

Tamil Philosophical Traditions in Continental Context

N. Muthu Mohan

*Professor & Head, Department of Guru Nanak Studies
Madurai Kamaraj University*

Introduction

In this Lecture dedicated to Padmabhushan Dr. Raja Sir M. A. Muthiah Chettiar Endowment, an attempt has been undertaken to trace the Tamil philosophical traditions in their relation to the Indian continental philosophies in order to identify the originality of the Tamil philosophical traditions as well as their dialectical interaction with the continental philosophical thought. I use the terms “dialectical interaction” intentionally meaning the methodology I have applied to study the phenomenon of Tamil in its existence and in relation to the continental philosophy and culture. The dialectical interaction presupposes difference, thus indicating the identity of Tamil tradition, and further means influence, impact and interpenetration from the part of the continental thought without in any way one subsuming the other. The dialectical interaction may also indicate the synthesis that might have come about as the result of the encounters that have occurred between the Tamil and the continental cultures.

The Proto-materialist Ethos of the Sangam Poetry

Any discussion on Tamil culture necessarily starts from the Sangam poetry of the Tamils, the period of which stretches from 3rd century B.C. to around 5th century A.D., thus a period of almost 800 years. Tamil scholars agree that the late Sangam period had the influence Jainism and Buddhism, however, they keep tracing out the original Tamil tradition before the advent of the Shramanic philosophies into South India.

The early Sangam poetry exhibits an amazing secular ethos devoid of any religious affiliation and mythology, an original way of thinking closely related to the immediate land and its variety, a type of geological materialism, unique of its kind among the ancient thoughts known. The ancient Tamils classified their land into five existential territories or landscapes in relation to the human life. They are Kurinji, Mullai, Marutham, Neythal and Palai. Kurinji is the mountain and the mountainous region, Mullai is the forest and forestry region, Marutham is the river and riverside areas, Neythal is the sea and sea shores and finally, Palai is the dry land and desert areas. This classification that goes with the name Thinaï is not merely geographical or geological, but describes the nature of people who live in the respective lands, their naturally conditioned occupations, culture and religion that emerge out of their pre-occupational

conditions and ethos. It is true that each and every thinaï or human landscape consists of a god of its own, however, the land and ethos, in no way, are derived from the gods mentioned. On the other hand, the gods are derived from the nature of the landscapes. No supernatural power is

attributed to the deities referred and the deities are not the creators of the world or the particular landscapes. No unity of Tamil country is presupposed, on the other hand, the geological variety plays the role of determinant here. The occupation and culture of the people are derived immanently from the surroundings that this approach of the ancient Tamils may be named as proto-materialism or naturalism. The principle of Thinal is one of the original contributions of the Tamils to make their identity.

Another set of Sangam poetry elucidates the cosmology or the structure of universe that is made out of the five natural elements, land, sky, air, water, and fire interacting and constructing the world. No creation specific is informed here, on the other hand, only the structure is indicated. No creator divine or superhuman has any reference in the configuration of the universe. Yet another song of the ancient Tamils places food as the foundational constituent of life and further equates food with land and water. There is a parallelism of land and water to body and soul (life). The term uyir that stands to represent soul does not have any metaphysical meaning, only to point out the biological entity of living.

The third significant statement of Sangam poetry that has philosophical implications is the conceptual classification of human life into Puram and Aham literally meaning external and internal forms of human existence. The terms Puram and Aham may tempt to equate them to the philosophical binaries of the objective and the subjective ends of human existence, however, within the limits of Sangam poetry, they mean merely the male and female spaces, the male space covering the war-bound life of the men and the female space embracing the family life of the women. Puram stands to indicate the explicitly lived life of men that is spent in war and trade, and Aham represents the intimate life of feelings of love experienced but not necessarily articulated by the women. In Aham, an increasing trend of internalization occurs. At times and often, the Aham voice of the women resist the Puram as if the nascent feelings of love of the women resist

the mode of life spent by men in war and trade. The concepts of Puram and Aham had not grown to the levels of the philosophical categories of the objective and the subjective within the Sangam poetry, although potentially they contain the meanings of materiality and spirituality, empirical and transcendental etc.

At this level, we do not name the philosophical positions of Sangam poetry as one of a systematized philosophy of materialism, but it is very much committed to the immediate earthly life and its prosperity, a positive, proto-materialist ethos oriented upon the natural environment, land and water and values of heroism, love etc. The proto-materialist standpoints of Sangam poetry are substantially important to us because we are inclined to argue that the native Tamil consciousness emerges out of this Proto-materialist Substratum all along later in its history. Despite its poetic spontaneity, the proto-materialist substratum stands as the basis of Tamil culture to exhibit manifestedly itself in later occasions.

Sociologically, the Sangam period can be evaluated as the period of transition from primitive tribal life to the life of a class society and we get the historical evidence of smaller tribal communities getting destroyed and bigger kingdoms emerging out of it. Similarly, the family as an anthropological institution too comes into existence. The Sangam poetry proves itself successful in creating the values that interpellate the family and state, the chaste woman

and the heroic man. The men are bound to the needs of an emerging state or a kingdom and the women are set to form the nucleus of the male dominated family. Sangam poetry is not predominantly interested in discovering the philosophical ultimates (ontology) but intensively engages itself in creating the values (axiology) conducive to construct a state and a family.

One can also find the resistances operating within the emerging society – the memory of the primitive tribal equality, a feeling of loss of the old order, the refusal of the women to enter into the male dominated family, descriptions of poverty and inequality that have started appearing in the class society and the critical advice of the poets to revert back to or to compensate the loss of the old order.

Post Sangam Literature: The First Encounter

The post Sangam period has produced the monumental grammatical work as Tholkaappiyam, the ethical treatises as Thirukural and Naladiyar and the first Tamil epics such as Cilappathikaram, Manimekalai, Civaka Cinthamani and Neelakesi. Enumerating the entire galaxy of linguistic, literary and ethical works of the late Sangam period, a reader shall be bewildered to find the creative genius of the period. It was a period, when the ancient Tamils had their first encounters with the continental philosophies such as Jainism and Buddhism. It is interesting to note that the Tamils got introduced to the continental philosophical schools, chronologically, first with the non-Vedic and Shramanic schools such as Ajivika, Jainism, Buddhism, Lokayata and Samkhya. The listed works have the definite and indubitable influence of the Shramanic schools of thought. The epics contain Jaina or Buddhist personae (mostly women) as their main characters.

(Why the names of the Women and their ornaments become the title of the Epics?) They contain a few chapters that are especially dedicated to open philosophical debates informing us the then existing philosophical schools (Parabakka and Purvabaksha). That the Vedic thought is enumerated as one among the many schools and not occupying any elaborate space itself is a fascinating fact. If one goes by the Tamil records, the chronology of the Shramanic schools shall be more ancient and its influence shall be more fundamental upon Tamil traditions than any other schools of thought.

It may be interesting to raise the question, why the Shramanic schools found conducive to enter into the Tamil culture? Or what was the reception of the Tamil culture to the Shramanic schools? History evidences that the Tamil soil was fertile and Tamil culture receptive and conducive to the entry of the Shramanic schools. The simple reason was the similarities in socio-cultural conditions. The Tamil country at the first centuries was very much alike and comparable to the stage of development of society that gave birth to Jainism or Buddhism in the North Indian context. The social and cultural ideals invoked and suggested by these schools of thought came to be very much fit to the needs of the socio-cultural conditions of the Tamils too.

The Ajivikas, Lokayatas, Jaina and Buddhists had the overwhelming influence upon the ancient Tamil society that they encaptured the entire spectrum of the Tamil mind, its language, literature, ethics and ways of living. The Shramanas authored the grammar of living of the

Tamils. In a sense, it was the exemplary beginning of the cultural politics of the Tamils initiated by the Jains and Buddhists in the Tamil land. They keyed and predetermined the politics of language and culture in Tamil soil, others (the Saivites, the Vaishnavites and the British) to follow the same in the latter periods.

The Jainas and Buddhists did not leave much full-fledged philosophical texts in Tamil and neither they tried to prompt the Tamils for elaborate philosophical exercises. Particularly, the ideal of asceticism did not find its support from the Tamil ethos. On the other hand, Jainism and Buddhism interacted with the Proto-materialistic Substratum earlier referred and they were mediated to import a comprehensive and rich ethical content to Tamil culture. The concept of Karma as deeds, speech and thought without having the Brahmanic ritual or Varnic implications entered into the Tamil ethos as a principle of universal ethics. The dialectics of Shramanic influence and the Proto-materialist substratum of the Tamils landed in the form of a secular and universal ethics. A durable moment of practicality and even a stream of pragmatism were implanted into the Tamil soil.

The turning of Tamil thought towards ethical realm during the post Sangam period itself is a significant problem to be probed upon. It is during this period the Tamil society takes focus upon the individual as its center. Subjectivities of the class society are interpellated (Louis Althusser) and constructed so as to produce man and woman, the hero and the learned, ethical being and immoral one, a worthy king and a loyal citizen etc. Immutable values in the form of laws and codes of family, state and civil society, fame, reputation and obscurity are generated. Secular criteria of a worthy ethical life were worked out.

It is true that Jainism and Buddhism contain a persuasive moment of ethical idealism and that particular moment was infused into the Tamil ethos but not at all at the cost of the philosophical substratum the Tamils had from the early Sangam poetry. A fascinating pragmatic synthesis of the proto-materialist substratum from below and an ethical idealism from above was the ultimate outcome of the period. The dialectics of materiality and spirituality makes them to meet at the middle realm to locate the ethics and the morality at the center. Ethics, in this sense, is the meeting point of metaphysics and materiality, and it is a practical realm intensely addressing the behavioral patterns of the individuals. "Experience and Extinguish" is the program finally achieved by the Tamils out of the above said dialectics of the period. The hero of Civaka Cinthamani, a prince, enjoys all the pleasures of life, conducts innumerable wars to expand his kingdom, marries any number of women and finally, enters into the life of an ascetic yielding himself to the laws of karma to liberate himself. The worldly life is now understood as the realm of karma and its effects, one that should be inevitably lived thoroughly, and in its latter stage voluntarily given up for the withering away of the karma and its effects. The realm of karma and its effects become the second substratum of Tamil culture by now. Although hedonism is not supported, material living is not rejected outright. [Kovalan- A hedonist, Manimekalai- an ascetic and Civakan- the one who turns around to asceticism are the models worked out in the epics and the binaries are recited (Levi Strauss) to find out the optimum]. Living and annihilating are comprehended as the moments of natural course of life that consists of at least two stages, experiencing and extinguishing, diachronically but organically synthesized at the individual. The karmic life at the first stage with ethical awareness and voluntary withering away of karmas at the second stage are the two moments composed into one.

Bhakti as the Revival of Emotionality

The bhakti movement from the 5th century A.D led by the Saivite Nayanmars and Vaishnavite Alvars can be characterized as an intensive period when the north Indian Puranas and Vedantic thought massively entered into the Tamil land to replace above all the Shramanic influence. Along with the replacement of Janism and Buddhism by the Saivite and Vaishnavite devotional thought, the ethics was displaced by Bhakti. The law of karma, although could not be removed from its foundational role, however, was challenged by the idea of Grace of God. Consequently, an emotional appeal to God for his grace is the new theme of Saivites and Vaishnavites.

Bhakti is celebrated predominantly as a South Indian phenomenon and its emotional appeal is astounding. Although there are so many puranic references in the bhakti hymns of Alvars and Nayanmars, the characteristic feature of South Indian bhakti is its musical nature. While the North Indian bhakti prefers the puranic narrative form, its South India counterpart opts the musical form of expression. It has to be noted that the musical pattern is conducive to the emotional mind set and collective forms of worship. While the narrative form invariably consists of time as its inalienable component, the emotional musical pattern hides deeply the temporal coordinate. Consequently, the musical form is mystical and immediate. The musical emotional mode has something important to tell about the capability of bhakti and its music to construct a community of religious followers (The Tamil terms Isai and Isaivu mean music as well as consensus).

The Saivites and Vaishnavites of Tamil land indeed have a claim that their devotion constructs a religious community surmounting the caste barriers that have eminently appeared in the then Tamil society. Tamil Vaishnavism is more vocal in its critique of caste system than the Saivite one. However, the final outcome of the conflict between the religious question (constructing a community) and the social question (caste rigidities) is not very much consoling. Within the Tamil bhakti, ultimately the caste order defeats the religious attempts of constructing a community.

One can hypothesize that the emotionality of the bhakti hymns has the continuing impact of the Proto-materialist substratum of the Sangam poetry. This becomes clear when bhakti emotionality is compared with the puritan ethics, rigidity of the law of karma and ascetic trends within Jainism and Buddhism. In the later sense, bhakti can be considered as the revival of the materiality of the native Tamil culture when Jainism and Buddhism turned to become more and more idealistic. The relation between karma and devotion especially within Tamil Saivism too is interesting. The law of karma introduced into Tamil thought by this time had become the second substratum of Tamil culture and the Tamil bhakti could not replace it even with the otherwise powerful concept of God. Keeping the law of karma untouched, the Saivites introduce God as the over all custodian of the karma. God cannot absolutely dismiss the effects of karma. It means that the

religious idealism of Saivism fails to destroy the substantial hold of the law of karma. "Karma first and God then" is the state of affairs of the Saivite religion. As if, we find another version of materialism from below and idealism from above.

Saiva Siddhanta: An Important Point of Culmination

At the turn of the first millennium A. D, the Tamil philosophical thought systematized itself and achieved the perfected philosophy of Saiva Siddhanta. I call it the perfected philosophy, because in it one finds the well organized and efficient philosophy of a developed feudal age. In Saiva Siddhanta, the ontological reality of individuality characteristic of a feudal society acquires its full philosophical acceptance. The best illustration of the present thesis is the status of the concept of Anavam. Anavam is the atomic (anu) individuality, in its extreme form, individualism, ego that is inalienably born with the soul. Its special status in Saiva Siddhanta is that it is said to be an ultimate element, one among the three basic categories that are eternal, Pathi, Pasu and Paasam literally the God, the Souls and the Fetters. Paasam consists of three moments that are Anavam, Kanmam and Mayai. While these three moments get an elaborate treatment in Saiva Siddhanta philosophy, Anavam is said to be the Mulamalam or the basic and primary fetter among the three. No other philosophical system among the Indian schools renders so fundamental a role to Anavam or ego as the Saiva Siddhanta. As Saiva Siddhanta emerges well after the Astika and Nastika schools of ancient India, it gets the historical opportunity to grasp the experiences of the earlier schools and encaptures, to the maximum, the spirit of the developed medieval society.

Saiva Siddhanta concept of liberation does not declare the world as maya or illusion that should be absolutely negated. It does not negate the reality of the world. On the other hand, Saiva Siddhanta accommodates the world and worldly life as a necessary moment in the course for liberation. It is said that the world is a creation of God, out of God's Grace, for the convenience of the Souls to learn the lessons of the world, to get themselves mature in the course of living in earth, or by living through the earthly life undergoing the effects of karma and thus, finally, voluntarily offering oneself to the idea of God. It can be called as the phenomenology of the soul to achieve its liberation. It consists of two important stages, the first, being unconsciously going through the materiality of the earthly life and the other is getting matured at the worldly level opting to reach the God. The path of liberation of the soul is en tour. The first stage is about to go through at the material realm and the second is an immanent idealism that emerges out from the first voluntarily. Is it not again a materialism from below and an idealism from above! A justification for earthly life, a necessary role for temporal life, a divine touch upon empirical life etc are the strong points of Saiva Siddhanta. Although the thesis that the world has been created by God to help the souls to get an opportunity to undergo the fortunes and misfortunes and thus to learn out them is itself interesting, it also has another justification that as per the earlier disposition of Tamil thought, one cannot escape the effects of karma. Consequently, there must be a space for the karmic world. One descends first to ascend afterwards. Ultimately, Saiva Siddhanta says that the karmic world pushes you to the spiritual realm. So it is experience and extinguish.

Another pertinent concept in Saiva Siddhanta that vocally speaks for the aliveness of the material world is the concept of Sakti or the female principle in Saivism. The concept of Sakti is complete in itself, as the source of creation, dynamism of the world and also the fountain head of grace in Saiva thought. She is the embodiment of iccha, kriya and jnana, thus the entire spectrum of earthly living. Sakti is maya, Mahamaya or Mahamayi, a positive principle in Saiva

Siddhanta. The positive role of Sakti is recognized and she stands insurmountable in Saiva thought.

Saiva Siddhanta philosophy assimilates into itself the earlier continental achievements of philosophies such as Samkhya, Jainism and Buddhism and further organically grows out of them into the next stage. The Samkhya parinama of the world from Prakriti-maya, the Jaina plurality of souls and its conception of karma, and the Buddhist idea of anatmavada softened to annihilation of anavam etc are flexibly internalized into Saiva philosophy. The philosophical synthesis reached by Siddhanta consists of materialist moments and idealist moments.

Saiva Siddhanta is a complete feudal philosophy because it contains the social gradations thoroughly assimilated and made into philosophical concepts. The fourfold conceptual classification is perfectly worked out in Saiva Siddhanta. The concept of Gradual or Stacial Maturation (Pari-pakkuvam) is an interesting concept that incorporates, integrates and transforms the social classification into philosophical classification. [The four Ways, the stages of Bhakti as Sariyai, Kiriya, Yogam and Jnanam, the levels reached Saalokam, Samiippiyam, Sarupam and Sayuchiyam etc).

The Philosophical Implications of the Making of Tamil Identity in Modern Period

As the discussions above indicate, the dialectics of materialism from below and idealism from above has different meanings in differing historical epochs. Their social implications too are varying. However, it can be said that it serves as the philosophical expression of the Tamil cultural identity withstanding the historical changes that have occurred in the history of the Tamils.

During the colonial modern conditions, the Tamil philosophical paradigm has once again asserted itself as well as it has undergone certain significant modifications. The most important aspect of the development in late 19th and early 20th centuries is the attempts to revisit the past and constructing the Tamil identity. The Tamil interest in constructing the identity informs the confidence of the Tamils in their cultural past in terms of asserting themselves at the face of the western culture that was here in the name of colonialism. On the other hand, the debates and modifications on questions of identity indicate the problems the Tamils had in terms of their willingness to undergo the modernization to which they got exposed. There were many attempts of asserting the identity and encountering the western culture.

Every emerging social group of Tamil country under colonial conditions has tried to appropriate the Tamil philosophical past in its own way, making itself prominent in the construction of Tamil identity. It is a type of cultural politics revived conserving certain moments of the past and modernizing the Tamil social aspirations. We can refer to at least Three notable social articulations, in this regard. The First is the trend that centered upon the Saivite leanings and that which desired to see the Tamil identity as the Saivite identity. Arumuga Navalar of Srilanka, Manonmaniam Sundaram Pillai and Maralmalai Adikal are the most vocal articulations of this trend. In the last decades of 19th century, the Saivite scholarship made use of the Siddhanta concept accepting the special ontological status of the world, went for adapting the Saiva

Siddhanta to modern western philosophies such as positivism, pragmatism and utilitarianism. It has to be mentioned that Saiva Siddhanta indeed had a materialist space from below for the knowledge of earthly sciences and the philosophies related to the empirical world. The Saivites made use of the materialist inner space to inherit the western empirical philosophies. In their next move, they asserted the spiritual supremacy of their own religion to the western one.

The second modern trend is that which inherited the secular Sangam tradition along with the ancestry of the Tamil language, thus placed the classical Tamil tradition at the center of its construction of the Tamil identity. The Dravidian intellectuals are the prominent representatives of this trend.

The third trend is the one picked up by the Dalit and Marxist intellectuals who identified themselves with the subaltern classes and castes. Ayothee Das Pandithar, for example, placed the Buddhist heritage at the center of his construction of the Tamil identity. The Marxists such as Naa. Vanamamalai brought the folk culture of the Tamils into the discussions about Tamil identity.

The competing and contesting trends of Tamil identity actually register the different ways of combining the materialist and idealist aspects of the Tamil philosophical traditions. The Saiva school resurrects and tries to retain the feudal conservative component under new conditions. The Dravidian scholars attempt to revive the romantic and secular substratum of the Tamil philosophical tradition. The Dalit and Marxist scholars revert to the subaltern and critical components of the Tamil philosophical corpus. Tamil identity, in this way, is under an intense debate. This debate continues and it is yet produce its enduring outcomes.

Conclusion

I have tried to elucidate in this lecture that the proto-materialist substratum of the Tamil culture has actively asserted itself to keep its identity in tact on the one hand and interacted with the continental trends of philosophy on the other hand. Even in the most recent period, it has asserted and interacted with the western trends. The debate around Tamil identity contains a moment of continuation with the past as well as its desire to modernize and post modernize itself.