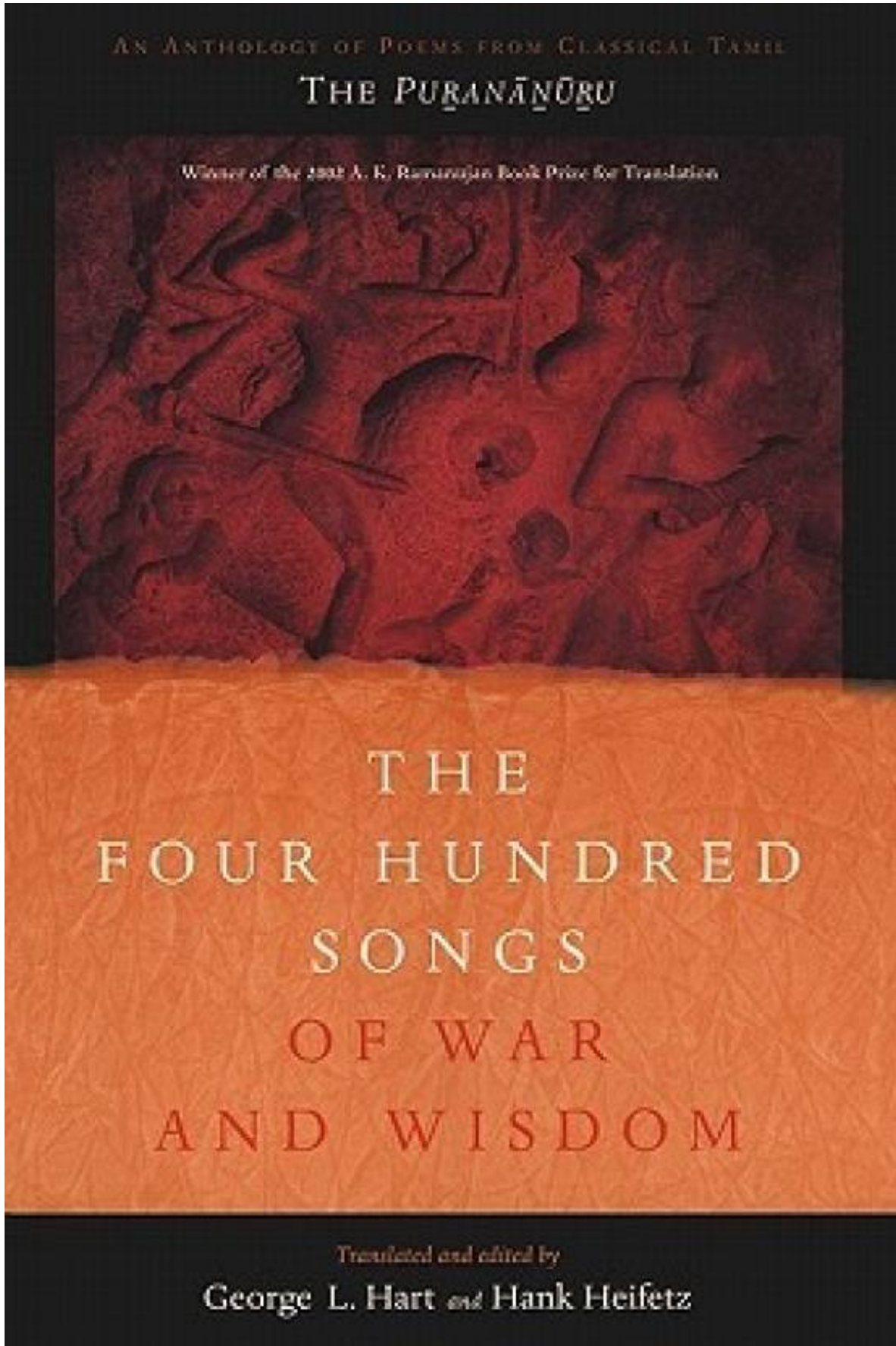


(Peer Reviewed)“I am not a mercenary poet”: The Art of Giving in the Purananuru

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Abstract

Giving or *eekai* has been a much valorised concept in classical Tamil literature and even chieftains have acquired fame much greater than that of the three great kings of ancient Tamilakam precisely because of their acts of giving. On a par with acts of valour, giving has made the giver a legendary figure. Besides, the poets and minstrels and the female entertainers known as *viralis* depended on this system of giving, a custom honoured by conventions. This paper looks into the intricacies of giving not only by examining the *tinai* and *turais* by which it is systematised but goes beyond them because almost every poem of the *Purananuru* is a praise poem. Instead of the praise becoming songs of sycophancy, the poet's insistence on being treated with dignity transforms it into a fine art, giving us panegyrics of exemplary intricacy. Though valour and giving are not easily imagined as related acts, the paper attempts to see them as not only historically interdependent, even artistically so.

Key words: *eekai*, *parisitrurai*, *parisil katanilai*, *parisil vitai*, *paatan*, *attruppada*

With the lone exception of the Invocation by Peruntevanar, almost all the poems of the *Purananuru* are praise poems (Marr 90). The kings and the chieftains and the other unnamed patrons find their valour or generosity and quite often both praised in these poems. The types of valour displayed on and off the battlefield follow a clearly marked system of *tinai*s and *turai*s – themes and situations – that I have discussed in an earlier paper^[1]. The act of giving and receiving, on the other hand, has its own *turai*s but it does not have an overarching set of rules and conventions that valour has. This want of rigidity, rather than impoverishing it, has supplied it with innumerable instances of individual giving, worthy enough to make them the stuff of legends and poetry, much more memorable than any act of bravery that the *Purananuru* has.

Let me briefly cover the various *tinai* and *turai*s of *giving*, a term I prefer to the more ponderous *charity*, as apt translation of *eekai*. The *paatan* *tinai* covers most praise poems, whether it is praise for a king's bravery or generosity. Understandably it has the largest collection of poems. The various acts of giving and receiving come under these *turai*s: *parisitrurai*, *parisil vitai*, *parisil katanilai*, *paanatruppada*, *pulavaratruppada* and *viraliyatruppada*. *Parisitrurai* speaks of the king's largesse and bards representing their needs to the patron. And it also includes reservations about accepting a gift given by a patron without knowledge of their true worth, a fact attesting to the dignity of the poets. *Parisil vitai* is sending off the poet laden with gifts, *parisil katanilai* solicits bounty from a king who keeps delaying his favour. The last three *atruppada*s are poems giving directions to the minstrel, poet and the danseuse respectively whose abject poverty and also itinerant lifestyle made them go in search of a patron (Marr 468-69).

Normally referred to as *eekai* (giving), this attribute is valorised as *kodai* (munificence) and the one who displays is a *vallal* or a great giver. Apart from the three great kings of ancient Tamilakam, the *muventar*, there were also great chieftains whose fame quite often rivalled that of the kings and which proved to be a source of jealousy and war. Perunchitiranar, after listing the seven great chieftains renowned for their giving, observes that his patron Kumanan alone could fill in the void left by their deaths.

There was *Pari*, the chieftain who fought his combats with kings

while their sticks beat down on the royal drums and spotless
 bright conches were sounded, the lord of Parampu where a white fall
 of water rolling stones in its flow thunders down a tall mountain,
 and there was *Ori* with his powerful bow who ruled Kolli's shining summit
 and *Malaiyan*, mighty in war, who was as generous as a rain cloud
 and who won his victories in battle astride his stallion Kari
 and *Elini*, who reigned astride his Stallion Mountain
 wearing his chaplet of kuvilam and his curving necklace, with his sharp spear,
 and there was *Pekan*, who ruled over a great mountain with towering summits
 watched over by an unassailable god, on its cold slopes caves full of darkness,
 and there was *Ay*, whom Moci, whose words are truth, has sung,
 and there was *Nalli*, who made his enemies flee from him, whose generosity
 was truly noble, who took it upon himself to utterly remove the poverty
 of those who came to him with desire – these seven dead,
 thinking of you now I have come here swiftly (158) (Hart 99-100) (My italics)*

Tinai: Paatan Turai: Parisil katanilai

This poem is remarkable not only as a chronicle of the Classical Age, but also for marrying the heroism of the rulers with their generosity. The historical reason for the combination of these disparate traits might be that the conquests in the battle provided the winner with a surplus of goods because of the "Winner takes it all" policy and the spoils later got distributed to those close to them. However, there is an inherent impulse to give which transcends this material reason about which we will see later.

The profession of composing poetry, the necessary erudition and observation it required, left little time for the poets to engage in any other occupation so that a professional poet like Kapilar could say, explaining the reason for the softness of his hand compared to the battle-hardened hands of his patron, the Cera King Valiyatan:

You stand on your chariot
 and draw an arrow
 from the quiver on your back
 and fit it to the bowstring
 with your callused fingers.
 Your hands give gifts
 without cease to the prize winners.
 So Chief, your hands are big and powerful.
 But the hands of the one
 who sings your praises
 know only the painful skill
 of holding the staff which smells of meat,
 kindling the smoke that smells like incense
 and eating rice cooked with meat and fat
 but have no other skill – all
 of which make them soft. (Ali 14)

Tinai: Paatan Turai: Iyanmoli)

One can see how Kapilar is able to harmonize the valour of his patron with his generosity as both acts contribute to the calluses in his hands. The profession of being a poet made them depend on a patron even for their daily needs, because, included in the list of objects given as prize, the reader very often finds food and beverages:

Liquor flowed freely

from the opened jar.
 With the slaughter of a he-goat
 there was a feast of rice and mutton.(113) (Ali 293)
 (Kapilar on Pari's Parampu Hills)
 Tinai: Potuviyal Turai: Kaiyarunilai

Also, the first need of the travel-weary, itinerant poet who passed through tough terrains and harsh climates was food before he reached the safe portals of his patron. Some of the poems of Perunchitiranar present touching pictures of unimaginable poverty and hunger not necessarily overdone to evoke pity because the graphic details could not be altogether imagined:

My mother is old. Over and over she complains about how many years
 have passed and she is still alive and her life will not end. Hobbling
 with so many small steps, a stick for an extra leg, her hair like
 spread spring, her eyesight gone, she cannot even walk to the verandah.
 And my love wears her one meagre, filthy garment and she is
 hungry and as she thinks of how things stand with her, she grieves.
 Her body is faded, her breasts withered as the many children moving
 beside her squeeze them and suck at them. In despair she plucks a young,
 half-grown shoot sprouting on a kirai plant on a garbage heap that others
 have picked near clean and she throws it into a pot without any salt
 and sets on the fire. She does not even remember when she ever
 had rice and without any buttermilk she eats the green leaves
 and complains about the Order of the World. (159) (Hart 100-01)

(Perunchitiranar pleading with Kumanan)

Tinai: Paatan Turai: Parisil katanilai

This also explains the extreme importance attached to food which in turn leads to the valorisation of farming and irrigation:

Mighty king, who give food, give life itself,
 as the body, without water, cannot be.
 It is the food that makes up this mortal coil.
 And food comes from the union of land and water.
 Who bring water to the land
 are those who create the body and the soul. (18) (My translation)

Poet: Kuta Pulaviyanar Tinai: Potuviyal Turai: MutuMoli Kanchi

Whether the patrons really understood the historical and literary valuations in their extension of patronage to the poets is unclear. But they really valued the friendship with the poets is evident from this poem of Pandyan Neduncheliyan, winner of the famed battle fought at Talalayankanam. Here the king could be seen taking an oath to destroy his enemies and the consequences of failing to do so:

And the poets
 praised for their great skill, Mankuti Marutan with his vast and lofty
 range of learning as well as all the others as firmly established
 as the earth, let them leave my land and sing no more about it! (72) (Hart 56)

Tinai: Kanchi Turai: Vanchinak kanchi

The king not only forgoes the valued friendship of Mankuti Marutan but considers himself all the

poorer for not being able to help others. This friendship with the poets manifests itself in extreme acts of giving as seen in these two poems, one by Avvaiyar and the other one by Peruntalai Saathanar. Many of Avvaiyar's poems are on her patron and long-term friend Atiyaman Neduman Anci, ruler of Takadur (present day Dharmapuri), a friendship which is as much cherished as the one between Kapilar and Vel Pari.

Without considering how difficult it is to obtain the sweet fruit of the myrobalan plant with its tiny leaves, which has to be plucked from a crevice on the summit of an ancient mountain hard to climb, you kept silence in your heart about its powers, and so that you might rescue me from death, you gave me that fruit! (91) (Hart 65)

Tinai: Paatan Turai: Valtiyal

What Atiyaman had done was to give the life-enhancing nelli fruit to Avvaiyar, obtained after great effort, without disclosing its real worth to her. She was touched by this selfless act and the poem is *her* way of immortalising him. Peruntalai Saathanar, in the extremity of his poverty, approached his patron Kumanan who now lived in exile in the forest after his younger brother Ilankumanan dethroned him and also announced a reward on his brother's head. More than the loss of his kingdom, what troubled Kumanan was his inability to help the poet in his hour of need and so he made a remarkable offer:

"I can't bear being so weak! When I see a great being in need, for him to go away without anything would be worse than losing my land!" So he handed me his and he offered me his head for there was nothing better for him to give me than himself! (165) (Hart 107)

Tinai: Paatan Turai: Parisil vitai

Since then, these great acts of giving have become the stuff of legends and folklore. The legend has it that Ilankumanan became ashamed of his betrayal and restored the kingdom to his brother. The offer of oneself to alleviate the suffering of the poet is further reinforced in this poem of Kapilar praising Pari:

Even if the singers come begging for his own person Pari, righteous soul, will not say 'no'. He will give himself to them. (108) (Thangappa 147)

Tinai: Paatan Turai: Iyanmoli

Sometimes the impulse to give seems to exceed all bounds of propriety, getting extended to the plants and birds too as it had happened in the case of Vel Pari and Vaiyavik Kopperum Pekan respectively. Pari was credited with the gift of his chariot as support to a jasmine climber as Kapilar states in a poem:

These are the daughters of that Pari whose lofty virtues were known far and wide, who gave a tall chariot with sonorous bells, saying, "Take it!" to a jasmine vine adorned with flowers, so that it might climb, though the vine had never put scars on its tongue through singing that king's praises! (200) (Hart 126)

Tinai: Paatan Turai: Parisittrurai

Pari's daughters were introduced to Vichiko through the act of kindness their father had shown to the jasmine vine, indication that even in Kapilar's time it must have acquired legendary proportions. Parinar made the gift of a shawl to a shivering peacock by his patron Pekan known to the world by making it the stuff of a poem:

Our king, Pekan, who has horses, who has elephants
 flowing with musth, once gave a garment to a peacock
 in the rain, though he knows they don't wear clothes!
 Because he feels the poverty of others, because it is
 a virtue to give what one can, he is generous
 and not at all for the sake of a better birth in his next life! (141) (Hart 89-90)

Tinai: Paatan Turai: Paanatrappadai

These extreme acts of kindness and generosity, which have now become textbook examples of Tamils' culture of giving, may appear at first as simple-minded acts of misplaced generosity, if not downright foolish. One would like to construe them, however, as ecocritically sensitive acts spawned by a culture which fostered biodiversity as well as bioequality and which led to the creation of a whole body of Akam Poetry whose logic of tinai embraced all landscapes, seasons, animals and plants.[\[ii\]](#)

If the kings and chiefs were by and large quite swift to come to the succour of the poets in need, there were a few who were a little bit tardy in rewarding them and which gave birth to a separate turai of *eekai* poems known as *parisil katanilai*:

He welcomes us still
 as on the first of days,
 though we go there
 not just one day,
 or two days,
 but many days
 with many friends,
 does Atiyaman Anci
 of the jewelled elephant
 and the artful chariot.
 Whether the time for gifts
 comes right now
 or is put off for later,
 it's like fodder
 left in reserve
 on the elephant's tusk,
 always there
 at hand, waiting;
 it won't become a lie.
 O wishful heart,
 do not scramble for it.
 Bless him,
 his works. (101) (Ramanujan 139)

Poet: Avvaiyar Tinai: Paatan Turai: Parisil katanilai

Parisittrurai, though supposed to be a representation of poets to their patron on *what* they wanted, also has poems on *how* they wanted it given. It includes musings on the act of giving, a reminder to the king on the dignity that must go with giving and how in the wide world there is no dearth of patrons to the deserving poet. In brief, it inscribes the whole ideology of giving:

It is disgraceful to beg.
 It is even more disgraceful
 not to give.
 It is ennobling to give.
 It is even more ennobling
 not to accept (204) (Thangappa 170)

Tinai: Paatan Turai: Parisittrurai
 (Kalaithin Yanaiyar on Valvil Ori)

The poem goes on to compare the generous patron to a small pool of drinking water to which all come and the miser, though has wealth like the ocean, never attracts the needy. Perunchitiranar grew indignant at Atiyaman Anci when he sent him away with a gift without even seeing him. The poet insists on being treated with dignity:

I am no money grabber^[iii]
 to accept these riches
 given with indifference.
 I will accept with pleasure
 however small a gift is,
 if given with love
 and after due recognition. (208) (Thangappa 172)

Tinai: Paatan Turai: Parisittrurai

Here is a poem by Avvaiyar written in anger against her patron Atiyaman Anci for the delay in giving her the gift:

This is no empty world and all the wise
 and famous men are not dead. ...
 Whether we go this way or whether we go that way, we will have rice!^[iv] (206) (Hart 130)

Tinai: Paatan Turai: Parisittrurai

On occasions the patron treated all poets alike, a want of discernment which invited a mild rebuke from the poet as Kapilar does in this one:

Thinking of the one in one direction
 many will come to get gifts
 from all the four.
 To know their ranks is difficult,
 giving gifts to them is all too easy.
 O mighty chief,
 if you are quite discerning
 do avoid treating all poets alike. (121) (Ali 302)

Tinai: Potuviyal Turai: Porun moli kanchi
 (Kapilar advising Malyaman Tirumudik Kari)

On certain other occasions, the poet felt the need to remind his patron of life after death and how giving outlasted death:

Even the rulers of countries go to the burning ground ...
 And that day will come when you must go there as well,
 but your bad reputation will remain, and your good reputation. (359) (Hart 203)

Poet: Kavitanar sings Antuvankiran. Tinai: Kanchi Turai: Perunkanchi

The poet goes on to counsel the king that giving horses and tuskers and chariots will ensure “your fame will remain here, shining and enduring.” (Hart 203) There were however patrons who preferred anonymity in giving, which made their giving all more remarkable. This poem by Vann Paranar praises Kandeerak Kopperu Nalli, one among the seven great givers, for his stubborn insistence on not disclosing his identity. He fed the poet and his starving relations with venison, gave the poet his necklace of pearls and an armlet:

Then I asked, “What is your country?”
but he would not tell me his country. When I asked him, “What
is your name?” he would not tell me his name! (150) (Hart 94)

Tinai: Paatan Turai: Iyanmoli

Only after asking others, the poet learnt that he was Nalli, the chief of Thotti Hills.

Some of the patrons stunned the poets by giving gifts which far exceeded their expectations, a turai known as *parisil vitai*, which meant “sending off with gifts.” As if appearing to make fun of the overblown generosity of Nanjil Valluvan, Avvaiyar compliments him because all that she asked of him was only “a little bit of rice” but he had given her “a giant elephant like a hill.”

Can one so much as imagine
a more lopsided gesture of liberality?
Don't great men when they are generous show any proportion? (140) (Hart 89)

Tinai: Paatan Turai: Parisil vitai

The poets, bards and other entertainers recognised themselves as belonging to a community of composers and singers and helped each other out in times of need, by directing the needy to a patron whose generosity they could rely on. These poems together form a considerable body known as “*attruppada* poems” which meant “setting (the needy) in the right course.” This close-knittedness among the poets – for instance Kapilar is praised by numerous other poets – makes the idea of the existence of an academy of poets (Sangam) not a far-fetched one.

The gratitude felt by the poets sublimated itself into innovative ways of praise. Kapilar's very brief poem on Vel Pari comparing him to rain has become a classic in itself:

“Pari, Pari,”
-So go the varied praises
of poets with fertile tongues.
There is not only Pari
but also rain
to sustain this world. (107) (Ali 288)

Tinai: Paatan Turai: Iyanmoli

It will be observed that in the monsoon-dependent landscape of Tamil Nadu, the rains are vital and giving comes steeped in recurrent images of rain. The poet Mutamociyar asks, wondering at the generosity of his patron in giving elephants as prizes, “O Aai, /do the cow elephants in your land/ give birth to ten calves at a time?” (130)(Thangappa 152) There is also the image of the warrior king whose body bore multiple scars of battle and he is compared to a medicinal tree whose bark has been stripped for use in curing (180), a syncretic image of valour and giving.

* The number immediately after the quoted text is the number of the poem in the source text

followed by pagination in the target text. The colophon gives the context where necessary.

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Endnotes

- [i] Refer "The Purananuru and the Tamil Concept of Valour"
- [ii] Refer "The Logic of Tinai in Akam Poetry"
- [iii] Marr translates it beautifully "I am no mercenary poet," (188) to which my title is indebted. The source text reads like this: "*Kanaatu eetha ip porutku yanor/vanikap parisilan illane*"
- [iv] The condensation that Avvaiyar achieves is not even remotely attained by this translation: "*Etthisai chelinum atthisai chore*"
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Peer Review:

The article entitled "**I am not a mercenary poet**": **The Art of Giving in the Purananuru** by Dr. M. Nazir Ali, analyses extensively the eekai (charity) thurais in Purananuru such as parisiturai, parisil katanilai, parisil vitai, paatan, and attrupadai.

Western scholars Dr. George Hart, Dr. Ralston Marr, and Indian scholars Thangappa, A. K. Ramanujan and the author Dr. Ali's English Translations on Purananuru are used appropriately in this article. The verses chosen for this article are magnificent, especially those written by Perunchitiranar and Peruntalai Saathanar pleading with Kumanan are soul-stirring.

As far as poet Perunchitiranar is concerned, despite his penurious state, he refused the meager offering bestowed on him by king Ilaveliman. This poet is also praised for his feminist notions, who treated his wife with equity.

There are no novel views regarding the verses, however, the explanations given by the author are lucid and clear-cut. In addition to this article, he has published the translation of the *Ainkurunuru* titled *Classical Tamil Love Poetry* and the collected poems of Kapilar

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<https://www.vallamai.com>

as *There is also rain*. It shows his huge interest and fondness for Tamil literature which is a commendable deed indeed!
