BHAVAN'S BOOK UNIVERSITY

ĀḶVĀRS OF SOUTH INDIA

K. C. Varadachari

GENERAL EDITORS

K. M. MUNSHI
R. R. DIWAKAR

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A

BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN, BOMBAY

What Bharatiya Vidya Stands for

Bharatiya Shiksha must ensure that no promising young Indian of character having faith in Bharat and her culture Bharatiya Vidya should be left without modern educational equipment by reason merely of want of funds.

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(b) the adoption by the student of the *Shishya* attitude by the development of—

(i) respect for the teacher,

(ii) a spirit of inquiry,

(iii) a spirit of service towards the teacher, the institution, Bharat and Bharatiya Vidya.

8. The ultimate aim of Bharatiya Shiksha is to teach the younger generation to appreciate and live up to the permanent values of Bharatiya Vidya which flowing from the supreme art of creative life-energy as represented by Shri Ramachandra, Shri Krishna, Vyasa, Buddha and Mahavira have expressed themselves in modern times in the life of Shri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, and Swami Vivekananda, Shri Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi.

9. Bharatiya Shiksha while equipping the student with every kind of scientific and technical training must teach the student, not to sacrifice an ancient form or attitude to an unreasoning passion for change; not to retain a form or attitude which in the light of modern times can be replaced by another form or attitude which is a truer and more effective expression of the spirit of Bharatiya Vidya; and to capture the spirit afresh for each generation to present it to the world.

आ नो भद्राः क्रतवो यन्तु विश्वतः।

Let noble thoughts come to us from every side

—Rigveda, I.89.i

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ĀLVĀRS OF SOUTH INDIA

By

K. C. VARADACHARI

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ĀLVĀRS OF SOUTH INDIA

K. C. VARADACHARI

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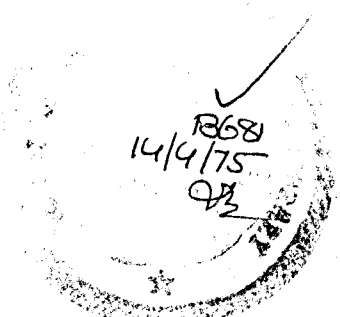

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

THE Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan—that Institute of Indian Culture in Bombay—needed a Book University, a series of books which, if read, would serve the purpose of providing higher education. Particular emphasis, however, was to be put on such literature as revealed the deeper impulsions of India. As a first step, it was decided to bring out in English 100 books, 50 of which were to be taken in hand almost at once. Each book was to contain from 200 to 250 pages and was to be priced at Rs. 1/75*.

It is our intention to publish the books we select, not only in English, but also in the following Indian languages: Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam.

This scheme, involving the publication of 900 volumes, requires ample funds and an all-India organisation. The Bhavan is exerting its utmost to supply them.

The objectives for which the Bhavan stands are the reintegration of the Indian culture in the light of modern knowledge and to suit our present-day needs and the resuscitation of its fundamental values in their pristine vigour.

Let me make our goal more explicit:

We seek the dignity of man, which necessarily implies the creation of social conditions which would allow him freedom to evolve along the lines of his own temperament and capacities; we seek the harmony of individual efforts and social relations, not in any makeshift way, but within the frame-work of the Moral Order; we seek the creative art of life, by the alchemy of which human limitations are progressively transmuted, so that man may become the instrument of God, and is able to see Him in all and all in Him.

The world, we feel, is too much with us. Nothing would uplift or inspire us so much as the beauty and aspiration which such books can teach.

In this series, therefore, the literature of India, ancient and modern, will be published in a form easily

* Since raised to Rs. 2.50.

accessible to all. Books in other literatures of the world, if they illustrate the principles we stand for, will also be included.

This common pool of literature, it is hoped, will enable the reader, eastern or western, to understand and appreciate currents of world thought, as also the movements of the mind in India, which, though they flow through different linguistic channels, have a common urge and aspiration.

Fittingly, the Book University's first venture is the *Mahabharata*, summarised by one of the greatest living Indians, C. Rajagopalachari; the second work is on a section of it, the *Gita* by H.V. Divatia, an eminent jurist and a student of philosophy. Centuries ago, it was proclaimed of the *Mahabharata*: "What is not in it, is nowhere." After twenty-five centuries, we can use the same words about it. He who knows it not, knows not the heights and depths of the soul; he misses the trials and tragedy and the beauty and grandeur of life.

The *Mahabharata* is not a mere epic; it is a romance, telling the tale of heroic men and women and of some who were divine; it is a whole literature in itself, containing a code of life, a philosophy of social and ethical relations, and speculative thought on human problems that is hard to rival; but, above all, it has for its core the *Gita* which is, as the world is beginning to find out, the noblest of scriptures and the grandest of sagas in which the climax is reached in the wondrous Apocalypse in the Eleventh Canto.

Through such books alone the harmonies underlying true culture, I am convinced, will one day reconcile the disorders of modern life.

I thank all those who have helped to make this new branch of the Bhavan's activity successful.

1, Queen Victoria Road,
New Delhi,
3rd October 1951.

K. M. MUNSHI

PREFACE

Āḻvārs are South Indian Śrī Vaiṣṇava Mystics. A systematic philosophy of mysticism was developed by them in their Hymns. No account of Indian mysticism would be complete without knowing something about these. All of them belonged to the first millennium after Christ. There have been some excellent works about them but none which gives a detailed account of their work. The Bhakti movement in India owes its orgin to them. The present work undertakes to elucidate the contribution made by these great mystics.

Though the general gist of this work has been published in the Journal of the Sri Venkatesvara Oriental Institute during the years 1950-51, and other research journals, this is an original work, having been rewritten. The author expresses his deepest thanks to the several editors of the Journals who have permitted him to use the published material.

He takes this occasion to express his deep debt of gratitude to Professor P. Sankaranarayanan for having gone through this work and for having suggested many modifications.

K. C. VARADACHARI

Sri Rajagriha,
Tirupati.

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INTRODUCTION

The mystic philosophy of the South Indian Āḻvārs has not been studied as fully as it merits. Their philosophy however played a very important role in the shaping of the religious life of the people of the South.

The Āḻvārs seem to have flourished between the 2nd century A.D. and 8th century A.D. Traditional accounts place them at the beginning of the Kali Yuga, that is about the second millennium B.C. Professor S. Vaiyapuri Pillai has come to the conclusion that the Āḻvār period falls between the 7th and 9th centuries A.D. In any case the Āḻvārs lived before 900 A.D.

The Āḻvār philosophy is deeply indebted to the Vedic and Purānic scriptures and is seeping with the mytho-mysticism characteristic of the latter. The Āḻvārs were also conversant with the *āgamas (pancarātra)* which provided them with the concrete worship of the icons.

The importance of a study of these Āḻvārs not only makes one understand the spiritual climate of the devotional school *(bhakti)* in its origins but also supplies the philosophy of Viśiṣṭādvaita with a background. They are one of the two important sources of the later system of Śrī Rāmānuja, the other being the *Upaniṣads (Vedanta)*. It is perhaps true that but for these mystical religious hymns, of the Āḻvārs, the unique *anubhava* or experience open to all devotees of God would not have received any fillip. It is also likely that the Śaiva school of *bhakti* as sung by its Nāyanmārs during the same period (700-900 A.D.) also received and gave impetus to the growth of a devotional approach to God all over the South. Later it tended to move upward to North India where it flourish-

ed through the various devotional sects of Caitanya, Kabir and others.

Mysticism has been one of the most fascinating phenomena in spiritual experience. It is undoubtedly also the most important for a proper evaluation of the springs of religious experiences. Much is known about religions, but not in regard to mystical experiences. Therefore many mature minds have turned towards a scientific study of mystical experience in order to find out the truth about it.

Mysticism has been defined in many ways. ' The word 'mystic' is said to be derived from *muo*, a Greek root which means 'experience that comes when one closes one's lids and lips.' It is an experience that comes to one when one meditates or practises *dhyāna*. It may mean *mauna* or silence. When one practises the silent mind, then one begins to experience the transcendent reality of oneself and later on of others. It is an experience that is beyond the grasp of the senses or the mind itself and, as such, it is incapable of being expressed in language or words. The Ultimate Reality has been held by mystics to be thus beyond the grasp of the senses and speech. Some have held that it is beyond the reach of life itself or breath and mind. Thus transcendental supersensory experience that comes about owing to the silencing of the mind or to a silent or quiet mind is what has been taught by the Mystics of the Upaniṣads, the Ṛṣis. It is therefore accepted on all hands that the Upaniṣads are the most mystical of ancient religious literature in the World. The hallmark of transcendental truth is therefore its mystical measure.

Mysticism is also defined as the direct unmediated experience of God. Reason cannot help us to reach it. It can be known, seen and entered into only by a trans-

cendent process of revelation, or flashes of insight or intuition. It is called *sākṣātkāra,* or direct experience. It is called *anubhava* or *aparokṣānubhūti.* It is characterised by the overwhelming sense of reality of the Transcendent, reducing all our sensory and other experiences to a level of *māyā* or magical reality or illusion or worthlessness. The reality of God in the mystical experience does two things: firstly its utter transcendence reduces the world to a level of illusion or worthlessness, and secondly, it makes the attainment of God or the Ultimate Being the one abiding concern of the individual even at the cost of complete identification of oneself with Him or loss of oneself. The mystical experience goes beyond the level of all realities of nature, soul and God too, and arrives at that supreme Oneness which is the womb of all. But this is more an assertion of the mystical experience at its highest than a metaphysical explanation.

Mystic experiences are also characterised by an experience of unadulterated bliss or ecstasy. The bliss experienced by the mystic at the moment of his realisation of that state of oneness or union with the Ultimate is transcendental happiness based on peace *(śānti,),* a peace that is the end of all struggles and contradictions, of puzzlements and so on. One attains a condition of spiritual illumination (*jnāna*), and spiritual freedom *(vairāgya),* which are the first intimations of immortal existence. One is said to swim in the ocean of knowledge and bliss. It is also one of deep love and intimacy with the Ultimate Being which grants to the individual in that condition a sense of real existence or living as a full being. Bliss is not mere pleasure or sense of absence of pain but a positive experience of union with the Ultimate Reality which is recognized as Existence (truth), Awareness (consciousness) and Infinitude and Immorta-

lity (which constitute bliss, *ānanda*). All mystics experience this unearthly bliss in the highest *yoga* (union).

Mystic bliss has been explained in beautiful terms by the seers who have claimed that all things in this universe live and move and have their being in bliss. The highest self has been almost equated with this bliss and the attainment of Self and attainment of bliss are identical.

Transcendental mysticism goes beyond the levels of human experience and remains sometimes beyond the expressions which man can understand. When such experiences however are vouchsafed to him, he either remains dumb and wondering or he tries to express them in human language and sign. We have many mystics who have held this transcendental mysticism to be the attainment of the dark Divine or Underground. This mysticism has been beyond the religious level and therefore religious appropriation of mysticism appears to be a lower level mysticism in so far as it seeks to make mysticism identical with religion. Religious experiences originally centre round the mystical flashes of divine uncovering of the transcendent. They seek to unite themselves with this transcendent condition. The religious men do get into intimate oneness with God but it is the realisation of the relationship with God that the soul experiences. We may perhaps say that mysticism is the experience of God in which the individual soul dissolves in deepest union and so has the experience of God as He is in Himself, whereas in religious experience it is the experience of God by the individual as God is for the individual in His fullest plenitude. Thus mysticism leans towards identity whereas religious experience leans towards organic unity or union. The religious mysticism is thus the experience of union by the individual with God in

all his plenitude and fullness. This is the experience of *rasa* (essence) or aesthetic fullness and fulfilment of man in God.

Broadly speaking, the *bhakti* schools are suffused with religious mysticism rather than pure mysticism. Religious mysticism has much concern with the personality of God, whereas pure mysticism is concerned with the inward enjoyment of God in essence. It is with the supremely transcendent aspect of God that it enters into ecstatic trance.

The religious mysticism that we find in the Āḻvār literature is deeply devotional. It is clear that all these saints are profoundly soaked in the love of the personality of God and His superhuman deeds in the world of men. God's love for His creation and creatures is shown to be immeasurably greater than what man can bear towards Him. Wonder, awe, love and faith mingle with each other to work up an alembic of purest intensity of self-giving and seeking God for His own sake. This latter culminating point is the sign of developing mysticism. Union with the Godhead in all His infinite manifestations and works leads to the mystic absorption in God to the point of loss of one's own consciousness and existence. In fact the return to one's own consciousness is seen to be a kind of fall and separation from God. Many exquisite hymns are devoted to reveal this suffering that befalls a saint when he seems to become aware of his condition without the Divine or bereft of the Divine.

That this religious mysticism is a valuable thing no one would deny. The awareness of the personality of God is all-important. Impersonality of Reality is not however advanced by these seers and saints, for they could hardly conceive of any impersonal reality unless it be something assumed as a name for the Reality as

It is in and for Itself. Even pure mysticism cannot affirm this, for that too seeks a transcendence over the individual in God, which is held to be a union developing into absorption.

The characteristics of religious mysticism should be clear from a deep study of the Āḻvār literature. These saints had had a tradition, the tradition of the Upaniṣads and the Vedas, along with the Purāṇas and *āgamas* which describe the exploits of God in His several incarnations. These exploits of God are concrete events and not general qualities, and have relevance for man. The reality of God is always not in an idealisation but in the actual impact of God in the life of man. The Purāṇas provide the fullest evidence of God's constant activity and participation in man's life.

The close acquaintance with the lore of the Purāṇas along with the abiding contemplation on the intuitive revelational truths which are illustrated and exemplified by the deeds of Godhead in the terrestrial world of men had together inspired these saints to rehearse the glory of God. They form the substance of their devotional contemplation which is continuous and steady. This leads to concentration and becomes the sole vocation of the saint. It leads to vision of the Divine in all His consummate splendour. There are indeed many instances in these hymns where the contemplation through inspired song culminates in the Vision, and that leads to the final entry of the soul of the saint into the very body of God, to become part and parcel of His divine body. The saints have entranced feelings and ecstatic contemplations. The religious experience of both holiness and numinous awareness is something that seems to be the universal characteristic of all these saints and mystics.

The understanding of the psychology of these saints

would briefly involve the consideration of the nature of the object of their contemplation. The saints and mystics of the South, especially the Āḻvārs, seem to be convinced that God is not merely the Absolute Transcendent, but beyond all characteristics and all determinations, the Unconditioned, known only through Transcendent Experience. Undoubtedly such an experience exists for pure mystics. That is beyond all possibility of human knowing and human love. The Āḻvārs, on the other hand, have felt that that Transcendent Being is verily also the one who is the Godhead whom mankind knows and loves, for He is with man and revealing Himself to man. His incarnations or miraculous intercessions have revealed that God is also immanent or within the creation while remaining transcendent—immanent in the historical sense. God created the Universe and entered into it or rather is constantly entering into it to keep it on the path of *dharma.* Thus it is recognized that God is transcendent and immanent, and historically regulating the creation through His divine births. These are the minimum presuppositions needed to explain the historical Godhead whom the saints have had the privilege of encountering in their devotions. Āḻvārs seem to have accepted the *āgama* version of the incarnation of God in addition to the already held Vedic conception of God as transcendent and immanent. The Purāṇas had provided the ground for the acceptance of the historical descents for the resuscitation of *dharma.* The *Bhagavad Gītā* (*Mahābhārata*) and the *Rāmāyaṇa* had also provided for the acceptance of the historical Godhead. These have been crowned by the acceptance of the iconic worship of the Godhead. The Āḻvārs held that the supreme Godhead out of love for all His creatures incarnated and could incarnate in icons so that man could have easy

access to Him. In every way the basic presupposition was that God is accessible, is the very incarnation of love and righteousness; in one word, He is Grace. Illimitable grace is God and on this firm belief they founded their whole method of approach or *yoga*.

This is the concept that led them to see in every thing that the Divine was and did and was doing the divine love which overpowers the nature of man wholly.

Beauty of God was like ambrosia and undiminishing in its nature and power over the heart and head of man and woman and all nature. The secret of beauty was discovered by man through devotional dedication and intuitive awakening.

Religious mysticism found excellence of experience in and through the supersensory beauty of God's personality. So much so, again and again, the Āḻvār cries out, "Having beheld thy beauty my eyes have no place for anything else besides." "My eyes having seen thee cannot see anything else." They were such who became blind to all that was not His beauty, deaf to all that was not His voice and word, and ignorant of all that was not His knowledge. Mystic religion undoubtedly leads one to the concept of liberation or *mukti*. Experience of God itself became liberation, not merely a step towards it. Service of God itself was liberation from the cycle of births and deaths. Such was their faith and their love that they refused to go beyond God, or away from God.

Āḻvārs also, once for all time, laid the lines of development for the practice of religious mysticism or *bhakti*. The ways of realising the manifold personality of God were also beautifully expressed in their hymns and can be shown to follow the well-tested canons of *bhakti*-methodology laid down by the Purāṇas and Itihāsas. The *bhakti* so cultivated however is not just a copying of the

methods of those excellent works which contain the experiences of so many of the earlier devotees of God. Unique developments of devotion are clearly seen in these hymns. The hymnal literature seems to have developed spontaneously even as in the case of the Vedic mantras which flowed out of spontaneous vision and audition of the Ṛṣis. This is similar to the songs or psalms of other religious mystics in the world.

The religious mystic is one who is supremely aware of the beauty of the world in the vision of God though he is equally conscious of its illusory and deluding nature when considered apart from God's immanence and historical presence. The South Indian religious mystic is however very much aware of the iconic presence of God in the temples. For him the icon is a real, speaking and communicating presence of God and not merely a sign or *liṅga* or *pratīka* of God mediating between the need for a sign of presence and the presence itself. This is rather extraordinary in mysticism and yet it must be said that the consistency with which the experience of God had happened in and through the icons which they worshipped leads one to assert that this kind of worship has sanctity and reality. The enjoyment of God in iconic representations shows the supreme possibility of Godly presence in material objects under circumstances defined by the seers themselves. Devotion, according to these saints, makes God do even the impossible and reveals God's supreme omnipotency.

These seers of God who are also lovers of God have opened up a great chapter in Indian spiritual Renaissance. The mystic idea of God as organic with Nature and soul is one of the profound insights which gave rise to the development of a theism that has been the inspiration to all later thinkers and philosophers. This in-

sight already formulated by Yājñavalkya and stated in dynamic yogic language by the *Bhagavad Gītā* was mystically verified by the Āḻvārs. Nāthamuni recognized this unique contribution of the Āḻvārs and above all of St. Śaṭhakopa, who has been since then known as the Kulapati of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vaiṣnavism. He therefore became the founder of the new school of *bhakti* which made surrender to God and God alone with His Śrī *(śreyas-śakti)* the means to God-experience *(divya-anubhava)*. He made God alone the object of his meditations and songs, hence his entire works were known as *Bhagavad-viṣaya* (having God as the content of his songs and meditations).

Nāthamuni seems to have collected and codified or arranged them and made arrangements to have them sung in the temples so as to aid the devotees in their own meditations and songs.

His grandson Yāmunācārya had further helped the spread of these songs, and it was left to Rāmānuja to have a steady flow of devotees undertake this *sādhana* or method of worship and experience. He also had the commentary on the *magnum opus* of Nammāḻvār or St. Śaṭhakopa, as he was called by the devotees, so that the devotees could contemplate on the excellent deeds of God as experienced by St. Śaṭhakopa. It seems clear that it is necessary to know the method and manner of contemplation rather than mechanically repeat them or sing them. Poetic excellence there abundantly is in these hymns and many poetic critics have seen the flawless perfection of St. Śaṭhakopa's poetic art. It is however the delicate delineations of the grace or love of God that lifts the poetry to sublimity or dedicated passion. Its spontaneous induction of intuitive union with God is its more important and pregnant role. It is necessary to

read these mystic hymns in the context of developing yogic-consciousness or awareness to God's supreme self-giving to man in all glory. The spread of Rāmānuja's teachings in religion and philosophy meant also the spread of the mystical literature of the Āḻvārs on which his teachings were based. The revelations of the Āḻvārs had the same or equal sanctity for him as the authoritative texts of the Vedas and Upaniṣads. The truths of both were considered to be capable of being considered to be same if not just complementary to one another or capable of being synthesized or harmonized. Thus the basic background of the Viśiṣṭādvaita philosophy of religion was the composite and harmonized truths of Veda and Āḻvār-hymns. Thus arose what has been known as *ubhaya-vedānta* (the two Vedāntas) harmonized to form a unitary system of philosophy and religion.

Thus the mystical tradition was synthesized to form a synthetic mystic religious philosophy. The roots of such a conception were already present in the literature of the Āḻvārs.

As we study each of the Āḻvārs it will become clear that their awakened insights embraced the whole of reality as pervaded by the divine light and grace, and each one of them was revealing a new facet or point of view, not partial but integral with every other.

CHAPTER I

THE FIRST THREE ĀLVĀRS AND THE MYTH

The story of the Āḻvārs has an interesting beginning. The first three Āḻvārs known as Poygai, Pūtattār and Pey were born miraculously of flowers. Poygai was born of the golden lotus in the tank (Poygai) near Yathoktakāri temple in Kāncī. He was also known as Sārayōgi or Kāsārayogi.* Pūtattār was born of *kurukkatti* flower at Mahābalipuram. Pey was born of the red lotus in the tank at Mylāpore (Madras).

They were going from temple to temple in search of God and for worshipping Him and having His vision. They chanced to meet under a common roof in the temple city, *Tiruk-Koil-ūr*, when there was a heavy downpour of rain. The first to seek shelter in the small room of a house was Poygai. The dimension of this room was such that it was fit for one man to lie down in it. Soon after the second Āḻvār Pūtattār entered and seeking admission he said that where there was lying space for one there can be room for two men to sit. So the two sat, when the third Āḻvār Pey entered saying that where two can sit three can stand. So all the three stood in that small room waiting for the rain to stop. At this juncture, it is narrated, they began to feel the presence of a fourth person, who was invisible. But this invisible person they described as the Supreme Being by which everything lives and moves and has its being.

The first Āḻvār (Poygai) intuited God's existence through his transcendent knowledge (*parajñāna*); the second (Pūtattār) through maturing gnosis passing into devotion (*parā-bhakti*); and the third (Pey) through the

* cf. *Dehalīśa Stuti:* Venkatanatha and the Guruparampara.

POYGAI ĀLVĀR

God's miraculous nature or Wonder-productive activity has been the starting point of all speculative philosophy and religion. It is this wonder or surprise of novelty that has challenged the intelligence of man to come to terms with it by understanding, by works and by devotion. The very first verse of Poygai Āḻvār reveals the Wonder nature of God's creative Being which is expressed by means of similes drawn from ordinary life.

> "Deeming the world as bowl, the full sea as ghee, the fierce-rayed Sun as the luminous wick, I have twined a garland of speech for the feet of Him who wields the red flaming discus so that there may be freedom from the ocean of misery."*

The world is compared to the lamp-bowl in which oil is poured and the wick is lighted. The earth has parts, is *sāvayava,* therefore it is considered to be an effect. Indeed all the entities herein mentioned are parts of one creation. The sea which is supported by the lamp bowl supports the flame of the wick. But the lighter of all these and the flame that reveals the structure of the universes point to a transcendent maker. Seas obey him and the Sun keeps his measures regularly. The proof so far given is for the efficient causality of God. Here earth, water and Sun stand for the original three elements mentioned by the Upaniṣads. All these are under the control of the Ruler who is the one to be known in order to cross over the misery of existence which is compared to the ocean. From the ocean is the oil gathered and it

* *Mudal Tiruvandādi* 1. cf. tran. J.S.M. Hooper: *Hymns of the Ālvārs* p. 12. note 1.

PŪTATTĀR

The second Āḻvār, Pūtattār, was born, it is said, in Māmallapuram, modern Mahābalipuram, in the Chingleput District of Madras State. He is important in so far as he forged ahead of Poygai Āḻvār with the transcendent knowledge (*parajñāna*) towards the transcendent devotion to God *(parābhakti)*. The transcendent knowledge does not remain at the level of mere intellectual perception and understanding. It is not content to think of the Divine as the cause, as the Being of marvellous power, omniscience and transcendence. The reasoning, however attenuated by logical discussion when it thrusts forward to apprehend the things in-itself *(yāthātathyato arthān)*, cannot but culminate in the knowledge suffused with trust and belief and faith in its being the means to our ultimate salvation or freedom from all sorrow. Devotion in a sense *is* the knowledge that none else is the way and the means and the goal of our endeavour. It is this torch of devotion that the second Āḻvār lights and with it seeks the apprehension of the Divine Nature. In the first Āḻvār we are not aware of his saying 'I SAW THE DIVINE'. 'I *know* the Divine' is very different from and very much less than the statement "I *saw* the Divine Lord."* Even so, however, without the first, the intuitive non-sensory experience of the Divine is something impossible.

Almost the very first hymn of the *Irendām Tiru-*

* Cf. *Bhagavad Gītā*, XI. 54:

भक्त्या त्वनन्यया शक्य अहं एवंविधोऽर्जुन! ।
ज्ञातुं द्रष्टुं च तत्त्वेन प्रवेष्टुं च परंतप! ॥

Knowing, seeing and entering into It with one's own entire being are the three processes that bear comparison with the three Āḻvārs: Poygai, Pūtattār and Pey respectively.

PEYĀLVĀR

Peyāḷvār is said to have been born in Mailāpore (Mylapore), modern Madras, of a red-lotus *(raktotpala)*. As the name signifies, he was mad, that is, God-mad or God-intoxicated. The greatness of Peyāḷvār lay in his knowledge-vision of the Divine from a deeper perception of God's eternal di-unity as Divine Two, comprising Nārāyaṇa and His consort Śrī *(Tiru)*. This perception, which is subtle and deep and profoundly revealing the Divine's Integral Nature, goes beyond the intuition of Poygai and the dream of Pūtattār in so far as it shows the redemptive Grace of God to one who has verily entered into Him. The impersonal or logical highest of the first Āḷvār melts imperceptibly into the Personal Highest of Pūtattār and grows into the experience of Grace inseparably united with the Person who is the primal Cause of all, the support and sustenance of all the worlds.

In one sense we can say that Pey saw God as with His infinite Śakti as the *tantras* have stated. For not only should we know the cause but also explain how that cause affects the universes. In Ṛg Vedic *khila, Śrī Sūkti* has invoked the supreme Divine Jātaveda to bring *Śrī Lakṣmī anapagāminī*, the compassionate Ārdrā, who resides in the lotus pond (*puṣkariṇī*), who is prosperity (*puṣṭī*), who is of beautiful hue, who is decked with golden garlands, who is the impeller (*sūrya*) and wealth (*mantra* 14). The Āḷvār's first verse in the *Mūnrām* or Third *Tiruvandādi* expresses the same Vision. The Mother has been brought into the vision of God, and this experience has become cardinal to the entire theology of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism, which emphasises that Śrī is the principle of redemptive grace which operates on and

CHAPTER II

BHAKHISĀRA

(The Āḻvār of Tirumaliśai)

Bhaktisāra or the Essence of Bhakti is the fourth Āḻvār. He is said to have been born of a sage Bhārgava and Kanakāngi, an apsarasa-woman, in a forest near Mahisārapuri. Having been left in the forest by his parents as soon as he was born, he was picked up by a childless cowherd and taken home and brought up in his family. He exhibited from his very birthday freedom from desire for food. His foster-father went and consulted a Śūdra sage nearby who, divining that the child was a great soul, prayed to it and offered milk. The child then drank some milk and asked his foster-mother to drink the remainder, saying that she would beget a child soon. A child was born to her in due course and was named Kanikanna, who remained with Bhaktisāra during his lifetime.

For seven years Bhaktisāra did not partake of any food. At the end of that period he left his home on pilgrimage to holy shrines strewn all over the country. He practised Yoga. In his wanderings he came across all types of religious and philosophical schools such as Buddhism (Śākya), Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāmkhya, Pātanjala and Kāpāla. After a considerable number of years he became Siddha, an adorer of God Śiva. He was considered to be a brilliant expounder of Śaiva philosophy. Finally he gave up speech and adopted the vow of silence (*maunavrata*).

The third Āḻvār Pey, coming to know of Bhaktisāra as a profound soul and yogi, went to him with a view to correct him and lead him to the real experience of the Ultimate Being. He found Bhaktisāra observing silence and unwilling to be drawn into any sort of discussion.

CHAPTER III

KULAŚEKHARA

Kulaśekhara is unique among the Āḻvārs in many respects. Tradition has it that he was the ruler of Travancore and it is also clear from references in his hymns. Kulaśekhara seems to have had mastery over the Tamil and Sanskrit languages. His understanding of the psychological approach to the object of his religious consciousness is unlike anything that religious or mystic tradition has given to us either before or after him.

In his hymns to the supreme Godhead (Perumāl) called *Perumāl Tirumoḻi*, Kulaśekhara traces the growth of this consciousness. The Tirumoḻi comprises 105 hymns and is divided into ten sections. The hymns reveal a general warming up of the religious passion between the individual soul and God.

The first section shows the soul hungering after Godhead, through praise, for attaining divine vision and divine company. This reveals the eternal lure of the Infinite.

Kulaśekhara is conscious of the Infinite. He felt the necessity of that Infinite to his own finite life. He knew with a deep and profound understanding of the scriptures (śrutis) that the Infinite Being beyond the reach of the finite mind is the One adorable Being who grants existence, intelligence, and peace or bliss that passeth all understanding. He knew that this Supreme Being is the repository of all transcending auspicious virtues capable of taking the individual beyond the worlds of misery and suffering. A touch of God transforms man albeit a sinner.

CHAPTER IV

VIPRANĀRĀYAṆA
(Toṇḍar-adip-podi)

Vipranārāyaṇa became one of the most romantic Āḻvārs because he fell from virtue and was redeemed by the grace of God. He earned the title 'Enjoyer of the dust of the holy feet of the devotees of God'* when he attained the love of God fully, through serving the devotees of God.

The *Guruparampara* mentions that he was born in the year 2814 B.C.** in the Mārgasīrṣa month (December-January) under the lunar asterism *Jyeṣṭha* in the village Tiru-Mandangudi. He belonged to the Brahmana *(vipra)* caste and grew up in the traditional way. As he grew up he perhaps followed the vocation of his parents who were tending gardens of *tulasi* and flowers pleasing to God and making garlands for the God in the local temple. Viṣṇu Citta of Śrīvilliputtūr was also doing the same thing at that temple. Being brought up in that pure religious and devout atmosphere, Nāráyaṇa was attached to his vocation, and his garden was well-nurtured and well-laid with fine trees and flower-plants, fragrant

* The *Guruparamparā* quotes from the *Mahābhārata* and *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa* and *Bhāradvāja Samhitā* the following *slokas* to illustrate the practice of wearing the dust of the feet of the devotees of God on one's head for attaining purity, etc.

Mahābhārata:

Nirapekṣam munim śāntam nirvairam samadarśanam
Anuvrajāmyaham nityam pūye yetyānghri reṇubhih.

Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa:

Yasya mūrdhni sthitam yāvad vaiṣnavānghrirajaś śubham
Gangādi sarvatīrthāni tāvat tiṣṭhantyasamśayam.

Bhāradvāja Samhita:

Etat samastapāpānām prāyaścittam manīṣibhih
Nirṇītam bhagavad-bhakta-pādodaka-niṣevaṇam.

** cf. *Ancient India;* Krishnaswami Aiyangar, p. 404. The historians at present assign him to the 7th Century.

CHAPTER V

TIRUPPĀṆ ĀLVĀR

Tiruppān Āḻvār was a saint belonging to the caste of untouchables (*pancamas*). He has sung only ten verses. These ten verses are just the expression of the revelation of the form of God granted to him as he entered or rather was taken into the *sanctum sanctorum* of Śrī Ranganātha's temple at Śrīrangam.

Tiruppān Āḻvār is also called *Muni-vāhāna*, one who has the Muni as his vehicle. The story runs that Tiruppān Āḻvār used to pray to God Śrī Ranganātha every day from a distance standing on the banks of the river Kāveri. His songs were considered to be sweet and enchanting. He was called Kavīśvara (lord of poets), an appellation that is granted to the highest types of hymnists. Obviously the last of the compositions is this Revelational Hymn.

One Lokasāranga Muni was the servant of Śrī Ranganātha shrine doing the service of taking holy water from the Kāveri to the shrine for the bath of the iconic form of Śrī Ranganātha. One day he found the Āḻvār near the place wherefrom he used to fill his pot with water. It was his custom not to speak when taking the water to the shrine. So he threw a small stone at the Āḻvār, which struck him. It hurt the Āḻvār and blood began to flow from the wound. The saint who was in a trance woke up from it and moved away from that spot. He felt that he had committed a serious mistake in standing at a place from where the water for the shrine was to be taken.

After performing his ablutions and bath, the Muni filled the vessel with water for the bath of Śrī Ranganātha and went his way to the temple.

CHAPTER VI

TIRUMANGAI ĀLVĀR

Tirumangai Āḻvār is one of the romantic personalities in the galaxy of mystics. He was also known as *Parakālan* (Beyond Time). He was also known as *Kalidhwamsin* (destroyer of *Kali*, the spirit of degeneration and evil). He was a petty chieftain. He was in many respects a dynamic figure, ardent in love, spectacular in his deeds, a rebel and a social reformer, even a kind of Robin Hood, and, above all, an exquisite lyricist. Becoming a devotee of God through love of a Vaiṣṇava girl, who was unwilling to marry anyone, however eminent in other respects, unless he worshipped Viṣṇu, he later became one of the most voluminous hymnists of Śrī Vaiṣṇava religion. The story goes that the girl whom he loved insisted that he should feed a thousand *bhāgavatas* a day for a period of a year. For the sake of the love of the woman, he began to develop love for God and won something richer than the love of the woman, the love of God. In this we can see the supreme quality of one-pointed devotion to the ideal of beauty which was naturally shifted, thanks to the spiritual midwifery of his wife, to the Beauty of beauties. This story has a parallel in the life of one Villi (Dhanurdāsa) during the lifetime of Śrī Rāmānuja who, similarly loving beauty, found that the beauty of Śrī Ranganātha's eyes was infinitely greater than those of his spouse to which he was deeply attached.

He was considered to be the Bow of the celestial Godhead or its incarnation. Tamil scholars fix his period as the 8th Century. It is stated that he was instrumental in the construction of the Śrīrangam temple with its sevenfold towers and prākārams (outer walls).

CHAPTER VII

VIṢṆU-CITTA

(Periyāḻvār)

Viṣṇucitta was a Brahmin belonging to Śrīvilliputtūr. He was doing service of supplying garlands which he had made from flowers in his garden to the Deity in the temple there. This happens to have been the well-known service which Brahmins used to undertake in addition to teaching those who came for sacred knowledge. It is well known also that though Viṣṇucitta was a very good man and ordinarily read he hardly had done his *Veda* and was not a scholar. His deep devotion to Śrī Kṛṣṇa was well known to all and he had obviously mystic experiences of deepest intimacy. He was constantly enjoying the Divine Bliss and has sung the wonderful Tirumoḻi known as *Periyāḻvār Tirumoḻi*. It is on the lines of the Tirumoḻis of other Āḻvārs. However, in this work, the Āḻvār enjoys singing about the experiences he had when he assumed the role of the parents of Śrī Kṛṣṇa and associates of Śrī Kṛṣṇa and lived the life of those people. This of course is the meditation through dramatization. The greatness of these hymns of dramatization lies in the exquisite discoveries of the greatest psychological depth and interest when one begins to develop tensions and poises and calms and storms which illuminate the entire relation between God and man and incidentally awakens the awareness of the Reality both in its individual depths and universal vastnesses.

He had also sung the daily song of prayer to God to awaken in the morning when the universal hosts of gods and men and all are waiting to worship Him.

CHAPTER VIII

GODĀ

(Āṇḍāl)

Godā is well-known as the only woman Āḻvār of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism.* She is said to be a foundling daughter of Viṣṇucitta. She was brought up by him in the orthodox fashion. Godā quite in the Bhāgavata manner began to worship Śrī Kṛṣṇa as the beloved. She sought the love of Śrī Kṛṣṇa and wished to be married to him alone.

As Godā grew up, her devotion also deepened, and all those who saw her were won over by her spiritual beauty. Her powers of poetic imagination seem to have attracted her foster-father who helped her to make them divine. Godā composed two major works, namely, *Tiruppāvāi*** and *Nāccĭyār Tirumoli*. The former is of rare beauty, revealing the preparations for gaining Śrī Kṛṣṇa as husband, and the latter is a composition reflecting her mind, when she imagines and dreams of her marriage with him.

Tiruppāvāi is called so because of the refrain at the end of each one of the thirty hymns. This refrain is usually interpreted as calling the help of the Divine Mother Kātyāyani for whom this *vrata* or observance is made for securing one's adorable person as husband.

These hymns are sung in the month of *Mārgaśirṣa*,† a month most sacred for an observance. Young unmarried

* Godā is also known as Āṇḍāl. Godā means giver of cows, of light, illuminations, and revelations. This is an ancient name of Śrīdevi. Godā is said to be an incarnation of her or Bhūdevi.

** Tiruppāvāi has been translated into English by several persons.

† *Mārgaśirṣa* is said to be the most beloved of Śrī Kṛṣṇa *māsānām mārgaśirṣo'ham. Brāhmī-muhūrta* of the year is said to be this month.

CHAPTER IX

ŚAṬHAKOPA

(Nammāḻvār)

Saint Śathakopa is held in the highest esteem as the Master Mystic of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism. He embodies the fullest mystical excellences and his experiences are of the highest spiritual order. He was recognized as the *Kulapati* (Founder-Seer) of Śrī Vaiṣṇava theology. He is endearingly called Our Saint (Nammāḻvār).

The story of this great saint is that he was born of one Kari and he himself was known as Māran. As soon as he was born he was so absorbed in the contemplation of God that he was not given to taking anything, but soon took up residence under a tamarind tree and remained there. His effulgence spread far and was seen by his foremost disciple Madhurakavi, who was on tour in the North. He hastened to the South following the direction of the effulgence. He reached the city of the Āḻvār and found that the effulgence radiated from the person seated under the tamarind tree. The saint was absorbed and was seen to take no food or water; nor would he talk. So Madhurakavi standing humbly before him put him a question: "If a soul is born of matter what does it eat and where does it rest?" The saint immediately replied, "It eats That and There it rests."* Thus Madhurakavi discovered that the Āḻvār was eating the Divine (spoken of by the *Upaniṣads* as the Food of the mystics) and was living in the Godhead even though he had taken birth in the mortal body (*śettatin vayarrir*). This meant

* *Śettatin vayarrir siriyadu pirandāl ettaittinruenge kidakkum? Attaittinru ange kidakkum,"* said Nammāḻvār. Attai refers to God, That, not to 'this' the mortal body (*acit*) or *prakriti*. cf. My article in Golden Jubilee Number of Śrī Ramaṇa, 1949 pp. 233-4.

CHAPTER X

MADHURAKAVI

With St. Śathakopa South Indian mysticism reaches its highest point of expression in the language of intuition and vision.

The noblest of souls seem to have experienced the heights of spiritual truths owing to their work among the people spreading the love of God and awakening men to their high destiny. Religion seems to have become once again the sheet-anchor of human conduct, and all aspired for the direct experience of God. It is obviously one of the glorious events that led the poetic Madhurakavi or the Kavi of Madhura or the sweet-tongued poet to the feet of St. Śathakopa. Having seen the effulgence of St. Śathakopa from afar he wended his way to the source of the effulgence and reached the tamarind tree under which the saint was seated in absorption. Having put him a direct question seeking information as to what that saint was living by and where he is residing or resting he learnt that St. Śathakopa was eating God (enjoying God as his food) and resting in God.* This profound truth made Madhurakavi choose St. Śathakopa as his *guru*.

He learnt all the hymns of the great saint and followed the method of *bhakti* and *prapatti*, and is said to have reached a very high stage equivalent to that of the other Āḻvārs. The traditional accounts include him among the Āḻvārs though with a difference. While all other Āḻvārs enjoyed the Mystic Vision of God and His infinite auspicious attributes, Madhurakavi sang about the glory of

* This incident is mentioned under Āḻvār St. Śathakopa.

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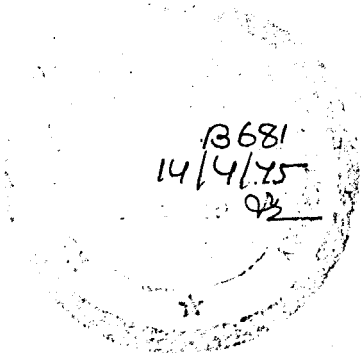

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