

The life and writings of Avyar*

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The Malabars, or more properly the Tamils, boast of having produced the celebrated Avyar, one of their ancient moral philosophers.

This Lady's writings contain good general ideas grounded in the science of morality.

She was a polytheist, and invokes the God Suppiramanien, or Pulleyar, the Son of Siven, who is held by the Hindus to be the protector of Learning and Science, as Mercury was amongst the Greeks.

Her origin and birth, as well as the era in which she flourished, are lost in fable.

Some pretend she was a goddess, one of Brimha's wives, and had been guilty of a trespass, for which she had been driven from heaven to earth, where she was condemned to remain till she had performed sufficient atonement for her sin, by severe and long repentance. On earth she composed her moral writings, for the benefit of mankind, and particularly for youth. On account of her divine origin, she is therefore highly respected.

Others take her to be one of the seven wise or moral philosophers, in whom the Tamils glory as well as the ancient Greeks, and

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Synkrētic

with more reason, as they have four ladies in the number, and only three men. Their wonderful birth is related in the *Kandapranam*, of which I will give only a short extract.

The female philosophers are Avyar, Uppay, Vallie and Uruvay; and the male, the famous Tiruvalluwer (whose writings contain good and elegant moral verses) Adigaman and Kavviler.

All these seven wise persons belonged to the same family, were of the same parents, but were educated by different charitable guardians. One in the royal palace by a king, the other in the hut of a basketmaker, another by a Brahmin, another even by an outcast, and so forth, but at last they all turned out sages; their birth was not less wonderful. Their father was Perali, and their grandfather Vedamoli, both great saints and philosophers. The latter saw, once in the night, a bright star falling down, in a village inhabited by outcasts, upon a house, wherein a girl was just born. By his prophetic power, he discovered that this girl would be one day married to his son Perali, who was then a boy of twelve years of age, which made him very uneasy.

He communicated his sorrow to his fellow Brahmins, but in general terms only; he told them, that the girl born last night in the village of outcasts, under such wonderful circumstances, would entail numberless misfortunes on the Brahmin cast in general; but he carefully concealed whatever had relation to his own son, since its disclosure would have excluded him from the cast.

They were all struck with terror at this sad prophecy, and they deliberated as to the disposal of the infant. The father was called, and informed of the unlucky destiny interwoven with his child, and he was asked which ought to suffer? his child, or the revered cast of Brahmins? The poor man answered very submissively; I deliver up my child entirely to you; do with her what you think proper. The child was brought, and her death was unanimously agreed upon. Vedamoli alone withheld his consent from this barbarous decree, and, instead of the death of the child, proposed its removal to a distant place, where it might be left to its fate.

They listened to this advice, made a box, laid the child in, and put it in the holy river Kaveri, leaving it to the destiny of the Deity. Dur-

ing this transaction, the old prophet ordered his son to go and look at the child before it was committed to the water, and see if he could discover any distinguished mark on her body. This he did, and returned with the answer, that the child had a very distinct black mark on her thigh. The matter was now dropped, and the old man died soon after, without further explanation on the subject.

When the poor little Nayad was thus floating to a remote country, a Brahmin was on a morning at the river, washing and performing his usual devotions and ceremonies. He saw the box coming on, and instead of finding a treasure, which he expected, discovered in it a new-born smiling girl. Having no children, though he had often prayed to obtain that blessing, he imagined his Deity had heard his prayers, and favoured him with this child. He put her to nurse, and provided for her education as his own daughter. Meanwhile young Perali, having been well-instructed in philosophy, began, after the example of his late father, to travel as a Njani to visit holy places, and to converse with saints and philosophers for his improvement.

On these travels, he came accidentally to the house of that Brahmin who had adopted the girl. The Brahmin, finding him to be a fine well-informed youth, grew fond of his character and zeal in learning, kept him several years in his house, and at last married him to the girl, who generally was supposed to be his own daughter. After they had lived happy together for a while, she once returned from her oblations, and on her changing her clothes, he was thunderstruck as it were at observing the mark on her thigh, and which discovered her low birth, of which she herself was ignorant. He hid from her his anxiety, but made inquiries at other Brahmins, how his father-in-law had got this supposed daughter, and the whole secret was now disclosed to him.

Not choosing to quarrel with his father-in-law, or to appear ungrateful for the kindness and benefits which had been conferred, he was silent; but in a state of much distraction, he went away without taking leave, or saying anything either to his father-in-law or to his wife. Both were much alarmed, and the father-in-law thinking his daughter had offended her husband, or was in some way the

cause of his displeasure, ordered her to go after him, and either to reconcile and bring him back, or to follow him everywhere and stay with him. She obeyed, went after him, and used every possible means to persuade him to forgive her if she had offended him, and to be cheerful and return to his father's house. But he was immovable, answered not a single word, looked much confused, went on hastily, and endeavoured to escape from her sight. However, she followed him wherever he went, and stayed at every choultry and shettrum,¹ where he passed the night, hoping that he at last would be prevailed upon to return with her. This continued for five days, and he tired of her entreaties, in the night, watched when she fell asleep, and then he arose, left her and went away. When she awoke, she looked about, and observed with the greatest concern he was gone, and she herself quite deserted. She did not know what to do, and whither to go, nor did she venture to return to her father, whose order she wished strictly to obey, and who might perhaps think she had killed her husband when she came back without him. In this deplorable situation, she wandered about in a neighbouring village, sighing and weeping; this was observed by a Brahmin, who asked her the cause of her tears. She informed him of her sad misfortunes, and all the circumstances of her former life, so far as she herself knew them. At this he was greatly affected, bid her come to his house, and promised to take care of her as one of his own daughters. She came, and behaved in such a manner that she endeared herself to him and to all his other daughters, who treated her as a sister. When this good man died, he divided his great estate in equal portions, and she got so much that she built a shettrum, wherein she passed her days religiously, and charitably treated the pilgrims and religious travellers who came to lodge there by night, with milk, rice, fruits, and all the victuals she could afford. At the same time she endeavoured to improve by them in knowledge and virtue, asked their advice, requested them to relate to her the circumstances of their lives; and did the same respecting her own life and adventures, her object in this being to pass the time in a mutually agreeable and useful manner. When she had continued so for several years, it happened that her husband came as a pilgrim to the

same shettrum, and was entertained by her in the same kind manner with which she received and entertained the other travellers. Neither knew the other. When she related also to him her adventures, he was surprised to find his wife in this virtuous person, and that he himself had so great a share in what she related. He admired her virtue and faithfulness, but was greatly confused in his mind, feigning to fall asleep during her discourse, but passed the night in the utmost anxiety. Before sunrise he arose, took his stick and little bundle, and went off without saying a word. At this she was highly surprised and affected, thinking she might have perhaps offended him, or not attended him well enough, and went therefore after him, asking, "Why do you go away so silent and troubled in mind? Have you taken perhaps any offence at me, or do you suspect my virtue? Tell and forgive, if I have done any thing amiss unknowingly. You go away just in the same manner as my husband when he left me." At this he could no longer refrain himself, he threw down his earthen vessels and bundle, and exclaimed, "Yes, I am thy husband! And thou art my wife. I have not left thee for any fault on thy side, but only for religious purposes. As thou hast remained so religious and faithful, I receive thee again, if thou wilt strictly do all that I shall order thee." Surprised and rejoiced at this happy discovery, she promised him solemnly to pay him the strictest obedience. From this time he carried her with him on all his travels, and had seven children by her, who became the abovementioned philosophers. This was indeed no great wonder, as they were born with the gifts of speech and of wisdom. She was ordered by her husband to expose the children in the woods in the open air, leaving them to Providence, without nursing, or taking any farther care of the newborn infants. This she obeyed implicitly, according to her solemn engagement, which she kept sacredly, though with inward reluctance, and the tender feelings of a mother. When she kissed and took leave of them, each began to speak and to comfort her. One said to her: "The Deity has formed me in thy womb, nourished me, and let me grow in it wonderfully till my birth. Dost thou now doubt that he will not provide for me further? Go, put thy trust in him, and follow his ways." The second child said at her departure: "God

provides even for the frog in a stone, shall he do less for me? Why art thou anxious for me? Be comforted and go.’ The third replied to her: ‘God has brought me into the world, and determined my fate—is he perhaps dead? He surely will not let me starve—go, dear mother, and fear nothing for my sake.’ The fourth said: ‘Is not the egg surrounded with a hard shell? And God notwithstanding vivifies the little brood in it—will not he feed it after it has broken through the shell? Thus he will also feed me, do not be troubled but cheerful, and be confident in his Providence.’ The fifth said to her: ‘He who has made the finest veins and channels within the plants, in which the nourishing particles of the earth rise and cause their growth, and who has formed the smallest insects so wonderfully in their parts, and gives them food, will not he do the same for me? Be not therefore cast down, but be in good spirits and hope in him.’ The sixth said: ‘Manifold and trifling are the occupations of men, but the great work of the Almighty is to create and to preserve; believe this and comfort thyself.’ The seventh addressed her thus: ‘God creates such different qualities in the trees and plants, that they produce sour, sweet, bitter, and various delicious fruits. He, who is powerful to do this, will also provide for me. Why dost thou weep, my dear mother? Be cheerful and hope in him.’ Each of these children was soon after found, taken up, nursed, and provided for by people of the highest, middle, and lowest ranks. One by a king, another by a washerman, another by a poet and philosopher, another by a toddyman,² another by a basket-maker, another by a brahmin, and another by an outcast. Avyar, of whose writings I shall give some account, had the fate to be educated by the poet. The time in which she lived, is placed in the age when the three famous kings, Smolen, Sheron, and Pandiek lived, which falls about the 9th century of the Christian era.

Amongst other sciences, she was well acquainted with chemistry, and became an adept, possessing the power of making gold, the best medicine, and the famous calpam, which preserves life to a great age, and by the virtue of which she lived 240 years. From this fabulous narration, which is differently represented in several Tamil ancient writings, I will proceed to her performances, which are the

little moral treatises *Atisūdi*, *Konnewenden*, *Mudurci*, *Nadwāli*, and *Kalvi-oluckam*. These are introduced in the Tamil schools, and read by the children amongst the first books which they learn to read. But neither the children understand it, nor can hardly any master comprehend each of the sentences they contain, as some are composed of such high and abstruse words, which admit more than one sense, and some say that each sentence could be interpreted in five different ways. Some appear to me clear enough, and admitting only one interpretation; but some are so dark, and those with whom I have consulted, vary so much amongst themselves, that I found it difficult to decide between their interpretations, and I choose therefore that which gave the best sense, and according to that manuscript which I possess, for there are also different manuscripts.

The sentences are placed according to the order of the Tamil alphabet; each accordingly begins with a letter, therefore we may call it, The Golden Alphabet of the Tamils.

I shall now give first a translation of the *Atisūdi*, and shall continue to translate the rest, if this meets with a favourable acceptance from the friends of ancient Indian learning.

Translation of the *Atisūdi* by Avyar

Glory and Honour be to the divine son of him, who is crowned with the flowers of the Ati (*Bauhiuia tomentosa*.)

Charity be thy pleasure.

Be not passionate.

Be not a miser in giving.

Hinder none in charity.

Do not manifest thy secrets.

Lose not thy courage.

Exercise thyself in cyphering and writing.

Synkrētic

To live on alms is shameful.
Give, and then eat.
Converse only with the peaceful.
Never cease to improve in learning.
Do not speak what is dishonest.
Do not raise the price of victuals.
Do not say more than thou hast seen.
Take care of what is most dear.
Bathe on each Saturday.
Speak what is agreeable.
Build not too large a house.
Know first one's character before thou art confident.
Honour thy father and mother.
Do not forget benefits received.
Sow in due time.
Tillage gives the best livelihood.
Do not walk about melancholy.
Do not play with snakes.
Bed thyself on cotton, (soft.)
Do not speak craftily.
Do not flatter.
Learn whilst thou art young.
Do not forget what is best for thy body.
Avoid affectation.
Forget offence.
To protect is noble.

The life and writings of Avyar

Seek a constant happiness.

Avoid what is low.

Keep strongly what is good.

Do not part with thy friend.

Do not hurt any body.

Hear and improve.

Do not use thy hands to do mischief.

Do not desire stolen goods.

Be not slothful in thy actions.

Keep strictly to the laws of the country.

Keep company with the virtuous.

Be not a scoffer.

Do not act against the custom of the country.

Make not others blush by thy speaking.

Do not love gaming.

What thou dost, do with propriety.

Consider the place where thou goest.

Do not walk about as a spy.

Do not speak too much.

Do not walk about like a dreamer.

Converse with those who are polite.

Endeavour to be settled at a fixed place.

Dedicate thyself to Tirumal, Vishtnoo.

Abhor what is bad.

Indulge not thy distress.

Save rather than destroy.

Synkrētic

Speak not disrespectfully of the Deity.
Be on good terms with thy fellow citizens.
Do not mind what women say.
Do not despise thy ancestors.
Do not pursue a conquered enemy.
Be constant in virtue.
Have a regard for country people.
Remain in thy station.
Do not play in water.
Do not occupy thyself with trifles.
Keep the divine laws.
Cultivate what gives the best fruit.
Remain constantly in what is just.
Do thy business without murmur.
Do not speak ill of any body.
Do not make thyself sick.
Mock not those who have any bodily defect.
Go not where a snake may lie.
Do not speak of others' faults.
Keep far from infection.
Endeavour to get a good name.
Seek thy livelihood by tilling the ground.
Endeavour to get the protection of the great.
Avoid being simple.
Converse not with the wicked.
Be prudent in applying thy money.

The life and writings of Avyar

Come not near to thine adversary.

Choose what is the best.

Do not come near one who is in a passion.

Avoid the company of choleric men.

Converse with those who are meek.

Follow the advices of wise men.

Go not into the house of the dancing girls.

Speak distinctly to be well understood.

Abhor bad lusts.

Do not speak falsely.

Do not like dispute.

Love learning.

Endeavour to get a house of your own.

Be an honest man.

Live peaceful with thy fellow citizen.

Do not speak frightfully.

Do not evil purposely.

Be clean in thy clothes.

Go only where there is peace.

Love religious meditation.

End of the moral sentences given by Avyar.

Translation of the *Kalwioluckam*,³ or *Rules of Learning*
by Avyar.

The zealous study of sciences brings increasing happiness and honour.

Synkrētic

From the fifth year of age learning must begin.
The more we learn the more understanding we get.
Spare no expense to learn reading and writing.
Of all treasures, reading and writing are the most valuable.
Learning is really the most durable treasure.
An ignorant man ought to remain dumb.
He who is ignorant of reading and writing, is indeed very poor.
Though thou should'st be very poor, learn at least something.
Of each matter endeavour to get a clear knowledge.
The true end of knowledge is to distinguish good and bad.
He who has learned nothing is a confused prattler.
The five syllables Na ma si va yah contain a great mystery.
He who is without knowledge is like a blind man.
Cyphering must be learned in youth.
Be not the cause of shame to thy relations.
Fly from all that is low.
One accomplished philosopher is hardly to be met with among
thousands.
A wise man will never cease to learn.
If all should be lost, what we have learned will never be lost.
He who loves instruction will never perish.
A wise man is like a supporting hand.
He who has attained learning by free self application,
excels other philosophers.
Continue always in learning, though thou should'st do
it at a great expense.
Enjoy always the company of wise men.

The life and writings of Avyar

He who has learned most is most worthy of honour.

What we have learned in youth, is like a writing cut in stone.
Speak the Tamil language not only elegantly, but also distinctly.

False speaking causes infinite quarrels.

He who studies sophistry and deceit, turns out a wicked man.

Science is an ornament wherever we come.

He who converses with the wicked, perishes with them.

Honour a moral master (tutor.)

Speak slowly when thou conversest or teachest.

He who knoweth himself is the wisest.

What thou hast learned teach also to others.

Learn in a proper manner, then thou wilt succeed in being wise.

He, who will be a tutor, must first have a well grounded
knowledge.

If one knows what sin is, he becomes wise.

The wicked will not accept of instruction.

Do not fix thy attention on vain women.

Well principled wise men approach the perfection of the Divinity.

Begin thy learning in the name of the Divine Son, (Pulleyar.)

Endeavour to be respected amongst men by learning.

Let thy learning be thy best friend.

Use the strongest entreaties where thou canst learn something,
then wilt thou become a great man in the world.

All perishes except learning.

Though one is of a low birth, learning will make him respected:

Religious wise men enjoy great happiness.

Though thou should'st be one hundred years old, endeavour still
to increase in knowledge.

Synkrētic

Wisdom is firm grounded even on the great ocean.
Without wisdom, nowhere is there ground to stand upon.
Learning also suits old age.
Wise men will never offend any by speaking.
Accept instructions even from men of a low birth.
Do not behave impolitely to men of learning.
Poets require a great deal of learning.
The unwise only flatter others.
Seek honor, and thou shalt get it.
The virtuous are also tutors.
Wisdom is the greatest treasure on earth.
The wiser the more respected.
Learning gives great fame.
Learn one thing after the other, but not hastily.
A science in which we take no pleasure is like a bitter medicine.
Speak so that town and country people may understand thee.
Wise men are as good as kings.
Do not deceive even thine own enemy.
Hast thou learned much, communicate it also in an
agreeable manner.
In whom is much science, in him is great value.
The present Tamil language does not equal the old.
He that knows the sciences of the ancients is the
greatest philosopher.
Truth is in learning the best.
Wise men are exalted above all other men.
True philosophy does not suffer a man to be put in confusion.

The life and writings of Avyar

In proportion as one increases in learning, he ought
also to increase in virtue.

The most prosperous good is the increase in learning.

He who has no knowledge knows not also the truth.

Wisdom is a treasure valued everywhere.

A good tutor is beloved over the whole world.

What we gain by science is the best estate, (inheritance).

Adore the Goddess Sarasbadi.

The *Vedam* (sacred writings) teaches wisdom.

Speak and write for the benefit of the public.

He who speaks well and connectedly, is best understood by all.

If knowledge has a proper influence on the mind, it makes us vir-
tuous.

End of the moral book Kalwivoluckam, composed by Avyar.

Translation of the small Tamil book *Konneivenden*,⁴ writ-
ten by the female philosopher Avyar

Continual praise be to the Son of him, who is crowned with the
flower of Konnei (Poinciana pulcherrima.)

Mother and Father are the first known Deity.

A good man attendeth religious service.

Without one's own house there is nowhere a good lodging.

The estate of the wicked will be robbed by the wicked.

Modesty is the best ornament of the fair sex.

If one maketh himself hateful to his fellow creatures,
he must entirely perish.

Exercise in writing and cyphering is most useful.

Synkrētic

Obstinate children are like a poisonous draft.
Though thou art very poor, do what is honest.
Adhere chiefly to the only one constantly.
The virtuous will always improve in wisdom and knowledge.
A wicked mouth destroys all wealth.
Seek wealth and money, but without quarrel.
Give in writing what shall stand fast.
A woman must attend herself best.
Even with thy nearest friends speak not impolitely.
Speak friendly even to the poor.
If one will criticise, he will find some fault everywhere.
Speak not haughtily, though thou art a great man.
To pardon is better than to revenge.
What shall stand firm must have witnesses.
Wisdom is of greater value than ready money.
To be on good terms with the King is useful in due time.
A calumnious mouth is a fire in the wood.
Good advisers are hated by the world.
The best ornament of a family is unanimity.
What a senior says, must a junior not despise.
If thou cherishest passion, all thy merit is lost.
Get first the plough, and then look out for the oxen.
A moral life has a happy influence on the public.
Gaming and quarrelling bring misery.
Without practical virtue there is no merit.
Keep a proper time even for thy bed.

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Be peaceful, give and be happy.

A merchant must be careful with money.

Laziness brings great distress.

To obey the father is better than prayer.

To honour the mother is better than divine service.

Seek thy convenient livelihood shouldst thou even do it
upon the sea.

Irreconcilableness ends in quarrel.

A bad wife is like a fire in the lap.

A slandering wife is like a devil.

Without the mercy of the Deity nothing will prosper.

He who squanders away even what he has not gained
justly must perish at last.

In January and February sleep under a good roof.

Better eat by hard labour than by humble begging.

Speak not what is low even to thy friend.

Without a clean conscience there is no good sleep.

If the public is happy, all are safe.

Improvement in wisdom improves our veracity.

Seek a house where good water is at hand.

Deliberate first well what thou art going to begin.

The reading of good books will improve welfare.

Who speaks as he thinks is an upright man.

What we propose we must pursue with zeal.

We must not speak dishonestly even to a poor man.

Dishonesty will end in infamy.

Laziness brings lamentations.

Synkrētic

The fruit will be equal to the seed.
We cannot always drink milk but must submit to the time.
An honest man does not touch another's property.
The name of a true great man will ever remain in esteem.
Lies are as much as murder and robbery.
What honesty can be expected from low fellows?
Amongst relations civility is often neglected.
A mild temper is a beauty in women.
The meek are the happiest.
Keep thyself from all that is bad.
Wisdom is the direct way to Heaven.
Let thy fellow creatures partake in thy enjoyments.
Where there is no rain, there is no crop.
After lightning follows rain.
Without a good steerer a ship cannot sail.
Who sows in time will have a good crop.
The precepts of the old ought to be cheerfully observed.
Who keeps the proper time to sleep will sleep well.
The plough never will let one suffer want.
Live in matrimony and be moderate.
Who breaks his word loses his interest.
Abhor and fly from lasciviousness.
Gain by deceit will at last be lost.
If Heaven is not favourable nothing will prosper.
From impolite people honesty can't be expected.
The words of the haughty are like arrows.

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A family ought to support their poor.
A great man must also have a great mind.
A good man will never deceive.
If the Lord is angry, no man can save.
All the world shall praise God.
Sleep on a safe place.
Without religion is no virtue.

End of the moral sentences called Konneivenden, written by Avyar.

Notes

- 1 *choultry and sbettrum*: refer to resting places or inns for travellers or pilgrims. Variant spellings include chottry, choutree, choutry, chatra, chatram, satram.
- 2 *toddyman*: refers to a person who collects and prepares toddy, the sweet white sap of various Asian and African palm trees used as a drink after rapid fermentation (palm wine).
- 3 *Kalvioluckam*: previously (p. 74) spelled *Kalvi-oluckam*, the inconsistency is the author's.
- 4 *Konneivenden*: previously (p. 74) spelled *Konnevenden*, the inconsistency is the author's.