

AVVAIYAR: THE RELEVANCE OF THE ANCIENT TAMIL POET TO CONTEMPORARY INDIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

'Avvai' refers to respectable elderly woman, a local form of the word 'amma', which means good woman in general for a woman of any age. Thus the name 'Avvaiyar' means 'a respectable good woman', so it is a generic title rather than the name of a particular woman. Abithana Chintamani, an encyclopaedia of Tamil literature written by A. Singaravelu Mudaliar, states that there were three female poets titled Avvaiyar. The first Avvaiyar is believed to have lived during the Sangam period i.e. 1st and 2nd century CE and had cordial relations with the Tamil chieftains Paari and Athiyaman. She wrote 59 poems in the Purananuru. The second Avvaiyar lived during the seventh or eighth century and was a follower of the poet-saint Sundarar. The devotional song Vinayagar Agaval is credited to her authorship. The third Avvaiyar seems to have lived in the 12th or 13th century during the Chola Reign. Her most well-known works are 'Aathichoodi' and 'Kondrai Vendhan'. 'Aathichoodi' means a person who wears a garland made out of the flower 'aathi', which references Lord Shiva. All the 109 poems from 'Aathichoodi' are alphabetically arranged by categories called varukkams. There are 9 varukkams in Aathichoodi. Since each line is arranged alphabetically, it is an interesting method of learning moral values along with the Tamil alphabet. For instance, the first line begins with the first letter of the alphabet "a" அறம் செய விரும்பு - Aram seiya virumbu (meaning: always desire to do your duties and moral acts). The second line is begins with "aa" ஆறுவது சினம் - Aaruvadhu sinam (meaning: Anger should always be controlled). Her collection of poems, 'Kondrai Vendhan' is full of moral instruction. These poems often feature anecdotes and parables to convey her moral teachings effectively. She uses everyday situations and common experiences to illustrate profound truths, making her poetry relatable and impactful. Her language is simple yet powerful, appealing to both the intellect and the heart. One of the recurring themes in Avvaiyar's poetry is the importance of education, both moral and intellectual. She emphasizes the role of education in shaping character, fostering empathy, and promoting social harmony. Her two other works, 'Mooturai' and 'Nalvali' were written for older children. All the four works are didactic in character - they explain the basic wisdom that should govern mundane life. Through her poems, Avvaiyar encourages lifelong learning and the pursuit of knowledge as a means to personal growth and societal progress. Although she is a significant figure in Tamil literature, not much is known of her personal life and her real name is also a mystery. In the content of her works and the spirit in which they are sung, this saint-poet is closer to the Tao Te Ching by Lao Tsu. In today's rapidly evolving Indian society, Avvaiyar's teachings continue to hold relevance, serving as guiding lights amidst modern challenges. This paper explores the enduring legacy of Avvaiyar and her relevance in contemporary Indian society.

Keywords: alphabet, Avvaiyar, didactic, education, moral, poetry.

INTRODUCTION - THE LEGEND OF AVVAIYAR

Three female poets named Avvaiyar are mentioned in A. Singaravelu Mudaliar's encyclopaedia of Tamil literature, Abithana Chintamani. These women are renowned poets. The first Avvaiyar is thought to have lived in the first and second centuries CE, during the Sangam period, and was friendly with the Tamil chieftains Paari and Athiyaman. She composed fifty-nine poems in Purananuru. The duration of the Third Sangam period was 1850 years. Despite disagreements among ancient Tamil academics about the period's exact age and length, the organic nature of the corpus of work now referred to as Sangam literature is generally acknowledged. A distinct corpus of poetry was created during the time that began before 250 A.D. and spanned more than five generations. It is typically divided into two categories: Pattuppattu (ten songs) and Ettuthohai (eight anthologies). The final of the Pattuppattu, or ten songs, is Purananuru. The poet-saint Sundarar was followed by the second Avvaiyar, who lived in the seventh or eighth century. Her composition, Vinayagar Agaval, is a religious song. It appears that the third Avvaiyar lived during the Chola Reign in the twelfth or thirteenth century. The two pieces she is most known for are "Aathichoodi" and "Kondrai Vendhan."

OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this paper is to explore the enduring legacy of Avvaiyar and her relevance in contemporary Indian society. There is also an attempt to place the works of Avvaiyar in the context of the Dhammapada and the Tao Te Ching.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although Avvaiyar's contribution to Tamil literature is widely acknowledged, there is very little historical or academic research done on her origins and socio-economic-cultural background. The little that we can glean about her life are by reading her works themselves. Most of the studies conducted on her life and works are in Tamil. The most well-known of the texts written about her are: *Auvaiyar* by S.N. Srirama Desikan,, *The History of Auvaiyar.* by C. Subramanyacharia, . *Avvaiyar.* by S. Anavarata Vinayagam Pillai and *Avvaiyar* by Dr. C. Rajagopalachari. The most recent work on the great poet is by Thomas Pruiksma titled *Give, Eat and Live.*

The first Avvaiyar

During the Sangam era, a poet named Avvaiyar lived in Tamil Nadu and is reported to have had friendly ties with two Tamil chieftains, Vel Pari and Athiyamān. Two of her 59 poems, which are among the 400 heroic poems about kings, battles, and public life found in the *Puṛaṇānūru*, have been lost, while a few have survived into the modern era in pieces. There are 157 poems in the collection; at least ten of them are women, and 14 of them are anonymous. The *Purananuru*, the most significant collection of courtly poems from the Sangam era in Tamil, has provided insights into the political and social history of ancient Tamil Nadu.

Many dates have been assigned to this anthology, ranging from the first century BCE to the fifth century CE. Tamil literary expert Kamil Zvelebil dates most of *Purananuru's* poetry to the second or third century CE. However, only a small number of poetry are attributed to the first century BCE. Hart and Heifetz claim that the *Purananuru* offers an insight into Tamil society prior to the significant impact of Indo-Aryan influences. The king dominated Tamil society during this time, women's purity was valued, and widows' rights were restricted. About all of the anthology is a secular dissertation about ancient Tamil ideas about kingship, the ongoing conflicts in the old Tamil-speaking territories, the valour of heroes, and their ferocity. Avvaiyyar provides over fifty-nine poems on a variety of topics, including bravery, kings, chieftains, conflicts, adversity, social flaws, and the wellbeing of the subjects. The poet's birthdate is suggested by a plaque on a statue of her in Chennai to be the first century BCE. Her given name is Avvaiyar, which translates to "respectable good woman"; her given name is unknown. According to Henry Bower, "she sang as sweetly as Sappho; yet not of love, but of virtue"(Thomson 399). The *Purananuru* has the popular elegy that follows, which is dedicated to the memory of Adhiyaman Neduaman Anchi, a Cheftain who is said to have given Avvaiyar a rare gooseberry in order to prolong her life. The two main categories of Sangam poetry are *Puram*, which is "exterior" or heroic poetry, and *Agam*, which is "interior" or love poetry.

Poem no. 235

If he got toddy in small measure

He would offer it to me

If it was in plenty

He too would drink enjoying my song.

He'd always share his meal with many.

Buxom meat with bones he'd offer me

Arrows and spears he'd encounter in the battle-field;

He used to strike my meat-stinking head

With his hand fragrant with musk;

The lance that pierced his chest

Perforated the plates of the minstrels

Maimed the hands of the poor and

Made pale the eyes of their kinsmen

And hit the tongues of the scholarly poets.

Is he dead? Where is my fatherly king?

Hereafter

There'll be neither melodists nor their patrons;

As the big flowers of Jalap wither away in vain

So many would die without succour.

This poem is an example of *Puram* or heroic poetry. The poetess is praising the brave deeds of her King who was like a father to her and the people of his kingdom. His death in battle is the end of music and poetry.

Purananuru, poem no. 187.

Whether town or forest

whether lowland or hill,

In whatever way people are good
the earth is good.
Long may it prosper.

Another example of Puram from the Purananuru is this poem by Avvaiyar. She seems to be implying that a land has no intrinsic qualities in it. It is only as excellent as its people. The poem implies a close bond between the natural world and people. It shows that there is harmony and connectivity between people and the Earth, and that both are good things by nature. This theme highlights a widely held notion in numerous spiritual and philosophical systems that humans are not separate from nature but are an integral part of it. The poem recognises and expresses gratitude for the variety of habitats on Earth by mentioning several landscape types, including town, woodland, lowland, and hill. The poem celebrates the diversity and complexity of the natural world by recognising the goodness of people and the Earth in a variety of contexts. "In whatever way people are good" suggests that the poetry has an ethical component. It implies that goodness can take on a variety of shapes and is not restricted to any one set of deeds or behaviours. This expansive definition of goodness highlights the value of identifying and valuing the goodness in others while promoting diversity and tolerance. The final words, "Long may it prosper," convey a benediction or wish for the planet's and humanity's continued prosperity. This feeling conveys a positive vision for the future and displays a desire for harmony, wealth, and prosperity. The poem subtly emphasises the value of environmental conservation by stressing how wonderful the Earth is. It implies that the welfare of humans and all other living things depends on preserving and tending to the Earth. Concerns about environmental sustainability and the need to preserve the world for future generations are relevant to this issue today.

The second Avvaiyar

The second Avvaiyar flourished during the time of the Chola dynasty in the 7th or 8th century, when the famous Tamil poets Kambar and Ottakoothar were active. Tamil people tend to imagine her as an elderly, wise woman. An ardent follower of Shri Ganesha named Avvaiyar offered pujas to him. She was informed that another follower of Shiva, the poet-saint Sundarar, had set off for Lord Shiva's abode, Mount Kailasa. Avvaiyar also desired to accompany him and arrive in Kailasa. She began rushing through the Sri Ganesh Puja with this thought in mind.

She was confronted by Sri Ganesha, who inquired as to why she was finishing the puja so rapidly. In response, Avvaiyar said that Sundarar had already begun for Kailasa and that she was hurrying through her puja because she wanted to follow him. Avvaiyar was instructed by Sri Ganesha to perform a puja to Him with complete focus and dedication, and he assured her that he would take her to Kailasa before Sundarar at the conclusion of the ritual. With complete trust, Avvaiyar completed the puja, and as promised, Sri Ganesha raised her up and carried her to Kailasa at its conclusion. Following this incident, Avvaiyar performed the song "Vinayaka Agaval," which is dedicated to Lord Ganesha. In this song, Avvaiyar tells the story of how Shri Ganesha took on Divine form and how he bestowed grace upon her by appearing to her as a mother. There is a picture of Avvaiyar at Muppandal, a tiny village in Tamil Nadu's Kanyakumari District. This is said to be the location where the great poet departed from this life, according to tradition.

The third Avvaiyar

The third Avvaiyar is believed to have lived in the 12th Century during the reign of the Chola kings. The reign of the Cholas began in the 9th century when they defeated the Pallava dynasty to come into power. This rule stretched for over five long centuries until the 13th century. The Early periods of the Chola rule saw the onset of the Sangam literature. Kantaman was one of the prominent rulers of this era. The medieval period was the era of absolute power and development for the Cholas. This is when kings like Aditya I and Parantaka I flourished. From here Rajaraj Chola and Rajendra Chola further expanded the kingdom into the Tamil region. This splendour persisted till the Pandyas arrived at the beginning of the 13th century. The Avvaiyar of this era is well-known for her compositions of "Moodhurai," "Aathichoodi," "Kondrai Vendhan," and "Nalvazhi." Avvaiyar, the court poet of the Chola king during the Middle Ages, was a contemporary of the renowned poets Kambar and Ottakkuttar. The lives of little children brought her a great deal of happiness. Even now, young children still read and enjoy her books, Aathichoodi and "Kondrai Vendhan," which were written for them. Mooturai and Nalvali, her other two compositions, were composed for older kids.

All four of the works have a didactic quality to them; they clarify the fundamental principles that ought to guide everyday existence. Avvaiyar addresses a wide range of subjects in these poems, such as moral behaviour, societal ideals, spirituality, and the significance of education. Her teachings place a strong emphasis on values like kindness, humility, honesty, and the quest of knowledge. She urges readers to live morally upright lives by sharing insightful life lessons in her poetry. Her poetry is compelling and relevant because she illustrates great truths via regular settings and experiences. Her writing is straightforward but effective, touching the heart as much as the mind.

'Aathichoodi'

The word 'Aathichudi' means a person who wears a garland made out of the flower 'aathi'. This alludes to Lord Shiva. An interesting fact is that all the 109 poems from Aathichudi are alphabetically arranged by classifications called varukkams. There are 9 varukkams in aathichudi. "Varukkam" means fine order. Varukkams are the categories in which the alphabets are ordered. For instance, the uyir varukkam includes a set of poems in which each singlet starts with a uyir ezhuthu in the correct order while kagara varukkam includes those from uyir mei series where the mei ezhuthu is 'tha', த். The way the order is maintained is astonishing. The 9 varukkams are: Uyir varukkam, Uyir Mei Varukkam, Kagara varukkam, Sagara Varukkam, Thagara Varukkam Nagara Varukkam Pagara Varukkam Magara Varukkam and Vagara Varukkam. The following 13 singlets start with uyir ezhuthukkal in an orderly arrangement. The 13th one has aayudha ezhuthu as the second letter of the first word.

The first few lines of the Aathichoodi are:

- Aram seiya virumbu - Have a wish to do your duties and moral acts.
- Aaruvadhu sinam- Anger should always be controlled.
- Iyalvadhu karaveal -Offer Help as much as you can.
- Eevadhu vilakkeal -Don't stop people from doing charity.
- Udaiyadhu vilambeal -Do not brag about your possessions.
- Ookamadhu kaivideal -Never lose hope. Always stay motivated and enthusiastic.
- Enn ezhuthu igazheal -Learning numbers and letters is very important. Do not undervalue those.

The lines are arranged according to Tamil alphabetical order. So the children who learn the alphabet also imbibe the moral lessons taught along with it at an impressionable age.

'Kondrai Vendhan'

'Kondrai Vendhan' is a collection of aphoristic teachings, moral and practical in character. It has a pithy tone and like Aathichoodi is didactic in purpose. Some of these sayings are:

- Annaiyum pithavum munnari deivam- Mother and Father are the first known Gods
- Oadhalin nandre vethiyarkku ozhukkam- For priests' morality is more important than chanting.
- Auviyam pesudhal aakkaththirku azhivu -Jealous words destroy one's prosperity.
- Karpu yenap paduvathu sol thirampaamai -Chastity is being true to one's word.
- Koor ambu aayinum veeriyam peasel. However sharp, do not brag.
- Kaip porul thannil meip porul kalvi. Education is the real wealth than the one in your hands.

Avvaiyar's poetry frequently addresses the value of education, both intellectual and moral. She places a strong emphasis on how education helps to develop empathy, build moral character, and advance societal peace. The poet promotes knowledge acquisition and lifelong learning as a means of fostering individual development and advancing society. Even though Avvaiyar's time was a great distance off from modern India, her lessons are still extremely applicable. Several of her ideas are highly relevant to contemporary societal challenges and provide insightful information: Her focus on fairness, empathy, and compassion highlights how crucial it is to build an inclusive society that protects the rights and dignity of all of its members.

'Nalvali' or 'Nalvazhi'

The word Nalvali means 'good conduct'. This collection begins with an invocation to Lord Ganesha. Some of the verses are:

Oh elephant faced Lord..

Milk, honey, jaggery and lentils

I would offer you as a mix...

bestow me three classical Tamil forms (Prose, Verse and Drama).

Nalvali is full of home truths. It is meant to be sung and since the language is simple, the lessons are understood by even the simplest of people.

However you conceive, this body is...

just a space for worms and diseases.

The wise know it and live unattached

Like drops of water upon a lotus leaf.

You can't miss a days food,

Turn down and take two days foods in one go,

You don't empathise my pain

You annoying stomach! It's hard to live with you!

You conceal your hard earned money

Listen ruined men...

once your soul leaves the body ..
who will enjoy your riches

'Moothurai'

The phrase "time-honored wisdom" comes close to the meaning of Moothurai. Once more, they are a series of straightforward, four-line poems intended to be sung. The lines that follow show how a elder's timeless wisdom is being transmitted to the next generation.

Help given to grateful people are
like an etch on a rock - opposed to it...
help given to insensitive people
are a writing on water

Recurrent attempts don't succeed
until the right time comes
Even trees that grow taller don't
bear fruits until the season comes

The average person may live by these words. These poems are strong and simple enough to be used on a daily basis. They cover the fundamentals, such as the body's needs, overcoming hardship, identifying a true friend, and other helpful topics.

It is thought that instead of staying in one place and putting out roots there, Avvaiyar roamed around the realm. The Tamil term "avvai" and the honorific suffix "ar" combine to form the name Avvaiyar. Respectable senior women are referred to by Avvai as "ammai," which is a broad phrase for excellent women of all ages. Hence, rather than being a particular person's name, the name Avvaiyar refers to a respectable, nice woman. Avvaiyar's name is not known. Her past is also unknown. There are numerous fictitious tales concerning her origins and upbringing, but no accurate details exist regarding her. Her four pieces are not devotional in any way. Every collection of poems opens with an invocation to Lord Ganesha; other than that, every line is straightforward, powerful, and ideal guidance for daily living.

Similarities to the Tao Te Ching

The Tao Te Ching by Lao Tsu and Avvaiyar share many themes and tones in common. The significance of inner balance and harmony is emphasised in both the Tao Te Ching and the Kondrai Vendhan. Lao Tsu discusses achieving inner peace and tranquillity through bringing oneself into alignment with the natural order, or Tao, in the Tao Te Ching. Similar to this, Avvaiyar addresses the significance of preserving mental stability and inner harmony in the face of life's obstacles in Kondrai Vendhan.

The Tao Te Ching By Lau-Tsu translated by Stephen Mitchell
Poem 27

A good traveller has no fixed plans
and is not intent upon arriving.

Lao Tsu and Avvaiyar espouse the values of simplicity and humility. They emphasise the significance of living a modest life devoid of irrational cravings and ego. While Avvaiyar's poetry usually emphasise the necessity of humility in one's own conduct and dealings with others, Lao Tsu's teachings frequently centre around the idea that simplicity is the way to discovering the great truths of the cosmos. They provide advice on moral behaviour and upstanding lifestyles. The Tao Te Ching by Lao Tsu highlights Wu Wei, or kindness, compassion, and non-action as the cornerstones of moral behaviour. In a same vein, Avvaiyar's Kondrai Vendhan addresses the significance of moral behaviour, truthfulness, and integrity in social interactions. Nature is cited in both works as a source of knowledge and creativity.

Lao Tsu commonly depicts philosophical ideas using images from nature, such as water flowing naturally or an uncarved rock signifying the primordial state. Similar to this, Avvaiyar uses metaphors from nature in Kondrai Vendhan to communicate spiritual truths and deeper intellectual understanding.

Similarities to the Dhammapada

There are also parallels between the Dhammapada, a compilation of teachings ascribed to Gautama Buddha, and Avvaiyar's Kondrai Vendhan and Aathichoodi. The Dhammapada and the verses of Avvaiyar are both filled with profound insight and moral lessons. They provide direction on how to live a moral life, deal with difficulties, and develop inner contentment and serenity. Universal topics like the nature of being, impermanence, the value of compassion, the traps of desire, and the quest of spiritual development are all explored in these writings.

These themes speak to readers from a variety of backgrounds and span time and cultural borders. Parables, allegories, and metaphors are frequently used by Avvaiyar and the Dhammapada to make their teachings easier to understand and retain. They convey significant truths and insights about human nature and the path to

enlightenment through straightforward but impactful narratives. The Dhammapada and the poetry of Avvaiyar both emphasise morality and ethics. The significance of living a morally pure life, exhibiting kindness, honesty, and charity, and developing virtues like patience, humility, and integrity are all emphasised. The Dhammapada and Avvaiyar both emphasise the importance of inner transformation as the path to spiritual enlightenment and human development. They support the development of healthy mental states, self-reflection, and mindfulness as vital elements of the spiritual path. Both are distinguished by their simplicity and lucidity of meaning. Both the Dhammapada's verses and Avvaiyar's poetry are frequently clear-cut, simple, and easy to understand, making them relevant to daily life.

CONCLUSION

At a time when male poet saints like Kambar, Ottakutha, Thiruvalluvar were writing their great religious texts, women poets like Avvaiyar were mingling among the common people are teaching them ethical ways to live. There are significant philosophical and poetical parallels between the Tao Te Ching, the Dhammapada, and the Tamil poems of Avvaiyar. Every piece of art exalts nature and promotes inner serenity, simplicity, and humility. They direct readers towards spiritual enlightenment and peace with the cosmos by highlighting the significance of virtue, awareness, and disengagement from worldly desires. They examine the fleeting essence of existence, the strength of compassion, and the way out of pain via succinct yet deep poetry. These timeless masterpieces transcend cultural boundaries and resound with global truths, inspiring searchers of wisdom and truth everywhere. The Dhammapada, the Tao Te Ching, and the poetry of Avvaiyar are still remarkably relevant to modern life, providing ageless knowledge that may be applied to current issues. These books serve as a constant reminder of the value of inner calm, moral behaviour, and mindfulness in an era of rapid technological innovation. They offer direction on developing resilience in the face of misfortune, managing complexity with simplicity, and creating peaceful connections with oneself and others. Their emphasis on ecological consciousness, humility, and compassion resonates well in the global context of today, encouraging us to live in balance with the environment and re-establish a connection with nature. In the midst of the complexity of the modern world, we can find direction and inspiration by accepting their teachings and living more meaningful lives.

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