

# Tamil, Vaiṣṇava, Vaidika: Kuruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyānkār, Irāmānuja Tātācāriyār and Modern Tamil Literary History

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**Abstract** The writing of literary histories of Tamil literature coincided with the practice of history itself as a discipline starting in the late nineteenth century. The historiographical practices conflated Tamil literary history, religious history, as well as notions of the Tamil nation, which led to such works becoming vitally important legitimising narratives that established the claim of self-defining groups within a new Tamil modernity. The absence of such a narrative also meant the erasure of a particular group, identifying itself as a caste or religious unit, or both, from Tamil history. It is in the light of these cultural and political stakes that we must view the textual and hermeneutical strategies of an old, Tamil, religious group, the Śrīvaiṣṇavas, to position themselves anew in the mid-twentieth century, in what they saw with anxiety as a Tamil, Śaiva Age.

**Keywords** Tamil Literary History · Kuruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyānkār · Irāmānuja Tātācāriyār · Vaiṣṇavism · Brahmin · Non-Brahmin · Śaivites

## Tamil Literary History and the Tropes of Religion

In his wide-ranging 1986 historiography of histories of Tamil literature, Karthigesu Sivathamby pointed out the paradox between the importance and appeal of Tamil literary history for the cultural and political formation of the modern Tamil identity, and the indeterminate and uneven nature of the practice of literary history as a discipline within the Tamil context. By the latter, he did not mean the epistemological crisis in theorizing literary histories in the light of post-modernity which has

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turned them into “heuristic constructions,” but, rather more modestly, the problems that have accompanied the writing of literary history from its inception as a discipline in the late eighteenth century in general, and from the nineteenth century in the Tamil context in particular. These latter include the bedevilment of periodization, the poorly defined criteria for the selection of sources, the tyranny and limitations of narrative and, last but not least, special to the Tamil case, the specter of Dravidian nationalism. This has haunted these issues and the discipline itself, and has laid in place a master narrative that has become difficult to question, let alone dislodge: one which presupposes an ahistorical Tamil-ness, strongly if not entirely monolingual, and also very likely mono-religious (Śaivite). The dominant and normative narrative of Tamil literary history, for Sivathamby, has therefore been one which conflates Tamil, the people, Tamil, the language and Śaivism, the religion.<sup>1</sup> Thus any literary history to emerge in the nineteenth or twentieth century that sought to assert the claims of other religious groups—those such as the Vaiṣṇavas, the Jains, the Christians and the Muslims, each with their rich and complex trajectories within the Tamil region, or those other linguistic groups (Telugu, Malayalam) within the linguistically more diverse administrative structure of the Madras Presidency—had to contend with this master narrative and forge alternative versions which either modified, contested or inverted it, but did not contradict the tyrannical link it established between literary history and religious history.<sup>2</sup> For, indeed, it is the strength of the tropes of this master narrative—its conflation of ethnicity, language, and religion—that accounts for its continuing relevance, as well as the relevance of literary history itself as a discipline in the Tamil cultural context. Modern literary histories, or texts that rely on incorporating a strand of literary history into their narrative, consider this trope, implicitly or explicitly, normative, and such works continue to be written because this remains one significant venue for reconfiguring religious identity and for the making of autochthonous claims in the post-colonial Tamil context. This paper looks at two such hybrid texts and the claims they make on behalf of Tamil Vaiṣṇavism: *An Enquiry into Caste and Religion (Jātimata-ārāycci*, henceforth *An Enquiry*) by S. Kuruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār and, more briefly, *The Vaiṣṇavism born of History (Varalārṇil piṛanta vaiṣṇavam)* by Akṇihōtram Irāmānuja Tātācāriyār. It does so in order to examine how Tamil religious identities other than a non-Brahmin Śaivite one attempted to insert or re-insert themselves into the master narratives of Tamil literary history that had become valid in the twentieth century. The primary focus is the religious identity of the Tamil Vaiṣṇavas, particularly those of the Śrīvaiṣṇava persuasion, and the changes this tradition underwent under the shadow and the pressures of Dravidian nationalism.

<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the formation of this dominant strand of narrative, and this is the strength of Sivathamby’s work, is strongly historicized and seen from the *longue durée* perspective. Sivathamby allows for the following possibilities: that the linking of Śaivism with Tamil has a long pre-colonial history, that the period between 1825 and 1929 is when the decisive contours of a Tamil ethnicity based on being Dravidian as well as the rejection of the hybridity of Tamil and Sanskrit for pure Tamil were in the process of being formed, and that it is in the post-1950s period, with the rise of the DMK, that the major literary locus of significance for Tamil identity becomes the *Caṅkam* Age.

<sup>2</sup> Cutler (2003, pp. 290–292).

## Tamil Vaiṣṇavism and the Challenge of Dravidian Politics

The paucity of studies regarding how Vaiṣṇavism in the Tamil country has responded to the challenges and critique of Tamil modernity is evident. In contrast, a few key and seminal studies have been undertaken that look at the relationship between Tamil Śaivism and the Dravidian movement, though such accounts have tended to concentrate overwhelmingly on the period prior to the emergence of the DMK, i.e., prior to the 1950s. Insofar as such studies have the parallel effect of also shedding light on the critical challenges faced by Vaiṣṇavites in the same period, it is not without interest for us to examine them briefly. The broad framework of these historical developments is laid out in an article of Venkatachalapathy (1995). In the same year, the dissertation by Vaitheespara<sup>3</sup> also appeared, which largely endorsed the historical formations outlined in Venkatachalapathy's article. Venkatachalapathy examines the years 1927–1944, the period of the emergence of the Self-Respect Movement and its consolidation, prior to the formation of the DMK. He argues that the relationship between the Self-Respecter phase of the Dravidian movement and the Śaiva elite was one of ambivalence, to say the least, if not outright hostility at certain junctures. The radical criticism of caste and religion in the Self-Respect Movement and its satirical views on canonical Śaiva texts such as the *Periya Purāṇam*, etc. were initially greeted “with shock, disbelief and dismay by the saivites,” even while responses were hastily being charted and divergent voices emerging on the Śaivite side (1995, p. 761). Dividing the Śaivite response broadly into “orthodox” and “moderate” factions, Venkatachalapathy suggests that the moderates emerged as victorious and the more influential. This was not least due to figures like Maṛaimalai Aṭikal (1876–1950), who might be called one of the founding fathers of neo-Śaivism. Both Venkatachalapathy (1995, p. 762) and Vaitheespara (1995, p. 506) agree that Aṭikal and his followers sought to show that he had long ago espoused the same principles as the Self-Respect Movement on caste and egalitarianism.<sup>4</sup> The relationship between moderate Śaivites like Aṭikal and the Self-Respecters fluctuated, with periods in the 1930s of a strategic alliance on a common non-Brahmin and anti-Hindi platform dissolving in the 1940s as a result of the re-emergence of old conflicts, usually centered on the issue of the Self-Respecters' atheism and radical social critique.<sup>5</sup> It is clear, though, that despite these fundamental differences, the Śaivite elite were very much a part of the cultural emergence of Dravidian nationalism and saw themselves as active participants in the dialogic process of its construction and consolidation. At its very best, the Śaivite response lay in the internalization of Self-Respect critique, leading to a

<sup>3</sup> Vaitheespara (1995).

<sup>4</sup> See also Raman (2009) on Aṭikal's attitude to caste and commensality.

<sup>5</sup> Venkatachalapathy (1995, p. 767): “Even when both shared an anti-brahminism, there was a wide divergence over what it meant. The saivites gave a very sectarian interpretation to anti-brahminism, harking back to a pre-aryan Tamil society, where the vellalars occupied a pre-eminent position. In this conception of ancient Tamil society, saivites replaced Brahmins, and their scriptures replaced the Vedas. Even caste remained, though it was only occupation based and no stigma was attached to it. In comparison with this, the self-respect version was revolutionary. In its view ancient Tamil society was egalitarian and democratic. There was neither religion nor caste. Perfect equality prevailed.”

critical, albeit still religious, self-reflexivity, as the life and writings of the somewhat lesser known yet fascinating figure, who merits a study of his own, Kaivalyam Cuvāmikaḷ shows.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to this earlier period, our current state of knowledge regarding any sort of differentiated Śaivite response during the post-1950s period in Tamil Nadu is limited. Nevertheless, we do have some clues, still insufficiently explored, with regard to the DMK's engagement and use of the ancient Tamil past to construct a new Tamil imaginary. Thus, Ramaswamy (Ramaswamy 1997, p. 70) has this to say about the DMK's attitude towards religion in the 1950s: "By the 1950s, both the DMK and Dravidianism generated a curious combination of agnosticism ('we do not ask whether there is a god or not'), monism ('there is only one god and one community'), populism ('god lives in the smiles of the poor'), and humanism ('we must develop that kind of outlook which treats all humanity as one'). This medley of diverse beliefs that Anita Diehl (1977, p. 29) has shrewdly characterized as 'pragmatic, agnostic humanism' opened up a space for the steady incorporation of all kinds of elements from popular as well as the devotional religious practices of the region into the ideology of Dravidianism, such as the celebration of the harvest festival, Pongal, the worship of Murugan; and the apotheosis of Valluvar and his *Tirukkuraḷ*. . .". As Ramaswamy has convincingly shown, political Dravidianism directed religious sensibility and fervor towards more secular gods, including Mother Tamil herself, in what has been called the "pietistics of Tamil devotion" (1997, pp. 85–87). This deification of the "mother-tongue" was paralleled by the divinization of the politician, a process that involved the use of old literary genres straddling the religious and non-religious/secular boundary, such as the eulogy, the panegyric or the praise-poem.<sup>7</sup>

Where were the Vaiṣṇavas in all this? Even though Periyār himself came from a traditionally Vaiṣṇava background, neither he nor the Self-Respect Movement spared the religion when it came to criticism. Periyār and the Self-Respecters chose the beloved canonical text of the Śrīvaiṣṇavas, the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* as a special target of satire in their debunking of Tamil religion, and involved themselves in creative re-readings of purāṇic mythology, such as that concerned with the 10 incarnations of Viṣṇu.<sup>8</sup> Though the Śaivites, as I have already shown, were not spared this criticism, the Tamil Śaiva identity, which was overwhelmingly non-Brahmin (the exception of course being the small group of Tamil Smārta Brahmins), enabled the Śaivite religious community to still stake its participation in the formation of Dravidian nationalism with its strong anti-Sanskrit and anti-Āryan (which can also be correlated to anti-Brahmin) trope. In contrast and despite Periyār's own Vaiṣṇavite family background,<sup>9</sup> as well as a recurrent positive and modern motif valorizing Rāmānuja as a pre-modern socio-religious reformer incorporating a

<sup>6</sup> See Geetha and Rajadurai (1998, pp. 333–335) on Kaivalyam Cuvāmikaḷ.

<sup>7</sup> Pandian (2007), Ramaswamy (1997, pp. 87–94) and Bate (2009, pp. 118–146).

<sup>8</sup> See Richman (1994, pp. 175–201) and Geetha and Rajadurai (1998, pp. 334–340).

<sup>9</sup> It is on these grounds that Maṛaimalai Aṭikaḷ attacked Periyār as anti-Śaivite in his article in the *Civanēcan* of June–July 1928. On this, see Venkatachalapathy (1995, p. 762).

strong caste criticism in his social actions rather than textual writings,<sup>10</sup> the Tamil Vaiṣṇavite identity remained compromised in such an attempt from the beginning by caste demographics—the strongest tradition of Tamil Vaiṣṇavism being Śrīvaiṣṇavism with its followers and religious heads, although there were some exceptions, overwhelmingly Brahmins.<sup>11</sup> Thus, even while several Tamil literary histories of the first decades of the twentieth century were written by Vaiṣṇava, Śrīvaiṣṇava Brahmins—such as Sesha Iyengar and Srinivasa Aiyangar—such contributions to Tamil scholarship were often explicitly weakened by a Brahminical bias or, even when not, inevitably suspect on the grounds of caste identity. The case of Mu. Irākava Aiyāṅkār (mentioned above), a scholar of old Tamil texts, editor of *Ceṅṭamiḷ* and a member of the editorial committee of the *Tamil Lexicon*, is one example of the latter situation. Thus, speaking of his predicament as a Tamil scholar, Ramaswamy (1997, pp. 195–196) says: “Not surprisingly, that anomalous figure, the Brahman who did profess his love for Tamil and dedicated his life to its cause, is tainted by association with the community of which he is recognized as a nominal member. He was further tainted because his love for Tamil was generally compensatory classicist and Indianist in complexion. This meant that he was not overtly anti-Sanskritic, anti-Aryan, or anti-India, even when he expressed his passionate desire for Tamil. Instead, he insisted on seeing Tamil as coexisting with Sanskrit and Sanskritic culture; and, not surprisingly, he is increasingly rendered marginal within the devotional community.”<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, marginalization within the Dravidianist cultural and political discourse centered on “Tamil,” and following the 1940s an increasingly weak voice within it, should not mislead us into thinking that a Vaiṣṇava voice ceased to exist. Rather, what is scarce is scholarship on such a voice or voices, particularly on those voices—not limited to the Brahmin—who attempted to recoup Tamil literary history, and thereby also a religious history for Vaiṣṇavism, or other minority religious traditions such as Jainism, within a Tamil nationhood.<sup>13</sup> Particularly significant is the fact that such interventions did not only come from those who participated in the discourse purely on the basis of their roles in academic institutions or in established circles of scholarly discourse. Rather, it has been overseen that they also emerged from within what one might call “orthodox” circles as well—where the historicization of religious traditions was felt to be less the positive outcome of attaining parity with Western scholarship in terms of methodological sophistication, but more a crisis of traditional historiographies and thought which needed to be tackled with

<sup>10</sup> This particular motif seems to have been derived in its early stages from the later hagiographical works of the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, particularly the later *Guruparaṃparāprabhāvams*. It was then picked up by socio-religious reformers and Dravidian nationalists in the first half of the twentieth century. For more on the reactions and counter-reactions on Rāmānuja as a socio-religious reformer, see Akṇihōtram Irāmānuja Tātācāriyār (1973, p. 254ff)

<sup>11</sup> On the relationship between Śrīvaiṣṇavism and Non-Brahminism, both at the theological and the socio-cultural level, see Hardy (1995), Hanumanthan (1979) and Narayanan (1994), to name a few.

<sup>12</sup> An exception can be found in U.Vē.Cāminātaiyar, who (as the article in this issue by Anne Monius shows) made it a deliberate point to camouflage his knowledge of Sanskrit in favour of an explicit and whole-hearted allegiance to Tamil alone, both in his literary endeavors as well as his autobiography.

<sup>13</sup> For the Jains and Tamil literary history, see Emmrich (in this issue).

an existential seriousness. These voices have been particularly neglected so far in studies of Tamil literary history, but recovering them would be important, not only to understand the complex and nuanced spectrum of responses to and discourses within the mainstream Dravidianist discourse of Tamil literary history, but also to see and obtain a larger picture of the modernization of Tamil religious traditions, in this case, Vaiṣṇavism. This would include looking at the genres and strategies it adopted to give itself a voice—however peripheral or weak—within the new Tamil imaginary. The two works I will discuss in the remaining sections of this article are symptomatic of the impulses and anxieties linked to the self-identity of Śrīvaiṣṇavas in what seemed to be a Śaivite and Tamil Age. The first of these is S. Kīruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyaṅkār's *An Enquiry into Caste and Religion*.

In 1977, the lawyer and Śrīvaiṣṇava scholar S. Kīruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyaṅkār, who was highly regarded and affectionately known as Śrī Sudarśana Svāmi within the religious community,<sup>14</sup> self-published the second and definitive edition of *An Enquiry into Caste and Religion* (*Cātimata Ārāycci*, henceforth, *An Enquiry*), an older version of which had already come out in serial installments a decade earlier in his Śrīvaiṣṇava, Teṅkalai<sup>15</sup> religious magazine *Śrīvaiṣṇava Sudarśanam*. He had written this version of the book, he says in the *Preface to the Second Edition*, to intervene in the contemporary debates about religion and caste whirling around the Tamil country at that point in time.<sup>16</sup> In fact, the book is very little about what its title seems to suggest. The bulk of it is unconcerned with issues of caste or the nexus of caste and religion, but rather with the issue of what constitutes the ancient and “real” religion of the Tamils, as revealed in its oldest and classical literature, that of the *Caṅkam*. Indeed, the core hypotheses of his book cannot be understood without the discourse centering on *Caṅkam* literature in the Tamil literary histories of the late nineteenth century. This discourse interpreted this literature as being the earliest literature of the Tamil nation, and that which revealed the social and religious life of the Tamils in antiquity. It is to the development of this interpretation that I now turn.

## Tamil Literary History and *Caṅkam* Literature

The story of the “discovery” or “re-discovery” of neglected classical Tamil literature in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth has been told and re-told in various histories of Tamil literature.<sup>17</sup> Regardless of the elements of exaggeration or legend-making that have contributed to this account of loss and recovery, this “re-discovery” coincided with the emergence and practice of literary history as a modern discipline within Tamil studies itself. A clear disjuncture or caesura can be seen in how literary history was

<sup>14</sup> For an online biographical note on Kīruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyaṅkār and his scholarly genealogy, see Rengarajan (1997).

<sup>15</sup> The Teṅkalais being a sub-sect of the Śrīvaiṣṇava community. On the historical split of the community into two sections, see Raman (2007).

<sup>16</sup> *An Enquiry*, p. xxi.

<sup>17</sup> A standard account is to be found in Zvelebil (1975, pp. 5–21).

practiced before the *Caṅkam* literature came to be seen as marking the moment of “origins” for Tamil literary history in general, and thereafter. The divide may also be characterized very broadly as the difference between literary history written as a compendium of poets and/or a bibliographic form, on one hand, and a narrative form, on the other. The first form is evident in some of the earliest such texts: *The Tamil Plutarch* by Simon Casie Chitty (1859), the *Pāvalar Carittira Tīpikam* (or *The Galaxy of Tamil Poets*) by Arnold (1886) and the *Pulavar Purāṇam* by Taṅṭapāṇi Cuvāmikaḷ (1901).<sup>18</sup> In all these works we have a compilation of eminent men, and occasional women of letters, with no narrative plot to make overall sense of why particular figures have been chosen or their chronology. Chitty’s work is an alphabetical listing, including biographies or legends and myths—making no distinction between them—of the lives of 196 individual poets and poetesses and their works, both from the South Indian Tamil region and Sri Lanka. Chitty’s work, as Arnold admits in his *Preface*, inspired him to enlarge on it and write his own, which came to include 410 literary figures. This kind of literary-historical writing became obsolete as soon as the re-discovery of the *Caṅkam* literature began to be seen as the pivotal point for the writing of both Tamil history and literary history. This was because *Caṅkam* literature provided the means for constructing the kind of narrative literary history so widely produced in nineteenth-century Europe, with an account of origins and a plot line of subsequent progress and, if need be, decline—all of which could also be linked to the meta-narrative of the “character” of a people or a nation.<sup>19</sup> From the early years of the twentieth century, *Caṅkam* literature becomes, for Tamil literary history, both the moment of origin as well as the utopian future, against which all subsequent literary production is to be measured and evaluated. Two works produced with the time span of a decade between each other can be taken as paradigmatic of the fault lines that this “point of origin” produced in the first 20–30 years of the twentieth century. The first is V. Kanakasabhai Pillai’s *The Tamils 1800 years ago*, which was published in 1904.

Of all the studies on *Caṅkam* literature that were published in the first decades of the twentieth century, Kanakasabhai Pillai’s work remained the touchstone, not only in terms of the book’s structure, but also the claims it boldly and imaginatively put forth. Calling him “the Father of modern Tamil research,” Subramania Aiyar remarked (Subramania Aiyar 1969, p. 94), a good sixty years later, “The book is a monument to his industry, ripe scholarship and critical acumen. It has exerted a great influence on subsequent Tamil studies and research; since its publication, it has been freely drawn upon by all the historians of India from Vincent Smith onwards for constructing the early history of the South Indian kingdoms.” The strength of the work lay in its evocative and strong emplotment, tracing the rise and decline of the “Tamil nation. Kanakasabhai Pillai sketched the grand sweep of his

<sup>18</sup> On the *Pulavar Purāṇam*, see Subramania Aiyar (1969, pp. 109–110).

<sup>19</sup> See Perkins (1992, pp. 1–2): “The discipline of literary history, as it was practiced in the nineteenth century could not narrate its own history without locating an origin.” Perkins goes on to say that it began in antiquarian works of the eighteenth century, enjoyed unquestioned popularity and prestige in the first 75 years of the nineteenth century and was characterized then “by 3 fundamental assumptions: that literary works are formed by their historical context; that change in literature takes place developmentally; and that this is the unfolding of an idea, principle, or suprapersonal entity.”



vision in his first chapter, showing that while the existence at the beginnings of the first millennium of a powerful Roman empire is well known, there was another empire just as great in southern India which is not as well known but deserves to be revealed—the Tamil empire. Then he lays down his gauntlet: “It is the general opinion of Western scholars that there was no Tamil literature before the ninth century A.D. But the fact appears to be that all that was original and excellent in the literature of the Tamils was written before the ninth century, and what followed was, for the most part, but a base imitation or translation of Sanskrit works” (Kanakasabhai Pillai 1966, p. 3). He concludes the chapter (1966, p. 9) by declaring his intention to use this literature to describe “the ancient geography of the Tamils, then their foreign commerce, the different races that spoke Tamil, their political history, and conclude with a brief account of their social life, mode of warfare, literature, philosophy and religion.” In most important respects, Kanakasabhai Pillai’s book, as well as M.S. Purnalingam Pillai’s *A Primer of Tamil Literature*, which came out in the same year, 1904, set the terms of discussion and debate regarding *Caṅkam* literature. Firstly, there was the issue of the nature of the corpus and what it might be said to consist of. The main difference between Purnalingam Pillai and Kanakasabhai Pillai lay in the number of works assigned to the earliest *Caṅkam* corpus, with the former essentially restricting the corpus to *Puṛaṇānūru*, *Akaṇānūru* and *Tolkāppiyam* and the latter including *Maṇimēkalai* and *Cilappatikāram* within it. In all subsequent literary histories, this remained the list of core works. While the conclusion long persisted that its earliest strata could be dated to the first centuries of the first millennium, a tendency grew to create an internal stratification of the so-called corpus, and hence the stretching out of its timespan between earlier, later and very late texts. A second issue concerned how the Āryan–Dravidian or Sanskrit–Tamil discourse was inserted into the evaluation of this literature, a discourse that provided a framework for Tamil literary history in general. It has been recently and correctly been pointed out by Stuart Blackburn that both the Tamil–Sanskrit and Āryan–Dravidian discourses had a long pre-colonial history (Blackburn 2000, pp. 473–474).<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the Dravidian discourse gained a further colonial lease on life in the scholarly work of F.W. Ellis and others, who were part of the intellectual and governmental project that has been called “the Madras School of Orientalism.”<sup>21</sup> The consolidation of this linguistic evidence through ethnic claims, most powerfully articulated in Robert Caldwell’s 1856 publication, meant that those who were writing histories of Tamil literature post-Caldwell now had recourse to established notions of the distinctive—distinct from Āryans, that is—racial and

<sup>20</sup> Blackburn bases some of his evidence for this on an analysis of the *Tiruvalluvamālai*, a medieval text dating perhaps to around the tenth century. But his observations are also strengthened and corroborated by textual evidence from medieval Śrīvaiṣṇava literature. On this see, for example, Hardy (1995) and Raman (2007, pp. 106–109).

<sup>21</sup> Re. Trautmann (2009, p. 4): “On a number of issues, then, entirely new readings of the history of India as a whole emerged from the work of the MSO, readings at odds with those put out by the Calcutta Orientalists. The most spectacular and enduring of these was the ‘Dravidian proof’ published by Ellis (1816). The published demonstration that the languages of South India were historically related to one another and, more importantly, were not derived from Sanskrit, directly controverted the Calcutta Orientalists; . . . The concept of what came to be called the Dravidian family of languages profoundly altered the view of India’s deep history. . . .” See also Trautman (2002, 2006).



linguistic identity of Tamils.<sup>22</sup> It appears that, although the Āryan–Dravidian trope is already present in the works of those who first edited the *Caṅkam* texts, such as Ci. Vai. Tāmōtaram Piḷḷai in his critical edition of the *Vīracōḷiyam*,<sup>23</sup> the works of P. Sundaram Pillai, Kanakasabhai Pillai and Purnalingam Pillai were the first to prominently deploy this paradigm in Tamil literary history.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, an important narrative thread in *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago* is that the Tamils are Dravidian, that they were antagonistic to the Āryans, that they had a high degree of civilization prior to the advent of the Āryans in the Tamil country, that the earliest Tamil language in the *Caṅkam* literature, with its conspicuously limited use of Sanskrit words, is evidence for this, and that the caste system was introduced by the Āryans into Tamil culture, which had formerly been devoid of it.<sup>25</sup> Thirdly, the literature was seen as representing the utopian past as well as constituting the pinnacle of Tamil literary sensibility. This view, voiced so eloquently by Kanakasabhai Pillai was taken up by other historians particularly sensitive to the literary merits of the texts. Thus, Sesha Iyengar (Sesha Iyengar 1995, p. 89) approvingly quoted K.V. Ramachandran in his work, who had this to say about the literary mode of the *Cillapatikāram*, which he categorized under *Caṅkam* literature: “The tragic muse was strangely foreign to the Sanskrit ear, but curiously enough Tamil genius has broken new ground in that bourgeois tragic composition, the *Silappathikaram*, which sets at defiance all known laws of the Sanskrit text-books. Here you have the poignancy of the tragic feeling and an effect identical with that of the early Greek tragedies.” Indeed, the view that the *Caṅkam* literature is the finest flower of an original Tamil mind, expressive of its humanism and naturalism, can be traced to these early enthusiastic studies and culminates in Zvelebil’s comments on this, in his enormously influential *The Smile of Murugan* (Zvelebil 1973, p. 16): “... all of them are to an extent pervaded by some conception of universal humanism and unity of mankind. The reasons for this humanism are not drawn from a monistic identity with the Primeval Being, but from the very nature of all men, from a rational unity found in nature and in the cosmos; above all, from a stoic-like, unimpassioned, imperturbable kind of acceptance of the facts of life.” This valorization, from the very moment of its re-discovery in the late nineteenth century, of *Caṅkam* literature as natural, humanistic and democratic undoubtedly had much to do with the canons of literary taste, arbitrated by Western Romanticism, as has been

<sup>22</sup> On Caldwell, Ramaswamy (1997), Geetha and Rajadurai (1998) and Dirks (2001). For a summary of this evidence, see Raman (2009).

<sup>23</sup> Thus, Tāmōtaram Piḷḷai, in his *Preface* to his edition of the *Vīracōḷiyam*, narrates the story of how the Āryans, when invading India, drove the original inhabitants of the North, the Dravidians, southwards, leading to the formation of the Southern kingdoms.

Tāmōtaram Piḷḷai [1881](1920, p. 3): ātikāḷattāriyarōtu camaskritam imayamalaikk appāiliruntu vantateṅrum, āriyar vaṭapālir pukkuḷ kaṅkātiratēcaṅkaḷai vēṅru kaiṭṭāriyarōtu aṅkēvacittavarkaḷ tamiḷar eṅṅum, āriyaraic ceṅyicca mutiṅyāmaiṅṅum avarkkuḷ kīḷpaṭṭirukka maṅamovvāmaiṅṅuṅ ... tamiḷar teṅṅiāccēṅru vatintu tamakkuḷlē cērācōḷapāṅṅiṅyā irācciyāṅkaḷai ēṅṅatuttinārkaḷeṅṅrun tuṅivār palaruḷar.

<sup>24</sup> On P. Sundaram Pillai, see Geetha and Rajadurai (1998, pp. 115–118). Cutler (2003, p. 289) says of Purnalingam Pillai’s book: “For Purnalingam Pillai, as for many like-minded scholars, this [*Caṅkam*] corpus lends credence to the view that Tamilnadu was the site of an early Dravidian civilization that predated and flourished independently of the Āryan-dominated North.”

<sup>25</sup> See Kanakasabhai Pillai (1966, pp. 51–52, 113, 116 etc.).

discussed by Bronner (2010) with regard to Sanskrit *kāvya* poetry. Fourthly, the *Caṅkam* literature was seen as a historical representation of reality, not as a corpus of literary documents shaped by literary conventions. The result was that it was seen to portray, as Kanakasabhai Pillai's work shows, the actual life of ancient Tamils. This notion, coupled with an increasing tendency to create a convergence between literary history and religious history, meant that *Caṅkam* became the most reliable evidence for the early religion of the Tamils. What this religion was or, alternatively, its lack formed much of the focus on *Caṅkam* in subsequent Tamil literary histories. In Kanakasabhai Pillai, this issue is addressed in the slender fifteenth chapter titled *Religion*. Here he describes, first, the religion of the tribals and "lower classes", moves on to point out that the favorite deity of the Tamil higher classes was Śiva, that there were also some Brahmins who had settled in the Tamil country at this time with their own forms of Vedic worship, and that the anti-brahmanical religions, Jainism and Buddhism were also popular (Kanakasabhai Pillai 1966, pp. 227–232). He concludes with a discussion of the religious tolerance of ancient Tamil society, a discourse that also continued to resonate in the works following him, and he was explicit, when pointing out religious traditions that contributed to this tolerance, to refer to the Jainas (whom he calls Nigrantas) and the Buddhists. Brahmanical religion is conspicuous in its absence from this list (Kanakasabhai Pillai 1966, pp. 233–234).<sup>26</sup>

Let us now turn to a work that provides a study in contrasts: *Tamil Studies* by M. Srinivasa Aiyangar, which appeared in 1914. In the eighth chapter of this book, titled *Periods of Tamil Literature*, Srinivasa Aiyangar goes through the periodization of other scholars and then lays down his own, dating and defining thereby the corpus of the *Caṅkam* literature. The dates are given as B.C. 600/500–A.D. 150. The corpus of works considered to belong to this period is the standard one mentioned above, the religion is classified as "Animistic" and "Buddhist," and the *Cilappatikāram* and *Maṇimēkalai* are omitted and slotted into the next period, dated A.D. 150–500, where the religion is mentioned as Jaina (Srinivasa Aiyangar 1986, p. 211). But later on in the same chapter, the *Cilappatikāram* and *Maṇimēkalai* are included in the list of *Caṅkam* works (1986, p. 216). In the subsequent chapters, which move on to provide details about the religion of the poets of the *Caṅkam*, *Tamil Studies* (1986, p. 251) seeming, at times, to correlate with *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago* in important respects: "The religion of the members of the three academies it is not easy to determine, as all the accounts we now have are from the Saiva source, and none from Buddhists and Jains. However, so late as the third or fourth century A.D. there was no Saivism or Vishnuism as understood now. But there was Brahmanism or the religion of the Vedas; and side by side with

<sup>26</sup> Ibid: "One of the greatest facts of ancient Tamil society was religious toleration, the spirit of free enquiry, or the liberty of human understanding. . . . The religious liberty had a great and salutary effect upon the intellectual and moral development of the Tamils. By softening feelings and manners, Buddhism also powerfully contributed to the amelioration of the social state. The Nigrantas and Buddhists aimed at a high ideal of morality. Justice, humanity, charity to all living beings and love of truth were the virtues which they taught by precept and example. These two religions necessarily exercised a very considerable influence upon moral and intellectual order, and upon public ideas and sentiments. The pure conceptions of morality which the Tamils had formed were the real basis of their civilization."

it there was also Jainism and Buddhism.” Paradoxically, there are also instances in the book when Srinivasa Aiyangar (1986, p. 193) seems to be granting an independent “non-Āryan” space to this literature: “The existing Tamil works, most of them, are either translations or adaptations of Tamil originals. There are, however, certain compositions which are not so. The five major and the five minor epics, the eight anthologies, the ten major and the eighteen minor poems belong to this class.” But these instances and contradictory statements are all framed within an overall discourse (1986, p. 186) that asserts, unequivocally, the Āryan dominance over Tamil literature and culture. “Its [Tamil Literature’s] groundwork is purely non-Aryan and its super-structure necessarily Aryan; because it was not as conquerors that the Aryan Brahmans entered the Tamil country, but as teachers of Vedic religion and philosophy.” This passage proceeds to set up a detailed distinction between an Islamic conquest of India, “which carried fire and sword with it,” and the earlier Aryan’s civilizing mission: “the Indo-Aryans established their spiritual supremacy by gentleness, refinement and persuasive manners. . . . the Aryans were honoured and respected as the ‘andanar’ or the possessors of tender qualities, and ‘parpar’ or the seers of the Vedas. . . . the Aryan assimilated and absorbed whatever was good outside his racial culture and exalted it by associating it with his higher civilization.” It is for this reason, not surprisingly, that the Dravidian ideologue Maṛaimalai Aṭikaḷ (Maṛaimalai Aṭikaḷ 1930, p. x) denounced *Tamil Studies* as a work of “brahmanical bias and haughtiness.”

Thus, while both works discussed above generally agree on the actual details of the religion of the *Caṅkam*, this religion, in turn, was framed within the context of a polemical Aryan–Dravidian debate in which the literature could be viewed in two quite different ways: either as a moment of pure Tamil prior to Āryanism, or the moment of the first contact, signaling the emergence of a composite culture. It is these themes of *Caṅkam* religion that subsequent works on Tamil literary history revisit again and again in the following decades, resulting in a predictable weariness to the caste background, as much of those who supported the Āryan superstructure of ancient Tamil civilization as of those who spoke against it. There were, of course, some notable exceptions on both sides: one of the most ardent champions of *Caṅkam* as Dravidian was Sesha Iyengar, as his 1925 work *Dravidian India* shows. In this study, Sesha Iyengar not only argues for a Dravidian substrate to all Vedic religion, but he went further, championing enthusiastically the uniqueness of its early poetic literature (Sesha Iyengar 1995, p. 103): “Of all the races of India, the only people, who had a poetical literature independent of Sanskrit, are the Tamils, a typical Dravidian people.” The same could be said of Mu. Irākavaiaṅkāṛ, who was the editor of the periodical *Centamiḷ* between the years 1904–1912. In a similar fashion, the strongest challenges to the Dravidianists were posed by Vaiyapuri Pillai (1891–1956) and those who received their scholarly training under him, such as Somasundaram Pillai.<sup>27</sup> Regarding Vaiyapuri Pillai, Sivathamby says (Vaiyapuri Pillai 1988, p. xxi), in a sympathetic yet critical assessment: “But there was one conviction of his, which began to seriously affect the impartiality of his findings. That was the belief he had in the inherent antiquity of Sanskrit literature. Whenever

<sup>27</sup> Somasundaram Pillai (1968).

he discussed a Sanskrit text in relation to a Tamil text, he was of the opinion that the Tamil one was invariably at the receiving end and that the Sanskrit text would not have imbibed a South Indian tradition.” One might further add that Vaiyapuri Pillai himself had formed a strong scholarly bond with the central figure of South Indian history, K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, whose views on *Caṅkam* religion could not be plainer (Nilakanta Sastri 1972, p. 53): “The most dominant feature of these poems is the composite nature of the culture they depict, in which Aryan, Sanskritic, or Northern elements have become inextricably mingled with the earlier indigenous culture. The fusion appears to be have been quite natural and voluntary, and there is no evidence of social disharmony. The Vedic religion of sacrifices, temple worship and festivals, Jainism and Buddhism, all flourished side by side with primitive forms of worship practiced by hunters, shepherds, fishermen and other folks, often accompanied by folk music and dances.”

With Nilakanta Sastri’s work we are already in the period in which Kīruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār’s *An Enquiry* was written. In seeking to locate his own work within the scholarship of his time, Kīruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār would most likely have taken recourse to it as well to the several literary histories that came out in this period.<sup>28</sup>

Histories of Tamil literature from the 1950s onward, even as they moved away from the more polemical aspects of the Āryan–Dravidian debate in its application to the *Caṅkam*, become more concerned with carving out a different kind of space for this literature—a secular space uncontaminated by religion. This was a development that Sivathamby, correctly I believe, attributes to the consolidation of Self-Respect ideology, as well the political space created by the formation of the Tirāviṭa Muṇṇētrak Kaḷakam, the “Dravidian Progress Association” (henceforth, DMK) in 1949 (Sivathamby 1986, p. 97).<sup>29</sup> Bernard Bate’s fascinating 2009 study of Dravidianist oratory shows that Dravidian politicians, starting from the 1940s and 1950s, developed a highly elaborate, deliberately archaic register of Tamil (*centamil*) that sought to instantiate an ancient Tamil past, a past whose core would also embrace the *Caṅkam* literature. Thus (Bate 2009, p. 28): “The use of *centamil* in political oratory is new, though by its very nature it embodies antiquity. In a world in which the concept of the “public” was emerging, Dravidianist politicians in the 1940s and 1950s responded to the new situation of independent, democratic India by producing public language on the model of the written word. In doing so, they performed what we might call a ‘spectacular literacy.’ It was spectacular in two respects: first, it was a truly spectacular performance meant for a largely agrarian and illiterate population that would have heard the language as coming from a very

<sup>28</sup> C. Jesudasan and Hephzibah Jesudasan’s *A History of Tamil Literature* (1961), N. Subrahmanian’s *Śāṅgam Polity* (1966), Meenakshisundaran’s *History of Tamil Literature* (1965), J.M. Somasundaram Pillai’s *A History of Tamil Literature with Texts and Translations from the Earliest Times to 600 A.D.* (1968) and Mu. Varatarācaṅ’s *Tamil Illakiya Varalāru* (1972) were some of the prominent ones.

<sup>29</sup> Sivathamby (1986, p. 97): “It is important at this juncture to observe the literary significance of the political move by Annadurai to highlight the pre-religious Tamil Literature as the focal point of Tamil culture. In terms of chronology and content it was the Cankam literature that was made to play this role. For a political movement like the DMK with its policy of both secularism and democracy it was essential to tap the secularistic tradition in Tamil Literature; thus their emphasis on Cankam Literature and Kural.” See further Sivathamby (1995).

different world; second, and by virtue of its literary qualities, it embodied a past, a specter of Tamil civilization itself. The people who spoke this new genre embodied that specter. They became Tamil civilization—with all its purity and antiquity intact.” In other words, one might say that through this new spoken genre the Tamil politician embodied a Tamil classicism and thus, in his own speech and as part of the new body politic, *Caṅkam* as well. Simultaneously, the emphasis on the secular nature of early Tamil literature was the trope to gain ascendancy. Thus, as I have mentioned previously, the notion that *Caṅkam* literature was somehow outside religion and part of a “secular” pre-Āryan Tamil culture, even while being mooted in the early decades of the twentieth century,<sup>30</sup> noticeably gains traction only with the rise and consolidation of political Dravidian nationalism. This equivalence of *Caṅkam* and secularity eventually comes to be taken for granted, a standard account of which we have in Zvelebil (1973, p. 20): “. . .let me mention another and very typical and characteristic feature of the pre-Aryan Tamil literature—its predominantly secular inspiration, the absence of any ‘religious’ sentiment. . . It was suspected and hinted at more than once, and probably quite conclusively proved by Kailasapathy, that the early poetry of the Tamils is founded on *secular, oral bardic* tradition—in sharp contrast to Vedic poetry, and comparable rather with the Greek or Welsh bardic literature and, in some respects, with the early amorous lyric poetry of the *troubadors* of Languedoc and Provence.”

In Kuruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār’s work *An Enquiry*, the literary case for the religion of the ancient Tamils rests upon the existence of specific *Caṅkam* texts, which includes the *Puṛaṇānūru*, *Akaṇānūru*, *Kallitokai*, *Narriṇai* and the *Tolkāppiyam*.<sup>31</sup> But by far the most detailed portions of the book are dedicated to a detailed paraphrase and analysis of a particular text of the *Caṅkam* corpus, the *Paripāṭal*, which Kuruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār uses to build up a detailed argument in favor of the “Vedic” and “Vaiṣṇava” context of the religion of the ancient Tamils. In order to understand his overwhelming focus on the *Paripāṭal* and how he utilizes it as his main source for establishing the “authentic” religion of the Tamils, we need to look briefly at the issue of its dating, its redaction and the commentary, its early twentieth century critical edition, and the scholarly consensus about the poems on Tirumāl, the Tamil deity who is considered co-terminous with the Sanskrit Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa/Nārāyaṇa.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> K.V. Ramachandran quoted in Sessa Iyer (1995 p. 89): “Throughout the period of the old secular literature, the inspiration is purely indigenous, with just a suggestion of the Sanskrit theorist and no more.”

Also see Sivaraja Pillai (1984 p. 9): “Before their contact with the Aryans, the Dravidians . . . were mainly engaged in building up a material civilization and securing for themselves the many amenities of life, individual and communal. Naturally, therefore, their lives took on a secular colour and came to be reflected as such in the literature of the period.”

<sup>31</sup> It is the scholarly consensus, with the exception of the controversial and unacceptable dating of Herman Tiekens (2001), that the core of the so-called *Caṅkam* poetry—which might be said to comprise the *Eṭṭutokai*, the *Pattupāṭṭu* and the *Tolkāppiyam*, as well as in some instances the *Maṇimēkalai* and the *Cilappatikāram*—was composed much earlier than the turn of the first millennium of the Common Era. This period also saw the systematic emergence of commentarial literature.

<sup>32</sup> For a detailed study of the merging of the Tamil and Sanskrit aspects of Tirumāl by the time of the composition of the Tamil devotional poetry of the Āḷvārs, see Hardy (1983).

### The *Paripāṭal* within *Caṅkam* Literature

The *Paripāṭal* is a collection of poetic fragments in the *paripāṭal* meter (hence its name), originally considered to consist of 70 poems of which today only 22 exist, together with some fragments.<sup>33</sup> Of these extant poems, eight deal with Murukan, eight with the river Vaikai and six with Tirumāl. It is these last poems that form the focus of *An Enquiry*. Traditionally considered a part of the *Eṭṭutokai* collection of the *Caṅkam* corpus, the dating of the *Paripāṭal* has swung between a wide spectrum of dates, from the second century CE to 7th–8th centuries CE.<sup>34</sup> Zvelebil (1975, pp. 101–102) suggested that the dating lies somewhere in between, and tends towards regarding both the *Paripāṭal* and the *Kalittokai*, another poetic anthology also belonging to the *Eṭṭutokai* corpus, as late *Caṅkam* compositions. He concludes that the work “seems to be relatively late, possibly between the latter half of the fourth and the first half of the sixth century A.D., this dating based on the evidence of its language and diction, the allusions to *purāṇic* matter, and references to temples and shrines considered to be built in the post-classical period.” François Gros, who has published the definitive study of this text is inclined to accept that, rather than being a late-*Caṅkam* composition, the *Paripāṭal* must be considered an integral part of the earliest *Caṅkam* corpus and, presumably, datable to as early as the third or fourth century CE (Gros 1968, p. XXIV). The dating of the Vaiṣṇava, the Tirumāl poems of the *Paripāṭal*, relies particularly upon the comparison between the Vaiṣṇavism delineated within it and that of the major corpus of Tamil Vaiṣṇavite devotional poetry to emerge in the early medieval period, the *Nālāyirattiyappirapantam*, the earliest portions of which have been shown to be convincingly datable to the 6th–7th century CE.<sup>35</sup> The most important piece of internal evidence relates particularly to *Paripāṭal* 15, which details the worship of Balaḍeva/Balarāma alongside Kaṇṇaṅ/ Kṛṣṇa in the sacred site of Tirumāliruñcōlai, near today’s Madurai. It has been pointed out that Balarāma worship is completely absent in the Vaiṣṇavism of the *Nālāyirattiyappirapantam* or any later Tamil Vaiṣṇava textual sources and temple sites, but evident in both earlier Sanskrit sources such as the *Harivaṃśa* of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*. This remains the most convincing piece of religious evidence to place the *Paripāṭal* prior to the *Nālāyirattiyappirapantam*.<sup>36</sup> It is this evidence for the relative antiquity of the *Paripāṭal* that is crucial for Kuruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyānkār’s purposes and what he takes for granted, although he does not directly touch upon the reasons for it in his work. But the relative chronology of the *Paripāṭal* to the *Nālāyirattiyappirapantam* is central to his interpretation of the text and his general hermeneutical strategies inasmuch as it establishes the existence of a form of Vaiṣṇavism that predates the emergence of what has come to be considered the classical period of Tamil *bhakti* literature, particularly the Śaiva *Tirumuṟai*, which forms part of the canon of Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta. It is, after all, the Śaivism of the Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta that comes to be

<sup>33</sup> Cāminātaiyar (1980, p. x).

<sup>34</sup> The former is suggested by Sarangapani (1984), the latter by Vaiyapuri Pillai (1988).

<sup>35</sup> Hardy (1983, pp. 241–270).

<sup>36</sup> Gros (1968, p. L) and Hardy (1983, pp. 204–205).



seen as the de facto normative religion of the Tamils in modern Tamil literary history. Thus, for Kuruṣnacuvāmi Aiyānkār the *Paripāṭal* is the primary literary evidence for a Tamil Vaiṣṇavism, which is seen as earlier than normative Tamil Śaivism—and this is what he repeatedly stresses in *An Enquiry*.

The extant text, as we now have it, was patched together by U.Vē. Cāminātaiyar and critically edited and published by him in 1918. Though there exist several studies of the *Caṅkam* literature that make some observations on the *Paripāṭal*,<sup>37</sup> the definitive study of the milieu of the text and a bilingual Tamil–French edition was done by François Gros in (1968). He also (Gros 1968, pp. 168–170), with great linguistic competence, has reconstructed lost sections of the text, such as the “*arākam*” passage of *Paripāṭal* 1.14–25, which Cāminātaiyar was unable to restore in the original text.

Gros (1968, p. 1) begins his preface to the text by quoting, half-seriously, the Sanskritist V. Raghavan on how the *Paripāṭal* is actually the fifth column of *Caṅkam* literature.<sup>38</sup> He takes it for granted that what V. Raghavan meant by this is self-evident. But the observation merits some consideration in that it is only meaningful within the context of an established discourse on Tamil identity and nationhood which is fundamentally based upon the interpretation of the *Caṅkam* texts, an interpretation that reads these texts, as we have already seen, as evidence of the pure “Dravidian genius.” This Dravidian genius excludes, by definition, the Āryan, the Sanskrit and, by extension, all that it is co-extensive with them, including brahminism. In this context, V. Raghavan is saying that the *Paripāṭal* undermines these dominant notions of a pure Tamil identity, in that it is a text which shows the close relationship between Tamil and Sanskrit. In other words, the *Paripāṭal* is the Vedic fifth column within the Tamil/*Caṅkam* nation! It is also for these reasons that the dating of the *Paripāṭal* also becomes an ideological act, it being dated, if a *Caṅkam* text at all, as a late one, full of Purāṇic allusions and Sanskritic vocabulary, to paraphrase Gros (1968, p. 1). Gros argues for the integrity of the early *Caṅkam* corpus as a whole, including the *Paripāṭal* within it, and implicitly seems to suggest that the Vedic and Sanskritic milieu of the text is one of the main reasons for its neglect in Tamil literary history.

Even a cursory look at the Tirumāl hymns of the *Paripāṭal* shows that the text abounds in references that explicitly locate Tirumāl worship within the Vedic and epic milieu. The very first poem, *Paripāṭal* 1, begins by praising Tirumāl as the one reclining on the serpent Ādiśeṣa, with Śrī-Lakṣmī and the Kaustubha gem as his crest-jewels, wearing yellow garments (*pitāmbara*) and existing also as Baladeva (1–5). He is the one whose greatness is revealed by the Vedas that is cherished or guarded by the Brahmins (*antaṅgar*) (13). His superiority to other gods is also revealed: he has produced both Kāma and Brahmā (28), he is actually also Śiva himself (43–44). *Paripāṭal* 2 evokes the creation of the earth from the five great elements and its rescue by the boar incarnation of Viṣṇu, Varāha, who is invoked and praised. Tirumāl is born as Kṛṣṇa, the younger brother of Baladeva but, at

<sup>37</sup> These include Hardy (1983), Marr (1985), Zvelebil (1973, 1975) and Tieken (2001), among others.

<sup>38</sup> I am unable to locate the source of Gros’ (1968, p. 1) quote of V. Raghavan: “Les auteurs du *Paripāṭal* sont la cinquième colonne de la littérature du Sangam!”...



another level of cosmic reality, he precedes him. He pervades, as the Inner Controller, the life of those who enquire into the Vedas, which men of wisdom have studied. The Vedas liken Tirumāl's grace (*arul*) to a rain-filled cloud. Particularly interesting is *Paripāṭal* 2, 61–64, which describes Tirumāl as the speech (*urai*) of the Vedic sacrificer, as the sacrificial post (*yūpa*) to which the sacrificial animal is bound, and the flames of the sacrificial fire.<sup>39</sup> *Paripāṭal* 3 asserts that the Vedas speak of the five elements (fire, wind, ether, earth and water), the sun and the moon, Brahmā, the planet Mars and others. The demons (*asuras*), the 22 *ādityas*, the eight *vasus*, the 21 *rudras*, the two *aśvins*, *yama* and his messengers, the three times seven worlds and the beings within them—all these have emerged and come forth from Tirumāl (4–11). The sacred scriptures of the Brahmins also say that Tirumāl is both Brahmā and the father of Brahmā, who appeared on the lotus flower (12–14). He is the foremost person of the Vedas (*mutumolimutalvaṅ*) (47). The *Sāmaveda* is an authority on him (62). Tirumāl is the most sacred portion (*maṛai*) of the Vedas (66). *Paripāṭal* 4 repeats that Tirumāl has many qualities which are revealed only in the sacred scriptures of the Brahmins (64–65). *Paripāṭal* 15 reiterates that it is the Vedas (*vāymoli*) that speak of Tirumāl's fame at the sacred site of Tirumāliruñcōlai (63–64). The seventh poem, taken from the *Paripāṭal Tirattu*, speaks of the Brahmins who never deviate from the path of the Vedas, who complete penances that unite virtue with the Vedas and establish their reputation (18–21).

A brief comparison of the Tirumāl motifs of the *Paripāṭal* with those relating to Viṣṇu in the Vedic and immediate post-Vedic Brāhmaṇa and epic literature shows how thoroughly vedicized the Vaiṣṇavism of the text is. It would not be unreasonable to speculate that this Vaiṣṇavism of the *Paripāṭal* may be drawn from Sanskrit textual sources: the Vedas and Brāhmaṇas, the *Mahābhārata* (particularly the *Nārāyaṇīya* section of the *Śāntiparvan*) and the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*. Here, one should draw attention to the following motifs that already appear in these sources: the mention of specific myths associated with Viṣṇu relating to his incarnation as the boar Varāha, his appearance as a beautiful woman and as the dwarf Vāmana (all myths already present in the epic literature); the general description of Tirumāl clad in yellow garments, with the Goddess and the jewel Kaustubha on his chest; and finally, and most importantly, the identification of Tirumāl with elements of the Vedic sacrifice in *Paripāṭal* 2.61–64. As Gonda (1969, pp. 77–83) has pointed out, there is, “the constant identification of Viṣṇu with the sacrifice in the brāhmaṇas.”<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Gros (1968, p. 8): Dans les paroles du maître (du sact=rifice) énoncées dans la Révélation Dans ce qui tient attaché le bouc dans les sacrifices rituels, Dans le fait d'activer la flamme brillante à l'éclat étincelant Quand on a allumé selon la règle un grand feu, au chant glorieux des Arcanes.

<sup>40</sup> Gonda (1969, pp. 77–83): “Viṣṇu is not only constantly declared to be the sacrifice. . . , he is also the protector of oblations. . . besides, the sacrificer is identified with him. . . It seems to be in perfect harmony with the character of the god Viṣṇu as it appears to have been under other circumstances, that the yūpa should belong to him.”

See also, for example, *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*.1.4.22–23:

*tvaṃ yajñastvaṃ vaśatkāras tvamomkāras tvamagnayah //*  
*tvaṃ vedastvaṃ tadaṅgāni tvaṃ yajñapuruṣo hare /*

(You are sacrifice; you are the oblation; you are the *Omkāra*; you are the sacrificial fires; you are the Vedas and its auxiliaries; O Hari, you are the person of the sacrifice.)

Gros (1968, p. XLIX), also referring to these verses, suggests that they indicate that the poet is seemingly taking the supremacy of Vedic ritual for granted, as well as, in general, the brahmanical tradition. There is also the repeated insistence in the text that the only true source of knowledge for Tirumāl's appearance, his deeds, his prowess, and his divine grace are the Vedas (called, variously, *maṛai*, *mutumolī* and *vāymolī*), which are guarded and transmitted by the Brahmins (*antaṇar*). It is based on this Vedicism of the Tirumāl poems of the *Paripāṭal* that Kīruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār builds his case for his specific understanding of the Vaiṣṇavism of the ancient Tamils.

### **Kīruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār, the *Paripāṭal* and the Retrieval of Tamil Religion<sup>41</sup>**

*An Enquiry* begins with the caveat that in contemporary society, there must be a pragmatic acceptance of differing religions and castes, building the case for this on a definition of “tolerance” by deploying neo-Vedāntic/Hindu strategies. I shall return to these shortly. However, the bulk of the book is concerned with an entirely different matter: a search for the most “tolerant” religion of the Tamil country. In seeking to locate this religion, Kīruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār also makes an implicit argument for situating religious tolerance historically, seeing literary sources as the only certain and direct evidence we have. Thus, he turns towards antiquity and the earliest available literature of Tamils, that of the *Caṅkam* Age. The *Caṅkam* literature, therefore, and literary history itself functions as a basis for two of the main hermeneutical tactics of the text, one that builds up the case for a religion of the ancient Tamils, and the other concerned with the implications of this discovery for the issue of religious tolerance. The two strands are constantly interwoven in the book, but for analytical purposes they will be scrutinized separately here.

The author explains to us that he has written his book as a guide to show that religious belief is of paramount importance, even in this modern age. Politicians today tend to speak of the elimination of caste as well as of religion/religious beliefs, since both of these are seen as the cause of dissension among human beings. This is simplistic because differences of this kind, as well as others, are innate to human beings. The solution is rather that one must live with such differences and still cultivate a sense of unity, as well as, most importantly, tolerance. One should have the good sense to recognize that the Supreme Being has created several religions in order to enable humans to reach him, in stages, each according to his aptitude. Thus, one should not confuse faiths nor thrust one's own upon others. This

<sup>41</sup> Kīruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār's study of the *Paripāṭal* presupposes the 1918 critical edition of U.Vē. Cāminātaiyar, with its observations on the extant text available to us. See Cāminātaiyar's detailed introduction to the second 1935 edition, pages viii–xv, and Kīruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār's reference to this edition in his interpretation of Song 1 (1977, p. 18). Thus, in his detailed analysis he focuses not only on the poems of the main text, predominantly understood as relating to Tirumāl, but also on the one full poem that was retrieved by Cāminātaiyar from the *Puṛattiraṭṭu* and incorporated into his critical edition as part of the selections known as the *Paripāṭal Fragments* (*paripāṭal tiraṭṭu*). It also appears that Gros was aware of Kīruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār's study on the *Paripāṭal*, since he mentions it explicitly as a devotional reading of the text in his introduction to the work (Gros 1968, p. 1).

indeed may be defined as tolerance, for which Kīruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār (1977, p. 3) uses the Tamil compound *Cakippuṭ tanmai*. He describes the book as a contribution to the strengthening of one's faith in one's own religion, which can lead to tolerance. The historical tolerance of the Śrīvaiṣṇavas is noteworthy, and it must be argued that it is those who believe in a Vaidika religion who exhibit the most tolerance. Thus, the book is also about the Vaidika religion and its antiquity within the Tamil culture, an antiquity that can only be established by looking at the oldest literary sources available (1977, p. 55ff).

The notion of tolerance explicated in *An Enquiry* has very old hermeneutical traditions, and is repeatedly found in canonical Hindu texts. Thus, for example, the conviction that there are different levels of religious aptitudes requiring different soteriological means is central to the doctrines of the *Bhagavadgītā*, as is the view, defined by Max Müller as henotheism, that there are multiple gods all subordinated to being the bodies of the One, in this case the Supreme God Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva.<sup>42</sup> Both of these notions are at work in the definition of tolerance proposed by Kīruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār—there are different religions according to the level of one's spiritual aptitude, yet at the same time, this very difference also implies a hierarchy by which some religions are lesser than others and one is above all the rest—in *An Enquiry* this turns out to be the Vaidika religion of Śrīvaiṣṇavism. Here, tolerance might be called innately hierarchical. This is not as paradoxical as it sounds, as Halbfass (1988, pp. 410–411) has brilliantly pointed out:

More important is the fact that traditional Hinduism does not recognize the ideas of man, and of human freedom and equality, which constitute the background of the modern concept of tolerance. Traditional Hinduism presupposes an irreducible, cosmologically established inequality of human beings, and a fundamentally hierarchical structure of society which leaves little room for the mutual recognition of free persons and their individual rights and choices. Divergent and foreign forms of religious behaviour and orientation, and religious plurality in general, are recognized and tolerated not as legitimate expressions of personal choice and human autonomy, but as manifestations of different levels of soteriological development.

Halbfass, as Paul Hacker before him, is at pains to distinguish these traditionalist notions of tolerance (one could, of course, question whether the word “tolerance” is appropriate for talking about this culturally different concept at all) from those of neo-Hindu thinkers such as Swami Vivekananda and Dr. Radhakrishnan. The difference is crucial. The traditionalist notion, to paraphrase Halbfass (1998, p. 408) again, draws clear boundaries or guidelines between that which is soteriologically true and legitimate and that which is not. The neo-Hindu bases its notions of tolerance on establishing the ultimate concordance between Hindu and non-Hindu modes of thought. The strong boundaries that Kīruṣṇasuvāmi Aiyāṅkār draws between other religions and the true, Vaidika religion are the clearest indication that we have here a traditionalist author, or at least one who sees an essential continuity of thought between his own writings on Vaiṣṇavism and the revered *ācāryas* of

<sup>42</sup> See Raman (2004).

pre-modernity. This will become increasingly clear as we continue to examine the text further, and particularly the relationship it posits between modernity, the contemporary and history.

Kiṛuṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār (1977, pp. 5–7) continues his literary study with the observation that the religion of the Vedas was widely prevalent throughout Indian subcontinent, not just in the north as commonly thought. but also in the south. The first literary evidence for this is the ancient work, the *Tolkāppiyam*, which speaks of the Vedic gods Tirumāl, Murukan, Intiraṅ and Varuṅaṅ. The *Eṭṭokai* and the *Pattupāṭṭu* provide literary evidence for the fact that the ancient Tamils accepted and sang about the Vedas as a sacred authority. The *Paripāṭal* refers to this in several verses (vs.1, 3 and 4 are cited as examples), in which the “sacred texts of the brahmins” (*antaṅar arumaṅrai*) are extolled. In the *Patirrup Pattu* (3.4), reciting the Vedas is listed as one of the six duties of Brahmins. Upaniṣadic statements about the emergence of Brahmā, the God from Viṣṇu’s navel, are reflected in *Paripāṭal* 3. That the Vedas are the ancient scriptures of India, “old words” (as reflected in the term *mutu molī* used to describe them in *Paripāṭal* 3), and that they impart the highest good and are supra-human is revealed in *Paripāṭal* 15 and 13. That they are also permanent and indestructible is revealed in *Paripāṭal* 2 and 3.

A considerable portion of *An Enquiry* ties the Vedic milieu of the *Paripāṭal* with that of other texts:

- The translation of utterances from the *Muṇḍaka* and *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣads* into Tamil, as in for instance the *Kaṭavuḷ Vāḷṭtu* of the *Narṅṅinai*;
- The repeated references in *Kalittokai* 3 to Viṣṇu as Tirumāl (3.4), Teyvamāl (3.7) and Nēmiyāṅ (3.5);
- The *Kalittokai* 2.37 reference to the ascetics who carry a three-stick staff (*mukkōl*) being a reference to the existence of *triḍaṅḍin* Vaiṣṇava ascetics in the Tamil country of this period;
- The evidence for the existence of ancient temples—Vēṅkaṭam—in the *Akaṅṅūru* and *Cilappatikāram*; Tiruvanantapuram in the *Patirrup Pāṭṭu*; Tiruveḷkā and Kaccimūtūr in the *Pattup Pāṭṭu*;

Knitting together these pieces of evidence for the prevalence of early Vaiṣṇavism in the Tamil country with intricate theological arguments—about which I shall say more later—*An Enquiry* arrives at the following broad theses about the religion of the *Paripāṭal*:

- Vaiṣṇavism is a religion that can be found in the earliest strata of Tamil literature, and hence it is the ancient and authentic religion of the Tamils. The central text that establishes this is the *Paripāṭal*, supported by allusions to Vaiṣṇavism in works such as the *Kalittokai* and *Narṅṅinai*.
- The Vaiṣṇavism thus established is not an Ur-Tamil, or even necessarily a Dravidian phenomenon, but a Vedic-Vedāntic religion, with its origins in the Vedas, the Brāhmaṅas, the Upaniṣads and the epic literature, including the *Bhagavadgītā*.
- The *Paripāṭal* is the first theological literary document of this Tamil-Sanskrit synthesis, systematized later in the school of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta and the

religious practices of the Śrīvaiṣṇavas. It therefore reveals the basic tenets of this system, which includes the following doctrines: (1) that Tirumāl/Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa is the highest and most supreme God; (2) that he pervades the entire world and the beings on it as their Inner Controller; (3) that the entire universe is his body and he, its soul; (4) that it is the Brahmins (*antaṇar*) who are the guardians and protectors of these timeless doctrines.

Kiruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār (1977, pp. 223–226) concludes that the ancient Tamils were *Vaidikas* who followed a Vedic religion, and further, that it was Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, and none other, that was accepted as the Vaidika religion by the ancient Tamils and that they regarded Tirumāl/Viṣṇu as the “Primary One of the Vedas” (*Vedamutalvaṅ*).

It is not the intention of this paper to focus on the historical veracity of these claims or the accuracy of the literary analysis of the selected passages—though this would be an interesting and worthwhile undertaking in itself. Indeed, individual claims can be examined and questioned, as can the selective appropriation of *Caṅkam* texts to support the main thesis. A single example should suffice: In focusing on the *Paripāṭal* and building up his entire case for Vaiṣṇavism as the original religion of the Tamils, Kiruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār is conspicuously silent about the existence of another text, probably composed around the same time and a part of the same *Eṭṭutokai* corpus: the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai*, dedicated to the worship of a very different god with even greater historical claims to being Dravidian, Murukaṅ. Nevertheless, what cannot be doubted is that the author lays claim to expertise in classical Tamil literature and that the text is a carefully thought out hermeneutical enterprise that attempts to validate a certain doctrinal standpoint, one which says a great deal about the relationship between the practice of history and the study of religion as modern disciplines. To understand what is at stake here, we need to turn to the main 180 pages of *An Enquiry*, where Kiruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār comments on the *Paripāṭal* as a Vedāntic, Vaiṣṇava text.

*An Enquiry* departs radically from previous commentaries on the *Paripāṭal* in that it does not seek to explicate the text on the basis of the traditional commentary of Parimēlaḷakar or even Cāmināiyar’s annotations to the text. Rather, its aim is to deconstruct the poems through the theological categories of a very specific religious tradition, that of the “qualified monism” or Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta school of thought of Rāmānuja. This is a project that has a long history in the Śrīvaiṣṇava textual tradition. As Clooney (1996, pp. 27–29) has pointed out in his study of the 12th–13th century Śrīvaiṣṇava commentaries on Tamil devotional poetry, particularly the *Tiruvāymoḷi* of Nammāḷvār, the aim of the commentators was to explicate the Tamil text while honoring their “theological commitments” to Vedānta. In order to do so, they interpreted Tamil poetry through the lens of the Sanskrit canon of the tradition, which includes the *Upaniṣads*, the ritual exegesis of the *Pūrvamīmāṃsā*, the aphoristic condensation of the *Upaniṣads* in the *Brahmasūtras*, and the interpretation of the latter in the commentary by Rāmānuja. Supplementary to this is their reading of the Tamil text through the devotional poetry, the *stotras*, of the lineage of teachers

(*guruparamparā*), as well as through the lives of the teachers themselves as hagiographical models to emulate.<sup>43</sup> We must place Kuruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār's commentary on the *Paripāṭal* in relation to this commentarial tradition, and identify how he has established the inter-textuality of the text, showing how it resonates with words, phrases and ideas from the established literary canon of the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, linking it conceptually with the *Upaniṣads* considered important to the tradition, the poetry of the *Nālāyirttivyapirapantam* itself, as well as the *stotra* literature of the *Śrīvaiṣṇava ācāryas*.<sup>44</sup> A closer look at his commentary on sections of *Paripāṭal* 3 shows us how he anchors its Vaiṣṇavism within the mainstream Śrīvaiṣṇava canonical literature.

In explicating *Paripāṭal* 3, *An Enquiry* uses the following textual sources:

- *Paripāṭal* 3.1, where the word Māyōṅ is used for Tirumāl: *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 4.10
- *Paripāṭal* 3.13–14, where Tirumāl is described as he who is born from the lotus flower as well as from his father: *Nārāyaṇopaniṣad* 1, *Subālopaniṣad* 3.6, *Mahānārāyaṇopaniṣad* 11.13 and *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 6.18
- *Paripāṭal* 3.19, where it is rhetorically asked if there is anyone who does not worship Tirumāl's feet: *Bhagavadgītā* 9.23
- *Paripāṭal* 3.32–40, where the many arms of Tirumāl are praised: *R̥gveda* 10.90, *Mahānārāyaṇopaniṣad* 11.13, *Bhagavadgītā* 4.11 and *Tiruvāymoli* 8.1.10;
- *Paripāṭal* 3.44–45, which suggests that his arms and bodies are innumerable: *Subālopaniṣad* 4.1 and *Mahānārāyaṇopaniṣad* 11.13.
- *Paripāṭal* 3.46–47, where it is declared that none other than Tirumāl himself can sing his own praise: *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 2.8.7, *Periyatirumoli* 5.2.1 and *Tiruvāymoli* 8.4.6.
- *Paripāṭal* 3.53, 56, which call Tirumāl the first among the Immortals as well as among the Demons: *Yajurveda Saṃhitā* 5.5, *Nārāyaṇopaniṣad* 1, *Bhagavadgītā* 9.29 and *Viṣṇu Purāna* 1.19.73.
- *Paripāṭal* 3.62–70, which describes Tirumāl as the inner quality (as for example, the heat within the fire) of all things: *Bhagavadgītā* 7.8–9, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 3.14.1, *Bhagavadgītā* 11.40 and *Bhagavadgītā* 9.4–5, among others.
- *Paripāṭal* 3.75–79, where Tirumāl is described as protecting all twenty-one cosmological worlds: *Tiruvāymoli* 10.10.10 and *Bhagavadgītā* 13.2.
- *Paripāṭal* 3.81–89, which refers to Tirumāl's many forms: *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 1.6.7, 1.7.8, *Mahānārāyaṇopaniṣad* 11, *Tiruvāymoli* 5.8.6, 4.8.8, among others.

It is this hermeneutical strategy of establishing the dependence of the poetry of the *Paripāṭal* on Vedic and post-Vedic Vedāntic literature, indeed its derivation from it, that enables Kuruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār to offer convincing literary proof for the Vaidika religion of the early Tamils. But there is more to this hermeneutical strategy than the linking of the Tamil literary tradition to the Sanskrit one. The earlier

<sup>43</sup> For a detailed analysis on the hermeneutical strategies of this commentarial literature, see Clooney (1996) and Raman (2007).

<sup>44</sup> For example, the comparisons drawn between *Paripāṭal*, 1.lines 1–5 and *Mutal Tiruvantāti* 54, *Nāṁmukaṅ Tiruvantāti* 9 and *Yāmunācārya's Stotratatna*.



Śrīvaiṣṇava commentarial literature also sought to establish absolute parity between both traditions as being Vedic and, therefore, ultimately, to show that Tamil poetry was as supra-mundane as the Vedas, and equivalent scriptural revelation. The Tamil literary tradition was thus inserted seamlessly into older canonical oeuvre and placed on par with Vedic authority, which is infallible. Most importantly, it is infallible because it was not composed by human hand, but emerged as a revelation from a time without history.<sup>45</sup> In a highly circumscribed way, Kīruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār does for the *Paripāṭal* what the earlier Śrīvaiṣṇava ācāryas did for the *Tiruvāymoli*: he shows that it contains the essence of the Vedas and the *Upaniṣads* and therefore is worthy of being inserted into the canonical literature of Śrīvaiṣṇavism. His theological position—his reading of the *Paripāṭal* being primarily a theological one—is completely in consonance with that of the twelfth-century commentator on the *Tiruvāymoli* who saw the text as an emanation of divine grace, one which allowed itself to be revealed through a man of wisdom such as Nam-mālvār, in a language other than the sacerdotal language of Sanskrit in order to make it widely accessible to humans.

Seen from the perspective of historiographical practice, we could perhaps read *An Enquiry* as falling within the possible genre of “puranic literary history” if one were to modify Partha Chaterjee’s 1992 typology of pre-colonial historiographical practices. Like the 1808 *Rājābali* of Mrityunjay Vidyānkar, *An Enquiry* is a text that eschews, even flagrantly disregards the ultimate question of the historical origin of the history it narrates, the historical origin of Tamil Vaiṣṇavism as a religious tradition, pushing it back to a mythic or divine time. Instead, the religious tradition is clearly and ultimately anchored in Vedic revelation, itself anchored in an ahistorical time. The nearest counterpart to *An Enquiry* in the Tamil Śaiva context, written nearly eighty years earlier, is the 1899 *The History of Tamil Called the Manifestation of the Dravidian (Tirāviṭṭaṭ pīrakāciṅkai eṇṇuṁ tamiḷ varalāru)* of Capāpati Nāvalar, in which the author, a devout Śaivite, denounced Orientalist scholarship that dated the Tamil devotional Śaivite poetry to the period of the Common Era and instead asserted the traditional position that it was coeval with the period of the Vedas and part of the same corpus of revelation.<sup>46</sup>

As in Nāvalar’s case, Kīruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār’s position is not due to a lack of awareness of historical methods, but precisely because of an acute awareness of the implications it has for the veracity and integrity of the religious tradition itself. This becomes clear when we examine the second part of *An Enquiry*, where he gives us one of his main reasons for having published the book, first in 1976 and then in a second edition with an expanded second preface in 1977. Here, he describes his

<sup>45</sup> Deutsch and van Buitenen (1971, p. 5): “Revelation, therefore, is by no means God’s word—because, paradoxically, if it were to derive from a divine person, its credibility would be impugned. It is held to be authorless, for if a person, divine or human, had authored it, it would be vulnerable to the defects inherent in such a person. It is axiomatic that revelation is infallible, and this infallibility can only be defended by its authorlessness. Then from where does it come? The answer is stark and simple: it is given with the world. . . . And even if a beginning of the world is assumed, as in later Hindu thought when it is held that the universe goes through a pulsating rhythm of origination, existence, and dissolution, it is also held that at the dawn of a new world the revelation reappears to the vision of the seers, who once more begin the transmission.”

<sup>46</sup> Nāvalar (1976, p. 158ff)



strong disagreement with the views on Tamil Vaiṣṇavism expressed in the work of another traditional scholar, Akṇihōtram Irāmānuja Tātācāriyār.

### **Akṇihōtram Irāmānuja Tātācāriyār and The Historicity of Tamil Vaiṣṇavism**

Akṇihōtram Irāmānuja Tātācāriyār's own long life (he lived a century and passed away in 2008, just after his hundredth year) is illustrative for a traditional scholarly life that charted a somewhat different path than that of "Puttur Swami," as Kuruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār was affectionately known within the community. While the latter was and remains widely read and respected within the Śrīvaiṣṇava community, Akṇihōtram Irāmānuja Tātācāriyār exercised influence not only at a pan-regional level,<sup>47</sup> but also as far as North American scholarship on Śrīvaiṣṇavism, serving as an articulate, native interlocutor to scholars such as John Carman, Robert Lester and Frederick Smith. In the process of his wide reading of western scholarship in Indology and religious studies, and as a part of a generation that identified with and saw itself at the forefront of socio-religious reform in India, his writings as well as his religious activism witnessed the increasing convergence of interests marked by the dominant motifs of neo-Hinduism: a move towards the reconciliation of "science" and religion,<sup>48</sup> the re-framing of one's own specific religious traditions as well as those of others in post-sectarian terms through new institutional frameworks (thus he was an enthusiastic supporter of certain cross-sectarian initiatives proposed in the first half of the twentieth century by the then head of the Kāñcīpuram Śaṅkara Maṭha, Chandrasekharendra Sarasvatī Cuvāmikal)<sup>49</sup> and, finally, a return to a religious position yet again stressing the sacerdotal authority of the Vedas as "revelation," but within the parameters of a re-framing of what such authority meant in neo-Hindu terms, a hermenutical enterprise going back at least to Dayananda Saraswati. Underlying these interests seems to be a general willingness to historicize his own religious tradition of Śrīvaiṣṇavism in a manner that marked a clear departure from traditional historiographical practices. It was primarily this that brought his intellectual position into clear conflict with that of Kuruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār. In other words, where an emic perspective would immediately lead us to focus on old and traditional intra-Śrīvaiṣṇava conflicts (Kuruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār

<sup>47</sup> Cf. *The Hindu* newspaper online edition of 30 March 2007 and the obituary of 30 December 2008. In both pieces, reference is made to his contribution in organizing a committee of the orthodox religious heads as a single voice to advise the Constituent Assembly of India on issues of freedom of religion during the process of framing the Indian Constitution.

<sup>48</sup> He appears to have been particularly influenced by his reading of Oliver Lodge (1851–1940), a British physicist and writer who turned to spiritualism and working with mediums in the latter half of his life after the tragic death of his son in World War I. Tātācāriyār (1973, pp. 6–7) particularly mentions his book *Reason and Belief*, published in 1910, as dealing with the issue of reconciling science and religion.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. "Ramanuja Thathachariar passes away." In *The Hindu*, online edition, 30 December 2008: "A keen campaigner for promoting a scientific temper vis-a-vis religion, Thathachariar was as comfortable in the company of students of science as he was in the company of religious scholars. He was also involved in various initiatives of Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati of Kanchi Mutt such as the Agama Silpa Sadas (intended to propagate temple architecture) and Tiruppavai-Tiruvembavai conferences (aimed at a fusion of Vaishnavism and Saivism)." For his own account of his involvement in the *Āgama Śilpa Sadas*, cf. *The Vaiṣṇavism Born of History*, p. 109.

belonging to the so-called Southern school (*teṅkalai*) of Śrīvaiṣṇavism, and Akṣiḥōtram Irāmājuca Tātācāriyār to the so-called Northern (*vatakalai*) school), it would be remiss of us to dwell on this less interesting and self-evident issue at the cost of some of the larger issues at stake—in the broadest sense this was a conflict between two highly respected and beloved traditionalists or neo-traditionalists about the relationship between religion and history.

The title of the 1970s book that provoked the immediate ire of Kuruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyānkār speaks for itself—*The Vaiṣṇavism Born of History (Varalārriḷ piṛanta vaiṇavam)*—and in his preface, Tātācāriyār (Tātācāriyār 1973, p. vi) lays down the gauntlet immediately, stating that this is a useful work for those seeking to understand Vaiṣṇavism by employing a historical consciousness (*varalārṛṇarcci*). The main arguments of the work are outlined in the preface and then repeated throughout the book. Tātācāriyār (1973, pp. 12–21) tells us that prior to the ninth century CE Tamil Vaiṣṇavism was, broadly speaking, “Vedic” in its forms. From the ninth century onwards the religious tradition undergoes radical changes. This was begun by the integration of the Vedic Viṣṇu with the figure of Nārāyaṇa, followed by the Goddess Śrī-Lakṣmī being included as an integral part of the divine and, thus, an equal object of worship, and finally, the introduction of the basic doctrines of a “qualified monism” by Rāmānuja. But the main and most radical innovations, the book suggests, took place in the post-Rāmānuja period following the thirteenth century, and Tātācāriyār (1973, pp. vi–viii, 5–6, 12–21, 119–127, 251–255) repeatedly points out that these innovations do not represent the doctrinal views of the early teachers. There are two strands to these innovations. The first elevates Tamil devotional poetry to the level of the Vedas and, thereby, introduces a theology of self-surrender (*prapatti*), which before that time had not been particularly prominent. The second entails the complete merging of older Tamil religious practices of temple worship with the ritual codes laid down in specific later texts, namely, the *Pāñcarātra Āgamas*. This latter innovation results in Tamil Vaiṣṇavism becoming, and remaining, primarily a temple-oriented religion, something that prior to the ninth century it was not. It is significant in this historical approach that departures, ruptures and radical innovations in the tradition are repeatedly stressed. There are clearly defined periods—the ninth century, the thirteenth century, etc.—during which the tradition undergoes radical transformation.

If one analyzes the historiographical approach of the two figures considered thus far—Tātācāriyār and Kuruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyānkār—it is possible to discern differences between them that could be described as being, following Hayden White (1975), diachronic or synchronic. To quote White (1975, p. 10):

In the former [the diachronic narrative] the sense of structural transformation is uppermost as the principal guiding representation. In the latter, the sense of structural continuity . . . or stasis . . . predominates. But the distinction between a synchronic and diachronic representation of historical reality should not be taken as indicating mutually exclusive ways of emplotting the historical field. This distinction points merely to the difference of emphasis in treating the relationship between continuity and change in a given representation of the historical process as a whole.

It might even be argued that emplotment through a strong diachronical narrative poses one of the strongest epistemological challenges to the validity of any orthodox Hindu religious tradition, inasmuch as it is based on the premise of a continually changing body of knowledge and, therefore, a continually changing textual tradition. But this would be anathema from an orthodox point of view, as has been repeatedly pointed out by scholars of Indian thought, where radical innovation and originality is not valued, but rather the opposite—the rediscovery or recovery of the original perfect knowledge that always existed.<sup>50</sup> As I have pointed out in another context, even where an author or commentator is genuinely innovative, such innovation can only be accepted when it is denied and embedded into a larger body of tradition. This being the case, Tātācāriyār's insistence on repeated change and innovation within the Śrīvaiṣṇava doctrine is a clear departure from the norms of traditional historiography, and it presents a grave danger from an orthodox point of view, particularly so if it were to draw the Vedas into the time of history, thus subjecting them to the lens of critical scrutiny and the historical process as a whole. Interestingly enough, this is where *The Vaiṣṇavism Born of History* draws a clear line—as if, somewhat intimidated by its own daring, the book, and perforce its author, draw back from subjecting the Vedas to the historical process. In doing so, the book salvages the basic foundations of orthodox doctrine and, therefore, Śrīvaiṣṇava theology at its roots. It does this by transposing history itself, shifting it from being plotted along a trajectory of linear time to one of cyclical time.

In his *Preface*, Tātācāriyār (1973, pp. 2–4) tackles this problem head on, pointing out that most religions have a founding figure, thereby accepting a founding story of their origins that is based on historical time. This, he says, is not the case with the Hindu tradition, which bases its notions of origins on cyclical time and the doctrine of the forever recurring fourfold cyclical ages (*caturyugas*). The Hindu tradition, as well as the scholars within it, generally holds that each such fourfold cycle mimics previous ones—thus yielding again and again, at each beginning, the Vedas (as well as the entire canonical textual traditions of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and all the post-Vedic literature). This being the case, the text suggests, it is not possible to assert in which fourfold cycle the Vedas emerged and, therefore, it is impossible to assign dates or speak of a historical time period when the events narrated in the Vedas took place.

Despite this significant concession to Vedic orthodoxy, Tātācāriyār did not win any kudos with Kīruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār, who found much that was offensive in the book with regard to each and every issue relating to change and innovation within the tradition. He collected the critical responses of several orthodox scholars, publishing them in the 1970s in a series of articles in his magazine *Śrīvaiṣṇava Sudarśanam*, and later compiling them into a book. His more specific critique arose

<sup>50</sup> See Deutsch and van Buitenen (1971, pp. 65–66): “We emphasize the fact that in the Indian context the acquisition of knowledge is not looked upon as a gradual discovery of it, but as a gradual recovery of it. At the beginning of history stands knowledge, complete and available. This knowledge is passed on from generation to generation through a patient transmission from teacher to pupil, and this transmission is founded on faith. . . The Indian teacher has little truck with originality. Ideally, he is the encyclopedia of all the erudition of former generations, and it is his task to pass on this knowledge to his pupil as it was passed on to him by his own master.”

out of the suspicion that Tātācāriyār was part of a cabal of reformist sectarian leaders (he particularly saw an unhealthy nexus between Tātācāriyār and the then head of the Kāñcīpuram Śāṅkara maṭha, which had resulted in the publication of Tātācāriyār's book) who were out, so to speak, to destroy Vaiṣṇavism. Nevertheless, conspiracy theories aside, his alarm and outrage also appears to have been motivated by a more serious critique that was general and trenchant, a critique that he incorporated into *An Enquiry*, which he had come to see as the counter-response to *The Vaiṣṇavism Born of History*. In it, he addressed the fundamental problem of the relationship between history, as a modern scholarly discipline, and religion, as a system of faith and belief. In his (1977, Part 2, pp. 2–4) own words:

“Even 26 years after our country has obtained independence from the white man [Tātācāriyār] has written those utterly contradictory words which they have taught him as they would teach a parrot chick, thus demonstrating that a mentality of enslavement has not left him. . . . If people are to believe what the white man has said about how the Viṣṇu of the Vedas is not Tirumāl but only Sūrya then they must also believe what that same white man has also said, to the effect that the Rudra of the Vedas is not Śiva but Agni! If Vaiṣṇavites are to believe that [the forefathers of the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition such as] Parāśara, the Āḷvārs and the Śrīvaiṣṇava teachers built up the tradition step-by-step then [they would have to believe the same of all the other religious traditions of the Tamil country]. If people are to believe what Akṇihōtri writes, that all the religions of the world were created by humans and cultivated by them then [they would have to believe this of Śaivism and other religions too].”

The writer Wilson (1992, p. vii) begins his biography of Christ, titled *Jesus—A Life*, with the words: “The Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith are two separate beings, with very different stories. It is difficult enough to reconstruct the first, and in the attempt we are likely to do irreparable harm to the second.” It is this “irreparable harm” of the reconstruction, the historical process, that was being warned against, ultimately, by Kīruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār, and his instinctive response was to verbally decimate the historical viewpoint of someone he felt should be more aware of his task of guarding the textual tradition. In doing so, he deliberately overlooked Tātācāriyār's complex hermeneutical position and his equally deep and serious concern with the discourse of history—his complex and reflective attempt to preserve the validity of the Vedas and their ahistoricity in the midst of reconciling the tradition with modern scholarship, by placing its historical personages in time. It should, nevertheless, be further noted that both men maintain a variety of interpretive positions that are not easy to categorize as a clear-cut divide between what is traditionalist-modernist (Tātācāriyār) and what is traditionalist-traditionalist (Kīruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār). This is because even though Tātācāriyār's Vaiṣṇavism is historicized, it is not strongly and repeatedly anchored in Tamil textual sources. In contrast, Kīruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār powerfully emphasizes the Tamil-ness of Vaiṣṇavism by focusing on the centrality of the *Paripāṭal* in his thesis. What is remarkable, for instance, is the extent to which *An Enquiry*, for all its seemingly reactionary elitism and Brahmanism, also seems to be a modernist work: it is an inverted, mirror image of works like *Vēḷḷāḷa Civilization*, written by the

Śaivite activist and reformer, Maṛaimalai Aṭikaḷ in 1923.<sup>51</sup> As I have shown in another context, this latter work links Tamil ethnicity with the Vēḷḷāḷa caste-grouping, and this, in turn, with Tamil Śaivism. One main argument of the book is that Śiva was an original Tamil god, with distinctly Tamil modes of worship, who came to be falsely conflated with the Āryan Rudra and Sanskritic forms of worship following the acculturation of the Tamils to Āryan/Brahmanical practices—an acculturation brought about by the perfidy and deceit of the Brahmins. As Vaitheespara (1999, p. 495) points out, this work had a widespread impact on the Tamil cultural politics of its time: “Thus, at the eve of the emergence of the Self Respect Movement in the mid 1920s, Adigal had clearly become one of the most popular advocates of non-Brahmin Tamil nationalism in South India.”

*An Enquiry* seems to be attempting to mirror, in reverse, texts like *Vēḷḷāḷa Civilization*. If Aṭikaḷ speaks of Śaivism as the one, non-āryan authentic religion of the Tamils, Kuruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār counters with Vaiṣṇavism as the one authentic, *vaidika* religion of the Tamils. The terminology of *Vaidika* is important—it is the claim, if you like, for a pan-Indian religion, for “Hinduism”, if not, under another name, “sanātana dharma.” If *Vēḷḷāḷa Civilization* builds its case for a history based on deceit and perfidy, then *An Enquiry* builds its case for one based on erasure and amnesia: the forgetting by Tamils of their ancient and true religion. Maṛaimalai Aṭikaḷ ends his book by shifting from being the defender of Dravidian pride to being a scolding critic of current-day Vēḷḷāḷa degeneracy—thus rupturing the arch of his narrative of the utopian past. In contrast, *An Enquiry* employs the neo-Hindu discourse of tolerance and authenticity to defend a beleaguered Brahmanism.

However, in all this let us recollect that neo-Śaivism, spearheaded by figures such as Ārumuka Nāvalar, Maṛaimalai Aṭikaḷ and Tiru V. Kalyāṅacuntara Mutaliyār (I mention their names in particular also because of their political significance), had already presented the blueprints of its historiographical agenda by the 1930s. Only after this was done was it confronted by the radicalism of the Self Respect movement. What, then, are we to make of the very late historiographical task undertaken in the 1970s by the two men just considered?

In my 2007 monograph on *Prapatti*, I alluded to the fact that the 1970s saw the emergence of several monographs (Gnanambal 1971; Jagadeesan 1977, among others) that provide evidence for the Tamil-ness of Śrīvaiṣṇavism, particularly its “Southern” or *Teṅkalai* school, by examining the social and historical institutions which emerged in the post-Rāmānuja period. In other words, interestingly, it was the 1970s that first saw the emergence of what might be considered a truly modernist Śrīvaiṣṇava historiography. It took on the longer-established modernist Śaiva historiography, which, for its part had already projected Śaivism as the only real religion of the Tamils. One of the questions I did not ask then, but would like to ask now is: what was it that engendered this historiographical interest on the Tamil Vaiṣṇava side at this particular juncture in Tamil history? One can only speculate. Was it the fact that this period saw the peak of anti-Hindi agitations, which in the end were to make the Congress Party passé in Tamil politics, as it was suspected of

<sup>51</sup> On *Vēḷḷāḷa Civilization*, see Vaitheespara (1999, pp. 480–495), Pandian (2007) and Raman (2009).

being a permanent representative of “Northern” interests? Was this *fin de siècle* feeling also connected to the passing away, in 1972, of the last politically astute Śrīvaiṣṇava Brahmin, a figure who had stood at the center of Tamil politics for so many decades while the Indian nation was coming of age—Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, or “Rajaji” as he was known? In other words, was the historiographical enterprise somehow linked to securing the place of the Tamil Brahmin within Tamil-ness exactly when the ground under his feet seemed to be slipping away? As I said, one can only speculate. A more specific reason why Kīruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār undertook his historiographical task is given in his own work (1977, p. xxii). It had begun as an essay that he had wished to deliver as a participant in the second World Tamil Conference (*Ulakattamiḷ Mānāṭu*), which took place in 1968 in Chennai. However, the organizers rejected the paper and, he says, did not permit him to participate. Deprived of the opportunity to showcase his work in a forum that united the study of Tamil and Tamil literature with modern political power and patronage, especially a political patronage reflecting a transformative moment in the politics of the state, with the DMK coming into power for the first time (the chief patrons of the conference were the outgoing Congress Chief Minister of the state M. Bhaktavatsalam and the incumbent, DMK Chief Minister C.N. Annadurai), Kīruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār wrote his book, it seems, to reclaim a space for the Śrīvaiṣṇava in Tamil literary history.

If, as I suggested at the beginning of this paper, seeking a space for the Tamil nation in modernity is enabled not only by political structures, but even more so by cultural ones such as the re-imagining of Tamil literary history, then it is not surprising that this would be a contested domain refracting the multiple and even contradictory narratives of several distinct and self-identified groups. It is not surprising that in the contest between several legitimizing narratives—both subaltern and elite—we also see the tension between pre-modern and modern temporalities and “the return of the anachronism,” to use the words of Aravamudan (2001). Aravamudan (2001, p. 350), paraphrasing Chakrabarty (2000), describes this anachronism as “reason’s collusion with historicism, because the historian’s objectification of the past creates an evidentiary discourse that can only observe its object, whereas the participation of the contemporary subject (the historian’s object) in premodern modes of thought or practice (such as religious ritual and unverifiable belief systems) renders him or her anachronistic, a relic of that observant historicism.” Is this not what is seen in Kīruṣṇacuvāmi Aiyāṅkār’s work in particular, and Tātācāriyār’s in some specifics? Both authors undertake a belated task, aligning themselves with models of Tamil historiographical writing from the early part of the twentieth century as if they were engaged in a dialogue of immediate significance. In other words, they are attempting to insert Śrīvaiṣṇavism into a modernist Tamil literary history, even while guarding it from the full implications of the historical process itself. The push and pull, the tensions in this contradictory enterprise are palpable, but these tensions are overridden by the urgency of participating in a story—the story of Tamil religion—that has already been written. In the light of this effort, these works are almost like the caret ^, the triangle symbol used to insert a word or words into already-written sentences, which seeks to belatedly expand upon



or complete them. They are attempting to bring out a different edition of an already-published book.

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