

Hymns of Alvars and Nayanmars and Their Relevance

Jaya Verma¹ • Rajiv Kumar Verma²

¹Associate Professor, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar College, University of Delhi, Delhi

²Associate Professor, Satyawati College (Eve.), University of Delhi, Delhi

Email Id: drrajivverma@hotmail.com

Abstract. Religion Played a Predominant role in Medieval India society. 'Religious Reform Movements' of India are different from those that the history of mankind had witnessed elsewhere. 'Religion' in India unquestionably served as a 'Social-force'. Forces of social - stability established themselves ultimately to score a victory over divisive and reactionary rays that the 'Movement' had generated. Need to illustrate this unique characteristic in historic perspective is obvious. The era that witnessed the Movement, gave birth to a new orientation to the south towards this end was in the shape of Bhakti Cult. It should be noted that the Movement did not stand to propagate any extraordinary or new religious beliefs and dogmas to their followers. The activities were confined to the frame-work of already established dogmas and doctrines. The role of the Movement could be better understood in the sense only i.e. to treat Religion (Movement) as a Social force.

The cult of Bhakti took its birth in the form of a 'Movement' in the Tamil country. The Movement has in its genesis the worship of the Gods Shiva and Vishnu. Saiva and Vaishnava saints of the South developed the 'Cult' considerably. The Saiva saints (Nayanmars) and the Vaishnava saints (Alvars) cause profound changes in religion. The Bhakti Literature "Tevaram" and "Prabandam" gives evidence of the development of Agamas (Shastraic Literature) which lie at the root of the temple-worship and is a direct product of the Devotional cult.

The Bhakti Movement is essentially a reform-mist Movement. Judged by the results, the Movement had profound influence on social behaviour and economic realignment. The ascetics and scholar saints devoted their lives in the service of their fellow brethren and the success of each in his mission was in direct proportion to the respect that he commanded from his followers. Their untiring efforts converted the Bhakti Cult into a forceful reform-movement which engulfed entire Tamilakam. Tamil Bhakti-Movement is primarily a religious phenomenon. The theistic system of Bhakti consists in the worship of a personal God who is the creator and Lord of the Universe. Devotion to Him is the best way to attain salvation or release from the everlasting cycle of births and deaths. The period of five Centuries commencing with A.D. 500 may be generally characterised as an "Age of Religious Revival." This awakening did not stop the progress of literature and arts. Temple-architecture was developed to a wonderfully high degree of perfection. The cave-temples of the Pallavas in Mahabalipuram in the present Chingleput district are a prominent style of architecture of this period. Such developments are clearly discernible in the works of the Nayanmars and Alvars. These hymns are sacred and take the rank of the Vedas. The present Paper will revisit the hymns of Alvars and Nayanmars and evaluate their relevance.

Keywords: Tamilakam, Social-force, Social – stability, Hymns, Alvars, Nayanmars, Tevaram, Prabandam.

From a Marxian perspective, religion, as a part of the superstructure of society, is shaped ultimately by the infrastructure i.e. economic factors. However, Max Weber rejects the view that religion is always shaped by economic factors. In his famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the spirit of Capitalism*, Weber examines the relationship between the rise of certain forms of Protestantism and the development of Western Industrial capitalism. Weber illustrates the spirit of capitalism with quotes from two books by Benjamin Franklin.¹ Franklin writes, 'Remember that time is money. Time wasting, idleness and diversion lose money. Remember that credit is money. A reputation for prudence and honesty will bring credit as will paying debts on time. A businessman should behave with industry and frugality and punctuality and justice in all his dealings.' At the same time another scholar Robert Bellah² believes that due to the emergence of new religious movements, the priorities would shift away from endless accumulation of wealth and power to greater concern for harmony with nature and between human beings. He concludes, 'It may be however that only the implementation of a utopian vision, a holistic reason that unites subjectivity and objectivity, will make human life in the twenty-first century worth living.' In this background, it will be interesting to unravel the connection between Buddhist ethics and capitalism i.e. Buddhist Economics leading to a new approach to Entrepreneurship in this age of Globalization with particular reference to India and Japan. Furthermore, an attempt will be made to discuss the shift from endless accumulation of wealth [i.e. capitalism] to greater concern for harmony with nature and between human beings.

Tamil Bhakti-Movement is primarily a religious phenomenon. The theistic system of Bhakti consists in the worship of a personal God who is the creator and Lord of the Universe. Devotion to Him is the best way to attain salvation or release from the everlasting cycle of births and deaths and as such cognizable as a system in an age of religious ferment. The period of five centuries commencing with A.D. 500 may be generally characterized as an "Age of Religious Revival." This awakening did not stop the progress of literature and arts. Temple-architecture was developed to a wonderfully high degree of perfection. The cave-temples of the Pallavas in Mahabalipuram in the present Chingleput district are a prominent style of architecture of this period.

Such developments are clearly discernible in the works of the Nayanmars and Alvars. These hymns are sacred and take the rank of the Vedas. In an Inscription of Narasimha-varman I,

the Pallava King, the expression "Tiruppathikarnpadi"¹, it is claimed that the reference is to the singing of the Tevaram hymns.² The claim is substantiated since the time of Rajaraja I we have explicit references to what is called "Muvarvanakkam" celebrating the Tevaram Trio. A temple is also dedicated to Manikkavasakar (Vadavurar) in Tirupperunturai (modern Auvudaiyarkil twenty miles to the south of Pudukkottai town).

The Saiva devotional literature is designated as Tirumurai of which as many as eleven are distinguished.³ The compilation was by Nambi Andar Nambi assigned to the eleventh century A.D. Of these collections the first three are attributed to Sambandar, The next four to Appar and Sundarar and the eighth to Manikkavasakar. "Tirukkovai" was a later addition to the eighth Tirumurai. The Eleventh Tirumurai consists of hymns sung by many devotees some of whom flourished in the period before the Tevaram Trio, and others after. It has been held that the division into eleven Tirumurais was made during the reign of Rajaraja I⁴. The consensus of critical opinion dates it to the early years of the reign of Rajaraja I who had the title of "Sivapathasekaran". This is a religious designation (One who has the feet of Siva on his crest). Epigraphy suggests that the king earned titles of Rajaraja' and 'Sivapathasekara' in the period between the eighteenth and twenty-first year of his reign.⁵

The Tevaram Trio consisting of four Samayacharyas, preached and practised a new kind of dynamic Saivism based upon Bhakti rejecting the Saivite cults such as those of Pasupatas, Kapalikas, Mavratas and other minor sects which were holding the field in their time and which continued later in some stray pockets. Similarly the Alvars preached practically a new kind of Vaishnavism, drawing inspiration from the principal avatars of Vishnu and the Itihasic and Puranic literature on them. Both the Nayanmars and Alvars devoted to the Vedas and Agamas embedded in the Sanskrit language emphasized Bhakti and devotion to God expressed in one's own language. They wrote in Tamil, by deliberate choice, with a view to elevate it in sanctity

¹South Indian Inscriptions : III part I, P 93.

²Another view is that the "Pathikams" may be the composition of Court - poets.

³Supra; Chapter I

⁴S. Somasundara Desikar: SaivasikamanikalIruvar (Tamil) (Madras, 1952) P32 ff K.A. NilakantaSastri: The ColasMadras, 1955, P. 180.

⁵SII : Volume II: Introduction, pp 13-14

and make it a suitable medium for the Bhaktas to approach God and pour out their inner longings to Him.

The protagonists of the Movement are all historical personages. Their moving and musical language roused the people to have faith in the Supreme God of their respective faiths, realize the sanctity of the temples in which the idols had been consecrated through Vedic mantras and Agamic rites and to worship them and surrender themselves to them. Their dynamism came into conflict with Jainism and Buddhism⁶. These two 'non-vedic' religions were ultimately worsted in the Seventh century A.D. The 'Saivite and Vaishnavite Bhakti saints proclaimed that all were children of God and equal in His eye provided they showed unstinted devotion to the Supreme God of their respective faiths; could aspire for salvation. The best way to God was to serve His devotees with zeal and reverence. They spread a religion of love and service. It contributed to a sense of equality of all, but this was restricted to the field of each religious sect.

The hagiology of Saivism and Vaishnavism comprises the lives of saints hailing from various sections of society. Tirujnanasambandar has sung of the hunter devotee Kannappar with reverent admiration. Nammalvar the greatest of the Alvars and Tirumankai held in reverence next to him were not brahmins. The lives of Nandanar among the Nayanmars and Tiruppanar among the Alvars belong to those of the lowest caste. The Vaishnava hagiology gives the moving story of Maraner Nambi, a panchama saint. Peria Nambi, one of the gurus of Ramanuja served him with loving devotion. Appar has a famous stanza wherein he states "Even if we get rule over Heaven and Earth along with the twin treasure of 'Sanka and Paduma, they will not last, if we are not single minded devotees of the great Lord (Siva)⁷. Nammalvar goes a step farther when he sings "we revere those who serve the devotees, who have surrendered to the Lord who holds the discus in his right hand" (Vishnu).⁸

V. Kanakasabhai feels that the Bhakti Movement is a byproduct of the Aryanising or sanskritising influence.⁹ To quote him "A study of Bhakti-movement suggests that it had its

⁶S.K,Aiyangar: Op.Cit.,P.232.

⁷Tevaram: Appar – 6.73.2

⁸Tiruvoimoli : 3.7.2.

⁹The Tamils Eighteen-hundred years ago: op.cit P.10

origin on the East-Coast, in and around such famous temples as Tiruppathi and Kanchi the seat of Tirumal or Vishnu... .Tiruppathi otherwise known as Venkatam was ruled by Pulli during the Sangam days, probably an ancestor of the Pallavas, who seems to have used a Sanskritic tribal name as their dynastic title." The claim that Pulli of Venkatam is an ancestor of the Pallavas can be set aside in the light of later researches on the origins of the Pallavas of Kanchi.¹⁰ M.G.S. Narayanan has very legitimate evidences to counter the claims of Kanakasabhai¹¹.

An attempt to trace the places visited by the hymnists gives positive clues of the Movement in space and time and has been attempted. Sanskrit Puranas and the Tamil Periyapuram point to the south as the "home of devotion in Kaliyuga".¹² The impression that we derive from the Tamil words for God and Temple, is the same. Kannappar, the "Ornament of Nagakula", Chandi the brahmin boy, one of the "panchamurtis", Pey the terrible chetty sage and Mular the Yogi of Saththanur belong to a very early period. Obviously Bhakti in the Tamilland had been first popular outside the brahmanical caste. There being no caste distinction, the "Aryan Vaidic influence' cannot be traced. The "Unaryan Religion" strengthened by the Buddhist continued the idea of the "Community of the Faithful" in which even the Panchama castes had its representatives.¹³ It is significant that only in the Tamil country such a galaxy of 'Saiva and Vaishnava devotees drawn mainly from non brahmanical orders are found right from early centuries. Notions of 'Equality' and 'Devotion to God' seem to be peculiarly and distinctly Southern.

The 'Tevaram' is a valuable source for history, but unfortunately contains only few dynastic references.¹⁴ It is a genuine document as its history can be traced back without a break to the age of Nambi (10th Century A.D.) and before it to the age of Sundarar (9th Century A.D.)

¹⁰C. Meenakshi: Administration and Social life under the Pallavas (Madras 1938 Passim). K.A. Nilakantasastry: A, History of South India. op. cit. Chapter on Pallavas.

¹¹M.G.S. Narayanan: Bhakti-Movement in-. South India (Indian Movements. Some aspects of Dissent. Protest and Reform(ed) S.C. Malik. Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Simla.1978) pp 36-37 .

¹²S.K. Aryangar: Vaishnavism in South India (Madras) Pp 8-11.

¹³Brahmans 16; Kings 6; Chieftains 5; Vaisyas 5 Vellalas 13; Shepherds 2; Other lower castes 9 (includes Washerman 1, Potter 1, Oil Monger 1, hunter 1, Weaver 1, Toddy Tapper 1 and AdiDravidas 2). The list is compiled on the basis of information in Periya-puranam of Sekkilar.

¹⁴P. Sundaram Pillai and Venkayya fix the date of 'Sambandhar in the middle of the 7th Century A.D. ShamaSastri makes it as Eighth century. Tamilian Antiquary. Volume I No.3 Proceedings of the Oriental Conference (1924) P.233

who mentions the hymning activities of the first two.¹⁵ While the hymns were sung they were written down in palm-leaves.¹⁶ They were probably collected and deposited in the temple at Chidambaram (Tillai). Tradition is strong and emphatic on the point that some hymns were irretrievably lost. Tradition also indirectly confirms here and there that Appar was a contemporary of Sambandhar.¹⁷ The references are to Chola and Pandya Kings. Sekkilar mentions Siruttonda as a Pallava-Commander who captured, burnt and plundered Vatapi.¹⁸ The boy saint Sambandar refers to a combination of the three Tamil Kings and friendliness among them.¹⁹ A contemporary king ruling in and around Sirkali, obviously a Chola is said by Sambandar to "rule among friends" meaning thereby that the neighboring Kings were friendly to him.²⁰ Sambandar converted Kun Pandya and he calls himself so before Mangayarkarasi, the queen of Kun.²¹

In a hymn on Mukkesvaram he calls the Pandya ruler of Uraiur and Vanchi too.²² There is a hymn on Brahmapuram (Sirkali)²³. It gives the names of a number of kings who ruled over Sirkali and the neighbouring parts. The most interesting figure in the list is a Chola who lived in the homeland a scion of the branch that ruled in Cuddapah. Such internal references from the Hymnal literature would suffice to counter the claims of Kanakasabhai.

M.G.S. Narayanan refers to certain "parallel and related developments"²⁴ He also observes that "one gets the impression that Bhakti as a distinctive movement had indeed manifested itself" in the North. According to him "it must have probably originated in the post-Mauryan period."²⁵ He suggests that it took roots in the Tamil soil by creating its own mythology

¹⁵VII 73, Puhkur; vii 83. Kolakka; vii 1.6. Ninravur

¹⁶iii. 42, 141

¹⁷Srinivasa Pillai: Tamil Varalaru (Tamil) Part-II (Tanjore. 1923)

¹⁸Periapuranam iii.

¹⁹i. 153; Mukkeesvaram

²⁰I, 80-Brahmapuram

²¹ii 50; Alavoi

²²ii, 153 Mukkeesvaram

²³J. 79-80

²⁴*Bhakti Movement in South India* : op.cit, Pp 37-38

²⁵Ibid: P.39

and legends'.²⁶ These views however appear to be over-drawn generalizations. It had already been indicated that the ideology in Tamilakam could be traced back to the Sangam epoch, the earliest known period of Tamil history.²⁷ It is therefore necessary to draw attention to certain characteristics of the Movement to affirm its genesis in the south (Tamilnadu).

In the North, as religion played the premier role in all walks of their life, the supremacy of brahmins in socio-cultural fields was total. It implied ipso facto, the dominance of the priestly class over the entire religious organisation of the Hindus. Alberuni tells us that the Vaisyas were treated just like Sudras in the beginning of the eleventh century.²⁸ Alberuni lists eight "Antyaja" castes below the status of the Sudras; they were "the weaver, the shoe-maker, the juggler the basket-maker, the sailor, the fisherman, the hunter of wild animals and the blacksmith". All those who did not fit into any of the above mentioned castes were simply classed as the out-castes or the Chandalas.²⁹ The actual services rendered by the priestly community for the privileges they enjoyed were rather of a negative character. The social atmosphere had been so sickening that it depressed and demoralized even the most intelligent and well to do householders. This situation is in sharp contrast to the situation in the South, pictured in hymnal literature.³⁰

A. Velu pillai observes as follows "That impact of the Aryans on the Tamils of the Sangam age was not violent as the Andhras or Karnatakas were the northern neighbours who received the jolt as shock – absorbers first. Yet the spread of the Agastya legend and the stay of the sage not in the Chola or Chera country but in the far south Pandya country in the Pothikai mountain in the Western Ghats is a point to be pondered."³¹ With Agastya, brahmanical culture spread, Brahmin as a caste was an "Aryan gift"- not the concept but the individual.³² N. Subrahmanian is emphatic that the Vadamas (a branch of Brahmins of Tamil Nadu) were

²⁶Ibid: P.41

²⁷Supra J Chapter I

²⁸Alberuni's India (Sachau) I. Ch. II

²⁹Ibid: IChLXVII

³⁰Supra: Same chapter

³¹A. Velu Pillai: Tamil IlakkiiyatilKalamum, Karuththum (Tamil) ; Madras , II end. 1978. PP- 13-14

³²N. Subrahmanian : Sangam Polity (Madurai, 1980) P. 46

North Indian Brahmins.³³ T.V. Kuppaswami has the following observation to make in the context "Racial theories built on the slender evidences... are accidental and do not taken as indicating Northern India" (Aryavarta)³⁴ N. Subrahmanian observes

"The brahmin of Tamilnadu is a veritable sociological problem with the process of Aryanisation spreading over India – certain people in South-India became brahmins".³⁵ It should also be noted that Kshatriya warriors or Vaisya traders are not included in the emigrant list. Such observations indicate that unlike in the North, the Southern brahmins did not hold the honour of indispensable priesthood.

Religion is not merely the collection of Faith. It has its roots deeply watered by social relations governed by Sastraic injunctions and had economic stakes too. As such we are interested in the course that religion took and not in its core. As the literature of Hindu scriptures are in Sanskrit, we need not say that the Hindu religion is the religion of Aryan culture as Sanskrit was widely used in metaphysical speculations by almost all sections of the people. 'Saiva Siddhanta' embeds north-Indian influences. Puranic works consider Bhakti as a "Female child born in Tamilnadu and became very old when she reached Gujarat".³⁶

Logically establishing the religious truths might have been first undertaken by the Buddhists and Jains. It was subsequently adopted by the Hindu savants too. As days rolled on, the intellectual participation gave place to Bhakti movement of expertise and esoteric knowledge. It was perhaps intended to be a social reform movement. The Alvars and Nayanmars did not openly proclaim that they will reform the society. Nor is it a Reformation. "It was an escape spiritually speaking, of certain God-conscious and God-saturated individuals who gave vent to their ecstatic excess through their lyrical out-pourings in the language of the people; by accident it captured large masses of people."³⁷ The development of the Bhakti cult saw the emergence of "Shiva brahmins". 'Saiva-Siddhanta' is not the monopoly of the Tamils. It is of all-India validity. As early as the Fifth century A.D., there were Saivite saints on the banks of the Godavari around Mantraleswara temple. In the West at the Somanath temple Laukalisapandit a

³³Ibid P.47

³⁴T.V. Kuppaswami :Sangam Chieftains and their times.(Thanjavur 1984) P. 141.

³⁵N. Subrahmanian:...op.cit, Pp 267-268.

³⁶T.P. Meenakshisundaran: Tamilumpirapanpatum (Tamil) (Annamalal 1978)...P.18

³⁷R. Rajalakshmi: Tamil Polity (Madurai 1983) P.164.

established mutts. The Chalukyas after initiation took pride in calling themselves Paramamahesvaras. Bhakti hymns tried to equate the Tamil-language to that of Sanskrit and not vice-versa.³⁸ At the time of the composition of "Periyapuranam" by Sekkilar, Saivism monopolised royal patronage. Sivacharyas ascended the social ladder. Rajagurus of the Cholas were not Vedic brahmins but the Sivacharyas.

A peep into the past of the ocean of Bhakti-movement would reveal three waves strengthening the bonds of popular Hinduism. The earliest wave spread from Kanchipuram, the second wave from Kaladi and the third wave was spear-headed by Ramanuja, with the result that the heterodox religions lost ground. Towards the later half of the Chola-period 'Saiva-Siddhanta' appeared in Tamil from Chidambaram (Tillai). The roots, it must be remembered are stretched in the Bhakti-movement of the Pallava period and in the temple administration of the Cholas.³⁹ Saivite compilation came after the Vaishnavite compilation of canonical literature by Nathamuni, the ideological stand taken by Sankara and Vaishnavite Siddhanta: of Ramanuja. The non-brahmin mutts that arose gave valuable support to Saiva Siddhanta. It assumed the pro-Vellala tilt and at times anti - brahmanical stand by opposing the Advaita of Sankara.

Ramanuja's name stands foremost in the development of Vaishnavism. Vaishnavism had also gone through the mill of the Bhakti cult. N. Jagadeesan repeats the doubt raised by K.A. Nilakanta Sastri when he says that we have lost the link between the years of the Bhakti movement and establishment of mutts, as well as the movements in the North and South.⁴⁰ It is just possible that in the Tamil country, the Movement was independent of the North though not perhaps absolutely. Jagadeesan had drawn a chart of caste/country composition of Alvars.⁴¹ Three are from Tondaimandalam, Five from Pandya-country, two from Chola country and two from Chera. Among the ranks are Kings, Chieftains as well as a Panchama. The verses of the Alvars were collected by Nathamuni. Tamil Prabandams and Sanskrit Geeta were equally

³⁸Ibid: Pp. 71-72.

³⁹K. Sivathambi :TinaikkotpattinSamooahaAtippataikal (Tamil (Aroichi. July 1971) p. 116

⁴⁰N. Jagadeesan: History of Srivaishnavism in the Tamil- country . (Koodal Publications, Madurai 1977) p. 8

⁴¹Ibid: Pp . 290

respected and the foundation for union was laid by Ramanuja.⁴²Ramanuja's reforms of the temple-administration of Srirangam is remarkable and his introduction of Vaikanasa at Tiruppathi is significant.⁴³ Another significant difference is in the content. In Saivite-literature , the Lover-fiance is minimum whereas Vaishnavite-literature abounds in Nayaka-Nayaki Bhava.

Cases of Saiva-Vaishnava conflict are not wanting. The inscription of the fourteenth regnal year of Rajaraja II refers to the Mahesvaras who mingle freely with the Vaishnavas were censured.⁴⁴N. Jagadeesan refers to the persecution of Ramanuja and concludes that there is no serious tradition or well attested literary evidence to believe that Ramanuja was persecuted.⁴⁵ Quoting T .A. Gopinatha Rao, Jagadeesan says that the hatred of the King was personal and not sectarian.

The evidences, particularly those provided by hymnical-literature bring out the unique character of the early phase of the Bhakti movement. The Alvars and Nayanmars are progressive but not revolutionary. The emergence of early Alvars like Pey and Butham is shrouded in mystery though the Vaishnavites pay homage to them. But here epigraphic references come to our rescue.⁴⁶ K. S. Goswami points out that Vaishnavism had an easy access into the family of the Pallava kings of Kanchipuram. Charudevi, the wife of Yuvamaharaja Sivaskanthavarman in the reign of Vijayaskantha-varman of the Pallava dynasty made a gift of four Nivaratanas of land to Lord Narayana installed in the temple of Kulimabattarka for the increase of their life and death.⁴⁷ This reference proves that although Vedic rites and sacrifices are stated to have been performed by the members of the royal family of the Pallavas of Kanchipuram, some female members too were devoted to the cult of the God Vasudeva in about the fourth Century A.D. South-India is the home of the Bhakti movement. Despite hurdles in determining chronological Sequence of events, the claim of Tamil savants as pioneers of the Movement can hardly be disputed.

⁴²Ibid P.11

⁴³Ibid : p.13

⁴⁴257 of 1924-25

⁴⁵N. Jagadeesan: Op. cit. p. 290

⁴⁶Rithpur Copper- plates of Prabavati Gupta.

⁴⁷K.S. Goswami: A Study of Vaishnavism (Calcutta 1956) P.32