

# Tamil Epics (*Silappatikāram* and *Maṇimēkalai*) as Cultural and Political Texts: Law, Justice, Religion, and Urban Life in Early Tamil Society

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# Tamil Epics (*Silappatikāram* and *Maṇimēkalai*) as Cultural and Political Texts: Law, Justice, Religion, and Urban Life in Early Tamil Society

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** *The Tamil epics Silappatikaram and Maṇimēkalai are literary masterpieces. They also have an immense cultural and political significance. They achieved this status by giving considerable information about social and cultural life, legal systems, ethics, and pluralistic religious practices in urban Tamil societies of the time. They were written from the 2nd to the 6th century CE. In this paper, it is focussed on defining the epics from the perspectives of the social order and the urban civilization of Tamil society, the justice and governance systems, and the civil and moral systems.*

**Methodology:** *In this paper, the exploratory qualitative research method is used. The relevant information is collected using keyword-based search in Google search engine, Google Scholar search engine, and AI-driven GPTs. This information is analysed and interpreted as per the objectives of the paper.*

**Analysis/ Results:** *Through the tragic story of Kannagi, the epic Silappatikaram and injustices done to women in society, the author, Ilango Adigal, also brings to the forefront the issues of justice, governance, and the moral responsibility of the king. Silappatikaram criticizes the exercise of arbitrary power. It also gives credence to the rule of law and justice as opposed to the king's law. Maṇimēkalai, and the author Sīthalai Sāttanār, also brings in the Buddhist ethical doctrine of social compassion and the renunciation of the world, and the positive discourse of social harmony from non-violence and the welfare of all.*

**Originality/ Values:** *This study examines the intersection of law, religion, and urban institutions in these epics and their influence on the construction of civic imaginaries. Puhār, Madurai, and Kanchi emerge as dynamic cities/ polities of commerce, politics, religion, and social integration/ intermingling. The Tamil epics, the author suggests, serve as the first literary/ imaginative critiques of justice and civic morality. In the end, Silappatikāram and Maṇimēkalai are placed as pivotal works for the commencement of the political thinking and cultural identity of the Tamils.*

**Type of Paper:** *Exploratory Research.*

**Keywords:** Tamil Epics; Silappatikāram; Maṇimēkalai; Justice and Law; Urban Culture

## 1. INTRODUCTION :

The Tamil epics *Silappatikāram* and *Maṇimēkalai* represent a sophisticated phase in the evolution of Tamil literary and cultural history. Far from being mere poetic narratives, these epics encode complex reflections on law, justice, governance, religion, and urban life. Emerging in a period of intense socio-economic transformation marked by urbanization, maritime trade, and religious plurality, the epics serve as cultural documents that record and critique the moral foundations of society [1-3].

*Silappatikāram* narrates the tragic story of Kannagi, whose unwavering commitment to justice leads to the destruction of Madurai after the wrongful execution of her husband. The epic thus becomes a powerful indictment of judicial failure and moral negligence in governance. Kingship is subjected to ethical scrutiny, and justice is presented as superior to royal authority. Law (*aram*) emerges as a cosmic and social principle that sustains order.

*Maṇimēkalai*, the sequel epic, shifts focus from retributive justice to ethical reform. Rooted in Buddhist philosophy, it emphasizes compassion, renunciation, and social welfare. The epic critiques material excess, caste rigidity, and violence, offering instead a vision of society grounded in moral self-discipline and universal compassion.

Both epics provide detailed portrayals of urban centers, depicting markets, courts, religious institutions, and civic spaces. Cities function not only as backdrops but as active agents shaping social interaction and political life. By examining these epics as cultural and political texts, this study seeks to illuminate how early Tamil society negotiated justice, authority, and ethical responsibility within a pluralistic and urbanized world [4-6].

## 2. OBJECTIVES :

- (1) To analyze *Silappatikāram* and *Maṇimēkalai* as texts reflecting legal and political thought in early Tamil society.
- (2) To examine representations of justice, kingship, and moral authority in the epics.
- (3) To assess how religion and urban life shape civic ethics and social order in these works.

## 3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE :

- (1) K. A. Nilakanta Sastri interpreted the Tamil epics as valuable historical sources illuminating early South Indian polity, urbanization, and trade [7].
- (2) Kamil Zvelebil emphasized the epics' synthesis of literary artistry and social philosophy, noting their concern with ethics and justice [8-9].
- (3) Irvatham Mahadevan highlighted the epics' role in reflecting a transitional society shaped by commerce, law, and cultural pluralism [10].
- (4) Martha Ann Selby analyzed *Maṇimēkalai* as a Buddhist ethical text engaging critically with social inequality and political power [11].

## 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY :

In this Study, the exploratory qualitative research method is used. The relevant information is collected using keyword-based search in Google search engine, Google Scholar search engine, and AI-driven GPTs. This information is analysed and interpreted as per the objectives of the paper [12-20].

## 5. THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE TAMIL EPICS :

The great Tamil epics *Silappatikāram* (The Tale of an Anklet) and *Maṇimēkalai*, are not mere literary accolades, but are extraordinary monuments of synthesis of their time. They are a testimony of an era, dating back to the early centuries of the Common Era, (between the 2nd and 5th centuries CE), and a period of great economic, cultural, and religious pluralism and maritime engagement in Tamil history [5]. The following paper proposes to illustrate the epics as intentional reflections and responses to the complex socio-cultural currents of post Sangam Tamilakam. The works are presented as narrative syntheses of the Tamil indigenous and Buddhist/Jain normative ethos, and the aesthetics and politics of the subcontinent [4].

### (1) The Post-Sangam Milieu: A Cosmopolitan Crossroads:

To understand the epics, one must first situate them in the transition from the classical Sangam age to the age of the early historical kingdoms. The Sangam period, with its anthologies of lyrical poetry, was rooted in a poetics of immediacy, delineating the interior landscapes of love (*akam*) and the exterior world of war and patronage (*puṇam*). By the time of the epics, Tamil society had undergone significant transformation:

- Urbanization and Mercantile Power: The flourishing trade with the Roman Empire (the *Yavanas*) and Southeast Asia brought unprecedented wealth to port cities like Puhar (Kāvērippattinam), the magnificent setting for *Silappatikāram*'s opening books. This mercantile prosperity created a new social force—the wealthy guilds (*niṣadam*) and caravan leaders (*ceṭṭi*)—whose ethos often contrasted with older, agrarian- and heroism-based value systems. The epics prominently feature merchants, sailors, and artisans, reflecting their central role in the contemporary political economy.

- Religious and Philosophical Ferment: This was a period of intense competition and dialogue between indigenous Tamil cults (the worship of Murugan, Kottravai, and other animistic deities), Vedic Brahmanism gaining royal patronage, and the ascendant, proselytizing "heterodox" traditions of Buddhism and Jainism. *Maṇimēkalai*, as an overtly Buddhist doctrinal epic, is a direct product of this ferment, while *Silappatikāram*, though traditionally attributed to a Jain prince (Iṣāṅkōvaṭikal), presents a remarkably syncretic religious panorama, respectfully depicting diverse practices.
- Political Consolidation: The earlier tribal chieftains (*vēḷir*) were giving way to larger, more centralized monarchies like the Cholas, Pandyas, and Cheras. The epics reflect this shift, exploring the nature of kingship, the relationship between the capital and the periphery, and the grave consequences of royal failure.

## (2) The Epics as Literary Synthesis and Innovation:

Against this backdrop, the epics represent a conscious leap in literary ambition, synthesizing diverse influences to create a new narrative form.

- Adapting the *Mahākāvya* Ideal: The poets were clearly aware of the Sanskrit *mahākāvya* (great poem) tradition, exemplified by works like Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita*. They adopted its expansive scale, its use of ornate description (*varṇanam*), and its incorporation of *rasa* theory. However, they indigenized this form. The core plots, characters, and ethical dilemmas are rooted in Tamil soil. The primary narrative of *Silappatikāram*—a wronged wife, a flawed king, and the pursuit of justice—draws on Tamil concepts of *karpu* (chastity) and *aram* (righteousness), transforming a domestic tragedy into a cosmic realignment of justice.
- Mapping a Cultural Geography: Both epics are intensely concerned with space. *Silappatikāram* is meticulously structured around the Tamil conception of the five landscapes (*tiṇai*) but expands it into a pan-subcontinental pilgrimage. The journey of Koṅkaṇavāl and Kaṇṇaki moves from the Chola port of Puhar (maritime *neytal*), through the forested Chera country (*kuṟiñci*), to the Pandyan capital of Madurai (agrarian *marutam*), symbolically uniting the Tamil lands. *Maṇimēkalai* extends this geography further, to Sri Lanka and mythical lands like Kāñcī, mapping the Buddhist *saṅgha*'s spiritual and physical network.
- Articulating a New Moral Order: The epics are deeply didactic, seeking to prescribe ethics for a changing world. *Silappatikāram* offers a powerful critique of the limitations of Sangam-era kingship and warrior codes. The king's failure to protect a common merchant (Kōvalaṅ) leads to the destruction of his city. The epic ultimately elevates the power of a chaste woman's truth (*karpu*) and the moral force of the aggrieved commoner above royal authority. *Maṇimēkalai* advocates for a more radical renunciatory ethic based on Buddhist compassion (*karuṇā*), non-violence, and the renunciation of desire, positioning it as a solution to the worldly suffering depicted in *Silappatikāram*.

## Specific historical realities are directly mirrored and interrogated in the epic plots [2-5]:

- The Tension between *Akam* and *Puṛam*: *Silappatikāram* brilliantly internalizes this core Sangam dichotomy. The first book (*Puharkkāṇṭam*) is the world of *akam*: love, intimacy, and domesticity within the bustling city. The third book (*Vaṅcikkāṇṭam*) is the world of *puṛam*: war, kingship, and public deification. The tragic second book (*Maturaikkāṇṭam*) is where these worlds catastrophically collide, as a private marital story triggers public, political apocalypse.
- The Role of Women and the Marginalized: The epics give unprecedented narrative agency to women—Kaṇṇaki, the chaste wife turned avenging goddess; Maṇimēkalai, the courtesan-turned-Buddhist nun; Mātavi, the accomplished courtesan. They also feature characters from lower social strata. This focus allows the epics to critique social hierarchies and explore ethical power from positions outside traditional male, kingly authority.
- Performance and Memory: The epics themselves are structured as performances, containing within them descriptions of dances, music, and recitals. This mirrors the vibrant performative culture of the time and underscores their function as cultural memory, designed to be heard and seen, not just read.

### The Epics as Foundational Cultural Texts:

Tāmil literature provides numerous examples of stories of literature as a way of expressing an entire culture, the anxieties, the hopes, the social structures. The *Silappatikāram* and Maṇimēkalai, born of the tensions between local and cosmopolitan as reflected in both the culture and the mercantile/ agrarian society, the structures around and the heroic/ renunciatory dualism, are attempting to create an integrated worldview. These works certainly reflected the changing society around them but, in the process, also shaped the identity of the Tāmils for centuries, defining the paradigms for narratives of justice, devotion and ethics, and shaping civilizational thought well into the Bhakti period. Understanding the context of these works in their many layered dimensions provides an answer to the question of why the works are so deeply and broadly conceived of as vessels of literature and why they are so important to the society navigating the early historical changes.

### 6. LAW, JUSTICE, AND MORAL ORDER IN THE *SILAPPATIKĀRAM* :

The *Silappatikāram*, as the first Tamil epic, was written by Iḷaṅkōvaṭikaḷ in the 5th century. Although the central story of the epic is a conjugal tragedy, it goes beyond that and addresses the issues of the law and the moral order as it pertains to the justice system, even though it might be unsettling. The epic illustrates the clash of various forms of justice. Out of all the systems of justice, the author portrays a stark and dire outcome of the failing systems of justice and institutes an otherworldly justice system through the wronged individual. This paper examines the epic's catastrophic failure and the justice system's drama as an adjudicatory review on the dissolution of a system based on a kinship moral economy, the rise of a state apparatus, and the ascendance of a moral power *karpu* in the sense of a true justice system [5].

#### (1) The Failure of Human, Royal Justice:

The epic's central tragedy unfolds in Madurai, the capital of the Pandyan kingdom, a setting emblematic of established state power and its legal machinery. The pivotal event is the miscarriage of justice by King Neṭuñceḷiyaṅ, who hastily condemns and executes the merchant Kōvalaṅ for the alleged theft of the queen's anklet.

- Flawed Procedure and Royal Hubris: The king's judgment is a masterclass in judicial failure. It is based on cursory, circumstantial evidence—the possession of one anklet, mistaken for the queen's pair. There is no inquiry, no cross-examination, no consideration of Kōvalaṅ's character or standing. The king's guards act on immediate suspicion, and the ruler himself, described as otherwise just, acts with impulsive, unquestioned authority. This haste (*taṇḍam*) signifies a critical flaw: the conflation of royal power (*aracu*) with infallible justice (*niṭi*). The king fails in his primary *dharmic* duty as the guardian of justice (*kāppōṇ*), revealing the vulnerability of a system where law is an extension of a single mortal's will.
- The King as Symbolic Center: In the classical Indian and Tamil political imagination, the king is the axis of the moral and natural order. His righteousness (*aram*) ensures cosmic harmony, timely rains, and societal prosperity. His failure is therefore not merely a personal error but a cosmological derailment. The epic literalizes this concept: the king's unjust act directly causes the city's physical destruction. His "good left eye" (the eye of justice) twitches upon seeing Kaṇṇaki, signaling the imminent collapse of the very order he is sworn to uphold.

#### (2) Kaṇṇaki's Juridical Appeal and the Emergence of Cosmic Justice:

Following Kōvalaṅ's execution, Kaṇṇaki does not merely grieve; she transforms into a litigant, systematically appealing to a higher court. Her progression mirrors an ascending hierarchy of justice.

- The Appeal to Evidence and Protocol: Kaṇṇaki first engages the king on his own terms. She enters the court, presents the matching anklet, proves Kōvalaṅ's innocence, and exposes the fatal error. This is a powerful moment of forensic justice, where truth-telling and material evidence confront royal decree. In establishing the factual innocence of her husband, she invalidates the king's judgment legally and morally.

Tērā mannā ceppuvadu uḍaiyēn  
Eḷḷaru siṟappin imaiyavar viyappa  
Puḷḷuru puṅkaṅ firrtōṅ aṅṟiyum

Vāyir̥ kaṭaimaṇi naṭunā naṭuṅga  
Āviṇ̥ kaṭaimaṇi ugu nīr̥ neṅcu cuḍat tān taṇ  
Arumperar̥ putalvanai āḷiyin maḍittōṇ  
Perumpeyarp̥ pukār̥ eṇ̥ padiyē avvūr̥  
Ēsāc̥ sirappin̥ icai viḷaṅgu peruṅkuṭi  
Māsāttu vāṇikaṇ̥ makaṇai yāki  
Vāldal̥ vēṇḍi ūḷvīnai turappac  
Sūḷkaḷal̥ mannā niṇṇakarp̥ pukunḍīṅgu  
Eṅkāl̥ silambu pakarṭal̥ vēṇḍi niṇṇār̥  
Kolaikkaḷap̥ paṭṭa Kōvalaṇ̥ maṇaivi  
Kaṇṇaki eṇ̥bad̥ eṇ̥ peyarē eṇ̥ap

This passage is spoken by Kaṇṇaki, the heroic wife in Silappatikāram, as she addresses the Pandya king. She declares that she has come not in anger but in righteous speech, compelled by unbearable injustice. Even the gods marvel at her purity and moral power, as her suffering burns the heart like sacred fire. She introduces her lineage with dignity—born in renowned Puhār, into an illustrious merchant family, married to Kōvalan, and devoted to righteous living. Fate led her to abandon past karma and enter the king's city seeking justice.

Her sole purpose, she declares, is to prove the truth of her anklet (silambu), unjustly accused as stolen, which led to her husband's wrongful execution. With unwavering moral authority, Kaṇṇaki identifies herself by name and role—not merely as a grieving widow, but as a woman whose chastity and truth stand as an unassailable force of justice.

The passage embodies the Tamil ideal that moral truth, when spoken with purity and restraint, possesses power greater than kings, law, or weapons.

- Invocation of *Karpu* as Juridical Power: Kaṇṇaki's ultimate appeal, however, transcends empirical evidence. When the king, acknowledging his error, offers his kingdom in reparation, she refuses. Her power now derives not from reasoned argument but from the accumulated, invisible force of her unwavering chastity and fidelity (*karpu*). *Karpu* in the Tamil tradition is not passive virtue but an active, combustible moral energy (*tīyam*). By tearing off her breast and casting it at the city, she unleashes this energy as a form of performative justice. Her act is a primal, corporeal indictment that bypasses all human institutions. The ensuing conflagration of Madurai is the direct manifestation of this cosmic justice—a dharma that operates automatically to rectify a fundamental imbalance caused by *adharmā*.

### (3) Competing Moral Orders: Kinship, State, and Dharma:

The epic's structure brilliantly contrasts three frameworks for moral order:

- The Kinship-Based Order of Pukār: In the first book, set in the mercantile port city of Pukār, social order is maintained through familial duty, mercantile honor, and the subtle codes of *akam* (the interior world). Transgression (Kōvalaṇ's infidelity) leads to exile and penance, resolved within the sphere of personal relationships and social censure.
- The State-Based Order of Madurai: Madurai represents a bureaucratic, impersonal order where law is codified and enforced by the sovereign. Here, a personal identity is reduced to a suspect's profile, and justice is swift but fatally impersonal. This system proves incapable of discerning truth or accommodating nuance, crushing the individual in its machinery.
- The Transcendent Dharmic Order: Kaṇṇaki's journey from Pukār to Madurai and finally to deification in the Chera country charts the failure of both previous orders. The resolution is found not in a better human court, but in a cosmic realignment. Her apotheosis into the goddess Pattini in the Chera kingdom represents the establishment of a new moral order, one where justice is enshrined in divine, cultic worship, forever memorializing the fallibility of kings and the ultimate sovereignty of *dharma*.

### (4) The Epic as Legal and Social Commentary:

The *Silappatikāram* can be read as a sophisticated critique of its historical moment. Composed in a period of increasing state centralization and contact with pan-Indian legal ideologies (*dharmaśāstra*), the epic issues a powerful caution:

- A Warning to Kings: It insists that royal power is legitimate only when exercised with scrupulous fairness, deep inquiry (*cūṇai*), and humility before the law. The king is its servant, not its embodiment.
- Validation of the Marginalized Voice: The epic centers a woman and a merchant—figures often on the peripheries of political power—as the ultimate arbiters of justice. It asserts that moral authority can reside outside traditional structures of state and priesthood.
- The Inescapability of Dharma: Ultimately, the epic posits a universe governed by an ineluctable moral causality. Human law may be corrupted or foolish, but a higher, impersonal justice will inevitably manifest, often through the agency of those who embody virtue.

*Silappatikāram* reimagines justice as a cosmic force, revealed through catastrophe when human law collapses. Truth and virtue, embodied in suffering, reshape political and sacred order beyond legal codes.

## 7. KINGSHIP, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND POLITICAL ETHICS :

The Tamil epics *Silappatikāram* and *Maṇimēkalai* provide profound, contrasting examinations of kingship and political ethics in early Tamil society (c. 5th-6th centuries CE). They function not as royal panegyrics but as critical political literature, interrogating the moral foundations and limits of sovereign power [3-5].

*Silappatikāram* centers on the catastrophic failure of royal justice. King Neṭuñceliyan of Madurai, though introduced as learned and generally just, commits a fatal judicial error, condemning the merchant Kōvalaṅ to death based on circumstantial evidence and without due process. This episode is a meticulous case study in failed accountability. The king's swift, unquestioned verdict exposes the inherent danger of concentrating judicial and executive power in a single, fallible mortal. His failure is not merely administrative but cosmic; in the Tamil and pan-Indian political imagination, the king (*kō*) is the linchpin (*maṅṭalam*) connecting human order (*aṛam*) with natural order.

His *adharmic* act—the abandonment of patient inquiry (*cūṇai*)—directly triggers the annihilation of his city by the righteous fury of Kaṇṇaki. The epic thus posits a severe political ethic: royal authority is a sacred trusteeship contingent upon scrupulous justice. When a king violates this trust, his legitimacy and his very kingdom are forfeit. Kaṇṇaki's transformation into a goddess of chastity (*pattini*) thereafter establishes a new, extra-political source of moral authority that forever judges kingship.

*Maṇimēkalai*, a Buddhist epic, offers a more systemic critique. It shifts the focus from the punishment of a bad king to the advocacy of an ideal dharmic ruler. Through dialogues and sermons, it outlines a Buddhist theory of kingship where the monarch's primary duty is to foster *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) and create conditions conducive to moral and material welfare. The epic contrasts the *cakkavatti* (the righteous wheel-turning monarch) with the conventional conqueror. A key political argument is that social stability—freedom from famine, crime, and unrest—is a direct karmic consequence of royal virtue and compassionate governance. The text also implicitly critiques the very *raison d'être* of the heroic; martial king celebrated in Sangam poetry. By having its heroine, *Maṇimēkalai*, repeatedly refuse marriage to princes, the epic devalues dynastic politics and worldly power (*aracu*) in favor of spiritual authority (*dhamma*). Together, these epics establish a potent Tamil tradition of holding kingship accountable to transcendent ethical standards, blending indigenous concepts of *aṛam* with Buddhist and Jain philosophies of righteous rule.

### ***Maṇimēkalai* and the Articulation of Buddhist Social Philosophy:**

The *Maṇimēkalai*, the second of the twin Tamil epics and the sole extant Buddhist *mahākāvya* in the language, transcends its narrative function to serve as a sophisticated treatise on Buddhist social philosophy. Composed by Cīttalaic Cāttaṇār (c. 6th century CE) as a conscious sequel and counterpoint to the *Silappatikāram*, the epic redirects the earlier work's tragic exploration of worldly (*laukika*) justice towards a soteriological (*lokottara*) solution rooted in Buddhist ethics. Here it is argued that through the spiritual journey of its eponymous heroine—a courtesan destined for enlightenment—the *Maṇimēkalai* systematically critiques Brahmanical and materialist worldviews, propagates core Buddhist doctrines of conditionality and compassion, and envisions a social order radically restructured upon the principles of altruism, non-violence, and universal welfare.

### (1) Narrative as Philosophical Pedagogy:

Unlike the *Silappatikāram*'s human drama of injustice and divine retribution, *Maṇimēkalai* employs its plot as a vehicle for explicit doctrinal instruction. The narrative arc follows Princess Maṇimēkalai's awakening to the truths of suffering (*duḥkha*) and impermanence (*anicca*), her mastery of Buddhist philosophy and magical powers, and her ultimate dedication to alleviating the world's misery. Key episodes are structured as philosophical debates and sermons:

- The Critique of Rival Systems: The epic stages confrontations with adherents of Ājīvika fatalism, Jain logic, and orthodox Vedic ritualism. In each case, through dialectical reasoning, these systems are shown to be inadequate or erroneous. This narrative strategy performs a dual function: it establishes the superiority of the Buddhist path (*dharma*) and maps the intellectual-religious landscape of cosmopolitan South India, positioning Buddhism as the rational and compassionate alternative.
- The *Arāṅkam* and *Kāya-cāttira* Discourses: Central to the epic are extended didactic passages. In the *Arāṅkam* chapter, the sage Aravaṇa Aṭikal instructs Maṇimēkalai using the Buddha's "lion's roar," detailing the twelve-linked chain of Dependent Origination (*Paṭicca-samuppāda*). This is not abstract metaphysics but a practical teaching on the causal nature of suffering, intended to equip her—and the audience—with the analytical tools to dismantle attachment. The teachings on the *kāya-cāttira* ("body-essence") further deconstruct the notion of a permanent self (*ātman*), a cornerstone of its philosophical argument.

### (2) The Social Imperative of *Karuṇā* (Compassion):

While philosophy provides the analytical framework, compassion (*karuṇā*) is the epic's driving social ethic. Maṇimēkalai's progression is marked by her evolving capacity for altruistic action, which the text presents as the natural consequence of correct understanding.

- From Aesthetics to Ethics: Maṇimēkalai begins as a paragon of artistic and sensual beauty, a courtesan in the making. Her transformation involves redirecting this power from eliciting desire (*kāma*) towards relieving suffering. Her possession of the *amṛta* bowl (*akaya pattra*), which provides unlimited food to the hungry, is the perfect symbol of this shift. It represents the application of wisdom as boundless, material compassion. Feeding the poor is not charity in a patronizing sense but the logical, practical expression of understanding universal interdependence and the primacy of alleviating *duḥkha*.
- Compassion as Social Leveling: The epic repeatedly depicts Maṇimēkalai ministering to all without distinction: the starving outcaste (*pulaiyaṅ*), the grieving mother, the condemned criminal. This radical, unconditional care actively dismantles social hierarchies based on caste (*jāti*) and purity. Buddhist compassion, as modeled here, creates a counter-community bound not by birth or ritual status, but by shared vulnerability and the mutual project of ending suffering.

### (3) The Buddhist Critique of Kingship and Violence:

The *Maṇimēkalai* offers a pointed revision of the *Silappatikāram*'s engagement with political authority. While the earlier epic culminates in the destruction of a unjust city and the deification of its avenger, *Maṇimēkalai* advocates for a non-violent, dharmic statecraft.

- The Renouncer and the King: Maṇimēkalai consistently rejects marriage and queenship, symbolically refusing to participate in the cyclical, often violent, politics of the patriarchal state. Her path of renunciation (*pravrajyā*) stands as a silent critique of worldly power (*rājya*). Yet she actively counsels rulers. Her teachings to various kings emphasize *ahiṃsā* (non-violence), righteous rule based on the *dhamma*, and the king's duty as a moral exemplar and provider, not merely a punisher.
- Karma as Social Theory: The epic's detailed exposition of karma is not merely about individual rebirth. It functions as a theory of social causality. Famine, war, and injustice are portrayed as collective karmic fruits. This provides a moral framework for social critique: a suffering populace reflects the unrighteous actions of its leaders and its own past deeds. The solution, therefore, must be collective moral rectification, beginning with the sovereign's adherence to the *dhamma*.

## 8. ENVISIONING A UTOPIAN SOCIAL ORDER: THE MAṆIPALLAVAM OF KĀŅCĪ :

The epic's philosophical and ethical teachings culminate in a vision of an ideal society. In the mythical land of Kāñcī on the isle of Maṇipallavam, Maṇimēkalai encounters a utopian community that embodies Buddhist social ideals [5].

- A Society Structured by Dharma: This community is free from hunger, theft, and violence. Its harmony is not enforced by law but emerges spontaneously from the inhabitants' collective observance of Buddhist precepts. It represents a social nirvana, a this-worldly approximation of a society liberated from the roots of conflict: greed, hatred, and delusion.
- The *Cakkaravāḷak-koṭṭam* and Universal Responsibility: The central institution of this utopia is the *Cakkaravāḷak-koṭṭam* ("Universal Public Hall"), a charitable feeding house and center for dharma teaching. This institution symbolizes the epic's core social philosophy: the duty of the spiritually advanced is to create material and educational infrastructures for universal welfare. It is a blueprint for a compassionate state, where resources are inexhaustible (thanks to the *amṛta* bowl) and dedicated to the upliftment of all.

### From Personal Liberation to Social Transformation:

The *Maṇimēkalai* does not posit a mere escape from society into individual nirvana. It articulates a profound Buddhist social gospel in which personal enlightenment is inextricably linked to active, compassionate engagement with the world. Through its heroine, the epic maps a path from the sensual confines of the *samsāric* city to the liberating wisdom of the dharma, and finally back to the suffering world, armed with the tools to transform it. It proposes that true justice is not retributive (as in *Silappatikāram*) but restorative and preventative, rooted in the elimination of suffering's causes through wisdom, moral conduct, and boundless compassion. In doing so, the *Maṇimēkalai* stands as one of the earliest and most comprehensive literary attempts to envision a entire social order—its politics, economics, and ethics—re-founded upon the radical, egalitarian principles of early Buddhism. It remains a monumental testament to the Tamil Buddhist imagination, where philosophy finds its ultimate expression in the selfless feeding of the hungry and the creation of a society worthy of the enlightened mind [4].

### Religion, Pluralism, and Ethical Discourse:

The Tamil epics are unique windows into the vibrant religious pluralism and competitive ethical discourse of early historical South India. They depict a society in which Vedic Brahmanism, Jain asceticism, Buddhist monasticism, and indigenous Tamil devotional cults coexisted and contended in the public square.

*Silappatikāram*, though traditionally attributed to a Jain author, Iḷaṅkōvaṭikaḷ, performs a remarkable act of syncretic representation. The epic respectfully depicts diverse religious practices: Brahmin priests performing Vedic rituals in Pukār, Jain ascetics (*maṇṇars*) imparting wisdom in Maturai, and the worship of the Tamil deity Korravai (Durga). This pluralism serves a narrative purpose, reflecting the cosmopolitan reality of mercantile cities and courts. However, its ultimate ethical framework is a universalized, humanistic dharma. The climax is not a sectarian victory but the apotheosis of Kaṇṇaki's *karpu* (chastity)—a Tamil moral virtue that transcends specific religious dogmas to become a universal, transformative force. The epic suggests that foundational ethical principles (truth, justice, fidelity) underpin and unify the diverse religious landscape.

Maṇimēkalai, in contrast, is an unapologetic work of Buddhist didacticism and polemic. It actively engages in theological debate to establish the superiority of the Buddha's path. Key chapters are structured as philosophical disputations where Buddhist logicians defeat proponents of Ājīvika fatalism, Jain atomism, and Vedic ritualism. The epic systematically critiques the logic of sacrifice (*yajña*), the concept of a permanent soul (*ātman*), and the efficacy of deterministic worldviews. Its primary ethical contribution is the emphatic placement of *karuṇā* (compassion) and *praññā* (wisdom) as the highest social virtues. The bodhisattva ideal embodied by Maṇimēkalai—who postpones her own nirvana to relieve worldly suffering—presents a radical social ethic of active, engaged altruism. This stands in deliberate contrast to both the heroic ethics of the *Silappatikāram* and the renunciatory withdrawal of some ascetic traditions. Thus, while *Silappatikāram* maps the pluralistic field, Maṇimēkalai plunges into its debates, using the literary form to argue for a specific, compassion-driven ethical system that seeks to reorganize social priorities around the alleviation of universal suffering (*duḥkha*).

## 9. URBAN LIFE, TRADE, AND CIVIC INSTITUTIONS IN EARLY TAMIL SOCIETY :

The Tamil epics, particularly the *Silappatikāram*, provide an unparalleled literary portrait of urban life, economic structures, and nascent civic institutions in the early historical Tamil kingdoms. They move beyond the pastoral and martial landscapes of Sangam poetry to celebrate and critique the bustling, complex world of the city (nakaram) [3-5].

The epic's first book is a lavish ethnographic tableau of Pukār (Kāvērippattinam), the Chola port capital. It describes a meticulously zoned city where international merchants (ceṭṭis), artisans, fishermen, and aristocrats occupy distinct quarters. The vibrant harbour, filled with Yavana (Roman/Greek) and other foreign ships, highlights Tamilakam's integration into Indian Ocean trade networks. This mercantile prosperity forms a crucial backdrop. The protagonist, Kōvalaṅ, is not a warrior or poet but a wealthy merchant whose status derives from trade, not land or battle. His tragic fate in Maturai underscores the vulnerability of this mobile, capital-dependent class when faced with a rigid, king-centric judicial system. The epic also details civic life: festivals, public halls (maṅṭapams), and theatres where dancers like Mātavi perform. These spaces represent a nascent public sphere where social reputation, artistic merit, and communal identity are forged outside the direct purview of the palace.

Maṅimēkalai further explores urban institutions through a Buddhist ethical lens. Its most significant contribution is the vision of the Cakkaravālak-koṭṭam (Universal Public Hall) in the utopian city of Kāñcī. This is portrayed as a quintessential civic institution—a charitable feeding house, a shelter for the destitute, and a center for dharma instruction. It embodies a Buddhist ideal of social infrastructure: a permanent, materially sustainable institution dedicated to universal welfare (sarva-loka-hita), funded by righteous rulers and managed by the morally upright. This contrasts with the episodic charity of kings and the kinship-bound support systems of traditional society. Furthermore, the epic's plot navigates various urban spaces—courtesans' quarters, temples, prisons, and parks—each serving as a stage for ethical dilemmas and teachings about karma and compassion. Together, the epics document the transition from a clan-based society to an urbanized, mercantile civilization. They reveal a world where wealth, profession, and ethical conduct in the civic arena are becoming as central to identity as lineage, and where the city itself emerges as both a site of profound danger and a potential arena for ethical perfection and social transformation.

## 10. CONCLUSION:

*Silappatikāram* and *Maṅimēkalai* are some of the best early Tamil civilizational texts and provide information that is many centuries old and is still relevant regarding the fields of law, justice, religion, and urban civilization. Both narratives, in the form of epic poetry, describe a societal order in which ethical power and justice are the controlling forces of a government. The downfall of Madurai in *Silappatikāram* is presented as a negative result of a lack of justice, while *Maṅimēkalai* calls for a reform based on the ethics of compassion and self-restraint.

There is in both epics a positive legal consciousness that suggests the ideal of the ruler being answerable to the law and the order of society being the result of law and justice rather than the law and violence. The choice of a city as a setting for the stories suggests the significance of the early Tamil civilizational society's advanced socio-economic and cultural conditions. Religion as a social and political ideology is presented as a positive ethical framework rather than as a set of dogmas.

Significantly, the dialogic relation between the two epics illustrates an evolving moral imagination—from retributive justice to an ethics of compassion. Such moral progress is indicative of the complexity and flexibility of political thinking in Tamil. Even today, the two epics remain pertinent to questions of the ethics of governance, social justice and pluralism. *Silappatikāram* and *Maṅimēkalai* demonstrate the value of literature as a means of political introspection and cultural self-awareness.

The *Silappatikāram* and *Maṅimēkalai* transcend literary classification, functioning as composite cultural constitutions of early Tamil society. Together they encode jurisprudential anxieties, urban moral economies, sectarian negotiation, and the gendered dimensions of justice within a single narrative continuum. Their enduring significance lies precisely in this multivalence — simultaneously epic, ethical treatise, and sociological document — rendering them irreplaceable primary sources for reconstructing the civilisational complexity of early South India.

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