

The Āzhwārs and Their Spiritual Legacy

The contribution made by the Āzhwārs of Tamil Nādu to Tamil heritage is quite unsurpassed. The term "ஆழ்வான்" ("*Āzhwān*") means "ஆழ்ந்து கிடப்பவன்" ("one who delves deeply into a chosen field and remains deeply immersed in it"). "ஆழ்வார்" "*Āzhwār*" is a term of respect. The Āzhwārs were a distinctive group of Tamil Vaishnava saints who delved deeply into the Divine through intense devotion or *Bhakti*. They experienced the Ultimate Reality in and through everything that they saw in the world of existence and poured their love and adoration for Him into beautiful poetry. The Reality that they experienced was not only transcendental but also all pervasive and immanent. Above all, the Reality was very personal and represented Sriman Nārāyanā ("*the support and the abode of hosts of souls*") with all auspicious and glorious attributes. The physical world is like the body of the Lord and the Lord is the life and soul of the physical world. The most important attribute of the Lord is His compassion, represented by "Sri" who eternally resides in His heart. "Sri" is mother Lakshmi, Who intercedes on behalf of the embodied souls and helps in their ultimate redemption. Hence Nārāyanā is known as Sriman Nārāyanā. The root "மதுப்" "matup" in "Srimat" (ஸ்ரீமத்), indicates "Nitya-Yoga" or eternal association. Thus the word "Sriman" implies the inseparable union of Sri with the Lord and therefore indicates only the *Divya Dampathi* (the divine couple). Surrendering to the Lord in utter devotion or Bhakthi is the simple means advocated by the Āzhwārs unlike other systems including the Védic injunctions or practices. If the Reality is the ultimate cause of all physical forms in the cosmos and the substratum of their very existence, then it must exist in and through all of them. In fact nothing could theoretically exist without the underlying Reality. Thus the Āzhwārs saw and felt Sriman Nārāyanā in everything. They visualized Him in all His great *Avatārās* on this earth such as *Matsya*, *Kūrma*, *Varāha*, *Nrsimha*, *Vāmana*, *Rāma*, *Krishnā* and others, which He had taken from time to time for the sake of human redemption. Sriman Nārāyanā not only was in their hearts but also in the skies, the rivers, the clouds, the mountains, the oceans, the lovely images in the temples ("*Archa Avatārā*") and in short everywhere. Their poetic verses give true meaning to temple worship where the icon, a symbol of the Lord but nevertheless imbued with the Lord like every atom of this physical universe.

The Āzhwārs' main contribution in the field of spirituality and religion and the history of Tamil literature, are the devotional Tamil poems on Sriman Nārāyanā that they left behind; poems which are referred to as "*pāsurams*," or 'verses.' Collectively, these *pāsurams* constitute the Nālāyira *Divya Prabandham*, which amounts to 4000 verses. According to tradition, they are equal to the Védās, in both their revealed knowledge, and in their importance to religious life. Unlike the Védās, which were in Sānskrit and could not be learnt by all and often restricted traditionally to some classes, the *Divya Prabandham* being in vernacular could be learned and recited by any one interested.

The Āzhwārs are twelve in number. They include: Poikai Pirān (பொய்கைபிரான்), BhudatĀzhwār (புதத்தாழ்வார்), PeyĀzhwār (பேயாழ்வார்), ThirumazhisaiPirān (திருமழிசைபிரான்), NammĀzhwār (நம்மாழ்வார்), MadhurakaviĀzhwār (மதுரகவிஆழ்வார்), Peri Āzhwār (பெரியாழ்வார்), Gōdhā (Āndāl) (ஸ்ரீஆண்டாள்),

KulaShékaraĀzhwār,.....(குலசேகரஆழ்வார்),...ThondaradippodiĀzhwār.....
 (தொண்டரடிப்பொடிஆழ்வார்), ThiruppānĀzhwār, (திருப்பாணாழ்வார்).....and
 Thirumangai Āzhwār (திருமங்கை ஆழ்வார்). Included by posterity in their company is
 the Sri Vaishnava Āchārya, Sri Rāmānuja. Technically, the *Divya Prabandham* only has
 3892 verses, if one omits the 108 benedictory verses on Sri. Rāmānuja.The advent of
 the Āzhwārs is prophesied in the *Srimad Bhāgavata Purānam*, There it tells us that:

"Especially in some parts of the Drāvīda [southern] regions of the country
 through which the Tāmrabarani, Kritamāla, Payaswini, the very holy
 Kāveri and the great west-flowing Mahānadi (Periyār) have their course,
 devotees of the Lord will specially abound. O King! Those who drink the
 waters of these rivers will become purified in mind and will generally
 develop devotion to Vāsudéva, the worshipful Lord." (*Bhāgavata
 Purānam*, Sk XI-5- 39-40).

The Āzhwārs all hailed from the region in Tamil Nādu adjoining the rivers *Kāveri*, *Pālar*
and Tāmrabarani. They were all from different walks of life, different social strata, and
 different periods. Yet they were amazingly unified in their vibrant divine experiences and
 their philosophic views. They were revolutionaries of their times. They were above all
 caste distinctions: for them, being in the devotional service of the Divine alone mattered.
 Some believe that they appeared at a time when Hinduism was facing challenges from
 other religions such as Buddhism and Jainism and came out strongly against the blind
 Védic rituals and deep sectarianism. The teachings of the Āzhwārs brought the true
 spiritual message of the Védās and the Upanishads to the masses in their own vernacular
 and helped in some ways to reduce human exploitation.

Although the details of their life stories are somewhat limited, what we know of them is
 truly elevating to all spiritual aspirants. The origins of some of the Āzhwārs are
 attributed, in traditional account, to mystic births as incarnations of the Lord's divine
 ornaments and eternal attendants (*Nitya Sūris*).

The first three of these great saint-sages, namely Sri Poikai Muni, Sri Bhudat Āzhwār and
 Sri Pey Āzhwār— called the Mudal (First) Āzhwārs, were contemporaries. They are
 believed to have lived in the Dwāpara Age and were considered to have had mystic
 origins. Thirumazhisai Pirān is said to have been born of a sage. Kulashékara Āzhwār and
 Thirumangai Āzhwārs were kings and hailed from the ruling class. Sri Peri, Āzhwār
 Thondaradippodi Āzhwār and Madhurakavi Āzhwār were from Brahmin families. Sri
 NammĀzhwār was born in a farmer's family and ThiruppānĀzhwār was from the Pāna
 community considered at the time to be a low class outside the fold of the caste system.
 Sri Gōdhā (Āndāḷ) was considered an incarnation of Bhū Dévi (Mother Earth) and was
 found in the field by Sri Peri Āzhwār much like Sri Sītha was discovered by King Janaka
 of Sri Rāma *Avathāra* period.

The story that relates the origin of the *Nālāyira Divya Prabandham* takes us back in time
 to one dark stormy night when the three First Āzhwārs met in *Thirukkōvalūr*, in a small
 corridor at the threshold of a house. The presiding deity from *Thirukkōvalūr* temple, Lord
 Trivikrama, along with Sri Mahā Lakshmi, eager to mingle with Their devotees, appeared
 amongst them although not revealing Their presence. However, the Āzhwārs felt Their

presence as a sense of pressure in that small space. This led to the spontaneous outpouring of the three sweet and fragrant garlands of verses, each containing one hundred *pāsurams* in the அந்தாதி (*andādhi*) style, each following the other, beginning with Sri Poikai Muni.

This story is referred to in Sri Poikai Āzhwār's *Mudal Thiruvandādhi*:

நீயும் திருமகளும் நின்றாயால்..... காமர் பூங்கோவல்
இடைகழியேபற்றியினி (86)

Sri Poikai Āzhwār glorifies the cosmic aspects of the Lord by starting with "வையம்தகளியா" — lighting a lamp with earth as the base, the surrounding oceans as the ghee and the burning Sun as the light. Sri Bhudat Āzhwār follows with "அன்பேதகளியா"—lighting a lamp with devotion as the base, love as the oil, the sweet mind as the wick and the knowing self as the shining flame offering all of them to the Lord. When these two lamps were lit, the Lord could no longer hide His presence. Sri Pey Āzhwār describes this in his மூன்றாம் திருவந்தாதி (*Mūndrām Thiruvandādhi*). His *pāsuram* begins with "திருக்கண்டேன்" confirming the "*Sriya patitvam*" of the Lord. The Struti declares ஹ்ரீஸ்ச தே லக்ஷ்மீஸ்ச பத்ந்யௌ (*Purusha Sūktam* 2-6), meaning "For Thee, Bhū Dévi and Sri Dévi are two consorts". The second ஈ (conjunction) indicates indirectly Neela Dévi as well. In addition, Āzhwār clearly indicates how the divine mother, Sri Mahā Lakshmi, brings the grace of the Lord easily.

The story of how the diverse compositions of the individual Āzhwārs came to be put together as the *Nālāyira Divya Prabandham* by the great Āchāryās is noteworthy. The various poetic works of the Āzhwārs would have been lost except for the efforts of Sri Nāthamuni, a sage who was the grandfather of Sri Ālavandār, the spiritual Āchārya of Sri Rāmānuja. Sri Nāthamuni apparently heard the ten verses of திருவாய்மொழி (*Thiruvāimozhi*), one of the works of Sri Nammāzhwār, which glorifies Sri Ārāmudan of *Thirukkudanthai*, being recited by some minstrels, This decad as all other decads in the series, ends with the words "ஆயிரத்துள் இப்பத்தும்" ("this ten verses amongst the thousand"). Hearing this, Sri Nāthamuni enquired after the minstrels about the rest of the thousand verses. However they could not help him in his quest. Sri Nāthamuni, being a great *Yōgi*, apparently sat in deep meditation invoking the blessings of Sri Nammāzhwār himself. Pleased with his ardent prayers, Sri Nammāzhwār apparently revealed not only his own works but also the works of all the other Āzhwārs.

The *Nālāyira Divya Prabandham* was thus passed down from Sri Nāthamuni, to his grandson, Sri Ālavandār. While Sri Ālavandār did not live long enough to directly supervise Sri Rāmānuja's initiation into the works of the Āzhwārs, Ālavandār's disciples did. It was Sri Rāmānuja, who popularized the poetry of the Āzhwārs by including them in Sri Vaishnava religious practice. Because of this succession of Achāryās— Nammāzhwār, to Nāthamuni, to Ālavandār, to Rāmānuja — we have the *Nālāyira Divya Prabandham* today.

Brief Outline of the Life Stories of the Āzhwārs:

Mudal Āzhwārs (முதல்ஆழ்வர்கள்) No great detail is available about the individual life histories of the three First Āzhwārs except the incident that brings them all together at *Thirukkōvalūr*. A brief outline of what has been recorded is as follows.

Sri Poikai Pirān (ஸ்ரீபொய்கைபிரான்)

This Āzhwār lived in the Dwāpara Age. He was the first of the Mudal Āzhwārs. He is said to have been born in a lotus flower in a pond (*poikai*) near திருவெஃகா (*Thiruvekhā*) temple in *Kānchipuram*. He was the *amsa* (incarnation) of the *Pāncha Janya* or the Conch of Sriman Nārāyanā. His avatāra took place on திருவோணம் (*Thiruvōnam Nakshatram*) in the month of ஐப்பசி (*Aippasi*) (*Tulā*). His work முதல்திருவந்தாதி (*Mudal Thiruvandādhī*) is set in the *andādhī* style where the end word or the syllable of each verse becomes the beginning word of the succeeding verse. The end word of the hundredth verse becomes, in turn, the beginning of the first verse, making the hundred verses a true garland of verses. Āzhwār sees the *Purushōttama* (the Supreme Person) in the Lord of the seven hills.

உளன் கண்டாய் நன்னெஞ்சே உத்தமனென்றும்
உளன் கண்டாய் உள்ளுவாருள்ளத்துளன் கண்டாய்
வெள்ளத்தினுள்ளானும் வேங்கடத்துமேயானும்
உள்ளத்தினுள்ளான் என்றோர் 99.

"My good heart, The Supreme being is forever with us. He resides forever in the hearts of those who remember him. Know too, that He, Who rests on the waves of the milk ocean and is present on the Vēnkata hill, is forever there in the inner recesses of your being".

Sri Bhūdat Āzhwār (ஸ்ரீ பூதத்தாழ்வார்):

He was the second of the Mudal Āzhwārs. His avatāra took place in திருக்கடல்மலை (*Mahābalipuram*), the day after that of Sri Poikai Āzhwār namely on அவிட்டம் (*Avittam Nakshatram*) in the *Tulā* month. He was considered as the *amsa* (incarnation) of the Mace or *Gadā* of Vishnu, born in a blue lilly. The work of this Āzhwār is இரண்டாம் திருவந்தாதி (*Irāndām Thiruvandādhī*) which is a poetic piece of high literary beauty and depth.

The Āzhwār points to the grace of the Lord as the underlying cause of the entire spiritual process.

அருள்புரிந்த சிந்தை அடியார்மேல் வைத்து
 பொருள் தெரிந்து காண்குற்றவப்போது - இருள்திரிந்து
 நோக்கினேன் நோக்கி நினைந்தேன் அது ஒண்கமலம்
 ஒக்கினேன் என்னையும் அங்கோர்ந்து (59)

"When the Lord cast His benevolent glance at us, His devotees, showering on us the grace of constant remembrance, making some substance out of mere straw, my ignorance dispelled, I looked closely at the reality of God and self, and meditated on His Feet resembling the lotus flower. I then offered my self to those feet without a thought of any other recourse".

Sri Pey Āzhwār (ஸ்ரீ பேயாழ்வார்):

He took his avatāra in Mylai (Mylapore) the day after Bhūdat Āzhwār on சதயம் (Sathaya Nakshatram) in the Tulā month, as the *amsa* (incarnation) of the Nandaka or the Sword of the Lord Nārāyanā, appearing in a red lilly flower in a large well of the Ādhi Kēshava Perumāḷ temple. This large well and a *nandavanam* (flower garden) are still to be found in the midst of the bustling modern Mylapore in Chennai. In his மூன்றாம் திருவந்தாதி (Mūndrām Thiruvandādi), beginning with "திருக்கண்டேன்" (Thirukkandén), Sri Pey Āzhwār establishes the *Sriya-patitvam* ("being the Lord of Sri") of Sriman Nārāyanā and indicates clearly how Sri Mother Lakshmi intercedes on behalf of the individual selves or *jīvas*.

சார்வுநமக்கென்றும் சக்கரத்தான் தண்டுழாய்
 தார்வாழ் வரைமார்பன் தான் முயங்கும் - காரார்ந்த
 வானமரு மின்னிமைக்கும் வண் தாமரை நெடுங்கண்
 தேனமரும் பூமேல் திரு. (100)

"The glorious mother Lakshmi is held close in His heart by the Lord, Who wields the discus and Who has the chest wide as the mountain adorned by the cool Tulasi garland. She is like the permanent lightning streak in the dense dark clouds in the skies. She has long beautiful lotus eyes and is seated on the honey laden lotus flower. She is forever our refuge".

Sri Thirumazhisai Pirān (ஸ்ரீ திருமழிசைபிரான்):

This Āzhwār must have been a contemporary of the Mudal Āzhwārs. There is good internal evidence of this from their *pāsurams*. He hailed from திருமழிசை (Thirumazhisai) near Chennai. He was born in the pleasant month of தை (Thai) on the day of மகம் (Makham Nakshatram). He is considered as the *amsa* (incarnation) of the

Sudarshana Chakra (Discus) of Lord Nārāyanā. He apparently was a great *Yogi* being born of a sage and took to the path of *Bhakti* in later years under the influence of Sri Pey Āzhwār. His love of the Lord was so total and transparent that he was known as பக்திஸாரர் (*Bhaktisāra*), a title conferred on him by Lord Siva. The Lord even in His *archa* (temple stone idol) form had responded to his bidding. The famous incidence was in *ThiruVekha* where the Lord came to be known as "*Yadhōktakāri*" "சொன்ன வண்ணம் செய்த பெருமாள்" since He acceded to Āzhwār's request and left with the Āzhwār and his disciple Kanikkannan, who was banished from the kingdom. When the Lord returned at the behest of the Āzhwār, He laid down in a direction opposite to the usual way on the Ādhi Sésha, -- namely the head of the Lord is on our right, as we face Him. Even today, only in this shrine, the Lord reclines this way.

The Āzhwār apparently spent many years in meditation at *Thirukkudanthai*. There is a shrine and a *nandavanam* there even today for the Āzhwār. Only two of his great works are still available. One is திருச்சந்தவிருத்தம் (*Thirucchanda Viruttam*), a beautiful rhythmic poem that is a lovely exposition of the Visishtādvaita philosophy. The second is நான்முகந்திருவந்தாதி (*Nānmukan Thiruvandādhi*), in which the Āzhwār establishes the transcendental nature of Lord Nārāyanā and indicates fully His *Nirhetuka Kripā* (unconditional compassion) for the *jīvās*.

This Āzhwār's intense love of the Lord is discernible in his *pāsurams*. His concern of the Lord touches one's heart.

நடந்த கால்கள் நொந்தவோ நடுங்குஞாலமேனமாய்
 இடந்தமெய்குலுங்கவோ விலங்குமால்வரைச்சுரம்
 கடந்த கால் பரந்த காவிரிக்கரைக்குடந்தையுள்
 கிடந்த வாறெழுந்திருந்து பேசுவாழிகேசனே 61 - (*Thirucchanda Viruttam*)

“Did Thy feet which walked all over the forests (as Sri Rāma) ache? Did Thy body feel exhausted having lifted the earth as the divine boar? O'Lord Késhava! Please get up and pray tell the reason why Thou repose in Thirukkudanthai on the banks of the river Kāveri with wide torrential flow overcoming all obstructions caused by huge hills and forests. Let all be auspicious to Thee.”

Āzhwār indicates the reason why the Lord has taken abode in various holy shrines.

நாகத்தணைகுடந்தை வெஃகா திருவெவ்வுள்
 நாகத்தணை அரங்கம் பேரன்பில் – நாகத்
 தணைப்பாற்கடல் கிடக்கும் ஆதிநெடுமால்
 அணைப்பார் கருத்தனாவான்

36. Nānmukan Thiruvandādhi

"On the serpent bed in Thirukkudanthai, ThiruVehkā and Thiruvevvul, on the serpent again in Thiruvarangam, Thiruppér, Thiruanbil and on ĀdhiSésa in the ocean of milk lies the ancient cause, the loving Lord with the sole intention to get into the minds of His devotees".

Clear spiritual knowledge bestowed by the grace of the Lord, allows a proper understanding of the relationship of the *Paramātmā* and the *Jīva*.. Āzhwār expresses this in his own instance.

அன்பாவாய் ஆரமுதமாவாய் அடியேனுக்
கின்பாவாய் எல்லாமும் நீயாவாய்- பொன்பாவை
கேள்வா கிளரொளியென் கேசவனே கேடின்றி
ஆள்வாய்க்கடியேன் நானாள்.

59 (*Nānmukan Thiruvandādhī*)

"You are Love sublime, the unsatiating nectar. You are my, your servant's Bliss and every kind of happiness. O' the Lord of Sri Lakshmi, whose halo adds lustre to Thee. O' my Lord Sri Késhavā, I am your servant, thy eternal possession".

Sri NammĀzhwār (ஸ்ரீ நம்மாழ்வார்):

Sri NammĀzhwār was born in திருக்குருகூர் (Thirukkurukūr) called Āzhwār *Thirunagari* in honour of the Āzhwār, soon after Sri Krishna avathāra was over. He was born on the auspicious Pūrnima day of the வைகாசி (Vaikāsi) month on விசாகம் (*Vishākam Nakshatram*). He was the incarnation of Sri Vishvakséna, the commander-in-chief of the Lord's eternal attendants. He was unusual as a child not taking milk and not responding to people around him and, yet, he remained healthy looking. His parents, feeling of no use to their son, left him under a tamarind tree in the local ஆதிபிரான் (*Ādipirān*) temple on the advice of the elders. He remained in meditation there for several years. Another *mahātmā* மதுரகவி (Madhurakavi) by name, who was on a pilgrimage to the North, saw a bright light in the Southern direction and decided to trace it to its source. That bright light brought him ultimately to *Thirukkurukūr*. When he enquired the local people of the village, they led him to the young boy seated in meditation in the lotus position under the tamarind tree. Madhurakavi threw a small pebble to wake him up and posed a strange philosophic question to him,

"செத்ததின் வயிற்றில் சிறியது பிறந்தால் எத்தைத் தின்று எங்கேகிடக்கும்?" (*"Sethathin vayitiril, siriyaathu pirandhāl etthai tindru engé kidakkum?"*) meaning if an individual *jīva* (*self*) takes birth in this lifeless material body, what will it eat and where will it exist?

Sri Namm Āzhwār replied as follows "அத்தைத் தின்று அங்கே கிடக்கும்" (*"atthai tindru angé kidakkum"*), "it will eat that and live there" implying that if the self is a liberated soul it will live in the divine awareness drawing its subsistence from it, on the

other hand if it is a *karma* bound soul, it will indulge in sense pleasures and live in the mundane world. Hearing this short but profound philosophic response, Sri Madhurakavi decided then and there that he had met his master and became Sri NammĀzhwār's disciple.

It is said that Sri NammĀzhwār lived for thirty two years. Four works of Sri NammĀzhwār are available, one is திருவிருத்தம் (*Thiruviruttam*) with 100 verses, the second is திருவாசிரியம் (*Thiruvāsiriyam*) with seven verses, the third is பெரியதிருவந்தாதி (*Periya Thiruvandāthi*) with 87 verses and the fourth is திருவாய்மொழி (*Thiruvāimozhi*) with 1102 verses. The latter is termed, "ஸ்ரீ பகவத் விஷயம்" (*Sri Bhagavat Vishayam*) and is considered equal to the *Sāma Vēda*. Several extensive commentaries have been written on this by Ācharyās who came after Sri Rāmānuja. Sri NammĀzhwār himself is called "வேதம் தமிழ் செய்த மாறன்" (literally "*Māran* who did *Vēda* in Tamil", *Māran* being another name of NammĀzhwār)

One can feel the Āzhwār's *anubhava* (experience) of the Lord through his *pāsurams*. It is said that the Lord from all of the *divya dēshas* (holy shrines) along with mother Lakshmi appeared before the Āzhwār to hear his *pāsurams*. The Āzhwār himself lived in divine consciousness. NammĀzhwār says "உண்ணும் சோறு பருகுநீர் திண்ணும் வெற்றிலை எல்லாம் கண்ணன்" — that the Lord sang on Himself through him "தம்மைக்கொண்டு தன்னைப் பாடினான்".

உயர்வற உயர்நலம் உடையவன் யவனவன்
மயர்வற மதிநலம் அருளினன் யவனவன்
அயர்வறும் அமரர்கள் அதிபதி யவனவன்
துயரறு சுடரடி தொழுதெழென்மனனே

1-1-1. *Thiruvāimozhi*

"Who is He who possesses the highest good?
Who is He, who graces clear knowledge and devotion dispelling ignorance?
Who is He, who is the Lord of the ever wakeful eternal stars?
O' my mind! Arise and worship His holy feet that destroy all sorrow"

மனனக மலமற மலர்மிசை எழுதரும்
மனன்உணர்வளவிலன் பொறியுணர் வவையிலன்
இனன் உணர்முழுநலம் எதிர்நிகழ் கழிவினும்
இனன்இவன் எனனுயிர் மிகுநிரை இலனே

1-1-2. *Thiruvāimozhi*

"He is beyond the grasp of even the pure mind freed of the fetters of passion and anger in which blossoms the *Yōgic* knowledge. He is beyond the knowledge derived from the

senses. He is the form of pure knowledge and bliss. He has none equal or superior in the future, the present or the past. He is my life".

திடவிசும்பு எரிவளி நீர்நிலம் இவைமிசை
படர்பொருள் முழுவதுமாய் அவை யவைதொறும்
உடல்மிசை உயிரெனக் கரந்தெங்கும் பரந்துளன்
சுடர்மிகுசுருதியுள் இவையுண்ட சுரனே

1-1-7. *Thiruvāimozhi*

"He is in the wide space, the fire, the wind, the water and the earth and in all of the things formed by them. The Lord, Who swallowed the universe and is the substance of the splendid *Sruti*, pervades the entire manifest universe like the self in the body".

கண்ணன்கழலிணை நண்ணும் மனமுடையீர்
எண்ணும் திருநாமம் திண்ணம் நாரணமே

10-5-1. *Thiruvāimozhi*

"O' All of you! Who desire to reach the holy feet of Krishna, His holy name "Nārāyanā" is what you need to think and meditate on. This is certain".

நாரணன் எம்மான் பார் அணங்காளன்
வாரணம் தொலைத்த காரணன்தானே

10-5-2. *Thiruvāimozhi*

"Nārāyanā is my Lord. He is the consort of the divine mother Earth. He is the Cause of all. He is the same Krishna who destroyed the mad elephant"

அமரர்க்கரியானை தமர்கட்கெளியானை
அமரத்தொழுவார்கட்கு அமராவினைகளே

10-5-9. *Thiruvāimozhi*

"He is unreachable even to the *dévas*. He is however accessible to His devotees. The effects of *karma* will never accrue to those who worship Him without other desires."

His *pāsuram*, which expresses his surrender at the holy feet of the Lord in *Thiruvēnkātam*, is often recited in the temples at the end of evening *Ārādhānā*. In this verse, the Āzhwār surrenders to the Lord by invoking first Sri Mahā Lakshmi Who resides eternally in His heart, for she acts in favour of all the *jīvās* always and with her on our side, all our faults will be overlooked by the Lord.

அகலகில்லேன் இறையுமென்று அலர்மேல் மங்கைஉறைமார்பா
நிகரில்புகழாய் உலகம்முன்றுடையாய் என்னை ஆள்வானே
நிகரிலமரர் முணிக்கணங்கள் வணங்கும் திருவேங்கடத்தானே
புகலின்றடியேன் உன்னடிக் கீழமர்ந்து புகுந்தேனே

"O' Lord on Whose heart resides the divine lady of the lotus flower saying that she can never stay away from Thee even for a moment. O' Lord of matchless glory, owner of all the three worlds, my ruler! O' Lord of *Thiruvēnkātam*, worshiped by peerless immortal *dēvas* and hosts of sages! I, Thy servant, without any other shelter, sat at Thy feet and sought Thee as refuge".

Sri NammĀzhwār thus leads all of us by showing us how to do *prapatthi* (complete and absolute surrender) and therefore he is said to be at the summit of those who surrender to the Lord (ப்ரபந்நஜனகூடஸ்த *“Prapannajana Kūtastha”*). It was Sri NammĀzhwār who bestowed the *Nālāyiram* to Sri Nāthamuni (நாதனுக்கு நாலாயிரம் உரைத்தபிரான்).

Sri Madhurakavi Āzhwār (ஸ்ரீ மதுரகவி ஆழ்வார்):

Sri Madhurakavi Āzhwār was born on சித்திரை (*Chitrā Nakshatram*) in the month of சித்திரை (*Chitthirai*). He was born in *Thirukkōlūr* as the *amsa* (incarnation) of Sri Garuda, Vishnu’s vehicle. His story is intertwined with that of Sri NammĀzhwār. His work consisted of only ten verses called "கண்ணினுண் சிறுத்தாம்பு" (*Kanninun Chirutthāmbu*) all on குருகைபிரான் (*Kurukaipirān*) which is another name of Sri NammĀzhwār since he hailed from *Thirukkurukūr*. Sri Madhurakavi who was a sage himself was attracted to the holy feet of Sri NammĀzhwār by the latter's immeasurable depth of love of the Lord. He became Sri NammĀzhwār's disciple and considered him as the Lord Himself. "தேவமற்றறியேன்" he says in *Kanninun Chirutthāmbu*. It is a beautiful piece of *Āchārya bhakti*.

Sri Peri Āzhwār (ஸ்ரீ பெரியாழ்வார்):

He was born in ஸ்ரீ வில்லிப்புத்தூர் (*Sri Villipputhūr*) on ஸ்வாதி (*Swāthi Nakshatram*) in the month of ஆனி (*āni*). He was known as Vishnu Chittar. He was considered the *amsa* of the Lord's chariot. He had a special honour of being the father of Sri Godhā (*Āndāl*) whom he found as a child in his *Tulasi* garden. He used to do flower garland service to the Lord வடபத்ரனாயி (*Vatapatra Sāyi*) in *Sri Villipputhūr*. Since *Āndāl* eventually was wedded to Lord Sri Ranganathā, Sri Peri Āzhwār became the father-in-law of the Lord. The Āzhwār's love of the Lord is like that of mother Yashodā's love of the child Sri Krishna. In fact many of the Āzhwār's *pāsurams* convey the mother's வாத்தஸல்ய (*Vātsalya*) feeling towards the Lord. நீராட்டம் (*Nīrāṭṭam*) beginning with வெண்ணெயளந்த (*Vennaiāḷanda*) that is recited during the Lord's *Thirumanjanam* is one example of this. In addition, The Āzhwār had sung the famous benedictory *pāsuram* of திருப்பல்லாண்டு (*Thiruppallāndu*) on the Lord Himself when He appeared to him

mounted on Garuda. It is for these reasons he is called பெரியாழ்வார் ("Great-Āzhwār") and *Thiruppallāndu* has been made the beginning of the *Nālāyiram* by the Āchāryās.

Sri Gōdhā (Sri Āndāl) (ஸ்ரீ ஆண்டாள்)

The story of Āndāl is relatively well known. She was like mother Sīthā born of Mother Earth. She appeared as a child in the Tulasi garden of Sri Peri Āzhwār on பூரம் (*Pūram-Nakshatram*) day in the ஆடி (*Ādi*) month. திருவாடிப்பூரம் (*Thiru Ādi Pūram*) is a very well known day to many. She was raised by Sri Peri Āzhwār with special love and care. Her devotion to the Lord grew enormously. She ultimately became the epitome of *Bhakti* for the Lord, giving her total self to Him. Her wishes to become the bride of the Lord eventually materialized with Lord Sri Ranganāthā Himself instructing the authorities of the temple to bring her fully decorated as a bride to His sanctum. Finally Sri Gōdhā merged completely with the Lord in the sanctum in Srirangam. Sri Gōdhā's நாச்சியார் திருமொழி (*Nāchiyār Thirumozhi*) and திருப்பாவை (*Thiruppāvai*) are very famous among the *Divya Prabandha Pāsurams*.

In *Thiruppāvai* Sri Andal assures us of the Lord's grace ("நாராயணனே நமக்கே பறை தருவான்") and shows us all how to surrender to the Lord.

"ஏற்றைக்கும் ஏழேழ்பிறவிக்கும் உந்தன்னோடு உற்றோமேயாவோம் உனக்கே நாமாட்செய்வோம் மற்றை நம் காமங்கள் மாற்று"

("O'Lord Gōvindā! Please change all our other desires so that we will be of Thee and serve Thee alone for ever even if we were to be born seven and seven times over".)

Sri Kula Shékara Āzhwār (ஸ்ரீ குலசேகர ஆழ்வார்):

This Āzhwār was a Chera king born on the புனர்பூசம் (*Punarvasu Nakshatram*) day in month of மாசி (*Māsi*). He was the *amsa* (incarnation) of *Kaustuba* or the Gem of the Lord. He was a great Sri Rāma *Bhakta*. His *Pāsurams* form the பெருமாள் திருமொழி (*Perumāḷ Thirumozhi*). Even in his *Pāsurams* on the Lord of திருக்கண்ணபுரம் (*Thirukkannapuram*), his bhakti towards Lord Sri Rāma is evident as his *Pāsurams* on this shrine starts with "மன்னுபுகழ் கோசலைதன் மணிவயிறு வாய்த்தவனே" referring the Lord as the precious son of the famous *Kausalyā*. In தில்லை நகர் (*Thillainagar-Chidambaram*), the Āzhwār visualizes Sri Rāma to be reclining as *Sri Gōvinda Rāja Perumāḷ* along with *Māruthi* who is considered an *amsa* (incarnation) of Lord Siva. In the last ten verses of பெருமாள் திருமொழி (*Perumāḷ Thirumozhi*), the Āzhwār describes the entire Srimad Rāmāyanam beautifully. In his verses on Lord Srinivasa of *Thiruvēnkata*, he craves to be born in the *Thiruvēnkata* hills just to have

constant joy of being with the Lord of *Thiruvénkatam*. He says that he would be happy to be born as an insentient entity like a door step at the entrance of the Lord's sanctum. ("படியாய்க்கிடந்து உன் பவளவாய்க் காண்பேன") To honor the desire of the Āzhwār, in *Thiruppathi*, the door step at the inner sanctum of the Lord is called "குலசேகரப்படி" ("*Kulashēkara*" door step").

Sri Thondaradippodi Āzhwār (ஸ்ரீதொண்டரடிப்பொடி ஆழ்வார்):

He was born in திருமண்டங்குடி (*Thirumandangudi*), as the *amsa* (incarnation) of the Lord's ornament *Vaijyanthi*, on the auspicious கேட்டை (*Khēttai Nakshtram*) day in the month of மார்கழி (*Mārgazhi*). He was called *Vipra Nārāyanā*. His story is most human and depicts how he is transformed into a great *bhakta* of Lord Sri Ranganāthā by the intercession of the Lord freeing him from the grips of human frailties. He renamed himself as "தொண்டரடிப்பொடி" which means, "dust at the feet of the devotees of the Lord". All his life, he served Lord Sri Ranganāthā making flower garlands and maintaining a *nandavanam* (flower garden) on the banks of Kāveri. Both his works are on Lord Sri Ranganāthā. One is திருப்பள்ளியெழுச்சி (*Thiruppalliyezhucchi*) which is to wake the Lord like in *Suprabhātam* and the other is a beautiful sweet garland of 45 verses called திருமாலை (*Thirumālai*) all on Sri Ranganāthā. To read, listen or to recite these verses will move one to tears and enrich the love of the Lord. The often quoted and famous verse which most may be familiar with is

பச்சைமாமலைபோல்மேனி * பவளவாய்க்கமலச்செங்கண்
 அச்சுதா அமரர் ஏறே! * ஆயர் தம் கொழுந்தே! என்னும்
 இச்சுவை தவிர யான்போய்* இந்திரலோகமாளும்
 அச்சுவை பெறினும் வேண்டேன்* அரங்கமா நகருள்ளானே

O Lord of holy Srirangam! I prefer the delight of uttering your holy name, calling you – "O Achutā, with the form resembling the great green mountain, with lotus eyes and coral like lips; Lord of the eternal attendants and the gem of the cowherds." to any pleasures of the world of Indra even if it were conferred upon me.

Sri ThiruppānĀzhwār (ஸ்ரீ திருப்பாணாழ்வார்):

Sri ThiruppānĀzhwār was born in உறையூர் (*Uraiyur*), a village near *Srirangam* as the *amsa* (incarnation) of *Srivatsa* mark on the chest of the Lord on ரோகிணி (*Rohini Nakshatram*) in the month of கார்த்திகை (*Kārtthigai*). He took birth among the பாணர் (*Pāna*) community considered to be of low class, who were not allowed to mingle with the so called high class people of the town. The Āzhwār however, from his very early childhood spent all his waking moments in singing the glory of the Lord Sri Ranganāthā with his lute in his hands, standing near the banks of the Kāveri river. One day while

singing, he was deeply immersed in divine thoughts and was totally oblivious of the external world. At that time, the high priest Lōka Sāranga Muni from the temple of Sri Ranganāthā came to fetch water from the river Kāveri for the Lord's *thirumanjanam*. Finding the Āzhwār to be in his path and not moving away despite his calls, the high priest of the temple threw a pebble at the Āzhwār. Although the Āzhwār was awakened in this rude manner, he apologised to the priest and moved away from the area. However, when the priest returned to the sanctum, he felt that the Lord appeared as though he was bleeding from his forehead. That night, the Lord appeared in his dream and told him of how he mistreated His most favourite devotee near the Kāveri river. He further commanded the high priest to bring the Āzhwār to His sanctum with full temple honours the very next day. Thus at the behest of the Lord, Āzhwār was brought to the sanctum of Lord Sri Ranganāthā with all the temple honours and literally carried on the shoulders by Lōka Sāranga Muni. This led the Āzhwār to divine ecstasy which bloomed in the form of the அமலனாதிபிரான் (*Amalanādirān*). The Āzhwār himself completely merged with Lord Sri Ranganāthā along with his mortal coils.

In the ten verses of *Amalanādirān* the Āzhwār describes the divine bliss arising from seeing the Lord from His holy feet to the crown. ThiruppānĀzhwār gets overwhelmed and immersed in the beauty of the Lord reclining on the serpent in *Srirangam*, Who at the time of deluge protects all life forms from extinction by swallowing the seven worlds as a child lying on the banyan leaf.

"ஆலமாமரத்தினிலைமேல்ஒருபாலகனாய்
ஞாலமேழுமுண்டான் அரங்கத்தரவணையான்"

Furthermore, the Āzhwār did not want to see anything else with the eyes that had seen his sweet Lord.

"என்னமுதனைக் கண்ட கண்கள்
மற்றொன்றினைக்காணாவே"

The work is short but has great philosophic import. It inspired three āchāryās to write commentaries on.

Sri Thirumangai Āzhwār (ஸ்ரீ திருமங்கை ஆழ்வார்):

Sri Thirumangai Āzhwār was the youngest and the last of the Āzhwārs. He was born on கார்த்திகை (*Kriṭhikai Nakshatram*) in the month of கார்த்திகை (*Kārthikai*), in *Thirukkurayalur* in திருவாலிநாடு (*Thiruvālinādu*). He was considered the *amsa* (incarnation) of the divine bow *Sārngam* of the Lord. He became a chieftain of the Chōzha king even when he was young. He was known by a variety of names including *Parakālan*, *Kaliyan*, *Mangaiyarkōne*, His call to spiritual journey and superior bhakti came when he married the divine and most beautiful குமுதவல்லி நாச்சியார்

(*Kumudavalli Nāchiyār*). She set two conditions for him before she would marry him. One was for him to embrace Sri Vaishnavism by taking proper instruction from an āchāryā and the second was to serve 1008 *bhāgavatās* (devotees) with a grand meal daily for one year. His ardent desire to keep his promise to his wife made him spend beyond his means. He had difficulties meeting the required collections of taxes for the Chōzha king. The latter made him a captive by force. He was vexed and upset with the Lord for not showing him the way. Due to Lord's love of the Āzhwār, He revealed the location of a hidden treasure in *Kānchipuram* in his dreams, with which the Āzhwār could compensate the King and continue feeding the *bhāgavatās*. The Āzhwār followed the lead and retrieved the treasure which made him meet his obligations for a while. Eventually however the funds ran out. He then with a few of his friends, decided to rob the rich to keep up the feeding of the *bhāgavatās*. The Lord's direct grace came to the Āzhwār during one of those occasions when he waited to waylay some rich couple travelling through the woods in the night. The Lord Himself along with Sri Mahā Lakshmi came in the form of a newlywed rich couple. The Āzhwār got the bridegroom to bundle up all the jewels and part with them by mere show of his sword. But the bundle was too heavy for the Āzhwār to carry. The Āzhwār felt that the bridegroom had put some kind of a “*mantric*” spell on him. He forced Him to reveal the “*mantra*”. Following this, the Lord imparted the *Ashta akshara* (the eight-syllabled) mantra to the Āzhwār. This immediately transformed the Āzhwār completely. The Āzhwār refers to this in the 5th verse of the first decad in பெரிய திருமொழி (*Periya Thirumozhi*) and mentions how effortlessly he obtained the grace of the Lord (கள்வனேன்ஆனேன்சிக்கெனத்திருவருள் பெற்றேன்). The Lord revealed Himself to the Āzhwār and commanded him to visit all His திவ்ய தேசம் (*divya dēshas* or holy shrines). Sri Thirumangai Āzhwār in fact visited many *divya dēshas*; some, difficult to reach even today, such as *Naimishāranayam*, *Bhadrināth* and *Ahōbilam*. Thus the Āzhwār utters his benediction (மங்களாஸநம்) on these shrines. Thus all the *divya dēshas* sung by the various Āzhwārs, came to take on a special meaning for the discerning devotees.

Sri Thirumangai Āzhwār was a very talented poet and he had a large share of verses in the *Nālāyiram*, with a variety of intricate poetry. One such work is திருவெழுக்கூற்றிருக்கை (*Thiruvezhuk Kūtrirukkai*). The other five works are பெரிய திருமொழி (*Periya Thirumozhi*) with 1084 verses, திருக்குறுந்தாண்டகம் (*Thirukkurun Thāndakam*) திருநெடுந்தாண்டக்கம் (*Thiru Nedun Thāndakam*), சிறிய திருமடல் (*Siriya Thirumadal*) and பெரிய திருமடல் (*Periya Thirumadal*). திருஞான ஸம்பந்தர் (*Thirujnana Sambandhar*), the *Saivite Nāyanār* saint was a contemporary of the Āzhwār and the Āzhwār's poetic skills were challenged by him when he visited *Sirghāzhi*. The Āzhwār sang ten verses on *Sirghāzhi Sri Rāmar* (*Periya Thirumozhi* 3 - 4) and won the admiration of *Sambandhar* who presented him with his trident acknowledging the Āzhwār to be a நாலுகவிப்பெருமாள் (*Nālu-kavipperumāḷ*). This is the reason why Thirumangai Āzhwār in the temples has a trident (வேல்) in his hands.

The first ten *Pāsurams* of *Periya Thirumozhi* beginning with "வாடினேன் வாடி வருந்தினேன் மனத்தால்" are very beautiful. In these verses, the Āzhwār feels elated about his own blessing of receiving Sriman Nārāyana *mantra*. He points out all its benefits, how it will remove all our woes and bring us “bliss divine” even in this world. He entreats all to chant the Nārāyana Namam.

துஞ்சுபோதழைமின் துயர்வரில் நினைமின்
துயரிலீர் சொல்லிலும் நன்றாம்
நஞ்சுதான் கண்டீர் நம்முடைவினைக்கு
நாராயணாவென்னும் நாமம்.

"Call Lord Nārāyanā's name at the time when life begins to fade. Think of Lord Nārāyanā's name when in distress, it is good to say even when there is none. Lo and behold! It is medicine for all our ills".

Sri Rāmānujā (ஸ்ரீ இராமானுஜர்):

Sri Rāmānujā was born in ஸ்ரீ பெரும்புதூர் (*Sri Perumpūdūr*) near Chennai on திருவாதிரை (*Thiruvādirai Nakshatram*) in the month of சித்திரை (*Chitthirai*) to a Védic Brāhmana by name *Āsuri Késhava* and his wife *Kāntimati* by the blessings of the Lord Sri Pārthasārathi of *Thiruvallikēni* in answer to their sincere devotional prayers. Sri Rāmānujā lived a long life of 120 years between 1017 to 1137 A.D, according to traditional accounts. Although he took early Védic teachings under the guidance of one Yādavaprakāsa, he had his differences with the latter's philosophy. The teacher felt threatened by the deep intellect of the astute student and plotted to kill him during a pilgrimage to the North. Sri Rāmānujā was alerted to this when they were half way up the journey. He managed to escape undetected. On the way back while he was lost in the woods in the dark night he was aided by a hunter couple who showed him the way and personally escorted him back to *Kānchipuram*. The next dawn he found himself in the outskirts of *Kānchipuram* near *Sri Varadarāja's* temple and the strange couple that helped him through the dark night were no longer to be seen. When his teacher returned from his pilgrimage, he was surprised to find Sri Rāmānujā again attending his classes.

After a while, Sri Rāmānujā sought the advice of one Thirukkacchi Nambi also known as Kānchi Pūrna, whom Sri Rāmānujā admired and respected for his deep devotion to the Lord.. On the latter's advise, Sri Rāmānujā began doing service to *Sri Varadarāja* by drawing water from the well and bringing it up for the Lord's *Thirumanjanam*. Yāmunāchārya, also known as Sri Āḷavandār of *Srirangam*, the grandson of Sri Nāthamuni (the editor of the *Prabhandham*) came to hear about the intellect and deep devotion of Sri Rāmānujā and sought Sri Rāmānujā out to take on the leadership role of the Sri Vaishnavās after him in *Srirangam*. However, Sri Āḷavandār passed away before this would materialize.

The spiritual earning of Sri Rāmānujā was growing more intensely at this time and he was paying less attention to worldly matters. He wanted Kānchi Pūrna to become his spiritual āchārya. Kānchi Pūrna declined to accede to his request in all his humility saying that he was born of a lower class unlike Sri Rāmānujā. Sri Rāmānujā was however above all petty differences based on caste and for him what counted was devotion to the Lord. But through Thirukkacchi Nambi who had direct abilities to communicate with Lord *Sri Varadarāja* because of his *bhakti*, he learnt that the Lord wanted him to be initiated by Sri Periya Nambi also known as Mahā Pūrna, another disciple of Sri Yāmunāchārya.

While Sri Rāmānujā was on his way to meet Sri Periya Nambi, the latter was also on his way from *Srirangam* to meet Sri Rāmānujā to try and convince him to take on the leadership of his devotees there. They both met at *Madhurāntakam* where Sri Rāmānujā got initiated into the Sri Vaishnavā's fold by Sri Periya Nambi. He came to learn all about the Āzhwārs' works through Sri Periya Nambi. However this period was abruptly ended since the wife of Sri Rāmānujā who had high caste mentality, verbally abused Sri Periya Nambi's wife on a petty matter. She also blamed Sri Rāmānujā for her lot in life, whereby having wedded to him she had lost all "her high caste dignity and customs". Sri Rāmānujā felt distressed having caused insult to his *Āchārya* and his wife, who both left *Kānchipuram* quite abruptly. He resolved to leave the life of a householder. When his wife had returned to her parents' home, he took to *Sannyāsa* with Lord *Varadarāja* as *Āchārya* through Kānchi Pūrna. The Lord gave him the name *Yatirāja*.

For a while Sri Rāmānujā set up a small monastery in *Kānchipuram* and lived there teaching Védanta. It was at this time strangely enough that his old teacher Yādava, disenchanted and regretting his own old ways, became a disciple of Sri Rāmānujā. Subsequently, at the earnest request of the devotees in *Srirangam*, Sri Rāmānujā returned to *Srirangam*. After learning many Sri Vaishnava texts, he sought to learn the true import of the ரஹஸ்யத்ரய (*Rahasyatraya* or three secrets) from Sri Thirukkōtiyūr Nambi who was the exponent at the time and who was also a former disciple of Yāmunāchārya. Apparently Sri Rāmānujā had to visit him eighteen times before the latter would instruct him about the true import of the three "*mantras*". Despite the fact that his āchārya had placed an injunction against him from revealing the secret meaning to others, the very first act of the broad minded Rāmānujā, was to get on top of the temple tower there and announce to everyone about the *mantras* and their secret meaning. When reprimanded by his āchārya, Rāmānujā told him that he would be more than happy to suffer all the consequences of his action since all others would derive benefit and reach the Lord.

Sri Rāmānujā became particularly inspired by Sri NammĀzhwār's *Thiruvāimozhi*. The philosophic truths expressed by the Āzhwārs in their *Pāsurams* became the basis of the philosophy of Visishtādvaita (qualified non-dualism) advanced by Sri Rāmānujā. His *Bhāshya* (commentary) of the Védanta Sutras of Sage Vyāsa came to be known as श्री भष्यम् (*Sri Bhāshya*). Sri Rāmānujā popularized the poetic verses of the Āzhwārs amongst his followers.. He himself was very fond of *Thiruppāvai* and was called *Thiruppāvai jeer*. He encouraged his disciples to write commentaries on *Thiruvāimozhi*.

He also instituted the recitation of *Divya Prabandham* in the temples during regular daily worship as well as during *Utsava* times. In addition special, *Adhyayana Utsavams* were held on yearly basis for recitation of the *Prabandhams* and the *Védas* giving both an equal status. Thus in Sri Vaishnava tradition, all teachers came to take the divine works (*Divya Sūkties*) of the *Āzhwārs* as *pramānam* (means of valid knowledge) like the *Védas* and the *Upanishads*.

When Sri Rāmānujā came to settle in *Srirangam*, Periya Kōil Nambi was in charge of *Srirangam* temple. Eventually he handed over the temple to Sri Rāmānujā's hands and became an ardent devotee of Sri Rāmānujā himself. He was given a special name by Sri Rāmānujā and was called *Amudanār* because of the sweet way in which he used to recite the *Prabandham*. He wrote a hundred and eight verses in praise of Sri Rāmānujā and the *Āzhwārs*. This is called இராமானுசநூற்றந்தாதி (*Rāmānuja Nūtrandādi*). These verses have also been made as part of the *Divya Prabandham* bringing the total verses to four thousand by the *Āchāryās* that came after Sri Rāmānujā.

To honour Sri Rāmānujā, the benedictory verse on the *Āzhwārs* usually chanted before recitation of the *Prabandham* includes Sri Rāmānujā (Yatīndra) along with all the *Āzhwārs*.

புதம்ஸரஸ்சமஹதாஹ்வய- பட்டநாத
 ஸ்ரீ பக்திஸார - குலஸேகர- யோகி வாஹாந்
 பக்தாங்க்ரிரேணு- பரகால- யதீந்த்ர- மிஸ்ராந்
 ஸ்ரீமத் பராங்குஸமுநிம் பிரணதோஸ்மி நித்யம்

"I bow daily to the holy feet of Bhūta (Bhudat Āzhwār), Saras (Poikai Pirān), Mahadāhvaya (Pey Āzhwār), Bhattanāda (Peri Āzhwār), Sri Bhaktisāra (Thirumazhisai Pirān), Kulashékara (Kulashékara Āzhwār), one who rode on the shoulders of Muni (ThiruppānĀzhwār), Bhaktāngrirénu (Thondaradippodi Āzhwār), Parakāla (Thirumangai Āzhwār), Yatīndra (Sri Rāmānujā) and Srimad Parankusa Muni (Madhurakavi Āzhwār and Sri NammĀzhwār)".

Sri Rāmānujā is known and respected for his philosophical work even among the Western scholars. Karl Potter who is the chief editor of the massive *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* project writes as follows about Sri Rāmānujā and the *Visishtādvaita* philosophy.

Rāmānujā, we have seen, elevates God to the supreme position in his ontology and elevates *bhakti* to the supreme position among the paths. In the last analysis, it is God's grace alone that can obtain freedom for us. Then what is the function of philosophy? Apparently Rāmānujā takes philosophy to be not the resolver of doubts, but rather the path of knowledge itself. This implies that doubts are to be encouraged, as they lead one to embark upon the path of knowledge. *Visishtādvaita* grows

into a fervently devotional religion, and in Srivaisnavism of the present day, an exceedingly influential sect in parts of the South, Rāmānujā's personality and organization of ritual comes to be seen as more important than his philosophical writings. With its emphasis on *bhakti* and *prapatti*, this development of Rāmānujā 's tradition can be said to represent one of the main arteries through which philosophy reached down to the masses, and it may be that Visistādvaita is today the most powerful philosophy in India in terms of numbers of adherents, whether they know themselves by that label or not. Visishtādvaita is not, however, the philosophy which the West associates with India, nor is it the avowed position of the large proportion of nineteenth-and twentieth-century professional philosophers in Indian universities. (Potter, Karl, 1963: *Presuppositions of India's Philosophies*. Englewood Cliffs N.J.: Prentice Hall, pp.252–253)".

The Philosophic message of the Divya Prabandham of the Āzhwārs:

Sri Vēnkatanātha (Swāmi Désikan), the great āchāryā and a renowned scholar of the 13th century A.D, in *Sri Guruparampara Sāram* states that the garlands of verses in Tamil by the Āzhwārs make us understand the difficult and often hidden meanings of the Védās and the Upanishads.

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செய்யதமிழ்மாலைகள் நாம்தெளிய வோதித்
தெளியாத மறைநிலங்கள் தெளிகின்றோமே".

The philosophic hymns of the Āzhwārs (நாலாயிர திவ்ய பிரபந்தம் *Nālāyira Divya Prabandham*) brought the Truth in a crystal clear fashion for even the common man to understand in his own vernacular.

Their works convey the "*Sarīra-Sarīrī-Bhava*" (சரீர சரீரீபாவ) implying 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 understanding of the relationship between the *Jīva* or the individual self and the *Paramātmā* which is that of a servant and his beloved Master.

Unlike the *Sruti* (Védās and the Upanishads) which emphasize the பரத்வம் ("Transcendental and the unreachable aspect"), the Āzhwārs emphasize the ஸௌஸீல்ய (*Saushīlya*) "the gracious condescension" and ஸௌலப்ய (*Saulabhya*) "easy accessibility" of the Lord. That is the reason for their ever-loving hymns on the *archa avatāra mūrthies* in various holy shrines of the Lord.

The Āzhwārs are unanimous in pointing out that the Lord is not only the *goal* (ப்ராப்யம்) but also the true *means* (ப்ராபகம்). The true meaning of the final teaching of Lord Krishna in Bhagavat Gītā comes across so clearly in their verses:

ஸர்வ த⁴ர்மான் பரித்யஜ்ய மாமேகம்

ஸரணம் வ்ரஜ

“Discarding all other means take me as the sole refuge”.

Surely the sages and the saints like the Āzhwārs who are immersed in divine love and experience and who reside forever under the feet of the Lord are our true guides to the Lord. Devotion to the devotees of the Lord is described to be one of the faultless ways by Sri Thirumazhisai Pirān.

பழுதாகாதொன்றறிந்தேன்பாற்கடலான் பாதம்
வழுவாவகைநினைந்து வைகல் தொழுவாரை
கண்டிறைஞ்சி வாழ்வார் கலந்தவினைகெடுத்து
விண்திறந்து வீற்றிருப்பார்மிக்கு.

89. *Nānmukan Thiruvandādhi*

The Lord's *Pādukā* பாதுகை refers to the sandals of the Lord (what resides under the Lord's holy feet). In the Sri Vaishnava tradition, the *Satāri* which is kept at the Lord's holy feet, bearing the symbols of the Lord's sandals on top of a crown represents, Sri NammĀzhwār himself. Sri NammĀzhwār was considered the foremost among the Āzhwārs. One of the other names of Sri NammĀzhwār was *Satāri* .

ஆழ்வார்கள் ஆசார்யர்கள் திருவடிகளே ஸரணம்

I surrender at the holy feet of the Āzhwārs and the Āchāryās.

Adiyen,
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