

PREFACE

The following book is intended to be a reference tool for those who seek an understanding of the structure of classical Tamil poetry. Classical Tamil poetry reflects indigenous literary and cultural traditions of southern India, and therefore, a study of it is imperative for obtaining a balanced view of India's past and present cultures. The language which produced this poetry, Tamil, is the only living language of modern India that has an uninterrupted history spanning more than two millennia, and therefore, a study of it becomes even more crucial for a thorough understanding of India's linguistic complexity.

I faced a most difficult challenge when writing this book—to approach the task with an open mind about the formal properties of classical Tamil. Once I accomplished a detachment from preconceived notions, a fresh world opened out for me which was the most gratifying experience. Whenever I came across a different linguistic form or whenever I thought of a different way of viewing things, I was truly excited, almost like a child off from school without any assignment, playing in her own yard trying to catch every snowflake at the first snowfall of the season. Indeed, language reflects a dynamic process like the accumulation of snow, but with a difference. It's dimensions constantly change with each influx from every direction but, unlike the snow, it has a perennial, fluid, and diasporic existence in some form or other. And it is possible to catch at least some snowflakes before they merge with the rest, but one has to be there when they reach the earth.

The seed of my passion for Tamil poetry and grammar was sown in high school when I had to memorize along with poetry some verses from a traditional medieval grammatical treatise in Tamil known as the Nannul (*Nannūl*). Thanks to the good old days of learning when most everything was based on memorizing things, whether lovely ancient poetry or dry grammatical rules, these “sounded” nice and that was sufficient reason to commit them to memory. But it was not until I read one of Browning's poems in college, that I was captivated by the perseverance and dedication that grammar could bring to one's character. Browning wrote about a grammarian:

“... ..

Back to his book then: deeper dropped his head:

Calculus racked him:

Leaden before, his eyes grew dross of lead:

Tussis attacked him.

... ..

So, with the throttling hands of death at strife,
Ground he at grammar
Still, through the rattle, parts of speech were rife;
While he could stammer
He settled *Hoti's* business -- let it be! --

... ..

[*The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1974:279–280]

In my case, calculus could not compete with the fascination provided by grammar, literature, and linguistics during my graduate years in Madurai and Philadelphia when I had the opportunity to learn materials more ancient and more modern than *Nannūl*. However, my earlier understanding of Tamil poetry and grammar deepened and took numerous positive turns only when I imparted them to native speakers of Tamil in Madurai and to non-native speakers here in the United States. And it is my Western students and colleagues who alerted me to the lack of a systematic and rigorous tool that would aid them to study classical Tamil. Therefore, my gratitude for the existence of this book starts with my Western friends of Tamil and goes back to my former students and teachers in Madurai.

First I wish to record my gratitude for my teachers who greatly influenced my understanding and appreciation of Tamil poetry and grammar: Mrs. Sarada Krishnamoorthy, Dr. C. Ilakkuvanar, Sri. Avvai Duraisamy Pillai, Sri. A.K. Parantamanar, Dr. Sp. Annamalai, Dr. N. Balusamy, Sri. Kati. Sundaram, Sri. N. Sankaranarayanan, Dr. M. Sundaram, and Dr. Durai Arangasamy.

Writing a book such as this does not just happen without the participation of colleagues and friends who encourage the effort. In the process, I drew upon the expertise of most everyone whom I knew was interested in pre-modern Tamil of Western Linguistics applicable to the study of classical languages. They carefully read through either my original proposal for this volume or sections which developed later into chapters, and always provided useful suggestions. In short, for providing help at crucial junctures to give a momentum and make this volume more user friendly, I thank Ernest Bender (U of Pennsylvania), Rahul Bonner (U of Chicago), George Cardona (U of Pennsylvania), Norman Cutler (U of Chicago), Henry Hoenigswald (U of Pennsylvania), Jim Lindholm (Tamil Language Study Association, Chicago), Leigh Lisker (U of Pennsylvania), J. Neethivanan (Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai), S.

Palaniappan (Dallas), Paula Richman (Oberlin College), Ludo Rocher (U of Pennsylvania), and Franklin Southworth (U of Pennsylvania). I thank Professor A.K. Ramanujan (U of Chicago) and Columbia University Press for giving me permission to use the translation of the classical Tamil poem, *puranānūru* 278, in *Poems of Love and War*, A.K. Ramanujan, 1985, Columbia University Press, New York.

Three colleagues deserve special mention for their very special contribution to this volume and I am indebted to them. For well over a decade, David Ludden has been a constant source of support for my teaching and research at the University of Pennsylvania. He patiently read through the first draft of the entire volume, and his detailed comments contributed to the improved second draft. I am thankful for his continued interest in Tamil. David Shulman (Hebrew University, Jerusalem) enthusiastically read large sections of the second draft and with his brilliant insight provided encouragement to my accomplishment of the pre-publication copy. He also generously provided a poetic translation of a classical Tamil poem, *ainkurunūru* 423, which I have used in the last chapter. I am fortunate for having established an everlasting contact with this star. With his endless patience and flair for poetry, George L. Hart (U of California, Berkeley) translated especially for this volume, a very challenging complex classical Tamil poem, *akanānūru* 9, which appears in the last chapter. As one of the reviewers of the manuscript for publication, he suggested that I expand the chapter on classical Tamil meter. This suggestion gave me an excellent opportunity to provide certain details about classical Tamil poems which I would not otherwise have had in my intention not to overwhelm the readers. I used the Tamil and TimesIndian fonts he has developed for the Apple Macintosh computer for creating the text base and doing the analysis for an ongoing project, of which this volume is a part.

My thanks are also due to the other anonymous reviewer of the manuscript for the American Philosophical Society and to Bruce Perry (U of Pennsylvania) and Elliot Stern (U of Pennsylvania) who originally provided editorial suggestions for improving the manuscript. I thank Jerome H. Bauer (U of Pennsylvania) whose TimesII font enabled me to use certain special Roman characters in this volume and Branavan Ganesan (U of Pennsylvania) who assisted me in drawing the diagrams which appear in the last chapter.

The brilliant suggestions by Richard Cohen, John Mosteller, Rosane Rocher, and Guy Welbon (all at the U of Pennsylvania) turned the task of desk-top publishing into a worthy pursuit. Carol Brecken-

ridge's (Editor, *Public Culture*, University of Pennsylvania) remarkable editing expertise transformed the chore into a labor of love.

I am grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities, and to Ms. Helen Agüera (NEH), for having supported the creation of this volume. I cannot adequately express my gratitude to the Department of South Asia Regional Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, and in particular, the successive chairpersons, Rosane Rocher, Alan Heston, and Arjun Appadurai, for kindly supporting my ongoing project to create a Historical Reference Grammar of pre-modern Tamil. I sincerely thank the American Philosophical Society for publishing this volume in their Memoirs series. It was very pleasant to work with Ms. Carole Le Faivre (Associate Editor, American Philosophical Society) who was patient and generous with her time. I thank her for her meticulous care and guidance.

Two people at the homefront are owed my deepest indebtedness: my grandfather, V.S. Swaminatha Iyer, who initiated my love for Tamil in my childhood by bribing me with mangoes and half-anna coins for memorizing *tirukkural* couplets; and my son Rajkumar who silently and graciously tolerated my lack of attention whenever I had to retreat into my own universe for producing this book later in my life.

Philadelphia, 1992

V.S.R.