

TRANSLATING THIRUKKURAL

General Introduction

There are many avenues a writer may scribble along, & among them is the process of recreating creation – that is to say the arduous rewording of the great works of ancient masters. This method was the core of the 16th century Renaissance – the new birth – where the lore-caskets of Arabian, Greek & Latin wisdom were studied, assimilated & regurgitated by European writers. A century later came the Georgian translations of Homer’s epics, & more recently Ezra Pound’s 20th century recreations of Confucius. It is in a similar capacity that I have been engaged, resulting in a new version of the Kural of Thiruvalluvar, or as it is more commonly known, Thirukkural. This 2000-year-old treatise on the art of living is ranked as the first book of the Tamils – that ancient, heroic, dark-skinned race that dwells in both Tamil Nadu & Sri Lanka. As I.A. Richards noted, ‘great cultures start in poetry,’ & it is with the Tamils that this is particularly notable. Their literature is held in the national esteem far greater than many other around the globe, the writers of which are elevated to the level of saints. Foremost among them is Thiruvalluvar, the creator of the Thirukkural, a timeless text that, as the giant of Tamil studies G.U. Pope observed;

“Outweighs the whole of remaining Tamil literature, & is one of the select number of great works, which have entered into the very soul of a whole people & which can never die “

Or is, more simply, in the words of John Lazarus;

The moral soil of Tamil Nadu

W.B. Yeats once opined, “The work of a supreme culture, they yet appear as much the growth of common soil as the grass & the rushes. A tradition, where poetry & religion are the same thing, has passed thro the centuries, gathering from learned & unlearned metaphor & emotion, & carried back again to the multitude the height of the scholar & of the noble – I hope that the world can appreciate these verses. We are not moved because of its strangeness but because we have met our own image.” He was not speaking about Thiruvalluvar, however, but about the Indian poet Tagore. Yet in this paragraph he sums up perfectly the contribution that Indian literature has made on the modern, western mind. In a similar vein, writings like the Tao Te Chung have steadily grown in influence, changing the way the West in especially look at the world. Over the past few decades we have slowly become obsessed with books on self improvement written by an assorted collection of lifestyle gurus. I believe the Kural to be the ultimate self-help book, a treatise

on the unchanging realities of human existence, tracing through its pages the outline of an ideal life.

As we stride through the twentieth century, a new culture awaits mankind – that of a unified ‘global village,’ needing its own ‘international literature,’ & the non-sectarian, anti-nationalistic Thirukkural fits the bill astonishingly well. To the Tamils, the Thirukkural *is* a divine book, but not in the sense of the Koran or Bible, which offer an obstinate outlook on the religious experience. Over the centuries it has been observed that people are more willing to die for their scriptures than to live by them, but the Thirukkural is simply a book to live by, a code of moral conduct to which all creeds, castes & colors can connect, whose lofty idealism has been acclaimed by all the religions of the world. In the words of EV Daniel, “The Holy Kural may well be the meeting ground, the common ground, of all religions.” Every sect & faith can see their own god through Vallavur’s portrayal of a universal deity, without all the bias that is inherent in classical religions. There are no myths, no miracles, no Apocalypse, no global mission, no ‘god above all others.’ Nor are there pantheons of myriad-minded gods – there is only one, although Thiruvallavar doesn’t actually provide a name. I believe this ultra-wise ascetic saw the pointlessness of sectarianism, as whichever faith you belong to, God is just God. Recognizing & sharing this sentiment, during the translation I have replaced the word ‘God’ with ‘Faith,’ for after all, isn’t the belief in an existential, omnipresent being merely faith in one’s spiritual convictions.

Thirukkural

Like the other great Vedic literatures, the Ramayana & the Mahabharata, Thirukkural is an epic. However, here the heroes are not princes & kings, nor are there any battles between demons or massive, monstrous armies. Instead, the star of the poem is the common man, & Thiruvalluvar tells his story through the many experiences that a lifetime would afford him; through friendship & love to statecraft & begging. The full magnitude of the achievement can be realized on a cursory glance through the text, where the multifaceted nature of mankind is so fully explored. The Kural is not a book of rules, laws or commandments. EV Daniel noted, “There are no ‘thou-shalt-do this and thou-shalt-not-do that.’ The Kural is a book with sharp observations of real life, a deep understanding of human weaknesses and strengths, and wise suggestions as to how we can live up to our fullest capacities as free human beings.”

What are the Kural? In Tamil, the word Kural means ‘dwarfish,’ & has been applied to the shortest measure in Tamil poetry – the Kural Venba. This is a couplet of only seven words –

four in the first line & three in the second. This curtness insists on an epigrammatic nature of composition, such as the English proverb 'A stitch in time, saves nine.' The kural are inherently simple, yet extremely subtle, being very similar to the Japanese Haiku, where ideas & sensations are expressed with a modicum of words. Yet in the hands of Valluvar, through the act of ellipsis, he condenses his world-view into phenomenal couplets that have become sharpened knives with which to unstitch the fabric of mortal existence & expose it to the world. Or as Archbishop Trench remarked;

"He abounds in short and memorable, and, if I might so call them, epigrammatic sayings, concentrating with a forceful brevity the whole truth which he desires to impart into some single phrase."

What he has achieved is no less than a blueprint for life. & these neat, ordered rows of kural have stamped an order on the chaos of human existence. Or as Reverend P Percival once wrote, "Nothing in the whole compass of human language can equal the force and terseness of the couplets in which the author of the Kural conveys the lessons of wisdom."

Two thousand years have passed since the Kural were first written down, but their message still resonates loudly through a human condition that seems eternally impervious to change. That there is in each kural a direct & corresponding emotion, event or fact, at large in the modern spirit, is a perpetual wonder of the basic activity of the human soul. Part of the delight in the Kural is the fact that most of them seem instantly recognizable to us, resonating with an inner understanding of life that we all hold deep within our psyches. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato called this 'Anamnesis' – that all learning is simply a recollection from a previous birth. He says that experiences gained in a former life can be taken forward into the next, a starting point if you will, in order that we can evolve even further as human beings. This 'Innatism' says that we are all programmed with certain kinds of knowledge that the kural one-by-one expose to our upper consciousness. Each one of these timeless teachings unlocks a tiny portion of the mysteries of the universe & as they are embraced by the willing student, a larger picture of the human condition shall slowly be surveyed. The Tamils say that following just a single kural will make us a better person. Then if the whole world were to do the same; as billions of raindrops make an ocean, so the absorption of many individual kural into the global psyche must form an ocean of goodness to cleanse the spirit of the world.

Tamil's & the Kural

Over the centuries the Kural have become a much-quoted fibre of the Tamil fabric, their quintessential guidebook for life. They are heard in the speeches of Indian prime ministers, they can be seen written above the driver' seat on most of the buses that range Tamil Nadu & they can be felt in the manners of every Tamil. The popularity of Thirukkural must come from its vivid & easy to remember couplets, which lend themselves quite readily to memory & recitation. Nowhere else in the world is such a vast amount of worldly knowledge stored within such a short, aesthetic & musical form. It is for this reason that the Tamils consider themselves to be blessed among the peoples of our planet, or as Shudhannanda Bharati wrote, "The outstanding greatness of Tamil Nadu was that it gave Valluvar to the world"

The people of Tamil Nadu worship Thiruvalluvar as a saint, the universal guru of their lives. Each year, on Thiruvalluvar day, they celebrate him with a public holiday. They have erected a beautiful shrine to him in the midst of a garden in Mylapore, every year celebrating a great festival there. In nearby Chennai they have erected the Valluvar Kottam, shaped like one of the great temple chariots the Indians wheel through the streets on festival days. A life-size statue of Thiruvalluvar has been installed within & all 1330 kural are depicted in bas-relief at its base. The greatest physical monument, however, is the magnificent 133-foot high statue of the saint stood majestically off the shores of Kanayakamari, the most southern point in India. It was dedicated at the dawn of the new millennium (1.1.2000), & stands like some spiritual lighthouse watching over the world.

To exemplify how the Tamils consider their national book, I found nothing better than an inspired speech made by Gurudeva, HH Sivaya Subramuniaswami, on Saint Thiruvalluvar's Guru Puja Day, February 15, 1979;

The Holy Kural should be used in everyday life - its verses committed to memory and meditated upon, quoted freely as your very own. You will sound wise if you do remember and share these jewels.

One of the greatest benefits of this scripture is to guide our actions and our thoughts, to direct our purpose in life and refine our interactions with our fellow man. Problems can be resolved in the light of the saint's wisdom

That is perhaps its main function - to perfect and protect our lives in the everyday world by preventing mistakes which can cause an unhappy karma, by preventing erroneous attitudes which can bring unnecessary sorrow into our experience.

It can be our refuge in times of confusion, a source of inspiration when we feel less than inspired

Small children all through South India memorize the Holy Kural in order to be able to chant it verse after verse - many can recite the entire 1,330 verses by heart.

This gives them a code of living that remains with them the rest of their lives. It is crucial that children be given the benefit of strong principles from an early age, especially in these times when television and the stories, plots and scenes that children see on television which form the code of living for their lives provide opposite and obscure values.

Thiruvalluvar

Thiruvalluvar can be seen as the ideal man; being a poet, scholar, lawgiver, oracle, social thinker, ethicist, psychologist, political scientist, experienced lover & containing in his own soul the soul of mankind. The word Valluvar itself means 'priest of the weaver of the Pariah class,' one of the lowest castes in India. It is interesting to compare this birth status with that of Jesus Christ, who himself was a low-born son of a common carpenter. The word 'Thirru' is the equivalent of 'Sri' in Hindi, & means 'Lord' or 'Holy.' Then Thiruvalluvar means 'Very holy priest of the weaver of the Pariah caste.' The general belief is that he was born in Thirumailai, near Mylapore, Chennai. There is evidence to show that he at least died there, for there is an ancient shrine dedicated to him at Mylapore, for it is a Tamil tradition to build a shrine at the place where a great individual passed away. That he is considered to come from Mylapore is also very exciting. This is the one spot in India associated with the apostles, & Saint Thomas was presumed to have died there, the same saint who had been an original witness to the Sermon on the Mount. Scholars have found a number of parallels between these very teachings of Jesus & the Kural. Compare these two aphorisms;

Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matthew 5-28)

Ignoring other women's womanliness
Crowns worthy husbands (Thirukkural 15-7)

History of the Kural

It is an interesting fact that the text the world knows as Thirukkural was given its name at a much later date than its composition. There are no records extant that claim a title for both writer & text, but what we have are simple legendary names. It is as if the Kural was deposited on the shores of Tamil Nadu by some divine creature, & left to do its sacred work. This is not uncommon in Tamil literature, as DR Caldwell noted,

“Tamil writers, like Hindu writers in general, hide their individuality in the shade of their writings. They seem to have regarded individual existence as worthless & absorption into the universal spirit of the classical literature of their country, as the highest good to which their compositions should aspire.”

The jury is still out on when the Kural were actually composed. Many Tamil scholars regard it as a second century work, while the Europeans have dated it much later, to about the eighth century. The earlier date is probably the more correct, as it wasn't until the sixth century AD that sectarian bitterness swept through south India. Until that time the various faiths lived happily & tolerantly together, & the non-sectarian Kural may reflect this. Yet again, perhaps Valluvar wrote his treatise as a counterpoise against the chaotic times of sectarian feuding. The question is indeed a thorny one, but then the beauty of the Kural is the fact that there can be found hardly a clue as to its date of composition. This simply adds to the timeless universality of the book, which is, in effect, speaking to men of all ages.

Many scholars have noticed the echoes & traces of the great books of wisdom that were extant in Thiruvalluvar's day. Two thousand years ago Tamil Nadu was a great maritime hinge between the trade of China & Rome. Through its ports passed the sailors, customs & literature of the known world, ports such as Mylapore where Valluvar is reputed to have lived. It is by no means a stretch of the imagination to see our venerable sage listening to the Greek traders speak of Plato, the Chinese of Confucius & the northern Indians of both the Buddha & the Hindu Vedas.

The Sangam Age

The Sangam Age is the traditional name for a quasi-mythological era deep in the Tamil past, where three 'Academies,' in the Grecian sense, were set up in Madurai. Upon them, the crème de la crème of Tamil scholars & writers converged, to determine the older classics & adjudicate on the new literary works of the day. In total, there were three Sangams, each stuffed full of poets & pieces, & it is with the second of them that the

illustrious name of Thiruvalluvar is linked. Throughout these highly literary & enquiring times many treatises were composed upon the art of living, but it is the Thirukkural that stands head & shoulders above them all, the genres highest expression & the Koh-I-Noor of Indian literature. As a repository of eastern wisdom it is on a parallel to the Tao Te Ching, the teachings of Buddha & the sayings of Confucius. These in turn were all a product of the general global question of ethics that raged two to three thousand years ago. The prime job of these philosophers was to help ordinary people effectively meet the challenge of daily life, to deal with its major losses, disappointments, challenges & tragedies.

The legend says that Valluvar submitted his palm-leaf manuscript of his Kural to the 49 Pandits of the second Sangam, the high-browed judges of the academy. He found them sat on a raft that floated on the serene waters of the Golden Lily tank, the fabulous centre-piece of the great Meenakshi Sundareswarar temple of Madurai. At first the Pandits initially scoffed at the sage, throwing scorn on the work of an unlearned man from the lower castes. Valluvar remained unphased by their mockery, & simply placed the manuscript on the raft according to the set custom. Much to the Pandit's astonishment, the raft immediately shrank, ducking these conceited men into the water, & leaving just enough room on the boards for the manuscript. Once on dry land the sodden scholars recognized through this miracle that the Kural were indeed divine, an opinion that has not changed a single iota for two millennia.

Spread of the Kural

Once the Kural had been accepted by the Pandits of Madurai, its influence penetrated every facet of Tamil society. The common Tamils took this rare blend of vibrant mysticism & pragmatic realism to their hearts, concerning as it does the everyday matters which affected their lives. The Kural was quoted in many early Tamil works, such as the Puranauru & the Manimekalai. It also influenced Kambar's excellent 13th century Tamil version of the Ramayana, where Rama & his wife Seeta were fully imbued with the moral guidance of Valluvar. Then, in 1272, the poet Parimelazhagar arranged the 1330 kural into the order which the modern world now knows them. They were placed into chapters of ten kural each, which were again divided into 3 sections – the *Muppaal* – of Virtue, Wealth & Love. The theory is that if these are fully adhered to, then the fourth muppaal – *Moksha* (salvation) – shall be achieved.

The first muppaal, *Aram* (virtue), contains the morals of life, an ethical code with which to perfect the individual, society & through them humanity as a whole. By following these maxims a solid basis is provided for fostering the other two Muppaal. In the *Porul* (wealth),

socio-economic values & proper political processes are elucidated. In essence it outlines an ideal state of nationhood. The last mupaal, *Imbam* (love) relates the many phases of love, placing an especial emphasis on the suffering that parted lovers endure.

Translations

The Kural were first brought to the attention of Europe by a series of missionaries entering Tamil Nadu via Madras (British), Pondicherry (France) & Tranquebar (Danish). The very first translation was in Latin & made by an Italian priest, Father Constantius Beschi, in the early eighteenth century. The next translator was the German AF Cammera, whose work was published in Leipzig in 1803. Then came the French Savant, M Ariel, who released his translation in 1848. It was he who proclaimed the Kural as “One of the highest & purest expressions of human thought.” These men were the pioneers, whose efforts helped to fan the flames of interest in this ancient text, which ever since has burnt fiercer & fiercer. Their efforts in translating Tamil can be compared to the discovery of the Rosetta stone, but instead of using that hieroglyphic key to open the doors of ancient Egypt, they have instead unlocked the wonders of the human soul.

Once the world became aware of these compact distiches of quintessential wisdom, the Kural have been translated into over 60 languages across the world, including 13 other Indian languages. The first English translation was in 1853, by the Reverend Drew, whose work would inspire GU Pope, a gargantuan figure of Kural lore. History now sees George Uglow Pope as the great standard bearer of Tamil, that ‘noble language’ as called it, immersing & devoting his entire life to its study & translation. His first lesson in the language occurred when he was an eighteen-year-old lad in England. Later that year he arrived in Madras & upon first hearing the true beauty of Tamil on the lips of a humble fisherman, he became determined to learn all about the language & to be able to speak it as fluently as a native. He set about meeting the greatest Tamil scholars of the day, & had soon unleashed his genius upon its life-long mission. By 1840 he was staying at Mylapore, about which he would later write, “While visiting the villages around here, that enthusiasm for the great Tamil poet was first kindled which has been an important factor in my life.”

‘Within a short time of my learning Tamil, I commenced translating Thirukkural, for the benefit of Europeans,’ he said, & after almost fifty years, on September 1st, 1886, he would complete his noble task, which by now he had declared the ‘masterpiece of human thought.’ By February 1893 he would also add an excellent, poetic translation of the Naltiyar to his many achievements in Tamil, which included an unfinished, yet massively

comprehensive dictionary of Tamil. For his erudite efforts he was given the honorary degrees by Oxford and Lambeth, & was awarded the much coveted Gold Medal of the Royal Asiatic Society in 1906. After a 'long and useful' life of 88 years, he died in 1908, when one of his last requests was to have his tomb decorated with the words, 'A student of Tamil.'

In that age of imperial oppression Pope wrote, "The speech of a dying people may, perhaps, be allowed to die. But this cannot be said of the Tamil race. Heaven forbid! Let the Tamilians cease to be ashamed of their vernacular." Without this passionate scholar, there is a chance that Thirukkural would still be confined to Tamil Nadu & the dusty university libraries of the world. As it was, the efforts of this incredible savant opened the door to the world's appreciation of Thirukkural. What he did for Tamil will ever live in the Tamilian heart; who are indebted to him, more than to anybody else for making the West see the true energy & exquisiteness of their language. Below is a sonnet which Pope wrote in praise of his illustrious master.

Sage Valluvar, priest of the lowly clan,
No tongue repeats, no speech reveals thy name ;
Yet, all things changing, dieth not thy fame,
For thou art bard of universal man ;
& still thy 'book' above the waters wan,
Virtue, true wealth, and joy, and being's aim,
In sweetest mystic couplets doth proclaim,
Where winds sea-wafted palmy forests fan.

Haply undreamed of 'visions ' glad thine eyes
In realms beyond thy fabled 'seven-fold birth',
& clouds of darkness from thy spirit roll ;
While lands far-off have heard with strange surprise
Faint echoes of thy song. Through all the earth
Men hail thee brother, seer of spotless soul.

Translating the Kural - 1

My own journey into Thirukkural began in February 2002. Two years previously, to celebrate the millennium, the Tamils had erected a giant statue of Thiruvalluvar off the coast of Kannayakamari, India's most southern point. It was this glorious statue which I first noticed as I arrived at that confluence of the three seas, where the Bay of Bengal, Arabian Sea & Indian Ocean fling their waves at the rocky shore from three different

directions. The monument is 133 feet high, representing the 133 chapters of the Kural. The pedestal on which the statue stands is 38 ft high, representing the 38 chapters in the Virtue section of the text. The remaining 95 feet of the statue itself represent the total number of chapters in the second and third parts of the Kural - Wealth & Love. The three parts are also echoed by the statue's right hand, which has three fingers pointing to the heavens. As I gazed upon the statue, all these nuances the time were unknown to me. Kannayakamari had seen my first steps into Tamil Nadu, & all I had gleaned from this visit was that the man who towered before me was the 'Holy Poet of Tamil Nadu.'

A few days later I found myself in the great city of Madurai, & it was here that I was first flung into the world of the Kural. In the lanes close to the great temple that forms the cities heart, I came across one of the Manivasagar Pathippagm bookshops that are scattered across Tamil Nadu. These are both publisher & bookseller & one of their publications caught my eye. It was a small red book with the famous image of Thiruvalluvar sitting cross legged in flowing white robes, a pen in his right hand & a scroll in his left. I immediately bought it & rushed back to my hotel. There, as I reclined under a fan to avoid the heat, I plunged into the Kural, a moment that will stay with me forever. I was immediately touched by its beauty & simplicity, & though my young western mind found some of the maxims a little difficult, I felt there & then an affinity for them. The copy I had was the famous co-translation by Reverend Drew & John Lazurus & on that very first evening I transformed two or three of them back into the Kural form. It was a small step on a journey that would take many years, but as I made it I knew that one day I would like to translate the every kural.

On my return to India in April 2002 I tucked my copy of the Kural away in my bookshelf & let it gather dust while I pursued other projects. For the next six years it would intermittently be looked at, at one point forming the bedrock of my own work in the Kural form, the results of which can be seen in the Humanology section of this book. All through these years the dedication I had made to translate the Kural niggled away at the back of mind. At the same time my literary abilities were strengthening, waiting for the right moment, some catalyst to trigger off the resolution of my promise. This came in September 2008, when I was visited by a friend. She had brought along with her a young Tamil, & conversation soon turned to the subject of the Kural. The fact that a non-Tamil could enjoy his native literature quite amazed him, & during the course of our evening together I resolved to once & for all translate the book for my peers.

Two months later I flew to Mumbai & traveled overland to Tamil Nadu. My first port of call was Thiruvannamalai, a bustling town nestled beneath the holy red mountain of Aranachala. It was here that the 20th century Sri Ramana Maharishi had spent most of his

life in deep contemplation. A famous Ashram had slowly developed about his meditations, which still thrives to this day, many decades after his death. One part of the ashram houses a library, & it was to its silent desks that I found myself drawn. To my delight there were many books on the Kural, which I plunged within in order to create as exact & enjoyable a rendition of the Kural as possible. While I sat at the long desks there, keeping cool beneath a spinning fan, several hefty tomes spread out before me, I was helped many times by the librarian, Ramesh Babu, who would assist me with the awkward points of classical Tamil.

I then took to the road, absorbing the Tamil culture & appreciation of the Kural from conversation to conversation. I felt it would enhance my own version if I was to compose along the same roads that Thiruvalluvar himself once trod. From Thiruvannamalai I passed to the famous beach at Mamallapuram, where under the statue of Thiruvalluvar I reached the half-way point in my translation. Next port of call was chaotic Chidambaram & its famous Annamalai library at the university there. Unfortunately the recent terrorist massacres at Mumbai prevented me from using the facilities. Instead I found a municipal library in the town which was quite adequate. My further travels would take me through the watery wonders of the Karveri Delta, the whitewashed former Danish colony at Tranquebar, the multi-templed town of Kumbakonam, the fabulous fortresses of Thanjavur & Trichy, before I found myself on an overnight train heading to Rameshwaram, arriving there early on Christmas Eve. By this point I had almost completed my task & was hoping to finish the Kural over the festive season. However, every hotel on the island was full, & I rather felt like Joseph & Mary as they trawled the inns of Bethlehem looking for somewhere to sleep. This same scene was repeated even 50 miles away in Ramanathapuram, which was full of Gujuratis who would take a fleet of buses down to Rameshwaram to join in the festivities. Eventually, late on Christmas Eve, I arrived in Madurai where I was very much relieved to find a hotel with vacancies.

As I awoke on Christmas Day I was taken aback by the fact that I was to finish my version of the Kural in the same city in which I had first delved into its pages. To do this I found a small, empty shrine in the Meenakshi Sundareswarar temple & went to work to the babble of human voices & jazz-like strains of an Indian trumpet. Six 2-foot tall black statues of gods, each sporting a 'skirt' & a garland of yellow flowers, sat watching me as I scribbled frantically. They were joined by a giant wall-painting of the green-skinned Siva & portraits of famous Tamil saints. It was a lovely moment to finally lay my pen to rest in such a place, & as I stepped outside into skintingling sunshine the fact I had just finished the divine Tamil text, in one of the holiest Hindu temples, on the most sacred day in Christendom, was not lost on me at all. In my elation I found the same bookshop where I had originally bought the Thirukkural, & there babbled out my story, on the conclusion of which the bookseller brought out another book. It was the Nalatiyar.

Up until this point I had known nothing about its existence, but a brief glance at its introductory proverb, which proclaimed it as an equal to Thirukkural, immediately piqued my interest. The timing was also exceptional. Only a few minutes previously I had completed the Kural, & now its sister text was in my hands! I felt the same sensation springing up as I had had on first looking into the Kural, & resolved once more to translate an ancient Tamil text into English. This I commenced as I continued my tour of Tamil Nadu, which passed through salubrious Kodaikkanal, the plains Palani & Mancunian Coimbatore, before reaching the gorgeous tea plantations of the Niligris Hills. It was there, in the remarkable town of Coonoor, that I spent a lovely two weeks, editing the Kural & translating the Naltiyar. Coonoor was to be my last place of residence in Tamil Nadu & I left that wonderful Indian state in January 2009. With me in my luggage was the same red copy of the Kural I had brought seven years previously. But alongside it now was my own completed version, complemented with a rendition of the Nalatiyar!

Nuances of Translation

Thirukkural is a wonderful book, but to an English speaker it might as well be written in Gaelic. Despite being among the most widely translated texts in the world, outside of Tamil Nadu it is one of the least read. Even the vast majority of the multi-lingual Indians cannot read a word of it. On top of this, to the English-speaking mind, the translations of the Kural we possess are often too wieldy or fanciful to absorb. The most widely known & respected translations in English are the poetical couplets of GU Pope, & the transliterations of Reverend Drew & John Lazurus. I offer their renditions of Kural 36-9 as an example.

The true 'support' who knows – rejects 'supports' he sought before –
Sorrow that clings all destroys, shall cling to him no more

(GU Pope)

He, who so lives as to know Him who is the support of all things & abandons all desire,
will be freed from the evils which would otherwise cleave to him & destroy (his efforts
after absorption)

(Drew & Lazurus)

Similarly, a modern rendition by a native Tamil, Kalaimamani Kalladan, reads;

The mind's nature is to cling to every thing; but that should realize the true thing & cling to it; & that should abandon all desires. If done so, any suffering destined to inflict a person, shall not occur

My own rendition of this particular kural, forced as I was into only seven words, goes as follows;

By choosing true virtue
Bruising ruin debarred

Perhaps it has lost a little in the translation, but the essential essence remains. It has been my intention to create something new from the wellsprings of each kural – not just a vague paraphrase, but a simple maxim for the modern human mind. In order to convey the Valluvar's magnificent message I felt each kural needed to be immediately understood. One of the chief beauties of the original is the compactness of an individual kural, or as PS Sundram observed, "Its soul is brevity, & with it least is most." The saint's succinct & subtle style, operating in such a short space, uses many poetic techniques; from rhyme & repetition, to intricate word-play & clever puns to expose the very heart of his philosophies. I have attempted to emulate these as best as possible, rendering a version that is as close to the original as possible. This has been helped by the English language, that most flexible & comprehensive of all the modern tongues. At the moment in the world there are 400 million native English speakers – second only to the mandarin of the insular Chinese. However, when you add the billion Indians unified by the English tongue, plus the fact that English is the one true lingua franca of commerce & culture, then it is only right that the 'global gospel' of Valluvar should be funneled through the English language into the world at large. As MS Venkatchalam wrote;

It is our bounden duty to make the world realize the richness of Kural & that can be done, only by rendering it into English & thus making it reach all the nook & corners of the world.

Despite Tamil being a beautifully sonorous, it is extremely complex - a single word may need two pages of explanation. However, one of the traditional strengths of the English language is that by flexing its inherent linguistic muscles it has always been able to adopt foreign lexicon, syntax & grammar, & be strengthened by them in the process. The subtle nuances & inflections of the English language have made it possible to translate the complexities of Tamil – for our words may *also* be variously expressed, & when placed in combination offer multitudinous shades of meaning. In addition, on a field level, as a fluent speaker of English I had the relative freedom of Tamil Nadu, where English is widely

spoken in the wake of the imperial Raj. I was able to both converse with educated Tamils on the nature of the Kural & form travel arrangements between the widely scattered libraries. In these dusty halls of academe, stuffed with books in both Tamil & English, I discovered many good translations of the Kural which helped me in my task. These include those of PS Sundaram, VR Ramachandra Dikshitar, FW Ellis, VVS Aiyer, Suddhananda Bharati & Kasthuri Srinivasan.

Linguistics

There is concrete evidence of the existence of the Tamil language from at least the third century BC, but recent archeological evidence has found it on ruins dating back to 1000BC. Its survival has run in tandem to the survival of the Tamils, in face of the much more powerful forces of Sanskrit & Hindi that over the centuries had attempted to take over this corner southern India. The Tamils are very passionate about their language, and recognize that if Hindi, the national language of India, was allowed to march into their land unchecked, their ancient culture would be no more. They cite cities such as Mumbai & Calcutta, where the native tongues have been reduced to a common patois. But fight the Tamils have, & indeed it was only recently that their ancient language was admitted into the law courts of Tamil Nadu. Prior to that only English & Hindi had been allowed. Now, Tamil has triumphantly become the first legally recognized classical language of India.

Like Turkish, Finnish, Basque & Filipino, the Tamil language embraces the linguistic process of agglutination. The word is derived from the Latin verb agglutinare, which means 'to glue together.' This is where affixes are added to the ends of words to increase or alter the base word's meaning. An example in English would be blamelessness – which literally means 'the quality of not having blame.' This method has given the world such incredible words as the Turkish *Avustralyalılaştıramadıklarımızdan*, which means "one of those whom we could not make resemble the Australian people." It is through this process that Valluvar was able to create huge depths of expression within the small framework of only seven words.

In the course of my task I have been forced to create a number of new words, to counteract the Tamil ability to agglutinate. Without this I would not have been able to create a viable translation of Valluvar's message to fit into my scheme. On certain occasions these new words have been extremely pleasing. For example, the word '*posipraxis*' is a composite joining of the words 'positive' & 'praxis.' The latter word means 'transforming an idea into action.' Therefore, the word *posipraxis* means 'the transforming ideas into positive actions.'

In the same fashion the word 'amabandon' is formed from 'amore' & 'abandon,' which conjoined together take on the meaning 'abandoned love.' I have also unearthed a number of obscure or ancient words, whose meaning would fit perfectly with the sentiment of Valluvar's language. For example 'ultramundane,' meaning, 'beyond our ordinary world, & 'euphrasian,' meaning 'well-minded delight.'

Nalatiyar

The Tamils have a unique tradition of didactic & ethical literature known as the Kilkanakku. This is a corpus of 18 full length works of humanistic & ethical content. These are not scattered proverbs, maxims & sayings but each has unifying themes & structures. Of them, Thirukkural is chief, but another, entitled 'Nalatiyar,' has long been considered it's equal. Despite this, it is largely unknown outside Tamil Nadu, despite being as rich in knowledge as the Kural, & often more beautiful poetically. There is a very famous Tamil proverb that reads;

*Banyan & Margosa are good for teeth
Nalatiyar & Thirukkural are good for tongue*

The meaning of this is quite clear. As daily brushing of the teeth makes them stronger, so a daily dose of wisdom will help us to lead a happy life, fully equipped for all its eventualities. GU Pope also saw the two treatises as complementary, & wrote, "These two great works, serving as natural commentaries, together throw a flood of light upon the whole ethical and social philosophy of the Tamil people." He would also write that the Tamils, "Are the foremost among the peoples of India, & the Thirukkural & the Nalatiyar have helped make them so."

Like Thirukkural, its date of composition fluctuates among scholars. But what is certain is its antiquity, its origins steeped in legend. It is said that many hundreds of years ago there was a severe famine in northern India. To escape its ravages 8000 Jains went south to seek the mercy of the Pandya kings. Fortunately for them the third Sangam was at its height & the reigning monarch, Ukkirap Peruvaluti, was a patron of the arts. He welcomed his guests with open arms & the Jains soon understood his benevolence knowing no bounds. They spent their time in Madurai in perfect happiness, teaching the King many wise things about life. Eventually they heard that the famine in their homelands had ended, the Jains

sought to return home. However, the king was endeared so much to their wisdom & artistry that he constantly found excuses to keep them in Madurai. Despite this, the Jains were adamant on returning, & one night all 8000 of them slipped away into the darkness. As a gift to their host each one had written four lines of wisdom on a palm leaf & left it in the royal temple. On discovering these events the unhappy King ordered the Nalati (quatrains) to be thrown into the flood of the great Vaikai River. To his astonishment, four hundred of these floated against the current & washed up on the shore. The now repentant king saw this was an act of God, & ordered the quatrains to be published together as the Nalatiyar (quatrainists).

Despite their equal status, as they were composed after the Kural, the Nalatiyar will always be seen as a younger child trying to emulate its superior sibling. This opinion has been reinforced by the rather forced form in which the text has come down through the ages to the modern world. It was compiled by a scholar called Pathumanar, who appears to have wanted to present it as another Kural. Indeed, he divided it into the same three parts – Virtue, Wealth, Love - & each chapter into ten individual quatrains. A sister text indeed! Unfortunately, a number of these individual maxims hold only a slender connection with the title of the chapter in which it is held, showing again how Pathumanar poured the Nalati into the successful Thirukkural mould. However, tradition is tradition, & despite its irregularities the senate of time has decreed that the Nalatiyar as we know it is set in stone.

Jainism has been one of the chief, enriching influences on all forms of Tamil literature, & many believe the Valluvar himself was a Jain teacher called Kundakunda who lived in the first century AD. Ancient Jain commentators are found quoting from the Kural & refer to it as 'emmottu' – our scripture. In the Sangam Age the Jain poet-scholars known as the Canror were highly valued by the Pandya kings, respected for their beautiful compositions & mastery of the vernacular language. In the post-sangam era, it was the Jains who compiled the eighteen didactic works that the Tamils still hold in high esteem to this day. Yet, despite Nalatiyar being composed by Jains, it is not particularly Jainist – containing, like the Kural, a universal, non-sectarian message. Whereas Thirukkural has a few scattered mentions of God & religion, the Nalatiyar has none. The Tamils still consider it a religious text, however, & know it by the name, Vellalar-vetham – the bible of the cultivators of the soil – reflecting that its message is primarily addressed to the common people.

When I first began my rendition of Nalatiyar I wanted to do a direct line-by-line translation of the quatrains. But on some reflection, I decided to keep the continuity of Valluvar's kural form & channel each of the quatrains into those same seven lines. The final product would then become, as I hope it is now, a regular stream of the highest Tamil wisdom. My task

was made easier by the form of the quatrains, which generally begin with a sublime poetic exclamation, & only in the final two lines is the quatrain's message conveyed. Focusing only on these two lines would lose much of the beautiful poetry that marks the Nalatiyar, which was quite a wrench as can be seen by a brief sample.

- lord of fertile land & everflowing waterfalls
- lord of cool sunshine warming ocean's running waves
- lord of good country with beautiful ebony mountains
- lord of flowery hills with lush & sparkling waterfalls
- lord of honey-bearing woods in the good country
- lord of long seashore with fine, unfailing salt-pans
- lord of the hills with lovely sandal groves on
- lord of cool lagoons & bays brimming with water
- lord of prosperous vineyards & huge gem-studded caverns

However, I wished to make the transition from Thirukkural to Nalatiyar as effortless as possible for the reader, & concentrated only on the moral precepts that each of the Nalati imparts.

The Garland of Thiruvalluvar

Ever since the Kural's inception, when the Sangam Pandits were thrown precipitously into the Golden Lotus Tank, many writers have sang panegyric praises of this impressive holy book. Traditionally they have been collected together in a sequence of stanzas known as the 'Tiruvalluva Malai,' or 'Garland of Thiruvalluvar,' usually placed as an appendix to Thirukkural. During my work I came across many writers extolling the work of Valluvar, which I have gathered together into a new garland, a bouquet containing the dried flowers of aeons ago, & the fresher scents of more modern minds.

The god Brahma, hiding his own true form, was born into the world as Valluvar, who took the three categories of the Vedas Virtue, Wealth and "Bliss and expressed them in the form of the Kural; therefore let my head worship this book, let my mouth praise it, let my mind ponder on it and let my ears listen to it.

Ugra-Peruvaludhi (Pandyan King)

The Kural is a semi-perforated mustard seed, into which the poet has poured the contents of the seven seas.

Idaikkadar

The only remedy available for the whole universe

Kaladar

There hardly exists in the literature of the world a collection of maxims in which we find such lofty wisdom as in Thirukkural

Albert Schweitzer

I wanted to learn Tamil, only to enable me to study Valluvar's Thirukkural through his mother tongue itself.... It is a treasure of wisdom

Mahatma Ghandi

O king, who rules over the land where tame birds fall asleep to the music of the rice-pounders ! The wonder of the thought contained in one of Valluvar's little verses is similar to the drop of water on the tip of the tiniest flower, which reflects the whole length of the tallest palmyra tree.

Kapilar

Thirukkural is as clear as an unpolluted spring. Yes! Thirukkural, the unique book, has come to remove the impurities of this world.

GU Pope

As Vishnu, when he appeared as Vamana, or the dwarf, measured with two steps heaven & earth, so with the two lines of his diminutive veppa-footed kural-verse Thiruvalluvar has measured the universe

Paranar

I hope that the reader can feel from these quotations the reverence that the Thirukkural has obtained over the years, His universality can not be denied, & this quotation, pertaining to the bard of the western world, William Shakespeare, can easily be applied to his eastern counterpart.

He was not of an age but for all time

Ben Johnson