

Classic Poetry Series

Avvaiyar
- poems -

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Avvaiyar(1st - 2nd Century CE)

The Avvaiyars (Tamil: அழகிய) "respectable women" was the title of more than one poet who was active during different periods of Tamil literature. The Avvaiyar were some of the most famous and important female poets of the Tamil canon. Abithana Chintamani states that there were three female poets titled Avvaiyar.

Among them, Avvaiyar I lived during the Sangam period (c. 1st and 2nd century CE) and had cordial relation with the Tamil chieftains Paari and Athiyaman. She wrote 59 poems in the Puṇaṇu.

Avvaiyar II lived during the period of Kambar and Ottakoothar during the reign of the Chola dynasty in the 13th century. She is often imagined as an old and intelligent lady by Tamil people. She wrote many of the poems that remain very popular even now and are inculcated in school textbooks in Tamil Nadu. These books include a list of dos and don'ts, useful for daily life, arranged in simple and short sentences.

There is a very famous legend that is associated with Auvaiyar (also Auvayar) (Tamil: அழகிய), a prominent female poets/ethicist/political activist of Sangam period (Tamil literature), and Naaval Pazham (Jambu) in Tamil Nadu. Auvaiyar, believing to have achieved everything that is to be achieved, is said to have been pondering her retirement from Tamil literary work while resting under Naaval Pazham tree. But she is met with and was wittily jostled by a disguised Lord Murugan (regarded as one of the guardian deities of Tamil language), who later revealed himself and made her realize that there was still a lot more to be done and learnt. Following this awakening, Auvaiyar is believed to have undertaken a fresh set of literary works, targeted at children. These works, even after a millennium, are often among the very first literature that children are exposed to in Tamil Nadu schools.

Name Etymology

The name Avvaiyar is a combination of Tamil word avvai with honorific suffix ar. Avvai refers to respectable elderly woman as the word ammai which means good woman in general term for a woman of any age. Thus the name Avvaiyar means a respectable good woman hence a generic title rather than a specific name of a person.

Sangam age Avvaiyar

The Avvaiyar who lived during the Sangam period is considered to be contemporary to poets Paranar, Kabilar and Thiruvalluvar. She is attributed as the author of 7 verses in Naṅṅai, 15 in Kuṅṅokai, 4 in Akanaṅṅu and 33 in Puṅṅanaṅṅu. Legend states that she was a court poet of the rulers of the Tamil country. She travelled from one part of the country to another and from one village to another, sharing the gruel of the poor farmers and composing songs for their enjoyment. Most of her songs were about a small-time chieftain Vallal Athiyamaan Nedumaan Anji and his family. The chieftain had also used her as his ambassador to avert war with another neighbouring chieftain Tontaiman. The rest of her songs related to the various aspects of state governance. Although traditions claim that she was a sister of Kabilar, Thiruvalluvar and Athiyamaan, V. R. Ramachandra Dikshitar refutes this claim based on his studies that all four of them were most likely of different walks of life, thus from different caste backgrounds and hence impossible to be siblings.

Chola age Avvaiyar

The medieval period Avvaiyar was the court poet of the Chola monarch and was the contemporary of Kambar and Ottakkuttar. She found great happiness in the life of small children. Her works, Aathichoodi and Konraiventhan written for young children, are even now generally read and enjoyed by them.

Her two other works, Mooturai and Nalvali were written for older children. All the four works are didactic in character — they explain the basic wisdom that should govern mundane life.

Shrine

In Muppandal, a small village in the Kanyakumari District of Tamil Nadu. there is an image of Avvaiyar. By tradition, this is stated to be the spot where the great poetess left the mortal world.

Avvai Vizha

Annual Avvai Vizha is organized & conducted by Government of Tamil Nadu to commemorate Avvaiyar's contribution to Tamil literature. This festival is celebrated every year in the month of Panguni on Sadhayam star day. Avvai Vizha has been started by local community long time back and still continuing willingly. Now Govt of Tamil Nadu is continuing this function and adding more values. Local community, Tamil scholars and scholars from various fields participating with passion on this occasion and deliver their speech. Avvai Vizha is conducted in the temple Avvayar situated at Thulasiyappattinam village,

Vedaranyam, Nagappatinam District, in the temple premises of Arulmigu Visvanathaswamy Thirukovil. Also this place is referred to famous interaction between Lord Muruga & Avvaiyar "Suttapazham Venduma Sudatha Pazham Venduma". This temple is under the control of the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department.

Legend

Legend has it that once the great king Athiyaman gave an eternal amla Nellikani (gooseberry) fruit to Avvaiyar, this is a special and powerful fruit, whoever eats it will have a healthy and long life. Athiyaman wanted Avvaiyar to eat the eternal fruit as she was the right person who could serve the Tamil community. If she could live forever, so would the Tamil heritage and language.

Publication in the U.S.

In 2009, Red Hen Press published a selection of Avvaiyar's poetry from the 12th century, entitled Give, Eat, and Live: Poems by Avviyar. The poems were selected and translated into English by Thomas Pruiksma, a poet and translator who discovered Avviyar's work while on a Fulbright scholarship at The American College in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India.

Atthi Chudi

Avvaiyar

Break But Do Not Bend

Would a pillar of granite,
When it is over-burdened
bend or buckle at any point
rather than splinter and fall?
Likewise the noble ones
When their honour is confronted
would lay down their very life
and not submit to the tyrannous.

Avvaiyar

Cool, Fragrant Lotus Feet

Cool, fragrant lotus feet
with anklets tinkling sweet,
gold girdle, flower-soft garment
setting off the comely hips,
pot-belly and big, heavy tusk,
elephant-face with the bright red mark,
five hands, the goad, the noose,
blue body dwelling in the heart,
pendulous jaws, four mighty shoulders,
three eyes and the three required marks,
two ears, the gold crown gleaming,
the breast aglow with the triple thread,
O Being, bright and beautiful!
Wish-yielding elephant, born of the
Master of Mystery in Mount Kailasa,
mouse-rider, fond of the three famed fruits,
desiring to make me yours this instant,
you like a mother have appeared before me
and cut the delusion of unending births.
You have come and entered my heart,
imprinting clear the five prime letters,
set foot in the world in the form of a guru,
declared the final truth is this, gladly,
graciously shown the way of life unfading.
With that unfailing weapon, your glance,
you have put an end to my heinous sins,
poured in my ear uncloying precepts,
laid bare for me the clarity
of ever-fresh awareness,
sweetly given me your sweet grace
for firm control of the senses five,
taught how to still the organs of action;
snapped my two-fold karma and dispelled
my darkness, giving, out of grace,
a place for me in all four states;
dissolved the illusion of triple filth,
taught me how to shut the five
sense gates of the nine-door temple,
fixed me firm in the six yogic centers,

stilled my speech, taught me
the writ of ida and pingala,
shown me at last the head of sushumna.
To the tongue of the serpent that sinks and soars
you have brought the force sustaining the three
bright spheres of sun, moon and fire -
the mantra unspoken asleep in the snake -
and explicitly uttered it;
imparted the skill of raising by breath
the raging flame of muladhara;
explained the secret of immortality,
the sun's movement and the charm
of the moon; the water lily's friend,
the sixteen states of the prasada mantra;
revealed to me in thoughtful wisdom
the six-faced form and the meanings four;
disclosed to me the subtle body
and the eight separate modes of being;
the orifice of Brahman opened,
giving me miraculous powers,
by your sweet grace, and mukti, too;
revealed my Self to me and by your grace
swept away accumulated karma,
stilled my mind in tranquil calm
beyond speech and thought;
clarified my intellect, plunged me
in bliss which is the common ground
of light and darkness.

Boundless beatitude you have given me,
ended all affliction, shown the way of grace:
Siva eternal at the core of sound,
Sivalinga within the heart,
atom within atom, vast beyond all vastness,
sweetness hid in the hardened node.

You have steadied me clear in human form
all besmeared with holy ashes;
added me to the congregation
of your servants true and trusty;
made me experience in my heart
the inmost meaning of the five letters;
restored my real state to me;
and rule me now, O Master of Wisdom,

Vinayaka. Your feet alone,
O Master of Wisdom, Vinayaka, your feet alone, are my sole refuge.

Avvaiyar

Demanding Companion

O ye troublesome
stomach of mine!
You are not agreeing
to forgo
your habitual meal
even for a day;
Nor would you accept
in one lot
food for two days –
today and tomorrow.

You do not realise
even for a moment
the travails I am put to
on your account!
All I can say,
O stomach of mine
is that it is indeed
an arduous task
to live with you!

Avvaiyar

O King, Is There Anything Unattainable

O king, is there anything unattainable
To them who intensely contemplate
On the fragrant feet of the son
Of Ummaiyal, of sweet and comely speech?
The thunderous thud of the swift elephant
And that of the agile horse must give place
To that of the rider of this old dame!
He is none other than the mighty Mahaganapati.

Avvaiyar

Real Freedom

Real vision

is that which sees

the One only

beyond the many;

Real valour

is that of the person

who has conquered for good

the senses five;

Real learning

is that which places

you in the state

of Deathlessness;

And real food

is what you consume

when you are totally

Liberated

and where you are not

under any command

and where you are neither

slave nor servant...

Avvaiyar

Real Life-Saver

Just because your brother and sister
are born in line with you,
do not expect them
to be supportive relatives;
For have you not observed
an inherited disease
turning a killer
although born with one?
(Do not be disheartened
over the truth I have set out)
for there are still those
not linked with you in birth,
who come to you in succour
in your hour of need,
even as the medicinal herb
growing on a distant hill
is drawn towards you
as cure for your illness...

Avvaiyar

Worth Four Crores

“(i) Not crossing the threshold
of those that disrespect you
is worth a crore indeed;

(ii) Not partaking of food
in the homes of those
that do not with full heart
invite you to do so,
is worth a crore indeed;

(iii) Expending crores even
in order to cultivate
association with those
of noble lineage
is worth a crore indeed;

(iv) Not allowing your tongue
ever to swerve from Truth,
even if you are offered
crores and crores as bribe
is worth a crore indeed;

Avvaiyar