

THE LIFE AND WORKS OF ALWARS

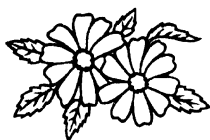


NAVALWAR

THE LIFE AND WORKS OF ALWARS

by

Smt. Radha Muralidhar



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DEDICATION



THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO
THE CHERISHED MEMORY
OF MY FATHER
LATE SHRI N. GOPALAKRISHNAN,
RETIRED CHIEF FINANCIAL
CONTROLLER, NEYVELI LIGNITE
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Alvars were saints of the Vaishnava tradition of South India. They were mystics who preached a message that is very relevant to the modern world. Their works brought about a religious resurgence and led to a revival of Hinduism in general and Vaishnavism in particular between the 6th and 8th centuries A.D. The middle ages have been characterised as the dark period in the religious history of Hindu dharma which faced the onslaught of Buddhism and Jainism and was weakened by the sectarianism and casteism within. Religious practices were dominated by rituals and superstitions and the masses were alienated as religious scriptures were mostly in Sanskrit. As a reaction to all this, came the bhakti movement which was pioneered by the Alvars of South India.

The Alvars represented a school of philosophy and there is a common principle that is preached by all of them. They lived chronologically close to each other and influenced each other. They all believed in mysticism, that is, a close one-to-one relationship with the Lord. They used Tamil as a medium for their songs and prayer. The melody and the charm of the verses, which were inspired by their divine love for God and mankind, made them immensely popular. Gradually over time, they became an integral part of temple worship and are today recited during the daily poojas.

This book is an attempt by the author to present the life histories of the Alvars in simple and lucid English. It is not possible to capture the entire magic of their verses in words other than their own. It has therefore become necessary to resort to quotations from their verses with English transcription. While many such books are available on the Alvars and their works in Tamil, there is a dearth of such books in the English language. A few of the widely acclaimed books in English have gone out of print. The author cherishes a

desire to popularise the works of Alvars among the younger generation. This book is a small beginning by way of an introduction where the charitras of all the Alvars, special aspects of their individual works and experiences have been covered

The author acknowledges with immense gratitude the constant encouragement and inspiration provided by the elders in the family, particularly her late father and uncle Dr.N.Ranganathan who has also provided the foreword to this book. This book has been made possible by the grace of Lord Venkateswara and the financial assistance provided by T.T.D. Special thanks to Shri K. Rajagopal of Saferun Press whose invaluable assistance has made this maiden venture fruitful in a very short time

Radha Muralidhar

4-1-1999

FOREWORD

Any serious student of history of human life on this earth will know for a fact that the empires and kingdoms that flourished from the time immemorial and the emperors and kings that ruled over them have all come and gone with very little residue except for a few stones perhaps. The modern times have seen the most rapid expansion of scientific knowledge and technology. And yet the powers of nature remain always a wonder and human beings often have to submit but meekly to its wrath from time to time. Day to day experiences in life also make everyone understand that there must be a force behind all the phenomenal existence. The religious among us call it God and the thinkers will term it transcendental Reality. Great philosophers like Sri Adi Sankara with their eloquent and intellectual arguments will have us convinced how the whole phenomenal world as we see is truly unreal and the only Reality that exists is Consciousness or Awareness. The present conception of the physical world and its realism stems primarily from our Avidya or ignorance which will vanish once the true Reality is apprehended just as the serpent disappears once the rope is perceived for what it is. Comprehension of such an abstract entity as Consciousness is difficult for most people and not appealing to many due to its impersonal nature. The same Reality is spoken of as the Lord of the Universe by the Sruti.

“Pathim Visvasya Atmesvaram Shasvatam Sivam Achyutam” (Narayana Sooktam). The statement ***“Pathim Visvasya”*** (i.e. The Lord of the Universe) will have no meaning if the Universe is unreal and amounted to nothing. In order to be the Lord of something, the latter must have an existence which is also real. In fact all of us know that physical life despite its limitations has reality which we can feel. Even the advanced Advaitins (the non-

dualists) among us will only sustain a large bump in the head if he or she tries to walk through a brick wall

The great Alwar saints of South India intuitively resolved the problem by experiencing the Reality in and through everything that they saw in the world of existence and poured their love and adoration for Him in beautiful poetry. The Reality that they experienced was not only transcendental but also all pervasive and immanent. Above all, the Reality was very personal and represented Srīman Narayana (meaning “the support and the abode of hosts of souls”) with all the glorious attributes. The physical world is like the body of the Lord and the Lord is the life and soul of the physical world (“*Sareera Sareere Bhava*”) The most important attribute of the Lord is His compassion and this is personified in His heart as Sri. Sri is the mother figure Who helps directly in the ultimate redemption of the embodied souls. Surrendering to the Lord in utter devotion or bhakti is the simple means advocated by the Alvars unlike other systems including the Vedic injunctions or practices. If the Reality is not only the ultimate cause of all physical forms in the cosmos but also the substratum of their very existence, then it must exist in and through all of them. In fact, nothing could theoretically exist without the underlying Reality. Thus the Alvars saw and felt Srīman Narayana in everything. They visualised Him in all His great avatars on this earth such as Matsya, Koorma, Varaha, Nrisimha, Vamana, Rama, Krishna and others which He had taken from time to time for the sake of human redemption. Srīman Narayana not only was in their hearts but also in the skies, the rivers, the clouds, the mountains, the oceans, the lovely images in the temples (“*Archa Avatara*”) and in short everywhere. Their verses (*Pasurams*) give true meaning to temple worship where the icon is but a symbol of the Lord but nevertheless imbued with the Lord like every atom of this physical universe.

The Alvars were from many walks of life and from different levels of society. They brought the philosophic message to the masses directly in the vernacular and helped to reduce human exploitation in some ways. They also helped in the revival of our traditional heritage (Sanaatana Dharma). The life stories and the poetry of the Alvars represent a rich heritage that we have had in the South that we not only can be proud of but also benefit from. They simply touch one's heart. The verses when learnt are the most helpful means for dynamic meditation or contemplation even as one pursues ones' daily activities. The tendency of the people to migrate far and wide over the globe in quest of greener pastures in terms of life's amenities and opportunities has had its toll in terms of lack of proficiency in one's own mother tongue as well as a general lack of adequate exposure to the ancient literature of our great land. The book "The Life and Works of Alvars" by Srimathi Radha Muralidhar is a timely aid written in English. It is concise but has interesting details both about the life stories of the Alvars and their poetical works. The presentation is simple and elegant. I believe that it will serve as a nice introductory book to anyone who is inquisitive enough to learn about these great saints. It will undoubtedly be of help to the newer and younger generation particularly with a background of Tamil heritage.

May the grace of the Alvars and the Lord forever shine on Srimathi Radha and help her carry on with similar endeavours.

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THE LIFE AND WORKS OF ALWARS

The Alwars were saints of the Srivaishnava tradition. They propagated the bhakti movement in South India. They were twelve in number namely Poigai Alwar, Pei Alwar, Bhutat Alwar, Thirumazhisai Alwar, Periyalwar, Godha, Nammalwar, Madhurakavi Alwar, Thiruppanalwar, Thondaradipodi Alwar, Kulasekhara Alwar and Thirumangai Alwar. Their devotional hymns, a total of 4000 verses (pasuras) in a combined form, are known as “Nalayira Divya Prabhandam”. The kshetras (temples) sung by the Alwars are referred to as “Divya Deshas”. There are 108 such divya deshas. The memory of the Alwars, their works and the temples sung by them are sacred to the Srivaishnavaites.

In the Srivaishnava tradition, the earlier among the Alwars are placed in the Dwapara Yuga (4300 B C) and the rest are placed in the beginning of Kaliyuga. There are many references to this in traditional works like “Upadesa Rathnamalai” of Manavala Mamunigal, “Divya Suri Stotram” and so on. But this traditional dating is not satisfactory to scholars and historians. The authoritative work on the historical dating of Alwars is a book titled “Alwargal Kala Nilai” by Pandit Raghava Iyengar. According to him, the Alwars lived between 6th to 8th century A.D. There is a brief account on the life and works of Alwars in Swami Ramakrishnananda’s book “Life of Ramanuja”. He pays homage to the Alwars who were a constant source of inspiration to Sri Ramanuja and other Vaishnava acharyas. Ramakrishnananda points out that the Alwars were special and unique. Their devotion is unparalleled in the annals of history. They were special to the Lord and shared a close relationship with Him. The Lord brought out through their charitras and words that they were dear to Him and bound Himself to their love and devotion.

The term “Alwar” means one who delves deeply into something (“*Azhndu kidappavan - Azhvan*”). The Alwars delved deeply into the attributes of the Lord and were very often lost to the external world and so they are called “*Azhwars*”. The term is frequently used as “*Alwars*” too which in Tamil means one who rules over God. This is quite apt in their case as the Lord was bound by their devotion.

The Alwars came from diverse social backgrounds. They were believed to be the incarnations of divine amsas like the “panchayudhas of Mahavishnu”. The origin of many of them like Poigai Alwar, Pei Alwar and Bhutat Alwar is shrouded in mystery. They were supposed to have appeared in flowers near hallowed shrines. Even Godha and Thirumazhisai Alwar were found and brought up by others. Some of them like Periyalwar and Madhurakavi came from orthodox Srivaishnava families. Some like Thiruppanalwar and Thirumazhisai Alwar belonged to the so called backward castes. Some like Kulasekhara Alwar and Thirumangai Alwar were kings. Godha was a woman. They cut across all social barriers and illustrate that all of us have a right of access to the Lord. They opened the Lord to all of us by their life and works.

The literary works of Alwars are very important to the overall evolution of the Vedic religion, in particular to the Srivaishnava sampradaya, as they brought about a resurgence of bhakti. This was possible because they sang their verses in Tamil which was a common parlance language. The other works like Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Bhagavad Gita are all in Sanskrit. Even in those days, Sanskrit education was limited to a minority, i.e. the brahmins and that too the males among them. The verses of Alwars were very popular unlike the scholastic works of other philosophers whose influence was limited to the Sanskrit educated intellectuals only. The

works of Alvars are rich in emotional appeal and are easy to understand and master. They render themselves to melodious music. They made religion democratic and are therefore very relevant to modern life and society.

The works of Alvars are accepted as “pramanam” by Srivaishnavaites on a par with the Vedas and the Upanishads and hence are called as “Tamil Vedas” or “Dravida Vedas”. They are believed to be the substance of Vedas in Tamil. The Vedas are accepted as pramanam since they were revealed by the Lord Himself. The Alvars mention in many places that all their verses came from the Lord Himself. They all agreed that they were mere instruments in the hands of the Lord and the Lord revealed this knowledge through them. Reference to Nammalwar’s “*En nenjathul irundu thamizh nool ivai mozhindu*”, “*Thammai konu thannai padinan*” and Thirumazhisai Alwar’s “*Vidaiyaga narthamizhai vithi ennullathai nee vilaithai katra mozhियagi kalandu*” clearly illustrates this.

The works of Alvars are said to be the origin of the “Sri Sampradaya” i.e. believing that Srīman Narayana (the Sṛiyapathī) is the Ultimate Reality. This origin is traced to the works of Pei Alvar. All the Alvars believed that the Lord is delighted when He is addressed as “Sṛiyapathī” and the easiest way to attain Him is through the grace of Sri Mahalakshmi. The works of Alvars are replete with references to the Lord as Sṛiyapathī such as “*Thiruvirunda marban sreedharanukku alay*”, “*Sreedharan seyya thamarai kannan*”, “*En thirumagalser marbane*”, “*Alarmel mangai urai marba*”, “*Pavai panimalaral vandirukkum marban*”. This is of course said in a limited historical sense. In a timeless context, all religions and schools of thought in religion originate from the Lord and lead to Him.

The works of Alvars are very important as they inspired many great acharyas who came in the tradition like Sri Ramanuja and Nathamuni. Sri Ramanuja was very much influenced by the works of Nammalwar. Nammalwar's "Thiruvaimozhi" and "Boddayana Vritti" are believed to be the sources of knowledge with which he made his "Sri Bhashya". There was a very strong emotional bond between him and Andal (Godha). She is referred to as Ramanuja's sister ("*Perumbudur mamunikku pinnanal vazhiye*"). He is also called "*Thiruppavai jeer*" as he used to recite Thiruppavai without fail while going for biksha. He was very fond of giving discourses on Andal's Thiruppavai.

The works of Alvars continue to inspire all of us till today. One cannot think of any divya desha without remembering the Alvars. All their verses rush into the mind when we think of Srirangam, Thiruvengadam, Thiruvekka, Thirukkcoilur and so on.

The Alvars were great teachers. They had absolute faith and conviction in their tradition. They could narrate their experiences and capture their anubhavas in easy and inspired verses. Their verses tell us that they have seen and experienced the Lord. They convince us that we can also do so with devotion. Their verses are the essence of their bhakti. They elevate the soul to great spiritual heights and fill us with spiritual energy.

The "Nalayira Divya Prabhandam", as we know it today, did not exist in this compiled text form for a long time. After the Alvars, many of these verses disappeared over time. Once Nathamuni, a great vaishnava acharya, heard a wandering minstrel singing Nammalwar's "*Aravamuthe*" pasura. He was moved by the beauty of the verse and noted that the verse ends with a reference to thousand other verses of the same poet ("*Kuzhalin maliya sonna*

orayirathul ippathum”). He wanted to learn more of Nammalwar’s verses but the minstrel did not know anything more than ten. Nathamuni failed to get more of them inspite of his tremendous effort. He then sat at the shrine of Nammalwar at Thirukurugur and meditated on him reciting Madhurakavi’s verses in praise of Nammalwar, 12000 times Nammalwar, with boundless mercy, blessed Nathamuni by revealing the entire 4000 pasuras (Nalayiram) to him. Nathamuni then compiled them into the form in which we know it today.

After Nathamuni, Ramanuja systematised his work and introduced the tradition of reciting the Nalayiram along with the Vedas in temples during special utsavas to the Lord. When the Lord is taken out on streets during ‘veedi utsavas’, the nalayira prabhandha goshti precedes the Lord while the vedaparayana goshti follows them. Ramanuja also encouraged his disciples to write special commentaries on the Nalayiram. These commentaries are called “Bhagavad Vishayam”. They bring out the esoteric significance of the verses and add sparkle and substance to their beauty.

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NALAYIRA DIVYA PRABHANDAM

<u>TITLE OF THE WORK</u>	<u>VERSES</u>	<u>NAME OF ALWAR</u>
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A. Mudalayiram

1. Periyalwar Thirumozhi	473	Periyalwar
2. Thiruppavai	30	Andal
3. Naachiyar Thirumozhi	143	Andal .
4. Perumal Thirumozhi	105	Kulasekhara Alwar
5. Thiruchanda Virutham	120	Thirumazhisai Alwar
6. Thirumaalai	45	Thondaradipodi Alwar
7. Thirupalliyezhuchi	10	Thondaradipodi Alwar
8. Amalanadhipiran	10	Thiruppanalwar
9. Kanninun Chiru Thambu	11	Madhurakavi Alwar

B. Periya Thirumozhi	1084	Thirumangai Alwar
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C. Thirukurunthandagam	20	Thirumangai Alwar
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D. Thirunedunthandagam	30	Thirumangai Alwar
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E. Iyarpa

1. Mudal Thiruvandadi	100	Poigai Alwar
2. Irandam Thiruvandadi	100	Bhutai Alwar
3. Munram Thiruvandadi	100	Pei Alwar
4. Nanmugan Thiruvandi	96	Thirumazhisai Alwar
5. Thiru Virutham	100	Nammalwar
6. Thiru Aasiriyam	7	Nammalwar
7. Periya Thiruvandadi	87	Nammalwar
8. Thiruvezhu Kutirukkai	1	Thirumangai Alwar
9. Siriya Thirumadal	40	Thirumangai Alwar
10. Periya Thirumadal	78	Thirumangai Alwar

F. Thiruvaimozhi	1102	Nammalwar
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G. Ramanuja Nutrandadi	108	Thiruvarangathu Amudhanar
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Total Verses	4000	
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HISTORICAL DATING OF ALWARS

The dating of Alvars and their chronological order is a matter which is the centre of a huge controversy. The only point on which there is complete agreement among all writers and scholars is that the traditional dating is highly unsatisfactory and unreliable

The practical difficulty faced in dating the Alvars is that there are many events about their lives which have become part of folklore and are mentioned by many writers. It is very difficult to establish whether they are authentic

The technique of dating resorted to is to establish the date of cities, kings, events mentioned in the verses of Alvars. But this is not very helpful as many of the Alvars were mystics and lived life in seclusion. They were not aware of the external world and their perception of it was different from that of the people who lived in society. They did not seek the company of kings or other poets. Very often the Alvars were contemporaries and lived close to each other without being aware of the existence of others

These problems are seen particularly in the case of Thiruppanalwar, Nammalwar and Kulasekhara Alwar. Thiruppanalwar sang just 10 verses and he is dated based on the chief priest mentioned in his charitra. In the case of Nammalwar, many stories are associated with him that defy rationalist explanation as he was a supreme mystic. In the case of King Kulasekhara, many kings of the same name have ruled Chera Nadu. There are doubts as to whether "Mukunda Mala", a Sanskrit hymn attributed to him, could really be his work. He is dated anywhere between 6 to 8th century A.D.

It is said that acharya Nathamuni compiled the Nalayiram and brought back big parts of it that were lost over time. He is dated by Pundit Raghava Iyengar to have lived from 850 A.D. to 920 A.D. This is historically authentic and fits with the dating of later acharyas like Alavandar and Ramanuja. Historically, the Tamil Sangham is said to have flourished in three phases- Mudal Sangham, Idai Sangham and Kadai Sangham. Kadai Sangham is dated at 2nd century A.D. Thirukkural is included among the Kadai Sangham literature. But the works of Alvars, inspite of its rich contributions to Tamil literature, are not included among these works. Therefore, the Alvars can be safely and surely dated between 200 A.D. to 850 A.D.

The “Alwargal Kala Nilai” of Pundit Raghava Iyengar is the most authentic and widely accepted book with regard to the dating of Alvars. This is quoted by eminent writers who have come from the tradition and also have a background of scholarship in Tamil literature and Indian history like K.C.Varadachari (Alvars of South India), C.Varadachari (Nammalwar), Ramakrishnananda (Life of Ramanuja) and Dr. Prema Nandakumar (Thirumazhisai Alwar).

According to Raghava Iyengar, the Mudal Alvars (Poigai, Bhutat and Pei) belong to the early 6th century A.D. and Thirumazhisai Alwar, who was Pei Alwar’s disciple, was born in mid 6th century and lived a very long life into the 7th century. He is said to have spent many years in a cave at Thiruvallikeni as a recluse.

Periyalwar was honoured by the Pandya King Vallabha Deva and is therefore dated to 690 A.D. (birth) based on this king’s reign. His daughter Andal lived between 716 A.D. and 735 A.D.

Nammalwar has sung about a divya desha called Varaguna Mangai. This place has an ancient temple and was renamed after a

king called Jatila Parantaka Varaguna I (768 - 815 A.D.). Nammalwar sings about this place with its new name. In this period, his avathara came on a Tamil Bahudanya year which falls on 798 A.D. He lived for 32 years till 830 A.D. (This dating is given by V Varadachari in his book on Nammalwar.)

There are references to Pandya kings of this time attempting to revive the Tamil Sangham. Madhurakavi Alwar is said to have presented Nammalwar's works to the Sangham. The only proof for this is that the poet Kamban pays homage to the Alwar in his invocatory verse. In his "Satagopar Andadhi", Kamban also praises the Alwar's verses by holding them to be far more inspired and melodious as compared to Manikkavachagar's Thiruvachagam. Such comparisons are made between poets who lived during the same time. So this dating of the Alwar is correct as it is slightly earlier to Kamban and Manikkavachagar who lived around this time. Madhurakavi who was Nammalwar's disciple was an elderly man when he came to Nammalwar and outlived him by few more years.

Thirumangai Alwar came last in the line of Alvars and refers to another king called Tondaiman Chakravarthi. This Alwar can be easily dated as he was a contemporary of this king and the Shaivaita saint Gnanasambandar. He lived from the end of 8th century and is said to have spent a major part of his later life in seclusion at Tirukkurungudi.



MUDAL ALWARS

Poigai Alwar, Bhutat Alwar and Pei Alwar are called the “Mudal Alwars” since they came first in the lineage of Alwars. They were contemporaries. Along with Thirumazhisai Alwar (also called Thirumazhisai Piran) who was a disciple of Pei Alwar, Mudal Alwars are believed to have lived towards the end of Dwapara Yuga. Historically they are placed before the other Alwars during mid 6th century A.D. It is traditional to narrate their life stories together as there is a bond of shared experiences between them.

Poigai Alwar’s avathara took place on Shravana nakshatram of Thula month. He is the amsa of Sriman Narayana’s conch “pancha janya”. He is believed to have appeared in a lotus flower in a beautiful pond (“*poigai*” in Tamil) very near the temple of Yadoktakari in Thiruvekka near Kanchipuram. This temple and the Lord have been hailed in glorious verses by Thirumazhisai Piran and by Swami Desikan in his “Vegasethu Sthotram”.

Bhutat Alwar’s avathara came on the day next to Poigai Alwar’s on Avittam nakshatram of Thula month at Thiru Kadalmallai

near Madras, popularly known as Mahabalipuram today. This place has a lovely temple where the Lord assumes an unusual posture. Unlike in other temples where the Lord always reclines on his Adishesha, in this temple he reclines on the ground (***“Tharai Sayana Perumal”***) His birth is believed to have taken place in a blue lily flower and he is the amsa of the Lord’s “gada” (mace).

Pei Alwar’s avathara came on the day next to Bhutat Alwar’s on Sathaya nakshatram of the Thula month at Mylapore in Madras and he is the amsa of Lord Vishnu’s sword. He appeared within a red lily flower inside a well near the Adikesava Perumal temple in Mylapore. He lived in the same place for a long time worshipping the Lord at the temple with flowers that he brought from his garden and also with his beautiful verses

Poigai Alwar’s verses are together called as “Mudal Thiruvandadi” which comprises of 100 verses. He has sung in ecstasy about Thiruvengada Mamalai and Srirangam. He mentions that he is devoted to Sriman Narayana as He destroys all evil karmas, forgives all our sins, purifies the heart and blesses us by residing in our hearts once we surrender to Him. The following pasura of his, which sings about the Lord’s Adishesha, is recited during aradhanam to the Lord.

***“Senral kudaiyam irundal singasanamam
ninral maravadiyam neel kadalul - enrum
punaiyam anivilakkam poom pattam pulgum
anaiyam thirumalukku aravu”***

Bhutat Alwar’s pasuras are called “Irاندam Thiruvandadi” (100 verses). In one of his verses, he sings about his great fortune that the Lord chose him to sing these beautiful Tamil verses in His praise.

***“Irun thamizh nanmalai inaiyadikke sonnen
perun thamizhan nallen peridu”***

Pei Alwar's pasuras in Nalayiram are called “Munram Thiruvandadi” (100 verses). He was a great scholar and was Thirumazhisai Piran's acharya. There are stories (with different versions) of how he brought Thirumazhisai Piran to the Srivaishnavaita fold. His pasuras are rooted in his strong faith. He was lost to the external world when he sang and danced about the Lord's grace. His total disregard for external appearance earned him the title of “Pei Alwar” as he says in one of his verses, ***“Peyanai ozhinden en nambiranukke”***.

He was fond of singing of the Lord as “Sriyapathi” and his verses are believed to have been the origin of “Sri Sampradaya”. Sri Sampradaya upholds Sriman Narayana as the almighty with Mahalakshmi (Sri) as His consort. She is the abode of the Lord's love, mercy and daya. She is the easiest means of attaining the Lord's grace. The Lord loves to be hailed as Sridharan. All the Alvars hold on to this marga of singing the Lord's praise as Sriyapathi. Their works are replete with references to this.

The Mudal Alvars lived very close to each other and had cherished a great desire to meet and share their experiences. The Lord decided to perform a grand miracle to bring His three devotees together. They left their native villages to go on a pilgrimage of divya deshas and converged on Thirukkoilur to have a darshan of the “Ulagalanda Perumal”. Poigai Alwar reached the place first by night fall and immediately it started pouring. He looked around for some shelter and entered the front porch of a small house. The place was just big enough for him to stretch himself. Immediately Bhutata Alwar also entered that place with the intention of sheltering for the night.

He greeted Poigai Alwar and wondered if he could join him there. Poigai Alwar sat up and told him that both of them could sit comfortably there and invited him in. Soon after, Pei Alwar also joined them and he was warmly received by the other two. The three of them stood there and introduced themselves. They were delighted to have their long cherished desire fulfilled and shared their spiritual experiences

They were engulfed in darkness as it continued to pour outside. After some time, they noticed that the place was getting more and more cramped as if there was someone else standing amidst them. Soon they realised that the Lord was playing with them. At that time Poigai Alwar sang his famous pasura where he lights a flame with the world as a lamp, the oceans as oil and the sun as the match.

*“Vayyam thagaliya var kadale neyyaga
veyya kadiron vilakkaga seyya
sudarazhiyan adikke soottinen sonmalai
idarazhi neengugave enru”*

Bhutat Alwar followed with “*Anbe thagaliyay*” pasura, where he lights a lamp with his great love, desire and thirst to see the Lord.

*“Anbe thagaliya arvame neyyaga
inburugu sinthai iduthiriya - nanpurugi
gnana sudar vilakkeitrinen naranarku
gnana thamizh purinda nan”*

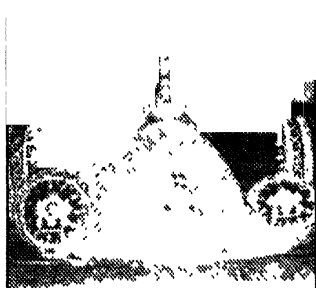
The Lord appeared before them in His “Trivikrama Avathara” form which he assumed to measure the three worlds and take them away from Maha Bali. Pei Alwar sang the glory of the Lord as He stood there in his “*Thiru Kanden*” pasura.

***“Thiru kanden ponmeni kanden thigazhum
arutkan aniniramum kanden serukkilarum
ponnazhi kanden purisangam kai kanden
en azhi vannan pal inru”***

Their three works were sung spontaneously when they stood before the Lord enjoying His special grace in Thirukkcoilur. Thirukkcoilur has a grand temple for Ulagalanda Perumal and is hallowed because of its association with the Mudal Alvars. In later days, it has attracted great Mahatmas like Ramana Maharshi and Sadguru Gnanananda, both of whom lived near this place. The entire place vibrates with the spiritual presence of all these great souls. A pilgrimage to this place re-charges us with spiritual energy. The Alvars have sung in great wonder about the grandeur of the Lord’s Trivikrama avathara. Andal worships the holy feet that spanned the three worlds (***“Anru ivvulagam alandai adi potri”***). Looking at the temporal world, Thirumazhisai Piran reminds us that life on it is transient and worshipping at the feet of the Lord, who spanned the three worlds with great joy, is the only means of attaining permanent bliss (***“Anru paralanda pada bodai unni vanin mel senru senru devarai irukkilada vanname”***). Nammalwar saw the Lord in all things around him and constantly meditated on the “Ulagalanda Swarupam” (***“Uruvadai vannamgal kanil ulagalandan enru thullum”***).

To Srivaishnavaites, divya deshas are temples that have been sung by the Alvars. These kshetras are special because of the archaavathara rupa of the Lord and because of the spiritual experiences of the Alvars who have sung their glory. All their verses rush into the mind when one thinks of any of these temples, enabling us to re-live their experiences in their own words.

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THIRUMAZHISAI ALWAR

Thirumazhisai Alwar was a contemporary of Poigai, Bhutat and Pei Alwars and is placed in the Dwapara Yuga according to our tradition and historically in the 6th century A.D His birth took place in the sacred Thirumazhisai kshetra close to the city of Madras. This kshetra has an old and beautiful temple for Lord Jagannatha. It is hallowed due to its association with great rishis who have performed penance here and by the avatara of the Alwar who is commonly referred to as “Bhakti Sarar” and “Thirumazhisai Piran”.

The Alwar’s birth took place on the auspicious Makha nakshatram of Thai month. He is believed to be the incarnation of Lord Vishnu’s “sudarshana chakra”. His father was the great Bhargava Rishi. At birth, the child was observed to be physically deformed (without any limbs) and the parents abandoned the child with great sorrow believing that it could not survive. Sriman Narayana appeared with his consort Lakshmi and blessed the child with great physical and spiritual powers and beauty. This child was later noticed by a poor hunter named Thiruvalan who was collecting twigs nearby. He took the child to his wife. The couple who were

childless were delighted to receive this divine child. But they were bewildered to note that the child refused to take milk or any form of sustenance. The whole village started talking about the extraordinary child. There lived another elderly couple belonging to a backward caste in Thirumazhisai who were great devotees of Lord Vishnu. They brought a little milk to feed the baby, and to every one's astonishment, the child started drinking the milk fed by them. In due course, the couple were blessed with a boy who was named "Kani Kannan" who later became an ardent disciple of Thirumazhisai Piran.

From the tender age of seven, the Alwar showed interest in ashtanga yoga and mastered the scriptures of Buddhism, Jainism and later Saivism in his quest for the ultimate reality. None of these gave him the bliss that he was searching for. He came to Mylapore in Madras to have a darshan of Lord Kapaleeswara and lived in a garden nearby. At this time, Pei Alwar (who had heard about Thirumazhisai Piran's spiritual quest) went in search of him. Like all great acharyas, he brought Thirumazhisai Piran into the Vaishnavate fold. The substance of Pei Alwar's upadesa to Thirumazhisai Piran was that one cannot attain spiritual knowledge by learning the substance of many religions and faiths. All of them are roads that lead to the Lord. But to attain Him, one must choose one among the various margas. Moreover with all the gnana and wisdom of the scriptures, we cannot explain or grasp the attributes of the Lord. One can get a glimpse of it only through faith and bhakti. The grace of the Lord has to be experienced. It cannot be explained. Thirumazhisai Piran was greatly moved by the beauty and conviction of Pei Alwar's verses on the Lord and received the "Thiru Manthira" upadesa from Pei Alwar. Later, when he meditated on the Lord reciting the Thiru Manthira, the Lord appeared before him on His "Garuda Vahanam".

From that day of his initiation into Srivaishnavism by Pei Alwar, Thirumazhisai Alwar sang a number of verses in praise of Lord Vishnu. He himself mentions that the Lord came to him through those verses and that he attained his faith through them. His verses have the power to do the same for all of us. They are the very essence of his bhakti

***“Kudaiyum vinaiyavi theerndhen - vidaiyaga
narthamizhai vithi en ullathai nee vilathai
katra mozhiyagi kalandu”***

***“Kalandan en ullathu kamavel thathai
nalan thanum mee thoppadunde”***

He is therefore called “Bhakti Sarar”. The Alwar in the following verse mentions how he was fortunate to come into the Srivaishnavate fold.

***“Shakkiyam katrom shamanam katrom shankaranar
akkiya agama nool arayndom - baggiyathal
sengan kariyanai sernduyvom theedivom
engatku ariya thonrumil”***

Once, when the Alwar was absorbed in meditation, Lord Siva appeared before him with his consort to bless him and asked him to seek any boon. Thirumazhisai Piran asked for an eternal place in heaven. Siva declined to give this boon as it was beyond his capacity. The Alwar on hearing this went back to his meditation. Siva was vexed to see the Alwar ignoring him and threatened to open his third eye to destroy him. The Alwar produced a third eye in his right foot to show Lord Siva that there was nothing impossible to bhaktas like him.

There are many stories of how the Alwar won over the opposition of Buddhists, Jains and Shaivaites and also of many orthodox Brahmins of the caste ridden society of those days who

believed that spiritual quest was their special privilege and looked down upon the lower castes. Alwar mentions in his verse that he was neither born or brought up in a Brahmin family, nor was he well versed in scriptures or other arts, and the only marga he knew was bhakti.

***“Kulangalaya veerirandil onrilum pirandilen
nalangalaya narkalaigal navilum navinrilen
pulangal aindum venrilen poriyilen punida nin
ilangu padam anri matror patrilen em eesane”***

The Alwar spent some time in association with the “Mudal Alwars” and all of them enjoyed sharing their experiences. He later went to Thiruvekka (near Kanchipuram) to visit the temple of the Lord who lay down to dam the flow of the Saraswati river (Vegasethu Temple). He took great delight in the reclining posture of Lord. He has sung beautiful verses on this form of the Lord in many divya deshas.

***“Nagathanai kudandai vekka thiruvevvul
nagathanai yarangam peranbil - nagathanai
parkadal kidakkum adinedumal
anaippar karuthanavan”***

The above verse mentions that the Lord assumed a reclining posture in the temples of Thiru kudandai, Thiruvekka, Thiruvallur, Thiruper, Anbil and Srirangam.

Here, in Thiruvekka, his disciple and friend from early days, Kani Kannan joined him. An old woman used to spend her time serving the Alwar. The Alwar, pleased with her devotion, blessed her with a boon. The old woman desired to acquire a young and beautiful form. She miraculously turned into a young woman of bewitching beauty with the grace of the Alwar. The king of Kanchipuram fell in love with her and married her.

As the years passed, the king grew older and was surprised to notice that the queen remained as young as ever. He questioned her about the secret of her eternal youth. The queen told him about the Alwar's special boon. The king asked the Alwar's disciple, who came for biksha, to bring the Alwar to his place. Kani Kannan replied that the Alwar would not go to anybody's place. The king requested him to sing a verse in his praise and bless him. Kani Kannan cleverly composed a verse in praise of Kanchipuram and the Lord of Thiruveikka, mentioning the king in it. The king, greatly enraged by what he perceived as an insult, banished Kani Kannan from his city. When Kani Kannan left Kanchi, Thirumazhisai Alwar also left with him. While going, he appealed to the Lord to pack up His Adi Sesha on which he reclined and leave the city along with His bhaktas

***“Kani kannan poginran kamaru poonkachi
manivanna nee kidakka venda - thunivudaya
senna pulavanum poginren neeyum unran
painnaga pai suruttikol”***

Immediately, the Lord who resides in the hearts of His bhaktas and binds Himself to their words, followed the Alwar out of the temple. The Alwar rested with the Lord and his entourage in a nearby village which is known as “**Oriravirukkai**”. By then, the king realised the enormity of his foolishness and rushed to beseech the Alwar to forgive him and to return to Kanchi. The Alwar blessed him with his grace and asked the Lord to return to the temple and to recline on His Adi Sesha once more.

***“Kani kannan pokkozhindan kamaru poonkachi
manivanna nee kidakka vendum - thunivudaya
senna pulavanum pokkozhinden - neeyum
undan painnaga pai paduthukol”***

The Lord implicitly followed the Alwar's instructions and since then He is called as "Yadoktakari" or "***Sonna vannam panna perumal***" meaning the Lord who listens to His bhaktas and obeys them.

Swami Desikan also sings of this deity as "Bhaktimatam Yadoktakari" meaning that the Lord listens to great bhaktas like Thirumazhisai Piran. Thirumazhisai Piran was greatly moved by the simplicity and sweetness of the Lord and sang beautiful verses in His praise.

***"Ninra thendai yooragathu irunda thendai padagathu
anru vekkanai kidandadu ennilada munnalam
anru nan pirandilen piranda pin marandilen
ninradum irundadum kidandadum en nenjule"***

In this verse, the Alwar states that from the day of his spiritual awakening, the Lord resided in his heart and not in any temple

He spent a long time towards the end of his life at Thiru Kudandai, enjoying the special grace of the Lord "Aravamuthan" there. It is said that the Lord sat up from His reclining posture to talk with the Alwar and the Alwar blessed the Lord with a long life ("***kidandavaru ezhundirundu pesu vazhi kesane***"). From that time, the Lord decided to switch names with the Alwar. In this temple, the Lord is referred to as "Aravamutha Alwar" and the Alwar is called as "Thirumazhisai Piran", a term normally used to refer to the Lord.

Nammalwar sings of Aravamuthan as the Lord who has been revered by great mahatmas like Thirumazhisai Piran.

***"Thisaivil veesum sezhumamanigal serum thiru kudandai
asaivil ulagam parava kidandai kana varaye"***

Thirumazhisai Piran is said to have left palm leaves on which he wrote his verses into the rising flood waters of the Cauveri river at

Thiru Kudandai The palm leaves on which his two works namely “Thiruchanda Virutham” (120 verses) and “Nanmugan Thiruvandadi” (96 verses) were written, floated back to him. The Alwar took this as the will of the Lord. These are the only two works of his that form part of Nalayiram today. In these works, the Alwar sings about the glory of the various avatars of the Lord, enjoys Him as seen in many divya deshas, shares his atmanubhavam with us, teaches the ways to perform bhakti and saranagati in steps and establishes Srīman Narayana as the ultimate goal to reach and yearn for.

Bhakti destroys all sinful thoughts and vāsanās and bestows one with all spiritual and material comforts. It cleanses the heart. Reciting the Lord’s name constantly and meditating on His form and kalyāṇa guṇas strengthens one’s faith and establishes a continuity. One, who dwells constantly on the Lord, does not lose faith or feel let down in any situation and experiences supreme bliss at all times. (“*Patharutha sindaiyodu ninru pasam vittavarku, ethirathum inbam ingum angum engum agume*”). They realise that everything that happens, happens with the will of the Lord (“*En thirathil en kol embiran kurippil vaithade*”).

Bhakti is a one to one relationship with the Lord and prayer is something personal between the Lord and the bhakta. Bhakti is being wedded to one central principle. A Srīvaiṣṇava, therefore, loves the Lord and cannot praise or meditate on any other form, as stated by the Alwar repeatedly in all these verses.

“*Marandum puram thozha mandar*”

“*Ulla nozhgal theer marundu vanavarkalūtha em
vallalarai anri matrōr deivam nan madippāne*”

“*Vaikunda selvanar sevadimel pattu*”

“*Enamayidanda moorthy endai padam enniye*”

“*Thiruvirunda marban sridharanukku alai*”

The Alwar prays to the Lord to bless him to think constantly of the Lord's feet (***"Ninna pada pangayam nirantharam ninaippadaga nee ninaikka vendume"***). Reciting the Alwar's pasuras certainly does this for all of us.

There is a small shrine at the brindavanam of Thirumazhisai Piran very near to the Aravamuthan sannidhi in Thiru Kudandai (Kumbhakonam) where the Alwar spent a big part of his later life.

The special features of the Alwar's verses can be summarised briefly as given below:

1. He expresses himself in strong and unambiguous words which have the power and the potency of the sudarshana chakra. The Alwar is said to be the incarnation of the chakra.
2. His devotion to the Lord is total. Such a faith has to be answered with a reciprocal grace. That is why the Lord listened to him and obeyed him.
3. The Alwar was completely absorbed in archavathara. In this form, the Lord is said to be easily attainable (Sulabhan). To the Alwar, the Lord was definitely Sulabhan. This is clearly brought out by many events in his charitra recounted earlier. It is said that the Alwar once went to a place called Siru Puliur and the Vighraha at the temple turned around to look at the Alwar wherever he went. The priests at the temple were astounded by this. Later they realised that the Lord was following the Alwar.
4. In the tradition of Pei Alwar, Thirumazhisai Piran is fond of praising the Lord as Sriyapathi and asks us to perform saranagathi at the feet of the Lord who is Sriyapathi (***"Thiruvilla devarai therelminthevu"***).

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PERIYALWAR

Periyalwar occupies a special place among Alvars as he became the father-in-law of Lord Ranganatha when his daughter Andal married Him. His avathara took place in Sri Villiputhur on Swathi nakshatram of Tamil Ani month. He is believed to be the amsa of the Lord's chariot. Historically he is placed around the later part of 6th century A.D. He belonged to a family of devout Vaishnava Brahmins and was named "Vishnuchitta". True to his name, his mind dwelt constantly on the form and leelas of the Lord. He did not show much interest in learning scriptures and constantly enjoyed the Lord as little Krishna.

He wanted to perform some kankaryam which the Lord was specially fond of. With this objective, he set up a beautiful garden with great variety of flowers and tulasi leaves. He used to prepare specially decorated garlands and offer them to the Lord at the "Vatapathra Sayee" temple.

Once, the king of Madurai named Vallabha Deva came to Sri Villiputhur in disguise and was going around the villages to know the welfare of his citizens. He saw a Brahmin sleeping on the front porch of a house and stopped to enquire about him. The Brahmin told the

king that he was a pilgrim returning south after a tour of many temples in the gangetic plains. The king asked him to teach some shlokas that will lead to his enlightenment. The pilgrim recited a shloka, the substance of which runs as follows: "One has to gather everything necessary when the sun shines for the rainy season One has to save for old age by working hard during the younger days. Similarly, one has to search for the Ultimate Reality in this birth to benefit in the next birth."

The king was greatly impressed by the shloka and honoured the Brahmin. His mind dwelt on the futility of his past life and he constantly worried about his future. He could not choose his faith from the various paths offered by different religions. He called his family preceptor named Selvanambi and asked him to call scholars and philosophers of various faiths to a contest which will determine the Reality

The king tied a big bag of gold coins to a long vertical pole and announced in the contest that the booty will go to the scholar who can bring it down with his faith. For many days, number of scholars tried in vain to do this with their scholarly works, eloquent speeches and heated debates. One night the Lord appeared in Vishnuchitta's dream and asked him to go to the king's court and win the contest. Vishnuchitta woke up in the morning and proceeded to the king's palace according to the Lord's directive. However he was well aware of his limitations as he had never shown any interest in scriptural learning. He was confident that the Lord's will always prevails

In the King's court, he proceeded to talk on "Sriman Narayana" as the Ultimate Reality. The words started flowing like a torrent as he went on quoting the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Puranas. The king, Selva Nambi and the entire gathering were thrilled

to the core by his conviction in his faith and were astounded to see the bag of coins fall on its own accord into Vishnuchitta's palms. The whole court acknowledged that Vishnuchitta had the special grace of the Lord. The king honoured him with the title "Bhattar Piran".

***"Pandiyar kondada pattarbiran vandanenru
eendiya sangam eduthooda - vendiya
vedangal odi viraindu kizhi aruthan
padangal yamudaya patru"***

The above pasura brings out the episode of how the Alwar came to be called Bhattar Piran. That evening, the king took Vishnuchitta on a ceremonial parade around the city on his elephant. Srīman Narayana, delighted to see all these honours being showered on the Alwar, appeared in the sky on His Garuda Vahanam with Mahalakshmi. Vishnuchitta was dazed to see the splendour of the Lord and since he always enjoyed Krishna as a child, blessed the Lord with a long life imagining himself as the Lord's mother and sang his "Thiru Pallandu" pasura. He came to be called "Periyalwar" as he thought of himself as elder to the Lord Himself to bless Him.

From that day of his victory in the king's court, he started offering garlands of his verses along with floral garlands to the Lord. He has enjoyed Krishna leelas as much as mother Yashoda would have done earlier. It is impossible to capture his anubhava in words other than his own. His "Pallandu" and "Neerattam" pasuras are part of aradhana kramam and are recited without fail while performing aradhana and thirumanjanam to the Lord. His pasuras (473 verses) in the Nalayiram are called "Periyalwar Thirumozhi". To Periyalwar, the various avatharas of the Lord are not recollections of the past depicted by the Puranas. They are dramas enacted right before his eyes and he bestows a benediction on the Lord for the

feats that He performed as Nrisimha, Rama and Krishna.

“Ilangai pazhalaga padai porudanukku pallandu”

“Andiyam podil ariyuruvagi ariyai azhithavanukku pallandu”

“Maya poru padai vananai ayiram tholum pozhikurudi paya suzhatriya azhi vallanukku pallandu”

Once, while he was collecting flowers and tulasi from his garden, he saw a small baby girl under a tulasi plant. Periyalwar carried this baby home to his wife Vraja. The couple, who were till then childless, were delighted to receive this divine grace of the Lord and showered their love on this child. They named her “Godha” meaning daughter of mother earth in Sanskrit. The child had the great fortune of growing up in this family of great bhaktas and turned out to be a great Krishna Premi whose experience is unparalleled in history. Even among the Alvars, Godha’s anubhavam surpasses that of all the others. The gnana and bhakti came to her at a very young age.

“Anju kudikku oru santhathiyai azhwargal

tham seyalai vinjiyanalai - pinjai

pazhuthalai andalai pathiyudan nalum

vazhuthai maname magizhndu” (Malavala Mamuni)

Godha pays homage to her father’s influence by referring to herself as “Bhattar Piran’s Godha” in all her verses. One can trace a lot of parallels between her verses and that of her father. It is said that Periyalwar sang all his verses on the Lords of divya deshas at Godha’s request as she wanted to choose and marry one among them. In his verses, Periyalwar refers to his only daughter, her love for Krishna and her later marriage to the Lord.

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GODHA (ANDAL)

Godha, popularly known as Andal, is perhaps the most well known among the Alvars. She occupies a special place as an Alvar and also as a consort of the Lord. To most Srivaishnavaites, initiation to the works of Alvars begin with Andal's "Thiruppavai". It is traditional to recite the whole of it as an everyday practice during pooja or at least the last two pasuras of it which form its crowning glory.

Godha is the avathara of Bhudevi, a manifestation of Sri Lakshmi. She is the personification of the Lord's mercy (Daya). Her father Periyalwar was picking flowers and tulasi leaves in his garden for the worship of Lord Vishnu when he noticed this small baby lying below a tulasi plant. Her avatara came on the holy Pooram nakshatram of Shravana month (Adi) at Sri Villiputhur. Periyalwar and his wife (named Vraja) who were childless received this girl as the Lord's prasada and brought her up with great love and care. She is dated around 6th century A.D.

There are numerous references to her birth in other works of acharyas. Swami Desikan calls her "Vasudha" meaning one born out of mother earth. She was named Godha by her parents which in

Sanskrit can mean daughter of mother earth or a garland which symbolises her offering garlands to the Lord (both of flowers and later of her inspired verses).

The child was unique by birth and upbringing and was privileged to be brought up in a spiritually charged environment. She turned out to be a great mahatma whose experience is unparalleled in history. She proudly proclaims herself to be “Villiputhur Vishnuchita’s Godha” in all her verses. True to the tradition of her father who sang “thiru pallandu” to the Lord, she saw and played with Krishna all the time. She participated in all the kankaryams performed by her parents. As she grew up, her love for Krishna grew along with her. Periyalwar sings of Godha’s love for Krishna in his pasura.

***“Karai poonum kannadi kanum than kaiyil valai kulukkum
koorai yudukkum ayarkkum than kovvai sevvai thiruthum
theri theri ninrayiram per devan thiram pidatrum”***

Once, in her effort to make herself beautiful for Krishna, she wore the garlands made by her father for the Lord and replaced it in the basket after sometime. She started doing this regularly and the Lord to whom it was offered later seemed to be delighted with it. One day Periyalwar, who was unaware of this practice, saw Godha wearing the garland and was shocked to see the disrespect his daughter had shown to a pooja offering. But Godha did not think that she had done anything wrong and remarked that the Lord was very fond of these garlands worn by her. Periyalwar made a fresh set of garlands for the Lord that day but noticed that the Lord did not seem to be as happy as usual. He attributed this to his daughter’s behaviour. That night, the Lord appeared in his dream and told him that He was pleased to wear the garlands worn by Godha. From that day this became a routine. The priests at the temple and the entire village started calling Godha as “***Soodi kodutha sudar kodi***”

and “**Andal**” meaning one who has come to rule over all of them Periyalwar realised that he had a divine child with the amsa of Lakshmi in her. Godha decorating herself for the Lord is symbolic of what every devotee has to do everyday for spiritual progress. A devotee of the Lord decorates the “self” with all satvic gunas like patience, love, mercy, endurance and destroys rajasic and tamasic qualities like anger, hatred, jealousy and material desires. He looks at himself in introspection asking whether his love would look attractive to the Lord. One should read the story of Godha and her marriage and the union with the Lord in a mystic sense.

As she grew up and was ready for marriage, Godha told her father that she could not bear to marry any mortal. She started performing her famous fast and penance through the month of Margazhi which is very dear to the Lord and composed her “Thiruppavai” as a tribute in verses. She heard her father telling her about the Lords of all divya deshas and chose to marry Sri Ranganatha. Periyalwar, now a worried man, went to bed concerned about his daughter’s willfulness. Lord Ranganatha appeared in his dream and asked for Andal’s hand in marriage. He had similarly instructed the temple priests of Srirangam to go with all the marriage paraphernalia and bring Godha for the marriage. The whole of Sri Villiputhur and Srirangam watched Andal entering the sanctum sanctorum of Srirangam temple and merging with the Lord after offering her garland to Him. Periyalwar joined the hallowed company of Janaka Maharaja to be hailed as the father-in-law of the Lord. Periyalwar sings about his daughter and her marriage to the Lord in the verse

***“Oru magal thannai udaiyen ulagam nirainda pugazhal
thirumagal pola valarthen senganmal than kondu ponan”***

Swami Desikan’s “Godha Sthuthi” is the most glorious tribute

that has been paid to the memory of Andal. He points out that the Lord Ranganatha Himself bowed down before Andal to accept the garland which she had adorned herself with. It is our duty to bow down before her everyday and to constantly recapture her anubhava through her words, as Swami Desikan points out in his “Godha Sthuthi” verse.

***“Thwanmouli dhamani vibho chirasa griheethe
swachanta kalpita sabheeti rasa pramodha
manjuswana madhulikaha vidhatu swayamthe
swaayamvaram kimapi mangala thoorya ghosham”***

From that day, all the purvacharyas have re-lived that special experience of Godha and have vied with each other to write special commentaries on her works throwing light on their esoteric significance.

***“Rangeswarasya thavacha pranayanubhandhat
anyonya mallya parivrittim abhishtuvante
vachalayanti vasudhe rasikas trilokeem
nyunanigatva samatha vishayair vivadaihi”***

(Godha Sthuthi)

All the Alwars, while singing on Sri Ranganatha, maintain that the Lord reclined facing south to constantly keep looking at Vibhishana, His ardent devotee in Lanka. Unlike the other Alwars, Swami Desikan sings that the Lord lay down looking at Sri Villiputhur, the avathara kshetra of His beloved Godha.

***“Dik dakshinapi paripatrima punyalabhyath
sarvothara bhavathi devi thava vatharathu
yathreyva rangapathina bhahumana poorvam
nidhraphi napi niyatham nihitha katakshat”***

(Godha Sthuthi)

Andal's Thiruppavai is a work which has an appeal that tends to grow over time. It can be enjoyed at many levels. Great acharyas have gone back to it again and again, searching in its depths for spiritual experience and have come out of it richer. It is a veritable gold mine to a spiritual seeker

Andal asks for a special relationship with the Lord and the Lord granted her request. She prays to the Lord on our behalf to destroy all our other desires ("**Undannodu utrome yavom, matrai nam kamangal matru**") Godha, being the personification of the Lord's mercy, did not keep her anubhava as something personal but shared it with the whole world serving as a constant source of inspiration to all of us. This reminds us of Sri Ramanuja proclaiming the "Thiru Manthira" from the temple gopuram after promising to treat it as a secret and of the special bond between him and Andal. It is said that Ramanuja went for his biksha everyday reciting Thiruppavai. He is known as "**Thiruppavai Jeeyar**". Once, while reciting "**Undu madagalitrin**" pasura, which refers to "Nappinnai" (gopika) opening the door with her bangles jingling, he stopped at a doorway for bhiksha. A young girl opened the door with jingling bangles. Ramanuja went into a trance in ecstasy believing that Nappinnai had come before him. Andal, in one of her pasuras, offered to give the Lord 100 bowls of a sweet dish if He would come forward to marry her

**"Noorunarum pozhil malirum solai nambikki nan
nooru thadavil vennai vai nerndu paravi vaithen
nooru thada nirainda akkaravadisil sonnen
eru thiruvudaiyan inru vandu ivai kollumgolo?"**

Ramanuja realised that she never had the time to fulfil her promise and with his brotherly love, took it upon himself to fulfil this promise at the "Azhagar Kovil". Later he went to Sri Villiputhur to have

darshan of Godha there and the Vighraha at the temple addressed him as “*Kovil annar*”. From that day, Godha has been hailed as the sister of the saint from Sri Perumbudur (“*Perumbudur mamunikku pinnanal vazhiye*”).

During Geethopadesha, seeing the Lord’s vishwarupa, Arjuna fell at his feet and remarked that he had always thought of Krishna as a friend, a pastoral (Govinda) and had never realised that He was the Almighty who is difficult to attain. Godha on the other hand, starts singing of Him as Narayana, the Almighty. By the end of Thiruppavai, she realises that He is easily available to bhaktas and rushes to take them in His fold if they take even a small faltering step towards Him (“*Siru per azhaithanavum seeri aruladhe*”).

From the days of Andal, it has become traditional to observe the month of Margazhi as a month of prayer and penance. In temples, aradhana for the Lord is offered early in the morning with recital of Thiruppavai through the thirty days. Devout Vaishnavaites participate in these collective prayers in large numbers. Many of them observe the practice at home. Infact the tradition reserves Margazhi month for Andal and her Thiruppavai, and other divya prabhanda pasuras are not recited during this time

Andal’s works which form part of Nalayiram are referred to as “Nachiyar Thirumozhi” (173 incomparable verses) which will always be looked upon by the devotees of Lord as a treasure trove. It would be fitting to pray to Godha as a final tribute in the words of Swami Desikan,

*“Sri vishnuchita kulanandhana kalpavalleem
sri rangaraja hari chandana yoga dhrushyam
saakshat kshamam karunaya kamala mivanyam
godham ananya sarana saranam prapathye”*

*** **



NAMMALWAR

The Vedas and the Upanishads are the ultimate source of all our spiritual and philosophical knowledge. They describe in great detail the nature of the parabrahma, the jeevatma, the relationship between the jeeva and the parabrahma, and the ultimate goal of human life that is to attain the lotus feet of the Lord. But reading and absorbing the tatva of the Upanishads is given only to great scholars. The Brahma Sutras and Bhagavad Gita attempt to present the Upanishads in a nutshell. Sri Bhashyam and Gita Bhashyam of Sri Ramanuja simplify the Brahma Sutras and the Gita. But even these works are beyond the capacity of ordinary mortals like us who do not have scholarship in Sanskrit.

The Nalayira Divya Prabandham of the Alvars present the gnana of all these hallowed works of our tradition in Tamil in a melodious, inspired and easy to assimilate form. They are the combined works of the twelve Alvars, but tradition has it that all these works were brought back to us through Nammalwar who appeared before Nathamuni to recite all the Nalayiram for him to compile. Hence he is hailed as “*Vedam thamizh seida maran*

satakopan” meaning one who presented the substance of the Vedas in Tamil and “*Nathanukku nalayiram uraitha piran*” meaning one who sang the 4000 divya prabhandas in praise of the Lord.

Nammalwar was born in Thirukurugur immediately after the birth of Kaliyuga. Historically he is placed at 8th century A.D. Thirukurugur is called “Alwar Thiru Nagari” to mark his avathara there. It is said that Lord Krishna promised to send a mahatma to the world to spread the name of the Lord and to propagate bhakti in the Kaliyuga, referring to the avathara of the Alwar. Nammalwar is believed to be the amsa of Visvaksena (the commander-in-chief of the Lord’s army).

His birth took place on the very auspicious Poornima day of the Tamil Vaikasi month in Vishakha nakshatram. His parents were great bhakthas (Kari and Udaya Nangai) who were childless for a long time. They had gone on a pilgrimage of temples in North India and on their way back they prayed to the Lord of Thirukurungudi to bless them with a child. The Alwar was born soon after by the divine grace of Thirukurungudi Nambi and was named “Maran” by his parents.

Right at birth, the parents noticed that the child born was unusual in many ways. He refused to take milk, did not respond to the people around but continued to live without any sustenance. The parents, concerned to see this, took the child to the temple and left him in a cradle under a tamarind tree and watched with great astonishment, the divine child growing and thriving in the same place. He continued to sit there in padmasana, in divine contemplation for sixteen years. His presence enfolded the whole village in a state of divine bliss.

The Alwar gives details about his life in various verses. He

mentions that Lord Krishna was food and water and everything necessary to him (“*Unnum shoru parugu neer thinnum vetrilai ellam kannan*”). He goes on to say that he played with Lord, he meditated at His holy feet, he had no interest in pleasures of the senses and he could not tolerate mundane life and that is why he kept his eyes closed

*“Kandu kettutru monthunduzhalum ainkaruvi
kandavinbam therivariya alavilla sitrinbam
ondodiyal thirumagalum neeyume ulanirpa
kanda sadir kandozhinden adainden un thiruvadiyai”*

His mind dwelt on the Lord all the time (“*Ozhivil kalamellam udanai manni*”). He was a staunch Srivaishnavaite who could not bear to think of other devatas (“*Unnithu matrору deivam thozhal avanaiyallal*”).

He saw Sriman Narayana in everything and in all people around him.

*“Thiruvudai mannarai kanil thirumalai kandene enrum
uruvudai vannangal kanil ulagalandan enru thullum
karuvudai thevilgal ellam kadal vannan kovile enrum”*

He mentions that his gnana and bhakti were not the result of any sadhana. They came naturally to him with the grace of the Lord.

“Mayarvara madinalam arulinan”

“Enakke arulgal seyya vidi soozhndadal enakkelamman”

“Ariya kalathulle adimaikkan anbu seivithu”

Around this time, there lived another mahatma called “Madhurakavi” who had gone on a pilgrimage to Ayodhya and other places in North India. He noticed a great flame shining constantly down south for two to three nights and was drawn towards it.

Following the flame, he reached the Thirukurugur temple and saw the Alwar seated there. To test him, he threw a small pebble before him and the divine boy woke up out of his trance for the first time. Madhurakavi posed a philosophical question to the boy who answered it effortlessly. The question runs like this - "***Sethadu vayitril siriyadu pirandal ethai thinru enge kidakkum?***". This means that if the jeeva (life which is eternal) is born into the body which is lifeless, what will it experience and where will it live? The young saint answered - "***Athai thinru ange kidakkum***". This means that if the jeeva is a realised soul, it will contemplate on the paramatma and will live in this divine consciousness. If not, it will endure the fruits of good and bad karma that results from its actions born out of sensory perceptions and will remain caught in the cycle of births and deaths. On hearing this short, yet precise answer to his intricate question, Madhurakavi recognised the mahatma before him and took refuge at his feet. Once Nammalwar woke up from his trance, he started singing his verses on the Lord. Madhurakavi recorded all the Alwar's songs. It is believed that the Alwar lived on the earth in the same place for 32 years.

Madhurakavi composed the very beautiful "Kanninun Chiru Thambu" in praise of Nammalwar. The verses are extolled by all for their beauty, melody and guru bhakti. The works of Nammalwar which form part of Nalayira Divya Prabhandham are "Thiruviruttam" (100 verses), "Thiruvasiriyam" (7 verses), "Periya Thiruvandadi" (87 verses) and "Thiruvaimozhi" (1102 verses). They are believed to be the substance of the four Vedas in that order.

In Thiruvirutham, the Alwar maintains that he finds mundane life in this world unbearable. In Thiruvasiriyam, he describes and enjoys the beauty of the Lord. In Periya Thiruvandadi, he cries out to the Lord to take him in His fold. In Thiruvaimozhi, he enjoys the

Lord, tells us the way towards Him and concludes with his “moksha anubhavam”.

The Alwar mentions in the very first Thiruvaimozhi that he needs a full thousand verses to sing the glory of the Lord.

***“Paranadimel kurugur satakopan sol
niranirai ayirathu ivai pathum veede”***

The Lord decided to fulfil this desire. When the Alwar performed saranagati to the Lord and beseeched Him, the Lord did not appear before him and waited for the Alwar to complete the 1000 verses that he mentioned in the first verse. The Alwar mentions that he is merely an instrument in the hands of the Lord and that the Lord sang His own glory through him (“*Thammai konu thannai padinan*”).

It is said that Nammalwar never stirred out of his place in Thirukurugur and the Lords of all the divya deshas appeared before him in all glory to hear him sing in praise of Them. Others say that the Alwar saw all the divya deshas with his divya dhrushti. He paints beautiful portraits of the temples and their surroundings. His verses on Thiruvenkada Mamalai, Srirangam, Thirukurungudi, Thiru Kudandai are some of the exceptional ones. When he sang the pasura,

***“Thirumalirumsolai malai enren enna
thirumal vandu en nenju niraiya pugundan”***

the Lord appeared before him on His Garuda Vahanam to take him to His abode. Nammalwar concludes by singing about the way to Sri Vaikunta and the endless bliss he enjoys at the Lord’s feet. In most temples, the Bramhotsava for the Lord is performed to culminate with Garudaseva on Alwar’s Thiru Nakshatram. Nammalwar is given a prime place of importance among the Alwars.

and acharyas in our tradition. He is referred to as “Adi Guru”. Madhurakavi points out that Nammalwar with his grace leads us towards the Lord. He has all qualities of a great acharya.

***“Payananragilum pangilaragilum
seyal nanraga thiruthi pani kolvan
kuyil ninral pozhilsoozh kurugur nambi
muyalginren undan mozhgayarku anbaye”***

Swami Desikan says that the way to Lord’s feet is by holding on to the feet of the Alwar.

***“Thandaiyena ninra thani thirumal thalil
thalai vaithom satakopan arulinale”***

The Lord’s padukas are called “Sri Sathan” after the Alwar since the Lord’s padukas at Srirangam are believed to be the Alwar himself.

***“Poomagalkon thennarangar poongazharku padukamai
tham magizhum selva satakopan”***

(Malavala Mamunigal)

Nammalwar is called as “Satakopan” as he conquered the “satavayu” and senses. He refers to himself as “Maran Satakopan”. The term “Nammalwar” was used by the Lord to address him. Srivaishnavaites continue to use the term as it brings out his special place in the sampradayam. In fact, the term “Alwar” when used without a prefix refers to Nammalwar.

Many great acharyas have written commentaries for Thiruvaimozhi (“*Arayirapadi*”, “*Irupathi nalayirapadi*” etc.). But these commentaries are made in a mixture of Sanskrit and Tamil. The Tamil language used is very strange, and unlike what is in vogue today, that most of us need a commentary for these commentaries.

At times, they succeed in making the text more complicated to a lay man than what it is, though they add to its substance by throwing light on its esoteric significance. Translating the substance of Thiruvaimozhi to English would therefore be of great service to our children who can enjoy the beauty of the work (in spite of lack of scholarship in Tamil).

Thiruvaimozhi of Nammalwar is a work of high philosophical content. It is the essence of the Srivaishnava Sampradayam and therefore the author feels it necessary to present a brief summary of it here. The basic tenets of the tradition are spread over the thousand one hundred and two verses. Each one of the tenets is highlighted with great love and care in particular verses.

Thiruvaimozhi is the substance of the Vedas in Tamil (Dravida Veda Sagaram). It is equal to the philosophy of all the Upanishads put together. Swami Desikan says that Thiruvaimozhi makes those parts of the Vedas which are intricate, easier to understand. “*Theliyada marainilamgal thelignrome*” The title Thiruvaimozhi was given by the Lord Himself when He came before Nammalwar to take him to His abode. Infact, the Lord addressed the Alwar as Nammalwar showing that he was very special to Him. The whole of it is about the grace of Sriman Narayana who blessed the Alwar with the gnana to make such a great work. The Alwar mentions this right at the beginning (*Mayarvara madinalam arulinan*). He goes on to say that the Lord sat in his heart and recited these Tamil verses “*En nenjathullirundu thamizh nool ivai mozhindu*”.

Thiruvaimozhi has been the source of knowledge to all Vaishnava acharyas, specially to Sri Ramanuja. The important elements of the artha panchakam discussed in the Sri Bhashyam

flow directly from Nammalwar's words. This is brought out in these verses which are in praise of Ramanuja - "***Satakopan moymbal valartha idayathai ramanujan, maran thunaiyadi keezh vazhvai ugakkum iramanusamuni***".

Acharyas who have made commentaries on Thiruvaimozhi have said that the whole of it is about the greatness of the Lord's Thiruvadi (sacred feet). Nammalwar himself repeatedly says this in many verses, particularly in the following verse.

***"Thiruvadiyai narananai kesavanai paramshudarai
thiruvadi servadu karudi shezhum kurugur satakopan
thiruvadimel uraitha thamizh ayirathul ippathum
thiruvadiye adaivikkum thiruvadi serndu, onrumine"***

He says that his verses are in praise of the Lord's Thiruvadi, sung with the objective of attaining the Thiruvadi. To others, understanding it is the means to reach the Lord's Thiruvadi. Infact, one can not think of the Lord's Thiruvadi without associating it with Nammalwar and his work. Swami Desikan observes that the lotus feet of Periya Perumal Sri Ranganatha acquired an added splendour when Nammalwar sang about their grace ("***Anikurugai nagar munivar navukku amaindana vidalariya periya perumal mei padangale***"). This close association has been enshrined into the tradition of calling the Lord's feet that is placed on our heads in temples as "Sri Satari" after Nammalwar.

Acharyas, in their commentaries of Thiruvaimozhi, have said that the whole work is an exhaustive description of the artha panchakam (the five important elements) to be clarified by a philosophical school of thought. It does so in tune with the Srivaishnava Sampradayam. This idea that Thiruvaimozhi is about the artha panchakam is put into this verse of Bhattar which is recited

as Thiruvaimozhi Dhaniyan.

***“Mikka irainilayum meyya uyirnilayum
thakka neriyum thadaiyagi thokkiyalum
oozhvinayum vazhvinayum odum kurugayarkon
yazhinisai vedathiyai”***

In the above verse it is said that Thiruvaimozhi explains the substance of the following .

- 1 ***“Irainilai”*** meaning the qualities of the parabrahma
2. ***“Uyirnilai”*** meaning the attributes of the jeeva
- 3 ***“Thakkanceri”*** meaning the relationship between the jeevatma and the paramatma
- 4 ***“Thadai”*** meaning the obstacles in the path of realisation
5. ***“Vazhvinai”*** meaning the marga for god realisation

It does all this in easy, sweet and melodious Tamil verses.

The opening verses are by themselves a grand curtain raiser to the depth of the work to follow. In these verses ***“Uyarvara uyarnalam”***, Nannalwar describes the paramatma who has been sung by the Vedas ***“Shudarmigu suruthiyul ivaiyunda surane”***. He is eternal, all pervading and all dimensions of the physical world like space, matter and time are but manifestation of Him His verses ***“Onrum thevum, mudijothiyai, muniye nanmugane”*** are the three Thiruvaimozhis where Nannalwar concentrates on establishing Sriman Narayana, the Sriyapathi as the creator and the Almighty ***“Ninra adi piran”*** All religion and schools of thought lead to Him ***“Nadineer vanangum deivamum ummaiyum mun padaithan, mattada palasamaya madi koduthai”***. In his ***“Mudijothiyai”*** pasuram, he describes the Lord as the abode of kalyana gunas and

hails Him as Sriyapathi (“*Poovinmel maduvazh marbina en solli yan vazhthuvane*”). He says that the Lord is guided by the command of Sri Mahalakshmi and the easiest marga to Him is through her grace. Nammalwar loves to address the Lord as Sriyapathi. There are innumerable references to this in his verses. This is specially observed in his verses where he performs saranagathi.

Nammalwar was a great gnani and a mystic. His anubhava is very beautiful and goes through a range of emotions. His mood changes rapidly from one verse to another though all of them are equally moving. He delved deeply into the attributes of the Lord and enjoyed a sense of oneness with Him. He sings with wonder that Srīman Narayana is an ocean of mercy, more bountiful than the mythical kalpavriksha. This vriksha is said to bless the seeker with anything he asks for. The Lord, according to Nammalwar, not only granted all his other desires, but gave Himself away to the Alwar who was devoted to Him.

***“Erparan ennai yakkikondur enakke thannai thanda
karpagam en amudam karmugil polum venkada nal verpan”***

According to him, all the leelas of the Lord were a grand conspiracy to charm his heart away from Him.

***“Edir shuzhal puk ennai thorpirappum enakke yarulkal seyya
vidhi shoozhndadal enakkel amman tiruvikkiramanaiye”***

He sings of the various avatharas of the Lord, zeroing in precisely on their specialities encompassing the whole substance of it in a few words. The following verses singing the various avatharas illustrate his anubhava.

“Kola varahamonrai nilakottidai konda endhai”

“Karpar iramapiranai allal matrum karparo”

“Kannan pirandavarum valarndavarum”

“Angu appozhude avan veeya thonriya en

singapiran perumai yarayum sheermaithe”

He was specially involved in the grace of the Lord's Krishnavathara and lived in Krishna consciousness. As Lord Krishna has said in the Geetha, a mahatma who sees the Lord everywhere is a rarity. Filled with his devotion to the Lord, Nammalwar swears in many verses that he can not think of or sing the praise of any other mortal or devatha

While explaining the attributes of the jeeva, the Alwar maintains that it is dependent on the Lord and goes through endless cycles of births and deaths. It lives engrossed in its karma. Life goes the way it is predestined. The development of personality is influenced by heredity and environment and these are in turn governed by destiny (***“Avaravar vidhi vazhi adaya ninranare”*** The only way to break free of the shackles of destiny is to hold on to the feet of the Lord who is karma and the fruits of karma (***Karumamum karuma palanumagiya karanan thannai, Onrume thozha namvinai oyume***). This is the only purushartha that the Alwar craves for.

Most of the verses of Nammalwar flow out of his love and divine consciousness where there is no awareness of the external world. Some of them are directly addressed to the Lord. In some, the Alwar addresses mankind and gives advice. His concern for mankind is expressed in anguish in these verses.

Life is transcient and even when one is alive, beset with innumerable problems like ill health, old age, bereavement and other anxieties. The life span becomes shorter by the day.

“Vaitha nal varai ellai kurugi senru ezhthilaippadan munnam adainino”

It is therefore important to understand the ultimate goal of life and to constantly pray to the Lord so that when the end comes, the mind dwells on the feet of the Lord which liberates the soul and grants permanent bliss.

“Avan thuyararu shudaradi thozhudezhan manane”

His verses ***“Oru nayagamai oda”***, graphically describe the turn of fortune that transforms great kings into paupers. He shows that all riches and personal relationships are momentary. We take a lot of things for granted though we constantly see the ravages of sickness and death all around us. People who are all powerful, mighty and successful today disappear most shockingly like bubbles on the surface of water. The paramatma is the only force that is all pervading and eternal. His grace and divinity grows over time. One should understand this Reality, realise the futility of pursuing the goals which are illusionary and follow the direction that will lead to Him. This marga is the tradition shown by the Alwars and the acharyas. Nammalwar is the foremost among them. To him, it is devotion to the Lord and association with bhagavathas that makes life in the world liveable. He brings this out in his verses ***“Inge thirinderku izhukkutrayen”***. As long as he can do this, there is nothing wrong with life on earth to him.

The Alwar was a great gnani who saw the Lord in all things. The dark clouds reminded him of the dark hued form of Krishna and the skies of the Lord's Trivikrama avathara. Yet he places a lot of importance on archavathara and temple worship. As a great acharya, he could realise that it is difficult for most of us to abstract from the properties of things in the world and to see the Lord in all

the things. This is possible only for great souls like the Alwar. He says in the words of Prahlada to his father “**Engum ulan kannan**” meaning that the Lord who is present everywhere must definitely be present in that pillar. But for ordinary people it is easier to see the Lord in the vigraha form that we see in a temple. It is the Almighty who has comedown in his archavathara to assume a simple form which is within our reach at Thiruvengkada Mamalai, says Nammalwar in “**Paran senru ser thiruvengada mamalai**”

He points out that these temples and kshetras are hallowed because of the spiritual experiences of great souls who lived there. He sings of Thiru Kudandai as the kshetra that has attracted great bhaktas like Thirumazhisai Piran. He sings of the Lord of Thiru Kannapuram as “**Vedanavar virumbum thiru kannapurathu adiyana**”. The anubhava of great souls becomes part and parcel of the greatness of the kshetra.

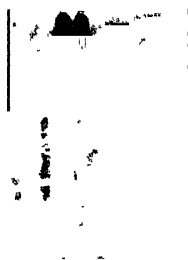
In His archavathara form, the Lord is easily attainable (Sulabhan). He was definitely so for the Alwar whose devotion to the Lord was total. This is illustrated by all these verses “**Thiruper nagaran-inru vandu iruppen enru nenju niraiya pugundan**”. Through his verses he shows that there existed a very special and intimate relationship between him and the Lord (“**Theera irumbunda neeradu pola en aruyirai araparugi enakku aravamudanai**”) His bhakti was atmanivedanam and he never stirred out of his place under the tamarind tree at Thirukurugur. He mentions that he never worshipped the Lord with flowers and all that he offered to the Lord was his love and his verses (“**Pookkolmalai kondu undan podal vanamgenelum un pookkolmalai nedu mudikku punaiyum kanni enaduyire**”). Through these, he captivated the Lord and the archamurthys of the

divya deshas appeared before him and begged him to sing about them. His charitra is a moving portrayal of the power of bhakti and the simplicity of the Lord. In his verses on Thiruper, he says that the Lord came and sat in his heart (*"Thirumal vandu en nenju niraiya pugundan"*). He tells the Lord that he will not let go of Him and appeals to Sri Mahalakshmi for her support (*"Ini nan pogalotten onrum mayam seyyel ennaye"*).

He invites other poets to come along and sing the grace of the Lord at Thirumalirunjolai. Like Thirumazhisai Piran, he stresses that the Lord is the only satisfying subject for him to sing. He cannot bear to sing of any mortal or devatha other than the Lord (*"Nakkondu manidam pada vanda kaviyen allen, unnithu matraru deivam thozhal unnai allal"*).

There is a whole range of emotional experiences that the Alwar portrays. They are rich in aesthetic appeal and fluctuate between boundless joy and deep despair frequently. He sings at times like a gnani full of wisdom that flows out of self realisation. In other verses, he is like a devotee craving for a spiritual experience frequently assuming a nayaki bhava. In most of his verses he is absorbed in his own thoughts. Once in a while he addresses mankind in the form of an upadesa. He concludes by giving us a glimpse of the supreme bliss that he enjoys at the feet of the Lord. Throughout this work he reassures us that reading and understanding Thiruvaimozhi is the surest way towards eternal bliss.

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MADHURAKAVI ALWAR

The divya charitra of Madhurakavi is closely woven around that of Nammalwar, his acharya. His avathara took place at Thirukolur which is very near Nammalwar's avathara kshetra of Thirukurugur. He was born in a devout Vaishnava Brahmin family before Nammalwar on Chitra nakshatram of Chitra month. He is believed to be the amsa of garuda.

He was a great gnanı, well versed in scriptures and spent his time in divine contemplation. In later life, he renounced material life and went on a pilgrimage to North India. After reaching Ayodhya, he stayed over there for some time wanting to remain close to Sri Rama at His holy birth place.

One night he looked down towards the south to bow to the Lord of his native Thirukolur when he saw a big flame beckoning him in that direction. For the next few nights, he continued to see this flame every night and felt a rush of great desire to follow it to its source. He started following the light travelling in the nights when he could see it and at the end found himself at the temple of Thirukurugur. He realised that there must be some special presence in the place

that had exerted this force on him. From the people of that village, he came to know about the divine child (Nammalwar) who was by now 16 years old. He watched him sitting in padmasana under the tamarind tree within the temple. He was captivated by the spiritual radiance of the boy and wanted to wake him up from his nishta. To catch his attention, he threw a small pebble before him. For the first time since his birth, the boy woke up from his trance and looked at Madhurakavi. Madhurakavi posed a philosophical question to test the young saint. The substance of it runs like this. "If the jeeva (life) is born into the body which is made up of matter which is lifeless, what will it experience and where will it live? ". The young saint answered the intricate question effortlessly in a few words saying, "*Athai thinru ange kidakkum*". This means that if the jeeva is a realised soul, it will contemplate on the paramatma and live in this divine consciousness. If not, it will endure the fruits of good and bad karmas that result from its actions born out of sensory perceptions and will continue to remain caught in the cycle of births and deaths.

Madhurakavi was lost in admiration for the young saint and was moved by the divine grace of the Lord which had guided him to this great mahatma. He was thrilled to have been instrumental in the Lord's leela of awakening Nammalwar to present his gnana to the world in the form of his works and accepted him as his "guru".

From that day he was involved totally in service to his guru. He regarded his guru as the Lord himself and service to his guru to be as fruitful as prapatti to the Lord. He realised that the way to the Lord's feet is by holding on to the feet of Nammalwar. He swore that he knew nothing apart from his guru ("*Thevu matrariyen kurugur nambi*"). He recorded all Nammalwar's verses and constantly sang them. He composed 11 verses called "Kanninun Chiru Thambu" on his guru. These verses are hailed by the whole

world as the essence of devotion and guru bhakti. He mentions that Nammalwar chose him as the medium for propogating his works (*“Ninru than pugazh etha arulinan”*). Nammalwar’s special grace is the only purushartha that he desired in this world (*“Arul kandeer ivvulaginil mikkade”*)

Nammalwar left the world at a very young age of 32 years. After him, Madhurakavi installed a golden vighraha of Nammalwar at the Thirukurugur temple and built a mandapa and vimanam for it. He performed thiruvadaradhanam in the shrine and trained groups of devotees to recite Thiruvaimozhi during ceremonial utsavas to the Lord. He started celebrating Nammalwar’s thirunakshatram with a grand brahmotsavam

When he performed this utsava on a particular year, the Tamil poets who formed the Madhurai Sangham Congress of that time, raised strong objection to Madhurakavi’s actions of according too much importance to Nammalwar and his works as these works did not have the recognition of the Tamil Sangham

Madhurakavi promised them that he would bring his guru’s works to the Sangham at Madhurai after the completion of the Alwar’s utsavam. He meditated at the Alwar’s sannidhi seeking his guidance. Nammalwar appeared before him and asked him to write one of his verses that runs like this on a palm leaf and present it before the Sangham poets.

*“Kannan kazhalinai
nannum manamudayeer
ennum thirunamam
thinnam naraname”*

Madhurakavi presented this verse to the Sangham and asked the poets to explain its meaning. The poets were baffled and the

palm leaf continued to circulate among them. Finally they accepted that they could not grasp its substance and placed the palm leaf on the Sangham board along with their works. The board pushed all their works into the pond and floated with Nammalwar's verse on it.

From that time the Tamil poets accepted Nammalwar's works as the foremost in literature and it became traditional to pay homage to him as Alwar and acharya before singing about the Lord. The famous poet Kambhan of that time begins his Ramayanam with a prayer to Nammalwar.

*“Tharugai neenda thayaradan than tharum
irugai vezhathi raghavan than kadai
thirugai velai tharai misai seppida
kurugai nadhan kurai kazhal kappade”*

He also composed the “Satakopar Andadhi” as a homage to Nammalwar.

Madhurakavi's charithra remains a constant source of inspiration to all of us. Our tradition stresses that acharya's anugraha is as important as the Lord's blessing. It is important to be discerning while choosing one's guru and faith. Having made a choice, one has to have steadfast devotion and faith in the perceptor's words. A devotee who is wedded to the guru finds himself at the Lord's feet effortlessly.

Nammalwar lived his life immersed in “Krishna consciousness” and said that Krishna was everything to him. Madhurakavi who was his disciple was immersed in his “guru” and knew nothing other than him. His verses (Kanninun Chiru Thambu) that sing the glory of his acharya are included as an important part of the Nalayiram (though they do not sing the Lord). It is said that Nathamuni prayed to

Nammalwar reciting these eleven verses 12000 times non-stop at the sannidhi of Nammalwar at Thirukurugur and Nammalwar with his boundless mercy answered his prayer by reciting all the Nalayiram for him to compile. We, therefore, owe the whole of Nalayiram to the guru bhakti of Madhurakavi and the grace of Nammalwar that Swami Desikan extols as “*Thiru maran karunai*”.

Kanninun Chiru Thambu is like the decorative pendant of a beautiful ornament. The beauty of the ornament is enhanced manifold by the pendant Malavala Mamuni establishes its place among the works of other Alvars in this verse.

*“Vaitha thirumanthirathin mathima mam padam pol
seertha madhurakavi seikalaiyai artha pugazh
ariyargal thangal aruli cheyal naduve
servithar thatpariyum therndu”*

Acharyas in their commentaries have said that Kanninun Chiru Thambu echoes the sentiments of Nammalwar expressed in his Thiruvaimozhi (“*Payilum shudaroli moorthiyai*”) where Nammalwar sings about the importance of satsangam and bhagavatha seva. Nammalwar is known as Lord Ranganatha’s “thiruvadi” at Srirangam.

*“Anikurugai nagar munivar navukku amaindana
vidalariya periya perumal mei padangale”*

(Swami Desikan)

Madhurakavi is worshipped as Nammalwar’s “Thiruvadi” at Alwar Thirunagari. Let us pray at the feet of Madhurakavi to bless us with steadfast devotion to Nammalwar and to the Lord.

*** *** *** ***



THIRUPPANALWAR

Thiruppanalwar's contribution to Nalayira Divya Prabhandam consists of ten exquisite verses in praise of Sri Ranganatha. His life story is wound inextricably around Srirangam and Sri Ranganatha.

Srirangam is the most important among the 108 divya deshas revered by the Srivaishnavaites. Lord Ranganatha reclines in a small island surrounded by the river Cauveri amidst the lush, pristine beauty of Trichy and has captivated for centuries the hearts of all bhaktas. It is a very ancient temple, believed to have been given by Lord Brahma to the kings of Ikshvaku dynasty, who ruled over Ayodhya. The Lord Himself is said to have worshipped here in His Ramavatara. Later He gave this temple to Vibhishana who was disconsolate at the prospect of separation from Him.

***“Arada arulamudam podinda kovil
ambujathon ayothi mannar kalitha kovil
tholada thani veeran thozhuda kovil
thunaiyana veedanarku thunaiyam kovil
serada payanellam serkum kovil
sezhumaraiyin mudalezhuthu sernda kovil
theerada vinai anaithum theerkum kovil
thiruvarangam ena thigazhum kovil thane”***

(Swami Desikan)

A big part of the outer temple with its saptha praharam and sannidhis to the Alvars are believed to have been reconstructed by Thirumangai Alwar. The Andal sannidhi is considered special as she married Sri Ranganatha and became one with Him. There is a beautiful sannidhi for Lord Lakshmi Nrisimha in whose presence Kambha Ramayana and Swami Desikan's Paduka Sahasram were presented. It is said that the Lord nodded his head in appreciation when Swami Desikan recited the work. The late Azhagiya Singar, the 44th pontiff of the Ahobila Mutt has constructed a grand towering rajagopuram to the temple.

Sri Ramanuja spent a big part of his monastic life in Srirangam and influenced the aradhana kramam and other temple rituals. He attained samadhi there. It is said that his sannidhi, within the temple, preserves his “Thirumeni” itself.

The divya deshas occupy a special place in the hearts of bhaktas because of the experiences of great souls associated with them. Srirangam is, from that point of view, the foremost among the divya deshas as all the Alvars (eleven of them excluding Madhurakavi who sang only about his guru Nammalwar) have sung the glory of the kshetra, the temple, the holy Cauveri river and the Lord. Other

great acharyas like Sri Ramanuja in his Sriranga Gadhyam and Swami Desikan in his Paduka Sahasram have enjoyed the Lord. Even today it attracts realised souls true to the words of Thirumazhisai Piran in his verse “*Atra patrar shutri vazhum andhaneer arangame*”. Ramanuja says that ultimate bliss lies in residing at the Lord’s feet in Srirangam (“*Athraiva sreerange sugamasva*”).

Among the verses of the Alvars on Sri Ranganatha (which are all very sweet), Thiruppanalwar’s “Amalanadhipiran” and Thondaradipodi Alwar’s “Thirumalai” are very special. Both of them were totally absorbed in Sri Ranganatha. Thiruppanalwar’s avathara took place in Uraiyur, a small hamlet near Srirangam. Uraiyur has an exquisite temple for Sri Ranganayaki within which is a small shrine for Thiruppanalwar marking his avathara there. The Alwar’s thirunakshatram falls on Rohini nakshatram of Karthigai month. He is the amsa of the Lord’s “srivatsa”.

He belonged to a community of minstrels who made a living by singing the praise of the Lord. They were regarded as a backward caste and were subjected to a lot of humiliation by the upper castes. In those days, they were not allowed into the temples to worship the Lord.

Thiruppanalwar, a great bhakta, used to stand on the banks of Cauveri away from the temple and sing to the Lord. His verses bring into the minds visual portraits of him adorned with tulasi mani malai and singing to the accompaniment of veena. He used to frequently go into a trance while singing and become totally cut off from the external world.

Once, while he was thus singing in ecstasy, a temple priest named Uloka Saranga Muni came to the Cauveri river with a golden pot in his hand to take water for the Lord’s thirumanjanam. Saranga

Muni, inspite of all his learning and high caste upbringing, lacked humility and compassion which are the essential qualities of a bhakta. He was annoyed to see this “Panar” blocking his way and tried to attract his attention. But the Alwar was lost in his ecstasy. Saranga Muni lost his temper and threw a stone at him to make him move away from his path. This hit the Alwar on his forehead and he jolted back to his senses, bleeding profusely. The Alwar, a very simple man, was alarmed to have been instrumental in angering a high caste priest and moved out of the way.

When the priest went back to the temple he was shocked to see a stream of blood flowing from the Lord’s forehead. He was greatly disturbed and spent the whole day in great sorrow unable to understand what was happening. That night Sri Ranganatha appeared in his dreams and expressed displeasure about the way the Muni had treated a great devotee. He instructed the Muni to ask the Alwar for forgiveness and to bring him with respect to the temple. The Muni rushed to the river bank early in the morning and saw Thiruppanalwar singing as usual there. He fell at his feet begging for his forgiveness. The Alwar was embarrassed with all this attention but realised that there must be the will of the Lord behind every thing. Saranga Muni picked up the Alwar on his back. He carried him through the temple praharas surrounded by all other priests right into the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. From then onwards, Thiruppanalwar was called as “Muni Vahanan” as he rode on the Muni’s shoulders.

The Alwar was thrilled to the core to enter the temple and have the darshan of the Lord whom he had always visualised within his mind. He was in a state of ecstasy wondering at the special grace of the Lord towards him. He spontaneously sang the beauty of the

Lord while his eyes rested on each part of the Lord's form, starting from the Lord's feet, the grace of which had brought him into the temple. He ends by saying that having seen Sri Ranganatha, his eyes refuse to see anything else.

***“Kondal vaṇṇanai kovalanai vennai
unda vayan - en ullam kavarndanai
andarkon aniyarangan en amudinai
kanda kangal matronrinai kanave”***

He enjoys the Lord as little Krishna, the “butter thief” who in His archavathara as Sri Ranganatha, stole his heart away from him. After the darshan, he merged with the Lord's feet.

***“Kattave kanda padam kamala nal adai undi
thettaru udarabandham thirumarbu kadam sevvai
vattamil kangal meni muniyeri thani pugundu
pattinal kandu vaazhum panar thal paravinome”***

*** *** *** ***



THONDARADIPODI ALWAR

The empire of the Chola kings of Tamil Nadu, embraced by the holy Cauveri river, was a lush fertile land that was the cradle of the bhakti movement. Within it lie about 40 Vaishnava divya deshas close to each other that are hallowed by their association with the leelas of the Lord and the anubhavas of the Alvars who had sung about them. One among them is Thiru Mandangudi which is the avathara kshetra of Thondaradipodi Alwar. He is believed to be the amsa of the Lord's "vajrayanti" (his favourite ornament) and was born in a Brahmin family. The family thought of Srīman Narayana as their treasure and bhakti to him as their only tradition. The child came with a divine aura around him on Kettai nakshatram of Margazhi month and was named "Vipra Narayana".

Even as a child, he showed a sweet satvic nature and was well trained by his father in scriptures. He remained detached from worldly life and was wedded to his service to the Lord and to His devotees. He came to be called "Thondaradipodi" referring to his humility and his devotion to bhagavathas.

Once, he left Mandagudi on a pilgrimage and headed towards Srirangam, the foremost among the divya deshas. He refers to it as periya kovil (*“Maruviya periya kovil madil thiruvarangam”*). Sri Ranganatha captivated his mind in the very first darshan and the Alwar, who came on a tour, remained there in a grove near the temple permanently. He could not bear to go away from the Lord whose beauty and grace he describes in his pasura.

*“Pachai ma malai pol meni pavazhavai kamala chenkan
achutha! amararere! ayar tham kozhunde! ennum
ichuvai thavira yan poi indira lokamalum
achuvai perinum venden arangama nagarulane”*

He constantly recaptured the soulabhya of the Lord who lay down facing Lanka in the south to bless his devotee Vibhishana who was disconsolate at the prospect of separation from Him. He enjoys the mercy of the Lord in His Ramavathara, the captivating charm of His Krishnavathara and His special grace towards bhaktas like Gajendra in his work “Thiru Maalai” (45 verses). To him, Srirangam was the only temple and Sri Ranganatha, the only deity to fill his heart (*“Ten thirai shoozh aranganaiye deivam enran”*). There is a saying in Tamil that one who does not know Thiru Maalai cannot know the Lord (*“Thirumalai ariyar perumalai ariya mattar”*). He also sang the “Thirupalliyezhuchi” to awaken the Lord which is recited as aradhana kramam everyday.

The Alwar created a beautiful garden full of fragrant flowers and tulasi. He used to spend all his time in his garden tending it and making beautiful garlands that glimmered with love and care. He lived in a small hut within the garden, visiting the temple thrice everyday to have darshan.

While the Alwar was thus immersed in his divine consciousness, the Lord decided to enact a leela to bring out to the world His commitment to His devotees. Around this time, there lived in Srirangam two glamorous, bewitching court dancers named Devi and Devadevi. They were extremely proud of their beauty and proficiency in fine arts and they enjoyed royal patronage. Once they came to the temple to dance before the Lord during utsava and were drawn into the Alwar's garden which captivated them. There, they met the Alwar engrossed in his work, his mind constantly meditating on the Lord. Devadevi fell in love with him and was upset to note that he paid no attention to her. Her sister warned her about getting infatuated with a man who was above the influence of worldly desires.

Devadevi, enraged by this advice, swore to turn the attention of this saint towards her charms within a month. She left with her sister to return to the garden dressed in simple clothes and approached the Alwar. She fell at his feet and begged him to accept her as his disciple seeking to perform service to him and to the Lord. The Alwar, a simple soul, accepted her at face value and was pleased to watch the commitment with which she served him. Slowly the Lord's maya diverted the Alwar's attention to the girl and the girl herself got more involved than what she bargained for.

After sometime, she expressed a desire to go back to her house to see her mother and sister. The Alwar, unable to tolerate separation, left with her and settled down in her place. Soon he was deprived of all his wealth by the girl's mother who kept demanding more money all the time. Finally when the Alwar had nothing to give, the mother turned him out. He returned in deep sorrow to his

garden while Devadevi mourned his sorry state and her helplessness.

Sri Ranganatha interfered to help the Alwar. He went to Devadevi's mother calling himself as the Alwar's servant and handed over a big gold vessel from the temple to her. The lady rejoiced over the very valuable gift and reluctant to lose the Alwar, sent Sri Ranganatha back to invite the Alwar. The Lord went to his devotee carrying the message and the Alwar rushed back to his beloved. The very next morning, the temple priest noticed the valuable vessel missing and reported the loss to the king. The king ordered a massive search and the vessel was found in the dancer's house. Devadevi's mother pleaded that the vessel was brought by the Alwar's servant while the Alwar swore he had no servant nor had any valuable wealth. The king refused to believe him and locked him up in a cell where the Alwar spent a sleepless night pleading to the Lord.

That night Sri Ranganatha appeared in the king's dream and explained that He had chosen to go on the Alwar's behalf to help him. The Lord made it clear that He was a devoted servant of his bhaktas and chose to humble Himself in any way for them. The king woke up in the morning realising that he had committed a grave sin of ill treating a great devotee. He had heard of Sri Krishna going as messenger for the Pandavas and as Arjuna's charioteer during the war. He realised that he had seen a miracle enacting itself before his own eyes and rushed to free the Alwar. He later took him in a bedecked palanquin to the temple and watched the Alwar rush to the sanctum sanctorum to have a darshan of the Lord who came to his service in all His mercy. From that day the Alwar went back to his sadhana and service to the Lord and bhaktas. Devadevi joined him in his humble abode. She and the king turned ardent devotees

of the Alwar and spent their lives at his feet holding onto them as the means for their spiritual progress.

The lives of great souls like Thondaradipodi Alwar transformed the lives of people who lived around them. Their works continue to live after them through ages enabling us to sing the praise of the Lord and to share the mystical experience of these great souls.

*“Matronrum vendam maname madil arangar
katrinam meitha kazhalinai keezh - utra
thirumalai paadum seer thondaradipodi em
perumanai eppozhudum pesu”*

*** **



KULASEKHARA ALWAR

Kulasekhara Alwar was the Tamil king of a small kingdom in Chera Nadu. His avathara came on the Punarvasu nakshatram of Tamil Masi month. He is the amsa of “kaustuba”, the gem that the Lord wears. His verses in the Nalayiram are called Kulasekhara “Perumal Thirumozhi” consisting of 105 verses. The very popular and sweet devotional hymn “Mukundamala” in Sanskrit is also attributed to him and he is the only one among the Alwars who had sung in Tamil as well as in Sanskrit. Different sources place his historical dating at different times. Some place him before Thirumangai Alwar in the 8th century A.D. and others towards the end of 6th century A.D.

Even as a child, Kulasekhara Alwar was very much captivated by the leelas of the Lord, specially that of His Ramavathara. He was closely associated with bhagavathas and constantly listened to their narration of the Puranas, reminding everyone of Bhakta Prahlada. In spite of belonging to the royal clan, he showed great humility, simplicity and a remarkable satvic nature unpolluted by desire for wealth and power. In his verses, he mentions

***“Ninnaiye than vendi neel selvam
vendathan thannaiye than vendum selvam pol”.***

He only wants association with Srīman Narayana and points out in the verse that it is natural for wealth to go along with the Lord as He is ‘Sriyapathi’. He did not care for the kingdom he inherited as he mentions in his verse ***“Arasamarndan adi shoodum arasai yallal arasaga ennen matrarasudane”***. He felt that the administrative duties and responsibilities stood in the way of fulfilling his great desire to visit divya deshas like Srīrangam and Thiruvēnkadam and to associate constantly with Vaishnava devotees.

There is a beautiful story of how he used to start a symbolic yatra to Srīrangam everyday by taking few steps in that direction. While hearing recitals of Ramayana, he got totally immersed in the narration and was lost to the external world. He was very often transported to the past where he used to weep along with Dasaratha and other Ayodhya citizens at the prospect of separation from Rama; fumed in anger at the injustice to Rama along with Bharatha and Lakshmana; celebrated Sita Rama kalyanam with festivities, distributed alms and rushed to the aid of Rama during battles. His courtiers found it a tough task to convince him that Ramayana was a depiction of the past. He echoes the anubhava of Nammalwar’s ***“Karpar iramapiranai allal matrum karparo”*** in his ***“Anganodu madil padai soozh ayothi”*** where he sings the glory of Ramavathara in 10 verses enjoying Thillai Govindaraja as Rama. He repeatedly emphasises that he is devoted to the service of Rama bhaktas in the verses ***“Ethuvar inaiyadiye ethinene”***.

He had great involvement in archavathara and stresses that the paramatma has come in this form to grace and bless His devotees.

“Enrum ninran avane ivan enru ethi nalam irainjumino”

In his verses on Thiruvenkada Mamalai, he craves to be born as some animate or inanimate being at the feet of Lord Srinivasa so that he can constantly enjoy the beauty of the Lord. In memory of this desire of Kulasekhara Alwar, the stepping stone at the “garbha griha” of the temple at Tirumalai is called as “Kulasekhara Padi”.

“Veriyar than solai thiruvengada malaimel

neriyai kidakkum nilaiyudaiyen avene”

“Padiya kidandu un pavalavai kanbene”

“Emberuman pon malai mel edenum avene”

In his “*Tharu thuyaram*” pasura about the Lord of “*Thiruvithuva kodu*”, he sings about the saranagathi tatvam and the qualities that a saranagatha should imbibe such as childlike simplicity, steadfast faith, single minded pursuit of one’s goal, patience and detachment from other activities which are not relevant.

Human life is transient and is beset with problems like ill health and old age. The future is uncertain and a bhakta should therefore constantly chant the name of the Lord and pray to Him to grant continuity so that the mind dwells on Him till the end when he is confronted by death. This is the essence of the Alwar’s message to us.

Many of his courtiers and ministers were envious of the Vaishnava devotees who enjoyed King Kulasekhara’s company and patronage constantly. They wanted to sow seeds of discontent in the heart of the King. They stole a valuable necklace from the King’s puja room and dropped it into a pot near the bhagavathas who had assembled for the Ramayana recital. The Alwar who was steadfast in his devotion to bhagavathas, refused to believe their involvement

in this and swore complete faith in them. He told the courtiers that he was willing to put his hand into a pot with poisonous snakes to prove to the court his commitment to truth and faith. He then proceeded to do it before the stunned court. The guilty ministers fell at his feet and confessed their plot. They turned staunch devotees of the Lord imbibing the faith that they saw in their King. His kingdom prospered and flourished under his benevolent reign resembling the rajya of his beloved Lord Rama.

Towards the end of his life, he found time to go on pilgrimage to all the divya deshas that were special to him, after crowning his son. The divya deshas sung by him are Thiru Kanna Puram, Thiru Chithira Koodam, Thiru Vithuva Kodu, Thiru Venkadam, Srirangam and Ayodhya.

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THIRUMANGAI ALWAR

Thirumangai Alwar came last in the line up of Alwars. His blessed avathara and the potency of his verses have the power to dispel the darkness of ignorance that surrounds us in the Kaliyuga and he was therefore hailed as “Kaliyan” by the Lord Himself. He refers to himself as the king of Thirumangai and Parakalan in his verses. From the references about him in other works, it is apparent that he was a contemporary of the Shaivaite saint Thiru Gnanasambandar and lived around the time of Thondaradipodi Alwar (8th century A.D.).

His works constitute a major part of the Nalayira Divya Prabandham as he was the most prolific writer among the Alwars. A big part of Nalayiram is accounted for between him and Nammalwar. His works are Periya Thirumozhi (1084 verses), Thiru Kurun Thandagam, Thiru Nedun Thandagam, Siriya Thirumadal, Periya Thirumadal and Thiruvezhu Kulrirurakkai

The Alwar leaves information about his life in many of his pasuras like the one quoted below.

***“Senkamalathu ayan anaya marayor nazhi
seerama vinnagar en sengan male
am kamala thadavayal soozh aazhinadan
arulmari, arattu amukki adayar seeyam
konkumalar kuzhaliyar vel, mangai vendan
kotravel parakalan kaliyan sonna
sangamuga tamizh malai patthum vallar”***

His avathara came in the Krithigai nakshatram of Krithigai month in Thirukurayallur in Thiruvallinadu. He is said to be the amsa of the Lord's bow “sarangam”. His father was a small chieftain for the Chola king and trained his son in martial arts. From his younger days, the Alwar also displayed a flair for poetry and music and was recognised as an inspired poet.

The Chola king was pleased with the Alwar's devoted service to him, crowned him the king of “Thirumangai”. The young king was absorbed in warfare and administrative work of his kingdom and was full of pride in his achievements in worldly affairs.

Around this time there lived a girl named Kumudavalli in Thirumangai who was believed to be a deva kanya who had come to the world due to the curse of a rishi. She was found as a tiny baby in a pond of lily flowers and was brought up with great love and care by her father who was a physician. The girl grew into a bewitching beauty and was the talk of the town. Thirumangai Alwar came to hear about her charms and came over to her father's place where he promptly fell in love with her. He approached her father to ask for her hand in marriage.

Bhakti and spiritual awakening came to the Alwar through this divine girl who was devoted to Sri Ranganatha. She agreed to

marry him if he fulfilled two of her conditions. One was that he should embrace Srivaishnavism by receiving pancha samskaram from an acharya and the other was that he should serve the devotees of the Lord by hosting a grand lunch for 1008 of them everyday. The Alwar, eager to please her, promised to fulfil both of her desires. He approached a devout Vaishnava acharya named Thirunaraiyur Nambi and became his disciple. His acharya watched with interest the single minded devotion of the young man who was willing to undertake such a great responsibility for the love of a woman. He recognised the hand of the Lord who seeks out His devotees and transforms their lives in mysterious ways.

Thirumangai Alwar married Kumudavalli and threw himself into the task of keeping his beautiful wife happy. He diverted all his funds to the service of bhagavathas. With this total involvement, he could not pay much attention to his state duties or to the Chola king. The king sent messengers to collect his share of taxes from the Alwar who had by now emptied his treasury and was penniless. The Alwar caught between his loyalty to the king and his promise to his wife, turned to the Lord for help. When no help was forthcoming he went on a fast for three days complaining bitterly to the Lord for not lending a helping hand to him. In a state of righteous indignation, he demanded that the Lord should come forward to protect him.

The Lord who was amused with the turn of events, appeared in the Alwar's dream and asked him to proceed to Kanchipuram to retrieve a huge treasure buried in the banks of the Vegavathi river. The Alwar proceeded to Kanchi with the king's ministers and found the treasure. He paid his dues to the king and used the rest of the resources for his bhagavatha seva. Soon he had exhausted all his resources and decided to take drastic steps to find money for his

huge commitment. With the help of a small band of friends who had special magical powers, he started plundering the rich to continue with his bhagavatha seva.

The Lord decided that it was time to interfere personally to bless the Alwar. He and Sri Mahalakshmi, adorned with heaps of jewellery and dressed in all finery like a bridal pair, appeared before the Alwar as he was waiting in a dense forest of **“Thirumanamkollai”** near Thiru Kudandai. The Alwar stopped them with his sword and asked them to remove all their jewellery. The Lord obediently removed them and innocently remarked that His anklet was stuck and could not be removed. Thirumangai Alwar fell at His feet and removed the anklet after a great struggle. He felt strangely elated as he bundled up the jewels and was astonished to find that he could not lift the bag.

He felt that the bridegroom had cast a spell on them using some mantra and in a great rage asked the bridegroom to reveal the mantra to him. The bridegroom promised to recite it as a rahasya and recited the ashtakshara mantram into the Alwar's ears. The Alwar fell at the feet of the Lord who, with His infinite grace, humoured him all along and had chosen to come personally to take him into His fold. There is a reference to this episode in the verse **“val valiyal manthiramkol mangayarkon”** meaning that Thirumangai Alwar who received mantra upadesa from the Lord's lips when he was brandishing a sword to threaten Him. The Alwar himself mentions that he had the unique fortune of attaining the Lord's grace effortlessly (**“Chikkena thiruvarul petren”**).

He proceeded to the temple of Aravamuthan singing about the glory of the Lord, the beauty of the kshetra and power of the ashtakshara mantra which had brought about his spiritual awakening.

***“Thooviser annam thunaiyodu punarum
soozh punal kudandaye thozhudu, en
naavinal uyya nan kandukonden
narayana ennum naamam”***

The first ten pasuras of the Alwar, singing the praise of the ashtakshara namam, are the most well known among his verses and perhaps the most beautiful. The Alwar begs us to constantly chant the name of the Lord for spiritual and material well being. He points out that it is like the mythical kalpavriksha capable of giving all that one's heart desires. A spiritual aspirant can spend years in reading and enjoying the verses of the Alwar and delve deep into their esoteric significance by going through the commentaries on them. But the essence of his entire work lies in a nutshell within the first ten verses which are believed to be very dear to the Lord Himself. Having heard them, the Lord is supposed to have requested the Alwar to visit all the other divya deshas and sing the glory of the Lord in all these temples.

Taking the Lord's desire as His command, the Alwar went on a pilgrimage of all Vaishnavite temples, travelling the length and breadth of this big country beginning with Thirupirudhi and Bhadrakashramam in the north. He occupies a unique position among the Alvars as the only one among them who has sung many of the divya deshas, personally visiting them. It is said that the Lords of all the divya deshas came to Nammalwar and begged him to sing about them while Thirumangai Alwar made a tremendous effort to reach out to many temples which were difficult to reach in those days like Naimisharanya, Bhadri, Ahobilam and so on. He mentions that many of these are inaccessible to those who don't have the grace of the Lord ***“Deivam allal sella vonna singavel kunrame”***.

After visiting all temples, he finally reached Srirangam where he spent a long time enjoying the darshan of the Lord and delighting Him with his “Thirumozhi”. He also organised a grand renovation of the temple. Thirumangai Alwar mentions another king named Thondaiman Chakravarthi who lived around that time and is said to have renovated many temples in Tamil Nadu. Both of them rendered great service by gathering resources for aradhana and utsavas in many divya deshas.

The Alwar brought the vigraha of Nammalwar that is worshipped in Srirangam now from Thirukurugur following the directives of the Lord and started the tradition of reciting the Alwar’s works during utsavas on their thirunakshatras.

He lived a long life (about 105-110 years) spending his last years with his wife at Thirukurungudi where he attained samadhi. The Alwar’s anubhava of the Lord is very special, inspiring and is rich in emotional appeal. While he was singing to the Lord at Thiru Kanna Mangai temple, the Lord is supposed to have asked him to explain the meaning of a verse. The Alwar asked the Lord to approach him as a student if he wanted to learn more about his verses and the Lord promised to do so.

***“Meymai sollin ven sangam onrendiya
kanna! nin thanakkum kurippagum
karkalam kaviyin porul thane”***

The great Vaishnava acharya Periya Vachaan Pillai who has written commentaries to the Nalayiram is believed to be the incarnation of Thirumangai Alwar and the Lord is said to have come as Periya Vachaan Pillai’s student named Kannan to sit at his feet and enjoy listening to his commentaries and discourses on Bhagavad

Vishayam. As Periya Vachaan Pillai, the Alwar adds sparkle and substance to his own verses.

The Alwar's charitra brings out the importance of bhagavatha seva and the need to associate with bhaktas who constantly sing and meditate on the Lord. He highlights the importance of satsangam in his verses.

***“Emperuman thal thozhuvar eppozhudum
en manatthe irukkinrare”***

“Peralan perodum periyorai oru kalum pirigilene”

***“En ayyarivum kondanukku aalanarkku aalam en anbu
thane”***

Modern life is too full of distractions and pressures that a spiritual aspirant needs a constant source of inspiration and association with Him to avoid being led away into pointless worldly activities. Reciting the works of the Alvars brings into the mind the highlights of their anubhava and act as a catalyst in spiritual development.

***“Vaazhi parakalan vaazhi kalikanri
vaazhi kunrayalur vaazhvendan - vaazhiyaro
maayonai vaal valiyal manthirankol
mangayarkon thooyon sudarmana vel”***

*** **



THIRUMANGAI ALWAR
with his consort

