

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

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

10. A STRATAGEM

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

11. AT BANGALORE

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

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

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

A POETS' POET

(Mahavidwan Sri Meenakshisundaram Pillai
of Tiruchirappalli)



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