

A NOTE ON *MANIMEKHALAI*

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This French scholar (1907 – 1994) authored many works including translations of the Tamil epics, *Cilappathikaram* (1965) and *Manimekhalai* (1989). He spent many years in India to learn Tamil and Tamil Music. To his Penguin publication of *Manimekhalai*, he has written this introduction.

Almost nothing is known of India, its daily life and institutions, in the troubled years of the first centuries of the Christian era. The *Manimekhalai*, one of the masterpieces of Tamil literature, gives us, in the form of a didactic novel full of freshness and poetry, a delightful insight into the ways of life, the pleasures, beliefs, and philosophical concepts of refined civilization. The story relates the adventures of a dancing girl who becomes a convert to Buddhism, a rather new creed at the time in South India. Tamil is the main pre – Aryan language still surviving today.

The *Manimekhalai* calls into question many of our received ideas concerning ancient India as well as our interpretation of the sources of its present – day religion and philosophy. In its clear accounts of the philosophical concepts of the time, the *Manimekhalai* presents the various currents of pre – Aryan thought (mainly preserved by the Ajivika ascetics and Jain monks) which gradually influenced the Vedic Aryan world and became an essential part of it and, through Buddhism, spread over the whole of the Far East and Central Asia.

* Source: *Manimekhalai (The Dancer with the Magic Bowl) by Merchant Prince Shattan*, Translated by Alain Daniélou, New Delhi:Penguin Books, Ltd. 1989. pp.vi-xvi.

Society

The society in which the action of the *Manimekhalai* takes place has little to do with the Aryanized civilization of the north which we know from Sanskrit texts. Although important cultural exchanges between the Aryan and Dravidian worlds had already taken place by this time, the latter was still able to maintain its independence, some of its features continuing even to our own times.

The center of religious and political power is the king. As in ancient China, the God's favour and the country's prosperity depend on the king's virtue. Spiritual and religious life is guided by sages, seers (rishis), who lead an ascetic life, living in the mountains or in secluded places. It appears the Dravidian society did not originally possess a priestly caste. However, during the *Manimekhalai* period, groups of Brahman from the north had already established themselves in villages or parts of the towns, forming separate communities which were treated sometimes with respect and sometimes with hostility. Anti – Brahman movements still exist today.

The very important middle class is represented by the merchants who could be ennobled by the king, receiving titles such as Chetty or Etthy. The caste of courtesans, female dancers, musicians, and prostitutes plays a very important role as the city's adornment and pleasure. Dynasties of dancers, born of celestial nymphs exiled from the paradise of Indra, the king of the gods, have taken up their abode in Tamil country, to the great joy of mankind. They have no apparent ties with temples; their dance is profane art which has nothing sacred about it. (Troupes of female dancers attached to the temples as the God's slaves Deva – dasi – have not yet made their appearance.)

Male transvestite prostitutes also exist, whose dances are greatly appreciated by the public. They wear a short skirt, probably of Greek origin.

The *Manimekhalai* describes a wide variety of funeral rites and ways of disposing of the dead. Such customs still survive in various parts of India. Cremation appears to be an Aryan contribution. The practice requiring widows to follow their husbands in death appears to be already widespread in ancient Dravidian society. It is the continuation of a prehistoric custom: the spirits of the dead should be accompanied in the afterlife by all the comforts of their earthly existence. This practice occurs occasionally even today.

The India of this period was a great maritime nation, which had colonized Southeast Asia and Indonesia. Introducing Shivaism – which still survives in Bali – and shortly afterwards, Buddhism. In the west, large numbers of Indian ships crossed the sea , exporting their produce to Egypt and Rome. The Greek geographer Ptolemy in the second century mentions the main ports of southern India and, in particular, Kaverts Emporium, the kaveripumpattinam (or Puhar) of the *Manimekhalai*.

Religion

Religion is basically ancient Shivaism, the cult of Murugan (Skanda), Shiva's son, being the most widespread. There are numerous divinities and spirits who are very close to man, playing a constant role in everyday life. Indra, the king of heaven, who rules the elements and upon whose benevolence the rains (source of all prosperity) depend, is the subject of an important cult. Among the goddesses, the goddess of the sea, Manimekhala, is especially worshiped by these great seafaring people. The rivers also have their goddesses, spirits, and fairies, who continually take part in human adventures. A terrible genie, who dwells at the town's main crossroads, seizes and devours miscreants.

Ancient Jainism, a moralistic and atheistic religion, also appears to be fairly widespread. From Jainism come the theories of non – violence and transmigration taken over by Buddhism.

The religious scene is divided among a great number of sects - religious, philosophic, mystic, theistic, atheistic, ascetic, or of free moral. Theological and philosophical debates are held under auspices of the various princes.

In such a context Buddhism, in its reformed Mahayana form, irrupted into southern India at the time of the *Manimekhalai*, spreading its theories on transmigration and Karma, but without otherwise affecting the structure of society. There were many other sects practicing the monastic life and recommending access as a means of spiritual progress. The main religious and philosophical sects, and especially the Ajivika, Nirgrantha, and Lokayata, are identical to those which, five centuries later, fought the famous Shankaracharya, who codified and unified these divergent currents, giving birth to what we now know as Hinduism.

Vedism

In the *Manimekhalai*, Vedism, the religion of the Aryans, is merely one religion among many. In a civilization of oral tradition, the Veda (from the root vid, to know) represents the seers (rishis') perception of the universal laws governing the world. This notion is very close to the " natural law" (dharma) to be developed by Buddhism. The Vedic hymns were transcribed when the Aryans finally adopted writing of Semitic origin, under Persian influence, towards the sixth century before the Christian era. At this point there appeared a phenomenon which was to have considerable consequences, and which can be termed "the idolatry of the book". The sacred texts would henceforth no longer be considered as the ancient sages' limited perception of the universal laws, but as a manifestation of the divine word – the "Word" – revealing those laws. The written Veda thus became the sole source to which all must refer, as in the case of other "religions of the book" with regard to the Old Testament, the Gospel, or the Koran.

Even today, one can join Hindu Brahmanism with – out believing in any god whatever, but not without believing in the supremacy of the Vedas. In the *Manimekhalai*, we find for the first time a clear statement of the principle of the "religions of the book".

The Ajivika

The monastic tradition of ascetics practicing incredible austerities and able to develop magic powers in part of the pre – Aryan civilization. These indigenous ascetic magicians, living naked and begging for food, are mentioned with astonishment in the Vedas. The basic knowledge of the wonderful civilization that preceded the Aryan invasions of the second millennium before our era was kept alive and handed down among these ascetics living on the margins of society. It is through them that the techniques of Yoga, Samkhya cosmology, Nyaya logic, and the ritual techniques of Tantra and Mimamsa gradually reappeared in the Aryan world.

The mendicant ascetics were divided into various sects, occasionally associated with strange practices, like the Kapalika ("wearers of skulls"), the Kajari ("black heads" who feigned madness), but the Ajivika were the main repositories of ancestral knowledge. These various traditions have survived on the margins of official Brahmanism right down to our own days.

Makkhali Gosala, the teacher of both the Buddha and the Jainist reformer Mahavira, was an Ajivika as was Lakulisha, who reestablished Shivaism shortly before the beginning of the Christian era. The *Manimekhalai* gives us important information regarding the Ajivika tradition. Greatly indebted to the Ajivika, Buddhist philosophy additionally borrowed the notions of karma and transmigration from Jainism.

The Rishis

The formulation of the concepts of the various philosophical schools is attributed to sages (*munis*) or seers (*rishis*). Chiefly known to us from other sources, the most important of these are Agastya, Vasishtha, Makkhali Gosala, and Jaimini.

Agastya and Vasishtha are mentioned in the Rig Veda as issuing from the sperm of the gods Mitra and Varuna, which was ejaculated at the sight of the nymph Urvasi. Mitra's sperm fell into an earthenware jar, which is why Agastya is called "the son of a jar" (*khumbhayoni*).

Agastya was responsible for spreading the Aryan message in the south of India. This is symbolized by the legend that the Vindhya mountains, which separate north and south prostrated themselves before him. Agastya who retired into the forest, became the counselor of the exiled Rama.

The sages Vrinchi and Shringi are companions of Shiva. Achala is a personage deified by Jainism. Kesha- kambala, "he who was only his hair to cover him," is not known to us from other sources. Jaimini, and authority on logic, must have lived four centuries before the *Manimekhalai*.

The other heads of schools mentioned are VedaVyasa, author of the *purva Mimamsa*, and Kritakoti, alias Boddhayana, author of a commentary on the two Mimamsa.

Aravana Adigal and Nagarjuna

One of the main characters in the *Manimekhalai* is Aravana Adigal; the preacher of Buddhism in the south of India. His name, whose Sanskrit equivalent would be Dharma - purna – swami (*the teacher accomplished in the dharma*) is not known to us from other sources. The Buddhism he teaches is that of the Great Vehicle, the Mahayana., Original Buddhism, the Hinayana or Little Vehicle, was essentially a monastic doctrine whose severe rules concerned only limited

communities, mainly consisting of Brahmans and converted kshatriyas living outside society. This form of Buddhism was in its decline when during the first century of our era, under the impulse of Ashvaghosha (a great scholar of Shivaite origin), four persons known as the four suns of Buddhism, at the court of the Emperor Kanishka, developed the universal aspect of the Buddha's teaching. They transformed it into a divinity, and placing the accent on the practice of charity and benevolence toward all living creatures rather than on an egocentric search for individual release. This renewed Buddhism introduced the concept of Bodhisattvas, human beings who by their virtue themselves became Buddhas. This concept is very far from that of the Hinayana which sought solely release or return to non – being. Buddhist sources relate that the Mahayana doctrine was developed and preached by Nagarjuna, a famous logician from the south of India. According to legend, he received the original teachings of the Buddha which had been preserved by the king of the Nagas, the people of the serpents who lived in an underground world. His name, or surname, means "Light of the serpent". Several works are attributed to Nagarjuna, but his teaching is known especially through Chinese translations of Sanskrit texts relating his life and doctrine.

There is an evident correspondence between the teachings of Nagarjuna and Aravana Adigal, as well as a concordance of place and dates, which gives great credibility to the identification of the two characters. Like Adigal, Nagarjuna had traveled all over India to study the philosophical and religious systems of his time before returning to preach Buddhism in his native land.

In the *Manimekhalai* we find a contemporary account of the teaching of Nagarjuna/Adigal, making it a very important document for the history of Buddhism. The Mahayana must have known a relatively brief diffusion in the kingdoms of southern India before the arrival of the Pallava dynasty in the third century, but it spread throughout the whole of the Far East, where the teaching of Nagarjuna Adigal is considered authoritative.

Philosophy

Apart from its popularized and occasionally humorous concept of transmigration, the *Manimekhalai* is a document of immense value with regard to the philosophical speculations of ancient India, presented in an easily accessible form.

Samkhya cosmology, Vaisheshika scientism, Nyayalogic, and Lokayata materialism. Originally tied to the Ajivika tradition, had forcibly reappeared in the Dravidian world as a result of the Shivaite revival just prior to the beginning of the Christian era. The concepts which had over the centuries gradually influenced the Vedic tradition, henceforth appeared independently in force, later giving rise to the philosophy of medieval India.

It was indeed within the families of missionary Brahmans established in the south of India, such as Nagarjuna, Dignaga, and Shankaracharya, and in the northern marches of Bengal and Kashmir, with Asvaghosha and Vasubandhu, that the philosophical ideas of Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism developed, a phenomenon similar to the rediscovery of Greek thought (and its eventually pre – Hellenic sources) by the Christian world.

The Celestial and Infernal Worlds

The Mahayana revived in the ancient religions, the notion and description of a series of celestial spheres, paradises where the elect dwell, and nether and infernal worlds inhabited by dark genies or demons. The paradises mentioned are the “world of light” (Dutita loka) and the “paradise of perfect bliss” (Tushita loka). The good or evil deeds committed in the terrestrial world allow souls to be reincarnate for a time in one of these worlds, in which their stay is strictly accounted for according to their acquired merits. The theory of Karma is thus strictly connected with transmigration.

The main gods are Shiva and his son Murugan. Brahma and Vishnu are often mentioned. Indra, the king of heaven and dispenser of rain, has an important place in Buddhist theology.

The Brahmas are the forefathers and regents of the various species of living beings.

Champu (Champapati) is the goddess of the earth, divine protectress of the continent of the Jambu – rose apple (the rose – wood continent), of which India is the center.

Manimekhalai is the goddess of the ocean. Chinta is Saravati, the goddess of knowledge.

Durga, the terrible aspect of Kali, dwelling in the Vindhya mountains, captures all who fly over her territory by seizing their shadow, and devours them.

Of the fairies and genies, the most important in this tale are the Vidyadhara, inhabitants of Tibet.

The Author

Shattan, the author of the *Manimekhalai*, was a noble merchant well known as a poet and poetry critic, and was one of the last members of the Sangam, the famous Academy of Tamil poets, whose beginnings are lost in history. Shattan was the protégé of King Chera Senguttuvan who, according to *Shilappadikaram*, The Ankle Bracelet, reigned for more than fifty years and made numerous conquests.

He was also a friend of Prince Ilango Adigal, the author of The Ankle Bracelet, whose approval he received for this work, a continuation of that same story. He must also have had the approval of Aravana Adigal, the great preacher of Buddhism in South India.

The action takes place in three southern kingdoms, whose dynasties fade into prehistory: in the west, the kingdom of Chera (nowadays Kerala): to the east Chola or Cholamandala (Cormandel, in the Madras region); and in the south, Pandya, whose capital is Madura.

Philosophical Vocabulary

The Dravidian civilization is the heir of the remarkable pre – Aryan civilization which produced cosmology, yoga, logic, and scientific materialism, all gradually absorbed by Sanskrit culture.

Sanskrit (or the “refined language”) is derived from primitive Vedic and is a beautifully constructed artificial language with roots which can be used to coin new words to express the most subtle notions. It became the universal culture language upon the gradual decline of the Dravidian heritage.

The great Sanskrit treatise on logic, the Nyayapravesha written by Dignana and translated into both Chinese and Tibetan, dates from the fifth century and reproduces almost word for word certain passages of the *Manimekhalai*, thus clearly of an earlier date.

The *Manimekhalai* gives highly interesting data on the ancient philosophical vocabulary of the pre – Aryan languages, sometimes mixed with terms from Sanskrit, and rather more often from Pali, the language of Buddhism. In his study on the *Manimekhalai* the great modern scholar S. Krishnaswami Aiyangar considers that the remarkable figure of Aravana Adigal who preached Buddhism in southern India was probably the master who inspired Dignana, responsible for spreading the ancient Dravidian logic (henceforth integrated with Buddhism) in the north of India. This appears evident if we accept the thesis that Nagarjuna and Aravana Adigal are one and the same person.

The Date of the *Manimekhalai*

All the data agree in placing the *Manimekhalai* in the second century of our era. Starting from the end of the third century (A.D. 295), the dominant power in the south of India belonged to the Pallavas, of Parthian origin, who came from Maratha country and spoke the Mahrastri dialect. They established themselves at Kanchi and subdued the three kingdoms of Chola, Pandya, and Chera.

The *Manimekhalai* was certainly written before their intrusion. There is absolutely no possibility of a Chola viceroy at Kanchi after the year 300 of our era.

Among previous authors, the text mentions, Jaimini whose Mimamsa Sutras date from about 200 B.C. and quotes a verse of the Kural of Tiruvalluvar who is generally considered as belonging to the first century A.D. Gajabahu, king of Ceylon, who is also mentioned, came to the throne in A.D. 171.

Some scholars, however, feel obliged to deny the evidence of the historical context for the sole reason that they refuse to admit that the Tamil text is older than Dignana's Sanskrit text, forgetting that Dignana lived in Kanchi and was therefore a southern Indian (like Shankaracharya later on) with access to traditional Dravidian sources unknown to the Indians of the north .

The *Manimekhalai's* antecedence is evident, furthermore, if we accept the identification of Nagarjuna and Aravana Adigal. The date of 171 A.D. proposed by Ramachandra Dikshitar for the Shilappadikaram cannot be very far from the true date for the *Manimekhalai*.
