

The Relation Between Pan-Indian, Regional and Oral Epics: A Study of Tamil Epics as a Test Case

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The study of folklore, very often, is inextricably linked with the quest for regional, linguistic and other cultural identities. This is born from a cursory look at the history of folklore studies of different countries. So a study of folklore, especially that of an important genre of folklore - the epic, makes one think about the relation it has with a recent movement of regional awakening; whether the folk epics played a role in molding the sentiments of people along lines dictated by the movement, in its bid to shape a new identity for the people of the region.

It is a fact that various Indian regions under British rule tried to assert their cultural identity during the Indian independence struggle. This was true also of the South Indian regions where Tamil was spoken. Although the Tamil literary heritage was used to fashion out an identity for the then emerging regional Tamil politics, it is strange to note that folk epic stories were never the focal point of this movement of Tamil cultural politics. This, perhaps, demonstrates the urban character of this cultural movement which considered the illiterate singer's folk epics to be inferior to the written epics in the language.

But another noteworthy feature of this movement was that it wanted to establish a Tamil identity against the pan-Indian Sanskritic cultural domination ¹. In this background, let us make a study of the various concepts of Tamil epic poetry from Tamil grammatical and rhetorical treatises which show it to be different from Sanskrit epic poetry.

Tolkāppiyar, the author of the earliest Tamil treatise who gives an account of sounds, words and poetics and who is very often dubbed the Tamil *Pānini*, claims to delineate a Tamil characterization of sounds, words and poetics, both by comparing and by differentiating the Tamil items from that of Sanskrit ². Tolkāppiyar translates and draws certain concepts from Sanskrit, adapts them to the Tamil way of life and develops still others to lend an air of independence to the Tamil way of thinking. Thus Tolkāppiyar may be considered as having introduced the new concept of fashioning out a multifaceted regional model of Indian understanding against a hegemonic unitary, all embracing Sanskrit model of Indian culture, literature and epics. Tolkāppiyar also according to some scholars, talks about epics. The word '*totarnilai*' which occurs in Tolkāppiyar perhaps

signifies a Tamil concept of the epic, which one may presume, is different from the Sanskrit concept, the characteristics of which are described in *Kāvyaadarsha* of Dandin. Dandin speaks of four vital characteristics necessary for an epic : *Dharma* (virtue) *Artha* (Wealth) *Kāma* (love) and *Mōksha* (liberation). But the indigenous Tamil epic called *Cilappatikāram* according to scholars, lacks the fourth characteristic and still is considered a *totarnilai*, an epic poem. So we outline the fact that while the Sanskrit concept of an epic lays emphasis on four characteristics, the Tamil concept is fashioned out of three characteristics. The definition of this genre, the epic, is derived from the study of an available epic of this language, and not from a codification of what an epic is. Still, what the term *totarnilai* signifies, is very important ; *totarnilai*, considered to be a substitute for the epic denotes a different kind of lengthy poem similar to epics¹. Thus we may say that *totarnilai* is not an actual translation of the word epic and that *totarnilai* characterizes an epic like *Cilappatikāram*, which according to specialists of this epic, lacks the fourth characterization given by Dandin, that is liberation (*Mōksha*). This is how *Cilappatikāram* comes to represent a full fledged Tamil epic different from a Sanskrit epic. (We will see later another form of local Tamil epic which usually is an adapted version of Sanskrit epic.)

Counterparts of this local epic or *totarnilai* exist in many of the twenty two Indian languages which are included in the eighty schedule of the Indian constitution. A comprehensive study is yet to be carried out, of these indigenous epics of Indian languages. Until this kind of study is taken up, comparison with the main tradition of Sanskritic epic is not possible. In spite of this lacuna in Indian epic research, we may be able to form a good idea about indigenous manifestations of local epics by studying the commonness of epic groups. These epic groups are scattered over many regional languages of different language families, that we can call second pan-Indian traditional epic groups. We shall organize the available data of these three classes of epic groups, the Sanskrit epics (well typified by the *Mahābhārata*), the regional epics (exemplified by the Tamil epics) and the oral tradition of epics.

A comparison between the *Mahābhārata* as available in Sanskrit and the local version of the epic, in this case, the Tamil version, enables one to make some important observations. The local versions because of their affinity to the local literary taste, adopt tested meters of the local language; they don't tread a new path metrically. Many a time, the local versions, although not deviating from the Sanskrit text and the names of the main characters, give a twist to certain characters and events by admitting minor changes. But

it is noteworthy that no new characters are introduced; nor is the extension of an episode permitted in the local written epic. Another important feature is the emphasis of local custom, where a particular custom referred to in the Sanskrit text conflicts with the customs of the area where the local epic was composed. Usually, no change in the perspective with which a character or event is viewed, is encouraged in the local epic. Thus, the local epic's relation to the Sanskrit epic text is different from the oral epic's relation to the same. Since the *Mahābhārata* story is reworked by Tamil oral poets, a study of part played by the story in the construction of the oral epics in Tamil, will throw more light on the study of the Tamil oral epic character.

II

In this background, we shall compare two traditions of epic singing, one the singing and enacting of the epic called *Aṅṅaṅmarsāwmy Katai* (The Brothers story) and the other, singing and enacting of the different and unique versions of the well known *Mahābhārata*. This comparison will facilitate us to relate these local stories to the well-known stories of pan-Indian *Mahābhārata* story line. The conclusions of a pioneering scholar who initiated the comparison of the *Aṅṅaṅmarsāwmy Katai* with the *Mahābhārata* may also be examined here ⁸.

The Brothers story, in different versions, deals with the love and affection of two brothers and a sister and their subsequent death. The story of this folk epic incorporates different sequences in different versions. Each telling is slightly different, depending on the situation and the occasion. But important sequences narrating the evil deeds of a goldsmith, the affection of the two brothers, the friendship of the low caste character Veerabhahu, and the travails of the sister, Taṅkāl, are never missed by any singer.

If one takes up the different versions of this story for a study, one comes across a range of these different versions starting from versions without the influence of *Mahābhārata* to ones with strong influence. Thus it is important to show that certain versions do not allow a comparison with the pan-Indian version of the *Mahābhārata* story. This observation will raise doubts whether comparison with the *Mahābhārata* is possible only at certain fringe elements of the main story. Let us look at some of the versions and their relation to the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* story.

One version of telling of the Brother's story does not at all mention the rivalry of the

cousins of the father of the triplets and hence does not lend scope for comparison with *Mahābhārata's* famous rivalry of cousins". But, towards the end of this version of the Brother's story, there is a comparison of Poṅṅar with Dharmaputra of *Mahābhārata*. Shankar and Bhima and Taṅkāḷ with Draupadi. So out of the five thousand lines of this version of the Brother's story, the word Bharatham (*Mahābhārata*) occurs in two places, the word Dharmar (Dharmaputra) in three places, Bhima occurs twice, Nakul twice. Draupadi twice, Vijayan (Arjun) and Sahadeva once each.

Another version of the Brothers story presents an interesting difference. This version, unlike the other ones, describes the rival cousins of the father of the triplets as thousand clansmen which reminds us of the Kauravas. Thus the rivalry is established between the triplet's uncles, who here play the role of Kauravas and the triplets, the substitute of the Pāṅdavas ¹⁰. This is a superimposed substitution, perhaps made later. But here the other occurrences of the names of the different characters of the *Mahābhārata* story are as scanty as in the versions mentioned earlier.

A field trip to any of the temples of Poṅṅar and Shankar would give one ample information about the devotees' beliefs about the relationship between the characters of the Brothers story and those of *Mahābhārata*. One would gather enough evidence to show that devotees who gather, after traveling many miles to these temples are of the opinion that Poṅṅar is the avatar of Dharmaputra of the Mahabharata. Shankar that of Bhima and Taṅkāḷ that of Draupadi the powerful female character of the Mahabharata. The first version we have mentioned says clearly that Shiva asked the five Pandava brothers to go and take birth on earth as Poṅṅar and Shankar.

So what we surmise is that there is very little evidence in the texts of the version of the Brothers story to prove that it is modeled on the story pattern of *Mahābhārata*. The strongest evidence, the rivalry of cousins, does not pertain to Poṅṅar and Shankar, and their cousins but to their father and his cousins. But it is not so in the *Mahābhārata*. Even if this kind of cousin rivalry is found in two versions, this could be a later addition. The second version brands the rivals of the triplets father as not 'thousand clansmen' as is the case in another version, but as 'eleven clansmen', thus pointing to another clan rivalry which has no connection with the Pandava - Kaurava rivalry of the *Mahābhārata*.

Thus, we may come to the safe conclusion that the textual part of the Brothers story

is not totally modeled on the *Mahābhārata* story of pan-Indian relevance, but the ritual part of the Poṅṅar - Sankar worship receives sanction from the worship of *Mahābhārata*'s characters, especially the worship of Draupadi which is very popular in the areas from which the devotees of Poṅṅar and Sankar come. Draupadi worship might have necessitated the remodeling of Taṅkāl, the sister of Poṅṅar and Sankar to take the form of Draupadi. This in turn led the Taṅkāl's two heroic brothers Poṅṅar and Sankar being related to *Mahābhārata* characters¹¹.

To the other points resemblance of the Brothers story and the *Mahābhārata*, which Brenda E.F. Beck has elaborated on, we shall not devote much space, as most of the points made are not convincing. She compares the part played by semi human groups as well as the theme of exile, the dress of epic characters, the game of dice, the way of greeting the king, the part played by animals, the status of women in the family, the part played by fate in determining the turn of events, the prankster theme associated with Lord Vishnu etc. of both the epics, though the arguments need more convincing evidences. Most of the items mentioned here can be found in other legends and epics too. This will render these arguments baseless, the chance occurrence of these items in two epics, need not lead us to conclude that the Brothers story helps to link the local culture to the pan-Indian culture and narrative. For example, the occurrence of the prankster theme of *Māyavan* (Lord Vishnu) in both the epics serves different purposes. This point will be driven home only if one makes a study of other legends and song narratives where Lord Vishnu similarly presents this theme of prankster. The difference between the prankster theme as presented by Lord Vishnu in the classic *Mahābhārata* and the folk depiction of the same, as we come across it in other stories remind one of the famous Russian author Bakhtin's study of Rabclais and his world. Bakhtin juxtaposes official medieval ideology and folk humor, and comes up with the idea that folk humor is the opposite of the official ideology. So the folk humor occurring in the Tamil *Mahābhārata* legends cannot be compared with that of Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. The presence of Lord Vishnu in *Mahābhārata* as a prankster occurs to validate the pan-Indian official ideology that *dharma* would triumph ultimately, whereas his presence in the Brothers story serves the opposite aim. As the listeners of the Brothers story are very different, Vishnu appears whenever Taṅkāl wants, or if there is any need for a twist in the story line.

Anyhow the listener's intention to link the local epic's episodes and characters with that of national grand epic cannot be ruled out. This will lead us to study the cultural

characteristics of the local group of people vis-a-vis the pan-Indian ethos and traits. Reserving the results of this discussion for the last part of this paper, let us go on to the study of different versions or tellings of the *Mahābhārata* legends or song narratives.

These various *Mahābhārata* song narratives, unlike the Brothers story are of comparatively shorter length and show a tendency to resemble the written poems in style, though do not belong to that genre. But their influence on other sung versions of the same story is doubtlessly strong. Alf Hiltbeutel, a scholar who has been studying the acculturation of Draupadi cult to different regions, notes that some of these *Mahābhārata* stories - not all - are enacted as dramas during the festivals of Draupadi deity in Tamil Nadu¹³. As for the structure of the stories of these legends, they are the reordered stories of the characters of the *Mahābhārata*. This reordering merits a discussion.

These narratives which are available in Tamil, are either elaborations of episodes of the *Mahābhārata* or new stories connected with the *Mahābhārata* characters. The themes of one or two of these would demonstrate the peculiar characteristics of these stories. One such text called *Ēniyēram* narrates how Duriyōdana, after driving the Pandavas into exile, falls in love with Subhadra, the wife of Arjuna¹⁴. Duriyōdana thinks that he was not able to not marry the beautiful Subhadra, only because of the evil plans of Krishna, who got her married to Arjuna. So Duriyōdana now wishes to marry Subhadra and fulfill his earlier wish. But unfortunately, he does not get the support of Karna to carry out his plans; nor does he get the consent of his own wife. Still, driven by his strong desire, he undertakes a journey to Madurai to see Subhadra who is living in the court of Alli who rules Madurai, the famous Tamil city. Alli uses a trick to punish Duriyōdana. She makes magical ladder and gets the carpenters to place images of Subhadra on all the steps of the ladder. When Duriyōdana climbs onto the tenth step to embrace the tenth image of Subhadra he is lifted into the air by the magical power of the ladder and to his utter horror, drawn to different places as punishment.

Another song story called *Alli Arasāni Mālai* recounts the love story of Arjuna who set out on a pilgrimage to South India. At that time, Madurai, the capital of the Pandiya Kingdom, was ruled by a queen, named Alli, who was given to the Pandiya king by the gods. Arjuna heard of the beauty of Alli. Alli's army had only women warriors. No man could go near the palace of the queen, as it was guarded against men. Arjuna fell in love with her. Alli did not like men and so, wanted to kill the man who was after her. He escaped

all Alli's attempts to kill him. In the end, Arjuna became a snake and came near Alli with the help of Krishna. Alli wanted that snake to keep it as her pet. During the night, Arjuna assumed his natural form and stayed with Alli without her knowledge. Then again, Arjuna appeared before Alli as an elderly Brahmin and while she slept he tied a nuptial thread around her neck as the mark of marrying her. Outraged by Arjuna's act she declared war. During the war all the brothers of Arjuna had beat a retreat except Arjuna's resourceful younger brother, Sahadeva. Sahadeva succeeded in trapping Alli in a steel cage. At last, taking the advice of Draupadi, Subhadra and Kunti, the mother of Arjuna, she submitted to Arjuna and gave birth to a son called Pulēndraṅ¹⁵.

After viewing two samples of the retelling of stories related to *Mahābhārata* characters, we may guess the themes of other such *Mahābhārata* related song stories. Instead of piling up the titles and details of those stories, we shall bring out the salient features of all these stories. If one makes a study of all these stories - there are roughly ten - one will find out that there lies an underlying pattern of events. They may be roughly schematized thus:

1. There are many new characters which do not find mention in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* versions. Such new characters are unique to the Tamil legends of *Mahābhārata*.
2. All these stories take up one event or character of the Sanskrit versions of the *Mahābhārata* and develop completely different plots around the same. No retelling takes place in the main plot of the *Mahābhārata*, particularly the war of the Kauravas with the Pāndavas.
3. All of these *Mahābhārata* stories present women as being stronger than men and many a time, men are discomfited and humiliated.
4. A lot of trickery is used in all these legends either as punishment or as a substitute for bloody wars. In one story¹⁶ the mighty Bhima is defeated again and again by women assistants of a queen. Most of the time he is defeated through magic, tricks and cock fights.
5. Another legend¹⁷ gives the details of Duriyōdana helping the Pāndavas, and this goes against the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* theme.
6. Some legends¹⁸ provide us with the elaboration of certain episodes of the Pan-Indian *Mahābhārata*; these elaborations are adopted to cater to the local necessities and interests of people.

III

Now, we are in a position to compare the configurations of different episodes, events and characters of the Tamil *Mahābhārata* of Villiputūrār's version with the pan-Indian *Mahābhārata* story structure. The comparison of the pattern of the Brothers story with that of Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* will help us define the local cultural identity vis-a-vis pan-Indian culture.

The existence of the native Brothers story and the group of stories about the sons and wives of well known *Mahābhārata* characters points to the creation of two separate epic related works of imaginations of the Tamils. What is interesting is that both these stories have a relation with the pan-Indian paradigm of the *Mahābhārata* story structure. But their relation is built on different echoes of the story structure of the *Mahābhārata*, for in the Brothers story, the names of some are superficially linked with the characters of the pan-Indian epic, while the deviated folk stories are the augmented accounts of a few characters of the *Mahābhārata*. We may say, these two manifestations of narrative imagination, in their respective ways, try to reorder the story of the *Mahābhārata*, one by extending the story structure of the *Mahābhārata* and the other by trying to mold itself on the model of the *Mahābhārata*. An act of constructing and reconstructing the pan-Indian *Mahābhārata* happens here. Likewise, if one considers the locality where the Draupadi cult and her worship spread, one will find that nearly the same or adjacent locality became the core area of the Brother's worship¹⁹. The historical time of the emergence of these two cults also are almost the same²⁰. So a vibrant folk religious movement emerges at the same or adjacent areas at almost the same time, takes on two narrative paradigms, one starting from the *Mahābhārata* story frame to branch out towards regional culture and the other starting from a regional story frame and showing a tendency to go towards the *Mahābhārata* story structure. The worship of the sister at the end of plays enacted by troupes during festivals of the Brothers' cult, by giving her the ritual pot called *Karakorum* (which is associated with the Draupadi cult of this region) also goes to strengthen our point. One main difference between these two cults is that the Brothers' cult has not spread beyond Tamil speaking areas of Trichy, Madurai, and Coimbatore districts, though the Draupadi cult has reached out to different countries and to different states of India. Thus the opposing tendencies of narratives as well as the Draupadi worship (that this worship adapts itself to suit local custom, is pointed out by Alf Hildebeital) well bears out

the fact that a conflict which creates a tension inside a linguistic regional culture yields a vibrancy to the local culture.

The components of the three stands of culture represented by the pan-Indian, the regional and the oral epics in different combinations ultimately constitute a tension in the different narrative domains of a language. The point made by a scholar has thrown much light on the different versions of the *Mahābhārata* legends is valid here. The story line of most of the Tamil regional versions of *Mahābhārata* stories, according to him follow Villiputūrār's (the poet who wrote the Tamil version of *Mahābhārata*, as we have seen) version of the *Mahābhārata*. The pan-Indian *Mahābhārata* entering a region through the filter of the local version of it, ultimately presents a tension of two oral narrative forces. The three identities fostered by pan-Indian, regional and oral versions form a configuration made of different parts of a conflicting presentation of a culture.

It is interesting to note that the different dispensation of these identities give way to a new idea of dialectically constituted folk cultural substratum of Tamil culture. Now comes the question of different identities vis-a-vis the formation of epics, the problem with which we started originally. Locally, the *Mahābhārata* is seen through regional and oral lenses; neither does a written regional epic exist unlinked to the main Sanskrit epic. So is the case with the third characterization of Indian epics, the oral compositions we come across in various language areas of India. As far as Tamil is concerned, though the cultural identity is crystallized on different domains, i.e. in pan-Indian, regional and oral levels, these domains do have shared common areas. So instead of coming to study these epics from a hierarchically positioned scheme considering separate pan-Indian, regional and then oral representations in that order, we employ a different scheme, now. Although this new scheme of study does not discount these three domains of epics each linked with its respective cultural identity, the conflicting and dialectically positioned tensions of two orally constructed discourses of the above epics attract our attention. Thereby these cultural identities are drawn into the vortex of a whirlpool of mutually opposed narrative manifestations of the two oral epics, the Brothers story and the *Mahābhārata*. This calls for a revision of our idea of the epic being merely the identity forming mechanism of a culture. Thus through the case study of Tamil, we get to understand that the function of oral epics in India is different.

Notes

1. See Eugene Irshick, *Politics and Social conflict in South India*, (Berkely, 1969); Eugene Irshick, *Tamil Revivalism in the 1930s* (Madras, 1986); R.L.(Jr.) Hardgrave *The Dravidian Movement*, (Bombay, 1965).
2. For an introductory account of the early Tamil poems with their counterparts in Sanskrit, See George L.Hart III, *The Poems of Ancient Tamil, Their Milieu and Their Sanskrit Counterpart* (Berkeley, 1975)
3. See the first chapter for a discussion on the Tamil concept of the epic:
G.Lakshmanaswamy, *Cilappatikāra-Manimēkalai Kāppiya Marapu* (Annāmalai Nagar, 1977).
4. A.K Ramanujan "Three Hundred Ramayanas " Five examples and three thoughts on translation" in *Many Ramayanas - The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (Delhi, 1992)
5. Lauri Honko, "*Traditions in the construction of Cultural Identity and Strategies of Ethnic Survival*" in *European Review* vol. 3 No.2 131-146 (Turku, 1995).
6. Though these five characteristics of Tamil epics were eclipsed after Sanskrit
7. criticism gained the upperhand in Tamil, traditional scholars enumerate and explain the five ancient Tamil epic norms as,
 - i) *Toṇmai* - an ancient narrative poem interspersed with prose and poetry.
 - ii) *Tōl* - an ancient poem on noble themes, the number of whose lines is not limited.
 - iii) *Viruṇtu* - a narrative poem on a novel theme composed in akaval metre.
 - iv) *Pulaṅ* - a poem supposed to be composed of spoken words
 - v) *Iyaipu* - a poem whose words harmonise with their meanings.
8. Brenda E.F. Beck, *The Three Twins, the Telling of a South Indian Folk Epic* (Bloomington, 1982)

9. The anonymous authors, *Poṇṇalakar Kaḷḷalakar Ammāṇal*
10. Kavingnar Sakthikanal's version of the Brothers story was taken from manuscripts and published by him in 1971. Brenda E.F. Beck uses this version as one of her Brothers story tellings.
11. See the version of the Brothers story, edited by Brenda E.F.Beck under the title , *Elder Brothers story* (Madras 1992)
12. Brenda E.F.Beck comparison of *Poṇṇar with Dharmaputra* will not stand the test of reason, as there are only scant references to the same in different versions of the Brothers Story.
13. See Brenda E.F.Beck, *The Three Twins, the Telling of a South Indian Folk Epic*, (Bloomington, 1982) pages 124 to 183.
14. Alf Hildebeital, *The Cult of Draupadi - Vol I* (Delhi, 1991)
15. The pen-name of the author of this legend which was published in the form of a chap book from Madras, is 'Pugalendi', a common pen-name of authors of many such legends. See Pugalendi Ēṇiyēṛram (Madras --)
16. The author of another legend by name *Alli Arasaṇi Malai*, is the same Pugalendi of the earlier chap book referred to here. See Pugalengi *Alli Arasaṇi Malai*, (Madras, --)
17. *Pugalendi*, Āravalli Suravalli Kathai, (Madras, --)
18. Pugalndi, Kurukshētra Mālai, (Madras,--)
19. Pugalendi, *Panchapāndavar Vanavāsam and Karṇamakārācan Cantai* (Madras,--)
20. See Alf Hildebeital, *The Cult of Draupadi* (Delhi, 1991) p. 24 and Brenda E.F.Beck, *The Three Twins* (Bloomington, 1982) p.9 for a comparison of the maps showing the core areas of the Draupadi cult with those showing the core areas of the Brothers' worship.

21. For this evidence, See Alf Hildebeital, *The Cult of Draupadi* (Delhi, 1991) p.17 to 23 and Brenda E.F.Beck, *The Three Twins* (Bloomington, 1982) p. 7 & 8

22. See M.Arunachalam, *Ballad Poetry*, (Tanjavur, 1976) p.28