

**Gangadevi, A Representation of Female Community in
Tamil Nadu – An Exploration of Ancient War Culture in
Kaval Kottam by Su. Venkatesan**

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Abstract

Kaval Kottam by Su. Venkatesan is a book packed with the history of more than eighty generations. The plot of the story starts from ancient Tamil Nadu before the British invasion and it gradually moves to the modern period. In its description, the novel pays tribute to the people who have sacrificed themselves for the betterment of the civilization. It also shows the transformation of women from battle field to kitchen and being brought under the category of second sex. Women during ancient times were equally talented and courageous enough to fight for their country. The feeling of patriotism is overwhelming in their attitude which they transmit to their children. Everything, starting from the kingdom to a small hut, is under the control of women as men are only an executing authority of the planning committee. They are selfless in their decisions and always think for the welfare of their country and the subjects. This paper deals with one such woman Gangadevi, the first queen who is encountered in the novel. She fights with her husband bravely against Moghuls to liberate the city of Madurai from them. This is an exploratory study of the period of Gangadevi, who is an embodiment of bravery and her contemporaries who were equally talented. It highlights the war and war methods employed by them in spite of men's methods which salvaged her country from Moghuls.

Keywords: Su. Venkatesan, *Kaval Kottam*, War, Women, Civilization, Patriotism, Moghuls

Kaval Kottam

Tamil Nadu has around two thousand five hundred small racial community divisions and more than three thousand racial groups. Every community has its own origin, history and its unique style of living but there are no evidences of the existence of these communities in written form. The manuscripts that have been found show that the history of Tamil Nadu can be divided into two periods: the history before Nayakka dynasty and the history after Nayakka Dynasty. The history of the people who lived before Nayakka dynasty is not very clear in the records but the people's history after Nayakka dynasty is recorded and many books based on this dynasty are being published. *Kaval Kottam* is a collection of history of Tamil Nadu for one thousand two hundred years which gives the

origin and the impact of the British invasion particularly in the southern parts of India and the tactics they used to bring the Kings under their control.

The plot of the story also revolves around the regions surrounding Madurai and Tirunelveli. The story is the amalgamation of both the histories of the Kings and the commoners. The plot highlights the bravery, intelligence and kind-heartedness of women in the first part. For instance, pregnant Sadachi, the Amman of kallargal community, bears the attack of the Moghuls and holds her life till she hands over the prestigious weapon 'Kannakol' to her husband in order to protect the whole country from theft; Gangadevi battles along with her husband in order to rescue Madurai from the Moghuls by forfeiting her life for the victory of her community; Veeranagamma, as per her name bravely sacrifice herself in the funeral pyre of her husband, Ranadeeran, in order to not let death separate them and on the other hand, Mangamma who fearlessly protests against the custom of Sati when her husband dies and takes over the country after him; Devadasi, Kunjarathammal who sells her entire property to provide food for her entire community when the whole country is in famine; Kazhuvayi who kills all the Europeans who disturbed their community in the name of governance; Veeraayi, cuts the throat of a soldier who tortures her community people. This forms the basic storyline.

Madurai is a place where there are a mixture of native people and Moghuls living together. Moghuls from the North invade Madurai during ancient times after which they start living in Madurai by sending the native people of Madurai out of town. Though they are sent out, some people stay there and start developing a civilization with Moghuls. The people who are sent out stay in Vijayanagar Empire and begin to gather strength from them to recapture their place in Madurai. Kumarakamban and his wife Gangadevi, the initiators, march towards Madurai to wage war against the Moghuls.

The novel starts with a war for land; there is bloodshed everywhere which is not visually appealing. All creatures, starting from men to cows, are tortured; all the people start to migrate in order to save their lives. Meanwhile, there is planning and description of Madurai for the soldiers by Kumarakamban on the banks of the river Vaigai.

Horses were running here and there across the street. Women were dragged by their hair along with the running horses . . . deadly cry everywhere . . . threatening and snickering in unknown languages by the horsemen. Two horsemen casually cross the god Karuppannasamy by carrying a woman with partially covered cloths on their horse's back. Blood dripped everywhere. (6)

The night before the war, Gangadevi takes Kumarakamban to Amanamalai to worship Theerthangarar as she believes that the blessings of God is important for their victory. The war is fought on the same night due to her urge, her personality completely changes as she reaches there. The devotion of the community towards acquiring their own place is reflected through Gangadevi's personality. Every member participates in the war from Vijayanagar Empire without any class, caste

and gender differences. Gangadevi is not the only woman who goes for war but also many women such as Renuga, Kanaganooga, Maramma go for war. They are very brave to take the life of others as well as to give the life. They highly respect the community which is now called 'scheduled castes', first preference is given to them as they consider them as the ancient community. Their community's old people kill a cow and eat it. As cow is considered as an incarnation of God, this angered the other communities and they prevent them from participating in the public events which has become a derogatory term representing their community. "Next as per the caste order, Sakkiliyar's (a scheduled caste) cow has to come as they are our older community" (20).

Importance of Rituals

Rituals are given importance in Tamil Nadu. There is a belief that these rituals help them to become virtuous and the offerings done in these rituals directly go to God which will make God happy which results in their victory. 'Aavu Poojai' is considered as one of the purest form of rituals as the cow is the direct descendent of God. Sacrificing the lives to God for the welfare of their community is called Bali. The ritual ceremony becomes complete only after they sacrifice a calf to the God called Ellamma in order to accept this calf instead of taking lives of people in the war. The war starts after the sacrifice. The people even sacrifice themselves for the welfare of the community. This is evident in when Kanaganooga, one of Gangadevi's friends surrenders her soul to Ellamma by cutting her throat by herself for her victory. "The word 'Balamavaaru...' 'Balamavaaru' sounded like magical words. She wore the Vanji garland that lied in the neck of Ellamma by worshipping. She took the dagger that was under Renuga's feet and sacrificed her soul by cutting her throat" (21).

Gangadevi

Women are the embodiment of success, bravery and knowledge. When people in other parts of the world say that the place of women is in the kitchen, there are real warriors entering the battlefield in the Nayakka dynasty. Gangadevi's character highlights the position of women in the country; when men are planning the moves in the war, Gangadevi starts it. She heads the war and gives instruction to the captain. Women are the mother of all creatures; she is the synonym of softness and humanity but when she enters the battlefield her personality changes entirely. The humanity in her decreases and her only motive is the victory of her community which makes her destroy the entrance of the castle. To demolish an entrance is not an easy task; the walls are very big and are constructed with strong metals such as iron and copper and there are more than thousands of soldiers to protect it, but it is mercilessly destroyed by her army under her captaincy.

They struggled hard to burn the entrance of the castle. They were continuously throwing the pots high filled with oil that are tied with the ropes made of banana stem. Then they started shooting the arrows carrying flames. The fire started spreading all over the castle. The men on the castle started to die as they could not tolerate the heat. (23)

Ganga's team progresses from the entrance to the main hall where she captures the castle and orders her troop to go in search of 'Sultan'. She is a humble Queen during a time when most of the

Queens wear their pride as their crown. She could have taken rest after the destruction of castle but does not do it. She participates with the other soldiers in the searching process. Her detective mind is more overpowering than the others. She rightly points out the hiding place of Sultan in the hills when everyone is searching in the plains. She controls everyone with her commanding voice. Everyone obeys her but it is not out of fear but due to the respect they have on her. This respect is reflected when the soldier, Manga volunteers himself to search for the Sultan. “She saw the mountain’s peak without winking her eyes and said, ‘Come after me’ without turning backwards” (25). When she says these words, thousands of horses and men follow her silently.

Her commanding personality completely changes when she is with her husband, Kumara Kamban. She is a commander to the army but to her husband she is a child, who always expects his command. She is talented both physically and intellectually. She wants to write an epic on his talents named ‘Madhura Vijayam’ and wants her husband to be an all-time hero. She not only acts as a wife but also as a friend who is always searched by Kumara Kamban to share the official matters. Kumara Kamban wants to present her with the sword that is won by him in the battle field but as a humble person she suggests presenting the sword to Mangan as he is the right person to have the sword. Her multitalented nature becomes a major reason for the success of the war that helps them recapture their empire in the Madurai region. Through this work, the author proclaims to the world that the women of Tamil Nadu possess the valour equivalent to men. With her physical and mental valour, the female body gets love, affection, care and respect from the family and the society.

References

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