

THIRUVACAGAM

G.U. Pope*

The English translation of *Tiruvacagam* was done by G.U. Pope (1820-1908) when he was in the eighties of his age. In other words, a Christian missionary got himself enraptured by the sweetness and piety of that Hindu hymnology. His opinions and comments of that devotional literature are reproduced here.

It has been repeatedly asked, 'Of what possible use can the republication, translation, and editing of books like the *Tiruvacagam* be?' - and, 'Who can be expected to desire to make themselves acquainted with such works?' This consideration has delayed the publication for some time; and it is not at all to be anticipated that the circulation of the book, at least in Europe, will, for some time to come, be encouraging. Still, this is a work that ought to be done! If the Tamil people and the English are ever in any degree to understand one another, and the English are ever in any degree to understand one another, and to appreciate each other's thoughts and feelings regarding the highest matters; if any progress is to be made in the development of a real science of Hinduism, as it now is, our English people must have the means of obtaining some insight into the living system which exercises at the present day such a marvelous power over the minds of the great majority of the best Tamil people.

For, under some form or other, Caivism is the real religion of the South of India, and of North Ceylon; and the Caiva Siddhanta philosophy has, and deserves to have, far more influence than any other. The fifty - one poems which are here edited, translated, and annotated, are recited daily in all the great Caiva temples of South India, are on every one's lips, and are as dear to the hearts of vast multitudes of excellent people there, as the *Palms of David* are to Jews and

* Source: *Tiruvacagam*, by G.Y.Pope, Oxford:Clarendon Press. 1900. pp. ix-xiv and xxxii-xxxvi.

Christians. The sacred mystic poetry of a people reveals their character and aspirations more truly than even their secular legends and ballads; for sacred hymns are continually sung by the devout of all ages, and both sexes and all classes of the community are saturated with their influence. The attentive consideration of the system here developed must lead to a sympathetic appreciation of what the hopes, fears, aspirations, and yearnings of the devoutest Hindu minds in the South are, and have been from time immemorial. I have occasionally ventured in notes to go beyond the province of editor and translator, and have criticized many things here and there; yet I feel quite sure that my kind and candid friends in South India will be in no danger of misunderstanding the spirit in which I have written. These are times when regard to all religious systems thorough rational investigation, searching historical criticism, and a careful candid consideration of the meaning of the symbols by which doctrines are supposed to be expressed, are quite necessary everywhere. The result of this searching, yet reverent, analysis has been and is, - ever more and more, - of the utmost value in the West. Whatever is TRUE will bear the test of the severest scrutiny, though men may feel obliged from time to time to modify the expressions of their belief, and to readjust their most cherished formulas. There is an evolution of religion. Meanwhile, TRUE DIVINE FAITH lives on, and grows more vigorously for the conflicts in which it is ever, of necessity, engaged.

It is much to be desired that our friends in South India should recognize this, and consent to enter upon a thorough scientific investigation of the historical foundations of their popular beliefs, the precise import of symbolical expressions, and the practical bearing of every portion of their wonderful 'Siddhantam'.

In matters of religion the greatest hindrance, - and the most truly irreligious thing, - is the spirit of ignorant, unreasoning, unsympathetic antagonism. Every system has its truths and profounder thoughts; and these lie deeper than 'full fathoms five' in man's nature; and must be fundamentally and essentially in large measure the same for all men, and for all time. It is only by recognizing these common truths, and making them the basis of inquiry, as to further alleged Divine communications, that it is possible to gain a true religious development.

Very many things celebrated in these remarkable poems are doubtless without even the shadow of historic foundation, but it is yet possible to feel a lively interest in some, at least, of them as poetic fancies. What seems graceful and touching to one people often excites laughter, or scorn, or even detestation, among others. So, in regard to symbols, it is quite certain that many expressions, figures of speech, and allegories, very dear to peoples in the West, have no significance what ever to those of the East. And very, very much that seems to Oriental mind edifying, is repellent to those of the West. Still, I think the time has really come when thoughtful and candid people may do much to remove the hindrances, that undoubtedly exist, to the closer union of the convictions and sentiments of devout men in East and West. I may add that nothing can be further from my purpose in this work, and more utterly distasteful to me, than theological controversy; and if in this work and one word of mine should give pain to any of my valued Tamil friend, I ask forgiveness in advance.

It seems also most desirable that all European whose lot it is to dwell in the Tamil lands, or who anywhere set themselves to benefit their Tamil fellow subjects, - and especially missionaries and teachers, - should take pains to know accurately the feelings and convictions for those for whom, and in the midst of whom, they work. For many years I have not ceased to say, - there in India, and here in Oxford, - to successive classes of students, 'You must learn not only to think in Tamil, but also to feel in Tamil, if you are to be intelligible and useful among the Tamil people.'

This publication (the fruit of much weary toil) may help, it is trusted, all who desire to be helped, along this certainly difficult road.

It must be confessed, moreover, that very earnestly wish also that my valued Tamil friends may be led to make the closer acquaintance of some of the magnificent collections of 'sacred poetry' existing in English. And this not only for the benefit (which must be great) of the individual student, but of Tamil literature. For no literature can stand alone.

I may safely take it for granted that my indulgent Tamil friends will not shrink from these Christian compositions., because they are full of the unstinted praises of Him Whom all acknowledge as the noblest, purest, best and most self – sacrificing of those who have worn the garment of our mortality, - any more than I have shrunk from long and appreciative study of poems containing very much

with which I can have but scanty sympathy. 'Scrutinize all things; hold fast that which is good!

I may add that my experience as a translator has taught me that to get even a glimpse of thought of a real poet, the student must often go down into the depths, must use every means to put himself in sympathy with his author, must learn to think and feel with him, and so – it may be – at least come to understand him.

Some German and Latin hymns were translated 50 years ago by that wonderful Tamil scholar and poetic genius, the missionary Fabricius; and '*Fabricius hymn book*' has been, and deserved to be, the basis of nearly all the Christian Tamil hymnology. Though it is hardly classical, it is so vigorous and real in its tone, that it does not seem likely ever to lose its hold upon the affections of the Tamil Christian community. Nevertheless it is to be earnestly desired that the transfusion of much great European and sacred poetry into popular, easy, rhythmic Tamil verse resembling that of Manikka Vacagar, should be attempted. If a foreigner has bestowed infinite pains (would that it had been with greater results!) on the study of the *Tiruvacagam*, perhaps some of the native scholars of South India, versed in English and Tamil, may be induced to inquire whether they cannot find fitting material for study, imitation, and translation in that inexhaustible mine of beauty and profound thought which is opened up in English sacred verse, from the Hebrew psalms down to the Christian poetry of the present day. Nothing of this sort can be expected to live and be effective among a people if not expressed in their own vernacular language, the 'vulgar tongue', 'in which they were born'.

The speech of a dying people may, perhaps, be allowed to die; but this cannot be said of the Tamil race. Heaven forbid! .

Dead languages have great uses. 'Even in their ashes live their wonted fires'. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*,! – yet, in many ways, the living tongues are better. One cannot tell what flowers may yet bloom, what fruits may yet ripen, on the hardy old trees. Let Tamilians cease to be ashamed of their vernacular!.

The work of translation was here and there difficult, and I had to compare a great number of similar verses to get at the meaning. An anonymous scholar, who has written the only commentary I know on the *Tiruvacagam*, confesses himself at a loss to explain, among others, Poems I – IV . I have altered a few

things in accordance with his interpretations, but have often seen reasons for differing. This work is very able and learned.

Generally my translation runs line for line with the original, and preserves something of its rhythm, where this did not interfere with fidelity to the sense, Of the *Tiruvacagam* itself nothing need be added to what is elsewhere said.

Some years ago, when this publication was hardly projected, one evening, after prayers, the writer was walking with the late Master of Balliol College in the quadrangle. The conversation turned upon Tamil legends, poetry and philosophy. At length, during a pause in the conversation, the Master said in a quick way peculiar to him, 'You must print it.' To this the natural answer was, 'Master!' I have no patent of immortality, and the work would take very long ' I can see him now, as he turned round, - while the moonlight fell upon his white hair and kindly face, - and laid his hand upon my shoulder, saying, 'To have a great work in progress is the way to live so then, though the words have often come to my mind as a prophecy, encouraging me when weary; and they have been fulfilled, while he has passed out of sight.

Rapture, and committed to memory in every Caiva temple by the people, amongst whom it is a traditional saying, that 'he whose heart is not melted by the *Tiruvacagam* must have a stone for a heart'. It is probable that a portion of the lyrics is of later date. It is scarcely possible to determine what sands of truth have been brought down in these traditions, and it is very hard indeed to say how much of their undoubted beauty and symbolic truth is due to influences (historically quite probable) from foreign sources; but it is impossible to read the poems without feeling that the sage of Tiru – Vathavur was a sincere seeker after God, whom, in ways that he then knew not of, he has since been permitted to know and worship.

The success of Manikka Vacagar in reviving Caivism, which seems to have been then almost extinct, was immediate, and we may say permanent; for, although there was a period of declension, when the Jain and Buddhist systems again became very prevalent, there arose another set of devotees who must be looked upon as his disciples, though, curiously enough, scarcely any reference to him is found in their writings. From his time dates the foundation of that vast multitude of Caiva shrines that constitute a peculiar feature of the Tamil country.

In considering the causes of his success, I feel inclined to set aside all stories of persecution carried on at his instigation. These belong, it appears to me,

to a later period, his own personal devotion and fervour of spirit made him an altogether irresistible apostle of his faith. I see no evidence of anything like it in the after times. He went about testifying that he had seen Civan in Perunturrai, and had then and there passed from darkness to light. He thus declared to all what he fully believed himself to have seen and handled. He was an enthusiast, but absolutely sincere. The doctrines that he taught will abundantly appear from an attentive consideration of his disputes with the Buddhist gurus. He taught the people that there was one supreme personal God, - no mere metaphysical abstraction, but the Lord of gods and men. He also taught that it was the gracious will of Civan to assume humanity, to come to earth as a guru, and to make disciples of those who sought Him with adequate preparation. He announced that this way of salvation was open to all classes of the community. He also taught very emphatically the immortality of the released soul - its conscious immortality - as he said that the virtual death of the soul which Buddhism teaches is not its release. It will be seen how very near in some not unimportant respects the Caiva system approximates to Christianity; and yet some of the corruptions to which it has led, by what almost seems a necessity, are amongst the most deplorable superstitions anywhere to be found. Here the truth of the old maxim is abundantly verified, '*Corruptio optimi pessima*'.

Again, the Caivites led the way in the propagation of their system by means of popular songs. Any one who compares the fervid piety of our sage's very beautiful, and generally very simple, lyrics will feel with what force they must have struck the chord that vibrated then as it vibrates still in millions of hearts. 'One touch of nature makes the whole world kin, and no one can read the sage's verses without profound emotion. Scarcely ever has the longing of the human soul for purity and peace and divine fellowship found worthier expression.

In considering the poetry of Tiru Manikka Vacagar, the Tamil student must feel its superiority to all the vast collections of the Devaram, although the authors of some of these enjoy perhaps a wider popularity among the Tamil people. Version can of course give nothing but the very faintest idea of the earnestness and grace of the sage's hymns. They cannot be rendered into simple prose without entirely misrepresenting them, and to put them rigidly into metre would involve a sacrifice of exactness in the rendering in this translation they are given line for line, and almost word for word, in language answering, as nearly as I know how to shape it, to the tone and manner of the Tamil originals. I find

this the way in which I can produce the most literal version. It is quite certain that the influence of these poems in South India is like that of the Psalms among Christians, and that they have touched for generations the hearts of the vast majority of the Tamil speaking people. There is in them a strange combination of lofty feeling and spirituality with what we must pronounce to be the grossest idolatry. And this leads to the thought that in the Caiva system of to – day, two things that would appear to be mutually destructive are found to flourish together, and even to strengthen one another. The more philosophical and refined the Caivite becomes, the more enthusiastic does he often appears to be in the performance of the incongruous rites of the popular worship. In general, Caivites pay peculiar adoration to two distinct idols, leaving out of question Ganeca and Suppiramanaya, the so – called sons of Civan. These two symbols are first the ‘lingam’ with the lingi, and secondly the image of Civan accompanied with Uma, whose form is generally combined into one with his. These really represent one idea, Civan and Catti, the god and the energy that is inseparable from him. Which combine to create, sustain, and destroy the phenomenal Universe.

It is sometime thought and said that the idols in these temples are mere signs, representing a symbols the Divine Being and some of His works and attributes. This is not altogether an adequate statement of the case. Each image by a peculiar service, which is called *Avaganam* (Sans. *Avaganam* = bringing unto) becomes the permanent abode of an indwelling deity, and is itself divine. The worshippers, as will be seen in our legends, seem to believe that the images of the god consume the food presented to them,. And are strengthened and refreshed by it. These images are treated and spoken of as living and sentient beings. They are seen to smile, to lift up hands to bless, to move from place to place, and to issue audible commands.’ Devout and enthusiastic worshippers amid the glare of the lamps and the smoke of the incense seem to be carried away so as to entirely identify the invisible object of their thoughts with that which is presented before their eyes. It was certainly so with our poet. If it be remembered that some of these images have been actually worshipped, tended, garlanded, and treated as human beings, for a thousand years; that each generation has done them service and lavished gifts upon them, that they are connected by association with long lines of saints and sages; and that it is earnestly believed that, Civan’s method of gracious manifestation is by, and through, and in these, - as what we should call sacraments of his perpetual

presence, - we shall understand with what profound awe and enthusiastic affection even images, to us most unsightly, can be beheld by multitudes of good and excellent people.

And so somehow the error and folly and idolatry often seem to be but the poetic accompaniments of what is mainly most worthy.

Once for all it, is necessary to state that the influence of the *Bhagavad – Gita* is to be traced in every part of Manikka Vacagar's poems. Civan takes the place of Krishna, and great deal, which I cannot help regarding as of exceeding value, is added, while much unbecoming and obsolete (I must be pardoned for a candid expression of feeling) Pauranic mythology and legend is dragged in, as simple poetic embellishment designed to please the multitude. I should advise every student of this Tamil work to compare it even verbally with that greatest of Sanskrit productions.

The Jain compositions were clever, pointed, elegant, full of satire and worldly wisdom, epigrammatic, but religious; for in the Naladiyar's four hundred quatrains there is no mention of God. Even in the sublime Kural's thirteen hundred and thirty couplets there are but ten which speak of Divine Being. The effect therefore of these songs – full of a living faith and devotion – was great and instantaneous. South India needed a personal God, an assurance of immortality, and a call to prayer. These it found in Manikka Vacagar's compositions.
