REFLECTIONS OF HINDU MYTHOLOGY IN TAMIL FOLKTALES

Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi
Naples

Mythology is one of the most popular subjects of study in several branches of the humanities. Convinced that it can give information on a people's culture and way of thinking, Prof. Parpola has thoroughly perused Hindu mythology in order to find clues for the decipherment of the Indus script, as well as for the understanding of iconographic details on seals and other items unearthed. Of course, not only scholars but also ordinary persons continue to be fascinated by the myths of their culture, as can be seen in modern Tamil metaphors and similes (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1995: 109–132), as well as in written literature and orally transmitted folktales. Although all the instances given below come from Tamil culture, they undoubtedly have parallels in other parts of India. In the following, I shall divide this selection of tales on mythic themes into three groups:

1. motifs known from well-known myths put into different narrative contexts;
2. folktales about well-known deities different from their classical myths;
3. folktales clearly inspired by well-known myths but expressing the themes in modern guise and introducing other changes characteristic of their genre.

1. MYTHIC MOTIFS IN FOLKTALES

Orally transmitted tales do not remain stable in retelling, as has been experimentally demonstrated by Bartlett decades ago (Bartlett 1967: 126; Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1987: xxiii). Contrary to proponents of the *Wandersage*, modern students of myths and folktales have begun to realize this fact. However, certain motifs and even clusters of motifs somehow captivate people's minds, so that they remain surprisingly stable. The ones which remain stable cannot normally be predicted but only found out *post hoc*. The situation recalls etymology. Although nothing remains absolutely stable in the history of a language, some words change little for thousands

of years. Even in its Tamilized form the term *vārttai* of Sanskrit origin, for instance, can be recognized as the English *word* and the German *Wort* thus pointing to a genetic relationship between Sanskrit and other Indo-European languages.

The disastrous effect of Śiva's third eye has similar persistence. Since supernumerary organs are universal folklore motifs, one cannot say that they belong by right to one particular tale. However, if such a cross-cultural motif has become part of a tale popular in a given region, its salience increases. If then the motif appears in other narrative contexts of the same region, the popular tale may be considered its source. Śiva's third fiery eye has repeatedly inspired modern writers to create similes (e.g. Putumaippittan 1962: 52) and whole stories (e.g. Ramamirtham 1964) while always keeping in mind its divine owner. A folk narrator (Murukanandam 1991c: 100–101) chooses to disregard not only its Śaiva context but even its fieriness and supernumeracy, concentrating only on its dangerous quality. It is not, however, the dangerous effect of the glance, as in evil eye beliefs, which he has in mind, but clearly Śiva's fiery eye, since it is the light coming from a demon's eye that causes disaster. Through this light the demon in pig guise transforms seven brothers, who chased him away from their rice grains, into stone statues. Although a cross-cultural motif, in Indian lore the transformation into stone recalls Ahalyā's fate in the *Rāmāyaṇa* upon being cursed by her cuckolded husband Gautama. The fact that the episode is an echo of the Ahalyā story is confirmed by the sequence of the tale. The eighth brother learns through a trick that his siblings can be revived if the pig's blood falls on the statues. This detail recalls Gautama, who, relenting his curse, promised that Ahalyā would come to life again when the dust from Rāma's feet would fall on her statue.

In the *sthalapurāṇa* of Mīnākṣi temple, Madurai (Panchanatham Pillai 1970: 99–100), it was predicted that Princess Mīnākṣiyamman's third breast would disappear on her marriage to Śiva, which it did. The motif of a supernumerary organ disappearing on marriage has inspired another folk narrator to create a tale about three sisters endowed with one, two and three eyes respectively. The moment a prince expressed his desire to marry the three-eyed one her extra eye disappeared (Rajanarayanan & Selvaraj 1993: 162).

Śiva's third eye in the middle of his forehead (Ta. *neṟṟikkaṇ*), and that of the long unfortunate three-eyed girl in the folktale, had negative connotations. The red dot in the middle of a woman's forehead, though it may remind one of Śiva's third eye through its place and colour, is a wholly positive ornament adding to her beauty and denoting her auspicious non-widowed status (either unmarried or married with a living husband). Stressing its auspiciousness, a Tamil blessing for a married woman is 'may you live long wearing flowers and the red dot' (*pūvum poṭṭumāka*), i.e. not become a drab-looking widow. A Tamil folktale makes the red dot (*poṭṭu*) on the forehead more than auspicious. It is worn by a cruel but devout demon who

sacrifices all first-borns to the goddess Kālī. A courageous designated victim, however, learns from his family deity that, if he erases the *poṭṭu*, the demon's size will shrink. With him thus reduced to helplessness, the youth can kill him, saving himself and other victims. (Rajanarayanan & Selvaraj 1993: 130–132.)

A deity desiring the sacrifice of first born children is a cross-cultural motif. In the Indian context it has, for instance, a parallel in King Hariścandra's vow to sacrifice his first-born son to the god Varuṇa in order to obtain the boon of sons. The son to be sacrificed at the age of sixteen – a favourite Indian number apparently already in the Indus Civilization – was called Rohita ('red'). Rohita was associated with both the rising red sun and the Vedic war-god Rudra whose name may have also originally meant 'red' (Parpola 1992: 229). Of course, unlike the youth in the folktale, Rohita could not kill the god who desired his blood, so he bought a human substitute victim.

I cannot think of a classical myth about the red dot. However, its pan-Indian use and great cultural importance (in the Tamil language *tilakam*, the Tamilized Sanskrit word for *poṭṭu*, refers to a person of excellence) makes it likely that it has been applied to the forehead for a very long time. Prof. Parpola persuasively argues that the Indus fish sign with a dot inside should be read as *poṭṭu mīṉ*, the Tamil name for the red rohita fish and the red morning star Rohiṇī (Aldebaran). The further association of the dotted fish sign with a war-like goddess such as Durgā (Parpola 1992: 231–233) does not seem far-fetched.

One of the best-known events in Kṛṣṇa's boisterous youth is his stealing of the *gopīs'* clothes while they were bathing in the Yamunā river. Modern Hindus have repeatedly placed this motif in both humorous and non-humorous contexts. Some decades ago during a drought a cartoon published in the Tamil magazine *Kalki* (No. 8.6, p. 62) showed Kṛṣṇa with a long face sitting on the branch of a tree overhanging a dry river bed. Asked by the *gopīs* why he was sad, he replied that if the river had not gone dry they would have bathed and he could have stolen their clothes. A Tamil folktale also speaks of clothes stolen during a drought but without any humorous intent. During a severe drought all tanks dried up except one on which people relied for their daily needs. The king learnt that water remained in this particular tank because a heavenly maiden used to come to bathe in it. (This motif recalls the legend of the Vaiṣṇava saint Tirumaṅkai Ālvār, in which the heavenly maiden, his future wife, bathed in an earthly tank (Vaidyanathan 1987: 115)). – The king not only secretly watched the maiden but also stole her clothes. The moment she noticed the theft, however, she disappeared and so did the water in the tank. Only after severe austerities did the king obtain her forgiveness and induce her to make the water return for the benefit of his people. (Rajanarayanan 1992a: 95–100.)

Even though anklets used to be worn also by male warriors, their primary association is with woman, perhaps because the 5th-century epic (Zvelebil 1973:

175) 'The lay of the anklet' (*Cilappatikāram*) has rendered them an emblematic female ornament in the minds of the Tamils. In a touching folktale, a girl separated by her parents from the cross-cousin whom she hoped to marry gave one of her anklets to an old man and go-between. The old man handed the anklet to the youth whom the girl loved and also told him where she now lived. He went there and asked for her hand in marriage, but was driven away by her upstart parents. Undeterred he walked around her house at night making her anklet tinkle. Recognizing its sound, she came out and eloped with him. (Rajanarayanan & Bharata Devi 1995: 137–142.)

2. FOLKTALES ABOUT HINDU DEITIES

Given the likely importance of astronomy in the Indus Valley Civilization, Prof. Parpola has frequently relied on astral myths for his decipherments. Among the most widely accepted readings of the Indus script are the fish sign with a circumflex or roof as *mai mīn* 'black star', the ancient Tamil name for Sani or Saturn (Parpola 1990: 280) and the fish sign accompanied by six strokes as *aru mīn* 'six stars', the Tamil name of the Pleiades. There can also be hardly any doubt that six women in a row represent the Pleiades conceived as the Kṛttikā mothers (Parpola 1992: 228), who, according to a pan-Indian myth, nursed Śiva's second son, the six-headed god Murukan or Kārttikēyan.

Numerous folktales speak of deities sometimes incidentally, sometimes making them the centre of plots. For the purpose of this study I shall limit myself to a selection of tales on astral deities belonging to the Nine Planets (*navagraha*), which are believed to be a native Indian (Parpola 1989: 6) – hence likely Dravidian – grouping, as well as to some other Aryan and Dravidian gods.

Two aetiological tales speak of the sun and the moon in a wedding context. The sun and the moon are brothers who attended a wedding. However, only the moon thought of taking some of the delicacies of the wedding meal home to his mother. She ate them "cooling" her mind, i.e. with pleasure (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1983: 208–209). Then, seeing that the sun had brought her nothing, she cursed him henceforth to burn like her [still] hungry stomach (a burning stomach is a metaphor for both hunger and anger). The moon she, conversely, blessed to be always cool. (Murukanandam 1991a: 70.)

Another folktale explains the phases of the moon as the consequence of a curse. Śiva told the moon, who used to be full the whole month, to shine at a celestial ceremony, but, since the moon had already promised to brighten a king's wedding taking place the same night, he dared to ask Śiva to put off his ceremony. Angry at this act of insubordination, Śiva cursed the moon henceforth to wax and wane. (Rajanarayanan 1992a: 122–124.)

In a further astral folktale, Śiva, rather than cursing, admitted having made an error. A princess gave birth to a basketful of eggs. The king ordered the eggs to be crushed on a washerman's stone in a river, but two eggs escaped and developed into a red and a black snake. When the princess wanted to take a bath in the river, the two snakes prevented her from doing so in punishment for having had their siblings killed. Seeing her despair, Śiva intervened and explained to the snakes that she was not to blame. It was his error to have her made give birth to snake's eggs. In compensation for the trouble he had given them, the snakes asked Śiva for the boon that they may periodically hide the sun and the moon. Their request having been granted, the snakes are now known as Rāhu and Ketu, the ascending and descending nodes of the moon, two of the Nine Planets. (Murukanandam 1991a: 106–107.) The association of these astral deities with Śiva is not accidental in the folktale, since the *navagraha* statues are found only in Śaiva temples.

A mental tendency makes us see dimness and slowness as negative qualities. Probably for this reason, the dim and slowly moving god Sani is considered dangerous. Despite the hierarchical superiority of the sun-god, who occupies the centre of the *navagrahas* arranged in a square, Sani seems to be worshipped most, not only in regular *pūjās* but also by individual devotees for apotropaic purposes. One of his favourite offerings is black sesame grains in accordance with his black image (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1977: 550–551). In folktales, when Sani possesses a person he is in serious trouble. Even magic arts become temporarily useless.

A prince had learnt all types of magic arts like riding a white flying horse and opening a locked temple door with his song – an episode reminiscent of one of the feats performed by the Śaiva saint Nāvukkaracar (Pulavar Arasu 1979: 158–160). Since the king had promised to give his daughter to the person who would be able to open the door that had so far resisted all other suitors' attempts, he was allowed to marry the princess. After the wedding, the princess took off her jewels to bathe in a tank. At that moment two stone statues of swans adorning the steps of the tank came to life and swallowed the jewels without her noticing it. The prince, who had accidentally watched the scene, told her what had happened. She did not believe him but accused him, who had come as an unknown stranger, of being the thief. The king condemned him to the forced labour of pulling an oil press. After seven and a half years, the period an astrologer had foretold that Sani would possess the prince, the two swans spat out the jewels in front of the princess. She begged his forgiveness, had him released and then flew off with him on a white horse to his native country. (Murukanandam 1991c: 83–85.)

It is generally agreed that Indra and Varuṇa are Aryan deities. Prof. Parpola believes that Varuṇa might have been the god of the Dāsas, an earlier wave of Aryans. He has proposed that

in order to secure the loyalty of their newly won Dāsa subjects, early Aryan kings made a compromise and adopted the cult of Varuṇa, the principal god of their former enemies (Parpola 1993: 53).

This compromise would imply a period of competition between the two deities. A Tamil folktale presents such a competition in an indirect way. Indra had told farmers not to sow because there would be no rain that year. One farmer, however, did sow after having worshipped a frog. Through its croaking the frog attracted Varuṇa, who made it rain, thus belying Indra and giving the clever farmer a bumper crop. (Murukanandam 1991b: 64–65.)

In myths all over the world important gods are almost never born in the natural way. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that in both myths and folktales supernatural events mark the birth of Pārvatī's two children, Gaṇeśa (Piḷḷaiyār in Tamil) and Murukaṉ. The events in folktales, however, differ widely from those described in classical myths. Although beheading is non exceptional in folktales – we shall see one instance below – a folk narrator explaining Gaṇeśa's birth dispenses with beheading and reheading. Since Pārvatī expressed delight at the picture of an elephant in her heavenly Kailāsa palace, Śiva granted her an elephant-headed child that jumped out of a picture holding on to the end of her saree (Valam 1992: 38–39).

A folk version of Murukaṉ's birth mixes elements from two well-known classical myths. During a dancing contest between Śiva and Kālī, in which the goddess was defeated, six sparks from Śiva's anklets fell into a pond and developed into six children. Moved by their cries, the Kārttikai mothers embraced them, thus joining them into one child with six heads and twelve arms. They took care, however, to declare that the boy was Īśvaraṉ's and Īśvari's child. (Rajanarayanan & Selvaraj 1993: 94.)

This folk version does without the sexual motif of the classical myth of Muru-kaṉ's birth and even indirectly denies it. In the classical myth of the dancing contest, in fact, Kālī was defeated because she could not lift her leg as high as her consort Śiva for decency's sake. The folktale is also interesting because it brings in anklets. Worn by Śiva, they cause the birth of Murukaṉ. Basing himself on the rebus principle, Prof. Parpola has proposed to read two intersecting circles as Tamil *muruku* meaning 'ring', 'young man' and the Tamil god, with cognates in other South and Central Dravidian languages. He has therefore suggested that these intersecting circles may be one of Murukaṉ's names in the Indus inscriptions (Parpola 1990: 270). Since both men and women used to wear anklets and ear-rings, the inter-secting rings may refer to either.

In the dancing contest Kālī was defeated, but on her own she is a fearful goddess, who may still be propitiated with animal sacrifice and demanded human sacrifice at least until the first part of the 20th century. In a folktale reflecting

modern reformed Hinduism a king announced that he who would make a human sacrifice would obtain half of the coins found in seven pots in a Kālī temple. A poor beggar and his wife, unable to feed their seven children, decided to sacrifice their five-year-old girl Gāyatrī. Before being sacrificed the child asked the goddess: "If the parents hate their child, the king must protect it. If he does not do so, the deity, who loves all living beings alike, must help, but if that deity desires its sacrifice, to whom should one complain?" Hearing the wise child's words, Kālī's heart of stone melted and she became a motherly woman. She no longer demanded the child's blood but compensated it richly. The king also changed his heart and henceforth ruled with generosity and compassion. (Murukanandam 1991d: 39–40.)

The wise child who teaches adults is a cross-cultural motif (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1983: 85–88) known, for instance, from the Bible where Jesus taught the Pharisees. In the Tamil context, however, it echoes the myth of the child Murukaṉ teaching his father Śiva the meaning of *Oṃ* while sitting on his lap.

3. FOLKTALES INSPIRED BY CLASSICAL MYTHS

In the preceding section I cited folktales about Hindu deities with or without echoes of classical myths. The folk narrator, however, may also create tales that are clearly versions of classical myths, even though they do not mention divine names and bring the events closer to his listeners' everyday life.

Undoubtedly, Ilaṅkō Aṭikaḷ did not invent the whole plot of his epic *Cilappati-kāram*, but he imbued pre-existing tales with great tradition values. Even after he thus codified the epic, however, oral versions have continued to flourish. One such version entitled *Chandra's Vengeance*, reported by Parthasarathy (1993: 321–326), makes numerous changes in accordance with motifs common in South Indian folklore.

Firstly, the triangle of husband, wife and lover is foreshadowed by three child-less women: a banker's wife, a queen and a nautchgirl each give birth to a child after having eaten different parts of a magic mango. The events are set in a more recent period than the classical epics, when taking dancing girls as concubines was no longer an accepted practice. Therefore, the husband, here called Koila, was forced to marry the nautchgirl's daughter Moulee because the garland she threw fell on his neck. Koila was already married to Chandra, the queen's daughter. As a child Chandra had been put inside a golden casket floating down a river because a Brahmin had foretold that she would burn and destroy the country. The casket was retrieved by the banker, who raised the girl together with his own son and married the two in childhood. In order to forget his wife, Koila was given a powerful drink. When Moulee's mother wanted him to pay for his upkeep – *devadāsīs'* mothers are usually presented as money-grabbing hags – he asked for one of Chandra's anklets.

As in the classical epic, the jeweller accused Koila of theft, but not because he stole the anklet. It had, instead, been carried away by an eagle to revenge itself on the jeweller for having destroyed its nest and killed its young. The queen recognized the anklet as that of her daughter, locked it up and pleaded for the case to be examined, but the king refused to do so. Koila avoided shameful execution by letting himself fall on his sword, thus cutting his body in two. When Chandra accused the king of murder, the locked-up anklet came rolling to the queen's feet. Fire rose from Chandra's hair, and burnt the city. In burning Madurai she did not spare Brahmins and cows, as in the epic, but the outcaste colony. She did not tear off her breast but tore out the jeweller's heart and offered it to the eagle. She then magically sewed her husband's body together and asked Śiva to restore his life, which he did.

The detail of Chandra's fury sparing only the outcaste colony suggests a fairly recent origin of this folk version. It was, in fact, told at the beginning of the 19th century, as Parthasarathy reports.

Another folktale that recalls a well-known episode of the *Mahābhārata* is set in vaguely medieval times when kings still ruled the country. While bathing, a renowned teacher, who counted princes and ministers' sons among his pupils, was carried away by a flood. A cowherd, who had long wanted to study but could not afford it, offered to save the teacher if he promised to become his guru. Hearing this request from a boy in whose family nobody had studied, the teacher preferred to be carried away by the river. Rajanarayanan and Selvaraj (1993: 252–253), who had the tale gathered, note that this story recalls the Karṇa-Paraśurāma episode in the *Mahābhārata*. In this episode, the low-ranking pupil was punished for having learnt what society had forbidden him to know. On finding out that his pupil Karṇa had lied to him when presenting himself as a Brahmin, Paraśurāma cursed him not to remember the life-saving mantra in the fated moment (Rajagopalachari 1968: 48). Somewhat mitigating the events of this tale, the folk narrator does not punish the willing student but makes the teacher sacrifice himself for an ideal difficult to understand in modern times. He does not make the cowherd simply a marginalized low-caste man but a morally reprehensible person devoid of elementary human kindness, whom the teacher might have thought unworthy of becoming his pupil for this reason too.

In the Karṇa-Paraśurāma episode of the *Mahābhārata*, modern Hindus would consider Paraśurāma the villain. In another of his myths, however, he shows the positive trait of filial obedience, though again exceeding its acceptable limits according to modern sensibility. In a folktale patently inspired by this Paraśurāma myth but doing without names, the father asks his eldest son to behead his mother, whom he suspects of having betrayed him, since she has lost her power of carrying water in a pot of unbaked clay. The eldest son refuses, recalling the Tamil saying "There is no greater temple than a mother". The younger son agrees to do so on condition

that his father grants him two boons. Just as in the classical myth, the first boon he requests is to revive his mother. As his second boon, however, he desires that henceforth his father, mother and the whole family should live in harmony (Murukanandam 1991d: 107–108).

One of the most famous side-stories in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is that of Ahalyā. It must have disturbed Kampaṉ so deeply that he changed Vālmīki's words in accordance with the Tamil value of a wife's absolute faithfulness to her husband. Unlike Vālmīki's Ahalyā, Kampaṉ's heroine is duped by Indra and thus does not consciously commit adultery. Modern Tamil literary versions follow Kampaṉ's lead (Putumaippittan 1977: 183–199; Akilan 1974: 90–104) and so does a folktale. Even though it again mentions no names, it undoubtedly presents an elaborate version of Kampaṉ's Ahalyā story. Dispensing with supernatural characters and transformations, it expresses the villagers' worldview.

Two brothers resemble each other as if they were twins. The younger, still unmarried brother, and the elder married man live in the same house. When heavy rain prevents the latter from returning home from the fields, his brother takes advantage of the occasion and embraces his sister-in-law who, half asleep, does not recognize him. On her husband's return she discovers that she has been duped, cries bitterly and thinks of suicide. Then, however, she decides not to tell her husband. When her brother-in-law attempts again to seduce her, she beats him away with a broom. She also prays to Mariyammaṉ that he should remain without offspring – a typical curse in both real life (Ramamirtham 1984: 24–25) and fiction (Ramamirtham 1965: 130). Her curse comes true: after seven years of marriage he is still without offspring. In despair he takes the vow of thrusting a spear into his side, but she tells him that he will do so in vain because of her curse. Several more years pass before he finally becomes wise. Prostrating himself at her feet he asks forgiveness for his youthful prank. She now feels pity for him. Taking part in a fire-walking ceremony, she succeeds in retracting her curse, after which the desired son is born to her repentant brother-in-law. (Rajanarayanan 1992b: 89–92.)

4. DISCUSSION

There is continuous cross-fertilization between written and oral traditions. A learned pandit's idea contained in a written text may filter down to the popular level and be reformulated or an illiterate villager's idea may be elaborated by the learned and, in this new vest, return to the popular level to be again reformulated. Thus there cannot be any clear-cut distinction between written and oral, learned and folk literatures, but some motifs in folktales reflecting Hindu mythology are nevertheless more typical of folk narrative than of classical myths. Such folk motifs may be cross-cultural, uniquely Indian or cross-cultural with an Indian culture-specific twist.

Riding a flying horse and drinking a magic potion that obliterates memory are folk-lore motifs of the world. Being abandoned in a basket floating in water we also know, for instance, from the myths of Moses as well as Romulus and Remus, but in Tamil folktales, including the oral version of the *Cilappatikāram*, the container tends to be a miraculously floating golden casket. While in the real-life *svayamvara* custom, the princess put a garland around the preferred suitor's neck, in Tamil folktales the garland is thrown and usually does not fall where it should. A bird revenging itself on the one who destroyed its nest is typical of Tamil folktales, as is the motif of a bird stealing jewels. The eating of a fruit causing pregnancy is again a cross-cultural folklore motif. The Virgin Mary, called Marjatta in the Kalevala, for instance, became pregnant by eating a berry (Sivalingam 1994: 364). However, the division of a fruit, usually a mango, causing the birth of different offspring seems to be a uniquely Indian motif appearing in several Tamil folktales. In this way the folk narrator joins the three protagonists of the *Cilappatikāram* not through their *karma*, a religious-philosophical idea belonging to "great tradition" Hinduism, but through a magical act. While Kōvalaṉ in the epic was executed, his folk alter ego, Koila, asks permission to commit suicide in order to avoid shameful execution, which is reminiscent of the hero's sense of honour in Tamil folk ballads (Filipsky 1998: 128–129; Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1998: 205–206).

While Hindu mythology has, in most cases, a cosmic or at least general human dimension, folktales reflecting it are placed in a local setting. For instance, possession by the inauspicious planetary deity Sani causes his victim to pull an oil-press, normally bullocks' work, and a pig eats villagers' grain. The fact that the pig is a demon shows the narrator's negative attitude to the animal in accordance with high caste standards, but this detail nevertheless suggests the atmosphere of an outcaste colony. The folk version of the Ahalyā myth brings in village rites, such as the gruesome vow of thrusting a spear into one's side and fire-walking.

The most typical characteristic of folktales on mythic themes is a toning down or domestication of events. The folk Ahalyā is not duped by Indra, who magically takes on her husband's form, but by the perfectly natural resemblance between brothers. She is shocked but then sensibly decides to refrain from committing suicide. She does not tell her husband in order not to ruin her conjugal happiness. She then manages to defend herself with her broom, a typical female weapon in real life and folk narrative.

Weddings, such as the glorious celebration of Śiva and Pārvatī's wedding in their Himalayan palace, are described also in classical Hindu myths, but the stress on the wedding meal in the aetiological folktale about the sun and the moon has a more down-to-earth flavour. References to lovingly given pleasant food as "cooling the stomach", while anger and hunger make it "burn", seem to be inspired by Tamil idioms and therefore can probably be conceived only in Dravidian India. So does

the saying "There is no greater temple than a mother" astutely adduced by the son to avoid having to kill his mother. The elephant-god jumping out of a picture and holding on to the end of Pārvatī's saree even takes us into the intimacy of the family. Just as the second boon requested by the folk Paraśurāma: to make the whole family live in peace.

So far I have stressed Tamil folk narrators' changes in classical myths. However, although everything can and does change, some things are likely to do so more than others. The drops of semen falling into a pond and causing Murukaṉ's birth, for instance, are likely to give offence to some listeners, so his birth may be alternatively ascribed to sparks from his third eye in another version of the myth and to sparks from his anklets in a folktale. In addition to changeable motifs, there are also motifs of remarkable stability. The love of ornaments may be considered an Indian cultural focus. In Germanic mythology the ring of the Nibelungen has cosmic power; in classical Indian mythology and folktales the anklet ring is first of all an ornament, to which, of course, symbolic meanings can be attributed at will. The same applies to the red dot on the forehead. Primarily a beauty spot (applied even to visiting foreigners as a friendly gesture), it can be given various positive symbolic meanings. If Prof. Parpola is right, it may already have been in use in Harappan times. Of course, not only ornaments, but also some Indian deities possess striking power of survival. Christ's two thousand years would hardly impress them. Although Indra and Varuṇa are no longer worshipped, to my knowledge, their memory remains vivid in similes and metaphors (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1995: 114, 126), as well as in folktales. More stable still is the worship of the sun, the sinister planet god Sani and Murukaṉ or Murukaṉ-like figures. These are certainly not the only instances of cultural continuity from the Indus Valley Civilization to present-day India. Prof. Parpola has pointed out several other and will, hopefully, reveal still more in the future.

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