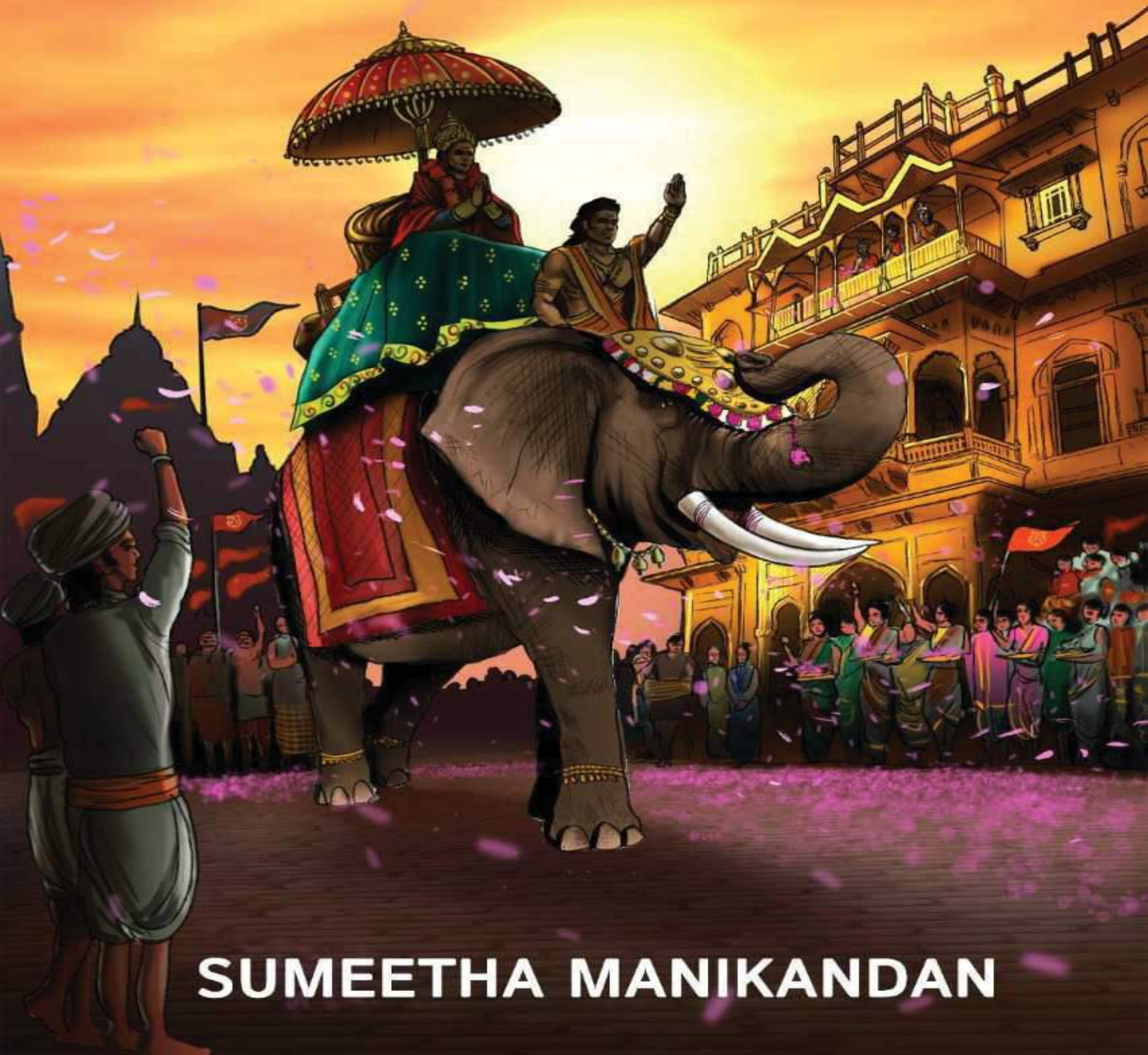


PONNI'S BELOVED

Volume 5: Epitome of Sacrifice



SUMEETHA MANIKANDAN

PONNI'S BELOVED

Volume 5

Epitome of Sacrifice

Sumeetha Manikandan

Version 1.0

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About The Author

Sumeetha Manikandan is a top bestselling romance author whose novellas 'Perfect Groom' and 'These Lines of Mehendi' have been on the top of Amazon India charts ever since their publication. A bookaholic, thinker, feminist and daydreamer, she reads across genres and is a crazy fan of history, romance and science fiction novels.

An avid reader of historical novels, she has been translating Kalki Krishnamurthy's classic Tamil novel Ponniyin Selvan for the past ten years and hopes to translate more of his novels into English.

Sumeetha is married to filmmaker K.S. Manikandan and lives with her daughter in Chennai.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge my father, S. Vijayaraghavan, who used to tell me the story of Ponniyin Selvan every evening during dinner and fuelled my interest to read the book.

My aunt, Ranganayaki, who lent me her Ponniyin Selvan books all those years ago when I was in school. I still treasure them to this day.

Navin and Vidya Sigamany for publishing the first drafts of Ponni's Beloved on their website Zine 5.com almost ten years ago. I would like to thank Inderpreet Kaur Uppal for her stellar efforts in editing the first two volumes.

A very special thanks to my second editor, Dhivya Balaji, for editing the rest of the volumes, especially Volume 5. Her passion to retain the original essence of the novel matched mine and I was glad to find another kindred soul who loved these books as much as I do.

Eternal thanks to Author Venkatesh Ramakrishnan, who encouraged me to resume the translation again. Writer and Journalist, Dhivakar Venkataraman, for providing valuable historical guidance for the cover page artwork.

Meenakshi Devaraj, an avid fan of the Ponniyin Selvan series, who rendered great help in translating Poonguzhali's song and the Devaram poems in this volume.

Friends like Raja King, Fowzia Iqbal, Abirami Baskaran, Sastha Prakash, Ramanujam Jaganathan, Thirukambigai Devi and countless others, who followed the translation avidly and promoted it among numerous groups.

I would also like to dedicate this book to all those fans who have been asking me for years to publish my translation, and to my

husband who claims to be the first among them.

A special dedication is due to Abirami Baskaran whose encouraging words were invaluable. She was one of many who left us all too soon. May her soul rest in peace.

Author's Note

Kalki Krishnamurthy's *Ponniyin Selvan* was the first Tamil novel that I read. To tell you the truth, I learnt to read Tamil using elementary school books just so that I could read this story.

They say that good books and great authors can transform lives. I have found it to be true in my case. I started translating this book ten years ago as a hobby and realized that I could write. Today, I am a freelance writer who makes a living out of writing, and I owe my profession to this novel!

Many authors have written phenomenal books in Tamil literature after Kalki Krishnamurthy, but *Ponniyin Selvan* remains the most popular book, widely read by many. *Ponniyin Selvan* has the right mixture of all things that makes an epic – political intrigue, conspiracy, betrayal, huge dollops of romance, infidelity, seduction, passion, alluring women, unrequited love, sacrifice and pure love.

Ponni's Beloved is an English translation, and as many readers have pointed out, no translation can do justice to the original. I have tried to capture the essence and soul of Kalki's writing in my translation.

I recently visited all the places (in India) that are mentioned in this novel. We started on Aadi 18 (Aug 3, 2019) for this trail trip almost in the footsteps of Vandiya Devan, and saw all the fascinating places that he mentions in the journey. I have included some of the photos in this volume.

Thank you,

Sumeetha Manikandan.

Note: For those who wish to sign up for this tour trail, do contact Tour Bee (7299646588). The tour trail was well organized and the

curator had many interesting stories about each place that we visited.

Foreword

Kalki Krishnamurthy's *Ponniyin Selvan* was serialized in the post-independence era and it ran for four long years. Talking about a golden era in Tamil history, it ensnared the imagination of a huge swathe of the Tamil population with people queuing in railway stations long before dawn to lay their hands on that week's edition of the *Kalki* magazine.

An entire generation dwelt upon the freshness of the novel and surprisingly it was not condemned to the recesses of the mind as a childhood fancy but continued to entice readers of subsequent generations as they were born and introduced to the Tamil language. The novel still has a colossal following but is bounded by the hedges of a language that is not easy to learn, it strictly remained out of the mainstream and well within the realms of the Tamil-speaking world.

Tamil people have been habitual migrants and the diaspora is spread over numerous countries. In today's generation, though many of them can speak fluent Tamil they lack the patience to read the Tamil script that is spread over 1000 pages of a novel. And that's when the need arises a need for a good translation.

When I read the novel late in my thirties, social media was just picking up and I was introduced to the yahoo group of *Ponniyin Selvan* fans around the year 2001. For the first time, readers from different age groups, and settled in different lands were congregating online.

It was there that I came across a translation of *Ponniyin Selvan* into English. (There had been one earlier in print but that left much to be desired for those who had read the original. In fact, at one point the earlier translator mentioned 'Maize' for the Tamil word *Cholam*. But it was pointed out in the group that Maize entered India 500 years after the storyline period.)

The online translation was a bold bid by a youngster. As much as the substance within, the attempt bedazzled a lot of us because for 40 years or more it was almost sacrilege to deal with Kalki's works. The one sequel in the market at that time had been mauled by the copyright owners!

Over the next decade, many of the members of the Yahoo group became novelists, biographers, bloggers, heritage activists and a host of history and literature-connected personalities. And I would like to list Sumeetha's translation of Kalki's work as a starting point for all this.

A translated work should remind us of the original and it should have the author's imprint on the words. I think Sumeetha comes out in flying colours on both fronts. I am sure her work would open up the genius of Kalki to many who were deprived of it all these days.

Biography of Venkatesh Ramakrishnan:

Author Venkatesh Ramakrishnan is a Chennai-based bilingual novelist from India. South Indian historical fiction is his forte. He has published three novels in Tamil, 2 of them are sequels to the famous Kalki Krishnamurthy novels Ponnin Selvan and Sivagamiyin Sabatham respectively, with the titles Kaviri Mainthan and Kanji Tharagai. One of his other fictional works in Tamil is Thillayil Oru Kollaikaran. Gods, Kings & Slaves. The Siege of Madurai is his first novel in English.

Character List

CHOLA ROYAL FAMILY

Paranthaka I – Grandfather of Sundara Chola, Paranthaka I ruled from 907 to 955 CE.

Rajadhithan – Eldest son and heir apparent of Paranthaka I. Prince Rajadhithan died in the Thakkolam War (950 CE), after which the crown was passed on to his younger brother Gandaraditha Chola.

Gandaradithan – Son of Paranthaka I. Sundara Chola's uncle. He was the Chola king from 950 to 957 CE. He was known for his great devotion to Lord Shiva.

Sembiyanmadevi – King Gandaradithan's queen, known for her piety and devotion to Lord Shiva. She belongs to the clan of Mazhavarayar and married the king despite his advanced age.

Aringzhan Chola – Son of Paranthaka I, and the father of Sundara Chola. He reigned for a very short period (from 956 to 957 CE).

Kalyani – Wife of Aringzhan Chola and the mother of Sundara Chola. She belongs to the Vaithumbarayar clan and is famous for her beauty.

Madhuranthakan – Son of King Gandaradithan and Sembiyanmadevi, and the first cousin of Sundara Chola.

Paranthaka II (Sundara Chola) – Emperor of the Chola and Pandya kingdoms from 957 to 970 CE, when this story happens. His handsomeness earned him the popular epithet of 'Sundara Chola,' meaning Handsome Chola.

Vanamadevi – Consort of Paranthaka II and the empress of the Cholas, she is the mother of Crown Prince Aditya Karikalan, Princess Kundavai, and Prince Arulmozhivarman. Her father is the noble chief Thirukkovalur Malayaman.

Aditya Karikalan – Eldest son of Sundara Chola and Vanamadevi, and crown prince to the Chola throne, Aditya Karikalan is a peerless warrior who defeated and killed the Pandya king and established Chola suzerainty over his kingdom.

Kundavai – Daughter of Sundara Chola and the younger sister of Aditya Karikalan. Kundavai is cherished throughout the kingdom for her wit, wisdom, grace, and intelligence. She lives in Pazhaiarai along with her companions and friends.

Arulmozhivarman – The youngest son of Sundara Chola and Vanamadevi, Arulmozhivarman is known throughout the kingdom as 'Ponniyin Selvan.' He later ascended the Chola throne as Raja Raja Cholan (985 - 1014 CE).

Noble Clans

PAZHUVUR CLAN

Periya Pazhuvetarayar – Lord Treasurer of the Chola kingdom and a peerless warrior who carried 64 battle scars on his body. He is the patriarch and the king of the powerful Pazhuvur clan and is an influential courtier and nobleman at the Chola court.

Nandini Devi – Queen and wife of Periya Pazhuvetarayar, Nandini is a young woman renowned for her beauty. Nandini's antecedents are a mystery and her past life is shrouded in secrecy.

Chinna Pazhuvetarayar – Also known as Kalanthaka Kanda, Chinna Pazhuvetarayar is the younger brother of Periya Pazhuvetarayar and is the commander of the Thanjavur fort. A powerful man with a strong physique, he is also the father-in-law of Prince Madhuranthakan.

KODUMBALUR CLAN

Budivikrama Kesari – The commander of troops in Elangai, he is also known as Kodumbalur Periya Vellar. He is the patriarch of the Kodumbalur Clan.

Vanathi – A Kodumbalur princess and the niece of Budivikrama Kesari, Vanathi is also the cherished companion and friend of Princess Kundavai, who hopes to wed her to Prince Arulmozhivarman.

Kodumbalur Siringa Vellar – Father of Vanathi and the younger brother of Budivikrama Kesari, he died valiantly in Elangai after leading a campaign across the sea.

SAMBUVARAYAR CLAN

Singannar Sambuvarayar – A powerful lord who ruled over Kadambur.

Kandanmaran – Son of Sambuvarayar who also fought along with Aditya Karikalan in many wars.

Manimegalai – Daughter of Sambuvarayar and the sister of Kandanmaran.

MALAYAMAN CLAN

Thirukkovalur Malayaman – Patriarch of the Malayaman clan and the father-in-law of Sundara Chola. He is close to his oldest grandson Aditya Karikalan.

VANAR CLAN

Vandiya Devan – Vallavareyan Vandiya Devan is Aditya Karikalan's bodyguard, friend, and confidante.

PANDYA KING'S BODYGUARDS

Ravidasan – The ringleader of the Pandya Abathuuthavigal who wish to avenge the death of their king. He is also known as 'Mandiravadi.'

Soman Sambavan – One of the conspirators and a member of Ravidasan's gang.

Edupankari – One of the Pandya conspirators who works in the Kadambur palace and overhears the noblemen's plots about the Chola succession.

Devaralan – Also known as Parameshwaran, he is one of the Pandya Abathuuthavigal who works in the Kadambur palace.

OTHER IMPORTANT CHARACTERS

Anirudha Brahmarayar – Prime Minister of the Chola Kingdom, and Sundara Cholar's trusted childhood friend and confidante.

Azhwarkadiyan Nambi – A Vaishnavite and a spy who is also known as Thirumalai or Thirumalaiappan. He also claims to be Nandini Devi's foster brother.

Parthibendra Pallavan – Close confidante and friend of Aditya Karikalan and a scion of the old Pallava dynasty.

Kudanthai Jodhidar – An astrologer in Kudanthai (present-day Kumbakonam) who is patronized by Kundavai.

KARAIYAR FAMILY

Thyagavidanga Karaiyar – Guardian of Kodi Karai lighthouse and father Poonguzhali and her brother Murugayyan.

Mandakini – Older sister of Thyagavidanga Karaiyar and Poonguzhali's aunt. She is also the woman who Sundara Cholar falls

in love with while in Elangai. Many suspect her to be the mother of Nandini. Many also call her 'Oomai Rani' (translates to Mute Queen).

Vaani Ammai – Senthana Amuthan's deaf and mute mother, and the twin sister of Mandakini.

Senthana Amuthan – A devout Shaivite who provides flowers from his garden to Thallikullathar Temple; the son of Vaani Ammai.

Poonguzhali – Senthana Amuthan's cousin who lives in Kodi Karai; the boat girl who saves the life of Ponnaiyin Selvar.

Murugayyan – Poonguzhali's brother who is timid and under the control of his wife. He also plies his boat for his livelihood.

Rakkammal – Murugayyan's wife, who is also a Pandya rebel and a member of Ravidasan's gang.

Karuthiruman – A boatman who saves Mandakini and is in love with Vaani Ammai.

King Mahindan – King of Elangai who is presently hiding in Rohana mountains.

The Story So Far...

In the 10th Century AD, the glorious Cholas ruled over the land of Tamil Nadu with emperor Sundara Chola on the throne. Sundara Chola had become bedridden with paralysis and there was confusion all over the Kingdom about who would ascend the throne next. The emperor has two sons and one daughter. The eldest, Aditya Karikalan, was anointed the crown prince of the Kingdom but his uncle Madhuranthakan (whose father ruled prior to Sundara Chola) also wished to ascend the throne.

The story begins when Aditya Karikalan sends his trusted bodyguard and friend Vandiya Devan with two messages, one for the emperor and the other for his sister Princess Kundavai. Vandiya Devan learns at Kadambur that all the important noblemen of the court, led by the Pazhuvur brothers, are hatching a conspiracy to crown Prince Madhuranthakan as the next Emperor.

While on his journey, Vandiya Devan also meets a fat Vaishnavan named Azhwarkadiyan Nambi (also known as Thirumalai) who wants to meet with Periya Pazhuvetarayar's wife who was once his sister. Vandiya Devan uses Nambi's name to meet with Nandini and she gives him a signet ring to enter the fort. Nambi, in the meanwhile, finds out that a gang of Pandya bodyguards are hatching a murderous plan to kill Prince Aditya Karikalan who had beheaded their king, and they were being aided with gold right from the treasury of the Cholas by Nandini.

Vandiya Devan goes to Thanjavur and successfully delivers his messages to the emperor in private. Fort Commander Chinna Pazhuvetarayar suspects his intentions and tries to imprison him, but he escapes and ends up in Nandini's palace, where she tries to allure him with her seductive beauty. He escapes from the fort through the underground passage and saves Kandanmaran's life.

He meets Princess Kundavai and falls in love with her. Kundavai sends a message to Arulmozhivarman, her younger brother who is warring in Elangai, to come back home, and hands it over to Vandiya Devan.

Vandiya Devan goes to Kodi Karai and with the help of Poonguzhali, a boat girl, he goes to Elangai.

In Kanchipuram, Aditya Karikalan's grandsire advises him to bring his brother Arulmozhi back from Elangai. His friend Parthibendran agrees to go to Elangai. And before he leaves, Karikalan reveals how much he loved Nandini and how she had betrayed him by trying to save the life of Pandya King and then subsequently marrying the old man Periya Pazhuvetarayar.

Kundavai arrives in Thanjavur and her father confesses to her that he had once loved a deaf and mute woman in Elangai who later committed suicide by jumping from a lighthouse. The emperor believes that he sees her ghost in the night, but Kundavai suspects that Nandini is acting like her mother's spirit to learn the truth about her birth. She also learns that Nandini could be her own sister!

In Elangai, Vandiya Devan meets with Nambi again and they both set out to meet Prince Arulmozhi and successfully give him the messages. They also meet a deaf and mute woman who loves the prince as her own son and saves his life many times. Vandiya Devan is astonished by her resemblance to Nandini and suspects that she might be her mother.

They also receive news from the boat girl Poonguzhali that the emperor has sent two ships to imprison the prince on the charge that he tried to usurp the throne of Elangai for his own. The prince leaves along with Poonguzhali to meet the ships. The prince finds out that the ships that came to imprison him were destroyed by the Arabs, and that they have imprisoned Vandiya Devan. He sets out in Parthibendran's ship to rescue Vandiya Devan. During a fierce storm, Vandiya Devan kills the Arab pirates with the help of the Pandya gang who later escape, abandoning him on the ship. The

prince rescues him and later Poonguzhali rescues them both while they are lost at sea.

The prince contracts a shivering fever and is incoherent. Vandiya Devan and Poonguzhali take him along with Senthana Amuthan to Nagapattinam Choodamani Viharam to treat his fever. In the meanwhile, Periya Pazhuvetarayar and Nandini, who are at Kodi Karai, learn that the prince is lost at sea. Parthibendran falls for the seductive allure of Nandini and is enamoured by her.

Vandiya Devan travels to Pazhalarai to give Kundavai the news that the prince has arrived and is safe, though the rest of the kingdom thinks that he is dead. There are riots in Pazhalarai when the news spreads. In the meanwhile, Nandini had sent Aditya Karikalan a message with Kandanmaran, asking him to meet at Kadambur to start peace talks and to wed Kandanmaran's sister to Aditya Karikalan. But Kundavai fears that it was a trap to kill him and sends Vandiya Devan to dissuade him from meeting Nandini.

Vandiya Devan and Nambi set out again to Kanchi. Kundavai meets Prince Arulmozhi and asks him to stay in the Viharam for a while.

In the meanwhile, Aditya Karikalan is on his way to Kadambur palace when his grandfather Malayaman tries to dissuade him unsuccessfully. Vandiya Devan and Nambi are near Kadambur Palace with their possessions washed away in the flood. They are trying to buy a horse to reach Aditya Karikalan before he arrives at Kadambur. They go to an isolated Ayyanar Temple to sleep when they see Edupankari coming there suddenly through an underground passage. Vandiya Devan travels through the passage and discovers that it ends in Kadambur Palace's hunters' chambers. He also discovers that the hunters' chambers open into women's anthappuram and learns that Nandini would be staying in that room. After a while, he hears Ravidasan and his gang approaching the hunters' chambers, leading him to hurriedly enter anthappuram where he encounters Manimegalai, Kandanmaran's sister.

Manimegalai had been in love with Vandiya Devan for a long time and has been resisting her brother's attempts to marry her off, first to Madhuranthakan and then to Aditya Karikalan. She demands an explanation from Vandiya Devan about his presence in the anthappuram. Vandiya Devan escapes from there through the terrace and jumps out of the palace where he meets Nambi. And together, they steal two horses and join Aditya Karikalan.

Aditya Karikalan gets a rousing welcome from Kadambur palace and the chieftains who had gathered, but his reckless behaviour and disrespectful attitude scare them out of their wits.

Near Kodi Karai, Poonguzhali and Senthana Amuthan are on their way to Nagapattinam when they spot Mandakini Devi in the woods. She had come there to know the fate of Ponniyin Selvar and Poonguzhali agrees to take her to the Viharam. Senthana Amuthan bids her goodbye and leaves for Thanjavur. While on their way, a few men kidnap Mandakini Devi and tie Poonguzhali to the boat. Senthana Amuthan rescues her and together they decide to follow the men who have abducted their aunt.

On the way to Thanjavur, a storm causes them to take refuge in a mandapam where they see the men who had abducted their aunt and they also see her sitting in the palanquin. Poonguzhali switches places with her and finds out that it was the Prime Minister who had hatched this plan to abduct Mandakini. Princess Kundavai, who comes to the prime minister's palace, convinces Poonguzhali to bring her aunt to the palace as they wished to unite the emperor with his lost love.

Poonguzhali agrees and tries to bring her to the prime minister's palace, but on the way, she sees Ravidasan and Soman Sambavan in the crowd and follows them to the underground chamber in Periya Pazhuvetarayar's palace. Mandakini learns that Soman Sambavan was planning to remain hidden in the underground dungeon until he finds the right time to assassinate Sundara Chola. She tries to frighten him while he is alone in the dungeon and comes out of the passageway, ending up in Sundara Chola's bedroom.

Sundara Chola, who is initially frightened by her presence, becomes furious when he learns that she had been alive all this while. That night, Mandakini is anxious about the assassin and she wakes up Poonguzhali and takes her into the underground chamber.

At Kadambur, Aditya Karikalan is openly discussing the conspiracy that the chieftains had hatched behind his back and laughs at their idea of dividing the empire. He demands that Periya Pazhuvetarayar bring Madhuranthakan to Kadambur to settle the issue of succession once and for all. Pazhuvetarayar decides to go to Thanjavur, but Nandini refuses to come with him, citing that she wants to protect his interest. Though he is filled with misgivings, Pazhuvetarayar starts for Thanjavur.

Nandini and Manimegalai go to Veera Narayana Dam to spend the day outdoors while Aditya Karikalan, Vandiya Devan, and others go to the nearby woods to hunt. While hunting down a wounded tiger, they follow it to the island where Nandini and Manimegalai were picnicking. There, Karikalan speaks to Nandini and seeks her forgiveness, telling her that she is Sundara Chola's daughter and his sister. Nandini refutes his claims as stories and blames Vandiya Devan for having lecherous thoughts about her. The four of them are forced to spend many hours together while a storm rages around them. Sambuvarayar brings a big ship to rescue them.

Chapter 1: Three Voices

Prince Arulmozhivarman had been waiting patiently for a long time. He was impatient to go to Thanjavur to meet his parents. He was also keen to prove to his father that he didn't conspire to snatch the throne of Elangai from Chola suzerainty and that he was innocent of the charges that were laid on him.

Nevertheless, he waited for a message from his dear sister before he left the sanctuary of the monastery. But it was difficult to pass time. Therefore, he took part in the daily prayers of the monks. He spent many hours looking at the beautiful paintings that were drawn on the walls of the monastery. He also took pleasure in discussing worldly affairs with the head monk, an old bikshu who had travelled to many far-away islands from China to Saavaga Theevu^[1]. The prince, who was fascinated by his travels, asked him to describe the places that he had been to, the people, and their culture....

He learned that the island of Kadaram^[2], known as the Sri Vijayam Kingdom, controlled many other small islands in the region. The prince asked the Bikshu to describe these kingdoms and the monk tirelessly told him everything that he knew about these places.

From environment to trade, people's habits, and customs, he told him many things. He also gave the prince a brief history of each kingdom and their ties to the old Pallava Kingdom, which resulted in a cultural exchange of arts and architecture. He also told him how the people there followed Buddhism but were also well-versed in the epics of the Hindu religion such as Ramayana and Mahabharata, and how they worshipped Hindu Gods as well. He also told him that the people had a special respect for Sage Agastya and worshipped him as the 'Father of Tamil Language' and had built many temples to honour him.

The prince committed to his memory all this information, especially the routes that would take him to these islands, and the

dangers that were inherent in the journey.

“Swami, is there any chance that you might visit these places again?”

“If the Lord Buddha wishes it, then I might visit them again. Why do you ask?”

“I wish to come along with you!”

“Prince, I am a monk who has forsaken this world. You are the son of the emperor. How can we travel together? It has been a huge responsibility to take care of you while you were here. Every minute, I fear that something untoward might happen....”

“Swami, I can lessen your burden by leaving immediately...”

“Prince, forgive me. I misspoke my fears. Taking care of your health and giving you sanctuary in this Viharam can in no way repay the benevolence and grace shown by your father and sister. You have helped us greatly by repairing and restoring our great old monasteries in Elangai and have also earned the respect and regard of our monastic leaders. They offered the throne of Elangai to you! Why did you refuse it? If you had become an independent king of that island kingdom, you would have your own fleet of ships and you can visit all these places on your own. You don't have to follow this old monk....”

“Swami, have you read the epic poem ‘Maha Vamsam’ that chronicles the history of Elangai kings?”

“Ayya, what are you saying? How could I become the head of this monastery without studying it?”

“Forgive me, I wanted to ask you whether you can read it in its original language. The epic chronicles the despicable deeds of the Elangai royal family in their quest for power. The son imprisons the father to seize the throne, while the mother kills the son with poison.

A son throws the mother into the fire... and there is no need to talk about the uncles, father-in-law, stepmothers, and stepsisters... Didn't the Maha Vamsam talk about the atrocities that people did to each other just to grab the throne?"

"True, but never forget that these incidents were used to teach people never to falter away from the path of dharma. And if they do, what kind of consequences they would have to face? Maha Vamsam is a holy book that can help people walk the path of dharma..."

"Swami, I am not finding fault with the holy book. I am merely saying that it chronicles the evil actions of people who tried to seize the throne of Elangai. That's why I see nothing wrong in rejecting the said throne."

"No, it was a wrong decision. The monastic heads of Elangai wanted a dynastic change in the kingdom. The atrocities and the evils committed by the previous dynasties had to be punished. Through you, they wished to establish a new lineage for the kingdom. You rejected a rare opportunity wherein you could have helped to spread and protect our faith far and wide like Emperor Ashoka..."

"Swami, it is unfair to compare me, who is hiding in the sanctuary of your Viharam, with the mighty Emperor Ashoka. Truly, I am unworthy to be even your disciple and you are hoping that I would protect your faith..."

"Prince, you have great inner strength. If you could but accept the faith of Buddha, you will get the opportunity to become as great as Ashoka!"

"Right from a young age, I have enshrined Murugan, Ganapathy, Shiva, Parvathy, and Perumal in my heart. I cannot forsake them and embrace the faith of Buddha. Forgive me, Swami. When I asked to come with you on your travels, it was not my intention to travel as a Bikshu and spread the faith of Buddha. I merely wish to see all these places..."

“Prince, I mistook your intent. Forgive me. But it cannot be denied that there is a deep connection between the faith of Buddha and your dynasty. In the lore of Buddha, we believe that he was born as the Chola Emperor Sibi, who offered his flesh to a wounded pigeon. The kings of the Chola empire claim to have descended from this great emperor. That’s why you adorn the title ‘Sembiyan’ when you assume the throne. Never forget that!”

“I can’t forget it, Swami. My blood and flesh remind me every day that I belong to the dynasty from which Emperor Sibi and Manu Needhi Cholan were born. They remind me to forsake wealth and comfort and help people. I also have ancestors like Vijayalaya Chola and Karikala Vallavan who ask me to pick up my sword, gather my army, go on conquests, and find glory in war and expanding the empire. Kings like Aditha Cholan, who had built great temples, ask me to renovate temples and build huge structures for the abode of Gods. I feel as if I am being pulled in all directions. In many ways, it might be better if I could embrace the faith of Buddha. I would like to learn more about him.”

The Buddha Bikshu’s face brightened when he heard this and he said, “Prince, you already know a lot of Buddha. What’s there for me to teach you?”

“Explain that picture that is drawn on the wall. I see a prince getting up from the bed. Who is the woman lying beside him and the baby in the cradle? Why is he leaving and why is he looking worried?”

“Prince, when Buddha was young, he was called Siddhartha and he was a prince just like you. He was married to the beautiful Yashodhara, and they had a new-born son. His father, the King, was ready to hand over the responsibility of the kingdom to him but Siddhartha wished to find ways to reduce people’s misery. Therefore, he renounced his wife, his son, and all worldly pleasures. This picture shows how he left his family behind in the dead of the night. Prince, haven’t you heard of this story before?”

“Yes, I have heard it before. But nothing tells a story like a beautiful picture. It has been so vividly portrayed here that I feel like waking up Yashodara and warning her, ‘Look, Siddhartha is leaving you. Stop him.’ Alright, tell me about the next picture.”

The old bikshu thus patiently explained each picture to the Prince with great care. In his heart of hearts, he did nurse a hope that the prince would one day embrace the faith of Buddha and therefore took particular care in explaining Siddhartha’s life history to him. The last picture showed Siddhartha under the tree of enlightenment where he receives the wisdom of the world. After hearing the bikshu’s explanations about it, the prince said, “Gurudeva, If I were to express an opinion that is contrary to yours, would you get angry?”

“Prince, I am a monk who has renounced this world. There is no room for anger in my heart. Please speak your mind.”

“I do not believe that Siddhartha gained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree.”

“Prince, during Ashoka’s reign, a branch from this tree was brought to Elangai and was nurtured carefully. It grew into a large tree and it still exists in Anuradhapuram. I am sure you must have seen it yourself. Then why do you disbelieve this fact?”

“Gurudeva, I don’t dispute the fact that the Bodhi tree exists but I don’t believe that Siddhartha got enlightened when he sat under it. On the contrary, the day he left his beautiful wife and his new-born son and a kingdom that rightfully belonged to him, to alleviate the suffering of the people... that’s when he received enlightenment. The sacrifice that he made that day is unlike anything we have seen in any stories or epics. Rama gave up his kingdom and went to the forest because his father ordered him to do so. Bharata refused to accept the kingdom that came to him because he was devoted to Rama. King Harishchandra gave up his kingdom because he had given his word to Sage Vishwamitra. Emperor Sibi had to cut off his own flesh and offer it to the pigeon because he had given sanctuary

to it. Prince Siddhartha had no such compulsion. He didn't have to sacrifice anything to please someone. He still gave up everything and left everything behind. I don't think he did anything so wonderful after he became enlightened. That's why I have always believed that when Siddhartha left the palace, leaving behind his kingdom, wife, son and worldly comforts... that's when he became enlightened!"

The prince's explanation greatly endeared him to the bikshu. He said, "While there is much truth in what you said, Buddha did indeed find a solution to the miseries of this world when he sat and meditated under the tree. That's where he started preaching to the people."

"Swami, more than what he preached, I find that there is a great lesson to learn from his life. That's why I would like to follow his example. I told you a while ago that three types of voices are heard within me. I would like to free myself from them. Kindly accept me as your disciple!"

"Prince, to gain a disciple like yourself is like gaining a treasure but I am unsuited for this honour. Nor am I brave enough. You could petition the Council of Biskshus in Elangai for this!"

"I have no doubts about the fact that only you could be my Guru. But what is it that you were saying about being brave?"

"Yes, my prince. I am not brave enough to accept you as my disciple. For the past two days, a rumour has been spreading across Nagapattinam that you have been living here and that we are forcibly attempting to convert you to the faith of Buddha. This has angered many in the city and some are even trying to mobilize people to attack the Viharam over this outrage."

"Aha! What is this foolishness? Why should people object if I joined the faith of Buddha? Why would they consider it an outrage if I shaved my head and wore ochre robes? I am not even married... so they can't even blame me for abandoning my wife!"

“Ayya, the people are not angry with you, but they are outraged by the fact that we are trying to turn you into a bikshu. If a mere rumour can incense the people thus, then imagine what would happen if it happened for real? People will storm into this Viharam and turn it into dust. Under the benevolent rule of your father, we have been living happily for so long. We even recite a special prayer for his health and long life every day. We don't want to ruin our peaceful life here. That's why I said that I dare not accept you as my disciple.”

Even as spoke thus, a huge clamour of voices could be heard outside the Viharam. The old Bikshu heard the commotion silently and then said, “It looks like the people have come in thousands to prove the truth of my words. I know not how to allay their fears. Only Lord Buddha should show me the way.”

He was right. Thousands had gathered in front of the Viharam, standing as one, and their voices were raised in protest.