

A Comparative Study of Kondraiventhan and Vetrivarkai

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Abstract

The ideas expressed in literature vary according to the period and social context. Values that are lauded in one era may lose their significance in the next. The fundamental life principles that define Tamil civilization have undergone changes due to shifts in economics, social hierarchy, religion, and political transformation. Ethical codes for individual and collective life were initially established by kings during the tribal stage. These norms developed into virtues (Aram). Although virtues change over time, poets continue to express them in literature with the noble objective that people should follow them even today. Kondraiventhan and Narunthokai are two ethical texts written in different periods. The objective of this article is to analyze the ethical principles stated in these two works through a comparative approach.

Key Terms: civilization - Akkam – Aram- Hospitality - Progeny

Introduction

The human mind has narrowed from the vast world of 'We' to the confined circle of 'I'. Several social factors may be responsible for this thought-disability, and literature is created to rectify them. In a time when media growth was unimaginable, Avvaiyar's Aathichoodi ruled educational institutions. In today's context, the internet teaches everything. The situation has shifted from commanding children not to touch or even look at a phone to one where education, from primary schooling to research, is taught online via mobile phones. Even though the social environment changes, it is the duty of a teacher to impart the excellence of Tamil to students. Specifically, teaching the ethics of life is essential. Teaching literature through comparison will undoubtedly enhance literary appreciation. Therefore, this article compares Kondraiventhan and Narunthokai (Vetrivarkai), both of which focus on ethical principles and use the technique of 'saying little to mean much' to express the virtues of life.

The Evolution of Ethics (Aram)

'The totality of moral principles defined by a human for himself is the complete form of Aram (Ethics),' states one view. Ancient Tamils considered ethics as a moral code that nurtures both the individual and society. When classifying the meaning of the word *Aram* as pointed out by Tamil literature, we find it is generally used in the sense of good virtue or discipline/conduct. Based on the idea that 'Aram was celebrated as the practice of discerning good habits and bad activities that a human must follow or avoid, respectively, to live well and attain the bliss that is the fruit of a good life,' a doubt arises: is Aram a word, an action, or a thought? If the thought is elevated, then the word and action will also be elevated. Thiruvalluvar states that Aram is the combination of all three. Ethics is interwoven throughout Akapporul (inner life literature) which speaks of pleasure. The establishment of the literary convention called 'Arathodu Nittal' (standing with virtue/confession) aims to convey how the conduct of life should be. The manner of *Arathodu Nittal* itself is carried out in a specific order, as stated by *Akam* grammar and poems.

A question may arise in today's generation: why shouldn't the heroine (Thalaivi) directly tell her foster mother (Sevili) or biological mother (Natthai) about her secret love (*kalavu* life) The final line of the *Noorppaa*, 'Neri-arindhōrē' (Those who know the way/custom), can be taken as the answer to that question. In Purapporul (outer life literature), we can discern that the methods of war were governed by rules. In the Vetchi Thina (cattle-raiding convention), the theme 'Surathu Uythal' (driving [cattle] through the path) indicates that the Vetchi warriors drove the captured cattle without causing distress through the difficult desert and wide forest paths. This is mentioned in the couplet:

Here, the poet praises the Pandya king who fought a Dharma Yudham (righteous war), asking the cattle, Brahmins, women, the sick, and those who have not yet had children (who must perform rituals for their ancestors) to move to a safe refuge, as they will be spared from his arrows. We also see a righteous war in the Ramayana. Kamban portrays the defeated Ravana standing before Rama, stripped of his crown, describing the scene:

He stood, digging the ground with his toe, his face and head darkened, with lowered eyes, an image of a Banyan tree with hanging roots, his hands hanging empty, so that the world might shout, 'This is the act of those who have transgressed *Aram*.'

We see that ethics is the central theme even in epics, and the four qualities of an epic are said to be *Aram*, *Porul*, *Inbam*, and *Vīdu* (Virtue, Wealth, Pleasure, and Salvation), with *Aram* taking precedence. The ethical texts of the post-Sangam period, the epics, and the minor literature (*Sitrilakkiyams*) all emphasize ethics. Even when examining modern literature, we can see that ethics remains prominent.

Avvaiyar

Avvaiyar is the author of the first four works: *Aathichoodi*, *Kondraiventhan*, *Moothurai*, and *Nalvazhi*. Since Avvaiyar's history was not documented by Tamils, various histories from different periods are known about her. Her history and period are not clearly defined. Many poems, a few books, and some stories are attributed to Avvaiyar, suggesting that there were at least three or four Avvaiyars from the time of Kamban onward. All the stories about Avvaiyar have been combined into a composite narrative, which is often recounted as her life history through oral tradition.

The word *Avvai* is understood to mean a female ascetic, mother, sister, grandmother, or elder woman. In Tulu and Kannada, as well as Tamil, *Avvai* means 'Ammāi' (Mother/Elder Woman). Ar. Sī. Paappā explains this by saying, 'The use of the name Avvaiyar as a paradigm for female scholarship is itself a great testament to her greatness.'

Athiveeramar Pandiyar

Athiveeramar Pandiyar, who composed *Narunthokai* (also known as *Vetrivarkai*), was a king belonging to the Pandya dynasty who lived in the 13th century. He is also known as the *Korkai Pandiyan*. He was proficient in Tamil scholarship. His rule gave him less fame than the books he composed, which keep his name alive today. His work *Naidatham* brought him acclaim. Following that, *Vetrivarkai*, also called *Narunthokai*, earned him fame. This work is revered like Avvaiyar's *Aathichoodi*. It adopts a straightforward approach to conveying ethical principles in a simple manner. Mu. Va. also notes that 'He also authored books like *Kāsikādam*, *Kūrma Purānam*, and *Linga Purānam*.'

Structure

Like *Aathichoodi*, *Kondraiventhan*, composed by Avvaiyar, arranges ethical maxims by systematically ordering the letters from 'A' (அ) to 'F' (ஃ). This work includes a phrase beginning with the letter 'Kau' (கௌ). Other letters (Sau (சௌ), Thau (தௌ), Nau (நௌ), Pau (பௌ), Mau (மௌ)) are not used as initial sounds. Excluding the hard consonants (Mei Ezhuthu), the work comprises 91 lines. This line is written using the *Āyda Ezhuthu* (ஃ). The remaining lines begin with the *Uyirmēi Ezhuthukkal* (consonant-vowels) in the series of Ka, Sa, Tha, Na, Pa, Ma, and Va. *Narunthokai* contains 81 songs, excluding the invocation poem. It is mostly composed of one-line verses, with a few resembling two-line *Kurals*, some as four-meter couplets (*Kanni*), and a couple of songs as three-line *Sindhadi* (short-meter). Each line has four meters (*Seer*). Song 74 has six lines, with four meters per line. This shows that the author adopted various structures of the *Venpaa* meter to express his thoughts. Athiveeramar Pandiyar composed the ethical principles he wished to convey in this work with varying line limits, ranging from one to six lines. Athiveeramar Pandiyar intended to convey ethics in the manner of Avvaiyar in *Narunthokai*.

Chronological Comparison

In his research article on the period of the Tamil poet Avvaiyar, Ar. Sī. Paappā views the Avvaiyar of the ethical period in two phases. He suggests that the Avvaiyar who composed *Aathichoodi* and *Kondraiventhan* predates the 12th century CE, stating: 'In these two texts, the initial letters 'Sa' (ச) and 'Da' (ட) appear. This is contrary to the rules of *Tholkāppiyam*

and the general trend of Sangam literature. Therefore, it can be said without doubt that it is post-Sangam period. Nannūl and Viracōzhiyam, believed to have been composed in the 12th to 14th centuries CE, state that the letter 'Sau' (சௌ) can begin a word. Thus, the Avvaiyar who composed Aathichoodi and Kondraiventhan predates the 12th century CE.' The period of Athiveeraramar Pandiyar, who composed Narunthokai, is the 14th century CE. His full name is Sadayavarman Athiveeraramar Pandiyan. Tamizh Annan mentions: 'Some kings of the Southern Pandya kingdom ruled from Tenkasi as their capital from the latter part of the 14th century to the latter part of the 17th century. He was one of them. He was the eldest son of the former king, Thirunelveli Māran. To commemorate his father, he built a temple called Kulasekara Udaiyar Ālayam in Tenkasi. His period is from 1564 to 1604 CE.'

Invocation

Ethical texts containing moral maxims usually begin with an Invocation to God. Texts that express Jain ethics contain a salutation to the Arhat. In both Kondraiventhan and Narunthokai, the invocation is addressed to Lord Ganesha. Just as the name Āthti-mālai Sūdi (*One who wears the Āthti Garland*) refers to Lord Shiva, Konraiventhan here refers to Shiva, the lord who wears the *Konrai* flower garland. Since the phrase is 'Konraiventhan Selvan' (*The Son of Konraiventhan*), the text is a prayer, 'We will always bow and worship the feet of Lord Ganesha, the son of Lord Shiva.' V. Suba. Mānikkam also interprets this: 'We will worship the feet of Lord Ganesha, the son of Lord Shiva, daily.' (We will adorn our heads with the flower feet of the five-handed (Ganesha), who is the essence of the Pranava mantra, 'Om'.) Here, the author prays, 'We will worship the lotus feet of the five-handed Ganesha, who is the inner meaning of the Pranava mantra, 'Om,' by adorning our heads with them.' When the ethical principles mentioned in these texts are classified and analyzed, they can be divided into Individual Ethics and Social Ethics. A civilized society is formed only when both function together. Therefore, Dr. Su. Maadhavan has categorized the ethics in moral literature into five fields of knowledge:

1. Sociology
2. Economics
3. Politics
4. Culture
5. Science

The ethics expressed from Sangam literature to modern literature also confirm this. The ethics presented in Kondraiventhan, written in the 12th century, and Vetrivarkai (Narunthokai), belonging to the 16th century, can be compared using the principle of literary development.

Sociology

Humans are social beings. When living together, they must follow certain codes. Education refines them. Although Sangam literature speaks of the excellence of education, ethical texts treat learning and teaching as virtuous acts. Education and lack of education are foundational concepts in moral literature.

Avvaiyar emphasizes the importance of education:

- 'Ennum Ezhuthum Kannena Thagum' (Numbers and Letters are worthy of being considered one's eyes.)
- 'Kaipporul Thannin Meipporul Kalvi' (Education is the true wealth compared to hand-held wealth.)
- 'Nirkkak Katral Sol Thirampaamai' (Learning to stand firm is not failing in one's word.)

Athiveeraramar Pandiyar states that the Guru (teacher) who imparts knowledge is equal to God. He says, *The one who teaches letters is God*, and *The beauty of learning is faultless expression*.

(Learning is good, learning is good; even if one has to beg for food, learning what needs to be learned is good.)

He emphasizes the need to learn, not as a command, but by urging, *Learn somehow*, thereby introducing a change in the manner of conveying ethics. He criticizes the nature of the uneducated:

- 'Kallaa Oruvan Kulanalam Merpal Pesuthal Nelinul Pirantha Patharaagum.' (The boasting of family pride by an uneducated person is chaff born within the paddy.)
- 'Naarpaal Kulathil Merpaal Oruvan Katrilan Āyin Keezhirupavan' (Even if a person is from a high caste among the four castes, if he is uneducated, he is an inferior person.)
- 'Ekkudi Pirappinum Yaavare Āyinum Akkudiyil Katrorai Melvaruga Enpar' (No matter what family they are born into, or who they are, people will ask the learned from that family to come forward.)

The ethical texts declare that education is the virtue that transcends caste, religion, and race and transforms a person into a human being.

Progeny

Tamil literature celebrates the family as a social structure. Kudaloor Kizhar beautifully describes how the foster mother (Sevilithāi) spoke to the biological mother (Natthaai) after seeing the heroine (Thalaivi) live with her lover after elopement:

(The maiden, with her soft *Kaandhal* flower-like fingers that had mixed the curds, wore her unwashed garment, her dark-lined eyes filled with cooking smoke, but her brow shone with subtle happiness when her husband ate the sweet and sour food she had cooked by herself and said, 'It is delicious.')

Tamils considered having children as a great blessing. Many Sangam poems speak of children as great wealth. In *Purananuru*, Pandiyan Arivudai Nambi sings beautifully about the significance of progeny.

Thiruvalluvar also lists having children as one of the great benefits of domestic life. He specifically speaks of the joy derived from children when they are young. What can compare to the pleasure of touching their bodies and the joy of hearing their lisping words?

Valluvar says there is no comparison:

Only those who have not heard the lisping words of their children will say that the music of the flute is sweet or the music of the lute is sweet.

Regarding this highly celebrated concept, Avvaiyar states, 'Ēvāmakal Mūvām Marundhu' (Children who act without being prompted are the ambrosia of immortality). She says that children who understand their parents' intent and carry out a task before being told are like an imperishable elixir to their parents, emphasizing that children must act according to their parents' nature.

Athiveeramar Pandiyar says that not all children born are true sons/daughters. Only those who love their parents and respectfully follow their wishes are true children (20).

Economics

Wealth (Porul) is necessary for family life to flourish. Tholkāppiyar mentions separation for the sake of wealth (*Porulvayir Pirivu*). Although ethical texts state that wealth is impermanent, they also say that necessary wealth must be sought.

Avvaiyar says:

- 'Thiraikadal Odiyum Thiraviyam Thedu' (Even cross the seas to seek wealth.)
- 'Thedaathu Azhikkin Paadaay Mudiya' (If you don't seek and instead ruin [what you have], it will end in misery.)

Athiveeramar Pandiyar says that the ignorant person who hands over his weapon of protection and his property to a stranger is useless, like chaff.

Politics

Tamil politics has been excellent since the Sangam period. The King was called 'Kō', and his place of residence was called 'Kōyil' (Temple). Ethical literature defined the necessary qualities and duties for a king.

Avvaiyar summarizes what the King must know in one line:

- 'Kotravan Arithal Uttridaththu Udhavi' (The king should know [the situation] and help in need.)

Athiveeramar Pandiyar says that a wicked king wearing a crown, who troubles his citizens and imposes unjust taxes, is useless like chaff.

- 'Kudiyalaith Thirundhu Vengōlodu Nindra Mudiudai Iraivanām Mūrkanum Patharē' (The crowned king, the brute, who stands with a cruel scepter, oppressing the citizens, is also chaff.)

Hospitality

Hospitality is a notable feature of Tamil culture. Sangam literature records kings offering hospitality to poets. Ethical texts praise offering food as a great virtue.

- 'Marundhe Aayinum Virundhōdu Undal' (Even if it is medicine, eat it with a guest.)
- 'Undikkku Azhagu Virundhōdu Undal' (The beauty of food is eating it with a guest.)

Similarly, the views of both authors are aligned on topics like Charity (Kodai) and Agriculture (Ulavu). Though separated by time, they agree on the method of expressing ethical principles.

Conclusion

There are opinions among people that ethical texts are difficult to follow because they are repetitive ('Kūriyadhu Kūral' - saying what has been said). However, there is nothing wrong with repetition if it is intended to correct mistakes when they occur. In a time when ethical virtues are diminishing, comparing these two ethical texts will be useful for teaching Tamil ethics to the younger generation.

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