

The Chronology of some of the Poets of the Tamil Sangam Era

THERE is a well-known tradition among the Tamils that in the days of old there existed in South India three Sangams or Academies of Tamil learning. These were organized bodies which acted as literary censors of every new poem that was sung. They accepted those poems which came up to the standard set up by them, and rejected those which they thought worthless. All the three of them were in the Pāṇḍya country and were under the patronage of the Pāṇḍya kings.

The tradition about these three Sangams are first mentioned in the commentary of the work called *Kaḷaviyal*, a grammar of love-poetry. Nakkīrar the famous literary critic of the Third Academy is said to be the author of this commentary ; but it was handed down orally for ten generations till it was put into writing by one Nilakaṅṭar of Mucirī¹ probably about the seventh century A.D.

1. Musiri, Mouziris of Ptolemy.

According to this tradition the Pāṇḍya kings established the three Sangams one after the other in their capitals. They were called the First Sangam, Second Sangam, and the Third Sangam. There were 549 poets in the First Sangam beginning with Akattiyaṅār, who is said to be the author of the first grammar of Tamil. One of these poets is mentioned to be Muṭināka Rāyar of Mura ciyūr.

After the First Sangam ceased to exist the Second Sangam was formed. The grammarians Akattiyaṅār and Tolkppiyaṅār were also members of this Academy. It counted some 59 poets.

When this Academy also came to a close, the Third Sangam came into existence. This is the last of the Sangams and it consisted of 49 members on its rolls. Of these poets Nakkīrar, the author of the commentary on *Kaḷviyal*, was one. It is mentioned in the commentary that the Pāṇḍya king Ukkirapperu Valuti was the last king who patronised this Assembly. The date of this king, according to Karagasabhai, is A.D. 128-140.² If this is presumed to be correct, this Sangam came to an end about the second century A.D.

The end of this Sangam was perhaps due to the invasion and occupation of the Tamil country by a foreign race called Kaḷabhras about that period. This incident is attested by the Vēlvikuṭi plates of the eighth century A.D.

Now, the so-called Sangam Collections which exist in the Tamil language to-day are said to belong to the Third Sangam. From the internal evidences found in the poems of these Collections and from the references supplied by ancient foreign writers, chiefly Greek and Roman, scholars had been able to assign roughly the date of this Third Sangam. It existed round about the early centuries of the Christian era, contemporaneous with the period of the Roman Emperor Augustus Caesar.

But in one of the Collections called *Puraṅānūru* belonging to this Sangam, there are some poems attributed to authors who are mentioned by tradition to have lived during the period of the First Sangam. From this fact and from the subject-matter dealt with in the poems some scholars have come to the conclusion that these poets actually belonged to the First Sangam.³

But it is doubtful whether these poems could be so old and whether they could be assigned to so ancient a date as the one which the tradition would have us believe.

The following are the poems under discussion :—

(1) *Puṟam* No. 358. The colophon underneath it mentions it as having been sung by Vāṅmikiyār. This poem deals with the greatness of penance.

2. *Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago* p. 80.

3. M. Raghava Aiyengar : " Sri Valmiki and South India," in *Tamilian Antiquary* Vol. I No. 7; and " The Tamils in the Epic Age " *ibid.*, Vol. II No. 1.

THE CHRONOLOGY OF SOME OF THE SANGAM POETS

(2) *Puram* No. 365 said to have been sung by Mārkkanṭēyanār.

(3) *Puram* No. 366 said to have been sung by Kōtamanār about Dharmaputra, the eldest of the Pāṇḍava brothers.

(4) *Puram* No. 2 sung by Muṭināka Rāyar of Murañciyūr about the Cēra King Utiyañ Cēral-ātaṅ.

In considering these poems it has to be remembered that the name Muṭināka Rāyar occurs in the commentary of the work *Kaḷaviyal* as a poet of the First Academy. Also, under *cūttiram* No. 20 of *Purattiṅai Iyāl* in *Tolkā - piyam*, *Poraḷ-atikāram* the commentator Naccinārkkiniyār writes that Vānmikan̄r, Mārkkanṭēyanār, and Kautamanār were all poets of the First Academy. Like the commentary on *Kaḷaviyal*, Naccinārkkiniyār also was recording in this case what he himself had heard about the Sangam.

As regards the names of these poets it is needless to mention that, excepting Muṭināka Rāyar, the other names are all names borrowed from Sanskrit. Their Sanskrit equivalents would be Vālmiki, Mārkaṇḍeya and Gautama. It is to be remembered that persons bearing these names are well-known figures in the Epic, Purāṇic and Buddhist periods of Aryan Literature in North India.⁴ When the Aryans of the North gradually penetrated into South India with their religion and culture, the Tamils probably began to attach great importance to the Aryan culture ; so much so that they began to assume even the names of the new-comers. This process might have gone on so much that round about the Christian era one found it difficult to differentiate the people bearing these names in later times from the ancient Aryan figures from whom the names were originally borrowed. Therefore when the scholars who edited the poems of the Sangam period into Collections found poems said to be sung by poets bearing these names, they associated them with the ancient Aryan figures and gave the poems a remote antiquity. It is needless to mention here that the custom of adopting the names of gods and of famous people of ancient times as the names of children might have prevailed in the Tamil country in those times also as it does to-day. Therefore these poems may be by later people bearing the names of Ancient Indo-Aryans. By the time the tradition about the Sangams grew up, these poems had become so ancient that scholars connected them with the poets of the Golden Age, namely the First Academy.

In speaking about the poet Kōtamanār one has to bear in mind that there is also another poet of the same name who was the author of the Third Ten of the work called Ten Tens (*Patirruḷ pattu*,) which was sung in honour of the Cēra King Palyāñaiacelkelu Kuṭṭuvan. From the *patikams* occurring at the end of the Second and Third Tens, it is known that this king was the son of the Cēra King Utiyañ Cēral. The name of the poet who sang about this king is given in the *patikam* as Pālaik Kautamanār.

4. See also p. 234, f.n.2 in *The History of the Tamils* by P.T.S. Iyengar.

Now, the word Kautamaṅār is built up from the word Gautama borrowed from Sanskrit. The word Gautama is a *taddhita* form of the word *Gotama*. It is found that not only *Gautama* but also the word *Gotama* was borrowed in Tamil. The Tamil equivalent of the word *Gotama* is Kōtamaṅār. It has been already shown that Kōtamaṅār was the name of a poet in the First Academy. In the Tamil language not much difference in meaning seems to have been attached to these two forms Kōtamaṅār and Kautamaṅār. A person bearing either of these two forms as his name could be referred to by the other form as well. In other words these two names could be regarded as identical. This being so, it may not be far wrong to suppose that there might have lived two poets bearing the same name Kōtamaṅār or Kautamaṅār as contemporaries. Both might have been equally famous so that people found it difficult to distinguish one from the other. In order to eliminate this difficulty one might have been called simply Kōtamaṅār and the other Pālaik Kautamaṅār. The latter one had his name prefixed by the word *Pālai*, because he was found to be an expert in composing verses about the *Pālai tīnai*.⁵

Again, as regards the poet Muṭināka Rāyar of Murañciyūr⁶ one finds that he is placed in the First Academy by tradition enunciated in the commentary on *Kaḷaviyal*. In his poem (*Puram* 2) this poet glorifies his patron the Cēra King Uṭiyañ Cēral-Ataṅ as having fed the Pāṇḍava and the Kaurava forces during the Mahābhārata war. This great battle is generally believed to have taken place somewhere about the eleventh century B.C.⁷ From this, some scholars have assigned eleventh century B.C. as the date of the First Academy.⁸ But the last part of the poet's name *Rāyar*⁹ suggests that he could not have lived at such an early date.

5. Poetry of the desert region.

6. The late Mr. A. Mututhamby Pillai of Jaffna in an article under the heading "Lanka in the Sangam Periods" published in the *Tamilian Antiquary*, Vol. II No. 1 says that the poet Muṭināka Rāyar might have gone to the Tamil Sangam (First Sangam) from Iḷam (Ceylon). He thinks that the poet might have been a king of the Nāgas who inhabited Ceylon in the early times.

There is no doubt that Ceylon was once inhabited by the tribe called the Nāgas. This is known from the Mahāvamsa and the gold-plates recently discovered at Vallipuram Temple near Point Pedro. From the latter it is known that Jaffna was called Nāga-dīpa in ancient times, as the plates belong to the second century A.D. This shows that in olden days Jaffna was principally a Nāga settlement. Also, it is now certain that it was Jaffna which is found under the name Nagadiboi in the map of Ptolemy.

Notwithstanding this, it is doubtful whether Muṭināka Rāyar could have belonged to Jaffna or any other part of Ceylon. The arguments of Mr. Mututhamby Pillai on this point are not very convincing.

7. V. R. R. Dikshitar: *Studies in Tamil Literature and History* p. 20.

8. From the traditional materials found in the *Sthala-purāna* of Madura some scholars assign a very remote date, 3900 B.C., as the beginning of the First Academy. See "A note on the Sangam Periods" in *Tamilian Antiquary* Vol. II No. 1 p. 14.

9. This term is also a title of the Vijayanagara kings. Compare also the Hindi and Bengali forms *rāy*.

THE CHRONOLOGY OF SOME OF THE SANGAM POETS

The Tamil form *Rāyar* is from the Prākṛit form *rāyā* of the Sanskrit word *rājā* "king." The Prakrit form *rāyā* could not have penetrated into the Tamil country till the advent of Jainism among the Tamils. It is known that the Jaina Canons were put into writing only at the end of the fourth or the beginning of the third century B.C.¹⁰ Therefore Jainism could not have spread down outh in the Tamil country till the third century B.C. or even later; as such a man with the suffix *Rāyar* to his name could not have lived before the Prākṛit Period of Indo-Aryan Literature.

Besides, the king about whom Muṭināka Rāyar sings is called Utiyañ Cēral. On examining about the term *Cēral*, it is to be noted that Cēra is referred to as Kerala in the Sanskrit Epics¹¹. Also, in one of the inscriptions of Asoka, the Cēra King is referred to as Kerala-putra.¹² From these references it is known that *Keral-a* was the term used by the old Indo-Aryans to denote the Cēra king. It is to be noted that this Indo-Aryan term is equivalent to the Tamil term *Cēral*. The difference between the two is that the Indo-Aryan term has the final suffix—*a* added to it, and the consonant *k*—is found initially instead of the *c*— in Tamil.

As regards the final vowel— in the Indo-Aryan form, it is possible that it was added by the Indo-Aryans themselves when they borrowed the term into their language.¹³ Further, regarding the initial consonant —it may be said that it was the original consonant used in the term in its ancient form, perhaps in the Dravidian, which in the Tamil language changed itself into —. The probability of this fact is attested by examples found in modern Dravidian languages as well—*e.g.*

Kan. <i>kivi</i> or <i>kimi</i>	" ear ":	Tulu. <i>kevi</i> : Tam. <i>cevi</i> : Tel. <i>cevi</i>
Kan. <i>kenne</i>	" head ":	Tam. <i>ceṇṇi</i>
Kan. <i>kiṇna</i>	" small ":	Tam. <i>ciṇṇa</i> : Tel. <i>cinna</i>
Kan. <i>key</i>	" action ":	Tam. <i>cey</i>
Kan. <i>kere</i>	" tank ":	Tam. <i>ceru</i> : Tel. <i>cerum</i>
Kan. <i>karumbu</i>	" hatred ":	Tam. <i>cerumpu</i>
Kan. <i>kē</i>	" to dwell ":	Tam. <i>cē</i>
Kan. <i>kēri</i>	" village	Tam. <i>cēri</i>

10. Winternitz : *A History of Indian Literature* Vol. II, p. 434 f.n. 2.

11. *Rāmā. Kiṣk* 41. 12; *Mahābhārata* 515, *Karṇa-digvijaya*

12. Mansehra Rock-Edict II. 6.

All the terms for the Cēra found in the inscriptions of Asoka begin with the consonant *k*—

Keraḍa-putro : Shābāzgarhi Edict II. 4,

Ketala-puto : Girnar „ II. 2.

Kelala-puto : Kalsi „ II. 4.

—see Inscriptions of Asoka Vol I, edited by Hultzsch.

13. At first the term *Keral-a* in Sanskrit might have denoted the country of the Cēra. Later on it was used to denote the king of this country. See Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya* under Pāṇini's Sutra *Kambojālluk.* (4-1-175) *Vyākaraṇa-Mahābhāṣya* (ed. Kielhorn) Vol. II. p.270; Also see P.T.S. Iyengar : *History of the Tamils* pp. 136—137.

UNIVERSITY OF CEYLON REVIEW

In these examples *k*—was probably older than *c*—. ¹⁴ If this is so, the older form of the term *cēral* could have been* *kē'al*. ¹⁵

As this form is recorded as *Keral-a* in the edicts of Aśoka, it may be concluded that in and before the third century B.C. **Kēral* was the term by which Dravidians referred to the Cēra king. Therefore, since the patron of Muṭināka Rāyar is mentioned as Utiyañ Cēral and not Utiyañ **Kēral*, it is to be inferred that he (the king) could not have lived before the third century B.C. Therefore, it is impossible to assign this poet and his royal patron to the First Academy.

The reference of Muṭināka Rāyar in his poem to the feeding of the Kau-rava and the Pāṇḍava forces during the Mahābhārata war by his patron Utiyañ Cēral-Ātan is already mentioned before. The following is the translation of the lines of the poem which refer to this incident.-

Majestic monarch! When the ten times ten
Kauravas, crowned with golden *tumpai* wreaths
Wrathful in battle 'gainst the heroes Five—
Lords of fiery steeds with tossing mane—
Their patrimony lusting after, fought,
Thou didst unstinted savoury food supply
To either host, till all the Kurus fell. ¹⁶

This reference to the Mahābhārata war will naturally tempt any one to put the date of this poem to a remote antiquity. But as already shown in the course of the discussion it is not possible to give such an ancient date to the poem. In giving explanation to this reference one can, perhaps, agree with the view of the late P. T. Srinivas Iyengar when he says that it is absurd to imagine that a Rāja of the Southern-most corner of India carried rice and condiments to Kurukṣetra for the purpose of feeding the wheat-eating followers of Dhuryodhana and Yudhiṣṭhira. He would explain that what the poet referred to here is the munificent liberality with which the king Utiyañ Cēral fed all the people who took part in a Kathākali dance depicting the incidents of the Mahābhārata war which was performed in his presence. A dumb show like that accompanied by songs is even to-day a frequent phenomenon in the Malabar country. The poet seems to have referred to an incident like this which took place during the time of Utiyañ Cēral and not during the time of the real Mahābhārata war. ¹⁷

From a study of the Sangam Texts and the post-Sangam works like *Cilappatikāram* and *Maṇimēkalai*, coupled with the information furnished

14 See also Pandit D. Savariroyan : "On the words Chera and Kerala" in *Tamilian Antiquary* Vol. I No. 1 (IV).

15 Ptolemy refers to the Cēra as *Kero*; Pliny *Caelo*.

16 K. G. Sessa Iyer : Ode to Chēramān-Udhiyan Chēral-Ādan—*Tamilian Antiquary* Vol. I No. 1. (III).

17 *History of the Tamils* p.492.

THE CHRONOLOGY OF SOME OF THE SANGAM POETS

by foreign writers, scholars have come to the conclusion that the date of the Cēra King Utiyañ Cēral is the early part of the first century A.D.¹⁸ Therefore the poet Muṭināka Rāyar also must be assigned that date. Again, in the course of the discussion it was pointed out that Kōtamañār might have been a contemporary of the poet Pālaik Kautamañār. Pālaik Kautamañār is the one who sang about the Cēra King Palyāñaiçcelkelu Kuṭṭuvaṇ. It has been pointed out before that Palyāñaiçcelkelu Kuṭṭuvāṇ was the son of Utiyañ Cēral. Therefore, the poet Kōtamañār, the contemporary of Pālaik Kautamañār must have lived a little after the poet Muṭināka Rāyar. From the arguments already shown Vānmikiyār and Markkaṇṭēyañār also must have lived near about the same time. Therefore, it may be concluded that the four poems referred to before were all sung by poets who lived round about the early centuries of the Christian era. All of them belonged to the Third Tamil Sangam.

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