SANGAM LITERATURE

Introduction

Sangam literature is the earliest extant literature of the Tamil people. According to tradition it consists of the compositions of the third Sangam. Though there is a controversy about the works to be included, all are agreed that Ettuttokai and Pattuppaattu should be included under this head. The present study of the philosophic thought in Sangam literature is based on the eighteen works of the above two anthologies.

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The eighteen works of Ettuttokai and Pattuppaattu are the following:

1. NaRRinai
2. KuRuptokai
3. AińkuRupuuRu
4. PatiRRuppattu
5. Paripaatal
6. Kalittokai
7. AkańaanuuRu
8. BuRangoanuuRu
9. TirumurukaaRRuppatai
10. PorunaraaRRuppatai
II. CiRupaanaaRRuppatai
12. PerumpaanaaRRuppatai
13. Mullaippaattu
14. Maturaikkaañci
15. Netunalvaatai
16. KuRincippaattu
17. Pattinappaalai
18. Malaipatukataam

Since a description of the details of the authors, structure and other features of these works would be an unnecessary exercise in repetition, it has not been attempted here.

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Date

Dating of Sangam classics is still one of the most controversial and undecided issues in Tamil research. They are placed in time between time immemorial to 8th Century A.D. by different researchers. A recent dating on grammatical basis places them between 180 B.C. - 290 A.D. and we may take this as a most agreeable one for the purpose of our study.
Background

Geographically speaking, the Sangam literature was produced in South India, in what was called Tamilakam or 'Greater Tamilnadu', comprising the modern Tamilnadu, Kerala and the southern parts of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The Sangam literature shows a perceptible awareness of India, not only as a geographical region but also as a 'cultural area'.

Historically the Sangam times is the dawn of the historical period in South India. It was immediately preceded by the Megalithic period (C.B.C. 8–2 or 10–4), which saw the rapid growth of culture from the Neolithic period due to the advent of iron and new technologies. This Megalithic period is important in the sense that abstract ideas, though primitive and crude were conceived of religion, God etc. In the development of philosophic ideas, the juxtaposition of the two periods, the Megalithic and Sangam is significant. While the former is pre-historic and proto-historic, without written records, the latter is historic with the first written records to throw some direct light on the 'philosophic condition' of the period. So naturally the study of the first written records of the Tamils assumes an importance in the tracing of the evolution of Tamil thought. Chances are more in it to see the original, indigenous and 'less contaminated' ideas of the Tamil people.
Politically speaking, the Tamil country was divided into several principalities and ruled by the three Tamil monarchs viz. Chera, Chola and Pandyas and a host of chieftains and tribal heads. More than 300 names of kings and other chieftains are known from Sangam literature. The important fact to be remembered here is that unlike in later times, no foreign powers, alien to Tamil land and culture ever had any political sway in Sangam times.

The society was divided into so many castes and clans. From Brahmins to Veettuvars all sections of the people were found. Even non-Tamil population like Greeks, North Indians were found. Sections of the people were still in nomadic and seminomadic stage. Clear distinction was recognisable between the urban and rural life.

Cultural and commercial contacts with East (Kaalakam Pattinap. 191), West (Greece and Rome), South (iiłam - Pattinap. 191) and North (Pari.5:8) had been carefully cultivated in Sangam days which could have their influence on the culture of the Sangam Tamils.

From primitive religious practices to advanced philosophic systems were found to be practised and, believed
by the Sangam people. Indian philosophic systems like Vedism, Buddhism, Jainism, Yoga, Pûrva Mimamsa, Samkhya and Carvaka were well known in those days. The temple worship was also very popular then. Local philosophers like Arivars lived there, who might have contributed to the indigenous philosophic development. Many of the great poets of Sangam period were undoubtedly 'popular philosophers', as Sidney has put it. It is to be noted here that at least 70 of the names of the Sangam poets are derived from the names of Gods, philosophers and religion.

Nature of the Corpus

Though love and war are the dominant themes of Sangam literature, other themes are not found absent. Paripaatal and MurukaaRRuppatai sing the glory of Gods. Some poems from puRanaanuuRu and Pattuppaattu (e.g. Maturaikkaanci) deal with some aspects of philosophy. Prof. S. Vaiyapuri Pillai sums up the nature of Sangam literature in the following lines:

'They portray the life of the times. They give us glimpses of political and social conditions. They describe with exactitude, yield 'leading ideas.' In this way, literature can be shown to reflect the history of philosophy. They disclose a vivid picture of the esteem in which learning, literature, and art were held by our ancients. They teach us a noble philosophy of life and conduct. They whisper to us sweetly and intimately about the domestic felicity of the ancient times. In short, they constitute a store house of facts bearing on ancient manners, customs and ideas, and they are one of the influences which have shaped the literature of the later Tamil.'
constitute a storehouse of facts bearing on ancient manners, customs and ideas and they are one of the influences which have contributed to mould the literature of the later Tamils.5

So the heterogeneous content of Sangam literature is an invaluable document in the reconstruction of the philosophy of the ancient Tamils, though it may be of limited value.

Method of study

Poetry, whether Sangam poetry or any other poetry is no substitute-philosophy. It has its own justifications and aims.6 As Rudolf Unger rightly argues 'literature is not philosophical knowledge translated into imagery and verse, but that literature expresses a general attitude towards life, that poets usually answer, unsystematically, questions which are also themes of philosophy but that the poetic mode of answering differs in different ages and situations.'7

Even then, 'frequently literature is thought of as a form of philosophy as ideas wrapped in form; and it is analysed to yield leading ideas.'8 In this way literature can be shown to reflect the history of philosophy.9

When dealing with 'Literature and Ideas', Rene Wellek and Austin Warren say that

'literature can be treated as a document in the history of ideas and philosophy, for literary history parallels and reflects intellectual history. Frequently either explicit statements or
Allusions show the allegiance of a poet to a specific philosophy or establish that he has had some direct acquaintance with philosophies once well known or at least that he is aware of their general assumptions.  

A.O. Lovejoy has developed the study of the history of ideas, which 'is simply a specific approach to the general history of thought: (1) Carvaaka (2) Jainism (3) Buddhism (4) Sankhya (5) Yoga (6) Puurva Mimaamsa (7) The influence of Greek philosophic thought.  

This thesis 'The Philosophic thought in Sangam Literature' is an attempt to study the philosophy of the ancient Tamils as a system rather than mere clusters of ideas. The term philosophic thought here denotes mainly the ideas which are normally included and discussed as parts or components of the philosophic systems. That means the ideas which look like 'philosophic' are taken as interconnected to reconstruct a system and not as mere isolated ideas.

Firstly the thoughts relating to the three main philosophic questions viz. the God, the soul and the world are abstracted from the stray references found all over Sangam literature in three chapters (The Philosophy of God, The Philosophy of Soul, and the Philosophy of world). Secondly the religious concept of the ancient Tamils in relation to philosophy is attempted in five separate articles under one chapter (The Gods of the five fold division (1) Tirumaal the god of the pastoral region (2) Murukan
the God of the hilly region (3) Intiran, the God of the agricultural region (4) Varunan, the God of the littoral region (5) KoRRavai the Goddess of the desert region).

Thirdly the influence of the Indian and foreign philosophic thought is traced with reference to the different schools in separate articles (The influence of Indian Philosophic thought: (1) Caarvaaka (2) Jainism (3) Buddhism (4) Saamkhya (5) Yoga (6) Puurva Mimaamsa (7) The influence of Greek philosophic thought). A contrastive study of the Tamil and Sanskrit thoughts is provided to shed more light on the independence of the two traditions. Concluding chapter sums up the major findings of the study.

This study is felt necessary to broaden our knowledge about the development and history of philosophic ideas in the early stages of our culture, before or simultaneous to the codification of them into different schools and systems.

The reconstruction of the philosophic thought in Sangam literature is made on the basis of the explicit statements or allusions found in them. However, external evidences from epigraphical (e.g. Brahmi inscriptions) and archaeological (e.g. Gudimallam Sivalingam etc.) sources have also been made use to support the hypotheses.
Previous Studies

No systematic attempt has ever been made to study the Sangam literature in this perspective, though occasional essays, research papers and chapters on Religion and Philosophy in the works on Sangam culture deal with one or the other aspects of philosophic thought in a sketchy way. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan and others have conducted similar studies in the Vedas and the great epics Mahabharata and Ramayana, to gauge the philosophy of those literatures. Dr. M.A. Dorai Rangaswamy attempted a philosophic study on Sundarar Teevaaram. This is the first systematic study of this kind on Sangam literature.
REFERENCES

1. For more details please see the books on History of Tamil Literature by Prof. S. Vaiyapuri Pillai, Dr. M. Rajamanikkanar, Prof. T. P. Meenakshisundaram etc.

2. There are various computations. Please see Prof. S. Vaiyapuri Pillai's History of Tamil Language and Literature (Beginning to 1000 A.D.) Madras, 1956, p. 44 and Sanga Ilakkiyam - Text only, Paari Nilayam, Madras. Appendix.


5. Vaiyapuri Pillai, S. History of Tamil Language and Literature (Beginning to 1000 A.D.) pp. 45 - 46.


7. Ibid. p. 115

8. Ibid. p. 110

9. Ibid. p. 112

10. Ibid. p. 111

11. Ibid. p. 111