THE LITTLE DEVOTEE: CËKKILÄR’S STORY OF CIRUTTOÑÇAR

The *TiruttoñÇar Puråñam* – ‘The Puråña of the venerable servants [of Śiva]’ – was composed by Cëkkilär in the first half of the twelfth century A.D. It contains the stories of the 63 Nåyanmårs, Tamil Śaiva saints. It is nowadays called simply the *Periya Puråñam*, ‘the great Puråña.’

One of the most interesting stories in all of Śaivism is certainly that of CiruttoñÇar, ‘the little devotee,’ that is translated here. It is important not merely because it is the most graphic Abraham and Isaac story I have ever encountered in India (or elsewhere, for that matter), but because it is one of the most popular stories in South Indian religion. There are many versions of it, not all in Tamil.

The earliest version is that given here, but it is followed very soon by the version of the thirteenth century Telugu writer Pålkuriki Sōmanåtha in his *Bāsavānnapuråñamu*. This version has not copied Cëkkilär’s Puråña, but is expressly said to be taken from oral sources. Thus it appears that even by the time of Cëkkilär, the story of the little devotee must have been spread over much of Southeastern India as an oral story and that even the Tamil poet must have drawn on oral sources for much of his material. It is interesting that the historicity of Parañcōti, who lived in the seventh century A.D., is confirmed by inscriptions, as is the fact that he was a general for the Pallava king and that he led an expedition that destroyed Våtåpi. The story of CiruttoñÇar was also written by the great Telugu poet Śrīnåtha in the fifteenth century in an account that is closer to Cëkkilär’s than Pålkuriki Sōmanåtha’s, even though Śrīnåtha evidently did not know Tamil. Even today the story of the Little Devotee is popular in the oral literature of Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh. Curiously, there is no version of the story that I have been able to discover in Sanskrit.

Clearly, then, the story of the Little Devotee is not just a tale of interest to a few people. It is spread over most of South India even today and is one of the most important accounts of bhakti in that area. It follows that the story has much to reveal about the nature of bhakti and of religion in South India.

There has been a tendency among Sanskritists and Western Indianists to write of bhakti as if it were a religion entirely of sweetness and light. Those who have discussed it have lingered long on the stories of Krishna and other

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Vaiṣṇava figures. Indeed, even in Tamil the Vaiṣṇava Tirumalācīyāḻvār said of Śaivism that its stories were not sweet to the ears in a reference that the commentators take to refer to the Ciruttoṭṭar story. It remains to investigate the significance of this strange story for the religion of South India. Are we, like the Vaiṣṇava commentators, to find it off-putting and somewhat barbaric, or is it possible to find in it some high and lofty symbolism befitting a great religion?

The theme of renouncing one’s family for religious purposes is quite old in India. For example, the Buddhist Jātaka about Viśvantara describes how that prince gave away his wife and children to ascetics who needed someone to beg for them. Yet in spite of superficial similarities, examination discloses that the present story is quite different from that of the Buddhist prince. First, it stresses the attachment that Ciruttoṭṭar had for his son. He is not, like the Buddhist, simply giving up something that no longer had meaning for him. Second, Ciruttoṭṭar cannot merely leave his son with someone and go off. He must kill him, rejoicing in his heart. Finally, Ciruttoṭṭar’s aim is not to renounce family life. His sacrifice of his son comes as he upholds the dharma of a householder by serving a guest. Thus the story of the Little Devotee, in spite of outward resemblance to that of Viśvantara and others of his ilk, is totally different. It is not a story of renunciation, but of sacrifice.

In this regard, it must be seen as an expression of indigenous South-Indian beliefs in the context of the Śaiva bhakti tradition. It takes the beliefs that are native to the area and almost universally held there and examines them in the light of what it’s author feels to be a higher form of reality. The bhakti religion is delineated by consideration of which beliefs are ultimately valid and which are not.

It has already been pointed out that in this story, the role of the householder is preferred to that of the renunciant; after all, the author could have simply had Ciruttoṭṭar renounce his family and go to the forest like countless ascetics in Indian tradition. Rather, the entire piece hinges around the family, even to Śiva himself, who finally appears with his wife and son. This is in line with the basic orientation of South Indian culture around the family and the distrust of renunciants found in Tamil from the beginning. The Tamils have always found the highest manifestation of the sacred in the family. They have always found a son, especially a young one, to be one of the highest expressions of human bliss. As the Caṅkam poet Pāṇṭiyar Arivuṭainampi sings in Puranānūru 188,

Even though a man is rich and owns many possessions, even though he eats with many,