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Manikkavachakar



Manika in Sanskrit means emerald. Vacha means words. The popular saint of Tamilnadu was deemed as having utterances equal to jewel. Hymns composed by him are called Tiruvachakam (holy words). There is a Tamil saying that nothing can melt the heart of the man whose heart does not melt at hearing hymns of Tiruvachakam.

Manikkavachakar was born in a village called Vaadavur (Vaatapuri) in Pandya Desa. Because of that people used to call him Vaadavurar. He was sent to school very early. He read religious books, absorbed the lessons therein, and became noted for his devotion to Siva, as also his kindness to living beings. Having heard about him, the Pandya king sent for him, made him his Prime Minister and conferred on him the title of "Thennavan Brahmarayan" i.e., Leader among brahmins in the south. Though he performed the duties of a minister with tact and integrity, he had no desire for material happiness. His mind was always absorbed in spiritual matters.

Feeling convinced that for the attainment of jnana, the grace of the guru is essential, he kept on making enquiries about it. Once the Pandya king directed the minister to buy a few good horses and bring them to him. As he was already in search of a guru, Manikkavachakar felt that it was a good opportunity and started with his retinue, carrying with him the required amount of gold. He visited all the temples on the way and reached a village called Tiruperundurai. For about a year before that, Parameswara had assumed the form of a school teacher and was teaching the poor children of the village seated on a street pial, near the temple. He had his meal which consisted of only cooked green vegetables, in the house of his pupils everyday by turn.

Well aware of the mental maturity of Manikkavachakar, Iswara anxiously awaited his arrival. By the time Manikkavachakar came, Iswara assumed the form of a Siddha Purusha (realised soul) and sat under a Kurundai (yellow amanth) tree within the temple. Many sannyasis had gathered around him. Manikkavachakar came to the temple, had darsan of the Lord in the sanctum sanctorum, and while doing pradakshina around the temple, saw the Siddha Purusha. He was thrilled at the sight and tears welled up in his eyes. Spontaneously, he lifted his hands above his head in salutation and prostrated at the feet of Iswara. He then got up, and prayed that he, a humble being, may also be accepted as a disciple. Having come to earth solely to bestow grace on Manikkavachakar, Iswara, through His mere look, gave him jnana upadesa (initiation into knowledge).

Manikkavachakar felt indescribable happiness and the upadesa given by Iswara took deep root in his heart. With folded hands and tears of joy, Manikkavachakar went round the guru, offered salutations, stripped himself of all his official dress and ornaments, placed them near the guru and stood before him with only a kowpeenam on. A deeply felt inspiration resulted in his spontaneously composing and singing beautiful and moving devotional songs in praise of his guru. Iswara was pleased, and addressing him as 'Manikkavachaka', commanded him to remain there, worshipping Him and singing His praise. His mission fulfilled, the Lord disappeared.

Fully convinced that he who had blessed him was no other than Iswara Himself, Manikkavachakar was stricken with unbearable grief and fell on the ground weeping and saying, "Oh! My lord, Why did you go away leaving me here?" The villagers were very much surprised at this and began a search for the person who was till then working in their village as a schoolteacher but could not find him anywhere. Then they realised that it was the Lord's leela. Some time later, Manikkavachakar got over his grief, decided to act according to the injunctions of Iswara, sent away his retinue to Madurai, spent all the gold with him on the temple and stayed there alone.

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Hearing all that had happened, the king immediately sent an order to Manikkavachakar to return to Madurai, but then how could he go to the king without the horses? If he wanted to purchase them, where was the money? Not knowing what to do, he prayed to Lord Siva for help. That night Lord Siva appeared to him in a dream, gave him a priceless gem and said, "Give this to the king and tell him the horses will come on the day of the Moola star in the month of Sravana". Startled at that vision he opened his eyes but the Lord was not there. Manikkavachakar was however, overjoyed at what had happened, put on his official dress and went to Madurai. He gave the gem to the king, discussed the auspicious time when the horses would be arriving and then anxiously waited for the day. He did not however, resume his official duties. Though his body was in Madurai, his mind was in Tirupperundurai. He was merely biding time. The Pandyan king, however, sent his spies to Perundurai and found out that there were no horses there meant for the king and that all the money meant for their purchase had been spent in the renovation of the temple. So he immediately imprisoned Manikkavachakar making him undergo all the trials and tribulations of prison life.

Meanwhile, as originally arranged, on the day of the Moola star, Iswara assumed the guise of a horseman, transformed the jackals of the jungle into horses, and brought them to the king. The king was astonished at this, took delivery of the horses and according to the advice of the keeper of the stables, had them tied up at the same place where all his other horses were kept. He thanked the horseman profusely and after sending him away with several presents, released Manikkavachakar from prison with profuse apologies. The same night, the new horses changed into their original forms, killed all the horses in the stables, ate them, created similar havoc in the city and fled. The king grew very angry, branded Manikkavachakar a trickster and put him back into prison.

Soon, in accordance with Iswara's orders, the waters of the river Vaigai rose in floods and the whole of the city of Madurai was under water. Alarmed at that, the king assembled all the people and ordered them to put up bunds around the river. For that purpose, he ordered every citizen to do a certain amount of work with the threat of dire consequences, should they fail to do their allotted work.

There was in Madurai an old woman by name 'Pittuvani Ammaiyaar'. She was a pious devotee of Lord Siva. She was living alone earning her livelihood by daily preparing and selling 'Pittu' (Pittu is sweetened powdered rice pressed into conical shapes). She had no one to do her allotted work on the river bund nor had she the money to hire a person to do it. She was therefore greatly worried and cried. "Iswara! What shall I do?" Seeing her helplessness, Iswara came there in the guise of a coolie, with a spade on his shoulder, and called out, "Granny, granny, do you want a coolie?" "Yes", she said, "But I do not have even a paisa in my hand to pay you. What to do?" He said, "I do not want any money and would be satisfied if you gave me a little Pittu to eat. I shall then do the allotted work on the river bund."

Pleased with that offer, she began making Pittu, but they did not come out in full shape but were broken. Surprised at this she gave all the bits to the coolie. He ate as many of them as he could and went away saying that he would attend to the bund-raising work. Surprisingly, the dough with the old woman remained intact even though she had prepared and given bits of the Pittu to the coolie. The coolie went to the work-spot but instead of doing the work lay down there idly coming in the way of others doing their work.

The king went round to inspect the progress of the work and found that the portion allotted to Ammaiyaar remained unattended to. On enquiry, his servants told him all about the pranks of that coolie. The king got infuriated, called the coolie and said, "Instead of doing the allotted work, you are lying down and singing". So saying, he hit the coolie on the back with a cane he had in his hand. The hit not only recoiled on the king himself, but on all living beings there, and all of them suffered the pain on that account. The king immediately realised that the person hit by him was Parameswara Himself in the guise of a coolie. The king stood aghast. Parameswara vanished and soon a voice from the sky said, "Oh king! Manikkavachakar is my beloved devotee. I myself did all this to show you his greatness. Release him and seek his blessings."

Soon after hearing that voice, the king went to see Manikkavachakar and on the way, he stepped into the house of Pittuvani Ammaiyaar to see her. By that time she had already got into a vimanam (a heavenly car moving through the skies) and was on her way to Kailas. The king was greatly surprised and saluted her and from there he went straight to Manikkavachakar and fell at his feet. Manikkavachakar lifted him with great respect, and enquired of his welfare. The king said, "Please forgive me and rule this kingdom yourself." Manikkavachakar, looking at the king, said with kindness, "Appah! (a term of endearment) As I have already agreed to serve the Lord, I cannot be bothered with the problems of ruling a kingdom. Please do not mistake me. Rule the kingdom yourself looking after the welfare of the people. Henceforth you will have nothing to worry about." So saying, smilingly, he put on the dress of a sannyasin and went about visiting holy places singing the praise of Siva.

Tiruvachakam is a volume of Tamil hymns composed by the Manikkavachakar. It contains 51 compositions and constitutes the eighth volume of the Tirumurai, the sacred anthology of Tamil Shaiva Siddhanta. The main message of the hymns is that the body is temporary and worldly comforts are the root cause of pain and sorrow. One should rather pray to leave the body and attain liberation (moksha). Soul should have control over the body: the ultimate highness in one's life is to reach Lord Shiva's feet.