

PUNĀLĀṬṬU IN TAMIL AND SANSKRIT CLASSICAL POETRY: A STUDY IN CULTURAL VARIATION

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The history of ancient civilizations bears witness to the close association of culture with rivers, the source of life-giving water. Nearly all the ancient civilizations like those of Mesopotamia, Egypt, China and India had developed along the banks of rivers which provided water for daily ablutions, domestic use and agriculture. They have also served as a means of transport and communication. Excavations in the Indus Valley reveal that the ancient inhabitants of the valley had built new cities on the ruins of old, showing that in spite of the danger of annihilation by floods they were yet drawn to the banks of the river. The regular places of bathing found as an important part of their town planning are indicative of their preoccupation with bathing and the water needed for the bath.¹

This preoccupation is also found in the Tamils of the Cankam period whose poems frequently speak of **punālāṭṭu**. **Punālāṭṭu** is a compound word made up of the word **punāl** meaning water and **āṭṭu** meaning to bathe, play, dance, move or cause to move, distress etc., and is usually used in the sense of bathing or sporting in the water. While this compound is used more often in the Cankam poems, more specific terms like **aruviyāṭal** (bathing in waterfalls or mountain streams), **cunaiyāṭal** (bathing in pools or tanks) and **kaṭalāṭal** (bathing in the sea) are also found in ancient Tamil literature. The Tamil term **punālāṭṭu** may seem to have an equivalent in the Sanskrit word **jalakrīḍa** but the former has much broader connotations.

1.1 Place

The ancient Tamil country occupying the southernmost tip of South India from Cape Comorin to the Vēṅkaṭa hills is bounded by the sea on two sides and the hills on the third. It was also watered by many streams and rivers. This natural setting provided ample place and opportunity for **punālāṭṭu**. Even though bathing in the sea was common, the ancient Tamils seem to have washed away the salt with fresh water after their sea-sport². The three main rivers, namely Porunai, Kāviri and Vaiyai, watering the Chera, Chola and Pandya kingdoms respectively and smaller rivers like the Kāñci (a tributary of the Kāviri) find mention as places where **punālāṭṭu** took place.³ The most common places were mountain streams and pools (**aruvi** and **cunai**)⁴, ponds and tanks (**kayam**)⁵ and streams, especially when filled with fresh water brought by seasonal rain.

The epics, **Cilappatikāram** and **Manimēkalai** speak of the **ilantikai** or the **entiravāvi** that may be used for bathing.⁶ These are water-jets operated mechanically and are found in private or public parks, usually near rivers or streams.

In the Sanskrit works there is no evidence of sea bathing but the water sport in the River Sarayu is described in detail. At certain spots along the river, flights of steps seem to have been built, enabling easy access to the water.⁷ Bathing in streams and the **nadisangama**, or confluence of rivers, find mention in the dramas of Bhāsa and Kālidāsa.⁸ According to the **Meghadūtam**, the yakṣa's house in Alakā, the mythical city, had

"...a pond attached to it, furnished with a flight of steps made from emerald slabs; (therein) smile full blown golden lotuses on glistening **vaidūrya** - stalks and swans dwell there, free from anxiety or longing for the Mānasa lake."⁹

Other Sanskrit works also mention the **vāpi**¹⁰ in the gardens adjoining mansions and palaces and the steps suggest that they must have been used for bathing or water-play during at least certain parts of the year. Besides the water-jets in parks, there were also special buildings or rooms filled with mechanical devices to jet out water (**dhārāgrha**; **jalayantra mandiram**).¹¹ Kings, especially those who had the means and the leisure for the pursuits of love and novelty, seem to have built special underwater rooms for amorous purposes.¹² These were part of the ponds attached to private gardens.

1.2 Occasion

The Tamils seem to have indulged in water sport with or without an excuse or occasion. The love poems describe the young heroine and her friends bathing and sporting in the streams, lakes or the sea while attending to simple chores like keeping the birds away from the ripe millet or keeping watch over the fish spread out to dry.¹³ This was just a pleasant way of whiling away their time, especially during the hot season or the day. The young and old alike seem to have rushed to the streams and rivers to bathe in the gushing new floods brought by the rain. This celebration is found in the pastoral regions as well as in towns like Madurai.

Sometimes a bath in a stream, pond or the sea had a special significance. Women delivered of children bathed in ponds after their period of confinement.¹⁴ These women were accompanied by their relatives. In the month of **Tai** (mid-January to mid-February) at the tail end of the rainy season, young, unmarried women bathed in ponds, streams, rivers or the sea at the chilly hours of dawn. This was part of a fast observed to obtain good husbands or, in the case of maidens already in love, to marry the youths of their choice. They bathed together in groups, wearing ornaments, flowers and leafy garments.¹⁵

The fisherfolk, living along the mouth of the Kāviri had a religious custom peculiar to their way of life. On full moon nights, the men did not go out to sea. Wearing the cool garlands of the fragrant screw pine (**tālai**) they planted the backbone of the shark on the beach and feasted on rich food and toddy from the palmyrah. Then they bathed in the sea so as to wash

away all their sins (tītu). This was followed by further enjoyment on the beach.¹⁶ According to the *Cilappatikāram*, Kōvalaṅ and Mātavi also left the city of Pukār or Kāviriṅṅaṅṅam, along with other citizens who flocked in large crowds, to watch this festival and water-sport on the seashore. Tents, usually depicting their social and financial status, were pitched along the shore for them to stay.¹⁷

While considering these out of the ordinary occasions for bathing in the sea or rivers, we cannot forget that bathing is part of the daily cleansing and abolutions for the Indian. It is still customary for women in village India to go to the river or pond in groups to bathe, wash and fetch water for the house.

Sanskrit literature does mention the bathing in rivers and ponds as part of the daily abolutions but it is not as common as in the Tamil works. Sitā is said to have made the streams of Rām-agiri sacred by bathing there during her sojourn on that mountain with Rama in exile.¹⁸ The sages in hermitages are said to plunge into streams at sunset¹⁹ to cleanse before their evening prayers.

Bathing on auspicious or special days (tithiviseṣa) at the confluence of rivers, especially those considered holy like the Ganges and the Jamuna was deemed beneficial.²⁰ But the bathing in rivers and water fountains during summer is mentioned more often. The heat of the North Indian summer left enough water for sport in very few places like the River Sarayu. However, the lack of ample water was made up for with the use of the water fountain (jala-yantra-mandiram)²¹

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of the bath, as depicted by the Classical Tamil and Sanskrit literature seems to be the same. It was undertaken as a pastime, as part of the daily cleansing routine or as a part of a fast or prayer.

1.4 Bathers

From ancient Tamil literature it is clear that *punalāṭṭu* was common to all, irrespective of age, gender or social or marital status, though more poems describe young girls as sporting in the waters. Often, this is used as an opportunity for the first and subsequent meeting of lovers. This love for *punalāṭṭu* continues into their married life. An *Aiṅkurunūru* poem depicts a husband who has returned after a separation, inviting his wife to sport with him in the pleasant fresh waters caused by the rains.²² Often, there is misunderstanding between the couple because the wife has heard that the husband had sported in the tank or river with other women. One husband who is questioned by the wife as to where he had been, says that he was out bathing in the fresh waters of the Vaiyai.²³ Whether it is true or not, this answer suggests that perhaps men too indulged in *punalāṭṭu* on their own. Children and hermits too bathed in the watersides near their place of residence.²⁴

The Sanskrit works considered in this paper understandably do not mention children sporting in the watersides. Only hermits bathing before prayers and the rich people with leisure are shown as sporting in the cool waters during summer. Bathing on special or auspicious days may be common to all as a part of their religious observances.

2. Cultural Variations - Spatial

2.1. Geographical

The most obvious difference regarding **punalāṭṭu** in Tamil and Sanskrit literatures is that the former uses it more often than the latter. Yet the Tamil passages are relatively shorter and convey something beyond the mere act of bathing.

A **Kalittokai** poem begins saying that the heroine bathes in the fast but pleasing waters of a mountain stream. But this is merely an introduction to the actual theme of the poem - the **tōḷi** informing her mother of the heroine's love for the hero. The bathing in the river, whether true or imagined, is one of the most possible reasons or excuses a girl on the mountain slope could have for meeting the hero. Her slipping her footing and being carried away by the stream is a fitting incident for depicting the nobility of the hero and the accidental nature of their meeting.²⁵ In an **Ainkurunūṅu** poem, a hero who has returned home before the **kār** season sets in, exhorts his wife,

The clouds with sounds of thunder
shed plenty of rain.
Kār season has begun
in the lovely (region of) thickets.
Let us sport in the pleasing fresh waters.
So hurry,
O maiden with long dark tresses.²⁶

Here the eagerness of the husband to bathe and sport in the fresh water is not an end in itself but a means of portraying the joy and satisfaction of a man who has returned with success and therefore, is able to indulge in sport with his beloved. So the happiness of a man who has kept his word to return before the **kār** season and his love for his beloved whose waiting has not been in vain are more important in the poem. But these are suggested by the excited invitation to the wife to hurry.

In the **Raghuvamśam**, Kālidāsa describes how the very hot summer causes Kuśa to think of "sport with young women in the water of the Sarayu which carries with it the flowers of the creepers on its banks and contains intoxicated swans anxious to swim in its waves." Hence tents are pitched on its banks and crocodiles are dragged out with nets to make the river safer. Here too, many women are said to have rushed into the river, - "hundreds of females

of my inner apartment", according to the king himself. The sandal paste of their body spreads on the water and makes it look like the rise of twilight interspersed with clouds.²⁷ The description of their sport takes 20 stanzas though 'it is not essential to the main story. The only significance of this watersport is that it gives the king the opportunity to meet Kumudavati and to marry her. This marriage is important, for his son and heir, Atithi, is born of this marriage. As for emotion or love, there is nothing that this water-sport seems to have caused, for Kuśa bathes not only with the women of his inner apartment but his wife as well,²⁸ and ends his sport by acquiring a new wife. Yet his own bathing in the river is described in four stanzas only. It is noticeable that the descriptions get longer as the poems get longer but the length of the descriptions tends to take away the purpose or the use of nature. Nature in longer poems adds to the beauty and shows the poets' ability to describe ordinary scenes in an extraordinary manner.

The **punalāṭṭu**, like other aspects of ancient Tamil life, shows the topophilia or the affective bond between the Tamils and ecology. Perhaps such a bond was not possible in towns and cities (**nagaram**) and in the life of the townsman (**nāgaraka**). Kālidāsa's **Abijñānaśākuntalam** is a charming attempt at portraying such a bond, but the introduction of the supernatural element in showing the trees as yielding jewels and cosmetics for Śakuntalā raises the play to an entirely different plane.

2.1.2 The topophilia of the Tamils is further demonstrated in the joyous and sometimes ceremonious welcome they accorded to the fresh floods caused by rain in July-August (**kār**) The **Paripaṭal** describes the water festival held in Madurai in conjunction with the new floods in the Vaiyai. Since many people bathed in the river, its water washed away the pastes, flowers and fragrant oils worn by the bathers. The bathers, however, did not find this in the least objectionable though the brahmins abstained from using the water for their ablutions before prayer.²⁹ Such intense love for the fresh floods is not noticeable in Sanskrit literature. In fact the water that flows in the rivers soon after the first rains is described as turbid and "full of dust, vermin and grass".³⁰ Naturally, it causes no excitement, though the sight of the rain cloud does.³¹

2.1.3 **Punalāṭṭu** as portrayed by the two literatures also throws light on the status of women in each society. The Tamil woman seems to have enjoyed more freedom of movement. Though some of the maidens seem to fear the watchful mothers and their prying looks or questions, the Tamil woman was still free to go out to guard the fish or millet field, bring food and water to the men tending the cattle or tilling fields or to exchange their produce for the produce from other ecological zones.³² This gave her more opportunities to indulge in **punalāṭṭu** with friends, or the youth with whom she had fallen in love. There is ample evidence to show that both of them sported in the waterfronts of their ecological zones and they continued to do so even after marriage.³³ The Tamil poems also show the husband indulging in **punalāṭṭu** with his mistresses.³⁴ But we have no instance of the wife or heroine bathing in the waters with the hero and his concubines. The woman's position in the north does not

seem to be the same. The people depicted being city dwellers, are shown to be spending their time in their mansion-like houses and the adjoining gardens and ponds, so that even though clandestine love is depicted, **punalāṭṭu** is hardly mentioned. In the very few works that mention **punalāṭṭu** after marriage, the wife and the concubines or women of the harem are shown as going together with the hero.³⁵ In both the northern and southern tradition, monogamy for men and women is the accepted ideal with Rama, and the maxims of the **Tiruk-kural** providing the norm, but in both the traditions practice fell far short of the ideal as far as the men were concerned. But in Tamil culture, the wife is shown to enjoy certain dignity and rights within her home. Even though later Cankam works show the wife and the concubine/mistress meeting outside the house during **punalāṭṭu** they are not depicted as going to the waterside together or as bathing together. Open hostility is apparent.³⁶

2.2 Variations based on ecological zones

2.2.1 These references to **punalāṭṭu** contain sufficient information to show that even in the Cankam poems there were cultural variations due to ecology, and the passage of time.

The montane, pastoral and maritime regions on the whole were rural districts where the people led simple, rustic lives. Their indulgence in **punalāṭṭu** was spontaneous and natural. They seem to have swum or had a dip in the water-fronts as and when they pleased, depending on their inclination and leisure. There were no aids or accessories mentioned except for floats (**puṇai**) to keep the bathers afloat. There is no detailed description of the **puṇai** used by people in these ecological zones and it is possible that only logs were used for the purpose. The **Cirupāṇārruppaṭai**, describing the natural resources and wealth of the patron Nalliyakkōṭan says that the streams in his country wash down logs of mastwood, eaglewood and sandalwood and that these logs serve as floats for women bathing at the waterfronts.³⁷ This suggests that the floats were logs of wood. Even the **Paripāṭal**, though belonging to a later period, mentions youths braving the waters of the Vaiyai on **taṇṭu**³⁸ a word meaning stem, bamboo, tube or club. But poems of the **marutam** or agricultural region, show an urban culture. The floats are referred to as elephants for the logs were carved out in the shape of elephants.³⁹ The **Cilappatikāram** mentions the "beautiful floats" (**pūmpuṇai**) used by the **gaṇikās** and their paramours in Madurai.⁴⁰

2.2.2 Besides, the townsfolk seem to have used special clothes referred to as **īraṇi** (literally **īr** = wet + **aṇi** = clothes) while bathing. It may be noted that only two **Akanānuru** poems contain this information and in both it is the harlot with whom the hero had sported in the waters, who wears this dress. The **Paripāṭal** apart from using the term says that the women of Madurai wore suitable clothes or sarees (**puṭṭakam**) and decked themselves with jewels and flowers to go bathing in the Vaiyai.⁴¹ There is no special mention of the type of clothes worn by the heroine while bathing or sporting in the water.

2.3. Cultural variation - temporal

A study of the ancient Tamil poems and the two epics also reveals the "cultural drift" or adaptations that have taken place through the ages. Most of these changes are not due to innovations but to certain changes that are in consonance with already existing tendencies or practices.

2.3.1 The simple, joyous celebration at the arrival of new floods in the rivers developed into a religio-social festival. The people of Madurai seem to have treated it as a time to pray for favours, for thanksgiving to the life-sustaining waters of the river and for enjoyment. They made offerings of flowers and fish, crab, prawn and conch made of gold to the river Vaiyai and prayed for regular rain that would bring more water to the river.⁴² This celebration in the Tamil month of āṭi (July-August) is the forerunner of the ātipperukku festival of later years.

2.3.2 The bathing of young women, especially the unmarried maidens in the cold waters in the month of January also acquired certain religious connotations. The later Cankam works like the **Kalittokai** and the **Paripāṭal** call it a penance (**tavam**)⁴³ and it is accompanied by certain rituals. At dawn on the full-moon day of **Mārkaṭi** (December-January) when the ātirai asterism is ascendent, the priests well-versed in the sacred texts begin the rituals with offerings in gold vessels made to Shiva the Lord of this asterism. Young maidens accompanied by their mothers are initiated by elderly women. They sing of the dawn, implore that the rains do not fail and bathe in the rivers or streams. Then, with their senses subdued, they stand near the fire kindled by the priests for worship. This fast must have been considered specially sacred even during the Cankam period for it is said to be a penance (**ceritavam**). Those who performed it are considered to have performed good deeds in their past birth to be able to observe this fast in their present birth.⁴⁴ This is a clear reference to the **mārkaṭinīrāṭal** that is associated with the devotional songs of Manikkavacakar's **Thiruvempāvai** and Āntal's **Tiruppāvai**.

2.3.3. Some variations are also found in the social aspects of this water-festival. The participants described in the **Paripāṭal** seem to be affluent, riding to the river bank on the backs of elephants, horses, and mules. Others used palanquins or carts drawn by horses or bullocks. They also took with them syringes and horns filled with musk oil and rosewater or fragrant extracts of flowers as well as rafts and "chariots" made of painted reed/bamboo.⁴⁵ This shows an urban culture with the rich having enough leisure to plan their festivities and to prepare in great detail. This aspect also seems comparable with the water-sport of king Atithi as mentioned in the **Raghuvamsam** for there too, the bathers used syringes filled with coloured water.⁴⁶ Compared to these elaborate preparations and the kind of water-sport these poems suggest, the **punalāttu** in the earlier, shorter poems show a simple, rustic way of life which finds enough pleasure and satisfaction in the ordinary act of bathing in the fresh waters.

2.4 Variation in Literature

The spatial (geographical) and temporal differences are also noticeable in literature. There is difference in form, style and even treatment of the same incidents and themes. For example in a poem from the *Aiṅkurunūru* the heroine says to the hero,

We shall not be angry;
So tell us not lies,
O Lord of the agricultural tracts!
Your eyes are very red
because you sported
in the reddish water of the first rains
and served as a float
for the shoulders of beautiful women.⁴⁷

The watersport during which the "beautiful women" held on to his shoulders is not important by itself. It is important because of the hurt and jealousy it causes the wife with whom he did not sport in the fresh waters. Instead he had sported with the harlots. Hence *ūtal* is the actual theme of the poem, though she says, "We shall not be angry."

A *Kalittokai* poem with the same aspect of love as its theme, suggests more details. The heroine, hearing the hero say that he is returning after bathing (*punalāṭi*) in the fresh waters of the *Kāviri* says,

O yes.
I heard you bathed in the water
with cool, curly dark tresses
as the fine sand; and
Beautiful surm-lined eyes
as the *kayal* fish.
In the fragrant park
filled with cool, scented flowers
destroying your reserve (*nāṇ*)
you bathed
in the beautiful fresh waters
that came at noon,
with the *paṇṇ* as a float.⁴⁸

In this poem, the number of lines used to convey the message that she knows all and there is no need to hide anything is more than the number in the previous poem. The length of a *Kalittokai* poem makes such details possible. But the intensity of feeling and subtlety is not comparable. The meaning is far more obvious than in the *Aiṅkurunūru* poem, though the art

and imagination of the poet is not to be doubted. This feature is even more clear in the poems on the Vaiyai in the **Paripāṭal**. Such bathing in the fresh waters of the Vaiyai is the cause of **ūtal** but often the message is hidden in a mass of description which does not have much bearing on this emotion. For example the sixth poem of the **Paripāṭal** is on the refusal of the hurt wife to allow the husband to come home (**vāyil maruttal**) which is merely a way of showing her anger and disapproval of his disloyalty. Of the 106 lines, the first 60 deal with the rain that causes fresh floods in the river, the description of the people and their preparations to bathe and sport in the waters, their mode of travel to the river banks, the crowds and the waters becoming muddy because of the crowds bathing there. The next 44 lines describe the anger of the hero's concubine because of his attraction to new women, his attempt to explain that he did not embrace anyone but merely tried to save a woman from drowning, the advice of the elderly women at the concubine's house not to be angry with him or else he might go off with the younger woman, her relenting and their bathing together in the waters of the Vaiyai. The last two lines,

O Vaiyai, may your ability to produce such love
that swells in the hearts
of those who bathe in your waters
never decrease,⁴⁹

suggest that she is still angry about what had happened. Though the whole poem is supposed to be what she herself said, the detailed description in the first 60 lines are not necessary to express her displeasure and annoyance.

In the epic **Cilappatikāram**, though a whole canto is named **Kāṭalātu kātai** (the Canto on Sea Bathing) it does not mention the actual bathing of **Kōvalan** and **Mātavi**, but describes the preparations, their journey to the seashore and their tent in which the fateful **Kāṇalvari** songs are sung.⁵⁰ But while describing the city of Maturai, **Ilānkō** sings of the various seasons. Of these **kār** is said to be the season when

Harlots, living in streets
where the west wind causes flags to flutter,
sport with their beloved, rich youths
at the water front with tall **marutam** trees
along the Vaiyai with fresh waters,
in which are tiny islands of white sand
spread with flowers.
They sail boats tall as mansions
and small wooden boats
and swim holding to beautiful floats.⁵¹

This description does not in any way serve the main story or project the emotion of the youth, the harlot or the wife, if he were married. But this description adds to the beauty and grandeur of the epic. A somewhat similar use of descriptions is found in the Sanskrit kāvya as well, as already discussed in 2.1.1.

A detailed comparative study of the various practices mentioned in the Cankam poems would yield a wealth of material useful for a social historian of the ancient Tamils.

Notes and References

This paper is based on a study of the following texts:

- Tamil:** i. The Eight Anthologies
ii. The Ten Idylls
iii. The 2 Epics (Cilappatikāram and Maṇimēkalai)

- Sanskrit:** i. The 2 kāvyas of Aśvaghōṣa
ii. The 13 plays of Bhaṣa
iii. The 6 works of Kālidāsa

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3. *Puṛāṇānūru*. 11:5; *Akaṇānūru*. 6:6; 166:13; *Kalittokai*. 98: 10; *Paṭṭirupattu*. 48:17-18
4. *Narṇai*. 147:10; 259:4; 357:7; 373:5 etc.
5. Ibid. 80:7; 310:3; *Maturaikkāñci* 603
6. *Cilappatikāram*. 10.31; *Maṇimēkalai*. 3:45; 28:7
7. *Raghuvamśam*. XVI:54ff.
8. *Svapnavāsavadattam* 1: 16; *Vikramorvaśiyam* V.
9. *Meghadūtam*. II:16..
10. *Kumārasambhavam*. II. 4.
11. *Meghadūtam*. 1:64; *Raghuvamśam* XIV: 49; *Ṛtusamharām*. 1:2.
12. *Raghuvamśam*. XIII.9.
13. *Narṇai* 259: 3-4; 373:4-9. *Akaṇānūru*. 302:4 etc.
14. *Maturaikkāñci*. 600-603; *Maṇimēkalai*. 7:75-76
15. *Paṭṭiṇappālai*. 85-100
16. *Cilappatikāram* 6:111-114.
17. *Meghadūtam*. 1.1
18. *Svapnavāsavadattam* 1.16.
19. *Narṇai*. 80:4-8; *Akaṇānūru*. 269: 14-21; *Aiṅkuranūru*. 84:3-4; *Kalittokai*. 59:12 ff; *Paṭṭipāṭal* 6:13-15
20. *Vikramorvaśiyam*. V.1.
21. *Ṛtusamharām*. 1.2
22. *Aiṅkuranūru*. 411.

23. Kalittokai. 90:10-11.
24. Puraṇānūru. 94, 252.
25. Kalittokai. 39
26. Aiṅkuruṇūru 411
27. Raghavaṇṣam. 16:54-73.
28. Ibid., 16:73
29. Paripāṭal. 6:41-45
30. Rṭusambhāram II: 7, 13.
31. Ibid. ; Meghadūtam. I.
32. Akanānūru. 60:4; 140:1-8; 390:6-10: etc.
33. Ibid. 302:4; 312:5-8; Aiṅkuruṇūru 411 etc
34. Akanānūru. 6:6-11; 166:12-15 etc.
35. Raghavaṇṣam XVI; Vikramorvaṣiyam V.
36. Paripāṭal. 20
37. Ciṛupaṇāruppāṭal. 116-118
38. Paripāṭal. 10:100; 11:106.
39. Akanānūru. 6:8-9; 166:12
40. Cilappatikāram. 14:74-75
41. Paripāṭal. 12:17.
42. Ibid. 10:85-86; 16:50-55
43. Kalittokai. 59:13.
44. Paripāṭal. 11:74-92
45. Ibid. 6:33-35; 10:9-18.
46. Raghavaṇṣam. XVI:70.
47. Aiṅkuruṇūru. 80; Akanānūru 6:6-11; 296: 4-7
48. Kalittokai. 98:10-19
49. Paripāṭal. 6:105-106.
50. Cilappatikāram. 6:111-176
51. Ibid. 14:70-75