

TIRUMAZHISAI ALVAR

Dr. PREMANANDA KUMAR



AZHVAR DIVYA PRABANDHA PROJECT

Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams

Tirupati

TIRUMAZHISAI ALWAR

(BHAKTISARA)

PREMA NANDAKUMAR



Published by

SRI D.V.L.N. MURTHY, I.A.S.

Executive Officer

T.T. Devasthanams

Tirupati

1994

TIRUMAZHISAI ALWAR
(Bhaktisara)

By

Prema Nandakumar

T.T.D. Religious Publication Series No: 445

1st Edition : 1994

Copies : 5000

Published by

Sri D.V.L.N. Murthy, I.A.S.

Executive Officer,

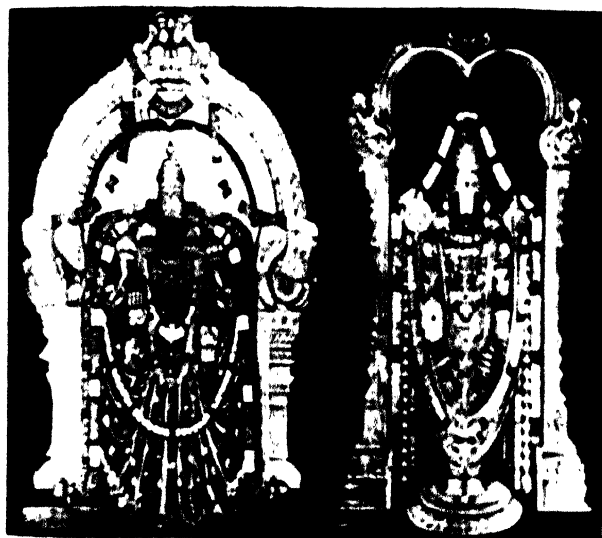
T.T. Devasthanams,

Tirupati.

Printed at

T.T. Devasthanams Press,

Tirupati - 517 507.



PREFACE

Several schools of Hindu religious thoughts have been established by great saints and thinkers. *Visishtadvaita* is one of those schools of thought which was propounded by Ramanujacharya on the basis of *Brahma Sutra* and *Tiruvaimozhi* of Nammalvar. The Hymns of twelve Alvars are instrumental in bringing about Bhakti movement and Prapatti Marga in India.

To spread the message of Alvars and Acharyas, the Divya Prabandha Project was started in the year 1991. To prepare and print small booklets on the lives and works of Alvars first in English and then in other Indian languages has been taken up by the Project and requested many eminent scholars in the field.

One such scholar Dr. Prema Nandakumar, was kind enough and prepared this booklet of Tirumazhisai Alvar. I am grateful to her.

I sincerely hope that this booklet will help the devoted public to worship Lord Venkateswara with understanding and devotion.

D.V.L.N. MURTHY, I.A.S.,

Executive Officer, T.T.D.,

Chairman,

Alvar Divya Prabandha Project

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. THE ALWARS	5
3. LIFE OF THIRUMAZHISAI ALWAR	13
4. NANMUKHAN TIRUVANTHATHI	18
5. TIRUCHCHANDA VIRUTHAM	25
6. CONCLUSION	37
7. SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY	43

• • •

TIRUMAZHISAI ALWAR

Bhaktisara

1. INTRODUCTION

The Dravidian land - India, south of the Vindhya - has never been a stranger to the path of devotion. Though there were deities like *Kotravai* and *Sevvel* worshipped by the Tamils, Narayana was also worshipped as *Mayon* and *Tirumal*. This may be seen from the earliest extant Tamil lyrics going back by two thousand years. By the time of *Paripadal* (3rd century A.D.), the religious mythology of Vaishnavism had been deeply and widely imbedded in the Tamil consciousness. In a series of lyrics, *Paripadal* describes Narayana as sleeping on *Adisesha*, with *Lakshmi* on his breast. The *Varaha* incarnation which guarded the world and saved the Vedas; the *Narasimha* incarnation that put an end to *Hiranyakasipu's* egoism; the *Vyuhas* of Vishnu as *Vasudeva*, *Sankarshana*, *Pradyumna* and *Anirudda*; *Krishna* dancing with the pots along with the cowherdesses; and the destruction of *Kesi* are some of the other references in *Paripadal* which incidentally proclaims the all-pervading nature of *Tirumal*:

*Your heat and glow are seen in the sun,
Your coolness and softness in the moon,
Your compassion and grace in the rains,
Your guardianship and patience in the earth,
Your scent and brilliance in the blossoms,
Your image and wideness in the waters,
Your form and sound in the space
Your appearance and withdrawal in the wind,
Therefore this, that, the rest and everything else
Have descended from you
Yet are dependent upon you.*¹

¹ Translated by Prema Nandakumar.

Though Tamil Nadu had thus a native ethos associated with Narayana worship during the Sangham Age, there followed several centuries when Hinduism itself came under an eclipse. Buddhism and Jainism waxed strong till the appearance of the Alvars and the Nayanmars who propagated Vaishnavism and Saivism respectively. These hymnologists travelled to the remotest villages on the map and gave a new life to temples and temple worship that had fallen into disuse. In the wake of these singers who spoke in the idiom of the common man and brought him face to face with the Divine over-stepping the priest-dominated frigid ritualism of sacrificial rituals, a tremendous enthusiasm took hold of the Tamils. Temple-building became a passion and personal worship a way of life.

The hymns of the Alvars contained several soul-satisfying facets for the aspirant who had become increasingly alienated from the Sanskrit used in rituals and sacrifices. When the Alvars sang in Tamil, the hymns came as a revelation for the devotees who could comprehend and envision the Supreme easily now. The message of love conveyed by the hymns struck a responsive chord in the devotees' heart. Ritualism took a back seat as the devotee approached the image of God directly, singing the hymns of the Alvars. And if a priest or two did stand in the way of the devotees's drawing close to the *archa* form in the temple, why there were other ways of worshipping the Divine, as the Alvars had given an assurance that a devotee can make the Divine's image as he pleased:

*"He takes the form desired by the devotees,
Accepts the name decided upon by them,
Even as they love and envision Him
And meditate upon Him ceaselessly,
He becomes that image."¹*

Such was the tremendous impact of the devotional hymns of the Alvars that the bhakti cult spread all over India with incredible speed. Tukaram and Eknath, Kabir and Meera, Surdas and Tulsidas, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and Guru Nanak are but the few names in the transformed religio-spiritual map of India.

¹ *Poykai Alvar*

That is why the Maiden, Bhakti is said to have been born in Dravida land, *utpannah Dravidechaham*.

The Alvars had not gone out of the Vedic stream; yet they had turned in the right direction to suit the new conditions imposed by non-Vedic religions like Jainism and Buddhism. Like the Jains and Buddhists, the Alvars used the language of the common man for accession of spiritual strength. If Kannada, Marathi, Telugu, Gujarati, Hindi, Bengali and Punjabi languages are today replete with the finest in devotional hymnology, it has been mainly due to the big change ushered in by the Tamil hymns in *Nalayira Divya Prabandham*.

Tradition speaks of a dark period in Tamil social and political life when the works of the Alvars were forgotten. It was by sheer accident that a priest, Ranganathamuni, famous as Nathamuni, heard ten verses of Nammalvar's *Tiruvaimozhi* in the temple of Kattumannarkoil (Veeranarayanapuram) sung by some pilgrims. This was the 'Aravamude' decad dedicated to the presiding deity of the Kumbakonam temple

"O Aravamuda' My body does melt
With love for you, O Narayana'
You rest in Tirukkudanthai
Rich in streams and fanned by sheaves
Ripe with corn' I have seen you'
My lord, my Pure One, my King'
You often transform yourself
Into different forms, O loveliness'
In Tirukkudanthai with streams
Where blow large red lotuses,
My lotus-eyed Lord rests,
What shall I do'
What shall I do? Who is my Saviour?
What do you propose to do with me?
I have no desire for anything but you
Lord resting in Tirukkudanthai
Mid a gloriously raised fortress'
May all my tomorrows be spent
In holding fast your divine feet.'"

Overwhelmed by the sublime verses that were infinitely sweet, easy to understand and holy to meditate upon, Nathamuni noted that the closing verse of the decad referred to "these ten of that thousand":

*"He snuffed out the life
Of heavy-boned Putana
By sucking her breast,
Kurukur's Satakopa has surrendered
To this Krishna and has indited
One thousand verses
Rivalling the notes of a flute
Those who can recite these ten
Of that thousand, will become
The darlings of angels ¹"*

So there was a work of thousand lovely verses dedicated to Narayana! But the pilgrims did not know any more except that the author of the work, Nammalvar belonged to Kurugur on the banks of the Tambraparni.

Nathamuni went to Kurugur. In the course of his enquiries he came across Parankusa who came in the lineage of Madhurakavi who had been Nammalvar's earnest disciple and who had indited ten verses upon his Guru. Nathamuni was taught the verses by Parankusa and told that the Guru could be propitiated by reciting these verses. Nathamuni was an adept in yoga. Accordingly, he went into a yogic trance repeating the 'Kanninun-Siruthambu' decad of Madhurakavi 12,000 times in front of the holy Tamarind Tree in Adinatha's temple.

Such deep aspiration must necessarily be echoed by the answering Grace. Nammalvar appeared to Nathamuni and gifted to him the entire *Tiruvaimozhi*. Indeed, he went further. On a request, he gave Nathamuni the works of the rest of the Alvars as well. Nathamuni codified the verses in its present form and arranged for its propagation through music recitations and scholarly discourses. His chief disciples, Krishnamacharya and Varadacharya, helped scores of trained singers to present the

verses in temples during the time of worship. This tradition had been kept alive these one thousand years and even today the Arayar Sevai in the Srirangam Temple is a much-cherished institution.

After Nathamuni, Ramanuja inaugurated the Age of Ubhaya Vedanta. Later on some learned Vaishnavite acharyas like Tirukurukai Piran Pillan, Peria Achan Pillai and Nampillai Wrote extensive commentaries on the verses in the *Nalayira Divya Prabandham*. Gaining a position equal with the Sanskrit heritage, the four thousand verses are now an integral part of the devotional literature of Sri Vaishnavism

THE ALVARS

Twelve Alvars have contributed to the hymns in the *Nalayira Divya Prabandham*. They are Poykai, Bhutam, Pey, Bhaktisara (Tirumazhisai), Kulasekhara, Vipranarayana (Tondaradippodi), Tiruppan, Tirumangai, Vishnuchitta (Perialvar), Goda devi (Andal), Satakopa (Nammalvar) and Madhurakavi. It is generally held that the Alvars belong to the period between 2nd and 9th century A.D.

Poykai, Bhutam and Pey are known as the first three Alvars. There is a significant story attached to them that implies a mystic origin to the *Nalayira Divya Prabandham*.

The three Alvars who were contemporaries were on a pilgrimage worshipping Vishnu in different temples and they happened to meet in Tirukoilur. It was raining heavily and so they sought shelter in the front room of a house. It was a very small place and the first to come in was Poykai Alvar, who lay down. Presently Bhutattalvar entered and now there was enough space for both only to sit. There was no let-up in the rain and as they sat meditating, Pey Alvar came to the place seeking shelter. So the three of them stood there repeating the Lord's name. Just then it began to appear as if they were being pressed together by a fourth person. It was a feeling, a presence and yet quite palpable.

The mystic Presence illumined in a flash the true nature of Reality to Poykai, Bhutam and Pey Alvars. The gnostic experience opened up the floodgates of sovereign devotional poesy for it was not inferential knowledge but direct perception that had brought the Alvars to the Divine. And what had they understood? Simply, that the whole creation is God and the devotee uses the world of phenomena to offer his thanksgiving to the Creator of this world. So Poykai sang:

*"With the world as bowl, the sea as ghee,
The fiery sun as the kindled wick, I have strung a garland of
praise for His feet,
For one who holds the red-flamed discus,
So as to cross this sea of troubles "*

There is a world within man which matches the external world and this too can be recognised clearly by intuition. Bhutattalvar uses the inner countries of this mind for his adoration:

*"Devotion as the bowl, aspiration as ghee,
Meditative delight as the wick,
Such the flaming lamp of knowledge
I have lighted for Narayana
Whom I have served through scriptural Tamil "*

When the outer and the inner worlds thus move in rhythm, all contraries disappear. One sees the One unalterable Truth everywhere. God appears then as Redemptive Grace, as recorded by the third aspirant at Tirukoilur, Pey Alvar:

*"I have seen Lakshmi, the golden form
Of my Lord brilliant as the sun,
The golden discus that veers ferocious
In the battle-ground, also the conch
In the hand of my sea-hued Lord "*

The Vedic invocations to Sri are experiential realities to the Alvars and they transcend the human barriers effortlessly. As Dr. K.C. Varadachari says:

"The divine love of God is such that one enters into the very being of God, losing oneself in the rapture of God's inner nature.

A new perception of the Reality happens, which is altogether different from what one perceives from the point of view of the world or the individual. The divinely possessed one perceives the world and all with the over-welling love that God has for his creation. It is no longer with human love that one loves God; but with God-love that one perceives the world and all. This is *parama-bhakti*, not merely transcendent, but superior verily to that also."¹

The three Alvars sang a hundred hymns each. These three hundred verses are the starting point of the *Dvaya Prabandham* canon. Thirumazhisai Alvar was their younger contemporary and thus among the earliest Alvars. The eminent historian, Mu. Raghava Iyengar has assigned him to the 7th century A.D. Tradition speaks of Thirumazhisai Alvar having been a devotee of Shiva. It was Pey Alvar who made him realise the glory of Narayana as the only sanctuary to gain salvation

The Alvars hailed from different strata of life. Kulasekhara Alvar was a king of Chera land and was an intense devotee of Rama. His attachment to Ranganatha who was worshipped by Rama himself was phenomenal. Tired with the purposeless cycle of pomp and power, Kulasekhara abdicated and settled down in Srirangam and spent his life worshipping Ranganatha. His *Perumal Tirumozhi* consisting of 105 verses are luminous examples of absolute self-surrender to the Divine. He was a master of simile as the following examples show

"Like a patient's love towards his surgeon
Who cuts him and brands him,
I shall aspire only for your love
Even if you should heap on me
Endless anguish as you wish'
O Lord of Vitruvakkodu'
Lord of Vitruvakkodu who destroyed
The terrible elephant' Whither shall I flee
To be saved except to your feet'
I am like the bird in mid-sea
And returns to the ship's flag-pole top"²

1. *Alvars of South India* (1966), p. 22

2. 5, iv-v

Another Alvar who made Srirangam his residence was Vipranarayana. A devout brahmin, he performed *pushpa kainkarya* (offering flower garlands for worship) to Ranganatha. Unfortunately for him, he fell a victim to the wiles of a courtesan, Devadevi. He lost his property to her and was thrown out of his garden. Ranganatha in the guise of a servant took a golden vessel from the temple and gave it to the courtesan as a gift from Vipranarayana. The king's guards took hold of the hapless brahmin who was accused of stealing a golden cup used for Ranganatha's worship. Finally the Lord took pity on him and announced his innocence. Vipranarayana returned to his service and life of pure devotion. Henceforth he called himself Tondaradippodi (Dust of the feet of the devotees) and indited *Tirupalliezhuchi* and *Tirumalai* in praise of Ranganatha. These hymns are among the most mellifluous in the *Nalayira Divya Prabandham*. *Tirupalliezhuchi* is a matin song of ten verses that is sung at dawn in temples dedicated to Vishnu.

*"The birds chirp in the flowering groves'
Darkness has vanished, dawn has entered
The gardens, from the eastern horizon
The sound of waves is spreading everywhere
The Immortals have come carrying garlands
That are fresh, woven with a variety
Of flowers touched by joyous bees
My Lord who resides in the temples
Where the King of Lanka comes to worship'
Rise, O rise, Lord of Srirangum!"¹*

Tirumalai has forty-five verses and contains high philosophy, a deep love of nature and an ecstatic envisioning of the Divine:

*"A body like an emerald mountain,
Coral lips, eyes like red lotuses,
O Archuta! Lord of Immortals!
For the sake of this supernal experience
I will reject even the lordship
Of the kingdom of Indra
O Resident of Srirangam city"*

*Even should men reach the Vedic span
 Of one hundred years, half of it
 Gets lost in sleep; of the rest,
 Fifteen for childhood's innocence,
 The rest to be divided between sickness,
 Hunger, old age and sorrows,
 Hence I do not want another birth,
 O Resident of Srirangam city!¹*

The gentle Tiruppan Alvar belonged to the caste of itinerant musicians (*panar*), once considered 'untouchable'. Born in Uraiyur near Srirangam, he spent long hours on the banks of the Kaveri playing the lute and praising the Lord. Once when he remained self-lost in this manner, Lokasaranga, a priest of the temple came to the river. As Tiruppan was in the way, Lokasaranga's assistants stoned him for his arrogance. Coming to himself, Tiruppan retired in all humility. The same night Ranganatha appeared in Lokasaranga's dream and commanded him to bring Tiruppan into the temple.

Tiruppan was quite overwhelmed when on the following day Lokasaranga insisted upon carrying him to the sanctum sanctorum. The ineffable vision of Lord Ranganatha in yogic trance brought forth ten verses of utmost beauty from Tiruppan's devotion-drenched heart. Even as he completed reciting his verse, he merged with the Lord:

*"He tore up the large body of the demon
 Hiranya; He is the Supreme
 Who is not easily approachable,
 Even for the Immortals, the Home-of-All,
 The Pure One of Srirangam
 His large eyes that are dark,
 Vast, bright and red-veined
 Have indeed rendered me mad."²*

Tirumangai Alvar is certainly the most colourful of the twelve devotional hymnologists. A petty chieftain, Tirumangai married

¹ verses 2 & 3

² verse 8.

Kumudavalli who was a great devotee of Narayana. Together they spent their immense wealth in feeding pilgrims. When he had nothing left, Tirumangai took to high-way robbery. And who should come as his willing victim but Ranganatha himself? Tirumangai spent long years of his life in Srirangam constructing and strengthening the temple's fortress walls.

He has written six works which are listed as *Peria Tirumozhi*, *Tirukkurundhandakam*, *Tirunedundhandakam*, *Tiruvezhukutirirukai*, *Siriya Tirumadal* and *Peria Tirumadal*. A great traveller, his poems are couched in powerful diction that conveys the inner life of a spiritual seeker with great honesty. Here is the first verse from *Peria Tirumozhi*:

*"I drooped in all my yesterdays,
Mental pain was my lot as I took birth
In this world of sorrows, pursued maidens,
All for bodily pleasures, and then,
During such rushing around, by His grace
I stepped into the true knowledge
That leads to Realisation. I aspired
And gained in the end the name, Narayana."*¹

Perialvar has been given the pride of place in *Nalayira Divya Prabandham* because his "Pallandu" verses are not a prayer but a benediction to the Lord! Such was his superior bhakti. He was the first to see the Lord as a little child. His verses on the childhood, boyhood and youth of Krishna initiated a new genre in Tamil literature known as 'Pillait-Tamil'. Here one watches the Divine with a double vision. Even as we see the child as one given to the play, pranks and pleasantries of an ordinary mortal being, we gain a vision of the extraordinary Divine Presence. Perialvar's verses describing the flute-play of Krishna are sweet and sublime:

*"He is like the rising, ruin-bearing cloud
With a face crowned by tresses
That image a drove of bees around a lotus
When the deers heard this Krishna's flute
They forgot grazing, let fall the grass*

¹ verse 1-1-1

*From their mouths, and stood still
As if they were a painting of stute deer "*¹

Perialvar was instrumental in teaching the Pandyan ruler Vallabhadeva of the name and nature of Narayana who is the secret of the Vedas. The pleased ruler presented him with a bag of gold and honoured him. Perialvar returned to Srivilliputtur where he engaged himself in tending a garden and offering the Lord Vatapatrasayi garlands of fresh flowers.

The bhakti-laden atmosphere of Perialvar's household moulded his foster daughter, Goda Devi. Also known as Andal, Goda Devi surrendered to Narayana completely. She would not hear of taking part in mundane life and rejected marriage. Her bridegroom would have to be Narayana. So real was her identification with the deity in the Srivilliputtur temple that she would wear the garlands prepared by her father for Vatapatrasayi's worship. On discovering the sacrilege, Perialvar admonished her but the Lord assured him that Andal's act was a pleasure and made the garlands dear to the Divine. Henceforth she came to be known as *choodi-k-kuduthal* (amukta malyada). When on a pilgrimage to Srirangam, she gained an ineffable vision of the Lord and merged with him. Andal's verses bring to the Divya Prabandham the total intensity of bridal mysticism. The thirty verses of her *Tiruppavai* describe the vrata performed by young girls in Margasirsa month and has a scriptural finality and great poetic beauty about it. Here young girls awaken one another and then wake up the lord and pray to him for eternal serviteurship, the mark of a true Vaishnava:

*"Listen to the significance of our coming
Quite early in the morning to worship
Your feet that are golden lotuses'
Born in the clan of cattle-grazers,
You cannot escape receiving our service
This vow was not for obtaining a Drum
For births seven times seven we are yours
We will serve only you, O Govinda'
Please chase away all other desires in us "*²

¹ Perialvar Tirumozhi, 3-6, ix

² Verse 29

Madhurakavi Alvar's ten verses in the *Divya Prabandham* are not addressed to Narayana but His greatest devotee, Nammalvar. It is said that Madhurakavi was the first to discover Nammalvar's spiritual brilliance when he asked the hitherto silent young man: "If a soul is born of matter, what does it eat and where does it rest?" Pat came the reply: "It eats That (the divine) and would lie there (in Matter)". From now on Madhurakavi the brahmin scholar from Tirukolur spent his days with Nammalvar, born in a farmer's caste. The eleven verses sung by him begin with the word 'Kanninun-Siruthambu' which means a rope made of tiny knots:

*"My wondrous Lord allowed himself
To be bound by a rope of tiny knots;
Yet sweeter than Him is Nambi
Of South Kurugur for me, my tongue
Springs nectar speaking of him."* ¹

Nammalvar is a term of endearment applied to Satakopa and because of his sterling services in propagating Vaishnavism, he is known as *prapanna jana kootastha* (head of aspirant souls) as he retold vedic truths in the everyday language of the common man, Tamil. His *Tiruviruttam* presents the different stops in the mystic's way: aspiration, the dark night of the soul, prostration, vision. *Tiruvasiriyam* reflects Vedic truths with poetic grace by drawing forth the figure of Narayana from the Nature that is visible to the human eyes:

*"Wearing the yellow garment
Bejewelled from the crown downwards
Flame-lipped and red-eyed,
Your green glorious body
Reclines on a snake
That's poisonous and fierce
You then appear to me
As the emerald mountain grand
That's adorned with red clouds,
The russet sun and the pleasant moon
Lying on the Sea-King's palm*

*Mid the clamorous waves
 You sleep in yogic silence.
 There Siva, Rudra and other gods
 Make obeisance to you.
 O king with the lotus navel!
 O Lord whose feet measured
 The three worlds!*¹

Peria Thiruvanthathi shows how one's mind can be trained to become an instrument to comprehend the Divine. Nammalvar's *Tiruvaimozhi* is a spiritual kaleidoscope that helps us draw close to the Divine. It is also the most musical of Nammalvar's compositions.

These twelve Alvars had initiated a bhakti revolution that transformed the spiritual map of India for all time to come.

3. LIFE OF TIRUMAZHISAI ALVAR

The life of Thirumazhisai Alvar has become inextricably entwined with strange mythology. Traditional accounts say that he was born to a recluse, Bhargava Muni and his wife at Thirumazhisai, near Madras. The babe was born as a lump of flesh and the parents abandoned it. However, the lump grew limbs and was found by a man of low caste, Tiruvalan. Tiruvalan and his wife adopted the child. The divine aura around the child attracted a devoted couple who offered him milk daily. By the grace of the child, the couple had a boy, Kanikannan. Kanikannan was to become Thirumazhisai Alvar's companion in his spiritual odyssey.

In our own times we have had Ramakrishna Paramahansa who sought to understand the core of several religions by adopting various religious disciplines at different stages of his sadhana. In the same way, Thirumazhisai Alvar is said to have adopted different religions. Thus he was by turns a follower of the Sankhya system, Buddhism and Jainism. He seems to have been a very devout Saiva for a while earning for himself the

sobriquet, Sivavakkiyar. There are poems attributed to a Siddha called Sivavakkiyar and attempts have been made to identify Thirumazhisai Alvar with him.

It was when Thirumazhisai Alvar came to Mylapore that a tremendous transformation took place in him. Hitherto he had been experimenting with various religions and proudly announcing his victory in philosophical and theological disputes. He had not met a match for his powers of disputation till he met Pey Alvar in Mylapore.

Pey Alvar was no disputant, but he glowed with Realisation for he had come face to face with the Divine. He exemplified an individual's affirmation of the Divine Essence as a particular *vibhuti* directly seen along with His Prakriti. K.C. Varadachari traces to this vision of Pey Alvar, the origin of Sri Vaishnava theology:

"The Mother had been brought into the vision of God, and this experience has become cardinal to the entire theology of Sri Vaishnavism, which emphasises that Sri is the principle of redemptive grace which operates on and through every function of the Divine Lord-cause. Nothing in this world is Graceless, all evil; for, at the bottom of all is the operation of purest Grace, a grace-power that is omnipotent, leading the soul to its transcendent destiny, acting as the teacher and Mother and all."¹

Pey Alvar seems to have travelled widely, but retained a particular fondness for Tirupati whose scenic beauties are recorded by him with pleasure in the *Moonram Thiruvanthathi*. There is a gentleness about his handling of words and feelings and he is never in doubt about the Grace of the Lord. He is fond of the Vamana avatars where the Lord's microcosmic manifestation assumes macrocosmic proportions, indicating the all-pervading nature of the Lord and His Grace:

¹ *Alvars of South India*, pp. 21-2.

*"As Lord, earth, the eight corners,
As Vedas and their meaning, as sky,
This Lord of Venkata with flooding water-falls
Is also in our hearts "1*

A Child-like, pure faith marks Pey Alvar's devotion. Just consign ourselves to the Lord's Grace as a child clings to the mother!

*"By reciting the names of the Lord
Who sports the right-curling conch, we attract
Brilliance, strength, riches, beauty,
Birth in a blameless family and all the best
That comes to us of their own accord "2*

To this person of crystalline faith came the disputant unparalleled, the Alvar of Thirumazhisai. He found Pey Alvar engaged in a strange task. Pey Alvar was planting seedlings with the roots upward and trying in vain to water them with the help of a pot full of holes. Maybe this devotee is really mad!

But then Pey Alvar began to explain. The hopeless task had been undertaken for the benefit of Thirumazhisai Alvar who was then wasting his lifetime in meaningless disputations. It was *experience* of the Divine that mattered and not an *explanation* of His presence. Mere verbiage, the reasonings of logic and the abracadabra of ritualism cannot reveal the Divine. One must till the inner countries of the mind, reject the vanities of one's vital and physical natures. One must have a single-hearted aspiration for the Ananda of divine consciousness. When one's sincerity and surrender is total, the divine dissolves one's ego in a supernal experience.

Thirumazhisai Alvar was thus inducted in a trice into the kingdom of God. When Pey Alvar found that Sivavakkiyar had gained the shoreless ocean of Narayana Darsan, he called him Bhaktisara. For, Thirumazhisai Alvar's apostolic exuberance would bring immeasurable gain to Srivaishnavism which is based

1 verse 39

2 verse 10

in bhakti yoga. After spending some time in the holy company of Pey Alvar, Bhaktisara returned to his birthplace and began practising yoga in tune with his devotion for Narayana as the Creator.

The life of Bhaktisara as a devotee of Narayana is encrusted with various legends to extol his Vishnu-bhakti. For instance, it is said that once an occultist, Shaktiharan, was flying in the air on his tiger mount. As the tiger could not fly above the place where Bhaktisara was repairing torn clothes, Shaktiharan came down. Saluting the sage, the occultist offered him a golden raiment to replace his rags but was astonished when Bhaktisara showed him a bejewelled armour on his body. He was also non-plussed when Bhaktisara's garland of Tulsi beads turned into a necklace of jewels.

After sometime, Bhaktisara found occultism a tiresome occupation. He entered yogic meditation in a cave and was discovered by Poygai, Bhutam and Pey Alvars. The foursome thrilled to the discovery of the Infinite as Narayana and were together for a while. After the first three Alvars left on their holy peregrinations, Bhaktisara remained in Tiruvallikkeni for a few months. Then he settled down in Tiruvehka near Kanchipuram.

Hagiology has several dramatic encounters of Bhaktisara in this place. Kanikannan was the Alvar's assistant in the Tiruvehka retreat. An old courtesan of the area took upon herself the task of keeping the premises of their residence neat. One day Bhaktisara expressed his satisfaction for the sincere service of the old maid. She thanked him and stood aside. As a token of his appreciation, Bhaktisara said spontaneously: "May you regain your youthful loveliness!" Wonder of wonders! The miracle happened and she regained her youthful looks.

The Pallava king of Kanchipuram fell in love with her and married her. Years passed. He became old, but the maid remained young. Questioned, she told him that her eternal youth was the gift of Bhaktisara. Since the king was still a slave to the physical body, he wished to invite Bhaktisara to the court through Kanikannan. To his chagrin, Kanikannan said that his spiritual mentor could not be commanded by anyone.

In fact, even he, the servant of Bhaktisara, could not be ordered about by anyone! Kanikannan also refused to pray to the Lord to favour the king with eternal youth.

The Pallava king was enraged. As Kanikannan refused to sing in praise of the king as well, he was exiled. Kanikannan reported the matter to Bhaktisara. The Alvar was delighted with the stand taken by Kanikannan. Standing in front of the Lord in the Tiruvehka temple, he burst out in song:

*"Kanikannan is going, O Lord
Of lovely Kanchipuram,
The gracious poet, me, ever brave,
Am also going. Come, fold up
Your bed of hooded snake!"*

After reciting the verse Bhaktisara followed Kanikannan into exile. O marvel! The Lord acted upon his devotee's fiat, folded up his serpent-bed and followed Bhaktisara! When the Supreme walked away thus, the other godheads of Kanchipuram followed suit. The city, famed for its prosperity and rich populace was rendered a desert in no time.

Flabbergasted, the king realised his folly when his ministers begged him to act wisely. All of them went to Bhaktisara and prayed for forgiveness. The gracious Alvar returned to the Lord of Tiruvehka and said:

*"Kanikannan is not going, O Lord
Of lovely Kanchipuram! Remain here
I, the poet, have decided to stay
Spread again your serpent-bed*

The Lord returned to the temple and all was well again in Kanchipuram. The story is yet another proof of the glorious state of Tamil poetry in those days. In the presence of an inspired Tamil poet, God Himself was a felt Presence.

Along with Poygai, Bhutam and Pey Alvars, Bhaktisara propagated the Tamil language by writing mellifluous Tamil lyrics which attained wide popularity. Truly are these hymnologists the 'Perum Thamizhar' who inspired a vast devotional litera-

ture in a language which had till then been used mostly for secular purposes. It may be safely said that the Tamil language itself came to be equated with the divine presence in the time of Bhaktisara.

After residing in Kanchipuram for a while, Bhaktisara and Kanikannan proceeded to Kumbakonam. Hagiology speaks of Bhaktisara's helping some Vedic brahmins in their ritualistic studies, in spite of belonging to a low caste. When some brahmins performing a sacrifice decried him for his presumption to achieve a status equal to themselves, he transformed himself into an image of Vishnu holding a blazing discus, thus underlining the significance of his presence on earth to put down false religions.

Having reached the temple of Aravamudhan, Bhaktisara prepared to salute the Lord. The garden-girt temple was beautiful and here was the devotee come after a tedious and hard journey. For the Alvar, the image of the Lord in the lying position appeared as real as himself. So he began speaking to the Lord, wondering why he had chosen the recumbent position:

"Did your feet get tired by walking?

The body seek rest for digging out

The earth as the terrible boar?

On the banks of Kaveri spread with woods,

Spaces of desert and running brooks

You are resting. O Kesava!

Just get up and speak to me!"

The Lord raised himself up a little and entered into a dialogue with the devotee. A definite bond was forged between Bhaktisara and Lord Aravamudhan of Kumbakonam. Henceforth the Alvar remained in the city throughout his life and spent his days in spreading Vishnu bhakti. Perhaps this is why he is referred to as 'Kudamookil Bhagavatar', the Vishnu Devotee of Kumbakonam.

4. NANMUKHAN TIRUVANTHATHI

For the first time in the history of Vaishnava literature, we find Bhaktisara dealing with the vyuha theory according to the

Pancharatra Agama. The aim of the Alvar is to establish the supremacy of Narayana over all the godheads envisioned by man since the time of the Vedas. During the vedic times deities like Indra had a leading place in the thought-processes of devotees. By the Puranic times it was obvious that only Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva had places of prominence in the divine hierarchy. Here again, Vishnu had an edge and Bhaktisara decided to establish once and for all the truth that the Indwelling Universal, the all-pervading Divine, is none but Narayana. Towards this end, he wrote his closely argued devotional masterpiece, *Nanmukhan Tiruvanthathi*.

It is obvious that after absorbing various doctrines, Bhaktisara had been vouchsafed the true nature of the Supreme in his yogic vision. He refers to this in the very first verse of *Nanmukhan Tiruvanthathi*:

*"Brahma was created by Narayana,
The four-faced Brahma, the first being
Created, gave rise to Shankara,
I am the first to understand this truth
And now make it known to all
This may be understood as such by you as well."*

Among the Alvars Bhaktisara alone uses unhesitatingly eloquent words to underline Narayana's supremacy amongst all that is created as well as all that remains unmanifest. When it comes to the One Supreme, Bhaktisara will stand for no compromising phrases, which gives us an idea of his fiery stand in theological debates. Certainly such a position make it appropriate to consider him as an emanation of the Lord's discus.

Comprising ninety-six verses, the *Nanmukhan Tiruvanthathi* juxtaposes skillfully the unrealisable supremacy of Narayana as well as His compassion that leads to the realisable, manifest form.

*"Who has known him as I have,
The Lord of the Milky Ocean
Who yet came down to Srirangam
Of yore, lay on the banyan leaf,*

*The One cause of creation,
The essence of godheads above,
The life of beings that lay hidden
In waters at the time of creation¹*

Any chance to compare and prove the supremacy of Narayana is welcome to Bhaktisara. He flashes out: how can we ever accept that Shiva could have a hand in this creation? Shiva but holds in his head the waters of the Ganga who had washed the feet of Narayana. In fact it is Narayana who withdraws creation into himself and then lets it out with himself remaining immanent in gods, men, animals and plants. Bhaktisara considers it a pity that the Jains, the Buddhists and Shaivites do not recognise the obvious truth. He sighs that they must ever remain in the slushes of ignorance.

With electric ease, Bhaktisara assures Narayana that even as he is the sole Lord, His existence can be assured only by the presence of a devotee like Bhaktisara! The devotee-poet takes a special pride in repeatedly referring to the Puranic stories that uphold the supremacy of Narayana. In fact, godheads like Brahma and Shiva cannot ever exhaustively praise Narayana, such being their limitations. All the more it is important for pigmy man to utilise all his gifts to draw near the Lord.

*"The Lord with tresses
Decorated by Tulsi leaves
Has for long loved me
Not wasting a moment
Salute and meditate upon Him
With bowed head worship Him
Offering cool blossoms
May your lips praise Him,
Your eyes feast upon His image
And ears listen to His deeds "²*

According to Bhaktisara, the Lord's love and compassion are boundless. He had saved the moon from extinction and helped

¹ Verse, 3

² Verse, 11

Gajendra. To get the Lord's help, there is no need for self-torturing vows and penances. He helps through many channels. As Shiva, he had saved Markandeya¹ There is nothing that is impossible for him when his devotee's future is at stake. Had he not covered the sun with his discus to enable Arjuna kill Jayadratha?

Bhaktisara goes on to say that Rudra taught Agasthya, Daksha, Pulastya and Kasyapa the right manner of worshipping Vishnu who resides in the Milky Ocean and the banyan leaf. Limitless are the forms of Vishnu and each one is a pathway to divine consciousness. There is Narasimha who cleft in twain Hiranyakasipu's breast. Those devotees who cling to the feet of even the worshippers of Narasimha gain a higher plane of Ananda. But then, is there any part of creation that is not Vishnu? All, all is he:

*"You are the Lord of the world
Whose Grace grants Release
You are the Lord
Of all Immortals
Fire, immense mountains,
All things within the eight directions,
The sun and the moon
All, all these are you"*¹

Even the terrible glory of creation becomes a supracosmic beauty in terms of the Lord's manifestation. The Narasimha incarnation illustrates this transformative presence powerfully.

*"These' - the terribilita that burst
From the pillar' Fire-belching eyes -
These' They flash, but are beautiful
When the Lord of Immortals
Dons the lion's garb."*²

Bhaktisara's poem then passes on to the all-pervading love that is the abiding nature of this Lord of creation. He is the saving Grace for those who surrender to him. As the primal

¹ Verse, 20

² Verse 21

cause beyond our normal vision and as the iconic form for our immediate worship the divine keeps close to His creation – us. He is “come to my heart, banishing its darkness”, come like the Hound of Heaven seeking a place in the devotee’s heart:

*“Who equals me? Not even He,
For He has no saviour Green-hued Lord!
Others know thee not
Where is the price
To buy my precious knowledge?”¹*

Thus, love is the secret of the Lord’s limiting himself into an incarnation. He is in search of love, and comes to earth seeking it. The devotee must surrender and place his love at the feet of Narayana. However, the incarnation does not barter with Grace like a merchant. For, even the *attempt* on the part of the devotee flows out of divine grace. Aspiration on our part must be there, but the Lord’s love is the reality:

*“Should you plant a seed in this world?
The field is the Lord’s who killed the bulls
The ruin-laden clouds show Him
Who will water our fields with Grace
You took avatars in four yugas.
You decided the end of the two armies
You praised Arjuna to rouse him to battle
O commander of the world
Through incarnation on earth!”²*

By giving the grace of God the highest position in religion, Bhaktisara and other Alvars paved the way for the Visishtadvaitic explanation of the Avatara theory expounded by Ramana jacharya:

“Mukti (liberation) would be impossible if divine justice functioned through the mathematical rigour of the law of karma. Therefore ethical religion requires that the legal conception of karma should be transformed into the religious idea of redemptive love; *krupa* or the grace of God transfigures the rigorous

¹ Verse, 51

² Verses 23&24

law of karma and becomes the ruling principle of religion. The contrast between the holiness of God and human culpability and sinfulness would leave no hope of salvation unless the saving grace of God mediates between the two and transforms the ruler into a *rakshaka* (saviour); *karma* then becomes an attitude of absolute self-surrender. From this angle of vision, even the law of retribution of *dandana* has redemption as its inner motive. Punishment for sin is born of God's mercy. Redemption is the central motive of divine incarnation. *Avatara* (incarnation) is the entry of divine love into cosmic history in its critical moral situations in order to arrest the progress of sin. Overpowered by mercy and tenderness God realizes his godliness by saving the sinner and seeking the saint " 1

*"The Lord of Srirangam guards me
And will never cast me
Into the evils of earth
He has come to stand and stay in my heart
Will he remain back in the beyond?" 2*

Bhaktisara recounts his soul-absorption in holy centres like Tirukoshtiyur, Tirupati, Tiruvallikkem, Kumbakonam, Tiruvahka, Tirupperai, Tiruananthapuram, Anbil. How can he exhaust the places where the Lord resides? The Lord is every where!

*"The sky, spreading fire, moving wind, the seas,
Mountains, glowing sun, cool moon,
The clouds above, living things, eight directions,
The spaces and the universe that contains all -
All have been created by the Lord's will " 3*

Bhaktisara had spent a lifetime in learning the ways of worship, philosophical methodology and numerous religions. All that appears purposeless now. Just say 'hill' (*veerpa*) and one gains eternal beatitude at the feet of the Lord. How marvelously simple! The Hill with pleasant waterfalls that celebrates

1 P N Srinivasachari, "The Visishtadvaita of Ramanuja", *The Cultural Heritage of India*, vol. III (1969), pp. 306-7

2 verse 30

3 verses 37

the Tiruvonam star of the Lord's manifestation! Bhaktisara calls upon us to hasten to this beautiful mountain-residence of Narayana where even Brahma and Shiva are found worshipping Vishnu all the time. Bhaktisara's devotional involvement does not overlook the poetry and drama of nature that is prodigal with its gift in the Venkata Hill. Not only gods and men, but even animals and birds worship Narayana:

*"The huntsmen of the place
Rise with bows to encircle
The elephant who holds aloft its trunk
To catch the moon as a lamp for the Lord
If we could circumambulate the Hill
And dance, it would do us good."*¹

There is nothing greater in value than such worship. Why then be slaves to men? Why go after lesser gods and false divinities? Krishna alone is the eternal saviour. When the devotee can hear the flute-call in his heart and gain the joy of god-consciousness, he would have arrived. Having tasted the love of Narayana, he seeks nought else. Bhaktisara's days are now full of such divine experience. He spends his time worshipping, writing about the Lord, reading such works, listening to the Lord's greatness and praying to Him. This is truly the life divine. He can never be tempted now to traverse other paths:

*"Having recognised the Primal Lord
And effectively tied Him with love
To their hearts - aspirants consider
This body a mere disease
Their sights are now set
Towards the Beyond"*²

Henceforth the true knowledge remains with the devotee allowing him to stay unperturbed in this world of human affairs.

The affirmations in the *Nanmukhan Tiruvanthathi* made in powerful Tamil verse have a rare finality about them reflecting the sage-like personality of Bhaktisara. The Alvar holds a high

¹ Verse, 46

² Verse, 79

place in granting the Tamil language its crucial position in the bhakti movement. Such is his literary personality that the language itself glows as the image of Narayana:

*"You have become my language
And entered me; You have sown
The seed of good Tamil in my heart
To harvest this scripture.
I am free from the delusion
That considers the mind as a bar
And also as the means to envision you"*¹

The Divine is. There need be no doubt about that. The Alvar gently sets aside the atheists who question such a presence:

*"O my heart! he is!
The good Lord is a reality.
He is in the meditative heart
The unequalled Lord is the Guardian
Of poor me and others like me as well"*²

Nanmukhan Thiruvanthuthi concludes with a glowing paen to the Supreme:

*"Of Brahma and Shiva you are the primal One,
You, the cause, you, the knowledge,
You, the learning, you, the good works
You are indeed my own Narayana"*³

5. TIRUCHCHANDA VIRUTHAM

If Nanmukhan Thiruvanthuthi establishes Narayana as the primal Cause whose infinite love makes him take the finite form of several incarnations to be with man, *Tiruchchanda Virutham* describes the cosmic Lord's all-pervading presence. The poem is made up of one hundred and twenty stanzas

¹ Verse, 81

² Verse, 86

³ Verse, 86

The infinite variety of nature is witness to the Lord's manifestation. The universe is He. In this approach, Bhaktisara takes us to the Vedic seers who recognised the all-pervading Supreme in manifested nature. Thus Rishi Hiranagarbha:

*"It is he through whom the heaven is strong
and the earth firm,
who has steadied the light and
the sky's vault,
and measured out the sphere of clouds
in the mid-region
Who is the Deity we shall worship
with our offerings?"¹*

Writing in Tamil, Bhaktisara also draws our attention to ancient Tamil poetry which has passages that celebrate the all-pervading God in the visual reality. *Paripadal*, for example:

*"You reside under the banyan tree
that has fire-red leaves
And thick shade-spreading branches,
Under the Kadamba tree,
In the middle of the river;
On high mountains that come in the way
Of the free movement of wind,
Hence you are all-pervading You are found
Where devotees hold up their hands in worship
You are their servant
You are the guardian of all their deeds."²*

Tiruchchanda Virutham opens with a numerological description of the cosmic categories that rise from the Supreme and spread out as the visible reality:

*"You are the Earth's five, Water's four,
Fire's three, Wind's two and the Ether
Of such variety are you,
How can we visualise your prime Being!"³*

¹ Translated by A.C. Bose, *Hymns from the Vedas* (1966), p. 59

² Translated by Prema Nandakumar

³ Verse, 1

The most cerebral of the Alvars, Bhaktisara delights in such presentations. The earth's five qualities indicated by him are sound, touch, form, taste and smell; water has sound, touch, form and taste; fire has sound, touch and form; wind has but sound and touch and the ether has only sound. These five elements have brought us the multifoliate garden of nature where the tiniest leaf carries an individual stamp from the Supreme. How utterly beyond understanding by our flawed mind is the Primal Cause, the Maker!

But this need not make us despondent. Beyond our mental categories He may be, but the Divine can be comprehended through his own creation by our loving heart. The second verse indicates this by insinuating the many-faceted image of the Lord which includes the actions at all levels of life, the physical, the vital, the psychic, the mental and the spiritual. He is the ordainer, Mover, the devotee and the enjoyer. The amazing word-play of the Alvar by using numbers in the seventh verse has been succinctly explained by K.C. Varadachari

"That God in all His manifestations is the object of enjoyment is clearly expressed. His omnipervasiveness is the basis of His enjoyability in all Nature from the unmanifest to the most manifest. All become instruments for enjoyment of God. Everything is also the seat and abode of enjoyment. And all are therefore to be realised as such. *Isavasyam idam sarvam yat kincha jagatyam jagat* - of the *Iśa* seems to be interpreted in a wonderful manner, for all are in a sense *bhōgopakarana*, *bhōgasthana* and *bhōgayutana* of the Divine which the individual should know and enjoy with the feeling of the Divine presence in all or invoke the Divine in all and enjoy that."¹

The eleventh verse images the Lord as the Cause and the Effect:

*"You are the significance of words,
The subject of speech,
The brilliance that appears
As that which is beyond speech,*

¹ *Alvars of South India*, p.50.

*You are visible through words
Created by yourself.
Who can enumerate your qualities in brief?"*

Traditional commentators explain the word *sol* (word) in this verse as the Vedas. Accordingly, we see the Lord as one who brings the devotees together through the Vedas, the soul of all the divinities referred to in the scriptures, the Supra-Vedic brilliance that cannot be envisioned even by the Vedas. Even Brahma and other gods created by Narayana are not able to comprehend His being.

However, because of the Lord's overwhelming compassion, He incarnates on the earth and reveals himself to man. Speaking in this strain, the first image that comes to the Alvar's mind is the All-Beautiful form of Krishna, the consort of Nappinnai:

*"There is no way to distinguish you;
Those who have heard of your incarnate glories
Speak of you as Nappinnai's beloved;
Indeed, unless your Grace reveals
Your All-Beautiful form, place of residence
And other details, how can we ever know?"*

To help the initiates, the great Rishis have recorded these revelations in the scriptures. Thus the Sama and other Vedas speak of the Lord in detail. The revelatory Purusha Sukta of the Rig Veda is well-known:

*"Purusha is thousand-headed,
thousand-eyed, thousand-footed;
and, pervading the earth on all sides,
he exists beyond the directions.
Purusha, indeed, is all this,
What has been and what will be,
and the Lord of immortality
Transcending my mortal nurture.
Such is his magnificence, but
Purusha is greater than this;*

*all beings are a fourth of him,
three-fourths - his immortality -
lie in heaven* ¹

It was obvious that one Rishi's experience as recorded in the Riks helped others to regain the experience of the Divine. Thus, a Rishi of the Yajur Veda has confirmed all that is said in Rig Veda's Purusha Sukta. Such is the individual revelation recorded in the Yajur Veda (*vedahametham Purusham mahantham*) about the primal Purusha:

*"I have known this mighty Purusha, who is
refulgent as the sun beyond darkness,
by knowing him alone one transcends death,
there is no other way to go"* ²

This is the point made by Bhaktisara in *Tiruchchonda Virutham*. When the aspirant seeks to know the mighty Purusha, innumerable forms tantalise his consciousness. For the Lord is beyond thought and yet conceivable as the supranormal image that rests on the brilliance of Adishesha in the milky ocean. He had come as a swan to teach mortals the Vedas. He rides Garuda and has the same Bird as his flag. He does not stand on status and is prepared to incarnate even as a fish or a tortoise to help man to achieve a divinised life. Indeed, in His compassion a corner of this earth is preferred by him as a permanent residence! Bhaktisara, of course, refers to Srirangam, the prime area in Vaishnavite temples:

*"O Ranga who accepted the monkeys'
Could you kindly let me know
What the gods and demons did
When you churned the ocean
With the snake-bound Mandara Hill,
While the trees wilted and the earth shook!"* ³

In fact, each one of the Lord's incarnations is wondrous in its special way. As, for instance, the Man-lion form that had

¹ Translated by A.C. Bose, *Hymns from the Vedas*, p. 285

² *ibid.*, 289.

³ Verse, 21

appeared out of a pillar to honour the faith of a little child. Is there a part of creation from which the Lord is absent?

*"You are in man, woman, in the neuter,
In all that is good here, guardian of emotion,
Sound and touch; director of the concept
That moves creation, all the same you appeared
As the cowherd, the Lie, the Truth,
The Dwarf who seemingly desired
A patch of earth."*¹

Though the Lord is all power and glory, he is an image of compassion for humanity. That is why he acts as one of us when he becomes a Rama or Krishna. Why, he even loves like us and goes through the painful motions associated with the feeling. Incarnating as a cowherd, he had yearned for the cowherdess, Nappinnai. So human, yet so divine! As Krishna, he has taken on a job of destroying ever so many enemies of mankind. In fact, the Lord assumes the form that pleases humanity best. In the Krita yuga, he is white indicating *sattva*, in Treta, he is red-gold; in Dwapara, emerald-green; in Kali, the complexion of blue blossoms. Yet man will not approach God with love and reverence. Such is the way of the world. But the Alvar is full of the Divine. He moves to Srirangam in a few brilliant verses of *Tiruchchanda Virutham*

This prime temple of Narayana is closely associated with the Rama incarnation. Bhaktisara refers to an incident in the childhood of Rama that is not recorded in Valmiki's epic:

*"This is the residence of Rama
Who straightened the hunchback of Mantharu
By striking it with a pellet
Here the crane walks after supping on crabs,
Here the valai fish dart
On sighting the crane, and kendai fish
Move fearlessly, guarded by blue lilies
Such is Srirangam rich with cool streams"*²

¹ Verse, 26

² Verse, 49

Probably this childhood incident in Rama's life reveals the cause for Manthara's "motiveless malignity" against him on the eve of his coronation. Further on, Bhaktisara refers to Rama's prowess as an archer and his killing of Ravana. With equal felicity, the Alvar then proceeds to hail the Krishna incarnation

*"O noble Lord who crawled between the sal trees
And brought them down, plucked out the tusk
At or battering the elephant,
Killed the horse-demon, measured the earth
Dear Divine who now rests in Kudanthai
To grant the wishes of vedic scholars"¹*

Each, moment of the Krishna incarnation is stuff for wonderment. As a babe, a boy, a youth and a king, Krishna was involved in supra-human activities. Bhaktisara who is credited with having occult powers, is naturally drawn to such seemingly occult incidents in what was apparently a human life of childhood, boyhood and youth. This is an incarnation to share experiences! But the Lord in his *ursha* form communicates only through silence. Bhaktisara comes face to face with the Divine and indites sublime verses:

*"Lord who resides in Kudanthai,
Richly endowed with cool fields
Fenced by golden corn,
Ponds, flowering groves,
And buildings high and beautiful!
The incomparable hero
Whose sublime hand bent the bow
To destroy the demons Kalanemi,
Danthavakran and Muran "²*

Tiruchchanda Virutham then tries to probe the paradox of the Divine's presence. Isn't the Lord soft, forgiving, compassionate? How is it that he is associated with an incarnation like the Man-lion? How come that he is found simultaneously in one's heart and also different places like Padakam, Urakam and Vehka?

¹ Verse, 58

² Verse, 59

Bhaktisara says that as long as he wondered about the multiple presence of the Divine, he was ignorant, for he had not been born to knowledge. But from the moment onwards when he could envision the universal immanence of the Lord, his doubts ceased to be. Henceforth he could not forget the presence of the Divine at any time or place. For he has recognised the Lord *within* him. So wherever he is, there one can find the Lord's Vaikuntha. He is himself Vaikuntha.

Bhaktisara from now on insinuates that if it had been possible for him, it should be possible for all aspirants to recognise the Indwelling Universal. The Alvar hints that yoga can help us achieve such a recognition. Some of the verses of *Tiruchchanda Virutham* refer to this yogic way:

*"Close the pathways of the senses
And seal it with wax, make sure
Even the Scent of the sensual
Does not waft inside,
Open the senses to god-consciousness
And light the lamp of knowledge
As this body kept together by bones
Becomes loose, and the mind melts,
Pure love for the Lord will rise within
How can we envision the Lord
Who wields the discus, except through such love?"¹*

To those who can achieve this yogic state, life on earth and in the beyond becomes pure Ananda consciousness. There is nothing in life that can rival one's love for God. Nor is there anything in life that can prevent one's attainment of such love when God decides to grant grace. What if Bhaktisara was not born in any of the four listed castes, that he has not gained expertise in the Vedas, nor controlled his senses, nor gained a state of desirelessness? Has he not surrendered completely to the twin feet of the Lord? Such total faith is enough. Bhaktisara prays to the lord not to reject him for any reason. Just give me the gift of refuge!

¹ *Verse, 76*

*"You created the ocean first,
And then you built a bridge
Over it; you rested in the ocean
To listen to our woes,
And churned it for the gods,
O cowherd who overcame
The seven bulls to wed Nappinnai'
I have surrendered to you
Just tell me 'Fear no more'!"¹*

The Supreme is all-pervading and knows the ways of beings caught in the human bondage. Must he then stand by silent when his devotee loses himself in worldly tinsel? Should not the Supreme who controls the Moola Prakriti see to it that a sincere devotee is not cast into the heap of repeated births? And who can show the way to Eternal Life but the Supreme himself, for he is the Way and the Goal!

*"My Lord who holds the fiery discus,
The conch, the mace, the bow
And the sword! one whose chest
Is adorned by lotus-born Lakshmi!
Show me a way out of this body
That is itself a sickness, phlegm-filled
So may I be safe at your feet!"²*

Bhaktisara indicates that despite faith born of pure devotion, his mind is beset with fears by the very fact of knowledge. Philosophy, religion and knowledge themselves can become a burden, create unnecessary doubts at crucial moments in one's life and become hurdles to the heart's direct movement towards the Supreme. After all, he had spent a great deal of time in mastering various religions and philosophies. How to forget this useless weight? Hence his statement that knowledge that helps man recognise the Supreme can itself become a bar to man's reaching the Supreme's presence:

¹ Verse, 92

² Verse, 97

*"Beloved of Nappinnai!
 Lord bright like the kayambu flower!
 I am sure Death's servants
 Are holding up to my heart
 All the evils of my past!
 I have now bound myself
 To you firmly
 Remove the fears that threaten
 To overwhelm me
 Because of my mind's reasonings!"*¹

What is the way out of this fortress formed by the mind that has chosen to clutter itself with theologies, philosophies, religions and scriptural injunctions of varied hue? Only incandescent devotion can pulverise the mental blocks of knowledge that stand in the way of attaining the Divine. It thus becomes necessary to seek a *subhasraya* to which we can bind our thoughts and escape the mind's pernicious influence and free ourselves from nameless terrors. The *Vishnu Purana* explains the need for such a *subhasraya* through the story of Kandikya and Kesidhwaja.

Kesidhwaja while enlightening Kandikya about yoga says:

"One who follows that yoga and reaches the Brahman never returns. If the mind holds on to the senses, it will lead to Ignorance. If the mind keeps a part, release is certain. The mind should be withdrawn from the senses and made to concentrate upon Brahman. The Brahman itself will then transform the *Jivatma* into a yogi as a magnet transforms the iron; yoga is the act of connecting the mind to the Brahman by conscious effort like self-control."²

Further on, Kesidhwaja speaks of other steps in yoga. After controlling one's breath by *pranayama* and the senses by *pratyahara*, one should settle the mind in an auspicious state (*subhasraya*). This *subhasraya* is the Parabrahman which is realised in two states. The *apara* (lower) state has a body like

¹ verse 99

² Translated by Prema Nandakumar.

Hiranyagarbha. The *para* (higher) state is formless. As the aspirant (*Yogayuk* of *yunjanana*) cannot concentrate upon the formless which is Pure Knowledge, he should hook his mind to the universal form of Lord Vishnu which is seen every where in all things. The element of *avidya* which is indispensable when contemplating upon the *apara* Brahman is present in various grades in plants, birds, cattle, men, gandharvas, gods, prajapati and Hiranyagarbha. Indeed all these are the images of Vishnu.

There is yet another form of Vishnu that is an ocean of all auspicious qualities. This is the form that acts out the divine drama in terms of incarnations so as to help mankind. Though it is everywhere, it is not affected by karmas, nor is it foiled by anyone. The *sadhaka* should meditate upon this form which destroys all sins. Vishnu, residing in the heart of a *yogi*, destroys all sins even like fire and wind when they touch a dry bush. Hence the mind should be ever associated with the auspicious form of Vishnu.

Bhaktisara points out that even such an attachment to the *divya mangala vighraha* of the Lord is gained only through the Lord's grace. And where is the boundary to the Lord's grace? He is all-compassion:

*"Ocean-hued Lord! Hail!
I have a request
Your nature is to grant grace
When you desire to do me good,
Please see to it that my mind
Is ever lost in thoughts
Of your lotus-feet
Be pleased to think thus."*¹

From now on till the conclusion of the *Tiruchchanda Virutham*, the All-auspicious form of Vishnu is evoked with heightened excitement by the Alvar. The Lord is ever found with Lakshmi; he is the Chief of the Immortals, the Pure One, the All-beautiful Krishna; the destroyer of evil forces like Kabandha, Dantavakra, Khara and Mura; one who measured the worlds, the young cowherd who held aloft the Govardhan Hill, a hero whose anger

decimated great heroes like Sisupala, Vali and Paundraka Vasudeva and Dantavakra and yet whose compassion gathered them into his own personality.

Now it is time to turn to one's heart that is trapped in an ageing body subject to mortal illnesses. In four emotive verses, Bhaktisara calls upon it to surrender to the Lord in entirety:

*"The days pass as swords,
Growing weak, I am now old,
Close to death, better bend in worship,
My heart, Servitude to him
Is the goal, His feet
Should grant me this joy of service*

*All hail, my heart! Listen
It was Narayana who gave
The Tulsi-scented drink to Shiva
Who wears Ganga in his tresses,
Has a dark neck and is one
Who begged with his pale skull-bowl,
Narayana, who is All-auspicious*

*My heart! If you wish
For that delight which comes through
On the destruction of Ignorance,
Worship Narayana henceforth,
The same Lord who is knowledge,
The sun, the magnificent Boar
Who held up the world by his tusk
And thus saved us all*

*My troubled heart! Why are you
Submerged in sorrow? We have now
Immersed within us as a guardian
The Lord who is father, mother,
The Lord, Mukunda, the Supernal
He will destroy all our births '1*

After all, we possess rare instruments to achieve such a total consciousness of the Divine. If only we would use our senses to think and meditate upon Narayana, he would remove fear, the sicknesses of the body and the mind, the weight of *samsara*. He is 'Veda-geeta', the Supreme praised by the Scriptures. Singing of him, meditating upon him, we can *come* to him.

Presently, Bhaktisara's heart gains complete poise in the act of surrender. No more the need to doubt or go in for a deliberate turning towards the Divine. Tired with all his inquiries, disillusioned with all his wanderings after strange gods, now his heart grows restful for good. Be it dawn, twilight, day, evening or night, the heart has no thought but that of Narayana. The eyes achieve a continuous vision of the Lord. Bhaktisara's aspiration has merged in to the holy flame of the Divine's answering Grace:

*"O Lord blue-sheened as kuyamhu flower
And resting in Srirangam
Encircled by the Kaveri'
The shoot of aspiration from me
Reaches out to the flaming flowers
That are your feet, for all time
Thence it spread all over
Experiencing all your images!"*

What a wonder this, that the compassionate Lord comes down to help man and holds him in an inseparable clasp! The Alvar exults in the last verse that his Ananda Yoga has hit unerringly the target by uniting him with the Lord and gaining him a realisation that is all-bliss, *inba vedu*.

6. CONCLUSION

Perhaps Bhaktisara alone among all the Alvars has given birth to innumerable legends which is an indication that he was capable of superhuman feats which astonished his contemporaries to no end. There are also severe contradictions in these legends and a very obvious attempt to use him as a symbol for

communal animosities in succeeding centuries. To this category belong stories like the one in which he is said to have slighted even Rudra, as he considered none except Narayana worthy of his obeisance.

Setting aside the legends, the two poems themselves stand witness to Tirumazhisai Alvar's bhakti-laden heart. There is a shining discriminatory intellect behind his Pasurams. It is as if his is a Mind of Light, and the categories of *chit*, *achit* and *Iswara* are automatically illumined by it. The message comes through with crystalline clarity. The Grace of God is certain; it is sure to come and guard the devotee one of these days, for the relationship between the devotee and the deity can never be destroyed. In the meantime one should not waste one's gifts in purposeless mundane desires and using one's literary talents to praise mere mortals. The Alvar refused to sing of human beings: *naakondur manudam paden*. Our limbs are for praising the Eternal:

*"Let the lips keep praising Narayana;
The eyes see the Lord,
The ears listen to God's glory
And the head bow in worship
In the divine presence."*¹

At the very opening movement of *Nanmukhan Thiruvanthathi*, Bhaktisara warns man against self-torture in the name of *tapas*. The pathway to Narayana is actually so easy that you need not even worship him. It is enough if you learn to be humble in the presence of the Lord's devotees.

As for God, he is ever ready to come and help us if we want to be helped. Such is the incredible approachability (*saulabhya*) of Narayana. To tease us into higher consciousness, the Lord rests in places like Kudanthai, Vehka and Tiruvevvur. How very good of him to choose the most beautiful places which have been generously endowed with nature!

Though we say we are devotees of Narayana as if we have chosen him, it is obvious that we who choose him have already been chosen by him. Such is Bhaktisara's firm conviction. He seems to feel it quite inappropriate to aver that he left other religions and chose Narayana. In fact it is Narayana who has chosen the Alvar:

*"O ignorant ones! I have gained
A heart that worships the feet
That have eluded even Shiva,
The feet ornamented with flowers
How come? It is because
He has walked into my heart
Do you think I now care for else?"¹*

Elsewhere Bhaktisara lists the various ways in which the Lord has accepted certain experiences for the sake of remaining close to his devotees. Surely we have not forgotten the Krishna incarnation!

*"He destroyed the cart,
Made the Kaliya snake dance,
Pulled out the tusks
Of the elephant, Kuvalayupada,
Drank the poison of Putana's breast,
Subjugated wild bulls
For the sake of Nappinnai
Thus he has become our Lord!"²*

Bhaktisara's works bring us some of the finest in nature poetry. He tells us that Nature can often be our teacher. Nature is particularly beautiful and meaningful in Venkata. Of all the temples described by the twelve Alvars, it is here that we get dramatic action in addition to mere praise of the beautiful and bountiful nature.

In Venkata Hill there are big waterfalls that bring down stones from the mountain crests. While the elephants withdraw

¹ Verse, 27

² Verse, 33

mistaking the brilliant stones to be balls of fire, snakes hide in their holes taking them to be lightning. This is very like our own selves, for we too are afraid to enter divine consciousness even when that plane is close to us. Either we are frightened that the experience may burn us and make us renounce the world or we hide in our own mental compartments unable to stand the onrush of Grace.

Another scene. An elephant stands still with its trunk raised up towards the moon; a few hunters surround it; a few hillsmen attack the hunters. Such is the drama that opens before Bhaktisara in another verse. To the Alvar the elephant appears to be trying to catch the moon to be used as a lamp for Venkateswara. So self-lost is the elephant in its chosen path of servitude that it is not conscious of the hunters who have surrounded it – a situation that is often repeated in the lives of intense devotees. Such devotees, however, will never be forsaken by the Lord. This is the assurance given in the *Gita*:

“He who sees Me in all things and sees all things in Me, he never becomes separated from Me, nor do I become separated from him.”¹

sa cha me na pranaayati! The world of human affairs may assault the devotee, but the Divine's Grace will guard him without fail. As the tribesmen do in the verse of Bhaktisara.

A complete surrender from the devotee brings as complete a guardianship from Narayana, says Bhaktisara. One loves to be a slave of the Supreme Lover! And how this lover does go in search of his beloved? *Aal parthu uzhi tharuvai* – one searching for a serviteur! His very coming removes sorrows and assures one of good wealth. Nay, he is himself the wealth. Hence the Alvar's exultation: “This rich treasure that has come to my mind is for me alone. Nobody else may share it!”

Such is Bhaktisara's determination to be ever a servant of Narayana that he will not stop this worship even if such worship would be to his detriment or would throw him into baser births.

¹ Chapter VI, verse 30

For Bhaktisara's ears it is Narayana's name alone which is sweet; this name is the refuge of humanity itself; this name is the inspiration for all poesy; for, this is the significance of all scriptures.

Bhaktisara also tells us that he is not the only one to have recognised the Lord's supremacy. According to him many have known this truth from times immemorial. Hasn't he given us the incandescent assurance through the *Gita*

"Abandon all dharmas. Take refuge in me alone I will save you from all sins. Do not fear ~"

This assurance moves the Alvar no end. In this context he refers to the story of Sumukha in the 74th verse of *Nannmukhan Thiruvanthathi*.

*"Frightened to death by Garuda
The bright serpent reached the bed
Of the milky ocean with vast waves,
Seeking refuge, he put the snake
On Garuda's strong body
My tongue shall praise nought
But this Form Auspicious ~"*

The Story of Sumukha occurs in the Udyoga Parva of the *Mahabharata*. Matali chose Sumukha, a serpent prince as the groom for his daughter, Gunakesi. Sumukha's grandfather Aryaka told Matali that Garuda had eaten Sumukha's father and had vowed to eat the boy as well. Undeterred, Matali went to Indra for help. Upendra (Narayana) who was there suggested giving Sumukha some nectar. Indra was afraid of Garuda and hence gave him only long life. The wedding was solemnised. When Garuda went to Indra in anger for coming in the way of his prey, Sumukha held on to the cot of Narayana. Garuda full of pride now berated the Lord. Wasn't he stronger than Narayana as he is the mount? But when tested, Garuda could not move even the hand of the Lord who then told him to avoid such pride. Placing the serpent Sumukha on Garuda, he

said: "Give him refuge. Guard him." From that day onwards Garuda and Sumukha became good friends.

Is there any parameter for the compassion of the Lord, wonders Thirumazhisai Alvar. The Lord had so beautifully resolved the problem by *requesting* Garuda to be Sumukha's refuge. For Garuda is chief among his devotees and he too should not be hurt in any way. Instead of himself guarding Sumukha, he yet made Garuda the guardian and effected a permanent reconciliation.

Surrender to the Lord thus takes away fear even from the lowest in his creation. Whence then should we be afraid of life on earth or a hell beyond? Repeat Narayana's name and all will be well, is the final message of Bhaktisara for us:

*"By listening to the holy name
Sung to dancing steps
By devotees all over the world,
The doors of hell have been destroyed
Hasten to worship Krishna
Who guarded the world
In the Great Deluge
My Good heart! He exists to guard us
The good Lord is here He lives on
In the hearts of those who meditate upon Him
Unequalled, he equals Himself Be sure
He guards poor me and my like "*

• • •

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Tamil:

Nalayira Divya Prabhandham

Thondakkulam Thozhukulam, P. Sri, 1957

Alvarkal Kalanilai, Part I, Ramanathapuram M. Raghava Iyengar

Thirumazhisai Azhvarin Pasurungai, M. B. Syamala, 1993

English:

Alvars of South India, K.C. Varadachari, 1966

Alvar Saints and Acharyas, Shuddhananda Bharati, 1968

The Way and the Goal, Vasudha Narayanan, 1987

• • •

