

BOOK REVIEW

Elaine Craddock, *Siva's Demon Devotee: Karaikkal Ammaiyar*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010, pages xii + 193; ISBN: 978-1-4384-3087-4.

This book is a scholarly study that penetrates into the ancient, medieval, and modern Tamil culture, literature, and religious nexus. The reader of the book would be attracted to author's systematic, precise and deep insight into Tamil Saiva tradition revolving around the life, work, and devotion of and devotion to *Karaikkal Ammaiyar*. *Karaikkal Ammaiyar* is a saintly Tamil poet who was the first to write a devotional poetry to Siva in Tamil language. The author deserves praise for his in-depth and painstaking effort both in integrating field (empirical) and academic (scholarly) research in order to comprehend Saiva tradition and the role of *Karaikkal Ammaiyar* in promoting this tradition. The reader is inspired and invited to go into the details about the uniqueness of Tamil culture and literature.

The first chapter focuses on the Tamil landscape and human behavior embedded in Tamil literature, especially in Tamil poetry. *Tolkappiyum*, later known as “*Cankam*” literature, and *Tirukkural* are the major Tamil literary works. These are long poems, which depict ancient Tamil culture and religious attitudes of the people of the time. They have *akam* and *puram* literary devices to cover the cultural and religious overtones of the milieu. The *akam* represents the love poetry and the *puram* represents the praise poetry in honour of heroes and kings. Nature and culture are not opposed to each other but together they give meaning. The geographical landscape is the map of human self; they reveal human emotions, thoughts, and desires. We see in the Tamil literature the fusion of North Indian and South Indian cultural and religious elements. The bhakti movement emerged in the North from Vedic traditions and flourished in the South. The *Saiva Sidhantha* originated in Central and North India and spread to South India by the work of Brahmins and Agamic school. Now it exists particularly in Tamil Nadu. While Agamic school gave emphasis to ritualism, the Tamil Saivism gave importance to devotion and spiritual knowledge. The *Sidhanta* upholds a dualistic philosophy where there exist Siva and individual souls; the individual souls achieve liberation through praising Siva by way of proper conduct, ritual actions, disciplined meditation on Siva, and, thus, by achieving supreme knowledge of Siva.

Tamil poetry consists of interplay between bhakti and philosophy. Karaikkal Ammaiyar introduced first post-classical meter in poetry, which is known as *kattalaik kalitturai*.

The second chapter goes deeper into *Karaikkal Ammaiyar's* poetry and its influence on a new emerging devotional community. This devotional community is not based on caste or gender but on devotion. Path becomes goal; devotion becomes liberation from karma and rebirth. We see in this chapter how devotion to Siva emerged in Tamil landscape. Siva was originally a Sanskrit god who was localized and was considered as a fitting response to other emerging religious traditions like Jainism and Buddhism. Ammaiyar's poetry synthesizes the themes of earlier *Cankam* poetry where the description of desolate places as the abode of powerful demons (powers personified) and cremation ground being a desolate place as a venue for dancing Siva to whom the devotees submit in worship. In short, Siva becomes the meeting point of awe and love.

The third chapter deals with the biographical and hagiographical details of Karaikkal Ammaiyar. She, originally named Punithavathi, was the wife of a rich merchant Paramatattan and an ardent devotee to Siva. A hungry Saiva devotee came to her residence one day. She gave the devotee one of the two mangoes that her husband had sent home to be kept for him. Later, when her husband came home she served him the other mango. The mango was very delicious and her husband asked for the other mango also to be served. As Punithavathi was in a dilemma, she prayed to Lord Siva and astonishingly by God's grace a mango appeared in her palm which she served immediately. This mango was more delicious than the first and the husband enquired about it and Punithavathi explained what had happened. The husband became afraid and considered her to be a woman with special powers. In fact, her devotion to Siva saved her from an embarrassing situation that would have made her husband suspicious of her honesty. Knowing eventually the supernatural powers of Punithavathi he left her and got settled with another family. Learning about this later developments Punithavathi dedicated completely to be the *pey* (devotee) of Siva. This chapter is developed from a strenuous work of the author collecting a variety of information about Ammaiyar from various sources, both written and oral traditions, and gave an authentic account of her life and devotion.

The fourth chapter deals with two towns associated with Karaikkal Ammaiyar. The first town Karaikkal is considered as the birth place of *Ammaiyar*. There is a temple that is dedicated to Ammaiyar which

arranges an annual mango festival commemorating the mango miracle that triggered Punithavathi's transformation to Karaikkal Ammaiyar. The other town is *Tiruvananthapuram*, which is associated with the Saiva tradition promoted by Ammaiyar. Ammaiyar, in her poetry, highlights the importance of this place as an arena to witness the dance of Siva. This chapter describes how Ammaiyar's devotion progressed as a path to her liberation. This chapter is a reflection of experience, imagination, and cultic elements associated with Ammaiyar.

The fifth chapter is dedicated to Ammaiyar's poetry itself. It is translated with annotations that would help the reader glimpse at the originality of her poetry. A reader would understand the poetry even if it is not in the original language.

Siva's Demon Devotee is a historical book as it gives a brief but sufficiently detailed background to Tamil landscape, culture, and religious allegiances. This is also a storybook where a reader is fascinated by the descriptive but captivating accounts of various mythological or legendary elements of cultural and religious heroes of Tamil Nadu. It may also be considered as a hagiographical or biographical work, as it portrays in detail the life and work of Karaikkal Ammaiyar, a celebrated Tamil poet-saint.

The unique and valuable contribution of Elaine Craddock is the escalation of the unique role of women with respect to devotion and literature from the historical and cultural past of Tamil landscape. He invites every reader to acknowledge this unique but forgotten role of women in otherwise a patriarchal society. Moreover, this book is a very good guide to the students of religion, culture, and literature.

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