

Synopsis

silappadhikaaram (Jewelled Anklet)

.....a story of women of substance



Silappathigaram, the story of Jewelled Anklets, is rooted in the ordinary lives of the early Tamils of the Pandyan Kingdom in the first century A.D. and is regarded by many as the national epic of the Tamil people.

Professor A.L. Basham writing in 'The Wonder that was India' comments that Silappathigaram has "a grim force and splendour unparalleled elsewhere in Indian literature - it is imbued with both the ferocity of the early Tamils and their stern respect for justice, and incidentally, it throws light on early Tamil political ideas."

That which follows is taken from the excellent translation by Professor A.L. Basham:

"Kovalan, the son of a wealthy merchant in Kavirippattinam, married Kannagi, the lovely daughter of another merchant. For some time they lived together happily, until, at a festival at the royal court, Kovalan met the dancer Madavi and fell in love with her. He bought her favours and in his infatuation forgot Kannagi and his home.

Gradually he spent all his wealth on the dancer. At last he was penniless, and returned repentantly to his uncomplaining wife. Their only fortune was a precious pair of anklets, which she gave to him willingly. With these as their capital they decided to go to the great city of Madurai, where Kovalan hoped to recoup his fortunes by trade."

"On their arrival at Madurai they found shelter in a cottage, and Kovalan went to the market to sell one of Kannagi's anklets. But the queen of Nedunjeliyan, king of the Pandyas, had just been robbed of a similar anklet by a wicked court jeweller.

The jeweller happened to see Kovalan with Kannagi's anklet, and immediately seized it and informed the King. Guards were sent to apprehend Kovalan, who was then killed on the King's orders. When the news was brought to Kannagi, she went out into the town, with her eyes ablaze with anger, carrying the remaining anklet in her hand as proof of her husband's innocence....

At last the patron goddess of the city interceded with Kannagi, and she agreed to withdraw her curse, and the fire abated. Weak with loss of blood from her self-amputated breast, Kannagi struggled to a hill outside the city, where after a few days she died, and was reunited with Kovalan in Heaven. Meanwhile the news of her death spread throughout the Tamil Land. She was deified, temples were raised and festivals held in her honour, and she became the patron goddess of wifely loyalty and chastity....

This theatrical production attempts to take the audience on a journey to those most civilized of times in the Sangam era and, hopefully, steal a glimpse of what the author saw. The epic is so brilliantly crafted; it evokes a sense of timeless identification with the virtues and weaknesses of its characters. For, it is not merely the story of its women of substance and Kovalan – but of love and life....of dreams and duties.....of injustice and retribution, of righteous living and karma.

In all who read Ilango's masterpiece, there emerges a sublime generosity and compulsive need to share its wealth, to embark on a literary treasure hunt in hungry search for every little detail that perhaps inspired him, or even merely attracted his attention. The upcoming theatrical performance is an attempt to seek and find, and then present these details, so all may partake of this feast, understand and appreciate the presence and play of creative forces. For, what use is knowledge, unless it touches many lives, spreading gently in ever-widening circles?

"...[Silappathikaram] should be familiar to the whole world and admired and be loved by all in the same way as the poems of Homer, the dramas of Shakespeare, the pictures of Rembrandt, the cathedrals of France and the sculptures of Greece...the epical poem Silappathikaram, which by its 'baroque splendour', and by the charm and magic of its lyrical parts belongs to the epic masterpieces of the world....." — *Czech Professor and Tamil Scholar, Dr. Kamil Zvelebil*