

SRI POIGAI AZHWAR'S MUDHAL THIRUVANDHADHI

(Text with a Free Translation and Commentary)

by

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at Tirumalai’
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Back Cover : ‘Sri Poigai Azhwar at Thiruvehka’

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DEDICATION

**THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF
MY MOTHER SMT. N.JAYALAKSHMI AND
FATHER SRI. T.R.NARASIMHAN**

Foreword

In Tamil heritage, the contributions made by the Azhwar Saints of Tamil Na'du are particularly noteworthy for their poetic beauty and rich philosophic content. The life stories of what is known about them as well as their poetic works reveal to us their remarkable personalities. They were born in and around the regions adjoining the rivers Ta'mirabarani, Pala'r and Ka'veri in Tamilna'du. They were all from different walks of life and belonged to different social strata. The common link between their works is their immense love of the divine. They brought the philosophic teachings of vedas and upanishads to the common folks in the vernacular and spoke out against the blind ritualistic practices. They were revolutionaries in some ways and helped to reduce human exploitation.

The transcendental reality was not merely an abstract principle or consciousness for them and the life on this earth was not just an illusion. The reality to them was very personal and was no other than Sriman Narayana meaning "The support and the abode of hosts of souls" with all the glorious, flawless and auspicious attributes. To them, the entire cosmos and all the sentient and the insentient entities in it were alive and pulsing with the underlying divinity of Narayana representing His body and He being the inner controller or the soul. The deity in the temple was not just an icon but very much alive and personal. The outpourings of their love and their personal experience of the Lord came out in the form of the most divine poetry. Azhwars point out very clearly in their works that the most important attribute of the Lord is His immense compassion ("nirhetuka kripa") represented by Sri, the divine mother forever residing in His heart and most easily accessible and Who helps in the ultimate redemption of the embodied souls. Thus Narayana is always known as Sriman Narayana.

The poetic works of these great personalities forming about four thousand verses called the Divya Prabandham have been termed the Tamil veda and held in great esteem by teachers and thinkers alike due to their rich philosophic content. They formed

the basis and inspiration for the philosophy of Visishta'dvaitam (Qualified non-dualism) propounded by Sri Ramanuja.

Many learned scholars have written extensive commentaries on their works bringing out many precious ideas and thoughts hidden as gems in their verses. These commentaries allow us to appreciate and understand their works better. However understanding these commentaries and their vivid explanations require certain proficiency in both Tamil and Sanskrit. Modern students are often not too familiar with the terminology and word usage of the commentators which can also pose significant difficulties. In addition, the modern era actually has thrown us all over the globe in search of economic prospects and left the skills in native languages in many of us to be far less than desired. Thus we need to look for various other aids such as translations to help us. But translations need to take into account the inspired commentaries of the great teachers and scholars who have made a tremendous contribution in this field.

Such a nice task has been undertaken with reference to the work of Sri Poigai Piran by the author N. Rajagopalan in the book entitled "Poigai Piran's Mudal Thiruvandadhi- Text with a free translation and commentary". Sri Poigai Azhwar is usually listed as the first of the three Mudal Azhwars and as such can be considered the foremost of the twelve Azhwars. His work "Mudal Thiruvandadhi" that is available to us consists of one hundred verses set in the style of Andadhi which means the ending word (or its syllable) of the first verse forms the beginning word of the next verse. The one hundredth verse in turn hooks up to the first verse forming a lovely garland of verses maintaining the eternal thread of continuity. The poetry is captivating and the words chosen by the Azhwar are precise and precious. The beauty of the poetry lends itself to musical arrangement and singing which add to their enjoyment besides facilitating ease of recall. When the meaning is understood, then the recitation or singing

of these verses can become a nice method of dynamic meditation for any aspirant of the divine.

The author has provided an elegant and succinct rendering of a free translation of these unique one hundred verses of the Azhwar using the interpretation of Sri Periyavachan Pillai as given in his commentary. The work captures the meaning well and provides additional commentary which should help all beginners and those less versed in Tamil to have a nice glimpse into the richness and beauty of the philosophic poetry of the Azhwar.

May the grace of the Azhwars and the Lord ever always shine on my brother Sri. Rajagopalan and encourage him in similar enriching endeavours.

Respectfully Yours,

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PREFACE

Poigai Azhwar's 'Mudhal Thiruvandha'thi' forms part of the 'NAALAAYIRA DIVYA PRABHANDHAM', the collective works of the Azhwars, who were Sri Vaishnavite saints of South India. The Azhwars were all worshippers of Lord Vishnu as the Supreme Soul (Parama'thma), and sang in praise of the Lord both as immanent in the universe and as transcendent and beyond it. They sang of Him in all His five 'pra'ka'ra's', or modes as 'ParaVa'sudeva' in Sri Vaikuntam, in 'vyuha' form in 'Kshira'bdhi', in His various 'vibhava'vatha'ra's' as Sri Rama, Krishna, etc. as 'antarya'mi' immanent in all creation and in "archa" form in the temples erected for Him. To them, God was as real and immanent in the 'archa' form as He is real and transcendent in Sri Vaikuntam.

They experienced, and articulated their experiences of, the Lord in all His glory, both in 'Nitya Vibhuti' in the transcendent form, and in the 'Lila 'Vibhuti' in the material universe, as extolled in the Upanishadic invocation, "OM, pu'rnam adah, pu'rnam idam, pu'rna't pu'rnam udacyate I pu'rnyasya pu'rnam a'da'ya pu'rnam eva'vasisyate II"

The complete whole or the Supreme Absolute Truth is the complete personality of this Supreme Soul. Because He is completely perfect, all emanations from Him such as this phenomenal world are also complete in themselves. Because He is the complete whole, even though so many complete units emanate from Him, He remains the complete balance. To the Azhwars then, God was a living presence experienced in the totality of His being and manifestation in His myriad creation, and not a mere abstraction or intellectual perception of an impersonal 'Brahman'. He lived in them and they lived in Him. or as one of the Azhwars beautifully expressed this

inextricable interrelationship, “உன்னைக் கொண்டென்னுள் வைத்தேனென்னையுமுன்னி லிட்டேன்.”

Poigai Azhwar was the forerunner of the Azhwar tradition ,who hailed from

Kanchipuram.Poigai Azhwar,along with Budat Azhwar who was born in Mahabalipuram, and Pei Azhwar born in Mylapore in Chennai,are referred to as ‘Mudhal Azhwars’,and were born on successive days in the same month and year.

They came together for the first time in a place called Thirukkovalur,in the front passage of a house usually called ‘dehali’ or ‘rayzhi’,while seeking shelter from rain on a stormy night.As the space therein was very small, they were barely able to squeeze in there,but all the same getting to know each other and sharing their experiences of their peregrinations to various ‘divya-desa’s’.Suddenly, they felt a strange pressure in the total darkness as if there was a fourth person in their midst.Being sages they lit a light through song to find out the reason for the apparent pressure they felt.

The fourth person was none other than Sri Narayana Himself, Who had materialised in that damp,dark passage eager to share their presence and ‘anubhava’.Each of them described their experiences as they felt.Sri Poigai Azhwar sang of the entire world of matter as a lamp,the seven seas as the ghee, and the bright sun as the flame, and dedicated his song to the Lord sporting the sparkling ‘Sudarsana’.Budat Azhwar lit the spiritual lamp dispelling the inner darkness of ‘agna’na’, visualising his love for Narayana as the lamp, yearning as the ghee,and mind pining away in divine bliss as the wick.In the resultant light of inner awakening,the ‘self’

melted and dissolved in the Lord. Pei Azhwar who was listening to these outpourings exulted in the direct perception of Narayana in the company of His divine consort Sri,or ‘Thiru’.The Brahman of the Upanishads had revealed Itself

to them; and by their Tamil verses they restated the truths contained in the Upanishads in the language of the land, Tamil. The 'Divya Prabhandham' was thus born. Actually, Poigai Azhwar himself has referred to this incident in one of his 'pasurams'.

Poigai Azhwar's 'Mudhal Thiruvandhathi' is mellifluous poetry surcharged with great spiritual fervour, affirming the 'parathvam' of Srīman Narayana, and the body-soul relationship of the entire phenomenal world to the 'Parama Purusha', and dispelling the ignorance stemming from the mental veil of 'maya'. He has sung in ecstasy about many of the 'vibhava' 'vatha' 'ra' 's' like Sri Varaha, Vamana, Rama, Krishna etc. and also about

God's presence in 'archa' form in shrines like Thiruvēkatam, Sri Rāgam, etc. The enchanting natural beauty of the Venkata hills and the incomparable greatness of the Lord of Thiruvēkatam find especial and frequent allusion in his verses. Thiruvēkatam is the favourite resting place of the Lord, in the description of the Azhwar, which the 'nitya suris' of Sri Vaikuntam cherish as their own, and where everyone from the vedic wise men to devout young women with sparkling eyes hasten in the predawn hours, when scattered stars are still visible on the firmament, carrying incense, flowers, and holy water. The awesome beauty of the ecology of the hills, the habitat of the dignified kurava tribe, elephants and pythons is recapitulated in vivid detail by the Azhwar, such as the imagery of the lined python rushing into its hole terrified of the sapphire-like stones strewn on the hillside thrown at the encroaching elephants by kurava people, mistaking them for stars falling from the sky, or of the elephant frozen in fright at the sight of the fire-sticks in the hands of the kurava hunters wending their way home on a dark night.

Poigai Azhwar assures us in the end that the Supreme

Being is forever with us.He that rests on the waves of the milk ocean,and is present on the Venkata hill is also there in the inner recesses of our being.In affirming this profound truth that God is forever in our hearts as ‘Antarya‘mi’, the Azhwar establishes the essence of ‘ Sri Vaishnava Sidha‘nta’ to the effect that the Way (upaya) is Sriman Narayan, and service at His Feet is the fruit, (upeya),(Saranam, Sarma).

This book is a small attempt in the direction of reaching out the message of the Azhwars to those interested in,but not able to savour, the treasure of their poetry in original.

The pages that follow contain a free translation of Sri Poigai Azhwar’s ‘Mudhal Thiruvandhathi’.The notes that are appended to the translation incorporate supporting references and annotations based on the salient aspects of the commentary of Sri Peria Va‘cha‘n Pillai,the famous ‘Vya‘kya‘nakarta’ of ‘Divya Prabhandham’,as recapitulated by Ubhayaveda‘nta Sri S.Krishnaswami Iyengar Swami (Sudarsanar) , Editor of ‘Sri Vaishnava Sudarsanam’. I am grateful to Dr.N.Ranganathan, Toronto Canada for his kind foreword.I also place on record my gratitude to Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams for their financial assistance enabling the publication of this work. I am also grateful to Sarvasri B.G.Kukillaya, P.S.Vasu and and their staff at Universal Print Systems for all their help in the design of the cover and format of the book and preparation of the inputs.

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