



Political Thinking
in
Indian Literature

Editor :
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śaṅgama

abhiḡyaṇ śhakuntalā

arthaśāstra

Mahābhārata

Rāmāyaṇa

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Political Thinking in Ancient Tamil Sangam Literature with Special Reference to Purananuru

D.Ramakrishnan

Introduction

Purananuru is a Tamil poetic work in the Emmuttokai (one of the eighteen *melkanakku noolgal*). Sangam Collection is classified into *PatileGmçlkaGakku* and *PatileGki;kaGakku* and each classification has eighteen collections, as an anthology of Tamil literature, belonging to the Sangam period corresponding to between 1000 BC – 300 AD. The *Purananuru* is one of the eight books in the secular anthology of Sangam literature. The secular anthology is entirely unique in Indian literature, which includes nearly all religious texts during this era. The *Purananuru* contains 400 poems of varying lengths in the *akaval* meter. More than 150 poets wrote the poems. It is not known when or who collected these poems into these anthologies. *Purananuru* is a source of information on the political and social history of pre-historic Tamil Nadu. In this Anthology there is information about the various rulers who ruled the Tamil country before and during the Sangam era.

According to Tamilian legends, there were three Sangam periods, namely Head Sangam, Middle Sangam and Last Sangam period. Historians use the term Sangam period to refer the last of these, the first two being legendary. So it is also called Last Sangam period (*Kamaissanku paravam* or Third Sangam period *Mun um sanku paravam*). The Sangam literature is thought to have been produced in three Sangam academies of each period. The evidence on the early history of the Tamil kingdoms consists of the epigraphs of the region, the Sangam literature, and archaeological data. Approximately during the period between 400 BC to AD 500, Tamilakam was ruled by the three Tamil dynasties of Pandya, Chola and Chera, and a few independent chieftains, the Velir.

Nature of *Purananuru*

Among the eight Sangam anthologies, *Purananuru* is concerned with life outside family - kings, wars, greatness, generosity, ethics and philosophy. *Purananuru* contains an assortment of themes in three hundred ninety seven poems. Of the original 400 poems, two have been lost, and some poems miss several lines. There are 400 poems in *Purananuru* including the invocation poem. Poems 267 and 268 are lost and some of the poems exist only in fragments. Of the poets who wrote these poems, there are men and women, kings and paupers. The oldest book of annotations found so far has annotations and commentary on the first 266 poems. The commentator Nachinarkiniyaar, of the eleventh – twelfth century Tamil Nadu, has written a complete commentary on all the poems. A majority of poems are

- ♦ praise of the king (2-85)
- ♦ their generosity (315-35)
- ♦ by poets for their patrons (86-173)
- ♦ war poems (283-314)
- ♦ ethical and moral poems (182-95)
- ♦ references to cattle raids (257-9, 262-3)

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- ♦ chief drinking toddy before raids (269)

Authors

It is not known exactly how many authors wrote the poems in *Purananuru*. There are 147 different names found from the colophons. However some of these could denote the same author. For example, Mangudi Kizhaar and Mangudi Maruthanaar could denote the same person. We don't know. Some of the authors of the poems, such as Kapilar and Nakkirar, have also written poems that are part of other anthologies.

Some of the names of the authors, such as Irumpitarthaliyaar and Kookaikozhiyaar, seem to be nicknames based on words from the poems rather than proper names. This suggests that those who compiled this anthology must have made up these names as the authors' names must have been lost when these poems were collected.

Subject Matter

As its name suggests, *Purananuru* poems deal with the *puram* (external or objective) concepts of life such as war, politics, wealth, as well as aspects of every-day living. Some of the poems are in the form of elegies in tribute to a fallen hero. These poems exhibit outpourings of affection and emotions. *Purananuru* principally revolves around three themes - the king and his powers over the environment, power of women's purity, namely *karpu* (chastity), and the system of caste, which is not too different from the current system prevalent among Tamil society. There are also a few poems in *Purananuru*, which are classified as *attruppatais*. *Attruppatai* poems read like travelogues in which poets who were returning with gifts, received from a king, encourage other poets to do the same by describing the glory of the king and his country. This gives an opportunity to the poet, among other topics, to describe in great detail the natural beauty, fertility, and resources of the territory that has to be traversed to reach the palace of the patron.

Structure

There seems to be some definite structure to the order of the poems in *Purananuru*. The poems at the beginning of the book deal with the three

major kings Chola, Chera and Pandya of ancient Tamil Nadu. The middle portion is on the lesser kings and the Velir chieftains, who were feudatories of these three major kingdoms, with a short intervening section (poems 182 - 195) of didactic poems. The final portion deals with the general scenery of war and the effect of warfare.

Landscapes

Just as the *akam* (subjective) poems are classified into seven *thinai*s or landscapes based on the mood of the poem, the Tamil prosodical tradition mentioned in the ancient Tamil grammatical treatise *Tolkappiyam* also classifies *puram* (objective) poems into seven *thinai*s based on the subject of the poems. These are

- ♦ *vetchi* - the provocation of war through attack and cattle raids
- ♦ *karanthai* - defending against cattle raids
- ♦ *vanchi* - invasion of the enemy's territory
- ♦ *kanchi* - transience and change, the fragility of human life, against the backdrop of war
- ♦ *uzhingi* - attacking the fort
- ♦ *noechi* - defence of the fort or territory
- ♦ *thumpai* - the frenzy of battle
- ♦ *vaakai* - victory
- ♦ *paadaan* - praise of a king's heroism or generosity, asking for gifts
- ♦ *pothuviyal* - general heroism (mostly philosophical musings and elegies for heroes).
- ♦ *kaikkilai* - unrequited love
- ♦ *perunthinai* - unsuitable love

The poems are further classified into *thurai*s. A *thurai* denotes the *locale* of the poem giving the situation under which it was written. Some of these are *parisil thurai* when the poet reminds the king or patron of the reward that he promised to him, *kalitruitanilai* in which the hero dies with the elephant he killed in battle, and so on. Some of the poems are too damaged in the manuscripts to determine their *thurai*s. It is not known

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whether the authors of the poems made these classifications. It is more likely that those who collected the anthology applied these classifications. Poem 289 was not assigned any classification, for reasons unknown.

Realism and fantasy

Purananuru songs exhibit a unique realism and immediacy not frequently found in classical literature. The nature and the subject of the poems lend us to believe that poets did not write these poems on events that happened years prior, rather they wrote (or sang) them on impulse *in situ*. Some of the poems are conversational in which the poet pleads, begs, chides or praises the king. One such example is poem 46. The poet Kovur Kizhaar addresses the Chola king Killivalavan to save the lives of the children of a defeated enemy who are about to be executed by getting trampled under an elephant. The poet says, "... O king, you belong to the heritage of kings who sliced their own flesh to save the life of a pigeon, look at these children; they are so naive of their plight that they have stopped crying to look at the swinging trunk of the elephant in amusement. Have pity on them..." The almost impressionistic picture the poem paints cannot be anything but by someone who is witness to the events presented in the poem.

Historical sources

Each *Purananuru* poem has a colophon attached to it giving the authorship and subject matter of the poem, the name of the king or chieftain to whom the poem relates and the occasion which called forth the eulogy are also found. It is from these colophons and rarely from the texts of the poems themselves, that we gather the names of many kings and chieftains and the poets and poetesses patronised by them. The task of reducing these names to an ordered scheme in which the different generations of contemporaries can be marked off one another has not been easy. To add to the confusions, some historians have even denounced

these colophons as later additions and untrustworthy as historical documents.

A careful study of the synchronisation between the kings, chieftains and the poets suggested by these colophons indicates that this body of literature reflect occurrences within a period of four or five continuous generations at the most, a period of 120 or 150 years. Although there have been attempts at dating the poems of *Purananuru* based on the mention of the Mahabharata war, a more reliable source for the period of these poems is based on the mentions one finds on the foreign trade and presence of Greek and Roman merchants in the port of Musiri (poem 343) give us a date of between 200 BCE to 150 CE for the period of these poems. This is further strengthened by the mention of Maurya in poem 175 and a reference to Ramayana in poem 378.

Samples

Though there are lots of poems describing about political thinking in *Purananuru*, here a few of them are taken for explanation, as samples.

1. **The Sages KaniyanPungundranar, *Purananuru*, 192**
To us all towns are one, all men our kin,
Life's good comes not from others' gifts,
nor ill,
Man's pains and pain's relief are from within.
Death's no new thing, nor do our blossoms thrill
When joyous life seems like a luscious draught.
When grieved, we patient suffer; for, we deem
This much-praised life of ours a fragile raft
Borne down the waters of some mountain stream
That o'er huge boulders roaring seeks the plain
Tho' storms with lightning's flash from darkened skies.
Descend, the raft goes on as fates ordain.
Thus have we seen in visions of the wise!
We marvel not at the greatness of the great,
Still less despise we men of low estate.
In the poem, Pungunranar emphasizes the Natural law. He uses the allegory of the raft and compares life with the raft. Just as the raft is carried by the water in its direction, in the same way everything in life will also follow the natural order.

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He compares birth to lightning which suggests that it can happen spontaneously anywhere. Further he says that, like a raft, human life also goes downstream a steep hill, faces a perilous journey through boulders and ultimately faces its climax which is death. The poet concludes that, since life follows the natural order, everyone faces the pre-ordained fate, and so it is not rational to magnify the greatness of great people, and it is even worse to despise the lowly people. In this way, social estates should not be given importance for considering one's value.

2 Puranânûru 20, Poet: Kurunkôliyâr Kilâr to King Çeramân Yânaikatchey Mântharan Çeral Irumporai, Thinai: Vâkai, Thurai: Arasa Vâkai

The depth of the vast ocean, the width of the wide world, the directions of wind, and the emptiness of space – one might be able to measure these, but your knowledge, kindness and liberal outlook are beyond measures. In your country, heat from fire that cooks rice, and that from the red hot sun are the only heat that people who live in your shadow know. They know only the pretty rainbows and not the murderous bows. They know only plows and not murderous weapons.

O Lord who seizes the land of others with your capable warriors! Pregnant women in your country, when they crave, will eat only your soil and not that of your enemies. You rule your country with protected forts on which arrows rest. You are vigilant and firm without thinking about omens when old birds move away and new birds come.

Since you are the way you are, all life on earth fears for you!

In this poem, the poet praises the king. In the first stanza the poet praises the king by saying that his knowledge, kindness and liberal outlook is beyond measures. He further says that in his rule, no ill will or animosity exist among his subjects. In the last stanza he says that the king Çeraman

rules in such a way that no other ruler can seize his kingdom, and he is so powerful that all life on earth fears for him.

3 Puranânûru 35, Poet Vellaikudi Nâkanâr sang to Chôlan Kulamutrathu Thunjiya Killi Valavan, Thinai: Pâdân, Thurai: Seviyarivurû

In this dense world where winds cannot penetrate, decorated with the sky, with huge ocean as its limits, among the three who rule over the cool Tamil land with roaring drums and armies, your royalty alone is true royalty! O greatness! Even if the moving sun's rays appear on four sides, even if Venus moves to the south, your country alone is truly a country where lovely, cool Kâviri flows and feeds the land, and appearing like spears, dancing flowers of sugarcanes with nodes sway!

You are the proud king of a greatly prosperous country! I will tell you something that concerns you! Listen to me! When one rules with a perfect sceptre and righteousness, the poor will receive showers when they ask for drops of rain.

Is your wide umbrella, which touches the sky and blinds the eyes with its brightness, a shield against the sun like a huge cloud in the sky? No! O Valavan with sharp spears! It is a shield for the suffering citizens!

On the wide field of battle where your elephant divisions lie scattered like pieces of young Palmyra trunks, your army withstands the onslaught of attacking forces, and cheers as it retreats, its victories rising from what grows in the furrows dug by plows. If the rains should fail, if harvests shrink, and if people do things that are against nature, this vast world blames the kings. If you really understand this, you will not listen to useless words that are uttered by slanderers! If you take care of farmers who

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work with their oxen and all the other communities, even your enemies will praise your feet!

In this poem, the poet praises the king's royalty in the first stanza. In the second stanza, the poet says that if the king rules righteously, his subjects will prosper, and his ruling would be like a shield for the poor and the unprivileged. In the last stanza, the poet says that it is a duty of the king to protect his subjects from natural calamities, and he should not pay a heed to the slanders by people who blame the king for such calamities. The poet says that if the king takes care of his farmers and other communities, then he will be praised even by his enemies.

4 Puranānūru 42, Poet Idaikkādanār sang to Chōlan Kulamutrathu Thunjiya Killi Valavan, Thinaī: Vākai, Thurai: Arasa Vākai

You are endless in charity and a leader of murderous battles! Lord, your elephants appear like mountains! Your army roars like the ocean! Your spears gleam like lightning! You have the ability to make the kings of the world tremble! What you do is never wrong and this is not new to you! With your righteousness and faultless sceptre, you afford protection as a tiger protects its cub, and your citizens listen only to the sounds of cool water even in dreams, and not those of warriors in your battlefields crying, "May you live long, Valavan! Remove our sorrows!" You are the ruler of a fine and greatly prosperous country with rich towns with fields. Your citizens are hospitable to their relatives from arid lands, and give them *vālai* fish that rice reapers remove from the lower sluices, tortoises overturned by the plough blades of those who plough, sweet juice that harvesters take from sugarcanes,

and water lilies plucked by women on the huge shores. Like the rivers that descend from the mountains and flow toward the ocean, all the poets come to you. When you glance at the countries of the two other kings, you are like Death with great might who is enraged, as he whirls his axe, for which there is just suffering and no cure!

In this poem, the poet praises the king. In the first stanza the poet says that the charity done by the king is endless. He is brave in battles and has great army. In the second stanza, the poet says that the king protects his subjects like a tiger protects its cub. Therefore, his subjects always pray for his long life. In the third stanza the poet says that he is the king of a rich and prosperous country and in his kingdom people are also generous and kind to others. The poet describes the king to be as powerful and mighty as death.

5 Puranānūru 55, Poet Mathurai Maruthan Iṅākanār sang to Pāndiyan Iṅavanthikai Palli Thunjiya Nanmāran, Thinaī: Pādān, Thurai: Seviyarivurū

O Māran donning a flower garland! You are like the god with a blue throat, a glowing eye, and a crescent moon on his head, who used the soaring mountain as a large bow, and a snake as a string, and with one arrow ruined three forts and brought victory to the celestials. You are superior to all the other kings! Even though you own an army with these four divisions – murderous elephants with fierce rage, proud swift horses, tall chariots with rising flags, and foot soldiers with strength in their hearts and desire for battles, esteemed righteousness is the foremost cause for real victory. So, not thinking that they are 'ours' and being unjust to favor them, and not hurting others because they are 'not ours', with bravery and manliness like the sun,

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with coolness like the moon and charitable like the sky, possessing these three great virtues, may you live a long life, so that there will not be people in need without anything! Greatness! May your life be longer than the sands brought and heaped by powerful winds, with deep scars, on the lovely vast shores of the ocean where white-crested waves roll from the deep waters in Senthil where Murukan rules!

In the above poem, the poet emphasizes the quality of righteousness in the king. In the first stanza, he praises the king and says that he is superior to all other kings. In the second stanza, the poet says that righteousness should of the king is the foremost cause for his real victory. The king did not discriminate between his 'own' people and 'others' and remains equal with them. The poet compares the king's manliness with the sun, coolness with the moon and charity with the sky and says that may he live long.

6 Puranānūru 117, Poet Kapilar sang this remembering Vēl Pāri 's Parambu Nadu, Thinai: Pothuviyal, Thurai: Kaiyaru Nilai

Even if Saturn smoldered, a comet appeared,
or if Venus ran toward the south,
his fields were full, bushes blossomed with
flowers, and rows of large-eyed wild cows calved
in the yards of houses and grazed on good grass.
Because of his just scepter, many wise men came
to him, rains never failed even in the dry lands,
and green-leaved *mullai* vines have buds like
the thorny teeth of young wildcats in their father's
land, the young girls with beautiful bangles.

In the above poem, the poet says that because the king ruled with righteousness, his kingdom will sustain against all natural hazards. His farms will be blossoming and his lands will never dry even if there is no rain. And many wise men would come to him, and his subjects would prosper.

7 Puranānūru 221, Poet Pothiyār sang for Kōperunchōlan, Thinai: Pothuviyal, Thurai: Kaiyaru Nilai

He was well-renowned for giving gifts to singers!
He was a greatly kind to dancers he gifted!
He was praised by the righteous for his just scepter!
His friendship was praised by the discerning!
He was gentle with women! Powerful to the powerful!
He sheltered the great ones of faultless Vedas!
Not considering all this, Death, without thinking,
seized his sweet life, that man with distinction.
Embrace your grieving families and come!
Let us berate Death, O poets whose words are honest!
Let us say, "As the wide world sways in sorrow,
the man who sheltered us and took on faultless fame,
has become a memorial stone!"

In the above poem, the poet mourns the death of the great king. In the first stanza the poet enumerates the qualities of the king. He says that the king was well-known for giving gifts, he was kind to others, he was just and righteous, was friendly, was gentle with women, was powerful and provided shelter to many great persons. But death did not consider all these great qualities of the king and seized his life. He mourns that such a great king has now become a memorial stone.

8 Puranānūru 230, Poet Arisil Kilār sang for Athiyamān Thakadūr Poruthu Veelntha Elini, Thinai: Pothuviyal, Thurai: Kaiyaru Nilai – the poet sang this after the king's death

Honest Elini with a gleaming sword, praised
by the world, ruled with an unwavering rod
of justice, and repelled enemy attacks!
The forests were safe for cows with calves
and travellers who walked on the hot paths.

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Heaps of grains lay unguarded in the fields.
Now that he has fallen in the battlefield,
like an infant that has lost its mother,
with distressed hearts and great hunger, the
people he loved are suffering.

Death without virtues! You have lost more
than the world plunged in sorrow. If you had
not taken this man, like a farmer who fell on
hard times and ate the seeds which would have
brought him prosperity flourishing in fields,
you would have many lives to take from his
battlefields and fulfil your hunger!

In this poem, the poet mourns the death of the king who died on the battle field. In the first stanza, the poet praised the virtues of the dead king. He says that the king was very powerful, he had repelled many enemy attacks and in his kingdom, people were happy as he ruled in a righteous manner. In the second stanza, the poet says that as the king laid dead on the battlefield, the people he loved are greatly in sorrow. In the last stanza, the poet describes Death as virtuous, because it had made the world plunged in sorrow by taking away the life of the king.

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King Vikramaditya once asked Vararuchi, the great Sanskrit scholar in his kingdom, which is the best shloka in Valmiki's Ramayana. Vararuchi came out with the following shloka which had three different meanings to relate to the feats of the king:

रामम् दशरथम् विद्धि माम् विद्धि जनक आत्मजाम् । अयोध्याम् अटवीम् विद्धि गच्छ तत यथा सुखम् ॥ (2-40-9 Ramayana).

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