

History and Imagination

Tamil Culture in the Global Context

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Tilling the Terrain of the Heart

Consider the seventh chapter of the tenth-grade Tamil language textbook issued by the Government of Tamil Nadu in the year 2000.² The chapter, entitled “Anna, the Peak of Culture,” pays homage to C N Annadurai: playwright, poet, former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, and leading figure in the development of a Dravidian politics in the state. The pages laud his virtuous deeds as illustrations of the ethics of selfhood extolled in early Tamil texts such as the *Tirukkural* and *Purananuru*. The chapter presents a single likeness in order to explicate the excellence of this way of life—

We say “cultivation” [*panpatutta*] for a maturation effected in the same way that land is ploughed, leveled, watered and sown. If the heart-that-is-land [*manamakiya nilam*] of the people is cultivated, “culture” [*panpaatu*] grows. In English, *cultivation* was first, *culture* came after. As the impurities in the hearts of people vanish and as rarer qualities accumulate, in the cultivated state in which people live as people, “quality” [*panpu*] shines its light; culture takes shape.

If the culture of a nation can be found in the qualities of its people, author Mu. Pi. Balasubramanian argued, these qualities may be identified by a reformed or corrected state of heart, speech and deed. Here were the tracks of a movement between West and East, one which traced a course of improvement—the people as its subject, cultivation as its means, culture as its *telos* or endpoint, and tillage as its pedagogic sign.

Panpaatu is a neologism, coined by Tamil literary critic T K Chidambaranatha Mudaliar in the mid-twentieth century as a calque on the English “culture.”³ Combining two terms—*panpu* as “quality” or “good quality” and *paatu* as a “condition” brought into being—the modern noun may be taken as a state of refinement, the achievement of a “condition of good quality.”⁴ It represents culture, in other words, as a state of being cultivated, or cultivatedness. The *Tirukkural* had identified *panpu* with virtues such as kindness, courtesy, and equa-

Culture, Cultivation, and Civility in the Tamil Country

ANAND PANDIAN

In 1923, Maraimalai Adigal, founder of the Tamil Purist Movement in south India, published a text entitled *Vellalar Nakarikam* or “Vellalar Civilization,” treating the history, customs and good qualities of the caste into which he was born. Interestingly enough, Maraimalai described the virtues of the Vellalas—their refinement of feeling, their generous giving, their sympathy for the suffering of all living creatures—as the fruit of agrarian labour.¹ Vellalas have been long and widely identified as the paradigmatic caste of settled cultivators in the Tamil country of south India (Stein 1980). In their struggle to till the land, Maraimalai had argued in this particular text, they had also succeeded in cultivating within themselves an exemplary heart.

Maraimalai Adigal and other elite Vellala scholars of the early twentieth century have been rightly criticized for identifying Tamil cultural heritage with the imagined nature of a single dominant community (e.g. Venkatachalapathy 1995). But these writers have nonetheless exercised a powerful influence on Tamil cultural nationalism in the twentieth century. Moreover, texts such as this one shed light on a unique feature of this political discourse: its representation of the agrarian environment as an essential site of cultural identity and national virtue. In this paper, I consider the genealogy and reverberation of this nationalist geography. How did culture in the Tamil country of southern India come to be identified with the virtues and practices of its agrarian citizenry?

nimity. In its contemporary usage, *panpaatu* is widely used to name the distinctive values and customs of various social groups, especially the Tamils, on behalf of whose collective merit it was first proposed.

On the face of it, this coinage of a term such as *panpaatu* might appear to represent a clear debt to Anglo-German “culture” or *Kultur*. Even in English, Balasubramanian himself had argued, “cultivation” preceded “culture.” Both culture and cultivation, we may recall, stem from the Latin *cultus*, the past participial form of *colere*—to till, tend, care for.⁵ In the West, the work of cultivation has long held an important place in discourses and practices of moral pedagogy. The Roman orator Cicero famously described philosophy itself as the agrarian “culture” or cultivation of the soul (Markus 1993: 7). Christian theologians for centuries urged the heirs of Adam to restore a fallen world to perfection through the gardening of its soils (Drayton 2000). And by the late nineteenth century, European powers throughout the globe regularly sought to moralize the human beings they ruled by making rural environments into vehicles of pedagogy: be they agricultural colonies for urban paupers in France, nursery school gardens for young children in Germany, or plantations for the subjects of British colonialism in India (Crossley 1991; Herrington 1998).

But is the transposition of this Western legacy solely what is at stake in the Tamil sense of *panpaatu*? Let us return to the Tamil terms at work in this south Indian schoolbook text. *Panpatutta*—the verbal form used by Mu. Pi. Balasubramanian—is defined by the *Tamil Lexicon* as a transitive verb with the following meanings: 1) to refine, temper, or season, and 2) to prepare or make suitable for tillage, as land. What should we make of its striking resemblance to the English “cultivation”—its ability to sustain both social and agrarian senses? Have persons, soils and things alike always been subject to techniques of *panpatutta*? When and how did refinement emerge as a possibility for individuals, collectives and the landscapes they inhabited in southern India? If there are other histories at stake in terms such as these, through what forces, vectors or relationships do they come into the present?

With some of these questions in mind, I sought out Dr Balasubramanian last summer at his small apartment in the neighbourhood of

Anna Nagar in Chennai. A writer closely identified with Dravidian politics and especially the DMK, he argued that the Tamil term for culture was in no sense derivative of its English analogue. “It came first in Tamil only, and then afterward in English,” he insisted, making a familiar claim for the antiquity of the civilization on whose behalf he had spent most of his adult life writing. But when I probed into the precise means by which these legacies came to work in the present, his answers grew more interesting. The retired professor told me that he had come from an agricultural family himself, and had stood and watched while his father’s lands were being ploughed as a child. It was these experiences that suddenly became consequential in the midst of his training as a professor of Tamil literature. And most importantly, the means by which these experiences became consequential was through an accidental flash of memory. He told me the following:

When I was studying for my MA, what we call *Panpaatu* or “Culture” was a subject. Our professor would give explanations, would he not? When he was explaining, as he was describing *panpaatu* as a cultivation of the heart, just like that, one day, in a *flow*, what he said was this—”It’s that only, if we cultivate the land we call it *panpatutta*, just like that cultivating the heart is *panpaatu*.” When he said that, a *flash* came to me. He said it by chance. But when I was an MA student, when he linked these two together and spoke, I felt as though there was a relationship between that agriculture and our cultivation of our hearts. The reason for the *flash* was the class itself.

The English word or image to which Balasubramanian turned at several points as he spoke, and the one that I would like to consider more closely now, is that of the *flash*. Walter Benjamin offers the following suggestive account: “The perception of similarity is in every case bound to an instantaneous flash.” In his musings on what he describes as “the mimetic faculty,” Benjamin describes language as an archive of such similarities or correspondences between things: “the nexus of meaning of words or sentences is the bearer through which,

like a flash, similarity appears. For its production by man—like its perception by him—is in many cases, and particularly the most important, tied to its flashing up. It flits past” (Benjamin 1999).

As always, Benjamin’s own language here is dense and demands an unpacking. Relations of similarity flash up in language, the literary critic had argued. If language is the bearer of similarity, then similarity needs language in order to flash up in the present. If the flash is to be taken as that which “flits past,” then it may be understood as making a sudden or instantaneous relationship between the past and the present, between what is and what has been, between what is and what will have been. As Benjamin insists, the “time-moment” here is critical. Similarities archived in language therefore provide a supple and unpredictable means by which pasts come to matter in the present. Language works as a structure of both remembrance and resemblance.

Let us note that there is a haziness or indeterminacy to the object that Balasubramanian had named his “flash” of memory: was he referring to the sudden occurrence of a good comparison between culture and agriculture to his MA professor, the sudden recurrence of a childhood memory of watching ploughed fields to MA student Balasubramanian as he listened to this professor lecture, the sudden recurrence of this memory of a classroom experience to writer Balasubramanian as he composed his tract on the peak of culture, or the recollection of these Tamil meanings of cultivated-ness in a contemporary pedagogic environment marked by the preeminence of English? If we accept that the present may be grasped as a structure of flashing resemblances, then each and all of these relations may be recognized as simultaneously at stake.

Anthropologists today are accustomed to interpreting the invocations of “culture” multiplying worldwide as symptoms of a globalizing anthropological imagination, one infecting greater numbers of foreign places with the tainted legacies of Western cultural nationalism if not imperialism (Sahlins 1999). What I seek to do in the remainder of this paper, however, is to excavate a different terrain of “culture” or cultivated-ness in south India, one indebted to a different set of histories. In order to propose his model of a cultivated culture

in the schoolbook chapter, Balasubramanian relied largely on textual fragments drawn from Tamil moral and didactic works on the subject of *aram* or virtue. His characterization of culture as a state of cultivated-ness echoed a longstanding elaboration of the agrarian environment as a place of virtue in Tamil cultural and literary production. Flashing into the present along with colonial and other modern histories, this structure of cascading resemblances makes possible an imagination of the cultivated landscape as an essential space of moral belonging in the Tamil country.

An Agrarian Civility

Consider *Athichuti*, a collection of pithy moral principles composed by the medieval Tamil poet Auvaiyar most likely in the eleventh or twelfth centuries.⁶ The work comprises 109 items of advice to children, each expressed in no more than two or three words and each inaugurated by a distinct character of the Tamil alphabet. Arranged from *a* and *aa*, *i* and *ii* onwards, the instructions introduce both the Tamil language itself as well as a grammar for the good life. Most of these are simple and would appear neither surprising nor unfamiliar to modern readers: study from a young age, do not leave aside good friends, bathe each Saturday, do not divulge secrets, enjoy giving, do not enjoy theft, care for your mother and father, do not wander about lazily, and so on. Amid these many commands, however, is one that is much more specific and distinctive in the kind of life that it recommends—“raise rice paddy.” Like a few other similar injunctions in the text—“eat by ploughing the land,” for example—this is a recommendation made bluntly and without elaboration, its virtuous quality resting on a presumption of commonsensical truth.

In the early eighteenth century, Tamil pandits in Tanjore were reportedly asking south Indian schoolboys to memorize the principles of *Athichuti* at the very outset of their education.⁷ The works of Auvaiyar remain a central element of elementary Tamil instruction in postcolonial Tamil Nadu, inculcated in official language textbooks today from the first grade onward. There are of course complicated questions surrounding the genealogy of moral discourses such as

these in modern south India: their profound recuperation and reformulation, for example, by twentieth-century Dravidian ideologues writing in the wake of colonial power (Blackburn 2000; Ramaswamy 1997). What I want to stress now, however, is that in didactic works such as these, Auvaiyar herself had echoed a long tradition of Tamil moral verse depicting the act of cultivation itself as an essentially virtuous endeavour.

“Only those who live by eating what they plough do live—all others follow behind begging to eat,” one couplet from the sixth-century *Tirukkural* proclaimed (no. 1033). The verse was one among ten in the *Kural* celebrating the proper exercise of the plough or *uzavu*. The *Kural* was one of the “Eighteen Minor Works”—a canon of Tamil works in verse likely composed between the sixth and eighth centuries AD. Betraying a strong Jain and Buddhist influence, these texts were largely concerned with the subject of *aram* or virtuous conduct (Cutler 1992). The moralizing couplets of the *Kural* represent one of the most durable elements of Tamil literary heritage. It is therefore not surprising that Auvaiyar had presented an echo of such language—eat by ploughing the land—in her own medieval collection of maxims. As one medieval commentator on the *Kural* had suggested, this particular verse was meant to distinguish between a life truly lived and a mere existence defined by nothing more than the “growing [of one’s] stomach.”⁸

What exactly was praiseworthy about an agrarian life? “One called a Vellalan will not eat while guests go hungry,” observes one verse in the *Tirikatukam*, another seventh-century collection of moral verses (no. 12). Another verse (no. 42) here named three qualities desirable or appropriate for *velan kuti* or agrarian citizens—avoiding the fruits of gambling, maintaining a fearful distance from Brahmins, and enjoying work with the plough. The earliest uses of *velanmai* itself in Tamil literature—understood today to mean the actual work of “agriculture” in a literal fashion—conveyed a sense of beneficence and liberality rather than agrarian cultivation as such (Ludden 1996: 48). As late as the ninth century, the Tamil glossary *Tivaakaram* identified *velanmai* with two virtues of a distinctly civil nature—*upakaram* and *upacaram*, which might best be understood as hospitality and courtesy.

Such texts explicitly praised cultivators as a class of essentially good people, but they also turned to agrarian practice as an allegory of virtuous conduct, and the cultivated landscape as an emblem of moral order. Take, for example, the *Nalatiyar*, one of the most prominent of the Eighteen Minor Works. Among its four hundred verses are ones suggesting that the virtuous retain their character even in bad company, like the sweetness of a plantain fruit ripening under bitter neem leaves; that those who live on nothing more than handouts will perish, like paddy watered by a meager irrigation tank; that the small win protection through their friendship with the great, like the grass that rings a tree trunk beyond the reach of a ploughblade; that the words of a poor man go unheeded, like a plough scratching the surface of dry soil; that the disposition of a son will follow that of his father, like the shoot of good paddy yielding the same grain with which it was planted.⁹ Claims such as these—clothed in the language of metaphor, simile and allegory—present virtue in the form of ecology, employing the agrarian environment as a didactic instrument of moral pedagogy.

Early Tamil works on virtue used such language in order to draw distinctions between higher and lower forms of personal conduct and social life—between the great and the small, the noble and ignoble, the learned and unlearned, and indeed, the civilized and savage (Gauthaman 1997). In this, they were little different from Sanskrit treatises on dharma or Western philosophies of virtue. In the making of such typological opposites, however, there is also one critical difference that must be emphasized: early Tamil literature did not identify incivility, vulgarity or baseness with rusticity as such. Unlike classical Sanskrit works—in which the urban and courtly civility of the *nagarika* was often opposed to the unrefined coarseness of the rural *gramya* (Ali 2004: 67–8)—classical and medieval Tamil texts did not depict rural life as the antithesis of cultured existence (Ramanujan 2000: 71).¹⁰ Sharp moral distinctions were drawn here as elsewhere between higher and lower classes of people. However, these distinctions were made not by opposing country folk to those of the city, but rather by opposing the denizens of contrary forms of agrarian, pastoral and uncultivated landscape.

The nature of such distinctions is illustrated in one of the verses from *Pazamozi Nanuru* or “Four Hundred Proverbs,” dating back to the seventh or eighth century AD. Each of these verses presents an interpretation of a proverb, delivered in the form of a lesson to a young man or woman. One particular verse (no. 166) seeks to explain the proverbial truth that “the quail’s heart belongs to the fields.” The saying is elucidated by means of the following striking comparison—

Indiscriminate sinners living out in the wilds [kaatu]
will not submit even settled in the country [naatu]—daily
raised by hand and let free, the quail’s
heart belongs to the fields.¹¹

The proverb lends a natural metaphor for the stubborn limits of any form of upbringing: a quail, raised however carefully, will always long for and tend toward the fields of its origin. The poem conveys the necessity of this truth, however, by drawing an implicit comparison with the immoral nature of those living beyond the ambit of the settled countryside—beings whose own refinement is a tenuous endeavour at best. Both terms of the comparison evoke a trajectory of development—both the possibility and the failure of a more cultivated way of life.

The crucial distinction at work in this verse is one that opposes *naatu* to *kaatu*—the life of the cultivated country counterpoised to the life of the forests, thickets, and other untilled tracts on its periphery. By early medieval times, cultivated lowlands in the Tamil country had consolidated into local agrarian territories known as *naatu* (Stein 1980: 90–140). Vellalas and other dominant cultivating communities directed the settlement, development and tillage of new lands on the periphery of cultivated tracts. They sought legitimacy for such authority by affiliating themselves with kings and chieftains, and patronizing religious mendicants, scholars, and temples. *Kaatu* came to stand for the wild and unruly peripheries beyond the pale of these agrarian territories: tended and inhabited by hunters, grazers and marginal cultivators who were assimilated only with great difficulty into the orbit of the lowland social and political order (Ludden 1996:

60–1). To this day the *kaatu* of the Tamil country retains the sense of a dangerous and troubling margin cultivated only tenuously.

The antagonism between *naatu* and *kaatu* presents a south Indian variation on the broader theme of country against city—a distinction pointing here toward an agrarian civilization with its own norms of civility. This was a cultural formation that slowly consolidated in the Tamil country over the course of many centuries, beginning in the latter part of the first millennium AD. Burton Stein (1980: 67) has described this preeminence of cultivators as one of the most significant features of early south Indian history: “It was a condition which was to endure for a millennium and contributed to the identity of one of the most durable peasant culture areas in history.” His language of a durable “culture area” may seem anachronistic from the standpoint of contemporary anthropological efforts to put ties between culture and place into question (e.g. Gupta and Ferguson 1997). To his credit, however, one might argue that Stein sought through such language to account for the historical conditions under which dominant cultivators, and the agrarian activity with which they were identified, attained a certain kind of cultural hegemony in south India.

These dimensions of medieval history provide one means of interpreting the prominence of agrarian motifs in the texts of the early Tamil moral canon. Such works began to proliferate in the sixth and seventh centuries. Most were therefore composed in a period of intense strife between rival religious sects and traditions, struggles that would continue in the Tamil country well into the twelfth century (Davis 1998). Literary historians have identified strains of Jain, Saiva and Vaishnava theology and philosophy in these works to varying degrees.¹² It appears highly plausible to suggest that such truths were presented in agrarian terms by many of these verses as a means of appealing to both patrons and followers in the countryside. Religious sects in early medieval India depended as much on the patronage and support of peasant cultivators as they did on kings, warriors and merchants. Agrarian idioms of virtue would have provided one powerful means of winning the allegiance of these cultivators, translating moral sentiment into the terms of daily life. The reliance of “Four Hundred Proverbs” on utterances that were already under-

stood—or already identifiable—as proverbial is highly significant in this regard.

The purpose of the Tamil moral canon was didactic, and its success in these terms may be judged by the enduring influence of its formulations. Tamil literature has alluded to or quoted verbatim verses from the *Tirukkural* nearly continuously from the time of its composition.¹³ *Nalatiyar* was described by G U Pope in the late nineteenth century as the Vellalar Veedam—“The Bible of the Cultivators of the soil.” And among the medieval moralists of later centuries, Auvaiyar was probably the most memorable. The authors of one twentieth-century Tamil literary history go as far as to suggest that “perhaps, no day passes without a Tamilian’s hearing or repeating, quite unawares, some profound and poignant reflection or other, of the People’s Poetess, on life” (Jesudasan and Jesudasan 1961). Although the hyperbole in this last speculation demands caution, I was struck myself by the extent to which my rural interlocutors in the midst of ethnographic fieldwork in the Cumbum Valley echoed the idioms and images of Auvaiyar’s various verses, without ever citing her by name. These elements from the past remain in the service of the present.

Agrarian similes for virtue appear in Tamil cultural tradition as nodes of intersection between literary form, pedagogic purpose and popular knowledge. They circulate in contemporary moral discourse as proverbs and maxims, “old sayings” and folk verities, stripped of their historical referents and carrying with them nothing more than the concrete scenes of agrarian livelihood they invoke. This reverberating archive of language, image, and experience betrays the traces of what I would describe as an agrarian civility: a way of imagining the refinement of self and conduct in relation to the historical experience and exemplary status of the cultivating citizenry. These idioms of moral development convey a sense that there is something intrinsically virtuous about the practice of agriculture, the tools by means of which it is exercised, and the people who wield these tools. They suggest that the space of the cultivated landscape be taken as an essential setting for the “civilizing process” in south India, to be credited with the same importance that Norbert Elias (1994) and others have lent the courts, towns, and monasteries of Europe.

What I propose under the rubric of agrarian civility is not an argument for Tamil “culture” in the conventional sense of a stable and coherent symbolic order. I gesture instead toward a language of power, an authoritative and persuasive means of representing civilization itself in agricultural terms, one that casts the refinement of conduct as an organic process aided by spade, plough, and sickle. At work here is an imagination of improvement arrayed along a developmental trajectory, reaching from the most savage inhabitant of savage tracts toward the civil cultivator of the most civilized terrain. Modern nationalist texts such as the one I have discussed deliberately recuperate these legacies in the service of cultural pedagogy. But images and idioms such as these also flash up unknowingly in the everyday moral discourse and ethical projects of contemporary Tamil people. I conclude this paper with a brief ethnographic vignette in order to allude to the efficacy of such recollection.

Discourses of Agrarian Virtue

Late one October morning in 2001, I waded across the swollen river toward the vast plain of ripened paddy at the heart of the Cumbum Valley, a lush agricultural region in southern Tamil Nadu placed between the plains of Madurai and the mountains of the Western Ghats. Cloudy skies promised to trouble the ongoing rice harvest for a second consecutive day. Clambering up onto a narrow rise above the water, I spotted Virumandi Thevar with his brother Raman, handling the meagre grain that had sprouted on its own from a riverside field left fallow and untilled. Raman was sifting out straw, dirt and chaff from a small heap of grain as I approached them, while Virumandi stacked the unthreshed sheaves to protect them from an imminent rain. “Just like that,” Virumandi said gesturing toward the empty husks tumbling away from his brother’s hands, “there is also a man of chaff. Without anything, without even one thing, without wisdom.” Was he thinking of someone else, or musing perhaps on what his own life had become?

Virumandi spoke to me that morning with a sense of bemused resignation. Ties with his own family were strained and frayed. It was

on the tea stall benches of Kullappa Gounden Patti village, where he sometimes slept at night, that I had first met him a few months prior. I was instantly struck by the steady stream of quips, quotes, anecdotes, analogies, and examples with which he spoke—a treasury of ethical discourse that returned so often to the experience of the toiling cultivator: useless people to be winnowed out from a life like chaff, advice to be dispensed to one's sons with the careful measure of irrigating water, discourse to be sought out only with those of good character just as a farmer searched for the best of lands on which to sow seeds. The last of these suddenly emerged one evening in the village bazaar, when a drunk young man insisted that I slap him on the cheeks for some unknown indiscretion. Virumandi looked on at our exchange with a bemused smile, and invoked the example of the farmer, land, and seeds as a means of advising that I speak only with those who had spoken well themselves.

Nalla nalla nilam parttu namum vitaikkanum. He had drawn this line that evening from a popular song in the 1967 Tamil hit film *Vivasayi* or “The Farmer”:

Searching out for the best of land,
we too must sow some seeds—
in the hearts of the people of the country,
it is honesty that we must grow.

In the film, it is M G Ramachandran or “MGR”—beloved cinematic icon and future Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu—who offers this lyrical counsel to a defiantly Westernized young woman.¹⁴ From his first beaming tractor jaunt onscreen in pantsuit, beret and sunglasses, to his climactic tussle against an evil landlord scheming to poison the village crops with a backpack pesticide sprayer, MGR plays to the hilt here the heroic possibilities of the modern farmer. But as the pilot of an Agricultural Research Station, the hero also undertakes projects of a markedly ethical nature: inculcating modesty in his urbane lover, compassion in his arrogant father, and dignity among the servile labourers. The dialogues and lyrics of the film entwine these moral and material projects into a unified narrative of agrarian pedagogy.

And it was advertised from the outset as a didactic enterprise in the tradition of Tamil moral literature. “Only if the farmer stands straight will the nation stand straight,” its promotional chapbook proclaims, citing the authority of the *Tirukkural*, Auvaiyar, and other Tamil texts.

Songs such as *nalla nalla nilam* echoed every now and then from the heart of the village bazaar where Virumandi and I had had this exchange that night, blaring from the loudspeakers mounted to the thatched roof of a tea stall. With every broadcast, the song projected an agrarian subject of national virtue. Each of its verses circled between an act of sowing and the growth that it promised, tracking the cultivation of virtues such as discipline, chastity, affection, and reason through the figurative fields of heart, school, family and nation. To imagine oneself as belonging to its imaginary “we,” as Virumandi did that evening, one had to identify both with these virtues and the rural environment to which they belonged.¹⁵ Moral traditions rely on the lessons of the past in order to critically engage with the demands of the present. Moralized landscapes such as these form compelling terrain for the cultivation of identity, civility, and even culture.

NOTES

1. See M S S Pandian (2006) for a lucid discussion of this text and its author.
2. My thanks to the grandson of Muthu Karuppa Thevar in Madurai for drawing this lesson—which he had read in school—to my attention.
3. I am grateful to V Arasu, A R Venkatachalapathy and Barney Bate for elucidating both the history and the usage of the term.
4. I draw these definitions from the *Tamil Lexicon*, which, as late as the printing of its fourth volume in 1931, did not include the word *panpaatu* among its entries.
5. These are the meanings attributed by the Oxford English Dictionary; Williams (1976) writes that it meant additionally to inhabit, protect and honour with worship.
6. V Arasu, personal communication.
7. As reported in a letter to Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg in 1712: “So soon

as the Child has learned his ABC. he is put to read a little Book containing wise moral Sentences, which are not then explain'd unto him, but only they teach him to read distinctly." I infer that it is indeed *Athichudi* that is described here, as the letter goes on to mention Auvaiyar's other noted works *Konraiventhan*, *Muturai* and *Nalvazhi* by name.

8. See Parithiyar's commentary in *Tirukkural Uraikkoththu* (2000). 637.

9. *Nalatiyar*, nos. 244, 191, 178, 115, and 367, respectively.

10. My thanks to George Hart and Indira Peterson for valuable exchanges on this issue.

11. In Tamil: *kaaturai vaazhkaik karuvina maakkalai / naaturaiya nalkinum nankozhukaar—naatorum / kaiyula thaaki vidinum, kurumpuuzhkku / ceyyula thaaku manam*.

12. Kamil Zvelebil (1995), for example, identifies invocations to Shiva, Balarama, Mayon and Murugan in *Inna Narpatu*, Vaisnava authorship of *Tirikatukkam* and *Nanmanikatikkai*, and Jain authorship of *Nalatiyar*, *Pazamozhi Nanuru*, and *Cirupanchamulam*.

13. Norman Cutler (1992) notes quotations from and allusions to the *Kural* in works such as *Cilappatikaram*, *Manimekalai*, and Kampan's *Ramayana*. "In Tamil culture *Tirukkural* is the quintessentially quotable text," he writes (1992). 552.

14. See Sunder Kaali (2000) on the "phallic" affirmation of the rustic in this film.

15. This paper is drawn from a larger manuscript project concerning the relation between the cultivation of the soil and the cultivation of virtue in the Tamil country of south India. The caste to which Virumandi belongs—the Piramalai Kallars—were classified as a "criminal tribe" by the colonial state in 1918 and subjected to an array of measures in social, moral, and agrarian pedagogy. The manuscript tracks multiple points of intersection between these modern interventions and the reverberating legacies of older moral discourses such as the ones that I have discussed in this paper, constituting the postcolonial self as a site of moral subjection and ethical self-reform.