

Contribution of Eminent Native Tamil Scholars to Tamil Literary History

Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D., D.Litt.

Professor, Head & Chairperson

School of English & Foreign Languages

Department of English & Comparative Literature

MADURAI KAMARAJ UNIVERSITY

MADURAI – 625 021

Tamil Nadu, India

Cell :9442621106 / 7339129324

schelliah62@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper attempts to bring to light the contribution of history of Tamil Literature through various methods and examples. Also, this paper presents the importance of Tamil and the difficulties faced by the Tamil literary historians. Moreover, this paper presents various religious principles and philosophical principles. This paper tries to prove that the classical language, Tamil admired not only by Tamilians but also western people. As the western literary theories have been influencing in Tamil literature. It reached the (goal) world. It proves that through western people, Tamilians have to know the importance of Tamil Literary history.

Key Words: Tamil Literature, Ethics, Tamil culture, Western literary theories.

It is out and out acceptable and true that formerly writing literary history was nothing but a narration of stories; but slowly the trend has got changed to effect a commendable and good survey of Tamil literary history in the light of Western theories and ideas, related to literary historiography, thereby explaining what is literary history and its development in the 20th century with a focus on the growth of the art of writing the history of Tamil literature and the availability of sources and the difficulties to be faced in making a survey of the few notable books on Tamil literary history. M.S. Purnalingam Pillai pays more attention to the legendary stories related to Tamil literature while V. Selvanayakam gives a clear picture of the history of Tamil literature. Prof. S. Vaiyapuri Pillai attempts to write a scientific literary history of Tamil. Whereas A. Veluppillai's book inaugurates a new approach and T.P. Meenakshisundaram's book *A History of Tamil Literature* makes a laborious attempt to present a survey. While M. Arunachalam presents a precisely bright account of the history of Tamil literature, Kamil Veith Zvelebil offers a wide study of the history of Tamil literature trying to draw parallels between Tamil literary theories and western literary theories.

Since Tamil is a classical language, fixing the date of its origin demands great efforts, immense intellect and authentic source. Entertaining or clarifying the doubtful matters associated with the history of Tamil and Tamil literature is, no doubt, a herculean task. There may be controversies as regards the data of composition of important works. The sources which are made

available now are not enough to derive the facts without any doubt. If future provides reliable sources of great importance, it will be a key to unlock the mysteries. Changes do occur now and then and so it is better to accept healthy improvements. Tamil literature is admired not only by the Tamil scholars but also by the foreign scholars. The western literary theories have been influencing Tamil literary trends from the beginning of the 20th century. The realm of knowledge knows no geographical boundaries. Literary contributions or interpretations often lead to novel improvements. Any attempt to write a Tamil literary historiography will certainly win the admiration of all men of letters and lovers of literature.

Writing literary history is called literary historiography which means the act of writing literary history scientifically. James Thorpe observes:

“Literary historiography is an art not a science, however much it may share with science the ideal of discovering and recording truth, and however much it may borrow from science its methods of discovering, selecting and classifying the data of its researchers” (P 57).

The literary historian should have some knowledge of order and the art of employing some techniques. There are a few important scholars like Robert Spiller, Barbara K. Lewinsky, Rene Wellek, Ulrich Weinstein, H.P.H. Teesing and R.M. Meyer who are solely responsible for the practice of the new methodology after the dawn of the 20th century. Spiller is said to be the first writer for giving a correct perspective of literary history. “Literary history is concerned with describing and explaining the expression in literature of a people during a period of time, in a place, and usually in a specific language” (Thorpe 55). For Rene Wellek, literary history traces the development over time, of specifically literary elements leading to “the history of literature as an art, in comparative isolation from its social history, the biographies of authors, or the appreciation of individual works” (Wellek 265).

Writing literary history is a complex art and a literary historian is expected to be beyond the clutches of all sorts of pride and prejudices. In a genuine and committed literary historian, one can find a linguist, a literary scholar, a literary critic, a textual critic and a literary historian. One can understand and make a thorough analysis of a work of art or a literary writer only with the help of the knowledge of literary history. For example, Tamil is the oldest of the Dravidian group of languages. The glory of Tamil is that it is the only living, classical language.” The language embodies an ancient, and varied literature, and a literary tradition whose origin is lost in the mists of pre-history. Among what is known as the Dravidian group of languages, Tamil is recognised today as the earliest to cultivate a great literature and a noble culture. It is gratifying that it is receiving in the latter half of the 20th century an increasing recognition among the linguistic scholars of the world” (Arunachalam P.XIII). If one sees the bright side of the intellectual world, there are many literary scholars who act

as intermediaries building bridges between the East and the West. The Tamil scholars try to widen the realm of Tamil literature and criticism by practicing and utilizing western theories.

Writing Tamil literary history is a 20th century phenomenon. Tamil is said to have been adorned with the ornaments of celebrated magnificent works of art. Tamil literature has made its historical march through the past twenty five centuries. While its antiquity adds supremacy to it, it causes many problems to the Tamil literary historians. On the basis of the sources available, this humble attempt is made to write something about Tamil literary history and a few Tamil literary historians why did contribute to the growth of Tamil literary history.

If the primary task of the literary historian is to record and explain the life histories of literary works, he is to make certain assumptions about the kinds of sources with which he is deal” (P 59). There are some important sources which provide the literary historian with helping evidences. As Prof. T.P. Meenakshisundaram puts it, “Any history can be only on the basis of the chronological arrangement of facts available”. Tradition, manuscripts, literary works, the colophons to the Cankam verses, inscriptions, references made by the foreigners and references formed in the other languages are the main sources available in Tamil. The age of every Tamil classic is a matter of dispute; and so, fixing the exact dates of some important works is a major problem. Tamil literary historians differ among themselves in utilizing the sources, and in handling the problematic factors. The survey of some of the books on the Tamil literary history illustrates it clearly.

Purnalingam Pillai’s *Tamil Literature* was considered the first literary history of Tamil written in English in 1904 in which the author discusses the growth of Tamil literature and its three generic divisions by pointing out that the ancient Tamil country was the submerged continent of Lemuria and the Tamil land was nothing but the cradle of the whole human race. There being an age-wise classification of Tamil literary history, he has divided it into six ages and the book is divided into six parts in accordance with its classifications. Part I which says about the Cankam age, narrates the traditional stories and anecdotes regarding the biography of the great poets like Akatiyar, Tolkappiyar and Valluvar; Part II deals with the age of Buddhists and Jains. In the first section, five major epics are discussed. The story of *Manimekalai* is narrated and there is a mention about its age. He is of the opinion that the time of its composition was the time of Ceran Cenkuttuvan, i.e. about A.D.90. He says that *Manimekalai* is the earliest of five great Tamil epics. After giving a canto-wise narration of *Cilappatikaram*, he tries to fix its age with reference to Gajabahu and Suthakarni. There is an analysis of the geographical details regarding the two epics Tiruttakkatevar’s *Civaka Cintamani* and *Nari Viruttam* are analysed. It is followed by a brief account of *Kuntalakeci* and *Valayapati* and a critical summary of *Perunkatai*. He draws comparisons between *Perunkataia* and *Civaka Cintamani*. The third part deals with the works, life history and the stories related to the life of the four Saiva Acaryas in detail and while it is dealt with in the first section, the second section offers a details analysis of the works of the twelve Alvars and the stories about them. Part-IV titled as ‘The Age of Literary Revival’ in which the first section discusses the ‘Great Trio’ – the works of Kampar, Pukalanti and Ottakkuttar and Part-V speaks of the Age of Mutts and or Matams’ which is the longest part with thirteen sections. The first four sections deal with some important poets like

Kalamekam, Villi, and Arunakirinatar and the king-poets like Ativirarama Pandiyan and the minor poets like Param Joti while the rest of the sections deal with the poets belonging to different mutts and matams and the last part titled 'The Age of European Culture' discusses the origin and development of Novel, Drama and Journal listing twenty poets belong to 'Jaffna School'. The age-wise classification is based on the literary and religious conditions prevailed in Tamil Nadu.

Tamil Ilakkiya Varalaru by the Ceylon scholar V. Selvanayakam published in 1991 got divided into six periods in which the classification is made in accordance with the political upheavals. The first division titled as 'The Cankam Period' discusses the time between 100 A.D. to 200 A.D. After giving a brief note on the three Cankams, the author speaks about Akatiyar and his disciples. Next he discusses the works of *Ettuttokai's* and *Pattuppattu* and analyses how their special qualities were brought to eminence and prominence. Then he speaks in praise of *Tirukkural* and says that *Cilappatikaram* and *Manimekalai* are the best epics belonging to 'The Post-Cankam Period'. In his opinion, the two epics provide a vivid picture of the contemporary political, religious and literary conditions. After presenting the critical appreciation of *Patinenkilkanakku* works, he explains how Poykai Alwar, Putan Alvar, Peyar Alwar and Karaikkal Ammaiyaar sowed the seeds of the literary movement which flourished in the Pallava period. Next the author explains how the Bhakti movement determined the literary movements of the Pallava period. Then he discusses the influence of Sanskrit on Tamil prose literature which paved path to a new style called Manippravala style.

The division called 'The Cola Period' between 900 A.D. to 1400 A.D. resembles Cankam period because there was a progress in every walk of life including literature, for, he has called this period the period of epics by painting out that the influence of Sanskrit gave a new direction to Tamil literature. While giving a brief note on *Tirumarai* and *Nalayira Tivya Prabandham* he has pointed out that the literary movement flourished in the Pallava period is also found in the Cola period. Under the sub-heading Kaviyankal, the author speaks about the ten epics. *Cintamani*, *Valaiyapati*, *Kuntalakesi*, *Nekakumara Kaviyam*, *Kantapuram* and *Periyapuram* receive critical discussion here. In his study about *Kampa Ramayanam*, the author explains how the Sankam literature influenced Kampa and in what way the circumstances fertilized the inspiration in him.

The Nayak period starting from 1400 A.D. and ended in 1800 A.D. considered as the fourth division depicts the political and religious state of the Nayak period with a focus on the qualities of the literary works of this period in terms of the contribution of the kings and the mutts to the enrichment of Tamil literature and the last period titled 'The European Period' talks about the change in the literary movement due to the western influence and the favourable factors which are responsible for the growth of prose literature and also the development of drama. Since the classification is done on the basis of political upheavals, it effects the literary classification. In the words of Robert E. Spiller,

“the basic structure of literary history,
is to be found in the rise and fall of
literary movements, delimited by time into

“periods” which are not sharply marked
By specific dates and may well be composed of
Literary works, their authors, and the
Controlling temper and ideas of that time and
Place” (Tharpe 64).

In the words of Weinstein,
“Periods, according to Teesing, are the
time spans of varying length’ which are
in themselves, relatively unified and
which distinguish themselves markedly
from others” (P 77).

These definitions can be applied to the periodization done by the author. While period belongs to temporal category, movement refers to literary event. In this book, each period stands for the temporal category in which the literary movements are explained.

Prof. S. Vaiyapuri Pillai’s *History of Tamil Language and Literature* discusses at length about the history of Tamil language and literature from the beginning to 300 A.D. in the first part and then from 300 A.D. to 1000 A.D. in the second part. In the first part, he does try to fix the time of birth, growth and development of Tamil suggesting a probable chronological order of the collections with a focus on the structural analysis of *Ettuttokai* and *Pattuppattu* followed by a discussion about the poets of the Cankam period. While the first part titled as “Anthology’ deals with *Ettuttokai* and *Pattuppattu*, the second part deals with *Paripatal* and *Kalittokai*. He speaks in praise of ‘Vairanandi Sangam’ and its literary achievements. Prof. Pillai, while speaking of the grammatical and ethical works, takes Akattiyam into account and he writes:

“No doubt’ the earliest grammar known to tradition is Agattiyam written by Agastya, a Brahmin sage. But even he was a member of the first Tamil Sangam, which as mentioned above, owed its origin to the Jains. He was followed by a number of distinguished Jaina grammarians, the chief among them as Tolkappiyar” (P 61)

He further writes:

“A work on Tamil grammar is attributed to him and he is said to be the father of Tamil. Perhaps someone claiming to be a descendant of Agastya wrote a grammar of the Tamil language. But the story that he was the

Guru of Tolkappiyar is of late origin,
perhaps of about the 10th century. Pannirupadlam
in whose payiram we find a reference to
Agastya being the Guru of Tolkappiyar
Is of doubtful authenticity” (P 65).

It is followed by the discussion of age and content of *Tolkappiyam*. In an elaborate segment, he suggests that Tolkappiyar is indebted to the Sanskrit works like *Panini*, *Siksha* and *Parata Natya Castra* and he makes a detailed analysis of *Tirukkural* in which he says that Tiruvalluvar is largely indebted to well-known treatises in Sanskrit like *Manu*, Kautilya, Kamantaka, Ayurvedic treatises and *Kamasutra*. Presenting a brief comparative analysis of *Tirukkural* and those Sanskrit works thereby speaking in praise of its supremacy, he writes:

“Valluvar, the Tamil sage, excels each one
of these ancients in his respective sphere” (86).

Pillai’s *History of Tamil Language and Literature* has become the target of severe criticism, for various reasons. His work has been repudiated by many scholars, especially his chronology of Tamil works.

Prof. T.P. Meenakshisundaram’s *A History of Tamil Literature* is one among the very few books on the history of Tamil literature which has won much attention and admiration in the realm of scholarly research and literary investigation. “The literary historian may – in fact, he must to a greater or lesser degree – be trained as a linguist, a textual critic, and a literary critic, but in his role as literary historian he has a separate and quite precise function” says Spiller. Prof. T.P. Meenakshisundaram is a linguist, and a literary critic. He is an eminent scholar, and the range of his scholarship is wide; and he is justly known in Tamil as “Panmolippulavar” which means scholar of many languages. His genuine literary knowledge plays a major role in bringing out the literary historian in him.

The entire book is divided into ten sections among which the first one makes some general remarks and the rest tell the story of the history of Tamil literature. The classifications are myriad in kind and most of them are literary classifications. The first section titled as “General Remarks” has four sub-divisions namely i) Introduction 2) Sources - Difficulties 3) Chronology – I Tradition and 4) Chronology-II other criteria. The brief introduction which points out the importance of Tamil, is followed by an analysis of the sources on which a Tamil literary historian can depend, and the difficulties he has to come across and he lists the difficulties faced by the Tamil literary historians.

T.P. Meenakshisundaram says that any history can be only on the basis of the chronological arrangement of the facts available. In the third sub-division, he explains how tradition becomes the main source. The other sources, like the internal evidences found in the literary works themselves, the external evidences received from the references to synchronisms, inscriptions, copper plates and foreign references are listed in the fourth division. According to T.P. Meenakshisundaram, the

survey of tradition has given us a rough division of the periods of Tamil literary history namely 1)The golden age of the Cankam Poets and its continuation” 2)The Pallavan Period 3)The Cola age and its continuation and 4)the age of foreign contact and the modern age. In his book *Opilakkiam (or Arimukam)*, Dr.V. Sachithanandam clearly states as follows:

“T.P. Meenakshisundaram has utilized his multilingual scholarship and writes a history of Tamil literature in English, which comprises Tamil literature into ten major divisions. But since he had delivered these lectures within a short time, he had to exclude certain important notes and remarks. If he had included them, when it was published in The form of a book, it would have been more useful. In spite of it, he has analysed the problems, which arise, When one writes a history of Tamil literature, in the first chapter, which runs up to sixteen pages. It will induce and kindle the thoughts of the literary Historians interested in doing research in this field” (P 136).

As regards the achievements of this book, C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar points out; “This account is a valuable addition to the literature of sympathetic and discerning literary criticism” (P 9). In a word, Prof. T.P. Meenakshisundaram proved himself to be an eminent literary historian in presenting the historic march of Tamil literature through the ages, with its varying fortunes.

A Velupillai’s *Tamil Ilakkiyatil Kalamum Karutum* traces the history of Tamil thought as it is revealed in Tamil literature. There are five divisions namely the period of Natural Principle, the period of Moral Principle; the period of Religious Principle and the Period of Scientific Principle. In the chapter titled as Ilarkai Nerikkalam, Tamil thoughts and ideas known from the analysis of Cankam literature is spoken of. While taking into consideration the location of Tamil land, contemporary political, social and religious states, he describes some of the special features of Tamils, like valour, pre-marital love, family life, hospitality, religious concepts, philosophical thoughts, political policies etc., thereby trying to trace how the foreign influences might have changed the Tamil thought. *Purananuru* is considered the source of information for the author to reveal the ideas of Tamils in this period. Under the title, the period of ‘Moral Principle’ he explains how the moral ideas dominated when *Tirukkural* and other *Patinenkilkanakku* works were written:

In the section ‘the period of Religious Principle’, he discusses how the Tamils were attracted by various religions making a critical analysis of the ideas put forth by the four Saiva Kuravas, Alvares, Nayanmars, Tirumular, Cekkilar and Kampar. According to him, when Appar and Campantar overcome the external forces like the influences of other religions in order to stabilize

Saivism, Cuntarar and Manikkavacakar who lived during the period in which Saivism dominated, tried to overcome the inducements of the human mind. He has explained a truth in a metaphorical language as follows:

“In the reign of Pallava kings, Compantar sowed the seed of Saivism, on the banks of the river, Vaikai. Towards the end of the Pallava reign that seed had grown into a tree, called Manikkavacakar which gave the fruit named Tiruvacakam.” (P 39)

In the section ‘the period of philosophical principle’ he explains how the religious feelings form the basis for philosophical thoughts and how the social and political conditions favoured the growth of philosophy and in the ‘the period of Scientific Principle’ he explains how the scientific principles have awakened the Tamil thought also and how Western Scientific knowledge removed the stagnation found in Tamil thought effecting a new approach to life and literature. In a word, it may be said that Velupillai’s novel approach has inaugurated a new method of writing Tamil literary history.

As per classifications made in terms of ages, periods, views principles and critical views and analysis, help the reader view Tamil literature from different angles. As Spiller puts it, “the ultimate and highest aim of the literary historian is therefore to help to explain the existence of master works” (60). M. Arunachalam’s *An Introduction to the History of Tamil Literature* published in 1954 is not only a short introduction to the history of Tamil literature but it is intended to acquaint the eager English reader with the wide range of Tamil literature over a time of more than twenty centuries. The primary concern of this book is not with dates but with the structure of works, and their several trends, and conspectus of literary events. The author has endeavoured in this book to survey each branch of literature from the beginning to the modern day, utilising political history, cultural phenomena, metrical growth, linguistic peculiarities and thoughts development. Though he does not adopt the western concepts regarding the art of writing a literary historiography, he does present a vivid, clear view of the history of Tamil literature. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar says:

“Mr. Arunachalam’s book is just what it claims to be: it is an introduction to a great subject, it is broad-based, it is very readable it is informative and instructive, and above all it is a labour of love and devotion to the cause of Tamil letters” (43).

To conclude, it may be stated that Tamil literature is a classical language admired not only by the Tamil scholars but also the foreign scholars. The western literary theories have been influencing Tamil literary trends from the beginning of the 20th century. If the Tamil literary historians collaborate and write a history of Tamil literature with the help of the western theories and

definitions related to the art of writing literary historiography, there will arise a more admirable Tamil literary historiography.

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