

Notes for David Davidar's The House of Blue Mangoes (2002)

Disclaimer: There are so many unfamiliar words in the book that it seems like it was written for an Indian audience. So I thought definitions might be helpful for non-Indian English speakers. The word definitions are just from searching the internet. I have no knowledge of Tamil or Hindi. If you have corrections or additional notes, since I didn't have time to look up all the words that weren't familiar to me, email them to me, bill4gb AT gmail DOT com. Thanks!

p213 Neelam Illum means house of blue mangoes.

p3, 5, 7, 8, 21, 23, 28, ... thalaivar – village headman.

p4 line 5 paracheri – the collection of huts occupied by the Paraiyans (pariahs, a caste of untouchables) of a village.

p3, 6, 157, 207, 341, 411, 414 casuarina tree – a form of ironwood tree. Sturdy, so useful as a tsunami break.

p7 Mariamman – main South Indian mother goddess (of disease and rain).

p8 line -5, 130, 185, 209 tahsildar – the revenue officer in charge of a taluk.
taluk – a division of a district comprising 3 to 5 firkas. There are usually 8 to 10 taluks in a district.
firka – a division of a taluk comprising 15 to 25 villages.

p9 line -1 ambattan – barber (in Tamil).

p20, 45, 68, 79, 133, 188 mirasidar – powerful landlords of the deep south.

p21 panchayat – literally an assembly of five men, actually a small committee of men either elected or nominated, to attend to the common affairs of a village or caste or other small aggregation of people.

p30 Were the religious texts ever edited by a visionary?

p37, 38, 39, 65, 92, 104, 105 poojari – worshipper (usually refers to a priest conducting prayers).

p39 shastra – (Sanskrit - rule) commonly used to mean a treatise or text written in explanation of some idea, especially in matters involving religion.

p40, 172, 180 pisasus – ghouls.

p44 silambu-attam: the art of stick fighting.

p52 (last line) puvarasu tree - Poovarasu is an evergreen tree with high medicinal value also used for furniture making. Yellow beautiful flowers are a main attraction of this tree. Its leaves, barks and flowers are used in Ayurveda medicines mainly used for skin diseases, jaundice and cough.

p58, 65 jaggery – unrefined sugar made from palm sap.

p66, 102, 155 vibhuti - the sacred ash used in religious worship in Hinduism. The main ingredient of Vibuthi is cow dung but several other substances such as milk and ghee prescribed in scriptures are also used to form a distinct treat for the senses.

p66 agarbattis – incense sticks (aka joss (good luck) sticks, dhoop, or dhoopbatti).

p67 line4, 102 prasadam – the happiness that comes from devotion to God; sacred food (when Krishna accepts what we offer Him it becomes prasadam); literally the Sanskrit word prasadam means mercy.

p82 lac/lakh – 100,000. (So there were 350,000 deaths in the Great Famine of 1876-1878.)

p90, 180 appam – bread made of rice batter on a stone griddle.

p102 shloka- meaning 'song', from the root *śru*, 'hear'[1]) is a category of [verse line](#) developed from the Vedic [Anuṣṭubh](#). It is the basis for Indian Epic verse, and may be considered the Indian verse form *par excellence*, occurring, as it does, far more frequently than any other meter in classical Sanskrit poetry.

p113 vaidyasalai – healing medicines.

p114 siddha medicine – Tamil diagnostics: pulses, examine eyes and tongue, interpretation of voice, touch and color, analysis of urine and feces.

p117 Agasthiar – greatest Tamil sage.

<http://swamimurugesu.blogspot.com/2007/12/agasthiar-muni.html> :

Agasthiar is now one of the most famous of holy men in India. He is considered to be a great sage and ascetic yogi and the oldest teacher of ancient times. Though less than five feet tall, he was a fighter, a famous hunter and an archer, who triumphed over barbarous enemies and whom, like Hercules of ancient Greece, none could approach in eating and drinking.

Traditionally, Agastyar is considered as the father of the Tamil language and grammar, and the royal chaplain (kulaguru) of the divine line of Pandiyan rulers. His treatise on Tamil grammar is said to have contained no less than 12 000 sutras or aphorisms.

There are hundreds of ancient treatises from various areas of science ascribed to Agastya. These include medicine, chemistry, pharmacy, astronomy and surgery. As a physician, Agastya occupies the same eminence among the Tamils as Hippocrates does amongst the Greeks.

p118 paal kolukattai – rice dumplings in milk.

p123 swadeshi – buy native products (swaraj means freedom).

p128, 297 mofussil - Originally, the regions of India outside the three [East India Company](#) capitals of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras; hence, parts of a country outside an urban centre; the [regions](#), rural areas. Usage: The term is used widely on the Indian subcontinent. Although value-neutral, the word occasionally carries negative connotations when used by residents of a large metropolis, similar to "*the boonies*" or "*the sticks*" in English. (It is probably value-neutral in this case.)

p133 payasam – a paste made from various ingredients but always containing coconut milk, eaten as a sweet snack.

p135 appalam – a kind of thin cake.

p135, 150, 1260 sambhar - a vegetable [stew](#) or chowder based on a [broth](#) made with [tamarind](#) and toovar dal (seeds of the pigeon-pea plant).

p135 rasam – thin South Indian curry.

p136, 157 nadeswaram - (also spelt ***nadhaswaram***, and also called ***nagaswaram***) is one of the most popular classical instruments of South India and the world's loudest non-brass acoustic instrument. It is a wind instrument similar to the North Indian shehnai (a double reed conical oboe) but larger, with a hardwood body and a large flaring bell made of wood or metal.

p137 murukku – a deep fried sweet made from threads of dough.

p137, 180 athirasam – a deep-fried rice flour dessert made from rice flour, jaggery, grated coconut, cardamom, and sesame seeds.
<http://en.petitchef.com/recipes/athirasam-ariselu-aathirasallu-for-icc-fid-719740>

p147 varma – direct manipulation of a patient's life centers. Could be dangerous and therefore proscribed for all but the most skilled. **Does this sound too advanced for medicine in the early 1900s?**

p148 kaya kalpa - a yoga practice supposedly used by the legendary Mahavatar Babaji to extend his lifetime by thousands of years. An ayurvedic technique for physical purification and transformation. Kaya means body and kalpa means transformation.

p155 **Bharatha Matha** - Mother India (Bharat - India, Mata - Mother) is a personification of India, and seen by some as a mother goddess of fertility. She is usually depicted as a lady, clad in a saree holding a flag.

tilak – forehead mark. <http://www.iloveindia.com/indian-traditions/tilak.html>

vilaku – oil lamp.

kumkumam – a red powder, a mixture of slaked lime and turmeric. Turmeric is an antiseptic. It is believed that applying kumkumam in the forehead (where the eyebrows meet) is effective, for this is a spot where nerve ends meet. Also, it is believed that kumkumam in the forehead drives away evil spirits and forces.

p159 kuzhambu - a mixture, broth, a liquid of a thick consistency, thick gruel.

p160 thylam - Form of herbal drugs in Siddha: Chooranam (powder), Leghyam, Thylam (oil), and Saththu (extract). <http://www.crisiddha.tn.nic.in/FAQS.html>

No particular safety tests or long term studies seem to have been done for medicinal concoctions back then.

p161 Bande Mataram – national song of India composed by Bankin Chandra. New Nationalism. http://www.indianchild.com/vande_mataram.htm

p162 **Revolutionaries Aaron was exposed to: Marx, Alfieri, Annie Besant, Aurobindo Ghosh, Subramania Iyer, V.O. Chidambara Pillai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak.**

p169, 180 idiyappam - Using cooked rice flour in an omappodi achu (noodle maker?), squeeze into the form of long threads on a plate (you can use idli plates for this) and steam it in a large vessel or a pressure cooker.

idli - is a south Indian savory cake popular throughout India. The cakes are usually two to three inches in diameter and are made by steaming a batter consisting of fermented black lentils (de-husked) and rice.

p178 therukoothu – street play (a form of village theater or folk opera).

p178 villupaatu - the lead singer sings and narrates the respective myth of the deity along with musical instruments like Kattai, Jalra and Uduku. The main function of Villu paatu performance is to invoke the spirit of the deity. The performers sit semi circle in front of the bow. The length of the bow (villu) is around seven feet and its middle portion is bent. The lead singer commences Villu paatu. He offers Pooja to all the musical instruments. He holds a small rod in his hands while singing. Rhythmic taps to the strings attached to the bow produce music. Generally villupaatu is performed through out the night during the annual folk religious festival.

p180 puttu - a breakfast dish consisting of firm cylinders of steamed ground rice with layers of coconut. It is served with other side dishes such as kadala curry or banana.

p180 neimeen kolambu – seer fish (a subfamily of the mackerel)
kulambu/kuzhambu (could only find pictures – a thick soup or stew?).

p198 line -1 **jutka** – horse-drawn carriage.

p205 line -1 **chunam** – lime.

p207 **pipal** - fig tree of India noted for great size and longevity.

Neem belongs to the botanical family Meliaceae. That means it is related to the mahogany tree. Neem is a very attractive, fast growing and evergreen tree. It has a straight trunk and the tree can reach a height of 30 metres and more, though 15 to 20 metres is the average. The bark is hard, rough and scaly, fissured even in young trees. It's often brown, but in older trees it can be pale or greyish-black. In India it is known as "the village pharmacy".

p208 maidan - a Persian word meaning Town square which entered many other languages (in Hindi and Bengali it can also mean "field").

p217 yatra – journey; pilgrimage.

p219 santoor - a trapezoid-shaped hammered dulcimer often made of walnut, with seventy strings. The special-shaped mallets (mezrab) are lightweight and are held between the index and middle fingers.

p219 nawab – deputy (a variant, nabob, has come into English).

p217-221 (chapter 56) is mango mania. Chausa mangoes are from Pradesh, Jyotsna's home.

p252 peltophorum tree (rusty shield-bearer) blooms in bronze and gold.

p259 Bharatanatyam – Indian classical dance (analogous to ballet in the West).

p301 leveret – young hare, typically less than a year old.

p319 ghat - can mean a descending path or stairway to a river, a mountain pass, or it could reference either the Western or Eastern Ghats (mountain ranges) in India.

p341 Rajapalayam (Tamil: இராஜபாளையம்) is a town and a special grade municipality in Virudhunagar district in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. It is located 85 km southwest of Madurai in the state of Tamil Nadu. Its main attractions are the Ayyanar Falls and the neighbour town of Srivilliputtur. The economy is based on the manufacture of textiles, and there are mills for spinning and weaving cotton, as well as a large cotton market. **It's also known for the Rajapalayam breed of dog.**

<http://pets-place.net/RajapalayamDogProfile.html>

p349 **Daniel's will.**

p358 **Helen insults Kannan's mother. Some kind of pecking order thing?**

p360 dosa – kind of like a crepe? Here's a recipe and picture:

<http://indianyummykitchen.blogspot.com/2010/03/indian-breakfast-dosa-coconut-chutney.html>

uppuma = upma? Sounds like a nice spicy hot breakfast cereal:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upma>

p372 vaidyan - physician, who uses ayurvedic medicines.

p413 **Avvaiyar** (Tamil: ஔவையார்)(also **Auvayar**) was the name of more than one poet who was active during different periods of **Tamil literature**. The name simply means respectable good lady and hence likely a given title rather than their real name. Avvaiyar II lived during the period of **Kambar** and **Ottakkuttar** during the reign of the **Cholas** in the 13th century. She is often imagined as an old but intelligent lady by **Tamil** and primarily referred by them as Auvai. Avvaiyar II wrote many of the poems that remain very popular even now and are inculcated in school text books in the State of **Tamil Nadu**. These books include a list of do's and don'ts, useful for daily life, arranged in simple and short sentences.

Murugan - chief deity of the ancient Tamils of South India, later identified in part with the **Hindu god Skanda**. He probably originated as a fertility god, and his worship is said to have included orgiastic dancing. He is described as joining his fierce mother, **Korravai**, in cannibal feasts on the battlefield, a practice that authorities use to explain his association with the North Indian war god Skanda. His favourite weapon was the trident or spear, and his banner carried the emblem of a wild fowl.

Mudhalier – a kind of prince.

Since 2000BC there have been settlements along the river Indus (in Pakistan).

One reason for everyone wanting their women to have fair skin is that for 4000 years India was ruled by people whiter than the native population.

Puram – town/city.

Chinar tree is a plane tree, iconic to Kashmir.

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