



The Sophia Hilton Foundation of Canada, Animation, Artwork, and Storytelling, *The Legend of Ponnivala*

Ontario: Ponnivala Productions, 2014. 650 minutes. Color. Available at www.ponnivala.com. \$8.99 per month (non-educational); free (educational).

THE LEGEND OF PONNIVALA, beautifully animated in twenty-six episodes running twenty-five minutes each, brings to life the Tamil bardic epic known as “Annamar Katai” (*añṇamār katai*) or the “Elder Brothers’ Story.” First recorded by anthropologist Brenda E. F. Beck in 1965 during fieldwork in the region of Konkunadu (Dr. Beck has been the driving force behind the production of the video and associated teaching materials), *The Legend of Ponnivala* is an epic saga of love, adventure, heroism, divine intervention, and magic, featuring the ruling family of Ponnivala (*ponnivala*) across three generations. Easily accessible online in both English and Tamil (free of charge to educators), *The Legend of Ponnivala* offers rich and compelling opportunities to introduce students at all levels to South Asian folklore, religious thought, social practice, history, and ethics.

The story begins as the great goddess, Parvati, creates nine brothers to cultivate the land. Famine strikes, and one brother, Kolatta, entreats the Cola king for help; he and his wife are thereby granted land in Ponnivala that prospers under their care. Famine strikes yet again, and Kolatta builds a spiked fence to keep ravenous cattle from destroying all his crops. Many cows are killed as they attempt to leap over the fence, and Parvati’s divine husband, Shiva, curses the family to childlessness for seven generations for the killing of so many sacred cows. Shiva’s divine counterpart, Vishnu, convinces him to give the couple a baby, but both parents die when the child, Kunnutaiya, is only five years old. After enduring a childhood of wandering and cruel treatment by his uncles, eventually Kunnutaiya returns to Ponnivala with his wife, Tamarai; after many years of struggle, they

successfully rebuild the kingdom. The king and his queen make the long journey to the gates of heaven to plead with Shiva to release them from the curse of barrenness for seven generations; Tamarai meditates for twenty-one years. Convinced of her worthiness, Shiva grants Tamarai three children: two sons, Ponnar and Cankar, and a daughter, Tankai. A fourth (male) child, Campukan, is granted to another woman of Ponnivala as an eventual aide to the young princes. Family tensions erupt once again, and the goddess Cellatta must hide the boys away from their male kinsman for five years until they are able to claim their rightful place as heirs to the kingdom. The warrior-kings then engage in a great battle with hunters of the forest, with victory achieved only after the palace dog, Ponnacci, bites and kills the great forest boar, Kompan. Realizing that their lives are nearing their natural ends, the brothers fall on their swords in a final act of sacrifice, and their devoted servant, Campukan, follows their example. Their loving sister, with the help of the heroic palace dog, performs the final funerary rites for her brothers and follows them to heaven.

Each episode begins with a visual reference to the bards reciting the epic story, and each episode, in turn, offers a discrete segment of the narrative in visually rich imagery evocative of its medieval setting. Numerous resources for productively using *The Legend of Ponnivala* with students of all ages are available on the website noted above, as are hard copies of the same for a nominal fee, including a *Teacher's Handbook* (outlining themes, indexing episodes, and explaining a video game known as “Ponnivala Parcheesi”); unit plans based on grade level; the complete story in graphic novel form (in either English or Tamil); and additional articles and scholarly resources on the epic. Most are designed for K-12 students, but college instructors may well find the additional resources valuable for the further background information provided and for locating specific episodes to use in class.

D. Nageshwar's animation of the Ponnivala story is enchanting throughout, and visual consistencies among characters and settings allow for easy recognition across a long and complex narrative. The story itself is fascinating, and makes easily accessible to English-speaking audiences an oral tradition of bardic performance now rapidly disappearing in South Asia. For those interested in using the Tamil resources for language instruction, both the animated episodes and the graphic novels are spoken and written in clear, grammatically precise forms that would be useful for Tamil-language learners at the intermediate level or beyond. While the full epic is lengthy, individual episodes largely map onto discrete narrative units, and the supplemental teaching materials, as above, are helpful for locating specific themes and settings. The epic provides particularly rich material for consideration of family relationships and obligations, the nature of divine-human encounters, tensions between king and subject, no less between agriculturalist and forest-dweller, and parallels with such better-known epic narratives as the *Mahabharata*. One might have wished for a bit more information on the specifics of performance among bards in Konkunadu (presumably it is an actual *avṇṇamār katai* recorded performance in the background of the final scene with the animated bards), but that is a minor complaint, indeed, about such a valuable educational resource freely available for use in the classroom.

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