

KĀMAṆ IN TAMIL CLASSICAL POETRY

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Kāmaṇ is the Tamil god of love, and as in the case of Greek Eros and Roman Cupid, his name means 'desire', 'sensuous passion' or 'sexual desire' or 'lust'. Even though love and heoisim have been the main themes of Cankam poetry, which is the earliest extant literature in Tamil, and love or *akam* poems form the major part of this literature,¹ Kāmaṇ is not mentioned in the earliest Cankam works. But the word *kāmam* is used extensively to denote the love between a man and a woman and is found in various terms and expressions in love poetry as for example in *kāmakkiḷatti* (a mistress of desire), *kāmañ cālā ilamaiyōl* (a girl too young to know of love) and *kāmatumiku tīram* (excessive love). A *Kuruntokai* poem (136) describes love or *kāmam* as something inherent in a person but manifests itself at the sight of the right person of the opposite sex. The poet compares this to the inherent rut (*matam*) of the elephant. It is usually under control and the elephant gets out of hand only when it chews the liquorice leaves of a particular plant (*kuḷaku*). Some poems mention love as an affliction or illness (*kāmanōy*, *aṇaṅku*, or *piṇi*)² cause by the hero (*talaivaṇ*) or the heroine (*talaivi*), depending on who the affected person is. But the Cankam poems do not seem to personify this affliction or its cause as a god. The nearest to this personification is *aṇaṅku* with its verbal form *aṇaṅkutaḷ*, meaning 'to afflict', used more in the sense of being stricken with love. There are a number of poems that refer to the heroine who has caused love in the heart of the hero or has afflicted him with love

¹The earliest extant literature in Tamil is generally known as Tamil Classical literature. It is also known as Caṅkam literature or poetry composed during the Caṅkam period. The date of composition for this literature, as in the case of most of the ancient literature of India, is a matter of controversy. But it is generally accepted to be between 3rd century B.C. and 2nd century A.D. This literature consists of eight anthologies of lyrics called the *Eṭṭuttokai*, ten idylls called the *Pattuppāṭṭu* and a book of grammar and conventions known as the *Tolkāppiyam*. Of these, the *Tolkāppiyam* is believed to be the earliest and is placed at 300 B.C. The *Eṭṭuttokai* consists of the *Akanāṇṇūru*, the *Aiṅkuṟuṇṇūru*, the *Kuruntokai*, the *Narriṇai*, the *Kalittokai*, the *Paripāṭal*, the *Paṭṭirruppatu* and the *Puṟaṇāṇṇūru*. The first six of these anthologies deal with the emotion of love (*akam*) and the last two deal with all other aspects of life (*puṟam*). Of the six anthologies of lyrics on *akam*, the *Kalittokai* and the *Paripāṭal* are considered to be compositions of a slightly later date than the other anthologies, though within the Caṅkam period. This opinion is based on the difference in language and the changes found in the society depicted in these poems. In spite of these subtle differences, the literary conventions followed are the same for all anthologies that deal with love. These two texts are, therefore, often said to be later Caṅkam works. The *Pattuppāṭṭu* contains ten long poems. They are the *Tirumurukārruppaṭai*, the *Porunarārruppaṭai*, the *Ċirupāṇārruppaṭai*, the *Perumpāṇārruppaṭai*, the *Mullaippāṭṭu*, the *Maturaikkāñci*, the *Neṟunalvāṭai*, the *Kuṟiṅcippāṭṭu*, the *Paṭṭinarpāṭai*, and the *Malaipaṭukāṭam*. These poems are also generally considered to be compositions of a later date. A very noticeable feature, that the *Pattuppāṭṭu*, the *Kalittokai* and the *Paripāṭal* share, is their length. They are much longer than the poems in the other anthologies and seem to lead naturally to the much longer epics.

²*Kuruntokai* 5, 136, 204; *Akanāṇṇūru* 52 etc.

as an *anañku* (*aṇañku cāl arivai*).³ The hero, too, is said to afflict the heroine.⁴ Quite often, a particular part of the body is said to cause this suffering. For example, the lovely breasts of the heroine⁵ or the broad chest of the hero⁶ are mentioned, perhaps because these parts of the body are recognised as being symbolic of the femininity or masculinity of the heroine or hero concerned. The concept of a love god or *Kāmaṇ* causing love or affliction in the men and women whom he attacks with his arrows is met with for the first time in the *Paripāṭal* and the *Kalittokai*.

The comparison of handsome men to *Māraṇ* (another name for *Kāmaṇ*) suggests that the god of love was also a god of beauty.⁷ Though no description is available in these texts, it may be believed that there was a particular form or a differentiating symbol, like *Murukaṇ*'s spear or *Viṣṇu*'s disc, by which he was recognised, for the *Paripāṭal* mentions, that the people could look at the paintings at Tirupparankunram and say, "This is *Kāmaṇ* and this is (his wife) *Rati*."⁸ All other references to him in this text deal with his arrows which are made of fragrant flowers. Hence he is known as "the one with arrows of scented flowers."⁹ The beauty of the women bathing in the river *Vaiyai* is described as causing pangs of love in the hearts of the youths and the poet makes the youths exclaim to one another,

Look at this maiden!
She is the deity
who afflicts those who behold her.
Look at her eyes!
They are *Kāmaṇ*'s armoury
and his weapon (arrow).¹⁰

Another poem not only mentions what this weapon is but also declares that,

Their eyes resemble
the five arrows of revered *Kāmaṇ*.
Their eyes, whose fragrance attracts bees,
have been sharpened
on the rasp (to make them deadlier).¹¹

Here, the tenderness of the eyes belies the ability to hurt mortally like sharpened arrows. One of the *Paripāṭal* poems on *Murukaṇ* describes the art gallery at Tirupparankunram as a fort

³ *Akaṇāṇṇūru* 181:25 also see *Kuṇṭokai* 119, *Naṇṇinai* 155, *Aiṅkuṇṇūru* 256, 259 etc.

⁴ *Kuṇṭokai* 362; *Akaṇāṇṇūru* 22:2-3 etc.

⁵ *Akaṇāṇṇūru* 161:11-13; 177:19.

⁶ *Ibid.* 22:2-3; *Kuṇṭokai* 362.

⁷ *Paripāṭal* 8:119.

⁸ *ibid.* 19:48.

⁹ *ibid.* 22:26.

¹⁰ *ibid.* 11:122-123.

¹¹ *ibid.* 10:97-99.

where archery (literally, the aiming of Kāmaṇ's arrows) is practised.¹² Apart from such general references to the arrows of the love-god, no details are found in the Caṅkam poems as to the exact nature of the arrows.

The *Kalittokai*, which also contains references to this deity and his arrows, furnishes us with further details. The arrows of Kāmaṇ cause the pangs of love in individuals. So, a young maiden who is overcome with love and hurt by the indifference of her lover asks,

Kāma! Are your arrows impartial
to all
in causing one's heart
to be consumed
with love (for one who is indifferent)?

In her desolation and anger, she wishes to hurt her lover as much as he has hurt her. To do so, she needs the arrows of Kāmaṇ that would pierce her lover's heart with love and longing. So she adds,

I shall,
holding Kāmaṇ's feet
beg for his arrows,
so that
he (her lover) shall come
riding the palmyra horse.¹³

In this text, for the first time in Tamil literature, we find mention of certain other details. Kāmaṇ is regarded as "the son of the Tall One (Tirumāl)"¹⁴ and a flag with a fish emblem is attributed to him.¹⁵ Though fish is said to be his emblem, some poems also mention the shark and so he is referred to as "the shark-bannered" (*curāk kotiyōn*).¹⁶ One of the poems contains an interesting incident woven round a ring with a shark engraved on it. A toddler, forgetting to suckle, ran out of the house. There, one of the harlots who was associated with his father, saw the boy and out of affection for him, adorned him with various ornaments. The mother, hearing this, chided the child for accepting those jewels as gifts and out of curiosity, set out to examine each one of them.

¹²*ibid.* 18:28-29.

¹³*Kalittokai* 147:46-47, 59-60. A palmyra horse is one made of the thorny stems of the palmyra palm. A youth afflicted by love, who finds no response in the maiden of his choice, is said to mount this, holding a picture or painting of the woman he loves. This is called *maṭal ērutal* and considered to be beyond the bounds of propriety.

¹⁴*Kalittokai* 140:8.

¹⁵*ibid.* 26:3.

¹⁶*ibid.* 147:42.

Amidst them she touched the ring
engraved with the male shark
and fitting his fragrant, petal-soft rosy fingers.
She said,
'I read this message.
She has done this (i.e. given the ring)
to show that,
stamping the emblem of *Kāmaṇ*
on his father's chest,
the boastful harlot
hopes to enslave him.¹⁷

In this poem, the shark is treated as a popularly known symbol of the god of love and therefore used as a literary device to convey a particular message.

The bow of *Kāmaṇ* is also frequently mentioned in the *Kalittokai*. For example, "one who has a bow" (*villavaṇ*)¹⁸ and the "master of the bow in his hand"¹⁹ are names that refer to his archery. Though it goes without saying that a god who strikes with his arrows, even if they are made of flowers, would certainly have a bow, his bow is not mentioned in the *Paripāṭal*. But this god who is depicted as causing others to suffer because of love is also said to be above this suffering and is treated as a symbol of self-control. A heroine, describing her husband says,

The lord of my shoulders is able
to remove the stems of the *netyal* flowers
(to weave a soft garland),
to sketch the sugar-cane on my upper arms,
to paint the *toyyil* on my youthful breasts.
He is also self-controlled
like the god holding a bow.²⁰

According to Tamil literary convention, offering soft garlands and painting designs of creepers and the sugar cane on her shoulders and breast, usually with the cool sandal paste, are part of love-making and the *talaivi* refers to his staying away from her for so long during their separation which needs self-control. This idea of *Kāmaṇ*'s self-control has been cleverly used by poets to describe the beauty of women. A heroine is said to be so beautiful that even *Kāmaṇ* would lose his composure and drop his weapons.²¹ In another *Kalittokai* poem, the hero who thinks that his lady-love is a great beauty, says

¹⁷*ibid.* 84:22-27.

¹⁸*ibid.* 35:15.

¹⁹*ibid.* 143:34-35.

²⁰*ibid.* 143:31-35.

²¹*ibid.* 108:4.

Mark this!
Were she to enter the temple of Kāmaṇ
with an offering of milk,
the god,
charmed by her beauty,
would let his weapons slip.²²

Perhaps it is because of such effect that a beautiful woman is believed to have on men that women are said to form Kāmaṇ's army (*paṭai*)²³

The *Kalittokai* also mentions a festival of Kāmaṇ. This seems to have been held in spring and mentioned in the *pālai* poems of this collection.²⁴ The time of year considered most suitable for *pālai* and its emotion, *pirivu* or agony during separation, is *vēṇil* (April — July). This is the season of heat when vegetation dries up and the rivers shrink into thin streams. Usually this seasonal heat, together with the dryness of the arid tracts, is said to correspond with the heat of separation that affects the separated lovers. In the *Kalittokai*, the months of April and May are described as beautiful and therefore most conducive to love. *Vēṇil* is now referred to as *iḷavēṇil*, to differentiate it from the latter part of the season now known as *mutuvēṇil*, and is treated as being synonymous with *vasanta* (spring) of the Sanskrit *kāvya*s. Some Caṅkam poems do refer to the beginning of the dry season as the time of fresh joys for those who are not separated²⁵ and the *Aiṅkuruṇūru* has a decade named *Ilavēṇiṟ Pattu*. But these poems contain no reference to Kāmaṇ who has come into prominence in the *Kalittokai* and the *Paripāṭal*. When a heroine in the *Kalittokai* is inconsolate because spring has come causing the fresh shoots and flowers to appear on the trees, her companion comforts her, saying,

My friend!
Do not suffer with an afflicted heart.
Your lover, thinking,
'In her loneliness without me,
in the season that aggravates it,
she would suffer
during the festival of Kāmaṇ,'
will come in haste
riding fast the safe, firm chariot,
to be with you.²⁶

²²*ibid.* 109:19-20.

²³*ibid.* 139:22-23.

²⁴*ibid.* 27, 24, 35:14.

²⁵*Akanāṇūru* 341.

²⁶*Kalittokai* 27:22-23.

A *marutam* poem shows a hero inviting his wife to sport on the banks of the Vaiyai. He says,

The black *kuyil* on the flowering branches
coos as if to say,
'Those with many excellent qualities
who are united!
Do not separate.
Those long separated,
Unite.'
The men and women of Maturai
sport together in the parks
filled with honeyed blossoms,
celebrating spring's festival to Kāmaṇ.
Let us join them.²⁷

This passage depicts a further development, connecting the *kuyil* and the spring season with Kāmaṇ. The poems in the *Kalittokai* and the *Paripāṭal* may be said to be the forerunners of the detailed descriptions of Kāmaṇ found in the epics.

The epic *Cilappatikāram* is full of references to Kāmaṇ and the manner of treatment accorded to this deity shows that all details were familiar at least in the literary circles, and seem very much like the descriptions of Kāma found in the *kāvya*s of *Kālidāsa* and other Sanskrit writers. Besides the various names found in the *Paripāṭal* and the *Kalittokai*, the *Cilappatikāram* uses three other names. Of these, *uruvilāṭaṇ*²⁸ and *kalaiyilāṭaṇ*²⁹ mean "the bodiless one" and is the same as *anaṅgaḥ* in Sanskrit, just as the name *Māraṇ* is the same as the Sanskrit *māraḥ*. In the *Cilappatikāram* he is called *maṇṇaṇ māraṇ*³⁰ or king *māraṇ* because of his universal influence. The other name *neṭuvēḷ* or "the Tall God" is rather confusing for the most obvious association of this name is with *Tirumāl* or *Viṣṇu*. Even the *Paripāṭal*, which contains references to Kāmaṇ, uses the term *neṭuvēḷ* as an epithet of *Viṣṇu* and there is no doubt that *Tirumāl* alone is meant in these contexts.³¹ According to Hindu mythology, Kāmaṇ is the son of *Tirumāl* and hence it is possible that the same epithet is used for the father and the son. In other *Cāṅkam* works, it is also used for *Śiva* and *Murukaṇ*.³² But on careful reading, it is clear that in the passages of both the Tamil epics in which *neṭuvēḷ* is used to denote Kāmaṇ, some other detail is added to make it quite clear that only the love god is meant. He is the *neṭuvēḷ* whose victorious bow is celebrated with a festival in March³³ or who has five arrows,³⁴

²⁷*ibid.* 92:60-68.

²⁸*Cilappatikāram* 2:44; 5:224; 14:36; 30:25; also *Maṇimēkalai* 5:6.

²⁹*Cilappatikāram* 10:28.

³⁰*ibid.* 8:6.

³¹*Paripāṭal* 3:37.

³²*Maturaiikkāñci* 455; *Puṛaṇāṅṅūru* 55:9; *Tirumurukāṅṅuppaṭai* 211, 273; *Akaṇāṅṅūru* 22:6; 98:27 etc.

³³*Cilappatikāram* 14:111-112.

³⁴*ibid.* 28:42.

an obvious reference to his arrows of flowers. In the *Maṇimēkalai*, he is the *neṭuvēḷ* whose arrows cause love or desire (*veṅkaṇai neṭuvēḷ*)³⁵ This name is perhaps used to show his greatness as one who has power over all living beings. The *Maṇimēkalai* also mentions that he is the son of Tirumāl and that he had once danced in the guise of a transversite (*pēṭi*)³⁶

While the *Kalittokai* mentions the festival of Māraṇ and contains a description of nature at the time of the festival which fits the spring season,³⁷ the *Cilappatikāram* is more specific about the month in which the festival was celebrated, at least in Maturai. It was in March-April or *paṅkuṇi* which is the last month of the season of late dew (*piṇpaṇi*).³⁸ In the earlier cantos of the epic, the festival of Indra is described and the day of celebration is said to be the full moon day in *Cittirai*³⁹ i.e. April-May. A *vidyādhara* and his wife are among the spectators at this festival. They themselves, having performed the necessary rite for the god of love at a park in the North on the day of his festival, left for the city of Pukār to witness the festival of Indra.⁴⁰ Their journey to the southern region seems to have been leisurely enough for the *vidyādhara* to point out places like the Himalayas, the Ganges, the city of Avanti, the Vindhya mountains and the fertile country of the Cholas.⁴¹ Hence the festival of Kāmaṇ must have been celebrated much earlier than the festival of Indra i.e. before April-May.

Though the term *villavaṇ* or “the one with a bow” is found in the Caṅkam poems, there is no actual description of Kāmaṇ’s bow till we come to the epics. The *Cilappatikāram* specifically mentions that it is a bow made of the sugar cane (*karuppuvil*)⁴² and so does the *Maṇimēkalai*.⁴³ Because of this, he is also described as Kāmaṇ with the sugar cane in his hand.⁴⁴ In Tamil literature, a bow is often used as a comparison for beautifully arched eyebrows, but in the *Cilappatikāram*, Kōvalaṇ, praising the beauty of his new wife Kaṇṇaki, likens her eye-brows to the bow of Kāmaṇ because they induce love.⁴⁵ Aiming his arrows with his sugar cane bow, Kāmaṇ is sure to cause suffering and hence the bow is unique and great (*oru peruṅ cilai*)⁴⁶

The Caṅkam works discussed here only mention his arrows that cause love pangs but the epics give more details. The arrows are fragrant flowers (*virai malar vāḷi*,⁴⁷ *naṅumpū vāḷi*)⁴⁸ or

³⁵*Maṇimēkalai* 4:112.

³⁶*ibid.* 3:124-125, also *Cilappatikāram* 6:56-57.

³⁷*Kalittokai* 35; also 36:14.

³⁸*Cilappatikāram* 14:111-112.

³⁹*ibid.* 5:64.

⁴⁰*ibid.* 6:1-4.

⁴¹*ibid.* 6:28-34.

⁴²*ibid.* 2:44, 4:82.

⁴³*Maṇimēkalai* 20:92; 25:90.

⁴⁴*ibid.* 23:27.

⁴⁵*Cilappatikāram* 2:44-45.

⁴⁶*ibid.* 30:25.

⁴⁷*ibid.* 2:24; 4:82; 8:50; 30:26, *Maṇimēkalai* 5:5.

⁴⁸*Cilappatikāram* 8:62.

malarkkaṇai)⁴⁹ and because of their power and ability are also known as the great or beautiful arrows of flowers (*māmalar vāḷi*).⁵⁰ The *Maṇimēkalai* also refers to them as arrows of buds (*aruppukkaṇai*),⁵¹ obviously meaning that they are full blown buds just opening their petals. Both the epics give the number of arrows as five (*aiṅkaṇai*)⁵² and the *Maṇimēkalai* mentions the names of the flowers that serve as the arrows of Kāmaṇ. While describing the gentle beauty of the Nāga princess, with whom king Neṭumuṭikkiḷḷi lived for a month before she went away for good, the epic mentions that because her eyes, ears, mouth, nose and body bore the fragrances of the *mayilai* (*aśoka*), *ceyalai* (*mullai* or arabian jasmine), *mā* (mango), *kuvaḷai* (blue nelumbo) and the many-petalled lotus, which are the arrows of Kāmaṇ with his victorious bow, the king became her willing slave, though he knew not who she was and from where she came.⁵³ This is the first mention in Tamil Literature of the five different flowers that serve as Kāmaṇ's arrows.

Since the various, flower-soft, fragrant limbs of a woman could affect even the strong of heart, women, especially those of the *gaṇikā* (courtesan) class are mentioned as Kāmaṇ's army. This "large army of the bodiless One" who allures the men of the city with their provocative ways is certainly differentiated from the chaste wives to whom these men would return with a feeling of fear and guilt.⁵⁴ This is perhaps the reason that when Mātavi decided to join the Buddhist Sanga and to initiate her daughter Maṇimēkalai as a nun, Kāmaṇ is said to have dropped his large bow and the arrows of fragrant flowers on the ground in despair and desperation.⁵⁵ Even Maṇimēkalai is described as one who had made Kāmaṇ helpless.⁵⁶ Now he has lost a young *gaṇikā* who could have helped him to attack and overcome many a powerful man in the city, including the prince of the realm, Utayakumāraṇ.

In fact, the *Cilappatikāram* symbolises Kāmaṇ as a king with all the insignia of royalty. Beside his queen Rati, his fish emblem and banner, sugarcane bow and flower arrows, he also has other trappings of kingship. The southern breeze (*teṇṇal*) is the messenger who comes with the news of the arrival of the king's friend and accomplice, the pleasant season of spring (*innīḷa vēṇṇil*). The cuckoo (*kuyil*), who is the trumpet bearer of this fish-bannered king, proclaims to his army (young *gaṇikās*) to change into fitting attire⁵⁷ for the cold season is no more. The evening, which causes joy to those who are united and sorrow to those in separation, is the elephant that serves him as well as his other friend, the moon.⁵⁸ The *Maṇimēkalai* mentions

⁴⁹*ibid.* 28:19, *Maṇimekālai* 19:100.

⁵⁰*Cilappatikāram* 15:101.

⁵¹*Maṇimēkalai* 20:92; 25:90.

⁵²*ibid.* 5:5; *Cilappatikāram* 28:42.

⁵³*Maṇimēkalai* 24:33-41.

⁵⁴*Cilappatikāram* 5:224-234.

⁵⁵*Ibid.* 30:25-26.

⁵⁶*Maṇimēkalai* 23:27-28, also 7:36.

⁵⁷*Cilappatikāram* 8:8-12.

⁵⁸*ibid.* 8:58-59.

the clouds as his chariot (*vāṇṇēr*).⁵⁹ The letter sent by Mātavi to her lover Kōvalaṇ when he walked out on her is based on this regalia of Kāmaṇ.

Pleasant Spring who unites all beings
with their desired mates
is a young (inexperienced) king.
Moon, who has appeared
on the crest of the evening
is not mature.
If those with their beloveds
stay away,
or those separated
forget their loved ones,
it is not to be wondered
were (Kāmaṇ) to take away dear life
with fragrant, flower-arrows.⁶⁰

The author of this epic describes the love god as the king who rules over the whole of the Tamil country from the Vēṅkata hills to the seas of Kumari (Cape Comorin) with Maturai, Uṛaiyūr, Vañci and Pukār as his capitals.⁶¹ Thus when the sun set, the city of Pukār was not without protection for,

Bearing arrows of fragrant flowers
and the sugar cane bow,
the lord of the victorious fish-banner
goes about.
Indeed the city is well guarded.⁶²

This passage seems a fitting conclusion to the canto on “The Sunset in the City of Pukār,” for according to Tamil poetic tradition, evening or sunset enhances the feelings of love and longing in the hearts of those in love.

The *Cilappatikāram* mentions a temple in which Kāmaṇ was worshipped. It was called *Kāmaṇē! Kōṭṭam* and was situated at the mouth of the River Kāviri. There were also two ponds at that place which were called *Cōma Kuṇṭam* and *Cūriya Kuṇṭam*. It was believed that women who bathed in these ponds and worshipped Kāmaṇ in his temple would find connubial happiness in this world and also reach heaven where they would continue to enjoy such good fortune.⁶³ The *Pattiṇappālai* mentions two ponds at the same spot in Pukār that satisfy two

⁵⁹*Maṇimēkalai* 20:91.

⁶⁰*Cilappatikāram* 8:56-63.

⁶¹*ibid.* 8:1-6; 51-52.

⁶²*ibid.* 4:82-85.

⁶³*ibid.* 9:57-62.

desires (*irukāmaṭṭu iṇaiyēri*)⁶⁴ meaning a happy life here and hereafter. Though the word *kāmam* is used in this context, there is no mention of the love god or his temple.

While tracing the development of the concept of the love god and his characteristics in Tamil literature, it is clear that this concept is not indigenous to Tamil literature like its conventions or the worship of Muruga. The obvious, and perhaps convenient, place to turn to would be Sanskrit literature. The names like *anaṅgaḥ*⁶⁵ (the Bodiless One), his wife Rati,⁶⁶ his association with Vasanta or Madhu (spring season),⁶⁷ the *kokila* or the cuckoo⁶⁸ the *malaya* breeze (the breeze from the south)⁶⁹ the moon,⁷⁰ the fish banner⁷¹ and the flower arrows⁷² seem to justify this. But one cannot help observing that there are some differences too. In Sanskrit, the bow is also made up of *kiṃśuka* flowers with the bees for the bow string⁷³ while the lotus fibres are also mentioned as being Kāma's bow string.⁷⁴ The mango blossom is his favourite arrow⁷⁵ and the mango shoots are the feathers attached to his arrows.⁷⁶ Besides, some references to Kāma seem contradictory, suggesting that the idea of the god of love is not very old or developed in Sanskrit literature of the early centuries after Christ.

No doubt, verses referring to Kāma are already found in the Vedas. In the *Ṛg Veda* he is mentioned only in one verse in the tenth *maṇḍala* and there he is associated with creation.

All that existed then was void and formless:
by the great power of warmth (*tapasaḥ*) was
born that Unit.

Thereafter arose Desire (Kāma) in the beginning;
Desire, the primal seed and germ of spirit.⁷⁷

⁶⁴Paṭṭiappālai 39.

⁶⁵Kumārasaṃbhavam 4:9, 13. Ṛtusaṃhāram 6:9, 10.

⁶⁶Kumārasaṃbhavam 3:73.

⁶⁷ibid. 3:13; 4:24.

⁶⁸ibid. 4:16.

⁶⁹Ṛtusaṃhāram 6:28.

⁷⁰ibid. 6:28.

⁷¹Abhijñānaśākuntalam. Act 3 Verse 5.

⁷²Kumārasaṃbhavam 3:10.

⁷³Ṛtusaṃhāram 6:28.

⁷⁴Kumārasaṃbhavam 4:29.

⁷⁵ibid. 3:14.

⁷⁶ibid. 3:27.

⁷⁷Ṛg. Veda X:129. 3 + 4; Atharva Veda XIX:52.

His role as the god causing love and longing is found in the *Atharva Veda*. A hymn of this Veda which is meant to be used as a charm to arouse the passionate love of a woman, has references to “the terrible arrow of Kāma” which pierces hearts.

That arrow, winged with longing thought,
its stem Desire, its neck Resolve.
Let Kāma, having truly aimed, shoot forth
and pierce thee in the heart.⁷⁸

The same text also personifies him as the primordial power, that together with Indra, Agni, Varuṇa, Viṣṇu, and other gods, can hurl down one’s enemies and be a sturdy guardian. He is, therefore, offered oblations and sacrificial butter. According to this hymn, Kāma was born at first; neither the gods nor the Fathers (*Pitrs*) nor men have equalled him and he is Manyuḥ.⁷⁹ He is identified with Agni⁸⁰ and praised as the giver and receiver of sacrifice.

The Brāhmaṇa texts also contain references to Kāma as being infinite and inexhaustible like the ocean (*Samudra iva hi kāmah*)⁸¹ and permeating every creature (*paśavaḥ kāmadhāranam*).⁸² The epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, are familiar with the story of his being burnt by Śiva, thereby becoming the Bodiless God (*anaṅgaḥ*).⁸³ They also mention his arrows that penetrate one’s heart and other names like Kandarpa⁸⁴ and Manmatha⁸⁵ besides the usual Kāma.⁸⁶

Aśvaghosa’s *kāvya*, the *Buddhacaritam* treats Kāma as a god, rather well-known to the listeners and readers of *kāvyas*. He is used as a standard of comparison for a handsome man and Buddha as Prince Sarvārthasiddha is said to be as good-looking as Puṣpaketu,⁸⁷ the flower-arrowed god of love. This certainly contains the suggestion that the Prince is capable of arousing love and longing in the hearts of the women who see him. But Aśvaghosa also refers to the love god as Māra, the enemy of good order or *dharma* (*saddharmaripuḥ*) and explains that though the world calls him “Kāmadeva, the owner of various weapons, the flower-armed, the lord of the course of desire”, he is actually the enemy of salvation (*mokṣadviṣaḥ*).⁸⁸ This

⁷⁸*Atharva Veda* III:25:1.

⁷⁹*ibid.* IX:2.

⁸⁰*ibid.* III:21:4 also VI:36:3.

⁸¹*Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* II:2:5 & 6. Quoted by H.H. Wilson *Kumārasambhavam*, Varanasi, 1966, p. 6.

⁸²*Satapatha Brāhmaṇa* VII:1:1:8.

⁸³*Mahābhārata* 12:183:10; *Rāmāyaṇa* 1.22.10ff.

⁸⁴*Mahābhārata* 1.175. 4 & 12.

⁸⁵*Rāmāyaṇa* 3.46.17 and 4.65.15.

⁸⁶*ibid.* 3.55.2 and *Mahābhārata* 1.160.32.

⁸⁷*Buddhacaritam* 3:11.

⁸⁸*ibid.* 13:1 & 2.

is in keeping with the message of Aśvaghosa's *kāvya*s. The Tamil *kāvya*s also use this name Māraṇ, but the *Cilappatikāram* merely uses it as one of the many names of the love god (*maṇṇaṇ māraṇ*)⁸⁹ The *Maṇimēkalai*, however, uses this name in the special Buddhist sense, especially when praising Buddha as the hero who overcomes Māraṇ (*māraṇai vellum vira*).⁹⁰ Even the role of Ratī is slightly different in the *Buddhacaritam*. She is accepted as the personification of the feeling of love or the erotic sentiment. All works, in Tamil and Sanskrit, which refer to her depict her as the wife and constant companion of Kāma. The *Buddhacaritam*, however, assigns to her a role somewhat similar to that of Menakā and other *apsarases* of Indra's heaven. When his arrows fail to have the desired effect on the heart of the aspiring Buddha, Kama feels that the prince-sage is not worthy of them. Neither is he worthy of being tempted by Ratī.⁹¹ This suggests that she is the instrument of Kāma in arousing the erotic sentiment in those he wished to bring under his sway. By the time Kālidāsa wrote his famous *kāvya*s, the concept of a love god and his regalia had become more or less fixed. The information obtained from Classical Tamil and Sanskrit texts may be tabulated as in Figure I.

One of the names for Kāma, *Puṣpa-dhanus* (the flower-bowed)⁹² may be a general reference to the *kiṇṣuka* flowers that make up his bow. The *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa* mentions that Brahma gave him a sugar cane bow (*ikṣu-cāpa*, *ikṣu-dhanus*) as a wedding gift.⁹³ Certain other details are also mentioned by encyclopedias and dictionaries. The Tamil *Kalaikkalāñciyam* lists the parrot as his vehicle (horse).⁹⁴ Sir Monier Williams in *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* gives *suka-vāha* (parrot-borne)⁹⁵ as a name of Kāma. He also indicates that this name, although given in native lexicons has not yet been met with in any published text. But he does not mention any name of Kama associated with the sugarcane.

The origin of this idea of a Cupid in Indian Literature is thus not clear. The word *kāma* is already found in the *Ṛg. Veda*, the earliest extant Indian Literature and according to Edward Moor, “. . . *kām* or *kāma* signifies desire, a sense which it also bears in ancient and modern Persian.”⁹⁶ M.B. Emeneau and T. Burrow do not list this word or its root in *A Dravidian Etymological Dictionary* or *Dravidian Borrowings from Indo Aryan*. But they list the word *kātal* with its variants *kātalaṇ*, *kātali*, *kātanmai* and other forms in the Kannada, Telugu and Kui languages.⁹⁷ The Tamil Lexicon gives *kāma* as the root for *kāmaṇ* as well as for the

⁸⁹*Cilappatikāram* 8:6.

⁹⁰*Maṇimēkalai* 11:61.

⁹¹*Buddhacaritam* 3:17.

⁹²*Kumārasambhavam* 5:54.

⁹³Ramachandra Dikshitar V.R. *The Purāṇa Index*. Vol. 1, p. 82 (*Brahmāṇḍa Purana* VI 15, 19, 18, 1, 19.26).

⁹⁴*Kalaikkalāñciyam*. Vol. 3, p. 512.

⁹⁵Monier-Williams, Sir Monier *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*, Delhi, 1970, p. 1979.

⁹⁶Moor, Edward. *The Hindu Pantheon*. Delhi, 1968, p. 293.

⁹⁷Emeneau, M.B. & Burrow, T. A. *Dravidian Etymological Dictionary*. Oxford, 1961, 1211.

Figure I

Kāmaṇ's attributes		Sanskrit	Tamil
Wife		Ratī	Rati
Friend/accomplice		Vasantha/Madhu Moon	ḷavēnil Moon
Messenger		Cuckoo	Southern breeze
Bard		Cuckoo	—
Trumpet bearer		—	cuckoo
Weapons	Bow	kiṃśuka flowers	sugar cane
	Bowstring	lotus fibres bees	—
	arrows	lotus aśoka mango navamallikā nilotpala	lotus acōku mango mullai nilōtpalam
feather on arrows		mango shoots	—
Elephant (used as vehicle)		southern breeze	evening
Chariot		—	clouds
Emblem		fish	fish
Umbrella		moon	—
Army		—	young kaṇikai
Festival		beginning of spring	end of muṇpaṇi or March

number of compounds which contain the term (eg. *kāmakurippu kāma+*).⁹⁸ Though the word *kāmam* and its various other forms, especially the adjectival form as in “*kāmarkaṭumpuṇal*”,⁹⁹ the desirous, swift water or *kāmakkilatti*,¹⁰⁰ the mistress (of desire) as against the *illakkilatti*, the mistress of the home etc., are commonly found in Caṅkam literature, it is by no means the only word used to denote the love between a man and a woman. The word *kātalan*¹⁰¹ for the lover and *kātali*¹⁰² for the lady love are found often. There are also other terms like *kēṇmai*,¹⁰³ *toṭarpu*¹⁰⁴ and *naṭpu*¹⁰⁵ which are used in the special or narrower sense of a love-relationship and not in the broader sense of friendship or acquaintance. All these suggest the possibility of an Indo-Aryan origin for the word *kāma*. The Ṛg Vedic reference to the love-god is more philosophical, associated with cosmogeny, than sensuous. But the idea of personification and mythology is certainly in keeping with the Vedic manner of treating important forces of nature. Desire of any kind, especially that of mate-selection and procreation is certainly a vital and potent force. This personification seems to have gathered various details as it passed through the ages. The details of Kāmaṇ’s regalia — the seasons, the southern breeze, the rain clouds, the cuckoo, the parrot, the sugar cane, and the flowers, are unmistakably indigenous to the Indian sub-continent so that Kāmaṇ as the love-god belongs to Indian Literature as a whole and not merely to one section of it.

⁹⁸Tamil Lexicon Vol. 2, p. 871.

⁹⁹Kalittokai 39:1.

¹⁰⁰Tolkāppiyam: Poruḷatikāram, 144:44.

¹⁰¹Kuruntokai 4:3; 41:1; 48:7; 59:6; 60:4; 152:5 etc. Akanānūru 22:20, Narriṇai 339:1 etc.

¹⁰²Kuruntokai 120:2; 151:5 etc.

¹⁰³ibid. 38:3, 90:6, 105:5, 264:4, 308:6 etc.

¹⁰⁴ibid. 373:8 etc.

¹⁰⁵ibid. 3:4, 134:7, 247:7, 377:5.

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