

Background:

The term **Azhwar** literally means "**one who has dived deep into the depths of the transcendental bliss or God experience**" It is a Tamizh ("Tamil" as often known) term. Tamil is the ancient language of South India also called the Southern language in contrast to Sanskrit, which often is referred to as the Northern language. Azhwars were born in South India in regions now referred to as the Tamilnadu along the banks of some of the well-known rivers of this region such as the Tamirabarani, Palaru and Kaaveri. They were from different walks of life as well as from a variety of social strata. They all had one thing in common. They were great devotees of the Lord. They experienced the Transcendental Reality in all its varied manifest and unmanifest aspects. Their experience taught them that the manifested cosmos and all the material world with all its variety of life forms is like the body of the cosmic soul, the underlying Truth pervading the whole both inside and out. They saw therefore the wonder of it all in its full extent. The all-pervading Almighty was a personal experience for them. They saw Him in everything since everything existed in Him. The world was not an illusion or any less truth than the abstract consciousness. The reality of life expressing the divine bore a fuller meaning to world and life in general despite its limitations in space and time. The deity in the temple became a Reality through their personal experience of Him. The Love for His glory became the theme of the outpourings of their heart. All of their experiences came out as beautiful poetry in the vernacular Tamil. There were twelve Azhwars in all and their combined works collected and available to us consist of four thousand verses of beautiful poetry called **Naalaayira Divya Prabhandham**.

The Azhwars through their poetry, brought out the deep meaning of the Vedas and the Upanishads in simple vernacular thus making the philosophy of the religion practical, simple and readily available to the masses of people. They were revolutionaries in as much as they spoke out against the blind ritualistic practice of the religion followed by the priests.

The Transcendental Reality has a cosmic but very personal form for the Azhwars. He is the storehouse of all glorious and flawless attributes and He is described to be no other than Narayana The literal meaning of the term is " the

ultimate abode of all embodied souls ". Narayana is described to be lying on His serpent bed in the cosmic waters in meditative sleep. From Him and by His Will arises the entire cosmos as well as the trinity controlling the creation, the sustenance and destruction. At the end of many millions of cycles of creation He withdraws the cosmos to Himself in its entirety. The mercy or compassion of the Lord is His best attribute and is co-eternal with the Lord in a personal form represented by the divine mother Sri also known as Lakshmi, who is described to be eternally resident in His heart. Thus Narayana is always referred to as Sriman Narayana. The cosmos becomes His body and He is the soul and the inner controller. Azhwars point to the ever-flowing grace of the Lord and its easy accessibility to genuine call for help in total surrender. They recommend this path of love as the simplest and above all the surest means of redemption of the embodied soul over all other paths. This theology of the Azhwars, which can be described as **Sri Vaishnavism** forms the basis for the interpretation of the Brahma Sutra and the Upanishads by Sri Ramanuja the great teacher who lived around 1000 A.D. The teachings of Sri Ramanuja and his philosophy have been described as **Visishta Advaitam** meaning "qualified non-dualism". He was inspired and influenced greatly by the philosophical poetry of the Azhwars.

Historical Perspectives:

Biased Interpretation of Ancient Indian History:

1. Historical perspectives of the times of the Azhwars must certainly take into account how the whole Indian History has been distorted and presented in a chronology to suit the theory of " Aryan Invasion" advanced primarily for political purposes. The theory was only based on linguistic similarities between Sanskrit and the European languages. The term "Arya" which simply means "respected" or "noble" was misinterpreted as to represent a race. The Vedic battle described in Rg Veda was thought to represent the winning of a fair colored race over a dark colored aboriginals or the Dravidan race. When Harappan civilization was found in western India, it was thought to have been destroyed by the invading Aryans although no such proof of this was ever shown.

2. Another point in the datum line of Indian History is the time of the so-called invasion of India by Alexander, the Greek warrior. Alexander's true contemporary was Chandra Gupta Vikramaditya of the Andhra Britya Surya vamsa Kings of Pataliputra who were good friends of Cyrus the great of Persia. Alexander's army never won against the Pataliputra army.

Instead of this Chandra Gupta, they equated the emperor Nanda Vamsa Chandra Gupta, founder of the Maurya dynasty (who had flag and seal with peacock as emblem) who ruled Pataliputra one thousand years before the time of Alexander. This Chandra Gupta's grandson was the great emperor Asoka who sent missionaries abroad to all civilized nations of the day to spread Buddhism. No missionaries were ever sent to Greece at his time. No one finds this incongruous and yet they claim that his grand father was Alexander's contemporary. In addition Greek History mentioned Samudra Gupta, the great General and son of Chandra Gupta Vikramaditya. It is absurd to equate Chandra Gupta Maurya with Chandra Gupta Vikramaditya since the former's son was actually Bindusara who was the father of Asoka and not Samudra Gupta. Thus one 1000 years of Indian History is simply swallowed and postdated by 1000 years.

3. Astronomical details provided in the epics like MahaBharatha were dismissed and history as recorded in the Puranas simply discounted. Conclusions thus reached on false premise and bias give such silly unrealistic dates for Rg Veda as 1500 B.C. and the epics like Ramayana and MahaBharatha as 500. B.C. This biased view is further enhanced due to ignorance of Tamil tradition and literature.

New Lines of Evidence:

The term "Arya" simply means "good" or "noble". It is a term, which only has a connotation of respect. It does not refer to a race or a language. When Buddha presented his tenets as "Arya Dharma" "noble law" it had no racial slur at his time. When Krishna criticized Arjuna for giving up his arms in the battlefield he called his behaviour "un-arya" or ignoble. Even in Rg Veda it is used primarily as an adjective. Harappan type escavations have been discovered elsewhere in the Indian subcontinent. In addition several lines of evidence now have been accumulated which prove conclusively:

1. There has been no external invasion of the kind proposed by Max-Muller and others.
2. The Vedic civilization originated in Bharat and the entire subcontinent had essentially the same basic culture, religion and philosophy despite some differences in language or the local customs.
3. The mathematical evidence of early Sutra writers of Sulbasutras clearly establishes the trail of mathematics, which leads from India to Greece and Babylonia.
4. The Astronomical details provided in Rg Veda, the Sutras and Brahmanas the early post Vedic literature as well as the epics like MahaBharatha have now been verified to be true details and clearly provide further precise way of dating periods and events described in these literature.

There is good literary, astronomical, mathematical and geological evidence to support the view that the early Rg Vedic period is no later than 3750.B.C.

It corresponds to the civilization, which had settled along the Saraswathi River. The Harappan civilization is in fact a late Saraswathi river civilization, which came to an end due to a long drought, which lasted for three hundred years or so. This caused the people to move not only east but also to the south and the west. This period is considered to correspond to the period of Sutras. Several Sutric authors such as Baudhayana and Apasthamba were in fact from the south. These lines of analysis give much credence to the Puranas, which give great detail about various dynasties and their times.

'Dhra' in Dravida simply means moving down. Thus those moved south of Vindhya were called Dravidas. The philosophy and teachings enshrined in the Vedas and the Upanishads are clearly identifiable in all of the ancient writings in Tamil is another clear proof of the unity of the Bharatiya people (people of India). The philosophic tenets seen in the poetry of the Azhwars is another testimony of this evidence.

Historical Details:

The historical details regarding the actual dates of the advent of the Azhwars are not actually available. Sri Ramanuja (1017.A.D.), his spiritual teacher Yamunacharya and his ancestor Sri Natha Muni (823 A.D.) were truly inspired by the Azhwars and their works. Thus they certainly predated these Acharyas or teachers. The oldest of them are the Mudal Azhwars. The youngest of these twelve Azhwars was Thirumangai Azhwar. The latter is considered to have been a contemporary of Sri Jnana Sambhandha one of the earliest four Naayanmars (Saivaite saints of Tamilnadu). His life account includes a meeting with the latter and winning a challenge posed by him. Thus he has been dated to around the 8th century A.D.

The most ancient of the Azhwars were the Mudal Azhwars. Very little is known about their full name even. They were known only by their nicknames given to them. The fourth in the list who is also contemporary of the Mudal Azhwars was Sri Thirumazhisai piran.

Traditional dates given by the earliest available works on the life of the Azhwars like the **Divya Suri Charitam** place their advent to Dvaparayugam. Since they also sing lovingly about Lord Krishna and his childhood pranks and the divine play they must also have lived sometime after the advent of Sri Krishna. The latter lived around the time of MahaBharatha . Vyasa MahaBharatha provides many detailed astronomical data relating to Krishna's birth, Bhishma's death, the date of the MahaBharatha war from which the date of MahaBharatha has been fixed to be around 3100 B.C. The beginning of the Kali Yuga has been calculated to be 10 th Jan 3104 B.C. based on the fact that the five planets Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn were at 300 degrees (MidShravishta-The initial point of the Zodiac of Vedanga Jyothisha). The effects of the age of Kali are supposed to have started after Sri. Krishna left this earth.

Tamil Heritage:

Tamil heritage has its origin with Sage Agasthya who figures in the great epic Ramayana. He is credited to have been the author of Tamil grammar called

Agathyam. He was also the founder of the First **Tamil Sangham** in the capital city of " Then Mathura " (South Mathura) of the Pandya kingdom of that period. The Pandya kingdom of the Ramayana period is referred to more than once in Valmiki's Ramayanam. King Dasaratha invites kings from different states including the Pandya and Chola Desa for the coronation of Prince Rama. Again King Sugreeva gives detailed description of the kingdoms of the south to his ministers when he gives them direction to organize the search for Sri Seetha. The date of the first Tamil Sangham is therefore the same period as the great epic of Ramayana. On account of the sea engulfing the land, the Pandya King had to move east and establish Kapatapuram as their new capital. The second Tamil Sangham flourished at this time. Again sea rising and causing another deluge forced the Pandya King to move again more in land and the modern Madura became the capital. The third Tamil Sangham flourished till 500 B.C. with the poet Nakkeerar as the president.

The earliest Tamil literature that is available is **Tholkappiam** which is the earliest available Tamil grammar written by Tholkappiar. In the Kalaviyal of Tholkappiam there is an annotation by Erayanar who gives a short history of the two earlier Sanghams, their poets, their works and the kings who supported them. Among the second Tamil Sangham members clear mention is made of "Thuvarai Koman". Thuvarai means Dwaraka and Koman means Lord. Thus the reference is clearly indicative of Lord Krishna who must have been the contemporary of the second Tamil Sangham.

The poetic works of the Mudal Azhwars and Thirumazhisai Piran have marked resemblance to the Sangham literature. The lack of inclusion of their works among the Sangham literature cannot in any way be construed to mean that their works must have come after the Sangham literature. Since the Azhwars were recluse and often led a God intoxicated life, interaction with kings or other poets of the day had no place in it.

Srimad Bhagavatha Maha Purana and the Advent of the Azhwars:

In book eleven of **Srimad Bhagavatha Mahapurana** verses **38 to 40** in the **5th** chapter as part of a discussion between King Nimi and sage Karabhajana describe the advent of the Azhwars in the Kali age.

" In the Kali age men devoted to Lord Narayana will be born in large numbers in the Dravida territory where in flow the rivers Tamraparni, Krtamala (Vaigai), Payaswini (Paalaar), the most sacred Kaaveri, Mahanadi (Periyar) which runs westwards"

It may be noted that Nammaazhwar and Madhurakavi Azhwar were born on the banks of Tamraparni. Periyazhwar and Sri Andal in a place close to river Vaigai , the Mudal Azhwars and Thirumazhisai Piran near Paalaar and Thodaradippodi Azhwar, Thiruppaanaazhwar and Thirumangai Azhwar near river Kaaveri. The term Kali Yuga may be taken to mean either the early part or the later part or both.

Srimad Bhagavatha Purana is accepted as authentic ancient work by Sri Vedanta Desika and has been annotated by Sri Madhva (12 th century).

Some scholars question the authorship of sage Vyasa for the Bhagavatha Purana and the time of writing of Bhagavatha Purana. This viewpoint however has no definite basis of evidence. Since Azhwars's poetry have a tremendous reference to childhood history of Sri Krishna and very little or in fact no detail is given about Sri Krishna's life in Vyasa MahaBharatha some modern scholars wish to propose that Srimad Bhagavatham must have been written by either Azhwars or somebody familiar with Azhwars' works.

One thing we can be certain of is that Srimad Bhagavatham is unlikely to have been written by Azhwars. A simple point can be made to prove this point. Srimad Bhagavatham gives great details of hell and how bad karmas will lead to the soul reaching hell (Naraka). Azhwars point out in no uncertain terms the shackles of the repeated cycles of birth and death in this world which the embodied soul has to go through is in fact the "Naraka". They bring the hope of sure freedom from being thrown into this by simply reaching out to the Lord.

Not only Azhwars's verses convey this directly, this has also been reiterated by the great acharyas who had come in the tradition of Sri Vaishnavism including all the commentarians who wrote extensively on Azhwars's Pasurams (Poetry).

Conclusions:

Some modern scholars place the time of the Azhwars from about the 6th century to about the end of the 8th century. The evidence for this is also somewhat sketchy and cannot be taken clearly proven since very little historic evidence exists in the case of Mudal Azhwars. There is no reason to totally dismiss traditional dates as false in the absence of evidence to the contrary. If traditional dates are taken into account as well, one will have to place their advent between the early part of Kali Yuga or at least from the time of the second or the third Tamil Sangham to the modern age of 8th century A.D.

Whatever has been their time period it is in no way a hindrance to our enjoyment of their lovely poetry, which will always remain a great source of inspiration for generations to come.

References:

1. The Holy Lives of the Azhwars or the Dravida Saints
Alkondavalli Govindacharya
Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute Publication
1982
2. Philosophy and Theistic Mysticism of the Alwars
S.M.S.Chari

Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Limited, Delhi 1997

3. Srimad Bhagavatha MahaPurana

GitaPress. Gorakhpur 1971.

4. "Ancient Heritage of Tamils" by V.G.Ramachandran

In " Mythology to History through Astronomy" edited by N.Mahalingam

N.I.A Publications, Pollachi, TamilNadu 1980.

5. Vedic "Aryans" and the Origins of Civilization

Navaratna S.Rajaram and David Frawley

A literary and Scientific perspective

W.H.Press. Quebec 1995.

