UNIT 1 SANGAM LITERATURE: AN INTRODUCTION

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will look at what Sangam Literature is as most of us would not really be aware of it. We may know about the Ramayana and the Mahabharata but may not be aware of the Literature from the South of our country. We also need to have some understanding of this classical literary tradition from the south as the epic under consideration is an ancient Tamil epic belonging to the Sangam Period. We will trace the growth and development of Sangam Literature and then locate the epic under consideration Cilappatikaran.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Indian Literature is a vast area comprising numerous diverse traditions which resulted in a vast and a complex literature in the last 3500 years. Every part of India has produced classical literature in various Indian languages. The literature produced in ancient India includes the Vedic corpus along with the Puranas, the Jain agamas and traditions and the vast literature produced during the Buddhist period which incorporates writings across Asia. The south of India has 4 major languages namely Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam and Telugu. All of them are classical languages with a robust literary tradition and Tamil literary history is of nearly two millennia.

Sangam Literature also spelled cankam/ chankam/shangam according to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, refers to a body of ancient Tamil writings probably produced during the “chankams/ literary academies located in Maturai, Tamil Nadu from the 4th to the 1st Century”. Sangam Literature is also referred to as early classical Tamil literature with works dating between 400 BCE to 250 CE. The word Sangam refers to an academy where this poetry was composed and later anthologised. The Literature of this period comprised three main types of literary works. We shall look at them next.

1.2 EARLY SANGAM LITERATURE

The most interesting feature of Sangam Literature is the fact that while most of the early literary traditions were religious writings in some form or the other,
Sangam Literature is not religious in that sense. The poems belonging to what is called Sangam Literature are based on two main themes – love / akam, and heroism/ praise of Kings and their deeds/ puram. But we will deal with akam and puram in Unit IV in detail as these two themes/ emotions form a crucial part of the text Cilappattikaran.

The literature of this period was comprised of the following types of works:

1. Ettuttokai (Eight Anthologies)
2. Pattuppatu (The Ten Long Poems)
3. Tolkappiyam (A Grammar Treatise)

The Ettuttokai or the Eight Anthologies of collected poetry are:

1. Kuruntokai
2. Narrinai
3. Akananuru
4. Ainkurunuru
5. Kalittokai
6. Purananuru
7. Patirruppattu
8. Paripatal

The theme of the first five anthologies (Kuruntokai, Narrinai, Akananuru, Ainkurunuru and Kalittokai) of the Ettuttokai or the Eight Anthologies of collected poetry is love/ akam. The theme of the next two anthologies (Purananuru and Patirruppattu) is heroism and praises of the Kings and their deeds while the Eighth Anthology or Paripatal contains poems that deal with love/ akam, heroism/ puram, and the praise of Kings and their deeds. The poems on heroism/ akam are a refreshing change from most of the early and medieval poetry written in the subcontinent as there is a sense of freshness and the poems are not bogged down by the use of literary conceits and mythological references. However, that is not to say that the poems of the Sangam period did not have any connection with religious works. The Paripatal contains some poems that deal with chiefly four deities - Vishnu, Shiva, Durga, and Murugan.

Moving on to the next collected works, we have the Ten Long Poems/ the Pattippattu.

The Pattippattu or The Ten Long Poems include:

1. Kurincippattu
2. Porunararruppatai
3. Cirupanarruppatai
4. Perumpanarruppatai
5. Maturaikkanci
6. Malaiapatukatam
7. Pattinappalai
8. Mullaiappattu
9. Netunalvatai
10. Tirumurukarruppatai

Along with these anthologies of classical Tamil poetry there was also produced during this period a grammar treatise called the Tolkappiyam which deals with the rules and the norms of Tamil poetics which is distinctly different from Sanskrit
poetics, something we have examined at length through the three previous blocks of this course. Sangam Literature is a part of the literary and historical rediscoveries made in the 19th century by a generation of Western and Indian orientalists who systemised the older manuscripts and translated them into English and subsequently published them in the print form. The rediscovery of the Sangam corpus was a major effort taken by a few men in the 19th century namely Caminta Aiyar (1855-1942) and Tamotaram Pillai (1832-1901) who discovered these old poems in crumbling palm leaf manuscripts and through exemplary scholarship translated and copied them to be published. Tamotaram Pillai published the first edition of the Ettuttokai (The Eight Anthologies) in 1877 CE. Subsequent efforts in the recent past have been made by scholarship like A K Ramanujan and Kamil Zvelebil who have translated and commented on a large selection of these anthologies.

Apart from the poetry that was written during the Sangam period we also have two epics that were composed and produced in manuscript form. The two epics are the Cilappatikaran and the Manimekalai. Both these epics have been composed after the Sangam period during the Buddhist and the Jain periods of Tamil Nadu. The Cilappatikaran is a Jain text with larger overtones of Jain philosophy and the Manimekalai is a Buddhist text with a heavy influence of Buddhist theology. The Cilappatikaran will be discussed in greater detail in the course of this block.

The Tolkappiyam is the earliest compendium of Tamil grammar and consists of three sections. The first two sections deal with Ancient Tamil linguistics like orthography, phonology, morphology and syntax. The third section deals with prosody, rhetoric, poetics, genres, themes, behavioural codes, poetic diction etc. The entire Tolkappiyam consists of 1612 Cuttirams which in a sense can be said to correspond to the Sanskrit sutra.

1.3 TAMIL POETICS & SANSKRIT POETICS

The poetry of the Sangam period reflects a syntax and poetics that is not seen in the tradition of poetry from the north of India. This poetry does not have the influence of Sanskrit poetics and prosody on it. As mentioned earlier, the uniqueness of this poetry is the thematic division of writing poetry into the Akam (Poems of Love) and the Puram (Poems of War). These poems are further categorised on ideas of emotion which can be compared to the idea of the Nav Rasas by Bharata in his Natyashastra. There is a huge difference in the portrayal of these emotions from the Rasas. The Rasas talk about emotions which are permanent (Stahi) and those which are transient (Vhabhichari).

The emotions portrayed in Sangam poetry are expressed through physical geography like the hills, the sea shore, the wasteland, the forest and the low land or the marshes. They are called Tenai and they form in the prosody analysis in the third section of the Tolkappiyam. The topographical related emotional Tenai’s in these poems include:

1. Kurinci (The Hills) signifying lovers meetings.
2. Neytal (The Sea Shore) signifying secret meetings at the sea shore and lovers anxiety.
3. *Palai (The Waste land)* signifying a lovers frustrating journey through the deserted landscape.

4. *Mullai (The Forest)* signifying happiness through physical and emotional union.

5. *Marutam (The Low land)* signifying a lovers unfaithful attitude.

### 1.4 THEMES IN SANGAM POETRY AS PER TAMIL POETICS

To understand the themes let’s examine a few poems within these scenic landscape categories.

1. *Kurinci (The Hills)* signifying lovers meetings. This poem is ascribed to a Sangam poet called Kapilar and is a part of the anthology called Ainkurunuru.

   **What she said**

   To her girlfriend, her foster mother within earshot:
   
   *Bless you, listen to me:*
   *My man wore the flowers,*
   *Their blossoms gold,*
   *Their buds, sapphire;*
   *Tell me, what do you call*
   *Those trees on his mountain slopes?*

   There is a reference to the emotion and its personification with mountain slopes that classifies this poem as belonging to the *tenai* category *Kurinci.*

2. *Neytal (The Sea Shore)* signifying secret meetings at the sea shore and lovers anxiety. This is a poem called *What her Girl Friend said* by the poet Ammuvanar in the anthology *Ainkurunuru.*

   **What her Girl Friend said**

   To him when he wanted to come by day:
   
   *O man of the seashore*
   *Where old womaen*
   *Dry their wet streaming hair*
   *And look like a flock*
   *Of herons in the bay,*
   *When people said,*
   *A chariot comes here often*
   *Splattering*
   *The dark neytal lilies*
   *Near the bubbling backwaters,*
   *Mother said at once,*
   *“Don’t go out.”*

   Here there is a reference to the neytal lilies personifying the secret meeting at the sea shore.

3. *Palai (The Waste land)* signifying a lovers frustrating journey through the deserted landscape. This poem is ascribed to a poet called Otalantaiyar and is a part of the anthology called Ainkurunuru.
What he said

In the desert

In this long summer wilderness
Seized and devoured by wildfire,
If I should shut my eyes
Even a wink
I see
Dead of night, a tall house
In a cool yard, and the girl
With freckles
Like kino flowers
Hair flowing as with honey,
Her skin a young mango leaf.

4. Mullai (The Forest) signifying happiness through physical and emotional union. The following poem is ascribed to a poet called Milaipperun Kantan and is a part of the anthology called Kuruntokai.

What she said

Only the dim witted say its evening
When the sun goes down
And the red sky reddens,
When misery deepens,
And the mullai begins to bloom
In the dusk.
But even when the tufted cock
Calls in the long city
And the long night
Breaks into dawn,
It is evening:
Even noon
Is evening
To one who has no one

5. Marutam (The Low land) signifying a lovers unfaithful attitude. The following poem is ascribed to a poet called Orampokiyar and is from the anthology titled Ainkurunuru

What she said

In his country,
Spotted crabs
Born in their mother’s death
Grow up with crocodiles
That devour their young.
Why is he here now?
And why does he take these women,
A jangle of gold bangles
As they make love,
Only to leave them?

The Tamil epics of South India Cilappatikaran and the Manimekhalai represent a society in a state of transformation dealing with a state of constant flux. The epical tradition in South India display ideas and characteristics of most of the
early religions in India. The Tamil epical tradition also includes the later retelling of the Ramayana by Kamban indicating the permeability of ideas and cross migration of those ideas through time to be adapted and reconstructed at a later date and maybe in a newer form/genre, but that is what all great literatures do, don’t they? Before we begin talking about the two Tamil Epics one of which is in our course, we would need to have a little understanding of Jainism as the Epic Cilappatikaran is basically a Jain text. Let’s do that in the next section.

1.5 JAINISM AND THE SELF IN CILAPPATIKARAN

Within a couple of centuries, we know that Buddhism had spread widely in the India of that time and this is evidenced by the large number of Ashokan edicts found in the areas that are a part of the two Tamil epics Cilappatikaran and the Manimekhalai. In the meantime, Jainism was not too far behind as the Jain Agama tradition talks about the Svetambara guru Kalakacharya being received in the court of the Satavahana king around the 1st century BCE and the documented presence of the Jaina Digambara monk Visakhacharya choosing to establish his area of operations in the Chola and Pandyas territories. What is amply testified is that the two religions received immense patronage within the Pallava courts of Kanchipuram and the Pandyan courts in Maturai. Kanchipuram is well known as one of the four Vidyaastanas/ seats of learning mentioned in the Mahabhashya of Patanjali the others being at Kolhapur in Maharashtra and at Penukonda in Andhra Pradesh. The Cilappatikaran on closer analysis does not appear to be in a fixed religious structure of Jainism but espouses a greater tolerance to the various beliefs around. The surrounding country, the politics of construction along with the religious interpellations constructs literature in such a way that the epic Cilappatikaran bears testimony to the fact that Cilappatikaran is in a sense a modification of the basic Kovalan and the Kannaki story which was a part of the folklore of the region and had been around much before the entry of the Buddhist and Jaina religions and thereby traditions.

The Cilappatikaran abounds with Jain themes and the idea of expiation is a major theme within Jainism. There are spaces within the text that indicate Jain themes but may not be advisable to bracket Cilappatikaran as being a completely Jain text. The larger Jain observance that occupies the Cilappatikaran is the idea of Sallekhana, and the presence of Kuvanti the Jain Sadhavi who is a spiritual preceptor/ religious adviser. Kannaki and Kovalan ritually practices this extreme Jain austerity/ Sallekhana wherein the body is slowly starved to death. This is a classic example and the practice of complete non action within the body and the mind. If you recall the Rajasthan High Court had banned the practice of Sallekhana in 2015 terming it a suicide, however, the Supreme Court stayed the ban of the Rajasthan High Court later that year.

And she moaned:
‘Was this the fate of those
Who were my companions?’ She vowed to starve herself to death.
So ended her life.

The Vipaka Srutam or The Oral Traditions of Karmic Life, one of the 60 Jain Agamas the canonical texts in Jainism divides the life of the individual into
the sentient and the non-sentient the Jiva and the Ajiva and it is the world of Karma that creates the non-sentient. The state of Ajiva brings out the notion of illusion and the notion of doer/ the primordial mover of the self and the ego. There is a conversation between a sage and the Jain nun Kuvanti at Srirangam where he explains to her the transience of life and the concept of Karma. This scene is also presented in the paly as it explains the basic Jain belief that an arhat or an evolved one has to intervene to guide a devotee/ a seeker of truth to the path of salvation. This idea is again very similar to the Buddhist notion of a Bodhisattava, a level below the Buddha / one who has attained Nirvana but who doesn’t do that in order to help sentient beings. This is an indication of how these two religions share common roots and similar world views.

No one can escape the prison house
Of the body’s rebirth unless he is blessed
With the light of the revealed Agamas.

The Jain traditions mention that Chandragupta Maurya settled down at Shravanabelagola and began institutionalising Jainism in the South and was to opt for the Sallekhana as a final mode of liberation. Jain history in South India depicts wide spread practice of Sallekhana or the ritual of starving oneself to death. It must be noted that Buddhism moves away from the concept and practice of Sallekhana as Buddhism focuses on the middle path and not on extremes. Hence, what we really find on careful reading of the Cilappatikaran is a larger shift within the literary imagination. The movement is away from the Sangam corpus with its emphasis on the five tinai's the bifurcation of experience with emotion; the emphasis on land as in the Tolkappiyam where the land decides the corresponding emotion. The Cilappatikaran and the Manimekalai though incorporating the basic Akām and Purām divisions is still able to make the epic accommodate newer traditions of the North. The different strands of influence that we see in the Cilappatikaran and the Manimekalai suggests a slow but steady homogenising influence of the Indian literary tradition with the various telling’s and re-telling’s of the various versions of the epical traditions.

The larger dialogic impulses present in the epic seek some common grounds for the human soul though the matters of doctrine and the modes of achieving it differ. Within the Jaina Bastis present in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka and the rock cut caves of the early years of the 1st century the epic point to a period in South India where there is a transition in the making, of a period from the earlier imaginations that engendered the Sangam poetry to a new fresher imports from the heart of the Indian sub-continent. In the next section we shall try and locate the text Cilappatikaran.

1.6 LOCATING THE CILAPPATIKARAN

The authorship of the Cilappatikaran is attributed to Ilanko Atikal. Now, the word Atikal literally means a Jaina saint or an ascetic. So what do you think we could infer from this? One stream of thought proclaims Atikal to be the younger ascetic brother of Cenkuttuvan (2nd CE), the Ceral King who renounced his family and the throne after hearing about a prophecy that he would succeed to the throne instead of his elder brother. It is believed that he then took the Jain vow of renunciation and entered a Jain monastery near Vanci. There is also another interesting legend associated with Sattanar the author of the Manimekalai and legend has it, that Sattanar actually met Ilanko
Atikal to seek his permission to bring out the Buddhist version of the epic. This is interesting as it tells us that given the socio-cultural space of the times, there never was any large scale violence between the Buddhists and the Jains in history unlike the heterodox sects and the Hindu ones.

The setting of the epic is the cities of Puhar and Kaṇci within the Tamil domain. This is of significance as two significant Greek texts - The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea of the 1st CE and Ptolemy’s Geography (2nd CE) mention the towns of Puhar as the town Khaberis and talk of the Kaveris Emporium and the flourishing Roman trade with the two Tamil kingdoms. Both the works describe at length the markets in the two towns providing a setting which is commonplace and populated with common folks much like the setting of our earlier play Mridhakatika. Situated within the larger Jain and the Buddhist themes are the mercantile communities and the guilds and the role of trade and its contribution to urbanity with courtesans, palaces, the common man and the religious institutions and individuals who people the epics.

Situated in the town of Puhar the epic – Cilappatikaran develops the kernel story of Kovalan and Kannaki, and as mentioned earlier was present in the oral tradition of folk tales and then worked on it. Since we do not have too many details on the genesis of the Cilappatikaran we may conjecture that the kernel of the story might not have been taken from within the larger Jain and the Buddhist traditions but could have been a local story that was later adapted for presentation to a larger audience who were primarily followers of the two religions.

The Kovalan and Kannaki story is ahistorical in the sense that all good stories are, permitting the gaze from across time to shift and re-allocate components within a discursive framework. The notional idea of the Manichean battle of the fight between the forces of light over darkness is interpolated within characters like Kovalan and Kannaki as they make sense of the world order around them across time. The Kovalan and Kannaki story precisely within its ahistorical positioning is able to gather its existence in history across time by being appropriated by other socio-cultural sects. So much so that Kannaki is worshipped as a deity, and as the epitome of chastity.

The story centres on Kovalan and his affair with Matavi a courtesan who dominates the relationship and with whom Kovalan has a daughter called Manimekhalai. He is not aware of the child he has fathered and she - Manimekhalai is the subject of the sequel epic of the Cilappatikaran the Manimekhalai. Kannaki who is distraught by her husband’s affair forgives him, when he realises his “mistake” and returns home. She (the wife Kannaki forgives him), reunites with her husband after the affair with Matavi is terminated due to a misunderstanding. In order to begin anew and recoup the losses they have incurred as a result of the affair, Kovalan and Kannaki migrate to Maturai the kingdom of the Pandian king Netunceliyan. Kovalan tries to sell Kannaki’s anklet but is cheated by a jeweller, is accused of stealing the Queen’s anklet and is executed without a trial. Kannaki is overwrought and goes to the King’s court where she breaks open her anklet to prove that her anklet has rubies and not pearls inside (whereas the Queen’s anklet had pearls inside), and in her extremely emotional state tears off her breast and flings it at the city of Maturai which burns to cinders. Thereafter, she ascends to heaven. Interestingly, there is the presence of a Jain nun Kavunti in the epic and the beheading
of Kovalan is attributed to the misdeeds of an earlier birth (bringing in the entire Jain ethos of transmigration of the soul).

1.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have attempted to provide a precise literary history of Sangam Literature. We have looked at the epic Cilappatikaran very briefly, discussed the sequel Manimekhalia, and tried to locate the two texts within their respective religious backgrounds/philosophies. We have also seen from historical monuments how other religions and literary traditions made their way to modern day Tamil Nadu and enriched Tamil Literature.

1.8 QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by the term Sangam Literature?
2. Is there a difference between Sanskrit Poetics and Tamil Poetics?