

## CHAPTER XV

### THE ATTRIBUTES OF THE DIVINE

The Supreme Person in the Vaiṣṇavite system of thought is Nārāyaṇa who is identical with Brahman. The infinitude of this person is beyond the comprehension of human thought and therefore cannot be adequately described. Nārāyaṇa is said to have a form and also not to have any. He is closely connected with the world, but is also apart from it.<sup>1</sup> There is nothing which He is not. He is Ourselves, He is She, It, This, That and They. He is the god of both good and bad people. He represents things which are nearby and those which are far off. He is those that became, are becoming and would become. He is the things of the past, present and future.<sup>2</sup> He could not be understood even by the learned.<sup>3</sup> He is neither male nor female, nor eunuch.<sup>4</sup> He cannot be said to exist or not to exist.<sup>5</sup> He cannot be known by the senses or mind<sup>6</sup> or His greatness ascertained even if one attempts to do so all through the times.<sup>7</sup> It is difficult to say whether He is standing or sitting or lying or He is not standing, sitting or lying.<sup>8</sup> His activities extend beyond space and hence could not be measured even by Brahmā.<sup>9</sup> He is not that which is or that which is not. It would be highly difficult to speak even a few

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1. T.V.M. 1.1: 3.

2. *ibid.* 1.1: 4.

3. *ibid.* 1.3: 3.

4. *ibid.* 2.5: 10.

5. *ibid.* 2.5: 10.

6. *ibid.* 1.1: 2. *cf.* Muṇ. Up. 1, 1: 6; 3.1: 8.

7. M.Tv. 68.

8. T.V.M. 1.1: 6.

9. *ibid.* 1.3: 10.

words about Him.<sup>10</sup> All the six schools of thought could not even discuss His nature, even if they group themselves together and attempt to do this all the time.<sup>11</sup> Though He is said to be of different colours in each *yuga*, He could not be visualised to have a particular form and a definite colour.<sup>12</sup> Words which are uttered could denote His names, but these are poor aids to know Him.<sup>13</sup>

Such descriptions of Nārāyaṇa which the compositions of the Ālvārs, especially those of Nammālvār, contain show that the Supreme Person lies beyond the understanding of words and thoughts.<sup>14</sup> In this respect, the approach of the Ālvārs is similar to that which is had in the *Upaniṣads*. The Ālvārs refer to the *Vedas* as revealed by the Supreme Person at the time of creation,<sup>15</sup> having preserved it during deluge.<sup>16</sup> The four eternal *Vedas* reveal Him as the only and the foremost Supreme Being.<sup>17</sup> God is the subject matter dealt with in the *Vedas*.<sup>18</sup> He is therefore to be known only through them<sup>19</sup> which are only Nārāyaṇa's form.<sup>20</sup> This is in consonance with the Vedāntic tradition that the *Vedas* are the sole authorities in matters relating to the ultimate reality. Perception and other means of valid cognition such as inference are of no avail in knowing the Supreme Person. The ancient *Vedas* treat Him as non-different from form and

10. *ibid.* 2.5: 10.

11. *ibid.* 4.10: 9. The six systems are those of Buddha, Kaṇāda, Jaina, Kapila, Patañjali and Gautama.

12. T.N. 3; Tc. V. 44; Nān. Tv. 24; Peri. Tm. 1.8: 2.

13. M.Tv. 56; cf. T.V.M. 2.5: 10; 2.7: 12; 3.1: 2; 3.4.

14. cf. Taitt. Up. 2: 4;

15. Peri, Tm. 5.7: 3; cf. M.Tv. 33.

16. 1. Tv. 48,

17. T.V.M. 1.1: 7; 1.6: 2; 3.5: 5; M.Tv. 68; 1. Tv. 45.

18. *ibid.* 3.1: 11; M.Tv. 28; Nān. Tv. 13; Peri. Tm. 3.5: 9. Periyāḷ. Tm 1.5: 3.

19. *ibid.* 7.1: 2.

20. *ibid.* 2.7: 2.

formlessness.<sup>21</sup> The *Sāma-veda*, the *Chāṇḍogya Upaniṣad*, the *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa* and the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* treat of Him. He is described as fit to be worshipped through the Pañcāgni which is taught in the *Katha Upaniṣad*.<sup>22</sup> Nammālvār goes to a further extent in declaring that the Supreme Person cannot be known even by the *Vedas* which are held to be repositories of knowledge and wisdom and also by the rare works such as *Itihāsas* and *Purāṇas*.<sup>23</sup> The *Vedas* describe Him in an indirect way.<sup>24</sup> The four *Vedas* run in search of Him,<sup>25</sup> but not yet found Him.<sup>26</sup> In a way, this explains the Upaniṣadic statement that words and thoughts return unsuccessfully without getting at Him.<sup>27</sup>

A study of the *Vedas* reveals that the subject matter of the Scriptures is the consort of Śrī.<sup>28</sup> He is the enchanting music of the *Rg. Veda*<sup>29</sup> and is the nectar as it were obtained from the four oceans of the *Vedas*.<sup>30</sup> He takes His abode in the four *Vedas* which are properly recited.<sup>31</sup> God is thus to be found not in the printed or written text of the *Vedas* but in their recitations. The *Sāstras* also declare Him as the Supreme Person.<sup>32</sup> Thus the *Vedas* serve as the only means of knowing the Supreme Person, however imperfectly He is presented through those texts.

The possession by the Supreme Person of the discus, conch, mace, bow and other weapons presupposes the admission of a physical frame for Him. Such a physical body must be

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21. *ibid.* 7.8: 10.

22. Tc. V. 14; Peri. Tm. 5.5: 9; cf. *ibid.* 7.7: 2.

23. T.V.M. 9.3: 3; cf. *ibid.*, 3.1: 6.

24. I.Tv. 83.

25. Peri. Tm. 4.8: 3.

26. *ibid.* 4.8: 7.

27. Taitt. Up. 2: 9.

28. Peri. Tm. 5.6: 1.

29. *ibid.* 6.1 : 7.

30. Periyāḷ. Tm. 4.3: 11.

31. MŪ. Tv. 11, 31.

32. *ibid.* 11.

of finite dimensions which could come within the comprehension of the mortals. At the same time, the admission of a body would deprive the Supreme Person of His infinite nature. It is therefore declared that Nārāyaṇa has two forms, one visible and the other invisible. The former is His own form and the latter is represented by the *Vedas*, *Itihāsas*, and *Purāṇas*.<sup>33</sup> Nammālvār goes a step further and declares that the Lord has a form and does not also have a form.<sup>34</sup> To have an invisible form is as good as having no form. The Ālvār does not see any reason to use the word 'form' which is invariably associated in its sense with the concrete nature and finiteness of the frame. To finitise the infinite is sacrilegious to the worshipper of the divine. When it is said that the Lord does not have a form, what is actually meant is that He has a cosmic body which encompasses the whole universe and which being transcendent is beyond the understanding of both gods and men. Such a cosmic form is not one, but many,<sup>35</sup> most of which are not known to any one. He takes any body He chooses but only a few of these come within the purview of human understanding.<sup>36</sup>

The *Itihāsa*, the *Purāṇas* and the *Āgamas* depict the Supreme Person as in possession of a physical frame<sup>37</sup> which is not made up of the flesh, bones and other products of matter but yet akin to that of the human beings. This is perhaps due to a desire to present to the suffering and devout humanity a frame, the like of which is familiar to it in their own bodies but which is far superior, more enduring and much more attractive than the mortal frames. The Ālvārs who had already this traditional representation of the Supreme Person began at first to get attracted to the cosmic form in which He found the several aspects of nature presenting themselves as the various parts of the body.<sup>38</sup>

33. V.P. 1.22 : 55, 56; 5.1 : 35 to 50; 6.5 : 61 to 69.

34. T.V.M. 1.1 : 9.

35. T.V.M. 2.5 : 6; cf. *ibid.*, 8.1 : 10.

36. *ibid.* 8.1 : 1. cf. M.Tv. 44.

37. *ibid.* 3.5 : 5; cf. M.Bh. Śānti. 206 : 60; Var. P. 31 : 40

38. T.V.M. 4.3 : 3; N.R.R. invocatory verse.

The depiction of ākāśa in the *Upaniṣad*<sup>39</sup> as the body of the Brahman should have suggested to the ancient seers and to the Ālvārs, the dark complexion of the Supreme Person Nārāyaṇa.<sup>40</sup> His face is said to be attractive through the complexion of the sea, water-laden cloud and blue sapphire<sup>41</sup>. The hugeness of the sea must be taken to refer to His cosmic body. The incitement of the water-laden cloud to the solace which it affords from the oppressive heat that His body would, when visualised, free the embodied self from the sufferings in the world. The limited size of the sapphire represents the attractiveness of His features.

The Ālvārs frequently refer to the parts of His body. Tenderness and charm together characterize each limb of His<sup>42</sup> and so the lotus that is fully blossomed is frequently cited to draw comparisons with each of these limbs.<sup>43</sup> Apart from the eyes<sup>44</sup> which proclaim His tenderness of feeling and compassion to humanity, the crown,<sup>45</sup> the shoulders<sup>46</sup> revealing His might and the feet<sup>47</sup> which are worshipped and sought after by the devout persons get frequent references and receive a graphic description. The feet of Tirivikrama were like lotuses, His body was like the water of the sea and the crown like the sun.<sup>48</sup>

The supramundane radiance<sup>49</sup> which has a bewitching influence on the Ālvārs affords ample opportunity to them to describe it as the cumulative effect produced on the worshipper without a specific reference to any limb. The mind of the Ālvārs is enthralled by this beauteous frame which is deco-

39. Taitt. Up. 1 : 6.

40. T.V.M. 6.1: 7; 6.2: 10.

41. *ibid.* 5.2: 3; 6.10: 3; Mu. T.V. 9.

42. T.V.M. 5.1: 6, 6.1: 7; 7.6: 6.

43. *ibid.*, 2.5: 3, 4; 5.5: 6; 8.9: 1; T.V.R. 43, 57; T.N 21; Mū. Tv. 9.

44. I. Tv. 18,

45. T.V.M. 8.8: 1; A.P. 7.

46. T.V.M. 6.1: 8; 3.1: 10; 3.3: 4.

47. *ibid.* 1.1: 1; 5.8: 8.

48. Mū. Tv. 5.6.

49. T.V.M. 6.10: 1, 1.7: 4.

rated by the gems, ornaments and robes which have each a peculiar grace and elegance.<sup>50</sup>

The use of the words, 'uṭampu'<sup>51</sup> 'vaṭivu',<sup>52</sup> 'uruvam'<sup>53</sup> and 'mūrtti'<sup>54</sup> is the clear proof for the Āḷvārs' recognition of a frame for the deity. The frame is referred to as divine or holy by the prefix 'tiru' as an ordinary epithet.<sup>55</sup> Quite often the Āḷvārs employ the phrase 'cuṭar oḷi' to convey the effulgent brilliance of the form.<sup>56</sup> This frame of the Lord is said to be unique pertaining to Him alone.<sup>57</sup>

Nammāḷvār describes the Lord's auspicious form in his poems as possessing the following physical attributes – the conch, the discus, the lotus eyes, the red lips;<sup>58</sup> the sacred thread, the ear pendants, the mole on the chest, the constantly worn ornaments and the four arms;<sup>59</sup> the victorious bow, the mace and the sword;<sup>60</sup> the cool basil garland, the golden crown, the auspicious form, the well-sitting silken garment and the waist girdle;<sup>61</sup> the long-drawn eye-brows and well-suited lotus eyes;<sup>62</sup> the well-drawn and well-shaped nose and the blue-hued complexion;<sup>63</sup> the halo around His body;<sup>64</sup> the well curved back, the narrow waist;<sup>65</sup> and the beauties of the

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50. *ibid.* 8.4: 7; 8.8: 1; 3.4: 3.  
 51. *ibid.* 4.8: 1.  
 52. *Ī.Tv.* 81.  
 53. *T.V.M.* 8.1: 1.  
 54. *ibid.* 3. 10: 10.  
 55. *ibid.* 1.10: 9; 7.1: 8.  
 56. *ibid.* 3.10: 9; 5.2: 11.  
 57. *ibid.* 4.3: 2; 4.8: 1.  
 58. *T.V.M.* 5.5<sup>o</sup> 1; 1.9: 3; *T.V.C.* 1.5.  
 59. *ibid.* 5.5: 2; 1.9: 8.  
 60. *ibid.* 5.5: 3.  
 61. *ibid.* 5.5: 4.  
 62. *ibid.* 5.5: 5.  
 63. *ibid.* 5.5: 6; 2.5: 5; cf. *C. TML. Kaṇ.* 12  
 64. *ibid.* 5.5: 7.  
 65. *ibid.* 5.5: 8.

body from head to foot with the ensemble of all the ornaments.<sup>66</sup>

The conception of a finitised form for the Supreme Person is based on the recognition of the motive which prompts Him to take up that form. This motive lies in His desire to present Himself before the devotees who are earnestly praying for a personal and direct communion with Him. This suggests that the love of God on the part of the selves brings Him near them. God is then actuated by a desire to join them and enjoy their presence. The Supreme Person must thus be recognized to have certain attributes or qualities which draw Him to the selves. The possession of such attributes is not to be explained through His physical frame.

The *Upaniṣads*<sup>67</sup> speak of Him as having three ontological attributes viz., *satyam* (real) *jñānam* (knowledge) and *anantam* (infinite). He has *satyam* which is unconditioned reality which is real of the real,<sup>68</sup> as the essential nature is not affected to expansion and contraction by matter and is not subjected to the workings of *karma*. Likewise, the attribute *jñānam* is infinite consciousness. Brahman is not limited through space or time or any object. The absolute is unconditioned and perfect. It is beyond the passing shows of *prakṛti*, the fleeting flux of time and the endless chain of causation. Though Brahman is in the phenomenal world of space-time, It exceeds their content. It is eternally unconditioned and perfect and therefore It is infinite. These three determining attributes form the essential nature of Brahman.

The Ālvārs, who were influenced by the tradition of the *Vedas*, refer to Nārāyaṇa as the ever true<sup>69</sup> and the ever real. He is unchangingly real. This feature forms the basis for the world to remain real, though it has to change ever and anon. The knowledge which is the attribute of Brahman is not

66. *ibid.* 5.5: 9.

67. *Taitt. Up.* 2: 1.

68. *Br. Up.* 2.1 : 20; 2.3 : 6.

69. *T.V.M.* 1. 1 : 2.

simply a knowledge, subjective in its features for our comprehension, but it is the ultimate object of our experience. It is self-luminous and is described as the light of lights. It is the supreme light, through which other things become lighted. Neither the sun, nor the moon, nor the stars shine by themselves. They derive their powers of illumination from Him.<sup>70</sup> It is this supreme and transcendent luminosity of Brahman that has attracted the attention of the Āḷvārs who found it in every aspect of God's manifestation. The form of Nārāyaṇa is effulgent and surpasses the lightning in its brilliance. Following the Upaniṣadic tradition Nammāḷvār refers to God more or less in the same terminology of light in all his poems. The Lord is referred to as "Peruñcōti"<sup>71</sup> - 'the Great Flame'; "Jñānac-cuṭar viḷakku"<sup>72</sup> - 'the Lamp of Light of Knowledge'; "Jñānac-cuṭar"<sup>73</sup> - the 'Light of Knowledge'.

The three attributes mentioned in the preceding paragraphs have formed the basis for the admission of the countless qualities in the case of the Supreme Person.<sup>74</sup> There is nothing that is visible or invisible that is not pervaded by Him.<sup>75</sup> This is proof of Nārāyaṇa's all-pervasiveness and omnipresence.<sup>76</sup> Similarly He is omniscient, and omnipotent.

The word 'brahman' which is used in the *Upaniṣads* to refer to the Supreme Being means 'huge and increasing'. This aspect of the divine was pressed into service, even in the periods of epics and *Purāṇas*, to determine the nature of Brahman in terms of essential nature (*svarūpa*), form (*rūpa*) and quality (*guṇa*) and every aspect of God's features is treated to be of the highest magnitude surpassing every other

70. Kath. Up. 5: 15; Mun. Up. 2.2: 10; Ch. Up. 3.13: 7. Sv. Up. 6: 14; Mait. Up. 6: 35. cf. V.S. 1.1: 25.

71. P. Tv. 4.

72. T.V.R. 44, 58.

73. T.V.M. 1.5: 10.

74. *ibid.* 1.3: 5.

75. *ibid.* 1.1: 10.

76. *ibid.* 2.8: 8, 9: 3.2: 7.



thing in the world.<sup>77</sup> This explains the use of the words like 'uyarvu ara'<sup>78</sup> which means not having anything higher than that.

Bliss (*ānanda*) is a very important attribute of Brahman which makes the devotee's experience of God delectable. The *Upaniṣad* speaks of the bliss to be of several gradations as enjoyed by several persons placed in different states. The bliss of Brahman is described to be unsurpassed by any others.<sup>79</sup> This is actually corroborated by Nammaḷvār in the opening line of the *Tiruvāymoli* where the Supreme Person is stated to have unsurpassed bliss.<sup>80</sup>

It is not proper to apprehend defects in God on the ground that He is present every where in the world whose impurities would affect God. The *Upaniṣads* declare that God is free from sins and possesses true will, and has no stain.<sup>81</sup> 'In Him, the miseries do not exist'.<sup>82</sup> Though responsible for the creation of the world, He is aloof from it.<sup>83</sup> He is unaffected by the impurities like the other in the jar and the sun reflected in water.<sup>84</sup> At the same time God is omniscient,<sup>85</sup> and is full of all auspicious qualities.<sup>86</sup> This proves that the Supreme Person has two marks, namely, absence of defects and presence of all auspicious qualities.<sup>87</sup> The Supreme Person is thus free from imperfections.<sup>88</sup> This is very ably shown by the use of a single word 'amalaṅ'<sup>89</sup>

77. *The Philosophy of Viśiṣṭādvaita*, pp. 201, 202.

78. T.V.M. 1.1 : 1.

79. Taitt. Up. 2 : 8.

80. TVM 1;1 : 1.

81. Ch. Up. 8.1 : 5; Sv. Up. 6 : 19.

82. V.P. 6.5 : 85.

83. Ch. Up. 8. 14.

84. Yajn. Smṛti. Pra. 144.

85. Muṅ. Up. 1.1 : 9.

86. V.P. 6.5 : 84.

87. cf. V.S. 3.2 : 11 to 25.

88. V.P. 1.22 : 53.

89. A.P. 1; T.V.M. 3.4 : 5.

which must be taken, in its etymological sense, to mean 'one in whom the impurities do not exist'. His qualities do not have any defect.

Among these qualities knowledge (*jñāna*), strength (*bala*), sovereignty (*aiśvarya*), virility (*virya*), potency (*śakti*), and splendour (*tējas*) are the six chief qualities which declare the supremacy of the Lord.<sup>90</sup> The characteristic feature of knowledge is luminosity which dispels the darkness of the mind. The Ālvārs were struck with wonder at this quality of Nārāyaṇa that they could not resist expressing the result of the vision of this quality by treating God as light itself which is imperishable.<sup>91</sup> It is not therefore surprising to find the first three Ālvārs get a clear vision of Lord amidst material darkness. He is "Parañcōti"<sup>92</sup> - 'the Transcendental Brightness'; "Vāṇ-cuṭar"<sup>93</sup> - 'the effulgence of all Space'; "Parañcuṭar"<sup>94</sup> - 'the Transcendental Flame'; "Jñāna veḷlac-  
cuṭar viḷakku"<sup>95</sup> - 'the Lamp with the Radiance of the flood of Knowledge'; Netuñcuṭar cōti"<sup>96</sup> - 'the Great Bright Radiance'; "Cuṭarkoḷ cōti"<sup>97</sup> - 'the Bright Radiance'; "Periya para nalmalarccōti"<sup>98</sup> - 'the Transcendental, fine flowery Brilliance' and so on. Again according to the Ālvār the Lord is "Ellaiyil jñānattan"<sup>99</sup> - He is One of limitless Knowledge'. He is spoken of as "Jñāna veḷlac-cuṭar mūrṭi"<sup>100</sup> - 'the One who embodies the flood of the light of the Knowledge'; "Niṟainta jñāna mūrṭti"<sup>101</sup> - 'Knowledge fully Incarnate';

90. V.P. 6.5 : 85.

91. Peri. Tm. 3.8 : 1.

92. ibid. 3.1 : 3; 3.6 : 3; cf. Peri. Tm. 11.8 : 7, 8.

93. ibid. 2.5 : 2.

94. ibid. 3.2 : 8; 3.5 : 7; 3.6 : 10; 4.3 : 9; 7.1 : 10. cf. Peri. Tm. 1.8 ; 4; 9.9 : 4.

95. ibid. 2.6 : 2.

96. ibid. 2.9 : 10.

97. ibid. 10.1 : 4.

98. ibid. 10.10 : 10.

99. ibid. 3.10 : 8.

100. ibid. 2.2 : 6.

101. ibid. 4.7 : 7; 4.8 : 6.

"Cuṭar oli mūrṭti"<sup>102</sup> – 'the Image of Radiant Light'. He is therefore conceived as "Jñānap-*pirāṇ*"<sup>103</sup> – 'the Lord of Knowledge'; "Ātiyam cōti uru"<sup>104</sup> – 'the Original in the form of Light'. Sometimes He is referred to, paradoxically, as light and darkness: "Oṅcuṭaroṭu iruḷumāy"<sup>105</sup> – 'the Lord who is both effulgent Light and Darkness'.

Light, flame, brightness, radiance are all various ways of describing real knowledge which is the form of God as *Cit* because the inexpressible can be expressed only through similes and metaphors. Knowledge is therefore described as "Oṅcuṭarkkaṭai"<sup>106</sup> – 'the beam of Radiance'; "Nalvetattul niṅra malarcuṭar"<sup>107</sup> – 'the flowery Radiance of the four Vedas'; "Oḷikkōṭa cōti"<sup>108</sup> – 'the bright Radiance'; "Cōti jñānamūrṭti"<sup>109</sup> – 'the Image of the Light of Knowledge'. The idea of this Absolute Light is described poetically as "Cāṭiṅal vayiram"<sup>110</sup> – 'the fine Diamond of the first water'; "Maṇimāṅikkac = cuṭar"<sup>111</sup> – 'the gem-like Effulgence'. It is also conceived sometimes as Blissful Absolute. The Ālvār refers to it as "Cuṭar jñāna inṅam"<sup>112</sup> – 'the Bliss of Bright Knowledge'. The idea of Absolute Beauty is expressed as "Pukarkoḷ cōtippirāṇ"<sup>113</sup> – 'the God of Radiance with Beauty'. It is eternal, never going out: "Vaḷar oli iṅaṅ"<sup>114</sup> – 'the Lord of waxing Brightness'; "Mūvā mutalvaṅ"<sup>115</sup> – 'the Unageing

102. *ibid.* 3.7 : 1; 5.2 : 11.

103. T.V.R. 99.

104. T.V.M. 3.5 : 5.

105. *ibid.* 5.10 : 7.

106. *ibid.* 1.7 : 4.

107. *ibid.* 3.1 : 10.

108. *ibid.* 3.7 : 6.

109. *ibid.* 4.3 : 8.

110. *ibid.* 3.4 : 4.

111. *ibid.* 5.7 : 6.

112. *ibid.* 10.10 : 10.

113. *ibid.* 6.4 : 3.

114. *ibid.* 3.10 : 10.

115. *ibid.* 2.1 : 10.

Original'; Māmaṇi vaṇṇaṅ<sup>116</sup> – the handsome Lord of gem-like Brightness'; "Oḷimaṇi vaṇṇaṅ"<sup>117</sup> – 'the Shining Handsome One'. Its purity and holiness are referred to as "Tūya cuṭarc-cōti"<sup>118</sup> – 'the pure bright Effulgence'. That the Absolute does not depend upon anything else is spoken of in terms of spontaneous and self-luminous light: "Nantā viḷak-kame"<sup>119</sup> – 'the Unkindled Flame'. That it transcends everything else, even the lights of the world and the soul, is brought out by such expressions as "Parañcuṭar"<sup>120</sup> "Parāncōti"<sup>121</sup> "Paramacōti".<sup>122</sup>

The Lord is self-luminous as real knowledge. He is within our mind. When the inner darkness disappears through yogic practices, He blazes forth as the beautiful light of the great gem. Nāmmālvār calls Him as "Karumāṇikkac-cuṭar"<sup>123</sup> – 'the Black Gem-like Flame'; "Ceñcuṭar mūrṭti"<sup>124</sup> – 'the Dazzling Radiant Image'. He is also referred to 'Karumāṇikkam' in many a place.<sup>125</sup> This metaphor of a gem not only brings out the self-luminous aspect but also its precious worth as the ultimate value. The aspect of bliss is also brought out by this because it is only endearing things and persons of love that are metaphorically spoken of as precious gems. The Lord is the great precious gem of beautiful colour: "Kuru māmaṇi"<sup>126</sup> – 'the Great, Excellent Gem'; "Maitōy cōti maṇivaṇṇaṅ"<sup>127</sup> – 'the Handsome One Who has the Radiance of pitch-dark Brightness'. It seems that Nāmmālvār is

116 Peri. Tm. 7.3: 7; 9.5: 6; 11.2: 7; 11.6: 9.

117. T.V.M. 3.4: 7; 3.10: 2.

118. ibid. 8.7: 4.

119. ibid. 2.1: 9. cf. Peri, Tm. 4.9: 2.

120. ibid 3.6: 10.

121. ibid. 3.6: 3.

122. T.K. 11.

123. ibid. 6.2: 10.

124. ibid. 6.6; 9.

125. ibid., 1.10: 1; 2.7: 1; 3.3: 3; 3.6: 10; 5.1: 5; 5.10: 7; 7.6: 5; 9.5: 7; 10.10: 1; 10.10: 3.

126. Peri. Tm. 7.10: 5. cf. ibid., 3.10: 2; T.K. 6.

127. T.V.M. 2.9: 2.

very fond of the precious stone - "Māṇikkam" - the red carbuncle, because to refer to God he employs the word with prefixes and suffixes profusely: "Cāti māṇikkam"<sup>128</sup> - 'the Red stone of first water'; "Karumāṇikkam"<sup>129</sup> - 'the Dark Gem'; "Maṇimāṇikkam"<sup>130</sup> - 'the Beautiful Gem'. He calls Him as "Poṇmalai"<sup>131</sup> - 'the Hillock of Gold'; Maṇikkunṇam"<sup>132</sup> - 'the Hill of Gems'; "Karumāṇikkamalai"<sup>133</sup> - 'the Hill of Black Gems'; "Karumāṇikkamāmalai"<sup>134</sup> - the Great Hill of Dark Gems', "Karumāṇikkak-kūṇṇam"<sup>135</sup> - the Hillock of Dark Gems'; He is "Marakatakkuṇṇam"<sup>136</sup> - 'the Hillock of Emerald'. He presses into service almost all the names of the precious stones to refer to God. He addresses Him "My Gem! my Pearl! and my precious Gem!"<sup>137</sup> "My precious Stone! my Emerald! and my Gold of Perfect Purity!"<sup>138</sup> He refers to Him as "the Pool of Emerald Gems".<sup>139</sup> The great Parakāla calls Him as "the Coral Reef of the Transcendental Hill",<sup>140</sup> "the Gold, the Great Gem, the Bright Ornamented Lightning",<sup>141</sup> "the Emerald with Pearly Brightness, the One of the Hue of the Thundering Clouds",<sup>142</sup> and "the Lamp without Extinction".<sup>143</sup> Nammālvār calls Him as "Paramēṭṭi"<sup>144</sup> - 'the Divine Man', and "the Great Original of Flaming Light"

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128. *ibid.* 3.4: 3.

129. *ibid.* 5.1: 1.

130. *ibid.* 5.7: 6. cf. *Peri. Tm.* 11.8: 8.

131. *ibid.* 2.6: 3. cf. *Peri. Tm.* 2.5: 1.

132. *ibid.* 5.3: 1.

133. *ibid.* 8.9: 1.

134. *ibid.* 9.9: 7,8.

135. *ibid.* 8.7: 6.

136. *T.V.C.* 1; *T.V.M.* 2.5: 4.

137. *T.V.R.* 84.

138. *ibid.* 85.

139. *T.V.M.* 10.1: 9. cf. *ibid.*, 8.9: 1

140. *Peri. Tm.* 7.1: 6.

141. *ibid.* 10. 1: 2.

142. *T.K.* 10.

143. *Peri. Tm.* 10.1: 4.

144. *T.V.M.* 9.10: 8.

etc.<sup>145</sup> He is the delectable Knowledge,<sup>146</sup> which is not produced<sup>147</sup> and through which He presents Himself to those who could see.<sup>148</sup> His pervasion of the universe is through the boundless knowledge.<sup>149</sup>

Strength which consists in the absence of exertion in spite of continuous engagement in taxing work is revealed in the exploits of Kṛṣṇa who was only a young boy. The Lord had then to engage Himself with the demons almost everyday in the groves and meadows of Gokulam while tending the cows there. Lordship is a quality which the Lord possessed as a result of which He was Himself the agent of many acts which He undertook through His strength. This was done by Him out of free will and not by becoming subservient to any one, as for instance the Lord assumed the form of tortoise<sup>150</sup> in order to support the Mandara mountain which was getting sunk in the milky ocean at the time of its being churned for the purpose of getting the nectar. Virility is marked by the absence of any adverse effect due to exertion and the never-failing nature of the undertaking in yielding the result. The successful defeat inflicted by Kṛṣṇa on the demons sent by Kamsa intending to have the former killed serves to illustrate this quality of the Lord.<sup>151</sup> Potency shows the unbounded ability of the Lord to withstand any amount of attack from the adversaries like Madhu, Kaiṭabha<sup>152</sup> and the forces of Rāvaṇa<sup>153</sup> and his hordes and also the taming the seven ferocious bulls<sup>154</sup> and plucking out the tusks of the kuvalayā-pīṭa.<sup>155</sup> Splendour consists in the Lord's having no need to

145. *ibid.* 10.1: 5.

146. *ibid.* 10.10: 10.

147. *ibid.* 3.1: 5.

148. *ibid.* 3.2: 7.

149. *ibid.* 3.2: 4.

150. *Peri. Tm.* 11.4: 2.

151. *Tc.* V. 37, 80.

152. *M.Tv.* 83.

153. *I.Tv.* 43.

154. *T.V.M.* 2.5: 7.

155. *ibid.* 2.7: 2.

look for anyone's assistance to achieve the task He has undertaken. This is best illustrated by Kṛṣṇa's fighting alone against the demon Bāṇa and the god Śiva and achieving victory over them.<sup>156</sup> The brilliant display of this quality is revealed by the Lord when He held no weapon of warfare but only the whip for driving the horses of Arjuna's chariot in the battlefield. He made Pāṇḍavas get victory with nobody's assistance.<sup>157</sup>

Nammālvār revels in the auspicious qualities of Bhagavan. He says: "O my resplendent Lord! I am absorbed in Thy auspicious qualities which are as delicious as milk"<sup>158</sup> He addresses the Lord as One Who ravished Nappinnai, and who is possessed of qualities which can fascinate Him though full of sins.<sup>159</sup> Among His manifold auspicious qualities such of them as *saulabhya*, *vātsalya* and *sousilya* have more significance and greater appeal to the Ālvārs as they make Him more accessible to one and all.

Accessibility (*saulabhya*) is the quality which consists in the Lord's mixing freely with all people without reference to their position or status. Kṛṣṇāvatāra is full of incidents to exhibit this quality.<sup>160</sup> The very thought of His birth, how He grew up and how He managed the Mahābhārata war melts the saint's soul. It is difficult to translate the fervour expressed by the simple Tamil words employed in the verses.<sup>161</sup> The Ālvār thinks of the incidents relating to Pūtana, and Śakaṭāśura, and then pictures to himself the fear exhibited by that sweet little Lord when Yaśodā threatened to beat Him with a small stick for having stolen ghee. That picture wherein the Divine Child is seen with His lotus eyes full of tears appears to cast a spell on the Ālvār's soul which again melts away into unprecedented love. The story goes that the

156. *ibid.* 3.10 : 4.

157. *ibid.* 3.2 : 3.

158. P. Tv. 58.

159. T.V.M. 8.1 : 8.

160. T.V.M. 1.3 : 1, 2.

161. *ibid.* 5.10 : 3.

trance that the Āḷvār got into while singing this hymn lasted for six months.<sup>162</sup> No wonder that the language employed in the verses of this hymn is enough to melt even the stony hearts. This trance, it is told, was the second one which he is said to have got into. The first one was much earlier while singing “Pattuṭai aṭiyavarkku eḷiyavaṇ”.<sup>163</sup> Here in this verse the saint seeks to demonstrate how easy of approach the Lord is to his devotees. At once, and as an instance of that *saulabhya* he conjures up before his mind’s eye the vision of the Lord in bondage. Says the Āḷvār: “How great is the accessibility of the great Lord of Lakṣmī who in the form of the child Kṛṣṇa submitted Himself to be tied to the mortar in a cowherd’s house, and that too as a punishment for stealing butter as it was being churned!”<sup>164</sup> With the onrush of feeling engendered by thus contrasting the consort of Śrī with the cowed down, weeping child tied to a mortar, the Āḷvār became speechless for six months, and got immersed in the inward enjoyment of the lapse of the High into the low, of the Eternal into the ephemeral. ‘Dāmodara’ – the quality of the Lord is proclaimed in this name itself, for it means ‘the One who has a string wound round His belly’.<sup>165</sup> The Āḷvār again says: “The easy accessibility of the Lord is so great that He without limit or discrimination is born into numerous births (*avatāras*) and that all His auspicious qualities without end get brightened in the light of His *saulabhya*.”<sup>166</sup> The Āḷvār dwells particularly on the fact that the Great Lord reduced Himself to the status of a charioteer to Arjuna at the time of the Kurukṣetra war.<sup>167</sup> Tirumaṅkaiyāḷvār too makes a reference to the Lord’s assumption of the role of a charioteer to Arjuna – Pārthasārathi.<sup>168</sup> “The tender lotus-like hands inserted into and then pulled out of the pot full of butter, from

162. *Īṭṭiṇ Tamiākkam*, Vol. V. 5.10 : 1 (Commentary).

163. T.V.M. 1.3 : 1.

164. *ibid.* *ibid.*

165. *ibid.* 4.5 : 3.

166. *ibid.* 1.3 : 2.

167. *ibid.* 3.6 : 10.

168. Peri. Tm. 2.10 : 8. The contemplation of the Āḷvār is highly eloquent.



which He tries to eat, (Yaśodā) whipping Him with a fine string, the Lord - child in a state of fear, the red-lips curd-whitened, the cries and look of fright, the stutter of lips, the stance of prayerful cringing" - this posture of the God-child fascinates Kulacēkarālvār who expresses it in the words of Devaki. The Ālvār says that Yaśodā who had the divine gift of witnessing that posture had also experienced the pinnacle of Paramānanda.<sup>169</sup> Nammālvār says: "The Lord by His *saulabhya* became the son of Nandagōpa, the cowherd as a god-sent find for him, and gave heavenly bliss to Yaśodā by turning Himself, of His own accord, into a child in her arms<sup>170</sup>" Thus, as the commentator points out the Lord presented the highest heavenly bliss in the form of the ordinary small pleasures of life - "Antamil pēriṅpattaic cirṅpamākiṅṅān".<sup>171</sup> In other words, Yaśodā's Kṛṣṇānubhava was a hundred times more sweet than the bliss of Paramapada. Again the saint says: "For the sake of Pāṇḍavas who were so companionable to Thee, Thou becamest the excellent charioteer".<sup>172</sup> The Ālvār avers that the Lord was so considerate as to enter the heart of such a despicable being as himself; and, what is more, to compose *Tiruvāymoḷi* from there for him.<sup>173</sup> Tirumaṅkaiyālvār in the last line of every verse of one hymn has a refrain in which he contemplates the *saulabhya* of the Lord in His Kṛṣṇāvatāra in the posture of being bound by the curdmaids as a punishment for stealing curd and butter.<sup>174</sup> In another hymn of the same Ālvār, a flyting is carried on between two maidens. In the first half of each verse, a maiden narrates an incident in which the Lord reduces Himself to a state of lowness. In the second half, the other maiden counters the first by pointing out the greatness in the lowness. As instances of the Lord deliberately attaining lowness are mentioned Rāma's treading the rough woods barefoot, Kṛṣṇa's being brought up as a cowherd

169. Perum. Tm. 7 : 8; cf. Peri. Tm. 6.7 : 4; 2.10 : 6.

170. T.V.M. 8.1 : 3.

171. *Iṅṅiṅ Tamilākkam*, Vol. VIII. 8.1 : 3 (Commentary).

172. T.V.M. 8.5 : 8.

173. *ibid.* 10.6 : 4.

174. Peri. Tm. 10.6.

child, stealing butter and getting bound for it, His turning the messenger for the Pāṇḍavas and a charioteer for Arjuna, and His begging Mahābali for 'three foot' of land.<sup>175</sup> Pūtattār declares that he would address the Lord with His "great names" such as 'the one who grazed the cows', 'the one who stole the butter', 'the one who was bound with the strings', 'the one who was tied to the mortar' etc., because He would respond to these names readily because of His *saulabhya*.<sup>176</sup> In this connection it is worthy to note what the small names are. Āṅṭāl, for instance, begs forgiveness of the Lord for having addressed Him using His "small names" such as "Nārāyaṇa", 'Govinda', 'Maṇivaṅṅa' etc.<sup>177</sup> Nammālvār affirms that if one, without doubting whether Lord would be inaccessible, or accessible, or indifferent, were to believe in His *saulabhya*, in His Kṛṣṇāvatāra, He would be the role of every kind of relative.<sup>178</sup> "The greater our feeling for the Lord" says the Ālvār "the more accessible He is".<sup>179</sup> The Ālvār refers to a specific instance when the Lord exhibited His *saulabhya*. The devotees in Heaven were offering incense to the Lord during ablution. When the smoke of incense was screening His face, He mysteriously came down to Gokulam to take in the butter and danced between the horns of the seven wild bulls in order to win the hand of Nappinnai.<sup>180</sup> The Ālvār wonders at the Lord's willingness to mix freely with the devotees in Vaikuṅṭha and with the gopis in the Gokulam without considering the status of the latter.

*Sausthya* is the intimacy that grows between the infinitely great or Īśvara the infinitesimally small or *jīva*. Nammālvār contemplates this quality of the Lord in accommodating Brahmā and Rudra who came to Him out of self-interest in His navel and in one side of His body respectively.

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175. *ibid.* 11.5.

176. I. Tv. 50.

177. T.Pv. 28.

178. P.Tv. 36.

179. *ibid.* 29.

180. T.V.R. 21, 61.

Similarly He entertained the celestials as His servants.<sup>181</sup> "The Lord intermingles with my heart" says the Āḷvār, "and makes me compose verses (not minding my low status)".<sup>182</sup> He personifies His quality as Lord Himself and addresses Him as such which fascinates his soul.<sup>183</sup> Tirumaṅkaiyāḷvār praises the Lord for His unusual gesture of good mixing in befriending Guha without any thought about his low class, his murderous career and his ignorance, but also introducing Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa as Guha's kinsfolk.<sup>184</sup> Similarly he praises the Lord for His love towards Hanumān with whom He was prepared to sit for dinner for his honest and devoted service, without minding the fact that Hanumān was of the animal species, a monkey.<sup>185</sup> Saving the elephant from the clutches of the crocodile,<sup>186</sup> of Sumukha from the threat of Garuḍa<sup>187</sup>, assuring the learned Brahmin of a place in Vaikuṅṭha after death,<sup>188</sup> allowing Mārkaṇḍeya to be ever at His feet,<sup>189</sup> bringing the dead son alive to his father,<sup>190</sup> bringing back to life the dead sons of an orthodox Brahmin after the lapse of several years<sup>191</sup> and instructing the king Toṅṭaimān in the secret doctrines<sup>192</sup> prove how the Lord mixed freely with people of all ranks.

*Vātsalya* is the tenderness and affection that overpowers, as it were, divine omniscience and makes it forget the sinfulness of the sinner. Nammāḷvār contemplates the affection of the lion-shaped Lord who readily made His

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181. T.V.M. 9.3 : 10.

182. *ibid.* 10.7 : 1.

183. *ibid.* 3.8 : 8.

184. Peri. Tm. 5.8 : 1.

185. *ibid.* 5.8 : 2.

186. *ibid.* 5.8 : 3.

187. *ibid.* 5.8 : 4.

188. *ibid.* 5.8 : 5.

189. *ibid.* 5.8 : 6.

190. *ibid.* 5.8 : 7.

191. *ibid.* 5.8 : 8.

192. *ibid.* 5.8 : 9.

appearance when Hiraṇya hit the pillar angrily challenging his son to demonstrate the presence of the Lord there and then.<sup>193</sup> He addresses the Lord in one verse as the One who swiftly removed the sorrow of the Elephant—“Ollai kaimmā tunpam kaṭinta pirāṇe!”<sup>194</sup>; he again refers to Him as Kannaṇ the cloud-hued Lord who redeemed the Elephant caught by the crocodile in a pond of fine flowers.<sup>195</sup> The Ālvār revels in the Govardhana incident: he refers to the Lord as the One who lifted the mountain and held it as an umbrella to protect kine from the rain of stones;<sup>196</sup> as the Prime subject of the *Vedas* who descended here on earth while His bright Form continued in Heaven in order to chastise Kamsa the oppressor of the good.<sup>197</sup> Again and again the Gajendra incident comes to the mind of the Ālvār. Says the Ālvār: “I salute Thee with my hands folded above my head. I lose myself in Thy love. O, the One who wiped the sorrow of the Elephant.”<sup>198</sup> He is the Lord who relieved the heart-sorrow of the Elephant which standing in the pond surrendered itself at His feet in the belief that there was no refuge other than Himself.<sup>199</sup> The reference to the incident of Gajendra and Prahlaḍa by Tirumaṅkaiyālvār in his Tiruvallik-kēṇi hymn is some thing eloquent. The Ālvār refers to the Lord as One who rode the Garuḍa and rushed to wield His discus in order to relieve the distress of the Elephant of the woods it stood with its trunk uplifted in prayerful appeal, with the crocodile catching its foot, when it went into the pond to pluck fresh flowers to offer for worship to the Lord.<sup>200</sup> Hiraṇya hardly liked it when his school-boy son chanted the thousand names of the Lord. He, enraged with his son, hit the pillar angrily. The Lord, in the shape of a bright lion with crescent-shaped canine teeth, flaming eyes and wide-open mouth, manifested Himself.<sup>201</sup>

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193. T.V.M. 2.8 : 9.

194. *ibid.* 2.9 : 1.

195. *ibid.* 3.5 : 1.

196. *ibid.* 3.5 : 3.

197. *ibid.* 3.5 : 5.

198. *ibid.* 5.1 : 7.

199. *ibid.* 7.10 : 8.

200. Peri. Tm. 2.3 : 9. cf. *ibid.*, 3.8 : 2.

201. *ibid.* 2.3 : 8.

The Lord is the embodiment of mercy. The infinite perfections of Īśvara are dominated by the redemptive motive of *dayā*. He embodies Himself as *dayā* to redeem the *jīva*. The Lord as *dayanidhi* is the rock of love and the sole refuge of those who are immersed in desolation and distress. The quality of mercy inspires confidence in God as the God of salvation and it soothes the broken heart and the contrite spirit. The Āḷvārs revel in this quality of the Lord. It is this quality, according to all of them, that forces the cosmic ruler or Nārāyaṇa to drive nara's chariot<sup>202</sup> and from that chariot-seat to give utterance to the gospel of redemption.<sup>203</sup> It is again *dayā* that prompted the Lord to save the world from the Deluge. Tirumaṅkaiyāḷvār contemplates this quality in one full decad.<sup>204</sup> He refers to the Lord as the one who saved the earth, the heaven, the celestials, the demons and others from the unpreventable Deluge by devouring all and lodging them safely in His stomach.<sup>205</sup> Nammāḷvār in several verses celebrates the same quality of the Lord who churned the deep sea to get nectar for the sake of the celestials.<sup>206</sup> Tirumaṅkaiyāḷvār refers to this incident in several verses bringing out the Lord's mercy.<sup>207</sup> Again, Nammāḷvār contemplates the quality of *dayā* of the Lord in several verses in the incident of the Lord lifting the Govardhana mountain and protecting the cowherd settlement with its cattle from the rain of stones by Indra.<sup>208</sup> It is this *dayā*, according to the Āḷvārs, that is the solace of life and the solace of death and has therefore the highest claim to universality. To them, *dayā* is the soul of Bhagavān Himself, as it is the source, sustenance and satisfaction of the divine nature. The deities other than Nārāyaṇa shall not be approached for mercy, as

202. *ibid.* 1.8: 4; 2.10: 8; 4.10: 5; 5.1: 7; 6.7: 7; 7.5: 2; 9.1: 9; 11.5: 8; Periyāḷ. Tm. 4.2; 7. I.Tv. 15; T.V.M. 4.6: 1; 7.5: 9; 8.5: 8.

203. T.V.M. 4.8: 6; 7.5: 10.

204. Peri. Tm. 11.6.

205. *ibid.* 11.6: 7.

206. T.V.M. 5.10: 10; 6.2: 3; 7.4: 2; 8.1: 1; 8.4: 4.

207. Peri. Tm. 1.4: 7; 3.10: 2; 6.8: 2; 8.5: 7; 8.8: 2; 10.6: 2.

208. T.V.M. 3.3: 8; 4.5: 7; 5.6: 5, 6; 5.10: 5; 7.2: 8; 7.4: 10; 7.7: 5.

209. M.Tv. 15.

any gesture shown by these deities to show pity would not yield any purposeful effect.<sup>209</sup>

Rectitude (*ārjva*) is one of the innumerable qualities which explains the honest behaviour of the person concerned through his dealings by thought, word and deed. God's rectitude in lifting up the Govardhana mountain enchanted the Ālvārs.<sup>210</sup> Śrī Kṛṣṇa stood by the cowherds and cows till Indra was forced to withdraw his spirit of vengeance. Liberality (*audārya*) of Nārāyaṇa is frequently referred to and this had made the Ālvārs call the deity as 'pirān'<sup>211</sup> using it together generally with the words 'rāma' and 'kṛṣṇa'. Many other qualities are there in Nārāyaṇa which have some kind of reference in the compositions of the Ālvārs. Omnipotence<sup>212</sup> (*sarvasaktiva*), true will<sup>213</sup> (*satya saṅkalpatva*) and others are suggested to be the qualities of Nārāyaṇa.

It appears that the Ālvārs did not conceive of the *śāḍguṇya* aspect of the Lord's qualities. They were much impressed by the knowledge which is one of the characteristic features declaring the essential nature of the Lord. Their love of God must have inspired them to experience the qualities of mercy, easy accessibility and others. It is these qualities which belong to God whose essential nature is already established that became more endearing to the Ālvārs. Nārāyaṇa's attributes, which pertain to His divine auspicious form, and the qualities which are helpful and endearing to humanity, are found to be not deficient in any thing or defective in any aspect. These are found generally to be present in other deities and men too to a far less degree than in Nārāyaṇa and highly to a limited extent. When they are not surpassed in the case of others and are found to be free from any deficiency, they attain perfection and they do so only in the case of Nārāyaṇa, the Divine Person whose essential nature explains why these are perfect.

210. T.V.M. 1.8: 4; 3.3: 8.

211. *ibid.* 6.1: 4; 9.6: 11.

212. *ibid.* 1.5: 10, 1.6: 9.

213. *ibid.* 3.7: 7.