

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 5

Issue: 1

Month: July

Year: 2020

P-ISSN: 2454-3993

E-ISSN: 2582-2810

Received: 20.05.2020

Accepted: 17.06.2020

Published: 01.07.2020

Citation:

Ali, N. (2020). Decoding the Battlelust: A Note on the Provocations to War in the Purananuru. *Shanlax International Journal of Tamil Research*, 5(1), 177–184.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/tamil.v5i1.3267>

*Corresponding Author:
mnaziali@gmail.com



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License

Decoding the Battlelust: A Note on the Provocations to War in the Purananuru

Nazir Ali

Former, Kanchi Mamunivar Government Institute of PG Studies & Research
Pondicherry, Tamil Nadu, India

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5152-9751>

Abstract - Unfettered by the tinais and turais by which the Purananuru is organized, this paper looks at the issues and subjectivities of the ancient Tamil society which determined its attitudes towards war. It includes in its narration not just the members of the royalty alone but every other stakeholder whose life was altered by war: the mother, the wife and the man himself. What the paper hopes to present is, by eschewing a theoretical framework, a world closer to the realities embodied and embedded in the poems of the Purananuru. Besides mapping the discourse of the society concerning war and heroism, it analyses the causes which frequently produced wars keeping the society in a state of perpetual volatility. Interestingly, it finds the glamorised world of the warrior co-existing with the gritty and often gruesome realities of the battlefield, with all its blood and gore.

Keywords: Sangam Literature, Purananuru, War, Kapilar, Parananar, Avvaiyar, Talayalankanam, Karikal Valavan, Makan Maruttal, Kudavayir Kottam

What the Purananuru presents is, unreservedly, a warrior society. One may become exalted or repulsed by it depending on one's proclivities, but there is no denying the fact that it invites sharp reactions of either kind. Without a clear understanding of the values inherent in it, the reader may be at a loss to understand why the actors in the puram drama inexorably moved in one direction rather than choosing its alternatives.

Thirsty and lying chained like a dog, the Chera King Irumporai, prisoner of Chenganan, the Chola King, muses this poem aloud in extreme anguish and distress:

Even if a baby dies,
or if it is stillborn as a lump of flesh,
it couldn't escape being put to the sword
by my ancestors for not being adult enough.
Here I am, suffering like a chained dog,
forced to beg for a little water
from these unfriendly guards
to quench the fire in my belly.
Will my forebears give birth
to a child like me on this earth? (74)*

For reasons now not known, enmity developed between Irumporai and the Chola King Chenganan and a bloody battle was fought at Kazhumalam. The battle turned out to be a fiasco to this Chera King, with his forces getting scattered and himself becoming a captive of the Chola King. He was imprisoned in Kudavayir Kottam, where he had to suffer the indignity of being kept chained. Denied even water, he seems to have asked one of the guards to fetch him a cup which was given after some dilation. Deeply hurt by this humiliation, the Chera King recalls the warrior ethics of the Tamil Kings who buried even a dead child after giving it a slash of the sword as a mark of heroic death and compares it to his present lot. The poem narrates this hurt in graphic terms and the colophon adds the King soon died denying himself any food from the enemy.

If it is assumed that such warrior ethics belongs only to the royalty and members of the elite classes, there are quite a number of other poems to demonstrate that even the laity shared such an attitude. Here is a poem spoken by the mother of an absent son to a girl interested in his whereabouts:

**Leaning on the pillar
of your little house
you ask me, girl,
the whereabouts of my son.
I am blest if I know that.
This womb that bore him
is like a den
abandoned by a tiger
after a brief stay.
Perhaps he will be found
in some battlefield.**

(86)

The battlefield has become home for the warrior son and war a way of life. The king, the mother, the son are all complicit in this discourse on what constitutes the proper conduct of the warrior, deviating from which becomes practically unthinkable. Judged by such standards, annihilating the enemy is not cruelty but heroism and plundering the enemy's wealth is reaping the spoils of war and laying waste to the enemy land is an abject lesson in subjugation. Let us now consider individually the variety of factors which provoked a king into waging a war taking as demonstrable proof the Purananuru poems themselves.

The expansionist desire

To begin with, the commonest cause of fighting wars happens to be the desire to expand one's kingdom. From Alexander the Great to Aurangzeb this has been the driving force behind wars. The Tamil kings too do not seem to be an exception to this expansionist desire as this poem, couched as praise of the Chera King Athan and composed by the noteworthy Sangam poet Kapilar makes it clear:

**The kings of the world worship him.
Seeking the pleasure of adventure,
ignoring common counsel,
he is driven by his belief
that his kingdom is small.
Undaunted, generous,
he is served by tough troops
who fight without subterfuge.** (8)

The war is not only a romantic adventure to the King but also a serious business venture which happens to be the motivating impulse behind all empire-building

exercises including the colonialist ventures which became the order of the world in subsequent centuries.

Once the enemy defences are down and his country is thrown open, everything in it becomes the possession of the conqueror and the desire for plunder gets legitimated as this poem by Karunkuzhal Athanar praising the Chola King Karikal Valavan does it:

**And whether
it is night or day matters nothing to your
desire
for plunder and the sound of weeping, as
your enemies scream
for their kin in the light of their blazing
cities! (7)**

By the successful completion of this venture, the king becomes an object of bardic adoration though these wars had widowed many a woman and orphaned many a child. What would be condemned in others not only gets condoned when the king does it, but becomes the subject matter of even epic poetry.

Jealousy and Anger

If we assume that a society that upholds such noble principles of warrior conduct will have little space for the play of subjectivities of any kind, then it would come as a surprise that jealousy and anger did determine the course of actions in ancient Tamil history. The three great kings of Tamilakam became so enraged with the spreading fame of Vel Pari, the chieftain of Parambu Hills, whom they decided to defeat with their combined might. They laid siege

to his Hills but the Hills were inaccessible and self-reliant and remained invulnerable for quite long to their onslaught. Kapilar, poet and staunch friend of Vel Pari, taunts the three great kings for using a faulty strategy to bring down Vel Pari:

**So, even if you bring an elephant
to tie to each tree
and a vast spread of chariots,
you'll not succeed with your swords.
But I know how his hills
can be taken: if you play
the twisted strings of the small lute
and go dancing and singing,
followed by your women
disguised as dancers,
he'll give as gift his country and hill
together. (109)**

George Hart, noted translator and scholar of the Purananuru observes: "The three great kings (the Chera, Chola and Pandya) became jealous of Pari and laid siege to his hill. In the end, they prevailed through the treachery of some of Pari's men. They killed Pari, and Kapilar took Pari's unmarried daughters to various kings to try to marry them."(271)

There are also instances of usurpation and palace revolt by the younger siblings who could not stomach the fame and generosity of their older ones. The Purananuru poem of Perunthalai Sathanar (165) pays rich tribute to Kumanan, the exiled king of Mudhiram Hills, for offering his head as reward for the starving poet because his brother, Elankumanan, the present ruler and usurper, had put a prize on it. (Pillai 352)

Refusal of Daughter in Marriage

It seems quite a number of wars were fought over women especially because the recalcitrant and headstrong fathers thought the groom who proposed was not suitable enough for their daughters. Here is a poem by Madurai Marutanilanakanar, forecasting the impending doom of the town precisely for this reason:

When a King Asks for a Chieftain's Daughter

The king scrapes the sweat
off his brow
with the blade of his spear
and says terrible things.
The girl's father
rants as well
and will not speak softly.

This is their natural way of speaking.

And come to think of it,
this lovely girl,

sharp teeth, cool eyes
streaked with red,
skin the color
of young mango leaf,

this goddess,

like a fire
sparked by the wood itself,

will devastate
the very place of her birth. (349)

The girl, supposed to be an adornment to the town she was born in, becomes the very cause of its destruction because the groom's ego is hurt and the father thinks that the groom was not humble enough in his

solicitation. Kapilar and more particularly Paranar have quite a number of such poems to their credit, because, itinerant by nature, they have witnessed the fall of innumerable provinces for this very reason. Here is a poem by Paranar who, interestingly, does not hold the daughter responsible for the war and destruction, but the mother who gave birth to such a lovely daughter:

The king who desired her was a man of rage.

Her father too wouldn't like to do his duty.

The bright faces of elephants
have coverlets on their long, high tusks.
They are restless standing close to the
totem tree.

The soldiers wielding bright spears
on either side

have kept their mouths shut.

Many, many instruments
not known even to the musicians
began to blare

much to the great distress
of this impregnable, well-guarded, old town.

Alas! Her daughter's youthful breasts
have the looks of a bud
of a branching ironwood in full bloom
growing close to the tiger mountain.

While her beauty gladdens every heart,
her mother, surely unjust,
has also made many enemies
to this town. (336)

This reason for the downfall of kingdoms must have been widespread which made refusal of daughter in marriage, Makan Maruttal and Makatpar Kanchi, part of the very poetics of the Purananuru. This makes one speculate whether the refusal of daughter was an affront to the king or the

kingdom which made the king and his loyal army plunge the whole nation into war. It makes one conclude that wars in ancient times were fought for reasons far more flimsy than the reasons for which modern wars are fought.

Infights among Clans

Along with sibling rivalry, as seen earlier, fights within clans have also been frequent and the precise reasons for such wars have been lost in the annals of history. Here one can find the poet, Kovur Kizhar, hard at work to bring about truce between Nalankilli and Nedunkilli, both chieftains of the Chola Kingdom, and also, as their names indicate, members of the same clan and victory for either one is not in any way going to enhance the reputation of the clan:

**He is not wearing
the pale flower of the huge palm.
Nor does he wear
the garland of dark-branched neem's flowers.
Your garland is made of laburnum.
The garland of one who fights you
is also made of laburnum.
Even if one of you lose,
it is your clan that loses.
Victory for both is not in nature.
Therefore, what you are doing
is not fit for your clan.
Your fight will give bodily pleasure
only to kings like you
riding chariots afflutter with flags. (45)**

The poet is literally telling the kings that they would be making fools of themselves by fighting this war as it would only provide amusement to the other kings but the good poet's efforts seem to have been in vain as

a later poem by Nalankilli (73) reiterates his desire to destroy his rival for "mocking him" failing which he wants his reputation damned.

Defence of One's Honour

Battles have been fought when the kings felt that their honour has been sullied, their royal aura diminished by insulting remarks made by their rivals. The king was expected to avenge these insults and no one questioned the legitimacy of these wars fought over honour. On the contrary, the king who succeeded in making his enemies eat humble pie turned out to be the very stuff of the legends which ensured his lasting fame. Pandyan Neduncheliyan came to be known as Talayalankanathu Seru Vendra Pandyan Neduncheliyan (the Pandya King Neduncheliyan who won the battle at Talayalankanam). The poem which follows is a monologue of Neduncheliyan in which he swears to annihilate his enemies for calling him a mere youth failing which he brings down all kinds of catastrophes on his own head:

**I'll scatter them in the insufferable battle
and take them captives along with their
war drums.
If not, let those who live in the shade of
my umbrella
find no shade wherever they go
and call me a cruel king.
Let me be an accursed king
whose own subjects shedding tears
call him a tyrant. (72)**

He urges the poets not to sing any panegyrics in praise of his kingdom and wishes upon himself such poverty as to

make him turn away the alms-seekers empty handed. Being a close friend of the master poet Mankudi Marutanar, the rage of the king comes out as a poem of oath, a sub-genre known as vanchina kanchi in puram poetry.

War as means of Imposing Order

The importance placed on the kings by the Tamil society, says George Hart, made them ideal figures to unleash the destructive energies, which they did in the battlefield where acts of cruelty get transformed into acts of heroism. “It is impossible to overstate the importance of the king in ancient Tamil society. He is the main figure who makes possible the ordered condition of the world, and he does this by tapping the disorder, chaos, and death endemic to it.” (xix) This poem of Paranar, presenting a gruesome picture of the battlefield, is in praise of the army of the Chera King, Katalottiya Velkezhu Kuttuan, as it ploughs through the enemy lines harvesting heads:

**The war elephant,
with its high, handsome tusks
fitted with iron coverings,
and long trunk is the cloud.
The swords held by the soldiers
who have sworn long
to cut down the enemy are lightning.
The war drum, with offerings of a blood
sacrifice
and beaten with thick, short sticks, is thunder
which makes the kings, like snakes,
tremble in fear*,
the swift moving horses are the gale winds.
Shot from taut bowstrings
arrows come down like rain
in the vast battlefield**

**made moist with the blood.
The chariots are ploughshares.
Entering this fertile farm
with your long spears poised,
and shattering the enemy's swords
and shields into seeds,
you make a pulpy harvest of the enemies'
heads.
She-devils surround
the corpses piled as stacks of grain
which the devils and fox packs pull and eat.
Ghosts guard this grim harvest.
In such a battlefield
where the bodies are like so much paddy,
you sat in majesty to listen
to the praises of the bards. (369)**

- * Snakes fear thunder is an ancient belief of the Tamils
- * Tuti is a percussion drum of the olden days

The extended farming metaphor is what gives the name Yerkala uruvakam to this theme in which instruments of war and destruction get magically transformed into instruments of production and harvest. Elephants become clouds, horses become winds, arrows are rain and the broken weapons of the enemy are the seeds and the piles of bodies become stacks of harvested grain. In all this mayhem, the king remains a symbol of order, because he not only unleashes the engines of war but also manages to contain them.

Display of Heroism and Loyalty to King

If the preceding reasons were what prompted the king to launch aggressive actions, there are also poems which tell us why men who took part in these battles with

no personal stakes nevertheless fought with verve, heroism and self-sacrifice. These men were fiercely loyal to the king, their loyalty spanning many generations. Avvaiyar, the woman poet of surpassing literary skill among the Sangam poets, introduces one such soldier to Atiyaman Anci, her patron and king, in the traditional banquet offered by the king prior to launching an attack:

**Offer the toddy to this man
before you dine O Chief,
fighter of angry wars with tuskers
and well-crafted chariots.
His father's father, standing unblinking
in the battle like the hub of a wheel
made by the carpenter,
received the spears
meant for your father's father and died.
This man, who has his famed valour,
will also shield you from the spear aimed at you,
my lord, like the palm-umbrella
sheltering us from rain! (290)**

Avvaiyar must have seen generations of kings and chieftains ruling and dying, though her own favourite was Atiyaman. As she outlived many of them, she must have known various generations of kings and the trusted soldiers they went around with. From the description offered by her, it is clear that loyalty to the king was also a strong factor which determined the actions of the soldiers in the battle ground.

Forms of Humiliation

In this poem by Nettimaiyar in honour of Pandyan Mutukutumi Peruvaluti, one can see how the conquering king spares no efforts in violating every place held sacrosanct by his enemy, an act which

not only humiliates the enemy but also completes his victory over him.

**Razing down the fortified city
of your enemies
you ploughed up their royal avenues
with donkeys.
Their fertile fields
where birds sang sweetly
you ruined
by driving your horse-drawn chariots
through them.
And their freshwater fountains
you destroyed
by sending your elephants
to trample upon them.
Your anger was so great. (15)**

The conquering king leaves behind a trail of destruction, and greater the provocation of the enemy, the more extensive the damage caused to his land and possessions.

Conclusion

Unlike in modern societies in which wars are clearly dissociated from civil life, the ancient Tamil society seems to have held war as very much integral to it, imagining it not as an exterior event to which one should accommodate but interiorising it as part and parcel of its life and ethos. That is why many cultural historians have considered the Tamil society to be militaristic, always in a state of war and instability. But if literature and other arts are presumed to be products of relative tranquillity, it is something of a paradox how classical Tamil literature was ever produced, unless, as Kamil Zvelebil maintains, the Purananuru poems are multilayered over time, accretions of centuries of literary efforts by poets who

lived non-contemporaneously with relative periods of quiet permitting literary activity (54).

* Translations are mine where no attribution is made.

References

1. Ali, Nazir. Trans. Ed. There is also rain. Authorspress, 2016. .
2. Hart, George L and Hank Heifetz. Trans. Ed. The Four Hundred Songs of War and Wisdom. Columbia University Press, 1999.
3. Pillai, Avvai Duraisami. Ed. Purananuru 2 Vols. Kazhaka Veliyeedu, 1964.
4. Ramanujan, A.K. Trans. Poems of Love and War. OUP, 1985.
5. Thangappa M. L. Trans. Love Stands Alone. Penguin Viking, 2010.
6. Zvelebil, Kamil. Handbook of Oriental Studies, Part 2: Tamil Literature. Brill, 1975.