

# VEDIC ROOTS OF EARLY TAMIL CULTURE

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In recent years attempts have been made to cast a new look at ancient India. For too long the picture has been distorted by myopic colonial readings of India's prehistory and early history, and more recently by ill-suited Marxist models. One such distortion was the Aryan invasion theory, now definitively on its way out, although its watered-down avatars are still struggling to survive. It will no doubt take some more time—and much more effort on the archaeological front—for a new perspective of the earliest civilization in the North of the subcontinent to take firm shape, but a beginning has been made.

We have a peculiar situation too as regards Southern India, and particularly Tamil Nadu. Take any classic account of Indian history and you will see how little space the South gets in comparison with the North. While rightly complaining that "Hitherto most historians of ancient India have written as if the south did not exist,"<sup>1</sup> Vincent Smith in his *Oxford History of India* hardly devotes a few pages to civilization in the South, that too with the usual stereotypes to which I will return shortly. R. C. Majumdar's *Advanced History of India*,<sup>2</sup> or A. L. Basham's *The Wonder That Was India*<sup>3</sup> are hardly better in that respect. The first serious *History of South India*,<sup>4</sup> that of K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, appeared only in 1947. Even recent surveys of Indian archaeology generally give the South a rather cursory treatment.

## **The Context**

It is a fact that archaeology in the South has so far unearthed little that can compare to findings in the North in terms of ancientness, massiveness or sophistication : the emergence of urban civilization in Tamil Nadu is now fixed at the second or third century BC, about two and a half millennia after the appearance of Indus cities. Moreover, we do not have any fully or largely excavated city or even medium-sized town : Madurai, the ancient capital of the Pandya kingdom, has hardly been explored at all ; Uraiyur, that of the early Cholas, saw a dozen trenches ;<sup>5</sup> Kanchipuram, the Pallavas' capital, had

seventeen, and Karur, that of the Cheras, hardly more ; Kaveripattinam,<sup>6</sup> part of the famous ancient city of Puhar (the first setting of the *Shilappadikaram* epic), saw more widespread excavations, yet limited with regard to the potential the site offers. The same may be said of Arikamedu (just south of Pondicherry), despite excavations by Jouveau-Dubreuil, Wheeler, and several other teams right up to the 1990s.<sup>7</sup>

All in all, the archaeological record scarcely measures up to what emerges from the Indo-Gangetic plains—which is one reason why awareness of these excavations has hardly reached the general public, even in Tamil Nadu ; it has heard more about the still superficial exploration of submerged Poompuhar than about the painstaking work done in recent decades at dozens of sites.

But there is a second reason for this poor awareness: scholars and politicians drawing inspiration from the Dravidian movement launched by E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker (“Periyar”) have very rigid ideas about the ancient history of Tamil Nadu. First, despite all evidence to the contrary, they still insist on the Aryan invasion theory in its most violent version, turning most North Indians and upper-caste Indians into descendants of the invading Aryans who overran the indigenous Dravidians, and Sanskrit into a deadly rival of Tamil. Consequently, they assert that Tamil is more ancient than Sanskrit, and civilization in the South older than in the North. Thus recently, Tamil Nadu’s Education minister decried in the State Assembly those who go “to the extent of saying that Dravidian civilization is part of Hinduism” and declared, “The Dravidian civilization is older than the Aryan.”<sup>8</sup> It is not uncommon to hear even good Tamil scholars utter such claims.

Now, it so happens that archaeological findings in Tamil Nadu, though scanty, are nevertheless decisive. Indeed, we now have a broad convergence between literary, epigraphic and archaeological evidence.<sup>9</sup> Thus names of cities, kings and chieftains mentioned in Sangam literature have often been confirmed by inscriptions and coins dating back to the second and third centuries BC. Kautilya speaks in his *Arthashastra* (c. fourth century BC) of the “easily travelled southern land route,” with diamonds, precious stones and pearls from the Pandya country ;<sup>10</sup> two Ashokan rock edicts (II and XIII<sup>11</sup>) respectfully refer to Chola, Pandya and Chera kingdoms as “neighbours,” therefore placing them firmly in the third century BC ; we also have Kharavela’s cave inscription near Bhubaneswar in which the Kalinga king (c. 150 BC) boasts of having broken up a “confederacy of the Dravida countries which had lasted for 113 years.”<sup>12</sup> From

all these, it appears that the earliest Tamil kingdoms must have been established around the fourth century BC ; again, archaeological findings date urban developments a century or two later, but this small gap will likely be filled by more extensive excavations. But there's the rub : beyond the fourth century BC and back to 700 or 1000 BC, all we find is a megalithic period, and going still further back, a neolithic period starting from about the third millennium BC. While those two prehistoric periods are as important as they are enigmatic, they show little sign of a complex culture,<sup>13</sup> and no clear connection with the dawn of urban civilization in the South.

Therefore the good minister's assertion as to the greater ancientness of the "Dravidian civilization" finds no support on the ground. In order to test his second assertion that that civilization is outside Hinduism, or the common claim that so-called "Dravidian culture" is wholly separate from so-called "Aryan" culture, let us take an unbiased look at the cultural backdrop of early Tamil society and try to make out some of its mainstays. That is what I propose to do briefly, using not only literary evidence, but first, material evidence from archaeological and numismatic sources as regards the dawn of the Sangam age. I may add that I have left out the Buddhist and Jain elements, already sufficiently well known, to concentrate on the Vedic and Puranic ones, which are usually underemphasized. Also, I will not deal here with the origin of South Indian people and languages, or with the nature of the process often called "Aryanization of the South" (I prefer the word "Indianization," used in this context by an archaeologist<sup>14</sup>). Those complex questions have been debated for decades, and will only reach firm conclusions, I believe, with ampler archaeological evidence.

### ***Vedic & Puranic Culture—Material Evidence***

Culturally, the megalithic people of the South shared many beliefs and practices with megalithic builders elsewhere in the subcontinent and beyond. Yet certain practices and artefacts were at least compatible with the Vedic world and may well have prepared for a ready acceptance of Vedic concepts—a natural assimilative process still observable in what has been called the "Hinduization" of tribals. Thus several cists surrounded by stone-circles have four vertical slabs arranged in the shape of a swastika.<sup>15</sup> The famous 3.5 metre-high figure of Mottur (in North Arcot district), carved out of a granite slab, is "perhaps the first anthropomorphic representation of a god in stone in Tamil

Nadu.”<sup>16</sup> Some megalithic burials have yielded iron or bronze objects such as mother goddess, horned masks, the trishul etc. As the archaeologist I. K. Sarma observes, such objects are

intimately connected with the worship of brahmanical Gods of the historical period, such as Śiva, Kārtikeya and later Ambā. The diadems of Adichanallur burials are like the mouth-pieces used by the devotees of Murugan.<sup>17</sup>

The archaeologist K. V. Raman also notes :

Some form of Mother-Goddess worship was prevalent in the Megalithic period [...] as suggested by the discovery of a small copper image of a Goddess in the urn-burials of Adichchanallur. More recently, in Megalithic burials the headstone, shaped like the seated Mother, has been located at two places in Tamil Nadu.<sup>18</sup>

Megalithic culture attached great importance to the cult of the dead and ancestors, which parallels that in Vedic culture. It is also likely that certain gods later absorbed into the Hindu pantheon, such as Aiyandar (or Sastha), Murugan (the later Kartik), Koravai (Durga), Naga deities, etc., were originally tribal gods of that period. Though probably of later date, certain megalithic sites in the Nilgiris were actually dolmen shrines, some of them holding Ganesh-like images, others lingams.<sup>19</sup> Megalithic practices evocative of later Hinduism are thus summarized by the British archaeologists Bridget and Raymond Allchin :

The orientation of port-holes and entrances on the cist graves is frequently towards the south. [...] This demands comparison with later Indian tradition where south is the quarter of Yama. Among the grave goods, iron is almost universal, and the occasional iron spears and tridents (*trisulas*) suggest an association with the god Śiva. The discovery in one grave of a trident with a wrought-iron buffalo fixed to the shaft is likewise suggestive, for the buffalo is also associated with Yama, and the buffalo demon was slain by the goddess Durgā, consort of Śiva, with a trident. [...] The picture which we obtain from this evidence, slight as it is, is suggestive of some form of worship of Śiva.<sup>20</sup>

About the third century BC, cities and towns appear owing to yet little understood factors ; exchanges with the Mauryan and Roman empires seem to have played an important catalytic role, as also the advent of iron. From the very beginning, Buddhist, Jain and Hindu<sup>21</sup> streaks are all clear.

Among the earliest evidences, a stratigraphic dig by I. K. Sarma within the *garbagriha* of the Parasuramesvara temple at Gudimallam,<sup>22</sup> brought to light the foundation of a remarkable Shivalingam of the Mauryan period (possibly third century BC) : it was fixed within two circular *pīthas* at the centre of a square *vāstu-mandala*. “The deity on the frontal face of the tall *linga* reveals himself as a proto-puranic Agni-Rudra”<sup>23</sup> standing on a kneeling *devayāna*. If this early date, which Sarma established on stratigraphic grounds and from pottery sherds, is correct, this fearsome image could well be the earliest such representation in the South.

Then we find “terracotta figures like Mother Goddess, Naga-*linga* etc., from Tirukkampuliyur ; a seated Ganesa from Alagarai ; *Vriskshadevatā* and Mother Goddess from Kaveripakkam and Kanchipuram, in almost certainly a pre-Pallava sequence.”<sup>24</sup> Cult of a Mother goddess is also noticed in the early levels at Uraiyur,<sup>25</sup> and at Kaveripattinam, Kanchipuram and Arikamedu.<sup>26</sup> Excavations at Kaveripattinam have brought to light many Buddhist artefacts, but also, though of later date, a few figurines of Yakshas, of Garuda and Ganesh.<sup>27</sup> Evidence of the Yaksha cult also comes from pottery inscriptions at Arikamedu.<sup>28</sup>

The same site also yielded one square copper coin of the early Cholas, depicting on the obverse an elephant, a ritual umbrella, the Srivatsa symbol, and the front portion of a horse.<sup>29</sup> This is in fact an important theme which recurs on many coins of the Sangam age,<sup>30</sup> recovered mostly from river beds near Karur, Madurai etc. Besides the Srivatsa (also found among artefacts at Kanchipuram<sup>31</sup>), many coins depict a swastika, a trishul, a conch, a *shadara-chakra*, a *damaru*, a crescent moon, and a sun with four, eight or twelve rays. Quite a few coins clearly show a *yagnakunda*. That is mostly the case with the Pandyas’ coins, some of which also portray a *yubastambha* to which a horse is tied as part of the ashvamedha sacrifice. As the numismatist R. Krishnamurthy puts it, “The importance of Pandya coins of Vedic sacrifice series lies in the fact that these coins corroborate what we know from Sangam literature about the performance of Vedic sacrifices by a Pandya king of this age.”<sup>32</sup>

Finally, it is remarkable how a single coin often depicts symbols normally associated with Lord Vishnu (the conch, the *srivatsa*, the *chakra*) together with symbols normally associated with Lord Shiva (the trishul, the crescent moon, the *damaru*).<sup>33</sup> Clearly, the two “sects” — a very clumsy word — got along well enough. Interestingly, other symbols depicted on these coins, such as the three-

or six-arched hill, the tree-in-railing, and the ritual stand in front of a horse, are frequently found in Mauryan iconography.<sup>34</sup>

All in all, the material evidence, though still meagre, makes it clear that Hindu concepts and cults were already integrated in the society of the early historic period of Tamil Nadu side by side with Buddhist and Jain elements. More excavations, for which there is great scope, are certain to confirm this, especially if they concentrate on ancient places of worship, as at Gudimallam. Let us now see the picture we get from Sangam literature.

### **Vedic & Puranic Culture—Literary Evidence**

It is unfortunate that the most ancient Sangam compositions are probably lost for ever ; we only know of them through brief quotations in later works. An early text, the Tamil grammar *Tolkāppiyam*, dated by most scholars to the first or second century AD,<sup>35</sup> is “said to have been modelled on the Sanskrit grammar of the Aindra school.”<sup>36</sup> Its content, says N. Raghunathan, shows that “the great literature of Sanskrit and the work of its grammarians and rhetoricians were well known and provided stimulus to creative writers in Tamil.... The *Tolkāppiyam* adopts the entire Rasa theory as worked out in the *Nāṭya Śāstra* of Bharata.”<sup>37</sup> It also refers to rituals and customs coming from the “Aryans,” a word which in Sangam literature simply means North Indians of Vedic culture ; for instance, the *Tolkāppiyam* “states definitely that marriage as a sacrament attended with ritual was established in the Tamil country by the Aryas,”<sup>38</sup> and it uses the same eight forms of marriage found in the Dharmashastras. Moreover, it mentions the caste system or “fourfold jathis” in the form of “Brahmins, Kings, Vaishyas and Vellalas,”<sup>39</sup> and calls Vedic mantras “the exalted expression of great sages.”<sup>40</sup>

The *Tolkāppiyam* also formulates the captivating division of the Tamil land into five regions (*tiṇai*), each associated with one particular aspect of love, one poetical expression, and also one deity : thus the hills (*kuriṇṇi*) with union and with Cheyon (Murugan) ; the desert (*pālai*) with separation and Koṟṟavai (Durga) ; the forests (*mullai*) with awaiting and Mayon (Vishnu-Krishna) ; the seashore (*neytal*) with wailing and Varuna ; and the cultivated lands (*marutam*) with quarrel and Ventan (Indra). Thus from the beginning we have a fusion of non-Vedic deities (Murugan or Koṟṟavai), Vedic gods (Indra, Varuna) and later Puranic deities such as Vishnu (Māl or Tirumāl). Such a synthesis is quite typical of the Hindu temperament and cannot be the result of an overnight or

superficial influence ; it is also as remote as possible from the separateness we are told is at the root of so-called "Dravidian culture."

Expectedly, this fusion grows by leaps and bounds in classical Sangam poetry whose composers were Brahmins, princes, merchants, farmers, including a number of women. The "Eight Anthologies" of poetry (or *eṭṭuttokai*) abound in references to many gods : Shiva, Uma, Murugan, Vishnu, Lakshmi (named Tiru, which corresponds to Śrī) and several other Saktis.<sup>41</sup> The *Paripāḍal*, one of those anthologies, consists almost entirely of devotional poetry to Vishnu. One poem<sup>42</sup> begins with a homage to him and Lakshmi, and goes on to praise Garuda, Shiva on his "majestic bull," the four-faced Brahma, the twelve Ādityas, the Ashwins, the Rudras, the Saptarishis, Indra with his "dreaded thunderbolt," the devas and asuras, etc., and makes glowing references to the Vedas and Vedic scholars.<sup>43</sup> So does the *Puranānūru*,<sup>44</sup> another of the eight anthologies, which in addition sees Lord Shiva as the source of the four Vedas (166) and describes Lord Vishnu as "blue-hued" (174) and "Garuda-bannered" (56).<sup>45</sup> Similarly, a poem (360) of a third anthology, the *Akanānūru*, declares that Shiva and Vishnu are the greatest of gods.<sup>46</sup>

Not only deities or scriptures, landmarks sacred in the North, such as the Himalayas or Ganga, also become objects of great veneration in Tamil poetry. North Indian cities are referred to, such as Ujjain, or Mathura after which Madurai was named. Court poets proudly claim that the Chera kings conquered North Indian kingdoms and carved their emblem onto the Himalayas. They clearly saw the subcontinent as one entity ; thus the *Puranānūru* says they ruled over "the whole land / With regions of hills, mountains, / Forests and inhabited lands / Having the Southern Kumari / And the great Northern Mount / And the Eastern and Western seas / As their borders..."<sup>47</sup>

The *Kural* (second to seventh century AD), authored by the celebrated Tiruvalluvar, is often described as an "atheistic" text, a hasty misconception. True, Valluvar's 1,330 pithy aphorisms mostly deal with ethics (*aram*), polity (*porul*) and love (*inbam*), following the traditional Sanskritic pattern of the four objects of human life : *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*, and *moksha* – the last implied rather than explicit. Still, the very first decade is an invocation to Bhagavan : "The ocean of births can be crossed by those who clasp God's feet, and none else"<sup>48</sup> (10) ; the same idea recurs later, for instance in this profound thought : "Cling to the One who clings to nothing ; and so clinging, cease to cling" (350). The *Kural*

also refers to Indra (25), to Vishnu's avatar of Vamana (610), and to Lakshmi (e.g. 167), asserting that she will shower her grace only on those who follow the path of dharma (179, 920). There is nothing very atheistic in all this, and in reality the values of the *Kural* are perfectly in tune with those found in several shastras or in the Gita.<sup>49</sup>

Let us briefly turn to the famous Tamil epic *Shilappadikaram* (second to sixth century AD), which relates the beautiful and tragic story of Kannagi and Kovalan; it opens with invocations to Chandra, Surya, and Indra, all of them Vedic Gods, and frequently praises Agni, Varuna, Shiva, Subrahmanya, Vishnu-Krishna, Uma, Kāli, Yama and so forth. There are mentions of the four Vedas and of "Vedic sacrifices being faultlessly performed." "In more than one place," writes V. Ramachandra Dikshitar, the first translator of the epic into English, "there are references to Vedic Brahmans, their fire rites, and their chanting of the Vedic hymns. The Brahman received much respect from the king and was often given gifts of wealth and cattle."<sup>50</sup> When Kovalan and Kannagi are married, they "walk around the holy fire," a typically Vedic rite still at the centre of the Hindu wedding. Welcomed by a tribe of fierce hunters on their way to Madurai, they witness a striking apparition of Durga, who is addressed equally as Lakshmi and Sarasvati—the three Shaktis of the Hindu trinity. There are numerous references to legends from the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, and the Puranas. After worshipping at two temples, one of Vishnu and the other of Shiva, the Chera king Shenguttuvan goes to the Himalayas in search of a stone for Kannagi's idol, and bathes it in the Ganges—in fact, the waters of Ganga and those of Cauvery were said to be equally sacred. Similar examples could be given from the *Manimekhalai*: even though it is a predominantly Buddhist work, it also mentions many Vedic and Puranic gods, and attributes the submergence of Puhar to the neglect of a festival to Indra.

As the archaeologist and epigraphist R. Nagaswamy remarks, "The fact that the literature of the *Sangam* age refers more to Vedic sacrifices than to temples is a pointer to the popularity of the Vedic cults among the Sangam Tamils."<sup>51</sup>

I should also make a mention of the tradition that regards Agastya, the great Vedic Rishi, as the originator of the Tamil language. He is said to have written a Tamil grammar, *Agattiyam*, to have presided over the first two Sangams, and is even now honoured in many temples of Tamil Nadu and worshipped in many homes. One of his traditional names is "Tamil muni." The

*Shilappadikaram* refers to him as “the great sage of the Podiyil hill,” and a hill is still today named after him at the southernmost tip of the Western Ghats.

It would be tempting to continue with this enumeration, which could easily fill a whole anthology. As a matter of fact, P. S. Subrahmanya Sastri showed with a wealth of examples how “a knowledge of Sanskrit literature from the Vedic period to the Classical period is essential to understand and appreciate a large number of passages scattered among the poems of Tamil literature.”<sup>52</sup> Others have added to the long list of such examples.<sup>53</sup> In other words, Vedic and Puranic themes are inextricably woven into Sangam literature and therefore into the most ancient culture of the Tamil land known to us.

### **Historical Period**

The historical period naturally takes us to the great Pallava, Chola and Pandya temples and to an overflowing of devotional literature by the Alvars, the Nayanmars and other seekers of the Divine who wandered over the length and breadth of the Tamil land, filling it with bhakti. But here let us just take a look at the rulers. An inscription records that a Pandya king led the elephant force in the Mahabharata War on behalf of the Pandavas, and that early Pandyas translated the epic into Tamil.<sup>54</sup> The first named Chera king, Udiyanjeral, is said to have sumptuously fed the armies on both sides during the War at Kurukshetra ; Chola and Pandya kings also voiced such claims—of course they may be devoid of historical basis, but they show how those kings sought to enhance their glory by connecting their lineage to heroes of the Mahabharata. So too, Chola and Chera kings proudly claimed descent from Lord Rama or from kings of the Lunar dynasty—in other words, an “Aryan” descent.

As regards religious practices, the greatest Chola king, Karikala, was a patron of both the Vedic religion and Tamil literature, while the Pandya king Nedunjelyan performed many Vedic sacrifices, and the dynasty of the Pallavas made their capital Kanchi into a great centre of Sanskrit learning and culture. K. V. Raman summarizes the “religious inheritance of the Pandyas” in these words :

The Pandyan kings were great champions of the Vedic religion from very early times.... According to the Sinnamanur plates, one of the early Pandyan kings performed a thousand *velvi* or yagas [Vedic sacrifices].... Though the majority of the Pandyan kings were Saivites, they extended

equal patronage to the other faiths ... [and included] invocatory verses to the Hindu Trinity uniformly in all their copper-plate grants. The Pandyas patronised all the six systems or schools of Hinduism.... Their religion was not one of narrow sectarian nature but broad-based with Vedic roots. They were free from linguistic or regional bias and took pride in saying that they considered Tamil and Sanskritic studies as complementary and equally valuable.<sup>55</sup>

This pluralism can already be seen in the two epics *Shilappadikaram* and *Manimekhalai*, which amply testify that what we call today Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism coexisted harmoniously. "The sectarian spirit was totally absent,"<sup>56</sup> writes Ramachandra Dikshitar. "Either the people did not look upon religious distinctions seriously, or there were no fundamental differences between one sect and another."<sup>57</sup>

That is also a reason why I have not stressed Buddhism and Jainism here. Those two faiths were no doubt significant in the early stages of Tamil society, but not as dominant as certain scholars insist upon in an attempt to eclipse the Vedic and Puranic elements. Buddhism and Jainism did contribute greatly in terms of religious thought, art and science, but faded centuries later under the flood of Hindu bhakti ; their insistence on world-shunning monasticism also did not agree very well with the Tamil temperament, its cult of heroism and its zest for life.

In any case, this superficial glance at Sangam literature makes it clear at the very least that, in the words of John R. Marr, "these poems show that the synthesis between Tamil culture and what may loosely be termed Aryan culture was already far advanced."<sup>58</sup> Nilakanta Sastri goes a step further and opines, "There does not exist a single line of Tamil literature written before the Tamils came into contact with, and let us add *accepted with genuine appreciation*, the Indo-Aryan culture of North Indian origin."<sup>59</sup>

### ***The Myth of Dravidian Culture***

And yet, such statements do not go deep enough, as they still imply a North-South contrast and an unknown Dravidian substratum over which the layer of "Aryan" culture was deposited. This view is only milder than that of the proponents of a "separate" and "secular" Dravidian culture, who insist on a physical and cultural Aryan-Dravidian clash as a result of which the pure "Dravidian" culture got swamped. As we have seen, archaeology, literature and

Tamil tradition all fail to come up with the slightest hint of such a conflict. Rather, as far as the eye can see into the past there is every sign of a deep cultural interaction between North and South, which blossomed not through any "imposition" but in a natural and peaceful manner, as everywhere else in the subcontinent and beyond.

As regards an imaginary Dravidian "secularism" (another quite inept word to use in the Indian context), it has been posited by many scholars: Marr,<sup>60</sup> Zvelebil<sup>61</sup> and others characterize Sangam poetry as "secular" and "pre-Aryan"<sup>62</sup> after severing its heroic or love themes from its strong spiritual undercurrents, in a feat typical of Western scholarship whose scrutiny always depends more on the magnifying glass than on the wide-angle lens. A far more insightful view comes from the historian M. G. S. Narayanan, who finds in Sangam literature "no trace of another, indigenous, culture other than what may be designated as tribal and primitive."<sup>63</sup> He concludes :

The Aryan-Dravidian or Aryan-Tamil dichotomy envisaged by some scholars may have to be given up since we are unable to come across anything which could be designated as purely Aryan or purely Dravidian in the character of South India of the Sangam Age. In view of this, the Sangam culture has to be looked upon as expressing in a local idiom all the essential features of classical "Hindu" culture.<sup>64</sup>

However, it is not as if the Tamil land passively received this culture : in exchange it generously gave elements from its own rich temperament and spirit. In fact, all four Southern States massively added to every genre of Sanskrit literature, not to speak of the signal contributions of a Shankara, a Ramanuja or a Madhwa. Cultural kinship does not mean that there is nothing distinctive about South Indian tradition ; the Tamil land can justly be proud of its ancient language, culture and genius, which have a strong stamp and character of their own, as anyone who browses through Sangam texts can immediately see : for all the mentions of gods, more often than not they just provide a backdrop ; what occupies the mind of the poets is the human side, its heroism or delicate emotions, its bouncy vitality, refined sensualism or its sweet love of Nature. "Vivid pictures of full-blooded life exhibiting itself in all its varied moods," as Raghunathan puts it. "One cannot but be impressed by the extraordinary vitality, variety and richness of the poetic achievement of the old Tamil."<sup>65</sup> Ganapathy Subbiah adds, "The aesthetic quality of many of the poems is breathtakingly refined."<sup>66</sup> It is true also that the Tamil language developed its

own literature along certain independent lines ; conventions of poetry, for instance, are strikingly original and more often than not different from those of Sanskrit literature.

More importantly, many scholars suggest that “the bhakti movement began in the Tamil country [and] later spread to North India.”<sup>67</sup> Subbiah, in a profound study, not only challenges the misconceived “secular” portrayal of the Sangam texts, but also the attribution of the Tamil bhakti to a northern origin ; rather, he suggests, it was distinctly a creation of Tamil culture, and Sangam literature “a reflection of the religious culture of the Tamils.”<sup>68</sup>

As regards the fundamental contributions of the South to temple architecture, music, dance and to the spread of Hindu culture to other South Asian countries, they are too well known to be repeated here. Besides, the region played a crucial role in preserving many important Sanskrit texts (a few Vedic recensions, Bhasa’s dramas, the *Arthashastra* for instance) better than the North was able to do, and even today some of India’s best Vedic scholars are found in Tamil Nadu and Kerala.<sup>69</sup> As Swami Vivekananda put it, “The South had been the repository of Vedic learning.”<sup>70</sup>

In other words, what is loosely called Hinduism would not be what it is without the South. To use the proverbial but apt image, the outflow from the Tamil land was a major tributary to the great river of Indian culture.

### **Conclusion**

It should now be crystal clear that anyone claiming a “separate,” “pre-Aryan” or “secular” Dravidian culture has no evidence to show for it, except his own ignorance of archaeology, numismatics and ancient Tamil literature. Not only was there never such a culture, there is in fact no meaning in the word “Dravidian” except either in the old geographical sense or in the modern linguistic sense ; racial and cultural meanings are as unscientific as they are irrational, although some scholars in India remain obstinately rooted in a colonial mindset.

The simple reality is that every region of India has developed according to its own genius, creating in its own bent, but while remaining faithful to the central Indian spirit. The Tamil land was certainly one of the most creative, and we must hope to see more of its generosity once warped notions about its ancient culture are out of the way.

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- <sup>6</sup> K. V. Soundara Rajan, *Kaveripattinam Excavations 1963-73* (New Delhi : Archaeological Survey of India, 1994).
- <sup>7</sup> See *The Ancient Port of Arikamedu – New Excavations and Researches 1989-1992*, vol. 1, ed. Vimala Begley (Pondicherry : École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1996).
- <sup>8</sup> As reported in *The New Indian Express* (Coimbatore edition), 12 April 2000. The occasion was a debate on “saffronization of the education system,” and the full first part of the quotation is : “The RSS has gone to the extent of saying that Dravidian civilization is part of Hinduism....”
- <sup>9</sup> For a good overview of the archaeological picture of ancient South India, see K. V. Raman, “Material Culture of South India as Revealed in Archaeological Excavations,” in *The Dawn of Indian Civilization (Up To c. 600 BC)*, ed. G. C. Pande (Delhi : Centre for Studies in Civilizations, 1999), p. 531-546.
- <sup>10</sup> K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *A History of South India*, p. 84.
- <sup>11</sup> *Uttankita Sanskrit Vidya Aranya Epigraphs* vol. II, *Prakrit and Sanskrit Epigraphs 257 BC to 320 AD*, ed. K. G. Krishnan (Mysore : Uttankita Vidya Aranya Trust, 1989), p. 16 ff, 42 ff.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151 ff.
- <sup>13</sup> I use the word “culture” in its ordinary meaning, not in the technical sense used by archaeologists, i.e. the totality of material artefacts of a particular category of settlement.
- <sup>14</sup> R. Nagaswamy, *Art and Culture of Tamil Nadu* (New Delhi : Sundeep Prakashan, 1980), p. 23.
- <sup>15</sup> B. Narasimhaiah, *Neolithic and Megalithic Cultures in Tamil Nadu* (Delhi : Sundeep Prakashan, 1980), p. 211 ; also in Bridget and Raymond Allchin, *The Rise of Civilization in India and Pakistan* (New Delhi : Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 331.
- <sup>16</sup> B. Narasimhaiah, *Neolithic and Megalithic Cultures in Tamil Nadu*, p. 203.
- <sup>17</sup> I. K. Sarma, *Religion in Art and Historical Archaeology of South India* (Madras : University of Madras, 1987), p. 33.

- <sup>18</sup> K. V. Raman, *Sakti Cult in Tamil Nadu – a Historical Perspective* (paper presented at a seminar on Sakti Cult, 9<sup>th</sup> session of the Indian Art History Congress at Hyderabad, in November 2000 ; in press).
- <sup>19</sup> William A. Noble, “Nilgiris Prehistoric Remains” in *Blue Mountains*, ed. Paul Hockings (Delhi : OUP, 1989), p. 116.
- <sup>20</sup> Bridget and Raymond Allchin, *The Rise of Civilization in India and Pakistan*, p.339-340.
- <sup>21</sup> The word “Hindu” is as convenient as it is unsatisfactory ; I use it in a broad sense that encompasses Vedic, Epic, Puranic culture, but without being exclusive of Buddhist or Jain faiths.
- <sup>22</sup> In the district of Chittoor (A.P.) near the present Tamil Nadu border ; this area was then regarded as part of Tamilaga (which extended as far north as present-day Tirupati).
- <sup>23</sup> I. K. Sarma, *Religion in Art and Historical Archaeology of South India*, p. 35.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid. , p. 34.
- <sup>25</sup> K. V. Raman, *Excavations at Uraiyur*, p. 84.
- <sup>26</sup> K. V. Raman, *Sakti Cult in Tamil Nadu*.
- <sup>27</sup> K. V. Soundara Rajan, *Kaveripattinam Excavations 1963-73*, p. 111-112.
- <sup>28</sup> Iravatham Mahadevan, “Pottery Inscriptions in Brahmi and Tamil-Brahmi” in *The Ancient Port of Arikamedu*, p. 295-296.
- <sup>29</sup> K. V. Raman, “A Note on the Square Copper Coin from Arikamedu” in *The Ancient Port of Arikamedu*, p. 391-392.
- <sup>30</sup> R. Krishnamurthy, *Sangam Age Tamil Coins* (Chennai : Garnet Publications, 1997). The following examples are drawn from this book.
- <sup>31</sup> K. V. Raman, “Archaeological Excavations in Kanchipuram”, in *Tamil Civilization*, vol. 5, N<sup>o</sup>1 & 2, p. 70-71.
- <sup>32</sup> R. Krishnamurthy, *Sangam Age Tamil Coins*, p. 26.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 46-47, etc.
- <sup>34</sup> Two important studies in this respect are : Savita Sharma, *Early Indian Symbols* (Delhi : Agam Kala Prakashan, 1990) and H. Sarkar & B. M. Pande, *Symbols and Graphic Representations in Indian Inscriptions* (New Delhi : Aryan Books International, 1999).
- <sup>35</sup> Sangam texts are notoriously hard to date and there is among scholars nearly as much divergence of views as with Sanskrit texts. Thus some date the *Tolkāppiyam* as late as the fifth or sixth century AD.
- <sup>36</sup> K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *A History of South India*, p. 130.
- <sup>37</sup> N. Raghunathan, *Six Long Poems from Sanham Tamil* (reprint Chennai : International Institute of Tamil Studies, 1997), p. 2, 10.
- <sup>38</sup> K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *A History of South India*, p. 130.
- <sup>39</sup> *Tolkāppiyam* Marabus 71, 72, 77, 81, quoted by S. Vaiyapuri Pillai in *Life of Ancient Tamils*.

- <sup>40</sup> *Tolkāppiyam*, Porul 166, 176, quoted by K. V. Sarma, "Spread of Vedic Culture in Ancient South India" in *The Adyar Library Bulletin*, 1983, 43:1, p. 5.
- <sup>41</sup> K. V. Raman, *Sakti Cult in Tamil Nadu*.
- <sup>42</sup> *Paripāḍal*, 8.
- <sup>43</sup> *Paripāḍal*, 3, 9, etc..
- <sup>44</sup> *Puranānūru*, 2, 93, etc. See also invocatory verse.
- <sup>45</sup> The last three references are quoted by K. V. Sarma in "Spread of Vedic Culture in Ancient South India," p. 5 & 8.
- <sup>46</sup> Quoted by K. V. Sarma in "Spread of Vedic Culture in Ancient South India," p. 8.
- <sup>47</sup> *Puranānūru*, 17 as translated in *Tamil Poetry Through the Ages*, vol. I, *Eṭṭuttokai: the Eight Anthologies*, ed. Shu Hikosaka and G. John Samuel (Chennai : Institute of Asian Studies, 1997), p. 311.
- <sup>48</sup> Tiruvalluvar, *The Kural*, translated by P. S. Sundaram (New Delhi : Penguin, 1990), p. 19.
- <sup>49</sup> For more details on Tiruvalluvar's indebtedness to Sanskrit texts, see V. R. Ramachandra Dikshitar's study of the Kural, as quoted by P. T. Srinivasa Iyengar in *History of the Tamils* (Madras : reprinted Asian Educational Services, 1995), p. 589-595.
- <sup>50</sup> V. R. Ramachandra Dikshitar, *Cilappatikaram* (Madras : 1939, reprinted Chennai : International Institute of Tamil Studies, 1997), p. 57,
- <sup>51</sup> R. Nagaswamy, *Art and Culture of Tamil Nadu*, p. 7.
- <sup>52</sup> P. S. Subrahmanya Sastri, *An Enquiry into the Relationship of Sanskrit and Tamil* (Trivandrum : University of Travancore, 1946), chapter 3.
- <sup>53</sup> See for instance : K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, "Sanskrit Elements in Early Tamil Literature," in *Essays in Indian Art, Religion and Society*, ed. Krishna Mohan Shrimali (New Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1987) ; K. V. Sarma, "Spread of Vedic Culture in Ancient South India" in *The Adyar Library Bulletin*, 1983, 43:1 ; Rangarajan, "Aryan Dravidian Racial Dispute from the Point of View of Sangam Literature," in *The Aryan Problem*, eds. S. B. Deo & Suryanath Kamath (Pune : Bharatiya Itihasa Sankalana Samiti, 1993), p. 81-83.
- <sup>54</sup> K. V. Raman, "Religious Inheritance of the Pandyas," in *Sree Meenakshi Koil Souvenir* (Madurai, n.d.), p. 168.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168-170.
- <sup>56</sup> V. R. Ramachandra Dikshitar, *Cilappatikaram*, p. 53.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- <sup>58</sup> John Ralston Marr, *The Eight Anthologies – A Study in Early Tamil Literature* (Madras : Institute of Asian Studies, 1985), p. vii.
- <sup>59</sup> K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, "Sanskrit Elements in Early Tamil Literature," p. 45 (emphasis mine).
- <sup>60</sup> John R. Marr, "The Early Dravidians," in *A Cultural History of India*, ed. A. L. Basham (Delhi : OUP, 1983), p. 34.

<sup>61</sup> Kamil Zvelebil, *The Smile of Murugan : On Tamil Literature of South India* (Leiden : E. J. Brill, 1973), p. 20, quoted in Ganapathy Subbiah, *Roots of Tamil Religious Thought* (Pondicherry : Pondicherry Institute of Linguistics and Culture, 1991), p.6.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> M. G. S. Narayanan, "The Vedic-Puranic-Shastraic Element in Tamil Sangam Society and Culture," in *Essays in Indian Art, Religion and Society*, p. 128.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>65</sup> N. Raghunathan, *Six Long Poems from Sanham Tamil*, p. 32.

<sup>66</sup> Ganapathy Subbiah, *Roots of Tamil Religious Thought*, p. 5.

<sup>67</sup> N. Subrahmanian, *The Tamils – Their History, Culture and Civilization* (Madras : Institute of Asian Studies, 1996), p. 118.

<sup>68</sup> Ganapathy Subbiah, *Roots of Tamil Religious Thought*, p. 160.

<sup>69</sup> I dare say that important ancient texts may yet be discovered among palm-leaf manuscripts in Tamil Nadu or Kerala (many of which are being mindlessly lost or destroyed for want of active interest). For instance, I was once shown in Kerala, among many ancient texts, a thick palm-leaf manuscript of a *Ramayana* by Vyasa. (Some traditions do mention it, but it has been regarded as lost.) Post-Independence India has been prodigiously careless in preserving its cultural heritage.

<sup>70</sup> Swami Vivekananda, "Reply to the Madras Address," *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Advaita Ashrama, 1948), p. 278.