

## Sri Aurobindo's Translation of *Thirukkural*

- Usha Mahadevan

Sri Aurobindo was not only a profound scholar, yogi, poet, dramatist and critic but also a translator per excellence. He has translated works from Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Bengali and Tamil. This paper seeks to study his translation of the first section of Thirukkural, Viz. 'Kadavul Vazhthu' along with the translation of Rev. G.U.Pope, Rev. Drew, Yogi Suddhananda Bharati and P.S.Sundaram.

Translation of any great literature offers a challenge and Kural offers one of the greatest of challenges because these illuminating aphorisms demand a language at once brief, sharp and polished so that the tone and tenor of Thiruvalluvar comes through in the translation. Sri Aurobindo's multilingual poetic appreciation, his absorption of Indian culture, his impersonality and above all his yogic superpersonality give him a heightened consciousness which has enabled him to translate Kural with great ease. Sri Aurobindo, the translator, is only a facet of Sri Aurobindo the versatile genius.

Sri Aurobindo was truly a multilingual genius. His English was not 'near native' but native for he spent his formative fourteen years [from age seven to twenty one] in Manchester, London and Cambridge. He was not only a brilliant scholar of Greek and Latin but was so completely at home with French, German and Italian that he could read Racine, Goethe and Dante in the original. After his return to India he learnt Sanskrit and several modern Indian languages.

One of the advantages of being a multilingual is flexibility. Clifford Sanders points out in his book *Literary Translation* that if you are a multilingual "you can avail yourself of the wide panoply of, say Hispanic literature as well as of the francophone nations"<sup>1</sup> Sri Aurobindo's multilingual background enables him to draw on a variety of material. His multifarious works in translations provide scores of examples to establish this point, but let me confine myself to Kural which is the subject of my paper. The Opening Kural "Agara Mudala Ezhuthellam Adi Bhagavan mudhatre ulagu." is translated by many using the letter 'A' to denote "Agara". Rev. Pope translates,

A as its first of letters, every speech maintains  
Rev. Drew translates it as

As all letters have the letter 'A' for their first  
Yogi Suddhananda Bharati says,

A leads letters  
P.S.Sundaram says

A begins the Alphabet

But Sri Aurobindo says,

Alpha of all letters the first

Clearly Sri Aurobindo is drawing on his classical scholarship here. Alpha is not only the first letter of the Greek alphabet. It is also the first star in the constellation, the beginning in any classification. As for the resonance, Alpha for 'Agaram' sounds exquisite.

As for the translation of the rest of the first Kural, each translation has come out with beautiful equivalents for 'Adhi Bhagavan Mudatre'. Rev. Pope says "Primal Deity", Rev Drew says "Eternal God"; Suddhananda Bharati says, "Ancient Lord"; P.S.Sundaram says "God Primordial" and Sri Aurobindo says "Original Godhead". It is said that Greeks have but one Homer, the English have many. So do Tamilians have but one 'Kural' the English so many !

It was Sri Aurobindo's absorption of Indian culture that enabled him to translate Vedic texts, epics, Sanskrit plays, Alwar's songs and Kural. Let's see how it features in his translation of the 'Kural'. Consider for the instance of the 10<sup>th</sup> Kural:

Piravi perungadal neendhuvar neendhar

Iraivanadi seradhar

'Perunkadal' is suggestive for 'Samsara Sagara' as well as the cycle of birth. 'Neenduvar' also suggests liberation from the cycle of birth. 'Neenduvar' is translated as 'Swim' by Rev. Pope, Rev. Drew as well as Yogi Suddhananda Bharati. But Sri Aurobindo uses the word 'cross': He says, "Cross the giant ocean of birth" and this truly elucidates the meaning in the 'Kural'. The idea of crossing from one state to another, from ignorance to knowledge, from the cycle of birth to liberation is the essence of the ancient Indian texts. The Sanskrit 'thru-tara' which means 'to cross' features in books of Sri Vidya Tradition. The "aim of the translator" says Geoffrey Samuelsson Brown, "should be to convey the meaning of the original work as opposed to producing a mere accurate rendering of words".<sup>2</sup> The goal of Literary Translation is "is not to translate what the S L author wrote but what he or she meant".<sup>3</sup> Here we see how the word "cross" conveys what Thiruvalluvar meant though "swim" is an accurate rendering for the word 'Neenduvar'. About freedom in attempts at translation, Sri Aurobindo says, "A translator is not necessarily bound to the exact word and letter of the original he chooses... We find that literal translation more completely betray than those that are reasonably free – turning life into death and poetic power into poverty and flatness" <sup>4</sup>. This is what he had written to one of his disciples who was attempting translation.

Coming to the stylistics aspect I find that Sri Aurobindo preserves the nuances of structure while rendering his translation. For instance, the second Kural 'Katrathinal aana payanen ...' is in the interrogative and Sri Aurobindo translates it as "what fruit is by learning". Rev Pope translates it as 'no fruit have men of all their studied lore'. Yogi Suddhananda Bharati translates, 'That lore is vain'. Though the meaning of Kural comes through Rev Pope and Yogi Suddhananda Bharati have not used the interrogative as Sri Aurobindo has. The interrogative, however, maintained by Rev. Drew and P.S. Sundaram. Whereas Rev. Drew says, "What profit...", Sundaram says, "What use..." Consider also Valluvar's use of the double negative, 'Neendar Iraivanadi Seradar'. This is accomplished beautifully Sri Aurobindo's translation:

but he shall not cross it  
who has touched not the feet of the Godhead

This is again different from Rev. Pope's

They swim the sea of births the Monarch's foot who gain  
None others reach the shore of being mighty main.

Or Rev. Drew's

None can swim the great sea of births, but  
Those who are united to the feet of God

Or Sudhananda Bharati's

The sea of births they alone swim  
Who clench His feet and cleave to him

The double negative is not preserved by Rev. Pope or Rev. Drew or Suddhananda Bharati though it does not affect the content of what has been conveyed in the SL.

Tamil was no mother tongue for Sri Aurobindo as with Suddhananda Bharati and P.S. Sundaram. Nor did Sri Aurobindo toil to learn it like Rev. Pope or Rev. Drew did. How then is this feat achieved by Sri Aurobindo? 'A literary translator must possess quality rather than qualification'<sup>5</sup> says, Samuelsson Brown. Impersonality, it is said, is a pre-requisite quality for a translator. A translator should have no identity—the item to be translated is the one only object before him. All the translators strive to achieve this but in the case of Sri Aurobindo it is something more than that because he was a Yogi. He himself says "Everything I wrote came from Yogic experience... from the heightening of my consciousness". Being a Yogi and poet he had access to the higher levels of consciousness. If impersonality is good, superpersonality is better. He did not of course get charioted by "Bacchus and his pards" nor even on the "viewless wings of poesy". But it was an ascent with a unified

consciousness. When the mind's will and heart's feeling are yoked to the inner self, it becomes a self-generated rocket. The translator now becomes an integer when he translates. No fraction, No dichotomy, only an integer.

In his celebrated essay, "Tradition and individual Talent" Eliot says, "Some can absorb knowledge, the more tardy must sweat for it" **6** A genius like Shakespeare acquired more essential history from Plutarch than most men could from the whole British museum. A genius like Sri Aurobindo could absorb knowledge and write, interpret, translate with ease and grace thanks to his Yogic experience.

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