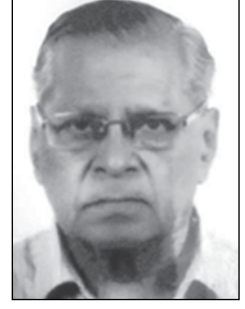


THE LEGEND OF VALLUVAR - AN EVALUATION BY STUART BLACKBURN : OUR EVALUATION OF HIS VIEWS



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Abstract:

Dr. Stuart Blackburn is a western Tamil scholar at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. His analysis and interpretation of the legend of Valluvar, the source material Tiruvalluvamalai, significance of the history of the Tamil Sangam incidents, and the convergence of the western scholars with natives are to be appreciated. The myths & debates surrounding the history of Valluvar are explored and critically analyzed. However, Dr. Blackburn's essay misses on the crucial part of Social Injustice that Tamil language was considered as *nīca bhāshā* (low level language) & Valluvar was not acceptable to the Vaidika Brahmans.

Essay:

1. Dr. Stuart Blackburn (Bb) is a western Tamil scholar now working in the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. His thrust area of study and research is Tamil Nadu folklore. Bb has written an essay entitled "Corruption and Redemption: The Legend of Valluvar and Tamil Literary History".
2. He begins his essay with the introduction of the theoretical concept of 'literary history' and 'history of literature'. There are differences

between these two concepts, he points out. He says further that 'literary history is an important subject for literary historiography, yet literary histories are rich source for understanding local conceptions of both history and literature. He states further that 'certainly in nineteenth century India, the focus of this essay, literary history was seized upon as evidence to be advanced in the major debates of the time; cultural identities, language ideologies, civilization hierarchies and nationalism were all asserted and challenged through literary histories in colonial India'.

3. Bb Points out the debate about the history of Valluvar and his work Thirukkural. He sees in the debate the history of Tamil language and its relationship with Sanskrit. He goes on in this way.

"The Tirukkural (hereafter (Kural) was no ordinary text, and during most of the century it was thought to be the oldest extant Tamil literature. Because of this antiquity of the text, it stood out at the centre of debates about the history of Tamil and its status vis-à-vis Sanskrit; because its author was said to be a Paraiyar, an untouchable, it was also prominent in debates about the category

- of 'Dravidian'; Not everyone accepted the Paraiyar identity of the author, Tiruvalluvar (hereafter Valluvar); the alternative identities proposed for him included Jainist, Buddhist, crypto-Christian, high-caste Hindu, Brahmin and half-Brahmin. Clearly for Tamils the Kural was a contentious classic – and has received more commentaries than any other Tamil text but it also became important for European missionaries and British civil servants as well, who were comforted by its non-idolatrous teachings and translated it many times."
4. Further Bb points out the debate about Kural and Valluvar in 19th century in which convergence of the views of the Tamils and the Europeans took place. It is an interesting point. I quote him here: 'The debate about the Kural and its author during the nineteenth century might recommend it as a case study of the colonial re-inscription of a traditional Indian literature. The reality, as I hope to show, was more complicated: a colonial intervention in a long standing debate about the status of Tamil in terms of Sanskrit and Brahminical learning, and about the social relations between Brahmins and Untouchables. The debate was articulated through various readings of the Kural and the legend of its author, in which the European interpretations converged with and also modified Tamil notions of their literary history. The two primary areas of convergence were: 1) the lowly birth of Kural's author, which was controversial within Tamil tradition and valorized by the Europeans; and 2) the relations between Tamil and Sanskrit which were set in a new historical and ethical framework, in which corruption gives way to redemption. Out of this colonial discourse between Europeans and Tamils emerged a consensus, a mutually convenient congruence between Tamil concerns about cultural difference and European notions of moral history that produced a narrative of Tamil literary history which continues to exert an influence today.'
 5. Then Bb enters into the source for the study of legend of Valluvar, i.e., Tiruvalluvamalai, of the middle period. He points out the conflict between the Tamil and Sanskrit languages and the Brahmanic culture expressed in the Tiruvalluvamalai. Anyway, this analysis and approach are incomplete. From our point of view the Tiruvalluvamalai is the advocate of Tamil culture and further it is a bombardment at the Vaidhikas and their religion.
 6. Bb's next step in his essay is the sketch of the 19th century European Christians' view of Valluvar. He terms this view as 'Christianized version of Valluvar's birth'. He listed a number of Europeans/Christians who were attracted by the legend of Valluvar and who talked and wrote about Valluvar and his work. The attraction is of secular content, non-idolatry and ethical ideas of Kural.
 7. "These brief notices were superseded in 1835, when Rev. William Taylor, who took over the task of editing the Mackenzie material from Wilson, produced a full summary of the legend. Like Wilson, Taylor concentrated on the events at Madurai inasmuch as they were useful in reconstructing the ancient history of the Tamil country; he appears to have digested previously printed accounts (especially Venkatramaswamie 1829), as well as the Mackenzie manuscript upon which Wilson had relied. Although he passes quickly over Valluvar's controversial birth, to his credit Taylor does include three slightly differing accounts of Valluvar's triumph over the proud poets of the Madurai Sangam. Another attempt to separate historical fact from unreliable legend was the account of Valluvar's life published in Jaffna in 1859 by Simon Casie Chitty. Drawing on many of his predecessors, but wishing to appear scrupulously factual, Chitty presents a bald summary of the birth and Madurai episodes only, adding that nothing further is known of Valluvar which can be relied upon."
- "In 1847 this summary of the Valluvar legend had been expanded into an elaborate narration,

covering seven pages of closely printed text. But Valluvar's antiquity and literary excellence were not the only reasons why Tamils began to print and debate his text. Its secular content was also useful to Tamils as they attempted to respond to Christian allegations of Hindu superstition and barbarity. As early as 1835, a missionary noted that 'the Kural is the only one (text) which the Hindus have as yet... thought proper to print and publish, as specimens of their credence' and as their 'appeals of a purer system'. Concurrent with these Tamil publications, brief sketches of the Valluvar legend in English gave way to more detailed narration, discussion and interpretation. By 1870, after nearly a century in Madras, British scholars, civil servants and missionaries had fashioned their own image of south Indian society and religion, in which the story of the lowly-born Valluvar was central. Missionary Charles Grover's 1871 narration of the legend and his analysis of it is the most revealing. Unlike his European predecessors, who used the legend for understanding past history, Grover presented the Valluvar legend as evidence of a moral trajectory in Tamil literary history which informed the present; later telling, notably by Robinson 1873, 1885) and Pope (1886), simply followed suit."

8. Then Bb, goes to point out the elements common to international and Indian folklore, which are also seen in the legend of Valluvar. Some of the miracles are pointed out: The unmoving tree shade, test of future bride's virtue, the mixed caste parentage and submitting poems for examination by other poets. We can say that these points throw light on the legend and its cultural context. I quote his passage:"

"The first thing we can say about this legend is that it is composed by elements common to international and Indian folklore. The hero as the youngest of seven children, his being cast out (as an outcaste) and his destroying a monster to win the daughter are all popular themes in international folktales, while the miracle of the unmoving tree shade is found

in the legend of Buddha. Still the story is unmistakably south Indian. Individual motifs, such as Valluvar's test of his future bride's virtue by asking her to cook rice from sand (or stones) are common place in Tamil tales. More significantly, the two major episodes of the legend - the mixed caste percentage of Valluvar and his submitting his poem for examination by other poets are also widespread in south Indian oral narrative and literary legend. Brahmin fathers and untouchable mothers regularly produce south Indian cultural heroes, such as Muttupaattan, popular regional goddesses, such as Renuka, and a host of lesser known figures. The second major episode, the proving of the Kural in its aranketram, is a necessary procedure in order to legitimize any highly-regarded Tamil composition, as Kampan and others can attest.

These two episodes, Valluvar's birth and the testing of his poem are the core of the legend and the source of its contested readings. This is hardly surprising since these episodes claim, first that the oldest extant Tamil text (at the time) was written by a Paraiyar and, second, that this Kural triumphed over a degenerate, Sanskritized Tamil at the ancient Madurai Sangam.

10. Then Bb, points out the features of the birth of Valluvar. Strikingly he says: "the mainstream colonial debate centered on four versions of Valluvar's birth. 1) that he was half-Brahmin (father) and half Paraiyar (mother); 2) that he was neither Brahmin nor Paraiyar, but a royal official; 3) that he was fully a Paraiyar; and 4) that he was fully a Brahmin." Then Bb lists those scholars who supported each kind of the legend. The story of half - Brahmin half - Periyar is widely followed and taught. The advocate of neither Brahmin nor Parayar is the Dravidian's Puranalingam Pillai. For the paraiyar story the advocates are Charles Grover, Dr. G.U. Pope, Dr. Robert Caldwell and Ayotidas Pandithar. For the Brahmin story the advocate is Ramachandra Dikshitar, a recent historian.

11. The reading of Valluvar's participation in the Tamil Sangam of Madurai by Bb is very striking and analytical. He sees the age old confrontation of Tamil against Brahminical tradition in this Tamil Sangam episode. His reading is here in his words, which points to redemption from corruption by Sanskritists:

"As Pope's Biblical phrase implies, Valluvar's low birth was only half the story; he must also, and against the odds, succeed. In south Indian narrative and cultural logic, too, his paraiyar birth set up a necessary confrontation with high-caste domination. Although this second core episode is thus a continuation of the tension generated within the first episode, the nature of the contestation is different. Valluvar's triumph at Madurai, when the astounded poets were forced to accept the Kural and write praise-poems on it, has not been accused of selective Brahminical 'editing' as was the case with the birth episode. Rather, the episode itself is a contestation, between claimants to the crown of authentic Tamil literary tradition. The various readings of this legendary struggle for control of the literary past must themselves be read in the text of the cultural politics of the nineteenth-century. In these accounts of the Madurai episode, European and (some) Tamil interpretations of the Valluvar legend once again converge, this time in a fortuitous alliance between the foreigners' perception of a corrupt but perfectible civilization and the Tamils' pursuit of a literary history that would rescue a pure language from its Sanskrit accretions.

12. The historical treatment of the history of the legend of Valluvar by Bb has brought out some unknown historical facts to light. We read it here: "Once it was understood that Valluvar had battled against the northern tradition of Sanskrit and Brahminical learning, the European readings of the Madurai episode could enter into and influence the long running debate about the history of Tamil and its status vis-a-vis Sanskrit. This is not the place to discuss the history of that conflict, but one thing is clear; from a very early date, Tamil tradition regarded the Sanskrit tradition with envy and resentment, as well as with admiration and respect. Although pre-

colonial interpretations of the Valluvar legend appear limited to the few sources discussed above, the 'Garland' registers the Tamil-Sanskrit conflict by frequently combative comparisons between the Kural and the Vedas, between Tamil and ariyam (aryan) and so on. Clearly the European readings of the legend did not create or even introduce these comparative elements to the debate. What they did bring to the debate, however, was a new moral, teleological framework that explained past and set an agenda for the present and future.

13. Bb summarizes what was corruption? How redemption was carried out and who performed it? European scholars had a role in explaining these things. Bb's words are here:

"The Orientalist translation of India into European categories and concepts has been described and critiqued in several studies. In the case of the European insistence on the 'humble origins' of Valluvar we recognize a colonial interpretation of south Indian culture within the historical narrative of European Christianity. Informing this interpretation, however, is a more fundamental perception, a belief that 'modern Hindu life in Southern India much resembles that Europe just before the Reformation. With this statement, Charles Grover introduced his translation of 'folk songs' of south India which he believed, reveal a 'silent Reformation' which had been at work for centuries, in local non-Brahmin sects, and which, while not breaking completely with the Brahminical order, 'present a scheme, more moral than religious, in which idolatry is unknown, and the divinity is always spoken of as the great soul of the universe, one and invisible. Grover then presented translations of the Valluvar's Kural, along with other anti-caste, anti-ritual literature in Tamil, as a shining example of this popular Hinduism, this 'secret' reformation, undermining the priestly dominion of Brahmins. Valluvar's teaching thus represented a deism, over against a polytheism of the Brahmins." "Other European readings of the Valluvar legend may lack Grover's melodrama, but collectively they produce a Tamil literary history presented to Europeans: ancient Tamil civilization had been corrupted by a sacerdotal order, an allegation of power

by a priestly institutionalized and centralized elite. The European worldview and this writing of literary history was nowhere more succinctly recalled than in Robert Caldwell's comment that the whole of the commandments could be translated into a pre-Sanskritic Tamil, except for one word: 'image'. What was needed? was stripping away these distorting accretions and revive the old moral code, the bedrock that had been obscured by priestly pride, power and ritual. What was needed, in a word, was Reformation."

14. Conclusions and Our View:

Bb's writing up of the Valluvar's legend, and the nature of his work are good. His analysis and interpretation of the legend, 19th century current views, the source material Tiruvalluvamalai, significance of the history of the Tamil Sangam incidents, and the convergence of the western scholars with natives are to be appreciated very much. There is new contribution in his essay particularly in drawing up the history of the current views of the 19th century held by native and foreign Tamil scholars. There are so many references in his essay. The bibliography is very much useful for further research.

Further we can put forth some of our views.

The analysis and interpretation of the legend of Valluvar need the application of the socio-economic cultural theory of Varnashrama Dharma, which prevents the Tamils and the Tamil language to talk about the Brahminical Vedas and Moksha. This theory talks about the concept of suddha/asuddha, touchable/ untouchable and social hierarchy. It also talks about the concept of Deva bhasha/nicabhasha. The Tamil language was considered as nica bhasha, i.e. untouchable by the Vaidikas. Valluvar was a Tamilian and he wrote in Tamil. Therefore he was not acceptable to the Vaidika Brahmans.

It is a surprise that this approach and its application are missing in Bb's essay. The essay is incomplete.

Another problem in the analysis of the legend of Valluvar is the interpretation of the world Valluvar, which has some more significations. The word Valluvar indicates 'proclaimer' - the royal

messenger, a country chief like Nancil Valluvan, etc. We can choose the meaning which suits the contribution of Valluvar. The signification of 'proclaimer' and chief disappeared in the course of history. The signification of the Paraiya priest was predominantly current in the medieval period. Thus we get the wide prevalence of Paraiya legenda and the consequent conflict with the Vaidhika religion. If we take only the signification of Paraiya caste for the world Valluvar, it may be folk etymology.

Bb has not moved to this extent.

Bibliography:

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About the Author:

Prof. T. Murugarathanam is an eighty six year young scholar and has served in Thirukkural Research at the Madurai Kamaraj University as a distinguished Professor & Head of Tamizh Studies. His fields of expertise include Linguistics, Philology, Literature & Indic Studies. He is ably supported by his wife Dr. Meenakshi Murugarathanam, who is also a Tamil scholar on her own merit and accord.

Prof. Murugarathanam is also the founder of the scholarly association - 'ஞாலத் தமிழ்ப் பண்பாட்டு ஆய்வு மன்றம்' (World Assembly of Research in Tamil Culture). He conducts regular workshops for enhancing the research skills of young scholars. He has authored 50+ books and has submitted papers internationally at Conferences held in United States, Canada, Malaysia & Mauritius. He is also a member of these renowned global bodies 1) Association for Asian Studies-USA, 2) International Institute for Asian Studies-Europe, 3) Institute Asian Studies-Chennai 4) Dravidian Linguistics Association -Thiruvananthapuram.

Dr. Murugarathanam has received many awards including the Tamizh Chemmal Award from the Government of Tamil Nadu and the Tamizhaakar Award from the Kundrakkudi Mutt. He also served as the very first Director of Tamil Development at the Thanjavur Tamil University.

