

Dr. Shuddhananda Bharati

Silambu  
Selvam

The Literary Treasure of  
Silappadikaram



ASSA  
Editions

Editor's Notes

## Silambu Selvam

We place this work at the feet of the Goddess of Tamil, bowing to her with the prayer: "Lady ruling over us, grant us the strength to spread the light of the arts developed by you, all over the world." It has been our desire for long to get the poetic treasure of *Silappadikaram* of Ilango Adigal rendered in its full form into lucid sensitive Tamil easily understandable by all; many good scholars of Tamil also enthusiastically urged us to do so. By the grace of Lord Shiva from whom Tamil was born, our desire has been fulfilled now by this work. It is a rare work of the literary art; which sets forth clearly the glories of the ancient civilisation of the Tamils. It will give a new sense of pride to all readers.

Dr. Shuddhananda Bharati has spent his life doing penance according to the pure Advaita path, having the welfare of the Tamils as his motivation. The Swami has written this book after having studied critically for two years past, 150 works and having understood the *Silappadikaram* thoroughly. These works include the Tamil Sangam classics, works in languages like English, Tamil, French and Sanskrit having a Tamil antiquarian interest and also works of a technical nature on the arts.

Tiru Desikavinayakam Pillai, the Tamil poet, has kindly gone through the manuscript of this book in Tamil line by line and rendered with his suggestions and interpretations

– we express our sense of gratefulness to this great scholar-poet, old in years, we also pay our obeisance to him.

The mention of *Silappadikaram* brings to mind first of all the name of Mahamahopadhyaya Dr. U. V. Swaminatha Iyer; to this great scholar who has researched painstakingly the veritable mine of Tamil Sangam works and brought out this ‘golden anklet’ of the Tamil Goddess called *Silappadikaram*, we pay our grateful respects.

Our thankfulness goes to Vidvan T. P. Minakshisundaram Pillai, M.A.B.L., M.O.L, who has done valuable and great services in the field of Tamil and religion and has obliged us with his Preface to the Tamil work, *Chilambu Chelvam*.

Thank you to Dr. J. Parthasarathi M.A., Ph.D. for the English translation *Silambu Selvam* and to Dr. Shuddhananda Bharati for *Chilambu Chelvam*, the original Tamil version.

With the energy of Aum Shuddha Shakti!

*Possessing the gifts of  
Song and service to the Lord,  
We will be the servants of  
Only the Prince who bears up  
The umbrella of the sky.*

Christian Piaget



Translator's preface by

## Dr. J. Parthasarathi

This rendering into English of Kaviyogi Shuddhananda Bharatiyar's *Chilambu Chelvam* has been a pleasure and a privilege; I have spent many hours under the fascination of the ancient Tamil bard Ilango Adigal and of his perceptive reteller the Kaviyogi in Tamil prose often leaping with enthusiasm and moral fervour. I invite readers unfamiliar with ancient Tamil poetic diction, wishing to enjoy the poetry of Ilango "without tears" to a perusal of this translation of the Tamil original, oriented to such an aim. I am sure this will delight and enlighten them. In translating this work, I have added clarificatory remarks here and there to Kaviyogi's narrations for the benefit of readers new to the ethos of the ancient Tamil world. Many passages of poetry quoted by him without prose paraphrases have been rendered by me in English, extending the enlightenment of the original.

Ilango's original text, *Silappadikaram* admits of different interpretations in several contexts and in all these Kaviyogi Shuddhananda's views have been respectfully preserved, though the translation is a free one, meant to be readable on its own account as a narration in English of the story with elucidation of situations dealt with in the *Silappadikaram*.

In transliterating Tamil names, the Tamil forms have been followed for the greater part with some deviations allowing for well-worn names and titles with spellings already

popular with readers. My indebtedness to Sri S. Ram Bharati for having involved me in this work defies formal expressions of thankfulness.

Dr. J. Parthasarathi, Vaikasi Visakam, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1997

Benedictory wishes kindly sent by

Poet S. Desikavinayakam Pillai

Verse

We invoke the Lord's grace  
That this treasure  
Of *Chilambu* written in sweet-  
flowing Tamil prose  
By Bharati living in Putuvai (Pondicherry)  
So that all may easily  
Get access to all the riches that the worthy  
Chera king had brought together  
In classical Tamil and revel in joy  
And that this work may shed its lustre  
For ever on earth!

We offer our praises to the heroic  
Deity of wifely chastity  
For whom three crowned kings  
of the three Tamil clauds,  
Performed deity worship celebrations.



## Vidvan T. P. Minakshisundaran

Subramania Bharathiyar speaks ecstatically of Tamil Nadu having the glory of a jewel-necklace which captivates our hearts, entitled *Silappadikaram*. But *Silappadikaram* itself is a poetical work composed in the ancient Tamil language, going back to a period of more than two thousand years ago. It is not in a form easily comprehensible by all, indeed there are people who find fault with it on this account. In this situation Swami Shuddhananda Bharati has rendered this work in Tamil prose current today and has thus done a sacred service to Tamil. The Tamil people have become greatly indebted to him.

Kannagi's beauty more appealing than even the sweetness of the Tamil language, her chastity exceeding in its glory even that of Sita, her heroic fire which flames out on hearing of the false charge levelled at her husband as a thief – these aspects have been depicted with great art by Ilango Adigal. Kovalan's glory as one who lived not for himself but for the service of others, like Eripatta Nayanar, and his life in tune with the requirements of blissful felicity – these also have been portrayed well in *Silappadikaram*. One cannot find anywhere else in the world an account like that of Madhavi, who excelled in wifely chastity though born in the family of a courtesan. Madhavi shines as the very embodiment of blissful experience combining the bliss of her expert dancing and her singing; her blissful excellence matures as a super-bliss, ripening over the bliss of flowers, groves, scents, dresses,

ornaments and services associated with her. King Senkuttuvan's heroic valour, rising in boiling indignation on hearing of the depreciation of the might of the Tamils (by some northern kings) rises high above even the lofty Himalayas. The Pandyan king Nedunchezhan gave up his life to straighten his sceptre-rod which had bent down on account of a wrong he had perpetrated by an act of indiscretion; indeed he shines as the embodiment of the ideal line of conduct for rulers. The moment his wife, the queen Pandi Madevi understood that he had departed from the path of justice, the very source of monarchical existence, she departed her life; what occurs to us to set against her subdued wifely chastity (of sacrifice) except the wifely chastity fulminating at the height of the wrong done, displayed by Kannagi? We may say that there is no other sweetly musical, poetical work treating of dance, excelling with many sided excellences as the *Silappadikaram*. Those who do not read this embodiment of 'Threefold Tamil' (poetry, music and dance) – will they be regarded as Tamilians?

The Tamil work that Swami Shuddhananda Bharati has written, rendering into Tamil prose this classic of great excellence, will by itself speak at length, of the greatness of the services to Tamil he has been rendering day and night, May he live long! May this work live long! May Tamil live on!

Vidvan T. P. Minakshisundaran, M.A., B.L., M.O.L  
Advocate, Alderman, Corporation of Madras  
'Tamilagam' 24<sup>th</sup> July 1929



# Song of Unity

*Unite. Unite, Unite, Oh Souls  
Unite and play your roles  
Unite in mind, unite in heart  
Unite in whole, unite in part  
Like words and tunes and sense in song  
Let East and West unite and live long  
Trees are many; the grove is one  
Branches are many; tree is one  
Shores are many; sea is one  
Limbs are many; body is one  
Bodies are many; self is one  
Stars are many; sky is one  
Flowers are many; honey is one  
Pages are many; book is one  
Thoughts are many; thinker is one  
Tastes are many; taster is one  
Actors are many; the drama is one  
Nations are many; the world is one  
Religions are many; Truth is one  
The wise are many; Wisdom is one  
Beings are many; breath is one  
Classes are many; college is one  
Find out this One behind the many  
Then life shall enjoy peaceful harmony*

# Presentation of Dr. Shuddhananda Bharati

11<sup>th</sup> May 1897 – 7<sup>th</sup> March 1990

## The wise one to the cosmic age

Although more than 90 years old, in his school in the south of India, *Kavi Yogi Maharishi* (great divine visionary, wise poet), Dr. Shuddhananda Bharati worked like a young man of twenty. When he was asked his age, he answered: "My age is Courage!" The Yogi wrote several hundred works in English, French, Tamil, Hindi, Telugu and Sanskrit; five thousand songs, and fifteen hundred poems in French. The magnum opus of the man conscious of the presence of God in him, *Bharata Shakti*, (in 50,000 verses) described his ideal: only One Humanity living in communion with only One God in a transformed world! *Bharata Shakti* is a monumental and unique work. The Yogi depicts the essence of all the religions, of all the prophets and saints, all the approaches of yoga and all the cultures on an allegorical fabric. It is a book for any age which all spiritual researchers and all nations should read and meditate on. His commitment is summarized in his book celebrating his life, *Pilgrim Soul*. The three poems mentioned in the opening express perfectly his ideal. His mantra, *Aum Shuddha Shakti Aum*, nourishes our souls and guides our steps toward the inner joy *Ananda*. It means: The light of Grace and power of the pure supreme Almighty bless us of peace, happiness and prosperity! Let the beauty and greatness of soul of Dr. Bharati Shuddhananda bloom and scent the entire Earth of its divine message and his spiritual and unifying benefactor!

Editions ASSA



Kantam one Pukar

# 1. The Treasure – Gift of Ilango Adigal

*Oh tongue, bear on yourself,  
The essence of the narrative Silappadikaram  
Composed by the Chera prince,  
As a work of great worth.*

Valluvar, Ilango and Kambar – “These three are Lords of poesy born by our Mother Goddess Tamil to benefit the whole world.” These poets resemble the righteous sceptre rod, the lion throne and the golden crown of the Tamil queen. They are like vital nerves serving to make the name of Tamil live as long as the world lasts. Valluvar explained the ways of living in the world as one ought to live, with the right use of virtue, wealth and pleasure. Ilango depicted word-pictures of the joys and woes of living according to the ways of behaviour dealt with by Valluvar. Kambar brought a divine light to bear on the art of living and kindled the flame of virtuous heroism which powders the demoniac nature forces to dust. Valluvar composed the grammar of living in the world; the other two composed the literature of living (guided by the grammar). Ilango expounded the greatness of womanhood. Kambar threw light on the brave manhood which guards the greatness of womanhood. These three monarchs of poesy have given us treasures of art, of never-fading appeal.

The treasure gifted to us by Ilango Adigal is a unique one, safeguarding the special right of the Tamils to their honoured place in the civilised world. It is the *Silappadikaram* –

a treasure which sets out clearly the refinement of life which we had attained even one thousand eight hundred years ago. This has a claim to be the best long narrative poem (Kappiyam) in the world's literature. This kappiyam of noble style combines in itself Shakespeare's dramatic mastery, Kalidasa's poetic excellence, Homer's epic heroism, Dante's depiction of love, Goethe's felicity of words and Virgil's packed meaning. Like *Thirukkural*, *Silappadikaram* too treats of all the three subjects of virtue (Aram), wealth-acquisition and spending (Porul) and enjoyment (Inbam). The fourth subject of liberation from the cycle of life called Veedu, following the three above-stated, is dealt within of the kappiyam of *Manimekalai*, continuing the sequence of the story of the former work. The *Silappadikaram* is a kappiyam which is a beauty with its words and meanings, its musical expression and sweetness of appeal. Along with this, it endures as a historical account (Itihasa) expounding directly the virtuous life of the Tamils, their heroism, their fine arts, their business abilities, their commercial prosperity, the excellence of their political organization, their tolerant attitudes, the glory of the intelligence and the flaming wifely chastity of Tamil women. Ilango Adigal's poem is by itself sufficient to enable the world to grasp the greatness of the ancient medieval Tamils.

When we read this work we forget the present and go into the second century AD, the period of the last Tamil Sangam (when this work was composed). What do we see there? Three Tamil kings, possessing greatness like Ashoka, Augustus Caesar and Napoleon, exercise their rule of pure Tamil sovereignty over their lands. Kings like

magnificent hills of heroic valour – Chera Senkuttuvan, Tirumavalavan and Nedunchezhan stand guard, protecting the sovereign authority of our Tamil Mother Goddess. The fame of the greatness of these three kings of the earth shines, encompassing the whole world, like the greatness of the three kings of poesy we have mentioned earlier. The victorious flags of these monarchs flutter high, reaching into the heavens above. On the Himalaya mountain the flags bearing the emblems of the bow, the fish and the tiger of the three Tamil kings are carved in the stone. The Aryan kings of the north pay great regard and bow before them. Greeks and Romans come from their continent of Europe and take up service at the courts of the Tamil kings, who exercise their sceptred sway for the people's benefit and dispense justice, hearing complaints made to them by anybody at anytime. When their sceptre of just rule gets twisted by a wrong, Tamil kings resolve to sacrifice their very lives – such is their nobility. Also the warrior followers of the Chera, Chola and Pandyan monarchs conquer their opponents in wars on land and sea and emerge, in serried ranks, wearing vagai flower-emblems of victory and beating the victor's drums as they march; kings of poesy come to sing the praises of the heroism of the kings of just rule!

Cities like Pumpukar, Madurai, Vanji and Kanchipuram excel with attractions at which even modern craftsmen will wonder. The lives of the residents of these cities glow with festivity obtaining at the celebrations of festivals of artistic excellence. We see manhood and womanhood joining like two electric forces and maintaining the household dharma. Queens of wifely chastity, venerable even to gods

of heaven, make for our prosperous society's growth. The faiths of Saivism, Vaishnavam, Jainam and Buddham observing their own tenets and yet respecting each other well, grow to great heights with mutual toleration. Women shine with their intellectual abilities just like men. Along with men following the profession of poetry like Ilango, Sathanar, Nakkirar, Kapilar, Parinar; women poets like Avvaiyar, Adimandiyar, Velliveetiyar, Kakkai Padiniyar were members of the Tamil Sangam of those days and contributed their share to the service of Tamil literature; we witness cries hailing the Threefold Tamil in every direction! On every side there is a luxurious overflow of rich life! The enlightenment of all-round education! All merchants, from a trader in salt to a dealer in grains, conduct their business in the proper way; industries increase and grow. People mostly use goods of native production; the dresses which remain after the satisfaction of the clothing needs of the Tamils, get exported to other countries. Ships of the Tamils journey west and east then return with plentiful heaps of gold (earned by their trade); the merchants voyaging over the wavy seas shine as veritable Kuberas (gods of wealth). Wealthy householders entertain guests who come to them and also look for fresh guests to be the objects of their hospitality. Social life is made blessed by the prevalence of the music of yazh (harp), and flute, pipe, dance, song, art, and poetic composition poetry, sense of beauty with ornamentation, virtue and love. Ah! Ah! Will we indeed see in future such a Tamil land of dignified glory, indeed the true Tamil land, the Tamil land of unfettered freedom? Will we see our Tamil queen, in these days also as it was in those days, hold the sceptre of excellence in arts and rule over the world of

knowledge? Tamil, Tamils and the Tamil land must shine again, getting back their old glory. Oh men of Tamil! May the sense of Tamil greatness ascend your nerves! There is a flame of energy which kindles brightly that sense of greatness in *Silappadikaram*. Pay heed to the treasure of *Silappadikaram*. You may then walk with your heads held high like the Himalayas, before the whole world.

*May Tamil flourish!*

*May the Tamils excel!*

*May the Tamil land shine in glory, shine in glory!*

## 2. The faultless speech detailing the story

Imayavaramban Neduncheralathan (Cheralathans in the Glossary) held sway over his people from Karuvur called Vanji, exercising his sceptre of justice from his throne. He conquered famous kings of the north and carved his bow-embled standard on the Himalaya mountain. Leading his army against them and winning victory, he made the name of the Tamils famous and his own bravery shine before all others. The *Pathiruppathu* poem testifies to this fact thus:

*He carved his bow emblem on the Himalayas  
And he exercised his sceptred sway, making it shine  
Over the Tamil land with the sounding sea as its bounds;  
With greatly commendable valour he subdued  
The Aryan kings having great fame.*

On account of this heroic exploit the Tamils praised this king as 'Imayavaramban' (one whose territory's limit was the Himalayas). To this king of great fame were born two sons of great gifts through his queen, the Chola princess Narchonai. Of the two, the elder was Chenkuttuvan; the younger was Ilango. The two sons grew to manhood, having received the training appropriate to kings in matters of learning and the art of war. The time came for King Cheralathan to choose the prince who would succeed him on the throne.

One day Cheralathan sat in state in his court hall with his two sons. Then there appeared before him a fortune-teller. He looked intently on the two princes and said to Cheralathan: "Lord of Vanji! The person fit to rule the country is your younger son. Only he has all the marks characteristic of royalty." The younger prince on hearing these words became indignant and cried out: "What is this! When there is the elder brother, the younger one is to rule! Is this proper?" Addressing his elder brother as 'Leader Prince' he added: "Wear the blessed royal crown and exercise your rule. I will rule the kingdom of knowledge as a writer-poet." To the astonishment of everyone, he relinquished the luxuries of the royal palace regarding them as mere straw at that very moment; he took to the renounced life of a sannyasi (ascetic) and began living in the temple of Tirukkunavayil, a place situated east of the capital town of Vanji. Ilango loved Chenkuttuvan even as Bharata loved Rama. In appreciation of the faultless ascetic life of Ilango, he was revered with the name Ilango Adigal (Ilango, the renounced saint).

Then Chenkuttuvan became the monarch of the earth and wore the kingly diadem, overcoming all obstacles. Ilango Adigal lived a life of purity of the ascetic conquering his senses and devoting his time to poetic composition; he became a king of poets. The Padikam (Prologue) to the *Silappadikaram* sets out clearly these circumstances of his becoming a king of poets.

Once Cheran Chenkuttuvan, his queen Venmal, Sathanar the poet the Madurai Tamil Sangam, and Ilango Adigal who lived a life of penance at Kunavayil temple, having renounced his royalty, went together to the hilly range of Tiruchenkundram to divert themselves by seeing the beauties of Nature. This hill is said to be close to Kodunkolur near Vanji. The hillmen of that place came in a group and paid obeisance to the king; they then spoke thus before Ilango Adigal: "Yonder is a venkai tree shining with golden-hued flowers. Under its rich shade a beautiful woman stood, a wife of chastity truly heroic. The celestial followers of the king of gods Devendra came and bowed before her and showed her, her husband (who had reached them). Then she, with them all, ascended to the heavenly world even as we were seeing them with our eyes. Oh wonder! We bring this to your attention, Oh saint!" The Chera king on hearing of this incident wished to know the full story of this heroine of wifely chastity. Sathanar, the poet belonging to Madurai, present there, said that he knew of what happened to that heroine and narrated the following account.

The glory of the city of Pukar in its refinement of the arts and the exuberance of its wealth and commerce can never

dry up. It is the ancient seaport of the Chola king wearing the Atti flower garland as his emblem. A merchant by name Kovalan lived there; there was also in that city a lady dancer by name Madhavi; her expertness in dancing was such that even the goddess of art of dance would praise and honour her talents. Kovalan fell in love with her, revelling in her company and spent away all his wealth with which rightful living and pleasure could have been enjoyed. He was reduced to poverty and what remained with him was only the anklet ornament of his wedded wife Kannagi. With the idea of selling this golden ornament giving out a musical jingle and beginning a new life, he went to Madurai with its towering storeyed houses and mansions.

Madurai was the capital town bespeaking the glory of the Pandyan kings famed with its praises sung by bards of old. The streets transacting business in that city were very big. Kovalan, who entered these streets with the anklet for sale with him, met a goldsmith coming like death itself before him and showed the ornament to him. This goldsmith had taken for himself a golden anklet of the Pandyan queen and falsely pleaded before the king that it was lost in his house by theft. Immediately it struck him that an excellent opportunity had then come to hide his own theft by foisting it on Kovalan. He said to Kovalan: "This is a very precious anklet and will suit none except the great queen of King Kopperundevi. I will go and speak to the king in this matter. Till then you wait here." He then hastened to the king's palace. Then the king, immersed in thoughts of his enjoyment with his queen, was going to her place in the palace. To him the thief goldsmith said:

“Oh great monarch! I have found the missing anklet in the hands of a thief!” The Pandyan king, wearing the margosa flower garland, was in a confused state of mind; he thoughtlessly ordered his guardsmen, experienced in his service, to go and kill the thief and fetch the anklet to him. Instead of saying: “Bring the thief here, with the anklet, to punish him with death,” he committed a momentous slip of his tongue; fate was working itself out, making him falter on the wrong side in his words.

The guardsmen killed Kovalan. His heroine of a wife, Kannagi, seeing him lying killed on the place of execution, was beside herself in her sorrow tearing her heart. She went before the Pandyan king, and set out in stirring terms the injustice she had suffered, as her eyes shed profuse tears. The tears of the heroine of wifely chastity brought on the destruction of the Pandyan monarch. As his straight sceptre of justice had bent down, the monarch fell down and died. Kannagi tore her left breast off her chest bearing the pearl necklace ornament and casting it on Madurai, cursed it to be consumed by flames. Indeed she is the ideal heroine of wifely chastity, praised and adored by people.

Chenkuttuvan, experiencing a sense of shock on hearing thus far, asked Sathanar, its narrator: “You said the tragedy happened because the result of earlier actions became productive at this time. What were their actions bearing fruit?” Sathanar said in reply: “Heroic monarch! Hear. In the ancient city of Madurai, irresistible to foes, I was sleeping in the common assembly hall called Velliyambalam in whose shrine Lord Shiva, wearing his beautiful crown of

Kondrai flowers, sheds His lustre by His presence. During midnight I saw with my eyes a sight. That heroine of ideal wifely chastity stood and before her appeared the guardian deity of Madurai and said: "Oh lady who caused the burning flames by your tearing off your breast! Nili, the wife of a merchant in Singapuram with high, undiminished fame for benevolence cast a curse in the previous birth, whose effect seized your husband and you now. On account of it your fate has ended thus. Oh damsel with long flowing tresses! After the passing of fourteen days more you will see your husband, not in the form of men of this world, but in the very form of the heavenly residents." I heard that declaration, free of all guile, made by that deity.

Ilango Adigal, who heard Sathanar's speech, melted in his heart at the tragic story. He spoke: "Dharma (or the ideal of virtue) becomes a veritable death god to the king who offends the path of rightful rule. A famed heroine of wifely loyalty merits the reverence and the obeisance of great men. Good and bad deeds done in the previous birth take shape and yield their fruits in the ongoing birth, causing people to experience them. These three points become clear on account of the part played by the anklet in this narration. Therefore we will make out a verse composition called *Silappadikaram*, combining poetry, music and dancing, it will have many verse varieties, prose poems, and songs meant for singing included in it."

Sathanar, feeling greatly delighted, encouraged him saying: "May you the revered ascetic give us this story-poem, belonging to all the three crowned kings of the Tamil land who figure in it."

According to the wish of Sathanar Ilango, Adigal gave us the poem with songs in it, covering the three divisions of life – centred respectively on virtue (aram), riches (porul) and pleasure (kamam). This poem of the *Silappadikaram* was recited before Sathanar, the friend and poet of Madurai Tamil Sangam, with the sobriquet Kulavanigan (dealer in grains). Adigal then thought of composing *Manimekalai* as the sequel poem dealing with liberation, (vidu) the fourth and final division of life. But Sathanar told him that he had already finished composing that poem, so Ilango Adigal concluded his poem with the statement:

*This Silappadikaram which completes the meaning further to that conveyed by Manimekalai*

## Silambu Selvam

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