

STIMW paper proposal

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## **“There’s a Trojan Horse in My Myth!”: The Case of Purūravas in Pre-Modern Tamiḷ Literature**

Among the ancient narratives of the Sanskrit tradition, the famous legend of Urvaśī and Purūravas stands out as one of the very few that have been repeatedly re-told and re-worked from Vedic times to this day. Modern scholarship tends to focus either on the Vedic versions of this narrative or on the celebrated *Vikramorvaśīyam*, a poetical gem and one of the three surviving plays of Kālidāsa. Later tellings, especially those composed in vernacular languages, receive little to no attention. This neglect, however, is unfortunate: in addition to their inherent literary value, these tellings can be used as cultural indicators that expose shifts in the literary tendencies, beliefs, and world views that characterized the “classical” narratives.

In this paper I examine the *Purūravaccakkiravarttikatai*, namely “The Story of Emperor Purūravas”, an elaborate prose version of the Urvaśī-Purūravas legend that was printed in early 19<sup>th</sup> century Madras, on the basis of recitation by local bards. The *Purūravaccakkiravarttikatai* is an example of a uniquely Tamiḷ narrative-tradition relating to this story. This tradition, which appears in a variety of literary genres in Tamiḷ dated from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, introduces certain curious departures from the rather stable narrative structure common to all major Sanskrit versions.

I argue that this pre-modern Tamiḷ tradition of the Urvaśī-Purūravas legend incorporates an unusual strategy of “manipulation of narrative structure”. The narrative is firmly bound to the Sanskritic (essentially Purāṇic) tellings, but at the same time undermines their “classical” foundations, criticizes their heroic and religious ethos, and replaces it with local sentiments and ideas. Moreover, I will suggest that this strategy belongs to a broader cultural tendency, emerging in late-medieval South-India, to fuse canonical Sanskrit traditions with folk materials – tales, themes, and motifs. This tendency may have been a stepping-stone en route to the present-day so-called “Hindu” mythological and ritual traditions of the Tamiḷ region.