

Thirumangai Mannan

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Thirumangai Azhwar, the last in the line up of the Azhwar saints was an interesting, colourful personality quite different from the other Azhwars in temperament. He was a versatile person; a courageous warrior, an efficient and powerful chieftain of Thirumangai, a great poet with such proficiency in the Tamizh language that nectar like words flowed in torrents from his lips. The Azhwar is known by many names like Arulmari, Kaliyan, Parakalan and Thirumangai Mannan. He was passionate about anything he pursued, whether it was wooing a bewitching damsel or building temples. The Azhwar comes out as a rebel who threw rules to the wind when they didn't suit him like in his Periya Thirumadal where he transforms into a lovelorn damsel the Parakala Nayaki to profess his love for the divine. When it was pointed out to him that in Tamizh culture, a Nayaki expressing her love in the form of a Madal in public was not accepted, he retorted saying "I am well aware of the Tamizh code but I choose to embrace the rules of Sanskrit which allows this freedom to women!"

மானோக்கின்
அன்ன நடையார் அலரேச ஆடவர்மேல்
மன்னு மடலூரார் என்பதோர் வாசகமும்
தென்னுரையில் கேட்டறிவதுண்டு அதனையாம்
தெளியோம்
மன்னும் வடநெறியே வேண்டினோம் (பெரிய திருமடல்)

"Maan nokkin anna nadayar alaresa aadavarmel
mannu madaloorar enbathor vasagamum
tennuraiyil kettu arivadundu adanai yam teliyom
mannum vadaneriye vendinom!"

The Azhwar leaves a lot autobiographical information about himself in the last verse of his works as in "Irun tamizh nool pulavan mangayalan mannu thol seer vandarai taar kaliyan senkayalan sen chol malai vallavar teedilare!" (Periya Tirumozhi 1-7-10)

இருந்தமிழ் நூற்புலவன்
மங்கையாளன் மன்னு தொல்சீர் வண்டறைதூர்க்கலியன்
செங்கையாளன் செஞ்சொல்மாலை வல்லவர் தீதிலரே
(பெரியதிருமொழி 1-7-10)

There is an amusing anecdote about this tendency of this Azhwar to speak a lot about his own achievements while singing the praise of the Lord. There lived in the temple of Srirangam a devotee who was employed for cleaning lamps known as Vilakku Pichchai. This guy used to keep talking to himself while working. Lord Ranganatha reclining in the Sanctum sanctorum started conversing with this man out of sheer boredom. He in turn used to report to the Lord all that was going on in the temple. Not that the Lord didn't know the news but he chose to amuse himself with this diversion. Villakku Pichai soon grew a little proud and pompous with this special attention he received. Once he heard the chanters in the temple reciting the Periya Tirumozhi verse "Senkamala" wherein the Azhwar speaks about his various titles a bit more than usual. Pichai brought this to the attention of the Lord and said "Your devotee starts by singing your praise and ends up singing more about himself!" Lord Ranganatha got annoyed with this piece of impertinence and remarked "So what is wrong with that? All the fame of Kaliyan is due to my grace, his devotion to me and is my praise indirectly!" After this interlude, the Lord withdrew into his Archa code of not speaking to anyone. The above episode mentioned in the commentary reveals that the Peria Perumal loved Kaliyan and his verses so much that he would not tolerate any criticism of them.

Thirumangai Azhwar was the most prolific writer among the Azhwar saints with six Prabandhas to his credit. They are in a variety of verses Aasu kavi, Vistara kavi, Madhura kavi and Chithra kavi. The verses presented in a wide range of poetic meters reveal his command over the Tamizh language and earned him the title of Naalu kavi perumal. It is said that in a confrontation with a Nayanmar the Azhwar entered a poetic contest and won the duel hands down. The opponent gave away his spear (Vel) as a token of submission. To mark this, the Azhwar is always seen in Archa form with the Vel held in his hand. It is also customary to install the Archa form of his consort Kumudavalli Naachiyar along with the Azhwar as she was instrumental in bringing him into the fold of devotion to the Lord and Bhagavatas. The bewitching form of the Azhwar with his consort at his Avatara Kshetra of Thiruvali Thirunagari captures the hearts of all and devotees who live around the place cannot stay away without a darshan of their Azhwar for long.

Among the Nalayiram, Kaliyan's Thirumadals and Thiruvezhukootrirkkai, a Chithirakkavi, which forms a chariot in words, are very special. Aaravamudha Azhwan, the Lord of Thirukkudandai who is held to be very enchanted with the Arulicheyal and Azhwar saints has this unique privilege to be adored by Kaliyan with this remarkable work which is displayed prominently as a painting in the front corridor of the huge temple. Thirukkudandai also was the

first Kshetra to receive this Azhwar's Mangalasanam in the very first decad of Peria Thirumozhi. "Soozh punal kudandaye thozhodu"

சூழ்புனல் குடந்தையே தொழுது (பெரியதிருமொழி 1-1-2)

In his Periya Thirumadal and Siriya Thirumadal, the Azhwar sings as the Parakala Nayaki. This bridal mysticism is an expression of the overflowing, boundless love for the divine. The Azhwars speak in their own words and voice when in full command of their self and speak as the Nayaki when their love overflows. "Gnana dasayil tan pecchu premadasayil pen pecchu" ("ஞான திசையில் தன் பேச்சு ப்ரேமதிசையில் பெண் பேச்சு") says the commentary. The overflowing Bhagavad Anubhavam needs to be channelised like the overflowing water of a reservoir in the rainy season which is released through numerous sluice gates. In such situations we find the saints speaking in many voices as the Nayaki, the Nayaki's mother voicing concern over her daughter's state and as the Nayaki's friend. In both the Madals, the Azhwar sings about numerous Divya deshas but dedicates the works to the Lord of Thirunaraiyur in the last verse.

Oora dozhien ulagariya onnudaleer!
Seerar mulaithadangal seralavum- parellam
Anrongi ninralandan ninra thirunaraiyur
Manronga oorvan madal.(Siriya Thirumadal)

ஊரா தொழியேன் உலகறிய ஒண்ணுதலீர்
சீரார் முலைத்தடங்கள் சேரளவும் - பாரெல்லாம்
அன்றோங்கி நின்றளந்தான் நின்ற திருநறையூர்
மன்றோங்க ஊர்வன் மடல் (சிறிய திருமடல்)

Mannir podippoosi vandiraikkum poochhoodi
Pennai madalpidiththu pinpine- annal
Thirunaraiyoor ninrapiran ter pogum veedi
Poru maraiyal selvam polindu (Periya Thirumadal)

மண்ணிற் பொடிப்பூசி வண்டிறைக்கும் பூச்சூடி
பெண்ணை மடல்பிடித்துப் பின்பின்னே - அண்ணல்
திருநறையூர் நின்றபிரான் தேர்போகும் வீதி
பொருமறையாச் செல்வம் பொலிந்து (பெரிய திருமடல்)

Thirumangai Azhwar went to Thirunaraiyur and sang his delectable verses bewitched by Nambi's Soundaryam. Thirunaraiyur Nambi was also the Azhwar's Acharyan and therefore commanded a special position in the Azhwar's heart. Later when Kaliyan returned to Srirangam the Peria Perumal with evident disappointment confronted him saying "Azhwar! You offered your special verses as Nayaki to Nambi!" The Azhwar tried to pacify Sri Ranganatha saying "But I built the huge rampart walls (Madil) of your temple to make it fit to be called the Peria Kovil. This is a special kainkaryam offered to you alone!" Unconvinced by this explanation given to placate him, Lord Ranganatha is said to have retorted saying "I would have been happier if you had offered your Madal to me and built the Madil for Nambi." This charming anecdote reveals the magic of Kaliyan's words that kept the Lord spell bound. It also reminds us that what protects the Lord and 'SriVaishnavaSri' is the benedictory words of the saints not the massive walls of bricks, stones and mortar built around them.

This Azhwar's devotion to the Archa form is incomparable. The idol form was vibrantly alive to him and responded to his faith and entreaties. He was truly the pioneer of the modern trend of Pilgrimage tourism. One must keep in mind that the Azhwar reached out covering distant Kshetras like Salagramam, Badri, Naimisaaranyam, Ahobilam in days when most modern comforts were unknown and transport was primitive. Among the 108 Divya deshas, 86 have been visited and sung by him unlike the Mangalasanam of Nammazhwar who never stirred from his abode under the Tamarind tree at Thirukkurugoor. All Nammazhwar's verses on Kshetras were sung with his Divya Drushti. But Thirumangai Azhwar took great pains and traveled to remote places with great zeal. In his first Prabandham the Periya Thirumozhi he dedicated decads to each Divyadesha but in later works started singing many temples together. Periyavachan Pillai's illuminating commentary throws light on why the Azhwar did this. "The Azhwar is getting older nearing his departure to Sri Vaikunta. His immense love for Archa makes him recall all the earlier anubhava. This can be compared to a young girl leaving her home after marriage. She goes around visiting all the dear ones recalling her joyous days with them and taking leave with a heavy heart." This is a sample from his Siriya Thirumadal

"Seerar Thiruvengadame thirukkovoalooore madil kacchi ooragame peragame peramarudiruttan
vellaraye vekkave perali thankal naraiyoor tiruppuliyoor aaramam soozhnda arangam
kanamangai karar mani nirakkannanoor vinnagaram seerar kanapuram serai thiruvazhundoor

karar kudandai kadigai kadanmallai erar pozhil soozh idavendai neermalai seeraarum maaliruncholai thirumogur paror pughazhum vadari vada madurai ooraaya ellam ozhiyame nanavanai.”

“சீரார் திருவேங்கடமே திருக்கோவ
லூரே, மதிள்கச்சிஊரகமே பேரகமே
பேரா மருதிறுத்தான் வெள்ளறையே வெஃகாவே
பேராலி தண்கால் நறையூர் திருப்புலியூர்
ஆராமம் சூழ்ந்த அரங்கம் - கணமங்கை
காரார் மணிநிறக் கண்ணனார் விண்ணகரம்
சீரார் கணபுரம் சேறை திருவமுந்தூர்
காரார் குடந்தை கடிகை கடன்மல்லை
ஏரார் பொழில்சூழ் இடவெந்தை நீர்மலை
சீராரும் மாலிருஞ்சோலை - திருமோகூர்
பாரோர் புகழும் வதாரி வடமதுரை
ஊராய எல்லாம் ஒழியாமே - நானவனை”
(சிறிய திருமடல்)

Thirumangai Azhwar’s devotion to Archa form was total that he rejected Moksha, the land of eternal bliss where the Muktaatma remains close to the Lord in Celestial form, to be inferior to Archa worship in this world. “Erar muyal vittu kakkai pin povade” is his bold statement. He is using the analogy of a hunter pursuing a rabbit abandoning the chase to try and catch a crow flying in the sky. The rabbit is easier to capture and tastier too is the point here. Archa is likewise within our reach and is the abode of all auspicious attributes while the celestial form is beyond reach and the bliss it confers is only hearsay spoken by the scriptures. Archa anubhava is based on actual experience. To Thirumangai Azhwar the Lord came in person with his consort to give initiation through the Ashtakshari mantra when threatened with a sword. “Vaal valiyal mandiramkol mangayarkon”. The Azhwar’s love for Archa was special and he in turn demanded special treatment from the Lord. When he did not get such a treatment or response he threw a tantrum and poured out his anger in verses, as in the decad on Thiru Indaloor. The Azhwar reached the temple and found the doors closed and could not contain his disappointment. He said “O Lord of Indaloor! Scriptures speak of you as the omniscient one! But you seem to know

everything other than my presence here at your gate! The shashtras declare that your glorious form belongs to the bhaktas. What then is the point in closing the gates when I have come all the way to have your darshan and to sing your praise? Do not consider me to be a submissive bhakta like the other Azhwars! I cannot tolerate separation from you and I need regular doses of Archa Anubhavam for survival”. At another Kshetra, Thiruninravoor, there is yet another sweet episode that drives home the point that the Lord’s of Kshetras needed the Azhwar as much as the Azhwar needed them. The Azhwar was visiting and singing full decads on each temple Thiruvallor,

Thiruvallikeni, Thiruneermalai, Thirukkadal mallai, Thiruvidadendai in a sequential order, when the Goddess of Thiruninravoor drew the attention of the Lord saying “O Lord! Kaliyan the last among the Azhwars has passed by our temple and we were preoccupied playing a game of dice. If he doesn’t sing our praise our temple will never be known as a Divya Desha. So please invite him with befitting honours”. The Lord of the Kshetra did invite the Azhwar who made a passing reference to him as “Ninravoor nithilaththai” in his verses on Thirukkadalmallai. These two words from the lips of Kaliyan made this Kshetra one among the revered hundred and eight Divya Deshas.

Thirumangai Mannan was a man of action who did not stop with his oral tributes. He was a great temple builder and raised huge resources to renovate temples. He also praises other kings who were instrumental in such Kainkaryam in glowing words of adoration. His devotion to the other Azhwar saints and to Bhagavatas in general is legendary. His verse “Sen thamizh paaduvar thevar” is believed to be a reference to the other Azhwar saints. While he was rebuilding the walls of the Srirangam temple he was told that a particular spot used to be the spot where Thondaradipodi Azhwar raised a garden for his Pushpa Kainkaryam. As a mark of deference to the Azhwar, Kaliyan restructured the Madil around the hallowed spot. Kaliyan also started the practice of chanting Nammazhwar’s prabandhas before the Lord at Srirangam. To perform this Utsava he used to bring the Archa Moorti of Nammazhwar from Azhwar Thirunagari and take him back after the Utsava with all the temple honours. This marks Kaliyan’s devotion to Bhagavatas and is also the first instance of according a place to Thiruvaimozhi on par with the Vedas in temple worship. The Adhyayanotsavam was developed to its present form of Irappathu, Pagal pathu by Acharya Nadamuni with the chanting of the entire Nalayiram. The essence of

Thirumangai Azhwar's life and his words can be summarized as devotion to Archa, Bhagavatas and the Arulicheyal of the Azhwar saints.

“Vazhi parakalan vazhi kalikanri
Vazhi kurayaloor vazh vendan
Vazhiyaro maayonai val valiyal Mandiram kol
Mangayarkon tooyon sudar mana vel.”

வாழி பரகாலன் வாழிகலிகன்றி
வாழி குறையலூர் வாழ்வேந்தன்
வாழியரோ மாயோனை வாள்வலியால் மந்திரங்கொள்
மங்கையர்கோன்
தூயோன் சுடர்மான வேல்.
