

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

ALVAR SAINTS and ACHARYAS

Kaviyogi Maharshi Shuddhananda Bharathi

**Shuddhananda Library,
Thiruvanmiyur, Chennai- 600041.
Ph: 97911 77741**

**Copy Right : @Shuddhananda Yoga Samaj(Regd),
Shuddhananda Nagar, Sivaganga - 630 551**

THE ALVAR — SAINTS THEIR LIFE AND TEACHINGS

My daily salutations to the Alvar Saints—Parasara Bhatta

1. WHO ARE THE ALVAR ?

The lamp of Divinity, which is the glory of India, was flickering; the tempest of foreign contacts was fast quenching the flame of Divine love. Man's self-sufficient vanity began to forget the divine Will behind the world-play. It began to cry down the voice of the omniscient Rishis whose spiritual laws were the bed-rock of India's civilization. A sort of moral paralysis prevailed over the soul-elevating doctrines of the Vedas. People were wasting their time either in endless logomachy or in sectarian quarrels. The popular mind was caught in the tangle of I and Mine and a thick gloom of nihilism covered the land. Even kings were caught in it. To save the land from this crisis, so unnatural to the soil, Kabir, Nanak, Tulsidas, Ramadas, Tukaram, Chaitanya and other spiritual stars appeared in North India.

Two sets of saints rekindled the flame of God-Love in the heart of South India. One set of devotees was the *Saivite Saints*. Manicca vachaka, Sambanda, Vagisa and Sundara were the most important among them. Thousands of their hymns are sung today. Their sacred utterances have been embedded in two grand amaranths of divine literature widely known as the *Devarams* (Garlands of Divine ecstasy) and the *Tiru Vachakam* (The sacred utterance). The hymns of the saivaites have been handed to us in twelve volumes. Their saintly life and the miracles of their inspired hymns have been clearly recorded in two big poetic works.

Another set of saints that purified the atmosphere of South India was the Vaishnavite devotees known as the "*Alvars*". The Tamil expression "ALVAR" means one who has taken a deep plunge into the ocean of divine consciousness. An Alvar is a golden river of love and ecstasy which finds its dynamic peace in the boundless ocean of *Sachchidananda*. An Alvar is a living *Gita*, breathing *Upanishad*, a moving temple, a hymning torrent of divine rapture! The Alvars are twelve in number. Their soul-thrilling hymns dedicated to Narayana, Rama, Krishna, etc., are 4000 in number. The Alvars were so simple, so humble, so much immersed in the Divine and so superconscious that they did not even care for the publicity of their sublime psalms. They did not preach like the missionaries. Their life was a ceaseless stream of divine communion. They took utter refuge at the feet of the Divine. Their mind was immersed in the Narayana-consciousness. Their heart was the sanctum of Narayana. Their tongue sang only His glory. Their body came around His temple. Their passion poured itself into torrents of Love at the feet of Narayana. Their eyes saw everywhere, in all, in every event, Narayana. Their hands worshipped Narayana with pure flowers. Their soul was wedded to Narayana. Their life was the breath of Narayana. As a Master, Father, Friend, Beloved, Child they loved and adored Narayana. "The He and the I have all been dissolved in Him even like milk and honey. My heart even in sleep leaves Him not! While I was ignorant of myself, I was fed up with I and Mine. Now I see, I am Thou; Mine is Thine; O Lord divert not my mind; keep it ever firmly united to Thy feet. O people, think of Narayana ! Speak the glory of Sri Krishna ! Do not waste your words in extolling the worldly rich! Worship Narayana daily with the immortal flower of Love. Sing His glory alone! He is the Creator; He is the world; He is the King; Utter His thousand sacred names! All evils shall fly away! He is rare even to the Devas. He is easy of attainment to His lovers! Love Him alone, O people that yearn for the freedom of bliss! This is the spirit in which the Alvars lived and spoke. Their hymns were dedicated to Rama, Krishna, Narayana, Narasimha, etc., worshipped in 108 important Vaishnavite temples of India. Sri Vaikuntam, Sri Villiputtur, Sri Ghoshtiyur, Sri Rangam, Tiruppati, Kumbakonam, Triplicane are some of the important Vaishnavite centres of South India. The Alvars have also dedicated hymns to the Divine worshipped in the temples of Badri Narayan, Ayodhya, Muttra, Salagram,

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

Brindavan, etc.. The Alvars are said to have lived between the seventh and the ninth century A.D. Their hymns were collected and handed down to humanity by a devotee and erudite scholar called *Sri Nada Muni*. Sri Ramanuja was the divine messenger that gave a definite shape and wide publicity to the *Prapatti Marga* (The path of Surrender) shown by the Alvars. The Vaishnavite scriptures hold that Mahavishnu sent down in the form of the twelve Alvars, His own Srivatsa, Kaustubha, Vijayanti, Vanamala, Sri, Bhu, Nila Devis, Ananta, Garuda, Vishvakshena, Sudarsana, Panchajanya, Gada, Nandaka, Saranga, etc., to redeem the world to the *Bhakti Marga*. The Alvars were born in different castes but are all equally worshipped. For as they say, they are one holy family that live in the Divine, glorifying His Name. They alone are low that do not love and worship the Divine. The *Divya Prabandam* embalming the 4000 hymns of these Seer-Poets, is a veritable treasure of Divine Knowledge full of light, love, beauty, harmony and bliss. They are mantras of the Real, torrents of beatitude, and we feel the thrill of the Divine Presence wherever they are sung by the Bhaktas even today. All the Vaishnavas, at home and in the temples, in all worships and ceremonies and rituals sing in chorus, the *Divya Prabandam* called Tiruvoy-Mozhi, the inspired word from the sacred lips of saints. The lives of these saints are revelations of the Divine Grace. They have a transforming effect. Let us begin with Vishnuchitta.

II. VISHNU CHITTA (PERIALVAR)

The hymns of *Vishnu chitta* popularly known as the *Perialvar* (Mahan Alvar), are the hallelujah of the Vaishnavites.

There was a Pandya King known as Valadeva, ruling over the Madura and Tirunelveli districts. In those days, kings were very much interested in the welfare of their subjects; they often went in disguise among them at night to know and rectify their grievances. Such a one was Valadeva. One night he was reconnoitering the city of Madura when, on the pial of a house, he saw a lonely stranger.

King : Who are you? What has brought you here?

Stranger: Sire, I am a Brahmin, a pilgrim from Benares going to Rameshwar. I am taking shelter here for the night.

King : Very well; you are a learned Brahmin; you have seen round the country. Tell me a truth from your experience.

Stranger: Hear me—

One must gather in summer the means for winter; what is needed for the night should be earned during the day; one must acquire in youth that which is necessary in old age; likewise one must earn even while in this world, the virtues that can vouchsafe him the bliss of heaven.

King: True, true, O Brahmin, I feel my folly. I have been wasting my life in worldly affairs! Sire, I aspire after the very virtues that can give me true bliss. Pray, return soon from your pilgrimage to stay with me and lead me in the right path.

The Brahmin initiated him in the *Bhakti Marga* and took leave. The king burned in his heart to know the Divine Reality. He called his priest, *Chelva Nambi*, a pious Brahmin, a true Vishnu Bhakta, and said “Sire, my heart yearns after God. Tell me how to attain His grace and bliss”. The priest replied: “O King, serve saintly devotees; hear their teachings, live in their company, follow their footsteps—this is the way to bliss; this is the deed worth doing”. “Then, tell me, wise man, where I can find such saints and how to recognize them?” The priest replied “O King, it is rather difficult to recognize saints from mere appearance, They may live anywhere, anywise. Call for a Parliament of religions. Declare that you aspire to know the real and clear path to Divine Bliss. Propose ample reward to the worthy”. “Good Proposal”, said the King, “this shall give me an opportunity to meet great saints and devotees”.

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

The parliament of religions was held in Madura. The Saivites, Vaishnavites, Saktas, Suryopasakas, Ganapatyas, Mayavadins, Vaiseshiks, Sankhyas, Pasupadas, the Jains, the Bhuddhists—all were well represented in the gathering. Discussions went on. None satisfied the king. His heart was looking for a greater saint of Reality.

Who could such a saint be except our Vishnuchitta? Hear his saintly life. Sri Villiputtur is a sacred place in the Tirunelveli district. There, a pious Brahmin, Mukunda by name, with his chaste wife Padma was daily praying God for the gift of a child. The prayer was granted. Vishnuchitta was born. He is said to be the incarnation of Garuda, the white necked eagle, which is the vehicle of Vishnu. He was born on the Ekadasi day, Sunday, while the star Swati was above. There was a halo of Divinity around the lovely child. The parents tended their darling with a loving care and did all the purificatory ceremonies due to a Brahmin child. The sacred-thread ceremony (*Upanayana*) was performed in the seventh year. The boy, turned himself, heart and soul, to the feet of Vishnu. His mind was immersed in Vishnu; He became in reality Vishnuchitta. He lived mostly in the local temple meditating upon Narayana and repeating His Name even like Haridas, and chanting his glory. He often told; “Narayana is the essence of all learning, the goal of all religions. Hence I shall take refuge in Him”. His heart overflowed with love and fervour. When he was a youth, he sold all his possessions, bought a fertile plot, and created a lovely flower garden. It became a rich heaven of green beauty, smelling sweet with tulasi, jasmin, rose, champak, chrysanthemum, lotus etc..He dug a tank for the lotus. He regarded flowers as the smile of Divinity. He repeated God’s name as he trimmed the plants, watered them and gently gathered the flowers. He strung new wreaths and had them adorned to the Narayana of the local temple. He ran into ecstasy gazing, gazing and gazing at the splendour of the Lord! Nothing else pleased him except this love and devotion. His magnetism attracted many good souls who devoted themselves to God. Vishnuchitta after a long prayer and meditation was taking rest one night, when the Lord Narayana appeared in dream and said: “Awake, Vishnuchitta! Start at once for Madura. A Parliament of religions is held there under the King’s patronage. Challenge the scholars. Maintain there my glory! Raise the standard of Divine Love. Reveal to the King the true and easy path to bliss!”. Vishnuchitta rose with a tremor of joy and prayed, “O My supreme Lord, I do Thy command and anon! But I am not a scholar. I am Thy humblest servant. Installing Thy holy Feet in my heart, I let Thy will fulfil itself through this simple instrument!”.

So he went; the King greeted him with great reverence. Like the full moon among the stars, Vishnuchitta shone in that assembly of pandits. He answered directly all the subtle questions of the scholars and maintained that Narayana is the Supreme Deity; utter surrender to His Feet in every part of the being is the only way to Bliss. He is the real Saviour. He manifests Himself through His *yogamaya* to protect the good and destroy all that is evil. He is in the heart of beings and responds to true devotees. Everyone is caught in the wheel of illusion. He alone is beyond that, ever free. Worshipping Him is the only way to get out of the labyrinth of *Maya*. He is highest Truth, the Infinite Bliss, the All-merciful, All bountiful. He is the Individual and the Universal. Believe in Him, adore Him, repeat His Name, hail His glory; Om Namō Narayanaya !

The King was convinced. He fell at the feet of Vishnuchitta, and accepted him as his master. He then organized a grand procession glorifying the holy day, when the Truth of Narayana was revealed to all. The city wore a festive appearance. Houses were thickset with flags and festoons. Streets bristled with devotees. Vishnuchitta was magnificently seated upon the state elephant. The multitude following him cried like the ocean waves “Om Namō Narayana!”. Vishnuchitta is steeped in divine ecstasy; his eyes stream with tears of joy. He looks up; he sees in the sky a splendour, soaring upon Garuda. Lo, Narayana Himself watches with delight, the honour done to His devotee. He hears with joy the Narayana Mantra raising to the heavens from the voice of the multitudes. Waves of emotion swell in his heart.

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

Vishnuchitta took the two bells hanging on both sides of the elephant and keeping time with them, sang a thrilling anthem. It has made an epoch in the communal life of the Vaishnavas:— “Many years, very many years, many billions of years unto Thee, O gem-like Splendour, O Lord of strong and puissant arms! Thy fair red-lotus-feet be our blessed protection ! Many thousands of years to our inseparable *union*. Many years to the charming Lakshmi that embraces Your breast ! To the shining discus resplendent in your right hand, many years ! Many years to that Panchajanya(Conch) that blows Thy glory in the battle field! We are a flawless community even unto our seventh generation! We hail ‘long live’ to Him who destroyed in war, the Asuras of Lanka ! O devotees that have surrendered your existence to Him, come, take His symbol and be blessed! If you are slaves of the stomach, off! We shall not admit you into our communion! O Bhaktas, hail openly the name of the Lord and thrill all towns and countries with the song of ‘NAMO NARAYANAYA!’”, and come quick into our fold! O ye servants of Hrishikesa, the Lord of gods, the killer of the demons, come and adore His feet! Hail His thousand names! Off with your former castes! Declare, ‘Many years, many thousands of years to our Lord!’” Generations to generations, our father, father’s father, our forefather, forefather’s father—all our family and descendents are His servitors! Hail many years, many thousands of years unto Him that in the form of a lion, destroyed one evening, the Asura Hiranya! Then our fetters shall fall away! We have received the sacred spark of His Chakra whose splendour blazes red with mounting flames! We are thereby united and we serve Him from generation to generation! Hail unto the Lord of the Discus that made the thousand arms of *Bana* reek with blood! Many years to Him who holds the Garudaflag! He shall grant us all enjoyments of existence—rich food, rich jewels, scents, servants, wealth, power, position, and prosperity! He shall purify us! O Lord that danced upon the five-headed snake, many years unto Thee! We are Thy humble servants; we wear the yellow cloths worn out by Thee! We eat the remnant of Thy dish. We reverentially wear on our head, the Tulasi garland already adorned to Thee. We go where Thy will commandeth, to fulfil Thy mission! The very day on which we were destined to be Thy humble servitors, we have attained salvation, by having our blessed home at Thy holy feet! O Immaculate, I am Thy rapturous devotee, Thy age-long servitor! With all the force of my pious fervour, I utter Thy mantra OM NAMO NARAYANAYA! Many years unto Thee, my Lord!”

This is the spirit of the inspiring communal anthem of the South Indian Vaishnavites. The song is known as “PALLANDU”. That means ‘many years’. Imagine the grand scene thrilling with the glory of Narayana! A voice spoke there impersonally: “Vishnuchitta, thou shalt hence be regarded as the supreme Bhattacharya (Bhattarpiran). Sing my glory, live for my glory and then ascend to my abode!” The procession came to an end. The king flooded him with honours. But what are the royal honours to a devotee of Narayana! Vishnuchitta took leave of the King and returned to his garden. Along with flowers, he strung for the Lord immortal garlands of hymns. Hymns blossomed daily in the garden of his ecstasy. Let us breathe a little of their holy perfume.

III. MY DARLING

Vishnuchitta fondled Sri Krishna with the love of Yasoda. We become children forgetting our age when we hear his lovely songs addressed to the tender Krishna; “Lo Krishna is born! O Joy! The whole Brindaban sings, dances, beats drums! Come fair ones, to enjoy the tender beauty, gemmed smile, and the lotus feet of my darling! My darling, do not cry! Sleep peacefully in this golden cradle (my heart).

“O moon, my darling calls you putting forth His tiny hands; come! Are you barren? Don’t you know the joy of children? Come O moon, my darling calls you. His babbling words are sweeter than nectar! Do not slight Him. This little one is greater than the greatest.

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

“Dance, my love! Wave Your head. I shall sing! Just as You danced upon the hood of Kaliya, dance before my eyes! Clap your hands and dance—the hands that drove the chariot of Arjun!

“Walk gently, my sweetie, to the jingle of Thy jewels and anklets! O Prince of Brindaban, King of the shepherds, ambassador of the Pandavas, creator of the *Mahabharata*, remover of the earth’s evil burden, embrace me with the lovely hands that hold the conch and the discus!”

Thus fondling Krishna, he would feed Him. “Rise up, my darling! Do not run away to play in the dust! O lamp of Brindaban, drink the milk from my breast swollen with affection!”

He would annoy Him saying “This is Your birthday; You have soiled Your body by playing in the street. I shall annoy You, come my gem, my treasure!”

He would braid His curls, adorn Him with beautiful flowers and advise Him not to do mischief. “See my darling, Narayana, my beauty, all the damsels loudly complain about Your unbearable mischief! They say, You drink away their fresh milk just when they are out to get fire from the next house to boil it! You steal into their homes and slip away with butter from pots tied above. I am ashamed, my darling. Ah, why are You so mischievous! Obey Your mother like a good child! When mothers go out to sell the curds, when fathers are out to graze the cattle, You enter their homes and dally with their daughters! With all Your mischief, I Love You. No, I shall not punish You! O my darling that kicked to death Sakatasura, go on with your pranks in my home”.

Then he would be sorry for having sent the tender boy to graze the cattle. “Ah cruel, why did I send Him to the forest to tend the cattle; alas, I did not give Him even an umbrella and sandala! Ah, the tender feet of my lovely one would be hurt by the hard stones on the rugged way! Even if the damsels complain of mischief, it does not matter! Let my darling play here!” Krishna comes in the evening with the cows, and Yasoda feels happy: “See sisters, my sea-coloured darling returns from the pasture! My tender bud, how hard-hearted I was to have sent Thee to meadows! Do your feet ache with pain, O my Joy? How anxious I was for Your return! My darling, You need not leave me to the forest from tomorrow! Be here with me, always; O Solace of my life!”. Now suddenly he becomes a Gopi, and amorously gazes at Krishna coming from the pasture; “Lo, that shepherd boy comes playing on his flute, laughing with his mates! Sisters, I have known nothing so charming like this pretty Gopal! My passion for Him breaks the bounds of my breast! See the sweet smile of His coral lips!”.

A mother complains: “Stung by His beauty, my daughter has become mad of Him and pines with love! My daughter adorns herself with the best robes and choicest jewels and verifies her beauty in the mirror. She is mad after Him!”. Then she will hear the flute of Krishna and melt into tender tears. He will become a Gopi and throw himself into the current of the music. “This is the great marvel of my life. Gopal played upon His flute! The whole world was spell-bound! Like herds of deer and peacock, youthful damsels with slipping robes and loose curls, ran to Him forgetting their kith and kin. Even Narada forgot his Vina! The Devas forgot to drink ambrosia! The flute of Krishna was sweeter than nectar ! The cows stood like images pricking their ears. The deer while chewing grass, stood like painted pictures near Him. Nature stood in silent trance.

THE MESSAGE OF PERIALVAR

Such was his love for the Lord and let us now hear his message:

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

“Poor are they that do not adore thee, O Divine. They have caused unnecessary birth pangs to their mothers. They eat and drink sin that do not hail the name of God! Vain is their human birth! They starve that eat without taking Thy name.

“Woe unto them that do not utter the word of God before the call of death! The pious install God Madhava in the temple of their heart and worship Him with the blossoms of Love. They escape the noose of death! Call your sons and daughters Vishnu, Govinda, Narayana! O Lord! I may forget Thee when Death strangles me. While I have memory, let me repeat Thy name. O My Father, my King, Light of my life, You must save me in that critical hour! I know nothing but Thy name! I have no shelter besides Thy feet. I have filled my being with Thy love. I have painted Thy image on the screen of my heart! My psychic being shines with the golden touch of Thy consciousness. I have installed Thee into my being's core. My utter surrender to Thee, Father, Protector! Hail Narayana !”.

IV. SRI ANDAL (RANGANAYAKI)

Gathering flowers for worship, one happy dawn, Vishnuchitta saw something glittering among the Tulsi plants. What was it! Ah a female child fair like the vernal rose! He fondly took the child and laid her at the feet of *Vatapatrasayi*, the deity of the local temple saying: “This priceless treasure is but Thine, meant for Thy service!” An oracle spoke: “Vishnuchitta, call this divine child, *Kodai* and tend her as your own daughter!”. “*Kodai*” means beautiful like a string of flowers. She was called *Andal* since she won the love and grace of the Supreme Lord.

Vishnuchitta loved the child just as he did the name of God. He was her father, mother, friend and teacher in one. It was a remarkable child. When she prattled, it was only the name of Vishnu. When she became a little girl, she did not play like other girls. Singing the Lord's glory tending the flower garden meant for His service along with her father, and preparing garlands were her joyful pastimes! As a maiden, the current of her virgin love ran to the bosom of Ranganatha of Sri Rangam. With the passion of Mirabai and Chaitanya, she loved Ranganatha. Song flowed from her heart like a luminous stream of blessedness ! She was love, her heart was love-mad, her songs were love-laden! Her virgin heart Prayed to the God of Love: “I pray thee, Manmatha (Cupid), let thy arrows of flower hasten me to my Beloved! Let it plunge me into the splendour of Krishna! Destine me, O God of love, for the sweet embrace of Ranga ! I have consecrated my swelling breast unto Him alone! If any one mentions that my love-laden breast is meant for the human touch, I shall cease to live, O Manmatha ! Is a fox of the forest to smell the sacred offering meant for gods? O let the lovely hands of Krishna alone possess me! I do penance for that, O god of love!” Her passion for Ranga knew no bounds! So much was her self-identity with the Beloved that she would put on the garland meant for Him and admire her beauty in the mirror saying: “Am I fair enough to kindle His love? Would the Charmer of my heart like my beauty?” She began to do this daily. The garland thus worn by her, breathed a heavenly odour. But one day the temple priest refused the garland pointing out a hair in it. The Alvar felt it very much, gathered fresh flowers and prepared fresh garlands for the Divine that day. Another day, the priest complained that the garland was a bit faded and desecrated. The Alvar searched for the cause. At last he happened to see from behind a curtain what his lovely daughter was doing. She wore the fresh garlands, and stood before the mirror singing: “O Sweet Enchanter, do you love my beauty now?” She stood in ecstasy. The Alvar ran to her crying, “Ah my daughter, what have you done! Are you insane? How dare you pollute the garland meant for Narayana? Repeat not, my child, this irreverence!” The Alvar prepared again fresh garlands and offered them to the Divine. But in his dream the Lord appeared and said, “My lover, I feel a thrill of pleasure in the garland once worn by Andal! Her love adds to its holiness. Offer *that* alone to me!”. The Alvar was convinced of the divinity of Andal and offered garlands as the Lord willed! Andal is regarded as the incarnation of Bhudevi (Goddess Earth) specially sent down here, to reveal the delight of love Divine. She reached the

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

summit of *Madhurabhava* (lover-beloved attitude). Her heart was a Brindaban where she lived love-lorn like Radha!

WAKE UP!

She considered other women as Gopis and called them all to adore Krishna. “Wake up, O fair ones of the prosperous Brindaban! The orient smiles bright. Lovely birds sing aubade. Hear you not the loud blast of the temple conch? Hear you not the sound of curds churned by the milkmaids! The morning star is up! Jupiter has gone to bed! The lotus opens; the lily closes its eyes! O jewelled daughters of happy Brindaban, wake up! Let us have our ablutions and see Sri Krishna. Open your doors, O ye parents, elders, and wake up your daughters and daughters-in-law! Are ye deaf, dumb, spell-bound? Do not doze away the dawn. O young parrots of Brindaban, hail the name of Madhava, Nandagopala! We sing the glory of Govinda before your courtyards. O petted-wife, sleepest thou yet, inside? Shame, arise! Let us finish our ablutions, and worship the splendour of Brindaban with fresh flowers! Let us sing His glory and meditate upon Him in our chaste heart! Yogis and Rishis extol His glory. Wake up the hymn of Narayana!”

Then she would invoke the Lord thus: “We have come, pure in heart, to Thy holy presence. Enchanter, sleepest Thou? Direct towards us, Thy gracious look! O splendour manifest upon earth, O Lion that came roaring with rage splitting the pillar to tear the terrible Hiranya, grant our aspiration! We stand before Your sanctum, as Thy eternal servitors! All joys on earth and heaven are theirs who are entirely Thine! Glory unto Thy feet that scaled the three worlds! Glory unto Thy prowess that conquered Lanka! Glory unto Thee, Saviour, that protected people under the shelter of the Govardhana Hill! Glory to Thy panchajanya whose roar shakes earth! O Govinda, we adore Thee this early dawn but for one boon: let us always, even unto our seventh birth be with Thee serving Thy Will alone! Change all other desires in us into this unique aspiration to be Thy humble servitors!” This is the substance of the long *morning song* of Andal with which the Vaishnavite wakes up, with which the morning service thrills in temples.

V. MADHURA—BHAVAM

Andal was steeped in super-consciousness. She lived, moved and had her being in her soul's Beloved. Within and without she saw nothing but Him of whom she was mad. Her body was in the garden of Vishnuchitta, but her mind was in Brindaban. She would play with the Gopis. She would build sand-houses. Krishna would come and pull down the sand-houses and laugh! “O Lotus-eyed, your word and deed excite our passion!” She would sing “Pray do not disturb our sand-houses. Even if you do so, we are unable to say anything harsh! We have been enchanted by Your beauty!” Another time, she would be bathing with the Gopis in the lake. Krishna would come and hide their sarees on the tree. She would entreat Him: “O Krishna, this is indecent; we shall give You our all; pray give back our robes; from tomorrow we shall not come to this lake”. Another time she would wander about demanding “Has anyone seen my Beloved Krishna this way? O tell me if anyone knows the whereabouts of my lotus-hued Vishnu?” The response will come within herself: “We saw Him in Brindaban, playing upon flute and dallying with the Gopis!”. She will sit under the fragrant bowers of her garden and address everything around: “O my dear jasmine, my friend, do not prick me with your smiles! O fruits, your colour reminds His lips! O Koil, what song is this? Sing after Krishna came and gave me life. Let me have the joy of His union; then I shall hear thy song! O gorgeous peacock, your gait resembles my Beloved's. Ocean, He who churned thee for nectar has entered my body! The flames of passion scorch me! O pearl-dropping clouds, see the tears raining upon my heaving breast. I shall not live a target to the darts of the cool south-wind! Have you any message from Him, O cumulus that comes like a frenzied elephant? Please deliver His message. He is my sole refuge. Does He consider this? Or would He slight me and cause my death? O winter-clouds, go and tell Him my pitiable condition”

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

During the spring, she would address pathetic lines to the cuckoo: “ He hides His form; but lives in my heart provoking love-pangs. I pine for Him; He jokes with me. O Koil that cooest intoxicated by the champaka-honey, compose thyself and call my Beloved! My bones melt! My sharp spear-like eyes close not their lids; I struggle in the sea of sorrow unable to find the boat of His grace. Thou knowest the pangs of separation from the beloved of one’s heart. O Cuckoo, coo for His coming! My breast is swollen with passion to embrace Him. It troubles my very life. O lovely cuckoo, thou shalt enjoy the fruit of the highest charity, if thou wouldst call for the coming of my Beloved! I have been caught in His noose! I am a slave of that Dwarf whose stride measured the worlds. He is now unfeeling, hard! The moon and the south wind weaken me and pierce me like a shaft! I know not why? O koil, thou livest with me in this garden; wouldst thou too vex me? O Cuckoo, if thou dost not sing today to the coming of Narayana, I shall chase thee hence!”.

“How fortunate you are O conch (panchajanya), that you drink the nectar of His lips!” she would sometimes ejaculate! “O bees, O lotuses blooming in the beautiful tank of the fertile grove where my Vishnu resides, tell me anon, how to escape this pain of separation; I have prepared for Him delicious sweets! Would He come and accept my offerings at least today? If He does so, I shall offer Him a thousand-fold more and serve Him as a slave!” Thus she would address the Garden of Vishnu! She would swoon out of extreme love (Purvaraga) and mutter: “Prosperous mothers, His love devours me! His coral lips enchant me as it breathes music into the golden flute. He is the word, substance of knowledge. He is the Omniscient! Pangs have thinned my frame. Bangles get loose. Has He felt the pulse of my passion?”

The crisis comes: she could bear no more the torture of separation. She cries again:— “He does not know the sufferings of a lonely maiden like me! Friends, bring me His yellow-silk. Bring me at least some Tulasi from Him for my tresses! Who will console me in this world? That thief who stole butter in the homes of Gopies, that cloud-coloured Lion has wounded me! I swoon ! I cannot rise! My strength is broken ! O friends, is there none to pour into my mouth the nectar of His lips and save my life? He does not even care whether I live or die! He has plundered my heart, ah Cruel! If I but see Him I would hurl my plucked breast upon His chest declaring ‘What is the use of this breast unembraced by Thee?’”

She entreats friends and relatives one day: “Ye others, you cannot conceive the passion that breaks my breast. All your pleadings are vain even like the words of the dumb to the deaf! Modesty is of no avail! All the neighbours are aware of my love! If you care to heal me sincerely, take me at once to the Brindaban and leave me near my Beloved! That Deceiver, shows me His beautiful form! I will run away with him defying my kith and kin. Before the scandal spreads take me, this midnight, to the doors of Nandagopa, whose pitiless, mischievous son has confused me. I shall see him alone; none else. Mothers, none can know my malady. The embrace of my sea-coloured Beloved alone shall heal me. Pray, take me hence to the banks of the lake where He leaped upon the hood of Kaliya from the Kadamba tree and did His war-dance! Mock not, reproach me not! O friends, take me to the hill under which he sheltered the cows! Relatives, guard your good name, honour, and welfare, by taking me anon to the city of my beloved. From this cage(body), a parrot calls aloud ‘Govinda! Govinda!’ If I chide and refuse to feed it, it shrieks louder still: “O Trivikrama’ that has measured the three worlds!” Thus she longed for Ranga’s grace and embrace.

The merciful Ranga surely responds to such a flood of love! He spoke in a dream to the temple authorities: “Go and bring my beloved Andal” He spoke in a dream to Vishnuchitta “Come with Andal to my temple where I shall accept her hands!” O joy and hope, O ecstasy! The *Beloved* revealed Himself to Andal and she had a grand dream-vision of her marriage with Ranganatha. Next day she tells what she saw to her intimate friend thus: “I dreamt a dream O my friend! The whole town was decorated with auspicious pots

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

(*Purnakumbha*) and festoons of flowers and leaves (torana) to greet my Beloved Lord Narayana!” It was declared: “Tomorrow is the day of wedlock! That Bull among Purushas, that Lion, called Madhava, Govinda, entered the marriage pandal adorned with luxuriant areca palms and the spathe of coconut! The gods thronged under the lead of Indra and proposed my bridal. They declared me as the bride of Ranga! Goddess Durga (Divine Energy) adorned me with the sacred robes and the wedding garlands! Holy Brahmins chanted mantras! They tied in the hands of my Beloved the amulets of protection (*Kankana*). Fair youthful damsels with radiant lamps and pots of felicity (*urnakalasa*) greeted the King of Mathura! The city thrilled with the joy of His coming! O what a dream, friend; Amidst the loud flourish of trumpets and peals of conches, under a conopy hung heavily with garlands of pearls, my Beloved Madhusudhana came and possessed my hands! Holy Brahmins of blessed voice chanted the Vedic hymns! They spread the holy grass (*Darbha*) around the ceremonial fire! And my Beloved, mighty like a war-elephant, grasped my hand and came round the flames! O my friend, what a happy dream! Narayana, our Lord, our Possessor, our eternal refuge, took my right foot and planted it on the grinding stone (denoting strong faith)! I saw then, the grand marriage procession! O what a happy dream, my friend!”

The dream became a reality. Palanquins and paraphernalia from Sri Rangam take Andal and her foster-father to the temple of Sri Ranganatha! Drums beat! Conches blow! The holy ones chant mantras! Bards sing! Bhaktas hail ‘Glory to Andal!’ ‘Glory to Ranga!’” Andal in the rapturous ecstasy of self-identification enters the *sanctum sanctorum*! She ascends the Sesha sayana (*serpent bed*)! Quick! A splendour everywhere! Where is Andal? O the Lover and the Beloved have become one! Andal’s mission was fulfilled! She was re-absorbed into the Eternal one from whom she emanated to manifest upon earth, Love Divine. Glory to Andal! Glory to Love!

Andal’s divine marriage is celebrated annually with much pomp in the Vaishnava temples. Vishnuchitta swooned of emotion. The Lord revealed the truth and consoled him. An inscription at Sri Villiputtur is said to contain the *pranayapatra* (love letter) of Ranga. Andal’s festival is celebrated there, on a very grand scale. Every Vaishnavite temple has a shrine for Andal. Worshipping Ranganatha and Andal and breathing the rest of his days in Divine consciousness, Vishnuchitta attained the feet of God.

VI. KULASEKHARA ALVAR

Dritavratha, the king of Calicut, did penance to have a worthy son, by the grace of Narayana. An effulgent gem was born to him on the twelfth lunar day when the star *Punarvasu* was in ascendancy. This holy child was named Kulasekhara. The pious royal father brought up his son in an atmosphere charged with learning, yearning, wisdom and devotion. Kulasekhara mastered Tamil, Sanskrit and all the scriptures extant in these ancient languages. He mastered the Vedas and the Vedangas and all the 64 arts. In the sciences of politics, warfare, archery, medicine, music, dance etc., he was an adept. He was fit in every way to shoulder the responsibilities of the kingdom. Dritavratha crowned Kulasekhara as the king, and himself took to the path of eternal Bliss.

Kulasekhara re-established Ramarajya in his dominion. He illumined every home with the light of education. He organized industries and removed poverty. He made his kingdom a heaven of wealth, wisdom and contentment.

Though his hand held the sceptre, his heart was in God. His body sat on the throne but in his mind sat Rama. He was filled with royal wealth and luxuries. His life was a flow of pleasure, banked by flowers of art and beauty. But pleasures did not please him. Beauty could not delude him. He could not find peace and joy in things of the senses and the intellect. He always prayed for the Divine Light: “When shall my eyes feast upon the splendour of the Beautiful? When shall the mouth sing to my heart’s content, the glory of

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

Omniscient reposing on the serpent couch? When shall my hands worship with fresh flowers of love the feet of Vishnu? When shall my hours be spent in the company of His devotees? When shall my head bow humbly to Ranga whose praise is sweetly sung by Tumburu, Narada, and the Vedic Rishis? O when shall my heart melt at the sight of the lotus eyes and the luminous face of Narayana extolled and adored by Indra, by the gods and saints everywhere? With melting heart and raining eyes, when shall I adore the Glorious One? He is the felicity of earth and heaven, gods, men and devotees! O when shall I dance in emotion and wallow in the dust of the feet of His devotees? My heart goes to His lotus feet! I am mad of Him! I shall set at naught the world and its noisy madness. The Godmad are sane; the world-mad are insane” Thus he would reflect, pray, weep and steep his mind in the Divine.

God hears and responds to the prayer of His sincere devotees. Narayana one night manifested to the *Bhakta* the splendour of His Person and the glory of His incarnations! Kulasekhara lost himself in ecstasy. Next morning he was a transformed man. He was drowned in Divine consciousness. Royal pleasures were nothing to him. The Divine Bliss was all-in-all. “I shall not trust to this frail mortality”, he said, “I shall leave this den of lures and cares. The pomps of court turn to naught. Senses deceive; their pleasures are false. I shall not mingle with the worldly. I have lost myself in God-love. The worldly men are the valets of Cupid. They run after food, clothes, wealth and sexual pleasure! I shall associate only with pure devotees. The pleasures of heaven are nothing to me. In the frenzy of passion I cry “O Vishnu, Narayana, Ranga, Rama!” He gathered around him pious devotees and spent hours in chant, worship, meditation and holy hearing. He adored Rama as a humble servant. We see in Kulasekhara Alvar the highest manifestation of the *Dasya-bhava*(servant-sentiment).

VII. DASYA BHAVA

Kulasekhara was rapturously listening to the Ramayana one day. Rama, leaving Lakshmana behind Him for the protection of Sita, faces single-handed, the multitude of Asuras under the head of Khara and Dushana. The Alvar heard this attentively:

“The righteous Rama, single-handed... Ah You say, how the battle shall result!” Kulasekhara, at once blew the clarion, mustered his army and said “Here I am with my forces to help Rama; He shall not go single!” While he was mobilising his troops, the Pundit read “Rama, single-handed, killed all the fourteen thousand Asuras!” Kulasekhara heaved a sigh of relief and disbanded his army since Rama had won the battle! So deep was the devotion of this Alvar to Rama.

But his path was not smooth. The ministers and courtiers thought otherwise about his raptures. They spoke ill of the devotees, who diverted the king’s attention from the state affairs. They contrived to prejudice the mind of the king against them. One day, a precious jewel was found missing from the treasury. The courtiers obstinately maintained that the theft was committed by the impostors whom the king believed as Bhaktas. “Rama, Rama!” said the king with a tremor” “I shall prove that real Bhaktas shall not stoop to theft!” and ordered the servants to bring a venomous cobra shut up in a pot. “Now”, declared he, “any one that dares to accuse the devotees, let him thrust his hand into this pot. If he is true, the cobra shall not bite”. There was a grim silence. None ventured forth. The king boldly inserted his hands into the snake-pot to prove the innocence of the pious devotees. The king got through the ordeal successfully. The jewel was recovered from the real thief; the cunning courtiers felt their folly ! Kulasekhara crowned his prince and spent his life in song-offering.

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

He stayed several years at Sri Rangam. He sang there in sanskrit *Mukunda Mala*, a popular work. He then stayed at Tiruppati where his most touching songs were sung: "I desire neither wealth, nor pleasures of the senses and the body. I do not desire to rule the earth or heaven. I desire neither celestial riches nor the enjoyment of damsels like Rambha, Urvashi and Menaka. Their song and dance shall not attract me; nor do I want to be a king of kings. O Lord of the Venkata Hill, glorious Vishnu, let me live up thy hill. Let me be a road leading to Thy feet; let me be a stream that waters Thy groves fragrant with honey-dropping flowers. Let me be at least a pillar of Thy temple. Or let me be a Champak in Thy hill buzzing with the bees! Or O, Venkatesa, let me be a fish in Thy holy lake. Coral-lipped Venkatesa, I shall be some thing upon Your golden Hill, a humble servitor at Thy feet!"

This Alvar made a pilgrimage to Brindaban, Mathura, Ayodhya, and other holy places and sang many hymns upon the Lilas of Krishna and Rama. He cradled Rama in his heart and rocked Him with sweet lullabies: "Sleep my darling Raghava, my nectar, pupil of my eye, solace of the miserable, Hero of unequalled valour, sleep, sleep!" He has sung the glory of Rama and His heroic deeds in many beautiful hymns. He has sung rapturous songs upon the love of the Gopis and the loveliness of Krishna! The most appealing are his hymns on perfect surrender to the Divine:

"The angry mother pushes away the child; yet the child cries remembering her love and mercy! So I am, O Supreme! Thou art reluctant to redress the ills of my life! Yet I cling to Thy feet; I have no other refuge.

The husband insults her before the public; yet the chaste wife clings to him and knows none else. Even so, though Thou wouldst not give me refuge, I shall still extol Thy feet. Their anklets jingle a promise of protection!

"Thou wouldst not lend me a gracious look; yet I shall cling to Thy Grace; for, I have no other hold. O Supreme! I am like a loyal subject who depends upon the royal sceptre under all afflictions.

"The patient's love towards the doctor abates not even though the latter cuts and scorches (the wound). O Supreme, though Thy *Maya*, grieves me gravely, I hold Thy feet and look for Thy Grace!"

"O Killer of the terrible elephant Kuvalayapida, I find redemption at Thy sacred feet. I am like a sea bird whose weary wings find rest upon the mast of a ship! The sun scorches. Yet the lotus opens only to its warm rays. Thou art mum to my sufferings. Yet my heart melts at the thought of Thy endless glory!

"The Rain-God may be indifferent; yet the crops eagerly look up for the dark rain clouds! Even so, my Lord, I fix my mind in Thee, though Thou wouldst not remove my sorrows! Asylum of Goodness, I shall not cross the bounds of Thy glorious mercy! The ocean does not cross in limit even though all the rivers of the world pour into it! He who wants Thee has no other want. Thou art my sole refuge, my only aspiration.... Surrender!"

VIII. VIPRANARAYANA (BHAKTA PADA RENU)

Inscrutable are the ways of the Divine Will! To some it opens a smooth way to bliss. Some others it tests for a long time. Just as a thorn is removed by another thorn, it uses the illusive forces to redeem some others to the path of truth. And this was true in the case of the Alvar Vipranarayana.

Vipranarayana, was the son of a pious Brahmin. He was a born devotee. He is supposed to be the incarnation of Vishnu's Tulsi garland. He studied the Vedas and devoted himself entirely to the feet of God who is the essence of scriptures.

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

He meditated as follows:—

“Hail Achuta, King of gods, tender hope of devotees, Thy body is grand like a verdant hill. Thy lips are coral and Thy eyes lotus-like! How delightful is Thy thought! I loathe even the joy of Indra before this rapture! Man’s age is hundred years; half of it is wasted in sleep! Out of the rest, fifteen years are spent in ignorant boyhood; the rest suffers hunger, passion, disease and woes! Therefore, I do not want rebirth, O Ranga; I want only the joy of serving Thee!”

With this resolve he came to Sri Rangam, raised there a beautiful garden, and offered fine garlands of flowers and songs to Ranga. He stayed in the garden hut and lived upon Ranga’s prasada. The world was nothing to him and Ranga was everything. “My body melts with love when I see my Father reposing upon the serpent, with His head to the west, feet stretched eastward, with the back to the north and facing Lanka where Bhakta Vibhishana is!” Thus he sang and consecrated his days to worship and horticulture. Then came a test, an irresistible temptation, perhaps to purify his vital and subconscious being.

There was a charming prostitute in Sri Rangam whose beauty won even the heart of kings. Devadevi was her name. One day she visited with her sister, the beautiful garden of Vipranarayana. Both were charmed by its fragrant air and luxuriant growth. Suddenly her eyes fell upon the pious youth, Vipranarayana. He was watering the Tulasi plants muttering the name of God; he did not divert his gaze towards the women. “Even kings are tempted by my peerless beauty; this youth does not even cast a look at me!” remarked Devadevi rather proudly. “It’s impossible my sister” said the other, “a devotee’s mind is fixed in God, the All-beautiful. He will crash at the physical beauty of a whore”. “Never! He is not a eunuch; he shall not escape my charms” declared Devadevi. “Vain hope! If you can tempt his heart, I shall be your slave for six months!” said her sister. “If I do not tempt this man, I shall be your slave for six months!” retorted Devadevi. The die was cast!

A young *Sanyasini* stood before Vipranarayana one day:

Vipra:—Who are you woman? What is your business!

Sanyasini:—Hear me, holy sire; my mother compels me to sell my body to the rich. I sternly refused to do so. Protect me holy sire; I shall live at the foot of this tree, tend your garden, make your garlands, take the remnants of your dish and spend my days as thy humble slave. Vipranarayana moved by pity, allowed her to live at a distance in the garden.

It rained heavily one day! The poor *Sanyasini* shivered in the cold; her only robe was drenched in the rain. Vipranarayana was moved by her pitiable condition. He asked her to come inside his hut and gave her his dry clothes. Both were alone. It is just the hour for Cupid’s arrow. The viper gently began her art of temptation and brought about Vipranarayana’s fall. “Holy sire, I touch Thy feet!” “Alright.” “My dear sir, I press thy legs”. “Very well”. “My lovely sir... a kiss of peace...” “O how sweet “. “O My lover!” “Ah my beloved!” She sprang into his open arms! Who is she ? She was Devadevi to whom we have already referred. Her vow was fulfilled! Divine love was poisoned by lust.

After sufficient intoxication, she showed the whore in her. Vipranarayana who served God, now adored the feet of a Devadevi. He visited regularly her brothel like another Bilvamangal and drank the poisonous honey of her passion into which he fell like an unsuspecting bee! She was his idol; her brothel his temple. Poor Brahmin! He lost his property, his virtue, his character, his devotion, his garden and his God!

But Narayana would not allow his devotee to go to perdition! Vipranarayana had given Devadevi the last pie he had! The next day, he went empty handed and knocked at the door. He thought she loved him as faithfully as he loved her.

“ Who is that?” “I, your lover, Vipranarayana!” “What have you brought me?” “My sweetness, I have brought my passion”. “Have you brought money?” “I have given

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

you my last pie!” “I have given you my last warning! be off!” “O my moon, my delight, my beauty, my charm! Open the door, I pray! I die without thy embrace!” “Off, I say! Know that my embrace costs heavily!” Vipranarayana had to go away. But Devadevi did not leave his heart. So strong is the temptation of sex. There is no way out of the valley of blind passion.

Another knock at the door of Devadevi! “Who is that?” “I am the servant of Vipranarayana?” “What is your intent?” “He has sent you a valuable gold plate!” “Ah, then, come sire!” The prostitute opens the door and receives the plate saying with a smile “Kindly ask my beloved sire to come; tell him that I am pining for him!” “All right!” The same figure went to Vipranarayana, who was in a state of swoon, and told him: “Rise up, O Narayana, Deadevi is pleased with you and calls you anon!” Vipira ran to her! She treated him with much respect and her behaviour was sweeter that day than on previous day! But who was that mysterious servant of Vipranarayana? Let us see!

In the morning there was a loud hubbub in the temple of Ranganatha. A gold plate was missing. The police held a busy inquest! The intelligence department started its work. The plate was discovered in Devadevi’s brothel! She told authorities that Vipranarayana sent her the plate last night through his servant. “I have no servant; I never sent her a gold plate! I am poor! I have never heard such things!” cried Vipranarayana! The plate was restored to the temple. The prostitute was fined for having accepted a stolen property. Vipranarayana was remanded by the king of Nisulapuri who ruled over Sri Rangan. (Nisulapuri or Uraiyur is near Tiruchirapalli). The king knew Vipranarayana as a *Bhakta*. He could not solve the mystery. Did the *Bhakta* steal the plate from Ranganatha whom he adored so much? The public say yes! The king’s conscience says—no!

At night the king had a dream. Ranganatha appeared before him and said: “All this is a play to redeem my *Bhakta*! It was I who gave the plate to her! I am the servant of my servants. Vipranarayana is quite innocent. Send him back to his garden” Wonder! The king thanked God, and at once released the *Bhakta*.

The veil of illusion fell from Vipranarayana’s eyes! With tears of remorse he stands at the feet of Ranga! His heart melts into a stream of prayer: “I was a wretch, a gambler, a thief; I associated with the vicious; I was caught into the snare of sex. Thou hast redeemed me; Thou hast saved me, O Ranganatha! Thou hast softened my iron heart! Why did I live without touching Thy feet, telling Thy prayer, loving Thy grace? Vain is my life! Why was I born at all? My heart is impure! My tongue has lost Thy sweet name! I have foresaken Truth and Purity! Sensual pleasure degraded me! O Ranga!, I shed tears of repentance at Thy feet. Have pity on me! I outlive this ignominy only to serve Thee. I know Thou wouldst never forsake Thy humble servant. I have fallen in public estimation. I possess no earthly wealth! I have no relatives, no friends! Supreme Purushottama, I catch firm hold of Thy feet! I cry for Thy grace, O Krishna, O cloud-coloured Lord! O my Father, Mother, who is there to save me in this world except Thee, Ranga.....! Sinner as I am, I am sure of Thy grace! They alone are high that adore Thy feet! Those who despise Thy glory and forget Thy name are low! Thou art in the heart of the pure. I stand dumb with awe before Thee. I shall not leave Thy feet! Surrender, Ranga, surrender, O my only Saviour!”

The Lord consoled him from within. The test had cleaned him thoroughly. He loved God with a purer heart and greater zeal than before. He became a transformed man. He called himself *Bhakta Pada renu* i.e dust of the devotee’s feet. He served the devotee’s of Ranga humbly. His tongue uttered the mantra of Vishnu and sang His glory! Early morning, he would go to the temple and sing sweetly his song of awakening: “Rise up, Ranga, rise up in my heart!”

Devadevi, disgusted with her immoral life, gave her all property to the temple,

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

renounced everything and became a humble devotee serving Ranganatha. If He finds a spark of devotion in any heart, He fans it ablaze into a flame of purifying Love! That is the nature of His marvellous Grace! Hail Vishnu!

IX. MUNIVAHANA (TIRUPPANALVAR)

Like Kanaka, Chokhamela and Nandanar, this Munivahana (Triuppana Alvar) was a harijan. He was picked up from a rice field and brought up by a harijan musician. The saint-child was quite different from other boys. He picked up some knowledge of music. He was able to play upon the lute. What did he sing to the accompaniment of lute? “Hari Narayana Hari Narayana!” Nothing enraptured his heart so much as the name of Narayana! He was steeped in *Purvaraga* (love preceding the meeting). He could not live away from the feet of Narayana! He wanted to have the Grace of Sri Ranga. But alas, an outcaste was not allowed into the temple. Did he agitate or take recourse to Satyagraha to enter the temple? No. He left once for all, the pariah quarters of Nisulapuri where he was born, and came away to Sri Rangam, just as Haridas came to Jagannath. He built a small hut on the southern bank of the Kaveri and kept on singing the glory of Narayana and meditating upon His Grace. He used to see from afar the beauty of Ranganatha in procession during festive days. Then torrents of emotion sprang from his heart and flooded his eyes! His flaming passion would pant day and night to see Ranganatha in His sanctum. He was extremely meek, humble, gentle and devoted to Harinam. None approached him and he would approach none—the blessing of being an out-caste! He would seldom see people. He panted for the sight of Narayana alone. He spoke not another word. He would sing in ecstasy: “These eyes that have seen the beautiful Ranga, shall not see other things. He has stolen my heart. Ah, His splendour has now stolen my heart. Ah, splendour has no limit! The All Beautiful has fully possessed my heart and mind. I am full of Him!” He would approach the temple but could not enter. At three O’clock in the morning, he would go unknown and clean the road before the temple where the Bhaktas walked. One dawn, the Harijan Bhakta stood near the temple lost in rapture. Just then, Lokasaranga Muni came there bringing water from the river Cauvery for the holy service. The Brahmins who followed him saw the harijan, standing on the way. They cried aloud “Off, you untouchable! How dare you stand here?” Cries had no effect. One impatient among them threw a stone; it hit the Bhakta’s forehead; blood was flowing. Only then the Bhakta knew where he was. “Pardon, holy sirs”, he implored meekly and hurried off to his hut. He was a hero of humility. He was not offended. But God was offended. For the priest saw blood flowing from Ranganatha’s forehead! God is the life and soul of the lover. He feels the pain when his lover is hit.

He went back to his hut and immersed himself still deeper in hymning the Glory of Ranga-Narayana! “He is the life throbbing in my heart !” he sang. He forgot the rest of the world.

Suddenly a holy man entered the hut. He fell at the feet of the *Bhakta*, who could not believe his eyes and could not speak, out of ecstasy. The man said to him “I am Saranga Muni, a humble servant of Ranganatha. The Deity ordered me to carry you to His holy Presence with all the temple honours! Pray sit upon my shoulders”. “What do I hear?” ejaculated the surprised *Bhakta*. “I... a pariah... a low-born... unfit even to go near *you*... a Brahman!...I, an outcast... an untouchable.. unfortunate... unfit even to approach the temple road... I, to get upon... your shoulders and go to the *Sanctum*, of Ranganatha! Ah Ranga, what is Your Will?”

Saranga Muni did not wait for further arguments. Quick, he took the *Bhakta* upon his strong shoulders and left him before Ranganatha! Ah, he was now ablaze with celestial fire; he danced in the frenzy of love! The blind man that regained sight, the barren woman that got a princely child, the miser that got back his lost wealth could not have had one-thousandth of the joy that overwhelmed our Munivahana (he is called so since he was taken

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

on the back of Saranga Muni). “O Pure Bliss, I faint with joy before Thy presence! I have lost my thoughts in Thee, O Ranga! O Saviour! Thou hast cut the chains of my ancient *Karma*. Thou hast made me Thine. Thou hast entered into me and possessed my entire being. Ah, I have not done any hard penance for such a great blessing! Thy love has dissolved my birth. Om Ranga, Om Narayna”.

He is choked with emotion and bliss consciousness. His body shines like a burning gem. A mysterious foot rests upon his head. A splendid light is seen. A beatific vision! Munivahana disappears into that Flame of splendour. Hail Love, hail Devotion, hail Surrender, hail Divine Grace! Munivahana is regarded as the incarnation of Srivatsa (A mark on Vishnu’s chest).

X. SAROYOGI (POYGAI ALVAR) BHUDATTALVAR AND PEY ALVAR

Where hearts meet in pure love, there the Supreme manifests Himself. Here we speak of the three most ancient Alvars, the three eternal stars of Knowledge and Love—*Jnana Bhakti*. Their 300 hymns are the essence of the Rigveda. Saroyogi (Poygai Alvar), the first of them, was born in Kanchipuram, which was the seat of art and learning in those days. He is said to be the incarnation of Panchajanya (conch). The second, Bhudattalvar, was born in Mahabalipuram and is regarded as the incarnation of the Mace (*Gada*). The third, Peyalvar, was in Mylapore, Madras, and is regarded as the incarnation of Nandaka (Sword of Vishnu). They deserve to be regarded like that, for they were the first three invulnerable instruments that established the glory of the Divine upon earth and cleared the path for the coming Alvars. They were born saints and sages of supreme knowledge. They lived in Him, for Him, singing His glory, spreading the joy of Devotion. They were scholars of high merit; they might have won royal honours had they but such an ambition. They had no attachment to material wealth, to fame and name, to worldly honours; they took refuge at the feet of the Divine and thought of none else, nothing else. They had no attachment for any place. They wandered throughout the land visiting important shrines, worshipping the pious devotees and glorifying the Divine.

Once the three saints happened to visit a holy place called Tirukkoilur. They did not know each other then. After worshipping the Divine in the local temple, late in the dark night, Saroyogi lodged in the narrow pial of a devotee’s hut. He was meditating upon God as he lay down, when a voice enquired, “Who lives here? Is there place for me to rest?” How can a devotee refuse the request of another devotee? “Yes, there is” said Saroyogi, “one can lie down and two can sit down!” “All right, let us sit down!” The two were sitting down and talking of God, when a third voice enquired, “Is there place for me here?” “Yes” said Saroyogi, “but only one can lie down, two can sit down and three can stand here”. All right. The three stood in the pial sending their thoughts god-ward, when they felt a great pressure as if somebody else was amidst them. “What is it? Some one presses us! Lo, who is that?” They felt the current of the Divine energism! They saw with the inner eye! Lo, what a splendid sight it was! The pitch dark night was driven away! The three Alvars saw Narayana. They fell into ecstasy! The Lord was before them now. He could give them at once any boon. But what did they ask? They poured themselves into surrender at His feet and prayed for the joy of singing His glory! “My sincere lovers, I am always in your hearts! Open the hearts of humanity to the glory of My Love and come to My Vaikuntha after fulfilling your mission in the world”. Thus spoke His impersonal voice. Each Alvar consecrated hundred verses to the glory of Narayana then and there. Let us have a few sparks of that Lamp of Wisdom.

XI. THE LAMP OF WISDOM

With Love as the bowl, aspiration as oil, blissful thought as the wick, I light the lamp of Wisdom to adore Vishnu! A lamp is lit there for the almighty Lord, Earth is its bowl, the rolling ocean is the oil, and the sun its effulgent flame! Aye, I saw today my sea-coloured Lord! I saw His charming beauty, His golden form effulgent like the burning sun! I saw His conch and discus!

He is; He is there in the heart of those that are in communion! Beyond all words; He is there like an emerald hill! He who measured the three worlds is there in the heart of the devotees that think of Him constantly. Himself is His equal; every form is His form; He is the vast sky, the ether, the stars and planets, the eight directions, the wind, the fire, the earth, the heaven, the Vedas and the meaning of the Vedas. He stands, He sits, He lies down, He walks there in my heart. Like a torrent pour yourself at His feet! That is the fruit of this birth! He is the One and the Many. The essence of all study is contained in one word—Madhava! Repeat His name! O man! You cannot reach the heaven of bliss through wealth! His grace alone can save you! He is the path; He is the goal. He is knowledge! Know His Reality; gather in, the errant mind and the senses; adore Him with a concentrated aspiration. He assumes forms for the sake of His lovers. Just as tendril seeks the pole for support, my mind runs in search of Vishnu! He is my only prop. I extol Him as Love. His joy is infinitely sweeter than the transient sex pleasure. I shall not covet another's property. I shall not associate with the vulgar. I would sing His name in holy company. I shall do His will. I shall control the five mad elephants (the senses). My tongue shall glorify Him alone; my hands shall salute Him alone, the Master of the universe. My eyes shall see Him alone everywhere and my ears shall listen to His truth alone. My mind shall think of Him and my heart shall feel Him. The mind shall be purified; the results of actions shall not bind; all prosperity shall flow towards the devotee. The devotee of the Supreme achieve things rare for the mortals. They enjoy heavenly bliss and rule the earth. All worship one Unique Lord severally, each according to his conception. All prayers go the Him.

That which is worth learning, that which the learned sages aspire for, that which is worth knowing is Narayana. He pervades the heaven the earth and everything. With every word speak of the Supreme One as long as your body endures. By garlands, by canticles, mantras, religious practices (*sadhana*), by concentration, adore Him. The pleasure of this world or that is nothing before the joy of worship.

XII. BHAKTISARA (THIRUMAZHISAI ALVAR)

Birth is not the test. Man is known by his love. The God-lover is great. He who runs mad after sex, gold, and clod feels his vanity one day. There is a holy place called Tirumazhisai (Mahisarapuram). Many Mahrishis did penance there. One of them was a great *Vishnu Bhakta* called Bhargava. His wife was Kanakavati. A divine child was born to them. That was our Bhaktisara. He was called after his birth place as Tirumazhisai Alvar. The parents left the child near a bush of canes. A hunter called Tiruvalan with his wife, Pankajavalli, came there to cut the canes. They found the child and gladly possessed that sweet treasure. They had no other child. They loved this child dearly. The child would not drink milk from any human breast. An old man gladly supplied fresh cow-milk for its feeding. This old man and his wife used to drink the remnant of his cup. By virtue of this *prasada*, a wonderful child was born to them. It was named Kanikannan. This Kanikannan became a fervent devotee of Bhaktisara.

Bhaktisara was a born genius. He mastered all the spiritual scriptures. He practised Vedantism, Saivism, Buddhism, Jainism. He was called Sivavakya when he was a Saivite. He has sung many songs on Siva. But no path led him to perfect peace. At last surrender to

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

Narayana gave him peace. His life was a flow of prayer:—

“O Limitless One, Lord of the seven worlds, Thou that holdest the conch, the discus, the bow and the sword in Thy hands to save *Dharma* and destroy *Adharma*, Lord of Lakshmi, cut off my mortal bonds. Open the way to Thy feet! Curbing the senses, controlling desire, I turn my passion towards Thee! Lord of *Maya*, save me from the misery of birth and from death save me! My thoughts are steeped in Thee! Thou art the life breathing in this flesh! Thou art vigilant, while I sleep! Thou art the ether, the earth the wind, the ocean. Thou art I, my Lord. Forgive all my faults, O my father, my Mother, my Life, my Master, my Saviour. Who can mouth Thy glory, O Narayana! Thou art the Word! Thou art the meaning! Words become dumb before Thee. Thou art the Light beyond the reach of thought and word. The world lives and moves in Thee; everything merges into Thee. Creation, protection, dissolution and renovation are Thy play. In Thee all is born, all move and into Thee enter! Like whiteness in the milk, Thou art everywhere. But Thou art beyond all the phenomenal world, unattached, ever free, ever unique. My heart is thy home, there I see Thee standing, sitting and reposing”.

He meditated thus for many years on the bank of the Gajendra lake, at Tirumazhisai. His mind sank into the heart and his heart was fixed in the Divine. With the lamp of wisdom, with heart-melting love and tenderness he sought Narayana. Narayana possessed him. “Benevolent Lord, thou hast healed all my maladies, gone is my birth! Thou hast made me thy bliss. Thy grace is surely mine. Behold I am none but Thine, O Narayana; I have no *raison d’etre* without Thee! In me Thou art!” Such was his self-identification with the universal Divine.

He was above all temptations. One day a deity appeared and promised boons. “Can you give me salvation?” “No” “Can you stop death?” “No.” “Poor deity!” “Then pass this thread through the needle, by your powers; let me see!” The offended deity, unable to do any harm to the *Bhakta* went away defied. A real Sadhu is above all such temptations. God is his only aim. A king came one day attracted by his effulgence, bowed before him and prayed, “O Sage, remove your rags and wear this ornamental dress!” The sage refused. Then the king pressed him to accept a precious chain of gold and diamonds. “Yours is nothing before this Tulasi garland” said the *Bhakta*. “You are the perfect among the perfect ones (*Mahapariurna*)” said the king and took leave. Another *siddha*, a great alchemist, offered him a rare magic pill (*Gulika*) by which one can go wherever he pleases. Bhaktisara refused it saying “It is not equal to the dust upon the body of a devotee!”.

Now Bhaktisara was immersed in *yoga*, in a cave. His aura attracted the three Alvars—Saroyogi, Bhudattalvar and Peyalvar—of whom we have spoken already. They embraced each other. Bhaktisara received them joyfully. They went on a pilgrimage. All the four stayed together doing *yoga* on the bank of the Kairava lake near Mylapore. Thence the three Alvars continued their pilgrimage. Bhaktisara continued his *yoga* in a Vishnu temple near Kanchipuram. Now his disciple Kanikannan, to whom we have already referred, served his master faithfully. An aged lady was also serving him. Pleased with her zeal and faith, the Alvar asked her to get from him a boon. “Make me young again, O Saint” she said. By his yogic force, the Alvar transformed her into a girl of tender beauty.

Then Kanchi was ruled by a Pallava king; this king fell in love with the above damsel and married her. He was becoming older and she younger and younger. The king demanded her one day the secret of her beauty. The queen replied, “The secret lies with Bhaktisara, a peerless sage who is doing *yoga* there near the tank of the Vishnu-temple. He has a disciple called Kanikannan. He comes here daily with the begging-bowl. You can approach the saint through him and get boons.” The king called Kanikannan, and requested him to bring his Master to receive his honours. “O king”, replied Kanikannan. “my divine master will not come here; his is fixed in *yoga*. He has no desire for any royal favour. He

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

obeys only the Supreme King Narayana!” The proud monarch compelled Kanikannan to compose a verse on him. “Sir, I do not sing on mortals; I sing only the glory of God and His devotees” replied Kanikannan. “Dare you dishonour me like that! Refuse to sing... my...glory!” ranted the offended monarch. “Then... leave my kingdom!” “Yes!” said Kanikannan and reported to the Master what had happened. “Quick let us both be off” said the sage. He took leave of the temple deity thus: “O Gem-coloured Vishnu, my Lord, my lover Kanikannan leaves this place. I who boldly sing Thy glory, follow him. Fold your bed of snake and come with us”. The two saints went away. The kingdom lost all prosperity. The temple lost its light. Heaven failed to shower. Darkness filled the hearts. The impudent king felt his folly, sought again the feet of Bhaktisara, shed tears of repentance and called them back to Kanchi. On coming back Bhaktisara prayed to Narayana, “O Lord, take your bed again in this temple; Kanikannan has returned; I have also returned”. The temple regained its lustre and the kingdom prospered. Such is the power of a saint.

After a few days the Yogi set out for Kumbakonam. A grand Vishnu temple flourishes there. On the way, he stayed in the verandah of a Brahman’s house. The Brahmans chanting the Vedas there suddenly stopped as soon as they saw Bhaktisara whom they mistook for a man of the low caste. They suffered punishment for this dishonour; they forgot where they left the chant and could not proceed further. Bhaktisara splitting and throwing before them a black paddy seed, remained them where they left the chant—*Krishnanam vrihinam nakhanirbhinanam*. “Excuse our folly sire, you are not an ordinary man. You are a saint!” said the discomfited Brahmans. A *Yaga* (Sacrifice) was going on in the same village. The priest requested the Alvar to preside over the *Yaga*. But the other Brahmans protested. They despised and reviled the Alvar. The Dikshita who was the master of the sacrifice felt very sorry for their behaviour, and prayed Bhaktisara to teach them a lesson. Bhaktisara in deep meditation, sang: “O Lord that holdest *Chakra* in the hand (*Chakrapani*), remove the human in me and make me divine. Thou art in my heart, O Narayana; Manifest in my body”. They saw a sudden transformation in the Alvar. The Brahmans saw Narayana before them. They fell at his feet, adored him with prayers and offerings.

Thence the Alvar went to Kumbakonam and remained there for life, immersed in *yoga* with the Divine and singing His glory. He was so impersonal, so humble, so unegoistic that he would not publish even his hymns. One day he threw the bundle of his manuscripts into the Kaveri. Two great books were secured from being carried away by the flood. They say that they resisted the current and floated back ashore. We have them in book form.

This is the essence of this Alvars’ teachings:—

“The Divine is the unique one; salvation comes by His Grace. He is the sole refuge to mortals. He is everywhere. He resides in the heart of all beings. His Grace is invincible. Nothing can equal Him. His love is the most valuable treasure for man. He is Bliss; the heart should ceaselessly love Him and be conscious of Him in everything. He is the meaning of the Vedas. He is the only one that deserves to be extolled and adored. He is the Knowledge, the Knower, the Known, He is all; all in all.”

This Alvar like the Vedic Rishis realized the divine in peace.

XIII. TIRUMANGAI ALVAR (NILA)

From the known to the unknown, from the concrete to the abstract, is the method of teaching. A wild deer is caught by means of a trained deer. Even so the World-Teacher, the Supreme Narayana, the Eternal One reclaims His devotees. Love is His concern, not birth or learning. Devotion is the measure of a lover. So was Nila (Tirumangai Alvar), a dauntless hero, an invulnerable warrior. He was born a Saivaite, in a village in the Choladesa. His father was a Kallar hero. He gave his son a sound education and a good training in the art of

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

warfare. Nila was the foremost archer, the quickest rider, the most skilful general and the bravest fighter. The Chola king admired this heroic youth and raised him to the commandership of his army. When Nila led an army, victory was sure. The king gave him some lands also. Though the call for the Divine path was in him, it was drowned by the eclat of his royal life. How to set ablaze the spark of divinity?

There was a pious virgin by name Kumudavalli at Tiruvali, a holy place. She was the foster-daughter of a fervent *Bhagavata* who cherished her dearly just as Vishnuchitta did Andal. She was a great devotee of Lord Narayana manifest in the temple of Tiruvali. She was peerless in beauty. Princes vied with one another for her hand. But none would she marry. Our Nila heard of her beauty. His youthful passion took fire and a psychic love was born in him. He went to the *Bhagavata* and demanded the hand of Kumudavalli. The father asked the consent of Kumudavalli. The holy maiden saw the man before her — a strapping youth, with iron muscles, fair mien, a latent divinity sparkling on his smiling face!

The youth won her heart just as the maiden won his heart. “But”, said she, “I can consent to give my hand only to a pure *Bhakta* of Vishnu!” “Very well” said Nila. He at once went to an *acharya*, converted himself into a Vaishnavite and returned with *dwadasa namam* (twelve castemarks). “Now?” “This outward conversion is nothing” said Kumudavalli again, “You must daily feed 1008 Bhaktas for one year and get their *prasada* to me everyday!” “Agreed!” The condition was fulfilled and the marriage was celebrated pompously.

A great transformation took place in Nila by this act of feeding the devotees. His thoughts flew to the Lord of all the worlds. He followed the footsteps of his holy wife to the Feet of Narayana. He thought that all his wealth and power were not worth the dust of the feet of Haribhaktas. He served them, obliged them and fed them in thousands daily. He spent all his property in this venture. One day he had not a pie except the tribute that must be paid to the king, but he could not stop the feeding. He would rather die of starvation than stop this *kainkarya* (holy service). “Narayana is there to protect me”, he said and spent away the tribute. Months passed; Nila’s tribute was not forthcoming. The officers of the court concocted all sorts of tales against the *Bhakta*. The king issued an arrest warrant. The officers went with a strong army to subdue Nila. The brave Nila with his Kallar warriors shattered the royal forces in a battle. The king himself came with a mighty force. The undaunted Nila fought still relentlessly saying, “It is for the Bhaktas that I spent the money. That is its proper use”. The king admired the hero and called him for terms. “I shall forget your bravado, your impudence in having fought with my forces, being my own commander”, said he, “but I insist upon my tribute. Until you pay that you shall be my prisoner”.

Nila was imprisoned. He prayed, “O God, I shall not touch food here! How can I eat without feeding Thy devotees! Their *prasada* has been my food. I shall starve and let Thy Will be done!”. Thus resolved, he was meditating upon the Divine. Would Narayana forsake His devotee? Did He not serve Ramdas of Golkonda and Narsi Mehta? Would He bear to see His devotee starve? Impossible. He appeared in his dream and said, “My lover, fear not; there is ample wealth buried there in the bed of the Vegavati river in Kanchipuram! Possess it for yourself!” Nila informed the king that he would pay his tribute in Kanchi. He was taken there under a strong police guard. The said treasure was unearthed; the king’s tribute was paid with interest. The *Bhakta* had the grace of Varadaraja in Kanchi. The Chola king was struck with awe. “Nila is not an ordinary commander. He is a *Bhagavata*, a true devotee upon whom is the grace and protection of God!” said he. The king fell at the feet of the devotee, begged his pardon, returned the tribute along with a sumptuous contribution for his holy services.

Nila now fed the Bhaktas with tenfold enthusiasm. The number increased by thousands. All his resources were spent and again he was penniless. Kumudavalli insisted upon feeding the Bhaktas. Nila could not take anything but their *prasada*. But where is the

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

means? There is. “I have strength and vigour; I am a fighter, Why should the rich possess idle wealth while a thousand want behind? I shall plunder the insolent rich and scatter their ill-earned gold among the poor!” said he, and started with a big gang!

Was Nila, then, the first communist long before the world saw a Lenin? Lenin was a human communist, Nila was God’s communist. That is the difference. He did not take a pie from the plundered wealth. He distributed all among the Bhaktas. He fed them with a greater devotion. The Divine comes to reclaim His own messenger. He comes to reveal his mission.

XIV. THE MANTRA

Our highway robber, Nila expects today a rich plunder. He lies in ambush, upon a big peepul tree. Indeed it is a millionaire that comes there with his beautiful wife heavily adorned with gold and gems. “Ho, ho!” cried the robber chief. His gang surrounded the rich man and his wife. “Deliver, in the name of God, all your money and ornaments!” cried Nila. “Deliver or die” cried the thieves! “Hear me a little, O robber! I live in yon Tiruvali! I am a Brahman. I conduct my dear wife from her mother’s home to my place. Leave us to reach our village peacefully. Robbery is a sin. It leads one to prison here and hell there”. “Ho, ho, ho, stop your sermon there! We are not robbers. We are here to unload your vanity, to distribute your idle riches among the poor. We do justice to the needy. Quack, deliver your load! A simple life is enough for you! At once! deliver!”

“Then, O robber, take all our ornaments!” said the rich Brahman. Nila plundered all their jewels. He allowed the lady to have her *mangalyam** and her saree. There was the signet-ring in the finger of the Brahman. “Deliver that too; you do not want a golden ring” said Nila. “Robber, it is hard to remove” said the Brahman. “All right, I shall take it!” said the robber chief, and applied his mouth and removed the ring. Now there is a bundle of gold and diamonds before him. He tried to carry away the bundle instantly. “Lift!” he commanded. Who could lift it? None! Nilan tried all his muscular force! The gang of stalwart robbers added their strength. The bundle could not be moved. “O Brahman, this is strange! I see your trick! You have made it heavy like a mountain by the force of some *mantra*! At once tell me what it is!” cried the desperate Nila. “Yes, I have put in it the force of a *mantra*!” ejaculated the Brahman. “Then tell me what that mantra is or I shall not leave you”. “Come, my dear robber! Lend me your ear and heart. Hear the *mantra* of mantras”. He took the robber aside and whispered into his ears —“OM NAMO NARAYANAYA”. The spark caught fire. Nila felt a new bliss flooding his being. He danced saying “Ah, what a blessed mantra! How blessed I am ! Om Namu Narayana!”

But where is the Brahman? Where is his wife? And what became of the bundle of ornaments? O thief of thieves! There was none! Surprise! He looked aloft! What a splendid sight! There were Narayana and Lakshmi flying on Garuda! He knew the Truth now! He cried in bitter repentance. “O what a sinner, an idiot, an impudent rogue I am! It is Narayana that has come in the guise of a Brahman to save me! I have touched Him and His Shakti with my sinful hands! I have threatened Him, beaten Him. I took the ring from His finger with my nasty mouth! How bad I am! How good, how gracious is my Lord! O Lord, surrender, surrender! Excuse me! My eyes have been opened! I am a thief, robber, gambler, a debauch. Yet my Gracious Lord has saved me! I have gravely offended Him, polluted Him, vilified Him! And He has treated me gently, sweetly spoken to me, and miraculously saved me! I repent, repent my folly” He was chiding himself and extolling the Lord, when a voice came from above: “My dear *Bhakta*, fear not. You have not offended me! Nothing pleases me like the touch of a devotee! I came to open your eyes today and to kindle ablaze your love. I came to reveal the mission of your life. Go hence to Sri Rangam. Complete the construction of the temple. Worship Me there with garlands of your songs. Raise the banner of My Love and faith and ascend to My Vaikunth”. So was it done.

* An ornament worn by a lady whose husband is alive

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

We see the Alvar a completely transformed man, melting into prayers before the presence of Ranganatha. “I had a miserable birth. My life withered up by dire mental grievances. I was mad after sexual pleasures. Through the grace of the great Redeemer, I have become conscious of the Truth and found out by His grace, a name that saved me—NARAYANA.

I have wasted long days in lust. I aspired for salvation, but adored the fair sex. I delighted in their embrace. My mind was always wandering after the senses. I was a thief, a sinner. By a miracle, I got His Grace. A name I have found out, a panacea,—NARAYANA. That name has saved me. My heart and body melt into tears of love. I shall cry day and night ‘Narayana, Narayana’. My Lord, my Saviour, my All, my King, my Life, has given me a *mantra*—Narayana. I am not learned; I have no control over my senses; I did harm to beings. My Lord has revealed me a name by which all my sins have gone. Ye that are learned, come and sing ‘Narayana’. It shall raise your pedigree; it shall give you wealth, prosperity; it shall raze to the ground the woes of the devotees. It shall give you immortal heaven. It shall bring you the supreme grace and the highest beatitude. It shall tend you more dearly than a mother. It shall give you all strength. Such a name I have found out. While you are awake, even while you are asleep, when difficulties assail you, hail, O lovers, the one name which is the antidote against all the bonds of *Karma*, against all miseries—NARAYANA.

My Lord, I am now ashamed of my sensual life. I am ashamed of the days when I was drowned in sex pleasures forgetful of my mission, my *Dharma*. I took shelter at Thy feet. A sinner, a cheat, I have been reclaimed to Thy feet by Thy grace. Accept me, O Lord, as an eternal servant of Thy feet. I shall be Thy happy slave, O God that curbed the pride of Kaliya. Lord of Lakshmi, King of Gods, O Beautiful, O Vishnu, I know today that redemption is at Thy feet alone; Surrender!”

This Alvar has sung thousands of hymns on Vishnu. All of them are sparks of ecstasy and divine consciousness. His hymns are justly called by the name “The Grand Apocalypse”. Most of his hymns were sung in Sri Rangam, Tirupati, Kumbakonam, Triplicane, and other important South Indian Kshetras. His songs are very deep, sweet learned and sublime.

He was an exemplar of *Dasyabhava* which regards the human soul as a servant of the Divine. He spent every breath of his life in song, worship and actual service of Narayana. He is said to be the Saranga (an incarnation of the bow of Lord Vishnu). He is the contemporary of the great Saivacharya Sri Jnana Sambandha, and is said to have surprised him by his mellifluous hymns! Besides the eternal flowers of love and knowledge with which he adored the feet of Vishnu, he has done a very substantial service to the temple of Sri Rangam which stands to his memory even today. The high walls and towers of Sri Rangam are monuments of his tireless labour. They have been raised at an enormous cost. It is said that he stole away a big gold image of Buddha from the *stupa* of Nagapatnam to defray the vast expenses. The Buddhists at last traced out the thief and complained to the Chola king. The holy culprit said in defence “Why should they require a gold image? Is not a brass or a stone image enough for their God? I have done the right thing in having skilfully brought it, melted and used it to build the temple wall of the supreme Vishnu. They must be glad so far!” “O he has menaced our religion!” cried the Buddhists. A hot discussion ensued. The Alvar maintained the truth of the Visistadwaita and bore the palm. The king did him several honours and sent him to Sri Rangam with trumpets of victory.

It was during this time that the great *yogi* and *siddha* Nammalvar flourished. Nammalvar came to Srirangam from Alwar Tirunagari. Tirumangai Alvar gave him a very grand reception, and listened with great devotion to his soul-thrilling hymns.

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

After this, Tirumangai Alvar went on a pilgrimage. He travelled the country from cape to mount and attained his final beatitude in Tirukkurungudi near Vanamamalai (Tinnevely District).

To live for the Divine in utter self-surrender, purifying the heart and the mind by constantly uttering His name is the message of this Alvar. “You need not do hard penance living on fruits and water or taking only air. You need not stand amidst five fires and do long *tapasya*. Keep Narayana always in your heart. Remember always the Divine. I cease to live when I forget Him. By the sword of His grace, I have cut off all my bonds! Now I aspire for nothing but His feet. All other desires have vanished. My heart adores those that adore Him. Think of Him that resides in my heart, O lovers! He is never away from the heart of the devotees. O my good heart, come let us sing His glory, let us dance in ecstasy, let us hail His thousand names, let us wear the Tulasi garland worn by Him, and embrace Him if it is His Will! My dear daughter Mind, mutters nothing but His name; she thinks and thinks and melts thinking of His form alone. Sleep has taken leave of her. She never forgets to say ‘Madhava, Narayana!’ with every breath. O cuckoo, coo His name! Parrots, speak His name! O cock, it is dawn; crow aloud His name! Devotees, sing His glory!”

XV. MADURAKAVI ALVAR

It is not an easy thing to surrender one’s egoism to a human *Guru*. By sincere love and service of the *Guru* one attains the bliss of divinity.

Madhurakavi (believed to be the incarnation of Garuda) was a Samavedi born in Tirukkoilur. He was a thorough Vedic scholar. But he thought that scholarship was worth nothing without love, devotion, and realisation. So he renounced everything and wandered as a pilgrim north and south, east and west. He sought after the Divine light. He visited Ayodhya, Mattura, Kasi etc.. While he was wandering on the banks of Ganges, he saw a splendid light in the southern direction. He saw it three days consecutively. He was attracted by it. He travelled and travelled in its wake till at last, he came to Kurukur where the light suddenly disappeared. On enquiry, he came to know of a great Yogi there. He saw the Yogi absorbed in *samadhi*, within the hole of a tamarind tree near the temple wall. Madhurakavi waited and waited; the Yogi sat silent, self-absorbed. “O Yogi Maharaj!” No response! He clapped his hands! No sign of movement. At last he produced a loud sound by striking a stone against the temple wall. No effect! The Yogi sat as he was ! He ventured near the hole and spoke out: “Sire, if the subtle soul is incarnate in the inert matter (*Asat*), what will it eat and where will it rest?” Now the Yogi opened his lips and replied: “*That it will eat, and There it will rest!*” The fifteenth chapter of the *Gita* (see stanzas 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15) explains this pithy axiom. What does the embodied Atma eat, how does it live and in which place? The subtle Atma lives within the core of the heart as the witnessing enjoyer of the actions of Prakrti! It is there as the Knower of the Field, an unattached Master of the play of Nature. Madurakavi at once knew His Guru, and the Yogi found out the disciple for whom he had been waiting so long. He was all *Sat* in the *Asat* (body).

“I know no other God” sings Madurakavi extolling his Master, “I shall sing his glory; I am his devotee; I laid my trust upon things of earth before! Ah vanity! Reality is here; I have found it today. I shall devote my entire life to hail his glory in all the eight directions of the world! He has revealed to me the truth of the Vedas. To love his holy feet is my *sadhana!* To serve Satakopa is my joy!”.

XVI. NAMMALVAR

That Yogi was indeed Satakopa, popularly known as Nammalvar. (Our Alvar). He is the greatest among the Alvars. His life is a stream of meditation and revelation.

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

There was in Sri Nagari (Thirukkukurur), a pious prince called Karimaran. His queen was a chaste devotee known as Udayanangai (she who has the divine grace). They did hard penance for a child. Their prayer was granted. A divine child was born to them. The child was Senamsa. The parents were extremely joyful. With brimming love and swelling delight, the mother embraced the child and gave her breast. But wonder, the child would not drink the mother's milk. What more? It did not take anything? It sits if seated, stands if put on legs, lies down quietly if laid down. The mother repented: "Ah, my fondling, I thought of having the joy of your suckling, listening to your broken words! Unfortunate woman, I have a dumb, deaf, mummy for a child!" The child kept silent like a self-absorbed Yogi. At last the parents decided to leave the child at the feet of Vishnu in the local temple. Lo, what does the child do? It walks now! Where? Straight to a tamarind tree. There is a big hole in its trunk. The child enters the hole, sits in lotus posture (Padmasana), closes its eyes, plunges into the Self! What more? Nothing but silence, silence! The child completely forgot its physical consciousness (*the Jada chetana*) so that he was called Satakopa.

This is the outer life of our saint. His hymns are a true record of his inner life which is the real life. That inner life of spiritual experience, as we have seen, was revealed to Madhurakavi.

What is the secret of the glory of a saint who sits like that, doing nothing? In these days of headlong activism and self-advertisements, peace and humility are looked upon with contempt. People strut before the public blowing their own party trumpets! Who can know the bliss that a Yogi like Nammalvar enjoys sitting immersed in the Self for years together. When a vessel of muddy water is left quiet at night, in the morning we get clear water above and the mud settles down at the bottom. Calm light, burns bright. It is upon the fixed axis that the wheel moves. When the mind goes out through the senses, it perverts man's vital energy. When the mind is gathered in, and the thoughts are controlled, a new current of energy is born in man. The more he reaches his Self or the centre, the more he becomes strong, happy, calm and luminous. When he finds out the Self, the That in him, he gets all powers; his being is divinised. This peace causes the *Kundalini* (cosmic energy to rise and force its way up to the *Sahasrara*, brain centre) opening on the way all the *chakras* (psychic centres) by which man gets wonderful powers and blissful experiences. When the *Kundalini* unites with the spirit in the *Sahasrara*, the human being becomes divine. This is the secret of sainthood. When the *Visuddha* (throat centre) and the *Ajna* (brow centre) chakras open thus, man blossoms into a spontaneous and omniscient poet. His word is Veda. The Alvars were such supreme poets. The hymns of Nammalvar are incomparable, untranslatable! They are the blossoms of cosmic vision and realization of Vishnu in the Self and in the world. They are all inner experiences put in the form of beautiful poetic images.

When it was read before the Tamil Sangam, all scholars were enraptured. Kamban, the greatest Tamil poet, was going to expound his wonderful *Ramayana* in the Sri Rangam temple. He first placed the holy work at the feet of Ranganatha and bowed when, a voice was heard, "Have you sung my Satakopa?" "Pardon me, Lord, I shall sing anon!" said Kamban, and began his *Ramayana* with a prayer to Nammalvar. Speaking about the hymns of Nammalvar before the pandits of the Tamil Sangam, Kamban said "Can a world of poems equal one word of the thousand hymns sung by Vagulabaran (Nammalvar)? Is a fly to vaunt itself before a golden eagle? Is a firefly to twinkle its light before the sunlight? Is a dog to roar at a tiger? Is a fox to strut before a lion? Is a devil to dance as a rival to Urvasi? Is an ordinary poet to challenge comparison with Nammalvar?" When Satakopa sang hymns before Ranganatha, a voice was born, "He is our Alvar (Nam-Alvar)". We have seen how Tirumangai Alvar and the Bhaktas were enraptured by the hymns of Nammalvar.

Nammalvar lived 35 years, always in Divine-consciousness, panting for the union of the Lord. He saw Him and Him alone everywhere, in all events, in everything:

"O how the All-beautiful charmed his soul and rendered her mad! She (soul) would

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

caress the earth and exclaim 'O this is Vamana's earth!' She would point to the sky and ejaculate 'Lo, there is His Vaikuntha!' 'O Sea-hued Beloved!' she would cry with eyes brimful of tears. She would raise her jewelled hands to the ocean and cry 'Behold the sea where my Supreme Lord reposes'. This is His form'. She would declare, pointing to the crimson sun. 'O Narayana' she would often mutter shedding tears. She consciously embraces the flames and cries, 'O Deathless Achyuta'. She would caress the cool breeze and say 'This is my Govind'. 'Behold my gem-hued Krishna' she says pointing to the full moon. 'Come Majestic Vishnu' she calls pointing to the hill standing there. 'Behold my Narayana has come' she would cry and rejoice when it rains heavily. She embraces the tender calf and says: 'Behold the calf that Govinda tended'. 'Behold His bed' she would ejaculate, running behind the gliding snake. She would faint saying 'O my Krishna, Krishna' when she hears the sweet flute. 'Behold the butter He ate', she will say when milk-maids bring butter. 'All worlds are Krishna's creation' she raves growing more and more mad of Him. She runs after those that wear the caste mark (Namam) crying, 'Behold the devotees of the Supreme Vishnu'. 'Behold the garland worn by Narayana she would say, seeing the fragrant Tulasi. 'It is the Lord of Lakshmi that I see there' she would exclaim, when she sees a rich and prosperous monarch. Seeing things of beautiful colour she would dance saying 'Behold the world-scanning Vamana'. 'All the beautiful shrines are temples of Krishna' she would maintain. In love and fear she would unceasingly adore Krishna's feet. She would regard with love great saints and say: 'Behold the Omnipresent One that has devoured all space'. She would flutter to reach the black mass of rain clouds saying 'That is Krishna'. 'There is my Lord Gopala', she would say running after the cow grazing on the meadows."

"Rare is that Mahatma that beholds Vasudeva everywhere" says the *Gita*. Such a Mahatma was Nammalvar. He would rave, cry, sing, dance, faint, sweat, weep, shed tears thinking of the Divine. O had we one thousandth of that divine fervour! Blessed are they that are thus mad after God, and see Him alone in all, for they are men of Reality. "Worship the Lord of Lakshmi, O my heart" says this Yogi of cosmic vision, "even in sleep. Think of Him, hail His name. He is the Father and Mother of all creatures. This man, that man, the man at the back, these those things, things yonder, are forms in which resides Krishna. That which is and that which is not is His form. Seek him, in and out, seekers. Off with the little I and mine. Root out egoism completely and make a wholesale surrender. Control thought, word and deed and take a deep plunge into the Divine consciousness. The embodied life flashes off like a lightning. The Divine alone is the Eternal one. Hands off all attachments. Hold firmly His feet. O seekers, take refuge in Narayana. That which stands, walks, runs, flows, lies down is all He. He is the indweller, Hail His glory. Repeat His name. Evils shall fly away. *Kali* shall shudder and fall. The golden age (*Satyayuga*) shall be born. Krishna shall play here with His mates". This is the message of the Yogi to humanity. The ignorant man thinks, "This is mine; I am all". The sage realises, "It is all Narayana; I am nothing but His temple. He is the real I in me, I live not when I forget Him". Saints live only when they live in Him. Their words are sparks of ecstasy. They open their mouth only to hail the Divine and sing His glory. It is He that sees through their eyes His own forms standing and moving in the objective world. It is He that hears through their ears. It is He that tastes through their tongue. It is He that knows Himself through their intuition. It is He that breathes in them as the life. It is He that throbs in their hearts. They eat, drink, sit, walk, sleep, see, smell, taste, speak, sing, dance in His consciousness. This is knowledge; this is reality, this is happiness. Blessed are the lamps of such knowledge; they are masters of the mind and the senses. They are conscious of the Divine just as ordinary men are conscious of the physical world. They are not affected by the passing pleasures and pains of this mundane life. They are like deep ocean that rests, ever vast and calm undisturbed by the surface waves; they contain within, unknown treasures. They give the world a few gems now and then. Such gems are the hymns of Nammalvar and other saints. Those who adorn their hearts with these priceless gems shall live the life of heaven though upon earth. They shall be the breathing and moving temples of the Divine. They purify themselves as well as the soil they tread. They are the lamps of humanity. They are the sons of *Satyayuga*. They

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

can see the vision of the golden age and sing with Nammalvar:—

“Prosperity, prosperity, felicity to all! The cruel curse upon human existence is gone! Destroyed is the hell of misery! Death has nothing to do here. *Kali*, the iron age, shall be no more. We have seen the devotees of the sea-hued Krishna enter the world in rich abundance, sing His glory, dance in ecstasy and prosper”.

Those who have eyes can see the hands of God carving even now, the destiny of humanity. Nammalvar was a messenger of Satyayuga. Let his prophecy be fulfilled!

XVII. THE ACHARYAS

Saints, to whatever clime they may belong, live in the Divine consciousness and the Divine is ever ready to protect them and lead them to Bliss. The life and teachings of Alvar saints have shown light to millions of devotees. Their hymns were collected and given to the world by the blessed Siddha Nadamuni. Many devoted Vaishnava Acharyas followed him and preserved the teachings of the Alvars and lived them; Pundarikaksha, Rama misra, Alvandar (Yamuna charya) Sri Ranganatha Gayaka, Purnacharya, Sri Gosthi Purna, Sri Maladhara, Sri Kanchi Purna, Bhagavat Ramanuja, Anandalvar, Kuranatha Alvar, Dasarathi, Govinda Desika, Sri Parasara Bhattacharya, Vedanta Vedy, Jagadacharya, Krishnapada, Pillailokacharya, Manavalamuni, Vedanta Desika, Varadacharya and a number of scholarly devotees lived in the spirit of the Alvars. They were pillars of Vaishnavism. They protected the religion and the religious institutions at a great sacrifice. Some of them gave their lives to save religion from the hands of persecutors and foreign invaders. Fire and sword threatened them. Yet with a smile of divine courage they stood like adamant forts of spiritual strength to safeguard their faith. The greatest of these Acharyas, Ramanuja, is known throughout the world. He was the apostle, in the real sense, of Vaishnavism. He gave it a form and a force which remains to this day. Whenever I stood among the holy company of the Vaishnavas in temples and heard the hymns of the Alvars, I have felt the presence of Narayana. Ah, what an atmosphere of peace and bliss! One must visit the temples at Sri Villiputtur, Alvarthirunagari, Sri Rangam, Kanchipuram and Tirugoshtipuram to hear the hymns of the Alvars and feel the thrill of the Divine Presence among the devotees.

Next to Ramanuja, I hold in great reverence Lokacharya commonly known as Pillailokacharya. He was an erudite scholar, an able expounder of the hymns of the Alvars and a saint of immaculate virtue. He was a bachelor. Love and surrender were his life-breath. He has written a precious scripture called *tattavatraya*, a treatise on Soul, Matter and God which is an authority on Sri Vaishnavism. Sri Lokacharya says:—

The soul-essence is happy in itself. It is eternal. It is *Achintya*, incomprehensible and immutable (Nirvikara). It is the Knower and the seat of Knowledge. But it is subject to Divine control. Everyone of its acts is liable to conform to the Divine Will. It is disposable for the Lord's purpose. It is incapable of existing and being preserved separately from the Divine who alone is the Absolute Being-Consciousness-Bliss. Soul bound to the body of nature is finite. The finite souls are of three kinds according to the evolution of their consciousness: 1. Bound Beings (Baddhas), 2. Freed Beings (Muktas), 3. Eternal, Ever-Free Beings (Nityas). Bound beings roll in impure mental-vital-physical consciousness. They are the Samsaris. Freed beings are those who are severed from dirty pleasures and pains and roll no more in the lower consciousness. They are transformed beings. Nityas are the archangels of wisdom, loving companions and servants of the Divine. All bondage comes from forgetfulness of God, and life in egoism. Water in its natural state is not hot, does not boil and make sound. It is poured into a vessel; that vessel is set upon fire. The fire heats the vessel, and that heats water and makes it steam and boil. Even so, the soul owing to its contact with the mind, the vital and the body gets bound to pleasures and pains, omissions and commissions, erratic activities, lust, wrath, malice, love, hatred etc.. Purity, turbidity and impurity, peace, passion and lethargy are the qualities of the seedmatter (Mulaprakriti) to

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

which the soul is bound. The vicissitudes of the age are for the body of nature and not for the soul. Lord is the Soul of all. He lives within all and controls the souls but is never touched by the mind or its dualities. He is manifest in all souls as Bliss. Gracious Lord, he stoops to them to lift them from pain and bondage. He raises them with parental fondness. How grateful should man be to God, the only Saviour! Yet how ungrateful are we to Him! How our little bit of egoistic, ignorant personality, shut up in this muddy vesture of decay, arrogates itself above His omniscience! The last word of Gita is “Leave off all your mental notions, all your deluded thoughts on life and life-escape. Surrender yourself whole-heartedly at My feet. I shall wash off your sins, I shall give you liberation”.

This is the central teaching of the Lord, of the Alvar saints who were His representatives on the earth and of the devotees who followed them. The Lord is ever manifest. He was when the world was not, and no creature was there. He is when the world is in the full swing of its evolution, and He shall be when this little clod shall be dissolved one day in the Deluge. Remember always that the earth we live in is nothing but a minute atom in the vast universe (Brahmanda). Remember man is a breathing mentalized atom in this atom. Remember always the One that is above all these manifestations of Nature. Remember that everything is a play of His conscious Force from A to Z. If man knows his humble measure, he will at once see that there is no way for his liberation, except wholesale surrender at the feet of the Infinite, Eternal, Immaculate, Unborn, Almighty, All-Blissful Truth which we call God, Brahma, Siva, Narayana, Father, Allah, Jehova according to our conception and fancy.

My Lord, Life of my life, Thou hast again thrown me into this body of nature—only to know Thee better and cling to Thee with a more sincere love and by Thy Grace rise up again and attain Thee. I throw myself at Thy feet. I have nothing to do here; nothing to add. No desire; no attachment. I have seen the world and its nature from top to toe. After all, I have come to know that Thou art the only Saviour, the only source of Bliss. None that surrenders to Thee is ever disappointed. Thou art all merciful. Kill my ego, possess me completely. Detach me from all other thought, from all other attachments and keep me firm in Thy hold. I do not even know what to ask of Thee. Every demand seems to me impertinent. It is an insult to Thy omniscience. For Thou art my very heart; and Thou knowest me better than I know myself. This frame has been designed to house Thee. Let no petty lust hide anywhere within it. Sweep away all my desires. Poor me, an atom in the vast world which is itself an atom of the Brahmanda, what can I do? What is there to be done for me personally? Nothing my Lord, nothing. Here I sink into silence placing my entire being at Thy feet. LET THY WILL BE DONE. OM NAMO NARAYANAYA.

XVIII. SAINT ALAVANDAR

It was about the year 1150 A.D; Madura was ruled by a Pandiya King. He was a great patron of learning. He gave freely to poets. His queen was very learned and intelligent.

Of all the pandits patronised by him, Vidwajjana Kolahala was very celebrated. He was the terror of pandits. None dared to challenge him. He exacted tributes from other pandits. He went in a palanquin, followed by a showy retinue blowing aloud his trumpet. Kolahala was an incarnation of self-conceit.

He was terrible towards any pandit that kept in arrears the tribute due to him.

Such a one was Sri Bashyacharya, a humble simple teacher, with sufficient learning for his work. One day the agent of Kolahala came to his pial school. The teacher was absent. A boy of barely twelve years answered his enquiries.

“Tell your Bashyacharya,” said the agent, “that he must wait upon our Vidwajjana

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

Kolahala with his tribute—this very day; or the consequence will be serious.” The boy boldly retorted: “Kindly Sir, know that our master shall not pay a pie to self-conceited fools. Go and tell him like that.”

Kolahala was enraged at this bravado. He called Bhashyacharya for a debate. Bhashyacharya felt nervous. That precocious boy whose name was Yamuna, said, “Sir, take hope; tell that Kolahala that your disciple shall challenge him in any debate. I shall bring down his pride and win laurels for you.” The master hesitatingly consented. Yamuna went to the court, took his seat and faced the renowned Kolahala boldly. “A mere boy to challenge the invulnerable Kolahala! Can a calf challenge a lion, a mud horse cross a flood? The boy is going to be defeated even at the outset.” This was the impression of the audience from the King to the peasant. Only the queen saw the lustre of intelligence in the boy, and assured of his success. “If he doest not win, I shall be your slave,” said the queen. “If this impertinent boy defeats my Pandit, I shall give him half my kingdom” said the King. The discussion commenced. “Silly boy” began the infatuated Kolahala, “do you know the alphabets? Can you write your name properly? Impertinent fellow, how dare you sit before me like that? Answer my questions.”

The boy retorted, “My dear sir, a spark of fire is enough to burn a heap of cotton. Go on, put me questions. I shall answer.” The pandit put him intricate questions. The boy answered boldly and correctly. “All right” said the Pandit, “boy, now you put me any question. I shall answer”. “Very well” said Yamuna. He put him three inconvenient questions: “Pandit, I say that your mother is not barren. Our king is virtuous, the queen is chaste. Deny these three statements if you can”. How can he deny these truths? His mother cannot be barren; he cannot say that the king was unvirtuous and the queen unchaste, without dire consequences. The Pandit was discomfitted. The king asked Yamuna to deny his statements. The boy replied, “Listen Sir, there is a saying, ‘one tree cannot be a grove nor one child a child’. Your mother begot only yourself. So she is considered barren. The king receives the sins of his subjects. So he cannot be all virtuous. A woman is first offered to Agni, Varuna and Indra and then to her husband. So the queen is not chaste.” The Pandit hung down his head, the audience applauded the young prodigy. The king admired his genius and gave him half the kingdom. The queen called him *Alavandar* (he who came to rule).

The boy became a ruler. Kolahala became his servant. Bhashyacharya was filled with joy. Alavandar reigned for many years maintaining wonderful peace and justice in his small kingdom. But his life was not to be wasted in royal luxury. It was meant for a holier purpose. This purpose was revealed to him by a holy man.

Alavandar lost his father while he was ten years old. He was the grandson of Nathamuni, a celebrated Bhakta, a devotee of the Alvars. Their hymns were the delight of his life. He was very fond of his grandchild and dedicated him to the service of Ranganatha. Nathamuni had a faithful disciple in Rama Misra generally known as Manakkal Nambi. He was a scholar and a devotee. He imbibed the spirit of Alvars from his Guru. Alavandar was a small child when Nathamuni died. “Manakkal Nambi, when my grandson grows to manhood, kindly reveal him the treasure which I held dearly all my life. It is the treasure of treasures. That is the rich legacy that I leave behind. Let him find it in the sanctum of Srirangam.... Jay Ranganatha!” These were the last words of the great soul.

The Bhakta Nambi waited for the opportune moment. King Alavandar could not find peace in the crown and sceptre. His heart yearned for something deeper and more permanent than fleeting pleasures. The clamorous luxuries of the palace ceased to enchant him. The throne was not very comfortable. Every kingdom has its enemy. Even the kingdom of heaven has a Satan. Earth and heaven are battlefields of the opposite forces. Alavandar’s little realm cannot be an exception to it. He wanted a large amount of money to wage war against his enemies.

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

At that time our Manakkal Nambi came to Madura. His purpose was to convert Alavandar and deliver Nathamuni's message. He did not approach the king directly. He got the confidence of his cook. He gave him daily a satvic herb for the king's dish. It was nicely cooked and served daily. The King liked it very much. One day Nambi did not bring it. The king felt the dish tasteless without it.

King: Why have you not prepared it today?

Cook: My Lord, the old brahman did not bring it as usual.

King: Which old brahman?

Cook: My Lord, a brahman brings the herb everyday and says, "Kindly cook this and serve it to my loving king".

King: Who is that ? Bring him to me.

Next day, Manakkal Nambi brought the herb. He was taken to the king. The king was struck by his pious mien of the brahman. He reverentially bowed to him and seated him.

King: Holy Sire, I am delighted to see thee. It seems as if thou art my guru. My psychic love turns towards thee. Thy herb satisfied, not my palate alone, but my soul also. I am very much obliged to thee. Sire, demand any favour from me, any treasure.

Nambi: King, I have come here to reveal a great treasure to which you are heir.

King: O what is that treasure? I.. heir to it? How? Where is it? I am in need of money for a warfare.

Nambi: Hear me O king: your grandfather was the revered Nathamuni. I am his humble disciple. During his last moments he entrusted me with the richest treasure of the world, to be safely passed on to you when you were a man. Then you were a small child and now you are a man, a king, one who has seen the ins and outs of life. You yearn for that treasure now.

King: Yes, holy sire, I remember how kind my grandfather was to me. Ah, has he given me such a big treasure! I am needy now. Kindly tell me where that treasure is

Nambi: Between two living rivers in a fortified place, a huge snake guards that treasure. There is a mantra to attain it. The heart's love and the mind's strength are also necessary to obtain it. Sire, by obtaining that treasure you obtain all.

King: O holy saint, come and show me that treasure. I shall possess it in the name of my good grandfather.

Nambi: Very well; then leave behind all cares, all other thoughts. Perfect concentration, intense aspiration, thorough faith are necessary to attain that great treasure. Renounce all attachments and follow me.

Alavandar placed the state affairs under responsible heads and started with Manakkal Nambi. Gita was the gospel of Nambi. He read it everyday from cover to cover. Alavandar listened to the Gita carefully. It purified his mind. He requested Nambi to initiate him into the heart of the Gita. For the Bhagavad Gita is not an ordinary book. The printing press may pour forth commentaries after commentaries upon it. Mere book study is not enough. The seeker must be earnest and get the Gita from a Guru. He must first hear, meditate and then read. He got initiation. He could not proceed further with his journey without finishing the book. Nambi explained him the whole book and Alavandar contemplated thus:

"Sri Krishna has already given me a priceless treasure. Where is a treasure like this Gita—a vast treasure of love, devotion and knowledge? It tells me what is real and what is unreal. It directs me to the feet of the Purushottama. There I shall pour myself in surrender. I have been living in the false glamour of royal luxury. I found no peace there. I studied a world of books for no good. The company of this sadhu has given me a delight which kingdom did not give.

Serving this holy man gives me greater joy than wielding the sceptre. I am no more

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

a slave of vanity. I shall hence be a servant of God and His devotees. I shall offer myself to Him in utter surrender. I shall live in Him. Whatever I think, do or speak, shall be dedicated to Him. He lives in my heart; yet I could not see Him. What is the use of my booklore? He is everywhere in the world. He is the Truth, Knowledge, Bliss. Yet I am seeking these elsewhere. He promises that his Bhakta shall not fail to have His grace, yet I do not believe in Him and I follow the little mind of doubt and division. This shall not be. I shall be a changed man. I shall hence be God's man. In Him I take shelter. I leave behind the throne. I make my heart the throne of God. Master, I know the Reality. I do not require any treasure on earth. Lead me to the treasure of treasures”.

Nambi was greatly satisfied at the ripeness of Alavandar's heart. “Sire, the treasure I am going to show you is not evanescent like others. It is an eternal treasure. Quick, follow me”. Alavandar eagerly and quietly followed Nambi.

Both came to Sri Rangam. They entered the temple. It was evening. Puja was going on. Brahmins chanted the Vedas. Bhaktas sang the hymns of Alvars. Alavandar was reborn. The holy atmosphere vibrated in him. The hymns thrilled into his heart. The priest was waving Light. Just at that time Manakkal Nambi told Alavandar, “My child see, this is the treasure of treasures that your holy grandfather has bequeathed to you. Possess it. Allow it to possess you. Live in it. ‘Om Namō Narayanaya’ is the mantra to attain it.”

Alavandar lost himself in ecstasy. “O what an unequalled treasure! Gratitude to my grandfather who possessed such a heaven of riches. Gratitude to the master, Nambi for having prepared my heart to see and have such an effulgent treasure. My God, Narayana, Govinda, Vishnu, Ranganatha, my surrender to Thee! Lead Thy humble servant. Thy Bhakti shall be my priceless treasure. What I called mine is nothing but a trivial atom in the vast infinite. God, I was preparing for a big war with an external enemy. But I found out by the good grace of Thy will the enemies lurking within me—lust, envy, pride, fear, doubt, arrogance, ignorance, insincerity, indolence etc. I repeat Thy mantra, ‘Om Namō Narayanaya’ to get rid of those enemies. Nambi has shown me the richest treasure. Yes, it is as he described. Kauveri and Coleroon are the two rivers surrounding Thy temple city. The serpent Adishesha guards you. You repose there in superconscious bliss. Earth's treasure comes and goes, It is impermanent. Thou art my eternal treasure. Lord I hug Thee to my bosom. I see Thee shining in my heart. It is you that breathe in me, see through my eyes, hear through my ears. I am nothing without Thee. I merge my little personality into Thy universal personality.... Let Thy love devour me. Surrender, Ranganatha, Surrender!”

Alavandar lived in the Real, leaving crown and sceptre to a successor. He settled in Sri Rangam and spent his days in study, in meditation, japa sadhana and holy company. He wrote a treatise on the qualified monism explaining the relation between chit, achit and God. To sing the hymns of the Divyaprabanda was his delight.

XIX. SRI RAMANUJA

The divine message of the *Divya Prabandham* was propagated far and wide by the great Vaishnavacharya Sri Ramanuja. O, what an inspiring personality he was! How learned, how pure, patient, simple, devoted, large-minded and saintly he was! He drew his descent from the great Acharya Alavandar. He was the son of Kesava Bhatta of Sri Perumpudur. He lost his father early in life. He learnt the Vedas under the tutelage of Yadavaprakasa in Kanchipuram. He was such a rare prodigy, and such was his keen intellect that he would find flaws even in the explanations of the great pandit Yadavaprakasa. The teacher grew jealous of the disciple and even plotted against his life. He conspired with Govinda Bhatta, a fellow-student and cousin of Ramanuja. Under the pretext of taking on a pilgrimage to Benares, Govinda Bhatta, instigated by the pandit, took Ramanuja to a thick forest and tried to end his life. How cruel! Fortunately for humanity, Ramanuja escaped

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

through the help of a hunter and his wife! A relative attempts to kill; a strange hunter saves him! How strange is human nature! In learning, character, devotion, there was no equal to Ramanuja. He had also developed certain psychic powers through which he was able to drive out the devil that had caught the princess of Kanchi.

Saint Alavandar, during his last moments sent a disciple to call Ramanuja by his side, so that he could entrust to him his mission. Before Ramanuja reached Sri Rangam, Alavandar reached the feet of Narayana. Ramanuja came a bit late, bowed to the body of Alavandar and watched it; he saw the three fingers of right hand closed. Ramanuja knew that it indicated a message to him. To write new commentaries to the *Brahmasutra*, the *Sahasranama* and the *Divya Prabandham* of the Alvars was the aspiration of the Saint's spirit. Ramanuja humbly bowed before the body of Alavandar and said, "I shall take up thy command, Master, and have the commentaries written!". At once the fingers straightened! He turned entirely to the *Bhaktimarga*. He was called to the path even like Guru Nanak, Jesus, and Chaitanya.

Ramanuja was a family man. But it happens very often that great souls have scarcely amicable companions in life. Ramanuja's case was similar to that.

He could not waste his life in pursuit of worldly thoughts while he was conscious of his divine mission. So he renounced home and all earthly ties. He went to Sri Rangam, and took *sannyasa* under the name of Yatiraja, the king of saints. His teacher, Yadavaprakasa too, bit by repentance, renounced the world and took order under the name Govindayogi, and came to Sri Rangam to serve Ramanuja.

Ramanuja had the compassion of Buddha, the love and patience of Jesus, the rapturous devotion of Namadeva, the sincere surrender of the Alvars and the apostolic zeal of St. John. He was initiated in the *ashtakshara mantra* (Om Namō Narayanaya) by saint *Peria Nambi* of Tirukottiyur.

Sri Nambi had advised him to keep the *mantra* a secret. But Ramanuja collected a large multitude of men of all castes, and preached the blessed *mantra* to them, from the top of a tower. "Hell shall be the reward for your impudence!" cried Nambi. "I shall gladly go to hell, my Master, if the multitude can escape hell by pronouncing the *mantra* of Mantras!" said Ramanuja meekly. The master, convinced of his large-mindedness, hugged him to his bosom and blessed him. He called the Mantra-Darsana of the Vedanta as Ramanuja-Darsana. Thus Ramanuja was equal-visioned. He learnt and re-learnt and got by heart the *Divya Prabandham* of the Alvars. He expounded wonderfully the subtle meaning contained in that Tamil Veda. Many disciples gathered around his radiance. He was installed on the holy seat of Alavandar. But he had to meet terrible enemies who attempted his life time out of number. One day poisoned food was served in his begging bowl. A woman hinted him about it, and Ramanuja threw it away to live long. He weighed in equal balance praise and blame, applause and calumny, and was a mountain of peace and calmness beyond the waves of dualities. He travelled throughout India holding boldly in his hands, the standard of the *Bhakti marga* preached by the Alvars. He wrote commentaries on the *Gita* and *Brahmasutra*. His commentary is known as *Sri Bhashya*. It was first expounded before an audience of great pandits in Kashmir. His most fervent disciple was Kurattalvar. He is Saint John of Ramanuja. He had two sons, Parasara and Pillan. Through Parasara Ramanuja brought out a fine commentary on the *Sahasranama*, and through Pillan he had an excellent commentary written on the *Divya Prabandham*. Thus he fulfilled the mission of Alavandar.

The Saivite king of Choladesa under whose sway Sri Rangam was, raised the flag of Saivism on which was written: "There is no God higher than Siva (*Sivat param nasti*)". He desired to compel all to accept it, especially Ramanuja. Anyone that ventured to challenge the statement was at the risk of his life. Ramanuja knew the king's intention. He had to do a good deal of service to re-establish *Visishtadwaita* firmly. His most faithful disciple

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

Kurattalvar read the thought of the Master and offered himself to go and challenge the king at any cost. He went in the garb of the Master along with Perianambi of whom we have already spoken. “*Siva is the greatest*” said the king. “*Dronam is greater than that*” retorted Kurattalvar. (Sivam is the name of a measure. *Dronam* is a measure immensely larger). Kurattalvar maintained the superiority of Vaishnavism and what was the result? Poor man, his eyes were branded! He bore the torture in the name of his Master. He suffered dire poverty with the patience of a *Yogi* doing hard penance. Yet he would never pray to the Divine for any earthly boons. “Give me more and more of Thy Devotion and make my life a greater and greater surrender unto Thy feet” was his prayer. Having thus persecuted Kurattalvar and Perianambi, the king searched for Ramanuja.

But where is Ramanuja? We see him now in Salagrama as the Guru of king Bhittideva. Ramanuja exorcised the evil spirit that had possessed the king’s daughter. This king was a pillar of strength to Vaishnavism in Mysore. The standard of victory was first raised in the kingdom of Bhittideva where Ramanuja stayed for twelve years and did wonderful service! In the year 1099, he discovered a temple at Namamalai. It was grandly rebuilt by the king. It is the famous temple of Tirunarayanapuram that flourishes even today. The image of Rama in its sanctum was in the possession of the Badshah of Delhi. The Badshah’s daughter was very fond of it. Ramanuja through a miracle won the heart of the Badshah and brought the beautiful image and established it in the temple of Tirunarayanapuram. On his way, he was attacked by some robbers but was protected by a set of Harijan devotees. For this help, the large-minded Ramanuja allowed the Harijans to enter the temple and worship God. It was he that named the depressed classes as Tirukkulattar (Harijan).

The Chola king who persecuted the Vaishnavites died of abscess. And Ramanuja after fulfilling his mission in Mysore returned to Sri Rangam. It was he who raised a temple in Sri Rangam for Nammalvar and the other Alvar saints and instituted festivals in their name. It was he who re-installed Govindarajaperumal in the temple of Tirupati and rebuilt it gorgeously. He travelled all over the land converting thousands of people to *Bhaktimarga*. Jesus had twelve disciples. Ramanuja had 74 saintly disciples. He lived healthy and strong devotedly following the path marked out by the Alvars for 120 long years. He appointed as his successor the saintly Pillailokachariar, who was the son of Kurattalvar, and reached the feet of Narayana whom he had served all his life with love, purity and surrender.

XX. MUDALIANDAN

We must remember with the name of Ramanuja, Mudaliandan or Dasarati, his most faithful companion. “I have renounced everything except Mudaliandan” said Ramanuja. Let us call his Andan; He was born in a village near Kanchipuram. His father was Narayana Dikshit, Yajur Vedi, Vadula Gotri. He married Bhuminachiar, the sister of Ramanuja. He was a fervent devotee of Rama, whom he prayed for a divine child. And so was born Dasarati alias Mudaliandan in the month of chaitra on Monday when the Star Punarvasu was on the zenith. Rama entered into his Spirit to serve Ramanuja. He studied Tamil and Sanskrit and became an erudite scholar. He mastered the Divyaprabandam, the hymns of Alvars especially those of Nammalvar. Ramanuja left the temple of Sri Rangam in his charge while he went to North India as an apostle of Vaishnavism. Andan was a dynamic Yogin, a fervent devotee of Ramanuja who gave him the heavy responsibility of continuing the holy services started by him at Tirunarayanapuram. He closely followed the Master and stood by him during his trials. To sing the hymns of the Alvar Saints and explain them to devotees was the delight of his life. Even Ramanuja revelled in those hymns so ably expounded by Andan. Ramanuja used to expound the Gita and his Sri Bashyam during day time and the hymns of Alvars during nights. Andan with his trained devotees chanted the hymns melodiously. Hundreds of such hymnners thrilled the atmosphere during festivals organised by Andan. Andan defeated in debates head-heavy pundits and made them surrender their ego to the Divine.

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

Utter surrender of the embodied soul to the Almighty one and consecrated service to His apostles—this was the teaching which Mudaliandan lived.

XXI. VEDANTA DESIKA

One hundred and thirty one years after the passing away of Ramanuja (1017 - 1137 A.D.) a splendid manifestation descended on this world—*Vedanta Desikacharya* (1268 - 1369 A.D.). He was a dauntless champion of Ramanuja's qualified monisim. He was a spiritual titan, a super man, a shining personality, a great poet, an artist, a master of Tamil and Sanskrit and a versatile genius in all walks of god-conscious life. He was hence acclaimed as *Sarvatantra-Swatantra* and *Kavi-tarkika Simha*, *Vedanta-Acharya*, master of all arts, lion among poets and debators, the holy teacher of Vedanta. Ramanuja lived for 120 years and Vedanta Desika for 101 years hale and healthy ever active as a resourceful defender of faith. We are today celebrating the seventh centenary of this brilliant prophet of Bhakti marga. Let us survey the foot prints of his life and know the essence of his works.

Vedanta Desika was born at Thuppul, a hamlet near Kanchipuram. His father was Anantasuri and his mother Totarammal. Both were pious souls devoted to God. They named their child Venkatanatha. Atreya Ramanuja his maternal uncle (a descendent of Nadambi Achan the direct disciple of Ramanuja) taught him all sacred scriptures extent in Tamil and Sanskrit. Venkatanatha, within 20 years, quickly mastered all branches of knowledge secular and spiritual. He got by heart the Sri Bashya of Ramanuja and expounded its truth in a ringing voice. His voice was really the silver-bell of God and it woke up sleeping souls to devotional fervour. He invoked Hayagriva the white faced horse (God of learning) for mastery of the Vedic lore and also Garuda. He did mantra-japam on the Oushadadri hill at Tiruvandipuram and attained inner enlightenment. Poetic talents came to him along with lofty thoughts and luminous expressions. He remained there for 15 years singing thrilling hymns and then returned to Kanchi.

He married Tirumangai and lived a spiritual life in the material world. He had a son by name Varadachari in 1316. He lived by expounding Vaishnavite scriptures, by alms and by writing poems and dramas and treatise on Vaishnavism. He extensively toured the country and met distinguished scholars like the famous Vidyaranya Swami. Sri Ranganatha Himself gave him the title *Vedantacharya*. He was thence called Vedanta Desika. He was 42 when he was honoured at the Sri Rangam temple by savants. He gained victory for the Bhakti marga of Ramanuja. Kings honoured him. He was requested to be a minister but he refused. His fame and name and his victorious voice roused the envy of mere book-worms and dry logicians. They could not stand before his radiating personality, the lion of dialectics. He routed jealous opponents in discourse and planted firmly the victorious flag of pure Vaishnavism. Sri Rangam temple was once attacked by Muslims. Desika helped the priests in removing the idols and they were replaced after 30 years by Koppanarya the army chief of Bukkaraja. Desika did great service to Sri Rangam and Tiruppati temples. He dedicated thrilling hymns to the deities.

Many miracles are attributed to Desika. Mr. Jealousy let loose a sorcerer against him. The wicked sorcerer tried his worst to kill the saint. But Saint Desika defied him by his spiritual force. The evil maker surrendered to the Master. A labourer challenged him in digging a well. Desika did dig a well and build the parapet wall too and the well stands in his home today. A Brahmacharin wanted money for his marriage. Desika sang his Kanakadara hymns which poured out gold and silver. Money was at his bidding. Desika stayed at Tirunarayanapuram for some years and 30 years at Satyamangalam singing heart-melting songs on God. It is said that he sculptured his own image before a sculptor who challenged him in the art.

His ripe old days were spent in prayer and meditation at Sri Rangam: (some say at

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

Tiruvandipuram). “O Lord, eternal effulgence seen in the middle of Sri Rangam, Thou shinest in my heart. O Thou that sleepest on the serpent, sleep in my consciousness”.

Lord resided in his heart and gave him blissful liberation on 14-11-1369 on the Krittik day which is the day of million lights. The bell of Venkatesa which he was, is still ringing the eternal Truth embalmed in his immortal works.

Desika made poetry the hand maid of philosophy.

1. Yadava Abhyudaya is a fascinating account of the boyhood plays of Sri Krishna. Sri Appaya Dikshit the reputed scholar, appreciated it and wrote a commentary on it hailing Desika as the lion among poets—Kavi tarkika Simham whose lines are full of sweetness and significance.

2. Hamsa sandesa like Kalidasa’s Meghasandesam is an exalted poem in which Rama sends his heart’s message through a swan to Sita imprisoned in the Asoka Vana of Ravana.

3. Padukasahasram (1008 verses) is in praise of Ranganatha’s sandals identified with the wooden sandals which Rama in the forest gave Bharata.

4. Sankalpa Suryodayam is an alligorical play like Prabodha Chandrodayam of Krishna Misra an advaitin. It upholds the Path of surrender preached by Alvars and Ramanuja.

5. His God-intoxicated poems on God are daily sung by Vaishnavites especially his poems on Garuda, Hayagriva, Gopala, Varadaraja etc. His Daya-Satakam on Lord Srinivasa and Yati Raja Satakam on Ramanuja are master-pieces of devotional fervour. He taught thirty times and more the Sri Bashya of the prince among ascetics. He has written an elaborate commentary on Sri Bashya and Gita, Tatvatraya and Tatparya chandrika. He was unrivalled in presenting Vedantic ideas with lucid precision.

6. His masterpiece is *Rahasya traya Saram*. It is a treasure of Spiritual Wisdom in four parts. It explains the philosophy of qualified monism, the way of attaining wisdom, the goal of the soul, the three mantras of self-surrender, the technics of Surrender, the duties of the teacher and the taught etc.

7. The Desika Prabandam in Tamil Verses tells us all that one has to know in a life dedicated to God. Vedanta Desika systematised, standardised and popularised Saranagati Yoga, the Yoga of Self surrender and consecration in which the soul is wedded to God, the Supreme. Adorations to the great Vedanta Desika who always lives in our heart calling us to pure and perfect Surrender to God.

XXI. SURRENDER ! SURRENDER !

In the temple of Varadaraja of Kanchi, Ramanuja early in life awaited the oracle of God. A voice born in him, which said:

“Vishnu, the Lord of Lakshmi, is the supreme truth; *Jiva* is different from the *Paramatma*. Surrender is the way to salvation. This is my faith.” This is the essence of Vaishnavism. The Divine is effulgent, the inner sun, the Purusha.

This is the conception of God in Vaishnavism. Vaishnavism has many universal elements in it. There is the God, the *Purushottama*. He is the *Purusha* who remains a witnessing enjoyer in everybody. God is the eternal Master, Lord, Omnipotent, Omniscient. The *Jiva* is the eternal servitor of the Supreme. Egoism must be rooted out, and the being

Alvar Saints And Acharyas

entirely surrendered to the Supreme. Through conscious Love one must forget oneself in the Divine. Narayana is *Sat* (Truth). His manifesting Force, Mahalakshmi, is *Chit* (Consciousness). The world is the expansion of their *Ananda*. The world is not a snake in the rope. It is the physical reality of Narayana, for everything is He. Just as the ethereal electricity manifests itself in a dynamo, Narayana manifests Himself through His conscious force to save the world. Rama, Krishna, Narasimha, etc., were such Avataras. He can be worshipped in his incarnate forms too (*Archa rupa.*) Narayana is the Father, Mahalakshmi is the Mother, and the world of beings their child!

Come, children of immortality, let us offer our entire love to our Father-Mother, and attain their love and grace! Think, O humanity! Think what is the real truth, the real joy, the real knowledge. Think of the passing time and how it devours all that man raises upon the endless space. Think how the warp and woof of time and space become threadbare! Take your refuge in the only Permanent Truth—that is God. Live the life; but make every breath a flower-offering to Narayana. Surrender your personal, self-sufficient egoism to Him. His will shall lead you! He shall remove your evils and defects. Trust Him sincerely, boldly, confidently. The twelve Alvars and Sri Ramanuja and Desika stand before us and a host of other Bhaktas and Jnanis as witnesses of the Divine Reality, as evidences of His unlimited grace and vast love! There is but one solace for humanity, one refuge, one source of peace and bliss—The Supreme Divine.

HARI AUM