A classified collection of Tamil proverbs

Jensen Herman
A CLASSIFIED COLLECTION
OF
TAMIL PROVERBS

BY THE
REV. HERMAN JENSEN,
Danish Missionary, Madras.

"AN OUNCE OF MOTHER WIT IS WORTH A POUND OF LEARNING."

MADRAS:
THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL PUBLISHING HOUSE.

LONDON:
TRÜBNER AND CO.

1897.
All Rights Reserved.
The Luz, 19th April, 1897.

From

The Hon'ble S. Subramania Iiyar, B.L., C.I.E.,
Dewan Bahadur.

Dear Sir,

I have no doubt that your forthcoming collection of Tamil proverbs will prove highly useful and interesting. The collection of sayings in the West by the side of these proverbs would enable many people to see how much similarity in ideas exists between the East and the West.

As regards the translation into English the ideas underlying those proverbs have been well brought out. I wish every success to your laudable undertaking.

Yours sincerely,

(Signed) S. Subramaniem.
FROM

C. W. TAMOTHAR AM PILLAY, ESQ., B.A., B.I.

The edition of proverbs brought out by the Rev. Mr. Jensen is decidedly an improvement upon its predecessors. Its classification under appropriate heads gives it a superior aspect, facilitating one to lay his hand on what he wants which he cannot do in a collection simply alphabetically arranged, the advantage of which is also combined in the edition by the index of the initial words.

Notwithstanding that there are slight errors of grammar and spelling, which a European compiler cannot but fall into, the book, I believe, will be of great use to both the Tamilians and foreigners.

(Signed) C. W. TAMOTHAR AM PILLAY.

MADRAS, 23rd April, 1897.
PREFACE.

About twenty years ago, when I got Percival’s collection of Tamil proverbs into my hands, I had only been a short time in India, and had as yet got no insight into Indian thought and literature. I had read only a couple of small Tamil story books, but when reading these I had already perceived that the Indians could hardly tell a story without introducing some proverbs into it. My attention was thus at an early period of my life in India drawn to proverbs, and I began to study Percival’s collection. I got, however, very little out of my study, as Percival had only given a translation of the Tamil proverbs, and had given no hints as to their meaning. So in those days I got no insight whatever into the real household proverbs, but had almost to rest satisfied with the many aphorisms, or what we in Tamil call சிங்கல், of which we find large numbers in all our Tamil proverb collections. Yet, from what I had seen in the story books and in Percival’s collection I had got an interest in these terse, blunt and poetic sayings; and year after year on getting deeper into the thought and life of India, and at the same time becoming acquainted with more and more of the proverbs, my interest in them steadily increased. And whenever I met with a new proverb either when talking with the people or reading Tamil books, I always looked for it in Percival’s collection, and if he had not got it, I took a note of it; and at times I tried to have some of them explained by the common people.

While I was thus leisurely prosecuting the study of Tamil proverbs, the Rev. J. Lazarus, B.A., began to prepare a “Dictionary of Tamil Proverbs.” I looked forward to the publication of this book with very great interest, but when it appeared, I was somewhat disappointed with it, partly because Mr. Lazarus had not given a translation of the proverbs and partly because his explanation of the proverbs seemed to me, from the insight I had got into the proverbs through years of study, not always to be the right
one. But the book roused my interest afresh, and I took a Tamil munshi for about three years to go through all the proverbs I had found in other collections, and those I now found in Mr. Lazarus's book, and also those I had collected myself. This study with my munshi together with the kind help I got from other Tamil people led me to a fuller understanding of Oriental proverbial literature, and after a couple of years investigation, I got the idea of publishing a collection of these beautiful national sayings. But no sooner had I began to realize the idea, than I felt how much easier it was to get an idea than to carry it out. And hundreds of times, when going on with this work, have I felt the force of the Tamil proverb: "I stepped into the water without knowing its depth."

When the idea of publishing a collection of Tamil proverbs occurred to me, I saw at once that I had great difficulties to face. I had the difficulty of two languages, both of which were foreign to me. I had the fear—and still have it—that it might be too much for a foreigner to venture on the publication of Tamil proverbs, as proverbs undoubtedly form the most difficult branch of a nation's literature to comprehend. Besides this, it was clear to me that if I were to publish Tamil proverbs, I could not adopt the usual alphabetical order, but would have to arrange them into groups. Another difficulty—and without comparison the most important one—was to get the proper meaning of the proverbs, not as some pandits may please to explain them, but as common men and women understand them, when they use them in their every day life. Another difficulty, again, was to have these thousands of proverbs before me sifted. What was to be taken, and what to be left out? It always seemed to me that our collections of proverbs suffered from a great evil, viz., that they contained too many useless sayings, too many aphorisms and too many repetitions of the same proverbs.

With these difficulties before me I started, hoping that the proverb would prove true: "Little strokes at last fell great oaks," or as we say in Tamil: "Stroke upon stroke will make even a grindstone creep."

When going into the study of Tamil proverbs one finds that little has been done in the way of making a scientific investigation of them. All proverbs, sayings and aphorisms we meet with in our
Tamil proverb collections we generally call Tamil proverbs, but these two terms—Tamil and Proverbs—raise two great questions: Are they all Tamil originally, and are they all proverbs? When comparing the Tamil proverbs with the Telugu ones, we find a good number almost word for word the same. And I remember when once walking with a friend in the streets of Pooma, that he quoted two Marathi proverbs, both of which we have literally in Tamil. At Bombay I once happened to look into a Marathi proverb collection, and when I asked for a translation of the first proverb in the book I found it to be ours: “The dancing girl, who could not dance, said that the hall was not big enough.” But which is which in our Tamil proverb collections. They are all called Tamil.

Again, is it right to insert in our collections of proverbs hundreds and hundreds of aphorisms, classical sayings (தியூறனூறு) and common sayings, when these only communicate a truth in a general way, without making use of any sort of illustration? It seems to me that we should not allow “the confusion of proverbs with mere precepts or maxims destitute of proverbial significance and character” to go on. Each in its proper place. I have not left them out altogether, but tried to insert only such as are common, and at the same time contain rare words or idiomatic phrases.

To show what I mean by aphorisms and precepts, I shall quote a few here:—

Here are a few more of the same kind, but a little more classical in their grammar:—

To show what I mean by aphorisms and precepts, I shall quote a few here:—

Here are a few more of the same kind, but a little more classical in their grammar:—
PREFACE.

But where would be the end of it, if these were to be passed off as proverbs? A fine collection, quite a Mahabharata, might be made out of them. The literature of India abounds in them. From the Mahabharata, Hitopadesha, शरणार्थ and other books, we could easily get a beautiful collection of aphorisms and sayings counted by thousands.

Many of the proverbs met with in books have so often been handled by pandits, that we meet with the same proverb in a number of forms. The same is the case with a number of proverbs, which, just because they are in common use all over the country, have become slightly altered when wandering about the country from place to place and from caste to caste. As they are in spite of slight changes the same proverb, they ought either to be put down together or references ought to be made from one to the other, as Captain Carr has tried to do in his collection of Telugu proverbs. If this is not done, they cannot but give the inexperienced student of proverbs a great deal of trouble; and to me they have been a real worry, as I had to find them all out, in order that I might not in this collection repeat two proverbs that are the same. Here are a few examples of this kind:
The above are only a few examples of the many repetitions of the very same proverb.

There is another way of changing a proverb, viz., by putting the second half of a proverb at the beginning, so that we get two proverbs out of one. As an instance:—பல்லவான் பார்த்து, பாடம் மறுவத் தையிடும், changed into:—பல்லவான் பார்த்து பாடம் மறுவத் தையிடும்; பல்லவான் பாடம், சாதரணமானப், changed into:—சாதரணமானப் பல்லவான் பாடம், சாதரணமானப் பல்லவான்.

As my aim in making this collection has been practical rather than scientific, I have not tried to solve all these difficulties in any other way than by trying my best to avoid all repetitions. But with reference to this there is much for any one to do who would try to give us a scientific collection of Tamil proverbs. In such a work we should also expect to see what we call Tamil proverbs sifted, so that we might learn where they have originated, as in a good English collection of proverbs we can see where each had its origin—in Greece, in Italy, in Spain, in Germany or elsewhere.

This collection of proverbs is a selection from the thousands that are given in our Tamil proverb collections, and also from the many I have come across when reading Tamil books and conversing with Tamil people. Though I feel sure that there are a good number of real household proverbs I have not given that ought to be in such a collection as this, I am at the same time convinced that there cannot be very many. Once a man gave me 200
proverbs which he had collected at Madura, but among them all I found only two new ones which were not more or less a repetition of what I had.

The Tamil proverb collections from which I have got help are:—A bazaar book containing about 2,000 proverbs without any English. கற்றியோர் கற்றியோர், a collection of about 5,000 Tamil proverbs published in 1872, which is with reference to real household proverbs, far superior to Percival's. The book is out of print but can be seen in our public libraries. Then there is Percival's collection of about 6,000 proverbs with an English translation. A very useful little "Handbook of Tamil Proverbs and Phrases" was published in 1888 by Mr. P. Satya Nesan, B.A., containing 500 proverbs only, but with translation, application and many similar English proverbs. The last collection that appeared was Mr. Lazarus's "Dictionary of Tamil Proverbs." This book is now the largest collection we have, and so far it makes its predecessors superfluous. Mr. Lazarus has not translated the proverbs, but to every one he has given a hint as to its meaning.

The other books from which I have chiefly drawn are the Tamil story books and Sastras. Of such I shall mention a few: சேலமல்லி, வேட்டியோட்டது, தேசிய்கள், நீண்டிருந்த பாடல்கள். Pandit S. M. Natesa Sastri's "Folklore in Southern India," which has a number of proverbs and Tamil stories to illustrate them. A magazine published some years ago called: "The Saguna Bodhini Series." A book called போதியோர் is, though written in poetry, full of proverbs. This is still more the case with "Vinoda Rasa manjari" by A. Viraswami Chettiard, late Pandit in the Madras Presidency College. This book is simply interwoven with Tamil Proverbs. "Mathar Neethy" is another story book containing many fine proverbs; and the same may be said of a book called: காலூர்குலார்வால். "The Viveka Chintamani," a monthly magazine, published by Mr. C. V. Swaminatha Iyer in Trivandrum, has for the last year had a number of Tamil proverbs with Tamil explanation in every issue. The Sastras translated from Sanskrit into Tamil contain hardly any proverbs except the Mahabharata. This royal storehouse of something of everything that India has produced contains a good number of proverbs interspersed throughout the huge volume. So even with reference to proverbs the Bengali proverb almost holds good: "What is there after the Mahabharata?"