

## CLASSICAL TAMIL POETRY

**Overview** Tamil is India's other classical language, which developed a rich corpus of poems during the same period as Kalidasa and other Sanskrit poets were at work. The Tamil poems were composed in the southern part of the subcontinent, far away from the courts that patronised Sanskrit literature in the north. Indeed, Tamil, and the other Dravidian languages, are historically unrelated to Sanskrit and developed its own poetic genres and aesthetics, which illustrate a different set of cultural values. The body of Tamil classical poetry, composed between about 100 and 600 CE, includes 2,381 works by 473 named and 102 anonymous poets, mostly men but also some prominent women. Many of these are short, haiku-like verses of five or ten lines, and only a few run to more than a hundred lines. What is so distinctive about these poems, and what differentiates them from their Sanskrit counterparts, is their precise attention to the physical world of nature and the interior world of human psychology. These are not courtly lyrics written with baroque ornamentation and displays of linguistic calisthenics. They do not present a grand vision or invoke a mythology or cosmology or philosophy. Instead, they tell small-scale stories with reference to the land and the heart. They are more direct and more personal than other early forms of Indian poetry. One reason for this immediacy is that Tamil classical poems are framed as conversations spoken, for example, by an anxious woman to her lover or by the bard to a king.

**History** Tamil literary tradition refers to its oldest texts as 'sangam' literature, based on a legend about an assembly (*sangam*) of poets and scholars who composed them. There were, supposedly, three such assemblies. The poems of the first were lost in a flood (a frequent occurrence in the legends of Indian literary history) and only a grammar remained from the second. The poems that survived from the third assembly are the classical poems we have today. In fact, however, they, too, were very nearly lost. After about 1000 CE, they virtually disappeared until they were rediscovered at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Working backward from the recovered manuscripts, other literary references and linguistic evidence, scholars believe that the Tamil corpus of love and war poems began to be edited and compiled from about 500 CE onward. Then commentaries appeared, which added colophons to the poems (e.g., 'What she said to her foster-mother'). By about 1000 CE, there were eight anthologies (of short verse) and ten long poems. The most famous of these anthologies are *Pattupattu* ('Ten [Narrative] Songs'), *Purananuru*, ('400 [Poems] on War'), *Akananuru* ('400 [Poems] on Love'), *Kuruntokai* ('Short Poems') and *Ainkurunuru* ('Five Hundred Short [Poems]'). However, as mentioned above, after 1000 CE, all these anthologies and long poems almost vanished from Tamil literary consciousness. They were known to some scholars, but they remained inaccessible to everyone else. Palm-leaf manuscripts crumbled and were eaten by ants or simply discarded as Tamil scholars and poets focused on devotional literature.

The recovery of this wonderful cache of poetry is, primarily, down to the efforts of two men. Swaminatha Aiyar (1855-1942) spent decades hunting down lost and damaged manuscripts of the classical poems, rummaging in attics and storehouses of monasteries. Along with others, Aiyar unearthed the old manuscripts, studied them, compared them edited them and then had them printed.

**Cultural significance** The rediscovery and translation of these classical poems has changed our understanding of Indian culture and literature. Before the 1970s, south India was widely regarded as a regional version of Sanskrit culture and literature. We knew that Tamil was a Dravidian language, unrelated to Sanskrit, but we thought that Tamil literature began with the devotional poems composed from about 600 CE onward. After the publication and translation of the much older classical poems, another cultural world was revealed, one which stands on its own, largely independent of Sanskrit influences. We found out that the poems and their classical commentators had developed a literary theory, with a complex set of genres rooted in the land and history of south India. The poems were composed at a time when even the great gods of Hinduism had not penetrated deeply into local soil. Siva and Vishnu play a distinctly small part in the poems, while there are many dedications to the local god Murugan. In fact, the whole notion of 'religion'—worship of the gods and their power to influence human affairs—is relatively weak in the poems. The supreme power is exercised by the king, who, like his Greek counterparts, can be wise or vain, valorous or cowardly. The poems also reveal a distinct social structure, in which Brahmins (like the mainstream Hindu gods) only appear on

the margins. Altogether, the classical Tamil poems reveal a unique sensibility and set of values. In the love poems, there is a delicate exploration of the 'interior landscape' of passion, the anguish of betrayal and the anxiety of waiting for a lover. In the war poems, the primary values are not piety and devotion but honour (*pukal*) and shame (*nan*), which determine one's reputation. A woman is defined by her 'chastity', although the Tamil word *karpu* has a more potent and potentially destructive element than the English word. The genius of this poetry is its lack of abstraction and ornamentation. Using the intimate language of its own genres, it renders complexity in terms of physical detail.

**Poets** We know little about the poets represented in this corpus, except for legends that have developed about some of the most prominent. Twelve of them were women, many are named after some distinctive characteristic (e.g., 'Big Eyes') and 34 are named after a striking phrase in their poem (e.g., 'He of mixed red-earth and rain'; see the first poem in the translations below). Several of the poets appear to have been itinerant bards, and there is no doubt that the poems, as we now have them, were close to an oral tradition. Most of the poems, of both love and war, are framed as declarative speech, as if by a singer or bard. Indeed, various types of bards and singers are frequently mentioned in the poems. And yet, the poems are too complex to be spontaneous oral compositions and were probably the result of careful reworking.

Auvaiyar is the most prominent of the female poets, with more than 60 poems in the corpus. She was a wandering bard, who sang most of her poems in praise of a local chieftain and his family, providing advice on statecraft and warfare. Legend holds that she was an Untouchable, though there is no evidence for such a claim.



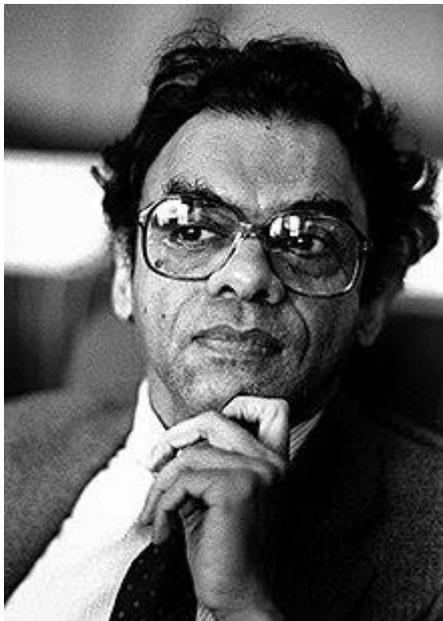
(statue of Auvaiyar on the beach at Madras, erected in 1968)

Kapilar is the most prolific male poet of classical Tamil poetry, who wrote no fewer than 235 short poems as well as one long ballad. From his many poems, and from later commentaries, it appears that he (like Auvaiyar) was attached to one particular king. He composed many poems about the king's victories and his death in battle, after which he took care of the dead king's daughter. After seeing them happily married, he took his own life by starvation ('sitting north' as it is known in Tamil literature).



(Swaminatha Aiyar, 1855-1942, studying manuscripts, date unknown, possibly 1930s)

Still, those printed books were largely ignored by Tamil scholars and public. It took the initiative and genius of another man, A.K. Ramanujan (1929-1993), to bring the poems to a wider audience. Ramanujan, a Tamil-born scholar and poet himself, happened to be browsing in the library at the University of Chicago when he stumbled across one of Aiyar's publications. That was in 1962. Over the next several decades, Ramanujan dedicated himself to studying and translating these old Tamil poems into English. Without the efforts and talents of these two men, separated by almost a century, these evocative poems would still have remained inaccessible to Tamils and everyone else.



(A. K. Ramanujan, 1929-1993, poet, scholar, critic; photo from 1988)

## Texts in translation

### Love poems

#### 1. From the *Kuruntokai*, translated by A K Ramanujan, 1967

What he said:

What could my mother be  
to yours? What kin is my father  
to yours anyway? And how  
did you and I meet ever?  
But in love  
our hearts have mingled  
like red earth and pouring rain.

This poem is one of the most famous (especially in this wonderful translation) of all Tamil classical poems. It is spoken by a man to his lover, who is obviously from a different caste and probably class. In the space of five lines (in the original), the poet makes a powerful statement about love, juxtaposing the mingling of nature (earth and rain) with the social constraints (of kin). There can be few more arresting images than this in the history of world literature. Not surprisingly, the poet is called 'He of mingling red earth and rain.'

#### 2. From the *Kuruntokai*, translated by A K Ramanujan, 1967

What She Said:

Bigger than earth, certainly,  
higher than the sky,  
more unfathomable than the waters  
is this love for this man  
of the mountain slopes  
where bees make rich honey  
from the flowers of the *kurinci*  
that has such black stalks.

This is another poem of lovers' union, clearly marked by mention of the *kurinci* flower. This time, however, the act of love-making is not given any social dimension; instead, it is simply the sweet pleasure that the bees have when making honey. The poem is typical of many in moving from larger to smaller objects, from the sky and earth, to the mountain slopes and finally to the flower and the detail of its black stalks. The lover is then likened to the mountain and the speaker becomes the tender plant, which takes twelve years to flower. Patience and then consummation.

#### 3. From the *Kuruntokai*, translated by A K Ramanujan, 1967

What She Said

Only the thief was there, no one else.  
And if he should lie, what can I do?  
There was only  
a thin-legged heron standing  
on legs yellow as millet stems  
and looking  
for lampreys  
in the running water  
when he took me.

This time the mood invoked is one of anxiety, even possibly fear. The thief is the lover, who is likened to a lonely, predatory heron. It is his word against hers. There are no witnesses because 'there was only' a single bird. The heron is a hunter, who pokes its beak into the water, a metaphor for the

sexual act of the thief. Notice again, how the poem shifts from the wide-angle focus of the opening to the close-up of the lampreys being speared in the water.

4. From the *Ainkurunuru*, based on a translation by G.U. Pope, 1884 What her friend said:

Oh, man from the hills! You wish to cross  
hot barren lands in this summer month, fine;  
The wealth you earn by going across,  
is it sweeter than seeing  
your loving wife's first born son smile.

The condition of love described in this poem is separation. A (presumably female) friend of a married woman speaks these accusatory words to her husband. He is a trader, or a merchant, who travels long distances during the dry season to earn money to support his family. But, the friend asks, what about your obligation to your wife and family? Which is sweeter, your money or your son's smile? Once again, the poem takes its own journey, beginning with the macrocosm of hills and dry lands, before honing in on a woman and her baby.

5. From the *Kuruntokai*, based on a translation by G.U. Pope, 1884

What her friend said:

She'll get tight-lipped and angry just on hearing it,  
What'll happen if she sees with her own eyes –  
Your whoring chest that many a girl has relished,  
like the chilly river front in the month of Thai  
where fragrant flower plaited girls revel.

Here, too, a woman offers advice to her friend's husband. She, the wife, already knows about his infidelity; it makes her angry and incommunicative. 'So, what will happen,' the friend asks the husband, 'when you go into the house with your body covered in the white flowers from your mistress?' The month of Thai is important because it coincides with January/February, the cold season when young women customarily went to bathe in the rivers and then dressed their hair with flowers.

6. From the *Ainkurunuru*, translation by A K Ramanujan, 1985

What she said to her friend:

You ask me to forget him, but how can I?  
His mountain, wearing its dark raincloud,  
white-crested as a bean flower the east wind opens,  
that mountain, that blue sapphire, is never out of sight.

This is the anxiety of waiting for a lover or husband to return home. A woman has tried to soothe the anxiety of her female friend by suggesting that she forget her man, and this is her reply. She can no more forget him than she can ignore the mountain that looms above the land. Again, we see how the poem works by a correspondence—here a mountain as huge and immovable as her love—in which an external marker stands for an internal state of mind.

## War poems

### 1. From the *Purunanuru*, translated by AK Ramanujan, 1985

This world lives  
because  
some men  
do not eat alone,  
not even when they get  
the sweet ambrosia of the gods;  
they've no anger in them,  
they fear evils other men fear  
but never sleep over them;  
give their lives for honour,  
will not touch a gift of whole worlds  
if tainted;  
there's no faintness in their hearts  
and they do not strive  
for themselves.  
because such men are,  
This world is.

Here is a catalogue of the traits of an ideal man. He is generous; he is not short-tempered; he is neither fearful nor foolhardy; he acts out of honour and will not accept a gift that is not honourable. And, finally, he conducts himself for the welfare of others. This personality profile would describe the ideal king in classical south India, especially the largesse and sense of justice, but it applies to anyone.

### 2. From the *Purunanuru*, translated by A K Ramanujan, 1985

To bring forth and raise a son is my duty.  
To make him noble is the father's.  
To make spears for him is the blacksmith's.  
To show him good ways is the king's.

And to bear a bright sword and do battle  
to butcher enemy elephants  
and come back  
That is a young man's duty.

The war poems, composed sometime between 100 and 500 CE, describe a total warrior society, in which everyone is tasked with producing men who fight. There is no room for compassion, for devotion to the gods or even for consideration of the morality of killing. In another poem from the same text it is said that even stillborn children are inflicted with a battle wound before being buried, lest they should suffer the shame of cowardice. Here, again, we can draw a parallel with the martial poems of ancient Greece, in which these values are described with similar vigour.

### 3. From the *Purunanuru*, translated by A K Ramanujan, 1985

The old woman's shoulders  
were dry, unfleshed,  
with outstanding veins;  
her low belly  
was like a lotus pad.  
When people said  
her son had taken fright,  
has turned his back on battle  
and died,  
she raged

and shouted,  
 If he really broke down  
 in the thick of battle,  
 I'll slash these breasts  
 that gave him suck,  
 and went there,  
 sword in hand.  
 Turning over body after fallen body,  
 she rummaged through the blood-red field  
 till she found her son,  
 quartered, in pieces,  
 and she rejoiced  
 more than on the day  
 she gave him birth

The warrior society envisioned in these poems is not exclusively male, not at least in its idealisation. Even the mother of a young soldier seeks out her son's corpse, turning over the bodies on the battle field, 'sword in hand,' hoping that he has not died a shameful death, that is, with a wound in the back. And when she discovers that he has been butchered, her happiness is unbounded.

4. From the *Purunanuru*, translated by A K Ramanujan, 1985

O heart,  
 Sorrowing for this lad once scared of a stick  
 Lifted in mock anger when he refused a drink of milk  
 Now, not content with killing war elephants with spotted trunks,  
 This son of the strong man who fell yesterday  
 Seems unaware of the arrow in his wound  
 His head of hair is plumed with a horse's  
 He has fallen on his shield  
 His beard still soft.

The values of honour and shame, which underpinned the warrior society of these poems, did not exclude sorrow at death. In this poem above, we hear the poet speaking (possibly in the voice of a mother) about the death of a young man. There is tenderness and playfulness in the portrait of the dead man as a child, and there is also pride in the courage the young man has shown in battle. He is 'unaware of the arrow' that has killed him. The whole poem is infused with nostalgia and poignancy, especially in its closing lines that juxtapose the warrior's hard metal shield with his soft beard.

5. From the *Purunanuru*, translated by A K Ramanujan, 1985

I cannot cry out.  
 I am afraid of tigers.  
 I cannot hold you, your chest is too wide for my lifting

Death has no codes  
 And has dealt you wrong,  
 May he shiver, as I do!  
 Hold my wrist of bangles  
 Let's get to the shade of that hill  
 Just try and walk a little.

In this cameo of a poem, we hear a woman talking to her dying husband. Struck cold with grief, she shows no respect for the warrior values celebrated in most poems. Indeed, she accuses Death of cheating on her man, and she curses Death to suffer. It is altogether a painful scene. The woman is too weak to carry the dying man, and he is too weak to move by himself. She wants to remove him from the heat of the sun, but even that patch of shade may prove too far.

6. From the *Purananuru*, translated by A K Ramanujan, 1985

The hills of Pari are something.  
Even if you three kings  
with your storied war drums  
lay a siege, there are four things  
which come forth in his Hills  
without the ploughman's efforts: first,  
the small-leaved paddy of the bamboo;  
second, the sweet and ripe jackfruit;  
third, the lush-vined sweet potato  
and fourth, the honey  
that is washed down by the blue waters  
from his stout and tall hills  
which resemble the sky  
and the fountains from it  
are like the stars in it.

So, even if you bring an elephant  
to tie to each tree  
and a vast spread of chariots,  
you'll not succeed with your swords.  
But I know how his hills  
can be taken: if you play  
the twisted strings of the small lute  
and go dancing and singing,  
followed by your women  
disguised as dancers,  
he'll give as gift his country and hill together.

This is one of the many poems sung by Kapilar in praise of his patron Pari. Pari is a king, celebrated for his generosity and his courage. There are more poems dedicated to him than to any other ruler. From those poems and commentaries we learn that the other three kings of the land had laid siege to his capital because Pari had refused to marry his daughters to any one of them. This poem thus acts as a trumpet blast directed against his enemies. Beware, the poet says, Pari and his mountain fortress are formidable; you will be defeated, no matter what you do. Notice also the ironical suggestion at the end: if you want to win over this generous king, go as dancers and singers. He may crush his enemies but he will give away his very mountain to singers (like me) who praise him.

7. From the *Purananuru*, based on the translation by G U Pope 1884

Like a sad mahout who lost the majestic elephant  
that he fed and cared for years,  
shedding tears on seeing the clamorous stable  
where it lived now desolate and empty,  
do I grieve too, looking at the fabled assembly  
in this hoary town that is bereft of  
golden garland-wearing skilled warrior Killi.

This poem was composed by a bard in the patronage of a Chola king named Killi. The background is that the king committed suicide when he found that his own sons were plotting to take the throne from him. The bard, commiserating with his patron, also wanted to starve himself to death, but the king forbade it because the bard's wife was pregnant. When the bard looks out at the city without its king, he sees only desolation and wrote this poem.

### Reading

George Hart and Hank Heifitz (trans.), *Four Hundred Poems of War and Wisdom*, 1999

A.K. Ramanujan (trans.), *The Interior Landscape*, 1967  
A.K. Ramanujan (trans.), *Poems of Love and War*, 1985