

Sri THONDARADIPODI AZHWAR

The empire of the Chola kings of Tamil Nadu, embraced by the holy *Cauvery* River, was a lush fertile land that was the cradle of the bhakti movement. Within it lie about 40 *Sri Vaishnava divya deshas* close to each other that are hallowed by their association with the leelas of the Lord and the anubhavas of the Azhwars who sung about them. One among them is *Thiru Mandangudi*, which is the avathara kshetra of Thondaradippodi Azhwar. He is believed to be the amsa of the Lord's "*Vaijayanti*" (his favourite ornament) and was born in a Brahmin family. The family thought of Sriman Narayana as their treasure and bhakti to him as their only tradition. The child came with a divine aura around him on Kettai Nakshatram of Margazhi month and was named "Vipra Narayana".

Even as child, he showed a sweet, satvic nature and was well trained by his father in scriptures. He remained detached from worldly life and was wedded to his service to the Lord and to his devotees. He came to be called as "Thondaradippodi" referring to his humility and his devotion to bhagavathas.

Once, he left Mandangudi on a pilgrimage and headed towards Srirangam, the foremost among divya deshas. He refers to it as Periya Kovil "மருவிய பெரிய கோயில் மதில் திருவரங்கம்". Sri Ranganatha captivated his mind in the very first darshan and the Azhwar who came on a tour remained there in a grove near the temple permanently. He could not bear to go away from the Lord whose beauty and grace he describes in his pasuram

"பச்சை மாமலை போல் மேனி பவளவாய் கமலச்செங்கண்
அச்சுதா! அமரரேறே! ஆயர்தம் கொழுந்தே! என்னும்
இச்சுவை தவிர யான் போய் இந்திர லோகமாளும்
அச்சுவை பெரினும் வேண்டேன் அரங்கமானகருளானே".

He constantly recaptured the *soulabhya* of the Lord who lay down facing Lanka in the south to bless his devotee Vibhishana who was disconsolate at the prospect of separation from him. He enjoys the mercy of the Lord in his Ramavathara, the captivating charm of his Krishnavathara and his special grace

towards bhaktas like Gajendra in his work “*Thiru Maalai*” (45 verses). To him, Srirangam is the only temple and Sri Ranganatha is the only deity to fill his heart. "தெண் திரை சூழ் அரங்கனையே தெய்வம் என்றான்". There is a saying in Tamil that one who does not know Thiru Maalai cannot know the Lord, "திருமாலை அறியாதார் திருமாலை அறியமாட்டார்". He also sang the திருப்பள்ளியெழுச்சி (*Thirupalliyezhuchi*) to awaken the Lord which is recited in daily "aradhana".

The Azhwar created a beautiful garden full of fragrant flowers and *Tulasi*. He used to spend all his time in his garden tending it and making beautiful garlands that glimmered with love and care. He lived in a small hut within the garden, visiting the temple thrice everyday to have darshan.

While the Azhwar was thus immersed in his divine consciousness, the Lord decided to enact a leela to bring out to the world His commitment to His devotees. Around this time, there lived in Srirangam two glamorous, bewitching court dancers named Devi and Devadevi. They were extremely proud of their beauty and proficiency in fine arts and they enjoyed royal patronage. Once they came to the temple to dance before the Lord during Utsava and were drawn into the Azhwar's garden, which captivated them. There they met the Azhwar engrossed in his work, his mind constantly meditating on the Lord. Devadevi fell in love with him and was upset to note that he paid no attention to her. Her sister warned her about getting infatuated with a man who was above the influence of worldly desires.

Devadevi, enraged by this advice, swore to turn the attention of this saint towards her charms within a month. She left with her sister to return to the garden dressed in simple clothes and approached the Azhwar. She fell at his feet and begged him to accept her as his disciple seeking to perform service to him and to the Lord. The Azhwar, a simple soul, accepted her at face value and was pleased to watch the commitment with which she served him. Slowly the Lord's Maya diverted the Azhwar's attention to the girl and the girl herself got involved more than what she bargained for.

After sometime, she expressed a desire to go back to her house to see her mother and sister. The Azhwar, unable to tolerate separation, left with her and settled down in her place. Soon he was deprived of all his wealth by the girl's

mother who kept demanding more money all the time. Finally when the Azhwar had nothing to give, the mother turned him out. He returned in deep sorrow to his garden while Devadevi mourned his sorry state and her helplessness.

Sri Ranganatha interfered to help the Azhwar. He went to Devadevi's mother calling himself as the Azhwar's servant and handed over a big gold vessel from the temple to her. The lady rejoiced over the very valuable gift and reluctant to lose the Azhwar, sent Sri Ranganatha back to invite the Azhwar. The Lord went to his devotee carrying the message and the Azhwar rushed back to his beloved. The very next morning, the temple priest noticed the valuable vessel missing and reported the loss to the king. The king ordered a massive search and the vessel was found in the dancer's house. Devadevi's mother pleaded that the vessel was brought by the Azhwar's servant while the Azhwar swore he had no servant nor had he any valuable wealth. The king refused to believe him and locked him up in a cell where the Azhwar spent a sleepless night pleading to the Lord.

That night Sri Ranganatha appeared in the king's dream and explained that he had chosen to go on the Azhwar's behalf to help him. The Lord made it clear that He was a devoted servant of his bhaktas and chose to humble himself in any way for them. The king woke up in the morning realising that he had committed a grave sin of ill-treating a great devotee. He had heard of Sri Krishna going as messenger for the Pandavas and as Arjuna's charioteer during the war. He realized that he had seen a miracle enacting itself before his own eyes and rushed to free the Azhwar. He later took him in a bedecked palanquin to the temple and watched the Azhwar rush to the sanctum sanctorum to have a darshan of the Lord who came to his service in all his mercy. From that day the Azhwar went back to his sadhana and service to the Lord and bhaktas. Devadevi joined him in his humble abode. She and the king turned ardent devotees of the Azhwar and spent their lives at his feet holding onto them as the means for their spiritual progress.

The lives of great souls like Thondaradippodi Azhwar transformed the lives of people who lived around them. Their works continue to live after them through ages enabling us to sing the praise of the Lord and to share the mystical experience of these great souls.

"மற்றொன்றும் வேண்டா மனமே மதில் அரங்கர்
கற்றினம் மேய்த்த கழலிணைக் கீழ் - உற்ற
திருமாலை பாடும் சீர்த் தொண்டரடிப்பொடி எம்
பெருமாளை எப்பொழுதும் பேசு"

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