Chap 5

POETRY II

MINOR POEMS
Besides his opus magnum (Tembavani), Beschi wrote a number of minor poems, which are characterised by their simple style, and touching devotion. Among them "Kitteri Ammal Ammanai" comes close to Tembavani in its subject matter which is about the legendary life of a woman saint. Kittery, virgin and martyr well known in Portugal. Beschi who introduced devotion to this saint in Tamilnad writes of it in his annual letter to Rome.

"For the first time, this year, St. Quittery, Virgin and Martyr, illustrious for a long time in Portugal on account of the miracles, began to be honoured in this Residence. Her name was invoked by the Christians and her fame spread with extraordinary rapidity. People flocked to Ellacurichi to venerate her image and loudly proclaimed the many graces obtained through her intercession. There are few Christians who do not acknowledge to have received some favour at the hands of St. Quitteri".¹ Even today there are people who are called Kitteri among Catholics.

Original story

The story of this saint as given by the Bollandists, the famous authorities in Catholic Hagiography, is the following:²

"In the second century A.D. the pagan king Caius Attibisius and his wife Celcia, in the province of Gabilia (in Spain)
were having seven daughters. When they were anxious to have a boy, they had again twin girls. The king, furious at this disappointment ordered the two last girls to be thrown into the river. The maid who was ordered to do so was a Catholic maid, who secretly entrusted the two children to a Catholic family, where they were baptised and brought up as Catholics. One of them was called Kitteri, who by a special inspiration dedicated her virginity to God’s service. Meanwhile King Caius heard of the existence of his two daughters, somehow, and feeling sorry for his former intention of killing them, received them back into his palace. Here the two sisters by their example and instruction converted the other seven sisters to the Catholic faith. The king tried to change their mind by kindness and threats and punishment. Nothing prevailed with Kitteri.

A rich duke called Germaine wanted to marry Kitteri; her father consented but not Kitteri, as she had vowed to be single for the sake of God’s service. As her father was more and more enraged, she according to her inspiration, left the palace, lived in a valley at Caskain in the Pyrenees and worked for religion there. In that region there ruled a petty king who having given up his Catholic faith which he had embraced in his younger days, was cruel to Catholics and exiled the Catholic Bishop. When news reached him of the fact that Kitteri was spreading the Catholic faith, he put
her in prison; but later learning of celestial life even in prison, he felt sorry, released her and came back to Catholic religion.

Kitteri now chose the hill of Pomer where other virgins joined her, with whom he started a congregation of virgins to work for God. She became well known for her counsels and kind helps to others, even miraculously. This fact reached the ears of her father Caius, who sent the duke Germaine whom Kitteri had refused to marry, to ask her if she would yield to her father's wish or die by his sword. She was steadfast in her purpose of being a virgin, she was beheaded by Germaine.

Miraculously Kitteri herself took her severed head, went to the church on the hill and there died. Innumerable favours were obtained through her intercession. And so lateron her father and Germaine too embraced the Catholic faith.

Hearing of the countless favours this saint was bestowing on her clients in Europe, Beschi started her devotion in Tamilnad, so that the people here who were then sorely tried by famine, pestilence and political strife, might benefit through this saint's help. He ordered a statue of the saint from Manila, installed in the church of Our Lady of Refuge at Jakkurichi, wrote circa 1732, thus Kitteriammaṭ Ammanai.3

Beschi's Version: In the hands of Fr. Beschi, this already miraculous story has become more thrilling. In the version he gives in this book, the mother of Kitteri brings...
forth at the same time nine girls. Being ashamed of it, she asks the Catholic maid to drown them in the river. The maid entrusts them to a Bishop under whom they grow as Catholics and learn through an ascetic, of their royal lineage. When the king heard that these nine sisters were spreading the Catholic faith which he hated, he orders them to be brought for trial. During the trial, he comes to know through Kitteri that they are his children. He keeps them all in his palace and tries by means of the pleasures and people of the palace to make them give up the new religion. As they were unyielding he imprisons them. Thy are released miraculously from the prison. Only Kitteri is found and brought back. When she refuses to marry the duke, she is again put in prison. In the prison she prays to Mary who appears and strengthens her and directs her to go to Pomper mountain and work for God. Released by angels, Kitteri, with thirty companions, goes to Pomper and works for God and men.

There, hearing once that Purosan, a petty chieftain under Caius, given up his faith, Kitteri herself goes to advise him. But the chieftain imprisons her. Third time in prison, Kitteri prays to God that this time either the chieftain's conversation or her death, must take place. When she was again taken away from prison to Pomper mountain, the chieftain pursued her; at the foot of the mountain he suddenly lost the use of his eyes, his legs, and hands. He was carried to the mountain where by the touch of Kitteri he was cured, and consequently converted to the Catholic religion again.
The father of Kitteri, hearing of this, orders her death as said in the original. The duke who beheads her is converted. The rest of the army perishes in a heavy storm. Kitteri in her glorious heavenly state prays and obtains that her eight sisters with whom she had lost contact years before, should work for the Catholic religion in different parts.

A miniature epic poem

Ammānai is favourite game of girls, who sitting in a circle toss a number of little balls from one to another dexterously and swiftly, while singing a simple song that in its rhythm is suited to the action and narrates some exploits of a deity or a popular leader. It is a wonderful achievement of Beschi to have made this ammanai a vehicle of a veritable epic theme, so elevating, so lovely and interesting. It contains ten cantos in all; every canto has three viruttams giving the story of the canto in brief.

As required by epic tradition, the poem starts with avaiyadakkam followed by the description of the country and the land. Kitteriammāl, one of the nine sisters is the heroine of this epic. She is the most excellent among all the nine sisters, a moon shining among the eight stars. She will show the truth to all and would seek out the evil doers. Along with her sisters she offers herself to God, the greatest of the benefactors, as a sacrifice, as a garland to his feet. Abandoned already by her father and mother, imprisoned by the father, she has later to be separated from the other sisters too.
It is touching to hear the sisters before their separation.

"Shall we who have been like the pearls in the same oyster, like buds in the same creeper, who have never been separated, now part from one another?"

When the other sisters have escaped the hands of their cruel father, Kitteri alone is traced and brought back to the palace of her father where in the midst of worldly pleasures awaits a danger to her faith, a share to her virginity; the proposal to marry a rich duke; it is relying on the unique grace of God, who is her father, mother and everything, that she overcomes the attacks of Cupid. After overcoming these obstacles Kitteri is now able to devote herself fully on the mount Pomper to men's service in the name of God. She goes to meet and bring back a fallen-away Catholic, a chieftain, with a strong resolve either to save him or to lose her life. She does not convince him in speech and is imprisoned. And so when the angel comes to release her out of the prison, she reminds him of her resolve to save his soul or to lose her life. Only after the angel assures her of the fulfilment of her resolve on mount Pomper consents to leave the prison. While in prison, she instructs people in honeyed words, and cures different illness. On mount Pomper she opens the eyes of the soul of the chieftain by opening the eyes of the body and curing him of his paralysis.5

The final act of her life is really heroic, though miraculous. The duke whose hand she refused in marriage
beheads her. She takes the head in her hands and looks at him smilingly and wins his soul to God. In her glory in heaven, she prays for her father and mother and for the efficient service of her eight sisters, which petitions are granted by God.

In this miniature epic, which has its lively narration of fights, arguments in the court, the supernatural incidents through the coming of angels to release the prisoners, the coming of Mary to strengthen Kittēri, Beschi gives a glimpse into the sentiments, reflections, and anxieties in the Catholic community of 18th century. In the midst of famine and persecutions, the faith of Catholics in the religion they had embraced was not always strong, particularly when faced with bright marriage prospects and material prosperity and the attraction of family ties.

The heroic life and death of Kittēri together with her life after death is certainly a great incentive to the people of those days; and the final prayer of the poet to Kittēri shows that this is the purpose. He prays for four favours: 'that the Catholic religion must be rooted in our heart; that we should avoid the snares of lust; that the kingdom of heaven, and not the one on earth should attract us; and that unmoved by love of kith and kin we should seek God.'

In another respect the Kittēriammāl Ammānai becomes
memorable. It is a characteristic of Indian epics to give importance to the chastity of women. Helen is a beauty, but not a chaste lady. Dido, in Virgil, shows true love, but her love is not accepted, is rather an impediment to the hero’s purpose. In Rāmāyaṇam and Cilappatikāram the chastity of the lady shines at the centre of the epic. This chastity of the lady offering her full self to a human person and being faithful to him is elevated into offering oneself to God’s service in the story of Karaikkāl Ammaiyyar and in Maṇiṉeḻkalai. It is this belonging to God as to a lover that is meant by in the Christian vow of virginity as seen in the lives of Christian saints beginning from the Blessed Virgin Mary and Therese of Lesieux. In the story of Kittēri, therefore, the Tamil epic tradition and the Christian practice find their fulfilment.

In Tēmbāvani the hero proved himself to be a garland to the feet of God. In Kittēriammal Ammānai the heroine becomes a garland to God’s feet. There some of the features of Cilappatikāram find an echo as mentioned earlier. Here some qualities of Maṇiṉeḻkalai - vowing virginity in God’s service, being imprisoned, doing acts of charity even in prison - are to be found. It may not be too much to say that Tēmbāvani and Kittēriammal Ammānai are somewhat like the twin classics of Cilappatikāram and Maṇiṉeḻkalai.

In another respect also these two supplement each other. Tēmbāvani with its high style in language, different
metres etc., is an example of a literary epic to be read, explained and understood. Kittēriammāl āmmāṇai with its simple āmmāṇai tune with its simple vocabulary filled with many common words,¹⁰ is a miniature epic to be heard. Thus we have both a folk epic and an art epic.
NOTES

1. Besse, op. cit. p.117

2. Taken from the edition of 'Kittēriammāl Ammānai' by Fr. R. Gnanapragasam, S.J., 1947

3. Besse, op. cit. p.189

4. Canto, 2.71-72

5. Canto 7.133

6. Canto 8.66-69

7. Besse, op. cit. p.87, 97

8. Canto 10.142 - 149


10. Common words:

    (1) Known to Catholics: metrianiar (1.57), cēnma-p-pāyā-k-aṟai (1.58); cēnmat-tītu (1.64), mōtcha (1.67), Cillumai (3.61), Kāttar (5.110), Cāmpanacu (6.50).

    (2) Known to all: cāṭi (2.44); nīca cūnam (3.5), tarpuran (3.50), iḷābam (3.92), aṟputam (5.83), nāṇāvitiṟṭil (5.135)
LYRICS

Fr. Beschi has written some lyrical poems in honour of Christ and His Mother which show that the poet can run the whole gamut of human emotions: anxiety, fear, joy, ecstasy and thrill, wonder, humour, and sadness. The following lyrical compositions express some of these emotions flowing from Christian truth along the Tamil way.

Adaikkala Nayakimēl Venkalippā

The Venbā of Our Lady of Refuge expresses the feelings of a devotee, who has turned from a loose moral path to the right path. The duts and make of passions hid from his sight the light of the Bible, and all sorts of evils followed. It is only by the words of Mary 'fear not' and holding fast to her that he could swim this sea of life.

Here Beschi certainly breathes the spirit and fragrance of Tiruvāsakam.¹

It is touching to hear that he is more attracted to Mary than a child to its mother. Even if a child, he says, were to survive if the mother forgets, I cannot live (if you
The poem closes with a mention of a double duty. It is your duty, Mary, to shelter me for ever at your feet.
It is mine to proclaim your mercy to all clearly, daily and everywhere". Here one is reminded of the Catholic hymn 'Ave Maria Stella' which requests Mary Monstra Te esse matrem' and of the prayer of St. Ephrem: "O thou who art full of grace, enlighten my understanding, loosen my tongue, that it may sing thy praises. 3

1. Tirunēṭakam, Adaikkalar-pattu, Piditta pattu.
2. அறிய வைக்க மாட்டே உனையே செம்மாரையே

Tirukāvalūṟ-k-Kalambakam

Kalambakam is a mixture of different kinds of poems: venturii, venba, aakaval, asiriyaviruttam, kalitturai, kaliviruttam, kalittalisai, marutpa, vanjittuarai, and vanjiviruttam. All these metres are found in Beschi's Kalambakam. According to Venbapattiyal, the Kalambakam on gods must have 100 stanzas. This is on May, having 100 stanzas, since by gods, persons in heaven are also meant. It is customary to name the poem after the place where the subject of the poem is honoured. Mary under the title of Our Lady of Refuge was and is honoured in Thirukkavalur; and so, the poem is entitled 'Thirukkavalur-k-Kalambakam'.

The poem should embody eighteen distinctive characteristics, although in practice some poems take less, some more. Of these eighteen, Beschi has omitted kali, which is the utterance of drunkards. In its place, as convention allows, he has taken members like Idaichi, Tendral and Valaichi.

Idaichi is an address to the shepherdess who sells milk and curd in the street. Here is how Beschi uses this member:

"O shepherdess, with enchanting eyes you are trying to sell milk mixed with water. But your life will not be effective here. Your lie will be out and you will be put to shame; for this is the Kavalur of the famous Annammal. Annammal is the Tamil equivalent of St. Anne, the mother of"
Mary. As the daughter is called by the mother's name and as the daughter inherits the mother's qualities (tayai-p-pol pillai, nulai-p-pol celai), Mary is called Annammal. Now Annam, in Indian tradition, is able to separate milk from water. And so Mary, the daughter of Annammal, is expected to expose the fraud of the shepherdess.

A comparison of Beschi's Kalambakam with other Kalambakams will show that Beschi's poem is in no way inferior to them. What is striking in Beschi's poem is that he has beautifully blended Christian ideas and traditions so naturally with the Tamil traditions of Kalambakam. Beschi adorns this idea with a comparison, saying that Mary is a flower that is at the same time fruit.

Kalam is another member in which the lady, seeing the signs of the seasons groans for the coming of the Lord. The majority of writers use Kar and Ilavenil; others like the Araitmaiyar have used all the six. Beschi too uses the six thus:

The rebellious late summer (Mutirvenil) of lust was over on account of the rainy season (kar) of unbearable tears; then came the cold season (kutir) in which the fear of hell shook me; still the evil action and illness continued to drip in the early and late dewy season (maan pani, munn pin kalam); after that came the spring (ilavenil) in which penance and wisdom flowered. All this because I took refuge
at the feet of the mother Kavalur. Here we see the Christian method of asceticism in which the evil in man is washed by contution (via negativa) and gives place to the higher life of virtue (via illuminativa), pleasantly depicted in the frame of the six seasons of Tamilnad.

NOTES
1. Durmalilingam Pillai, 'Tamil Literature', p. 97 (Published by Bibliotheca, Wunnirpallam, Tinnevelly Dt., S. India)
2. Kalai-k-kalanjiyam, Vol. 3, p. 327, article in 'Kalambakam'
3. Stanza 14
4. (புனித) பெர்னூயனே பைரூயனே பிரகாரகையும் புனிதப் பொருளாயின்

Christian hymn: Alma Redemtionis Mater

tu quae genuisti
Natura mirante, tinurn sanctum Genitorem.
ADAIIKALA MAI.

In this poem, the devotee's feeling has grown from a sinner's hope and confidence in Mary to a holy audacity. If you can give refuge to God (who became your child) in your hands, to the moon under your feet, to the sun around your body, and to angels, why won't you take me in? Is there no place, for me?" The assurance that there is place for him is expressed in musical lines that dance with joy and repeat the same sonorous words.

G. Tevaram

Tevaram means 'garland to God', and is usually applied to the sacred hymns of Sambander, Apper, and Sundarar. Beschi gives in this lyric a garland of praise to God. It is in the tradition of Tamil hymns, set to music (Antala-k-kurinji Ragham - Cavurashtakam, ati talam).

The whole lyric is an expression of wonder, not without a tinge of sadness; wonder at the wonderful nature of God, his attitudes, his innumerable benedicts—giving us everything and giving us Himself and sadness, that men do not worship Him. This hymn reminds us of the Christian principle that man after his death goes to worship God, becomes a garland to God, in Beschi's phrase in Tembavani and Kitteriammal, and that man before death must think of it since
he is liable to forget or neglect it.

This poem is still found at the end of popular prayer books. And elderly men in villages round about Tiruchirappalli assert that in their younger days this Tevaram used to be sung during the funeral procession of Christians.

Annai Alunkal Antati

This is a lyric on Mary, the Sorrowful Mother (Pieta). Since the famous Pieta of Michael Angelo, the scene of the Blessed Mother with the body of the dead Christ had become famous and in this lyric Beschi takes us to that scene of deep sorrow expressed in a religious dialogue. For this Beschi employs another kind of lyric, antati, in which the last word or syllable or letter of one stanza becomes the first of the next.

Mary at the foot of the cross, when Jesus' body is still hanging, looks at her son, speaks to Him of his early days of the prophecy of Simeon: "You see the world"; she says, "you consider it as one with you and suffer. Why don't you see me who am consumed in your torments?"

Mary faints: others support her; she hears the consoling words of Christ; she stands up and addresses men: "It is your proud thoughts that have crowned him."
It is your lustful eyes that have pierced his eyes with thorn. This tree (of the Cross) is the yardstick to measure the extent of God's love and your malice; on her request the body of Jesus is taken down from the cross. Mary just looked at his body; some said she was dead; some said she was live.

They bury him in the tomb. For Mary, who is like a bird which has lost its young one, the garden where Jesus is buried is the most fertile grove, the tomb is her room. She inquires from men why they have done so to her Son: "Is it because he gave sight to the blind, that you have crucified his bond?" She prays to the Archangel Gabriel, who comes to consol her, reminding her of Christ's resurrection. Uttering no words, she is immersed in the twin driver of tears and joy and sorrow. As the sun too is being immersed into the western sea, the friends of Mary take her home.

The aim of this sorrowful lyric is to make us mingle our tears with the tears of Mary. It is the common petition that the Catholic asks in his love for Mary as seen in the prayers and hymns of the Catholic church.

NOTES

2. Stanza 38  
5. Sixth Christian Hymn "Stabat Mater" - Fae me Lecum pie flere'.
VANNAM

Vannam is very musical poem whose syllables must be according to fixed pattern. Among its different kinds, kalai vannam according to Beschi's own definition in his Grammar of high Tamil (No. 143), treats of a hero in eight stanzas. In the first his qualities are extolled, in the second his country is described, in the third his birth narrated, in the fourth his works are enumerated, in the last four his body of admirers are described.

The hero of this lyric is Jesus. First his divine attributes are mentioned; then the country of Judea is described, thirdly his birth in Bethlehem is depicted in which Beschi calls him Cintamani. Then Christ's acts of kindness to the sick and the dead are extolled. "He is above the praise of poets."

In the last four stanzas is described in brief the saintly and heroic life of four female saints of the Catholic Church: St. Mary Magdalen, St. Cecily, St. Barbara and St. Kitteri.

This Vannam which has been ordinarily a means of describing human heroes and human love that often verged on the vulgar, is here made a means of depicting the Divine hero and the noble love of women for him, a love that is true love but elevated above the earth.