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Uniqueness of warfare in Tamil culture: A study

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Abstract--The voluminous Tamil literary works serve as the mirrors on the social ethics of the ancient Tamils. They are graphic and gravitating in bringing to our memory the distinct dynamism of the Tamil society of yore and the varied facets of their walks of life in different fields like values, art and architecture, commerce etcetera. Every literary work is a clear index of its contemporary social facets and cultural achievements. They are the real measuring scales of man's achievement in his progress of civility and creativity and development of appreciation of values. The history of the Tamils goes as far back as *Tolkappiyar's* period of two thousand years from now. *Tolkappiyam* and the Sangam literature are profuse with their prevalent social and cultural ethos. The ancient Tamils were concerned; they thought that love (family life) and war (social life) were the two main aspects of life. This paper deals about the war aspects of the Tamils which formed a part of their culture.

Keywords---Sangam, war, Tamil tradition, ethics, Tamil culture.

Introduction

The art of war was developed as a part of our ancient Tamil culture. The marital life was linked with the family life and classified under various '*tinai*' and '*turai*'. The classifications and stages of the warfare given under various '*tinai*' and '*turai*' of the Sankam literature should have reached that stage after a considerable growth¹. It should have taken some hundreds of years to attain such a civilised stage. But for their military process, the Tamil kingdoms and their cultural development would have come to an end even before the Sankam age; and we

may not be in a position to speak much of our ancient culture². In Sankam age the territory of Tamil Nādu was marked by Vindhya Mountain (*Venkadam*) in the north, the Indian ocean (Kumari) in the South, the Bay of Bengal in the east and the Arabian sea in the west³.

The political set up of Tamil Nadu in that age made it inevitable for the three Tamil kingdoms (*Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas*) to fight with one another to establish their superiority as the Tamil Kingdom. When one of the Tamil Kings went to fight with other countries, he used to represent the whole Tamil Nadu and used the symbols of all the three kings. So, it was necessary for them to have military forces trained both in offensive and defensive battles. A number of battles and their outcome have been mentioned in the Sangam literature. A number of poems were written depicting the various incidents on different occasions. Sangam literature more often describes Nature and incidents. The details given in *Tolkappiyam, Sankam literature, Thirukkural, Silappathikaram*, etc., help us to a great extent to understand the various aspects of warfare of respective periods.

Method

This paper has been attempted by both primary and secondary sources. Tamil literature is the most important and authentic source material for writing this article and it is supplemented by various books written by various authors. The methodology used in this study is descriptive method⁴⁻²¹.

Discussion

Warfare

Warfare served as the catalyst for political build-up. If a body politic could exist without war, it was called a state that had not erred from ethical codes and one without an enemy. War took place just to protect the country from ruin. In one sense it can be a constructive factor. The tradition was that the king went to war to protect his people and to earn fame for himself. Lust for land, gold and fame had prompted the kings to wage wars.

Vañcitāṇē mullaiyatupuraṇē
Eñcāmaṇṇaivēntaṇaivēntaṇ
Añcutakattalaicceṇṇuaṭalkurittanṇē (*Tolkappiyam Porul 64*)

Thus, *Tolkappiyam* bears evidence of the fact that lust for land had been the cause for war. The warfare of emperors had earned a unique fame for the Tamils. During the time of war, they had scrupulously observed ethical codes. Humanism illuminated the warfare of the Tamils. If two great kings proposed to wage a war against each other, they would get their warriors set to steal into the enemy's border and lure their cows. After luring the cows, they set out to wage the war. Thus, the war was meant only to protect the cows. Only after securing the cows, the war started. There were also instances where the masters of the would intercept the aggressors, wage a war and recover the cows. This was how wars were triggered during the time of *Tolkappiyar*. It was a sound ethical code to

lure the herds of cows and at the same time to give them protection. The Tamil tradition was that not the least harm be done unto Brahmins, women folk, sick people, invalids, elders and children. They took care to see that the declaration of war was announced by beating drums in the enemy's territory. They forewarned the enemy to make arrangements for sufficient protection. It is laudable that Tamils followed these golden rules thousands of years back, *Tolkappiyar* in the following lines, reveals how a war started:

Vēntuviṭumuṇaiṅarvērrupulakkaḷaviṅ
Ātantuōmpalmēvarruākum. (TholkappiyamPuram 60)

Stealing cattle was called 'Vetchi'. Recovering cattle was 'Karantai'. During interception war took place in spite of the initial victory as depicted in the following lines of *Tolkappiyar*. 'Vanji' is the aggression on the buffer territory. The king who undertook this expedition used to don the *Vanji* garland. This is also a war culture. The enemy king, being helpless, confined himself to the fort, closing the gates. The aggressor laid siege to the fort. The defender, within the fort, protected the fort with adequate safety measures. Destruction of a fort was 'Nochchi'. Defence of the fort was 'Ulinai'. The aggressor, on entering the fort victoriously, hoisted his umbrella, planted his sword and celebrated his success. This is called both 'Kudainat Kol' and 'Vanat Kol'. *Kudai*(Umbrella) represents assurance of protection of the subject citizens. *Val* (Sword) represents the destruction of the enemy. The king who played defensive remaining within his fort fixed a day to dare the enemy by emerging out. This day is 'Natkotal'.

The aggressor used to climb up the fortress with the help of a ladder fitted to a plank on the wall. Standing aloft on the wall he waged war against those within the fort. The defenders used to prevent the attackers from climbing up the ladder with the help of suitable machinery. they counter-attacked the aggressors. They shot arrows at those who were already on the walls. They wielded their swords and cut the heads of the attackers. The crocodiles in the mote devoured the fallen heads. The outsiders, however, inches to the middle wall. The insiders continued to resist waterways. The victorious king used to fasten his lock of hairs with the vanquished king and bathed in the water. He washed the sword of victory in the water. Then he honoured his warriors. Some monarchs established their names thus. They led expeditions against others just to earn the praise of the world for his superiority in the show of his might. The other king also braved him and faced him in the war field. This was called 'Tumbaitinai' by the seers:

Tumpaitāṅēneytalatupuraṅē
Maintuporuḷākavantavēntaṅaic
ceṅrutalaiaḷikkumcīrappīruēṅpa. (Tholkappiyamporulpuram -12)

Here is the live scene of a war between two kings who were yearning for fame. Trumpets rent the air. Warriors in the garrisons began to arm to their teeth. a hero jumped into the fray. It is enemies that encircled him. But they feared to attack him. They took position at a distance and aimed their shots at him. All the arrows stitched his body. Although his soul parted with him, he did not kiss the earth. The plain reason was all the arrows and lances that pierced his body served as spokes of a car. This shows the chivalry of the Tamil soil:

*Kaṇaiyum velum tuṇaiyuraṁoyttaliṅ
ceṇṇauyirīṇṇirayākkai
irunilamṭiṇṭāarunilaivakaiyoṭu
irupārpaṭṭaorucirappiṇṇē (TholkappiyamPorulPurattinaiyal 13)*

There were instances of war where warriors abstained from fighting but the horses and the elephants would fight against each other. Warriors fought like tigers. A king took his position in the first line and fought, throwing his lance. But his enemies suddenly surrounded him. Seeing the king in danger, his lieutenant ran to his rescue and saved him. In another place the commander-in-chief was engaged in a solo. But he died a heroic death, the gruesome scene upsetting the witnesses. In yet another theatre of war the army was having a setback. Seeing this, the general, like a bison, rose to the occasion, braved the enemy single handed and halted the enemy's progress. Some warriors, in a lightning speed, slay the heads and halt the enemies and make a big heap of the skulls. A hero lost his shield and his sword blunted but yet he did dare to fight. This was much applauded by those who witnessed the scene.

Here is the scene of the elephant war. A hero mounting an elephant dealt with those who came in cheers to attack him. Warriors danced around the dead elephant of the enemy king. Those enemy warriors who had killed the general came under the fierce attack of the hero. Heads began to roll as the provoked enemy retorted like a cyclone. In another spot was going on the sword war. The two enemy kings were fighting face to face. Destruction their virulent action. According to the war ethics when two enemy kings fought in person face to face an emperor used to reap the fruits of victory. He celebrated the victory by hoisting his umbrella and planting his sword. As he did an unholy of killing his enemies, he took a holy and feel-refreshed. This is called 'KudaiMankalam' or 'Val Mankalam' or 'ManneyilalittaMannumankalam'.

Tolkappiyar's age witnessed the peak of multifarious wealth. Various industries were in prosperous condition. This helps us to ascertain the work ethics of the ancient Tamils culture. During the age of *Tolkappiyar* there were no foreign migrants in Tamil Nādu. The Tamils lived as a pure race. They were engaged in many industries. Those industries where major industries were the main source of wealth of the people. Man was graced as man proper by these industries. These were austere enterprises, state enterprises, commerce and agriculture. These essential under-takings were assigned to *Antanar*, *Aracar*, *Vanikar* and *Vellalar*. This classification had been vague even before *Tolkappiyar*. Tamil Nadu was thus industrially prosperous for many years in the distant past. Those who performed these four-fold works were called '*Narpalinar*'.

After the period of *Tolkappiyar* came *Aryans*. They were envious of the industrial wealth and the prosperous life of the Tamils. Influenced by the Tamils industrial feats, Aryans also entered into industrial careers. As they had a grabbing quality, they lay claim over these advanced industries. In course of time, contrary to truth, they asserted that the Tamils followed their precedence in industrial know-how. This was a travesty of truth. Aryans imitated the example of Tamils in classifying the industrial people as *Narpalinar*. But the Tamils did not create any

inequality of high and low among these classes. But it is the Aryans who pioneered social inequality as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras.

Tolkappiyar refers the *Narpalinar* as follows:

Ēvalmarapiṇēṇōrumuriyar

Ākiyanilaimaiavarumaṇṇar. (TholkappiyamPorulAhattinaiyal -26)

In this '**Eval Marapin Enor**' refers to *Narpalinar*. It grammatically refers to those entrepreneurs of *antanar*, *aracar*, *vanikar* and *Vellalar* at whose command were the labourers. The seven industries of *Parppanar*. *Aracar*, *Vanikar*, *Vellalars*, *Ariyar* and *Maravar* and those artisans who were at their command. 'Enor' refers to both *vanikars* and *Vellalars*. The warfare of the period of *Cintamani* had not undergone any drastic change since the Sangam age. It was based on the norms of *Thirukkural* and *Tolkappiyam*. But due to foreign influence the morale underwent some changes. The striking change was chanting mantras by the warriors when they shot missiles. Even men without wisdom or character took advantage of this occult practice. *Padiruppattu* has reference to warriors belonging to the merchant community. Merchants continued to be warriors in the *Cintamani* period too.

Here is a picturesque scene of a Warfield: Heroes pulled out the spears pierced into their bosoms. The spears were bent. They were straightened with the help of the trunks of the elephants used as vices! These are scenes that would chill the spines of the enemies. On the inauguration of wars, the warriors used to shout exultations like: 'Long live Civakan! Long live Kovintan! Long live Nantan!' When the warriors were breathing their last, they used to have pieces of gold in their mouths. The wounded soldiers were given immediate medical treatment. The treatment was scientific and effective.

War Ethics

The breasts of the heroes were full of scars. Those were big and broad. They were caused by the white needles that dipped into the blood when the wounds were stitched. And these wounds were caused in the war. The Chera heroes wore garlands of *tumpai* flowers and waged war against those who were wounded with arrows; against those who were not wounded, they fought without the garland; that was how they proved their discipline. This means that the Chera warriors would not fight against those who received wounds of fame; that those without wounds did not deserve to be foes against whom they fought without the garland of the *tumpai* flowers; and they fought only with their equals. The warriors were mighty enough to boost the war; they could challenge anyone even if it was the God of Death; they were ploughmen whose ploughs were their own arms! When they turned their eyes on any place, it was sure to perish; like the God of Death, they flew into anger; they belonged to the prestige of having destroyed lands of different languages; in strength they were unexcelled; those who waged war against them were rare to survive. They were graceful enough to be blessed by the power of victory and valour.

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