

SUMMARY

The idea of God is innate in man. Some are fortunate to have the realization of God and very often they pass through various stages beginning from rigid self-training and culminating in divine communion. The *avatāra* of the released selves as Ālvārs could be justified with reference to these stages of God-realization. The inexpressible ultimate Reality finds in the selves a kind of articulation however inadequate it could be for giving a full description of Godhead. The Ālvārs, leaving aside the ontological, and epistemological approaches for the study of God, make the aesthetic approach, and their attempt represents the continuation of the Upaniṣadic description of God. The compositions of the Ālvārs have therefore a greater appeal to the human mind.

Introduction

India has been a secular state since she gained independence in 1947. It has been so declared in the Indian Constitution which came into force on the 26th January, 1950. This declaration was made to suit the conveniences of administering a land peopled by inhabitants who profess faiths which are other than the indigenous Hinduism. Nevertheless, the fact remains there that religion is the warp and woof of the Hindu society. It has been so for millennia. The stability of the Hindu society down to the present day notwithstanding the impact on it of foreign faiths, the uninterrupted enlightened attitude towards ultimate Reality and a real, enduring earnestness in the cause of peace characterize the Hindu society and this is not a little due to the religious influence on the people. It was Alexis Carrel that remarked: "Religion brings to man an inner strength, spiritual light, ineffable peace".

A society needs economic development without which it will be subjected to the militant power of other societies. The economic stability may make it grow stronger with the further development of material welfare. Without the guidance for chalking out the correct path in its policies, the society may acquire an aggressive attitude and as such it needs some direction in the right path. Religion performs this function in a society, by keeping the economic power under proper control without undermining it. The Latin proverb says, 'A man without religion is like a beast without bridle'. What applies to an individual is applicable, with equal felicity, to a society and a nation which is constituted by many individuals who impart strength to the individuality of the nation by their just behaviour. Irreligion or anti-religion is practised by a minority in a nation whose expectations are not fulfilled by the preach-

ings of that religion which they follow and so turn against their own religion out of sheer frustration. Treating the origin and development of irreligion, which is, of course, very ancient, is out of context when the religious attitudes, backed by philosophical inquiry, should engage the attention and study of a research worker.

The word 'religion' is made up of two parts, namely, 're' and 'ligion' which mean respectively 'again' and 'binding'. The word when thus derived can be taken to mean that man who is finite is part of the infinite from which he got separated. When it is said that he formed part of the infinite, what is meant is that he existed formerly in close union with the infinite. On account of his deeds he had to come away from it and hence the suffering is all the more severe. Even in bondage he is not really far away from the infinite, but owing to *karma* he feels the separation very keenly such that by practising the religious acts he could get at the Divine. The basis for this kind of feeling is only the desire to get bound or tied again to the infinite. The feeling that the finite is separated from the Divine and is not in a position to have direct communion because of the limitations which are set by the physical frame and material surroundings creates in man a conviction that he had committed a sin on account of which he could not be with God. The acts of sin committed now and then by force of circumstances do affect man. The pious men and the saints do not commit sins but yet feel that they are sinners. They declare at times that they are the repositories of sins and are at the head of the host of sinners.¹ Thus it is not the committing of sins that makes these pious selves get themselves filled with remorse, but the feeling of having committed the sinful acts that makes them give expression to their having sinned. This is called *naicyānusandhāna* a mere declaration that they are sinners. Any act of unfaithfulness which they are forced to commit creates in them a more serious sense of sinfulness than in the case of an ordinary person who commits it.² This is the reason why such men are not able to bear sepa-

1 *Śāstra-ratnam* 23; cf. T.V.M. 4.7:1,3,9; *ibid.* 5.7:1,2.

2 *The Essentials of Theism*, p. 148.

ration from the deity, while an ordinary man, who though attracted by divine perfection, is not much worried by the lack of opportunities of having God-vision. While in the case of the latter, the thought of God does engage a little of his time, in the case of the former matters other than those of the Divine get insignificant attraction.

The idea of God is innate in man. It is not actually acquired by education or any training spiritual or otherwise. People who could be condemned as very low and uncivilised believe in God. The very lowest Australian bushfolk-the most barbarous perhaps of barbarous creatures - believe in the existence of a supreme being who is a moral law-giver and judge. They even call him 'Father' and worship him in the character of an elderly gentleman. Savages are rarely athiests like us 'they entertain the larger hope'³. To have the idea of God is however different from having religious sense.

Sentimental minds are easily affected by beautiful expressions and enchanting music during religious worship. Such affections may reveal themselves in the form of external manifestations such as the gush of the tears of joy, change of voice choked with tears and others. Both those who are subjected to these experiences and who witness them are likely to take these manifestations as religious experiences.⁴ However, even the non-believers in the existence of God get, on occasions like these, such emotional experiences, but this need not be wholly applied to all cases, as there are cases of genuine devotees who are to be marked out to be as such with much diligence. However, their experiences could not serve to guide others who are yet to enter the realms of God-realization. People of this kind could form the group of persons who require others' guidance in the matter of spiritual experiences and are better placed than others, for sympathetically responding to the religious content of the appeals made by men of devout faith.

3. *What is Civilization?* p. 88.

4. cf *The Essentials of Theism*, p. 7.

The development of religious consciousness is not a sudden phenomenon. A rather unromantic and deep study of God and His existence is required to be made by the aspirants to spiritual experiences. This will have to be undertaken, not in temples where the din and pomp of festivities easily attract all kinds of persons, but in secluded spots where the earnest aspirant could be in the least affected by the elements of temptation. Such cultivation of a disciplined life ensures at the right time which would be at any time near or distant the budding of the religious experience. This process could rather be likened to the flowering of plants which requires definite lapses of times varying according to the nature of the plant since the seeds were sown for their growth.⁵ This could be taken to represent the procedure of *karma*, *jñāna*, and *yoga* which should, as matters of events, follow one after another. However, this may not universally hold good. Man has, at the time of his birth, some residues of previous lives. The achievements in those lives, if any, could possibly change this order with the result that while some are destined to take only to the path of *karma*, others are endowed, at the time of birth, with sufficient knowledge of ultimate truth that they are not required to do all the deeds. Yet, others, like a *yogi* in trance, indulge in thoughts about the divine.

Men, whether they pass through these stages or suddenly enter into the portals of God-realization, are not at all competent to guide the destinies of people through their religious experiences. Very few alone among them would have had the direct vision of God. The finitude of humanity cannot by any means gauge the perfection of the divine. It is left to the infinite Being to choose the occasion and reveal Himself to the aspirant and endow him with the necessary equipment for enjoying communion with Him.⁶ All the same, it is not every God-chosen man that could himself express to others his experience with God. With all the wealth of attainments for the same, the person may not be able to communicate his experience to others. Some could do this through an artless

5. cf. *ibid.*, p. 7.

6. *Kath. Up* 2: 23.

talk. Only very few may be able to give expression to their experiences in well-chosen words of enduring appeal. Infinity of God is so inexhaustible that even the most well-equipped God-intoxicated poet cannot adequately speak about God.⁷

The fortunate selves, who were chosen by God and who had gone to enjoy spiritual communion of non-earthly kind after leaving their mortal coil, are endowed with faultless knowledge of God and His attributes. They have capacities to have enjoyment of bliss (*ānanda*) and as such are better equipped than others to speak of communion with God. It is this fact that suggests of what would have formed the basis for the divine descent of the Ālvārs and Ācāryas. While some of them are held to be the divine weapons of Viṣṇu descended down to the earth, others are verily, Ādiśeṣa and Viṣvakṣena. The contact with the material world does not in the least affect the nature of their having been released. With their knowledge and other attributes without being influenced by the limitations of the world, they moved on as if they were in Vaikuṇṭham. The mortal frame alone degraded them to be men on earth. This is clear from the life accounts of all the Ālvārs, with notable exceptions.⁸ These exceptions are exceptions only in one sense. While the other Ālvārs had occasions to display their God-hunger from the very time of their birth, these had to wait for an occasion for their spiritual realization getting aroused. This does not however prove that they do not belong to the host of devout men.

As it is God that awakens religious consciousness in man, it is not necessary that to be religious-minded, one should be intelligent or undergo training.⁹ This is clear from the example of Dhruva.¹⁰ Just as one could lead a pure life without being learned and one who is deeply learned is not necessarily

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7. It is in this light that the Upaniṣadic passage requires to be explained. cf. Taitt. Up. 2: 9; *The Essentials of Theism*, p.93.
8. Periyālvār, Tirumaṅkaiyālvār, Toṅṅaraṭip - poṭiyālvār, Matura-kāviyālvār and Kulācekarālvār.
9. *Man, the Unknown*, pp. 282-83.
10. Bhāg. P. 4.9.

found to lead a moral life, aesthetic and religious senses could be aroused in men who have no education. Those who are educated are found to lack in aesthetic and religious senses. Hence religious consciousness is not the prerogative of the learned few nor is it confined to the persons born in the higher castes only. The Vaisnavite theology has wisely adopted a sane line of interpretation. Instead of giving credit to the superior social status of a devotee, it has made God's grace, after the pattern of *Upaniṣads*, as mainly responsible for the arousing of religious consciousness, the individual, whatever be his status, being only the medium for the display of religious sense. It is in this sense that Nammālvār, though he was not born in the higher caste, is admitted in the tradition of the Vaisnavite religion as the *super-prapaṇna*, being at the head of all his followers and through whom alone all who came after him have to approach God.

While speaking about God whose infinity in every one of His aspects lies beyond human range, limitations of one kind or other are to be faced. God is the Lord of time and He is not in time. He is beyond space and not within it. Everything other than God is finite. Therefore there is nothing that could be brought in to depict Him or any aspect of His with reference to the temporal, spatial and objective world. It is because of this that the Supreme Person is said to be beyond the reach of the words and thought.¹¹ However, men cannot assume silence on this account. He begins to articulate or blabber what is surging within. This inadequacy of expression is responsible for man's incompetence to effectively and correctly describe God. He therefore chooses his own expressions, for he does not know any other. He draws for purposes of analogical expressions, instances of the world with which he is familiar. Hence he describes God as sugarcane, honey and so on.¹² All the same, these do not fully bring out the greatness of God.

11. Taitt. Up 2: 9.

12. Peri. Tm. 7.3; 10; cf. *ibid.* 2.3: 2; *ibid.* 7.10: 1, 2 and T.V.M. 3.4. and *The Essentials of Theism* p. 94.

A passionate longing on the part of the devotee to have direct vision of God is not without justification. The prayers and pleadings would not only become unintelligible and worthless but would also create in the mind of the devotee an utter indifference, though not dis-illusionment, towards God, had not the Deity taken step to communicate Himself to the devotees. The sense of complete dependence of the devotee on God instils hope for the aspirant and makes the sufferings for re-union with God bearable. That self could have the direct apprehension of God who chooses to display His greatness to it. It is in this sense that God's presentation of His omnipresent form to Arjuna is to be explained. Man's limited powers of understanding are no match for God's eminence and as such he approaches God with the commingling of reverential fear and attraction. There is room for fear because the whole thing is mysterious and he cannot any longer bear the sight which overpowers him. Divine perfection however draws him near God.

The impact of the external world on the human mind could be interpreted to be threefold. The ideas are aroused, the objectiveness is felt and the human beings function themselves with reference to it verbally or through physical activities. Logic, sense organs and semantics respectively operate in these three fields. The results which are arrived at through the operation of these, establish that there shall be a powerful being behind the subjective world as well as the objective one. The mind of that being who could be designated as God is behind all this. The tasks of creation and protection of these presuppose that the idea of God is sustainable. The more one reflects deeply on this the more one is convinced that a reverential attitude is aroused in man for God. Naturally, those who reflect and meditate upon this become worshippers of the Divine. Others who could not adopt this process follow simply what these do and join them. This is the reason why worshippers of God are far more numerous than the worshippers of mammon or any other thing in the world.¹³

13. cf. *Collected Papers of Charles Saunders Pierce*, edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss 6, cited on p. 486 of *God in Modern Philosophy*.

Philosophy, which is of the nature of enquiry into the nature of reality, adopts several methods of proving the existence of God such as metaphysical and ontological¹⁴ and the moralistic.¹⁵ It is one thing to attempt at proving God's existence and it is another to attempt at knowing Him. The former is an act which is purely an intellectual feat and comprises analytical procedures which tend to become more and more abstract, leaving aside the existential aspect of God. However, those who are keen on knowing Him do not but take note of the fact that there must be a creator for the world. The devotion which they have for the Divine does not make them indulge in abstract discussions as to the manner in which creation could have taken place or the materials out of which the world has been created. The idea that He who created does also afford protection and therefore He alone shall be approached for protection is uppermost in their minds. Hence the devout worshippers, like the Ālvārs, refer constantly to the acts of divine creation and protection.

The general understanding of creation is that God creates the world in order that the selves, which lie inactive during the period of deluge, could take the physical frames in accordance with the results of their past deeds and undergo experiences for such actions and gain also fresh and new ones which if He wills would contribute to their spiritual progress and if He does not would leave them far behind. The Vaiṣṇavite theology would offer a better and more convincing explanation for this theory. As a matter of fact, this is, in a general way, the interpretation offered by the theologians of any religion. The *Upaniṣads* declare that creation is an act of the Will of the Divine¹⁶ and that the world is a sport¹⁷. Both these require an explanation. Why should the Divine entertain a will? If the intention of God is to bring a world into being in which the selves would have recompense for their

14. These methods are not fully effective. Vide: *God in Modern Philosophy*, pp. 398-399 and *History of Western Philosophy*, p. 476.

15. cf. *The Essentials of Theism*, pp. 117, 141.

16. Taitt. Up. 2: 6.

17. V.S. 2.1: 33.

deeds, then this would be only a repetition of what happened earlier, that is, before deluge. Again, God is said to enjoy the world as a child does its playthings. The selves are not inanimate objects like playthings. They have the capacity to enjoy or suffer when affected by others. Will not God be contributing to their suffering also? How then could he be justified if He adds to their sufferings in His sports with them? A study of the compositions of the Ālvārs shows that God creates the world through His Will prompted by generosity for mankind. If finite beings exist, they do so because of the sustenance they derive from the Infinite. The selves, which also come under the category of the finite, shall not be allowed to remain in complete ignorance of their nature in relation to the Supreme Person. God therefore provides, through creation, an opportunity for the selves to "have an actual share in the general nature of being".¹⁸ This is well expounded in Vaiṣṇavite theology. It is to protect His men that God descends down to the earth which He has created. It could rather be said with the Ālvār that God takes such forms which His particular devotee yearns to behold and have communion with and presents Himself before him.¹⁹ This explains the various descents which the Lord took in *vibhava* and also *arcā*. God felt that He should be with His man and came to him, entered his heart and filled it up to the brim.²⁰ He made the Ālvār realize His full pervasion of His person. He has not chosen to leave him on any account. The Ālvār notably observes that He is casting His looks hither and thither remaining within him.²¹ It is this kind of intense communion which the cowherdesses in Vṛndāvana sought passionately. This is suggested to be the motive for the creation of the world and divine descent of the Lord.²²

Theology is based on mere faith which takes divine disclosure of truth as never failing and hence does not provide

18. *The Essentials of Theism*, p. 103.

19. M. Tv. 44. ●

20. T.V.M. 1.7: 7; 9.6: 3, 5, 8, 10.

21. *ibid.*, 1.9.

22. Rāmānuja: *Bhagavadgītābhāṣya* 4:8

scope for the exercise of free reasoning. Revelation is admitted of unquestioned authority. On the other hand, philosophical enquiry affords room for a critical examination of all facts and begins questioning even the authority of revelation. The Vaiṣṇavite school brings about a reconciliation between the two. Revelation can be examined critically but could not be discarded. Revelation which takes the name of the *Vedas* is a document as it were containing the findings of eternal truths offered by great seers as a result of their spiritual intuition. These truths intuited by the sages lie beyond the operation of the senses and so beyond inference also. Naturally the authority of revelation which contains information on these truths cannot be explained away but could be explained on grounds of reason.

The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* begins with an enquiry of Brahman and notes the stages marked by *anna*, *prāṇa*, *manas*, *vijñāna* and *ānanda*. The conclusion arrived at is that Brahman is *ānanda* which is a strong ground for maintaining that Brahman is bliss (*ānanda*) and *rasa* (delectation). Bliss is not denied to the individual self but there is a gradation in the quantum of bliss which goes on increasing with the selves who are placed at different levels. It is said in this *Upaniṣad* that the bliss of Brahman is too great being at the highest stage representing it from the stage of man.²³ Both these facts are to be studied together and result of this study would show that Brahman is of unexcelled bliss. The Sanskrit word for unexcelled is '*niratiśaya*' which means unsurpassed, thereby meaning 'that a stage higher than that of Brahman does not exist'. The Ālvārs start there where the treatment was left by the *Upaniṣads*. Hence Nammālvār begins the *Tiruvāymoḷi* with the words "uyarvu aṛa uyarnalam uṭaiyavaṇ". "uyarvu aṛa" means 'having no higher of that category'. "uyarnalam" means 'great bliss'. The passage means that Brahman has great bliss which has no higher stage. This is only a paraphrase, rather a more explicit rendering of the Sanskrit word '*niratiśaya*'. Another factor that requires mentioning here is that the word '*brahman*' which means 'big and in-

23. Taitt Up. 2: 8.

creasing' is aptly rendered by Nammālvār in the passage cited above. To be huge or great, Brahman must have some other objects which shall be smaller to it. To be increasing, it must go on increasing, the previous stages being marked by the occupation of others which could not compete with it. Both these meanings show that Brahman is supreme and must possess attributes which alone could be made use of for noting the difference between it and others. Innumerable qualities should be meant here, for Brahman's eminence and superiority over other things must be in all aspects without exception. The *Upaniṣads* rightly state *ānanda* as the supreme mark of Brahman and rightly did Nammālvār note this and introduced this concept in the opening line of the *Tiruvāymoli*. The ultimate truth (*tattva*) is thus started here by the Ālvār.

The *Upaniṣads*²⁴ describe Brahman as '*rasa*', that is, enjoyable. The next passage tells us that on getting it, the self becomes blissful. That is, the self is able to enjoy communion with God after realizing Brahman. Standing at a distance with awe and terror is not what characterises God-realization. It is not simple *karma*, doing rights which are enjoined by the *Vedas*. Merely knowing Brahman does not satisfy the self. Enjoyability of God's presence marks the result which the self shall aspire for even in this life. There is thus a mystic tinge in the Vaiṣṇavite concept of God-realization. This experience (*anubhava*) cannot be complete and perfect so long as the self lives in this world. It can assume its fullness (*paripūrṇabrahmānubhava*) only in the stage of final release when all shackles of the material kind get shattered.

It is held that the Upaniṣadic passages like 'All this is verily Brahman'²⁵ point to the pantheistic tinge, but what this passage means is that this world constituting all the existent things is Brahman. The world does not exhaust Brahman which transcends it.²⁶ Besides, the passage means that the

24. Taitt. Up. 2.7.

25. Ch. Up. 3.14: 1

26. R.V. 10.90: 1.

world is in Brahman, owing its being and sustenance to it. God is transcendental, a feature which explains His infinitude. He is also immanent which consists not only in being the inner essence of the world, or their core but also its epicentre controlling and ruling the world. This explains that God is the redeemer "apportioning pleasures and penalties in exact proportion to the moral worthiness of the *kartā* or doer."²⁷ This Vedāntic concept of Brahman does not offer any consolation to suffering humanity. The negative concept²⁸ of Brahman having no inequality or cruelty with reference to the selves who get the results according to the nature of their deeds²⁹ does not give the selves any hope for depending upon God in order to become free from the miserable effects of the deeds committed voluntarily or otherwise. God is therefore declared in the *Āgamas* as taking the five forms out of mercy for helping humanity. These forms do not represent any anthropomorphic development. Rightly does the school of Vaiṣṇavism attach importance to the *vibhāva* and *arcā* forms of God. Even there the *arcā* form gets more significance. Divine grace makes God take the divine form called *Śubhāśraya* or *Divyamaṅgalavighraha* (auspicious form) the very name of which shows that it has no material setting. This sets aside the concept of incarnation of the Christian theology from getting applied to this concept of *vibhāva* and *arcā* which could be better rendered by the word '*avatāra*' or divine descent. Divine mercy which displays itself in these forms is the outcome of the ethical perfection of God which is represented by *amalatva*. In one word '*amalatva*' shows the absence of all possible defects and attributable changes which the selves and the non-sentient things are subjected to. This quality stands for purity of all kinds.

The Absolute or abstract deity does not satisfy the God-hunger of man. The devotion of man does not get perfected until there is a response from the Divine. Man yearns to have some sort of personal relationship with God. The concept of

27. *The Philosophy of Viśiṣṭādvaita*, p. 152.

28. *V.S.* 2.1: 34.

29. *Br, Up.* 4.4: 5.

a personal deity is thus necessary for the devout worshipper. What kind of personal relationship man would be desirous of having cannot be easily determined. It depends to a large extent on two factors. The first one is the nature of response on the part of God that would evoke feelings of attraction in the devotee. The second factor lies in the mental attitude, aptitude and capacity of man to receive the particular kind of response from God. The accumulated residues of *karma* of the self in previous births have a definite part in shaping the predilections of man. One cannot predict what kind of reception the self would be able to offer to God. God could be considered as creator and protector. In general, fatherhood of God could receive stress in this case. Respect coupled with freedom, restraint associated with submission to the dictates of a supreme well-wisher and a sense of security which the deity would not withhold from the sinner, not in the least mindful of the latter's defects, mark the attitude of the devotee. The forms of the Lord as the child Kṛṣṇa and the youthful Rāma attracted almost all the Ālvārs making them treat such forms with parental affection. It is really surprising how the element of devotion transforms the attitude of the devotees. Parental affection is expected by the devotees of God but here, the devotee treats himself as the parent of the child who is God Himself. In certain cases, the loveliness of the form of God as that of Kṛṣṇa and more so of that in the *arcā* form as in the shrines of Tirunaraiyūr captured the mind and senses of the Ālvārs to the extent of making them behave as though they were the spouses fit for the Lord.

One of the greatest contributions made by the Ālvārs in regard to the concept of the Godhead is the stress on the infatuating aesthetic beauty of God. The theological background for this is supplied in the sacred texts such as epics, *Purāṇas* and *Āgamas*. The Ālvārs went into raptures at the enchanting beauty of the *arcā* forms which they identified with the Sleeping Beauty in the milky ocean and the *vibhava* forms.³⁰ The aesthetic attribute *ānanda* forms the basis for the enjoyment of the forms whose attractiveness is to a large

30. *The Philosophy of Viśiṣṭādvaita*, p.205.

extent related to the ethical perfection of *amalatva*. This is well borne out by the composition of Tiruppāṇālvār who begins it by referring to this attribute and surveys graphically the Sleeping Beauty at Śrī Raṅgam from foot to head. The Ālvārs conceive of this elegant beauty even in Nature which serves as a vesture to the Divine and become attracted to God treating Him as a child or lover and themselves as father, mother and beloveds. It is rightly remarked : "But to the *mumukṣu*, as a mystic who seeks the intimacy of communion, the ontological Beyond and the ethically Perfect have no value or attraction. It is aesthetics that mediates between metaphysics and ethics and brings down heaven to earth, and elevates earth to heaven. Aesthetics is midway between sensuousness and spirituality, and bridges the gulf between the finite and infinite".³¹

The compositions of the Ālvārs are more expository of God-realization than being a critical enquiry into God's existence. Their mystical experiences are recorded in their compositions. The Ālvārs had much of the aesthetic temperament which involves hard discipline and renouncement of all the things in the world. Practice of contemplation shall be continued for a long time expecting the spiritual light to be shed. Shut from the world, the aspirant weans himself from himself. "His mind escapes from space and time".³² He gets communion with God and enjoys his realization of the ineffable Being possessed of aesthetic perfection and innumerable virtues which draw the human mind to It.

The idea of God, as could be gathered from the ancient sources such as *Vedas*, *Itihāśas*, *Purāṇas* and *Āgamas*, is found inherited by the Ālvārs. The *Nālayira Divya Prabandham* took up for treatment a personal deity, endowed with a frame of aesthetic perfection. Initiated into mystic experience, the Ālvārs went into raptures at their communion with the Divine beauty which presented Itself in a variety of

31. *ibid.*, p.201.

32. *Man, the Unknown*, p.132.

forms and at times in accordance with their wishes also. The one feature that could be declared to be prominent in their compositions is that they felt not infrequently the physical limitations which prevented them from having uninterrupted communion and yearned for a termination of these limits in order to have Him within and without and enjoy His immediate and intense presence.