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Kerala Women's Writing in Sanskrit: Ambādēvi Tampurāṭṭi of Cemprol Koṭṭāraṁ – Her Life and Literary Oeuvre

Abstract

It seems to be of great importance to collect all possible data which will finally allow us to write the chapter of the history of Sanskrit literature which has never been thoroughly written, namely the one concerning the literary activity of Indian women. It is high time to notice the presence of Sanskrit literature written by them and to try to understand their place and role in the world of Sanskrit culture dominated by men writers, however not exclusively. Every piece of information we are still able to gather makes the picture more complete and deepens our knowledge. The present article is devoted to Svāti Tirunāl Ambādēvi Tampurāṭṭi of Cemprol Koṭṭāraṁ (1890–1928), the authoress from the Kingdom of Travancore, composing both in Sanskrit and her mother tongue, Malayalam.

Keywords: Svāti Tirunāl Ambādēvi Tampurāṭṭi, Cemprol Koṭṭāraṁ, Sanskrit, literature, Kerala, women's writings, Travancore, Malayalam

The traces of Indian women's writings in Sanskrit¹ are not easy to find for someone who would like to re-write the history of Sanskrit literature, supplementing the missing chapter, never thoroughly written so far, about the participation of women in literary creativity. Although lots of pieces of evidence are most probably lost forever, there is still a chance to regain the manuscripts of some authoresses, especially those who lived recently, in the 19th and at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Some of their works

¹ The present article is the result of the project OPUS 4 2012/07/B/HS2/01294 financed by the National Science Centre, Poland. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. R.P. Raja for his willingness to share his knowledge of the history of different royal houses of Kerala and to Chemprol Raja Raja Varma for offering me the copy of his grandmother Ambādēvi Tampurāṭṭi's manuscript and some other valuable materials and his help. Both gentlemen provided me with precious pieces of information concerning Ambādēvi Tampurāṭṭi's life and day.

may be still kept by their families, some were published in local magazines or in a form of booklets, printed and distributed locally, and can be obtained from private archives. It may also be still possible to gather and preserve biographical details concerning their lives.

During my fieldwork in Kerala,² a southern state of India, in 2014 and 2015, made possible due to the financial support of National Science Centre in Poland, I was able to collect several Sanskrit manuscripts authored by women as well as very rare printed editions of their works. The present paper will focus on the literary oeuvre and biography of Svāti Tirunāl³ Ambādēvi Tampurāṭṭi⁴ (Fig. 1) born in the month of Mīnam (Pisces) on the 25th, in the Malabar year 1065, corresponding to 6th April, 1890 A.D.



Fig. 1. Svāti Tirunāl Ambādēvi Tampurāṭṭi (1890–1928)
(Photograph of the original picture: Lidia Sudyka)

Her mother was Trikkēṭṭa Tirunāl Kuñṅikuṭṭi and her father Brahmaśrī Kṛṣṇan Nampūtiri of Elaṅṅallūr Mana in Kottayam⁵ District. She was married to Brahmaśrī

² During the British domination in that region lasting 150 years, Kerala (Anglicised form of Malayalam – Kēraḷa) consisted of three parts: the northern part of Kerala known as Malabar (Mal. Malabār), which belonged to Madras Presidency, and the native states of Travancore (Mal. Tiruvitāṅkōṭṭū, Tiruvāṅkōṭṭū, Tirivitaṅkūr, Tiruvitāṅkūr) and Cochin (Mal. Kocci). In 1956 they were joined and formed the state known as Kerala. Before that time there were several smaller and bigger kingdoms and principalities (more in: A. Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, Kottayam 2014; A. P. Ibrahimkunju, *Medieval Kerala*, Kariavattom, Thiruvananthapuram 2007).

³ A number of Malayalam words (geographical names, names and titles of individuals, some terms) and Sanskrit ones are frequently used in this article. The Sanskrit terms and quotations are given according to IAST. As to the Malayalam I apply ISO 15919.

⁴ In Kerala royal and noble families the full name of its members contained the name of the asterism (*nakṣatra*) under which he/she was born, then the name, which was traditionally given in the particular family and finally the title expressing position of the family, e.g. Tampurān for male members and Tampurāṭṭi for females. As the list of male and female names in the family tradition was limited, in order to differentiate between one Ambādēvi and another, the pet name, used in the family, was given. Sometimes only the pet name was left in the memory of younger generation.

⁵ Anglicised form of Mal. Kōṭṭayam.

Andaladi Divākaran Nampūtirippād, a well-known scholar from Andaladi Mana, near Pattambi,⁶ in South Malabar, Kerala. Ambādēvi had five children: Rēvati Tirunāl C.K. Kēraḷa Varma, Cittira Tirunāl C.K. Rāja Rāja Varma, Aśvati Tirunāl Śrīmatī Tampurāṭṭi, Viśākham Tirunāl C.K. Ravi Varma, and Utram Tirunāl C.K. Rāma Varma.

She belonged to the aristocratic matrilineal family⁷ from which the husbands for Travancorean princesses used to be chosen. The history of this family is complicated. They began as a royal house in South Malabar known as Parappūr Svarūpam. As the family was growing, their matriarchs were starting its different branches.⁸ In 1688,⁹ due to certain political developments, one of the branches migrated to Travancore and finally settled down in the village of Kilimanoor.¹⁰ They are known in the course of history as the Kilimanoor Royal Family.¹¹ In the year 1766, when Haidar Alī Khān attacked Malabar,¹² another branch of the family fled to Travancore seeking shelter under Kārtika Tirunāl Rāma Varma known as Dharma Rāja. Dharma Rāja accommodated them in Changanacherry.¹³ Soon they branched out again. Lakṣmīpuram, Anantapuram and Cemprol Koṭṭāram¹⁴ (Fig. 2) in Haripad¹⁵ are its three lines. Ambādēvi Tampurāṭṭi belonged to Cemprol Koṭṭāram.¹⁶

⁶ Anglicised form of Mal. Pattāmpi.

⁷ More about matrilineal system in Kerala can be found in works by Eleanor Kathleen Gough, e.g. *The Traditional Kinship System of the Nayars of Malabar*, Cambridge Mass. 1954, or in some chapters of the book *Matrilineal Kinship* edited by her and David Murray Schneider in 1961.

⁸ Irawati Karve in her book *Kinship Organization in India* states: "Rivalries of brothers, co-wives and sisters-in-law, and between daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law do not seem to form a theme of the songs and proverbs of matrilineal people. And yet a *thārwad* claiming descent from one ancestress breaks up into separate units. How and why the breaks occurs, I am unfortunately unable to point out, as I have not studied the Kerala family from that point of view." (Irawati Karve, *Kinship Organization in India*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay 1965, p. 11) But also here in the *taravāṭṭū* (Mal.), a joint family observing matrilineal system of inheritance (Mal. *marumakāttayam*), rivalries and quarrels happened. According to Dr. R.P. Raja, a member of the Mavelikkara (Mal. Māvēlikkara) family, the author of many publications concerning the history of Travancore, whom I interviewed and who was so kind as to provide notes concerning the history of his family, "At one point of time, the family was left with three female members named Ambika, Umamba and Ambadevi. In course of time, disputes arose among sisters, and they decided to leave Mekkotta and to establish their own separate Kovilakoms (palaces)." (R.P. Raja, notes prepared for the author, 13th Febraury 2014).

⁹ R.P. Raja, notes prepared for the author, 13th Febraury 2014.

¹⁰ Anglicised form of Mal. Kiḷimānūr.

¹¹ Rāghava Varma of this family sired the founder of the Travancore Kingdom, King Mārtāṅṭa Varma, born in 1705. The estate was handed over by him to the family of his father (more about the circumstances of this donation in: V. Nagam Aiya, *The Travancore State Manual*, Vol. 1, Trivandrum 1906, pp. 328–329). In 1753 the areas controlled by Kiḷimānūr Kōyil Tampurāns, as this was their title, were exempted from taxes and granted autonomous status.

¹² More about the Mysorean invasion in: Ibrahimkunju *Medieval Kerala*, pp. 213–232; 306–317; Shreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, pp. 306–317; Nagam Aiya, *Travancore State Manual*, pp. 380–384.

¹³ Anglicised form of Mal. Caṅṅanaśśēri.

¹⁴ Mal. *koṭṭāram* – 'a royal residence', especially in Travancore.

¹⁵ Anglicised form of Mal. Harippād.

¹⁶ The genealogical tree of the Parappūr Svarūpam is given in R.P. Raja's monography *New Light on Swathi Thirunal*, Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies (INDIS), Trivandrum 2006, pp. 283–284.



Fig. 2. Cempul Kottaram (Photo: Lidia Sudyka)

In old orthodox homes of the royal families of Kerala there was a sensitive awareness and will to continue Sanskrit tradition and learning. Due to the social organization and subsequent economic stability, the essential physical needs of their members were satisfied and they had plenty of free time at their disposal to pursue their interests without any distractions or hindrances. So it was only natural that these families, though very limited in number, produced many great Sanskrit scholars and writers of Kerala. But while the men in most cases earned fame, the female members, living cloistered life, were less known outside. Ambādēvi was more fortunate than the others because even during her lifetime she began to earn a name in the literary field. It was thanks to certain publications of those times and her personal contacts. One of Ambādēvi's very few visitors was a poet and journalist, Vennikkulam Gōpāla Kurup (1902–1980).¹⁷ He used to come frequently requesting for some write-ups from her. As the Keralan society was highly orthodox in its ideas of caste pollution, Vennikulam Gōpāla Kurup could not enter the house, but waited at the door. Ambādēvi would give a note or her poem by dropping it into the hands of Gōpāla Kurup, for touching him would pollute her. These restrictions were due to the caste difference but as a woman she had even more limitations and rules to follow. For instance, when women were menstruating, they themselves were polluted and treated as 'untouchables'. So they could not use some items as they could spoil them with their touch. Among such special objects was water. Home-made ink was prepared with water, therefore touching the ink would pollute it and the substance would have to be thrown away. So, during such periods, Ambādēvi would write her literary works in pencil and give it to her friend through a messenger.

¹⁷ See the entry concerning Kurup in *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature: Devraj to Jyoti*, Vol. 2, Chief Editor: Amaresh Datta, New Delhi 1988, p. 1445.

Ambādēvi never went to any school but received her education at home.¹⁸ At that time and in such a family it meant that she was well acquainted with the Sanskrit language and its literature. Her son Viśākham Tirunāl C.K. Ravi Varma remembers a Nampūtiri neighbour, nearly as old as his mother, who “used to sit in the veranda and learn Sanskrit from mother sitting inside the adjacent room”.¹⁹ In that case a Nampūtiri, as belonging to the highest strata of the Keralan society, under certain circumstances would have been polluted if they had been sitting in one room.

It is a well-known fact that she also communicated with the famous poet Vaḷḷattōḷ Nārāyaṇa Mēnōn (16 October 1878–13 March 1958), one of the so-called Great Trio of Malayalam poetry.²⁰ Whether she had contacts with other poets is not known. But it is proved that she established some links with literary magazines. Possibly the contacts were built through Vaḷḷattōḷ and Kurup, who published their own articles in the magazines. Her work *Śrībhūtanāthodaya* was published in parts in the “Vanita Kusumam”, a ladies’ magazine. This Malayali magazine and some others were important instruments of creating an ambience for social reform movements at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. As Teena Antony writes:

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, women’s magazines in Malayalam and other Indian languages provided opportunities for women writers and readers to express their opinions and debate issues that were related to their lives.²¹

The literary works of women-writers were also published there. Ambādēvi wrote both in Malayalam and Sanskrit but only her two works in Malayalam were published. These are: the mentioned-above poem *Śrībhūtanāthodayam* and the *Aṣṭamicampū* – translation of the work of a famous scholar and poet Mēlpaṭṭūr Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa²² from Sanskrit into Malayalam. The *Ajāmilamokṣam* and *Kanyakubjatilaykatha*, both in Malayalam, were never published. Although written in vernacular, all four poems belong to Sanskrit literary culture. The story of Ajāmila is described in the 6th canto of *Śrīmadbhāgavatam*. A sinful Brahmin Ajāmila is saved because of repeating the name of God when the messengers of death were approaching him. The story of the origin of the name of Kanyakubja

¹⁸ About traditional education in Kerala read more in: Ananda Wood, *Knowledge before printing and after. The Indian tradition in changing Kerala*, Delhi/Bombay/Calcutta/Madras 1985. The issues of women education in Kerala were addressed in Lidia Sudyka, *Zapomniana poezja. Sanskrycka twórczość kobiet z rodu władców Koczinu*, “Przegląd Orientalistyczny” 1–2 (257–258) (2016), pp. 217–230.

¹⁹ Viśākham Tirunāl C.K. Ravi Varma in: R.P. Raja (ed.), *Chemprol Kottarathil Swathithirunal Ambadevi Thampuratti*, Kottayam, 2012, p. 17.

²⁰ The other two poets are: Kumāran Āśān (1873–1924) and Uḷḷūr S. Paramēśvarayyar (1877–1949). See for example K.M. George, *A Survey of Malayalam Literature*, London 1968, pp. 147–159.

²¹ T. Antony, *Women’s Education: A Reading of Early Malayalam Magazines*, “Artha – Journal of Social Sciences” 12, 3 (2013), p. 20.

²² K. Kunjunni Raja devotes a whole chapter of his book to discuss his works and life, see K. Kunjunni Raja, *Nārāyaṇabhaṭṭa of Melputtūr*, in: *The Contribution of Kerala to Sanskrit Literature*, Madras 1980, pp. 119–152.

city is known from the *Rāmāyaṇa* I.32. The *Śrībhūtanāthodayam* refers to Śiva. The *Aṣṭamicampū* of Mēlpattūr Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa describes the *aṣṭami* festival as celebrated in Vaikkam in North Travancore.²³

Ambādēvi authored many poems in Manipravalam²⁴ and Sanskrit. Out of them only one Sanskrit work has been preserved in fragments. This is the *Daśakumāracarita*, of which the following parts are available:

Chapter II – from verse 294 to 385, Chapter III – 257 stanzas, Chapter IV – 161 stanzas, Chapter V – 127 stanzas, Chapter VI – 294 stanzas, Chapter VII – 131 stanzas, Chapter VIII – 281 and Conclusion – 68 stanzas (last stanza illegible).

Thus, the number of preserved strophes is 1410 and a part of the composition is lost.

This never published manuscript of her *Daśakumāracarita* was written in Malayalam script on 44 pages of the notebook (Fig. 3), sometimes with small corrections above the line and postscripts in Malayalam as that one at the end of the second chapter informing that since the verse 361 was omitted, it has been introduced at the very end, after the colophon finishing the *ucchvāsa*. Ambādēvi's son, Viśākham Tirunāl C.K. Ravi Varma, remembers that his mother “used to do all literary work in old notebooks, writing very closely with hardly any space between stanzas and paragraphs and using an ostrich feather pen and home prepared ink.”²⁵ Dr. R. P. Raja, a son of C.K. Kerala Varma of Cemprol family, explains that:

those were times when writing material changed from cadjan leaves to paper. But then, paper or notebooks were not so easily available as it is today and so one had to scribble on whatever little paper or notebook that came one's way. And the case of Amba Devi was not different”.²⁶

Perhaps one of these old, ordinary looking notebooks was just thrown away one day.

On the other hand, we do not know what was the intention of Ambādēvi – whether she decided to restrict herself to the part called by her *Uttarapīṭhikā* only or encompassed also *Pūrvapīṭhikā* into her poetic version. According to the family tradition, since she was known as an excellent Sanskrit scholar, she was asked to rewrite in verse the famous prose work of Daṇḍin (7th/8th c. A.D.), *Daśakumāracarita*, i.e. the “Adventures of ten young men”. The ears of Keralites prefer a melodious flow of poetry so eagerly recited by them and learnt by heart. And she did it using different metres, typical for Sanskrit poetry, such as *vaṃśastha*, *anuṣṭubh śloka*, *triṣṭubh*, *mandākrantā*, *śikhariṇī*, *jagatī*, *sragdharā*, *upajāti*, to name only some of them.

²³ Ibidem, p. 145.

²⁴ Manipravalam (*maṇipravālam*) – a hybrid language mixing, in the case of Kerala, Malayalam and Sanskrit languages.

²⁵ Viśākham Tirunāl C.K. Ravi Varma in: R.P. Raja (ed.), *Chemprol Kottarathil Swathithirunal Ambadevi Thampuratti*, p. 17.

²⁶ R.P. Raja, notes prepared for the author, 08.01.2017.

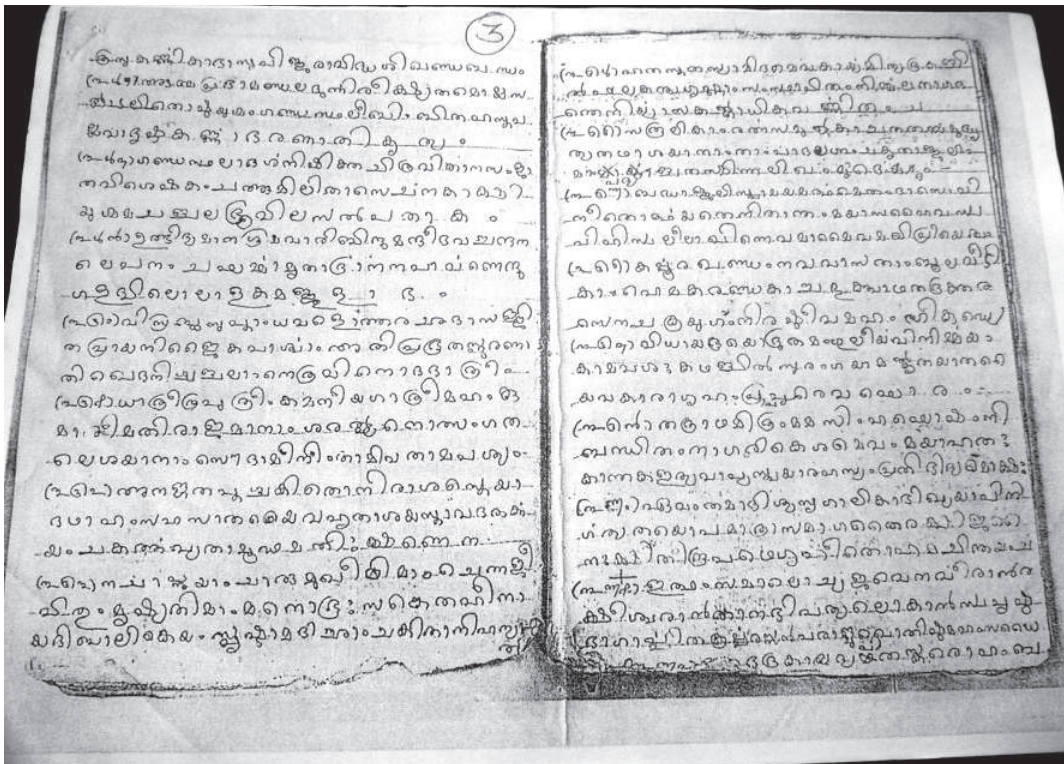


Fig. 3. A page from *Daśakumāracarita* manuscript in Ambādēvi Tampurāṭṭi's handwriting (Photo: Lidia Sudyka)

The textual history of Daṇḍin's prose masterpiece is quite complicated. Unfortunately, it has not come down to us in an intact form. The story has no beginning and ends abruptly. It made several writers willing to provide substitutes for the missing parts of narrative. One of them was Ketana living in the 13th century A.D., the author of *Daśakumāracaritamū* in Telugu, whom A.K. Warder credits with an important position in disseminating the text in its version as adventures of ten boys.²⁷ In 1924 M.R. Kavi edited *Avantisundarīkathā*, the text restored with many lacunae from incomplete and damaged manuscripts preserved in Kerala. Some scholars believe that it contains the first part of Daṇḍin's work, whereas some others disagree, treating the text edited as the *Avantisundarī* not being his composition.²⁸ Nevertheless, the long-established practice concerning the presentation of Daṇḍin's narrative is to introduce an opening, namely the *Pūrvapāṭhikā*,²⁹ which generally comprises five chapters (called in Sanskrit *ucchvāsa*),

²⁷ A.K. Warder, *Indian Kāvya Literature*. Vol. 4. *The Ways of Originality (Bāṇa to Dāmodaragupta)*, M. Banarsidass, Delhi 1983, pp. 167–169.

²⁸ S. Lienhard, *A History of Classical Poetry: Sanskrit-Pali-Prakrit*. (*A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. III, Fasc. 1.), Wiesbaden 1984, pp. 236–237. The latest proposal of Herman Tiekens aims at showing that all three parts of the text, which he calls a patchwork, form a close-knit frame story. He argues that “the cuts between the beginning, central part and ending are too neat to assume that the beginning and end were lost accidentally. Instead, the authors of the alternative beginnings and endings would have had access to the originals, which they replaced by their own, “improved versions.” (Tiekens 2013: 248). He also claims that Daṇḍin himself could author the *pūrvapāṭhikā*.

²⁹ Skt. *pūrvapāṭhikā* – ‘introduction’.

then the part in eight *ucchvāsas* (6–13), which is considered by some scholars to be the only part composed by Daṇḍin and later known as the *Daśakumāracarita*. As a kind of conclusion serves the *Uttarapīṭhikā*, not very long, in two chapters (14–15) or without any division into chapters.

Ambādēvi's manuscript starts almost at the end of the second *ucchvāsa*. The poetess finishes each *ucchvāsa* with a statement:

*daśakumāracarite uttarapīṭhikāyām dvitīya (trītiya, caturtha, etc.)
ucchvāsas samāptaḥ /*

The second (third, fourth etc.) chapter of *Uttarapīṭhikā* in the “Adventures of ten young men” has been finished.

One can be sure that the first chapter (*ucchvāsa*)³⁰ as well as 293 stanzas of the second one are missing. What about the *Pūrvapīṭhikā*? Most probably Ambādēvi Tampurāṭṭi wrote it. Such conclusion can be drawn from the fact that evidently she planned her composition in two parts. She informs her reader that this particular chapter in *Uttarapīṭhikā* finishes. In Sanskrit *uttara* means ‘later, following, subsequent, latter’ and also ‘concluding’. Placing all the eight *ucchvāsas* in the section described as subsequent (we definitely have to take this meaning into consideration, especially since Ambādēvi does not follow the usual practice of situating these eight chapters in the central part of the text) at all probability means that there was a first part. Perhaps it was written down together with the first and the beginning of the second *ucchvāsa* in another, now lost notebook. The word *uttarapīṭhikā* also appears on the top of page 41d of the manuscript in another role, namely introducing, as a title, the conclusion, a practice which this time is in perfect agreement with the tradition of transmitting Daṇḍin's text described above.

Ambādēvi manages her literary project, as we may call this endeavour, quite well. If we compare Daṇḍin's original, she preserves the necessary contents to follow the story, although some epithets and parts of the description are sometimes missing. Sometimes she uses the same words as those selected by Daṇḍin, sometimes looks for synonyms more suitable for her purpose, for instance suiting the metre. To compare, let us see the beginning of the fourth chapter of “Adventures of ten young men”:³¹

*suhṛd[em. t]bhir ebhir diśi diśy aham tu
paribhraman deva bhavā[em. a]didṛkṣuḥ /*

³⁰ The family claims that this first chapter contained 385 stanzas (notes prepared by RP. Raja on 18th January 2014).

³¹ I provide the appropriate Daṇḍin's prose fragment for the sake of comparison:

deva, so 'ham apy ebhir eva suhṛdbhir ekakarmormimālinemibhūmivalayaṃ paribhramann upāsaraṃ kadācit kāśīpurīm vārāṇasīm / upasprśya maṇibhaṅganirmalāmbhasi maṇikarṇikāyām avimuktesvaraṃ bhagavantam andhakamathanam abhipraṇāmya pradakṣiṇaṃ paribhraman puruṣam ekam āyāmavantam āyasaparighapīvarābhyām bhujābhyām ābadhyamānaparikaram avirataruditocchūnatāmradṛṣṭim adrākṣam / atarkayaṃ ca- (M.R. Kale, *Dasakumaracharita of Daṇḍin, Text with Sanskrit Commentary, Various Readings, A Litteral English Translation, Explanatory and Critical Notes, and an Exhaustive Introduction*, M. Banarsidass, Delhi 1986, p. 123.

*kaśīpurīm tāpaharām kadācit
vārāṇasīm tām samupāsaram ca // (1)*

Sire, wishing to see you,
I was roaming here and there with these friends.
Once I arrived at this City of Light,
which removes affliction – Vārāṇasī.

*vāriṇy upasprśya maṇiprakāśe
mahānubhāvaṁ maṇikarṇikāyām /
natvāndhakārim bhagavantam ārāt
pradakṣiṇam tatra cakāra so'ham // (2)*

Having bathed in the crystal clear waters,
at the Maṇikarṇikā Ghat, after bowing before Lord Śiva,
the mighty enemy of demon Andhaka,
I immediately circumambulated this [temple].

*āyāmantam paribaddhakakṣā-
bandham bhuj[em.bhubh]ābhyām atipīvarābhyām /
atarkk³² ayam pūruṣam ekṣya kañcit
tadā sadākrandanatāmranetrām // (3)*

At that moment,
seeing a certain very tall man,
girding up his loins with his extremely massive arms
and with his eyes red due to incessant crying, I reflected:

These three stanzas are composed of four eleven-syllable quarters (*pāda*) each. They are all written in a mixture of *upendravajrā* and *indravajrā*, the so-called upajāti metre. However, the poetess applies different patterns of introducing both metres. In the first stanza three *pādas* are in *upendravajrā* and the last one in *indravajrā*. In the second stanza *indravajrā* and *upendravajrā* come alternately. In the third one two first *pādas* are in *indravajrā*, then comes a pair of *upendravajrā pādas*. It shows that the poetess was carefully planning the application of metres. Also euphonic qualities are taken into account as there are alliterations in these stanzas. Vārāṇasī is described as *tāpaharā*, namely removing sorrows. The compound *bhavādidṛkṣu*, also absent from the original prose text, can be understood in many ways and most probably that was the intention of the poetess. I have proposed the emendation of *bhava* to *bhavā* because of metrical reasons and the logic of the narrative, nevertheless, the poetess could also allude to the meanings that the *bhava* brings. *Bhava* denotes 'worldly existence, the world, welfare', but can also mean Śiva, and Vārāṇasī is the city of Śiva. In comparison to Daṇḍin's prose, it can be noticed that the verses of Ambādēvi, not forming long sentences and

³² Doubled consonants are characteristic of this manuscript.

devoid of very long compound words, are easier to comprehend. It goes without saying that they are more melodious and it would be worth the effort to memorise them. And it was the aim of such an undertaking.

Even the small sample of this work shows her as a person with a very good command of Sanskrit and knowledge of classical metres. One can only regret that we do not possess her own independent works, showing her own poetical imagination.

Following a short illness, at the age of 38, Svāti Tirunāl Ambādēvi Tampurāṭṭi passed away on the 26th of Makaram, 1103 M.E. (Malabar Era) corresponding to 8th February, 1928. She lived at the time when harsh orthodoxy forced women to follow a very closed and secluded life. There was no way of self-expressing for them. Or better to put it another way round: they could achieve a mastery in the field of literature, science or art, but the knowledge of their achievements was limited, almost closed within the four walls of their homes. Quite rarely did their reputation as good scholars and writers have a chance to reach a wider audience. A member of Ambādēvi's family, Dr. R.P. Raja, is convinced that some manuscripts written by women still can be recovered but only very hard and systematic efforts could bring out works which still lay hidden not only in royal residences but in Brahmin (Skt. *brāhmaṇa*), Nair (Mal. *nāyar*) and Ezhava (Mal. *īḷavan*)³³ homes in all Kerala. However, Ambādēvi's case was different. Her poems in the Malayalam language were published during her lifetime and her talent and knowledge recognised. Her death was announced in an obituary published in the "Vanita Kusumam" magazine. Her name and works are mentioned in Uḷḷūr S. Paramēśvarayyar's well-known history of literature, the *Kerala Sāhitya Caritram*. What should be done now is the publication of her *Daśakumāracarita*, which was luckily preserved by her family. It would be not only an important testimony showing the skills and knowledge of a woman writing in Sanskrit at the beginning of the 20th century and the continuation of Sanskrit tradition in Kerala at that time, but also a contribution to the reception of the *Daśakumāracarita*.

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³³ More about stratification of the Kerala society for instance in: C.J. Fuller, *The Nayars Today*, Cambridge 1976.

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