

# Vengalarajan Katai: The New Mythology of a Caste in Change

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Vengalarajan Katai, a heroic folk narrative, is a highly popular narrative among the people of Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari districts. The story is sung, even today, in Villuppattu (bow song) performance. The narrative eulogizes the genealogy of Nadars, a caste community, whose traditional occupation is palmyra climbing. The story is constructed through a skilful blending of history/pseudo history and myth, reality and imagination. It constitutes the perceptions and expressions of a folk mind influenced by the socio-cultural change that took place among the Nadars in the middle of the nineteenth century. Hence, before going into the text, a brief discussion of social change is appropriate.

## I

At the beginning of the nineteenth century Nadars—or the Chanars as they were then known—were almost entirely engaged in the cultivation and climbing of the palmyra trees for the extraction of toddy and manufacture of jaggery. They were concentrated geographically in the palmyra forests of the southernmost part of Tamilnadu. The Nadars, however, were divided among themselves by geographic isolation, the endogamy of sub-castes and by the class barrier which separated the palmyra climbing tapers from the aristocratic land owners, the Nadans, 'lords of the soil'. The plight of the palmyra climbers in the hands of the higher caste—particularly Nairs in the princely state of Travancore—was very severe. The todday-tappers, defiled by their ritually impure calling, suffered the social disabilities of a low almost untouchable community.

Persons of low caste in Travancore were not usually permitted

to approach those of higher status and fixed distances were prescribed for each caste group. A Nadar must remain thirty-six paces distant from a Nambudiri Brahmin and must come no closer than twelve to a Nair. As members of a degraded caste, the Nadars were prohibited from entering into the temple, carrying an umbrella, wearing shoes or golden ornaments. Their houses could not be higher than one storey in height. They were not allowed to milk cows. Nadar women were not permitted to carry pots of water on their hips, as was the custom among the higher caste; nor were they permitted to cover the upper portions of their bodies (Hardgrave, 1979:149) The Nadars were subjected to heavy taxation and while they were not enslaved as were the Paraiyans, the Nadars were forced to perform corvee labour in service to the state.

After the introduction of the British rule, the missionaries found a rich field among the Nadars and by 1840s, a mass movement had brought a large portion of the community into the church. The European missionaries working among the Nadars offered them not only the gospels of a new religion, but the possibility of a secular salvation in their release from the fetters of the tradition which had for centuries burdened them with social disabilities and economic dependence. The earliest movement for social uplift among the Nadar community came in their response to the efforts of the London Missionary Society in southern Travancore. Here the mission field was so predominantly Nadars that in 1820, the year following the founding of the Nagercoil Church, nearly all of the three thousand people who had placed themselves under instruction were the Nadars.

With the aid of the missionaries, the Nadars extracted themselves from many of the burdensome taxes and from the corvee labour demanded by the government and also fought for the social upliftment of the community. The movement for social uplift was symbolized in the Nadars attempt to vest themselves with the attributes of higher status and their efforts beginning in the early nineteenth century soon gave rise to the 'breast cloth controversy'. As already mentioned, by tradition the Nadar, like all the lower castes, were categorically forbidden to cover their breasts at any time.

As early as 1812, Colonel Munro, then resident of Travancore, issued an order that permission be granted to the women converted to Christianity to cover their bosoms as obtained among Christians in other countries. In pursuance of this order, the government of Travancore issued a circular order in 1914 permitting the female

converts of the lower caste to cover their bodies with a short bodice or jacket. They were not, however, permitted to wear the upper cloth in the manner of the higher caste Nair women. But in addition to the prescribed jacket, the Nadar women increasingly adopted the use of the upper cloth, which was worn by the women of the higher caste. As a result, the Nairs revolted against the violation of the social custom by the Nadars. Their antagonism was not only against the Nadars but also against the mission. Believing the Nadars to use Christianity as an excuse to evade taxation and corvee labour as well as a lever to raise their social status the Nairs lashed out at the mission and burned their chapels and schools. The riot continued for five months (October 1858 to February 1959). At last, yielding to the pressure of the British government, the State of Travancore, issued a Royal Proclamation which reads as follows: 'We, hereby, proclaim to abolish all rules prohibiting the covering of the upper parts of the persons of channar women and to grant them perfect liberty to meet the requirements of decency any way they may deem proper but not like the women of higher caste.'

The Nadars of Tirunelveli, like their fellow brothers in Travancore, were also largely palmyra climbers. Their social condition was slightly better than the Nadars of Travancore since they were under the British rule. In 1849 Robert Caldwell wrote a pamphlet entitled *The Tinnevelly Shanors: A sketch of their religion, their moral condition and characteristic as a caste*, and it was published by the Christian knowledge society press, Madras. The following year, 1850, he sent a slightly revised version of the paper to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel for publication in England. In an accompanying letter, Caldwell wrote that the tract had been intended for the English audience and the publication of it in India was but a secondary idea. His object was that of awakening sympathy for the Nadars and obtaining funds from the friends in England for the purpose of educating and elevating them. Caldwell who lived among the Nadars and acquired a first hand knowledge about their position in society revealed in his book their low status and degraded position.

Under the British, a section for the Nadars migrated to Ramnad and Madurai districts where they settled as merchants and money lenders and gradually acquired wealth and power. Another section got English education and held respectable positions in government service. These people found an increasing gap between its low traditional status and its rising new socio-economic position. In an effort

to achieve a social status, they began to adopt the attributes of the higher castes through the process of Sanskritization. They claimed a higher, more ritually pure position in the caste hierarchy through the construction of new mythology of caste histories to place them at the top. This process first, got its expression by the attacking Caldwell.

The first man who raised his voice against the description of Nadars in the book of Caldwell was one Mr. Arumanayagam. Born in 1823 he received his education at the Christian missionary and went on further studies at the seminary in a nearby town, Sayarpuram. As one of the most brilliant student of the mission, he gained proficiency not only in English, but studies Sanskrit, Hebrew, Latin and Greek as well. Upon the completion of his studies in 1850, he returned to Nazareth where he was engaged as the mission school monitor or Chattampillai. Within few years Chattampillai was dismissed from his mission employment and excommunicated from the religion and some calumnious charge was levied against him. Chattampillai then went for sometime to Madras, where he was perhaps the first man of his community to read the pamphlet written by Caldwell on Tirunelveli Nadars. Chattampillai was greatly disturbed by reading Caldwell's description of low and degraded position of Nadar caste, of heathenish practices of devil worship, of their predilection to voice and intellectual dullness. Chattampillai wrote a pamphlet against Caldwell in 1857 and his manuscript appears to have been the first attempt by a Nadar to establish the claims of a higher status through a mythological reconstruction of kingly past to the Nadar community.

From 1857, the date of Chattampillai's unpublished treatise on the Nadar caste, more than forty books, pamphlets and periodicals were produced extolling the high status and greatness of the Nadars. The first of the published histories of the Nadar community, to which reference is available was *Chanror Marapu (chanror antiquity)* published at Madras in 1871, by Rev. H. Martin Winfred, son of the first Indian pastor of the American Madura Mission. His father I. Winfred published another treatise three years later, entitled *Chanror Kula Marapu Kattal (To Safeguard the Customs of the Chanror)*. The lengthy volume sought to establish the Nadars as the descendants of the Pandyan kings, and having established their noble status, exhorted all Nadars to assume the customs of the Kshatriyas.

Basing his arguments on Winfred's work Samuel Sargunar, a Christian Nadar employed as a sub-registrar for Chengalpat District, published a small pamphlet *Dravida Kshatriyas* in 1880 in which

he sought to reconstruct the glory of the Nadar past on the basis of an etymological analysis of the word *chanar*, used contemptuously to refer to the caste, was in fact a corruption of *chanrar* (the learned or the noble man). As the term *chanrar* has been used frequently to refer to the kings of Tamilnadu, the Nadars were then taken to be the ancestors of these rulers, and therefore Kshatriyas. In 1883, Samuel Sargunar published another pamphlet, *Bishop Caldwell and the Tinneveli Shanaras*. Presenting the Nadars as learned Kshatriyas, Sargunar attacked Caldwell for having drawn a 'dark picture' of the condition and status of the community in his *Tinneveli Shanars*, published thirty-four years earlier.

On 16 June 1883, a letter appeared in the *Madras Times* critical of Sargunar's attack on Caldwell. In a reply to the letter published as a pamphlet P. David Nadar affirmed Sargunar's arguments as 'sound'. Several petitions were circulated among the Nadar Christians and submitted to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and to the Archbishop of Canterbury against Caldwell's return to Tirunelveli who was in Scotland at that time. Among the most active petitioner was Y. Gnamuttu Nadar, Graduate, S.G.C.L. Clerk, District Court Tirunelveli. In a letter to Rev. H.W. Tucker, Secretary of the S.P.G. London, Gnamuttu Nadar blamed Bishop Caldwell's writings for the Tirunelveli schism of 1857 and for the resuscitation of caste feeling among the Nadar Christians, 'we are descended from the good old Pandyan kings of Tirunelveli and Madurai', he wrote 'and since we have been persecuted by our conquerors, some of us occupy a low position.' The debate continued till the end of the last century. However, the formula of the Nadar historians was very simple:

The *chanror* caste is the kshatriya caste  
 The *chanar* caste is the chanror caste  
 Therefore the *chanar* caste is the kshatriya caste.

## II

The story of Vengalarajan reflects this climatic condition of change. However, it does not present a picture of their degraded position in reality, but their aspirations of collective memory. The story of the ballad runs as follows:

A sage of divine power, Vidyadara, has been doing penance in a place called Ervadi, in the midst of hilly surroundings. An undoing distraction to

his penance came in the form of seven celestial maids who came there for bathing sport in a spring called Elacunai nearby. The sage gave in to his animal instincts and had sexual congress with these women invoking his power of magic. The women who fell hapless preys to his lust, aided by the divine will, gave birth to a male child each, left the children to the care of the sage and went back to their celestial abode.

Mother Kali adopted these seven children and tended them with grace.... Under the protective eye of Kali, these boys achieved feats of extraordinary valour and grew to become men of unsurpassing courage. At the command of Lord Shiva, Kali along with her seven children, led her army against the demon Tarutan (Tarukan) who had a boon of not to be distracted by any 'man' and killed him. On their way home, she felt very thirsty. She asked her sons to find a source of water to quench her thirst. The sons looked for around climbing a tree. They found a tank at a distance. But before they could reach the spot they found a disgraced Brahman sage and his wife, after drinking all the water in the tank there, have been hiding in the bushes thereabout. It was actually the ambrosial water which this sage had brought down to the earth on his being thrown to the earth from his celestial home by the ire of Indra. Kali became enraged at the guile of the sage and cursed him and his wife to become palmyra trees, male and female respectively, and also planted them upside down. The goddess then blessed her seven sons with the vocation of tapping the ambrosial juice from the palm tree, imparted them the art proper for the vocation and gave them the implements necessary for climbing the tree and extracting its juice. She went leaving them on this earth with the divine command that they take the heavenly drink of the tree unflinching and live to supply it to the men of the world as well as to the celestial above.

These seven men have been known since then as Valangaiyar (right hand men). They married the seven daughters of Camikkaran, a demon, who was killed by them in war. Thus the Valangai men lived in glory and prosperity in their occupation. It is at this time that these seven men met the Chola king Karikal Cholan who kept them with him as his principal warriors. They undertook many a heroic quest, winning formidable enemies of the land and earning the acclaim of the Chola king and his subjects as well.

The Chola country underwent heavy drought without rain for many years. At last rain came at the command of a chaste woman who was identified by the Valangaiyar. The unprecedented rain, then, caused a great havoc to the Chola land breaching the rivers and tanks. On the advice of a low caste Ilavan, the king ordered these Valangai

men to mend its breaches which they strongly resented as unbecoming of their standing and demeaning to their clan's name and eminence. The adamant attitude of the brothers incurred the wrath of the Chola king who then ordered their head to be trod by an elephant. Two of the Valangai men lost their lives because of the punishment. The remaining five unrelenting still and refused to touch the sand basket. They said:

Let our all heads go severed thence  
Go servile carrying sand never would be.

Thwarted Karikal Cholan, let them off. The five men appealed to their mother Kali whose divine fury caused severe famine in the Chola country. Having come to see the cause behind this, through an astrologer, the Chola king propitiated the mother Kali. The Valankai men then asked the king to bring the Ilavan on whose suggestion he demanded the Valangai clan to do the disgraceful act of carrying sand basket. He was brought before the brothers who dragged him along the streets in revenge. Thenceforth, the clan of this low caste man came to be called as Ilavan ('ilu' means to 'drag', one who was dragged on the floor.

The Valangai clan grew by the divine grace and multiplied to seven hundred. By their deeds of valour and benevolence they rose to great fame and popularity. They lived in glory befitting the title canror (noble/superior/eminant) by which they came to be called. While the other four of the Valangai men lived in power and contentment in the native soil, the fifth brother went to the Lanka country where he lived a prosperous and happy life extracting the ambrosial juice from the palm trees which had grown in abundance in that country. Meanwhile, sage Vidyadara, the father, came there searching for his son and blessed him with a herbal magic by which one could turn the baser metals into gold. Using the herb, the Valankai chief turned pieces of iron into gold and soon found himself in the midst of heaps of gold. As a means of protecting the wealth, he buried the bars of gold around his fort and in that place he raised plantain trees. The trees grew luxuriant to bear clusters of golden fruits. Hearing of that the whites pressed him to reveal the secret. Before letting the secret of the herb to alien whites, the Valangai chief got them issue coins of gold that bear on one side the emblem of the Valangai clan along with the implements of their vocation. He also revealed this secret to his grandson Vengalarajan who was growing into the youth of promise

and a quintessential embodiment of the aspirations and spirit of the clan. The secret once revealed, the whites cut off the head of the Valangai chief and killed him.

Fearing further trouble from the inimical aliens, Vengalarajan left the Lanka soil along with his people. He voyaged along several places and settled down finally at Camikkattuvilai in Kanyakumari district. He had two sons, Calaikkulattampi and Cinnattampi, and two lovely daughters Tiraimukattalaki and Cankumukattalaki. He had by now raised a small army for the security of his fort, a fort made of bronze signifying his name, and the protection of his clan for which his sons were made the chiefs. Meanwhile, the two maids went to Prakkai town to witness the bathing festival for the Lord much against the advice of the father and brothers. The Chera king of the province also came to the festival was enthralled by the captivating beauty of the Valangai maids. He sent words to Vengalarajan seeking his daughter's hand in marriage which the Valangai chief contemptuously rejects in a moment of overweening pride in the superiority of his clan. The offended Chera king besieged the ramparts of the Valangai chief. With no matching army to counter and with his native pride preventing him from giving in, Vengalarajan severed Tiraimukattalaki's head, albeit with her willing consent, and throws it out of the fort. The Chera king went back to his country, after performing the final ritual to the head of Tiraimukattalaki.

Apprehending further trouble from the Chera king, Vengalarajan left Camikkattuvilai and went in search of a congenial land. Finally, he settled in Kurumpur. The father apparently tortured by his conscience for having sacrificed his elder daughter at the altar of his swelling pride of his clan's superiority and Cankumukattalaki having lost her dearly loved sister in the most tragic circumstances are marked by inner anguish, desperation and despondence though the world around looked seemingly propitious and receptive. After having remained confined at home for a long time Cankumukattalaki, one day, went out to have a bath in the tank a little further. By sheer will of destiny, a hair of hers, as she was drying her tresses, fell into the hands of Nalarajan, the ruler of the province who was passing on the way. Marvelled by the extraordinary length and comeliness of the hair, Nalarajan wanted to own Cankumukattalaki in marriage. Vengalarajan scornfully rebuffed the offer with his characteristic conceit and pride. Unable to bear the slight and humiliation, the Kurumpur ruler vowed to bring dishonour on the Valangai maids virtue as well as destruction



on Vengalarajan and his clan. He raised a sacrificial fire, wherein he invoked malevolent deities. Having appeased by Nalarajan, Cenkitakkaran, one of the invoked deities, took the form of a mango fruit and got himself dropped into the water vessel which Cankumukuttalaki was carrying. Branding her a thief, Nalarajan subjected her to insufferable humiliation, indignities, disgrace and physical torment. Unable to bear the disgrace, Vengalarajan shut himself and his men inside the fort and embraced death. And heeding to Cankumukuttalaki's prayer, Lord Shiva, caused a storm of sand and dust which devastated the country of Nalarajan along with his counsellors and others. Vengalarajan's fort too got completely destroyed. Cankumukuttalaki submitted herself to the Lord and breathed her last.

### III

The narrative manifests the socio-cultural change in its own way of blending pseudo-history and myth; reality and supernaturalism. It creates a new mythology about the origin and vocation of the Nadars. Like all Brahmins claim that they are the descendants of various *rishis* the ballad also traces the genealogy of Nadars from a sage. They are the children for the sage Vidyadara; they were brought up by the goddess Kali. The goddess created palmyra on the earth for the sake of her children; she taught them the art of climbing the tree and also extracting juice from it. The palmyra juice is nothing but the ambrosial nectar. Thus the narrative invents a divinity to their origin and occupation.

The ballad eulogizes the valour, courage and prowess of the Nadars. Their proto-genitors were the lieutenants of the goddess Kali and took part in her expeditions against the demons. They were the army chief of Karikal Cholan and conquered his enemies. The names of his enemies are mentioned as Camparan (Shampara), Kalyanan and Amantikan. Camparan is a mythic character. He was a demon and was killed by the Dasharatha at the request of Lord Indra. Kalyanan might probably be Kalyana Vallalan, a chieftain of the Konkan region; Amantikan might probably be Avantikan, a king of Avanti. Thus the characters have been selected from pseudo historical and mythical worlds and got blended to construct a new mythology of the Nadar community.

The king Karikal Cholan, rejoiced at their valour and prowess

bestowed on them umbrella and palanquin. This has more relevance with the time of the ballad. It was the privileges of the higher caste to hold the umbrella and travel in a palanquin. Whereas the people of the lower castes were deprived of this right. Claiming that their ancestors were given the honour of umbrella and palanquin by the king, the ballad claims a royal sanction to their higher position in the society.

When the Chola king ordered the Valangai men to mend the breaches of Kaveri carrying mud basket on their heads, they refused to do so. 'O King! Do not compel us. We won't touch the sand basket. We will not do the work which brings disgrace to our clan', they said. They were very firm in their decision even after two of them were tramped by the elephant. Carrying mud basket was the occupation of a low caste people. It might also probably be the voice of protest against the king of Travancore who forced the Nadars to perform such *Carkar Uliyam* (corvee labour) in the state.

The ballad denotes the ancestors of the Nadars as *Valangaiyar* (right-hand men) *Canror* (noble men) and *Nadalvar* (rulers of the country). As it is already mentioned, the Nadar intellectuals attempted to prove that the word *chanar*—the etymological meaning of the word is not clearly known. But one learned missionary explains it *chan* (a span) plus *nar* (fibre or string), that is the noose, one span in length used by the chanar in climbing palmyra (Thurston, 1987:369-70)—is the derivation of the word *chanror* (noble man) which is frequently used in ancient Tamil literature to denote the kings and noble persons. Similarly the term 'Nadar' is derived from *Nadalvar* which means rulers of the land. Further calling the Nadars as *Valangaiyar*, the ballad places them at the top of the hierarchy next to Brahmins.

The ballad attempts to describe the proto-genitors of the caste as kings. It says that the Valangai chiefs were the rulers of Chola Nadu, Kaveri Nadu, Tondai Nadu, Kandi Nadu and Lanka. It describes Vengalarajan as a king. His name bears the suffix 'rajan'. He raised his own fort and army and circulated his own coin inscribing his clan's emblem on one side, and the whiteman's emblem on the other. This coin was popularly known as 'chanar coin' (*Shanar Kacu*) among the people.

The coin referred to is the gold venetian sequin frequently dug up in Tirunelveli, relics of the time when Tuticorin was a great trading port. These coins, like those of the Republic of Venice, bore the name of the Doge and were stamped with a Bishop's pastoral staff. Some of

the chanars believe these emblems to represent the tool bag and climbing stick used in mounting their beloved trees, to which they undoubtedly bear a considerable resemblance. Hence they conclude that the sequins to be the coinage, not of the ancient spouse of the Adriatic, but of their own royal ancestors, cultivators of the plamyra like themselves (Hardgrave, 1979:166-7). The composer invents a 'history' out of it.

Further, Vengalarajan rejected the offer of Chera king to his daughter in marriage. In the same spirit he rejected the offer of the Kurumpur king also. With overweening pride in the superiority of his clan, he asked:

Can Nalarajan the ruler low come equal to us?  
 Could he ask marital bond in our clan eminent?  
 Could this ruler small claim a station matching?  
 Never could his be equal to our noble tribe  
 Never could one be equal to this Valangai clan.

Vengalarajan and his two daughters became martyrs over the pride of their clan. They live in the hearts of the people of Nadars. The Villuppattu performance and other medium of the oral transmission of this heroic story refresh their memory and fill their hearts with a sense pride.

Thus the socio-cultural change sprouted among the people of Nadars, got its manifestation in several ways. It was manifested as a revolt of the Nadars against the social disabilities imposed on them by the higher caste; it was manifested as a claim of higher, ritually more pure position in the caste hierarchy, and it was also manifested as a construction of a new folk mythology.

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