

LTTE suicides and the Cankam world of devotion

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Since the Tigers, the Liberation Tigers for Tamil Eelam, have hit the headlines, their penetrating use of suicide bombers and the cult of cyanide suicides which has informed the practices of their military cadre have caught the world's attention. Whatever the forebodings elsewhere, to the immediate constituency which the Tiger leadership addresses the pictures of armed warriors with cyanide capsules on chains around their necks have been stirring messages, good fodder for mobilisation.

It would seem that the mythologies from the Tamil past, especially from the Cankam (pronounced Sangam) and Chola (Cola) periods, have been utilised by the Tiger leadership over the years to develop a cult of martyred action and military discipline. Indeed I am reliably informed that the Tiger high command is assiduously searching for material from the Cankam literature to sustain their ideological work.

This is an instrumentalist clarification on my part. While not incorrect it is nevertheless incomplete; it is not the whole story. The very endeavour on the part of the Tiger leadership indicates that time and heritage are a measure of value. And the instrumentalist theory of ideological manipulation says naught about the reasons why specific themes from the Cankam literature (from amidst a range of possibilities) have been selected in the first place. Nor does it clarify why these themes have such mileage, such resonances, among its audience of Tiger recruits — who we should not be treated as robots.

The significance of the Cankam literature for the understanding of Tiger ideology came home to me in the course of a conversation with Professor Ravinder Kumar. From his position as a secular North Indian, Ravinder Kumar had found the temper of Cankam poetry quite chilling, even frightening. Its emphasis on filial devotion, he felt, took religiosity and its bondages some leagues deeper than the religiosities with which he was familiar (personal communication). I am not able to comment on the comparison. But the translations and commentary in A.K. Ramanujan's *Poems of Love and War* (Delhi 1985, OUP) highlight the theme of martyred devotion to a cause/king which is one strand in the heterogeneous corpus of Cankam poetry.

For the most part Cankam poetry can be distinguished along two dimensions: the *akam*, meaning "interior, heart, household;" and the *puram*, meaning "exterior", outer parts of the body, yard outside the house, public. While being different genres *akam*, and *puram*, poems also have "many things in common, inhabit the same world" (Ramanujan 1985: 233, 234). Thus their relationship is not an opposition so much as a "consubstantial" difference — so that the syntactical artifice

to mark the relationship should not be a colon, or a stroke, but a hyphenated continuum: as "*akam-puram*", a form that should be extended to the "nature-culture" relation in the Indic world for which *akam-puram* is a gloss.

My interest is in the *puram* poems. While "*akam* poems are love poems," "*puram* are all other kinds of poems, usually about war, values, community, it is the 'public' poetry of the ancient Tamils, celebrating the ferocity and glory of kings, lamenting the death of heroes..." (Ramanujan 1985: 235). Thus, says Ramanujan, the "entire society in the *puram* poems, is geared to the values of war, to fashioning a warrior 'like a chariot wheel' Honour (*puka*), fame, a good name (*peya*) in life or in death... are what a man seeks: a sense of shame (*nan*) controls that seeking from within" (1985: 289).

Three illustrative poems, selected from a range of similar possibilities, are worth pondering over.

A.

Tirumal

In fire, you are the heat.
In flowers you are the scent.
Among stones, you are the diamond.

In words, you are the truth.
Among virtues, you are love.
In warrior's wrath, you are the strength.

In the Vedas, you are the secret.
Of the elements, you are the first.

In the scorching sun, you are the light.
In the moonlight, you are the softness.
Everything, you are everything,
the sense, the substance of everything.

(From *Peripatal* 3: 63-68 in Ramanujan 1985: 218)

B.

Not rice, Not water

Only the king
is the life-breath
of a kingdom.

And it is the duty
of a king
with his army of spears
to know
he's the life
of the wide, blossoming kingdom

(From *Puranaanuru* 186 in Ramanujan 1985: 158)

Mothers (3)

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
had 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

(From *Purananuru* 278 Ramanujan 1985: 182)

These were the sort of sentiments that Ravinder Kumar found so ice-cold awesome, their intensity of filial devotion to a heroic centre so fiercely foreboding.

It remains for scholars of Eelamist and Tiger ideology (the two overlap without being synonymous) to decipher their texts in ways which test my suggestion that the revived Cankam traditions of the nineteenth century-and-after may have inspired and girded the ongoing suicide cult of martyrdom among the Tigers. This analytical work will have to be located within the broader context in which the suicide rate in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka has always — that is, since statistical time — been among the highest incidences in Sri Lanka. In this testing work the focus should be on the Eelamist thinking, and especially the poetry of Kasi Ananthan *et al*, in the 1970s and early 80s rather than the state ideology of the contemporary post 1986-87 LTTE regime.

Here, the thinking and practice of Ponnudarai Sivakumaran will be critical. From Narayan Samy's recent book on the Tigers it appears that he was among the earliest of the Eelamist

militants, and as a teen-ager unsuccessfully attempted to assassinate Somaweera Chandrasiri and Alfred Duriappah in the early 1970's. When cornered by the police after a botched-up attempt at a bank robbery on the 5th June 1974, Sivakumaran swallowed a cyanide pill. His act, then, was the exemplary cyanide suicide.

Given the retrospective mythicizations it is unlikely that one can ever deconstruct the inspirations within Sivakumaran's thinking. But one can analyse the legends which developed — immediately, as with Jan Palach's self-immolation in Prague in 1969 — around his act. Sivakumaran's funeral in Jaffna, it should be emphasised, was a landmark event. The shops were shut, eulogies were distributed in pamphlet form and a multitude gathered. Several youths slashed their fingers and inscribed bloody dots on their foreheads, while "some youths attacked moderate Tamil politicians with slippers when they began speaking about Sivakumaran" (Narayan Samy 1994:29). Here, then, we see not only the religio-political fervour of martyrdom, but the crystallising peaks to which funerals 'elevate' persons.

In probing the connections between the *puram* poetry of the Cankam period and the suicide cult of Sri Lankan Tamil Eelamists, of course, one must be mindful of the differences in geo-political context, notably that between the dynastic kingdoms of ancient times and the nation states within a global order of rapid communication. Ramanujan warns us that in the Cankam poetry.

Not even the rousing abstraction of a whole nation or a kingdom is the subject of song — though a Tamil territory, a Tamilakam, is mentioned. Only the individual king or hero, his battles, his bounty, his justice, and his life, are poetic subjects. Loyalty is loyalty to a master, not to an idea or a community (1985:288).

However, the opposition which Ramanujan rightly marks can be merged, consubstantiated. Just as it was possible in medieval times for the capital in Asia and South East Asia to stand for the whole kingdom, in the Indic world past and present it has been possible for a single iconic figure to represent a nation or a cause (which is why statue building is of such symbolic import in Sri Lanka). In my argument, then, as the Tigers have emerged as the principal 'guardians' of the Jaffna people in the face of ravages from the threatening Sri Lankan state, Prabhakaran has become — for the true believers rather than all the Sri Lankan Tamil people — the embodiment of Eelam and the embodiment of the "Tamil people". (For this sort of reasoning the contours of the latter term do not need precise spelling out). In our deciphering of this reasoning what matters is the iconic consubstantiality between the three idealised images. To those personnel drawing strength from their filial devotion, in battle, in life, in death, Eelam-Tamilian-Prabhakaran become one, an "ambrosia" of fulfilment.