

NAMMALWAR

A SKETCH OF HIS LIFE AND TEACHINGS



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NAMMALWAR.

 F the several cults that have arisen within Hinduism, the one that has had a most valuable history and that, in many forms, still claims a most influential following in India, is Vaishnavism. Along with the sister cult of Saivism, Vaishnavism took its rise in the early centuries of the Christian era. It underwent many changes and assumed many forms during the course of centuries ; but it still retains in form and doctrine the impress which was given to it in the days of the Gupta rule when the great epics dealing with Vaishnavite myth and story were written or re-edited and the Puranas were composed. The history of Vaishnavism in North India does not concern us here ; but a few words on its advent and growth in South India are necessary to a right understanding of the poetry and achievement of the great Tamil mystic, Nammalwar, the subject of this sketch.

VAISHNAVISM IN SOUTH INDIA

We have already in the sketch of *Appar* dealt with the religious condition of South India in the early centuries of the Christian

era. We saw how the field was occupied by the two classic heretical faiths—Jainism and Buddhism, and how Saivism on its arrival set itself against them and in the end drove them out. Vaishnavism too had a similar task before it in South India. Soon after its arrival, it ranged itself alongside Saivism and helped in uprooting the Jain and Buddhistic faiths.

Vaishnavism, however, we find, spread and grew in influence in South India many generations earlier than Saivism; for the best Tamil Vaishnavite poetry and Vaishnavite art are clearly older than the corresponding Saivite poetry and Saivite art. The earlier among the Alwars, or the Tamil singers of Vaishnavism, flourished long before the Pallavas and the Cholas came into prominence and power, and had therefore little royal support. The days of the later Alwars however coincide with the days of the supremacy of the Pallavas some of whom were great patrons of Vaishnavism; and though the story of Thirumalisai reveals some persecution, that of Thirumangai, the last of the Alwars, shows their support and protection. When the Pallavas fell, the Cholas obtained supremacy over the whole of South India; and, being Saivites, they often persecuted men of Vaishnavite faith. But before the Chola persecution

began, Vaishnavism had become well-established in South India ; a great vernacular literature had grown and an apostolic seat of great fame and learning had been established at Srirangam, near Uraiyur. The persecution only drove Vaishnavism for a time to other lands where it secured fresh converts, and thereby became the religion of many non-Tamil-speaking communities—an achievement which far surpasses any of Tamil Saivism. Tamil Vaishnavism also developed new schools of philosophic thought and religious reform which exercised in the end an all-Indian influence.

THE ALWARS AND THE ACHARYAS

The history of Vaishnavism in South India can be divided into two periods—those of the Alwars and of the Acharyas. The Alwars, or mystics “sunk in the sea of Divine Love,” were those early poets, twelve in number, who were born at various places and lived at different times and whose poems were collected in latter days into a Vaishnavite Church-litany, entitled the *Prabhandham*. Though their individual dates cannot be ascertained, yet the age in which they flourished can be roughly defined as extending from the 4th or 5th century A. D. to the 8th century. And then for two centuries there is a gap in Vaishnavite history, till Nathamuni,

the first of the apostles or Acharyas, appears in the tenth century. Tradition would seem to represent the Acharyas as having succeeded the Alwars in unbroken continuity, but recent research has established otherwise.

The Acharyas or Preceptors were those who occupied the apostolic seat at Srirangam, and in later times included the many spiritual and ecclesiastical heads that arose in various parts of the Tamil land. The greatest among them, and those most honoured for their contribution to Vaishnavite thought and literature, are those from Nathamuni down to Vedanta Desika and Manavala Mahamuni to the latter of whom are to be traced the two sects between which the Tamil Vaishnavas are at present divided. Unlike the Alwars who were unassuming bards and lived a life of quietitude and mystical intuition, the Acharyas who succeeded them were a great deal in the nature of teachers and apostles who expounded the secrets of Vaishnavite doctrine to the learned, and, being erudite scholars and thinkers, propounded new concepts of Vaishnavite philosophy and religion. One of them, Ramanuja, sixth in succession from Nathamuni, became more eminent than the rest and propounded a theistic system of philosophy which has exerted remarkable influence all over India. The lives

of the Acharyas as well as of the Alwars are found in traditional chronicles in Tamil called *Guruparamparais* which exist in various versions. The lives and works of the most prominent among the Acharyas are dealt with in a small English work by Mr. T. Rajagopalachariar, entitled *The Vaishnavite Reformers of India* (Published by G. A. Natesan and Co.).

THE ALWARS

The Alwars, among whom by universal acceptance Nammalwar the subject of the sketch is the greatest, deserve to be treated in detail. "They can," writes Professor Krishnaswami Aiyangar, "be collected into three groups according to the traditional accounts—the ancient, the middle and the last.

Ancient.

| | | |
|-------------------|------|-------|
| Poygai Alwar | 4203 | B. C. |
| Bhuthattalwar | 4203 | " |
| Pey Alwar | 4203 | " |
| Tirumalisai Alwar | 4203 | " |

Middle.

| | | |
|-------------------|------|-------|
| Nammalwar | 3102 | B. C. |
| Madhurakavi Alwar | 3102 | " |
| Kulasekhara Alwar | 3075 | " |
| Peri Alwar | 3056 | " |
| Andal | 3005 | " |

Last.

| | | |
|----------------------|------|-------|
| Tondaradippodi Alwar | 2814 | B. C. |
| Tiruppan Alwar | 2760 | „ |
| Tirumangai Alwar | 2706 | „ |

Disregarding these apparently definite dates, in which however most Tamil works, particularly those of a religious character, are peculiarly weak, it is still possible to regard this traditional order as fairly in chronological sequence. Even the Vaishnava hagio-logists have very little to say about the first group. Their information about the second is meagre, while of the third they have something to say that may be historical.”

The first three Alwars in the first group—Poygai, Bhuthattalwar and Pey Alwar—move in the accounts before us in a sort of half-mythical light, and nothing about them can be known with certainty except their places of birth. A curious story is told of how these three Alwars—perhaps they were contemporaries—met together on a stormy night beneath a thatched shed at Thirukkovilur and there embarked on a mysterious discourse. When the three Alwars stood thus confined within the shed, God Vishnu himself, we are told, made his appearance among them in bodily form. The Alwars, perhaps inconvenienced at the incommodious

presence of a fourth person, tried to know who the intruder was; when lo! to their vision there rose the divine form of their God Vishnu himself. Inspired by the vision, they composed, we are told, each a hundred stanzas in *Venba* metre, being those which still stand in the respective names of these Alvars in the *Prabhandham* collection. Whatever be their origin, these verses are good specimens of early Vaishnava poetry and discover a good deal of mystical intuition and love. The rich legends of Vaishnavite mythology are largely drawn upon and form the main theme of these verses.

The next in chronological sequence is Thirumalisai Alwar. His story, as given in the chronicles, is exceedingly legendary, and little of historical value can be gleaned from it. He was born at Thirumalisai by the name of which village the Alwar is still known to the world. He was perhaps a foundling and was brought up by one Thiruvadan and his wife Pangayachchelviar. He had a disciple or follower, belonging to the Sudra caste, by name Kanikannan. He was well read in the Vedas and Vaishnavite scriptures and, if we may believe a traditional stanza, he had studied other current religions—Jainism, Buddhism, and Saivism—and adopted the Vaishnavite faith as he found it

superior to them all. He seems to have come under the notice of the contemporary Pallava king with whom he or his disciple had some quarrel, as a result of which both master and disciple were forced to go into exile. By a strange miracle, however, their holiness was brought home to the Pallava King, and he at last requested them to stay in their places towards the end of his life. Thirumalisai Alwar travelled southwards, and visited Chidambaram and Kudanthai (modern Kumbakonam, Tanjore Dt.) Tradition invests the Alwar with a very long life running into hundreds of years; but, as we find nothing in the accounts after the saint's visit to Kumbakonam, we may surmise that the saint breathed his last there. The stanzas of Thirumalisai Alwar are some two hundred in number, half in *vrittam* and half in *venba* metre. In style and matter, they can be grouped with the three hundred stanzas of the first three Alwars already dealt with.

Coming to the second group, the chief names therein are those of Nammalwar, Kulasekhara Alwar, Periyalwar and his daughter Andal. Nammalwar is dealt with in the sketch.

Kulasekhara Alwar was born a king at Kolli in Travancore. His father's name was

Dridavratha. He should have been well read in Sanskrit as well as in Tamil, for, besides the ten poems in Tamil found in the *Prabhandam*, he has also left a Sanskrit poem in praise of Vishnu entitled *Mukundamala*. Tradition tells us that, towards the end of his life, disgusted with his worldly surroundings, he abdicated his throne and went and spent his days at Srirangam. The poems of Kulasekhara Alwar, ten in number, are all well written and contain a good deal of learning and poetry. One or two of them have become exceedingly popular and are household songs among the Tamil Vaishnavites; like the one beginning—
 “Give whatever ills Thou canst, O Lord;
 Without Thy feet I know of no other refuge;
 Though the mother that did beget the child
 do throw it away from her in momentary
 anger,

The child doth think only on her love and weep—even so am I, O Lord.”

Periyalwar, the other Alwar belonging to this group, was born at Strivilliputtur (Madura District). He was a Brahmin by birth; his parents were called Mukundachariar and Padumaiyar, the saint's own original name being Vishnuchitta. Periyalwar had perhaps no very great learning in the beginning of his life, as we may infer from the

legend of God's equipping him with learning and knowledge when he went out for the tournament of learned men at the Pandyan Court. Therefore a poor Brahmin by birth and without much learning, he devoted himself to the keeping of a little garden and making flower-garlands for the deity in the local temple of Strivilliputtur. A very curious legend connects the birth of Andal, the wonderful girl-mystic and professedly the daughter of Periyalwar, with this garden-life of Periyalwar, by saying that, while the latter was one day digging round a basil-plant, a child miraculously appeared which grew into the gifted Andal.

The only episode found in the life of Periyalwar is the one in which he is said to have won a victory over the learned men of the time assembled for religious dispute in the Pandyan Court. The King who convened the assembly is called Vallabha Deva in the Vaishnava chronicles. Desirous to know the high truths of religion, he sent for all the learned men of his realm and set apart a prize, consisting of a sum of money, to be given to him among the learned, whose knowledge and learning could set out the highest truths. Periyalwar had at first no mind to attend the assembly ; but receiving in a dream in the night a commission from the local deity

itself, he went, devoid of learning though he was, and sat in the assembly. The God that had sent him to the Court now filled his tongue with learning and eloquence; and the simple Brahmin of Strivilliputtur was, to his own surprise, hailed by the King and the assembly as the chief of the learned and the winner of the prize. Vishnuchitta was also honoured with the title of *Bhattarpiran*. The devout Vishnuchitta returned after some time to his native village of Strivilliputtur; and there giving away the wealth, that he got as a reward in the Pandyan Court, to the deity of the temple, resumed his duties as a maker of garlands unto the deity.

The mysterious birth of Andal has been already adverted to. Periyalwar brought her up very lovingly and it was perhaps from his lips that the gifted girl learnt the elements of Vaishnavite myth and legend. More than his words, those flower-garlands which he daily made seemed to have profoundly affected the mystical heart of Andal; for a curious story tells us that, attracted by the smell of those flowers, she wore those garlands in her own tresses before their transmission to the deity of the temple; and the devout Vishnuchitta, seeing Andal with the flowers on her head one day, grew

angry and was at last forced to acquiesce in her doings by the deity itself who, according to the accounts, was delighted at the girl's loving act of profanation. The story of Andal, mysterious from the beginning, ends also in mystery. Inquired on attaining womanhood if she would marry any, the story says, the girl-mystic replied: "She would marry none but the God Vishnu himself"; and the saintly parent, continues the legend, led her literally to the side of the deity at Srirangam, Vishnu's chief image on earth, and there the divine bride disappeared.

The songs of Andal, most of them covering not more than ten stanzas, are fifteen in number. They are some of the sweetest and most mystical songs in the entire Tamil Vanishnavite collection. All of them bespeak the same intense mystical desire to see and live in God. One of them, more remarkable than the rest—perhaps it was the one that gave rise to the curious legend mentioned last—celebrates a mystical marriage with God, a theme well known to religious poetry of all lands; beginning at first with somewhat concrete ideas, as the poem proceeds, in the eighth stanza, the veil is suddenly lifted and we hear:—
“Narayana, the friend, Our Lord,

*Our support in this and the several lives
to come,*

He did, with His sacred hands, take hold
of mine—”

Her mystical words and doings seem to have brought on her some social censure, but she disregarded it all and lived her life of devotion and mystical rapture.

“Leaving her father, mother and the rest of her kin, she goes her own solitary way. Such is the censure that has risen : I cannot live it down—Lo ! the Lord of Maya comes and His Form doth shine before my eyes.”

The poems of Periyalwar, under fifty in number, are full of Vaishnavite learning and metrical variety. The subject matter of the poems is purely descriptive, though one or two of them like the last one in the collection touches rare heights of mystical emotion :—

“Even as one would fill a pot with the nectar that flowed out of the ocean as it was churned,

Even so, with hungry soul and open mouth,
I have drunk of Thee, O Lord, and filled myself.

“Even as one, taking a piece of gold, rubs it on the touchstone till the golden streak appears,

Even so I have smeared my song with Thy name ;

Thee I have shrined in my heart and myself I have sunk in Thee ;

“ Thy glories without leaving a single one I have painted on my heart as on a wall.”

The age of the Alwars belonging to this second group may be put down, as will be seen later on, as the one extending from the fifth to the seventh centuries A. D.

The third group, according to the classification given above, consists of Tondaradipodi Alwar, a Brahmin, Thirappan Alwar, a Panchama (one outside the four castes) and Thirumangai Alwar, a profuse poet and one variously described as a Sudra and a Mlechcha.

There is very little to be found in the lives of the first two. Tondaradipodi was a temple servant in charge of the garden attached to the temple at Srirangam and, like Periyalwar, he daily gathered flowers and made garlands for the temple deity. If we may believe the story, Tondaradippodi was somewhat given to sensuous life and habits. The *Prabhandham* contains two poems in his name, the longer of them containing some

forty and odd stanzas. Some of the stanzas in that poem discover great religious yearning and even seem to sound a strange autobiographical note—

“I have no place to call mine own ; I own
no plot of land ; nor have I any kin ;
O Great God, I have not grasped Thy feet ;
O Cloud-dark One ! O Beautiful-Eyed ! I cry ;
Who is there to succour me ? O Dweller in
the city of Srirangam !”

Thiruppan Alwar was a Panchama born belonging to the city of Uraiyur. The story tells us that the saint, being a Panchama by birth, and forbidden from approaching the temple at Srirangam, daily took his stand on the southern bank of the river Kaveri, and, from there, *vina* in hand, sang and worshipped the deity of the temple lying on the northern bank. His piety was, it seems, at last recognised and he was taken into the temple. The elevation of Thiruppan Alwar to sainthood and the inclusion of his verses in the *Prabhandham* mark the noble catholicity of Tamil Vaishnavism.

Thirumangai Alwar, the last of the Alwars, has, along with Nammalwar, contributed the largest number of poems to the *Prabhandham*. His story however is the subject of many weird and conflicting legends. He was born at Thirukkuriyalur (Tanjore District), a

Mlechcha or Sudra by caste. He became a general under the Chola king against whom however he rebelled, and afterwards seems to have taken to the life of a freebooter. A sudden change however came over his life on his betrothal to a Vaishnava maiden whose influence led him into channels of piety and Vaishnavite learning. In latter days he seems to have come under the notice of the Pallava King. The cruelty of his earlier military and freebooting life was not without its effects even in latter days when he had become a Vaishnava preacher and poet. For we read that, when towards the close of his life he set about repairing and building the shrine at Srirangam, he, finding no wealth at his disposal, went and demolished a golden image of Buddha in a shrine at Negapatam (Tanjore District). From a decade in praise of the Paramesvaravinnagar at Kanchi found among the poems of Thirumangai Alwar, Professor Krishnaswami Aiyangar has established that the Alwar should have flourished in the first half of the eighth century A. D. In the poem in question, there are references to the achievements of a Pallava ruler whom the learned Professor identifies with the famous Nandivarman who ruled at Kanchi from 710 A. D. to 760 A. D.

The poems of Thirumangai, more than one

hundred in number are entitled *Peria Thirumoli* and cover a large portion of the *Prabhandham*. In matter and form these poems closely resemble those of the prolific Saivite poet, Sambhandhar. Full of legendary and descriptive matter, they often lack in those movements of mystical feeling or high spiritual thought which are found in poets who have left by far lesser works.

THE POETRY & INFLUENCE OF THE ALWARS

Some idea of the poetry of the various mystics, whom we have passed in review, may be gathered from the quotations from their poems already given. They cover a wide field, ranging from the simple plaintive songs of Tondaradippodi to the thought-laden odes of Nammalwar, from the polished poems of Kulasekhara Alwar to the mystical love-songs of Andal. But their individual value apart, these poems of the Tamil mystics form the first great utterance of a provincial people under purely Hinduistic influences. The songs of the Vaishnavite singers taken along with those of the contemporary Saivite poets—both considerably similar alike in their poetry and spiritual content—form the earliest and most remarkable religious poetry known to any Indian vernacular. Perhaps not so protestant in spirit and full of humane philosophy as the poems of the latter-day Hindi,

Marathi or Bengali poets, they are yet highly devotional and packed with philosophic thought and speculation. The poems of Appar and Nammalwar, the two greatest poets of the Saivite and Vaishnavite schools—both Vellalas and typical of the soil—form the high-water mark of this early mediæval Tamil poetry and sum up the great theistic faith of the early Mediæval Tamils. In the purity of their utterance, in their devotion and love, in their grasp of the profound Aryan concepts of Godhead and Soul, these Tamil poets remain one of the greatest schools of mystics India has known. Though somewhat theologic in form, the religion of these poets is not a crude worship of foreign and imported gods, but a sublime theism founded on strong philosophic concepts and spiritual experience.

The poetry of Nammalwar and other Vaishnava mystics, as distinguished from that of the Saivites, has had a special and historical part to play. For if we may believe the evidence afforded by the Tamil Vaishnava chronicles, the poetry of the Vaishnava mystics went a great deal to build up that special form of Theistic Philosophy which was later on preached by Ramanuja, and through him, became the religion of some of the most eminent North Indian reform-

ers in the Middle Ages. The main ideas in the religion of Ramanuja—the concept of a God endowed with attributes, the notions of Love and Self-surrender—were, the chronicles prove, derived from the utterances of Nammalwar and other mystics. (Vide the extracts given in *The Holy Wisdom of the Dravida Saints* by A. Govindacharyaswamin). Considered in this light, the lives and poetry of the Alwars assume a great importance, since the creed of Ramanuja, in the shaping of which they had a part, became the religion not only of a large part of South India but also the basis of some of the most eminent reformatory schools that arose in North India in the 16th and 17th centuries A. D.

We now proceed to give the life of Nammalwar as we find it in the *Tamil Guruparamparais*.

NAMMALWAR'S BIRTH AND PARENTAGE

Kariar, a Vellala, was an inhabitant of the town of Thirukkuruhur (Tinnevely District) on the banks of the Tambraparni. His ancestors were all ardent worshippers of Vishnu. He was married while young to Udaiyanangaiyar, daughter of the Vaishnava *sthanik* of the village of Thiruvananthapuram lying on the other side of the Ghats. Kariar and Udaiyanangaiyar had no children for a long time. Once when they were returning from

a visit to Thiruvananthapuram, they halted on the way at a Vaishnavite shrine in the village of Thirukkurungudi and prayed to the deity of the shrine for a son. Their prayers were heard and ere long Udaiyanangaiyar gave birth to a son.

THE CHILD NAMMALWAR

The child so born was however a strange one. It neither opened its eyes nor cried, nor sucked its mother's milk. The parents, seized with fear, took the child on the twelfth day after its birth to the local Vaishnavite shrine on the river-bank, and there hung a cradle in a tamarind tree near by and left the child therein, thinking it more fit, perhaps, that the strange child should be in the charge of the Deity. The child was named Maran. The child thus left, we are told, lived on, and even grew—without food or water—for some sixteen summers. The parents quieted themselves with the thought that the child was some heavenly prodigy, and stood waiting for the day when it would come back to, or emerge into, ordinary life.

Such is the story of the childhood and youth of Nammalwar, the first great Tamil mystic and poet, as found in the traditional chronicles. As to the historicity or otherwise of this unique legend we have no materials to judge at this distance of time.

THE ARRIVAL AND DISCIPLESHIP OF
MADHURAKAVI

The only important episode in the life of Nammalwar (and one which seems to have a historical basis) is the arrival of Madhurakavi at Thirukkuruhr and the change it brought into the life of the child-prodigy. The story as told in the *Guruparamparai*s is embellished with a good deal of legend and miracle. Madhurakavi was a Brahmin of Thirukkolor (Chola country) and belonged to the Sama Veda clan. As befitted a member of his caste, he early learnt the Vedas and all the Sciences; and, on entering years of manhood, started on a pilgrimage to the sacred places of North India, Ajodhya and the rest. While travelling along the banks of the Ganges, Madhurakavi saw one night a strange light appear in the South as of a new-risen sun and was amazed. A day passed and the next night the same light appeared. The Southern pilgrim was at first at a loss to know what it meant; but at last guessing that some great thing had happened in the South, his native land, prepared to follow the light that so strangely appeared in the night. Following it, he travelled on and on towards the South, till he came to where the town of Thirukkuruhr lay on the banks of the Tambraparni; and the strange light dis-

appeared. Madhurakavi then went among the inhabitants of the town and inquired if anything, strange or noteworthy, had happened in the place. They told him of the strange child that had been born several summers ago and that now lay in a cradle in the shade of the tamarind tree on the bank of the river. Madhurakavi wended to the spot on the river-side, and, seeing the tree and the silent Maran beneath, was filled with surprise and strange thoughts. Curious whether the rapt-looking preternatural youth had any consciousness or not, Madhurakavi, we read, lifted and threw down on the earth in Maran's front a big stone; Maran, who had remained with closed eyes for sixteen summers, now opened them and saw. Further curious, what Maran's thoughts were, Madhurakavi asked him an abstruse philosophical question, "If within a dead thing, a small thing were to take birth, what would the latter eat or where would it lie?" meaning "If within Inanimate Matter the subtle Soul or *Jivan* were to take birth, what would it feed on and where would it rest?". Maran replied "The small thing will feed on *it* and rest *therein*", meaning "The subtle Soul, encased in Matter (or *Prakriti*), will feed on it (*i.e.* the *Prakriti*, *i.e.* joys and sorrows) and rest in it." Madhurakavi, continues the story,

was struck with admiration at the subtle and sententious reply, and, seeing in the strange-born youth great genius and spiritual vision, chose to remain by his side and learn wisdom at his feet. Thence Maran, we are told, kindled perhaps by the genial company and discourse of Madhurakavi, burst forth in song. Madhurakavi carefully wrote down the songs, as they were sung, on palm-leaves and, at some later time, perhaps after the death of Nammalwar (whom we have till now described by his original name of *Maran*), published them to the world.

This remarkable legend of the meeting of the Vellala youth and the Brahmin scholar, and the subsequent life-long companionship that ensued between them, is not perhaps without some foundation or meaning. A Vellala by birth, Nammalwar, though gifted with original genius and profound mystical talent, may not have been alive to all the hidden wealth of Vaishnavite religion and Sanskrit lore. The Brahmin scholar and pilgrim, Madhurakavi, might therefore in the guise of friend and disciple have brought the Tamil mystic something which he lacked. The decade in praise of Nammalwar (quoted elsewhere) which is the only work of Madhurakavi that has come down to us would rather seem to suggest, by the high

eulogy it contains, that Madhurakavi had everything to learn from, and nothing to give to, Nammalwar. But still from the curious fact that the poetical activity, and even the bodily activity, of Nammalwar is said to date from his meeting with Madhurakavi, and also the fact that Madhurakavi was well read in the Vedas and Sanskrit works, we are tempted to infer that the Vellala poet owed something of his inspiration and spiritual learning to Madhurakavi. The legend however is too ancient and meagre for us to hazard any opinion with safety.

There is another legend, which is often described at length in the traditional lives of Nammalwar, to which we may refer here. It is that of a visit from God Vishnu and his divine consort who came down from their heavenly abode to Thirukuruhur itself, and, vouchsafing the saint their sight, left him with their blessings.

NAMMALWAR'S LATER DAYS

What Nammalwar's mode of life was after he emerged into youth and manhood, composing songs apart, how he and Madhurakavi lived and spent their days, as to these the traditional accounts are completely silent, and we are thrown back on pure conjecture. His poems however furnish some light and we are able

to discover one or two possible features of his life. Among the hundred and odd poems, a small number of Nammalwar are addressed to the deities of some of the shrines in South India. Among the shrines or places so referred to are those of Thirupper, Thiruvinnagar, Thirukkudanthai, Thiruvaramam—all in the Chola country; Thirumaliruncholai, Thirumohur, Thollaivillimangalam, Thirupullingudi, Thirukkurungudi—in the Madura and Tinnevely Districts or the old Pandya country; Thiruananthapuram, Thiruvanparisaram, Thiruppuliyur, Thiruchchenkanur, Thirunavai, and Thiruvallaval—in modern Travancore. Leaving the few shrines of the Chola kingdom and Thiruppathi lying farther north, the places to which songs are frequently addressed are those lying near his own native place in the Pandya country and a number of places on the other side of the Ghats in modern Travancore. Whether the addressing of the poems to the deities in these various places means that the saint actually visited them is not known. The traditional accounts of his life are quite silent and reveal no pilgrimages or wanderings on his part. But still judging from the habits of the later-day Tamil mystics and poets, and also from the fact that some of the poems

(especially those addressed to the deities of Kudanthai, Thirukkolor, etc.) discover great wealth of emotion, we are tempted to infer that the Vellala mystic actually visited them and composed those poems in moments of present adoration and ecstasy.

Nammalwar was perhaps unmarried. The chronicles say nothing on the subject.

NAMMALWAR AS A POET

We have already said that the Brahmin Madhurakavi wrote down Nammalwar's songs as he sang them perhaps extempore, and later on gave them to the world. Nothing more we know about Nammalwar's life as a poet. That he had high emotional and mystical talents there can be no doubt, and such talents should have characterised his words and utterances with a great eagerness and love. Some of his poems, couched in the language of human love, reveal beautiful depths of mystical passion and longing for which there are few parallels in any Indian vernacular. The study of Nammalwar's poems further suggests that he should have had a great and loving sense of Nature and Her beauty. The imagery in many of his poems of the "Great Mountain," "The Shining Stars," "The Pellucid Sea," "The Broad White Waters," "The Spreading Clouds" attests the saint's remarkable love

and knowledge of Nature. With his native home situated on the banks of the Tambraparni, facing the Ghats on the one side and the sea on the other, he should have daily imbibed of those great things of Nature; and they should have appeared to him, as to the mystical girl of his poems, as "the form of Shri-dhara." Be his mode of life and its joys as they may, it remains that he is the first great poet to voice forth the notions of a personal and loving religion, and the first to break Tamil to the uses of mystical and devout poetry. In course of time, a long race of poets, Saivite and Vaishnavite, arose, who carried Tamil poetry to greater heights of refinement and music, but none of them, it may be safely said, ever surpassed him in the intensity of his mystical emotion or sublimity of spiritual vision.

NAMMALWAR'S DEATH

According to the *Guruparamparais*, Nammalwar died when he was thirty-five years old. It was indeed a premature death. A similar early death is recorded to have overtaken other gifted Tamil mystics, Sambhandar and Manickavacagar for example. Madhurakavi survived him for some time and made efforts to publish the poems and perpetuate the memory of Nammalwar. In Nammalwar's own native

town, Madhurakavi had an image of the saint set up, and arranged for daily, monthly and yearly celebrations in its honour. An image of Nammalwar is still worshipped in the present shrine of Thirukkuruhur (now called Alwar Thirunakari) and attracts large numbers of visitors and devotees. Madhurakavi should have also made arrangements for the recitation of Nammalwar's songs in the temple and elsewhere—a thing which is to become more prominent in the latter history of Vaishnavism in the Tamil land. With the increasing fame and popularity of the poems, the recitation seems to have found a place in the ritual of other temples, notably Srirangam in the north. When we come to the days of Thirumangai Alwar in the early half of the eighth century we read that he re-established the custom of reciting *Thiruvoymoli* (that was the name by which the hundred songs of Nammalwar have been known) in the shrine at Srirangam, the custom having before fallen into disuse. A similar effort is recorded in the life of Nathamuni, the first of the Vaishnava apostles or Acharyas of Srirangam of the tenth century.

Before we close this sketch of the life of Nammalwar we would quote the poem left by Madhurakavi in praise of Nammalwar. It

testifies to a high and beautiful appreciation of Nammalwar's poetry and mission :

" If, with heart fixed on the Great Lord of Illusion

That allowed Himself to be bound by a small rope,

One should say ' The scion of Kuruhur, '

Then nectar will flow into my tongue (1)

Singing his name with my tongue, I enjoy delight,

I grasp the truth of his golden feet ;

I know of no other divinity ; singing the songs of the scion of Kuruhur, I wander forth. (2)

Desirous to behold the Dark Beauteous Lord,

I have become the disciple of the great Kuruhur scion ;

O the good that I have reaped ! (3)

From to-day he hath set me wholly to sing his praise ;

Behold ! the Kuruhur scion will despise me not ! (6)

Finding me the lord Maran hath by his grace ended all my olden sins ;

I will proclaim, so that all the eight quarters of the earth may know,

The grace of Shadagopan, the master of
beautiful Tamil. (7)

That the grace-filled devotees might swell
with love,

He did sing in song the substance of the
Vedas high ;

Out of his grace he did sing a thousand
verses sweet ;

Behold ! his grace is great !” (8)

THE AGE OF NAMMALWAR

As regards the age of Nammalwar, the following essay on the subject by Prof. Krishnaswami Aiyangar is the most recent and critical.

“Nammalwar’s works had long been published and had acquired wide celebrity, but could not be obtained in the days of Nathamuni except at the Alwar’s birth-place. In those days this celebrity could not have been attained in a short period of time. Nathamuni was, according to tradition, the contemporary of Kampan whose work, *Shadagoparrandadi*, deifies the Alwar. This circumstance again suggests considerable lapse of time. Ramanuja, the famous reformer of the Vaishnavas, came in the fifth generation from Nathamuni, not in official succession only but also in actual descent ; and Ramanuja’s life, A. D. 1017-1137, is coeval with the Chola ascendancy in

Southern India. Therefore we must assign Nathamuni at least to a century earlier. . . . If then Nathamuni lived about A.D. 900, we must go back for Tirumangai Alwar a century or two so as to allow time for his arrangements at Srirangam for the worship of Nammalwar to fall into desuetude. We must go back again from this time for Nammalwar, if already he had become a saint worthy of being worshipped in a public place of worship of the dignity of 'The Temple of the Vaishnavas' (*viz.*, Srirangam).

Reserving a fuller examination of Tirumangai Alwar's history for a future occasion, it is quite in place to remark here that his and Kulasekhara Alwar's poems were considered of sufficient sanctity to warrant provision being made for their recital by Prince Chola Kerala, viceroy of Kongu, about A. D. 1050. This apart, one of the most unfamiliar of the *birudas* or titles of Tirumangai Alwar had already become a name assumed by Vaishnavas, as we have Arathamukkidasan among the inscriptions of Raja Raja II about A. D. 1150. To crown all, there are inscriptions in the temple at Ukkal near Mamandur, dated about A. D. 1000, which give the name of the god as Tiruvoymoli Deva. *Tiruvoymoli* is the work *sui generis* of Nammalwar and that a god should be named after it speaks for

considerable antiquity. Dr. Hultzsch is of opinion that 'Nammalwar must have lived centuries before A. D. 1000.'

Coupled with these considerations, there is the fact that Nammalwar deliberately worked at popularising the 'hidden lore,' the Vedas. This could have been only when the Dravidian Hindus were preparing for the supersession of Buddhism by Brahmanism, no more to be the recondite lore of the learned Brahmins only. This theory finds powerful support in the fact that the works of Nammalwar, in comparison with those of later Alvars, are peculiarly free from any caustic reflections on the Saivas. Under these circumstances I am inclined to think that we shall have to look for the age of Nammalwar in the period of struggle between Buddhism and Brahminism for mastery in South India and that period is between A. D. 500 and 700."

NAMMALWAR'S RELIGION AND POETRY

We have already in the sketch of *Appar* dealt with the nature of the theistic faith that the neo-Aryan cults of Saivism and Vaishnavism brought to the Tamil Land. We there dealt with it with reference to Saivism and Appar's poetry. But the same observations will fit in here with reference to Vaishnavism and Nammalwar's poetry. For,

in spite of the cleavage that at present divides the two cults, and the differing systems of thought and doctrine that either has now evolved with differing terminology, we find judging by the poetry and utterances of these early mystics that the cults were one in their main doctrine and spiritual content. In both we find the same concepts of Godhead and Its Indwelling in the human soul. Under both the cults men yearned for the same ideals of soul-equanimity and freedom and for final release from desire and worldly attachments.

The following poem is allegorical ; it would however be familiar to students of old Indian poetry. The poetry of the piece is only rivalled by the subtle mystical insight into the various forms of Nature contained in it :—

“Playing in the dust, she would say ‘This is Vamanan’s Earth’ ;

Pointing to the sky, she would say ‘This is the Heaven where He lieth’ and pray ;

With eyes full of tears, she would cry ‘O Sea-blue Lord’ ;

O, my women-friends adorned numerously with bangles, what shall I do to Him that hath thus filled my daughter with high madness ? (1)

Folding her close-bangled arms, she would say ‘This is the sea where the Lord doth lie’ ;

Pointing to the reddening sun, she would say 'This is the image of Shridhar':

With eyes pouring tears, she cries 'Oh Narayana';

I understand not the doings of my little deer-like one of heavenly shape. (2)

Embracing hot fire, she would cry 'Achyuta' and burn her limbs;

Embracing the cool, blowing wind, she would say 'My Govinda';

She would inhale the fragrance of basil-leaves;

Alas! the deer-like one that I, the unlucky, begat; the bangles on her forearm do grow close; all her doings are one to me. (3)

Pointing to the full moon, she would say 'This is the Resplendent, Gem-like One';

Beholding the standing mountain, she would say 'O Great Vishnu, come';

When the rains do pour in abundance, she would say 'Narayana is come' and dance;

With such mad ecstasies has He filled my beautiful one. (4)

Embracing the emerald-like calves that roam, she would say 'These are the calves that Govinda hath tended';

Running after a young serpent, she would say 'This is His bed';

I do not understand what happens; alas! the comedy that the Deceitful One doth play

on the beautiful, creeper-like damsel that I, the luckless one, begat. (5)

When the dancers do dance with the pot, she would run unto them saying 'Here is Govinda';

When she hears the sweet music of the flute, she would think it is Krishna's and fall into ecstasies;

When she sees shepherdesses with butter, she would say, 'This is the butter that He ate';

Alas! the madness that has laid hold of my tender darling towards Him that drank milk of the witch's breast! (6)

With increased madness, she would say 'All the worlds are the creation of the Beautiful-eyed';

When she sees men smeared with ashes, she would run after them thinking they are Vishnu's devotees;

When she sees the fragrant basil-leaves, she would say 'These form His wreath';

Conscious or ecstatic, the blessed one is full of the Deceitful Lord. (7)

If she ever beholds a royal person, she would say 'I have seen the sacred Vishnu';

If she beholds shapely-coloured things, she would leap with joy, saying 'Oh! the World-Measurer';

All temples with idols are, she would say, the
temples of the sea-dark Lord ;

Trembling with fear or confident, she is ever
possessed of the desire of Vishnu's feet. (8)

When she sees the Divine Ones, she would
say ' Oh Lord that did subdue the Earth ' ;

Seeing huge dark clouds, she would cry
' Krishna ' and fain attempt to fly ;

Seeing crowds of large beautiful cows, she
would run after them saying ' Here is the
Lord ' ;

Alas ! the deceitful One doth much beguile
and intoxicate my darling of precious
birth." (9)

The following small poem is in the same
form and speaks to a more intense yearning :

" With body swaying and heart melting,
Ever singing and shedding tears,
She doth ever reach out and cry ' Nara-
simha '

And pine, this long-browed one. (1)

This maiden, of long brow,
Melteth in her desire to see Thee ;
.....But Thou art without compassion. (2)

With her melting heart, she doth resemble

Wax that in fire's presence doth lie ;
 Thou art without mercy ; what shall I do ?
 O Lord that didst burn up Lanka ! (3)

With her life growing faint and dry within
 her,
 She doth cry ' O Lord, O Beautiful-eyed,
 O God that liest on the white waters,'
 Alas ! the deceit that she suffers under." (7)

The following poems, full of an intense longing for God's Grace and Love, are perhaps the most distinctive and valuable contribution by the Tamil mystic to Indian religious poetry. We have translated a large number of them :

" Small though I be and devoid of virtue—
 though my sins be great,
 When, ever and anon, I do cry on Thee with
 hands joined on my head,
 And call Thee ' O Swallower of the Earth,
 O Image of Knowledge Divine, O Nara-
 yana,'

Thou comest not so that my eyes may behold
 Thy beauty, nor takest me to Thyself. (1)
 O my generous Lord that dost pour Thy pure
 joy and sweetness in our hearts in floods
 that cannot be contained,
 O Lord that didst subdue the Earth—
 When I thus cry on Thee in the day and in
 the mid hour of night,

O Thievish One, Thou bestowest not Thyself
on my sight. (2)

Alas ! of imperishable sins how many did I
commit !

O Lord that didst, leaping, conquer the
Earth !

When I cry on Thee, and my heart doth
melt and my eyes are bedewed with tears,
Thou comest not before my eyes nor sayest
at least ' Sinner thou.' (3)

O Lord of excellent golden hue,
Come, stand before me with Thy radiant
lotus-eyes—

What boots it that I, small one, without
modesty, should thus cry on Thee ?

Thou art He, the Great One, whom even the
worshipping gods behold not. (4)

O Father, Lord of the powerful wheel,
O Valiant One that didst churn the deep
ocean ;

Desirous to embrace Thee and Thy shoulders
four,

My eyes are ever tearful and my soul doth
perpetually droop ;

I would fain behold Thee even now, O Lord. (5)

Ever casting out my eyes to behold Thee,
Within my soul my appetite grows ;

I am devoid of knowledge, though Thou dost
pervade all, my body, my soul, my senses
five. (6)

O Lord adorned with the bright *tulsi*-wreath !

Thou appearest not on this sea-girt earth,
So that we, Thy devotees, gathering the
flowers that grow in all the eight quarters
of the earth, may lay them on Thy sacred
feet to the delight of our hands,

And worship Thee with hymns and rejoice. (8)

I have not worshipped Thee with food or
water ; I have not subdued my senses ;

I have not at all times gathered flowers and
worshipped Thee with devotion ;

While my ignorant heart doth swell with
longing, I, the sinful one, am oppressed
and do grope ;—

Where shall I behold the Lord of the Wheel ?
(9)

Crying ‘ Lord of the Wheel ’, I cast my eyes
on all sides ; my eyes brim with tears ;

I am much afflicted ; sinful one that I am,
I see Thee not ;

O God, O Form of Knowledge Transcendent,
O Light of the Vedas,

Grant that I may, with befitting eyes of
faith, behold Thee and worship Thee.” (10)

“ O Great Vishnu ! O Nectar that never sati-
ates !

My heart, filled with Thy love, doth melt and
thaw like water ;

O Lord, I saw Thee lying in resplendent
beauty in sacred Kudanthai. (1)

What shall I do, O Lord? Who is my suc-
cour? What doest Thou?

Other than Thee, from none else do I crave
anything. (3)

O Lord that liest in Kudanthai great with
virtuous men!

Desirous of seeing Thee, I faint,
And, looking heavenward, I do weep and
pray. (4)

Desirous to behold Thy feet, I weep, I pray;
I tire myself with song;

Casting expectant eyes on all sides, I bend
and shrink with shame. (5)

How long shall I remain separate from Thee?

O Lord that liest in old renowned Kudanthai!

O Lord of Heavenly ones! O Music of the
Yal! O Nectar! O Knowledge's End!

O Male Lion! (6)

O Male Lion! O Beautiful Golden Splendour!

• O Red-eyed Black Cloud!

O Effulgence! O Mass of Coral Splendour!
O my Parent!

Through Thy grace, Thou didst give me Thy
everlasting service;

I cannot support myself; henceforth bestow
Thy feet on me and wash off my births. (7)

Thou canst end our miseries; Thou canst,
without ending them, save us;

When my life doth fail from my weakened
body,

Grant that I may without faltering closely
grasp Thy feet and depart. (8)

Making me meet, Thou hast set me beneath
Thy feet, O Lord !

O God of Gods, O Great Primeval Being !

O God that dost overspread the World,

Come that I may behold Thee ! (9)

Thou wouldst come without coming, O Lord
of Illusion !

Becoming a nectar that never satiates, Thou
dost taste sweet at the very core of my
life ;

Attaining Thy service, shall I still wallow
in this mud of life ?" (10)

"O Beautiful-crested ! O Lord of Beautiful
Feet whom the three Worlds adore,

O Lord that didst churn the deep ocean,

O cloud-coloured One, O Great One among
the gods—

Thus doth my heart meditate. (1)

Continually worshipping Thee with hands
joined,

My eyes do desire to see Thee in bodily form,
O Lord that, without a house, dost lie on the
hooded serpent. (4)

O Life, O Beauteous Nectar, my Lord,

Though my sinful heart doth ever cry and
call on Thee, I find not my way to behold
Thy beauty. (7)

O Beauty, O Blue Shape with lotus-eyes,
O Virtue that dost draw to Thee my very soul,
When shall I behold Thee? (8)

Mad with the longing to behold Thy feet,
I pine and lay unto Thee little flowers of
poesy ;

How long shall I thus remain and cry ? ” (10)

The following poem, more poetic and
beautiful in its imagery, is full of the same
longing. The last stanza strikes a familiar
mystical note:—

“ O Lord of Illusion ! O Beautiful-eyed !
O Lord with pure red flower-like hands, feet
and eyes ! with red resplendent lips !
O Lord, come one day that I may behold
Thee ! (1)

Desiring to behold Thee, my eyes and mouth
do grow dry ;

I shrink and waste with sorrow ;

Alas ! that Thou art merciless and showest
Thyself not, that I may behold Thee ! (2)

Thy body full of radiance like a crystal cloud,
Thy red lips,

Thy eyes beautiful like lotuses born of sweet
water—

How these have filled all my heart, I cannot
tell ;

O Lord that sleepest on the pellucid sea
like some beautiful blue cloud resting on a
mountain of pure silver ! (4)

O Lord of cloud's hue ! O my Dear Beautiful-eyed ! O Ruler of the Universe !—

When I thus call on Thee to come and take
me as Thine own,

Canst Thou not appear one day in the sky or
on the earth or on the waters of the broad
ocean or elsewhere,

So that I, Thy devotee, may behold Thy
Feet ? (6)

If Thou appearest not, take me into Thy
presence and accept my worship and let
me stand beneath Thy feet that did cross
the earth ;

O Lord ! with Thy red mouth and lotus-
like eye, hand and foot, Thy Beauty doth
resemble that of some dark-coloured Sun
that, spreading its rays infinitely, doth
shine resplendent. (7)

O Lord that standest hidden in all—the
Wind, Fire, Water, Sky and Earth—like
ghee in milk !

O Lord that yet transcendest all ! where shall
I behold Thee ? " (10)

The following two poems sound a note of
beatific attainment and furnish very characteristic poetry :—

“O Lord of Vaikunta ! O Gem-like One ! O Sacred Dwarf !

O Supreme God that, seated in my heart, art ever to me nectar-like, O Lord that endest the ills of Thy worshippers, though visiting the evil ones with them,

I have grasped Thee closely. (1)

Finding new life, ending all my countless sins, I have attained Thy everlasting service ; will I leave Thee ?

My thoughts are ever with Thee, O Lord that sleepest the *Yoga*-sleep on the body of the five-hooded serpent in the milk-ocean. (5)

Ever meditating on Thee, ever singing of Thy greatness,

I have cut down all my past sins to the root ; O Lord that didst tear off the broad chest of him that despised you in thought !

What is there impossible to me ? (6)

Henceforth what is there impossible to me ?

The God, that did swallow the seven worlds, has of his own sweet accord come and entered my heart ; He will keep not away from it ;

With all my sins cut off, my lives, the seven preceding and the seven after, have all been rescued from Hell and are changed. (7)

Passing through several changing lives, I have at last attained Thy feet ; my heart has

gained in faith ; and I am immersed in endless flood of sacred bliss ;
 O Lord, keep not away from my heart " (8)

" I uttered 'The Garden-Mount where the sacred Vishnu doth dwell'

When the great Vishnu came and did inhabit my heart completely. (1)

The Lord that doth dwell in Per did come to-day and enter my heart saying 'I will remove not' ;

I have closely grasped Him. (2)

I have grasped Him ; I have killed this life ;
 I will fall not into misery ; I have killed the illusion that roots one in life ;

The path to the feet of Him that dwells at Thirupper has become easy to me. (3)

Finding the path to Him easily, my eyes and heart do rejoice ;

The Lord of Thirupper will surely bestow on me the High Heaven. (4)

He will bestow the Heavens on me ; having betrothed His word unto me, He hath of His own accord entered this my fleshy cage,

And hath removed all the sins that do hold me from Him, (5)

The Lord of Thirupper hath entered my soul, saying 'I will remain with Thee' ;

Attaining my desires, I eat of nectar and re-
joice. (6)

The One that fadeth not from my vision—the
One that is great in thought's eye, the subtle
Small.—

The Sweetness of the seven tunes—He hath
surely entered my heart to-day. (8)

Making me meet, He hath of his own accord
stationed Himself in my heart ;

In the past, He did leave me astray ; what
for did He do so ? (9)

I have come near to Thee ; serving Thee with
fond delight, I have attained Thy feet ;

This is all that I hereafter desire ; sin will
beset not him that devotes himself to the
Lord of Thirupper.” (10)

Among the several poems descriptive of
Godhead, found in Nammalwar, the following
one is worth quoting.—

“ Shall I call Him the Great Praiseworthy
One ?—Shall I call Him the peerless
Earth ?

Shall I call Him the bright Ocean ? Shall
I call Him the Fire, the Wind ?

Shall I call Him the Spreading Sky ? Shall
I call Him the Shining Bodies two ?

Shall I call Him this all ?—How shall I des-
cribe Him, the Beautiful-eyed ? (1)

Shall I call Him the Mountains all ?

Shall I call Him the Spreading Clouds? Shall
I call Him the Shining Stars?

Shall I call Him the Sciences all that the
tongue doth learn? Shall I call Him the
Spirit of Knowledge True?—

How shall I describe Him, the Lotus-eyed, of
resplendent Beauty? (2)

Shall I call Him the Lotus-eyed? Shall I
call Him the Red-coral-Mouthed?

Shall I call Him the One of Beauteous Shin-
ing Feet? Shall I call Him the Dark-
coloured One? (3)

Shall I call Him the Gem of the first water?
Shall I call Him the bright golden Pearl?

Shall I call Him the Diamond of the first
water? Shall I call Him the clear un-
broken Light?

Shall I call Him the Beautiful Primeval
Light? Shall I call Him the beautiful
Primeval male?—

How shall I describe Him, the Timeless, the
Everlasting, and the Pure? (4)

Shall I call Him the Everlasting, the Pure?
Shall I call Him the Medicine Sweet

That cures the ills of the devout? Shall I
call Him the beneficent Ocean-born nectar?

Shall I call Him a Mass of Sweetness? the
food of six sweetnesses combined?

Shall I call Him the Honey of ghee-like taste?

Shall I call Him Fruit or Milk ? (5)
Shall I call Him the fruit of the Vedas four ?
Shall I call Him the Scriptures all ? Shall I
call Him the sum of all the secret things
that we hear ? (6)
Shall I call Him the Wealth without blemish ?
Shall I call Him the Heaven without stain ?
Shall I call Him the Faultless Release ?
How shall I describe Him, the bright gem-
like One ? (7)
He is all the created things and all the religi-
ons of men ;
He cannot be reached by the senses ; He is
past all knowledge ;—
If, within the soul's core where life doth have
its source, one doth cultivate
Concentration and thoughts all withdrawn
from things, then one can secure Him, the
Lord." (10)

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