The Blend of Sanskrit Myth and Tamil Folklore in *Thiru-murugātru-p-padai*

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From the unreal lead me to the real,
From darkness lead me to light,
From death lead me to immortality.
Brihad-āranyaka Upanishad

MODERN scholars, both Indian and Western, are unanimous in their high regard for Tamil literature, for it is "the only Indian literature which is both classical and modern" (Zvelbil 1973: 11). On the one hand, it is as ancient and classical as the very best Sanskrit or Greek literature, while on the other, it is as modern and vibrant as the most significant English or American literature.

In its very beginnings, Tamil literature is almost purely Dravidian in form and content. It shows little or no trace of "Sanskritization," and seems to have flowered and flourished quite vigorously on its own. In its later stages, however, it has been clearly influenced to a considerable extent by Sanskritic culture, though it has managed to fuse and blend this Aryan product with its own indigenous Dravidian creation, so that as Tamil literature gradually unfolds over the centuries we see a continuous and remarkable Aryan-Dravidian synthesis.

One of the finest examples of this synthesis is the short yet intensely devotional poem *Thiru-murugātru-p-padai*. The poem is traditionally included among the ten idylls (*Patthu-pāttu*) of the Age of the Third Sangam[1] and is attributed to Nakkirar.[2]

In this brief paper, we shall examine how Sanskrit mythology and Tamil folklore are delicately interwoven in this medieval Tamil classic and try to show that these mythical and folklorish aspects, ap-

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parently so remote from each other, are, in fact, harmoniously blended with each other.

The poem takes the traditional form of an *ātru-p-padai*: an exhortation from one who has benefited greatly from a generous patron to another needing help to seek out the same patron and find a solution to his problems. But the poem differs radically from the other poems in this genre in its content, for the patron to be sought here is no ordinary mortal; he is the Lord Muruga himself and the boon to be secured is nothing less than *moksha*, or freedom from the bondage of the world, the wearisome round of birth, death and rebirth.

Essentially, therefore, the poem is the *upadesa*, or teaching of a *guru* to his disciple. The *guru*, who is an ardent devotee of Lord Muruga (or Subrahmanya as he is known in Sanskrit literature), urges his aspiring disciple to seek Muruga's grace by worshiping him as the embodiment of supreme Beauty and Truth. He directs the aspirant particularly to six sacred shrines at Thiru-p-parankunṛam, Thiru-chīr-alaivāi, Thiru-āvinan-kudi, Thiru-ēraham, Kunṛu-thor-ādal and Paḷam-udir-chōlai, where he may hope to realize the divine presence of Lord Muruga, provided his heart and mind have been duly purified through penance and meditation.

The poem falls naturally into six parts: the first describes the beauty and valour of Muruga and dwells lovingly on the excellence of his abode at Thiru-p-parankunṛam; the second portrays the six faces and the twelve arms of Muruga in the temple at Thiru-chīr-alaivāi (famous now as Thiru-chendur) and expatiates on the symbolism of the multiple faces and arms; the third deals with the shrine at Thiru-āvinan-kudi (modern Paḷani) and the fourth with the temple at Thiru-ēraham (now known as Swamimalai); the fifth narrates the dance of Lord Muruga on his beloved hills and the sixth vividly depicts his abode in Paḷam-udir-chōlai.

The *guru* describes in loving detail Lord Muruga's form and features, his consorts and mounts, his banner and spear, and dwells ecstatically on his legendary exploits and adorable pastimes. He recounts the different ways in which persons with varied backgrounds worship Lord Muruga, ranging from the sages, who have vanquished shifting desires and enshrined his changeless beauty in their hearts, to the simple women of the hill-tribes, who adorn themselves with sweet-scented garlands and sound their flutes and horns in his honor; from the learned Brahmins chanting his sacred name melodiously and strewing flowers on his figure in the temple to the illiterate woman muttering of him under her breath and scattering blood-stained rice on his altar. The poet extols the universality and tolerance of Lord Muruga in accepting

all genuine devotion and urges his disciple to seek his grace.

Lord Muruga is identified with the Vedic god of war, Subrahmanya, variously known as Kartikeya, Skanda and Kumara (Sinha 1979: 55; Raghunathan 1978: 96). He is, however, undoubtedly rooted in the Tamilian soil and has clearly been deeply adored by the Tamilians from time immemorial, for references to Muruga abound in Tamil literature from its very beginnings.[3] The Tamil name, Muruga, stems from the Tamil word ***murugu*** and means beauty; it has its counterpart in the Sanskrit name, Kumara, which signifies youth as well as beauty (Sinha 1979: 55; Raghunathan 1978: 96).

Of course, the Aryan-Dravidian synthesis in the poem extends far beyond mere names to descriptions and symbols.

The six shrines which the ***guru*** describes to his disciple form the fortresses or encampments (***padai-veedus***) in which Muruga, in tune with his Vedic character as the god of war, takes up abode with his forces after each successful campaign against the hostile hordes of the demons. Interestingly enough, all the six shrines are located on hill-tops, in accordance with a very basic religious tradition in the Tamil culture: it is believed that Muruga dearly loves a romp on the hills; hence, an aspirant may easily obtain ***darshanam*** of the Lord by worshiping him at those spots where he has manifested himself locally.

Drawing freely from the Sanskrit mythology surrounding Subrahmanya, the poem praises Lord Muruga, enshrined in his devotees' hearts, as a child of the daughter of Himavān, the King of the lofty Himalayas (*l.* 265).[4] It represents Muruga as having six faces, since he was nursed by the six star deities of the constellation Krittika in a grassy " blue tarn " in the Himalayas (*l.* 262).[5] Elsewhere, the poem describes the six faces of Subrahmanya at Thiru-chīr-alaivāi in great detail, ascribing some mystic significance to each one of them: the first face dispels the darkness and ignorance of the world and ushers in the light of wisdom; the second blesses his devotees; the third protects the *yajnas* or sacrificial offerings of the Brahmins; the fourth clarifies the mysteries of the Self and bestows *gnana* or wisdom on the sincere aspirant; the fifth destroys all evil forces; and the sixth gazes fondly at Valli, his bride from the hill-tribes, symbolizing the love of the Lord even for an untutored human soul.

While the poem thus exploits the almost limitless riches of Sanskrit mythology and symbolism, never does it let us forget the specifically " local " characteristics of Muruga, which have rooted him in the very soil of Tamil Nadu and endeared him to the Tamils from " the dark backward and abysm of time." In fact, the passionate love of the ancient Tamils for the beauty of nature, in its wild splendour of moun-

tains and forests as well as in its tamed comeliness of meadows and streams, seems to have crystallized into the handsome youthful figure of the Lord and earned him the title of Muruga or the Beautiful One. And, in a certain sense, it is the smile of Muruga, the embodiment of Beauty, that we encounter everywhere in Tamil literature, investing it with a unique other-worldly charm and potency. Even the beauty of natural phenomena such as sunrise and sunset appears to have evoked a passionate aesthetic response from the ancient Tamils and moved them to clothe the Lord himself in glowing red. It is quite appropriate, therefore, that the whole poem, *Thiru-murugātru-p-padai*, should seem aglow with red, the color of Muruga. His fiery form on the blue-green peacock, his favorite mount, resembles the rising sun honor over an emerald sea (*ll.* 1–4); the celestial damsels who dance in his wear bright red garments (*l.*17) and the hills on which the shedevils cavort in celebration of the Lord's victory over the mighty demon, Sura, are covered with flame-red *kānthal* flowers (*l.* 47).

Muruga has two consorts, one Aryan and the other Dravidian. The senior, Devayānai, is the daughter of Indra, the king of the gods in Sanskrit mythology; the younger, Valli, is the daughter of the Kuravas —hunters who reside in the hills of Tamil Nadu. Symbolism is evident in the very descriptions of Devayānai and Valli: the former is a spotlessly chaste goddess with a fair forehead (*l.* 7) and the latter is a modest dark maiden with a waist as slender as a flowering creeper (*ll.* 101–102). While Devayānai is divine and represents Muruga's inherent creative energy (*kriyā-sakti*), Valli is all too human and suggests Muruga's beauty (*murugu*) and love (*anbu*).

But it is in the worship accorded to Lord Muruga that we see the most dramatic contrast and fusion of Aryan and Dravidian elements in the poem.

Within the first twenty lines of the poem, for instance, we encounter this arresting description of the celestial maidens dancing in Muruga's honor on mountins towering into the sky:

> They have
> bright,
> rosy,
> tender feet
> with tinkling anklets.
> Rounded shanks
> and gently swaying
> waists.
> Broad luscious shoulders
> and thin garments red

like Indragopa's wings.
Their mounds of Venus bear
brilliant girdles strung
with many shining gems.
(*ll.* 14–19)[6]

The dancers are divine and they perform on an almost unearthly stage, high in the mountains; yet their movements are earthly, joyful and sensuous, betokening an altogether human and whole-hearted love of life and beauty. In other words, they inhabit the realms of myth and reality at once and move from one to the other with nonchalant ease. The enchanting rhythm of their dance evokes in us an aching awareness of the divine beauty that is Muruga.

Muruga as embodied in the dancing of the lovely goddesses on the mountains is quite the opposite of the Muruga represented in the cavorting of the she-devil (*pēy-mahal*) on the battle-field:

dry-haired,
twisted and projecting teeth
in her gaping mouth,
rolling eye-balls,
greenish eyes
with a fearful gaze,
ears that pain her heavy breasts
as the owl with bulging eyes
and the cruel snake
hang down from her ears
bothering her breasts.
In her hands with shining bangles
she holds a black skull,
smelling rotten.
. . .
As she dances, shoulders heaving,
her mouth drips with fat.
(*ll.* 51–59; Zvelbil 1973: 127)

This horrific description of the she-devil's ***tunangai*** dance is pure folklore and accurately reflects the character of the ancient Tamils, who treated life and death with equal gusto.[7] At the same time, the ***tunangai*** dance is quite in keeping with the qualities of Muruga's Aryan counterpart, Subrahmanya, the god of war in Sanskrit mythology.

In the shrines sacred to Muruga, he is worshiped by the learned Brahmins in their own traditional manner. The Brahmins are called the twice-born (*iru-pirap-pālar*); entitled to wear the three-banded

sacred thread, they are well-versed in the Vedic scriptures and lead pure, blameless lives according to the universal law of Dharma. Hence, they are punctilious in observing all the proper rituals in their worship. At the appointed hours each day at Thiru-ēraham, for example, the twice-born have their obligatory purifying bath; even before the wet cloth around their middle is dry, they are in the temple, where they join their palms high above their heads in adoration, chant Muruga's sacred six-syllabled name (*sa ra va na bha va*) and reverently offer fragrant flowers to his image in the *sanctum sanctorum* (*ll.* 182–193).

In marked contrast to the complex ritualized worship of the learned Brahmins, there is the simple rustic devotion of the Kurava woman from the hills. Rapt in her thoughts of Muruga, she has wound a red thread on her wrist as a token of her stern self-discipline and deep adoration and keeps muttering his name under her breath, so that it may act as a powerful spell and induce in her a supernatural trance. She hangs huge garlands of red oleander over the doors of Muruga's rude little shrine near her mountain hamlet, strews blood-red flowers over his image to the accompaniment of a rustic song in the *kurinchi* mode, and scatters pure white rice stained with the blood of a stout ram as a sacrificial offering on the altar (*ll.* 234–249).

It should be quite clear from even these few examples that there is a constant and remarkable fusion of the Brahminic god, Subrahmanya, with the pre-Aryan Muruga, the Tamilian deity *par excellence*. Consequently, he is at once delightful and fearful. Beautiful and terrible by turns, he can be the lovely youth who charms his way into the hearts of his beloved devotees one moment; the next moment, he can be the fierce warrior who effortlessly destroys the demonic forces in the world. Also, he can receive the rude and simple worship of the primitive tribesmen of the hills as graciously as he can receive the most profound penance and meditation (*tapas*) of the enlightened sages.

The masterful synthesis of Aryan and Dravidian elements in the poem has a definite purpose. By delicately weaving together the Sanskrit myths and the Tamil folklore that surround Muruga, the poem manages to suggest that, in the final analysis, he transcends all cultural barriers and contradictions and is one with *nirguna Brahman*, the Absolute Reality without Attributes of the Upanishads. The splendid opening lines of the poem, invoking the presence of Lord Muruga, are, in fact, strongly reminiscent of the description of Brahman in the Upanishads:

> He is like the new-risen sun on an emerald sea.
> He is the dazzling uncreated Light
> that shines in the heart

when all the senses are stilled.
He is *That* which destroys ignorance
and supports the wise.
(*ll.* 1–6)

There is even a brief but graphic outline in the poem (*ll.* 67–72) of the fundamental principles of the ***bhakti marga***, or the way of devotion, expounded in the *Gita*: freedom from bondage is the ultimate goal of all existence and freedom can easily be obtained by giving up egotism and desire, by taking refuge from all evil at the feet of the Lord and, above all, by loving the Lord whole-heartedly. In fact, the poem is full of the spirit of devotion and self-surrender. It is meant, therefore, to act as a guide (***ātru-p-padai***) to salvation not only for the disciple of the ***guru*** in the poem, but for all those who have " ears to hear " and hearts to abide by the instructions.

NOTES

1. According to a very persistent Tamil literary tradition, the Sangam was an Academy of Letters, a voluntary organization of Tamil poets. It was responsible for critically controlling and shaping the literary output as well as the cultural life of the ancient Tamils. Apparently, there were three such Sangams or Academies in the capital of the Pandya kingdom in ancient Tamil Nadu. The capital was shifted from time to time due to natural calamities; thus, southern Madurai, the seat of the First Sangam, and Kapāta-puram, the seat of the Second Sangam, were swallowed up by the sea and the literary works belonging to the ages of the first two Sangams were irrevocably lost. The Third Sangam, located in modern Madurai, monitored the production of the bulk of classical Tamil literature, which is therefore known as Sangam literature. The most plausible date for this literature is 100–250 A.D. See Zvelbil 1973: 23–44.

2. Scholars have long debated both the authorship and the date of composition of *Thiru-murugātru-p-padai*. The poem is popularly believed to be the work of Nakkirar of the Third Sangam, who was also the author of the classic *Nedu-nal-vādai* (included among the ten idylls of the *Patthu-pāttu*) and of other short lyrics, all of them predominantly secular in character. But many scholars have come to the conclusion that there were two Nakkirars and that the earlier Nakkirar, who probably lived some time between 150 and 250 A.D., could not have written such an intensely devotional poem as *Thiru-murugātru-p-padai*. They suggest that the Nakkirar who wrote *Thiru-murugātru-p-padai* lived a few centuries after the author of *Nedu-nal-vādai*. I am myself inclined to agree with Mr. Vaiyapuri Pillai who, after a careful consideration of the problems of chronology, concludes that the *Thiru-murugātru-p-padai* was the work of a Nakkirar who belonged to the 10th century A.D. See Pillai 1956.

3. See Sinha 1979: 56. Sinha points out that even the *Tolkāppiyam*, " the most ancient of the extant Sangam works," glorified Muruga, " the red god seated on the blue peacock, who is ever young and resplendent," as " the favoured god of the Tamils."

4. Muruga is traditionally considered to be the divine offspring of God Siva and Goddess Uma. According to Sanskrit mythology, Goddess Uma is the daughter of Himavān, the King of the lofty Himalayan range; she is also known as Parvathi. She is identified with Kotravai, the Goddess of War and Victory in Tamil folklore. She is also the primordial Creatrix, the Mother of the Universe in Sanskrit and Tamil religious tradition. *Thiru-murugātru-p-padai* refers to her in all these possible ways.

In referring to the individual lines in the poem, *Thiru-murugātru-p-padai*, I have adhered to the numbers given by N. Raghunathan in his English translation of the poem in *Six Long Poems from Sangam Tamil* (1978). These line numbers do not necessarily coincide with those in the original Tamil text.

5. There are various accounts of the story of Muruga (or Subrahmanya) in the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharatha* and the *puranas*. *Thiru-murugātru-p-padai* gives the following version which seems to combine a few of the various accounts: when Siva was making love to Uma, he acceded to Indra's request and refrained from spilling his seed in her. The seed was borne by Agni, the god of fire, to a blue tarn overgrown with reeds (*sara-vanam* in Sanskrit) high in the Himalayas. The wives of six sages who came to bathe in the lake conceived and brought forth six children. These six children later assumed the form of a mighty warrior with six faces and twelve hands. He came to be known as Kartikeya, since the six mothers who had nursed him became the six stars of the Krittika (the Pleiades) constellation.

6. Translation in Zvelbil 1973: 129. Subsequent translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

7. Classical Tamil poetry revels in all the aspects of life and sings of love and war with equal verve. Hence it abounds not only in acute observations about human relationships, but also in gory and gruesome descriptions of war, so that the poetry often verges on fantasy. See note in Zvelbil 1973: 126.

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