

**THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF BHAKTI II**  
**Royal Bhakti, Local Bhakti**

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**THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF BHAKTI II**  
**Royal Bhakti, Local Bhakti**

edited by  
Emmanuel FRANCIS & Charlotte SCHMID

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# Hagiography Versus History: The Tamil Pāṇar in Bhakti-Oriented Hagiographic Texts and Inscriptions

Sudalaimuthu PALANIAPPAN

The ‘Archaeology of Bhakti’ can be understood with a literal interpretation of ‘archaeology’ meaning a study of the past by the clearing away of dirt covering physical entities such as temples, statues, and inscriptions. However, one can also interpret ‘archaeology’ metaphorically, meaning a study of the past clearing away the dirt of misunderstanding and misinformation covering the past. That is what is being attempted in this paper with respect to the localness of the Pāṇar saints.

As I have shown (2004), the appellation by which Bhakti saints were designated—Nāyaṇār in the case of Śaiva saints and Āḷvār in the case of Vaiṣṇava saints—implied all saints were to be considered ‘royal’, since both terms also were used in reference to royal personages as well as deities.<sup>1</sup> If the ‘local’ were to be contrasted with the ‘royal’, with respect to the 63 Śaiva saints called Nāyaṇārs and the 12 Vaiṣṇava saints called Āḷvārs, except for the Śaiva saint Nantaṇār, there was no other saint as ‘local’ as the Pāṇar<sup>2</sup> saints, i.e., the Śaiva saint Tirunīlakaṇṭa Yāḷppāṇa Nāyaṇār, and the Vaiṣṇava saint

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<sup>1</sup> The reasons for the use of Āḷvar instead of Āḷvār can be found in Palaniappan (2004). In the present article, however, the conventional and later spelling Āḷvār will be maintained from now on.

<sup>2</sup> Pāṇaṇ is the singular form. Pāṇar can serve as both plural and honorific singular forms. Pāṇaṇār is strictly an honorific singular form.

Tiruppāṇālvār, both of whom were dated by Arunachalam (1977: 24 and 49) to the seventh century CE.<sup>3</sup> Even Kaṇṇappār was a ‘prince’ of the hunter community. Royal devotees could build temples using trans-local resources from all over their dominion. Upper caste devotees formed trans-local alliances/organizations and muster resources to build temples and worship in them. Examples are the Cittiramēli Periyānātu organization<sup>4</sup> of cultivators as well as the Ticaiyāyirattu Ainnūruvar<sup>5</sup> merchant guild. Brahmins had a long history of travelling across royal domains with temples in many locations endowed with grants to feed such non-local Brahmins.<sup>6</sup> But there is no evidence that the untouchable low castes had any such trans-local organizations. So the untouchable’s expression of Bhakti was constrained not only by the lack of such trans-local organizations but he/she was also prevented from entering even the local temple due to low social status. So, the royals and the untouchables occupied the two poles of the royal Bhakti-local Bhakti axis too.

Upper caste devotees like Campantar and Appār could travel widely, stay in *mathas*, visit royal temples, and worship in them. In the case of the Pāṇars, Classical Tamil poetry depicts them as traveling widely which was indeed the model for the later travel by Bhakti saints such as Appār and Campantar. While the Classical Tamil poems portray the Pāṇars as traveling widely and enjoying the hospitality of the royals inside their palaces with no constraints whatsoever, as we will discuss later, the *Periyapurāṇam* makes it clear that the Śaiva Pāṇar saint, Nīlakaṇṭar, was able to enter the temples in different places only due to the intervention of Lord Śiva. In the case of the Vaiṣṇava saint, Tiruppāṇālvār, the hagiographies indicate that he was not allowed inside the temple at Śrīraṅgam without the intervention of Lord Viṣṇu. He could only stand outside. Thus the Bhakti of the untouchables was so restricted in its expression by their social status that their Bhakti can be considered the epitome of local Bhakti. It is because of such correlation of social status with the local expression of the Bhakti of the low caste devotees, I feel the term ‘local’ can serve as a surrogate for the low social status of devotees. In order to understand the ‘local’ nature of the Pāṇar, one has to understand the social status of the Pāṇar and their cultural roles historically.

<sup>3</sup> Dehejia (1988: 184) dates Tiruppāṇālvār to the eighth century CE, Zvelebil (1975: 156) to circa 825 CE.

<sup>4</sup> SII 8, No. 291, p.160

<sup>5</sup> SII 8, No. 442, p. 232

<sup>6</sup> SII 14, No. 192, p. 107



The Tamil Pāṇars were bards, who traveled all over ancient Tamiḷakam, played *yāl* (lute) and sang songs before commoners as well as in the courts of rulers. The Pāṇars had an important role in ensuring the auspiciousness in the early Tamil society.<sup>7</sup> It was considered a royal duty to support the Pāṇars (*pāṇkaṭaṇ*).<sup>8</sup> If the Pāṇars were ‘local’, they definitely had society-obligated royal support. The songs of the Pāṇars served as a model for many of the Classical Tamil poems and even non-Pāṇar poets composed poems that imagined their authors to be Pāṇars.

The Classical Tamil poems also influenced the later Tamil Bhakti poems such as those in the *Tēvāram* and the *Tivviyappirapantam*.<sup>9</sup> As the Bhakti saints went from place to place singing in praise of the local deity, they ultimately emulated the peripatetic lifestyle of the ancient Pāṇars. Thus, one can say that the influence of the Pāṇars on the Tamil Bhakti movement has been a fundamental one.

While the Pāṇars are found to be mentioned in Tamil literary texts as well as epigraphs from the earliest times, there have been significant differences of opinion regarding their social status among scholars. For instance, P.T. Srinivasa Iyengar wrote in 1929 (2001: 16):

The Pāṇar, originally singers and after the institution of kingship in the pastoral stage of culture, royal bards and panegyrists, followed an ancient and honored, though ill-rewarded, profession among the Tamils. The ancient Pāṇars were the friends and counselors of kings during the long ages when pure Tamil culture flourished; but when Aryan culture from North India mingled with that of South India during historical times, the persistence of the Pāṇar in the over-indulgence in meat-food especially

<sup>7</sup> Palaniappan (2008: 42).

<sup>8</sup> Kailasapathy (1968: 56–57).

<sup>9</sup> As Peterson (1983: 357–358) has noted, “Religious pilgrimage is an ancient, pan-Hindu phenomenon in India. However, the Periya Purāṇam model of the pilgrim-singer-saint is predominantly Tamil in conception. Recent studies on Tamil devotional (bhakti) movements have brought out the idea that these movements have much in common with the ideals and institutions of the ancient civilization which produced the classical Tamil poetry of *akam* (interior, love) and *puṇam* (exterior, war, public life). The connection between poetry and wandering and that between poetry, emotion (especially love), and particular landscapes, are a uniquely Tamil heritage, as illustrated by the ancient Tamil institutions of wandering bards and *pāṇaṇ* musicians and by the elaborate scheme of landscape-emotion correspondences in the classical love poetry.”

beef, and the drinking of ardent spirits brought about their social degradation into one of the lowest and most untouchable castes of South India.

Partly relying on Iyengar's views, Kailasapathy (1968: 95) said the following:

The Pāṇar were minstrels who sang their songs to the accompaniment of the Yāl, 'lute'. In medieval times, the word came to denote a lower caste. But in the early poems not only do we note the absence of the caste system, but also find that the Pāṇar were held in high esteem as a vocational group.

Discussing the different social strata of the ancient Tamil society, Zvelebil (1992: 29) said the following:

Finally, there was the level representing the élite strata: the rulers, their minstrels and bards, priesthood, administrative apparatus, warriors. Fundamentally, they were closely connected with the land-owning 'middle' section of the national culture.

Obviously, Zvelebil (1992) considered the Pāṇars to be part of the élite strata in the ancient Tamil society with significant royal support.

While Iyengar, Kailasapathy, and Zvelebil considered the Pāṇars to be a group held in high esteem in the ancient Tamil society, Hart (1999: 322) considered them to be untouchables—in other words, people, who can be considered the epitome of the 'local' as discussed earlier. That Hart has based his opinion on the social status of the ancient Pāṇars on later medieval hagiographies is made clear by Hart's following statement (1975: 120):

The low status of bards may also be inferred from the fact that several centuries after the anthologies, Tiruppāṇālvar, who was a Pāṇar by caste, was considered to be so low that he was not allowed into the temple.<sup>10</sup>

Based on hagiographical traditions, Arunachalam (1977: 24 and 49) too considered the Pāṇars to be untouchables and not being eligible to enter the

<sup>10</sup> The story of Tiruppāṇālvar, one of the 12 Vaiṣṇava saints, occurs in different medieval Vaiṣṇava hagiographical works such as the *Āṛāyirappaṭi Kuruparamparāprapāvam*. Indeed, even Iyengar and Kailasapathy seemed to have based their views of the social status of the medieval Pāṇars on the hagiographies of Bhakti saints. For a discussion of the different versions of the story of Tiruppāṇālvar, see Hardy (1991). Hardy (1991: 135) followed Kailasapathy in considering the Pāṇars to have fallen to the untouchable status during medieval times.

temples. But Ludden (1996: 123) has presented demographic data from 1823 from the Tirunelvēli area that showed that the Pāṇars were one of several castes that formed the large non-untouchable Śūdra category. Also, Thurston (1909: 29) has presented ethnographic information, according to which the Pāṇars employed Brahmins and Veḷḷāḷas as priests and could enter temples. This difference in social status of the Pāṇars between what is found in the hagiographic texts and the current reality cannot be explained by any mass mobilization for upward mobility in the past, since the population of the Pāṇars was extremely low compared to major dominant castes.<sup>11</sup> This leads one to ask if historically the Pāṇars were as 'local' as the hagiographical tradition would have us believe. If not, what could be the real motivation for the hagiographical tradition to portray the Pāṇars as the quintessential 'local' Bhakti proponents?

What is interesting about the traditional views regarding the social status of the Pāṇars is that they were not informed by any real data on the Pāṇars actually living in Tamil Nadu during medieval times. Such real data are indeed available to us from Tamil inscriptions, which present a drastically different picture of the social status of the Pāṇars.

In the following sections I shall present the treatment of the Pāṇars in Tamil Bhakti texts, and contrast it with that found in secular texts, and inscriptions. This will help us excavate the true social status of these bards over the centuries in marked contrast to the traditional views held by many scholars. This will be followed by a discussion of why the Bhakti texts might have chosen to portray the Pāṇars as personifiers of 'local' Bhakti.

### 1. THE PĀṆARS IN CLASSICAL TAMIL TEXTS

Before delving into the treatment of the Pāṇars in later Tamil Bhakti texts, one should note briefly how the Pāṇars were presented in the Classical Tamil texts which fall into two major categories of Akam (interior) and Puṛam (exterior). The Puṛam poems dealt with several different themes such as philanthropy, war, education, statecraft, justice, one bard guiding another towards a philanthropist,

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, in the fertile Tirunelveli area studied by Ludden, the Pāṇars numbered only 199 while the Brahmins numbered 12499, the Veḷḷāḷas (including Toṇṭaimaṇṭala Mudaliar) numbered 19075, and the Maravar numbered 14140.

and impermanence of life. What Iyengar mentioned earlier regarding the Pāṇars, i.e., they were poor but highly respected and valued by the kings and chieftains, applied to their representation in the Puram poems. The *Cirupānārruppatai* and the *Perumpānārruppatai* are two examples of texts dealing with Puram themes of one bard guiding another bard to go to a chieftain or king, who was expected to receive the bard warmly and shower him with gifts.

In the Akam poems, the Pāṇars are found to be *dramatis personae* mainly in poems dealing with the hero's relationship with other women, and the hero separated from the heroine due to causes such as war or money-making. In those poems dealing with the hero's relationship with other women, the Pāṇars are portrayed as messengers conveying the hero's desire to return home. In those poems dealing with the hero's separation due to other reasons such as war, the Pāṇars are mostly portrayed as messengers from the heroine explaining to the hero how the heroine is suffering due to their separation and the need for him to return home. The portrayal of the Pāṇars was different in these two types of poems.

According to Tamil literary convention, the first type of poems was classified as belonging to the Marutam or cultivated landscape. In these poems, the Pāṇars were emissaries from the hero, who wanted to get back to the heroine after being with the other woman. The sulking heroines were presented as scolding the Pāṇars as aiding and abetting the hero's undesirable conduct. In the latter type of poems, in which the Pāṇars were representing the heroine, the heroines were very appreciative of the Pāṇars.

In *Kalittokai* 68, a poem in which the heroine is critical of the hero's conduct, she is also critical of a person, who is referred to as *pulaiyan* and is traditionally interpreted as referring to a Pāṇan serving as the hero's emissary. As I have already discussed:

the words, '*pulaiyan*' and '*pulai*', had positive connotations in Classical Tamil. They did not connote despised persons as happened in later times. We can also conclude that '*pulai*' meant 'prosperity, auspiciousness' (synonymous with Tamil '*polivu*' and Sanskrit '*maṅgala*') and not 'pollution'. Accordingly, '*pulaiyan*'/'*pulai*' was a male/female, who was supposed to engender auspiciousness or prosperity through different occupations such as priest, washerwoman, drummer, and bard. They were not considered polluted. (Palaniappan 2008: 47)

But the word *pulai* came to mean ‘baseness’/‘pollution’ in post-Classical Tamil usage and *pulaiyaṅ* came to refer to a base/polluted person. Indeed, Nacciṅārkkīṇiyar, a commentator of the fourteenth century, being aware of the later meaning of *pulaiyaṅ*, explained the use of *pulaiyaṅ* in *Kalittokai* 68.19 as *ceṛar col* (word of anger) implying that the Pāṇaṅ in the poem was not a base person in reality. Indeed Nacciṅārkkīṇiyar, in his commentary on *Tolkāppiyam*, *Poruḷatikāram* 147.25 (p. 193 for the *mūlam* and p. 201 for the *urai*), explains the term *koṭiyōr* (cruel ones) in the text as referring to Pāṇar, Kuttār, Viraliyar, Brahmins and others who serve as messengers sent by the hero when he wants to come back to the heroine after being with other women. What is interesting is that Brahmins are also included in this criticism.

That Pāṇars were not considered base persons in ancient times is shown by *Paripāṭal* 3, a pre-Bhakti movement Classical Tamil poem, which calls Viṣṇu “a good Pāṇaṅ of lute” in a poem that is full of Vedic and Purāṇic elements. As part of the poem’s adoration of Viṣṇu, *Paripāṭal* (3.81–86) offers the following praise:

*ceṅkaṭ kāri karuṅkaṅ vellai*  
*ponkaṭ paccai painkaṅ māal*  
*iṭavala kuṭavala kōvala kāvala*  
*kāṇā maraṇa nīyā niṇaiva*  
*māyā manna ulakāḷ manṇava*  
*tolliyar pulava nalliyālp pāṇa* (*Paripāṭal* 3.81–86)

You are the red-eyed one with dark complexion (Vāsudeva); the black-eyed and white complexioned one (Saṃkarṣaṇa); the golden complexioned one (Pradyumna); the green complexioned one (Aniruddha); the one, who dances to the left and right (of cowherd girls), the one who dances with the pot; the one, who has the plough; the one, who is the lord of cowherds; the one who protects; the one whose nature is not being seen; the one who never leaves the devotee’s thought; the one that never dies; the one who rules the world; the poet of ancient texts; **the good Pāṇaṅ of lute** (...) (emphasis mine)<sup>12</sup>

To understand the significance of Viṣṇu being praised as a bard in the above poem, one has to understand the nature of the Tirumāl poems. Hardy (1983) says the following regarding the Tirumāl poems of the *Paripāṭal*:

<sup>12</sup> Unless otherwise mentioned all translations are mine.

It appears now to be possible to define the milieu underlying the *Tirumāl* hymns in the *Paripāṭal*. Its locale is the temple, its conception of Māl is that of the transcendental incomprehensible absolute, its cultural roots are as much in the Tamil tradition as in the Vedas, and its centre of orientation are the Brahmins (...) (p. 209)

Personally, I would formulate as the fundamental framework within which bhakti is realized in the *Tirumāl* hymns: devotional worship of the god in the temple who yet remains the god of *transcendence infinite* (...) There is a great number of such descriptions which are clearly inspired by iconography and the concrete *vigraha* in the temple (...) (p. 210)

Thus we have *Paripāṭal* 3 composed in the context of a temple-oriented Brahmanical milieu before the time of Campantar, praising Viṣṇu as a Pāṇaṇ. One cannot imagine this if the Pāṇaṇ were untouchable before the time of Campantar.

### 1.1. CLASSICAL TAMIL THEMES IN BHAKTI POETRY

Both Puṛam and Akam themes find representation in the Bhakti poetry. The bard in the Classical Tamil Puṛam poem going from one patron to another is mostly replaced by a saint in the Bhakti poetry going from one temple to another worshipping his/her favorite deity localized in those temples—Śiva or Viṣṇu or Murukaṇ. As for the Akam poems, the Bhakti poems replaced the hero of the Classical Tamil poems with either Śiva or Viṣṇu or Murukaṇ and either the saint-poet or an idealized devotee took the place of the heroine.<sup>13</sup> Those Bhakti poems with the Marutam theme also often mention a Pāṇaṇ acting as a messenger from the hero and being scolded by the heroine.

### 1.2. THE PĀṆARS IN A BHAKTI POEM OF THE PUṚAM GENRE

The portrayal of the Pāṇars in Bhakti poems of Puṛam genre will be explored first. The following *Tēvāram* verse by Campantar of the seventh century CE speaks of Śiva as giving wealth to a Pāṇaṇ.

<sup>13</sup> See Carman and Narayanan (1989: 21–33) for a discussion of Puṛam and Akam elements in the Bhakti poetry.

*nakkam ēkuvar nāṭum ōr ūrumē nātaṅ mēṇiyil mācuṇam ūrumē  
takka pūmanaic currak karuḷoṭe tāram uytattu pāṇarku aruḷoṭe  
mikka tenṇavan tēvikku aṇiyaiyē mella nalkiya tonṭarkku aṇiyaiyē  
akkinār amutu uṅkalan oṭumē ālavāy aranār umaīyōṭumē  
(Tēvāram 3.115.6)*

(Śiva) will go naked all over countries and settlements. On the Lord's body a big cobra will crawl. At night with grace he gave to the Pāṇaṅ wealth surrounding the beautiful house where he was staying. You, who are close to the devotees, slowly gave the (marriage) ornament to the queen of the eminent Pāṇḍya king, the eating vessel of the One who wears the *rudrākṣa* is the skull of Brahmā, Hara of Ālavāy is with Umā.

According to *Periyapurāṇam* 2768, the Pāṇaṅ mentioned in this verse is Nīlakaṇṭha Yāḷppāṇar. However, Cāminātaiyar (1972: 274) believed that the Pāṇaṅ in this verse referred to a devotee by the name Pāṇapattirar of Madurai. In any case, it is clear that the verse is reminiscent of a Puṇam situation, in which the Pāṇaṅ receives wealth from a ruler. The only difference from Classical Tamil poems is that the donor here is Śiva instead of a ruler. In the following verse also, Campantar mentions a Pāṇaṅ, who was a devotee of Śiva.

*nāṇamuṭai vētiyaṇum nāraṇaṇum naṇṇavoṇāt  
tāṇu enai āḷuṭaiyāṅ taṅ aṭiyārkkku anpuṭaimai  
pāṇaṅ icai pattimaiyāl pāṭutalum parintaḷittāṅ  
kōṇal ilam piṇaic cenṇik kōḷili em perumāṅē (Tēvāram 1.62.9)*

Sthāṇu, who cannot be approached by shameful Brahmā and Nārāyaṇa,<sup>14</sup> is my Master. With concern He gave to the Pāṇaṅ, who sang with devotion because he loved the devotees of Śiva. He is the Lord in Kōḷili, with a curved young crescent on his head.

Cāminātaiyar (1972: 274) and V.M. Subrahmanya Ayyar<sup>15</sup> believed that the Pāṇaṅ mentioned here is Pāṇapattirar.<sup>16</sup> There is a Bhakti poem about

<sup>14</sup> This is a reference to the Liṅgodbhavamūrti.

<sup>15</sup> See [http://www.ifpindia.org/ecrere/upload/digital\\_database/Site/Digital\\_Tevaram/U\\_TEV/VMS1\\_062.HTM](http://www.ifpindia.org/ecrere/upload/digital_database/Site/Digital_Tevaram/U_TEV/VMS1_062.HTM)

<sup>16</sup> If Cāminātaiyar and Ayyar were correct, the Cēra king, who met Pāṇapattirar, must have been different from the one, who was assumed to be a contemporary of Cuntarar since Cuntarar lived in the beginning of the eighth century CE.

Pāṇapattirar that follows the Puṛam format even more closely than the above two verses.

The 11<sup>th</sup> *Tirumurai* of the Tamil Śaiva canon opens with an interesting poem called the *Tirumukappācuram*, or The Sacred Order in the Form of a Letter-Poem. That poem was a recommendation letter from Lord Śiva of Madurai to the Cēra king by the name Kaḷarirraivār, one of the 63 Nāyaṅārs. The letter characterized Pāṇapattiraṅ, the bearer of the letter and a lute-player from Madurai, as being devoted to Śiva as much as the Cēra king was, and instructed the king to give ample gifts to the bard. The situation is reminiscent of the bards going from one king to another in the Puṛam genre:

*mati mali puricai māṭak kūṭal*  
*pati micai nilavum pāl niṛa varic ciraṅ*  
*annam payil polil ālavāyil*  
*maṅṅiya civaṅ yāṅ moḷi taru māṛṛam*  
*paruvak koṅmūp paṭiyenap pāvalarkku*  
*urimaiyiṅ urimaiyiṅ utavi oḷi tikaḷ*  
*kuru mā mati purai kulaviya kuṭaikkūḷ*  
*ceru mā ukaikkum cēralaṅ kāṅka*  
*paṅpāl yāl vala pāṇapattiraṅ*  
*taṅ pōl eṅpāl aṅpaṅ taṅpāl*  
*kāṅpatu karutip pōntaṅaṅ*  
*māṅ poruḷ koṭuttu varaviṭuppatuvē (Tirumukappācuram)<sup>17</sup>*

I am Śiva in the Ālavāy temple in the grove with white-feathered swans, which is in the city of Kūṭal (Madurai) with tall buildings which are touched by the moon. This is my utterance. O Cēralaṅ king, giving like the seasonal rain-cloud to the poets again and again in friendship and being under the parasol that is shining bright and colorful and riding the war horse, may you see this. Pāṇapattiraṅ, who is an expert in playing the lute, is a devotee of mine just like you. He has gone in order to see you. May you give him a lot of wealth and send him back.

By equating the devotion of the king with that of the bard, the poem suggests an equivalence between the royal Bhakti of the king and the Bhakti

<sup>17</sup> The *Tirumukappācuram* text quoted here is cited in the *Tiruvilaiyāṭarpurāṇam, Kūṭarkāṅṅam* (1969: 407) along with the following textual variants: *varic ciraṅku*, *civaṅ yām*, *orumaṅyiṅ urimaiyiṅ*, *yālil*, and *taṅpōl empāl*.



of the bard. This poem was cited in the *Kallāṭam* of the tenth century CE as given below.

*paripurak kampalai iru cevi unṇum  
kuṭakkōc cēraṅ kiṭaittitu kāṅka eṅa  
mati mali puricait tirumukam kūri  
aṅṇu urut taritta iṅṇu icaip pāṅan  
pera niti koṭukka eṅa uṅa viṭuttu aruḷiya  
mātavār valuttum kūṭarku iraivaṅ (Kallāṭam 12.25–30)*

The Lord of Kūṭal (Śiva), who is praised by great sages and who told the Western Cēra king who hears the sound of the anklets (of dancing Śiva), “May you receive and read the order with the opening lines *matimali puricai* and give riches to be received by the bard of pleasant music who is an embodiment of devotion.”

In all these verses of the Puṛam genre found in texts earlier than the *Periyapurāṇam*, as in the case of Classical Puṛam poetry, the Pāṅar devotee was not described as being of low caste. However, a Bhakti poem of the Akam genre presents a different view of the Pāṅars.

### 1.3. THE PĀṆARS IN A BHAKTI POEM OF THE AKAM GENRE

In the *Tirukkōvaiyār* 25.35 of Māṅikkavācakar, a ninth-century CE Bhakti saint, the heroine scolded the Pāṅar as ‘base cow-eater’ as given below.

*mai koṅṭa kaṅṭar vayal koṅṭa  
tillai malku ūrar niṅvāy  
mey koṅṭa aṅṇinar eṅpatu eṅ  
viḷḷā aruḷ periyar  
vai koṅṭa ūci kol cēriyīṅ  
virru em il vaṅṅa vaṅṅaṅ  
poy koṅṭu nirkalurrō pulai  
āttinṇi pōntatuwē (Tirukkōvaiyār 386)*

Why do you say, “The one who has a dark neck and the one who is from the town with fields and abounding in Tillai bush has true love for you”? He is a great person whose grace for us never leaves. Is it for standing here uttering different kinds of lies (as ineffective as) attempting to sell a needle in the street of blacksmiths that the base cow-eater came here?

As noted earlier, the criticism and anger directed against the Pāṇars by the heroine in the Marutam landscape poems of Akam genre are stock-in-trade of Classical Tamil poetry. The words of anger (*ceṛar col*) uttered by the heroine of Akam poems criticizing the Pāṇars are not to be taken literally as referring to their real social status. What Māṇikkavācakar, the author of the above poem has done is to apply the post-Classical interpretation of the word *pulai* ‘base’ as an adjective to refer to a Pāṇar, who is made out to be a cow-eater. Māṇikkavācakar’s use of *pulai* in combination with cow-eating follows an earlier precedent by the Śaiva saint Tirunāvukkaracar, who described *pulaiyar* as cow-eaters in *Tēvāram* 6.95.10 as given below.<sup>18</sup>

*caṅkaniti patumaniti irañṭum tantu taraṇiyōṭu vāṇ ālat taruvarēnum  
maṅkuvār avar celvam matippōm allōm mātavarkku ēkāntar allār ākil  
aṅkam elām kuraintu aluku toḷunōyarāy ā urittut tinru ulalum pulaiyarēnum  
kaṅkai vār caṭaik karantārkkku aṅparākil avar kaṅṭṭir nām vaṇaṅkum  
kaṭavulārē (Tēvāram 6.95.10)*

If non-devotees of the Great Lord (Śiva) give us the two kinds of treasures of Kubera and dominion over the earth and the heaven, we will not esteem their wealth. But, if the devotees of the one who has hidden the Ganges in his hair locks suffer from leprosy that is eating away their limbs and they skin the cows, eat, and wander, they are indeed gods whom we worship.

What should be reiterated here is that since the Pāṇar is called a ‘base cow-eater’ by the heroine in a love poem as an angry outburst, it should not have been taken as literal truth.<sup>19</sup> But later hagiographical works have indeed interpreted the Pāṇars as base persons.

<sup>18</sup> The hymn number for this verse is 6.309.10 based on *Tēvārap patikaṅkaḷ* (1973–1974). What is important to note here is that the Bhakti of a person who was considered the lowest socially, i.e., constrained the most by social conditions to be local, is highlighted in this poem.

<sup>19</sup> After all, Tirumaṅkai Āḷvār of the eighth century refers to the Pāṇar in a highly respectful way as *pāṇanār* using the honorific form in a verse meant to be an utterance of the mother about her daughter:  
*nīḷ nilā murrattu ninru ivaḷ nōkkināḷ  
kāṇumō kaṅṅapuram enru kāṭṭināḷ  
pāṇanār tinṇam irukka inī ivaḷ  
nāṇumō nanru nanru naraiyūrarkkē (Periya Tirumoli 8.2.2)*

## 2. THE PĀṆARS IN HAGIOGRAPHICAL WORKS

Starting in the twelfth century, hagiographical texts like the *Periyapurāṇam*, the *Tiruvālavāyutaiyār Tiruvilaiyāṭarapurāṇam*, and the *Ārāyirappaṭi Kuruparamparāprapāvam* (AKPP; supposedly based on the Sanskrit *Divyasūricarita*) began to portray the Pāṇar saints/devotees such as Pāṇapattiraṇār alias Pāṇapattirar, Tirunīlakaṇṭa Nāyaṇār alias Nīlakaṇṭar, and Tiruppāṇālvār as ones belonging to a low caste but being emancipated by their devotion.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the words of anger of the heroine in stock Akam situations were being used to characterize the Pāṇar's status in Tamil society in stories involving Puṇam situations too. In the story of Vaiṣṇava Nampāṭuvāṇ of the *Kaiśikapurāṇa* (*Kaicikapurāṇam* in Tamil) associated with the temple at Tirukkuruṅkuṭi too, the person who was described merely as Caṇḍāla in the original Sanskrit text as well as Maṇipravāḷam commentaries has come to be characterized as a Pāṇaṇ in a relatively recent Tamil sthalapurāṇic version<sup>21</sup> and scholarly writing.<sup>22</sup>

The Pāṇar saints of Śaiva tradition are studied first. These include Nīlakaṇṭar, Pāṇapattirar, the wife of Pāṇapattirar, and a female descendant of Nīlakaṇṭar.

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She stood on the long moon terrace and looked. She pointed and said, "Do you see Kaṇṇapuram?" With the honorable Pāṇaṇ remaining firm, from now on will she have any shame? This is indeed good for the Lord of Nārāiyūr.

<sup>20</sup> Although the *taṇiyans* (individual stanzas) praising Tiruppāṇālvār by Periya Nampī and Tirumalai Nampī of late tenth/early eleventh centuries mention Tiruppāṇālvār being carried by a *muni*, they do not mention that Tiruppāṇālvār was of low caste. The phenomenon of a winner in a contest being carried on the shoulders by the loser has a long history in Tamil Nadu and has nothing to do with caste. TTP 57.32 refers to such an incident involving a contest between two female singers, in which the winner was carried on the shoulders by the loser. In his autobiography, Cāminātaiyar (1990: 57) says that when he was a young student, he had been carried by other students in a similar manner and the practice was called *kutiraiyēṛram* (*kutirai* + *ēṛram*, 'riding the horse'). So what Periya Nampī and Tirumalai Nampī indicated in their stanzas could very well have been the simple fact of Tiruppāṇālvār being victorious in some contest with the *muni*.

<sup>21</sup> Śrīnivāsaṇ (2003–2004: 33).

<sup>22</sup> Arunachalam (1977: 44).

## 2.1. NĪLAKAṆṬAR

One of the 63 saints whose stories are described by Cēkkiḷār in his *Periyapurāṇam* was Nīlakaṇṭar, who was a Pāṇar (bard). In the later part of his life, he traveled with Campantar, the Brahmin saint, and provided musical accompaniment by playing his lute. When Nīlakaṇṭar first met Campantar, Campantar welcomed him happily, took him to the outside yard of the local Śiva temple, and made him worship there as shown below.

*kōyilīṅ pura muṅṅil koṭupukkuk kumpiṭuvittu  
ēyum icai yāl unkaḷ iraivarukku inku iyarrum ena  
āya pukaḷḷ pīḷaiyār aruḷ perṛa atarḷku iraiñci  
mēya totait tantiri yāl vīkki icai virikkiṅṛār* (*Periyapurāṇam* 2032)

Taking him to the outside yard of the temple and making him worship, he said, “play your fitting musical lute here for your Lord” and Nīlakaṇṭar, bowing to the grace of famous Campantar, started playing music by tuning the lute with strings.

Here Cēkkiḷār, the author of the *Periyapurāṇam*, implies that the bard was not eligible to go inside the temple. This is also seen in Nīlakaṇṭar’s visit to temples in Madurai and Tiruvārūr, where he first stood at the gate of the temples and played his lute.

*ālavāy amarntār kōyil vāyilai aṭaintu niṅṅru  
pālai ir ēlu kōtta paṅṅiṅṅir karuvi vīkkik  
kālam ātaritta paṅṅil kai pāla muraiyum ārāyntu  
ēla vār kuḷalāl pākar pāṅikaḷ yālil iṭṭār* (*Periyapurāṇam* 4216)

Reaching the entrance of the temple of the One residing at Ālavāy, after tuning the musical instrument (lute) that can produce melodies strung together according to the 14 kinds of major scales, exploring several times the melody fit for the time, he played on the lute songs that praised the One who has on one half of his body the lady with fragrant long hair.

It should be noted that Nantaṅār, the Pulaiyar saint, is also described by Cēkkiḷār as standing at the entrance of Tiruppunkūr temple without going inside.<sup>23</sup> Thus Cēkkiḷār indicates the ritual status of Nīlakaṇṭar. In other words, Cēkkiḷār implies the ultimate ‘local’ nature of Nīlakaṇṭar.

<sup>23</sup> *Periyapurāṇam* 1058.

When Nīlakaṇṭar went to the temple in Madurai, he stood at the temple entrance and sang. Cēkkiḷār says that on hearing the music of Nīlakaṇṭar, Śiva had him brought inside the temple.

*marravar karuviṭ pāṭal maturai nīṭu ālavāyil  
korravan tiruvullattuk koṇṭu taṇ toṇṭarkkellām  
arrai nāḷ kaṇavil ēva aruḷ perum pāṇanārait  
terrīnār puraṅkaḷ cerrār tirumuṇṭu koṇṭu puḷkkār  
(Periyapurāṇam 4217)*

Considering the music played on the instrument of the Pāṇar, the Lord of the tall Ālavāy temple of Madurai, ordered all his devotees in their dreams, and they brought the great bard with divine grace to the area in front of (the sanctum sanctorum of) the One who destroyed Tripura.

Thus after Nīlakaṇṭar was brought inside the temple, a divine voice asked the devotees to provide the bard with a plank to sit on and play. Nīlakaṇṭar was provided with a golden plank as given below.

*antattu elunta ōcai aṇṭinir pāṇar pāṭum  
canta yāl taraiyir cītam tākkil viḷḷu aliyum enru  
cuntarap palakai muṇ nīr iṭum enat toṇṭar iṭṭār  
centamiḷḷ pāṇanārum tiruvaruḷ perṛuc cērntār  
(Periyapurāṇam 4220)*

A voice from sky said that if the lute played by Pāṇar with devotion was affected by the coldness of the earth, it would go out of tune and so you (devotees) should lay a beautiful plank in front.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, the devotees laid the plank. Thus the bard of exalted Tamil received the divine grace and sat on it.

Similarly, in Tiruvārūr, when Nīlakaṇṭar reached the usual temple entrance and started singing, Śiva opened another entrance for Nīlakaṇṭar through which he entered the temple and worshipped.

*kōyil vāyil muṇ aṭaintu kūṛram cerra perum tiralum  
tāyīṇ nalla perum karuṇai aṭiyārkkku aḷikkum taṇṇaiyūm  
ēyūm karuviyil toṭuttu aṅku iṭṭup pāṭak kēṭṭu aṅkaṇ  
vāyil vēru vaṭa ticaiyil vakuppap pukuntu vaṇaṅkinār  
(Periyapurāṇam 4222)*

<sup>24</sup> That the plank was of gold is mentioned in *Periyapurāṇam* 4223.

Reaching the front of the temple gate, he played on his lute songs that described Śiva's great power that destroyed Yama, the cool grace with which he gives to devotees love that is superior even to a mother's. On hearing this, Śiva opened a different entrance on the northern side and the bard entered the temple and worshipped.

Later when Campantar, Nīlakaṇṭar, and Mataṅka Cūlāmaṇiyār, Nīlakaṇṭar's wife, visited the home of Nīlanakkar, a Brahmin saint, Campantar asked the host to arrange a place for Nīlakaṇṭar and his wife to sleep. Nīlanakkar had them sleep near the Vedic fire altar in the center of the house. As a consequence, the Vedic fire burned even more brightly.

*ninṛa aṅparai nīlakaṇṭap perumpāṇarkku  
inṛu taṅka ōr iṭam koṭuttu aruḷuvīr eṇṇa  
nanrum inṇurru naṭumaṅai vētiyiṅ pāṅkarc  
cenru marrāvarkku iṭam koṭuttanar tirumaraiyōr  
(Periyapurāṇam 1857)*

Campantar told the one standing (Nīlanakkar), "Please give the great lute player Nīlakaṇṭar a place to stay tonight. The Brahmin (Nīlanakkar) becoming very happy went to the side of the altar in the center of the house and gave Nīlakaṇṭar a place (to sleep).

*āṅku vētiyil aṛāta cem tī valam culīvu uṛru  
ōṅki munṇaiyil orupaṭittu aṅriyē oḷirat  
tāṅku nūlavar makilvu uṛac cakōṭa yālt talaiivar  
pāṅku pāṇiyāruṭaṅ aruḷāl pallikoṇṭār  
(Periyapurāṇam 1858)*

There, in the altar, the red flame rose curving right and grew bright more than earlier. The one wearing the sacred thread was pleased. Due to (Śiva's) grace, the expert in playing *cakoṭa* lute went to bed on the side (of the altar) with the bardess (his wife).

Thus, without explicitly calling the bard's status to be low, Cēkkiḷār makes it obvious that the Pāṇar saint was ineligible to enter the temple and it was the intervention of Śiva that allowed him to enter the two temples. For sleeping inside the home of Nīlanakkar, a Brahmin, Campantar, a Brahmin, intervened. But fortunately, unlike in the case of Nantaṅār, Nīlakaṇṭar was not made to go through fire to be born again as a Brahmin.

## 2.2 PĀṆAPATTIRAR

The hagiography of Pāṇapattirar, the Pāṇar of Madurai, is even more interesting than Nīlakaṅṭhar's. Although Pāṇapattirar is not included among the 63 individual saints in the *Periyapurāṇam*, Cēkkiḷār cites the *Tirumukappācuram*<sup>25</sup> and narrates the episode of Pāṇapattirar going from Madurai to the Cēra king, Kaḷarirraivār, and being offered considerable wealth. It should be noted that the Cēra king is described as falling at the feet of Pāṇapattirar as given below.

*kēṭṭa polutē kai talaimēl koṅṭu kīlarnta pēr anpāl  
nāṭṭam poli nīr valintu iliya eluntu naṭukkam mika eyti  
ōṭṭattu am poṇ māḷikaiyiṅ purattil urukum cintaiyuṭaṅ  
pāṭṭiṅ talaimaip pāṇanār pātam pala kāl paṇikinrār  
(Periyapurāṇam 3777)*

As soon as he heard (that Pāṇapattirar was at the palace entrance) with his hands clasped above his head in obeisance, shedding tears due to swelling up love, (the Cēra king) rose and, with his body shaking, went outside the palace decorated with purified beautiful gold, and with melting heart fell several times at the feet of Pāṇapattirar, who was excellent in singing.

The Cēra king is also described as walking behind the bard till they went outside the capital to see him off.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, the *Periyapurāṇam* identifies him as Pāṇanār<sup>27</sup> Pattiraṇār but does not mention him being of low caste.

On the other hand, the *Tiruvālavāyūṭaiyār Tiruvīlaiyāṭarpurāṇam* (TTP) of the thirteenth century CE, which describes the miraculous deeds of Śiva in Madurai, narrates the stories about Pāṇapattirar in more detail. Out of the 64 'games' played by Śiva in Madurai, four involve Pāṇapattirar or his wife, the same number of 'games' involving Māṇikkavācakar, the Brahmin saint, who was the Pāṇḍya king's minister. When TTP introduces Pāṇapattirar in the story of Śiva selling firewood, he is described as a singer in the Śiva temple in Madurai as well as the Pāṇḍya king's court.<sup>28</sup> He is described as being quite well

<sup>25</sup> *Periyapurāṇam* 3775.

<sup>26</sup> *Periyapurāṇam* 3785.

<sup>27</sup> As we saw in *Periya Tirumoli* 8.2.2, Pāṇanār is the honorific form of the singular Pāṇan.

<sup>28</sup> TTP 54.2. There are some differences between this version of the story and that found in the later *Tiruvīlaiyāṭarpurāṇam* of Paraṅcōti, which is dated by Zvelebil (1975: 56) between the sixteenth and eighteenth century CE.

off. When Icaivallān, a Pāṇaṇ visiting from the Cōḷa kingdom, challenged the Pāṇḍya king of Madurai saying that he would defeat any singer in the Pāṇḍya kingdom, the king sent for Pāṇapattirar and asked him to contest against Icaivallān. Not being confident of his own musical ability to defeat Icaivallān, Pāṇapattirar prayed to Śiva. Śiva took the form of a firewood vendor. He went to the place where the visiting singer was staying and sang a song. Icaivallān was awed by the song and asked the firewood vendor, who taught him to sing. Śiva, the firewood vendor, said it was Pāṇapattirar. On hearing this, Icaivallān was afraid to face Pāṇapattirar in the music contest and fled the kingdom. Śiva thus saved the reputation of Pāṇapattirar and the Pāṇḍya kingdom.

In this story, while describing Pāṇapattirar as he entered the Pāṇḍya king's palace, he is described as wearing silk clothes and jewels with bright gems.<sup>29</sup> Given that the same Tamil word *kōyil* is used to describe a royal palace and a temple, and the rituals meant for a king and a deity were similar, if a person could enter the palace, there is no reason to expect that he/she would be forbidden to enter the temple as an untouchable would be.

In the next story in TTP, Pāṇapattirar had ceased going to the court to sing and sang only in the temple. As Pāṇapattirar did not have any other source of income, Śiva took money and valuables from the royal treasury and gave him. Pāṇapattirar used the wealth for food and clothes and also to give to others, who came to him seeking support. As the wealth of the treasury got exhausted, one night Śiva appeared in his dream and told him that he had written a letter for Pāṇapattirar (with the opening, *mati mali puricai*) to take to the Cēra king, Kalarirrarivār.<sup>30</sup> The letter instructed the king to give the bard a lot of wealth. When Pāṇapattirar met the Cēra king with the miraculous letter, he received the bard very respectfully and honored him.

*ōṭai yānaiṇ piṭar micai ōṅkura*  
*nāṭu kāṇa nakarvalam koṇṭu pōyk*  
*kūṭam nīṭu taṇ kōyilulḷ pukku alar*  
*ēṭu tāṅku tavicil iruttinaṇ* (TTP 55.22)

Seating him high on the back of the elephant wearing the golden forehead ornament, the Cēra king took him on a procession around

<sup>29</sup> TTP 54.7.

<sup>30</sup> TTP 55.8.



the city for the country to see. Then he entered his long palace with him and made him sit on the flower-strewn seat.

*iruntavaṅ taṅṅai iṅaṅā kavē pāvittu eṅṅey  
varuntu meym mulutum peytu maṅcaṅam āṭṭic cūṭṭic  
curumpu cūl mālai cāṭṭit tūcu taṅ kalavai pūcip  
parintu arucuvaiyin ūṭṭip paṅintanaṅ karaṅkaḷ kūppi* (TTP 55.23)

Considering the seated bard as God himself, he applied oil all over his tired body, bathed him, adorned him with a garland which was buzzed by bees and smeared clean cool sandal paste, fed him lovingly with tasty food, and bowed to him with folded hands.

The king honored him and offered him not only considerable wealth but also his entire kingdom. But Pāṅapattirar declined the offer of kingdom. During this interaction, Pāṅapattirar referred to himself as a person of low caste/lineage either in a case of self-abasement or referring to his social status in comparison to that of the king as given below.

*munṅurām ninru pōrri innaṅam moliyak kaṅṅa  
aṅṅuṅaiṅ pāṅaṅ aṅci aṅi tolutu avani kākkum  
naṅkuḷa aracē eṅṅai ippaṅi navilāninṅratu  
eṅkol naṅku ilāta yāṅ ṅr ili kulap pāṅaṅ eṅṅāṅ*  
(TTP 55.27, emphasis mine)

As Pāṅapattirar heard the Cēra king stand in front and speak thus, the loving bard showed great respect and bowed at the king's feet and said, "O king of good caste lineage, who protects the world, why do you speak to me like this? I am a bard of low caste lineage without any goodness."

For the first time, Pāṅapattirar is made out to be of a low caste/lineage when even the *Periyapurāṅam* had failed to say anything about his social status. The reply of the Cēra king is given below.

*iyaintanaṅ poraiyar kōmāṅ ilaṅku eṅṅumpu iṅratu āka  
nayanṅtu ulaku aṅaṅṅittum tanta nāṅmukaṅ āti āka  
uyarṅta pal piṅapput tōrum uyirṅku uyirāy nam iṅcaṅ  
cayam pēra nirral kaṅṅiṅr tāṅṅtatu ētu uyarṅtatu ētu* (TTP 55.28)

Showing the same respect to the bard, the king of Poraiyar dynasty said, "With the bright ant as the last and Brahmā, who brought forth all the desirable worlds, as the first, you see our Lord victoriously residing

as the lives of multitude of higher beings. Which is the low one and which is the high one?”

The Cēra king’s reply reveals why the bard was made out to be a person of low caste/lineage. As TTP 55.28 shows, the text wants to show that in the ideology of Bhakti, when one sees Śiva in all living beings including animals, there can be no difference among people with one being a low one and another being a high one. Moreover, by the offer of the kingdom to the bard, which he declined, the hagiographer tries to make the ‘local’ Bhakti of the bard equal to the royal Bhakti of the Cēra king. The hagiographer modifies the Puram theme of the king giving to the bard, by having the god give to the king as well as the Pāṇar, with the king being shown to be subordinate to the god. The god and not the king is the ultimate source of riches (that is grace)—even for the king himself. Thus all the devotees are made equal.

The TTP’s next story of Pāṇapattirar involves Śiva of Madurai offering a golden plank to Pāṇapattirar for him to sit on and sing. This is in contrast to the *Periyapurāṇam*, which names Nīlakaṇṭhar to be the recipient of the golden plank. But TTP does not make the bard stand outside the temple initially as *Periyapurāṇam* does with Nīlakaṇṭhar. Pāṇapattirar is described as going to the temple at midnight in pouring rain, standing behind Nandi (the bull, the vehicle of Śiva), and singing.<sup>31</sup> The exact position of Nandi in relation to the *garbhagr̥ha* is not mentioned in the poem.<sup>32</sup> Since his lute is described as becoming wet, one has to assume that the Nandi was out in the open but inside the temple. Thus TTP portrays the bard as eligible to enter the temple without any divine intervention even though Pāṇapattirar refers to himself as one of low caste/lineage in the earlier episode involving the Cēra king.

<sup>31</sup> TTP 56.7

<sup>32</sup> In the story of Nantaṇār in the *Periyapurāṇam*, Cēkkiḷār locates the Nandi in Tiruppuṅkūr in the *tirumunṇu*, the area immediately in front of the deity. According to *Periyapurāṇam*, Nantaṇār stood at the entrance of the temple and did not go in. The Nandi initially blocked his view of Śiva in the *garbhagr̥ha*. According to Fuller (1984, xx–xxvi), in the Madurai temple the Nandi closest to the *garbhagr̥ha* is just outside the *ardhamaṇḍapa* and the farthest Nandi is inside the *Viravasantarāyamaṇḍapa*, to the west of the east gate of the temple.

### 2.3. PĀṆAPATTIRAR'S WIFE

The next story in TTP involved Pāṇapattirar's wife, who was a singer in the court of the Pāṇḍya king. One day the king invited the wife of Pāṇapattirar to sleep with him. When she refused, the king planned a music contest and invited a female singer from outside the kingdom to compete against Pāṇapattirar's wife. He also stipulated that the defeated singer had to carry the winner on her back. In the initial round of the competition, even though the courtiers realized that Pāṇapattirar's wife was clearly the better singer, they unfairly sided with the king and said the visiting singer sang better. Pāṇapattirar's wife was sad and went to the temple and prayed to Śiva. At that time, there was a voice from the sky that said the following:

*aṅḡu uṭaiyālē, neṅcakam aṅcēl  
naṅ parivōṭum utavuvaṅ nālai  
miṅ poli māraṅtaṅ pulam viṭṭē  
eṅ pulam vā pō eṅraṅaṅ emmāṅ* (TTP 57.19)

“O’ woman with devotion, do not be afraid in your heart. I shall help you with good concern. Leaving the place of Māraṅ (the Pāṇḍya king), come to my place. Go now!” said our Father (Śiva).

After hearing this utterance from the sky, Pāṇapattirar's wife went to the court and requested that the next round of the competition to take place in a pavilion in the temple of Śiva. In the next round in the temple, with Śiva's grace, Pāṇapattirar's wife was declared the winner and she was carried on the shoulders of the visiting singer as a sign of victory. The king sought her forgiveness and gave her a lot of gifts. This story brings out the triumph of the ‘local’ Bhakti of the Pāṅar woman over the royal power.

### 2.4. THE PĀṆAR WOMAN WHO SET THE TĒVĀRAM HYMNS TO MUSIC

In the Śaiva hagiographical tradition, we have one more Pāṅar woman to look at. This involves the fourteenth century story of the *Tirumuraikaṅṭapurāṅam* traditionally attributed to Umāpati Civācāriyār, belonging to the Dikṣita Brahmin community of Chidambaram, and one of the four main proponents of Śaiva Siddhānta philosophy. This work describes how the *Tēvāram* hymns were lost and rediscovered in the Chidambaram temple by Nampi Aṅṭār

Nampi, an Ādiśaiva Brahmin from Tirunaṛaiyūr, through the intercession of Vināyaka. By the time they were rediscovered, the original melodies associated with the hymns had been forgotten. So Nampi Aṅṭār Nampi went to Tiruverukkattampuliyūr, the hometown of Nīlakaṅṭar and prayed to Śiva in the temple. There Śiva told Nampi Aṅṭār Nampi that He has blessed a woman from the good lineage of Nīlakaṅṭar with expertise in music. Nampi Aṅṭār Nampi called for her and hearing her good music was very pleased. Meanwhile, the Cōḷa king heard a voice from the sky saying that the woman be brought before Lord Naṭarāja in Chidambaram temple to set the hymns to music. Thus the music that was set by her, praised by divine grace, and heard by the king, Nampi Aṅṭār Nampi, 3000 Brahmins of Chidambaram, and other devotees spread throughout the Tamil region due to divine grace.<sup>33</sup>

*āṅku avalai ampalattuḷ āṭuvār tirumuṅpē  
pāṅkiṇuṭaṅ koṭuwantu paṅṅaṭaivu payil pāṭa  
ōṅku aruḷāl murai paṅittarṅku okkum eṇa atira ocai  
nīṅku ariya vāṅiṅkaṅ nikaḷa aracaṅ kēṭṭāṅ  
(Tirumuraikaṅṭapurāṅam 93)*

The king heard a reverberating voice from the sky that spread everywhere that said: “It will be fitting to bring her into the holy area in front of the One, who dances in the hall with appropriate honors and have her set the music with lofty grace in order to sing with melody.”

Thus, the Pāṅar woman set music in the Chidambaram temple in front of Śiva after divine intervention.

## 2.5. TIRUPPĀṆĀLVĀR

The social status of the Pāṅars is portrayed much worse in the case of the Vaiṣṇava saint Tiruppāṅālvār. The hagiography of Tiruppāṅālvār is well discussed by Hardy (1991). What is discussed here is the shorter version contained in the AKPP.<sup>34</sup> Here Tiruppāṅālvār is explicitly described as an

<sup>33</sup> The Śaiva tradition believes that the *paṅs* in which the *Tēvāram* hymns are sung today by the Ōṭuvār in Śaiva temples are the same as what were set by the Pāṅar woman.

<sup>34</sup> This text is traditionally ascribed to Pinpaḷakiya Perumāḷ Jiyar of the thirteenth century. Based on Venkatachari (1978: 159f), Hardy (1991: 138–39, n.20) considers this

untouchable *pañcama*. Here is what Hardy (1991: 139) said translating the relevant lines and commenting on one line:

He was born into the fifth varṇa that was spoken about [by Nammālvār in the phrase] “(caṇḍālas that have no ‘goodness’ whatsoever since) they fall below any of the four classes that constitute a good family.” But a positive simile is added: ‘like the Bhāgavatas who correct mistakes made in the sacrifices of brahmins.’

The phrase of Nammālvār mentioned above occurs in the following verse:

*kulam tāṅku cātikaḷ nālilum kīḷ ilintu ettaṅai*  
*nalām tāṅ ilāta caṅṅāla caṅṅāḷarkaḷ ākilum*  
*valam tāṅku cakkarattu aṅṅal maṅivaṅṅarku āḷ eṅru ul*  
*kalantār aṅṅiār aṅṅiār tam aṅṅiār em aṅṅikālē* (*Tiruvāymoli* 3.7.9)

Even if they are lower than the four castes that form the basis of lineage and are despised among the despised (untouchables) without any auspiciousness<sup>35</sup> but think that they are the servants of the gem-hued Lord who carries the wheel in his right hand, their servants’ servants’ servants are our lords.

In the shorter version of the story of Tiruppāṅālvār given by the AKPP, the Pāṅar saint being aware of his own caste status and afraid to enter and pollute the sacred island of Śrīraṅgam with its temple for Raṅganātha, stood on the southern bank of river Kāvēri and sang in praise of Raṅganātha. Raṅganātha appeared in the dream of Lokasāraṅga, a Brahmin *muni*, and asked him to carry the Pāṅar saint on his shoulders and bring him to Him. This, Lokasāraṅga did the next day. Tiruppāṅālvār sang the hymn beginning with the words, “Amalaṅāti pirāṅ,” and merged into Raṅganātha.

Although Hardy did not seem to have realized it, the positive simile mentioned by him is really related to the story of Nampāṅuvāṅ, which will be discussed next.

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a doubtful ascription. The text references a Sanskrit text *Divyasūricarita* traditionally ascribed to Garuḍavāhana Paṇḍita who was supposedly a disciple of Rāmānuja and thus dated in the twelfth century. But A. S. Ramanatha Ayyar (EI 24, 90ff.) concludes that the *Divyasūricarita* was probably composed by one Garuḍavāhana Bhatta after an inscription of 1493 CE in Śrīraṅgam temple, in which his name appears. In any case, Periyavāccāṅ Pillai refers to the story in his commentary on *Tirumālai* 42. See *Tirumālaivyaḱyāṅgam* (pp. 475–476).

<sup>35</sup> I prefer to use ‘auspiciousness’ instead of ‘goodness’.

## 2.6. NAMPĀṬUVĀN

The story of Nampāṭuvān or Kaiśikaṇ is called the *Kaiśikapurāṇa*. It is claimed to be part of the *Varāhapurāṇa*. I am giving below an adaptation of the brief outline of the story as presented by Welbon (1982: 78).

A *caṇḍāla* devotee of Viṣṇu is assaulted by *brahmarākṣasa* (a demon who was a brahmin in a previous birth) while on his way to sing before the Lord. After some argument, the demon is persuaded to release the untouchable so that the latter's vow to sing to Nārāyaṇa can be fulfilled. For his part, the *caṇḍāla* pledges to return to the *rākṣasa* immediately thereafter.

Although tempted to flee along the way by a man who turns out to be Viṣṇu in disguise, the singer goes back to the cannibal demon. The latter, however, now demands not the singer's flesh but rather the merit (or a portion of it) accruing from singing the praise to Viṣṇu. Eventually, the *caṇḍāla* grants the demon's request, offering that merit gained in singing *kaiśika paṇ*. Both songster and the demon are released thereby from their low estates, assured of rebirth as brahmins, and promised the ultimate attainment of Vaikuṅṭha.

It should be noted that the Brahmin had become a demon because he had died without completing a sacrifice he had begun. This is what Hardy referred to as the 'positive simile' in Tiruppāṇālvār's story in the AKPP.

In his commentary on the *Kaiśikapurāṇa*, the *Kaicikapurāṇavyākhyāna*, Parāśara Bhaṭṭar did not call the singer a Pāṇaṇ. In commenting on the *Tirumālai* 33 and 42, authored by Toṅṅaraṭippoṭi Ālvār, Periyavāccāṇ Piḷḷai mentions Nampāṭuvān's story but did not call him a Pāṇaṇ.<sup>36</sup> The AKPP also did not explicitly refer to Nampāṭuvān as a Pāṇaṇ although it did compare the story of Nampāṭuvān with that of Tiruppāṇālvār. But in the relatively recent *sthalapurāṇa* of Tirukkuṟuṅkuṭi,<sup>37</sup> and in Arunachalam (1977: 44) the *caṇḍāla* character is explicitly called a Pāṇaṇ.

Thus the hagiographic works beginning in the twelfth century have made the Pāṇars to be of very low social status. But if one looks at the

<sup>36</sup> *Tirumālaivākyāṇam* (pp. 372 and 472). Periyavāccāṇ Piḷḷai mentions Lokasāraṅga carrying Tiruppāṇālvār on his head (*Tirumālaivākyāṇam*, p. 476).

<sup>37</sup> Śrīnivāsaṇ (2004: 33).

information provided by inscriptions, a shockingly different picture of the Pāṇar community emerges.

### 3. THE PĀṆARS IN THE INSCRIPTIONS OF TAMIL KINGS

There are many Tamil inscriptions that mention individual or multiple persons of the Pāṇar community. A few key inscriptions will be discussed below.

#### 3.1. THE PĀṆARS AS SANSKRIT THEATER PERFORMERS

There is a famous inscription of the Cōla king Rājaraḥa I in the Tanjore (Taṅcāvūr) temple, which lists 400 dancers and other professionals associated with the temple, each of whom received a specific amount of paddy identified as shares.<sup>38</sup> Each share represented the harvest from a land measuring 20 *vēlis*. The number of shares given to a professional shows how the society estimated the relative value of their service.

After the 400 dancers, dance teachers are listed. Singers and other professionals are listed next. Each dancer received one share and each dance teacher received two shares. Each singer received one and a half share as given below:

*e[...]ṭa pāṭṭu onṛukkuk kurāvaṇ vīracōlaṇāna pañcavañ māṭevi  
nāṭakamayyaṇukkup paṅku onṛaraiyum merpaṭi onṛukku maraikkāṭṭuk  
kaṇavatiyāna tiruvelḷaraiccākaikkup paṅku onṛaraiyum merpaṭi onṛukku  
orriyūraṇ ciṅkaṇukkup paṅku onṛaraiyum merpaṭi onṛukku orriyūraṇ  
iḷāṅkāvaṇukkup paṅku onṛaraiyum* (SII 2, No. 66, 3<sup>rd</sup> section, line 9, p. 274)

For [singing *tēci*<sup>39</sup>] for one (person) singing, to Kurāvaṇ Vīracōlaṇ alias Pañcavaṇmāṭevi Nāṭakamayyaṇ, one and a half share, for another, to

<sup>38</sup> SII 2, No. 66.

<sup>39</sup> The published text string is *ெ... [டபாட்]டு ஒன்றுக்கு* (SII 2, No. 66, p. 274), to be compared with the *தெசிய் [ப் ப] ாட தெசிய் பாடுவாற்கு* (SII 19, No. 181, p. 92). The relevant text string thus begins with the character indicating that the first letter had either the medial vowel *e/ē* or *o/ō* since the orthography of the eleventh century CE does not distinguish between a short *e* and a long *ē* or between a short *o* and a long *ō*. The final letter of the string before *pāṭṭu* ‘singing’ is *ṭa*. A temple ritual that seems to fit these conditions is singing *tēci* which would be indicated by the words *tēci pāṭa*. Such a ritual is mentioned in SII 19, No. 181, p. 92, in which *tēci* is

Maṛaikkāṭṭuk Kaṇavati alias Tiruveḷḷaraic Cākkai, one and a half share, for another, to Orriyūraṅ Ciṅkaṅ, one and a half share, for another, to Orriyūraṅ Iḷaṅkāvaṅ, one and a half share ...

Please note that one of the singers is called Tiruveḷḷaraic Cākkai meaning 'the Cākkai from Tiruveḷḷarai.' Actually, the name Kūttac Cākkaiyaṅ is found in the *Cilappatikāram* referring to a dancer, who depicts the dance of Śiva Ardhanārīśvara before the Cēra king Ceṅkuṭṭuvaṅ in his palace.<sup>40</sup> During medieval times, inscriptions show that the title, Cākkai or Cākkaiyār, referred to a performer of Sanskrit drama like the Cākyārs of Kerala.<sup>41</sup>

A tenth-century inscription in Tiruviṭaimarutūr refers to a Kīrtti Maṛaikkāṭṭaṅ alias Tiruveḷḷaraic Cākkai, who was given a grant of land to perform *āriyakkūttu* (Sanskrit drama) of seven acts.<sup>42</sup> Another tenth-century inscription in Tiruvāvaṭuturāi mentions one Kumaraṅ Śrīkaṇṭaṅ, who was a Cākkaiyār and had the right of *cākkaik kāṇi* in the town. Kumaraṅ Śrīkaṇṭaṅ was given an additional grant of land to perform *āriyakkūttu* in seven acts.<sup>43</sup> This additional grant was classified as *nirttapōkam/nittapōkam* (Skt. *nṛttabhoga*) and the land was called *cākkai vēli*. A tenth-century inscription in Kīlappaluvūr mentions one Aṭalaiyūrc Cākkai who performed *cākkaik kūttu* in three acts.<sup>44</sup>

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inscribed as *tēciy* with a paragogic *y*. Also to be noted is the fact that these singers are listed immediately after 400 temple dancers and seven dance teachers, but before the instrumentalists. So, most likely, "*tēci pāṭa*" referred to singing for the dance. One of the dance styles was known as *tēci* according to the *Arumpatavurai*, a commentary on the *Cilappatikāram* (see p. 57). So, even though Maṛaikkāṭṭuk Kaṇavati had the title Cākkai, he was only engaged to sing and not to perform Sanskrit drama as mentioned by Nagaswamy (2012: 369).

<sup>40</sup> *Cilappatikāram* 28.77.

<sup>41</sup> Scholars of Kerala history have long accepted the equivalence of Cākkai and Cākyār. According to Narayanan (1996: 194), "There were also male actors in the temple known as Cākkai or Cākyār. Their descendants continue to perform Kūttu (mono-acting and story-telling) and Kūṭiyāṭṭam (play acting), forming a sub-caste of hereditary professional actors in Kerala." According to Tamil Lexicon, *cākkai* also meant 'astrologer', 'king's ministerial officer', and 'priest'. But these meanings do not apply to a performer of music or drama.

<sup>42</sup> SII 5, No. 718.

<sup>43</sup> ARE 1925, No. 120.

<sup>44</sup> SII 19, No. 171, p. 87.



It is to be noted that after listing many other professionals, the Tanjore inscription lists four Pāṇars, each of whom was supposed to receive one and a half shares. Two of the four Pāṇars have names ending in Cākkai as shown below:

*pāṇaṇ uttamaṇ cūrriyāṇa arikulakesariccākkaiikkuppaṅku oṇṇaraiyum merpaṭi aiyārāṇ ariñcikkuppaṅku oṇṇaraiyum merpaṭi aparāyitaṇ vaṭavāyilāṇa pallavaṇ cākkaiikkuppaṅku oṇṇaraiyum merpaṭi vaṭuvūrariñcikkuppaṅku oṇṇaraiyum (...)* (SII 2, No. 66, p. 278)

To the Pāṇaṇ Uttamaṇ Cūrri alias Arikulakēcaric Cākkai, one and a half share, for the same, to Aiyārāṇ Ariñci, one and a half share, for the same, to Aparāyitaṇ Vaṭavāyilāṇ alias Pallavaṇ Cākkai, one and a half share, for the same, to Vaṭuvūr Ariñci, one and a half share (...)" (emphasis mine)

Since these four were not listed together with singers or dancers, based on the title Cākkai, we can conclude that most probably they were performers of *cākkaikkūttu* or *āriyakkūttu*, which must have been performed by persons with the title Cākkai. E. Hultzsch, the editor of the inscription, had translated 'Pāṇaṇ' as 'tailor' based on the popular usage documented from the Vijayanagara period onwards as we will discuss later.<sup>45</sup> Hultzsch had missed the significance of the title Cākkai in the names of the Pāṇars. He had also failed to notice their *per capita* share of the grant (one and a half share), which was the same as what Maraikkāṭṭuk Kaṇavati alias Tiruveḷḷaraic Cākkai, the singer, received for singing *tēci* songs. Also, it should be noted that elsewhere the inscription mentions that those who sang Sanskrit and Tamil songs also received one and a half shares each.<sup>46</sup> In contrast, tailors, who were mentioned elsewhere in the inscription, received only one share each.<sup>47</sup>

Next we find an inscription from the eleventh century CE from Koṭumpālūr in Putukkōṭṭai district, which mentions a Pāṇaṇ by the name Arumolītēvac Cākkai, who donated seven goats and some clarified butter to the Śiva temple so that temple lamps could be lit. Note that this Pāṇaṇ also had the title Cākkai.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> SII 2, No. 66, p. 303. Also see section 5.

<sup>46</sup> SII 2, No. 66, p. 275.

<sup>47</sup> SII 2, No. 66, p. 277.

<sup>48</sup> Palaniappan (2008: 5).

According to Moser (2011: 175–176), early literary and inscriptional references to Cākkai/Cākyār are available only from areas in the present state of Tamil Nadu; up to the twelfth century there is no evidence of performing Cākyārs in Kerala; and the Cākyārs might have spread to Kerala from Tamil Nadu in the eleventh century.<sup>49</sup> This suggests that some of the Tamil Pāṇars with the title Cākkai might have moved to Kerala in the eleventh century.<sup>50</sup> According to Iyer ([1912] 1969: 129) the Cākyārs are a subset of a number of temple service castes known as *ambalavāsis*. They perform the *upanayana* ceremony for their boys and are allowed to recite the Gāyatrīmantra ten times. Given the high status of Kerala's Cākyārs, persons who performed Sanskrit dramas in Brahmanical temples in Tamil Nadu in the eleventh century CE could not have been considered untouchables. Clearly, the Tamil Pāṇars were not untouchables.

### 3.2. THE PĀṆARS AS TEMPLE SINGERS AND TEACHERS OF MUSIC TO TEMPLE WOMEN

There is an important inscription in the Mahāliṅgasvāmi temple in Tiruviṭaimarutūr in Tanjore district. This inscription was issued in the ninth year of Kulottuṅga II Cōla in the twelfth century CE. It should be noted that this was inscribed during the reign of the same king for whom the *Periyapurāṇam* is believed to have been composed! The translation of the relevant parts of the inscription is given below.<sup>51</sup>

*tribhuvanacakravattikaḷ śrikulottuṅkacōladēvaṛku yāṅṅu 9 āvatu mutal  
kāṇi perrapaṭikkū pāṇan irumuṭi cōlan pirānāṇa acañcalapperayanukku  
uyyakkkoṅṭār vaḷanāṅṅu tiraimūrnāṅṅu uṭaiyār tiruviṭaimartuṭaiyārku  
pāṭavum ikkoyilil taḷiyillār<sup>52</sup> tevaraṭiyārai pāṭṭuvikkavum pāṇarai*

<sup>49</sup> Moser (2011: 177) also mentions a legend, which “tells of the first Cākyār actor, who came from Tamil Nadu to Kerala as part of the retinue of a Perumal king and who introduced their theatre tradition to the local stage.”

<sup>50</sup> According to Dr. Gopal Venu, a scholar of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, even as late as 300 years ago, ‘Cākyār’ was only a title and did not refer to a caste (personal communication on January 10, 2011 at his residence in Irinjalakuda, Kerala).

<sup>51</sup> The transliterated text is based on the published text of the inscription.

<sup>52</sup> *taḷiyillār* is error for *taḷiyilār*.

*iṭakkaṭavanāka ivanukkum ivan vaṅṣattār̥kum ikkoyil pāṇaperāka<sup>53</sup> munṇu perruvarum kācum nellum ul̥paṭa yāṅṭu onṇatāvatu mutal nāl onṇukku ūrkkālāl nel kalamāka vanta nellu ikkoyilil palapaṇi nivantakkāraṭuṅ kūṭa nivantaṅ kaṭṭi innellukku veṅṭum nilam munnuṭaiyārai tavirttu ittevar tevatānamāna ūrkalile pāṇakāṇiyum nilajivitamumāka aṭaittu munṇu pāṇar kuṭiyiruppāna maṇaiyum ivanukku viṭṭu ipṇaṭikku kalveṭṭi koḷvatāka onṇatāvatu mutal prasādam perramaikku prasātaṅ cetaṇuḷina tirumukam malaiyappirāyarum tirumantira olai putukkuṭaiyārum eluṭtiṭṭa tirumukappaṭiyum [...] ivai koyirkaṇakku kuṅṭaiyūrkiḷava neluṭtu ipṇaṭikku ivai tevarkanmi tirucciṇṇampalapaṭṭa neluṭtu ipṇaṭikku ivai śrīkāriyam mulaṅkuṭaiyā neluṭtu ipṇaṭikku ivai śrīmāheśvara kaṅkāṇi tiruvāti anṇaṇkaraci neluṭtu* (SII 5, No. 705, lines 5–14, pp. 295–296)

In the ninth year of the rule of Tribhuvanacakravarti Śrīkulottuṅka-  
coḷadeva, in the manner of the *kāṇi* received earlier, it is established  
that the Pāṇaṅ Irumuṭi Cōlan Pirāṅ alias Acañcalap Perayaṅ will assign  
Pāṇars to sing to the Lord of Tiruviṭaimarutūr in Tiraimūr Nāṭu in  
Uyyakkoṅṭār Vaḷanāṭu and train the *taḷiyilār* and *tēvaraṭiyār* in the  
temple to sing. (For doing this), an endowment of gold and paddy is  
established for him and his descendants as the *pāṇpēru* which has been  
received earlier (at the rate of) one *kalam* per day using the measure  
of the village in agreement with the endowees for many services. This  
is done by removing from the land for producing this paddy those in  
possession earlier and assigning as *pāṅkāṇi* and land for livelihood in  
the devadāna villages, and assigning to him the house, where earlier  
Pāṇars resided, as per the receipt of the gift received from the ninth  
year through the royal order signed by Malaiyappirāyar and Tirumantira  
Ōlai Putukkuṭaiyār and will be inscribed on stone (...) signed by the  
temple accountant Kuṅṭaiyūrkiḷavaṅ, *tēvarkanmi* Tirucciṇṇampalapaṭṭaṅ,  
temple manager Mūlaṅkuṭaiyāṅ, and the supervisor of Māheśvaras,  
Tiruvāti Anṇaṇkaracu.

<sup>53</sup> The editors of the inscription have interpreted the form பாணபெருக in the inscription as *pāṇaperāka* not realizing that it is better grammatically to take it as *pāṇpēra*. The same is true for *pāṇakāṇiyum* occurring late in the inscription, which is taken by me as *pāṅkāṇiyum*. As shown in the transliterated text, the inscription has *n* instead of *ṅ* in many instances, which have been corrected in the translation. For instance *irumuṭi cōlan pirāṅāna acañcalapperayan* is corrected to Irumuṭi Cōlan Pirāṅ alias Acañcalap Perayaṅ, *kuṅṭaiyūrkiḷavan* to Kuṅṭaiyūrkiḷavaṅ, *tirucciṇṇampalapaṭṭaṅ* to Tirucciṇṇampalapaṭṭaṅ, *mulaṅkuṭaiyāṅ* to Mūlaṅkuṭaiyāṅ, and *anṇaṇkarac(u)* to Anṇaṇkaracu.

This inscription shows that the Pāṇars sang in front of the deity in a Brahmanical Śiva temple, they trained the temple dancers, and they were given gold, paddy, as well as a house as an endowment for these services. It is also important to see the role of royal Bhakti in the appointment of the Pāṇan to sing before the deity. Obviously, the Pāṇars were of high status at this time and they participated in the expression of the royal Bhakti.

### 3.3. THE PĀṆARS' INTERACTION WITH MEDIEVAL TAMIL KINGS

The Pāṇar's high social status is also inferred by some inscriptions in non-devotional contexts. The eulogy (*meykkīrtti*) of a circa 1135 CE inscription of Kulottuṅga II Cōla in Tirumalāpāṭi in Ariyalur District states that under his rule great scholars, rare poets, the Pāṇars of good music, actors, and instrumentalists were relieved of the suffering of having to go from country to country as supplicants and they became famous as philanthropists:

(...) *perumpulavaru maruṅkaviṅṅaru nāppuru nallicaip pāṇarum koṭiyavaruṅ kuyilavaru nāṭunāṭu cenr' iravalarā yiṭumpai niṅkiṭ puravalarāyṭ pukaḷ paṭaiṭṭa* (...) (SII 5, No. 645, lines 14–16)<sup>54</sup>

(...) As the great scholars, rare poets, Pāṇars, who make good music that arises from the strings (of the lute), actors, and instrumentalists are relieved of their suffering that arises from having to go from country to country as supplicants and establish fame as liberal persons (...)

This inscription is cited by Auvai Cu. Turaicāmi Piḷḷai in his commentary on *Patirruppattu* 43.19–20 to highlight the tradition of royal patronage of the Pāṇars and other artists continuing from the period of Classical Tamil poetry to the twelfth century CE. Clearly, as corroborated by the Tiruviṭaimarutūr inscription we discussed earlier, the king valued and supported the Pāṇars as he did the poets and scholars. This was the same king under whom Cēkkiḷār served as a minister and authored the *Periyapurāṇam* in which Cēkkiḷār portrayed the Pāṇars as untouchables!

<sup>54</sup> In order to fit the spirit of the inscription, the sandhi in *iravalarā yiṭumpai* has to be split as *iravalarāya iṭumpai*. For instance, Rajam (1992: 73) explains *vayanḱiṭṭu* < *vayanḱa* + *iṭṭu* in *Kalittokai* 55.2.

According to an inscription of 1209–1210 CE in Cēraṇūr near Tirumayam, when Kulottuṅga II Cōḷa defeated the Pāṇḍya king, the Cōḷa king gave to the Pāṇaṇ, who sang of his valour, the title of Pāṇṭiyaṇ (Pāṇḍya).<sup>55</sup> He also decreed that the erstwhile Pāṇḍya king would no longer be called Pāṇṭiyaṇ.<sup>56</sup>

According to an inscription of circa 1236 CE in Tirunelvēli, when Māravarmaṇ Cuntarapāṇṭiyaṇ, the Pāṇḍya king, defeated the Cōḷa king, the Pāṇḍya king gave the Cōḷa crown to a Pāṇaṇ in retaliation.<sup>57</sup> As we know, giving gifts of gold obtained from the defeated king to Tamil Pāṇars was an ancient Tamil custom and is part of the Puṛam genre.<sup>58</sup> The same custom seems to have been followed by the Tamil kings as late as the beginning of the thirteenth century as shown by the Tirunelvēli inscription discussed above.

A thirteenth-century inscription in Aṇṇūr in Avināci in Coimbatore District mentions the name of a person, who played drums and had the *naṭṭuvark kāṇi* or grant for teaching dance in the temple. The name of the person is Cōḷaṇ Vaṭukaṇāṇa Iṭaṅkaiyār Pāṇanitta[...].<sup>59</sup> Although the name is incomplete, *nitta*, the second half of the name, was most probably the beginning of a name like *nittaviṭaṅkan*<sup>60</sup> or *nittappēraiyan*,<sup>61</sup> in which *nitta* meant *ṛtta*.<sup>62</sup> What is interesting about the first part *pāṇa* is that, in combination with the *naṭṭuvark kāṇi*, it suggests that the Pāṇars were also engaged in playing drums and teaching dance associated with a temple. It should be noted that in the Tiruvāṇṭuṭurai inscription mentioned earlier the grant given to Kumaraṇ Śrīkaṇṭaṇ for performing *āriyakkūttu* (Sanskrit drama) was called *nittapōkam/nirttapōkam* (Sanskrit *ṛttabhoga*) meaning ‘the enjoyment by performers of dance.’ indicating that dance and drama were considered to be

<sup>55</sup> IPS 2, No. 163, p. 143.

<sup>56</sup> Based on some verses in the anthology called the *Peruntokai*, Cētuppiḷḷai ([1947] 2007: 66–67) discusses the friendship between this Pāṇaṇ and the Bāṇa chieftain, who assisted Kulottuṅga II in his war effort.

<sup>57</sup> SII 5, No. 431, p. 155. See IPS 2, No. 256, p. 228, n. 27, for considering it as a retaliatory act.

<sup>58</sup> *Puranāṇūru* 126.1–2

<sup>59</sup> *kōyamuttūr māvaṭṭak kalveṭṭukal*, vol. 1, No. 829/2003, line 3.

<sup>60</sup> SII 5, No. 579, line 42.

<sup>61</sup> ARE 1907, No. 264.

<sup>62</sup> *Paripāṭal* 12.43.

the same in popular usage. The fact that the Pāṇaṇ of the Aṅṅūr inscription was a dance teacher adds more weight to our interpretation of the Pāṇars mentioned in Tanjore inscription as being performers of Sanskrit drama.

### 3.4. MEDIEVAL CASTE HIERARCHY AND THE PĀṆARS

The inscriptions discussed so far show that the Pāṇars were engaged in music and dance and enjoyed a relatively high social status in real life notwithstanding their portrayal by hagiographers. However, Leslie Orr (2000: 237) says:

On the one hand, we find in a thirteenth-century record (SII 7.118) from North Arcot district a list of communities swearing loyalty to their rule: *pāṇar* are grouped with low-status groups like *paraiyar*, *vēṭar* (hunters), and *iruḷar* (tribals) at the end of the list (*uvaccar*, interestingly, are listed toward the beginning, together with shepherds [*maṅṛāṭikalum*] and *śivabrāhmaṇas*). On the other hand, in the same period—but much to the south, in Madurai district—we find an inscription (ARE 476 of 1963) that confirms the land rights (*kārāṇmai*) of a *pāṇaṇ* who is mentioned by name, which suggests a relatively high social and economic standing for this individual.

The problem with the thirteenth-century inscription from North Arcot district mentioned by Orr is that it does not present the castes either in descending order or ascending order in terms of the traditional social hierarchy of the times. For instance, the Kaikkōḷar are listed ahead of the Śivabrāhmaṇas in contradiction to the traditional caste hierarchy. Unless a person's or group's status is explicitly mentioned as low, one cannot infer hierarchical social status from the juxtaposition of caste names. In this case, the juxtaposition of the Pāṇars and Paraiyars was probably based on alliteration.

What is really interesting is that the inscription from Tiruvātavūr in Madurai district mentioned by Orr refers to a royal order issued by the Pāṇḍya king granting the village Cīrukuḷam in Kaḷavaḷi Nāṭu as a *devadāna* (endowment to a temple) to god Tirumaṇai Nāyaṇār and stipulating that the *kārāṇmai* (right of cultivation) continue to rest with one Pāṇaṇ Aiyānāyaṇ.<sup>63</sup> Here again the relatively high social standing of the Pāṇaṇ was royally

<sup>63</sup> ARE 1962–1963, No. 476.

recognized. Indeed one can see from an inscription from Singavaram (Ciṅkavaram) near Gingee (Ceñci) in northern Tamil Nadu that the social status of the Pāṇars did not fall even in the fifteenth century, as will be discussed later.

#### 4. SECULAR TEXTS BEFORE THE VIJAYANAGARA RULE

While hagiographies present the Pāṇars as low caste, it will be interesting to see how secular texts after the *Tirukkōvaiyār* portray the Pāṇar. The *Arumṇatavurai*, the commentary of the *Cilappatikāram* glosses Pāṇar as tailors.<sup>64</sup> The Pāṇars are also identified as *pāṇcāti* in the *Arumṇatavurai*.<sup>65</sup> However, in the absence of any signifier of hierarchy, it is not clear if, by ‘*cāti*,’ the commentator meant what we understand today as caste, i.e., endogamous, hierarchically-related to other social groups, and often identified with one occupation. It should be noted that the term *cāti* was also used as a term referring to any category even by the later commentator Aṭṭiyārkkunallār, who refers to many types of flowers as ‘*pūkkalīn cātippanmai*’ (the multitude of category of flowers), the Potiyil and Himalaya mountains as belonging to a single *cāti* (category) of mountain, and *erumai* (water buffalo) as *cātippeyar* (name of a category).<sup>66</sup>

The *Kaliṅkattupparaṇi*, an eleventh-century text praising the Cōla victory over the Kaliṅga kingdom, mentions that the Pāṇars sang in the court of Kulottuṅga his own compositions. The Cōla king gave them gifts such as *kālam*, a wind instrument, and elephants.<sup>67</sup> He also discussed some faults in their singing.

<sup>64</sup> See the commentary for *Cilappatikāram* 5.32. The tailor’s job involves touching people to take measurements. They could not have been untouchables. The *Arumṇatavurai* cannot be precisely dated. Aruṇācalam (1971: 81–84) dates it to the eleventh century on the occurrence of the term *arccanāpōkam*, which is very questionable. The *Arumṇatavurai* cites the *Purapporuḷ Venpāmālai* (ninth century CE) and is cited by Aṭṭiyārkkunallār. Since Aṭṭiyārkkunallār is dated by Zvelebil (1975: 114) between the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries CE, the date of *Arumṇatavurai* could be between the ninth and the twelfth centuries CE.

<sup>65</sup> *Cilappatikāram*, p. 134.

<sup>66</sup> See respectively *Cilappatikāram*, pp. 49, 152, 325.

<sup>67</sup> *Kaliṅkattupparaṇi* 325.

The *Tañcaivāṇaṇ Kōvai* of the thirteenth century CE had the heroine addressing the Pāṇaṇ in a verse of Marutam genre as a calf-eater.<sup>68</sup> But, as mentioned earlier, Nacciṇārkkīṇiyar, the commentator of the fourteenth century, being aware of the later meaning of *pulaiyaṇ*, interpreted the use of *pulaiyaṇ* in the ancient poem *Kalittokai* 68.19 as referring to a Pāṇaṇ and explained it as *ceṇar col* (word of anger) implying that the Pāṇaṇ in the poem was not a base person in reality, since *pulaiyaṇ* meant an untouchable in the fourteenth century CE. Nacciṇārkkīṇiyar seems not to have been influenced by Cēkkiḷār.

### 5. THE PĀṆARS IN THE VIJAYANAGARA PERIOD

Tamil Nadu came under Vijayanagara rule in the fourteenth century. The ruling ideology was based on a pan-Indic Sanskritic viewpoint. In this period, both in literature and inscriptions, the Pāṇars ceased to be mentioned as musicians. On the other hand, literary works such as the *Kōyil Tiruvakaval* by Paṭṭiṇattār<sup>69</sup> of the fourteenth century CE associate the Pāṇars with tailoring.

There are no known inscriptions of the Pāṇars in this period except for the one in the Ādivarāhaperumāl temple in Singavaram in Gingee taluk in former South Arcot District. In the reign of Pratāpa Dēvarāya in 1445 CE, we find in an inscription from this temple that a Pāṇar was assigned to be a *tiruviḷakkukkuṭi* serving the temple.<sup>70</sup> This is a very unusual inscription. The term *tiruviḷakkukkuṭi* referred to a person who was assigned the job of maintaining the lamps in a temple and this job was usually assigned to shepherds or cowherds. Here, instead of the usual shepherd or cowherd, a Pāṇar, whom one would normally expect to be a singer by profession, was being assigned to be a maintainer of temple lamps. Clearly, this was not a job done by an untouchable. Thus the social conditions of the Pāṇars were obviously in flux as they seemed to have moved away from music and were taking up different occupations in different parts of the Tamil country in the fifteenth century. But by the time Bālarāmarman, the king of Travancore,

<sup>68</sup> *Tañcaivāṇaṇ Kōvai* 393.

<sup>69</sup> Cōmacuntaram (1992: 316).

<sup>70</sup> SII 17, No. 252.



wrote his Sanskrit work, *Bālarāma-Bharatam*, in the eighteenth century, the Pāṇars had come to be identified as tailors. This is because in his text *Bālarāmavarman* referred to Pāṇapattirar as a tailor.<sup>71</sup>

## 6. UNRELIABILITY OF HAGIOGRAPHY AS SOCIAL HISTORY

As the inscriptional data during medieval times under the Pāṇḍya and Cōḷa kings show, the Pāṇars have performed Sanskrit dramas, trained temple dancers in singing, and sung inside Brahmanical temples in front of the deity. Both Cōḷa and Pāṇḍya kings honored individual Pāṇars after winning major victories in war in a manner similar to that during the Classical Tamil times. In spite of this, Cēkkiḷār had chosen to present the Pāṇar saints as untouchables with quintessential 'local' Bhakti.

Regarding the 'local' nature of the Pāṇar saints, the following statements by Dehejia (1988: 2) about hagiography in general is instructive:

One has to consider the gradual and cumulative process by which hagiography generally takes shape to realize the manner in which stories may and do develop. The hagiographer, writing centuries after the death of saints and faced with scanty material, often had to invent stories.

Also what Hardy (1983: 243) says in connection with Vaiṣṇava hagiographies is applicable to Śaiva hagiographies as well:

it would be quite mistaken to accept any hagiographical information in these works as *prima facie* evidence. When these works are studied critically, they can tell us how the Āḷvārs were regarded and interpreted by the Vaiṣṇavas in the centuries after Rāmānuja and can yield interesting information about Śrīvaiṣṇava history; but that is very different from providing a historical account of the lives of the Āḷvārs.

The evidence for changing hagiography is seen even in the writing of a twentieth century Tamil scholar who has researched the history of Tamil texts. For instance, writing about the story of Campantar requesting Nīlanakkar to give Nīlakaṅṅar a place to stay for the night, Arunachalam (1977: 26) says the following:

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<sup>71</sup> TAS 4, pts. 1 and 2, p. 109.

So, he called aside his host and requested him to give a suitable resting place for them for the night. Nilanakka [i.e. Nilanakkar] the host was rather piqued by the request of Sambandha [i.e. Campantar]. “Why should Sambandha make this special mention? Do I not know that all men of God are equal? What if one of them was a pana [i.e. Pāṇar]?” Such were naturally his thoughts.

As we had seen earlier, *Periyapurāṇam* 1857 does not mention these thoughts of Nilanakkar. This is clearly an invention of Arunachalam based on his twentieth century sensibilities.

Similar invention has been done by Cēkkiḷār. Before Cēkkiḷār, even Nampi Aṅṅār Nampi, who described Nantaṅār as having outcaste status, did not say anything negative about the caste status of Nilakaṅṅar.<sup>72</sup> It was Cēkkiḷār, who, for the first time, seems to have used the words of anger used by the heroine in the stock Marutam scenario of the *Tirukkōvaiyār* poem—which was not to be taken literally—to paint Nilakaṅṅar as an untouchable. Since Cēkkiḷār, as the minister of the king Kulottuṅga II Cōḷa must have known that the Pāṅars were royally recognized singers inside Brahmanical temples, why did he present the Pāṅars as untouchables? The only explanation could be that Cēkkiḷār wanted to explain the contemporary status of the Pāṅars as resulting from them being emancipated due to the Bhakti of persons like Nilakaṅṅar, the embodiment of the ‘local’. In other words, according to Cēkkiḷār, following the ideology of Bhakti resulted in the elimination of status differences among its adherents.

The story of Pāṅapattirar visiting the Cēra king exhibits a key difference between the *Periyapurāṇam* and TTP. Perhaps because he is not describing the bard in a temple context, Cēkkiḷār does not say anything about the social status of the bard. But, TTP presents Pāṅapattirar as stating that he is a person of low caste/lineage, in spite of his being highly honored by the Cēra king. To this, the Cēra king is described as saying that there are no differences such as high one and low one among those who worship Śiva. In other words, according to TTP, there is no difference between the royal Bhakti and the ‘local’ Bhakti. It is obvious that the issue of caste/lineage of the bard is deliberately broached by the author of TTP

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<sup>72</sup> Ebeling (2010: 452).

in order to emphasize the resulting equality in status among the followers of Bhakti ideology.

This incident also corroborates the reason why the Pāṇars are portrayed as untouchables in the hagiographies. From its very adoption of the names meaning ‘ruler’ or ‘lord’ to signify all saints including untouchables, the Bhakti movement sought to equalize status differences among its followers, including the royals and locals. The story of Pūcalār exemplifies this.<sup>73</sup>

Among the Śaiva saints, there was a poor Brahmin saint called Pūcalār, who lived during the time of Rājasimha Pallava. He wanted to build a Śiva temple but had no money. So he built it mentally. At the same time, the Pallava king was building the famous Kailāsanātha temple. When Pūcalār and Rājasimha chose the same day as the day of consecration of their respective temples, Śiva told the king to postpone the consecration of the royal temple since he would be at the consecration of the temple of Pūcalār. This story illustrates the equivalence, if not the superiority, of the ‘local’ Bhakti to the royal Bhakti. However, Pūcalār was still a Brahmin, even if he was poor. The story of the Pāṇapattirar goes one step further by removing Brahminhood from such a comparison. As seen in the *Tirumukappācuram*, Śiva makes the equivalence of the ‘local’ Bhakti and royal Bhakti very explicit. TPP again reiterates the same.

Using the Pāṇar saints to highlight the efficacy of the Bhakti ideology has one advantage over using a saint like Nantaṇār. In the case of Nantaṇār, he was made to go through a fire and did not live in this world after emancipation. On the other hand in the case of Nīlakaṇṭar, the efficacy of his ‘local’ Bhakti was demonstrated by Śiva bringing him inside the temple in Madurai, giving him a golden plank to sit on, and opening a new entrance for him to enter the temple in Tiruvārūr. Nīlakaṇṭar could also stay in the home of a Vedic Brahmin. Similarly, in the case of Pāṇapattirar, Śiva’s interventions caused him to overcome poverty and challenges to his musical ability and live a long life on this earth. Thus in the case of the Pāṇar devotees in Śaivism, the Pāṇar saints could demonstrate the efficacy of their devotion in this world. From the viewpoint of promoting the ideology of Bhakti to a low caste person, the Pāṇars’ stories are more appealing than

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<sup>73</sup> *Periyapurāṇam* 4171–4188.

that of Nantaṅār. Regarding Nantaṅār's story, Ebeling (2010: 470) says the following:

Making sure that Nantaṅ's behaviour would not be interpreted as contesting the Chola social order, Cēkkiḷār took great care to contain it, to keep it within the limits of caste *dharmā*. Moreover, even though Nantaṅ was exemplary in his duty and devotion, he still had to be burned to achieve his goal. The significance of this fire ordeal should not be underestimated. It is, of course, at one level a familiar literary motif, well-known to a medieval South-Indian audience at least since Rāma's testing of Sītā's chastity in the *Rāmāyaṇa* story. But it is also an element that grounds Nantaṅ's story unambiguously in the realm of miracles, of impossibility. Those who desire to follow in Nantaṅār's [*sic*] footsteps would have to face the same ordeal, an ordeal that entails—beyond all literary symbolism—the burning of a human being. The fire ritual is thus effectively geared towards scaring off imitators, in case any other *paraiyan*<sup>74</sup> should think that Nantaṅ's story was indeed repeatable.

While Nantaṅār's story might scare away potential recruits to Bhakti ideology, the story of Nīlakaṅṭar would not. After all, potential Bhakti adherents in the twelfth century could be presented with the story that the Pāṅars, who were once untouchables, were now respected members of the temple culture due to emancipation by Bhakti. Also as in the case of Nantaṅār, Nīlakaṅṭar is also presented as voluntarily following the societal rules by not entering the temples on his own. Thus Cēkkiḷār ensured that even in Nīlakaṅṭar's story, there was encouragement to the lower sections of the society to follow the Bhakti ideology but no encouragement to flout the social rules.

Cēkkiḷār's portrayal of the 'local' saints seems to have influenced the later hagiographical traditions among the Vaiṣṇavas regarding Tiruppāṅḷvār and Nampāṭuvāṅ, especially after the fourteenth century when the Pāṅars ceased to be actively involved in music-related activities coinciding with the advent of the Vijayanagara rule.<sup>75</sup> In doing this, the Vaiṣṇavas seemed to have forgotten the portrayal of the Pāṅaṅ in *Paripāṭal* 3.

<sup>74</sup> It should be noted that, contrary to what Ebeling has stated, Nantaṅār was a *pulaiyar* and not a *paraiyar* in the *Periyapurāṇam*.

<sup>75</sup> Tiruppāṅḷvār's reluctance to set foot on Śrīraṅgam is remarkably similar to Nantaṅār's reluctance to set foot on Chidambaram. Tiruppāṅḷvār's reluctance to enter Śrīraṅgam

This means that there is no evidence that the Tamil Pāṇars were ever untouchables in Tamil Nadu. The hagiographies' portrayal of the Pāṇars was simply an invention to highlight a fictitious 'local' nature in order to emphasize the efficacy of Bhakti.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The Pāṇars had been held in high esteem by the Tamil kings since the times of the Classical Tamil poetry through the thirteenth century. They were performers enjoying royal recognition and support. However, as part of the tradition of love poetry, in poems of Marutam genre, the heroine was often presented as scolding the Pāṇar in anger when he tried to persuade the heroine to allow the hero to come back home after he had been with the other woman. The angry outburst was just that and not reflective of reality. But, Cēkkiḷār has exploited the opening given by the Marutam poem in the *Tirukkōvaiyār* and ascribed untouchable status to the Pāṇars. Doing so allowed him to promote the Bhakti ideology to persons of lower social status in a less threatening way than the story of Nantaṇār. The Vaiṣṇava tradition seems to have followed the Śaiva tradition in this regard. Thus both traditions have presented the Pāṇar saints as untouchables, representing their devotion as the quintessential Bhakti of the 'local'. But in spite of the hagiographical tradition, the Tamil Pāṇars in Tamil Nadu have never been an untouchable community till today. Thus the reality is that the Pāṇars have never been as 'local' as the hagiographers had projected.

Most scholars of Tamil literature and history have not been aware of the Tamil Pāṇars living in Tamil Nadu even today. Most of them also have not been familiar with the information on the Pāṇars provided by Tamil inscriptions. Such scholars have taken the hagiographies as history, neglecting the ideological promotional objectives of such a textual genre. Even the few scholars who are familiar with the living Tamil Pāṇars have successfully bought into the notion that it was the Bhakti movement that uplifted the Pāṇars from their medieval low status. For instance, Poṇṇaiyā (1978: 151) includes the Pāṇars among those groups in southern Pāṇḍya country, who were converted to Śaivism from the time of Campantar, adopted Vellāla

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temple parallels Nilakaṇṭar's reluctance to enter temples in Madurai and Tiruvārūr.

cultural elements, and became Veḷḷāḷas with the caste title ‘Piḷḷai’. An integrated use of literature, epigraphic information, and temple architecture information helps to bring a more accurate historical understanding of the ‘royal’ and ‘local’ in the Bhakti movement.

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#### ABBREVIATIONS

AKPP	<i>Ārāyirappaṭi Kuruparamparāprapāvam</i>
ARE	<i>Annual Reports on Indian Epigraphy</i>
EI	<i>Epigraphia Indica</i>
IPS	<i>Inscriptions in the Pudukkottai State</i>
SII	<i>South Indian Inscriptions</i>
TAS	<i>Travancore Archaeological Series</i>
TTP	<i>Tiruvālavāyūṭaiyār Tiruvilaiyāṭarpurāṇam</i>

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