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Some Buddhist Poems in Tamil*

by G. Vijayavenugopal

Introduction

Vīracōḻiyam is a grammatical treatise in Tamil written by Puttamittiran (< Skt. Buddhamitra) in the 11th century A.D., during the reign of the Cola king Vīrarājēndra.[1] In his introductory verse Puttamittiran claims himself as 'the ruler of Ponparṟi' which is identified as the present Ponpetti village in Tanjore district.[2] Again the title 'ruler' may imply that he got an assignment on the revenues of Ponpetti from the Coḻa ruler.'[3] This grammar, based on the Sanskrit model, explains, though rather briefly, the structure of the Tamil language, including that used in inscriptions. For instance, it mentions -icci as one of the feminine gender suffixes (which is not mentioned by Tolkāppiyam, the earliest Tamil grammar, written around 3rd century B.C.), which is used in one of the inscriptions of Sundaracoḻa (of 10th century A.D.).[4] This grammar, being written by a Buddhist, was widely used in the Buddhist monasteries by those who learnt Tamil and, according to Godakumbura, the Sinhalese grammatical work, viz. Sidada Saṅkara, is based on this.

There is a commentary for this grammar, written by one Peruntēvanār, was is also a pupil of Puttamittiran, in which we find a number of stray Buddhist verses quoted as examples for various grammatical rules. Since the commentator has not given the name of the authors of the works to which they belong, nothing can be said about the origin of these verses. Further, except for casual references, nothing has been said about these verses in modern studies of Buddhism in Tamilnadu. However, these poems throw some light on the religious conditions, especially on the status of Buddhism, in the Tamil country during the 10th century A.D.

Avalōkitēswara cult and Buddha bhakti tradition:

Puttamittiran mentions Avalōkitēswara in two verses. First in his introductory verse[6] he mentions that Agastya learnt Tamil under Avalōkitēswara and later spread it to the world. Secondly in the penultimate verse in the chapter, viz. Kiriyā-pata-p-paṭalam, he states: 'the true Tamil of Avalōkitēswara whose fame shines in several thousand ways.' According to the Śaivite tradition of Tamilnadu, Śiva explains Tamil to Agastya and the hill Potikai/Potiyil is the residence of Agastya. For our purpose the mentioning of Avalōkitēswara is important. According to the Buddhist tradition this Mount Potikai is the seat of Bodhisattva Avalōkitēswara. Taranath[7] mentions that Potala is a mythical mountain in the South and is the seat of Avalōkitēswara. Hien-Tsiang, the Chinese traveller, also mentions one Mo-lo-kiu-ch'a. Beal and Hultzsch have identified both Taranath's Potala and Hien-Tsiangs's Mo-lo-kiu-ch'a (= Malaiyam) as Potikai and Hultzsch states that Hieun-Tsiang or his Buddhist informants seem to have transformed Agastya, who is supposed to reside on Podigai, into the Bodhisattva Avalōkitēswara.[8] But, as pointed out above, according to Puttamittiran, Agastya is the disciple of Avalōkitēswara. Thus it is clear that the Buddhist tradition of Tamilnadu has identified Potikai, the seat of Agastya, as also the seat of Avalōkitēswara and made Agastya his disciple. One of the meanings of the name Avalōkitēswara is 'the Lord who looks from on high (i.e. from the mountains, where he lives, like Siva)'[9] and probably this meaning might be responsible for the Tamil Buddhist tradition. What is important here is the popularity of the Avalōkitēswara cult in the Tamil country. It attained much significance when Mahāyānism became very popular.

It is very unfortunate that no systematic study has been done so far with reference to the origin, development, and fall of Buddhism in Tamilnadu. The only complete Buddhist literary work in Tamil available now is Maṇimēkalai (generally assigned to 2nd century A.D., but it could have been written around 4th century A.D.) which contains not only literal translations (though partial) from the I canto of Mahavagga of Vinayapiṭaka,[10] but also refers to the Pāramitās.[11] It is not clear whether these pāramitās refer to the six kinds of pāramitās of the Hīnayāna doctrine or the extended pāramitās (i.e. ten pāramitās) of the Mahāyāna doctrine, though the learned editor interprets it to mean the ten pāramitās. But the verses quoted in Vīracōliyam commentary definitely belong to Mahāyānism. According to Har Dayal, 'the

bodhisattva doctrine may be said to have been the inevitable outcome of the tendency towards bhakti and the new conception of Buddhahood.'[12] Conditions before the 11th century in Tamilnadu reveal that there was prevalent a strong Buddha bhakti tradition and idol worship should have been very popular. The period between 650 A.D. and 950 A.D. is considered to be the period of bhakti movement which saw the revival of Hinduism and the gradual weakening of the influence of both Buddhism and Jainism. The Āḻvārs and Nāyanmars spearheaded this movement and as a result a large number of Śiva and Viṣṇu temples were built by the kings who adopted these religions. Sometimes some of the Buddhist temples might have been changed into Hindu temples.[13] But at the same time these kings patronised other religions like Buddhism and Jainism, too, by making liberal donations, endowments, etc. to the vihāras and paḷḷis (of the Jains). The verses praising Buddha or Bōdhisattva Avalōkitēswara quoted by the commentator of Vīracoḻiyam reveal the Buddha bhakti tradition to have been quite similar to Śiva bhakti or Viṣṇu bhakti traditions.

Now the question is, which was the model? Did the Buddhists and Jains follow the Hindu bhakti movement and compose poetry on those lines, or vice versa? There are two things involved here. One is the bhakti movement itself and the other is the bhakti poetry resulting from this movement. Har Dayal claims that 'the idea of bhakti originated among the Buddhists and was adopted in self defence by the Hindus.' '. . . [The] ideal of bhakti arose and flourished among the Buddhists.'[14] However, he also points out that the new sects of the Hindus 'exercised a profound influence on the further development of Buddhism.'[15] There are counter claims too. For instance Aiyaswami Sastri, quoting Kimura and Radhakrishnan, states that 'the evolution of the original atheistic Buddhism into theistic Mahāyānism was a result of the religious fervour of its adherents under the dominating influence of theistic Hinduism through the centuries.'[16] The same thing could be said about the development in Tamilnadu also. It is possible that the Tamil poet Cēkkiḻār who wrote the famous Śaivite hagiology called Periyapurāṇam, 'the big Purāṇa,' might have gotten some inspiration from the Buddhist Jātaka stories in modelling the biographies of the Śaivite saints. Or this could have been done even before him, at least in oral tradition, since Cēkkiḻār is only giving a poetic form to these stories.

But the verses quoted in Vīracōḻiyam show the influence of Śiva/Viṣṇu bhakti poetry. Some of the verses are definitely modelled after

Paripāṭal, an anthology of poems following the old caṅkam tradition, composed ca. 2nd century A.D. Verses quoted on p. 140 and 142 are in the old poetic forms called vaṇṇaka ottāḻicai-k-kalippā and ampōtaraṅka ottāḻicai-k-kalippā (old poetic metres). The verse quoted on p. 157 follows the poetic form adopted in Tirukkuṟaḷ, an ancient Tamil ethical work. Similarly verses quoted on p. 161 follow other old metres like tāḻicai and āciriyattāḻicai. Thus we find an interesting interaction between these religious movements; as a result we see some are taken from the Buddhist/Jain tradition and some are borrowed from the Tamil bhakti tradition. At least the verses quoted in the commentary of Vīracōḻiyam reveal the influence of Tamil bhakti poetry on Buddhist literary activity. One of the characteristic features of the Tamil bhakti poetry is the praising of the Lord, eulogising His qualities. For example, Śiva is associated with the banyan tree in the Tamil bhakti poems. In the same way, the verses which praise the qualities of the Bodhisattva always mention him as the one who sits under the bodhi tree and showers His Grace. As Śiva/Viṣṇu are mentioned by various names, the Bodhisattva is referred to as Mātavar (p. 124) 'the great medicant,' Punniyan (p. 125, 159) 'the One who does good,' Varadaṉ (p. 125) 'benefactor,' Aṟivan (p. 126) 'one who knows everything,' Vāman (p. 125), kōtilā aṟam pakarnta kōn (p. 127) 'the king who told the dharma which is flawless,' Punitan (p. 157), 'the pure one,' Ātināta (p. 161) 'the ancient Lord,' cōti (p. 183) 'the light,' Niṟaivar (p. 188) 'the full one,' Kuṟṟamāna aintōṭaṅkōr mūṉṟaṟutta nātan (p. 127) 'the Lord who cut the eight faults.' Similarly the verse quoted on p. 140 states that the bodhisattva has told the 32 kalas and 89 siddhis, and the verse on p. 142 mentions him as the yogi who accompanies all the souls in their births and deaths.

Another characteristic feature of Tamil bhakti poetry is the use of mythologies of Śiva/Viṣṇu. In the Buddha bhakti verses quoted one sees a number of mythologies associated with the bodhisattva. Thus there is the story of weighing his flesh (p. 140), the story of offering his body to a hungry tiger (p. 114, 140, 142), the conquering of Māra (p. 141, 142), the story of becoming a fish and becoming one with truth (p. 141), the story of becoming a deer and revealing the divine qualities (p. 141), the story of preaching the dharma to five rākshasas (p. 144), the story of removing the sufferings of the Nāgas (p. 141), the story of giving eyes to Indra at the latter's request (p. 125, 165). Another feature of the Tamil bhakti poetry is the praising of the sacred place/town of Śiva/Viṣṇu. Similarly, we find one verse (p. 188) wherein the

city Tuṭitapuram (< Duṣita) is mentioned as the abode of Niraivar, 'the full one.'

Two verses which were quoted partially reveal the influence of Tantric Buddhism. One verse (p. 171) states that 'I will wander around and play until the exhaustion of the desires before the swung top stops.' The metaphor vīcina pamparam, 'the swung top' refers to the soul and its birth. The other verse (p. 171) runs like this: 'I will wander and play before the built palace collapses.' Here the metaphor used is eṭutta māṭam, 'the built palace,' suggesting the soul in a new body. Thus these poems reveal the Buddha bhakti tradition in Tamilnadu during the 10th/11th centuries A.D. as similar to the Tamil Śiva/Viṣṇu bhakti tradition.

NOTES

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* I wish to thank Prof. A.K. Narain for encouraging me to write this paper and Ms. Abbie Ziffren for typing it.

1. Kōvintarāca Mutaliyār, Kā. Ra., ed., *Vīracōliyam*, 1st ed. (1942: rpt. Madras: SSPS, May 1970), verse 7. All page numbers are given according to this edition.
2. *Annual Reports on Epigraphy*, 1899, paragraph 50.
3. Nilakanta Sastri, K.A., *Colas* (1955, University of Madras), p. 683.
4. Srinivasan, K. R. 'A note on other Buddhist vestiges in Tamilnad,' in *Story of Buddhism with special reference to South India*, eds. Aiyappan, A. and Srinivasan, P.R. (1960, Dept. of Information and Publicity, Govt. of Madras), p. 160.
5. 'The Dravidian element in Sinhalese' in *Bulletin of the Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. XI (1943-46), pp. 837-841.
6. Op. cit., p. 2, Verse 2.
7. Schiefner (tr.) *From Tibetan to German* (1869, St. Petersberg), quoted by Hultzsch. See footnote 8.
8. 'The country of Malakota,' in *The Indian Antiquary* (August 1889), p. 240.
9. Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit literature* (1932, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., London), p. 47.
10. Vēṅkaṭacāmi, Sīni, Mayilai, *Pauttamum Tamilum* (1964, SISSBPS, Madras), pp. 13-14.
11. Cuvāmināta Aiyar, U.V. *Manimēkalai* (6th ed., 1965, Publication of Tiyākarāca Vilācam, Madras), ch. 26:45, 29:26.
12. Op. cit., p. 35.
13. Venkatacami, op. cit., p. 59.
14. Op. cit., p. 34.
15. Ibid., p. 36.
16. 'Later modifications of Buddhism,' in *2500 Years of Buddhism*, ed. P.V. Bapat (1959, the Publications Division, Govt. of India), p. 349.