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Abstract

Tamil literary history abounds in legends about texts lost and found. The theme resurfaces in modern literary history in descriptions of the rediscovery of classical Caṅkam poetry at the end of the nineteenth century. If this poetic corpus has never been literally lost but has merely been invisible, circulating in the small circle of scholars, it is said to have been kept away by brahmins from its rightful owner, the Tamil people. Instead, the brahmins forced their own Sanskrit texts upon the Tamils. Curiously, this scenario, which is clearly indebted to the political idiom of the Dravidian movement, finds its most explicit expression in the works of two scholars, A.K. Ramanujan and K.V. Zvelebil, who, contrary to their colleagues, past and present, working in Tamil Nadu itself, could easily have ignored any form of pressure from the political side. At the same time, both were men with strong literary ambitions, who as such have been carried away by literary fancy itself.

Keywords

Tamil, Sanskrit, Dravidian movement, Brahmin, Literary history, classical language, Caṅkam poetry

Introduction

Tamil literary history abounds in stories about texts lost and found. Each of these stories has its own heroes and villains. In the medieval stories, the texts are threatened by natural disasters, insects, neglect or the absence of persons qualified to transmit them. The heroes responsible for the recovery of the texts are kings, gods and saints of exceptional devotion. In the modern avatar of these medieval stories, the myth about the rediscovery of the classical Tamil literature and the causes of the loss of the texts has been concentrated in the person of the Brahmin. He is the main villain of the story. The heroes are a new kind of saints and kings, namely scholars with a singular dedication to the Tamil cause and their patrons. This story has its roots in the political climate in Tamil Nadu in the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, when certain non-Brahmin

groups started to resent the Brahmins for their hegemonic position in the social, economic and cultural life and managed to translate these feelings into a political programme. While, with one exception, the medieval stories are mainly celebrations of royal patronage, the modern reconstruction of the loss and rediscovery of the classical Tamil literature is marked by a strikingly hostile tone; the vocabulary is that of an all-out war, in which the enemy is turned into a veritable demon. What is equally curious is the leading role played in this Brahmin-bashing by two scholars from outside the Tamil-speaking region, who ideally should have been immune to the particular political set-up in Tamil Nadu. It is all the more curious if one realizes that classical Tamil texts have never been lost.

In what follows, I will discuss several such stories from medieval times. These serve mainly as a background to the modern version from the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries that originated in the wake of the appearance of the first printed editions of Old Tamil Caṅkam poetry and the rise of the Tamil movement claiming independence for the Tamil-speaking part of India.

The Revelation of the Vaiṣṇava 4,000

Tamil has two large bodies of so-called Bhakti or devotional poetry, one dealing with Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa and the other with Śiva. The corpus of Tamil Vaiṣṇava Bhakti hymns, the *Nālāyira Tivya Pirapantam*, consists of 4,000 (*nāl-āyira[m]*) stanzas attributed to altogether fourteen different saints or *ālvārs*. Among these, Nammālvār, literally ‘our *ālvār*’, occupies an exceptional position on account of the number of his verses¹ as well as the role assigned to him in the story of the compilation and transmission of the poetic corpus. The story in question is told in Piṅpaḷakiya Perumāl Jīyar’s *Guruparamparāprabhāvam* or ‘The Splendour of Succession of Teachers’. The text has been dated in the thirteenth century, or approximately three centuries after the first attempts at the compilation of the poems.²

According to the *Guruparamparāprabhāvam*, the Vaiṣṇava Bhakti poetic corpus as we now have it has been revealed twice.³ The first revelation seems to

¹ The fourth group of 1,000 verses is attributed in its entirety to Nammālvār, as are three sections of the third group of 1,000.

² For the date of the compilation of the Bhakti poems, see Tieken (2001: 213–28). Tamil literary history is like a closed shop. The dates of the texts are fixed and one is allowed to enter only after having promised not to tamper with them and break up the consensus. However, this seems to be precisely what is needed, as most dates are based on very weak evidence or a priori assumptions (see Tieken 2008a). In the article just mentioned, I have reconsidered the evidence for the early dating of Old Tamil Caṅkam poetry at the first centuries of our era and suggested an alternative date in the eighth or ninth century. With that, the date of Bhakti poetry as a block was shifted forward as well. In the present article, I follow my own new dates for classical Tamil literature.

³ My source for the following story of the two revelations from the *Guruparamparāprabhāvam* is Carman and Narayanan (1989: 4–6).

account for the transformation of a previously amorphous collection of hymns into four groups of 1,000 hymns each. This division made possible the identification of *Nālāyira Tivya Pirapantam* with the four Vedas. Thus it describes how, after Viṣṇu had appeared before him, Nammālvār burst out into song and produced four poems. The four poems are said to be the four Vedas, but at the same time, the fourth is said to be the *Tiruvāymoli*, which title is otherwise used for the fourth group of 1,000 poems attributed to Nammālvār himself.

Apparently, after that the corpus was lost and had to be revealed a second time. The story concerned opens with Nāthamuni, who had once heard a fragment of Nammālvār's *Tiruvāymoli* and went in search of the complete text. In his quest, he travelled to Tirukkukūr where Nammālvār lived. There he met Parāṅkuśadāsa, the disciple of Maturakavi, who in his turn was the disciple of Nammālvār. Parāṅkuśadāsa taught him a fragment of a hymn, which his teacher Maturakavi had taught him and advised him to recite it before Nammālvār 12,000 times. After Nāthamuni had done so, Nammālvār gave him the 'Three Secrets', the *Tiruvāymoli* and the other 3,000 poems, the truth of all philosophies and the secret of the eightfold *yoga*. The *Tiruvāymoli* and the other 3,000 poems formed the *Nālāyira Tivya Pirapantam*. Nāthamuni, next, instituted the singing of hymns from that collection at home and in the temple, side by side with recitation from the Veda.

As the title suggests, the *Guruparamparāprabhāvam* is concerned with tracing the lineage of Vaiṣṇava teachers. The greatest saint, certainly the greatest as far as the quality and volume of his poetry are concerned, is placed at the beginning of that tradition. He is credited with giving the poetic corpus its present shape and subsequently with supplying systems for doctrinal interpretation and helpful religious practices. Furthermore, it should be noted that the Bhakti poems were not really lost; they had merely become inaccessible to ordinary persons. The hymns are revealed only to saints of exceptional devotion, to either Viṣṇu or the teacher. In this respect, the story of the recovery of Vaiṣṇava Bhakti poetry differs from that of the Śaiva Bhakti poetic corpus. As we will see presently, the latter legend, found in the *Tirumuṛaikaṇṭapurāṇam* written by the fourteenth century teacher Umāpati, speaks of manuscripts rescued just in time from being completely eaten by ants.⁴

Salvaging the Hymns of the Śaiva Saints

The *Tirumuṛaikaṇṭapurāṇam* opens with the Cōla king Apayakula-cēkaraṅ's request to the poet Nampī Āṅṭār Nampī to make known to the world the hymns and life histories of the Śaiva poets.⁵ After having overcome the reluctance of the

⁴ On Umāpati, see Prentiss (1996: 240ff).

⁵ Shulman (1988: xvii–xxii).

priests of the Śiva temple in Chidambaram to co-operate, Nampi discovered the manuscripts of the hymns, half eaten by ants, in a sealed room in the golden hall of that temple. Nampi compiled first, the hymns of Appar, Cuntarar and Campantar in seven books and with the help of a musician who had accompanied Campantar during his travels was able to restore the particular musical tradition. Next, the hymns of the other saints were compiled in four books, which were added to the first seven. The final, eleventh, book contains, among other texts, Nampi's own *Tiruttoṅṅar tiruvantāti*, in which he describes the lives of the sixty-three *nāyanmār* or poet-saints.⁶

What is interesting in this story is the role played by the Cōḷa king: it is he who set the activity of collecting the corpus of hymns in motion.⁷ In addition to that, the restoration and compilation of the texts are situated in the great Śaiva temple in Chidambaram, which was an important political centre during Cōḷa times.⁸ Apart from that, the *Tirumuṛaikaṅṅapurāṅgam* introduces the idea that, what we now have is just a small part of what originally was a much more extensive corpus, most of which was lost. This element is absent in the Vaiṣṇava tradition. In this connection, it should be noted that in the *Guruparamparābrhāvam*, the *Nālāyira Tivya Pirapantam* is said to be like the Vedas and consequently could under no condition be presented as just a sample of something bigger.⁹ On the contrary, it is supposed to be complete: containing everything there is and ever was.

Another interesting aspect of the story concerns the refusal of the temple priests to co-operate in the search for the manuscripts. Hall supposed that the priests did not wish to give up their autonomy over the temple management.¹⁰ It is not unlikely, though, that this part of the story is, rather, reminiscent of the priests' opposition to the introduction of Tamil texts in the temple worship. In this connection, we should not overlook the fact that the *dikshitar* priests of the Chidambaram temple were (as they still are) Brahmins, who at that time would have been committed to a form of worship founded on the Vedic tradition, including hymns and formulas in Sanskrit. So what Umāpati's story refers to, is the Tamilization of the temple worship in Chidambaram under the auspices of the Cōḷa king in the face of opposition by the Brahminic temple priests.

⁶ At a later stage, Cēkkiḷār's *Periyapurāṅgam* was added to the corpus, another and more elaborate book on the life histories of the saints.

⁷ On the role of the Cōḷas in the process of anthologizing Śaiva Bhakti poetry, see Champakalakshmi (1996: 135–63).

⁸ See Hall (2001: 85–116).

⁹ Admittedly, as everything in the world is by definition grounded in the Vedas, *mīmāṃsakas*, out of necessity, do work with the idea that certain parts of the Vedas have been lost.

¹⁰ Hall (2001: 89).

Third Time Lucky: Caṅkam Poetry

From religious literature we now turn to the secular poems of classical Caṅkam literature. The term *caṅkam* (Sanskrit *saṅgha*) refers to an academy of poets and scholars who were established in Madurai and produced poetry as well as a treatise on the grammar and poetics of the poems. According to the legend, there were three successive such academies. The so-called Caṅkam texts that we now have are said to be the product of the last or third, academy.

The story of the origin of Caṅkam poetry is found in Nakkīraṅṅār's commentary on Iṛaiyaṅṅār's *Akapporuḷ* and is part of the story of the *Werdegang* of this text and its commentary.¹¹ The aim is to describe how these relatively late texts, Iṛaiyaṅṅār's *Akapporuḷ* and Nakkīraṅṅār's commentary, as well as the 'root' texts, that is, the Caṅkam poems, had arrived in the western part of south India from Madurai in the eastern part.

According to Nakkīraṅṅār's commentary on Iṛaiyaṅṅār's *Akapporuḷ*, Caṅkam poetry is the product of the third Caṅkam instituted by the Pāṅṅiya king in Uttara Maturai, after the first and second, in Madurai and Kapāṅapuram respectively, had been destroyed by floods. The first Caṅkam lasted 4,440 years, was supported by eighty-nine kings and included 4,449 poets. In the following Caṅkams, these numbers decreased: to 3,700 years, fifty-nine kings and 3,700 poets in the second, and to 1,850 years, forty-nine kings and 449 poets in the third. With the number of poets declining in each successive Caṅkam, there also was a decline in literary output. For instance, in the first Caṅkam, 4,449 poets produced ever so many *paripāṅṅal* songs; in the third Caṅkam, only seventy *paripāṅṅals* were composed.

After that, the story continues with the origin of the *Akapporuḷ* itself and its commentary. During the third Caṅkam, the Pāṅṅiya kingdom was visited by drought and famine. The king sent away his court poets, telling them to return after the situation became normal again. When after twelve years the rains returned, the king's men managed to bring back most of the poets and scholars but were unable to find one knowledgeable in the field of poetics. The king was desperate, for 'What is the point of researching into letters, words, and structures, if one does not know the meaning?' He turned to Śiva in the Madurai temple. The latter, out of pity for the king, wrote sixty verses on copper plates. Śiva placed the copper plates beneath the altar, which, however, was the very place which the sweepers while cleaning the temple mostly overlooked. Therefore, that same day Śiva gave a Brahmin a sign to sweep under the altar also. This Brahmin immediately realized what text it was that he had found there and brought it to the king. The king in turn gave it to the members of the academy for interpretation. However, these scholars could not agree among one another on the correct interpretation

¹¹ See Buck and Paramasivam (1997: 1–9). The translation from the commentary given below is found on p. 9. See also Zvelebil (1973: 109–35).

and requested the king to appoint an arbitrator. The king, however, did not see why these scholars were not able to decide among themselves. Thereupon they turned to Śiva, who referred them to a mute five-year-old boy and told them to present their interpretations before that boy and watch carefully his reactions: in case of the correct meaning of a verse, tears would come to the boy's eyes and his body hair would bristle. He also told them that the boy was actually his son Kumāraṅ or Murukaṅ, who was suffering from the consequences of a curse. The interpretations of the first forty-eight scholars received only a lukewarm response from the boy; when it was Nakkīraṅār's turn, the boy started to cry and his body hair stood on end. There and then it was decided that Nakkīraṅār had arrived at the true interpretation of the text. The story continues with the history of the transmission of the commentary, which travelled from Madurai in the east to Muciṛi on the west coast of south India:

Madurai Kaṅakkāyaṅār's son Nakkīraṅār taught it to his son Kīraṅkoṛraṅār. He taught it to Tēṅūrkkīlār, who taught it to Paṭiyaṅkoṛraṅār. He taught it to Celvattācīriyar Peruṅcuvanār, who taught it to Maṅalūr Professor Puliyaṅkāypperuṅcēntaṅār. He taught it to the Cellūr Professor Āṅṅaipperuṅkumāraṅār, who taught it to the Tirukkunṅam Professor. He taught it to Mātalavaṅār Iṅākaṅār, and he taught it to the Muciṛi Professor Nīlakaṅṅaṅār. This is how the commentary has come down to us.

In the story about the *Akapporuḷ* the Cankam tradition is said to be interrupted by famine. Among the survivors of the famine, no one is found who knows the meaning of the poetry. Again, as in the case of the Śaiva Bhakti poems, it is the king who is the instigator of the attempt to revive the particular tradition, in which he finally succeeds after divine intervention. Note also that the text is discovered in the temple in the royal capital.

The last part of the story, detailing the emigration of the *Akapporuḷ* together with Nakkīraṅār's commentary from Madurai to Muciṛi, is interesting because there is evidence to suggest that the entire corpus of Cankam poetry as we now have it is indeed a west-coast adaptation of an original version originating in Madurai in the east. Other evidence of the adoption in the west-coast region of the east-coast culture is found in, for instance, the *Cilappatikāram*. This text describes the institution by the western Cēra king of the Paṭṭiṅi cult, which had earlier proved its efficacy in the Cōḷa and Pāṅṅiya realms in the east.¹²

However, one aspect of the story of the *Akapporuḷ* is more difficult to fit into the picture of Cankam poetry. Thus, it is strange to read that the *Akapporuḷ* was composed by Śiva to make good the loss of the knowledge of the poetics of Cankam poetry, or, more particularly, of the *akam*, or love poems, in this corpus. For, if we turn to the preceding legend on the Cankam literature proper, we read that the corpus included the *Tolkāppiyam*, the third part of which, the *Poruḷatikāram*,

¹² Tieken (2009: 202–08).

deals precisely with poetics. It is therefore tempting to conclude that the story about the *Akapporu!* is a later addition, which was appended to the Caṅkam legend rather carelessly.¹³

Poems Floating up to the Surface

David Shulman has compared the Caṅkam legend with the many legends, involving floods, about the origin of shrines and temples in South India. According to him we are dealing with an old type of cosmogonic myth, in which the world survives the flood (destructive flood) or else is born from it (creative flood).¹⁴ In the Caṅkam legend, Madurai is presented as the indestructible centre of the world and as the ancient home of Tamil poetry.¹⁵ The succession of academies fits in with the idea in India that creation is an ever-recurring event: the present, third academy is not the first of its kind; it is the rebirth of an earlier one after a cataclysmic flood. It should be noted that in the Caṅkam legend, the theme of rebirth after destruction by a natural disaster (flood, drought) seems to have been combined with another motif, found, for instance, in Rājaśekhara's *Kāvyaṁīmāṁsā* and Vatsyāyana's *Kāmasūtra*. These texts are presented as the result of a process of slimming down the contents of a truly gigantic text through shortening by several generations of experts and scholars.¹⁶ Likewise, each successive Caṅkam witnessed a decline in the number of years, kings, poets and poems.

This image of Caṅkam poetry as a continuation of an ancient tradition seems to fit it well. In order to make this clear, a brief detour is required into the question of the dating of Caṅkam poetry. As we know, Caṅkam poetry consists of eight collections of poems, and a work dealing with the grammar and poetics of the poems. The poems can be divided into two categories: village poems, describing the unhappy love lives of poor people living in small villages in the countryside and the so-called heroic poems, describing characters such as kings and bards, typical of a heroic age. The poems are all set in a time and milieu that was hardly influenced by the North Indian Sanskrit culture. The Pallavas (third to seventh century AD), known for their patronage of Sanskrit, are not mentioned in the poems. At the time

¹³ It is also otherwise possible to distinguish two distinct strands in the myth. Thus, while in the second part, on the origin of the *Akapporu!*, we meet Śiva and his son Kumāraṅ, the first part, about the floods destroying Maturai, shows a strong Kṛṣṇa-ite influence. In any case, the name Maturai refers to Mathurā, and Kapāṭapuram is a loan translation of Dvāravatī. Both towns play an important role in the mythology of Kṛṣṇa. It is generally assumed that the third Maturai is Madurai in south India. This remains to be seen. The commentary speaks of Uttara Maturai, which, instead, seems to refer to Mathurā in north India, called 'Uttara' to distinguish it from so-called Teṅ Maturai, or 'southern Madurai'. Buck and Paramasivam translate Uttara Maturai as 'Upper Madurai', but this merely indicates their embarrassment with the word *uttara*.

¹⁴ Shulman (1988: 89–100).

¹⁵ But see the preceding note on Uttara Maturai.

¹⁶ Fezas (1994).

of the rediscovery of this poetic corpus between approximately 1890 and 1920, Cankam poetry was almost automatically dated at the period depicted in it, that is, in the time before the Pallavas. In this way, the Tamil-speaking south could claim an ancient (secular) literary tradition of its own independent of Sanskrit; a claim, which in fact has been only recently honoured in 2004 by the Government of India, by granting Tamil the status of a classical language.

However, the evidence for this early dating is meagre and largely circular. As I have recently tried to show, Cankam poetry should not be dated at the period depicted in it, but after that.¹⁷ There is evidence to suggest that the Cankam literary tradition was started only by the Pāṇṭiyas of the eighth or ninth century. The historical poems in this corpus, in which we hear bards praising kings in Tamil, project the use of Tamil as a literary language back into an ancient past. The so-called Cankam myth does exactly the same thing. It presents the present Cankam as heir to a line of similar institutions, which go far back into time. In addition to that, the myth affirms the role of the Pāṇṭiya dynasty in turning Tamil into a literary language.

A Modern Myth

It is interesting to see, then, how history repeats itself. When Cankam literature was rediscovered in the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century it came to be used in the attempts of the emerging non-Brahmin castes to break down the real and perceived hegemony of Brahmins in the economic and cultural life in south India.¹⁸ These Brahmins were also, as a group identified with Sanskrit literature. In this context, Cankam poetry was brought in to back up claims that Tamil had a literature and culture of its own, independent of Sanskrit; one that was, moreover, as ancient as Sanskrit, if not more.¹⁹ It should be noted that the early date of Cankam poetry was established in this time and climate and subsequently was never seriously questioned.

The rediscovery of old Tamil literature at the end of the nineteenth century is often described in terms of a tradition (almost) lost and found. One of the chapter

¹⁷ See Tiekēn (2001).

¹⁸ See Irshick (1969) and in particular the tables on pp. 14–18, showing the domination of the Brahmins in literacy, appointments in government jobs and university degrees. For a history and in-depth analysis of the Brahmin and non-Brahmin conflict, see Pandian (2007). On the influence of the political situation in Tamil Nadu on literary studies at universities there, see Sivathamby (1988), in particular p. xxiii. Note also the following passage on p. xxiv: '[G]radually the leading institutions connected with Tamil studies began to have scholars supporting or supported by Dravidian ideologies'. One wonders if the situation has changed since the 1950s referred to here.

¹⁹ This claim applies of course in particular to (secular) Sanskrit Kāvya literature and leaves aside all older (religious) literature in (Vedic) Sanskrit.

headings in Ramanujan's introduction to his translations from Caṅkam poetry reads 'A Tradition Lost and Found'.²⁰ However, while some texts may indeed have been lost, to speak of a lost tradition is clearly an exaggeration. Thus, for most texts, manuscripts were still available, and more importantly, the particular poetic tradition was visibly present in Tamil texts well into the eighteenth century. The tradition was never lost. It, and this applies in particular to the non-religious, non-devotional literary texts, simply led an inconspicuous life in small circles of the literary elite, as it probably always had. In this, a great change was brought about at the end of the nineteenth century, when the texts were made available to the general public through printed editions. For the first time scholars went actively in search of texts to print and, in the political climate of the time, they were mainly interested in texts in supposedly pure Tamil and also otherwise free from influences of North Indian culture. In particular, the Caṅkam texts met these conditions. In their introductions to the editions of these texts or in their autobiographies, these scholars gave vivid accounts of this quest and the surprise finds they made along the way. They wrote that they were just in time. Had they waited much longer, the literary tradition might have been lost completely. The following quotation from Ci. Vay. Tāmōtaram Piḷḷai's preface to his edition of one of the Caṅkam texts serves as a typical example:

Only what has escaped fire and water [and religious taboo] remains; even of that, termites and the bug named Rama's Arrow take a toll; the third element, earth, has its share ... When you untie a knot, the leaf cracks. When you turn a leaf, it breaks in half ... Old manuscripts are crumbling and there is no one to make new copies.²¹

²⁰ Ramanujan (1985: p. xi). The sentence is quoted as an apt description by Zvelebil (1992: p. 149). Ramanujan begins this chapter as follows:

These classics were not always known to the Tamils themselves. They were dramatically rediscovered in the later decades of the nineteenth century, a period of transition, when both paper and palm leaf were used as writing materials. The great texts of classical Tamil literature, including the Eight Anthologies [of the Caṅkam corpus] and the Twin Epics (*Cilappatikāram* and *Maṇimēkalai*) were inaccessible to most scholars all through the early nineteenth century, though they were known and had been commented on a century earlier. Eighteenth-century Hindu scholars, devout worshippers of Śiva or Viṣṇu, had tabooed as irreligious all secular and non-Hindu texts, which included the classical Tamil anthologies. They also disallowed the study of Jaina and Buddhist texts, which included the Twin Epics. Under this restriction and taboo, even the finest of Tamil scholars, such as Cāmināta Aiyar (who is the hero of this section), had to give their days and nights of impassioned study to the religious and grammatical texts of the medieval period, many of which were of minor importance. (Ramanujan 1985: pp. xi–xii)

As we will see, Zvelebil's analysis (1992/1973) of the situation is basically a slightly elaborated paraphrase of Ramanujan's text.

²¹ Quoted from Ramanujan (1985: xiii). I am unfortunately unable to find out if the bracketed phrase is Tāmōtaram Piḷḷai's own text or an addition made by Ramanujan.

Bashing the Brahmins

But again, the Old Tamil literature was not 'lost'. It was merely inconspicuous. It is interesting to see, however, how the rhetoric of literary history came to be completely taken over by the political analysis of the situation, in which Brahmins and Sanskrit were the villains responsible for all the real and perceived disadvantages suffered by the non-Brahmin castes in South India in the political, economic and cultural life. If the texts were not lost, they were almost lost. They were wilfully pushed into oblivion and the persons responsible for this outrage were the Brahmins. What is most curious in this is the role played by two scholars from outside: namely, A.K. Ramanujan (see above, note 20) and K.V. Zvelebil. In this connection, I would like to quote several passages from the sixth chapter of Zvelebil's 1992 *Companion Studies to the History of Tamil Literature*. The chapter concerned is entitled 'Rediscovery of Ancient Tamil Literature: the Tamil Renaissance'. One of Zvelebil's concerns is to account for his (and Ramanujan's) use of the term 'rediscovery':

One of the reasons is related to the problem of 'connectivity': the development of Tamil literature, of Tamil culture, was in one sense a discontinuous, if not a disjoint, process: a decisive, deep hiatus, almost a chasm, apparently occurred in its evolution during the 6th–8th centuries AD. When the secular, anonymous, highly conventionalized and standardised 'bardic' poetry ceased to be a living tradition and became part of a frozen classical heritage, giving way to the highly personal, emotional, individualized religious hymnody of the Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva Bhakti movement. This all-embracing and far-reaching, deep change coincided to some extent with the transition from the largely oral state of affairs when transmission of works of verbal art was mostly occurring in an oral: aural milieu, to a situation when writing (both monumental, inscriptional, as well as intimate, on palm leaves) was instrumental in ushering in the era of restricted and elitist but powerful literacy. It was also the period when the influence of Jaina and Buddhist heterodoxy was waning under pressures of Brahmanic orthodoxy.²²

Here several factors are enumerated for the checkered history of classical Tamil poetry. From a living tradition, this 'bardic' poetry was turned into a 'frozen' classical literature; next, this secular poetry was pushed to the background by the religious Bhakti hymns and the final blow was delivered by Brahminic orthodoxy. A little further on, Zvelebil is even more explicit in laying the blame on the Brahmins:

A decisive factor for ancient literature being hidden in the limbo of oblivion was the strong and lasting influence of militant Brahmanical Hinduism. Later medieval Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava scholars 'apparently tabooed as irreligious all secular texts; they disallowed from study all Jain and Buddhist texts'.²³

²² Zvelebil (1992: 144–45).

²³ Zvelebil (1992: 147). He quotes Ramanujan (1985: xiii) here.

Next, Zvelebil refers to a list of books condemned as ‘unnecessary, indeed inferior writings which one should not read wasting one’s time’. The list, which had been drawn up by a certain Cāmināta Tēcikar (seventeenth or eighteenth century), ‘contains virtually almost all the best achievements of Tamil Literature!’ On the other hand, Zvelebil had to admit that this literature was not really lost: ‘[T]he names of the quoted books show that, even at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the great classics were known at least to some scholars even if they were prohibited by influential fanatics like Cāmināta Tēcikar’.²⁴

Finally, one more quote:

Under this intellectual taboo even famous scholars were probably unaware (or indeed did not wish to be aware) of the existence of the great classical literature, and dedicated their abilities and efforts to the study of second-rate religious and erudite texts of the medieval period, and their creative skills to the composition of innumerable *sthalapurāṇas* and devotional or philosophical *prabandhas*. A typical example of such [a] group of scholars-cum-learned poets was Mahāvidvān Śrī Mīṇāṭcicutaram Pillai (1815–76) who had become a legend in his own time, and deservedly so; he was the most revered teacher of U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, and inspired a host of other savants and poets. And yet, even to this great scholar and fine, lovable man, the Tamil classics were inaccessible.²⁵

Contemporary Political Rhetoric

These reconstructions of the loss and rediscovery of ancient Tamil literature echo, almost verbatim, the political rhetoric of the anti-Brahmin movement of the last part of the eighteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries in what is now Tamil Nadu. According to the leaders of the movement, the Brahmins ‘had supposedly introduced all that was impure and foreign into the once-pure Tamil and Dravidian culture’.²⁶ The respective literary traditions, Sanskrit and Tamil, were from the very beginning made part of the political repertory. In this connection, I would like to quote from Irschick’s summary of the presidential speech given by W.P.A. Soundara Pandya Nadar during the first Provincial Self-Respect Conference at Chingleput in 1929. The president claimed, Irschick writes, that the greatness of Tamil literature was ‘demonstrated by the three Sangams of the Madura Tamil Academy which was fostered by the ancient Pandya kings, and [by the] valuable works of the poets of these Sangams’. The ‘Puranas, Itihasa, Vedas, and Agamas, which naturally create dissension among people’, were ‘the false interpolations of an intermediate era. They are not the products of Tamilian wisdom’, but mere ‘literary rubbish’.²⁷ Earlier, in 1921, a lecture in Tamil on the

²⁴ Zvelebil (1992: 147–48).

²⁵ Zvelebil (1992: 48).

²⁶ Irschick (1969: 331).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

'Deluge of the Dark Ages', given at the Madurai Tamil Sangam mentioned the damages inflicted by Brahmins on Tamil literature.²⁸

Modern Saints and Devotees

If the Brahmins were made into the villains in this story, who were its heroes? As we have seen, in the medieval stories the heroes were kings, gods, saints and scholars. The quest for the lost texts was often initiated by the king or as in the case of Caṅkam poetry, it was the king who provided, again and again, the institutional backing for the composition of the poems. Divine intervention in the recovery of, for instance, the Śaiva Bhakti poems seems to underline the close connection between the Cōla dynasty and the temple town of Chidambaram. It should be noted that the story of the compilation of the Vaiṣṇava Bhakti poetic corpus is exceptional in that it lacks any reference to the political powers of the time. It is a story of religious revelation pure and simple, the main aim being the equation of the hymns with the eternal Veda. In the recovery and compilation of the Vaiṣṇava *Nālāyira Tivya Prabandham* and the Śaiva *Tirumuṟai*, an important role is played by the saints Nammālvār and Nampī Āṇṭār Nampī respectively, who, as a result of their devotion were qualified to receive the sacred texts. Rather than saints or devotees, the story about the rediscovery of the meaning of the Caṅkam poems, which is a secular poetry, features appropriately, secular figures such as scholars and teachers.

In the modern histories of the rediscovery of the Caṅkam poetic corpus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the heroes are a few passionate scholars and their patrons. The role of the kings seems to have been taken over by rich patrons, mostly wealthy land-owners from the non-Brahmin Vellala caste.²⁹ Thus, Ma. Ti. Mīṇāṭcuntaram Pillai was supported by a certain Laṭcmaṇa Pillai, a rich landlord.³⁰ He also stayed for some time in Bangalore at the invitation of a rich Tamil student, Tēvarāca Pillai. He returned from there with the enormous amount of ₹ 5,000.³¹ U.V. Cāmināta Aiyar's future career as editor of classical Tamil texts was determined when he was still a young boy, by a visit to his father's house of a 'man of great standing and wealth'. The visitor was an intimate friend of Mīṇāṭcuntaram and advised Cāmināta's father to send the boy to Mīṇāṭcuntaram.³²

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

²⁹ The role of 'patrons' in the search for old texts and their publication, which was an unprofitable undertaking, will be dealt with in more detail by V. Rajesh in his PhD thesis (submitted to the Indian Institute of Technology, Chennai).

³⁰ Zvelebil (1992: 169).

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 171, n. 59.

God plays no role in the modern story either. In this connection, it should be noted, however, that the ‘Tamil movement’ had a strong pragmatic and anti-religious undercurrent. If divine intervention did no longer go down that easily, then what about the ‘godsend’ *munsif* in the following passage from Cāmināta’s autobiography as summarized by Ramanujan:

Cāmināta Aiyar (1855–1942), a man of vast learning, was entirely unaware even of the existence of the breathtaking epics and anthologies of early Tamil, until he met a liberal-minded *munsif* (civil judge) named Rāmacuvāmi Mutaliyār, in a small temple town, Kumpakōṇam. Aiyar records the date of this fateful meeting, for it was no less, as October 21, 1880, a Thursday. To him, as to all students of Tamil literature, this date is ‘etched in red letters’. The *munsif* had just been transferred to that small town. When Aiyar met him, the judge asked him what he had studied and under whom. Aiyar named his well-known mentor and listed all the grammars, religious texts, and commentaries he had labored over. The judge, unimpressed, asked him, ‘That’s all? What use is that? Have you studied the old texts?’ He named some. Aiyar, one of the most erudite and thoroughgoing of Tamil scholars, was aghast that he had not even heard of them. The judge then gave him a handwritten manuscript to take home and to read. In his autobiography, Aiyar says the good fortune of his past lives took him there that Thursday and opened a new life for him. Cāmināta Aiyar, who was 44 then, devoted the rest of his long life to roaming the villages, rummaging in private attics and the storerooms of monasteries, to unearthing, editing, and printing classical Tamil texts.³³

The real heroes of the story, however, are the first editors of the classical texts. They were very special men. Their work of editing and printing classical Tamil texts was not just something they did on the side but, as becomes abundantly clear from the above quotation, was an all-absorbing life-long commitment. In his autobiography, Cāmināta Aiyar speaks frequently of his dedication to the Tamil cause. The motto of his life is the following verse from a seventeenth century poem: ‘O preminent Tamil! I exist because of you! Even the ambrosia of the celestials, I do not desire!’³⁴

He wrote about his devotion to Tamil thus:

Contrary to everyone’s desires, from the time I was a young man, my mind was immersed in the beauties of the goddess Tamil (*Tamil teyvam*). More and more, it yearned for Tamil[ttāy’s [Mother Tamil’s] auspicious grace (*tiruvaru!*). Sanskrit, Telugu, English—none of these held my interest. Sometimes, I even felt a deep aversion towards them ... Tamil had captured my heart.³⁵

Cāmināta favoured the study of Tamil above that of Sanskrit or English, even though the latter languages would have brought him much more benefits. A few days after his marriage, after having received many presents, he started to realize

³³ Ramanujan (1985: p. xii).

³⁴ Quoted from Ramaswamy (1998: 209).

³⁵ Quoted from *ibid.*

that ‘there was little gain from all this. I have only one purpose. Tamil is my wealth. It is the food for the hunger of my mind ... It was true then. It is true now.’³⁶

A Scenario Wholly Unnecessary

As we saw, in Umāpati’s *Tirumuṛaikāṇṭapurāṇam*, we already find a description of the temple priests of Chidambaram resisting the introduction of the singing of Tamil hymns in their temple. In South Indian history, Brahmins may have opposed the introduction of a Tamil liturgy, or, rather, defended the position of ‘their’ Sanskrit liturgical texts against encroachments by the regional languages. However, to apply this situation arbitrarily to literary texts seems wholly unnecessary. The destructive role assigned to the Brahmins by the Justice Party and its successors, the Self-Respect movement and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), and later by scholars like Ramanujan and Zvelebil is, as far as literary history is concerned, an unfair perversion of the truth. In the first place, as we have seen, the literature was never really lost. It was just inconspicuous, as most literature was before printing. Second, it is well known that Brahmins did play an important role in the rediscovery of classical Tamil literature. One of the most famous Brahmins is Cāmināta Aiyar, mentioned above, whose ‘Brahmanness [was] pondered over, debated, and then set aside in favor of [his] incorporation into the devotional community’.³⁷ And, third, it is my guess that any investigation into the circles in which the manuscripts of the ancient Tamil texts were kept will probably yield quite a number of Brahmins or scholars, who were otherwise interested in Sanskrit texts.³⁸ Finally, the impression given is particularly unfair as many classical Tamil texts have actually been written by Brahmins or else by poets who also wrote in Sanskrit.³⁹ I need only mention Vedāntadeśika here.⁴⁰ Apart from that, the influence of the Sanskrit literary tradition is clearly visible in Tamil literature from its very beginning, though many scholars prefer to turn a blind eye to this phenomenon.⁴¹

In Tamil Nadu, the study of its classical literature has from its inception been part of the political domain. The fact that Tamil could muster a (secular) classical literature of its own, supposedly independent of Sanskrit literature and as

³⁶ Quoted from *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

³⁸ Unfortunately, specific information on the persons and institutions keeping manuscripts in the Tamil-speaking parts is not available. My guess is based on an extrapolation from what we know from other parts of India.

³⁹ This situation is also met with in medieval north India, with authors writing texts in the so-called vernaculars (actually Apabhraṃśa) as well as in Sanskrit; see Tiekken (2008b: 367).

⁴⁰ See Hopkins (2003).

⁴¹ See Tiekken (2001) on the level of genre. See also Tiekken (2009: 232) for a concrete example on the word level.

old as, if not older than, that of Sanskrit, might account for the vehemence, persistence or, if one wishes, the success, of the Tamil movement compared to similar movements, if any, in the Malayalam-, Kannada- and Telugu-speaking areas.⁴² At the same time, Tamil scholars seem to have left the story of the role of the Brahmins basically to the politicians. In the literary histories of scholars from Tamil Nadu itself, one will not easily find such dramatic passages as quoted above from Ramanujan and Zvelebil. As an example, I would like to quote from T.P. Meenakshisundaram's *A History of Tamil Literature*:

In addition to all these factors [the absence of old, reliable manuscripts and the like], one has to admit a break in the traditional study of these ancient works as confessed to the present speaker by the erudite scholar and editor Dr. Cāmināta Aiyar. Because of the troubled times, there were only a few scholars in Tamil in the 18th century.⁴³

As one can see, there is no reference to Brahminic domination. The phrase, 'troubled times', seems instead to refer to the colonial administration, which favoured education in English and had banned the printing of books in the indigenous languages.

The content and tone of the quotations from Ramanujan and Zvelebil are hard to explain. As far as Zvelebil is concerned, we may have to reckon with an element of competition or rivalry between him and Ramanujan.⁴⁴ In his *The Lord of the Meeting Rivers*, Zvelebil may have taken his cue from Ramanujan and felt the need to outdo the latter in his enthusiasm for the Tamil cause. Furthermore, Zvelebil would appear to have had a personal stake in extolling the heroism of the first generation of Tamil scholars and editors: namely, the wish to be acknowledged as one of their pupils and successors. Thus, in the scholarly lineages presented in his *Companion Studies to the History of Tamil Literature* he positions himself in the lineage going back to Malaikkōṭṭai Maṭṭacuvāmi Mamam Vēlāyuta Muṇivar, directly below U.V. Cāmināta Aiyar, as well as in the lineage of Mahāvidvān Mē. Vī. Vēṇukōpāla Piḷḷai.⁴⁵ It is, of course, possible that for Ramanujan, the phrase 'A tradition lost and found' was initially just a helpful label provided by the Tamil literary tradition itself, which, as we have noted, abounds in texts lost

⁴² However, this has recently managed to affect the other South Indian states as well. After the Union Government in 2004 officially declared Tamil a classical language, the same status was applied for, and granted, to Sanskrit in 2005. After that, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh woke up and claimed classical status for their languages as well, which was granted in October 2008; however, this was only after the definition of what is a classical language had been watered down considerably. Tamil Nadu has, next, asked the High Court in Chennai to review the decision of the Union Government. The question of whose language is the most classical has turned into a matter of discord in South India.

⁴³ Meenakshisundaram (1965: 5).

⁴⁴ It is telling that Ramanujan's *Speaking of Śiva* (1973), with examples of Vīraśaiva poetry, was followed in 1984 by Zvelebil's *The Lord of the Meeting Rivers*, with translations of poems from the same tradition.

⁴⁵ Zvelebil (1992: 263 and 268).

and found. What may have happened next is that the label got stuck and that when it had to be filled in Ramanujan fell back almost automatically on the scenario entertained within the political circles in Tamil Nadu. All this, however, remains mere guesswork. What is clear, though, is that the writing of literary histories of Tamil could do with a little less drama, passion and politics.

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