

VAIṢṆAVITE RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY IN THE NĀLĀYIRAM

SUMMARY

This section forms the main part of this thesis wherein the aspects of religion and philosophy of the Āḷvārs, especially that of Nammāḷvār, are fully discussed. The already existent concepts of Vaiṣṇavism paved the way for the Āḷvārs for the formulation of Vaiṣṇavite theism, though not as a system of thought. Nammāḷvār recognizes the *Upaniṣadic* concept of Brahman and the one accepted in theology as a personal deity and identifies Him as Nārāyaṇa with Śrī in his poems. His complexion and other individualistic traits are shown to arrest the mind of the devotees.

The Lord's attributes which lie beyond human comprehension are *satyam*, *jñānam*, and *anantam*. These are the chief attributes which form the basis for the admission of countless qualities. Bliss (*ānanda*) is an important attribute of the Lord which produces delectable experience in His devotees. Among His many auspicious qualities, *saulabhya*, *sauśīlya*, *vātsalya*, *dayā* have much attraction for the Āḷvārs. The five forms of God, the transcendent, the grouped, the divinely descended, the immanent and the idol forms mentioned in the

Āgamas are accepted by the Ālvārs and they express their experience of such forms in their utterances. God in the transcendental state possesses the super-essential qualities of *satyam*, *jñānam*, *anantam*, *amalam* and *ānandam*. In the grouped form the Lord manifests Himself as Vāsudeva, Saṅkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna and Aniruddha. The *avatāras* of God takes place (*Vibhava* form) when evil triumphs over goodness and creates a crisis in moral life. There are frequent references to such *avatāras* as Varāha, Vāmana, Narasimha, Rāma and Kṛṣṇa. The fourth state of God, *antaryāmin*, makes the souls pulsate with their creative life and participate in their inner joy and make the mortal selves immortal. The fifth state is the idol which is the reservoir of redemptive mercy. In fact, the poems of the Ālvārs are the treasure of their experience of this form. Nammālvār in one hymn of ten verses stresses the easy accessibility of *arcā*. It has also been pointed out that the Ālvārs revel in the exploits of Nārāyaṇa both in the *para* and *vibhava* states and these saints have frescoed them in their hearts, so to say.

The nature of self is clearly realized by the Ālvārs, particularly by Nammālvār; but they have not employed the classification of selves as *nitya*, *mukta* and *bhaddha*. Nārāyaṇa is the creator, protector and destroyer of the Universe. A number of verses in *Tiruvāymoḷi* refer to the involutory and evolutionary processes of the Universe. The interrelations of God, self and the world have been explained on the basis of *karma*. Īśvara as the *sarīrin* of all is clearly intuited by these saints and He is considered as having endless glories or posses-

sions. The *lālā-vibhāti* exists for His sport and *nityavibhāti* is time as eternity.

The Ālvārs have a strong faith that the Lord's grace alone could lead us to emancipation. They dived deep in the ocean of His auspicious qualities through their love they had for Him. To them God's *dayā* is more attractive; He is *dayānidhi* to them. In the act of operation of God's grace, the office performed by Lakṣmī is unique and significant. The Ālvārs lay emphasis on God-love. This God-love or '*avā*' is seen to have been mentioned in their poems. To Nammālvār God is the food he eats, the water he drinks and the betel he chews. The Ālvārs in general could not give up the great joy, the ecstasy, they were having by their communion with Him as is seen from their poems and references to this aspect are countless. In their ecstasy of their mystic experience, pain and delight take their positions alternately. The apparent contradictions of the world proclaim only with a loud note that He cannot be comprehended by man. The god-experience is called '*amutu*' by the Ālvārs. To Nammālvār is '*Ellām Kaṇṇāṇ.*'

The Ālvārs are Nature mystics. The basis of soul and Nature is God who is described under various names by different thinkers. Nature, according to the Ālvārs, is the theatre of the Divine *līlā* of Love and the Lord wears the garment of nature and plays with the finite self till the two are united. To them the universe of *cit* and *acit* has its unity only in God. It is the creative expression of the divine sports of love. The intense love of the mystic

for God has one fundamental characteristic feature, namely, he chooses to be quite submissive to the Lord and is passive. Whether man or woman, the mystic has much of the nature of woman. The mystic passes through several stages which a bride undergoes in the periods of wedding-day and honeymoon. The view that God is the bridegroom and the devout soul of the devotees, the bride is an allegorical expression of the intimate communion between the soul and God. This aspect of bridal mysticism is seen in abundance in the poems of the Ālvārs especially those of Āṇṭāl, Tirumaṅkaiyālvār and Nammālvār. So they give expression to their mystic feeling in the language of love and in this mode they have adopted the technique of love poetry. In explaining the bridal mysticism it has been shown that *Bhagavat-kāma* is different from *viṣaya-kāma*. All the technical aspects of *Akattiṇai* are successfully pressed into service by the Ālvārs in their portrayal of love indicating thereby that bridal mysticism is only a mental process which transports the mystics of either sex to a plane above the physical one and that it is a masterly device selected by a poet-devotee to give vent to his feelings of passion and love for God.

The intense kind of God-experience or communion does not last long. It is a gift from God and the devotee is to remain only waiting for receiving it. Being aware of his inability to work for it, he feels the imperative need for prayer to get His grace. The primary requisite for undertaking the act of worship is the purity of instrument (*karaṇa*). It has been shown that this worship can be per-

formed by body, speech and mind and this worship is referred to by the Ālvārs as 'pūcai' or 'pūcaṅgai'. By worship one can get rid of his mental impurities. Different kinds of prayers are indicated here; several modes of *bhakti* are pointed out. Acts of workship, whatever form they take are reducible to the level of service (*kainkarya*). It has been shown that *kainkarya* can be undertaken to God in any of His forms and since the *para*, *vyūha* and *antaryāmin* are not within the easy reach of the mortals, the Vaiṣṇavite school has preferred to enjoin service to the deity in the *arcā* forms.

The cult of *bhāgavatas* is an important aspect in the Vaiṣṇavite religion. Many of the Ālvārs express their desire of being the God's devotees. It has been shown that the devotees of Viṣṇu had their existence even in the days of *Tolkāppiyam*. In Vaiṣṇavism the cult of *bhāgavata* worship is considered greater than the worship of the Lord Himself according to ancient texts. The Lord is immensely pleased at the service rendered to the devotees who are His very self. Maturakaviyālvār is the best instance of a devotee of Lord's devotee. Nammālvār likes to have the company of the devotees of the Lord even in the state of release. It has been shown here that the celebration of festivals and observances of the sacred days play an appreciable role in the *bhāgavata* cult and that the poems of the Ālvārs refer to the occasions of festivals connected with temples.

The ultimate goal of the religious philosophy of Vaiṣṇavism is *mokṣa* which is the state of the release of the soul from bondage to *karma*. Nam-

mālvār conceives *mokṣa* as the God's abode and also a place of free souls who are real immortals and refers to this place as "*tuyar illā vītu*". It has been shown that the two concepts '*celkati*' and '*mākkati*' in combination may be interpreted to mean the straight and shining path of *arcirāti gati* as mentioned in the *Upaniṣads*. The means of salvation as suggested in this faith is devotion and self-surrender. The spiritual experience of the Ālvārs is epitomised in the *saraṇāgati* of Nammālvār. Almost all the Ālvārs speak of their self-surrender to the Lord. That the purports of three secrets, *mūla-mantra*, *dvayamantra* and *caramaśloka* contain the essentials of *Vedānta* have been explained here and also shown that the *mantras* reveal the role of divine grace in the play of God seeking man and man seeking God. The implication of the concept of Godhead as Nārāyaṇa with Śrī has been brought out. The soul's ascent to the Absolute as visualised by Nammālvār and the welcome offered to it in *Paramapada* are indicated.

It has been shown that the teachings of the other Ālvārs are similar to what Nammālvār contributed. But they have tried their hands in employing several forms of compositions. The first three Ālvārs have respectively *parabhakti*, *parajñāna* and *parama bhakti* all to almost the same degree, but their compositions reveal that each one of these is prominent in the work of each one of them. Intense meditation on the nature of reality made Tirumaḷicaiyālvār realize the truth about Godhead. The *Tiruppalli Eḷucci* of Toṇṭaraṭip-poṭiyālvār is a fine pastoral poem which is intended to awaken the Lord

in the early hours of the morning. The other work is *Tirumālai* (Sacred Garland) which name was given to it on an analogy to his service of rearing a flower garden and wreathing the flowers into garlands for the Lord which was considered great by him. In these verses he advises people to utter the name of God by citing his own painful experiences with women. Kulacēkarālvār's passionate longing to worship the Sleeping Beauty at Śrī Raṅgam, his keen desire in having the company of the *bhāgavatas* while worshipping the deity, his intense longing to be reborn in Tirumalai hills in any capacity, his representing of his absolute dependence of God for protection and the apt analogies to illustrate this aspect show the intense devotion of the Ālvār. His depiction of the love which the cowherdesses had for Kṛṣṇa his depiction of motherly feeling in the person of Devaki and the fatherly affection in the person of Daśaratha are marked by their naturalness and direct appeal to our feeling. Tiruppānālvār's *Amalanātipirāṇ* is unique for its intense religious feeling and gives a very graphic description of the Lord at Śrī Raṅgam

Tirumaṅkaiyālvār is the only Ālvār who successfully tried his hand at various forms of compositions in wide varieties of metres. His two *Matals* are a unique contribution to the *Akam* poetry and to the history of bridal mysticism. Among other Ālvārs he has shown greater attention to the description of Nature. Many folk-song motifs are successfully handled by this saint. The cardinal tenets of the Viṣiṣṭādvaita system find their support in the poems of this Ālvār. Periyālvār is noted for his

maṅgalāsāsanam to the Lord by wishing well of God and praying for His well-being. He is also marked for his depiction of Kṛṣṇa's childhood in a variety of situations so beautifully as to lead the scholars think that he is the founder of Piḷḷai-t-tamiḷ type of literature. Āṅṅāl's two poems *Tiruppāvai* and *Nācciyār Tirumoli* are, from the point of view of bridal mysticism, inspired lyrical rhapsodies which are the quintessence of mystic love poured out spontaneously with unpremeditated but self-concealed art. The first teaches people of their utter dependence upon God and of the need to serve Him. The Vaiṣṇavite tradition has attached great significance to *Tirupallāṅṅu* of Periyālvār and to the *Tiruppāvai* of Āṅṅāl in the daily worship both in the houses and in the temples and in fact both these saints, father and daughter, have come to occupy supreme position in the recitation of the *Nālāyiram*. The decad "*vāraṅamāyiram*" of the *Nācciyār Tirumoli* is now recited on the occasion of the marriage in the Vaiṣṇavite families.

Maturakaviyālvār's *Kaṅṅinun Ciṅuttāmpu* which is to be sung before the recitation of *Tiruvāymoli* is undertaken because of his sincere devotion to his preceptor Nammālvār. Amutaṅār's *Rāmānuca-nūṅṅantāti* is another poem praising the greatness of the preceptor Rāmānuja by his pupil. It is said that the teachings of Nammālvār were ever in the mind of Rāmānuja and guided him in writing his philosophical works. Throughout this chapter it has been stressed that the Ālvārs are mainly instrumental for the popularisation of the *arcā* form of worship.

Whenever the worldly attractions were irresistible the Āḷvārs prayed to God for saving them from getting entrapped by the senses. Occasionally they offer a bit of advice also to humanity. Nammāḷvār starts singing for the redemption of his fellowmen. This feeling is more pronounced in his *Tiruvāymoḷi*. In several places he draws God's attention to the world. It has been shown that they are not preceptors to reform the world and enforce ethical code on people. It has been shown that the Āḷvārs are the band of mystic people who came in the line of *Vedic* tradition. Nammāḷvār is spoken of as "*vētam tamil ceyta māraṇ*" (māraṇ who rendered the *Veda* into Tamil). To many of the *Ācāryas* after Nāthamuni, *Nālāyiram* became reputed as *Tamil Vedas* and *Tiruvāymoḷi* as the *Upaniṣad*. Just as the *Vedas* became the supreme authority as a source book of knowledge about ultimate truths, so also these matters which have attained popularity through the *Nālāyiram* justify the compositions of the Āḷvārs to get the appellation *Vedas* and the *Nālāyiram* can be termed as *Drāvida Veda*.

CHAPTER XIII

THE GENERAL APPROACH OF THE ĀḶVĀRS

The vast Sanskrit literature represented by the *Āgamas*, *Purāṇas* and epics and the ancient classical Tamil literature provided the ĀḶvārs with sufficient data about the theistic aspects of philosophy and religion. Much material was then available to them to develop the already existent concepts of Vaiṣṇavism into a fully developed form of Vaiṣṇavite theism though not as a system of thought.

The significant imports which are conveyed by the names Viṣṇu, Vāsudeva and Nārāyaṇa are meant to be denoted by the name Nārāyaṇa itself which the ĀḶvārs use frequently to refer to the Supreme Being.¹ The *Paurāṇic* representation of Viṣṇu as one of the *Tirimūrttis* and as having more power and individuality over the other two and being quite independent of them also is retained by the ĀḶvārs. The earth which was lifted by the Lord in His descent as Varāha, gained an eminent position in the *Purāṇas* by getting married to Him,² but it is in these compositions of the ĀḶvārs that she (*Bhū*) gets the status of becoming His consort along with Lakṣmī.³ The influence of the Tamil versions of the Bhāgavata story added Nappinnai as one more consort to the Lord.⁴ The divine form with its dark complexion, together with the distinguishing marks such as conch, discus and others, is repeatedly mentioned by the ĀḶvārs to demonstrate the easy accessibility, approachability and identification of the Lord. Another trait of His that finds reference in the *Nālāyiram* is

1. Periyāḷ. Tm. 4.6; Peri. Tm. 1.1; Nāṅ. Tv. 1; T.V.M. 1.2: 10.

2. cf. *Śrī Gunaratnakāśa*, 26.

3. Peri. Tm. 4.5: 5; M.Tv. 42; Tc. V. 72; T.V.M. 8.1: 1.

4. T.V.R. 3; T.V.M. 1.9: 4; Peri. Tm. 2.3: 5.

His plentitude which is never affected by His acts of creation. The Ālvārs conveniently chose the word 'nampi' which they used to refer to this aspect of Nārāyaṇa.⁵ He is the Lord of the two regions (*vibhūti*) of prosperity one representing the material world and the other to be reached by His devotees.⁶ For the first time in the Vaiṣṇavite literature the concept of God having the world as His body⁷ is evolved in these compositions not as a fundamental doctrine but as an experienced fact that requires no proof and therefore to be admitted without any reservation.

That the Lord is also addressed by the twelve names beginning with Keśava and ending with Dāmodara, sometimes brings out the full implications of addressing God with such names.⁸

That the Lord is beyond the reach of the *Vedas*⁹ but is to be known from the *Vedas* is repeatedly mentioned¹⁰ thus showing that these compositions deserve a place in the Vaiṣṇavite religion as they owe much to the *Vedic* sources.

The Ālvārs were not much interested in enumerating the Lord's attributes but confined themselves to mention by way of illustrations, His easy accessibility and above all His mercy for the suffering selves. They are equally drawn towards the Lord by the parental affection (*vātsalya*) which He displays now and then. It is but natural that on account of this quality that the Ālvārs should approach the Lord for guidance and protection, as they would their fathers. The various exploits which He displayed through His divine descents are sufficient proofs for His readiness to relieve His men of their

5. Periyāḷ. Tm. 1.9: 4; 2.3: 1; T.V.M. 1.10: 8.

6. M.Tv. 68.

7. T.V.M. 1.1: 7; 8 5: 10; Peri. Tm. 7.10: 9.

8. Periyāḷ. Tm. 2.3; T.V.M. 2.7.

9. Peri. Tm. 4.1: 6; 4.8: 7.

10. *ibid.* 7.1: 2; M.Tv. 33.

sufferings. Their wonder is explicitly uttered through their poems not necessarily for the extraordinary powers which He exhibited but chiefly for His feeling of compassion which prompted Him to take such forms which His men would have desired to visualize. It is therefore that among the five forms which the Lord takes, the *vibhava* and *arcā* forms had more attraction for these saints. In this connection it must be noted that the approach of worship by the Ālvārs to these forms was a synthetic one comprising all the five.¹¹

Certain incidents which are not too well-known but traceable to the *Purāṇas* are mentioned for purposes of illustrations, but a few among them could not have their sources determined. Killing the seven bulls, breaking the *kurunta* tree, *Kuṭakkūttu* and others which are all mentioned in the ancient Tamil literature find frequent references in these Tamil poems of the saints.¹²

Above all this, the Ālvārs were actuated by a deep attraction towards the Lord, which led to the outpourings of their heart in the mellifluous Tamil verses. Besides the deep yearning to be by the side of the Lord, mystic experience also characterises their love for Him. Love however is not of a uniform nature. The affection which a mother would bestow on the child and the mother's interest in attending to the child's bedecking and fondling are gloriously and deftly displayed by Periyālvār.¹³ How the Lord's absence is keenly felt is represented in the disguised form of the lamentations of Devaki,¹⁴ Kauśalyā, and Daśaratha.¹⁵ However, the chief mode of display of their love takes the shape of the bride's love for her lover who is no other than the Lord Himself.

Love of the Ālvārs which is not different from devotion

11. M.Tv. 99; I.Tv. 28; Mū.Tv. 30; Nāṅ. Tv. 36; T.V.M. 6.9: 5.

12. Vide Appendix III.

13. Periyā]. Tm. 1.3; 2.4; 2.7.

14. Perum. Tm. 7.

15. *ibid.* 9.

shows their relation with Him. Awe and mystery marked their love with the result that they sang His praise and spoke in favour of worshipping Him and His men. Even there, true to the traditions of theistic religions, the Ālvārs chose to worship His feet, long for keeping them on their heads thus revealing the feet that they would rather prefer to be His servants than have His companionship which He would of course not withhold from them.

What is of great astonishment and interest is the Ālvār's great absorption in the *arcā* forms of God. Firstly, the deep impressions of theistic tendencies are aroused in them at the sight of these forms. Secondly, these saints are made to call the exploits of the Lord through His other forms which are associated with the person of the *arcā* forms. Thirdly and lastly, the aesthetic beauty of the idols noted for their architectural perfection evokes in the minds of the Ālvārs feelings of varied nature. Apart from the transcendental heights of the Lord which the saints are conscious of, the fascinating perfection of the beautiful idols draws them close to the deity and make them pay soul-stirring praises which they are capable of giving expression to. The masculine features which arouse in the minds of not only men but also women by reason of their expressiveness of indomitable courage and martial spirit, attract these pious souls and remind them too often of the heroic deeds of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa. At the same time, these features are uniquely mingled with those of bewitching handsomeness which captivate the soul enrapture it as it would the mind of a woman. Naturally, these Ālvārs pour forth their hearts in musical melodies filled with passionate lyrical touches in the background of devotional elements of very pure and perfect order.

The references to three *mantras* show beyond the shadow of doubt that they had before their periods the concepts of these but which, on account of their writings, became the crux of the post-Ālvār Vaiṣṇavism and indispensable to the doctrine of self-surrender.¹⁶

Much as they were alive to the limitations of men in bondage and the sufferings of being mortals, they revealed through their compositions how much of worldly sufferings they knew. They were not, in the real sense, affected by the sufferings of the world but they did not choose to remain passive witnesses of human suffering. In a variety of ways, they offered solutions to end the sufferings.¹⁷

Having relished the sweet experience of communion with God, they could not remain content with the enjoyment of love. They realised that they had to face the limits imposed on them for these enjoyments by the mortal frames. With a view to have uninterrupted enjoyment of God's proximity they hankered for a life beyond death when there would be no imperfect frame nor the spatial or temporal limitations.