

CHAPTER XIV

THE GODHEAD

To the Āḷvārs, the existence of the Supreme Deity is an admitted fact and as such there was no need for them to make any attempt to prove His existence. The gross bodies that are seen in the world are only manifestations of God. Though they are not generally apprehended as such, they are to be taken as representing His existence in a subtle form and therefore as lying beyond comprehension. He is likely to be referred to as not existing but in reality He is existing.¹ The epics and the *Purāṇas* declare the identity between the Upaniṣadic concept of the Supreme as Brahman and the theological one as a Personal Deity.² Nammāḷvār recognizes this and refers to Him in the opening verse of the *Tiruvāymoḷi* as 'avaṅ' a word in the masculine gender. This word which is a personal pronoun suggests that the Supreme Person is well-known and becomes readily understood when this word is used. The name of the deity is not mentioned here in the first decad which is devoted to the treatment of the nature of the Supreme Being.

In the next decad the Āḷvār identifies this person with Nārāyaṇa.³ Elsewhere he refers to Him as 'Māyaṅ'.⁴ The word 'nārāyaṇa' has much significance here. The word 'nāra' means the things relating to men and those that are created. The Supreme Person is the resting place (*ayana*) of all that is created.⁵ Again the Vedic deities, as we know, are more than

-
1. T.V.M. 1.1: 9.
 2. M.Bh. Anugītā 186: 9, 10; V.P. 6.5: 76.
 3. T.V.M. 1.2: 10; cf. *ibid.* 1.3: 3.
 4. T.V.C. 7.
 5. cf. M.Bh. Anusāsaṇa 186: 7.

one and it is necessary to ascertain which among these is supreme as the substratum of others. After the manner of the *Purāṇas*, the Ālvārs recognise the concept of Tirimūrtti, that is Brahmā as the creator, Viṣṇu the protector and Rudra the destroyer of the Universe.⁶ Nārāyaṇa is identified with Tirimūrtti.⁷ He created Brahmā from whom Śiva sprang.⁸ While Brahmā and Śiva do the work of creation and destruction of the Universe respectively at the instance of Nārāyaṇa, the task of protecting the created was undertaken by Nārāyaṇa Himself.⁹ This declares Nārāyaṇa's supremacy over the other two deities. The other deities as Indra, Varuṇa, Sūrya and others who came to occupy a relatively subordinate position in the epics and the *Purāṇas* became verily reduced to a still inferior position of utter dependence on Nārāyaṇa, who likewise came to be treated by Nammālvār as the foremost among all deities.¹⁰ Nārāyaṇa is equal only to Himself and there is no deity equal or superior to Him.¹¹ Again the Ālvārs, continuing the traditional teachings of the ancient seers, have spoken of these differences between the Lord of all on one side and Brahmā, Rudra and other deities on the other. "The gods are the only food eaten by Bhagavān and vomited afterwards (eaten during *pralaya* and vomited during creation); are there any (gods) who are not the nature of this vomit?"¹² Nammālvār says: "Arjuna saw on Śiva's head, the flowers of the garland that he had placed at the feet of the holy Bhagavān which had measured the whole world, and understood clearly that Śrīkṛṣṇa was the Supreme Deity wearing a garland of green tuḷaci."¹³ In another context he

6. T.V.M. 1.1: 8; 1.3: 3; 2.8: 3; 8.4: 9.

7. *ibid.* 3.6: 1, 2; 7.6: 3, 4; 8.4: 6, 10; 8.8: 4; Peri. Tm. 6.6: 6.

8. Tc. V. 5; Nāṇ. Tv. 1; TVLK. 1. 1; T.V.M. 10. 10: 3. cf. Var. P. 90: 3.

9. Nāṇ. Tv. 87; cf. Rām. Uttara. 101: 26.

10. Periyāḷ. Tm. 4.10: 7; Peri. Tm. 6.1: 9; Tc. V. 48; T.V.C. 3; M.T. 15; cf. M.Bh. Bhīṣma 67: 2.

11. T.V.M. 2.3: 2; 4.5: 7. cf. M.Bh. Bhīṣma 67: 2.

12. Peri. Tm. 11.6: 2.

13. T.V.M. 2.8: 6.

addresses the Lord as: "O Thou art the original bulb of the lotus of the navel, from which arose Brahmā, Śiva, Indra and others who worship Thee with reverence".¹⁴ The contrast between Nārāyaṇa and Rudra is vividly drawn in respect of their positions. While Viṣṇu has Garuḍa as the vehicle, Śiva's vehicle is the bull. The *Vedas* speak of the glory of the former while the *Śaiva Āgamas* alone speak of the greatness of the latter. The milky ocean is the resting place for the former, whereas the latter's place is the mount Kailāsa. Kindliness characterizes the former who is the protector of the world while ferocity is the mark of the latter who is the destroyer. The discus is the weapon of Viṣṇu whose complexion reminds us of the water-laden cloud whereas Śiva who is fierce like fire has trident as the weapon.¹⁵

Viṣṇu's omnipresent form presents every thing in the world to one who can visualise Him. In particular, the Ālvārs mention the presence of Śiva in the person of Viṣṇu. "On the right side of the Lord, Rudra takes his place; Brahmā and the worlds created by him abide in His navel."¹⁶ In the compositions of the Ālvārs there is thus frequent reference to Śiva in particular, intending to show that Rudra held in highest veneration by the Śaivites, is not the Supreme Person but subordinated to Viṣṇu and Brahmā also. His position is not totally eclipsed by Nārāyaṇa's eminence as it is the case with other deities. The Ālvārs could note his pre-eminent position in the body of Nārāyaṇa. Pārvati is stated to have conveyed to her consort Śiva about Nārāyaṇa's greatness¹⁷ which it is said, was given to people by Śiva by way of secret instructions.¹⁸ The Ālvārs therefore describe the gods as attending upon Nārāyaṇa. "The one with crescent moon and matted hair on his head, the four-faced god, and Indra know Thee to be Supreme and worship Thee."¹⁹ "My Lord is He

14. *ibid.* 10.10: 3.

15. *M.Tv.* 5.

16. *T.V.M.* 1.3: 9. cf. 2.5: 2; 4.8: 1, 10; 7.6: 7; 10.4: 6 *Peri. Tm.* 2.6: 9; 3.4: 9; 6.1: 3; 7.10: 3, 7; 9.6: 1; *M.Tv.* 28, 98; *Mu. Tv.* 31.

17. *Nāṅ. Tv.* 78.

18. *ibid.* 17; cf. *Bhāg. P.* 4.24: 27-31.

19. *T.V.M.* 3.1: 10; cf. *Peri. Tm.* 4.1: 4; *M.Tv.* 52.

Who swallows (for saving at the time of involution) all sentient beings including Rudra and Brahmā."²⁰ "Indra who rules over the gods, Brahmā the god with four faces, and the great Śiva with matted locks of hair—all these meditate with earnestness and sincerity on His lotus feet and go about praising Him."²¹ "It is well known through the story of Kapāla *mokṣa* that Nārāyaṇa is the Supreme deity to the renounced god Rudra, and his father Brahmā and other gods."²² "The unique cloud-complexioned God who, with *Mokṣa*, *Svarga*, and Hell as uppermost limits and with the celestials in the middle, and as the three-fold cause, extends everywhere."²³ "The dancing God who has His temple at Vaikunṭha is worshipped by all the templed gods."²⁴ "The supreme Lord blesses Śiva and Brahmā who find Him beyond their reach and worship Him longing for His grace."²⁵ "The Lord at Tirumāliruñcōlai is the One Who is celebrated by the three-eyed god, Brahmā the source of knowledge, the Devas and their king, and the ṛṣis who can dispel ignorance"²⁶; and "He in the form of Varāha, that lifted the whole universe is God as much of the Celestials and Eternals as of the terrestrials"²⁷; and further "He who is the embodiment of individuality, He who stands no comparison with other and He amidst others is an individual by Himself."²⁸ "All the deities, Rudras, Ādityas, Sages, Māruts, Yakṣas, Gandharvas, Vidyādharas, Indra and others throng at His gate and patiently await to behold Him in the early hours of the morning."²⁹

20. *ibid.* 3.10: 9.

21. *ibid.* 2.2: 10; cf. *ibid.* 3.6: 4.

22. *ibid.* 4.10: 4.

23. *ibid.* 2.8: 10.

24. *ibid.* 8.6: 5.

25. *ibid.* 10.7: 6; cf. P. Tv. 71; M. Tv. 74; and M. Bh. Śānti 361: 14, 15.

26. *ibid.* 10.7: 7.

27. T.V.R. 99.

28. P.Tv. 24.

29. T.E. 6, 7, 8, 9.

In spite of holding a position far higher than that of the mortals, the gods are no better than men in their inability to comprehend the real nature and greatness of Nārāyaṇa.³⁰ Periyālvār says: "O Lord Whose glory cannot be adequately understood even by him who rides on the unique bull and by the four-faced god"³¹; and again "Neither the god who has the bull emblem for his banner (Śiva), nor Brahmā, nor Indra, nor any other knows the remedy for the disease called 'birth' (*samsāra*)"³². "Who can know of the glory of the Lord" says Tirumaḷicaiyālvār, "who swallowed the universe and brought it into being? Even the blue-throated god and the eight-eyed Brahmā cannot understand it."³³ Poykaiyālvār says: "One can prattle something which may result in the names of the Lord being uttered; but who can comprehend Him? Even Brahmā who abides permanently in the lotus bulb of His navel cannot see His lotus feet";³⁴ and again, "who can comprehend Thy glory even if one takes to research for all the time? Who can understand Thy auspicious Form? Or who else can know at least the ocean of milk on which You repose?"³⁵ None is equal to the Lord.³⁶

The concept of Godhead as conceived by the Ālvārs was not narrowed down, or restricted thus in its applicability to Nārāyaṇa alone but was all-encompassing in its aspect. The Paurāṇikas dwell at length on the heno-theistic aspect of various deities. The worship of the phallus is enjoined in some *Purānas*. The Jains and Buddhists uphold their own concept of the deity. All these dispute zealously with those whose concepts of the deity are opposed to theirs. The truth about all these concepts is that Nārāyaṇa alone presents

30. Peri. Tm. 7.6: 6; Nāṇ. Tv. 2, 10; cf. M.Bh. Śānti. 210: 33.

31. Periyā]. Tm. 4.10: 4.

32. *ibid.* 5.3: 6.

33. Nāṇ. Tv. 73.

34. M. Tv. 56.

35. *ibid.* 68.

36. Nāṇ. Tv. 56.

Himself with all these features.³⁷ Nammālvār is not advocating polytheism here but monotheism which is catholic in its comprehension. Exclusive and not preferential worship would inevitably lead to this conclusion. The other deities have their role to play but have their subservience to Nārāyaṇa. In a way, this attitude is akin to and not identical with the one which, it is held, was stated by the great Nyāya exponent Udayanācārya in the Eleventh century A.D. Hari, another name for Viṣṇu, is described to have been worshipped by the followers of the different schools of thought under different names.³⁸ Of similar strain is the famous *bhajana* song of Mahātma Gāndhi.³⁹

The one chief aspect of God head in the school of Vaiṣṇavism as taught in the ancient works like *Viṣṇupurāna* and Ālvārs' compositions is that the personal deity who is no other than Brahman is Nārāyaṇa with Śrī. The *Nālayiram* came into being under the aegis of the Divine Couple, Nārāyaṇa and Śrī who were the prompters of the *Prabandhas* and the verses of the First three Ālvārs were sung and had their premiere (*arāṅkēṇṇam*) in Their presence. Poykaiyālvār says: "Thou the protector of the cowherds for the torrents of rain caused by Indra, and the Goddess Lakṣmī".⁴⁰ The god-intoxicated Peyālvār who was blessed with a direct vision of the luminous form of the Lord and Śrī exclaimed: "I have seen Lakṣmī. I have seen a golden-coloured beautiful figure (body). I have seen the lovely effulgence of the rising sun. I have seen the bright discus and conch in the hands. All these I see today in my ocean-hued Lord."⁴¹ Nammālvār

37. T.V.M. 4.10: 5.

38. This utterance has only the validity of hear-say, as it is not recorded in any work of this writer. "The Śaivas worship Him as Siva; the Vedāntins as Brahman; the Buddhists as Buddha, the Naiyayikas as Karta (creator); the Jains as Arhat; and Mīmāṃsakas as karma" (Vide: *Outlines of Hinduism*, p. 199).

39. "Sīta Rāma is the purifier of those who have fallen down. Jesus (Īśvar) and Allāh are His names. O, Lord give wisdom to all."

40. M.Tv. 86.

41. Mu. Tv. 1.

refers to the Divine Couple in his poem: "Thou art ever with Lakṣmī adorned with shining bracelets".⁴² "Am I still to remain in *samsāra* without enjoying You in the company of Lakṣmī?"⁴³ "Thy grace and the grace of the lotus-born Goddess - with these I will sweep the floor of Thy temple".⁴⁴ "Thou and the lotus-born spouse should be pleased to accept the service of three worlds."⁴⁵ Thus the Lord is referred to as ever associated with Śrī,⁴⁶ and as the consort of Śrī.⁴⁷ He is addressed as 'Mātava' meaning consort of Śrī, as He had kept in His chest⁴⁸ the accomplished woman, whose looks resemble those of the deer. Tirumaḷicaiyālvār makes an emphatic declaration that those deities who have no relationship to Śrī are no deities at all.⁴⁹ Nārāyaṇa and Śrī are ever united together.⁵⁰

The descent of the Lord as Varāha gave importance to the earth which came to be designated as Bhūdevi, married to Viṣṇu. Thus arose a place for Bhūdevi along with Viṣṇu. Nappinnai, the gopī in the gokulam, married Kṛṣṇa. Thus the Lord is frequently referred to as having Bhūdevi and Śrīdevi,⁵¹ and at times also Nappinnai.⁵² Śrīdevi and Bhūdevi are said to be shampooing the feet of the Lord when He is having the *yoganidra*.⁵³

42. T.V.M. 4.9: 10.

43. *ibid.* 6.9: 3.

44. *ibid.* 9.2: 1.

45. *ibid.* 9.2: 3.

46. *ibid.* 1.3: 8; 6.10: 10.

47. *ibid.* 1.9: 1.

48. *cf.* P.R.P. 1. 11. 3, 9.

49. Nāṅ. Tv. 53; *cf.* *ibid.* 62.

50. V.P. 1.8: 17, 35.

51. Peri. Tm. 4.5: 5; 7.8: 1; 8.7: 9; M.Tv. 42; Tc.V. 72.

52. T.V.R. 3, 21; T.V.M. 1.9: 4; 8.1: 1. Peri. Tm. 2.3: 5; 3.3: 9; 3.10: 1.

53. T.V.L.K. 11. 26 to 28.

There are certain characteristics which have a special and particular applicability to Nārāyaṇa alone and to which the Ālvārs make frequent references. The Lord is of the complexion of the cloud, has four arms adorned with conch, discus, mace, sword and bow.⁵⁴ The sword is called Nandaka and the bow Sārṅga. The garland made of tuḷaci is worn by Him alone and not by any other deity. The Ālvārs wax eloquent over the Lord's having this garland.⁵⁵ Garuḍa is His vehicle and also the emblem in His banner and not of any other deity.⁵⁶ He reclines on a bed of Ādiśeṣa.⁵⁷ The precious stone called *kaustubha* adorns His chest⁵⁸ which has a mole called *Śrīvatsa*⁵⁹. He wears a cloth golden in colour.⁶⁰

Thus the Supreme Person is, according to the Ālvārs, Nārāyaṇa with Śrīdevi, Bhūdevi and Nappinnai as His consorts. He is reckoned as one with Tirimūrtti and is also beyond the comprehension of Brahmā, Śiva, Indra and other deities who are all subordinated to Him and who perform the duties of creation, destruction and other functions in accordance with the lines laid down by Him and are therefore indebted to Him who possess peculiar marks which single Him out in the group of His hosts.

-
54. T.V.M. 8.8: 1. cf. *ibid.* 2.5: 1; M.Tv. 28, Mu. Tv. 21, 100; P.R.P. 2.11. 36 to 40.
55. *ibid.* 1.5: 7; 1.8: 1, Mu. Tv. 50; Nāṅ.Tv. 11. PRP. 13. 1.60.
56. *ibid.* 1.6: 10; 1.8: 1; 5.7: 3; M.Tv. 17, 22; 1.Tv. 92, 96; Mu. Tv. 7. cf. C.L.P. 2.17: 28, P.R.P. 3.1:60.
57. *ibid.* 6.6: 7; 10. 2: 8; M.Tv. 53, 1.Tv. 15; Mu. Tv. 80; cf. C.L.P. 1.11: 1.2.
58. Mu. Tv. 87. cf. P.R.P. 1.1.9.
59. T.V.M. 10.3: 5.
60. T.V.R. 1.1.1; A.P. 2.3; cf. C.L.P. 2. 11; p.50; P.R.P. 1.11. 10, 56; 3.1. 88; 13.11.1, 2.