
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 *Cilappatikaran*.

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

1. *Ettuttokai* (Eight Anthologies)
2. *Pattuppattu* (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. *Patirrupattu*
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 *Patirrupattu*) 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 *Pattuppattu* or The Ten Long Poems include:

1. *Kurincippattu*
2. *Porunararruppatai*
3. *Cirupanarruppatai*
4. *Perumpanarruppatai*
5. *Maturaikkanci*
6. *Malaipatukatam*
7. *Pattinappalai*
8. *Mullaippattu*
9. *Netunalvatai*
10. *Tirumukurarruppatai*

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 orientalist 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 **Ammuvar** 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 women
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 *Vidyastanas*/ 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 it 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 *Manimekhalai* though incorporating the basic *Akâm* and *Purâm* 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 *Manimekhalai* 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 *Manimekhalai* 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 *Kâñci* 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 *Khoberis* 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 *Mrichhakatika*. 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-alter 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?
3. Examine some of the themes of Classical Tamil Poetry/ Sangam Poetry.



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