

CHAPTER IXX

NATURE MYSTICISM

Every experience is a matter of subject-object relationship in which the subject is usually generalized as the spirit or soul while the object is spoken of as Nature or Universe or more generally as *Prakṛti*. The basis of soul and Nature is God or the absolute which is described under various names such as Brahman, Nārāyaṇa, Śiva and so on in the various systems of philosophy. Mysticism is the way in which man experiences union with God and attains immortal bliss. It is a philosophy of religion as it is both a view and way of life. It describes the spiritual quest of man for God and justifies this spiritual experience by a philosophy or theoretical explanation. It is a personal spiritual approach to God as the God of love. In spite of differences due to environment, endowment, organisation and other factors the mystics of all lands experience God in and through Nature. They postulate what they call the self-evident truth that mystic experience is knowable. They maintain that the gulf between the sensible and the super-sensible can be bridged. To them what is here is 'yonder' and what is 'yonder' is here. The two are alike and the like can know the like. God is a Supreme Reality that is realisable according to them.

Though the philosophy of nature or *prakṛti* is not so important as that of the spirit or *ātman* it furnishes a corrective to the subjective tendencies of mysticism as a personal intuitive experience. It is a matter of common knowledge that science studies in a disinterested way a particular province of reality and has a piecemeal view thereof. But philosophy reflects on nature as a connected whole; and, as the cosmology of religion, it enquires into the nature of God as the ground of all beings. Nature is the world of space-time-cause and it is governed by the law of uniformity and unity. God

is in nature, but is not nature. Nature is external to the finite self, but not to God. Nature and the self are eternal but neither is derived from the other nor created by it. Though they are eternally distinct, they are not external to God who is their ground and mystic goal.

Creation is the self-limitation of God in the interests of soul-making. Nature 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. The flowery garment of the world as revealed in the shining sun and the moon, the fragrance of the lotus and lily and the sweet song of the cuckoo and the koel is for some mystics a medium of ineffable perception, a source of exalted joy, the veritable clothing of God. It serves as a fine medium for the self to reach out to the Absolute. The mysterious vitality of trees, the silent magic of the forest, the strange and steady cycle of its life, possess in a peculiar degree this power of unleashing the human soul. Unsullied by the corroding touch of consciousness, that life can make a contact with the "great life of the All", and through its mighty rhythms man can receive a message concerning the true and timeless world of "all that is, and was, and evermore shall be". The poet, the artist and the mystic gifted with 'the vision and the faculty divine' intuit their spiritual kinship with the soul of Nature and are lost in blissful communion with its glowing beauty and rhythm.

According to Nammālvār, God is the subject and the object: "He is my Lord, the Lord of Vaikuṇṭha, the Master of the Eternals, who as the sole, independent Form constituted the Primordial Seed, created by the mere wish Brahmā, Siva, Indra and other deities, the great seers, the sentient beings, men and animals, and non-sentient beings, and created the great mystic ocean (sea of Āvaraṇa) and is asleep on it";¹ Tirumānkaiyālvār's perception of nature itself as God is something grand: "Clothed with the garment of the waters

1. T.V.M. 1.5: 4.

of the ocean, with the wide earth for His feet, with the wide expanse of the space for His body, the eight fair directions for His shoulders, and the zenith of the macrocosm (*aṇḍam*) for His crown, He stands".² The Lord is gloriously depicted by Nammālvār as a hill of emerald, wearing the ruddy huge cloud and bearing on the head the red brilliant-rayed sun. The cool-rayed moon is His ornament adorning the neck called significantly as '*candrahāra*'. The multitude of twinkling stars are His lustrous ornaments. The yellow garment, crest-gem and the *candrahāra* are thus represented by these three presentations of Nature. The Lord is imagined by the Ālvār to be lying on the arm of the God of the sea.³ The vision of the mystic poets is more or less akin to that of Arjuna who beheld the Universal Form of the Lord with the aid of the supernatural eye bestowed by Him.⁴ These mystics necessarily have recourse to metaphors, allegories and parables when they begin to express and explain their inexpressible experience and naturally their language becomes poetic. The saints of *Nalāyiram* have had such experiences which have found expression in their exquisite poetry.

God is held to be the inner controller (*antaryāmin*) of the selves and of the inanimate world. This form which God takes is one of the five finitised forms. Though this is to be admitted, it is not so easy, as it appears to be, to prove it in the case of the inanimate world. He is to be shown to remain within the world whose another name is Nature and this becomes a possibility by recognising God's full pervasion of Nature. He is not only *beyond* Nature but is *in* Nature. The soul-essence is rooted or grounded in the super-essence of God and is sustained by His love. God is closer to us than our own breath and nearer than our hands and feet. God's centre is every where and circumference nowhere. He dwells in the stone below and the star above and is eternal in the

2. Peri. Tm. 6.6: 3; cf. M.Tv. 17, and the invocatory verses of *Narṇṇai*; again cf. Mū. Tv. 41. Here the Ālvār speaks of God having the lightning as his garment.

3. T V, C. 1.

4. Bh. G. 11: 5 to 8.

temporal. The Lord says: "Cleave the wood and there I am". The immortal Tamil poet Kampan says: "Know thou that the Lord is present alive in the smallest unit of length and in the hundredth part of an atom; in the great Méru mountain and in the pillar standing here, and in the words spoken by thee too".⁵ Prahlāda's intuition of the *Paramātmān* in the pillar⁶ and Yaśoda's cosmic vision of Kṛṣṇa⁷ are classic examples to illustrate divine immanence in inanimate as well as human nature. William Blake is only echoing the mystic notion of Boheme who speaks of our seeing a flower to whom the world is but a mirror of the Deity where the soul can hold a converse with Him therein and even, according to whom, a flower in the wall will reveal God in all His glory like the lilies and the starry heavens. Tennyson when he sees a flower experiences the same truth. He sees the unity of the universe in the flower.⁸

Similarly, Nature mysticism inspires the devotee who experiences and enjoys the beauty of God objectively in all things and at the end he realizes the mystery of this Absolute beauty remaining already enthroned in the heart as the Lord of Love. Tagore had a vision of the world bathed in the radiance of beauty which, according to him, looks Heaven and Earth when the song of the singer was not distinct from Him Who was *Rasa* itself in the drama of love and spiritual wedding.⁹ The immortal poet Kampan describes the unfailing rains, feeding the perennial river the Gaṅga made holy and sacred in the minds of the people by legends and literature. The rains and the floods remind him of the divine legends.

5. K.R. Yutta. *Iraniva*, 124.

6. T.V.M. 2.8: 9.

7. Periyāḷ. Tm. 2.3: 6.

8. "Flower in the crannied wall
I pluck you out the crannies
Hold you here, root and all in my hand
Little flower, but if I could understand
What you are, root and all and all in all,
I should know what God and man is"

9. Vide B G. Ray: *The Philosophy of Tagore*.

Like God, they take the form of many things, sometimes reminding us even of the prostitute. He does not leave us in doubt; for he tells us that, like God appearing in many forms according to the beliefs of various sects and religions, water takes many different forms of channels and reservoirs according to the shape men give it.¹⁰ Cosmic consciousness, as pointed out by Bucke, is the consciousness of the Cosmos in its entirety; but it is not a mere addition or summation of all things of the world. Cosmos is the eternal expression of the dynamic love of the Almighty while creation is the process of the Formless God revealing to us in varied forms.¹¹ The one becomes many out of love according to an *Upaniṣadic* statement. This is to help the soul thrown into space and time, as it were, to unveil itself and intuit its true divine nature, to kiss it away unto divinity. Before creation, *prakṛti* was in a latent state; but in creation the latent becomes the patent and *manas*, *prāṇa* and the elements gradually evolve from it. The self is different from *prakṛti* and is eternal. It is somehow associated with the body made of *prakṛti* which is subjected to the ills of mundane life. But it can release itself from the perishing body and attain immortality by the redemptive grace of the Saviour Who is the Soul of souls. The sense of separateness is dissolved when the soul feels ensouled by His grace and greeted by His Love. Then it realizes that spirituality has its meaning and value in Divinity and not in mere Nature Mysticism.

Higher mysticism is the communion between the self of the man and the In-dwelling Self, and Nature mysticism is a half-way house to it and not the goal or the final stopping place. Even the ancient Caṅkam poetry of the Tamils has in general no touch of divinity in it even though Nature comes

10. K.R. Pāla, 619.

11. cf. K.R. Cuntara. (invocatory verse).

there as the background and stage for the drama of human life, 'uri-p-poru' as it is called. The Caṅkam poetry abounds in description of Nature which colours the human life in many ways. For example, the droning noise of the sea appears like the mourning cry very much to the desperate heroine separated from her lover.¹² The sea seems to mourn in sympathy with her. Sometimes a jarring note is heard; an opposition or disregard is felt. The same heroine sometimes feels that the sea which goes on with its dance of waves remains cruelly unconcerned about her own sufferings.¹³ All these moods are too well known in any poetry to need emphasis. Description of Nature, as in any high poetry, stands as a symbol to reveal to us the inner meaning of the story, the ebb and flow of emotions, as seen by the poet in his vision. Nature plays another important role, especially in ancient Tamil poetry, as giving room for the free play of allegory (*uḷḷurai uvamam*) and suggestion (*iṟaicci*). There Nature helps the poets to wield their satirical remarks, biting or sweet, with hidden meaning to achieve the concentration and economy they aim at. Such descriptions of Nature are seen in the hymns of Āḷvārs who achieve their purpose by this aspect.

The universal love of Nammāḷvār and other Āḷvārs may be better understood by our realization of the wide scope of their poetic interest with vision of Beauty every where. A list of the *fauna* and *flora* of their poetry may help us here. One may note in their poetry various kinds of bamboos, the sugar-cane, various kinds of paddy and grains, the cocoanut, the arecanut, the palmyra and varieties of the plantains being often found mentioned. The sandal, the mango, the *veṅkal*, the *kōṅku*, the *punnai*, the *ñāḷal*, various kinds of jack tree, the *vākal*, the *nelli* (*āmlakam*), the *curapunnai*, the *kuravam*, the *acōku*, the *aloe*, and others are referred to. *Miḷaku* and *kaṟi* (pepper varieties), turmeric, are their favourites. Some of these are food like paddy; others like

12. K.L.T. 129.

13. *ibid.* 123.

sandal, *akli* etc., are famous for their fragrance; still others like the jack, the mango, the plantain etc., are noted for their fruits; a few others like the *vēṅkai*, the *kuravam* etc., for their flowers and fewer still like pepper for their spices.

The Āḷvār poets are generally fond of flowers. They refer to the blooming *kōṅku*, *vēṅkai*, *punnai*, *kuravu*, *makiḷ* (*vakulam*), *kuruntam*, *ceruntl*, *mallikai*, *mauvai*, and *mullai* (jasmine varieties), *mātavi*, *kurukkatti*, *ceṅpakam*, *piṭṭavam*, *karuviḷai*, *pūvai*, *iruvāṭci*, *pātiri*, *karumukai*, varieties of the sword flower (*tālai* and *kaltai*), *mantāram* (*pārijātam*) and *kuṭṭi*. The beautiful water flowers of all varieties and descriptions whose distinctions the later generations have forgotten occupy in the Āḷvārs the unique position of beauty – *kaḷunir*, *ceṅkaḷunir*, *kāvi*, *karuṅkuvaḷai*, *ceṅkuvaḷai*, *karunilam*, *nīlam*, *kumutam*, *all* (*āmpai*), *kamalam*, *aravintam*, *paṅkayam*, *muṅṅakam* and *tāmarai* (lotus varieties).

The floods of Kāviri, Maṅṅai and Gaṅga rush down carrying in their floods many precious things like fruits, fragrant wood, yak tails, (*veṅcāmarai*) elephant tusks, precious gems, pearls, coral and gold, conches and fish and thereby enriching the country. Triumaṅkaiyāḷvār mentions even the clothings of nymphs being carried by the waters of the Gaṅga.¹⁴

Mention is made of the birds of all varieties by these saints. The koel (cuckoo), the peacock, the dove, the parrot, the *anril*, the *cempōttu*, the *pūvai* (*nākaṇavāyp-puḷ*), and even the wild cock, the crow and the eagle are the favourite birds of the poet-saints. The water birds like *kuruku*, *nārai*, *kokku* and *annam* have beauty of their own and the saints refer to them in many contexts. The dancing of the peacock recording to the singing of the bees and the repetition of the *Vedas* and the God's name by the parrots is often mentioned.

14. Peri. Tm. 1.4: 4.

Among the insects the bee is the highly popular one with our saints. It is more attractive to them than the birds. Though the possession of six legs is the characteristic feature of all insects in general, that aspect (*aṟupatam*) is reserved for the bees by the poets of our country. The keen and loving eye of the poet distinguishes a variety of them: *vaṇṭu*, *curumpu*, *varivaṇṭu*, *tumpi* etc. The poets lose their heart in their hum and dance round the honey of the flowers; hence the general name 'matukaram' to them.

The monkeys (a variety of them viz., *kaṭuvan*, *manti*, *kuraṅku*), the loving couple of elephants, the dark buffalo, the varieties of deer (*pulvāy*, *kalai*, *marai*, *mān*) the yak, the boar varieties (*keḷal*, *ēnam*), the tiger, the lion, the *mācuṇam* (perhaps python), the wild dog, the must elephant, and the jackal, engage the attention of those poets and they occupy a happy place in their hymns. The mention of the *āḷi* by these poets is perhaps in the sense of a lion; for, otherwise, it is a mythological animal. Such descriptions as a female monkey requesting the male monkey sitting on a high peak in the Tirupati hills to pluck out the full moon from the sky and give it to her, and a male elephant offering prayer to the Lord add beauty to their verses.¹⁵

The poet-saints enjoy the glimpses of divine beauty in the moving, jumping and darting of the fish in the rushing floods and in the sleeping ponds. *Vāḷai*, *kayal*, *varāl*, *keṇṭai*, *cēl*, *āval*, *veḷ iravu* and *malaṅku* (serpent fish) are the favourite fish varieties mentioned in the hymns. The crab varieties (*nāṇṭu*, *nalli*, *alavan*), and the tortoise have all attracted the attention of the Āḷvārs along with the sacred conches *ippi*, *caṅku* and *vālampuri*.

But in the mysticism of the Āḷvārs and Nāyaṇmārs and other later Tamil poets like Kampan there is no boundary line between nature, human nature and God since they have a strong faith in the immanence of God in all things as well as in man and also His transcendence. Nature sets the stage for

15. Mū. Tv. 53, 70.

Man; he can rise from animal nature in the suitable environment. To the Indian mystic the universe appears animated by the vital impulses of God. To him the universe of *acit* and *cit* has its unity only in Brahman. It is the creative expression of the divine sports of love. The beauties of nature and the fair forms of human and celestial beings are but partial revelations of the unsurpassed beauty of God. The whole Cosmos appear in His *Rūpa* which Viśiṣṭādvaitins call *saṁtra* of God. The universe as form of God was revealed to Arjuna.¹⁶ The universe appears as the divine Light to Poykaiyāḷvār who says :

“Vaiyam takaḷiyā vārkaṭalē neyyāka
Veyya katirōṅ viḷakkāka”¹⁷

– ‘The world is the bowl; the sea is the ghee; the fierce-rayed sun is the luminous wick’.

It cannot be said that the objective world does exhaust Nature. Nature appearing as the objective world not only includes all that are seen external to us, but includes our body as well. Even this becomes sanctified as the temple of the Lord. People moving with their bodies on this earth also form part of this world and Nature. They are the walking temples, ‘*naṭamaṭum koyilkaḷ*’ as Tirumūliar calls them. “The heart-beat in the mystic is in tune with the heart-beat of the world owing to spiritual community and the immanence of God in each person. Like the germ-cell in the body, the soul is the epitome of the universe as an inter-related living whole”¹⁸ It is the microcosm of the Cosmos macrocosm. As in the macrocosm (*aṇdam*), so in the microcosm (*piṇdam*) the Universal Soul is reflected in the mirror of our individual soul. Nay, He is the ‘*antaryāmin*’ the inner Soul; and as such, He is the Reality of reality, the life of Life; the great

16. Bh. G. 11. The Tamil *Kantapurāṇam* gives a description of a similar form of Murukan appearing in the *Viśvarupa* before the *aśura* Cūrapaṇman.

17. M.Tv. 1.

18. *Mystics and Mysticism*, p. 57.

Light as the *Upaṅśads*¹⁹ put it from which the lesser lights get their illumination. The light of macrocosm is found, as it were, in that of microcosm. Devotion (*anpu*) is the lamp-bowl, aspiration (*ārvam* or *prēma*) or hankering after the Lord is the ghee (oil), the blissful heart is the wick and knowledge (*jñāna*) is the bright flame: this is the mystic vision of Pūtattālvār in which the Lord appears as the Inner Light.

“Anpē takḷiyā ārvamē neyyāka
Inpuruku cintai iṭutiriyā – naṅpuruki
Nānac cuṭarvilak kēṇṇinēn nārapaṅku
Nānat tamiḷ purinta nān”²⁰

These two lights, the outer and the inner, reveal the hidden Lord who is the soul in all things. So it appears that every soul is the temple of the Lord demanding its worship and service.

Nammālvār's mind is so filled with the experience of the beauty of God that He is reminded of Him whenever he beholds the dark clouds, big hills, the vast sea, pitch darkness and the flower called *pūvai* which are ever with the bees and any object dark in appearance.²¹ The saint's life which is thinly attached to the body and thus is ready to fly off from there owing to unbearable love for the Lord, becomes firm and the body too becomes stout, when he beholds *pūvai-pū*, *kāyām-pū*, *karuneytal-pū* and *ceṅkaḷunir-pū* which are all blue in colour.²² It is imagined that the clouds should have continuously put forth efforts, and swept over the vast sky, for they must have performed some kind of penance somewhere as otherwise their resemblance to the complexion of the Lord cannot be explained.²³ The Ālvār who entertained a fancy of this kind seems to address the clouds themselves. “O clouds! what processes (*yoga*) did you adopt to become

19. Muṅ Up. 2.2: 10; Kath. Up. 5: 15; Sv. Up. 6:14.

20. I.Tv. 1

21. P.Tv. 49; cf. M. Tv. 89.

22. *ibid.* 73; cf. T.V.M. 4.4: 4, 9; 8.5: 8; Nāc. Tm. 9: 4; Nān. Tv. 23.

23. *ibid.* 85.

similar to God in appearance? How did you obtain these processes? Could this be the penance you had performed by torturing your bodies through wanderings in the vast skies bearing the water for preserving the life of beings? Your getting this result of your penance must be due to the favour of God".²⁴ The beautiful water-laden cloud with a streak of lightning brings to the mind of Pēyāļvār the presence of the Lord with Śrī. The cloud does its work of giving protection from the sun's heat and rain by wandering through the sky thus bearing a likeness to the Lord who moves quickly from place to place to protect the suffering humanity. It thunders during the rainy season and resembles in this respect the Lord who blows His conch.²⁵

The Āļvār is reminded of God's complexion by the sight of the blue lilies. The lilies ought to be found in the forests but they did not choose to remain there. They entered into tanks and stood there motionless which is proof of the strength of their legs for performing penance there. Thus they acquired the complexion of the Lord.²⁶ The sea, which is blue in colour, is said to have acquired this complexion by having always close touch with the body of the Lord who lies there.²⁷ The blue sapphire when it is beheld, reminds us the complexion of the Lord. The sky at twilight shows the Lord who wears the garland of *tuļaci*.²⁸

The Lord's pervasion in the universe is such that the form of any object whatsoever presents to us only His form, since that object could not exist without Him. The form of Brahmā, the constellations, the blazing fire, the mountains, the eight directions, sun and moon are all the forms of the Lord.²⁹ His form is presented by the ever moving wind, the vast expanse of the space, the hard earth, the blazing fire,

24. T.V.R. 32.

25. MĪ. Tv. 86.

26. T.V.R. 38,

27. M.Tv. 19.

28. MĪ. Tv. 87.

29. *ibid.* 38.

the sun and the moon, men and other living beings inclusive of immobile non-sentient objects.³⁰ The Lord, who is of the nature of the self-luminous knowledge, pervades the universe through the full length, breadth, height and depth and is the very life of all Nature and of all the selves.³¹

Nature's exhilarating and exuberant charm is such that it more often arouses and inflames the sensuous appetite of the selves. The souls, which have taken up a physical body due to the effects of the past deeds become much impassioned by the impact of the alluring aspects of Nature under the most tempting circumstances.³² Nature which Yāmuna describes as *māya* and Rāmānuja as obscuring the nature of God, takes a powerful hold on such occasions on men with very rare exceptions. To this class of exceptions belong the religious minded persons, who, affected by intense delectability, find, beneath the sensuousness of such sights, visions of God who is the ultimate basis for such fascinating environments. The religious back-ground, which is furnished by the recitation of the *Vedas*, the performance of the ritualistic acts and such other functions, evokes the emotion of the Āḷvārs with the result that they wax eloquent over the attractive features of the shrine and the presiding deity there. Mystic experience which is the specific feature of the life of devotion of the Āḷvārs is better revealed in their ecstatic presentation of the temples situated in such surroundings.

The hymns of *Nālayiram* abound in the descriptions of Nature, its mountains, rivers and cities these Āḷvār saints visited. These places are held to be equally holy and divine as the temples where the Lord has chosen to be present as *arcā*. It is therefore tantamount to saying that the description of Nature is one way of describing the Lord Himself. Tirumaṅkaiyāḷvār describes the Himālayas as a place full of odori-

30. T.V.M. 3.6: 5; cf. *ibid.*, 8.1: 6, 7.

31. *ibid.* 1.5: 10; cf. Mū. Tv. 24.

32. cf. At the sight of the cloud, the mind of a person, though happy, becomes changed, that is, it entertains a longing (*Meghadūta* 1).

ferous groves where the dark clouds rumble and the heavy feathered peacocks climbing the steep slopes on their bellies dance on the peaks;³³ where roam the sharp-toothed lions which have their abode in the caves and which frighten even the huge mountain-like and majestic tuskers;³⁴ where in the shade of *venkai* trees on flowery beds the tusker sleeps with its consort; and as a great mountain with its slopes on which clouds enclose the *venkai* trees with thick growing pepper creepers entwining them, and with the adjoining hills haunted by striped, battle-ready tigers.³⁵ The Āḷvār refers to Cīṅka-vēḷkuṇṇam (Ahobīlam) where the tigers from their hiding in bamboo bushes watch the tracks of the roaming elephants.³⁶ In the Tirupati Hills, according to Pūtatāḷvār, a male elephant uproots a tender bamboo and thrusts it into a big honey-comb and offers it with sweet honey to its mate.³⁷ The same idea is repeated by Tirumaṅkaiyāḷvār too.³⁸ This Āḷvār shows Tirumāḷirūcōlai Hill to us as a place where, as the clouds having collected water from the deep sea ascend the sky rumbling, the lion, mistaking that sound for the trumpeting of the elephant, roars in reply.³⁹

The sacred Gaṅga in its course brings the clothes and garlands of *Apsara* women, and also precious stones;⁴⁰ the river, through its main force and with swift currents in its depths, breaks mountains and pushes along its course even huge tuskers.⁴¹ The holy Kāvīri also brings in its course the tusks of elephants killed by lions, white-teak trees (*akḷl*), excellent pearls, and the white locks of hair of mountain deer (*kavarī māṅ*) and other such precious mountain finds;⁴² the

33. Peri. Tm. 1.2: 1.

34. *ibid.* 1.2: 2.

35. *ibid.* 1.3: 7.

36. *ibid.* 1.7: 6.

37. I. Tv. 75.

38. Peri. Tm. 1.2: 5; cf. K.R. *Ayōtti-cittirakūṭa*. 10.

39. *ibid.* 9.8: 6.

40. *ibid.* 1.4: 4.

41. *ibid.* 1.4: 6.

42. *ibid.* 3.8: 3.

river in its swelling course carries many kinds of flowers and heaps of mangoes which drop into the river because of the falling of cocoanuts from tall well-grown trees;⁴³ it also gathers in its course the nine precious stones, the precious pearls in the bamboos and the locks of hair of mountain deer;⁴⁴ it collects and carries along white-teak logs, sandal wood logs, gold ingots and pearls;⁴⁵ it brings in its course gold ingots, pearls, claws of lions and tusks of elephants.⁴⁶

Nammālvār pleads for mercy from the deity at Tirumalai abounding in the blossomed lotuses shining like fire,⁴⁷ perhaps reminding us of the presence of Śrī. The clear and beautiful rills in that hill flow with gold dust, pearls and gems, which form part of the minerals imbedded in the dense hilly ranges.⁴⁸ This adds to the picturesque scenery of the hill which therefore attracts the devotees to the Lord. Pēyālvār offers a graphic description of the hill. The supreme Lord, the indweller, pervading in all the directions, revealing the *Vedas* whose purport He is, is present in the Tirumalai hills which by their loftiness appear to reach the region of the moon and where the waters in the flooded rills raise pleasant and rumbling sounds. That deity is present in the mind of the Ālvār.⁴⁹ The waters too perhaps sing in their wonted tone, the praise of the Lord who has created them.

The towns and cities are spoken of as being surrounded by the beautiful fields and groves. Tiruvallikkēni is a town where into the cool, thick groves, with fragrant *kurava* flowers and resounding with the sounds of cuckoos and peacocks, the sun's rays do not penetrate at all.⁵⁰ Tirukkōvalūr

43. *ibid.* 4.4: 3.

44. *ibid.* 5.1: 9; 5.4: 9; 5.7: 10.

45. *ibid.* 6.9: 5.

46. *ibid.* 6.9: 6.

47. T.V.M. 6.10: 2.

48. *ibid.* 6.10: 3.

49. MĪ. Tv. 39.

50. Peri. Tm. 2.3: 7.

is described as a place which is like the smithy of the goldsmith, with dark *neytal* flowers as charcoal, with *punnai* buds as pearls, the blossoms as gold, and with red lotuses as fire;⁵¹ as a place where the sweet sugar-cane grows to the music of swarms of honey bees in groves full of *kōngu* blossoms, *cura-punnai* and *kurava* trees;⁵² the town is surrounded by arecanut groves; the arecanut palms have buds resembling white pearls, the ripening ones becoming green emeralds and the ripened fruits reddening like corals.⁵³ In the groves near Tiruvakīntrapuram hears of monkeys romp about, eating jack fruits, on *vēnkai*, *kōṅku* and *ceṅpaka* trees full of golden flowers.⁵⁴ The women agricultural labourers at *Cikāḷi* take the *neytal* flowers for their eyes and *āmpal* flowers for their lips stand still refraining from weeding operations;⁵⁵ the town is surrounded by the fields where the *neytal* flowers resemble the eyes, the lotuses the faces and the *āmpal* flowers the collection of lips of beautiful women;⁵⁶ where in the groves the juice oozes out of jack fruits with the weight of which the branches are bent down, because of the fall of ripened arecanuts as a result of squirrels leaping about from branch to branch.⁵⁷ The description of Nānkūr is catching. Near that town the buffaloes keep wallowing in pools with mud on their horns after having eaten up well grown sugar-canes;⁵⁸ on the top of mansions abound pearls dropped from clouds pierced by spears planted on the building top;⁵⁹ beside the beautiful groves the sound of the musical instrument spread sky-high; the hum of the bees, the chant of *Vedas*, and the tinkling of the anklets of women combine into something like the roar of the floods at the time of Deluge;⁶⁰ the

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51. *ibid.* 2.10: 3.
 52. *ibid.* 2.10: 4.
 53. *ibid.* 2.10: 7.
 54. *ibid.* 3.1: 5.
 55. *ibid.* 3.4: 3.
 56. *ibid.* 3.4: 5. cf. Tēraḷuntūr hymn 7.5: 10.
 57. *ibid.* 3.4: 8.
 58. *ibid.* 3.8: 6.
 59. *ibid.* 3.9: 4.
 60. *ibid.* 3.10: 5.

peacocks dance to the hum of bees at the time of the rumbling of clouds overhanging the cool and vast groves;⁶¹ the young arecanut trees drop their pearl-like buds into crab-holes vacated by the crabs which with wide open mouths enter the lotus flowers on slushy ground;⁶² the gazelle-eyed, red-lipped damsels teach soft words to emerald-green parrots perching on their hands.⁶⁴ In the groves surrounding Puḷḷam-pūtaṅkuṭi the *curumpus* (species of wasps) drone on fragrant flowers, comely peacocks dance, and striped winged bees make music.⁶⁴ In Kūṭalūr the fish in water mistake the sword-flower (*tāḷam-pū*) on the shore for cranes and get frightened.⁶³ In the mango groves at Tiruveḷḷarai the cuckoos to counter the bitter tang of tender mango leaves pecked at by them drink the sweet juice of jack fruits.⁹⁶ The mansions at Tirukkaṅṅaṅkuṭi are surrounded by plantain fields heavily laden, arecanut trees growing tall, *kurava* trees, fine jack fruit trees, cool mango groves and *māṭavi* creepers;⁶⁷ in that place herds of peacocks roaming the woods stop to dance as thick clouds provide drum music with their rumbling, and as the bees in search of honey hum tunes.⁶⁸ The world is thus the beautiful garment of God to these mystic seers.

The Tirukkuṭantai hymn glorifies the deity at Kumbakonam and is stated to have fascinated Nāthamuni and aroused in him a burning zeal to unearth all the compositions, depicts Tirukkuṭanti (Kumbakonam) in an ideal setting with the prosperous rich paddy fields all around, assured of plenty of water supplied to them.⁶⁹ The lotuses grown there often remind us of the Lord's enchanting eyes.⁷⁰ The place

61. *ibid.* 4.2: 3.

62. *ibid.* 4.4: 1.

63. *ibid.* 4.4: 6. cf. 3.8: 8.

64. *ibid.* 5.1: 1.

65. *ibid.* 5.2: 9.

66. *ibid.* 5.3: 4.

67. *ibid.* 9.1: 6.

68. *ibid.* 9.1: 7; 1.10: 6; 2.3: 2; cf. P.Tv. 5, 70.

69. T.V.M. 5.8: 1.

70. *ibid.* 5.8: 2.

abounds in rich mansions where dwell persons supreme through their devotion to the Lord.⁷¹ It is no surprise, if the Āḷvār grows rapturous and addresses the deity as supreme through enchanting beauty and exclaims that he could not contain the insatiable beauty.⁷² He is the fascinating melodious music of the *viṣṭā*, nectar, fruit of the wisdom, the bold lion⁷³ and the hill of corals shooting up to the stellar region.⁷⁴ When He entered the mind of the Āḷvār, He was not visible as He was then formless but after entering, He possessed a divine form. Being an insatiable nectar, He is deliciously sweet not to the tongue which cannot taste it, but mystically relished from within.⁷⁵ Nammāḷvār's experience is the result of the surroundings which tempt the religious emotion to burst into rhapsody.

Nammāḷvār yearns with severe longing to reach the feet of the Lord of Tiruvallavāḷ where the shrine is situated amidst the groves rich in floral-juices and jasmine flowers.⁷⁶ Trees like *punnai*, *makil*, *mātavi*, arecanut and cocoanut palms, and plantain and others wafting gentle fragrance.⁷⁷ The lotuses which by their beauty remind the lustrous and enchanting faces of women, the sweet hum of the bees and gentle breeze lend charm to the surroundings providing an ideal and favourable mental attitude to drink deep the charm of the Lord.⁷⁸ The shrine at Tirukkāṭkarai fascinates him by its natural surroundings to such an extent that the Āḷvār feels the intense longing no longer bearable. The streets in this place are fragrant with blue lotuses (*kāvi*) and the mind of the Āḷvār loses its balance while it reflects on the beauty of the Lord in this shrine.⁷⁹ The tanks and

71. *ibid.* 5.8 : 3.

72. *ibid.* 5.8 : 5.

73. *ibid.* 5.8 : 6.

74. *ibid.* 5.8 : 9.

75. *ibid.* 5.8 : 10; cf. *ibid.* 6.10 : 3.

76. *ibid.* 5.9 : 1.

77. *ibid.* 5.9 : 2, 4.

78. *ibid.* 5.9 : 6, 7, 9.

79. *ibid.* 9.6 : 1.

groves of flowering trees remind the Āḷvār of the greatness of the Lord. The mind melts at the thought of this place and the soul cannot tolerate his singing the greatness of the Lord.⁸⁰ The Āḷvār is at a loss to understand the Grace of the Lord with which He enjoyed the soul of this insignificant person.⁸¹ The rich flooded regions on the southern bank of the Kāviri where the shrine of Tiruppērnakar is situated remind the Āḷvār of the happy setting of Tirumāḷiruñcōlai, where the deity entered into the Āḷvār and fully occupied his mind.⁸² The groves abounding with the hum of the bees fill the Āḷvār's mind when the Lord entered his mortal frame and removed all the *karma*.⁸³

Tirumaṅkaiyālvār recapitulates how the Lord at Tiruvāli entered into him out of His own accord and afforded him a delectable experience. The Āḷvār could not dissociate the regions from the red sprouts of *acōka*, or of the dance of the peacocks which mistake the smoke rising from the jaggery-manufacturing centres for the dense clouds, reminding the Āḷvār of the huge blue hill lying in the milky ocean.⁸⁴ The fishes jumping from the fields during harvest⁸⁵ proclaim the prosperous condition of the regions there. The *pumai* trees and the fields inhabited by swans seduce the mind by drawing it towards the slender-waisted women, but the Āḷvār wonders that the Lord took care to place the mind of the Āḷvār at His feet drawing it away from that sensuousness.⁸⁶ On the contrary, the sweet melody of music, the boom of the conches, the dispersing sound of the musical instruments and the sweet sound of the dances, prevail at Tiruvāli. They are equally tempting and so the Āḷvār requests the

80. *ibid.* 9.6: 2.

81. *ibid.* 9.6: 4, 5.

82. *ibid.* 10.8: 1; cf. *ibid.* 2.10.

83. *ibid.* 10.8: 5.

84. *Peri. Tm.* 3.5: 1.

85. *ibid.* 3.5: 3.

86. *ibid.* 3.5: 4.

Lord not to leave his mind now engaged in worshipping Him with flowers.⁸⁷

The tender paddy stalks wafted by the gentle breeze present the picture of chowries. The swans, koels, peacocks, and parrots move about their wonted way in the rich fields and groves of plantains and arecanuts. Such surroundings at Tiruvaṅuntūr allured the Āḷvār to identify the Lord in the shrine there with Śrī Kṛṣṇa's whose elegant sports receive a graphic depiction.⁸⁸ Tirukkannaṅkuṭi is a place refreshed with floral scents emanating from the flowers like jasmine. The Lord is therefore He who took the form of the Fish who controlled the ever-surgings flood.⁸⁹ The swans are seated on the lotuses, the lotus-leaves above them appearing like umbrella.⁹⁰ The peacocks dances in the groves, the clouds issue the gentle rumbling sound of the drum and the intoxicated bees hum probably to applaud the feet of Śrī Rāma.⁹¹ Tirukkannapuram has a peculiar attraction to Tirumaṅkaiyāḷvār where there is the shrine for the Lord who held high up the Govardhana hill. It is but natural that this place should be surrounded by waters which take with them in their course creepers of corals.⁹² The clouds and columns of smoke of amber should proclaim that the blue-complexioned Lord is enshrined there.⁹³ Hares and fishes move about in the shallow fields.⁹⁴

To Nammāḷvār the Lord becomes every thing. He is the fire, the water, the earth, the sky and the wind; He is the mother, the father, and the sons and daughters; He is other things beyond these, and one and all. He is the sound of the

87. *ibid.* 3.5 : 5.

88. *ibid.* 7.8.

89. *ibid.* 9.1 : 3.

90. *ibid.* 9.1 : 5.

91. *ibid.* 9.1 : 7; cf. *ibid.* 9.1 : 9.

92. *ibid.* 8.3 : 1.

93. *ibid.* 8.3 : 2.

94. *ibid.* 8.7 : 3.

strings of the harp, the sugar-cane juice and the nectar.⁹⁵ He is the sun and the moon; the numerous beautiful stars and darkness; the down-pour of rain, praise and blame alike; and cruel death with cruel eyes.⁹⁶ He is the prime mover of all the *yugas* and of the innumerable similar and dissimilar objects in those *yugas*.⁹⁷ He is being and non-being, numerous sentient and non-sentient beings and the prime mover behind all these.⁹⁸ He is body and soul, elimination and generation and the player of tricks of illusion.⁹⁹ He is forgetfulness and remembrance, heat and coldness, the quality of wonder as well as the objects of wonder, victory and defeat, deed and its fruits.¹⁰⁰ He is the doer of deeds of sorrow, arrogance, gratification, desires which bring sorrows, the measure of things, the static and the dynamic.¹⁰¹ He is the three worlds, their creator, the one immanent in them and transcendent over them.¹⁰² He is the desired taste, sight, touch, sound and smell of all the organs and the senses.¹⁰³ He is the Form celebrated in the ancient scriptures as well as the Formless.¹⁰⁴ So His nature and shape are impenetrable to all.¹⁰⁵ That the behaviour of Parāṅkuśa Nāyaki in her intense love of God, as described by her mother, will clearly reveal that God is all.¹⁰⁶ "All the world is the creation of Kaṇṇan" - 'Ēṟiya piṭṭinōṭu ellā ulakum kaṇṇāṁ paṭaiṭṭu ennum'.¹⁰⁷

Nammālvār enjoys the wonder of the self-contradic-

95. T.V.M. 2.3 : 7; 5.8 : 6; 7.1 : 6.

96. *ibid.* 7.8 : 2.

97. *ibid.* 7.8 : 3.

98. *ibid.* 7.8 : 4.

99. *ibid.* 7.8 : 5.

100. *ibid.* 7.8 : 6.

101. *ibid.* 7.8 : 7.

102. *ibid.* 7.8 : 8.

103. *ibid.* 7.8 : 9.

104. *ibid.* 7.8 : 10.

105. *ibid.* 7.8 : 11.

106. *ibid.* 4.4.

107. *ibid.* 4.4 : 7.

tions of the world play or *viruddha vibhūti*¹⁰⁸ of the wonderful *Māyin* and seeks to laugh it away by trying to go beyond it. In the blending of the joy of the eternal realism and the tragic tension of the realm of *samsāra*, there results the aesthetic feeling that the cosmos has a cosmic touch. The Āḷvār is simply amazed at His paradoxical glory in the course of which he gives free and full expression to his feelings of wonder and amazement at the way the Lord manifests Himself in the world. He puts a question point-blank to Him to divulge the secret by which He manages to be all this. This is perhaps a question to which no answer is vouchsafed except that He is "*aṟivu ariya pirān*"¹⁰⁹ – 'the Lord who cannot be understood by human intellect'. The Āḷvār himself says in another context: "I of very small intellect hanker to see Him who cannot be known by any one. Can there be a greater folly than this?"¹¹⁰ Unfitness to sing of Him is gradually disclosed to be only a corollary to the appreciation of the Lord's unsurpassed greatness, which is far above human ken. One can see that Āḷvār's modesty is not born of a superficial sense of conventionality, but out of an abiding sense of His indescribability. The Āḷvār refers to the comparisons, similes and analogies, that he and others of his ilk indulge in very often, while trying to describe His indescribable beauty and features: "The lotus can never equal Thy eye or feet or hand. Molten gold can come nowhere near the resplendence of Thy Form. And so the comparisons and the suggestions we employ in order to praise Thee, only show how small and trivial our attempts to praise Thou art";¹¹¹ and again "All the sacred words that are uttered by any one in any world are nothing but a pale reflection of Thy praise. What words can I employ to sing in praise of Thee."¹¹² "What shall I call Thee" is the refrain of a whole hymn. "Shall I call Thee Earth, Sea, Fire,

108. T.V.M. 6.3.

109. *ibid.* 5.5: 11.

110. *ibid.* 1.5: 7.

111. *ibid.* 3.1: 2.

112. *ibid.* 3.1: 6.

113. *ibid.* 3.4: 1; cf. P.Tv. 11.

Wind, Sky, Sun and Moon?¹¹³ Shall I call Thee the groups of mountains, loving rain, the ever-shining constellations of stars, the arts that are mouthed by the tongue, or the very breath which is ultimately responsible of these arts?¹¹⁴ Shall I call Thee medicine that is desired by every one, or the nectar of the sea of Milk?¹¹⁵ Shall I call Thee milk, or shall I speak of Thee as the cream and essence of the four *Vedas*, or the religious code?¹¹⁶ and so on. There are about fifty-two 'eṅkos' (engo = Shall I say thus?) in the first eight verses of this hymn. It is seen here how the Ālvār fumbles and flounders for words and expressions suited to describe Him.

The God is both eminent and imminent; He is inside the world becoming the world itself, but He is beyond it all. The statement of the Ālvār that Brahmā, Śiva and Indra are beyond the ken of vision of men, but Kaṇṇan (Viṣṇu) beyond the ken of these gods themselves¹¹⁷ emphasizes this great truth. Nammālvār is not a mere Nature mystic. He intuits God in Nature and also as transcending it. He says: "Thou art the soul of the world; Thou art in the shape of the released souls which extend in all ten directions innumerable in the outer space";¹¹⁸ "Thou art the prime mover of the permanent three worlds; having created them, Thou art both immanent and transcendent in these";¹¹⁹ "whatever is beyond this world, Thou art that too;.....Thou art also what are beyond the grasp of the senses";¹²⁰ "He is the life-principle behind all that is beyond the Universe too";¹²¹ "Thou art the prime mover behind the 'elements' and the life-principle. Thou art the ethereal space, and also Brahmā and Śiva who are in

114. *ibid.* 3.4:2.

115. *ibid.* 3.4:5.

116. *ibid.* 3.4:6.

117. T.V.M. 7.7:11. cf. 1.3:9; 1.9:5; 1.9:8; 3.1:10; 3.10:9; 4.10:4
10.7:6; 10.7:7; 10.10:3.

118. *ibid.* 6.9:7.

119. *ibid.* 7.8:8.

120. *ibid.* 8.1:6.

121. *ibid.* 8.8:2.

it";¹²² "Thou art the ever expanding Form which informs and enfolds within itself the dimensions of space, the Self of self, which is larger than these, and also transcends the above two".¹²³

In this connection, transcendence (*anantarva*) of the Lord is to be considered from several angles. In point of time, He is unlimited, as time is under His control, rather He is the Lord of time.¹²⁴ In respect of space, He knows no limitations. Even in the finitised visible form as Tirivikrama, the world which He measured could not be fully pervaded by His foot, as the world was so small that His foot is to be treated as having gone beyond the world.¹²⁵ In His formless condition there is no vocabulary to render His greatness. Hence the *Vedas* confined themselves to stating that He has a thousand heads, thousand eyes, and thousand feet. It is said that He pervaded the entire earth and stood beyond to the extent of ten inches.¹²⁶ Here the word 'thousand' must be taken to mean 'countless'¹²⁷ and the word 'inch' (*an̄gula*) must mean 'an unlimited extent'.¹²⁸ The words 'ten inches' shall mean that 'this is only an attempt to span the space to the extent of which He extended and this is only an apology for the space which cannot be measured fully and accurately'. There is a third kind of transcendence according to which there is no object anywhere which could bear any comparison to Him.¹²⁹

122. *ibid.* 10.10:4.

123. *ibid.* 10.10:10.

124. *ibid.* 1.1:2; 3.8:8.

125. *cf.* M.Tv. 84.

126. R.V. 10.90:1.

127. *Puruṣasūkta Bhāṣya*, p. 21; *cf.* Bh.G. 11:19.

128. Abi S. 59:21.

129. T.V.M. 3.1:10.