CILAPPADIKARAM

THE EARLIEST TAMIL EPIC

BY

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An epic has been defined as a narrative of length dealing with events of importance and grandeur. Its events and persons stimulate us because they enhance our faith in the worth of man's achievement and his nobility and dignity. Though Cilappadikaram consists of not more than five thousand lines of poetry, only half in length of Virgil's Aeneid, it is nevertheless a long poem and celebrates the great achievements of Kannaki (the heroine of the poem) and of a Pandya and a Chera king, who are to be regarded as the other heroes of the poem. Kannaki stands pre-eminent because she is represented as having emerged successful in the conflict with the Pandyan king, who admitted his guilt in ordering the death of her innocent husband wrongly convicted of theft. To her the gods render allegiance : the fire-god obeys her commands and swallows the city of Madurai, leaving unhurt such of those as she exempted ; the sun-god speaks to her in response to her pointing to the innocence of her husband ; the guardian angel of Madurai city (called Madura dēvi) treads before her with faltering steps, waits long to gain access to her and cajoles her into giving a hearing (Canto XXIII) ; the celestials under the lead of Indra descend from heaven, appear before her, show her her dead husband in flesh and blood and then escort her to heaven. She re-appears, after reaching heaven, to bless the Chera king, Senkuttuvan, who had consecrated a temple in her honour. She also forgives and blesses the Royal dynasty of the Pandya who had wronged her. In these achievements of hers, the poet Ilankō expresses the significance of human

achievements. Her essential nobility shines throughout the book. She could have quarrelled with her husband for having practically deserted her; she could have cursed her rival Mathavi, who came in the way of her marital happiness; she could have denied her husband access to her, when he often turned up for financial help. On the other hand, she gave him her anklets, the last of her jewels with a smile on her face, when she found he was in distress and in need of money, if only to please her rival, Mathavi. This gentle nature and nobility of her character have earned her everlasting fame. If Kannaki is not a heroine of the other type, winning wars and laurels, it is because at the time of composition of the epic, that is, the second century A.D. the Tamils had become a well-settled race, intent more on the arts of peace than of war. Moral courage, presence of mind, endurance under trying circumstances and desire to vindicate the honour of her husband are the distinguishing characteristics of this remarkable character.

The Pandya king, whose ideals of kingly honour and justice are so high that he actually collapses and dies on finding that he has been the instrument of a miscarriage of justice, deserves also to be regarded as a hero of the epic, even though his personal courage and prowess do not figure in the story. The circumstances in which he was placed misled him into a deviation from the normal course of justice, and in his anxiety to placate his queen he rashly ordered the execution of Kovalan (the husband of the heroine, Kannaki) on the basis of a false charge made by the real culprit but he does not think of the extenuating circumstances. Instead he is overwhelmed by his act of injustice and wills himself to death in order to save his honour. By thus sacrificing his life, he has won immortal glory. Here, again, we find man in his magnificence and nobility.

If a hero should surpass others in strength and courage, we find such a hero in Senkuttuvan, the Chera king. He

has the valour of Achilles; several are the battles he has already won. He has conquered many chieftains and won the battles with the other two great kings of the Tamil country, the Chola and the Pandya, whose seals he is using in token thereof. He has established friendly relations with "Nuttuvar Kannar" (the Sathakarnis) of the Central Provinces. He has also gone, as far as the Ganges and defied the might of the Northerners. Now, he again goes north and conquers the Aryan kings Visittira, Rudra, Bairava, Chitra, Singha, Sveta etc., and subjugates them. He captures Kanaka and Vijaya, sons of Balakumara (Canto XXVI), and after reaching his own capital, Vanchi, orders that the prisoners be taken to the other two Tamil kingdoms and exhibited before their sovereigns. A vain-glorious deed perhaps! The etiquette of war required that one should not pursue those that were fleeing, one should not capture those that were trying to escape. The Chola and Pandya kings, to whom the captives were shown, remarked that it was rather strange that Senkuttuvan should have made captives of persons fleeing for their lives after putting on the garb of ascetics. The fact was of course that most of those who fled had been spared and only a few who braved and gave battle were captured. The Pandya and the Chola, while apparently insinuating against the Chera king, were only indirectly praising his prowess which enabled him to bring mighty warriors as captives.

To the question whether Cilappadikaram is an oral or written epic, the answer is that it is largely written and only partially oral. A large number of verses in "Kānal vari", for instance, were probably a part of oral composition already existing, which, sung to the accompaniment of the musical instrument "Yāl", was familiar to many. (Cf. Canto VII 1.20 et.seq.). The verses, however, in "Aychiyar kuravai" (XVII) and "Kunra Kuravai" (XXIV) etc. were obviously the poet's own compositions and not collections of separate lays already existing.

Ilanko had a rich supply of stories, an important source of material for an epic poet. Witness for instance, the stories of Nala and Damayanti (XIV 1.50 et. seq.), Rama and Sita (XIV 11.46-49), Devasura war, Mahabharata war etc. (XXVI 11.236 et. seq.), of the Brahman who hid the treasure trove (XXI), of the Pandya who chopped off his right hand (XXIII), of the thieves who bolted away (XVI), of the monkey that was grateful (XV), of the Brahman lady who killed a mongoose (XV), of the seven chaste women of Puhar who wrought miracles (XXI) etc. These stories and episodes can be detached and enjoyed by themselves.

Ilanko was mainly a literary epic poet. He wrote for readers rather than hearers. He avoided stock phrases and embellished his poem by fashioning his words with care and artistry. It was customary to compare the gait of a woman to that of a swan and her speech to the voice of a parrot but Ilanko re-created these dead metaphors and introduced new life into his descriptions. (vide Canto II-11.38-80). Addressing Kannaki, his bride, Kovalan said, for instance, that the swans defeated by her gait tracked off in shame to hide themselves amidst the flower-beds in the fields and the parrots, though they found they were not her peers in the matter of speech, which had the sweetness of a lute and a flute and nectar all commingled, would not leave her hands in the hope that they would learn from her the secret of her speech charm.

Many are the ways in which Ilanko describes such familiar things as the approach of an evening or a dawn. Canto IV portrays the fall of an evening in Puhar, the Chola capital. There the poet shows how it caused pleasure to persons like Mathavi who were in the company of their lovers and how equally it was distressing to persons like Kannaki who had been separated from their husbands. The shepherds sing sweet notes on their flutes ; the beetles do so through the Mullai (November) buds ; the tender breeze spreads fine fragrance all round ; women with

sparkling ornaments light the lamps ; the crescent moon, though young, dispels darkness even as the Pandya kings, though young, would annihilate their enemies. Thus the evening came, spreading sweetness among the lovers. To the lonely wives on the other hand who had been separated from their husbands, it brought only anguish ; they discarded their pearls and sandal-paste and chose not to decorate their bed-chamber with flowers.

This is only one description of the onset of an evening. Other descriptions in the book show a pleasing variety in language. They occur in Cantos XIV (1.83 et. seq.), XXII, XXVII, and XXVIII ; each has a distinctive splendour. The descriptions of dawn in Cantos XIII, XIV and XXVII are also remarkable for their grandeur.

Cilappadikaram appeals by its fine poetical texture, by its choice of apt and significant words, phrases and lines. The pauses and the stops, the play and counter-play of words found in Canto XVIII (Tunba malai 1. 8, 11, 24 etc., and 11. 9-10 and 11. 25-28) have a subtle effect of their own, which does not perhaps become evident until the second or subsequent reading. The wavering rhythms in which the poet couches the passages breaking the news of Kovalan's murder are also remarkable. Mention must also be made of the austere sublimities to which the poet rises in describing the omens and super-natural occurrences portending evil on the eve of the appearance of Kannaki at the Pandyan king's court. (Canto XX 11. 1-27).

Cilappadikaram is a Tamil epic composed in the second century A.D. and partakes of the characteristics of the Homeric epic in some respects and of the Virgilian epic in some others. The straight and simple way in which Kovalan confesses his faults, short-comings and misdeeds in the presence of his wife is comparable to Homer. Canto XVI (lines 57-70) is charged with the single emotion of Kovalan's repentance. Poetry cannot rise to nobler levels than in these vivid, expressive lines (especially 11. 63-70).

" How many vain days did I spend with worthless women, indulging in useless gossip and cavil ! How have I belied the hopes and expectations of my parents ! Alas ! I heeded not their behests ! Again, how much have I wronged you ! What grief have I caused you !! I did not even pause to think it was unworthy of me to ask you to accompany me. 'Follow me', I said, and you came, my beloved one ! What a noble act have you done ! " There are probably few passages to equal this in any literature.

Just as Homer's characters keep to regular forms of address, Ilanko's courtiers, ministers, ambassadors and commanders adhere to the regular forms appropriate in the presence of a king. This is seen in the trial scene in Madurai Kandam, where the herald ushers in Kannaki and also in the scenes in Vanchi Kandam (the third part of the book).

In another respect also, Cilappadikaram resembles the Homeric epic. Kannaki dies not for the honour of society but for her own honour. True, she lives for others, as she lives for herself but when her husband is killed, she wants to join him in death and only postpones it till she vindicates his honour.

Light fun is provided in Canto XIV (Ur Kāṇ Kathai) in the accounts of men and women spending their time in sport and pastime. The descriptions of how they spend their morning, noon and evening remind us of Homer. In the accounts of gods such as those we find in Canto XI (Kādu Kāṇ Kathai) where a jungle deity tempts Kovalan, we have comic interludes. The whole of this canto is replete with an air of the supernatural.

This Tamil epic partakes also of the characteristics of the Virgilian epic. One of the heroes, Senkuttuvan is prepared to die not for his personal glory but for the honour of his land. When he was informed by a wandering minstrel that certain kings of the North had spoken in disparaging terms of the valour of Tamil kings, he gave

orders forthwith for a military expedition to the North, without waiting to verify, whether the insinuation pertained to him or to the other two Tamil kings, the Chola and the Pandya. An insult to any Tamil king was an insult to the entire Tamil nation and must be avenged by him. He led the expedition, prepared to fight for the glory of his country. In this sense, he was a national hero.

Ilanko's characters speak with variety. There are three dreams, one of Kannaki, another of Kovalan and a third of the Pandyan queen and each has a variety of its own, both in conception and import. There are again two epistles, both sent by Mathavi to Kovalan (Canto VIII and Canto XIII) but each has an individuality of its own. One is couched in a tone of remonstrance, while the other is written in a spirit of repentance, even though the purpose of both the epistles was to re-gain the love of Kovalan. Ilanko's art lay in skilful variation of even repetitive themes. The incident relating to the death of the Pandyan king and queen has to be repeatedly told in different settings but the artful way in which the poet mentions this in Cantos XX (77-81), XXV (11. 95-99), XV (11. 78-86), XXVIII (212-213), XXIX (1. 20) avoids monotony.

The artifice of employing synonyms to take away the tedium is also found in Ilanko. Take, for instance, the use of five different words in five lines to indicate the same object, viz., temple (Canto XIV—11. 7-11 : the words are koyil niyamam, nakaram, kottam, and palli). So also, in Canto X—11. 119-140, the words, othai, oli, pani, mankalam, pattu are used to denote a single meaning. Side by side with this, one meets with the employment of the same word, Koyil, five times in five successive lines in Canto V (11. 169-175) but one does not experience any monotony here, because of the otherwise sweet setting in which the word occurs.

Ilanko's style is ornate in places. A uniform clarity is not always aimed at by the poet and some passages are

intelligible only after repeated readings. We come across such passages, which nevertheless appeal to us by their poetical texture, in Canto XIII (11. 48 to 51) containing a pun on the word Mathavi, Canto XIII (11. 87-92) containing two epistles in one, Canto XIII (11. 184-188) containing a pun (cilēḍai) bearing on the words "Kannīr" (meaning tears and water from the plant) and "Kāl" (leg and wind), and Canto XIII (11. 151-170) describing the majestic flow of the river Vaiyai.

Cilappadikaram is Virgilian in character in another respect also. It contains a wide sweep of history, philosophy, religion and ethics. It contains accounts of the relationship between the Chola, the Pandya and the Chera kings of the Tamil country. It narrates how one king succeeded another in the Chola region and in the Pandya kingdom. (vide Canto XXVII Nirpadai—11. 118-123; ibid. 11. 159-171; ibid. 127-138). It points out that the Chola king was reckoned as the first and foremost citizen of the Chola state (Canto I—11. 31-32). It states how the Chera king Chenkuttuvan viewed kingship, how he wished to be loved by his subjects, how his sole desire was to bring happiness to them, how he scorned the idea of ever being cruel to them, how he regarded kingship as an office full of thorns but nevertheless a great opportunity given to him to serve the people. (vide Canto XXVI (Kāl Kōl) 11. 16-18; Canto XXV (Kāṭchi) 11. 100-104).

Philosophy is conveyed through the characters, Kaunthi Adigal and Madalan. Kaunthi Adigal says to Mankattu Brahman that it is not impossible for man to achieve anything under the sun if he is true unto himself and to the world, and if he loves his neighbours as he loves himself (Canto XI). Madalan exhorts King Chenkuttuvan to do acts of charity. "Youth is evanescent wealth rotates, the body is mortal. The world is a stage where we are actors; we pass from one birth to another just as actors change from one make-up to another. We will be judged only by our actions; we will receive

rewards or punishments according as we have done good things or evil. Do therefore good things, here and now" —. In these words he spoke to King Chenkuttuvan (Canto XXVIII—Naḍu Kal—11. 133-186).

Religious references to Sivan, Murugan, Vishnu, Kottavai (or Durga) and Argha abound in the work. Ethical passages occur frequently, especially towards the end of the work: "Do no harm to others; Realise the existence of God; Honour those who are devoted to God; Hate falsehood; Avoid backbiting; Neither kill nor eat flesh; give alms, do penance; Never be ungrateful; Despise friendship with the wicked; Never resort to perjury; follow the wise path" etc., etc. (Canto XXX (Varan taru) 11. 186-202). That the wise and the learned should forgive the unwise actions of misguided or ignorant people is brought out by the poet in his own inimitable style in Canto X (Nādu Kāṇ)—11. 237-238.

Yet another point of agreement between Ilanko and Virgil is in the avoidance of two extremes of being either too puritan or too frivolous in describing sexual pleasures. Ilanko is totally unlike Tiruttakadevar of the 9th century, who runs riot in describing the amorous adventures of Jeevaka, the hero of his work Jeevaka Chintamani. Nor does he think that love-making in literary works should be left to the Gods, who were free to transgress the limitations and obligations laid on man, as found in Kandapuranam and other Puranams of a later age. Like Spenser, he sang of ideal love. The love of Kannaki for Kovalan is highly idealised. Only, Mathavi comes in the way and Kovalan is captivated by her qualities of grace and attainments in dance and music. Mathavi, although born of a family of courtezans, is determined to lead a chaste life and shows an unwavering loyalty to Kovalan, even after he finally leaves her, to rejoin his wife. There is a sublimity in the love between Mathavi and Kovalan as described by the poet.

Just as Virgil bears the stamp of the Caesarean and the Augustan ages, Ilanko exemplifies a transitional stage in the development of the Tamil country; he stands between what is called the Sangam age when the pure, undefiled Tamil civilisation existed and the post-Sangam period which came to be engrossed more and more with matters religious, consequent on sectarian religious conflicts. Also like Virgil, Ilanko on the one hand glorifies the conquering spirit of the Tamils as pictured in the conquests of Chenkuttuvan, while on the other hand, through the words of Madalan addressed to Chenkuttuvan, he indicates the futility of mere military successes, when more important duties await the king.

Ilanko's heroes again are partly Homeric and partly Virgilian. Kannaki's revenge on the citizens of Madurai for an unjust act committed by their king is not an example to be followed. But her ideals of true love, fortitude and courage stand out prominently, as worthy of admiration and emulation. As Dryden says, the design of an epic is to form the mind to heroic virtue by example. Under circumstances similar to those which happened to Kannaki, some women would have paid unkindness with unkindness, some would have retaliated against their husbands and some would have deserted the home of their husbands when forsaken. But Kannaki was of a different mettle and chose a more difficult course of action; hence she is remembered by posterity.

Romance and supernatural elements also find a place in the epic. There are fabulous and incredible elements of wonderland in Canto XI (Kadu Kan). The underground passages and corridors alluded to by Varottamai read like a romance. Ilanko makes this account both fantastic and lively. The episode of Vana dēvathai, trying to seduce Kovalan, is delightful, though at the supernatural level. We are reminded of Homer's elements of the Fairyland and Virgil's transformation of Aenea's ships into nymphs, when we read the account of a mischievous,

misguided couple being turned into jackals by the curse of Kaunti Adigal, who could not bear the insult offered to her companions Kovalan and Kannaki.

It is interesting to note that Ilanko, like Milton, never applies sardonic humour to his main characters. He has nothing but praise for Kannaki, the chief heroine of the epic. Kaunthi Adigal, the ascetic and Mathari, the shepherdess praise her as an example to be followed by other women. The Pandyan Queen praises her, the Chera Queen deems her fit to be worshipped, the sun-god and fire-god do her errands, the Chola king Karikalan, King Gajabahu of Ceylon and other kings assemble and do homage to her image and all through the epic the poet has avoided the ludicrous in depicting her. (See also Canto XXII (Alar padu) 11. 134-136, where even her action in burning the city is justified by certain women of Madurai). Friends of Kannaki and of her foster-mother all praise her and the ideal for which she lived (vide Canto XXIX).

Ilanko draws several morals from the events of his epic: that an unjust ruler is inevitably punished, that a chaste woman receives the homage of all, human beings and celestials; that no man can escape his fate. Besides, many a lesson he has left the reader to draw indirectly, e.g., one should not indulge in gossip, one should take great care of trust property; one should be brave and never despondent; one should have faith in God. Ilanko apparently thought that poetry was intended not merely to beguile one's leisure but it should inspire and instruct. All in all, Ilanko has achieved unqualified success as a poet and takes a high rank among the epic poets of the world.

In later periods, poets like Tiruttakadevar, Sekkilar and Kambar attempted to copy it and even rival it, but throughout the centuries it has maintained a central place in Tamil literature. It has an unparalleled variety of appeal and deserves to hold a high place not only in Tamil literature but also in world literature.