**From Kaurava Queen to Great Goddess:**

**The Metamorphosis of Peruntiruvāḷ in Northwestern Tamilnadu**

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The first time I met Peruntiruvāḷ standing as Duryodhana’s wife and queen, I was standing at the *paṭukaḷam*, the "the field/place of dying," the place where Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas, died. It was 2002 and I was in the small village of T. Kuliyaṉūr located in Dharmapuri area in northwestern Tamilnadu. It was in this "field/place of dying" that the ritual theater performance— *terukkūttu* ("street drama”)—called “The Eighteenth Day War” culminated. I was attending the grand finale of a three-day festival celebrated in honor of the anti-hero Duryodhana. The story goes that after his death in the *Mahābhārata* war, Duryodhana returns as king for a day in the land of the Kauravas, and as a *cāmi* (god) during his festival. Here, Duryodhana, after briefly reveling in his role as king for a day, is ritually killed once again in the *paṭukaḷam*. It was at this moment that Peruntiruvāḷ, the Kaurava queen, made her appearance.

The *terukkūttu* actor portraying Bhīma had just struck Duryodhana’s effigy on the thigh with his powerful mace. The priest of the T. Kuliyaṉūr Draupadī temple was tying a knot in the hair of an icon of Draupadī, which was standing on the effigy of Duryodhana, when we (myself along with Alf Hiltebeitel and S. Ravindran) observed a small crowd of spectators witnessing another set of rituals being performed on the actor who portrayed Peruntiruvāḷ. One actor removed the string of flowers adorning Peruntiruvāḷ's hair bun and wiped off the ‘auspicious’ vermillion dot from her forehead while she lamented her king’s demise. Two other actors quickly removed the glass bangles from her arms. With her hair now disheveled, Peruntiruvāḷ, holding a winnow containing a bowl in one hand and a sweeping broom in the other, made her exit from the stage on a small ladder carried by two actors. As the actors placed the ladder beside the effigy of Duryodhana, the actor playing Peruntiruvāḷ stood up and walked amidst the crowd. Several women and some men in the crowd bowed their heads in a sign of respect, and Peruntiruvāḷ gestured as if sweeping the ground with the broom then briefly touched the heads of people, alternating these two actions. Throughout this blessing session, Peruntiruvāḷ cried the painful songs of lamentation (*oppāri*), reminding the onlookers of her fate as a widow and requesting money for her sustenance. Some women joined in the lamentation and sang mournfully along with Peruntiruvāḷ. The bowl on the winnow rapidly filled with coins and rupee bills.

The scene of Peruntiruvāḷ's lamentation and the response of onlookers in this village stood in stark contrast to *paṭukaḷam* rites conducted in other areas of Tamilnadu. Most remarkably, as Hiltebeitel promptly observed, the emotional atmosphere here was quite different from the light-hearted tone found in the core area of the Draupadi cult, around Ceñji (Gingee), where these rites took on a “parodic nature.” In the core area, there was a sense of exuberance due to the reversal of fortunes between Draupadī and the Kaurava women since the Kauravas were now all deceased. I recalled that during the *paṭukaḷam* rites in the core area, not only did women refrain from shedding tears for Peruntiruvāḷ, but the actor portraying the role did not maintain a solemn or serious demeanor. No lamentation, no grief. Moreover, the actor representing Peruntiruvāḷ, standing beside the effigy of Duryodhana, was hardly recognized as Peruntiruvāḷ by the onlookers there.

In fact, it was not clear that anyone in the core area recognized this woman at all. For example, during our fieldwork in Devikapuram near Gingee in the third week of July in 2000, Rani and Mallika, two middle-aged women in their forties from the weaver caste group of Cengunta Mutaliyars, could not name the ‘woman’ who arrived with a broom and a winnow. A female agricultural laborer called Annamma from Vanniyar caste, who seemed familiar with the Mahābhārata story, confused Peruntiruvāḷ with Gāndhārī. When I enquired again whether it was Peruntiruvāḷ or Gāndhārī, she replied that “both were the same” and “we can call them by any name.” To my question whether she had seen anybody crying along with Peruntiruvāḷ while watching the *paṭukaḷam*, she quickly responded, “No, why should we cry?” The confusion about Peruntiruvāḷ’s identity was also evident in my conversations with a couple of young women in their twenties, Parameswari and Malar, belonging to the Agamudaiya Mutaliyar caste, from Karanampet village near Devikapuram. For Parameswari, the woman who came with a winnow and a broom belonged to the household of the heroic Pāṇḍavas, and she came to sweep the floor of the battlefield “clean” since the place was “full of blood, heads, and bodies.”

This striking difference piqued the curiosity of both Hiltebeitel and me, leading us to explore deeper into her influence among devotees in the Dharmapuri region, starting from 2002. This paper traces the diverse histories and stories of Peruntiruvāḷ and explains why she is perceived as a marginal figure in the core area of the Draupadī cult, but garners tremendous attention and support in Dharmapuri as evident in T. Kuliyaṉūr. In the course of our research, we discovered that support for Peruntiruvāḷ extended beyond mere empathy due to her status as a widow. Scores of Vanniyar families in the region venerate her as their lineage deity, fondly referring to her as Periyāṇṭacchi. The name “Periyāṇṭacchi,” literally means “She, the big ruler,” or “She, of the big universe (*aṇṭam*), or “Big lady.” As our fieldwork continued in the ensuing years, I started unearthing the socio-cultural and historical dynamics contributing to the transformation of Peruntiruvāḷ into a revered lineage deity in this area.

Several questions guided the research. First, what is the role of the *Mahābhārata* epic, specifically the Draupadi cult mythologies, in shaping the different dynamics we observed; are there any folk narratives of the Mahābhārata in the Dharmapuri region that portray Peruntiruvāḷ as a lineage deity of Vanniyars with a dedicated festival? Second, given our familiarity with the festival of Duryodhana (known also as Periyāṇṭavar), a festival that shares the same ritual space—an agricultural field owned by an individual named Venkatachalam in a valley—with the one dedicated to Periyāṇṭacchi, I sought to understand the relationship that Duryodhana and Peruntiruvāḷ share in their post-death incarnations as deities. Finally, since Peruntiruvāḷ and Periyāṇṭavar are regarded as incarnations of Pārvatī and Śiva by their devotees, I wished to trace the association of these lineage deities with the deities in the larger Hindu pantheon. Hiltebeitel encouraged me to proceed further with my inquiry, which we had planned as a chapter authored by me in our monograph on the transformation of the Draupadī cult in the Dharmapuri area, a work being prepared now for publication.

This paper represents one small part of our monograph on Draupadī cult discourses in northwestern parts of Tamilnadu, focusing mainly on the Dharmapuri area. Hiltebeitel’s first volume (1988) focused on Draupadī cult mythologies and ritual complexities in and around the region of Gingee (now in Villupuram District, Tamilnadu), which served as the medieval capital of a "Nayakate" or "viceroyalty,” during the era commonly referred to as the Vijayanagara Empire (1336-1646). Identifying the Gingee region as the "core area" in which the Draupadi cult flourished and consolidated first, Hiltebeitel extensively investigated the historical and geographical dispersal of the cult in different phases throughout the Gingee region and beyond it. In his second volume (1991), he drew attention to wide variations in ritual cycles and festival practices from the "core area" in the Draupadi temples in the Tanjore region, situated just south of the central Gingee area. This region appeared to have the second highest density of the goddess's temples. Hiltebeitel conceived the third volume, co-authored with me, as the third one in the series, considering the government census volumes as well as his own previous studies have "severely underrepresented the number of temples in the Dharmapuri area." In his words, "[f]rom 1998 on, he thus devoted all his fieldwork to the Dharmapuri area, learning that the concentration of Draupadi temples there is nearly as great as it is around Gingee." I had the opportunity to work alongside him a few years after he started.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The Dharmapuri area, which includes the mountainous terrains of Krishnagiri and Dharmapuri Districts through which the Kāverī River flows into northern Tamil Nadu, serves as an important gateway of diasporic spread along the borders with the neighboring South Indian states of Andhra and Karnataka. In this area, in contrast to the "core area" of the Draupadī cult and its diverse structural transformations in the region of Tanjore, patterns of the practices of the cult suggest its disintegration or fragmentation.[[2]](#endnote-2) Moreover, unlike the "core area" of the cult, in the Dharmapuri area, we come across several *Mahābhārata* figures in addition to Draupadī who also had dedicated temples. For instance, there are temples devoted to Kuntī, Draupadī's mother-in-law; Abhimanyu, Draupadī's co-wife’s son; Aravāṉ, another son of her co-wife; and more significantly, open air temples dedicated to Duryodhana, her five husbands’ cousin and adversary, and his queen Peruntiruvāḷ, underscoring a distinct interest in the epic's antagonists in this area. Furthermore, peculiar ritual events such as mass exorcisms of ghosts during the festivals that are dedicated to the divine incarnations of Duryodhana and Peruntiruvāḷ in their subsequent incarnations also set this region apart.

In light of these pertinent variations, we explored how the epic, particularly the Draupadī cult mythologies, have transmuted in this area. We concentrated mainly on a network of seven temples and six festivals within a valley located northwest of Dharmapuri. The twin Kuliyaṉūr villages, bearing the initials T. Kuliyaṉūr and P. Kuliyaṉūr, served as the focal hubs in our research. While some of our chapters in the proposed monograph attempt to trace the historical diffusion of the cult, my concern here is the emergence of the queen of the anti-hero Duryodhana as a deity in this region. As Section I of this paper will show, Peruntiruvāḷ's *satī* in the funeral pyres of her husband, a different ending than Bhānumatī’s in the Sanskrit epic or her own ending in the mythologies of the "core area" of the Draupadī cult, has facilitated her emergence as a deity. Certain cultural elements specific to the Tamil milieu played a contributory role in this transformation. Revered as a lineage deity of several groups of the Vanniyar caste, Peruntiruvāḷ, in her new incarnation as Periyāṇṭacchi, is perceived as the supreme Śakti or Pārvatī herself. In Section II of this paper, I investigate the discursive strategies of the Draupadi cult mythologies and corresponding folklore versions of the *Mahābhārata* epic in Karnataka in this endeavor. This paper draws upon a diverse range of sources, including chapbook materials and the intertextual dialogues between these chapbooks, in addition to mythological narratives, *terukkūttu* performances, news articles, iconographic representations, festival rituals, relevant manuscripts, and, most significantly, valuable conversations with our interlocutors, including priests and *terukkūttu* masters-experts.

**Section I**

**Peruntiruvāḷ as Periyāṇṭacchi: Why did she Desire a Separate Festival**

Jayaraman, a key organizer of Periyāṇṭacchi festival for the past twenty-three years, explained that Periyāṇṭacchi is the lineage deity (*kulateyvam*) for about two hundred families of the Vanniya Kavundar caste group in and around T. Kuliyaṉūr village. These families collectively refer to themselves as *paṅkāḷikaḷ* and consider themselves as *campantis* (literally 'in-laws') of other families in the same caste group who venerate Duryodhana-Periyāṇṭavar as their lineage deity.[[3]](#endnote-3) For her festival in T. Kuliyanūr in the last week of April in 2005, each of these families was asked to contribute 75 rupees as a "tax" to cover the expenses of the festival, which also serves a token of their affiliation with the deity.[[4]](#endnote-4) This marked the third time they were organizing the biennial festival after an interval of approximately "sixty years," he informed us. [[5]](#endnote-5)

We met Jayaraman and his uncle (his father’s younger brother) Palani at the Draupadī temple (Hiltebeitel called it "The Sunflower Draupadī temple" as the temple was surrounded by a field of sunflowers), in Utthaṉūr on Monday (April 25) morning. They were performing the "inviting of the goddess.” Called "*Ammaṉ Aḻaittal*," this is a customary event that inaugurates any festival of a goddess in the Tamil context. This event involves the formal procession of the goddess from a nearby temple or water source, such as a tank or a well, to the festival site, and marks the beginning of a series of other events of the festival. The deity, carried from Utthaṉūr, would arrive at the estate or agricultural field of Venkatachalam three hours later, where a large mud effigy of the goddess had been constructed the previous night. The next day, an elaborate worship, including three ritual sacrifices (*muppūcai*)—a pig, a chicken, and a goat—would be offered to the goddess.

Despite their busy activities, during a brief thirty-minute window that we managed to secure with Palani and Jayaraman, they referred to the goddess as Duryodhana’s wife in the Mahābhārata. Palani quickly clarified his response: “She is Iśvaraṉ’s (Śiva’s) wife. Only during this Age [Dvāpara yuga], she is Duryodhana’s wife. Iśvaraṉ is one incarnation; Duryodhana is another.” Palani added that a play, titled *Turuvācar Karvapaṅka Nātakam* (“The Taming of Durvāsa’s Arrogance”), addresses Periyāṇṭacchi as Pārvatī. This play is usually performed as a *terukkūttu* (“street drama”) on the main day of the festival and is an integral part of its repertoire, taking place in the vicinity of the Utthaṉūr Draupadī temple. In the year 2017, one of the *paṅkāḷikaḷ*, G. Venu from Tha. Kuliyanūr, presided over the play, as indicated in the festival invitation.[[6]](#endnote-6) Although I did not have the opportunity to witness this play in person, I will provide a couple of its versions, gathered from a chapbook and from Palani, in the course of this discussion.

The chapbook, titled “*Aṅkāḷammai Carittirameṉṉum Tūruvācakakapaṅka N*ā*takam*” (“*The History of Aṅkāḷammaṉ or the Taming of Durvāsa*” 1927, hereafter TKN), composed by Varata Upattiyayar, delineates the tale of Durvāsa as follows. Endowed with twenty-two eyes (one on each toe and finger, in addition to two on his face), the sage Durvāsa visits the abodes of Brahmā, Śiva, and Viṣṇu, expecting their worship. As Brahmā disrespects him, Durvāsa curses him, demanding that Śiva chop off one of his (five) heads. The sage then confronts Śiva and Pārvatī in their abode of Kayilai (Mount Kailāsa), asserting his superiority over all gods. When they disagree, he curses Śiva, causing him to fall into a state of frenzy, and curses Pārvatī to become a wandering ghost (*alakai*). In retaliation, Pārvatī curses the sage that all twenty-two of his eyes would be destroyed. Following this, when Śiva departs to nourish all beings in the cosmos, Brahmā visits his abode. Pārvatī, mistaking Brahmā for Śiva, falls at his feet. She realizes the mistake, attributing it to their striking resemblance, as both have five heads. Later, she complains to Śiva and urges him to sever Brahmā's head. When Śiva plucks one of Brahmā's heads off, due to the sin of killing, he becomes frenzied and starts dancing. Pārvatī also dances like a ghost, and together, they traverse the three worlds. Meanwhile, Durvāsa visits Vaikuntam, where Viṣṇu, alongside Lakṣmī, in the guise of massaging his feet, alongside Lakṣmī, wipes off Durvāsa's extra eyes as well his arrogance. As Śiva and Pārvatī roam the world with insatiable hunger, Viṣṇu erects a "board with his seal” ("*muttirai bōrdu*") in Vaikuṇṭam, proclaiming the serving of "blood-rice" (or "blood and rice;" in Tamil, *utiram cōru*). When, upon the instruction of Viṣṇu, Lakṣmī feeds blood-rice to the divine couple, the “dull-witted” skull of Brahmā leaves Śiva’s hand and sticks to Pārvatī’s hand. At this moment, Pārvatī transforms into Aṅkāḷammaṉ (Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari), standing tall, bridging the space between earth and sky while holding the skull. Śiva, upon seeing her, asks Viṣṇu how he can continue to exist with this gory appearance of Pārvatī'. Viṣṇu reveals that his sister will reside as a “ghost” in Malaiyaṉūr, and Śiva will take the form of Tānṭavarāyaṉ near her in Malaiyaṉūr. When Śiva inquires about food for Brahmā's skull, Viṣṇu explains that it will consume the blood from sacrifices of goats and chickens, offered by devotees. He adds that it will also drink the blood of Rāvaṇa and his kin during Viṣṇu's incarnation as Rāma, and, when he, as a friend of the Pāṇḍavas, avenges Duryodhana and his brothers, the skull will drink their blood too. In the Kali yuga, when he takes the incarnation of Kalki, Pārvatī and Śiva will revert to their original forms. Viṣṇu says, he will remove the sacred thread or *kaṅkaṇam* from his hand at that time.[[7]](#endnote-7)

The chapbook, which includes "Aṅkāḷammaṉ (Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari)" in its title, does not explicitly mention the name "Periyāṇṭacchi." However, during our fieldwork in Veḷḷekauṇṭaṉ Pāḷaiyam, conducted during the Periyāṇṭacchi festival in 2004, celebrated by the Cengunta Mutaliyars, we encountered devotees from that caste group using both names interchangeably for the same goddess. Gnanam, a resident of the village, explained, "Aṅkāḷammaṉ is our kulateyvam. Hence we celebrate Periyāṇṭacchi" (2004). Others, including Sittanathan, Valli, and Pushpa (2004), further clarified that "if she stands, she is Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari, and if she lies down, she is Periyāṇṭacchi," implying these deities are one and the same.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Contrastingly, in the narrative accounts of Vanniyars in Dharmapuri, there is a clear dissociation between Periyāṇṭacchi and Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari. Vanniyars firmly establish their identification of their goddess with Peruntiruvāḷ. When we first heard of the Periyāṇṭacchi festival of Vanniyars from Murugan, the Vanniyar priest at the 'new' Draupadī temple at P. Kuliyanūr (2001), she was introduced to us as Duryodhana's wife. Murugan's brother, Arumugam, in a separate conversation later that year, also reiterated this identification. Similarly, several others, including Palani, Jayaraman, and Jayaraman's wife Indrani, identified Periyāntaccci with Peruntiruvāḷ during our successive visit (2005). Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari did not figure at all in their remarks.[[9]](#endnote-9) One narrative, relating to Periyāṇṭacchi and provided by Palani, echoed the chapbook narrative of the TKN, but with significant changes in its concluding portions. His narrative did not mention Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari. Additionally, in his narrative, the practice of *muppūcai* ('three sacrifices'), forming a crucial part of the Periyāṇṭacchi festival, appeared distinctly. According to Palani's version, when Viṣṇu instructed Lakṣmī to feed Śiva, she began offering him food. However, instead of Śiva, Brahmā's skull began consuming it and slowly released it from his hand, captivated by the food's taste. Viṣṇu then promised the skull that in Pārvatī's next incarnation as Periyāṇṭacchi, he would offer it a worship involving "three sacrifices," and it could have a blood sacrifice (*bali*) then. Palani explained, "In the Kṛta yuga, the divine couple incarnated as Iśvaraṉ and Īśvarī, and in the Dvāpara yuga, they assumed the forms of Duryodhana and Duryodhana's wife."

The second story of Palani drew upon the *uṭaṉkattai* (*satī*) of Duryodhana’s wife after his death in the Mahābhārata battlefield: “When Duryodhana died on the eighteenth day of the war, The Pāṇḍavas cremated the Kauravas. All arrangements were made by Kṛṣṇa since he was related to the Pāṇḍavas on their mother’s side (*tāyāti*), and all the heirs [of the Kauravas] have died. Kṛṣṇa arranged for this war to do away with the burden of the earth. As Bhānumatī (Peruntiruvāḷ) was about the mount the pyre of Duryodhana, Kṛṣṇa asked what boon she would like. She requested that she should be venerated as a deity in the Kali yuga. Kṛṣṇa promised she would come back as Periyāṇṭacchi and should be accorded a festival with *muppūcai*. After getting this boon, she entered the burning pyre of her husband. Then she was born as Periyāṇṭacchi in Malaiyaṉūr.” While Palani was narrating this, Jayaraman nodded in agreement and reiterated that Bhānumatī had incarnated as Periyāṇṭacchi during the Kali yuga in Malaiyaṉūr.

In Palani's description of the appearance of Periyāṇṭacchi to me, Malaiyaṉūr was mentioned: "She possesses four arms, each bearing a trident, a sword, an *uṭukkai* (a small hourglass-shaped drum), and a firepot. She first descended in Malaiyaṉūr." Jayaraman's wife, Indrani, also spoke of the goddess's descent in Malaiyaṉūr: "The husband and wife (Duryodhana and his wife) performed numerous benevolent acts for people. As a result, Kṛṣṇa blessed them, saying that in the future, people would make statues in their honor and worship them. Due to Kṛṣṇa's boon, Peruntiruvāḷ was reborn as Periyāṇṭacchi in Malaiyaṉūr." Such reference to 'Malaiyaṉūr' may suggest a potential connection between the Periyāṇṭacchi of the Vanniyars and Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari, who has Mēl Malaiyaṉūr (or Malaiyaṉūr) as the epicenter of her worship. In fact, festival practices of Periyāṇṭacchi by Vanniyars strongly resemble the festival of Periyāṇṭacchi, celebrated as Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari as such, by Cengunta Mutaliyars. In particular, the recumbent mud effigy of Periyāṇṭacchi, constructed in the festival of Vanniyars, bears resemblance to the effigy constructed for Periyāṇṭacchi-Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari by the Cengunta Mutaliyars. These mud effigies, in turn, evoke the image of the dying Ātiśakti (the primordial śakti) Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari, a legend originating from Mēl Malaiyaṉūr.[[10]](#endnote-10) Secondly, the stories of both the deities Periyāṇṭacchi-Peruntiruvāḷ and Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari-Ātiśakti feature Viṣṇu, known as Kṛṣṇa or Kaṇṇaṉ, as a central character who determines the fate of the goddesses. In the former narrative, Kṛṣṇa rewards Peruntiruvāḷ's act of *satī*, paving the way for her transformation into Periyāṇṭacchi. In the case of Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari as Ātiśakti, Kaṇṇaṉ unfolds a sequence of narrative events that ultimately leads to her incineration.

Despite these strong resonances, both Palani and Jayaraman insisted that Periyāṇṭacchi is distinct from Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari ("*atu v*ē*ṟa, itu v*ē*ṟa*"), in an attempt to firmly root their goddess within the *Mahābhārata*. Palani made a deliberate effort to clarify his reference to Malaiyaṉūr, emphasizing the difference: "Periyāṇṭacchi resides 'side-by-side' with Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari in Malaiyaṉūr, but they exist in different continuities." He even referred to the iconography of Periyāṇṭacchi in support of his assertion (2018; again, in a phone conversation in September 2019): "If you observe our Periyāṇṭacchi, she carries a short sword, a trident, an *uṭukkai*, and a firepot in her arms, while Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari holds the skull of Brahmā and a demon [sic] in her hand. They perform *mayanakkoḷḷai* (pillaging of the graveyard) for Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari. What we do for Periyāṇṭacchi is entirely different. They may consider and worship Periyāṇṭacchi, but they are distinct goddesses with different histories."

He also described the iconography of a small bronze icon (approximately a foot high and weighing about 2 kilos) of Periyāṇṭacchi kept in a bamboo basket at Jayaraman's house.[[11]](#endnote-11) This icon, he explained, has four arms: "In the upper right hand, the trident; in the lower right hand, the sword; in the upper left hand, the *uṭukkai* drum; and in the lower left hand, the firepot."[[12]](#endnote-12)The firepot, for Palani, represents the light in the form of “wisdom” that the goddess bestows upon her devotees. Upon further reflection on his description, I came to realize that while both the *TKN* and Palani's rendition mention the skull of Brahmā, there are subtle distinctions between them. In the former, the skull plays an instrumental role in the goddess's transformation into her new form as Aṅkāḷammaṉ, whereas in the latter, the goddess seems somewhat detached from it. Furthermore, despite the skull receiving assurance of blood sacrifice in Palani's narrative, it does not feature in the festival rites at Venkatachalam's agricultural field either.[[13]](#endnote-13)

A lullaby dedicated to the goddess, which is sung at the Periyāṇṭacchi festival, was also shared by Palani. The initial lines of the song acknowledge Periyāṇṭacchi as Pārvatī and allude to her previous incarnation as Peruntiruvāḷ:

Ariraro, ariraro, ariraro, my mother

Periyāṇṭacchi, ariraro

In the first abode known as Kayilai (Mount Kailāsa), you resided

You are the Devi of our Araṉ (Śiva)

Mount the bull, our mother Periyāyi

You are the younger sister of the blue-complexioned Gopālaṉ (Kṛṣṇa)

You were born as Peruntiruvāḷ in the Dvāpara yuga

A "history," borrowing the term from Palani (September & December; 2019), of Periyāṇṭacchi, which he mentioned he had transcribed from the oral account passed down by his elders, recounts the *satī* of Peruntiruvāḷ. The "history" also provides a rationale for why the festivals of Periyāṇṭavar and Periyāṇṭacchi are not celebrated simultaneously but instead alternate in the Dharmapuri area. According to this "history," upon learning of Duryodhana's impending demise, Peruntiruvāḷ visits his *paṭukaḷam* and implores Kṛṣṇa (*emperumāṉ*) with tears, asking, "Why did this happen? My husband has lost all his children, relatives, chariots, horses, and his army. How will I continue to live?" Kṛṣṇa responds, "*Dharma* has triumphed, and *adharma* has been vanquished. The Pāṇḍavas, following the path of *dharma*, endure, while you, adhering to *adharma*, have met your end. Now, you must uphold the *dharma* of a devoted and chaste wife (*'pattiṉi'* and *'pativiratā ciroṉmaṇi'*). Hence, you should ascend your husband's funeral pyre and let your body be consumed in fire along with his. The last rites will be performed by the Pāṇḍavas. What boon do you desire?" Peruntiruvāḷ replies: "Similar to the eternal life granted to the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī, I also wish for a grand festival in my honor. I desire a festival for my husband as well, but I do not wish for our festivals to coincide. Draupadī and I share the same maternal home. They should regard me as their daughter and celebrate a separate festival in my honor." Kṛṣṇa then grants her request, and says:

Your maternal home is Draupadī's maternal home as well. I bestow upon you the boon that the Periyāṇṭacchi Ammaṉ festival will be observed on a Monday falling within the first fifteen days of the month of Cittirai. Your devotees will wield the sword of valor (*'vīra* *vāḷ'*) and the ceremonial knife (*'pattākkatti'*) to perform the 'sword-cutting.' They will cry out *'Oh, kilalala*!' and drive away the spirits. You will be reborn in Malaiyaṉūr, bearing a trident in one hand, a mighty sword in another, an *uṭukkai* drum in the third hand, and a firepot in the fourth. You shall be worshipped in a reclined posture. The loss of her husband would understandably enrage any woman. Moreover, they [the Pāṇḍavas] have obliterated all the forces on your side. Should you be given a *puja* in a standing posture, it might result in dire consequences due to your grief. In your reclined posture, let all that anger ascend to the heavens. Your standing posture would bring about the destruction of the world. Worshipping you in your reclined form is the most suitable for both you and the world."[[14]](#endnote-14)

On Peruntiruvāḷ's insistence on a separate festival, Palani further explained to me: "She was aware that her husband had followed the path of *adharma* and harbored enmity towards the Pāṇḍavas, leading to his demise. She did not wish to be associated with *adharma* and thus wanted to distance her festival from her husband's. She feared that if both festivals were held simultaneously, people in the Kali yuga would accuse her of condoning his treachery.” In my conversation with Indrani in 2019, I got a slightly different version of Peruntiruvāḷ's *satī*. In that version, no one led Peruntiruvāḷ to death. As soon as Peruntiruvāḷ heard her husband Duryodhana died, she proceeded to perform “*utaṉkattai*.” In the cremation ground, Kṛṣṇa asked her what boon would she seek from him, and she responded that she should be celebrated as a female deity (*peṇ teivam*) in the Kali yuga.

Peruntiruvāḷ's *satī* as we learn from Dharmapuri fieldwork is a marked departure from the *satī* of Kaurava widows, as narrated in the *Mahābhārata* epic or in the Draupadī cult *Mahābhārata* in the core area of Gingee. In the Sanskrit epic, the Kaurava widows do not commit *satī* by entering the flames following their husbands' deaths. In the “Putradarśana Parvan” (the "Book of Seeing the Sons”), upon Vyāsa's suggestion, long after their husbands have passed away, the Kaurava widows immerse themselves in the waters of the Ganga, enacting a watery *satī*. Vyāsa also provides an incentive, like a boon for this act, when he says the following: "All those Kṣatriya women whose lords are slain, those foremost women who desire the worlds won by their husbands, unwearied, let them quickly (*kṣipram*) plunge into" the river (*Mbh*. 41. 17-22: cited in Hiltebeitel 1999, 480). In the core area of the Draupadī cult folklore, Kṛṣṇa orchestrates a fiery *satī* for them. He instructs Draupadī to conjure a sacrificial fire and persuades the widows to walk on it. He also suggests Draupadī offer an enticing yet deceptive incentive: "Ordinarily people won't walk through fire, but knowing that you were born in fire, if you say they will get back their children, husbands, etc., they will follow you, believing that by doing so they will get their loved ones back, that those whom they lost in battle will come back to life” (Hiltebeitel 1999, 481). However, as the folklore goes, all the widows are consumed in flames and joined their “loved ones” only in "heaven."

In the case of Peruntiruvāḷ’s *satī*, gathered from Palani, there was no trickery involved on the part of Kṛṣṇa when he instructed her to self-immolate in the funeral pyres of her husband. His command was based singularly on the dharma of a devout wife, as "*pattiṉi*." In the variant version of Indrani, she proceeded to perform *satī* on her own. More significantly, it was not Kṛṣṇa but Peruntiruvāḷ herself who chose her own reward. She requested different festivals for herself and her husband in their new incarnations. At the same time, she deliberately avoided seeking a reunion with her husband. In fact, taking it a step further, she made it clear in her request to Kṛṣṇa that she wished to have no association with him even in their next incarnations.

While Palani interprets Peruntiruvāḷ’s request for a separate festival as her commitment to upholding *dharma* and her desire not to be associated with the wicked ways of her husband in her future incarnation as a goddess, it is precisely this demand that establishes her as a goddess in the Tamil cultural context. Peruntiruvāḷ's determination to maintain a distinct identity separate from her spouse aligns perfectly with the archetypal representations of the chaste goddess, primarily rooted in the frugal sexual economy of women, advocated in Tamil mythologies of the goddess. In my earlier work on the south Indian goddess Māriyammaṉ, I have explored the concept of this frugal sexual economy, which revolves around the "restraint" applied to the use of a female's "embodied sexual resources and energy." This notion of restraint, enforced through the notion of chastity, has the potential to elevate a female into a goddess or reinforce the divine status of an existing goddess within Tamil mythologies.[[15]](#endnote-15) Often, this notion of restraint not only pertains to marital fidelity on the part of the female or goddess but can also manifest as the severe form of "virginity or absolute sexual control."[[16]](#endnote-16) To establish this control, it becomes essential to create a separation between the goddess and her male spouse. In other words, this distancing serves as an enabling strategy in the transformation of a female into a goddess or reinforcement of a goddess in her stature.

The conventional practice of alternating the Periyāṇṭacchi and Periyānṭavar festivals in T. Kuliyaṉūr underscores the Tamil cultural norm or, perhaps, fixation that firmly places the goddess within the entrenched discourses of female chastity-as-virginity. One might question whether Peruntiruvāḷ can truly be considered a virgin, given her previous marital life as Duryodhana's wife and her bearing of children. Upon asking this to Palani, he promptly stated, "That was in the past. She underwent *satī*. Now, she is our mother; therefore, we celebrate her." It is possible, therefore, that Peruntiruvāḷ's act of *satī*, although framed as a dharmic act of a devout wife, effectively serves to erase her identity as Duryodhana's wife, paving the way for her transformation into a goddess.

**Section II**

**From Lineage to Larger Pantheon: Periyāṇṭacchi's Identification with Pārvatī**

All the aforementioned materials firmly establish the association of Periyāṇṭacchi with Peruntiruvāḷ in the narratives of Vanniyars in Dharmapuri; yet there is still much to explore in understanding Periyāṇṭacchi being recognized as Pārvatī. Both of these deities are perceived by our interlocutors as manifestations of the overarching figure of Śakti. I recall a conversation with Murugan in 2003 when he mentioned that there is no direct correspondence (*campantam*) between Periyāṇṭacchi (of Vanniyars) and Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari, but at the same time, “both are the forms of Śakti, originating from her one thousand and eight forms."

While priests and worshippers might perceive an equivalence among female deities, it is worth noting that the Draupadī cult mythologies, in tandem with certain folklore traditions from Karnataka, play a key role in forging and consolidating this identification, specifically between Periyāṇṭacchi and Pārvatī, and at a complementary level between Periyānṭavar and Śiva. The story of "Arjuna's *Tapas*" (“Arjuna’s Austerities”), which includes his journey through forests to perform this act, forming part of the Draupadī cult repertoire, has played a crucial role in establishing the association of these lineage deities with the deities in the larger Hindu pantheon. Two episodes in “Arjuna’s *Tapas*,” namely Arjuna’s encounter with the hunter couple, Pēraṇṭacchi and Pēraṇṭaṉ, read with the subsequent episode of Śiva’s granting the Pāśupata boon to Arjuna are highly relevant to the following discussion in this regard.[[17]](#endnote-17)

In the folklore of the Draupadī cult, as Arjuna embarks on his journey to Mount Kailāsa, in order to perform *tapas*, he confronts a series of trials, often in the form of seductions by women, both mortal and divine. In the Sanskrit epic, Arjuna's tests are limited to his encounter with his father, Indra, who assumes the guise of a Brahmin ascetic to challenge Arjuna's determination, questioning how he can pursue his *tapas* while carrying his weapons.[[18]](#endnote-18) However, in the Tamil rendition of the epic, the *Villipāratam*, there are significant deviations from this narrative description. As Hiltebeitel has pointed out, drawing upon the sixth century Sanskrit text *Kirātārjunīya* of Bharavi, it presents Arjuna’s encounter with a set of divine courtesans or Apsarases sent by Indra (1988, 283). The Tamil folklore versions introduce some more women characters who attempt to tempt Arjuna (Hiltebeitel 1988, 283). For instance, in the chapbook edition of Iramaccantira Kavirayar, Viṣṇu appears in the form of Mohini, the enchantress, as the first figure of temptation in the path of Arjuna. Another chapbook edition by Irattina Nayakar (1979) adds one more interruption, namely the appearance of the “forest temptress,” called “Pēraṇṭi” after the flirtations of Mohini and before Apsaras appear to tempt him (1988, 283).[[19]](#endnote-19)

In the Irattina Nayakar edition of Arjuna’s *tapas* (hereinafter, *AT*), the character Pēraṇṭi, who appears as a beautiful woman, introduces herself to Arjuna as “Kanṭapēraṇṭi or Pēraṇṭacci [Pēraṇṭacchi],” with the latter name immediately striking a chord with Periyāṇṭacchi. Pēranṭacci is described as a sweet-smelling young woman, resembling a doll with parrot-like speech, whose beauty could even disturb the minds of sages. Arjuna addresses her as "Mātaṅki" and "the woman who deceitfully eats corpses." These modes of address allude to the goddess in two ways: firstly, a reference to a Mahavidya, and secondly, an allusion to the goddesses Draupadī and Periyāyi.[[20]](#endnote-20) Particularly, the recumbent Periyāyi of Mēl Malaiyaṉūr, whose sanctum is near one of the outer walls of the temple of Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari, conceived “as the goddess who eats dead bodies” comes to mind.[[21]](#endnote-21) In the *AT*, Pēranṭi's husband, Pēraṇṭaṉ, is portrayed as a formidable hunter exuding immense strength. He is said to be capable of beheading the wicked, strikingly reminiscent of Śiva, who has beheaded Dakṣa and Brahmā. When he walks, the universe trembles and demons get frightened. When Arjuna spurns Pēranṭi's advances, she resolves to humble him and lodges a complaint with her fierce husband. She accuses the sage Arjuna of dishonoring her, alleging inappropriate advances. She says the sage touched her breasts, disarrayed her clothes and asked her to have sexual intercourse with him. She insists that her husband must behead Arjuna, stipulating that until this beheading occurs, he will not be her husband, and she will not be his wife. Pēraṇṭaṉ challenges Arjuna to a duel, which culminates in Arjuna using his arrow to slay him. Subsequently, she implores Arjuna for forgiveness and beseeches him to revive her husband, a request that Arjuna duly fulfills.

Another drama, *Arccunaṉ Tapacu Purāna Nātakam* (*The Drama of the Legend of Arjuna’s Tapas*, hereinafter *ATPN*), edited from a manuscript dated 1962 and attributed to the renowned *kūttu* actor Ka. Devaraji, who hailed from Periyakurumba Street in Vaniyampadi, presents a more intricate account of Arjuna's encounter with Pēraṇṭacchi. Devaraji was a member of a *terukkūttu* troupe that performed in various towns, particularly the towns, Arur and Hosur, which are in close proximity to our fieldwork location in Dharmapuri. Unlike the version in *AT*, this text portrays Pēraṇṭacchi more expressive and more insistent in her desire. It frames her desire in a manner that borders on incestuous. Pēraṇṭacchi is referred to as a "*rākṣasī*," a demon, while simultaneously being described as a "demonic goddess" (*arakki teyvam*) and a "mother goddess" (*ammaṉ*). The text also alludes to her as "the virgin of the big universe" (Pēranṭakkaṉṉi) and "Tillai Pēraṇṭacchi" (Pēraṇṭacchi of Tillai or Chidambaram), alluding to her divine stature with these various epithets.

Unlike in the *AT*, in this drama *ATPN*, when Arjuna rejects Pēraṇṭacchi’s sexual advances saying his mind is on the “Supreme One” (*paramporuḷ*), he tries to convince Pēraṇṭacchi that their relationship is only that of a son and mother. He repudiates her desire as improper and, with the polite suffix of “ma,” repeatedly addresses her as "Mother, who has begotten me" (*peṟṟa mātāvē or peṟṟa tāyārē*) in his responses.[[22]](#endnote-22) For instance, the first few lines of his response to Pēraṇṭacchi’s flirtations go like this:

Why do you follow me *ammā*

Lady, Mother, who has begotten me!

Ma, I am going to perform good austerity to Śiva

Lady, Mother, who has begotten me!

Pēraṇṭacchi realizes that Arjuna wants to ‘escape’ her by calling her “mother” and himself “son,” yet she continues to express her pining for him. [[23]](#endnote-23) When Arjuna chides her strongly, now scolding her “*rākṣasī*”” and “*arakki*,” she lies to her husband Pēraṇṭaṉ that the sage Arjuna has raped her. She demands that he behead Arjuna and tie his head at the main entrance of their house. In an altercation between Arjuna and the hunter, Arjuna reminds him how so many crores of people suffered in this world for the sake of a woman, by citing instances of Sūrppaṉakai of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the wife of the king Hariścandra. In the list, he also includes the “chaste woman” (Draupadī), who created the Bharata wars (*p*ā*rataṅkaḷ*), which, actually, will be taking place only in the future.

At one point, Arjuna also calls the hunter “Rattiṉa Sabāpati,” meaning the “Lord of the Court of Gems,” which is a famous name for Śiva at Chidambaram. With all these references, the hunter couple roaming the forests unmistakably evoke the image of Śiva and Pārvatī, who began their wanderings as a consequence of the sage Durvāsa's curse. A reference to the wanderings of Śiva and Pārvatī in the forests (of Mēl Malaiyaṉūr), depicted in a *terukkūttu* performance version of the drama on taming of Durvāsa is noteworthy in this context.[[24]](#endnote-24)

However, Pēraṇṭaṉ does not listen to Arjuna’s advice concerning women. He insists to fight and a combat ensues between him and Arjuna, in which Arjuna kills him with an arrow. Later, moved by Pēraṇṭacchi's pleas and advised by the seven sister goddesses (*kaṉṉimār*), Arjuna retrieves Pēraṇṭaṉ's life force (*uyir*) from Indra's realm, reviving him.[[25]](#endnote-25)

The *tapas* scene of Arjuna in the ATPN brings forth the mother-son relationship again but this time positively. In this scene, it portrays the maternal affection that the goddess Pārvatī (or Gaurī) holds towards Arjuna, creating a contrast to Pēraṇṭacchi’s "incestuous" desires. To provide a brief summary, as Arjuna performs his *tapas* atop a "ninety-foot post" on Mount Kailāsa, within the abode of Mount Kailāsa, Pārvatī turns to Śiva and asks, "Lord, is there anyone on Earth who possesses ten beauties like you?' Śiva responds: "Gaurī, there is no one on Earth except King Yudhisthira's younger brother, Arjuna, who resembles me." Intrigued, Gaurī expresses her desire to see him, saying, "I want to lay my eyes on that son (in Tamil, “*piḷḷai*”)." Śiva suggests they visit Arjuna in the guise of a head-hunter and a head-huntress, accompanied by Śiva's *ganas* as hunters and the four Vedas as their dogs. Their journey leads them to encounter Mūkāsura, a boar. When Śiva shoots an arrow at the boar, it seeks refuge with Arjuna for protection, sparking a dispute between hunter Śiva and Arjuna. Śiva then proposes to Pārvatī, "If we send our dogs to drag the boar away, Arjuna will descend and confront me. During the ensuing battle, observe Arjuna's *maccha r*ē*kai*, my lady.'"

The term "*maccha rēkai*" literally translates to the "fish-sign or mole-sign" because in Tamil, "*maccham*" refers to both fish and mole and "*rēkai*" means a sign or mark, serving as evidence or a trace. As foretold by Śiva, Arjuna descends and engages in a fierce battle with him. Eventually, in the midst of their struggle, Arjuna manages to overpower Śiva, targeting him with his arrow. Śiva then invites Pārvatī to gaze upon Arjuna's beauty. Upon seeing Arjuna, Pārvatī remarks, "Lord of the universe, I cannot distinguish between you and Arjuna."[[26]](#endnote-26) In this moment, as the play depicts, "Śiva does not become angry, but it is his right big toe that becomes incensed, flinging Arjuna into the sky."[[27]](#endnote-27) In witnessing this, Pārvatī expresses her distress to Śiva, saying, "My dearest son has ascended to the sky," and implores him, saying, "Please bring this beautiful boy back." Arjuna's ascent to the sky signifies his apparent demise, but Pārvatī acts swiftly to return her "son" to the earthly realm with her maternal protective grace. Śiva instructs her to cast her earring upon the ground to create a pond into which Arjuna could descend. From the sand of this pond, Arjuna creates a linga (a symbol of Śiva) and continues his worship. Impressed by his devout worship, Śiva and Pārvatī reveal themselves and grant Arjuna the Pāśupata weapon. While bestowing this powerful weapon upon Arjuna, Śiva advises him to exercise discretion in its use, saying, “The weapon should not be aimed at an army of a few (*aṟpam*) men. Only when it is aimed at a formidable army will the food be sufficient for the weapon.” This advice of Śiva about the Pāśupata weapon alludes to the hungry skull of Brahmā, and it brings this narrative again in dialogue with the versions of the story of “Taming of Durvāsa,” including the version in the *TKN*.[[28]](#endnote-28)

Pārvatī ‘s desire to see the fish-sign on the back of Arjuna appears to be a recurring theme, not confined solely to the textual version of the episode, such as ATPN, but also figuring in *terukkūttu* performances associated with the Draupadī cult in the Tamil milieu. For instance, in a rendition by the Malaiyūr Sri Gopalaswamy Drama Troupe, when Arjuna prevails over Śiva, pushing him down, Śiva recalls this desire of Pārvatī: [[29]](#endnote-29)

Once upon a time, when you saw a shining star in the sky, you asked me: “Today I see a star shining like anything, Swamy!” I replied: “A human being having a fish-sign like me is born on the earth.” You replied: “I have seen the fish-sign only on you, not on anybody before. Let us go and see how it looks.” At that time, I assured you: “He is a human. It is not good for us to go and see him. One day, he will come seeking us. At that time, I will show that to you.” Do you see the beautiful fish-sign on his back, similar to me?

Pārvatī acknowledges his words, saying, “Yes, I have seen.” Immediately Śiva quips, “Yet I am not angry. Only my little toe gets angry.”[[30]](#endnote-30)

In Karnataka as well, as shown by Nagaraja Rao (1979), local folk traditions surrounding the *tapas* scene and the Arjuna-Śiva duel emphasize Pārvatī's desire to witness the "auspicious mark" on Arjuna's body, along with the deliberate fall of Śiva so that Pārvatī could have the opportunity to see it (18). Rao informs us that the depiction of the mark on Arjuna's back has figured in Telugu and Kannada traditions, particularly flourishing in the Hoysala period sculptures, starting in the tenth century Andhra region (Rao 1979, 18, 34-62, 68, 85-88; as cited in Hiltebeitel 1998, 209). [[31]](#endnote-31) Pārvatī assuming the role of the female hunter and observing the mark on Arjuna's back is first documented in the 10th century AD at Alampur, as pointed out by Rao (90). Moreover, he discusses a prevalent interpretation found in local traditions in Karnataka regarding Śiva's "fall." In Kannada literature, especially during the 10th to 12th centuries, there existed a version of the Kirātārjunīya story deeply rooted in local tradition. In this version, it was believed that Arjuna genuinely defeated Śiva in their battle, challenging the notion that Śiva's fall was merely a pretense, suggesting instead that the god had indeed suffered a real defeat (Rao 85).

Such local folklore, Rao observes, could have provided the impetus for the portrayal of Śiva’s defeat by a mortal in Jaina compositions of the episode by poets, such as Pampa, Ranna and Nemichandra (85). For him, the “main interest” in the local tradition in Karnataka “happens to be the fact that here Śiva is defeated in the fight.” He also provides sculptural representations that attest to the victory of Arjuna over Śiva. For instance, he draws attention to a panel at the Papanatha temple at Pattadakal of the eighth century C.E., which shows “Arjuna sitting on the chest of the *kirāta* [hunter], whose head rests on the *kirātī’s* [huntress’s] lap, holding the neck of the *kirāta*, and is about to deliver a blow” (89).[[32]](#endnote-32) Such sculptural depictions obviously resonate with the Kannada folklore flourished in those regions.

The narrative accounts of Arjuna's *tapas* in Tamil folklore, discussed in this article may seem diverse, but they collectively suggest a trend that they have engaged with the Kannada folklore versions of Śiva’s defeat in the *tapas* scene.[[33]](#endnote-33) In textual renditions such as the *ATPN* and *terukkūttu* performances, Śiva only "pretends" to fall during the bestowal of the Pāśupata boon. Nevertheless, in the earlier episode involving the hunter couple Pēraṇṭaṉ and Pēraṇṭacchi, Arjuna literally kills Pēraṇṭaṉ, although he is revived later. It appears that Tamil folklore has found a way to mitigate the stigma of a mortal defeating Śiva in Kannada folklore versions by shifting this event from the culminating *tapas* scene to the earlier episode, featuring the hunter couple. However, we still see subtle allusions to Śiva in the references to Pēraṇṭaṉ.

The Draupadī cult folklore also appears to have reworked the theme of Pārvatī's desire in the *tapas* scene, in fact, in a much elaborate manner, but again relegating it to the earlier episode featuring the hunter couple. Pārvatī’s identification with Pēraṇṭacchi is obvious in *AT*, and it is even more pronounced in the *ATPN*. Pēraṇṭacchi is addressed as the goddess (*ammaṉ*) or through her various names in the latter text. The mythologies of Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari have influenced the portrayal of her character in its narrative. Her "improper" desire for Arjuna takes on an "incestuous" quality, resembling the desire of Ātiśakti-Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari for Rudra. Pēraṇṭacchi's demand to behead Arjuna echoes a similar demand made by Pārvatī to Śiva to behead Brahmā in the TKN drama, which narrates the origin of Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari.

The folklore’s attempt at reworking appears to be effective, but only to a certain extent. In the final scene of the boon bestowal, a contrast, of course, emerges between the lustful female hunter Pēraṇṭacchi and Pārvatī, who exhibits grace in the form of maternal love towards Arjuna. However, hints of the goddess's erotic desire remain evident in her comments as she contemplates the resemblances between Arjuna and her spouse.[[34]](#endnote-34) Pārvatī’s remarks indicate her erotic longing, also inappropriate to the milieu of *tapas* austerities. Palani, our interlocutor at T. Kuliyanūr, explained Pārvatī's state, saying, "She got *mayakkam* on seeing the fish-sign on the back of Arjuna." The Tamil term *mayakkam* indicates not only "mental delusion," "confusion," or "giddiness" but also conveys the meanings of "sexual longing" and a "state of erotic rapture." This term serves as a reminder (remainder?) of the erotic dimension of the goddess's desire for the "son" or son-like figure.

Such reworkings of the Draupadī cult folklore, concerning Pārvatī and Śiva involved in the scene of Arjuna’s *tapas*, have influenced the identification of these divinities with the lineage deities of Vanniyars. They have also contributed to festival dynamics of the lineage deities, as attested by a crucial mythology of Periyāṇṭavar and Periyāṇṭacchi, shared by Sittanathan and Santhamoorthy. Both of them have been former *pūcāris* at the old Draupadī temple in T. Kuliyanūr three decades years back. We (Hiltebeitel, Srinivasan, and Ravindran) had the opportunity to meet Sittanathan and Santhamoorthy, during the Periyāṇṭacchi festival held by Cengunta Mutaliyars in Veḷḷekauṇṭaṉ Pāḷaiyam in 2004. Sittanathan straightaway identified Periyāṇṭacchi as the goddess Pārvatī, and her spouse Periyāṇṭavar with Śiva. When we enquired about the origins of Periyāṇṭacchi festival of Vanniyars in particular, since the Cengunta Mutaliyars’ Periyāṇṭacchi has no connection with the Mahābhārata, Sittanathan and Santhamoorthy provided the following account of it:

Santhamoorthy: Arjuna embarked on *tapas*. Periyāṇṭavar and Periyāṇṭacchi ventured into the forest with the intention of creating an obstacle for Arjuna.

Sittanathan: Do you know why they sought to create an impediment? Arjuna was heading to Velliyangiri ("white hill," signifying Mount Kailāsa). He was exceedingly handsome. This lady desired him, but Arjuna declined her advances. He told her, "I am fasting (*viratam*) and am on my way to plant the *tapas* tree (post for performing his austerity)." He rejected her and continued on his path. Subsequently, Periyāṇṭacchi tore her skirt and blouse. She then went to Periyāṇṭavar and falsely claimed that Arjuna had violated her. Periyāṇṭavar, who possessed the strength to tether an elephant to his waist string, became enraged. He ascended to the mountaintop and obstructed Arjuna's path by rolling rocks and stones. Arjuna sought help from Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu), but Viṣṇu expressed his inability to intervene. Consequently, Arjuna invoked his father Indra for assistance. He prayed to Indra, who provided him with arrows. With these arrows, Arjuna defeated both Periyāṇṭavar and Periyāṇṭacchi, causing them to fall to the ground.

According to Sittanathan and Santhamoorthy, when Arjuna fired arrows at them, they both fell, as if "dying.” They also explained that the festival is organized to pacify the goddess, who had fallen.[[35]](#endnote-35)

It is pertinent to note that this narrative elucidates a key event connected with the Periyāṇṭacchi festival of the Vanniyars, which is the "rolling of the stone.” We have been informed by Palani and Jayaraman that in the past, a stone would roll down from the nearby hill known as Muḷḷampanṟikkuttai Malai ("the mountain with stagnant water for boars").[[36]](#endnote-36) The stone's descent served as a "sign" that "Periyāṇṭacchi had arrived and indicated her readiness to accept offerings." In Palani's words, the rolling of the stone from the hillock served as "an announcement that she was on her way to the festival." We were informed that the stone would roll down from the hill only after the commencement of the month of Cittirai (Apirl-May) and would be visible only to those who had received the goddess's grace. By tradition, the goddess's festival could only commence after the sighting of the rolling stone. However, as explained by Palani and Jayaraman, this tradition is no longer followed, and the festival is now held on a Monday preceding the fifteenth day of the month of Cittirai.[[37]](#endnote-37)

Sittanathan's version intertwines elements from both the Karnataka folklore version of Śiva’s defeat in his duel with Arjuna and the Tamil Draupadī cult's engagement with this narrative. This convergence is not surprising, given that Dharmapuri, our fieldwork site, is situated on the border of Tamil Nadu with Karnataka. In his version, there is a dual influence at play. On the one hand, the defeat and eventual demise of Śiva-Periyāṇṭavar seem to have been influenced by Kannada folklore traditions. On the other hand, aligning with the trend in Draupadī cult folklore in Tamil, this defeat does not take place in the *tapas* scene but rather takes place during the encounter involving the hunter couple. Nevertheless, Sittanathan’s narrative does not feature a substitute victim such as the figure of Pēraṇṭaṉ taking the place of Śiva as we usually see in the Draupadī cult folklore materials; rather, remaining close to the version in Karnataka, it keeps the identity of Śiva as such as Periyāṇṭavar. Similarly, nor does it morph the sexually desiring Pārvatī into the figure of the female hunter; it maintains the identity of Pārvatī as such as Periyāṇṭacchi.

Furthermore, Sittanathan’s narrative has introduced a new element, which is the fall of Periyāṇṭacchi alongside Periyāṇṭavar, a fate not meted out by the female hunter Pēraṇṭacchi or the goddess Pārvatī in the Draupadī cult folklore and the Karnataka folklore version. The fall of Periyāṇṭacchi, described as *uyir pokutal* (in translation, “life-force leaving”), alongside her husband Periyāṇṭavar hints at a variant of *satī*.[[38]](#endnote-38) Moreover, neither Periyāṇṭavar nor Periyāṇṭacchi is restored back in Sittanathan’s account. Their ending, reminiscent of the irreversible endings of Duryodhana and Peruntiruvāḷ, establishes a direct parallel between the two pairs. In the mythology of Vanniyars of Dharmapuri, when Duryodhana and Peruntiruvāḷ reincarnate in the Kali *yuga*, now as lineage deities, they adopt the names Periyāṇṭavar and Periyāṇṭacchi respectively, reaffirming their identification with them. The “sign” of the rolling of the stone, which marked the inauguration of the Periyāṇṭacchi festival in earlier times, further confirms it. Furthermore, it is this identification that allows these lineage deities to be traced back as Śiva and Pārvatī of the Krtayuga and the larger Hindu pantheon.

Lastly, it may be worth pondering, albeit briefly, whether the lustful dimension of Pārvatī and the subdued dimension of Śiva have any impact on the cults of Periyāṇṭacchi and Periyāṇṭavar among Vanniyars in Dharmapuri. In the cult of Periyāṇṭavar, with the caste group’s “greatest involvement” in the Draupadī cult of the *Mahābhārata,*[[39]](#endnote-39) it appears that the figure of the subdued god has easily found its mirror image in Duryodhana, who, similar to the former, is defeated by another Pāṇḍava brother Bhīma in the *Mahābhārata* war. Even during the festival celebrating his new incarnation as Periyāṇṭavar, he is remembered as Duryodhana only to be killed again. In contrast, the erotic dimension of Pārvatī does not surface overtly in Vanniyars’ discourses of Periyāṇṭacchi. [[40]](#endnote-40) For our interlocutors, Peruntiruvāḷ was a supreme *pativrata* of Duryodhana. In the festival practice of Vanniyars, Periyāṇṭacchi’s recumbent mud effigy of the festival alludes to her dying in *satī*.

Notwithstanding this self-effacing sacrifice, the Vanniyars’ Periyāṇṭacchi refuses to be associated with her husband Duryodhana-Periyāṇṭavar after her death, as I discussed earlier. In December 2019, Palani in our conversation resented how people belonging to Udayar caste have started celebrating Periyāṇṭavar and Periyāṇṭacchi together in old Dharmapuri town:[[41]](#endnote-41) “Those people have made their statues in concrete, *Ammā*. Permanent! Both the male deity and the female deity are kept side by side! They invited me to their temple but I refused to go. Periyāṇṭacchi demanded a separate worship. How can they do this?” Then he expressed his fear: “I will not visit that temple. If I go, the mother (goddess) will be enraged.”

Periyāṇṭacchi’s demand to be worshipped as an independent goddess is further reinforced by details that I gathered from another nearby village, Ettimarattuppatti. In the village, about sixty Vanniyar *paṅkāḷikaḷ* families, who have moved from Annasagaram several decades back, conduct her festival once every three years. Instead of the play that features Durvāsa, they conduct "The Eighteenth Day War" on the night of the goddess's festival in this village. As it is customary in this play to construct a mud effigy of Duryodhana in *paṭukaḷam* for the enactment of his killing the next day, I wondered whether his effigy is constructed next to Periyāṇṭacchi’s effigy made for her festival in their village. However, for Chinnachamy, the *pūcāri* of the festival in whom the goddess “descends” during the festival, the possibility of the two effigies lying side by side was simply inconceivable. As he remarked rather curtly, "Duryodhana’s effigy is made as part of the play since he dies, but this [effigy] is that of the goddess." Chinnachamy, of course, regarded Periyāṇṭacchi as Peruntiruvāḷ. Nevertheless, when I started asking about Periyāṇṭavar, Chinnachamy first said he did not know much about him. After some time, he remarked, "We make only the female deity (*peṇ cāmi*) here, and not any male deity (*āṇ cāmi*). If you want to know about the male deity, go to T. Kuliyanūr, where they make him." When I inquired whether Periyāṇṭavar of T. Kuliyanūr and the female deity they worship were husband and wife, he said he was unaware of any such relationship between the two deities. This undeniably illustrates the ongoing evolution of the festival of Periyāṇṭacchi as an independent domain, detached from Periyāṇṭavar. So much so that even the main *pūcāri* of her festival is not aware of Duryodhana’s existence in his after-life as Periyāṇṭavar.

**Notes**

1. “Introduction” in the co-authored monograph by Hiltebeitel & Srinivasan (manuscript in progress). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “Introduction” in our co-authored monograph by Hiltebeitel & Srinivasan (manuscript in progress). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Trautmann defines *paṅkāḷikaḷ* as those who embody the “sense of a local patrilineal group, whether a lineage or a village” (1981, 186). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Hiltebeitel and I first had a chance to visit this festival in the year 2005. The payment of tax also represents the 'share' (*pariku*) that each family, as a part of the lineage, contributes to the festival. As noted by Isabelle Nabokov (2000, 151), lineage members 'must have a "share"' in their sacrificial offerings to the lineage deity. Both the festivals of Periyāṇṭacchi and Periyānṭavar include 'three sacrifices' as their central components. I would also emphasize that the 'share' establishes the family's right to be a part of the lineage. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. They conducted the first festival in the year 2001. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In the nearby village Ettimarattuppatti, Vanniyars usually conduct the *terukkūttu* drama “Eighteenth Day War” on the night of the festival for the goddess, which I will discuss at the end of this article. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The Sanskrit term *kaṅkaṇam*, means *kāppu* or a protective wrist-thread in Tamil. Viṣṇu’s wearing *kaṅkaṇam* consecrates him and makes him a *dikṣīta* of the battlefield sacrifices of the Rāmāyaṇa and the *Mahābhārata*. For a discussion on the tying of the string of *kāppu* and the status of the *dikṣīta*, refer to Hiltebeitel (1991, 88-90). Since Viṣṇu, together with the battlefield sacrifice, announces the sacrifice of animals by people, he also identifies himself with them. On the one hand, this confirms Hiltebeitel’s observation that “Gods and humans,” could be “joint sacrificers.” (Hiltebeitel 1991, 89). At the same time, this identification makes Viṣṇu joining the rank of devotees of Aṅkāḷammaṉ. The narrative, in fact, alludes to Viṣṇu as the first devotee of the goddess, since he, even before his incarnations as Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, sets an example of offering when he arranges to feed the blood-rice. Further, even though the blood-rice is fed to the skull, since it is situated in the hand of the goddess, it metonymically indicates the goddess as well. In some versions of the story, the goddess demands the sacrifice or she is given a boon of such sacrifice. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. These Cengunta Mutaliyar families, numbering around one hundred, migrated from Arcot near Vellore, not far from Gingee. They visit Mēl Malaiyaṉūr annually to worship Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari as their kulateyvam; at the same time, they celebrate her once every five years or so through festivals such as the one held in their village Veḷḷekauṇṭaṉ Pāḷaiyam. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Murugan’s younger brother Arumugam told us that even though Periyāṇṭacchi is not Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari, they belong to the "same family.” However, we could not learn anything more about this family connection from him. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See Meyer 6-9. The legend, which functions as a creation story as well, narrates that Ātiśakti, seeking a companion for her, created the *trimūrti.* As the three gods understood that “she wanted to become their wife,” they felt “this was not right,” since she is their “mother.” As the three gods would not fulfill her desire she decimated them into ashes. Nevertheless, she was persistent in her desire, and seeking the help of Kaṇṇaṉ, her brother, she revived the three gods for her purpose. Kaṇṇaṉ told the gods that of the three, Rudra is his sister’s choice. He advised Rudra that he should get the five precious things that his sister possesses. Thus, Rudra agreed to marry her, with a condition that she should give away those five things, including the eye on her forehead and the trident, to him. As soon as Rudra received them, he “opened the eye on his forehead” and Ātiśakti was “burned to ashes” (Meyer 8). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Like most lineage deities, Periyāṇṭacchi does not have a permanent shrine. In addition, her icon is not worshipped regularly; it is taken out only during the time of her festival. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. For Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari’s iconography, see Meyer 78. As she observes, “the lower left will always carry the cup or skull (*kap*ā*lam*).” The iconography of Periyāṇṭacchi may appear similar to what Eveline Meyer describes as the “*cutta*” Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari, albeit with one change: the fire-pot in Periyāṇṭacchi’s icon in the place of the skull (*brahmā kapalam*) in Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari’s icon. “*Cutta”* implies the vegetarian goddess, who does not prefer blood sacrifice. Periyāṇṭacchi of Vanniyars is not a “*cutta*” goddess, and devotees, from time to time, mentioned that the blood sacrifice is offered to her. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. When I enquired again whether a blood sacrifice is offered to the skull, as promised by Viṣṇu, during the festival, Palani stated: “We don’t do the skull and all that here (their village).” Moreover, not once did we hear people talking about the skull in the festival of Vanniyars. In Venkatachalam’s agricultural field, the mud effigy of the goddess had a lamp (with a wick and oil) in the lower left hand, reinforcing the reference to fire in the hand of the goddess. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. In the text, Kṛṣṇa also instructs how the festival should be done step by step. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. The “chaste” goddess, inasmuch as her sexual resources are less expended or unexpended displays her *śakti* through performing “miraculous” phenomena, a classic example of which would be walking on the fire. See Srinivasan 2009, 209-210. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. In this connection, see my discussions (2009, 211) that draws upon my fieldwork on Māriyammaṉ. In framing my arguments, I have reworked David Shulman’s observation on the remarkable shift of female chastity from that of “devotion to one’s husband” to chastity as “virginity” in the Tamil mythological realm (Shulman 1980, 148; cited in Srinivasan 22). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Together, both these episodes provide a meaningful interface between the drama TKN and the central myth of Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari as Ātiśakti, previously discussed. For this myth, see footnote 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See the *Mbh*. 3.38.30-36, cited in Hiltebeitel (1988, 283). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. The Tamil *terukkūttu* dramas further elaborate on the sequence of interruptions, and incorporate additional characters, such as Ellammā (not the Telugu/Tamil goddess Ellammā) or Elakaṉṉi, as Hiltebeitel has noted (1998, 283). For a description of *tapas* tree, see Hiltebeitel 1988, 284. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. I could not get more information on Periyāyi from Palani. But the lullaby song to the goddess Periyāṇṭacchi, sent by him, addresses her as Periyāyi. For Draupadī’s eating corpses of the cremation ground, consult the folk story in Hiltebeitel 1988, 289-95. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. See Meyer 169. I suspect Palani had this goddess in mind when he said, “Periyāṇṭacchi resides ‘side-by-side’ with Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari in Malaiyaṉūr.” [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. I counted seventeen times. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. In a *terukkūttu* performance of this episode, the mother-son relationship is further emphasized in the encounter between Arjuna and Pēraṇṭacchi. For example, in a rendition by Malaiyur Sri Gopalaswamy Drama Troupe, Arjuna addresses Pēraṇṭacchi as “*tāi*” (mother). This angers her, leading her to retort defiantly: “Kunti tēvi is the mother who birthed you, Mātra tēvi raised you, but I am your keep! Come to me, my lord! (*cuvāmi*).” [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. In a *terukkūttu* version of the “Taming of Durvāsa” performed in Salem, the cursed Īśvaran and Īśvarī dance in madness. A dialogue takes place between Viṣṇu and Śiva, and the former tells the latter: “Now the Dvāpara yuga is going on. In this yuga, Śiva and Pārvatī got mad, and wandering they have come to the forest of Malaiyaṉūr.” [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. In a chapbook play titled “*Turiyōtaṉaṉ Karvapaṅgameṉṉum Arccuṉaṉ Caṇtai Nātakam*” (1947), during the Pāṇḍavas' exile in the forest of "Kamadheṉu Vaṉam," Arjuna rescues Duryodhana, who is accompanied by Peruntiruvāḷ, after he is captured in a battle by one of Indra's sons and taken to the Indraloka. Arjuna's act of retrieving the hunter's life from the Indraloka resonates with this story. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Arjuna’s striking resemblance with Śiva resonates with the resemblance between Śiva and Brahmā. While Śiva beheads Brahmā, Arjuna is only flung into the sky by Śiva’s toe, and is revived later due to Pārvatī’s protection. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Unlike in the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata*, where Arjuna is mangled into a “ball of flesh,” here Arjuna is only thrown into the sky. Indira V. Peterson, citing the interpretations of this episode in Sanskrit epic by Madeleine Biardeau (1978, 150-151) and Jacques Scheuer (1982, 232-237), points out that Arjuna undergoes a kind of *dīkṣā* or initiation at the hands of Śiva, before he is reborn (1991, 244). In the drama *ATPN* as well as in the *terukkūttu* performance of Arjuna’s *tapas*, there is no mention of Arjuna’s body mangled by Śiva. Arjuna is sent to the sky by Śiva’s toes and eventually comes back. Hiltebeitel has observed elsewhere (1988, 285), in this particular scene, there is “nothing of the early south Indian popular tradition that Arjuna wins the fight.” As I will show in this article, the Tamil folklore tradition on this scene reworks the defeat of Śiva by Arjuna in its own style. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. The Pāśupata weapon is nothing but the “Rudraic arm called Brahmā’s head, of terrible power” (Mbh.3.41.7-8: cited in Hiltebeitel 1988, 374). The Draupadī cult, particularly in the episode of Arjuna’s *tapas*, as per the above folklore version of the drama, seems to be aware of the transformation of Brahmā’s head or skull into a “doomsday weapon.” See Hiltebeitel (1988, 374) for a discussion on the mythologies which help in the reframing of the weapon, which is, at once, both the “head of Brahmā” and Pāśupata. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. In the course of their argument, Śiva asks Arjuna where did his valor go when his cousin (*periyappā* *makan*) touched his wife. Pārvatī says with pride if anyone had touched her, her husband would have beheaded them, alluding to Śiva’s act of beheading his adversaries, such as Brahmā and Dakṣa, who had shown untoward interest in her in the past. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. The usage “toe” may also allude to the male genital organ, as in common in Tamil slang. Śiva’s utterance seems to imply his sexual envy toward Arjuna. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. In a panel of sculptures at Tiruvetkalam in Tamilnadu, Arjuna has a mark on his back. For this reference, see: <https://shorturl.at/frxy9> [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. See Indira V. Peterson interprets this encounter between Śiva and Arjuna as a display of the god’s divine sport or *līlā*, with the intent of bringing out Arjuna’s heroism (1991, 248.) [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. In the ATPN, Pēraṇṭacchi compels Arjuna to remain and not depart with these words: 'Don't leave, Don't leave, Jangama Deva! Don't leave, Don't stay here! I will eat you' (68). The mention of 'Jangama' from the Vīrasaiva traditions provides a clue about the influence of sources from Karnataka regarding this episode. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Studies on goddesses and women have been pointing out for several years now that projecting a duality onto the personality of the goddess/female and compartmentalizing them as "benevolent" and "ambivalent" or "breast mother" and "tooth mother" or "maternal" and "dangerous" is unproductive. For an early critique of such categorization, see Erndl 1993, 153-157. For a careful illustrative study of how these "dichotomized views" are "externally imposed" on women, see Gold 1995, 122-133. Lindsay Harlan also succinctly notes that such constructed dichotomies "ignore continuities and overlaps between supposedly opposed traits associated with them, and divert attention from mediating or divergent tendencies they exhibit' (2003, 111). In the context of this discussion, although the female hunter appears to embody lust, and Pārvatī is evocative of motherhood, the traits they exhibit range from one to the other, as the tapas scene demonstrates. In one version of the story of Pēraṇṭacchi, told by Muttu, a *terukkūttu* master of the Vetrivel Nataka Sabhā from Vīrāsanur in 2000 (Hiltebeitel and Srinivasan), she and her hunter husband, after his revival, plead for a child as a boon from Arjuna, which he grants through his prayer to Śiva. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. The two *pūcāri*s know well that similar to Periyāṇṭacchi, the male god Periyāṇṭavar is also celebrated by Vanniyars. Since we were specifically asking about Periyāṇṭacchi festival, they seem to focus on this event here. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. In Tamil, “*muḷḷampanṟi*” means boar, “*kuttai*,” in this context, means “stagnant water,” and “*malai*” refers to a hill. Jayaraman clarified there were many boars in this area and the name indicates that “the boars come and drink from stagnant water -- in the hill somewhere.” [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Palani and Jayaraman were not aware of the story of the goddess Pārvatī turning into Periyāṇṭacchi (and Śiva into Periyāṇṭavar) through Arjuna’s arrows, even though they also referred to Periyāṇṭavar and Periyāṇṭacchi as the incarnations of the divine couple. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. While one might be inclined to interpret Periyāṇṭacchi's death as a potential "punishment" for her erotic desires, similar to the death of Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari as Ātiśakti, the simultaneous demise of the couple aligns more closely with the concept of *satī*. Moreover, Periyāṇṭacchi and [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. See Hiltebeitel 1988, 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. In the Indonesian version of the *Mahābhārata*, Duryodhana’s wife harbors a love for Arjuna (Pattanaik 2010, 120), but no such affair is mentioned in the Tamil folklore texts or materials that we have gathered. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. I am not sure whether Udayars regard Periyāṇṭacchi and Periyāṇṭavar as incarnations of Peruntiruval and Duryodhana like the Vanniyars do. This is for research in future.

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