

Rāmāyaṇa Allusions in Tamil Riddles

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I. Introduction

The Rāma story indisputably counts among the most popular traditional stories of India and is part of the common knowledge of all her peoples – whether they hail from Gujarat, from Bengal or from Tamilnadu. Apart from Rāma who is worshipped as being considered the sixth incarnation of Viṣṇu, and Sītā who is venerated as the ideal wife, also other characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* receive due attention from the people of India - most of all, Hanumat who enjoys special devotion with lorry and bus drivers, as in handling their vehicles they depend on Hanumat's popularly most appreciated qualities, i.e., strength and endurance.

Thus it is no wonder that in common folklore genres, such as folk-tales, folk-songs, proverbs and riddles, we frequently come across allusions to the Rāma story, its *dramatis personae et scaenae*, its various episodes and incorporated myths and legends. The original sources of such allusions are either the classical *Rāmāyaṇa* versions, i.e., Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, Kampaṇ's *Irāmāvātāram*, Tulasīdāsa's *Rāmacaritamānasa* or, one of the numerous regional and folk *Rāmāyaṇa* versions which have come down to us in various written and unwritten Indian languages.

The aim of this paper is to draw the attention of scholars to *Rāmāyaṇa* allusions as being found in Tamil riddles. A search for such in the most comprehensive and exhaustive Tamil riddle collection, "*Tamiḷil viṭukataikal*", compiled and edited by Ca. Vē Cuppiramaṇiaṇ (in the following: TVK), led to the result that from among 2504 riddles listed therein, at least fifteen items (plus three variants) contained allusions to the *Rāmāyaṇa*:

- (a) eleven allusions in the riddle questions (TVK 56 [No. 15], 96 [No. 6a] and 195 [No. 6b], 420 [No. 16], 577 [No. 11], 659 [No. 14], 748 [No. 9], 916 [No. 3], 1426 [No. 12], 1526 [No. 4], 1717 [No. 7a] and 1718 [No. 7b]);
- (b) two allusions in the answers to the riddles (TVK 857 [No. 8], 1605 [No. 2]);
- (c) four allusions in the questions as well as in the answers to the riddles (TVK 351 [No. 1], 352 [No. 10], 748 [No. 9], 1250 [No. 5a] and 2503 [No. 5b]).

One more riddle which I found in one of the numerous smaller Tamil riddle collections has been added to the above corpus as it contained an allusion to one more character of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the wording of the riddle question (NVK, p. 13 [No. 13]).

In the following, the nineteen riddles are presented along with translations and – wherever necessary – with commenting explanations.

II. The Riddles

1. TVK 351

*irāmaṇum aracu ceyvāṇ ayōttiṇil alla
irāvaṇaṇum caṇṭai ceyvāṇ pōrkaḷattil alla
cītaiyum pū muṭippāl cīṅkārīppāl
cīntai makīṇt-iṭum māntarum matu uṇṇar maṇaiyil alla.
atu eṇṇa? - irāmāyaṇa-p puttakam.*

Rāma (Irāmaṇ) reigns, but not in Ayodhyā (Ayōtti).
Rāvaṇa (Irāvaṇaṇ) fights, but not in the battle-field.
Sītā (Cītai) ties flowers [to her hair and] adorns herself.
Rejoicing within their hearts, the people drink nectar, but not in their homes.

What's that? - The *Rāmāyaṇa (Irāmāvatāram)* (book).

2. TVK 1605¹

*naṇṇamiḷṇ nāl eḷuttīl "ōr maṇṇaṇ pēr"
naṇṇum itīṇ "ōṇṇ iraṇṭu" akkula nallōṇ ām
maṇṇum uḷa iraṇṭ-eḷuttum "nakaram" ākum
vāyitta mutaloṭu nāṅk ōr "vaṇṇitai" ākum
muṇṇa-v iraṇṭoṭu nāṅkum "pāy" eṇṇ-ākum
mūṇ iraṇṭum āyṇt uṇṇariṇ "pīri" eṇṇ-ākum.
kaṇṇavarkaḷ koṇṇāṭṭum kaṇṇa-mikk ārnta
kaṇṇiṇ naccīṇārkkīṇiṇya kaḷaru it eṇṇē?
aḷalār "rakupati" yē ām aḷakar rāḷi viṭukataikku-t takka viṭai.*

Ye good Tamilians! Within four syllables the name of a king [is contained].
The first and second of these four yield a noble person of that lineage.
The following two syllables mean "town".
The fourth joined with the first yields a woman.
Together with the second the fourth means "to jump".
When you take into consideration the third and the second, it becomes [a word meaning] "to separate".

O commentator² of a poem which is praised by poets and abounds in dignity and greatness, say: What's this?

The proper answer to the riddle is: The powerful hero Raghupati (Rakupati),
incarnation of Viṣṇu (Aḷakar).

¹ The riddle is based on a pun on *rakupati*: 1. and 2. syllable = *raku*, "Raghu"; 3. and 4. syllable = *pati*, "town"; 1. and 4. syllable = *rati*, "woman"; 2. and 4. syllable = *kuti*, "to jump"; 3. and 2. syllable = *paku*, "to divide".

² Naccīṇārkkīṇiṇyār is the name of a famous commentator of the 14. Century; here his name is simply used in the meaning of "commentator".

3. TVK 916³

*kaṟuppu-c caṭṭaiikkāraṅ
kallattanattil keṭṭikkāraṅ
tōṭṭi-vēlai ceyt-iṭuvāṅ
cuṟucuruppāy irunt-iṭuvāṅ
oruvaṅnai nām kūppiṭṭāl
ūrāraiye alaippavaṅ
cītaiyaiyē kottinattāl śrī-rāmar cāpam ēṟṟavaṅ.
avaṅ yār? - kākam.*

A man wearing a black robe.
A man cunning in deceiving.
He works as a scavenger.
He is very swift.
If we call one,
he will invite all the people of his village.
Because he had pecked at Sitā (Cītai), he was cursed by Śrī Rāma (Śrī Rāmar).

Who's that person? - The crow.

4. TVK 1526⁴

*tāṅē tāṅ rōṅṟun tampirāṅnum alla
takunta kuṅaṅ-kuṟircci tarum cantiraṅ alla
kāṅ-ēr-pacc-iṭaṅ-koṭi-y ām umaiyum alla
kaṅakk-eḷuttun teriya vaikkum vāṅi-y alla
vāṅē-y-antarar pukaḷvār cāṅaki-y alla
varumūṅṟul iṭaiyatu tām iṭai-p pārṭt ām
ēṅ ēṅ eṅṟ avviṭai vant-irukkum ākil
iyar-peyar mēvum porulai-y iyampuvirē.
atu eṅṅa? - poṅṅāṅkaṅṅikkīrai.*

³ The riddle alludes to an episode which is found in Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, Appendix I, No. 26 (after *Sarga* 89), verses 77-115. As this passage is not very well known, it is quoted here:

The remaining venison was set apart for being dried, and Rama told Sita to scare away the crows from it. But Rama, to his great amusement, found Sita much distressed by a bold crow. No sooner it was scared away, it again greedily came near the meat. Sita chased the crow again and again, but all in vain, it rather threatened to strike her with its beak, wings and claws. Rama laughed finding Sita thus annoyed by the crow, and her cheeks were glowing with rage, her lips quivering in anger, and frowns darkening her lovely brow.

Rama rebuked the bird for its impudence, but apparently it paid no heed to Rama's words, but flew again at Sita. At this, Rama fixed an arrow with mantras to his bow and aimed at the crow. The bird sprang upon its wings, but the magic shaft followed wherever it flew. The crow then flew back to Rama and fell at his feet and pleaded for its life.

Rama hearing the bird entreating for its life said, "Finding Sita much distressed I took her side and set this arrow with mantras to take your life, but since you ask for forgiveness and to spare your life, I shall grant thy prayer – I must protect the suppliant. But my shaft is never discharged in vain, so give up some part of your body in exchange of your life."

Thinking that it was better to live than to die, the crow yielded an eye and the arrow at once struck the crow in the eye. Sita in deep amazement stared at this. The bird then flew away where it liked. (English rendering by Makhan Lal Sen, *The Ramayana*, Vol. I, p. 281 f.)

⁴ Meaning and sense of line 6 is obscure as it is not quite clear what is meant by "from among three" and "the middlemost of them". As far as the plant *Illecebrum sessilis* is concerned, I did not succeed in getting any specific information. So I am unable to comment on its qualities alluded to in the riddle.

It comes into being by itself, but it's not God (Śiva).
 It bestows coolness of an appropriate quality, but it's not the moon.
 It is like a beautiful young green creeping plant of the jungle, but it's not Umā (Umai).
 It teaches arithmetic and grammar, but it's not Sarasvatī (Vāṇi).
 It is praised by the celestials, but it's not Jānakī (Cāṇaki).
 If, from among three [answers?] that will come to your mind, you examine the
 middlemost of them, and
 if, by thorough inquiries, you have found that answer,
 you may name [that] thing to which a natural name is attached!

What's that? - The plant *Illecebrum sessilis* or, *Alternanthera sessilis*.⁵

5. (a) TVK 1250

caṇaka-nakarīṅ peyar
aṇumāṅ peyar
pārvati-tēviyīṅ peyar
koṇṭavaḷiṅ peyar
oru avayava-p peyar
oru irākattin peyar
inta āru peyarkaḷiṅ naṭu eḷuttukaḷai-y ellām onru cērttāl
oru stalattin peyar.

appeyar yātu? - ti-ru-vā-ṇai-k-kā (mitilai – māṛuti - pavāṇi - maṇaiivi – mūḷku – mukāri).

The name of Janaka's (Caṇaka's) town.
 A name of Hanumat (Aṇumāṅ).
 A name of goddess Pārvati (Pārvati).
 A name for "wife".
 The name of a body part.
 The name of a *rāga* tune.
 If you combine the middle syllables (or letters) of these six names, [you will get] the
 name of a sacred place.

What's that name? - Tiruvāṇaikkā (a sacred place with a famous Śiva shrine near
 Tiruccirāppalli).

5. (b) TVK 2503

jaṇaka-nakarīṅ peyar
aṇumāṅ peyar
pārvatiyīṅ peyar
peṇṇāiyai-k kuṛikkum peyar
ōr avayava-p peyar
ōr irāka-p peyar
ākiya ivvāṇṇai kaṇṭu piṭittu
inta-p peyarkaḷiṅ naṭu-v eḷuttāl
vicēṭamāṇa pāṭal peṇṇa oru ūriṅ peyara-k kāṇalām!
anta ūriṅ peyar eṇṇa? - ti-ru-vā-ṇai-k-kā (mitilai – māṛuti- pavāṇi - maṇaiivi – mūḷku –
mukāri).

The name of Janaka's (Jaṇaka's) town.

⁵ A kind of edible greens with shiny little leaves and gold-coloured flowers, growing in damp places.

A name of Hanumat (Aṇumān).
 A name of Pārvati (Pārvati).
 A name that denotes “wife”.
 The name of a body part.
 The name of a *rāga* tune.
 Let us find out these six [names] and, with the help of the middle syllable (letter) of these names, hit upon the name of a place that has attained special fame!
 What’s the name of that place? - Tiruvāṇaikkā.

6. (a) TVK 96

*antarattil parantu varum paruntē-y aṇṇu
 aḷakāṇa vālum uṇṇu aṇṇumār aṇṇu
 vintaiyuṭaṇ kaṭṭ-uṇṇu kaṭṭum aṇṇu
 vēntaratu tirunāmam avarkkē-y uṇṇu.
 atu eṇṇa? - kāṇṇāṭi-paṭṭam.*

It flies high in the sky, but it’s not a pariah kite.
 It has a beautiful tail, but it’s not Hanumat (Aṇumār).
 It is wonderfully fabricated, but it’s no fabrication.
 It even wears the sacred mark of a king.

What’s that? - The kite.

6. (b) TVK 195

*akācantāṇil paṇakkum paṇavai-y alla
 atikamāy vāl uṇṇu aṇṇumār alla
 vākāṇa kompum uṇṇu erutum alla
 vāyo-aṭittāl mēl eḷumpun tūḷi-y alla
 ēkānta veyilālum eyvār illai
 iraiccaluṭaṇ āṭum atu pāmpum alla
 pōkātu āḷntu viṭuṇ kāl tāṇ iṇṇēl.
 pukaluvīr ikkataiyiṇ putumai kaṇṇē. - paṭṭam.*

It flies high in the sky, but it’s not a bird.
 Its tail is very long, but it’s not Hanumat (Aṇumār).
 It has beautiful horns, but it’s not a bull.
 If the wind blows it rises upwards, but it’s no dust.
 They don’t let it go in the blazing heat of the sun.
 Rustling it moves along, but it’s not a snake.
 It can’t walk, but glides down, because it has no legs.

When you will have solved this strange riddle, you may tell [the answer]. - The kite.

7. (a) TVK 1717

*neṭṭ-uṭalāy nīṇṭ-irukkum aravam alla
 neruppil viḷaiyāṭum civaṇum alla
 kaṭṭu-muṭṭāy vil piṭikkum vicayaṇ alla
 kaṇṇavar payappaṭuvār kaḷḷaṇum alla
 vaṭṭa-mukattil tuṇi kiḷampum mēkam alla
 vāyiṇāl tiṇṇu kakkum vauvālum alla
 paṭṭaṇattai-c cuṭṭu aḷikkum aṇṇumār alla
 pāriṇil itarkum ōr iṇaiyum illaiyē.
 atu eṇṇa? - tuppākki.*

It has a long body, but it's not a snake.
 It dances in the fire, but it's not Śiva (Civaṅ).
 Vigorously it catches (bends) the bow, but it's not Vijaya (i.e., Arjuna) (Vicayaṅ).
 Those who see it, are afraid, but it's not a thief.
 Light emerges from its round face, but it's not a rain cloud.
 It eats and vomits through its mouth, but it's not a bat.
 It burns and destroys a town, but it's not Hanumat (Anumār).
 There is nothing on earth that is similar to it.

What's that? – The gun.

7. (b) TVK 1718

*neṭṭu-neṭṭāy nīṅṭ-irukkum pāmpum alla
 neruppilē vīlaiyāṭṭum civaṅum alla
 paṭṭaṅattai-c cuṭṭ-āḷikkum anumār alla
 vāyalē tiṅṅru kakkum vauvāl alla.
 maṅṅavaṅē ikkataikku viṭai colvāyē! – tuppākki.*

It's very long, but it's not a snake.
 It dances in the fire, but it's not Śiva (Civaṅ).
 It burns and destroys a town, but it's not Hanumat (Anumār).
 It eats and vomits through its mouth, but it's not a bat.

O king, may you give the answer to this riddle! – The gun.

8. TVK 857⁶

*karaṅkaḷ irupatt eṅpār kāḷi-y allāṅ
 kaṅam uṭaiya kāḷ iraṅṭu maṅitaṅ allāṅ
 ciraṅkaḷ ir-aintuṭaṅē cakatt ōr mēccum
 ceya-vīraṅ avaṅ pōla-t tēvar illai
 yukantaṅilē kari-tantam uṭaintu kāṅum
 ulakattil ivaṅ perumai-y uraiḱk oṅātu
 karantaṅilē viṅai koṅṭu vācippāṅ kāṅ!
 kaṅṅavarē ivaṅ evaṅō kaḷaruvīrē! - irāvaṅaṅ.*

He is said to have twenty arms, but he is not Kāli (Kāḷi).
 He has two strong legs, but he is not a man.
 The whole universe praises him with his ten heads.
 A victorious hero like him is not [found] among the gods.
 In a battle, he has broken off the tusks of an elephant – behold!
 His greatness in the world cannot be expressed in words.
 In his hands he holds the *Vīṅā* and plays it – behold!

O ye scholars, may you make known who he is! - Rāvaṅa (Irāvaṅaṅ).

⁶ Such a praise of the demon king of Laṅkā is found only in the south Indian (i.e., Dravidian) versions of the Rāmāyaṅa.

9. TVK 748⁷

*ōkō kiḷakkē rāvaṇaṇ tōppē
ceṅkāl naṅṅē cevanti-p pūvē
caṭṭuṇu vantu peṭṭiyil aṅkē!
atu eṇṇa? - cūriyaṇ.*

O eastern region, o grove of Rāvaṇa (Rāvaṇaṇ), o crayfish with red legs, o (red) Christmas flower!

Come quickly and get settled in a chest!

What's that? – The sun.

10. TVK 352⁸

*irāvaṇaṇ cīrac arṇat ēṇ?
irāvellī maṛaivat ēṇ?
irāmaṇ tāratāt / irā mantāratāt.*

Why did it happen that Rāvaṇa's (Irāvaṇaṇ's) heads were cut off?
Why does it happen that the stars of the night disappear?

Because of Rāma's (Irāmaṇ's) wife. / Because of cloudiness in the night.

11. TVK 577

*etir-k katai pōṭṭa rāvaṇaṇukku mutukilē munnūru vaṭu.
atu eṇṇa? - callaṭai.*

Brandishing his battle club, Rāvaṇa (Rāvaṇaṇ) got three hundred wounds on his back.

What's that? – A (large) sieve.

12. TVK 1426

*taka-taka taṭṭu-p pōlē
tāmarai muṭṭu-p pōlē
intiraṇ eḷuttu-p pōlē
irāvaṇaṇ curuṭṭu-p pōlē.
atu eṇṇa? – pāmpu.*

It's like a glittering metal plate.

It's [long] like a lotus stalk.

It's [fast] like Indra's (Intiraṇ's) hand-writing (i.e., lightning).

It's shrewd like Rāvaṇa (Irāvaṇaṇ).

What's that? The snake.

⁷ The "grove of Rāvaṇa" is a metaphor for Sri Lanka. In the southern parts of Tamilnadu the sun appears to rise in Sri Lanka for which reason she is compared here to the aurora. The third line is a typical riddle paraphrase meaning: Rise, walk quickly over the sky, and set!

⁸ A play of words depending on how the words are separated when written together in Sandhi form.

13. NVK, p. 13

*viṭṭil kuṭi-y iruppāṇ viruntāliyum alla
viṭintatum tūṅkiṭuvāṇ kumpakarṇaṇum alla
toṭṭāl koṇṇ-iṭuvāṇ neruppum alla.
avaṇ yār? - miṇcāra viḷakku.*

He stays in my house, but he is not my guest.
As soon as it dawns, he will go to sleep, but he is not Kumbhakarṇa (Kumpakarṇaṇ).
If I touch him, he will kill me, but it is not fire.

What's that? – The electric lamp.

14. TVK 659⁹

*ērum irāṅkum eḷil vākai maruvuṅ
kūrum irāmaṇ paṇiyē koḷḷum-āl - vērum oṇ-
r eṇṇuṅ ciraṅcīvi-y eṇṇ uraipparē-y aṇumā-
ṇ aṇṇ āṇ eṇṇ āṇāyṅt aṇai!
viṭai-y illai.*

Climbing up and climbing down it embraces the beautiful *sirissa* tree.
It renders service according to Rāma's (Irāmaṇ's) instructions.
They call him "long-lived person", but he is somebody else, different from Hanumat (Aṇumāṇ).
When you have thought over it (and found out) who it is, announce it!
(According to TVK:) No answer.

15. TVK 56

*aṭuppu-c cātam kotippat ēṇ?
arici aṇṇam āvat ēṇ?
ilaṅkai aḷintat ēṇ?
irumpu urukuvat ēṇ?
neruppāl.*

Why does rice boil on the fire-place?
Why does rice become boiled rice (food)?
Why did Laṅkā (Ilaṅkai) perish?
Why does iron melt?

Because of fire.

⁹ The answer is doubtlessly *aṇṇil*, "the palm squirrel", which, according to a folk-belief wide-spread in South India, assisted the monkeys and bears in building the bridge from the mainland to Laṅkā. When Rāma noticed that stones thrown into the water by a palm squirrel kept floating on its surface, while stones that he flung into the sea went down below the water, he was amazed and asked the palm squirrel whether it knew the reason for that. The palm squirrel responded: "For the simple reason that you don't throw the stones into the water in the name of Rāma!" Touched by the devotion of the palm squirrel Rāma stroked its back. And since that time, the back of the palm squirrels is embellished by three lines – the marks of Rāma's fingers.

According to tradition there are seven *ciraṅcīviyar*, "persons blessed with immortality", namely, Accuvattāmaṇ (Aśvatthāman), Makāpali (Mahābali), Viyācaṇ (Vyāsa), Aṇumaṇ (Hanumat), Vipīṣaṇaṇ (Vibhīṣaṇa), Kirupācāriyaṇ (Kṛpācārya) and Paracurāmaṇ (Paraśurāma). - In general, *ciraṅcīvi*, "long-lived person", is a term of blessing, prefixed to names of male persons either in speech or writing. Here, this term is bestowed on the palm squirrel because of its devotion to Rāma. The riddle is based on a pun on the different use and meaning of *ciraṅcīvi* and *ciraṅcīviyar*.

16. TVK 420

*uṭamp ellām urōmam uṇṭu vāl nīṇṭ-irukkum
maram ēri-t tāuvavāṇ palam tūpāṇ aṇilum alla
kiḷaikalai-p piṭitt ūñcal āṭuvāṇ nām
eppaṭi-c ceyyiṇum appaṭi-c ceyvāṇ
ilaṅkāpuri-k kōṭṭaiyai-t tāṇṭiṇavan
ivaṇē.*

avaṇ yār? - kurāṅku.

He is hairy all over his body. He has a long tail.
He climbs up trees and jumps about. He eats fruits, but he is not a palm squirrel.
He takes hold of branches and swings to and fro.
Whatever we do, he imitates.
It was him who leapt over the fortress of the city of Laṅkā (Ilaṅkāpuri).
Who's that person? – The monkey.

III. Summary

In summing up, we find that the riddles presented here contain,

- (a) one allusion to the *Rāmāyaṇa*:
TVK 351 (No. 1): the contents of the *Rāmāyaṇa*;
- (b) four allusions to Rāma / Raghupati:
TVK 351 (No. 1): Rāma reigns over Ayodhyā,
TVK 659 (No. 14): Rāma gives instructions to palm squirrels,
TVK 916 (No. 3): Rāma curses a crow,
TVK 1605 (No. 2): Rāma's name;
- (c) four allusions to Sitā / Jānakī / Rāma's wife:
TVK 351 (No. 1): Sitā adorns herself,
TVK 352 (No. 10): Sitā is the reason for Rāvaṇa's beheading,
TVK 916 (No. 3): Sitā is pecked at by a crow;
TVK 1526 (No. 4): Sitā is praised by the celestials;
- (d) eight (ten) allusions to Hanumat / Māruti / monkey:
TVK 96 (No. 6a): Hanumat's beautiful tail,
TVK 195 (No. 6b): Hanumat's long tail;
TVK 420 (No. 16): Hanumat's physical characteristics, habits and his daring deed of leaping over the fortress of the city of Laṅkā,
TVK 659 (No. 14): Hanumat is one of the seven "long-lived persons",
TVK 1717 (No. 7a): Hanumat burns and destroys Laṅkā,
TVK 1718 (No. 7b): do.,
TVK 1250 (No. 5a): Hanumat's name,
TVK 2503 (No. 5b): do.;
- (e) six allusions to Rāvaṇa:
TVK 351 (No. 1): Rāvaṇa fights in the battlefield,
TVK 352 (No. 10): Rāvaṇa's beheading is caused by Sitā,
TVK 577 (No. 11): Rāvaṇa brandishes his battle club and gets 300 wounds,
TVK 748 (No. 9): Rāvaṇa's grove (i.e., Sri Lanka),
TVK 857 (No. 8): Rāvaṇa's physical characteristics, habits, daring deeds and praise,
TVK 1426 (No. 12): Rāvaṇa's shrewdness;
- (f) one allusion to Kumbhakarṇa:
NVK, p.13 (No. 13): Kumbhakarṇa's habit of sleeping for six months;
- (g) one allusion to Ayodhyā:
TVK 351 (No. 1): Ayodhyā is reigned by Rāma;

- (h) two (four) allusions to Janaka's town / Mithilā:
 TVK 1250 (No. 5a): the name of Mithilā,
 TVK 2503 (No. 5b): do.;
- (i) two allusions to Laṅkā / Laṅkāpurī:
 TVK 56 (No. 15): Laṅkā perishes through fire,
 TVK 420 (No. 16): Hanumat leaps over the fortress of the city of Laṅkā.

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