

Terms and transliteration

Transliteration of technical terms

Tamil terms are transliterated according to the usage of the Tamil Lexicon, they stand in brackets after the English word. Sanskrit terms are marked with 'Skt.'. Tamil and Sanskrit words in the plural are left in the singular (following the Tamil convention), but, where the absence of a plural marker can cause ambiguity, I have added the English plural 's'.

Names of deities

There are many ways in which the name of a Tamil god or goddess can be spelled, even if there is only one way, according to the dictionary. It lies in the nature of this study to accept a deity's name as it is conceived of by the villagers; thus they spell Karuppar instead of Karuppar, Karuppaṇacāmi instead of Karuppaṇacāmi. Whenever I found the name of a deity actually written down, I followed its spelling. For the sake of clarity, however, I have always used the same form of a deity's name where there was no written record, following the most common usage of its spelling. The names of some Tamil gods or castes can end either in '-n' or '-r'; '-r' is usually considered the more polite form. Here, again, I have followed the local usage.

A problem arises with regard to deities who have equivalent Sanskrit names. Consistency would demand Tamil spelling throughout; Śiva is Civaṅ in Tamilnadu, Vīrabhadra is Vīrapattiraṅ or Vīrapatraṅ, etc. On the one hand, the names of the most illustrious of the Hindu gods are by now so familiar to even persons who do not have a specialized Hindu knowledge that it makes little sense to introduce new ways of spelling. Civaṅ can confuse the reader since the word image deviates much from Śiva. On the other hand, there is often a qualitative difference between the Tamil deity and the pan-Hindu deity: Kāḷi is not really the same as Kālī. Taking this into consideration, I generally have used the Sanskrit unless the context demanded the Tamil spelling. I have not used the Tamil spelling for Śiva, Viṣṇu, Brahmā and their consorts.

Names of places

The spelling of all villages and towns is in Tamil, that of the districts in the anglicized form. The reason is simple: anglicizing names of villages creates unclearness since vowel lengths, retroflexes etc. cannot be indicated; while this is not crucial for the large towns (everyone will understand Coimbatore even though the town is called Kōyamuttūr), it is for villages. It is different with the names of districts, here the Tamil form is likely to annoy the reader. He/she will recognize Erode, but will wonder about Īrōṭu. It should be noted that I have used the most recent names of the districts, those in use since 1997.

The language

The study is about gods and goddesses, but perhaps more so about gods. In the text deity stands for gods and goddesses together, meaning that when I use the term, it applies to both. With two exceptions the informant priests were male, hence when I speak of the priest, a 'he' is meant. The same holds for the dancer of the god, the cāmiyāṭi. Where there is a female cāmiyāṭi, I have specifically mentioned her. Both men and women come to the temple as devotees. Rather than constantly having to say 'he/she', I am using sometimes 'he' and sometimes 'she'. The context will make it clear where only 'he' or only 'she' is meant. Instead of calling the former 'Untouchables' Harijans, Scheduled Castes, Adi Dravidas or Adivasis, I use the now more accepted term 'Dalits'. When I speak of Dalit castes, I mean the Paḷḷar, Paraiyar and Cakkiliyar.

Informants generally counted distance and height in feet (aṭi), while I am more used to the metric system. If in the text feet and meter appear side by side, it may be excused. My own approximate appraisals will be in meters (as in the height of a statue), but where I follow informants' information I have left the measurement in feet.