

seems almost certain that the earliest stratum was composed before the great Pallava dynasty of Kāñci became dominant in the Tamil Land in the 6th century, and it is probably some centuries older than this.

Tamil tradition tells of three literary academies (*śaṅgam*) which met at Madurai. The earliest of these was attended by gods and legendary sages, and all its works have perished. Of the second, there survives only the early Tamil grammar, *Tolkāppiyam*. The poets of the Third Śaṅgam, on the other hand, wrote the "Eight Anthologies" (*Ettutogai*), which are the greatest monument of ancient Tamil literature, as well as a number of later works. Some authorities have doubted the tradition of the Śaṅgams, and it is almost certain that the grammar *Tolkāppiyam*, attributed to the Second Śaṅgam, is later than many of the poems of the Third. But the tradition of the Śaṅgams, which is a strongly held one, has no parallel in Northern legend, and we may believe that the bards of the Tamil Land, who wandered over the country enjoying the patronage of chieftains and villagers alike, would meet from time to time in the city of Madurai for great festivals of poetry and music, and that many of the verses of the Anthologies were recited there.

The poetry of the "Eight Anthologies" is little known outside the land of its origin, and its language is so archaic that the modern educated Tamil cannot read it without special study. The relation of the language of the Śaṅgam literature to Tamil as it is now written is perhaps similar to that of *Piers Plowman* to modern English. The tradition of Tamil poetry at the time of the composition of these works must already have been a long one, for the poetic conventions finally fixed in the *Tolkāppiyam* had almost reached their finished form even in the earliest poems of the Anthologies. But their style is much nearer that of folk literature than is the style of courtly Sanskrit. The life of the peasant and the scenes of the countryside, the bustle of the towns and the ruthlessness of war, are here depicted as though from direct experience, and with no formal unrealistic idealization.

Together the "Eight Anthologies" \* make up a very large body of poetic literature, and contain well over 2,000 poems, ascribed to more than 200 authors. To them must be added "The Ten Songs" (*Patuppāṭṭu*), containing ten longer poems of similar style but somewhat later date. Until the end of the last century this great collection was

\* *Narīṇai*: 400 short poems on love, each of from nine to twelve lines; *Kuṟuntogai*, 400 love poems of from four to eight lines each; *Aingurunūru*, 500 short erotic poems; *Paṭiruppaṭṭu*, a short collection of eight (originally ten) poems, each of ten verses, in praise of the king of the Cēra country (Malabār); *Paripādal*, twenty-four (originally seventy) poems in praise of gods; *Kalittogai*, 150 love poems; *Aganānūru*, 400 love-lyrics of varying length; and *Puṇānūru*, 400 poems in praise of kings.

almost forgotten, even by the Tamils themselves; only within the last fifty years have the rare manuscripts containing it been edited and given to the world. Much is still untranslated, and the full and thorough study of the Śaṅgam literature from the critical and historical point of view has yet to be made.

Very early the Tamils developed the passion for classification which is noticeable in many aspects of ancient Indian learning. Poetry was divided into two main groups: "internal" (*agam*), dealing with love, and "external" (*puram*), dealing with the praise of kings. A further division was made according to the region of the Tamil Land to which the poem referred or was most appropriate. Conventionally there were five regions (*tiṇai*): the hills (*kuriṇṇi*), the dry lands (*pālai*), the jungle and woodland (*mullai*), the cultivated plains (*marudam*), and the coast (*neydal*). Each was connected with some special aspect of love or war; thus the hills were the scene of poems on pre-nuptial love and cattle-raiding; the dry lands, of the long separation of lovers, and of the laying waste of the countryside; the jungle, of the brief parting of lovers, and of raiding expeditions; the valleys, of post-nuptial love or the wiles of courtezans, and of siege; and the seacoast, of the parting of fishermen's wives from their lords, and of pitched battle. To each region were attributed its own appropriate flowers, animals and people. Every poem of the "Eight Anthologies" was classified in one of the five sections, but much of the poetry was written with little regard for this formal classification.

A unique feature of Tamil poetry is the initial rhyme or assonance. This does not appear in the earliest Tamil literature, but by the end of the Śaṅgam period it was quite regular. The first syllable, or syllables, of each couplet must rhyme. Thus:

*ISAIYĀD' eṇiṇum iyaṇṇiōr āṇṇāl*  
*AŚAIYĀDu nīrpadām āṇmai; isaiyuṅga!*  
*KANDARirai alaikkun kāṇal an taṇ sēṇṇa*  
*PENḌIRum vālārō marṇu."*

"Though you fail, to work and struggle,  
 unwaveringly steadfast—this is manliness.

Lord of the cool and lovely shore, where the waves shake the thorny  
 groves!

Will not even women flourish in prosperity?"<sup>60</sup>

This initial assonance, in some poems continued through four or more lines, is never to be found in the poetry of Sanskritic languages, or as far as we know, in that of any other language. Its effect, a little strange at first, rapidly becomes pleasant to the reader, and to the Tamil is as enjoyable as the end rhyme of European poetry.