

WESTERNERS AND THE TAMIL LANGUAGE

K.R.Vadivale*

Strictly speaking, this article is partially relevant to the topic but it highlights how far *Thirukkural*, an ethical treatise has been rendered into European languages. The last paragraph gives brief but comprehensive details of Tamil studies all over the world.

In about 1730 AD, the Tamil *Thirukkural* was translated into Latin by Fr.Beschi, one of the greatest European Tamil scholars. Rev. Beschi an Italian Christian missionary who came to India learnt Tamil grammars and literature to carry on his missionary work. He wore saffron dress like *sadhus* and assumed the Tamil name Veeramamunivar. He composed the story of Jesus Christ in the form of an epic poem in the name *Thembavani*. He also wrote a *prabandham* called "*Kavalur Kalambagam*" and a grammatical treatise "*Thonnool*". He also wrote "*Vedhiyar Ozukkam*" and "*Paramarthaguru*".

Tamil is the most ancient of the languages now spoken in India and belongs to the Dravidian family comprised of 23 languages. These languages are spoken mainly in the southern part of India as well as in a few regions of central and northern parts of India. The Bruhui language of the Dravidian group is spoken at present in the Baluchistan region of Pakistan near the river Sindhu. Excavations at Harappa and Mohanjadaro in this region evidence the ancientness of the Dravidian languages to 5000 B.C. The word Dravidian also originates from the word Thamil. The other classical languages of the world are Latin, Hebrew, Greek, and Sanskrit. All of these languages contain Tamil words. This shows the antiquity of Tamil. Further these languages are not spoken today. There are a number of Tamil words found even in English, for example the English words

* K.R.Vadivale (CIBC Mellon- Toronto-CANADA) Wednesday, December 2,2009 at 11:39 pm
Source: http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=188363759709

mango, cash, curry, catamaran, coir, coolie to name a few, have Tamil origin. Tamil is recognized today as the earliest language possessing an unbroken history of literary production for the past twenty centuries. In the earliest times all Tamil literary works were composed in poetic form. All books were written in verse.

Tamil has its own independent script and literary history dating back from the early pre Christian era. There are 247 characters in the Tamil script, which may be condensed to 38-40. With little change over the centuries literate readers can easily follow the ancient works today. Christian missionaries working in South India and Sri Lanka introduced printing and simplified Tamil prose writing only in the eighteenth century.

The meaning of the word Tamil is sweet, beauty and naturalness. This word occurs in the *Tholkappiam*, the earliest text written in Tamil. *Tholkappiam* is a grammatical work belonging to the third century B.C. In the ancient literature the word Tamil also denotes the race, country, people and army. Tamil is rich in vocabulary showing subtle and minute differences in meaning. For example, the word *vaaymai* denotes truth by words. The word *unmai* denotes truth by mind (thought) while the word *meymai* stands for truth by body (action). There are seven words in Tamil to denote various stages of flower from bud to dry flower. – *wiz, arumpu, mottu, mukai, malar, alar, vii, and cemmam*.

Many books become obsolete during the lifetime of the author, some after a century; some others after a few centuries; but obsolete they do become. *Thirukkural* as a book that deals with 'the Art of Living', is gaining increasing acceptance. It consists of thousand three hundred and thirty couplets called *Kurals* each being an epigram, simple, forcible and at the same time captivating. It is said to occupy in the literature of world a place comparable to the Confucian analects, Plato's dialogues, Aristotle's ethics and Seneca's writings. The author of this great work Thiruvalluvar lived between the third and the first century B.C. During this period, Tamil Nadu had wide international contacts with countries ranging from Egypt, Greece, and Rome in the west, Burma, Malaysia, and China in the east. A representative of the Pandya King attended the coronation of Emperor Augustus in Rome, as mentioned by Strabo, a Greek who wrote his Geography in the first century AD.

An arrestingly astute couplet of the poet was explained in English to Dr.Graul, a great German Scholar; and he was so much taken with it that he

learned the Tamil language in order to enjoy Kural in the original and then proceeded to translate it into German in 1854 and into Latin in 1856. After translating a good portion of the *Thirukkural*, Dr. Graul declared, "No translation can convey any idea of its charming effect. It is truly an apple of gold in a network of silver". Scholars who have studied it in western translations (of which several exist) have been impressed by its universal appeal. Albert Schweitzer who read it in German translation says in his book *Indian Thought and Development* (1951) "there hardly exists in the literature of the world a book of lofty maxims". M. Ariel, a great French Savant, translated in 1848 some fragments of the *Kural* into French and he referred to an earlier French translation of the *Kural* made by some unknown author in 1730 AD and kept in the Bibliotheque Nationale of France. It may perhaps be relevant to recapture the assessment of M. Ariel, who says: "that which above all is wonderful in the *Kural* is the fact that its author addresses himself without regard to castes, peoples, or beliefs, to the whole community of mankind, that he formulates sovereign morality and absolute reason; that he proclaims in their eternal abstractness, virtue and truth; that it presents, as it were, in one group, the highest laws of domestic and social life; that he is equally perfect in thought, in language and in poetry, in the austere metaphysical contemplation of the great mysteries of the Divine nature as in the easy and graceful analysis of the tenderest emotions of the heart". The following observations of Rev. Dr. G. U. Pope, who translated the *Kural* into English in 1886, deserve mention: "It is certainly not an anthology but the perfect and most elaborate work of one master". There was a notion among the European Christian Missionaries that humility, charity, and forgiveness of injuries are virtues, which have not been preached by non-Christian nations. He exploded this prejudice and observed, "Grant says that humility, charity and forgiveness of injuries are not described by Aristotle. Now these three are everywhere forcibly inculcated by this Tamil moralist (Thiruvalluvar).

Rev. Dr. J. Lazarus, a missionary himself, proclaimed, "The *Kural* cannot be improved nor its plan made more perfect. It is a perfect mosaic in itself. A slight change in the size, shape or color of a single stone would mar the beauty of the whole. It is refreshing to think that a Nation, which has produced so great a man and so unique a work, cannot be a hopeless despicable race. The morality he preached could not have grown except out of an essentially moral soil". Rev. Percival, a perceptive English critic, proclaimed; "nothing certainly in the whole compass of human language can equal the force and terseness of the sententious

distiches in which the author conveys the lessons of wisdom he utters". It is, therefore, no surprise that *Thirukkural* is the most translated of the Tamil works. It has been translated into Latin, German, French, Dutch, Finish, Polish, Russian, Chinese, Fiji, Malay, and Burmese and into such Indian languages as Sanskrit, Urdu, Marathi, Bengali, Hindi, Telugu, and Malayalam. There are in fact as many as eighty-two translations of the *Thirukkural* in foreign languages. Umarupulavar wrote the history of Nabigal Nayagam in epic form in the name "*Seerappuranam*". In Tamil not only literary works but also classics in the fields of Astrology, Medicine etc, were made in verse forms. Even dictionaries were written in verse. They were called the '*Nigandus*' (Thesauruses).

In 1862, Dr. M. Winslow, a Christian missionary in Tamil Nadu, compiled a comprehensive dictionary called the "*Winslow's Tamil and English Dictionary*", which has English meanings for 67,000 Tamil words embracing both the common and poetic dialects including principal astronomical, astrological, mythological, botanical, scientific and official terms as well as the names of many authors, poets, heroes and gods. Another famous poet in Tamil is Kambar (twelfth century A.D). His epic *Ramayanam* consists of more than ten thousand verses. The story is planned as the story of growing universal brotherhood and of a federation of kingdoms of love and justice ruled by ideal brothers without any distinction, caste etc.

Both as a geographically widespread Indian language, and as the language of groups of ethnic and sociological interest, Tamil came to be studied in the USA and Tamil language found a place in the teaching programs especially of the Universities of Pennsylvania, Chicago, Wisconsin, California, and Kansas state, and in the rotating summer school. The development of the South Asian Programmes in Universities assumed new proportions and coordinated the research of several scholars in different branches of Tamilology by the incorporation of the American Institute of Indian studies. This Institute has supported financially a number of scholars including R.E. Frykenberg, Burton Stein and Eugene F. Irschick to work on various aspects of Tamilology. In addition to Oxford, Cambridge, Leyden, and Uppsala, the Sudasien Institute in Heidelberg has a multidisciplinary programme, which includes various aspects of Tamil Studies and the teaching of Tamil at different levels. The University of Bonn, and the University of Stockholm also introduced Tamil. The works of the Leningrad and Moscow scholars, together with the pupils of Dr. Arno Lehman make the Eastern Europe conspicuous among schools, which contribute, to Tamil

Studies. Other countries like Australia, Canada, South America, Israel, Italy, Japan, and Philippines also developed active interest in Tamilology. The creation of the Department of Indian Studies in the University of Malaya with its South East Asian orientation, its emphasis on Tamil Studies and its schedule of publications is a turning point in the history of Tamil Studies.
