

PREFACE

This book is a fruit of my study of the compositions of the Ālvārs from the Religious and Philosophical points of view in the main and occasionally from the literary viewpoint. A fairly thorough critical study is offered in the following pages of the hymns on the strength of work done over a period of five years.

The focus of the study is on Nammālvār's poems, for he is the most well-known amongst the Ālvārs and held as the leading exponent of Vaiṣṇavism through Tamil and as the head of all those who have been following him representing Śrī Vaiṣṇavism in the post-Ālvār period. However, the compositions of the other Ālvārs and the contributions made by them to the cause of Vaiṣṇavism have also been taken into consideration for purpose of nothing similarly in treatment to that of Nammālvār and for separately mentioning their contributions whichever are individualistic and unique in their nature.

Although a critical study of the commentaries and criticisms upon these compositions is not within the framework of the present study, the expositions of the later Ācāryas including their commentaries are utilised mainly for clarifying the interpretation of certain typical passages and problems of religious significance. A general, but brief, account of some of the well-known commentaries is given in a separate chapter (Section V, Chapter XXXI).

Schools of thought in India and elsewhere have been mostly maintaining Religion and Philosophy as independent branches. However, Indian philosophy has been theistic from the earliest times with the exception of the schools of Absolutism. The concept of a personal deity is involved in this co-ordinated development of religion and philosophy, the principles of which have coalesced rendering impossible a treatment of one in a manner independent of the other. Works which are brought under the subject of philosophy proper do not question the foundations of religious experience and can be admitted to tacitly lend support to the validity of the religious experiences. Works like the *Itihāsas*, *Purāṇas* and

also *Āgāmas* which are written in Sanskrit and the compositions of the *Ālvārs* which are in Tamil are religious in nature and content. They presuppose the authority of the philosophical foundations on which they are based and on which they are the solid super-structures built at various periods. There is thus no room for a discussion as to the exclusive nature of treatment philosophical or religious of the problems dealt with in these compositions.

A study of the religious and philosophical contributions made by the *Ālvārs* cannot be undertaken without reference to the materials which are available in cognate sources. To free such materials from the scope of this study would lead to the understanding of these compositions as the rise of thoughts newly invented by the *Ālvārs* without any traditional background and so not capable of accounting for the popularity at the hands of those who have been steeped in age-long traditional lores. An attempt is therefore made here to classify the results of the study on this subject under sections which represent the beginnings of the religious tradition which inspired the writing of these compositions, a general account of the *Ālvārs* and their compositions, then an intensive study of Nammālvār's compositions, the influence of these compositions on the development of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism in the subsequent periods and a conclusion on the worth of these compositions.

The study is divided into six sections the first of which forms an introduction dealing with the *Ālvārs*' approach to Reality. The second section is devoted to proving that the cult of Viṣṇu is as ancient as the *Vedas* themselves are. The theistic, personal and *saguna* aspects of the deity are traceable to the *Itihāsas*, *Purāṇas* and the *Bhagavad-gītā*. The various forms which the Lord takes for the welfare of humanity are found better developed in the *Āgamas*, their beginnings being indicated in the other earlier sources. Practical code of conduct of a Vaiṣṇavite gets treatment in the *Dharmasāstras* in addition to the sources mentioned above. Some of the aspects of the deity are also suggested and described also in the ancient Tamil classical literature. This section serves as a preparatory chapter to the thesis.

The question of the period of the Ālvārs is taken up in the third section where the literary, epigraphical and other materials are brought forward to fix the dates of the Ālvārs with an approximate degree of certainty. The dispute regarding the actual number of verses and the order in which the compositions of these Ālvārs are to follow are discussed in the same section which also contains a brief literary appreciation of these compositions. The traditional conclusions on some of the matters treated in this section have been shown to be inadmissible in the light of the materials that are available of late. This section serves as a useful background for a deep study of the compositions of the Ālvārs.

The fourth section is the biggest with fourteen chapters dealing with several aspects of the *Nālāyiram*. The general approach of the Ālvārs is treated at the outset. The preminence of Nārāyaṇa, His perfections, forms, exploits and His relationship to the self and the world take up the next four chapters. God is shown to be both immanent and transcendent and the inner-controller of one and all not excluding Brahmā and Rudra. Mystic experience which varies among the devout men belonging to the various faiths of the world finds its presentation in the form of Nature and Bridal Love. The former is not to be mistaken for pantheism since it implies God's transcendence also. The latter, though it can be traced to the *līlās* of Kṛṣṇa in Vṛndāvana, finds a full and rich depiction only at the hands of the Ālvārs. The reason for this lies in the aesthetic appreciation of God with particular reference to His descent as Kṛṣṇa and the *arcā* forms. The available sources have been fully utilised in this study of this aspect of love. Apart from devotion which functions ordinarily not at the mystic level but which draws man closer to the deity, the spirit of service which man owes to his deity as an act of obligation gets treatment and is shown to attain its perfection in rendering service to the *bhāgavatas*. The rich blissful experience which a devotee is allowed to have by the deity here within the limitations of the material world is openly proved as obtainable even in the state of release. This aspect does not receive this much of explicit support in the sources which are said to belong to the earliest period of literary development.

After indicating the individual contributions of the other Āḷvārs it is shown that the Āḷvārs do not generally escape from the suffering humanity to find consolation, encouragement and delightful enjoyment in God-realization. God-experience is well reflected in a major part of their compositions. The Āḷvārs are yet alive to the sufferings of humanity and they prescribe enviable recipes to tide over the miseries of the world now and here itself. The contributions of the Āḷvārs are crowned with unique success in that their compositions came to be looked upon on a level with that of the *Vedas* a rare and unique privilege given to what is written in a language which is other than Sanskrit.

The fifth section traces the impact and the influence of the message of the Āḷvārs on the leading exponents of Vaiṣṇavism in the post-Āḷvār period. The tenets of the Viśiṣṭādvaita school of Vedānta, though primarily based on the triple foundations (*prasthānatraya*), were actually given shape and developed on the lines of the teachings of the Āḷvārs. This was begun by Nāthamuni, underwent a good development at the hands of Yāmuna and took a crystalised shape at the hands of Rāmānuja who recognised and gave a special status to the *Nālāyiram* by his teachings and by directing his pupil Pillān to give an exposition of *Tiruvāymoli*. This attitude to the compositions of the Āḷvārs as being an integral part of the spiritual training of the Vaiṣṇavites was maintained and continued by Rāmānuja's disciples. But for the schism which has slightly divided the followers of the great master to form into two divisions bearing authority for doctrinal interpretation, the tradition of the Āḷvārs' message is being uninterruptedly maintained in tact. Much of what is found to be the specific features characterizing the outlook and conduct of a Vaiṣṇavite within and without the house, in temples and religious conventions owes mainly to what the Āḷvārs had taught and what has been assimilated by the Ācāryas from Nāthamuni downwards into the character of a Śrī Vaiṣṇavite. The commentaries on the *Nālāyiram* and the *Tiruvāymoli* in particular have been having greater attraction and appeal both to the teachers, disciples and those who listen to the discourses on them. However, it must be said that these commentaries have more of the ideal

of eulogizing the *bhāgavata* cult than what is actually needed to understand the spirit and tenor of the Āḷvars. The anecdotes which find room often times in these commentaries cloud much of the main issue which are involved in the interpretation of the original text.

The last section shows that the doctrine of self-surrender though not unknown in the period before the Āḷvars got a direct advocacy in the composition of the Āḷvars and finding room in the spiritual training became one of the cardinal tenets of the post-Rāmānuja Vaiṣṇavism. It is no exaggeration to state emphatically that through Rāmānuja who gave importance to the path of devotion keeping those of *karma* and *jñāna* at just below its level on account of the influence borne on him by the teachings of the Āḷvars³ that the devotional aspect, the mystic ideal of Nature and Bride, the spirit of service to God and His men which characterise any religious faith permeated the theistic schools of later Vaiṣṇavism such as those of Maḍhva, Nimbārka, Vallabha and others. A study of these compositions in comparison to that of these later schools of Vaiṣṇavism would have pertinence to a study undertaken on the development of *bhakti* according to Rāmānuja and so is not attempted here as it lies beyond the scope of this thesis.

The materials on which this study is based as also a table showing the method of transliteration adopted are given separately before the thesis proper. The appendices which are eight in number contain information on the list of *Brahma Vidyas*, the order of enumerating the Āḷvars, and the anecdotes referred to by the Āḷvars but not traceable to any known source. A list is given on the number of verses composed by Nammāḷvār on the *arcā* forms of God enshrined in various temples. Another list here contains the number of shrines exclusively celebrated by some Āḷvars. The list of succession of the Vaiṣṇavits ācāryas is also given for the understanding of the two traditions of the post-Rāmānuja school. A table setting out the dates of the Āḷvars acceptable to the traditionalists also forms a separate appendix.

The work was originally submitted as a doctoral Thesis to Sri Venkateswara University. I heartily acknowledge the able guidance provided for the work by Dr. V. Varadachari, then Reader in Sanskrit Department of the University and now Professor Emeritus in the Department. But for his unstinting help and meticulous supervision the work could not have been taken shape as it has.

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As a humble gesture to appreciation and regard, I dedicate this volume to late lamented Bharata Ratna Dr. S. Radhakrishnan who did more than any one to acquaint the West with the true essence of Indian thought.

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