

THE ĀLVĀRS AND THE RĀMĀNUJA SCHOOL OF VAIṢṆAVISM

The composition of the Ālvārs undoubtedly produced a powerful impression on the Southern school of Vaiṣṇavism which owed its origin and development to the *Viṣṇu-purāṇa* and Vaiṣṇavite Āgamas. The Sanskrit sources furnished this Vaiṣṇavite school with sufficient material for the development of its own philosophy. The *Divya Prabandhams* were also influenced if not inspired to a large extent by these Sanskrit sources. The product of the earlier exotic influences was something unique, a devotional lyricism of a type not known earlier in the Tamil country. The entire credit goes to the Ālvārs and the Nāyanmārs for presenting in lyrics emotionally affective material on godhead and godhood. This had a powerful appeal to the exponents of the Viṣistādvaita *Vedānta* who drew copiously from the *Nālayīram* as their basic texts. This sacred anthology verily provided not only the basis of a speculative philosophy but also a way of life, and bridged the gulf between day-to-day life and religion.

The Āgamas enjoyed singular popularity as they governed the conduct of the rituals in the temples. The compositions of the Ālvārs contained much material that had connection with the *arcā* aspect of God. What they delineated about *arcā* became codified into a system of worship in temples in conformity with the Āgamas during the period of Rāmānuja. That pilgrimages to temples for worship had already become a notable feature of Vaiṣṇavism is evident from the fact that the Ālvārs who not content with mere visits composed hymns in Tamil extolling the greatness of the deities in the several shrines. Nāthamuni made pilgrimages to well-known shrines following the example of the earlier Ālvārs.

There arose a particular concept, in the post-Rāmānuja period, though the exact period of the name of the Ācārya responsible for it could not be found out, regarding the greatness of certain shrines and their place in the list of holy ones which were considered as fit to be visited. The accounts about such places that are contained in the *Purāṇas* were taken into account for determining the importance of the particular shrine. Along side of them, the recognition that a particular shrine was visited by one or more Ālvārs who sang the glory of the Lord there was the criterion to declare that shrine as more holy or worthy of visit in preference to others about which there is no record of their connection with the Ālvārs. It is this attitude of the Vaiṣṇavites towards the importance of the temples that was instrumental in giving the first place to ŚrīRāṅgam among the shrines where the deity had his glory sung by all the Ālvārs. Tirumalai, Tirukkannapuram, Tirumālitruñcōlai and others come next according to the number of Ālvārs who visited them. It appears that these shrines at ŚrīRāṅgam, Tirumalai, and Kāñci were prominent even before Rāmānuja's time and have definitely got preference over other shrines in the enumeration of the shrines as Kōyil, Tirumalai and Perumāḷ Kōyoil.¹ The services rendered by Tirumalai Nampi and Tirukkacci Nampi to the shrines at Tirumalai and Kāñci respectively bear testimony to the significant place which these two shrines had in the early period of Vaiṣṇavism. The Ācāryas visited certain shrines on account of which they become prominent such as Maturāntakam, Mannārgudi and Tirunārāyanapuram. Places like Śrī Muṣṣam were already prominent on account of their celebrity handed down by tradition as recorded in the ancient texts like the *Purāṇas*. The Āgamic classification of the shrines like *Svayamvyakta*, *Saidha*, *Ārṣa* and *Mānuṣa* also received recognition while determining the glory of a sacred place, along with its connection with the Ālvārs.

1. The name 'Perumāḷ Kōyil' must have been given to keep this shrine distinct from the Saivite shrines of Kāñci. cf. In the enumeration of Saivite temples, Chidambaram gets the name *Kōil* perhaps on account of its prominence.

After the compositions of the Ālvārs became popular, Vaiṣṇavite temples came to have small niches for the Ālvārs within their enclosures. Nammālvār has the unique distinction of presiding over a separate shrine at Ālvār Tirunagari.² Āṅṅāl has a shrine set apart for her in all temples. The other Ālvārs have separate shrines for themselves in the places of their birth. In Ālvār Tirunakari, the birth place of Nammālvār, even the tamarind tree beneath which the Ālvār meditated, is still preserved.

In all the temples the *Nalāyiram* is recited every day in the morning and evening. The recitors are mostly those who have the right of heredity for doing this service and very often, they are joined by others as well who have training in the recitation. During occasions which could be normally five or six every month, festivals of a moderate nature which are ordinarily two on the average for a month and the *Brahmōtsava* which is annual, the *Divya Prabandham* is recited in front of the deity by the party leading the procession either inside the temple or through the streets in the place where the temple is situated. Those who recited the *Vedas* follow the deity. The recitation of the composition of the Ālvārs, which has the sanction of the *Āgamas*,³ is described by Vedānta Deśika as an act which could rid the streets of all impurities in order that the deity could be taken in procession to follow their recitors.⁴ Vedānta Deśika is said to have taken part in a dispute at Kañci on the occasion of the festival there, with those who questioned the propriety of singing the Tamil hymns in the presence of the deity in addition to the *Vedic* recitation⁵ succeeded in regularising the recitation of the Tamil hymns. On all occasions, the procession which starts, is stopped at a particular place fixed for the purpose and all the music comes to a stop when the *Prabandham* is begun for recitation. After the recitation of the few songs of which there is understanding about their

2. This was visited by Nāthamuni, Vide G.P. p. 72.

3. *Īśv.* S. 11 ; 256.

4. R.T.S. p: 72.

5. Introduction to *Saṅkalpasūryodaya*, p. 63.

number is over, the procession starts and after the return of the deity to the temple, the same process is repeated to mark the conclusion of the *Prabandham* recitation. Just before the beginning and conclusion, the recitors are honoured by the temple priests with *sathāri*. *Sathāri*, it must be understood here, is the image of the God's Feet fixed to the top of a crown-shaped pedestal made of metal with the hollow facing down. To receive it with the bowing head is the greatest honour one can yearn to receive in a temple.*

Before the period of Rāmānuja, the festivals were conducted in big temples and in the shrines situated in the places of the birth of the Ālvārs for ten days, the concluding day coinciding with the day of birth of the Ālvārs. Thus the Ālvārs were raised to the status of deities receiving worship in temples like God and had their birth days celebrated in the form of festivals. In some places, there is the regular flagstaff (*dhvajasthambha*) in front of the shrine of the Ālvārs. The Ālvār and the deity are taken in procession through the streets on the day of his birth (called *Tirunakṣatram*) and every formality beginning the recitation of the *Prābandham* is observed then as it would be when the deity alone is taken in procession. *Sathāri* and honouring the devotees with it became part and parcel of worshipping the Ālvār. In due course, this principle and procedure came to be applied to great Ācāryas like Rāmānuja, Vedānta Deśika and Maṇavālamūnikal who have separate shrines in almost all the temples and have their annual festivals where the procedural details are not different for those obtained when the deity is worshipped. The principle of *Sathāri* gets its applicability here also.

During daily service called '*Tiruvārāadhanam*' and ablutions known as '*Tirumañcaṇam*' which take place on occasions, there are certain items which require the recitation of the hymns of the Ālvārs without which the particular undertaking would be considered incomplete. For instance, there is *mantrapuṣṭam* which a person holding the right attends to it,

6. *Tiruvāraṅgarpeyūmāl* Araiyar received this honour at Kāñci. Vide. G.P. p. 122.

consists of recitation of the relevant yet fixed passages from the *Vedas* and from the compositions of the Ālvārs especially the verse of the *Mutal-tiruvantāli* beginning with the words 'venṇal kuṭalyām'⁷ and from those of the Ācāryas also. During the ablutions, passages from the *Puruṣa-sūkta* and the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* are at first recited and uniformly a hymn beginning with the words 'venṇal aḷainta' in the composition of Periyālvār,⁸ where the Ālvār calls the young Kṛṣṇa who was dusty in his body by taking butter and playing in mud to come to him for taking bath. A person who holds the highest honour for rendering service in a shrine at a particular place may also recite a collection of *ślokas* and Tamil hymns of the Ālvārs which is technically called 'Kaṭṭiyam'. The verse beginning with the words 'naṭanta kālkaḷ nontavō' of the *Tiruccanta-viruttam*⁹ gets generally included here. The daily recitation of the *Prabandham* begins with the recitation of the 'tanḷyans' in honour of (i) Vedānta Deśika¹⁰ or Manvālamāmuṇika,¹¹ (ii) the *Guruparamparā*,¹² (iii) Rāmānuja,¹³ (iv) Nammālvār¹⁴ (v) all the Ālvārs and (vi) Periyālvār.¹⁵ This is followed by the recitation of Periyālvār's *Tirupallāṅṅu*. All the five are to be recited before the composition of any Ālvār is taken up, to be followed by the 'tanḷyans' of that Ālvār and then his composition.

During the annual festivals, the deity is taken in procession on the horse-vehicle on the eighth day during the night. The idol of Tirumānkaiyālvār is brought to a particular place to meet the Lord. This is held as marking the occasion

-
7. M. Tv. 5.
 8. Periyal. Tm. 2: 4.
 9. Tc. V. 61. It is also said that Parācara Paṭṭar prepared a 'Kaṭṭiyam' to be recited in the temple at Śrī Raṅgam.
 10. The verse beginning with 'Rāmānuja dayāpētram'.
 11. The verse beginning with 'Śrīsaḷla dayāpātram'.
 12. The verse beginning with 'Lakṣmīnāthasamārambham'.
 13. The verse beginning with 'Yonityaameantha'.
 14. The verse beginning with 'Bhūtam saraśca'.
 15. The three verses beginning with 'Gurumukham'. 'Minṇār taṭamatil' 'Pāṇṭiyān koṇṭāta'.

when the Ālvār tried to rob the wayfarers of their valuable belongings and use them for feeding the Śrī Vaiṣṇavites. According to the life-account of this Ālvār, God initiated the Ālvār in the learning of the *Rahasyas*, when the Ālvār began to express emotionally the first verse¹⁶ beginning with 'vāṅnāṅ vaṅ!' in the *Periya-tirumōḷi*. The reciters sing the whole hymn, then the Ālvār is duly honoured and then the procession continues. On the day in the *ḡyēṣṡha* month (corresponding to 'Āṅi' month of the Tamil calendar) which has the constellation 'Svāṅi' the deity in big shrines is taken in procession on the Garuda vehicle Periyālvār by His side. This day is held in great respect to celebrate the singing of *Pallāṅṡu* by this Ālvār.¹⁷ All the temples celebrate the birthday of Āṅṡāḡ, usually called 'Tiruvāṡippūrām' for ten days when the idol of Āṅṡāḡ is taken in procession. In recognition of having composed the *Tiruppāvai*, the idol of Āṅṡāḡ is taken in all places every morning in the Tamil month of *Mārkaḡi* to a tank or lake nearby. The ablutions take place there during the day and the procession returns to the shrine in the evening. This is generally done at least for ten days the last day coinciding with the *Bhōḡi* day which precedes the *Pōṅkaḡ* (Makara Saṅkarāṅti) day. Āṅṡāḡ is held to have married Śrī Raṅganāṡha on the *Bhōḡi* day and in view of this, this day is devoted in all temples to celebrate the marriage of Āṅṡāḡ and Śrī Raṅganāṡha, if that shrine is there or the presiding deity in that place, inasmuch as there is no formal distinction in Vaiṣṇavism, between Śrī Raṅganāṡha and the deity in the other temples. Again, during the month of *Mārkaḡi*, there is a festival conducted in all the temples for twenty days, the first ten which is called 'Pakal-pattu' and which comes to an end on the day preceding the *Vaikunṡa Ēkāṡhaṡi* day and the next ten called 'Irāp-pattu' starting on the *Vaikunṡa Ēkāṡhaṡi* day and lasting for ten days from that day. The *Pakal-pattu* festival was, it is held, started by Nāṡhamuni when he arranged the Four Thousand verses of the

16. Peri. Tm. 1.1: 1.

17. This day is known as the day when the reality of the supreme person (*paratattvanirṅaya*) was settled in the court of Pāṅṡiya by this Ālvār.

Ālvārs. The other festival had been begun, it is stated, by Tirumaṅkaiyālvār himself. In the latter all the idols of the Ālvārs and Ācāryas are brought to a hall where the deity is seated. They are individually honoured on all the ten days. The three thousand verses of all other Ālvārs are recited in the first ten days and the thousand verses of Nammālvār during the second festival. The composition of Maturakavi is recited on every day in the latter case. In some temples, one of the days in the second festival is devoted to celebrate the composition of Maturakavi Ālvār. The two festivals are called *Adhyayana Utsava* because the *Divya Prabandham* has been treated to be equal to the *Vedas*.¹⁸ Further, during the festivals celebrated for the deity, or the Ālvārs, or the Ācāryas, all the four thousand verses of the *Nalayiram* are recited. The recitation begins with the compositions of the First Three Ālvārs, *Nānmukan-tiruvantāti* of Tirumalīcaiyālvār, Nammālvār's *Tiruviruttam*, *Tiruvācīriyam*, and *Periya-tiruvantāti*, and Tirumaṅkaiyālvār's *Tiruvelukkūṟṟirukkai*, *Clīriya-tirumaṭal* and *Periya-tirumaṭal*. Then follow the compositions of Periyālvār and others. The descendants of Tiruvaraṅkapparamāi Araiyaṟ who taught the *Tiruvāymol* to Rāmānuja recite the *Divya Prabandham* before Śrī Raṅganātha at Śrīraṅgam with dance poses and appropriate music.¹⁹ Nearly seven days are declared in a month as days when the *Vedas* should not be studied.²⁰ The *Nalayiram* came to be looked upon as *Vedas* in Tamil. The convention of the Vaiṣṇavite school has been that from the *Pūrṇimā* day in the Tamil month of *Kārttikai* till the end of the *Irāp-pattu* festival, the period is treated as the days when the *Divya Prabandham* should not be recited. During this period all the *tanīyaṅs* for the *Divya Prabandham* are alone recited, as also the *Tecikap-pirapantam* of Vedānta Deśika and the *Upatēcaratnamālai* of Maṇavālamāmunika].

18. G.P. p. 84. This contains a reference to this festival at Śrī Raṅgam.

19. Nāthamuni set the *Prabandham* to music. G.P. p. 74; for dance poses vide *ibid.* p. 84.

20. These are called '*Anadhyayana days*'.

The concluding session in a temple either daily or occasionally as in the case of a festival of the presiding deity, or Āḷvār, or Ācārya has an important item called 'cāttumaṟai', which marks the end of the recitation of both the *Vedas* and the *Nālāyiram*. As in the case of the *Vedas*, there is a general pattern of the commencement of the *Prabhanda cāttumaṟai*. The last two verses of *Tiruppāvai* and the first two verses of *Tiruppallāṅṅu* are recited twice each and then follow the passages which mean the following: 'May the divine command of the respectable Rāmānuja grow strong and grow stronger, with its powers unobstructed in all places or all occasions and at all times. May the divine command of Rāmānuja shine forth every day, pervade to the end of the quarters, for it aims at the welfare of all the worlds. O Lord, please make the glory of Śrī Raṅgam grow strong every day without any trouble'. (This is recited twice). The *Vaṭakalai* school has the *taniyaṅs* of Ātreya Rāmānuja²¹ and Vedānta Deśika²² to be recited next. The *Tenkalai* school recites the *taniyaṅs* of Tiruvāymoḷippilḷai²³ and Maṇavālamāmunikaḷ.²⁴ This is followed by 'vaḷittirunāmam'²⁵ in honour of Vedānta Deśika for *Vaṭakalai* school. This is composed in Tamil and refers to the contribution made by Deśika. Here Deśika is mentioned as having had the grace of Ātreya Rāmānuja and offered a splendid exposition of Nammāḷvār's *Tiruvāymoḷi* and Rāmānuja's *Śrī Bhāṣya*. This is followed by the expression of long life prayed for Vedānta Deśika which means only the continuation of the traditions set up by him. Among them, are mentioned his clear exposition of the *Tamil Vedas*, his agreement with and therefore cherishing the ideals of Tirumaṅkaiāḷvār and the epithet *centamiḷ tuppiḷ* for him which brings out his erudition and proficiency in Tamil and his

21. This begins with the words 'Namōramanujāryāye'

22. This commences with the word 'Rāmānujadayāpātram'.

23. This begins with the words 'Namah śrīsattanāthāya'.

24. This commences with the word 'Śrīsailesādapāpātram'.

25. This consists in the repetition of the name of the Āḷvār or Ācārya who is then glorified associating it with the word 'vāḷi' which expresses the sense of 'wishing for the life' of that Āḷvār or Ācārya as the case may be.

family name 'tuppi' which also means holy (*tū*) grass (*pul*). In the next passage, there is a prayer for the continuation of tradition of the four *Vedas* and the *Veda* of Nammālvār and for the well-being of the worlds. Vedānta Deśika is then wished to live on for one more century. Lastly, it is recited that more praising or admiring the feet of Vedānta Deśika would pave the way for leading a life free from suffering. The day of his birth is then glorified in two verses in which it is mentioned that Vedānta Deśika understood well the worth of Tamil of the lord wearing the Vakuḷa garlands i.e., Nammālvār. The *Tenkala* school's '*vāḷittirunāman*' extols Maṇavālamāmunikaḷ as having had the grace of Tiruvāymoḷip-piḷḷai and given a splendid exposition of the contents of the *Tiruvāymoḷi* of Nammālvār. Then there is a prayer for the long life of Maṇavālamāmunikaḷ which is finally followed by a prayer for the continuation of the tradition of the *bhāgavatas*, for the well being of Śrī Raṅgam, of the *Tamil Veda* of Saṭhakōpa and of the worlds which are surrounded by the seas and a wish to Maṇavālamāmunikaḷ to live for a century more. Besides, there is a '*vāḷittirunāman*' for each Ālvār, which is sung during the celebration of their annual birthday festivals. Each one mentions the number of hymns composed by the particular Ālvār in whose honour the '*vāḷittirunāman*' is composed. The days of birth of Rāmānuja and Maṇavālamāmunikaḷ are also glorified. Thus the temples, where the rituals are performed according to the *Āgamas*, were brought under the influence of the Ālvārs' compositions to such an extent that through the efforts of Rāmānuja, every facility is made available to cherish the worth of and celebrate, through glorification, the contributions of the Ālvārs. The *Tamil Prabandams* have spread beyond the limits of Tamil Nāṭu and are sung in the temples situated in the Mysore and Andhra States.

The Vaiṣṇavite community has been much influenced by the *Divya Prabandham*. Its importance is so well realized that it has deeply penetrated into every aspect of the life of a Vaiṣṇavite. No marriage in a Vaiṣṇavite family is complete without having Āṅṅāls hymn '*vāraṇamayiram*'²⁶ sung in chorus

with the bride and bridegroom made to sit facing each other gently rolling the coconut at each other. The daily ritual of worshipping the deity in the house is done much in the same way as in the temple, though not so elaborately. At the conclusion of the *pūja* the '*cāttumaṇai*' is conducted much in the way of the temple. Devout Vaiṣṇavites take bath early before sunrise every day in the *Markali* month and recite *Tiruppallī-ēluccl* of Toṅṅaraṭippotiyaḷvār and *Tiruppāvai* of Āṅṅā. Again on the occasion of death anniversaries ('*śrāddha*') the Vaiṣṇavites arrange for the recitation of all the four thousand verses or at least any portion which they can arrange for. On the thirteenth day from the date of passing away of an elderly person, there is arrangement for the recitation of the *Vedas* and the *Nālāyiram* and those, who have facilities, take also a procession through the main streets of the locality with these recitations. It is not therefore surprising that both the *Śrāddha* day and this day are called *Tiruvacḥyayana* days.

What a devotee should be like and how should one treat a devotee are in a general way known to have been treated in early Sanskrit sources. The concept of a devotee and of a devotee of a devotee, as it is understood in later Vaiṣṇavism, represents a development of these concepts treated in early sources under the influence of the compositions of the Ālvārs and also the preaching and practice of them by Rāmānuja and his followers for generations. A devotee is not satisfied with what he is able to get due to devotion. He feels immensely pleased when he could share it in the company of other devotees. This practice could be traced to Periyālvār asking others to join him and wish for the welfare of the Lord.²⁷ It is not as if God requires any wishing from the devotees but the devotee cannot even dream that anything untoward could happen to the Lord Whom he loves. Hence his prayer for communion. The devotees of God therefore join together on occasions. They yearn to have such an occasion and are reluctant to leave such a communion

27. *Tiruppallāntu* 4.

easily.²⁸ They have much respect for one another. In such a communion, every devotee realises that God is the Supreme Person and that he is likely to be His servant to render service at His Feet. At the same time, each devotee feels that as an individual he must show respect to a devotee of God. He must perforce treat himself as inferior in order to treat the other as a person to deserve respect at his hands. Since every *bhakta* has the same feeling towards another, the social status of one becoming the superior and the other inferior disappears and inequalities in life become suppressed. No wonder then that a *bhakta* readily prostrates at the feet of another who does the same for the former. In such gatherings, even if there is a visible indication of few of them holding a definite position of advantage over others as *Ācārya* or *Ācārya-puruṣa* having an occasion to exhibit in public their rather relatively superior position, they are respected by others who do not mind their position relegated to the background and openly display their humility which has been the hall-mark of culture in India.²⁹ The behaviour of such men in other gatherings is of a different kind, sometimes smacking of their anxiety to dominate over others.

It is this mental attitude of a Vaiṣṇavite that has been the sole moving force for the efficient conduct of festivals, for which they go in largest numbers, firstly to do service to God and then to other *bhaktas*. One noteworthy feature here is that the *bhakta* is not visiting any shrine for the mere *darśan* as the communities other than those of the Vaiṣṇavites do, but to do service (*kainkarya*) which may be of any kind.³⁰ Bearing the idol of the deity or reciting the *Veda* and the *Nālayiram* or simply to follow in the company of a *bhakta* is considered to be service. Since greater facilities are available for discharging one's duty to the *arcā* form of God, people are found to assemble in large numbers on the occasion of a festival.³¹ It is this that has been the motive behind the

28. cf. the sentiment expressed in *Kural*, 394.

29. The devout Vaiṣṇavite yearns for becoming a servant of a *bhakta*. Vide: T.E. 10; A.P. 1; cf. TVM 3.7; 5.2.

30. Peri. Tm. 2.1; TVM. 1.4; 11; cf. T. Pv. 29.

31. A.P. 10.

desire of people to spend their life in a sacred place.³² Even in the present days when people have to go to far-off places for earning their livelihood, the Vaiṣṇavite community is still found to be inhabiting Tirupati, Kāñci, Kumbakonam, Śrī Raṅgam, Śrī Villiputtūr, Āḷvār Tirunakari and other places spending the time in visiting the shrine. Maturakaviyāḷvār's devotion to Nammāḷvār which did not even admit God to receive it, impressed the community to such an extent that the devotion and service to the Ācārya came to be considered as sacred and obligatory as that which is to be shown to God. It is this that made every Vaiṣṇavite seek an enlightened and accomplished Vaiṣṇavite as his Ācārya. A *taniyan* which is composed glorifying that Ācārya, is recited daily by the devotee. The annual birthday of the Ācārya is celebrated by each disciple in his house or by all such disciples in a common place.

As an individual, the Vaiṣṇavite uses the word 'Āṭiyēn' which means 'humble self' while referring to himself to another Vaiṣṇavite, thereby putting to practice, in himself, the humble behaviour which he was taught by his Ācārya. The same individual refers to the Vaiṣṇavite before him as 'Tēvar' or 'Tēvarir' which means that the latter is a deity or God for him, which shows that every Vaiṣṇavite must practise in himself, the act of treating any Vaiṣṇavite as God Himself. The daily worship that is done in the house is not referred to by the word 'pūja' which is quite common among the Indians but by the word 'ārādhana' which means the act of delighting another. The deity must be served in such a manner by the devotee that he delights the former by his intense devotion and service. The same word 'ārādhana' is used also while respecting the Ācārya and any great devout Vaiṣṇavite. The devotee uses the word 'kuṭicai' (hut) to refer his abode however magnificent it may be and the word 'tirumāḷikai' (mansion) whatever be the insignificant nature of the residence of the Vaiṣṇavite whose abode is referred to. While welcoming a Vaiṣṇavite one uses the expression 'Eḷuntaruḷa vēṇṭum' meaning that he is requested to be with him and confer on him his blessings. All these expressions

reveal very clearly how the Vaiṣṇavite community has been trained to treat the *bhaktas* or for that matter any Vaiṣṇavite, by extending to them the regard which they would show to God Himself. An enlightened attitude of this kind could not have come to prevail but for the preaching of the compositions of the Ālvārs by Nāthamuni and all his followers in the succeeding generations. This has so much permeated the community that no one feels the need for questioning the authority of this kind of behaviour or entertaining any doubt about it. The expressions 'aṭiyār' meaning a servant willing to render services, 'tonṭaraṭip-poṭi' and 'tonṭanukkuṭ-tonṭan'³³ - all reveal how the influence of the Ālvārs' compositions has impressed the community.³⁴ In fact, the names of Ālvārs such as Saṭhakōpaṇ, Maturakavi, Viṣṇucittaṇ, Parakālaṇ are quite common and are borne by the people. The names 'Āṇṭāḷ' and 'Kōṭai' are frequently had by the women of the community and some times by the members of the Saivite community also. Nextly, 'Rāmānuja' and 'Deśika' are too familiar names of the Ācāryas now held by the Vaiṣṇavites. While writing letters one refers to himself as 'caramāvādhi dāsa' meaning that he chooses to be the servant at the lowermost rung of the ladder which is marked by at least six people who are treated by him as his Ācāryas.³⁵

The enlightened attitude of a devotee is such that a particular devotee is admitted to have the freedom and right to sell away another devotee to any one, since the latter feels that he is a devotee of the former.³⁶ It must be remembered in this connection that the word '*bhakti*' is used to refer to the devotion of a self for God and also to the respect which a self has for a devotee. This suggests that the devotee is held in much veneration by others. This is proof that like God, a *bhakta* is the *śeṣi* while a self, as he is to God, is the *śeṣa* to that *bhakta*. Naturally, the conclusion that could be

33. TVM. 6.9: 11.

34. *ibid.* 5.6: 11; 8.10: 11.

35. cf. Periyāl. Tm. 1.1: 6; TVM. 1.10: 3; 2.7: 1; 3.7: 8 to 10; Peri
... Tm. 4.9: 9.

36. Periyāḷ. Tm. 4.4: 10.

drawn from this is that every self considers himself to be the property (*svam*) of the devotee whom he addresses as *svāmin* (the possessor of himself, the property).³⁷ This attitude has grown as a result of the imbibing of the essence of what the Āḷvārs preached through their compositions.³⁸ Kulacēkarāḷvār's use of the word '*Tōṅṅaraṭṭip-poṭi*'³⁹ has much significance. The dust clinging to the feet of the devotees is more sacred than the waters of Gaṅga. Hence the Vaiṣṇavite tradition believes in the practice of taking the *Śripāda tīrttam* of reverential persons. Such devotees are called '*Tōṅṅar*' as they render service to God.⁴⁰

Man cannot but commit sins on account of his ignorance of the nature of Reality. Lack of training in good directions is mainly responsible for this condition. A proper understanding and realization of the need for leading a good ethical life could be achieved by the study of the sacred texts but it is found even persons who have this kind of training do err. So an easier and surer means of correcting one's evil behaviour lies in worshipping the devotees of God. Those who have realized that they are the last devotees (*caramāvadhi-dāsa*) are capable of purifying those who came into contact with them.⁴¹ The moment one makes up his mind to serve the devotees, one is absolved of one's sins.⁴² Even though one would have become a greater sinner by violating the laws of God, one has to get rid of them only by bowing to the devotees. He who bears with patience the harsh words that are uttered by the devotees of God is verily the Vaiṣṇavite.⁴³ The Vaiṣṇavite community of the present day may not be aware of these sources which prove the need for joining the company of the devotees but has been trained by the earlier generations of Vaiṣṇavites to involuntarily seek the company

37. A.P. 1; Peri. Tm. 8.10: 3. cf. TVM. 3.7: 1.

38. This is due to the influence of TVM. 3.7: 9.

39. Perum. Tm. 2: 2.

40. Periyāḷ. Tm. 1.1; T.M. 45.

41. *Līṅgapurāṇam* - uttarabhāga 4.9: 10.

42. TVM. 8.10: 1; Periyāḷ. Tm. 1.1: 9.

43. cf. *Līṅgapurāṇam* 2.4: 9, 10.

of the *bhaktas* and *bhāgavatas*. This may not appear to be peculiar on the face of it to Vaiṣṇavism; but, while they are received as guests in houses and mingle in congregations, the behaviour would show that these traits have penetrated deep into the life of the Vaiṣṇavites only. It is this that explains why men and women, both young and old, proceed to the abode of a great *bhakta* and pay their respects to them. The words '*tanṭam camarppittal*' which means literally 'offering oneself before the respectable persons like a stick' convey how willingly the Vaiṣṇavites have been trained to lie prostrate at the feet of a Vaiṣṇavite and these are accompanied by the use of the words '*Aṭiyēn tāsaṅ*' revealing that the man who bows reveals his humility and refers to himself as a servant ready to carry out any command that he would be called upon to do. Thus these people get the evil effects of the previous deeds removed without themselves being aware of it. These expressions and the concepts underlying their usages have not come to prevail from any Sanskrit source. Having been used by the Āḷvārs, they have found their rightful place in the life of the Ācāryas and have been continuing to the present day.

On the model of reciting the *Divya Prabandham* there has come into existence the system of congregational prayer of which two phases could be mentioned here. One is the singing of the *Tiruppāval* by a band of singers in the early mornings of the Tamil month of *Mārkaḷi*. This is done by the devotees going round the streets of the locality singing the *Tiruppāval* in chorus to the accompaniment of the drone (*ṣrutī*) and the drum.⁴⁴ Āṅṭāḷ herself made a reference to this as '*Caṅkat-tamiḷ mālai*'⁴⁵ (a garland of verses to be sung in chorus). The other kind is singing the names of God called '*nāmaavalis*'.⁴⁶ The Āḷvārs make reference to the latter kind.⁴⁷ Both the kinds come under the *bhajana* type of singing and is a

44. This kind of group-singing is in vogue at Tiruvaiyāru when musicians sing the *Pāñcarātra kṛtis* of Tyāgarāja.

45. T.Pv. 30.

46. These are in vogue specially among the *bhajana* parties.

47. TVM. 3.5 : 1.

mode of worshipping the Lord.⁴⁸ Some of the participants grow rapturous and also dance to the subdued resonant sounds of the drum.⁴⁹ Congregational prayers are of common occurrence and particularly on every Saturday evening, on the *Śrī Jayanti*, *Śrī Rāmanavami*, *Vaikunṭha Ēkādaśī* and similar other occasions. People with deep devotion arrange themselves in more than one *bhajana* party and follow the deity on occasions of festivals through the streets. The participation in *bhajana* parties like this produces a refreshing effect. The material prosperity has come to be looked upon as an appendage and so wealth has been spent for the construction of halls for congregational prayers (*bhajana maṭhs*) and for the creation of trusts to conduct such prayers on occasions. The time spent by people in participating in these prayers is usefully spent. It chastens the soul and promotes the development of good will among the people. Here again, the Āḷvārs' compositions as taught and preached by the Ācāryas have been more instrumental for the development of this spirit among the Vaiṣṇavites particularly among those who occupy rather a low status spiritually and economically also. It is not as if, all other compositions, which are in Sanskrit, are forbidden to be used here. For instance, the *Gopikā-gītā*⁵⁰ and *Mukundamāla* have frequent uses in group singing. The commonest form of *bhajana* has taken the shape of repeating the God's names as many times as possible. The *Viṣṇu-purāṇa*⁵¹ suggests this and more has been contributed in this direction by the Āḷvārs.⁵²

Ever since Rāmānuja passed away, the word '*Rāmānujāye divyājñā*' is repeated every day during *cāttumaṣal* both in the houses and temples. If trust could be placed on the information contained in the source books, Rāmānuja is said to have addressed his disciples thrice when he was about to lay down his mortal frame. The first address was

48. *ibid.* 2.7.

49. *ibid.* 3.5: 2. cf. *ibid.* 5.2.

50. *Bhāg.* P. 10.31.

51. *V.P.* 3.7: 33.

52. *TVM.* 2.7; *M.Tv.* 51, 66; *I.Tv.* 50.

to ask them not to lament his death. He warned them that if they did so, they would have no relationship to the feet of Ālavantār.⁵³ The second address was delivered to the Śrī Vaiṣṇavites to the effect that the Vaiṣṇavites have six services⁵⁴ to discharge as long as they live on earth. They are: (i) the *Śrī Bhāṣya* should be studied and taught to others; (ii) if one is not qualified for this, then he shall show regard to the composition of Nammālvār, thereby indicating that the *Tiruvāymoḷi* should be studied and taught to others; (iii) one shall reside in any one of the places of the Lord, which means that a place where is a shrine for the Lord should be selected for residence; (iv) service is to be rendered to the Lord⁵⁵ and from the context, this must mean only in that sacred place; (v) reflecting or the constant meditation of the *Dvaya-mantra*; (vi) rendering service by becoming the friend of and following the *prapannas*. The use of the expression, 'when there is no qualification', must be taken to be implied in the succeeding cases also, as otherwise, there would result the absurd conclusion that all the five except the first will have to be attended to at one and the same time. This is also recounted in Tamil. The second *kaṅkaryā* is related to the compositions which is referred to as '*aruḷle-ceyal*' which means 'composing after conferring a blessing on the listeners'. Such expressions are used by a writer with reference to the compositions of the Ācāryas whose words are held as authority. In the context, this may be taken to refer to all the Four Thousand verses of the Ālvārs. A verse in Sanskrit is cited in this context which means that the *kaṅkaryā*, which is mentioned as the fourth, shall be discharged by residing in Tirunārāyaṇapuram in the Mysore state.⁵⁶ Vedānta Deśika enumerates all these three in succession,⁵⁷ but mentions five only among them, omitting the third. It is impossible to

53. RTS. pp. 560, 561.

54. This is given in the form of a verse in Sanskrit, vide G.P. p. 190.

55. cf. TVM. 2.6: 5; 3.3: 1.

56. vide G.P., p. 190. The mention of Tirunārāyaṇapuram must be taken to imply an illustration here and so any sacred place may be taken to have been mentioned here.

57. RTS. pp. 562-563.

infer that Rāmānuja did not, according to Vedānta Deśika, include this. From the context containing three addresses Deśika, suggests that a holy place is one where the devotees dwell⁵⁸ and a Vaiṣṇavite shall reside where the Ācaryas are honoured⁵⁹ and make a slashing remark⁶⁰ that even the seven sacred places⁶¹ would cease to be sacred if they do not appeal to the liking of the devotees of Viṣṇu. The third address is regarding the conduct and behaviour of his devotees in society. It can be stated as in the following lines: 'In this life on earth, find out by careful discrimination your friends, enemies and the indifferent. Śrī Vaiṣṇavites are your friends; those who hate God, are your enemies; the worldly are the indifferent ones. Let your heart rejoice at the sight of friends as though you have come across fine betel, flowers and scents. At the sight of your enemies let your heart tremble as though you have faced a snake, a tiger, fire and so forth. At the sight of the indifferent, do not mind them as you would not mind stocks and stones before you. Such should be the conduct of those who have taken refuge in God. Association with your friends, the Vaiṣṇavites, will confer spiritual illumination on you. Shun the company of your enemies and the indifferent too, do not talk to them, never show respect to them in consideration of the worldly benefits thereby accruing to you, for such benefits are sure to make you soon an enemy of God. Remembering that the All-merciful Being is ready to supply you all that you pray for, never beg of your enemies.'

Among these the first is of the nature of advice or direction and could not be referred to as command. Evidently, the second and third addresses which enumerate the services that are to be rendered by a Vaiṣṇavite according to his capacity and treat the attitude of a devotee in social

58. *ibid.*, pp. 620-621.

59. *ibid.*, pp. 622-623.

60. *ibid.*, p. 634.

61. Ayōdhya, Mathura, Māya, Kāsi, Kāñci, Avanti and Dvāraka are mentioned as the seven sacred cities which enable those who reside there get *mokṣa*.

life must be taken to stand for the divine command. Curiously enough, the *Yatindra-pravaṇa-prabhāva* mentions Rāmānuja to have appeared in the dream of Maṇavālamāmuniḥ and asked him to study *Śrī Bhāṣya* at Kāñci under Kiṭāmpi Nāyanar, the grand disciple of Vedānta Deśika and then propagate the commentaries on the compositions of the Ālvārs.⁶² Earlier in his life, Maṇavālamāmuniḥ was asked by his preceptor Tiruvāymoḷip-piḷlai to study the *Śrī Bhāṣya* only once and remain at Śrī Raṅgam by devoting all his life for the propagation of the *Nālayiram*.⁶³ Maṇavālamāmuniḥ's proficiency in the *Nyāya*, *Mīmāṃsā* and *Vyākaraṇa* systems was amazing that he established his superiority in argumentation to the scholars at Kāñci.⁶⁴ Rāmānuja's command was that only he who is not competent to study and teach the *Śrī Bhāṣya* to others, could devote his time to the study and teaching of the *Divya Prabandham*. Maṇavālamāmuniḥ was quite competent to carry out the first-mentioned *kaiṅkarya*. It must be remembered that free and wide choice was not intended by Rāmānuja to be exercised in the selection of the *kaiṅkarya* from the list. Lack of competence of a person to take up a particular service among those enumerated here must be deemed to qualify that person to take up the service mentioned next to that. Rāmānuja would not have meant that a selection of a particular *kaiṅkarya* should be left to the free will of the individual who would be taking to that ignoring completely the divine command of Rāmānuja. It is only the command of the Ācārya, that is Tiruvāymoḷip-piḷlai and not any other consideration that mattered most for Maṇavālamāmuniḥ in the selection of *kaiṅkarya* which is now mostly adopted by the adherents of the *Tenkalai* school. The study and teaching of the *Śrī Bhāṣya* and of *Divya Prabandham*, residence in a holy place, and rendering service in any capacity to that deity were included in order to enable all Vaiṣṇavites who are competent to discharge one duty or other. The other two services would enable all others who could not do

62. *Yatindra-pravaṇa-prabhāva*, p. 42

63. *ibid.* p. 31.

64. *ibid.* p. 43.

any of the above services to be in the Vaiṣṇavite fold so as to give others the delight of being in the gathering of the *bhaktas*. It is saddening to note that this all comprehensive scope of Rāmānuja's command has been lost sight of and narrowed down to have limited applicability not on account of incompetence but because of the exercise of the individual's free will. The expression '*Rāmānujācārya divyājñā*' is repeated as a parrot does every day in every temple, and houses also without realizing the full implication of the holy command.

The *Brahma-sūtras* and Nammālvār's *Tiruvāymoḷi* gained importance in the days before Rāmānuja's. Since both represent the *Upaniṣadic* teachings, both come to be referred to as *Vedānta*. Through his commentary *Śrī Bhāṣya* on the *Brahma-sūtras*, Rāmānuja established the import of the teachings of the *Upaniṣads*. The scholars who immediately preceded Rāmānuja were fully aware of the import of the *Tiruvāymoḷi* as taught by Ājavantār.⁶⁵ Rāmānuja who was initiated in the study of the *Tiruvāymoḷi*⁶⁶ by Tirumālaiyāṅṅān, realized the importance of this composition for Vaiṣṇavism and so authorised Piḷḷān to compose a commentary on this sacred work. He made him also the chief person to be in charge of both the *Vedāntas*.⁶⁷ That the Vaiṣṇavite tradition treats the *Tiruvāymoḷi* as *Vedānta* is evident from the references made by later writers to it as *Drāmidōpaniṣad*,⁶⁸ which means *Upaniṣad* in Tamil. In his *taniyan*⁶⁹ composed in honour of the *Tiruvāymoḷi* Nāthamuni referred to it as representing the essence of the *Upaniṣad* (*Chāṇḍogya*) of the *Sāma-veda*. The first hymn in the *Tiruvāymoḷi* has four lines. The first line which means that the Lord is bliss which is unsurpassed represents the contents of chapters I and II of the *Brahma-sūtras*. The second line which means that the

65. *Yatirājavaibhavam*, 1 which refers to Tirumalai Nampi.

66. *Rāmānuja Aṣṭottara satanāmaṣṭotra*, 6. Here Rāmānuja is referred to as *Vedānta dvyasārajña*, that is, one who knows the essence of the two *Vedāntas*.

67. *ibid.* 108.

68. *cf. Drāmidōpaniṣad-sāra*.

69. This begins with '*Baktāmṛtam*'.

Lord has given the Ālvār the knowledge which is free from ignorance and also devotion, represents the contents of its chapter III. The third and fourth lines mean that the Lord is the head of all the gods and the appeal is made to worship the fact of that Lord which would destroy all miseries and these represent the contents of Chapter IV of Vyāsa's work. The two *Vedāntas* have been connected as supplementing each other. The full import of one is not fully understandable without the proper appreciation of the contents of the other.

Even to those who are not Śrī Vaiṣṇavites the hymns of the Ālvārs and the compositions of Rāmānuja and his followers have brought a particular liking. It is readily admitted that discourses on any episode of the *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata* are enlivened only by the citations and expositions of the hymns of the Ālvārs as recorded in the works of Parācara Paṭṭar, Vaṭakkut-tiruvltip-piḷḷai, Vedānta Deśika and Maṇvālamāmuniḷai and others. Of course, there is a regular programme of such discourses running to months even in certain places like Madras, Tiruccirappalli, Coimbatore and in the north Indian cities also like Bombay and Delhi, not to speak of the arrangement of the *Tiruppāvai* discourses during the month of *Mārkaḷi*. It is thus evident that the essence of what the Ālvārs intended to convey to humanity through their compositions has been propagated by the Ācāryas and besides propagating it, put it also in their practice. The Ācāryas were primarily responsible to make it permeate into the conduct of the temple ritual and into the routine life of a Vaiṣṇavite. This has resulted in the moulding of the character of a Vaiṣṇavite who strives earnestly to live up to the high ideals which he inherits from his own family, Ācārya and *bhāgavatas*. Strifes and quarrels would have become ended if these ideals are kept in view by every Vaiṣṇavite, so that Rāmānuja's divine command would stand true to the description that it is intended to benefit the world.