

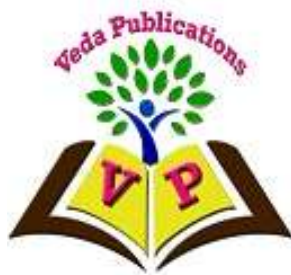


THE CULTURAL BACKDROP OF 'CHILAPPATHIKARAM' AS ALLIED TO THE CULTURE OF KERALA

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ABSTRACT



'Chilappathikaram', the legendary poem in Tamil written during Sangha Age by Ilamko Adikal has literal, historical, sociological and cultural perspectives and they are proven by evidences of historical monuments. Though Chilappathikaram deals with the mythical tragic story of the couple Kovalan and Kannaki, it has a mighty cultural as well as historical back up. All the poems written in Sangha age have envisaged the history of the time. Since they have also dealt seriously with the rituals and art forms of the time, the cultural aspects also have been reinforced. The story of Kovalan and Kannaki begins in Madurai of Tamilnadu and ends in Kerala which is clear from Chilappathikaram. [Madurai was part of Pandyanadu and Kerala of Cheranadu.] According to Chilappathikaram, after the death of Kovalan, Kannaki had moved to the hilly areas of Cheranadu and died or rather canonized there only. The historical figure Madurai King Cheran Chenkuttuvan had visited the place where Kannaki died or taken into the heaven, when he heard about it and it is narrated in Chilappathikaram. The people of the place had received him with offerings such as fruits and tender coconut. Life period of Illango Adikal and the story of Chilappathikaram are also the same as it is clear from the twenty fifth and thirtieth Gaadhas[chapters]of the book. Hence he might have strong evidences both directly and from people who experienced the incidents concerned with the historical aspects of the story. The temples far and wide in the name of Kannaki in different attires viz. Kali, Muthiyamma, Kannaki etc., in Tamilnadu and Kerala throw light to the historical as well as cultural facets of the story in Chilappathikaram. The ancient trade path from Madurai via Cheranadu which had once extended up to Musiris [now Kodungalloor in Kerala] also had helped to trace the cultural remnants of the story. The Research paper is intended to study the cultural aspects of Chilappathikaram and its transcendence to the culture of Kerala.

Keywords: *Sangha Age, Chilappathikaram, Kannaki, Kovalan, Cheranadu, Pandhyanadu*

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INTRODUCTION

The everlasting legendary poetic work during Sangha Age, Chilappathikaram is crucial in the history of Kerala and Tamilnadu as well as in the possibility of a cultural transcendence between the two states. The history of south India [Chera, Chola and Pandhya nadu] during the first few centuries since A.D. is revealed only through the literary works of Sangha Age. Among the works of the Age, Chilappathikaram preserves the supreme importance and fame as it represents the transcended culture between the two states. According to Chilappathikaram, Kannaki was believed to be in Cheranadu [ancient Kerala] after the death of Kovalan. The Kannaki temples established during ancient times far and wide in Kerala and Tamilnadu with the rituals thereof, strictly followed still as per Tamil tradition, prove the possibilities of such cultural transcendence. Hence the study on Chilappathikaram has much importance in the cultural backdrop of both Tamilnadu and Kerala.

The thematic structure of Chilappathikaram as linked to History:

The tragic story of the young couple, Kovalan and Kannaki is the central theme of Chilappathikaram. Kovalan, husband of Kannaki was killed by the King of Madurai suspecting him as a thief of the Queen's anklet which was actually that of Kannaki who had asked him to sell it in the market because of their poverty. When Kannaki knew about the death of her innocent husband, she plucked one of her breasts and threw it down on Madurai which burnt the entire Madurai Kingdom including the king and queen into ashes, as it is depicted in the legend. The poetry was written around by 5th century A.D. Ilango Adikal, the younger brother of Cheran Chenguttuvan, the author of the poem has also a strong backdrop of Jainism. It is clear from the book that, being the prevailing religions of the time, both Jainism and Buddhism had deep roots in the society. The intervention and advice of the Jain priestess Kavunthi Adikal towards Kannaki and Kovalan in Chilappathikaram on their way to Madurai proves the depth of Jainism as well as Buddhism among the society. Another instance is that Manimekhala, daughter of Kovalan and his extra-marital love Madhavi [dancer and prostitute who plundered the

all the riches of Kovalan], who never followed the path of her mother and instead became a Buddhist priestess.

Culturally, development of literature, music and drama are involved in Chilappathikaram. Hence in Tamil, it is also called a Muthamizhu Kavyam. The development of art forms such as music and dance was very prevalent in south India during Sangha age and was proven clearly by the various art forms described in Chilappathikaram.¹ The versification was intended for the exhortation of virtuous life through love and empathy among people. Since the story of Kannaki and Kovalan assumes a mixing up of History and legend in way of romance or assumes the form of a historical romance, a delineation of historical, cultural and romantic elements from the book becomes a herculean task.

The introductory part of Chilappathikaram which was argued to be written by someone else other than Ilango Adikal, reveals that Kannaki was seen under a Venga Tree [which is quite common in Kerala, even now a day] by the tribal people, Malankurava. She was taken into the heaven by the head of the deities, Devendran as of from their words. Evidently, the place where Kannaki died was somewhere in the eastern hills or in other words, the Western Ghats of Kerala. The ancient Mangaladevi temple in the name of Kannaki, amidst the Thekkady forest in the Idukki District of Kerala may be indicating the possibilities of such a place. The name Mangalapuram² of Mangalore also acclaims some relation with Mangaladevi.

The ancient Cheranadu and most of its parts including the hilly areas of the Western Ghats lies in the Idukki district of Kerala. Besides, the Kannaki temples in different forms/demeanors of Kannaki situated far and wide in Kerala and the legends therewith also allies the legendary story in Chilappathikaram with historical links. For instance, Bhagavathi [the deity] established in Kodungallor is Kannaki.³ Besides, most of the deities established all over Kerala and also in Sri Lanka are more or less related to Kannaki which shows the possibilities of the deep transcendence of culture from Tamilnadu to Kerala through Chilappathikaram. The structure of Chilappathikaram is, by way of telling the story of Kovalan and Kannaki, the different forms of rituals,



art forms and other visionaries of the time are also mentioned as a part of each incident or step of the story.

Various art forms of the time as depicted in Chilappathikaram:

Varieties of antique art forms are displayed in Chilappathikaram in different contexts. One of such main art form is Koothu [a type of dance]. Different types of Koothu are narrated such as Iruvakai koothu viz., Akakkoothu and Purakkoothu. While describing about the dancing talents of Madhavi, the dancer cum Prostitute, the qualifications of the Nadyacharya [the Dance Guru]⁴ is illustrated. The classic and scientific steps and structure of the art form are narrated with all minute specialties of dance if approached rather like science.

While discussing about the qualifications of the best music guru [Sangeethacharya], different types of Indian lute [veena],⁵ and music of varied types are illustrated. Similarly the same of a poet is stated as, he should be quite well versed in the Muthamil, and Nadyasasthra and able to write without making any mistake concerned. Talent in different types of Koothu, music, drama, prose and verse, rhythm, proper use of instruments etc. form the qualifications of a Mardangigacharya.[another Guru]⁶ In short, the Pukar kandham⁷ of Chilappathikaram widely discusses the qualifications of the practitioners of different art forms and instruments and instrumentalists of the time and thereby gives a detailed perception on the cultural background of common folk at the time.

The social life and culture of people are narrated in the Indrolsavagaadha. Streets with different types of vendors of the time as of flowers, sandals etc., silk weavers and traders,⁸ local people and foreigners are indicative of the same. The visionary of a culturally forward period is evident in the picturesque depiction of the wide Royal Pathways; busy market; beautiful castles of the traders; farmers; local practitioners of Ayurveda; Scholars; carpenters; street vendors; expert musicians; astrologists; experts in astronomy; lady dancers; prostitutes etc. The story of the guard spirit [Kavalbhootham]⁹ sent by Lord Indra to save the king Mujukunda from all dangers was a prevailing legend. The offerings thereof and the various art forms like

Kuravakoothu performed in respect of the welfare of the king were also part of the legend. Even the warriors were fighting in front of the altar and ready to sacrifice their life for the richness of the king.

Eleven types of Vinodakoothu[entertainment dance] are mentioned in the Samudrasnana Gatha. Kudakoothu[dancing with pot in different ways] is one among them. Marakalkoothu [dance upon the false limbs made of wood], Pavakkoothu [dance using puppets], Kadachikoothu [dance by lady farmers], etc are described to be as part of the legends. They are mentioned as beautiful art forms rendering a feast for the eyes.¹⁰ The other types of Koothu are mentioned towards the rest of the chapter.

When the maiden of Madhavi meet Kovalan for her to take him back again and continue the sexual life with her, the reply of Kovalan was with a remembrance of her expertise in the Varikoothu¹¹ [another form of dance] of eight types. Madhavi was well practiced in sixty art forms and more. In the context, Kovalan praises her perfection in performing all the eight forms of Varikoothu in different contexts. Kovalan returns back the maiden refusing her invitation to prolong his extra-marital relation with Madhavi. Here also the cultural background is interspersed in the structure of the story so that the appreciation of the story stands quite unaffected.

Kavunthi Adikal, the Jain priestess who accompanies Kovalan and Kannaki to Madurai describes the panorama of life on their way, which provides the vividness of life and culture of people belong to different villages. For instance, she narrates about the big voices of velars¹² [a particular race of Kerala who are basically farmers] who plough the fields, and the Njattupattu[songs sung rhythmically by the ladies while planting the paddy in the field] of the ladies, wet in mud but intoxicated with liquor. Several other scenes of village life and rituals like Ashtakarmas [eight duties as per Jainism] are continued throughout the chapter. The Ashtamasidhis [Eight talents acquired as of Jainism], Ashtamagunas [Eight virtues] etc. are also worth to be mentioned.

The legend of a bad deity is referred in Maduraikandham who tried to deceive Kovalan in disguise of the maiden of Madhavi¹³ but fails to have



sex with Kovalan since he recited the mantra of Durga. The deity reveals her identity as a fairy and begs pardon for her imprudence and pleads him not to reveal the incident to Kannaki or Kavunthi Adikal as she was afraid of the power of chastity of Kannaki. The culture of keeping absolute loyalty only to the husband had great acceptance, during ancient times. The power of chastity had also been considered stronger than even the power of penance. The legends regarding the Kongunattu Manga, Chandhi and Durga are also described along with.

On the way to Madurai, when Kovalan came to Kannaki and Kavunthi Adikal, he saw the local singers praising Durga using Chengottu Vipanchika¹⁴ [a kind of veena/lute which is most important among the four types of the same]. The technical and theoretical part of their musical performance is analyzed in the forthcoming verses. It was evident that importance to musical performances and use of special musical instruments had formed the part of their culture which may be further confirmed in Nagaradarsanagatha¹⁵ when Kovalan entered Madurai town hearing the voice of conch and clamour of Murasu heard in three ways and the toot which awakened Madurai that morning.

One of the rituals as illustrated in Maduraikandam¹⁶ was that seven oxen are fostered for the seven maidens. Those who defeat one ox would get the maiden married. Besides, the seven maidens were given names of the seven notes in music. In addition, they were kept displayed according to seven Rasis [place of star -signs]

Vanchikandam towards the end of the story begins with the Kuravakoothu of Vettuva¹⁷ sect. It's about what they have seen under the Venga tree [a kind of tree very common in Kerala] in Karimala [in Cheranadu]. They had seen that a girl with single breast standing under the tree and when asked why she had been there, she replied that she had lost her innocent husband and hence destroyed Madurai. She was taken into heaven by the deities when the Malangkuravas were witnessed. The series of legends, stories and art forms from beginning to end adorns Chilappathikaram but occasionally makes it difficult to delineate history and legend.

Conclusion:

Chilappathikaram has assumed the position of an epic in a sense or in terms of its worldwide appreciation and popularity even after several centuries of its creation. The cultural transcendence it has provided as from Tamilnadu to Kerala as a part of the story is to be remarked especially since it is strongly allied to the historical monuments viz. Kannaki temples, as well. The rituals that follow the Tamil tradition still in such temples add proof to the legendary story of Kannaki and Kovalan. Even the Mannan tribes of Idukki district of Kerala acclaim the tradition as the predecessors of Pandhya king's servants. They say that their ancestors had run off from Madurai with the king, centuries before and taken refuge in Cheranadu. In short Chilappathikaram has enough worth still to be analyzed in detail and in different perspectives.

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