

Preface to *spoken* Tamil
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ABSTRACT

This paper is a contribution to an anthropology of aurality in Tamil Nādu. Using a sociolinguistic approach to performance, I shall argue that contemporary low caste performers in Tamil Nādu are part of a discursive tradition that dates back to Caṅkam times in order to show how this tradition, the dialogue between the art of writing and the practice of speech, is actually a feeling in Tamil that affects the concept of locality in Tamil. This feeling, or *spoken* Tamil, is a kind of aural competence. In performance, it is a way of speaking with writing in mind. In writing, it is that sentiment which demonstrates a kind of ethnographic authority. Caṅkam literature, Bhakti devotion, Tamil nationalism--indeed, the practice of *spoken* Tamil has been, and continues to be, a mode of organizing people in light of the state. Then and now, *spoken* Tamil has never been about how people really speak. Rather, it has always been a way of producing citizens by manufacturing aural competence.

KEYWORDS

locality, aurality, writing

THE PROBLEM OF LOCALITY



When Makālinkam's *Degeneracies* first appeared in 1998, the questions it affected were concerned, not so much with what kind of novel it was; but rather with the confusion between the representation of space and the practice of locality: the front cover consists of a photograph describing tightly knit rows of young, and in phenotype West African, men standing. The faces of the young men in the first five rows are clearly visible. After this, the heads begin to blur. From what we can see, each young man is without clothes and standing with a wooden staff of about six to seven feet tall. Each staff appears to be distinctly crafted and tipped with orbicular arrangements. The heads and faces of these young men are shaven clean. Judging by the title and the angle of the light reflecting on that part of their faces which reaches upward from the right eyebrow to the natural line of the hair, we may infer that the sun is setting.

“The world that is revealed in the Nigerian novel *Degeneracies*,” remarks Kalam publishers on the back cover, “may also be reminiscent to a

great extent of Indian life and Tamil life. This novel's mode of representing our tradition, beliefs, customs and habits, wealth of oral literature, and desire for independence may stimulate the interest of Tamil readers.” In the preface to *Degeneracies*, Cuntara Rāmacāmi concurs that the many cultural and political problems of Africa may be compared with those of India and Tamil Nādu. For example, the postcolonial literature in Africa and India share similar themes in the way they discuss a moral decay of society during and after colonization. “When we assemble African life by way of the essence that lies in their rational creations,” asserts Rāmacāmi, “making comparisons with that might be of some use to us in understanding the critical times that are in our lives” (Āccipi 1998:10).

Our lives is a martial art. Though a coward, a musician, and a debtor, the wily Unoka is forever defending himself against the aggressions of his community. While relaxing at home playing a flute, his neighbor pays him a visit. Okoye is also a musician, though not a coward and not in debt. Today Okoye has come to collect on a loan he made to Unoka. Nevertheless, tradition commences. Greetings are exchanged, Okoye unrolls his goatskin and sits, Unoka retreats further into his dwelling, and after a moment, the advance:

‘என்னிடம் கோலாப்பாக்கு இருக்குது’ என்று கூறிக்கொண்டு
விருந்தாளியிடம் தட்டை நகர்த்தித் தானும் அமர்ந்தான்.

‘உனக்கு நன்றி. கோலா கொண்டு வருபவன் வாழ்வைக் கொண்டுவருவான். நீ தான் அதை உடைக்க வேண்டும்’ என்று பதிலளித்து ஓக்கொயெ தட்டைத் திருப்பிக் கொடுத்தான்.

‘இல்லை, இது உனக்குத்தான் உரியது’ என்று உனோக்கா கோலப்பாக்கை உடைக்கும் கௌரவத்தை எடுத்துக் கொள்ளும்வரை இருவரும் சில நேரம் வாதித்தார்கள். ஓக்கொயெ இந்த நேரம் ஒரு கட்டிச்சுண்ணாம்பை எடுத்து நிலத்தில் சில கோடுகளைக் கீறினான். பின்னர் தனது கால் பெருவிரலையும் தீட்டினான் (19).

[“I have a *kōlā pākku*”, he said and sat down, passing, of course, the plate to his guest.

Okoye returned the plate answering, “Thank you. The one who brings *kōlā* brings life. Surely you should break that.”

“No, indeed this is fitting for you.” The two of them argued for some time until Unoka took the honor of breaking the *kōlā pākku*. During this time, Okoye took a lump of *cunṇāmpu* and etched some lines on the ground. Afterwards, he smeared his big toe.]

The practices surrounding *kōlā pākku* emerge in Tamil as practices in self-defense. The *kōlā pākku* technique refers to the practices of being a coward, a musician, a debtor—the practice of being Unoka. It also refers to virile men, tone deaf culture, and money lenders as a threat to, or the conditions for the possibility of, Unoka. The honor of breaking the *kōlā pākku* is the honor of knowledge, knowledge that clarifies the relationship between Unoka and Okoye. Okoye plays the role of the supplicant, smears his big toe and asks for the money owed to him. Unoka plays the role of the superior, laughs and enunciates:

‘அந்தச் சுவரைப் பார்.’ செம்மண் பூசப்பட்ட தன் குடிசையின் தூர இருந்த சுவரைக் காட்டிச் சொன்னான். ‘அதோ தெரியும் சுண்ணாம்புக் கோடுகளைப் பார்.’... ‘அங்கே இருக்கும் ஒவ்வொரு கோடும் ஒரு நூறு கவரிக்குச் சமன். அங்கே பார். அங்கு ஒரு ஆயிரம் கவரி கடன் கொடுக்க வேணும். ஆனால் அந்த மனிசன் அதற்காக காலையில் வந்து என்னை எழுப்பவில்லை. நான் உனக்குத் தருவேன். இன்றைக்கல்ல. எங்களுடைய பெரியவர்கள் சொல்லி இருக்கிறார்கள், நின்று கொண்டிருப்பவர்களுக்குப் பின்னால் முழங்காலில் இருப்பவர்களுக்கு, பிந்தித்தான் சூரிய ஒளி விழும் என்று.’ பெரிய கடனை முதலில் கொடுக்கப் போவதைப் போல இன்னும் ஒரு மூக்குத் தூளை எடுத்தான். ஓக்கொயெ தனது ஆட்டுத் தோலைச் சுருட்டிக்கொண்டு திரும்பிப் போய்விட்டான் (20).

[“Look at that door,” he said while pointing out the door that was on the far end of his house that had been smeared with red earth. “Look at those visible lines of *cunṇāmpu*...Each line that is there is equivalent to one hundred cowry. Look there. There, I have to give a thousand cowries. But that man did not come waking me up in the morning for that. I will give it

to you. Not today. Our elders have said ‘the sun shines late for those that are on their knee behind those that are standing.’ And then as if he was going first to give the big loans, Unoka took a whiff of snuff. Okoye folded his goat skin and left.]

A debtor’s *kōlā pākku* technique succeeds in fending off, yet one more time, payment owed for a debt.

In *Degeneracies*, the martial arts are reinforced by grammar. The consistency of deictic constructions such as pronouns, case suffixes, and demonstratives indicate structures of social relating within which manipulations may occur. In the earlier passages citing the conversation between Unoka and Okoye, the conjugation of the copulate ‘have’ in ‘I have a *kōlā pākku*’ plays a dual role. First, it serves its grammatical purpose as a copulate. Second, ‘have’ is aural: ‘*irukku*’ (a copulate which, in this case, literally means ‘exist’, or ‘being’--‘the *kōlā pākku* exists to me’) isn’t so much a codification of the oral form of the literary *irukkīratu*, as it is a reference to how people say *irukkīratu*. In other words, when we write *irukku*, we are creating a feel for a conversation. The pronoun ‘you’ presented here is in the familiar form of ‘you’ [un]. Thus, Makālīnkam makes Unoka and Okoye out to be familiar friends. This familiarity highlights the breaking of the *kōlā pākku* as a ritual. Of course, Unoka passes the *kōlā pākku* to Okoye. Of course, Okoye passes it back. Of course, the two argue. These competing paradigms—the formality surrounding the *kōlā pākku* and the familiarity of two friends—allow the reader to appreciate the wit of Unoka and his ability to use the formality of *kōlā pākku* to avoid paying his defaulted loan.

The organization of demonstratives anticipate a Tamil locality, putting into perspective for us a whole set of categories, including habits, speech patterns, mores, that mediate the space of the characters. The use of ‘this’ and ‘that’ in the above passages are used to refer to *kōlā pākku* and the sources of Unoka’s debt. By positioning both referents as formalities, Unoka’s ascendancy is inevitable. Okoye’s deference in the *kōlā pākku* ritual is extended to his submission concerning his loan.

Of course, *kōlā pākku* is reminiscent of the ubiquity of paan in *our lives*. Having carefully glazed the betel leaf with *cunṇāmpu*, one’s favorite *pākku* is sprinkled, and the leaf is wrapped to become paan. *Cunṇāmpu* transforms paan, providing a spicy taste and turning the mouth red. Language about Africa allows us to see our way through India. For Rāmacāmi, the space created in *Degeneracies* refers to *our lives* as a sign of Tamil life.

‘சிதைவுகள்’ தமிழுக்கு வரும்போது, அதன் கதாபாத்திரங்கள் தம் வாழ்க்கையில் தழுவி நின்ற பண்டைய வாழ்க்கை முறைபோல் மற்றொரு பண்டைய வாழ்க்கை முறை சார்ந்த வாசகர்களிடம் வந்து சேர்கிறார்கள். மொழிபெயர்ப்பாளரின் திறனால் இந்த உறவு அக்கதாபாத்திரங்களுக்கு வெகு இதமாகக் கூடியிருக்கிறது. தமிழ் அலட்டிக்கொள்ளாமல் அம்மக்களுக்குரிய வாழ்வை வாங்கிக்கொள்வதையும் இம்மொழிபெயர்ப்பு மூலம் நாம் உணர முடியும். ‘சிதைவுகளைப் படிக்கும் தமிழ் வாசகன் தமிழ் வாழ்வுடனும் இந்திய வாழ்வுடனும் அது கொண்டிருக்கும் ஒற்றுமையை

உணராமல் இருக்க முடியாது. அவர்களுடைய நம்பிக்கைகளும், பழக்க வழக்கங்களும், சம்பிரதாயங்களும் நம் வாழ்வோடு நெருங்கி வருகின்றன. மேற்கத்திய வாழ்வின் அந்நியத்தன்மையை மொழிபெயர்ப்புகளில் கண்டு சலித்தவர்களுக்கு இத்தமிழாக்கம் நெருக்கமான அனுபவத்தைத் தரக்கூடியதாக இருக்கும் (Āccipi 1998:12).

[When *Degeneracies* comes to Tamil, like the former ways of life that have been embraced in their life, those characters will come and join the readers that are familiar with another former way of life. Through the skill of the translator, this relationship may be very enjoyable for such characters. Through this translation, we are able to feel the eliminating of the livelihood befitting those people without teasing Tamil. The Tamil reader that reads *Degeneracies* will be unable to not feel the unity that looks like Indian life and Tamil life. Their beliefs, customs and habits, and traditions approximate our lives. This Tamil translation may provide an intimate experience to those that have grown disgusted looking at translations of the foreignness of western lifestyles.]

In this way, the postcolonial is identical with locality. Amidst traditional techniques, between traditional and colonial practices lie the dissonance that refers to our memory of “the former ways of life.” Inconvenience defines locality by referring to practices of inconvenience, or the Third World novel, as instances of postcolonial memory.

Degeneracies becomes a device in which we store our dissonance. In storage, our folkways, religions, philosophies become interactive modes of limitation. Embedded in a paragraph on religious techniques will be links to numerous other paragraphs on the folk arts. For the user interested in sexuality, a passage on *kōlā pākku* techniques may point her to a passage concerned with wrestling practices. For another user interested in philosophy, the very same citation of *kōlā pākku* techniques might point her to another passage dealing with the concept of community. The martial arts refer to practices of defense as context-dependent formations while simultaneously projecting itself as a sign of the Third World.

It is not clear, though, how such a locality is compatible with lived spaces. In providing a global network of reference, the postcolonial locality disregards those very specific experiences that are attached to very specific spaces. The experience of imperialism in Tamil Nādu may differ from the experience of imperialism in Nigeria. Perhaps, suggests Civacēkaram in a review of *Degeneracies*, the decision by the Ibo to merge Ibo culture with that of the colonizers caused the degeneracy:

ஆபிரிக்காவில் வெள்ளையர் வருகையை யொட்டிய சமுதாய வாழ்க்கையின் சமூகவியல், பண்பாட்டுக் கூறுகளை நமது கிராமச் சூழலுடனோ நாமறிந்த மரபுடனோ வைத்து நோக்குவதில் ஆபத்துக்கள் உள்ளன. ஆபிரிக்காவின் பழங்குடுச் சமூக வாழ்க்கை முக்கியமாக இரண்டு வகையான புறத்தாக்கங்கட்கு உள்ளாயிற்று. ஒன்று இஸ்லாத்தினதும் ஆதி கிறிஸ்துவத்தினதும் வருகை. மற்றது, காலத்தாற் பிற்பட்ட, மேனாட்டுக்

கிறிஸ்துவத்துடன் கொலனிய ஆட்சிமுறையின் வருகை. நமது பழங்குடிச் சமூகம் அயலினின்று அடுத்தடுத்து வந்த பல மாற்றங்களை இருபது நூற்றாண்டுகள் முன்னமே உல்வாங்கத் தொடுங்கியது. அதை விட, சமஸ்கிருதப் பண்பாட்டில் அதைவிட வேறு அயற்கூறுகளும் உள்ளன. எனவே ‘சிதைவுகளை’ வழங்கும் கொலனிய காலத்துக் காட்சிகளை நமது சூழலின் அடிப்படையில் விளங்கிக்கொள்ளும் போது மிகுதியான எளிமைப்படுத்தலாலும் தவறுகள் ஏற்படலாம் (Civacēkaram 1999:48-49).

[There are dangers in attaching a cultural milieu, that civil society which is associated with the coming of White people in Africa, with customs and the village milieu that we know. Africa’s tribal societies have had two major external influences. First, the coming of original Christianity and Islam. Second, after that time, was the coming of the colonial way with Western Christianity. Before the twentieth century, our tribal societies of today began to succumb to many ongoing changes. Moreover, Sanskrit culture had penetrated sections of Tamil society on many different levels in many different ways. Compared with our village society, there are different foreign features. Therefore, when we make sense of the time of colonial rule that *Degeneracies* presents, mistakes may arise through excessive assumptions about our fundamental milieu.]

A South Asian’s understanding of the Black race, says Civacēkaram, comes from the segregation experienced during colonial rule. South Asians side with the plight of black skin due to their sense of the ways in which their society has succumbed to the value of skin color. Verily, in America, Europe, Australia, black skinned people are grouped like a ‘caste’ (Civacēkaram 1999). In other words, the problem with the category ‘postcolonial’ is that it confuses spaces with localities. In the postcolonial locality, the martial arts in Nigeria are anchored in generic techniques of self-defense that anticipate a homologous relationship with the practice of caste.

Degeneracies, concludes Civacēkaram, is a kind of frustration. For example, the word “cat” in Tamil usually refers to a house cat. In Africa, however, the word “cat” nearly always refers to tigers, lions, panthers, etc. Thus for an African, writing “the one who threw four hundred cats” is the equivalent of “the one who defeated four hundred strong, agile men.” However, reading “the one who threw four hundred cats” in Tamil sounds somewhat silly. The English word “spoil” primarily has the meaning of “overripe” as in “the plantains are spoiled”; or “ruined” as in “due to the rain, my plans are ruined.” Of course, “spoil” may refer to that compulsion of showing excessive affection as is often the case with parents to their children: “you’re going to spoil that little boy.” In *Degeneracies*, the word “spoil” is never used to convey the concept of ruin. Because relationships between spaces and localities are dubious, meanings wane, unable to defend themselves against the reader: to wit; Makālinkam’s *Degeneracies* is always trying to be a text while never quite passing as a book—even the translation of the title as *Degeneracies* mutates the fundamental enterprise embedded in the original title of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.

PRACTICING LOCALITY

Arjun Appadurai (1995) also makes a clear distinction between locality and space, or what he refers to as neighborhood. For Appadurai, locality is a relational phenomenon, a mobilization of “the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity and the relativity of contexts.” A neighborhood, by contrast, is the “actually existing social forms in which locality...is realized” (Appadurai 1995:208). Local subjects take shape through the civilizing mission of the nation state. Locality, then, mediates neighborhoods in order to reinforce that sense of civil society that motivates nations.

Clearly, the practices of locality in Nigeria differ from those in Tamil Nādu. However, the techniques rendered in the civilizing project renders them identical and in prose, neighborhoods lose their distinction. To this, the question underlying Civacēkaram’s critique of *Degeneracies* still stands: is it possible for a neighborhood in Tamil Nādu to reflect reflect upon and represent a neighborhood in Nigeria without absolving their distinctions? Though this discussion does not attempt to resolve this issue surrounding inter-neighborhood representation, it seeks to approach the issue with reference to the role that the feel for speech in Tamil has on the practice of locality in Tamil Nādu: to wit, what it is about the banal in Tamil that makes it civil?

There is a burden in Civacēkaram’s critique of *Degeneracies* that refers to feel for Tamil. That sense of locality to which Civacēkaram appeals is a dialogue between the art of writing and the practice of speech. This feeling, or *spoken* Tamil, is a form of aural competence. In performance, it is a way of speaking with writing in mind. In writing, it is that sentiment which demonstrates a kind of ethnographic authority. As *spoken* Tamil is concerned less with contrasting orality and literacy and more with manipulating the difference between neighborhoods and locality, Civacēkaram’s critique of *Degeneracies* assumes a praxis of manipulation in Tamil. Caṅkam literature, bhakti devotion, Tamil nationalism--indeed, the practice of *spoken* Tamil has been, and continues to be, a mode of organizing people in light of the state. Then and now, *spoken* Tamil has never been about how people really speak. Rather, it has always been a way of producing citizens by manufacturing aural competence.

MOTILITY: THE ESSENCE OF LOCALITY

Bernard Bate’s work on political speech in Tamil is one of the more recent discussions of the nature of language, citizenship and power in contemporary Tamil Nādu (Bate 2009). Bate presents a figure of heteroglossia in Tamil in order to present an outline of the context of democratic practice in Tamil Nādu. “The difference between *cemmai* [high] and *kochai* [low]... constitutes a phenomenological distinction of people, of epochs, of national space, and social processes within a massively heteroglossic situation” (Bates 2009:17). This difference, argues Bate, is a product of Dravidianist and nationalist politics.

But when George Hart (1975) notes that most of the classical poems that comprise Caṅkam literature are rooted in a low-status bardic tradition, clearly the difference between “high” and “low” registers in Tamil were tools of prosody in classical South India. Many older

texts, such as Kampan's Rāmāyaṇa, contain interpolations that are clearly banal (Hart and Heifetz 1999:xxiii).

The 16th century Arwi text of Vaṅṅapparimalappulavar, *Āyira Macalā*, or [*The Book*] of *One Thousand Questions*, was written, according to Shu'ayb 'Ālim, with "all the basic forms of the finest spoken and grammatical Tamil" (Ālim 1993:89). Because writing Tamil in the Arabic script was also an effort by Muslims in Tamil Nādu to look like proper Muslims, manipulating the difference between high and low registers in Tamil was at once an act of propriety and at the same time a way of creating a context for Islam in Tamil Nādu (Ricci 2011).

And of course, manipulating the difference between high and low registers was the tool missionaries used to spread Christianity in South India. Cupratīk Kavirāyar wrote a piece in the early half of the eighteenth century entitled "Viṛali Viṭu Tūtu" (Pillai 1990:983). The piece was so raunchy, especially his explicit descriptions of sex, that performing it was banned by the government. This very same blind, vulgar, kinky old man taught Tamil to the famous Jesuit Constantine Joseph Beschi. Beschi's grammars distinguishing high Tamil (*centamiḷ*) and low Tamil (*koṭuntamiḷ*) remains an influential analytic in understanding the Tamil language (Beschi 1917 and 1971; Britto 1986; Schiffman 1974). His *Tēmpāvaṇi* (1960) is as much a theory of high Tamil as is it a story about the life of St. John.

Somewhere amidst the difference between high and low registers in Tamil lies context--the essence of Bate's argument is certainly profound. However, the difference that Bate speaks of is as old as Tamil itself. Moreover, I argue that producing this difference in Tamil is a distinctive feature of a low-status writing tradition that reinforces contemporary Dravidian politics as much as it did the figure of kingship in classical times.

George Hart (1975) has argued that the manipulation of difference in Tamil is related to low status and their patterns of movement in Tamil Nādu:

The Tamil poems were composed by a class of men called *pulavaṅ*, who included in their ranks Brahmans (perhaps ten percent), kings, the highest non Brahman castes, and a few women. There is some evidence that men of low birth could not be a *pulavaṅ*, but the poems of the *pulavaṅ* were often composed in imitation of songs sung by Pāṇaṅs, Kiṇaiyaṅs (also called Paraiyaṅs), and Tuṭiyaṅs, all of whom belonged to low castes and made their living wandering from the court of one king to another and singing of the king's greatness, hoping to be rewarded (an occupation they shared with the *pulavaṅ*). These Pāṇaṅs, Kiṇaiyaṅs, and Tuṭiyaṅs were without question oral poets...(Hart 1975:46).

The practice of mimicry that exists, for Hart, between orality and literacy, is the source of classical literature in Tamil. Though considering the presence of the bardic tradition today and the role such practices have in creating context, it seems more than probable that then and now there existed a tradition of manipulation in Tamil that created a sense of things oral and things literate.

I shall argue that the *pulavaṅ* weren't mimicking orality as much as they were in dialogue with and extensions of low status-bards. The Pāṇaṅ, for example, in comparison to the *pulavaṅ*, is unschooled. He is not formally trained in the arts and literature as is the *pulavaṅ*. From classical poetry, we know his troupe is itinerant. When they are not traveling and performing, they work on the land. They eat fish. Yet, the Pāṇaṅ creates verse with a clear understanding of difference in mind.

Auvaïyar's fame is connected to her unschooled practices.¹ She is known to have travelled from village to village, eating the food of poor farmers and composing songs for them. Moreover, the oppāri she wrote upon the death of Chief Atiyamāṅ Netumāṅ Añci is something unschooled artisans do:

May there be no morning anymore! May there be no evening anymore!
Let the days I have left in my life not have any more meaning!
As the feathers of peacocks adorn his memorial stone of a hero,
when the small cup of clear toddy filtered through fiber is poured
down upon it, will he accept it, he who would not
accept an entire country of high mountains with soaring summits? (Hart
2002:144)²

Gunasekaran has argued that scheduled caste practices are the essence of Tamil expression.³ As Gunasekaran knelt on the floor performing a scene of women grieving over a dead body, he explained that the feeling that loved ones have for the dearly departed is the basis of an oppāri. Beating his chest and moaning, he argued that the pauses, the crying, the rhythm must be understood in terms of this practice of grieving.

An oppāri is usually defined as a lamentation by women making doleful reference to the personal appearance and good qualities of the deceased. In Tamil Nādu, many of these lamentations for the dearly departed are also hired performances. Low-status artisans are hired to do the mourning. When Gunasekaran says that the oppāri is a Scheduled-Caste tradition, he is saying that "how women grieve" is a mode of unschooled writing that teaches women how to feel.

There exists in contemporary Tamil Nādu a troupe organized through Caṅtanam. Caṅtanam is a low-status, unschooled writer who travels from village to village to perform. Caṅtanam is actively part of a tradition of unschooled writing that has flourished without break in Tamil Nādu for over 2000 years. The following is an example of an oppāri written by M.P. Cāmikkaṅṇu that was in the possession of Caṅtanam.

1. Auvaïyar is a famous court poet during the Caṅkam times. She wrote 53 poems in the *Puṛaṅāṅṇūru*

2. The Tamil from *Puṛaṅāṅṇūru* 232

இல்லா கியரோ, காலை மாலை!

அல்லா கியர், யான் வாழும் நாளே!

நடுகல் பீலி சூட்டி, நார்அரி

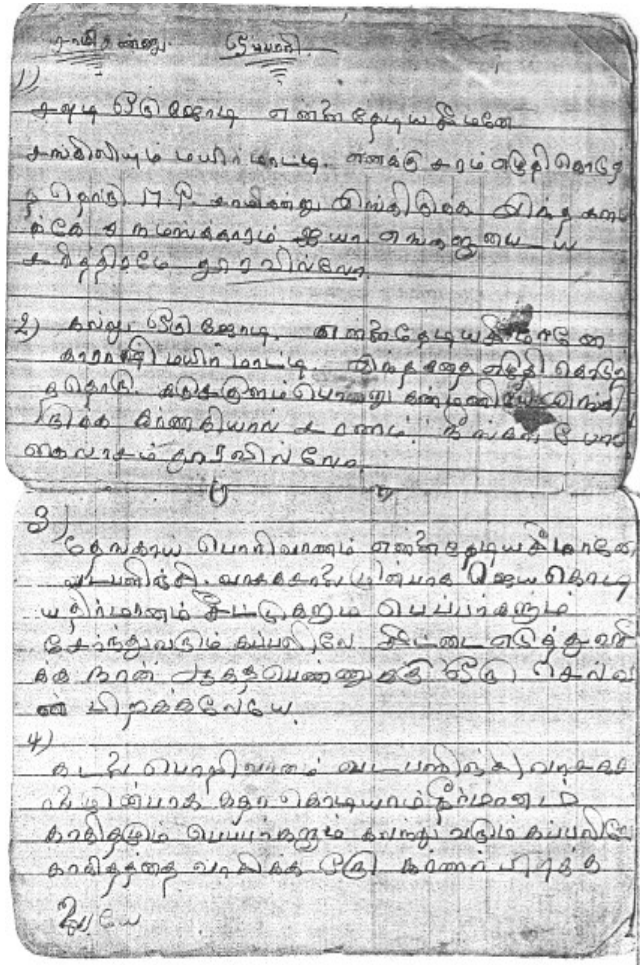
சிறுகலத்து உகுப்பவும் கொள்வன் கொல்லொ-

கோடு உயர் பிறங்குமலை கெழீஇய

நாடு உடன் கொடுப்புவும் கொள்ளா தோனே?

3. interview year 2000

1. A pair of earrings. You Lord who longed for me
Wearing a chained hairpin and writing this verse for me here
Is one M. P. Cāmikkaṇṇu.
I bow here to his end. Oh! Aiya! Has our existence become too far for you?
2. A pair of stone-studded earrings. You Lord who longed for me.
Wearing a kārākṣi shaped hairpin and writing this verse
is Poṇṇu Kaṇmaṇi from Karucakuḷam to whom I pay my respects.
The abode of Kailasam you have reached – is it far off?
3. Sparklers (which look like) coconut flakes. You Lord who longed for me.
In front of the Vadapalinji library, Jeya kodi⁴ bursts.
Papers and documents arrive in the ship. In order to read these sheets wasn't I born as a son to this unfortunate woman?
4. Sparklers (which look like) peanuts and puffed rice. The kadarkodi dais⁵ in front of the Vadapalinji library.
Papers and documents arrive in the ship. In order to read the paper, wasn't I born as a son?



In this oppāri, writing is the ground of locality and the very essence of grief itself. It is a reference point for other writers and performers. This oppāri is divided in four sections. The repetition of phrases in each section helps to mark the section in order to emphasize the rhythm and also to suggest when to cry in the performance.

The wailing, the crying, the incoherent mumbling--in unschooled terms, the practice of grief is essentially a way of organizing concrete experiences into an aggregate such that one ‘wanders’ from one experience to the next. In this oppāri, we move, as if arbitrarily, from the sensation of kārākṣi shaped hairpins to the space of Karucakuḷam; from the sensation of sparklers to the space of the library; from the space of the dais to the sensation of documents. This representation of wandering provides that sense of grief.

This oppāri doesn’t reflect Kaṇmaṇi’s prestige as much as it creates it and reinforces it. Indeed, prestige isn’t an objective item that one owns. Rather it is a feeling that one invokes, caresses, and manipulates.

4. “Jeya Kodi” is a brand name of sparklers, or fire crackers
5. a small dais like construction on which a flag post is placed

Writing is a way of conveying the importance of the deceased, Poṇṇu Kaṇmaṇi from Karucakuḷam. One is reminded of a pānar/pulavar-patron relationship during Caṅkam times in which having a bard promoted the stature of the patron. Citing the author's name in the grieving, and thereby proclaiming that someone wrote a piece specifically for this occasion, enhances the prestige of the deceased in the community. Historically, the manufacture of prestige has been motivated by the practice of unschooled writing.

During Caṅkam times, the primary form of wealth redistribution was gifting. Gifting was based on kinship and interpersonal relationships (such as a bard receiving gifts from patron), the latter being an important way of legitimizing the rule of chiefs. Champakalakshmi identifies three levels of gift redistribution: vēntar, vēḷir, and kiḷār (Champakalakshmi 1996). Gifts from the vēntar were gifts from kings. They provided subsistence items for people under their rule. They also provided prestigious gifts (such as gold coins and lotuses, gems, horses, elephants) to the pulavar. Gifts from the vēḷir were gifts from chieftains in the same manner though in lower scale as the vēntar. Gifts from the kiḷār were from landowning families/elders to this 'constituency'.

Though economic surplus during Caṅkam times came from warfare/plunder and maritime trade, socioeconomies were based on a barter system within and between localities. An example of interlocal exchange might be wood and honey of the hill regions for milk from the pastoral region. The significance of barter existed in the subjective acts encoding the exchange. Because relationships, particularly the practices surrounding gifting, governed alliances, knowing how to give was just as important, if not more so, than the act of giving itself.

In a moving passage from the *Puṟunānūru*, a low-status pānar named Kōṇāṭṭu Eriḱcilūr Maturaik Kumaraṅār tells how he prefers the patronage of chiefs over kings as the former knew how to give:

When we think, “This king has chariots with banners fluttering at their heights, with horses that gallop like the rush of the wind!” and “That king has elephants which fight as if they were ramming

mountains

while his army glowing with weapons could as well be the ocean!”

or “This is a conquering king, who triumphs in his wars

with his drums that are as awesome as the roaring of thunder!”

the wealth of such rulers does not astonish us, they who are shaded by white umbrellas, who wear bright ornaments, whose armies hold

lands!

But there is a kind of man who does astonish us, though he may only be king of a village that grows no more than millet from dry fields, the small leaves sprouting from the living joints of the tiny fragrant muñṇai plants that sheep have grazed down within the enclosures fenced with thorns, if that man only shows the virtue of knowing how to treat us as we should be treated! Even when we are overwhelmed by suffering, we do not turn our minds

to the wealth of those who are utterly without awareness,
but we think of the poverty, O greatness!
of those who are truly aware, and over and over we feel happy! (Hart
2002:124)⁶

Just as pāṇars were a source of establishing the legitimacy of kings and chiefs, unschooled writing created the conditions for the possibility of authority in Tamil. During Caṅkam times, the authority of kings and chiefs was subjective because authority was context dependent. They are as powerful as they are culturally aware. Knowing how to give is one example of this.

Maturaik Kumaraṅār’s “critique of the king” contrasts the objective king with the subjective chief. Though the king who controls space is impressive, it is the chief who manages localities that is truly magnificent.

There is a notable difference between space and locality. Sivathamby notes what he considers a discrepancy between the tuṇaṅkai ritual mentioned in the Caṅkam works *Akanāṅṅūru*⁷ and *Maturaikkāñci*⁸ {with the explanation of tuṇaṅkai given by 15th century commentator Nacciṅārkkīṇiyār (Sivathamby 1981). In the Caṅkam works, the tuṇaṅkai refers to a battlefield dance of demons and goblins that was performed by the victors in battle. Nacciṅārkkīṇiyār explains that this dance is part of an agricultural ritual that takes place after harvest. Sivathamby dismisses Nacciṅārkkīṇiyār’s explanation thus: “the ritual is too martial to allow an equation with the agricultural ceremonies” (Sivathamby 1981:187).

But Sivathamby is confusing space of the agricultural ritual with the practice of locality invoked through that ritual in war. As an agricultural ritual, the tuṇaṅkai refers to events in a specific space. The celebration of harvest in, say, village A is not related to the harvest in village

6. in Tamil from *Puranāṅṅūru* 197:

வளிநடந் தன்ன வாஅய்ச் செலல் இவுளியடு
கொடிநுடங்கு மிசைய தேரினர் எனாஅக்,
கடல்கண் டன்ன ஒண்படைத் தானையடு
மலைமாறு மலைக்குங் களிற்றினர் எனாஅ,
உரும்உடன் றன்ன உட்குவரு முரசமொடு
செருமேம் படுஉம் வென்றியர் எனாஅ,
மண்கெழு தானை, ஒண்பூண் வேந்தர்
வெண்குடைச் செல்வம் வியத்தலோ இலமே;
எம்மால் வியக்கப் படுஉ மோரே,
இடுமுள் படப்பை மறிமேய்ந்து ஒழிந்த
குறுநறு முஞ்சைக் கொழுங்கண் குற்றடகு,
புன்புல வரகின் சொன்றியடு, பெறுஉம்,
சீறார் மன்னர் ஆயினும், எம்வயின்
பாடறிந்து ஒழுகும் பண்பி னோரே;
மிகப்பேர் எவ்வம் உறினும், எனைத்தும்
உணர்ச்சி யில்லோர் உடைமை யுள்ளேம்;
நல்லறி வுடையோர் நல்குரவு
உள்ளுதும், பெரும! யாம், உவந்து நனி பெரிதே!

7. *Akanāṅṅūru*: 142

8. *Maturaikkāñci*: 27

B. The *tunaikai* in battle may be understood as the generic form of the agricultural ritual. Just as soldiers are from various villages, their rituals are generalized. In battle, the *tunaikai* ritual unites war and kingship with the peasant. This unity is a reflection of unschooled wandering. And this reflection of wandering is that feeling of locality.

The transformation of these rituals into expressions of war renders them pan-spatial and the essence of subjectivity. Through war, a place is transformed from an objective neighborhood into an instance in a circulatory flow between neighborhoods. Through war, neighborhoods are mobilized into a generalized aggregate, or a locality. In this way, we may recall that the poetess Auvaiyar's writing is portrayed as a reflection of her wandering among common people. In this way, the fundamental significance of war in ancient South India is not so much about the loot acquired from plundering as it is the medium through which localities were created.

When we consider the motility of unschooled writers, what Hart characterizes as "wandering from the court of one king to another and singing of the king's greatness, hoping to be rewarded", along with the content of unschooled texts; unschooled writing appears to be less a reflection of a specific neighborhood and more a representation of the movement between neighborhoods.

For some time now, understanding motilities in South Asia has been a way of making sense of the relationship between people and the land. In an effort to discipline tax revenue, the British colonial administration mapped pilgrimage routes in order to better understand economic zones. The work of Sopher (1967, 1968) and Bhardwaj (1973, 1988) used motility in order to delineate spiritual regions in South Asia. Stein (1977, 1980) and Mines (2005, 2008) have used motility to understand those contestations and practices of concession that distinguish a place.

Clearly, how people actually move about is important. This paper, however, is concerned with the *representation* of moving about. From the wandering about during *Caṅkam* times to the commuting of the present, the motility of unschooled artisans has been evolving.⁹ In what began as a source of kingship, I argue that this tradition of representing movement exists today as the essence of the state.

THE NĀDU: THE POLITICS OF LOCALITY

From the medieval times through the present, *spoken* Tamil played an essential role in reinforcing emerging socioeconomic practices by converting contested geographies into configurations of belonging, or a *nādu*. According to Burton Stein (1977), the *nādu* is a motility, a kind of existential gait, that has existed through *Caṅkam* times to the present. Though shifting, morphing and evolving, the *nādu* retains at its core a dialogue between production and representation.

In a sense, therefore, the *nādu* itself, during the pre- and early Chola periods, can be seen as a micro circulatory region leading to changes in the

9. By the term "commuting," I mean movement motivated by contracts and payment for labor rendered

character of these small, frequently isolated localities. According to Classical poems, which reflected a very early point in this transforming process, the *nādu* was a clan or tribal territory over which a warrior chief (celebrated in the *puṛam*-type poems) held sway. During Chola times, partly as a result of the movement of and the inclusion within each *nādu* of learned and ritually proficient Brahmans, the hundreds of *nādus* of Tamil country had become complex and pluralistic settings of peasant society. However, each *nādu* also retained a "tribe-like" or "segmentary" character, local dominance over resources being vested in the peasant folk of each locality-persons usually identified as "men of the *nādu*" (*nāṭṭār*). Up to the thirteenth century, each locality was to a high degree separate and autonomous-except in the most populous parts of the Kaveri basin, where interlocality integration resulted from the supralocal power of the Chola kings whose domain this was (Stein 1977:16).

Interestingly, "tribe-like" and "segmentary" are synonyms of the same feeling that refers to the practice of locality in Tamil. It is a fractal that expressed new combinations when the brahmans arrived. These emerging combinations during Chola times became the order of things.

However, scholars have pointed out that Stein's *nādu* is not unlike centrality of the village in colonialist prose (Veluthat 2010, Champalakshmi 1996). According to Veluthat (2009) and Champalakshmi (1996), the fractal approach presents the *nādu* as an instance of an a priori Tamil *Nādu* much like the village was an instance of Indic civilization.

But the *nādu* as fractal anticipates the art of imagination. Be it the colonial program of attaching people to places (Irschick 1994) or the Tamil nationalists' proclamation of Saiva Siddhanta as the original Tamil religion (Ishimatsu 1999), that tribe-like feeling of a *nādu* underscores how the political configuration of space never quite matches the organic practice of locality. I agree with Stein's position that the practice of locality in Tamil is as old as Tamil itself. However problematic the *nādu*-as-fractal may appear, the practice of locality in Tamil persists through socio economic paradigms.

For Veluthat, the *nādu* refers to a grouping of agricultural settlements, and a corporate group of spokesmen of that locality (Veluthat 2009:110). The act of locality was in fact a mode of mediation between the designs of the state and the aspirations of neighborhoods.

For Veluthat, the *nādu* exists in the defensive, as a way of mitigating, though often conceding to, the centralizing efforts of the state and brahmans. In this way, the *nādu* is a martial art. From at least the fifth century, the *Veḷḷāḷas* were extending their agricultural influence in the agricultural localities, while the brahmedeyas began articulating an agrarian order in non agricultural, most likely pastoral, localities (Champalakshmi 1996:38).

Brahmadeyas, those land grants given to groups of brahman settlers, introduced new socioeconomies. It brought in new farming methods such as irrigation techniques and seasonal regulation of cultivation. The Brahmadeyas encouraged new forms of social integration by facilitating new relationships between peasants and ruling entities.

Beginning in the medieval times, land relations began to be organized around the brahmedeya and the temple giving rise to three types of landowners--the brahmana, the vēḷāḷa, and the temple. Space was being contextualized according to the varṇa system that categorized society in accordance with four tiers: Brahmins (priestly or scholarly group), Kṣatriya (martial or royal group), Vaiśyas (merchant group) and Sūdras (laborers). Even so, practically, space was mobilized through the two broad categories of brāhmaṇa and non-brāhmaṇa.

From a formal perspective, brahmadeyas made sense. The brahmadeyas were a mechanism for cultivating virgin land. The varṇa framework that the Brahmins brought with them was a way of accommodating and ordering the emerging diversity of occupations.

In a way, the distinctive feature of medieval South India is the creating and contesting of localities. Whereas brahmadeyas played a central role in expanding the codifying rule of the state, at least three types of supralocal agrarian configurations emerged in medieval South India, in large part, as a response to that effort. Vēḷāḷas formed “periyānāḍus” in order to defend themselves against the oppression of the state (Rajukumar 1974). A number of hill tribes who were recruited into the Cola army became peasants, organized themselves as nāḍus, and began forming periyānāḍus to confront the nāḍus dominated by the Vēḷāḷas. Tenant farmers cultivating the land in brahmadeyas formed pēriḷamai-nāḍus to confront the impositions of Brahmins and the state (Karashima and Subbarayalu 2004)

Converting these neighborhoods into localities is the distinctive feature of unschooled writing. Thus, from an unschooled perspective, the brahmedeyas was good business. Unschooled writing laminated preexisting practices and deities onto the varṇa framework. Unschooled writing grounded the expanding configurations of nāḍus, periyānāḍus, and supralocal mercantile guilds. Kambar’s twelfth century *Ērerupatu*, a piece which glorifies the Vēḷāḷar caste, forges linkages between the Chola kingdom, puranic episodes and the agricultural practices in order to mobilize various spaces into a locality under the direction of a Vēḷāḷar community (Pillai 1991:149).

Then and now, *spoken* Tamil helped create the epistemological ground within which socio political power is anchored. One of the ways to follow the politics of conversion during classical and medieval times is to understand the manner in which *spoken* Tamil is being practiced today: "I am unlearned," begins the 70-year old Caṇtanam to my question about his background in relation to his profession. "I am SC (Scheduled-Caste). There was no work...So I became a singer...The songs come from my head." I had come to Caṇtanam in order that I might understand something about the famous folk song concerning the murder of Maṇikkuravan. Scholars and just plain folk, both are quick to point out that this song is part of an oral tradition. It is an example of an untouchable critique of society: Maṇikkuravan was an untouchable, he was a hooligan, he used to steal from the rich and give to the poor, etcetera. From what I had gathered, Maṇikkuravan was indeed an extraordinary rowdy who was murdered in 1953 at the age of 22. Soon afterwards a statue was built in a cemetery in Tataneeri, Madurai in his honor. Every year around January 15, many Scheduled-Caste folk make offerings to him at the place where the statue is erected. This song tells the story of Maṇikkuravan’s exploits, how he died, and how people grieved for him. "Maṇikkuravan was SC!" someone sitting next to me

volunteers. During this interview with Caṅtanam, men, women, and children from the neighborhood would casually enter Caṅtanam's two room hut and take part in the conversation. After some time, some would leave and others would come. "Ah yes, the song by Paccaiyappan," says Caṅtanam, "I have the text."

"He wrote it?" I asked.

"Of course."

"And you have it?"

"Isn't that what I said?"

"I don't understand. How is it that you have his writings?"

"He would leave some of his writings with me. Sometimes I would make amendments."

"Was Paccaiyappan SC?"

"No, he was upper-caste"

"May I see that song he wrote?"

"Now?"

"Yes, now." Caṅtanam withdraws to the other room and opens a wooden trunk. He pulls out heaps of paper. After a few moments of looking through the piles, he casually hands me the original manuscript of the murder ballad of Maṅikkuṛavan. Pointing to the oodles of paper now scattered throughout the room I ask, "what are those?"

"These are other songs."

"Who wrote them?"

"Many people. Mostly from me."

"You write your songs?"

"Of course."

"I didn't know you wrote songs."

"You didn't ask." Caṅtanam shows me a song.

"This song about smoking marijuana, is this your song?"

"Yes."

"No!" Someone else in the room volunteers, "you got that from Cinnāṅṅi."

"Yes and no," Caṅtanam rejoins, "some of the lines come from Cinnāṅṅi, but the overall arrangement and meter is mine."

"What did your father do?" I asked.

"He," replied Caṅtanam "was a song writer."

"Does each troupe write their own songs?"

"There is a leader in the troupe. He writes the songs."

"But people say folk singers are unlearned."

"This is true."

"Yet you write."

"Little brother, learning is one thing, writing is another."

"Big brother, but people say you can't write."

"Who says this?"

"Everyone."

"Who's everyone?"

"The mechanics say so, the professors say so, the government officials--"

"Those people don't understand our work. Listen, everyone in the troupe must have completed at least Fifth Standard. We don't finish Secondary School or go to college, but we must know how to read and write. Sometimes, there are one or two people in the troupe who do not read. Okay, but it is difficult. You have to teach them the songs line by line and it takes too much time. If everyone reads, they can take a copy of the song and memorize it quickly."

"But--"

"No writing, no kaccēri..."

The term kaccēri is used to describe a wide range of performances that fall under the category of entertainment. Many religious rituals--such as the karakatam--are now often referred to as kaccēri. Even political rallies are referred to as kaccēri. The kaccēri that Caṅṅanam speaks of takes place in the villages. It consists of songs, dances, and small skits lasting upwards to ten hours. Perhaps the defining characteristic about the kaccēri in which Caṅṅanam used to perform is that it is considered a medium for authentic speech.

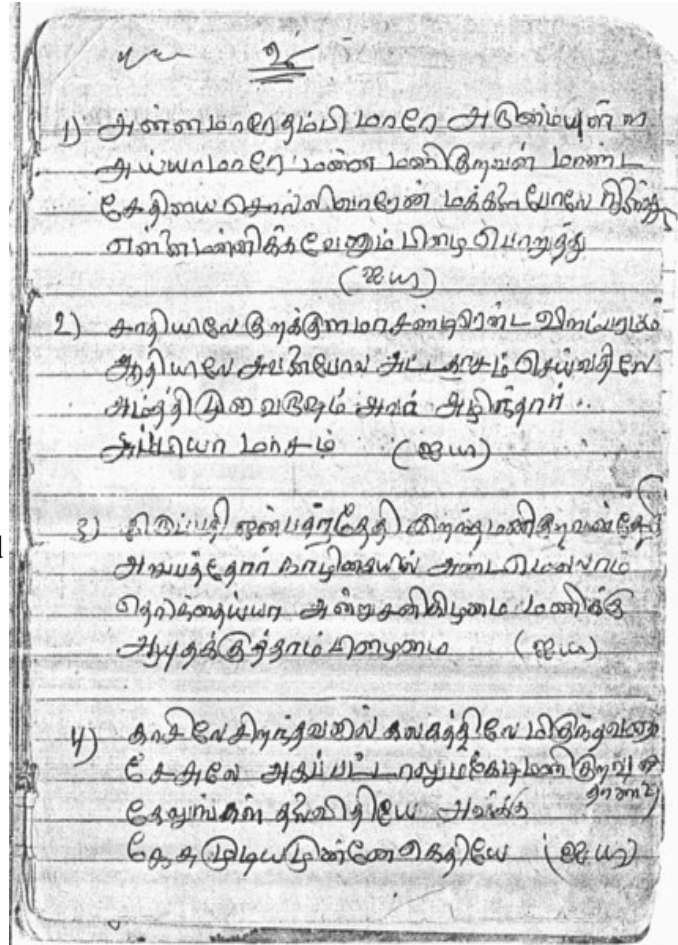
In the kaccēri, however, authentic speech is a way of writing. It organizes verse, troupes, and traditions of writing. It is that sentiment in writing that creates locality as a different space. When Caṅṅanam writes, he is producing a difference between the speech in performance and the speech outside of performance; between his troupe and other troupes; between this particular piece (the song about marijuana) and that piece (the writings of Cinnāṅṅi). Writing makes difference local.

S. Perumal Konar and T.V.S. Paccaiyappan are two unschooled writers from Madurai who maintained a successful career writing through the kaccēri. The latter moved to Chennai and wrote songs for Tamil movies. S. Perumal Konar was a supporter of the Congress Party. His writings would often include support for the Congress Party. He was also illiterate. He would recite his songs to his wife and his wife would transcribe them. Each time one of his songs were performed, he would get a fee. T.V.S. Paccaiyappan was a supporter of the DMK party. Paccaiyappan, however, charged a one time fee of Rs. 1000 to sing his songs. Word has it that S. Perumal Konar had a mind for melody but was lacking in terms of prosody. Artists would

usually rework his wording according to the melody he envisioned. T.V.S. Paccaiappan was said to be the opposite. Not known for his ear for melody, he is remembered as one of the outstanding lyricists of Madurai.

Paccaiappan's account of Maṅikkuravan is generally considered to be one of the best murder ballads ever written. The following text of Paccaiappan's Maṅikkuravan murder ballad is an example of how space is converted into locality through the manipulation of difference:

1. Elder brothers, younger brothers,
persons of distinction
I come to tell the news of
Maṅikkuravan's death
I think like the people
You should forgive me
and indulge any mistakes (aiya)
2. Concerning the great roughneck of
the Kurava jāti,
There are two things:
first, performing all that pomp and
grandeur as he did,
second, in the year 1953, he perished
in the month of Appiya¹⁰ (aiya)¹¹
3. The date of the 29th is the news of
Maṅikkuravan's
transcendence.
Within sixty nāḷikai¹², everyone
knew aiyya
It was Saturday, and for
Maṅikkuravan it was an unfortunate
day to be hurt by a weapon (aiya)
4. With the cash, he was the preeminent one
In a fight, he was the excessive one
And though he was brought under the influence of a tumultuous crowd,
It was KD¹³ Maṅikkuravan dance
Listen to his fate, and listen to his plight before the end of the case (aiya)



10. month of October

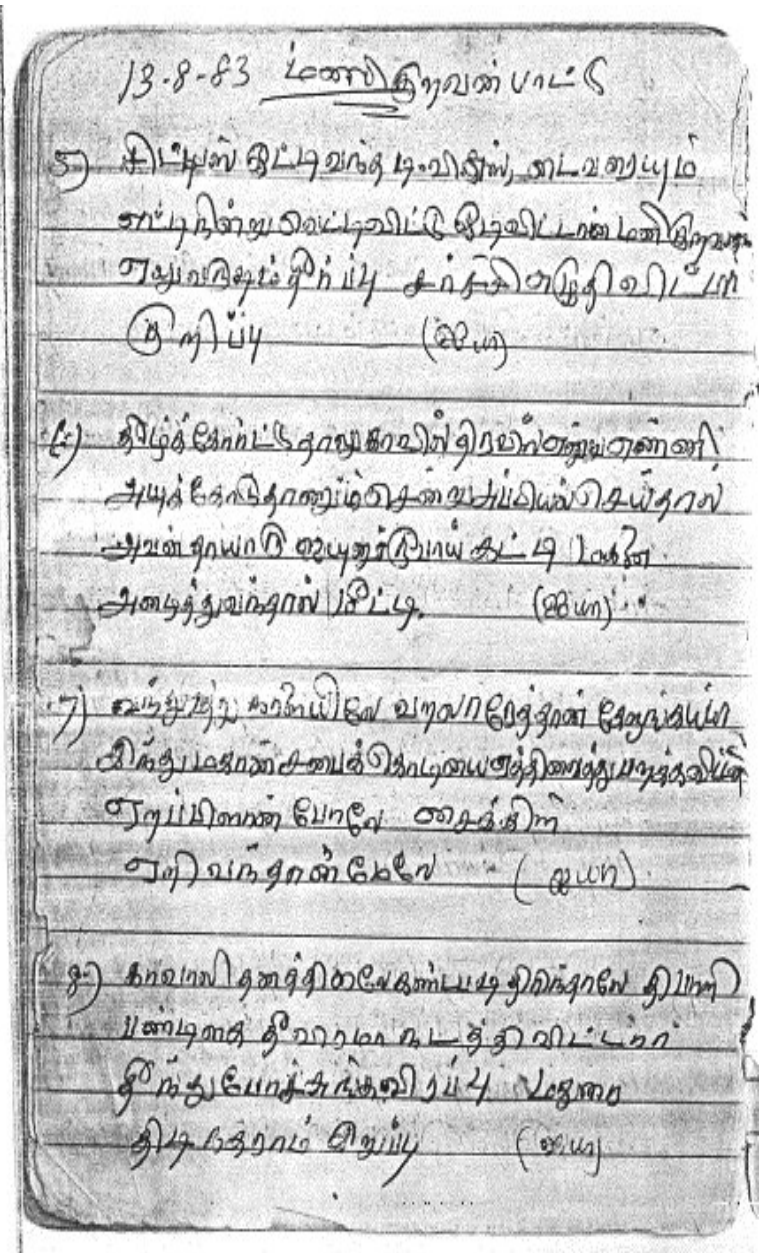
11. the word "aiyā" is used here as an instruction. "aiyā" tells the performer/reader to repeat the last line

12. A nāḷikai is a measure time used mostly in astrology. One nāḷikai is equivalent to 24 minutes. 60 nāḷikai is 24 hours.

minutes

13. "KD" means "known deliquent"

- 5 Boarding the city bus,
Maṅikkuravan stabbed the
T.V.S. driver and ran off.
"Seven years" the judge
sentenced (aiya)
- 6 Thinking it would be difficult
in the lower courts
Maṅikkuravan's mother
appealed in the high court.
She paid 500 rupees and
saved her son (aiya)
- 7 The next morning at ten
o'clock,
--please listen to the details:
riding on his bicycle like an
aeroplane, he came and
hoisted the flag of the Hindu
Mahāśabhā.¹⁴ (aiya)
- 8 Rowdies roaming everywhere
In a rage, the Tipavali¹⁵
festival continued.
before long, the zeal ebbed
off
of this man who dwelt in the
Tiṭṭinakaram – a locality
in Madurai (aiya)
- 9 Saturday night, drinking
cārayam.¹⁶
It is a time of intoxication.
Maṅikkuravan was vexed with guile.
He dragged another woman, and the mother who gave birth to him was furious.
(aiya)



14. Hindu Mahāśabhā (All-Indian Hindu Assembly) is a Hindu nationalist political party in India. It was founded in 1915 as an alternative to Indian National Congress and sought to oppose the Muslim separatism of the Muslim League.

15. festive celebration on the night of the 14th day of the dark fortnight at moon-rise in the month of Aippaci (between October and November). Aippaci is the same month that Maṅikkuravan is killed)

16. locally brewed liquor.

10 putting his hands around her neck,
and without doing anything peaceful to the woman he trapped,
carried her across Railway Road.
Forgetting what Gandhi said,
he consumed his last wasteful feast. (aiya)

மணிகுறவன் பாயல்

4) சனிக்கிராமம் சாயங்காலம் சாயங்காலம் போய் ஊருக்கு
மணிகுறவன் தாயை வசனம் பண்ணி கையால் கட்டி
மேற்கூர் மென்னை இடுக்கி வயிற்று மொத்தம்
மணம் விடுக்கி. (ஊய)

11 He was snared on Railway Road next to the 'palaiyur' car shed.
"he was cut down from the teppam¹⁷ in a rice paddy,"
thus said Valluvar,¹⁸ his dynasty is over. (aiya)

10) அடித்துக்கொண்டு போன மென்னை இடுக்கி எதுமே
வெய்யாண்டிவ கயிற்று வேளையே போட்டு
கடத்திட்டாராம் வெய்யாண்டிவேளே கோத்திரமொன்று
மறந்து இடிச்சு விடுகிறார் விடுகிறது (ஊய)

12 Upon seeing the mangled body someone called the police.
"It's a sure bet" said the Subinspector who came running.
He summoned Manikkuravan's mother and made a few inquiries. (aiya)

11) மனசுக்குக் கொண்டு வந்திருக்கிற வெய்யாண்டி வேளே
வெய்யாண்டி வேளையே கோத்துக்கொண்டிருக்கிற
வெய்யாண்டி வேளே அங்க
வெய்யாண்டி வேளே (ஊய)

13 They say the inspector wrote asking about the mother of the one who died.
The Kurava lady wept all the way to the hospital;
the doctors said that they will have to cut the body for postmortem. (aiya)

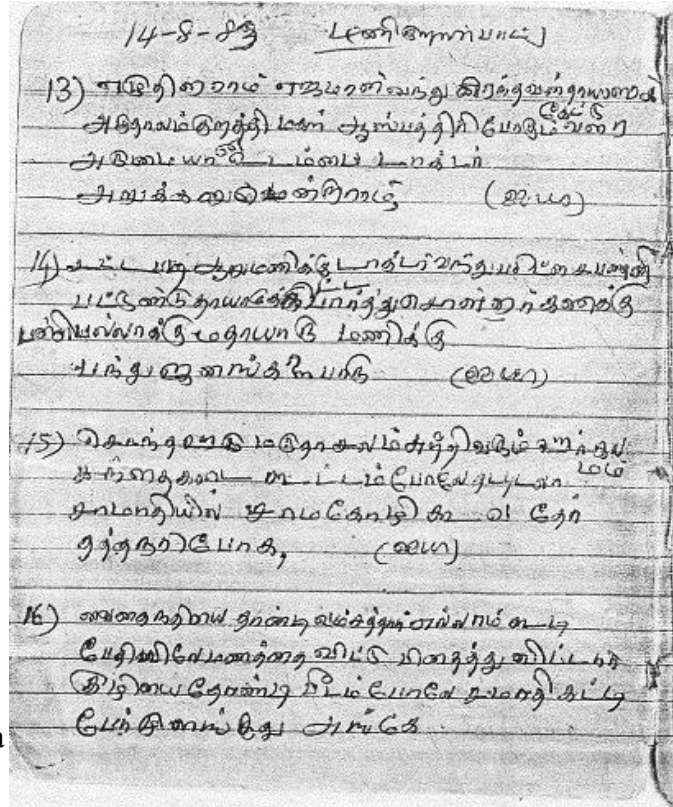
12) வெய்யாண்டி வேளே கோத்துக்கொண்டிருக்கிற
சுண்டிட்டு வந்து விடுகிறார் விடுகிறது
நீடிவந்து தாயை நேரில் அழைத்தார் திடீர்
சனிக்கிராமம் விடுகிறது (ஊய)

14 Punctually at six the doctor came and conducted an autopsy,
He told the mother all the details frankly.
"The funeral palanquin is ready for Manikkuravan;

17. a decorated float which carries the deity and is floated during temple festival in the temple tank
18. the author of the Tirukkural

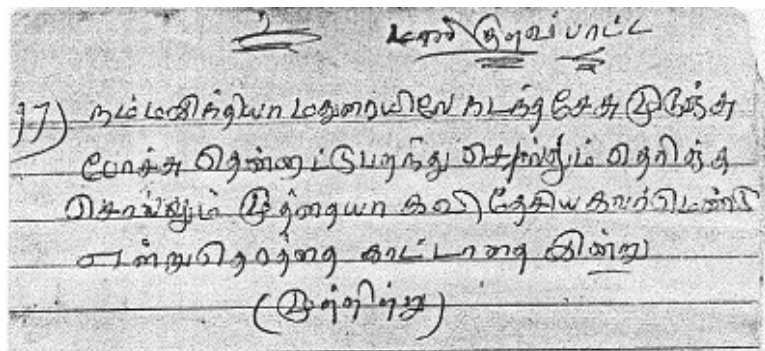
Look at the people who have come.” (aiya)

- 15 Maṅikkuravan’s native village was Marutacalam
But his presence was felt up to Kambam.
The hubbub was like the gathering in a marketplace
The night rooster crowed in arbitration, and the chariot¹⁹ went to Tattanari.²⁰ (aiya)



- 16 All of the family gathered crossing the Vaikai river
In catharsis, they were delirious losing their minds.
There the folk were wailing, digging the pit and constructing a grave like a chair²¹

- 17 The tumult that happened in Madurai in our India is finished
All understanding and all knowing South India’s Muttaiya
Kavi tells you that now we have a National Government --so don’t fool around!



This particular ballad is written according to the maraṭi meṭṭu. A maraṭi meṭṭu is the meṭṭu used in oppāri. Organizing references to caste (Kuravan jāti), astrology (nāḷikai), month (Appiya), Political party (Hindu Mahāsabhā), generate a generic, Tamil society. But it is the distinction of these references, the significance, say, of the Hindu Mahāsabhā in Madurai (implicitly contrasting it with Congress and the DMK), that make these generic references local.

In addition to being a source of income for unschooled writers, manufacturing locality had the effect of organizing artisans along political lines. For example, both S. Perumal Konar and T.V.S. Paccaiyappan wrote separate murder ballads about Maṅikkuravan. Those troupes

19. referring to the funeral palanquin

20. an area in Madurai where the cemetery is located

21. this reference to 'chair' is describing a special kind of burial, also referred to as a 'camātikkuḷi', a grave for interring the remains of an ascetic in an erect sitting posture

performing S. Perumal Konar's version tended to be supporters of Congress. Those performing T.V.S. Paccaiyappan's version tended to be supporters of the DMK. This sense of difference underscored the identity of political consciousness with *spoken* Tamil.

The story of Maṅikkuravan is a way of making Madurai local. The Maṅikkuravan murder ballad links distinct experiences into an interilluminating aggregate, or a feeling. In popular culture, this feel for experience is the essence of political power. The political alliance of unschooled writing needs to be understood in this manner. The writing and performance of the Maṅikkuravan murder ballad is an example of how political entities such as Congress and DMK were actively making themselves local in order to be relevant. Certainly there are unschooled writings that are explicitly written for political parties. But the significance of the Maṅikkuravan murder ballads, to my mind, is in the associations. *Meṭtu*, prosody, and content are associated with a political party. Indeed, part of knowing unschooled writers is knowing their political affiliation.

As we begin to focus on writing proper in Tamil, then the practice of *spoken* Tamil becomes an essential criteria for making sense of texts in Tamil. The fundamental difference between, say, Caṅkam writing and Bhakti writing, then, is not so much that the former is humanistic compared to the religious aspirations of the latter. Using *spoken* Tamil as an analytic clarifies the fundamental difference between Caṅkam and Bhakti as the difference between differing practices of locality. The tensions between *nādu*s, *periyānādu*s, *brahmadeyas*, and mercantile guilds that characterize the medieval period produced localities that were epistemologically distinct from those being practiced during Caṅkam times.

Given the centrality of unschooled writing to the practice of *spoken* Tamil, I distinguish Tamil writing, following Zvelebil (1975), into two categories: Caṅkam and Devotion. Caṅkam writing accounts for the establishment of localities in Tamil. I define devotional writing in Tamil as a renewed call for localities. Devotional writing begins with Bhakti and continues through the present day. The writings that occurred under the heyday of the self respect/Tamil devotion movements, for example, are in essence a renewed call for locality. Renewed calls for locality are not present in Caṅkam writing. This is due in large part, I believe, to the nature of socioeconomy. The wealth from long distant and maritime trade was second in importance to social mores and gift giving in the determination of social integration. It is from around the sixth century onwards that we begin seeing the accumulation of wealth determining the nature of social integration, a phenomenon that we see existing through the present time.

In a way, devotional writing in Tamil, by converting folk traditions into vedic format, reflect growing contests over localities. The deity of the hills locality, Murukan, is transformed into Subrahmanya (son of Siva). The pastoral deity, *Māyōn*, is transformed into Vishnu. The attempt here is to mobilize pastoral and hilly spaces into a larger aggregate. The *periyānādu*s formed in retaliation to these efforts are essentially a competing aggregate.

In another way, the representation of wandering that is at the heart of unschooled writing was a source of reflection during medieval South India. For example, Nampi Antar Nampi, the hagiographer during the period of Rajaraja, rediscovered some forgotten hymns that were preserved in the family of a low-caste artisans. It was the female member of this household who

helped the hagiographer put the hymns to music (Champakalakshi 1994:210). Māṇikkavācakar, the author of the *Tiruvācakam*, noted that upon seeing women playing the game called ‘ammānai’ and singing songs that accompanied it, wrote hymns incorporating this meṭṭu (Pope 1900:117). The ‘Ānantakkallippu’ meṭṭu attributed to the 18th century Tāyumānavar is a popular folk meṭṭu with which one can see pandarams singing on the street while selling flowers and medicinal items. Representing the movement between places has the effect of codifying practices and thereby creating a sense of intimacy that homologizes an aggregate of places, or a nādu, with a feel for the language, or *spoken* Tamil.

AURALITY: THE FEEL FOR LOCALITY

The homology between locality and *spoken* continues a medium through which history, especially the history of writing, in Tamil is created. Formally, the first Tamil novel is *Story of Piratāp Mutaliyār* [*Piratāp Mutaliyār Carittiram*] written by Māyūram Vētanāyakam Piḷḷai in 1879. However, P. K. Cuntararājan, the well-known writer and literary and film critic, argues that T. V. Cēṣaiyaṅkāṅ’s *The Story of Avatāni from Ātiyūr Village* [*Ātiyūr Avatāni Carittiram*] published in 1875 is the first Tamil novel. Cuntararājan’s argument anticipates the fundamental significance that aurality has in the life of Tamil.

Cēṣaiyaṅkāṅ’s text is a moment in *spoken* Tamil. According to Cuntararājan (1994), the aurality that *The Story of Avatāni from Ātiyūr Village* evokes situates the text as an act of locality within a bazaar of such practices:

தமிழில் அச்சு இயந்திர வசதி பரவலாகப் பயன்பட்ட சமயத்தில் கடந்த நூற்றாண்டின் மத்தியிலே எழுத்தறிவு பெறாதவர்களின் அறிவு வளர்ச்சிக்காக கர்ணபரம்பரையாக வந்த தமிழ் வீரர்களின் கதைகள் பாடல்களாக அச்சில் வெளியிடப்பட்டன. விழாக்களிலும் சந்தைகளிலும் இத்தகைய கதைப்பாடல் புத்தகங்கள் விற்கப்பட்டன. எழுதப்படிக்கத் தெரிந்தவர்கள் இந்தப் பாடல்களை ராகம் போட்டுப் படிக்க படிப்பறியாத மக்கள் கூட்டமாய் இருந்து கேட்டு ரசிப்பது வழக்கமாய் இருந்தது. தேசிங்குராசன் கதை அல்லி அரசாணி மாலை, கட்டபொம்மன் கதைப்பாடல் முதலிய வீரசாகசக் கதைகள்தான் ஒருகாலத்தில் பாமர மக்களின் அறிவுக்கும் பொழுதுபோக்குக்கும் உதவின. அம்மாளை என்ற இலகுவான பாடல் வடிவத்தை சென்னை புரசைவாக்கம் வித்துவான் சேஷையங்கார் என்ற பேராசிரியர் கடந்த நூற்றாண்டின் பிற்பகுதியில் (1875) இந்துக்களுள் காணப்படும் குணா குணங்களையும் நடைகளையும் வருணித்து நாவல் என்ற பெயர் கொடுத்து "ஆதியூர் அவதானி சரிதம்" என்ற தலைப்புடன் எழுதி வெளியிட்டார் (சுந்தரராஜன் 1994).

[During the [mid 19th century] when the printing press was pervasive through society, literate people could publish traditional Tamil hero stories as songs for the betterment of illiterate people. These pamphlets would be sold in the marketplace and during festivals. Those

who knew how to write would put a meṭṭu to these songs, and those who didn't know how to read would gather, listen and enjoy. Tēciṅkurācan story, the Alli Aracāni Mālai, the Kaṭṭapomman story-song--indeed, heroic stories helped enlighten ordinary folk while passing the time. The professor named Cēṣaiyaṅkāṛ, from the Puracaivākkam area of Chennai, wrote a novel entitled “*The Story of Avatāni from Ātiyūr Village*” [*Ātiyūr Avatāni Caritiram*]” in which the social practices, the good and evil of Hindus at the end of the nineteenth century are elaborately described through the ammānai meṭṭu (Cuntararājan 1994).]

The practice of locality is that epistemological ground upon which Cēṣaiyaṅkāṛ makes sense. The printing press codified patterns of movement, movement between literate and illiterate, amongst the circulation of the marketplace and festivals. Thus, before Cēṣaiyaṅkāṛ wrote his novel, printing presses were commonplace. Printing folk songs were commonplace. Indeed, the printing press was a tool that helped reinforce the difference between space and locality.

Cēṣaiyaṅkāṛ's invocation of the ammānai meṭṭu, the rationale of which is similar to that of Māṅikkavācakar's 9th century *Tiruvācakam*, is a method making *The Story of Avatāni from Ātiyūr Village* local. As the language of narration, it is a generalization of specific feminine practices in specific places. This generalization produces the sentiment that disciplines the story.

As a sentiment, femininity is also used to convey a kind of “word of mouth” sensation. Just as the famous folk songs were printed to reinforce locality; ammānai refers to the practices and speech of innocent girls as something the reader has heard before. The lived experiences of the reader, an individual who is part of a neighborhood, confirms the aurality of the text.

Stuart Blackburn (2003) has argued that the printing press in the nineteenth century helped to bridge the gap between orality and literacy through the printing of folklore. However, as I have tried to show, “orality” and “literacy” is an effect of the production of aurality. I would argue that just as the pulavar is an extension of the pāṇar, the printing press is an extension of unschooled writing.

In this way, we may understand why *The Story of Avatāni from Ātiyūr Village* was, in Cēṣaiyaṅkāṛ's own words, an act of speech:

தமிழ்ப் பாஷையின் மூலமாய்க் கல்வியுங் களிப்புந் தேடும்
இந்நாட்டவர் புறநாட்டவர் யாவர்க்கும் ஒருமொழி பகருகின்றேன்.
ஆதரவுடன் செவிசாய்த்துக் கேட்பாராக. காவியங்களும் கதைகளும், பல பல
காலங்களில் நிகழ்ந்த வரலாறுகளை அல்லது நிகழ்ந்தனவாகப்
பாவிக்கப்படும் வர்தமானங்களைத் தழுவி நிற்பனவாயினும், ஆக்கியோர்
களின் காலத் தனுபவங் களை அவைகள் ஆங்காங்கு காட்டாமற் போகா.
நான் சொல்வதற்கோர் நிதர்சனங் காட்டுவேன். ஆதியில் வான்மீகி முனிவர்
இயற்றிய வட மொழி இராமாயணத்திலும், பின்பு கம்பர் புனைந்த தென்மொழி
இராமாயணத்திலும், தேசவர்ணனை ஜனவர்ணனைகளில், பல
குணபேதங்களையும் ஆசாரபேதங்களையுங் காணலாம். இக்கலப்பு
கவிகளின் குணதோஷங்களைப் பன்னும் நிபுணர்களில் சிலர்க்கு விபரீத

மாகவந் தோற்றும். கற்பனைக் கதைகளும், ஒருகாலத்தில் இன்பந் தருவன. மற் றொரு காலத்தில் தரா; பாலர்க்குக் களிப்பூட்டுவன முதியர்க்கூட்டா; சிற்றறிவோரை மகிழ்விப் பன பேரறிவோரை மகிழ்வியா. நம்தேயத்துச்சனங்களுள் குடதிசை நூல்களை ஆராய்ந்தறிந்தவர்கள் நமது புராணாதி கதைகளுள் ஊற்றம் வையார். இந்நூதனக் கல்வித்துறைகள யறியாத நமது முதியரோ, இவர்மேல் வசை கூறுவர். மனிதன் சித்தவிருத்தி யிப்படி யாக விருக்கும். நானோவெனில் நமது வித்துவான்கள் வழக்கமாயிறங்குந் துறைகளை விட்டுக் காலத்தியற்கையைத் தழுவிப் புதுத்துறையில் காலிட் டேன் (சேஷையங்கார் 1875).

[As someone from this nādu searching for joy and learning through the Tamil language, there is one language that I speak to any foreigner. Nota bene: those stories and epics, in embracing the contemporary state of affairs in order to make sense of current or historical events, say nothing about the author’s experiences. For example, we may see moral and character differences in the descriptions of nations and people between the Ramayana that Valmiki wrote in the northern language and the Ramayana that Kamban had composed in the southern language. This fusion is strange for a few among the experts who speak of the flaws in the poems. With fiction, there are times when one gives joy, other times he does not; he provides joy for children, but he does not for adults, he makes the ignorant happy but not the educated. Those of our countrymen who have studied western books insult our ancient stories. They slander our elders who do not know these new academic departments. Human temperament is like this. As for me, while our scholars abandon the cultural harbors, I have set foot on a new path embracing the spirit of the times (Cēṣaiyaṅkāṛ 1875).]

In his own words, this novel is a renewed call for locality by reinforcing the significance of *spoken* Tamil. Contemporary scholars are aloof. They don’t write in light of common folk. They inevitably slander the elders because they don’t engage the folk in classical texts.

The Story of Avatāni from Ātiyūr Village is essentially about the trials concerning widow remarriage. Despite its relevance, Cuntararājan notes that very little has been written about the novel. There was one professor, a Dr. Pārttacārati, who wrote an article in 1976 concerning the novel. In this article, Dr. Pārttacārati noted the two lines where the author Cēṣaiyaṅkāṛ writes, “Nelvēli Cēṣaiyaṅkāṛ said to his adorable daughter/it is not a crime to speak of remarriage” as an example of the author’s subjectivity. Dr. Pārttacārati concluded that those lines are an example of how the author used his own name in the story in order to relate his experiences to those of the common man.

But Dr. Pārttacārati is looking at this novel as literature, an abstraction that anticipates its own set of references. As we approach this novel as an act of *spoken* Tamil, a representation of wandering, Cuntararājan’s insights make sense. Cuntararājan remarks that two years before this novel was published, 19th May 1873, a lawyer from Tirunelvēli named Cēṣaiyaṅkāṛ wrote a

piece in the *Athenium and Daily News*, an English medium newspaper out of Madras. “I am a Vaṭakalai Vaishṇava Brahmin from Tirunelvēli,” he wrote. “I work as a lawyer in the Tiruvitānkūr court. I was shocked to hear the news that my one and only daughter lost her husband after three years of marriage. I became tormented knowing that my lovely daughter, having become a widow, will now begin a life of grief and contempt.”²²

Tirunelvēli Cēṣaiyaṅkāṛ was aware that the British government made widow remarriage legal in Bengal. Using that law as a precedent, he decided to have his daughter remarried. He consulted with many of his associates regarding this matter. After some negotiations, the chief minister of Tiruvitānkūr gave his blessing for the marriage of Tirunelvēli Cēṣaiyaṅkāṛ’s daughter.

However, a number of people opposed this and tried to kill Tirunelvēli Cēṣaiyaṅkāṛ on the day of the wedding. A group of Brahmins and non Brahmins gathered and set fire to the marriage hall. After the incident, the offenders were fined 50 rupees and released. As word of Tirunelvēli Cēṣaiyaṅkāṛ’s cultural transgression spread, things continued to get worse for him. The man who was maintaining his village house quit. His butler quit.

His barber and his dhobi refused to work for him. Some of his associates who worked in government began ignoring him. Moreover, a few of his associates succeeded in getting an exclusive government edict expelling Tirunelvēli Cēṣaiyaṅkāṛ from his caste. Because Tirunelvēli Cēṣaiyaṅkāṛ had remarried his widowed daughter, they argued, he had transgressed the very essence of his caste. Therefore, having left his caste of his own accord, he was forbidden from entering the temple.

Common sense exists somewhere between writing and speech. The author Cēṣaiyaṅkāṛ knew about the lawyer Tirunelvēli Cēṣaiyaṅkāṛ. Perhaps more importantly, the general public knew about Tirunelvēli Cēṣaiyaṅkāṛ. That the names of the leading characters in the *The Story of Avatāni from Ātiyūr Village* come from the trials of Tirunelvēli Cēṣaiyaṅkāṛ is an example of how the author was linking spaces and forging localities. Much like Paccaiyappan’s Maṅikkuravan Murder ballad, Cēṣaiyaṅkāṛ is creating localities in order to laminate common sense onto the socio-political aspirations of the Dravidian Movement.

Cuntararājan’s argument for the *The Story of Avatāni from Ātiyūr Village* being the first novel in Tamil is more than a matter of the date of publication. It is a matter of feeling. Cēṣaiyaṅkāṛ’s novel is as much a product of the local as it is a creating of the local.

Journalism was another implication of using the printing press as a tool to practice locality. When Aditanar established the daily newspaper *Thinathanthi* in 1943, he did so with an understanding of locality writing in mind. One current editor of *Thinathanthi* half jokingly suggested that the *Thinathanthi* of old wrote the news around the movies²³. One reading, say, an

22. நான் திருநெல்வேலியைச் சேர்ந்த வடகலை வைஷ்ணவ பிராமணன். திருவிதாங்கூர் நீதி மன்றத்தில் ஒரு வழக்கறிஞராகப் பணிபுரிகின்றேன். என்னுடைய ஒரே மகள் தன்னுடைய பதின்மூன்றாவது வயதில் கணவனை இழந்துவிட்டாள் என்ற செய்தி கேட்டுமிகவும் அதிர்ந்து போனேன். என்னுடைய அருமை மகள் ஒரு விதவையாக வாழ்ந்து அவமதிப்புக்கும் அவமானத்திற்கும் உள்ளாகி வாழ்கை முழுவதும் துன்பத்தை அனுபவிக்கும் விதவை என்ற நிலையை அடைந்துவிட்டது எனக்கு தீராத கவலையாக நேர்ந்துவிட்டது.

23 personal interview

article on the latest events concerning politics, will come upon a clipping from a currently popular movie. The clipping will consist of some random scene. Under the clipping would be an excerpt from the actress in the picture. These words would be in quotations, a cue instructing the reader that these lines were authentic speech. Another cue presented to the reader was the spelling. These words were spelled according to how it might sound if the given actress were actually pronouncing the words. In the *Thinathanthi* of the 1940s, "the movie scene" was one of the main venues for expressing authentic speech.

Through time, and certainly by the 1970s, *spoken* Tamil became the medium for *Thinathanthi*. Articles are to be written with an idea of an illiterate listener in mind, the value of information is to be located in adverbial phrases, objectivity is to be intimately linked with narrative flow--as *spoken* became a way of knowing, the writing of the news became the writing of common sense. Moreover, *spoken* is lucrative. Today, *Thinathanthi* is the largest circulating newspaper of any language in India with a readership of over 10 million. The readers of *Thinathanthi* are the "uneducated" in Tamil Nādu. This is the daily of choice among rickshaw drivers, bus conductors, and motorcycle mechanics.

In contrast to *Thinathanthi*, *Thinamalar* is a Tamil daily that caters to the well educated. *Thinamalar* has become the daily of choice among the bourgeois or those aspiring to be bourgeois in Tamil Nādu who continue to read Tamil. On page four of *Thinamalar* is the popular

column "Tea Shop Bench". There are many like Krishnan who believe that the spelling for the word shop, 'kāṭā', is purposefully different from the formal 'kaṭai'.²⁴ Krishnan proceeded to explain to me that if the word were to be used anywhere else in the newspaper, it would certainly be spelled in the manner of the latter. In addition, the title is presented in two lines. The first line reads "ṭī kāṭ" followed by "āpencu." In this first line, we see the word for tea [ṭī], a space, and part of the word for store [kāṭ]. The vowel that concludes the word for shop begins the second line juxtaposed by the word "bench."

The formatting of the title suggests that the rhythm of the title reads differently from what would be pronounced in the formal. According to Krishnan, the long "ā" is one of the ways in this column that the slow paced world of the Tamil village will be composed. The different rhythm invokes the different modes of expression. In this generic



24 personal interview with Krishnan, the mechanic

village, people are practical and the world outside of the village is understood in terms of the village.

And of course, there are those who understand the title “Tea Shop Bench” to be spelled correctly. For them, it is a matter of fonts that carry the sense of unrefined. Dilip Kumar reminds us that there are no misspelled words here.²⁵ The formatting is a stylistic that publishers use to spice up Tamil. Though, according to Kumar, not all embellishments are legible. I think both Dilip and Krishnan would agree that “Tea Shop Bench” presents a theory of politics through interlocutors that represent the common elders of a common village.

Another mode of authentic speech is that “Tea Shop Bench” is presented as a dialogue. In “Tea Bench Shop,” each conversant is equally as important as the next. Equality imagines a world of village life as a place of diversity. The diversity is represented in the diversity of interlocutors. There is always a conversation among a Christian, a Muslim, and a Hindu, each trying to make a point that would be obvious to the others involved if only they could just say it. The wit of “Tea Shop Bench” is anchored, not in its fidelity to real speech, but rather in the manner in which it continually creates frustration. The beginning of each editorial introduces the interlocutors in the middle of a conversation:

“இப்போ உங்களுக்கும் எனக்கும் இருக்கற சண்டையில் அண்ணாசிய பலி குடுக்கறதுல என்னங்க நியாயம்...?” என்று அருகிலிருந்த குப்பண்ணாவை பார்த்து திடீரென்று கேட்டார் அந்தோணிசாமி.

“என்ன ஓய் சொல்ரீர்...நேக்கும் உமக்கும் செண்டையா...?” என்று குப்பண்ணா குழம்பினார்.

“அத அப்பறம் பாத்துக்கோங்க...அதுல ஏன் வே என்னிய பலி குடுக்கணும்ன்னா சொல்லுதீரு...?” என்று அண்ணாச்சி ஆவேசமாக பாய்ந்தார்.

[“What sort of justice is there,” asked Anthoniswamy suddenly glancing at nearby Kuppanna, “making Annaacci a sacrificial goat in the quarrel between us now...”

“What are you saying?” Kuppanna became belligerent, “Is there a fight between us?”

Annaacci leaped forward in a frenzy, “You can settle all that later..tell me why did you say that I should be sacrificed in the bargain?”²⁶

The reader has to play “catch up.” This catching up is linked to the manner in which the dialogue unfolds. The interlocutors are conversing. Anthony suddenly asks for tea, Kuppanna interrupts, Annaacci angrily leaps forward—the reader is peeking in on an ongoing, normal conversation, the kind of conversation that takes place at a tea shop in a village where folks are always interrupting, acting abruptly and being affective.

25 personal conversation with the Tamil writer Dilip Kumar

26 *Tinamalar* June 14, 1999.

Earlier in this conversation, Anna is the accidental victim in a fight between Kuppanna and Anthony. Anthony was suggesting to Kuppanna that Anna has been unjustly sacrificed. In the passage above, the generic village is transformed into Tamil Nādu. The sacrificial lamb Anna is soon transposed onto the political party TMC [Congress Party of Tamil Nādu]. Moopanaar, who at the time of this article was leader of the TMC, is suggesting that his party is being used as a sacrificial lamb.

The discussion concerning the sacrificial lamb has evolved into the political jousting of the ADMK's leader Jayalalitha. In common parlance, Jayalalitha's fame as a movie star is commonly associated with her political power. The conversation concludes by presenting a model of film. Kuppanna raises the issue of the changing roles that members in Jayalalitha's cabinet perform. How is it that someone who was once a policeman is now a Deputy Commissioner? As is the case with the movies, Kuppanna asserts, an actor plays the role he is given. The differences among folk sayings, movies, politics, and the internal arguments of the interlocutors is a feel for the language of the column.

This sentiment is also the substance of community. The cartoon that comes along with the column presents eight middle aged men. Of these eight men, one is smoking a cigarette. Five are wearing the sacred ash on their foreheads signifying that they are Hindu. One is wearing the traditional Muslim cap and beard signifying that he is Muslim. The other two have no visible marks thereby signifying the possibility that they are Christian. Four men are presented in the background sitting around a table. The other four men are in the foreground. The man on the bench is talking with the man directly to his right. Behind the man on the bench is another man who appears to be interrupting. To the left of the cartoon is the Muslim. His body is positioned away from the conversation and yet he is leaning into the conversation. In the Village, there is no right way to criticize. The men pictured are eavesdropping, interrupting, and being silent.

There is the matter of the picture of the woman in the upper right-hand corner of the cartoon. The fact that the artist makes prominent the nipples on her breasts and bottled beverage on the lower right of the picture suggests that the woman in the picture is naked, or at least partially so. The naked woman also encourages a sense of community. These men are from different backgrounds; and yet they are brought together by common concerns. Between things writing and speech, a Christian and a Muslim and a Hindu, the village and the city, a naked young woman and clothed old men, proverbs and politicians, is writing. In-between is the place of *spoken* Tamil.

This paper is about aural competence and the localities it creates. Tendencies such as "orality and literacy," be they conceptual (Lord 1960; Ong 1982; Goody 1987) or practical (Finnegan 1988) or hopeful (Havelock 1963), are beside the point (Biakolo 1999). *Spoken* is not about how people really speak, it's about how real people write. In Tamil Nādu, writing *comprehends* speech. In Tamil Nādu, this comprehension is a feeling that governs the practice of locality.

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