

## DEVELOPMENT OF VAISHNAVISM IN KUMBAKONAM

R. RENUGADEVI\*

### Introduction:

Kumbakonam is the headquarters of a taluk of the same name in the district of Tanjavur and is on the main line of the Southern Railway. It is celebrated city of temples, both Siva and Vishnu. This city has a very long and eventful history. It was known in the past as Tiruk, Kudamukku or Tiru-Kudandai. According to local legends there was a deluge after the Dvaparayuga. The Almighty placed I change of Brahma a pot of nectar and the seeds of creation, and left is adrift in the deluge. The drifting sacred pot finally got stranded at this place. Siva as Kiratamurti, appeared on the scene; and with his arrow pierced the pot and spilt the nectar, which flowed all over. The greater part of it flowed into a tank, now called the Mahamakha tank, where even today a great bathing festival is celebrated once in twelve years.

### Historical Events:

The cauvery river delta was first recognized by the cholas rulers, as an ideal place to settle, as it was rich in alluvial soil, which was best suited fro agriculture. They set up their capital at Uraiyr in Tiruchirappali. Kumbakonam was the second capital of Cholas, who ruled since 3<sup>rd</sup> century. It was developed as a religious center orgnaised around several temples. Most of the old Shiva temples and Vishnu temples, mandapam and padithore belong to this period. The pandyas of Madurai came into power in 13<sup>th</sup> century. Hoysalas ruled from 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards who was over powered by the Vijayanagar kings, who appointed Nayaka to rule the region. The nayakas made additions to the existing Shiva temples and made new Vaishna temples. Art

---

\* Ph.D., Research Scholar, Department of History, Annamalai University, Annamalainjagar-608 002, Tamilnadu, India.

architecture, crafts, literature, music and dance were patronized by Chola, Nayaka and Maratha rulers in the region. Later the city was, recognized for its importance; as a centre for handicrafts and artifacts. The cholas first established their hold in the Tamil region with capital located in Uraiyur in Tiruchirapalli The Cholas recognized the importance of the cauvery delta region and initiated growth of paddy in this region.

### **Evolution of the Kumbakonam:**

Mythologically Kumbakonam assumed its origin, centered around the Kumbeshwara temple, the two holy tanks of Mahamakam and Pottvamarai, and the Bandurai temple. The evolution of the city was marked by the rise of temple settlements. There are nine Siva temples and five Vaishna temples. The two Siva temples (Nageshwara temple and Kasi Vishwanatha temple) and one Vaishnava temple (Sarangapani) formed the nuclei of Saiva and Vaishnava settlements. The initial brick structures were converted to stone vimanas and nuclei of huge temple complexes, which grew steadily in size from chola period and gained additional subsidiary shrines and enclosures with tall gopurams, during the Vijayanagara and Nayaka period. During the Vijayanagara-Nayaka period, vaishnavism gained importance and Sarangapani temple became the centre of this major settlement. Another one Vaishna temple is Chakrapani temple. Chakrapani temple its residential area came into existence along with several Vaishnava mathams.

### **Alvaras:**

The word 'alvar' has been explained as one in deep wisdom and the alvars are thus wise seers who exercise a spiritual sovereignty over the hearts of men. Tradition arranges the Alvars into three groups in the following order:

#### **Ancient**

<b>Tamil Name</b>	-	<b>Sanskrit Name</b>
Poygai Alvar	-	Savoygin – 4203 C.E.
Bhutattar	-	Bhutayogin – 4203 C.E.

- Peyalvar - Mahodyoginor Bhvantayogin-4203 C.E.  
Tirumalisai Alvar - Bhaktisara – 4203 C.E.

**Middle**

- Nammalvar - Sathakopa - 3102 C.E.  
Madhurakavi Alvar - Sathkopa 3102 C.E.

Kulasekhara Alvar - Sathakopa 3075 C.E.

Perialvar - Visnucitta – 3056 C.E.

Andal - Goda – 3005 C.E.

**Last**

Tondaradipodi Alvar - Bhaktangrivenu – 2814 C.E.

Tiruppan Alvar - Yogivahana – 2760 C.E.

Tirumangai Alvar - Parakala – 2706 C.E.

As the traditional dates of these Alvars take us to anything from five to six thousand years backwards these seemingly precise dates are of no use whatsoever as historical data.

**Religious Centre in Kumbakonam:**

This ancient city on the river Kaveri, formerly called Kudamukku, with a number of Vishnu and Siva temples. This is only place where the great Mahamagha festival occurring once in twelve years and celebrated in February takes place and which has temples dedicated to the Trimurtis Brahma, Vishnu and Siva. The ruins of an ancient structure in a Suburban village called Solamaligai or the palace of the Cholas indicate that Kumbakonam was the capital of the Chola kings. It is also said that king Srimara Pandya, who lived about the ninth century defeated the arrives of the cholas and the Gangas here which accounts for so many temples in Kumbakonam such as Kumbeswara, Nageswara, Someswara, Adi Visveswara, Abimukeswara, Goutameswara, Banapuriswara, Visvanatha, Varahara, Lakshminarayana, Sarangapani, Chakrapani, Ramaswamy, Adivaragaperumal, and Varadaraja Perumal temples. The town itself is named after this

incident. There are also 18 other important centres within a radius of ten miles and they are Tiruvidaimarudur, Tribhuvanam, Ammachatram, Tirunageswaram, Ayyavadi, Sivapuri, Sakkottai, Kottayur, Banadurai, Maruthanthanallur, Pattiswaram, Sakthimutham, Darasuram, Tiruvalanjali, Swamimalai, Innambur, Karuppur and Tiruppirambiyam.

Besides, there are five Vishnu temples in this city the Ramaswami temple, Sri Chakarapani temple, Sri Adivaraga Perumal Temple, Sri Varadharaja Perumal temple and Sarangapani temple. The former which is full of rich and elaborate sculptural is of more recent origin having been erected in the seventeenth century C.E. The earlier and more celebrated temple is that of Sarangapani temple. It is believed that the Vaidika Vimana of the sarangapani temple. The Vaidika Vimana is conceived of as a chariot with wheels drawn by horses and elephants on a grander scale than that of the Sarangapani temple built in the period of Vikramachola. As in Vaikuntham, the Srivimana has two gateways. (The Northern gate, opened on the Makara Sankranti day) and the Dakshinayana Vasal (opened on the 18<sup>th</sup> of the month of Adi in the Tamil Calendar)

Though the temple existed in the Pallava and Chola periods, the present structure a stone temple in the shape of a charit seems to be attributable to the period of the later cholas. Most likely the reign of Vikrama Chola. The gateway portion of the gopuram of this temple is also attributable to the time of the later cholas, but his super-structure of eleven nilais, about 46 metres high, may belong to the Vijayanagar period.

The main deity of central shrine is Pallikondar. The processional deity is Sarangapani. His consort is Komalavalli. There is a legend associated with these two deities. Thus Sarangapani and Komalavalli constitute the processional deities of the temple. Sarangapani bears a bow in his hand. The consort's shrine dedicated to Komalavalli is to the right of the Dakshinayana gateway of the temple. An interesting feature of this temple is that there are labelled sculptures depicting the Karanas of Bharata's Natya. Sastra found on the first tier of the gopuram in contrast to the arrangement in the generality of other temples containing the Karana sculptures. Where they are found on the wall surface of the entrance portion itself, or on the Kantham of the tiruch-churru-maligai.

This temple has had a long past from the early centuries of the Christian era, as Bhutattalvar and Periyalvar (2<sup>nd</sup> Century C.E.) have sung hymns on the lord of this temple.

“*aiyaram vaippanpasaich – cherndu  
kudamukkil koyilakondu*”

- *Bhutattalvar*

“*Padamukkinayiravaip – Pambanaimel  
Serndai-Kudamukkil Koyilakkondu*”

- *Peyalvar*

Periyalvar and Andal have sung hymns on the Lord of Kundandai; also Tirumangai alvar (eight century C.E.)

Tirumalisai alvar seems to have spent his last years and attained salvation here. Nammalvar also is associated with this temple.

### **Vaishnava Development:**

Vishnu, the second member of the supreme Hindu divine trinity, the others being Siva and Brahma. Brahma and intellectual creation personifying conceptions found in vedic literature, receives little worship. Vishnu and Siva however, are syncretic deities, composed of elements drawn from many sources and very real to their followers between them, they embrace almost all of sectarian Hinduism, as expressed in cults centered on themselves, their wives and sons, or figures associated with them. To his sectaries, each god in supreme fulfilling all the functions of creation maintenance, dissolution and in due time no creation of the universe and the other god is inferior.

Like most Indian gods, Vishnu has many names the puranas give him a thousand. The commonest are Hari, Vikramaditya, and the names of his various incarnations. He is worshipped directly as Vishnu a more commonly, in his avatars. In addition to the 10 principal avatars mentions in the puranas, many lesser incarnations as honoured. Many bhakti cults are associated with Vishnu especially in his form as Krishna, in whose workship erotic practices may appear. Vishnu worship was also prevalent in the early Kadamba Kingdom but the most popular religion there appears to have been Jainism. The south where some of the early Pallava and early Ganga rulers were devout Bhagavats. Some of the early Kadamba kings, who call themselves parama-

brahmanya, may have been vaishnavas. Several Southern rulers, who claim to have been Kaliyugadasavasanna, dharm-oddharananyia sannaddha, possibly attempted to suppress heretical creeds such as Bhuddhism and Jainism, to revive the Brahmanical religion and also possibly to represent themselves like Samudragupta of the north, as incarnations of Visnu, emulating the god's doing in the varaha form. Another indication of the influence of Vaishnavite Brahmanism in the far south is the importance attached in some Pallava and Kadamba records to the go-brahmana exactly as in the vaishnava in the vaishnava inscriptions from India. In the later part of the Mahabharatha, Vishnu is represented as the benefactor of the cow and the Brahmana. This points not only to the association of the Brahmanas with Vishnu worship, but also to the important position to which they rose in social estimation in the period in question.

The association of the name of the pandya capital Madura, which is the same as mathura, the home of the early Bhagavata sect. The Tamil country soon becoming the greatest stronghold of the Bhagavata religion and giving birth to the Alvaras and their celebrated songs in Tamil on Bhaki and Krishna workshop. The workshop of Krishna and Baladeva in the Tamil land about the age of the Guptas is attested to by Tamil literature. The Silappadikaram refers to temples of the two gods at Madura Kaviripattinam and Kudamukku describes them as the dark-complexioned god bearing the wheel and the white-complexioned god.

The best evidence of the influence of Vasihanvism in the for south, specially in the Tamil country is furnished by the devotional songs of the Alvars, of whom a short account has been given above. They sang in praise of Narayana and the Krishna, Rama and Vamana avatars. They were also familiar with Krishna's dalliance with the gopis. One of them a lady regarded herself as a gopi and approached the God her beloved in that spirit. They revered vaidic literature and knew the principal puranas but inculcated the recitation of Gods name, meditation on his different forms and their worship at the temples such as those at Srirangam, Kumbakonam, Triupati and Alagarkoil. It is apparently because of the Alvars and their successors. The Vaishnava acaryas, that the Bhagavata purana speaks of the existence of large numbers of the worshippers of Vasudeva Narayana in the Dravida country in the Kali-age.

There is a tradition that the Bhakti Cult originated in the Dravida country. Apparently in support of this tradition the Bhagavatapurana says that in the Kali age the devotees of Lord Narayana would be found here and there, and that they would exist in large number in the Dravida country

through which the rivers Tamvaparni, Krtamala, Kaveri and Pratici flow. The book adds that the people who drink the sacred water of these rivers would mostly be turned into the holy devotees of Lord Vishnu. According to the Tamil tradition the first book praising Lord Vishnu in the Tamil songs was composed in C.E. 4203 under the title Poygai Alvar of which the Sanskrit equivalent is Saroyogin. Such well known books called Alvar are ten in number, the latest Tirumangai Alvar being composed in C.E. 2706.

The Alvars hailed from different parts of the Tamil country. The Pallava country contributed the first four Alvar enumerated above and cola desa the last three: the cero country contributed Kulasekhara; and Pandya Nadu contributed the rest, notably Nammalvar. The greatest of them all and Andal, one of the supreme women mystics of the world. From this distribution it is sometimes assumed that the Vaisnava movement began first in the Pallava country in the north and then passed on to the cola country. Finally gravitated to the south, culminating in the Tirunelveli district, the place of the great Namalvar's nativity. It is also worthy of note that the twelve Alvars a cosmopolitan group, being gathered from all castes and various strata of society their one common characteristic being their fellowship in the love of God. Nammalvar is a Vellala caste, Tirumangai came from a Kalla (robber) family; Kulaskhara was a princely ascetic; Perialvar was a Brhamin. All this illustrates the noble catholicity of the Tamil of a by gone age. The four thousand stanzas that make up the Nalayira prabandham are divided into four more or less equal parts. The first thousand stanzas include the work of Perialvar, Andal, Kulasekhara, Tirumalisai, Tondaradipoodi, Tiruppan and Madhurakavi; this part is called Tirumoli. The second part called Peria Tirumoli, is the work exclusively of Tirumangai. The third part called Iyalpa, includes the work of the first three Alvars, and the rest of the third part is made up of Tirmalisai, Nammalvar and Tirumangai contributions; the last part, Tirvaymoli is exclusively the work of Nammalvar. These four thousand hymns are recited in temples by Tamil Vaishnavas to this day.

The first three Alvars, Poykai, Bhutattas and Peyalvar have contributed one hundred Stanzas each in Venba metre in praise of Tirumala. The poems are richly embroidered by references to Visnu's sports in his various avatars. But the general keynote of the poem is love, an upsurge of mystical longing for the Lord. The traditional story is that Poykai, Butlattar and Peyalvar accidentally took shelter in the same place in pitch darkness.

Of the five Alvars in the second group, Nammalavar and Madhurakavi may be taken together. Nammalvar was a mystic in excelsis, one of the greatest of god intoxicated men. Madhurakavi, the Brhamin scholar and saint, sought out Nammalvar and nursed that great mystic but with the warmth of his devotion till petal by petal it blossomed to its full amplitude and dedicated its unearthly beauty to God or Gods. Nammalvar Sang of God because the urge to trumpet his praises was in him an elemental irresistible force and Madhurakavi took down the verses as they came, and preserved them for posterity.

The sweetness, intuitive depth and kindling imagery of Nammalavar's hymns have been praised but cannot be praised too highly. Nammalvar contribution to the Nalayira Prabandham consist of the whole of the fourth part called Tiruvaymoil, and Tiruviuttam, Tiruvaisiriyam and Periyatiruvantadi which are included in the third part. Tiruvaymoli is subdivided into ten parts and each part contains ten poems. This century of poems taking up 1102 stanzas. Nammalvar's poetry is encyclopaedic in its mystic range and covers the entire gamut of striving, half-lights and false trails the nights of darkness, the burst of morning sunshine, the splendour of beatitude and the ecstasy undying. The Jeeva seeks him and would be with him, because he has already chosen and is with his devotee. The Jeeva some times is compared to a love-sick maiden hungering and pining for the divine nectar of her lord's love. The symbolism of love is intricate and subtly elaborate and the whole of Tiruviruttam is cast in the form of such a symbolic love poem. Tiruviruttam indeed is one of the incandescent peaks of mystic poetry and its century of stanzas illustrates poetically every unblemished shade of erotic symbolism.

Madhurakavi was the born disciple, his whole life being dedicated to Nammalvar his short hymn in praise of his guru is sung by all Vaishnava devotees. Periyalvar was a Brahmin, according to tradition found the child Andal at the foot of a tree while digging in his garden and taking her home brought her up with more than a fatherly affection. Periyalvar's most famous songs is Triuppalandu which he composed when he was vouch safed the beatific vision of the lord. Periyalvas daughter Andal or Kodai from the outset thirsted for the divine and poured forth her divine love into some of the finest poetry in the language. She saw herself as one of Krishna's gopis sought him with singular fervour and determination, and achieved union with him at last at Srirangam of her two works Nacchiyar, Tirumoli and Tiruppavai, the latter is rightly more famous.

Kulasekhara the remaining member of the second group of Alvars was a king of Travancore whose God hunger made him more and more unworldly. Till at last he renounced the throne and whole heartedly consecrated himself to the service of the Divine. Perumal Tirumoli his contribution to the four thousand consists of 103 stanzas. The discussion so far has concentrated on the stages of development of various religious which had their firm footing in the firmament of protecting the cultural and spiritual area of South India tradition. It is needless to say that offer the onslaught of Vainism and Budhuism into the religious output of the South Indian People. The revival of Hinduism became possible and the re-establishment of the respective tenets of Hinduism was propagated by the Saivaite saints followed by the Vaisnavaite sages. It is under this religious background that the temple activities became more important and prominent in the daily life of the people of South India. The Alvars composed mostly in Tamil, and consisting of the devotional songs in praise either of Lord Vishnu, or of some of this incarnations, are held in high respect by the Local Vaisnavas, and are popularly called the Vaisnava Veda. After the age of the Alvars either the religious authors kept silent, or the books composed by them were lost. The next literary reference to Vishnu worship is found in the Maratha country in the cave inscription at Nanaghat, which is believed to be inscribed in the Ist or second century C.E. since that time Vishnu worship flourished in different parts of Southern India, and many kings are said to have founded temples for Lord Visnu or even for some of this incarnations. The absence of literary records of a similar kind for such a long time, may be held as indicative of the fact that saivism prevailed upon vaishnavism every now and then, and that no preacher of Vaishnavism of a high merit flourished during the period. The Bhakti Cult of the Vaishnavas flourished again in Southern India with the advent of Natha muni in the 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E. and new shape was given to it by his successors. We learn from different epigraphic and monumental records of the early Pallavas, the Kadambas, the Vakatakas, the western calukyas of Badami, the later pallavas, the colas the pandyas, the Rastrakutas and other dynasties that, Vaishnavism existed at different part of Southern India in all times, though on different occasions it faded due to prevalence of Saivism. The copper plate inscription at the early Pallava king Vijayaskanda Varman mentions a land grant by Caru Devi the queen of Vijaya Buddhavarman to Lord Narayana, worshipped at the temple founded by a local devotees. The copper plate inscription of Praphavati Gupta queen of the Vakataka king Rudra Sena II, found at Poona and many other South Indian inscriptions of the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E. begin with

the invocation 'Jitam Bhagavata Tena Visnuna' showing the prevalence of Vishnu worship in Southern India in those days. The copper-plate inscription of provarasena II describes Lord Cakrapani as the giver of good fortune to his father RudraSena II, as well as to his own self. The Pallava king Simhavarman, in his copper plate inscription has been described as bhagavat-padanudhyata and paramabhugavata. These and other evidences prove beyond doubt that Vaishnavism flourished in Southern India in the sixth and seventh centuries CE. Dozens of Vishnu temples erected at Badami Pattadakal, Godag, Lakkundi and other places in the Calukya territory and also at Vishnu Kacni Mahabalipuram, Kumbakonam etc. In the Tamil country prove beyond doubt that Vaishnavism existed with full vigour in different parts of Southern Indian during most of the centuries of the Christian era.

### **Conclusion:**

The role of temples in the religious and spiritual upliftment of the people became imminent and inevitable. The styles, structure, ritual, architecture the tantras, the various sastras and the mantras were strictly followed while a temple was concentrated or the presiding deity was manifested. According to the rules laid down in the scriptures, agamas, Upanishads, puranas and other holy texts of the vaidic traditions of South India. This strict adherence of the traditions made each and every temple of South India a seat of importance. The Hinduism as a whole had complexities and the different cults and sects emerged into various religious focused on different manifestations of gods and goddess like vaishnavism.

### **Acknowledgement:**

The authors are deeply indebted to Professor and Head, Department of History, Annamalai University, Annamalainagar-608002, Tamil Nadu, India for their inspiring help, constant support and for providing facilities in the department to carry out the research work.

**Notes and References:**

- *Madras District Gazetteers*, Tanjore District, Vol. I, Government Press, Madras, 1933.
- Action plan for the Provision of Basic Amenities and Infrastructure Development Works in Kumbakonam Town for the Mahamagham Festival, 2004.
- K.A. Nilakanta Sastri and N. Venkataramayya, *Further Sources of Vijayanagara History*, University of Madras, 1946.
- Hemchandra Raychaudhuri, *Materials for the Study of the Early History of the Vaishnava Sect*, Oriental Books, Reprint Corporation, 1920.
- Sundaresan Chettiar, *Kumbakonathu Thalavaralaru*, Kumbakonam, 1980.
- R. Champaka Lakshmi, *Growth of Urban Centres in South India*, Kudamukku – Palaiyarai, The Twin City of the Cholas, Studies in History, Vol. I, 1979.
- P. Carl, *Kumbakonam Art Architecture and Urbanism, Space: Ritual and Meaning in a Sacred – Royal City of South India*, Cambridge University, U.K. 1998.
- J.S.M. Hooper, *Hymns of the Alvars*, Pioneer Book Services, 1929.
- M.A. Venkata Krishnan, *Nalayira Divya Prabhanda Mondra Ayiram*, Say Sri Ram Prints, 1999.
- S. Venugopala Charya, *World-Wide Hindu Culture and Vaishnava Bhakti*, Mandya, 1992.
- B.V. Ramanujan, *History of Vaishnavism to South India Upto Ramanuja*, Annamalai University, Annamalainagar, 1973.
- K. Venkata Samy Reddiyar, *Nalayira Divya Prabhandham*, Thiru Venkadathan Thirumandram, 1973.
- U.V. Madhi Srinivasan, *Periya Thirumozhi Nalayira Divya Prabhandam*, Varaki Prints, 1998 .
- M. RagavaIyengar, *Alvarkalin Kalanilai, Manivasakar Noolagam*, 1996 .
- *Kathleen Gough, Rural Society in South East India*, Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- P. Nagaswami, *Art and Culture of Tamil Nadu*, Sundeep Prakashan, Delhi, 1980.