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## **A Collection of Jaffna Tamil Riddles from Oral Tradition**

### **Abstract**

This paper presents, for the first time, a collection of nearly fifty orally transmitted Tamil riddles from Jaffna, Sri Lanka, with English translation. It also provides comparative material from Tamil Nadu, India, drawn from S. V. SUBRAMANIAN's comprehensive *Tamilil viṭukataika!* (1980) and gives references to Archer TAYLOR's classificatory work *English Riddles from Oral Tradition* (1951).

Many of the riddles presented here have no parallel among those riddles that have already found their way into print, a fact suggesting that only a modest fraction of all Tamil riddles have thus far been recorded and documented. Also noteworthy is the existence of riddles dealing with objects and phenomena of the modern age, indicating that riddling is an art still very much alive among the Tamil people.

**Key words:** folklore — oral tradition — riddles — Jaffna — Tamil

*nāl eḷuttīl viṭukatai onr ākum anta*  
*nāl eḷuttīl murpāti 'tavir' enr ām an*  
*nāl eḷuttīl pizpāti 'caritam' ākum*  
*navil mūnrum onrum urin 'ceyyuḷ' ām an*  
*nāl eḷuttīl mūn(ru) iraṇṭu 'viṭamē'-y ākum*  
*nannum onrum irum urin 'vittē' ām an*  
*nāl eḷuttīl āy molī-y atu tān ennē?*  
*naviluti nī viṭukataiyai nank arintē!*  
*viṭukatai.*

(SUBRAMANIAN 1980, 222; no. 1644)

Out of four syllables a riddle is formed  
 the first half of these four syllables means "to leave,"  
 the last half of these four syllables means "story,"  
 but if the third and the first syllable of the said (word) are joined, it means  
 "poetry";  
 the third and the second of these four syllables mean "poison";  
 if the first and the last syllable are joined, it means "seed."  
 What exactly is the word consisting of these four syllables?  
 After having well understood the riddle, explain it!  
 The riddle.<sup>1</sup>

#### INTRODUCTION

**I**N the words of Charles Francis POTTER, folklore "is a lively fossil which refuses to die. It is a precipitate of the scientific and cultural lag of centuries and millenia of human experience. . . . [In] a sense, folklore is how we used to do it and wish we could now. Hence, folklore is always the delight of children because it is the poetic wisdom of the childhood of the race. It is also the pleasure of the old who are wise enough to renew their youth by rebaptism in the eternal simplicities in completing the circle of life" (1972, 401).

Among the many manifestations of folklore, riddles have long been the object of scholarly attention, and it is commonly agreed that they

“rank with myths, fables, folktales, and proverbs as one of the earliest and most widespread types of formulated thought” (POTTER 1972, 938).

From the olden times, as an early exercise of the primitive mind in its adjustment to the world about it, comes the riddle. . . . The fresher the vision, when the world was young, so much keener was the interest in the phenomena of nature, in the phenomena of life, and in the simple institutions which surrounded man. All harmonies and fitnesses, all discrepancies and inconsistencies attract the notice of children and the childlike man. Hence children love riddles; hence savages and primitive people put them. All folklore is full of them. They are the mystery and at the same time the rationalism of the juvenile mind. As civilization advances they still sustain life, but they grow more complicated, more conscious and exacting, as the simpler relations become commonplace, and interest in them fades and wears off. (POTTER 1972, 939, citing Maurice Bloomfield)

[Riddles] are essentially metaphors, and metaphors are the result of the primary mental processes of association, comparison, and the perception of likeness and differences. . . . Possibly confirmatory of their antiquity, too, is the ubiquitous element of humor and wit. The essence of the ludicrous is the unexpected, so the laughter of primitive and simple-minded men and of little children is easily excited by the sudden discovery of similarity in two objects which a person would not ordinarily expect to resemble each other. Sophisticated persons and those of orthodox mind, whether that orthodoxy be of religion, social custom, or materialistic science, seldom appreciate or even understand riddles. (POTTER 1972, 938).

Evidently I do not belong to either of the above-mentioned categories of people, for, from my very early childhood onwards, riddles have never ceased to fascinate me. Thus it is small wonder that, in the course of carrying out linguistic and anthropological fieldwork among various tribal communities (the Ālu Kurumbas, Pālu Kurumbas, Muḍugas, Beṭṭu Kurumbas, and Paṇiyas) in the Nilgiri Hills of South India in 1974–76 and 1981–82, I was particularly eager to collect as many riddles as my informants could provide. This endeavor resulted in four fairly representative riddle collections of varying sizes: Ālu Kurumba, 83; Pālu Kurumba, 21; Beṭṭu Kurumba, 41; and Paṇiya, 44. Three of these collections have been published and the fourth is in preparation (KAPP 1978, 1984, 1987).

During my stays in Tamil Nadu, however, I did not restrict my riddle collecting to the above communities but also spent some time recording those of the Tamils. Since that time I have attempted to enlarge my collection of Tamil riddles through correspondence with Tamil-speaking friends in Germany and Tamil Nadu, and now have over four hundred items. I am now in the process of preparing an edition of these riddles, with translation and commentary. This collection incorporates a number of Jaffna Tamil riddles, fifty in all, which I was able to obtain, through the kind mediation of N. Rajanayagam, from four Sri Lankan Tamils living in the Heidelberg area: J. Shanthakumary and Santhira Segara Pillaiyar Kovilady from Nallur, North Jaffna; and A. V. Jayavirasinkam and his sister, A. V. Thaneswary from Karaveddy, West Karaveddy.

The main aim of this paper is to present these fifty riddles, with comparative material subjoined in cases where parallel or related riddles are found in S. V. SUBRAMANIAN's comprehensive Tamil riddle collection *Tamiḷil vitukataikal* (1980; hereafter abbreviated as *TVK*), which comprises 2,504 riddles in all, and Archer TAYLOR's fundamental classificatory work *English Riddles from Oral Tradition* (1951; hereafter *EROT*).

TAYLOR, who leaves the answers to the riddles out of account "except for subsidiary purposes," classifies his riddles according to the following method:

[The] fundamental conception underlying the enigmatical comparison determines the place of the riddle. The main subdivisions or chapters in this collection are descriptions of (1) something living, (2) an animal, (3) several animals, (4) a person, (5) several persons, (6) a plant, (7) a thing. In these varieties of the true riddle an object is equated to something entirely different from itself, and this latter thing forms the basis of the classification. (1951, 3-4)

Since the number of riddles in the collection below is, in my opinion, too small to warrant a classificatory system as detailed as Taylor's, I have decided upon a more lucid arrangement in which the riddles are classified according to their answers, under the topics of "nature" (riddles 1 and 2), "plants, including plant products" (riddles 3-13), "animals, including animal products" (riddles 14-27), "man" (riddles 28-31), and "things" (riddles 32-50). However, as a brief synopsis concentrating on the main subdivisions (with some modifications), I offer below a classification of the present riddle collection according to Taylor's method.

## Classificatory synopsis of the riddles

- 1) Comparisons to a living creature
  - 1.1 Comparisons of a thing to a living creature: riddles 10 (paddy ears), 28 (eyes), 40 (match), 43 (watch), 44 (diary), and 46 (bicycle).
- 2) Comparisons to a person/persons
  - 2.1 Comparisons of an animal/animals to a person/persons: riddles 17 (crab to prince), 18 (butterfly to man), 19 (wasp to doctor), 20 (mosquito to man), 21 (ant to man);
  - 2.2 Comparisons of a thing/things to a person/persons: riddles 3 (jackfruit to persons), 6 (palmyra fruits to men), 7 (wild dates to ladies), 9 (blossom to Muslim), 12 (onion to man), 13 (turmeric to lady), 15 (cow's teats to queens), 29 (tongue to man), 35 (ladle to child), 36 (sweet dish to man), 37 (sweet dish to boy and girl), 41 (electric current to man), 45 (umbrella to man), 47 and 48 (postbox to lady), 50 (signpost to man).
- 3) Comparisons to an animal/animals
  - 3.1 Comparison of animals to an animal: riddle 22 (termites to snake);
  - 3.2 Comparisons of a thing/things to an animal/animals: riddles 11 (black gram to black and white cows), 24 (noise of butter churning to the barking of a dog, etc.), 33 (little curved hedge bill to palm squirrel), 34a (needle to horse).
- 4) Comparisons to a plant/plants
  - 4.1 Comparison of an animal to plants and things: riddle 14 (cow to green trees, etc.).
- 5) Comparisons to a thing/things
  - 5.1 Comparison of an animal to a thing: riddle 16 (palm squirrel to chain);
  - 5.2 Comparisons of a thing/things to a thing/things: riddles 1 (stars to popcorn), 2 (rain to the long ribs of palm leaves), 4 (ripe coconuts to hairy testicles), 5 (green coconut to pot), 8 (pomegranate to pot), 23 (elephant dung to black pot), 25 (white and yellow of egg to two types of unguents), 26 (egg to temple), 27 (honeycomb to *maṇḍapa*), 30 (tongue to plank), 31 (palm of hand to courtyard and houses), 32 (iron to thing), 34b (thread to horsetail), 38 (betel leaf, areca nut, lime to things), 39 (matches to chips, matchbox to house), 42 (*tāli* to several things), 49 (road to mat).

This synopsis indicates that Jaffna riddles (at least to the extent that we can tell from this collection) tend to favor “comparisons of a thing/things to a person/persons” (2. 2.) and “comparisons of a thing/things to a thing/things” (5. 2).

Checking the *TVK* for parallels to the riddles in the collection below yielded the following interesting results. The *TVK* includes

- 1) corresponding riddles with identical wording: three riddles;
- 2) parallel riddles with nearly identical wording or identical wording in part: fourteen riddles;
- 3) parallel riddles with similar wording: six riddles;
- 4) related riddles with different wording but corresponding contents: seven riddles;
- 5) no parallels: twenty (!) riddles (4, 5, 6, 9, 18, 23, 28, 30, 32, 33, 35, 36, 40, 42, 43, 44, 45, 48, 49, 50).

These results, in particular that listed under 5), were unexpected and therefore surprising, indicating that of the wealth of Tamil riddles only a (modest) fraction has thus far been recorded and documented. Students of Tamil folklore should be encouraged by this to continue in their efforts to record orally transmitted riddles in all Tamil-speaking areas, and should not rest content with the available riddle collections.

In conclusion, at least three general characteristics of the present riddle collection may be mentioned:

- 1) The existence of riddles dealing with the phenomena of the modern world, such as 41 (electric current), 44 (diary), 46 (bicycle), and 47 and 48 (postbox), which demonstrates that riddling is still in vogue among the Tamils and by no means dying out;
- 2) The frequent occurrence of the alliteration and initial rhyme so typical of Tamil riddling, as in 6 (*to-:to-*), 13 (*ma-:ma-*), 14 (*pa-:pā- / vī-:vī-*), 20 (*ta-:ta-*), 24 (*ca-:cā- / mu-:mū-*), 36 (*ku-:ku-*), 37 (*ci-:cī-:cī-:cī- / ci- / ce-:cī-*), 39 (*ci-:cī-*), 42 (*ta-:tā- / i-:ī-*), 46 (*ma-:mī-*), 48 (*vā-:vā-*), 50 (*vī-:vī-:ve-*);
- 3) The occurrence of a formulaic sentence that, with some variation in wording, is not infrequent in Tamil riddling (though it appears here only once): . . . *mālaiyai cikk-illāmal avilppavarukku cennaipaṭṭanam cīṭanam* (those who can untie the garland . . . without tangling it [will get] Madras as a dowry).

THE RIDDLES<sup>2</sup>

## NATURE

- 1a) *cuḷaku niraīya-c cōlam-pori;*  
*viṭiya-p pārttāl, onrum illai. atu enna?*  
 A winnowing-fan full of popcorn;  
 but if you look at it at dawn, there is nothing in it. What is it?  
*atu naṭcattivāṅkaḷ.* The stars.
- b) *cuḷaku niraīya cōlam-pori;*  
*viṭintāl, onrum illai. atu enna?*  
*(cuḷaku=cuḷaku; cōlam=cōlam)*  
 A winnowing-fan full of popcorn;  
 but if it dawns, there is nothing in it. What is it?  
*atu naṭcattivāram.* The stars.

\* Compare TVK 1348 (answer identical), 2000 (answer similar):

1348. *cuḷavu niraīya veṇṭaikkāy;*  
*viṭintu pārttāl, onrum illai.*  
*(cuḷavu=cuḷaku)*  
 A winnowing-fan full of okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus*);  
 but if you look at it after dawn, there is nothing in it.
2000. *poḷutu pōnāl pūntōṭṭam;*  
*viṭintu pārttāl, veru-t iōṭṭam. atu enna?*  
 If the sun sets, a flower-garden;  
 but if you look at it after dawn, an empty garden. What is it?  
*atu vāṇam.* The sky.

\* EROT 1094. Vanish in the Daytime (447–49, 807).

- 2) *īkku īkku neṭum īkku,*  
*enna enna ennu-p-paṭātu. atu enna?*  
*(īkku=īrkku; ennu-p-paṭātu=enna-p-paṭātu)*  
 Ribs of palm leaves, ribs of palm leaves, long ribs of palm leaves;  
 while you count and count, (you find that) they cannot be  
 counted. What is it?  
*atu maḷai.* The rain.

\* Compare TVK 390 (answer identical):

390. *īkki ikki neṭum ikki.*  
*(īkki=īrkku)*

## PLANTS, INCLUDING PLANT PRODUCTS

- 3) *tāy paraṭṭaicci,*

*mōḷ puluṭṭaiacci,*  
*taṅkacci pāni-k kuṭṭi,*  
*tampi mā-k kuṭṭi. atu enna?*  
 (*mōḷ*=*makaḷ*; *taṅkacci*=*taṅkaicci*)  
 The mother has shaggy hair,  
 the daughter is lean,  
 the little sister is a child of sweet juice,  
 the little brother is a child of flour. What is it?  
*atu palā-p-paḷam.* A jackfruit (*Artocarpus integrifolia*).

\* Compare TVK 109, 233 (answer identical), 1513 (answer different):

109. *appan coriyan,*  
*āttāḷ caṭaiacci,*  
*aṅṅaṅ muḷiyan,*  
*nān cakkarai-k kuṭṭi.*  
 (*muḷiyan*=*miliyan*; *cakkarai*=*carakkarai*)  
 The father is a scabby man,  
 the mother has shaggy hair,  
 the elder brother has big eyeballs,  
 but I am a sugar baby.

233. *āy caṭaiacci,*  
*appan coriyan,*  
*nān carakkarai-k kuṭṭi.*  
 Mother has shaggy hair,  
 father is a scabby man,  
 but I am a sugar baby.

1513. *tāy paraṭṭaiacci,*  
*makaḷ uruṭṭaiacci. avai yāvai?*  
 (*paraṭṭaiacci*: from *para*, “to spread,” etc.)  
 The mother is flat,  
 the daughter is round. What are they?  
*avai ammi, kulavi.* A grinding stone and a roller.

4) *vaṭakkilē iruntu vāṛavarukku*  
*puṭukku niraṭiya mayir. atu enna?*  
 (*vāṛavarukku*=*varukiravarukku*; *puṭukku*=*piṭukku*)  
 Those men who come from the north  
 have testicles covered with hairs. What are they?  
*atu tēnkāy.* Coconuts.

5) *nām nirappāta kuṭam tānē nirampi payaṅ tarum. atu enna?*  
 A pot that was not filled by us, gets filled by itself and gives  
 us its yield. What is it?  
*atu iḷa-nīr.* The water of a green coconut.

6) *tomm-eṅṭu viḷuntār,*

*toppi kaḷanrār. atu enna?*

(*enṭu = enru; kaḷanrār = kaḷanrār*)

They fell down with a thud and took off their hats. What are they?

*atu paṇaṅkāy.*

Palmyra fruits (*Borassus flabelliformis*).

7) *kāṭṭukkuḷ karuṅṅiyum civappiyum kai kāṭṭukinam. atu enna?*

(*kāṭṭukinam = kāṭṭukinrār*)

In the forest, a black lady and a red lady make signs with their hands. What are they?

*atu iccāṅkāy, iccampaḷam.*

The ripe and unripe fruits of the wild date palm (*Phoenix sylvestris*).

\* Compare TVK 1957:

1957. *pūttapōtu māñcaḷ,  
pūttatum civappu,  
kāyttapōtu civappu,  
kāyttatum karuṅṅu. atu enna?*

(*-pōtu = -pōlutu; karuṅṅu = karuṅṅu*)

When it starts blossoming, it is yellow;

as soon as it blossoms, it is red;

when it starts bearing fruit, it is red;

as soon as it bears fruit, it is black. What is it?

*atu iccampaḷam.*

(The ripe fruit of) the wild date palm.

8) *cempu niraia muttu. atu enna?*

A pot full of pearls. What is it?

*atu mātuḷampaḷam.*

A pomegranate.

(*mātuḷampaḷam = mātaḷampaḷam*)

\* Compare TVK 1101, 1391, 1393, 1408 (answer identical):

1101. *kuṭukkai niraia vayira-maṇi.*

A pot full of diamonds.

1391. *ceppu niraia māṇikkam.*

A casket full of rubies.

1393. *cempu niraia kempu.*

A pot full of rubies.

1408. *compu niraia kempu.*

(*compu = cempu*)

\* EROT 1355. Round, Yellow; Holds Many Things (556–57, 835–36).

9) *ārrilai iruntu vāra cōṇakanukku cūrrilē oru oṭṭai. atu enna?*

(*ārrilai* = *ārrilē*; *vāra* = *varukira*)

A Muslim who comes from the riverside has a hole in his bottom. What is it?

*atu iluppampū.*

The blossom of the tree *Bassia longifolia*.

- 10) *āṭuvar pāṭuvar cāyvar carivar,*  
*kākam irukka kopp illai. atu enna?*

They can dance, they can sing, they can lean back, they can fall down,

but there is no branch for the crows to sit. What are they?

*atu neṛkatir.*

Paddy ears.

\* Compare TVK 992, 1005 (answer identical)

992. *kāykkum pūkkum*  
*kalakalakkum, ānāl*  
*kākkāy uṭkāra iṭam illai.*  
It bears fruit, it flowers,  
it rustles, but

there is no place for the crows to sit.

1005. *kārāna karu-maṇalil*  
*karutta vālai karuttu viṭṭu*  
*ciṃpu viṭṭu ciṇukku viṭṭu*  
*kākkāy ēra-k kopp illai.*

(*karutta* = *karutta*; *karuttu* = *kuruttu*; *ciṇukku* = *ciṇukku*)

A black plantain in the pitch-black sand;

it sprouts, and after that young stalks spring up, and after that knots appear,

but there is no branch for the crows to perch on.

- 11) *karuppum veḷḷaiyumāṇa māṭukaḷ kuḷa-k-karaikku kuḷikka-p*  
*pōṇaṇa. karuppu māṭukaḷ niṛka, veḷḷai māṭukaḷ tirumpi vantaṇa.*  
*atu enna?*

Black and white cows went to the bank of a tank to take a bath.

While the black cows remained (in the tank), the white cows came back home. What are they?

*atu uluntu kaluvutal.*

The washing of black gram  
(*Phaseolus mungo*).

\* Compare TVK 618, 866, 1136, 2448 (answer identical):

618. *en kutirai karuppu-k kutirai;*  
*kuḷippāṭṭināl, veḷuppu-k kutirai.*

My horse is a black horse;

but if I wash it, it becomes a white horse.

866. *karuppu-k kutiraiyum veḷḷai-k kutiraiyum*

*ārrukku-p pōkināna;*  
*karuppu-k kutirai ārruṭan celkīratu,*  
*veḷḷai-k kutirai viṭṭukku-t tirumpukīratu.*  
 (karuppu = karuppu)

A black horse and a white horse go to a river;  
 the black horse goes with the river,  
 the white horse comes back home.

1136. *kulippāṭṭa iranṭu māṭu kūṭṭi-k koṇṭu pōnēn;*  
*karuppu māṭu onru, veḷḷai māṭu onru.*  
*karuppu māṭu ārrōṭē pōy viṭṭatu,*  
*veḷḷai māṭu viṭṭukku vantū viṭṭatu.*

I took two cows (to the river) to wash them;  
 one was a black cow, the other was a white cow.  
 But the black cow went away with the river and  
 only the white cow came back home again.

2448. *veḷḷai-k kutiraiyum karuppu-k kutiraiyum ārrukku pōccu.*  
*veḷḷai-k kutirai viṭṭirku vantatu,*  
*karuppu-k kutirai ārrōṭu pōccu.*  
 (pōccu = pōyirru)

A white horse and a black horse went to a river.  
 The white horse came back home,  
 but the black horse went away with the river.

- 12a) *maṇṇukkuḷ irukkum māyāṇṭi;*  
*urikka urikka tōlāṇṭi. atu enna?*

Under the soil, there lives a mysterious man;  
 When you strip and strip him, (you find that) he is a man of  
 only skin. What is it?

*atu veṅkāyam.* An onion.

- b) *urikka urikka, onrum illai. atu enna?*

When you strip and strip him, (at the end) there is nothing left.  
 What is it?

*atu veṅkāyam.* An onion.

\* Compare TVK 516, 2049 (answer identical):

516. *ūriliruntu vāṅki vanta māṭṭirku*  
*urikka urikka verun tōl.*

When you skin and skin a bullock which I brought from the town,  
 (you find that) it is nothing but skin.

2049. *maṇṇukkuḷ pīrantāṇṭi,*  
*mā-perum tōlāṇṭi,*  
*kāṇṇirai-t taruvāṇṭi.*

A man who was born in the soil,  
 a man who abounds in skin,  
 a man who makes you weep.

\* *EROT* 1439. Patch on Patch: An Onion (594–95, 844–45).

- 13) *mañcaḷ niratt aḷaki,*  
*mañkaiyar mukatt aḷaki. aval yār?*  
 A beautiful lady of yellow complexion,  
 a lady more beautiful on the faces of ladies. Who is she?  
*atu mañcaḷ.* Turmeric.

\* Compare *TVK* 2019, 2048 (answer identical), 2027 (answer different):

2019. *mañkalattin ciṅṅam,*  
*mañkaiyarin tōḷi.*  
 A symbol of auspiciousness and  
 the companion of a lady.
2048. *mañṅukkuḷ piṟakkum,*  
*mañkaiyarukku aḷaku tarum.*  
 It is born in the soil and  
 it gives beauty to the ladies.
2027. *mañcaḷ nira aḷaki nān,*  
*maṇam illāta aḷaki nān;*  
*māṅkaḷi vantāl, varavēr pār enṇai. nān yār?*  
 I am a beautiful lady of yellow complexion,  
 I am a beautiful lady without any odor;  
 if December comes, people will welcome me. Who am I?  
*atu pūcaṇi-p-pū.* The flower of the pumpkin plant.

#### ANIMALS, INCLUDING ANIMAL PRODUCTS

- 14) *paccai-maram nālu,*  
*pāla-maram nālu,*  
*vīcu-kōl oṅṅru,*  
*viṟaku-taṭi iraṅṅu. atu enṇa?*  
 Four green trees,  
 four trees containing a milky sap,  
 one (waving) switch,  
 two pieces of firewood. What is it?  
*atu pacu-māṭu.* A cow.

\* Compare *TVK* 1813, 1846 (answer identical):

1813. *paṭṭa maram iraṅṅu,*  
*paṭāta maram nāṅku,*  
*viciṟi iraṅṅu,*  
*veṅcā-maram oṅṅru.*  
 Two dead trees,  
 four live trees,  
 two fans,

one whisk.

1846. *pantal kāl nālu,*  
*pavaḷa-k kāl nālu, vellī-t taṭi iranṭu,*  
*veṅcā-maram onru.*  
*(pavaḷa = pavaḷa)*  
 Four shed posts,  
 four posts of coral,  
 two silver sticks,  
 one whisk.

\* *EROT* 1476–94. Four Hang; Two Point the Way (610–21, 849–52).

- 15) *nālu rācāttiyaḷ maḷaiyil naṇaiyāmal pōkiṇam. atu enna?*  
*(rācāttiyaḷ = irācāttikaḷ; pōkiṇam = pōkiṇrār)*  
 Four queens walk in the rain without getting wet. What are they?  
*atu māṭṭu-mulai.* The teats of a cow.

\* Compare *TVK* 100, 1527, 1569, 1633, 1851 (answer identical):

100. *antarāḷa kāṭṭilē*  
*nālu pēr naṇaiyāmal niṟkiṇrār.*  
 In the middle of a desert,  
 there are four people not getting wet.

1527. *tiṭu-tiṭ-ena maḷai peyya-t,*  
*tiṭṭi-y ellām vellam oṭa,*  
*nānku ūr rājākkal*  
*naṇaiyāmal varukirārkaḷ.*  
*(tiṭṭi = tiṭṭu)*  
 While the pattering rain pours down,  
 while the water floods all sandbanks,  
 four village chiefs come along without getting wet.

1569. *tonti uṭalilē tuvarāṅkāy-p pottalilē*  
*nālu pēr turai-makkaḷ naṇaiyāmal vārāṅka.*  
*(vārāṅka = varukirārkaḷ)*  
 With big-bellied bodies, with pouches (full) of pigeon-peas (*Cajanus indicus*), four noblemen come along without getting wet.

1633. *nālu pāppāṇ naṇaiyāmal pōrāṇ.*  
*(pāppāṇ = pāppāṇ; pōrāṇ = pōkirāṇ)*  
 Four Brahmins walk along without getting wet.

1851. *payaṅkaramāna maḷaiyilum nānku*  
*pērkaḷ naṇaiyāmal celkiṇraṇar.*  
 In a terrible rain, four people walk along without getting wet.

\* *EROT* 961–63. Go through Rain; Are Not Wet. § 5 (cf. 354–55).

- 16) *ēr ēru caṅkili,*  
*iraṅk iraṅku caṅkili,*

*ērāta komp ellām ēri vanta caṅkili. atu enna?*

Climb, climb, O chain!

Descend, descend, O chain!

It's a chain that climbed all branches that cannot be climbed.

What is it?

*atu aṇil.*

A palm squirrel.

\* Compare TVK 657 (answer identical), 658 (answer different):

657. *ēru ēru caṅkili,*

*iraṅku iraṅku caṅkili,*

*eṭṭāta komp ellām*

*toṭṭu vā caṅkili.*

Climb, climb, O chain!

Descend, descend, O chain!

Touch all branches that cannot be reached

and come, O chain!

658. *ērum caṅkili iraṅkum caṅkili,*

*kottāmpetti muṭaiyum caṅkili. atu enna?*

*(kottāmpetti = kottā-p-petti = kottai-p-petti)*

A chain that climbs, a chain that descends,

a chain that plaits baskets. What is it?

*atu micurum kūtum.*

Honeybees and their comb.

*(micuru = miṇiru = ṇimiru)*

17a) *eṭṭu-k kāl ūnri,*

*iru kāl paṭam eṭuttu,*

*vaṭṭa-k kuṭai piṭittu,*

*vārār-ām vanniyanār. atu enna?*

*(vārār = varukirār)*

Resting on eight feet,

taking photographs with two feet,

holding a round umbrella,

a prince is said to come along. What is it?

*atu nanṭu.*

A crab.

b) *eṭṭu-k kāl ūnri,*

*iru kāl paṭam eṭuttu,*

*vaṭṭa-k kuṭai piṭittu,*

*vārār-ām vanniyan-āl.*

*(vārār = varukirār)*

c) *eṭṭu-k kāl ūnri,*

*iru kāl paṭam eṭuttu,*

*vaṭṭa-k kuṭai piṭittu,*

*vārār-ām vanniyan.*

\* Compare TVK 567 (answer identical):

567. *eṭṭu-k kāl ūnri,*  
*iru kāl paṭam eṭuttu,*  
*vaṭṭa-k kuṭai piṭittu,*  
*varukirār-ām vanniyanār.*

\* EROT 48-55. The Odin Riddle. § 7. A crab (24-28).

18) *vaṇṇa-vaṇṇa āṭaiyil tēn unṇa-c celluvān. avan yār?*  
 In a colorful robe, he walks round to eat honey. Who is he?  
*atu vaṇṇattu-p-pūcci.* A butterfly.

19) *ṭākkuttar vantār,*  
*ūciyai pōṭṭār;*  
*ālai-k kāṇa-v-illai. atu enna?*  
 (*ṭākkuttar = ṭāktar*)  
 The doctor came and  
 gave an injection;  
 but there was nobody to be seen. What is it?  
*atu kuḷavi.* A wasp.  
 (*kuḷavi = kuḷavi*)

\* Compare TVK 1419 (answer different):

1419. *ṭāktar vantār, ūci pōṭṭār;*  
*kācu vānkāmal oṭi viṭṭār. avar yār?*  
 The doctor came and gave an injection;  
 but without taking his fees, he ran away. Who is he?  
*atu tēl.* A scorpion.

20) *taṭṭināl, vārān;*  
*taṭavināl, pōrān. atu enna?*  
 (*vārān = varukirān; pōrān = pōkirān*)  
 If you chase him off, he comes again;  
 but if you stroke him, he goes (dies). What is it?  
*atu nuḷampu.* A mosquito.

\* Compare TVK 1446 (answer identical):

1446. *taṭṭināl, paṇappān;*  
*taṭavināl, cāvān.*  
 If you chase him off, he flies away;  
 but if you stroke him, he dies.

21) *antā pōrān, intā pōrān;*  
*aṭiyai pārṭtāl, teriya-v-illai. atu enna?*  
 (*pōrān = pōkirān*)  
 He goes that way, he goes this way;

but if you look for his track, it is not to be seen. What is it?  
*atu erumpu.* An ant.

\* Compare TVK 92 (answer identical):

92. *atō pōkirān cittaṅṅi (ciruwan);*  
*avan pōkum taṭam teriyātu.*  
*(cittaṅṅi = cirrāṅṅi)*  
 Look, there goes a little man;  
 but his track is not to be seen.

\* EROT 181–85. Moves; Leaves No Track. § 12. Ants (64–65, 705).

22) *vēliyai curri nīla pāmpu. atu enna?*  
 Round about a fence a dark snake. What is it?  
*atu karaiyān.* Termites.

\* Compare TVK 2492 (answer identical), 2493 (answer different):

2492. *vēliyai-c curri nīriya mālai.*  
*(nīriya = nēriya)*

Round about a fence a straight garland.

2493. *vēliyai-c curri nīliya-p pāmpu. atu enna?*

Round about a fence a dark snake. What is it?

*atu araiṅṅai-kayiru.* The cord to which the loincloth is attached.

\* EROT 1342. Round As a Hoop, Long As a Snake (553–54, 835).

23) *kāṭṭukkuḷ kari-c-caṭṭi mūṭi-y-irukku. atu enna?*  
*(kari = kari-; -irukku = -irukkum)*  
 In the forest, a smutty pot is covered by a lid. What is it?  
*atu yānai-malam.* Elephant dung.

24) *caḷḷu-valḷu nāy kuraikkum*  
*cāntapaṭiyān tōppilē;*  
*muṭṭai iṭṭu kuṅcu porikkum*  
*mūṅkilaṭiyān tōppilē. atu enna?*  
 A dog barks angrily  
 in the grove of a man from Cāntapaṭi;  
 having laid eggs, it hatches the young ones  
 in the grove of a man from Mūṅkilaṭi. What is it?  
*atu mōrum veṅṅaiyum.* The buttermilk and the butter  
*(veṅṅai = veṅṅey)* (the churning of curdled milk).

\* Compare TVK 1247 (answer identical):

1247. *caḷḷu-valḷu nāy kuraikkum*  
*cāttappāṭiyān tōppilē;*  
*muṭṭai-y iṭṭu kuṅcu porikkum*  
*mūṅkilaṭiyān tōppilē.*

A dog barks angrily  
in the grove of a man from Cāttappāṭi;  
it lays eggs and hatches the young ones  
in the grove of a man from Mūñkilaṭi.

\* *EROT* 387. Squeals (129, 726).

- 25) *oru peṭṭikkul iru tailam. atu enna?*  
Two (types of) unguents in one box. What is it?  
*atu muṭṭai.* An egg.

\* Compare *TVK* 692 (answer identical):

692. *oru kuppikkulḷē iranṭu ennai.*  
(*ennai = enney*)  
Two (types of) oils in one bottle.

\* *EROT* 1140. Castle on the Seaside (479–80).

- 26a) *vellai-k kōyil, viḷuntu kumpiṭa iṭam illai. atu enna?*  
A white temple, but no place to bow and worship. What is it?  
*atu muṭṭai.* An egg.
- b) *cāntu pōṭṭa kōyilukkuḷ viḷuntu kumpiṭa iṭam illai. atu enna?*  
In a whitewashed temple, there is no place to bow and worship.  
What is it?  
*atu muṭṭai.* An egg.

\* Compare *TVK* 1261, 2460 (answer identical):

1261. *cāntu pūciṇa kōvilukkuḷ*  
*pūntu purappaṭa vali-y illai.*  
(*pūntu = pukuntu*)  
There is no way to enter a whitewashed temple and come out again.

2460. *vellai-p piḷḷaiyār kōyilukku-p*  
*pūṭṭum illai torappum illai.*  
(*torappu = turappu*)  
For a white Gaṇeśa temple there is neither lock nor key.

\* *EROT* 1133. Little White House without Doors (475, 814–15).

\* *EROT* 1187. Box Cannot Be Opened (502–503).

- 27a) *āyiram taccar kūṭi,*  
*alākāṇa maṇṭapam kaṭṭi,*  
*oruvar kaṇ-paṭṭu,*  
*uṭaintat-ām maṇṭapam. atu enna?*  
A thousand carpenters came together  
and built a beautiful *maṇḍapa* (hall),  
but when a single person had spotted it,  
it is said to have broken in pieces. What is it?

- atu tēṅ-kūtu.* A honeycomb.
- b) *āyiram taccar kūṭi,*  
*aḷakāṇa maṅṭapam kaṭṭi,*  
*oruvar kai paṭṭāl,*  
*uṭaintu viṭum. atu enṇa?*  
 A thousand carpenters come together  
 and build a beautiful *maṅḍapa* (hall),  
 but if a single person touches it (accidentally) with his hands,  
 it breaks in pieces. What is it?  
*atu tēṅ-kūtu.* A honeycomb.

\* Compare TVK 239, 241, 1859 (answer identical):

239. *āyiram taccar kūṭi,*  
*aḷakāṇa maṅṭapaṅ kaṭṭi,*  
*oruvaṅ kaṅ-paṭṭu,*  
*uṭaintat-ām maṅṭapam.*
241. *āyiram pēr kaṭṭiya araṅka-maṅi maṅṭapam,*  
*oruvaṅ kaṅ-paṭṭāl. oliyum anta maṅṭapam.*  
*(kaṭṭiya = kaṭṭina)*  
 There is a *maṅḍapa* (hall) (studded) with pearls and (furnished) with  
 a stage that has been built by a thousand people;  
 but if a single person spots it, that *maṅḍapa* will go to pieces.
1859. *pala pēr kaṭṭiya viṭu*  
*oruvaṅ kaṅ-paṭṭu,*  
*uṭaintat-ām.*  
*(kaṭṭiya = kaṭṭina)*  
 After a single person had spotted a house  
 that many people had built,  
 it is said to have broken in pieces.

MAN

- 28) *kamerā illāmal paṭam eṭuppatu enṇa?*  
 What is it that can take photographs without having a camera?  
*atu kaṅ.* The eyes.
- 29) *vāṭā pōṭā eṅpāṅ.*  
*avaṅ iruṅpatō āḷa-k kuḷiyil. avaṅ yār?*  
 He commands: “Hey, come!” “Hey, go!”  
 But the place where he lives is a deep pit. Who is he?  
*atu nāḷku.* The tongue.

\* Compare TVK 58 (answer identical):

58. *aṭē puṭē eṅpāṅ.*  
*viṭṭai viṭṭu veliyēra māṭṭāṅ.*  
*(aṭē = aṭi-y-ē; puṭē = piṭi-y-ē)*

He commands: "Beat (him/her/it)!" "Catch (him/her/it)!"  
But he cannot come out of his house.

- 30) *naṭṭu vīṭṭukkul muṭṭu-p palakai. atu enna?*  
(*naṭṭu=naṭu*)  
In the middle of a house an obstructing plank. What is it?  
*atu nāḱku.* The tongue.

\* *EROT* 1150. Red Cave That Is Always Wet (485–88, 818–19).

- 31) *aintu vīṭṭukku oru murrām. atu enna?*  
There is one courtyard for five houses. What is it?  
*atu uḷḷaṅkai.* The palm of the hand.

\* Compare *TVK* 663 (answer identical):

663. *aintu ūrkaḷukku orē mantai.*  
There is only one grazing ground for five villages.

THINGS

- 32) *ōṭṭumpōtu karuppu;*  
*iḷukkumpōtu civappu. atu enna?*  
(*-pōtu=-polutu*)  
When you push it in, it is black;  
but when you pull it out, it is red. What is it?  
*atu kollan paṭṭatai irumpu.* The iron in the smithy.
- 33) *cuṭṭa aṇil koppilē pāyutu. atu enna?*  
(*pāyutu=pāykiratu*)  
A burnt palm squirrel jumps on a branch. What is it?  
*atu kokka-taṭi catakam.* A little curved hedge bill.
- 34) *kutirai oṭa oṭa, vāl kuraikiratu. atu enna?*  
While a horse runs and runs, its tail shortens. What is it?  
*atu ūciyum nūlum.* A needle and thread.

\* Compare *TVK* 1119 (answer identical):

1119. *kutirai oṭa oṭa, vāl kuraikiratu.*

\* *EROT* 203. Goes About; Leaves Its Tail Behind (73–74, 707).

\* *EROT* 351–53. Form (109, 720).

\* *EROT* 419–35. Is Ridden, Jumps, or Walks. 421–35. Abnormal Riding  
(142–43, 732).

\* *EROT* 531–34. One Eye and a Tail (187–90, 745).

\* *EROT* 535–36. Person with a Tail (190–91, 745).

\* *EROT* 594–600. Various Kinds of Dress (219).

- 35) *ippa pīranta pillai appanukku cōru pōṭukirāṇ. avan yār?*  
*(ippa=ippolutu)*  
 A newborn child serves rice to daddy. Who is he?  
*atu akappai.* A ladle [made of a coconut-shell].
- 36) *kuḷattukkullē kutittavan kummālam pōṭukirāṇ. avan yār?*  
 A man who jumped into a tank romps about there. Who is he?  
*atu palakāram.* A *palakāram* [a kind of sweet dish].

\* Compare TVK 1286 (answer identical):

1286. *cilu-cilutta taṇṇiril*  
*cemmariyātu mēyutu.*  
*(mēyutu=mēykirātu)*  
 A sheep grazes in bubbling water.

- 37) *cinṇaṇ cirukkanum cinṇaṇ cirukkiyum*  
*cērntu makīltu kōrītta mālaiyai*  
*cikk-illāmal avilppavarukku*  
*cennai paṭṭanam cītanam. atu enna?*  
*(makīltu=makīlntu; kōrītta=kōrtta=kōtta)*  
 Those who can untie the garland that a young man and a young woman have jointly strung in a joyful mood without tangling it, (will get) Madras as a gift. What is it?  
*atu iṭiyappam.* An *iṭiyappam* [a kind of sweet dish].

\* Compare TVK 1309 (answer different):

1309. *cinna-c cirukkiyum cinna-p paiyanum*  
*cirittu-k kaṭṭina tāli*  
*cikk-illāmal aviḷttavarukku-c*  
*cennai paṭṭinam inām. atu enna?*  
*(cirittu=cirittu; cennai paṭṭinam=cenna(i)paṭṭanam)*  
 Those who untied the marriage badge a young woman and young man had tied while giggling without tangling it, (got) Madras as a gift.  
*atu tūkkaṇāṅkuruvi-k kūtu.* The nest of the weaverbird (*Ploceus baya*).

- 38) *onru mitakkum,*  
*onru tālum,*  
*onru karaiyum. atu enna?*  
*(tālum=tālum)*  
 One floats (on the water),  
 one sinks, and  
 one dissolves. What are they?  
*atu verilai, pākku, cuṇṇāmpu.* The betel leaf, the areca nut,  
 and the lime.

\* Compare TVK 2082, 2172 (answer identical):

2082. *malaikku pōnēn,*  
*mañkammālai-k kaṇṭēn.*  
*mūuru cāmāṅkaḷ tantāl,*  
*onru muḷukirru,*  
*inn-onru mitantatu,*  
*maru-onru karaintatu.*  
 I went to the hills.  
 There I saw Mañkammā.  
 She gave me three things:  
 one sank (in the water),  
 the other floated,  
 and the third dissolved.

2172. *murukan viṭṭirku pōnēn.*  
*mūuru vastu-p perrēn.*  
*taṇṇiyilē pōṭṭēn,*  
*onru karaintatu,*  
*onru mitantatu,*  
*onru amiṅtatu.*  
*(taṇṇiyilē = taṇṇirilē)*  
 I went to the house (temple) of Murukan.  
 There I obtained three things.  
 I put them in water;  
 one dissolved,  
 one floated, and  
 one sank.

39) *cinna viṭṭil cirāy aṭukki irukku. atu enna?*  
*(aṭukki irukku = aṭukki-y-irukkum)*  
 Chips are piled up in a little house. What is it?  
*atu tī-p-peṭṭi.* [The matches in] a matchbox.

\* Compare TVK 1320 (answer identical), 1325 (answer different):

1320. *cinnañ-ciru viṭṭilē*  
*cippāykaḷ pala pēru.*  
 In a tiny little house,  
 there are many sepoys.

1325. *cinna viṭṭukku niraīya-c cirā. atu enna?*  
*(cirā = cirāy)*  
 A little house full of chips. What is it?  
*atu paṅkaḷ.* The teeth.

\* EROT 907. Flat-top House (334, 774).

\* EROT 924 (343).

40a) *talai-y unṭu, vāl illai;*

*uṭamp unṭu, kāl illai;*

*āṇāl taṭṭa-c cīrum. atu enna?*

It has a head, but no tail;

it has a body, but no legs;

but when you hit it, it hisses. What is it?

*atu neruppu-k-kuccu.* A match.

b) *taṭṭināl, cīrum. atu enna?*

If you hit it, it hisses. What is it?

*atu neruppu-k-kucci.* A match.

41) *nallavan, toṭṭu-p pēcināl keṭṭavan. avan yār?*

A good man—but if you move freely (carelessly) with him, a bad man. Who is he?

*atu miṇcāram.* The electric current.

\* Compare TVK 458, 1565 (answer identical):

458. *uyir illā manitan toṭṭālum viṭṭālum piṭikkirān.*

(*illā=illāta*)

A lifeless man gets hold of you if you touch him and [if so] if you [wish to] leave him.

1565. *toṭṭāl piṭittu-k koḷlum,*

*āṇāl paṭai-y alla;*

*viṭṭāl vēlai ceyyum,*

*āṇāl entīram alla.*

If you touch it, it catches you,

but it is no glue;

if you leave it alone, it works,

but it is no machine.

42) *taḷa-taḷa taṅkam pōla,*

*tāmarai-vaḷaiyam pōla,*

*iyamaṇiṅ pallai pōla,*

*intirāṇiyiṅ kaṇṇai-p pōla. atu enna?*

It's like glittering gold,

it's like a lotus stalk,

it's like Yama's teeth,

it's like Indrāṇī's eyes. What is it?

*atu tāli.* The *tāli* [marriage badge].

43) *oru vēḷai unav iṭṭāl, oru nāl ulaikkum. atu enna?*

If you give it a meal once [a day], it works hard the whole day.  
What is it?

*atu kaṭikāram.* A watch.

44) *aṭuttavar kataiyai aluṭṭ illāmal*

*aṇuṭiṇam cumakkum cumai tāṅki. atu enna?*

A carrier of burdens carries daily the stories of others without getting bored. What is it?

*atu țairi.* A diary.

- 45) *małai-kālam ulāvaruvāñ. avan yār?*  
He wanders about during the rainy season. Who is he?  
*atu kuțai.* An umbrella.

- 46) *matittāl, niřkum;*  
*mitittāl, oțum. atu enna?*  
If you pay respect to it, it stands still;  
but if you tread it, it runs. What is it?  
*atu miti-vaņți.* A bicycle.

\* Compare TVK 169, 1023 (answer identical):

169. *ałutti mitittāl,*  
*alari-k koņțu oțum.*  
If you tread it hard,  
it runs off crying.

1023. *kālāl utaittāl,*  
*kārāl urulum.*  
If you tread it with your foot,  
it rolls with the help of air.

- 47) *civappu cēlai uțuttu-k koņțu,*  
*ā enru niřpāl-ām. avał yār?*  
She is said to stand there dressed in a red sari with her mouth  
wide open. Who is she?  
*atu pōșț-bāks.* A postbox.

\* Compare TVK 424, 2374 (answer identical):

424. *uțal civappu, vāy akalam,*  
*uņavu kākitam.*  
The body, red; the mouth, wide open; the food, paper.

2374. *vāññāl ellām*  
*vāyai-t tirant-irukkum.*  
All the days of its life, it keeps its mouth open.

- 48) *vāyāl viłun̄kum ałaki;*  
*vāyirrai tirantāl,*  
*attañaiyum appaiyē. atu enna?*  
(*tirantāl = tirantāl*)  
A beautiful lady who swallows [everything] with her mouth;  
but if you open her stomach, [you find] everything just as it  
was. What is it?  
*atu tapāl-pețți.* A postbox.  
(*tapāl-pețți = tapārpețți*)

- 49) *cutta-c cutta, cutta-p-paṭātu pāy enna?*  
(*cutta = curra*)  
What kind of mat is it that cannot be rolled up even if you go on and on rolling it?  
*atu rōṭṭu.* A road.
- 50) *vīṭu illāṭavan*  
*vīṭi-y ellām*  
*veḷiccam pōṭukirāṇ. avan yār?*  
A man who has no house of his own boasts on all streets. Who is he?  
*atu vaḷi-kāṭṭi.* A signpost.

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paddy ears: no. 10  
*palakāram* (sweet dish): no. 36  
palm of hand: no. 31  
palm squirrel: no. 16  
palmyra fruits (*Borassus flabelliformis*): no. 6  
pomegranate: no. 8  
postbox: nos. 47, 48  
rain: no. 2  
road: no. 49  
signpost: no. 50  
stars: no. 1  
sweet dish: *see iṭiyappam, palakāram tāli* (marriage badge): no. 42  
teats, cow's: no. 15  
termites: no. 22  
thread: *see* needle and thread  
tongue: nos. 29, 30  
turmeric: no. 13  
umbrella: no. 45  
wasp: no. 19  
watch: no. 43  
wild date palm (*Phoenix sylvestris*), fruits of: no. 7

## NOTES

1. *viṭukatai*, "riddle." *viṭu* means "to leave," *katai* means "story," *kavi* means "poetry," *kaṭu* means "poison," and *vitai* means "seed."

2. Riddles 1a, 11, 12b, 17c, 26a, 27b, 28, 31, 40b, 45, and 47 were communicated to me by Mrs. J. Shanthakumary and Mrs. Santhira Segara Pillaiyar Kovilady from Nallur, North Jaffna. All other riddles were noted down for me by Mr. A. V. Jayavirasinkam and his sister, Mrs. A. V. Thaneswary from Karaveddy, West Karaveddy.

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