

Tradition in Early Tamil Poetry

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ALTHOUGH many scholars within the last fifty years have attempted to write the history of early Tamil literature, none has so far been successful in tracing historically the growth and development of literary traditions in the Sangam and post-Sangam periods. To those interested in this field of study the history of the Tamil poetry of these early periods continues to be a problem. Continuity in the social and cultural life of a race generally indicates continuity in its literary history also. There is no evidence to prove that there was any radical change in the social and cultural history of the Tamils at any time even though the period immediately preceding the Pallava occupation of the South is considered to be a dark age in the political history of the Tamil country. Therefore, we can assume that in literary history too there would have been continuity and until this continuity in the literary tradition is established and its development traced historically, the literary history of the early periods cannot be written, as it has been done in the case of the literature of the European countries. I wish to point out in this article some of the difficulties one will have to face in reconstructing the literary history of the Sangam period. The difficulties will be still greater when one tries to trace historically the development of the literary tradition in the post-Sangam period.

It is generally believed that the eight anthologies and the ten Idylls belong to the Sangam period, which is said to have extended over a period of about three centuries. With the help of these works and of the *Porulhathikaaram* of *Tholkaappiyam* which is a repository of the early poetic traditions, we will have to work out the growth of the tradition of Tamil poetry in the early centuries of the Christian era. In this period, during which the political history of the Tamils had gone through many vicissitudes, the literature, too, which had the life of the people as its source and inspiration, would have undergone many changes. The literary tradition of the early Tamils, which had its origin in the works that were produced long before the days of the Sangam, could not have been static during the Sangam period, which, as stated above, lasted for more than three centuries. Therefore, its growth and the various stages of its development will have to be worked out with the help of the works that have been preserved for us. The main task of those interested in this field of study is to arrange not only the anthologies but also the poems in these anthologies in their chronological

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order. Many a scholar has attempted to do this preliminary work but none has so far succeeded because every one has taken *Pethittuppaththu* to be a genuine work of the Sangam period and the details found in the *pathikam* of the work as genuine historical data for the reconstruction of the political history of the Sangam period. One such scholar is K. N. Sivarajapillai, who depends mainly on the *pathikam* of *Puthittuppaththu* for writing his otherwise interesting work, *The Chronology of the Early Tamils*. A critical study of the language and the contents of the poems in *Puthittuppaththu* would have revealed to scholars that it was not a genuine work of the Sangam period and that Kapilar, ParaNar and other poets of the Sangam period did not compose the poems in the work. It is definitely a work written during a later period to eulogize some of the Chera kings who were supposed to have lived during the Sangam period. There are more than fifty words and phrases in the poems of this work which are not found in the poems of the Sangam poets or, more importantly, in the poems of the poets who were supposed to have composed some of the 'tens' in the anthology. Here are a few of them:

மனாலக் கலவை	manaalakkalavai	(Poem 11)
நனையமைகள்	nhanaiyamaikalh	(" 12)
நூலாக்கலிங்கம்	nhuulaakkalingkam	(" 12)
தொறுத்த (வயல்)	thotuththa (vayal)	(" 13)
வெய்துறவு	veithutavu	(" 15)
பைதிரம்	paithiram	(" 19)
பத்தல்	paththal	(" 19)
மாசிலீயர்	maaciliiyar	(" 20)
பாகுடி	paakuTi	(" 21)
பரிவேட்பு	pariveeTpu	(" 21)
வழியடை	vazhiyaTai	(" 22)
மூயின	muuyina	(" 22)
ஒலித்தலை	oliththalai	(" 22)
குலை	kulai	(" 24)
ஆநியம்	aanhiyam	(" 24)
இளை	ilhai	(" 28)
(பரவா) ஓங்கு	(paravaa) vuungku	(" 29)
பதப்பர்	pathappar	(" 30)
வையாமாலையர் வசையுநர்	vaiyamaalayar vacaiyunhar	(" 32)
படலம்	paTalam	(" 39)
வெவ்வர்	vevvar	(" 41)
கண்டி	kaNTi	(" 43)
செங்குணக்கு	cengkuNakku	(" 50)

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இரைஇய	iraiiya	(„ 52)
நளிந்தனை	nhalinhthanai	(„ 52)
கட்டளை வலிப்ப	kaTTalhai valippa	(„ 81)
ஆரிறை	aaritai	(„ 82)
குவவுக்குரை	kuvavukkurai	(„ 84)
முத்தை	muththai	(„ 85)

Even those who are not very familiar with the work of the Sangam poets will not fail to note in the poems of this work a lack of the sincerity and the genuine feeling which we find in the compositions of the Sangam poets. A critical analysis of the content of the poems in the anthology will make clear the artificiality with which martial incidents and other details are described. The contradictory nature of statements found in certain poems is a clear proof that it cannot be relied upon as a source of data for the reconstruction of the history of the early Tamils. Therefore, this work will have to be excluded from consideration when we attempt to trace the political and literary history of the Sangam period.

Kaliththokai, which is considered to be a Sangam work, cannot be depended upon for the reconstruction of the literary history of this early period, though some useful information can be gleaned from it to trace the growth of the *akam* tradition (theme of love) and the development of metrical forms in the Sangam and the Post-Sangam periods. The five divisions of this anthology are ascribed to five poets of whom at least two belonged to the Sangam period. When one makes a critical study of the poems in this anthology, and notes the metrical forms employed in them, and the social and cultural background in which they were produced, one is tempted to agree with Nachchinaarkkiniar who states that the poems in it (which were composed by various poets over a long period of time) were compiled by Nallanhthuvanaar, a poet who lived long after the Sangam period. Although a few of the poems appear to belong to the Sangam period both in language and tradition, the majority of them reflect the culture of a period far removed from the Sangam period. The various stages in the development of the *kali* rhythm—its origin in the *venba*, its appearance as a distinct rhythm, its development into the complicated form of *kochchakam* and *urazhkali*, until its disintegration later into the smaller units *thutai*, *thaazhicai*, and *viruththani*, which came into existence at the beginning of the Pallava period—could all be traced with the help of the poems in this anthology. These poems which exhibit these various stages could not, therefore, have all been composed within the limits of the Sangam period. Of all the forms of *kali* metre, *oththaazhicaikkali* appears, from the large number collected into

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this anthology, to be the most popular on account of its dramatic nature and its simplicity of form, and in these respects it may be compared to the early lyrical ballads of the West. The arrangement of these and other *kali* poems in the order of their metrical development would enable the historical development of the literary tradition during the Post-Sangam period to be traced; it would by no means, however, reveal the history of Tamil poetry during the Sangam period.

The anthology *ParipaaTTu* will in no way reveal the literary history of the Sangam period. Like *kali*, it developed from the *venba* and was considered to be as suitable as that rhythm for the expression of themes of love in *akam* poetry. Since all the poems in the anthology are not available today, the evolution of its form from its beginning to the highest point it reached in its development cannot be traced with certainty as in the case of the *kali* metre. However, three stages in its development can be roughly delineated with the help of the existing poems. The first stage, during which it was made use of for love themes only, can be seen in the poems on Vaikai; the second stage, during which it began to be used as a medium for the expression of divine love while continuing to be a medium for the communication of human love, can be seen in some of the poems on Murugan and Thirumaal; the third and last stage, during which it was fully devotional in nature, can be seen in some of the poems which would probably have been composed at a time when the *bhakti* movement was beginning to be felt in the Tamil land in the 6th Century. The form of *paripaaTTu*, when it reached the highest stage in its development, was as complicated as the highest form of *kali*. From the point of view of the common man, therefore, it had become less useful as a medium for the communication of the feeling of *bhakti* or devotion to God. Hence the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava saints of the Pallava period had to employ the simpler and more appropriate forms, *viruththam* and *thutai*, in their *pathikams*. It would not be wrong to presume that the genesis of the metrical form of *paripaaTTu* and its development through the three stages described above would have taken at least two centuries and that the period in which it developed would have been closer to the Pallava period than to the Sangam period. It is thus clear that this anthology too would not be of any help to us in ascertaining the literary history of the Sangam period.

Let us now consider the other *akam* anthologies, namely *NhattiNai*, *Kutunthokai*, and *Akanaa'mutu* to see whether they are of any use in tracing the development of the literary traditions of the Sangam period. These three anthologies exhibit a single pattern in organisation, which is that

poems in *akaval* metre are grouped into four hundred in each of them according to the length of the poems. Although they were compiled by different scholars at different times, they all contain mainly poems written according to the poetic conventions of a particular period of time. *Akaval* which is one of the basic rhythms employed in early Tamil poetry, had developed from its simplest form to the highly developed form it has in *MaNimeekalai* during the course of a few centuries. The three anthologies under discussion contain poems exhibiting the different stages in the development of this rhythm. Unlike *NhattiNai* and *kutunthokai*, however, *Akanaanuutu*, the last of the three to be compiled, does not contain any poems that illustrate its earliest patterns. It is generally believed that all the 1200 poems in the three anthologies are of the same pattern, that these were all composed at a certain period of time and that they exhibit a particular stage in the development of Tamil poetry in the early days. This hypothesis, when examined in the light of the colophons and other details given under the poems in *Putanaanuutu*, does not appear to be quite correct. The poems can be grouped broadly under three heads on the basis of their exhibiting the conventions and traditions that prevailed during three successive periods in the Sangam age. Of these three periods at least the middle one could be traced fairly accurately with the help of the historical data that are available in *Putanaanuutu* and in some of the poems of the three *akaval* anthologies referred to above.

Before going into the problem of ascertaining the tradition that prevailed during the time of this one generation of poets, a word will have to be said with regard to the manner in which these poems were collected. Poems composed by more than a hundred poets who lived in different parts of the Tamil country have been assembled together in these works by different scholars. Would it have been likely that these scholars would have gone to distant places in search of these poems at a time when there were not many facilities for travelling and to have collected only those poems that were suitable for their anthologies, leaving the other poems to be collected later by others who compiled the other anthologies? It is not probable that these scholars would have gone to distant places scattered throughout the length and breadth of the Tamil country and selected only poems of a certain length and left the rest. Therefore, it could be presumed that poems that were found in various places were all collected and preserved in one place by the efforts of scholars and kings interested in them and that these collections were made use of by scholars during a later period to compile these anthologies. There has been difference of opinion among

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scholars as to which *akam* anthology was compiled first. Some say it was *NhattiNai* but others say it was *Kutunthokai*. Since this is not relevant to the subject under consideration I do not wish to discuss it here.

The details as to how the three periods could be worked out from the historical data that are available cannot find a place in this short article. However, I wish to indicate the main lines along which the middle period could be worked out. We find that many of the poets anthologised both in *Putanaamuutu* and in the three *akaval* anthologies *NhattiNai*, *Kutunthokai* and *Akanaamuutu* praise the noble deeds of various kings and chieftains whose numbers are quite considerable. This fact may be used to ascertain which kings, chieftains and poets were contemporaries, or which of them lived within a generation or two of one another. I shall indicate here how this could be done. Aricikilaar, Kapilar, ParaNar and Perungkuntuurkizhaar address Peekan in order to bring about a reconciliation between him and his wife Kannaki. Auvaiyaar, in praising the gallantry of Athiyamaan Anjci, mentions ParaNar (in Puram 99) as her contemporary. Thus we can conclude that Aricikilar, Kapilar, ParaNar, Perungkuntuurkizhaar, and Auvaiyaar were contemporaries. No less than nineteen poets including ParaNar praised the valour of the Pandiyan ruler Nhetunjeezhiyan, who should be judged as the greatest of the kings of the Sangam Age. The particulars of the poets etc. are as follows:—

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| 1. ITaikkuntuur Kizhaar | (Puram 76, 77, 78, 79) |
| 2. KallaaTanaar | („ 17, 23, 25, 371) |
| 3. Kutungkoozhiyuur Kizhaar | („ 17) |
| 4. MaangkuTi Maruthanaar | („ 24, 26, Mathuraikkaanci) |
| 5. KuTapulaviyanaar | („ 18, 19) |
| 6. Nhakkiirar | (Akam 36, 56, 253, 340, 358, NhetunalvaaTai) |
| 7. ParaNar | („ 116, 162, Kutunthokai 393) |
| 8. Mathurai-k-kaNakkaayanaar | (Aham 338) |
| 9. AalankuTi VangkaNaar | („ 106) |
| 10. ThaayangkaNNanaar | („ 149) |
| 11. Iizhaththuppuuthanh-theevanaar | („ 231) |
| 12. Aalampeericaaththanaar | („ 47, 175) |
| 13. Peeraalavaayar | („ 392) |
| 14. MathuraiththaTTangkaN-Nanaar | („ 335) |

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15. Muthukuuththanaar („ 137)
16. Pothumpilkizhaar
Makanaar VengkaNNiyaar (Nattinai 287)
17. Vittuutu VaNNakkan
TaTTanaar („ 298)
18. Maruthan IlhaNhaakanaar „ 39)
19. ITaikkali Nhaattu Nhalluur
Nhatthaththanaar (CitupaaN 61—67)

Most of these poets, if not all, would have been his contemporaries. Some of these poets praise other kings and chieftains who lived at that time, and these kings and chieftains are, moreover, praised by various other contemporary poets too. By thus grouping the poets of a particular period of time or of a particular generation on the basis of the historical data available in the Sangam works, we will be able to list about 50 poets who lived during the time of the great Pandiyan king NheTunjcezhayan and rulers such as Paari, Peekan, Anjci, Oori, Nhannan, Kaari and others who were his contemporaries. When we apply this method of grouping of contemporary poets to grouping of contemporary poems found in the three *akam* anthologies, we will discover that a fairly large number of poems in them, about one third in fact, were composed by these poets, that is, poets who belonged to a single generation in the Sangam age. With the help of these poems we will be able to work out fairly accurately the poetic traditions and conventions of the period of Kapilar, ParaNar and Nakkiirar. The tradition was more or less fixed and did not vary according to the tastes of individual poets of the time. There are many poets whose poems are found in these three anthologies, who cannot be assigned to any particular generation or to the reign of any particular king. But their poems do not vary in convention or tradition from those of the group of poets who were contemporaries of Kapilar, ParaNar and Nakkiirar. If such poems too could be added to the poems of the period of the great trio then there will be only a few poems left which would have to be assigned to a period either before or after this period.

I do not wish to go into the details of the tradition that prevailed at the time of these great poets. It is necessary to point out, however, that this tradition did not originate during this period; it had, rather, developed from the tradition which existed prior to this period. As this implies, it formed only a particular stage in the growth and development of the literary tradition of the Sangam period. When we glance through the love poetry in the three anthologies, we will not fail to observe that the subject

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matter of poetry was derived from the social and cultural life of the people and that, as life changed, so did the poetic tradition. A poetic tradition based on the life of a people changes as the life changes. This is true of Tamil poetry as it is true of the poetry of any language. Life in the Sangam age was not static but was changing slowly and the influence of this change was reflected in the literature of the time. We are able to observe three distinct stages in the development of the poetic tradition of the Sangam period. The first stage in the development of poetic tradition would be found in the poems written before the time of Kapilar and ParaNar. The second stage is illustrated by the poems produced in the days of Kapilar and ParaNar. The third stage in the development of the *akam* traditions can be observed from the poems in *Aingikutunhuutu*, an anthology of poems that must have been written long after the days of Kapilar and ParaNar. It does not appear that this anthology is a collection of verses written by five different poets, as is commonly believed. When we analyse the pattern of the poems in this work, it appears almost certain that it must have been designed and executed by a single poet living at a time far removed from the time of Kapilar and ParaNar. By that time great changes had taken place both in the conventions and in the poetic tradition.

The importance of *Aingikutunhuutu* for one who is interested in tracing the history of early Tamil poetic tradition cannot be overestimated. New conventions find a place for the first time in this anthology. The earlier convention of a single poem in *akaval* metre forming a unit of expression gives place in it to ten verses forming a single unit. Greater importance is given in it to the description of nature and to the use of such description for the indirect-expression of modes, feeling and attitudes than in the poems of the days of Kapilar and ParaNar. *Kaikkilhai*, the theme of one-sided love finds a place in it for the first time in Tamil poetry. It serves almost as a link between the stages reflected in the earlier anthologies namely, *NhattiNai*, *Kutunthokai* and *Akanaanuutu* and the later ones, namely *Kaliththokai* and *ParipaaTTu* in the development of early poetic tradition. The author of this important work has been experimenting with a metrical form of ten stanzas forming one unit of expression, which was extensively used by the poets of the Pallava period and perfected only at the end of that period. An analysis of these experiments is a fascinating study but it cannot find a place in this article.

I shall conclude this article by giving an example to show how the *akam* tradition of early Tamil poetry based on the life of the people had changed in certain aspects even before the days of Kapilar and ParaNar.

The love theme, which was the subject matter of early poetry, had five aspects or divisions according to the environment in which the people lived. Thus the theme of separation in love was assigned to the warriors who lived in the Paalai region as being appropriate to the life of the men of that region, since these men had to be away from their homes for short periods at a time to earn their livelihood. The tradition of having five divisions in *akam* or love originated at a time when people lived in all the five regions, Paalai, Mullai, Kutinji, Marutham and Neithal in the Tamil land. During the time of Kapilar and ParaNar the people of Paalai had moved into the more fertile regions of Kutinji and Mullai for permanent settlement, and therefore, the theme of separation had to be modified to fit into the new pattern of society that occupied only four of the five natural regions. Therefore, the *paalaitthiNai* or separation in love, which was meant earlier for the people of the Paalai region was considered appropriate during the time of Kapilar and ParaNar for the men of the hilly tracts who had to go to distant places through the arid Paalai region in search of their livelihood. This change in *paalaitthiNai* had occurred by the time of Kapilar and ParaNar. This is only an example to show how the early tradition of love poetry was changing as the life of the people was changing in the early days. During the Sangam period the life of the people in the Tamil country was changing rapidly on account of the Aryan and European influences on the economic, religious and cultural life of the people, and the consequent change in the literary tradition of the people was almost inevitable at that time. Therefore, this change in the tradition and the stages by which it took place cannot be traced historically as long as the poems in the eight Anthologies and the ten Idylls are not arranged in their chronological order. Until Tamil scholars take to this aspect of study seriously, the history of early Tamil poetry cannot be traced.

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