

Śaiva religion and the performing arts in a Tamil Novel: Kalaimaṇi's *Tillāṇā Mōkaṇāmpāl*

Indira Viswanathan Peterson

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

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

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

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

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

The Plot of *Tillāṇā Mōkaṇāmpāl*

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

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

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

the birth of a son, Tillainayakam. The entire narrative is presented as the reminiscences of Professor Tillainayakam, retold by the author-narrator.

Reimagining a sacred Tamil past

In the late 1950's *TM*'s middle-class urban audience were consumers of Bharatanatyam dance and Karnatak music, the performing arts of the Madras concert stage, whose status as "classical traditions" had been negotiated and constructed over half a century, mainly by Madras-based brahmin intellectuals, and in some respects through brahmin-dominated academies (Allen 1997, and Subramanian 1999). In contrast to these projects, in *TM* Kalaimaṇi firmly locates the classical and the authentic in the earlier, temple-based *catir* and *periya mēlam* cultures that had been the purview of hereditary non-brahmin artists, the *devadāsī-s* and the *nākasvaram* players, who together formed the community of *icai vellālar* (formerly known as *mēlakkārar*).³ By the mid-thirties and early forties, the *mēlam* performance culture, and *devadāsī-s* in particular, had been displaced by a culture of performance on the concert stage by non-hereditary (and largely brahmin) performance, with the city of Madras as its hub. Kalaimaṇi's novel presents the art of the *icai vellālar* as the sacred, authentic tradition that had been uprooted, desacralized and commercialized in the process of being moved to the Madras *sabhā-s* ('academies') and stage. Kalaimaṇi suggests that the destruction of the artistic prerogatives of the *icai vellālar* also narrowed the audience of the performing arts from the Tamil "masses" or "folk" to a minority urban elite. However, driven though it is by nostalgia for a lost world, *TM* is robust and positive in tone. Part elegy and requiem, part critique, the novel is, above all, a celebration of the culture of the *icai vellālar*.

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

³ On the heritage of the *mēlakkārar-s*, see Cuntaram 1990 and Cuntaram 1992.

⁴ On the sacred geography traced by the Tamil saint's pilgrimages and hymns in the Kaveri delta, see Peterson 1989, pp. 12-14 and 146 -47.

traditions of each place are closely interwoven with detailed explanations of the practices, repertoire and techniques of the *catir* dance and *periya mēlam*.

In Kalaimaṇi's portrayal, the traditional repertoire of hereditary performers is far richer and has a far greater compass than the modern, secular repertoire in the arts. In the *Tillānā-nākasvaram* contest at Tiruvārūr (Chapters 56 and 57), for instance, Caṇmukam and Mōkaṇā cover the range of compositional genres and cultural forms in the repertoire, using ancient Tamil texts such as the *Cilappatikāram*, Cuntaramūrṭti Nāyaṇār's *Tēvāram* hymns dedicated to Tiruvārūr, the *devadāsī* repertoire of *padam* compositions, the special *tāla*-s and *naṭai*-s (beat-cycles and rhythm patterns) employed in *nākasvaram* and *devadāsī* traditions. Karnatak classical music's Tamil, Telugu and Sanskrit compositions are all encompassed in the capacious sweep of the two *mēlam* traditions. Caṇmukam and Mōkaṇā trade in Telugu and Tamil *pada varṇam*-s, *padam*-s and *jāvāli*-s. Caṇmukam's grandest *rāga ālāpana* (elaboration) and compositional performance at the Tiruvārūr temple festival (chapter 55) focuses on Muttusvāmi Dikṣitar's majestic Sanskrit composition dedicated to Subrahmaṇya / Murukaṇ, "Śrī subrahmaṇyāya namaste".

The world of the *mēlakkarar* arts is open and diverse in other ways as well. At the temple festivals classical compositions and *rāga*-s rub shoulders with folk song and dance forms such as *poykkāl kutirai*, *paḷḷu*, and *kummi*. Caṇmukam's friendship with Jiljil Ramāmaṇi is perhaps Kalaimaṇi's master-stroke in portraying the openness and "public" nature of the Tamil musical and dance traditions. When we first meet Ramāmaṇi she has moved from a failed career as a third-rate *catir* dancer to the popular drama stage, where she specializes in 'Parsi' song and dance and "kaḷḷa part" ('robber part', involving male impersonation and vigorous dancing). Throughout the novel, too, Kalaimaṇi points out the ready accessibility of the temple arts, and especially *nākasvaram* music, to huge publics in vast spaces. In the controversy surrounding the *pāri nāyaṇam*, the *icai vellāḷar* are portrayed as being mindful of tradition, but also open to innovation.

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

The discourses of Kalaimaṇi's cultural reconstruction differ from both pan-Indian and regional nationalizing discourses precisely in arguing for a 'whole'

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

II Translations from *Tillānā Mōkaṇāmpāl*

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

The spirit and sensibility of the *Tēvāram* hymns to Śiva permeates the novel. Many chapter headings are phrases from the *Tēvāram*, and specific hymns are invoked at critical moments in the plot. Kalaimaṇi's narrative directly connects the history of the Tamil arts with the sacred lore of Tiruvārūr, embodied particularly in the lives of the *Tēvāram* saints Appar and Cuntarar. *Mōkaṇā* is directly linked with the illustrious lineage of dancers attached to the Tiruvārūr temple. Of special relevance to her is the life of Paravai Nācciyār, a *ruttira kaṇikai* dancer whose marriage to Cuntarar is a major legend of Tiruvārūr (Ghose 233). The most important of the sacred associations of Tiruvārūr, in addition to the cult of the Goddess Kamalāmbā, is the esoteric doctrine of *ajapā* (unspoken) dance of Tyāgarāja, a mystic doctrine equal to that of the dance of Naṭarāja at Chidambaram. In essence, the *ajapā* dance is Śiva's dance on Viṣṇu's chest, in the rhythm and form of the life-breath flowing in and out of the body.⁵ Not only is the *ajapā* dance invoked at critical points in the novel, *nāda* (sound, as primal manifestation of reality) as embodied in Caṇmukam's playing, and the dynamic of the universe, as embodied in *Mōkaṇā*'s dancing, and the entire action of the novel, are explicated as manifestations of Tyāgarāja's *ajapā-naṭanam*.

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

⁵ See Rajeshwari Ghose's detailed study of the mystical doctrine of Tyāgarāja's *ajapā* dance, in Ghose (1996), pp. 97-134.

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

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

Chapter 45 The *Pāri Nāyaṅam*

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

Barring the lullaby, the first song that all of us in this land hear is the music of the *nākasvaram*. Scholars have long debated the name of the instrument, whether it is *nātasvaram* or *nākacuram*, and what the name might

mean.⁶ Neither name appears in the classical Tamil texts, but today, the very pole that holds up the wedding canopy is planted only to the accompaniment of the *nākasvaram*. There is no villager who has not heard the Bhūpāḷam and Bilahari *rāga*-s played at the temple at dawn. The *nākasvaram* is universally celebrated as the instrument signifying auspiciousness.

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

Till recently, players used a *nākasvaram* called *timiri*, an instrument that was slightly larger than the *mukavīṇai*. Both the *timiri* and the *mukavīṇai* were high-pitched instruments, and the instrument our Caṇmukam played was a *timiri*.

In those days, the tradition of the *pāri nāyaṇam* was restricted to Tiruvārūr. A group of musicians called *nāyīṇār aṭiyār* had the right to play the *pāri*, an instrument of grand sound. Its rich tones would dive deep into the Kamalālayam water-tank, and emerge to enchant the entire town.

The great *vidvān* Cāmikkaṇṇu Nātasvarakkārar was a member of the hereditary community of *pāri* musicians and an expert in the instrument. That is why Caṇmukam had come to him. When Caṇmukam said that he wanted to learn the *pāri*, Cāmikkaṇṇu Nātasvarakkārar said, "*Tampī*⁷, you are an expert in the *timiri*. Your imagination flourishes on that instrument. It will be very hard for you to give it up and learn the *pāri*."

"I can learn it in ten days' time!" said Caṇmukam.

"*Tampī*, I applaud your enthusiasm, but learning to play the *pāri nāyaṇam* is not as easy as you think. It needs a skilled hand."

"One can't learn any instrument without a skilled hand, *aṇṇē*,⁸ I am a perpetual student. You can teach me with confidence."

"But you will have to master it!"

"With effort, one can master any art!"

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

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

⁶ Kalaimaṇi opts for "*nātasvaram*". In my translation I have used *nākasvaram*, except in the name "*Cāmikkaṇṇu Nātasvarakkārar*"

⁷ Younger brother.

⁸ Elder brother.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"When shall we begin?"

"Right now."

"What? At midnight?"

"Yes."

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

"No."

"Why, *tampi*?"

"Today I have come to your house as a student".

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

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

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

"*Aiyō*, that is slander! Who would say such things about you?"

When Cāmikkaṇṇu said, "They say these things in the town, *tampi*. Allright, please go to bed. We will start the lessons in the morning!", Caṇmukam acquiesced.

His heart was filled with joy. All night long he dreamt that he was playing the *pāri nāyaṇam*, and that, unable to dance to his music, Mōkaṇā was crying, "Stop, stop! See how the blood is pooling in my feet!"

Chapter 48 There is neither victory nor defeat for the brave

Introduction: Determined to prevent Caṇmukam and Mōkaṇā from meeting each other again through the Tillāṇā contest, Vaitti pays Kuppucāmi Nāyaṇakkārar, Cāmikkaṇṇu Nātasvarakkārar's jealous relative, to object to his teaching the pāri nāyaṇam to a musician who does not belong to the Tiruvārūr Nayiṇār Aṭiyār community. The matter is to be decided at a public panchayat court convened by the trustees and officers of the Tiruvārūr temple, in the Tēvāciriyaṇ maṇṭapam hall, famed as a meeting place of ritual officiants and the learned of Tiruvārūr as early as the time of Cuntaramūrṭti Nāyaṇār.

On that day the Paraśaivas, descendants of Tampiyappa muṭṭukkārar and players of the *cuttamattaḷam* and *pañcamukavāṭṭiyam* drums at the sanctum of Tyāgarāja, sat on one side of the Tēvāciriyaṇ hall.⁹ Naṭṭumuṭṭu Naṭarācamūrṭti, the head of their group, wore the orthodox accoutrements of the sacred ash, *rudrākṣa* beads and sacred thread.

On the other side sat the *nayiṇār aṭiyār* community, to which Kuppucāmi Nāyaṇakkārar belonged. These were the hereditary temple servants who played the *ekkāḷam*, *tirucciṇṇam*, conch, *vanka*, *karṇā*, and the *koṭukōṭṭi* drum, as well as the *pāri nāyaṇam*, the drone, the *tavil* drum and the *tāḷam* hand cymbals.¹⁰

The trustees and managers of Tiruvārūr temple, treasurers, the *ōtuōār* ritual singers of the *Tēvāram*, and the specialists in charge of the *rakaciyam* (mystery of the *ajāpā* dance), *kaḷal kāṇṭal* and other sacred rites, sat in front of the *rājatāṇi* hall.¹¹ The temple women sat on the other side. Seniormost among them was Koṇṭi Ammaiṅār. A member of the *patiyilār* temple ritual specialist community, she had the privilege of dancing in front of Tyāgarāja's sanctum at the evening worship.¹² These ladies begin dancing only after the age of forty. They dance to the music of accompanists, according to the injunctions of the *āgama*-s, dressed in white garments, wearing white flowers and white ornaments, and with their hair bound high in a knot on one side of the head. That lady sat on one side of the hall.

⁹ Tampiyappa Muṭṭukkārar, a contemporary and associate of the composer Muttusvāmi Dikṣitar, is credited with the organization of the ritual repertoire for the *nākasvaram* at the Tiruvārūr temple. In *TM* Cāmikkaṇṇu Nātasvarakkārar is said to be a member of the lineage of disciples of Tampiyappar. The *pañcamukavāṭṭiyam*, a five headed drum, is one of the special instruments played in Tiruvārūr temple ritual. For a detailed discussion of the priests and other ritual officiants at the Tiruvārūr Śiva temple, as well as its institutional organization, see Ghose 1996, pp.199-252.

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

¹¹ At the concrete, ritual level, the *rakaciyam* is the mystery or secret of facilitating the performance of the *ajāpā* dance by the Tyāgarāja icon in procession during the *Paṅkuṇi Uttiram* and *Ārudrā* festivals (Ghose 1996, p.125). Special ritualists know the technique of suspending the Tyāgarāja icon on a banana fibre cord, so that the icon moves to an extremely gentle rhythm, thus performing the *ajāpā* dance. Ghose (1996, pp. 236 -8) states that this *rakaciyam* was the duty of a group called *Vilupperumar*. It is possible that "*rājatāṇi maṇṭapam*" is a reference to the Rājanārāyaṇa *maṇṭapam* hall.

¹² On the history of the dancers (*tēvaraṭiyār*, *patiyilār*) attached to the Tiruvārūr temple, and the *koṇṭi* class of dancers, see Ghose 1996, 230 -235. On the dance and ritual repertoire of the Tiruvārūr dancers, see Kersenboom 1987, pp. 138 - 151.

The female temple servants who played the flute and *vīṇā* through the window of the sanctum sat next to her.¹³ Other *dāsī*-s, who performed rites such as waving the plate of auspicious lustration and showing the ritual hand gestures, sat nearby. Since the entire town had been invited, *Mōkaṇā* and *Vaṭivāmpāl* sat in the women's section of the audience and watched the proceedings of the *panchayat* court.

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

Among the members of the *panchayat* seated on the dais was *Vīti viṭaṅka nāyiṇār*, the priest from the community of those who have the privilege of "touching the sacred body" of *Tyāgarāja*.¹⁴ He wore diamond studs in his ears and a five-fold silk *pattāru vēṭṭi* cloth around his waist.¹⁵ An upper cloth covered his chest, and his body was sumptuously adorned with Śaiva ornaments. His lips constantly murmured "*namaccivāya*", the five syllable mantra. Next to him sat *Tiyākavinōta Piramarāyar*. He too belonged to the priestly community. He wore sacred ash on his forehead, *rudrākṣa* bead earrings, and the *gauriśaṅkaram* ornament around his neck. He was humming the *rāga Kalyāṇi*.

Crowned by a mass of matted hair, the *tampirāṇ* ascetic from the monastery of the royal endowment at the *Tarumapuram Āṭiṇam* monastic seat sat beside *Piramarāyar*. Two assistant *tampirāṇs* sat behind him and waited on him.¹⁶

Alliyaṅkōtai Aṭimarāvāta tēcikar, the *ōtuvār* singer of hymns, was the fourth member of the *panchayat*.¹⁷ With every movement, he chanted, "*Śivā, tirucciṛṛampalam*". The fifth member was the director of internal administration at the temple. He neither hummed nor chanted, but looked around every now and then with an air of self-importance.

¹³ The temple women sang through this window, known as *teṅṅavācal* (*Tiyākēcar Kuṟavaṅci*, English Introduction, p. 19).

¹⁴ The phrase "*muppolutum tirumēṇi tiṅṅuvār*" (men who thrice daily touch the Lord's sacred image) is already used for a special class of priests at *Tiruvārūr* by *Cuntaramūrtti Nāyaṇār* (*Tēvāram* 7. 39. 10, Peterson 1989, poem 270, p.335). According to *Ghose* (1996, p. 235- 41), the *Nāyiṇār* are the *kurukkaḷ* priests, who actually perform the worship rites in the sanctum, while the *Piramarāyar* (or *Brahmarāyar* or *Paramarāyar*) have the privilege of decorating the icon, but not of performing the worship. Both are Śivācāryas, brahmans who have been initiated into the Śaiva rites.

¹⁵ *Vēṭṭi* = *vēṣṭi*, cloth worn as lower garment by men.

¹⁶ The *Tarumapuram Āṭiṇam*, the Tamil Śaiva monastic seat situated in *Tarumapuram* near *Mayavaram*, is one of the most important centers of Śaiva (especially Śaiva Siddhānta) learning in the *Kaveri delta*. The *tampirāṇ* ascetic is the representative of the *Paṅṭāra Caṅṅiti*, the head of the *Āṭiṇam*. The *Āṭiṇam* oversees several temple endowments, including the "*rājan /rājāṅga kaṭṭalai*" (royal endowment).

¹⁷ On the *ōtuvār* singers and their performance of the *Tēvāram* and other Tamil hymns during the worship rites in the Tamil Śiva temples, see *Peterson* 1989, pp. 52-75.

Chapter 52 The flood that flowed from the heart

Introduction: Mōkaṇā is busy preparing for the Tillānā contest, along with her dance teacher Muttukkumara Naṭṭuvaṇār and Varataṇ, who accompanies her on the mirutaṅkam drum. A strong man who devotes much time to physical exercise, Varadaṇ loves Mōkaṇā like an elder brother.

“What is going on, Varatā? It looks as if you have taken all the ashes from the stove to clean your teeth! A pot of yesterday’s rice is missing as well.¹⁸ What is going on here? How many times do you need to brush your teeth? And how much rice can you eat?” said Vaṭivāmpāl.

“Who’s got time to brush their teeth or to eat, *ammā*?¹⁹ I have no time for anything other than smearing paste on the *mirutaṅkam*”, Varataṇ said, scraping the rice-pot.

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

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

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

It was her habit, every morning and evening, to gaze with reverence at the diamond necklace that she kept in the safe.²⁰ When she tried to open the safe that morning, however, the lock seemed stuck. She could not turn the key. She called to Varataṇ to come and help her, but Varataṇ paid no heed, and kept on playing “*tatiṅkiṇatōm*”. Luckily, when she went to the front of the house to look for him, she saw a locksmith passing by and had him come in and repair the lock. It was because of her resentment at Varataṇ’s not coming to her aid when she needed him that she had shouted at him for taking the pot of old rice.

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

“Why me? When you are there, *ammā*, why ask me to talk to her?”

¹⁸ “*palaiya cātam*” or “*palaiyatu*”, day-old-rice, is commonly eaten with curds at breakfast or lunch.

¹⁹ *Ammā* = mother. A respectful form of address for women.

²⁰ The necklace is a present from the Minor, to be given to Mōkaṇā. Vaṭivāmpāl is waiting for the right moment to broach the subject to her daughter.

“Does she treat me as her mother? She doesn’t even look at me these days!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 55 The enchanting *pāri nāyaṇam*

Introduction: The panchayat court has given permission to Caṇmukam to perform on the pāri nāyaṇam at Tiruvārūr temple on a designated day, the 13th day of the festival of Paṅkuṇi Uttiram, when the deity is taken out in procession as riṣapavākaṇar, the Lord who rides on the bull. The tillāṇa contest is scheduled to take place within the temple precincts after the procession has come to an end.

Beginning this chapter with a wonderful description of the Tiruvārūr temple festival, Kalaimaṇi rhapsodizes about Caṇmukam’s performance of a Dikṣitar composition on the god Subrahmaṇya,

²¹ *Pallavi* is the first segment of the the *kṛti* or *kīrttaṇai* song in Karnatak music. It is followed by the *anupallavi* and one or more *caraṇam*-s.

²² A dose of castor oil is given to induce or to help maintain regular bowel movements. *Tāḷa* (*tāḷam*) here refers to the regular pattern of beats used in Indian dance and music.

following it with praise of his Tamil persona as *Murukaṇ*. Only a portion of the author's paean to *Murukaṇ* and his connections with the Tamil language and culture has been translated here. The praise of *Murukaṇ* is resumed in other segments of the novel, pertaining to the temple at *Cikkal*, and the pilgrimage shrine of *Murukaṇ* in *Katirkānam* in *Ilam* (in Sri Lanka).

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

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

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

The *Mirasdar* landowners of *Maṇṇārkuṭi* travelled to *Tiruvārūr* in beautiful "*cāraṭṭu*" coaches.²³ They exchanged courteous smiles, even though their diamond jewels vied with each other for status.

On that day in *Tiruvārūr* you could see betel boxes in the shape of books, round boxes, flat ones, oval boxes, and every other kind of betel box. The old song goes, "Teeth are precious, sir, *tillālē*,/ but the betel juice stain on the teeth / is gold itself, *taṇṇāṇē*."²⁴ Indeed, if we could calculate the cost of the betel leaf, areca nut and tobacco all those people consumed in *Tiruvārūr* that day, we would know the cost of the golden stain that they had acquired for the silver coin of their teeth.

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

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

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

²³ "*Cāraṭṭu*" is probably a corruption of "chariot".

²⁴ *Tillālē*, *taṇṇāṇē* = nonsense syllables used in folk songs.

In a corner of the shore of the Kamalālayam tank at the temple, a *karakam* pot-dancer was dancing to the *Simhanandana tāḷa*²⁵. Since Tiruvārūr is a town renowned for its crafts, with entire streets inhabited by craftsmen who make ornaments from paper and pith, the *karakam* dance of Tiruvārūr was dazzling, graced by the splendor of the ornaments on the temple car, the street, and the entire town. Thousands of people watched the dance.

At another spot, the Māriyamman Kōyil Pakkiri troupe of dummy horse dancers was dancing to the *kiṭukīṭṭi* drum band. The man who played the male rider was dressed up as King Serfoji of Tanjavur, the one who played the female rider was dressed as his queen, and they argued with each other.²⁶

Man:

I came to you after determining
the auspicious day, time and stars, *aṭi*,
I came after I had heard the soothsayers' predictions, *aṭi*.

Woman:

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

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

Elsewhere a *bhajanai* group was singing "Naṭarāja, Naṭarāja, beautiful dancer, Naṭarāja", to the accompaniment of hand-cymbals and the *mirutaṅkam* drum. Wearing a crown of *rudrākṣa* beads and strings of *akka* beads on his chest and arms, the leader of the group was himself dancing Naṭarāja's dance.

At yet another spot, five or six people were seated on a dais, singing "*Manmatha lāvāṇi*" to the accompaniment of the *ṭēp* and other instruments.²⁷ When they sang, "How could we have cattle, and houses, and property, and sons-in-law, and daughters-in-law, if Manmatha had really been burned to ashes?" Manmatha, god of love, himself laughed from his hiding place.

In the midst of all this din, suddenly there was the sound of firecrackers exploding, announcing the beginning of *riṣapavākanam*, the Lord's procession on his bull mount. At once, the crowd ran to *viṭṭa vācal*, the temple gateway from which the procession would emerge.²⁸

²⁵ By dancing in the complex patterns demanded by the *simhanandana tāḷa*, the dancer traces the figure of a lion (*siṃha*) on the ground. The *karakam*, in which the dancer carries a pot on the head, is usually performed at temples of the goddess Māriyamman.

²⁶ The dummy horse dance (*poykkāl kutirai*) is typical of the Tanjavur region, and appears to have developed during the rule of the Marathas (1685 -1855). Serfoji II of Tanjavur (ruled 1798 -1832) acquired legendary fame for his patronage of literature and the arts.

²⁷ The *lāvāṇi* is a Marathi song and dance form that became popular in Tanjavur under the Marathas (Seetha 1981, p. 360 -61). It was sung to the accompaniment of the *tuntunā*, a string instrument, and the *deph* drum. During temples festivals Tamil *lāvāṇi*-s were sung on the theme of Śiva burning Manmatha, the god of love, to ashes. As here, the *lāvāṇi* usually took the form of an impromptu debate between two teams, one (*erinta kaṭci*) claiming that Manmatha had been burned, and the other (*eriyāta kaṭci*) claiming the contrary.

²⁸ This is the north gate of the Tiruvārūr temple. The blessings of the god Gaṇapati enshrined near this gate is invoked in the *kaṇapati kāppu* of the *Tiyākēcar Kuṟavaṅci*. (song 2).

The lamps at the temple are lit only with *ney*, clarified butter. In the old days, there was no dearth of dairy cattle in the Cōla land. Even then, however, we hear that the Śaiva saint and devotee Naminanti had a wick and a lamp, but no *ney* for the lamp. He tried to borrow some *ney* from his Jain neighbor. The Jain refused to give the butter, and taunted Naminanti, saying, 'What need does the god of light have for a lamp? And why *ney*? Can't you light his lamp with water?' Crying, "O God, I do not have *ney*, but I have my hands. Please accept my devotion itself as the butter", he scooped up a handful of water from the Kamalālayam tank, and poured it into the lamp. It immediately turned into *ney*, and he lit the lamp with this clarified butter. The revered Nāvukkaracar (Appar) sang about this as follows:

"The jewel among devotees, the humble servant
of Ārūr's Lord who wears the sweet lotus garland,
Nampinanti made the oil lamps burn on water;
surely the whole world knows this miracle!"²⁹

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

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

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

"Salutations to Śrī Subrahmaṇya,

²⁹ Appar, *Tēvāram* 4.103.2 (for a translation of the full text of this verse, see Peterson 1989, poem 263, p. 325).

Salutations to him who is handsome
like a thousand Manmatha-s,
he who is the refuge of the destitute.”³⁰

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

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

Chapter 62 Life sprouted, consciousness blossomed

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

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

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

³⁰ “Śrī subrahmaṇyāya namaste” in the *rāga* Kāmbōdi, a *kṛti* composition in Sanskrit by Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitar. Note that Kalaimaṇi uses this composition as a context for his praise of Murukan and the Tamil language.

³¹ *Tiruppukal* is the title of the collection of Aruṅakirinātar’s celebrated Tamil songs to Murukan.

No telegram in the world could have fetched the herb that he sought in Tanjavur, for in those days the herbs used in our healing systems were kept secret. In those days, people would not have known that *kaiyāntakarai* is a code name for the herb *karicilāṅkaṇṇi*. As for these days, no one can understand either name!.....

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

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

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

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

"*Aiyō*, alas, *attāṅ*", she cried involuntarily.

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

"*Cāmi*,³³ You alone can save him, "Mōkaṅā implored, joining her palms in reverence, but Paratēciyār took Caṅmukam's hand and checked his pulse, then fell into thought. Vaṭivāmpāl stood with arms crossed. Varataṅ stared at him. Everyone crowded around him.

Mōkaṅā said: "*Cāmi*, how is he? I would gladly give my own life, if only you could save him!"

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

"It was on my account that he was stabbed. He does not have a single enemy in this world".

"Are you saying that you have enemies?"

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

³² "*Attāṅ*" is the term by which a Tamil girl addresses the cross-cousin (father's sister's son) who has a right to marry her. The term is more generally used to address one's husband.

³³ *Cāmi*, *cuvāmi* = sir, lord, master. Term of great respect.

had compassion for me. Cursed female birth! Some enemy threw a knife at him, thinking that he could get me by killing him. I am the cause of all this. Thanks to him, I got the prizes of a title and a gold chain. Thanks to me, his prize is this knife-wound. *Cāmi*, I will give my life for his. Save him, please save him!"

Mōkaṇā fell in supplication at Paratēciyār's feet, but he lifted her up.

"Child, it is not enough to carry learning in your feet, you need wisdom of the heart as well. A sure sense of rhythm in the hand is not enough, you need concentration of the mind. You are prattling, because you do not understand the true nature of things. *Ammā*, it is not for us to give or to take life. God is not so destitute that he needs to borrow your life to shore up Caṇmukam, like a man borrowing milk from a neighbour to feed me. He alone is the creator, and he is the destroyer as well. If it is his will, he can revive even a corpse. Did he not once come to save Ciṛuttoṇṭar?³⁴ Pray to him, *ammā*!"

"*Cāmi*, his body is so cold! Why does he not speak? Look, his eyes are open, but he does not see!"

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

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

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

Tarumaṇ quickly fetched a matchbox.

Tarumaṇ, Varataṇ, Mutturākku, even the Minor, looked intently at Paratēciyār, wondering with what medicine he was about to treat Caṇmukam, and wondering whether Caṇmukam would live.

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

³⁴ Paratēciyār refers to the story (cited in the *Tēvāram* and narrated in Cēkkilār's hagiography *Periya purāṇam*) of the Śaiva saint Ciṛuttoṇṭar, whom Śiva tested by appearing as a holy man and demanding Ciṛuttoṇṭar's son for his meal. When Ciṛuttoṇṭar showed the strength of his devotion by complying with his guest's demand, Śiva revived the son and rewarded the saint.

into Caṇmukam's nose, along with each inbreath. Everyone's eyes were trained on him. He had a worried look on his face. Some time went by.

"*Cuvāmi*, What can I do?"

"Praise God, *ammā*, pray to him. Let medicine be joined with mantra".

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How did you bring them so quickly?"

"I ran out even as *cāmi* was telling you to dance. I ran to the house and brought them. Dance, *taṅkacci*, little sister, dance!"

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

Mōkaṇā looked at the wick that Paratēciyār held in his hand. The flame in that wick seemed to her to be the flame of life itself. "After all, is not life like a flame? Who is the one who saves it from being extinguished? Lord Śiva, save Caṇmukam's life! Save the light that lights my life! Save my life from being enveloped by darkness!"

It illuminates the heart.
 it dispels darkness.
 It illumines speech
 with its radiance.
 It dwells within every soul,
 it is seen by everyone,
 It is the light of the knowing self,
 the chant of "Hail Śiva".³⁵

"You are the light in the heart, you are the light that rids the heart of sorrow, you are the light in speech, you are the light that shows the path, you are the object of sight; dwelling as light in the eye, you make the eye see. O Lord Śiva, brahmin who is the essence of the Veda, radiant immortal, O *namaccivāyam*, the saving chant of 'Hail Śiva!', you alone are my refuge. O object of the *namaccivāya mantra*, you who saved Nāvukkaracar when he was bound to a rock and cast into the sea, save the lord of my heart!" — the song expressed all these tender feelings.³⁶ Her body thrilled. Today her voice did not sing, her heart sang. The song had no *rāga* melody, but it was suffused with emotion.

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

He wears the sacred ash on his forehead
 He is sumptuously adorned with white bones.
 He moves swifter than the wind.
 He has a third eye on his brow.
 He kicked Death with his foot
 wearing the ringing anklet.³⁷

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

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

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

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

³⁷ Quotation from Appar *Tēvāram* 6.242. 2, a hymn dedicated to Śiva in the Mūlaṭṭāṇam (Vaṇmikanātar) shrine in Tiruvārūr temple. Appar refers to the myth which narrates how Śiva rescued his devotee, the boy Mārkaṇḍeya, from death, by kicking Yama, god of death, on the chest when he came to take the boy away on the day appointed for his death. The myth is represented in the iconic form of Śiva as Kālāntaka or Kālasaṃhāramūrti, and the event is said to have taken place in Tirukkaṭāvūr. See Peterson 1989, p. 342 and 347.

the Lord. She kept on dancing, as one possessed. "*Jal jal*", the ankle bells rang out.

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

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

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

His tongue trembled. It was as if he was about to speak. Slowly the word 'Mōkaṇā' came out of him. Crying, "*attān*", Mōkaṇā ran to him.

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

"Mōkaṇā, feed him something with your hand", said Paratēciyār.

"*Cāmi*, I have some citron fruit. May I give it to him?"

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

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

Tarumaṇ ran to Caṇmukam, crying, "*Tampi*, have you come back to life?"

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

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

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

Pleading, "*Cāmi*, that is no mere wick, it is my whole life. Please don't let it die out", Mōkaṇā sat down at Caṇmukam's bedside with a glass of milk.

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