

Mainstream Tradition and Exclusive Traditions: A Study of Kongu Folk Epic *Annanmar Kathai*

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Abstract: All histories of mainstream culture are based on written literary sources and accord only a peripheral status to oral sources (exclusive or territorial voices). The earliest works in two South Indian languages, Tolkappiyam (*naadaga vazakkum ulagiyal vazakkum*) in Tamil and Kavirajamarga (*marga and desi*) in Kannada have acknowledged the existence of these binary opposites. *Marga* is the homogenized, neutralized mainstream culture and *desi* is the heterogenous, regional or community specific exclusive culture. No cultural history has a perfect balance of both *marga* and *desi*, the *marga* always having an upper hand due to the nexus between politics and culture. The dominant culture tries to homogenize all the indigenous cultures making it a tussle between secularization and vernacularization. This paper makes a survey of the contributions made by the non-native scholars without a 'Eurocentric standard of judgment' and the contributions made by the native scholars with a 'regional and national consciousness' to the formation of the cultural history of Tamilnadu. Acknowledging the fact that Tamil had preserved its individuality independent of Sanskrit and the Tamil classical tradition had incorporated the regional elements in it, it goes beyond to see the contribution of the oral tradition, by looking at the birth and growth of folk epic *Annanmar Kathai* (hereafter AMK) to the Tamil culture and to the Indian culture as well. The folk epic has three texts - verbal, performance and ritual. An overview of all the three texts are given. The ritual or devotional text is given more attention to define the characteristics of folk religion. The complementary nature of both vedic and non-vedic traditions are outlined.

Keywords: mainstream culture, community specific exclusive culture, *marga*, *desi*, secularization, vernacularization.

I. INTRODUCTION

All histories of mainstream culture are based on written literary sources and accord only a peripheral status to oral sources (exclusive or territorial voices). The earliest works in two South Indian languages, Tolkappiyam (*naadaga vazakkum ulagiyal vazakkum*) in Tamil and Kavirajamarga (*marga and desi*) in Kannada have acknowledged the existence of these binary opposites. *Marga* is the homogenized, neutralized mainstream culture and *desi* is the heterogenous, regional or community specific exclusive culture. No cultural history has a perfect balance of both *marga* and *desi*, the *marga* always having an upper hand due to the nexus between politics and culture. The dominant culture tries to homogenize all the indigenous cultures making it a tussle between secularization and vernacularization. Sheldon Pollock sees the millennium long influence of Sanskrit and Latin as secularization and the birth of Indian and European languages as vernacularization. This vernacularization goes through the stages of a written form of the vernacular (literization) and the development of imaginative discourse (literarization).ⁱ Pollock fears that the indigenous cultures that came into existence taking a millennium of years are now threatened by the 'coercive globalism'. All the sub-cultures of India allowed this homogenization, unable to resist forces from within and without. No attempt was made to see 'beyond the dead Sanskrit high tradition to include the multifarious *bhashas* in their dynamic contexts-- the privileging of literatures in the *bhashas* over those in English and Sanskrit.'ⁱⁱ This conscious and unconscious oppression of indigenous personality also helped to

nurture national and regional consciousness asserting their existence.ⁱⁱⁱ This assertion was made not only by the native scholars but also by non-native ones who saw ‘the transition of knowledge based upon royal patronage, based upon memory culture to the university support of scholarship’ and they were the ones, with the help of Indian intellectuals, ‘who created new careers for an Indian modernity and who cast the record of the past into new moulds and prepared it for a new future.’^{iv}

Acknowledging the fact that Tamil had preserved its individuality independent of Sanskrit and the Tamil classical tradition had incorporated the regional elements in it, the birth and growth of the folk epic *Annammar Kathai* (hereafter AMK) has contributed significantly to the Tamil culture and the Indian culture as well. The folk epic has three texts - verbal, performance and ritual.

Annammar Kathai – The Story^v

Goddess Parvathi comes to the earth with the name Periakkandi due to a curse that had befallen her. She is on a pillar of penance waiting to be expiated by a virtuous sister Thangal coming in search of her two valiant brothers who died a sudden and heroic death in the same forest. The brothers and the sister are the children of the couple- Kunnudaiyan and Thamarai who had gone through much harassment at the hands of the agnatic cousins of Kunnudaiyan before settling down to a prosperous life with the divine blessings of Mayavar. Mayavar fixes the life span of two of their sons-Ponnar and Sangar- to be only 16 years and offers some magical powers to the daughter Thangal who controls the life of her two brothers. Though the Brothers marry, they lead a celibate life concentrating on the welfare of their subjects. When the parents die, unable to bear the loss, the sister asks for a parrot which dwells in the forest of their enemy Hunter Kali. The Brothers fulfill the desire of their sister but earn the wrath of Kali who vows to take revenge on them. A goldsmith is sent to kill Ponnar through a well laid out plan but Ponnar senses the impending danger at the right time and kills the goldsmith. Whether through their enemy Hunter Kali or not, the Brothers are drawn towards the eternal battlefield (*Padugalam*) and face death not by the sword of their enemy but by their own, to save their dignity and self-respect. The valiant heroes faces death with perfect mental equanimity.

Jolted by a bad dream, the sister Thangal wakes up to find the bad omens coming true. Crows that had never flown in Valanadu were now steaming across the sky and Thangal is certain that these symptoms denote the end of the brothers. She calls her sisters-in-law to accompany her but they refuse saying that they were wives only by name and nothing more. Furious, Thangal curses the palace to burn, willing only three things to remain unscathed- their mangal sutra, yellow thread and pallu. Taking these with her, she sets out wailing through the forest. Her tears reach Periakkandi Amman who enquires and on learning the reason, helps her along. The dead bodies are found. With Easwara’s help, they stitch up the wounds with a golden needle and yarn. Holy water is sprinkled on them. Sangar regains consciousness first followed by others but they all die again after a brief conversation with the sister. Mayavar makes Thangal the seventh maiden to assist Periakkandi in her penance and they are all taken to the celestial abode.

This story is sung and performed across the Kongu region by bards and singers for the past many centuries. The story had gone through the tribal, pastoral and peasant cultures all through its existence. All the places associated with the story have become holy shrines where, along with the regular worshipping, different methods of faith healing are also offered. Certain findings have been arrived at through an exhaustive textual and field study.^{vi} This folk epic has three texts- verbal, performance and ritual or devotional. Each text reveals the contemporary epic situation. Folk epics originated during medieval period when there was a political vacuum. These epics are not heroic epics and have less relevance to classical epics, both Sanskritic and vernacular. *Dharma* and ‘mythical consciousness’ are the main concerns of folk epics. These epics have different thematic contents like pathos, ambivalence, disorder, restlessness and deeper human complexities. The bards and singers observed all these from the social situation and expressed them through their musical instruments and theatre performances.

Verbal Text: The Diversity:

Most of the Tamil ballads appeared during Nayaka’s period. The bards of these ballads are found to possess a heightened consciousness incorporating region, religion, caste, clan, family and devotion. The singers connect the story to the contemporary Kongu Vellala community by conducting all the life-cycle rituals during their theatre performances. This makes the performers preservers and transmitters of folk epics and folk culture. In spite of being community specific, folk epics have a universal message and this message is delivered through the other forms of the texts. Folk epics sometimes have sectarian interests. Revival of caste pride is one among them. When the shrines appear as a result of deification,

satellite versions of folk epics also appear glorifying the deity and the heroes. This attempt is just to extend the glorification of communities to realize self-interests including political. The South Indian folk epics that appeared during the medieval period and their religious affiliations bear enough evidence to show that they belong to Pre-Aryan Dravidian civilization. This Dravidian culture is mother-goddess oriented and fertility is its important aspect. The left hand and right hand castes which existed during the folk epic period are the historical representatives of Exclusive Tradition. The folk epic community is characterized by a) Awesome veneration b) Grievance Redressal System c) Eclectic Deity Affiliation d) Subjective Sanctity Parameters. The folk epic grows along with the community providing space to their spiritual aspirations.

Performance Text: The Scope and Effect:

Musical elements and mythical elements are indispensable parts of performance text and the performers are aware of these and not the written text. The performers are treated as sorcerers and seers too. A performance is an amalgamation of many art and cultural forms and their purpose is to create an historical-mythical consciousness among the audience. The 'performance markers' of AMK include the beating of *udukkai* with the accompaniment of sights, sounds and smells. Many life cycle rituals observed during the performances are culture and community specific and provide authenticity to the performance and make the performers, cultural guardians. The performance also has ludic and liminal elements. The performers follow professional ethics. A dramatized AMK performance ends with taking the villagers to the shrines of the deified heroes and to the places of mythical and historical interest. Water and women play a prominent role in the rituals connected with the performances. Hero stone worship is a part of it. This animistic ritual symbolizes fertility. An interest created among the folk through continuous playing of AMK narrative performance led to the construction of the Annanmar shrine at the place, located in Valanadu of Manapparai Taluk, where they are believed to have ruled. This is the causative effect of the performance text. The popularity of the folk epic also led to the commercial folk theatre performances based on chapbook versions.

Ritual Text: Expanding Dimensions:

Ritual text has an autonomous existence. It is non-verbal. It touches the innermost recesses of the folk's mind. It stirs him to terror and ecstasy. It converts the profane space and time to a sacred one. Totemistic and animistic societies undergo this process more. The cataleptic state of *Padugalam* (mock death or eternal battlefield) and its revival by performers with their singing power symbolize parts of the cycle, creation-destruction and regeneration. Motifs like heroism have no place in it. It operates with a large network of elements like myths and symbols, ancestor worship, sacrifice, ritual spots, ritual objects and ritual journey. Participation of women and the impact of womanhood are other important factors. These are not isolated phenomena and are parts of historical continuity of folk tradition.

The Vedic and Non-Vedic Differences:

The influence of folk epic, through all its three texts, on the folk community is placed in the historical context. The empirical study made in a specific geographic region and diachronic study made on the verbal texts of both documented and undocumented versions are compared with the mainstream tradition which is a mix of both vedic and non-vedic elements.^{vii} The rituals of vedic and folk communities have a tradition of their own. The mystical element also changes accordingly. While the vedic rituals remain pure, axiomatic, otherworldly, fire-oriented, individual, sublime and verbalized, the folk rituals are this worldly, 'impure', liminal, orgiastic, water-oriented, women-centred, dramatized and collective. These conclusions are the result of the scholarly works carried out by native scholars like D D Kosambi^{viii} and D P Chattopadhyaya^{ix} who had placed issues in the widest historical perspective. The entry of non-native scholars like Burton Stein widened the scope of the research by tracing the influence of power over the religious life of folk community. This has happened in the study of Saivism and Saktism. 'The smaller administrative units introduced by the Cholas created smaller social groups and necessitated the invention of personal gods. With the help of Brahmins, the Cholas superimposed Saivism over Saktism all over South India especially in the folk epic region of Northern Kongu and Southern Karnataka where there is a huge tribal population'^x.

Mainstream Tradition and Exclusive Traditions: Changing Paradigms:

Vedic culture alone will not make the mainstream tradition. As it is a dynamic process, mainstream culture gets periodically redefined with the merger or discarding of certain elements. The same logic applies to exclusive traditions also. But one item that would make a clear distinction between these two traditions is blood sacrifice or animal sacrifice practiced in certain exclusive, non-vedic cultures. This is seen as a part of animism where the blood of the animal is used

to make contact with the cosmic forces and to propitiate the dead souls. This custom of *bali* (sacrifice) has a historical continuity with the vedic tradition^{xi} which had discarded it at a certain point of time in history. Both mainstream tradition and exclusive traditions get reinvented during the course of history. Exclusive traditions show more accommodativeness as they are patronized by the subaltern class. Studies in folk epics have led to these many interesting areas of India's complex cultural structure and these studies were carried out mainly by trans-regional Indian scholars and non-native foreign scholars. From a pure anthropological and administrative points of view of the colonial period^{xiii} these studies have traveled quite a bit to reach from mere Anthropology to Social and Cultural Anthropology and finally to Culture Studies. The following books have made a major contribution to the study. 1. *The Three Twins: The Telling of a South Indian Folk Epic* (1982) by Brenda E F Beck 2. *Another Harmony- New Essays on the Folklore of India* (1986) edited by Stuart Blackburn and A K Ramanujan 3. *Oral Epics in India* (1989) edited by Stuart Blackburn and A K Ramanujan. Studies by all these scholars disprove the theory that colonial and postcolonial research will carry the legacy of cultural imperialism. On the other hand, studies by native, regional scholars appear to be a bit polarized. This presupposes the fact that religious affiliations of the subalterns are flexible, accommodative and occupation based and sometimes prone to manipulations by dominant ideologies. The recent changes noticed in the three texts of the folk epic support this view.

Verbal Text: The new additions to this text belong to a different genre with a mix of verse, prose and dialogue forms. The verbal text moves closer to a more devotional outlook justifying certain unjustifiable actions of the Brothers. One such work is Mohai Karuppaiah's *Annanmar Tharisanam* (The Vision of the Brothers). The title itself is suggestive of the veneration accorded to the folk epic characters making them full fledged folk deities. Karuppaiah also refers to the vaishnavization efforts of Nayaka kings. Thirumalai Nayaka extended the distance of Kallalagar's procession from Thenur to Vandiyur with an intention of minimizing the popularity of Mother Goddess temples located all along the route.^{xiii} This is an attempt to destroy an exclusive culture.

Personal Gods: Another recent development is the interest shown by the Tamil intellectuals on urban folklore by chronicling the printing, publishing and distribution of chapbooks based on sensational personal and social events. A. R Venkatachopathy quotes one important incident of the demand for chapbooks on Mother Goddess worship from various communities living in Chennai whenever there is a Mother Goddess festival in their respective villages^{xiv}. An urbanite does not move away from his Mother Goddess who is his personal god even after a longer period of stay in a city.

Worship Patterns: While dealing with the folk epics, the concern of the non-native scholars are still with taxonomical issues like regional martial and sacrificial epics. They also see folk epic as alternative traditions offering a counter culture.^{xv} They look for parallels with characters from classical epics. It will be very frustrating for those scholars if they make such stereotyped studies on *Annanmar Kathai*. The changes that occur in the triangular structure of Verbal, Performance and Ritual texts of the folk epic are well within the scope of the studies made already. Valanadu is one of the ritual spots. About 20-30% of increase is noticed in the number of people visiting the shrine every year.^{xvi} Most of the groups come with the singer who performed at their village. There is a phenomenal increase in the number of goats and sheep sacrificed both at Valanadu and Virappur and the consumption of liquor too has reached unmanageable proportions. This is causing a lot of inconvenience to the women who accompany their men to these holy shrines. They certainly do not consider drunken revelry as a part of the spiritual quest.^{xvii} The place where the final battle was waged, Padugalam, is supposed to be a deserted place where we find the dead and mutilated bodies with vultures pouncing on them. The place also should be reverberating with the dirge of Thangal over the loss of her dear brothers. It more or less maintained this ambience till recently. Now the news comes that a huge temple is going to be built there by the father-in-law of a Tamil film actor.^{xviii} The temple will surely be consecrated by vedic priests with the chanting of mantras. Even the ritual of *padugalam* (mock death) might be performed inside the new temple. Folk religion might accommodate this and much more. Unlike the vedic or mainstream religion it reinvents itself, losing its identity in the process.

II. CONCLUSION

Despite the onslaught of a 'coercive globalism' which threatens to homogenize all the sub-cultures of India, the Tamil folk epic *Annanmar Kathai* has managed to hold its forte, through its verbal, performance and ritual texts. With its powerful ritualistic and musical performance, the heterogeneity of the folk epic has been retained, adding to the richness of the Tamil culture and in turn the Indian culture. By incorporating the regional elements and remaining true to its form and nature, the *desi* has been able to resist the force of the *marga* in this Tamil folk epic which continues to remain alive through the lively performances of the bards.

END NOTES

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- ii Devy, G N. *The G N Devy Reader*. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2009. pp.xiii-xviii
- iii Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures*. London: Routledge, 1989. pp.9-12.
- iv Trautmann, Thomas R, ed. *The Madras School of Orientalism: Producing Knowledge in Colonial South India*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2009. pp. 2-16.
- v This story is based on three sources: (1) The recording of Erusanampalayam Ramasamy by Brenda Beck in 1965 and published in 1992. (2) The recording of Devanampalayam Mysamy by P Krishnaswami in 1997 and (3) the printed version of Pichan, *Annamar Swamy Kathai* edited by Sakthikkanal. No major deviations are found in these three versions.
- vi Krishnaswami, P, *A Comparative Study of Maleya Madeshwara and Annanmar Kathai* An unpublished PhD thesis submitted to Bangalore University: Bangalore, 2000. pp.293-301
- vii These observations are based on the fieldwork undertaken by this researcher during the period 1995-2000 and on the information collected from the informants periodically from the year 2000
- viii Kosambi, Damodar Dhamanand, *An Introduction to the study of Indian History*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1983 (1956) and *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical outline* (1970) by the same author
- ix Chattopadhyaya, Debiprasad, *Lokayata: A study in Ancient Indian Materialism*. New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1992 (1959)
- x Krishnaswami, P, *ibid*, p.294. This is discussed extensively in Burton Stein's book, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985 (1980)
- xi Kosambi, D D, *Myth and Reality*, as quoted in Krishnaswami, P, *ibid*. p.255
- xii Works of Francis Buchanan (1807) and Edgar Thurston (1909)
- xiii Karuppaiah, Mohai. *Annamar Tharisanam: Ponnar-Sangar Varalaru*. Namakkal: Sitharmalai Pathippagam, 2004. p.70
- xiv Venkatachalapathy, A R, *Muchandi Ilakkiam*. Nagercoil: Kalachuvadu Pathippagam, 2004. p.38
- xv Hildebeital, Alf, *Draupadi Among the Rajputs, Muslims and Dalits-Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001
- xvi Personal Interview with Chandrashekar, Manapparai, one of the trustees of the Temple, 5-4-2010.
- xvii Personal Interview with Ms Gunasekari Ramasamy, Goppanurpudur, 17-3-2010
- xviii Personal Interview with Chandrashekar, Manapparai, 5-4-2010