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Source: *Mahfil*, Spring and Summer, 1968, Vol. 4, No. 3/4, TAMIL ISSUE (Spring and Summer, 1968), pp. 5-12

Published by: Asian Studies Center, Michigan State University

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40874188>

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by

KAMIL ZVELEBIL

First of all, What is Silappadigaram? According to Adiyarkunnallar, the medieval commentator on the work, it is an iyalicainātakapporultotarnilaicceyyul, which means "a poetical work dealing with a story with elements of song and dance or music and drama." This is not a bad definition of the main properties of the work, but it is hardly a satisfactory answer to the question: What is Silappadigaram?

My answer is:

1. It is a saga of the cult of Goddess Pattini.
2. It is the first literary expression and the first ripe cultural fruit of the Dravidian-Aryan synthesis.
3. It is the first consciously national work of Tamil literature, a literary expression of the fact that the Tamils had by that time attained nationhood.
4. It is, of course, a supreme work of art.

If I maintain that this magnificent epic poem is the saga of Pattini's cult, I do not mean that it is primarily a religious work. The original epical poem is primarily and totally a kāppiyam, a work of art. Its author obviously did not intend to produce a sacred, ritualistic text of the cult.

The legend, of course, was there long before the great poem was born, and independently of it--as it is there today, and again independent of it. An old poem, Narṛinai 216, and an even older poem, Puram 278, mention the story, just as it occurs much later in Vaishyapuram; and in the commentary to Yapparungalavirutti, we find a line which is part of the heroine's lament, but which is not found in our version of the epic. Today the story is known in ballad, Puranic, and dramatic forms, e.g., the Kōvalaṅ katai, or the Kaṇṇaki purāṇam. The characters are much transformed: the hero, Kovalan, is a licensed profligate; Madavi an avaricious prostitute; and Kannagi a terrible shrew. I heard illiterate workers in the textile mills of Madurai speak of Kovalan and Karni; in their version, for example, the classical Madavi was transformed into Magadi, the corrupt daughter of a devadāsī by the name of Vasantamala. The cult is also alive in a few places in Kerala and in Ceylon; the deity is connected with fertility rites, marriages, etc. In Tamilnad, Negapatam was, and probably still is, the place where Kannagi was (is) worshipped as Goddess Pattini. Thus we have, e.g., several works edited at the beginning of our century containing legends, kummis, and hymns to Pattiniam.

man of Nākapattanam (cf., Śrī pattinīyammanpēril naluṅku, 1915, or Pattinīyamman varalāru carittiram, 2nd edition, 1915).

But Ilangovadigal's great poem, although a version of the widely-spread and obviously very old legend, is primarily a story of human proportions, of human love and passions, infidelity, jealousies and chastity, so human, in fact, that the deus ex machina appears more or less casually and as a non-essential factor, or rather is forced to appear by the logic of human passions and actions. It is Kannagi, the woman, who alone matters to the poet; Kannagi, the human being, who, backed by the sympathies of the entire people of Madurai, performs her duty and avenges the death of her husband; it is she who for one moment doubts the very existence of God, and who finally conquers and overthrows the law of karma and forces gods and karma to capitulate.

And the fact that in the 3rd book of the poem, this extremely human and humane heroine, this woman who is transformed before our eyes from a simple, quiet, patient maid into a passionate, admirable woman of the magnitude of a Greek heroine, the fact that she herself becomes a goddess, is the logical--in India's way of thinking, at least--outcome and result of her inner growth and development.

Let me first deal with the date of the poem and with its integrity.

In canto 30, lines 155-164, we may read: "The monarch of the world circumambulated the shrine thrice and stood proffering his respects. In front of him the Arya kings released from prison, the Kongu ruler of the Kudagu, the king of Malva, and Kayavāgu, the king of sea-girt Lanka, prayed reverentially to the deity . . .": Kayavāgu, alias Gajabāhu, the king of sea-girt Lanka, that is, of Ceylon.

Years and years were spent in discussions of this verse since it was first made a matter of attention and importance by V. Kanakasabhai Pillai in his trail-blazing book, The Tamils 1800 Years Ago (1904).

In the history of Ceylon, there is only one Gajabāhu who might be identified with the ruler of sea-girt Lanka. He is Gajabāhu I, who, according to Wilhelm Geiger, ruled between 171-193 A.D.--(K. N. Sastri says 173-195)--anyhow, a ruler of the later second century. According to this line in the 3rd book of the epic, Gajabāhu I and Chera Senguttuvan were contemporaries.

This statement, known as the "Gajabāhu synchronism," became at once an object of sharp criticism. One must admit that the objections were well-founded: first, if Senguttuvan the Chera and Gajabāhu I of Ceylon actually met at the end of the second century A.D., and if--as the text and tradition maintain--Senguttuvan's younger brother, Prince Ilango, was the author of the work, how are we to explain the striking differences between the language of this epic poem and that of the classical Tamil lyrical poetry which should be contemporaneous with Silappadigaram? In the epic we have the first occurrences of such items and forms as inta, "this"; uṇṭel, a conditional formation; the pronouns nān, tām, tān; of the present tense suffix -kkipr-/-kipr-; there are also clear lexical innovations like tampi, kaṭai, etc.

How is it possible that the ideology, the rites and cults, customs and manners, the political situation, and the religious and philosophical background of the poem is in striking contrast to the whole cultural, social, and political world of the so-called Sangam poetry? There is, e.g., a thorough knowledge of Bharatanāṭyaśāstra revealed in the 3rd canto of the 1st book; in 11.54-74 of the 15th canto, we have a clear reminiscence of the Panchatantra: the author speaks about Bengal, about many places in North India, etc. Beyond doubt, the civilization of Silappadigaram is based upon a well-progressed synthesis of pre-Aryan as well as Aryan elements in the South, in all spheres of life and culture, in thoughts and habits of the people.

How is it possible that the epic quotes faithfully a couplet of the famous early post-Sangam didactic work Tirukkural (No. 55) which is supposed to have been composed only in the fourth-fifth century A.D.? But it also quotes other later works of Tamil literature, such as Palamolinānūru 46, and many earlier works such as Patirruppattu, Tolkāppiyam, etc. By no stretch of imagination is it possible to consider the bulk of classical Tamil lyrical poetry and this epic, as we have it today, as contemporaneous works.

But the defenders of the faith in the "Gajabāhu synchronism" supported their hypothesis by no less valid arguments: by archeological finds and by quotations from Greek and Roman authors, like Pliny, Strabo, Ptolemy. Their arguments more or less proved that Senguttuvan's age must be assigned roughly to 100-250 A.D., and not later; that, in other words, Senguttuvan and Gajabāhu were contemporaries. It is interesting that when the medieval commentary of Adiyarkunallar was studied carefully once again, it was found that this great commentator had calculated the date of the departure of Kovalan and Kannagi from Kaviripattinam, computing on the basis of astronomical data; his date for the story is 174 A.D.

The "Gajabāhu synchronism," as such, was accepted by most of the serious scholars, since, to quote K. A. Nilakantha Sastri, "it fits very well with all other lines of evidence derived from the general probabilities of history in North and South India . . . from archeology, from Greek and Roman authors, and from early Tamil literary sources." (A Comprehensive History of India, Vol. 2, 1957.)

On the other hand, Silappadigaram as we have it today, in that literary form which is accessible to us, could not have been composed before the fifth-sixth century A.D.

Somehow or other the most simple solution did not occur to scholars. And so the antagonists of the "Gajabāhu synchronism," and those who rightly maintained that the work must be of later origin, joined hands and proclaimed that the 3rd book of Silappadigaram which contains the synchronism and the tradition of Ilango's authorship, and which is thus the real trouble-maker, is not an integral part of the work; it is, in their opinion, entirely a later appendix.

This was, of course, a very serious statement--a sort of declaration of war. But the antagonists of the poem's integrity had some powerful arguments.

First of all, the structural argument: the first two books are self-sufficient; they form a closed structure, a single complete unit; the story

of the two lovers is perfectly finished and needs no continuation whatsoever, while the 3rd book is a non-functional appendix, an independent and somewhat boring panegyric which has nothing to do with the story of Kovalan and Kannagi.

This reasoning, which is so very non-Indian, and based to a great extent upon Western, Aristotelian concepts, originated interestingly enough with a Tamil scholar, P.T.S. Iyengar, and was quite ably elaborated by another Tamil, Sami Sidambaranar.

It is true that, structurally, and from the point of view of the story itself, the first two books form a perfectly closed unit--by application of Western aesthetic criteria, though! But, ideologically, from the point of thought-content and subject-matter of the poem, it is entirely in agreement with the Indian tradition and with Indian aesthetic conceptions that the heroine of the book becomes ultimately the object of apotheosis, and that the 3rd book is, at the same time, a panegyric on the ruling dynasty whose member had very probably been the poet himself.

I shall go even further. I maintain that even from the point of view of form, of structure, we cannot escape the conclusion that the third part is an integral portion of the poem. First of all, in terms of traditional Tamil views, Silappadigaram celebrates both love and war, it deals both with akam and puram; without the 3rd book (the puram portion) it would be incomplete, and the balance and symmetry would be destroyed. The 1st book, describing the country of the Cholas, is the stage set for the opening and development of that tragic story of human passions; the 2nd book--the action of which takes place in the Pandya country--contains the climax of the human story, the culmination of the tragedy; and the 3rd book, describing the country of the Cheras--since times immemorial an integral part of the Tamil land--contains the typically Indian conclusion of the story: the deification of Kannagi-Pattini. Thus, the poem has three dominant phases; it is like a threefold classical musical composition, each of the movements set in one of the three capitals of the three Tamil kingdoms. The Lay of the Anklet is the first consciously national work of Tamil literature. It transcends the borders and barriers of different landscapes (the tinais of classical lyrics) and of different tribal loyalties. Ilangovadigal has on purpose set the stage for the tale in all three Tamil kingdoms; he enshrines in his poem the whole of Tamil India. The 3rd book, dedicated to the Cheras, is therefore an organic and indispensable part of the poem.

Further objections--such as the fact that the 3rd book is not quite as full of dramatic and swift-moving action as the first two--are too weak to withstand the other two facts which support the integrity of the work: unanimous consensus of indigenous tradition, and, more important, the doubtless fact that the language of the whole work, its style and diction, are perfectly homogeneous.

It is interesting that the most simple and obvious solution of the whole problem occurred to scholars only as the last possibility: namely, that the synchronism of Senguttuval and Gajabāhu--a reliable historical fact in itself--is not valid only for the time of the origin of the poem; in other words, it does not coincide with the date of the literary work, while it is

valid for the time when historical Gajabāhu met with historical Senguttuvan; in yet other words, it is valid for the story which formed the basis of the 3rd book of the poem, but invalid for the date of the origin of that poem itself.

Silappadigaram is primarily the story of a woman. Except for Kannagi, there is, so to say, no hero in the poem. She alone matters to the poet. Wedded when she was twelve, beautiful, shy, a sheltered and beloved maiden, she shows at first extreme reticence--a "gracious silence."

The young couple, Kovalan and Kannagi, keep a quiet and happy home for some time, until Kovalan abandons Kannagi for Madavi, the dancing girl, who lives in grand style, lures her lover to the fashionable resorts of the time, and is set into marvelous contrast with the patient, chaste wife. Then, on account of a silly quarrel, Kovalan and Madavi fall out, or so it seems, for the fact is that Kovalan has lost faith in Madavi and also is probably over-spent and exhausted by the kind of life he has been leading as her lover. Kovalan is back at home with his wife, who is prepared to follow him wherever he will go. Madavi's plea for reconciliation is rejected. Ruined in his career, Kovalan accepts his wife's anklet, cilambu, to raise the money on which he wants to build a new life. For this purpose they travel to Madurai, the Pandya capital. On their long and strenuous journey, Kavundi Adigal, a Jain nun, gives them much friendship and comfort. In Madurai, Kovalan entrusts his beloved to the care of poor and honest folk of a shepherd community and walks forth alone to seek out a jeweller who would help him sell Kannagi's anklet. Thus he meets his fate: a goldsmith, who has misappropriated the queen's anklet, sees a golden opportunity in Kovalan's coming. Kovalan is brought before the king as the culprit. Since Kannagi's anklet resembles the jewel of the queen, Kovalan's doom is sealed. He is executed.

When Kannagi arrives on the scene--an entirely different being now, not the meek and reticent girl we know from the 1st book--she proves her husband's innocence by bursting open her anklet--incidentally, a deeply symbolic act--revealing to the king the diamond inside instead of the pearls which were contained in the queen's jewel. The shocked king is killed by remorse, and his queen becomes a true satee. Kannagi's wrath then turns on the capital city, the seat of crime and profligacy; tearing off her breast and hurling it onto the city, she sets fire to Madurai and the whole city goes up in flames. She then turns west to Cheranad where Kovalan, in a divine chariot, meets her on a mountain, and both are then received into heaven.

A temple to Kannagi is built in Vanji, the Chera capital. Senguttuvan, the powerful king of the Cheras, has the stone for carving her image brought down all the way from the Himalayas on the shoulders and heads of conquered Arya kings. Kannagi comes back to grace the temple with her presence, now a full-blown deity.

It is not ruled out that the popular legend is an echo of a tragedy which actually happened in Madurai sometime in the first century A.D. during the reign of the Pandya king Nedunjelian. Anyhow, when the throne of the Cheras was occupied by Senguttuvan (about 180 A.D.), the cult of the "grand chaste lady" seems to have been firmly established there. Later, sometime in the fifth-sixth centuries (this is how a historical linguist would date the poem), the popular legend, which has become the saga of the cult, became a

source of inspiration of the prince-poet, Ilangovadigal. According to tradition, he was the younger brother of Senguttuvan, the son of King Cheraladan I mayavaramban. He renounced the throne which, according to a prophecy, he should have occupied. The vow of asceticism kept faithfully all his life earned for Ilango (which simply means "prince," or "younger brother of the king") the title Adigal or "saint."

It seems quite probable that the poet actually belonged to the Chera royal family--though of course to a much later time than his famous forebear Senguttuvan--and it is not ruled out that--as maintained in the introduction to the poem--it was another poet, Sattanar (the author of the well-known twin-epic Manimegalai), a friend of Ilango, who discussed one version of the Kannagi-Pattini legend with Ilango, and this discussion inspired Ilango to compose his poem. Or the poem--the entire poem as we have it now--was composed by some unknown poet and ascribed to an Ilango, a prince of the Chera family. Though an argument ex silentio, we should not forget that ancient Tamil poetry which knows well King Senguttuvan, does not at all, not even once, mention any brother of his, a prince by name of Ilango.

Anyhow, the cult of Kannagi-Pattini must have been well established in Cheranad; but, at the same time, Jainism and Buddhism were still flourishing in the South, which shows also that Ilango composed his poem sometime between the end of the fifth and the beginning of the seventh century. He embodied a reliable historical tradition in his poem: his royal ancestor Senguttuvan, victorious in battle with the Aryas, is conceived as a national Tamil hero, and Ilango describes his march to the north and finally the erection of a shrine to Pattini, which was witnessed by a number of contemporary rulers, among them Gajabāhu I of Ceylon.

The only false statement Ilango has made--we may easily forgive him--is that, at the very end of the poem, he brings himself into the story, as if he had personally witnessed the meeting of the kings in honor of Pattini. This kind of fraud is well known from other literature, too.

The story of Silappadigaram, as already said, is a thoroughly human story, in spite of the divine chariot which goes up to heaven with Kannagi and Kovalan on board. The driving forces of the story spring out of the hearts of the human beings, motivated by human thoughts and passions. One of the greatest merits of the work is the treatment of the problem of wrong: the poet's conception of guilt. Who is to be blamed for the tragedy? The hot-headed king? The weak Kovalan? Or the attractive Madavi?

Silappadigaram is not a story of schematic shadowy figures, of crystal-clear and faultless heroes and raven black demoniac villains. If we seriously ask who is the villain in the piece, we are actually unable to answer. Nobody is entirely to be blamed--and all of them are guilty. Not a single character in the epic is thoroughly bad or thoroughly good--not even the pious Jain woman-ascetic, and probably not even Kannagi.

Certainly not the king, who is not intrinsically unjust--he is only hot-tempered and excitable and somewhat unbalanced. Not even the goldsmith who is not evil to the core, but merely a greedy coward. And Madavi? Is she perhaps an immoral and vicious harlot--as she appears in some folk versions of the tale? Not at all. She is a charming character: sweet, clever, loving,

passionate, trained to attract. Was it her fault that she was born in her caste and trained to become a courtesan?

What about Kovalan? He is of that tribe of Indian literary heroes who are affectionate, brave, handsome, very accomplished--but not very faithful, not very gallant, not very chivalrous, not very strong; who are no proof against the vices of society and the charms of an attractive woman. In short, he is very human.

The only figure which is clearly good from the beginning to the end, and is painted in one bright basic color, is Kannagi. But she, too, is human; she, too, is not fully perfect. In perfection there is, metaphysically so to say, no change; once perfect, always perfect, always the same, pure perfect ens. But there is tremendous change in Kannagi. At the beginning of the story, she is an innocent, sheltered girl, obedient and silent--she just does not speak at first at all--an excellent wife; perhaps a mere child. When Kovalan returns to her, we might expect a passionate scene of reconciliation. There is no such thing. There are no recriminations, no explanations. She simply offers her anklet when Kovalan confesses poverty. And Kovalan is deeply moved by her silent acceptance of him back into the shelter of her love. But all this quiet beauty and silence, this extreme patience merely shows the depth of emotion dedicated entirely to the husband. And with his undeserved death, that deep emotion is unleashed and turned into a storm of pathos and passion (C. and H. Jesudasan).

And yet all these people who are actually not guilty, confess their guilt; they plead guilty, Madavi, Kovalan, the king, and even Kannagi. And this is what makes Silappadigaram a supreme masterpiece of Tamil poetry. tan titu ilal---en titu enre---"She did no wrong. I alone am to blame," says Kovalan when he reads a letter from Madavi (13th canto in the 2nd book). But Madavi confesses her guilt by the act of renunciation; she, who was so fond of the éclat of the king and court, who loved gold and jewels and extravagant life above all--she atones for her guilt by becoming a nun and persuading the daughter she bore Kovalan to become a nun as well.

The king is shocked by his own deed and exclaims: yānē kalvan---ketuka en āyul---"I am the robber of Kovalan's life--Let me die!" And he is killed by remorse.

Kannagi herself says (29th canto): tennavan tītilan---"The king of the South has not committed crime." And she blames her past for what has happened. Out of the shock and pain which she has experienced when told of Kovalan's death, an unforeseen, painful skepsis is born in her mind (cf., canto 19); but, almost at once, there is a tremendous resolution: first, to know the truth; then, to perform the act of justice. And when this is accomplished (canto 21), she goes on to fight the very fate, to combat the very basis of the philosophical and religious ideology which lies at the bottom of the work; out of a tremendous inner and hidden tension between the karmic and dharmic interpretation of the world, and human hearts, this tremendous resolution of Kannagi is born--not to rest, not to eat, not to sleep, only to go and search for Kovalan, until she finally succeeds; she compels the forces of karma to give up--and so Kovalan and Kannagi are reunited. It is no wonder that a woman of such calibre should be deified.

The blend of epic narration and lyrical stanzas (plus a little genuine prose) is unique in this great poem. The narrative portions proper are, of course, not in prose--and hence each prosaic translation, Danielou's and Glazov's included, is rather inadequate; these portions are in the ācīriyappā (akaval) meter of ancient classical poetry; they have a dignified grandeur and a definite prosodic pattern. The narration is interrupted by whole garlands of lyrics, exquisite jets of pure song which interrupt the "baroque splendor" (Basham) of the main narration. These lyrical songs are still full of flavor of the past classical age, but, at the same time, fully functional to the action--not merely descriptive embellishments.

The one fault found by some critics in the poem--the over-emphasis on Fate--is conditioned by the ideology of karma prevalent at the time when the great epic was born. Saivism, Vaishnavism, and, above all Jainism and Buddhism are shown by Ilango to coexist without friction and disharmony. The poet's own strong inclination towards Jainism is seen in many features of the poem. On the other hand, the story was so powerful and the characters--mainly, of course, the central figure of Kannagi--which the poet created, so strong and so full of life, that the ultimate actions of Kannagi--setting fire to Madurai and her struggle with Fate to win Kovalan back--mean a rebellion against that Fate, and perhaps even a denial, a negation of the whole basic karmic-dharmic philosophy. This, of course, may be highly controversial, but it is quite tempting (even though it may seem somewhat far-fetched) to see in the ultimate actions of Kannagi a denial of karmic philosophy within the poet's mind itself.

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