

# A POETS' POET

(Mahavidwan Sri Meenakshisundaram Pillai  
of Tiruchirappalli)



Sridharam K. Guruswamy



*Published by :*

Mahamahopadhyaya

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1976

# A POETS' POET

Life of

Maha Vidwan

Sri Meenakshisundaram Pillai

*Based on*

The Biography in Tamil

*by*

Mahamahopadhyaya Dr. U. V. Swaminathaiyer



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## PUBLISHER'S NOTE.

Sri Meenakshisundaram Pillai (1815 to 1876) was the Adheena Vidwan (Poet Laureate) of the Tiruvavaduthurai Mutt and was conferred the title of Mahavidwan by the Mutt. Mahamahopadhyaya Dr. U. V. Swaminatha Iyer who was his foremost disciple, had the utmost reverence for his Guru and never missed an occasion to pay his meed of tribute to him.

In the columns of the "Swadesa Mitran" of 8th October 1900, he sent out a call for all material that would be helpful in compiling a definitive biography of the great Master. Then in 1902, at Kumbakonam, he gave a three-day-long discourse on this ennobling theme. Principal J. M. Hensman, who attended, insisted on the Life being written and published at the earliest. It was a privilege, says Dr. Iyer, that thrilled him with delight and pride.

First, Dr. Iyer started with the publication of an anthology of Mr. Pillai's poetical works, in 1910. Then came the biography in two parts, the first part published in 1933 dealing with the period from date of birth 1815 up to the date Dr. Iyer joined him as his pupil in 1870; the second part was published in 1934 covering the later years from 1870 up to Sri Pillai's demise in 1876, the period during which Dr. Iyer was intimately associated with Sri Pillai as his pupil. These two volumes in Tamil do full justice to the manifold greatness of the Hero-his facility and accomplishment in every department of poetry, his unique services as a teacher, above all, his lovable character. In the last chapter of the biography Dr. Iyer gives a masterly, yet objective estimate of the greatness, work and worth of his beloved Master. Parts of this sum-up will be found in the no less well written Chapter 34 of this work. Each of the two Tamil Volumes exceed 350 pages; they have gone through three to four editions, having been prescribed as text books by the University and greatly used by scholars and others. During 1965, in connection with 151st birthday of Sri Pillai, this Library brought out an abridgment in Tamil of the original, this also in two volumes. Both the original and the abridgment are now out of print.



This year, 1976, marks the death centenary of the Mahavidwan and the Library has thought it appropriate to observe and commemorate the event by bringing forth an abridged English biography of the Poet so that Sri Pillai and his great services to Tamil may be more widely known and appreciated by foreigners and others not knowing Tamil.

With this object in view, the Library commissioned Sri Sridharam K. Guruswamy, to write a life-sketch of Sri Pillai. How well and truly he has executed his commission (which he considered his sacred duty) will be evident from the following pages and the discerning tribute paid to him by Dr. Meenakshisundaram in his valuable Foreword. We thank him for the fine piece of writing he has done as also his guru, the late Professor A. Rama Iyer, who kindly suggested his name to us as the fittest person.

We are specially grateful to Dr. T. P. Meenakshisundaram for contributing a beautiful Foreword. Herein we present, as he says, a story that "deserves to be placed in the hands of the world". What could be nearer to the heart of Dr. Iyer, whose honoured name this Library bears, than a recognition of his own Master's greatness and worth overflowing the limits of the Tamil Land and embracing the globe in its sweep?

As a follow up to the present English work on the Mahavidwan the Library proposes to publish in English the one-volume condensation in Tamil of Dr. Iyer's own Autobiography made by his distinguished pupil, Vageesa Kalanidhi K. V. Jagannathan, who is the Director of Research of the Library. The English manuscript is ready, also from the same gifted pen as the author of this book. The Library has thus cause to be grateful to Sri Sridharam K. Guruswamy doubly for the help rendered so readily and so willingly.

Dr. Iyer's Autobiography ends roughly with the first half of his life (1855 to 1899). He died, full of years and honour before he could take up the later half (covering the period 1899 to 1942). The Library is making strenuous efforts to publish a biography in Tamil covering this later period and has entrusted the work to Sri K. V. Jagannathan. We hope and trust we will be able to publish this companion volume as early as possible.



The Library hopes that, with the completion of this biography of Dr. Iyer, there will be before the public two books of immeasurable value, giving the life sketches of a Master and his pupil—the Mahavidwan and the Mahamahopadhyaya—who, each in his own way, has done so much for Tamil and what it stands for both of them models of giant gifts and giant goodness, a perusal of whose biography, even in outline, is bound to renew in us our faith in life, in humanity and in the ideals and values that are there for all time.

J. V. Swaminatha Iyer

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Tiruvanmiyur,  
Madras—600041  
1st January 1976

(Chairman, Executive Committee)  
Dr. U. V. Swaminatha Iyer Library.



## FOREWORD

Dr. U. V. Swaminatha Iyer was a great man. It was he who published many of the Tamil Classics and opened to the eyes of the Tamilagam and the World the glory and greatness of the ancient Tamil Culture and Civilisation, leading to researches in ancient Tamil History and Tamil thought. Without any English or Western education, he himself framed a theory of Textual Criticism and in this he stands unique. He has enriched Modern Tamil literature by his Autobiography, again a new field in Tamil. Biographical literature in Tamil, can now be proud of the biography of his Teacher by him.

He gives his personal experience of the history of the literary World of those days in which his Teacher was the moving spirit. This gives added significance and makes it a great piece of literature. It is also an introduction to the poetry of his teacher Meenakshisundaram Pillai, a poetry which has lost its glamour and popularity in the changed atmosphere of Tamil Studies, but the personal touch introduced by our author brings out its human significance and compels our attention.

To our Author, the very name of his Teacher was like the name of the beloved. It was my good fortune to be named after his Teacher, my father himself having been a student of another disciple of Meenakshisundaram Pillai, Subbaraya Chettiar; and my name itself made Dr. Swaminatha Iyer to take a keen interest in me. From this I was able to fathom the deep love and reverence he has towards his teacher.

The literary world of the Tamil Land of the last century cannot be understood from within but for this biography. Meenakshisundaram Pillai was a great poet—a poets' poet, as this English version of the biography tells us. He has given volumes of majestic Tamil Poetry, but more than that, he has inspired a number of Tamil Scholars like Vedanayagam Pillai, Thiagaraja Chettiar, Subbaraya Chettiar and above all Dr. Swaminatha Iyer, who have made the Tamil studies what they are today by their lifelong devotion to Tamil. Further, he made the Thiruva-



vaduthurai Mutt a home of Tamil. All this is indeed a great miracle which can be understood only when we read the biography by Dr. Swaminatha Iyer.

This story deserves to be placed in the hands of the world, and it is this the author of the English version has done. It is not a literal translation. The author has made the material his own and given the story in beautiful idiomatic English. He has given English renderings here and there of Meenakshisundaram Pillai's verses ; they read like original compositions in English.

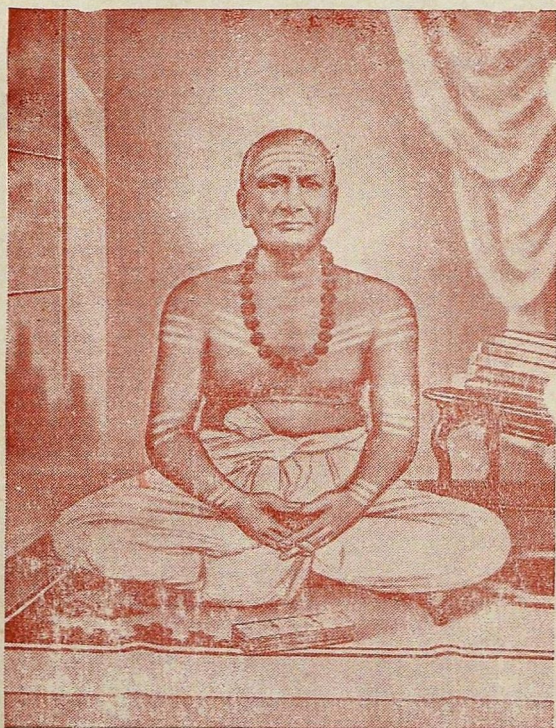
The Original work in Tamil is voluminous and this has a special appeal to the Tamilians, but to a foreigner the inner spirit alone has to be conveyed and the author of this English version has succeeded in making his readers feel the same kind of love and reverence which Dr. Iyer felt towards his beloved Teacher. The story, in its condensed form, becomes much more interesting by gaining a deeper and richer unity.

The author deserves our congratulations, and Dr. Swaminatha Iyer Library, in publishing this, will be making the name of Dr. Iyer and of his Teacher Meenakshisundaram Pillai popular among the English reading public also.

Madras-2

T. P. MEENAKSHISUNDARAM





Mahavidwan Pillai Avergal  
1815—1876



# A POETS' POET

## 1. PARENTAGE AND BIRTH

There lived in Madurai, in what is known as Adi Narayana Pillai Street today, a family of Saiva Vellalas who had charge of the accounts coming under the Fish-Signet (one of several) in the temple of Sri Minakshi Sundareswara. One day in the year was set apart for according temple honours to this family for the services they rendered.

At the dawn of the nineteenth century, such rights and duties devolved upon Chidambaram Pillai who was well-read and devoted to his work. Owing to some disagreement with the temple authorities, he gave up his job left Madurai with his wife Annathachi and travelling north settled down at Ennai Gramam to the west of Tiruchirappalli on the southern bank of the river Cauvery.

In accordance with the practice obtaining in those days, Chidambaram Pillai was received with every mark of hospitality by the people of the village. They admired him for his gift of poetry, took lessons from him in writings religious and secular and revered him too for his piety. During a season of unprecedented drought they begged him to compose a special prayer invoking rain and he obliged them.

*Hearken Lord, Who succourest souls in distress,  
Hearken and release from each thrice-blessed Tress  
Of Thine the rain-cloud that lieth there concealed  
And gladden with a downpour every heart and field.*

Luckily for him, the rains set in within a few days. The grateful village people asked him how much paddy he would need per year to maintain himself in comfort. He said that thirty-six bags would do. They raised the quantity among themselves, handed it over to him, and begged him to continue to live in their midst.



It is said that Chiddmbaram Pillai rendered similar services in villages near by teaching and composing poetry. The inhabitants of Adavattoor wanted their children to be educated by this good man and with the permission of the people of Ennai Gramam took him to their own place. There he came to be known popularly as Chidambara Vathiyar. He went once every year on a pilgrimage to Madurai to offer worship at the temple there. Every day he used to read Tiruvilaiyadal Puranam with devotion and he also taught it to those who wished to learn it from him.

It was at Adavattoor at 2.18 a.m. on the night of Thursday 6th April 1815, that a son was born to him. He named the child Minakshisundaram after the tutelary deity of his family. The people of Somarasampettai then prevailed upon Chidambaram Pillai to spend a few years with them too. It was at this latter place that another son and a daughter were born. They were named Chokkalingam and Minakshi respectively.

## 2. EDUCATION AND MARRIAGE

Minakshisundaram Pillai attended his father's school from his fifth year and was taught the usual children's classics, arithmetical tables, some devotional poetry and the Tamil lexicon known as *Nighandu*. Standing head and shoulders above his school-fellows in studies he was soon made monitor.

He listened to the discussions that his father held with scholars who came to him on a visit, followed closely the meaning of the verses he was taught and developed a gift for speaking readily skilfully and in a mellifluous voice. His father noted his precocity and coached him at home too. He got by heart the grammar work *Nannool*, among other books and listened with understanding when standard works like *Naidadam* were being taught to seniors.

Those were days when printed books were rare. Sri Pillai learnt early to write a beautiful hand on palm-leaves. He copied out every poem that had an appeal for him and soon had it by heart. He came out with apt quotations whenever occasions arose and soon mastered every-thing that his father could teach him,



Like father, like son. Chidambaram Pillai noted his son's ability to compose verse and encouraged him in his efforts. The usual practice is for the teacher to give the last line of a stanza and ask the pupil to fill in the rest. This the boy did easily to the admiration of every one.

Then came practice in employing 'yamaka' or puns. This art of using the same words and phrases in several succeeding lines, making them yield each time a different meaning suited to the context was a pastime for poets, and a mark of their thorough mastery of their vocation. It also afforded special delight to more sophisticated readers.

Minakshisundaram Pillai took to such advanced stages of the art of poetry as to the manner born, and spent all his spare time in imitating the works of his forerunners in the field and composing verses of various kinds. He was encouraged in this by scholars then residing in places like Worur and Tiruchirappalli, who heard of him and struck up an acquaintance with him.

Leading citizens of these parts often invited Chidambaram Pillai to their homes and the invitation naturally included his son and foremost pupil. This budding genius could always be counted upon to keep an audience instructed and entertained by both recitation of poetry and its exposition. Occasions like these also served as an incentive to him to further development of his powers.

There is a pleasant episode connected with this early period of the Poet's life.

Days like the full moon and new moon were school holidays and students used to be sent on errands on such days. They usually went in groups, playing a literary game. One boy would recite a poem, another would take his cue from the last word of this and give a poem he knew which started with this word. And so the chain went on endlessly with linked sweetness long drawn out.

Chidambaram Pillai used to send his boy to buy provisions from the shops at Tiruchirappalli; and when the boy went, his class-mates went with him. There was a toll-gate on the way and the chowkidar in charge was a lover of learning of the name of



Ranga Pillai. He was also a good friend of Chidambaram Pillai. When the boys passed by his gate, he used to ask them what they had been studying last, made them recite from those poems and explain them too in detail. Sri Pillai did his part so well that he soon came to be specially liked by this learned chowkidar.

One day Ranga Pillai said to the boys, "your master would surely have taught you by now to compose verse. Come along, let me have a 'venba' on Pillaiyar now," Before the others could put together a line or two Sri Pillai had his 'venba' ready.

*O Thou who wrotest Bharatam on Meru Mount  
And madest Thy Father's chariot come to grief  
Bless us that we might drink deep of learning's fount  
And become Thy worthy scholars, O worthy Chief!*

So the invention of new melodies went on, every time the boys went to town and came back. Ranga Pillai paid on the spot two annas (one-eighth of a rupee) for each such verse composed by Minakshisundaram and he was enabled thereby to obtain grocery in abundance for his family's use. The encouragement given by Ranga Pillai during these days counted for much in the rapid development of the boy's talent; and the number of verses he composed like this in his younger days is reported to be considerable.

A friend of the family of the name of Malai Andia Pillai once took the young Poet to a land-owner of Murungapettai and spoke to him about his gift. Another person who was seated nearby at the time, quoted a stanza and asked the boy to give its meaning. He did so. That stranger repeated the words he had used before namely, "Could you not give us by now the meaning of this song of mine?" "Now, compose a 'venba' of your own with this as its last line," he said.

The response was astonishing. Sri Pillai gave a 'venba', eking out the line a little to suit the metre. It was a play on words applicable both to the foodgrain, paddy and to the Gods of the Hindu Trinity.



*Sprouting in the 'water-lotus' forming into the 'rice-swan' of song  
Hugging the mortar closely slumbering on the waters for long,  
Riding on the Bull there on high and joining the 'Sun-*

*sheaf' They shine*

*Could you not give us by now the meaning of this*

*riddle-song of mine?*

Brahma, the Creator is seated on the lotus and rides a swan. The word for lotus in Tamil used here means also water and the word for swan means also cooked rice. Paddy grows in the water and later shapes itself into rice. So the line applies to both paddy and Brahma. Vishnu, the Preserver, incarnated as Krishna, was tied to the mortar by his foster-mother. He is also depicted as slumbering on the waters. Paddy is pounded into rice in a mortar. It also stands for long in a flooded field during its growth. So what applies to Vishnu applies equally to paddy.

Siva, the Destroyer rides on the bull and dwells in the orb of the Sun. Bullocks are used for transporting paddy-bags (and also for threshing the grain under their hooves). The word for a sheaf of grain is in Tamil the same as for the Sun. Paddy is gathered into sheaves. Thus the parallel is complete between Siva and paddy.

The climax is reached in the very last word of the original. It is 'sol'. It is the imperative, 'say'! It is also the meaning or solution of the riddle contained in the preceding lines since another meaning of 'sol' is paddy itself.

The piece came so effortlessly and so well that it captivated the landowner and he gave a wagon-load of paddy as his reward. The young Minakshisundaram secured many prizes like this by similar performances elsewhere.

In 1829 Chidambaram Pillai passed away. The poet who was now in his fifteenth year poured out his grief in verse. Only one stanza is now extant. The year was Virodhi literally means 'Enemy'.



*Thou art my Enemy, forsooth, thou unkind Year  
Thou madest me part from my Parent so dear  
Who taught me the best that sages without peer  
Left behind in writing: Now say, what else have I to fear?*

The obsequies were soon over. The people of the village prevailed upon the bereaved family to continue in their midst and contributed liberally for their support.

They also put their heads together and arranged for the poet's marriage. Cauvery Achi was the name of the fortunate bride. The wedding was celebrated on a grand scale.

Whenever he was free Sri Pillai went to places nearby obtained classical writings on loan, copied them down for his study and spent his time in the company of the best minds of the past.

### 3. SHIFTING TO TIRUCHIRAPPALLI

Somarasampettai provided every comfort except the company of learned men, which was what Sri Pillai needed most at this stage. He spoke about this to his friends at Tiruchirappalli, who welcomed him to the city with open arms. Taking leave of his well-beloved friends at the village, he shifted to a small house built on the bare rock to the south of the East street on the Rockfort. The rent was a quarter of a rupee per month.

There were a number of scholars in residence at Tiruchirappalli and its environs at that time, each of whom had made a specialised study of some works, which he taught to pupils. Sri Pillai went to these by turns, won their good-will, sat at their feet and learnt all they had to impart. To see him was to like him, for few people had his keenness of intellect, his depth of learning, his gift of original composition and above all, his modesty and extreme good nature.

Some of the more prominent scholars of this day who belonged to this area were (1) Muthu Veera Vathiyar, who lived in Bandiman Street, a blacksmith by trade and author of several



works of grammar (2) Somasundara Mudaliar, who was patronized by the famous Manikka Mudaliar for his proficiency in Saivite religious works (3) Irulandi Vathiyar of Bima Naickan Palayam who rode on a bullock because his legs were atrophied, who got about with the assistance of a pupil and obtained gifts from the well-to-do by a demonstration of his learning (4) Palakarai Veeraraghava Chettiar, the father of Shodasavadanam Subbaraya Chettiar (5) Arumugam Pillai of Kalla Street, who specialised in medicine too, one of whose pupils, Seshaiyengar, became later a member of the Presidency College staff and the author of several works and whose correspondence with his erstwhile master was always carried on in verse (6) Maruda Muthu Pillai who was as well versed in astrology as in grammar and literature (7) Appavaiyar of Tiru Nayam (Tinniyam) who came of a family of scholars and composed Tiru Vilaiyadal Keertanas and other works and (8) Maruda Nayakam Pillai, who specialised in Saiva Siddhanta philosophy also and was the first to edit and publish standard works of that school.

Similarly there were patrons too who extended their assistance to Sri Pillai who now spent as much time in teaching others as in getting taught himself.

A holy man of the name of Velayudha Munivar came to Tiruchi at this time and stayed at the Mouna Swami Mutt on the Rockfort for some months. Sri Pillai with another scholar of the name of Sri Govinda Pillai went to him regularly, morning and evening and got valuable instruction in many classics of whose existence they had not been aware till then. Sri Pillai then studied Kamba Ramayanam and other works and had his doubts cleared by the experts he found somewhere or other.

Tamil grammar comprises five heads: letters, words, content, prosody and figures of speech. Of these, the first four were by now familiar ground for Sri Pillai as he had been working hard at them since his boyhood. The standard work on the last figures of speech was *Dandi Alankaram* but there was no one he knew who had either a copy of that book with him or was competent to teach it.

There was at this time a mendicant in Tiruchirappalli who begged from door to door, but was reputed to be a man of great



erudition and a specialist too in the above-mentioned work of grammar. He avoided the company of men and communicated rarely with those who sought enlightenment from him. He left a few palm-leaf books at a Mutt for safe-keeping; and it was quite likely that one of these was the book Sri Pillai wanted.

The young poet noted the movements of this eccentric accompanied him as he went on his rounds, engaged him in interesting talk, got him a little of the raw opium to which he was addicted and when he was in the proper mood, prevailed upon him to lend his book to him. He won that scholar's favour so completely that he was able to take lessons from him in this and in other standard texts. He copied all these on palm-leaves for his own study and reference later.

An elderly scholar at Karkkudi near Tiruchirappalli taught Sri Pillai some more grammar and also that division of poetry that is known as Chitra Kavi, which is the art of arranging the letters of a stanza according to a set order in pictures of chariots, or of eight inter-twining snakes and so on.

#### 4. FIRST VISIT TO TIRUVAHAVADUTURAI

Sri Pillai never missed a day's recital of Tevaram and Tiruvachakam, for such had been his father's explicit directive to him. He studied in addition whatever work of devotional literature he could obtain, to whichever religion or cult it might belong, and enjoyed its poetic beauty.

There were other young men who studied along with Sri Pillai and emulated him in composing verse. In the company of such friends he often visited sacred shrines. At Tittakudi the trustee of the temple asked him for a hymn in praise of the Deity; he composed a set of ten verses accordingly in the course of his brief stay there.

His fame as a gifted poet soon preceded him wherever he went and it became a rule for people in charge of temples to obtain from him poems celebrating the Deities worshipped there.



There is a marked difference between the poetry he composed now and his works of a later period. These earlier poems sprang spontaneously from love of God and were simple in diction. Some of the ideas and the flow of language remind us of Tevaram and Tiruvachakam Hymns.

*How can I hope, O Lord, for salvation—how  
When I omit each morn and eve to bow  
To Thee, or sing Thy praises, or take a vow  
To adore Thee with flowers, or serve Thy servants now?*

His later poems are charged with wonderful imagery, packed with ideas of Siddhanta philosophy and embellished with interesting word-play and ingenious figures of speech.

When Sri Pillai visited Oottattoor, he was prevailed upon by friends to write a poem about the temple there. He composed an andaadi of a hundred verses, weaving into it all the facts of the stala purana and the names of the Deities and making the very words leap and sing, as they flow into a crescendo with all the ten verses at the close ending with *Potri* (or Hallelujah).

Two scholars who gave musical discourses at Poovalur requested Sri Pillai to give the story of Mayil Ravana in verse form. He did so in a total of one hundred stanzas and helped them to make a living out of that.

Not content with visiting places of pilgrimage he now wished to offer worship daily by himself in the time-honoured way and so was initiated into Siva Puja by an aged guru who lived in East Chintamani, Tiruchi. He was just past twenty and from now on never missed a day's routine of loving adoration of God in private.

Sri Pillai came upon a copy of *Tiruvanaikka Puranam* in the house of the trustee of that temple and found it to be superior in every way to all the works of a similar nature he had read before. Lost in admiration he went over it again and again and revelled in the varied beauties. There were however, certain passages in it which were not quite clear and there was no one in the neighbourhood who would resolve his doubts for him.



So he decided that the proper place to go to at this stage would be the Mutt at Tiruvaavaduturai.

He took a pupil of his as his travelling companion and set out on the journey. He offered worship at every temple en route, spent hours in happy discussions with the scholars he met and reached Patteeswaram.

There he had the good fortune to be entertained by Appa Pillai, a descendant of Tiruchathimutra Pulavar and the author of several poems who took him to a fellow-villager, Namasivaya Pillai, who was a territorial magnate and a keen philanthropist. These two had known each other before by reputation and were now meeting for the first time.

A scholar of repute in that area, of the name of Pasupati Pandaram, happened to drop in; and some people in the company wanted him to assess the attainments of the young visitor. He accordingly quoted the 56th stanza *Mayilai Andaadi* and asked him to give its meaning.

Sri Pillai made the gentleman repeat the stanza, indicated to what division and classification of theme in love poetry it belonged, gave word for word meaning and finally, to the delight of his audience, quoted parallel verses from other works and explained them all. There happened to be present among the gathering several distinguished men of learning and they extolled Sri Pillai's vast and deep erudition and also his extreme modesty and good nature.

The warm welcome given by Namasivaya Pillai made the young poet spend a few more days in that village. At the request of the local people he then composed and formally released in public *Pazhasai Patitruppattandaadi*, a work redolent of the best writings of ancient days in both content and flow of language.

When finally he spoke to his host of his desire to proceed to Tiruvaavaduturai, he was assured that he was welcome to drop in at this place as often as he liked and that he could look upon that house as his own and command every comfort he wished for.



Travelling by way of Tiruvalanchuzhi, Swamimalai Kumbakonam and Tiruvidaimarudur, at all of which places people vied with one another in according him a cordial reception, he finally reached his destination.

A ravishing sight awaited him there. The monks in their shining ochre robes who look like so many personifications of purity and devotion, the cream of society that came in an unending stream from far and near to pay their homage, the scholars and artists who stood about in knots, speaking about the rewards they had received, each according to his worth, the attendants who performed their duties like clock-work, providing flowers, fruits and other accessories to worship and the all-pervading atmosphere of love of learning and love of God combined, took his breath away.

The Head of the Mutt at this time, the fourteenth in the order of succession, was His Holiness Veloor Sri Subramanya Desikar, an all-round scholar, expert teacher and an eloquent and entertaining speaker. It was he who created the traditions governing the procedure and etiquette to be followed at the Mutt.

Sri Pillai duly asked for permission to wait upon His Holiness and when taken into the presence did his homage, reciting the verses he had composed and offering the fruits and other tribute he had brought with him. Desikar was favourably impressed with his young visitor and made kind enquiries about him.

Sri Pillai stayed for a few days and noted the excellence of the arrangements made for the promotion of both Tamil and Sanskrit studies. Brahmin students received stipends in kind and went and sat at the feet of scholars in villages hard by, like Tiruvalangadu, Tirukkodikka, Bhaskararajapuram and Kuttralam. Every facility was provided in the Mutt itself for the study of literature of all kinds, Vaishnavite as well as Saivite, under the supervision of experts. As those in charge of the farm, the granary, the stores and the mess were all monks who did their work with loyalty and devotion, the Head of the Mutt was free most of the time to attend to education and to patronizing arts and letters.

Desikar set difficult tests orally to gauge the degree of Sri Pillai's attainments in Tamil and the latter acquitted himself



with credit. He also referred his own doubts to Desikar who explained them all to him, sometimes with a mere gesture more eloquent than words. Sri Pillai used to speak often in later years about the wonderful way in which his problems were all solved for him and how he regretted not having come to that place earlier. The desire was first planted in his heart at this time that he should somehow continue his association with the Mutt all his life long.

At last the day came when he bade humble farewell to Desikar, promising to wait upon him as often as he was able to. This he did at intervals, after he returned to Tiruchirappalli, whenever he felt the urge and the need to do so.

## 5. A POET IN FULL BLOOM

The close acquaintance with the Head of the Mutt however brief it had been and the confidence he now felt as a result of his meeting him, emboldened Sri Pillai to attempt more ambitious literary modes; and his efforts were crowned with success.

While on a visit to Tiruppaingneeli, he was persuaded by his friends to compose a poem on the sanctity of the temple in that village. The language he employed is refreshingly simple; but it is the apparent simplicity of the consummate art that conceals itself. He employed the usual word-play-tiripu and yamaka-in plenty and also interspersed themes associated with the poetry of love, like sending a companion, a swan, a parrot, a bee, a heron and a cloud as messengers. The distilled essence of his study of hundreds of similar works went into the very texture of this Tiripandaadi, which remains at the same time strikingly original and spontaneous.

Sri Pillai was twenty-six when he composed another Tiripandaadi on Tiruvanaikka. It is now lost. With the experience gained so far he composed a similar poem on the Rock Temple at Tiruchirappalli, taking special pains over it and it is acknowledged to be the best he had written till then. It contains twelve stanzas in the beginning as prayer and self-description and in this sense it is unique among his writings of a similar nature.



Sri Pillai was one day being ferried across the Cauvery with some others intent, like him, to visit the temple at Tiruvanaikka. (There was no bridge there at that time). A good friend of his then suggested he should write a poem on the Goddess Akhilanda Nayaki. Another said, "We know that Sivaprakasa Swamigal completed a poem on Tiruvannamalai by the time he circled the hill once on foot. Can you do like that now?"

"There is no harm in trying," said Sri Pillai and started part writing and part dictating what he composed from that minute. He continued like that after they had all offered worship at the temple and the poem was completed before the party returned home. It was a marvel how he had managed to say everything pertinent to the temple and the Deities in the most imaginative and attractive manner and in such a very short space of time too. The friend who had made that request to him gave him a generous recompense for his feat.

Another of his good patrons, Lakshmana Pillai by name, prevailed upon him to write a 'Pillai Tamil' on the same Goddess. This type of poem he was attempting for the first time; and so he invoked the aid of the Gods and the Saints in twelve opening stanzas. Such a feature is not to be found in any other 'Pillai Tamil', either his own or those written by other poets before his time. The poem turned out to be of such flawless perfection that every one implored him to get it printed; but he did not have the facilities for it just then. An opportunity for that was to come, however, quite soon.

## 6. FIRST TRIP TO MADRAS

Sri Pillai was always in search of kindred souls; contact with whom would be of considerable satisfaction to him. The Government of Madras had at this time organized an Education Society consisting of the most prominent scholars then available and entrusted to them tasks like teaching, lecturing, editing, writing text-books, rendering into prose the contents of well-known poems and translating into Tamil worth-while literature from other languages.



Vidwan Tandavaraya Mudaliar was the head of this Society till he was transferred to Visakhapatnam on other duty in 1839. Other members were Kandasami Pulavar, Nayanappa Mudaliar, Ramaswami Pillai, Ramanuja Kavirayar, Visakha Perumal Aiyar and Mazhavai Mahalinga Aiyar.

Sri Pillai heard of the wonderful work these people were doing by way of both research and publication and wished very much to meet them all and profit by what they could impart to him. Lack of means, however, stood in the way of his undertaking such a journey. This time he had fortune on his side.

His good friend Lakshmana Pillai had to conduct a suit at the High Court in Madras and was on the look-out for some one to whom he could entrust proper charge of it. The person had to be reliable and capable too. The sterling qualities of Sri Pillai now flashed into his mind.

"Can you please do me a favour?" he said to him when he met him. "I want some one to attend to a family suit of ours going on in Madras. I shall be grateful if you yourself could undertake that responsibility".

Sri Pillai's heart leaped up with joy when he heard this. It was a dream come true! "If you decide to send me, sir, I shall not only look after that litigation and do the needful but also satisfy a long-felt desire in my heart," he said.

"A long-felt desire? What may that be?"

"There are scholars of great renown in Madras whom I have long wanted to meet. This would provide an opportunity for me to get to know them and to have certain doubts cleared by them."

Lakshmana Pillai turned to friends who were near. "Look at this Prince of Poets!" he said. "Who would ever openly admit like this that there were gaps in their knowledge? It is always the way of men of little learning to put on airs and claim to be omniscient; they would be blind men leading the blind into the ditch. See how eager our young friend is to improve himself!"



He extolled Sri Pillai's virtues gave him a servant to attend on him and placed at his disposal adequate funds for the journey to Madras and for a stay of several months in that city.

The elders who came to see him off noted several incidents of good omen that occurred at that moment and blessed him, saying, "You are bound to succeed in this enterprise, young man and return home triumphant".

Sri Pillai went by way of Patteeswaram, Mayuram Chidambaram and such places and reached Madras. He there gave necessary instructions to a lawyer and wrote about it all in detail to Lakshmana Pillai. Then he felt himself free to seek the scholars whom he had so much wished to meet. Three of these took kindly to him.

Sri Pillai soon settled into a fixed pattern of life, which did not leave him even a free minute to enter a temple on the way or offer worship inside it, as he wished to do. The mornings he spent with Kancheepuram Sabhapathi Mudaliar and cleared his doubts in works like *Kanda puranam* and *Peria puranam*. Afternoons would see him with Tiruvenkata Mudaliar at Egmore studying *Kallaadam*, *Tiruvachakam* and *Kural*. During the early hours of the night he met Tiruvambalattinmamudam Pillai at Mylapore and learnt from him the more abstruse passages in *Kamba Ramayanam*, *Bhagavatam* and the Vaishnavite commentaries. The hours in between were spent in assisting these and other scholars in their research and teaching those who came to him for guidance. One of such pupils was Ponnambala Mudaliar of Purasawalkam, who became later Tamil Pandit at the Government College Kumbakonam and the Presidency College Madras.

The three elderly scholars named above whenever they met for discussion and comparing of notes, spoke in admiration of Sri Pillai, his many-sided genius and his winsome modesty. The very doubts the young man raised served as an incentive to them to apply their own brains all the more to the concerned masterpieces, to discover new beauties in them and also to take up other such works for comparative study and research.

The high light of this visit to Madras was Sri Pillai's meeting with that doyen among Tamil scholars, Mazhavai Mahalingaiyar.



Kancheepuram Sabhapathi Mudaliar and his two friends decided among themselves to give Mahalingaiyar a pleasant surprise by introducing to him this young phenomenon and so they took him to the latter's house on a certain Sunday.

It is on record that in the world of Tamil learning in those days, Mahalingaiyar's word was law. When Arumuga Navalar translated the Bible into Tamil, Mahalingaiyar was unanimously chosen to give his verdict whether that work was fit to be printed or not. There is also the instance of a certain scholar of the name of Ramanuja Kavirayar who, out of arrogance and spite, despised and belittled the attainments of all others and they went and complained about this to Mahalingaiyar. He became their champion and challenged the Kavirayar to answer his questions wherever and in whatever company he met him and thus effectively silenced him for good. This great scholar was perfectly at home in both language and literature; proficient in music and devoted to his friends, besides being a man of infinite courage and daring.

He now welcomed his three friends and pointing to their companion, asked, "may I know who he is". Sabhapathi Mudaliar answered. "He belongs to Tiruchirappalli. His name is Minaksisundaram Pillai. He has long expressed a desire to meet you. So we have taken him here to see you. He is a fine Tamil scholar, as you can find out for yourself".

Mahalingaiyar became all attention as soon as the word 'Tamil' fell on his ears. He turned to the young man and said, "Could you please tell me the names of the classics you have studied?" And when Sri Pillai gave just a few names and stopped, he added, "Please recite any poem you know."

The young Poet chose a favourite passage and from the way he rendered it, Mahalingaiyar concluded that he must be a person of high attainments indeed. "I am only able to see that this is a selection from a Pillai Tamil and that it is a poem of matchless beauty. But I do not know whose work it is. Perhaps it is current only in the area around Tiruchirappalli. I have not heard any one here mention the poem even by name", he said. Then he added, "Could you please tell me which paragon among poets unknown to me has blessed us all with such a fine composition?"



With becoming humility Sri Pillai stated that it was a selection from his own *Akhilanda Nayaki Pillai Tamil*.

“What!” said Mahalingaiyar to himself, “How modest this young man still is after having composed such lovely poetry! Surely this could not be his first work, for the maturity of judgment shown in the writing proves it to be the final fruit of years of unremitting practice. No, no! I have certainly not set eyes on his equal in my life till this day.”

He then requested Sri Pillai to repeat that selection and then to recite a few more of such poems, listened with increasing admiration and said in the end, “I too have a little piece for you to hear, in your turn. Please listen.

*Gone, gone with the wind is the fame that in days of yore  
Two mighty Poets gained with their Pillai Tamil—Sage  
Kumaraguru and Pahazhikkootan; our very eyes before  
We see this Minakshisundaram of sweet and tender age;  
He sang but yesterday of the Goddess of Analkka and bore  
At once the palm from these with his divinest poetic rage!*

Mahalinga Aiyar turned to his friends and said, “It is remarkable that a young man of such gifts should at the same time be so modest too!”

“Has this poem been printed? If not, it should be done at once. We should not deprive readers of the joy this work is sure to afford, them” he said next.

From that day Mahalinga Aiyar took Sri Pillai with him in his own carriage wherever he went. He gave him the clarifications he sought in higher grammar, lent him for his study a rare work not obtainable elsewhere and also got enlightening tips from him of help to himself. At Sri Pillai’s request he demonstrated how with just one stanza before him he used to drill all kinds of grammar points into his pupils at the Presidency College.

*Akhilanda Nayaki Pillai Tamil* was printed in April 1842 with laudatory verses affixed to it from fifteen of the foremost men of letters of the day, who treated him, not as a young man



who had come to study under them but as an equal, if not a superior.

The court action which had brought Sri Pillai to Madras ended in about a year and he returned to Tiruchirappalli, taking leave of his friends, though the parting was painful on both sides.

## 7. TEACHING AND LEARNING

Sri Pillai was now even better equipped than before to teach others and to guide them because he had observed the methods adopted by the giants in the field he had met in Madras. Most of his time he gave to students and to fellow poets, guiding them in their first steps in study and in composition with gentle solicitude. Except at meal time he could usually be found in the upstairs apartment of his friend Chidambaram Pillai in Andar Street, or in the Sorgapura Mutt in East Chintamani.

On 30th July 1844 a son was born to him and he named him Chidambaram after his own father. He spent some months again at Patteeswaram and places near by at the request of his friends there.

Ashtavadhaanam Sabhapati Mudaliar on his way back from his pilgrimage to Rameswaram, stopped with Sri Pillai for a few days at his request. Hearing of his presence in Tiruchirappalli, many of the leaders of society there requested Sri Pillai to arrange for a demonstration of ashtavadhaanam by Mudaliar. So he organised a conference and every one was impressed by the performance which Mudaliar gave in their presence.

One among the audience, an influential official of the name of Chellappa Mudaliar, said to Pillai "We have witnessed your friends's ashtavadhaanam with deep admiration. Could you train any of your own pupils in such intellectual feats?"

Sri Pillai made no answer at the time; but after Sabhapathi Mudaliar had left the town, he selected one Subbaraya Chettiar by name and coached him in the art of performing, not eight simultaneous feats but sixteen. Within a few months he was able



to organize a second conference at which this Subbaraya Chettiar gave a demonstration of his newly acquired skill. The audience which included that same Sheristadar Chellappa Mudaliar was carried away by the excellence of the performance. Gifts were showered on Subbaraya Chettiar and the title 'Shodasavadhaani' was conferred on him then. Ever since he came to be known as Shodasavadhaanam Subbaraya Chettiar.

Sri Pillai was about thirty at this time. People of means vied with one another in honouring him and ministering to his needs in return for the enlightenment they obtained from him. They entertained at their own expense even the pupils who were studying under Sri Pillai. Of these, the one who was closest to him at this time and accompanied him wherever he went was known as Subbaraya Mudaliar.

Towards the end of 1844 Sri Pillai went to Tiruvaavaduturai to have the privilege of meeting the Head of the Mutt again, but learnt with a shock that he had attained to Heaven. He missed that teacher and guide sorely and gave expression to his grief in an elegy. The new Head of the Mutt was too busy with philosophical researches of his own to devote time to teaching. On enquiry Sri Pillai learnt that the only person competent to lead him into the higher reaches of literature was a senior monk of the name of Ambalavana Munivar. But he was more or less a recluse who avoided the company of students and others and kept reading at all hours for his own benefit.

When Sri Pillai went to him and did his obeisance and spoke about his need, he was asked to come the next day. He went again the next day and several days again after that till the obstinate monk finally consented to teach him *Kambar Andaadi*. Then he sent him away to come on an auspicious day. Sri Pillai was patience itself and waited on his new teacher at the appointed hour.

On that day there was a further trial. The old monk got angry because Sri Pillai did not receive the book from his hands in the traditional manner. Sri Pillai begged and entreated to be excused if he had been unconsciously guilty of a misdemeanour. "Go and see", the senior monk said, how the novitiates behave when they



take lessons from their teachers. Learn that mode and then you may come back." At last the explanation came. "It is the custom here, on the day the lessons begin for the student to make an offering of flowers as a mark of respect and await further commands."

Sri Pillai brought flowers and other articles needed and offered worship to his master in the time-honoured style. Just when he began after that to read the first page, the master went away saying it was time for his own private routine of prayer and worship.

The next day Sri Pillai won his favour by waiting upon him again with flower-offerings and fanning him till he was pleased. This short poem *Kambar Andaadi* was taught fully in a few days and then Ambalavaana Munivar refused to teach him anything more for the time being. Sri Pillai however was happy to have had him as his guru for a short spell and whenever occasion arose spoke of him in terms of the highest praise.

He continued to visit Tiruvaavaduturai frequently and enrolled himself formally as a pupil there. He studied Saiva Siddhanta Philosophy then under the Head of the Mutt and the senior monks and made use of the knowledge he had mastered thus in all his later writings.

## 8. PERIAPURANAM DISCOURSES; SOME PROMINENT PUPILS

The very difficulties Sri Pillai met with in picking up bits of knowledge here and there confirmed in him the determination to place himself unreservedly at the disposal of any one who might come to him with a view to study. He was ready at all hours to lay aside every other business and start teaching his pupils when they wanted it. He went one step further. He provided food and clothing to needy young men and enabled them to concentrate all their attention on their studies without a single care in the world. To the end of his days he gave priority to the needs of his pupils above his own. He readily forgave any one who did



him an injury, but never one who insulted or otherwise ill-treated any of his beloved body of pupils.

Namasivaya Desikar, who was his pupil and junior Head of the Mutt at the time of Melagaram Subramanya Desikar used to say that the benefit derived by teaching a piece was equal to reading it a thousand times. People competent to judge have declared that it was Sri Pillai's natural love of teaching that contributed most to the rapid maturing of his powers and his extraordinary success as a poet.

Some pupils expressed a desire to study *Peria Puranam* (Lives of the Saivite Saints) and when Sri pillai started teaching it, others dropped in and the classes were soon transformed into discourses. A well-to-do citizen then placed a spacious hall in his house at Sri Pillai's disposal and even remunerated him for the discourses month by month. Sri Pillai's fame increased and the audience came to include people from nearby places too:

This aroused the jealousy of one who was not a Saivite and he thought of a way to put an end to this series of discourses. He met the host in private and after a shrewd preamble, said "*Peria Puranam* is an excellent epic. No doubt about that; but it should be read or explained in a public place like a mutt or a temple, not in a private dwelling. See, every episode ends with the death of the person concerned and it is not auspicious for householders, especially a man with a large family like you. I have no other interest at heart except your welfare. I have done my duty now on account of the regard and affection I have for you. You may do what you please."

That gentleman had evinced an interest in these discourses not because he was interested in religion or in poetry, but because of the publicity and the prestige they brought him. When Sri Pillai guessed at his new state of mind, he offered to discontinue the series and announced to his audience that there would be no more discourses at that place thereafter.

Another wealthy citizen a rival, now came forward and offered a bigger donation to the poet if he would conclude the series under *his* auspices. Sri Pillai did not however accede to that request, since in this case too the guiding motive was love of



publicity and not any love of literature or love of God and His Saints. He declared openly that he wanted to talk in the presence of people who were sincere though poor.

The series continued at a different venue and came to a successful close. The citizens joined together and paid him due honour on the concluding day. The study of *Perla Puranam* soon came to be a daily habit for people in that area.

Thyagaraja Chettiar belonged to a prosperous family of Puvaloor whose members were engaged in both trade and agriculture. He took a keen interest in Tamil literature at an early age and mastered most of the preliminary texts with the help of teachers in and around Puvaloor. In 1840 he was drawn to Sri Pillai and soon became his foremost pupil.

Sri Pillai liked him for his earnestness as a scholar and his ability to compose original verse. Thyagaraja Chettiar took it upon himself to teach beginners who kept coming to his Master. He also made it a point to take down himself everything that the gifted poet dictated, whether long poems or just occasional verses. He used to be moved to tears by the lofty quality of his Master's poetry and dilated on its merits in the presence of others. He became his Master's inseparable companion and soon won the first place in his affections.

When Thyagaraja Chettiar read out poetry, taught it or composed verses of his own, his manner and his tone were exactly like those of Sri Pillai. In the sphere of Tamil scholarship the position he attained was second only to that of his Master. For some time he used to compose a stanza every day in praise of Sri Pillai with a view to have it at the end as an 'andaadi'. But he failed to make the full one hundred and the work is incomplete to this day.

Among other pupils of Sri Pillai at this time mention may be made of Saminatha Kavirayar of Tiruveezhimizhalai. After a thorough study of other works he came in 1844 to Sri Pillai for further specialization in *Kamba Ramayanam*. His master was drawn to him on account of the keenness of his intellect and the sweetness of his voice. Sri Pillai had copied the whole of *Kamba Ramayanam* with his own hand three times over. Of these he gave one copy to



this Saminatha Kavirayar, another to Arumugatha Pillai of Patteeswaram and retained the third for his own use.

Saminatha Kavirayar attained a high degree of proficiency and developed a gift too for expounding Ramayanam before large audiences. He went for this purpose on invitation to several places, but did so without the knowledge of his Master; his reverence for him and his diffidence in his presence prevented him from informing him of it.

Sri Pillai who knew about this, once listened to one of his discourses from a place of concealment. Then he made up his mind to bring him into the limelight. He convened a special gathering and persuaded his pupil to speak therein on certain selected episodes from that great work. Then he covered him with a robe of honour with his own hands and conferred on him the title 'Kamba Ramayana Prasanga Vidwan.'

Saminatha Kavirayar at once leaped into fame and spent his entire life expounding the epic. He never forgot what he owed to his Master. He used to start his discourse wherever it might be, with a poem in praise of his great benefactor. He composed several such poems from time to time in his day.

## 9. THYAGARAJA LEELA

Sri Pillai visited Thyagaraja Chettiar's birthplace Puvaloor and was prevailed upon there to compose a poem in honour of the local deity. This he did in a hundred stanzas, as rich in content as any he was to write later and at the same time retaining the wonderful musical movement of the Tevaram Hymns. Only twenty-four of these stanzas are now extant together with the invocation.

On a visit to Lalgudi, he composed a Pillaittamil on the Goddess in the Siva Temple. This poem is simpler in diction than the one on Akhilanda Nayaki, but in imaginative reach it excels it. It is one more proof of his versatility that he could depict local traditions and associations faithfully and at the same time achieve a work of transcendent beauty that is both spontaneous in flow and universal in appeal.



Members of Thyagaraja Chettiar's family used to visit Tiruvarur fairly often because the presiding deity at the temple there, Thyagaraja by name, was specially sacred to them. Sri Pillai himself paid several visits to Tiruvarur, both in their company and alone. The festival held in March-April is the most famous of several in that shrine and he attended it in 1845.

As he was sitting in the thousand-pillared hall in the temple in the company of his friends and admirers the leading citizens of the locality waited upon him with the request that he should compose an epic in honour of Thyagaraja.

This he readily agreed to do and started writing the preliminary chapters at once. The miracles and other deeds of divine favour associated with God Thyagaraja are three-hundred-and-sixty in number. But when he tried to secure a copy of the original Sanskrit work, he was able to obtain only the first thirteen parts and a portion of the fourteenth. With the help of these he proceeded up to 699 stanzas and had to give up the work at that stage. He was not able to complete it in his lifetime and it was a source of enduring regret to him that God had not vouchsafed to him the joy and good fortune of celebrating His greatness in full in a work of adequate length and dignity.

*Thyagaraja Leela* is the first among the many epics in the grand style taken up by Sri Pillai in his distinguished career and the opening chapters were therefore planned by him with minute care and executed with artistic elaboration. He spent more time than he used to do over the verses; he corrected and revised them and then had them copied out fair. The stray palm-leaves containing the first draft as he wrote it are still preserved.

Thyagaraja Chettiar recalls an incident in connection with the writing of this (incomplete) epic. "My master bathed at this particular spot in the river (at Puvaloor) and sat on that flat rock there, doing his daily routine of divine worship. Placing near him flowers and other things needed, I went and sat at some distance from him. The minutes ticked by and still he did not get up after his meditation. It was something unusual and so I went near him and gently reported that it was getting late. 'Thyagarasu', he said, 'bring our writing implements'. He started dictating, and I went on taking everything down."



Thyagaraja Chettiar used to shed tears as he spoke of his experience that day. He of course had the whole of that work by heart and when he quoted from it and dilated upon its merits, his audience were always thrilled.

The first verse Sri Pillai dictated on that memorable day was No. 159, describing the temple building :—

*See, see the bulls that are mounting guard on those lofty  
ramparts there  
As if to challenge the gods of Heaven who come hither to pray:  
"You are welcome, every one. to worship here", they say,  
"But if you intend to steal our Master, beware our horns,  
beware" !*

Another disciple of Sri Pillai at this time, called Madurai Nayaka Mudaliar, has said, "My Master went one day at about dawn from Tiruchirappalli towards Worur and stopped at a way-side stream to clean his teeth with a twig. He was then in full sight of passers-by, who went to Worur, finished their business and returned to the city. They noted that Sri Pillai was still there, sitting in the same posture, cleaning his teeth, oblivious of the sun beating down fiercely on him. Some of them were worried because it was now past ten o' clock; they went near him and gently reminded him of the unusually long time he was taking over this ritual. 'Is that so?' he said, washed his mouth and his hands, took down from the cloth that he had wound round his head his style and his palm-leaves, transcribed the stanzas that had been taking shape in his head and then returned with these friends to Tiruchirappalli."

These stanzas are included in the chapter on Naimisaranya in the epic, *Thyagaraja Leela*. A disciple of the Poet of the name of Savarimuthu Pillai of Varaganeri added these palm-leaves to his treasured collection. This incident goes to prove how completely Sri Pillai was absorbed in the work he was composing. Every aspect of the projected epic was of special interest to him; Tiruvarur, the centre of a fertile tract, with prosperous handicrafts and trade, his own beloved Chola Desa, watered by the divine Cauvery and, above all Siva as Thyagaraja, the Hero.



The poem won instantaneous applause from every one who read it. Later in his life, when Sri Pillai was Poet by appointment to the Mutt, His Holiness Melagaram Sri Subramanya Desikar, at a gathering of the learned, after listening to disquisitions on the beauties of Sanskrit literature, called upon Sri Pillai to recite his own poetic description of trees in Naimisaranya and made the audience realize that the Tamil language too was equally rich in works of high imaginative beauty.

A Sanskrit scholar from Kalahasti, a Sri Vaishnava, who happened to be present, was so much carried away by Sri Pillai's remarkable gift of poetry that he composed on the spot a set of five exquisite stanzas in Sanskrit extolling him and read it out to the gathering.

## 10. A STRATAGEM

Easily the most devoted pupil of Sri Pillai during this period was without question a resourceful and influential young man of the name of Sundaram Pillai. If he found that Master needed anything, he would move heaven and earth to get it for him. If any one, however powerful, made a disparaging remark about him, he could not get away with it; Sundaram Pillai would pull him up, and would not let him go till he had worsted him in argument, made him take back his remark and apologise in the presence of all. He had the gift of friendship and there were at his beck and call a number of people who would do any task he set to them, just to be patted on the back by him at the end. He was witty in conversation, shrewd in judging men and things, and quite adroit in manipulating these for what he considered to be fair and just.

Sri Pillai took up the study of *Tiruttanikai Puranam* and found certain allusions to Agastya in it rather obscure. He got the information that these points would be cleared up by a study of *Siva Dharmottara*. He could not obtain a copy of the latter work anywhere till one day he was told that a local saivite priest had it with him. He tried his best to borrow it of him; he offered good security, his friends interceded on his behalf; but still that priest was adamant in his refusal.



One day a splendid carriage drawn by a pair of horses stopped in front of that priest's house. A liveried servant announced the arrival of his master and other servants spread a red carpet on the pial and placed cushions on it for sitting and for leaning on. The master alighted from the carriage and took his seat majestically. Other liveried servants stood around, awaiting orders.

The priest kept him waiting for some time and then properly attired came out to meet him. He asked an attendant who stood near who his master was and what had brought him there.

The man answered with bated breath, "He belongs to a well-known family of zamindars in the south and came here on a pilgrimage. He lodged yesterday in a bungalow in Cantonment with a view to spend three days here, visiting temples before proceeding to Chidambaram. His mother suddenly fell ill and in spite of the best medical attention passed away in a matter of hours. The cremation took place last evening and the collection of ashes this morning; if this sad event had occurred in his own native town, everything would have been conducted on a lavish scale. Now he requires some guidance regarding the obsequies to be performed on the sixteenth day. When we enquired of people here, we were directed to you as a leading authority on such matters. Our master was disappointed yesterday because he could not obtain some of the articles and commodities he wanted. He wishes therefore to return to his own parts for conducting the rest of the ceremonies".

"Why, there is no need!" the priest answered. "I shall take charge and conduct everything better than any other man on earth. All we need is cash. There is nothing here that I cannot command. I shall take you to the best spot for such an occasion, and provide you with everything you need. Just you watch me do it!"

"To my master cost is no consideration. He has also enough men with him to go round and collect the accessories. Well, when his father passed away before, he spent the days of mourning, under advice, studying *Siva Dharmottara*. It is for this purpose that he is keen now on returning home". The attendant then added under his breath, "We have tried our best to make him stay. He is obstinate like a child. His heart is set on that book. Having come so far, we have to pack up and go away just to indulge his fancy."



The priest then made out a list of the articles needed for the final days' observances. "Oh," said the attendant, "Is this all? In our own place, Master would have to spend several times as much. He gets off cheap."

"People in these parts demur at having to spend even a tenth of this," the priest remarked. "Besides, I have with me the book you want, and shall gladly give it to you."

The distinguished visitor got up, saying to the priest, "Then you yourself officiate at the ceremonies and also assist us sufficiently in advance to procure the necessary stuff." He got into his carriage without delay.

The attendant said to the priest, "when should we come to you again?"

"It is enough if you come just a week in advance. We shall get everything to our satisfaction. Please wait a minute", said the priest as he ran inside, brought the palm-leaf script of *Siva Dharmottara* and said to his prospective client, "Excuse me, please for not giving this to you even earlier. What is the use of my keeping such a book if it is not of timely use to an exalted patron like you?"

"Oh, that is all right!" the gentleman said, as he placed five rupees in the hands of his host, who then let go the hand-rail which he had been clutching till then.

The carriage drove off, with some of the servants running in front and some behind it.

That day week, the attendant came to the priest again and placed in his hands his book and one gold sovereign. "Every relative of my master insisted on returning to our native town for the ceremonies. He regretted very much his inability to come and take leave of you. I do hope he would still be sending for you from there."

The priest was naturally disappointed at this turn of events, but found consolation in the piece of gold in his hands.



These seven days in between the book had been with Sri Pillai. Sundaram Pillai had brought it to him. Looking at him his Master asked, "How did you obtain this book, my friend? And then, why have you removed your moustaches? Should you not have told me of your bereavement? I would have come at once to meet you!"

"Dear Master," answered Sundaram Pillai. "I shall certainly explain everything later in detail. First have the book copied for your reference within a week. Let no one know that the book is with us".

Sri Pillai gave each friend and pupil of his a set of ten palm-leaves to be copied, and transcribed the rest himself. On the seventh day the leaves were assembled and after comparison of the copy with the original, the latter was returned to Sundaram Pillai who called for it. Sundaram Pillai had the book and the sovereign given to the priest by the friend who had acted as his attendant.

Sri Pillai heard from some other person of the ruse adopted by his pupil to get him the book he had badly wanted. Sundaram Pillai avoided meeting his Master for some time for fear he might not approve of what he had done. When finally they met, Sri Pillai asked, "was it fair, my friend, was it fair to take on yourself all that trouble?"

Sundaram Pillai said in reply, "The scriptures agree in saying that a little untruth is justified if it could result in unmixed good. No one has been put to any loss or trouble over this. If it is still considered to be a fault, Master should forgive me for that."

Years later, in 1873, Sri Pillai had occasion to explain before a gathering at Kumbakonam some verses from his puranam on Nagapattinam. Thyagaraja Chettiar kept interrupting him raising objection to the content of a verse here or there. The tone he used was overbearing.

After he had left, Sri Pillai turned to his friends near by and said, "Would Thyagarasu have dared to address me like this if Sundaram Pillai had been alive? Would he not have made him



smart for it here and now? That is why you see, he talks with such impunity."

It was common knowledge that Sri Pillai gave the highest place in his regard among his former pupils to Thyagaraja Chettiar. If he should have spoken like this of Sundaram Pillai with so much more affection in comparison with Chettiar whom he now dismissed so lightly one could have an idea of the unquestioning loyalty and devotion shown by that ideal pupil.

Others too have borne testimony to Sundaram Pillai's unique qualities; but the later generation of Sri Pillai's students always regretted that a premature death had robbed them of the privilege of seeing him and knowing him at first-hand.

## 11. AT BANGALORE

It was in 1848 that one of Sri Pillai's admirers, of the name of Arunachala Mudaliar presented him with a commodious house in the southern row of the South Street on the Rockfort in Tiruchirappalli, filled it with furniture, utensils and provisions and continued to look after his needs for years. It was the possession of this house in his own name that made Sri Pillai famous as Tirisirapuram Minakshisundaram Pillai for all time. He was now relieved and happy that he could at last teach his pupils under his own roof without having to seek accommodation for them elsewhere.

He was still troubled in mind however, over the condition of students who came to him from outlying villages, who were ill-clothed and ill-fed and without the means to marry and settle down in life, though they had reached the proper age. He used to put up prayers specifically for them.

Residents of Worur now requested Sri Pillai to write *Worur Puranam*. They said that unlike as in the case of Thyagaraja Leela, the Sanskrit original was available in full and so it would be easy for him to plan his work on an equally grand scale and bring it to fruition soon. He started writing that puranam on an auspicious day.



There was at this time at Bangalore a prominent citizen called Devaraja Pillai, who was a man of immense wealth and also a keen student of Tamil. He sent his representatives to inform Sri Pillai that on account of his business commitments he was not able to leave his headquarters and would be immensely happy if Sri Pillai could go to Bangalore and stay with him for some time. He wished to revise works he had already studied under others and learn further classics now. He assured him that every one of his needs would be attended to and he would be treated with the utmost respect.

Sri Pillai asked if he could bring with him those who were staying with him and being taught by him at the time. When he got answer that any number of them were equally welcome he said he would go. Nothing in his life gave him so much happiness as teaching and here came an opportunity of an unusual kind which he did not like to miss.

Devaraja Pillai sent him a letter of respectful invitation and requested his friends at Tiruchirappalli to arrange for his every comfort during the journey. Sri Pillai took with him his family and the students who offered to accompany him. When he had almost reached his destination, the change in climate brought on an attack of fever. Devaraja Pillai hurried to where he was staying, took him to Bangalore and arranged for his being given the best treatment available. Sri Pillai recovered in a few days. This was in 1849 when he was in his thirty-fifth year.

Classes started on an auspicious day. Devaraja Pillai first got his doubts cleared in the works he had already read and then studied epic poems like *Tiruvilaiyadal* and grammar texts like *Nannool*.

Tamil scholars in that area hearing of Sri Pillai's presence in Bangalore, flocked to him and availed themselves of that opportunity to refer their doubts to him and to learn more and more of standard literature at his feet.

Sri Pillai found on enquiry that an aged man of ninety who had formerly been Sivagnana Munivar's personal attendant lived nearby. He went to see him and got from him much interesting



information about that great poet. He gave him all the assistance he could during his stay at that place.

Sri Pillai had taken with him to Bangalore the Tamil prose translation of *Woriur Puranam* and whenever he was free he composed his own poetic version. He was to write more puranams like this later, but *Woriur Puranam* is in a class by itself.

When Sri Pillai wrote *Ambar Puranam* twenty years later, Thyagaraja Chettiar remarked, "How is it that this is not as good in conception and execution as *Woriur Puranam*? I believe you would have written this equally well if you had bestowed a little more thought."

"True, true," Sri Pillai answered. "But it is also true that when I composed that other work I was maintained in perfect comfort by Valloor Devaraja Pillai. If any one undertakes to support me like that today, I could write things ten times better. The credit for the superiority of the other work should go entirely to that patron."

As Devaraja Pillai sometimes sat watching Sri Pillai composing his *Woriur Puranam* he took it into his head to compose some poetry on his own. He did write certain verses and got them corrected by his Master. There was in Canarese a poem on Kuchela and he was fired with ambition to render it into Tamil verse. Versifying is an art that comes easily with practice; but as he had had no previous experience, he found the going pretty hard. His interest flagged and the sense of failure preyed on his mind.

Sri Pillai heard of his attempt and the result. He comforted him with the assurance that he would himself fulfil his wish to see the story in verse form and that he could take up some other theme for his own satisfaction and handle it successfully, after getting a little more practice.

He pointed out to Devaraja Pillai how each one of his verses could be improved, revised the work he had already done and then started dictating during his leisure hours at the rate of about fifty stanzas a day. The poem was finished in a matter of days.



Devaraja Pillai was astonished. "You certainly are a super-man, sir, a semi-divine being. I have wasted paper in plenty before I could get just one stanza to shape itself as I wished. But you go on talking with people and composing verse simultaneously and there has not been a single occasion for you to recast what you have dictated or alter a word anywhere. Only now I realize how wonderful your gift is and I bow before it. I know I should venerate you even more as you very well deserve to be.

Sri Pillai put him in the way of writing verse, demonstrating how ideas are to be clothed one by one in musical language that falls into a pattern of itself. Devaraja Pillai took heart and immediately started to translate *Soota Samhita* in Tamil verse. He was in this again biting off more than he could chew; he found it difficult to continue beyond a few verses and then tore up his manuscript.

Sri Pillai again spoke words of comfort to him. "If you are keen on bringing out *Soota Samhita* in Tamil, I give you my word, I shall do it on your behalf before your very eyes and then return to Tiruchirappalli." And so he did in a few months.

*Soota Samhita* is one of six such compilations found in *Skaanda Purana* and consists of four chapters, all celebrating Siva the shrines sacred to him and the gist of the Upanishads. It was a theme dear to Sri Pillai's heart and so he gave free play to his imagination and his poetic ingenuity in his version. The rhythm and the tempo suit the content from page to page and there is a surprising variety in the metrical patterns adopted.

Shodasavadhaanam Subbaraya Chettiar was one of the pupils who had accompanied the Poet on this trip. Sri Pillai organized several demonstrations of his skill in the presence of the elite of Bangalore and secured for him suitable remuneration for his use. He then explained to Devaraja Pillai that he had compelling business to attend to at Tiruchirappalli and would be happy if he was permitted to leave.

Devaraja Pillai was reluctant to let him go, but seeing he had no option, placed before him costly silks and other presents and a sum of five thousand rupees. Prostrating before him he said, "May my Master be gracious enough to accept this. I venture to



assure him I shall remain his slave and in his debt to the end of my life."

Sri Pillai had never been given such a large sum before. As it had been his habit to go on teaching and teaching for its own sake, he felt it hardly fair to accept the amount without giving something in return. He thought for a minute and said, "It has been a time-honoured practice among poets in Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu to issue their writings in the names of the patrons who supported them and I see nothing wrong in this." He placed *Kuchela Upakhyanam* and *Soota Samhita* before Devaraja Pillai and continued, "These two works were composed at your instance under your hospitable roof. Please, for my sake, have them therefore printed and published in your own name. You need have no compunctions, since I offer these from the fulness of my heart. That is the only way I can show my gratitude to you; I know of no other. Otherwise there would be an acting void in my heart. Please do grant me this wish."

Devaraja Pillai stood stupefied. He was unwilling to receive the books as a return gift, since he actually trembled at the thought of the princelessness of his Master's work as compared with his own insignificance. His friends who stood near also joined in the entreaty; finally they had to take charge of both the scripts themselves to satisfy the wishes of the donor. It was these friends who later got them printed too. Hearing of their enterprise, Sri Pillai sent laudatory verses from those he knew along with some of his own, in time to be included in the two publications.

Sri Pillai returned to Tiruchirappalli. Devaraja Pillai soon developed his poetic talent and was able to compose several major works by himself. His Master revised and edited them for him one by one. At the head of every letter Devaraja Pillai wrote he invariably put a new verse he composed in honour of his guru.

## 12. A SPECIALIST IN GRAMMAR

The amount Sri Pillai brought with him from Bangalore was useful to him in many ways. He paid his debts, bought for cash the palm-leaf scripts of books he wanted, arranged for the marriage of some of his pupils and gave gifts to others who were needy, setting apart some of it also for a thanks-giving offering at the temples of Tiruchirappalli and Tiruvanaikka.



He had also brought with him from Bangalore the completed script of *Woriur Puranam* and was now prevailed upon by the local citizens to have it released in public in the usual manner. A temporary hall was put upon the temple premises and gaily decorated, to accommodate the pick of the community who attended the 'arangetram' and on the concluding day the Poet was given the usual generous presents in cash and in the form of clothes and jewels. In due time the title of Vidwan was also conferred on him at a conference of scholars.

When Sri Pillai composed the earlier half of Thyagaraja Leela on a scale commensurate to the grandeur of the theme, there was a discontent there deep down in his heart that he could not continue it the same way and complete it successfully. That dissatisfaction he made up for by planning and executing *Woriur Puranam* as a model epic, perfect in every part. He also composed a Pillai Tamil on Goddess Kantimati. Such works as these silenced unfriendly critics who had envied him the rewards he had obtained at Bangalore and they conceded that, for his learning and his musical invention, he deserved all this and a lot more.

Among other works of this period, the most notable is a *Kalambakam*, the first of its kind, he composed on Ratnachalam temple, at the request of the votaries, an influential community known as Chettiars of the Twelfth Order, since they dedicated one-twelfth of all they earned to the service of the temple.

Sri Pillai spent as much time in study as he did in teaching and composing poetry. But however hard he studied, he felt there was nothing to equal sitting at the feet of a competent master and learning things from him. Now he was in search of such a teacher because there were some passages as well as certain quotations in a grammar work, *Ilakkana Vilakkam*, which baffled him. He heard of a great scholar named Keezh Veloor Subramanya Desikar who had come in the direct line of teacher-pupil relationship from the time of the author of the above book.

A person close to Desikar told Sri Pillai that any one who wanted to be taught by him should engage him for a minimum of six months at the rate of twenty rupees a month and pay three



months' allowance in advance. He should also make a suitable payment at the conclusion of the course. On the day the lessons begin he should sign the roll Desikar kept with him, offer him an elevated seat and then begin his studies.

Sri Pillai agreed to the terms, requested Desikar to come to him at Tiruchirappalli at an early date and paid him the expenses of travel. He sold the ear-rings that had been presented to him at Woriur and paid the six months' allowance in advance. As he went on studying *Ilakkana Vilakkam* he considered it as great good fortune to have had such a guide; and when that work was over, started others and completed them too by the date specified.

There were certain scholars at Tiruchirappalli who thought there must be something quite special if Sri Pillai himself was to be taking lessons from another and came therefore to join him from time to time. As however Sri Pillai read through each work at a great pace and only stopped to get knotty problems solved by his master, they were unable to profit from the teaching. How could they follow such a lesson when they had no doubts to get cleared and how could they have any doubts to clear when they had not read through those standard works even once?

Sri Pillai on the other hand was happy that he had been able to condense in a six-months' course what it would otherwise have taken years for him to master. He gave the teacher more than enough, got others also to make him suitable presents and sent him back quite pleased. Desikar, in his turn, considered himself fortunate to have had such a pupil and continued to speak of his qualities of head and heart of others ever after. Sri Pillai kept visiting him whenever he was free, just to have the pleasure of discussing with him topics of common interest.

Desikar's fame as a teacher spread as a result of this and scholars came from far and near to enroll themselves as his pupils. He taught them and then sent them on for further literary studies to Sri Pillai himself at Tiruchirappalli.

People at Tiruchirappalli wanted him to write a puranam on that town; but he declined the offer saying that one puranam was already in existence, written by Ellappa Navalur and it was of



adequate merit. At their request he corrected revised and published it in 1851.

During these years he visited Tiruvaavaduturai several times and also Dharmapuram at the invitation of the Head of that Mutt.

### 13. SOME MORE PROMINENT PUPILS

Some members of the Saivite community in the city were eaten up with envy at the growing fame of Sri Pillai and they complained once that it was wrong on his part to move closely with people belonging to other sects and to teach them works which were at variance with his own beliefs. At an important gathering he met them and silenced them all saying "just as it is a humanitarian act to feed the hungry, it is equally meritorious to satisfy the knowledge-hunger of people irrespective of the religion they belong to. It is part of my religion to teach with affection whoever comes to me seeking enlightenment. I do not teach any work to spread the tenets it contains; I consider it solely as a thing of beauty, worth studying for its literary value. Anything is welcome if it is good Tamil and any one is welcome if he is eager to learn it."

There were Brahmin scholars, Smarthas, Vaishnavites and Madhwas, people of other communities within the Hindu fold and also Christians and Muslims among his pupils. He made no distinction between one pupil and another, judged the attainments of each one, taught him what he had come to learn and sent him away immensely grateful and happy.

Gulam Khadar Navalar was a Muslim scholar from Nagore who studied under him works like *Seerappuranam* dealing with the life of the blessed Prophet.

Savarayalu Nayakar was a scholar who had made his mark at Pondicherry and he got Thyagaraja Chettiar to introduce him to Sri Pillai, who gauged the level of his learning, taught him certain texts of general interest first and then took him through *Tembavani* and other Christian religious works which he had specially come to study.



Savarayalu Nayakar's prestige as an authority on Tamil within his own community rose tenfold on account of this discipleship and he never once failed, either to pay eloquent tribute to the debt he owed to Sri Pillai on each and every occasion, or to help him and every one of his pupils in all the ways he could. Whenever he got up to speak from a platform, he began his address with a verse of tribute to his Master.

*I do make bold this day to speak to you, O Friends  
By favour of my peerless Master, that beacon light  
That from the sacred Rock at Tiruchit shineth bright  
Scattering the murk in pupils' minds. Fame attends  
Eternal on that omniscient Being; I do bow  
To that Minakshisundaram and invoke his blessings now.*

Even in the poems he composed or addressed to others he declared himself proudly every time that he was Sri Pillai's most devoted pupil and he never missed an occasion to praise him on such lines as these when he wrote or spoke to him.

*How facile you make all learning, O Master; how well  
You imprint it in our minds! Truly, of all who serve  
Our kind on earth, one way or other, we can tell  
Your gift of wisdom is rarest; we praise it without reserve.*

Other men of letters too, when referring to Savarayalu Nayakar, invariably complimented him in their verses first as one who drank deep of this perennial stream of knowledge and poetry that flows by the name of Sri Pillai.

The famous Vedanayakam Pillai, one of the pioneers of the new Tamil movement was at this time translator in the District Court at Tiruchirappalli. He devoted all his spare time to the study and appreciation of literature and loved the company of kindred minds. He had been drawn to Sri Pillai from his early days and he now deemed it an honour to get his doubts cleared by him and to cover fresh ground in literature under his guidance. Affection in their case was sincere and reciprocal.

Vedanayakam Pillai used to bring verses or send them by some one, for his Master to revise. Listening to a song composed by him once, Sri Pillai wrote :



*What good thing is there that good men wish for  
but cannot gain?  
Let them but meditate, among the priceless words that rain  
From the lips of Vedanayakam, on just one word, no more!  
For he sings of God in Highest Glory and God would pour  
His blessings on them in plenty from out of His endless store.*

It so happened that a monk appointed by the Mutt at Dharmapuram to administer the Rock Temple became a tool in the hands of mischief-mongers, who set him up against his employers and were ready to back him regardless of expense. The Head of the Mutt sought the help of Sri Pillai to have a petition drafted in English by a suitable person and presented in court on his behalf.

Sri Pillai naturally thought of Vedanayakam Pillai as the most competent man available, but found him closeted with the other party who were seeking his help for their side offering an attractive fee. He wrote out a stanza and sent it to him by a messenger :

*O Vedanayaka, I do thy favour sue;  
Where can I go for refuge if not to you?  
Thy hand alone can now my cause rescue;  
This cause is God's; I speak but what is true  
Can I requite a cloud and pay its due?*

Vedanayakam Pillai took the cue, dismissed the other party, came rushing to Sri Pillai and said, "Is it fair on your part, sir, to come all the way for this and write such a moving appeal too? You might have sent word and I would have done the needful".

He sat at the petition from that minute. In due time it was presented in court the trial came on and the judge found in favour of the Head of the Mutt.

Soon after this Sri Pillai composed *Kulattoor Kovai*, a special type of poem in 438 lines in honour of this same student-friend, Vedanayakam Pillai. This was in the year 1853.



There came to Sri Pillai at this time from near Tirunelveli a student of the name of Ariyankaval Pillai. As was usual with him he asked him to recite a poem and the young man quoted from *Tiru Kutrala Puranam* a verse that describes the gentle breezes that blow in those regions.

Sri Pillai was delighted with it, for it was from a work he had not seen before and it was of exquisite beauty. He made Ariyankaval Pillai repeat that verse and recite several more from the same work. From that day he looked forward to obtaining the whole book some time quite soon and reading it for his pleasure.

This young man won the favour of his master and also of his fellow-pupils, on account of his attainments and his highly lovable character. He showed himself an adept in composing original verses too. As he had come from a distant place he spent all his time with his Master and went to sleep on the pial of his house at night.

One night Sri Pillai suddenly woke up and saw through the window the full moon showering on the world its silver flood. He also noted his pupil, sitting and leaning on a pillar, sunk in thought. Sri Pillai composed himself to sleep again and when he woke up a second time, the young man was surely there, same as before, seated unmoving. He could not go to sleep after this and lay watching him, wide awake.

Soon there came from Ariyankaval Pillai's lips, in a low, pitiful and musical voice, some three verses which he kept repeating to himself again and again. One of them ran like this:

*That nymph with lustrous eyes and gentle mien  
That queen of beauty whose name is verily Queen  
Whose voice is golden ever, and who has been  
Enthroned in my heart so late, can she, can she be seen  
By me again, O God, while yet these vernal woods are green?*

Sri Pillai let a few days pass and in the course of casual conversation understood by stray questioning spread over a week every detail he needed about him—to what place he belonged,



who his parents were and also the fact that he had only recently been married.

Without the young man's knowledge he wrote a letter to his father. "Your son is getting on well here and has made commendable progress in his studies. His manners too are exemplary. But because he misses the kind of food he has been used to he is getting rather thin of late. I shall be happy if you could arrange to come and stay here for some months bringing with you his mother and his wife. You can then surely count on his studying here in comfort and completing his studies too with success. You need not have the least worry about house-keeping at this end. Everything, you will find, has been fixed up for your comfortable stay. Only let me know a little in advance when you would be arriving."

A few days later, early in the afternoon, Sri Pillai was taking a class on the pial when he heard his name being mentioned in an enquiry two or three houses off. Ariyankaval Pillai turned to see who it might be, jumped down from the pial and running up asked, "why did you come here? How can you come without telling me when I did not want you to come?" It was, of course his parents and his wife.

Sri Pillai guessed the situation, joined the group and pacified his pupil. "Look here, brother. Don't be upset like this. It is I who sent for them, having your own comfort in view." He sent them to the house he had rented for their use and arranged for their dinner to be sent to them.

Later, he took the father aside and said, "Even if your son is in a temper, please don't mind it. Try to get on smoothly with him. I felt your presence necessary here so that he could concentrate better on his studies."

The father occasionally visited his native town on business now and then, while the others stayed on for the duration of Ariyankaval Pillai's studies, his Master supplying their wants in full. This pupil returned home after several months, but came back once in a way, seeking further guidance whenever the need arose.



This is but one instance of the way in which Sri Pillai looked after the welfare of the pupils under his charge. He had no need to be told expressly, but divined their state of mind somehow and attended to their comfort in all things big and small.

A young man of the name of Azhagiri Raju was engaged one day in drawing water from a well for irrigating the crops, when a relative of his fell foul of him, saying he was too stupid to do even that work well. Azhagiri Raju was stung to the quick, as he was well versed in Tamil literature, having been taught by the best men in his own place, Ramanathapuram, "Look here," he said, "if I have become stupid, it is because of my association with such people as you. I shall not step into this town again until my merit is fully recognized."

He came straight from there to Sri Pillai at Tiruchirappalli, and became in due course not only a full-fledged scholar but an expert teacher.

A few years later, he was appointed tutor to the young Panditturai Tevar of Palavanattam Zamin, who shot into fame later as the founder of the present Madurai Tamil Sangam and a noted patron of arts and letters. He, Panditturai Tevar, used to tell everybody whom he met that most of the gifted teachers of Tamil Nadu were either Sri Pillai's pupils or the pupils of his pupils, that of the four scholars who had taught him in his younger days, three had studied under Sri Pillai, that he owed all his love of Tamil to the beautiful way in which Azhagiri Raju roused and sustained his interest in the nuances of literary usage and that he had never tired of hearing from him of his Master's genius as poet and as teacher and his extreme goodness as a most lovable gentleman.

Thus, a very large number of people came and studied under Sri Pillai, some for a few days or weeks and several others for months and years together.

## 14. SECOND TRIP TO MADRAS

The friends Sri Pillai had made during his first visit to Madras kept writing to him requesting him to pay another visit to them. He too had long felt a desire to meet them again and to discuss poetry with them at their level. He took some weeks over the



journey, stopping at the usual places on the way and was finally welcomed by Sabhapati Mudaliar and others when he reached the city.

Sabhapati Mudaliar had sung certain verses in praise of a Vinayaka Mudaliar of Vyasarpadi who had built and endowed a chatram (institution for feeding people free) on the southern side of the Mylapore temple tank. Sri Pillai was now prevailed upon by his friend to compose a poem on the donor-which he did, in a garland of one hundred verses. That open-handed patron Vinayaka Mudaliar presented him with one hundred pagodas (Rs. 350) for his work. This poem was printed in 1856.

Sabhapati Mudaliar, as also others sampled the works composed by Sri Pillai after his return to Tiruchirappalli, and liked in particular his *Kulattoor Kovai* in praise of Vedanayakam Pillai. He now made the request that he should write another poem on the same lines on Vinayaka Mudaliar. He began such a work and completed the first one hundred verses, when Vinayaka Mudaliar made him an advance payment of four hundred rupees. He promised to complete it at Tiruchirappalli and send it to him from there. (It was Thyagaraja Chettiar who continued from where his Master had left off and finished the work later to the satisfaction of every one)

Vinayaka Mudaliar listened enraptured to *Thyagaraja Leela* and to *Woriur Puranam* and requested Pillai placing in his hands the Sanskrit original, to compose a similar puranam on Mylapore. The preliminary chapters were composed on the spot and some of the passages in it were circulated among admiring friends. But even these parts were lost afterwards.

Sri Pillai went on a pilgrimage now in 1853, when he was about thirty-nine to places like Kulattoor near Madras, made famous by Sivagnana Munivar and Sri Kachiappa Munivar who had stayed there and made notable contributions to Tamil poetry. When, similarly he went to Tottikkalai on an invitation from Krishnaswami Mudaliar of that place he gave expositions of the works composed by Sivagnana Munivar on the local deities and himself contributed a garland of one hundred verses.



Returning to the city, he took leave of his friends and started for home. He was entertained at places on the way by former pupils and others. On reaching Tiruchirappalli he settled down again into his former routine of teaching and composing poetry.

In 1854 Tandavaraya Tambiran who was one of those who had known him closest from the days of his first visit to Madras, stopped at Tiruchirappalli on his way down south to Kallidai-kurichi. Sri Pillai waited upon him with his pupils and whenever he went to see him, the holy man who was Poet by Appointment to the Tiruvaavaduturai Mutt, examined the young men in the works they had studied under Sri Pillai. The more searching the examination the greater was his astonishment at the marvellous way they had been coached in so many works of different kinds so well and in such a short space of time each, by their Master.

Tandavaraya Tambiran knew what an up-hill task it is to accumulate knowledge little by little and so was lost in admiration of the technical excellence of Sri Pillai's teaching methods. He wished it might be possible to take him to Tiruvaavaduturai and make him settle down as a teacher there. The pupils would derive as much benefit as the teacher himself who deserved every encouragement in the laudable vocation he had chosen.

So, when he went to Kallidaikkurichi, he spoke about Sri Pillai to Melagaram Sri Subramanya Desikar who was Junior Head of the Mutt at this time. Desikar had been himself a pupil once under Tambiran and wished him to teach both monks and laymen who kept coming to Tiruvaavaduturai for their studies.

Tambiran answered, "I have no gift for teaching, nor do I have the health for it. But I can tell you of one who is pre-eminently fitted for the task. I have met him twice in Madras and also at Tiruchirappalli where he lives. The more I think of him the greater is my admiration for him both as a poet and as a teacher. I can't think of any one who is his equal in either field. What he does not know is not worth knowing, in writings ancient and modern. When he starts teaching, he does it with such zest that it is a delight to watch him do it. The longer the hours he puts in the more infectious in his enthusiasm for the job and the freshness and vigour he retains to the end. If he could be persuaded to become our Poet Laureate he would prepare dozens



of scholars on the same lines as himself and his presence will redound to the fame of our Mutt for all time."

Desikar made a mental note of this and was awaiting a suitable opportunity for meeting Sri Pillai and inviting him to take up teaching work under the auspices of the Mutt at Tiruvaavaduturai.

## 15. AT SIRKAZHI

It was in 1859 that Sri Pillai received pressing invitations from Vinayaka Mudliar and others to come to Madras again, complete the puranam on Mylapore and give them the pleasure of his company for some months. He was now up to his eyes in debt and so decided that another trip to Madras would solve his difficulties and secure for him enough funds to honour all his commitments. He took with him the script containing the earlier chapters of the puranam and accompanied by a chosen band of pupils set out for Madras.

He came as far as Sirkazhi and there he met Vedanayakam Pillai who had been posted there the previous year as District Munsiff. As this friend had often urged him to pay him a visit he now went and stayed at his house.

Vedanayakam Pillai had just completed writing one of his works called *Neeti Nool* or Book of Ethics and availed himself of this opportunity to have it corrected and revised by his Master. In the laudatory verse Sri Pillai affixed to that work he made reference to the fact that Vedanayakam Pillai not only wrote poems but had poems written and dedicated to him, including some by himself—a double honour which persons seldom achieve.

Some of the leading citizens of the place now insisted on his giving them a sample of the Kovai he had composed in the Munsiff's honour and he obliged them. They at once unanimously entreated him to compose a similar work on Sri Brahma Pureesa the Deity in the local Siva temple.

Sri Pillai said in answer, "The truth is that I have promised to visit my friends in Madras and complete a puranam on



Mylapore which I began composing during my last visit to that place. This business is urgent since the payment to be made would be of immediate use to me. I shall certainly fulfil your wishes on my return trip, I shall then be more free in mind to carry out your commands."

It was throwing words away. Vedanayakam Pillai too joined the others and put additional pressure on Sri Pillai to make him stay. "You are very well aware, sir" he said, "I have no joy in life equal to what I derive from your company and conversation. I stand to benefit in several ways if you accede to their request and compose the poem they have so much set their hearts on."

Sri Pillai had to agree. Lodgings were arranged for him as also every other thing he needed for a comfortable stay. The people of Sirkazhi and those belonging to places nearby vied with one another in playing host to their distinguished guest.

Sri Pillai composed ten to fifteen stanzas a day, devoting much thought to each and read these out to the friends who were with him from time to time. The work was completed in a few months. A day was fixed for the 'arangetram', the venue selected being the Valamburi Hall in the south quadrangle of the temple. Many people of note from far and near responded to the invitation. One of those present was Guruswami Pillai, who belonged to a family of scholars and was to draw later quite close to the Poet himself by means of a marriage alliance. Swaminatha Kavirayar read the verses.

The audience blessed the day the Poet came to that town and considered themselves specially fortunate in having the privilege of listening to his wonderful poetry and his still more wonderful exposition.

But there were not wanting at first some local men who were green with envy. They were bent on bringing some discredit or other to one who had eclipsed them so completely. They set up a man to raise objections from time to time.

The meaning of one stanza was explained in full one day and the Poet was about to take up the next, when this critic stood up and said after a muttered consultation with the coterie among



whom he was seated, "Why should references to the Deities of Tirukazhukundram and other shrines be brought into a poem dealing solely with Srikazhi?"

Sri Pillai took this objection in good part. He felt that it provided him with an occasion to explain certain truths of interest to all. He said, "It is a tradition among devotees of the Lord to consider Him omnipotent and by whatever name a Deity in one temple happens to be known, it is their practice to identify Him with similar manifestations of the Divine in other shrines and under other names. For example, in *Tiru Chitrambala Kovai*, there are lines that are full of such cross-references to other shrines and the acts of divine grace are attributed to them all without distinction." The audience were in a fervour of delight on listening to the apt quotations that came in a continual stream.

But the man had come to scoff, not to pray. He turned the butt end of the bayonet now and made a disparaging personal remark.

Sri Pillai did not mind the abuse; but Vedanayakam Pillai who presided, did. He knew the party. [He had warned the Poet already about such ungrateful men, who received assistance from him and then indulged in backbiting. He now asked the guards who had come with him to conduct the man outside with all show of politeness.

Sri Pillai could not bear such indignity being meted out to any one, however misguided or malevolent towards him he might be. He restrained the guards from carrying out the instructions their judge had given them and also mollified his friend, "It is all part of the literary game. We consider it proper for any one to pick holes in other men's work. It is attack and defence that lends interest to a public performance like this."

The pseudo-critic with those who had backed him, sat through the rest of the 'arangetram', sadder and wiser than before. The function continued day after day and it was something for 'gods to envy and angels to admire'. As soon as the exposition for each day was over, the president Vedanayakam Pillai recited a short poem, eulogizing the performance. Of the hundreds of stanzas



he read out like this, twenty are luckily extant and have been printed. Sri Pillai was moved by such abounding goodness and acknowledged it thus :

*You made me, sing, O Vedanayakam, of God in Heaven above  
And present here at sacred Kazhi too; and for doing that you  
praise  
To the skies poor me, whose songs but one and one alone among  
your lays  
Would more than match in beauty-each lay of yours as matchless  
as your love.*

It was in September 1861 that the arangetram drew to a magnificent conclusion and even Vedanayakam Pillai was amazed at the enthusiasm evinced by the people. Individual contributions ranged from Rs. 50/- to Rs. 300/-, besides presentations in kind. The Head of the Dharmapuram Mutt too sent robes of honour and other suitable presents.

At the request of Vedanayakam Pillai, the Poet wrote to his friends in Madras saying he would choose some other occasion to pay them a visit and bring with him, if possible at that time the puranam on Mylapore duly completed. But it was not to be. Even the part he had composed was mislaid and lost.

Sri Pillai had to continue at Sirkazhi for some months more, teaching a number of people who now sought guidance from him in their studies and visiting places near by complying with the request of the friends he had picked up there.

During one of his many visits to Chidambaram he composed an Andaadi on the holy centre, *Thiru Thillai Yamaka Andaadi*, which is universally acknowledged to be of unrivalled beauty.

Invited to Perumana Nalloor he obliged his host, Siva Loka Thyaga Mudaliar, by composing a *Pillai Tamil* on the Goddess—which poem was printed later by Thyagaraja Chettiar. In this his imagination rises to further heights and the language is exquisitely musical.



Sri Pillai spent part of what funds he had now at his disposal on rendering assistance to his pupils to one of whom, Muthu Kumara Pillai he made a gift of a house after bearing the expenses of his marriage. With the balance he arranged to repay all the debts he had contracted at Tiruchirappalli.

## 16. SETTLING DOWN AT MAYURAM

Some prominent citizens of Mayuram felt it would be an honour to have Sri Pillai in their midst permanently. Twelve of them agreed to pay him an allowance of ten rupees a month by rotation and they prevailed upon him to make Mayuram his home. This was in 1860. He lived in rented houses in the South Car Street for ten years and then bought a house of his own in the southern row of the same street. The chief reason that weighed with Sri Pillai in the decision he took now was the proximity of Tiruvaavaduturai, which he wanted to visit as often as he could.

As luck would have it, Vedanayakam Pillai too was transferred from Sirkazhi to Mayuram as Munsiff. He had now another title to fame too. Famine broke out in certain areas of Tamil Nadu and Vedanayakam Pillai took it upon himself to arrange for the feeding of the poor who came flocking into the town.

Students could in those days support themselves comfortably on five rupees a month. Those who could afford that sum, or raise it somehow settled down at Mayuram to study under Sri Pillai. Those who could not and were permitted by custom to dine with him found a ready welcome to stay with him.

Besides the large number of students Sri Pillai made friends with other scholars of repute in the locality, who maintained themselves by delivering discourses or running schools. They dropped in frequently and watched him as he taught his pupils and composed and dictated poetry. Most of them helped by writing to dictation or reading verses at lectures and in other ways.

There were also at this time some prominent musicians at Mayuram, the best known among them being the author of *Nandanar Charitram*, Gopalakrishna Bharatiyar of Mudikondan. He



used to meet Sri Pillai occasionally and exchange a few polite remarks. His songs had caught the imagination of the public. The poor who sang them were always sure of obtaining charity in cash and in kind. The musically gifted, who delivered discourses based on that opera, had a regular assured income. Laymen who listened to these went on a pilgrimage to places celebrated in it with these songs on their lips. Only the learned demurred because the story, as developed by Bharatiyar, deviated in details from *Perla Puranam* and also because the language here and there did not conform strictly to rules of grammar.

Sri Pillai used to contribute readily when approached by an author for introductory verses to be prefixed to his writings; but for the reasons stated above, he fended off Bharatiyar whenever he came to him for that favour. He used to enjoy his siesta for a while after dinner; and when one day he was just getting awake, he heard songs sung in a soft voice by some one seated on the pial. One piece followed another and then came the song that begins with these lines:

O for a sight of the Lord in His Temple of Gold  
To end the miseries we are heir to !

Sri Pillai got up from bed, sat listening to this and similar other songs that followed in gentle sequence. Tears gushed forth and coursed down his cheeks. He forgot the world for a while in this divine ecstasy and then stepping out, welcomed Bharatiyar who was seated there singing. He gave him the laudatory verse he had so often sought and apologized to him for having delayed it so long.

## 17. INSTALLED AT TIRUVAAVADUTURAI

The Junior Head of the Tiruvaavaduturai Mutt at this time was a remarkable personage of the name of Melagaram Subramanya Desikar, a lineal descendant of Melagaram Tirikoota-rasappa Kavirayar of *Tiru Kutrala Kuravanji* fame. He had heard of Sri Pillai from Tandavaraya Tambiran and after getting to know him personally during his frequent visits to the Mutt was all



the more keen on obtaining his services to teach the monks and the laymen at the Mutt. He convinced the Head of the Mutt of the necessity to appoint Sri Pillai there, by speaking of the reputation he had made at Madras, Bangalore and elsewhere, both as a teacher and as a poet. Just as the Mutt was giving a fillip to Sanskrit studies, it was incumbent on it to encourage Tamil studies also regardless of expense, he said. The final argument that won him his suit was that Sri Pillai was not worldly-minded in the least and would want nothing for himself if his pupils were cared for properly at the Mutt.

So Sri Pillai came to be made Scholar by Appointment at the Court of His Holiness Sri Ambalavaana Desikar. Two attendants were sanctioned for looking after him and were paid a monthly wage for that. There was a spacious cowshed opposite to the Mutt buildings, which was remodelled to serve as residence for Sri Pillai and the students who stayed with him. He welcomed this move in particular, because Hindu sentiment regards any place associated with cows as holy ground.

Some of the senior pupils Sri Pillai had to teach now had already made their mark as scholars. One was Namasivaya Tambiran of Tirunelveli Pettai, a monk and another was Narayana Chettiar of Devakottai. Namasivaya Tambiran made it a point to study systematically by himself any book before it was taken up by the Master and after he had been taught, revise it so thoroughly that he acquired full mastery of its contents and had them fixed firmly in his mind.

Sri Pillai acquainted himself with the customs and traditions of the Mutt in an incredibly short space of time and composed a Kalambakam on the Head, Sri Ambalavaana Desikar. There were already in existence several poems celebrating the greatness of the Mutt; but, at the 'arangetram' that was held on a special occasion in the presence of eminent people, everyone found this work first and foremost in literary merit and the rest nowhere.

In compliance with their unanimous wish and in consultation with the Junior Head, the Head of the Mutt conferred on Sri Pillai the title of Maha Vidwan. The Poet was presented with shawls and other customary gifts and he was also allotted the first place at the head of the table among laymen at meal-time.



Among those who had been patronized by Subramanya Desikar were two brothers, Ramaswami Aiyar and Maha Vaidyanatha Aiyar. Though they were primarily notable as musicians and composers of music, they were equally famous as scholars. So retentive was their memory that they never forgot what they heard or read just once. Subramanya Desikar had long wanted to introduce these remarkable men to Sri Pillai and the occasion came during the first Guru Pooja—or Founder's Day—after Sri Pillai had taken service in the Mutt.

During the interval afforded by a fireworks display on the night of the Guru Pooja, Desikar effected the introduction and then asked the Brothers to sing a song for the benefit of the friend just introduced. They at once sang three beautiful stanzas which they set to music and the performance was marvellous. It was immortal music married to immortal verse, verse that described the Devotees, Brahma and others passing through a wood and questioning the birds, the blossoms and other denizens about the passage through it of Lord Siva with his Divine Consort.

Almost beside himself with astonishment, Sri Pillai managed to ask them, "May I know wherefrom is this selection?" He was too stupefied to know.

"It is from your own *Soota Samhita*, from the chapter that narrates how the Creator and others realized the Ultimate Wisdom as a fruit of the austerities They performed at Chidambaram", they answered.

"Do you happen to know any more selections from that work."

"Certainly Sir, Sundara Swamigal of Kodaganallur, who knows the Sanskrit original quite well, used to ask us to sing more and more passages like these and then go into raptures over your marvellous poetic gift."

"You stated that this is my composition. How do you happen to know that?"

"Why, Aiyasami Pillai of Tirunelveli and several others too have told us about it."



Subramanya Desikar now spoke to Sri Pillai, "Who could shut out the radiance of the sun? You may seek to hide your light under a brushel, but see how far your genius flashes its beams".

Sri Pillai noted with growing admiration the personality of the two Brothers, their deep devotion their ability to sing without any movement of limbs or contortions of the face and their clear rendering that enhanced the beauty of the verse they took up and adorned it. "O Masters", he said, "I have never heard in my life anything to match your singing. It is divine. I invoke God's blessings on you from the fulness of my heart. I only pray it may be given to me to meet you oftener and become more intimate"

"It is all due to the grace of His Holiness here," the Brothers answered, pointing to Desikar. "We have long wanted to meet you and our prayers have been answered at last. There are so many things we are eager to learn from you. We thank God who has been pleased to lead us to you today."

The next day, in the afternoon, before an audience that was both fit and full, Maha Vaidyanatha Aiyar and his brother gave a concert as they usually did whenever they visited the Mutt. Sri Pillai was so moved that he eulogized them in verses comparing them to Siva who took on the role of Songster in Madurai.

Sri Pillai camped at different sacred places later, releasing to the public the puranams he composed on those shrines. On such occasions, Maha Vaidyanatha Aiyar and his brother used to attend and stay for two or three days, listening to him. They would then include his verses in their repertoire and make use of them as occasion offered, during their concerts and musical discourses.

Stay at the Mutt provided Sri Pillai with the opportunity of meeting men of attainments in different branches of learning, especially Sanskrit. Such acquaintance proved to be mutually profitable, for it led to an exchange of the best thought in either medium.

Sri Pillai's former friend Namasivaya Pillai of Patteeswaram, was now no more; but his son, Arumugatta Pillai, often prevailed upon Sri Pillai, whom he revered, to come to Patteeswaram and spend a few days with him from time to time.



## 18. GOD'S PLENTY

Sri Pillai continued to compose during this period various types of poems like Kura Vanji, Pillai Tamil and Sthala puranas. One of the most remarkable of these was the Pillai Tamil he wrote on Sri Ambalavana Desikar himself. Besides being an exposition of philosophy and of the traditions peculiar to the Mutt, it also happens to be pure poetry.

The 'arangetram' of this work came off in the presence of a distinguished gathering, presided over by His Holiness himself with Sri Subramanya Desikar seated by his side. Hindu tradition insists that the guru who imparts spiritual enlightenment should himself be regarded as God incarnate. This faith enables the Poet to give free play to his imagination. Day after day the audience was treated to a rich feast of literary sweetness, the like of which one experiences but rarely and remembers all one's life with pleasure.

In Pillai Tamil, the god or goddess is regarded as a winsome child and the stages of development of this theme include one inviting the child to give a kiss.

In one shrine near by, the Deity was worshipped by a maiden of extraordinary devotion, who was however so short that she could not reach up to garland the Divine Image properly. The Image then leaned down to enable her to place the garland round its neck. It remains bent like that to this day. Sri Pillai refers to this and says that the hero of his poem need not bend so much to receive the garland of verse he has woven and impart a kiss in return.

This ingenious comparison and the musical flow of language won instant applause. His Holiness sent for a garland of Rudraksha beads (mounted on gold and set with precious gems) from his coffer and said, "We bend a little now and we also request you to bow and lean forward a little." With these words he adorned Sri Pillai with that jewel with his own hands. And thus the poetic banquet continued for days. The same themes and the



same types of composition were treated by this Poet with distinctive originality each time, the fertility of his invention and the versatility of his approach being truly inexhaustible.

It was in 1862 that, complying with the wishes of the Head of the Dharmapuram Mutt, Sri Pillai completed a puranam on Tiru Kurukkai. The letter sent by His Holiness to a prominent landowner of the name of Saravana Pillai, asking him to arrange for every detail of the final 'arangetram' function, mentions, besides other things, the following :

"It is well known that each sacred shrine has additional lustre shed upon it by its sthalapuranam. The Tevaram Hymns are there, redounding to its sanctity, of course; but it is the puranam itself that popularises every feature of an important centre of pilgrimage like Kurukkai. Completing a puranam confers, we need hardly add as much merit as building and endowing the shrine itself. It is up to you therefore to have everything prepared and performed under your personal supervision."

In the same year, 1862, Sri Pillai went on a pilgrimage to holy places further south and at the request of his former pupil Ramaswami Pillai, spent a few days in Madurai. Pammal Vijayaranga Mudaliar was Inspector of Schools there at this time. He expressed a wish to have two poems composed in honour of Saint Tiru Gnana Sambandha Moorti Nayanar and Sri Pillai accordingly wrote two-a Patitruppattandadi and an Ananda Kalippu. Both were recited before the elite of the town on the premises of the Mutt at Madurai and were printed by Sri Mudaliar.

There continued to flow from Sri Pillai's lips a wonderful variety of works, as he complied with alacrity with the wishes of any one who came to him for such favours. Once there came to Tiruvaavaduturai a distinguished poet from Settur, of the name of Kandasami Kavirayar. He had long waited for an opportunity to meet Sri Pillai and to spend some time in his company.

When he came he found Sri Pillai busily dictating part of a long poem, but not too busy to talk to friends. He participated in the conversation and at the same time went on with his work of forming verses in his mind and uttering them extempore. The



Kavirayar was himself a poet and he knew how demanding the muse sometimes is. He was amazed at what he witnessed with his own eyes and quoted an old popular description of the throes of writing. He remained a steadfast admirer of Sri Pillai for life.

*See, see the way how verse is indited  
By Chokkalingam, our Laureate!  
Dawn doth find him duly incited  
By the Muse. He would tarry at  
His task no longer, but straight for pen  
He seeks an hour, for paper two,  
Then seeks a corner within his den  
To suit him nicely, for none or few  
Should come disturbing. It is fairly noon  
When, his glasses dangling on his nose,  
He writes with frenzy. By sunset, soon,  
He has one stanza, see. of neatly cut-up prose!*

The Poet continued composing all kinds of works in a continuous stream, for none who went to him for such a favour ever returned empty-handed. He was all the same hard pressed for funds.

His pupil, Narayana Chettiar of Devakottai now requested him to come to his own place and the Poet complied. He visited Karaikudi too and then at Kovilur he recited the puranam he had written on the local temple. The Head of the Vedanta Mutt there, who had organized the function was generous in remunerating him for his services and also got other members of the Nagarathar community to render assistance to him in several ways.

## 19. THE AMBASSADOR

At about this time something happened that raised Sri Pillai's prestige in the eyes of everyone and won him special favour from the Head of the Mutt.

A gentleman of the name of Rangaswami Pillai came from Madurai to Thanjavur on transfer as the chief judicial officer



there. He was unique in many ways. He never went and met anyone on a social footing and never allowed anyone to visit him either at his residence. He was so strict and incorruptible that even the most powerful and influential people would not venture to approach him for an introduction, let alone for any favour. He had all the same a reputation for piety and a deep love of literature.

It was customary at Tiruvaavaduturai Mutt to invite to occasions like the Guru Pooja, officials posted to towns in the neighbourhood and these officials invariably responded to the invitation. While discussing arrangements with leading men of the district, Ambalavana Desikar naturally expressed his desire to extend an invitation to Rangaswami Pillai also.

One and all of them said at once, "It would be no use. It is something that cannot be done. Who has heard of Rangaswami Pillai going anywhere on a visit? Many have tried to see him, officials as well as non-officials, but the door has remained shut in their faces. That man is quite inaccessible."

Reports like this coming from every quarter, only whetted Desikar's desire. He wanted to pitch upon some messenger who would be able to take an invitation and deliver it to him.

Seeing him plunged in thought Subramanya Desikar, his Junior asked and understood the cause of his worry. "Simply because these big men say with one voice that a certain thing is impossible it does not become so for that very reason", he said.

"What is there to be done? People don't dare to draw near him. I see no way out."

"I assure you, there is".

"How, pray?"

"We have with us someone to whom nothing is impossible. He will accomplish our object for us."



"I don't believe it. Who may that be?"

"Our Maha Vidwan, of course!"

"You are joking! He is the gentlest, the most docile and reserved man I've known. That judge would surely never care to set eyes on him."

"Your Holiness may kindly take my word for it. Not only this Rangaswami Pillai, but those in much higher status too, would bow down to our Poet of Poets. His name, I duly submit, is one to conjure with wherever Tamil is spoken."

Ambalavana Desikar did not share his Junior's confidence, but let him try.

Subramanya Desikar disclosed to Sri Pillai the nature of his mission, equipped him for the journey and sent him to Thanjavur.

On his way to that city the Poet wondered to whom he could go in the first instance. There was a Ramaswami Pillai a former pupil and a noted grammarian, who might guide him to the right person. He went straight to his house. That friend was away at the time, but soon returned and was overjoyed to see his revered Master under his roof. Sri Pillai had come with his own attendants and everything was arranged for his comfortable stay there that night.

When morning came the two set out for a walk. Sri Pillai chose that opportunity to speak to his friend. "I am here to invite judge Rangaswami Pillai to the Guru Pooja at the Mutt. I don't know who is going to help me to do it. It is up to you to advise me and to see to it that I succeed."

Ramaswami Pillai said, "What people say is true. The judge has made such a reputation wherever he is posted. He never sees, or is seen by anyone outside the strict requirements of duty and that too at court. But I am lucky. I have the privilege of studying with him in his spare time works like *Tiruvilaiyadal* and *Peria Puranam*. He has the highest regard for men of learning. As Master is here in person he is bound to succeed. I shall go to



him now and inform him of Master's arrival in this town. I am sure Master will be sent for. I shall come myself or send some one on my behalf."

Sri Pillai thanked God. He had somehow stumbled on the right person for the job.

Judge Rangaswami Pillai took up his book as soon as Ramaswami Pillai entered his house. But the latter said, "I have today something important to communicate and request I may be permitted to do so."

"By all means, yes."

"Your Honour is sure to have heard of Maha Vidwan Minakshisundaram Pillai. He is usually described as the Kamban of the present age. Kamban composed ten thousand stanzas. Maha Vidwan Pillai has already written several times that ten thousand and is likely to write a good deal more in the days to come. He is an inspired poet; he always composes extempore. Poetry comes to him as naturally as breathing. The Goddess of Learning surely dwells on his tongue and touches his lips as he begins to speak. He is second to none in his devotion too, for he glorifies God everyday in thought, word and deed. The number of his pupils is legion. He has taught them all freely, without taking a fee. What he has earned in other ways, he has lavished on them, feeding them and clothing them at his expense and they carved out successful careers for themselves, thanks to his help. I have never seen or heard of the like of him. I studied under him. Whenever I have doubts, I go to him to get them cleared. The Holy Mutt at Tiruvaavaduturai is fortunate to have him now as Court Poet in residence. Most part of each day he is coaching successive sets of scholars there."

"Yes, yes. Such reports have reached me. I have always felt a wish to meet him. But the nature of the office I hold prevents me from going anywhere or meeting anyone. What am I to do?"

"This exalted personage has now graced my humble residence with his presence. There are any number of people in this town who have been denied the honour of such a visit. I am fortunate



in having been singled out for that favour. He came last evening. He has expressed to me in private a desire to meet Your Honour. Many of his former pupils are serving as high officials in different places. Munsiff Vedanayakam Pillai of Mayuram is one such. He is a person likely to be known to Your Honour. Studying under my Master is somehow different from studying under others. He can, in one week, open a whole realm of knowledge to our view, which other teachers cannot achieve in months and years. Your Honour is lucky in that he has come to this town on purpose to obtain an interview."

"You say he is staying in your house. May I come there to see him? What hour would be convenient?"

"No, please. He fully realizes the dignity of your exalted office and would not forgive me if I took you there to see him. Give me the necessary permission and I shall take him here. Or, some one may be sent instead of me."

"No, that would not be manners. It would be best for me to go and wait upon him and obtain his blessings."

"Your Honour has not done such a thing before and I for one, would never countenance deviation from that practice."

When Ramaswami Pillai started the judge placed his own carriage at his disposal.

The judge received his illustrious visitor at the gate, took him inside, garlanded him, placed an offering of fruits and prostrated on the ground before him. "I feel greatly honoured by this visit. I ought to have come and paid my respects to you where you are staying, but was prevented by our friend from doing so," he said. "I pray I may be excused for that."

"My Master is a divinely inspired poet and if he composes a verse in Your Honour's name, it will be a benediction and a harbinger of good fortune," said Ramaswami Pillai.

The judge said, "After all, why should he celebrate poor me in a poem? Any other theme would do. If he is so minded he may compose just one verse on the Pandyan kingdom I come from."



Ramaswami Pillai said turning to the Poet, "It is up to you, sir, to fulfil the wishes of both of us and pronounce a blessing on both His Honour to satisfy me and Pandya Desa to satisfy him, if possible in one and the same verse."

Quick as lightning was the response.

*Where else do you find these fortunes two—  
Learning and Wealth—so well combined,  
Where else have God and Goddess too,  
With mighty Skanda, as sovereigns reigned,  
Where else hath Rangaswami true  
Dispensed strict justice with steadfast mind,  
If not in this Pandyan state we woo  
As beloved most of all mankind?*

Familiar as he was with his Master's unique gifts, even Ramaswami Pillai was astounded. Rangaswami Pillai was moved to tears. He stood speechless with emotion. "I am an insignificant creature and a perfect stranger to you. Still you have placed me in your debt for ever. There is nothing I can do to show my appreciation. I shall remember this visit till the end of my days."

When the two were about to start, the judge took Ramaswami Pillai aside and said to him, "I should like to offer a token of my gratitude. The least I can do is to place at his feet a few months' salary. You know us both. It is for you to guide me in this matter."

"No, please. Master is indifferent to money. I shall find out if he has any other wish at heart and come and report it in the evening."

That evening Ramaswami Pillai said, "He desires only one thing. His spiritual preceptor is Head of the Mutt at Tiruvaavaduturai. He would be happy if Your Honour would grace the occasion of the Guru Pooja there next month."

"What! Has he any need himself to have a spiritual guide? If it is his wish, I shall certainly fulfil it. What objection could I



have to visit a place hallowed by his presence? But Guru Pooja would be an occasion for a great press of people to collect there. Left to myself, I should like to go and pay my respects on an ordinary day. Anyway, of what benefit is such a visit going to be to our Master?"

Ramaswami Pillai arranged for another meeting. Sri Pillai assured the Judge that a visit any time would be a great honour and took leave of both.

Ambalavana Desikar was pleased to hear this, but he made no secret of the fact that he would be sure of it only if it actually happened.

A day was fixed for the visit during the court holidays and Ramaswami Pillai intimated it in advance to Sri Pillai, as agreed. Judge Rangaswami Pillai came on time and was received with due honour. He was greatly impressed by the personality of both the Head and the Next-in-Succession by the arrangements made for specialised studies by students in large numbers and for feeding people without stint. He was both filled with regret that he had not come earlier and happy to have learnt at least now so much about that Institution. Though he had brought the customary gifts, when he went back he declined every return gift except the sacred ash given to every devotee.

Ambalavana Desikar now put full faith in all that the Junior Head had told him about Sri Pillai's reputation abroad. He sent for the officials of the Mutt and issued instructions that anything that the Poet Laureate might happen to need should be supplied even before he asked for it in so many words.

Subramanya Desikar was happy at the turn events had taken. He pointed out how no visitor who counted ever failed to pay his respects to Sri Pillai at the time he did homage to the Heads of the Mutt. Hearing the reports of such visitors too, Ambalavana Desikar realized that it was an honour to have Sri Pillai there as resident teacher and also that no expenditure ever incurred would be too much considering the fame he brought to the Institution.



## 20. KUMBAKONAM—1865.

Two pupils of Maha Vidwan Sri Pillai became Pandits at the Government College one after the other—Ponnambala Mudaliar and Swaminatha Desikar. At their request Sri Pillai used to spend a few days at Kumbakonam whenever he passed that way. It was then that he became acquainted with Rao Bahadur T. Gopala Rao, who had won state wide reputation as a professor of English. Gopala Rao used to speak in later years with great admiration of his genius and his majestic personal appearance.

Gopala Rao was asked by Diwan Madhava Rao of Travancore to recommend a Tamil Pandit for the Maharajah's College there. He offered that post to Sri Pillai; telling him that it carried a salary of Rs. 100/- with perquisites and that the Government there would deem it an honour to have him as their foremost scholar in Tamil. Sri Pillai declined it. "I shall be losing my independence if I take up such a job," he said. "I am happy where I am, doing something after my own heart, spending most of my time with young men of little means and teaching them. I would not exchange this for any position of profit or prestige." He recommended Swaminatha Desikar for that post. It was then that Thagaraja Chettiar succeeded Desikar at the College. He reported to duty on 3.7.1865.

Sri Pillai's visits to Kumbakonam continued, since Chettiar, also had been his pupil. At the request of the Tahsildar Sivagurunatha Pillai and others, he then went over and camped at Kumbakonam, to compose a 'puranam' on that town. Seshaiyengar of Mangalakkudi was his amanuensis and small portions were composed each morning and read out the same evening. The hall in front of Sri Kumbheswara Swami Temple was the venue of the 'arangetram', Sivagurunatha Pillai presided and shone in the reflected glory.

There were not wanting here too people who envied Sri Pillai the admiration he evoked among the public. One of them took it upon himself to detach Sivagurunatha Pillai from this laudable enterprise.



After a cleverly contrived preamble, this man said, "Out of the genuine love and regard I have for you, I have got to warn you of the risk you are running."

"You have every right to safeguard my interests. Speak on."

"I had been to the house of the Sheristadar of the Collector's Office. You know what mischief writers of anonymous petitions are capable of doing. Merchants of this place also are afraid that you may use your influence to collect heavy contributions from them. Under such circumstances it would be best for you not to have anything more to do with this business."

"Well, thank you very much indeed for this timely advice," said the weak-willed Tahsildar. "I shall be quite careful hereafter. If there are further developments, don't fail to let me know." He was nervous throughout the day and afraid for his job. He did not attend the 'arangetram' that evening.

Out of the kindness of his heart Sri Pillai called on the Tahsildar the next morning. "I heard you were indisposed," he said, "Are you better now?" He did not, naturally, know the turn events had taken.

Sivagurunatha Pillai pretended at first to be too busy to speak to him. Then he said, "It is wrong on your part to use my name and compel people, as you are doing, to contribute liberally to the 'arangetram'. My superiors in office would not countenance my being involved in this fund-raising drive. I endanger my job and I might even forfeit my pension--all on account of your imprudence. I shall never attend this function, hereafter. Be careful not to use my name any more."

For the first and last time in his life Sri Pillai got really wild. He blamed his own fate for having misjudged this man and for having been associated with him for some days. He said, "May I tell you, my good friend, I don't have to lean on you for support in this town? There is no need for me to use your name or profit by your influence. I always value genuine affection, when I find it among the poorest of the poor and spurn the wealth of the arrogant and the purse-proud set. You can't imagine the sort of regard I am held in by people of far higher status than you. It is funny to hear you say I am maintaining myself by trading on



your good name and official standing. Wherever I may happen to go, I can do without the favour of such people as you. Even if you were to come and offer to participate again in my meetings, I tell you, you will not be welcome. Understand, please, that this is the last time I see you and speak to you, Good-bye."

This sudden display of temper from the gentlest of nature's gentlemen came as a shock to those who were standing by and who did not expect such an outburst over what was of course an unmerited insult. They narrated the incident of which they had been eye-witnesses to other people and it spread quickly in the town.

This timorous official was now seized with another kind of fear. He got hold of a trusted friend and sent him post haste to Tiruvaavaduturai instructing, "Please tell Sri Subramanya Desikar that the Vidwan of the Mutt has behaved most disrespectfully towards me and that he should be instructed suitably to behave himself."

Subramanya Desikar guessed who would have caused this unpleasant situation and he selected the right person to tackle it. He said to Viswalinga Tambiran, one of the most capable of the monks. "There seems to be some misunderstanding between Sri Pillai and Sivagurunatha Pillai. Have it set right."

The Tambiran went straight to Sivagurunatha Pillai, who said at once, "Your Minakshisundaram Pillai has spoken disrespectfully to me. You should warn him. Ask him to be polite to me as long as he stays in this town. Is he not in the employ of your Mutt?"

"I speak as ordered by His Holiness" the Tambiran replied "You are labouring under a misapprehension and you have not understood the real worth of a person like our Maha Vidwan. He is not our employee and he is not paid any salary. It is an honour to the Mutt that he has chosen to stay there and teach. The highest officials in the land defer to him. He is of the same stature of Kamban and other immortals of old. Many consider him a divine incarnation and revere him as much as they revere Goddess Tamil. So, it should be purely your fault to have incurred his displeasure."

Sivagurunatha Pillai now realised that, giving ear to what an envious tale-bearer had told him, he had made an ass of himself.



He said at length, "Please see to it that I don't get into any further trouble over this. I assure you I shall give Sri Pillai the respect that is his due."

"That is right. You have spoken like a wise man at last," said Viswalinga Tambiran. "Our Maha Vidwan never harbours ill-will even towards the most evil and wicked among men. He readily forgives those who insult him or do him an injury. You need have no worry on that account. Only, be on your best behaviour and everything would be all right."

Sri Pillai was pleased to see his good friend the Tambiran at Kumbakonam and requested him to give him the pleasure of his company during the 'arangetram' that was going on every evening. Viswalinga Tambiran then told him in detail all that had passed between him and the Tahsildar and asked him to ignore any unfriendliness that official might have been guilty of. Sri Pillai brushed that aside and requested his friend to convey to His Holiness his respectful compliments and also the assurance he felt that with His Holiness's blessings, the 'arangetram' was proving a splendid success.

Sri Pillai had experience of a few more such people who wanted to be associated with the 'puranam' because it brought them the privilege of getting closely acquainted with Sri Pillai and not because of any love of God or love of literature, which was all foreign to their nature. But they were at the same time reluctant to help in any manner in the conduct of the function.

Other well-meaning citizens however now rallied round Sri Pillai and the 'arangetram' continued without a hitch. Kancheepuram Sabhapati Mudaliar, who had been to Rameswaram with his family, stopped at Kumbakonam on his way back. Sri Pillai fixed up lodgings for him, arranged for comfortable stay and at his wish, took him to Tiruvaavaduturai to pay his homage to the Heads of the Mutt. Mudaliar attended the arangetram for a few days with pleasure.

Sri Subramanya Desikar once referred to this visit to the Mutt by Sabhapati Mudaliar. "We had always been of the opinion that the highest honour in any gathering of scholars was Sri Pillai's by right, because he towered above everyone else in his attainments. He had studied a few classics under this Mudaliar in his



youth and for that reason, treated him still with veneration, gave him due precedence and stood aside with the humility of a pupil when the two were here. Which other person, I ask, has both such modesty and such gratitude ingrained in him? In this respect Sri Pillai is the most remarkable specimen of both these virtues I have ever known."

Kumbakonam could boast of a number of Vishnu Temples too and Sri Pillai included an account of the greatness and sanctity of these in his 'puranam' on the town. At the request of the Trustee of one such Temple he enlarged his celebration of the advent of the goddess Sri Komalavalli a set of ten exquisitely beautiful verses dealing with her childhood, as in a regular Pillai Tamil. Vaishnavites and Saivites alike were pleased with the way in which both the composition and the interpretation of the verses were tactfully managed to afford delight to either.

As stated already, verses for each evening's function were composed only in the morning. One day, on account of a stream of visitors, the Poet could not spare a minute for his work even in the early afternoon. Seshaiyengar, his amanuensis, stood there worry written large on his face, as Sri Pillai went on talking to friends. The Poet then asked him to bring his palm-leaves and style and in about two hours dictated fifty stanzas at a stretch. This marvellous feat soon became the talk of the town and of all places in the neighbourhood.

The day the 'arangetram' drew to a close (early in 1866) was celebrated like a festival at Kumbakonam. The palm-leaf script was placed in the howdah of an elephant and taken at the head of a procession. A special palanquin was purchased for the Poet's use—it remained with him for life—and seated in it, he was borne by some of the biggest men in the area as if to remind people of the time-honoured way the Tamil nation honoured its scholars. Besides silk clothes and shawls, a sum of two thousand rupees was collected and placed before him.

Sri Pillai then composed at the request of one friend *Mangalambikai Pillai Tamil* and at the request of another *Kudandai Tiripandaadi*. During his stay in that town, Tyagaraja Chettiar once invited him to visit the College. He gave him his own seat and standing by his side, requested him to test the pupils'



progress. He did so and then selecting one young man at random asked him to recite any verse he liked. He stood up and quoted the description of the triumphant return from exile of Nala and Damayanti.

*Could peacocks dancing at clouds that lower,  
Or a face that is blessed with eyes—like a flower.  
Or crops that drink-in a heaven-sent shower,  
Ever match the thrill that at turret and tower  
Jubilant crowds felt at the magic hour  
Their King and their Queen were restored to power?*

That student also briefly explained the meaning, and added "Our own joy, here today, sir, is similar to this." Sri Pillai complimented Chettiar on the resourcefulness shown by his pupils.

Poondi Ranganatha Mudaliar and others sought a meeting with Sri Pillai and cherished it as their most treasured memory.

When the Poet left Kumbakonam, he distributed the clothes among his pupils and his friends, paid the dues to the tradesmen who had carried him in their books and borrowed what he needed for his return trip home.

## 21. A MIDNIGHT INTERLUDE

The Poet's friends made special arrangements for his trips to different places in the course of 1866. The Mutt at Tiruvaavaduturai bore the expenses of his outward journey and the Nagarathars who, at the instance of his pupil, Narayana Chettiar of Devakottai and of Sri Chidambara Aiya of Kovilur, invited him to their places paid for his expenses during his stay in their midst and also for the return trip. In all Sri Pillai visited three places this year, Sooraikkudi, Kandadevi and Veeravanam (Sakkottai). Narayana Chettiar remained with him throughout and saw to it that he lacked for nothing. It was only at Kovilur and these three other places that Sri Pillai was able to take home intact what he had been offered for his verses—calculated at a rupee per stanza.



On his way to Kardadevi accompanied by his pupils and his attendants, Sri Pillai found himself benighted, shortly after passing Pattukkottai. There was no place he could camp in and at 9 p.m. managed to reach a hamlet of miserable hovels. He was then directed to go to the Agraharam and there too he found only one thatched cottage.

His servants went and asked if they could have facilities there for cooking their supper. A young woman, who was there alone with her children and was awaiting the return of her husband, grew frightened at the approach of strangers and said they could find no convenience like that at her place. There was in front of that cottage an open space, used as a threshing-floor and the bullocks were unyoked there. The moon was shining bright. Sri Pillai found a tank, where he was able to offer his evening prayers and then he got back and laid himself down, unable to quell the pangs of hunger and equally concerned about his companions who had to endure the same privations as himself.

The owner of the house returned now, carrying a basket on his head. When Sri Pillai's attendants called to him, he hurried off, afraid that they might be asking for a share of what he had. Getting into his house, he showed his wife the food-grains he had brought and said, "Look here. Are we not lucky today? This will last us two whole days." Then he partook of the cooked rice left over from the midday meal, stretched himself on a palm-fibre cot in the courtyard and in his happiness began to sing. The notes came clear and reached the ears of the group camping on the threshing ground.

*How can he hope to sing, O Goddess, verses sweet  
As honey, as milk, as grape-juice, who never thought it meet  
To bow to Thee just once and meditate on Thy Feet,  
Thine Arms that bear a book and a rosary and greet  
Him with promise of boons and safety, on Thy Tresses without  
peer  
On which the crescent moon ever loves to dwell—and on the  
whole, sheer  
White radiance of Thy Form like autumn skies pellucid,  
clear?*



Other such verses followed. Sri Pillai's pupils drew near their Master and said, "The owner of this house seems to be well versed in Tamil, sir. He is singing lovely verses in praise of the Goddess of Learning."

"Manage somehow to bring him here and make him sing in my hearing."

The man needed some persuasion and the assurance that nothing more was required of him than rendering a few more of his songs in their Master's presence. "Is that so? Are there really people in this wilderness interested in poetry?" he said. "Then I shall do so with pleasure." He brought his cot with him, sat on it and sang again the same pieces for the benefit of his audience.

"May I know what standard authors you have studied?" Sri Pillai asked him.

"All I have studied, sir," he replied, "is the art of begging. My father was a good scholar and taught me a few things I still remember. All his collection of books is now lost. I have no time for reading even if some one came forward to teach me. From sunrise to sunset I go from place to place and collect what I can. We have certain hereditary rights in these parts and get a modicum of foodgrains during the harvests. The only pleasure I have is to go over my stock of poems over and over again. I love poetry, but what good is it without the means to cultivate it? People speak of a scholar of great renown, of the name of Minakshisundaram Pillai, at distant Mayuram, who supports all needy pupils, teaches them fully in a few years and sends them out into the world to carve successful careers for themselves. Who else would do like that in these heartless modern days? I should love to go and meet him just once; but how can I, fettered as I am with wife and children?" He ran on like this for some time longer, when one of Sri Pillai's pupils whispered in his ear, "This gentleman here is the scholar about whom you have been speaking. He is on his way now to Kandadevi to read out the puranam of that place."

"He, Is that so" said the man, as he sprang from his seat. He was tongue-tied with wonder and admiration for a few minutes. "The Gods, the Gods, They are kind to me" he exclaimed and



ran towards his house. He wanted somehow to prepare food and offer it to his guests.

Sri Pillai's attendants ran after him, stopped him and said, "We have with us enough provisions and utensils. You may use them freely" and compelled him to accept them. In an incredibly short time, he and his wife managed to cook an excellent meal and serve it to the party.

The man kept awake throughout that night and requested his distinguished visitor to explain to him certain passages he knew but had failed to understand. In the morning he insisted that Sri Pillai should be his guest for that day. The Poet complied with his wishes and was entertained by him decently, as he had not spared himself to provide him with the best the place afforded.

He stood, shedding tears in his inconsolable grief, when the time for parting drew near. Sri Pillai noted how devoted he was to learning and to him. He placed at his disposal funds enough for his family to get on with for a few months, then took him with him as he continued his journey and taught him all he wanted to study.

In later years this scholar of the lonely cottage in the wilderness used to visit Tiruvaavaduturai often and study some more under Sri Pillai. The Head of the Mutt too used to give him gifts of money and such like in recognition of his learning.

## 22. NAGAPATTINAM AND MAYURAM

On his return to Tiruvaavaduturai, Sri Pillai resumed his teaching. Except during the hours Sri Subramanya Desikar spent in discussion and research in Sanskrit classics, he insisted that Sri Pillai's classes should be held in his own presence. He did not miss a single hour of *Kamba Ramayanam*, a work he knew thoroughly and enjoyed all the more now when Sri Pillai guided the senior scholars through it. So with Kovais too. The Poet arranged to provide a copy each of all the available Kovais and made them enjoy a comparative study of them all. Sri Desikar once remarked that he noted thus how stage by stage different poets developed



the same theme and displayed imagination and ingenuity in offering each time something refreshingly new and original conforming strictly to the ordained pattern at the same time.

Among those who studied under Sri Pillai now, the foremost were Namasivaya Tambiran, Paramasiva Tambiran, Ramaswami Pillai of Madurai and Narayana Chettiar of Devakottai.

The last-named was easily the most remarkable of them all. He belonged to a well-known family of philanthropists. He was blind, but had a wonderfully retentive memory. He followed the classes closely and also engaged some one to read to him at home. Each line he studied was imprinted indelibly on his memory. When he referred his doubts to his Master, he used to recall precisely the chapter, the verse and the particular line in which he found that difficult word or phrase-even after an interval of months. It was a wonder how he carried all this so well in his head.

His daily routine too was remarkable. He bathed and changed early in the morning and then tapped his temples with his knuckles a thousand-and-eight times, as every good devotee of Sri Vinayaka ought to do to win His favour. Then he went over Siva's Five-Letter-Spell in prayer, (the Panchakshara) also a thousand-and-eight times. He then recited a Tevaram compendium compiled by Agastya and portions of Tiruvachakam and then *Tiru Murukatrappadai* six times over. Breakfast would follow then and only then. If he was forced at any time to miss a part of this routine, he invariably made up for it later in the day, or the next morning, in addition to that day's usual count. Everyone declared that it was such spiritual exercises that developed in him those remarkable mental gifts and aptitudes.

During these months Sri Pillai composed a puranam on Kutralam (Thiruthuruthi) and sets of verses on Sri Vinayaka and Sri Muruga of that place, as well as a Yamaka Andaadi on Tiruvaavaduturai at the request of some monks belonging to the Mutt.

In 1867 Sri Pillai accompanied the Heads of the Mutt on a pilgrimage to Tiruvannamalai. Savarayalu Nayakar of Pondicherry met him there and prevailed upon him to visit his native town.



Danappachariyar, a lawyer and a munificent philanthropist of Pondicherry, spent a few days with him, listening to his exposition of poetry with unbounded delight. His latest Andaadi was printed there and he had to teach it to an admiring set of the citizens of Pondicherry. He was loaded with gifts and seen off by the people as he completed the rest of the pilgrimage and returned to Tiruvaavaduturai.

When a request was made to Sri Pillai for a puranam on Taniyur, a suburb of Mayuram, he produced a gem of a puranam in miniature, of just 202 stanzas, incorporating into it with delightful ingenuity a few stanzas in praise of the special excellence in the art of weaving for which the people of that locality are well-known--as desired by those master weavers themselves. Sri Subramanya Desikar used to say that this work gave him as much pleasure as any of the longer works, because it did not miss a single important feature of a grand epic while at the same time, displayed the highest imaginative reach and fertility of invention.

A regular puranam on Mayuram town had to follow as a matter of course, but it conformed in size to the Sanskrit original and came to 1894 stanzas in all. It was printed immediately in Madras by Subbaraya Chettiar in September 1868. That work contains beautiful verse from beginning to end, in rare metrical forms; and Sage Agastya's praise of Sri Muruga, for example, concludes with such lines as these:

*What use is the tongue that utters not His name?*

*What use is the tongue that sings not His fame?*

The *Kasi Rahasyam* that Sri Pillai wrote at this time contained 1012 stanzas and its 'arangetram' was held in Tiruvidaimarudur temple. In the same year, 1868, he visited Nagapattinam at the request of leading citizens there and collected material for a puranam. When he started composing, the amanuensis was a good writer and scholar of exceptional ability, named Gopala Pillai. He was one day led by his own pride to complain jokingly that the Peot was not composing verses fast enough to cause him much of a strain. He did not know at the time that these words were spoken within his Master's hearing.



Usually, Sri Pillai started his dictation at 7 in the morning and continued till 10 when he would get up for his bath, midday prayers and food. The next morning Sri Pillai took his own time to begin composing. He collected his thoughts for a while and then went at such a speed that it was all Gopala Pillai could do to keep pace with him. Long before 10, his fingers began to ache and he anxiously waited for the clock to strike 10. The attendant came to remind Sri Pillai that it was time for his bath. "Yes, yes," he replied, but he went on without a break.

Gopala Pillai now and then placed the style and palm-leaf down and rubbed his benumbed fingers to restore circulation. He did so in the hope that his Master would notice it and call off further work. The others who were near went away at 11, but the dictation continued. At 12, Gopala Pillai felt sure he could not add a single word more. He fell prostrate before the Poet.

"What is the matter?" he said. "Get up, brother."

"I cannot write any more, sir. Pride goes before a fall. I boasted among my friends that I could write faster than Master could dictate and now I eat my words. I know what kind of poetry has flowed from Master this morning. Other poets could not have accomplished as much in weeks. I cannot consider Master human any longer. Master's gifts are divinely inspired. It will be some time before I regain the use of my fingers and resume my service of scribe under Master. I request I may be forgiven". He held out his swollen fingers for his Master to see.

"I am sorry," said the Poet. "You might have told me; I would have stopped at once. As this chapter is of unusual interest, I did not want to check the flow and disturb the order of events as I had formed it in my mind this morning. Well, you had better go and have your food now and rest." Gopala Pillai left, looking crestfallen.

His friends teased him good-humouredly that evening. "What is the matter with you?" they asked. Those who had been spectators of the exploit described everything. "Ah, we knew even then that it was wrong on your part to have boasted as you did. Master goes slow only out of consideration for you. If he were to let himself go, who could ever keep up with him? Have you learnt your lesson now?"



Another scholar, Muthusami Pillai, filled in for him and the work went on.

It was at this time that Munsiff Vedanayakam Pillai sent a scholar called Saverinatha Pillai to study under the Poet. He belonged to Karaikkal. Though he was a Christian by religion, there was very little in his bearing to mark him from the rest. He was a good speaker, with a melodious voice and venerated his Master. He became his inseparable companion and attended to his comfort to the end. He easily took his place from now on as Sri Pillai's most devoted pupil.

The Poet left for Nagapattinam on invitation, in February 1869 and the 'arangetram' was scheduled to begin a month later. It continued, with breaks, for a whole year. Local scholars attended the function regularly. There were naturally some who wanted to make trouble and raised objections. These were met on the Poet's behalf by Mahadeva Sastrigal of Tiruchirappalli, who had rendered the original Sanskrit puranam into Tamil prose for him and now quoted authority by chapter and verse from the Vedas and other sacred texts to bear out Sri Pillai's interpretation.

While the 'arangetram' was in progress, a holy man of the name of Sundara Swamigal, who happened to visit the town, hearing of this function, graced it with his presence. This Swamigal was the guru of Maha Vaidyanatha Aiyar and a host of others. The audience rose as one man to do him homage. He addressed a eulogy to the Poet, saying, "I have long wanted to meet you and I thank God I have been enabled by His grace to do so today. As a devotee of God and as a propagator of the best religious works in Tamil in these days we are yet to see your equal. I am quite familiar with your marvellous rendering of *Soota Samhita* and I make use of it in my own discourses. I have known you by report from Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan, Aiyasami Pillai and others and today I am happy to meet you in person. May God bless you with long life and vouchsafe that the good work you are engaged in may continue long and bear fruit."

His Holiness Sri Sankaracharya of Kanchi camped at Nagapattinam while the 'arangetram' was going on and hearing about Sri Pillai expressed his wish to see him. Mahadeva Sastrigal took him one afternoon to the presence of His Holiness. His Holiness



spoke to the eminent people who were with him at that time, dilating upon Sri Pillai's manifold claim to greatness. Sri Pillai treated the audience, at His Holiness's command, to a discourse on Kamba Ramayanam and also to selected passages from the puranam then being released. His Holiness listened with delight and gave him his blessing, along with the customary presents made to one of his attainments.

Keezh Veloor Subramanya Desikar, who had taught a grammar text to Sri Pillai in his younger days, acceded to his request and attended the arangetram for some days. He was received with the utmost respect by his former pupil, who introduced him to the audience, dwelling on his deep erudition and other titles to public regard.

In the middle of 1869 news reached him that Ambalavana Desikar had attained to Heaven at Tiruvaavaduturai and that Subramanya Desikar had succeeded him as Head of the Mutt. He went there to pay his respects and then, returning to Nagapattinam brought the 'arangetram' to a successful close. His admirers had got the 'puranam' printed and published even before the arangetram was over. He returned to Mayuram in 1870.

Of the numerous 'puranams' composed by the Poet before, each one is admired for certain special merits; but the work on Nagapattinam is unique in combining in itself the best that is to be seen in every puranam, not only his own but those of others too. Critics gave it unstinted praise and it also remained its author's special favourite among his innumerable works.

Munsiff Vedanayakam Pillai came to Tiruvaavaduturai one day to pay his respects to Subramanya Desikar and he brought with him certain verses he had composed in his honour. The verses were so lovely and so apt that Sri Pillai was moved to compliment both Desikar and Vedanayakam Pillai in an extempore effusion.

The Munsiff's respect and admiration for Desikar grew each day as he came to know him more intimately. On his return to Mayuram, he wrote a short poem and sent it to Sri Pillai.



*O thou resplendent gem on the crest of Poesy,  
 Minakshisundaram of boundless wisdom! Tell thou me,  
 What deeds of merit, what acts of virtue have they done—  
 Thine eyes, thine ears, thy tongue as well—for they have won  
 The right, the privilege, the blessed boon to see,  
 To hear, to speak withal, both day and night so free  
 In the presence of that flawless soul adored of men,  
 Saint Subramanya Desika? Tell me. Then  
 Mine eyes, mine ears and my tongue too, sure would profited be.*

There is a shrine sung about in Tevaram Hymns at the village of Tiru Ambar and prominent people of that place wanted the puranam to be put into Tamil verse by Sri Pillai. The Sanskrit original was nowhere to be found. Seshaiyengar of Tirumangalakudi, after spending a year in searching for it, managed at last to copy it from the palm-leaf script stored in Saraswati Mahal, Thanjavur. This was in 1869.

With the convenience of his pupils in view, Sri Pillai bought for Rs. 900 a house in the south street, to the west of the Tiruvaavaduturai Branch Mutt. The garden space at the back extended right up to a tank. He desired to have a building put up there, on the edge of the tank, so that he could use part of it for his daily devotions and part for teaching his pupils. Arumugatha Pillai of Patteeswaram bore the expenses of the construction, even without being asked to do so; and thus Sri Pillai had his wish fulfilled. He sent for his wife and son from Tiruchi and entered into occupation.

The Temple at Tiruvidaimarudur was dear to the heart of Sri Pillai and he composed, both for his own satisfaction and in compliance with the request of friends, an Ula, totalling 721 verses. The 'arangetram' was held in the front part of the temple and was attended by Sanskrit scholars, members of the priestly community and others. Tyagaraja Chettiar came every evening from Kumbakonam to sit through the discourses. Here too there were not wanting some unfriendly elements, bent on making trouble. Chettiar used to stand up and ask, "Is there any one here to object to the matter or to the language in the passage covered today? If so, I shall explain them myself!" No one had the temerity to take up the challenge and the function ended successfully.



At the instance of the Head of Sri Kasi Mutt at Tiruppanandal, Sri Pillai narrated the life of the Founder of the Kasi Mutt, Sri Kumara Gurupara Swamigal in a poem of 338 verses.

Sri Namasivaya Desikar, who had studied under Sri Pillai was now installed as the Junior Head of the Tiruvaavaduturai Mutt. At his request Sri Pillai went and stayed with him at Kallidaikkurichi for some days and then returned to the Mutt headquarters.

### 23. SWAMINATHA AIYAR

Sri Pillai's house at Mayuram proved to be a veritable Temple of Learning during his residence there. From morning to midnight he taught pupils, composed poetry and dilated on the beauties of literature to those who came to offer him homage. His fame by now was so firmly established that he became a legend in his own time. Even illiterate people were taught to look on him as an incarnation and they came from far and near just to glimpse a sight of him from a distance. Mayuram afforded him the company of learned men and the elite of the neighbourhood thought it an honour to call on him every now and then. They treasured the moments he spoke to them and spent some time watching him teach and dictate poetry to his pupils. Sri Pillai loved the place and with the permission of Subramanya Desikar, Head of the Mutt he spent the greater part of his days in that town.

It was in April 1871 that Sri U. V. Swaminatha Aiyar, then a young lad of sixteen odd came to Mayuram to study under Sri Pillai. He had had a number of capable teachers before, all of whom had agreed on one point, namely, that the only thing for him to do would be to enrol himself as a pupil of Maha Vidwan Sri Minakshisundaram Pillai. They had taught him all that they themselves knew of poetry and grammar; but the young scholar's appetite for knowledge was insatiable. His dream came true when his father took him one afternoon to the Poet's house and the Poet came from the garden at the back to the front part of the house to receive his two visitors.



The Poet was in low spirits just now and with reason. There are always men of little learning to whom reading and writing are only a passport to a living. They see no purpose in pursuing knowledge for a number of years beyond a certain stage. It is only if a taste is cultivated for the good things of the mind that the more one learns the more one realizes there is a great deal yet to learn. This spark from heaven does not fall on one and all.

Such Philistines in and around Mayuram had busied themselves, detaching Sri Pillai's pupils from him. "So you are studying Tamil. That is a good thing indeed," they said to the young scholars. "But, you see, Master always wants to keep his pupils with him. One book is as good as another; and when you have studied two or three books, you can certainly manage on your own. Somehow wriggle yourselves out before it is too late. You can earn a decent living now, delivering talks. Not only that. You will awake one morning and find yourselves famous. What is the good of wasting precious years, poring over books?"

Several scholars found this advice sensible and took it. One of them actually made himself a plausible imitation of his Master, what with Rudraksha beads, silver-headed walking-stick and a tiny casket of silver filled with sacred ash tucked at his waist! Walking and talking like Sri Pillai, he went to people who had not met the great original and got paid by them for composing poems big and small. On account of the sound training he had had, however brief, what he wrote improved with practice and passed muster. Others just used their Master's name and got on somehow, afraid to appear again before him and account for their desertion.

So, when Aiyar's father had made his request and Sri Pillai also had tested the budding scholar and satisfied himself about his attainments, he said, "Young men keep coming here often and they put in earnest effort for some time. They are also well-behaved and I coach them with pleasure. But in a matter of months they slip away without notice, inciting others also to do likewise. Some ask for permission to go home on a visit, promising to get back soon--which they never do. If they got a good grounding in literature and then went away, it would be a source of satisfaction to them and to me. As it is, what they pick up is perfunctory, superficial. Just when they are being trained to



tackle the bigger classics, they drop out and I have got to do the same spade work again for set after set and stop with that. You know how disappointing that could be. It was not like this in former days.

“For example, take Arumuga Tambiran of Dharmapuram. He showed commendable progress in a few months and just when I assured myself I could lick him into shape, he stayed away and has not met me since. So with another, Raghavachariar; so with a number of others, after I came to these parts from Tiruchirappalli. The foundation they have laid in literature they mistake for the edifice itself and this loss they cannot make up for in later life. So I have to think twice nowadays before I accept a new pupil. So much good scholar-material going to waste causes me pain and I speak from experience and the sense of frustration it has in recent days given me.”

Aiyar's father said, “You, sir, need have no misgivings about this boy. He will stay with you for as long as you wish to keep him at his studies; as he has no other wish or ambition in life except to profit fully by your teaching. I relinquish all my rights in him from this day in your favour and it is for you to assume entire charge of his future.”

“What arrangements are you making for his food during his stay in this town?” asked Sri Pillai.

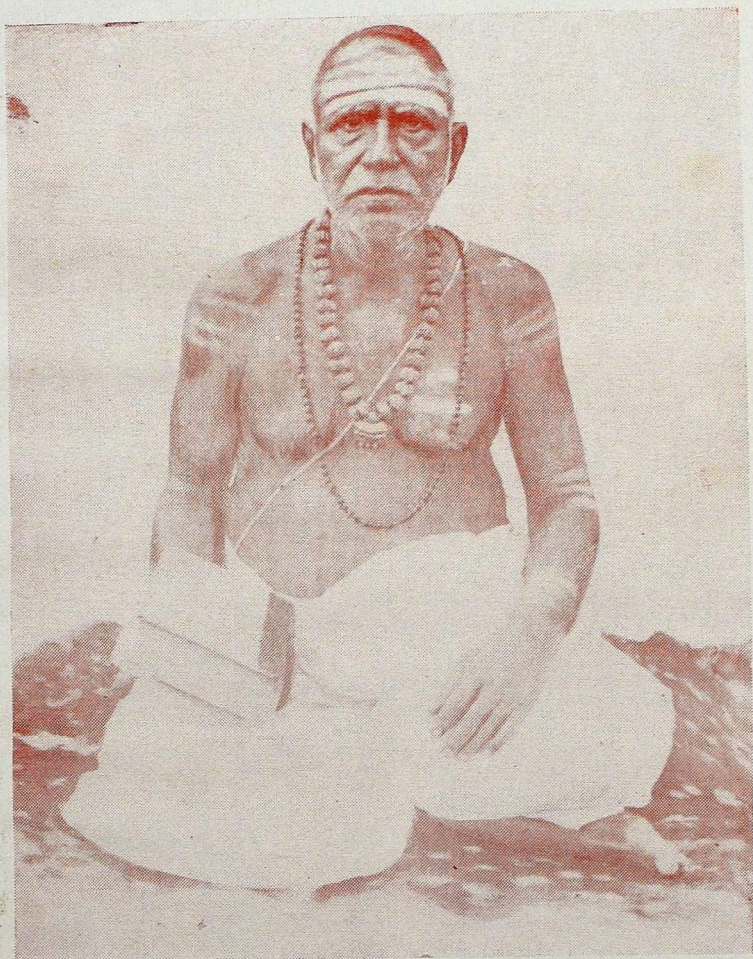
“It is for you, sir, to make some suitable arrangement.”

“When I camp at Tiruvaavaduturai or Patteeswaram, I can do that easily. This is the only place where I do not command any facilities. If he happened to belong to any other community, he would always be welcome to stay with me and share whatever I have. I regret I am not able just now to extend to him such assistance as I should love to.”

“In that case, I shall make a monthly remittance towards his boarding charges. We shall be grateful if you could fix a day for starting lessons.”

The next day, in the afternoon, Aiyar's father said that his boy wished to study grammar more thoroughly. Sri Pillai said, “The time to specialize in grammar would be when the student





Dr. U. V. Swaminatha Iyer  
1855—1942



has mastered at least ten thousand verses. What working knowledge he has now is enough for the present. I shall take up higher grammar in due course."

At last, an auspicious day and hour were found. Aiyar reported himself to Sri Pillai and received from him a copy of *Naidadam*. Sri Pillai made him read a few verses and guided him through the intricacies of their meaning in an expert manner. His approach was so refreshingly original that the young man's heart thumped with delight. Sri Pillai then questioned him in what he had been taught, was satisfied with his diligence and handed him over to a senior pupil for completing the rest of that poem.

Aiyar's father fixed up a place where he could have his meals and then took leave of Sri Pillai. He was assured by him at the time that the boy would be well cared for under his protection. "I shall send him to you any time you want to see him," he said, "and if you feel like seeing him, you are welcome too, any time. You will find him here quite comfortable and happy."

## 24. FIRST LESSONS

Young Swaminatha Aiyar was a bit disappointed that he had been entrusted to a senior pupil who perhaps did not know as much as he himself did about *Naidadam*. He was naturally anxious to learn everything directly from Sri Pillai and so hurried through that book as fast as he could. Something happened now to prove that fortune was on his side and to make his Master take a personal interest in him.

Sri Pillai loved to see trees in bloom and also trees laden with fruit. So he arranged to plant seedlings of many kinds in his extensive garden. Transplanted trees will not take root in the new soil for some time. All the old leaves wither and drop and then new leaf-buds sprout slowly here and there. It would be a pleasure to see the lifsap struggling to assert itself and put forth tiny leaves tentatively. Then, like magic, the whole tree will be clothed in no time with attractive green, if the tree decides to live. With the best of care, sometimes, transplanted trees also die out. Sri Pillai used to note each morning and evening which trees were showing



signs of life among the hundreds he had taken care to plant and tend. If there were no leafbuds at all, his heart would sink at the sight of young lives dying in exile, while it would also leap up with joy when the immigrant plants adjusted themselves to the new surroundings and cherished by their new owner, greeted him with buds.

Swaminatha Aiyar made it a point to visit the garden early in the morning on getting up from bed, note the trees that were putting forth leaf-buds for the first time and then take his Master round to these, one by one. Thus he struck up a personal acquaintance. Days passed and then he mustered enough courage to suggest he would love to take lessons directly from him.

Sri Pillai first taught Swaminatha Aiyar and the other students of his set *Tiru Kudandai Tiripu Andaadi*. It was a pleasant shock to the young scholar to realize that whereas he had wrestled with a work like that for days, unable to cover more than five or six stanzas a session, he had been enabled now to master all the hundred verses in just two days and no more. Neither the teacher nor the taught felt this as a strain, since Sri Pillai used to be in excellent high spirits as he went over the poem, dwelling only on points which his pupils would be unable to construe and guiding them through the background of the incidents and characters described and through intricacies of grammatical construction. At each turn the young men felt a surge of confidence in their own latent abilities, now drawn out and brought into full play by a Master to whom teaching was an inborn gift perfected in technique by a life-time of varied experience.

Other works followed, in tens and dozens, the thoroughness of the teaching matched by its celerity. Sri Pillai never needed a table-copy of any of the books he was teaching; he had them all by heart; imprinted there by years of constant teaching. Learning under such conditions was exciting like a game. After classes were over, the students sat quite near and revised the day's lessons, reading them to themselves in a low voice. They had thus an opportunity to overhear the conversation between their Master and his distinguished visitors and acquire plenty of rare and valuable side information of literary interest. Now and then they would also be called upon to recite certain verses of more than common interest and explain them too for the benefit of the



elders present. This system loosened their tongues, gave them address and fluency in speaking to strangers and so made them shed all platform fright.

Printed books being hard to come by in those days, students had to copy out their texts from palm-leaf books into palm-leaves of their own. Sri Pillai used to obtain leaves of good quality, cut and arrange them in proper sizes, punch them and tie them with strings for his students' use. He used also to regale them with anecdotes in the lives of famous writers, quoting their occasional verses and make the young men take these down in an anthology they thus compiled for study and reference later.

Sri Pillai never thought it beneath himself to acquire information that he wanted from any one, without letting prestige, so-called, stand in the way. He was always on the look-out for works he had not seen before. Thus, he once came across *Tiru Kutrala Yamaka Andaadi* and studied it with keen appreciation. The local allusions in it which he could not make out, he got his pupil, Chandrasekaram Pillai of Tirunelveli, to explain clearly to him.

Broad-minded as he was, Sri Pillai was still too deeply rooted in his devotion to Siva to bring himself easily to call his latest scholar by his Vaishnavite name of Venkataraman. He found out that, before his Upanayanam, he had been called Swaminathan. This being a name dear to his heart, Venkataraman came to be known as Swaminathan ever since. Sri Pillai learnt in the course of a casual conversation that he was taking lessons in music too every day from Gopalakrishna Bharatiyar. He advised him against it, as it would be a distraction; so Swaminatha Aiyar gave his undivided attention to his Tamil studies and gave up music lessons to please his Master.

Not content with teaching poetry, Sri Pillai set his pupils to composing verses of their own, by giving them last lines which they could shape into a stanza, by filling in the other three. Simultaneously he himself composed such verses, so that they could compare notes and improve their powers. He permitted these beginners to attend the classes in classics like Peria



*Puranam*, which he held for seniors. Such books too he knew by heart and when there were omissions in printed books, supplied them from memory or by reference to palm-leaf scripts in his private collection.

These were days when Sri Pillai had no steady income and so endured privations with patience. Only those who knew him intimately knew what he had to put up with. There were literally hundreds of admirers, who still did not bother about how he managed to get on. It is an irony that those who are richly endowed in mind and spirit are often kept in material want and made to do without the barest necessities of life. Sri Pillai was no exception to this rule for the greater part of his life, especially towards the end.

One day Sri Swaminatha Aiyar happened to mention to his friends his first good teacher of poetry, Satakopa Aiyangar of Ariyilur. Sri Pillai, who caught that name as he entered the house, called upon him to quote a verse from Kamba Ramayanam and explain it as Aiyangar had done. Sri Swaminatha Aiyar selected the scene at the end of the first day's battle between Rama and Ravana, resulting in the latter's discomfiture.

*Empty his hands as home he went that day,  
Dropping on field of battle his mighty chest  
Studded with tusks, his arms that once did sway  
A mountain, his wily tongue that made him dear  
To sages, his twice-five crowns that adorned each crest,  
His sword invincible and his valour without peer.*

"How is it that Ravana is said to have dropped his limbs etc., on the battle-field when he had them all intact?" asked Sri Pillai.

"These limbs, etc., stand for their powers," the young scholar answered, quoting the grammar rule governing such usage. "When Sri Hanuman struck Ravana with his fist on the chest, the tusks of elephants broken and embedded in it fell off at the back and so the chest lost its tremendous power. When Ravana was unable to lift the divine form of Sri Lakshmana who had been struck down by a javelin, he forfeited the strength of his arms that had once shaken mount Kailas itself. When Sri Rama asked him



whether he would at least at that stage restore Sri Sita to him and make peace, Ravana stood silent with shame and his tongue therefore had lost its wonted skill. The ten gold crowns that adorned his ten heads had been toppled down by Sri Rama's arrows. The sword that Lord Siva had given him now went back to the Lord because it had not been used at the critical moment for which it had been intended. Finally, of course, he lost for ever the reputation he had made as conqueror of both earth and heaven."

Sri Pillai was pleased with this answer and stated that he had met Satakopa Aiyangar and had admired his literary perception.

One of the two attendants given to Sri Pillai by the Mutt was named Panchanadam Pillai. He was ill-natured and ill-tempered too. He never forgave the Poet for "wasting" his energies and his time on students, who were of no earthly use to him. He fell foul of the students too and never missed an occasion to hurt them if he could. He would, for example, snatch away the lamp the students used for reading by night, saying it was needed at the kitchen. He was a talebearer too and could make mischief between Master and pupil or misrepresent every one to the authorities at the Mutt. Sri Pillai cautioned the students to treat him with the utmost respect lest he should do them an ill turn himself or through the agency of others over whom he had a hold.

Sri Pillai had a parent's solicitude in ministering to the young men's comfort. He never failed to enquire if they had taken food and had relished it; and if any one was late by a few minutes he used to sit watching for his arrival with worry and anxiety for his welfare.

His Holiness the Head of the Mutt invited Sri Pillai to attend his predecessor's anniversary day at the end of June. On his return Sri Pillai mentioned to his friends that he had been 'ordered' to come to Tiruvaavaduturai to teach the junior monks. Just at this time Arumugatha Pillai of Patteeswaram arrived at Mayuram to request him to come to his own village and spend some weeks with him.



## 25. AT PATTEESWARAM

Sri Pillai acceded to Arumugatha Pillai's request and left Mayuram, taking with him his new pupil and his attendant Panchanadam Pillai. He proposed to break journey at Tiruvavaduturai and obtain Desikar's permission for proceeding to Patteeswaram.

When Sri Pillai had made obeisance, Desikar said, "All of us here have been thinking of you since yesterday. Sri Maha Vaidyanatha Aiyar gave a musical discourse on the life of Somasi Mara Nayanar and it was attended by a distinguished gathering of the most illustrious scholars in the neighbourhood as also many people of wealth and standing. He quoted profusely from the Vedas and other sacred writings, ancient and modern and the highlight of this splendid performance was ofcourse his rendering of a number of verses from your *Soota Samhita* and other works. He would mention a point and then say, 'Sri Pillai also has dealt with this in this manner', before singing those marvellous poems of yours. We were all in the seventh heaven, lost in admiration of your subtle grasp of spiritual truths and the magical perfection of your language."

Sri Pillai had informed Desikar during his previous visit about Swaminatha Aiyar as one who had been studying under him for some months. Desikar examined the young scholar, found him perfect in every way and complimented him on his attainments both in literature and in music.

That afternoon Sri Pillai was engaged in clearing all the doubts that the scholar monks at the Mutt had kept ready in a list against such a visit. Desikar himself came of the most distinguished family of scholars in Tirunelveli area and had taught literature and prosody and such like to the monks under him. But there were certain passages, especially quotations from older works found in standard texts, which he could not fully construe. These he had reserved and at his instance the monks plied their distinguished visitor with question after question for hours on end.



It was all child's play to Sri Pillai, with becoming modesty and with a face illumined by wisdom and keen enjoyment of the work he was engaged in, he went on explaining things tirelessly. The others who were present still watched and still their wonder grew, till there was a reference to Chitra Kavi, or the art of arranging the letters of a verse in diagrams of chariots, snakes and so on. Sri Swaminatha Aiyar now stole the show by quickly demonstrating the art, forestalling his Master. This excited the admiration of every one; and Desikar advised the young scholar to utilize to the full the rare opportunity he now had of studying at the feet of one of the greatest poets and teachers of all time. He also presented him with several sets of books and gave him a standing invitation to the Mutt, with promise of every assistance he might need.

Desikar then pleaded lack of time to do all the work of teaching himself and expressed a wish that Sri Pillai should take it off his hands and leave him more free to attend to administrative duties. Arumugatha Pillai now stood up and requested permission to take Sri Pillai with him to Patteeswaram, promising to send him back to Tiruvaavaduturai in a few weeks. Desikar agreed and Sri Pillai took leave of him.

That night the Poet spent at Tiruvidaimarudur, met Tyagaraja Chettiar at Kumbakonam in the morning and reached Patteeswaram in time for his midday prayers, dinner and rest. Though far on the right side of sixty, he was of feeble health these days and except on special occasions, did most of his teaching reclining or lying down. Not a moment was wasted. Anecdotes of poets, memorable verses, the historical background of the places they passed through—all these flowed without interruption and the young scholar received them and kept them imprinted in his mind.

Arumugatha Pillai was sole owner of the village of Melai Pazhaiyarai, adjacent to Patteeswaram; it was beautiful and fertile as a fragment of paradise, with running streams bounding it on the north and the south, smiling fields, dense coconut and banana groves and a beautiful building set in a garden lush with jack and mango trees and tall and graceful areca palms. This place was Sri Pillai's favourite resort. Fruits and tender coconuts were offered in plenty by the generous host to all who came here in company with the Poet in the warm afternoons. Visitors kept



coming from far and near, to pay him homage, to exchange courtesies, to listen to his talk, to get taught by him and to sit and watch him teaching others or composing verses on the spur, of the moment.

Swaminatha Aiyar soon completed the study of the books he had brought with him; so he was now taught the Poet's own works like the Puranams on Nagapattinam and Mayuram. In the beginning, some fifty to one hundred verses would be covered each day and then, with practice, he was able to do up to two hundred. The Poet took him direct into the heart of each stanza, showed the way it was put together and trained him to look for niceties of meaning and expression in every line. If the young man went too fast, he stopped him and made him repeat the content of what he had studied then and there and drew his attention to points he should remember in that context. Each book was revised and the wealth of fresh material that came with a second reading left the eager, young man speechless with amazement.

Classes would begin at dawn and continue till ten or eleven with an interval at eight for the pupil's breakfast. In the evening, after prayers had been offered on the banks of the river, Master and pupil would return by way of the Agraharam, where the Master would wait on the pial of the house at which the pupil's meals had been arranged for. He would sometimes stay there in the dark, when no lamp was available. He would then take his young companion to Arumugatha Pillai's house and continue his teaching, till the host came for his customary reading of *Kanda Puranam* as a religious observance, with the Master to guide him through more knotty ground.

At nine everyone used to lie down and go to sleep. The host would wake up at midnight wake others and have supper served to all. Anyone who came was welcome day or night, but the hour at which people could have food was a discomfort. Once, Savarinatha Pillai who had come from Mayuram to join his Master, got the hours changed. He wrote a skit, which came to the notice of Arumugatha Pillai and did the trick. He had said in it,



*Hath our Maker foresight? No! For if He had,  
He would have known that, at this sacred place,  
Till midnight we all would famished be so bad,  
He'd have made us trees and not of the human race!*

Somehow Arumugatha Pillai developed a prejudice against Swaminatha Aiyar and teased him. Aiyar however put up with pin-pricks patiently out of consideration for the feelings of his Master.

One of the services the Poet rendered to his host was to be present when he negotiated with his creditors for the settlement of his loans. These landowners of neighbouring villages, who had lent huge sums to Arumugatha Pillai, had such high regard for his distinguished guest that, in his presence, they gladly agreed to waive part or whole of the interest due and had the bonds cancelled.

Swaminatha Aiyar went home for Deepavali, but fell ill with fever. Sri Pillai sent someone or other to visit him regularly and bring him reports till his complete recovery.

## 26. GURU POOJA

Founder's Day or Guru Pooja of Sri Namasivaya Desikar at Tiruvaayaduturai is an event people for miles round look forward to with eager anticipation. It falls on the day the moon is in constellation Aswini, between mid-January and mid-February in the Tamil month of Thai.

Conferences of learned men, discourses, concerts by the leading musicians of the day, performances by batch after batch of pipers and drummers, processions, displays of fireworks and above all, sumptuous feeding of the thousands who gather there for the occasion, from the highest to the lowest—all these make the day a memorable occasion for men of all sorts and conditions.

The Court Poet was almost as much a centre of attraction for the discerning that day as any other spectacular scene or event. When he stepped into the Mutt in the afternoon, Kumarasami



Tambiran (who was to become, later, Head of Sri Kasi Mutt) and others stood up to receive him. "Would you find it convenient, sir, to teach us something today?" they asked.

"By all means, yes. What would you like me to take up?" asked Sri Pillai.

"*Kasi Kalambakam*" they said with one voice. Fifty stanzas were covered by eight o' clock that night. Sri Swaminatha Aiyar who had arrived only that day from his village after his illness, also attended the class. The procession started at ten and then came the formal reception in the hall of audience.

It was customary at this reception to give return gifts to those devotees who had to leave the same night and the value of the gifts varied according to the status of the recipient and the tribute he laid at the feet of His Holiness. The others would stay over and participate in a similar function the next day.

Sri Pillai, being of feeble health, turned in for the night at the quarters assigned to him; but he was to have no rest that night.

Pasupati Pandaram was a person he had known in his younger days, on his first visit to Patteeswaram. It was he who had questioned him then to test and gauge his attainments as a scholar. He came now to see him, hummed and hawed and beat about the bush for long before he came to the point. He badly needed clothes. The Head of the Mutt would present him with clothes if he went to see him that night with a poem. Would Sri Pillai oblige? He felt confident that with his skill in music, he could make his recitation sufficiently impressive and it was well known that His Holiness loved nothing so much as music and poetry.

Sri Pillai asked him to be careful in passing off the piece as his own and gave him what he improvised in just a minute or two, written out on a slip of paper.

*O Thou. Subramanya of far-flung fame!  
Clothed once in tiger-skin. Thou gavest away  
Good cloth of gold to Thy votaries. That same  
Fine cloth Thou wearest now. So, who can say  
What raiment Thou wouldst vouchsafe me this day?*



It is part of tradition to identify the Guru with God. Siva wears the rough skin of a tiger Himself, but bestows the best there is on His worshippers—like costly silk of a golden hue. During the procession at Guru Pooja, the Head of the Mutt himself usually wears such yellow silk for the nonce. So, what he gives to devotees should be proportionately still more expensive stuff. This idea is implied in these lines.

Pasupati Pandaram, did some gate-crashing and after a tedious preamble recited this short poem in Desikar's presence. "Shall I explain it too?" he asked.

"No, there is no need. The piece has identified itself and has also explained its own meaning." Desikar sent for a set of costly clothes, gave them to the man with the remark, "It is this verse that has earned you such honour," and sent him away brusquely, as he dawdled some more.

Pasupati Pandaram disturbed Sri Pillai once more to make a full report, thanked him effusively and went away at last, delighted with his triumph.

The next minute brought another suitor, with the same request and then another and another in an unending stream till dawn. Sri Pillai did not have the heart to refuse. Each piece turned out to be better than the previous one and Desikar also continued to select and give better and better sets of clothes each time, in proportion to the quality of the verses. So that long night ended at last, with an inexhaustible gift of poetry at one end and an equally inexhaustible gift of worldly goods at the other.

When morning came, Sri Pillai was seized with misgivings about what he had done. After getting through his morning's routine of prayers he went straight to the Presence to pay his respects and to make sure his services in the cause of the needy had not been taken amiso.

"Well, Sri Pillai," said Desikar with a smile. "It seems you had very little rest last night!" He then turned to a group of distinguished visitors who were seated near by and said, "It is our unique good fortune to have this prince among poets to adorn our



Mutt. No other possession would redound to our honour in the same degree." He then explained to them what had taken place overnight and those who listened remained spell-bound.

Sri Pillai, with his innate modesty, attributed everything good there was in him and others to the fostering generosity of his patron. "How could any of the arts flourish if there was no one to give suitable encouragement?" he said and quoted authority after authority to stress how noble a virtue is generosity. One of these verses is a well-known piece used by the Poetess avvaiyar, to obtain a bag of gold for a friend.

*Hearken, O Fortune, I do for Thy judgment sue;  
Descend anon to bless us if what I say is true!  
One man in a hundred may step in where meet  
Learned men in council. One in a thousand a seat  
May find among them. Among ten thousand men  
We meet but one who speaketh wisely. Then  
To give and give in plenty-and this planet to adorn  
Among ten million perhaps just one noble soul is born.*

## 27. A WEDDING

After the Guru Pooja Sri Pillai returned to Mayuram and there taught the works of Sivaprakasa Swamigal for some days. To comply with the request of the inmates of the Mutt, he then went back to Tiruvaavaduturai. On the way he dictated Ambar Puranam, which he had been composing at intervals. It was a treat to watch him dictate without interruption verse of the rarest quality even as the carriage went rolling over uneven roads.

At the Mutt Desikar expressed his wish that Sri Pillai should engage seniors like Kumarasami Tambiran at one session and the juniors at the other. He permitted Sri Swaminatha Aiyar to attend both classes and to read the poems for his Master. He gave him copies of the books he needed and if he was late, the classes waited for him to come and join them.

On Sivaratri Day that year Desikar showed his high regard for Sri Pillai by initiating him into a more esoteric mode of



worship. When passages replete with philosophical ideas came up in the books that were being studied, he used himself to explain them, to the delight of Sri Pillai, the scholars and other seniors who assembled then to hear him.

As Sri Pillai went on teaching, he would point out correct readings and set right mistakes of every kind. The students who put more faith in the printed texts realized later, with growing understanding, that Sri Pillai had been right and the popular versions wrong.

Sundara Swamigal at Kodaganallur arranged at this time for the renovation of the temples at Tiruvaiyaru and at seven other villages adjacent to it and their rededication on one and the same date. He came to the Mutt in that connection, accompanied by Maha Vaidyanatha Aiyar, Aiyasami Pillai of Tirunelveli and other notables. Sundara Swamigal said to Maha Vidwan Sri Pillai, "You are among the foremost devotees of God, and so any obeisance you make I offer direct to Him." He lifted him from the floor and seated him by his side.

At Desikar's request Maha Vaidyanatha Aiyar sang the passage from Sri Pillai's *Soota Samhita* describing Lord Siva in his abode, Maha Kailasa, transporting the audience to ineffable delight. Other songs followed, like selections from Sri Pillai's compositions on Ambala Vana Desikar and Ramaswami Aiyar's *Peria Purana Kirtanas*. The distinguished visitors then left for Tiruvaiyaru.

Etiquette requires that when all are seated at a meal, with His Holiness at the head of the monks and Sri Pillai occupying the first place among the laymen, no one should get up before the others. But once at Mayuram, where the whole party was staying during the temple festival, Sri Pillai stood up and started towards the door. This is simply something that is not done, especially before the meal is served.

Desikar sent an attendant to stop Sri Pillai and ask him what the matter was. He replied, "I left Swaminatha Aiyar outside. I failed to make any arrangement for his supper."



Desikar then said, "It is more than an hour since I sent him with a guide for that very purpose; by this time he would have had his supper and got back." Even after such an assurance, Sri Pillai could hardly bring himself to resume his seat and eat properly. With his mind fixed elsewhere he sat through meal-time and then hurried to his house next-door, even before washing his hands. He found Sri Swaminatha Aiyar there, ascertained that he had taken his food already and then only washed his hands and rejoined him. This incident has some poignancy because it effected a reconciliation after there had been a little misunderstanding and coolness between master and pupil.

Friends came there from the Branch Mutt in a few minutes and said, "Only today have we realized with wonder the extent of affection Master has for Sri Swaminatha Aiyar. There is no precedent for this at all that we know of. His Holiness is even now speaking about this to everyone."

Some time after the party returned to Tiruvaavaduturai, negotiations were started for the marriage of Sri Pillai's son, Chidambaram Pillai with Meenakshi, daughter of a well-known scholar of Sirkazhi, of the name of Guruswami Pillai. Desikar himself took the initiative, and sent certain elders to invite that gentleman to the Mutt. Terms were settled in the presence of Desikar, who contributed one thousand rupees towards the expenses of the wedding.

Everyone of note attended the function, which came off grandly at Mayuram on 19-6-1872. Entertainments were held on all the days of the wedding, with vocal and instrumental music by the leading artistes of the day and also mimicry and imitation by an expert in that art.

Sri Pillai's former pupil, Savarayalu Nayakar of Pondicherry, on receiving the wedding invitation, sent as his gift a decent sum that far exceeded his Master's expectations and moved him to such an extent that he composed a poem of thirty-three stanzas, showing his deep appreciation and sent it to him. Nayakar had it printed and published at once.

An admirer contributed to an English Daily at this time a short report which said, "There are at the present day two gifted



men who may well be described as the two eyes on the face of of this nation. One of them is a master of prose and the other of marvellous poetry. Arumuga Navalar is running a school at Chidambaram for the promotion of Tamil learning, while Maha Vidwan Minakshisundaram Pillai is himself a walking library and he educates and trains scholars without number, paying their expenses himself." Vedanayakam Pillai read this press note and gave Sri Pillai its substance, when he came to see him at about the time the issue of that Daily came to his hands.

When Sri Pillai lay ill with fever for a few days at about this time, he made his Pupil read out *Tanjai Vanan Kovai* to him and found the relief he needed in its poetic beauty. He always gave praise where it was due and was generous in his appreciation of other people's writings. Another poet whose work he listened to with pleasure at this time was Pala Pattadai Chokkanatha Pulavar.

## 28. A HECTIC TIME

The wedding of Sri Pillai's son was an occasion on which expenses had been unrestrained. Much help had come from many quarters, but more had been spent; and so Sri Pillai was faced with heavy bills outstanding at the cloth-dealers' and grocers'. He sent Sri Swaminatha Aiyar in advance to Tiruvaavaduturai, telling him he would follow in a week or so.

A few days later there came a letter to the Head of the Mutt from Subramanya Tambiran, who was in charge of the temple at Tirupperunturai, popularly known as Avudaiyarkoil. "I request," so ran the letter, "that instructions may kindly be issued to Maha Vidwan Sri Pillai for composing a regular puranam on the temple at this place as desired by the people here. Herewith are submitted two old Puranams and a Tamil version of the original Sanskrit puranam, I should like to have the 'arangetram' during the forthcoming festival in December-January and I agree to contribute Rs. 2.000 out of my own salary at its conclusion. Everything would also be found for the Poet for the duration of his stay at this place."



Desikar sent Sri Swaminatha Iyer to Mayuram with this message and the books and asked him to bring word if Sri Pillai was agreeable. The moment Sri Pillai heard of the proposal he stood, in spirit, in front of the temple at Tirupperunturai, before the Image of Sri Vinayakar there, known as the "One who stays in the Sun". Out came these words from his lips, by way of first response.

*Lifelong let us pray to that Elephant-Headed One  
Who weareth the moon on His Head and basketh in the Sun.*

Those who stood near were struck with wonder at the lovely way the sentiment had been expressed on the spur of the moment.

On the way to the Mutt Sri Pillai taught Sri Swaminatha Aiyar a long poem with minute attention to detail and at the Mutt resumed his teaching to the seniors in the morning and the juniors in the evening. If, in between the sessions, Sri Pillai took more time over his midday devotions than usual, His Holiness Sri Desikar would wait for him to come and join him at dinner before falling to with the inmates of the Mutt. The doorway admitting guests into the dining-hall was rather short and Sri Pillai had therefore to be careful while entering. Noticing that, Desikar ordered the lintel to be raised to the proper height so that Sri Pillai could come in holding his head high. His was a stately figure and his patron wanted him to sail in royalty as befitted his rank.

As desired by Desikar, at the auspicious hour selected for it, Sri Pillai started composing Tirupperunturai Puranam. He dictated the usual prayer to Vinayaka and paused. Sri Swaminatha Aiyar who took it down, now reminded him of what he had uttered at Mayuram when he had gone to him with the books and the proposal. "Is that so"? he asked and completed a second such prayer, including in it what had already come to him unsought at the beginning.

*Lifelong let us pray to that Elephant-Headed One  
Who weareth the Moon on His Head and basketh in the Sun,  
Proclaiming to all thereby the graces He hath won  
In double measure—obtaining the favour of the Right  
Orb of Vision of our Lord's by day that shineth bright,  
And of His Consort too at the Left shedding Her gentler Light,*



The learned and the wise who stood near watched with wonder this phenomenal interpretation that came spontaneously to the Poet of a simple fact pertaining to Vinayaka and the way he took it in his stride and went on with the next verse and the next without a pause.

The chapter describing the locale of Avudaiyarkoil (Tirupperunturai) was soon over and Sri Pillai wished to read it out in Desikar's presence. He wrote to Tyagaraja Chettiar to be present at the time, for he chose a Saturday and Chettiar could spend the weekend with him without detriment to his duties at college. Every line that he wrote conformed to the rules governing the composition of epics, followed closely the example of his fore-runners in the field and still remained original and exclusively true to the place and events described.

Those who kept coming to pay their devours to the Head of the Mutt included people blessed with abundance of means and men of letters not favoured to an equal extent by Dame Fortune. They thought alike that the offerings they brought would not be complete without a poem too addressed to that illustrious patron. Sri Pillai complied with the wishes of the former by composing verses for them that would suit the individual needs of each and of the latter by revising and improving what they had brought for being submitted at the Mutt. During holidays, pandits serving in schools and colleges used to come to him for clarification of difficult passages and scholars too from places far away who would stay for days and weeks to study one or two selected works. At such times Desikar would himself take over Sri Pillai's classes and leave him free to attend to the needs of such visitors.

It is also amusing to note that several came under the guise of students seeking guidance, only drawn by the good food that was provided free for all—for each in a place according to his station—for the entire duration of his stay at the Mutt.

Homer sometimes nods and it would be no wonder if Sri Pillai, rushed as he was, made a mistake now and then. The one and only occasion on record that brought him to a standstill was when he was teaching *Kanda Puranam*. It was the seventieth stanza of the chapter narrating the birth of Gajamukha—an



Asura. "Well," he said, "I am unable to construe it and explain it to you now. But I have taught this before several times. Let us wait till the next visit of Narayana Chettiar. He is sure to remember how I interpreted these lines then. My own memory has now let me down."

Wonder of wonders ! Narayana Chettiar did come; he had hardly taken his seat and Sri Pillai had just begun to address him in these words, "We have a doubt in the Gajamukha Urpatti chapter of Kanda Puranam," when Chettiar interrupted him, saying "Do you refer, sir, to the seventieth stanza?" and repeated the entire stanza and the meaning he had been taught years and years before. The assembled scholars could hardly believe their ears, for it is perhaps once in a life-time, if at all, one witnesses such a feat of memory and such unique devotion to learning.

When *Peria Puranam* was being taught, Sri Swaminatha Aiyar fell ill with small-pox and was sent to his uncle's village for treatment. With the permission of the Head of the Mutt, Sri Pillai suspended the classes for the duration of his absence. He himself went on a tour, but managed to keep in touch with the progress made by his pupil in his illness. On his way back he had himself a spell of paralytic fever at Nidamangalam. He stayed there till he recovered and was strong enough to undertake the journey to Tiruvaavaduturai in time for the Guru Pooja.

After Guru Pooja came Maha Makham. It was the year 1873; and all the eminent people from every corner of Tamil Nadu who came to Kumbakonam paid their respects to Desikar and to his Court Poet, who were both camping there for the festival.

Desikar, who could not always help Sri Pillai to the extent he wished to, devised ways for getting him the assistance he needed through others. One of these was the Zamindar of Sattur; and the introduction Desikar effected was of benefit to both the Poet and the Zamindar.

Desikar also had a house (one of three) specially built for Sri Pillai and his pupils to stay in and took care too to make the entrance of the specified height, to suit his tall figure. Even today that house is popularly known as Sri Pillai's house.



Swaminatha Aiyar returned on 26-2-1873 and the classes were resumed. Two scholars now sought admission; Sri Pillai agreed to take them, though they had been most active in the campaign of mud-slinging against him at the time of 'arangetrams'. He forgave his enemies readily, but the other scholars would not, though their Master asked them to stop baiting the new arrivals. Finally he interceded with His Holiness on their behalf. The other young men took the advice of the Head, the two then studied in peace and went away reformed and grateful.

A certain Veluchami Pillai who came from Madras and profited so much from the Poet's teaching that he composed Venbas readily (a difficult thing to do) and earned the title of Venba Puli (Tiger). Later he served as Tamil Pandit at Kancheepuram.

## 29. PATTEESWARAM AGAIN

Few people knew why Sri Pillai chose to go to Patteeswaram at this time. He was always in want, he borrowed right and left and repaid these loans when he got lump sums in remuneration at the end of 'arangetrams'. To make part payments to the tradesmen at Mayuram he tried to raise five hundred rupees, pending completion of *Tirupperunturai Puranam* and the realization of the two thousand rupees promised for it.

A steward of the Mutt had plenty of money with him, but when the Poet put forth a feeler said, "What security can he offer? Tell him I have no funds to spare at present." Other efforts were equally fruitless and so Sri Pillai wanted to go and lie low at some place where he would at least have the leisure to continue his writing. He obtained Desikar's permission and taking only Sri Swaminatha Aiyar with him left for Patteeswaram. He stayed there till the middle of November.

People who did not know Sri Pillai intimately could never guess that he would be embarrassed for funds. There were admirers among the most well-to-do who would have placed at his feet whatever sum he chose to indicate; but he could never bring himself to ask them. They supposed, from the style he lived in



and the help he gave to others, that he was above want. When they met him, they showed him the same respect they gave to others who towered far above them even in worldly means.

If Sri Pillai had occasion to go to a meeting, those present would rise as one man, the organizers would rush to the gate to receive him and accord him the top place in their midst. It was not necessary that he should have known such persons before. If he happened to rest for a few minutes at any place on his way, word would spread who had come there and soon perfect strangers would crowd round him, bearing platefuls of fruits, candy and betel leaves as their mark of respect. Looking at him, no one could associate lack of adequate means with such a fine aristocratic figure and bearing, though he belonged only to the aristocracy of the mind and spirit that endures through eternity. He had that gift of personality which, independent of his attainments, won him spontaneous homage in any gathering of men.

Once Sri Pillai had occasion to pass through the street to the north of Sri Nageswara Swami temple at Kumbakonam. A gentleman who saw him followed him for some distance, holding his own umbrella over the Poet's head, before he noticed it. "How can you do this, brother?" he said, turning to him. "Where are you living now?"

"I am working in Tiruchirapalli District, sir," the gentleman answered. "This is a red-letter day in my life. My hands are blessed now, offering this token homage to one whom I daily adore."

When he had left with his retinue, his own companions pressed the Poet to tell them who he was. "He is an engineer who has to his credit much good work, in addition to his love of learning and acts of philanthropy. He has arranged for the irrigation of lands north of the Coleroon by devising a new river named Ponniyar. He is called Balasundara Mudaliar and they have named a new settlement after him, as Balasundarapuram."

There was an influential man of the name of Sivaprakasa Pillai of Avoor who came to study under this Poet during his stay at Patteeswaram. Sri Pillai gave him a new work he had written



*Brahma Vidya Nayaki Pillai Tamil*) and said, "Could you kindly arrange for the 'arangetram' of this poem? If you fix up the function, try to obtain a sum of fifty rupees in advance. I need the sum badly." Nothing came of this attempt too, to raise a small sum without the knowledge of his host, Arumugatha Pillai. He sent the poem to his good old pupil, Swaminatha Desikar at Trivandrum, with a note; and he remitted by return the amount he needed. Whatever he chose to ask, he was sure to obtain, if not at one place, then at another.

There are a few incidents of this period that reveal what kind of man Sri Pillai was. Even such a good friend as Thyagaraja Chettiar refused one night to lend to Swaminatha Aiyar a textbook of grammar by Visakha Perumal Aiyar which he needed for his study. Another copy of that book was placed in the young scholar's hands by six the next morning. Sri Pillai had got up from bed two hours before dawn, walked a fairly long distance to the house of the Junior college pandit, borrowed the book from him and returned to chettiar's house by sunrise, after finishing his morning prayers at a river on the way.

Sivaprakasa Pillai had written a poem on the shrine at Avoor near Patteeswaram which he got corrected and revised, by Sri Pillai and prevailed upon him to attend with his friends the 'arangetram' at Avoor temple premises. On Sri Pillai's return to Patteeswaram after the first of ten days of the 'arangetram', Arumugatha Pillai forbade everyone to attend the rest of the function. He would forgive anything on earth, except an affront to his master. Due honour had not been paid to him at Avoor on that first day; and so Arumugatha Pillai refused even to speak to Sivaprakasa Pillai when he came and entreated him for forgiveness on bended knees. The poor author now stayed in the neighbourhood, refusing to take any food and determined to fast till Arumugatha Pillai lifted his interdict.

Sri Pillai took pity on him when he heard of his plight, wrote a verse, gave it to him and asked him to read it out in Arumugatha Pillai's presence. That potentate recognized the Poet's hand in this intercession, fed Sivaprakasam Pillai and then permitted every one to attend the rest of the 'arangetram' except his own friend, philosopher and guide. This was what Sri Pillai had stated on that penitent's behalf:—



*Would any one in all this world ever call thy anger just or fair  
 At my fault unwitting, O thou scholar of wondrous rare  
 Attainments, Prince Arumugam, endowed with the fullest share  
 At birth of all thy father Namasivayam's goodness? Where  
 Can I turn for succour, since to oppose thee here none would  
 ever dare?*

Sri Swaminatha Aiyar now asked Thyagaraja Chettiar to recommend him for some job or other, since he wanted to be of help to his father; and Chettiar said that at the Native High School, which was about to be started, there was vacant a pandit's post on Rs. 15 a month. When Sri Pillai heard of it, he said, "Thyagarasu, why such haste? Let him study for a few more years and then you can provide for him." Chettiar bore this in mind and carried out his Master's instructions when the opportunity came in 1880.

Comedy too was not wanting. Arumugatha Pillai dared his brother-in-law who pretended to be a scholar, to go to Tyagaraja Chettiar and win his favour by composing a poem in his honour. That man had bluffed his way through life, passing off other people's work as his own. Sri Pillai gave him this piece on the sly to help him.

*O, how am I this Tyagaraja to call?  
 As gem among poets, as shape compounded of all  
 Saintly virtues, as Agastya who has left his seat  
 On Podihai and come here on his feet  
 To bless us or as combination of every art  
 Personified, in Tamil, to delight each Tamilian heart?*

Thyagaraja Chettiar questioned the man ruthlessly and exposed his pretensions, but sent with him all the same two basket-loads of mangoes to enable him to win his wager. The last act of the farce which threatened to become serious was enacted at Patteeswaram, the cat being let out of the bag only the next day when Thyagaraja Chettiar came from Kumbakonam and explained everything.



To assist Arumugatha Pillai in settling certain of his family affairs, the Poet had to go to Tiruchirappalli and to Thanjavur. He proceeded up to Nidamangalam by carriage and then took the train from there. The road up to Nidamangalam, lined by trees, was pleasant to walk in and the Poet preferred to walk whenever he felt like it. Sri Swaminatha Aiyar went with him, taking down parts of *Tirupperunturai Puranam* which he dictated as he walked. Whether he was teaching or composing poetry, whatever he did at an umbrageous spot always turned out exceptionally well.

At Tiruchirappalli this Poet held court like a king at the Sorgapuram Mutt in East Chintamani. People kept coming to him to clear their doubts, to listen to his latest poems, to get their own writings improved by his suggestions, to offer him tokens of their regard, to sing his praises, to regret how empty and forsaken the town looked after he had left it, to take him to temples near by, to press him to come back and settle down again in their midst and to invite him to dinner at their homes.

Savarimutha Pillai of Varaganeri prevailed upon the Poet to give a talk on one of the chapters in *Perla Puranam* at his house and sent out a Christian preacher who kept interrupting the discourse out of spite. Sri Pillai had patiently met that priest's arguments and explained things, till the moment he was expelled. Even then he spoke to him in tones of affection, asking him to remember him and their brief spell of scholarly acquaintance.

His stay at Thanjavur in September served as an occasion for old friends like Ramaswami Pillai the Grammarian to come to him and utilize his presence in various ways. Pandit Aiyasami Pillai studied the whole of *Kalladam* now at his feet. Those who came from Tiruvaiyaru and other places too benefited by his visit. An admirer, an artist in metalware, named Muthukkumara Pathar presented him with beautifully carved utensils to be used in worship. An Oduvar from Piran Malai, who stayed with him for long singing Tevaram Hymns, was paid a monthly wage for singing and performing on his Sarangi during the hours of worship.



### 30. PRESTIGE

The Piran Malai Oduvar sang in the presence of Sri Pillai on the day he left Patteeswaram for Tiruvavaduturai a song composed to an English tune by Mambazha Kavichinga Navalar. Immediately Sri Pillai felt an urge to compose a similar song in the same tune in honour of his illustrious patron, Sri Desikar. That song so impressed the inmates of the Mutt that it was sung in chorus every day thereafter while Desikar returned to his state-room from the temple and pronounced his blessing on the devotees present.

At the time Sri Pillai was due to start for Tirupperunturai he wanted to redeem from a money lender his gem-set necklace of beads that had been pledged with him, so that he might wear it during the 'arangetram'. But he was not able to raise the three hundred rupees he needed for it. Finally he sent Sri Swaminatha Aiyar to Ratnam Pillai of Cholan Maaligai with a request for the loan of that sum, promising to repay it with interest on his return from the 'arangetram'. Ratnam Pillai obliged him, but said to Sri Swaminatha Aiyar, "I have long wanted to be of some service to Master and am happy to have such an opportunity now. I have no intention of getting this amount back from him. Please intimate this to him gently at a suitable moment." Sri Pillai was moved by such genuine affection and thanked him in a letter with a poem in it praising him for his generosity, as well as for the expert way in which he was administering the temples under his charge, renovating them and conducting daily worship and annual festivals in them with meticulous care.

Many notable monks and laymen as well as students like Saverinatha Pillai accompanied the Poet on his journey to Tirupperunturai. His daily quota of teaching continued without interruption even when he was on the move. People at places on the way entertained him royally and pressed him to stay a few days in their midst. "I have got to be at my destination in time for Tiruvadurai. I have to hurry now. I shall try to spend some days with you, if I can, on my return trip," he said to them as he continued his journey.



Sri Swaminatha Aiyar, accompanied by a monk went to the temple in advance to announce the Poet's arrival and found there a distinguished gathering of leading landowners of the area, several Nagarathars including Narayana Chettiar of Devakottai and scholars, with Venba Puli Pichuvaiyar of Vembathur at their head. The moment Pichuvaiyar saw these two he improvised a venba and repeated it to Subramanya Tambiran their host, mentioning in it the arrival of these visitors.

The Tambiran arranged to receive the Poet with full temple honours and took him in procession to the shrine where everything connected with worship was conducted in a most solemn and impressive manner for his benefit. At its conclusion he turned round and noticed his old friend Pichuvaiyar.

Then followed a flow of poetry and a feast of soul among the eminent scholars gathered there for the occasion. Pichuvaiyar had accomplished an extraordinary feat by composing a Yamaka Andaadi without a single labial (letter like 'p' or 'm') in it from first to last. He now read it out before the assembled notables. One of the scholars present kept objecting to passages at every step. Pichuvaiyar now accomplished an even more marvellous feat by rewriting the lines to meet the objections fully, without a moment's thought or preparation. Seeing the speed with which the revision was made, Sri Pillai remonstrated with the critic. "You know, sir, how wonderfully our friend has mastered an art that others cannot even dream of attempting in their lives. As you go on objecting to the use of certain words, please see how he substitutes other, more acceptable words with the speed of lightning. Our part is to admire the performance whole-heartedly and not to damp the poet with carping criticism like this. Pray, let him continue with the same high spirits to the end." The rest of the poem was read out, without further interruption, to the intense admiration of one and all.

So day by day the assembly continued, with every one who had brought his work there to be read in the presence of Sri Pillai, to be revised and improved by him and for him to set his seal of approval with his unfailing courtesy at the end.

On the day specified there was a brilliant gathering of the representatives of the best society from all parts of the state. The script of the puranam was placed in the sanctum



Sanctorum and after special prayers, was given into the hands of Sri Pillai. He was garlanded, and the sacred silk symbol of divine grace, was tied round his head like a turban and he was led with the music of pipe and drum and the chanting of hymns to the Kanakasabhai, one of the six big halls of the temple. Seated there on a dais, the Poet commenced the arangetram. Sri Swaminatha Aiyar read out the verses from the beginning and Sri Pillai based his eloquent discourse on each one of them, to the indescribable delight of the distinguished audience. The hours were from three to five in the evening.

Among those who attended regularly were Narayana Chettiar of Devakottai and two of his friends who had specially come to stay at this place and who had made a name as scholars both in Sanskrit and in Tamil.

One day it so happened that these three friends were late. Sri Pillai felt that it would not be fair to start his discourse until they too had come and taken their seats. This delay of a few minutes was more than Subramanya Tambiran could bear. He kept his face averted for the duration of the lecture kept silent when it was over and went away abruptly.

The next day everyone was present on time, but the Tambiran was nowhere to be found. Sri Pillai did not know why and went in search of him. He came upon him at last at the back of the temple, superintending the renovation work that was going on there. Sri Pillai drew near and saluted him in the traditional manner. The Tambiran however neither noticed him nor spoke a word, but hurried away elsewhere.

Sri Swaminatha Aiyar followed him and catching up with him, stood near him for a while. Then came the expected eruption, "Whom does your Pillai take me for? Is this the way to treat me? Has he no better manners? I am there present in person, but he asks me to wait till the arrival of some strangers. What would the public think? He has made me lose face in front of every body. Who asked him to write the puranam, who invited him to this place and who is meeting the expenses of his stay here? Is it I or those fancy friends of his? That I should very well like to know!"

The outburst was over. Subramanya Tambiran would not budge an inch. There was no 'arangetram' that day, or for several days succeeding.



Then, persuaded by others somehow, he at last agreed to come and sit through the function. His fit of ill temper had blown over. But the wound he had inflicted on the Poet's heart rankled. It never healed.

The portion of the puranam that had been composed already soon drew to a close and then the passage for each evening's 'arangetram' had to be composed in the preceding morning itself.

One day the context required a prayer—Manikka Vachakar praising the Teacher Divine seated under the Kurunda Tree. It was time for his bath and midday devotions, the attendants came and kept reminding him, but the address to God continued to flow in a continual stream, as the tears too flowed uninterrupted down his cheeks. Sri Swaminatha Aiyar's fingers flashed across the page, line by line, taking all that poetry down and preserving it for the benefit of posterity.

Those who stood by knew what poignant grief pent up long in his heart had opened these springs of emotion and their own hearts now melted in sympathy. Some of the verses ran like this :

*How can I celebrate in adequate numbers  
Thine special compassion for me,  
While all around Thee stand Thy devotees ?  
Who praise and pray and adore Thee  
With hearts that weep and melt in entreaty,  
As now at Tirupperunturai I see  
Thou hast come for my sake to this Pandyan Kingdom,  
O Lord seated under the Kurunda Tree?*

*All my days have I spent in the chase  
Of shades that ephemeral be,  
Preferring the bitter, the sour, the unripe,  
To the fruit of divine ecstasy;  
Thou hast added poor me to the effulgent company  
Of sages and Saints who are free  
Of Heaven at Tirupperunturai on this day of days,  
O Lord seated under the Kurunda Tree!*



*The Minor Gods and the Sages Immortal,  
 Restless in their jealousy,  
 Stand around and see Thee plant Thy Feet  
 Lovely as lotuses on me,  
 Crowning my head, to absolve me of stains  
 And from fear to set me free  
 This day at Tirupperunturai out of Thy grace  
 O Lord seated under the Kurunda Tree!*

*Not a single virtue could I count as my own  
 But, with Mother Yoga Nayaki,  
 Thou hast, O Atma Nayaka, vouchsafed Thy sight  
 On this hallowed spot to me  
 What return can I render now or in another  
 Life unto eternity  
 For this gift Thou hast conferred at Tirupperunturai,  
 O Lord seated under the Kurunda Tree?*

Sri Pillai, in his study of source material of a dozen different kinds, came upon the lament of Manikka Vachakar when the orderlies of the Pandyan monarch meted out the punishment awarded to him. This passage in *Tiru Vaatavoor Adigal Puranam* went straight to his heart. He used to say that the author was able to write so beautifully only because he had been specially blessed by Agastya. He had this lament read out to him as often as possible :

*No river would stay a river after mingling in the ocean wave;  
 I broke the bonds of life and then bound myself Thy slave.  
 Why didst Thou then hand me over to the Pandyan King again?  
 He hath made me stand so long in this noon day sun in pain.  
 Thine the shame and Thine the disgrace, see, see,  
 how they torment me;  
 If Thou dost clean abandon me now, who would  
 not abandon Thee?*

During the intervals between 'arangetram' and other work, musicians like Atmanatha Bhagavatar came to Sri Pillai and entertained him with their music and poets like Subbu Bharatiyar and Satavadhanam Subramanya Aiyar paid their homage to him in verse.



Just on the day when Desikar's letter came to Subramanya Tambiran, congratulating him on the double privilege that was his, of listening to *Sri Pillai's* poetry being rendered by *Sri Swaminatha Aiyar*, the latter was keeping to his bed with high fever. His work as scribe was taken over by Periannam Pillai of Kumbakonam and the reading of the verses fell to the share of Saverinatha Pillai. The Poet got his beloved pupil the best treatment available; but he preferred to go home to Uttamadanapuram for further treatment. The parting between the two proved a most touching scene.

Narayana Chettiar of Devakottai, who had won by his austerities and devotion the title of Van Tondar (an appellation of Saint Sundaramoorthi Nayanar) now said, "I request Master be pleased to compose a Pillai Tamil in honour of Sekkizhar, the author of *Peria Puranam*." The Poet gladly welcomed this suggestion, saying, "Van Tondar the Saint provided the nucleus for the whole of *Peria Puranam*; and it is appropriate that Van Tondar the Chettiar should originate a work on the author of that puranam". He concentrated his attention on the theme, whenever he was free and had the poem written within a very few days.

Sri Pillai had studied and taught *Peria Puranam* for such a number of years with love and appreciation that the Pillai Tamil shaped itself delightfully well from first to last. Just as he had invoked the illustrious predecessors at the Mutt at the beginning of *Ambala Vana Desikar Pillai Tamil*, he blazed another new trail now by invoking the blessings of the Sixty-Three Saints of *Peria Puranam* on the infant Sekkizhar. Among other things, he dwelt on the ingenuity Sekkizhar showed in avoiding direct mention of anything inauspicious throughout his long epic, the poetic way in which he described the shrines sacred to Siva in the five kinds of natural regions and his inestimable services in the cause of spiritual enlightenment.

This was the last Pillai Tamil this Poet composed; and to this day it has remained with devotees of discernment as much a favourite work as *Tevaram* and *Peria Puranam*. All who came to Tirupperunturai now insisted on having it read out to them and the Poet obliged them with pleasure day after day.

In due course the 'arangetram' got completed on a day selected for the function and it came off as grandly as the wedding of a royal personage at his state capital. Officials from



Pudukkottai and elsewhere, the influential Nagarathars from neighbouring towns, representatives of Zamindars in nearby places and others attended in large numbers. The 'puranam' that comprised a total of 1659 stanzas was taken round in procession, placed in a gaily decorated palanquin. Subramanya Tambiran paid the Poet the two thousand rupees he had promised, besides other suitable amounts to his pupils. As he had stated in his letter to Desikar all this constituted what he had been saving and setting aside from his own salary for years.

All the prominent people who came to the 'arangetram' met Sri Pillai and requested him to visit their own places before returning to Tiruvaavaduturai. The Zamindars and the wealthy landowners of those days considered the company of the learned as a distinction and they vied with one another in patronising musicians and scholars in Sanskrit and Tamil. They had at that time few other outlets for expenditure and so they earmarked the greater part of their income for the promotion of culture and learning. It would be an honour to them, they were sure, if the foremost Poet of the day chose to spend some time with them and he also promised to visit them as far as his time would permit.

### 31. A TRIUMPHAL ROUND

The first invitation that Sri Pillai accepted was that of the Head of the Tiruvannamalai Mutt at Kunrakkudi, brought to him by Appa Pillai, an official of that Mutt, who was himself a fine scholar and lover of fine arts. He stopped at places on the way and after spending some days with his host, was seen off by him, provided with a palanquin to ride in. He next visited Narayana Chettiar and other friends at Devakottai and then at Karaikudi composed a set of fifteen verses celebrating Guru Pooja as requested by his friends there.

The Zamindars of estates further south had the pleasure of entertaining the Poet next for a few days each, before he turned north and camped at Pudukkottai at the house of Ganapati Kavirayar, the Court Poet at Tiru Gokarnam. He was invited to the palace by the Senior Maha Rani, Sri Brihadamba Bai Saheb, who for several days listened to him as he explained to her at her request several rare spiritual principles and points imbedded



in *Tevaram* and *Peria Puranam*. She showed her appreciation of such services by means of gifts, that included a set of silver utensils to be used in his daily routine of worship. Sri Pillai spent a month at that town and for the duration of his stay all the provisions he needed were supplied daily from the palace stores.

At Tiruvarankulam the Poet undertook to write a puranam and made a beginning, but it remained a fragment for want of time and opportunity. When he reached Kumbakonam at last, Thyagaraja Chettiar, with his store of worldly wisdom, gave his Master sound practical advice. "I know, sir, you have with you now a sum of over four thousand rupees. I shall invest this on your behalf and see to it that the income it yields is of use to your family. Left to yourself, you are sure to part with this amount in a matter of days. You are yet to realize the value of money. There is no one, as far as I see, to guide you in matters of this sort, except me; and you simply *should* take my advice." Chettiar argued with him in a number of ways, but he was only wasting his breath over this. Sri Pillai repaid certain urgent loans and ran through the balance, as he usually did, all, as Chettiar had said, in a matter of days helping others in need.

Arumugatha Pillai had come to Pudukkottai and stayed with the Poet for some days, requesting him to come to Patteeswaram. He now stayed for a spell at Patteeswaram and Cholan Maaligai, before rejoining Desikar at Tiruvaavaduturai. He made a full report to his patron of the happenings at Tirupperunturai and elsewhere and treated him to choice passages from the 'puranam', and the whole of *Sekkizhar Pillai Tamil*, over a number of days, affording him the keenest possible enjoyment.

A landowner of Kanjanur (to the north-west of Tiruvaavaduturai) named Swaminathaiyar was an admirer of Sri Pillai and revised with his guidance *Naidadam*, *Tiruvilalyadal* and other such works he had studied before under others. He also used to take him and his pupils often to his village and entertain them all royally. When Sri Pillai's attendant Swaminatha Chettiar wished to construct a house, he purchased and sent all the timber required for the purpose and refused to receive payment in return.

The Poet was in his sixtieth year, when Kumaraswami Tambiran fell ill rather seriously and went to Tiruvidaimarudur



for treatment. He requested his Master to compose for him a prayer to the Deity of the place, which he could recite daily. Stanzas 1, 4 and 9 of this set of ten verses-known as *Maruda Vaanar Padigam*—specifically petition God for recovery from illness. Within a few days he got well returned to the Mutt and resumed his studies.

The Poet's sixtieth birthday was celebrated on a grand scale at the Mutt's expense by order of His Holiness Sri Subramanya Desikar. Desikar also issued instructions to Velu Pillai of Ambar, asking him to expedite preparations for the 'arangetram' of *Ambar Puranam*. Velu Pillai came to Tiruvaavaduturai and took the Poet with all his retinue to his place and maintained them in comfort. Sri Swaminathaiyar who had gone home for treatment when he fell ill at Tirupperunturai, now rejoined him here. The 'arangetram' came off in due course as grandly as at any other place and the Poet continued to make Ambar his residence for a few days longer even after the function was over.

In one chapter of this poem the Poet has accomplished a unique feat, illustrating exhaustively all the different kinds of word-play, figures of speech and such like in thirty-nine successive stanzas.

## 32. THE LAST PHASE

Sri Pillai wished to go on a pilgrimage to certain places near Ambar, but returned with all speed to Tiruvaavaduturai because of a sudden setback in health. Even in his weak state, he did not give up teaching and now did a hundred to a hundred and fifty stanzas of *Kamba Ramayanam* a day at the request of the senior pupils. The beauty of that sublime epic often moved him to tears.

Sri Ambalavaana Munivar, who had taught him *Kambar Andaadi* long before, was at a highly advanced age made Head of a Mutt at Suryanar Koil. He was the most unpractical of men and so had been easily incited by mischiefmongers to engage in an utterly frivolous court action. Sri Pillai was persuaded by his well-wishers to urge the old monk to give up the suit and have it settled amicably out of court; but his golden words fell on deaf



ears. Sri Ambala Vaana Munivar (Desikar now) duly lost the case, after having poured plenty of money down the drain.

The symptoms of the Poet's illness became more pronounced. His legs and his lower abdomen swelled out. His system rejected nutriment. But, when his pupils pressed him to compose a Tiripandadi, he gave them one on the Deity at Tiruvidaimarudur. This was the last work he completed this side heaven.

An admirer from London wrote him a letter at this time and it reached him directly, though it was addressed simply to "Maha Vidwan Minakshisundaram Pillai, India". Everyone, including Desikar, was delighted with this indubitable proof that Sri Pillai was well-known far and wide.

Desikar wished to have the life of Sri Sivagnana Munivar sung by Sri Pillai; he heard of that wish and immediately started dictating the poem on a theme ever dear to his heart. He continued it even when he was taken to Tiruvidaimarudur for better treatment, but it could not, in the condition he was in, go on. The line which says that the greatness of the region where the Munivar was born baffles description by one like him was the last and significantly so. Sri Pillai was also requested to take up other works like this, but the days when he could turn the tap and let the verses flow in rich profusion were not to come again.

The nights were sleepless and he had choice religious works recited and sung to him to occupy his thoughts and refresh his spirits. He arranged to have special prayers offered at the Tiruvidaimarudur temple for about ten days in September for his recovery. He really felt better as a result of that, but after some time there was a relapse.

Desikar came to see him one day. There was no precedent at all in the annals of the Mutt for such a visit at any time to a private individual like Sri Pillai; but it now proved the great regard the present Head held him in. Sri Pillai seeing his illustrious visitor, suddenly stood up, folding his hands above his head. Desikar spoke a few kind words, instructed the people there to attend to him with the utmost care and returned to Tiruvaavadurai.



Sri Pillai too followed him there shortly, since the treatment he received at Tiruvidaimarudur did not do any good. Kumaraswami Tambiran went through his own routine of worship first and then performed the services of worship which Sri Pillai used to do in his presence for his satisfaction. Whatever things he needed were supplied without delay by orders of the Head of the Mutt. He still continued to explain briefly any difficult passages that were referred to him by his pupils who in their turn taught the junior scholars at the Mutt.

At his son's request Sri Pillai went to Mayuram to spend the festive season of Dipavali at his own home. Desikar arranged for this short journey to be made in comfort by palanquin. He also sent with him as was customary, new clothes to be worn by him and others on Dipavali day.

Sri Swaminathaiyar went to Mayuram a few days later to escort him on his way back to Tiruvaavaduturai. The first thing Sri Pillai said to him was, "I am sorry you were not given any new clothes for Dipavali." He immediately had a set of clothes bought for cash, tipped with turmeric the four edges of each to make the gift auspicious and made his pupil wear them in his presence. It was an inexplicable oversight at the Mutt that he had been left out at the time of distribution of gift clothes. Sri Swaminathaiyar himself did not mind the omission, but Sri Pillai did and made splendid reparations himself for the fault of others at the earliest opportunity he had.

Sri Swaminathaiyar, sauntering along the bazaar at Mayuram, caught sight of the seven volumes of *Ramayanam* put up for sale at a shop for seven rupees. He proceeded direct to Tiruvaavaduturai where an uncle (the husband of his maternal aunt) was village accountant, borrowed the money from him, ran back, bought the books and took them to his Master.

"What books are these?" asked Sri Pillai.

"*Ramayanam*. I want Master to give them to me now with his own hands."

"How did you obtain them?"



“I bought them in the bazaar.”

“What did you do for the cash?”

“I got it from my Karnam Uncle”.

“Oh, you have needlessly put yourself to a lot of trouble and shelled out precious money. If you had told me I would have given you my own books with pleasure.” He now pronounced his good wishes and placed the books in his hands.

But the young scholar did not mind the arduous job of running the ten miles to get the cash and the ten miles back to get the books, for after having used others' books for years, he was now experiencing the thrill of having a set of books of his own.

Back again at Tiruvaavaduturai, Sri Pillai found his own condition deteriorating. Sri Swaminathaiyar brought for him just the dishes he would find palatable, instructing his aunt to prepare them with care. Nellaiappa Tambiran, Temple Superintendent at Tiruvidaimarudur sent the Poet a silver cup which he could use conveniently for taking liquid and semi-liquid food.

Sri Pillai's pupils took turns watching at his bedside through the long, unending nights. He used to listen to their reading of *Tiruvarur Kovai*, *Tevaram* and *Tiruvachakam* and explain their doubts though speaking was an effort and a strain he could not easily manage. His wife and son came over from Mayuram to stay with him now and minister to his needs.

The Poet knew that his end was drawing near and the thought uppermost in his mind was that he should do something for Saverinatha Pillai in return for his years of devoted service. He had come under the pretext of studying under him but had taken over spontaneously the management of his family affairs and the duties of a personal servant as a labour of the purest love.

He dictated to Sri Swaminathaiyar letters addressed to Munsiff Vedanayakam Pillai, Savarimutha Pillai of Varaganeri, Savarayalu Nayakar of Pondicherry, Dhanukodi Mudaliar of Karaikal and other Christian friends, as well as to others like



Arumugatha Pillai of Patteeswaram and Ratnam Pillai of Cholan Maligai. As usual there came the verse to be invariably found at the start of every letter. Though the tongue faltered as it formed the words, the mind kept its clarity unimpaired to the last and the verses flowed, as ever unchecked.

"Saverinathu, my son," he said to him, handing him the letters, "give the letters to the addressees, accept what they give in return, marry and settle down in life. God bless you for all the happiness you have afforded me!" That model young man received the gift with eyes blinded by tears.

The foremost Sanskrit scholars of the area had known Sri Pillai for long and had cherished him as a most valued friend. They now came along with others to see him and grieved over his condition. When Sri Agnilinga Sastrigal of Kanjanur spent some time like this with him, he indicated by a sign that he wished that day to hear something special from this highly revered visitor. He accordingly quoted and explained the choicest selections from the works of Sri Haradatta Sivacharya, Sri Aiya of Tiru Iyalur, Sri Appaiya Dikshita, Sri Nilakanta Dikshita and others. When he came to Sri Sankara's *Sivanantha Lahari* and quoted the stanza beginning with "Sadaa Mohaatavyaam", he turned to Swaminatha Aiyer, who brought palm-leaf and style and took down the verse translation that had automatically formed in the Poet's head. Only the last line was changed a bit and the prayer was addressed specifically to Sri Nataraja of Chidambaram.

The month of Thai came round and along with it the Brahmotsavam at the temple and Guru Pooja at the Mutt. Monks and laymen, leaders of society and officials, scholars and artistes, filled the village and its environs along with crowds of sightseers from far and near. The whole place, decorated and lighted up at night, looked like Kailasa, with Gods and Sages pressing thick in a state of blissful ecstasy.

On Tuesday, 1st February 1876, was the fifth day of both the festivals and the Image of the Deity was taken round in procession. Sri Swaminathaiyar had been keeping Desikar in touch with the Poet's condition from time to time and now, while leading the temple procession, he asked Sri Swaminathaiyar again how the



Master was. "He is conscious," he said in reply, "he follows what others say, but is himself unable to speak anything in reply."

Sri Swaminathaiyar then returned to his Master and, at a sign from him, took coconuts, fruit, betel and camphor, offered these to the Deity through the officiating priest and brought back the sacred ash. Sri Pillai received it from him and put it on his forehead.

Just after midnight a sort of slackness was noticeable in the great man's body as it lay stretched on his bed. Saverinatha Pillai now gently lifted him from behind and leaned his head and shoulders on his own chest. It continued like this for more than an hour.

And then the Master regained consciousness. His lips moved. "Tiru Vaa" was all that issued out of them. Sri Swaminathaiyar brought *Tiruvachakam* and read the ten verses that sing of God as our Last Refuge and Sanctuary. The Poet lay listening, with his eyes closed. There was a tremor. The right eye-lid opened. The soul had found its passage through it to its final Refuge and Sanctuary at the Feet of Sri Nataraja.

Saverinatha Pillai reverently laid his Master on the bed and joined the others who now crowded round, with tears gushing hot, and wailed and wept and lamented.

Sri Desikar was foremost among those who had been closest to Sri Pillai and knew his worth—from the days he had been Junior Head, and had spoken to his predecessor, extolling his all-round perfection. He had to bear the shock as best he could, because he was also obliged that day to go through the routine of the most important function at the Mutt in the whole year—the days of Guru Pooja.

At orders from him the obsequies were performed as befitting the rank of the Laureate of the Institution, who had also adorned it as its leading lay disciple. Priests came to officiate at the ceremonies, sent for from all the neighbouring places.



Without consideration of cost, the sacred remains, with ashes and rudraksha beads lending these an air of the utmost sanctity, were taken in solemn procession, to the firing of rockets as the monks who had been the great Master's pupils stood, lining the Mutt buildings, shedding tears.

The Sanskrit scholars lamented, calling out loud to the dear departed as modern Kalidasa in Tamil. Scholars who had studied under him kept up their wailing, saying, "Where shall we go, who will teach us hereafter, as thou hast done, O thou Ocean of Learning?" Others apostrophized him, mentioning his manifold virtues, "O thou serene soul! O thou repository of goodness! O friend of the helpless and the needy!" The common people kept up their mournful chant, "Master, O Master!"

Chidambaram Pillai lighted the funeral pyre set up on the banks of the Cauvery, filled with sandal-wood and drenched in fragrant essences. All sounds stopped at that solemn moment.

It looked as if earth and heaven were alike plunged in inconsolable grief.

The mourners bathed and returned to their homes, with heads communing with the ground. The Master's pupils, without thought of food or other care, took each his favourite poem among his teacher's works and sat reading it, trying to find what peace they could in those words of imperishable loveliness.

### 33. POSTSCRIPT

"Who can contend against Fate? Our cup of sorrow is as full to the brim as yours. But we cannot express it openly. No amount of weeping and tears would help us reclaim the gem we have lost. You may look upon this place as your own. We shall very soon provide you with a house to live in. We are, thank God, in a position to supply all your needs—except bring back our Poet-Friend. You are as much an inmate of the Mutt as any of the monks here. We ourselves shall teach you what remains yet for you to study. Profit by that, and teach the new-comers. You may continue to live with us without a care in the world."



So spoke His Holiness Sri Subramanya Desikar, addressing Sri Swaminathaiyar who, unable to contain his emotion in the other's presence, burst into sobs on the afternoon of the day of the funeral. He was as good as his word. He built him a new house where he could live with his parents and where he soon settled down as a house holder. He wanted to make him Adeena Vidwan or Court Poet, in succession to Sri Pillai; but he declined the honour. He had him styled in writing and in print always as Sri Swaminathaiyar of Tiruvaavaduturai. Later, when the first poignancy of grief had mellowed and he started on a tour to Madurai and other places, he had the young scholar actually invested with the ring, the bracelet and the shawls pertaining to the high office of laureateship. And, when the time came against the advice of everyone, he also relieved him in time and enabled him to obtain a job with distinction.

That night a gathering of people who had come to pay their respects to him, Desikar spoke only, of Sri Pillai and his eminence as poet and lovable gentleman. "Wherever Tamil is spoken Sri Pillai's fame has penetrated and, wherever he is mentioned and admired, our Mutt also comes in for praise. People of every creed kept coming here because his reputation as teacher had made the Mutt a veritable university open to all. High officials and other notables who have no connection whatever with the Mutt have been here a number of times, drawn by his illustrious presence. He has rendered certain services to the Mutt which cannot at any time be compassed by means of official influence, position of power and authority or expenditure of enormous sums. What have we given him in return? Very little indeed!

"He would have been welcome anywhere and shed lustre on the court of any prince or ruler. Sivagnana Munivar had close affiliations with the Mutt, but he did not stay and teach at this place. Sri Pillai filled that void, and filled it wonderfully well. We cannot see the like of him again.

"When people of status came to visit us, they used to say at the end, 'Be so good as to have us taken and introduced to Sri Pillai'. When are we going to hear such words hereafter? Men of light and leading would stop here for an hour or so. But, within that short space, Sri Pillai used to improvise poems reflect-



ing their greatness and our own attitude to them and his own incomparable magic touch and recite these poems while yet the visitors were in our midst, well in advance of their leave-taking. Who else has got such gifts? Whatever the function that was organized here and however splendidly it happened to go off, he used to transport the audience to the seventh heaven by crowning it all with a poem appropriate to the occasion just before it ended.

"We have, in the long course of years, come across innumerable men of learning. How proud some of them became on account of a little skill or knowledge they have acquired with practice! But here we have seen with our own eyes one whose gifts and natural endowments were truly colossal in comparison. Has any one ever heard him speak a word about himself or anything he has written? He was still and unexcited as the deep ocean in a calm. Can any one give another instance of such modesty co-existing with such superhuman excellence?

"Of all the persons we have met, by far the most eminent scholar till recent days was our Adeena Vidwan, Tandavaraya Tambiran and this great scholar declared roundly that Sri Pillai has neither superior nor equal in erudition and was lost in wonder and admiration whenever he spoke of him. What a pity his longevity did not match his genius!

"If any one had brought us a report about a person who had such marvellous poetic gifts, we would have dismissed his tale as a concoction or exaggeration. Seeing is believing; and we have watched this prodigy surpassing himself all day and every day. In the world of Tamil learning the gap made by his departure will remain unfilled for ever. Now we shall find time lying heavy indeed on our hands. God's will be done!"

Later, Desikar sent for Sri Pillai's creditors to come with their bonds and said to them, "It should not be said that our Maha Vidwan passed away without paying his debts, for that would reflect upon the Mutt he was connected with. It is up to you to waive part or whole of the interest due and, if possible, of the principal also. Those who insist will have their dues settled in full." Bags of money were placed before them and counted out, in the presence of Chidambaram Pillai and some of Sri Pillai's pupils.



All the creditors were satisfied, one by one and the bonds cancelled.

Then Desikar turned to Chidambaram Pillai and said, "We do not want our critics to say that a sum of about three thousand rupees belonging to the Mutt has been given away for nothing. Now, hand over to the library of the Mutt all your father's books. They are going to be of no use to you," Chidambaram Pillai did so. The palm-leaf scripts alone filled three enormous boxes.

Chidambaram Pillai had a large family which he found difficult to support, but he did not let the Mutt know about it. It was Vedanayakam Pillai who drew Desikar's attention to it in a poem of five stanzas and Desikar gave Chidambaram Pillai all the help he could. The learned Munsiff again persuaded Deputy Collector Murugesam Pillai to give his protegee the post of revenue accountant in the village of Kappoor in Mayuram Taluk. Chidambaram Pillai had some schooling in English and he acquitted himself well in his job. His superiors in office also showed special consideration to him as the son of such an illustrious father.

To clear the loans he had raised, Chidambaram Pillai had to sell the house in Mayuram. At the request of Sri Swaminatha Aiyar, His Holiness Sri Ambalavaana Desikar placed at his disposal a house belonging to the Mutt in the same street on the opposite row, but it could not be occupied because it was used for storing building materials for the temple now under renovation.

Sri Swaminatha Aiyar then sought the help of Panditamani Kadiresan Chettiar of Mahipalanpatti and Kandaswami Kavirayar of Setrur and with their assistance, collected a purse of over one thousand rupees, which was invested for the family's use. This was in 1916.

Chidambaram Pillai's second son Vaidyanathasami Pillai was long lived and he succeeded his father as Karnam of Kappoor. When a son was born to him he named him Meenakshisundaram, as desired by Sri Swaminatha Aiyar. This boy was bright and took to the study of literature successfully at an early age.



## 34. A SUMMING-UP

### Appearance

Maha Vidwan Meenakshisundaram Pillai had an imposing presence, with height and bulk in proportion and the arms reaching down to his knees. That broad expanse of brow proclaimed the vigour of his mind. A line, reputed to be the Vidya Rekai, shot across his palm and climbed well into the middle finger, indicating according to experts, unusual powers both of memory and poetic invention. Physiognomists, impressed with the softness of his palms, declared he would live well, never lacking creature comforts for himself and his dependents as well, irrespective of vicissitudes. His complexion was middling. There was a serenity about him, a simplicity that was deceptive. It never gave away the depth and range of the gifts within.

He invariably wore a dhoti of spotless white in the traditional style, with an angavastram to match and a towel tied round his waist. Around his neck was an ornamental string of Rudraaksha beads mounted in gold, with the sacred Gauri Shankar at the fastening, front and back. When he went for a walk, he sported a cane. His gait reminded one of the ambling of an elephant. That same slowness and gentleness marked his speech too. Raising the tone in anger or in threat—well—that was quite foreign to the way he was made.

### The day's routine

An early riser, he walked a mile or more to attend to his morning ablutions, regaling his companions with choice bits of poetry as he walked. The pupils who resided with him sometimes overslept. Then one could see him sauntering at the housefront, going over well-known hymns in a subdued voice, till they got up and joined him. He could never bring himself to wake them any other way.

Meadows, groves and rivers afforded him special delight. The sight of springs dug in the river-bed in summer and of the water



welling up, clear as crystal--this sight ravished him. He soaked his cloths in these, almost as a pastime, before rinsing them. This too in no way interrupted the flow of original verse, premeditated or impromptu.

When he travelled, he often got down from his carriage, letting his pupils ride, for he loved to stretch his legs, revelling in the beauty of the surrounding scenery.

While teaching, he rested his elbows on a cushion placed on his lap. If at the Monastery, he kept his arms folded. That posture he never changed for up to six hours at a time!

There was one settled tone he used for reciting poetry. Most of his listeners adopted that tone for themselves! One noted this in places in and around Tiruchirappalli at that time.

Breakfast had no place in the day's routine. Dinner came only after he had finished his prayer and worship at noon. The other meal was at night. He was partial to dishes with a dash of pepper in them, to leafy vegetables, fragrant ghee, mango fruit and the kernel of tender coconuts. At bedtime he never missed a glass of warm milk. More than a glass was sent for his use during his stay at the Monastery. The surplus was shared among his pupils.

### Character

Patience and contentment, humility and compassion, piety and gratitude and an abundant love for his pupils, were among the traits that went to the making of this superman. He had his share of tribulations brought on by need and the jealousy of lesser men; but his spirit rose towering above all these. He shook off insults and injuries aimed at him and always returned good for evil. Such unperturbed equanimity was the magnet that over the years drew countless pupils and admirers to him.

Money to him was not an end, but a tool for doing good when it came unasked. There were friends, ready and willing, to place their all at his feet; but his bearing furnished no clue to the spells of indigence he passed through. He also turned a deaf ear to mere money-making schemes like running a school, or editing books for profit.



He never picked holes. Nor would he permit his friends to do so. When he detected a fault, he pointed that out to that scholar or author in private as gently as he could, never in company. He went out of the way to praise and commend other men on their attainments. Such eulogies served to bring out the best in them and they soon surpassed themselves and prospered.

His pity gave ere charity began. His tongue and pen and purse were ever at the disposal of the less fortunate. By the same token, he never once forgot a good turn. The poems he composed were no supplications for favours, but genuine appreciations of benefits derived. In proof he cited Kamban, Ottakkoottar, Puhazhendi, Villiputtooaraar and others who felt in duty bound to celebrate the goodness, nobility and worth of their patrons suitably.

### Piety

God, as Siva, was a living presence in this devotee's thoughts. A tiny silver casket was tucked into the folds of his dhoti at the right waist during day and rested by his pillow at night. It contained sacred ash. He was never once seen without this symbol of piety adorning his forehead. Before turning in for the night he spent a few moments in deep meditation. Long hours of pooja sustained and strengthened his spirit. The sight of flowers and other accessories in plenty delighted him and he availed himself of these whenever he could.

He belonged in fact to the esoteric circle, having received due initiation at an early age. He visited shrines and celebrated in song the distinctive greatness and sanctity of each. Such a life of unswerving faith had its fitting culmination. He passed on to a better world on the day of the Rishabha Vaahana festival at the local temple, at a moment when his mind was steeped in the most poignant section of Tiruvaachakam recited for his special benefit.

Tolerance of other sects and religions came naturally to him. Genuine respect and esteem for people of religions other than his own helped to sweeten his life and temper.

### A dedicated teacher

It would be impossible to exaggerate the Maha Vidwan's services in the cause of Tamil literature—its growth and its



dissemination. We know of no other person to whom teaching and writing were the breath of his being to the same degree.

In early life he had met with no end of trouble in collecting knowledge as the bee collects honey from sources varied and distant; and so he took it upon himself to impart all that knowledge painlessly — pleurably too — in the widest commonalty spread. He looked upon it as his life's one and only mission.

He remained more than a mother to the young men who came to sit at his feet. Blind and deaf to their shortcomings, he spared no pains to transform them with his warmth and generosity unobtrusively, that is, without their becoming conscious of the process. To him his disciples were in actual fact his family.

He was accessible at all hours to everyone willing to learn. He could make no distinctions among these young men on any ground. People went to him without the least apprehension that they would be subjected to a battery of questions, or criticised, or simply relegated to a corner, or have the bread of their mouth taken with unkind comment.

He moved earth and heaven to see his pupils well placed in life. He presented them to visitors of eminence who had come on purpose to meet him, encouraging them to display their acquirements (for their own ultimate benefit) in that presence, without self-consciousness.

He was the proverbial philosopher's stone. The least contact with him sufficed to transmute each pupil of his into purest gold. His too was the auspicious touch. To meet him just once, if only to receive a book at his hands, made a man blossom soon into a scholar and poet of repute on his own.

The number of his pupils who came in due time to adorn the highest places in the world of letters — as court poets, college professors, or heads of religious establishments — was legion.

### **Method and skill**

If there was one thing that never wearied Mr. Pillai, in body or in mind, it was teaching, teaching and yet more teaching. Nothing afforded him greater happiness than an opportunity to pass on knowledge to others. He instinctively gauged each pupil's ability and apperception and conferred maximum enlightenment



in the minimum of time expended, elucidating just the points that would prove obscure or confusing to him. We could explain only in this way his triumph in transforming hundreds of fledglings into expert fliers exploring the empyrean in his company.

He had no set hours for his pet occupation; any time served—even meal-time, the time spent in journeys and the moments preliminary to slumber. Savari Muthaa Pillai, headman of Varaganeri, used to shed tears as he recounted his experience. "Master came once and spent a few days with me here at my request. He had been teaching me a few selected passages from Periya Puraanam. One day I noted that his tone became louder as the hours ticked by. His eyes were suffused with red. I reminded him it was time for his noon-day prayers. He answered that there was something wrong with his health; that it looked like fever. Placing my palm against his chest I found the temperature alarming. I was moved as much by his solicitude for me as by his love of teaching that made him oblivious of everything else, including his own ill health. Among teachers he was certainly unique!"

Mr. Pillai was a veritable library in himself. He never once kept a book in his hands while teaching. Prose or verse, classics or recent writings—all were sorted and stored in his mind. He quoted parallel passages from a multitude of standard works and explained them all. In this manner, each new book he took up was already half familiar to his pupils when he started teaching it. The quotations one finds in commentaries he dealt with in detail, embellishing the context with illustrative incidents in the lives of those authors. Students hung on his lips as he grew reminiscent, recalling how and from whom he had collected his information. He also gave his pupils intensive practice in the writing of verse. His residence thereby became truly a poetry workshop.

He was, again, interested in the origin of words and the sanctity conferred on these by ancient usage. He insisted on the mastery of major works before one set out to specialize in higher grammar, rightly giving priority to literature over the frame work of language. Students found themselves growing in intellectual stature when he told them on return of conferences he had had with scholars elsewhere and the explication of difficult texts he had given them there at their request.



## Erudition

The Maha Vidwan's knowledge of literature was both deep and wide. He had begun at a tender age to move with some of the best minds of his day and to retain systematically all that they had to pass on to him. Each book that came his way he mastered and assimilated with such thoroughness that it became part of his mental texture for him to draw on at will. His thirst proved insatiable. He ferreted out palm-leaf books from most unlikely corners, read them, taught them, and if there was need, made out copies of them for his own use. He noted down whatever phrases or allusions in these baffled him and did not rest till he had had them clarified by senior scholars on whom he waited with becoming humility later.

There is a flutter in our hearts as we think of the way in which he kept alive countless works that but for his study and teaching of these would have been allowed to sink into neglect and oblivion. The works of Kumara Gurupara Swamigal, Sivaprakasa Swamigal and Sivagnana Munivar are cases in point. His elucidation of Kambar Andaadi, Mullai Andaadi, Kaanchi Puraanam, Kallaadam and similar works formed the base of the commentaries that came to be published by others in due course.

## Calligraphy

An ardent book-lover, Mr. Pillai found keen enjoyment in collecting rare books, in classifying them on his shelves and in adding to them copies of other books he made with his own hand. His writing on palm-leaf, as a result of lifelong practice, was inimitable. Each letter was a perfect pearl and the lines equally well-formed and straight. He wrote out three copies of the whole of Kamba Ramayanam, gave away two and retained one for his own reference. The stack of scripts written by him kept growing year after year and became soon innumerable. He taught this art to his pupils too.

## Devotion to Tamil

Few people could be absorbed in the beauties of Tamil literature to the same extent as he. He often forgot that he should spare some moments for such merely physical needs as



food and sleep. There were times when poetry had for him a therapeutic value also, when he lay ill. Tears flowed of their own accord as his mind dwelt on passages of immortal loveliness, purifying and strengthening both matter and spirit.

### **The spontaneity of his genius**

The Maha Vidwan had the gift of poetry implanted in him at birth. Verses came to him as naturally as breathing. The itch to write, however, he satisfied only occasionally, at the request of friends. If he had been kept above want by discerning patrons, there would have been a deluge of poetry of flawless perfection all his life. The varied works we have today, wonderful as they are in quality too, are only rills and rivulets when compared with the mighty sweep of the ocean of poetry that might have been under conditions more conducive.

This flow never depended on mood, on environment or leisure. The Poet would be carrying on a lively conversation with visitors of note and he would continue to dictate at the same time an original work to a student seated at his side. Once the scheme of a major work was formed in his mind the stanzas came in uninterrupted succession, hundreds of them at a sitting. An on-looker would mistake these for recitation of poetry memorized earlier, unaware of the Minerva shooting out of this Jove's head in full panoply day after day, hour after enchanting hour.

Surely there has never been unto this day another poet who could match him in fecundity of imagination and variety of invention with all that body of wonderful writing conforming at the same time strictly to the rules that obtain of poetries (and of prosody) whether epics, long and short or compositions of different kinds.

Some of these epics were scheduled for first formal presentation and disquisition in public long before they were completed. The forenoon was devoted to a continuation of the narrative and the discourse based on it came regularly in the afternoon of the same day, till the work and its exposition drew to a triumphant conclusion on the day fixed originally for the celebration,



The Poet's spoken language was quite simple, lucid and marked with the utmost gentleness. His pace, as he spoke was leisurely, enabling even laymen to grasp the significance of each separate word and phrase he employed and the scope and content of the work he dealt with.

### **A name to conjure with**

Endowed with gifts such as come but rarely to mortal men, Mr. Pillai was yet loved and cherished most for his character, for his winning manners and modesty. His fame spread far and wide as one who taught with tireless devotion pupils whom he fed and clothed too at his own expense. The respectful mention of his name, in common talk, denoted only him, though hundreds of others bore that name, but remained undistinguished in that generation. More scholars longed all their lives for an opportunity to meet him than were actually vouchsafed that privilege and that thrill.

His Holiness Sri Subramania Desikar summed up the Maha Vidwan's greatness aptly when he said time and again,

“Scholars who come to see us declare themselves first as either Mr. Pillai's pupils or his teachers and guides at some stage or other. They say this as proof of their own worth. But each time I listen to them the eminence of Mr. Pillai in our eyes keeps mounting to loftier and still loftier heights.”

This Poets' Poet not only enriched the Tamil language with works of his own of varied and imperishable beauty, but was the cause of a great awakening in our land. Wherever poetry is studied and enjoyed today, wherever a writer is appreciated and cherished, we may take it for granted that the seeds for such pleasure and such recognition were sown by this prince among men. The edifice that we raise to the Tamil Muse today rests securely on the foundations laid well and truly by one, the like of whom the world may not see again.

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