

In Search of the Beginnings and Growth of Knowledge Production in Tamil

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Abstract

The article seeks to explore the beginnings and growth of knowledge production in the Tamil language, literature and culture. Starting with the Sangam poems it discusses at length the poetics and the grammatical exegesis in *Tolkāppiyam*. The importance of this work lay not only in its grammar but also in its character as the first known Tamil work creating the basis for a knowledge system which the early Tamils must have required. It founded the traditional method of expounding grammar, which was later followed and developed by most grammatical works. The educational system at this early stage was not organised institutionally, but was taught from teacher to student in small groups. The main subjects taught and passed on by memory and also written down on palm-leaf manuscripts were grammar, poetics and mathematics and its ancillary astronomy. The post-Sangam period (4th-6th centuries AD), representing the transition to a new socio-economic formation and the spread of the Buddhist and Jain religions in the region, witnessed the production of the *Patinenkīlkkāṇakku*, a series of 18 didactic works on ethics, morality and social norms. A major aspect of the didactic works is that they reflect not only the influence of Sanskrit in a greater measure but contain clear evidence of the knowledge of indigenous medicine, which was developed probably by the Jain ascetics but had become familiar to the Tamils by then.

Key words: *Akam*, Didactic, Grammar, Indigenous medicine, Jaina and Buddhist contribution Language, *Karma*, Literature, Poetics, *Puram*, Sanskrit influence, *Siddha*, *Tīnai*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Taking the simple way to recognize knowledge systems in ancient and early medieval times, one looks for educational institutions, which taught various sciences, physical and social. The early historical Sangam works carry very little information on such institutions except for the fact that the Sangam anthologies were the creations of a literary academy promoted by the Pāṇḍyas of Madurai. Here the academy's independent status and the recognition of peer groups were perhaps more important than mere royal/chiefly patronage. In fact, the composition and collection of the poems of the *Akam* and *Puram* themes were not systematically done but were carried out occasionally due to the need for legitimizing

lineage connections of the rulers. The composers were *Pāṇar* and *Pulavar*; the former referring to bards moving from one chieftom to another seeking gifts and patronage. The latter perhaps occupied a higher level as litterateurs with a close relationship/ friendship with the chieftains in whose domain they were located. Some of them may have been Brāhmaṇas, but well versed in Tamil.

The Jains and Buddhists have also contributed to the literary corpus of the Sangam. The influence of the Jains, in particular, was permanent in Tamil language and literature for they have also established the basic norms for the Tamil language and linguistics. In the early historical period, the Jains composed many poems

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and were counted among the Cānrōr, the learned members of the Tamil Sangam at Madurai, the Tamil city par excellence, under the patronage of the Pāṇḍyas. The poems of Ulōccanār, who was a Jain poet, have been classified among the *Akam* and *Puram* collections, the *Kuruntokai* and *Narīnai* (Subrahmanian, 1990, p. 124). Kaṇiyan Pūnkunran, a Jain poet and astrologer authored a verse of the *Puram* collection and *Narīnai*. (Subrahmanian, 1990, p. 214). The *Maturaikkānci* of Mankuti Marutanar, refers to a Jain monastery at Madurai and the monks as great seers, who could look into the past and the future, along with the present (Mudaliar, 2001, Article 15). The Jain practice of self-immolation by slow starvation or *vadakkiruttal* (*Sallekhana*) is known to the *Puram* verses apart from knowledge of their beliefs. However, there is certainly no evidence of Tamil society being influenced in any significant way by their beliefs in the impermanence of worldly life.

As poems of Love and War (*Akam* and *Puram*), the Sangam works certainly lay greater importance on the science of war, more in the nature of tribal conflicts, for hegemony. These collections were followed by the *Padinenkīlkaṇakku* works usually understood as didactic works, different in their themes and contents but perhaps more useful in their clues to the kinds of knowledge that were in existence or were promoted as ethical and moral guides to society. They are often assigned to the same period (3rd century BC- AD 300) as the Sangam works, but this is highly questionable.

However, one major work of this period is *Tolkāppiyam* (the earliest work on Tamil Grammar), which has been dated variously from the 2nd to the 9th centuries AD. Recent work on the early Tamil Brāhmi inscriptions has argued in favour of a 2nd century date, both due to its relevance to these inscriptions and the writing system that is laid down in this work on grammar (Mahadevan, 2003, pp. 230–31). A much earlier

work on grammar called *Akattiyam* (not extant), attributed to the sage Agastya, is believed to have existed from which the *Tolkāppiyam* drew its inspiration. It would therefore be pertinent to see what the *Tolkāppiyam* is intended for, how it is organized into three major aspects of a language and its literature and how it serves as a guide to understand the writing (Phonology) and the word (Morphology) and more important the meaning of the Sangam poems, collected as anthologies on Love and War (*Akam* and *Puram*). Composed in a literary language, the Sangam poems are not easily comprehensible even to Tamil scholars without the help of *Tolkāppiyam*, and the medieval commentaries on these works. Hence the importance of this work lay not only in its grammar but also in its character as the first known Tamil work creating the basis for a knowledge system which the early Tamils must have required and the chiefly patrons promoted. It certainly founded the traditional method of expounding grammar, later followed and developed for Tamil language and literature by many subsequent grammatical works.

Tolkāppiyar's way of analysis and explanation lead us to conclude that he is more particular about the cognitive development which emphasizes intellectual outcomes rather than mere teaching methods and techniques. The fact that this work has three sections, one on Phonology/Orthography (*Eluttu*), (*Śol* = word), the second on Morphology (*Sol*), and the third on Semantics (*Porul* = meaning/interpretation) adds to its significance as a major guide to ancient Tamil literature. Particularly important is the *Porul Atikāram*, which is the key to the interpretation of the Sangam works. It lays down the *Akam* and *Puram* conventions, some aspects of Psychology related to *Akam*, Poetics, figures of speech and with social and other conventions related to public behavior (Subrahmanian, 1966, p. 334). *Tolkāppiyam*'s classification and explanation of the *tiṇai* (seven of them are listed), literally

meaning situations of various kinds (e.g., of different love and war situations), and eco-zones, are the most significant from the point of view of the historian as they are directly related to geography and environment, and their relationship to man. This is to be seen as the most important pointer to their knowledge of the environment, which was passed on to those studying the socio-economic conditions of these eco-zones and which were developed by posterity, particularly pastoral (*mullai*) and agricultural activities (*marutam*) and coastal (*neital*) fishing and trade by the tribal/ethnic groups associated with the regions concerned.

N. Subrahmanian says that the three divisions are known in technical language as *Piṇḍam* or Trinity, comprising the *Eḷuttadikāram* (Orthography), *Solladikāram* (Etymology and Syntax) and *Poruḷadikāram* [the conventions of *Akam* (love) and *Puram* (Non-love) themes, figures of speech, prosody, social and literary conventions of a residual nature, and social psychology in relation to dramatic and allied literature] (Subrahmanian, 1990, p. 9). According to him the *Akam* and *Puram* classification of literary themes in Tamil is *sui generis*. Each of these three divisions of this work is sub-divided into nine *lyals* (sub-chapters) and so the work consists of 27 *lyals* and of 1612 *sūtras*. Although the *Agattiyam* of Agastya (not extant) is believed to have dealt with the three conventional divisions of Tamil, namely *lyal*, *Ísai* and *Nāṭakam*, the *Tolkāppiyam* does not deal with that conventional division (Subrahmanian, 1966, p. 334).

A special poetical preface or *Śirappuppāyiram* is prefixed to the text. It is said that this *pāyiram* was composed by Panambāranār, a classmate of this grammarian. *Tolkāppiyam*, has been commented upon by medieval commentators such as Iḷampūraṇar, Śenāvaraiyar, Perāśiriyar, Naccinārkkiniyar, Deiva Śilaiyār and Kallāḍanār, placed between the 10th and 15th centuries AD. This work is noticed first in the commentary to the

Iṛaiyanār Ahapporuḷ (post- 6th century AD) in the final form. According to a later work (*Purapporuḷ Venbā Mālai*) Tolkāppiyar and Panambāranār were among the 12 disciples of Agattiyar (Agastya), who contributed one chapter each to *Pannirupadalam*, an elaborate work on *Poruḷ*, which is not extant. This account however is not supported by any other evidence (Pillai, 1988, pp.47–48).

Ilakkuvanar is critical of those scholars, especially of T.P. Meenakshisundaram, finding parallelisms in *Tolkāppiyam* and Sanskrit works [knowledge of Sanskrit and borrowings by Tolkāppiyar (Ilakkuvanar, 1963, Introduction)]. Tamil scholars, in general, are not inclined to acknowledge the use of Sanskrit and its influence in such early works and are keen on dating the work to a pre- Pāṇinian age i.e., not later than the 6th century BC. Tamil, according to Ilakkuvanar, for example, was committed to writing before the arrival of the Brāhmaṇas and creations of words are found in Tamil by analogy. *Tolkāppiyam* is an original work and Yāska's *Nirukta*, he says, follows *Tolkāppiyam*. Naccinārkkiniyar's interpretations of some verses in *Poruḷ* with reference to Sanskrit works are, in his view, not correct. The structure of Tamil society was entirely different from that of Āryan society during the pre-Christian era (Ilakkuvanar, 1963, 391ff). Caste system was unknown to Tamil society and some verses on castes were inserted later into the body of *Tolkāppiyam* and references to Antaṇar, Pārppār and Ayyar cannot to be taken as Brāhmaṇas. However, the four-fold division as mentioned in *Tolkāppiyam* viz., *Araśar*, *Antaṇar*, *Vanigar* and *Vēḷāḷar* does not follow the *varṇa*-s in the Brāhmaṇical order (*Brāhmaṇas*, *Kṣatriyas*, *Vaiśyas* and *Śūdras*) but is more like the Buddhist order, which gives precedence to the *Kṣatriyas*. However it indicates that Tolkāppiyar was familiar with Sanskrit and the social norms of the Indo-Aryan society. It is a matter of general agreement that *varṇa* differentiation came to the Dravidian

south comparatively late for the earliest Tamil literature shows a society of tribal characteristics. Recent researches would also show that the hierarchy of the *varṇa* system was absent and the tribal and kin-based organization was common in all eco-zones, with the exception of *marutam*, the riverine plains, where the first Brāhmaṇa settlements appeared. The division of society into that of the *cāṇṟōr* (*mēlōr* or *uyarntor*) and *Iḷicinar* (lowly) was more conspicuous (Gurukkal, 2010, p. 212).

Further it is claimed by Ilakkuvanar that the interpolations in the work (in *Porul* in particular) were due to influence of Sanskrit, which was dominant during the middle ages. Rules of Sanskrit grammar, according to him, were forced upon the Tamil language (Ilakkuvanar, 1963, p. 378). He accepts that Tollāppiyar knew Sanskrit, but *vadasol* (Sanskrit words) were minimized and the borrowing of Sanskrit words also was systematized. Later Lexicographers also found that the use of Sanskrit words was considerable. S. Vaiyapuri Pillai, the Tamil scholar who brings down the date of this work to 6th century AD, on the other hand, lists a number of Sanskrit words in the work (Pillai, 1988, pp. 30–31).

The importance of this work to understand the socio-economic activities of the early historical period is undeniable. The early historical period, i.e., 3rd century BC to 3rd century AD, was characterized by folk traditions, tribal basis of social organization and different eco-cultural zones called the *tinai*, each with its own tribal deity, representing different socio-economic milieux. It is only in the *marutam* or plains, where agricultural operations were intensified that Brāhmaṇical presence is indicated and in the *marutam* and the *neital* or littoral, where there was a spurt of trade and commercial activity that the Jain and Buddhist religions gained followers, particularly among the traders. The *Kurinci* or the hilly tracts were marked mainly by hunting as the

major economic activity and the *Pālai*, literally desert, is more in the nature of a transition zone where robbery was a major means of livelihood. The Tamil region was, according to Panambāranār, the land extending from Venkatam to Kumari and the five *tiṇais* or eco-zones were found dispersed within this region.

The educational system of this period was not organised institutionally, but was taught from teacher (*kaṇakkayar*, *āśiriyar*, *āśār*, *uvāttiyar*) to student in private collecting a group of students i.e., a *paḷḷi*. The main subjects taught and passed on by memory and also written down on Palm-Leaf manuscripts were Grammar, Poetics and Mathematics and its ancillary Astronomy. Later came the *Nakaṇḍus* (Skt *Nighaṇṭus*, dictionaries and Lexicons) for the students to commit to memory (Subrahmanian, 1966, pp.326–29). References to the arts of jewel making, pearl fishing, pottery and textile weaving, the fine arts of music and dance are numerous, as also architecture, sculpture (mainly of clay, terra cotta = *maṇṇṅṅāḷar*) and painting yet no texts on such arts were written and preserved in Tamil till the introduction of temple art and architecture (the *Vāstuśāstras* and *Śilpaśāstras*) in the early Medieval Period.

2. THE PATINEṆKĪLKAṆAKKU WORKS

The 18 minor (*Patineṇ-kilkaṇakku*) works (are also often assigned to the same period i.e., that of the Sangam works, notwithstanding the differences in themes, contents and purpose of composition (Chidambaranar, 1957; 1966; Subrahmanian, 1990). It would be more appropriate to date them in the post- Sangam era. It is in the post-Sangam period (4th-6th centuries), representing the transition to a new socio-economic formation that the Buddhist and Jain religions emerged as dominant religions and the *Patineṇ-kīlkaṇakku*, a series of didactic works on ethics, morality and social norms were composed, a majority of which were authored by the Jains.

The spread of Buddhism and Jainism in South India began much earlier i.e., during the Mauryan period, through Buddhist missionaries who were sent by Asoka to various regions, especially South India and Srilanka. Jainism however came with a migration of the Jains from north India to Karnataka (Sravana Belgola in Karnataka and to the Tamil country). Many of them are mentioned (as ascetics) in the early Tamil Brāhmi inscriptions of the 2nd century BC to 3rd century AD period. Representing non-Vedic and non-Brahmanic traditions, they introduced the Tamil region to spiritual and philosophic systems unknown to the early Tamils. Initially their impact was minimal, but the transition to a new economic and social formation may be attributed to their influence and literary activity as well as their contribution to Tamil literary conventions and Grammar.

The eighteen didactic works (which contain a fair amount of Sanskrit words) together represent a stage of intensive literary activity dominated by anti-Vedic and non-brāhmaṇical sectarian religions like Buddhism and Jainism. They would also suggest that Tamil society was moving away, under the influence of these faiths, from its purely anthropo-centric religious and humanistic or material attitudes which were slowly but surely eroded or changed by the metaphysical and spiritual ideas of non-Vedic origins. The twin epics, *Śilappadikaram* and *Maṇimēkalai* also fall in the same period and attest to the numerical strength of the Jains and Buddhists in the urban centres of the early historical period and the post-Sangam period. The *Śilappadikāram* provides useful insights into the nature of the Jain religion, the Jain monasteries and nunneries whose inmates played an influential role in contemporary society. At the same time these two epics also introduce us to the world of the merchant and craftsmen in the dual centres of power established by the three traditional Tamil powers of the Cēras, Cōḷas and Pāṇḍyas, such as Karūr-Vanci and Muṣīri, Uṛaiyūr

and Puhār and Madurai and Koṛkai. The *Maṇimēkalai* also provides, in addition, evidence of the inter-regional trade networks by bringing in the regions of South and South East Asia such as Sāvaka (Java) (Champakalakshmi, 1988, pp.115–16). The main aim of this Buddhist work is to establish the greatness of Buddhism and its philosophy *vis-a-vis* other religions and philosophical systems (the six systems of Philosophy) introduced to us in the form of ‘Listening to the Philosophers’, viz., the *Vaidika* system, *Ājīvika*, *Nirgrantha* (Jain) *Sāmkhya*, *Vaiśeṣika* and *Bhūtavādas* as well as Buddhism.

Among the 18 didactic works, the *Tirukkuraḷ* (or *Kuraḷ*) and *Nālaḍiyār* held in high esteem by the Tamils as treasures of Tamil literature, are claimed to be Jain works, although there is a continuing controversy about the *Tirukkuraḷ*. The Jains attribute its authorship to Kundakunda also known as Ēlācārya, who is believed to have lived around the beginning of the Christian era. It is noteworthy that the medieval commentator of the *Nīlakesi*, a Jain work in Tamil refers to the *Tirukkuraḷ* as “*emmottu*” or “our scripture” (Ramesh, 1974, p.37). The *Tirukkuraḷ* is of universal value in its ethical and normative character. Of particular significance is the emphasis in *Tirukkuraḷ* on *ahimsa*. The scrupulous abstinence from the destruction of life is frequently declared to be the chief excellence of a true ascetic as expressed in the couplet “*avisorindāyiram vēṭṭalin onraṇ uyir seguttuṇṇāmai nanru*” meaning “not killing a single creature for the sake of your food is far better than a thousand *yāgas* performed according to Vedic rules” (verse 269). The *Nālaḍiyār* emphasizes the importance on *ahimsa* (*kollāmai*), the greatness of ascetics (*nīttār perumai*), abstinence from meat eating, impermanence of mundane things, the greatness of renunciation and extinction of desire (Mudaliar, 2001, Article 15 John Samuel). The doctrine of *Karma*, would also seem to pervade the various genres of Jain and Buddhist literature, the epics *Śilappadikaram* and *Maṇimēkalai* and works on

ethics, morality and the early medieval *Kāvya*s and *Purāṇa*s. This would suggest that the non-Brahmanical religions and their philosophy had spread to all the south Indian regions and had established their presence in society.

The *Nālaḍiyār*, compiled by one Padumanār, is often called “*vēḷāḷar vēdam*”, the *Veda* of the cultivators of the soil. The work is replete with ideas like the transience of wealth, youth and body and the view that *paḷavinai* or *karma* determines the nature of present life. There is however no evidence in the work of any particular religion being the source of its influence, although its stress on lofty and impressive ideals like righteousness and charity are generally in keeping with Jain ideals. Epigrams from the *Nālaḍiyār* have become household words throughout the Tamil country. G.U. Pope has rightly characterized them as having a “strong sense of moral obligations, an earnest aspiration after righteousness, a fervent and unselfish charity and generally a loftiness of aim that are very impressive” (Pope 1958, xi). The date of this work may also fall within the period of transition, although scholars assign either to the 1st–2nd centuries AD or to the 7th–8th centuries AD (Ramesh, 1974, pp. 43–44).

The *Paḷamoḷi* of Munrurai Araiyanār and the *Araṇericcāram* of Tirumunaippāḍyār lay emphasis on principles of conduct (the five rules such as *ahimsa*, *satya*, *astya*, *brahmacarya* and *parimita-parigraha*) in Jainism governing the lives of the householder as well as the ascetic. Uncertainty still prevails as to the Jain authorship of other works like the *Tiṇaimālai Nūrraimbadu* following the Sangam themes of love and war. The *Nānmaṇikkadigai*, *Aintiṇai Elupatu* also belong to this genre and may be assigned to the period 4th–6th centuries AD, when Jainism was in the ascendancy (Ramesh, 1974, p. 46).

A major aspect of the 18 didactic works is that they reflect not only the influence of Sanskrit

in a greater measure but contain clear evidence of the knowledge of indigenous medicine, which was developed probably by the Jain ascetics but had become familiar to the Tamils as seen in the 18 works. The works like the *Ēlādi*, *Tirikaḍugam* and *Śīrupancamūlam* use the names of many herbs and their powers of curing bodily ills and introduce their equivalence to cure mental problems and establish moral and ethical behaviour in society. For example, in the *Ēlādi* of Kanimetaiyar (Dikshitar, 1936, p. 43) each stanza consists of six ideas, which are equal to the Āyurvedic medicinal plants, *ēlam* = cardamom, *ilavangam* = cloves, *miḷagu* = pepper, *śukku* = dried ginger, *śirunāvalpū* = the flower of the *śirunāval* and *tippili* = long pepper, which are together called the ‘*Ēlādi Cūrṇa*’, which according to that system of medicine were a sovereign remedy for all physical illnesses of man.

In the *Tirikaḍugam*, (of Nallādanār) each stanza prescribes three remedies for the ills of the spirit and mind, just as *śukku* = dry ginger, *miḷagu* = pepper and *tippili* = piper longum are reputed in the Āyurvedic system of medicine to provide a universal panacea for all physical ills of man. The name of the work *Trikaḍukam* is itself derived from these three medicines, commonly used in indigenous medicine for various physical ailments. The work in reality lays down three *aṛams* (*dharma*-s) which when followed by anybody would as a result not only free him from illness of the body but also of the mind. *Śīrupancamūlam* of (Āḍuraittamiḷ Āśiriyar Kāri Āśān) similarly contains references to five Āyurvedic pharmacopeia – five medicinal roots for physical illness. They are ‘*kaṇḍan kattiri vēr*; *śirruvalutunai vēr*; *śirrumalli vēr*; *nerunji vēr*; *perumalli vēr*—roots of five well known herbs. The author treats them as a remedy for problems of a spiritual and intellectual life of man (Chidambaranar, 1957, pp. 67–76).

It is important to note that many of these roots and herbs just mentioned are still used in

Āyurvedic and Siddha medicine. Interestingly the Siddhas were known at least from the 8th century as wandering mendicants, an unorganised group who were anti- Vedic, anti-Brāhmaṇical and anti-ritual of any kind and radical in their views of life. Their presence is known right down to the medieval period and they seem to have continued to develop a system which may be traced from the ones mentioned in the above works. It is also believed that the Siddhas wrote some texts on medicine, their system being known as *Siddhavidyam*. Their pre-occupation with medicine and alchemy is attributed to their quest for perfect health and immortality. The attainment of immortality, salvation and perfect health in life is common to all Tantric Siddhayogas (Meenakshi, 1996, pp.111-34). It is evident that early Tamil Literature, the Sangam Corpus is devoid of any reference to philosophical systems and to the physical and natural sciences, despite the fact that the Brāhmaṇical tradition was well known to the authors of the anthologies and *Tolkāppiyam*, the earliest extant grammar work. With the coming of the non-Brāhmaṇical Buddhism and Jainism, a visible change appears both in the 18 works and the two epics which discuss or refer to various systems of philosophy, moral and ethical principles.

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