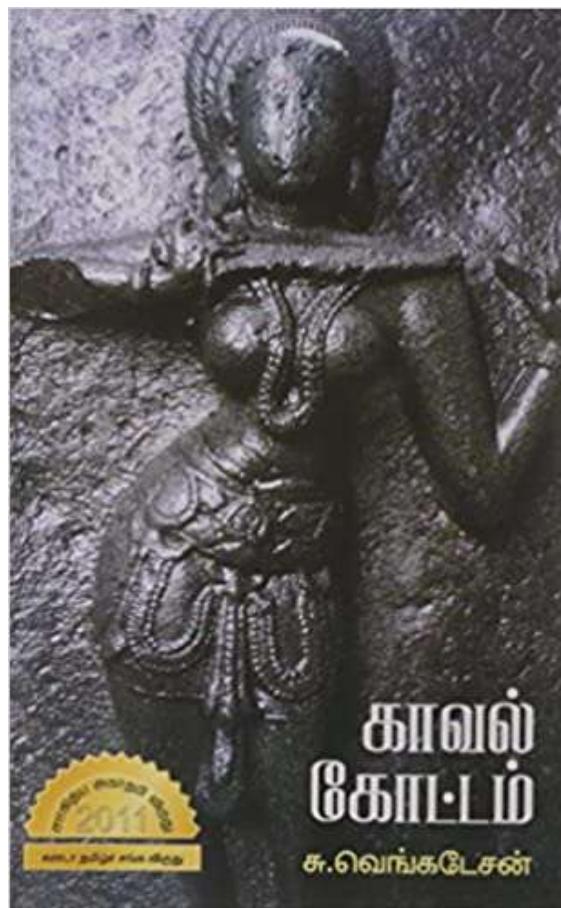


Su. Venkatesan: Tamil Valour in *Kavalkottam*

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Courtesy: https://www.amazon.in/Kaaval-Kotam-S-Vengadesan/dp/B00JXG4576/ref=sr_1_9?dchild=1&keywords=kaval+kottam&qid=1616553914&s=books&sr=1-9

Abstract

This paper aims at studying *Kavalkottam* by Su. Venkatesan as an attempt to re-understand the Tamil past. It is viewed as a launch of Tamil valour and as a reinforcement of Tamils' ideology of moral superiority which the writer achieves by projecting the land as a

region of straightforward warriors. The paper attempts to study the other social commentaries made by the novelist through his epic portrayal of Tamil monarchic past that merges into the colonial past and later into democratic nation, narrated in a sumptuous, minutely descriptive and rich style. The Tamil community's story of being guardians to the villages to becoming migrant workers in other lands is traced by Venkatesan with sensitivity and imagination.

Keywords: Venkatesan, Karupanan, Criminal Act 1871, Tamil Nadu, Gods



Su. Venkatesan, M.P.
Sahitya Akademi Award Winning Novelist
Courtesy: *Times of India*

The novel *Kavalkottam* traces the story of the people of central Tamil Nadu who have a rich history of being great warriors. Due to socio-political changes these people shift into different types of professionals and bring about new castes, losing their superior position in society as civic guardians in the course of time. The Tamil title *Kavalkottam* means 'The stronghold of Guardians' or 'The Guardians' Divisions' roughly. The Tamil word 'kaval' means 'guarding to protect.' 'Kottam' can refer to a 'regiment' or 'division' or 'stronghold.'

Karupanan in the novel symbolizes, or represents as depicted by Su. Venkatesan, the Tamil warrior race from the central part of Tamil Nadu, and it is he who begins the story as

narrated in the omniscient voice of the novelist. He regains consciousness after the Northern men on horses devastate the village for which he is the guard. His wife Sadachi, a pregnant woman in advanced stage, gives him the lance and asks the fatally wounded Karupanan to run after the Northern men and continue his work as the guardian of the village, and he dies in the encounter after killing one such vandal.

The novelist doesn't venture into any kind of descriptions that might involve self-pity; there is no effort made to portray the sentiments of the man who dies fighting; there is equally no time spent in describing his wife's mourning for her husband – she doesn't try to take care of her mortally wounded husband – instead, tells him to move on and kill the invaders. The scene launches the traditional Tamil woman – a woman of courage who has warrior qualities and has a presence in the public sphere.

Subsequent to his death, Sadachi leaves the village after three days, and travels down south and delivers her child in a cave. The novel traces eight generations of her posterity and tells us how Karupanan becomes an icon and God in his society. He is lovingly called Karupan and temples are built for him, as the grateful people celebrate his honesty and bold courage. There are no scenes created by the writer to project him as a martyr in the contemporary sense of the word; instead, he is accepted as a God, and is presented with dignity, and hence due respect is given to his characterization.

This habit of worshipping great leaders is the local tradition and the writer reflects it as close to life as possible. These powerful men who die in the process of protecting their society are perceived as Gods. Society accepts their power to fight and die without worrying about their 'self' as a sign of greatness constantly reinforcing their memories is their religion. Men who go beyond themselves are the supermen in a Nietzschean sense and Tamil societies look at them as true Gods and Venkatesan captures the genesis of religions in a simple narrative style.

Writers establish or reestablish thoughts and ideologies, value systems, and stories create or re-create cultural codes and Venkatesan re-establishes the lost tradition of the village gods, who actually were great martyrs who would have lost their lives in the act of protecting their people.

Villages celebrate their stories and Karupanan is a guardian god of manly valour, and his wife Sadachi, is represented as a true Tamil courageous woman as established in the Tamil ideology; she gives the dagger along with reassuring words to her husband to get up from his wounded state and run after the northern men on horses. Karupanan does run after a horseman, manages to kill him and gets himself killed in the process. The writer has not created a specific scene to represent her sorrow:

She poured milk on the spot where he was buried on the third day and left for her mother's place and relatives. She walked down the southern part of Vaigai river. She saw new villages being created on her way. She carried the left over pots, and the freshly grown pulse of 'Mochai' in sack cloth and walked holding Karupanan's stick. Her steps were confident, and she walked on the path of Nagamalai in the hot sand with her child in her womb. When she came near Amana Hills, she developed pains to deliver her child. As the pain intensified, she continued to walk towards a cave in the hill. (Venkatesan 20)

The character of Sadachi thus symbolises the iconic Tamil woman of Sangam literature and the Tamil phrases and stories reveal her tolerance for pain, sustained work power and blunt courage and boldness. The novel portrays her as the grand old lady of the clan when it describes the later generations, born out of Sadachi's child:

When a child was born or if there was a hair removing ceremony for the child, people would go to Karupan, worship Him, and old women would narrate the story of the grand old lady of the clan, Sadachi. When men started their new work of guarding also, they would tell similar stories after the men's hair is shaved, as the tradition. The story would begin from Kaluvan, and continue further about Mokaiyan, Mondi, Peyan, Karupanan, Kaluvan, Thathan, and Mayandi, the eight generation of these hardy men. These are only stories of the people. If these stories break, then the villages too will break. The village and stories are not two different things. Stories and life-breath are not two different things. When stories are forgotten, lives are lost. Hence stories are the breath of life. Stories are born from the soil. They speak about the soil. The soil's earliest harvest is the story of the soil. (Venkatesan 722)

The stories of the people hold the history of the land, and these tales are told from the perspective of ordinary men and women. They do not carry the written historical records of the winners, and their vision limits itself to the local or regional sphere, but with universal values. They present a different face of Tamil Nadu, different from mainstream discourses.

The words "Tamil culture" immediately evoke the image of the towering gopuram (entrance gateways) of the Hindu temple, at once a commanding grandeur and solemnity; of a beautiful dancing girl, decked out in all her finery, graceful and lovely; to the literary minded, of the squatting sage Thiruvalluvar with his palm-leaf and stylus; to the gastronomically inclined, of idli (a rice and lentil batter) and sambar (lentils, vegetable and tamarind). When we attempt to understand what constitutes Tamil culture in terms of an average man's life, particularly in the

context of the present day, we encounter elements which cannot be isolated and defined, yet are deep rooted in a society which has always been instinctively aware of its strengths and weaknesses. (Ramakrishnan 4)

Venkatesan takes up these deep rooted social and religious elements of Tamil society and reconstructs their genesis by narrating their history tracing them through written and unwritten traditions of expressions ranging from government documents to folk tales from the villages. The isolated elements are brought by the writer to the centre through his narratives of stories that he hears from villagers which he fixes in written historical records.

The hero of the novel and the God of the people is Karupanan who becomes the guardian god of the people as Karupan. Venkatesan portrays the folklore and its history in contemporary Tamil language, making it an easy read. It presents a parallel history of the people of Tamil Nadu, much different from a classically defined format, and lives very close to nature. It lives on in the stories narrated by old women of the villages. The mainstream classical culture does not tell the stories of the gods of the people, and the marginalised oral traditions continue to exist, the novelist seems to emphasize quite vehemently.

Although it is the monumental architecture of India's classical temples which usually overwhelms the visitor, it is the country's folk temples, several times greater in number, that reflect the living faith of the people. India's village temples owe their origin to a belief in the various manifestations malevolent and benevolent of the spirit of nature, and to a conviction that God dwells in all animate and inanimate phenomena trees, rivers, mountains, water-tanks, the sea, lightning and the wind. They are also connected to the fertility cult so widely prevalent throughout the ancient world. Faith in the Mother Goddess led to the personification of every village settlement in a grama devata, a village Goddess who protects the villagers, decides their fate and guides them like a fond mother. Another concept that has made an important contribution to the development of village Gods is the worship of heroes who laid down their lives for the sake of their country or community. These heroes were commemorated and worshipped by the erection of Hero Stones or Memorial Stones, thousands of which are found in Tamil Nadu and other parts of India. (Nagaswamy 29)

The Goddesses of these villages are great and powerful women who have lived for the society just like male heroes. Karupanan's wife emerges as a loyal and great woman who continues her journey of life, thinking of the welfare of her people and she also continues her agricultural work. Mochai, the pulse of the common man of Tamil Nadu, is cultivated, no matter what happens to the men of the family. Even after her husband's death, she walks on carrying the

seeds to cultivate and help the community live on. She lives with dignity and the community thrives and she dies as a grand old lady. Meanwhile history topples down everything in the society, and the British view these local guardians from a different perspective and brand them as criminals.

Sadachi's posterity is completely demoralized and most of them are tortured and killed by the police gradually. Thathanoor, Nalloor, Pusala Patti, and Veeranoor are now branded as places of criminals' locations. The people try to explain their position as guardians of villages and their tradition of protecting fellow people to the government through the church and the lawyers. These concepts are so strange to the western mind that their arguments do not win in any forum. The westerners simply dismissed their tradition as stealing, and brought it under the act of a crime. Newly established local power structures support the British administration and these local people are oppressed and slowly they lose their power.

The women of this region fight against the British just as how they fought against the northern soldiers decades back:

The old lady from Nalloor who had fainted after being beaten up by the police got up as if to plead for her life. She jumped up suddenly and fell on the British soldier and bit his throat off in a fraction of a second. His blood splashed everywhere. As he screamed in pain, the other police men hit her continuously. She fell down and died. The grand old lady's death brought a lot of chaos; the screams 'the grand old mother has been beaten up to death,' brought the men out, rushing from their hiding spots. They began to attack the police with swords and lances and even stones. The police ordered for shooting and the entire village became a bloody battlefield. They shot sixty rounds. Sixteen people's dead bodies were dragged around the streets, and later were piled one upon another and buried in a big hole dug for the purpose. (Venkatesan 1159-1160)

The sixty four men are arrested and the novel tells us that no one "knew what happened to them" (Venkatesan 1160). The next day, one of the villagers, sleeping in the Karupan temple has a dream: "The grand old mother is standing throughout the night, standing as a guardian to the village" (Venkatesan 1161). After a week, the people put four stones, two big and two small, under the neem tree and begin to worship them as Gods. The two big stones now have become two gods – the grand old mother, Angammal, and her granddaughter, Pinniakkal – who are beaten up to death by the British police. The two small stones symbolize two Gods – Koravakalai and Veeranakalai – men who are shot by the British police. The neem tree symbolizes the old man Mayandi, and he has grown well, branching out on all sides (Venkatesan 1162).

“Kalla Nadu is located in the south-western side of Amana hills,” and the novel portrays the lives of these bold and courageous men and women, and their past experiences. Venkatesan has “researched for ten years” extensively through the “documents collected by the missionaries,” and their letters to each other that tell us how they were used by the government to collect data about the local people to arrest them and make them workers in tea estates; he has collected “government documents and written histories.” The novel is written in a highly realistic manner using his research on “Keelakudi history,” paving the way for the present archaeological research in the place (Venkatesan (1167-1168). It breaks the stereotypical representations of the villages as places of illiteracy, and presents them as superior examples of knowledge systems co-existing with nature and living courageously.

As discussed, people’s stories create a belief system of Gods and Goddesses, who would have been the benefactors of them when they were alive. Warriors turn into professional robbers in the turn of history and Venkatesan weaves their teary tale with historical details, knowledge gathered from legends and creativity with sensitivity and empathy.

Culverts, copper plates, and government documents record the history of the rulers, and these records intertwine with the oral stories, folk songs, and local phrases depicting the history from the perspectives of the people. These contradictory versions of human histories raise mutual questions, reject each other, commit gross errors by mis-recording actual history, telling narratives from one viewpoint or other. Only the artist has the sublime work of narrating human history from an objective and neutral location. Therefore, his epics stand the test of time and acquire the power to travel across time and space. They get the energy to reshape the human mind and win over to truth. The novel is the best medium to tell the stories of life and its big doors help the reader enter the world described by the novelist with ease. (Venkatesan’s introduction to the novel written in 2013)

An artist turns dead history into live life once again by infusing blood into its veins. He has the power of imagination to depict life once again as it was originally lived, with multiple perspectives and viewpoints. *Kavalkottam* vividly depicts the mainstream and local histories of central Tamil Nadu and its people as a people of courage and boldness.

The Criminal Act of 1871 would explain how governments changed their perspectives on the local tribes or clans in India:

If the Local Government has reason to believe that any tribe, gang or class of persons is addicted to the systematic commission of non-bailable offences, it may report the case to the Governor General in Council, and may request his

permission to declare such tribe, gang or class to be a criminal tribe. The report shall state the reasons why such tribe, gang or class is considered to be addicted to the systematic commission of non-bailable offences, and, as far as possible, the nature and the circumstances of the offences in which the members of the tribe are supposed to have been concerned; and shall describe the manner in which it is proposed that such tribe, gang or class shall earn its living when the provisions hereinafter contained have been applied to it. If such tribe, gang or class has no fixed place of residence, the report shall state whether such tribe, gang or class follows any lawful occupation, and whether such occupation is, in the opinion of the Local Government, the real occupation of such tribe, gang or class, or a pretence for the purpose of facilitating the commission of crimes, and shall set forth the grounds on which such opinion is based; and the report shall also specify the place of residence in which such wandering tribe, gang or class is to be settled under the provisions hereinafter contained, and the arrangements which are proposed to be made for enabling it to earn its living therein. If, upon the consideration of any such report, the Governor General in Council is satisfied that the tribe, gang or class to which it relates ought to be declared criminal, and that the means by which it is proposed that such tribe, gang or class shall earn its living are adequate, he may authorize the Local Government to publish in the Local Gazette a notification declaring that such tribe, gang or class is a criminal tribe, and thereupon the provisions of this Act shall become applicable to such tribe, gang or class. (Casemine.com)

Venkatesan re-presents this period in the history of Tamil Nadu and has attempted to recreate the environment which brought in social changes. The people of this novel are portrayed as courageous and straightforward, and surely are not presented as robbers or thieves. They are painted as victims of social and political changes that changed the entire world as global migrations. The western perception of Indian society and its systems of social arrangements has been captured in the novel. History and contemporary research on Tamil Nadu have brought the past and writers are trying to re-imagine the past of the South Indian region especially, the central part of Tamil Nadu.

David Arnold's work on the criminal tribes of Madras and Anand Yang's study of the Magahiya Doms of Northeast India are extensive works in terms of their engagement with the criminal tribes, but offer little help in terms of establishing trans-regional connections...This is particularly visible in an edited volume, *Crime and Criminality in British India*, which is one of the earliest works in the field. In his essay on the situation of crime in Madras in the later colonial period, David Arnold views CTA as "a means by which to remodel the recalcitrant and, in

colonial view, unproductive communities into “useful” and law-abiding participants in the colonial economy” (Safdar 3)

Venkatesan has worked extensively and imagined scenes and situations evoking written history and has merged it with unwritten oral traditions and legends.

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