

**MANIMEKALAI'S
RENUNCIATION**

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In August 1987 Dr. (Smt.) Prema Nandakumar was invited to deliver the Annual Founder's Day address in memory of the founders of the Institute, Shri B. P. Wadia and Smt. Sophia Wadia. Dr. Nandakumar chose for her topic an ancient Tamil classic which remains untranslated into English

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MANIMEKALAI'S RENUNCIATION

by

PKEMA NANDAKUMAR

Ever Since I chose Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* for my doctoral dissertation Three decades go, epic heroines have endlessly, fascinated me and when presently I began studying ancient Tamil literature, I felt overwhelmed by three great epic heroines who shed the lustre of the Messed feminine in three different stances: Kannaki of *Silappadhikaram*, Manimekalai of Sathanar's epic and Vijayai of *Jeevaka Chintamani*, who bring to t& thus total involvement in love which only woman is capable of as wife, as daughter, and as mother. Again, as Manimekalai stands for that pure maternal love which sustains the world, ya love which we desperately need today, she has a special fascination for me. Manimekalai herself speaks of her desire to be a mother, not in a narrow or familial sense, but of the selfless maternal love for the teeming suffering millions, when she receives the Amuda Surabai [Nectar-Vessel):

“In this enormous island of Jambu,
There ate prosperous homes made by good deeds.
In the past: at their entrance stand many
Wearing rags, suffering pangs of hunger,
Unmindful of heat, daring heavy rains,
Loaded with sorrows .innumerable,
The legacy of their past evil ways.
This magical vessel acts through the heart
Even like a mother's breast when she yields
Sweet milk out of love for her new-born babe.”

These- few lines give us an idea of Manimekalai as a perfect exemplar of Buddhist compassion. And the epic itself is an eloquent witness to the glorious era of Buddhism in ancient Tamil Nadu when the message of Tathagatha's compassion was received widely and deeply by a grateful people.

Buddhism seems to have entered Tamil Nadu in the time of Emperor Asoka. One of his Rock Edicts speaks of Asoka's remorse in having caused bloodshed in Kalinga. He has now realized that the true conquest consists in winning over men's hearts by Dharma, and has begun achieving such victories in his land and in other realms including the Greece of Antiochus as well as countries ruled over by Ptolemy, Antigonos, Magas and Alexander. In the same way he has won victories of Dharma in the of the Cholas and the Pandyas as far as Tambraparni. Tambraparni could refer to Tirunelveli in India or Ceylon which is now known as Sri Lanka. Asoka achieved this by sending Buddhist missions, a fact corroborated by the Ceylonese chronicles, *Mahavamsa* and *Dipavamsa*. They record nine missions of which the one led by Asoka's son, Mahinda, is important for our study. Tradition also speaks of Mahinda as Asoka's brother. Broths or son, the monk. Mahinda was the most successful of the spiritual ambassadors of Asoka. He was welcomed by King Tissa. Conversion came not long after. The Theravada (Hinayana) Buddhism established in Ceylon by Mahinda in King Tissa's time continues to flourish in that island till today. Asoka's daughter Sanghamitra who accompanied Mahinda established a Buddhist nunnery in the island. The mission had also brought a cutting of the Bodhi tree from Bodh Gaya and planted it in Ceylon.

Though the *Mahavamsa* avoids the mention of. Tamil Nadu and says that .Mahinda reached Ceylon by air; it is safer to rely upon the, traditional account of Mahinda beginning his pilgrimage from Vidisha (Sanchi), (probably) traveling through Kanchi and the Pandyan land and sailing to Ceylon. The stone beds in caves found in Pandya country resemble the earliest attempts of Buddhist monks to gain solitude and a life of bare subsistence resembling the originals in Ceylon.

Mahinda is said to have built seven Buddhist viharas in Kaveri-p-poombattinam. These viharas ascribed to Indra by poets were no doubt inspired by Mahinda (Mahendra). As only the worship of Buddha's Feet is mentioned in the epic and not the worship of his image, it is safe to conclude that the earliest type of "Buddhism had reached Tamil Nadu soon after the Buddha's withdrawal. *Manimekalai* must needs belong to this era as the epic poem mentions only worship of Buddha's feet and there are no references to Buddhist priests officiating at the worship. Later on, Tamil Nadu was to contribute a good deal in terms of art and intellect to Mahayana Buddhism. Great commentators and teachers like Nagarjuna and Bodhi Dharma belonged to Tamil Nadu. Many of the Hindu temples in Kanchi appear to have been temples to Buddha and the statues of suddha may be found in several places. Sri Seeni Venkataswamy asserts that the Kamakshi temple at Kanchi was originally a temple dedicated to Tara Devi, a Buddhist goddess.

After 5th century Buddhism was pushed to the background due to the phenomenal popularity of Vaishnavism and Saivism nurtured by the mystic poets, Alwars and Nayannars. The Buddhist convents had become dens of slothful ease due to excessive prosperity. The Hinayana-Mahayana division confused the believers. Jainism took full advantage of this and the Jain disputant Akalanga drove the Buddhists away from Kanchipuram. By 15th century Buddhism had disappeared completely from Tamil Nadu.

When Buddhism came first, it had gained popularity by adopting the language of the people leading to widespread conversions. This in its turn led to a mass of translations. Original creations came not long after. A great volume of Buddhist literature — translations, commentaries, grammars and poetry — enriched the libraries of the Buddhist missions (Baudha palli). But large-scale vandalism during the period of decline dealt this literature a grievous blow. Only two Tamil Buddhist works have survived in their entirety. Of these, Buddha mitra's *Veerachozhiyam* is a book of grammar. Buddhamitra affirms that the Tamil language was created by the bodhisattva Avalokiteswara and taught to Agastya. Perundevanar's commentary on this work gives important historical details and mentions other Tamil classics like *Kundalakesi*, *Nariviruttam*, *Nyaya Choodamani* and *Vachcha-t-tollayiram*. The other work that has triumphantly survived is *Manimekalai*. Since the author Koolavanihan Sathanar is often referred to affectionately as "Sathan, teacher of graceful Tamil", it is quite possible that love of Tamil proved stronger than hatred of the religion. Someone, somewhere, somehow, kept the epic alive as a priceless gift to posterity.

When the poem achieved survival for about 1500 years, it really won the crown of immortality. Dr. U. V. Swaminatha Iyer's heroic endeavors in the editorial field brought out a magnificent edition of the epic at the dawn of this century. Several editions have followed, and there have been in-depth studies of the epic by eminent scholars. In the result, *Manimekalai* has now an unassailably eminent position in the Tamil literary world.

The 'Padikam' (Introduction) of *Manimekalai* says that Koolavanihan Sathanar indited this poem titled 'Manimekalai's Renunciation' and recited it to Prince Hango, the author of the other great Tamil epic, *Silappadhikaram*. He was grain merchant. Though there is some debate over the exact date of composition, there is little doubt about Sathanar having lived after 2nd century A. D. Though Sathanar's name is cited as the Sangham poet who wrote verses for *Nattrinai* (3), *Ahananooru* (5) *Purananooru* (1) and *Kuruntogai* (1) as well as a verse for *Tiruvalluvamalai*, the generally held belief is that the author of the epic. *Mani*, *mekalai* was a different person. In fact, the late prof. S. Vaiyapuri Pillai assigns him to 8th-9th centuries. However, V. Kanakasabhai in his seminal work, *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago*, prefers 3rd century A. D. Researchers of today like N. Balusamy and T. N. Vasudeva Rao

also hold on to this dating chiefly because there is no mention of the Pallavas in the epic; and Pallavas were a powerful royal house in Kanchi since the 3rd century A. D. Dr. S. N. Kandaswamy favours 5th century as the philosophical exposition of Buddhism in the epic follows Dignaga who belonged to that century. Again, Sathanar appears to have been inspired by Buddhaghosha's commentaries on the Jatakas and the Dhammapada. Buddhaghosha was a contemporary of Dignaga. -

As far as we are concerned, *Manimekalai* is the reality. And the epic gives ample proof that the author was a profound scholar, original thinker and a sublime poet. It was no easy task to project the character of Manimekali as a pointed flame of aspiration amidst a welter of criss-crossing sub-plots and tame the Tamil language to convey the technical terms of Buddhist theology. Besides, Sathanar's first-hand knowledge of cities like Kaveri-p-poombattinam, Vanji and Kanchi make the epic an unrivalled social document revealing the life-style of Tamils 1500 years ago. And, of course, *Manimekalai* has a compelling narrative movement, an array of adorable characters and flights of superb poetry.

4758 lines of *ahavarpa* (blank verse) divided into thirty cantos make up the text of *Manimekalai*. Though the epic is a poem doubled with philosophy, philosophy does not intrude upon the narrative in a heavy way. Sathanar has set aside three cantos exclusively for this purpose. 'Listening to the Philosophers' details the various systems of philosophy then prevalent in India; Vaidika system, Ajivaka, Nirgrantha, Sankhya, Vaisheshika and Bhuta Vadas as well as Buddhism. The last two cantos, 'Manimekalai Receives the Dharma' and 'The Maiden's Askesis to Overcome Mortal Birth' take us to the subtler points of Buddhist philosophy. For the rest, it is a pure narrative on which the wings of Buddha's compassion brood, animating the characters in various ways. Hence it is poetic imagination that sits enthroned in *Manimekalai*; the strong, buoyant; simile-studded, stately and superior epic imagination that rings with the universal theme of Buddha's *koruna*.

The main outline of the epic is easily told. Manimekalai, daughter of the royal dancer Madhavi, has decided to follow her mother into a Buddhist nunnery. But the Prince of the land is in love with her and wishes to possess her. Manimekalai is taken to the isle of Manipallavam by her family deity and gains a nectar-vessel, the Amuda Surabhi, from the lake Gomukhi. She returns to Kaveri-p-poombattinam and engages herself in good works. The Prince comes in pursuit but he is killed by a vidhyadhara. Manimekalai is imprisoned by the enraged queen but not all the tortures devised by the Queen can harm her. Manimekalai is released, goes to different places bringing succour to millions thanks to the Amuda Surabhi. Finally, we see her receiving instruction on the subtleties of Buddhist theology from her family Preceptor, Aravana Adikal. She then enters the nunnery to take up a life of penance to overcome the ills of mortal birth. ;

In the course of unwinding this narrative we traverse several myths mid legends and miracles galore. We are also constantly moved in and out of time as the past lives of the epic characters are detailed. At times we stand still watching the colour transparencies illumed by Sathanar transporting us to the distant past. For instance, as Manimekalai walks past the outer battlements of Vanji, we tarry to take in the rushing waters of the moat:

Vanji's moat was like a rainbow garment
With scented water used by the housewives.
For washing tresses flowing through tunnels;
Water with powders used by youthful men
And women bathing in artificial ponds;
Sweet-smelling waters flung through syringes

And horns to celebrate the King's birthday.
 Pure water from the hands of householder-
 Devotees washing the feet of sages.
 Water that flows from pots in wayside rooms
 Filled and scented by the charitable.
 Water from well-to-do homes where they grind
 Spices taking care with the proper proportion.
 As such water alone flowed all over,
 Alligators, crocodiles and fishes
 Lost the smell of raw flesh on their body.
 Lotus and other lily varieties
 Spread on the surface with the bees a-buzzing.

Wisdom too is effortlessly imparted to us often, encapsulated in very few lines that nevertheless carry immense significances. Thus Madhavi recalling the saint Aravana's word.

"Those that are born are condemned to sorrow;
 Those that beyond birth win eternal bliss.
 Attachment leads to sorrow,
 while great joy Results from non-attachment."

The essence of Buddhism — namely, the cause of *dukka* and the way to liberation through non-attachment .. is crystallised in these four lines. But non-attachment, of course, does not mean a sterile turning away from life. Commenting on the Buddha's referring to his incarnation as an act. performed "for the weal and welfare of many, out of Compassion towards the world, for the good, the weal and welfare of gods and men", Shri B. P. Wadia says :

"----the acquiring of the wisdom that leads to the *summum bonum* demands the practice of Compassion. No Compassion, no Wisdom. One may gain knowledge without Compassion; but not Wisdom, divine and eternal, which leads to the realization of Peace, Bliss and Light. Compassion is then not only the supreme end; it is also the means by which the darkness of ignorance is dispersed ; the glamour of world-deception is overcome ; the machinations of the egotistic self are defeated ; the ugliness of evil is pierced and the beauty of the supreme Unity is perceived".

Such is the message of *Manimekalai*. To quote Dipatilakai in the epic,

"and only the lives of those
 Who save the helpless from hunger are blessed.
 They who are fosterers of living things
 In this world give precious life itself".

This positive approach marks the art of Sathanar in bringing to life the epic characters. What an ensemble of great characters that has been gifted to us in this epic ! Madhavi, Sutamati, Manimekalai, the saint Aravana, Aaputhran, Aadirai, Marudi, Dharmadatta, Visakai, Bumichandra and Punyaraja are all noble in their own ways. But Manimekalai and Aaputhran are the two characters who easily stand out because of their sheer strength of purpose. Of these two, again, it is Manimekalai who fills the epic with her presence and literally pervades our consciousness.

For this to happen, it is obvious that Manimekalai must have been based upon a real-life character. The Pillar-statue revealing the future of Manimekali in the 21st canto says :

“To chase away ignorance and save living things
 There will rise the sun of Buddha, spreading
 Dharma, gleaming, with realizations.
 Till then will I be in this place guarding The Truth,
 through several births and deaths.
 May you and your mothers live faultless.
 May your mind be ever filled with dharma’.
 When Aravana says so, you will follow his words
 Without fail. Your life will come to end At Kanchi
 after you perform good deeds.
 Henceforth, your births in north Magadha
 Will be male, and you will lead dharmic lives.
 Nobly born, freed from ignorance, you will
 Gain release when you are the chief disciple - Of
 Buddha who teaches the Truthful Path.”

As Prof Vaiyapuri Pillai has said, the *avadana* about the past births of either Sariputta or Moggallanna who were the chief disciples of the Buddha could reveal the seed-idea of Manimekalai’s character. However, as it happens when a religious or secular legend is taken up for creative recordation, a transformation in terms of the poet’s experiences is unavoidable. The Manimekalai of Sathanar belongs very much to his 'world and as is natural* she belongs to all time. Ever since Sathanar indited the epic thousands of Manimekalai* have manifested in India and carried on their ministry of universal compassion. In our own time) we have Mother Teresa who engaged herself in good works in cities like Bombay and Calcutta. There are hundreds of Manimekalais toiling in obscure places, and feeding and comforting the poor and the wretched of the earth. Thus the epic heroine Manimekalai is very much a part of our present-day experience and posits the possibilities when a sensitive soul decides to renounce the *preyas* of comfortable living in favour of the *sreyas* of selfless service for ushering in a life humane, and ultimately a life divine upon the earth.

It is true that Madhavi had decided Manimekalai should, take to renunciation. The spiritual daughter of the chaste and holy Kannaki will not sell herself and become the Prince’s paramour :

. “Unable to accept, her husband’s woe
 She plucked out her youthful lovely breast
 Covered by cascading tresses and tears
 Flinging which she caused the fire that burnt
 The famed city ! Such the noble mother
 To whom Manimekalai is daughter;
 Never will she lead an immoral life
 But ever walk the path of purity”.

But Sathanar is a careful student of human psychology. The change in Manimekalai has to come from *within*, and it is she, not Madhavi, who should decide about her renunciation. This is tellingly brought out in the fourth and fifth cantos. Manimekalai is hidden within the Marble Room. Outside Sutamati speaks to Udayakumaran of the vanity of human wishes and the impermanence of the human body:

“This body is caused by previous deeds.
 It is the field for further *karma*; and sans decor,
 mere neat to be cast off.

Subject to age: receptacle of ills;
Cause of desire; container of misdeeds.
A pit that hides the snake known as anger.
Within it is (he heart, tossed by sorrow,
Fear, helplessness and an endless pain.
Knowing thus, look close at the inner truth.”

The Prince is, however, sure that the maid can be easily won over because she belongs to a courtesan’s family, and her grandmother Chitrapati is favourably disposed to his suit. Sutamati warns him that Manimekalai is a girl of deep penance and has the power to damn. She has overcome Cupid.

ஊழ்தரு தவத்தன் சாபச்சரத்தி
காமற் கடந்த வாய்மையன்

After the Prince goes away, Manimekalai comes out. Her ears have heard both Sutamati and the Prince. Her heart has been a battlefield. She has been made aware of the desire within her heart when she perceived the noble-looking Prince, a veritable Subramania.’ But with a firm movement, she overcomes Mara’s tantalising attack and she speaks words dipped in fire, rendered keener because she recognizes her human weakness :

“In words censorious he” spoke of me
As s unchaste, with no penance, unguarded,
A woman for sale, and would possess me.
Yet, my mind followed the stranger’s footsteps.
Mother! Is this the nature of desire?
If so, may it be destroyed for ever!”

This is Manimekalai’s moment of spiritual victory. Sathanar comes back to this feat of renunciation later on perhaps to underline the unique heroism needed of a young, helpless girl to sustain her solemn resolve. Udayakumaran lies killed, and Manimekalai gazes upon the body which had in an earlier birth been that of her husband Rahulan. Her human feelings come to the fore again, and she laments bitterly that a life of promise has thus been abruptly ended. The Pillar-Statue gives her proper guidance at this moment of uncertainty, and the lingering residue of the ordinary egotistic human consciousness — *me, for me, my lover* — is burnt down at last. She now rises, carrying within her the universal love — the *metta bhavana*—which leads her out of the shell of egoistic separativity. She is no more unsure of herself or in doubt about her present and her future. This "strength, the silence of the gods” within her helps her to withstand the machinations of the Queen and even effect a complete transformation of the royal heart.

At the same time, Manimekalai does not withdraw from the field of action. The rest of the epic exemplifies the need for good works in one’s life. Manimekalai shows the way as she brings succour to

“The blind, the deaf, the lame, helpless people
With no guardians, the dumb, the sick;
Those performing vratas, men sick with hunger”.

Even the birds and animals come within the' circle of her loving, kindness: a thousand varieties of animals and other sentient beings come to her to receive food from the Amuda Surabhi. This is the *bodhisattva* ideal of *metta bhavana* (maitri bhavana) that makes one identify oneself with all creation and thereby helps all living things. Manimekalai’s transformation as well as the accounts of her past lives mark the emergence of the *metta bhavana*,

the first step for gaining enlightenment.

“As the practice of *metta bhavana* also indicates, Buddhism does not require the suppression of the natural affections so much as their universalisation. That same feeling which, when directed to one person only, is a source of bondage and suffering, becomes, as soon as it is radiated towards all, one of the conditions making for liberation and bliss. Though for a lay Bodhisattva his own kith and kin are among the first objects of generosity, by no means are they the last. As he recollects that all living things have, in one birth or another, been his own mother and father, his own wives and children,, his generosity becomes an ever-expanding circle that seeks to include all”.¹

The other unforgettable image of sterling compassion in the epic is Aaputhran whose story inspires Manimekalai to take up the cause of curing people’s hunger. He was born to the Brahmin girl Sali of Benaras who had committed adultery. Fearing social ostracism, she went towards Cape-Comorin and on the way gave birth, to a male child. Abandoned by Sali, the babe was guarded by a cow for seven days and was hence named Aaputhran (son of a cow) by his foster-father, the Brahmin Ilamputhi. When Aaputhran grew up, he once released a cow meant for sacrifice and was berated by the brahmins of the place. He asked: why should they kill a cow that gives life-sustaining milk? They twitted him about his birth. He laughed:

“Achala was a cow’s son; Srinigi, a deer’s;
A tiger’s offspring, Virinchi; was not
Famous Kesakambala a jackal’s son?
When you give plentiful praise to these sages As
the progenitors of your caste,
Where is stain for my caste traced to a cow ?”

All the same, the Brahmins chased him away. He went to Madurai and rested in the temple of Chinta Devi. The goddess appeared before him and gave him a Nectar-vessel which could produce illimitable food. Indra became jealous of Aaputhran’s fame in erasing human misery and engineered Aaputhran’s going away from Madurai. Aaputhran left for Savaka (Java) where a drought had brought untold sufferings. On the way he was left alone in a deserted island by mistake. He refused to make use of the Amuda Surabhi to feed himself as that would mean putting a divine gift to a selfish use. He left the vessel. in the Gomukhi lake and withdrew from his body. It is from this lake that Manimekalai gains the vessel. Aaputhran is born as Punyarajan in Savaka and presently becomes its ruler. Manimekalai meets Punyarajan, recounts his past life to him and urges him to lead a life of universal compassion.

“When the kings
Of the earth take to a life of dharma,
What better way to save the world from evil ?
If you ask what is dharma, hear this.
Forget not ! No greater dharma is there
Than to give mankind food, clothes and shelter!”

One cannot help asking a few questions about the thematic content of *Manimekalai*. Is there a need for so many meandering stories of the past and the present and the future to stress the presiding idea of *metta bhavana*? Does not the epic suffer from the absence of a centralised tale? Is there not a danger of Manimekalai’s character losing its powerful impact

¹ Bhikku Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism* (1976), p. 468

upon the reader? But then, *Manimekalai* is an epic in the true Buddhist tradition Its aim is not academic discussion but practical transformation. Sathanar's motive was the same that is seen behind the Pali canon compiled centuries ago. In the words of Lama Anagarika Govinda :

“The Jatakas are the divine song of the Bodhisattva ideal in a form which speaks directly to the human heart and which, therefore, is not only understandable to the wise but even to the, simplest mind. Only the all-too-clever will smile at them indulgently. Upto the present day the Jatakas have not lost their human appeal and continue to exert a deep influence upon the religious life in all Buddhist countries. In Ceylon, Burma, Siam, and Cambodia crowds of people listen with rapt attention for hours when Bhikkus during the full-moon nights recite the stories of the Buddha's former lives, and even in Tibet I have seen tears in the eyes of sturdy caravan men, when sitting around the camp-fire the Bodhisattva's suffering and sacrifice were retold. For these people the Jatakas are not literature or 'folklore' but something that happens in their very presence and profoundly affects their own life. Something that moves them to the core of their being,, because it is ever-present reality to them”.²

As mentioned earlier, Sathanar was no doubt inspired by Buddhaghosha's *Visuddhimagga* and *Dhammapada-atthakatha* both .of which contained numerous tales illustrating Buddhist tenets. Many of the tales are about the merchant communities (Sathanar himself was a grain merchant) who performs charity, and so Sathanar uses several stories of the Chetti community. As for the saint Aravana, the original may have been the monk Dhammapala, a native of Kanchi who headed the Nalanda university for sometime.³ Be it received heritage or personal experience, Sathanar's poetic genius transforms mere names into unforgettable characters. For example, the story of Adirai and Saduvan probably goes back to that of Mahadana Setti narrated by Buddhaghosha.

Saduvan lost his immense wealth to a danseuse. Ashamed to face his chaste wife Aadirai, he left on a sea voyage with a group of merchants to make his fortune. A cyclone destroyed the ship. Saduvan alone escaped and reached an island of Nagas. A few companions of Saduvan who escaped drowning returned to Aadirai with the doleful tidings. She tried to perform suttee but the fire would not singe her and she sat on the burning pyre unharmed as Lakshmi on the red lotus. A voice assured her of Saduvan's safety. Meantime Saduvan was taken to the Chief of the Nagas who welcomed him to his den :

“The leader held court along with his spouse
Looking like a bear and its female
On that stage spread with dried blood and white bones
Where the stench of blood and wine was quite thick.
But language brought the merchant good friendship”.

Having heard of Saduvan's providential escape, the Chief Priest (guru-magan) ordered his people to give Saduvan wine, meat and a girl. Saduvan refused the offer.

“The discerning have rejected
Mind-boggling wine and the killing of life.
The death of those who are born and the birth
Of those dead is like sleeping and waking.
As we know that those who do good deeds reach

² quoted in *A Survey of Buddhism*, pp. 436-7.

³ See S. N. Kandaswamy, *Buddhism as Expounded in Manimekalai* (1978), p. 58,

The heavens and the rest fall is deep hell
The wise have rejected these two evils.
Know it to be so”.

The Naga preist was incensed and a trifle amused; How can a life reach another body? Who has seen this happen? Saduvan explained:

“When life is within the body it feels
What happens to it. But when life withdraw It is
unaware of even being burnt.
Thus you know of life which has fled from hence.
Not me alone but all discerning men Know that there
is a new place to return For the lives of the dead. Our
body Lies here, but life moves to far places In
dreams. In the same way they enter bodies -
Fashioned according to deeds in the previous birth”.

The priest with eyes that glowed like burning coals was convinced by Saduvan’s sincere speech. He took holy instruction from the merchant mid decided not to harm living beings, avoid wine and give up debauchery. Saduvan returned home and lived a life of charity. Aadirai becomes an object of admiration and reverence. When she places alms into the Amuda Surabhi, Aadirai invokes a blessing: “May the whole world be free of hunger!”
பாரகம் அடங்கலும் பசிப்பிணி அறுக. Immediately the vessel begins to pour out an endless supply of life-sustaining food.

Apart from such dramatic recitals of Jataka tales, Sathanar also calls upon his poetic powers to keep us enchanted with the progress of the tale. There are lovely descriptions of gardens in cities like Vanji, Kanchi, Savakam, Manipallavam and Kaveri-'p-poombattinam, truly a delight for the environmentalists ! A variety of dramatic scenes involving the flora and fauna in the gardens give the epic an ever-green shimmer. Thus the King Mavankilli and his Queen Seerthi in their palace garden watching a lovely’ scene:

“Our King enjoyed the flower garden Where the
beetles on the branches flouted,
The bees sounded like the strings of a lute,
The nightingales sang and the peacocks danced.
In a corner with a swan sans its mate
Danced a peacock and its hen in rhythm
Going round and round, their large wings unfurled:
The gracious King watched the sight with pleasure,
As if it were, the dance of Lord Krishna
With his elder brother and Nappinnai.
The sight of a speckled peacock
Close to a mango near a flower
Appeared as though a maid was feeding
A parrot with milk from a golden plate.
He laughed to see a male monkey swinging
Its mate seated on the bejeweled swing
Specially erected for lovely girls
Within the garden full of flowering trees.
The closeness of bamboo clumps with green leaves To the
kadamba tree with white blossoms

Made him salute with his hands worshipfully:
Here is Krishna with his elder brother.”

Manimekalai which is the earliest of the three ancient Tamil epics is literally a treasure-trove for historians and sociologists. The action of the epic takes place in the three major divisions of Tamil Nadu: Chola (Puhar), Chera (Vanji), and Pandya (Madurai) as also in Kanchi, a viceroyalty of the Cholas. There are special references to several kings of these dynasties. Scholars like V. Kanakasabhai, U. V. Swaminatha Iyer, Seeni Venkataswamy, S. Krishnaswamy -Iyengar and Mu. Raghava Iyengar has admirably reconstructed the political and social life of the ancient Tamils with the help of this epic Heavy dependence upon *Manimekalai* by historians may be seen in passages such as this that connects India and Sri Lanka:

“Ceylon was known as Lanka-dvipa or Ratna-dvipa: the highest mountain in the island was Samanoli (now called Adam’s Peak): and on its summit was an impression of Buddha’s foot, which was an object of pilgrimage to Buddhists far and near. Between Ceylon and India was the island Manipallavam, on which there was one of the sacred seats of Buddha, then held in great veneration by all Buddhists. It is said to have been at a distance of thirty yojanas south of Puhar, the ancient sea port at the mouth of the Kaveri. A ship sailing from the coast to Madura to Chavakam (Java) touched at Manipallavam. To the east of Ceylon were the islands inhabited by a race of Nagas called Nakkasaranar or, naked ‘nomads’, who were cannibals. Beyond this island was Chavakam, a large kingdom the capital of which was Nagapuram. The king of this country claimed to be a descendent of the God Indra, and what is most remarkable, the language spoken in Chavakam appears, to have been Tamil! This Chavakam was most probably Sumatra or Java”.

As we take leave of the epic, the stories of humans in the process of moral evolution, the superb epic Similes, the sweet-channelled poetry, the flight? of philosophic thought, the summaries of Buddhist theology and the heartwarming descriptions of peoples and places that offer vital clues to reconstruct the Sangham Age gently withdraw from our vision. We are left alone with *Manimekalai* } human like ourselves, yet dime in her soulful compassion, uttering gentle and meaningful words of love and wisdom, an image of humility and anxiety to transform the world into a place of calm and that make her one of the greatest epic heroines in world literature. *Manimekalai* Who hat renounced the world but has retained *maitri* for the whole creation welcoming “all living beings” to receive the “medicine for hunger-sickness” from the Amuda Surabhi. What a scene fills our field of vision!

“Folk speaking eighteen languages came there.
Among them, the blind, the deaf and the lame.
Guardianless people, the dumb, the sick.
Ascetics and others ill with hunger.
People who had grown poor through idleness.
Ten thousand varieties of animals.
Thus all classes of living beings gathered.
Like life-giving physic for those- who ate,
Like the result of giving aims to ascetics,
Like the yield' when the seed in sown with thought
To water, earth, season and work in the fields,
Like rains that fall to help the earth’s increase,
Was the maid compared and thanked by people
Whose hunger sickness had been cured by her.”

Is this then a vain dream, a magic vessel? But then, the Amuda Surabhi is natty this green, green earth, this space-ship, Sakhambhari. Life on earth can be made the life divine if We heed the message of the Buddha and observe *maitri*. As the contemporary saint, the Sankaracharya of Kanchi has reiterated:

“Mother Earth is a wish-yielding cow; the Supreme is all Compassion. May there be charity ever on the increase! May humanity be blessed with everything good 1 Let everyone cherish *maitri* and see the other person as oneself!”

ஐனனீ ப்ருதுவீ காமதுகாஸ்தே
ஐனகோ தேவ: ஸகல தயாநு:
தாம்யத தத்த தயத்வம் ஐனதா
ச்ரயோ பூயா ஸகல ஐனனாம்
மைத்ரீம் பஜத அகில ஹ்ருஜ்ஜேத்ரீம்
ஆத்மவதேவ பரானஸி பச்யத!