

TIRUPPĀN ĀḶVĀR

INTRODUCTORY

Tiruppānāḷvār is the untouchable saint of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism. He has sung ten verses only. These ten verses are to be seen as the revelation of the form of God to the unveiled eyes, and it is the most beautiful form of the Divine, the gentle form of the Divine. The Story runs that Tiruppānāḷvār used to pray to the Lord of Śrīraṅgaṃ every day morning from a distance on the banks of the Cauvery.¹ One Lōkasāraṅgamahāmuni who used to perform the service of taking holy water from the Cauvery to the Lord for bath everyday, seeing the saint standing near where he used to take the water for the Lord, asked him to move away from that place throwing a stone at him since he was completely in a trance of Love. It struck the saint on his forehead and blood began to flow. Aroused from his trance by this, the saint saw the muni, and feeling that he had committed a mistake in standing at the place moved away from the place. The muni having performed his ablutions and bath, filled his vessel with water for bath of the Lord and went away. But that night the Lord appeared to the muni and instructed him to bring on his own shoulders the saint for having treated the saint that morning in the manner he had done. Thus ordered next morning the muni went to the saint and told him that the Lord of Śrīraṅgaṃ had ordered him to bring the saint to Him but the āḷvār told him

¹ A South Indian river of great repute.

that he could not tread even the ground of the Lord of Śrīraṅgaṃ. The muni then offered to carry him on his own shoulders in conformity with the commands of the Lord. On entering the sacred precincts of the temple the Lord manifested to him His most auspicious form of grace. The āḶvār first saw the sacred feet of God, then the apparel, then the navel, the neck and shoulders, and the face and the crown—all of increasing entrancing beauty. The last line breaths the transcendent note "My eyes having beheld thee cannot verily have any place for seeing anything else."

The first three āḶvārs like the Vedic seers enjoyed the transcendent primarily and touched upon the theme of arcā. Like Vālmīki, Kulaśēkhara being devoted to the Lord as Rāma enjoyed also the arcā-form of God, because the arcā is the most approachable form. Śaṭhakōpa like Parāśara and Vēda Vyāsa attached to God as Śrī Kṛṣṇa, experienced the beauties and glories of the arcā also. Tirumaṅgai ĀḶvār whilst enjoying the transcendent Lord lost himself in the effulgence of the arcā. This āḶvār, on the other hand, was fully devoted to the arcā-form. This is the view of Aḷakiya-manavāḷappērumāla. We can see however that the āḶvār starts with the most complete statement of the secret unity of the five fold Lord. Indeed as Śrī Vēṅkaṭanaṭha has stated in his commentary of Tiruppān-āḶvār's work *Amalan-āṭi-piran* (the name of the work obviously taken from the opening words of the hymn) it includes in it the esoterics of the Praṇava,¹ the sacred root-formula, the Dvaya and the

¹ The first letter of the first Hymn is A, the first letter of the second verse is U, the first letter of the third verse is M. cf. the Tiruvāymōḷi

carama-ślōka of the Gītā. Thus any one who studies this work should also seize upon the esoteric suggestion underlying this great but small work. It is because of its supreme quality the āḷvār is described as 'Kavīśvara' (Lord of poets).¹ (A Emperor of musician singers)

THE POEM

I. The lotus-feet of the Lord-God of the long-walled, Śrīraṅgaṃ, the taintless, the origin, (the helper), the luminous being who made me the servant of he devotees of His feet the King of immortals, the dweller on the fragrant forest Veṅgadaṃ, immaculate, holy, the Ruler of the law-abiding-abode, who has absorbed my mind, have entered my eye of themselves and revealed themselves (as vision).

The Divine is above all as the supreme object of the religious consciousness, transcendent to all the faults and mistakes and errors and illusion of man, or the soul, however high up in evolution. That is the reason why the Divine is addressed as the *Amalan*, the enemy of all defects. Not only is He in Himself so free, it is a dynamic nature in so far as any one who approaches Him or touches Him in any manner is freed from all sins and defects. In Him all the

which begins with the first verse itself having the U, M, A as the initial letters of the first three lines.

¹ Śrī-lokasāraṅga-mahāmunīndraskandhādhirūdham kalayāmi nityam !
Kaḷaṅkahīnam kamanīyabhaktam kavīśvaram gāyaka-sārvabaumam.

faults get extinguished because *apahatapāpmatva* is the essential and primary sign of deity. He is the Origin of the created universe. He is the only creator, there was no second at the beginning. It is stated in Vēdānta (V.S.I.2 : *Janmādyasya Yatah*) that it is the primary fact about God as the sign of sovereign transcendence of His nature. He is also the Helper, the saviour (*pirān*) of all souls, because He is the saviour, and all the rest whether gods or men or creatures of any other kind and variety are the saved, the śēṣavarga, other than the One supreme Divine. Thus the āḷvār no sooner than he utters the first trumpeting epithets of the divine nature proceeds to speak of himself as having been made the attender or servant of the servants and worshippers of His feet, the very feet that now have of their own accord, entered his mortal but rather transformed eyes. This is a great step in the path of ascent to glory. The love of the feet of the knowers of truth, the truth that is important and pregnant with supremest possibilities. The Divine on accepting the surrender of the soul places him under the service of the masters of devotion, because He has the right to dispose of the soul as He supremely pleases. It is pointed out that the Lord is eternally a free Being who is distinct from the bound souls made free. He is also superior to the immortals because He is their sovereign. The Lord of Veṅgadam thus is stated to be the same Being whom the Gods worship, according to tradition and legend.

He is the person who removes the defects of others also, of those who seek absolute refuge in Him only. Indeed is He *āśrita-para-tantra*. He is easy of access and is Good. By such acts of removing other's defects or sins He

does not get tainted by them. Thus he is *nimalan* and *nirmalan*. Though omniscient without any reservation of place and time yet because of His absolute love for His devotees He does not 'see' the faults of these, and even if He sees them He sees them for the purpose of removing them. He is the source of all *Nīti* or dharma. Indeed His is the world of *Nīti*, of absolute righteousness, of divine order or *Ṛta*, because even the denizens of that universe (*paramapada*) are absolutely spontaneously righteous and dutiful to the Divine Being only. He is the cool and wonderful Being of the Śrīraṅgaṃ and the Master who grants the status of the serpent of Himself in the celestial abode. The verse fully lays down the characteristics of God and of the souls in relation to Him. The supreme secret of the path is the surrender to the Will of the Divine alone, because the Divine is Pure, effulgent, Holy, origin of All, the beneficent Lord, who of Himself hastens to the devotees to grant them His Vision. And the vision starts with the most auspicious sign of the Feet of God.

II. Growing big (like a lotus) measured the worlds to the upmost extent of space where it was anointed by Brahman and other (Godheads): Rāma destroyer of the night-wanderers with fierce arrows! Lord of Śrīraṅgaṃ of fragrant gardens!—in thine red-cloth hath my mind got entranced.

The first verse stated the spontaneous free-coming-in of the Grace of God. In the second verse is mentioned the joy of seeing the garment of God in addition to the seeing of the feet. Descent of Grace and of God into the individual is intimated.

The great Veṅkaṭanātha states that this verse has reference to the *Trivikrama-avatār* of Śrī Viṣṇu who having made up His mind to help Indra who had lost his sovereignty to Bali, and having also decided to protect Bali, the grand son of Prahlāda, his asura-devotee, placed His splendid feet (which really typifies His omnipervasiveness) on all gods and asuras and men without distinction, in order to reveal His own supreme sovereign Grace and protective consideration for all creatures. The āḷvār realised here the supreme graciousness and love typified by the red-cloth, red being the colour of deep love for creatures. It is the Dawn of Grace.¹ Thus the feet of the Lord were followed by the vision of the lovely and love-revealing attribute of the godhead, the sovereign, Lord of all the worlds, the Sire of Brahman and Ruler of gods.

This is succeeded by the Divine Lord revealing His navel, the navel from which Brahman took his birth.

- III. The Dawn like² cloth round the waist of Him who is on the Veṅgadaṃ hill of the Northern boundary (of the Tamil land where monkeys reside (a reference to Great Hanuman), where the eternal meet for offering worship to Him: of Him who is resting on the the serpent at Śrīraṅgaṃ; and above that the incomparable lotus place of birth of Brahman, have become the breath of my heart indeed.

¹ Āḷvārs always represent the redness of Kṛṣṇa's eyes as representing his love for his creatures and devotees in particular.

² Dusk-like seems to be more literal as a translation.

In this third verse beginning with the third letter of the Praṇava, which esoterically represents the souls, the ālvār illustrates how they behave, and reveals his own experience. The monkeys here symbolise the inconstant and wavering souls which hanker after low fruits and puerile ends. The gods too gather on the mountain of Veṅgaḍaṃ for worshipping its Lord; the eternals too who are more than gods because they are beyond the pale of *saṃsāra*, are devoted only to the service of the Supreme Lord or godhead. The Lord of Veṅgaḍaṃ is thus the supreme Object of the bound souls as well as the freed and eternally free souls. He is also the Object of worship for Brahman who is born of His navel.

Thus the meaning of the word 'Ādī' (origin) mentioned in the first hymn gets illuminated. The beauty of the waist and the navel, above it is thus enjoyed.

The fourth hymn states the distinction of the ten-headed rākṣasa-king (Rāvaṇa) who by his *tapas* gained boons from gods like Brahman and Rudra. It shews that the boons granted by these lesser gods are first capable of causing inordinate arrogance of possession, and secondly that their boons get superseded by the Will of the Divine Lord. According to the structure of the ten hymns the first three teach the esoteric meaning of the Praṇava—of the Īśvara, Mother of Grace and the Jīva. In the fourth hymn the seekers mind, ego, possessiveness and others and being are made to subordinate themselves to the Divine godhead of the form of Rāma, the slayer of the ten-headed rākṣasa.

Thus the meaning of the speech of Surrender or abnegation to God is elucidated. Then the waist girdle enters the eye or field of Vision of āḷvār.

- IV. Having entered, the waist-girdle is parading before my mind--the waist girdle of the Lord of Śrīraṅgaṃ where bee are humming and big peacocks are dancing, who has defeated the king of Laṅka girt on all sides with high walls, and cut off his ten heads with His fierce arrows, who is of the colour of the (cool) ocean;
- V. Having destroyed my heavy (load of) sins, (He) who made me love Him, and for having done so, He entered my heart: what great and severe askesis did I do (to gain this love from Him) I know not. The chest of the Lord of Śrīraṅgaṃ, adorned with mother Śrī and the pearl-garland, has made me the slave of its beauty.
- VI. The neck of Him who delivered the wearer of the digit-moon of his sin, (of) the father who is residing in Śrīraṅgaṃ (that is) surrounded by gardens where beautiful bees are humming, who swallowed up as nectar the worlds and beyond worlds (and) the great earth with its sevenfold mountains and all, behold! (It) has proffered me deliverance and Divine Life!

The fifth and sixth hymns reveal the auspiciousness of the Lord: for the hope of true and highest religion is the attainment of Śreyas, the true wealth of divine oneness

through absolute and consecrated surrender to Him. The presence of Śrī in the chest of Māl, as an ornament and as His heart (*hṛdaya*) regrading the creation and creatures, is the most enjoyable phase of the union. The presence of Love, Mercy, overflowing grace or *dayā* for the souls is the unique fact of the nature of the deity. It is because of this the Divine creates the world, and saves the souls or redeems them or abolishes their sins which are even impossible to get rid of by means of propitiation or expiation. The Divine removes all sins along with their foul smell, root and branch, all because of the *hṛdaya* of His existence or eternal Nature, the presence of the Śrī (who is the *sampat*, wealth worldly as well as other-worldly). The divine grace is such that He removes the sin as well as the complete subordination to sense-life and becomes the master of the soul and granting it a duty to perform which would never lead it to regression into sinful conduct. Once the Divine Lord becomes the Master of the soul, the soul is from then on guided at every step by the Divine and there is only the upward movement, and regression or fall or return to the original condition becomes once for all impossible. The āḶvār not only states that the Lord removes the sin, and makes the soul his servant, but also that the Lord enters into the soul's heart, thus making the soul the exclusive object of His enjoyments. The Lord is not only the transcendent beneficent Being but also the inner *antaryāmin* and *bhōktā* of the individual. This is something that men usually arrive at or attain through great penance and prayer and sacrifices. But I have got it, says the āḶvār out of His supreme Grace as it were in reply to my Surrender (as implied in the *Praṇava* and *Mūla* or root-mantra). Even so

the grace of God is such that the Lord wears the soul in His heart and resides in a most accessible place and in an easily enjoyable form of beauty at Śrīraṅgaṃ. As the most beautiful Being He is adorned with the pearl-garland; to beauty all are beholden and are dependent. Thus the Lord more than all the objects of senses grants the fullest delight to the transformed senses of devotion.

Śrī Vēṅkaṭanātha states that in this hymn the following meanings are enunciated;- i) The destruction of evil; ii) the attainment of the desirable; iii) the pervasion of the Divine Lord inside and outside of oneself; iv) the eternal and unceasing mercifulness of the Lord; v) the accessibility of the Divine which is the essential condition of all kinds of Means (*upāya*); vi) the possession of the Form which permits the wearing of the individual soul or Mother or other powers and the worlds even as ornaments or articles of personal enjoyment, *bhūṣaṇa*; vii) the masterhood (*svāmitva*) which is the essence of the Goal of man; viii) the husband of Śrī, the Supreme Mother of all, pointing to the inseparable quality of beneficence and fullness of plenitude of Grace in all respects; ix) The dependence-nature of the soul who is designated as '*Nāra*';¹ and x) the fruits of servanthood is ever-vigilant service of the Divine (*kaiṅkarya*). These ten meanings are incorporated in the hymn, and these should be fully grasped when meditating on this verse.

A hymn being at once a prayer and a praise reveals the intimate relationship between the devotee and the Lord and

¹ Nāra is the word used for the soul: Manu. I. 10

reveals all the characteristics of both, and even the process of relating.

VII. The lips of the wonderful Person, who in His two hands, holds the beautiful conch and the foe-annihilating disc, whose beautiful body is like that of the mountain (green): who is adorned with fragrant Tulasi-garland and wears the crown of sovereignty, (who is) my father who resides at Śrīraṅgaṃ which is an ornament having reclined on the serpent-bed— have attracted my mind.

VIII. The dark, broad eyes shining with red lines and long in His face who tore the body of the big asura,¹ who is the friend of the immortals, the primeval cause, the saviour, the pure Person residing at Śrīraṅgaṃ,— have made me entranced in it.

IX. The child Divine on the small leaf of the great Banyan tree, who swallowed up the seven worlds, now residing in Śrīraṅgaṃ seated on the serpent, (with) the beautiful gem-garlands, pearl-garlands, and His Blue body that is incomparable, That has now taken full possession of my mind(heart)

X. The cloud-hued cowherd, butter-mouthed, has stolen my heart; These mine eyes which have beheld

¹ Hiraṇyakaśipa who was slain by Narasimha.

Him, the Lord of those beyond the egg¹ residing in the beautiful Śrīraṅgaṃ, my nectar, can see nought else.²

¹ The created world of conditioned space and time. The egg reveals the notion of space that is limited but unbound as Einstein would say.

² The meaning is that they cannot be made to see any thing at all other than the Divine Supertranscendental form, the form that Markaṇḍēya saw, and Tirumaḷṣai enjoyed, the Māyā-form of the Divine. It may mean that the ĀḶvār had indeed sought mergence in that form of the Divine. The story runs that when he was taken into the sanctum sanctorum of Śrīraṅgaṃ temple by Lōkasāraṅgamaḥāṃuni and after he had sung the last hymn he was absorbed into the image. But the ideal he desclaims may be that He saw nothing without Him for He saw everything within Him and of Him and nothing else was perceived except He, Vāsudēva. Transformed, divinised utterly by the Lord's grace there was thereafter no seeing apart from or outside of or indeed other than Himself.

