

## THE ĀLVĀRS AND THE WORLD

The devout men of God are also men of the world. They are also as much living a life in the material environment as others do. Some of them are fully alive to the temptations of life and sufferings of humanity. In fact, Tirumañkaiyālvār and Toṭṭaraṭipotiṭiyālvār had tasted the harder aspects of life. On the other hand, some Ālvārs had, as a result of age-long experience, a subjective attitude of the worldly illis. All the same their minds were steeped in enjoying God-realization and as such avoided the allurements of the world. Whenever the worldly attractions were irresistible, they prayed to God for saving them from getting enticed by the senses. The compositions of the Ālvārs refer frequently to these aspects of their life and on occasions, the Ālvārs offer a bit of advice also to humanity.

"The true mystics of all ages and climes claim to have had a direct experience of God and proclaim in their joy 'come and see' and invite humanity to have similar experiences. They are free from the barriers that divide one man from another and therefore extend their spiritual hospitality to others".<sup>1</sup> Nammālvār, the great mystic as he is, has immense sympathy for his fellow-beings, and occupies a pre-eminent place among God's devotees. It is he alone that starts singing for the redemption of all his fellowmen. The first song with which he opened his lips is a humble appeal for mercy for the whole mankind. Like the great ṛṣis of Daṇḍakāraṇya<sup>2</sup> who drew the attention of Rāma to the mutilated limbs of the sages of that place victimised by the Rākṣasas in order to invoke His sympathy and obtain his promise of redress. Saint Parāṅkusa draws the Lord's attention to the serious

1. *Mystics and Mysticism*, p. 428.

2. Rām Āraṇya. 6: 15, 16.

drawbacks and failings of humanity : "O Lord; Pray lend Thy ear truly to the humble petition (viññappam) of mine. May we all (entire mankind) never more wallow in this woeful state of false knowledge, evil conduct, and filthy body".<sup>3</sup>

The above sentiment is voiced forth by one who had never talked a word before that since his birth. Is it not a sure indication of the compassion residing in his heart for the whole of mankind?. It may be presumed that this compassion must have been his upper most thought drowning probably even the God-love that had kept him speechless for many years. The sentiment expressed in the first verse of the Ājvār is exceptional and unique; his compassion for the suffering humanity is commensurate only with his love towards God. It can be seen that this feeling being reflected throughout his four poems, coming to the surface only now and then, but ever present there. The first word of the first verse viz., 'poy' stands for falsehood and the last word of the last verse viz., 'uyarntē'<sup>4</sup> stands for exaltation. If ever any soul migrated from falsehood to exaltation it was Nammājvār. Prince Siddhārtha activated by his pity and compassion for the afflicted renounced his kingdom and took to the life of a mendicant trying to find a solution to soothe and heal and became a Buddha; but he did not postulate God in his philosophy. But Saṭhakōpa, whose compassion for the erring humanity equalled, and even exceeded Buddha's indulges very frequently in heart-felt prayer to his God to help man to cast off sin, and partake of the pleasures of divine Bliss. There are indeed occasions when he bitterly complains against God and accuses Him of being selfish and self-centred and not caring for the true welfare of His created beings.<sup>5</sup> There are again occasions when finding that no one in the world responds to his call to come and pray, the Ājvār becomes bitter and says things very uncomplimentary to man.<sup>6</sup> He says: "Let

3. T.V.R. 1.

4. T.V.M. 10. 10: 10.

5. T.V.R. 3, 4, 13, 25, 33, 50: P. Tv. 6, 9, 15, 22: T.V.M. 1.4; 2.1; 2.4 5.3; 6.2; 8.5: 9.6.

6. T.V.M. 4.9; 7.5.

any one do anything he likes. Who can try to correct this wide and diverse world? I rejoice in the feeling that by the Grace of Lord Kṛṣṇa, Who is the Lord of the Eternals, I have been enabled to wipe out pain and distress from my mind".<sup>7</sup> But his fellow-feeling very soon asserts itself. Then we find him casting off complacency, putting in a plea once more for afflicted men and telling the Lord that it would be wrong for Him to expect men to think of Him or come to Him even to pray for succour.<sup>8</sup> He asks: "What stuff are they made of? Where are they situate? How can'st Thou expectest them to think of Thee, or to come to Thee for relief?"<sup>9</sup> The Āḷvār tries to explain by referring to the primordial sin that prevents man from even bowing his head or folding his hands in prayer;<sup>10</sup> and to the potency of the senses that are strong enough to assail even the Lord's chosen devotees in Paramapada - "Vinpuḷārpermarṅku aṭimai ceyvāraiyum cerum aim-pulaṅ ivai".<sup>11</sup>

This alternation of feeling in the Āḷvār between sympathy for man in his distress, and disgust at man's waywardness which persists in putting God out of man's thought, word and deed, - and between prayer for his own safety and for the safety of the entire humanity - is seen even more pronounced in his *Tiruvāymōḷi*. He is even more vociferous here in his condemnation of God's indifference to human woes: "Already this wretched world is unable to concentrate on the freshness and beauty of Thy glorious Form. And to such a distracted world Thou hast given a multitude of conflicting and mutually destructive faiths and schisms. If Thou, Who art bound to protect them, indulge in self-satisfaction, and think of nothing but the freshness and fragrance of Thy *tuḷaci* garland, wiltst not this world goest to ruin?"<sup>12</sup> That even during

---

7. P. Tv. 25.

8. *ibid.* 32.

9. *ibid.* 47.

10. *ibid.* 84.

11. T.V.M. 7.1:5.

12. *ibid.* 3.1:4.

his ecstatic moments of God-enjoyment, the saint has an eye towards afflicted humanity and never fails to shed a tear for their inability to partake of the feast of the soul he is reveling in, speaks volumes about his compassion for suffering humanity. His is a desire to share his God-enjoyment with his fellow beings. Even in the first *contum* he calls out to them in three decads.<sup>13</sup> It is noteworthy that these three decads are couched in short metre quite unlike the others which is not a mere coincidence. It must be a deliberate trick of language indulged in to invite reluctant men into the Divine fold by giving them short, but sweet advice. Be that as it may, one thing is clear: the one hundred decads of the great work of this Ālvār are interspersed with hymns addressed to his fellowmen. Those hymns point out to them the emptiness of human life and the vanity of human wishes at times; at other times, they draw their attention to the greatness and glory of God, and to the pleasures and ecstasies derived and derivable from God-life and God-love.

There are several places in the course of the *Tiruvāymoḷi* where the Ālvār draws God's attention to the world. The feelings with which he does so are markedly diverse. In one hymn he dreads, shuns and abhors the world that he sees before him, and prays to God to take him away and not to show him the wicked world.<sup>14</sup> The Ālvār loses himself in the thought that God combines in Himself all the contradictions known to man.<sup>15</sup> As a born mystic he is sustained by the love of God and he extends the hospitality of his divine experience to the whole world of *jīvas* with a view to establishing a spiritual community of devotees.

Life on earth is only for a limited period. The maximum duration, as known from the *Vedas*, is limited to one hundred years. Half of this is spent in sleep. Fifteen years of the remaining half are spent in childhood and boyhood. The rest is taken up by all kinds of sufferings such as illness,

---

13. *ibid.* 1.2; 1.6; 1.8.

14. T.V.M. 4.9.

15. *ibid.* 6.3.

hunger, old age and miseries.<sup>16</sup> There is however no guarantee that every individual is bound to live for one hundred years. One may die now or at a later date. People do witness that life here is not stable. Yet they have faith in life as if it would be everlasting. They are really of debased thought.<sup>17</sup> Until the physical frame begins to scent debility, the self does imagine that it has been always strong and formidable.<sup>18</sup>

Apart from the desire to live for long, there is the attraction of sex which creates a self-complacent attitude that man enjoys the company of women and that the pleasurable situation in which he is placed could not be taken away from him at any time. Personal experience teaches man, however, that there sets in both physical and mental debilities.<sup>19</sup> *Toṅṅaraṅṅip-poṅṅiyālvār* recollects with much remorse how he lost the occasions for rendering service to God by being lured into the company of women.<sup>20</sup> When the eyes roll with rheum and the man is affected by consumption, the women who were sweet in their utterances to him, ask him to go away gently. Such women would join together and laugh at him and ask him why he was coming to them coughing. They may laughingly tell him 'Don't come to see us in this condition'. The women, whose slender waists fascinated him before, would scorn at him and shut the door against his face. They, whose eyes were once bewitching him and uttered sweet words to him will now jeer at him. They, whose sexual passions were uncontrollable, now suppress them and refer to him as wicked and old. He who was fondled as cupid is now treated as decrepit. Such are the situations which a man of voluptuousness will have to face.<sup>21</sup> Therefore the *Ālvārs* warn

16. T.M. 3; cf. *Bhartrhari: Vairāgyasatakam* (v. 10) for a similar description.

17. Tc. V. 66; cf. English rendering of this verse: "Living beings enter the abode of Yama every day. Those who remain behind wish to live permanently. What is more wonderful than this?"

18. cf. T.M. 6.

19. T.M. 5.

20. *ibid.* 33; cf. *ibid.* 16.

21. cf. *Peri. Tm.* 6.4.

people not to get attracted by women. They are requested to think of the evils that lie in the path of material life and pray to God for protection before they are deceived by women and they are still in sound health.<sup>22</sup> The diseases eat away the body. The relatives press him when he is disabled to tell them where his possessions lie. The senses and limbs gradually fail to function. People begin to cry in distress all round.<sup>23</sup> In addition to the residues of past experiences, there is the danger of man falling an easy prey to bad company. To this evil group belong those who mistake the unreal for the real and *vice versa* and who are lascivious. Food and clothing alone form their pursuit.<sup>24</sup>

The Ālvārs appear to enjoin a code of conduct for themselves as it were. They would not aspire to have the wealth of another, nor would they make friends with the wicked.<sup>25</sup> They would only think of God, worship Him and his devout men. The Ālvārs therefore appeal to their mind<sup>26</sup> and also to the people to worship God.<sup>27</sup> According to them the Ascent to the Absolute starts with purified and moral state.<sup>28</sup> They speak of the removal of faults, the removal of angry mind, the false sense of prestige and vain desire. They also refer to the necessity of conquering or transmuting the passions. The devotees are described as those whose mind has become calm and is without any blemish.<sup>29</sup> Their company therefore gives acme of divine bliss to these saints.<sup>30</sup> God is pleased with the character and behaviour of such devotees who are capable of worshipping His Feet. Therefore the Ālvārs always desire the company of goodmen, – the *bhāgavatas* – the devotees of God who in their opinion can influence to a great deal their life and conduct.

---

22. T.M. 2.

23. Periyā]. Tm. 4.5; cf. Peri. Tm. 1.1: 7.

24. Perum. Tm. 3.

25. cf. M. Tv. 64 to 67.

26. Peri. Tm. 1.5; 3.9; M. Tv. 48; I. Tv. 41.

27. *ibid.* 11.6; T.V.M. 2.10; 4.10.

28. cf. Peri. Tm. 6.1; 6.2; 6.3; T.V.M. 3.8; 4.9; 7.1.

29. T.V.M. 8.10: 9, 10.

30. *ibid.* 8.10: 7.

The Ālvārs were imbued with sympathetic outlook for humanity but were not men who were to mix up freely with the sufferers and live amidst them. The devotional element was preponderant in their lives and as such they either went into deep meditation or moved from place to place visising the sacred shrines. The knowledge of the sufferings in the world which they had is found suggested or described in their poems when they became aware of the limitations set to their enjoyment of God's presence. Then they appealed to God to free them from such restrictions enabling them to have supreme bliss without any hindrance. On occasions, they appealed to their minds not to return to the worthless atmosphere of material prosperity and advised people to forsake the worldly pleasures for taking to a better and healthier way of life which would lead to eternal prosperity. Tirumaḷicaiyālvār, Toṅṅaraṭi-poṭiyālvār and Tirumaṅkaiyālvār had much to contribute by way of advice to people. The Ālvārs are not thus either spiritual preceptors or *ācāryas* or reformers imbued with the zeal to enforce ethical codes on people. They did not have a band of disciples whom they could train or a host of followers who carry out their injunctions. They were more poets to sing of the glory of the Divine, leaving the task of leading the people in the right direction to those who were prepared to work towards that end.