

MY GURU

And gladly wolde he lerne, and gladly teche.

CHAUCER, *Canterbury Tales*, 'Prologue'

The fourth of November 1958 was a great day in my life. It was the day that proved to be a turning point in my intellectual life. It was the day I was 'baptised' into a new language. It was the day Tamil won its sway over one who had been born in a different state and into a different language.

On that day, Kalaithanthai called Professor Avvai S. Duraisamy Pillai, the great Tamil scholar, to our house, and placing a copy of *Tirukkural* with Parimelazhagar's commentary into his hands, entrusted him with the task of teaching me Tamil. I still remember the bewilderment in Avvai's eyes as he received the book and looked at Kalaithanthai, me and the book.

He started with the Tamil alphabet and then straight plunged into the introductory portion of Parimelazhagar's commentary. What a stentorian voice he had! But I became apprehensive and trembled like a deer in the forest. I had to go through the book letter by letter and it all seemed daunting and far beyond me. I did not feel equal to the task and was in despair. Avvai was all sympathy and encouragement. "It will all be easy as time goes on." He proceeded slowly, and gently led me into the golden realm of Tamil Literature. To enable me to follow easily, he explained everything mostly in English in the beginning. He unlocked the treasures of Tamil Literature for me. Soon I started feeling at home in Tamil Literature. He taught me without haste, without becoming cross with me when I faltered, with a pleasant face and without deviating from his purpose.

I was really blessed in having Avvai as my *guru*. His profound scholarship, great mastery of Tamil literature, nobility and humility filled me with amazement. To listen to his explication of a text was a treat. He was very sensitive to the nuances of literature and

was able to make me respond to them. There might be countless teachers and countless students. But, Avvai as a teacher was unparalleled and a class by himself. Once he started his lessons, he would forget himself. He would never get tired. He had undertaken the work of teaching me Tamil and looked upon it as a mission. He did his job with enthusiasm, true devotion and dedication. If only we could get one such dedicated teacher today!

Totally absorbed in his work, he would not know the passage of time. I would get tired and try to give him a hint. I would ask him the time. He would just say, "I have no watch," and go on. After some time, I would openly ask him, "Could we stop here?" His invariable reply was, "Just a few more pages." But for his indefatigable enthusiasm and unrelenting effort, I would not have acquired what little knowledge I have of Tamil. His eagerness to teach me was more than my readiness to learn. He was a great teacher. I can say of him what Wordsworth said about his sister: "He gave me eyes, he gave me ears". Tamil poetry, especially Tamil religious poetry, cast a spell over me.