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The Function of Poets in the *Purananuru*

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Abstract - Praised for its literary, historical and cultural contributions, the Purananuru is acknowledged to be the most important among the eight anthologies of the Ettutokai. The one hundred and forty nine known poets to whom the three hundred and eighty three poems are clearly attributable have not only provided us with a wealth of information and wisdom, but have also, unobtrusively, told us something about themselves. The main reason for this disclosure is to be found in the nature of puram poetry itself: freed as it was from the strict, universalizing and impersonal conventions of akam poetry where such revelations will be intrusive, it allowed greater latitude to the poets to say more of themselves. This lifting of the mask or persona gives startlingly clear images of the poets and the variety of functions they were called upon to perform as value givers, moralists, friends, philosophers, counsellors and diplomats. This article analyses these functions – the nobility, dynamism and the sheer stability their interventions provided to a society always on the brink of war.

Key Words: Sangam Literature, Purananuru, Vadakkiruttal, Natukal, George Hart, Kaniyan Poongundrun, Alathur Kilar.

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Poet as Philosopher

If the word philosopher is taken to mean 'lover of Sophia, the goddess of wisdom' there are quite a number of Purananuru poets who warrant this title. It is fitting that the eulogy to learning, education in general, comes from a Philosopher-King. Neduncheliyan, a Pandya King, stresses the importance of learning even if it comes at a huge cost as even the mother whose love knows no distinction loves only the learned son more than the others.

**Among those born from the same belly,
who share the same nature, a mother's
heart will be most tender
towards the most learned! (183)
(Hart 118)**

Likewise, it would be the learned son rather than the eldest that the king would call upon for counsel and even if born in a lower class, he would be honoured by men from the upper class. It shows the king and the society privileging knowledge as the most valuable acquisition available to man. It is this love of learning and respect for teachers that later finds ample expression in the classic text of Pathinen Keezh Kanakku, the Tirukkural.

Though this poem is the only contribution of Kaniyan Poongundrun to the Purananuru, it is no exaggeration to say that it is the most quoted of all poems. It celebrates universal brotherhood, the basic humanism which is the bedrock of Tamil culture and the need to maintain equanimity of mind under all circumstances, a trait philosophical to its core.

**Every town our home town,
every man a kinsman.**

So runs this remarkable poem, tranquilly meditating on the fickleness and transience of life, which, rather than engendering contempt for it, makes the poet treat the high and the low, the great and the weak, with a huge measure of compassion:

So,
**we are not amazed by the great,
and we do not scorn the little. (192)
(Ramanujan 162)**

Though life is transient and uncertain like a raft let loose on torrential waters, the kind of values implicit in this poem provides direction and guidance to it, anchoring the jetsam and flotsam of human life. It is surprising to come across a poem of this kind especially from a society perceived to be perpetually at war with itself. Perhaps it is indirect counsel to the warring kings and chieftains to look at the essential humanity of all men in a world beset with turbulence and uncertainties.

There are poems by Ilam Peruvaluti who meditates on men whose nobility sustains the world (182), Mocikeeranan reflecting on the centrality of a king as a life giver (186) and Picirandaiyar offering a philosophical explanation for his lack of gray hair "though so full of years" (191) and a whole range of Kanchi poems urging the kings and patrons to be more charitable in this life for a life beyond death and so on.

Poet as Historian

It is only through the recorded accounts given by the poets that we come across fascinating pieces of history which would otherwise be lost as no other narratives now exist. The famous battles fought at Talayalankanam, Venni Perunthalai, Kudavayir Kottam and the infamous siege of Vel Pari's Parambu Hills are but a few examples. This historical negligence comes as a great surprise as the kings and chieftains always desired their fame to outlast their own life span. No chronicles are likely to match the vividness and accuracy of the poems of Kapilar which give such rendering of Parambu Hills before and after Pari's fall. The maidens of Parambu who

once counted

**the proud horses clad in iron
of the opposing kings**

**now count 'the carts of the salt-sellers'
which makes the poet say**

Alas, how it hurts me to see it!

May my life end! (116) (Ali 296)

The degradation of the Hills seems to have set in even in the lifetime of the poet, because, with the demise of Pari, the central figure of Parambu, the Hills also decline. A poem by Alathur Kilar gives a graphic presentation of a timid king who hides in his fortress even as his opponent cuts down the tutelary trees announcing his warlike intention:

**The sound of the falling trees
reverberate through the castle gates
and reach your opponent's ears.**

**Still he keeps blissfully inactive
without a mind to find you. (36)**

(Thangappa 128)

The colophon explains that this admonition of Alathur Kilar not to fight a war with a coward was given to Killivalavan, the Chola King when he laid a siege to Karuvur (Pillai 102). Many of the Vanchi poems, spoken by the Kings themselves, convey their resolve to destroy the enemies failing which they invite perdition on their own kingdoms. Poems 71, 72 and 73 are excellent examples of such heroic intentions composed by the Poet-Kings Bootha Pandyan, Neduncheliyan (both Pandya kings) and Nalankilli (the Chola King) respectively. Apart from these heroic battles fought and won, there are also anecdotal histories and micro-narratives of kings and chieftains as entertaining and instructional as any other piece of writing. Chief Pekan offering his shawl to a peacock shivering in cold, Pari's generosity to a jasmine plant, Kumanan offering his own head to a starving poet have become the stuff of legends.

Poet as Advisor

The poet's role as advisor to the king shows the high esteem in which they were held, an office they used with a sense of balance, wisdom and discretion. They exercised a moderating influence on the headstrong kings leading to avoidance of needless cruelty and suffering. When the Chola King Killi Valavan prepares to kill the two children of Malayaman, his enemy, by having a killer elephant trample over them (Pillai 124), Kovur Kilar intercedes on their behalf and the image he paints is enough to move even the hardest hearted:

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 same poet tries to bring about peace between two warring clansmen, Nalankilli and Nedunkilli (Kesikan 91), by pointing out how they would make laughing stock of themselves by fighting a war. Both chieftains, belonging to the same clan which distinguishes itself by wearing the chaplet of laburnum, will only succeed in weakening the clan's strength:

**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 aflutter with flags. (45)**

Avvaiyar, acting as an emissary of her king and patron Atiyaman, cautions Tondaiman against launching a foolhardy attack on the former in a very subtle message comparing the state of their respective weaponry:
Here,

**your weapons
are decked with flowers
and peacock feathers.
Their strong rounded shafts
well oiled and polished,
they are kept in a guarded mansion.
But there,
the weapons of my patron ---**

**having ploughed into the hearts of
foes
are broken and blunted.
They now lie
in the blacksmith's forge. (95)**
(Thangappa 140)

Besides offering their good counsel in matters of State, the poets often extended it to the personal lives of their patrons and chiefs, if they were found to be wayward. Pekan, otherwise a good and generous chief, became enamoured of another woman which led to his separation from his wife Kannaki. She became emaciated at this unfortunate turn of events which led quite a number of poets including Kapilar, Parinar and Aricil Kilar to take up her cause and unify her with her husband (Kesikan 193). Here Parinar makes a forceful plea on her behalf:

**I come to you not because I am hungry,
not because of the burden
of my family! But the gift for which I
beg is that tonight
you may mount your chariot strung
with bells and free her
of the anguish she lives with, and for
that I sing "May those
who love mercy act with justice!"
(145) (Hart 92)**

To offer advice to a King endowed with arbitrary power of life and death and also get him to act accordingly call for a great deal of moral uprightness and courage which the poets, in spite of not having any officially sanctioned power, seem to possess in good measure.

Poet as Friend

The elevation of the poet to be the friend of a king or chieftain bespeaks the trust and value placed on them by the rulers. One such friendship was between Avvaiyar and Atiyaman whom she portrays as unobtrusive as a firestick asleep on the eaves of roof but from which a flame could leap up any moment (315). The most telling culmination of this friendship was the offer of the nellikkani (myrobalan) believed to have life-extending properties:

**Close to the old towering mountains,
on its most unclimbable peak,
there grows a tiny-leaved gooseberry
whose immortal fruit you gave me,
keeping it to yourself how precious it
is! (91)**

Kapilar's friendship with Vel Pari was so deep that he wished to die along with his king but was prevented from doing so:

**You must have been angry with me
for you never agreed
that I should go with you
and advised me to avoid it
as you differed with me.**

But he makes the compelling wish to be “destined the good fate / of seeing you without cease” even in the next birth (236) (Ali 312). Kopperum Cholan, even in the extremity of dying, believed that his good friend Picirandaiyar would eventually reach him because the bond of friendship between the two was so strong:

**At a time when I was rich, he remained
there, distant! But he will not stay
away in my time of pain.
(215) (Hart 136)**

The colophon offers that Picirandaiyar did eventually reach him surprising the good men (Canror) around the king by being true to his prediction. The poets, though not very rich by any standards, could win the affection of the kings through their truthfulness and selflessness and fulfilled the office of being the king's trusted counsels.

Poet as Repository of Culture

From a historical perspective, it is as the repository of cultural practices that the poets of the Purananuru outshine their other roles. These incidental bits and pieces which they casually drop, if mapped properly, offer valuable glimpses into the past. It shows a very refined civilization with an equally sophisticated literary tradition to accompany it. Travelling across two millennia, the images encapsulated in it reach us with amazing clarity because the poet, unlike the historian, presents them with solidity of specificity. The poet Mocikeeranar, tired after a long trek for an audience with the Chera King Ceralirumporai, goes to sleep on the cot where the royal drum is kept, an offence punishable with death.

**You turned away the edge of your
sword that would have,
had you been enraged, cut me in two!**

**But you did even more!
You approached me and raised your
strong arm
big around as a concert drum and
fanned me to keep me cool!
(50) (Hart 38)**

Apart from the abundant respect and affection that most kings bore towards the poets, we also gather that the royal drum “which hungers for blood” occupies a sacrosanct place in the palace, and violating its space is an offence of the worst kind. The king not only spared the poet’s life but made him more comfortable by fanning him. Another nugget of valuable information tells us that the hide for the drum came from the victorious of the two bulls (288) because it is an awe-inspiring instrument meant to evoke warlike feelings. The wood for the making of the drum was obtained from the tutelary tree of the vanquished king all of which show the high esteem accorded to the royal drum. Cutting down the tutelary tree is an act of aggression, a clear provocation to battle and a king who ignores this challenge is a coward as Alathur Kilar records it (36). The tutelary tree has also brought infamy to the king as it happened in the case of Nannan who ordered the execution of a girl who ate the mango which floated down the stream where she was swimming (151). We also learn about the practice of “Vadakkiruttal” an extreme act of penance by a king or a noble man in which he fasted himself to death facing the direction of north. Kopperum Cholan (215,216,217, etc.) and Kapilar (236) are notable examples

of this practice which was usually a result of humiliation in war or simply a desire to cease to exist in a world bereft of a dear friend. Memorial stones or Natukals were erected in honour of these great men and their souls were deemed to dwell in them and elaborate rituals carried out in their memory (232).

Conclusion

Though humble in life, often stricken down by poverty, the poets of the Sangam Age have played pivotal roles not only as recorders of history, sometimes even makers of it. As chroniclers, they have done exemplary service in keeping an extraordinary civilization alive by offering vignettes of events. The light it throws may be fitful and fragmentary yet it has the clarity of lightning which suddenly illuminates a vast, dark landscape. They have done it in clear, concise and quite often memorable language, characteristics apparent even in translation. In the absence of any other documentary evidence, and until archaeologists and epigraphists come up with their own reconstructions, it is the offerings of these poets, discovered by a stroke of fortune by Tamil savants like Dr. U.Ve. Swaminathaier, that provide us with glimpses of a civilization as rich and varied as any other civilization in the world.