



# Tiru Em Paavai

ROBERT BUTLER

The *Tiruvempaavai*, named from its recurring refrain *El Or Empaavai*, was written by the Tamil poet-sage Manikkavachakar during his visit to Tiruvannamalai on his way to Chidambaram, where, according to tradition, he was to merge with the ultimate reality, Lord Siva, in a blaze of light, leaving no physical trace behind. The purely ecstatic mood of the poem seems to prefigure that final apotheosis. The genesis of the poem is described as follows in an early biography of the saint, the *Tiruvadavur Adigal Puranam*:

It was in the month of Margazhi, when, in the ten days before the ardhra asterism, beautiful maidens go from house to noble house calling each other forth in the early dawn, just as the darkness is dispersing, and, banding together, go to bathe in the holy tank. On observing their noble qualities, he sang the immortal hymn *Tiruvempaavai*.

There have been many more or less esoteric interpretations of this work, but the simplest, and least controversial, if indeed any interpretation be required at all, is to regard it as a divine allegory in

which the individual soul or *jiva* calls upon its fellows to awake from the darkness of delusion, and gain salvation by coming to bathe in the blissful waters at the dawn of the Lord's grace, personified in the form of his Consort, Uma-Parvati.

The refrain has not been translated and it is not usual to do so. If translated it might mean something like: *Fair Maid of ours, embrace and know (the Lord)*. One may assume that it was already *fossilized* as a ritual refrain at the time of the composition, expressing in a multi-faceted way the exhilaration and heightened spiritual awareness of the participants in the bathing ritual.

1.

Though you hear us sing of that rare Light  
whose greatness knows neither source nor end,  
O Maid, whose eyes are wide and bright,  
as we wend through the street  
do you still sleep? Do your ears not hear  
the prayers that we pray to the Lord's cinctured feet?  
As you, sobbing, roll from your flower-strewn couch,  
to lie lost in swoon, of nought aware,  
what then, what then?  
Is this the nature of our companion fair?  
*El Or Empaavai!*

2.

It is ever your wont, both day and night,  
when ere we speak,  
O Maid with flawless jewels adorned,  
to offer your love to that Supernal Light.  
Whence now your desire for this flowery couch?  
*For shame, jewelled Maidens, is it then meet  
to play and jest in this holy place  
where he comes in grace the grace to grant  
of His flowery feet, that, all abashed,*

*the Hosts of Heaven fear to adore?  
Dancer in Tillai's sacred Hall!  
God! Teacher! Sivaloka's Lord!  
Are we not His lovers, all?  
El Or Empaavai!*

**Note:** Verses 2-4 take the form of a series of verbal exchanges between the group of girls in the street, and another of their number who is proving a little tardy in coming out to join the group in their procession to the tank. The words of the girl inside the house are given in italics. The tone appears to be one of playful *badinage*. Is the girl merely half-asleep, or lost in contemplation of the Lord? They carry on speaking to her for a number of verses subsequently, until, as we may assume, she comes out and joins them and they make their way together to the tank.

3.

With pearly smile, arise, come forth, open your door,  
speak words with sweetness overflowing  
of the Ambrosial One, the Lord, our Blissful Paramour.  
*Decorous maids, devoted Ones, God's ancient faithful!  
what sin is it if we His fledgling devotees, our frailty to dispel,  
fall subject to His gracious rule?*  
Is this deceit? Your love for Him know we not full well?  
Should not they, whose minds are pure  
our own Lord Siva praise and adore?  
Thus much we ask of you, no more!  
*El Or Empaavai!*

4.

*You whose smiles are radiant pearls,  
is this not dawn's light?  
With voices sweet, have you all come  
like parrots, all in plumage bright?  
We'll count and tell, but you at least*

forbear to vainly pass your hours in sleep!  
 Of Him who's Heaven's balm, the Vedas' hidden law,  
 of Him who to our eyes is bliss, we sing,  
 as hearts soften, melt and flow in rapture deep —  
 we can no more — come yourself and count  
 and if there's any lack, go back to sleep.  
*El Or Empaavai!*

5.  
 Deceitful maid upon whose lips  
 milk mixed with honey flows,  
 the Mount that Ayan could not see, nor Visnu know,  
 we'll know, you said, but surely lied —  
 else let your door be opened wide!  
 Of how He came in majesty, we sing,  
 unseen by heaven, earth, and all the rest,  
 cleansed our souls, became our King.  
 'Sivan, Sivan', goes up our heartfelt plea,  
 But you, fair Dame, with perfumed braids,  
 Do you not know? Can you not, see?  
*El Or Empaavai!*

6.  
 But yesterday 'To rouse you up,  
 tomorrow I shall come', you said,  
 so tell now, shameless, doe-eyed One,  
 as dawn's light breaks,  
 whither have you wandering gone?  
 He's Sky, He's Earth, He's all that is,  
 but Him we cannot know.  
 Yet to those who praise  
 those cinctured feet, from heaven come,  
 His own protecting grace to show,  
 you speak no word,  
 your body does not melt and flow.

Your nature may be so —  
 but for our sake and all others too, sing  
 and praise our heavenly King!  
*El Or Empaavai!*

7.  
 Sister, some traits we know of you:  
 when clarion calls proclaim  
 Him whom Gods in heaven all know not,  
 The One, the glorious Lord on High,  
 your wont it is  
 to open wide your mouth and *Sivan* cry,  
 and e'en before the shout  
 of *Southern One!* is raised,  
 you melt like wax before a flame.  
 'My own Lord! King! Ambrosia sweet!'  
 you've heard our several voices say,  
 and yet, alone, you slumbering stay!  
 In silence like those foolish ones  
 whose hearts are stone, you lie.  
 To such a sleep,  
 what worth can we ascribe?  
*El Or Empaavai!*

8.  
 Song of bird and cockerel cry are everywhere;  
 everywhere the white conch calls,  
 and music of the seven-toned scale resounds.  
 Grace unequalled, Light Supreme, beyond compare,  
 exalted peerless Essence, we sing, do you not hear?  
 What sleep, bless you, is this? Will you not speak!  
 Is it thus, like ocean-dwelling Visnu, all asleep,  
 that the love we bear our King shall be repaid?  
 So sing the First One at the end of time,  
 the only One, the Partner of the artless Maid!  
*El Or Empaavai!*

**Note:** The ‘sleeping’ girl is jokingly compared to Lord Visnu, who performs his allotted function of preserving the cosmic sphere as he lies asleep upon the Ocean of Milk. The exact point of the joke is unclear. Possibly it is saying: ‘Do you think that you are equal to Lord Visnu, in thinking that you can show the required love to Lord Siva merely by remaining asleep?’

9.

Timeless essence of this ancient world,  
yet ever born anew in each created form!  
We fair devotees have won You for our Lord,  
and now to those who serve Your holy feet  
we’ll bow down low as worshippers devout.  
To these alone shall we belong.  
They shall be our husbands, whom we  
shall humbly serve as they in joy decree.  
Our King, if You to us this boon do grant,  
no lack for us can ever be!  
*El Or Empaavai!*

10.

Beneath the seven realms of Hell His lotus feet  
reach down, transcending speech, and on His head  
His crown, with flowers intertwined, of all reality  
is the crown! His lady is the half of Him, He is not One.  
He is our sole Companion, whose glory  
the Vedas first, then Gods and earth itself,  
try as the may, are powerless to sing.  
Within His devotees He dwells,  
the peerless Leader of our clan!  
O temple maids,  
where is His home and what His name?  
Who is His foe and who His kin,  
and how may we His praises sing?  
*El Or Empaavai!*

11.

Into the broad and buzzing tank we splashing wade  
scoop water in our hands and scoop again,  
and sing Your holy feet. Oh Master, see how we  
Your faithful devotees are blest!  
Rich, red as burning fire, with ash besmeared  
You are the Bridegroom of the Maid whose  
eyes are dark and wide, whose waist is slim!  
O Lord, in this Your play of grace we’ve fully done  
all that whereby a soul’s salvation may be won.  
Guard us, lest we weary in our task.  
*El Or Empaavai!*

12.

Lord of the holy spring  
where we rejoicing bathe,  
that pressing woes of birth may die!  
Dancer midst the dancing flames  
in noble Tillai’s Court!  
To guard, create and then conceal this heaven,  
earth, and all that is, is but Your sport!  
No sooner do we speak, than in the tank  
with flowers bright, we plunge and splash.  
Bees hum about our jewelled braids  
as bangles tinkle, girdles clash.  
Our Master’s golden Foot we praise  
as in the waters wide we bathe.  
*El Or Empaavai!*

13.

With lotus blossoms red and fresh  
and water lilies’ purple hue,  
with snakes and choirs of tiny birds,  
and those who’ve come to cleanse their sins  
assembled here, this surging tank

recalls to us our Queen and King,  
 as in we plunge and plunge again.  
 Bangles jingle, anklets ring,  
 and swelling waters swell our breasts  
 as in the lotus pool we spring.  
*El Or Empaavai!*

14.  
 As jewels of gold and ear-rings sway,  
 as braids entwined with flowers swing,  
 and swarms of insects, flitting, play,  
 of Tillai's sacred Hall we sing  
 as in the cooling flood we bathe.  
 We sing the Vedas' inner sense  
 and how He that sense withholds.  
 The First One's glory sing we now,  
 the glory of the Last,  
 we sing the beauty of that Light,  
 the kondrai wreath upon His brow  
 we sing, and of the holy Feet  
 of that fair Maid who makes us grow  
 and bear us up at every stage,  
 we sing and bathe.  
*El Or Empaavai!*

15.  
 Upon one time, there lived  
 a dame who ever cried 'Our Lord. Our Lord'.  
 His glorious name ne'er left her lips,  
 and in her heart was melting bliss,  
 whilst tears in endless streams coursed down,  
 as, prostrating once, she rose not from the ground.  
 To other Gods she gave no praise,  
 but only to our mighty King, like one possessed,  
 she homage paid. Where is her like?

To her wise Feet, O Maids with jewels  
 upon your full and shapely breasts,  
 we sing full-voiced and plunging bathe  
 within this fair and flowering flood.  
*El Or Empaavai!*

**Note:** In verse 15 Manikkavachakar sings of Karaikal Ammaiyar who is one of the 63 Saiva Saints, the Nayanmar whose stories are told in the Periya Puranam (*Tiru Ninra Sarukkam* v. 1722 – 1787). Her name was Punithavathiyar, and she was the beautiful young wife of a merchant of the town of Karaikaal. Her devotion to Lord Siva knew no bounds. Rejected by her husband as a wife, on account of her divine attributes, she prayed to Lord Siva to become one of his celestial hosts, a demoness with dried and shrivelled flesh, whose only desire was to worship the Lord, and witness his divine dance. When she finally approached Mount Kailash, walking on her head out of respect for the Lord, Lord Siva did not hesitate to hold her up, even before his own consort Uma, as a model of divine love: *Varum ival nammai peenum ammai kaan, ummaiye!* "See, Uma, she who comes is the Mother who loves us well!" Henceforth her name became Karaikal Ammaiyar. A number of poems of hers are contained in the 11th *Tirumurai* (Tamil Holy Scripture), which is an anthology composed of the writings of a number of different saints.

16.  
 O Cloud, you drank the sea,  
 then like our Queen arose,  
 and, glorious, shone with lightning bolts  
 fine as the slender waist  
 of Her who rules our souls.  
 The golden anklets at her feet  
 sound in your thunder's roar,  
 and in your rainbow bright

her holy arching brow we see.  
 And like the ample grace  
 which she, our Queen, affords  
 to us who stand before,  
 as servants of our royal Lord  
 whose side she quits no more, O Cloud,  
 let your torrents pour!

*El Or Empaavai!*

17.

You whose dusky locks in perfumed coils flow!  
 Of Him who brings delight which red-eyed Mal  
 and Brahma too with all the Gods could never know,  
 who purifies our souls, and then in every home arises  
 His compassion to bestow;  
 the Warrior, who grants to us His lotus feet  
 of ruddy gold, the fair-eyed King,  
 our Lord as rare ambrosia sweet unto His devotees,  
 we'll sing, His glory to extol,  
 as in the flowery lotus flood we plunging go.

*El Or Empaavai!*

18.

Even as the gems that thickly cluster  
 upon the crowns of Gods on high,  
 when they bow down, will lose their lustre  
 before the lotus feet of Lord Annamalai,  
 likewise the sun, with bright-eyed gaze  
 dispels the darkness with his rays,  
 so that stars flee as their cool light fades.  
 Thus does He stand before us  
 as woman, man, and androgyne,  
 as luminous space, as earth itself,  
 and yet from all these separate,  
 ambrosia to the eye made manifest.

So sing you then His holy feet, O Maid,  
 and in the flowery flood, plunging, bathe!  
*El Or empaavai!*

19.

In awe do we that time-worn phrase renew:  
 'The refuge for the child  
 entrusted to your hand is you!'  
 So hear us Lord, as now these vows we take,  
 that none but Your true devotees  
 shall press our bosoms to their chest,  
 our hands to none but You shall holy service make,  
 our eyes no other sight shall see by night or day.  
 If, then, our King, You thus to us do grant,  
 then what's it to us? Let the sun rise where it may!

*El Or Empaavai!*

20.

Praise to Your lotus feet, the First! Grant us Your grace!  
 Praise to Your ruddy feet, the Last! Grant us Your grace!  
 Praise be, the feet of gold, the source of all that lives !  
 Praise be, the flowery feet, the bliss of all that lives !  
 Praise be to Your twin feet, of all that lives the final goal!  
 Praise be, the lotus flower, to Mal and Brahma both unknown!  
 Praise to the golden feet that us in grace enslaved, and saved!  
 Praise be, we say, and bathing go in this the month of Margazhi!

*El Or Empaavai!* ▲