

# REFERENCES TO THE RAMAYANA IN ANCIENT TAMIL LITERATURE

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Two great masterpieces of India put Sanskrit on the map of world literature, the **Pancatantra** and the **Ramayana**.<sup>1</sup> The **Ramayana** is the *Adi-kavya* and the model and fountainhead of all Sanskrit poetry and drama and inspirer of the literatures in all Indian languages.<sup>2</sup> For ages it has been passed down orally from generation to generation. This story has the great distinction of having spread all over Asia and unifying the people who are of different language, culture and geographical region. The unifying factor is basic human emotions. Besides, it is also lofty in various general aspects of ordinary life, like time, language, literature, religion, age, economics and education.<sup>3</sup>

It was Valmiki who gave the Rama-story that was prevalent among the people great prominence by giving it a literary form. He made it into a great *itihasa* in the Sanskrit language. Through the ages it has gained popularity and is now found in epic form in 300 different languages.<sup>4</sup> The different **Ramayanas** were composed in different periods of time, in differing cultural situations with varying religious leanings. These depict the different stages of development in society, religion and traditions.<sup>5</sup>

References to the **Ramayana** story are found in the **Rg Veda** itself. Later, they are also found in the **Jataka Tales** written in the Prakrit language for the purpose of spreading the Buddhist religion. Faber is of the opinion that the **Jataka Tales** belong to the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. In other words they are placed before Valmiki. He also thinks that the **Dasaratha Jataka** must be the germ for the **Ramayana** of Valmiki. Dinesh Candra Sen also agrees with Faber's views.<sup>6</sup>

## 1.1 *The Ramayana of Valmiki*

Valmiki was the cause for the spread of the Rama-story among the people, by giving it a literary form. He is celebrated as the *adi kavi* (first poet) and his **Ramayana** as the *adi kavya* (the first *kavya* or poem). The Rama that Valmiki characterised was a hero with distinctive abilities and qualities, born of the Ikshuvaku race. But those who came after Valmiki made him an incarnation of Tirumal.<sup>7</sup>

## 1.2 *Kamparamayanam*

The **Kamparamayanam** is hailed as the best **Ramayana** written in Tamil. This great work was composed by Kampar who has been praised for ages by scholars, poets and the common people as *kaviccakaravartti*. This poet of the later Chola period (9<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D.) was born as the son of Atittan at Tiruvaluntur. He had the benevolent Cataiyan of Vennainallur as his patron.<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to come to a definite conclusion regarding the date of Kampar. There are many views that place him in the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D., the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

Kampar's **Ramayanam** contains six *kandams*, divided into 116 *patalams* with a total of 10436 verses. He depicts Rama as an incarnation of Tirumal and hence named it **Iramavataram**.<sup>9</sup> Though he took his story from Valmiki, he has changed and made adjustments to it to suit Tamil cultural traditions as well as his own ideas and aims.<sup>10</sup> For this creation of Kampar the **Valmiki Ramayana** was only the source. Kampar's epic is not a translation of Valmiki's *kavya*.<sup>11</sup>

**Kamparamayanam** ends with six *kandams*. He did not sing the **Uttarakanda** of Valmiki. Scholars are of the opinion that the Tamil version of this *kandam* that is available today was sung by the famous Ottakkuttar who lived in the 12<sup>th</sup> century around 1163 A.D.

The manner in which the **Ramayana** story took its hold on the culture of the Tamils is still the subject of research. Yet, the **Ramayana** story is not new to the Tamils. There are evidences to show that the influence of the **Ramayana** has existed ever since the Sangam period. These may be identified through a detailed examination of ancient Tamil literature.

## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

- (i) This paper examines the extent or frequency of the **Ramayana** references found in ancient Tamil literature.
- (ii) The materials thus examined are collected and explained.
- (iii) This paper tries to establish that as far as Tamil literature is concerned, though the **Ramayana** story has made a great impact during the time of Kampar, it was already known as early as the Sangam period.

## 3.0 METHODOLOGY

Methodology is the orderly procedure used to collect particulars or facts in a detailed and exact manner, so as to use them for further examination. Generally two research methods are used. One is library research which is based on texts already published and the other is field work. Since this study uses published works and their literary interpretation, library research is the chief, basic method used.

The necessary details have been collected using the documentation method. Through this the texts concerned and their commentaries have been examined so that besides the detailed facts and information clear interpretations are obtained. The information thus collected have been analysed using the synthesis method. Using this the researcher is able to classify the details gathered.

## 4.0 REFERENCES TO THE RAMAYANA IN ANCIENT TAMIL LITERATURE

Chronologically, Tamil literature may be divided into three main groups, namely ancient, Medieval and Modern literatures.<sup>12</sup> Among these, only those works that fall within the ancient period are studied in this paper (Please see Appendix: Table 1).

These again may be divided as Sangam literature, Ethical works and Ancient epics.

### 4.1 Sangam Literature

Literature composed during the centuries beginning from about 500 B.C to 200 A.D is known as Sangam literature.<sup>13</sup> It consists of the Eight Anthologies and the Ten Idylls or **Pattuppattu**. Among these, four anthologies, namely **Akananuru**, **Purananuru**, **Kalittokai** and **Paripatal** and only Maturakkanci from the Ten Idylls contain references to the **Ramayana** story.

**(i) Akananuru**

The **Akananuru**, placed first in the list of **Ettuttokai** (Eight Anthologies)<sup>14</sup> contains 400 verses of *akam* or love poetry. Ancient Tamil literary tradition divided poetry or literature into *akam* and *puram*. *Akam* refers to all aspects of as of a couple's love, beginning with their meeting, subsequent meetings in secret, their marriage and thereafter. This experience is personal to the couple only.<sup>15</sup>

In its first section known as **Kalirruyanainirai**, the poet Maturait Tamilk Kuttanar Katuvan Mallanar refers to a **Ramayana** incident. This reference is contained in the following lines:

Like the banyan with many aerial roots, on the shores of the large roaring sea near the very ancient point (of Tiruvanai) belonging to the Pandyas with the valorous spear, fell quiet for the consultation of Rama, ever victorious in battle. (*Akam*. 70:13-16)

This **Ramayana** incident is used as a comparison. During courtship, the hero came with ardour and love, to meet his heroine. He braved many obstacles to do so. This caused gossip in the village. But once the couple got married, the gossip stopped like the birds stopped their noise when Rama held his consultation under the banyan tree. This was mentioned to the heroine by her friend.<sup>16</sup>

Once when Rama was on the southern shores of India, he held a discussion with the *vanara* chiefs under a banyan tree. The birds on the tree made great noise but Rama, with his divine quality made them quiet so that the noise did not cause any hindrance to their meeting.<sup>17</sup>

Here, the birds stopping their noise is used as a comparison to the ceasing of the gossip.

**(ii) Purananuru**

The fourth text listed in the Eight Anthologies is **Purananuru**<sup>18</sup> which deals with *puram* or matters other than love. *Puram* refers to external matters and experiences that may be known to others as well. It speaks of one's behavior towards society and deals with *aram* or *dharma* and *porul* or *artha*. Hence this class of literature sings of heroism, charity or benevolence, ethics, rules of governance and the like.<sup>19</sup> In this also, a poem by Unpoti Pacunkutaiyar contains a reference to an incident from the **Ramayana**.

When the violent *asura* abducted Sita  
Who accompanied Rama (capable) of great anger,  
Her beautiful jewels were dropped to the ground.  
Like the red-faced monkey hoardes  
That found and wore them. ....

It is said that Sita, when abducted by Ravana, wished to let Rama know her whereabouts. So she removed the pieces of jewellery she was wearing and threw them down one by one. The jewels thus scattered were picked by the monkeys in the forest. But since they did not know which jewel is worn on which part of the body, they wore them on the wrong limbs.<sup>20</sup>

This is used as a comparison to explain the generosity of a Chola king and the ignorance of a poor *porunan's* relatives. The King Ceruppali Erinta Ilancetenni gave various ornaments and wealth to a *porunan* who sang his praises. The *porunan's* relatives receiving them, wore finger rings on their ears, ear-ornaments on their fingers, waistband round their necks and necklaces round their waists, so that it made those who saw them, laugh.<sup>21</sup>

**(iii) Kalittokai**

In the list of eight anthologies, the seventh is the **Kalittokai** also known as **Nurraimpatu Kali** (150 *Kali* verses).<sup>22</sup> It consists of 150 verses, including the benedictory verse. These were sung by five poets each singing on one particular *tinai*. *Tinai* refers to a particular division of land, namely the hilly area, grassland, agricultural tracts, maritime region and the desert with the aspect of love considered appropriate to it.<sup>23</sup> In this text, a verse in the *kurinci* section sung by Kapilar, mentions an incident related to a **Ramayana** character, Ravana.

The wet-haired Shiva who bent the Himalayas as a bow,  
Sat with Uma on the tall hill.  
Once, the ten-headed, King of the *asuras*  
Placed his large arms beautified with bangles  
Under the mountain, but unable to lift it  
(or let go) he suffered .....<sup>24</sup>

Here, Ravana's effort to lift the Himalayas where Shiva lives, is used as a simile.

A hero prolongs his secret courtship without making arrangements for their marriage. One day, the friend of his heroine decides to talk to him alone so as to induce him to think of marriage. She says to him, "Ravana, the king of the *rakshasas*, placing his strong hands under the Himalayas where Lord Shiva sits tried to lift it. But he was unable and suffered (pain). Similarly, an elephant in rut seeing the *venkai* tree covered with flowers and resembling a tiger, became angry and thrust its tusks under the tree and tried to fell it. But the tusks were caught in the trunk of the tree that stood firm. Unable to free itself the elephant trumpeted loud, its voice resounding along the slopes. O Lord of the hill-slopes with such elephants! Listen to what I have to say!" Here, the elephant's act of piercing the tree-trunk till its tusks got caught in it and its cry of anger and pain are compared to Ravana slipping his hands under the Himalayas and his cry of pain when he could not withdraw them.

**(iv) Paripatal**

The Sangam anthology called **Paripatal** or **Elupatu Paripatal** (70 verses in *paripatal* metre) is the last in the list of **Eight Anthologies**.<sup>25</sup> The main theme of these poems is love and they deal with lovers sporting on the hill-slopes and the river. The poems are entitled **Vaiyai**, the river that runs beside Maturai, **Cevvel** or Lord Murukan who resides on Tirupparankunram, a hill near Maturai and **Tirumal** who resides at Tirumaliruncolai also a hill near that city.<sup>26</sup> In this collection, the poet Nappannanar mentions that the story of Akalya was painted in the temple of Tirupparankunram.

In his poem on **Cevvel** or Murukan he describes the Tirupparankunram, the hill belonging to the Pandyas and sacred to Murukan. Devotees who climb the hill and go round the temple, seeing the painting say,

This is Indra as cat, she is Akalya.  
He is Guatama; due to his anger  
(she) turned to stone"<sup>27</sup>

This is a clear reference to the story of Akalya whose beauty attracted Indra who seduced her in the form of her husband Gautama. When the sage who returned earlier than was expected, Indra turned himself into a cat and tried to leave the scene. But Gautama cursed both of them and by that curse Akalya was turned to stone. Later, when the dust from the feet of Rama touched her, she regained her feminine form.

**(v) Maturaikkanci**

The sixth text in the list of **Ten Idylls** known as **Pattuppattu** in Tamil, is the **Maturaikkanci**.<sup>28</sup> This is the longest of the Ten Idylls. It is made up of 782 lines of *aciriyappa* metre mixed with lines of *vancippa*. The aim of this work was to make the Pandya King (Talaiyalankanattue Ceruvenra pandiyan Netunceliyan) realise the transitory nature of this world and to make him think of higher ideals of life.<sup>29</sup> In this idyll, Mankuti Marutanar also sings the praises of the subjects, just rule and valour of the Pandya King. While describing his valour, the poet compares him to the sage Agastya.

O Valiant King, who is a decendent of Agastya.  
Also comparable to that ancient, eminent sage  
on the (Potiyil) hill with waterfalls,  
who made the King of the South (Ravana)  
To move further south.<sup>30</sup>

This is a reference to the ancient story that once, when Ravana ruled the southern realm, he tyrannized his subjects. So Sage Agastya entered into a musical competition with the *asura* who was able to win Shiva's grace with his singing. But in the contest the sage was able to melt the Potiyil hill<sup>31</sup> with his singing. Having lost, Ravana ran away to Lanka. Preventing Ravana from ruling the Pandya Kingdom is a great, courageous act. Since Ravana ruled the southern regions, he is also known as *Tennavan* (the Southerner). This name is found in other texts as well.<sup>32</sup> However, this incident is not found in the **Ramayana**.

**4.2 Ethical Literature**

The earliest available ethical works were composed from about 100-500 A.D.<sup>33</sup>

This period is usually referred to as the age that overlaps the last two centuries of the Sanggam period. Some of the works composed during these five centuries have been collectively called **Patinen Kilkanakku**, meaning literally "18 Works of Short Verses". Of these, five sing of love, one of war and the rest (12) of ethical principles and behavior.<sup>34</sup> The ethical work **Palamoli Nanuru** contains a reference to a **Ramayana** incident.

**(i) Palamoli Nanuru (400 Proverbs)**

In the list of the 18 ethical literature this text of 400 Proverbs composed by Munrurai Araiyanar is placed third.<sup>35</sup> In this anthology of 400 verses, including the benedictory verse, each one ends with a proverb. Hence its name meaning "Four Hundred Proverbs". All the verses are in the *venpa* metre. Among the **Kilkanakku** works, it is ranked as the third in order of importance after **Tirukkural** and **Nalatiyar**.<sup>36</sup> The **Ramayana** incident where Vibhishana the younger brother of Ravana takes refuge with Rama is mentioned in one of the verses.

Vibhishana who follows *dharma* (*aram*) advises Ravana to free Sita. But Ravana would not listen. So after all efforts, he leaves Lanka and takes refuge with Rama, the champion of *dharma*. Finally he was crowned King of Lanka.

The younger brother of Lanka's King.  
Becoming the friend of Rama wearing garlands of gold.  
Gained the lordship of Lanka itself.  
Who has not gained greatness by befriending the great?<sup>37</sup>

This advice is of greater significance to kings who should listen to the advice of wise men with experience. Here Vibhishana is used as an example of a prince who gained by befriending the good and the wise.

### 4.3 Ancient Epics

During about the same period as the early Ethical literature (100-500 A.D) the ancient epics, notably the **Cilappatikaram** and the **Manimekalai** were composed.<sup>38</sup> These too aim at instilling certain ethical behavior associated with religious practices.

#### (i) *Cilappatikaram*

The first epic in Tamil, the **Cilappatikaram** was composed by Ilanko Atikal in the second century A.D.<sup>39</sup> It is hailed as containing all the three aspects of Tamil – *iyal* (prose), *icai* (music) and *natakam* (dance and drama).<sup>40</sup> Its aims are also three-fold. They are:- *aram* itself would cause death to an unjust ruler, a chaste lady is praised by worthy people and the consequences of past *karma* cannot be avoided.

The story centres around Kannaki, a maiden of the trader class. Kovalan who marries her becomes enamoured of Matavi, a *ganika*. Having lost his wealth due to his lavishness, he returns to his wife. Both leave their city of Pukar and reach Maturai. While trying to sell his wife's anklet (*cilampu*) he is cheated by the royal goldsmith and is killed as a thief. Kannaki seeks justice in the Pandya court and then curses that his capital is burnt to ashes. Later, the Cera king builds a temple in her honour. This work also contains references to some **Ramayana** incidents.

On their way to Maturai, they meet the Jaina nun Kavunti Atikal and continue their journey with her. At one place they meet Kocikan who brings a letter from Matavi. He tells them that the city of Pukar is saddened by Kovalan's departure, just like Ayodhya was saddened by the departure of Rama who obeyed his father's words.

“Like Ayodhya (distressed by) its separation  
From the Victorious One (Rama) who  
Went to the forest, difficult to cross,  
Thinking, “Obeying my father is the best act;  
All else, even the Kingdom, is trifle.”<sup>41</sup>

Here, Kovalan leaving Pukar with his wife and the sorrow of the people of that city is compared to the helpless sorrow of the people of Ayodhya when Rama went to the forest with Sita and Lakshmana.

Later in the epic Kavunti Atikal relates to Kovalan the pains of life that one goes through and tries to point out that his situation is not so intolerable. While saying these, she uses the **Ramayana** story. She says,

“Tirumal, the father of the Lord of Vedas (Brahma),  
At his father's command, left with his wife,  
Then losing her, experienced great sorrow  
Do you not know this?”<sup>42</sup>

Rama is mentioned as Tirumal and He Himself had suffered because of His separation from Sita. Hence Kovalan who has his wife with him should consider himself more fortunate.

In another instance in the **Cilappatikaram**, Rama is identified with Tirumal. When Kannaki was entrusted in the care of Matari, they go with the latter to the outskirts of the city of Maturai. Kovalan then leaves for the city with one of the anklets of Kannaki to be sold there. But there, due to the deceit of a goldsmith, he is killed and Matari notices certain ill omens. Wishing to avoid calamity she arranges a *kuravai* dance to worship Tirumal, the deity of the cowherds. During this dance they also sing the praises of Tirumal mentioning his victories in his different *avatas*.

With his brother he went to the forest, reddening  
His two feet that crossed the three worlds.  
He destroyed the Fortress of Co and the  
defences of ancient Lanka.<sup>43</sup>

This tendency is also found when the victory of the Cera King Cenkuttuvan is praised. The three wars that Tirumal is said to have participated in are mentioned. They are the *deva-asura* war after the churning of the Milky Ocean, the war in Lanka which has the sea as its moat, and the Bharata war in which he was the charioteer.<sup>44</sup> This king's war with the Arya kings is said to have lasted only 18 *nalikais*.<sup>45</sup> The epic **Cilappatikaram** again compares this to the three wars mentioned above. "The war between the *devas* and *asuras* lasted 18 years; that between Rama and Ravana lasted 18 months; the Bharata war (between the Pandavas and Duryodhana) lasted 18 days; but that between Ceran Cenkuttuvan and Kanaga-Vijaya took 18 *nalikais*.<sup>46</sup>

## (ii) **Manimekalai**

The **Manimekalai** composed in the 7<sup>th</sup> century may be considered the second Tamil epic. The story is a continuation of the **Cilappatikaram**.<sup>47</sup> After Kovalan's death, Matavi with their daughter Manimekalai enters the Buddhist faith and renouncing worldly lives, they become nuns. However, the Chola prince Utayakumaran was attracted to Manimekalai. To avoid his advances she escapes to the island of Manipallavam with the help of the deity Manimekalai, after whom she was named. There she realises her former birth and receives the *amutacurapi*, a miraculous bowl that never runs out of food. Later, she returns to the Chola capital Pukar and feeds the hungry. This work by Cittalaic Cattamar also contains references to **Ramayana** incidents.

Kayacantikai, a woman belonging to the Vidyadhara class of beings, was afflicted by the disease *yanaitti* which caused insatiable hunger. When she met Manimekalai, she related her problem and begged for help. In order to explain the seriousness of her hunger, she uses an incident in the Rama story.

When the Tall One born on earth (as Rama)  
and unconscious of the divinity  
Blocked the seas, difficult to overcome,  
All the high hills brought and thrown in by the monkeys  
Entered the stomach of the sea resided by the deity.

This is a reference to Rama as an *avatara* of Netumal or Vishnu, in human form with the respective characteristics. But the monkeys bringing hills and rocks to fill the sea to form a bridge is used as a comparison. Just as the sea takes in all the things – large and small – thrown into it, all the food that she ate could not satisfy her hunger.<sup>48</sup>

Manimekalai, reaching Vanci, meets the exponents of various religions and philosophies and requests them to explain the finer points of their teachings. The exponent of Logic mentions the various laws of logic. One such is the Law of Elimination which he explains with an example from the **Ramayana**.

To say "Rama won", it also means that  
Ravana who is *adharmic*, lost.<sup>49</sup>

While enumerating the different parks and gardens the Campati Vanam is also mentioned. It is said to be the park where Campati (the brother of Jadayu) who lost his wings because they were burnt by the angry heat of the sun.<sup>50</sup> "The beautiful large sea-ghat at Kumari built by the monkeys"<sup>51</sup> clearly refers to the monkeys building a bridge for Rama to cross over to Lanka.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

From the foregoing pages, it may be concluded that **Ramayana** incidents are not new to the Tamils. This paper shows that they have been referred to in Tamil literatures including the Sangam works which are the most ancient in Tamil. It is also evident that the Tamils had known the basic story even by the time Valmiki composed his epic. Besides, the study shows that Tamil literatures refer also to some incidents not found in Valmiki's work. Based on these findings, it may be deduced that **Ramayana** events were popular among the Tamils and they emerged as useful references in their literatures. Moreover, the concept that Rama is an *avatara* of Tirumal is also evident from this study. It is the general opinion of scholars that Valmiki depicted Rama as a human hero. Hence the depiction of Rama as an *avatara* in the Tamil literature of the same period is certainly worthy of special attention. Thus the Tamils have played a great role in showing Rama as Tirumal himself.

## Endnotes

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5. Valviyar Kalanciyam. 1991. Vol. 4, p. 117.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 1991. Vol. 4, p. 118.
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9. Ibid., Vol. 4, p. 121.
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16. Cuntara Canmukanar. 1990. Tamil Nul Tokuppuk Kalaik Kalanciyam, pp. 157 and 158; Akananuru: Kalirruyanai Nirai. 1945. With N.M. Venkatacamy Nattar's Commentary. Chennai, p. 167.
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24. Kalittokai: 38: 1-5.
25. Cuntara Canmukanar. 1990. Tamil Nul Tokuppuk Kalaik Kalanciyam, p. 323.
26. Ibid., pp. 345-347.
27. Paripatal: 19: 50-52.
28. Cuntara Canmukanar. 1990. Tamil Nul Tokuppuk Kalaik Kalanciyam, p. 190.
29. Balasubramaniam, C. 1959. Tamil Ilakkiya Varalaru, p. 63.
30. Maturaikkanci: 40-42.
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32. Maturaikkanci: 40-41.
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41. Cilappatikaram: 13: 63-65.
42. Ibid., 14: 46-49.
43. Ibid., 17:35: 2-4.
44. Ibid., 26: 237-238.
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46. Cilappatikaram: 27: 6-10.
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48. Manimekalai: 17: 9-12.
49. Ibid., 27: 53-54.
50. Ibid., 3: 53-54.
51. Ibid., 5: 37.