

Kannagi (Tamil: கண்ணகி), sometimes spelled Kannaki is a legendary Tamil woman who forms the central character of the Tamil epic Cilappatikāram. Kannagi is described as a chaste woman who stays with her husband despite his adultery, their attempt to rebuild their marriage after her unrepentant husband had lost everything, how he is framed then punished without the due checks and processes of justice. Kannagi proves and protests the injustice, then curses the king and city of Madurai, leading to the death of the unjust Pandyan king of Madurai, who had wrongfully put her husband Kovalan to death. The society that made her suffer then endures retribution as the city Madurai, in consequence, is burnt to the ground because of her curse.

In Tamil folklore, Kannagi has been deified as the symbol – sometimes as a goddess – of chastity, with sculptures or reliefs in Hindu temples iconographically reminding the visitor of her breaking her anklet or tearing her bleeding breast and throwing it at the city.

Text

The Kannagi story first appears in the Sangam era poem Narrinai 312. A more extended version appears in the Cilappatikāram.

Legend

Kannagi was the daughter of the merchant and ship captain Manayakan from Puhar. She marries the son of Macattuvan, Kovalan, whose family were sea traders and had the sea goddess Manimekalai as patron deity. Later, Kovalan met a dancer Madhavi and had an affair with her, which prompted him to spend all his wealth on the dancer. At last, penniless, Kovalan realized his mistake and returned to his wife, Kannagi. Kovalan hoped to recoup his fortunes by trading in Madurai and selling the precious anklet of Kannagi.

Madurai was ruled by the Pandyan king Neṭuñceliyaṇ I. When Kovalan tried to sell the anklet, it was mistaken for a stolen anklet of the queen. Kovalan was accused of having stolen the anklet and was immediately beheaded by the king without trial. When Kannagi was informed of this, she became furious, and set out to prove her husband's innocence to the king.

Kannagi came to the king's court, broke open the anklet seized from Kovalan and showed that it contained rubies, as opposed to the queen's anklets which contained pearls. Realizing the error, the king committed suicide in shame, after having caused such a huge miscarriage of justice. Kannagi uttered a curse that the entire city of Madurai be burnt. The capital city of the Pandyas was set ablaze, resulting in huge losses. However, at the request of the goddess Meenakshi, she calmed down and later attained salvation. The story forms the crux of the

Cilappatikāram.

Worship

As Kannaki Amman, she is eulogized as the epitome of chastity and is worshiped as a goddess in select regions. She is worshiped as a goddess Pattini in Sri Lanka in Sinhalese Buddhism,[9] and as Kannaki Amman by the Sri Lankan Tamil people, and as Kodungallur Bhagavati and Attukal Bhagavati in the South Indian state of Kerala. Keralites believe Kannaki to be an incarnation of the goddess Bhadrakali, who reached Kodungallur and attained salvation in the Kodungallur Bhagavathy Temple

Tamil Nadu

the Cilappatikāram, and its sequel, Maṇimēkalai, offer evidence that Kannaki was praised as a goddess even during the lifetime of Maṇimēkalai, the daughter of Kovalan and Madhavi. Cilappatikāram tells about the Kannaki worship of another Pandyan King "Vetrivel Cheliyan", for relieving the land from the drought and curse of her on Pandya Nadu.

Kannaki Amman's worship involves her identification with the Dravidian folk religion's rain goddess, Mariamman. Cilappatikāram states that Mariamman is none other than Kannaki by stating that Kannaki burnt Madurai on the Friday of the Ādi month which is identified as the month of Mariamman's veneration in Tamil Nadu.

However, several temples, like Thyagaraja Temple, Tiruvottiyur, still commemorate the goddess as Kannaki Amman. Mathura Kalamman Temple, Siruvachur and the Mangala Devi Kannagi Temple in Idukki district are the other few temples where their connection with Kannaki is still remembered.

Kerala

The Kannaki cult, perhaps initiated by the Chera dynasty of Kerala, is still preserved in the form of the Bhagavati cult. The famous Bhagavati Temple at Kodungallur, which was the former capital of Cheras, remembers its ancient interaction with the Kannaki cult in its Sthala Puranam. Though the deity of the temple is still observed as Bhadra Kali, she is often praised by the devotees as Kannaki and Muthumari in Kodungallur.

Attukal Bhagavati Temple, Moothanthara Kannaki Amman Temple and so many Goddess Bhagavati temples are believed to be located on the journey of Kannaki to Chera Nadu (Kerala) after the burning of Madurai.

Sri Lanka

According to folklore, after the burning of Madurai, Kannagi traveled to Kerala and eventually arrived at the island of Pungudutheevu, near the ancient Manipallavam, now known as Nainativu. She visited approximately 25 sites in Sri Lanka, mostly along the east coast, and finally reached Vattapalai. Disguised as an old woman, she asked some boys herding buffaloes for food. They offered her Pongal made from buffalo milk instead of cow milk. She then requested a lamp lit with sea water. The boys, fearing she was a witch, sought help from the village. When the villagers arrived, Kannagi asked one of the boys to comb her hair, revealing a miraculous sight of 1,000 eyes in her head. She then ascended to heaven, declaring herself as Kannagi of Poompuhar and instructed the villagers to perform the same ritual each year on the day of Vaikasi. This tradition continues today, with both Sinhalese and Tamils participating in the festival by offering Pongal and lighting sea water lamps. King Gajabahu I recognized Kannagi as Pattini, making her a guardian deity of Sri Lanka for both communities.

Tamil Hindus

Sri Lankan beliefs on Kannaki are intermediate to Cilappatikāram and common Sri Lankan Beliefs. Eastern Sri Lankan and Vanni Tamils praises her as "Kannakai Amman". There are so many evidences in Yalpana Vaipava Malai, chronicle of Jaffna Kingdom confirms that Kannaki was also popular during the rule of the Aryacakravarti dynasty (1215–1624) in Northern Sri Lanka. The author of the Sri Lankan epic on Kannaki equivalent to the Cilappatikāram, the Kannaki Vaḷakkurai, recited in eastern Kannaki Amman temples, is believed to be written by the Jaffna king Jeyaveera Cinkaiariyan (1380–1410).

The Kannagi cult was especially popular among the coastal folk who considered her as their guardian deity since she was the daughter of a rich sea trader of Kaveripattinam. Since most of the coastal folk were converted to Catholicism during the Portuguese rule, most of the Kannaki shrines became churches of Our Lady. The remaining temples of Kannaki were transformed into Agamic Raja Rajeshwari and Bhuvaneshvari Temples as Kannaki was considered as an incarnation of Shakti by the activists of Saiva movement of 19th Century in Jaffna in the leadership of Navalar.

Kannaki is mainly praised once in a year during the Vaikasi month (May–June) of Tamil Calendar in Batticaloa and Ampara Districts. The Festival is called Catangu and Katavu Tirattal. Kalyanak Kāl Naduthal (Planting Wedding Pillar), Vaḷakkurai Pāduthal (Reciting the verses of "Kannaki Vaḷkkurai"), Kulirthi Paaduthal ("Singing Cooling verses") are common rituals of the festival. The festival days differ from temple to temple from three days to seven days. At the end of the festival, the sanctum of Kannaki temple is closed and it will be only opened when the next Cadangu begins.

Sinhalese Buddhists

Although the hierophant of Kannaki is fully transformed into the Bhagavati and Mariamman cult in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, respectively, Sri Lanka still preserves the Kannaki cult in its own form. The [Sinhalese praise her as Pattini. Their stories of that goddess also differ from those of the Cilappatikāram and see her as an avatar of the Buddha. She was born as a mango in the garden of the Pandyan king. She was neglected by him and kept in a boat at sea and grew up in Chola country. She eventually slew the evil Pandyan king and was hired as one of the guardian gods of Lanka by the Buddha.

The grant festival of Sri Lanka, the Esala Perahera, initially included only Kannaki, Vishnu, Kataragama, and Natha. The holy tooth relic of Buddha was annexed in the procession during the period of Kirti Sri Rajasinha of Kandy Kingdom. (1747 - 1782) according to the request of Upali Thera, a Buddhist monk from Konbaung Burma.

Polkeliya "coconut fight", Gammaduwa "village rituals", and ankeliya "horn play" are the main three aspects of the Pattini cult. There are well-known devales at Kandy, Nawagamuwa and Panama for Pattini Deviyo.

In popular culture

A Tamil epic film Kannagi directed by R. S. Mani released in 1942. This was the first Tamil film based on the epic Silapadhigamam.

A similar movie named Poompuhar released in 1964.

A Malayalam film Kodungallooramma directed by Kunchacko starring Prem Nazir, K. R. Vijaya, Adoor Bhasi and Thikkurissy Sukumaran Nair was released in 1968.

A statue of Kannagi holding her anklet, depicting a scene from Cilappatikaram was installed on Marina Beach, Chennai. It was removed in December 2001 citing reasons that it hindered traffic. The statue was reinstalled in June 2006

A Sinhala film called Paththini was released on 5 May 2016 in Sri Lanka. The role of the goddess Paththni or Kannagi was played by Pooja Umashankar.

Images

