

## The *Purananuru* and the Tamil Concept of Valour

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### Abstract

This research article analyses the Tamil concept of valour as portrayed in the great master text of the *Purananuru*. It takes for its analysis nine of the eleven major tinai (situations) and nine turais (themes) to impart variety and comprehensiveness to the understanding of this very important aspect of Tamil *puram* life. If love between man and woman in all its complexity is central to *akam* poetry, valour in *and* off the battle is vital to *puram* poetry. The *Purananuru* follows tinai and turai divisions of its own, quite similar to as well as markedly different from the genres enumerated in the great founding text, the *Tolkappiam*. It also attempts to understand the rationale behind the extraordinary valorisation of this concept using some of the hypotheses advanced by George Hart in his ground-breaking translation of the *Purananuru*. While concurring that the frequent and internecine wars in ancient Tamilakam might have given indispensability to this concept, it tries to find parallels between the Tamil concept of *maram* and the Greek notions of *arête*. It detects the presence of war in almost every one of the poems, including the genre of *kaikkilai* or one-sided love.

**Keywords:** *Purananuru*, *Ettutokai*, George Hart, *arête*, *aporia*, tinai, turai, *Tolkappiam*,

Among the eight anthologies of the *Ettutokai*, the *Purananuru* is the master text chronicling every facet of Tamil life other than love. George Hart, the most meticulous among translators and scholars, says it is also among the earliest of the anthologies falling between the first and third Century C.E. and the most important:

It was written before Aryan influence had penetrated the south as thoroughly as it did later and is a testament of pre-Aryan South India and, to a significant extent, pre-Aryan India. Consequently, the *Purananuru* is extremely important to the study and understanding of the development of much of South Asia's history, culture, religion and linguistics. (xv)

The *Purananuru*, whose literal meaning is "the exterior four hundred," has only 397 poems if we exclude the invocatory song by Peruntevanar and two more poems irrevocably lost. Unlike the *Pathitruppathu*, which is also a *puram* collection but which is only a glorification of the Chera kings, the *Purananuru* distinguishes itself by having poems on a variety of topics which makes it a virtual treasure house of Tamil antiquity and a literary masterpiece. Nearly one hundred and fifty poets have contributed to the making of it. It clusters around the fifty great kings of ancient Tamilakam, and eighty-three smaller kings.

Broadly, it includes poems on war and the valour (*maram*), poems of praise, royal ethics, especially the generosity expected of kings (*eekai*), suppliants' requests, poems celebrating

friendship with kings and chieftains, cattle raids as prelude to war, the king's solemn swearing to defeat an upstart rival, a handful of poems on unrequited love, poems expressing fear over the destruction of a town for refusal to give a daughter in marriage, poems of lamentation over the fall of a kingdom or the demise of a king and so on. Despite this amazing variety, one can observe that in almost every one of them explicit or implicit reference is made to war and valour. If a king displays no propensity to fight, he comes in for scathing criticism:

*The sound of falling trees*

Whether you will go to war  
or not,  
I leave to your judgment.  
But your soldiers  
entering your enemy's land  
have started cutting the trees  
of his tutelary forest  
with long-handled axes  
sharpened with the blacksmith's file.  
Tottering under their thrust  
the long boughs shed  
their sweet-smelling flowers.  
The dunes of Aanporunai –  
where young maidens  
wearing anklets and bangles  
used to play *kalangu*  
with coins of gold –  
are undermined.  
The sounds of the falling trees  
reverberate through the castle gates  
and reach your opponent's ears.  
Still he keeps blissfully inactive  
without a mind to fight you.  
Shame on you  
that you are here  
with the beating of your drums  
decked with rainbow-like wreaths  
to fight such a coward! (*Purananuru* 36. Subsequent references carry the number alone)

Alathur Kilar on Killivalavan, the Chola King (Thangappa 128-29)

Cutting the tutelary tree of a king is sure provocation to war just as raiding the cattle is. <sup>i</sup>The king who ignores it is surely without any self-respect and the king who has chosen to fight him is as much to blame for targeting such a coward. If valour is indispensable to a king, it is equally so to a soldier. The mother who is brought news of her son's cowardice swears to cut off her breasts which fed him if the news happens to be correct. Fortunately, it turns out to be false:

*Mothers (3)*

The old woman's shoulders

were dry, unfleshed,  
with outstanding veins;  
her low belly  
was like a lotus pad.

When people said  
her son had taken fright,  
has turned his back on battle  
and died,

she raged  
and shouted,  
“If he really broke down  
in the thick of battle,  
I’ll slash these breasts  
that gave him suck,”  
and went there,  
sword in hand.

Turning over body after fallen body,  
she rummaged through the blood-red field  
till she found her son,  
quartered, in pieces,

and she rejoiced  
more than on the day  
she gave him birth. (278)

- Kakkaiapatiniyar Naccelaiyar (Ramanujan 182)

What love is to Akam poetry, valour is to Puram poetry. Just as the former explores the multidimensionality of love by assigning it tinai and the names of flowers common there, the Puram poetry, though not as strict in its conventions as its Akam counterpart, still has seven broad divisions which are supposed to correspond to the seven-fold divisions of Akam poetry and which John Ralston Marr considers to be “artificial” and “far-fetched.”<sup>ii</sup> (35) But the tinai divisions of Puram poetry are at variance with the tinai divisions of the *Purananuru*, with which we are after all concerned. To give a brief description of these eleven tinai divisions that the *Purananuru* has:

1. Karandai (Indian sphaeranthus): Recovering the cattle taken away in raids by the enemy after defeating them.
2. Kanchi (Hibiscus populnea): To counter the enemy king who is knocking at the gates after wearing the kanchi flower. Also transience of the world.
3. Kaikkilai: One-sided love of either gender
4. Tumbai (Leucas aspera): Wearing this flower during actual battle

5. Nochi (*Vitex negundo*): That which is worn by soldiers guarding the ramparts and their praise
6. Padaan: Praising the king's fame, generosity, etc. Elegiac in nature as many are posthumous celebrations.
7. Peruntinai: Mismatched love
8. Podhuviyal: Giving the common criteria of all ethical principles
9. Vanchi (*Calamus rotang*): Contemplating the capture of enemy territory wearing this flower
10. Vakai (*Albizia lebbek*): Wearing this flower marks the great tumult after the conquest of the enemy
11. Vetchi (*Ixxora coccinea*): Raiding the cattle of the enemy with or without the king's sanction.

It will be observed that among the eleven tinai into which the poems of the *Purananuru* are classified, excluding kaikkilai and peruntinai, a majority have to do with war or war-like activities. Even the three kaikkilai poems of Nakkannaiyar, a woman poet, express the one-sided love for the captive Chola king, Kopperunarkilli (83-85) and war is not far away even in matters related to heart.<sup>iii</sup> The *Purananuru* also has 67 different turais which means a subject or theme out of which only 42 agree with the turais listed in the *Tolkaappiam* and the remaining 25 are wholly new.

What I intend to do is to offer a sampling of poems chosen for the variety of tinai and turais as they illustrate them and by doing so, obtain a comprehensive idea of the concept of valour as inscribed in the *Purananuru* before making inquiries into the rationale of the valorisation of this concept and how deeply embedded it is in the Tamil way of life.

### **Karandai**

Though the large herd moves on behind its leading bull, they do not.  
They are there, hanging back. You cannot see the warriors who hold  
powerful bows as they crouch in hiding within the great  
leaf-shrouded forest. Do not go! Do not go after the cows  
That leap and gambol as if they were low caste women whose bodies  
have been possessed by a god,  
you who wear war anklets and by your side a shining sword! (259)

Kotaipatiya Perumputanar Tinai: Karandai Turai: cerumalaital and/or pillaipeyarcci  
(Hart 157)

The young soldier prepares to give chase to the herd of cattle being driven away by the enemy but he is cautioned not to do so as the enemy archers wait to kill anyone who is foolhardy to do so. One can be sure that the soldier ignored this counsel and probably paid the price with his life. What appears to be a suicidal mission, if examined in its historical context, might give us an idea of the concept of valour which for Tamils was not merely a concept but a way of conduct, the right way of conduct to a soldier. To fight an enemy against all odds is risky, to be sure, but to emerge victorious in such a situation is a lifetime opportunity which a true soldier never lets slip by. His deed will become immortalised in the annals of history and literature which a soldier

preferred to a staid life. Cerumalaital is a turai which has poems only on subject-matter related to fights against cattle-theft. Pillaipeyarcci is to fight against all odds.

### **Kanchi**

*Let me be accused of unjust rule*

Angry like lions,  
 possessed of relentless minds  
 and aggressive armies,  
 the Kings have agreed  
 to declare war against me.  
 If I don't see them take to their heels  
 with their chariots running helter skelter  
 all the while screaming  
 in the unbearable battle,  
 let me be parted from this woman  
 who has large and kohl-lined eyes.  
 Let me also be accused of unjust rule  
 by keeping a loveless tyrant in my court.  
 In the famed towns surrounded by fertile Vaikai,  
 Mavan of Maiyal, the chief of a town  
 with its ever-renewing wealth,  
 Aandhai, chief of enduring Aeyil,  
 famed Antuvan Sathan and Aadhanazhisi,  
 hot-tempered Iyakkan  
 and a few other men including these,  
 let me be excluded from their  
 sweet and honoured friendship  
 which I value as I do my eyes.  
 Born in the lineage of kings  
 who protect many lives,  
 let me be removed from being the guardian  
 of this Southern Kingdom  
 and be born as a guard of harsh lands of others. (71)

Ollayur thandha Bootha Pandian

Tinai: Kanchi                      Turai: Vanchinakanchi (My translation)

As he won back Ollayur to the Pandya Kingdom, he is known by this title. His wife Perunko Pendu is also a good poet. Strong in archery, he once fell afoul of the Chera and Chola Kings who united to fight against him. This poem is born out of anger in which the Pandya King swears to defeat the combined might of the Chera and Chola armies without achieving which he is prepared to die in the battle though it means separation from his beautiful wife. He dies in the battle and even against the counsel of the wise elders ("sandror"), his wife enters fire preferring death to life without her husband. It shall be observed that among the other things that the King swears to

give up in the event of defeat, the most important are the just rule, love of his wife, friendship and the pride of being the ruler of Pandya Kingdom.

Kanchi tinai refers to the stand of the king to oppose his enemies knocking at his borders and Vanchina Kanchi is a deliberate belittling of his enemies. Perhaps the king senses that the odds of victory for him are small given the number of things he prepares to forswear if he is defeated. Or perhaps he was reminding himself of the kind of losses he would incur if the battle swings the other way and which would spur him on to fight better. What is important is his choice to fight his enemies rather than submit to them or compromise with them because the discourse on royal conduct pre-empts any such course of action.

### **Tumbai**

*Can any herd of deer .....*

Can any herd of deer,  
in the foothills  
where the *kanthal* blooms  
resembling broken bangles  
and wild jasmine unfolding  
amidst lush green bushes  
spread their combined fragrance,  
stand before a charging tiger?  
Can any patch of darkness cling  
to the murky corners of the sky  
when the dazzling sun comes out?  
And when a lordly bull  
pulling a heavily loaded carriage,  
axle bending under the weight  
and wheels sinking into the soil,  
walks with vigorous strides  
throwing up the sand  
and trampling rocks to pieces,  
is there any obstacle  
which he cannot overcome?  
In the same manner,  
O warrior king,  
with long ebony arms  
reaching down to your thighs  
and hands unfailing,  
when you enter the battlefield,  
is there any soldier on earth  
to defeat you  
and exult over the capture  
of your vast country? (90)

Auvaiyar Tinai: Tumbai Turai: Thanai maram (Thangappa 136-37)

Adhiyaman Neduman Anchi, a chieftain who ruled with Takadur as his capital in the present Dharmapuri District (Pillai 208-09), is much beloved of the famous woman poet Auvaiyar. The context of this poem is supposed to be a moment of aporia in the mind of Adhiyaman on fighting a battle, which calls for this exhortation from Auvaiyar reminding him of his prowess in it. It will be seen that the poets encourage their patrons to fight rather than seek a pacifist determination as the battles alone proved the mettle of a king. In fact, many of the kings have the famous battles which they fought and won prefixed to their names like “Talalayankanathu seru venra Pandyan Neduchelivan” meaning the Pandya King Nedunchelian who won the battle at Talalayankanam.

Tumbai is the leucas flower (white dead nettle) the fighting army wore and Thanai maram speaks of the valour displayed in the battle.

### Nochi

*Even his hills are good*

Merciful are the Parambu Hills of Pari!  
 Even if you three kings  
 with your storied war drums  
 lay a siege, there are four things  
 which come forth in his Hills  
 without the ploughman's efforts: first,  
 the small-leaved paddy of the bamboo;  
 second, the sweet and ripe jackfruit;  
 third, the lush-vined sweet potato  
 and fourth, the honey  
 that is washed down by the blue waters  
 of Ori from his stout and tall hills  
 which resemble the sky  
 and the fountains from it  
 are like the stars in it.  
 So, even if you bring an elephant  
 to tie to each tree  
 and a vast spread of chariots,  
 you'll not succeed with your swords.  
 But I know how his hills  
 can be taken: if you play  
 the twisted strings of the small lute  
 and go dancing and singing,  
 followed by your women  
 disguised as dancers,  
 he'll give as gift his country and hill together. (109)

Kapilar Tinai: *Nochi* Turai: *Makan maruttal* (Ali 290)

Parambu Hills, now known as Piranmalai in Sivagangai District, are legendary in Tamil literature for they were the seat of the Velir king Pari's capital, the patron and bosom friend of Kapilar. These hills had defied the siege and onslaught of the three great kings of Tamilakam for a long

time because Pari refused to give his daughters in marriage to anyone of them. Even chieftains took umbrage at such refusal and this cause had brought ruin to many a city as evident from several poems by Paranar, one of the elder and noteworthy poets of the Classical Age.<sup>iv</sup> So much so that *Makan maruttal*, which literally means “refusal of daughter,” has become one of the turais of Puram poetry. Though Pari must have had unassailable conviction in the invulnerability and self-sufficiency of his mountain kingdom, it would take extraordinary courage to pit oneself against the combined might of the three great kings. But he may not have counted against treachery. The important thing is, in matters of self-respect and valour, the Davids did not worry about the Goliaths.

Botanically known as *vitex negundo*, *nochi tinai* talks about the defence of a kingdom and praises those guarding the ramparts of the city on whose valour and steadfastness the safety of the city depended. The devastating sarcasm against the three kings who became intolerant of the fame of Pari is a poetic device Kapilar uses on many occasions, but never with so much contempt.

### Paadaan

#### *A Small Strip of Land*

Powerful, victorious and kind,  
 ruler of a country  
 where a small strip of land  
 wide enough for one elephant to lie down  
 produces enough food  
 to feed seven war elephants.  
 You are the destroyer  
 of the garrisoned castles of your foes.  
 And you have forged for yourself  
 war anklets from the gold of their crowns.  
 You have risen to an exalted state  
 while your detractors  
 are steeped in shame.  
 Your admirers bask in glory.  
 Let me see you in this state  
 in future too,  
 always sweet in words  
 and easily accessible. (40)

Avur Mulankilar on Killivalavan, the Chola King

Tinai: Paadaan Turai: Seviyaruvuru (Thangappa 130)

Paadaan is eulogy of the king’s fame, power and generosity and elegiac in tone. Making anklets out of the crowns of a fallen king is not only a gesture of humiliation but also one of valour, an act which would otherwise seem supremely arrogant is rather becoming when it is done by a king. There are instances of a king plucking the tooth of his fallen rival and fixing it to his royal portals. It would be seen that a sizeable number of the *Purananuru* poems fall under this head as it was customary for the indigent poets to praise their patrons, sometimes out of all proportions and so hyperbole is a frequently employed poetic device in poems of this kind. In almost every one of



these poems it is the King's valour that comes in for praise more than any other royal attribute. As for the turai seviyaruvuru, it tells the king principles of good governance.

### **Podhuviyal**

The drums have forgotten their drumming clay. The yals have forgotten their ragas.  
 The giant pots lie over on their sides and have forgotten how to hold the ghee.  
 His followers have forgotten the pure toddy around which the bees would gather.  
 The plowmen have forgotten how they used to raise an uproar and the villages  
 with their broad streets have forgotten how to carry out their festivals!  
 Just as on the great day when the moon has grown full and the two spheres  
 of light  
 stare one at the other and then one of them vanishes over the mountain out  
 into the empty evening, so in shame after taking a wound in the back,  
 although from a worthy opposing king who had thought to take aim  
 at his chest,  
 that ruler of imposing Martial Courage now is seated next to his sword. He has chosen  
 to sit on the ground, facing the north! And here by day,  
 when the sun is shining, time does not go by as the time of day once did before. (65)

Kalattalaiyar on Ceraman Perun Ceralatan when he fought with Colan Karikar Peruvalattan, was ashamed of a back wound (he suffered) and faced north (to starve himself to death).

Tinai: Podhuviyal Turai: Kaiyarunilai  
 (Hart 65-66)

This poem reports two events: One is the wound received by Ceralatan on his back inflicted by his opponent, though he "had thought to take aim at his chest." The second is the decision of the wounded king to give up his life fasting facing the direction of north. The wound, though it might only be minor, because it was received on the back, proved to be a mark of cowardice and so it turned out to be fatal. The king prefers death to dishonour and giving up one's life facing north is the standard practice of self-immolation. It will also be observed that even the rival king did not contemplate such a heinous act and what happened was only an accident. As podhuviyal gives the criteria common to all tinais, this poem has been classified as one. Kaiyarunilai is expression of pathos at an event of the past. Many of Kapilar's poems expressing pathos at the fall of Parambu after Pari's killing belong to this theme or turai.

### **Vanchi**

*A great conqueror*

Your swords  
 stained with the blood  
 of your enemies  
 bear the beauty  
 of the evening sky.

The warrior's anklets

worn around your legs  
resemble the tusks  
of a killer boar.

Your shield  
riddled with arrows  
looks like a target board.

Your war horses  
grinding their metal bits  
and spitting blood  
look like tigers  
with the victim's blood  
in their mouths.

Your elephants  
their white tusks broken  
battering enemy doors open  
look like Death.

Your self  
seated on your golden chariot  
drawn by swift horses with bright manes flying  
have the beauty of the rising sun.

And like a child  
who had lost its mother  
the lands of your enemies  
who have angered you  
send out wails and screams  
without cease. (4)

Paranar on Ilanchetchenni    Tinai: Vanchi    Turai: Korravallai (Thangappa 117-18)

Wearing the vanchi flower is declaration of aggression and intent to annexe enemy territory, quite the reverse of wearing kanchi, which is a sign of defending one's territory. Every object chosen for description, from the bloodstained sword to the shield riddled with arrows looking like "target board" indicates the bravery and might of the king in the battlefield. The enemy is portrayed, correspondingly, to be in a state of helplessness, brought out by the analogy of the orphaned child crying out for its mother. The turai korravallai, even as it praises the king's valour and aggression, cannot but speak pityingly about the victims.

### **Vakai**

*There is only a little daylight left*

After bathing in the cool fountain  
close to his antique town  
and adorned with the bright leaves

of tender neem growing in the common  
 and walking like an elephant  
 heralded by the beat of the clear drum,  
 the hardened warrior Cheliyan arrived.  
 Perhaps some of his fickle-headed enemies  
 may manage to live  
 as there is only a little daylight left. (79)

Idaikundrur Kizhar praises Pandyan Neduncheliyan's victory at Thalalayankanam Tinai:  
 vakai Turai: Arasa vakai  
 My translation

The victory of the Pandya King at Thalalayankanam is legendary as he defeated the combined might of the Chera and Chola kings assisted by five other smaller kings. This poem of Kizhar gives cryptic but no less effective idea of the stir that Pandya's arrival at the battlefield created ending with the rather terrible prognosis of a few soldiers surviving the battle and whose survival was not due to any act of bravery but because of the darkness coming after the sunset beyond which, by common consent, the kings agreed not to extend the battle. So vakai tinai is a celebration of victory *after* the war, but here the poet feels so sure of the outcome that he feels no need to wait for it. A more graphic description of the same event is given in the *Purananuru* poem 19, which shows Death himself (personified as Kootruvan) taking fright at the devastation and carnage of the battle. The turai Arasa vakai celebrates a king's victory.

### Vetchi

Strain the toddy! Slaughter a male goat! In a pavilion  
 with pale columns, roofed over with green leaves,  
 spread the fresh sand everywhere that has been  
 carried here by the waters! My lord is approaching now  
 with a herd, but more tired than he is are the men  
 who take their stand beside him behind  
 the cattle and they ward off the vanguard of the enemy! (262)

Madurai Peralavayar Tinai: Vetchi Turai: Undattu (Hart 159)

If karandai tinai talks about the recovery of cattle lost in enemy raid, Vetchi is about making a raid to capture the enemy cattle. Cattle raids not only served as provocation to war, a skirmish to draw the enemy out, it also augmented the wealth of a community besides providing opportunities for the young men to display their valour. Perhaps the symbolic cattle capture known as *jallikattu*, a sport famous in Alanganallur and which the Supreme Court banned, has its origin in these cattle raids described so vividly in the *Purananuru*. The *natukals* or tombstones which dotted the landscape, as several of the poems report, might be for the fallen raiders whom the archers ambushed. As the community as a whole benefited out of these raids, the young men who took part in it were treated to a sumptuous feast which involved slaughtering male goats and distillation of toddy. These celebratory feasts went by the turai of undattu.

Even though I have chosen the major tinais of the *Purananuru* which are directly concerned with war and display of individual bravery, there are a great many turais which also describe the fallout of war, especially on the womenfolk. Taken together they convey a stoical acceptance of war and

some like the poem quoted earlier communicate joy over the heroic death of the son or the husband. There is a poem, obviously a monologue, of a wife holding a dying husband whispering him to walk a few steps towards the shadow of rock for fear of her voice may bring a tiger to the battlefield (255). These poems which conveyed the helpless state of a bereaved woman are classified as “mutupalai.” There is another one by Okkur Maasaathiyar which celebrates the guts of a woman, who had lost, in successive battles, her father and husband, but now prepares to send her only son to battle who is not even old enough to fight one. (279) This one went under the turai of mutinmullai which records the anger of women born in warrior caste. Given the pervasive references to war, it may not be inappropriate to describe the entire *Purananuru* collection as Classical Tamil War Poetry in the same way as Akam poetry has been described as Classical Tamil Love Poetry.

George Hart observes that because of the centrality accorded to the King by the Tamil society and the quasi divine powers invested on him, the killing in the battlefields is treated as harvest and the battlefield itself becomes metamorphosed into farmland and the King is imagined to be engaged in harmless agricultural activity:

One common recurrence in the poems is the comparison of the war to the harvest: the falling arrows are the rain; the flashing swords and spears are the lightning; the corpses with the broken necks are the grain bending down ready for the harvest; the stacks of corpses are the stacks of paddy; and the elephants trampling the corpses are the buffaloes thrashing the grain. These metaphors show that the king is considered to be a sort of machine designed to metamorphose dangerous power – the killing on the battlefield – into its auspicious analogue – the production and harvesting of grain. (xix)

There are two turais of the *Purananuru* which support such a viewpoint: one is yerkala uruvakam and the other one, mara kala vazhi. Both these turais imagine the battlefield as land meant for ploughing and the king as a farmer. Let me just paraphrase one such poem which uses this imagery:

The battle-ready elephants in metal masks are the monsoon clouds, swords borne by the soldiers are like lightning, the drums are thunder, the fast-moving horses are wind, arrows fired from the bows are rain, the bloodied earth is rain-soaked soil, the chariots are the ploughshares, the soldiers holding the spear and shield are the farmers busy harvesting. (369)

Such poems are not huge in number (they are only five) and one cannot base an entire theory on such meagre textual evidence. Besides, the kind of enthusiasm and heroism that the soldier displays in the battlefield and the *refusal* to kill an enemy who has surrendered or taken to heels, a virtue much eulogised by poets of the *Purananuru*, are indications of a nobility or magnanimity too great to be accounted for by such an activity as farming which Hart finds analogous to deeds in the battlefield. I would like to draw parallels of Tamil heroism with the display of *arête* by the Greeks, especially the Homeric *arête*, which means “excellence” rather than virtue. \* The Tamil youth who displays heroism of the kind certainly does so for his king and his own family honour, but more than anything else, he is living up to an expectation of himself. The strength, skill and above all sacrifice, are explicable in no other terms. Like the Homeric hero, he is shown to be an all-rounder: a distiller of toddy, an able hunter, a loyal subject and when challenged to a contest, an indomitable wrestler. The display of valour in battlefields takes sublime forms of excellence in calmer times. There are kings who give away their chariots to unsupported jasmine climber, shawls to shivering peacocks, their own heads (on which there is a price) to relieve the poverty of a poor poet and deny a life-enhancing fruit to oneself only to offer it to a poet. Such acts of

nobility, whether fictitious or factual, can only emerge from a society whose public discourse is governed by firm notions of excellence.

A society usually valorises a specific attribute or castigates its absence for reasons of its survival. No other society seems to set so much score over valour as does the Tamil society. Explaining this Hart says:

The poems reveal kings locked in an interminable and vicious struggle for supremacy. Kings did not usually want direct power over the lands of their rivals; instead, they were happy if they could force their enemies to acknowledge their supremacy by paying tribute. What was important to the old Tamil kings was they have the proper royal aura and that their subjects and others recognize this. It was crucial that they be treated with respect; otherwise, they could not function as kings, for they would not be acknowledged as such. It is no surprise, then, that we find the Tamil kings sparing no effort to prove their bravery and ferocity in war. (xviii)

The internecine wars kept the society in a state of volatility. If the three great kings of ancient Tamilakam were not busy fighting among themselves (a lack of solidarity among Tamils which even today is a matter of concern), they intrigued against the smaller kings and fought with them. Malayaman Tirumudikari, one of the patrons of Kapilar with Tirukovalur as capital, though a smaller king, was very much sought after by the great kings as he could swing the outcome of a battle either way. Kapilar acknowledges this in one of his poems. (Ali 303. *Purananuru* 122) A society in such perpetual turmoil and instability might set a high premium on valour and treat its absence with derision.

\*For a lively discussion of *arête* I suggest Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Along with cutting the tutelary tree and raiding cattle, one can also add refusal of daughter in marriage as provocation to war.

<sup>ii</sup> Selby's "Dialogues of Space, Desire and Gender" in *Tamil Geographies* differs from this view by finding close parallels with the akam and puram tinai. As the tinai and turai divisions of the *Purananuru* are more indebted to *Purap Porul Venbamalai*, these overlappings do not matter much.

<sup>iii</sup> It is noteworthy that the three kaikkilai and five peruntinai poems in the *Purananuru* are expressions of unfulfilled feminine love for their warrior lovers and husbands.

<sup>iv</sup> Parinar, believed to be an elder contemporary of Kapilar, has composed poems of moving description of towns facing destruction by the enemy king who felt humiliated by the father's refusal of his daughter (336, 341, 343, 348, 352, 354).

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