



POSITIONS OF SANGAM WOMEN IN TAMIL SOCIETY

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Abstract

The Tamil society had not granted any legal or social equality on par with men. They had to lead a dependent life. The duties of women in Tamil society were having its own political, social and economic variation. The women were generally confined to household duties and they had no place in political activities and economic pursuits. The Sangam literature describes the position of women in ancient Tamil society. The natural feminine qualities such as *Achcham*, *Madam* and *Naanam* were insisted in the Sangam literature

Introduction

The Tamil society had not granted any legal or social equality on par with men. They had to lead a dependent life. Before the marriage they depended upon their father or brother and after marriage they were dependants of the husband or sons. The duties of women in Tamil society were having its own political, social and economic variation. The women were generally confined to household duties and they had no place in political activities and economic pursuits. But during the Sangam age, as the social conditions was totally different from that of today, the women were generally venerated and their social status was not at all in a worse position.¹ the masculine traits were the determinants of adjudging the noticeable difference between men and women. The treatment of women known for their “love, shyness and implicit acceptance and retention of elderly advice without question”, were the ideal feminine traits.²

As the Tamil society was a patriarchal one and enjoyed matrilineal succession to property was approved, the family was a male dominating one and the women were given only a secondary position. Further as the men were the bread winners for the family they became the overlords of the family and as heads of the family the others were subordinated to him. The women, who were biologically handicapped had no right to public office and had no right to inherit property at that time.³ In this regard it should also be noticed that the status or position of women was a debased and an impaired one mainly due to their incapacity to interrogate the social taboos.⁴ The Sangam literature describes the position of women in ancient Tamil society. In the Sangam Age, women were treated with special consideration. The natural feminine qualities such as *Achcham*, *Madam* and *Naanam* were insisted in the Sangam literature. Their most important virtue was chastity. The women were given freedom to choose their life partners during the Sangam period.

Chastity

For women normally the most important virtue was that of chastity. Girls who have come of age were confined to the house and watched by female elders in the house.⁴ It was *karpu* began to be effective the moment a woman set her heart on a man. That moment she begins to treat him as her lord, wear the *mullai* flower representative of *karpu* by convention, and refuses to worship another god.

The *Silappadikaram* says; “the wisdom of woman is only huge folly.”⁵ “Chastity was more important than shyness and shyness was more important than life itself” she was to worship her husband at day break and avoid worshipping other gods. A woman who could claim to be chaste in thought word and deed could make the very elements obey her. The *Silappadikaram* enumerates the stories of many chaste woman of Puhar “who because of their chastity worked many miracles”. There were the two kinds of *karpu*, (1) the *arakarpu*: the peaceful maintenance of chastity; eg., *Kopperumdevi* wife of *Aryappadai Kadanda Nedunjelian*, who died the moment her husband died; and (2) the *marakkarpu* : the ferocious manifestation of chastity; e.g., *Kannagi* who died only after wreaking terrible vengeance on those who brought about the murder of her husband.⁶

The poetesses

The Sangam literature, a woman had to play different roles in the family such as a dutiful wife, responsible mother and an ideal hostess to guests. Women’s education was also insisted during the Sangam Age. The girls of the Sangam age were given a good training in literature, music and drama. The Sangam literature bears ample evidence to the fact that many women had distinguished themselves in the art of music.⁷ More than fifty women have been ranked among the Sangam poets.⁸ Avvaiyior, the great poetess was of very high literacy attainments, untrammelled wisdom and strength. Avvai, the most renowned of the poetesses, move about the royal courts and is as much the friend of kings and chiefs, their counselor and as powerful teacher of Tamil society. Outstanding among the poetesses were Avvaiyar, Kakkaipadiniyar, Natchellaiyar, Nakaiyar, Nanmudiyar, Aathimanthiyar, Mudathama kanniyar, Ponnudiyar, Mullaiyar and Velli veedhiyar. The mastery of



grammar by Kakkaiadinayar is amply known by the two grammar book known as “Kakkai padiniyam and Siru kakkai padiniyam.”⁹

Marriage

Though the sangam Tamils were known for both arranged and love marriages, *Silppatikaram* stands to prove that arranged marriage was prevalent then. The arranged marriage was announced to the public by women mounted on elephants.¹⁰ Such a practice indicates the fact that the arranged marriages were confirmed by the public by that announcement. So the ritualistic marriage of the Tamils found no much difference of all through aged. Since Kovalan, aged 16 years and Kannagi aged 12 years got married it is always obvious that marriageable age during that period was less than that of today. The story of anklet reminds us of the tradition *cilamu kali nonbu* of the Tamils.¹¹

As pointed out in the *Mullaikkali* of *kalitogai* since *Silppatikaram*¹² contains erutual i-e bull baiting, one can understand that marriages took place after testing the velour of the bridegroom. In the same way the use of a necklace called *pulippal tali* made if tiger teeth were a common custom associated with the marriages of the Tamils of that period. In this context it must be remembered here that, “the marital ritual of the bride and bridegroom circumambulating the sacrificial fire i-e, tivalam is mentioned only in *Silppatikaram*.”¹³

Sati

The positions of married woman become deplorable if she lost her husband, such women were treated very badly by the society. Either, she was directed to die (or) to lead a humiliating life. The custom of a wife killing herself immediately after the death of her husband was mentioned in *Tolkappiyam*. The widows suffered severe restrictions imposed on them. They used to give up eating betel leaves and bathing in cold water. Again, they were insisted to wear pure white cloth and not allowed to attend any social functions. Thus the life of the widows was worse than that of an ascetic, knowing the cruelty in widowhood; they preferred sati rather than ascetic life.¹⁴

Food

The Sangam Tamils were fully accustomed to a sumptuous food, whether vegetarian (or) non-vegetarian and believed in eating well.¹⁵ The references such as *kaliyer*, *kuviyar*, *kal nodi attiyar*, *minvilaipparadavar*, *veluppupakarunar*, *pasavar*, *palnina vilaignar*, *osunar*,¹⁶ indicate the role of different items included in food stuffs and the things used in the culinary act. In the same way offering of cooked rice, *nolai* (sweet small ball made of dried powdered sesame mixed with sugar and ghee), *sweet pongal* expose that it was customary among the Tamils of the sangam and to offer the common food items as offerings to the gods.

Dress

Sangam works *Silppatikaram* too contains reference about the dress and such an analysis will give an idea about the dress habits of the Tamils of that period. The term *tunnakarar*, generally meaning tailor, suggests that the Tamils were used to wear stitched cloths and different kinds of dresses. In the same way when *karukar* were the people who were engaged in embroidery work with the use of silk hair and cotton¹⁷ one can estimate the handicraft work and the use of clothes of artistic varieties. The comparison of the waves of the sea with dress suggests the importance assigned to dress by the Tamils the use of *Puntugil* of different colors will attest the above fact the ascetics were interested in using the dress made of tiger skin.¹⁸ When different kinds of dresses were in vogue the use of dress studded with pearl (*pavalakkalai*) seems to be a venerable one. The kodi *kalingam* suggested the use of fine variety. The use of fine variety from *kalingam* embroidered cloth upper cloth and blanket gives an idea about the varieties of dress used by the Tamils of *Silppatikaram* and contemporary period. The same thing is applicable even to the use of *kalagam* generally meaning a blue cloth equal to that of *kalingam*. It was customary among the Tamils to use washed cloths. The term *kaliyar* (washer men), used commonly by the Tamils.¹⁹

Cosmetic and ornaments

While the use of betel nut was to have a fragrant smell after meals, the use of garlands made up of sandalwood along with beads and pearls will show their attachment towards cosmetics. The use of *sandu* i-e., sandal wood powder was also of that nature. *Alattagam*, the applying of red paste in the feet by women for decoration is a continuous practice even today even after the period of *Manimegalai*.²⁰ The hair was washed with cosmetics of 32 various kinds such as ghee, five kinds of seeds etc. The women were found of adding artificial fragrance to their hair by the use of cosmetics. The women were accustomed to applying sweet smelling oils to the hair.

The use of *eyetex* was common custom among the women folk of Tamilnadu. The references about *anjanam maitadangan aiyari unkan* etc, will substantiate it. It was a custom to adore the bride with *eyetex*. It is a significant aspect among the



women of Tamil country to use flowers in the form of a garland was a practice among them.²¹ That brings out the practice of using garlands. The garland of jasmine and the utilization of flowers to adorn the combed hair with flowers suggest that the Tamils were found of decorating them by various ways.

The term *manimuthu aram*²² and the use of Cangili, Kuntodar, Pungnan, *Punaivinai* were custom to decorate themselves. By using different ornaments in their necks such as pun and *aram* the Tamils ornamented themselves. As it was a common practice among the Tamils to use bangles while *Silappatikaram* contains references of the same kind, one can have an idea about the conventional use of the ornament.

Customs

Social customs and institutions have specific values in the portrayal of the society. The term *tayam*²³ the custom of sharing the property among the brothers and that pinpoints indirectly the divided life and the absence of joint family system. The other sangam works which contain similar references reveal the background of the society. The reference about a case among the brothers and the term *kudi* suggest the existence of families of specific clans. The *funeral functions*, self immolation at the altar of *Aiyai* and the sacrifices offered to feud the manes are all generally called *kadan*. Such customary practices associated with death existed then. Like other Tamil works *Silappatikaram* has also mentioned about the erection of a *shemienna*, known as *pandal* in Tamil²⁴ to serve as a resting place for the pedestrians during summer seasons.

The fact is that while legally the written constitution of today grant to woman a certain condition of equality with man and says that she cannot be excluded on the ground of sex alone from the rights and duties of public life, there is no knowing that grant has materially and factually altered the condition of women in society and in ancient Tamilaham there was no statement of legal and social equality between the sexes; on the other hand it was clearly understood that the duties of a woman in society are different from those of a man, that basic qualities of a woman are different from those of a man; and by implication, therefore, woman is not to aspire to the same place in society, as man.

Notes and Reference

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14. *Silappatikaram*: VIII: 8:17:1.
15. *Ahananuru*: 20:2, *Aintinai Aimbadu*: 47:3.
16. *Silappatikaram*: VII: 5:11, VII: 6:13:1.
17. *Silappatikaram*: V: 26.
18. *Silappatikaram*: XIV: 54-55.
19. *Manimegalai*: VI:110, IX:40.
20. *Silappatikaram*:VI:76-79.
21. *Aingurunuru*:16:2, *Kalaval*:1, *Karnapatu*:8:3.
22. *Silappatikaram*: XII: 10, 10:1-2, XIII: 21, 168.
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24. *Silappatikaram*: VI: 59, XIV: 146.