

Note on Transliteration, Pronunciation, and Translations of Tamil Primary Sources

Besides certain obvious exceptions (such as well-known place names or proper names), I have used the standard transliteration system for Tamil as explained in Beythan (1943) so as to satisfy specialist readers and enable non-specialist readers to pronounce the unfamiliar words they encounter. Similarly, words from other Indian languages have generally been transliterated following the standard conventions for the language in question. The pronunciation of Tamil is approximately as follows:

Vowels

The vowels *a*, *i*, *u*, *e*, *o* are pronounced as in Italian and short unless marked by a macron which denotes long vowels (*ā*, *ī*, *ū*, *ē*, *ō*). It is important always to pay attention to that distinction. *ai* is pronounced as in Engl. *stray*, *au* as in *house*. Word-initial *e/ē* and *o/ō* are pronounced with a glide [jɛ]/[je:] (as in *Yemen* and *Yeats*) and [wɔ]/[wo:] (as in *wombat* and *woe*). Word-final *u* is pronounced short with the lips spread [ʊ], not rounded.

Consonants

The consonants are pronounced approximately as in English with the following exceptions. Double consonants *tt*, *mm*, *pp* etc. always have to

be pronounced distinctly. *ṭ*, *ṇ*, and *ḷ* are retroflex sounds pronounced with the tip of the tongue curved back to touch the hard palate [ʈ], [ṇ], [ʡ]. Intervocally and after nasals, *k*, *t*, *ṭ*, *p* become voiced, e.g., Vētanāyakam [ve:da'na:jagam], Kampan [ˈkamban]. Intervocalical *k* can be softened to *h* as in *akam* [ˈaham]. *ḷ* is pronounced like the *r* in American Engl. *purr*; *ṇ* as in Engl. *pin*. *c* and *cc* are pronounced [tʃ] as in Engl. *match*, but word-initial and intervocalical *c* is often pronounced [s] as in Engl. *sea*, e.g., Caṅkam [ˈsaŋgam]. *ṇ* is the velar nasal *ng* [ŋ] in Engl. *sing*; followed by *k* it is pronounced [ŋg], e.g., *iṅkē* “here” rhymes with English *sing gay*. *ṇ* is pronounced as in Spanish [ɲ] or like Engl. *ny* in *banyan*. *r* and *ṛ* are both trilled as in Spanish, but *ṛṛ* is pronounced somewhat like *tr* in English *tree*, and *ṛṛ* like *ndr* in *laundry*.

Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine. While this book is primarily a historical study of the uses of literature, it is also meant—in its reliance on Tamil primary sources—to be philologically grounded. Many of the texts I discuss below are little known and not easily accessible even to Tamil specialists. I have therefore decided to include quotations from Tamil primary sources at some length. The translations from Tamil I give here do not lay any claim to literary status. Rather than “sounding nice,” they are intended as philologically accurate renderings of the original Tamil text. However, given the present state of affairs in the field of Tamil studies, to attempt such renderings is fraught with many difficulties, particularly when we translate pre-modern texts, such as the works of the poets discussed here. In far too many cases, we still do not really understand these texts well enough and thus cannot afford to change texts in translation simply to make them sound better in English. Also, some of the texts discussed here are literary in a very self-conscious way. Their very essence is to play with language and poetic conventions, to mislead and surprise the reader, to obfuscate and to be ambiguous. Consequently, rather than glossing over these problems, I have decided to address them directly whenever possible. As such discussions of textual minutiae might distract the reader from the general historical argument of the book, they have been kept to a minimum and relegated to a separate appendix where the original Tamil texts of all the primary sources used may be found together with brief annotations. These hopefully fulfill a major philological requirement: to illustrate the translation process and to make my decisions transparent, so that the reader can see why I adopted a particular reading and discarded others. All the original quotations are numbered, and this number is found in square brackets [] in the main text of this book so as to allow for easy reference.

However, when my analysis deals with the language of a particular text (as in the discussion of *cittirakkavi* stanzas in Chapter 2), the original Tamil text had to be quoted in the main text. In the most puzzling of these cases, I have inserted the original Tamil words into the English translation between braces { } in order to show accurately how the original maps onto its English shadow and to reduce some of the violence inherent in any act of translation. I am not sure whether—in adhering to these general guidelines—I have always managed to steer clear of what some have called “Translatorese” or “Indologese” (see e.g. Doniger/Smith 1991: lxxiii). I can only say that I have very much tried to do so. But on the other hand, we still know so little about the semantic and morphological niceties of pre-modern Tamil. Therefore, I am convinced that in cases of doubt greater precision ultimately warrants a slightly less “sexy” translation.



Figure 1.1. His Highness Dambadas Ramachandra Tondaiman Bahadur (1829–1886), painting by Raja Ravi Varma (1879).