

POEMS
OF
SUBRAMANIA BHARATI

A Selection Translated by
P. S. Sundaram



VIKAS PUBLISHING HOUSE PVT LTD
DELHI BOMBAY BANGALORE KANPUR LONDON

First Published 1982
by
Vikas Publishing House
in association with
Authors Guild Co-operative Society
to mark the Centenary of the Birth of
Subramania Bharati

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Printed at the Jodhpur University Press

To the memory of

My Teacher

A. SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

Scholar, Critic and Poet

Acknowledgements

A test of great poetry is the extent to which its appeal is universal even in garbs different from those originally made for them. Bharati was quite clear in his mind that the way to attract the world's attention to the glories of Tamil is not 'secretly among ourselves' bragging of those glories, but presenting them to the world in adequate translations. No apology therefore is necessary for this rendering into English of what Tamils regard as among the finest of their poetry.

In 1958, when I rushed in where wiser men would have feared to tread, I turned to Professor K. N. Sundaresan of Khallikote College, Berhampore, for the understanding of some of the difficulties in Bharati. I had also the benefit of advice from Professor K. Swaminathan. With my old tutor A. Srinivasa Raghavan, to whose memory this book is dedicated, I carried on a controversy regarding the translation of the first stanza of 'Freedom Plant.' My greatest help in the book I am bringing out now has been Mr. R. Padmanabhan, a monument of Tamil learning, himself a translator of Sanskrit slokas into wonderful Tamil verse, and a gem of a man, who gave me at all times not only ungrudging but most enthusiastic and effective help. To these four I am indebted.

Four of the translations appearing in this volume, all of them short, were published earlier by the *Swarajya*, *Triveni* and *Tamil Culture*. They now appear with slight changes, I hope for the better.

I am grateful to my friend V. V. John, Mr. Mohan Swaroop Maheshwari and the Staff of the Jodhpur University Press for seeing my typescript through the press so well and in such a short time.

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Subramania Bharati

Subramania Bharati, the greatest if not also the first of the poets in modern Tamil, was born on the 11th of December 1882. His father Chinnaswami Aiyar was an important official in the court of the Zamindar of Ettayapuram in the district of Tinnevely (now Thirunelveli). The poet was not *named* Bharati. It was a title given to him by the pandits of Ettayapuram in recognition of his remarkable gifts as a debater and a poet, either at the age of eleven when he defeated a much older scholar and poet in argument, or at the time of his marriage when he was fourteen years and a half and his wife Chellammal seven.

Bharati lost his mother when he was five, and studied in the Tinnevely Hindu High School for three years from 1894 to 1897. He did not complete his schooling there because he fell out with his Tamil teachers. After his marriage he went to Benares to stay with his aunt and continue his studies. While in Benares he grew a moustache and took to a turban worn in the north Indian style. He also got rid of his tuft, 'cropping' his hair in the European fashion, which distressed his uncle so much that the latter said that he would not eat in the same room with his nephew until he shaved off his moustache and grew his tuft again. The young man aping alien ways had made himself an outcaste.

Nevertheless, when the uncle was at a loss one day when his *puja* could not be concluded in the absence of the man who came regularly to sing the traditional Tamil hymn from the *Tiruvachakam*, young Bharati came to his rescue, his aunt remembering how well-versed he was in these ancient Tamil classics. At the end of the *puja*, the uncle embraced the scapegrace who

yet had so much grace in him. He must have realised somewhat late that the tuft does not make the devotee.

Bharati passed the Matriculation of Allahabad University in the first division, thereby demonstrating that if he was a drop-out at Tinnevely, it was not because he was intellectually inferior. He joined the Central Hindu College and learnt Hindi and Sanskrit which were compulsory subjects there. It is not clear whether he sat for the final examination and took his degree.

His growing interest in politics alarmed his child-wife in distant Kadayam, who wrote to him in Tamil:

Brother-in-law Viswanathan has come. He says that you are exerting yourself in the cause of national freedom and writing ceaselessly in that connection. He says that if you break the law you are liable to penal transportation.

Bharati replied reassuring her, and asked her not to spend her time in such worries but in studying Tamil.

He returned to Ettayapuram in 1902 but the two years he spent there with the Zamindar were probably not happy. His first poem appeared in *Vivekabhamu* a journal published from Madura. He joined the Setupati High School there in September 1904 as Tamil pundit. But he worked in that capacity only for three months.

From November 1904, Bharati turned to journalism (*Swadesamitran*, *Chakravartini*, *India*). In the Congress split at Surat in 1907, Bharati was on the side of the extremists led by Tilak. His patriotic songs published in 1908 with the help of that warm-hearted philanthropist V. Krishnaswami Aiyar, drew the jealous scrutiny of the Government of Madras, and Bharati thereafter was a marked man. To escape persecution if not also prosecution, Bharati took refuge in Pondicherry, a French

possession, in the same year. He continued editing *India* from there, but after two years the paper had to wind up for lack of financial support and sales.

Bharati's contact with Aurobindo Ghosh, who came to Pondicherry in 1910, was a rich and unforgettable experience. From Sri Aurobindo Bharati learnt a great deal of philosophy. He made other friends also, celebrated in his poem *Bharati Sixtysix*.

The outbreak of war in Europe in 1914 added to the difficulties of the suspected seditionists in Pondicherry. Bharati's *Kannan Pattu* came out in Madras in 1917, with the significant omission of 'Kannan my King'. In November 1918, Bharati left Pondicherry to get back home. He was caught by the police at Cuddalore, spent a few days in gaol (November 20 to December 14), and was prevailed upon by his friends to give an undertaking to Government eschewing all political activities. On release he went to Kadayam to his waiting wife.

Bharati came back to Madras in 1920 to rejoin the *Sivadesamitran* as Assistant Editor. In 1921, going as usual to the Parthasarathi Temple at Triplicane and looking up his friend there, the temple elephant, he was seized by that animal and tossed up in the air. He came down unconscious.

The fall damaged Bharati's frame weakened already by addiction to opium. The accident took place in June 1921. He died on the 11th of September, aged three months short of thirtynine years.

Though Bharati died so young, he cannot be reckoned with Chatterton and Keats among the inheritors of 'unfulfilled renown'. His was a name to conjure with, at any rate in South India, while he was still alive. But his fame was not so much as a poet as of a patriot

and a writer of patriotic songs. His loudly-expressed admiration for Tilak, his fiery denunciations in the *Swadesamitran*, and the fact that he had to seek refuge in French territory to escape the probing attentions of the Government of Madras, made him a hero and a 'freedom fighter'. His lilting songs were on numerous lips, and no procession or public meeting in a Tamil district in the days of 'non-co-operation' could begin, carry on or end without singing a few of them. After the attainment of independence, many of them, naturally, have lost their urgency.

Fed on Byron and Shelley, Bharati realised early the importance of freedom and the sacred duty of resisting tyranny. He wrote in praise not only of Dadabhai Naoroji, Lajpatrai and Tilak, but also Mazzini, Belgium overrun by the Kaiser and the 'New Russia'. He admired Sivaji. These we may take as routine. His pentad to Mahatma Gandhi, however, is noteworthy for his ability to see and admire what made Gandhi unique as a national leader—not merely the end he had in view, which was to remove the distress of India's millions, and the means discovered as the most effective for this, namely non-co-operation; but above all, the way he chose for himself and his countrymen, the straight and narrow path of non-violence, not only the avoidance of hatred but positive love for the man fought against.

Bharati's love of Tamil, both the language as it was in his own day and the rich literature left as a heritage, was no less than his love of India. He could not understand the low opinion the educated Tamil had of his mother tongue, a fact noticed and lamented earlier by the great Tamil scholar and savant, A. U. Pope. The 'high born' Brahmin's predilection for Sanskrit—the language of all religious rites, the Vedas, the Itihasas

and the Puranas—was no doubt responsible for this. Himself a Brahmin from an orthodox family, Bharati did not share this prejudice.

When he claims for Valluvan, Ilango and Kamban a place among the world's immortals, Bharati does so not as an ignorant chauvinist but as one who has savoured both the sweetness of these writers and the strength and richness of others in Sanskrit and English. He translated many Vedic hymns and more than one Upanishad into Tamil; and he maintained not only that Tamil works should be translated into foreign tongues so that the world may decide how good or bad they are, but also that we in India have still much to learn from foreign writers, and should enrich our own languages and culture by such learning. What enrages him is not that we read foreign authors but that we are so utterly ignorant of our own.

His contact with Aurobindo Ghosh and a few Tamil swamis in Pondicherry added a philosophical dimension to Bharati's thoughts, but he is basically a rebel and a free-thinker. In 'Illusion or Reality?' he raises the question, "If the scorpion is not real but only an appearance, what about its sting?" In *Bharati Sixtysix* he says,

Many siddhas there have been before me
I too am a siddha.

He makes fun of the adwaitins no doubt with his tongue in his cheek. When he says Sankara died but

Me you will find immortal
This truth you have got cheap
Not I the one to lie
Not even should I die

it is obvious that at least in part this Indian bull is meant as a joke. But only in part. It is the visible,

the tangible, the audible that are a poet's concern — and Bharati is above all a poet. Women's breasts were to him as to Kalidasa

Sivalingams worthy of worship.

He would not have taken Sankara's advice to look on them as mounds of meat.

Like his favourite poet Shelley whose *dasan* or worshipper he proclaimed himself to be, Bharati was a non-conformist. Rebellion was in his blood. He scandalised his people by insisting that his wife should walk hand in hand with him to the river, as he will no doubt scandalise many readers even today by his suggestion that the best way to avoid war is to make love. The freedom that he wanted for India was not something vague and abstract and the replacement, out of 'self-respect', of the white bureaucracy by a brown, the Englishman by the Brahmin. It was freedom for the outcaste and the suppressed, the cobbler, the fisherman and the hunter, the so-called criminal tribes.

A new law will we make
And ever keep:
If a single man goes without food
All earth that outrage shall make good
Or fall in one fell sweep!

When he went to the Congress session in Calcutta in 1906, Bharati came into contact with Sister Nivedita. From her he learnt to perceive how ignorant and narrow-minded the orthodox Indian is in the way he treats his wife and daughters. Education for women and contact with the outside world were denied so that their chastity might be maintained intact. What about chastity for men? Bharati asked.

An advocate of Women's Lib sixty years ago, and a glorifier of love, Bharati drew the line at 'Free Love' then coming into fashion. "Free love is false love", he said,

Like thieves these menfolk on earth
Would taste the joys of women
Stealing pleasures for themselves
They preach all the time to their women
The greatness of chastity.

But those who advocated free love did *not* preach to their women the greatness of chastity. Bharati had perhaps to make this gratuitous assumption in order to discredit the notion of love without marriage, the trial or companionate marriage.

Bharati's views on arranged marriages set out unequivocally in *My Life* will no doubt shock orthodox opinion.

They call slavery liberation
They call trash a treasure
A thing without fragrance
They call a marriage
Be a virgin if you can
Burn in hell if you must
Whatever sin you may commit
Don't marry.

His falling headlong in love at the age of twelve with a girl of nine is sought to be explained away as an allegory. It was the goddess of poesy, we are told, who won his heart. "A simple child that lightly draws its breath"—what could it know of such love? Dante, another poet, fell in love with Beatrice when the two were even younger—nine and eight respectively. It is time we stopped twisting a poet's words to suit our notions.

Bharati wrote many devotional songs, but even these are not likely to please the orthodox entirely. His song in praise of Saraswati makes fun of those who will worship with flowers and sandal paste, stacks of palm leaf, but will do nothing to spread literacy, found schools or endow libraries. But side by side with the practical zeal of the social reformer was Bharati's awareness and awe of the Godhead.

Three gods in the Hindu pantheon appealed to him most—Murugan most popular in South India, Sakti the Mother Goddess and Kannan or Krishna. His 'Dance of Dissolution' is a masterpiece reaching its climax when Sakti joins Siva and the love between them changes the dance of destruction to one of bliss. In *Kannan Pattu* he sees every object that he loves or reverences as an aspect of Krishna—not merely sees it with a philosophic eye, but also feels it with all his senses and soul. The blending of humour and devotion, everyday life and yogic realisation, makes 'Kannan my Servant' unique. Suddenly after three sounds comes 'not a fourth sound but a star'.

Kuyil is Bharati's most ambitious poem and to a Tamil reader at any rate completely satisfactory. An intelligent Englishman who read a translation of it objected to its pointlessness. Samuel Pepys had the same objection to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It seemed to him a hotchpotch. The *Kuyil* has been read as an allegory of the three *gunas* (*satwa*, *rajas* and *thamas*) represented respectively by the koel, the monkey and the bull; conventional marriage (between cross cousins), arranged marriage, and marriage after love; *pasu*, *pati* and *pasam* (the soul, God and bondage). When the koel says repeatedly of Maadan that she promised to marry him out of pity not love, could it not be that the poet is referring to his own earlier works as the result of

compassion rather than love, his mind and heart being meant actually for the eternal not the temporal, the transcendental not the earthly?

There are those who would look on *Panchali Sabadam* as a political manifesto, Draupadi stripped and degraded representing all too obviously Mother India, the wicked Dussasana the ruthless foreigner. The poem has indeed a relevance to our time but not on these lines. What provokes the poet's wrath is less the wickedness of Dussasana than the supineness of the people who put up with it. There is no scene in the *Mahabharata*, *pace* Bharati's modest statement that his work is *only* a translation, portraying the attitude of the people on the streets:

Bee-like on either side a crowd
Had gathered, and their disapproval
Hummed and hawed and just looked on.
Not worth a note their grovelling whine.
Impotent dogs . . .

however moved
Themselves unmoving, stood like trees!

Bhishma in the *Mahabharata* expounding the dilemmas posed by *dharma* is a respectable figure. As presented by Bharati, he is contemptible:

Dear lady, it may well be
That as per old usage and the laws
Of the Vedic seers, you have a case . . .
That men and women were fully equal
People thought then. But all that is altered.

Taking this along with what Bharati has to say in 'The New Woman', the irony will escape only those so wedded to the sacredness of the law that they cannot see what an ass it can be, and determined to make Bharati equally blind and law-abiding.

In a short dedication-cum-preface to his *Panchali Sabadam* Bharati wrote that his aim in producing that work was to acquaint the reader with the possibilities of a new Tamil poetics. To use simple words, an easy style and grammatical links which will not confuse, was what he aimed at. He also wished to use popular rhythms and folk tunes. "I am not presuming to set an example", he said modestly, "only to suggest possibilities".

What makes him the greatest of modern Tamil poets is the fire and fervour of his patriotic songs, his concern with the social problems of his time which still remain to plague us, the sweetness of his lyrics of love and devotion, his wit and humour, the boldness of his thought, and the completeness of his identification with the characters he portrays — whether it is a teenage girl waking to love, a fond father idolising his child, a master grumbling about his servant, or Panchali confronting an assembly of ruffians, pompous old men and impotent husbands. The lyrical outbursts in *Kuyil* on light and sound and love and beauty are the distilled essence of poetry. There is ample reason to believe that had he lived on, his insight and versatility would have found even more scope than they did in the legacy he has left to us of deep feeling, haunting music and felicitous expression.

Tamil poetry until quite recently was meant not merely to be read or recited but sung. Bharati himself set practically all of his poetry to music. In translating him into English, far more will be gained by exploiting to the utmost the resources of metre and rhyme than by excluding them, merely because among certain academics rhyme is crime and metre suspect. I make no apology therefore for using such forms as I thought would best represent Bharati's music and rhetoric.

POEMS

Vande Mataram

"Vande Mataram"¹ we will sing!
These words throughout our land shall ring!
"Vande Mataram" we will say!
Motherland, hail! To you we pray.

No more talk of caste and creed,
No more talk of birth and breed;
Who first drew breath in this our land,
Brahmin or other caste, with us he will stand.

What if an outcaste? Does he not live
With us right here and his labour give?
Has he become a Chinese man
And will harm us the way an alien can?

A thousand castes we have, oh dear!
But outsiders have no place here.
However they quarrel, can the sons of one mother
Cease to be brothers of one another?

Only united, true life we attain;
Divided go down, and none of us gain;
This is the lesson we all have to heed;
Once we know this, what else do we need?

Whatever fruits our efforts will bear
All of us equally in them will share;
For all thirty crores of us there shall be life,
Or for all thirty crores of us death after strife!

A pittance we preferred as serfs in a cottage
Forsaking our birthright for a mess of pottage;

This scandal and shame we have got to erase,
Spit on it, spurn it, and end the disgrace!

*The Wild Mother*²

A demon is our mother
A madcap dire
In love with another madcap
Who plays with fire!

A diver in a sea
Of tuneful waves
In sweet sounds a-plenty
She dips and laves.

Poetic groves her haunts
Where words are aching-sweet
Flower-decked, wine-flown
She dances on metrical feet.

The Vedas are her music
And Truth the spear in her hand.
Uncountable the skills she strews
For the world to understand.

Not an easy thing that war
Where, she the hero's bow,
Twanged, and a million of men
In a welter of blood laid low!

Freedom Plant

With tears, not water, this plant we reared:
Is it your pleasure, Lord, it should be seared?

A lustrous lamp with our life's ghee fed:
Is it your pleasure it should be dead?

After years a thousand there came on a day
A diamond most dazzling: shall we throw it away?

That virtue will win is a lie of the sages?
Not enough our suffering through all these ages?

Can't you see heroes and men of letters
Slaving at mills, rotting in fetters?³

Countless good ones, their hearts stifled,
Blinded, bewildered, of all things rified?

By baleful tyranny kept separated
Fathers from families, lovers ill-fated?

O Father, we have abused all that you gave us:
Who but you now to heal and save us?

Isn't sweet freedom the best of your boons?
Will you not guard it against heartless baboons?

Can life exist if there is no rain?
Without freedom are not all things vain?

Merciful, generous, can you not see
How our hearts are of falsehood free?

Is it in vain our substance we spend?
Torture our bodies, moan without end?

When for you and through you we fight for *your* right,
How comes it you cannot pity our plight?

Is this a new thing to which we aspire?
Didn't our forefathers have all we desire?

If virtue and you abide as they say
Grant us this one gift in our day!

To Mahatma Gandhi: A Pentad

Hail, Gandhi, my master, come
To put new life in a land
Degraded, poverty-stricken,
Her freedom crumbled like sand;
Utterly ruined, unique
In the world for sheer distress —
Rejuvenate her, Mahatma,
India, our age-old mistress!

A simple scheme whereby
Slavery will cease,
And all our countrymen
Advance and get increase
Of riches and knowledge and wisdom,
And learn to be darers and doers —

TO MAHATMA GANDHI: A PENTAD

This you invented, foremost of men,
Fame amaranthine is yours!

How shall I praise you? To whom compare?⁴
Him who brought the Himalayan herb
To counter the cruel serpentine arrow?
Or him who the Thunderer's conceit to curb
Put up a hill as it were an umbrella?
The corrosive ulcer of utter dependence
Cureless and endless, *you* will cure now —
With how simple a simple, what magical sense!

To look on your enemy as your own self,
Even him who plans your perdition;
To look on every living thing
As of God's works a sacred edition;
To bring into politics that bloody arena
Of vengeance and contrived disaster,
A large-hearted wisdom, religion, philosophy —
How novel, how daring, my master!

The broad road, the war road, of all out destruction,
For that you have nothing but contempt;
The straight path and narrow of service unselfish,
O Pilgrim, it is this you attempt.
To fight without rancour for freedom and nationhood,
Non-co-operate⁵ with those that would thrall men —
This is your way of salvation for India,
Peace on earth, good will to all men!

Freedom

Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!

Freedom to the outcastes degraded,
Themselves in three grades!
Freedom to fishermen and nomads
And tribes in "criminal trades"!⁶
Engaged in skilful work,
Harming none,
Learned and wise, in our land
All shall live as one!

Of poor and slave no more
Talk shall be.
This land shall cease to have
Men of low degree.
Knowledge and wealth we shall get,
And joyous in mind
All men united shall live.
Equality find.

The folly that deems women low
We shall burn.
Subjection, slavery end
At every turn.
Through life in all possible ways
Shall equal be
Men and women, and all live
Happy, free!

The Chorus of Freedom

Dance we will and sing in chorus
That blissful freedom has dawned for us!⁷

Gone are the days when the Brahmin
Was called God;
Gone are the days when the whiteman
Was called lord;
Gone are the days when we bowed
To bootlickers;
And did the bidding of rogues,
Loot pickers!

Everywhere "Freedom"
Is what one hears;
Equality assured
After years;
This victory on conches
We shall blow;
And let the whole wide world
This fact know.

The day has dawned
That will make us one;
Liars and cheats
Will have justice done;
The good shall now
Be regarded great;
The wicked and treacherous
Meet their fate.

Workers and peasants
We will hail;

SUBRAMANIA BHARATI

At idlers and gluttons
We will rail;
No more shall we die
Ploughing the sands
Or wear out our limbs
On absentee's lands.

The land where we are
We now know is ours;
To us we know given
By the heavenly powers;
To no one on earth
Slaves shall we be;
To God alone vassals,
Happy and free!

The Commonwealth of India

The Commonwealth of India, hail! for ever hail!
The Commonwealth of India, may she never fail!

For thirty crores of people
A commonwealth
A state beyond compare
A novelty most rare
Here's to her health!

Shall man deprive another man
Of his food?

THE COMMONWEALTH OF INDIA

Shall he look on as means he has none
Of livelihood?
Shall such things be again?
Even in thought be again?
Amongst us be again?

Of large fields and timely rains
No dearth in our land;
Fruits and roots and grains
Unnumbered she can give,
Yes, unnumbered she can give,
Daily unnumbered she can give!

A new law will we make
And ever keep;
If a single man goes without food
All earth this outrage shall make good
Or fall in one fell sweep!

"In every life do I exist":
'Twas Kannan our Lord said so.^s
The way all men may turn divine
India to the world will show,
Yes, India to the world will show.
Indeed India to the world will show.

All are of one caste, all are of one kin
All are India's children.
All have the same pull, all have the same place,
All are this country's kings,
Yes, all are this country's kings,
Indeed all are this country's kings!

Mother Tamil

(To her Children)

Siva of old was my Father
And Agastya the Aryan sage
Found me attractive and gave me
A grammar my thoughts to engage.

Three kings of different clans⁹
Brought me up fondly and fair
So that the place I obtained
Could with high Aryan compare.

Poets in the Tamil land
Made a heady mixture in glee
Of wine, fire, wind and sky
And passed on that potion to me.

Many skills and sciences besides
They mastered and left behind;
My fame spread over the world
My children could improve their mind.

But Time the blind destroyer
Has scattered the treasures I had,
Because he cannot distinguish
Between the good and the bad.

Sweeping all things before him
Like a flash flood unopposed
It is he who is to blame
For the way he has disposed

Of the numerous sweet tunes¹⁰
That fell on my maiden ears

MOTHER TAMIL

Whose names alas! I cannot
Recall for all my tears.

Because of my Father's grace
And that sage's spiritual might
The killer Time till now
Hasn't dared to affront my sight.

But today I heard something
A foreigner impart —¹¹
My dears, what shall I say?
It pierced my very heart!

"Many new sciences subtle
Elemental and profound
Are growing up in the west
And in Tamil will never be found.

"That language cannot express them —
It does not have the tool;
Slowly it will die now —
The western tongues will rule".

So spoke that silly fellow:
Oh how the very thought smarts!
Go forth in the eight directions
And bring home all sciences and arts.

Because of my Father's grace
And that sage's spiritual might
This great scandal will end
And my fame for ever burn bright!

Tamil

Of all the languages that we know
There is none as Tamil sweet;
Yet the world's gibe, like ignorant beasts
We lie sunk in defeat.
What use to glory in that name
And live obscurely here
Instead of making that sweet tongue ring
Like a bell far off and near?

Of all the poets that we know
We see none to compare
With Kamban, Valluvan, Ilango —¹³
No boast this, but truth bare!
Dumb, deaf and blind we live now —
Listen, let us make it our aim
For our own sake from the house-tops
The greatness of Tamil to proclaim.

We must translate into Tamil
Great works of foreign lands,
While deathless works in Tamil
Are written by living hands;
No use in secret among ourselves
Repeating a stale old story —
The test of all true greatness is
That outsiders hail our glory.

Then only will our words ring bright
When brightness within one can find;
The arts in flood will surely release
Those sunk in pits and blind.

IN PRAISE OF SARASWATI

Raised up they will regain their sight
And status against odds;
Let us then taste this nectar of Tamil
And tasting it become as gods!

*In Praise of Saraswati*¹³

She dwells in the white lotus
And the sound the vina makes;
In the poet's heart whose song
Our inmost being takes;
She is the light at the end
Of the tunnel the Vedas explore;
And of the frank and compassionate words
Of sages, the essence and core.

In the witching songs our women sing
And in the children's patter;
On the tongues of her favourite birds
Koels and parrots that chatter;
In the faultless work of the artist,
In paintings and temple and tower,
You will find her Beauty incarnate
And feel her entrancing power.

She is the family goddess of those
That honestly work for a living;
Harness-makers, carpenters, masons
To their tasks strength and souls giving;

Traders in reliable goods,
Pious priests and valorous kings
Find in her their sole refuge,
The goddess expert in all things.

The goddess who understands evil
And tells you what should *not* be braved;
The goddess who is the very life of life
To those that would have their souls saved;
The goddess whom all those pursue
Who are keen on a job well done;
The goddess of poets and *devas*
And toilers whose bread is hard won.

All those who belong to this land,
Come, let us her favour invoke;
Her worship, you will soon discover,
Is more than a ritual joke;
To mutter a few old *mantras*
And with flowers and sandalwood paste
Bedeck a stack of palm-leaves
Is of time and thought but a waste.

The lamp of learning in every house,
In each street a school or two;
In the towns and cities of our land
Polytechnics not a few;
Where there is no research
To consign that place to the fire
Is the best way to win her favour,
The nectar of our desire.

The land of the Jews and Greeks,
The land of the rising sun,
Far off small-feet China,
And ancient rich Iran;

IN PRAISE OF SARASWATI

Turkey, and those other lands
Beyond the seas that part —
Bright shine the light all over
Of the goddess of learning and art!

This great land which is yours
Was once the soul of learning;
Today by neglecting knowledge
Only disgrace you are earning;
To live like the shameless beasts
Is not life, Sirs, by your leave —
Come, let us start a new chapter
Not over lost chances grieve.

To plant orchards, dig wells
And relieve the travellers' pains
With a thousand wayside choultries,
To build ten thousand fanes;
Establish numerous charities
That will our greatness reiterate —
A million times better than all this
Is to make one poor soul literate.

Let the wealthy give heaps of gold
And those who are poor small change;
The orator's words, the labourer's muscle,
From each what he can arrange;
Let all the honey-tongued women
Join our worship and sing,
Welcome for this great task
Is every talent you can bring!

*A Prayer to Sakti*¹⁴

Does anyone make a lovely harp
And fling it in the dust?
With burning senses you endowed me —
Answer me, be just.

Won't you give me strength so that
I can serve this world?
Or am I to be a burden on it
Callously by you hurled?

I asked you for a frame that my mind
Can operate like a ball;
A heart uncraving, a quivering flame
Of a life which nothing can pall;

Though my flesh should be burnt by you, I asked
For a soul that will sing your praise —
A steadfast spirit: tell me are these
Too much for you to raise?

Parasakti

"Our Mother the Superpower"

"Give us tales in verse,
Epics and long-drawn lays;
Lifelike characters
In well-constructed plays" —
But day and night my heart
In her alone finds joy;
Except in her service
Myself I cannot employ.

"The people's poverty
And their grinding misery sing";
"Appeal to all the world
And mankind together bring";
"Preach morality";
"Bother only about Art —
Beauty is your field,
In nothing else take part".

Whenever I try to compose
Poems for our people's welfare,
Or else on the technique of verse
Lavish my concern and care,
Great Sakti the Mother just then
In a whisper her wish will reveal
And claiming all things for herself
My tentative efforts congeal.

When, caught in the beauty of rain,
Storm clouds gathering dark,
Lightning that flashes in streaks,
Winds gusty, pitiless and stark,

I think, "What a wonderful theme!
I shall depict this downpour",
Says Mother, "All this is Myself—
Rain, lightning, storm and uproar!"

Herself hard to describe
She won't let me describe another—
Can you see a flame burning in a lily?
You will then see the beauty of our Mother,
Can you sense the awareness of a stone,
Seize fixity in Time's flood,
Feel the hardness of diamonds in the grass?
Then Sakti you will know in your blood.

To His Heart

Yet once more let me tell you, craven heart,
No use whatever in grieving over aught;
Not through our desires are we here—
Beginning, middle and end *we* have not wrought;
Through the supernal grace of some great God
You have found that earthly things are dearly bought;
No worries more need future years bring
If only to your freedom you will cling.

Things unimagined she can bring about
And make them work together her planned ends;
Wilfully to pervert truth is sin,
Or be ungrateful for the good she sends;

TO HIS HEART

My mistress and my goddess, brave men's queen,
Goddess even of the gods whom she defends:
Guardian of marches, giver of domestic joy,
In praise of her flower-like feet yourself employ.

As Sakti we shall laud her, Muruhan,¹⁵
Sankaran¹⁶ call her, Kannan our heart's ease;
Your only sure refuge on earth, who can
Remove your wants, give sorrow its surcease;
Ask for the greatness that devotion brings,
Freedom from hunger and from fell disease;
Your feet set firmly on the virtuous road
By Her whose own two feet the world bestrode.

"Give me riches if I ask for them;
Remove the smallnesses that in me dwell;
On the tight string of learning thread my thoughts;
Through mercy kill my doubts and ring their knell;
Drive out that devil, the ever-tormenting self;
And make me seek your grace, undrying well:
Guide me and guard me, never let us part,
Om Sakti, obeisance", say to her, my heart.

What comes out as song is all *Her* saying —
O heart, an idle thing she won't tell thee;
You will get what you ask, without a doubt —
Harm won't assail; God is; Victory shall be;
Once more I tell you this: The Primordial Force
The Vedas' visible head and crown is She:
She has cast us in the saintly Janaka's¹⁷ part —
"Om Sakti, obeisance", say to her, my heart.

*The Song of Govinda*¹⁸

With your two eyes divine
Unwinking
Lotus-red and lotus-soft
Look, Govinda; into my woman's eyes.
To me that seek
Vouchsafe your golden feet.
Lord of those that move
And those that move not
My cares remove
O! crores and crores
Unnumbered.

Poor me!
When will you remove that thought
Of "Poor me!"?
O Lord, when can I
In this breeze and bird and tree,
In the cloud, the boundless sky,
In the sea, on earth,
In the street, the house,
In every act therein,
You perceive and with you merge?

Forgetting my two eyes
And making your two mine
Let me, Govinda, learn
To see the world as You
And so get fulfilled —
Shed cruelty, indifference,
Sloth and all other sins
Cringing poverty
Meanness of spirit.

NANDALALA

Teach me, Govinda
That lesson of true life
Sweet as nectar!

*Nandalala*¹⁹

In the plumes of the crow,
Nandalala,
Is your dark glow,
Nandalala.

In the trees' green,
Nandalala,
Is your emerald sheen,
Nandalala.

In each sound one hears,
Nandalala,
Is the music of your spheres,
Nandalala.

A finger in the fire,
Nandalala,
Is my fulfilled desire,
Nandalala.

It thrills through and through,
Nandalala,
As if I touched you,
Nandalala!

*A Garland for Kannan*²⁰

On Kannan's feet
If you muse, my mind,
You will Death defeat
And salvation find.

Find wealth and fame,
Distinction dear,
In His gracious name
While living here.

Here gather will
The gods of Heaven,
And lumps of ill
With goodness leaven.

If good you love
O poets, sing
The glories of
That immortal King.

King eternal
Aiding the gods
Against the infernal
Asura hordes.

Hordes umbrageous
He will quell;
Penance of sages
Reward well.

Well know you,
Though diverse in name

TO THE SUN

Siva and Vishnu
Are both the same.

The same supreme
Manifold might,
Ever lasting beam
Of blazing light!

To the Sun

Scattering your rays on the sea
How swiftly you go up the sky!
With the spreading light delighted
How merrily sing the birds!
And the sea with its limbs all spread
Making each little drop its eye
Takes in your dazzling form
And sings your praise with joy!

My soul is like that sea
Always under you.
Filling with your splendour
Every atom of it
Make me truly live.
Great God, the light of the Sun,
Giving life to all the world
With your far-off look from the sky!

You look and look on the earth
As if in love with her!

Nor is there any doubt
That she too is in love with you.
The smile that lights up her face
When she sees you in your glory!
You two are our primal parents
To whom a thousand bows!

*The Dance of Dissolution*²¹

Bursts the universe, thunder keeping time,
Bare and blood-soaked plains provide the stage;
On these the devils sing in glee, and you
Kali, Mother, Kangali, Chamundi,
Your sounding feet interpreting the song,
The Dance of Dissolution dance in joy
Involving me too in that Devil Dance.

All five elements now dissolved made one,
And that one tamed, submerged in Sakti potent,
A dazzling brightness which blinds thought itself
As with the speed of lightning, belching fire,
You dance your dance ever-lasting, Kali, Mother
Involving me too in that Devil Dance.

All space in ruins, striking awareness dead,
All paths destroyed through which the Powers act,
In utter chaos crying "Ho, ho, ho",
The demons wander, and you frenzied dance
Destroying all and roaring, Kali, Mother
Involving me too in that Devil Dance.

THE VICTORY DRUM.

Demons headlong their heads bashing, dashing
Quickly crashing, smashing, beating time,
With your flaming eyes in eight directions
You shoot fire consuming all creation
As you continue dancing, Kali, Mother
Involving me too in that Devil Dance.

Collapse the three worlds, and with them Time itself;
Remains alone God's splendour in His trance.
In His great Peace your wrath evaporates.
Your hand takes His, cajoling, coaxing, loving
And your wild dance is now a dance of Bliss
Involving me too in it, Kali, Mother!

The Victory Drum

Beat the drum, beat the drum,
Beat the drum of victory!

The demon Fear we have ejected,
The snake Deceit we have killed;
The Vedic blaze which lights our days
All earth with bliss has filled.

We have dived in the depths of the Sun,
We have drunk of the nectar of Light;
And as for Death who steals our breath
We have stared and scared him out of sight!

The crow and sparrow our kin;
One with us mountain and sea;
Wherever we glance ourselves a-dance
In a whirl of Ecstasy!

*Illusion or Reality?*²²

You that stand, and walk, and fly,
Are you but dreams?
And dry streams?
You that we learn, and hear, and ponder,
Are you but illusion?
A shallow delusion?

Groves, and sunshine, and sky,
Are you a snare?
A castle in the air?
Since all that is past is a tale that is told,
Am I too inanity?
And this world a vanity?

Time and space, and the things that we see,
Are they all ideal
Their nature unreal?*

If a seed may within it a forest contain
Are trees mere tropes?
Literary dopes?

*In other words, only the form of the scorpion illusion or also its sting? (Bharati)

TO HIS MIND

If all we see are bound to pass,
All that are past were once seen;
Can Fate pursue what never has been?
That which we see is reality,
What is unseen hypothesis;
Sakti survives metathesis.



To His Mind

Restless imp, my mind,
Take orders from today:
Efface yourself, I am your lord,
Listen to what I say;
Fix your thought on Sakti's feet;
Ceaseless to them pray;
The virtuous actions I prescribe
Effect without delay.

*To His Heart*²³

The past will not return, poor fool,
Ever lost in vain regret,
Don't drown yourself in the whirlpool
Of worry and killing fret.

Think every day, "I am born anew",
And live; eat, drink and play;
The Devil is dead and won't pursue —
Evil will all away!

Befriend Your Foe

Befriend your foe, dear heart,
Befriend your foe.

In the midst of smoke we see
Fire on earth, dear heart,
Fire on earth.
Among enemies too, our Lord, Love
Takes his birth, dear heart,
Takes his birth.

In a common shell we find
An orient pearl, dear heart,
An orient pearl.

BEFRIEND YOUR FOE

In a slum a luscious creeper may
Its scent unfurl, dear heart,
Its scent unfurl.

When into a frank soul creeps in guile,
Can you call it frank, dear heart,
Can you call it frank?
If with honey you mix venom,
Isn't it poison rank, dear heart,
Isn't it poison rank?

If you will purchase life with shame,
Is it a seemly thing, dear heart,
Is it a seemly thing?
By seeking another's shame, your own
Won't you surely bring, dear heart,
Won't you surely bring?

Did his army not side the Kurus in the war
Against his friend, dear heart.
Against his friend?²⁴

And yet did he not, his whip in his hand,
On Arjuna tend, dear heart,
On Arjuna tend?

Even a tiger wanting to eat you,
Receive it with love, dear heart,
Receive it with love.

Magnipotent Mother Kali, it might be
Come from above, dear heart,
Come from above.

My Life

"A lie, a dream, a tale that is told", Pattinathar.²⁵

FOREWORD

That all life is a dream
Is no doubt a true saying;
That the petty happenings of this world
Are not real, I too know;
But I have not seen
The blissful state they talk about
Beyond this wasteland.
Who has returned from the beyond?²⁶
I know only half the truth. (1)

I know that the illusory cannot be real;
But I have not been blessed with the skill
To explore the nature of reality.
And what I cannot know for myself
I lack the simple faith to take on trust
Depending on what others say.
Perhaps in a short while I shall know. (2)

This world is an immense dream
And in that
The lives of those men
The mere ephemera who eat and sleep
And hinder each other and die
Are a dream within a dream;
If in that dream for a few days
A bright-browed damsel can fascinate us
With an indescribable, an ambrosial sweetness
That phantom truly divine
Deserves a blessing! (3)

MY LIFE

At the age of ten there were many boys
Who ran and jumped
Swam in ponds and rivers
Climbed trees, chattered —
But lest I should displease my father
I never stepped into the streets with them.
Alone among hundreds
I grieved companionless. (4)

CALF LOVE

How shall I describe in words
The delicious dream of that day?
Not in sleep did it occur
But in broad wakefulness.
A gentle presence, a sweet voice
Eyes dark, body fragrant
A goddess in the form of a girl —
I fell headlong in love with her! (5)

"A girl of nine who seemed to me
The Sakuntala of legend" . . .²⁷
If this should surprise anyone
What shall I do? Was I to blame?
Who can resist the current
Of a great flood of love?
How could a poor child resist
The bow that brought down sages? (6)

It is the love of later years
That is tainted, undivine;
Our own coarser pleasures
Are a little mixed with it;
Adults who would wed a girl
Are masters of themselves;

I saw and found this young deer
And Cupid's darts found me! (7)

Prahlada and Kumaraguru²⁸
Gnanasambandar and Druva
Lost their boyish hearts to God
And pined in unmeasured devotion.
I gave my life to Cupid
Mind-born and mind-consuming.
Theirs of yore is a deathless fame—
What foolish I got you will know. (8)

Daily she came to draw water
Preceded by Cupid armed
On her face a winsome smile
A dazzling row of orient pearls.
I kept her under my close watch
As mean and worthless hirelings
The patriots whose freedom plant
Their kings would fain uproot and crush. (9)

Many were the days I spent
My linked thought all yoked
To the wheels of that chariot on which
Her beauty rode sublime.
On her retreating form
My eyes delighted fed.
When her bright flower-face returns
A new life I shall gain. (10)

The luminous philosophers say
That whatever good a man wishes
With all his senses, heart and soul
He is sure to get.
I too know this.
Would we were not by nature beasts!

We should then reach heaven
On the back of a wish. (11)

All the things we see around
In this delusive world
Are low — not worth our while.
The things we desire with all our heart
We can obtain tomorrow.
Coarse minds and faint hearts
Bound like sheep hither and yon
Seek a thousand things
And put off by each petty check
Never get what they want. (12)

They will blame Fate and rail at their friends
Curse their enemies in wrath
Conspire, quote false scriptures
Riffle horoscopes, deny God
Never realising that the way to win
Is to nurse a whole-hearted deathless wish —
They are like the blind, bewildered. (13)

What shall I say of the million fears
That beset me in my maiden love?
Who can describe devotion truly
Though he may say a thousand things?
Like a lame one that must have honey
From the topmost tree, and lo and behold!
His legs are healed, he can get his honey —
She whom I loved returned my love. (14)

Love if one-sided
Is poison borne by the sea;
When shared by both alike
Can nectar its equal be?

Those are the blessed men
To whom Heaven is no treasure
Who love a woman and their love
Is returned in equal measure. (15)

The full moon beclouded
A tender flower under frost
Sweet milk soured and bitter
Lovely eyes lacking vision —
Such is unrequited love:
The misery of him who sighs in vain
Cannot be told. (16)

I can no more sing of this
Than the king of heaven of poverty.
The eager maid so hard to win
Gave me all her love.
We knew no evil, sin or crime —
Like the men in the Age of Gold
We were utterly innocent
Of bonds, restraints, conventions, rules. (17)

Like a pair of birds in a forest
Making love
Like the Gandharvas in heaven²⁹
Caught in love
Not with our bodies
But our souls alone
That honey-tongued one and I
Spent a few days in bliss. (18)

Once in the hall of a Siva temple
On Tiruvadurai day³⁰
When I was alone
With that bright gazelle, my love
She half-said something and disappeared.

MY LIFE

Then turning up again
Mascara in her lotus hand,
"I shall leave a mark on you", she said
Put a dot on my forehead
And left me amazed.

(19)

The one who bore me
Left me yearning when I was five;
The one who begot her
Worshipped Siva with Tamil songs
Thrice a day.
When at the end of his *pūja*
I offered the flowers he had left
To my own golden goddess.
O the sweetness of her smile for me!

(20)

ENGLISH EDUCATION

To Tinnevely my father sent me
To get a Western schooling —
A lion cub to eat grass
A Brahmin to sell meat.
So decided my father
Thrusting this disgusting thing
Down my Aryan throat.

(21)

He sent me to study this thing
The food for jackals and dogs
For those who would sell their souls
An emasculating fare!
How could I put my heart
Into this worthless study?
Torn from my lovely bird
What joy could I find in such trash?

(22)

They study science for a dozen years
 And can't spot a single star;
 Know a thousand tropes
 Without knowing a poet's heart;
 Prattle of Economics
 Don't know their country looted;
 Name a thousand disciplines
 All of them equally bootless. (23)

That there lived a man called Kamban³¹
 And a poet by name Kalidasa
 That the sky with its planets and stars
 Was all mapped out by a Bhaskaran
 That with incredible acumen
 A Panini wrote on grammar
 That appearance and reality
 Were thoroughly explored by a Sankara (24)

That Cheran's brother wrote an epic³²
 And the divine Valluvan on ethics
 That the Cholas and the Pandiyas
 Maintained their lands and laws
 That Asoka, grace abounding,
 Ruled his kingdom in righteousness
 And against the tyranny of iconoclasts
 Sivaji fought and won — (25)

Not one of all this do they know
 Who go to English schools
 Neither the greatness of old
 Nor the disgrace of the present
 Ignorant of what is in store
 Mad after impotent knowledge
 What shall I say of these fools
 How show my indignation? (26)

My guileless father
 Seeking my own good
 Sent me to this hell
 Of foreign learning
 A pit out of which
 No one can climb
 A dark cave *animaled* not peopled
 By delusion and falsehood
 Cheating and strife
 A veritable zoo! (27)

I would say one thing
 To those lying Iyers⁸⁸ and Sahebs
 Who forced this English education on me
 If they would listen:
 "On your lessons I wasted all my time
 Only to get
 My body tired, eyes sunken
 Brightness dimmed, spirit sickened
 Doubts doubled, freedom lost
 And brains reduced to a cipher". (28)

My father spent thousands;
 More thousands of harm accrued to me;
 Not one jot of good did I gain
 This will I swear in forty thousand temples.
 That I somehow escaped with my life
 From the great darkness into which I fell
 Was due in part to my past good deeds
 And the grace of my goddess, my Motherland. (29)

MARRIAGE

The heart dissolves
 The tongue falters to utter

And however we may lament
We know no way to alter it —
If you want to know
It is marriage I am taking about —
In the sequence of our deeds
In the life of man
Is there another thing as dreadful? (30)

They call slavery liberation
They call trash a treasure
A thing without fragrance
They call marriage.³⁴
Be a virgin if you can
Burn in hell if you must
Whatever sin you may commit
Don't marry! (31)

To get such a wife as Vasishtha did
As Rama and after them Valluvan³⁵
There is no guarantee
Even after a thousand years
Of fasting and penance.
Will you take for nectar and drink
The toddy that wretches sell?
Don't listen to what the infected say.
Bull-like in gait and strength
If you want to retain your manliness
Do not marry. (32)

Whatever men in other countries may do
Young men in this country
Who would like to rejuvenate
Our land here
So declined, so like a corpse
Must never even think
Of doing this dirty and ruinous thing

Come what ailments may
And even if millions blame. (33)

When one sees these wicked and cruel men
Getting together in their idiocy
To celebrate this murder called marriage
Between babes dolled up
Whose mouths are wet with their mother's milk
One feels that it would be far better
If for another thousand years
They remain slaves and perish. (34)

There a girl at ten
I loved with all my heart
And here another at twelve³⁶
My father made me marry.
Knowing that this was wrong
I was helpless to resist
Nor did I know then
How love's flame would burn up my heart. (35)

When I wedded this other one
I did not say to myself
That the first love alone should stand
Nor was all my thought in this.
Since the first to me was so real
I took the second as a joke.
Before I could mature
With knowledge and experience
Love was one thing to me
And duty another. (36)

Cupid's signpost pointed one way
Public bonds another.
What steps in this predicament
Should a twelve-year old take?

If duty dictates aught
Whatever sorrows may come
To stick to that alone is right —
This too I didn't realise. (37)

The Sastras, the rites, the pujas
The mantras, the sacred string —³⁷
They all seemed to exist
Only to throttle me.
No one explained their rightness.
False and cruel men
Talked of the way of wisdom.
When mere pretence is enough for our elders
How does an innocent explore truth? (38)

MY FATHER'S POVERTY

Meanwhile my father lost his wealth
And fell into great misery.
All the money he had
Was lost through the foul play of foreigners.³⁸
Old friends who had once flattered
Now quietly dropped him.
Will parasites and dependants
Ever care for one in want? (39)

In this Kali age
When a Brahmin becomes a trader
He bent all his energies
On making money alone;
Ventured his fortune
On various bottoms
Made much and lived well
But when the bubble burst
He was undone. (40)

In this false delusive world
 The more one thirsts after a thing
 And drinks it whenever he can
 The less is his thirst quenched.
 When we get the thing we want
 Our desire too increases
 And even if we get it till the very end
 We die unsatisfied. (41)

For ever shall we bow
 To the great saint who said
 "There is no end to desire
 Do not imagine
 That you will ever be satisfied
 With material things".³⁹
 Though he had a keen mind and a courageous heart
 Which won men's respect
 My good father gave all his thoughts to money
 And sank in a sea of sorrow. (42)

THE GREATNESS OF WEALTH

It was not a false saying
 Of our great poet⁴⁰
 That this earth is not for those
 Who lack means.
 The poor have no kith, no kin
 Caught in a flood of hindrances
 They have no refuge, no landing ground.
 The first duty of those who have no means
 Is certainly to acquire it.
 I blame only those deluded misers
 Who worship money
 And giving up their all for it
 Yearn and lose their lives.
 My gibe is not against the Goddess of Wealth. (43)

For ever will I honour
 The truly wise who say⁴¹
 That virtue alone gives real happiness.
 How many crore torments have I not suffered
 Chasing other things in this world?
 I dare not even think of them
 And break my heart.
 Let the young men in our country know this:
 Virtue alone gives real happiness
 And so befriend virtue and be saved. (44)

That one can learn the truth
 Only by harsh experience
 Of the results of one's own deeds
 Is indeed just, my God.
 But does it behove your grace
 And generosity?
 Alas, in that case
 Even before a little truth is known
 How our souls must suffer!
 It is like the slow journey uphill
 Of a tortoise —
 We shall arrive at the truth
 When the tortoise reaches the top! (45)

My father gone, ruin surrounded me
 There was no one on earth to rescue me
 My mind was confused, body helpless
 Since all my zeal was gone.
 The stupid education I had bought from fools
 Was worthless as clod.
 There seemed to be no way out.
 Why was I born in this unhappy land? (46)

THE END

This world is an immense dream
And in that the lives of those men
The mere ephemera who eat and sleep
And hinder each other and die
Are a dream within a dream.
And so
What use sorrowful thoughts?
Where do regrets take us?
Who would die
Thinking of the few days he will live
Before he disappears? (47)

Those who lack wisdom and renunciation
Cannot see anything on earth but sorrow.
I never pined over the past
Never forgot
That divine poesy god-gifted
Is a net to catch the very stars of heaven.
O Mother who brought about all that is past
Look after my future too. (48)

A clear head, a steadfast heart
A flood of love in the soul
Absolute control of the senses
The mind fixed all day long
On the straight path of your grace
Grant me these that I may be
A true *karmayogi*⁴²
O you, Indefinable, Transcendent
Great Supreme Alone! (49)

Bharati Sixtysix

Praise Be! In Praise of Sakti

Many *siddhas* there were before me⁴³

I too am a *siddha*

The one who writes all this

Seated in my mind

Is that almighty

Ruler of the earth

The mind's jewel:

Into a lotus fresh as the morning

For love's sake she has turned herself,

And me

Into a bee

Sucking her.

(1)

For endless ages she will abide —

Her red lips honey-sweet unsating —

Took shape

As earth, water, fire, wind, sky;

Will destroy all this coming down

As war, disease, death;

Can if she likes

Grant directly bliss ineffable

Make us immortal on this very earth.

(2)

Great Kali, Omnipotent, Uma, Mother Goddess

Bhairavi, Kangali, Manonmani, Mamayi

Luminous Word, red fire, lightning-eyed, Sakti

Fed me, taught me

The Primordial Pool of Ambrosia

Never let me enter the jungle of wces

Well of poesy undefiled

Sweet as honey
Drips through me. (3)

THE WAY TO CONQUER DEATH

To the golden feet I bow
And declare the truths I know:
All life, our fathers said, is God
And this as the final truth I took.
They said, but what did they do?
Can an *advaitin* die?
All those *Siddhas* of the past
Are finished, are dead, are turned to dust! (4)

In holes and in forests
In bushes, on hills
In lanes now and then
Like shades some see them.
Why prick and probe a wound?
The Buddha died diseased
The Brahmin Sankara died
And Ramanuja⁴⁴ followed suit. (5)

Jesus died on a cross
Krishna died of an arrow⁴⁵
The much praised Rama drowned himself
Me you will find immortal!
This truth you have got cheap
Not I the one to lie
Not even should I die
Listen to me, listen

THE DEVILS

There shall be for man
No sorrow and no death
Would he but destroy
Shame and care, lies and rage
Fear, yearning
Death too he would destroy

The rest I shall tell later
But kill rage first
You will have no more death on earth;
We forget that great word
To look on others' goods as trash⁴⁶
To see God in everything
And the fire of wrath
Blazes in our hearts. (6, 7)

THE ILLS OF WRATH

The angry burn themselves and die
Themselves the knives that cut their throats
Men die daily in millions out of wrath
Raging against others
Careworn
They plunge themselves in a sea of sorrow (8)

It is great Sakti's aid we need
With that we have no worry
Not in our hands is deathlessness
Isn't our birth because of her?
Let me tell you in simple Tamil
Do but listen
He who made us will nourish us
With a cool mind rejoice and live
And let the world go hang! (9)

NO WHINING

What matters if Cancer and Capricorn
Change places
And the world spins
Upside down?
If poison cannot kill us
What else matters?
We shall live, don't whine
Useless is whining
Crores and crores died of it
Fear naught on earth evermore! (10)

GREAT IS PATIENCE

On Tiruteni⁴⁷ sits enthroned
Kumaran our God
And what do you think it signifies?
Tiruteni is divine patience
That is what the Tamil means
To bear and to forbear is wisdom
That the patient will rule the earth
Is an ancient saying in Tamil
With much sense in it
He that endures on earth
Is a god. (11)

Yudhishtira⁴⁸ son of Dharma
A long while guarded patience.
Losing it at the end
He waged war with those younger
Scorched our land in the battlefield
Set up want and sorrow
And left for the hills and the sky. (12)

Is it not cruel
To contrive unnatural death
To living beings on earth?
How can one give up
Sweet life?
The cause of death
If you want to know
Says that great botanist
Jagadish Chandra Bose⁴⁹
Ripe in wisdom and experience
Is "shock to the nerves". (13)

Anger shocks the nerves
Great anger shocks them greatly
Even a small anger
Is dangerous
Fear weakens the nerves
Sorrow tears them asunder
Care boils and burns them
Hence it is I say
Quell wrath and so quell the rest. (14)

WHERE IS GOD?

"Where is that Hari, your God?"
Growled Hiranyakasipu⁵⁰
And his saintly son replied
"In pillar and post, in tree and twig".
Not an atom but contains his greatness
Not a single thing without Sakti
No anguish, no anguish, no anguish
If all is God, whence anguish? (15)

Listen, son, see you a donkey
A "lowly" pig, a scorpion

Raise your two hands, bow your head
 And recognise the God before you.
 Dust and excreta too you should honour
 The crowded sum of all is God
 This let me say for liberation
 "Not only heaven but earth too is God". (16)

Pure wisdom, said the wise, is God
 Mere earth also is God, say the Vedas
 The learned guru is God, said the wise
 Likewise the ignorant Pariah, say the Vedas
 If what these madmen say is true
 That all that lives is God
 Tell me if the women and babes around you
 Are not God. (17)

All life is God, naught else
 Those that creep and those that fly
 And not merely living things
 But all existence which we see
 The sun that warms, the moon, the stars
 The clouds and all the numerous things
 Even the lifeless are all God
 This pen is God and all I write! (18)

IN PRAISE OF THE GURUS : KULLACCHAMI

Hail! The sage philosopher Desikan!
 Embracing all the land
 Tireless
 By the grace of that great one
 Life eternal is ours
 He showed me the greatness of the goddess
 The nature of awareness
 And cleared my mind

He showed me
The way to clutch heaven
While here on earth
Blessings on his feet! (19)

My heart, think ever of his feet
The holy feet of my lord Desikan
He saw the open spaces
Beyond the three skies
The Sun in the heaven of Moksha
Who gave me peace secure
Great wizard of penance and piety
Wrapped in the robe of his wisdom
Cold Death I could safely defy! (20)

They call him Kullacchami
"The little god"
A mature man of God
He cut all bonds
Set fire to cravenness
Reached the very skies
Destroyed destruction
Killed Death.
On his head he carried
The Ganga of Wisdom
A tree of support for the tendril of love
His feet I shall glorify first. (21)

Speech cannot exhaust his greatness
Nor yet writing in a row;
Can one measure the sun with chains?
Or parcel out a great guru's accomplishments?
A thousand books will not suffice
Let me say it all in brief
Because of his *kayakalpa*⁵¹
There was none on earth to cast his age. (22)

THE GURU SIGHTED

One day in Puducheri
In a small house in Dharmaraja Street
Rajaramier a man from Nagapattinam
Came to consult me
Regarding the Upanishads
His father had rendered into Tamil.
Into that house came Kullacchami. (23)

Tenderly taking his hands
I spoke to him thus
"Friend Desikan
Some call you sage
And some a madcap
Some laud you before me
As one that has mastered the yogas completely
Tell me the truth without frills
Great soul
Reveal yourself. (24)

"Who are you?
What are your skills?
What do you know?
Why tramp you in rags?
You stare unwinking like a god⁵²
And play with dogs and the kids in the street
You roam about like a loony
And have the form and figure of Siva
Why stand you unconcerned?
Noble soul, you must tell me all. (25)

He tried to shake me off
That Kullacchami
I would not leave him
He looked around and smiled

I saw his sacred feet
Then the stainless one broke loose
Jumped across into the backyard
After him I ran
And held up that godman there. (26)

THE MESSAGE

Next door was a ruin
The great yogi gave me
A gracious look
Showed me an abandoned wall
The sun on high
And its image in a well.
"Do you understand?"
"I do"
In great joy he went
And I
Had glimpsed a root
Of the tree of Vedanta. (27)

The message Desikan delivered
By word and deed
I shall in clear terms
Tell the world
"Control your breath by *pranayama*
And live like a clod, a wall.
As you see the bright sun in a well
So in yourself you will see God
Not exposition
But experience leading to bliss
Is true philosophy. (28)

Were I bent on a treatise
All this I would set out at length
And expound.

He showed me the sky
Said the love of the bright eyed Goddess
Alone was the way of life here
And much knowledge else he gave me
Infinite his hints
My great philosopher and guide
Never taken in by the false
A god on earth
Kullacchami (29)

Another day
With a huge load on his back
Of rags and dirty linen
Came before me the compassionate sage
The blessed feet
Which the wise worshipped.
Smiling I asked him
"What is this, my lord?
What utter lunacy!
Why the load?" (30)

He too smiled and said
"I bear my load on the outside
You your rubbish within"
Saying which he vanished.
I caught the point of his words.
Their minds laden with old lies
Men die in vain distress
Freedom should start from within. (31)

The past will not come back
Fools, brooding ever on the past,
Don't fall into the pit
Of killing care
And die there
No need to mark the past

Resolved firmly in your minds
That today you are born anew
Eat, play and live in joy.
Instead no need to cry (32)

Again and again
Over what is gone
Foolish men
Again and again you see
A new breath entering
A new life sprouting.
How deluded of you to think
That the cycle of karma⁵³
Is the soul!
To lose yourself in the deer-eyed Devi⁵⁴
And so to live
Is life. (33)

Past deeds will not touch me
"The Son of God, am I not he?
This minute newly am I born
I am new, I am God, I am perfect"
Those that live thus on earth like gods
Are the *siddhas*
At one jump reaching the top of Dharma
They have no aims, no failure, no frustration. (34)

Even if with infinite aims
They do a million things
Not enslaved to Fate here
Their skills derived
From Siva the unpredictable
With Uma on his bull⁵⁵
These souls move in the world
Like fire
Destroying the dense darkness of the past

Wise disciple
Engage in works without asking for results
And you will become immortal. (35)

Listen, all these truths set above
Kullacchami the clear-minded
Over many days
Taught with words, hints, revelations.
As his body so his feet
Filled me with joy
The lotus feet
Worshipped by valorous kings
Long may he live! (36)

IN PRAISE OF GOVINDASWAMI

After these few words in praise
Of Kullacchami
Listen now to the praise
Of my lord Govindaswami
The bright and famous
Who made all that I learnt on earth
Bear fruit
A spirit without spot
An answer to the prayers
Of Puducheri's people
Like the good Kullacchami
Rooted in ancient Dharma. (37)

Moksha through love, said the Buddha then
That is what Govindaswami achieved now
To all in distress a mother
A fountain of grace
A yogi daring
He could swallow the sea for love

Said love was God
Himself was love
All life he looked upon as God
Unworried, undeluded. (38)

With his golden feet he decided once
To consecrate my house
Appeared as my dead father
And then as the mother who bore me
That he was a great yogi
Versed in the supreme wisdom
Was evident
In him as guru I took refuge
Lost fear of death
Grew strong. (39)

IN PRAISE OF THE SWAMI FROM SRI LANKA

A few words I said in praise of Govindaswami.
The man from Sri Lanka
The eye of the world
The sage who never forgot the feet of the goddess
The Nataraja of Chidambaram⁵⁶
The boat to take sinners across
The gateway to Paradise
I saw him in Puducheri
Noted for its tanks and fishes. (40)

Many devotees on earth
Make idols of gold
Lingams of red stone
And worship them
Friends, for me to take refuge
Is the God from Sri Lanka
His auspicious eyes raining grace.

To look on him as Siva
Is to attain all the *siddhis*. (41)

IN PRAISE OF KUALAI KANNAN⁵⁷

The one who brought to me
The man from Sri Lanka
The rider of Nandi, the dweller in Kailasa⁵⁸
Was known on this earth as Kuvalai Kannan
Born a Brahmin
He looked on Pariahs and other outcastes
As his equals
He trod the right Vedic way
And gained the grace of God. (42)

All the great sages were Kannan's friends
All the gods were his devotees
High-minded, greatly daring
Kualaiyur Kannan was a hero.
He brought to my house
The peerless one from Sri Lanka
His lotus feet I laid to my heart
"Then and there I attained true moksha".⁵⁹ (43)

We worship great gurus
Lose fear on earth, lose bonds
Eternal grace of God is ours
Immortal on earth are we.
There are many kings in this world
Bent upon destroying it
Their pride will have a fall.
Our kings are the sages
Who yearn not, fear not, hinder not others
And have grace eternal. (44)

FREEDOM FOR WOMEN

Freedom for women a new law
I proclaimed
Hear its value
If all life on earth is God
Fools, why not the wife?
High-flying stories you spin
Preach freedom, rain floods of compassion
If you deny women freedom
Life has no worth in this world. (45)

THE GREATNESS OF THE MOTHER

To keep your wife a slave
Is it right to depress all women?
A usage to make the world laugh
Does it not make nonsense of love?
O you who are dead to all feeling
Don't you know that the person who bore
Suckled and brought you up
Is none other than Uma herself?
Didn't old granny our Auvyar⁶⁰ say
Treat your mother and father as gods? (46)

What greater god than one's mother?
And isn't your mother a woman?
Your sisters elder and younger
Are all of them also not women?
To make one woman your slave
Is it right to enslave all motherhood?
Like mother, like son they say
Is it then matter for wonder
That the sons of a slave are all slaves? (47)

What we practise at home
 Is what will obtain in the country
 If at home we must have a slave
 Working for the freedom of the country
 We needs must die in frustration.
 Let us live like birds in the woods
 Without worry and with love.
 And with God's blessing
 Love will now be the theme of my song. (48)

IN PRAISE OF LOVE

Out of love comes union
 And union is peace
 Out of love comes poesy
 Music, sculpture, the arts.
 Therefore worldlings, love.
 Is not love this world's chief bliss?
 Love makes us immortal
 Kills care, makes death a lie. (49)

Siva made Sakti his half
 Brahma set his wife on his tongue
 Vishnu bears on his breast
 The bright-faced goddess of wealth
 Is there even in heaven
 A joy to rival women?
 Your love-bound wife is Sakti
 Through whom you should get godhead. (50)

To Kalidasa
 Women's breasts
 Were Sivalingams worthy of worship
 Rama that lion
 Took with him to the forest

One for whom
In his infatuation
He pursued a golden deer⁶¹
Which led
To sorrows manifold.
Do not all the epics on earth
And indeed all things literary
Glorify love? (51)

Love in drama and epic
Our people will lap up with glee
But at home by well or riverside
They will growl at this very thing.
They will murder it if they can
And send it away on a bier
Jealous fools set on destroying
This tender plant that is love
With their idiot rules which hamper
Spoil and pervert. (52)

Steeped in love will kings
Ever think of going to battle?
Caught in women's charms
Will ministers think of warfare?
Exchanging words of love
All night and all day long
Billing and cooing like birds
Will army chiefs resort to arms? (53)

FREE LOVE

Fast growing in Europe
Is a new cult: Free Love
All women they say there
Can live with whom they like

Mixing like the beasts.
When love ceases they can unmix
And without trouble
Go away with whom they like. (54)

Words these of impotent men
Free love is false love
Like thieves these menfolk on earth
Would taste the joys of women
Stealing pleasures for themselves
They preach all the time to their women
The greatness of chastity. (55)

If men forget chastity and err
Won't women too lose their morals?
Shameless such talk
Can you burn the house and keep the roof?
Isn't it for love that women betray?
Hiding reality
How the world prates of chastity! (56)

THE ONENESS OF CREEDS
A Talk with Govindaswami

Again came one day to my house
Govinda hero and sage
The man born to be king
Far above earthly kings
The king of love.
My mind blossomed at his sight
Like the sunflower seeing the sun.
Work while it is day, I thought
Make hay while the sun shines (57)

Let the chaff blow in the breeze
This is the time to give up the "I"

Shed negligence
 Kill the demons
 Deal with delusion.
 Good luck brought the guru
 Let me get wisdom from him. (58)

"Tell me the Truth now" I said
 "The way to quell Death the queller
 Tell me, I beseech you".
 The divine master said
 "First let us bow
 To the deathless king of Kailasa
 Crown our heads with his lotus feet.
 No bonds no bonds no bonds
 No fear no fear no fear at all. (59)

"The Vedas say Thou art That
 Hear from me what That is
That is all that we see
 All things on earth are sweet
 You are none other than That
 So whatever may happen on earth
 Take into your heart Rama's feet
 Decked with flowers sweet as honey
 And live. (60)

"Like the hair on one's body
 Numerous the beings in nature
 If only men will not kill
 There is no need for tears
 Or to struggle with arid land
 No need to fight over canals
 There will be rain
 God Is
 Unless Siva dies the land will be fertile. (61)

"So if men will cease to be thieves
 All can live without toil
 Quarrelling, dividing, putting up a fence
 And calling all this self-defence
 Lawless bandits rule over us
 A cruel thing to contemplate
 The goddess in her grace has shown you
 What you should proclaim. (62)

"One word contains many
 One word can clean all stain
 In order that one word may stick
 Many are the formulae coined!
 Hail Siva say some
 Hari, Hari say others
 Rama, Rama say a third
 Siva, Siva a fourth
 Om Sakti invoked by the wise
 Is also that same thing. (63)

"I have given you now the essence
 Doubt no more the truth of God
 Hard hearts will not see God
 Fill your heart for ever with grace
 Faint hearts will not see God
 Do ever the heroic deed
 Jehova on high and Alla—
 Clutch their feet who clutch theirs. (64)

"Five continents on earth
 And of religions a crore
 Buddhism Jainism Zorastrianism
 The Christian worship of Jesus
 The Hindus' Sanatana Islam Jewry
 The Tao of the Chinese
 From 'blindman's buff' all the way up

How many creeds we know!
But deep in them all
Is one essence. (65)

“Listen now to that essence
Which I shall expound
You are God, You are God, God yourself
You are That, you are That, yourself are That
To deny God’s presence on earth
Is a delusion that has entered your mind
Put away that delusion
And assert for ever ‘I am God’ ”. (66)

The New Woman

Hail! hail! A thousand hails!
Ten thousand hails to your golden feet!
Like a fresh lotus in the mud
Bright and beautiful you have come!
The drums of Freedom ushering you
Have beaten all our distress away —
Maiden Queen, the answer at last
To our people’s penances!

“Women too have the right to be free!”
Those words emerging from your lotus mouth —
Was it Narada’s *vina* I heard
Or the honey-sweet flute of Krishna himself?
Perhaps the Vedas as a golden girl

THE NEW WOMAN

To save and exalt us spoke those words —
Or straight from heaven has nectar descended
To wipe out at once both old age and death?

They are mad, we are told, who would enslave
Human beings endowed with reason;
The way for men to become gods
Is to cease to do demeaning tasks,
Walk upright and throw in the fire
The scrolls of bondage and slavery —
Did you hear these novelties
Out of that sweet gold-bud mouth?

When men and women are equal deemed
Our brains on earth will burgeon, it seems;
Clothed in virtue, in woman's form here,
Is the very goddess, Our Mother, it seems;
Fear and shame to dogs belong,
Wisdom, virtue, freedom and courage
Are a well-born woman's natural traits —
You heard these claims of that heavenly girl?

As good as the land is the crop that it yields;
For an ignorant woman trained as a serf
To produce lofty characters
Is quite impossible, it seems;
Well-born women are by nature chaste;
With brute might and ignorance to guard their virtue
Is, it seems, both foolish and wrong —
These girlish novelties, did you hear?

These words and deeds of the New Woman
However strange in this our age
Were in the older Vedic days
Common speech and acts, they say.

In full agreement with the sages
These dulcet truths the maid utters
Were perverted later, it seems,
To our sorrow and decline.

A straight look and an upright gait,
Brows that fear none on earth,
A pride arising from mature knowledge
Will keep a woman steadfast, it seems.
A woman's duty, we are told,
Is to spit on the darkness of ignorance
And a helpless, sunk, uncultured life—
Did you hear that fledgling girl?

To know the subtleties of life,
To learn the various arts and crafts,
One must travel all over the world
And bring novelties home, it seems.
In the sweat of their brows they will work, they say,
To raise our land and make her great.
To retire and live in a hole in the house—
These heroines won't have it, they say!

Many and many a lore they will learn;
Many and many a deed they will do;
Destroy all the hoary lies;
Raze down all the stupid blocks;
All that men have done so far
They will reform for God's assent;
Earn men's regard by the way they live—
Did you listen to that youngster's aims?

Hail! hail! Long live and hail!
The New Women's glory for ever glow!
To transform and renew our world,
To make all men immortal like gods,

FREEDOM FOR WOMEN

The eager goddess, our great Mother,
Has of her grace become a girl
And come to earth to tell us these truths —
The greatest treasure of all we have gained!

Freedom for Women

We sing the joyous song
Of women free —
With our eyes' sparkle, our life's
Will now agree!

Clap your hands and dance,
Shake the land;
The Devil is dead, good days are here,
Not too much manned!

Dead those who thought a girl that reads
Commits a sin;
Crest-fallen those who would ever keep
Their women within.

Like bullocks beaten and yoked to the plough
They thought they would
Beat us too up and domesticate —
As if they could!

A dog is not consulted when
Sold for a price;
Afraid to kill, us too they have
Cut to this size.

Chastity? Yes — but for both sexes
The same measure;
Down with the tyrants who mate their girls
To suit *their* pleasure!

To rule the land and make the laws
Are all *we* here;
To reach as high as any man can
We do not fear.

The Vedas we too can create
And define sin;
It is we that cook and also raise
Clan and kin.

We will wed the man we love
And give him a hand;
Better than the ancient saws, our deeds
Will raise our land!

A Storm

Based on an incident in Puducheri Wednesday the 22nd
of November, 1916

WIFE: The wind blows, the sea roars,
 Wake up, my dear;
 The rain drives through holes and doors
 Causing great fear!

A FIRE-CHICK

HUSBAND: The sky glows, the earth shakes;
 Strays, goddess, from your path
Lost wretches, for our poor sakes,
 Remit your wrath.

WIFE: That very hut but yesterday
 Was our place:
Driven thence by death's sway
 We are saved by her grace!

A Fire-Chick

I found a little fire-chick
And put it in a forest bush;
The forest burned and turned to ash.
A fiery hero when we have
What foolish talk of chick and hen!

To Sister Nivedita

An offering to grace divine,
A temple built for Love,
The sun to lighten my dark mind,
For our crops a shower from above.

Great treasure for us in poverty sunk
Who know no way to wealth,
The fire to burn our servile rolls,
Mother, Goddess, my soul's health!

Welcome to the Prince of Wales

1905-1906

Welcome, Prince! Long may you live!
The precious son of a great king
Of a far island in the West,
You deserve to be welcomed.
Royal Highness, you and your wife
Have come across these thousands of leagues
Just to see me. Hail, all hail!

Listen to my words that come spontaneous
From a full and joyous heart.
Before your fathers started to rule
My loved children in this land
My heart was riddled with a hundred sores
Caused by the numberless torments inflicted
By unloving aliens for a thousand years.
No use now to grieve over the past.
When your people came after them
Some of those sores have been healed.
Wars were no more and my poor sons
Could live at last in peace and secure.
Once again my land as of old
Could rain in abundance the grace of God.

WELCOME TO THE PRINCE OF WALES

Many new industries arose
And employments to make wealth.
Besides, all the horrors ceased
Of cruel religious fanatics.
Female infants thrown into rivers,
Children crushed under chariot wheels,
Widows burnt with their husband's corpses,
And other such evils disappeared.
A ray or two from that sun of knowledge
Which pierced the darkness in the West
Found their way here to light my sons.

But so what? Millions more
Botherations are still here.
Poverty and a thousand other
New evils have come with you.

Still all these through God's grace
Will fade away, not strike root.
All diseases your men will cure.
That they came with medicines is no lie.
And so for ever let them flourish,
The people of England worthy of fame.
My dear children and those united
In a friendship devoid of pinpricks
Neither in any way hurting the other
Live well together! And your father the king
Of that fair race, may he be happy!
Live you, and she, Mary your love,
The gentle swan in your heart's sweet lake!
And my own dear children, long may they live!

*Kannan Pattu*⁶³
KANNAN MY FRIEND

"With the gold-bright Subhadra
How shall I elope?"
In two twos he gives me a tip
With that task to cope.
"I see no way to kill
Karna the archer ace,⁶⁴
Help me": in one second a ruse
That hero to outface!

In the days I roamed the forests
He kept fear afar;
When I fought at the head of my army
He willingly guided my car;
For ailments of the body
Apt medicines he prescribes;
To counter cares ignoble
The right course describes.

Ask him the way to live,
In a word he gives it to you;
The way to work, to master fate,
Obtain the fruit that is due;
Call him and he will come,
No excuses made —
A shelter in rain, for hunger food,
Our Kannan, life's sure aid.

Ask and he will give, put up
With all your jibes and jokes;
Dance and sing and assuage
Sorrow with gentle strokes;

Before I put my thought in words
He knows what is in my mind;
Where in all my hosts of friends
His kindness can I find?

If into my mind enters conceit
He will smash it with a blow;
If I utter a word with guile in my heart
He will spit on my face and go;
Like a great flood his words of grace
Will cleanse the rotting moss
That gathers in a petty mind
Brooding on shame and loss.⁶⁵

Like a child he will romp and roll and laugh
And circle in endless whirls;
And scheme devices all day long
To snare the pretty girls;
If I ignore him I am lost,
Endless will be my trouble;
Should I lose Kannan what is this world
But a worthless bubble?

My wrath he quenches with a word
And laughter shakes my sides;
All rifts and strains removed at once,
Sulks gone, pure joy abides;
In danger standing next to me
Disastrous tides he turns;
Evils that moth-like come in hordes
Like a flame he quickly burns.

Liars and those that won't do right
He will trample under his feet;
Though he himself, a mystery,
Piles up mounts of deceit!

SUBRAMANIA BHARATI

He will act like a maid or a madcap,
Wayward, by rules unbound,
Burn like fire, like water cool
As suits the means he has found.

Like a soldier whose trade it is to kill
Is Kannan in temperament;
Like a child's his words, frank and revealing,
Free as the firmament.
The good he will guard from every harm,
And as to others I could name,
More deadly than plague or poison he,
More cruel and scorching than flame.

In witching songs that feed love,
In arts that gladden the eye,
In soldier-craft, in everything,
Perfect his mastery.
Great God enthroned in the mind and heart
Of the Veda-chanting sages,
With his Gita he enraptured me—
I will bless him through the ages!

KANNAN MY MOTHER

Never, never sates the milk
Of awareness in Nature's breast,
Stored up and given me to suck
By my mother, of all others the best:
Kannan her name, with her arms,
The wide skies, embracing me,
Delectable stories she tells
On her lap, the earth, placing me.

Some of these stories are sweet
Of victory and elation,

Others tragic and sad
 Of defeat, ruination;
Suited to my liking and years
 Knowing my inmost mind
With love she tells them, and I
 Agog in them ecstasy find!

Strange and wondrous sights
 Many and varied she will show;
A doll called the moon which exudes
 A cool ambrosial glow;
Flocks and flocks of clouds,
 Multihued dolls that cause rain;
But first the sun whose splendour
 In words to describe were vain!

Up there the stars, heaven's fishes,
 Brilliant, a-glitter like gems,
Their number I tried to count,
 In vain my stratagems!
And mountains there are in forests,
 Unmoving from where they stand,
Silent, absorbed, not saying
 A word when they join our band.

Goodly rivers a-running
 And sporting all over the lea —
Slowly they wend and fall
 In that very big doll, the sea!
No bounds you will find for that —
 Foams and spouts that sing
"Om" the name of my mother
 You will hear in their loud ring.

Groves of all kinds, gem-like
 With multi-coloured flowers,

Delicious fruits a-hanging
From trees in many bowers;
How has she filled this world!
Of goodly dolls what store!
Beautiful, tasteful, useful,
Crore upon many a crore!

Things to eat she gives,
Unsating songs to hear;
And for company
Thoughtful friends and dear;
Sweet to make the sense ache,
With their heavenly beauty burn,
For love she rings me around
With women at every turn.

Winged birds and beasts
Wandering over the earth,
Crawling reptiles, fish
Of which there is no dearth!
Unnumbered, of various kinds,
These my friends in the sea —
Blessings in full she has given,
To count them is not for me!

Sastras a crore, and what's more,
Wisdom, discernment;
For my leisure that I may not lack
Laughter, amusement,
False doctrines, martyrdoms,
The tyranny and antics of kings,
Elders' hypocrisies, youth's
Follies, self-torturings.

Whatever I want she will give,
Hasten to yield ere I ask,

KANNAN PATTU

As she did to Arjun my brother,⁶⁶
 Make me fit for my task.
To gain her favour and keep it
 I shall ever do deeds that are fair;
Fame and long life she will give me
 And greatness beyond compare!

KANNAN MY FATHER

To the earth was I sent, but I have
 In Mercury brothers;
And daily through space as ordained
 Go circling others,
My kinsmen that over their tracts
 As pleases them hold their sway,
And the God of them all is our father
 Whom let me describe as I may.

No lack of wealth, no counting
 The gold that my dad has put by;
Expert in knowledge is he
 And exquisite his poesy.
Yet also a streak of madness
 Midst all his wonderful parts —
The good he must test and try
 To the point of breaking their hearts!

No tongue dare utter aloud
 His real, his very own name!
Men call him our Kannan or God
 But that isn't quite the same.
Those that have not seen his face
 Call him three ways⁶⁷ and they fight;
Those that know nothing about him
 Say he comes from the realms of light.

He was born of the warrior caste
And was among cowherds bred;
With the Brahmins he got his fame —
And with *Chettis* a gay life he led.⁶⁸
Black in colour himself
He goes for the gold-bright girls;
Free and easy, on your empty, false Sastras
A good deal of contempt he hurls.

The poor he will always befriend,
While the purse-proud provoke his ire;
Those that in sorrow are brave
Through him will gain their desire.
Uncertain of temper is he,
Changing from day to day;
A haunter of ruins, in stories and songs
Whiling his time away.

Pleasure to him is not good luck
Nor is pain a mischance;
With love that all things living
Might in clear knowledge advance,
Much hardship he will cause
With his minister Fate,
And the thing destined before
Bring about on due date.

The Vedas he strung together
In men's language won't be found;
His Vedas are not the idle tales
Earthly men have bound.
Men's vedas may sometimes admit
A little of his Vedas' leaven —
But indeed each inspired word
Is Vedic and comes from Heaven!

KANNAN PATTU

Four castes he did ordain,
But in their folly men ruined it all;
"Virtue, wisdom and duty:
Best in them highest caste call."
The false texts that ascribe caste
To external form and birth
He says should all be burnt
For the good of all men on earth.

An ancient of days, my father's
Young looks know no change;
No weariness, sorrow, disease
Or age can over him range;
No fear, no attachment;
No hostile taking of sides;
Urbane he lets Fate act
And joyous but neutral presides.

Those who are stricken with sorrow
He will playfully dismiss and bless;
"Seize love", he will say, "you will then
Be utterly sorrowless".
The ones that bear their burden
Bones broken, he will commend;
Those who seek bliss his bliss
Is in giving them bliss without end.

KANNAN MY SERVANT

They always want more wages —
No loyalty will bind them;
And if there is extra work to do
You will hardly ever find them.

"You didn't come yesterday, my man?"
"I nearly lost my life, Sir,

A scorpion bit me with its teeth.⁶⁹
A demon caught my wife, Sir.

"Twelfth day since grandma died —
Most solemn of all days".
The lies they tell are endless,
Perverse their deeds always.

With your agnates *they* must confer;⁷⁰
Your secrets all broadcast;
If *t'il* runs short in the house⁷¹
That is matter for a trumpet blast!

O servants! impossible creatures,
They are our wormwood and gall:
With them we live in misery —
Without them can't live at all!

Depressed, to such straits driven,
As I waged my endless battle,
Came one who said he was a cowherd,
Expert in managing cattle.

"And children too I can manage —
Sweep and dust the house;
Oil and light the lamps;
Feed and milk the cows.

"Your clothes and things will be safe;
I'll do whatever you say;
Your little ones will be happy
With my song and dance and play.

"Through forests and wild paths,
By day or darkest night,

KANNAN PATTU

To save you from beasts and bandits
I shall never be out of your sight.

"I will go wherever you go,
And prove a useful guard;
It won't be any bother
To keep watch and ward.

"Book learning I have none;
An uncultured creature I;
But I can fence and box and wrestle,
Serve without treachery".

All this he said and stood.
"Your name?" I asked the man.
"You may call me Kannan", he said,
"So call me my village clan".

Firm and straight he was,
With a look as straight as his limb;
An engaging voice he had,
Straightway I engaged him.

"You talk a lot, my man,
And your excellence proclaim;
What wages", I asked him,
"Would you like to name?"

"My master, I have no kin,
Nor have I a wife;
A single man am I
Leading a lonely life.

"Though grey hairs I have none,
I have been on earth for ages;

It is love I want, not money —
Your grace shall be my wages”.

“An ancient crackpot this”;
I thought with satisfaction,
And took him on the spot,
Well pleased with my own action.

From that day forth I see
Kannan's love for us
Increasing day by day —
Our voices in chorus

Can scarce hope to exhaust
The tale of good he has done :
His devotion, ability,
Patience and sense of fun.

Like eyelids guarding the eyes,
He guards my household;
Never once have I heard him murmur,
Or talk back saucy or bold.

He sweeps the house and the street;
The maids are under control;
Teacher and doctor and nurse
To the young is his chosen role.

All things are always in stock;
No dearth of milk or whey;
And as for the girls, in him
A loving mother find they.

Friend, philosopher and guide,
In looks a mere servant;
In action how like a god
Answering prayers fervent!

KANNAN PATTU

From nowhere he appeared;
 Called himself a cowherd loon —
The penance I must have performed
 To gain so great a boon!

From the day he set his foot
 In my blest abode,
All cares, anxiety and fear
 Are as a lightened load.

Riches and youth, good dower,
 Excellence and fame,
Learning, judgment, poesy,
 Oneness with the unnameable Name,

Clear-sighted knowledge of God,
 Glory and grace that abound —
From the day I made Kannan my man,
 The salvation my eyes have found!

“From the day I made Kannan my man” —
 But wouldn't it be truer to say,
“When I became Kannan's man”?
 O happy, O blessed day!

KANNAN MY KING

Till the foe waxes fat and ripe
 He will look on, and bide and bide;
Laughing and gay, invincibly patient,
 Days, months, years let slide.

Not in our lifetime, we make moan,
 Will Kannan win and our foe perish;
Broken and brooding, for ages and aeons,
 A desperate hope is all we cherish.

He will gather no army, gain no ally,
Nor stock for the warfare weapons and gold;
"Cowherd, coward, sapless and gutless!"
Words of derision will leave him cold.⁷²

While sceptre in hand his uncle gloats⁷³
Sending him demons with fell intent,
In a tuneful trance he whiles away time
With flower-gay damsels well content.

Like parched plants that thirst for rain
While the people around him pine for battle,
He will think only of music and mime,
The flute and the drum and the beat of the rattle.

Should we fall at his feet, and clutch them and beg
For a way out, he will answer in words that diddle:
"One out of four is sure to succeed"⁷⁴
Pray, how are we going to read that riddle?

While in his strength we put our trust,
Shameless a sheltered life he will lead;
Get some petty evils removed
Teach us to flee, hide and take heed.

Practise feints, exercise prowess,
Learn the power of incantations;
Thus will he live, discarding his greatness,
In utter humility, the king of nations.

When the time comes and the fruit is ripe,
Forth he will burst, a cobra hissing,
Like the churned poison striking with terror⁷⁵
The entire universe, nothing missing!

Finished the foe, root and branch,
Scorched the very earth on which he stood;

KANNAN PATTU

What our world and heaven a thousand years
Endured, in a second will be made good.

One moment in which the discus to seize,
One moment in which to establish right;
In between will be no moment,
And utterly ruined the enemy's might!

Kannan, my King: his fame for ever
Shall in poesy be extolled;
I who came to sweep his precincts
An honoured counsellor was enrolled.

For my daily bread I came to serve him,
He gave me wealth beyond compare;
An ignoramus I, but to me
The subtle Vedas he laid bare.

May the grace of my Lord last for ever!
Prosper the earth, sin go down;
The land that waited on his favour
No longer wretched, gain renown!

KANNAN MY DISCIPLE

Me he became and also another
Us too together, the same yet apart:
Kannan the Juggler (Who knows his intent?) —
As if he was less discerning than I,
As if he needed my aid, my efforts
As if through taking me for his model
And heeding my words he could improve himself!
As if he really thought my poems
And my intelligence were superior —
Me he sought that rogue Kannan

As a teacher, O Lord, for him the disciple!

Fool that I was I fell in that net
And the things that I went through —
An epic of woes!

My ego unconquered, unabandoned
I was unable to conquer the world
Or to set anyone above my self
And see him in beatitude.
No inner clarity nor joy abiding
Was mine. To punish my folly
In trying to mend all lives on this earth
Remove their sorrow and make them happy
The Juggler Kannan forced himself on me;
Praised me, lauded my poems
Put me in great conceit of myself.

To the good old granny chewing her gums
This was a most acceptable bon-bon!

I plied him with many and detailed instructions:
"Don't do this", "Avoid that",
"Never talk thus", "Don't wish for those",
"This you must learn, that you mustn't",
"Make friends with these, run after those".
In such teachings unceasing I spent my life.

Like the shrew in the story on purpose perverse
Whatever I taught him he did the reverse!

With my small mind I set great store
By the praise and regard of men of the world
And the respectable lives that all of them led.
Not only did Kannan curiously shun
The paths that I showed him with such concern
But I saw to my sorrow his deliberate indulgence
In habits and manners to disgust the world
And make him on all sides blamed and despised.

Day by day in his distressing ways
Excelling himself he soon reached a stage
When elders and ancient crones in the streets

Thought him a madcap, scoffed at him
And mingled their pity with derision.

The whelming sorrow that rose in my heart
Cannot be told. That the world should call
The youth whom I sought to make a Superman
A crackpot cut my heart in two.
With many rules of conduct, stratagems, scriptures,
I bored Kannan through and through.
Even if I failed to take him to godhead
I was determined that he should not
Lose his manhood and perish. And so
With angry words that boiled and burnt
Jocular, biting, laughing, scornful,
In many and various ways I tried
To save Kannan and bring him over.
In vain.

Mad and savage, unmindful of aught,
Apathetic to every issue,
Like an ape, a bear, a horned devil,
Abstracted, vacant, unheeding he stood.
By this
My pride and ego a thousand times hurt
Enraged beyond measure, "By some means or other
I'll see Kannan cured", I said.
I was possessed by this passion and thought
"If somehow I can find him a job
Fix him up somewhere even by force
He will be cured".

Thinking thus and waiting my chance
One day I took Kannan aside
Into my house and said, "My son,
Boundless for me your love and regard,
Relying on it I would ask you a favour
Which you must do. Men's deeds, you see,
Gain lustre by company. Except the time
Spent in earning my life's means

It is good for me that I should always
Be with those that study the Sastras,
Engage in discussions, find their happiness
In getting into the heart of poesy.
Barring you I know none sensible
Eager to spend all his time with me.

Hence

For my good and as my help
Stay with me a while, I beg you,
Don't refuse and plunge me in sorrow,
Agree to this".

"So be it", said Kannan, "but without work
I will not remain idle with you.
Show me a job and I stay".

Knowing his nature and his ability,
"Transcribe daily my poems in fair.
Do that", I said. "Right", he replied,
And stood there may be a half hour and then
"Let me go", he said. Annoyed I gave him
An old tale and ordered, "Write this out fair".
As if agreeing he took it in hand
And stood for a minute. "I must go", he said.
Enraged I replied, "Go back on your word?
Not then for nothing do men call you mad".
To which he replied, "I'll do this tomorrow".
"Will you do this at once here and now
Or won't you?" I growled. "Reply in one word".
In one word without batting an eyelid he said, "No".

My rage blazing up, a flood overflowing,
Eyes red, lids throbbing, I shouted in wrath,
"Hence wretch, avaunt, never for a moment
Let me see you again. Never again
In this world come near me. Go, go, go",
I thundered at him. Up rose Kannan
And went. My eyes filled with tears,
"O my son", I said, "Go and good go with you!

KANNAN PATTU

The gods protect you! Thinking to improve you
I did many things. I am utterly vanquished,
Out-manoeuvred. Don't come back.
Go and prosper".

Calmly without sorrow I bade him good-bye.
Kannan went and in a second
Brought from somewhere a good pen
And copied aright the part I had shown him.
"Sir, in all things I shall go your way,
Perform all tasks. No more shall sorrow
Come to you through me". Many things else
Of good import he said, laughed and vanished!

And the next second the Kannan that went
Rose in my heart and said these words:
"Son, it is not for you to create,
Change or destroy. The moment you said
That you were vanquished, that moment you won.
Whatever you want to do in this world
Do it uncraving and without wrath.
So will you prosper. Farewell", he said.
Prosper for ever and fare well he!

KANNAN MY DIVINE

In many a Sastra I searched
And doubt on doubt in them found!
How can one hope to get Truth
From a fool's basket with old lies bound?
Only in my heart was the passion
Somehow this world's mystery
To probe, but a thousand vexations
Daily encompassed me.

After many days' wandering on earth
Up there where the Jamuna flowed

I came across an old man
With a stick and a face that glowed.
His eyes the abode of clarity,
White beard and matted hair
Claimed my respect; and with him
While talking of many things there,

My craving reading aright
Well-pleased he told me this:
"Brother, the man you seek,
The bright one ever in bliss,
Of royal family born,
In north Mathura reigns; if you reach
Him Kannan your refuge
The truth to you he will teach".

To Mathura I went, and there
Sought Kannan, and him addressing,
Told him my name, place, wish
And begged of him a blessing.
But when I saw his form like Cupid,
His friends many a young blade,
His mind preoccupied
With a ruler's task and trade,

His dances and songs, thought I,
"That old man in the garb of a sage
Whom I met on the river bank
Could be killed with great advantage.
Of a petty principedom ruler
Caught daily in worries and scrapes
How can Kannan discover and expound
Truth which the ascetic escapes?"

Thus did I think and stayed on.
Then taking me aside, "My son,

Attend", he said, "I will tell you
How knowledge supreme may be won.
Without a care in the mind,
In meditation finding pleasure,
When one conquers and forgets the self,
One's wisdom the heavens can measure.

A great splendour is the moon,
A true thing it is and eternal;
This world with its ecstatic dance
Set going by its magic supernal;
The moment you concentrate on it,
It will come down, embrace you and bless;
If the Sastras declare this a lie,
A lie declare such foolishness!

From that lone thing, the primordial sea,
Bubbled life in its numerous forms;
Awareness, the sun in his glory,
With his rays all life transforms;
All things that appear on earth
Their colours and class from him gain;
Well-versed in the rules ordained
Right conduct the good maintain.

With their thoughts they seek salvation
And joyfully rule the earth;
Like an elephant full of must
Majestic their gait and their girth;
Whatever happens daily
Through my Father's grace
Is happiness, purity, bliss
That the massed cares can outface.

Brightness in their perception,
Lofty designs in thought,

SUBRAMANIA BHARATI

From virtue's path never erring
On earth their work is wrought.
Arts they pursue and the true
Nature of wealth understand;
Worries remove, and bright-eyed
In happiness take a hand.

Women, wealth, fame, dance and song,
Poesy, arts, everything —
Though their hearts may be given to these
Another's misery to them is a sting.
Whatever they seek, in full
And in a few days they attain,
Though in jungles and bushes they dwell,
In God's garden it is they remain.

I have told you the way of the wise;
That wisdom soon may you get!"
In a voice sweeter than honey
The truth before me he set.
The degrading dreams of old
Vanished, I knew not how;
Wisdom's blaze I had seen,
The world but its dance to me now!

KANNAMMA MY CHILD

My little poppet, Kannamma,
My heavenly treasure!
Come to take my sins away,
Bless beyond measure.

Peach ambrosial, darling child,
Speaking picture of gold!

KANNAN PATTU

Dancing honey, dripping and tripping,
For me to enfold.

Come you a-running, Kannamma,
What rapture to race you!
Come you a-dancing, my soul
Goes out to embrace you.

A whiff of your hair, and sky-high
Burgeons my pride;
When folks praise you, a thrill
Runs through my side.

A kiss on your cheek and my heart
Is a drunkard dazed;
When I hold and hug you I am
Completely crazed.

If your cheek glows in chagrin, my mind
Quivers in unrest;
When you knit your brows, my heart
Stifles oppressed.

Tears from your eyes, sweetheart,
Draw blood from my breast!
Apple of my eye, my life
Is by you sole possessed.

Your childish prattle, Kannamma,
Smooths my path;
Your jasmine smile at once
Subdues my wrath.

Can ancient scrolls tell tales
As sweet as you?
Is there your like among gods
For love that is true?

SUBRAMANIA BHARATI

What gem or jewel like you
On breast to wear?
What treasure for a virtuous life
So rich and rare?

KANNAN MY PLAYBOY

A persistent playboy is Kannan,
To the girls in his street a perpetual nuisance.

Fruits he will give me to eat,
Then snatch them to see my hopes foiled;
If I beg him, "My darling, my sweet",
He will give them back, bitten and soiled!

Honey-sweet things he will place
Out of my reach to annoy;
He will call me his gazelle of grace,
And a sharp pinch will shorten my joy.

With beautiful flowers he will tease,
Make me cry, tempt me no end,
"Close your eyes, you shall have these":
I do and they pass to my friend!

He will pull at my plait from behind,
I turn, he is out of my view;
Handfuls of dust most unkind
He has heaped on my sari brand new!

His magical flute he would play
And flood us with nectar divine;
Eyes closed, mouths open we would stay
And lap up that exquisite wine.

KANNAN PATTU

On us thus absorbed six or seven
Thick black ants he would loose —
Was there ever on earth or in heaven
A mischief to rival this ruse?

We must turn up for play as he bids;
Our work is as nothing to his game;
He will run, jump, dance with the kids,
Steal home and hold us to blame.

Mama's darling is he, if you please,
Auntie Awful's too, Papa's ditto;
To those tormenting old folk this tease
Is a model most fair and fit, oh!

Expert in carrying tales,
He has no scruples, no fears;
His cunning, when he is caught, never fails,
And he sets us poor girls by our ears!

KANNAN MY BELOVED (i)

Like a fly on a hook,
Like a flame in the breeze,
My poor heart a-flutter
Throbbled in unease;
Like a caged parrot
I moped all alone —
What pleased me once most
Now made me groan.

Stretched on my mat,
Fretful and weary,
I found even mother
Dismal and dreary;

And as for you, friends,
With your ceaseless chatter,
Like a disease I dreaded you
And your patter.

No food for me, dear,
No sleep and no rest;
Nor fragrance in aught —
Even flowers the best;
No firmness, no fixity,
Only confusion;
No joy even fleeting,
Pain in profusion.

Milk tasted bitter
And bed proved a scarring;
Dear Polly's twitter
Hateful and jarring;
Four doctors in conference
Said, "Too late they have seen us";
The bridgeside astrologer
Blamed Saturn and Venus!

In a dream, on a night,
Unseen, unknown,
Somebody touched me,
My heart's very own.
Woke I a-quiver
My sweet one to capture —
Naught was to seize there
Except the rapture!

A cool wave drenched me,
I was myself again;
In all my old haunts
Did my relish regain;

KANNAN PATTU

Desire surged upward —
My heart Joy's abode;
Fear was a dead thing,
Beauty in strode!

The spot where he brushed me
With his finger and palm,
It thrills and it tingles,
It stills and is calm.
"Who is this Unknown?"
I mused and I mused:
And lo! Kannan's image
With beauty suffused!

KANNAN MY BELOVED (ii)
"Sleep and Vigil"

So late, beside your selves, and wide awake,
The row you make!
At dead of night when even thieves would snore,
What an uproar!
You have roused the town shouting to each other,
Forgot I have a mother;
With your sapient chatter over odds and ends
You disgust me, friends.

I have borne all this long, but the curse
Is daily worse:
"Nani's plait a crookback pulled, pell-mell
Her flowers fell";
"An elephant ran amok, red the town painted,
And Anji fainted;"
"Rohini ate up all the butter in the pot,
A belly ache got";

"Ten urchins found Patni in the field and kissed her,
Not one missed her";
"An astrologer foretold Natthi's daughter numerous things,
Plus forty kings";
"A maimed Malayalee at Kovini gloated and glared,
Got her quite scared";
"Back home is good-for-nothing Vidya, pretentious wench,
With her German and French".

The tales you tell, the lies, stale jokes and cheap!
They have spoilt my sleep.
For God's sake tie up all the flutes,
Drums and lutes.
Put out the lights except that one, very small,
Which turn to the wall,
And leave me alone to rest as I might,
Go home, good night!

(After their departure)

But what sleep can I have until I see my lord,
Kannan my God?
The girls have left, my beloved is waiting and awake
For my sake.
"Near that hedge, at the corner of Bell Metal Street,
We shall meet",
He said. What odds these eyes will never close in rest
Till he is clapped to my breast?

KANNAN MY BELOVED (iii)
"The Search in a Forest"

Looking for you in a forest
O how tired and lost was I!

Goodly trees all around
Laden with wonderful fruits,
Bamboo enclosures arow,
Streams that made music like lutes.

Flowers that set hearts aflame,
Oceans of scattered leaves,
Wide and tempting pools,
And bushes with thorny sheaves.

Long-eyed and lovely gazelles,
Tigers rehearsing their roar,
Birds with their friendly lays
And pythons stretched on the floor.

Lions striding like kings,
Elephants a-tremble to hear them,
Young does scattering in front,
And frogs that wouldn't go near them.

Foot-sore and weary I stumbled,
My eyes through the gloom ceased to peer,
When suddenly stood there before me
A hunter with a spear and a leer!

"My girl, with your ravishing beauty
You have driven me crazy", he said:
"Darling, the apple of my eye,
I must hug you and take you to bed.

"How come you are tired and lost?
Good meat let us prepare and eat;
I will fetch you delicious fruits
And toddy divinely sweet".

So spoke that grim-eyed hunter,
His stare put my poor soul a-stretch;

On the rack, with folded hands,
I said these words to that wretch:

"My brother, I fall at your feet;
With evil words don't frighten me;
A woman, another man's wife,
Is it right you should even see?"

"Have done, I want no preaching;
It is pleasure I seek of your body;
Your dalliance makes my head whirl,
My dear, like frothy old toddy".

I heard those words and screaming
"Kannan" I swooned in my fear;
Not many moments since then
I awake and find you here.

O Kannan, where is that hunter?
Was it he that screamed, fell a-swoon?
My jewel, come to rescue me,
How bountiful is your boon!

KANNAN MY BELOVED (iv)
"A Message"

What are his intentions, my dearest dear,⁷⁶
It is that he must tell you, my dearest dear,
Let him speak out, my dearest dear,
And something we will do, my dearest dear.

Unwed, we women, my dearest dear,
Can manage quite well, my dearest dear,
Other princes a-plenty, my dearest dear,
This too you must tell, my dearest dear.

KANNAN PATTU

A king unfaithless, my dearest dear,
Has no friend anywhere, my dearest dear,
What fault he found here, my dearest dear,
Let him clearly declare, my dearest dear.

Isn't it shameless, my dearest dear,
To seduce and skulk, my dearest dear,
Deceit personified, my dearest dear,
Old Ponni called him, my dearest dear.

Things told on the riverside, my dearest dear,
One day, in secret, my dearest dear,
Tell him, by drumbeat, my dearest dear,
I will broadcast town-wide, my dearest dear.

Treacherous, his schemings, my dearest dear,
With milkmaids and such, my dearest dear,
With warrior ladies, my dearest dear,
Won't help him much, my dearest dear.

To us born women, my dearest dear,
Woes and woes yet, my dearest dear,
A tune he piped once, my dearest dear,
My heart can't forget, my dearest dear.

Restless, my mind, my dearest dear,
Thinks aye of that whelp, my dearest dear,
The final word now, my dearest dear,
And God for our help, my dearest dear!

KANNAN MY BELOVED (V)

His features all forgotten —
Isn't it a disgrace
That I should still remember
His love, but not his face?

SUBRAMANIA BHARATI

A something flits and fleets,
Like him and yet not wholly;
On a nearer view I miss
The jasmine smile, how sorely!

Ceaseless and unresting
My heart recalls his ways;
And my lips, you know, for ever
Chant that sweet cheat's praise.

How sinful of these eyes
To lose his living features —
Was ever among women before
So helpless and hapless a creature?

The bee forgetting honey,
The sunflower the sun,
A shoot forgetting rain
Are not of this world's run.

If they can't recall his face
What have these eyes to give?
Without even a painted picture
My dear, how shall I live?

KANNAN MY LOVER

Fruits he will bring, my Kannan,
Sweet as candy;
Sandal paste, ice-cold,
And attars dandy;
Blue bending like the sky
A fragrant dot
On my forehead fix,
A beauty spot.

KANNAN PATTU

Hair oils he will bring
Of sweet scent;
And for black beetle eyes
Collyrium blent;
Crushed flowers with which to make
Red paint for feet;
A speaking god to girls
Is Kannan sweet.

Saffron he will bring
For the breast;
Give untold wealth, embrace,
Make love with zest;
Without fear or shame
Look on his face,
No more sorrows then,
Abounding grace!

KANNAMMA MY BELOVED (i)
“Apocalypse”

Do the rays of your eyes, Kannamma,
From sun and moon roll?
And is your dark eyeball
Heaven's black bowl?
In your blue silk and diamonds
You look like the skies
Glittering at midnight
With their thousand eyes.

Is your flashing smile
Flowers a-row?
The coel's song
Is your voice, I know;

Your heaving breast
The sea's blue waves —
For you, virgin goddess,
My heart craves.

You cite scriptures, dear,
What use are they?
A man afire
No rules will obey.
Wedding rites before elders
We will later go through;
No waiting now, look,
A big kiss for you!

KANNAMMA MY BELOVED (ii)
"Eyes covered from behind"

Perched on the pier one day
I gazed at the sea and the sky;
Saw the wide circle on high
Clasping and kissing the bay.
Lost in that crowded blue
And rapturous dreams not a few,
Of pleasure I had my fill
While Time seemed to stand still.

Suddenly came from behind
Someone who closed both my eyes.
In the scent of the silk and its rise,
In the feel of those hands so refined,
In the gush of my joy upclimbing,
In our heartbeats' perfect timing,
I knew who it was. "This feat
Can't fool me, Kannamma, my sweet!"

She laughed and I put her hands back
And hugged her. "Now out with your news".
"What found you so lost in your views
Of sea, sky, waves and cloud rack?
What saw you in the spun foam?
In the bubbles, in heaven's blue dome?
Bit by bit, taking your measure,
What gained you of knowledge or pleasure?

"In the sea I saw your face;
In heaven's blue rim your face;
In the spun foam your face;
In the small bubbles your face;
Bit by bit, taking my measure,
Your face was my knowledge and pleasure.
You laughed, and in a tight embrace
We stand now, face to face!"

KANNAMMA MY BELOVED (iii)

"Off with that veil"

The Muslims of Delhi, my dear, you must thank"
For this outlandish fashion of veiling the face;
Wasp waist and a figure that is full and alluring
They sure must be clothed and confined in their place;
Wasp waist and a figure that is full and alluring
No clothing or cincture can spoil their grace;
But who can make love when only words are allowed
And the face is a splendour cut off by a cloud?

You talk of old ways and Aryan excellence:
Which Aryan girl ever was a walking screen?
We have met and have spoken, the ice is now broken —
This silly convention still, what does it mean?

No longer uncertain, if I pull off this curtain,
No sensible creature will obstruct me, I ween;
Parsnips are not buttered with fine words and feeling —
With an orange in hand, should I fight shy of peeling?

KANNAMMA MY BELOVED (iv)
“Wherefore this shyness?”

Wherefore this shyness? Because you are a princess
Shamed by a commoner thus to be used?
Or do you think we are still babies
And our friendship some way have abused?
I asked you only to take your veil off,
Saw your ardour, and your dress unloosed —
Why cover your eyes? What notions possess
Your mind, I am utterly unable to guess.

Did I not know you when you were a child?
Redden your cheek with kiss upon kiss?
No strangers ever were we to each other,
Our two souls always united in bliss.
Why talk at length? Coming thus far
A craven should I be if I stop at this:
How can you think of me as another?
Do your two eyes shy at each other?

Must I repeat the stale old tales
That men tell women the wide world o'er?
When words meet music perfectly mated
Do they on each other compliments pour?
Does the moon pause and flatter the sky
Before taking possession and flooding its floor?
Must fire ere it licks the wood in the range
With proper ceremony courtesies exchange?

KANNAN PATTU

All the astrologers I have consulted —
I will but tell you what I was told;
Not a day or two back was this contact established,
The tie that connects us is as Time itself old:
Great Rama were you in the days that are gone,
And I Princess of Mithila, the city of gold;
You Krishna with flute, the well spring of sweetness,
And I Partha⁷⁸ your friend providing completeness.

Still earlier I Prahlada, and you
The man-lion came my father to quell;
Then was I the Buddha who wooed and wedded
Princess Yasodara⁷⁹, yourself they tell;
These men I have consulted are good ones and true,
No reason to doubt they know their lore well;
And right till the end together we must be —
Why cover your eyes then and shy off from me?

KANNAMMA MY BELOVED (v)
“A Tryst Broken”

“In the southern corner of the grove
This side the river bed,
Look out for me; when the moon is up
I will come with my maid”, you said.
You have failed me, Kannamma,
Broken my heart;
Wherever I turn just a phantom like you
Makes a false start.

I am all in a fever, and my head
Whirls and aches.
The wide expanse of heaven the moon
In her arms takes.

All the earth relaxed and asleep
Is at rest.
Only I in my lonely hell
Toss oppressed.

Strict at all times your sentinels
Guard their treasure;
Though your slave I can't be with you
At my pleasure.
Tyranny unbearable, bondage, surveillance
Concentrated,
A princess, why must you put up with all this
And feel frustrated?

Alas that I didn't pile up
Penances in my past
To spend but one night with you
In your arms held fast!
Fondle you, utter sweet nothings,
Your person cover
With caresses a thousand crore,
Your acknowledged lover!

KANNAMMA MY BELOVED (vi)
"Fusion"

The flashing ray are you and I the seeing eye,
You the honey, I the bee,
What mouth can exhaust all your merits?
Heady nectar, Kannamma, brightness, purity!

You are the lute and I the finger,
You are the string and I the gem;
Turn where I will your eyes on me flash,
Queen of queens, Kannamma; my life's stem.

KANNAN PATTU

You are the rain and I the peacock;
You are the wine and I the glass;
Wisdom rays from your bright face;
Flawless beauty, honey-spring lass.

You are the moon, and I the sea;
You are the tune and I the song;
The apple of my eye, curdled joy;
Sweetness unplumbed though sounded long.

You are the fragrance and I the flower;
I am the words and you their meaning;
Heaven's light, helpful, ineffable,
My honey, my peach, my joy past gleaming.

You are the attraction and I the magnet;
You are the Veda and knowledge I;
Sweet wisdom upsurging in meditation,
Shaped sound, the ideal you personify.

My good life you and I your sinews;
To seek you, my wealth, myself I employ;
Beauty transcendent, gold glow pervading,
Jasmine smile, Kannamma, butting joy!

You are my star, and I your moon;
Heroism you, and I what you win;
All joys that abound in earth and heaven
Fuse in you, Kannamma, my nectar within!

KANNAN MY LIEGE LORD

Shelterless, agonised and stumbling,
Pain for my guerdon,

SUBRAMANIA BHARATI

A mendicant pariah your slave I would be,
Yours the burden,
Lord, yours the burden.

Banish my poverty, disease and sorrow,
Let me know joy!
With love in my heart your praise I shall sing,
Be in your sacred employ,
Lord, be in your sacred employ.

All through the township aloud I shall chant
Your greatness and glory;
By beat of drum make the four quarters resound
With your story,
Lord, with your story.

“Among the outcasts of his farm
His stock has gone high
Since he became Kannan’s” —
It is this brought me nigh,
Lord, this brought me nigh.

Your cattle I will graze, your forests
And fields I will guard;
Try me hard and then
Fix the award,
Lord, fix the award.

Gardens I will dig and grow plants,
Put me to the test;
If rains I wrongly predict,
Beat me as seems best,
Lord, punish as seems best.

My wife and children must get
Their gruel and live;

KANNAN PATTU

And others too to whom
Aid *I* must give,
Lord, aid *I* must give.

Four cubits of cloth I must give them
For very shame;
Bound also to give
Dhotis in God's name,⁸⁰
Lord, dhotis in God's name.

This house with its nine openings,⁸¹
To do me harm,
Certain devils have entered, to be driven
With uttered charm,
Lord, with uttered charm.

Ghosts, demons and thieves, all such
Mouths shut, hands bound,
On just hearing my name should quit —
A way must be found,
To end torment a way must be found!

KANNAMMA GODDESS OF MY HOUSEHOLD

In you I take refuge, Kannamma,
In you I take refuge.

That wealth, position, fame pursuing,
Cancerous care I may not be wooing.

That you might kill with your fiery dart
Meanness and fear new lodged in my heart.

That self-willed I may not misery obtain,
But work *your* will and fulness obtain.

Know no more sorrow, despondence, defeat,
And let virtues spring in the print of Love's feet.

Of evil and good what do we know?
Weed the bad out, let the good grow!

Kuyil

A little distance to the west
Of the famous town Pudukkottai
In Tamil Nadu in the South
May be seen a mango grove.
In the morning sun the blue sea —
Its billows hugging the opulent coast
Singing their regular Vedic chant —
Provides a combination of colours
Azure against red, like glittering gems.
From all four sides the huntsmen come
To that large grove to shoot birds.

In that grove one blessed morn
Free from the hunter's incursion,
A female Koel caught my eye
Sitting pretty on a branch.

She thrilled the males of the koel clan,
Destroyed their peace, set their hearts on fire;
Ravished all the birds in that grove
And made them forget their morning chores;

Filled the air with nectar divine
And scattered lightning in thin streaks:
A koel in shape, a siren from heaven
With her enthralling music she was casting a spell.

Drunk already on poetry
I lost myself in this daydream
Which seemed to come quite out of this world!
Hearing this koel's pristine song
Ecstatic, rapt out of my senses,
"Why can't I", I asked myself,
"My human form for a koel's change?
Then should I from this sweet bird
Never be separated at all!
And the two of us together should
Live and love and enjoy ourselves.
How sweet if in her fiery music
Both of us should be consumed!"

So I thought, mused much and yearned.
The very gods could never have heard
Such sweet music as I heard that day.
In the kuk-kuk of that koel's song
A lot of meaning seemed enclosed.
That would I fain reveal to the world.
But as for the wonderful voice, dear friends,
Where do you think that I should go?

THE KOEL'S SONG

Love, love, love
Love departing, love departing
Death, death, death!

SUBRAMANIA BHARATI

Light, light, light
Light obscuring, light obscuring
Blight, blight, blight.

Cheer, cheer, cheer
Cheer if ended, cheer if ended
Drear, drear, drear.

Tone, tone, tone
Tone enfeebled, tone enfeebled
Moan, moan, moan.

Time, time, time
Time if ill-kept, time if ill-kept
Crime, crime, crime.

Style, style, style
Style abandoned, style abandoned
Vile, vile, vile.

Fame, fame, fame
Fame if sullied, fame if sullied
Shame, shame, shame.

Firm, firm, firm
Firmness cracking, firmness cracking
Worm, worm, worm.

Entwine, twine, twine
And later if the lad departs
Pine, pine, pine.

Flute, flute, flute
And if a rift should there appear
Mute, mute, mute.

THE KOEL'S LOVE STORY

When that witching song was ended
 All around was perfect calm
 As in it joy with grief was blended.
 I looked again, and save that koel
 No bird else was there to see.
 And she that one bird full of sorrow
 Head hung down looked wan and withered.

Going near the tree she sat on,
 "Darling bird, my treasure", I said,
 "With your song so winsome sweet
 That it can set seven worlds on fire,
 What can ail you? Tell me true".

And when that magic bird, that koel
 In human language answered me
 My heart burned. I heard her out.

"I pine and pine for love", she said,
 "Or else for death I yearn and yearn".

"Your song enchants all birds of the sky,
 Your wisdom is no less than theirs.
 How can you then not find a lover?"

In a voice choked with grief and shame
 The song-bird told her story thus:
 "Setting aside both pride and grief
 The whole truth I shall tell you, Sir.
 All I ask is pity for a woman
 And the forgiveness that goes with it.
 Small though I am in body and mind
 Born on this earth as a little bird
 Through God's grace or may be His ire

Every tongue I can understand
And am acquainted with all men's thoughts.

To the chirp and twitter of forest birds,
The breeze's song among the trees,
The sound of river and waterfall,
The ceaseless music the blue waves make
In their eternal ebb and flow,
The songs that arise honey-sweet
When girls discover their growing love,
The songs of watermen, the sweet babble
The bangles of paddy-huskers make,
The feeling music of limestone pounders
And the old, old ditties that ploughmen sing,
The chorus songs of girls in a circle
With their hands and bracelets keeping time,
The flutes and lutes which men play
And the vocal songs they all delight in —
On hill and dale, in town and forest,
To sounds like these I gave myself.
Alas poor me! that my heart should stifle
With words my tongue is afraid to speak!
With your long look you pierce my heart —
Man, can't you read what it contains?
I pine and pine for love", she said,
"Or else for death I yearn and yearn".

Hearing that little koel then
I was seized with a fever new and sweet
And was aware of nothing else
In my heart and in my soul
Than the sweet prattle of that bird.
"Give me love or give me death":
That burden sounded over all the keyboard,
Sat triumphant on every fret

Of that answering vina, my inmost heart.
Nothing else could I hear then.

As I stood transfixed, my mind a whirl
All the birds returned just then
To their branches in the grove and made a din.
The blue-black koel, long-suffering, said,
"That the course of true love never runs smooth,
My bright-eyed blessing, is well known.
You came like a boat to help me cross
The sea of sorrow in which I sink.
But even that joy I must now forego
Which I found in sharing my thoughts with you.
Come again, kind Sir, I pray you,
The fourth day from now, if you please.
Don't forget, O nobly born!
You have captured my heart, and should you fail
I will not live. The fourth day, remember.
For me, poor sinner, these four days will be
Like ten eons. Farewell! My heart
Goes with you, Sir. Farewell", she said.
Great and unquenchable was her grief
When that little koel disappeared.

LOVE TRIUMPHANT

I knew not whether what I saw
Was a dream or real, I ceased to think.
Like one possessed by twenty devils,
My eyes and face like a drunken sot's,
A victim to all the arrows of Cupid
Which found their way deep into my heart,
A million koels I seemed to see
In that one form on every branch.
The world was simply filled with it.

SUBRAMANIA BHARATI

Home I went unsteady, reeling.
And the things I endured in the course of that day,
The beatings, tossings to and fro,
What drum, what shuttle could have survived?
The day passed and there I was,
My life, Cupid with his long bow,
That juggling bird with its siren song
Stood all stock still as though bewitched!

Early in the morning, at crack of dawn
(I tell no lies) like a puppet moved
By cunning Cupid, unconscious myself,
My two legs striding as if on their own,
I reached the grove to see that bird.
What I saw on the long road thither
I can't recall. When I reached the copse
The green trees were all in the red sun a-glitter.
And the birds, as if they knew my wish,
Had left the place. By the fierce love moved
Which that wonder bird had wrought in me
Exceeding eager I circled each place
And scanned every branch in search of her.

KOEL AND MONKEY

She wasn't on the tree where last she was.
Looking around all a-quiver —
O treachery! O Woman! O false god Cupid!
My heart! my past! this wretched world!
How shall I tell the sight I saw?
Listen, all men driven crazy by women!
Listen too you poets who glorify love,
Listen mankind, and cruel Fate listen!
The juggler koel was seated on a branch
With her flashing eyes and tiny body
Her mouth full of coaxing words

Pleading tearfully, O my God!
 With a male monkey and saying to him
 All manner of things, Heaven only knows what!
 What is good? what is ill? what should one do?
 Then and there I decided
 To cut down those two with my sword.
 But before I did execution
 I also wished to hear a little
 What that koel had to tell that monkey.
 Carefully trying to avoid their eyes
 I took shelter under that tree
 And in hiding heard these words
 Uttered by that female bird:

“O Monkey, Your Highness, unequalled in beauty,
 Can a woman of whatever birth resist
 Your sublime looks, withstand your charm?
 Of all that live on earth men think
 They are chief and lord. Perhaps we may
 Concede their claim in running a village,
 A temple, a clan, a government.
 But in beauty of body and loud discourse,
 In sitting in state with back bent double,
 Can men ever hope to equal a monkey?
 However they may strain themselves,
 Confront you with their bodies clad
 Not naturally with silk-soft fell
 But their own fanciful creations,
 With beard and moustache carefully grown
 To ape in vain your ape’s beauty,
 Drinking and dancing in the hope that they might
 Reach your heights in curvets and jumps,
 Climbing with ladders the towers you can take
 With such ease in your stride, and doing much else,
 Can they in speed come near a monkey?
 Where will they go, oh where, for a tail?
 Can their miserable tuck-ins rival it?

They do indeed have tails of a sort
 Which from their turbans hang like rags
 (And things they proudly *call* their tails
 Which no formal occasion can be formal without),
 But when it comes to taking a leap
 Can those human inventions give them the swing
 That a God-given tail alone can give?
 With your meatless diet and benign looks
 What caste on earth is pious like you?
 A gem among monkeys I have found.
 Though born, alas, a wretched bird
 My past penances I must thank
 For falling thus under your spell.
 I sing, great Sir, out of my love.
 Be pleased, I pray you, to hear me"
 (What that koel spoke in monkey-tongue
 I managed somehow to understand).
 The wretched bird with a feeling that burnt
 Sang her song ambrosially sweet:

Love, love, love

Love departing, love departing

Death, death, death.

Beasts in forests and babes in arms
 And serpents, they say, respond to music.
 This dry monkey, as if now drunk
 His senses lost with too much toddy,
 Ran and jumped, clapped his hands,
 Alternate shut and opened his eyes,
 And scattered with his hands and feet
 All the dust he could get together.
 "Ha, ha! My soul! how it melts!
 O darling koel, my precious, divine,
 The love I bear cannot be told.
 'Love departing instant death'
 You sang, but *with* love have killed me!

KUYIL

All parting hence for me is over.
Right now I will savour a kiss from you".

These words of his made me so sore
I was bent on killing him at once
And threw my sword at him, when lo!
Was it a dream or was I awake?
Or was it a divine dispensation?
The little monkey scowling escaped
And that curious koel disappeared.
The grove was full of the noise of birds
And I a fool completely lost
Groped in vain all over the place—
But that little imp of a koel had gone!

DARKNESS AND LIGHT

Up in the sky the sun held court
In might and majesty in a bright halo.
My limbs all tired, my sight unsteady,
My heart beating, no way of retreat,
By shame and grief quite overcome,
I got back home and fell in a faint.
By the evening however I was myself again.
All around me were my friends.
"Why this swoon?", "Where did you go?",
"What on earth were you up to?",
"Before day broke, early and alone,
You went out, we heard: what for and why?"
"What made you fast throughout the day?"
With a volley of questions they crowded and crushed me.
I just did not know what to tell whom.
"I can't reply now in any detail.
Come tomorrow, I will tell you all.
Today you must just leave me alone".

The friends left, and my poor mother
Gave me good milk and something to eat.
A little refreshed I lay alone,
Forgot all and fell asleep.

Even now when I tell of the past
How the old grief crowds into my heart!
Words come rushing, trip and fall,
Matter gathers in a heap in the mind.
The salesman's art I do not have
To stop a tragedy in the middle
And exercise the mind in spinning
Long yarns of mere description.
And at the thought of the story itself
The mind boggles and shies away.
Let me rather now compose
A paen in praise of the beauty of dawn.

To melt gold, and cool it, and turn it
Into honey—is that just a gimmick?
When light spreads slowly over the sky
And soon sets all of it aflame
Where is the simile to describe that miracle?
The eye is wonderful, they say.
But isn't the eye of that eye more wonderful
Which makes us measure the very heavens?
If those great ones who meditate
On the Primordial Alone
Describe it as a spreading Light
To what other thing on this earth
Can Light itself be compared?
That which makes the grass giggle,
The flower a surprise, mud clear,
Water smile, the sky a plain—
That miracle-worker Light
I awoke in the morning and worshipped.
I saw again the world involved,
Enjoying itself as on all four sides

KUYIL

Life and the sounds of living arose.
And now, dear friends, listen to me
As the tragic tale I continue.

KOEL AND BULL

Awakened from sleep, my legs as before
Dragging me groveward, hardly aware,
I went to the copse and looked around.
The flock of birds was not to be seen.
I only saw in a far corner
On the top branch of the mango tree
The blue-black koel, and heard her spin
A long yarn to one below—
An old bull that deeply absorbed
Was eagerly lapping it all up.

I saw, flared up and was perturbed.
My heart aflame I choked and growled.
My body was bathed in perspiration.
I decided to make a dash with my sword
But then bethinking it would be best
To listen first to all its tales
And then kill that lying bird
Hid myself as before
While the koel told its stale romance
In glittering words with a golden voice;

“O Bull the magnet that draws all
Feminine hearts, Eros himself
Epiphanic in bovine form,
Is there on earth beauty like yours?
Men themselves, commending strength,
Compare their children to a bull.
O noble one, of bulls most weighty,
Your long face and outstanding horns,
Your body huge like a cotton bale,

Your shoulders Atlantean, tail heroic
 Your "moo" a roar like thunder out of heaven,
 Your dexterity in twisting your tail
 And lashing with it any silly bird
 That presumes to sit on your broad back —
 All these for long I have noted and loved.
 Born myself in the clan of birds
 That know nothing of lordly shape,
 Strength of muscle or stride majestic,
 Day and night for a little food
 I roam the forests, pick up crumbs,
 Myself a food for foolish men
 To whom my value is my meat.
 What did I gain born like this
 In the little clan of the koel?
 Is there on earth a sinner like me?
 But have you not heard how out of mud
 Springs the lotus, and out of a fish
 Comes the bright and precious pearl?
 Can base birth keep down and check
 The love that arises in one's heart?
 Is Cupid, too, class-conscious, a snob?
 Useless a long-drawn argument then!
 It may be that in my foolishness,
 Or who knows for my past penance,
 Among all males, I, poor me,
 Have been able to fix on you.
 After you have God-like helped
 Those devils called men to fill their maws,
 And helpless on their own two feet
 With your help to transport themselves,
 When you enjoy your rest well earned,
 Poor me, I will come and sing to you;
 Take a little space on your back;
 Feel happy with a stroke from your tail;
 Sing a sharp note that will harmonise

With your deep bass; kill without ruth
 The ticks that will plague and pester you.
 When after grazing in forest and field
 On a full stomach you chew the cud
 I will be by your side, regale you with tales.
 O great Bull, hero of the forest,
 I fall at your feet. Save this female.
 I pine with love. I know full well
 That it is not for a woman to take the lead.
 But in a case like this so out of the way
 What way out for love suppressed?
 Shyness and nicety are among equals—
 What shame can the poor have before the rich?
 Do we not trumpet our love of God?
 Do subjects keep back their wants from their king?
 When did love take note of shame?"

These and many more loving words
 That treacherous koel at great length spoke
 And as of old sang her guileful song,
 That filled all earth with its sweetness:

Love, love, love

Love departing, love departing

Death, death, death!

Till the song ended nor earth nor heaven,
 I knew: nor was I aware
 Of the forest. and its trees,
 Knew not myself nor yet the bull.
 The only thing I knew and felt
 Was the bubbling sweetness of that golden voice.

O Creator, four-faced Brahma,
 You made this world of old, they say,
 Gathered the waters, heaped up the earth,
 Produced fire, cold and heat,
 Blew the air and spread the sky.
 Who can measure your handiwork's might?
 Great big spherical worlds in crores

Which the mind of man cannot conceive
You have set up in outer space
And keep them eternally moving.
And in secret, O mischievous Brahma,
How much power you have hidden!
Time too you have made and boundless space.
Millions are the beings that
Day after day appear and fade
In worlds that are innumerable.
Lives self-conscious you have created.
Great indeed are all these works.
Who on earth can tell your skill?

Yet among all your wonderful works
The greatest surely is the wonder of music.
If forest and sea and sky are wonders
Unrivalled on earth is the miracle of music.
If the elements working together is a wonder
What of the notes that harmonise?
More than the million sights that charm
Is the witching charm of sweet sound.

When the magic of that divine song
Sung by that trashy thrush was over
Back on earth again, I flashed
The sword in my hand at that bull.
Before it could hit him the bull had fled,
The koel had gone, and all those birds
Came back to their branches as before.
And I unashamed of my love for that bird
Sought her in vain and came back home.

I thought and thought but nothing was clear —
How the forest koel brought tears to my eyes
With its tale of love that melted my heart;
How foolishly I fell in love with it;
How the story I was going to write
Was held up by this absurd bird;
How a heart that never cared for a thing

KUYIL

Was amazed and consumed by the fire of love;
How a wretched monkey and a hack bull
Turned up as rivals and cruel foes;
And in all this tomfoolery I
Unabashed like a madcap pursued my love—
I thought and thought but nothing was clear.
My eyelids closed and I plunged into sleep.

THE FOURTH DAY

The fourth day, my day of tryst
With that treacherous koel which befooled me,
Tempted me with its great love
Only to charm and betray me.
Upstairs at home when I was thinking
Of the humiliations to which that cheat
Had subjected me, all astonished
And not knowing what to do,
My eyes sought the way to the woods.
I saw a black bird in the sky
And wondered, "Is this then our cheat?"
As it hovered at a distance
I could not clearly make it out,
Nor was content to part from it.
With growing wonder I came down
And found myself out in the street.
In the west was this form seen
A black spot in a sea of light.
When I made towards it a little fast
To know if it was that shameless bird
The thing that stood still began to fly.
Stood I, it stood; moved I, it moved;
Would not let me approach and know it.
Thus from the sky it showed the way
And I on earth went following it.

In the end that bird neared
 The mango grove I mentioned before
 And unhindered got in there.
 And fool that I am I too went in
 And found that little black koel
 Seated on a branch in a flood of light
 And golden-voiced in a new tone sing
 Its lying stale old tale of love.
 I saw it and choking with rage went near.

"You wretched koel, Falsehood's self,
 Who know not what constancy is,
 I suppose", I said, "you dragged me here
 To listen to your despicable song
 Inspired by your darling monkey
 And your sweet-heart, the bull".

In my rage I thought I would kill it
 But again my heart relented.
 The lying koel meanwhile
 Had turned her heart into iron
 Though like a stream deceitful tears
 Gushed from her eyes. In a voice
 Musical and sweet as ever
 This is what she had to say:

"My darling Sir, is it your pleasure
 To keep poor me alive on earth
 Or kill me straight? Reply in a word.
 The *krouncha* bird widowed won't live.⁶²
 An angry sun will kill a flower.
 Where can a child find refuge
 If its own mother is after its blood?
 When gods get wrathful what happens to men?
 My love, my king, my noble Sir,
 If even in thought you are angry with me
 That moment I will kill myself,
 Fall into a blazing fire,
 Be eaten up by a ravening beast.

I know the crime you accuse me of —
 I won't blame you, nor should you me.
 With a low monkey and a hack bull
 I flirted like a coquette according to you:
 What shall I say? what do? how live?
 Sir, it isn't for me to contradict you,
 And yet I am guiltless, believe it or not.
 O cruel Fate, yours be the burden
 Whether I am joined with my king here
 And thus improve my condition
 Or not believing a word of mine
 He despises and rejects me
 And I on the instant fall into a fire.
 I am prepared for either lot.
 What dare I not do, cruel Fate?

THE KOEL'S PAST

"My rare treasure, my God, my life,
 Be pleased to hear one thing ere you go.
 Near the long-ranged Podiya once
 In a grove on the branch of a mango tree
 Rapt in thought I was sitting alone.
 To that place then came a sage.
 I took him for a great soul
 And fell at his feet; and he the exalted
 Saw and blessed me. And thereupon
 'Vedic sage,' I said, 'my birth
 Was among the lowly birds.
 How is it that unlike others
 And contrary to my inborn limits
 I understand all languages?
 Why like men's is my mental state?
 Explain this, Sir', I humbly said.

And this is what that sage replied.
 'Listen, koel, in your former birth
 You were the child of a hunter chief
 Muruhan the brave who led brave men
 On a mountain in the south in Chera land.
 In your youthful beauty you stood unrivalled
 By any in all three Tamil lands.⁸³

Among the fine upstanding huntsmen
 A cousin of yours Maadan by name,
 A victim to the arrows of Cupid,
 Struck and melted by your beauty,
 Long resolved to marry you,
 Wooed you with flowers, fresh honey, and gold.
 Daily he wooed you, his heart yearning,
 All his thoughts fixed solely on you.
 Not out of love but out of pity,
 Honey-tongued one, you gave him your word.
 You just could not see him pine.

Meanwhile your beauty's great fame spread
 All over the country. A hunter chief,
 Rich and brave, near the Honey Mountains,
 A terror to all the neighbourhood,
 Known as the bald-headed Tiger
 Sought for his eldest son Oran
 A fitting wife and decided
 That you should be the bride he sought.
 'I am minded to marry your daughter to my son'
 He told your father to his infinite joy.
 In twice six days in proper style
 He wanted the wedding to take place.

When Maadan heard that in twelve days' time
 A stranger from the Honey Mountains
 Would come and snatch you away from him,
 His mind a furnace of fire and smoke
 He came to you the very next day
 To rate and tax you with stinging words.

And you in your deep compassion
 Said, 'Abate, Maadan, your anger awhile.
 Though compelled to marry Oran
 And under his aegis forced to live
 In three months I shall work out a plan
 Of separation and back return.
 The sacred string that binds a woman
 To her husband all her life
 I shall take off and leave behind,
 And in eight months yourself I will wed.
 Shall I go back on my word to you?
 Believe me, Maadan, trust me', you said.
 Not out of love but out of pity.
 (In your former birth as the hunter's daughter
 They called you, my dear, the little Kuyili)
 Then a few days later, one evening,
 When you and your companion girls
 Were playing in the forest like lightning-streaks
 King Cheraman's dear son came a-hunting.
 Alone he came pursuing a deer.
 He saw you and your friends at play.
 Infatuated beyond all bounds
 He decided to make you his.
 And you too fell madly in love.
 He gazed at you and you stood gazing.⁸⁴
 In that one gaze your souls commingled.
 Your friends seeing his gorgeous gear
 Guessed he must be the emperor's son
 And frightened left. 'The Prince of Vanji
 I am', he said, 'O blessed daughter
 Of the hunter chief, divinely fair,
 Today I realise my luck as a man.
 I am in love with you at first sight'.
 Keeping down your whelming love,
 'Sir', you said, 'in your stately home
 There must be five hundred women

Peerless in beauty, learned, tuneful
 That with their voices can melt a stone.
 Wed one of them and be happy ever.
 I a tribal need no king.
 Can a fierce lion yearn for a hare?
 Do conquering kings go to huntsmen for brides?
 Content to live as chaste women
 Even to a Prince we are not for sale.
 Your golden feet I touch. Farewell.
 How bad of my friends to have left me and gone!

When you spoke thus and stood helpless, confused,
 That Prince reading your love in your eyes
 Got nearer and quick as lightning
 Kissed your cheek which went all red.
 Annoyed you moved away, but where
 Are the rules to bind those in love?
 With a leap he clasped you to his bosom.

'Save you what woman have I on earth?
 My gold, my gem, nectar, delight!
 You are my wife, and you are my queen,
 My help and refuge, my family god.
 What girl shall I think of other than you?
 Why without reason should you doubt me?
 We shall march straight to your home now,
 My tale I will tell and with Vedic rites
 Marry you, my maiden queen!'

He struck your right hand and swore.
 You swelled with joy, were ecstatic,
 In the surging wave of happiness
 Forgot all shame, all consciousness.
 In that unsating dream of delight
 Tight embraced his broad shoulders
 To drink the honey of his lips.
 And he the Prince like a bee in honey
 Like iron drawn by the magic of a magnet
 Fondly clasped you, and your red lips

Kissed and sucked up with his own.

Arrived just then from his town
And hearing that you had gone to the woods
With your friends to make merry,
Eager to meet you there at once,
Oran turned up. He came, he saw.

'What!' he said, 'in broad daylight!
Look at this brazen wench's doing!
Before even the marriage is through
My name is mud, my shame complete!
The troth was plighted truly but look
At the breach this insolent wretch has wrought!'
So tall Oran stood fuming, perplexed.

Somebody meanwhile had told Maadan
Of bridegroom Oran's arrival .
And his departure to the grove
In search of his bride and her friends.
In a trice with a leap and a bound
His body sweating, his eyes a-fire,
Came Maadan there. But for him
The hunter chief's son from the Honey Mountain
Had no eyes. Nor had Maadan any time
For tall Oran towering like a tree.
Only one thing the two of them saw:
Kuyili the maid wrapped up in a stranger.
That alone Maadan saw, that alone Oran.
Maddened was Maadan, maddened was Oran.

But the Prince and the maid were in Paradise
Completely rapt, their eyelids closed.
In the heavenly joy of their souls' mingling
Deep in communion were four eyes shut;
And seeing them, their souls aflame
Darting sparks, were four eyes open.

Maadan, sword drawn, rushed at the Prince.
Oran likewise rushed with his sword.
Two stabs pierced the Prince's back

And he turning in two sweeps
Felled them both who went down dumb.
The Prince, too, tired fell on the earth.
As you gathered him, your eyes a flood,
Mouth lamenting, heart broken,
'Dear girl', said the Prince, 'I am finished.
In a few moments I shall die.
No need to weep, death is nothing.
Again, dear heart, we shall turn up on earth.
Again, my precious, I will love you
And with you joined live in joy.
There shall be birth again and cheer,
A life together in the future'.

He said and closed his eyes and smiled.
His face was beaming as he passed away.

By a trick of Maadan's performed here
You, poor thing, have a bird's form.
Your Prince is a man now growing up
In a town on the seacoast in Tondai.
He will see you in a wood, hear you sing
A tender song. Because of the past
He will again be caught in love
With you, dear koel, said that sage.

'Sir', I replied, 'I am now a koel
While he the Prince is a lofty human.
Even if love should be between us
How can marriage ever be?
Won't the Prince's deathbed utterance
Prove a falsehood?' He smiled and said,
'Poor fool, you were born in this life too
A human child to a huntsman
In the Vindhya. But because
Of the past none may escape,
Maadan and Oran who as evil spirits
Were roaming the forests and the hills
Saw you there, and lest you should

In this birth too join the Prince,
 Transformed themselves and so contrived
 That you should get a Koel's form.
 And wheresoever you go now
 Those two haunt you as Monkey and Bull.
 Have you not understood this?'

'Oh my Fate!' I then exclaimed,
 'Is it right that the dead
 Should so torture those alive?
 If these devils befool me
 Make me forget my birth
 And torment me all the time,
 If they, when I meet my lover,
 In their great rage contrive harm
 What shall I do? My lord, is there
 No remedy for this?' I asked

Consoling me the great sage said,
 'O koel when in Tondai land
 That Prince sees you in a grove
 And lost in the sweetness of your song
 Stands transfixed in great love
 Those two devils with their cunning
 Will work various illusions
 To confuse and make him doubt you.
 He will take you then for a betrayer
 And perplexed and angry wish to leave.
 What happens then you will find then.
 It is time for my evening rites', he said,
 And with that vanished into thin air.

O my beloved, I have said
 All that the sage said without a change.
 How you will take it I don't know, alas!
 Noble one, vouchsafe me love,
 Or failing that, vouchsafe me death
 At your own hands, she said and then
 Into my hands that koel fell.

But who will have the heart to kill?
 Even the devil, the saying goes,
 Is melted by a woman's woes.
 And if devils ruthless at times
 Indulge in jugglery and deceit
 Will any human act on that?
 Can there be love where doubt exists?
 When a woman reveals her passion
 Where is the man that will not yield?
 Fondly I caught that dear bird
 Set it in front and gazed at it.
 The madness of love surging in me
 I gave it a kiss — and the koel was gone!

A miracle, a miracle that can't be described!
 Nectar emerging from the ocean of love,
 The land of faery, the Divine as Woman!
 There she stood, intense in love
 Looked at me with eyes unwinking,
 And then a little bowed her head.
 O Lord, how can I in words
 Describe her beauty, or her two eyes
 That looked as if they would eat me up?
 Can speech convey the poetry
 That lies afloat in loving eyes?
 Can I forget the divine flash
 Lighting her teeth white as pearls
 Or the ripe richness of her lips?
 A streak of lightning alighted on earth,
 Who can describe her exquisite form
 Her chiselled features, her firm figure
 Sweeter than honey ever was?

One word to the learned let me say:
 Mixing with the fruit-juice of poesy
 The essence of music and of dance
 And adding to it a little nectar
 The Creator must have put all to dry

In love's sunshine, that with the candy
Thus obtained he could fashion her body.

Seeing her there in rapture I
Clasped her and sucked the wine of her lips
Kissing and kissing and kissing again
And lost my senses in ecstasy.
When after a little while, lo and behold!
The girl and the grove and everything else
Vanished completely, and with a shriek
I fell down. When I opened my eyes
All I saw was the old roll of paper,
Pen, news-sheets and tattered mat,
All recalling the house where I lived.

The grove, the koel, love and romance
Were but the result it would appear
Of the enchanting beauty of the evening,
A false creation of the brain.
And yet dear savants, deeply read,
A figment of fancy though it may be
If you can see in it a bit of philosophy,
A flight esoteric, an allegory,
I shall be thankful if you let me know.

From *Panchali Sabadam*⁸⁵

Canto V

Draupadi dragged to the Court

"Listen, young lord", Panchali said,
"Because of sickness, the monthly curse,
A single garment covers me
Not fit to face a kingly court.
Besides is it right for a royal clan
To take possession of a brother's wife
Won as a stake in a gambling match
And humiliate a helpless woman?
Acquaint your brother with my state
And so farewell, please leave me now".

"Ha, ha" neighed that hulking fool,
Cleared his throat and getting near
Seized Panchali's hair with his hand
And pulled her towards him with a jerk.

"Help! Alas!" the Princess cried,
Her senses lost, and half her life.
Round his impious hands the wretch
Had wound her tresses long and black
And dragged her by them through the street.
Bee-like on either side a crowd
Had gathered, and their disapproval
Hummed and hawed and just looked on.
Not worth a comment their grovelling whine.
Impotent dogs! Instead of kicking
Their beastly prince into the nethermost hell
And taking that golden girl inside,
They wrung their hands, and however moved
Themselves unmoving stood like trees.

What use in a crisis an effeminate moan?
A dazzling damsel penance-born⁸⁶

Seized by her hair, to shame exposed,
Was dragged to a court steeped in sin
Its royal princes doom-destined!

She saw that gathering, cried and sobbed:
"O cursed Fate, my husbands, you
Who set my foot on the grinding stone,⁸⁷
Showed me Arundhati in the sky,
And in front of the sacred fire
Took me for wife to love and guard,
Will you today see me insulted
Before all these sinful men?"

Arjuna looked askance at his bow,
And Bhima at those hills, his shoulders.
As for Yudhishtira the eldest
He bowed his head and gazed on the earth.

And she while sobbing still held on:
Assembled here are men of learning,
Of spotless fame and eloquence,
Sages who have done penance,
Noble men of high descent —
And yet not one of you indignant?
Those strong men in bondage now —
My censure will not make them act.
But you, dim-witted, drag me here
Into this court and speak me vile,
And not one voice shouts "Stop" to you?
Where lies my help?" she cried aloud
Her eyes flashed fire on her husbands.

Seeing the rest sitting dumb as before
Self-distrustful like so many bastards
Dussasana in his frenzy
Twitted her again with "Slave" and "Harlot"
And many other insults and gibes.
Karna laughed, Sakuni applauded,
And as for the rest of that learned council,
They rested, keeping their own counsel!

Then spoke Bhishma the venerable:
"It is Yudhishtira, my dear, who staked and lost you,
And now with words you would undo that deed!
Expert at dice is Sakuni, his skill
Got the better of your husband.
To have staked you at all, you here contend,
Was wrong. Dear lady, it may well be
That as per old usage and the laws
Of the Vedic seers you have a case.
But all that now is ancient history.
That men and women were fully equal
People thought then. But all that is altered.
If we look at the laws of today
A woman can never compare with a man.
A husband has the absolute right
To sell his wife or gift her away.
What obtains is the law of the jungle.
Even when he has enslaved himself
Your husband can treat you as *his* slave.
The law allows it, a court will uphold it.
"If one sees these wicked men
And contemplates the way they behave
Why, it is enough to make stones shudder
And the very beasts shut their eyes in ruth.
But though this deed offends morality,
Since what you want is law, the sanctions,
I am bound to tell you what will go against you.
Alas! I lack the skill and strength
To avert a great disaster", he said,
And saying that cast down his eyes.
"Oh, how wonderful your exposition
Of law and morality!" she replied.
"Of old when Ravana abducted Sita
Imprisoned her in his garden
Convoked his assembly of councillors
And gave them the news of what he had done,

FROM PANCHALI SABADAM

'You have done well', said they all,
'In perfect conformity with virtue'.
When the Devil rules the Sastras will say
That corpses are the food to eat.
When they prevailed on the guileless king
To play at dice, was it foul or fair?
Was not all this a conspiracy?
Was this hall not designed
To deprive him of his kingdom?
You have wives, you have sisters,
And yet can see a women outraged?
Does scandal not affect you at all?
Open your eyes, take pity", she said
And raised her hands in supplication.
Like a stricken deer she trembled and wept,
Her fragrant tresses swept the ground.

Notes

1. *Vande Mataram*: The words in Sanskrit mean "I bow to the Mother", the Mother here being 'Mother India'. These are the opening words of a poem in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's Bengali novel *Anand Math* (1882). The poem became the unofficial national anthem of India during the people's agitation against the partition of Bengal in 1905-06. It was at one time sedition to recite or sing this poem. Bharati's assertion "We will sing it" in 1908 was therefore in the nature of a challenge to the alien government in the land.
2. *The Wild Mother*: Published among the patriotic songs, the reason being that Sakti who loves the madman Siva is identified with Mother India. The reference in the last stanza is to the Mahabharata war. The implication is that in her own time and with the greatest of ease, Sakti will rescue Bharat (India) from her foreign enemy as she helped Arjuna the Pandava hero against his cousins the Kurus.
3. The reference is to men like Lajpatrai rotting in a gaol in Burma without trial, and the great visionary and enterprising mercantile-mariner, V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, imprisoned for sedition and forced literally to tread the mill like an ox.
4. *To whom compare?* The first reference is to Hanuman in the Yuddhakanda of the *Ramayana* who was required to bring a herb from the Himalayas to cure Lakshmana stricken unconscious in the battle. Hanuman, unable to locate the herb, brought the mountain on which it grew!
The second reference is to Krishna in the *Bhagavatam* (Bk. X Pt. I Ch. 25) who protected his friends and kine against Indra, the god of rain and thunder, by lifting up the mountain Govardhana and holding it up as an umbrella.
5. *Non-co-operate*: In 1921 Mahatma Gandhi decided to fight the British not with swords and guns but by non-violent non-co-operation with the rulers.
6. The Government of India classified certain people in the land as 'criminal tribes' because of their nomadic and unlawful activities. For Westerners to describe a whole class of people thus, was to have been so Indianized as to think no longer in terms of individuals but castes.
7. *Freedom has dawned for us*: This was written long before 1947, a poet's anticipation of what was to come.
8. *It was Kannan our Lord said so*: Krishna in the *Bhagawad Gita* (particularly chapter IX).
9. *Three Kings of different clans*: The Chola, Chera and Pandya kings who ruled over the three regions which formerly made up the Tamil-speaking areas of India. They were in existence as early as the 2nd and 3rd Centuries A.D.

NOTES

10. *Numerous sweet tunes*: The *Silappadikaram* (vide note 12 below) contains the names of several *pans* or ragas which cannot now be identified, though guesses have been made.
11. The reference is clearly to one Professor Geddes who "made the ignorant remark that the Indians seemed as anxious to revive their mother-tongue as were the Irish and the Welsh to revive Gaelic", implying that languages like Bengali and Tamil were as dead as Gaelic. Bharati took exception to this in an English newspaper article (vide P. Mahadevan: Subramania Bharati, p. 147).
12. *Kamban, Valluvan, Ilango*: Kamban (12th Century) was the author of the Tamil *Ramayana*, Valluvan (4th Century A.D.) of the *Kural* a book on ethics, and Ilango of the *Silappadikaram* (c. 465 A.D.) a long poem of great beauty and significance as regards ancient Tamil culture and civilization.
13. *Saraswati*: Corresponds in Hindu culture to Pallas Athene, but is the goddess not only of wisdom but also of all the arts and skills.
14. *Sakti*: The female Principle asserting itself as Power.
15. *Muruhan*: Subrahmanya, the second son of Siva, specially worshipped in South India.
16. *Sankaran*: The Tamil rendering of Sankara, Siva.
17. *Janaka*: A philosopher mentioned in the Vedas and identified with the king of Videha, Sita's foster father.
18. *Govinda*: One of the names of Krishna. The speaker may be presumed to be a *gopi*, one of the many milkmaids in love with Krishna, to whom he was both sweetheart and God.
 There are two readings of a word in the second line of the poem, according to which the lotus-soft eyes could refer either to Govinda himself who is divine, or to the divine being (Lakshmi) whose eyes he is looking at with his own unwinking eyes. My translation is of the first reading which I prefer.
19. *Nandalala*: Literally the delight of Nanda, namely Krishna.
20. *A Garland*: In ancient Tamil poetry linking up one stanza with another that follows it by using the last word of the former as the first word of the latter is quite common. Bharati has followed that practice here and the English translation attempts to do likewise.
21. *The Dance of Dissolution*: According to Hindu mythology, Time is cosmic and circular. At the end of four great *yugas* each running to hundreds of thousands of years, there is a conflagration (or a flood) in which all creation is destroyed, to be revived again at God's pleasure when Purusha and Prakriti or Siva and Sakti come together.
22. *Illusion or Reality?* The poem is preceded by a short discourse in prose on the inadvisability of training all and sundry to believe that life is only an illusion and other-worldliness is all.
23. This was later incorporated into *Bharati Sixtysix* and appears

as stanza 32 in it. The last lines of poem and stanza however are different.

24. Bharati's own rendering of these lines in English makes them less obscure than they are in the Tamil:

When Arjuna fought 'twas Krishna whom
He faced disguised as foes;
'Twas Krishna too that drove his car
In charioteering pose.

But apart from this philosophical aspect of adwaita, in the great war between Duryodhana and Arjuna, while Krishna as a non-combatant was on Arjuna's side, his army fought for Duryodhana and against Arjuna, Krishna thus maintaining his 'impartiality'!

25. *Pattinattar*: A great Tamil poet and saint from Kaveripumpattinam. This line is in stanza 52 of his *Kacchitiruvahal* XI.
26. Kamban in describing the explosive effect of the eruption of Narasimha out of a pillar (*Iramavataram*, Yuddhakandam III 130) says, perhaps half humorously, that he did not know what effect this had in outer space as no one brought any news from there.
27. *Sakuntala*: Heroine of Kalidasa's well-known drama the *Sakuntalam*, itself based on a Mahabharata story.
28. *Prahlada*: Son of Hiranyakasipu in the *Bhagavatam* (Bk. VII chapters 2 to 10). He worshipped Vishnu, regarded by his father as the latter's arch enemy.

Kumaraguru: A child whose dumbness till the age of five was miraculously cured by his devotion to Subrahmanya in Tiruchendur in South India. He became a great poet. Supposed to have been a contemporary of Akbar in the 16th Century.

Gnanasambandar: One of the earliest of the Tamil poets (c. 7th Century A.D.) supposed to have been suckled as a baby by Parvati, the wife of Siva.

Druva: The young prince in the *Bhagavatam* (Bk. IV chapters 8 to 12) who, ill-treated by his step-mother, went in search of Vishnu and found him through severe penance. After many years as king he was transformed into the Pole Star.

29. *Gandharvas*: One of the supernatural orders in heaven noted for their musical skill. The *Gandharva vivaha* is one of the eight forms of marriage, where a man and a maid in love with each other may unite themselves as husband and wife dispensing with all religious rites.
30. *Tiruvadurai Day*: A day in the month of margasirsha (December-January), sacred to Nataraja, Siva the Dancer.
31. *Kamban*: Vide note 12.

Bhaskaran: A great astronomer belonging to the 11th Century A.D., author of the *Siddhanta Siromani* a book on astronomy as well as books on arithmetic and algebra.

Panini: A Sanskrit grammarian of the 4th Century B.C.

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- Sankara*: Founder of Advaita, the philosophy of non-duality.
32. *Cheran's brother... epic*: This is the *Silappadikaram* of Ilango (vide note 12). Ilango's brother ruled over what is now Kerala. *Cholas and Pandiyas*: Tamil kings from the 2nd Century A.D. to the 11th Century (vide note 9).
Sivaji: (1627-1680) The Maharatta chief who waged war against Aurangzeb, the puritanical Mogul emperor.
33. *Iyers*: South Indian Brahmins, among the earliest in India to take to English education.
34. In these lines Bharati is cleverly punning upon the relevant Tamil words. *Vidu* in Tamil means both 'house' or 'domesticity' and 'liberation'; *porul* means both 'treasure' and the married state in which alone one is justified in seeking wealth; *manam* means both 'fragrance' and 'marriage'.
35. *Vasishtha*: A great sage whose wife Arundhati is the very pattern of a chaste and devoted wife. It is part of a South Indian marriage ritual even today to ask the bride to look at that place in the sky where the star Arundhati is located.
Rama's wife Sita is another exemplar of a perfect wife.
Valluvan: vide note 12. His wife Vasuki was so devoted to her husband that when he declared that it was night when it was broad daylight and asked for a lamp to search for his shuttle she immediately produced the lamp.
36. *Here another at twelve*: When Bharati married in 1897, he was actually twelve and a half and his wife Chellamma seven.
37. *The sacred string*: As the Christian weds his bride with a ring, the South Indian weds his with a string he puts round her neck.
38. The reference is to Chinnaswami Aiyar losing his wealth in 'mechanical explorations' in connection with his textile mill.
39. The Tamil quotation is from Thayumanavar, a great saint of the second half of the 17th Century (*Paripurnanandam*, stanza X).
40. *Our great poet*: Valluvan: *Kural*, 247.
41. *The truly wise*: Valluvan: *Kural*, 39.
42. *Karmayogi*: One who attains salvation, that is union with God without any further births and deaths, by doing his duty on earth irrespective of consequences.
43. *Siddhas*: Those who have acquired certain spiritual powers known as *siddhis* generally enumerated as eight, such as expanding or contracting oneself at will, levitation, etc.
44. *Ramanuja*: The great Vaishnavite philosopher of the 12th Century A.D. who founded the school of Visisthadvaita, qualified monism.
45. *Krishna died of an arrow*: According to the *Bhagavatam* (Book XI chapter 30), after Krishna's kinsmen had all killed one another in a drunken bout, the Lord retired to the foot of

- a peepul tree, and when he was there a hunter from a distance mistook his left foot "red as a lotus" for a deer and shot at it and killed him. *Rama drowned himself*: After ruling Ayodhya for 11000 years Rama was reminded by Time that he should get back to Visnuland. Thereupon with his brothers and many other followers he entered into the river Sarayu and was swept away (*The Ramayana*, Uttarakanda, chapter 110).
46. *To look on others' goods as trash*: Not to covet another's wealth is the teaching of all religions. The great word specifically referred to here is the first stanza of the Isavasya Upanishad which links this idea with that of seeing God in everything.
 47. *Tiruteni*: A station about 80 kilometres to the north west of Madras with a famous temple of Kumara or Subrahmanya.
 48. *Yudhishtira*: The eldest of the Pandava princes, heroes of the *Mahabharata*.
 49. *Jagadish Chandra Bose*: The great botanist of Bengal who established by his researches that plants have a nervous system more sensitive than that of human beings (1858-1937).
 50. *Hiranyakasipu*: Father of Prahlada, vide note 28.
 51. *Kayakalpa*: The science of rejuvenation through massage, etc.
 52. *Unwinking like a god*: The gods in Hindu mythology have eyelids which never close.
 53. *The cycle of karma*: Karma is [literally 'action'. The cycle of karma is action and its consequences which do not end with one life but go on from birth to successive birth until all the consequences of both our good deeds and bad are worked out.
 54. *The deer-eyed Devi*: Devi is any goddess. Here the supreme goddess Sakti is signified.
 55. *Siva ... Uma ... bull*: The great god Siva rides a bull and Uma is one of the names of his consort Parvati.
 56. *The Nataraja of Chidambaram*: While every Siva temple has a Nataraja in bronze in its north east corner, the central figure of the temple at Chidambaram is Nataraja and the temple is dedicated to Siva the Dancer.
 57. *Kuvalai Kannan*: This was one Krishnamachari who came from Kuvalaiyur 'as if from the blue' and became one of Bharati's most intimate and helpful friends in Puducheri.
 58. *The rider of Nandi ... Kailasa*: Siva whose bull is Nandi and who is thought of as dwelling on the snow-capped mountain Kailasa (vide note 48).
 59. The quotation is from Nammalwar's *Tiruvaimoli*: VIII 8.6.
 60. *Auwyar*: An ancient poetess noted for her pithy common sense.
 61. *Golden deer*: This was Maricha, a Rakshasa, who in the form of a golden deer separated Rama from his wife so that the latter could be abducted by Ravana the Demon King.
 62. The Prince referred to is George, afterwards George V.
 63. *Kannan Pattu*: Kannan is the Tamil form of the Hindi Kanhai,

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one of the names of Krishna. Krishna in the Bhagawad Gita says that He, almighty God, presents himself to his devotees in whatever form they choose to give him, and Bharati in these poems chooses different forms for him.

In the first, *Kannan my Friend*, the speaker is Arjuna, the Pandava prince, younger brother to Yudhishtira (vide note 48) and greatest of the Mahabharata heroes. Arjuna in love with Subhadra, Krishna's sister, asked him for advice as to how he would be able to marry her and was told that the best way was to abduct her as her other brother Balarama wanted her to marry Duryodhana (*Mahabharata* Adi Parva ch. 221-23; *Bhagavatam* Bk. X ch. 86).

64. *Karna*: As great an archer as Arjuna himself and his greatest rival and enemy.
65. *Brooding on shame and loss*: This refers to the condition to which the Pandavas were reduced when Yudhishtira lost his kingdom and their wife Draupadi was publicly humiliated as a result of the gambling match into which he was inveigled (*Mahabharata* Sabha Parva, ch. 46-81). Bharati's *Panchali Sabadam* deals with this crucial episode of the great epic.
66. *Arjun my brother*: The speaker is the poet, not Arjuna.
67. *Call him three ways*: This could be Brahma (or Brahman), Vishnu and Siva, or Siva, Vishnu and Devi or any three of the multitudinous Hindu gods!
68. *He was born... he led*: As the son of Vasudeva he was a kshatriya, his friends were the sudra cowherds, his teachers the brahmins, and his sweethearts the cherti girls came from the vaisya caste.
69. *A scorpion bit me with its teeth*: The joke, unlike the scorpion's sting, lies in the teeth. So does the servant!
70. *Agnates*: Parallel cousins notorious for disputes over ancestral property, like the Pandavas and the Kauravas. To be let down before *them* is particularly humiliating.
71. *Til*: Sesame, necessary not only for making sweetmeats but also for religious rites, especially for the dead.
72. *Words of derision will leave him cold*: Particularly with reference to Sisupala, King of the Chedis, his cousin whose life he promised his mother to spare so long as he confined himself to less than a hundred insults. Sisupala in his arrogance and hatred exceeded the number and was destroyed with a sweep of Krishna's discus (*Mahabharata*, Sabha ch. 40-45; *Bhagavatam* Bk. X Part ii : ch. 74).
73. *Sceptre in hand his uncle gloats*: This was Kamsa the tyrannical uncle who, told that his sister's child would be his death, promptly imprisoned her and her husband. He also usurped the throne of his father Ugrasena who also was imprisoned (*Bhagavatam* Bk. X Part i : ch. 1).

74. *One out of four*: The ways prescribed for dealing with an enemy are successively *sama* (conciliation), *dana* (gifts), *bheda* (causing a division among the foes) and *danda* (force).
75. *The churned poison*: When the gods and the demons churned the ocean to obtain nectar from it, what came out first was a deadly poison which would have destroyed the universe but for Siva swallowing it.
76. *My dearest dear*: A refrain which characterises a particular kind of folk song which Bharati is here imitating.
77. *The Muslims of Delhi*: *Purdhas* and *burgas* which prevent women from being seen by others while they themselves can see them, came to India when the Muslims conquered the north and established their customs there.
78. *Partha*: The son of Pritha or Kunti, here Arjuna.
79. *Yasodara*: The wife of the Buddha.
80. *Dhotis in God's name*: Presents of cloth on occasions like a death in the family, which even the poorest cannot avoid.
81. *House with its nine openings*: The human body as described in the Gita (chapter V 13) and elsewhere.
82. *The krouncha bird widowed won't live*: This was a popular belief. It was the lament of a widowed krauncha which inspired Valmiki to utter the first *sloka*, thereby providing him with the verse form in which to compose the *Ramayana*.
83. *All three Tamil lands*: Ruled respectively by the Chola, Chera and Pandiya kings.
84. *He gazed at you . . .*: The Tamil original echoes a famous line in Kamban's *Ramayana* describing the way in which Rama and Sita fell in love with each other (Balakandam: X 35).
85. *Panchali Sabadam*: 'Sapatha' in Sanskrit is a vow, and Panchali is another name for Draupadi, the heroine of the *Mahabharata* and the wife of the five Pandava princes. When she was dragged by her hair, stripped and publicly humiliated she made a terrible vow that she would not tie up her hair until it was soaked in the blood of her tormentors. The incident in the Sabha Parva of the *Mahabharata* is the climax of that epic after which there is no turning back to peace.
86. *Penance-born*: Like many other heroes and heroines in the Indian epics, Draupadi came into being as the result of her father doing penance for a child. She arose dazzling from the sacrificial fire.
87. *Placed my foot . . . Arundhati*: These are the traditional rites in a South Indian Hindu marriage (vide note 35).