The Renunciation in Maṇimēkalai: A Consideration of turavu

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1. Introduction

In Maṇi, the heroine Maṇimēkalai is described wearing jewels with ornaments and flowers on her beautiful long hair throughout much of the story, whereas in some parts, she appears to be a nun. Among scholars, therefore, opinions vary as to the renunciation of Maṇimēkalai. Some say that she is a nun from the beginning of the story, while others maintain that she became a nun at the end of the story. One of the terms that is associated with the debate on the renunciation of Maṇimēkalai is turavu. Turavu is a noun which derives from the verb tura. The term turavu is defined as "to leave, relinquish, forsake, renounce the worldly pleasures." The word turavu in Maṇi is interpreted to mean becoming a priest or a nun, and those researches have been made on the basis of this interpretation. The meanings of several terms in Maṇi are often ambiguous, for Maṇi is the only Tamil Buddhist epic that is preserved in its entirety, and in addition, no traditional commentary is attached to it. This fact makes it difficult to clearly define the meanings of terms in Maṇi. This paper, therefore, focuses on the question of how to define turavu in Maṇi by investigating the examples of turavu in the works which are prior to Maṇi and Cīf.

2. Examples of turavu

(a) Sangam literature: In Sangam literature, turavu and its verbal form tura mostly mean to leave or forsake [someone/something]. Only one example in Purāṇānūru 363 means to renounce (the world). But there is no concrete evidence to interpret this turavu as becoming a priest or a nun.

(b) Didactic works: Chapter 35 of Kural and Chapter 6 of Nāl are titled Turavu. From this it is assumed that at the time these didactic works were written, the word turavu already had some clear sense and so became a title of these works.
The verses of Kural are generally so brief that it is difficult to limit tugavu to one meaning. From the repeated admonition to abandon worldly attachment and the content of Kural 344, 345, tugavu should mean to abandon attachment or to leave worldly pleasures. On the other hand, tugavu in Nal may mean to renounce the world, for Nal 54 refers to quitting the household paths. But the contents of the verses other than this verse are so varied that this chapter does not refer only renouncing the world. And in either case, it must be noted that these verses do not indicate that the word tugavu means abandoning attachment or leaving worldly pleasures in order to become a priest or a nun.

(c) Mani: In a scene, Manimekalai's mother tells the event by which she embraced Buddhism (Mani. 2:41-69). By the word turanten which she uttered there, it is generally thought that she became a nun. But on that occasion, she just received the five silas, and there is no clear description to conclude that she became a nun. In other scenes, it is not clear that she is a nun, either. On the basis of the interpretation that we have noted, it is probable that she abandoned worldly attachment or pleasures. In Mani there are also some branch stories where several characters tell the events which caused them to embrace Buddhism. Based on these stories, some researchers concluded that they were priests or nuns. In fact, however, these stories lack concrete expressions regarding as to they were priests or nuns, and it is doubtful that they were so. When we judge the meaning of tugavu in Mani from its context, even if it means to renounce the world, it would be difficult to interpret it as becoming a nun.

(d) Cil: Contrary to examples that we have seen above, some of tugavu in Cil contain the sense of becoming a priest or a nun. There is an expression "pluck her hair with the garland and jewels" in the description of tugavu related to Manimekalai (Cil. 1-28). So this tugavu does mean to become a nun. By the expression "to pluck the hair," it is clear that this tugavu strongly manifests the character of Jainism. Furthermore, from the description of the scene in which Manimekalai's grandfather entered a temple, we can judge another derivative of tugra to mean to become a priest. Tugavu in Cil can be interpreted as becoming a priest or a nun. We cannot, however, apply this interpretation in Cil to tugavu in Mani, for the chronological order of the composition between Cil and Mani has yet to be
decided. Because the descriptions of Manimekalai in the two epics do not coincide, even if Cil. was written earlier than Mani., the probability that Mani. might have been composed by borrowing only the outline from Cil. still remains. Therefore, another probability that the meaning of turavu in the two epics may differ from each other should be taken into consideration.

3. Conclusion

Although turavu in Mani. has so far been limited to the sense of becoming a nun, there is no plain evidence in the works which are prior to Mani. to assume that turavu in Mani. means to become a nun. The examples in Cil. only make it possible to interpret it in such a sense. However, on the grounds that the chronological order between the two epics or the mutual influence are not clear, we should avoid applying the interpretation in Cil. to Mani. Consequently, we should interpret it in a broader sense such as "to leave worldly pleasures, to abandon attachment and to renounce the world."

1) Mani. is a Tamil Buddhist epic, written by Cattanār in about 6 C.
2) It is depicted that Manimekalai took the form of nun. (Mani. 15)
4) Dravidian Etymological Dictionary (2nd ed.) 3365.
5) Cil. was composed by Ilango Atikal, Jain. In their characters and the story lines, Cil. and Mani. are related to each other and are, therefore, called twin epic.
6) Ancient Tamil poetic works which were written mainly from 1 A. D. to 3 A. D., named "Sangam literature" after a literary school of that period.
7) One of Sangam literature, Ettuttokai. It contains 400 heroic poems.
8) This is a didactic work from about 6 C. written by Tiruvaḷḷuvar, Jain.
9) This is a didactic work from about 8 C. Although the dating of Mani. has not been settled yet, it is prior to that of Nāl. whose upper limit is 680 A. D.
10) kalai. Although this part has been translated "to cut the hair," kalai means to pluck, not to cut.

<abbreviation> Cil.: Cilappatikāram, Kuṟaḷ.: Tirukkuṟaḷ, Nāl.: Nāḷaiṭiyār, Mani.: Manimekalai

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