

KUMARASWAMY PULAVAR

(FIFTIETH DEATH ANNIVERSARY MEMOIR)



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by

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**PULAVARAKAM
MYLANY : CHUNNAKAM
CEYLON**

1972

Pulavarakam Publications 22

Price Re. 1-00

Thirumakal Press
Chunnakam

Preface

At the request of several of my friends I brought out in the year 1970 a comprehensive Tamil biography of Kumaraswamy Pulavar of Chunnakam, the foremost Tamil poet and Scholar of Jaffna. This brief English memoir of the Pulavar is intended to serve the needs of the English educated public and is written by me to commemorate his fiftieth death anniversary which falls on 9-3-1972. It embodies the salient points of his life and all superfluous details are purposely avoided to make it brief. It is my earnest hope that this memoir will serve as an introduction to the study of Pulavar's life in detail.

My sincere thanks are due to Mr. S. Veerasingham, Retired Principal of Somaskanda College, Puttur, for reading through the manuscript and making valuable suggestions.

*Pulavarakam
Chunnakam
9-3-1972*

K. Muthukumaraswamy Pillai

KUMARASWAMY PULAVAR

(1854 — 1922)

The latter half of the nineteenth century could be considered one of the most remarkable periods in the history of Jaffna. It was during this period that a galaxy of literary celebrities like Arumuga Navalar, Rao Bahadur C. W. Thamothearam Pillai, P. Murugesu Pandithar, S. Sangara Pandithar and political leaders like Sir P. Ramanathan and a host of others emerged on the horizon of Jaffna and pioneered the cultural movement to revitalize the people in all walks of life after the torpor that had set in during the rule of the Portuguese and the Dutch when Hindu culture received a severe setback. It is no exaggeration to say that Hindu religion touched its lowest ebb during this period. The people had lost their self-confidence and developed an inferiority complex. The situation was in no way better even during the early part of the British rule when the Christian missionaries began their activities by establishing many churches, hospitals and schools and converted many Hindus to Christianity. It was left to Arumuga Navalar 'the champion reformer of the Hindus' to stem the tide of the Christian

onslaught and bring about a revival of Hindu culture and religion. After the death of Navalar in 1879, Pulavar succeeded him as the foremost man of letters to devote his entire life to the cause of Saiva Religion and Tamil.

Pulavar was born in the village of Chunnakam on the 18th of Thai (Jan.) 1854. He came of a highly enlightened and respectable Vellala family which had migrated from the neighbouring village of Uduvil and settled at Chunnakam during the early part of the 18th century. His father Ambalavana Pillai was an orthodox Saivite well versed in the religious sastras. He was the only person in his community who had received the special Saiva initiation (விசேட சூக்கை). He was a man of unimpeachable character, simple in taste, straight-forward in his dealings and generous in his disposition. His natural wisdom and his immense love for religion made a profound impression on his son. Pulavar's mother Chithampara Ammaiyyar was the daughter of Kumaru Udayar of Copay, who was an influential land-lord in affluent circumstances. She belonged to the old generation of women who, though not educated in the modern sense of the term, proved to be an ideal person, broad-minded, gentle and god-fearing. She was a devoted mother and a faithful wife. Her influence on her son was also profound.

Pulavar was fortunate in having been born in a family whose ancestors were closely connected with the social, cultural and religious life of the people of Jaffna. His paternal great-uncle was Muthukumara Kavirayar, a great poet who waged single-handed an incessant war against the Christian missionaries long before Arumuga Navalar was born. He was the Tamil guru of Rao Bahadur C. W. Thamotharam Pillai the veteran Tamil scholar and publisher of ancient Tamil classical works. Two of his books written for anti-christian propaganda were *Gnana-Kummi* and *Jesumatha Parikaram* which established his name as a great Tamil poet. They were published by Arumuga Navalar in the year 1872, as he found them useful in his fight against the missionaries. Pulavar's maternal grand-father's son was Sangara Pandither of Neervely who was a great scholar in both Sanskrit and Tamil and a great philosopher. He had enriched Tamil language by translating many useful Sanskrit works into Tamil. Kumaraswamy Pulavar had inherited some of the best characteristics from his ancestors. He had inherited his sturdy honesty and uprightness from his paternal side and worldly wisdom from his maternal side. We can trace the vigour of his mind and love of learning to both sides. He was brought up in an enlightened

home in which all noble qualities and an abiding love for religion and Tamil literature could be nurtured.

When Pulavar was six years old he was enrolled as a pupil of the Mallagam English School which is one of the earliest English schools founded in Jaffna. Here he studied up to the fourth standard. His father, an orthodox and conservative Saivite, fearing that his son's education in a foreign medium might in the long run bring about in him a moral and intellectual servility, stopped him from school education and sent him to Murugesa Pandither of the same place to learn Tamil under him. English education which was a sure passport to lucrative appointments in those days was denied to Pulavar. If left to himself he would have preferred to continue his English studies, but his father was adamant in his resolve to stop him from school. Even in his Tamil education his father did not take much interest. It was mainly through his own effort that he rose step by step to the position of a reputed scholar and poet. Under Murugesa Pandither he acquired a sound mastery of Tamil language and literature. He imbibed a great enthusiasm for learning and delved deep into ancient classical literature reading continuously and omnivorously scores and scores of books. Among his fellow

pupils were S. Saravanamuthu Pulavar of Urelu, A. Muthuthamby Pillai of Manipay and M. Vaithianather of Chunnakam. All of them remained Pulavar's intimate friends throughout their life.

Pulavar studied Sanskrit under Naganatha Pandither of Chunnakam who was an erudite scholar in that language. As he was a near relation of Pulavar he took a very keen interest in his education. He translated many Sanskrit works into Tamil and encouraged Pulavar to study all of them. *Hitopadesam* is one of his translations which was later published by Pulavar.

At the impressionable age of fifteen Pulavar was attracted by the rare eloquence and the magnetic personality of Arumuga Navalar. He attended most of the lectures delivered by him after his return from India in 1870. He came into close contact with him after he was introduced to him as the grand-nephew of the famous Muthukumara Kavirayar of Chunnakam. The experienced eyes of Navalar saw that the lad of fifteen, if properly guided, could one day become a distinguished scholar and poet. Navalar loved him very much and encouraged him by inviting him to visit him frequently and to clear his doubts in the books he was studying. Under the able guidance of Navalar

he developed an intense passion for knowledge. He studied hard and the range of his studies was very wide and varied. Being free from material wants, unencumbered with difficulties and blessed with a happy home, he was able to devote all the time at his disposal to the development of his literary powers. Though a teenager he attracted the attention of the prominent scholars of that day who were astonished at the depth of his knowledge.

During his early days Pulavar composed many beautiful poems and contributed many articles, some of which were literary criticisms, to the leading newspapers and magazines of India and Ceylon. The chief papers that published his contributions were *Elangainesan* (Jaffna), *Udayapanu* (Jaffna), *Srilokaranjani* (Madras) and *Ariyuvilakkam* (Trivandrum). The articles were highly praised by no less a person than Arumuga Navalar himself. The flowering of poetic talent in him was received with whole-hearted acclamation by his friends and admirers who awarded him the title of "Pulavar".

After finishing his education in his twenty-second year he became a successful schoolmaster. When Rao Bahadur C. W. Thamotharam-Pillai, the veteran scholar and publisher, started a classical school at Elalai in 1876, he appointed

Pulavar first as an assistant teacher and later as head-master of the school. He served that school successfully for twenty-two years without a break. He attracted a large number of pupils from all parts of Jaffna. Two of his pupils who distinguished themselves as great scholars were Vidwan Sivananda Iyer of Tellippalai and Mylvaganam Pillai, Notary Public of Myliddy. This school which did great service to Tamil for twenty-two years was closed in the year 1898 owing to financial difficulties that confronted the founder.

Pulavar spent the next four years (1898—1902) teaching pupils at his home at Chunnakam. Pandit S. Kandia Pillai of Copay, K. Chithamparanathan Proctor S. C. of Vaddukkoddai and Vidwan S. Ganesa Iyer of Punnalaikkadduvan were a few of his distinguished pupils.

Pulavar lost his parents during this period. His mother died in 1885 and his father died in 1886. The losses made him very sad. His marriage with Chinnacchi Ammaiyar which took place in 1892 brought him peace of mind and happiness. He had by her a daughter named Visaladshiammai and two sons named Ambalavana Pillai and Muthukumaraswamy Pillai. After fifteen years of happy married life his wife passed away in 1907.

During the period from 1898 to 1902 Pulavar was actively engaged in helping K. Kadiravel Pillai, (Retired Police Magistrate) of Uduppiddy, in the compilation of his *Tamil Dictionary*. Pulavar was entrusted with the laborious task of collecting classical words which had not been included in the dictionaries of the day. The wide experience so gained by him stood him in good stead, when he compiled his dictionary called *Itakkia chol Akarathi*. At the request of Kadiravel Pillai, Pulavar had produced an original grammatical research work known as *Illakkanachandrikai* which is a treatise on Sanskrit derivatives. Kadiravel Pillai had a very high opinion of Pulavar and when Pulavar left him to take up the post of head-master at Navalar School, he gave him an excellent testimonial highly recommending him for the post.

The head-master of Navalar Saiva Prakasa Vidyasalai (Vannarpannai) passed away in the year 1902 and Kailaya Pillai who was the Manager of that school was in search of a suitable Tamil scholar to fill the post. He was personally aware of the scholarship of Pulavar and appointed him to that post on 1-10-1902. The courage and the spirit of self-sacrifice with which Pulavar decided to accept the post which did not carry sufficient emoluments speaks very highly of his devotion to Tamil and

Saiva Religion. He served the school for twenty years with much pride, as he had always looked upon Navalar, the founder of this school, as his spiritual guru. This post lifted him out of the comparative obscurity in which he was living and exalted him to the pinnacle of fame. Some of his pupils during this period who distinguished themselves as poets and scholars are Pandithamani S. Kanapathy Pillai of Madduvil, Pulavarmani A. Periathamby Pillai of Batticaloa and Pandit S. Kadirippillai of Pannalai.

Pulavar made three trips to India during the years 1886, 1893 and 1907. During these trips he extensively travelled in South India visiting important temples, famous mutts and places noted for literary tradition. During these trips he had good opportunities to renew contacts with his old friends and admirers and to make new friends. During his first trip he visited Kumbakonam and Madras. At Kumbakonam he was received by Murugesu Pandithar who was at that time the Tamil Pandit at Pottamarai High School. While staying with him for a few days he made the acquaintance of Mahamahopadyayar U. V. Saminatha Iyer who was the Tamil Pandit at the Government College, Kumbakonam. The friendship that started between the two lasted till the end of Pulavar's

life. When he went to Madras he was received by Rao Bahadur C. W. Thamotharam Pillai with whom he stayed for about a month. During his stay there he published *Hitopadesam* written by his teacher, Pandit Naganatha Pillai. The second trip was spent mainly in visiting holy places. As cholera was prevailing in South India at that time the trip was cut short. The last and the third trip was made in 1909 after the death of his wife. He was accompanied, among others, by Somaskanda Pandither of Thavady and M. Vaithianather of Chunnakam. The trip was an extensive one and lasted about a month. He was received at Madura by Pandithurai Thevar, the President of the Madura Tamil Sangam, and some of his colleagues. While staying as a guest of Thevar he came in contact with R. Ragava Iyengar, M. Ragava Iyengar, Thiru. Narayana Iyengar, Gopala Iyer and others who were introduced to him by Pandithurai Thevar. He was received at Chidambaram by S. Ponnambala Pillai, head master of Navalar Saiva Vidyasalai. He stayed with him for three days. He visited Nadarajar Temple on the first day and on the second day he tested the pupils of Navalar Vidyasalai. On the third day he made arrangements with Ponnambala Pillai for the publication of his important books such as *Ilakkia chol Akarathi*, *Thandialankaram* (commentary), *Kambaramayanam* (*Balakandam*) with

commentary etc. At Thiruvavaduthurai he was received by Ambalavana Desikar, the then head of the mutt, with whom he spent one full day discussing topics of literary and religious interest. The Desikar was so impressed with the deep erudition of Pulavar that he honoured him by presenting him two valuable silk shawls as a token of his esteem. He received similar honours from the head of Suriyanarayana Koil Mutt when he visited it. At Thirupparankunram he met his old friend Senthinatha Iyer and spent a day with him. At Thirunelveli he met his friend Palavanna Mudaliar, B. A., B. L. a prominent Vakil and Scholar. He met Muthiapillai a great Saivasithantha philosopher at Thoothukudi (Tuticorin) and spent a day with him. From there he went to Colombo and then to Jaffna.

No other scholar after Arumuga Navalar had produced as many works as had been produced by Pulavar. The books are varied in character and are popular both in India and Ceylon. Some of his books were highly commended by no less a person than the Raja of Ramnad, the president of the Madura Tamil Sangam. Some of them were prescribed as text books by the Madras University and the Education Department of Madras.

Pulavar has twenty poems to his credit. Three of his best poetical works are *Megathootha karikai*, *Chanakkia Neethi Venba* and *Ramothantham*. The first one is a Tamil translation in kalithurai metre of Kalidasa's famous Sanskrit work *Megasanthesam*. This is the first book of Pulavar that brought him fame both in India and Ceylon. Many literary celebrities including Vidwan R. Ragava Iyengar and Swamy Vedachalam had testified to the excellence of the poem. *Chanakkia Neethi Venba* and *Ramothantham* are two other translations composed in venba and virutham metre respectively. The poems are simple and lucid and written in a medium best suited for use in schools.

Pulavar's prose works are few in number. They are *Thamil pulavar charithiram*, *Sisupal-charitam*, *Hitopadesam* and *Raguvamsa Charithamiratham*. *Thamil Pulavar Charithiram* is Pulavar's *Magnum Opus*. It deals with the lives of important Tamil poets who lived in India and Ceylon. Pulavar has brought to light much valuable information in this book about poets of Ceylon. The book was dedicated to the Raja of Ramnad. *Sisupala Charitham* was based on the Sanskrit work called *Magam*. *Raguvamsa charithamiratham* and *Hitopadesam* are translations of the Sanskrit books of the same names.

Pulavar was a great commentator. He has written commentaries on twenty books. The most important are those written on *Sudamani Nikandu*, *Neethinerivilakkam*, *Thiruvathavoor Puranam*, *Kamba Ramayanam - Bala-kandam*, *Thandialankaram*, *Yapparunkalakkarikai* and *Ahapporulvilakkam*.

Pulavar was a renowned grammarian. He has written two original researches in grammar namely *Vinaippakupatha Vilakkam* and *Ilakkana Chandrikai*. The first is a masterly treatise on Tamil verbal derivatives and is the first book of its kind in Tamil. The second deals mainly with rules that govern Sanskrit derivatives which appear in various forms in Tamil classics. The time and labour involved in the preparation of the above books were immense. They are indispensable to an intelligent and critical study of Tamil Grammar. They bear traces of the author's originality of mind and his thorough acquaintance with ancient classical literature.

The poetical works of Pulavar testify to his ability to compose melodious and beautiful poetry with a remarkable degree of metrical skill and fluency closely packed with thoughts. It is difficult to find a single unnecessary word in his poems. Even a casual reader of his poems cannot fail to observe that at

times they rise to great heights as in *Megathootha karikai*. One can hardly avoid assigning to his poems a place among the best poetical works of the day.

Pulavar was a great master of Tamil prose too. His prose exhibits clearness, variety, ease, beauty and persuasiveness. He was fastidious on the verge of over refinement. The richness of his style is seen in the prefaces written to his books. The medium used by him is the golden mean between the highly Sanskritized diction and pure Sentamil. It combines the dignity and soft beauty of Sanskrit with the vigour of Sentamil.

Though Pulavar was not an orator of the highest order like Arumuga Navalar, he was frequently invited to speak on religious and literary subjects throughout the length and breadth of Jaffna by his friends and admirers. His speeches were very much appreciated by his listeners. They were generally terse and to the point. He did not care to sway the audience by playing on their emotions or by the magic of spoken words. His speeches were well thought out and well planned.

Among the literary critics of his time Pulavar occupied a very high place. He had developed the power of criticism from his young days. The critical acumen, thoroughness and practical

efficiency of his writings and his contempt for shoddy work won him the esteem of the literary celebrities like Arumuga Navalar. By his insistence on a high standard of excellence and by his presentation of certain principles of judgment, he stood high in the estimation of his readers. The perspicuity of his mind instinctively discovered the errors in all new publications with an unerring accuracy which winnowed the chaff from the grain. He insisted on accuracy even in the smallest detail. The cogency of his arguments and the subtlety of his intellect are revealed in the innumerable criticisms contributed by him to leading newspapers of India and Ceylon. There was no beating about the bush in his writings which abound in sarcastic humour. He was an accomplished critic who knew how to criticise others without wounding them. He always took great care not to speak or write without sufficient thought and care.

As a critic he made history by the publication of a pamphlet directed against the edition of *Cheevaka chintamany* by Mahamahopadyayar V. Saminatha Iyer. The pamphlet challenged the correctness of portions of the text and of the commentary as edited by him. All the mistakes pointed out in the pamphlet by Pulavar were corrected by

Iyer in his second edition of the book. Saminatha Iyer was large hearted enough to befriend Pulavar through his letters. Pulavar published a criticism directed against *Thiravidapparakasikai* of Sabapathy Navalar of Copay. Of the many errors pointed out by him in the pamphlet, the most important is 'வேத்துணையோர் பரிபாடல்' which he corrected as 'எத்துணையோ பரிபாடல்'. The correction was universally acclaimed the best that was made by any scholar in recent times. Of the criticisms which brought him wide popularity in India was the one bearing the title *Pingala Nikandu* which was contributed to *Arivuvilakkam*, a weekly magazine published in Trivandrum. The article in question challenged the correctness of many words in *Pingala - Nikandu* edited by T. Sivan Pillai, Inspector of Schools, hailing from Veerarchimangalam. On behalf of Sivan Pillai the challenge was partly met by Maharaj Karthikeya Mudaliar in a reply published in the same magazine on 10-11-1901.

Rev. J. S. Chandler, the editor of the *Madras Tamil Lexicon* sent copies of the prospectus of the Lexicon to all leading scholars in Jaffna including Pulavar for review and opinion. Pulavar found that the prospectus was faulty in many respects. He prepared a long memo-

randum dealing with the shortcomings of the Lexicon and sent it to Rev. J. S. Chandler through the Jaffna Tamil Sangam. On receiving the memorandum Rev. Chandler came to Jaffna on 7-2-1914 and discussed with Pulavar all the points raised in the memorandum. Rev. Chandler was so much impressed with the deep erudition of Pulavar that he earnestly invited him to serve in the Lexicon office in Madras, but Pulavar was unwilling to leave Navalar School and go to Madras. As a memento of his visit to Jaffna Pulavar presented to Rev. Chandler a manuscript copy of a dictionary which he had compiled for publication.

The services rendered by Pulavar as Head Master for forty-two years, his work as author of more than sixty books and his reputation for personal integrity of character, all these enabled him to win the esteem and gratitude of his country-men and the government. The Sentamil Paripalana Sabai, at one of its meetings presided over by Sir Ambalavanar Kanagasabai resolved on 23-6-1920 to forward a memorial to His Excellency the Governor of Ceylon praying for the grant of a substantial pension for Pulavar in recognition of his meritorious services to Tamil Language and Literature. His Excellency granted the prayer contained in the memorial and ordered the payment

of a certain sum of money as a token of recognition of Pulavar's services. The signal honour shown to Pulavar by the Government of Ceylon was received with great jubilation by all his friends and admirers.

Pulavar was a man of stainless honour, noble bearing, dignity and uncompromising independence. He was gentle at heart and full of human sympathy. He was not greedy for money or power. He was neither vain nor sensitive. He was always unruffled and seldom lost his temper. His integrity was beyond reproach. He had a rugged honesty of purpose and was scrupulous in all matters of public importance. His wide reading and his brilliant and humorous conversation helped him to mix with common people to his great delight. The massive simplicity of Pulavar drew all his friends near him. He lived a life bereft of luxuries. In his behaviour and dress he represented the characteristic simplicity of a common man. Pulavar contained in himself the quintessence of the best of Aryan and Dravidian culture. He always dined on a diet which was barely sufficient for an ascetic. He was a conservative and was unwilling to sacrifice the past for an uncertain future.

The incessant literary activities of Pulavar during his declining years told on his health

very badly. He had a severe attack of rheumatism and high blood pressure in the year 1919 and was in bed for about five months. This bad health, though a handicap to any mortal, was not allowed to interfere with his literary activities or his availability to his friends, students and visitors. His travelling days were practically over and his teaching work at Navalar School came to an end. His students came all the way from Vannarpannai and continued their studies at his bedside. In 1922 he was advised by his doctors to take complete rest but nothing on earth could prevent him from taking interest in matters of literary importance.

This continued strain made his condition worse. His indomitable spirit persisted only for a short time; but on the 30th of February 1922, he developed symptoms of fever and dysentery (bacillus) which proved fatal. The end came at 3 A. M., on the 9th of March 1922. The death of Pulavar caused widespread grief among his relations, friends, students and admirers. Some of those who sent condolence telegrams were Sethupathy (The Rajah of Ramnad), Pettachchi Chettiar (Zemindar of Andippatty), Sir P. Arunachalam (Colombo) and T. Kanagasuntharam Pillai (Madras). Those who sent letters of condolence were: Hon. K. Balasingham (Colombo), Prof. M. Kandasamy Mudaliar (Pachaiyappa's College), R. Ragava Iyengar (Sethu Samasthana

Vidwan), U. V. Saminatha Iyer (Mahamahopadyayar), and Thiru. Narayana Iyengar, Editor of Sentamil (Madura) etc. Vidwan P. Muthia Pillai of Thoothukudi, Mahamahopadyayar M. Kadiresan Chettiar of Mahipalanpatty, V. P. Subramania Mudaliar of Thirunelvely and a host of others composed elegies in memory of Pulavar. The death of Pulavar removed a great personality from the Tamil literary world and the vacuum so created has not been filled. Among the literary celebrities of the modern age Pulavar will be remembered for the signal services rendered to Tamil Language and literature. We close this short memoir with the following record left by no less a person than K. Sessa Iyer, B. A. B. L., Judge of the High Court of Trivandrum under date 18-10-1925.

“ The name of Kumaraswamy Pulavar of Chunnakam is among the best honoured in the Tamil land today. Possessed of sound and accurate scholarship in Tamil and Sanskrit, he became a great teacher and an indefatigable writer and his services were eagerly sought and freely rendered throughout Ceylon and South India for the promotion of Tamil. He did much solid work to keep aloft the flaming torch of Tamil learning.”

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