

## A PREFATORY STUDY OF THE NĀLAYIRAM

## SUMMARY

In the section under reference, a study of the age of the Āḷvārs, of the numerology of the *Nālayiram*, and a general summary of each of the works of the Āḷvārs are attempted.

The age of the Āḷvārs is shrouded in mystery. Literary evidences such as *Guruparamparās*, *Divya-sūricaritam*, anecdotes recorded in later works, glimpses of society depicted in their poems and the linguistic evidences to some extent are examined. Reliance is placed on the names of years in the sixty-year cycle to arrive at the dates of their birth to a fair degree of accuracy leaving aside the dates relating to the *yūga* calculation as out of consideration. The limits of the dates of the Āḷvārs are fixed C 700 and 850 A.D.

The number of verses in the *Divya Prabandham* and their pattern of arrangement have been detailed here and the problem of the exact number 4000 with reference to *Prabandha-cāram* of Vedānta Deśika, the number of *Prabandhams* in the collection and the needless controversy over the possible order of poems of Tirumaṅkaiyāḷvār, the question of claiming

'*Tiruppallāṅṭu*' of Periyālvār as a separate work, the dissection of the two *Maṭals* into a number of small slices and naming them as 'verses' to suit convenience, the inclusion of Amutaṅār's poem in the anthology – are all discussed.

A summary regarding the purport of the twenty-four *Prabandhams* in the *Nālāyiram* collection is given to enable a fuller comprehension of the religion and philosophy of the Ālvārs.

## THE AGE OF THE ĀLVĀRS

The Age of the Ālvārs is shrouded in mystery. In an age in which historical sense is keenly alive, there is obviously no place for the chronology fabricated by tradition. The fabulous claims, which tradition makes on behalf of the Ālvārs as belonging to the ages far in advance of the dates which are historically valid, have been upheld only by the incurably credulous. Though the age of the Ālvārs has recently received considerable attention at the hands of the historians, no unbiased attempt seems to have been made to arrive at the exact dates of these Ālvārs from the sources available so far. Here is undertaken a brief consideration of their ages from the historical point of view leaving aside the miraculous incidents associated with their birth and life.

According to the *Guruparamparās*, some of the Ālvārs were born in the *Dvāpara-yuga* and others in the *Kaliyuga*.<sup>1</sup> Tirumaḷicai Ālvār is said to have lived for 4700 years.<sup>2</sup> While dealing with the lives of the Ālvārs and mentioning their names, together with the stars in which they were born, their compositions and the number of verses in their compositions, no particular order is found adopted by the different writers.<sup>3</sup> It is also not clear whether these authors had any serious intention to mention the names of the Ālvārs in the order of their birth. At first sight, it appears as though it was intended to maintain this order. Really speaking, with the exception of one writer,<sup>4</sup> others had no

1. Poykaiyār, Pūtattār, Pēyār, Tirumaḷicai Ālvār and Maturakavi Ālvār are stated to have been born in the *Dvāpāra-yuga*, while others in the *Kaliyuga*.

2. G.P. p. 23.

3. Vide: Appendix II.

4. U.P.R. v. 6 to 26.

intention to conform to this order. Curiously enough, there is more unanimity in the *Divyasūricarita*, *Guruparamparā* and *Prabandha-cāra* of Vedānta Deśika in following a particular order. There is of course a reference in one<sup>5</sup> of the *Gurūparamparās* to maintain an order in the treatment which is different from the one relating to the birth of Āḷvārs. It is, however, doubtful whether this deserves acceptance. Besides, the *Guruparamparās* and the life-accounts which are published in the printed texts of the *Nalāyira Divya Prabandham*, mention the dates according to the *yuga* calculation and the years by their names which are included in the sixty year cycle beginning with *Prabhava*. Historically proved data that are available on the age of the Āḷvārs militate against the admission of these dates for the Āḷvārs. However, the names of the years are helpful in arriving at the dates of the birth of the Āḷvārs to a fair degree of accuracy, of course, leaving aside, out of consideration, the dates relating to the *yuga* calculation. A different order is therefore to be adopted for the treatment of the age of the Āḷvārs.

### THE FIRST ĀḶVĀRS

The first three Āḷvārs, Poykaiyār, Pūtattār and Pēyār, were not born in the ordinary way, but miraculously<sup>6</sup> in Kāñcī, Tirukkattalmallai and Tirumayilai respectively. All the three Āḷvārs were contemporaries since they were traditionally said to have met for the first time at Tirukkōyilūr<sup>7</sup>

5. G.P. p. 23.

6. They are said to have born of flowers: Poykaiyār of golden-lotus, in the tank near the Yathōktakāri temple at Kāñcī, Pūtattār of the Mātavi flower and Pēyār of red-lotus (G.P. pp. 7, 8). cf. D.S.C. II: 12, where Pūtattālvār is stated to have sprung out of blue lily; ibid II: 13 where Pēyālvār is said to have come out of a pond of lilies.

7. M.Tv. 86. A beautiful legend tell sus how these saints sought shelter on a dark night from the down-pour of heavy rain in a narrow enclave which could just contain them standing, when Viṣṇu Himself sought their company as the fourth; they felt the pressure due to the presence of the new companion, and recognizing His identity, they praised Him in song then and there.

and afterwards at Tirumalīcai<sup>8</sup> near Madras to enjoy the companionship of Tirumalīcaiyālvār. Perhaps Pēyālvār was a younger contemporary of the other two Ālvārs. But for the one incident of the meeting of the three saints, the *Grupampara* gives no particulars regarding them. The devotion of these early saints is gentle, simple devotion, altogether free from an intolerant sectarian outlook. This fact together with their use of *Veṅpā* metre only in their devotional hymns points to a really early date for them—earlier than all the other Ālvārs.

The question of the age of these Ālvārs is involved in hopeless obscurity. Poykaiyār and Pēyār refer to a Viṅṇakaram (from the Sanskrit word (*viṣṇugṛham*) in their respective *Antātis*.<sup>9</sup> This Viṅṇakaram is identified by some with the Paramēśvara-Viṅṇakaram (Vaikunta Perumāḷ temple at Kāñci)<sup>10</sup> and by others with the Nantipura-Viṅṇakaram (Nāthankōil).<sup>11</sup> In the latter case, the word 'nanti' is taken to refer to Nantivarman I who, it is said, was a devotee of Viṣṇu. Prof. S. Vaiyapuri Pillai refuses to accept both the identifications, the reason for the former being that Paramēśvara-Viṅṇakaram was built by Nantivarman II (A.D. 731-796) so called by his personal name which was Paramēśvaraṇ. The contention of the learned Professor's non-acceptance of the latter is that nothing is known about Nantivarman except that he was the father of Siṃhaviṣṇu and the Pallava line itself was known as Siṃhaviṣṇu line. Moreover, Nantipura-Viṅṇakaram, the modern Nāthankōil, is in the Cōḷa country near Kumbakonam; and it was Siṃhaviṣṇu who brought the region watered by the Kāviri for the first time under the Pallavas.

The one fact, according to Prof. Pillai, which indisputably settles the question of the date of these Ālvārs is a reference by Pūtattālvār to Māmallai<sup>12</sup> which is none other

8. D.S.C. III: 8; G.P. p. 17.

9. M.Tv. 77; Mū. Tv. 61, 62. I. Tv does not make a reference to this.

10. *Tamil Studies*, p. 301.

11. *Ālvārkaḷ Kālanilai*, pp. 40, 41.

12. I. Tv. 70.

than the modern Mahābalipuram. Its original name was Mahāmallapuram.<sup>13</sup> The word 'vinṇākar' occurring before the word 'tiruvehkā' in the verse of Poykaiyālvār and Pēyālvār referred to above suggests the proximity of Vinṇakaram to Tiruvehkā in Kāñci. That this Vinṇakaram could have been built by Paramēśvaravarman I<sup>14</sup> (A.D. 670-680) is evident from the frequent association of the words 'pallavar-kōṇ', 'kacci' and Paramēśvara-Vinṇakaram in Tirumaṅkaiyālvār's poem.<sup>15</sup> The traditional year<sup>16</sup> in which the three Ālvārs were born was *Siddhārthi* which could be taken to correspond to A.D. 719 and not to an earlier date. This receives support from the reference in the composition of these Ālvārs, to Vinṇakaram which was built about A.D. 680. Even the tradition says that this Ālvār was born at Kaṭalmallai which is the same as Mahābalipuram. Now Mahāmalla was the famous Narasimhavarman I (A.D. 630-668) who for his military prowess was known with this title. So Pūtattālvār could have lived only after A.D. 650. But on the basis of joint authorship of a verse<sup>17</sup> one can conclude that Kāraikkāl Pēyār and Pēyālvār were contemporaries and Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār would need to be placed about A.D. 700<sup>18</sup>. Poykaiyār and Pūtattār belonged to the same period. So these three Ālvārs must have lived in about the beginning of the first quarter of the eighth century.

13. This was founded by Narasimhavarman I Mahāmalla. Vide *History of Ancient India*, pp. 448, 449.

14. *History of India, Part I Ancient of India*, p. 300 (2nd Edition, 1953).

15. Peri. Tm, 2. 9.

16. P.T.A. p. 2.

17. *Yāpparūnkala Vṛtti*, 93, pp. 350-352. The verse referred to here begins with "Karaippār peru".

18. Two verses beginning with "Vañci veliya" and "Karaippār peru" are ascribed to Karaikkāl Ammaiyār and Avvaiyār jointly by Nacciṅārkkīyār (Tol. *ceyyul* Nac. p. 66). Contrary to this, the former verse is ascribed to Poykaiyār exclusively (Yap. Comm. p. 350) and the latter to Pūtattār and Kāraikkāl Pēyār jointly (ibid., 352) by the commentator on *Yāpparūnkalam*. Kāraikkāl Pēyār may be assigned to A.D. 700. (*History of Tamil Language and Literature*, pp. 107, 108).

## TIRUMAḶICAI ĀḶVĀR

TirumaḶicai ĀḶvār, otherwise known as Bhaktisāra, is mentioned next in the list.<sup>19</sup> Born as the son of Bhārgava ṛṣi at TirumaḶicai, also called Mahisāra,<sup>20</sup> and thrown away by his parents<sup>21</sup> on the wayside, the baby was picked up by Tiruvāḷaṅ,<sup>22</sup> who having been childless, was very glad to bring up the foundling as his own child. It was fed upon the milk supplied *gratis* by a pious cowherd. Soon a child was born to the cowherd also. This child was named Kaṅikappaṅ, and he subsequently became a disciple to TirumaḶicaiyāḶvār.

As the boy TirumaḶicai grew in years, he learnt that it was necessary to examine critically the various systems of philosophy that were then in currency, and after the requisite preparation, he searched for truth in the heterodox systems of Buddhism, Jainism, Cārvaka philosophy. It is said that the ĀḶvār spent a period of seven hundred years in meditation occupying a cave in a forest near TirumaḶicai.<sup>23</sup> He examined the six orthodox systems and also that of a *Kudṛṣṭi* which must refer to that of Advaita.<sup>24</sup> The Śaiva schools of religion were examined.<sup>25</sup> It was at TirumaḶicai that he met the first three ĀḶvārs and gained their friendship.<sup>26</sup> In their company he paid a visit to Mayilai the birth place of PēyāḶvār. He

19. G.P., p.10; T.P. 371; D.S.C. II: 23.

20. G.P., p. 11.

21. Sage Bhārgava and a celestial nymph were the parents (D.S.C. II: 28-35).

22. G.P. p. 12.

23. D.S.C II: 54. G.P. (p.15) mentions that he spent this period at Tiruvallikēṇi where he established his greatness by conquering Śiva who on that occasion bestowed upon him the title 'Bhaktisāra'.

24. *ibid.*, II: 58.

25. *ibid.*, II: 60.

26. D.S.C. does not state that all the first three ĀḶvārs met Bhaktisāra and not certainly at Tiruvallikēṇi (III: 8). PoykaiyāḶvār alone met him and both then went to Tiruvallikēṇi (III: 13). Both sat there under the Kesara tree on the bank of the tank of lilies and enjoyed meditation (III: 14). Bhaktisāra learnt yogic practices from PoykaiyāḶvār (III: 15).

then proceeded to Kāñcipuram with Kaṇikannan whom he took with him from his native village.

There is a story of the Ālvār turning an old prostitute into a young damsel whom the local king married infatuated by her beauty.<sup>27</sup> But her beauty was waxing day by day while the king's was waning. Knowing from his wife the cause for this strange phenomenon and the Ālvār's spiritual greatness, the king sent word to the disciple of the Ālvār, Kaṇikannan, and wanted him to bring the Ālvār to his presence. The disciple expressed his inability to do so. At this, the king asked him to sing in praise of himself. This was refused by the disciple because mortal lips were given only to praise God, and none else. Enraged at the reply, the king ordered him to leave the capital. The disciple did so followed by his *guru*, the Ālvār, and it is said that the deity in the temple also followed them. At this, all the other gods and townsmen left, and the whole city of Kāñcī had wholesale evacuation. The king got alarmed at this and ran up to the Ālvār and requested him to forgive him for the offence, and the Ālvār granted him pardon. After a short stay at Kāñcī the Ālvār went to Kumbakonam where he spent the rest of his life. This, in brief, is the traditional version of the Ālvār's life-history.

As regards the date of this Ālvār, there is no internal evidence in his writings to proceed upon with any degree of certainty. He was born in the year *Siddhārthi* which corresponds to A.D. 720<sup>28</sup>. He was a contemporary of the first three Ālvārs who were also born in the same year *Siddhārthi*. Much significance need not be attached to the period of seven hundred years which he is said to have spent in meditation after which he met the three Ālvārs. That he learnt from Poykaiyālvār the various methods of meditation need not show him to have been younger to Poykaiyālvār. This date of birth as A.D. 720 for this Ālvār becomes acceptable, as he could have made Nandivarman II Pallavamalla (A.D. 731-

27. G.P., p. 19. This took place when the Ālvār was staying in the Yathōktakāri temple at Kāñcī.

28. P.T.A., p. 3; A.G.P. fol. 7 (b).



794)<sup>29</sup> turn a Vaiṣṇavite through his pupil Kaṇikannaṅ. But from their general tenor of his poems, it might be inferred that he should have lived at a period when the Jains, Buddhists and Saivites were struggling for religious supremacy. This Ālvār may be regarded as the Vaiṣṇavite counterpart of Tirumūlar though there is little in common between the Ālvār's views against Śaivism and the unconventional cosmopolitan and at times even iconoclastic negativism of Tirumūlar. The story that Tirumaḷicai Ālvār met the first three Ālvārs at Tiruvallikkēni may indicate that his real date was the same as that of Tirumūlar whose date is fixed in the first quarter of the eighth century.<sup>30</sup> The miracle of the rejuvenation by Tirumaḷicai Ālvār of the old prostitute with whom the Pallava king<sup>31</sup> fell in love after her youth was restored is apocryphal. He introduced the use of the sacred mud as the Vaiṣṇavite creed mark and this is perhaps commemorated in the story that he discovered the place in Tiruvallikkēni where the earth for that mark was available.<sup>32</sup> He mentions the shrines of Tiruvēṅkaṭam, Śrīraṅgam and many smaller ones including one at Tiruvallikkēni where a record in the twelfth year of Dantivarman Pallava (A.D. 795-845)<sup>33</sup> is found. His verses are reminiscent of *Ācārak-kōvai* and other works. His date may not be later than the eighth century.

There are expressions in his work such as '*potu-pokku*' (Nāṅ. Tv. 32), '*vālaṭṭum*' (ibid 38), '*uṟukinṟēn*' (ibid 42) which are found used in works belonging to a subsequent period.<sup>34</sup> Such linguistic evidences point to an age; but they are in no way helpful in determining the date of the composition.

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29. *History of India, Part I: Ancient India*, p. 300.

30. *History of Tamil Language and Literature*, p. 108.

31. G.P., p. 18.

32. D.S.C., III: 16, 17, 18.

33. *History of India, Part I Ancient India*, p. 300.

34. *History of Tamil Language and Literature*, p. 121 (foot note).

## TONṬARATĪP-POṬIYĀḶVĀR

The story of this Āḷvār whose earlier name was Vipranārāyaṇa is the story of a sinner turned into saint like Bilva-maṅgala of Kerala<sup>35</sup> and Vemana of Andhra desa.<sup>36</sup> He was born in a village called Maṅṭankuṭi in Thaṅjāvūr District in an orthodox Soliya brahmin family. After the study of the *Vedas* and the *Śāstras*, he took to the quiet and unostentatious occupation of cultivating a flower garden and dedicating the flowers to the Sleeping Beauty of Śrīraṅgam.<sup>37</sup> He was going on with this work undisturbed, when one day he came across a dancing girl of winning manners and equally tempting features. She was returning with her sister from the court of the Cōḷa King at Uṛaiyūr. On their way home, this woman made a wager to her sister saying that she would win every one by the charm of her beauty, among whom this austere Vaiṣṇavite saint was no exception. With this view in mind, she began to serve him in the improvement of his garden and in course of time she managed to entice him away from his devotion. Before the end of a year, poor Vipranārāyaṇa had degraded himself having lost all his claims to reverence. All day long his thoughts were set on her and before long he forgot his flower garden. Month after month passed and Vipranārāyaṇa became totally a different person.<sup>38</sup> He turned penniless and in consequence was abandoned by his 'sweet-heart'.

God would never desert His devotees. Śrī Raṅganātha taking pity on the wretched condition of His devotee undertook to reclaim him.<sup>39</sup> He assumed one day the form of a temple servant and carried a golden bowl belonging to the temple to Vipranārāyaṇa's concubine, presented it to her stating that it was from her lover Vipranārāyaṇa and that his errand was to communicate to her his desire to meet her that

35. *The Contribution of Kerala to Sanskrit Literature*, pp. 31-34.

36. *Śataka Vānmayā Sarvaswamū*, pp. 134-156.

37. T.M. 45; T.E. 10. In this respect he resembles Periyāḷvār and Mēḷākāra of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*.

38. T.M. 25, 31, 33, 34.

39. *ibid.*, 10.

night. Both met that night and spent a very happy time. Next morning the loss of the golden bowl was brought to the notice of the temple authorities, and on vigorous search it was detected in the house of Vipranārāyaṇa's concubine. Of course Vipranārāyaṇa was given to understand that Śrī Raṅganātha was the source of correction. He regained his senses and became an Ālvār and thenceforward he remained faithful to his Lord. He continued his *kaiśkarya* as before to the Lord. He expiated his sins by purificatory deeds such as drinking of water washed of the feet of the devotees of the Lord.<sup>40</sup>

The Ālvār's work, *Tirumālai* not only gives some autobiographical incidents of his life, but also some valuable evidence regarding his date. The Ālvār refers to two Purāṇic stories in his work<sup>41</sup> and one of them about Muḍgala is traced to *Viṣṇudharmōttara-purāṇa*<sup>42</sup> by an ancient commentator. The other story about Kṣatra-bandhu has been traced by Sri T.A. Gopinatha Rao to the seventeenth chapter of the same *Purāṇa*.<sup>43</sup> This *Purāṇa* is one of the *upapurāṇas* and its date is sometime between 628 and 1000, A.D. as it extracts *Paitamahāsiddhānta* from the *Brahma-sphuṭa-siddhānta* written by Brahmagupta in 628 A.D. which Alberuni (1030 A.D.) studied later very minutely. This fact is helpful in assigning the Ālvār to a period in the eighth century which is admissible from the evidence of his birth in the year *Prabhava* which corresponds to 727 A.D.<sup>44</sup> and he is said to have lived for 105 years.<sup>45</sup>

The Ālvār also uses 'ōlakkam'<sup>46</sup> 'patyal'<sup>47</sup> and 'pōlkan'<sup>48</sup> which are later day words not found even in the

40. G.P., pp. 40-41; D.S.C. VI : 76, 77.

41. T.M., 4, 12.

42. Chap. 90.

43. *History of Sri Vaiṣṇavas* p. 20; cf. Winternitz: H.I.L. I, p. 580.

44. P.T.A., p. 6.

45. A.G.P., for. 10 (b).

46. T.E., 9.

47. T.M., 37.

48. *ibid.*, 33.

*Tivākaram*, *Piṅkalantai* and *Cūtāmaṇi Nikaṇṭu*. His word 'kaṇṇarā'<sup>49</sup> is hardly grammatical. The recitation of *Tiruppaḷi Eḷucci* in the Śrīraṅgam temple is provided in a record of 1085 A.D. The construction of the fourth wall of the Śrīraṅgam temple by Tirumaṅkaiyālvār in such a way as it should be slightly out of its proper alignment without disturbing Toṇṭaraṭip-poṭi's flower garden and the latter's personal word of thankfulness to the former,<sup>50</sup> and the identity of the last two lines of one verse in *Tirumālai* and of one verse in *Tirukkuṟuntāṇṭakam*<sup>51</sup> lead us to conclude that the date of this Ālvār must be prior to that of Tirumaṅkaiyālvār.

### KULACĒKARA ĀLVĀR

The next Ālvār is Kulacēkara Ālvār who styles himself as Kollikāvalan (the king of Kolli), Kūṭal-nāyakaṇ (the Lord of Maturai) and Kolikkōṇ (the Lord of Uṟaiyūr).<sup>52</sup> These names indicate that he who was a prince had sway over the Kerala, Pāṇṭiya and Cōḷa kingdoms. He was born in Tiruvaṅcikkūlam on the Malabar coast as a prince of Kēraḷa.<sup>53</sup> Remarkable in his devotion to Viṣṇu, he, in course of time, abdicated his throne in favour of his son and retired to Śrīraṅgam where he is said to have engaged himself in the construction of portions of the temple of Raṅganātha.<sup>54</sup>

In one of his verses,<sup>55</sup> the Ālvār uses the expression 'toṇṭaraṭip-poṭi' which was most probably adopted by Vipranārāyaṇa as his surname. He is said to have been born in the twenty-eighth *Kali Parābhava* year. Leaving aside this *kali* age, if reliance is placed on the year *Parābhava*, Kulacē-

49. *ibid.*, 44.

50. G.P., p. 53.

51. T.M. 17; T.K. 13.

52. Perum, Tm. 2: 10, vide: *The Contributions of Kerala to Sanskrit Literature*, p. 2.

53. T.P. 374.

54. *Kōyil Oḷuku*. cf. *Ālvārkaḷ Kālanṭai*, p. 176.

55. Perum. Tm. 2: 2.

kara's year of birth could be 767 A.D.<sup>56</sup> He is said to have composed a lyric called *Mukundamālā*.<sup>57</sup> He had a daughter who was much attracted to Śrī Raṅganātha. He gave her in marriage to the Lord.<sup>58</sup> So he could be placed in the eighth century. He was a Cēra king, most probably of the *koṅku-cēra* line. He has not even referred to any of the sacred shrines in the Cēra country. There is nothing to betray his nationality except the word 'accan' which occurs in one of his hymns.<sup>59</sup> The Ālvār had sung about Tiruvēṅkaṭam,<sup>60</sup> Tiruvarāṅkam,<sup>61</sup> Tirukkannapuram,<sup>62</sup> Ālinakar,<sup>63</sup> Tillaic-citrakūṭam<sup>64</sup> - in the Cōla country. There is reference to Mallaimānagar; but Periyavāccāṅ Pillai, the commentator, gives a different interpretation altogether. Neither Tillaic-citrakūṭam nor the Lord Govindarāja is mentioned by Cuntaramūtti nāyaṅār and probably the date of this temple is 750 A.D.<sup>65</sup> This confirms the date that has been already reached. He has sung one decad on the Lord of Vittuvakkōṭu which is identified as a former suburb of Vañci-karuvūr by Prof. M. Raghava Iyengar,<sup>66</sup> and this may be accepted. The Ālvār shows his knowledge of Kural<sup>67</sup>. His hymn on 'Tettaruntiral'<sup>68</sup> was recited at Śrīraṅgam according to an inscription of 1085 A.D.<sup>69</sup>

56. *The Contributions of Kerala to Sanskrit Literature*, p. 2.

57. *ibid.*, pp. 3-5, G.P., p. 27.

58. D.S.C. V: 25.

59. Perum Tm. 2: 9.

60. *ibid.*, 4.

61. *ibid.*, 1, 2, 3; 8: 10.

62. *ibid.*, 8.

63. *ibid.*, 8: 7.

64. *ibid.*, 10.

65. His period has been fixed as the beginning of the eighth century A.D. by Prof. S. Vaiyapuri Pillai (*History of Tamil Language and Literature*, p. 110).

66. *Ālvārkaḷ Kālanilai* pp. 167, 168. The word 'Vittuvakkōṭu' means 'a place of habitation by Vidvans'; 'Kōṭu' means 'water-bank' (vide *Kural* 553 and its commentary).

67. Perum. Tm. 5: 3, cf. *Kural*, 542.

68. *ibid.*, 2.

69. *Cōlas* II, p. 479.

## TIRUPPĀNĀLVĀR

Tiruppānālvār, like Tirunllakāṇṭayālpāṇar of the Śaiva hagiology, was a musician of low caste, but, in addition, he was a poet. He was a native of Uṇṇaiyūr near Tiruccirāppaḷli. His low birth deprived him of the privilege of entering the holy precincts of the Lord of Śrīraṅgam. So he had to sing the praises of Śrī Raṅganātha from the southern bank of the Kāviri. He was a saint of a highly devotional temperament, justly honoured by God, who ordered, it is said, one Lōkaśaraṅgamuni to carry the Ālvār to the temple on his shoulders (hence known as Munivāhana), where he after contemplation vanished into divinity.<sup>70</sup> He has left only one poem '*Amalanātipirāṇ*' consisting of ten verses. The poem must have been set to music, though its tune is not given anywhere. The exquisite simplicity of the poem and the deep emotion it evokes makes it an outstanding composition among the hymns of the Vaiṣṇavite saints. Although the ancient musical systems of the Tamils have completely disappeared, its specimen is appreciated through the melody of his composition.

He is stated to have taken his birth in the year *Durmati*<sup>71</sup> which corresponds to 781 A.D. and to have lived for seventy five years.<sup>72</sup> '*utara pantam*',<sup>73</sup> and '*vāram*'<sup>74</sup> are the two words of a later period used by him in his poem.<sup>75</sup> Since this linguistic evidence is not helpful and since no other evidence is available the only period that is admissible for this Ālvār is the eighth century.

Apart from the *Guruparamparā* and other traditional sources, there is no direct evidence to place this Ālvār immediately after Toṇṇaraṭip-poṭi who was born in *Kali* 298th

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70. G.P., p 46.

71. P.T.A., p. 7.

72. G.P., p. 42.

73. A.P., 4.

74. *ibid.*, 5.

75. *History of Tamil Language and Literature*, p; 120.

year. Tiruppāṇālvār was born in Kali 343rd year. Leaving *Kali* era out of consideration, Tiruppāṇālvār must have born forty-five years after Toṇṭaraṭip-poṭi, that is, in 772 A.D., but Toṇṭaraṭip-poṭi was born in *Parābhava* (727 A.D.) and Tiruppāṇālvār in *Durmati* (781 A.D.).<sup>76</sup> This is after fifty-four years which could not be reconciled with the difference of forty-five years noted above. There is no harm in admitting 781 A.D. as the date of this Ālvār, as there is no evidence to contradict this date and as this is in consonance with the traditional account given in the sources. He must, however, be placed only after Kulacēkarālvār.

### TIRUMAṆKAIYĀLVĀR

Tirumaṅkaiyālvār is believed to have been born of *Kalla* caste and to have led a life of brigandage. He was a native of Tirukkuraivalūr near Cikāli in the Thaṅjāvūr District. His parents named him Kaliyaṅ. It appears that he held the office of the generalissimo under the Cōla king and that he was the feudal chieftain of a small principality or a group of villages called Āli Nāṭu in the eastern part of the Cōla country. His headquarters appear to have been Tirumaṅkai, and from the way in which he speaks of this place<sup>77</sup> it must have been an important town in his days, though it could not be identified with any of the existing villages in the Cikāli taluk. He developed into a devotee of Lord Nārāyaṇa through his wife Kumudavalli who was the daughter of a Vaiṣṇavite doctor. The pious lady married him on condition that he should become an ardent Vaiṣṇavite in thought, word and deed and that he should feed 1008 Vaiṣṇavite devotees every day for one year. By her initiation and preaching, Kaliyaṅ became a staunch worshipper of Viṣṇu.

Tirumaṅkai Maṅṅaṅ seems to be the most learned of all the Vaiṣṇavite saints. His contributions to the *Nālayiram* amount to 1361 verses and consist of six separate poems which

76. P.T.A., p. 7.

77. Peri. Tm. 1. 9: 10; 2. 1: 10; 2. 3: 10; 2. 7: 10; 2. 8: 10 etc. (the last verses of his hymns).

form, it is stated, the logical supplement to the four poems of Nammālvār. In fact, the works of Nammālvār are conventionally regarded as the four *Vedas*, while those of Tirumaṅkaiyālvār as the six *Vedāṅgas*.<sup>78</sup> Even in his own life time he should have been admitted as a famous poet,<sup>79</sup> a successful controversialist<sup>80</sup> and a great donor of charities. It is chronicled that at a poetical contest he was conferred the title of 'Nārkavip-perumāḷ (the Master of the four kinds of poetry).<sup>81</sup> The compositions of this Ālvār are said to be of four kinds, namely, Ācu, Matura, Citra and Vistāra.<sup>82</sup>

In his later days he resigned his office, perhaps on account of some misunderstanding between him and the Cōla king,<sup>83</sup> and set out on a pilgrimage from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin. Being a man of considerable wealth and influence Kaliyaṅ visited eighty-six shrines out of 108 temples and sang hymns in praise of the deities. The Ālvār spent large sums in building the fourth rampart wall in the Srīraṅgam temple which has been known to this day as 'Tirumaṅkai Maṅṅaṅ Tirumatil' (the sacred wall of Tirumaṅkaiyālvār). To secure funds for this sacred work, he is said to have demolished a golden image of Buddha at Nākappaṭṭiṅam which was in his days a deserted seat of Buddhism.<sup>84</sup> It is stated that he even resorted to highway robbery in order to

78. G.P., p. 52.; U.R.M. 9.

79. Peri. Tm 1. 7: 10. In this verse, the Ālvār himself refers as 'Iruntamiḷ nūṅpulavaṅ'.

80. It is mentioned that he worsted Tirujñāna Campantar in a poetical contest. (G.P., p. 52). This is not acceptable as Tirujñāna Campantar flourished in the seventh century. vide *History of Ancient India*, p. 483.

81. Kūrattālvāṅ's commendatory verse (Taniyaṅ) praises this Ālvār's poems as suitable literature for the five branches of Tamil Grammar thereby signifying to the excellence of this Ālvār's works.

82. G.P., p. 52.

83. It is stated that he had misappropriated the revenue of the villages he had the tenure of, and so the king imprisoned him. He got his release by paying off the amount through the assistance of God Aruḷāḷaperumāḷ of Kāñcī (G.P., p. 49) and began a new walk of life - that of a highway robber.

84. G.P. p. 53.



carry out his holy mission and charities. The D.S.C. says that he robbed of Śrī Raṅganātha and Sri Āṇṭāl when they were returning to Śrī Villiputtūr.<sup>85</sup>

Though born at Tirukkuraiyalūr of Āli Nāṭu, the Ālvār spent his last days at Tirukkuṅkuṭi in the Tirunelveli District. He is referred to by several names, namely, Kalikaṅṅi, Kaliyaṅṅ, Parakālaṅṅ, Aruḷmāri, Araṭṭamukki etc.<sup>86</sup> These titles perhaps indicate his real profession. He must have lived in stirring times, chosen a military career and won high distinctions in it.

The Ālvār, unlike several of the Tamil poets, has left clear evidence of the time when he flourished. We have ample references to the Pallava and the Cōla kings and the political events of their times. He has sung about Paramēśvara Viṅṅakaram<sup>87</sup> at Kāñci which was built by Paramēśvaravarman I (670-680 A.D.)<sup>88</sup>. It is also possible to suggest that this temple Viṅṅakaram was well known during the period of the first three Ālvārs and that it became reputed as Paramēśvara Viṅṅakaram after Nandivarman II (731-796 A.D.)<sup>89</sup> built or rebuilt it. From the references which the Ālvār makes to this temple, it is clear that both the temple and the deity were respected and worshipped by the king of Mallas (Mallaiyarkōṅṅ).<sup>90</sup> This king must have been no other than Mahāmalla, the title by which the Pallava king Narasiṃhavarman I (630-668 A.D.) was known.<sup>91</sup> Many armies of the rival kings are stated to have been overcome by the Pallava king.<sup>92</sup> This shall refer to the continual victories and defeats which the Pallava kings had in their encounters with the Cālukyaṅṅ

85. DSC Tamil version (pp. 121-124). That the Lord was on his way to Sri Villiputtūr is not mentioned in G.P. (p. 50).

86. Peri. Tm. 3.4: 10.

87. *ibid.* 2. 9. This is now known as Vaikuṅṅh Perumāḷ temple.

88. *History of India : Part I Ancient India*, p. 300.

89. *ibid.*, p. 300.

90. Peri. Tm 2. 9: 1.

91. *History of India : Part I Ancient India*, p. 300.

92. Peri. Tm. 2. 9: 7.

kings towards the end of the seventh and beginning of the ninth century. Paramēśvaravarman I (670-680 A.D.), Naraśimhavarman II (680-720 A.D.) and Paramēśvaravarman II (720-731 A.D.) took part in these encounters. These references, which the Ālvār gives, contain the word 'paṁinta' having the sense of the past event, perhaps, lingering in the memory of the then generation.<sup>93</sup> The Ālvār refers also to 'Vayiramēkaṇ' which was probably the epithet by which Dantivarman (754 A.D.), son of Nandivarman, was known. The word 'vaṇaṅkum' which is used here with reference to this king, conveys the sense of an event which was occurring in the period of this king.<sup>94</sup> An incident, which is recorded to have taken place in the twelfth regnal year of this Vayiramēkaṇ, makes a reference to the restoration of a field to the Pārthasārathi Perumāḷ temple at Tiruvallikkēṇi by one Pukaḷttunai. This temple was built about 790 A.D.<sup>95</sup> The conclusion that could be drawn from these references is that this Ālvār flourished in the middle of the ninth century.

Tirumaṅkai Ālvār's birth in the year *Nala*<sup>96</sup> which corresponds to 776 A.D., lends support to this period for him. This Ālvār is said to have lived for 105 years.<sup>97</sup> He must have visited Kāñci during the time of Dantivarman (795-845 A.D.).

Literary and linguistic evidences support this conclusion. A verse from the Nāḷaṭṭiyār (680 A.D.) is referred to in the *Ciṭṭiya-tirumaḷal* of this Ālvār.<sup>98</sup> A number of proverbs in *Paḷamoli* (725 A.D.) occur in some of the compositions of

93. There are other words here which point to the same conclusion, e.g., *mun-nāḷ* (2. 9 : 3), *paṇṭorukāl* (2. 9 : 4) and *aṇṇu* (2. 9 : 5).\*

94. Peri. Tm. 2. 8 : 10. This verse is sung in praise of the deity in one of the Viṣṇu temples at Kāñci. Aṭṭapuyakarattāṇ, by which name the deity is referred to here, shows the deity with eight arms (*puyams*).

95. *History of Tamil Language and Literature*, pp. 127, 128.

96. G.P., p. 46.

97. A.G.P., fol. 10 (a)

98. V. 114, Couplet 4.

this Ālvār.<sup>99</sup> The story of Vāsavadattā in the Perunkatai (700 A.D.) is referred to in the *Ciriva-tirumaṭal*.<sup>100</sup> The type of poem named *cappāṇi* occurs in the compositions of both Periyālvār (785-870 A.D.) and Tirumaṅkai Ālvār, one line actually finding a place in both.<sup>101</sup> Similarly expressions like 'yacōtai tan ciṅkam' and 'yacōtai yiḷamciṅkam' occur in the works of both Tirumaṅkai Ālvār and Āṇṭāl (b. in 836 A.D.).<sup>102</sup> On the strength of the above evidences, Tirumaṅkai Ālvār could be taken to have lived during the period 776-881 A.D., at any rate in the first half of the ninth century.

The traditional sources, however, keep this Ālvār at the end of the list which enumerates the names of the Ālvārs, with the exception of some<sup>103</sup> which mention Nammālvār as the last one. He was perhaps the Ālvār who lived up to a very late age (881 A.D.), but in the order of birth, he is to be placed before Periyālvār (born in 785 A.D.). In another respect, he deserves to be placed after Kulacēkara (born in 767 A.D.), Tirumaṅkai Ālvār was born in *Kali* 398, while Tiruppāṇālvār was born in *Kali* 343. Leaving the *Kali yuga* reference here, Tiruppāṇālvār must be taken to have preceded this Ālvār by 55 years. This agrees with 776 A.D., the year of birth of this Ālvār, if the former is to be admitted to have been born in 721 A.D. This date should receive support but for the mentioning of Tiruppāṇālvār after Toṇṭaraṭippoṭiyālvār (born in 727 A.D.) in the traditional sources.

### PERIYĀLVĀR AND ĀṆṬĀĻ

Periyālvār is only a surname while his real name was Viṭṭucittan or Viṣṇu-cittan (whose mind was set on Viṣṇu).

99. v 223 = Peri. Tm. 11.8 : 6; v 358 = ibid. 7. 10 : 4;

v 252 = ibid. 10. 9 : 8; v 253 = ibid 11.8 : 3.

v 370 = C. Tml. couplet 3.

100. Couplet 65. This evidence need not be attached much significance, as the story of Vāsavadattā was too well known from the beginning of the Christian era about which time, the *Brhatkathā* was composed by Guṇādhyā who flourished near the Vindhya ranges.

101. Periyāl. Tm. 1.6 = Peri. Tm. 10.5.

102. Peri. Tm. 6.8 : 6 = T.P. 1.

103. G'.P.p. 99; R.N. 18.

He was a native of Śrī Villip-puttūr in the Rāmanāthapuram District and a brahmin by birth. He is believed to have been a victor in a religious polemic held at the court of a Pāṇṭiya king and won a bag of gold in prize.<sup>104</sup> The title of Paṭṭar-pirāṇ was further bestowed on him by the king.<sup>105</sup> The gold could have been spent in improving his flower-garden which he dedicated to the services of the local deity at Śrī Villip-puttūr.

One day, coming across a female child under a *tuḷasi* plant in his garden, he adopted her and brought her up as his own daughter.<sup>106</sup> When the girl came of age, he gave her sound education both on the religious and secular sides; and this befitted her to help her foster-father in his devotional activities. The story is that Āṇṭāl developed a fascination for the nice garlands made by her father and she decked herself with it before they were offered to the deity. She would steal away a few moments for the purpose during her father's short absence and would replace the garlands in their original place before her father returned. One day the father chanced to see his daughter's freaks and chiding her not to repeat the act of sacrilege, had no garland to present that day. That night Viṣṇu-cittaṅ had a dream in which God intimated to him His special pleasure in accepting only such garlands as had been worn by Āṇṭāl and not any other; in fact, they were doubly dear to Him on account of her using them. Thenceforth the devoted Āḷvār conformed to the God's desire by offering used garlands. On this account Āṇṭāl came to be known as Cūṭik-koṭutta-nācciyār (the lady who gave what was worn by her).<sup>107</sup> When she came of marriageable age, she refused to marry any one except Lord Raṅganātha of Śrīraṅgam.<sup>108</sup> In her intense

104. Taniyans beginning with "*Maṅṅar taṭamatil!*" and "*Pāṇṭiyen koṇṭāṭa*" (By Pāṇṭiya Paṭṭar).

105. G.P., p. 30.

106. Periyāl. Tm. 3. 8:4.

107. This story has become a theme of the well-known Telugu work '*Āmuktamālyadā* or *Viṣṇu-cittīya*' one of the five great *Kavyas* (epic poems) by the celebrated emperor Kṛṣṇadēva Rāya of Vijayanagar.

108. Nac. Tm. 1:5.

devotion to Viṣṇu. Āṇṭāl dreamt of her marriage with God; and described her experience in a hymn which is sung to this day when a marriage takes place in a Vaiṣṇavite household.<sup>109</sup> God appeared to the Ālvār in a dream to declare before Him His acceptance of the girl in marriage and ordered her to be brought to his temple at Śrīraṅgam. Accordingly Periyālvār took her there with great joy and when she entered the *sanctum sanctorum* of Raṅganātha she was absorbed into the idol.<sup>110</sup> Periyālvār was duly honoured as the father-in-law of the deity and then sent back to his native place, Śrī Villiputtūr.

The identity of the Pāṇṭiya king referred to by Periyālvār in his hymns<sup>111</sup> as '*Naṭumāraṅ*' and '*Apimānatuṅkan*' is a matter of controversy among scholars.<sup>112</sup> The *Guruparampara works* identify him with Śrī Vallabha Pāṇṭiya<sup>113</sup> who had also the name Śrīmāra. This king reigned during the period (815-862 A.D.).<sup>114</sup> Viṣṇu-cittaṅ was born in the year *Kuroḍhana*<sup>115</sup> which corresponds to 785 A.D. and lived for eighty five years.<sup>116</sup> He could have been a contemporary of this king in whose court he won a wager. Āṇṭāl was born in the year *Nala*<sup>117</sup> which corresponds to 836 A.D. There is a reference in Āṇṭāl's *Tiruppāvai* which mentions the setting of Jupiter (Vyāḷaṅ) and the rising of Venus (Veḷḷi-Śukra). Professor M. Raghava Iyengar chooses December 18 of 731 A.D. as the date which Āṇṭāl had in view, and also as the date<sup>118</sup> which tallied with the regnal periods of both Kō-Neṭumāraṅ and his adversary Nandivarman II Pallavamalla (731-796 A.D.). But

109. *ibid.*, 6. (*Vāraṅam āyiram*).

110. G.P., p. 35.

111. Periyal. Tm. 4. 2: 7; 4. 4: 8.

112. '*Apimānatuṅkan*' appears as an epithet of Celva-nampi, the minister of Vallabha-dēva (G.P., p. 29).

113. G.P., p. 28.

114. *History of India, Part I Ancient India*, p. 229.

115. P.T.A., p. 5.

116. A.G.P., fol. 9 (b).

117. *Nālāytram* (P. Krishnamacharyar's edition) p. 100.

118. *Ālvārkal kālāntal*, pp. 76-81.

recent researches<sup>119</sup> have brought to light the fact that Paramēśvara Varman II was reigning in (720-731 A.D.). So this date chosen by Professor Iyengar is untenable. Among the alternative dates furnished by the learned Professor, either 885 or 886 A.D. would meet the astronomical requirements. It might after all be straining the astronomical arguments a bit too much. It may therefore be proper to conclude that the Ālvār and his foster-daughter Āṅṅāl probably lived round about 850 A.D.

### NAMMĀLVĀR AND MATURAKAVI

Nammālvār is considered by the Vaiṣṇavites to be the greatest of the Ālvārs for the spiritual wisdom contained in his poems. He was born of a Vellāla family of Tirukkuṟukūr, now known as Ālvār-Tirunakari in the Tirunelveli District. His parents gave him the name Māraṅ and Śaṭhakopa was the Sanskrit title probably given to him by his spiritual preceptor. Like other Ālvārs, he too was a born *yogi*. Even as a child he left his house to take his seat under a tamarind tree which was adjacent to his house. He continued to remain there in meditation for sixteen years. He is held to be the greatest of the Ālvārs and he was certainly the most philosophic minded among them. The *Bhakti* movement reached culmination in him. A disciple of his Maturakavi by name, composed a decad in honour of his preceptor and ended the long line of Vaiṣṇava saints.

Maturakavi was a native of Tirukkōḷur in the Tirunelveli District and a brahmin by birth. While he was at Ayodhyā on pilgrimage, he happened to observe one night a brilliant light in the southern quarter of the sky. He took it as a mark pointing to the presence of a great person, started in the direction of that light and reached Tirukkuṟukūr where he found this prodigy. Maturakavi then became the disciple of Nammālvār, who began composing verses which the devout disciple got recorded in the palm leaves.

119. Vide Prof. K.A.N. Sastri's "New Light on Later Pallava chronology" in M.M. Potdar commemoration volume.

Nammālvār was born in the year *Bahuḍhānya* which corresponds to 798 A.D.<sup>120</sup> Maturakavi's birth was in the year 800 A.D. (*Vikrama*).<sup>121</sup> Maturakavi installed Nammālvār in *arcā* form even when the latter was alive and conducted worship and festivals for it.<sup>122</sup> He lived for fifty years<sup>123</sup> after the passing away of Nammālvār in his thirty fifth year.<sup>124</sup> Maturakavi is also counted as an Ālvār. These two Ālvārs could therefore be placed in the second half of the ninth century.

The birth of Nammālvār in 738 A.D. would have been admissible, had not the Ālvār sung in praise of the deities at Varakuṇamaṅkai<sup>125</sup> and Crivaramaṅkalam.<sup>126</sup> Both these places were named after the Pāṇṭiyāṅ king Jatila Parāntaka Varaguṇa I (c. 765-815 A.D.), who had his kingdom extended on all sides, at the expense of the Cōlas, Keraḷas and other neighbours.<sup>127</sup> The Ālvār is evidently referring to these shrines when they were known with these names, though their existence prior to this period with a different name could not be ruled out. This enables to place Nammālvār in the first half of the ninth century A.D. and make Maturakavi his contemporary.

The years of birth of the Ālvārs give useful material for fixing the period of the Ālvārs. The *Kali* and *Dvāpara* eras mentioned in the sources do not make sense and deserve to be rejected in many cases. The names of the years mentioned in this connection help in arriving at the years of the birth of the Ālvārs but this is to be arrived at only with the aid of internal evidences contained in the compositions of the Ālvārs. The order in which the names of the Ālvārs is enu-

120. G.P., p. 55.

121. P.T.A., p. 8; A.G.P. fol 8(b).

122. G.P., p. 60.

123. A.G.P., fol. 9 (a).

124. A.G.P., fol. 8 (b).

125. T.V.M., 9. 2: 4.

126. *ibid.*, 5.7.

127. *History of Ancient India*, p. 484.

merated and their life accounts are dealt with in the sources, is only to be discarded in favour of a different order which is based on other evidences which are available internally and from external sources. Till fresh materials are found necessitating a change that is followed here, the traditional sources are to be kept on only for the information they provide for the understanding the life accounts of the Āḷvārs.

Regarding the latest limit for the age of the Āḷvārs, the first half of the ninth century seems to be admissible. Yāmunaçārya, who was born in *Kali* 4018, *Dhātu* year, was the grandson of Nāthamuni, who was not alive then. 916 A.D. could be the date of birth of Yāmuna. Nāthamuni learnt the four thousand verses of the Āḷvārs from Nammāḷvār himself who appeared to him through *yogic* power, that is, he did not meet the Āḷvār when he was alive. He met Parāṅkuśadāsa, a disciple of Maturakavi and was told by him that the compositions of the Āḷvārs were lost then for a long time. What exactly is meant by the long time is not clear. The *Guru-paramparā* tradion means that the long time must be taken to be fairly long when the Āḷvārs' dates are placed around the beginning of *Kaliyuga*. This interpretation is untenable and the non-availability of these compositions even for a generation may be interpreted in terms of a long time. This meeting must have taken place after 883 A.D. when Maturakavi passed away. Much significance could not be attached to the 'long time' referred to here. It only means that all the compositions were not then available. The non-availability of them at this time, which was not far distant from the middle of the ninth century when Periyāḷvār, Āṅtāḷ, Tirumaṅkai Āḷvār and Maturakavi Āḷvār were in the last years of life, could be explained only by admitting that some of the Āḷvārs, though they were contemporaries, did not have occasion to meet each other and as a result of this, their compositions were not known outside the regions where they flourished. Nāthamuni is said to have arranged the compositions of the Āḷvārs and made them recited by his disciples. This must have taken place about 900 A.D. It will not therefore be wrong, if the limits of the age of the Āḷvārs is fixed in the period 700–850 A.D.