

CELEBRATION OF CHILDHOOD

*A Comparative Study of Childhood in
Pillaittamil and the Gospels**

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0. INTRODUCTION

"All grown-ups were once children – although few of them remember it."¹ Thus says Antoine de Saint Exupéry, an existential novelist in his thought-provoking tiny fictitious novel called *The Little Prince*. He is very right. Psychologists affirm that childhood is a very important stage in the life of a person and the experiences and their imprint in this age carry their influence all through his/her life. Therefore it goes without saying that the age of childhood needs to be taken very seriously.

But today we see a rather ambivalent attitude towards childhood in our society. On one side we see well fed and well cared for children happily going to their schools in colourful uniforms. During festivals and community gatherings, front rows are occupied by these privileged children, some of whom even get chances to exhibit their talents on the stage. On the other hand, many unprivileged children, instead of going to schools with books, go to factories to work the whole day in order to support

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¹ Antoine de Saint Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, En. Tr., by Katherine Woods, London: Mammoth, 1995, 4.

their families losing their happiness and their very childhood. Enter into any restaurant in Tamil Nadu and you will see children under fourteen years employed to wipe the tables and wash the plates and tumblers. Even in many of the houses little girls are employed as servants who have to be at the beck and call of the whole household. Heart breaking news of female infanticide, child-mortality due to malnutrition and rampant child abuses are not very rare.

Media in general highlight the achievements of the privileged children. Turn the television and you will see the 'amul baby' type of children fill up practically all the advertisements. It gives a false sense of reality especially when most of children are either in the factories or in the slums struggling for their survival. "The starving and emaciated children with sunken eyes, hollow cheeks and protruding bellies are the symbol of the masses of poor living in abject poverty in the cities and villages of Asia. They cry out to us."² These are but a few of our experiences.³

With this backdrop, we inquire into the concept of childhood that our society has had down through the centuries and that our Christian faith prompts us to have. The Tamil society had been one of the very few societies that had esteemed children highly right from its antiquities. The esteem for children and the high place given to them prompted it to produce a unique literary genre called *Pillaittamil*, in which great heroes and gods were depicted as children. This very fact bears witness to what place children had in Tamil minds. Paradoxically, the same Tamil society neglects children today. In the same manner, against the background of very low estimation of children in the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman world, Jesus stands apart with high esteem for children and genuine love and concern for them. But Christianity has not adequately responded to the problems of

² Felix Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope at the Dawn of the Millennium*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000, 45.

³ For more examples, cf. Samuel Rayan, "Serve the Younger," *Jeevadhara*, vol. XIX, no. 109 (May 1989) 167-178. The author gives ample examples of children's problems.

children except but for its concern for their education and apostolic formation.

This paper aims at exploring into how the unique literary genre, namely *Pillaittamil*, characterises childhood. It also seeks to show how Jesus estimated children against the Greco-Jewish background of his times. Some implications for today are also drawn out.

I. CHILDREN IN *PILLAITTAMIL* LITERATURE

Pillaittamil can be defined as a literary genre that considers a goddess, god, saint, famous king, generous philanthropist, great person or master as a *child* (called *pillai* in Tamil) singing his/her childhood in ten stages in order to admire his/her specific actions and achievements."⁴ It comes under the classification of *Cirrilakkiyam* (Minor Literature). The first formal *Pillaittamil* was *Kulōttuñka Cōlan Pillaittamil* composed by *Oṭṭakkūttar* in the 12th century AD. From then onwards, many works of *Pillaittamil* have come into existence. Thus we have today about three hundred works in the genre of *Pillaittamil* literature.⁵

1. Literary Background of *Pillaittamil* Literature

This unique literary genre did not emerge all of a sudden. It has a strong literary background. Certain works of *Caṅkam* literature, mention one or the other aspect of *Pillaittamil*. The actual features of *Pillaittamil* are found in the literatures belonging to a later period. In the *Caṅkam* literature, children are depicted as those who make family life meaningful and happy. They are considered like gold, very precious.⁶ Their infant-babbles are praised and their childhood mischiefs are welcomed wholeheartedly. Their childhood plays, entertainments, education,

⁴ Cf. K. Muthurasan, *Pillaittamil Ilakkiyañkal: Ōr Āyvu*, Dharmapuri: Vasantha Selvi Publications, 1992, 24.

⁵ Cf. as numbered by K. Muthurasan, *ibid.*, 36.

⁶ Cf. S. Sivakami, "Ciraṅ" in N. Kadikasalam and S. Sivakami (eds), *Caṅka Ilakkiyam. Kavitaiyiyal Nōkku Cintanaip Pippula Matippīṭu* Chennai: International Institute of Tamil Studies, 1998, 176ff.

formation, etc., are given importance in Caṅkam literature. *Puraṇānūru* (poem 188) acknowledges that children's prattlings and appearance can attract anybody and hence they are the greatest wealth and gift of life. The same idea is also found in *Kuruntokai*.⁷

The most illustrious examples would be some of the couplets of *Tirukkuraḷ*, authored by *Tiruvaḷḷuvar*. They give very important place to children in the family.⁸ Regarding the prattling of the child, *Tiruvaḷḷuvar* has the following to say:

Only those parents, who have not heard
The prattlings of their children,
Will say that the flute is sweet,
And that the *yāḷ* is sweet.⁹

In the later literatures too children receive a beloved position. *Nammālvār* compares the happy noises children make during their play with the sound of recitation of the *Vedas*, and the sound of a festival.¹⁰

The very creation of the literary genre *Piḷḷaittamiḷ*, is itself an evidence for the privileged place children enjoyed in the Tamil society, especially in the literary sphere. It also implies that considering grown-ups as children makes it possible to accept them and love them as children. Eminent people will also have enemies and others who may have towards them some hate feelings. It was also true in the case of gods in those times when

⁷ மாசு இல் அங்கை மணிமருள் அவ்வாய்
நாவொடு நவிலா நகைபடு தீம் சொல்
யாவரும் விழையும் பொலந்தொடிப் புதல்வன் (குறுந்தொகை 16:3-5).

⁸ For நன்கலம் நன்மக்கட் பேறு (குறள் 60).
பெறுமவற்றுள் யாமறிவது இல்லை அறிவறிந்த
மக்கட்பேறு அல்ல பிற (குறள் 61).
அமிழ்தினும் ஆற்ற இனிதேதம் மக்கள்
சிறுகை அளாவிய கூழ் (குறள் 64).

⁹ S. Raju Chettiar, "The Prattling Child in Thiruvalluvar," *Journal of Tamil Studies*, 8 (December 1975) 84-87. The author has translated it. The Tamil couplet goes as follows:

குழல்இனிது யாழ்இனிது என்பதம் மக்கள்
மழலைச்சொல் கேளா தவர். (குறள் 66). *Yāḷ* is an ancient musical instrument.

¹⁰ Cf. for a citation in K. Muthurasan, *Caiva Camaya Piḷḷaittamiḷ Nūlkaḷ*, 12.

*Piḷḷaittamiḷ*s took shape.¹¹ Showing such heroes as children will help to reduce such hate feelings because no one hates a child. The differences and discriminations among the grownups are not found among children. Children do not relate among themselves on the basis of such divisions.

2. Ten Childhood Stages in *Piḷḷaittamiḷ* Literature

The ten commonly employed stages are: *Kāppu* (protection), *Ceṅkīrai* (baby's talk or head-movement), *Tāl* (lullaby or cradle song), *Cappāṇi* (clapping), *Muttam* (child's kiss), *Varukai/Varāṇai* (child's walk), *Ampuli* (showing the moon), *Ciṟṟil* (boys destroying the little sand houses built by girls), *Ciṟuparai* (boys sounding *parai*, i.e., an instrument/toy which makes noise) and *Ciṟutēr* (boys moving small three wheeled toy cars in play). The last three stages in feminine *Piḷḷaittamiḷ* are different and they may be selected from the following: *Ciṟṟil Iḷaittal* (making small sand houses in play) *Ciṟucōru Ākkal* (cooking rice in play) *Kuḷamakan* (playing with dolls), *Ūsal* (playing on swing), *Kalaṅku* (a kind of play with stone), *Ammānai* (another kind of play with stones), *Nīrātal* (swimming in fresh water), etc. There are also other supplementary stages from which the poets can choose. However, the first seven stages are not changed.

The first stage in all the works of *Piḷḷaittamiḷ* is *Kāppu*, which means 'protection' – protection from any kind of danger, especially, illness. Invocation is made to gods to protect the hero/heroine who is seen as a child. *Kāppu* comes from an ancient custom of the Tamils which is found even today: on the seventh day of the birth of a child the mother ties *kāppu*, which is prepared of grains like paddy tied in a piece of yellow cloth, around the wrist of the child. This is done in front of the family god with the prayer that the god may protect the child from illness and other dangers. Later this *kāppu* became an ornament made of gold or silver worn by girls.¹² Bangles also come under this category. The habit of wearing around the wrist sacred threads blessed at shrines

¹¹ Cf. S. Saundarapandian, *Tamiḷil Piḷḷaittamiḷ Iḷakkiam*, 60.

¹² K. Muthurasan, *Caiva Camaya Piḷḷaittamiḷ Nūlkaḷ*, 18.

and holy places is also noteworthy in this context. It also symbolises the devotee's trust in God's protection. Children need protection because they are totally helpless and dependent.

Ceñkīrai is the second stage in *Piḷḷaittamiḷ* literature. Regarding the meaning of the term there are two different understandings. The first is derived from the term *kīrai*, which means a herb-like green vegetable whose tender leaves and trunk are edible. They sway gently in the breeze. The baby's gentle movements are compared to the gentle sway of the *kīrai*.¹³ Some others have understood *kīrai* as *kīram*, a term for parrot. As parrots stand on one leg and raise the other and sway gently babies also fold one leg, extend the other, raise themselves with the support of the hands and sway their head gently. Another understanding goes to the root meaning of the term *Ceñkīrai*. *Kīr* means word or speech. *Ceñkīr* means word which does not signify anything – a meaningless utterance (babbling), which usually comes out of a baby's mouth. A baby of five months starts to make utterances that are not clear. Some hold this stage as *Ceñkīrai*.¹⁴ Though one is unable to grasp, the parents and those who love the baby will be pleased to listen to them. In whatever way we understand this stage, we can note what is significant in this stage is the baby's first attempt to relate itself with others – the adult world. In the first mode of the above understandings, we see the baby's effort to look up at others and recognise their presence. The poets by requesting the hero-child to do *Ceñkīrai* encourage his/her communication.

The third stage, *Tāl*, is singing lullabies or cradle songs to the child. It reflects the common custom of the mother doing the same and sending her baby to sleep. There are innumerable cradle songs. They are very rich in imagination but very simple in expression. These cradle songs hold children in high esteem, as precious gifts from God. They enumerate the pledges fulfilled by the parents and grand parents for the gift of a baby. Promises are made to babies that all sort of protection would be given to them so

¹³ Cf. S. Saundarapandian, *Tamiḷil Piḷḷaittamiḷ Ilakkiyam*, 47.

¹⁴ Cf. S. Saundarapandian, *Tamiḷil Piḷḷaittamiḷ Ilakkiyam*, 47. He prefers this understanding to the previous one.

that they could sleep peacefully and so many other things would be brought to them to make them happy. Often they express the economical and social situation of the family and the relationships among the parents and other relatives of the baby. They also express the dreams each mother has for her baby. In one of the songs the baby is seen as one who has come to rectify the broken relationship between its father and uncle (mother's brother).¹⁵ Though there are differences between these songs and the poems they definitely bring out the fact of care and concern that are due to children.

The fourth stage of *Pillaittami* is *Cappāṇi*. The baby at her/his ninth month learns to sit straight on the floor. The parents and the relatives are very happy. The baby is also happy. The baby expresses her/his happiness through clapping hands. The grown-ups also clap to the baby and the baby imitates it. *Cappāṇi* is the combination of *cap* + *pāṇi*. *Cap* refers to the peculiar sound that is produced by baby's clap. *Pāṇi* means hands. Hence *cappāṇi* means clapping of hands.¹⁶ Clapping is an expression of happiness and appreciation. Children and babies also clap when they are happy. A happy and clapping child makes others also happy. Happy children are the greatest wealth in the world. The adult world wishes to see children happy. It is this wish that is expressed through the stage of *cappāṇi* in *Pillaittami* literature.

The fourth stage is *Muttam* which means kiss. The parents of a child and other grown-ups kiss the child to show their affection and love. At this stage the child learns to reciprocate it. Parents and others request the child to kiss them. In *Pillaittami* literature, the poets do the same. They consider themselves as parents, place the baby on their laps and request them (the

¹⁵ சந்திரரோ உன் தகப்பன், குரியரோ உன் மாமன்
சந்திரருக்கும் குரியருக்கும் சலிப்பாத்த வந்த கண்ணோ?
வெள்ளியோ உன் தகப்பன், வேந்தரோ உன் மாமன்
வெள்ளிக்கும் வேந்தர்க்கும் வினையாத்த வந்த கண்ணோ? quoted in Lēnā Tamilvāṇan,
Tamilakat Tālāṭṭup Pāṭalka, Chennai: Manimekalai Publishers, 1994 second edition,
19.

¹⁶ Cf. K. Muthurasan, *Caiva Camaya Pillaittami Nūlka*, 20-21; S. Saundarapandian, *Tamilil Pillaittami Ilakkiam*, 49.

heroines/heroes) to give a kiss with their tender lips. They also compare the kiss of their heroes/heroines with other precious things of the world and affirm that the kiss is the most precious of all.¹⁷

The fifth stage, *varukai* (*vārānai*), happens when the child is one year old and he/she usually begins to walk. It puts forward its slow and faltering steps. 'Varuka!' is the common Tamil term to welcome anybody. At this stage, when the child just begins to walk, the parents as well as those who are familiar with him/her, call him/her to come closer. The poems of *Varukai* in *Pillaittamil* literature are of this nature.

The sixth stage is *Ampuli*. *Ampuli* refers to the moon. The poems are composed in such a way as the mother or the one who takes care of the baby calls the moon to come down and play with the baby. In them, the child is compared with the moon and shown as more precious and greater than the moon. It is true that the poems contain the valour or victories of the grown-up hero. Yet, since this pattern is followed in all the *Pillaittamils*, we can assume that the concept of childhood itself enjoys a high position in *Pillaittamil* literature.

The subsequent three stages are related to the play that boys and girls are engaged in. As the child enjoys playing, the parents and others enjoy watching them. Several childhood plays are brought to limelight through various stages of *Pillaittamil* literature. To mention some, girls building sand houses, boys playfully destroying them, girls playing with stones and dolls, boys beating drums and rolling toy cars, etc.

All these stages firmly affirm a fact. Though hardly any work of *Pillaittamil* is on real children, the stages employed truly belong to childhood. Though they are sung for grown-ups, they are out of real appreciation for childhood. Such a literature expresses the longing to see the heroes as children because the age of childhood is appreciated, enjoyed and celebrated. In it we can read the real longing of any person to relive his/her childhood.

¹⁷ Cf. K. Muthurasan, *Caiva Camaya Pillaittamil Nūlkaḷ*, 21.

3. Common Metaphors and Similes Used for Children in *Piḷḷaittamiḷ* Literature

i. Most Commonly Occurring Metaphors and Similes

Poems are naturally imaginative. Hence it is natural for them to use metaphors and similes. *Piḷḷaittamiḷ* literature also uses them for children. The most commonly occurring metaphors and similes can be classified as those (1) that refer to tenderness; (2) that appeal aesthetically to the senses especially of sight and taste; (3) that denote preciousness; (4) that refer to the cosmic bodies and goods of nature that are necessary for human existence; and (5) that refer to the characteristics of certain animals and birds.¹⁸

Metaphors and Similes that Refer to Tenderness include flower, bunch of flowers, 'tender plant' (*Kulakkoḷuntē*, and *Kuṅkumakkoḷunte*), 'tender baby' (*pacuṅkuḷavi*), etc. *Koḷuntu* has two meanings: (i) the tender leave or the top part of any plant and (ii) the name of a sweet-smelling plant itself which is also very tender. *Metaphors and Similes that Appeal to the Senses* include numerous beautiful things, such as, paintings, birds, flowers, 'beautiful painting' (*eḷilōviyamē*), 'beauty', 'inner beauty' (*eḷilē*, *uḷḷalakē*), etc., which appeal to the sense of sight, numerous types of fruits, other sweet objects like sugarcane, honey, *amutam*, a kind of cream made of milk, rice flour, etc., which appeal to the sense of taste, 'sweet music' (*innicai*) which appeals to the sense of hearing, sweet-smelling 'sandalwood' (*cantaṇam*) which appeals to the sense of smell and so on. *Metaphors and Similes that Denote Preciousness* are mainly *maṇi* or *māṇikkam*, which means pearl, diamond, pupil of the eye, 'nine precious stones', etc. *Metaphors and Similes of Cosmic Bodies and Natural Resources*, that are employed in *Piḷḷaittamiḷ* literature are the objects like the sun, the moon with its cool light, clouds, wind, light, river, etc. *Names of Birds and Animal Used as Metaphors and Similes* include beautiful birds like peacock, parrot, a peculiar legendary bird called '*aṇṇam*', etc., and animals like elephant, lion, etc.

¹⁸ The metaphors and similes that are mentioned here are traced from several works of *Piḷḷaittamiḷ* literature and classified by the writer.

ii. Significance of These Metaphors and Similes

The first set of similes refers to tenderness. A flower or a new shoot/leaf, for example, is a very tender object. It makes one happy. Likewise, a young parrot is very soft in nature. It needs protection and constant care for its survival. It is at the same time very beautiful. Another striking characteristic of these objects is that they are purely gifts of nature – gifts of God.

In the second set of similes, that which appeal to the senses, there are a variety of objects both natural and artificial. A beautiful painting is man-made; so also is a sweet piece of music. But the beautiful birds, fruits, etc., are gifts from nature or God. Man can prepare *Amutam*. But the other sweet things like honey, and sugar cane are gifts from nature or God. They all make man happy and his life pleasant. They signify sweetness.

The precious metals and stones, such as gold, diamond, pearl as well as the pupil of the eye, etc., signify preciousness. They are also rare and only with much difficulty one can obtain some of them. Such precious objects are also guarded carefully. They mean wealth. Possessing some or the other of them raises one's social status. Therefore, there is no one who will not be fascinated by them.¹⁹

The cosmic realities, such as the sun, the moon, the clouds that bring rain, the light, the river, etc., signify deeper values. They are not only useful to man but also indispensable for the existence of any life. Sun is the source of light and heat. Physical light helps us see things, walk without faltering, read, write, etc. Heat is also necessary for life. According to the Bible, the first thing to be created was light (Gen 1:3). Light symbolises the presence of God. It overcomes darkness, which, in general, symbolises evil. In Christian tradition, Jesus is presented as the light which was coming to the world to enlighten every man (Jn 1:9). The moon, in contrast to the sun, is a symbol of cool light. If the sun makes one hot in the daytime, the moon on its part cools down. Moon attracts

¹⁹ Cf. the parables of Jesus on the Hidden Treasure and the Precious Pearl (Mt 13:44-46).

children very much. It is noteworthy to recall the stage of *Ampuli*. Clouds that bring rain find a prominent place in *Pillaittamil* literature. Rain that brings water is very much needed for any life to survive and prosper. If water is brought down on earth by rain, it is carried to far away places by rivers. So the cloud that produces rain and water, and river that distributes water – both find place in *Pillaittamil* literature.

Employing the names of animals especially those of elephant and lion is proper only to masculine *Pillaittamil*. Both these animals represent power, strength, and bravery. An elephant is very expensive and its possession implies high social status. There is a proverb that runs like this: "An elephant, alive or dead, is worth a thousand sovereigns."²⁰ It is a royal animal. The phrase 'strength of an elephant' has become a proverb in day-to-day communication to signify great strength and confidence. A lion is a wild animal and considered as the king of the forest. Thus, both elephant and lion have royal significance and represent power, strength, leadership, firmness, confidence, etc.

These metaphors and similes have great significance for childhood: first of all, all these objects are positively desirable ones: either they are useful or they make one happy. They are compared to tender, soft, sweet and pleasant things, things that appeal to human senses, which anyone will like. They are pleasant gifts from God. Therefore, we can conclude that children are desirable, loveable and appealing to the human society. Psychologists also admit that babyhood, that is the first two years of a person is the most appealing age.²¹

Secondly, since children are compared to precious things, they are seen as gifts not only pleasant but also precious. This has far-reaching implications for the society. Children rightly deserve the protection, care, watching over by society. They are not to be neglected. The preciousness of children is one of the underlying principles of *Pillaittamil* literature itself.

²⁰ யானை இருந்தாலும் ஆயிரம் பொன், இறந்தாலும் ஆயிரம் பொன்.

²¹ Cf. Elizabeth B. Hurlock, *Developmental Psychology: A Life-Span Approach*, New Delhi: Tata McGraw-Hill Edition, 1999, 22nd reprint, 81.

Thirdly, children are compared to indispensable gifts of nature, such as the sun, the moon, the clouds, etc. Children are not only pleasant and precious, but also indispensable to society. A human society survives only through children. By begetting children each family in a society perpetuates itself. Thus children are indispensable to any society.

Fourthly, all these similes and metaphors express the dream and desire of the society regarding children. Each parent wants his/her child to become great in all respects – to be pleasant and sweet to other persons, to make others happy, to become well-known, to acquire leadership qualities, to become wealthy like one in a royal family, to achieve great things in life, etc. With this wish in mind the parents call them pearl, diamond, honey, lion, etc. It also highlights the duty of the parents and society to form them accordingly and provide them an atmosphere to grow as great persons.

II. CHILDREN IN THE GOSPELS

The gospels as well as the New Testament as a whole have been influenced by the Jewish and the Hellenistic traditions. Hence it is right to see the children in the gospels against the background of these two traditions. There was no high estimation of children in the antiquities. From the classical period, in general, children were not sufficiently cared for. They were exposed to death due to cultic reasons, economic difficulties, and to weed out cripples, the unfit, and often girl Children.²² Childhood had no particular significance except that it was merely a biographical stage.

1. Old Testament Tradition

Though in the Old Testament children were considered as the greatest gift of God, a blessing and guarantee of the covenant

²² Cf. Oepke, *παις κτλ.*, TDNT, vol. v, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983, 639.

with Israel,²³ they were the powerless ones on the bottom rung of Hebrew society.²⁴ They were to be educated strictly and strict obedience was demanded of them. The Old Testament "hardly pays any psychological, let alone philosophical or artistic, regard to the individuality of the child."²⁵ Spending time with children was probably considered as waste. An odd Talmud anecdote might tell of a scholar spending time with a child, but this is regarded as a waste of time ... R. Dosa b. Archinos said: "Morning sleep, mid-day wine, chattering with children and tarrying in places where men of the common people assemble, destroy a man."²⁶ Likewise, the principle of the innocence of children is alien to the OT. There was even a debate as to whether children sin already in the womb.²⁷ Radical judgements and acts of revenge which do not spare the child lead to conclusions of this kind (Is 13:16; Jer 6:11; 44:7; Ps 137:9). Verses like "Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock" (Ps 137:9), "Their infants will be dashed in pieces before their eyes..." (Is 13:16), and similar ones in Nahum 3:10 bear witness to the extreme cruelty to children in the biblical times, having no regard for their innocence.²⁸ Such cruel treatment was meted out to Israelites by their enemies (cf. 2Kgs 8:7-13), and Israelites on their part pray and wish the same to the enemies revengefully. On both sides, children are among the victims of cruelty.

The high estimation and expectation of the Messianic Child, which is not peculiar to the Old Testament,²⁹ present a

²³ Cf. Joseph A. Grassi, "Child, Children," in David Noel Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, New York: Doubleday, 1992, 904. Cf. also Oepke, *παις κτλ.*, 645.

²⁴ Joseph A. Grassi, "Child, Children," 905.

²⁵ Oepke, *παις κτλ.*, 646.

²⁶ as cited in *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 647.

²⁸ cf. Samuel Rayan, "Serve the Younger," 167-178.

²⁹ The idea of the wonder child 'divinely descended child' comes from a Hellenistic author, Virgil. Cf. *ibid.*, 641. Cf. also Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*, New York: Doubleday, An Image Book, 1979, 564-565.

bright side of childhood. "A future *child* of David's line will be the hope of his people despite much suffering."³⁰ But it cannot be counted as general high estimation of children.

2. Hellenistic Tradition

It is said that a formal rediscovery of the child took place in Hellenism.³¹ Poetry, drama and art began, though in part, to acquire a closer relation to the child.³² The childhood (boyhood) of great people found place in art. Children were depicted as imitating the adults. "But the taste is sentimental and perverse. The rich surround themselves with *deliciae*. ... slave children amuse the carousing guests with impertinences, smooth the churned up floor of the arena, and are even torn to pieces by beasts."³³ The so called rediscovery of the child was to a great extent for the benefits of the rich adults.

With regard to the innocence of the child, the antiquity already from Hellenism attached the original sin and guilt with the child.³⁴ In the strict sense, the innocence of childhood could find no place. Moreover, antiquity primarily sees in the child the element of immaturity and childishness. They could easily be frightened. As in the OT, here too strenuous educative effort was considered as the only way to get something out of the child. With this low estimation of the child, "there was no sense of limitation of the educator, no regard for the developing personality, no profound love for the child, even in the later period."³⁵

The only place where a few children enjoyed some high estimation was the sphere of religion. Children were used in the cults and magic. In many Greek cults priestly functions were

³⁰ Joseph A. Grassi, "Child, Children," 904. Cf. also the author's citation of Is 7:14,16; 9:16.

³¹ Oepke, *παις κτλ.*, 640-641.

³² Cf. *ibid.* for references from Homer and Vergil.

³³ *Ibid.*, 641.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 642.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 643.

discharged by children alone to ensure the chastity of the minister and the ministry of priestly children was highly esteemed.³⁶

In short, both the Hellenistic and Old Testament Judaic tradition did not accord any privileged position for children that can be compared with the Tamil tradition.

3.3. In the Gospels

Children find a definite place in the synoptic gospels more than in the rest of the books of the New Testament. The gospels of Matthew and Luke contain something of the childhood of Jesus and all the three synoptic gospels record the role of children in Jesus' life and ministry. This fact can be studied at two levels: first, the portrayal of Jesus himself as a child and the second, the place of children in the life and ministry of Jesus. John uses the term children only metaphorically, and hence it is out of our perspective.

3.3.1. Jesus the Child

While there are many narratives on the childhood of Jesus in several apocryphal literature like the *Protoevangelium of James*, *Gospel of Thomas*, etc., in the canonical books we find the infancy narratives only in the gospels according to Matthew (1-2) and Luke (1-2). Biblical scholars are certain that these narratives are rather the 'vehicles of the evangelist's theology'³⁷ than historical facts. "Many scholars today would argue that this tradition may be more influenced by post-Easter faith rather than by historical incident, bearing witness that Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph was also the Son of God."³⁸ "Whether or not the infancy narratives were historical, whether or not they were based on eyewitness testimony, whether or not they had a pre-Gospel existence, Matthew and Luke thought they were appropriate introductions to

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 37.

³⁸ S.C. Barton, "Child, Children," in Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (eds), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1992, 101.

the career and significance of Jesus."³⁹ We shall highlight how the child Jesus is depicted in these narratives.

In the gospel of Matthew, we do not see anything of the childhood activities of Jesus. What we find are: a genealogy of Jesus which in its very beginning introduces Jesus as "*Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham*" (Mt 1:1-17); the events that took place on the occasion of Jesus' birth: the fact that Mary was conceived (1: 18); Joseph's dilemma (1:19); the angel's words to Joseph (1:20-24); Joseph's acceptance of Mary (1:25); birth of Jesus (1:25); the star and the coming of the Wise Men from the East (2:1-12); Jesus' flight to Egypt (2:13-15); Herod's killing of the babies and the mourning of the mothers (2:16-18); Jesus' return to Nazareth (2:19-23).

There are deep theological implications to each of these episodes.⁴⁰ Three factors draw our attention: the first is the effort of Joseph and Mary to protect the baby Jesus from Herod; the second is the massacre of children by Herod; and the third is the mourning of the mothers. All these three factors are connected with the same event: Herod's effort to do away with the child Jesus. On the one side, we see the cruelty of the head of a nation even to innocent children to safeguard his selfish interests. On the other side we see the efforts of Joseph and Mary to save Jesus and the tender love the mothers had for their babies expressed through their mourning. According to scholars, these events have more theological meaning connected with history of Israel.⁴¹ Anyhow, the evangelist has used the concept of child even if metaphorically.

The Matthean account of the infancy leads to some reflections. First, in this account of the childhood of Jesus, Jesus has no active part to play because this account is concerned only with the first two years of the child. Luke, on the contrary, extends the age up to twelve years (Lk 2:42). Joseph and Mary had to protect him. Of course, the age of Jesus when he returned from

³⁹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 38.

⁴⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 57-232 for a detailed study.

⁴¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 213-219.

Egypt is not mentioned. As a child, Jesus is portrayed in the gospel according to Matthew, as a passive receiver of any treatment. The gospel narrative brings out the helplessness and total dependency of the child Jesus for his survival.

Luke's account contains not only the childhood of Jesus, but also that of John the Baptist. Scholars have found a clear parallelism in the narrations between the two characters.⁴² The narrative includes: the annunciation of the birth of John the Baptist and the happiness of his mother Elizabeth (Lk 1:5-23); the annunciation of the birth of Jesus Christ (1:26-35); the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth and the connected events including the *Magnificat* (1:36-56); The birth of John the Baptist and the *Benedictus* (1:57-80); the birth of Jesus (2:1-7); announcement to the shepherds and the angels' song (2:8-14); The shepherds' visit to the baby Jesus (2:14-20); circumcision, naming, presentation in the Temple and the song of Simeon (2:21-24) and finding of boy Jesus in the Temple (2:41-52).

Luke's account of the childhood of Jesus extends up to his twelfth year, that is, till the end of childhood, and we find some active role that the boy Jesus played. Luke has dedicated half of the infancy narrative section (chapter 1) to the preparation for the birth of Jesus. Only in the second chapter, matters pertaining to the child – the birth, the shepherds' visit, circumcision etc., and finally one particular event from the boyhood of Jesus – are found. It is the last part that interests us. One can note three elements in Jesus' boyhood character depicted in this section: first, his eagerness to be in the "Father's house" (2:49) among the "teachers, listening to them and asking them questions" (2:46); secondly, the brilliance of the boy Jesus which was a matter of amazement to the teachers (cf. 2: 47); thirdly, the boy's obedience to his parents (2:51).

3.3.2. Jesus and Children

For a Christian theological reflection on children the main focus of attention falls on Jesus' attitude towards children that is expressed through his words and actions. Unlike the Jewish

⁴² Cf. *ibid.*, 248-253.

religious leaders who apparently did not have high estimation of children and who could have possibly avoided them, Jesus sets a new trend with regard to the understanding of children. The most important episode that reveals Jesus' attitude towards children is his act of blessing them which is recorded in all the three synoptic gospels (Mt 19: 13-15; Mk 10:13-16; Lk 18:15-17).

This episode portrays the contrast between the attitude of the disciples and that of Jesus towards children. While the parents brought their children to Jesus so that he might touch them, the disciples *rebuke* the parents. Commentators have tried to find the reason for this action of the disciples: (1) Jesus was tired and the disciples would not have any one to disturb him;⁴³ (2) Children were too young to come to a master and make responsible commitment;⁴⁴ (3) Sick people were usually brought to Jesus so that he might touch them and heal them, whereas in this case, the disciples might have seen the action of the parents as an interruption in their time with Jesus with their unreasonable demand to touch their children while they were perfectly well;⁴⁵ (4) Jesus was becoming increasingly aware of his suffering and death which is to come and obviously the disciples were also disturbed and therefore they wanted to protect him from any kind of botheration.⁴⁶ But one cannot exclude the possibility of the disciples having the antique Jewish mind that chattering and spending time with children was waste of time and unbecoming of a rabbi.

The response of Jesus in this situation is distinctly different. He becomes indignant (Mk 10:14) with the disciples. Jesus showed much patience with his disciples even when they completely misunderstood his words, deeds and objectives. But at

⁴³ Cf. C. Brown, *παῖς*, *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. I, Grand Rapids, The Zondervan Corp., 1975, 283-285.

⁴⁴ Cf. *ibid.*

⁴⁵ Cf. Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel According to St. Mathew*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1982, 262.

⁴⁶ Cf. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1974, first print 1954, 249-250.

certain circumstances he got angry with them. One typical instance is Mt 16:23, where Jesus uses strong words to Peter when the latter expressed his opinion against the acceptance of suffering and death. Likewise, he becomes indignant with the disciples when they hinder the children from being brought to him. Being with Jesus, the disciples should have at least learnt that children and the powerless society that they represent were always welcome in the presence of Jesus and God.

The subsequent words of Jesus show the highest estimation Jesus had for children: "for to such belongs the kingdom of God". Jesus presents children as models of the recipients of the Kingdom of God – the only project of his life and ministry. Elsewhere also Jesus presents children as models of the same. When the disciples asked who would be the greater in the kingdom, Jesus, "calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them, and said, 'Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven'" (Mt 18:2-4; cf. also Mk 9:35-36; Lk 9:46-47). Mark and Luke have added the saying of Jesus in the episode of the blessing of children. Jesus continues with the importance of receiving children to the extent of identifying himself with them as he identified himself with the "least of brethren" who were the needy, the hungry and thirsty, the suffering, etc. (cf. Mt 25:31-46).

Various reasons are given by commentators as to why Jesus presented children as the models for the recipients of the Kingdom of God. First of all, his own words show that children are humble (Mt 18:4). So Jesus gives importance to the childhood character of humility and gentleness.⁴⁷ William Barclay finds four reasons including humility in which pride, prestige and self importance are absent; obedience and natural instinct to obey where pride and false independence find no place; trust expressed in acceptance of authority and confidence in others without any

⁴⁷ Cf. S.C. Barton, "Child, Children," 101; W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, vol. iii, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997, 35-36.

suspicion on the world and the short memory of the child which does not allow to keep grudges or bitterness.⁴⁸ Joseph A. Fitzmyer comments on the Lukan account of this episode (18:15-17):

... to these minors in human society a share in the Kingdom of God is destined. The added saying in v. 17 draws still another lesson from the presence of such little ones: They are to be recognised not only as members of the kingdom, but as models for adults who would like to accept it. Without saying so explicitly, Jesus is thus extolling the openness and sheer receptivity of these tiny human beings. Their freshness, their lack of claim to achievement are what is being held up to adults accosted by the message of the Kingdom. The little child ... thus becomes the symbol of the ideal entrant into the Kingdom.⁴⁹

Still another reason for the preference for children by Jesus is their helplessness and total dependence. "The child's littleness, immaturity and need of assistance, though commonly disparaged, keep the way open for the fatherly love of God, whereas grown-ups so often block it."⁵⁰ Anthony de Mello finds a sense of marvel, wonder and absorption in children, a spiritual disposition, which helps them to enter into the Kingdom. "This is the prerogative of children. They are often in a state of wonder. So they easily slip into the Kingdom."⁵¹ Also "this kind of absorption one sees in little children. They are close to the Kingdom."⁵² By presenting children as the models of the recipients of the Kingdom, Jesus opposes to the low estimation of children common among his people.⁵³

The next point that has to be highlighted is the action of Jesus – taking children in his arms and blessing them. This reveals the deep love and affection Jesus had for children. Some authors

⁴⁸ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, 250.

⁴⁹ Joseph a Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke X-XXIV*, New York: Doubleday, The Anchor Bible, 1985, 1193.

⁵⁰ Οερκε, *παις κτλ.*, 649.

⁵¹ Anthony de Mello, *The Song of the Bird*, Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1988, 19.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵³ Cf. Οερκε, *παις κτλ.*, 649.

see the taking of a child in arms as part of the adoption ritual.⁵⁴ Laying hands and blessing was common among the Jews.⁵⁵ As already seen, parents blessed their children before their death. In the NT, laying of hands is done for many reasons: (1) healing (Mk 1:31, 41; 5:23; 6:5; 9:27; 16:18; Lk 13:13; 14:4; Acts 3:7; 5:12, 15; 9:11; 28:8); (2) blessing (Mt 19:13); (3) visible sign of imparting of the Holy Spirit at baptism (Acts 8:17) and (4) Institution of office (Acts 6:6; 13:1; 1Tim 1:18; 4:14; 2Tim 1:6).⁵⁶ In the gospels it meant healing and blessing when Jesus laid hands on somebody. Jesus so frequently laid his hands on those whom he healed, that the parents naturally thought that it would be an advantage to their children to have them touched by the great healer.⁵⁷ Children were so important for Jesus as they were to their parents that he not only laid his hands on them and blessed them against the expectation of the disciples, but also took them in his arms expressing his deep love and affection for them. Jesus' raising of the dead child (Mk 5:41-42 and par.), and healing of the possessed boy (Mk 9:25-27 and par.) bear witness to the attitude of Jesus towards children that they were not to be excluded from his ministry. They too had equal right to be healed by Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Childhood has been welcomed, appreciated, esteemed and celebrated in our Tamil society right from the times of *Caṅkam* literature and the unique literary genre *Piḷḷaittamiḷ* is also a living literature, in the sense that works of *Piḷḷaittamiḷ* are being produced till the present times. Jesus also gives great importance to children in his life and ministry and poses them as models of the recipients of his only project, that is the Kingdom. Still some pricking questions linger: why does the Tamil society, which is the possessor of a fine tradition of esteeming children highly, neglect children and subject them to so many injustices like child labour,

⁵⁴ Joseph A. Grassi, "Child, Children," 905.

⁵⁵ Cf. I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke. A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1978, 681-682.

⁵⁶ Cf. Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary*, 261.

⁵⁷ Cf. *ibid.*

female infanticide, and so on? Why do the followers of Christ not give children more importance in their theological thinking and pastoral planning? What insights can be gathered from literatures like *Pillaittamil* for theological and social thinking? Finally what should be our Christian answer to children who gaze upon us pleading for protection and justice?

The response to these questions should be comprehensive comprising theological, social, psychological, historical, literary and cultural factors. For instance, many of the insights and implications of *Pillaittamil* literature can give us ample material for theologising on children and childhood. Contemporary events that occur to a major part of Third World children, a growing concern for children promoted by organisations like UNICEF and the world-wide awareness regarding them in other areas like psychology, education, etc., can also help us in this venture. Above all Jesus' attitude towards children that goes radically against the concept of his contemporaries is a guiding principle. Anyhow, emergence of a theology of children and childhood is a need of the time. It should have the child's perspective – how the child sees the world, their sufferings, etc. Likewise, giving sufficient care for the formation programmes of children and conscientisation of the grown-ups in favour of children in the pastoral planning in the parishes, dioceses and other structures of the Church also is equally and vitally important. All these efforts should lead to the eradication of child labour, female infanticide, neglect of children, child abuse, etc., and help to prepare a more conducive atmosphere for all children to develop, grow and prosper in a fitting manner. We, the Tamil Christians, who have a double background of respecting children, have this unavoidable task. In the literary world, a new genre of *Pillaittamil* literature that would highlight the present conditions of underprivileged children should emerge. If the traditional grammar does not allow such efforts, a new grammar for a new *Pillaittamil* should be made.

If such efforts are taken, we can be certain that celebration of childhood will remain not only a legend of olden days but also become a fact of today in our society.