

# The God Concept in the *Purananuru*

(புறநானூற்றில் கடவுட் கோட்பாடு)

M. Nazir Ali/ மு. நசீர் அலி<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

புறநானூற்றில் தமிழர்கள் தங்கள் கடவுள்களை எந்தக் கோணத்தில் நோக்கினார்கள் மற்றும் தங்கள் சமயத்தை எம்மாதிரிப் பின்பற்றினார்கள் என்பதை இக்கட்டுரை ஆய்வு செய்து அதன் அடிப்படையில் ஒரு கோட்பாட்டை உருவாக்க முயற்சி செய்கின்றது. திணை, துறை மற்றும் அகப்பொருள், புறப்பொருள், முதல், கரு, உரி ஆகியவற்றில் செலவிடப்பட்ட உருவாக்கம், தமிழர்கள் தங்கள் சமயக் கோட்பாட்டை உருவாக்கச் செலவிடவில்லை என்றுதான் சொல்லவேண்டும். இந்த இளகிய நிலை தமிழ்ச் சமுதாயத்தை ஒரு பேதமில்லாச் சமுதாயமாக நிலைநிறுத்துவதற்குப் பெரிதும் உதவியது என்று கொள்ளலாம். மற்ற கலாச்சாரங்களை ஏற்றுக் கொள்ளக்கூடிய ஒரு பக்குவம் அடைந்த சமுதாயமாகவும் அது அமைந்தது. அக இலக்கியத்தின்வழி, மற்ற உயிரினங்களையும் உள்ளடக்கிய, மதிக்கின்ற இலக்கியமாக அடையாளம் கொண்டதனை அறிய முடிகின்றது. புற இலக்கியத்தின்வழி, மானுடப் பண்புகளை பறைசாற்றும் இலக்கியமாக உருவெடுத்ததனை அறிய முடிகின்றது.

This essay seeks to understand how the Tamils viewed their gods and followed their faith and decipher a theology out of it. Given the enormous amount of theorization done on the *tinais*, *turais*, the differentiation between *akam* and *puram* poetry and the various classifications on *mutal*, *uri* and *karu porul*, it is rather surprising that the Tamils did not extend the same zeal to matters related to their faith ensuring that their society remained secular to its core. This want of rigidity and dogma, instead of being disabling, has enabled them to evolve a syncretic culture. In literary matters, it expressed itself as an ecocritically sensitive *akam* poetics which honours and encompasses all creations of nature. In *puram* poetry, it became a celebration of humanistic virtues like valour and generosity and at its most sublime, universal brotherhood. Needless to say, its literary accomplishments are far ahead of its time.

Key words: George Hart, Siva, Peruntevanar, Murugan, Visnu, katavul vazhtu

Citation: நசீர் அலி மு., (May 2021), “The God Concept in the *Purananuru* (புறநானூற்றில் கடவுட் கோட்பாடு), *IETS (Inam: International E-Journal of Tamil Studies)* (ISSN:2455-0531), Vol.7, Issue 26, pp.15-18.

In the Introduction to the *Four Hundred Songs of War and Wisdom*, George Hart, renowned translator and Tamil scholar, makes an interesting observation:

The *Purananuru* is one of the few works of classical India that confront life without the insulation of a philosophical façade; it makes no basic assumptions about karma and the other world; it faces existence as a great and unsolved mystery. (xv)

It turned out to be the seed for a whole branching of thought. It meant that unlike literatures which are grounded in philosophical or theological premises – and it not only means explicitly theological literature like *Paradise Lost* or *The Pilgrim’s Progress* – the *Purananuru* eschews such assumptions to confront the world as it is. It also implied that by doing so it is more faithful to the realities it represented rather than viewing them through preconceived notions of dogma. This set me about exploring the various representations of god in this great work, paying special attention to poems in which such representations are structured into the body of the poem. As a pointer to his observation made above, Hart invites the reader’s attention to Poem 194, his endnote describing it as “one of the most intriguing poems in the *Purananuru* in which the poet blames the creator for making a world that is filled with pain.”(xxxiii) It is worth looking at the whole poem:

In one house the funeral drum rattles. In one house  
the wedding music of a concert drum booms out pleasure!  
Women who have their men with them don ornaments of flowers!

<sup>2</sup> Dr. M. Nazir Ali, Associate Professor of English (Retd.), PG Centre, Puducherry, Orcid ID: [orcid.org/0000-0002-5152-9751](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5152-9751), [mnaziali@gmail.com](mailto:mnaziali@gmail.com)

Women whose men have gone off pour down their falling tears.  
Surely a god who has no virtues is the creator of this world  
which is so filled with pain! (Nankaniyar) (Hart 192-193)

The poet agrees that there is a creator of this world but he does not subscribe to the idea of an unprejudiced god because he parcels out pain to some and pleasure to a few others. This is an unjust god, a god who has no virtues (“*panbilalan*”). The poem shows no underlying karmic notions as well, as pain or pleasure being retribution or reward for what happened in previous births. The god may be unjust, but the poet says what is right to him: he finds god, who is the supreme embodiment of all things virtuous, to be without virtues, a bad god. The actual reality of a world filled with unjustified pain is explicable only in such terms. The poet ends with a homily to ignore this painful aspect of the world and consider only the pleasantness of it (not rendered in this translation) but the portrait of the god he has drawn remains intact. It makes the god concept contingent on personal experience, an empirical god. This must have made Hart say that the existential issue is “a great and unsolved mystery” to the poets of the *Purananuru*.

There is no precise description of this god of the ancient Tamils nor is there a clear cut number to it. The exact dwelling of the god is not given except to ascribe the war drum, the memorial stone or certain other trees as habitual abodes for the god inviting rituals and worship for these objects from the devotee. The *Purananuru* concept of god pre-exists the arrival of the Pallavas and Hart is emphatic in his assertion that the Hindu gods were modelled after the kings *after* the brahmanization of Tamil culture. (xvii-xviii) Exploring the practices as inscribed in it will offer a window to view the landscape of beliefs of the Tamils, more so with reference to gods as their manifestation is discernible only through the rituals and customs put in practice.

The praise of Siva with which the *Purananuru* begins, a poem ascribed to Bharatam Patiya Peruntevanar, is almost unanimously agreed among scholars as a later production, probably composed in the 8 century C.E. (Hart xxviii) John Ralston Marr also confirms this view that the five invocations prefixed to the *Kuruntokai*, *Narrinai*, *Akananuru* and *Ainkurunuru*, besides the *Purananuru*, “could well have been composed by a poet of the Pallava period.” (71) This “*katavul vazhtu*” is somewhat equivalent to the invocation to the Muses one finds in the Western epics, and it is not part of the Tamil literary tradition. This is an attempt to make the Sangam anthologies conform to the literary tradition of the north in which long works begin with such invocations. Though there are scattered references to Siva and Visnu, the god who gets most frequently mentioned is Murugan or *ceyyon*, and almost every time it is the valour of the god that gets compared to the valour of the king or chieftain. (56)

The *Purananuru* makes no attempt to provide a comprehensive theology of the Tamils of the classical age and this could be due to two reasons: its main subject matter is life lived here and now and so kings, battles, valour and charity are matters of greater preoccupation than otherworldly affairs. Or it could imply that life lived rightly here on earth is sufficient to take care of the afterlife as, for example, this poem by the Pandya King Ilamperuvaluti, says:

*The world keeps going*

The world keeps going  
because there live in it  
men who will not eat alone  
even ambrosia from the gods;  
men who do not hate;  
men who do not remain torpid  
fearing things that others fear.  
They'd lay down their lives  
in deeds of fame,  
but will not do any wrong  
even if the whole world  
is laid at their feet.

And they are tireless.  
Having all these fine qualities,  
they strive hard,  
not for their own good  
but for the good of others. (182) (Thangappa 157)

The focus of the poem is living right and nowhere does it mention that worship, devotion to god or any other spiritual aspect as matters of paramount importance to keep the world going. In other words, what it posits, along with the rest of the *Purananuru*, is a world of secular values free from devotional content. In a way, it is like the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon literature which also viewed the world without theological preconceptions.\* That is perhaps why Hart finds the world of the *Purananuru* not limited by a “philosophical façade” or assumptions of karma.

The Tamil society of this age might be without a structured dogma which regulated the affairs of this world but it did not mean it was without its set of supernatural beliefs. Being a society which placed an unusually high value on valour, (its codification of valour is far more systematic and rigorous than the way it structured its matters of faith) there are elaborate rituals associated with instruments of battle. The war drum, especially, was an object of special attention with its attendant rituals of cleansing and purification, an esteemed space for its placement known as “*muracu kattil*” (a bed for the war drum) and the belief that god resided in it. (399) The banyan tree was believed to be a dwelling of god (“*katavul alam*” 199) and where there was no resident god, the *natukal* or the memorial stone where the spirit of the warrior resided became the object of worship. (335) Possession by god, especially Murugan, by castes designated as “Velan” (Hart 322) is widely recorded even in the Akam anthologies. An entire decad in the *Ainkurunuru* (Decad 25) is devoted to the dance of the shaman in which he is supposed to reveal the cause of the thalavi’s sickness after he becomes possessed by “Murugu”. (Ali 132-136)

In his discussion of the Tamil society and its three constituent parts, Hart mentions the king, the women, and the low castes and the king comes in for the greatest scrutiny. As he observes:

It is impossible to overstate the importance of the king in ancient Tamil society. He is the main figure who makes possible the creation of an ordered condition of the world, and he does this by tapping the disorder, chaos, and death endemic to it. He kills in battle, drinks toddy and spirits (which connect him with the disordered world of the supernatural), and consorts with low castes (who are tainted by disordered power). Because of the king, the rains come, enemies are kept at bay, and the fields are fertile. (xix)

God is conspicuously absent in this discussion because, if one takes a closer look at the functions of the king, it is obvious that he is godlike not only in the aura that surrounds him but in the way he is able to keep the chaotic supernatural elements under his control in consequence to which even the natural order of the world obeyed him. The rather “manic glorification of kings” (xxxii) that Hart finds in the *Purananuru* is attributable to this reposing of divine power on the king. The etymology of “*koi*” which originally meant the house of king and later became the house of god also supports the primacy accorded to the king.

It is surprising that the *Purananuru*, which has poems related to the exterior, the objective and all other things not included in the Akam poetry, does not spell out at least a succinct concept of Tamil theology. There is a whole lot of poems on how transient life is and how the graveyard makes a final claim on all human life. (194,359-360, 362-366) This transience becomes a matter of focus in order to make the patron lead a righteous life or, more specifically, a charitable life. There are of course scattered references to the worship of the drum, the sword, the spear and the memorial stone but nothing that can be remotely called theology or dogma or afterlife. It would be improper to call the Tamils, for example, pantheists because the aforementioned objects are all manmade. It is a variety of polytheism and Hart quotes Ramanujan’s translation of Basavanna to give us an idea of the omnipresence of god that the Tamils understood. (Hart 259)\* This absence of categorization and systematization is surprising because the *Tolkappiam*, the mother of all classical Tamil texts, has shown a penchant for formulaic

conceptions, a craze for theorization. What becomes clear from this is that the Tamils of the Classical Age had shown a greater preoccupation with matters of language, grammar and poetics and less so with religion or dogma, a tradition that continues unbroken from the *Tolkappiam* to the *Purananuru*. It is this absence of rigidity and dogmatism that could give birth to a poem like Kaniyan Poongundrun's, "Yatum ure, yavarum kelir" (192), a poem which, sweeping across national boundaries and peoples of various faiths and beliefs, celebrates humanity as a whole.

\*Susan Bassnett praises Ezra Pound's translation of the Old English poem "The Seafarer" for the way he was able to retain its Pre-Christian connotations in her *Translation Studies*.

\*To give an idea of the polytheism informing the tenth-century Kannada poetry of Basavanna Hart quotes Ramanujan's translation implying the Tamil concept of god is not dissimilar to it:

The pot is god. The winnowing  
fan is god. The stone in the  
street is god. The comb is a  
god. The bowstring is also a  
god. The bushel is a god and the  
spouted cup is a god ... (qtd. in Hart 259)

More succinctly, the proverb, "*Thoonilum iruppar, thurimbilum iruppar*" (God resides in a pillar as well as in particle of dust) sums up the pervasive presence of god as understood by the Tamils.

## References

- ❖ Ali, Nazir. M *Classical Tamil Love Poetry: Ainkurunuru or Five Hundred Short Poems*. Partridge India, 2013.
- ❖ ----- . Trans. Ed. *There is also rain*. Authorspress, 2016.
- ❖ Hart, George L and Hank Heifetz. Trans. Ed. *The Four Hundred Songs of War and Wisdom*. Columbia University Press, 1999.
- ❖ Kailasapathy, K. *Tamil Heroic Poetry*. Clarendon Press, 1968.
- ❖ Kesikan, Puliyur. Ed. *Purananuru*. Pari Nilayam, 2009.
- ❖ Marr, John Ralston. *The Eight Anthologies: A Study in Early Tamil Literature*. Institute of Asian Studies, 1985.
- ❖ Pillai, Avvai Duraisami. Ed. *Purananuru 2 Vols*. Kazhaka Veliyeedu, 1964.
- ❖ Ramanujan, A.K. Trans. *Poems of Love and War*. OUP, 1985.
- ❖ Thangappa M. L. Trans. *Love Stands Alone*. Penguin Viking, 2010.
- ❖ Zvelebil, Kamil. *The Smile of Murugan: On Tamil Literature of South India*. Brill, 1973.
- ❖ ----- . *Handbook of Oriental Studies*, Brill, 1975.

\*\*\*