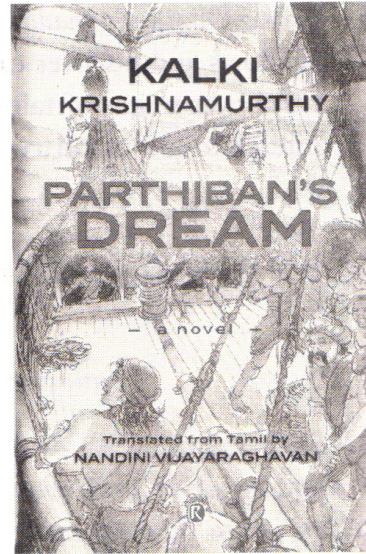


Parthiban's Dream by Kalki Krishnamurthy, Ratna Books, 2021, Pp. 388, Rs. 599/-

Kalki Krishnamurthy (1899-1954), a celebrated and popular writer of historical fiction and romances in Tamil continues to hold sway over contemporary readers. Most of his novels have been made into movies and have helped forge a wider audience who access his books in Tamil and in translations with renewed vigor. The immense box-office success of his novel *Ponniyin Selvan*, a film directed by Mani Ratnam in two Parts, is an instance of Kalki's enduring popularity. His novel, *Parthiban Kanavu*, serialised from 1941-43, is the earliest of his historical fictions. Its prequel, *Sivakamiyin Sabadham* (*Sivakami's Oath*) was published later in 1944-46. And Kalki's ever-green novel, *Ponniyin Selvan*, was serialised in his journal *Kalki* (1950-54). Kalki grasped the pulse of his readers in the crucial decades of the 1940s and 1950s when the nation was transitioning from its intense struggle for independence to a phase of negotiating demands of a new state and governance. His novels weave together issues of good governance, the battle of rulers vying for authority, the consolidation of kingdoms and positioning of the dream of establishing a unified Tamizhagam. The contestation between Cholas, Pallavas and Pandiyas for gaining hegemony over the Tamil country figures prominently in all his novels.



Nandini Vijayaraghavan's English translation of Kalki's *Parthiban Kanavu* as *Parthiban's Dream* is a timely recall of Kalki's dexterity in weaving history, fiction, romance and nationalist aspirations in a riveting prose that is at once simple and stately. The novel follows the classic structure of three parts, showcasing the dream of a Chola king, Parthiba Maharaja, to regain his legacy of Chola pride and glory, his death at a battle with the Pallavas and the ascent

of his son years later to the chola throne with the help of the Pallava king, Narasimha Varman. The novel's narrative takes us through war, intrigue, exile, impersonation, royal processions and the cult of human sacrifice offered in a forested hideout. The twists and turns, the courtly and the plebian lifestyle, the numerous escapades and timely rescue of the royal chola prince by the Pallava king, gallivanting incognito, keep the reader glued to the narrative.

The novel relates to a period in history when the cholas were finding it hard to retain their throne and prestige while the Pallavas were gaining substantial power over Chola land and the rest of Tamil Nadu. The Pallava king's love for art, sculpture, his aesthetic delight in collecting artifacts and initiating the construction of the rock temples at Mahabalipuram are highlighted in the novel. The king is also a patron of Saivite saint poets, the Sivanadiyars. The king himself dons the robes of a Sivanadiyar to crisscross through his kingdom to curb the cult of human sacrifice, rescue the Chola prince in distress and offer protection to the Chola queen. Although the Chola king Parthiban dies a heroic death at the battlefield, it is the Pallava king who emerges as an endearing strategist and a hero who survives through his wit. Notwithstanding a few chapters outlining the heroic past of the Cholas or the legendary wars won by the Pallavas that evoke the machismo and valour of kings, the novel stays within a middle-class imagination that is enthralled by the spectacle of kingship. The royal processions, the witty conversations of the Pallava king and the princess Kundavai, their preoccupation with the arts, in particular, sculpture and dance help in the projection of kingship and governance as a spectacle, an ideal that plays to the gallery, as it were. The necessity of a court, ministers, advisors, strategists are dispensed with and the Pallava king Narasimha Varman dazzles the reader in a series of impersonations and effortless governance of a large, expanding kingdom through his ubiquitous presence in the narrative while his stark absence from his court never poses any threat to his authority.

The picturesque spectacle of royalty is further enhanced by the romance and wit of a smart princess like Kundavai who falls in love with the exiled Chola prince, Vikraman. The novel's highpoint lies in their growing romance and the desperate circumstances which keep the lovers on their toes until the very end, culminating in their marriage, when they receive the blessing of the Pallava king who also restores the Chola kingdom to Vikraman. Of course, the glorious period of Raja Raja Chola and Rajendra Chola had to await another three centuries. *Parthiban's Dream* is set at a much earlier period but lays the dream of an independent Chola land firmly in Vikraman's youthful

mind. The novel showcases tales of tender love: between the boatman Ponnai and his wife Valli; King Narasimhan's chivalry towards his former love and present Chola queen, Arulmozhi; the heady romance between Vikraman and Kundavai. The fusion of the historical with the romantic is Kalki's forte and this novel is a delightful mesh of the two genres. However, it stays within the privileged spaces of society so faithfully that even the few ordinary folks we encounter do not worry about quotidian demands but merrily sail through the web of wit, chivalry and intrigue! Kalki even brushes aside the friction and feuds between the Saivaites and the Vaishnavites and presents the Pallava kingdom as an ideal kingdom, offering patronage to both the sects who live in harmony, which of course is as fictionalised as his notion of history.

The villains in the novel are pretty filmy like the ambitious but ineffectual Marappan or the grotesque but foolish Kala Bairavar, a battle fatigued commander masquerading as the head of a cult. His followers, the Kabalis are brought back to the mainstream faith at the end of the novel, adding another feather in the Pallava king's cap. The Pallava king is shown to be engaged on a civilizing mission and succeeds to defeat his enemies, promote Saivism and put down superstition with a firm hand. Kalki's concern for projecting an ideal ruler, a benevolent, people-friendly king, a patron of arts and religion, a liberal father and a brave warrior finds its fruition in the representation of the Pallava king, Narasimha Varman. The novel begins and ends with a slant towards the Chola kingdom but projects the Pallava king as a more dynamic and successful ruler. The women in this novel, whether Valli or Kundavai are shown as fiercely independent, affirming their agency and taking important decisions both in private and public spheres.

The translation is ably done and renders the novel in English a breezy read. The frequent glossing in parenthesis, within the text, is a tad distracting and often redundant. A glossary at the end could have served the purpose better. The translation has gained immensely by the original illustrations done by Gopulu for the Tamil text in the 1940s. His style adds a refreshing earthiness to the narrative, rendering the distant and the royal, rather interestingly, familiar and accessible. Kundavai and Valli; Vikraman and the Sivanadiyar stay on longer in our minds, partly owing to Gopulu's vivid illustrations. This is a novel that shows how re-visiting history can be made an attractive spectacle that lets you forget the harsher truths of that era.

B. Mangalam