

SILAPPATHIKAARAM

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This bi-lingual writer was Delhi – based for a long time. Though controversial in many respects, he is not so in this brief note on *Silappadhikaaram* which he has rendered into English prose.

Silappadhikaaram, the Anklet Story, belongs to the accepted canon of ancient Tamil texts. It is one of the five major epics of the Tamils, the second being *Manimekalai* a sequel to *Silappadhikaaram*, the third, *Jeevaka Chintamani* the fourth *Kundalakesi* and the last *Valayapathi* listed not necessarily in chronological order. Only the first three are available in complete form, the other two being found only in references of the later commentators.

Silappadhikaaram, is an epic of great literary importance. It differs from other epics in having a heroine as the full-fledged hero and is in blank verse which, in its quality and texture, is of a high perfection which is recognizable. It has historical geographical, religious, legendary and mythological strands twisted into it, plaited would be a better word, which makes it interesting even as a human document. But the attempt of the poet seems to have been the tricky one of explaining how and why things happen as they do happen. Joy and pain are fruits of individual action, done in the past lives or the present. Thus *Silappadhikaaram* fully subscribes to the theory of the reincarnation of men and to an order of beings who are somewhat intermediary called loosely Gods and Daemons, *vidhyadharas* etc. These are matters common to the general Indian tradition and are believed in by the majority of the Indian tradition and are

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believed in by the majority of the Indian people – even if we are inclined to call them superstitions today.

It is a moral tale such as the Jains loved to tell. Even though Jains did not question or seek to stem the rise of Vedic practices and the tenets of Hindu religion which were gaining hold of the Tamil mind at the period when the epic was written but they incorporated them in their texts trying to explain things in a Jain way, willing to coexist, keeping their Jain individuality.

That the author of the *Silappadhikaaram*, Ilango Adigal was a Jain by religious persuasion and pursuit, needs no special emphasis. It is obvious from the fact that Jain though he was not intolerant of other religions of his time. That he chose the story as a moral text is also obvious from the last section in which the author speaks in his own person summarizing the Jain maxims of conduct of life, in an able summary towards the end in the 30th canto, in conclusion.

Ilango Adigal chose a theme which was no doubt current in his time and known to many of his readers. It is traditionally accepted that the story of *Manimekalai* which is properly a sequel to the Anklet Story was written earlier and it describes the state of Buddhism in Tamil country at that time. Both Buddhism and Jainism were out of the fold of Hinduism and the Jain author of the epic might have thought it necessary to compose a Jain epic to offset the Buddhist epic written during his own lifetime and becoming popular, setting out the story of the parents of *Manimekalai* in Jain terms.

Ilango Adigal is not anonymous in the general tradition of Indian authors of that time, nothing being known about them except their names. In the concluding section, the poet tells the story of how he was born younger son to Chera King, of how some astrologer predicted that he would inherit the kingdom while his elder brother to whom the throne belonged by right was alive and of how, to obviate such an eventuality, the younger prince renounced the life of the world becoming a monk and joining the monastery.

All this the text vouches for, in the poets, own words. But legend adds that he was the younger brother of the Chera King Senguttuvan and that he spoke of contemporary events the course of which were vouchsafed to him by eye witnesses, poets, those associated with the heroine of the epic etc. But these legends have been ably questioned by a scholar the late S. Vaiyaapuri Pillai who in his *History of Tamil literature* and in his *Kavya Kaalam* (The age of epics) questions the legend and adduces evidence to the contrary. If we accept the story

as written by a contemporary of the events it would mean that the epic was composed sometime in the second century A.D. If we accept the evidence of Vaiyaapuri Pillai who argues from evidences of textual analysis that words like Banglar and others came into use much later, we might be inclined to accept his date the second quarter of the tenth century as the date of the epic. The later date sounds more likely as an obvious explanation of the rise and current popularity of the Goddess Patni, a metamorphosis of the human Kannagi. The evidence seems to be authenticated also by the sophistication of city life details of which are to be found on every page in the epic; the life dealt with in the poems of the ancient Tamil classics as found in the older portions of the *Eight Anthologies* and the ten longer poems are more primitive. But the epic poet strives to follow the conventions established by the poets of the *Eight Anthologies* and the ten longer poems.

How a man can attain super manhood – in this case a woman attaining to the state of Goddess worshipped of many – can be an interesting study at all times and the human element is further accentuated by the evidence of a belief the supernatural to which Indians as a whole have been prone down to the present day. Kannagi setting out as a faithful patient wife accompanying her husband from Puhaar to Madurai in his poverty after neglecting his wife accentuates the tradition and pattern of wifhood and womanhood prevalent in the poet's day and continuing to this day. That she rises in anger against the great Pandaya King of Madurai at the injustice done to her husband who has been executed as a common thief, he being innocent of the crime attributed to him and brings about the fall of the King and the destruction of the city of Madurai follows a pattern that is not unbelievable. Toady it might be couched in terms to political action but in that day it was couched in terms of religious action and equated to the supernatural in the course it took. Kannagi then was no ordinary woman; she had bidden fair to rise to super womanhood , strictly in terms of prevailing terms and the people began to recognize her as a Goddess.

It is in this context that the author brings in the third of the historical kingdoms of the Tamils into the picture. Having recognized Kannagai as a Goddess, she has to have a temple built to her. A temple means a Hindu vedic sanctification, worship, rituals etc. The Chera king makes it an excuse to march north to humble some Kings who have spoken slightly of him, reduces them, culls a suitable stone from the northernmost hills of the land the Himalayas, duly bathes it in the sacred waters of the Ganga and installs it in a temple he built near

his capital, Vanchi. Thus the poet speaks of the three great Kings, kingdoms and capitals of the Tamils – the historical Kings of Chola dynasty ruling from Puhar, the Pandyas from Madurai and the Cheras from Vanchi are authenticated. Puhar was lost in the sea but it still exists as a village ; Madurai has an antiquity that is as impressive as any city in the north of India and Vanchi is a matter of controversy as to its location and remains though its existence has never been questioned. Senguttuvan as well as the Chola Kings named as well as a King from Lanka named in the text are matters of historical reality.

As a matter of curiosity in regard to realistic accuracy, the poet can be quoted in his description of places and the country side he makes the protagonists pass through. His details regarding the Maravas in Pandaya land and the Kuravas in Chera land are accurate and recognizable even to this day. A small detail like the plains of Sirumalai hill near Madurai can be cited as evidence of the accuracy of the poet in his description; the Sirumalai plains are famous to this day proving that the poet, in spite of his penchant for the supernatural, was meticulous as regards material details he recorded. The epic combines the realistic and the religious and the supernatural in human lives rather too uncomfortably for us today but his method is consciously evidencing perhaps a certainty of material and theme such as Dante had in detailing the geography and the supernatural in his epic, *The Divine comedy*.

As an epic *Silappadhikaram* invites comparison with best in that genre produced elsewhere in the world – to Homer and to Dante especially. He is nearer to Dante in that he was composing an epic not of the heroic age but of the religious age. The precision of intellect and imagery he brought to the writing of *Silappadhikaram* places him beside Dante as a great poet in a world series of poets. But such a critical analysis will have to wait for a larger familiarization of *Silappadhikaram* story to the world reader. It is hoped that this rendering into English will eventually bring about such a familiarization as to lead to a critical analysis of the poet Ilango Adigal as one of the best in the world tradition of poetry.
