

Chapter I The King's Minister

8

If you wish to know that goodly land of ancient fame,
blessed by the primal One,
three-eyed, four-armed, five-faced,
the comely Lord Siva,
it is the Pandyan land, enriched by the Vaigai River
which, incensed at the ocean's gift of poison to the Lord
refused to mingle with its dark waters.¹

9

It is the land where the great sage Agastya
first imparted the true Tamil tongue,
by the grace of Him who sits in royal state on high Mount Kailash,
the fertile land where all good things abound,
and where the Pandyan king, slayer of his angry foes,
reigns supreme throughout his domain.

10

Foremost in that land,
where pleasing cities and great riches abound,
is holy Vadavur,
more favoured than the realm of the gods,
and source of great prosperity.
It is the home of brahmins, learned in the ancient vedic lore,
and abode of Him who rides, mounted on the prancing bull.

11

Amongst the brahmins of that city
lived an elder of the one true Saivite faith,
a member of the illustrious caste of royal counsellors,
and with him his good wife,
slender as a lightening flash,
from whose womb was born the sage of holy Vadavur.
First he was among those who dispensed the southern monarch's rule,
by the grace of the Lord who shares his being
with Her whose form is slender as a reed.

¹ To save the world, Siva drank the poison produced when the gods and asuras churned the ocean of milk. The Vaigai River is pictured as shunning the ocean for committing such a hostile act towards Siva.

12

A sun of true knowledge, he arose,
dispersing the spreading gloom of this false world's illusion,
eclipsing the dim stars of other faiths,
which cast the deluded into the yawning pit of Hell,
and bringing into fullest flower
the lotus in the heart of all
who serve the one who rules us as our Lord.

13

To this son who, to the greater glory of Lord Siva's name,
was to rout the foolish Buddhist in a great debate,²
who, entering one last time upon birth's ineluctable round,
was never more to take on name and form,
they gave the blessed name of Tiruvadavurar.³

14

By the will of the Creator,
which abides and germinates in the seed of spiritual discipline,
sprouts forth as the young shoot of active grace,
and removes the weeds of our blind errors,
that holy crop grew to maturity,
to be harvested as the true knowledge of reality, which is Sivam.

15

To him, who fed on the nectar of true knowledge
that assuages the ignominious thirst
to wander long from womb to womb,
they lovingly gave nourishment,
honey and the rich extracts of the sugar-cane,
the three fruits⁴ and fragrant cow's milk,
so that his heart rejoiced.

² This episode forms chapter six of the present work.

³ Manikkavachagar is generally referred to in this work as Vadavurar, which means 'He of Vadavur'. Vadavur was his home town. The Tiru is an honorific prefix.

⁴ The three kinds of fruit are banana, jack-fruit and mango.

16

His hair they dressed in a beautiful coil,
he against whose name no damning trace of sin is entered
in the ledger of the Lord of Death,⁵
who by the Almighty's supreme command
assesses with unerring judgement
the actions that the incarnate soul performs,
and, daily writing out the tale of deeds,
metes out pain and joy in fitting measure.

17

One favourable and auspicious day
they spread rare gold and the nine precious gems
thickly over the ground,⁶
richly adorning the goddess Earth,
and united him in marriage to the maiden Learning,
whose threefold offspring he closely embraced:
the practice of austerities, the essential meaning of the holy ash,
and the infallible knowledge of Lord Siva.

18

After he had studied books on law and the lengthy ancient epics,
the works of the six vedic schools of philosophy,⁷
each claiming: 'Here is the truth. All else is false!',
the Vedas themselves which all the world praised
as the repository of fundamental truth,
and the canonical works of the Saivite faith,
they bestowed upon him the three-stranded sacred thread.

⁵ Yama. A graphic illustration of the Saiva tenet that each individual soul must reap the necessary and inevitable consequences of its actions.

⁶ In order that the young child might trace his first letters in them. This is in accordance with the practice of the time of spreading rice grains on the ground for the same purpose.

⁷ The six religious systems which are considered to be vedic, each of which is based on a deity of the Hindu pantheon: Saivam (Siva), Vaishnavam (Vishnu), Saktam (Sakti), Sauram (the Sun), Ganapattiyam (Ganesh), Kaumara (Murugan).

19

By the grace of the Lord who wears in His locks
the crescent moon and the copious, swift-rushing waters of the Ganges,
who girds Himself with a tiger skin,
and whose shoulders are bedecked with a swaying necklace of bones,
he had, by the age of twice-eight years,
studied and mastered all the learned disciplines,
including the holy Saiva Agamas,
which abolish rebirth and the attachment to kith and kin.

20

Through the report of men of eminence,
the Pandyan king, whose Tamil tongue is fertile soil for all the arts,
came to hear of all these deeds, and summoned him to his presence.
Proffering gifts in token of his high regard,
he formed an undying friendship with that great sage,
who through devotion to the Lord,
whose hand grasps the emblem of the deer,
was to perceive the final truth
and sing His holy hymns for the world's salvation.

21

The king, knowing of his accomplishments,
recognised as one of noble worth
our spiritual leader and son of Vadavur,
where the sound of conches echoes
over close-surrounding fields and tanks,
and conferred upon him a glorious title and authority
to protect that land, bounded by the ocean's swelling waves,
to rout powerful enemies, and to administer fairly the king's just rule.

22

To the delight of all the populace, the Pandyan Lord of the Tamirparni river
conferred upon him the illustrious titles of 'The Southern Lord's⁸ Brahmin King',
so that he commanded respect even in the councils of kings.
An elephant mount and royal palanquin he gave him,
a yak-tail whisk worked in gold and a white umbrella like the full moon's disk,
and robes and jewellery, set with the flashing brilliance of the nine precious gems.

⁸ An epithet of the Pandyan kings, as ruling in the south.

23

Taking up his ministerial authority,
he of noble fame, the sage of Vadavur,
experienced great felicity,
as if he dwelt in Indra's heavenly paradise.
As he stood surrounded by his army's serried ranks,
it seemed that the silvery moon itself,
escorted by the starry hosts,
had descended from its heavenly station
to spread its rays across the earth.

24

Unswerving in his rectitude,
fostering justice and spreading happiness as his principal duties,
he took upon his shoulders, decorated with great armlets,
the weight of the entire world,
so that the most compassionate Pandyan king,
the eight elephants who support the earth,
their temples running with dark juices,
and beneath them the eight great venomous serpents,
all were relieved of their burden.⁹

25

To those who took pleasure in virtuous deeds,
he was like a watchful eye, and a protecting coat-of-mail;
to his enemies he brought woe,
to those who paid him homage, joy,
and to the needy, a motherly concern.
So it was that he who waxed great in devotion to Lord Siva's holy feet
exercised upon the earth, in no mean or common fashion,
the sovereign power of his temporal Lord.

⁹ In Hindu cosmology, the earth is said to be supported by eight elephants, one at each point of the compass, and one at each of the intermediate points; these are in turn supported by eight serpents. This theme, a very common one in Tamil literature, is taken up again in verse thirty-nine.

26

It was in these days that, from the study of Saiva works,
he came to comprehend the worldly bond in its manifold forms,
the manner in which the physical body, variously arising through birth,
became united with the soul,
and the way in which the Supreme Lord,
in conferring the wondrous gifts
of worldly experience and final liberation,
graciously performed His divine operations.

27

Distressed by the realisation that, due to the illusory mind,
the soul, uniting with all the various life forms,
dies and is reborn again and again,
he conceived a great affection for that most beloved One,
who bears aloft the axe and the deer,
just as when, in the fierce heat of the midday sun,
men gratefully seek out the cool shade.

28

Upon realising that every soul is imprisoned
by the effects of its own actions,
which scorch like fire,
he became convinced of the fruitlessness of worldly life,
and, like an actor in a play,
who conceals his true character under an assumed outer appearance,
he continued outwardly to administer the king's just rule,
whilst renouncing all within his heart.

29

He who appeared upon the earth with heaven's blessing,
foremost among all the learned brahmins,
attained the fourth and final stage of spiritual maturity,
in which the soul is ripe for the highest truth,
and perceived how the holy Five Letters
merged into the one supernal Lord of Lords.
Thus did it become his one desire to seek out an enlightened Master
and abide at his holy feet.

30

Just as, in a grove of wood-apple trees
teeming with troops of wild monkeys,
men throw stones up into the branches
in their eager desire to obtain the sweet fruits,
so did he begin to converse with learned Saivites,
versed in all the arts of scholarly disputation,
enquiring if there were indeed any such enlightened souls.

31

Like a bee, buzzing noisily
as it hurries across the richly fertile landscape,
hovering busily over walled tanks and flower gardens,
searching out the flowers richest in cool, delightful honey,
he who had recited and understood the good books of the immaculate Lord,
imprinting them upon his heart,
sought diligently to discover who they might be
who had fathomed reality to its ultimate depths.
and fully comprehended it.

32

One day amidst the swishing of yak-hair fans, flourished by elegant ladies
with saintly ascetics, brahmins, and accomplished bards thronging thickly about,
the Pandyan King, supreme Lord of the flawless lunar race,¹⁰
his crown, thickly encrusted with exquisite gems, casting forth sun-like rays,
had seated himself upon his lion throne.

33

Into the presence of this royal guardian of the earth
came distinguished emissaries,
who worshipped him with warm affection and addressed him thus:
'Spotless son of Yadu! At the deep ocean's shore,
where it borders the wide domain of the Chola King,
who wears upon his breast a garland of atti flowers,
noble Aryans have landed, bringing fine, healthy horses.
This we have seen.'

¹⁰ The Pandyan King is here praised as a descendant of the lunar race, of which the ancient King Yadu (see the following verse) was fifth in line of descent and founder of the Tadava dynasty.

34

On hearing this, the most valiant Pandyan king,
who wears upon his banner the emblem of the fish,
rejoiced, praising the worthy messengers,
and saying that their devotion placed them high amongst those at his command.
Then, seeking out the countenance of his loyal minister,
who held his Lord as dear as his own body and his own life,
bade him go and bring back the beautiful great prancing steeds.

35

After the devotee of the Lord with the matted locks
had acceded to the king's request,
that protector of the earth, with beaming countenance,
entered his treasure chamber, a fitting abode for the gods themselves,
and, for the purchase of the horses,
gave him four times four crores of gold coins,
the lawful revenues of his just rule.

36

Thus did he who with melting heart fixed his thoughts on Lord Siva
set off on that auspicious journey to buy fine swift horses,
having received the priceless riches from the hands of the king,
he who, triumphant, plants his banner,
emblazoned with the beautiful carp,
upon high mountain peaks,
and upon whose powerful shoulders
dwells the victorious maiden who wields the bow,
and She who bestows wealth, seated upon the lotus flower.¹¹

37

In telling him to take such rich treasures,
and go to Perunturai,
where a wise teacher dwelt amongst sages of great attainment,
the virtuous Pandyan's action resembled
the creative energy of Lord Siva himself,
which impelled Vadavurar to obtain supreme deliverance,
eliminating that [worldly] consciousness.

¹¹ Two of the eight aspects of Lakshmi, consort of Vishnu, Goddess of Fortune and patroness of worldly things. The first is Viralakshmi, carrying the bow, symbol of Victory, and the second Danalakshmi, Goddess of Wealth, who is usually depicted as seated on a lotus flower.

38

The far-spreading army of the King
whose banner bears the emblem of the bow,¹²
the hosts of the King whose standard
is emblazoned with the tiger,¹³
and the various divisions of other royal armies,
rose up and preceded him,
he who clung tightly to Lord Siva's holy feet
to which only those attain
in whom there is no worldly clinging;
he whom men looked up to as a cloud of compassionate grace,
rivalling in splendour the King himself,
Pandyan Lord of the [Pothiya] mountain,
that gave forth the Tamil tongue, rich in all the arts.

39

To the fore, to the rear, and on the flanks
plunging steeds in vast numbers came on,
some stepping in time to the rattle of the drums,
some rushing swiftly, like an agile mind in their movements.
Of elephants there was a multitude, like great, black mountains,
equal in strength to those which support the earth,
swaying uncertainly as they plant their feet
Upon the trembling heads of the eight deadly poisonous serpents.

40

There were natives of the Konkan, Kalinga, Kongu and Tulu lands,
Sinhalese, Orissans, Chinese, and Telugu men,
Malayalis and powerful Malvans, all flocking together
in a thronging mass, too numerous to count.¹⁴

41

Such was the great army which thronged everywhere about him;
Tamil bards mounted on high-stepping horses rode close at his side;
beautiful maidens in close company crowded in on either flank,
whilst the strains of pipe and lute heralded his advance.

¹² The Chera King.

¹³ The Chola King.

¹⁴ The Konkan land was the low country of western India between the Ghats and the Arabian sea, extending from Goa to Gujarat. Kalinga is modern-day Orissa and Ganjam. Kongu was the land comprising Coimbatore, Salem and a portion of Mysore. Tulu land was on the west coast, south of Canara.

42

Ladies with long braided tresses, weighed down with ornaments of gold,
their waists wound with silks, waved their cooling yak-tail fans;
white umbrellas shone resplendent like the moon at the full;
Everywhere the rattle of drums was heard,
And conch-shells and noble clarions sounded out their call.

43

Panegyrists, clapping their hands and singing his praises, pressed to his side.
Maidens with beautiful tresses sang sweetly,
and the glittering ensign, emblazoned with the carp,
whose fame encompasses the eight directions,
fluttered above his matchless palanquin, thickly inlaid with cool pearls.

44

So, on that propitious day,
he who was pre-eminent among brahmins learned in the Vedas,
left his lofty palace to worship at the shrine of the comely Lord Siva,
who wears at His neck bones and peerless rudraksha beads;
then, taking his leave,
he approached the palace of his king, Lord of the lunar race.

45

After obtaining the blessing of that royal patron of the Tamil tongue,
he journeyed into the lands of the Chola king,
whose companion is beautiful Victory,
and leaving behind the thickly clustering gopurams and palaces,
rising like mountain ranges,
he departed under good auspices from fair Madurai's royal seat.

46

Just as the broad western ocean, gathering force with a great roar,
bursts through the dykes and surges over the lands of the auspicious East,
so did they travel on for many a league,
traversing forests and mountains, and towns and villages in great number.

After passing through successive bodily incarnations,
like so many cities,
which come into being and perish in endless succession,
he abandoned that course and embarked on the pathway to God.
Just so, let us tell now how Manikkavachagar,
through the grace of the supremely Beloved,
came that day to lofty Perunturai,
to obtain final liberation, the source of all good.