

SOME CONTRIBUTIONS OF ĀLVĀRS TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF BHAKTI

We have a vast literature on the bhakti school but scarcely an adequate account of the important part played by Ālvārs or Seers of South India. The Ālvār are the mystic-religious Vaiṣṇava saints who have given a new orientation to bhakti by making it more catholic and universal. Bhakti indeed is devotion of God and as a path it has been counseled in the Bhagavat-Gītā as more supreme than the sāmkhya (jñāna –mārga) or yoga or karma. In the Ālvār literature we have a profound worship of the Divine in his five-foldness and not merely devotion and duty but a radical surrender of oneself. The five-foldness of the Deity is a special doctrine of the Pāñcarātra-school and srivaiṣṇava Ālvārs¹ accept the nature of the manifested Divine as five-fold as Vāsudeva, vyūhas (cosmic functions), Vibhava (the descents of the Divine or

¹ For the first time Ālvār-literature we have the mention of the special Pāñcarātra doctrine of five-foldness of the Divine nature in the *Tirucchanda-viruttam of Tirumaḷiśai-Ālvār* (4th century), 17th verse runs thus.

“The one person, three persons, in all four persons; Being thus the enjoyable person, and the person realised through meritorious deeds and the Person of many manifestational forms, O Prim Lord lying on the serpent in the Ocean of Milk and beyond it, You are the transcendent Unique Form.”

cf. Śrī-vaccana-bhūṣaṇam: Pillai Lokācārya: 39. sūtra: “Antaryāmi-form is like the waters deep in the bowels of the earth; Para – form is like the enveloping waters (outside the egg); vyūhas is like the milk – ocean (difficult to attain); Vibhavas are like mighty floods, whilst Arcās are overflowing tanks with waters of the above.”

Avatāras), Antayāmi and Arcā(image). The Āḷvārs lay great stress on this most approachable form (subhāśraya) of arcā in so far as it is that which the devotee can imagine and realise as leading upto the highest transcendent God Himself. The arcā can be of any of the four forms such as Vāsudeva, or cosmic deities like Sankarṣaṇa, Abniruddha, Pradhymna or Acyuta. The Vaikhānasa school has indeed made provision in the temple worship for the five bears or forms corresponding to the four-fold divisions given above. It would be necessary to consider philosophically the justification of the worship of the icons which form the fundamental vitality of popular religion in India, but I shall deal with that elsewhere. In the meanwhile it may be stated that if worship of ancestors and heroes is justifiable the worship of the descends of the Divine, the avatāras, vibhūtis of God is justified.

The Āḷvārs worked out a synthesis between the Vedic and the āgama views about the nature of God and defined the means of approach to Him. in this too their originality consisted in point out vigorously the futility of the path of mere bhakti that is not followed upto its logical conclusion in the universal realisation of god-indwellingness in all creation.

II

Śrī Venkaṭanātha writing on the unique method of the Āḷvārs as self-surrender, total and integral, says that it is distinguished from bhakti.

“Because of the lack of strength to pursue the methods of bhakti and others which depend upon merit.

Because of the incapacity to learn from the śāstras or from holy discussions, Good men, differing from one another in all these four or in one or two or three, verily for the sake of liberation seek the Lord through direct prapatti (svatantra-prapatti)¹.

Thus here we have the qualifications for bhakti, namely, the arduous path of devotion, which requires intelligence that is awakened and the capacity to learn from the scriptures as to the method of devotion and the facilities to hear and live in the company of holy men. The main distinction then between the paraptti or self-surrender and bhakti that is dependent on the qualification of devotion or one-pointedness of mind, intelligence and capacity to imbibe scriptural teaching and facilities to hear holy discussions lies essentially in the one demanding qualifications and the other none. The reference of Śrī Venkaṭanātha to good men (*santah*) is surely to the Āḷvārs and the ācāryas who followed their teaching loyally. If this be so can we legitimately say that this is a development whereas it is a departure from the bhakti? Not so, if we look at the general use of the theory of bhakti which has to become a general theory of devotion universalized and without distinction of caste or āśrama.

The devotional doctrine is defined by Venkaṭanātha as the contemplation of the Supreme Lord without depending on anything else, with one-pointed mind. This requires loving pure (*sātvika*) spiritual discrimination which causes the clear knowledge of the Divine to arise. But prapatti equally grants the fruits of the bhakti being more universal in its application. The Āḷvārs had inclined to the view that self-surrender to God does not involve the possession of the disciplines of the jñāna and karma and bhakti yoga¹.

The Āḷvārs consciousness is of the universal being who is anxious to save the seeker who is prepared to surrender his all to Him and stake his all in the love and power and glory of God. This is the essential promise of all Śaranūāgata-doctrines. From the Vedic literature downwards we have the promise of refuge, *abhya-pradāna*, grant of freedom from fear. Rg Veda.X.125.5 states that God out of his grace grants everything to soul and makes it a sage, a mighty being and knower of Brahman². God's prasāda or grace is most closely linked up with man's total surrender or refuge – seeking, though this must be known to be neither a cause-effect relation nor yet a bargain. For God's grace is immeasurable only demanding a slight occasion (*vyāja*) for His revealing His grace and love for all. The statement that bhakti is a upāya or means to God-

realisation or liberation is to be understood of the instrumental or causal sense of necessity just as some persons hold that magic or sounds or mantras have the power to force the gods to grant fruits even in a mechanical manner. On the contrary, we know that the power or jñāna or karma or even bhakti is essentially limited; they lead upto the metaphysical or effectual or devotional askesis; the fruits of such knowledge depend upon the grace of God himself. Hence the statement that not through jñāna - askesis but through His grace alone consequent on great devotion does one achieve the vision of the Highest Being or liberation. The instrumentality of bhakti or jñāna thus is only a upacāra usage. God's grace is the most important fact which makes men become divinized. Man's knowledge and works may only lead upto it but cannot by any means make for the descent of grace, for then the self or self consciousness of the soul intrudes itself. The prasāda of God is a veritable gift of the Divine whether it be the Vision eternal or the foundational knowledge that saves, or the Peace that is the why prasāda is many times declared to be the peace of mind. Without this prasāda, there can be no release, mukti, or even a possibility of jumping the life to come. It is not all knowledge, knowledge even of the categories that saves, but the divine knowledge, knowledge granted by the divine, that saves. This saving-knowledge is what is to be got by a seeker and for this purpose the only quick and total path is self-surrender. Thus have that Āṅvār stated. This is what we find to have been intimated by the famous mantra. Īśa. 18. (Rg.Veda.I.189.1), which is used in various contexts under many occasions. "We shall the speech of surrender, *nama uktim*, dispose". The Śvetāśvatara (VI.18) uses the most important word of surrender as the means to God's grace, *śaraṇam aham prapadye*. The *Taittirīya* (Nārāyaṇavāka, 5.1) gives direction to sacrifice oneself to the Divine. The Gītā makes most clear reference to the doctrine of prapatti, and it is the view of the Āṅvārs and ācāryas of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism that Gītā teaches the prapatti or self-surrender doctrine as the path and the way to liberation¹. at the very beginning Arjuna makes his surrender (II.7). Śrī Kṛṣṇa advises that surrender alone is the means to cross over illusion that is difficult to pierce (VII.

14); and again in the closing chapter (XVIII.62,66) Śrī Kṛṣṇa reiterates the path of surrender as that which will save.

The efficacy of prapatti to lead up to the manifestation of prasāda is fully explained in the Pāñcarātra and the Vaikhānasa āgamas. The worship of the Arcā form of God forms the important part of these two āgamas and the worship is followed by self-surrender. The self-surrender is the preliminary to all activities and is directed towards liberation. Even after liberation the knowledge of dependence on the Divine (jñāna) being firmly rooted the individual continues to worship and surrender to the Divine. In the Pāñcarātra school in almost all its āgamas there is mention of the six-fold practice of surrender. The *Abhirbudhnya Samhitā* (37. 25-26) enumerates the six angās of surrender as ānukūlyasya samkalpa, prākūlyasya varjanam, Goptr̥tva-varaṇam, rakṣiṣyatīit viśvāsaḥ, ātma nikṣepa, kārpaṇya. With more or less uniformity Nārada Pāñcarātra confirms this.

¹ Rahasya-traya-sāra: Upāya-vibhāgādhikāra, final verse

Rāmāyaṇa which is considered by Śrīvaiṣṇava writers to be the Śaraṇāgati-veda par excellence enunciated the efficacy of the self-surrender and the prasāda nature of God¹. In the Bālakāṇḍa we find the Devas seeking refuge from the torments of Rāvaṇa and asuric forces (XV. 16; XV.24). We find Lakṣmaṇa surrendering to his divine brother in the Ayodhya kāṇḍa. in the forest Śrī Bharata performed Śaraṇāgati, as well as the sages of the Daṇḍaka forest in the Kiṣkindhā-kāṇḍa, Sugrīva sought refuge and was granted refuge. In the Sundara-kāṇḍa we have the surrender of Trijata, and in the Yuddha, that of Vibhīṣaṇa. above all we find Śrī Rāma making the supreme statement that even if it be Rāvaṇa who sought refuge He would great it. Vibhīṣaṇa, it is acclaimed performed the self-surrender along with its six agas of ānukūlyasya samkalpa, prātikūlyasya varjanam, goptr̥tva varaṇam, rakṣiṣyatīit viśvāsa and kārpaṇya and ātma-nikṣepa.

The above brief sketch is to intimate that the background of the Āḷvār psychology of devotion was soaked in the scriptural vedic and purāṇic tradition².

The history of bhakti coupled with self-surrender o prapatti consists in a three-fold process so arriving at the vision

¹ *Abayapradānasār* 10 chapters: Venkaṭanātha: (20 esoteric sermon) deals with this point must fully. 79 (Annalys. B.O.R.I)

² We have found the purāṇic references of the s wide differences between the versions of certain stories; for instance, Mārkaṇḍeya is said to be a devotee of Nārāyaṇa though a pupil of Rudra,. Rudra himself is said to be a great teacher of the Nārāyaṇa doctrine. (cf. *Tirucchanda-Viruttam*. Verse 8 and *Nānmukhan-Tiruvandādi* 15, 17 and 18 verses).

of the Lord. The first three Āḷvārs who belonged to the same period following the path of synthesies arrived at the knowledge of the Divine through transcendent knowledge (*para-jñāna*), transcendent devotion (*para-bhakti*) and finally parama-bhakti. Poygai Āḷvār was so struck by the majesty and beauty of the natural phenomena and their unique order that he asked himself the question of the Creator and kenow the supreme *causa sui*. God was the all-ruler and all-creator. Pudattāḷvār saw the Lord to be not merely the *causa sui* but that he is an Object of our devotionalised knowledge (*para-bhakti*)¹. The third Āḷvār Pey-Āḷvār, profiting by the paths of knowledge of the Divine and of the devotionalised knowledge was enabled to perceive that all, that those tow grant, was merely glamorous cosmic vision; the inner nature of God, the personal Ruler immortal and universal, who is more than the impersonal is to be known through surrender to Him. this surrender is *parama – bhakti*, the fullest Vision, that is knowledge and devotion expressing themselves in the total dependence-nature on the Divine. Pey-Āḷvār was granted the Vision of the intimate

¹ Mudal Tiruvandādi, 1

Deeming the world as bowl, the full ocean as ghee, the fierce rayed Sun as the wick,

I have owned a garland of verse for the feet of the red-flaming-discus wearer ..'

Irāndām Tiruvandādaid. 1

Devotion as the lamp bowl, aspiration as Ghee, the melted mind as the wick, with a melting soul have I lighted the bright flame of Love to Nārāyaṇa...' Munrām Tiruvandādi. 1

The mother have I seen in the Lord of Ocean hue !

That form of golden splendour have I seen !

That radiant Sun-like form have I seen !

sauṣṭīya form, the kalyāṇa tamam ṛpaṃ¹, which Arjuna sought as the other form crowned with mace and discus² along with the mother of the Universe. The fourth Āḷvār, who is said to have been a free-thinker, a Buddhist, Jain and Śaiva seer and poet before he was converted by the third Āḷvār to Śrīvaisūnūavism points out that the object of the religious quest should be the Highest that the mind can know in the causal and redemptive categories. If it be anything less than the highest there can only result bondage and not freedom. Once this surrender is made God becomes the master, the Kṣātrajñā, the knower and ploughman of the field. 'Is it necessary to plant the seed of effort in the field. 'Is it necessary to plant the seed of effort in the field of ancient saṃsāra of Kṛṣṇa? God does all, only man should be absolutely His. What is necessary is to worship, to adore, to surrender at his feet and at the feet of all those who have done so.

tirumaḷisāi's philosophy of religion is a complete exposition of the need to realise the fullness and greatness of God and His cosmos, His Grace and His excellences the obiter Āḷvārs continue and elaborate the neat conclusions of the first four Āḷvārs. The Great Śaṭhakopa, the author of the *Tiruvoymozhi*, who is considered to be ' the chief of the Śrīvaisṇavas, has described the many attributes of God. According to him, though he got, through God's grace divine knowledge and even devotion (para-jñāna and para-bhakti)³

¹ Īśa. 16.

² B.G.XI.45-6

³ Para-bhakti, para – jñāna and parama – bhakti – this is said to be the order of succession in the experience towards vision. Commentating on Śrī Rāmānuja's *Śraṇāgati-gadya*, Sudarśana (Śrutaparakāśikācārya) writes: Uttarottara sāksātkārābhiveśaḥ parabhaktiḥ, sāksātkāraḥ parajñānam, uttarottarānu bhavābhiniveśaḥ paramabhaktiḥ. Parabhakti is the cause of parajñāna, and this in turn is the cause of pramabhakti which is complete or total devotion to God. Śrī Venkaṭanātha's view is similar to that of Sudarśana. In the *Tatparya-Candrikā*, commenting on Yāmunācārya's final verse of the *Gītārthasamgraha* we find that the view is similar to the development vouchsafed by Poygai, Pudattar and Pay of parajñāna, parabhakti, and paramabhakti, which mean knowledge of the Divine and Direct Vision of the integral dependence of oneself on the Divine.

without the help of Vedic rites or jñāna or mediation, he could not have his wishes fulfilled. In other words we find that he was as lamenting the absence of his Lord, Viśeṣa², and could not experience at will the Divine. In other words satya-samkalpatva did not form one of his siddhis. This he found to be possible only through surrender to the Divine Lord completely, that is, without remainder. This surrender he made to the Arcā-form of God at Tirupati. He made it very clear that bhakti must necessarily fulfill itself in surrender².

Śrī Kulaśekhara, the royal saint who renounced his throne preferring worship of God, has revealed the richness of the devotion that becomes knowledge and experience through viśeṣa or viraha, sneha, madhura and vātsalya. Surrender is to be made to the Supreme object alone and not to any and every object however much near and dear it may actually appear to be in the forms of child and lover and son. The *Perumāḷ Tirumozhi* breathes a spiritual atmosphere that is rare even amidst the Āḷvārs.

¹ *Tiruviruttam*.

² Cf.B.G. Mamanā bhava madbhkto madyājī mām namas kuru I

The worship of the Divine includes in a real sense love of his creation and most surely those who have also yielded themselves to the love of the Divine. The bhāgavatas or the souls that have become devoted to the beauty of God and greatness of God are to be worshipped. Śrī Kulaśekhara in his Perumāl Tirumozhi sought to move amidst them and dance with them with joy of the love of God. Madhurakavi, the disciple of Śaṭhakopa exalted the devotion to the Ācāryass or teachers as being equally important on the path. Surrender to the Divine may be made through the intercession and mediation of the saints of God and not directly since we may not be fit to do so ourselves, or the circumstances may not be opportune for it. The path to liberation according to Madhurakavi lies in the service of the Ācārya. Śrī Venkaṭanātha writes of Madhurakavi. “Those who are dependent for protection on the feet of the Lord Śaṭhakopa, the path shewn by the holy Madhurakavi will prove beneficent as it had been for him¹.”

Whilst we know that the above Āḷvārs had been visiting several shrines (tirupatis) singing about the respective deities and making their complete surrender to them and thus realizing all that they wanted, happiness here and happiness in everything, when we come to Periyāḷvār, or Viṣṇucitta, we find that he worshipped not at shrines but at his own residence, a small image of Śrī Kṛṣṇa. He decorated this image, sang songs to it, gave offering to it, played with it, indeed he made it his one single companion. God was worshipped as his child.

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¹ *Rahasyatrayasāra*: Gurparamparāprabhāvam.

slight intimation of this attitude was already made by Śrī Kulaśekhara when he in the person of Devaki sang cradle songs to Kṛṣṇa¹. but this reaches a total action in Viṣṇucitta’s life. It is mentioned in *Īśvara Samhitā* that there are two kinds of

icon-worship. Svārhta and parārtha. That form which is worshipped by any individual at his own home as his personal companion, who protects him and grants him fruits is svārtham, whereas the communal deity installed in the temples is called parārtham, Prapatti can be made at either place. Viṣṇucotta worshipped in both ways as he seems to have supplied flower garlands to the God at the Śrīvilliputtur temple also, in addition to worshipping at home. Both are efficient as objects of worship and are to be known as one God only.

The child mother relation as pointed out was already utilized by Śrī Kulaśekhara just as the lover and beloved relationship was utilized by Śaṭhakopa (in this *Tiruviruttam* and *iruvoymozhi*) and Śrī Kulaśekharta (*Perumāḷ Tirumozhi V*), and very early by Tirumaḷiśai's Nānmukan Tiruvandādi, v.39, where the Āḷvār says that He will draw a mystic omen-circle on sand a practice common among all young maidens waiting for their beloved to prophesy whether they will be successfully met. This whole process of expression of the relationship between man and God which is intimated to be one of dependence of man on God is reversed or inverted in the child-mother or father relationship which psychologically speaking is a defensive reaction of the ideal of non-seeking of anything from the Divine who is All and knows what the individual is and should be in his Divine Nature. Man's fullest surrender is only

¹ *Perumāḷ Tirumozhi, VI*

for the utter belonging to the Divine seeking nothing, asking nothing, and being nothing apart from him. this niṣkāma is the fullest point of surrender too as it is in karma or jñāna . this is a very unique development and most luminously is it clear in the experiences of Śrī Kulaśekhara. Tiruppān Āḷvār expanded the teaching of Śaṭhakopa and praised above all the important place that Arcā-worship and surrender to it means. Godā or Āndāl, the foster – daughter of Viṣṇucitta (Periyāḷvār), in a very comprehensive work revealed a path of transformation of the love consciousness to the highest level of Supramental union with God with the help of Ācāryas and worship of God as the beloved. Bhakti here was

transformed into supreme be premā or p̄rīt. Tirumangai Āḷvār, the most prolific hymnist, has praised the utter renunciation of self and felling of kārpaṇya or helplessness or akimcanya as the most essential fact about śaraṇāgati which leads to liberation. In this very important element of kārpaṇya and akimcanya there is built up the entire foundation of a total transformation due to a total surrender or offering or sacrifice.

Tondaradippodi āḷvār accepted the doctrine of the Absolute devotion to be identical with the theory of akimcanya. In other respects his loyalty to the worship of the Arcā is clearly visible.

This brief survey of the bhakti as viewed by the āḷvār clearly reveals that what they were inculcating was not the mere bhakti of devotional path prescribed to the orthodox followers of Vedic knowledge and Vedic karma as the fulfillment of their desires in God. On the contrary the bhakti of the āḷvār was definitely not limited to the Vedic jñāna or the Vedic karma but to Parama bhakti which is expressed by the total surrender of the individual seeking refuge and liberation and all fulfillment in and through God only. God dwells in man and all and it is man's business to make the body the temple of worship of the divine in man and in all. The Gītā intimated, as we have shown, that he who has the kārpaṇya, he who has found no other refuge, for him the only one course open is to surrender to the Divine. As is the goal so should be the means; exalted ends require exalted powers of the Divine to lead man to them. This leads to the highest happiness, highest knowledge, highest union.

All the Ācāryas of the Śrīvaiṣṇavas beginning with Ālandār or Yāmunacārya accepted this to be the central truth of the Gītā. Śrī Rāmānuja, though he has not taught in the Śrī Gītābhāṣya about the efficacy of prapatti, he, in his Śaraṇāgati-gadya discussing the subsidiary nature of prapatti to bhakti-yoga, said that prapatti is an independent means to God. In bhakti yoga there are certain limitations as to varṇa and āśrama, not so in prapatti or refuge – seeking; the only qualification for prapatti is to have no qualification, not even

ability to seek help oneself. For that is the state of utter for total disappearance of oneself from the field of action and it the state of utter vacuity of dynamic reception of help from the Divine. Into such a vessel alone does the Supramental Grace descend.

Prapatti in addition to its general efficacy makes one not merely a sage and superman or siddha; it makes it possible for man to enjoy God here and now. The āḷvār s in one sense can be said to be, in the language of the Advaital Jīvanmuktas, vibhūtis of the divine and not freed souls. To Tirmuḷīśai āḷvār came the great truth that mind is not an obstruction or a means to vision of the Divine (N.T. 81). Asking himself the question whether happiness could be had only in the state of realise, the same āḷvār says that happiness in the state of samsāra even can be had for its is after all not due to place that happiness results but due to the uninterrupted possession of the Love of God and his reciprocating Grace.

“O Lord decorated with honed tualsi garlad |
even though I attain the blessedness immeasurable
on attain Heave on separation from you feet.
The love of thee which on separation from your feet
The love of ten-fold rope (of devotion) firm, will
Itself become by Happniess (*inbāmakum*).” (N.T. 83)
This vies is also that of Āndāl and others.

The āḷvār is bhakti thus is more compressive and fundamentally universal devotion of God through surrender entire or toil of the individual, whose all actions are refunded to the Divine, in and through whom the Divine Godhead acts through His perennial grace. It does not recognize difference of caste or even other types of adhikāra or fitness or capacity. This bhakti is the universal acceptance of God’s temporal and divine or transcendent Universe, wherein the devotees shall move as a child and companion and beloved and servant of the Divine, free an perfect, with a consciousness this it divinized.