

NAMMALVAR

V. VARADACHARI



AZHVAR DIVYA PRABANDHA PROJECT

Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams

Tirupati

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Published by
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Executive Officer
T.T. Devasthanams
Tirupati

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By

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PREFACE

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

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

One such scholar Dr. V.Varadachary, French Institute of Indology, Pondichery was kind enough and prepared this booklet of Nammalvar. I am grateful to him.

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

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CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. LIFE OF NAMMALVAR	1
3. THE DISCIPLE - MADHURAKAVI	4
4. NAMMALVAR'S WORKS	5
5. THE DATE OF NAMMALVAR	11
6. THE SHRINES GLORIFIED BY NAMMALVAR	12

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NAMMALVAR

Introduction:

A mystic is born and not made. Thus he does not require any learning or practice to become one. He has abiding faith in God and his grace. Those, who become devotees of God by dint of learning leading finally to God's realisation, have many worldly aspirations which they seek to get fulfilled through divine grace. On the other hand, a mystic seeks to get direct communion with God, while all other pursuits have no attraction to him. God shows himself to him of his own accord. The mystic is much exhilarated at this enchanting vision.

Life of Nammalvar:

Nammalvar is a super mystic. He was born at Kurukur, a place on the southern bank of the river Tamraparni, a river rich in pearls and adding much to the fertility of the fields and groves lying adjacent to its banks. There lived in that small town a family of great men who had been traditionally devout worshippers of Vishnu for seven generations. Their names are remembered as Tiruvalutinatar, Arantankiyar, Cakrapaniyar, Acyutar, Centamaraikkannan, Cenkannan, Porkariyar and Kariyar, the preceding member being the father of the succeeding one.

Kurukur is said to have got this name from an incident noted in the chronicles. According to this, Brahma, the creator, desired to choose a proper holy place to worship Vishnu who directed him to the shrine of Sri Adinatha on the bank of the Tamraparni river and worship him there. The creator did accordingly. He returned to his place with the blessings of Sri Adinatha. Vishnu became the preceptor (guru, written as kuru in Tamil) for Brahma and instructed him for worship. The place thus became known as Kurukapuri. The repute of the place got enhanced and got the name Tirunagari. It became famous after the birth of Nammalvar and assumed the name Alvar Tirunagari.

Exclusive attachment to a person, particularly God, is called devotion. It is deep-rooted and intense in the sense that the person who is devoted to God, does not like to get the favour of mortals to gain personal and material ends. What all he would wish for is to get God's favour which would provide him with all necessities to lead a virtuous life that would please God. It is therefore natural that Kariyar had to get married and his father Porkariyar cherished a desire to have an alliance with an equally religious minded family settled at Tiruvanparicaram, a holy place near Nagarkovil, in the Tirunelveli District of Tamil Nadu. The father took his son and paid a visit to Tiruvanparicaram. The deity in the temple there is called Tiruvalmarpan, one in whose chest dwells Sri (Lakshmi). This name is identical with the name Srinivasa, of the deity at Tirumalai. The place Tiruvanparicaram is therefore called at present as Tirupaticaram. The devout person with whom Porkariyar sought an alliance had the name of the deity at that place. His daughter was called Utaya Nankaiyar, (a woman having all accomplishments). Portkariyar expressed the purpose of his visit to Tiruvalmarpan, who saw the divine hand in his visit. He was overjoyed and readily agreed to give his daughter in marriage to Kariyar, the son of Porkariyar. The marriage was duly celebrated consistent with the dignity of both the parties. The married couple stayed there for sometime and returned to Kurukur.

After the lapse of some time, the couple paid a visit to Tiruvanparicaram, on receiving an invitation from Tiruvalmarpan to visit his place. Their stay was happy and they visited Tirukkurunkuti, a small holy place adjacent to a hill and provided by nature with green groves with trees dripping with honey. Desolate is that family or the wedded pair, if it is bereft of progeny. The couple therefore worshipped the Lord there. The couple requested Sri Nambi, with which name God is well - known there, to bless them with a son. The request was granted. The child was not to be of the common kind at human level. God assured the couple that he would himself descend to them as their son.

Delight of the couple knew no bounds. It returned to Kurukai with faith in the divine word. After a time, Utaya Nankaiyar be-

came pregnant and delivered a son in due course. The following is the account contained in the Garuparampara-s regarding the day of birth of the child. Bahudhanya was the year, Vaisakha month, Karkataka lagna, Purnima, Friday and Visakha star.

The child did not cry, nor drink mother's milk and did not open the eyes; but there was no sign of emaciation. This brought to the parents of the child much disappointment and disquietude. However, they got reconciled to this situation by their faith that God's will always prevail and he knows how best this predicament is to be tackled.

Adisesha came down to that place and assumed the shape of a tamarind tree so as to provide shelter for the child and prevent rain and heat from causing inconvenience to the child. In Vaishnava terminology, the tree came to be called as Tirup-puliyalvar. This tree, which has grown in the outer enclosure of the main shrine in the temple is worshipped by people. It has been growing and growing and has extended all the area with its seven main branches encroaching part of the vimana in the temple.

The child was taken to the shrine by Sri Adinatha on the twelfth day since its birth and was given the name Maran, a name quite apt for the child which was quite opposed in its behaviour, rather existence, to the children of the normal kind. The child left that place and crawled towards the tamarind tree and sat beneath it. The parents brought a golden cradle and suspended it there from the branches of the tree. Though laid there, the child sat down beneath the tree and remained motionless, without displaying any sign of hunger or any want.

Maran remained there for sixteen years. The chronicles mention that at the direction of God, Visvakshena, the chief of the Lord's retinue came to Maran and instructed him in the esoterics of Vaishnavism after due initiation. The deity in the shrine at Tirukkurunkudi told Porkariyar that He would be born as his son. Maran must then be admitted as God himself descended at Tirunagari. His omniscience cannot therefore be questioned. Yet, every soul must have initiation into the sacred lore and therefore Visvakshena gave instructions to Maran.

Hagiology places Visvaksena as the Acharya of Maran and this gets support from this incident.

It is the belief of the followers of religious customs in India that a child is well aware of its nature, position and merits and defects in its life and avows to take care after birth to have self - control and lead a virtuous life avoiding the pitfalls that generally occur to the unwary self. At the time of birth, Satha, a kind of air observes all the wisdom of the child and therefore it is very ignorant of everything about itself. Maran should have prevented Satha from approaching him to observe his vision and wisdom otherwise, his living in a manner, which is out of the ordinary, could not be explained. The chroniclers gave Maran, the name Sathakopa, meaning who drove away Satha uttering him. Significance of this name, the descent of God as Maram and initiation by Visvaksena into the tenets of Vaishnavism, all show that Maran was omniscient and was reflecting upon the eternal doctrines of Vaishnavism till his sixteenth year. This must have been a fact as corroborated by his encounter with Madhurakavi in his sixteenth year

The disciple Madhurakavi Alwar:

Madhurakavi (797 - 852 A.D) was born at Tirukkolor two miles to the east of Tirunaguri on the southern bank of the river Tamraparni. He was a brahmin following the Sama Veda. He was well studied in that Veda together with five auxiliaries (Vedanagas.) and Sastras. He undertook a pilgrimage to the sacred places in the north. He stayed at Ayodhya for some time, after visiting some sacred places there. One might be thought of his native place Tirukkolor. He turned to the south to reflect upon that place. He beheld then a very bright luminous light in that direction. He desired to find out where from it emerged. The next day also gave him the same vision. He had the same experience on the third night also. He left Ayodhya and proceeded in the direction of that light and at last found himself before Maran beneath the tamarind tree at Kurukai. He did not see that light there. He was told by the people of Kurukai about the child seated beneath the tamarind tree. He too became surprised at the sight of the child. He threw a stone before

Maran to find out what kind of child it was. Maran opened his eyes at the sound of the fall of stone before him but did not utter a word. Maran should have then completed his reflections on reality in his sixteenth year. Otherwise, he would not have opened his eyes.

Was the child mute or had the gift of speech? He put a question, to find out whether the child would speak: "When what is little is born in the dead, what will it eat and where will it lie?" The reply came out as 'it will eat it and lie there.' Madhurakavi understood the sense as follows:- The soul, which is atomic in size is born in a body made of the non-sentient matter. It will experience the results of its past deeds and be there in that body. By birth, the contact of the self with the body is meant. It is also suggested this goes on till the results of the past deeds get exhausted. Madhurakavi was stunned at his quick reply. The full import of the answer given by Maran became evident to the scholar Madhurakavi. Maran's reply was unpremeditated. He could not be a scholar of the ordinary kind. Madhurakavi found therefore in Maran, not a scholar of the worldly kind but a saint completely free from the weaknesses which afflict people. He was then not in need to have an explanation for his answer or more utterances to arrive at a conclusive understanding of the worth of Maran. Therefore he prostrated at the feet of Maran and prayed for admitting him as his disciple.

Nammalvar's Works:

Maran found, in Madhurakavi, a true disciple and taught him the nature of Reality, means of attaining it and the nature of moksha. What he taught is now available in the form of four compositions with the names - Tiruviruttam, Tiruvasiriyam, Periya Tiruvantadi and Tiruvaymoli.

These are treated, by the traditionalists as containing the essence of the Rigveda, Yajurveda, Atharvanveda and Samaveda respectively. It will not be incorrect to consider them in a different way also. The Vedas contain two divisions-karmakanda comprising the samhita and Brahmana portions and Jnanakanda, having the Aranyaka and upanishads. The former treats Karma,

deeds, while the latter Jnana and Bhakti in a general way though not exclusively. Yet, Bhakti does not get as much treated as is required. The four thousand verses of the Alvars, especially the four compositions of Namalvar (Maran) deal with Bhakti and Bhakti alone. The four compositions of Maran could therefore be held as containing the essence of the treatment of Bhakti as found in the four respective Vedas. It may be even said that detailed treatment of Bhakti, which is not available in the upanishads, is found only in the four compositions of Maran. These may be taken as part of the Vedas, representing their concluding portions, of course in Tamil language. Thus the Tiruviruttam contains the essence of the upanishads of the Rigveda, the Tiruvasiriyam that of those of the Yajurveda, the Periya Tiruvantadi that of those of the Atharvaveda and the Tiruvaymoli, that of those of the Samaveda, especially the Chandogya upanishad.

Some features of these compositions are: they are in the form of verses, they depict God as possessing countless and amiable qualities and he has enchanting physical body presented in His divine descents and especially in the form of idols enshrined in temples. The transcendental and immanent forms of God get their due treatment.

One important factor that gives much credit to these compositions is the mystic element which at times assumes the shape of bridal mysticism with the introduction of female characters, wife, (or beloved), her mother and friend which serves two purposes. The abject dependence of man on God can at best be depicted through the delineation of love of a woman for her husband. Secondly, this introduction avoids monotony in treatment, providing direct appeal to personal feelings.

The Tiruviruttam contains one hundred stanzas of metrical kind. The word Viruttam means a kind of poem belonging to Tamil poetry. This word can also be taken to mean an event which in the context is love of Maran for God. That the human body is an impediment to experiencing God is stressed here.

The Tiruvasiriyam is a poem in 71 lines of unequal formation in seven sections. The word *asiriyam* refers to the metre called *Asiriyappa*, well known in Tamil literature. Much imagination

is displayed in this poem which describes the experience which Maran would be having after release from worldly bondage. He prays to God for giving him that experience in this very life.

Periya Tiruvantadi is the third poem containing eighty seven stanzas composed in *venba*, a special kind of metre adopted in Tamil literature but the name of the poem is *Periya Tiruvantadi*. Each stanza is an independent lyric conveying Maran's love for God, the trials and failures which he has to face now and then. Each stanza depicts one or other aspect of Maran's love. Practically, there is no link between one stanza and another. That these stanzas form a composite whole is shown by the name *Antadi* in the title which means the ending word of the preceding stanza begins the subsequent stanza. The word '*periya*' means great.

The Tiruvaymoli is the magnum opus of Maran. *Vaymoli*: language of the divine and the title means Divine Word. It contains 1102 stanzas. It is divided into ten divisions each called *pattu*. Each *pattu* contains ten groups of stanzas, each group having the name *Tiruvaymoli* and eleven stanzas each, except one of them alone having thirteen stanzas. The last stanza in most of the groups contains the name of the Alvar mentioned as *Sathakopa*. In the main, it upholds Vishnu's supremacy over all gods and treats this matter after the manner obtained in the *upanisads*. God's immanence and transcendence receive a very well-merited and emphatic treatment. He is both desirable and at the same time defies description. Worship of God is strongly recommended for humanity with implicit faith in his face. Nothing but service at His feet would provide man with delectable experience and life of man without it will lead him to desolation. More than worshipping Him, His devotees deserve much regard at the hands of people. Maran gives useful advice to people to begin their early life with the cultivation of these good traits which alone would bring the worldly miseries to their final end.

The Alvar stresses the need to worship the archa forms of God enshrined in temples. There are 29 groups (each containing eleven stanzas) called *Tiruvaymoli* devoted to the glorification

of the archa forms of God in thirty three shrines of which five are to the north of the Pandya territory, the rest confined to the Pandya and Kerala regions. Four shrines have received only one stanza. Besides, there are single stanzas devoted to the deities in many of these shrines. It is worth noting here that the Lord of Tirumaliruncholai near Madurai is glorified in two groups and the Lord of Venkatam in three groups, while all others get only a group of stanzas. The Lord of Tiruvenkatam, to whom Maran surrendered himself, is praised in fifty two stanzas, while Lord Alagar of Tirumaliruncholai in thirty five.

The mystic element dominates the stanzas devoted to the archa forms and also to other forms like Para, Trancendental and Vibhava, divine descents. The Lord does not present Himself before the Alvar as long as the latter would like to enjoy His presence. He disappears too often drowning the Alvar in dejection and sorrow and reappears to soothe the desperate devotee. Thus there are occasions of despair and exultation which fall, by turn, to the lot of the Alvar. Passivity, dependence, implicit faith in getting solace in times of distress and a really exchanting vision of the person who arouses an irresistible attraction have made Maran's mind turn effeminate. Thus he becomes the spouse or would-be bride for God. A mother and friend are supposed to keep company with this bride and console her in time of disappointment and appeal to her lover for affording help and encouragement to the bride. Thus elements of bridal mysticism dominate parts of the Tiruvaymoli. There are thirty one groups (Tiruvaymoli) which deal with all the aspects of bridal mysticism. These depictions are with reference to Vishnu, His descents and also archa forms. The exploits of God in His descents and the fascinating appearance in the archa forms are enough to kindle the love of the Alvar throwing him into mental conditions ranging from despair to delight.

When Madhurakavi was serving his Acharya Sathakopa, Lord Vishnu appeared before Maran, mounted on garuda bedecked with ornaments so as to enable Maran enjoy Him in all aspects at one and the same time. Maran enjoyed all this to his heart's content and could not contain them within himself. Thereupon, he revealed his experiences in the four compositions - Tiruvirut-

tam, Tiruvasiriam, Periya Tiruvantati and Tiruvaymoli. Then the permanent designers of Vaikuntha (Nityasuris), those who live in Svetadvipa and the deities who are present in archa form in the sacred shrines arrived before Maran in order to behold the glory of Maran. Maran exclaimed at this that bondage is destroyed and called all the devotees to come there together and celebrate this occasion.

This is the account given in the Guruparampara, about Maran's experience of God, particularly in archa forms. This account raises some problems which require careful study leading to satisfying conclusion

Maran is admitted as having remained under the tamarind tree till his last day of life on earth. He did not move away from there and had been silent till his sixteenth year. His compositions deal with thirty three shrines on earth and the Milky ocean and Parama Pada which are beyond the reach of mortals. Among the shrines, five are in Chola country, twelve each in Pandiya and hilly (including Kerala) regions, one in Tondainadu and three in the north. These compositions on the archa forms are four hundred and three of which 359 are on the shrines in the world.

Maran did not move out from the tamarind tree and did not talk to anyone till his sixteenth year. How did he know that the shrines are in various parts of the land? Why did he sing the glory of the form of god in twenty four shrines alone lying adjacent to his place? Why was he so much attracted to the Lord of Tiruvenkatam as to devote fifty two stanzas, the highest number on this Lord? Besides, five shrines have received treatment more than once not in succession but in different groups. Particularly, Tiruvenkatam in seven pattus (ten Tiruvaymolis). For instance, after singing the glory of the Lord at Tirumaliruncholai in two groups and two stanzas, he speaks of the glory of the archa forms in twenty seven other shrines and speaks of Tirumaliruncholai again. How is this to be accounted for?

Logically speaking, mystic experience played a dominant role in the life of Maran. Without any effort on his part, the deities

representing the archa forms in many shrines appeared before Maran. Invariably, Maran was dejected and desperate as he was unable to visualise the glory of God continuously whereupon God in a particular shrine appeared before him. Then he sang His glory and often appealed to His mercy and requested Him to be ever present before him, but God disappeared all on a sudden leaving Maran in utter gloom. In certain archa forms God presented Himself repeatedly. Maran could recount the experience of such of those forms appearing before him. The question as to why Maran did sing about the forms in shrines near his place and not in far-off places does not therefore arise. For the same reason, it must be admitted that Maran didn't choose any form intentionally. Why was he much attracted to the Lord of Venkatam is not known and the Lord of that holy place chose to appear before Maran frequently is the only answer that could be given here.

Again, it is fair to admit that Maran did not compose his poems immediately after Vishnu appeared before him, for his depiction of the archa forms in various shrines could not be expected to have formed part of his compositions before those forms appeared before him. As the archa forms appeared before him, he could have composed the stanzas in their praise, which his pupil Madhurakavi recorded in writing. At the same time, it must be understood that mysticism of the objective or symbolic kind did not prevail all through the periods when Maran composed the poems. Mystic experience was continual with breaks due to disappointment, dialogues with persons on his plight and fond hopes of getting God's vision.

Maran is said he have lived for 32 years and 35 years according to some chronicles. Madhurakavi, whose original name is forgotten and who won unique reputation by treating Maran as his God, lived for fifty five years.

Besides the names Maran and Sathakopa, Nammalvar, (our Alvar) is the name given to him by the Lord of Srirangam. He wore the garland of Vakula flowers, which adorned the Lord at Kurukai and so got the name Vakulabharana. His depiction of Vishnu's glory in his compositions is apt and convincing to

the utter defeat of the adversaries of Vaishnavism that he was acclaimed as Parankusa, a goad for the (elephants of) opponents. He is Kulapati according to Yamunacharya, the grandson of Nathamuni who had the just claim to have revived the Tamil compositions, including those of Maran to the level on a par with the vedas. Of these names, Sathakopan and Nammalvar are widely known. Sathakopa is the chief among the Alvars. This is attested by three important factors that prevail in Vaishnavism. One is he is considered as the head of the group of all Alvars, others representing the limbs of the body. This is only an attempt to suggest that Vishnu is the inner soul for this body of which the chief limb is head represented by Sathakopa. The second factor is that Sathakopa attained the feet of God. Every person, who worships the archa form in a shrine, is honoured by the priest with the placing of Sathari on his head, the highest blessing which he can get. Thirdly Nammalvar is super-prapanna. He was born a mortal and occupies a position of rank between Visvaksena and Nathamuni, the first Acharya next only to Sathakopa. All persons have to reach God only through him.

The Date of Alvar:

There is a problem regarding the period of Nammalvar. Tradition notes his birth to have taken place on the forty third day since the Kaliyuga commenced. There is a difficulty in admitting his date. The archa form and the shrine at Nanguneri near Tirunalveli town in the far south are sung by him in V 7. This place is mentioned by Sathakopa as Sirivaramanikalam. Varagunnamankai, another shrine is sung in IX 2-4. The two shrines, which are referred to have got these names, when the Pandya King Jatula Parantaka Varaguna I (768-815 A.D.) ruled over the regions where these two lay. Only these two got the name Varaguna associated with their appellations, though no other place out of eighteen shrines in the Pandiya territory got this name. The two shrines could have been in existence long before the period of kingship of Varaguna. Building of huge

structure or work of renovation undertaken by this king must have given his name to these two places. Sathakopa, who was born in the Bahudhanya year corresponding to 798 A.D. could be taken to have lived till 830 A.D.

The Shrines Glorified by Nammalvar:

The Shrines which received glorification in the compositions of Sathakopa

	No. of stanzas
1. Srivaramangalam, also known as Vanamamalai and Nanguneri, 30 km. south of Tirunelveli.	11
2. Srivaikuntham, 27 km. east of Tirunelveli	2
3. Srirangam, near Tiruchirappalli	13
4. Tiruvananthapuram, capital of Kerala state	11
5. Tirukattthanam, 3 km. from Chankannanceri between Ernakulam and Kollam, Kerala	11
6. Tirukkannapuram near Kivalur in the Tiruvarur - Nagapattinam Railway.	11
7. Tirukkattkarai, 16 km. from Ernakulam, Kerala	11
8. Tirukkulantai, known as Kumbakonam	11
9. Tirukkurukur, known as Alvar Tirunagari	11
10. Tirukkulantai, 11 km north-east of Srivaikuntam railway station	11
11. Tirukkurunkudi, south-west of Nanguneri.	13
12. Tirukkolor, 3 km. east of Alvar Tirunagari.	11
13. Tiruchenkunrur, near Kottayam, between Ernakulam and Kollam.	11
14. Tirunavay, 40 km. from Shornur railway station in Kerala.	11
15. Tiruppuliyur.	11

16.	Tiruppulinkuti, 3 km from Srivaikun- tam railway station.	12
17.	Tiruppernagar, 35 km. to the east of Tiruchirappali	11
18.	Tirupperaiyil, 5 km. from Tirubali on the road to Tiruchendur	11
19.	Tirumaliruncholai, 19 km north of Madurai.	46
20.	Tirumulikkalam from Alwaye station in Shoranur-Ernakulam.	11
21.	Tirumohur, 12 km north of Madurai.	11
22.	Tiruvanparisaram, 3 km from Na- garkoil	1
23.	Tiruvanvandur near Tiruvallaval	11
24.	Tiruvallaval near Kottayam in Shoranur-Kollam	11
25.	Tiruvattaru, 25 km from Nagarkoil	11
26.	Tiruvananvinai, 11 km from Chenka- nur in between Ernakulam-Kerala	11
27.	Tiruvinnakar, also known as Oppili yappan koil 6 km from Kumbakonam	11
28.	Tiruvehka in Kamelipuram	1
29.	Tiruvenkatam - Tirumalai	52
30.	Tuvarai 18 km. from Jamnagar in Gujarat.	1
31.	Tolavillimangalam, 3 km from Alvar Tirunagari railway station	11
32.	Vadamadurai, 3 km from Mathura junction (near Delhi)	11
33.	Varagunamankai, 1½ km from Sri- vaikuntham	1

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