



Epic Studies Vaiyapuri Pillai's

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Abstract

He emphasized the general traditions regarding Kappiyam (epic literature) and the importance of chronological study. He accepted the traditional notion that a *kappiyam* should deal with the four great aims: *Aram* (virtue), *Porul* (wealth or material well-being), *Inbam* (pleasure), and *Veedu* (household or family life). Furthermore, he gave great importance to literary chronology, arguing that understanding the period in which a work was composed is essential for correctly comprehending its ideas and themes.

Keywords: Vaiyapuri pillai, kappiyam, Tamil epic, Aryan influence

Introduction

Vyapuri Pillai was one of the early Tamil scholars who analyzed the history and development of Tamil epics (Kāvya / Kappiyams) such as Silappadikaram, Manimekalai, Cīvaka Cintāmaṇi, and Periya Purāṇam. He believed that the epic tradition in Tamil was influenced by the northern (Aryan) literary culture, particularly through Jain and Buddhist traditions that came from North India. According to him: The first Tamil epic was Perunkathai. The epic movement in Tamil began only after Aryan influence reached the Tamil region. Vyapuri Pillai also argued that before these epics, Tamil literature did not use the term “Kappiyam” (Epic) in its classical sense. He maintained that Tamil writers may have adapted the epic form from Sanskrit literary models.

In the dominant Sanskrit tradition, Professor Vaiyapuri Pillai positioned himself as part of that mainstream, presenting through his research an opposing stance to the tanittamil (pure Tamil) movement and the Tamil scholarly trend that were influential during his time. While the Dravidian movement sought to elevate the Tamil language—emphasizing its antiquity and greatness—many Tamil scholars worked actively in support of that goal.

In contrast, Vaiyapuri Pillai's approach often involved pushing back against this trend—by minimizing the antiquity of Tamil literature and grammar, and by arguing that the origins of Tamil works were rooted in Sanskrit literary and grammatical traditions. His *Kāvya-kālam* (The Age of Epics) clearly reveals this orientation.

His deep knowledge of both Tamil and Sanskrit literature, along with his English education and his training as a lawyer, established him as a capable literary historian. However, his one-sided and predetermined conclusions often appear unnatural or biased. This raises a sense of disappointment—how could a Tamil professor, who also contributed to compiling a great Tamil lexicon, express such views?

It seems that his perspective was shaped by a kind of negative approach or conflict theory. Given his legal background, such argumentative reasoning is perhaps unsurprising. Nevertheless, his dialectical or conflict-based mode of literary study sparked fresh thought and awakened Tamil scholars—an impact that cannot be denied.

It is no surprise that Vaiyapuri Pillai's line of thought created a major turning point in the study of Tamil literature

— inspiring approaches based on sociology, theology, history, and comparative analysis.

In his general introduction to the concept of the *kāvya* (epic), the Professor asserts that both the literary form and the philosophical ideas behind *kāvya* and *purāṇa* were derived from Sanskrit traditions. He argues that the very definition (*lakṣaṇa*) of *kāvya* originated in Sanskrit. Citing the Silappadikaram verse “*vaḍamozhi vācam seitha nalledu*” (“a fine book written in Sanskrit”), he emphasizes that even studying Tamil epics requires knowledge of Sanskrit — “It is worth noting that one must know Sanskrit to study these epics” (*Kāvya-kālam*, p.16).

Furthermore, he even denies that the term *kāppiyam* (epic) belongs to Tamil, remarking that the statement “*kāppiyam* is a Tamil word” is something to be laughed at (*p.*13).

Vaiyapuri Pillai also argues that defining *kāppiyam* as *toṭarnilai ceyyu!* (a continuous poetic composition) is inappropriate. While discussing the general nature of epics, he examines this terminology in depth. He claims that the term *toṭarnilai* was mistakenly considered authoritative in *Tolkappiyam*. Instead, he insists that *āṭci* (governance or structure) in *Tolkappiyam* refers to simplicity, conciseness, firmness of meaning, and stylistic excellence — not to the concept of *toṭarnilai*.

He points out that the word *toṭarnilai* occurs only once in *Tolkappiyam* (*Seyyul*, verse 203), and that during the Sanskritic period, it was wrongly assumed that *toṭarnilai* was *Tolkappiyar āṭci* (a rule of *Tolkappiyar*). Hence, he concludes that replacing the term *kāvya* — which denotes simplicity, brevity, compact meaning, and stylistic excellence — with *toṭarnilai* is unjustified (*pp.*234–235).

Moreover, Vaiyapuri Pillai contends that during *Tolkappiyar's* time, there was no notion of *kāvya* in Tamil literary history. According to him, this concept entered Tamil only around the 8th century CE, following the emergence of works like *Silappadikaram*. By the 11th century, the Sanskrit term *kāvya* had been adopted into Tamil, and by the 12th century, it was replaced by the term *toṭarnilai* (*p.*234).

It is evident that Professor Vaiyapuri Pillai was unwilling to accept that the word “*kāppiyam*” (epic) existed in ancient Tamil literary or grammatical usage, or to recognize the meaning it once conveyed. Later research, however, has clarified these aspects. It is also noteworthy that even in

Sanskrit, the term “kāvya” was not used in the sense of “epic.”

Although the word *kāpiyam* may not have been directly used in Tamil to denote story-based literature, it is clear that such literary compositions might have been referred to through other artistic terms such as *urai* (discourse), *tonmai* (antiquity), *thōl* (ancient text), or *virundhu* (feast).

In the second part of his work *Kāvya-kālam* (The Age of Epics), Vaiyapuri Pillai presents the chronological frameworks proposed by earlier literary historians and then offers his own periodization. He rejects the works of earlier scholars such as Damodaram Pillai, V. K. Suryanarayana Sastri, Bishop Caldwell, Julien Vinson, and M. Srinivasa Iyengar, claiming that they lacked a true sense of linguistic analysis, historical awareness, epigraphical knowledge, and religious understanding.

He divides Tamil literary history into two epic periods:

- **Early Epic Period:** A.D. 750–1000
- **Later Epic Period:** A.D. 1100–1300

According to him, the basis for this classification is the work *Perunkathai*. He confidently asserts that *Perunkathai* was the first epic to emerge in Tamil literature. In the section on the history of Tamil epics, he explicitly mentions this idea.

Thus, the foundation of his argument rests on the belief that the Tamil epic tradition was derived from Sanskrit influence. Perhaps he assumed that since in all other Indian languages the earliest epic attempts were modeled after the Sanskrit *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, Tamil could not have been an exception to this pattern.

In his attempt to establish that *Silappathikaram* is a later work, Professor Vaiyapuri Pillai does not present as many linguistic or textual evidences for *Perunkathai* as he does for *Silappathikaram*. He mentions that the *Brhatkathā* composed by Gunadhya in the *Paiśāca* language was translated into Sanskrit by King Durvindhya of the Ganga dynasty, and that this translation appeared only around A.D. 600. Referring to this, he suggests that the Tamil translation (*Perunkathai*) could have been made after this period. Citing the linguistic usage of words like “*nāṇ*” (I) and “*ippati*” (thus), he estimates its time to be around A.D. 750.

However, Vaiyapuri Pillai does not clarify that many of the *Śaiva*, Buddhist *Purāṇas*, *Darśana Śāstras* (philosophical treatises), and other early texts were not written in Sanskrit but in *Pāli* and *Prakrit*. Modern research therefore concludes that the original *Brhatkathā*, on which *Perunkathai* is based, was actually written in *Prakrit*, not Sanskrit. Similarly, *Jīvaka Cintāmaṇi* is also believed to have a *Prakrit* source, while the *Manimekalai*—its associated sub-narratives and philosophical content—is said to have its roots in *Pāli*. Hence, Vaiyapuri Pillai’s generalization that all these works ultimately stemmed from Sanskrit sources does not hold true.

When explaining the social and literary background of the epics, Vaiyapuri Pillai refers to the *Sangam* age—particularly the *panar* (bards), their livelihood through musical performances, their messenger songs, heroic poems, and the associated *veerar vazhipadu* (hero worship)—as elements of Tamil cultural life. Yet, he does not link these elements to the evolution of the Tamil epic tradition.

Citing W. P. Kerr, he observes that during the heroic age, poems became “verses repeatedly praising minor kings

without deviation.” He notes that during this period, there was growing interaction between Tamils and Aryans—as reflected in references to *mutthippuram* 2, *arutthozi andhanar* (Puram 397), *velvi andhanar* (Puram 361), and numerous allusions to the *Mahabharata* (Akam 233; Puram 2, 366; *Pathirruppathu* 14; *Sirupanarruppadai* 238–241; *Perumpanarruppadai* 415–417) and the *Ramayana* (Akam 70; *Sirupanarruppadai* 119, 120; Puram 378; *Madurai Kanchi* 40–42).

He also refers to wars between Tamil rulers and Aryans (Aru 396), their alliances, and the consequent *Vaidhika*–*Jain* conflicts, as well as the spread of theories of rebirth, the rise of sub-narratives, and the growth of Buddhist and Jain philosophical writings. According to him, all these cultural and intellectual developments ultimately gave rise to the Tamil epic tradition, emerging only after translations of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* had become known in Tamil.

The Aryan artistic and cultural traditions greatly influenced Tamil Nadu, especially among the upper classes, including kings and nobles. The Aryans served as soothsayers, priests, and ministers to the rulers, which led to the rise and strengthening of Vedic religion in the Tamil region. Vaiyapuri Pillai explains that Jainism was the main religion that competed with this Vedic dominance, and through this line of reasoning, he tries to establish that the Tamil epic tradition originated from northern (Sanskritic) literary culture.

In Indian history, it is well known that by 500 BCE, during the times of Mahavira and the Buddha, these non-Vedic (heterodox) traditions had already flourished in North India. The spread of Jainism and Buddhism in Tamil Nadu from the pre-Christian centuries is also well attested by numerous cave inscriptions. Hence, Vaiyapuri Pillai’s claim that this “opposing tradition” entered Tamil Nadu only around 600 CE and then gave rise to epic literature appears historically inconsistent.

Regarding the history of Tamil epics, he argues that *Silappathikaram* arose after works like *Perunkathai*, *Vasudevanar’s Cintamani* (c. 350 CE), and *Nambiyar’s Cintamani*. He claims that Jain poets in Tamil Nadu took an old local tale—originally popular in oral tradition—and, following the example of translating Sanskrit narratives into Tamil, crafted it into an aesthetically refined literary masterpiece, namely *Silappathikaram*.

According to him, *Silappathikaram* was composed in a social milieu characterized by wealth and luxury, a period when the worship of the goddess *Pattini* (*Kannagi*) became popular, and when the status of the *panars* (bards) had declined—music and dance had turned into art forms associated with courtesans. He insists that the story of *Silappathikaram* was a legend, not a historical event, the characters and incidents being the creative imagination of the poet, including the idea that *Ilango Adigal* was the brother of Chera king *Senguttuvan*.

Conclusion

In his epic studies, Vaiyapuri Pillai tends to elevate one particular Tamil epic—such as *Civaka Cintamani*—while undermining the others like *Silappathikaram*, *Periyapuramam*, and *Kambaramayanam*, all of which were highly regarded by Tamil scholars of his time. His research thus moves along a line that appears opposed to Tamil cultural nationalism, reflecting a worldview that aligns more with Sanskritic or North Indian literary ideology.

It seems that a deeper understanding of his literary outlook may emerge only when examined in relation to his personal background and intellectual context.

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