

Avvaiyar

The Fearless Wanderer

Translations by C. Rajagopalachari

*The anger of the little-minded divides like a crack
in stone*

*There are others who when angered are like gold
That divides but easily welds again*

*But the anger of noble souls that walk in the
righteous path*

*Is like the arrow's wound in water
Which splashes momentarily but itself unites
again.*

Avvaiyar

AVVAIYAR is loved and respected in Tamil Nadu as an incarnation of the goddess of learning, Saraswati. There are even some shrines dedicated to her.

The most accepted theory is that she lived in the Sangam period, the golden period of classical Tamil literature and art. Another theory is that she lived in the time of Cheraman Perumal, the eighth century king. Yet another theory is that she was a contemporary of Kamban, the twelfth century poet who wrote the Tamil *Ramayana*. These conflicting theories have helped perpetuate the legend that she lived for many centuries. It is also likely that the name "Avvaiyar" or mother was

given to a series of women poets.

Avvaiyar is constructed in legend as a grand old woman, with flowing white hair, who was totally fearless, afraid of neither ruler nor wild animal nor supernatural force. She struck terror into the hearts of the unjust. She wandered the land, admonishing husbands and wives who misbehaved, and advising rulers.

Tradition has it that she was the child of an untouchable mother and a high caste father, was abandoned, and was brought up by untouchables. Another version is that she belonged to the caste of dancing girls. From childhood, she worshipped Ganesh and invoked his aid to achieve the

form of an old woman and thus avoid marriage (see pages 18 to 29 of this issue).

Avvaiyar is the most popular of the classic Tamil poets. Her poems are read by young children — the first thing a Tamil child reads is her *Attichudi* or alphabet aphorisms. She is also read by scholars among classics of the highest rank. Simplicity of expression and terseness are the characteristic features of her verse.

On the hospitality of shepherd girls Angava and Sangava who sheltered her from rain, fed her and gave her their own small sized half-sari to wear:

These girls with arms all full of bangles,
They served me their feast, warm and fragrant
And asked me to eat as much as I liked,
Pouring the ghee on it,
It was green, and they said it was only vegetables cooked,
But really they served me Amrit!

Poor Barri the shepherd held me by my cloth
And would not let me go at all from his house.
And simple Kaari of Paliyanur
Gave me his pick-axe, saying, dig with me.
Seraman said, come let us go to Kailas.
These three love-offerings rank high
And rank with the little blue sari
That the girls so lovingly gave for me to wear.

(on a woman married to an unworthy man)
If I could get at the Brahma (the creator) that yoked
This deer to this dry log of a man
I would wring his four necks and fling his four heads
To go the same way that the fifth went before.

A virtuous wife worthy of her lord
Makes life happy under my conditions.
But when there is incompatibility
Don't tell any one, but take sanyaas.

Take it not always that relatives
Are those whom blood unites.
Disease that is born with you,
Does it not kill?
The herb that grows in the distant jungle,
Does it not save you?
Will you hear me how I feasted at the great Wedding

Of the Pandyan King, the royal scholar?
I was pressed and was pushed and my hunger sore oppressed me,
My belly shrank, but of rice I had nothing.

When a woman, at her husband's bidding, very unwillingly served food to Avvai:

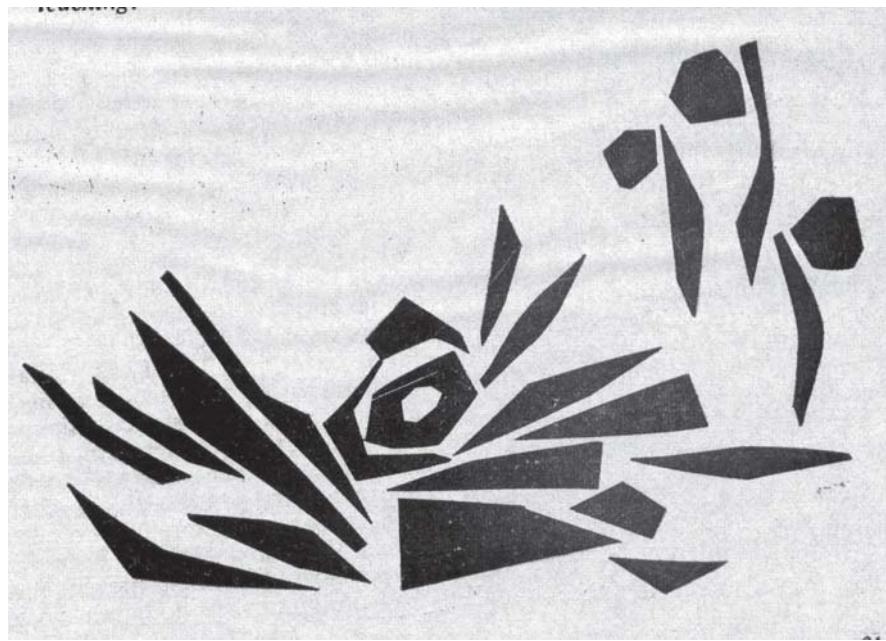
Alas! my eyes blink to see,
My hands shake with shame,
And my good mouth refuses to open
And all my bones burn so with pain
At the sight of food so unwillingly served!

The divine poets Kural, the sum of the sacred Vedas,
The Thevaram of the Three (Shaivite saints)
The Tiruvaimczhi of the (Vaithnav) sage,
the Tirukkovai, the Tiruvachakam, the Tirumantram of Tirumular,
All are but one and the same teaching.
We bow to the undeserving we wander, and we beg,

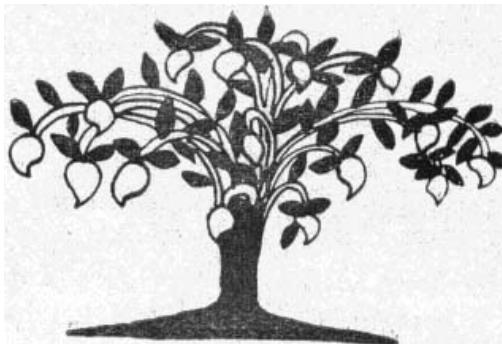
We cross the wide ocean, we pretend, we enslave and rule,
We sing eulogies, and we lead our souls to the Pit:
All for a measure of rice for this tyrant Belly.

Look at the swallow's ties', or the beautiful lac,
The white ant's wonderful structure;
Look at the honey and the hive of the bee;
Or the little spider's delicate web:
No mortal man can imitate these.
Let no one therefore vaunt his skill
Because he can do this or that.
There is none but in something excels.

Harshness cannot succeed against gentleness,
The arrow speeds its way through the wild elephant
But it cannot pierce through yielding cotton.
The rock that breaks not for the blows of the long crowbar
Splits under the gentle stress of the



green treeroot.
Compare the king and the man of learning;
The scholar's dominion is greater than the king's.
The king's glory is limited to his domains;
But the scholar is esteemed wherever he may go.



Consider it well, this body is but a worthless home
For poisonous worms and diseases numberless.
The wise know this and so like the water on the lotus
Without attachment pass their lives in silence.

Men may do deadly evil unto them;
The wise will yet exert to save these men.
Have you seen men aim deadly blows
With axes at the stately tree?
Until the end when the noble tree falls down
It throws its hospitable shade
On the axe-men, and protects them

from the sun.
Of afflictions hard to bear
Hard, very hard to bear is poverty;
Harder still is poverty in youth.
Greater affliction than that
Is disease incurable.
But harder is his lot
Who is yoked to a wife
Who loves him not.
And his affliction greatest,
Who has to look to such a one
For his daily food.

Verases by Avvaiyar, translated by C. Rajagopalachari in his monograph *Avvaiaar*; Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1971, which had earlier appeared in Gandhi's *Young India*. Commentary compiled from this monograph, and from material sent in by Akhila Shivedas and Shri Ramachandran.

S.S. Vasan's Avvaiyar

THE life and times of a legendary mystic have been portrayed in S. S. Vasan's *Avvaiyar* (1953), which was re-run on national TV recently. Vasan has used material drawn from folklore and tradition with incidents born of his own invention. In any case, authentic information is lacking regarding this saintsinger of the early days of the Christian era, on which Vasan could have based his screenplay. In Vasan's hands, the film has developed into a strange blend of fable and fantasy, revealing less the beliefs of the Sangam age to which Avvaiyar belonged, than the ideas of contemporary Tamilnadu regarding women who take to the independent life of a religious leader and litterateur.

In order to cover Avvaiyar's life-span, Vasan has adopted an episodic approach to the story. Incidents are strung together loosely. We start with Avvaiyar's birth as the daughter of a low-caste mother and a Brahmin father, abandoned and left to die

in a storm. Picked up by a childless Brahman couple, she grows into a precocious young girl, far ahead of her years in poetic ability and philosophical wisdom. The major crisis of her life, which leads her to recognise and accept her religious vocation, is depicted with a generous dose of the miraculous. An elephant appears before the young girl and guides her away from her carefree companions to an image of Lord Ganesha, set in a forest clearing. The Lord reveals to his teenage devotee her life's mission as a peripatetic religious teacher, in the southern kingdoms. Avvaiyar is then pledged to be married to the son of a local chieftain, who is enamoured of her looks. Realising that her beauty is an obstacle, that would prevent her miraculously from fulfilling her godgiven vocation, Avvaiyar seeks and is granted the boon of the loss of her youthful good looks. Transformed into a middleaged, greyhaired woman, she then sets out on her lifelong travels. For

the rest of her life, her voyages take her through the kingdoms of the Cholas, the Pandyas and the Cheras, the three great powers, whose territories are depicted in Sangam literature. This gives Vasan an opportunity to introduce several incidents, which are supposed to throw light on Avvaiyar's benign influence on the spiritual and intellectual life of the day. There are miracles galore. Avvaiyar sings and draws forth rain from the skies to succour a droughtstricken population. She moves among the common people and advises them not to be avaricious and wicked; those who do not heed her advice are punished miraculously.

Avvaiyar's role in the Tamil renaissance of the Sangam age has been portrayed by Vasan in loving detail. Her words of wisdom couched in the simple language of the ordinary man, replete with images drawn from daily life, have been set to haunting melodies. Although she is not a member of the Sangam (the poetic group

organised around the Pandyan court), Vasan makes Avvaiyar play the main part in compelling the Sangam to extend recognition to Tiruvalluvar, the author of the great *Tirukkural*. When the leading lights of the Sangam criticise the two line stanza and simple poetic diction of Tiruvalluvar, Avvaiyar challenges them to a test in which the miraculous again intervenes. She drops the *Tirukkural* into the temple tank at Madurai and it is raised to the surface in a vast golden lotus, proof of the enduring quality of this great piece of literature.

By and by, her life draws to a close. Avvaiyar cries out to god to relieve her of the weary load of duty and devotion, Lord Subramanya of Palani appears and takes her up to heaven amidst general rejoicing.

This is Vasan's storyline, told with a great deal of spectacle and ceremony. Vasan is a producer cast in the Cecil B. de Mille mould. He was among the earliest of the Indian moviemakers to imitate the Hollywoodian style of massive productions, full of scenes built on a grand scale. His sole preoccupation is straightforward entertainment. To this end, he is prepared to put in anything that would keep his audience riveted to the screen. Although *Avvaiyar* is a three-hour extravaganza, Vasan succeeds in holding his viewers spellbound. Marvel is piled on marvel. Elephants storm a huge fortress wall. The ground cracks open in a terrifying earthquake to block the path of an invading army. A ghost shrieks and screams in a haunted temple. The structure of the film itself encourages digressions and Vasan moves swiftly from reel to reel with no other thought than to fix his viewers' attention.

For all his gimmicks, however, Vasan has succeeded in imbuing his heroine with some of the essence of true religious exaltation. His choice of K.B. Sundarambal for the main role is a tour de force. Her glorious singing voice and serene portrayal bear the stamp of an extraordinary personality. Sundarambal strides majestically through the film, the very picture of intelligence and humanity, breaking into song in almost every frame. Vasan has drawn on the rich repertoire of

lyrics attributed to Avvaiyar and set them to inspired, entralling music.

Vasan and Sundarambal between them have also made Avvaiyar's religious vocation appear perfectly credible. This redounds to their credit, especially when we remember how sadly, later films like Gulzar's "Meera" have failed to make a comparable impact. Hema Malini in Gulzar's movie is gauche and unconvincing; there is in her none of the dignity and confidence of Sundarambal's portrayal. Neither the character of Avvaiyar nor the poetic ambience of the period have been cheapened and for this Vasan must be complimented.

Granted all this, however, nowhere has Vasan used the film to comment on the low status of women in society. In the context of narrating the story of a woman poet and religious leader, such a reference would have been most natural and appropriate. The producer skirts the issue itself. Avvaiyar hands out advice in all the situations that confront her. But Vasan makes her opinions conform strictly to the current stereotypes of the respective roles of the sexes.

Avvaiyar's independence and intelligence are confined to her alone; she is never presented as a role model for other women. She is qualified to be a votary of god only because she has been set apart from the ordinary run of mortals from birth itself. Other women are not entitled to the same privilege. The distinction between Avvaiyar and other women is clearly drawn at the moment when Avvaiyar surrenders her beauty and youth to god and moves beyond the pale of social norms. This action liberates her from the usual compulsions of a woman's life—she does not have to make a satisfactory marriage or become a dutiful wife.

Avvaiyar is fully conscious of the difference between her destiny and that of the rest of womankind. She sees no contradiction in advising an "erring" woman to submit herself patiently and devotedly to her husband. There is much else in the movie that is derogatory to the status of women. The two daughters of Parivalluvar are blessed by Avvaiyar to become worthy wives of a great husband

and are later married off bigamously to the same king (played by matinee idol, Gemini Ganeshan). Avvaiyar's vocation therefore poses no challenge to the traditional bastions of male superiority nor to man's divine right to rule over woman.

Vasan shows the same preference for the status quo in other matters. He steers clear of anything that could be construed as controversial. The fact of Avvaiyar's birth as the offspring of an intercaste union is not developed by Vasan as an occasion to criticise the rigidity and cruelty of the caste system. Avvaiyar unlike other religious reformers, does not deride meaningless religious rituals. Both of these are topics on which most saints of the *bhakti* tradition have generally voiced their views. But Vasan's intention is evidently not to focus on Avvaiyar's role as a social reformer.

Vasan stints no effort, however, in projecting Avvaiyar as a leading protagonist in the revival of Tamil language and culture during the Sangam age. Glorifying the poets of this period would have been popular in Tamilnadu during the early '50s when the DMK was mobilising mass support in the state by arousing the pride of the people in Tamil (as opposed to Sanskrit) culture. In addition to the incidents built around the Sangam and the *Tirukkural*, throughout the movie, Avvaiyar is referred to as the "mother of Tamil" and the great reviver of Tamil civilisation. Vasan's "Avvaiyyar" is the personification of Tamil culture; she is never meant to be the embodiment of ideal womanhood.

Vasan has used the story of Avvaiyar principally to extol the nascent Tamil nationalism of his days and to entertain the masses with music, magic and marvels. To a certain extent, he has succeeded in capturing the solitary quest of the mystic, drunk with god and fixed on salvation for self and the world. But the impact of the film in terms of what it has expressed regarding the right of women to lead independent and fulfilled lives is negligible.

—Renuka Viswanathan