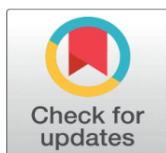


THE SOUNDSCAPE OF SANGAM: MUSICAL TRADITIONS AND THEIR SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO PATHITTUPATHU

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ABSTRACT

The Sangam literature, the earliest known in South India provides insights into the life of the people and the importance given to artistic activity during the time. The musical traditions embedded in the Sangam literature reveal a unique blend of nature and culture of the people who inhabited the landscapes. The musicians held esteemed status in society and the reference of which can be seen in Sangam works like Akanannuru, Puranannuru, pathittupathu, Cilapadikaram etc.

Keywords: Yazh, Pan, Paan, Tinai, Valaippattu

1. INTRODUCTION

The Sangam literature is the earliest known literature in South India. The Sangam period is a period of significant literary and cultural contributions particularly through the Sangam literature which is a collection of odes, lyrics and idylls written in Tamil. Sangam literature provides insights into the polity, economy and society of the early periods of Christian Era in South India. More than that the literature is significant as a source of all things related to the common man and his society that is his land, cattle, flora Fauna, his emotions, passions, ambitions, knowledge, professions, love, life, family, war, victory, death, grief and so on. This paper tries to analyse the musical traditions that embedded in the Sangam works which has a unique blend of nature and culture of the people who inhabited these landscapes.

The Sangam literary works have been classified into two major anthologies: Ettuthokai and Pathuppattu. Ettuthokai (meaning "Eight Anthologies") is a collection of 2,421 short poems grouped into eight distinct compilations, while Pathuppattu (meaning "Ten Idylls") is a collection of ten long, independent poems. These long poems often extend up to 800 lines, with the longest one found in Pathuppattu. The work chosen for study, pathittupathu, is the fourth book of Ettuthokai. The other texts included in Ettuthokai are: Narrinai, Kurunthokai, Ainkurunuru, Paripadal, Kalithokai, Akananuru, and Purananuru. The ten long poems included in Pathuppattu are: Thirumurugatrupadai, Porunaratrupadai,

Sirupanatrupadai, Perumpanatrupadai, Mullaippattu, Maduraikkanchi, Nedunalvada, Kurinchipattu, Pattinappalai, and Malaipadukadam (1)

The Sangam literary works are part of the ancient Tamil literary classification known as "Akam" (interior) and "Puram" (exterior). Akam literature primarily deals with themes of love (Sringara Rasa), while Puram focuses on heroism (Veera Rasa). One important subcategory of Akam literature is called "Uri," which explores various emotional stages of the lovers, such as union and separation. Another subcategory, known as "Muthal," describes the setting and time that influence these emotional states. Among all literary elements in Tamil literature, the depiction of place and time (desha-kaala varnana) holds special significance and plays a central role in conveying the emotional tone of the poetry.

The Tamil poets have beautifully classified the landscapes of Tamizhakam into five types — Kurinji, Mullai, Marutham, Palai, and Neithal — and used them to vividly portray different aspects of love (Sringara Rasa). This method of expression is considered highly captivating and artistic. To truly understand the greatness of Tamil literature, one must immerse themselves in the charming and poetic descriptions of these five landscape types. Kurinji refers to mountainous regions with abundant rainfall, where fruit-bearing trees and fragrant creepers like mullai (jasmine) grow in lush profusion. Poets have chosen this landscape as the setting for describing union in romantic love (Sambhoga Sringara). Mullai landscapes consist of forests and the adjoining regions. The women of these areas are portrayed as deeply devoted and committed to protecting their chastity, often wearing mullai flowers as a symbol of their virtue. Poets considered Mullai an ideal setting for depicting both union and separation in romantic love (Sambhoga and Vipralambha Sringara).

Marutham refers to regions with paddy fields and the areas surrounding them. Poets have mostly chosen this landscape to depict separation in romantic love (Vipralambha Sringara). In poems set in the Marutham landscape, the separation between the hero and heroine typically ends in reunion. The descriptions in the Palai landscape focus entirely on sorrowful separation (Vipralambha Sringara). Located between the Kurinji and Mullai regions, Palai refers to arid, barren wilderness areas. Since these regions are desolate, the men and women living there often wander to distant lands in search of necessities for survival, making separation a common and inevitable theme. Neithal refers to coastal regions with intense sunlight and numerous cool, shady groves that remain undisturbed. The natural elements of this landscape are inherently sensual and emotionally stirring. Because of this, poets often used the Neithal landscape to depict the sorrow and longing of heroines separated from their lovers. In short, Kurinji and Mullai were considered ideal landscapes by Tamil poets to depict the union of the hero and heroine, while Marutham, Palai, and Neithal were chosen to portray the various stages of sorrowful separation in their love. Tamil poets thus embraced these five regions as symbolic settings to vividly portray the full range of romantic emotions.(2)

Each society has had its own arrangements of music. Tamil music was called Pan or Paan which means a piece of music. Here Pan means "padal" (to sing) and paan means "pattu" that is song. Ancient Tamil music or the Sangam music was associated with regions, individuals and time. The people listened and enjoyed the musical sounds of nature - the humming of bees, the droning of the Beetles, the cooing of the cuckoos, the hooting of the torrents etc. All the five tinai (the regions) kurinji, mullai, marutham, neithal and palai had five distinct types of music and musical instruments, Tamil musical notes were classified as kurinjippan, palaippan, mullaipan, marudappan and neitharppan. According to the time of a day it was classified as iravuppan, kalaippan and malaippan.(3)

They had their Tamil version of saptaswarams i.e kural, thutham, kaikilai, ulai, vilari, and tharam. Male artists were called panar and female ones as parathiyar or padinneyar. Ancient panars were companions and advisors of rulers. There was a separate class of bards known as vairiyar.(4) Bards sang in praise of kings in their palaces and in public assemblies of the village. It is evident that when the guardian tree of a hostile ruler was felled, the vairiyar used to sing song in merriment. Paripadal is a collection of songs and Tamil verses set to music. Womenfolk of the panar were called viraliyar. Thus there were panar, porunar, vairiyar, kodiyar, viraliyar etc. ived during the period. (5) These musicians had high esteem in the society and were paid lavishly by the rulers which is evident from the sangam works. Structure of music, musical instruments, methods of singing, the circumstances under which music developed etc. have been cited in these texts.

Both vocal and instrumental music were recognisable and renowned during the Sangam age. Ettuthokai, Aganannuru and Pathupattu talk about all four kinds of instruments; string, wind, skin headed percussion and metal headed concussion. They were thorkaruvai, thulaikaruvai, narambukaruvai and kachakaruvai. A few of them were muzhavu, aakuli, pathalai and ellari that constitute skin headed percussion. Thoombu and kuzhal constitute wood wind instruments. Kodu constitutes stringed variety and paandi, a cymbal that represents metallic/brass instrument.(6) Epic

Silapadhikaram mentions about kuzhal, yaazh, thannumai, muzhavu and aamandhirigai as the chief instruments played during the performance of Madhavi. Silapadhikaram is considered as a musical and dance treatise and laid the foundation of Carnatic music. Stringed instruments are yal. And there were kurinjial, mullaiyal, marudamyal, neitalyal and palaiyal. That means separate yals were used in separate tinai. Likewise, there were kuzhal and parai. (7)

As far as the type of songs are concerned, they were depending on events and ceremonies. While worshipping God, so as to ensure a happy life with their consorts or relief from tiresomeness, to win one's love they sang hymns. In Paripadal, kolai denotes songs. Sangam works mentioned different varieties of songs. For example, while swinging in the 'unchal', on ceremonial occasions like wedding. Mangalavaltupadal were sang on auspicious occasions. Women pounding rice resorted to vallaippuattu, to evict animals from the wounded soldiers in the battlefield they sang Vilaripal. To evict evil spirits, they sang kanjipal. Alolam is a type of song sang at the fields to protect the paddy from birds' attack.

Pathittupathu, the classical Tamil poetic work and one of the Eight Anthologies in Sangam literature, provides valuable insights into the music and musicians of ancient Tamil society, focusing on the instruments, genres, and contexts in which they are created. The Pathittupathu consists of ten collections of ten verses each. Of these, only collections two to nine have come to us. The tenth collection has not survived. Each song in each collection has eight to ten lines. It is sung in the simplest Tamil language, reflecting the lifestyle of the ancient Tamil society without any disregard for the rules of Tamil grammar. Each song is sung in the most ancient Tamil language. In the Ettuthokai collection, after Kurumthokai and Ainkurunuru, the next oldest is Pathittupathu. No poet who lived after the fourth century AD has participated in composing the songs in Pathittupathu. The Pathittupathu glorifies the achievements of the ten kings who ruled Chera madalam during the Sangam period. The Cheramandalam included the lands that lay between the seacoast from Mangalapuram (modern Mangalore) in the north to Kanyakumari in the south and western ghats.

The last part in each ten collection of Pathittupathu is Pathikam (poem). In that part, known as the Pathikam, the names of the king and the poet who sing the song, the information about the awards the poet received as a result of the song, and the time when each king ruled are given. Various historical elements that are not in the songs are included in the Patikam. The Patikam must have been created when the songs that were scattered in many books were compiled and organized. The documents for the things mentioned in the Patikam may have been lost. (8)

Pathittupathu gives insights into the music and musicians of ancient Tamil Society. In ancient Tamil society, music played a significant role in various contexts, including royal courts, festivals, and agricultural settings. The Panars, a community of musicians, were known for their expertise in playing the Yazh (Veena), a stringed instrument. The Periyazh, a type of Yazh with 21 strings, was specifically mentioned in Pathittupathu as an instrument used to sing songs like the Uzhinjathina, which celebrated the heroic deeds of kings who did not surrender to their enemies. The use of the Yazh in these contexts highlights its importance in ancient Tamil music culture.

The Pathittupathu also describes the use of other musical instruments, such as the drum, peruvankiyam, ellari, akuli, thatta, and kuzhal, which were used in Padalathura performances. Additionally, the Thannumai (Mridangam), a percussion instrument, was played by ploughmen in the fields, demonstrating the integration of music into everyday life. The text also mentions various music genres, including the Pala Ragam and Thazhanchi, which were used to praise warriors on the battlefield and evoke emotions of love and compassion.

The ninth song of third collection sings like this, taking part in the festivals celebrated without fail, the 'Koothars' with their 'Yazh' will stop at every crowded street, and sing songs to the tune of their music. In the first song of fifth collection, we can see that the children of panas set out carrying the curved yazh (type of veena), whose strings are pulled tight and whose sound is in tune with the song. The koothar will walk with a drum with a sound matching the song, a 'peruvankiyam' an instrument made of bamboo rings strung on the trunk, and other musical instruments on one side, and a bag containing traditional instruments such as ellari, akuli, thatta and a kuzhal for the 'padalathura' on the other side, and a pole tied to its shoulder.

In the sixth song of fifth collection goes like this. The young pana girls will sing in the 'periyazh' (a type of large yazh with twenty-one strings) with their strings tied so tightly that they could hear the melody, will sing the 'Uzhinjathina' (a song sung with yazh that celebrates the heroic deeds of the king who did not give in to his enemies) in various ragas about the nature of the king who does not surrender to his enemies. In the seventh song of sixth collection, panar invite viralis to visit the King Cheran. Here panar were described as singing the Pala ragam, strung together with the strings of the Periyazh, which Panar always carries in his hand and has been playing with his fingers for a long time, and praising the warriors on the battlefield, strumming the flute and singing the Thazhanchi in the Iniya ragam. The fifth song of seventh collection describes the singers who with the use of the Palayazh, that produce sweet sounds, as singing the

Palaragam mixed with Karunarasam in various ways. The tenth song of ninth collection describes how the peacocks in the marshy fields (marutham land), thinking it was thunder, swayed as the ploughmen played the musical instrument called thannumai (mridangam) in the fields, and the warriors' thadariparas resounded clearly.

The role of musicians in ancient Tamil society was multifaceted. They entertained and praised kings in royal courts, performed at crowded streets and public gatherings, and even played instruments while working in the fields. The Panars, in particular, were known for their expertise in playing the Yazh and singing songs that celebrated the bravery and generosity of kings. The Pathittupathu provides a rich glimpse into the music and musicians of ancient Tamil society, highlighting the importance of music in various contexts and demonstrating the complexity and diversity of ancient Tamil music culture. (9)

The Pathittupathu provides a rich glimpse into the complex dynamics of patronage and reward in ancient Tamil society, highlighting the importance of poetry and poets in shaping the cultural and social landscape of the time. The work also describes the rewards given to each poet who composed the ten songs in every decade, highlighting the generosity and appreciation of the patrons, typically kings and chieftains, along with the prestigious status occupied by the poets in that society. The rewards received by the poets varied, but often included land grants, gold coins, and other forms of wealth. For instance, Kapiyaru Kapiyanar was rewarded with forty lakhs of gold coins and a gift from the tax collected, for singing about Narmudi Cheralathan. Similarly, Paranan was honored with the experience of the Umbar forest and the position of Guru (teacher) to King Chenguttuvan's son, Kuttuvan Cheral for singing about Cheral Chenguttuvan. Pathikam 6 gives reference that as a reward for singing the poem, Cheralathan gave the poet nine tolas of gold and a few gold coins for ornaments, and in addition, he was allowed to live in the palace. Pathikam 7 mentions that as a reward, Chelva Kadumko Azhiyathan, the King gave a hundred thousand kanams of land called Cherupuram and, in addition to that, he gave the poet Kapilar the right to all the directions that could be seen from the hill called 'Nanna'.

The Pathittupathu also highlights the close relationship between poets and their patrons. Poets would often request specific rewards or favors from their patrons, and the patrons would generously grant these requests. For example, Arichil Kizhar requested the position of Amatya from King Perumcheral Irumborai and was honored with the position. Similarly, Perumkuntur Kizhar was rewarded with thirty-two thousand kanams of land, cows, bulls, and warriors to protect them, by King Ilam Cheral Irumborai. The rewards received by poets not only reflected their artistic merit but also their social status and influence. Poets were highly respected members of society, and their praise and commemoration of their patrons' achievements were seen as essential to their reputation and legacy.

In essence, music in the Sangam age was not a separate or isolated art form but an organic expression of life itself. Unlike modern perceptions of music as performance-oriented, Sangam music was interwoven with daily practices, rituals, agriculture, warfare, love, and devotion. It drew its identity from the landscapes (tinai) that structured Sangam poetry — kurinji, mullai, marutham, palai, and neithal — with each region shaping distinct musical forms, instruments, and moods. Music was also classified according to time, occasion, and emotion, showing its role as a medium through which people interpreted their surroundings, relationships, and lived experiences. Thus, Sangam music was essentially a cultural language through which nature and society were understood and expressed.

The paper concludes that Sangam music was a reflection of society itself—rooted in landscapes, daily life, and emotions, while also serving as a tool of prestige, power, and spiritual expression. It was both an artistic practice and a social institution, shaping identity and sustaining cultural memory. The blending of art, history, and society shows that music was not isolated but part of a holistic worldview in ancient Tamilakam. In conclusion, we can see that the music tradition during the sangam period is closely associated with the everyday life of the people and it reveals a unique blend of nature and culture of the people who inhabited these landscapes. This shows how the people of ancient Tamilakam connected their art directly to their natural surroundings and lived experiences.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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