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In praise of Citizen Kannagi

Eric Miller

Kannagi proved that even a non-native with no money and no family in sight can fight City Hall and win her case — that is inspiring.



BACK ON THE PEDESTAL: The Kannagi statue on the Marina in Chennai. — Photo: Shaju John

I WRITE in praise of Kannagi, global symbol of justice, and of the dignity of the individual!

This is her story — the *Silappathikaram*, the *Epic of the Anklet* — as I know it: Kannagi and Kovalan married in Poompuhar, on the east coast. After some time, Kovalan went off with a dancer named Madhavi. A year later, he returned home. He and Kannagi walked to Madurai, a distance of about 250 km, to start a new life. There Kovalan was unjustly put to death by the local ruler, the Pandian king: Kovalan had been falsely accused of stealing the queen's anklet. Kannagi came to the court and proved that her husband had been innocent of this crime. The king punished himself for the injustice he had done, by simply laying himself down and dying. Kannagi walked around the city three times, tore off her left breast and threw it against the city wall, and called for the city to burn — but for good people and

animals to be unharmed. Agni, the god of Fire, accomplished this. Kannagi wandered to the western mountains, where some people worshipped her.

Actually, there are the Mudhuvans — Adivasis located in the mountains west of Pollachi — who claim to be descendents of people who accompanied Kannagi as she left Madurai. Even today, to some people in those mountains, Kannagi is a feared and loved local "Amman," a manifestation of Sakti or Kali. Such traditions give India a lot of depth. India is one of the few places in the world where the divine continues to be worshipped in female forms.

Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi's interest in Kannagi is, of course, as a cultural symbol. One reason the Chief Minister is sensitive to cultural symbols is that he is a writer — a screenwriter, novelist, poet, and literary critic. In world history, there have been very few writers who have also been successful politicians. Beyond Tamil Nadu, the only individual who comes to mind is Vaclav Havel, the last President of Czechoslovakia and the first President of the Czech Republic. In fact, the Dravidian Movement has involved a unique mix of politics and culture — classical, folk, and popular (including stage and cinema) — and a number of its central figures have been both writers and political leaders. Long live this wonderful south Indian tradition of writers as leaders!

Kannagi has been criticised for calling for Madurai to burn, even after the Pandian king punished himself for putting Kovalan to death unjustly. First, it should be noted that the Sun had told Kannagi, "A raging fire will burn this city" (line 63, canto 18, the book of Madurai). Secondly, while it is true that Kannagi requested Madurai's destruction, the act was committed by Agni, the god of Fire.

People of Madurai gave Kannagi a lot of support when she discovered her husband's body. However, Kannagi did come to address them in an indignant tone:

"Are there women here? ...

Are there women who would allow such vileness

To be done to their own husbands? ...

Are there good people here? ...

Is there a god here?"

(lines 67-73, canto 19, the book of Madurai)

Ilango Adigal — who gave up the throne of the Chera kingdom to become a forest monk, and who wrote down the story of Kannagi about 1400 years ago — does not tell us how the people of Madurai responded to these questions (he was not an eyewitness, in any case). Moreover, it seems that it was simply a tradition that the state of a city should reflect the state of the king's justice. At a mythic level, the burning of the city was an act of purification, leading to regeneration. All of that aside, it may indeed be that Kannagi's request for the burning of Madurai does not reflect her best qualities as a human being.

Another criticism of Kannagi has been that she was foolish to fight on behalf of her husband, who had done her an injustice. It is one of the mysteries of life that many a woman continues to love her man despite his failings. Kovalan received poetic justice. True, he did not steal the queen's anklet. But early in the story he committed a far worse crime: he broke

his wife's heart (when he abandoned her for another woman). Kovalan tried to make amends, but it seems that in terms of his karma, the damage had been done.

Some have questioned Kannagi as a role model for women. At issue here is the double standard of promiscuous men insisting that their wives be chaste. It is a sad fact of life today that one of the leading ways women catch sexually transmitted diseases is this: their husbands have contact with other women, and then bring the disease home and poison their wives with it. This is why the use of condoms is a public health issue, and women who wish to discuss this publicly should be allowed to do so.

Kannagi is a very relevant figure in the world today. She is just beginning to become known in the global consciousness, and I believe she is destined to be an important figure there. However, it is not Kannagi as a woman that I praise today — it is Kannagi as an individual. In my home town, New York City, we have a pessimistic saying: "You cannot fight City Hall." But Kannagi proved that you can fight City Hall, and this is the core of the story. That one person — with no money, in a place that was not native to her, with no family in sight — could go before the highest civic authority, and speak, and win her case — that is great.

All of the world's political leaders should know the story of Kannagi, and of the Pandian king. For the great hero of the *Silappathikaram* — after Kannagi — is the Pandian king. He punished himself when he realised he had made a mistake. Such self-punishment by leaders is a tradition in south India — another example being the king who punished his son for killing a calf. This tradition is one reason that India is a moral leader of the world.

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