

Tirumūlar`s *Tirumandiram*: A Tamil Classic on Tantric Kundalinī-Yoga

***The Tirumandiram*. T. N. Ganapathy, gen. ed. Ten volumes. St. Etienne de Bolton, Quebec: Babaji`s Kriya Yoga and Publications, copublished with Varthamanan Publications, Theyagaraya Nagar, Chennai, India, 2010. 3766 pages. \$100.00 USD plus \$50.00 S&H 10-volume set.**

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There are at least four Yoga scriptures that should have a place in any library of core Yoga works: Patanjali`s *Yoga-Sūtra*, the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, and the ten-chapter edition of the *Hatha-Yoga-Pradīpikā* of Svātmarāma Yodīndra, which are all composed in Sanskrit. The fourth scripture is Tirumūlar`s *Tiru-Mandiram*, which is written in Tamil. Until recently, the last-mentioned work was available only in a dubious English rendering, which I was reluctant to recommend to my students.

A dozen or so years ago, I expressed to Marshall Govindan (Satchitananda), president of Babaji`s Kriya Yoga Order of Acharyas, my earnest wish to one day see a competent English translation of the *Tiru-Mandiram*. I had no idea that my words would find a receptive ear. Govindan wasted no time to raise the necessary funds to assemble a team of Tamil experts to set about translating this text of no fewer than 3,047 recondite verses. After a decade of solid labor, Tirumūlar`s highly encrypted esoteric work was released in English at a gala celebration held in Chennai, India, on January 17, 2010.

I confess I was both awestruck and overjoyed when I unpacked the ten finely printed volumes of the *Tiru-Mandiram* translation, which came to me as an unexpected gift in a neat cloth-wrapped package from India. Immediately I started to look through all ten volumes and then settled on carefully reading word for word the third *tantiram* (“book”) of Tirumūlar`s composition, which deals specifically with primary yogic concepts. Being familiar with these teachings from the Sanskrit literature, I readily slipped into the rhythm of Tirumūlar`s poetic/devotional exposition and allowed him to carry my mind toward the lofty regions that seem to have been his spiritual home. Later, I read the remaining eight of nine books of the *Tiru-Mandiram* in their proper sequence, allowing Tirumūlar`s work to progressively unfold itself for me.

Based on the Tiruppanandal Kāci-t-tirumadam edition, the present translation with commentary, which runs into more than 3,000 pages, also made use of Dr. S. Annamalai`s 1999 critical edition of the text.

What makes this edition singularly attractive is that in addition to a close-to-the-original English translation, Tirumūlar`s text is also reproduced in Tamil and in transliteration. I

have personally found it inspiring to recite aloud some of the Tamil quatrains, appreciating their mantric quality and the melodious Tamil language.

In his General Preface, seventy-eight-year-old Prof. T. N. Ganapathy confesses that this massive project made him “stagger at times” and also made him wonder whether he was “attempting the impossible” (p. xix). This undertaking was complicated by the fact that certain traditionalist Shaivites objected to producing a commentary on Tirumūlar’s sacred work, especially in English. Humbly, Prof. Ganapathy, who served as general editor, states that the English commentaries accompanying Tirumūlar’s verses are not intended as a traditional *bhāshya* but claim only to furnish “clues and guidelines for understanding the richness of the spiritual mystical experiences of the saint.” “The commentaries,” he goes on to explain, “are meant to be guides, pointing to the goal, to the essence, but themselves are unrealized, mere descriptions of truth” (p. xxi).

Prof. Ganapathy’s team of translators and commentators comprised Shri T. V. Venkataraman (books 1-3), Dr. T. N. Ramachandran (book 4), Dr. KR Arumugam (book 5), Prof. P. S. Somasundaram (book 7), and Prof. S. N. Kandaswamy (book 8). Prof. Ganapathy himself was responsible for translating and commenting upon books 6 and 9, and he also edited the entire translation. He admits: “No translation can convey the literal sweetness of the original and its wonderful philosophical concepts and mystical emotion, which carry one away like a torrent or a tempest” (p. xxv). The *Tiru-Mandiram* is extremely recondite, and its verses are “most difficult to translate and interpret” (p. xxv). Prof. Ganapathy assures the reader, however, that the “translators have taken extreme care not to project certain pet theories and prejudices” (p. xxv) and to translate the verses as faithfully as possible, given their limited understanding.

In particular the present edition seeks to steer a neutral course between the two contending philosophical orientations to Tirumūlar’s work. The first is the strictly theistic (dualistic) interpretation of the devotional Siddhānta branch of South-Indian Shaivism. The second is the Tantric orientation, which is nondualistic and follows the pathway of the Siddhas. In the tenth volume, which contains various appendices and indices, the controversy about theistic/dualistic versus Tantric/nondualistic is taken up separately. As the overall editor, Prof. Ganapathy has allowed each translator his own voice rather than attempt to achieve “dull uniformity.” There is, however, a fundamental unity underlying the various translations, which he ascribes to Tirumūlar himself.

The following is a short synopsis of the nine books (*tandiram*) of the *Tiru-Mandiram*:

Book 1: Beginning with a 50-verse invocation of Lord Shiva, Tirumūlar next praises the *Vedas* and *Āgamas* and then offers verses on the *guru* tradition, fellow students, his own seven disciples (viz. Mālāngan, Indiran, Coman, Piraman, Uruttiran, Kālāngi, and Kancamalayan), and his own journey, followed by a section on Shiva’s relationship to the Hindu trinity (consisting of Brahma, Vishnu, and Rudra). After these introductory stanzas, Tirumūlar proceeds to impart spiritual instruction about the path of attaining Shiva’s love, which leads to the opening of the “inner eye” and ultimately to absolute bliss.

Book 2: Commencing with 2 stanzas in praise of Sage Agastya, Tirumūlar then goes on to explain the mystical import of Lord Shiva’s eight heroic exploits and other deeds, as described in various *Purānas*. He also offers verses on the three categories of individuated being (Sanskrit: *jīva*), on worthy and unworthy folk, as well as on the desecration of temples. Tirumūlar concludes with a unique teaching about Shiva’s “downward face” (Sanskrit: *adhomukha*) by which he showers grace upon devotees.

Book 3: This portion, consisting of 335 verses, specifically deals with the eight-limbed Yoga first formulated by Patanjali and also with various Tantric practices. It strongly champions the Siddha tradition.

Book 4: Here Tirumūlar discusses various *cakras* (i.e., *mandalas*)—their construction and ritual use, and he dedicates 100 quatrains to describing the *kundalinī-shakti*.

Book 5: This book offers a description of the four ways to God realization—through the *caryā*, *kriyā*, *yoga*, and *jnāna* method—and the four stages of liberation to which they lead: *sāloka*, *sāmīpya*, *sārūpya*, and *sāyujya*. Tirumūlar also defines the three realities of Shaivism: *pati* (lord), *pashu* (soul), and *pāsha* (bondage). He also speaks of the four degrees of the descent of divine power (Tamil: *catti-nipādam*), known in Sanskrit as *shakti-pāta*.

Book 6: This short section talks about the *guru*, subject, object, and knowledge; renunciation, austerity; the attainment of knowledge through divine grace; hypocrisy; sacred ashes; the apparel of a penitent, a knower, and a Shiva devotee, which leads over into a discussion about who is fit or unfit for the spiritual process.

Book 7: This book explains the six props (*ādhāra*), worship of the *guru*, of Shiva’s *linga*, and of Shiva’s devotees; the microcosmic sun; the *bindu*; the soul, the enlightened one, and related matters.

Book 8: Here the states of experience on the spiritual path are explained at some length (in 527 verses). In verse 2370, Tirumūlar states that the end of the *Vedas*, the end of the *Āgamas*, the end of the subtle sound (*nāda*), the end of illumination, the end of the eight-limbed Yoga, and the end of the five subtle aspects (*kalā*) are all essentially the same, but only a pure individual can comprehend this. As verse 2381 states, these six endings occur in ecstasy (*samādhi*) where *jīva* becomes Shiva.

Book 9: This final book of the *Tiru-Mandiram* describes in mostly esoteric language the ultimate realization of Shiva (*shiva-bhoga*) and the state of liberated souls.

Tirumūlar, a fully realized adept (by his own testimony), was a master of Kundalinī-Yoga, who had been initiated into this method by Nandī, a North-Indian adept whose spiritual realization was such that Tirumūlar equated him with Shiva himself. His Tantric store house include *mantra* (sacred sound), *yantra* (graphic *mantras*), locks (*bandha*), seals (*mudrā*), breath control (*prānāyāma*) and the other seven limbs of Yoga, as well as

ritual worship, the right-hand method of “bedstead Yoga” (*paryanga-yoga*), and various forms of initiation (*dīkshā*).

Tirumūlar’s description of diverse aspects of the *kundalinī* process leave no doubt that he had completely mastered this esoteric (Tantric) Yoga, which leads to the highest goal of emptiness (i.e., insubstantiality), or *shūnya* (Tamil: *kaduveli*). This is a reference to the indescribable infinite luminous space that is the ultimate Reality, Shiva. Little wonder that this kind of nondualist mystical language did not sit well with the dualist Shaiva Siddhānta adherents. It is, however, gratifying to know that thanks to the efforts of the late Sri Satguru Sivasubrahmuniaswami (see Appendix One in vol. 10, pp. 3393-3449), the gap between the nondualists and the dualists (or, rather, pluralists) has been narrowed, which has led to a new appreciation of the spiritual genius of Tirumūlar and his extraordinary work among the Tamils.

Yoga-loving English speakers and the academic community owe an enormous gratitude to Marshall Govindan (Satchitananda) for initiating and sustaining this mammoth project, to his wife Durga Ahlund Govindan for her unstinting editorial and other support, and to Prof. T. N. Ganapathy and his team of translators and editors for successfully completing a truly monumental undertaking. One can only hope that the release of this complete rendering of the *Tiru-Mandiram* will end the relative neglect of the Tamil spiritual literature at the hands of Western scholars. The immense value of a careful study of this literature is overwhelmingly clear from the present work.

One problem area that deserves attention is Tirumūlar’s date. The editors generously placed him about 200 A.D., which is close to Prof. S. Dasgupta’s (first Indian ed. 1975, vol. 5, p. 19) proposed date for the saint (first century A.D.). But in light of the teachings, as they are now reliably accessible through the present translation, such an early date is highly improbable. A review is not the place to examine this chronological matter in detail. I would, however, like to proffer the following basic thoughts:

First, The age of the Shaiva *Āgamas* is a bone of contention between the Sanskrit-speaking North and the Tamil-speaking South. Tirumūlar himself (see verse 65) explains that Shiva expounded his teachings in both “Āriyam” (i.e. Sanskrit) and Tamil. But then he also hints (see verse 81) at himself taking to teaching the wisdom of the *Āgamas* in Tamil after having received them from his *guru* Nandi(deva) at Mount Kailāsha. This Nandi is mentioned in verse 62 as one of the recipients of nine *Āgamas* (listed in verse 63, which could have been interpolated), which he then transmitted to Tirumūlar. The Nāthas know Tirumūlar as Mūlanātha, a direct disciple of Adinātha (i.e., Shiva). The South Indian Siddhas regard Tirumūlar as the first promulgator of the new tradition of Yoga (*nava-yoga*), which Tirumūlar himself confirms (see verse 122). He calls this innovative teaching Shiva-Yoga (see verse 884).

Tirumūlar states in two verses that the *Āgamas* are countless (see verse 58), and that there were twenty-eight of them (see verse 57). Prof. M. S. G. Dyczkowski (1988, p. 5) observes that “there is no concrete evidence to suggest that any [*Āgamas*] existed much before the sixth century. The earliest reference to Tantric manuscripts cannot be

dated before the first half of the seventh century.” He further notes that “the Śaivāgamas proliferated to an astonishing degree at an extremely rapid rate.”

Second, Prof. K. V. Zvelebil (repr. 1993, p. 73), who places Tirumūlar in the seventh century, says that the saint is mentioned in Cuntarar’s *Tirutonttokai*, which Prof. Zvelebil assigns to the late seventh to early eighth century. If correct, this is a definite *terminus ante quem*.

Third, Tirumūlar refers to the *Linga-*, the *Shiva-*, and the Tamil *Kanda-Purāna* by name. The first-mentioned text has been dated to between 500 and 800 A.D. The *Shiva-Purāna*, which quotes the *Linga-Purāna*, must accordingly be of a later date. Prof. R. C. Hazra (repr. 1982, vol. 2, p. 261) suggested 600-1000 A.D., with some portions having been composed not earlier than 950 A.D. But these dates are conjectural, and the *Shiva-Purāna* could have been in existence one or two centuries earlier. The *Kanda-Purāna* was created probably as late as the fourteenth century, which makes this reference suspicious. Obviously, the *Tiru-Mandiram* has been subject to fairly extensive interpolation.

Fourth, according to Prof. D. G. White (1996, p. 76), who places Tirumūlar and his teacher Nandi in the sixth to seventh centuries, the “magical alchemy” of the Siddhas (see, e.g., verses 834 and 841) belongs to the period before 1000 A.D.

Fifth, in verse 563, Tirumūlar refers to 108 *āsanās*. This quatrain was very probably interpolated, as it suggests that Tirumūlar was aware of a fairly developed form of Hatha-Yoga, which would place him after the time of Goraksha—an unlikely date. Early Hatha-Yoga was focused on breath control and meditation rather than postures. It is, of course, possible that “108” symbolically stands for “a plethora.”

Sixth, Tirumūlar’s biography is given in the *Periya-Purānam*, which, according to Prof. L. Rocher (1986, p. 77), was composed in the eleventh century by Shekkilār, the minister of a Cola king. Interestingly, the *Tiru-Mandiram* refers to the *Periya-Purānam* twice (see verses 744 and 2113), which would seem to mark these stanzas as interpolations.

Given the above considerations, I would tentatively assign Tirumūlar to the period between 600 to 650 A.D. to allow sufficient time for his reputation as a Siddha to have spread and for Cuntarar to refer to him in his *Tirutonttokai*. Placing him earlier would clash with widely accepted dates for the *Purānas* and the earliest *Āgamas*. Based on his teachings, I would intuitively have placed him closer to the time of Goraksha (eleventh century), but if Tirumūlar does indeed belong to the seventh century, we must conclude that he had access to early forms of sophisticated Tantric teachings (his *guru* Nandi’s).

At any rate, Tirumūlar was a premier teacher, who was chiefly responsible for disseminating Shaiva Tantric teachings to the Tamil-speaking world. Irrespective of his actual date, his teaching is of inestimable value and, in part, helps explain and complements the Sanskrit sources of North India.

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