The Folk Hero and Class Interests in Tamil Heroic Ballads

By

STUART H. BLACKBURN

Department of South and Southeast Asia Studies
University of California, Berkeley

While various phenomena of folklore are simultaneously claimed by literalists and symbolists, there seems little disagreement that the "hero" is an explicit statement of cultural values. The study of the hero is of immense value to the student of culture, yet comparatively little scholarly attention has been directed to it (and even less in recent years). This paper attempts to show that previously studies have revealed only one class of hero, the courtly, or in India "puranic," hero. The ballads of the Tamil-speaking people of India, however, evidence another type of hero, hereafter the "local hero," who differs from the courtly model precisely because he represents a different social class. The second intent of this paper is to reveal that common assumptions about the evolution of the ballad are inadequate. It has usually been argued that ballads, indeed all folk genres, develop according to impersonal, natural laws. This theory is contradicted by the evidence adduced here and the role of the conscious, human, class-motivated interests is examined.

More specifically, it is this writer's position that the folk hero is one who protects what the folk group values and/or challenges what the group devalues. Hence a bank president is a hero to some groups because he protects what they value—private property—while social revolutionaries are heroized by others because they challenge what oppresses them. Alternately, the validity of the definition is confirmed by the fact that different groups view the same figure differently. For example, the social bandit, a widely distributed hero type (Robin Hood, Gregorio Cortez, Jesse James), represents anarchy and violence to the priveleged classes, but defiance and strength for the lower classes. One Tamil ballad describes how poor folk perceive a bandit condemned by the then British police:

> He passes by the rich with an air of contempt,
> Here comes Jambulingam—our Nadar Jambulingam.
> The rich run helter-skelter to save their skins,
> He frightens the police in broad daylight,
> He leads the poor against the rich,
> He loots the rich to share among the poor,
> Here comes Jambulingam—our Nadar Jambulingam.[1]

If, as our definition posits, it is true that folk heroes reflect the values of the heroizing group, how are we to account for the fact that Hahn, Rank, Raglan, Campbell, et al. have found a relatively stable biographical pattern among heroes of various cultures?[2] First it should be noted that these heroes have been chosen from almost exclusively Caucasian cultures, with a predominant Greek Roman bias. The occasional addition of an Egyptian, Indian or Persian name to avoid just this criticism does little to affect the already established cultural hegemony. It is not surprising then that Oedipus should be the only hero to receive the full 22 points in Raglan's scale. It is even more indicative of the class bias of the scale that of those whose full biographies which were surveyed, the hero who scored the least points is the social bandit—Robin Hood. The bias of these "comparative" studies was demonstrated without even crossing the Bosporus when Alfred Nutt applied Hahn's criteria to Celtic material and found it wanting.[3]

The biographical patterns of these heroes are similar not only because they have been selected from one tradition, but also because they represent the values of one segment of society. The congruence among their class values is in fact greater than the divergence between their cultures. They are the aristocrats of courtly society—the princes, knights, religious leaders and titled persons. Indeed, the very biographical motifs from the hero patterns reveal this slant rather clearly. "The hero's mother is a royal mother," "The hero is usually ... the son of a king," "He marries a princess," "His father is a king," "becomes a king."[4]

---

1. Nā. Vānamāmalai, "Dacoits and Robbers in Tamil Ballads," *Folklore*, (Calcutta), (Feb. 1971), p. 66.

2. For a good summary of these hero studies see Archer Taylor's "The Biographical Pattern in Traditional Narrative," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* (Bloomington), 1, (1964), pp. 114–129. Citations for each of the studies may be found there. References for Raglan are from *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama* (New York: 1956). A study which the Taylor article does not survey is Jan de Vries *Heroic Song and Heroic Legend* (London: 1963). All these citations with editorial comments may be also found in Alan Dundes, *The Study of Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs: 1965), pp. 142–4.

3. Alfred Nutt, "The Arayan Expulsion-and-Return Formula in the Folk and Hero Tales of the Celts," *The Folklore Record*, 4 (1881), pp. 1–44.

4. Raglan, pp. 174–5; Taylor, pp. 115–6.

This prejudice is prominent also in folk hero studies from the Indian tradition. Like everything else in Indian studies, folklore research has been overwhelmingly based on classical, almost exclusively Sanscritic, and largely literary sources. Moreover, the fact that many early Sanscritists came from Classical studies made the jump from Perseus to Krishna easy. Thus Bloomfield's 1913 monograph on Mūladeva, the trickster of tricksters of Sanscrit fiction, and von Buitenen's 1950 article on the hero are based entirely on classical traditions and suggest that the courtly hero is the "Indian hero".[5] N. K. Sidhanta's 1930 study of heroic lore is a warmed over version of Bowra à la India and thus deals only with puranic materials.[6] Kailasapathy's 1968 study of Tamil heroic poetry, Parry and Lord applied to South India, is one of the few studies to treat Tamil material, but it is confined to literary sources only.[7]

Predictably it was the civil servants who actually lived in India and knew local languages who collected heroic ballads from non-Sanscritic sources. But the heroes of these minor epics, e.g., Raju Rasalu and Gopi Chand, are only variants of the courtly model exemplified by Krishna and Rama.[8]

This puranic hero as an Indian parallel to the Hahn-Raglan hero would seem a neat observation were it not for the existence of another hero type. This hero is largely unknown because there is a connection between those classes that patronize the puranic hero and those that control the institutions of learning, publishing houses and other means of communication. If we know that scholars have neglected folklore generally, it is understandable that, identifying with the classes represented

---

5. Hans von Buitenen, "The Indian Hero as Vidyāhara," *JAF* 71 (July–Sept. 1958), pp. 305–311; Maurice Bloomfield, "The Characters and Adventures of Mūladeva," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 52, No. 208 (Jan.–April 1913), pp. 616–650.

6. N. K. Sidhanta, *The Heroic Age of India—A Comparative Study* (New York: 1930).

7. K. Kailasapathy, *Tamil Heroic Poetry* (Oxford: 1968).

8. R. C. Temple, *Legends of the Punjab*, 3 vols. (London: 1884–1901), vol. 3. x–xiv. (Contains Temple's early typology of his heroes); G. A. Grierson, "Two Versions of the Song of Gopi Chand," *Journal Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 54, pt. 1 (1885), pp. 135–238; Mary Longsworth-Dames, *Popular Poetry of the Baloches* (London: 1907); D. C. Sen, *Eastern Bengal Ballads*, 4 vols. (Calcutta: 1923–32). A later article by Grierson, "The Popular Literature of Northern India," *Bulletin of School of Oriental Studies*, 1:3 (1920), pp. 87–122, describes the ballad of Hir and Ranjha as the most popular in Northern India and one which runs counter to all caste prejudice in the Punjab. This is important because it indicates that lovers crossing the caste barriers are heroized in parts of India other than the Tamil region (see also footnote 29).

by the puranic hero, they would ignore the local hero even more.

As the protector of the lower classes, the local hero necessarily differs from the puranic hero in the content of his acts. While the puranic hero protects the chastity of princesses or does battle for the king, the local hero protects cattle or crops of the village. While the puranic hero challenges forces that threaten to upset the status quo of the kingdom, the local hero opposes casteism and social injustice. Further, the heroism of the local hero is a function of his humaness, not his approximation of a god as with the puranic hero.[9] Thus the local hero, unlike the puranic, has little recourse to magic, divine intervention or the supernatural in his exploits. Likewise, questions of fate, re-incarnation, and astrological calculations affect little the life of the local hero.

Before examining the local hero in Tamil ballads, certain introductory information would be useful. Heroism is deeply rooted in the cultural traditions of the 40 million plus Tamil speakers in southern India. Their earliest literature, dating from the first centuries A.D., contains 400 poems in the heroic mode and reveals an extraordinary preoccupation with honor and the intrinsic value of a warrior's death. Corpses were slashed to give the appearance of a death from combat and one poem proudly describes a mother, having found her son's mutilated body among those fallen on the battlefield, as more joyful than on the day she birthed him.[10] In another poem a king ritually starves himself to death because he is ashamed that he was wounded in the back. Thus, to claim an heroic age for the Tamils is ungainsayable. Yet the heroes remain within the priveleged classes, the kings and generals, that patronized the literature, which itself is courtly and classical and not of the oral tradition.

Luckily veneration of heroes has been preserved in Tamil areas by other means—hero stones set up as monuments to fallen warrious and propitiated according to proscribed rites. Inscriptions etched in these stones, some as recent as the 13th century, have been published and provide us with more information about the heroes.[11] Significantly, here,

---

9. C. M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (London: 1952), p. 5. Relevant to our discussion, Bowra qualifies this view later (p. 94): "The greatest heroes are thought to be so wonderful that they cannot be wholly human but must have something divine about them." This tendency to identify the hero is part of the process we have termed "puranicization."

10. George Hart, *The Poems of Ancient Tamil* (Berkeley: 1975), p. 88.

11. Vānamāmalai, "Hero Stones and Folk beliefs," *Journal of Tamil Studies* (Madras) 2 (1972), pp. 37–44. See also R. Nagaswamy's *Cenkam Naṭurkal* (Dept. of Archeology Madras n.d.) which contains inscriptions of more than 60 hero stones.

too, there are two classes of heroes. One is from the puranic tradition, the king, general, courtier who fell fighting for his king or kingdom; and the other is a local hero, a watchman, a common foot solider or common citizen who died defending against marauders, cattle-lifters or robbers. Here is the origin of the local hero tradition which has survived in oral ballads. That these ancient local heroes suffered death at the hands of cattle-raiders forges a strong link to the local heroes of the latter ballads. Two of the most popular ballads recount how the hero dies in the same manner. One dies defending against cattle-raiders and the other defending a city against robbers.

I propose now to survey the ballads in order to, first, delineate the local hero and, second, to show how this type is transformed toward the puranic model. The story of the Ballad of Mutuppaṭṭan, hereafter Mutuppaṭṭan, is as follows: Mutuppaṭṭan, one of five Brahmin brothers, quarrels with his family and leaves to seek his fortune elsewhere. After finding employment in a nearby kingdom, his brothers seek him out to marry him off to a particular girl so that the family will acquire certain property rights. They find him and convince him to return. On his return, however, he is mesmerized by the singing of two women. He runs to them, declaring his love for them, and pleads with them to marry him. As members of an untouchable caste, Paṛaiyar, they are shocked and, since he could only be joking, insulted at his play. The energy of the narrative, which has building up to this scene, bursts with their dramatic reply, "You are like the great Śiva himself, my Lord! Would the earth bear our impurity?[12] With this, they run away and tell their father who, angry at the Brahmin's joke, starts out to punish him. He comes upon Muttuppaṭṭan who has fallen down with dispair and exhaustation after unsuccessfully chasing the women. Mutuppaṭṭan explains that he is serious. The father is shocked, but moved by his sincerity and agrees to the marriage if Mutuppaṭṭan performs certain tasks: cutting off his sacred thread and top knot (the symbols of his Brahmin birth), transport the carcass of a dead cattle, skin the body and sew sandals from the hide (all the work of the Paṛaiyar untouchables). Muttuppaṭṭan completes the tasks, in effect renouncing his Brahmin birth and becoming an untouchable, and marries the women. He is sleeping blissfully on his marriage night when a messenger comes and informs him that raiders are stealing his father-in-law's cattle. Despite the protests of his wives, he leaves to do battle with the intruders and slays

---

12. *Muttuppaṭṭan Katai* (ed. Nā. Vānamālai) (Madurai: 1971), p. 36.

them all, except one. The survivor conceals himself in a bush and when
Muttuppaṭṭan turns away kills him with a lance. The wives mourn his
death and go to a nearby king to ask permission to light a funeral pyre.
He refuses and tried to entice them to join his harem. They manage
to leave and join their husband on the fire and all are transported to
Śiva's heaven.

The skeleton story is universal—journey to another land, tasks per-
formed for marriage, villain/monster slain. However, in contrast to
puranic stories, the tasks are skipped over almost completely and the
battle commands but a few lines. More important is the astonishing
fact that none of the 22 biographical motifs which define the courtly hero
in Raglan's scale is found in this ballad. Muttupaṭṭan a very different
hero, the local hero par excellence whose heroism is essentially the re-
nunciation of the very thing which would connect him to the courtly
world of the puranic hero: his Brahmin status. Moreover, his marriage
to the untouchable women strikes at the very heart of the caste hierarchy
which the puranic heroes and their patrons benefit from and support.
Finally, he is a hero because, like those commemorated in the stone
inscriptions, he defended against marauding cattle thieves, protecting
the property of his untouchable father-in-law.

Cinnatampi is another local hero who is venerated in Tamil ballads.
His heroism is that he saved his village from famine because he drove
off the mountain pigs that threatened the crops. He is an untouchable,
but is rewarded for his valor with the post of local watchman. This is
the traditional calling of another, higher caste whose members become
jealous of his power and kill him.

There are several other local hero ballads which should be sum-
marized briefly. The Kātavarāyan ballad is the reverse of Muttuppaṭṭan;
he is an untouchable who is seduced by and elopes with a Brahmin
woman. He, too, is later killed by caste prejudice. Kautalamāṭan is a
Muslim youth who defends the rights of an untouchable woman against
sexual harassment from higher castes and dies for it. Cinnanāṭān is a
hero who is ritually betrothed to a child bride for reasons of property
interitance, but lives with a low-caste woman. His family tolerates this
until it is time to consummate the childhood marriage and acquire
the proper rights. Cinnanāṭān refuses to desert his lover and is treacher-
ously slain by his own family. Pallicciyammān is a tribal woman who
comes down from the hills to meet per Hindu lover. They are both
killed because they transgressed sex-caste norms.

Also, Tamil possesses a number of historical ballads, of more recent

origin, whose protagonists are local heroes writ large for all segments of Tamil society because they die fighting against the military invasions of the British. Finally, the social bandit type claims three ballads in Tamil and represents the local hero by his defiance of social authority.

Two important observations emerge from this survey of the ballads. First, none of the heroes can claim even one of Raglan's points. Secondly, every one of them is venerated for protecting the interests of the lower classes and/or opposing sexual and caste norms that oppress them.

Omitted from this survey is perhaps the most popular of all Tamil ballads, Madurai Vīran (The Hero of Madurai), hereafter Vīran. I introduce it here because it affords an instructive comparison with Muttuppaṭṭan through which we can now approach our second goal—examination of the development from the local to the puranic hero. Vīran is an untouchable who elopes with a higher caste woman whose father, a local king, sends an army to retrieve her. Vīran defeats them and is called to Madurai to defend against robbers who are plundering within the walled city itself. This he does and is honored. But then the story takes a strange twist. Vīran is caught making off with one of the King's women and is summarily quartered. Later, learning who it is that he has ordered quartered, the repentant King requests a goddess to restore his limbs. This is done, but Vīran is unhappy and declares that he must die as he has sinned in a previous birth. Later he is unhappy because propiatory rites are not performed satisfactorily. On the goddess' advice, he communicates this to the king in a dream and the latter arranges a daily worship and Vīran becomes deified.

Vīran is essentially a local hero (the only Raglan point he scores, his marriage to the king's daughter, is, in fact, a defiance of the caste hierarchy of the puranic, courtly world). Moreover, the core of the story is quite similar to the Muttupaṭṭan story, the model for the local hero story: the hero crosses sex and caste barriers, defends against robbers and is killed. This is the essence of Vīran's heroism and the reason he is considered a hero by local audiences. Yet, embellishments in style and content have so obscured this that the ballad presents a world very different from that of Muttuppaṭṭan.

Most obviously, the physical setting of Vīran, largely in three courts, is quite different from that of Muttuppaṭṭan which, except for two short scenes, remains in the village, in the fields, and in the hut of the untouchable. Consequently, the personnae in Vīran are kings, ministers, courtiers and princesses, while in Muttuppaṭṭan all the main characters are untouchables (except the hero who eventually becomes one).

In fact, the very heroes themselves represent different personalities though their social acts are similar to the local hero type. The bold, swashbuckling, amorous, daring, sometimes suprahuman Vīran is much closer to Bloomfield's Mūladeva, the Sanscrit puranic hero, than is Muttuppaṭṭan.[13] Vīran seduces women, changes into a fly to enter bedchambers, sprinkles magic powder to cause watchmen to fall asleep, while Muttuppaṭṭan remains a common man who, though beautiful, is extraordinary because of his revolutionary act.

Other elements in Vīran which are conspicuous by their absence in Muttuppaṭṭan and the other local hero ballads include the use of magic by the hero, references to and appearances by gods, hyperbolic descriptions of armies, battles, and the arming of the hero. There are also subtle differences in style which are best seen by comparing translations of similar episodes. Here is a translation of the battle scenes from Vīran:

> Leaping into the ranks of the elephants like a yāli,
> Leaping into the ranks of the army like a small tiger,
> He came and surrounded these inferior armies,
> All the armies broke rank and ran there.
> All the king's armies are dying away,
> Scattering a thousand in front,
> Scattering a thousand behind.
> All the armies thought they were dying then,
> They were "our life is going because of the king."
> They were lamenting as they were dying then,
> Look, like a rain of flowers upon the Lord,
> Vīran continued on against the wicked king's troops.
> And he bravely cut them up into pieces then.[14]

Another section repeats lines 1–6 and then continues:

> That terrible Vīran laid them completely low,
> All the thieves' armies lost their consciousness.
> Body weakened, they fell saying, "it's the hand of fate."
> Crying to Great Śiva for refugee, they fell.
> All the gods were happily watching him there,
> The Vīran who had conquered all the armies that day.
> Eminent in the four directions, Vīran sat in state,
> Look, he victoriously comes atop the white elephant![15]

The only battle scene from Muttuppaṭṭan is as follows:

> Some he cut and killed with his sword.

    13. Bloomfield, p. 619.
    14. *Maṭurai Vīra Cāmi Katai* (The story of God Madurai Vīran) (Madras: 1972), p. 44.
    15. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

> Some he killed stabbing with his spear.
> Some he cut down, letting out a howl,
> Some he smashed, destroyed and cut down,
> Some, wounded, cried, "don't cut me",
> Some, wounded by the dagger,
> Stabbed themselves, losing wife and fame,
> Some lost their arms and their trunk.[16]

The contrast between the repetition of the phrase "thousand" in Vīran and "some" in Muttuppaṭṭan points up a difference both in setting and style. In the first ballad, the scope is greater, armies clash, and the hyperbolic "thousand" is frequent. In the second, there is a clash of individuals and the description is more realistic and concrete. Also, the comparison of Vīran to the yāli, a mythical animal, and the references to fate and gods illustrate the puranic style of that ballad. The Vīran battle creates an aura of phantasmagoria, while Muttuppaṭṭan focuses on detail in a brisk, action-oriented narrative.

A comparison of description of another episode, the marriage, reveals further this stylistic variance. Here is the Vīran passage:

> Great Siva and Mother Parvati with her herd,
> And the 30 million sages and gods,
> And the elephant-faced Pillaiyar, son of Siva,
> They all plaited various yellow threads
> Around this marriage badge, seen by all.
> Taking sandal wood paste and correctly applying it,
> And sitting Pillaiyar on his shrine,
> Bringing sacred grass and showering dear Pillaiyar
> With flowers, greatly worshipping and praising,
> Placing the correct marriage badge before his feet,
> They all bowed and paid obeisance.
> They lit incense from the sacred tree
> While the gods watched happily.
> And then the lion-like Vīran
> Carefully took the threaded marriage badge,
> And bowing down towards the gods
> Repeating "Siva, Siva", that Vīran
> Placed it on the woman's lovely neck.[17]

A similar scene from Muttuppaṭṭan translates thus:

> Leaving the marriage room, the two women blessed with fortune,
> Wearing bangles, beads, ear ornaments, annointed with sandal paste,
> A tilak on their forehead, penciled eyes and nose rings,
> And the affectionate Muttuppaṭṭan were placed in the marriage dais
> After singing for a full nāli* they brought in Pillaiyar

16. *Muttuppaṭṭan Katai*, p. 44.
17. *Vīran*, p. 33.
* a nāli equals 24 minutes.

And with the moon, sun and gods as witnesses, Muttuppaṭṭan
Tied the marriage badge on the necks of Timmakkā and Pommakkā.[18]

Although both these passages contain the same basic elements,
Pillaiyar, the tying of the marriage badge and presence of the gods, I
hope the greater importance given to the deities and the more high
blown style in Vīran is clear in the translations.

Finally, we can look at one more episode from these two ballads,
the wife grieving over her dead husband's body. In Vīran, the wife
comes looking for him and finds him having been quartered at the king's
order:

Walking like a swan, she came close and stood,
Looking at Vīran she heaved and heaved in tears,
"Is this what I, sinful one, came to find you for?
Did I come to see your arms and legs cut off?
Oh, I was not aware of what was written (fate),
Oh, my Lord, who did this crime to you?
Oh, my King, is there someone to remember your line?"
As Pommi (his wife) lamented thus angrily,
Her husband opened his mouth and spoke to her,
"Oh, my Queen, can even Śiva or Vishnu
Change what has been written?
No one can destroy what has been written"[19]

In Muttuppaṭṭan the wives find the hero dead from a wound in
the back:

Beating themselves they fell down in the dust,
Pained, they threw down the rice and the pot,
They beat their stomachs hurting the spleen,
They picked him up and held him to their chest,
"The tilak* hasn't worn off, the mark hasn't faded!
The smell hasn't been taken down, the people haven't gone!"[20]

(the passage continues with a number of similar lines, all to express the
extreme suddeness of the death of their new husband.)

In the Vīran passage the dramatic intensity of grief is transformed
into a sermon on the inexorable nature of fate. The bard manipulates
the situation to pontificate about one of the ideological underpinnings
of puranic culture. This is particularly instructive because we know
that one of the tendencies of the puranic ballad is to subordinate
the powers of humans to that of the gods. Again, in contrast, the
Muttuppaṭṭan passage is detailed, realistic and avoids any mention of

18. *Muttuppaṭṭan*, p. 41.
19. *Vīran*, p. 62.
* mark placed on bride's forehead during marriage.
20. *Muttuppaṭṭan*, p. 46.

gods or fate. Instead, the actions of the women closely resemble true lamentation in Tamil culture and the poet uses a moving series of statements implicity expressing the tragedy of murder on the marriage night.[21]

Having compared the ballads in terms of setting, characters, plot and style, it remains to examine the point of view. Since the central focus in both ballads, somewhat obscured in Vīran, is the highly charged theme of inter-caste sex, the point of view of the narration could significantly alter the perception of the action. More specifically, the ballad's attitude toward the untouchables, or Chakkilis, reveals its class identity and that of its patrons. In Vīran, for example, the untouchables are first introduced by their caste name, Chakkili, and are repeatedly referred to as such throughout the story (although Vīran's father's name is occasionally used, partially out of deference for his age). Also, Vīran's Chakkili caste stigma is precisely what terrifies the chieftain's daughter when he pleads with her to make love with him. At one point, she wails, "Am I fated to be spoiled by a Chakkili?"[22] In this scene the poet achieves dramatic tension by exploiting the fears, anger and anxiety that this "black rapist" threat represents to the upper classes. It is only after Vīran convince that he was only raised by Chakkilis, and is actually of noble birth himself, that she consents.

This contrasts neatly with the point of view in Muttuppaṭṭan. There the only use of the term "Chakkili" occurs when the untouchables themselves use it to thwart Muttuppaṭṭan's intentions—a remarkable attempt to utilize the caste prejudice against them for their own ends. Otherwise, throughout the ballad the women and the other Chakkilis are referred to by personal name. In fact, at the marriage, the names of the Chakkili guests are reeled off in catalogue fashion—a congregation of impurities that would cause a courtly audience to shrink in horror! Moreover, the feelings and thoughts of the Chakkilis are expressed through their own articulations. By contrast, in Vīran, we learn about the Chakkilis from statements of others, high caste people who, like the king's daughter, are afraid of their impure touch.

Muttuppaṭṭan encourages us to emphathize with the Chakkilis (as the translations show) in their joy in marriage and grief at death. The sense of identity with them is perhaps most dramatically revealed when

21. Bowra, pp. 8–13, states that the lament, as a genre, has a close connection to the evolution of the heroic genre.
22. Vīan, p. 30. Another printed version of the story as a drama (*Maturai Vīra Nāṭakam*, n.d.) emphasizes this fear of defilement at the hands of an untouchable.

the father meets Muttuppaṭṭan. Looking at the outcaste, whose very touch would defile him, the Brahmin Muttuppaṭṭan addresses him, "Oh, dear maternal uncle!" Thus the Chakkilis become fully human, sympathetic beings, whereas in Vīran they remain dark shadows behind the opprobrious label "Chakkili."

This contrast between the two ballads is also revealed in the heroes' act of renunciation and the subsequent movement of the plot. The untouchable Vīran renounces his Chakkili birth to marry the princess, while Muttuppaṭṭan renounces his Brahmin birth to marry two Chakkilis. After Vīran's renunciation the story steadily moves away from his low-caste home, his parents and toward the court. After Mutuppaṭṭan's repudiation of his Brahmin birth the story moves to the hut of the Chakkilis and remains there.

Another significant difference lies in the beginnings of the ballads. Vīran follows the traditional Indian puranic and universal heroic pattern and begins with a detailed section regarding the circumstances of his birth and youth. Muttuppaṭṭan and all the other local hero ballads in Tamil begin in medias res and proceed directly to the action.

Likewise, the final scenes, the death and funeral, in Vīran reveal its puranic nature (see translations, p. 138). There the acceptance of fate, of what has been "written," is the theme and the scene proliferates with gods and goddesses. These elements are absent in the Muttuppaṭṭan funeral scene which takes only 13 lines compared to more than 100 in Vīran.[23]

Another post-mortem motif found in Vīran and not in Muttuppaṭṭan is the propitiation of a soul wrongfully killed in order to prevent it from taking revenge. This is widespread in Indian, and particularly Tamil, folklore and is found even in the two great literary Tamil epics.[24] Its

23. Wm. Hugh Jansen, "The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore," in Dundes, pp. 43–56.

24. The epics are *Cilapatikkāram* and *Maṇimēkalai* (The former has been ably translated by V. R. Ramachandra Dikshitar, *The Silapatikkaram* (London: 1939), and S. Krishnaswami Aiyangar has summarized the second in *Manimekalai in Its Historical Setting* (London: 1928). In addition, an article by K. P. S. Hameed ("Structural Pattern of Two Traditional Narratives in Tamil," in R. A. Asher, ed., *Proceedings of the Second International Conference—Seminar of Tamil Studies* [Madras: 1971], 1, pp. 196–204) shows that this motif of exacting revenge is also part of another epic, *Nīkalkēci*. Emeneau's vast collections of tribal folklore in S. India reveals only one example of this motif—a dead man demands proper funeral rites (cf. Vīran), *Kota Texts, University of California Publications in Linguistics*, II (1946), pp. 196/7–198/9. As a final note, this seems to be a prevalent folk belief in S. India as there are numerous Māta Sāmi temples in the southern districts of Tamilnatu erected to appease the soul of one unjustly killed.

presence in Vīran, where it is the focus of the last 350 lines, and absence
in Muttuppaṭṭan is further evidence of puranic accretions in the former.

To this point we have delineated the puranic and local hero types,
the first purpose of this article, illustrating differences in style and plot.
We have also noted a difference in movement of the plot away from
Chakkili life to courtly life. This part of the transformation of a ballad
from the local to puranic models, is the second purpose of this article. To
describe this process more carefully, we return to the fact that Vīran
commences with the standard puranic motif of the miraculous birth and
youth of the hero.

This motif in Vīran is a later addition, however, and has the effect
of redirecting the entire story, in essence that of a local hero, toward
the puranic model. Vīran is said to be actually born of Brahmin parents
who abandoned him in the woods because there were omens that he
would bring ruin to the kingdom. Then, we are told, he is found and
raised by the Chakkili family with whom he is associated in the rest of
the story. This falsified heritage for the hero earns him three new Raglan
points (royal father, virgin mother, and abandonment) and brings him
into agreement with the principal features of Hahn's Aryan expulsion
and return formula.

The various details of Vīran's new birth (omen of calamity, aban-
donment in the forest) are common in Indian folklore and provide the
means by which a local ballad may be transformed into a more puranic
story. Moreover, this insertion of a Brahminical birth is particularly
connected with "puranization" because it cancels the essence of the
ballad, the daring defiance of the social system. Suppression of such
defiance of sex-caste rules is crucial because it is what threatens the
patrons of puranic lore most. Other additions which we have noted in
Vīran, emphasis on fate, dharmic order, and the influence of gods, serve
to nullify another aspect of the local hero, the belief in the efficacy of
human actions, and contribute to puranization.

It is significant that these several puranic insertions occur, primarily,
at the beginning and end of the ballads where such additions are easiest.
Indeed, if these insertions are not addition, but part of the original story,
we have to believe that the story was about how a Chakkili was, in fact,
not a Chakkili. In other words, the purpose of the ballad, we must be-
lieve, was to nullify itself. More importantly, the substituted birth is not
confined to Vīran; the same device is used in other ballads to precisely
the same ends.

Kāttavarāyan is like Vīran, an untouchable who marries a Brahmin

woman. However, there is a section inserted (less skillfully than in Vīran) in the middle of the story which explains that he is, in fact, not an untouchable, but a celestial who suffered a curse by Śiva. This forced him to be born in the guise of an untouchable and commit this terrible sin, i.e., marrying a Brahmin, for which he is righteously murdered. Since he is actually of divine origin, the miscegenation is an illusion and his murderers are exonerated because it was a god's decree that he should die. This also neatly removes the threat of the unjustly killed soul taking revenge on the murderers.

This third and most conclusive instance of the use of this insertion device to purge the local hero ballad of its threat to high castes and transform it into a more acceptable puranic model is Muttuppaṭṭan itself. The version I summarized above is the standard version of the ballad, but the research of Vānamāmalai has revealed that certain sung versions show variance.[25] In the oral renditions of the ballad performed for a festival at a temple, mentioned in the text itself, the cross-caste sex is eliminated by a substituted birth. It is sung that a cow of a Brahmin falls into a well and dies. Learning of this, the Brahmin goes to Benares to atone for his greatest of sins (death of a cow). His wife, left behind, performs various penances to remove guilt from him. Śiva answers her prayers by causing her to birth two children. Since her husband is away, she fears the village will assume illicit sex and abandons them in a forest. A snake protects the children and eventually a Chakkili comes, takes them home and raises them. The children are given the names Timmakkā and Pommakkā, the women whom Muttuppaṭṭan later marries. Thus, the Chakkili women whom the Brahmin Muttuppaṭṭan marries, are not, in fact, Chakkilis, but Brahmins.

Noting these important differences, Vānamāmalai went to interview the singer of this version in whose family the ballad has been sung for at least three generations. The singer admitted that pressure from high caste patrons of the festival at which he sings forced him to introduce these changes.

It is more than coincidental that this substituted birth section is exactly the same as that in Vīran. Even the incident of the snake raising its hood to protect the abandoned child from the sun is found in both ballads.[26] More importantly, the function of the additions in both ballads

---

25. *Muttuppaṭṭan*, pp. 15–16.
26. This motif is also found in an oral ballad adaptation of the Cilapati-kkāram (see: Brenda Beck, "The study of a Tamil Epic; Several Versions of Silappadikkaram Compared," *Journal of Tamil Studies*, 1 (1972), p. 33).

is identical, i.e., to cancel the inter-caste sex of the local hero ballad. It is interesting that in both stories it is the low-caste member of the pair of lovers, the untouchable Vīran and the women in Muttuppaṭṭan, who is given the new birth. One might ask why the alternative strategy was not used, e.g., giving a low status birth to the high caste member. The answer, I feel, lies simply in the fact that these ballads, whether by patronage pressure or by a "natural" process, tend to approach a puranic model, and a story about two low-caste, here untouchable, lovers would certainly not be that.

Before considering the implications of this puranization by sub-stituted birth, I will discuss another heroic ballad (Tēcinku Rājan) in order to, by comparison, put Vīran and Muttuppaṭṭan and puraniza-tion in better perspective. The story of Tēcinku Rājan is that the Mughal Emperor in Delhi invites all his tributaries to his court to try to mount a celestial, magical, swift horse. The father of Tēcinku goes and, with the others, fails and is consequently jailed. When Tēcinku attains maturity he goes to Delhi, successfully rides the horse and wins his father's release. Tēcinku returns to the south and becomes ruler of a petty kingdom under the Emperor and his subordinates in the area. Later the Emperor sends an army against Tēcinku because he has not paid tribute. Tēcinku is valorous in battle, but because his best friend, a Muslim, is treacherously killed, he loses heart and kills himself.[27]

The motif of the magical horse and the task it presents dominates the story and thus we have a very conventional ballad about a prince who marries a princess, performs tasks, and dies nobly in battle against the tyrant. Further, all the puranic elements which were found in Vīran, and absent or minor in Muttuppaṭṭan, are prominent. Tēcinku is often found in worship, the god of a large, influential temple is a key figure and the action shifts between spacious courts and battlefields. Still, however, there are features which place it within the general local hero tradition. The hero's friendship with a Muslim in this ballad is significant because in it all Muslims are portrayed as infidels and the very thought of their entry into a Hindu temple rouses anger. Such a challenge to prevailing social rules is the mark of the local hero. Secondly, his bold defiance of the Emperor is a rallying call for the other petty chiefs to assert their independence from foreign domination. Thus, we may de-

---

27. *Tēcinku Rājan Katai* (Madras: 1972). The remainder of the heroic ballads in Tamil are of this puranic, war-historical type: *Irammappa Ammanai, Kāncākipu Ivarrāsākal, Kaṭṭupommu, Marutu, Palācirāja, Katai, Iravikkuṭṭi Pillai Pōr Katai.*

scribe him as a character performing actions of the local hero on a large
scale. He is a local hero to the other chieftains just as Muttuppaṭṭan is
to the villagers. Hence, a continuum runs from the local hero of
Muttuppaṭṭan to the more puranicized Vīran to the fully puranicized
local hero Tēcinku.

Another aspect of this puranic transformation is the geographical
spread of the ballad as it "puranicizes." This is revealed on three differ-
ent levels for the three ballads Muttuppaṭṭan, Vīran and Tēcinku.
In the first ballad, for example, the action is restricted to an area equal
perhaps to a small county, and never enters a large kingdom; in the
second the area is many times larger, encompassing two well-known king-
doms; and in the third the action covers the entire continent from the
south to Delhi (the very seat of Imperial power).

On another level, the spread of the ballad is indicated by the rela-
tive spread of the cult of the deified hero. Thus, Muttuppaṭṭan is still
worshipped (under another name, given in the ballad) in certain small
temples which appear in the song itself. Vīran, however, has become the
object of a cult spread across the entire Tamil-speaking area. Finally,
though he is not deified, Tēcinku's ballad is sung not only in the Tamil
region, but in a neighboring linguistic region as well.

On a third level, the relative geographical range of the deities pro-
minent in the ballad also corresponds to the range of the ballad itself.
The most important god in Muttuppaṭṭan is Corimuttu, a very localized
god whose cult is restricted to the area described in the ballad. While
there is no one deity prominent in Vīran, references to Śiva are numerous
and there also occurs a list of kings and kingdoms that indicates the
spread of the ballad. In Tēcinku, the central god is Rankanātan, an
influential god associated with an influential temple in a large city.

An examination of this geographical factor helps us to understand
why the local hero remains local. Because the nature of his heroism
earns the veneration of lower caste peoples, the local hero will not be
patronized by courts, nor the cults of the court. This means the range
of his ballad will not extend beyond the local area. Conversely, a ballad
which praises a widespread cult, like that of Rankanātan is more mobile
because it can garner the patronage of temple and court. Here then is
the explanation for the predominance of the puranic or courtly type in
international folklore scholarship on the hero.

This sociological aspect of the transformation process is worthy of
a separate study itself. We have noted the role of patronage and class
interests in puranization, but it is also noteworthy that the transforma-

tion of heroes from one type to another is relatively facile in Indian society as compared with other social structures. Bowra's scheme, for example, which bifurcates "primitive" heroic poetry into "proletarian" and "aristocratic" poetry would not be conducive to such an easy transformation because the bifurcated traditions do not share a common culture. In India, however, Coomaraswamy has described how the folk-classical continuum rests on a substrata of a shared culture and differentiated economic status only.[28] Consequently, the movement of the local hero to the tatus of the puranic hero is eased by the particular fluidity of the dēsi (folk)-marga (classical) continuum in India.

To recapitulate what has been presented here, the hero of most of the heroic ballads in Tamil, or the local hero, does not conform to any of the biographical patterns of heroes in Raglan, Hahn, Rank, De Vries or Campbell. Rather these standard biographies describe more accurately another class of Indian hero, the puranic hero. The closer the local hero approaches the puranic, the closer he approaches the models of Raglan et al. The points of contrast between the local and puranic hero may be schematically summarized as follows:

Puranic Hero/Ballad	*Local Hero/Ballad*
1. Hero high-caste, usually son of a king.	1. Hero low-caste, usually untouchable.

la. substituted birth for local hero
gives him high birth of puranic hero.

2. Protects social order, interests of priveleged classes.	2. Defies social order, protects interests of low classes.
3. Role of magic, supernatural, fate important.	3. Role not important.
4. Role of deities, Brahmins important.	4. Role not important.
5. Associated with widely spread deity.	5. Associated with local deity.
6. Action focuses on court and battlefield.	6. Action focuses on village, low-caste quarter.
7. Point of view external to low-caste life.	7. Point of view internal to low-caste life.

---

28. A. K. Coomaraswamy, "The Nature of 'Folklore' and 'Popular Art'," *Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society* (Bangalore) 27 (July–Aug. 1936), pp. 1–12. Also printed in *Indian Arts and Letters*, II: 2 (1937), pp. 76–84.

After delineating these two types of heroes, we analyzed the process by which the local hero ballad became transformed into the puranic type. Transformation of this kind has been traditionally regarded as the result of the anonymous processes of history. However, the Tamil ballads present us with another force, more human and more conscious. The transformation in Tamil ballads proceeds not only according to "laws," but also according to human class interests. Indeed, as we have seen, the most crucial and influential changes in these ballads have resulted from this pressure.

Other research in India has shown that the role of class interests is not an eccentricity of the Tamil region. As one example, D.C. Sen has demonstrated that Brahminical orthodoxy has suppressed the same threats to ex-caste rules in Bengali ballads that are found in the Tamil material.[29] Beyond India, Paredes' study of Gregorio Cortez provides a fascinating parallel. Not onl ydoes this hero of the border corridos conform to our definition of the local Tamil hero, but in a passing note we learn that the only Anglo-American version portrays him as a common criminal.[30] From what we have found in India it is entirely predictable that this local hero of Mexican-Americans would become a mere horse thief in the eyes of the dominent culture whose values he challenged. The lack of further data of this nature is only the result of the class bias of folklore and folklorists themselves who seek such explanations.[31]

Developing out of the scientism (Marx, Freud, Darwin) of the 19th

29. D. C. Sen, II, p. 5; IV, p. 367. Other studies re: the folk hero in India available to me in translation are all from South India: K. K. N. Kurup, "The Cult of Teyyam and Hero Worship," *Folklore* (Cal.) 14:1 (Jan. 1973), pp. 1–25; 2 (Feb. 1973), pp. 45–69; 3 (March 1973), pp. 85–101; N. V. Kamesvara and V. Sundaresan, "Hero in Andhra Folklore," *Folklore* (Cal.) 16:6 (June 1975), pp. 204–213; Nā. Vānamāmalai, "Tamilnāttuk-Kataip-Pātalkalil Cōka Mutivu" (trans. "Tragic Ending in Tamil Folk Ballads," Ārāycci 2:2 (March 1971), pp. 129–151. Kurup's heroes are taken from the oral tradition in the rural areas, yet, only one, Pottan Teyyam (an outcaste who instructs Siva on the fine points of philosophy and the illusion of caste) is akin to the heroes found in the Tamil ballads. For the social rebel as hero in the Muslim tradition, see Ralph Russell, "The Urdu Ghazal in Muslim *Society*," *South Asian Review*, 3:2 (Jan. 1970), 141–149.
30. Americo Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hand* (Austin: 1958), p. 113. Also Orrin Klapp's "defender type" ("The Folk Hero," *JAF* 62 (Jan.–March 1943, pp. 17–25) approaches the local hero theoretically.
31. A valuable study of the role of the group pressure in influencing oral material in the puranic tradition is provided by V. S. Sukthankar's "The Bhrgus and the Bharata: A Text-Historical Study," *Journal of the Bhandikar Oriental Research Institute*, 18 (1937), pp. 1–76 and Robert Goldman's, *Gods, Priests, and Warriors: The Bhrgus of the Mahābhārata* (Princeton: 1977).

century, the early folklorists, too, "discovered" impersonal laws they felt governed evolution in folklore.[32] This lent an air of legitimacy to the fledgling disclipine and perhaps underlined the universality of folk literature (in contrast to the isolated, time-bound elite literature) by its connection to these greater, wider forces that shape human destiny. The findings of this paper present a counterweight to this still influential bias toward the impersonality of the lore over the human motivations of the folk. While we readily admit selfinterest and class interest in other areas of life, somehow the folk are sublimely unscathed by such motivations.[33]

32. See for example the Chadwicks' *The Growth of Literature* (Cambridge: 1932–40), 3 vols. Other examples include: Knut Liestol, *The Origins of the Icelandic Family Sagas* (Cambridge: 1930), pp. 62–70; Moltke Moe, *De Episke Gundlove* (Oslo: 1914), English trans. unavailable; Alex Olrik, *The Heroic Legends of Denmark* (New York: 1919), pp. 1–7; *A Book of Danish Ballads* (Princeton: 1939), trans. E. M. Smith-Dampier, pp. 70–71.

33. Although Jan Vansina's book, *Oral Tradition: Study in Historical Methodology* (trans. H. M. Wright) (Chicago: 1966, French ed. 1961), (see (pp. 33, 77–78, 89), does document certain distortions an falsifications in African folklore, it is chiefly concerned with dynastic genealogies and not the private or caste interests found in the Tamil ballads.