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## The Portrait of the King in the Purananuru

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**Abstract** - There is no disputing the fact that the Purananuru firmly places the king or the chieftain as the central and dominant figure of the classical age. Almost every poem is a paean to his nobility, bravery or generosity. Whether it is fighting a battle or rewarding an indigent poet or defending his capital from an aggressor, the king occupies the centre stage. The rise and fall of his state is in direct proportion to his own rise and fall thereby binding his fortunes with the wellbeing of the society he rules. He is expected to be righteous and just not only for his own sake but for the sake of the kingdom. There is so much riding on the king that a false step will not only ruin him personally but also plunge the whole nation into chaos. It is this synonymy between the king and the state that the Purananuru captures and constructs and by doing so, it constructs the whole of the society and its power structure.

**Keywords:** Sangam Literature, Criticism, Purananuru, Kingdom, Candror, George Hart, Vadakkiruttal, tutelary tree, Cilappatikaram

## புறநானூறு தீட்டும் அரசனின் ஓவியம்

மு. நசீர் அலி

இணை பேராசிரியர் (ஓய்வு), ஆங்கிலத் துறை,  
காஞ்சி மாமுனிவர் அரசு ஆராய்ச்சி மற்றும் முதுகலை ஆய்வுகள் நிறுவனம்  
புதுச்சேரி

### ஆய்வுச்சுருக்கம்:

புறநானூற்றில் அரசன் தான் முன்னிலைப் படுத்தப்படுகிறான் பெரும்பாலான ஓவ்வொரு கவிதையும் அரசனின் மாண்பு, வீரம் மற்றும் கொடைக்கு சூட்டப்பட்ட புகழ் ஆரம் என்றே சொல்லலாம். போரிடும்போதும், இல்லை என்று சொல்லாமல் கொடுக்கும் போதும் தன் நாட்டை எதிரியினிடம் இருந்து காக்கும்போதும் அரசனே மய்யப்படுத்தப்படுகிறான். நாடு வாழ்வதும் வீழ்வதும் அரசனுடைய வாழ்விலும் வீழ்ச்சியிலும் அடங்கி உள்ளன. அதனால் அவனுடைய ஆளுமை நீதி தவறாமை அவனுக்கு மட்டும் இல்லாமல் அவனுடைய நாட்டுக்கே இன்றியமையாத அம்சங்களாக கருதப்படுகின்றன. இந்த அம்சங்களை உருவாக்க சமுதாயத்தில் நடக்கும் உரையாடல் (Discourse) முக்கியக் காரணமாக அமைகின்றது. புறநானூறு, அரசனுக்கும் அவன் ஆளுகின்ற நாட்டிற்கும் இருக்கும் உறவை எவ்வாறு பதிவு செய்கின்றது என்பதை ஆய்வு செய்வதே இக்கட்டுரையின் நோக்கமாகும்.

**முக்கியச் சொற்கள்:** சங்கஇலக்கியம், திறனாய்வு, புறநானூறு, அரசன்

Noble, valiant, chivalrous and undaunted are some of the adjectives that one is likely to associate with the kings and chieftains of the Sangam Age from the images that emerge out of the Purananuru. The exceptions are so rare as to be non-existent. He is recklessly brave on the battlefield and equally limitless in charity to the poets and bards, even if we allow generous margins to the lavish praise heaped upon him by grateful poets. There are very rare occasions he swerves from the path of justice represented by the white parasol under whose canopy he rules and the words of the wise candror are always available to him as course correction, in case he errs. So, though the king appears to act as if he has illimitable autonomy, the ironclad royal ethics hardly allows him to act recklessly or whimsically. Here is a poem to illustrate this point:

*Not rice, Not Water*  
Not rice,  
not water,

only the king  
is the life-breath  
of a kingdom.  
And it is the duty  
of a king  
with his army of spears  
to know  
he's the life  
of the wide, blossoming kingdom (186)  
(Ramanujan 158)

This poem of Mocikeeranar firmly establishes the centrality of the king, cautioning him in the same breath that a failure to be aware of this might have devastating consequences. It binds the king irrevocably to his kingdom or, to be more accurate, to the discourse of the kingdom on how a king should be and what is expected of him. This participation in the discourse of royal power gives everyone, from the poet to the lowliest outcast, a stake in the dispensation of that power. This is how the ancient Tamil society ensured its

stability and survival: no matter how great the king was, he was subject to this tacit commentary of the society. It made the king realize that with power came responsibility.

To say that the ancient Tamil king was brave is to state the obvious. There are innumerable examples to demonstrate from the Purananuru that the king, bent on expansionist or punitive expeditions, displayed fearsome courage or died nobly fighting the enemy. That he displayed this courage because it was expected of him is to make the kingly figure a little more complex by calling attention to his invisible sociological bonds. But the king was also a quasi divine figure and very often his valour got him compared to the Tamil god of war, Murugan with his invincible spear. George Hart endows the Tamil king with supernatural power which he unleashes on his enemies in the battlefield, transforming the battlefield to, simply, fields and farms allowing him to make a rich harvest of his opponents' heads. (xix) Even in the battlefield, one can observe the warrior ethics hard at work. To take to one's heels in the face of enemy onslaught is to invite eternal shame. Even for tactical reasons it was not allowed because there are poems which praise the king for attaining victory without any subterfuge. Drawing a parallel between the cowardly sun and the valiant Cera king Valiyatan, Kapilar says:

Undaunted, generous,  
he is served by tough troops  
who fight without subterfuge (8) (Ali 283)

One does not live to fight another day. To die with an arrow or spear piercing the chest bespeaks bravery and correspondingly, survival with an injury on the back was construed as an act of cowardice, shame the kings expiated by fasting unto death facing the direction of north known as Vadakkiruttal. (111) The following poem tells how the king wanted to live up to an expectation of his own ancestors failing which death was preferable:

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)\*

The captive king reflects on his own captive state and the indignities he had to suffer, conditions his forefathers would never approve.

Physically, the king is portrayed as epitome of masculinity. There are poems which call attention to his fully developed chest which makes women fall in love with him. Kapilar, contrasting his own soft hands with that of his king shows how callused and rough they are because of repeatedly drawing the bowstrings (14). Avvaiyar gives excellent portraits of her king and patron, Atiyaman Anci, comparing him to the wheel of a chariot over which a craftsman laboured for more than a month used as he was to making eight chariots a day (87). His bloodshot eyes, fresh from the battle, hardly show any tenderness even when he looks at his infant son (100). She also remarks on the king's exceptionally long hands which reach up to his knee. (90) His legs are adorned with anklets of bravery, an ornament sometimes made out of the crown of a vanquished king. Taken together, the king emerges as an imposing figure, inspiring respect from his own men and striking terror in the hearts of his opponents.

If the warrior aspect of the king takes primacy among his character traits, it is his generosity to his relations, friends, poets and bards that comes next. This is the benign aspect that the king shows to his own countrymen, while he keeps on display his most terrible aspect, almost bordering on bloodlust, to his enemies. With the exception of a few kings or chieftains who were indifferent or tardy in giving gifts to the poets, most of them exhibit recklessness in charity almost too difficult to believe. Killer elephants, lotuses made of gold, apparel fine as snakeskin, meat and toddy enough

to nourish the extended family of the poet for many days – nothing was too much for the king to give away to the indigent poets and bards. There are occasions when such charity gets extended even to non-humans, like for example a jasmine climber or peacock shivering in rain.

The Purananuru records two instances of miscarriage of justice by the king: one was when Nannan, a chieftain bent on preserving the letter of the law, executed a girl who made the mistake of eating the mango of his tutelary tree (151). In the other poem, a dreadful horror of infant-killing gets stopped by the timely intervention of the poet (46)\*\*. While counselling the king, the poet reminds the Cola king that he comes in the lineage of Cibi, a king who sacrificed himself to render justice to the dove that he was defending. So it is to be understood that the ancient kings of Tamilakam, in spite of the power they wielded, avoided travesties of justice, the power of which was symbolised by the sceptre (cenkol) and the white umbrella (venn kotrak kutai). The Cilappatikaram records the instant death of the king struck by the horror of killing an innocent man. On matters of valour, justice and charity it was the prevailing discourse of the society that determined the king's actions, discourse which he not only created but to which he also subscribed.

The king enjoyed bonhomie among his troops and there is a separate turai (theme) called undattu which meant hearty celebration with meat and toddy which the king partook with his men. Avvaiyar narrates how Atiyaman used to spend time with his troops, eating and drinking, offering the cup of toddy, an honour, to his most loyal guard. He stood with them through thick and thin, earning their love and loyalty.

Ambition to expand his kingdom and fight wars to achieve this end was a virtue with a king. Kapilar praises his patron Ceral Athan for this reason (8). On the flip side, the king who lacked gumption to defend his kingdom from an attack was an object of derision (36). Kings who felt themselves slighted could legitimately fight battles. Here is a poem composed by the

Pandya king himself, justifying the launching of a battle and conveying his resolve to decimate his enemies:

Those who praise his kingdom  
are a laughing stock,  
he is a mere youth,  
so they say hurting my feelings.  
“We are possessed of an army  
whose mighty elephants have broad feet,  
towering legs and from whose sides  
the bells tinkle, and we have horses with char-  
iots  
and soldiers skilled in weapons,”  
so did the kings speak scornful words  
without any fear of my great might.  
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.  
Let the much-praised poets  
led by the learned Mankudi Marutan  
leave the borders of my kingdom  
without singing its praise.  
Let the kinsmen I protect grieve a lot  
as I have nothing to give to the poor! (72)

Except for one instance in which the chieftain got separated from his wife\*\*\*, almost all the kings seem to have been exemplary husbands, so much so, even when the wise men of the king's council tried to stop her, Perunkop Pendu, wife of Putappandiyan, gave up her life in her husband's funeral pyre (246)

If the kings of ancient Tamilakam did not turn their rule into oppressive monarchy, as we find for instance many of the English kings doing thereby sowing seeds of discord resulting even in the bloody execution of the king himself, the powerful discourse of the society on what constitutes kingship and the king's willingness to abide

by it are the main reasons. There is not a single instance of the populace rising and executing a king in the Sangam history of Tamilnadu. The king did not distance himself from the people he ruled and there are legends of the king going round in disguise to feel the pulse of the people.

### Endnotes

When the Chola King Killi Valavan prepared to kill the two children of Malayaman, his enemy, by having a killer elephant trample over them (Pillai 124), Kovur Kilar interceded on their behalf and prevailed upon the king from carrying it out:

Look at these children,  
the crowns of their heads are still soft.  
As they watch the elephants,  
they even forget to cry,  
stare dumbstruck at the crowd  
in some new terror  
of things unknown. (46) (Ramanujan 122)

The young king Neduncheliyan was opposed by seven other kings and chieftains who held his youth to be too immature to govern, fully confident that before the might of their armies, he just had no chance. On hearing the words of scorn spoken against him, Neduncheliyan became enraged and swore to defeat them. In the unfortunate event he was not able to succeed, he

wants his subjects to call him a tyrant, the poets to sing no panegyrics in praise of his kingdom and let him become so reduced in circumstances that he had to turn away the alms-seekers empty handed. Being a close friend of the poet Mankudi Marutanar, the rage of the king comes out as a poem of oath, which in itself is a sub-genre of puram poetry.

Pekan saddened his wife Kannaki by leaving her and whose cause was espoused by renowned poets like Kapilar, Parinar and Aricil Kilar (143-146)

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