

A BUDDHIST WOMAN'S PATH TO ENLIGHTENMENT

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Buddhists and Jains have been contributing to the development of Tamil language and literature from time immemorial. Pālai Pātiya Kautamanār is considered to be one of the Buddhist poets who has composed some of the Cankam poems which are dated roughly between 300 B.C. and 300 A.D. A significant contribution by the Buddhists to Tamil literary texts is the narrative called Maṇimēkalai, which is traditionally believed to have been composed between 200 A.D. and 500 A.D. This major narrative was written by Cīttalai Cāttan. Uppsala University organised a workshop on this narrative in May 25 - 29, 1995. The papers presented at this workshop and the proceedings have been edited by Peter Schalk. The Editor in chief has given an appropriate and attractive title to the Volume namely.

A Buddhist Woman's Path to Enlightenment

The Maṇimēkalai is a narrative poem describing the circumstances under which Maṇimēkalai, the daughter of Kōvalan renounced the world and took the vows of a Buddhist nun. Her path to enlightenment is the main theme of the narrative. Having gone through the mundane life, she at last sat at the feet of the venerable abbot and learnt the doctrines of Buddha. She was convinced that the doctrines were true and was prepared to take refuge in the threefold gem, the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Having learnt the duties of a nun, she was ceremoniously admitted into the order. This great narrative was the subject of an interesting and serious academic seminar at Uppsala. The outcome is an elaborate study on the narrative Maṇimēkalai as a historical

document for the situation of Buddhism in Tamilnadu in the 6th century A.D., historical problems regarding the text and problems regarding its authorship, genre, dating, historical setting and sectarian affiliation.

The Chief Editor, Peter Schalk, has written a long and critical introduction to this volume. In the introduction, Peter Schalk, has highlighted the salient features of all the papers in the Volume. It is methodically and meticulously written so that the readers would be guided to read through the entire papers with ease and clarity.

Students of History of Tamil literature would have naturally expected that the problem of dating Maṇimēkalai would have been settled at this workshop. But this volume indicates that the debate on date of Maṇimēkalai would continue. The editor in Chief has summarised the contributors' opinions as follows: "To sum up, there are then three main scholarly traditions of dating, an early one that places that Maṇimēkalai in pre-pallava period a

middle one that focuses on the 6th century A.D., and finally a late one that stipulates the 9th - 10th centuries. There are also smaller deviations from this classification. This volume's contributors have not been able to reach a consensus on the date of the Maṇimēkalai" (p.21). However, I feel that the readers of this volume have for the first time been presented with clear arguments for different datings. In this way A.Veluppillai's paper "Historical Background of the Maṇimēkalai and Indigenization of Buddhism" and S.Pathmanathan's paper "The Maṇimēkalai in its Historical Setting" are useful

Paula Richman's treatment of gender and persuasion in Maṇimēkalai is very interesting and she raises certain appropriate questions for which we have to find the correct answers. One such question is: "on numerous occasions, characters in the Maṇimēkalai comment that she has assumed the garb of an ascetic, yet Cāttanār continues to describe her tasteful jewelry and her bangle-covered wrists. Although the nun

eschews sexual love; Cāttanār dwells on descriptions of her Mound of Venus and the red lines in her eyes traditionally signs of sexual allure. Why?" Paula Richman has reasonably raised the question as to why Cāttanār dwells on describing Maṇimēkalai's Mound of Venus when she was not really pondering on sexual love. This seems to be poetic tradition found in many Tamil literary texts. Let me give one example. In Ariccantirā Purāṇam, Cantiramati's son dies of snake-bite. His friends are coming to convey this sad news to Cantiramathi. The boys say "Maṇa Kama| Kuḷalay! un mainṭanai aravutīṇṭi....." ("Oh Maiden with sweet smelling hair! Your son has been bitten by snake....."). One wonders why on earth these boys think of Cantiramati's fragrant hair when they come to convey a really sad news to her. Traditionally, the poets want their heroes or heroines to be fit and beautiful even when they are in distress. Cāttanār is not exception to this. Paula Richman's statement that "The red lines in her eyes traditionally signs of sexual allure" is not true. Red lines

in eyes are traditionally considered to be signs of beauty not signs of sexual allure. There is a subtle difference between "aiyarineṭuṇ kaṇ" ('long eyes with beauty lines'-in Maṇimēkalai) and Matavi Cen Kan-um" (Matavi's red eyes - In Cilappatikāram). Red eyes in Tamil literature is always a sign of sexual allure but not the red lines in the eyes which are always considered to be signs of beauty in both male and female. Paula Richman's examination on the relationship between gender and Buddhism has brought out new facts regarding the artistic talents of Cāttanār and the Tamil literary traditions. These, I am sure, would provide food for the readers' thoughts.

Prema Nanthakumar views Maṇimēkalai as an inspirer of the sacred narrative in Tamil literature. She says "and ever since the Maṇimēkalai, a brilliant mix of creative imagination, historical databank, religious instruction, moral artistry and spiritual affirmation, Tamil poetry has assumed the sacred narrative as a serious literary genre. Call it historical accident or the deliberate choice of the

"Time Spirit", a Buddhist story has come to be a major inspirational source for Tamil poetry down the age". With this pronouncement she goes on to provide literary compositions up to 1985 which have been inspired by Maṇimēkalai.

The Magic Bowl is the subject of two papers in this Volume, one by Prema Nanthakumar and the other by D.Dennis Hudson. The concept of Amuta Curapi, according to Pirema Nanthakumar, "was alien to the ancient Tamil temperament of rationalist humanism". But she has correctly linked it with the ancient Tamil precedents. She points out that early Buddhism did not speak of annadāna but it spoke of physicians who helped the common people. Here she sees hunger as a disease and cites an ancient Tamil poem where chief Paṇṇan was referred to as Pacippiṇi Maruttuvan "Physician of the hunger disease". Cāttanār refers to Maṇimēkalai as āruyir Maruttuvi. Therefore, Prema Nanthakumar concludes, "Thus hunger was considered a disease and the charitable ones who gave food to the

hungry people were referred to as doctors. The vessel then is a symbol of the medicine that cures disease, a symbol of plenty, a symbol of charity and no more". Dennis Hudson, on the other hand, views the magic bowl referring to the mantric rites that were used to produce prosperity for Kings and Kingdoms and to purify the consciousness of those who employed them. He links it with other sacred vessels referred to in other non-Tamil texts. Paula Richman and David Shulman too have attempted to interpret the story of magic bowl (amuta curapi) in Manimekalai. As Peter Shalk correctly stated it is true that "the amuṭacurapi seems to be an inexhaustive source not only of food, but of possible interpretations as well.

Peter Schalk in his paper "A Comparative Study of the Flower Offering in Some Classical Tamil Texts, including Maṇimēkalai" has shown that the reference to flower offering in Maṇimēkalai is the very first reference to a Buddhist puṣpadāna in the whole literary Tamil Buddhist tradition. He dismisses often quoted

poetic lines in old Tamil Texts *Maturaikkānci* and *Neṭunalvāṭai* which were considered to be reference to "flower offering". He has presented irrefutable evidences to prove his thesis that a genuine Buddhist "flower offering" ritual practice is found only in *Maṇimēkalai* and not in any other Tamil texts that precede it.

A. Velupillai in his paper on "A Negative Evaluation of Non-Buddhist Indian Religions in the *Maṇimēkalai*" has clearly shown that the polemical trend in Tamil literature could have started with the Tamil Buddhist text *Maṇimēkalai*. He had made a detailed study of the twenty-seventh chapter of the text, which is devoted entirely to the exposition of the logic and Philosophy of various Indian religions, except Buddhism. He has devoted the entire paper to show that the author of *Maṇimēkalai* has guided his heroine to adopt a negative evaluation of other religions.

One paper that is strikingly unique in this volume and opens up a new dimension on the study of

Maṇimēkalai is "Cāttanār's Dream-Book" written by David Shulman. Basing on the *patikam*, he says that *Maṇimēkalai* is a kind of dream-text. According to *patikam*, Cāttanār had been "lying" or "sleeping" in a temple when Madurai was burning by the fiery breast of Kaṇṇaki. Cāttanār seemed to have overheard the conversation between the Madurai goddess and Kaṇṇaki and he learnt the entire story of *Cilappatikāram* and *Maṇimēkalai*. David Shulman thinks that "The whole conversation-indeed the entire story of our two intertwined texts-would be a dream". He also states that the poet could have overheard the goddess in a dream. So, according to David Shulman, the poet composes a *Kavya* out of his dream. Peter Schalk in his Introduction to this Volume (p.11) compares what Gananath Obeyesekere (*The Cult of the Goddess Pattini*, 1984) says about the ritual *gammaduwa* in a Sinhala-Buddhist tradition about Kaṇṇaki. Taking it as a cue he says "so Cāttanār (did not dream nor did he observe or remember historical events, but he) witnessed a powerful and

moving dromenon". Therefore, Peter Schalk concludes, Cāttanār is not a dreamer. The whole arguments about dream or no dream are based entirely on the patikam preface, which is said to have been added later to the completed text. I leave it to the readers to draw their own conclusions. However, one cannot deny that David Shulman has, opened a new dimension of Cāttanār's mindset and the pattern of the story of Maṇimēkalai.

Two papers, one on "Ētunikaḷcci in the Maṇimēkalai: the Manifestation of Beneficial Root "Causes" and Renunciation" by Anne Monius and Arankaracan Vijayalatumi (Rangarajan Vijayaluxmy) and the other on "The Role of Rebirth in the lives of Maṇimēkalai" by A.Veluppillai highlight the process of causation. Their papers give us the impression that the cognitive and strong emotional

process of realisation of Karmic causality is Cāttanār's very focus of interest in the Buddha dharma. The last paper on "Vedic Traditions in the Maṇimēkalai" by Ira Nākacuvāmi details the influence of vedic traditions on the essentially a Buddhist Text Maṇimēkalai.

The workshop, according to the Editor of this Volume, was organised "to exploit Maṇimēkalai as a historical document for describing the situation of Buddhism in Tamilakam in the 6th century A.D" All the papers in the Volume highlight this central point. The Editor should be congratulated for his painstaking efforts in compiling the papers with such precision and meaningful outlay.