They are a) *periyā purāṇām* by Śēkkilār b) *tiruvilaiyāṭar purāṇam* by Parañcōti munivar c) *kantapurāṇam* and d) *kāñcipurāṇām*. Among these, *periyā purāṇām* acquired the high authority and popularity of the Sanskrit *purāṇās*.⁸ This was composed in the eleventh century by Śēkkilār, a minister of the Cola King, and it is a hagiography of sixty three Nāyanmārs who lived approximately from A. D. 300 to 900.

1.1. The Nāyanmārs

The Nāyanmārs are usually depicted either as one of the representatives of the Lord Śivā from kailay, where Śivā lives, or as one of the true devotees of the Lord Śivā. The first chapter of *periyā purāṇām*, for example, describes the story of Suntarar, who

⁶ Zvelebil 1974, p. 170.

⁷ Zvelebil 1974, p. 170.

was sent to earth from *kailay* by Śivā. He was born in a village called tirunāvalūr and lived there with the name of nampiyārūrār. When he was about to get married to a daughter of one of the local Śaiva saints, Lord Śivā appeared before him in the form of an old man and takes control of him. So, he was called tiruttonṭrāṭkoṇṭār in *periya purāṇām*. To cite an example, Nāyanmār is attributed as one of Śaivā's devotees. Third chapter of this work illustrates a story of a king called Meypporuḷ nāyanār (knowledgeable in ultimate truth) lived in Tirukkōvilūr. Another king named Mūttanātar, who could not conquer him in a live battle, took the form of a Śaivā devotee approaches Meypporuḷ nāyanār in private. When he was reciting one of Lord Śivā's poems for Meypporuḷ, he stabs him with a sword that he hid around his waist. Before Meypporuḷ nāyanār dies, however, commands his servants not to punish mūttanātar saying “he was his own man, a Śivā devotee”. Upon knowing Meypporuḷ nāyanār's love on him, Lord Śivā appears in front of him and offers his grace and took him to the heaven.

2. Tiruṽilāiyāṭar purāṇam

Tiruṽilāiyāṭar purāṇam, on the other hand, narrates stories of the Lord Śivā in his various manifestations as *Śōmasuntarak kaṭavuḷ* in Madurai. Source for this work is believed to be a Sanskrit *purāṇā* called *ālāciya mānmiyam*, and it is one of the sections of Kantapuraṇām that narrates the stories of the Lord Murkan, a son of Śivā.⁹ There exists a number of Tamil purāṇās describing the Lord Śivā's games/sports (usually mischievous in nature). To cite a few, the works such as *kaṭampavana purāṇam*,

⁸ Rocher 1986, p. 77. Cf. S. K. Chatterji: W. Norman Brown vol. (1962), 33.

⁹ Venkatasami, N. M. 1965, p. 3.

cuntara pāṇṭiyam, Tiruvālavuṭaiyār's *tiruvilaiyāṭar purāṇam* etc., are narratives of Lord Śivā's games of various sort.¹⁰ Some of these games include “the Lord’s famous dance in *velliampalam*”, “throwing a spear across the ocean”, “throwing a chisel onto the crown of Lord Indra”, “relieving Indra from his sin”, “his marriage”, “inviting all the seven worlds”, “selling bangles”, “killing of the Chola king in a riverbed”, “selling logs”, “transforming a fox into horse” and so on.¹¹

2. 1. Life history of Parañcōti munivar

According to N. M. Venkaṭacāmi nāṭṭār, who wrote a commentary for *Tiruvilaiyāṭar purāṇam*, Parañcōti munivar was born in a Śaiva family in Chola country about 280 years ago. He was fluent both in Sanskrit and in Tamil, and visited many Śivā temples in Tamil country to offer his service to the Lord. He reached Madurai and lived there by offering his service to the Lord Śōmasuntaran and the goddess mīnāṭci. One day the goddess appeared in his dream and asked him to sing of her husband’s sacred games. Upon the Goddess’ request, it is said that Parañcōti munivar composed the poems of *Tiruvilaiyāṭar purāṇam*, and offered them to the Lord in front of a group of revered poets and saints, who assembled in the Sanctum of Lord Śōmasuntaran’s temple in Madurai. N. M. venkaṭacāmi nāṭṭār, the commentator of this work ends the above account of Parañcōti munivar’s history with a typical phrase “*enṟu periyōr kūṟuvar*” meaning “so says the elite”, thus leading speculations about the author of *tiruvilaiyāṭar purāṇam*. Similar account of Parañcōti munivar’s composition of *tiruvilaiyāṭar purāṇam* and his submission to the Lord in front a group

¹⁰ Venkatasami, N. M. 1965. p. 4.

¹¹ N. M. venkaṭacāmi nāṭṭār, 1965, p. 2.

of respectable saints is also described in the first poem that serves as the preface to this work.

Lord tirumāl who sleeps on a snake bed
Churned the ocean and offered the nector to the dēvās,
So did the learned Parañcōti
Sang of the greatness of Madurai in precious Tamil
- The Madurai that is surrounded by gardens
and swarmed with plenty of six legged rhyming bees.
In the temple of Lord Śivā
wearing the arugā grass that his devotees always worship
And in front of all the esteemed saints
Offered the nector of *Tiruvīlaiyāṭar purāṇam*.¹²

According to N. M. veñkaṭacāmi nāṭṭār this poem could have been written by one of the disciples of Parañcōti munivar. Interestingly, the author of this poem compares an event from vaiṣṇavā tradition to a Śaivā devotee's work.

2.2. The *purāṇam*

The poems in *Tiruvīlaiyāṭar purāṇam*, are composed mainly of three types. They are either in *aṟu cīraṭiācīriya viruttam* with six words in each stanza” or *kalinilaitturai* with five words in each stanza or *kalivirutam* with four words in each stanza.

Tiruvīlaiyāṭar purāṇam contains two major sections including Maturaik kāṇṭam 'chapter on Madurai' and *Tiruvīlaiyāṭalkaḷ* 'Games of the Sacred'. The chapter on Madurai consists of eleven sections each describing a number of sub topics including 1) lord vinayakar's sacred form, 2) invocation to vināyakar, 3) lord Śivā's sacred form, 4) lord Murkan's sacred form, 5) excellence of the Pandya country, 6) excellence of the Madurai city, 7) excellence of the sacred Kaylai - Śivā's place, 8) historical importance

¹² T. P. Preface – Special Poem

of the city, 9) importance of the temples in Madurai, 10) importance of the god in Madurai and 11) concluding section. The second chapter entitled *tiruvīlaiyāṭalkaḷ* narrates eighteen different stories of Śivā. An elaborate account of one of the *tiruvīlaiyāṭalkaḷ* namely *velliampalat tirukkuuttāṭiya paṭalam* "Chapter on Śivā's dance in Madurai" is made in this paper in section 2.5.

2.3. *Tiruvīlaiyāṭar purāṇam and its merits*

In the invocation poem, Parañcōti narrates the merit that one obtains upon listening to *tiruvīlaiyāṭar purāṇam*. According to him, anyone who listens to the *tiruvīlaiyāṭar purāṇam*, would obtain immense wealth; good mannered children; will be able to get rid of all their enmities in life; won't get any disease of any sort; and will conduct a long life, besides they will also reach the heaven after death and enjoy all divine pleasures therein. Eventually, with all merits, they will reach the feet of the Lord Śivā and continue living with him forever with all joy.

tiṅkaḷaṇi tiruvāla vāyem maṇṇal
 tiruvīlaiyāṭ ṭivaiyanpu ceytu kēṭpōr
caṅkaniti patumanitic celva mōṅkit
 takaimaitaru makappeṟuvar pakaiyai velvar
maṅkalanān maṇampeṟuvar piṇivan teytār
 vāznālu nanipeṟuvar vānaa ṭeytip
puṅkavarā yaṅkuḷḷa pōka mūlkip
 puṇṇiyarāyc civanatikkiil naṇṇi vaazvār.¹³

Our beloved
 wearing the moon; having his precious presence in a sacred temple!
 Those who listens to his sacred games
 with affection and love,
 Be flourished with a wealth
 of all śaṅka niti (god's wealth) and patuma niti (people's wealth!)!
 Be possessed with
 good mannered children!

¹³ T.P. 5:1.

Conquer all the enmities!
Be possessed with all auspicious things in life!
Lead a life without any disease!
Reach heaven and plunge into all divine pleasures!
With all merits reach the feet of Śivā!
Assimilate to his life forever!

2.4. Poet's use of Rhyme and Simile

One of the significant aspects of Parañcōti's poems is his elegant use of similes, as may be noted in the following poem where he compares the Lord and his knowledge to a flower and its beauty. The Lord is a composition of Truth, Knowledge and Bliss; and they can not be separated from each other at any cost, precisely as how one can not separate the beauty and fragrance that are united together tightly in a flower. It is this adorable combination of the poet's use of simile and rhyme that makes his poems an effective tool to advocate a strong religious fervor among those who recite and listen to them.

To add to it, in all the songs, the first word of every stanza rhymes identical, thus giving an aesthetic appeal to readers, especially in the course of their recitation and memorization of the poems. This is evident from the following poem - a *kalinilaitturai* type – where Parañcōti munivar states that the purpose of his singing about the Lord Śivā is to conquer one's sins in entirety.

Pūvaṇṇam pūvin maṇampōla meypōta minpam
Flower-color flower's fragrance like truth knowledge bliss
āvaṇṇa meykoṇ ṭavanṇan valiyānai tāṅgi
like body-possess his power(sakti) accepting
mūvaṇṇa ṛacan nitimut toliḷceyya vālā
three gods his court in front duty-perform capable
mēvaṇṇa lannan vilaiyaatṭin vinaiyai velvām.
motion-less his games' sins conquer¹⁴

¹⁴ T. P. 8:5

Flower is inseparable from its beauty and fragrance,
 So does the Lord who is a composition of Truth, Knowledge and Bliss.
 He who carries the power – Sakti - on his head.
 He who made the three divines ayan (Brahma), ari (Tirumal) and aran (Indra)
 engage in the three ultimate deeds of the earth:
 Making, Offering and Destruction!
 By saying all the sacred games of this Lord, who is a standstill,
 You conquer all the troubles from your sins.

2.4.1. Stories of Hindu Religion in *Tiruvīlaiyāṭar purāṇam*

Parañcōti illustrates in many of his poems a series of stories relevant to Śaivite tradition in general, and are quoted widely in other literary works of Tamil as well. The author's reference for how Śivā is the master of all the three major deities in Hindu religion namely Brahmā, Tirumāl and Indrā as may be seen in the stanza *mūvaṇṇa ṛacan nitimut tolilceyya vālā* "He who made the three divines ayan (Brahma), ari (Tirumal) and aran (Indra) engages himself with the three actions of the earth: Making, Offering and Destruction!" intensifies his attempt to praise Śivā and his merit. Extensive use of such stories in his work makes this purāṇam a store-house of knowledge - in the encyclopedic fashion - of Hindu religion and culture as rightly pointed out by Rocher.¹⁵ Typical to any Hindu religious literature, Parañcōti also uses rather extensively the religiously significant phrases like vīṭu peṟutal "attaining the heavenly state", vinaiyai velvām "conquering all sins", teyvat tīrttam "divine water" and so on. This is obvious from the following poem where he compares the sumptuous holy water to harsh fire.

teyvavit tīrttam tannai ninaivinṟit tīṇṭi nālum
 devinly-this liquid knowledge-without touch even-if
avviya vinay nīnti yarumperal vīṭu cērvar

¹⁵ Rocher 1986, p. 12.

one's sins removed precious heaven reach
ivvurai meyyē yaaku mennenin manattā nanṛi
this word true-indeed becomes why-ask without knowledge
vevvaza ṛiṇṇi nāluñ cuṭumanṛi viṭumō vammā.
hot fire touch even-if burnt will it leave you otherwise.¹⁶

Touch this divine water even unknowingly,
Be sure to be purified from all sins,
Be sure to have attained the unattainable heaven.
As sure as how your finger that touches the dreadful fire,
-with or without intention, is burnt.

2.5. The Dance of Śivā in veḷḷiyampalam - Madurai:

Lord Śivā is said to have performed his magnificent dance in five different sacred places called *ampala* in Tamil country, and each one of these performances possesses historical relevance. One of the chapters of *tiruvilaiyāṭar purāṇam* narrates Śivā's dance in veḷḷiyampalam "Silver hall in Madurai. Lord Śivā with the name of Śōmasuntarak kaṭavuḷ in Madurai is getting married to the goddess mīnākṣi. After the marriage, he invites the kings, saints and other reputed people in the town for a grand dinner. These eminent people took their holy dip in a sacred pond, worshiped the sacred Lord and got ready for this precious dinner. Two saints among the attendee named viyākkira pātar and patañcali muni pleaded the Lord for a performance of his gracious dance.

Accepting their request, *Śōmasuntarak kaṭavuḷ* performed his dance in Madurai.

Siva, the matchless, with the name of Sundara Pandian,
arrived the earth, departing the divine world!
Had his intention to stabilize the ultimate wisdom on earth.
Married to Uma, a source of light for the moon!
Wearing the Crown for the kingdom of earth,
Performed his majestic dance
for the delight of the saints!
We begin to narrate this dance of limitless joy and ecstasy.¹⁷

¹⁶ T. P. 177:19.

¹⁷ T.P. 456:1.

Married to virtuous Piratti, like a thin stake of a flower.
With an eye in his forehead the Lord Śōmasuntaran,
The one who rules the world,
Invites for a dinner
the kings, celestials, saints and others,
those who were in the gracious wedding.¹⁸

All who were in the gracious wedding,
Had a dip in a sacred pond with full of lotus flowers.
Performed all their services to god accordingly.
Arrived for the dinner in the court of Sundara Pandiyan.
Saints viyākkira pātar and patañcali
fell on the feet of the Lord.
summoned for a gracious dance,
instead of a precious dinner.¹⁹

Accepting the request from the saints viyākkira pātar and patañcali, the Lord Śōmasuntaran prepares himself to exhibit a magnificent dance in Madurai, a place he relates metaphorically to the top of head in his body. *Ponnampalam* “Chidambaram”, where he performed his other dance earlier, according to him, is his heart. Listening to the Lord’s comparison of his body to sacred places, the saints request him for an explanation of the other parts of his body.²⁰

“We perform that dance,
in this velliyampalam”, Said the Lord.
“The World is nothing but a Human Form!
Heart is the ponnampalam (Chidambaram) and
Top of head is this velliyampalam”,
proclaimed the Lord gracefully.
Oh! The Lord! “What the other parts are then?”
asked the Saints.
The Lord Says!²¹

Above the waist lies the seven world!

¹⁸ T.P. 456:2.

¹⁹ T.P. 456:3.

²⁰ As each one of Śivā’s temples are related to human body part, the human body here is nothing but the body of lord Śivā. In other words, it may be assumed that the Lord’s body is spread in the land of Tamil country in the form of his temples.

²¹ T.P. 457:5.

Beneath the waist lies another seven world!
Worlds are the human body, so to say!
Exists limitless Sanctorum on this earth!
To describe them all, impossible it would be!
We explain some, listen you all!²²

Historically²³ significant temples (stānam) of Śivā in Tamil Nadu include the ones in Tiruvārūr, in Tanjore district, Tiruvānaikkōvil in Tiruchi district, Tiruvaṇṇāmalai in Salem district, Tirucciṟṟampalam (Chidambaram) in South-Arcot district, Tirukkaḷatti in Pudukkottai district and kāci in Chengalput district. All these centers of Śivā are united together in the form of his body. Thus, according to the poem, Tiruvārūr is the foot (mūlam), Tiruvānaikkōvil is assumed to be the reproductive organ (kuyyam), Tiruvaṇṇāmalai is the waist (maṇipūrattānam), Chidambaram is the heart (itayam), Tirukkaḷatti is the matchless head (kaṇṭam) and finally kāci is the middle part of the two eye brows.²⁴ Having compared his temples with that of his own body, the Lord thus prepares to dance.

2.5.1. The Magnificent occasion

Lord Śōmasuntarak kaṭavuḷ's dance performance is surrounded by tirunanti tēvar's drumming; nārata munivar's flute; tumpuru and kantaruva's singing of the kantaruva music and all five bees' rhyme imitating the melody of the ocean. Besides, the goddess Śaraswati who is on a lotus flower plays her veena, Brahma, who has four faces, plays his yāz and sings simultaneously. Velliampalam, the sanctorum of knowledge, is poured with flowers like rain.

²² T.P. 458:5.

²³ The temples that are described in many literary works of Tamil are usually assumed historically relevant places. They are also called pāṭal peṟṟa talaṅkaḷ "Sacred places that have mentions in poems".

2.5.2. The Dance

On Muyalakan, the demon,

Whose body with the color of aggressive tides of ocean!
Whose hair like atrocious fire!
Whose red eyes protruding in pain
Looking up, twisting his head!
With an anger, as though due to a pain when destroying the world!
Bending his back hard!
Pressing the right leg hard!
Showing a form
like an appearance of the sun in the middle of dark sea!²⁵

Having!

The sacred lotus like foot,
Blossomed like a bloomed red lotus flower!
The ten sacred hands,
Reaching out beyond all the directions!
The strong shoulders therein!
The black throat with poison,
That saved graciously the sacred ropes of married women!
The long ears,
With beautiful kuṇṭala rings!²⁶

With

Beautifully braided red hair!
Glowing forehead-ashes in silver color!
The three eyes with full of divine power!
The waist rope!
The sacred chest full of sharp pig's horn!
The right side occupied by
The goddess with eyes like fish!
A lovely sight on the goddess!²⁷

Filled everywhere with

Sounds from the river Ganges!
Songs of the kaṭukkai bee!
Sounds of the auspicious mattaḷa drum!
Sounds of the magical melody of the vētā!
Sounds of the red fire that dangles in his hands!

²⁴ Note that Tiruvārūr, the foot, is far south, and kāci, the forehead, is farther north, thus his body constitutes the whole of Tamil country.

²⁵ T.P. 461:13.

²⁶ T.P. 461:14.

²⁷ T.P. 461:15.

Sounds of the anklets in his sacred legs!
Filling in the ears of the two saints like nector²⁸

Danced gracefully
The sacred Śōmasuntarak kaṭavuḷ!

Folded the hands over the head and prayed
The two saints, witnessing the dance with full of joy!
Fell on the feet and prayed!
Sang songs with mouthful of notes and melodies!
Drowned in the ocean of bliss and happiness!
Showed their affection and love to the Lord!²⁹

2.5.3. The Praise

Drowned in the ocean of happiness, the two saints viyākkira pātar and patañcali muni
praise the Lord out of immense joy.

We
Praise your dance!
 your dance in veḷḷiyampalam
 for the delight of your devotees!
Praise your sacred shoulder!
 smeared with sacred ashes!
Praise your beautifully braided hair!
Praise your right side of the body!
 With Uma residing part of you
 with charming flowers on her head
 with fish like eyes.
You exhibit a divine dance that is immortal for ever, and

We...
Praise you the Lord! We Praise you the Lord!³⁰

en kaṭan paṇi ceytu kiṭappatē

-Tirunāvukkaracar tēvāram 5-19-9.

My only duty is to praise the Lord.

²⁸ T.P. 461:16.

²⁹ T.P. 461:17.

³⁰ T.P. 466:22.

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