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The Past as an Exponent of the Present in Modern Tamil Literature: Story-(re)-Telling and Telling History in Selected Works of Indira Parthasarathy

ABSTRACT: Indira Parthasarathy is the author of many works that touch upon historical issues but are in fact reflections on contemporary India. Although the narrative of some of them takes place in the past, they cannot be called historical literature. While the author is not really interested in describing the past *per se*, as is also often the case with other contemporary Tamil writers, clear references to the past and history help him showcase contemporary issues, current problems, and life as it is here and now. The article briefly discusses two plays, whose protagonists are historical figures; a novel based on a contemporary event that has become an integral part of the history of Tamil Nadu; and two other works which came to be written on the basis of writer's own life experience in Poland and are in a way related to the history of that country.

KEYWORDS: Tamil literature, Tamil drama, Indira Parthasarathy, history

Indira Parthasarathy (Intirā Pārttacārati) is the pen name of Dr. Ranganathan Parthasarathy (Araṅkanātaṉ Pārttacārati),[1] the doyen of Modern Tamil

[1] The given or personal name of the writer is Ranganathan. Indira is the name of his wife. According to his own testimony, he wrote and published some short stories

literature. Born in 1930, he studied Tamil literature at Annamalai University,[2] and being particularly interested in Tamil Vaiṣṇava literature of Bhakti period (c. 6–9th cent.), he continued his research at the University of Delhi, where he moved as a Tamil language teacher. After obtaining a doctoral degree, he began his academic career as professor of Tamil, teaching respectively at the University of Delhi (1962–1988), the University of Warsaw in Poland (1981–1986), and the Pondicherry University (1988–1992), where he established and then headed the Sankaradas Swamigal School of Performing Arts.

Indira Parthasarathy combined his academic interests with literary work, soon becoming a recognizable figure in the world of modern Tamil literature. He authored numerous short stories, over a dozen novels, and later became known as an accomplished playwright and a person devoted to the performing arts and modern theatre. Most probably he is the only one among Tamil writers to become the recipient of both the Sahitya Akademi Award (1977) and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (2004), the highest awards of the Government of India conferred in the field of literature and performing arts respectively. In 2010 he was honored with the prestigious Padma Shri, the fourth-highest civilian award in the Republic of India.

It is a common feature of many Indian literatures of the post-independence period that the contemporary narratives take place largely in the cities. Although the writers do not abandon their interests in social, political or psychological topics (Perumal 1987: 227), the protagonists, apart from being the representatives of the "native working class," quite often belong also to the newly emerging and English-educated middle

under that name just to make her happy when she was suffering from health problems. Parthasarathy is personal name of the writer's father (Sivasankari 1998: 304). The concept of surnames is unknown to Tamil tradition so nowadays father's name is commonly used instead.

[2] Since Parthasarathy belonged to an orthodox family and his father was a Sanskrit scholar, his decision to study Tamil met with "stiff opposition" as he admitted in one of the interviews (Sivasankari 1998: 304).

class, represented mostly by the new Indian intelligentsia.[3] Thus a leading character more often than not is an ordinary but educated man from the city, working in an office, and whose basic problems relate to his family and professional life. This is also the case of Indira Parthasarathy's fiction as many of his literary works are set in the city, and the protagonists are young, modern intellectuals. For example, his first novel, or *Tantira pūmi* (1969, "Tricky Land"),[4] to quote his own words, is a "description of the Delhi lifestyle" (Sivasankari 1998: 304). An orientation towards the urban life can also be seen in his other novels, e.g., the based in New Delhi *Ventu taṇinta kāṭukaḷ* (1981, "Scorched Forests")[5] and *Tiraikaḷukku appāl* (1974, "Beyond the Veils").[6] Similarly, the protagonists of *Ēcuviṉ tōḻarkaḷ* (1987, "Comrades of Jesus")[7] live in the city, but this time the city is located outside India—the leading protagonist is an Indian professor working in Poland, and among other characters are the academics from the University of Warsaw and the diplomatic staff of the Indian embassy in Warsaw.

In an interview with Sivasankari, Indira Parthasarathy claims that he writes "to create an awareness among people about social problems and inequities" (Sivasankari 1998: 304). He then adds: "All my characters have been based on real life characters whom I have met some time or the other" (*ibid.*: 305). According to him, he writes because he considers writing to be his social responsibility (Parthasarathy 1992: 65). It is then not surprising that in his literary works he often refers to contemporary social issues, especially the problem of caste, often using for the purpose the lens of the past, history and mythology.

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[3] It has been argued that in Tamil context the novel as a new literary genre is "directly linked to the emergence of the middle class" (Venkatachalapathy 2002: 85, after Kailācapati 1968).

[4] It appeared in 2007 in the English translation of Janaki Venkataraman (Parthasarathy 2007c).

[5] It was published in English translation by Padma Narayanan in 2007 (Parthasarathy 2007a).

[6] Lakshmi Kannan's translation appeared in 1983 (Parthasarathy 1983).

[7] Translated into English by K. V. Ramanathan (Parthasarathy 2005a).

Apart from the fact that Indira Parthasarathy's literary works deal largely with contemporary social problems faced by the citizens of the nascent Republic of India, and the narrative takes place mostly among representatives of the middle-class, mainly intellectuals and officials in the vibrant capital in New Delhi where the author himself lived and worked, in many of his works there are also quite expressive references to the broadly understood historical events and distinctly presented (para) historical themes rewritten according to his personal worldview.

It is interesting to note that the references to the past in the context of contemporary Indian literature are quite frequently treated as a manifestation of modernity. This issue was emphasized by A. R. Venkatachalapathy who opened his essay on Tamil novel during the inter-war period saying: "the recognition that the novel, along with the concept of history and the idea of the nation-state, is a sign of the modern" (Venkatachalapathy 2002: 81). Accordingly, being evidently inspired by issues of the present times, Indira Parthasarathy does not avoid talking about the past and history which enables him to relate to the issues of the present. Therefore, the references to both the past and the present are very important elements of his fiction. Indira Parthasarathy seems to be quite aware of this because he himself admits that he had to "learn to exploit the cultural content of this tradition for a profitable present and future" (Parthasarathy 1992: 66). Although his works can hardly be classified as historical literature, still the references to the past and history can be seen in many of them, that too not only in his prose works such as the novels and short stories, but also in his dramas. Suffice it to say that three of his most important plays are titled after historical or semi-historical figures, e.g., *Auraṅkacīp* (1976, "Aurangzeb"),[8] *Nantaṉ katai* (1978, "The Story of Nandan"),[9] and *Rāmāṉujar* (1997, "Ramanuja").[10]

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[8] Translated into English by T. Sriraman (Parthasarathy 2004).

[9] It appeared in English translation by C. T. Indra (Parthasarathy 2003).

[10] The English translation by T. Sriraman was published in 2008 (Parthasarathy 2008a). In 2001 Indira Parthasarathy received Saraswati Samman for the year 1999, an award given by K. K. Birla Foundation, Delhi.

This division (history versus mythology) is also visible in the way in which the volume of his collected dramas is organized, where *Nantaṉ katai* falls under the category of *toṉmam* (mythology), while *Auraṅkacīp* and *Rāmāṉujar* are treated as the *varalāṟu* (history) (Pārttacārati 2007: 6).

Indira Parthasarathy's attitude to the past and history is neither scientific nor academic in nature, hence the term "history" points to both historical as well as mythological events which are quite often recognized as full-fledged historical occurrences.[11] Therefore, it can be said that his works on historical issues are based both on history and legend. Accordingly, Indira Parthasarathy retells traditional stories, but at the same time he tells history which he clearly relates to the present. As noted by Meenakshi Mukherjee, Indian writers are often drawn to myths and legends, and one of the main reasons for this is the mythological "quality of timelessness" (Mukherjee 1971: 133–134). Thus, rendering a well-known legend or mythologizing present events can be a forceful literary technique to express writer's personal opinions and worldview.

The aforementioned play *Rāmāṉujar* belongs to the group of Parthasarathy's writings which may be considered as the tradition-inspired works retelling (hi)story. The play is about the historical figure of Ramanuja, the great Indian philosopher, founder of the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta school of thought, and religious leader (*ācārya*) of the Śrīvaiṣṇava movement who lived in the 11th–12th century. According to traditional scholarship Ramanuja's life spanned 120 years (1017–1137) which shows that in this case we are dealing, to a certain extent, with a mixture

[11] Myths and legends in the culture of South India, as well as in other parts of the world, are often treated on par with historical facts. Suffice it to say that back in the 19th and even 20th century the idea of Lemuria as a lost, ocean-seized land from which Tamil people were to originate (which is mentioned in classical Tamil poetry from the first centuries of our era) was presented in history textbooks as an indisputable fact. Sumathi Ramaswamy who extensively researched on the Lemuria, quoted among others M. Seshagiri Sastri, who in 1897 tellingly complained: "among the majority of the Tamil pandits and other studying Tamil literature there is not much difference between a real history on the one hand and traditions, myths and legends on the other, and Tamil poems are studied and taught with a ready credulousness" (Ramaswamy 2004: 152).

of historical facts and traditional beliefs. There are not many historical records of Ramanuja's life. What is known about him, and what is traditionally considered as factual, comes mostly from the Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiographies, e.g., texts produced by a specific religious community and portraying the lives of saints and other figures important to the followers of the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition. Created in a religious environment, such texts narrate the life and activities of a particular saint (or a group of saints) within the specific religious framework. Therefore, the hagiographies—as literary creative works of religious nature—cannot always be treated as reliable historical accounts. They are authoritative texts, but rather in religious and not historical context. As noted by Srilata Raman (2007: 264), the first Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiographies combined facts with fiction quite freely and their main task was to create a kind of internal hierarchy for the newly developing religious movement and build sense of continuity of the tradition rather than relate bare facts.

It seems that in his *Rāmāṉujar* Indira Parthasarathy follows the general hagiographic patterns of the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition for he uses some quite well-known scenes from the life of Ramanuja, which were previously described in the authoritative medieval texts. Interestingly, in the text of this drama, the playwright intertwines his retellings with individual stanzas from the original Early Medieval poetry of the *āḻvār*s, poets and saints, who stand in the Śrīvaiṣṇava hierarchy above the teachers of the doctrine (*ācārya*s) and the leaders of the Śrīvaiṣṇava movement as if he wanted to boost the authoritative significance of the events from the life of Ramanuja he chose to present in his play. However, Indira Parthasarathy produces his own retellings of such scenes and to this end he adopts a new mode of modern dramatic expression.

Although based on Ramanuja's life, the play is obviously not a simple account of events known from the hagiographic texts. As Indira Parthasarathy notes in his introduction to the English translation of the play, time in Indian tradition is generally not understood as a "linear arithmetic progression of sequential events" (Parthasarathy 2008b: 1). Therefore, it immediately becomes obvious that his own representation of events in Ramanuja's life will not follow the template of a chronicle

and, indeed, such chronological and even logical approach to Ramanuja's life is not present in the dramatic text. Rather, the specific scenes appear to have been selected to introduce and popularize the ideas of this philosopher to the contemporary audience or readers of the drama.

One of the features of Ramanuja's worldview and thought that is clearly emphasized in Parthasarathy's play is his attitude to the issue of caste. Ramanuja, as a philosopher and, above all, religious leader of the Śrīvaiṣṇava movement, was responsible for the social change that took place within his community which had many non-Brahmin members, including the untouchables. It was Ramanuja who recognized the right of the untouchables to study the Hindu sacred texts, and much against the Brahmin orthodoxy, he disagreed with the exclusion of the untouchables from certain religious practices. Ramanuja himself is still remembered as the person who initiated into Śrīvaiṣṇavism many people from the lower social strata, women included, and apparently many among his followers were not accepted by the conservative Brahmins (Seshadri 1998: 29, 43). In his play, Indira Parthasarathy presents certain scenes in which the low caste characters make their appearance and the caste issues—especially the problem of the untouchability—are essential for the development of the storyline. These are to be found for example in Act I, in a scene where Ramanuja is told about the three unfulfilled wishes of Alavandar (Āḷavantār)[12]—the first of these wishes being the vision of a casteless society and the possibility of salvation even to those who have no protection i.e. the untouchables (*cātiyaṟṟa camutāyam nātiyaṟṟavarkkum naṟkati*)[13]; or the scene involving Tirukkachi Nambi (Tirukkacci Nampi), a Vaishya whom Ramanuja accepted as his guru and invited for a meal to his house, but to whom Ramanuja's wife, fearing that her husband might lose his ritual purity,

[12] Alavandar was a philosopher and religious leader whose disciple Ramanuja sought to be. However, when Ramanuja arrived in Śrirangam (Śrīraṅkam) to meet his spiritual master for the first time in person, Alavandar had already passed away.

[13] The other two unfulfilled wishes of Alavandar were: the necessity of expanding the Vaiṣṇava dharma (*vaiṇava tarmam … viriyavēṇṭum*) and writing a commentary on the *Brahmasūtra*s (*pirumma cūttirattukku viyākkiyāṉam*) (Pārttacārati 1997: 17).

served the food outside their home and at a time when Ramanuja was away (Pārttacārati 1997: 18–24).

Apparently, Indira Parthasarathy's main aim is not to present Ramanuja's "real" life based on "historical" sources, but to show to his modern readers that ideas preached by the great thinker and Śrīvaiṣṇava saint are still relevant and factually accurate for the contemporary world. The playwright enhances this effect further through an appropriate selection of background scenery, which is in this case devoid of most local elements. Thus, the scenography is deliberately planned in a fairly limited manner which allows the author to show that the narrative could, to a large extent, take place anywhere and anytime. Besides, Indira Parthasarathy underscores Ramanuja's contemporaneity when he writes in his Introduction that "the main aim of this drama is to make those who read it or watch it on stage realize that Ramanuja is our contemporary."[14]

Evidently, the reference to the past, history and biographical method, well-known from the surviving hagiographic texts of the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, forms a purposefully crafted backdrop for reflections on the contemporary world and its current problems that post-independence Indian society needs to face, especially the caste problems that Ramanuja had to deal with also almost a thousand years ago.

Indira Parthasarathy's interest in the problems of caste is also visible in his other play, i.e., *Nantaṉ katai*. In this case the playwright draws on the Tamil Śaiva tradition; however, the author still remains in the sphere of traditional hagiographic texts, from which he chooses the figure of Nandan (Nantaṉ), the untouchable devotee of Śiva. The historicity of Nandan is not as obvious as that of Ramanuja, which is also

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[14] "innāṭakattiṉ nōkkam rāmānujar namakkuc camakālattavar eṉṟu itai paṭikkiṉṟavarkaḷum mēṭai ēṟumpōtu pārkkiṉṟavarkaḷum uṇara vēṇṭum eṉpatu tāṉ" (Pārttacārati 1997:10).

Another novel in which Indira Parthasarathy depicts a mythological character as a contemporary person is *Kiruṣṇā kiruṣṇā* (2003), translated into English by the author himself (Parthasarathy 2007b). In the Introduction to his translation, he openly writes: "My attempt in writing this novel is to portray him as our contemporary and as one who would be relevant for all the periods to come" (Parthasarathy 2007b: 10).

reflected in the very title of the play, where the word *katai* may be understood not only as 'the story' but also as 'the legend' which is clearly expressed in the title of the English translation authored by C. T. Indra.

Nandan belongs to the group of 63 *nāyaṉmār*s or Śaiva saints venerated by the Tamil tradition. A list of their names was most probably compiled and presented for the first time in one of the poems by Cuntarar in the 8th or 9th century, and the most authoritative hagiographic text concerning their lives and activities is Cēkkiḻār's *Periya purāṇam* ("Great Purana") from the 12th century, one of the canonical texts belonging to the school of Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta (for more, see Ebeling 2010: 450–475). Since then, the character of Nandan, the only untouchable among *nāyaṉmār*s, appears quite frequently in modern Tamil literature, film, theatre and folklore (*ibid.*: 482–493), and in the 20th century he was regarded by many Dalit rights activists as an icon of protest against the oppression of Dalits and the supremacy of the higher castes (cf. Manickam 1990).[15] In the Introduction, Indira Parthasarathy admits that he was inspired to write his own retelling of Nandan's story by the *Nantaṉ carittirak kīrttaṉai* composed by Kōpālakiruṣṇa Pārati in 1861 (Pārttacārati 2007: 205).[16]

As in the case of many other saints, no historical data about Nandan have survived, and his life is known only from hagiographic records, mainly the *Periya purāṇam*, then numerous legends and folk stories.[17] Indira Parthasarathy's play is yet another retelling of the life of this

[15] In fact, Lynn Vincentnathan, who was carrying out her research on the stories about Nandan in the 1990s, observed that Nandan was actually not "a hero for today's untouchable youth" (Vincentnathan 1993: 170), which she explains by pointing to the rather obedient (and not revolutionary) nature of Nandan who accepted his fate and did not try to change it much.

[16] On Kōpālakiruṣṇa Pārati and his composition, see Ebeling 2010: 475–481.

[17] As L. Vincentnathan notes, the story of Nandan has different versions, depending on the caste of the storytellers (Vincentnathan 1993: 163). This is mainly due to the fact that such legends about anomalistic "untouchable" saints obviously disturb and contradict the upper caste Hindus' perception of caste division according to which the untouchables are inherently inferior and polluting.

legendary person where the playwright narrates a story, not history. One of the events mentioned in the legends of Nandan is his visit to the temple of Śiva-Naṭarāja in Chidambaram (Citamparam). Because of his low origins[18] Nandan was afraid to enter the holy city of Chidambaram. But he was directed by Śiva to go into the temple by passing through a holy fire, so obeying the divine command Nandan stepped into the pyre and came out of it with his body completely purified which allowed him to enter the temple, pray to God and be finally united with Śiva (Indra 2003b: xiv–xv; Vincentnathan 1993: 164–165). The possibility of entering the temple by untouchable persons, even if they were great devotees of Śiva, was evidently against the Brahmin tradition.[19] As the result the Brahmins of Chidambaram allowed Nandan to enter their holy and pure temple only because they were compelled to do so by Śiva's command (Pechilis Prentiss 1996: 242–243).

This story, being based on religious tale and legend, does not refer to any historiographical documents but nonetheless seems deeply historical to the Śaiva followers. Basing his play on the legend of Nandan, Indira Parthasarathy approaches hereby both history and myth (Indra 2008: xlvi). And again, similarly to the other previously mentioned play (*Rāmāṉujar*), he uses historical, or rather in this case, mythological sources, to comment upon the contemporary caste problems. Unlike the legendary hero, Indira Parthasarathy's Nandan dies after he is tricked by the upper caste members who, after the dance contest,[20] persuade him to go to Chidambaram and step into the sacrificial fire. This is supposed to wipe out his sin of being born an untouchable and help him to become a Brahmin. In this way he is punished for his dreams of being free and liberated as the true Brahmin he never was.

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[18] Nandan was providing leather for temple drums (Monius 2004: 189).

[19] All Hindus, irrespective of their caste, are entitled to enter any Hindu temple in Tamil Nadu only after 1947, the year in which The Tamil Nadu Temple Entry Authorization Act was passed.

[20] The contest consisted of a Bharatanatyam (*parata nāṭṭiyam*), a classical form of dance practiced in the temples of higher castes, and the Koothu (*kūttu*), a folk dance performed by the lower castes. The rivalry and hostility between lower and higher social groups is obvious here.

C. T. Indra who translated *Nantaṉ katai* into English wrote that Indira Parthasarathy "brilliantly rehistoricizes the original legend about an outcast called Nandan" (Indra 2003a: 75). It proves that Indira Parthasarathy returns to history and by referring to a figure traditionally considered historical, showcases present times, and above all, the social ills of modern India. In fact, although Indira Parthasarathy depicts a legendary (or maybe even historical) figure and describes events known from the hagiographies believed by some to be entirely reliable historical material, he is not actually talking about the past, but rather about the contemporary world he lives in. He speaks about the present as if it had happened in historical times, which allows him to clearly refer to social problems of the contemporary world. Therefore, his (semi)historical plays, though based on historical themes and persons, are carefully crafted reflections on the present times.

Indira Parthasarathy's critique of the privileges and hegemony of the present-day upper castes is expressed through references to past events and a change in perception of the semi-historical figure of Nandan. As C. T. Indra explains, earlier, in the hagiographical texts, Nandan was shown solely in the religious context—as a person who wanted to see and worship Śiva in the Chidambaram temple which he was not allowed to enter because of his social background. But basically he was a faithful, exemplary devotee who knew his place in the social order. It was ultimately God Śiva Himself who allowed him to come inside the temple on the condition that he first passed through the cleansing ritual of fire. Self-immolation made Nandan as pure as the temple Brahmins of Chidambaram and enabled him to unite with Śiva, his beloved God. But Parthasarathy's Nandan does not accept his social position and wants to become a Brahmin; he wishes to change the existing social order. Thus, he poses a serious threat to the system of social supremacy of the upper castes particularly when he convinces other people from the lower castes not to eat meat, drink alcohol or worship folk deities.[21]

[21] The change of such habits and lifestyle as postulated by Nandan reflects the need for acculturation of local societies, their adaptation to the requirements of

And eventually, he pays a high price. Tricked by the Brahmins, he enters the fire as the original Nandan did long before him and dies in terrible agony. His screams are heard by his companions gathered around him. The presence of others is here especially significant—the untouchables are warned in an exceptionally cruel way not to ever dare to follow in the footsteps of this "modern" Nandan.

Just as in his plays, the social problems of untouchability and the oppressed castes are present in Indira Parthasarathy's prosaic works as well. This is particularly obvious in his novel *Kurutippuṉal* (1975, *The River of Blood*),[22] for which the author received the annual award of the India's National Academy of Letters (Sahitya Akademi) in 1977.[23] The novel is based on recent events, so in this case Indira Parthasarathy literally tells history as it really was and does not retell (semi)legendary or factual (hi)stories as he did in the two plays mentioned earlier. However, it is still not a historical account par excellence, but rather author's own literary vision and interpretation of what had happened.

Kurutippuṉal refers directly to the massacre that took place on 25th December 1968 in Keezhvenmani (Kīḻveṇmaṇi), a small village in the then Thanjavur (Tañcāvūr) district. The local non-Brahmin landowners and their henchmen burnt alive 44 Dalits, or the representatives of the so-called untouchable castes who were landless agricultural labourers working on their masters' fields (Viswanathan 2005: 29). The victims were mostly helpless women and children who, according to the eyewitnesses, were murdered with the tacit permission of the policemen who passively watched the unfolding tragedy. According to the reports, 23 children aged 1–16 were killed in the massacre; women (16 victims) predominated among the adults; and even some

the Brahminical tradition and new cultural models which M. N. Srinivas described as the process of Sanskritization (Srinivas 1956; Srinivas 1957: 531–533). I. Parthasarathy mentions this term in the Introduction to his *Nantaṉ katai* (Pārttacārati 2007: 205).

22 It was translated into English by Ka. Naa. Subramanyam (Parthasarathy 2006).

23 In 1983 Sreedhar Rajan directed a film based on this novel, titled *Kaṇ civantāl maṇ civakkum* ("If the Eyes Redden, the Soil Will Turn Red Too").

70-year-olds were among the five killed men; the numbers indicate the extreme heartlessness of the criminal perpetrators.[24] To honour the victims, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) has erected in the village a memorial to mark the annual Keezhvenmani Martyrs' Day.

Not all perpetrators of the crime have been clearly identified. The massacre was attributed to local landowners on whose orders some 200 goons accompanied by police vehicles[25] raided Dalit houses and shot at innocent people, as a result of which two men were killed. The terrified Dalits while escaping from the burned houses took refuge in one of the huts located on the outskirts of the village, a hut which the attackers cordoned off and then set on fire, knowing that there was a large group of people inside.[26] Those who managed to get out of the burning hut, including two children, were thrown back into the fire by the attackers.[27]

Ten landowners were found guilty and sentenced to ten years in prison, but their sentences were overturned on appeal. I. Gopalakrishna Naidu, the leader of the Paddy Producers' Association (Nel Uṟpattiyāḷar Caṅkam) was found to be the main culprit (Sivaraman 1973: 929). However, his sentence was also overturned by the Madras High Court in 1975 (Viswanathan 2005: 29). Ultimately, no one was punished but Gopalakrishna Naidu was assassinated in 1980 (Gros 2009: 382; Kanagasabai 2014: 114), possibly as a result of revenge.[28]

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[24] https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/keezhvenmani-the-first-chronicle-of-violence-against-dalits-in-independent-india/article25826814.ece, accessed on 1.03.2021.

[25] According to Ravikumar (2005: xxvi) in many cases of anti-Dalit violence in Tamil Nadu "the police abetted the crimes as perpetrators." The cases of oppression of Dalits by police and police measures against them are frequently reported by S. Viswanathan (2005). The subject of police cruelty is also present in modern Tamil literature (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1997: 250).

[26] https://www.thehindu.com/archives/from-the-archives-dec-27-42-persons-burnt-alive-in-thanjavur-village/article25835459.ece, accessed on 1.03.2021.

[27] https://indianfolk.com/remembering-keezhvenmani-massacre-edited-anu-vensila/, accessed on 1.03.2021.

[28] Hugo Gorringe alludes to the Keezhvenmani massacre when he writes about the "chosen traumas" that may become the focus of the social movements; it is thus

The immediate cause of the carnage was a strike undertaken by local farm workers during the rice harvest. Under the influence of the growing power and agitation of the Communist Party, landless workers originating from the so-called untouchable castes and seeking to improve their position, demanded that the landowners increase their daily wages during the harvest season (Gough 1974: 1391). When the landowners did not agree to these demands, workers refused to work and did not show in the fields. Since the harvest was already underway, large financial losses would have been incurred if the rice was not harvested in time. The landlords chose not to raise wages and instead brought in outside labour, which caused animosity between the two groups of workers. The local workers, while remaining unemployed, had no financial resources to meet their everyday needs and came to the conclusion that the newcomers, along with the landowners employing them in contravention to the previously established rules, deprived them not only of the possibility of a decent income, but also of basic livelihood (cf. Kanagasabai 2014: 109–111). Thus, the problem had two dimensions, socio-economic and political, and was related to the issues of caste and class accordingly. It can be said that a tragic meeting of tradition and modernity took place at that moment. The existing caste system had so far forced landless farm workers to perform almost slave labour for the landowners. The Republic of India established in 1947, however, prohibited discrimination on the basis of caste, and the communist thinkers and leftist activists who were gaining more and more popularity in South India, supported agricultural workers in their fight against poverty and exploitation by their employers, in this case the wealthy landowners. The communists considered the problem of Dalits from Keezhvenmani to be more a kind of class struggle than a caste rivalry (Viswanathan 2005: 19). As mentioned above, the Keezhvenmani massacre was viewed from two main vantage points—of caste and class. The events leading to the massacre were analyzed

frequently used by Dalit activists not only to "emphasise the significance of an event," but also to "evoke a sense of strength and the capacity of retaliation" (Gorringe 2005: 135).

primarily as a struggle between castes and a Dalits' attempt to gain independence from the upper castes. On the other hand, the issue of the worker-employer dispute was also emphasized by the politicians and communists, inclined in their analyses to look at this tragic event through the prism of the working-class struggle for decent work, just wages and right to strike.

One of the first to speak on the issue of the Keezhvenmani massacre[29] was Indira Parthasarathy who took up this subject in his novel *Kurutippuṉal* which appeared just seven years after the tragedy, providing thus quite an incisive and fresh look at the problem. One may say that in this case Indira Parthasarathy relates history that is happening almost right before his eyes. By using his literary imagination, he was not simply (re)telling (hi)story but was actively telling the history and relating the almost current events. And again, as in the case of *Rāmāṉujar* or *Nantaṉ katai*, he did not simply chronicle the events, but instead, created his own story based on the theme of the Keezhvenmani massacre.

The main characters of the novel are not oppressed Dalits but two intellectuals from Delhi who stay in the village and observe the feudal

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[29] Most probably the first writer to refer to the Keezhvenmani massacre in Tamil literature was Gnanakoothan (Ñāṉakkūttaṉ, 1938–2016), who mentioned this incident in his rather short poem of 13 lines, first published in 1969, then reprinted in his poetry collections in 1976 and 1994 (Gros 2009: 383; English translation given by Gros, *ibid*.: 384). Literary works based on the same incident include among others Cōlai Cuntaraperumāḷ's novel *Cennel* (1999, "The Red Paddy") in Tamil, Pāṭṭāḷi's Tamil novel *Kīḻait tī. Piṉ Veṇmaṇi nāval* (2007, "The Eastern Fire. The Novel about Venmani Later"); Meena Kandasamy's English novel, *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014); English translation by Vasantha Surya of an anonymous poem *Tīkkuḷiyal* (2004, "The Bath in the Fire") which appeared as *Christmas at Keelvenmani* in Ravikumar, R. Azhagarasan (eds.) 2012: 47–53; cf. discussion of Tamil original by F. Gros 2009: 386–387. Mythily Sivaraman, a women's rights activist, has published articles on the subject collected in her book (Sivaraman 2013). The topic of Keezhvenmani massacre was also introduced into the films—in 1997 T. Nagarajan directed *Aravintaṉ*, a feature film inspired by this theme; and in 2006 Bharathi Krishnakumar directed a documentary *Rāmaiyāviṉ kuṭicai* ("The Hut of Ramiah").

relations between the mighty landowner on one hand and his agricultural workers and other villagers who are supported by the local teacher with a communist background on the other. The strategy adopted by Indira Parthasarathy to show the events from the point of view of an "outside observer"[30] who is also the protagonist of the novel is, according to F. Gros, "the most common stereotype and persistent curse in contemporary imaginative Tamil fiction, issuing mostly from the urbanized middle-class" (Gros 2009: 386). This "curse" did not allow Indira Parthasarathy, himself a Brahmin intellectual from distant Delhi, to dive deeper into the subject of caste oppression, but it is still important to note that he was probably one of the very few Tamil writers who dared to take up this complex topic in his writing. However, he introduced an imaginary sexual plot which was to explain the cruel behaviour of the landowner and to justify somehow that his motivation was not only a caste bias but had a personal, psychological dimension. This subtheme was not positively received by the readers especially those of the leftist persuasion for whom the carnage had its obvious origins in the struggle between the social classes. As noted by Indira Parthasarathy himself, he "had fictionalized the incident" so that historical characters became his own "projections" (Parthasarathy 1992: 65), a view which was not accepted by the Communist Party activists who happened even to burn the copies of the novel[31] in order to manifest their opposition to Parthasarathy's creative approach to the problem of class struggle and the necessity for social revolution as they understood it.

[30] This expression is found, for example, in the scene when Gopal, one of the protagonists, thinks about the problems he is witnessing and facing himself in the village. Thus, he comes to the conclusion: "From now on I cannot step aside and remain [only] an observer" (*otuṅkiyiruntu oru pārvaiyāḷaṉāka iṉi eṉṉāl irukka muṭiyātu*; Pārttacārati 2000: 105). Soon, however, his doubts return, so again he thinks that it would be better not to get involved in the local problems, after all he does not belong to the village, so he says: "I am only a single man who came [here] from outside" (*nāṉ oru taṉi āḷu, veḷiyūrlēntu vantirukkiṟavaṉ*; Pārttacārati 2000: 105).

[31] https://thewire.in/caste/keezhvenmani-massacre, accessed on 1.03.2021, https://www.thehindu.com/lit-for-life/indira-parthasarathy-will-be-given-the-lifetime-achievement-award-this-year-at-lit-for-life/article22382738.ece, accessed on 1.03.2021.

Interestingly, some among numerous works composed by Indira Parthasarathy may be said to contain certain autobiographical elements, or direct references to the past and historical events, this time experienced by the writer personally. These include the aforementioned novel, *Ēcuviṉ tōḻarkaḷ*, and a short story, *Niyāyaṅkaḷ* (1983, "Justices"),[32] both written during (or right after) the writer's stay in Poland. The main character of *Ēcuviṉ tōḻarkaḷ* is an unnamed professor from India who teaches at the University of Warsaw, so in this case the consistency of the events with Parthasarathy's life is obvious. The reader, however, does not gain much information about personal life of Parthasarathy or about actual, historical events that took place in Poland at the time. Again, as in the case of the previously mentioned works, this novel serves better as a stage to present the issues of the complex human psyche rather than to interpret current processes that take place behind the scenes, such as the Solidarity movement and the introduction of the martial law in Poland. As the writer points out in the Introduction (Parthasarathy 2005b: x–xi), *Ēcuviṉ tōḻarkaḷ* is simply a novel, a figment of his imagination and not a travelogue, therefore the historical situation of Poland in the 1980s forms only "the warp of this story" told through the eyes of the local academics and the employees of the Indian embassy in Warsaw.

The first-person narrator of *Niyāyaṅkaḷ* also happens to be an anonymous professor who during the wedding of his student's brother meets one Janush Walton, person who during the Second World War escaped from the German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp in Auschwitz. On the day when his missing daughter, who somehow survived the war and later migrated to Israel, finally manages, after many years' search, to find him in Warsaw, Janush commits suicide. This comes about because he cannot come to terms with the firsthand knowledge his daughter shared with him about the atrocities committed

[32] It appeared first in 1983, then was included in author's collection of short-stories *Yukatarmam* (Pārttacārati 1984: 81–92). In English translation by C. T. Indra it appeared as *Justifications* (Parthasarathy 2000).

by the Jews in the West Bank. It seemed to him as if all he had experienced in Auschwitz was not just a bad dream, but a reality which was still happening in other parts of the world, with history repeating itself. Unable to accept this, Janush takes sleeping pills to free himself from the pain of both the past and the present.

This short story is a good closing point for deliberations about the past and history in Indira Parthasarathy's literary works. History, so distant and seemingly absent in his main narratives of the modern city life, is a complex part and the focal point of selected stories without which it is impossible to understand current events and social situations described therein. As shown above, in many other works by Parthasarathy, history and the past—although they seem to be in the very foreground of the narration—remain concealed in the background, and yet it is only thanks to them that the writer can express his views about the present day and interpret the world of his time.

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