

Manikkavasagar's Gnanathalisai: Verses of Wisdom: A Biocosmic Worldview

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Abstract

Manikkavasagar, a seminal figure in Tamil Saivite devotional literature, offers profound spiritual insights through his magnum opus, Tiruvachagam. Among its numerous hymns, Gnanathalisai, literally "Verses of Wisdom," stands out for its deep philosophical exploration. This paper argues that Gnanathalisai articulates a comprehensive biocosmic worldview, wherein the human experience, natural phenomena, and the vastness of the cosmos are intricately interconnected and steeped in divine immanence. Through an analytical examination of key thematic elements within Gnanathalisai, this study reveals how Manikkavasagar portrays the human body as a microcosm of the macrocosm, views nature as an explicit manifestation of the divine, and delineates the cycles of existence within a spiritually unified cosmic order. The paper concludes that Gnanathalisai not only serves as a guide for spiritual liberation but also fosters a holistic understanding of reality that resonates with contemporary ecological and holistic thought.

Keywords: Biocosmic, Saiva philosophy, Gnanathalisai, Manikkavasagar, Tiruvachagam, Worldview, Saiva Siddhanta, Tamil Literature, Divine Immanence, Microcosm

மாணிக்கவாசகரின் ஞானத்தமிழை: ஞானப் பாடல்கள்: ஒரு உயிர்-பிரபஞ்சக் கண்ணோட்டம்

பேராசிரியர். சாரதா தள்ளம்,

ஆங்கிலத் துறை, ஸ்ரீ வெங்கடேஸ்வரா பல்கலைக்கழகம், திருப்பதி 517 502:

சுருக்கம்

தமிழ்ச் சைவப் பக்தி இலக்கியத்தில் ஒரு முக்கியப் புள்ளியான மாணிக்கவாசகர், தனது தலைசிறந்த படைப்பான திருவாசகம் மூலம் ஆழ்ந்த ஆன்மீக நுண்ணறிவுகளை வழங்குகிறார். அதன் பல பதிகங்களுக்கிடையே, "ஞானப் பாடல்கள்" என்று பொருள்படும் ஞானத்தமிழை, அதன் ஆழ்ந்த தத்துவ ஆராய்ச்சிக்காக தனித்து நிற்கிறது. இந்தக் கட்டுரை, ஞானத்தமிழை ஒரு விரிவான உயிர்-பிரபஞ்சக் கண்ணோட்டத்தை வெளிப்படுத்துகிறது என்று வாதிடுகிறது. இதில், மனித அனுபவம், இயற்கை நிகழ்வுகள், மற்றும் பிரபஞ்சத்தின் பரந்த தன்மை ஆகியவை சிக்கலாக ஒன்றோடொன்று இணைக்கப்பட்டு, தெய்வீக வியாபகத்தில் ஊறிப்போயுள்ளன. ஞானத்தமிழைக்குள் உள்ள முக்கிய கருப்பொருள் கூறுகளை பகுப்பாய்வு செய்து ஆராய்வதன் மூலம், மாணிக்கவாசகர் மனித உடலை பேரண்டத்தின் ஒரு சிற்றளவாக (microcosm) எவ்வாறு சித்தரிக்கிறார், இயற்கையைத் தெய்வீகத்தின் வெளிப்படையான வெளிப்பாடாகக்

கருதுகிறார், மற்றும் ஆன்மீக ரீதியாக ஒன்றிணைந்த அண்ட வரிசைக்குள் (cosmic order) இருப்பின் சுழற்சிகளை எவ்வாறு விளக்குகிறார் என்பதை இந்த ஆய்வு வெளிப்படுத்துகிறது. ஞானத்தழிசை ஆன்மீக விடுதலைக்கான ஒரு வழிகாட்டியாக மட்டுமல்லாமல், சமகால சூழலியல் மற்றும் முழுமையான சிந்தனையுடன் ஒத்துப்போகும் யதார்த்தத்தைப் பற்றிய ஒரு முழுமையான புரிதலையும் வளர்க்கிறது என்று இந்தக் கட்டுரை முடிவு செய்கிறது.

முக்கிய சொற்கள்: உயிர்-பிரபஞ்ச, சைவத் தத்துவம், ஞானத்தழிசை, மாணிக்கவாசகர், திருவாசகம், உயிர்-பிரபஞ்சக் கண்ணோட்டம், சைவ சித்தாந்தம், தமிழிலக்கியம், தெய்வீக வியாபகம், சிற்றண்டம்-பேரண்டம்.

Introduction:

Manikkavasagar's Gnanathalisai is a sublime work of Saiva philosophy that has somehow received scant attention from translators and critics alike. The poem remains significant for its outstanding rendition of the process of attaining the highest power of meditation and its scientific explication of the same akin to that of Thirumoolar's Thirumanthiram. If Aurobindo's magnum opus Savitri aids us to travel into a state of supra mental consciousness, Gnanathalisai explicates in concrete terms the process of a state of yogic meditateness as seen in the Vedantic and Saiva traditions. The supreme fusion of the two seemingly divergent practices only aid Manikkavasagar to dissect the process of the unexplicable meditation in concrete terms, owing to his attainment of the highest state of consciousness. Vanavil.K. Ravi's translation into English makes this rare work known to the English speaking world. This paper probes into the salient features of this sublime poem which was in consonance with the practices of the Siddhars and the Saiva saints.

Verses of Wisdom:

A Bio-cosmic Worldview is an annotated translation of Manikkavasagar's less known poetic composition *Gnanathalisai*, comprising of twelve stanzas. The relative anonymity could be attributed to the very texture of the poem since it is a unique spiritual dissection that plunges into human complex yogic-pranic experience. Moreover, the poet remains synonymous with *Thiruvassagam* his more popular devotional text of the Tamil land, a continued cultural heritage, since it is sung in the temples to this day! Manikkavasagar stands unique amongst the 63 Saiva Nayanmars owing to the amalgamative nature of his religious philosophy, that is more akin to the Tamil Siddhars' revolutionary religious stance, in demystifying religious dogmas and rituals. The Tamil Siddhars, were wandering saints, who reposed great faith in transcendence, who belonged to a non-confirmist, "tradition which opposes" and not in a mere "counter-tradition." They denounced idol worship, rituals and prayers as actually fetter and with hold the soul from liberation (see Ganapathy p 6). Gnanathalisai is also in some ways similar to the Vedantic religion in embracing the highest yogic-meditative principles. Vanavil K. Ravi's translation of this text is highly appreciable on numerous grounds. Basically, it is a pioneering attempt, as no other translator has translated it into English.¹ The complexity and the relative anonymity of the text has rendered the translation significant. What makes the translation more noteworthy is the large corpus of notes and the multiple essays on the text which throws light on the intricate complexities of the seemingly simple poems. As Dr.

T.N. Ganapathy, the former director of the Tamil Yoga Siddha Research Project has stated in the foreword, the translation is “brilliant”. What appeals to the readers is his “...presentation of ideas, without using much of the philosophical jargon in simple and effective English... [which is]... a spiritual and intuitive venture” (13).

Manikkavasagar was not a servitor, but a spiritual scientist, involved in the yogic-pranic, meditative experience that aids one to perceive the bio cosmic vision of the universe. *Tat tvam asi* (That thou art) and *aham brahmasmi* (God is you) form the quintessence of this poem. His works have appealed to the later religious seers also, since Ramana Maharishi was intensely drawn to his yogic-meditative stance. *Thiruvagasam* was recited on the death-bed of Ramana’s mother as Ramana Maharishi strongly believed that the sublime verses would help her soul attain *mukti*. Manikkavasagar, is one of the four *samayakuravars* (Fathers of the Faith) in the pantheon of Nayanamars, (the others being Appar, Sundarar and Sambandar). Hagiographical accounts reveal his birth at Thiruvavadavur, near Madurai, on the banks of the Vaigai river around the 9th century CE and that he enjoyed the patronage of King Arimardhana Pandiyan, who made him his chief minister. His birth name was Vadavurar, and the name “Manikka” “vasagar” (diamond utterer), was bestowed on him by none other than Lord Siva himself, owing to the heart-melting sublime poetry that he sang in praise of the Lord. The intense and unwavering devotion, his trials on the banks of the Vaigai are all well known in the Tamil region, since many of these episodes remain re-enacted to this day. His final departure from the worldly form to attain a divine merger with the transcendental supreme in Chidambaram is similar to Ramalingar, who attained it in Chennai. It is significant that this saint poet lived at a time when the Bhakti movement was at its crescendo. The movement was itself a diatribe against both Jainism and Buddhism which attempted to supplant Hinduism. Manikkavasagar believed in a formless God, which propelled him to construct a temple for Lord Siva at Thirupperunthurai without a Linga. The formless amalgamates into a state of nothingness. The nothingness is a state of meditative *shunya*, an aspect of devotion later vouched strongly by the later Veerasaivites of Karnataka as enunciated in *Shunyasmpadene*, a powerful religious text.

Amongst Manikkavasagar’s literary corpus, *Gnanathalisai* composed in 12 stanzas stands unique in its process of attaining a fusion with the formless divine through a series of deconstructive experiences that depart from traditional forms of ritualistic worship. The poem is both a spiritual and an undisputable scientific account of the process of intense meditation, the paths through which the *prana*² travels, and its ultimate effect on soul-elevation. The poem’s circular pattern is unmissable, since it begins with clear delineation of the effects of the intense yogic prana sadhana, while the concluding signature verse reveals the ultimate state of freedom from the cycle of birth and death as a consequence of the yogic-meditative process. A foray into the salient features of the twelve stanzas would throw more light on this spiritual manual which is aimed at elevating the human race towards higher spiritual realms.

The opening stanza describes the effects of reaching the summits of the intensely singular meditative experience that enables one to perceive the “tip of the spiral field”.³ The attainment is possible when one controls and regulates one’s breath and the *prana*. The effects of the process of attainment are described throughout the 12 stanzas. It opens the third eye, discards superficialities of ritualism; all falsities of life like human relationships, trickery, untruth etc. disappear as the soul steps into the “intransitory” domain that is “fearless”, “matchless” yet “vibration-free” (verse 1). The process purges the soul of all forms of argumentations, and negative attributes associated with human life like “lust”, “animosity” and blind adherence to “scriptural injunctions”. With the “desire-links” severed, it is easy for the soul to cross the ocean of life and reach “the shore” (verse 1) As *prana* reaches the illumined inner self “made of light”, it beholds the sprouting of seeds that bestow the three much aspired qualities of “bliss, benevolence and birthlessness” (verse 2). Severed from worldly desires, the soul resonates with “eternal bliss” as it automatically releases itself from the incessant cycles of birth and death. The focus which is retained “between the eyebrows”⁴ endows one with the power to witness a “cosmic dance” perceived intuitively in a state of “trance”. In such a yogic state, the soul is untouched by passion, sin or the malevolent effects of the planets, as it stands high on “wisdom” essential to reach the “divine abode” (verse 3). The soul’s ascension into the higher abode aids one to witness the musical seeds that unfolds the much sought -after triple qualities like “bliss, benevolence, birthlessness” and freedom from “dependence on worldly things” to only behold an inner illumination that dispels all darkness. In the state of supreme silence, the soul is freed from mundanities like “speech and hunger”, yet filled with an inner bliss that unfetters the soul from “planetary chain(s)” (verse 4). In the process, the intensely meditative process aids the spirit to “ascend the twelve steps”⁵ while also “transcending the four”⁶ (verse 5). This significant verse delineates the process of the soul’s ascension that communicates in a clear voice, sans “dissension or gymnastic pride” (verse 5). Human knowledge with its inherent limitations is aware of the “nine gateways”,⁷ but it is ignorant of the “tenth” (verse 6). The soul’s ascent endows it with a higher realization that yearns only for a divine merger where the soul delves into the “chamber of bliss” (verse 6), realized not through bookish knowledge but only through the sublime merger with the Supreme divine! It is a transcendental plane embedded in the “micro” and macro” space, “where silence reigns supreme” the abode to which the soul enters through the “twelve steps” (verse 7). The domain that the soul discovers as described in the eighth verse vindicates silence, which aids one to transcend the three spaces as it enters the fourth. Ravi interprets the space of the chakras thus, which is summarized as follows. The 4th space is located between the first and the second (*Mooladhara* and *Svadishtanam*), the 3rd space between the *Svadishtanam* and *Manipoorakam* and the 2nd space between the *Manipoorakam* and *Anatham* (see Ravi p117-118). After crossing these centres, it approaches the *Vissudhi*, the place where the three paths “converge ...inside the arch” (verse 8). On transcending the three paths viz. the *Ida*, *Pingala* and *Suli Munai* (spiral field), it transcends the differences and reaches only the single space, where the soul learns to discern binaries and

differences, and merge into a “state of oneness.” (Ravi 117-18) Once the pranic upsurge attains its pinnacle, the soul is insulated from the mundanities of sense organs and conflicts. The metamorphosis of the soul is fully cognizant only after it transcends the twelve steps, since it resolves to never return to the commonplace world from its stationed “Golden Temple” (verse 10). The soul perceives a liberation from humdrum rituals, “sleep, joy and distress” to ascend into an uplifting world of heavenly bliss. The last two stanzas are first person expressions of the spiritual summits experienced by him. Travel to the threshold of total liberation bestows upon him a second birth, since he has travelled across the six energy centres and also the *maya* of phenomenal existence. The experience aids him to discard petty differences, rituals, cycles of birth and death, rituals, dogmas and the like. He is one with space, an ocean of supreme bliss. Identity is a mere “smear”. The final stanza summarises the principles enunciated in the poem, while concurrently explicating the highest purpose of these verses. The role of a guru in spiritual sadhana is supreme. The poet identifies himself as a guru, Manikkavasagar, who sang the *Thiruvagasam*. He further asserts that he sang the former when he still embraced the bodily world. But this present composition was living in a higher form of existence, making this short apocryptic work, a manual for yogic *sadhakas* and spiritual aspirants. English literature also abounds in delineation of the highest yogic-pranic experiences. Aurobindo’s magnum opus *Savitri*, his shorter poetic compositions like *Thought the Paraclete* and *Rose of God* also delineate highest spiritual experiences. Poetry is *mantra* to Aurobindo. Such poetry is “Future Poetry” to him as it is the only panacea for the human race. To Manikkavasagar, if one practices *Gnanathalisai*, one does not even enter the portals of the womb, and enters into a state of birthlessness. He grieves that he does not possess these heightened spiritual experiences continuously. The world is laden with Karma, and the only way to transcend it is through the highest pranic-meditative experience! The poem is significant since it resonates with many ideas in Patanjali’s *yogasutras*. Patanjali comprehended human beings not as mere biological entities, but as a holistic mechanism of the body, mind and consciousness. A consciousness of yoga has existed in ancient Indian texts like Gita, the Upanishads and the like. But Patanjali had first codified it into a systematic and scientific process nearly two thousand years ago, that aided the human soul to scientifically align itself with the larger bio cosmos leading to its sublime realization. *Gnanathalisai* of Manikkavasagar is a live enactment of his self-drawn codes which could have been inspired by our Vedic, Upanishadic tradition, the *Gita*, Patanjali’s *yoga sutras*, It is a treatise for generations to come!

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Notes

1. The explication of *Gnanthalisai* has been attempted by a few only in Tamil. Swami Sankarananda made a commentary in 1973, while Paranjyothi Mahan made one such attempt in 2002. V.Ravi largely follows these commentaries while also relying on his own understanding of the text (see Ravi128).
2. *Prana*: “Indian thinkers analyse the whole of the manifested universe into two ultimate entities- *Akasa* and *Prana*. *Akasa* is the ultimate or basic stuff out of which all gross forms from galaxies to atoms, from microscopic cells to the perfected human and divine bodies take shape and into which they resolve when they are dissolved or disintegrated to the pristine condition.....what works upon the *Akasa* and shapes it into all forms of manifestations is called prana, the...all-inclusive basic energy into which all forms of energy known to us as manifesting in matter and mind are reduced at the end of the cycle.” (see Ravi 146-47)
3. Tip of the spiral field: The poet uses the Tamil word “*suli munai*” which has been translated by Ravi as “tip of the spiral field”. It refers to a concentrated energy centre whose tip is the summit of spiritual experience. The Sanskrit equivalent is “*Sushumna*”. Etymologically, *Sushumna* and *Sushupti* (deep sleep) spring from the same root. (see Ravi 130) The Tamil Siddhars proclaim that there are three subtle cords which run parallel, corresponding to the spinal cord. They are “the left” (*idakalai*/lunar cord), “the right” (*pingalai*/solar cord) and the “middle” (*sulu munai*). The *suli munai* referred to in the opening stanza stresses that the middle path creates this spiral field.
4. Between the eyebrows: The reference is to the *ajna chakra* between the eyebrows, where concentration is placed during meditation for a unifocal enhanced focus and clarity of vision. It is the sixth of the chakras.
5. Ascend the twelve steps: “Twelve is a significant number denoting the two subtle cords supposed to run on either side of the spinal cord and the ten divisions into which these two branch off.” (see Ravi 104-105)
6. “Transcending the four”: This phrase suggests the four elements: earth, water, air and fire. The four elements need to be transcended. Aristotle believed in these. Even before Aristotle, Empedocles had propounded the theory of four elements. But Aristotle developed it into a full-fledged doctrine. (see Ravi 130) Indian yogic systems believed in the “space” fifth element which was relatively complex to transcend, but not insurmountable. At the level of experience, space or *Akasa* is an intricate abstraction.
7. Nine gateways: They are the nine gateways to the human physiology: the pair of eyes, pair of ears, the pair of nostrils, the mouth, anus and urethra. There is also a tenth gateway, a minute opening which

belongs to the subtle body. Swami Vivekananda states that the Susumna ends in “two lotuses, the lower lotus surrounding the triangle of the Kundalini, and the top one in the brain surrounding the pineal gland.” (The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda vol viii, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, 8th. Reprint, 1991, p52, cited in Ravi 149.)

Hinduism believes in ten senses or *Das Indriya* which are the access points between our inner and outer experiences. They are at the core of Sadhana (spiritual practice). A restraint and regulation of our *Indriyas* are mandatory for self-realization because the senses focus on the material world, whilst the true nature of the self is spiritual which, many believe, cannot be obtained through the focus on material desires. It has to be transcended to attain the supreme realization. In other words, the senses are too distracting for us to get close to the *Atman*. We must discard the senses. As in the Bhagavad Gita;

“*With your activities dedicated to Me [Krishna] and your mind and intelligence fixed on Me, you will attain Me without doubt.*” Bhagavad Gita 8.7

These sensory indulgences block the realization of our true nature and limits our capacity to know the higher or absolute truth.

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