

Thiruppaanazhwar

The contribution of the Azhwar saints of Tamilnadu is a treasure quite unsurpassed in our heritage. Azhwars identified the true message of the Vedas and the Upanishads, often elusive even to the most learned, by their experience of the Divine, the transcendental reality. The concept of the transcendental Reality was not abstract and impersonal. They experienced the Reality in its totality, in all of its expressions, in and through all of its creation, in the transcendental pure state of consciousness and in the inner recesses of one's self. The outpourings of their devotion to that Supreme Person (Purushottama), Sriman Narayana flowed in the form of beautiful poetry studded with rich philosophy. Their experience of His divine incarnations was the pulsatile feeling of the Eternal Now. The icons ("His Archa avataara moorthies") in the temples, were alive and vibrant to their salutations. The philosophic hymns of the Azhwars (Naalaayira Divya prabandham) were therefore, beautiful, melodious and brought the Truth in a crystal clear fashion for even the common man to understand in his own vernacular. They in fact formed the basis for the philosophy of Visishtadvaita "Qualified non-dualism" propounded by the great Acharya Sri Ramanuja of later years.

Azhwars were twelve in number and they hailed from different walks of life and most of them were born in the region adjacent to the Cauveri and Tamirabarani rivers in Tamilnadu. Azhwars were revolutionaries of their times. They had no caste distinctions. For them, being in the devotional service of the divine alone mattered, the "thondakkulam" as stated by Sri Peri Azhwar in his Thiruppallandu. Although the details of their life stories are somewhat limited, what we know of them are truly elevating to all spiritual aspirants.

The story of Thiru Paanaazhwar is most simple and yet profound and touching to the heart. He was born and raised among the Paanars who were considered of low class and were not allowed to dwell with the so called high class people of the town. Azhwar on the other hand was completely immersed in divine love all his life with his mind fixed on the archa moorthy, Lord Sri Ranganatha. And eventually the Lord received him with great honours into his sanctum being carried literally on the shoulders by the high priest of the temple. The devotee who had been awaiting that moment all of his life, experienced the most sublime divine ecstasy which was

immortalized in the form of the verses of Amalan aadipiraan. Thiru Paanaazhwar himself merged completely with the Lord in His sanctum similar to Sri Aandal. The life of Thiru Paanaahwar should teach us to rise above all caste distinctions and give up all ego arising out of one's status in life. Furthermore, the status in life is neither an impediment nor important in spiritual quest and fulfillment.

Although Amalan aadipiraan consists of only ten verses, it is extremely beautiful and profoundly philosophic.

"மிக்க இறைநிலையும் மெய்யாம் உயிர் நிலையும்
தக்க நெறியும் தடையாகித் தொக்கியலும்
ஊழ்வினையும் வாழ்வினையும் ஓதும் குருகையர்கோன்
யாழின் இசை வேதத்து இயல் "

(திருவாய்மொழி தனியன்)

This verse by Sri Parasara Bhattar indicates that the five important things that one needs to know in one's life ("Artha panchakam"), are contained in the beautiful melodious music of the saint from Kurukai (Sri Nam Azhwar). The five things referred to are:

மிக்க இறைநிலை- (the nature of the Reality, the Lord),
மெய்யாம் உயிர்நிலை- (the nature of the self or the atma),
தக்க நெறி -(The way or the means)
தடையாகித் தொக்கியலும் ஊழ்வினை - (the obstacles)
வாழ்வினை - (the goal or what to be obtained).

Azhwars are unanimous in their definition of these five essential things. They emphasize the easy accessibility of the Lord, as opposed to His transcendental state. That is the reason for their ever loving hymns on the archa avataara moorthies in various holy shrines of the Lord. Thiru Paanazhwar's life is a testimony to this fact. The "Sareera Sareere Bhava" conveyed in their works implies that the physical world is the body of the Lord and the Lord represents the life and soul of the physical world. True knowledge consists in understanding this. This will lead to an awakened realisation of the relationship of the Jeeva to the Paramatma which is that of a servant and his beloved master. They show that the Lord is not only the way or the means but also the goal. The unconditional compassion

("nirhetuka kripa") the Lord has for His creation, becomes the means to overcome all bondage resulting from one's actions. One can find all of these and more in Thiru Paanaazhwar's ten verses of Amalan aadipiraan.

The encoded message of the verses is alluded to by the author in relationship to the "Om Kara" which is the nature of Brahman indicated by the first letter of the first three verses and "the way or the means" indicated by the first letter of the fifth, sixth and seventh verses namely பா து கை.. The latter refers to the sandals of the Lord (what resides under the Lord's holy feet). Surely the sages and the saints like the Azhwars who are immersed in divine love and experience and who reside forever under the feet of the Lord are our true guide and way to the Lord. "அளியனென்றருளி உன்னடியார்க்கு ஆட்படுத்தாய் " is what Sri Thondaradippodi Azhwar requests the Lord in Thiruppalli Yezhucchi. The very first line of the first verse of Amalan aadipiraan reads "அடியார்க்கென்னை ஆட்படுத்த விமலன்". Devotion to the devotees of the Lord is described to be one of the faultless ways by Sri Thirumazhisai Piraan

பழுதாகாதொன்றறிந்தேன் பாற்கடலான் பாதம்
வழுவாவகைநினைந்து வைகல்-தொழுவாரை
கண்டிறைஞ்சிவாழ்வார். Naanmukan Thiruvandadhi 89.

In Sri Vaishnava tradition, Sri Nam Azhwar himself represents Sri Paduka of Lord Sri Ranganatha for he is considered the foremost among the Azhwars. It was through his grace that Sri Nadamuni was able to obtain all of the Naalaayiram (the four thousand verses of the Azhwars). No wonder Swami Desikan was inspired to compose one thousand verses extolling Lord Sri Ranganatha's paduka ("Paduka sahasram").

Much like Sri Goda who refers to the Lord's unconditional compassion "ஆலின் இலையாய் | அருளேலோரெம்பாவாய்", Thiru Paanaazhwar also gets overwhelmed by His நிர் ஹேதுக க்ருபா and gets immersed in the beauty of the Lord who at the time of deluge protects all life forms from extinction as a child lying on the banyan leaf.

மால் தான் புகுந்த மட நெஞ்சம் மற்றதுவும்
பேறாகக் கொள்வனோ பேதைகள் -நீறாடி
தான் காணமாட்டாத தாரகலசேவடியை

யான் காணவல்லேற்கிது.

"Will I consider anything else desirable O'fools than my blessed heart wherein the Lord entered Himself so I can see His broad holy feet covered with flowers which even Rudra with ash covered body can not see".

So states Sri Thirumazhisai Piran in NaanMukan Thiruvandadhi 27.

Thiru Paanaazhwar exemplifies this feeling. For him there was no other goal to be desired and he wished to see nothing else with the eyes that had seen the Lord. என் அமுதனைக் கண்ட கண்கள் மற்றொன்றினைக் காணாவே.

These verses of the Azhwar inspired three great acharyas to write commentaries on them as indicated by the author. Among them, Sri Swami Desikan must have been especially attracted to the Azhwar's work as suggested by the title of his commentary namely "Muni Vahana Bhogam". It is classified under his "rahasya granthas - secret works". This is particularly striking since he wrote no commentary on other Azhwars' works. In addition he also composed a devotional hymn in Sanskrit "Bhagavat Dhyana Sopaanam" somewhat similar to Azhwar's work. The beautiful step by step description of the Lord's resplendent form from His holy feet to His crown helps one to focus one's attention on the divine.

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