

DRAVIDIAN VERSUS ARYAN CULTURE

Prof. Dr. Thomas Manickam cmi*

Introduction

In the Dravidavrutta, south of Vindhya and Satpura mountains, there flourished in India from very ancient times, say pre-Vedic times, a composite culture generally known as the Dravidian culture. Linguistically it was a mixture of an interspersed language group of people living in overlapping geographical boundaries, called Tamilnadu, Teligudesam, Karnataka and Kerala, where people were speaking Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam respectively. Although there appears in later times in this region a spontaneous permeation of Vedic Sanskritic culture and language, except Malayalam, all other three languages kept up their respective vernacular characters integrally and were least affected by the Aryan cultural genres of the Sanskritic language structures. So the regional linguistic specialities, slangs, nuances and idioms, which express the genius of the customs, traditions, practices, beliefs, myths and other symbolic structures of these Dravidian peoples survived the tests of time in spite of numerous onslaughts from the dominating intruders of the Aryavrutta, north of Vindhya and Satpura, as often epitomised in the Epic Ramayana and some Puranas of the Aryan culture. In the context of understanding the cultural roots of the Dalits of the south Indian origins a search for the truth and myth of Dravidian Culture is significant.

1. Truth of Dravidian Culture

Among the Dravidain group of cultural identities of people, the Tamils with their indigenous language genres, styles, characters, idioms and intonations, are considered to be the oldest. According to many scholars like the late V.Raghavan, author of *The Indian Heritage* (1956), Tamil is one of the oldest 'living languages' of the world, with an unbroken literary history of over two millennia.

* Prof. Thomas Manickam, Dean of Faculty of Philosophy, Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore

Raghavan is of opinion that Tamil bears the literary record of the ancient Dravidian stock of India, and this literature developed on its own strength much before the influence of Sanskrit from North India. There are some outstanding literary works in ancient Tamil such as Thiruvalluvar's *Kural* known as *Tirukural*. Comparatively it is now regarded as one of the greatest religious and spiritual classics.

Tirukural has its own inimitable literary characteristics and beauty, and it is esteemed as a sacred book by the Tamil Vaishnava tradition (*parampara*). The extent of the popularity of the *Kural* may be estimated from the fact that each devotional sect of South India, especially Tamilian religiosity, is anxious to claim Valluvar, the saint poet of the *Kural*, for its own. M. Winternitz, however, says that he belongs to none of them of rather to all of them. Valluvar stands above all races, castes and sects and what he teaches is general human morality and wisdom. Winternitz further adds that it is no wonder that the *Kural* has not only been much read, studied and highly priced in the land of its origin for centuries, but also has found many admirers in the West ever since it has become known. The truth is that no other Tamil classic has had so much impact in and outside Tamil Nadu as the *Kural* of Valluvar. Since 1730 A.D. many scholars of the West and the East have translated the same into Latin, French, German, English, Czech, Sanskrit, Hindi, Telugu, Malayalam, Urdu and other regional languages.

The *Kural* has according to many scholars and their writings, two main aspects to its greatness, namely the most profound thoughts on the most baffling problems of human existence, and the most astounding economy of words and finish of poetic style. Apart from literary excellence, the *Kural* has been generally acclaimed as the unique compendium of the purest moral rules. According to Brother Lucien, a comparative linguist of South Africa, "Tirukural is a detailed and comprehensive book of virtues which guide us, not by laying down the law, but by throwing challenge upon challenge to the conscience of man in the form of its many profoundly appealing observations upon every moral issue. Indeed, it may otherwise be called the printed conscience" (Quoted by V.Raghavan, *The Indian Heritage*, Bangalore, 1956, p. vii).

Morality shines brilliantly in all the Kurals (couplets) of Valluvar. Yet the saint poet did not restrict himself within the periphery of moral virtue (*aram*). He has also dwelt upon the *porul* (meaning/wealth), and *inpam* (love). Thus it appears similar to the four human values (*purusharthas*) of Sanskritic ethical traditions of the Aryans, Valluvar has dealt with the first three, namely *aram* (*dharma*), *porul* (*artha*) and *inpam* (*kama*). It may be of interest to note that though Valluvar is generally regarded as a saint, yet of his 1330 Kurals, 700 are on *porul* while 380 kurals deal with *aram*, and *inpam* is spread over the remaining 250 Kurals. Valluvar's Kurals on *aram* have been studied most by scholars and devotees, while some explorations have been also made on his Kurals on *inpam*, but no important studies have been made on his Kurals on *porul*. It appears that Valluvar felt that unless the standard of social thinking and behaviour could be based on justice and morality, individuals could not remain virtuous. Further it appears that he believed that man can think of God only when his life in this world is peaceful, free from emotional tension, and is protected by a benign ruler.

Like all ancient Indian sages, the ancestry and the date of Valluvar's birth and early part of his life are shrouded in obscurity. It is generally believed that he was Paraiyah by caste. The term Valluvar is also a caste-name, and the people of this caste were by profession the drummers in villages. Socially they were - and still are - considered to be very low. The word *paraiyah*, derived *para* (drum) also means drummer. Perhaps because of this similarity some scholars suggest that Thirivallurvar was a Paraiyah by caste. There is a tradition that Valluvar belonged to Myalapore, but a verse in Tiruvalluvamalai claims him for Madura. The name Valluvar stands for a depressed community whose distance from the higher castes in education and prosperity is unthinkable. It may be rightly inferred that in Valluvar's day the social set up had not become so degraded as to deny a low caste' Valluvan the privilege of thinking out a moral code of his own, fitted with a clear head and a clean heart. Shri Srinivasa Iyengar is of opinion that Thiruvalluvar flourished in the first century A.D.

2. The Dravidian Agamas (Revealed Scriptures)

There exists literary evidences to indicate that during the 7th and 8th centuries A.D. there prevailed both Jain and Buddhist sects,

considered to be heretical reactions to orthodox Brahmanism in South India, especially in Tamilnadu and Karnataka. In these centuries we also notice the emergence of the Saivite and Vaishnavite saints known as Nayanars and Alvars who vehemently fought against the two heresies and re-established Brahmanic ritualistic and devotional popular religions in their respective denominations. These saints went from shrine to shrine singing glorious hymns in honour of their respective sectarian deities enshrined there. These hymns were later honoured by the respective devotees as the revelations (*agamas*) of their saints.

i The Agamas of Nayanars (Saivite Tradition)

The Tamil Saiva *Agamas* comprise the twelve Tirumurais: The first seven (collectively called Tevaram) consist of the devotional hymns of Tirugnana Sambandhar. Appar and Sundarar; the eighth is called Tiruvachakam, the devotional hymns of Manikkavasakar, the ninth called Tiruisaippa, a miscellaneous collection, the tenth called Tirumandiram, the mystic recordations of Tirumovlar, the eleventh still another miscellaneous collection, and the twelfth is known as Sekkishaar's *Periyapuranam*, that weaves into a splendid epic narrative the lives of the sixty-three Tamil Saiva Saints. The canon brings together nearly 20,000 verses, and the musings, meditations and affirmations of twenty-six singer saints.

The *Periyapuranam* by Sekkishaar gives us information about sixty-three devotees only, of whom the major four are: Thirugnana Sambandhar, Thirunavukarasar (also known as Appar), Sundaramurthy Swamikal and Thirumoolar, the author of the tenth Thirumurai. These four Nayanars account for one half of the output of the songs in the Thirumurais.

ii The Agamas of the Alvars (Vaishnavite Tradition)

The tradition of the Alvars enlist the following *agamas* as the sacred scriptures of their venerable saintly tradition: Tirukural of Tiruvalluvar (around first century A.D.), mention has been made about it previously in detail. The next is called Nalayira divya prabandham (Four thousand holy writings), attributed collectively to

the devotional hymns of twelve Alvar-saints headed by Periyalvar. The third is known as *Thiruvaimozhikal* attributed to Tirumozhisai Alvar and Nammalvar. Added to these devotional lyrics of great charm the tradition also accepts Pancharatra Samhita, including Bhagavata, Sattvata, Ekantika and others.

3. The Dravidian Mythology

Regarding the understanding of the myths and mythological belief-systems of the Dravidians, prominent place is commanded by the Tamil popular traditions. At least from the time of the Sanskrit Epic Ramayana onward we have some clear idea about the mythological stories of Dravidian culture. In spite of several efforts made by the Brahmins who came from the northern Sanskritic cultural imperialism mentioned in the Ramayana of Valmiki, following the enthronement of Sri Rama as the hero of the Aryan empire, the people of Janasthan (Dravidavrutta) could not be fully demythologised of their own cultural antiquity. In Tamilnadu, Karnataka and Telugudesam (Andhrapradesh) there prevailed the ancient tribal and village folk culture, mythical beliefs, social customs and annual festivals unimpaired by any influence of the Aryan colonization and conquests described mythologically by Valmiki along with the exodus of the clan of Rama, expelled due to family feud from the "solar tribe" of Ayodhya, the centre of settlement of the Aryan immigrants to the Gangetic plane.

The most ancient documents of Tamil literature, the poems of the third "Sangam Cycles", dated from 3rd century BC to 3rd century AD portray a race quite detached from the religious preoccupations, as already mentioned before while discussing the poems of Thiruvalluvar. The people of this period in the Tamil regions appear to be more inclined towards solving their socio-cultural problems of day-to day living relying very much of their own ancestral mythical faith-practices, deeply rooted in the powers of mother earth and the forces of nature. Although there are occasional references to their knowledge of some of the North Indian myths, from a distance they do not seem to believe in them and to transform their socio-religious life accordingly. The Tamil myths and beliefs of the Sangam

literature seem very different from those of the Bramanical mythologies of the Aryan north. In fact traditions among them, even when they appear in a legendary form are about human beings rather than about supernatural creatures of divine principalities. Although a myth may include an element of the marvellous, it really aims at constructing a viable secular history, consisting of economic, social, literary and political harmony of human life. The great myth of Mahabali (Maveli), celebrated annually in Kerala as the core of the Onam festival is typical of this secular concern of the prosperity and happiness of the people, as the central concern of a ruler who is a down to earth human being rather than a superhuman divine prodigy incarnated from "Kailash" to Kanayakumari as a model king, patronized by Valmiki, the Aryan myth maker, who had a low estimation of the people of Janasthan of Bali, Sugreeva and Hanuman, who were heroes of their own peoples with perfect human form, ideas and ideals. Valmiki described these people as *vanaras* (jungle beings), having less human status than that of the Aryan heroes of Rama, Lakshmana and others.

Finally, Tamil people had and still have their own favourite mythical deities. For example, the god Murugan, who is often identified with Subramanyan, the Aryan minor god, son of Siva, does not in fact represent quite what he does to other Hindus of Aryan stock. Murugan represents the predominant power of nature and so he is associated with mountain regions, better portrayed as a god of benevolence, protection and shelter. A common man goes to him for all that he believes as obtainable as divine help. There are so many stories of mythical character popularised about Sri Murugan. In short the Tamils have their own mythology, besides knowing some of the Aryan Brahmanical traditions of the north Indian mythologies. They are familiar with heroes of Mahabharata and Ramayana. Moreover, Kamban, the great poet of Tamil literature even adapted the plot of Valmiki Ramayana to suit to the taste of the Tamils and Kamba Ramayana has a lot of cultural adaptations as distinct from that of the Aryan cultural elements idealised in Valmiki's Ramayana; and further it is more of spiritual saga rather than a "conquest story of the Aryans over the Dravidians". (Ref. Larousse *World Mythology*, 5th impr. 1977, pp. 267 ff).

4. The Dravida Movement (Reformative and Political)

In 1947, as the time approached for the transfer of political power from the British Raj to an independent India, communal strife percolated the subcontinent. Within Hindu society itself fissiparous tendencies of regional nationalism were asserting themselves to the detriment of Indian political and cultural unity. On the eve of independence, E.V. Ramaswami Nicker, leader of the newly formed Dravida kashakam in Madras, called upon the Dravidian peoples of south India, "to guard against the transfer of power from the British to the Aryans". (Ref. *Hindu*, Feb.11, 1946). Fearing Brahmin dominance under an Aryan "imperialism" of the North, Nicker called for the formation of a separate South Indian State, called Dravidasthan, enjoining his followers to sign a pledge of support for complete separation from the Indian Union. But less than eight years later Naiker rallied his black-shirted followers to the support of a newly formed Congress Ministry under Kamaraj Nadar, and declared opposition to the Davida Munnetra Kazhakam (DMK) an offshoot of the Dravida Kazhakam (DK).

But as the Congres Party of Madras became increasingly "Tamilized" in the years following 1954, the issue of a separate Dravidasthan became a symbol of a growing specificity of regional demands on the part of the DMK. In the general election of 1962, the DMK emerged as the strongest Opposition party ever challenging the entrenched Congress Party in Madras. The DMK had campaigned on the issues of "bread and butter politics", and its election Manifesto reflected an immediate economic concern for Tamil Nadu and in that rush for the affirmation of the Tamils' regional claims, DMK forgot all the great aspirations for a separate and independent Dravidasthan and at the hight of its own power monkerings for the Tamils at the expense of the equal claims of other states of South India, the movement for a Dravidasthan over against the Aryan Brahmanic political supremacy of the North also was virtually dead.