

A World of Nourishment  
Reflections on Food in Indian Culture

*Edited by Cinzia Pieruccini and Paola M. Rossi*

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## The semantics of food in old Tamil poetry

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It seems appropriate to begin a study on food with a definition coined by Olga Freidenberg, a Russian scholar, who was a specialist in ancient literature and culture: 'Food is a metaphor of life and resurrection'.<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, this is a universal truth well understood all over the world, and it is no wonder that we meet a somewhat similar expression in old Tamil poetry, namely in the anthology called *Puṛaṇāṇūru*.

*uṇṭi koṭuttōr uyir koṭuttārē*  
*uṇṭi mutarṛē uṇavin piṇṭam*  
*uṇavu eṇappaṭuvatu nilattoṭu nīrē* (Puṛa. 18, 19-21)

Those who give feeding give life.  
The first in feeding is a lump of food.  
What is called food is water together with the earth  
[or, produced by water with the earth].

Food is an important component of the contents of old Tamil poetry and is quite often mentioned in the so-called *caṅkam* poems. In fact, they present a vast nomenclature of food products and dishes consumed by Tamils, along with verbal pictures of cooking and eating which are often given in some detail. For example, Puṛa. 168, 8-13 describes a feast undertaken by mountain hunters (*kuṛavar*) to celebrate the new harvest of millet:

*maraiyān kaṛanta nuraiko ṭimpāl*  
*māṇṇṛati puḷukkiya pulavunāṅgu kuḷici*  
*vāṅkēḷ irumputtai kalāa terri*  
*cānta viṛaki ṇuvitta puṅkam*  
*kūtaḷam kaviṇiya kuḷavi muṇṇiṛ*  
*ceḷuṅkōḷ vāḷai yakalilaiṭ pakukkum* (...) (Puṛa. 168, 8-13)

1. Freidenberg 1997, 67.

The hunters pour the sweet foaming milk of the she-elk  
 Into the unwashed pot with white paunchy side,  
 Smelling of meat, for pieces of deer were boiled in it;  
 In the yard with jasmine decorated with ipomoea  
 [They] divide on wide leaves of the plantain abundant with fruit  
 [Their] rice boiled on fire made of sandalwood.

To compose a list of food and dishes known to Tamil people of ancient times is outside the limits of the present article. I shall try to discover how food enters the sphere of Tamil culture and literature, what semantics it acquires, and how it is used with poetical purposes.<sup>2</sup>

Generally speaking, Tamil people's rations as seen through the old poetry, included rice, millet, different vegetables, fruits and roots, milk, and milk products. They were not vegetarians and ate fish and meat lavishly (the meat of ram, deer, hare, boar, porcupine, iguana, tortoise, fowl) using salt, ghee, and spices.<sup>3</sup> It is natural to suggest that all these items were common to all parts of Tamilakam (or to the whole India for that matter). At the same time, there is also quite a natural and traceable tendency in the texts to connect certain food-products with certain regions and their dwellers. Thus, the main food for hunters was meat, millet, and honey; for agriculturalists – rice; for fishermen – food brought by the sea; for shepherds – milk and milk-products, and for the tribes of hunters and robbers from the desert areas (*pālai*) – meat once again. We can even speak of the ethnic characteristics of food-products and kitchens, but for our purpose it is more important that food became a part of the old Tamil poetic system of five canonical themes, called *tiṇai*. Each theme consists of a certain love-situation correlated with a particular landscape which is represented by a set of specific canonical features (called *karu*, literally 'embryo'). Food is considered one of these and recognized by the poetic tradition in a *sūtra* of the old Tamil grammatical and poetical treatise *Tolkāppiyam* (*Poruḷatikāram*, 20) which presents the *karu*-elements of the themes. Food occupies the second place after local gods in this work.

The *caṅkam* poets when speaking of food usually adhered to this regional principle. Moreover, they often try to use it for solving purely poetic tasks. For instance, the poet Uruttiraṅ Kaṇṇaṅār in his poem *Perumpāṇāṅṅruppaṭai* (Peru.) from the *Pattuppāṭṭu* collection not only mentions some food items as attributes of certain regions, but also introduces them as points along the path a poet should follow (in the situation known as *āṅruppaṭai* when one poet explains to a fellow-poet the route to a generous patron): *ūṅ puḷukkaḷ* (100) (...) *tēkkilaiḱ kuvaiinum paitṭir kaṭumpoṭu patamikaḱ perukuvir* 'you and your companions

2. One of the early works in which food and eating were treated in a cultural perspective was the article by Brenda Beck (Beck 1969).

3. The flesh of the domestic cow is not mentioned in the texts, but wild-cow meat (*āmāṇ*) was consumed (*Cirupāṇāṅruppaṭai*, Ciru. 177).

who end [people's] distress, will get pieces of meat served on teak leaves' (100, 104-105); *cuvavilāi nellin (...) uṭumpiṇ vaṛaikāl yāttatu (...) perukuvir* 'you will get rice grown on hillocks and a bunch of fried legs of iguana' (131-133); *pacuntinai mūral pāloṭum perukuvir* 'you will get boiled millet with milk' (168); *iṅcuvai mūrar perukuvir* 'you will get sweet boiled rice' (194-195); *vennir ariyal viralalai narumpiḷi taṇmīṅ cūṭṭoṭu taḷartalum perukuvir* 'you will quench your hunger receiving fresh fried fish and fragrant juice [made] from rice-paste stirred by fingers' (281-282). Thus, the poet on his way to the king should encounter different people: mountain hunters (*kuṛavar*), hunters from the wild plains (*eyiṇar*), shepherds (*iṭaiyar*), peasants (*uḷavar*), and fishermen (*paratar*), and he should pass through the geographical zones they occupy (in terms of *tiṇai*-landscapes: *kuṛiṅci, pālai, mullai, marutam, neyāl*).

This poetic device (repeated in *Ciru.*, another poem from *Pattuppāṭṭu*) not only demonstrates the regional features of the country and the characteristic points of the route, but also appears to be saturated with a clear panegyric meaning. Indeed, the abundance of food enjoyed by the people of the kingdom signifies their happy life under the sceptre of the ruler and, in a disguised fashion, expresses the idea that the king provides food for his subjects. That is why food-products, scenes of eating and drinking, festivals and feasts, fertile fields of rice, unfailing crops, etc. constitute a regular feature of praise-poems. In *Pura.* 236 the poet *Kapilar* thus addresses his patron *Pāri*: *kalaiyuṇa kiḷinta muḷavumarū perumpalam cilaikeḷu kuṛavarku alkumicaivākum malaikēlu nāṭa* 'O, the owner of the mountain country where big jack-fruits, resembling *mulavu*-drums, are torn [from the trees] and eaten by monkeys, and what is left is a food for the hunters-*kuṛavar* with bows' (1-3). The idea of these lines is not only to show the land rich in food for both beast and man, but also to stress that the food is ready and easy to obtain.

Another example gives a picture of food brought together from different parts of the Chola kingdom, thereby producing the impression of a happy plentiful life:

*kāṇurai vāḷkkaik katanāy vēṭṭuvan*  
*māṇracai corinta vaṭṭiyu māymakaḷ*  
*tayirkoṭu vanta tacumpu niraia*  
*ēriṅ vāḷnar pēri larivaiyar*  
*kuḷakkū viḷanta kaḷakkoḷ veṇṇel*  
*mukantaṇar koṭuppa* (*Pura.* 33, 1-6)

The hunter with fierce dogs who leads his life in the forest  
 Gives a basket full of the deer's meat,  
 The cow-girl – a pot full with *tayir*;<sup>4</sup>

4. A kind of home-made yogurt.

The women from the big houses of those who live by the plough  
Scoop the white rice which has grown in the field beneath ponds.

However, the more or less abstract idea of a king feeding his subjects takes a very concrete and meaningful form in Tamil poetry in connection with a specific relationship between kings and the poet-performers, whose work was to compose and sing praise-songs. Since I have dealt with this subject in detail previously,<sup>5</sup> I shall only stress two points here: firstly, the relationship in question was part of a much broader system of ties between supplicants and patrons (*iravalar-puravalar*); in fact it symbolized the interrelation between a ruler and his land and people; secondly, considerable stress was laid upon the act of feeding poets and performers in this relationship, and this appeared to be one of the main obligations of a king or a chieftain towards these figures.

The importance of the motive can be illustrated by numerous instances from anthologies, especially from *Puṛa*: *neruppuṇ cīṇan taṇinta niṇantaiyaṅku koḷuṅkukuraḷai parūukkaṇ maṇṭaiyo tūḷmāru peyara uṅku mentainir kāṅkuvantiṇeṇ* ‘I have come, o father, to see you and [thinking] that we shall eat fat pieces of meat fried on fire which ceased its anger, and drink *kaḷ*<sup>6</sup> incessantly in big vessels (...)’ (*Puṛa*. 125, 2-4); *vēṭṭattir rāṇuyir cekutta māṇiṇap puḷukko ṭāṇuruk kaṇṇa vēriyai nalki* ‘he gave us fat pieces of deer which he killed in the hunt, and toddy which was like ghee made of cow’s [milk]’ (*Puṛa*. 152, 25-26); *pāṇar paitar curratup pacippakai yāki* ‘he became the enemy of the hunger of bards (*pāṇar*) and their weak relatives’ (*Puṛa*. 212, 11-12); in *Puṛa*. 14, 13-15 the poet states that the bards at the king’s court ‘do not know other troublesome work apart from eating meat, rice, and curry’ (*ūṇṇuvai kaṇicōṇuntu varuntutoli lallatu piṇitutoli laṇiyāvākaḷ*); in his praise-song for the chieftain Ōri, the poet Vanparaṇar as the leader of a group of bards says, in a somewhat grotesque way, that after much eating and drinking at Ōri’s court they ‘could not dance and forgot their songs’ (*āṭalu mollārtam pāṭalum maṇantē*, *Puṛa*. 153, 12).

The number of examples from poems showing eating and drinking at kings’ courts can be easily multiplied, which only stresses the important place of this motive in Tamil poetry. Its inner significance lies in the fact that the relationship of bards and patrons can be viewed from the angle of a certain ritual, structurally similar to rites of passage. In this case the motive of food and eating fully corresponds to the third stage of such rituals connected with the ideas of renovation, life, and energy.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, the previous stage which may be called transitional signifies sufferings, danger, and death. It finds its poetic ex-

5. Dubianski 2000, 62-72.

6. An alcoholic drink made from palm-juice.

7. Dubianski 2000, 64-65. These stages, as B. Beck demonstrated (Beck 1969), are understood in terms of heating and cooling and it is no wonder that hunger is looked upon as hot (*kāypaci* ‘hot hunger’ *Puṛa*. 150, 14; *vayiruttī* ‘the fire of guts’ *Puṛa*. 74, 5).



pression in descriptions of the deplorable physical state of bards and their family, the state of utmost poverty, hunger and thirst. In the fragment from *Pura*. 159, 6-14 the poet describes his wife's sufferings:

*pacanta mēṇiyoṭu paṭaraṭa varunti*  
*maruṅkiṭ koṇṭa palkuru mākkal*  
*picantutiṇa vāṭiya mulaiyaḷ peritalintu*  
*kuppaik kīrai koykaṇ ṅakaiṭta*  
*muṟṟā viḷantalir koytukon ṭuppiṇru*  
*nīrulai yāka vēṟṟi mōriṇ*  
*ṟaviḷppata maṟantu pācaṭaku micaiṇtu*  
*mācoṭu kuṟainta vuṭukkaiya ḷaṟampaliyāt*  
*tuvvā ḷākiya veṇvey yōlum* (*Pura*. 159, 6-14)

With pale body, thinking [of us] in despair,  
 She, with breasts dried out and bruised by many children at her  
 side, suffering much,  
 Plucks young unripe sprouts [grown] on a heap of rotten vegeta-  
 bles,  
 Puts them into a pot with water without salt.  
 She who forgot [even what is] poor rice without *mōr*<sup>8</sup> pounds  
 them;  
 Clad in dirty rags, cursing *dharma*, she cannot eat it, but does not  
 get angry with me.

In this and similar cases, the state of hunger can be considered circumstantial, so to say, but there are situations when starvation is brought on voluntarily. First of all, a feminine ritual of the type known as *noṇṇu* in Tamil culture should be mentioned. This also has the structure of a rite of passage and is connected with the idea of fertility, often constituting a religious service as shown in the poem *Tiruppāvai* by Āṇṭāl (9c). In verse 2, the girls who are performing the rite in the name of Krishna describe their departure from a normal state and a kind of ascetic behaviour with the rejection of food, among other things:

*vaiyattu vālvīrkāl nāmumnam pāvaikkuc*  
*ceyyuṅ kiricaikal kēlirō pāṟkaṭaluḷ*  
*paiyat tuyiṇṟa parama ṇaṭipāṭi*  
*neyyūṇṇōm pāluṇṇōm nāṭkālē nīrāṭi*  
*maiṇṇiṭ ṭeḷutōm malaritṭu nāmmuṭiyōm*  
*ceyyā taṇaceyōm tikkuṟalai ceṇṟōtōm*  
 (*Tiruppāvai* 2, 1-6 = TPA. 475)

8. A kind of butter-milk.

O you, who live in this spacious world! We also  
 Undertake actions corresponding to the rite – won't you listen  
 about them?  
 Having sung the Transcendental one, who sleeps on the hood [of  
 the snake]  
 Amidst the milk-ocean,  
**We do not eat ghee, do not drink milk.** At the beginning of the day  
 After bathing we do not decorate our hair with flowers, do not  
 blacken our eyes,  
 We do not do improper things, do not utter, even by chance, evil  
 words (...).

The third and final stage of the rite signifies the end of fasting and is accompa-  
 nied by a feast:

*kūṭārai vellumcīrk kōvintā uṇṇaṇṇaiṇ  
 pāṭip paraikoṇṭu yāmpērum cammāṇam  
 nāṭu pukaḷum pariciṇāl ṇaṇṇākac  
 cūṭakamē tōḷvalaiyē tōṭē cevippūvē  
 paṭakamē yeṇṇaṇṇaiya palkalaṇṇum yāmaṇivōm  
 āṭai yuṭupṇō matanṇiṇṇē pārcōru  
 mūṭaney peytu muḷaṅkai vaḷivārak  
 kūṭi yiruntu kuḷirntēḷō rempāvāy (Tiruppāvai 27 = TPA. 500)*

O, Govinda who has the habit of conquering those who do not  
 join you!  
 On having sung you and completed the rite, we will get your re-  
 sponse,  
 Let it be so good that the whole country will praise it!  
 And we, putting arm-bracelets, earrings, feet-bangles  
 And other decorations on, clad in new clothes,  
**Shall pour lavishly – up to our elbows – butter**  
**Into the vessels full of rice and milk,**  
 And together shall be cooled off. Accept [our rite], o, our *pāval*

No doubt, cooling off here means eating. It crowns the rite of passage and dis-  
 closes the semantics of food as a source of life and renovation.

Religious fasting is not the only case of self-starvation which has a special  
 aim and meaning. Ancient Tamil kings were known to resort to this when they  
 suffered defeat in battle or lost their dignity in some other way. They used to go  
 to a solitary place and sit there facing the Northern part of the horizon. They  
 would reject eating and drinking until they died. The custom, or, rather, vow,  
 was, presumably, borrowed from the ascetic practice of Jainas, *sallekhana*. It  
 was called *vaṭakkiruttal* ('staying [facing] North') and mentioned in Puga. 65, 66  
 and Aka. 55 referring to kings wounded in the back during battle, which was  
 considered shameful.

There is one more interesting example of a similar vow in the military sphere given by Pati. 58, 6-7: in the words of the warriors ‘we will not eat until we overcome the walls of the enemy’s fortress’ (*matil kaṭantallatu uṅkuva mallēm*). Another case of rejecting food is represented by a notion (influenced, perhaps, by Buddhist thought) expressed in Puṛa. 182: the world exists because of the existence of people who, among the other things they do for the sake of others, ‘do not eat and enjoy [food] alone, even if they get the *amṛta* of gods’ (*intirar amiḷtam iyaiva tāyiṇum iṇiteṇa tamiyar uṇṭalum ilarē*, Puṛa. 182, 1-3).

Rejection of food is also met with in Tamil love-poetry (*akam*). It is always connected with the heroine’s emotions. In the poems on *kuriñci-tiṇai* there is a situation when she cannot meet her beloved, because she is being guarded and kept at home. She is grief-stricken and does not take food, even milk: *pālum uṇṇāl* (Aka. 48, 2); *tēṇoṭu tūmpāl uṇṇāl* ‘she does not drink sweet milk with honey’ (Naṛ. 179, 5-6). The same occurs in the situation when she runs away with the young boy and her behaviour at home on the eve of her flight is called to mind: *manicey maṇṭait tūmpāl ēnti iṇāttāyār maṭuppavum uṇṇāl* ‘she does not drink sweet milk given to her by her foster-mother in a cup made of sapphire’ (Aka. 105, 5-6); *cempor puṇaikalat tamporik kalanta pālum palaveṇa vuṇṇāl* ‘she does not eat, saying “much”, even milk mixed with good rice in a vessel decorated with gold’ (Kuṛu. 356, 6-7).

In the situation of separation when the heroine is waiting for her husband to return from his journey (usually a military expedition) she takes up a mode of behaviour which can be defined as a ritual of separation, another variety of rites of passage.<sup>9</sup> Its description can be reconstructed from Tamil poetry in many details. Among other things her physical state at this period is expressively described: her body is virtually withering, its beauty (*nalam*) perishing. Fasting is without doubt one of the conditions of the rite, but not much is actually said about it in poems. However, a number of general typological considerations and also several features of the heroine’s appearance allow it to be presumed: the brown-blue colour of her skin dims and is replaced by a specific pale, yellowish tinge which is called *pacalai* or *pacappu* (the verb *pacattal*).<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, in this context the heroine herself is understood as the food for this paleness: *pacalai yuṇṇiyar vēṇṭum titalai yalkuleṇ māmaik kaviṇē* ‘the mango beauty of my loins covered with small spots would be eaten by *pacalai*’ (Kuṛu. 27, 4-5). This motive brings us further to the image of a woman eaten by her sufferings in the love-affair. A short poem from the Kuṛu. anthology serves as a good example:

9. Dubianski 2000, 127-30.

10. It is not a mere coincidence that in the poem Puṛa. 159 cited above, the poet uses exactly the same verb: *pacanta mēṇṇiyōṭu*, that is, ‘with pale body’ to describe a hungry woman (Puṛa. 159, 6).

*puṇavaṇ ruṭavaip poṇṇōr cīruṭṭinai*  
*kīlikuṛait tuṇṭa kūlai yīruvi*  
*perumpeya luṇmaiṇi ṇilaiyolit tānken*  
*urañcettu muḷeṇē tōḷiyēṇ*  
*nalām puti tuṇṭa pulampigāṇē* (Kuru. 133)

Like stubbles of small millet, resembling gold,  
 Which was eaten and smashed by parrots on the field of a high-  
 lander  
 Leaves sprout [again] because of heavy rain,  
 Though my strength has died, I still exist, my friend,  
 By my affliction which has eaten recently [or, for the first time]  
 The wealth of my beauty.

The poetical structure of the poem points to the fact that the heroine's beauty has actually been eaten by her lover (a notion which has obvious sexual connotations). In some other instances it is stated explicitly: *avar uṇṭa eṇ nalaṇē* 'my beauty which was eaten by him' (Kuru. 112, 5).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the heroine of Tamil *kuṇṇi-tiṇai* love-poetry (describing premarital meetings) is in some subtle way associated with food. It is remarkable that when she reaches puberty, a girl is defined in Tamil with the verb *camaital*, whose transitive form *camaittal* means 'to cook'. B. Beck explains this fact in terms of the main theme of her article (cooling-heating processes): coming of age means that a girl is in a heated condition.<sup>12</sup> But it also means that she is ripe for sexual relations and marriage, or, in terms of the present article, for 'being eaten'.

There are certain indications in *kuṇṇi* poems that the heroine is associated with *tiṇai*, a mountain millet, one of the main food-products of the tribe of mountain-hunters (*kuṇṇavar*). This association is worked out first of all on a vegetative level: girls who have just reached puberty are sent to guard the field of ripening millet (the situation that should stimulate fertility energy on both sides). At the same time, food overtones in the association were obvious for poets, and they used them to construct poetical images with an inner meaning (or 'inner comparison'), as in Naṅ. 98, which contains a verbal picture of a boar trying to enter the millet-field to feast itself on the fresh ears. In the poetic system of *akam* poetry the boar is a symbol of the hero who wants to enjoy the girl's virgin beauty.<sup>13</sup>

A further important semantic property of food should be named: in some poetic contexts food symbolizes the unity of lovers in a family way, their happiness, and how they care for each other. It is true, however, that poets usually

11. See also: Kuru. 236, 6; 384, 3; Naṅ. 15, 4; Aka. 320, 13.

12. Beck 1969, 562.

13. This poem was translated and analysed in Dubyanskiy 2013, 68.

present idyllic scenes drawing pictures of animals and birds, but, again, these pictures always symbolize human relations: *aṇṇal iralai ceṇṇiyalaip pataviṇ ceṇkol meṅkural maṇṇiyāṭu maruṇkiṇ maṭappiṇai yarutti* ‘a handsome stag is feeding its simpleton pair with a lamb at its side, with bunches of soft [millet] with red stalks’ (Aka. 34, 4-7); *piṭṭipaci kaḷaiya peruṇkai vēlam meṇṇiṇai yāam poḷikkum* ‘the elephant with a big trunk splits soft branches of the yam-tree to quench the hunger of its mate’ (Kuru. 37, 2-3).

The descriptions and examples given herewith do not exhaust all the possible semantics of food and images connected with food that are found in Tamil poetry. But they do give us a clear-cut notion of its importance and of the many ways of its poetical usage.



*Puraṇāpūru*, mūlamum paḷaiya uraiyum, makāmakōpāttiyāya tākṣiṇātyakalāniti  
 ṭāktar u vē cāminātaiyaravarkaḷ (patippācīriyar), ṭāktar u ve cāminātaiyar  
 nūṇilaiyam, ceṇṇai 1971.

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