

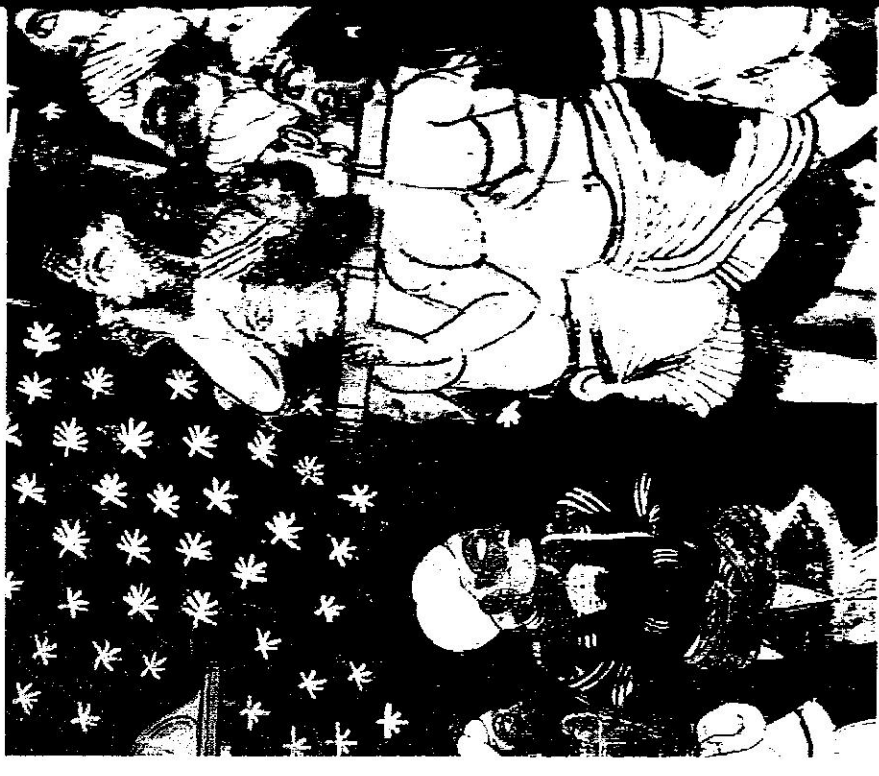
Introducing Tyāgarāja

The monumental Śiva temple in Tiruvarur, in the heart of the Kaveri Delta, is usually known today as the Tyāgarāja-svāmi Kōyil after the form of Śiva, together with his wife Uma and their son Skanda-Murukan, which is situated immediately to the south of the foundational shrine of Valmukanatha, Lord of the Anthill. Unlike Valmukanatha, Tyāgarāja is a mobile image; twice a year he leaves his home inside the innermost domain of the temple to take up temporary residence in the Jeyamraya Nandapa in the outer *prākāra*. During the Paṇḍurūttaram festival in early spring, his festival image, Candrasekhara, goes still further outside to ride a series of vehicles through the streets adjacent to the temple, and the god also rides his great chariot (*tolliṭṭa*) during the Vaantotsava or Spring Festival, in May. Uma Tyāgarāja shows us, at the most primary level of his activity, a god in movement through space, a dancing, breathing image imbued with a certain kind of active awareness; a god who reaches out to his servants, and is in turn nurtured, enhanced, and further energized by them.

At the same time, this god is in large measure hidden from external view, wrapped in veils of varying opacity, abashed within his own recesses. A cryptic or evasive dimension is integral to his being. His

dance is a tantalizing riddle that easily lends itself to elaborate exegesis, most of it rather late and oblique. This atmosphere of secret meanings and hidden layers of existence contributes to a pervasive sense of the deity's continuously deepening beauty. Tyāgarāja is a beautiful god, before all else. We may have reason to ask ourselves what a word like "beauty" really means in this case.

There are other permanent features of his personality, his moods and moods, his preferred ritual states, his diurnal and annual rhythms. Such rhythms define him, insofar as so manifold a deity can be defined. Perhaps we should put aside this word, and with it the hope of offering a definitive history, for the evolution of the Tyāgarāja system, as I would like to call it, is an enigmatic business at best. There is, however, a story to be told, one that resonates with but is by no means identical to the story the temple tells of this god's origins. We will study this latter story in its main versions, literary as well as pictorial. But no single narrative can exhaust the permutations: this deity is a grammarian, a linguist whose body is made up of mantric syllables, but whose mantra is *apapa*, "unuttered"; he has a particular fondness for the *cekkalaṇṇa* flowers, now rare in Tiruvarur; he is intimately linked, in annual ritual, to an outside community, one of whose members, leads, his progeny, he has generated a family for himself and





can apparently generate one for others. He exists in relation to his wife who takes up her position to his left and to their son, Skanda-Murukan, who sits below these two parents. He is most emphatically not alone: "springtime, the moment of life's renewal, is his characteristic season.

In another sense, too, he is not alone: he inhabits a space next to the Anthill Lord, who has his own anecdotal story; and he lives, by his own choice and need, in the city of Kamalāmbāl, the unmarried goddess engaged in *tapas* who is, in some sense, continuous with the city of Tiruvarur and embedded in the city's heart. Her vast tank, the Kamalālayam, occupies a separate space to the northwest of the temple, in the third *prakāra*; and she, too, is intimately linked to *mantra* and syllables (the *akṣara-pīṭha*, the seat of the phonemes, is immediately behind her shrine). Another form of the lonely goddess, the fierce Kāndia Durgā, lives inside the enclosure. Tyāgarāja's consort, Nilotpalāmbāl,¹ sits in the second *prākāra*; and Valmikanātha has his bride, Soma-kulāmbikā or Priyavāṭaiyammai, "she who never goes away," next to his *garbhagṛha*. More generally, as the plethora of female deities attests, Tiruvarur is a *Śakti-pīṭha*, a power site pregnant with female creativity. As we shall see, this fact is cited by Tyāgarāja himself as the rationale for his presence in the city.



Rhythmic movement, a dance, a breath, an inaudible mantra, a mantric body, a certain restlessness that finds release in movement, a partly hidden self, opaque to others and to the self, an engaged openness to diverse feminine divinities, a creativity linked to these forms: to all of these initial features, easily articulated but not so easily combined, we need to add one more, perhaps the most conspicuous in the painted murals. Tyāgarāja is a royal god, at home in the world of politics and war; his decision to take up residence at Tiruvarur situates him firmly within the domain of a highly specific metaphysical politics. Indeed, as his very name indicates, Tyāgarāja is a king—of giving, or giving up, renouncing, releasing, endowing, offering (all this is *tyāga*). Some say he gave up the world, or the cosmos, in order to be at home in Tiruvarur. In this he was aided by a human king with a monkey's face named Mucukunda, whom the Cholas claimed as one of their



in culture. To Tyagaraja looks to the Cholas, who built the temple as, we now know it, even as he embodies the vision of the Nayaka kings of Tanjavur who made the A. a landmark, a their major statement of regal identity and state power.

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Who is this god, and how long has he been in Tiruvannamalai? According to the tradition recorded in the Tiruvannamalai temple records, the *Kantapurāṇam*, and many Tamil poetic works on the temple, it was the Chola king Mucukunda who brought the image to this site. This story, illustrated in the ceiling murals, will be the main focus of our essay. A Chola cultum is definitely fundamental to the evolution of the Vayagana cult. But we can go a little farther back with the help of Tamil canonical sources, which know this god by the puzzling name *Vīviṭaṅkaṇ*. The title Vayagana itself appears only in works from the sixteenth century onwards, if we put aside, for now, an isolated mention in a work known as *Īṭṭiyēḷupatu*, popularly ascribed to the Chola-period poet Ōṭṭakkūṭṭar. The controversial dating of this latter text is still unresolved.

iii Appai's *Teṇāram* 5.7.7-8 (mid-first millennium):

[illegible]

the *akam-inset* belong to a short *akam-inset*, in the second type the 1st verse *patikan* as a whole appears to belong to a procession through the streets. From verse 6 to 8 suddenly move into a new *gana*, with a love-sick heroine whose unrestrained behavior is reproved by her rather alarmed wet-nurse.



(*cēvilī*). Possibly, if the later processional template is adumbrated here, this heroine is one of the women thronging the streets of the city as the god passes by.² I likewise, as A. Kandiah has shown,³ such set-piece adaptations of the ancient *akam* conventions are not uncommon in the *Tevāraṇi*. In any case, verse 8 makes it clear that *Vītiṽṭaiṅkaṇ* is moving through the streets of Tiruvavar (*paṇṇi vīti vīṭṭaiṅkaṇ*). There is no reason to doubt that this name applies to the god in his movable, festive form and thus, in all likelihood, distinct from Vannmikanātan/Valmikanātha, Śiva as deity of the *mūlasthanam* at Tiruvavar, rooted in place in the anthill which is said by our texts to be the oldest cultic site in this temple.

The atmosphere of the two verses is feverish (the heroine is *tavaṇi*, a woman in a heated, love-stricken state), as suits a situation of passionate longing for the ultimately unreachable lover. Another term deserves attention: the young lady is *kōṇṭi*, or has become *kōṇṭi*, usually glossed as *paṭṭi* or *picci*, uncontrolled, wild, naughty. (An older instance – *Narrai* 174 – uses the word to mean “prostitute, concubine.”)⁴ Today “*Kōṇṭi*” is the name of Tyāgarāja’s consort, placed beside him on the *Somāskanda* image. It is likely that the *Teṇṇam* verse gave birth to this epithet, although we cannot rule out the possibility that the verse reflects an already existing name for the goddess at Tiruvārur, a playful, passionate concubine or wife.