

PERIYAPURANAM

Overview The *Periyapuranam* ('Great Purana') is a collection of hagiographical stories about the Tamil devotional poems who sang in praise of Siva. Compiled in the 12th century CE, at the height of the Chola Empire in South India, this text is a written version of oral stories that had circulated about these saints. Many, but by no means all, of the 63 were also historical poets, such as the great trio of Sundarar, Appar and Sambandar, who lived in the 7th and 8th centuries CE. Collectively known as the Nayanmars ('Masters' or 'Leaders'), the stories of their lives are regarded as sacred scripture by the followers of Siva in south India. Of the 63 Nayanmars, only three were women: Karaikkal Ammai, Mangaiyarkkarasiyar and Isaiganiyar (the mother of Sundarar).

This great compendium of the *Periyapuranam* is considered the twelfth and final volume of Saiva sacred texts. It is sometimes called the *Tirutondar Puranam*, or the 'Purana of Holy Devotees.' The author of this long, theological narrative poem, comprising over 4,000 verses, is Cekkilar, who served as a court poet and advisor to Kulatonga Chola II (r. 1133-1150). It is called a *purana*, or legendary history, giving it the same cultural status as the Sanskrit *puranas* composed a few centuries earlier.

History The *Periyapuranam* did not appear out of thin air in the 12th century. In fact, it is the final stage of a long process of compiling and editing the lives of the Saiva saints in Tamil. The earliest known version of this hagiographical project was composed by the poet-saint Sundarar in the 8th century. His short work of only eleven stanzas, the *Tirutontattokai* ("The List of the Holy Devotees"), included the names of 62 saints, stretching back to the 6th century CE. The second stage happened in the 11th century, when a poet named Nampi added more narrative and biographical material, and stuck Sundarar's name in front, bringing the total of saints to 63. This work was done as part of larger project of compiling the songs of the twenty or so poets included in the list of 63, a compilation that became canonical for worshippers of Siva. The third and final stage of this scholarly and hagiographical project was expanding and revising all this material into a single coherent poem, which was achieved by Cekkilar in the 12th century. That poem is the *Periyapuranam*.

There is also an interesting story about the origins of the text. The king Kulotanga Chola II had been an ardent devotee of Siva until he heard a recitation of the Jain epic *Jivakacintamani*, whose beauty charmed him. Apparently, he was impressed by the course of the hero's life, which goes from sensuality to nirvana. Concerned that his king was being led astray, down the track of a heterodox and dangerous religion (Jainism), Cekkilar (the king's advisor) stepped in and encouraged him to read the Saiva saints' lives as written down by Sundarar and Nampi. Fascinated by these works, the king sent Cekkilar to a famous temple (at Chidambaram, close to Madras), where he spent an entire year composing the *Periyapuranam*. While struggling to find an appropriate beginning for the poem, Cekkilar heard a voice from the sky say, 'All the world.' That became the first and last phrase of this long and complex poem. When the king heard the finished work, he was overcome with joy and arranged for the poet to be honoured in a procession while riding on a white elephant. Within a short time, Cekkilar's poem was hailed as the Tamil Veda and has remained a classic of the literature ever since.

Poet All we can reliably say about Cekkilar is that he lived at the time of Kulotanga Chola II (r. 1133-1150) and that had a high position at the court in Tanjore. It is believed that he was born into a caste of Vellalas (who were high-ranking agriculturalists) in a village near Madras. A hagiography of this hagiographer was written about two centuries after his death.

Cultural significance In the long history of Tamil literature, the *Periyapuranam* has a status as a single text that is only surpassed by Kamban's *Ramayana* (also possibly 12th c.) and the *Cilappatikaram* (5th or 6th c. CE). That comparison is perhaps a little unfair since those two texts tell a riveting story in elegant verse, while the *Periyapuranam* is a compilation of stories about Saiva saints. In such a contest, the romantic epics will always be more popular than hagiography. And yet, this medieval Tamil hagiography is more than just the telling of saints' lives. It is also an important cultural and sociological document. Among its 63 condensed biographies are stories of people from all walks of life. Amid the kings and merchants, there are fishermen, potters, weavers, farmers, a blacksmith, a

Pulayan (Untouchable) and an oil-monger. True, there are only three women, but even that represents an advance on the literary status accorded to women in previous centuries. Another noteworthy social element is that all the 63 poets were married; unlike many medieval Indian texts, renouncers play no part.

The text is important also because it helped to create a cultural and linguistic identity for Tamils based on territory. Geography has always been emphasised in Siva devotional poetry, which names the temples and the towns where the god can be worshipped. By naming the towns where the 63 poets lived, the *Periyapurānam* functioned as a sort of guide for pilgrims and a sacred map for Tamils. While it is true that almost half of the poets come from the central Tamil region, ruled by the Chola kings, many others are scattered far beyond this core territory. The continuing legacy of the text is no where more evident than at a temple in Kundrathur (near Madras), which is regarded as the birthplace of Cekkilar. A temple was built to Cekkilar there in the 14th century, and today an annual festival is held in his honour.

Poem The more than 4,000 stanzas of the *Periyapurānam* narrate the life-stories of 63 saints (poets and devotees) who sang about and worshipped Siva. It begins with a mythic story on Mt Kailasa, the heavenly abode of Siva, and slowly descends to the Chola kingdom, where the text was composed (or compiled) by Cekkilar. This court poet, in true Indian storytelling fashion, uses the saints' lives to bring in a host of oral tales and legends. In telling these lives, Cekkilar sticks to a fairly uniform structure. He begins with a sketch of the saint's family and early life before introducing an emotional or ethical problem that becomes the turning point in the story, leading the worried man to his eventual discovery of Siva's grace. Although they always end in redemption, the content of the stories varies from blissful to bloody. For example, in one tale, Siva disguises himself as a Brahmin in order to test the devotion of a man who prided himself on his generosity of the worshippers of Siva. When the Brahmin/Siva asked that the man to give him his wife, he readily agreed. And when the poor wife's kinsmen came to rescue her, he drew a sword and cut them all down in a fury of righteous anger. Violence, self-sacrifice, blood and ritual are combined or overlap in several other stories (see Cirutondar, below).

Overall, the *Periyapurānam* functions as a manual for good living by providing 63 exemplary lives of generosity, compassion and, most of all, total commitment to the worship of Siva. We can gain a sense of what the text meant (and still means to many) by quoting its Prologue (translated by R. Rangachari in 2008):

It is a nectar that will give you the immortal love, drink it.
It is a perennial river of love that will make the lands of your mind fertile, irrigate with it.
It is an ocean that will get you pearl heaps of desirable qualities, dwell in it.
It is a sharp sword that will cut off the bonds to make you feel the bliss of freedom, hold it strong.
It is a teacher that tells morals of life, make yourself a rock of discipline.
It is a historical information resource, develop your knowledge with that.



(image of the Cekkilar festival at Kundrathur, palm-leaf, date unknown)



(Cekkilar temple at Kundrathur, near Madras)

Stories

1. The Little Disciple (Cirutondar)

Story: There once was a Brahmin who lived in a small village on the banks of the Kaveri River. His original name was Paramjoti. He was a learned man, who could recite Sanskrit texts and perform complex rituals. But he was also skilful with weapons, and so the king made him commander of his vast armies. The Brahmin general went on campaign after campaign, always coming back victorious, and usually with booty taken from the enemy's treasury. Paramjoti was also fanatical in his alms-giving to the worshippers of Siva; he went out every day and would not return home until he had fed at least one ascetic. He showed such limitless generosity that he was given the name 'Little Disciple'. One day, an ascetic came up to his house. He was a Bairava ascetic, that is, a member of a fierce sect of Siva worshippers reputed to eat meat and drink liquor. When Paramjoti asked the ascetic what he wanted, the man said he wanted the flesh of a young and handsome boy. Paramjoti hesitated, but just for a moment, and then agreed. With no other boy available, he had decided to give the man his own five-year-old son.

When the boy came home from school, his wife cut him up and cooked him in a big black pot, while the ascetic watched from the adjoining room. Soon, he was invited to eat his meal. Before touching the food, however, the ascetic asked what pieces were in the dish. Finding out that the head was missing, he asked for that, too, saying he wouldn't touch a thing without it. The parents agreed while the ascetic took a ritual bath and returned. As he sat down cross-legged on the floor, with the plate before him, he asked Paramjoti to call his son, so that they all could eat the meal together. Paramjoti said that his son was 'not available' at that time. The ascetic got angry and shouted at him to bring his son. Not wanting to disobey the ascetic, Paramjoti went to the front door and called out his son's name. A moment later, as he turned to re-enter the house, his son appeared. With the parents confused and relieved, the ascetic then revealed himself as Siva. Impressed with Paramjoti's unwavering devotion, Siva took him and his family up to Mt Kailasa, where they lived with the gods.

Comment: The theme of this story is self-sacrifice in the name of god. This is a common theme in many religious texts, in India and elsewhere, but here it is taken to the extreme in order to leave no doubt of its importance. With echoes of the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, a father who prides himself on giving food is asked to serve up his own child. It is, on the surface, an absurd and cruel demand. It defies any sense of humanity. It is illogical. But that, of course, is just the point. Devotion to Siva cannot be measured by conventional behaviour, cannot be judged by ordinary morals and cannot be grasped by man-made ethics. It transcends all our understanding and we can comprehend it only by going over the edge and into the unknown. And yet the story is told using well-known tropes. For example, giving food to a god is the central act of Hindu rituals. A man earns respect and spiritual merit by feeding ascetics and pilgrims. In fact, the word *bhakti* (which we translate as 'devotion') comes from root words that mean 'partaking' and 'sharing', which are all appropriate in the context of eating food. When we eat, we consume something of the giver of food, and the two parties merge, just as the Little Disciple becomes one with Siva.

2. Kannappar

Story: One of the most famous saints in the *Periyapuram* is Kannappar ('The Eye Man'), a rustic hunter who worshipped Siva in unorthodox ways. He sprinkled liquor over a crude image of the god, tossed on pieces of fresh red meat and then jumped around in a frenzied dance. One day, however, a Brahmin saw what he was doing and was outraged by this supposed desecration. The next day the Brahmin watched again. The hunter knelt down before the image and noticed that one of the Lord's eyes was bleeding. He immediately sharpened one of his arrows, cut out one of his own eyes and inserted it into Siva's empty socket. Then he saw that Siva's other eye was also oozing blood and began to cut out his other eye but stopped. How could he put his second eye into the empty socket in the image when he couldn't see? The hunter then lifted his foot and planted a toe in the empty socket, to know where it was, and began to carve out his second eye. Touching a god with one's foot is a defilement, so the Brahmin called out in protest. But Siva was so struck by the heart-felt devotion of the hunter that he restored both his eyes. Siva then made Kannappar a saint and lifted him up to heaven.

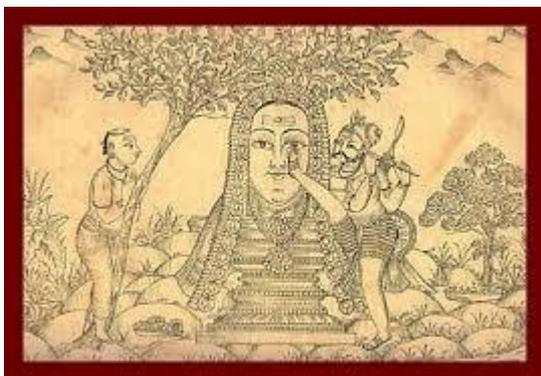


(Kannappar, left, tries to remove his second eye but is stopped by Siva, painting, probably 18th century)

Comment: Here, too, we have a story with a ritual self-sacrifice, not of a son (as above), but of oneself, one's own eyes. And in the true spirit of Hindu devotionism, the conventions of a Brahmin are dismissed as official nonsense. Kannappar is depicted as a hunter, who may be a tribal or someone who is at least beyond the limits of settled society; yet, he, not the onlooking Brahmin, is the hero. In fact, the story contains a neat reversal of ritual. Classical literature likes to compare eyes to flowers, and flowers are what normal people are supposed to offer to gods. But Kannappar gives Siva the real thing—his own eyes.



(bronze statue of saint Kannappar, c. 12th c. CE)



(A Brahmin, left, looks on as Kannappar gives Siva one of his own eyes, palm-leaf, date unknown)

3. Vanthondan (Sundarar)

Story: A Brahmin priest named Nambi was about to be married. All the arrangements had been made, and all the guests gathered in outside the temple for the ceremony. In the middle of the wedding ritual, an old ascetic wandered in and stood, balancing himself on a stick. No one knew who he was, but he shouted in a loud voice: 'Listen, everyone. This man here, the would-be-groom, is actually my slave.' The wedding crowd gasped and waited in silence for someone to object. 'That's right,' the old man continued. 'It says so right here, in this palm-leaf manuscript, signed by Nambi's grandfather.' Now Nambi was furious and shouted, 'Who are you, you old goat! You must be stark raving mad. I'm no one's slave.' He looked the old man up and down. 'Probably you're suffering from senility.' He then grabbed the palm-leaf document and destroyed it. 'There! There's your evidence!' he sneered. But the old man smiled and produced another. 'I expected that,' he said. 'What that young fool destroyed was only a copy. Here is the original.'

Waving that document, he continued to press his claim and the dispute ended up in a council of elders. They examined the original document, comparing the signature on it with those on other documents held in the temple. They matched. The document was verified. The groom was a slave. The young man, no older than sixteen, began to cry as he was led away by the old man. But when the old man entered the temple, he turned into a flash of blinding light. Then Nambi realised that the Brahmin was Siva himself, and that he, Nambi, had served Siva in a previous life. Nambi tried to apologise to Siva for having called him a mad old fool, but Siva was not angry with his servant. 'No need to apologise. Instead, I want you to sing of me. You can swear at me, abuse me, call me "mad" just as you did only an hour ago. But I want you always to be dressed as a groom, in those beautiful clothes because I will call you Sundarar, 'The Beautiful One.' Your other name is 'Vanthondan' ('The Argumentative Disciple')." Siva looked at him and said, you a little laugh, 'But don't argue now, please.'

Comment: Sundarar is one of the most important of the 63 saints. Born in the 8th century CE, he is an historical figure and major devotional poet, whose songs are collected in the sacred hymns of Siva. This curious story about a disrupted wedding describes his awakening and provides a template for all devotees. As you enter into your conventional social role, the story seems to say, do not neglect your devotion to Siva. You can become a husband, and have children, but your first attachment must be to god. The story also contains a little linguistic game. When the old man disrupts the wedding ceremony, he is called 'mad' by Nambi/Sundarar. Later, when all is revealed, Siva tells Sundarar that he must always call him 'mad' in his poems. And the first line of Sundarar's first poem addresses Siva as 'Oh, mad-man who wears the crescent moon (*pitta pirai cuti*).'



(images of Sundarar, second from right, and three other poet-saints; date unknown)

Reading

G. Vanmikanathan (trans.), *Periyapuram*, 1985

Indira Peterson, 'Tamil Saiva hagiography,' In *According to Tradition: Hagiographical Writing in India*, eds. Wm. Callewaert and R. Snell, 1994