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Culture of the Tamil Society as Portrayed in *Ponniyin Selvan*

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## ***Ponniyin Selvan*, a Novel Exalted as an Epic**

Embodied in the customs and practices of a society, culture demarcates the traditional values of a society from its neighbouring territory. Certain rituals in a society may be *suis generis* to a particular society. These customs and rituals are best exemplified in the Literature or any work of art of that region. *Ponniyin Selvan*, a novel exalted as an epic, reveals the culture of the Tamil society during the reign of Emperor Sundara Chozhar in the ninth century A.D.

## **History, Historical Novels and Reality**

Historical novels are an important part of modern literature. When these are based only on raw facts of history and focus only on reporting such facts, they do not reach the level of sensibility that we demand and expect from good storytelling.

Sequence of major events reported may be strictly historical, but there are adequate and infinite ways to add on to such events by way of characters, plots and purpose. To bring alive the historical context in the mind of the reader is a very important demand that a historical fiction writer should achieve. There is hardly any permission to be anachronistic as such errors may not find favor with the readers. Mainly, readers come to expect some information that they already have about the past reflected in such novels. Characterization, ultimate purpose, particularly ultimate sacrifice, and inspiring and heart-moving love episodes, and so many other factors come to influence the success of historical fiction.

India historical fiction, in particular, has a very nostalgic twist as the writers and readers want to experience the glory of the past, to overcome and forget about the sad plight of our present day conditions!

Historical fiction in India, unfortunately, soon becomes equivalent to history under such circumstances. We tend to forget and ignore the past failures, and the failings of our characters. We are left with a Golden Age, and we do not wish to accept that this may be simply a creation and interpretation of a skillful writer.

Saying this, however, does not diminish the excellent knowledge of history Kalki, the creator of *Ponniyin Selvan*, demonstrates in the novel. Kalki's novel has become a

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classic, speaking and educating several generations since it began to be serialized several decades ago. Now the work is also available in translation in English.

### **Problems of Translating a Historical Fiction**

In essence, translation of a novel is intended for those who are unable to read and enjoy it in the original language, or for those who think that they may enjoy the work in translation, because of their acquaintance with the language into which the work is translated. In both the cases, whether native Indian, Diaspora Indian, or simply a non-Indian reader, to cater to their needs and for greater enjoyment, novel's intricacy needs to be translated. However, it is not simply the culture-based emotional expressions, but also culture-based material civilization needs a sort of explanation easy to read, easy to comprehend, while retaining the idiomatic flavor. Almost an impossible task to achieve, indeed!

I read *Ponniyin Selvan* in its English translation. With some background in Tamil language and material history, and with some desire to know more about the history of Tamil people, I did enjoy the translation and could partake of the literary sensibility that Kalki wanted to convey to his readers.

### **Evolving Interest**

As part of my continuing participation in the process of literary interpretation of historical fiction, I present below some of the salient points that I gleaned from Kalki's *Ponniyin Selvan*.

To be honest, I was least interested in Tamil Literature, until my final year in post-graduation. The first volume of *Ponniyin Selvan* was prescribed for our semester. Yet that text never interested me, until I started to read the text and, believe me, I never rested until I completed all the six volumes of *Ponniyin Selvan*. Thirumalai (personal communication) also reported that he had the very same experience in his high school days reading in the *Ponniyin Selvan* in Tamil, in an interior rural town!

I had never dreamt that Tamil culture had such a glorious past. Now I have read the text thrice and still I feel that many aspects of our culture have evaded my notice. I still wonder whether the theme of the text is nothing but a simple theme of love and war. Yet what makes the text so special and so interesting is the Tamil culture which the author simultaneously reveals as the story progresses. Thirumalai also reports that the novel can also be seen in the context of continuing Sinhala-Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka.

Another important feature which I found out as I was reading the text was that the author had adhered, though not strictly, to the patterns of Akam when he speaks of love between the central characters.

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My investigation still continues, and never once have I felt bored when reading this text. This text has aroused my interest in other works like *Silappathikaram* and other ancient texts which elaborate on Tamil culture.

### **The Chola Country**

“Kaveri among rivers, the Chola among kings and the Chola mandalam among countries” were the best, so wrote Avvaiyar, a great Tamil woman poet.

According to Tamil tradition, the old Chola country comprised the region that includes the modern-day central region comprising Tiruchirapalli and Thanjavur Districts and adjoining areas in Tamil Nadu. The dynasty originated in the fertile valley of the Kaveri River. The river Kaveri and its tributaries dominate this landscape of a flat country that gradually slopes towards the sea. The river Kaveri, also known as *Ponni* (golden) river, has had a special place in the culture of the Cholas and the Tamils. The annual floods in the Kaveri marked an occasion for celebration, *Adiperukku*, in which the whole Chola country took part.

### **The Beginning**

The novel begins with the people preparing themselves for this great regional festival, as our hero Vandiyathevan is introduced.

The Chola country was ruled by an Emperor/Chakravarthy and one believed in the divine right of kings. The king was addressed as Deva meaning god. The King was god for the Tamil people. The novel witnesses this reverence due a King.

In the novel too, we see that though the king is bedridden, everybody reveres him. Vandiyathevan voices out this thought when he meets the Emperor for the first time at the Thanjavur palace.

“Prabhu! For the son, the father is God. For the people, the King is God. The Puranas tell us that a King has aspects of Vishnu.”(PS Part I, 144)

The qualities expected in a king were compared to the five elements. He is said to be patient like the earth; his plans broadly laid like the sky; is strong and destructive in his anger like the wind and fire; cool and merciful as water to his friends. The king was considered as life to the people.

These traits were prevalent from the Sangam period.

### **In Praise of Kings – The Divine Right of Kings**

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Considered equivalent to gods, the kings were praised highly, and temples were commemorated after their names. The Chozha kings assumed the title Parakesari (lion to the enemy) and Rajakesari (lion among kings). They also held titles like Ko-Parakesari or Ko-Rajakesari, Ko meaning god. The Tamil people believed in the Divine right of kings and the king himself was exalted to the position of a God and was revered throughout the land.

In the first volume of the novel, The First Floods, the poets sing in praise of the king. The poem goes as:

“We praise Sundara Chozhar, the virtuous one  
Who protects us like the shade of the bodhi tree  
Long live the munificence, beauty and power  
Of this mighty king of Nandipura” (PS Part I, 146)

### **Chola Administration**

His power had no limitations but important transactions were conducted with the assistance of ministers and officers. History says that the Chola kings consecrated the heir-apparent as the Yuvaraja/Crown Prince during the coronation/makutabhisekam so as to avoid internal disputes. Most of them were appointed as viceroys in distant provinces.

The Chola kings associated their own sons in the day to day administration of the kingdom. The two sons of the King Aditha Karikalar and Arulmozhivarmar are in distant lands and served as commandants of the army away from their king and, right from the beginning of the novel, the readers are informed that Aditha Karikalan is the Crown Prince.

### **Living Rich and Regal**

The royal household encouraged polygamy and the royalty lived in palatial buildings. The separate quarters for women were called the anthapuram and young boys of the king were brought up in these quarters until a certain age.

We see Ponniyin Selvan talking to Kundavai that he was pampered and spoilt by the women in the *anthapuram*. Apart from the servant maid, the princesses were accompanied by a group of maids from the clans of chieftans. Kundavai is also surrounded by a group of women who envy Vanathi, who enjoys the Princess' favour.

### **High-sounding Titles**

Another notable aspect during Raja Raja Chola's reign is the building of the cenotaph/pallipadai commonly known as the sepulchral temples erected at the honour of renowned Chola kings. The high-sounding titles for the brave during the war were revered highly. The titles which were bestowed upon warriors were not easily attained.

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They had to perform extremely brave deeds which risked their lives to attain such name and fame. These titles earned by the warriors commanded a privilege in the society for the brave men. One such man is the Periya Pazhuvettarayar. The public does not look at him with great liking because of his arrogance; nevertheless, he is revered for his brave deeds in war. Wherever he goes, his titles always accompany him

“The warrior of warriors. The most famed of the valorous. The lance-bearer who fearlessly attacked the Pandya army, who fought in twenty-four battles, who bears sixty-four battle scars on his sacred self, the Dhanadhikari, the Keeper of the Treasury, the Dhanyapandaram, the Custodian of the Granary, the levier of taxes, Periya Pazhuvettarayar, is coming.”(PS Part I, 11)

### **Elaborate List of Royal Emblems**

Speaking about administration, the banner, umbrella, murasu or the royal drum, flowers and swords constituted the Royal insignia. It is said that when the scepter falls/swerves, it symbolized the degraded status of the king and the umbrella normally white denoted the unstained judgments in his kingdom. The murasu was used in carrying out the royal orders. We see a drummer entering Pazhaiyaarai announcing the arrest of the protagonist when he failed to return from Lanka.

### **The Bodyguards of King – Suicide Warriors**

The king is protected by bodyguards called puvelaikkaras. In *Ponniyin Selvan*, we are introduced to three such puvelaikkaras or bodyguards with an important difference—they take an oath in front of their clan deity with blood that they would take care of the king at all costs and if they failed to protect him, they would sacrifice their own lives. The Velakkara Battalion has vowed to protect the king at the expense of their own lives and all their arrogant acts as they walk out of the fort is tolerated as deeds of mischief. Another perfect example is the Apathudavaigal of the Padya clan who have vowed to destroy the Chola dynasty since their king was murdered by the Cholas. The Pandya conspirators-Ravidasan, Soman Saambavan, Idumbankari and Nandini lurk around only with this vengeful deed in their minds.

The king was protected by bodyguards called puvelaikkaras who normally take a vow to guard the king at the expense of their own lives. There are three types of puvelaikkaras mentioned in *Ponniyin Selvan*. The Velakkara Battalion, Sundara Chozha Therinja Kaikolar Battalion and the bodyguards of the dead Pandyan king called the Apathudavigal. The troops enjoyed many privileges because of the vow they had taken. Kalki describes them in his novel as

“It was an important institution in old Tamilnadu, especially in the Chozha Kingdom. The Velakkarars were bodyguards to the reigning kings, but

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with an important difference. They had taken an oath that they would give their lives to ensure that no harm came to the king. If, because of their carelessness or because of circumstances beyond their control, the king's life was endangered, they had sworn to cut off their heads and offer them to Durga. Naturally warriors who had taken such a grim oath enjoyed privileges to which others were not entitled.” (PS Part I, 124)

### **Checks and Balance through Committees**

Though the kings' orders were supreme, the force of royal autocracy was tempered by advisory bodies like 'aimperumkulu' and 'enperayam'. Though the king's power had no limitations important decisions and transactions were conducted with the assistance of ministers and officers. These important officials were often chieftains who have had long standing cordial relationship with the Ruler over generations. The novel does not show any distinct divisions like the aimperumkulu but we are able to see the present day political scenario as in the form of ruling and opposition parties-Kodambalur, Malayaman clan supporting the king whereas the Pazhuvettarayars conspiring with Sambuvaraiyars against the king.

### **The Armed Forces**

War was a sport among the men. It was considered heroic to die on the battlefield and a wound at the back was a shame to manhood. The four wings of army/chaturanga were the elephantry (aanaipadai), chariotry, cavalry, and infantry. Traces of these wings are seen in the novel but these divisions are not dealt with, in detail.

### **Royal Privileges**

The members of the royal household enjoyed many privileges-they travelled in a special route known as the royal route and the laymen were denied the chance of using it. Women travelled in closed palanquins which were carried by the palanquin bearers. The royal seal or the insignia was required for any man wanting to visit the royal household. Only with the help of the Pazhuvoor insignia, Vandiyathevan is able to enter the Thanjavur palace for the first time to see the king.

### **Statesmanship**

A minister was expected to be the pinnacle of wisdom, well versed in arasiyal, acute in judgement and resolute in action. Anirudha Brahmarayar is known for his crafty statesmanship. He is feared by all, including Kundavai. He puts the weal of his country ahead of other priorities and hence covers up many truths involving the King's personal life. Another able statesman is Vandiyathevan who is able to cross his hurdles primarily through his wit and impish behaviour.

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The Cholas' system of government was monarchical, as in the Sangam age however, there was little in common between the local chiefdoms of the earlier time and the imperial-like states of Chola kings. The kingdom was divided into small divisions for the sake of governance. A number of villages constituted a larger entity known as a Kurram, Nadu or Kottram, depending on the area. A number of Kurrams constituted a valanadu. Though these distinctions are not clearly seen, we get a rough idea through the eyes of Vandiyathevan, and the presence of small princes like Sambuvarayar, Malayaman, Kodambalur Velar with their allotted territory in the Chola realm suggest that the big Chola Empire was divided into small kingdoms for the sake of governing the huge country.

### **Forts and Barricades**

The royal palaces were surrounded by a fort. Royal orderlies of various denominations such as perfumers, garland makers, betel bearers, arecanut servers, armourers, dressing valets, light bearers, bodyguards, time criers, etc waited upon the royal household. Sendhan Amudhan tells Vandiyathevan that he is responsible for making garlands for the deities in the temple inside the fort. Though the fort was open for all these activities, it was well guarded.

### **Hospitality – A Chief Feature**

Hospitality was the hallmark of the people. In Part IV, when Vandiyathevan enters the blacksmith's shop, the blacksmith treats Vandiyathevan kindly though he is a stranger. Even at Sendhan Amudhan's house Vandiyathevan receives a warm welcome. Patriotism is another trait in all the Tamilians. Every citizen honours the king and even the Pazhuvettarayers who conspire against the king do so only for the welfare of the Chola country. Another instance where the love of one's country is revealed is in Part III. At Anaimangalam, in a conversation with her brother Arulmozhi, Kundavai tells that she loves him very much and one of the reasons for it is that she strongly feels that he will conquer territories and add glory to the Chola kingdom.

### **Justice and Heroism**

Justice and heroism were the two eyes of kingship and the kings themselves served as royal examples in the fields. Madurantakan was not respected by the people simply because he was not brave (by travelling in a closed palanquin meant for women). We also see the old Malayaman repeating the heroic exploits of the battle at Thakkolam. Dying in a battle with a wound on the chest was the greatest honour a warrior could ever achieve. Similarly a wound on the back for a man was the greatest shame, he could ever incur on himself. Kandanmaran is one such character who is a victim of this infamy. Though he was unknowingly attacked, and received a wound on his back, he does not escape the laughter of warriors like Periya Pazhuvettarayar and his brother.

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There is a close relation between the microcosm and the macrocosm world of the Tamil society. The personal world of the people is very closely related to the society. In other words, the society makes an individual. Though Arulmozhi is attracted towards Poonkuzhalali, he knows very well in his heart that he will not be able to marry her because she is a boatgirl. The same is seen in the relationship between Emperor Sundara Cholar and Mandakini Devi.

The people are respected according to their profession and there were separate quarters allotted for every class of people. The temple priests stayed near the temple and they were revered. Poets enjoyed huge favour from the kings from time immemorial. Here too, Sundara Cholar though bedridden, grants permission to the poets who wanted the 'king's darshan'. There are numerous instances in the novel where the poets returned home with huge prizes bestowed upon them.

### **Astrology**

Belief in astrology was a part and parcel of life for the Tamil people. Fate and karma were indispensable in their lives. The Kudandai josier entertained the royal people too. The ominous signs of the pole star resulted in the death of the Crown Prince. The author too, satisfies the wishes of the readers by fulfilling the predictions of the josier. Signs of auspicion were adhered to without fail-before leaving to Lanka, Ponniyin Selvan visits his sister and at the sight of the Prince, Vanathi faints thereby dropping the auspicious plate from her hands which was spoken as an ill omen. Concepts of Rebirth and Transmigration are also used in the text.

### **Tolerance of Other Sects and Religions**

With regard to religion, religious tolerance is felt on a larger scale in the novel. Buddhism was beginning to flourish in the kingdom and the kings encouraged it. Prof. K.A.N Sastri says "He (Raja Raja Chola I) was tolerant and extended protection and patronage towards all sects." History says that though an ardent Saivite, Arulmozhivarman helped to construct a Buddhist vihara at Nagapatnam. Sembianmadevi, the dowager widow queen was also a Saivite but she too does not disapprove other beliefs. Azhwarkadiyan, the Vaishnavite is seen picking up quarrels against the Saivites and with people who practised other beliefs. But as the story progresses, the intent of his quarrels is also a part of his strategy in espionage. Building temples to the deities was a common activity for the Cholas and in the novel too, the revered Sembianmadevi contributes financially in the construction of temples.

### **International Trade**

Trade was carried out in the ancient days through the barter system where goods were exchanged mutually. Kaverippattinam, on the coast near the Kaveri delta, was a major port town and the other port town of Nagappattinam was the most important centres of

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Cholas. These two towns became hubs of trade and commerce and attracted many religious faiths, including Buddhism records history. We see that the ports mentioned here are also seen as ports of significance in Ponniyin Selvan too. Moreover, foreign trade is also present in the story where we see the Arabs on the sea connecting Lanka and Cholanadu.

### **Art and Architecture**

We see an appreciation of sculptures in the conversation among the older Malayaman, Adita Karikalar, and Pallava Parthibendran at the shore of Mamallapuram towards the end of the first book. In Part II, we also see the hero Ponniyin Selvan captivated by the paintings and sculptures in the ruined mandapam in Lanka with Mandakini Devi-the mute women. These pieces of art provide us with vital information that works of art like paintings and sculpture flourished in the ancient civilizations too.

### **Role and Place of Women in Society**

Women were revered and respected down the ages of our society. We witness it throughout the novel. They had no part in the administrative world but here Kundavai is portrayed as the modern multi-faceted woman. Chastity certifies a woman and a reader innocent of this quality in our culture will be able to realize its worth in the scene in Book III, where Kundavai meets Vandiyathevan in the prison and holds his hand and tells him that she will marry nobody since she has held his hand. Though women were treated as delicate, the 'Tamil Courage' was inherent. Vanathi, though considered a coward and fragile stands her ground when the Prime Minister asks her where Ponniyin Selvan is? Self immolation of the wife after the death of her man was very common in the society. It is recorded that the consort of Emperor Sundara Cholar immolated herself at the death of her husband, though the novel does not show a trace of this practice.

Ancient master-pieces in Tamil Literature strictly adhered to the tenets of the Sangam Age. Ponniyin Selvan, knowingly or unknowingly exhibits some of the features of Sangam Literature. Poetry, the predominant genre in Sangam Age, revolved only around two topics-Akam and Puram. The former concerned about the inner self, dealt about love and the emotions associated with it. On the other hand, Puram dealt with the outer world mostly war and its surroundings. Here in Ponniyin Selvan too, the central themes are love and war. Moreover the feelings associated with Akam and Puram were related to the Landscapes of the Tamil country. On close observation of the text, these associations are also not absent in the novel.

### **Reading a Novel in Translation**

A major advantage in translating a work of art is that, it contributes toward the growth of a language. The vocabulary of the language increases and this is one of the criteria for a language to live and English language is renowned for this feature. The ideas conveyed in

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the novel are simply Tamil and for an unfamiliar reader the novel is also a source book of an entire culture. At the same time, such intensely historical and cultural piece of fiction would demand extra effort for those who are not acquainted with the history and culture that form the backdrop of the novel. *Ponniyin Selvan* is no exception to this common rule.

A language plays a crucial role in communicating a text and English being a Universal language helps in reviving a lost culture. Without a universal language, it is impossible to take a culture to the world - without the translation of *Ponniyin Selvan*; the entire knowledge of a culture would have been restricted only to a smaller crowd (the natives), apart from the sheer enjoyment on reading the story.

Arulmozhi Varmar as *Ponniyin Selvan*, through the author Kalki, has attained the pinnacle of glory then as Raja Raja Chola I in history which merely records bare facts. Here lies the power of the English language. Thus through this translated piece of art, the scope of a culture is widened (in terms of knowledge and not necessarily in its implication).

### **A Note on the Text**

The Primary Source *Ponniyin Selvan* is abbreviated as PS in the paper.

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