

AGATHIYAR

[From "THE TAMIL PLUTARCH" *A summary account of the lives of the poets and poetesses of Southern India and Ceylon, written in 1856, by Simon Caste Chetty (author of the Ceylon Gazetteer). Revised Edition with notes contributed by Dr. T. P. Meenakshisundaram and Foreword by Swami Vipulananda, published by General Publishers, Ltd., 20, Parson's Road, Colombo, 1946.]*

A brief account of his life

The history of Agastiyer being blended with the Hindu Mythology, it is now difficult to separate the real particulars of his life from those that are fabulous. This much, however, is certain, that he was a native of Aryavarta, otherwise called Punyabhumi, or the holy land, situated between the Imaus and Vindhya mountains, and that he led the first colony of Brahmans which settled, in Southern India from the north, under the auspices of KULASEKHARA, the founder of Pandiyen dynasty at Madura. The fable of his levelling the Vindhya mountain, which had elevated its summits even to the skies and impeded the progress of the sun and moon, implies, his passing over it into the south with the Brahmans from the north; while the other fable that on the occasion when all the gods and sages assembled together on the Imaus mountain, to celebrate the nuptials of Siva and Parvati, the northern part of the earth became depressed, and the southern part elevated, and Siva, dismissed Agastiyer sending him to the Pothiya mountain to reduce both parts to the same level, implies, his civilizing the people of the south and rendering them equal to the people of the north in point of civilisation. Not only is Agastiyer believed to have diffused the worship of Siva amongst the Tamils, but also to have taught them *Medicine, Chemistry, Astronomy, and the other sciences*. The legend, however, which attributes to him the invention of the Tamil alphabet, is far from probable. Perhaps, he merely enlarged it by inserting in it such of the letters as are now used to represent the sound of Sanscrit derivatives. Although it cannot be denied that the Tamils owe much of their civilization to Agastiyer, it is nevertheless not to be supposed, that before he arrived amongst them, they were altogether immersed in barbarism, and that they were not acquainted with the art of writing. His treatise on Tamil grammar is said to have contained no less than 12,000 Sutras or aphorisms; but with the exception of some fragments which have been preserved in quotations by TOLKA' PIYANAA'R in his work on the same subject, it is not extant. Agastiyer wrote both in Sanscrit, and in Tamil. He is reputed to have written a lakh of verses on theology, an equal number on alchemy, and two lakhs on medicine, but most of the Tamil works commonly ascribed to him are in reality not his productions. In the medical treatise entitled *Irrunuttanju, lues venerea*, is described under the name of *Paranghiviyad'hi*, or "the Portuguese disease," and again in the alchemical treatise, entitled *Puranasutram*, sublimate of mercury is described under the name of *Paranghipashanam*, or "the Portuguese mineral"; hence these two works bear undoubted marks of having been written after the arrival of the Portuguese in India.

As a physician, Agasthyer occupies the same eminence amongst the Tamils as HIPPOCRATES does amongst the Greeks, and it is deserving of notice, that there are some very curious coincidences between the doctrines of the former, and those of the latter, especially as regards the prognosis and diagnosis of diseases, the critical days, and premonitory symptoms of death. His knowledge of medicine was confessedly extensive, nor was he less remarkable for his skill in surgery. The story of his having once opened the cranium of a patient, in order to remove a toad, which had lodged itself in the brain, when disentangled from the twist of fable, at once proves that he was acquainted with trepanning; and it should be remarked that the existence of seminal animalcules, which was discovered by LUDWIG HAMM in Europe only in A. D. 1677 (See English Cyclopaedia, Biography, Vol. iii, p. 871) is mentioned by Agasthyer in one of his medical works, entitled *Kurunadichutram*. (Robert's Oriental Illustrations of the Sacred Scriptures, p. 281). He was also well skilled in chemistry, especially in that part of it which relates to the analysis and synthesis of minerals, and the vehicles by the aid of which the transmutation of metals is effected.

Agasthyer was a married man. It is said that his wife LOPA'MUDRA was a pattern of conjugal affection, who attracted universal admiration on that account, and that he had a son by her named SA'GAREN. At what period, Agasthyer established himself in Southern India is not known, and it must always remain so until we shall have been able to ascertain the real date of the existence of the king KULASE'K'HARA PANDIYEN, by whom he was patronized. All accounts concur in assigning the foundation of the Pandiya kingdom at Madura to KULASE'K'HARA PANDIYEN; but they are at considerable variance with regard to the time when that event happened. Some place it as high up as B. C. 1500 (Taylor's Oriental Historical Manuscripts, Vol. i, p. 135), while others bring it down to a later period; but we have reasons to believe that it could not have been later than at least, the ninth century B. C.; for, from the fact of WIJAYA who founded the Singhalese dynasty in Ceylon in B. C. 543, marrying the daughter of a Pandiyen, and the Pandiyen sending along with her to Ceylon a retinue of seven hundred daughters of his nobility, together with eighteen officers of state, and seventy-five menial servants, besides elephants, horses, and chariots, as recorded in the Mahawanso, it would appear that the Pandiya kingdom was not then in its infancy, but fully organized and at the lowest calculation a few centuries old. When Agasthyer left the court of KULASE'K'HARA PANDIYAN, he is stated to have assumed the ascetic life, and to have retired to the *Pothiya* mountain, where the Hindus absurdly believe him to be still alive, although invisible to ordinary eyes.

Agasthyer was a theist in philosophy, and the Rev. Mr. TAYLOR, who calls him "the prince of Indian doctors," and "one of India's greatest Philosophers," justly observes, that in "so far as a superiority to popular errors is concerned, he may perhaps claim to rank on a level with SOCRATES, or PLATO." (Taylor's Oriental Historical Manuscripts, Vol. i, p. 172, p. 175)

Agasthyer is said to have had twelve disciples to whom he taught the different arts and sciences, and who were afterwards employed by him in instructing the

People. The names of these disciples are TOLKA'PPIYANA'R, ADANKO'TA'ST'RI'YANA'R, TURA'LINGANA'R, SEMPUCHE'YANA'R, VAIYA'BIGANA'R, VA'IPPIYANA'R, PANAMBA'RANA'R, KAZHA'RAMBANA'R, AVINAYANA'R, KA'KEIPA'DINIYANA'R, NATTATTANA'R and VA'MANA'R; but few particulars are known respecting them.

Note by Dr. T. P. MEENAKSHI SUNDARAM.

This name is written and pronounced in Tamil as Agattiyar. Late Professor K. Subramaniya Pillai derived it from the word "Agattiyam" meaning "the indispensable", but even then it cannot be, as he claimed it, a pure Tamil word. Agastya is a Vedic seer around whose name many fables were woven during the age of the Epics and the Puranas. He has come to be looked upon as the founder or at least the promoter of Tamil language. Naccinarkkiniyar assumes that Maduraiakkanci of the Sangam age refers to Agastiyar but his interpretation is not accepted by all. The commentary on "Iraiyana Akapporul", which cannot be earlier than the seventh century A. D. and the Velvikkudi Grant give the earliest reference to Agastya as presiding over the destinies of Tamil. When Colonists went from the Pandya country to the Eastern Indian Archipelago, the cult of Agastya, as the Tamil seer, spread there and temples built in his honour. At the next stage of the tradition prevailing during the age of the commentators on Tolkappiyam, the authorship of a book on grammar in Tamil is assigned to him and Tolkappiyar the author of the earliest Tamil grammar now extant, is made one of his twelve disciples. A few sutras and ideas are quoted from this Agattiyam. The quotations given by Cenavarayar refer to the views of the various schools of Sanskrit grammarians. Such minute references are against the spirit of Tolkappiyam. The quotation given by Teivaccilaiyar refers to the various foreign languages and I have shown elsewhere this must be posterior to Tolkappiyam. The quotations given in Nannul Viruttiyurai are certainly of later date, expressing views which have become popular only during the times of Cankara Namacciayar. In the last century, a book alleged to be Peragattiyam and Sirragattiyam was printed but the forgery is too patent to deceive any one. The book gives the Sanskrit equivalents of all Tamil grammatical terms.

By the eleventh century A. D. an astrology of poetry was developed and when some of these views were ascribed to Agastiyar all the commentators with one voice protested. The earliest commentator Ilampuranar seems to doubt the story of the twelve disciples of Agastya.

Siddhas in the Tamil land, trace their origin to Agastya and various works on mysticism, worship, medicine and alchemy are in circulation as having come from his pen. Their language is too modern to be older than the fifteenth century A. D. It is an established usage among the Siddhas to assume the names of the seers of ancient times. There is no end to the growth of such apocryphal works but this does not minimise their greatness and usefulness. The Ashtakam is no longer ascribed to him.

Agastya as a historical figure is no more than a will o' the wisp but as a tradition he wields an influence which is felt on all walks of Tamilian life.