

MISCELLANY

Manimekalai: The ancient Buddhist Tamil epic, its relevance to psychiatry

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ABSTRACT

This article refers to materials of psychiatric interest found in the *Manimekalai* written by the 2nd Century CE Buddhist poet Sathanar. From the early description of a wandering psychotic in the streets of Pukar, the ancient maritime capital of the Cholas it is opined that this description fits that of present-day schizophrenia. A drunkard making fun of a Jain monk and a cross-dressed individual are also found in the same streets. *Manimekalai*'s request to the Chola king to convert the prison to a place of piety with Buddhist monks is mentioned. Lord Buddha's teachings on the compassionate way of life are presented.

Key words: Buddhism, history, psychiatry, schizophrenia

INTRODUCTION

There are numerous notions relating to mental illness and mental health in *Manimekalai*, the Tamil Buddhist epic of the post-*Sangam* era of Tamil literature. This period is renowned for the publication of the eight anthologies and 10 lyrics and also the 18 didactical works including *Thirukkural*. All these works are totally secular with few references to the pre-Aryan Gods of Lord Shiva, Murugan, and Kortravai. The Buddhist poet Sathanar's epic *Manimekalai* in the late 2nd century C.E. or the early third century broke new grounds by describing the teachings of Lord Buddha for the 1st time in Tamil. It is remarkable that he gathered this information in Pali language, the language in which Lord Buddha himself preached to the common people in their mother tongue. He has described the prevailing five religions in Tamil land along with the logic and the practice of the Buddha's faith in the various cantons of the poem; a few centuries before the Chinese travelers Fa Hien and Huang Tsang. In spite of his realistic allusions to the Vedic religion, Sathanar

disapproves the caste system and rituals like cow sacrifice. This could be found in the personage of Aaputhiran.

A very apt description of a schizophrenia subject is to be found when *Manimekalai* goes to the *Uvavanam* (Flower garden) along with her companion Sudhamathi to collect flowers for stringing a garland. This incident occurs in one of the streets of the Chola capital city of Pukar.^[1] This maritime capital was an important center where many *Vihars* were founded by Mahendhir, Emperor Ashoka's close relative. In this *Uvavanam*, Lord Buddha's sacred feet (*peedigai*) were worshiped in a crystal palace.

Manimekalai meets a drunkard who makes the following jibe at a Jain monk:

"Welcome saint. I prostrate before thy flowery feet!
Oh! Our savior hear my appeals!
Your life entering your dirty body,
Will grieve like those shut up in unventilated dungeon!
Our leader has shown this that gives by itself
Bliss during this birth! And deliverance in the coming birth!

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The sweet toddy matured in the palm of lush green branches!!
Is there killing in this? Oh! Saint of true austerity!
Consume it and get convinced!

Manimekalai encounters a mad man on her way to the flower garden:

Shoulders adorned with garland of pink “*alari*,”
Neck adorned with a garland of bad odoured “*erukkam*” flower,
Twigs of the mighty tree has he gathered to hold together
Tatters on his person, his entire body is smeared with white paste of ash
And sandal,
Talks he with others in a senseless blabber,
He cries, he falls, he blurts, he shouts,
He worships, he bellows, he gets up. He twists, he circles,
He turns, he moves to a corner and lies down, he shouts,
And picks up quarrel with his shadow,
And verily behind the mad young man, who is hapless and functionless,
The people stand around and gape at his tragedy.

Then, a hermaphrodite’s dance (*paedi koothu*) is watched by other interested spectators:

The dancer had a curly beard and dark hair!
Coral red mouth and pearl-white teeth!
Bright wide eyes with red lines!
And wearing garland made of white conch shell,
Dark low eye brows and crescent moon forehead
Fair hand like *kantal* and upright tender breasts!
Wide *alkul* and fair lean hip!
Wearing a skirt! Drawings on his shoulders
He was enacting a *kuttu*
Performed by Kaman son of him who measured the earth,
In the street of *Conakar* of *Vanan-Asura* king.

We will pay special attention to the description of the vagrant lunatic. Could this description be considered compatible with that of a subject with schizophrenia? The answer is a difficult one, with no clear consensus among psychiatrists.

I would argue that the description fits with that given in the DSM V for schizophrenia:

- Delusions
- Hallucinations
- Disorganized speech
- Grossly disorganized or catatonic behavior
- Negative symptoms (i.e., diminished emotional expression or avolition).

No. (3) is definitely present and probably nos. (1) and (2) also.

Dr. Femi Oyeboode, Professor of Psychiatry and Consultant Psychiatrist at the National Centre for Mental Health at Birmingham, UK – an authority on literature and psychiatry, in a personal communication was kind enough to give his views on this:

- “I think we must assume that this a description of psychosis
- There is no straightforward description of mood or affect although some commentators might argue that “twisting,” “circling,” “turning,” and “crying” are examples of joyous and/or sad behavior. My own view is that the actual words in Tamil may help to determine whether these are simply unusual behaviors with a motor component and that “crying” is merely a term for shouting out
- The rest of the description in my view is characteristic of vagrant psychotics as can still be seen in Africa and I am sure in parts of Asia too. In contemporary terminology, I think untreated hebephrenic schizophrenia is the most appropriate diagnosis.”

Professor Emeritus N.N. Wig of the Postgraduate Institute of Medical Sciences, Chandigarh, India, had this to say:

“In the current diagnostic systems, it will probably be considered a psychotic illness. In my view, it may not be very proper to try to give a more precise contemporary label with the available information.”

Professor Sarada Menon of the Madras Medical College said in her opinion: “The subject i.e. the madman in Manimekalai could be diagnosed as a chronic untreated psychotic with comorbid illness.”

From the information provided, it could be assumed that this description of schizophrenia as conceived today is one of the earliest if not the earliest in the history of world psychiatry.

It is very difficult to assume whether schizophrenia, as it is conceived today as a mental illness, existed in various ancient cultures. We are not quite sure whether the disorder existed in the past. Historians are divided on the subject. They feel that the disorder is of recent origin,^[2] but Lewis affirms that the disorder is an ancient one.^[3] According to Freedman, Kaplan, and Sadock’s *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry* (1976) “as early as 1400 B.C., a Hindu fragment from the Ayurveda, a condition is brought on by devils in which the afflicted is gluttonous, filthy, walks about naked, has lost his memory, and moves about in an uneasy manner.”^[4] Youseff and Youseff allude to the existence of schizophrenia

in the medieval Islamic culture that dates back to the 6th–7th century A.D.^[5] The masterly descriptions of Tom O' Bedlam by Shakespeare in 16th century refer to many of the homeless schizophrenia patients belonging to the Bedlam period of 13th century Britain. Most of their appearance, behavior, and thinking have been depicted in his "*King Lear*" as Tom O' Bedlam.^[6]

I heard myself proclaimed
And by the happy hallow of a tree
Escaped the hunt. No port is free, no place
That guard and most unusual vigilance
Does not attend my making. While I may' scape.
Act 2, Scene 3, Lines 1–12

Hearing imaginary voices is another hallmark of serious mental illness, well known to the laity:

EDGAR: The foul fiend haunts poor Tom in the voice of
a nightingale
Hopdance cries in Tom's belly for two white herring
Croak not black angel; I have no food for thee.
Act 3, Scene 6, Lines 32–35

The descriptions of the behavior and appearance of the drunkard, the madman, and the hermaphrodite appeal to the psychiatrists of today; and the scenarios are not very different from that of the mentally ill in the metropolitan cities of today.

PRISON REFORM BY MANIMEKALAI

The situations prevailing in the prisons of the Chola days have not escaped the scrutiny of the compassionate youthful Buddhist protagonist. Another remarkable achievement by Manimekalai is the conversion of the prison at Pukar to a place of piety. She makes a request in this regard to the Chola King Mavan Killi:

Asked the King
"How shall we then help thee in this regard?"

The tender girl replied
"Demolish the jail and erect there instead
A house of charity. Long live thou!"

The king released the prisoners and there, as Manimekalai desired, to enable them of great penance for higher achievements, he built an enclave for charities with the royal levy.

THE WAY OF LIFE

Buddhism is more of an ethical system enjoining practical rules of morality than a system of religion. The Buddha did not profess to expound the relation of God to man nor did he discuss questions concerning the nature of God or soul. He wanted his disciples to aim at purity in thought, word, and deed. He laid special stress on the virtues of truthfulness, reverence, and respect for animal life.^[7,8]

Sathanar, through the mouth of Aravana Adigal, espouses the esoteric logic in Canto 29 and ethics of life in Canto 30 when he initiates Manimekalai in the ways of Buddhism, and she starts ascetic life.

Mathew Arnold is rather narrow when he talks of "the light of Asia"; it should have been "the light of the World."

POST SCRIPT

It is exactly 60 years since Professor MV Govindaswamy and Professor SK Ramachandra Rao of the National Institute of Mental Health, Bangalore, India, innovatively introduced the study of Indian philosophy including Buddhism to the postgraduate curriculum of psychiatry in India. It is only proper that we should remember their services to the Indian psychiatry in particular and World psychiatry at large.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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