

POYGAI

The first three ĀḶvārs form an interesting beginning to the Philosophic Theism of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism. The story goes that the first three ĀḶvārs, Poygai, Bhūtattār and Pey were not born in the ordinary way but miraculously. They are said to have born of flowers.¹ One does not know the actual dates when they lived. I have suggested the period. All that we know of them is contained in the three hundred verses composed by them informing the three *Tiruvandādis* of hundred verses each. They were obviously wandering minstrels singing and praising and adoring God at every shrine. Their meeting one another is however said to be the cause of their simultaneous enlightenment. This is indeed the most important traditional story worthy of all credence.

Though born at different places, they seem to have been almost of the same age. They chanced to meet one another under a common roof in the Temple City-Tiru-koil-ūr when there was heavy downpour of rain. The first to arrive was the Poygal ĀḶvārs. There was only lying space for one individual in that corridor-room. Soon after, there entered Bhūtattār who said that where there is lying space for one there can be sitting room for two. Whilst the two were seated, there entered the third ĀḶvārs Pey, who claimed a standing place saying that the sitting room for two can be standing room for three. Thus on that night in that corridor-room the three ĀḶvārs were taking refuge from rain, closely packed for want of more space. The lying down pose signifies Jñāna and Shuṣṭi; the sitting pose signifies Upāsana and svapna; the standing pose denotes Bhakti and Jāgrat: All three end in the fourth-Realisation of God. It is narrated that at this juncture they began to feel the presence of a fourth being or Person, but who was invisible. In this invisible being they described the Supreme Being or Self of all, each in his own way. The first inferred God's existence through his knowledge (*para-Jñāna*); the second through maturing knowledge passing into devotion (*para-Bhakti*) and the third through conjoint knowledge the devotion attained the supreme vision of His Form with His Spouse. Tradition has it that the goal of all these three ways of knowing is one only. The path of inferential, knowledge, the path of devotion saturated with knowledge, and the path of Vision, intuitive realisation, are not three separate ways. They form one unitary manner of progressive realisation. Knowledge passes over into transcendent devotion, and transcendent devotion culminates in Vision of the Divine form and attributes. The ways of approach are triple, but the Object of all the three is one only.

¹ Other names of Poygai are Sārayogi, Kāsarayogi born of golden-lotus in the Poygai tank near the Yathōktakāri temple in Kāñci. This temple was the place of worship of the fourth ĀḶvār Bhakti-Sāra of Tirumaḷsai.

Tuḷāyām śravāṇe jātam kāñcyām kāñcanavārijāt!
Dvāpare pāñcajanyaṁśam sārayōginam āśrayē !!.

2. A second and deeper analysis of the story given above will be interesting. The inferential method is certainly incapable of proving the divine transcendent Being who is at once the material and the efficient cause of the universe. This has been ably upheld by all Vēdāntic thinkers.¹ Scriptural testimony alone can be valid, if at all, to prove the efficient and material causality of Brahman or God. The real power of the Lord is revealed in his works. The inference that is based on the analogy of the human ability to construct, can only lead to the affirmation of a finite constructor, a world-carpenter or pot-maker, but not a divine creator of the Universe. The uniformity of nature, on the other hand, reveals that there is a principle of universal order which might demand the postulate of the Divine Maker or legislator, who somehow through His power as Ruler controls the processes of the universe. It is not easy for any mind, even the most primitive, to be without enquiring about the cause of universe. The cause-effect problem, whether it is argued from the stand-point of non-existent effects-theory² or the potential existence theory³ of explanation, must prove one of two things, either the efficient causality of the creative maker who confirms on matter the forms that are in Him as eternally Ideas, or Order, or the material causality of continuity of evolution of forms such as are potentially to be discovered in it, by the maker or by its own natural inward stress and strain (*Svabhāva*).

The inwardness or residence of the ideas of order must either be in the efficient cause or in the material cause. If the efficient cause is something that is external to or other than the material cause, one must presume that the efficient cause, because of its natural power (*Svabhāva Śakti*), is capable of endowing the material with its ideas so as to make them real in it. But it is always right to argue that we cannot endow a material with a form or a form with a body of matter which that material cannot bear. One cannot make a statue of water or a vessel of water or fire or air. These are the limitations of matter. They restrict the creative activity of the maker. We cannot divorce these two capacities or limitations. This being so, the solution to the problem seems to lie in a different direction. The efficient creator or maker or cause knows the nature of matter as it is in itself so as to be able to shape it. This is the problem of knowledge. The creator of the universe only manifests the order of His eternal nature in and through the forms and substances of matter that are capable of realising it. It is this reciprocity of knowing and being between the ideal and the actual between the efficient and the material causes which is all important for any explanation of causality.

God is the all-creator because He performs undoubtedly miracles, miracles which reveal this fundamental knowing-being. Miracles do not contravene the illimitable potencies of things but only reveal them. God has infinite power of knowing the

¹ VĒDĀNTA SŪTRĀS : Sāstrayōnitvāt." I.1.3.

² Asat-Kārya-Vāda

³ Sat-Kārya-Vāda

inherent possibilities in all things and substances so that what to our knowledge is a miracle is a fundamental truth of things as in they are in themselves. That is why God appears to be the wonderful Seer.

3. It is usual to think of things as produced, since things are seen to be produced and destroyed every minute. The notion that all things have the nature of effects or that they are effectuations is almost a primitive one. That does not condemn them however. Religion itself has always felt that the things of the universe are effects. Change of causes into effects is something perceived and cannot be dismissed at all from the plane of reason. The ordinary man of the world thinks that the world is a workmanship of a potter albeit divine, who is shaping it.

Among the most important characteristics of such inferences is the act that it presumes the existence of the potter as perfect and eternally existing, who coexists with the universe. An analogy based on such a presumption of the co-existence of creature and creator is incapable of being substantiated. On the contrary, all analogies which try to prove the existence of the deity, the original creator of the universe, are incapable of proving anything except a finite being. They cannot prove the infinite. And therefore analogical inferences are incapable of being applied beyond the level of our understanding. A potter need not co-exist with his pot; there is no special necessity to presume either his immortality or his perfection in respect of the existence of the pot. The changing processes of the universe are not like the potter's creations; and the imperfection of the universe almost certainly points out the imperfect partial nature of the creator if there be one. A mechanical explanation seems to be more fitted to explain creation or process under such circumstances, than inferences about the existence of a creator, who is infinite and perfect and who is the law-giver. Thus it is that we should go to the scriptural revelation which alone can prove or establish the existence of God. In other words, the only certainty about God's actual existence can come to man only through two ways, firstly, through personal faith that He is and that He does control and desire us, and secondly, and only secondly, that it is declared to us by those who have communed with Him and have seen Him in His pristine effulgence and fullness and glory as the most perfect Being. Thus it is also we find that in matters concerning the actual existence of Creator-God, all intellectual efforts and inductive attempts can do something, that is they can show that though we cannot deduce the existence of God or His nature, they can intimate something beyond themselves. When the great German philosopher Kant wrote his Critique, he discovered that the mind imposed the conditions of its own structure on the real, but such impositions always revealed certain limitations. Reality was more than the categorial make-up. It entailed conduct. What was circumscribed by Pure Reason had to be explained by the Practical Reason. The Nonmenal consciousness had to be touched. That was possible only by postulating the actual existence of personal experience and its apprehensions. The reason that is therefore seen to be at work in regard to the total apprehension of reality is something very different from our ordinary reason. It is

reason that is integral knowing and acting as one comprehensive activity. This is what is known as the *Para- Jñāna* the knowledge of the transcendent, transcendent to mere sense perception and transcendent to inferential reason that is circumscribed by sense-perception.

4. It is interesting therefore to find that the first ĀḶvār Poygai who is said to have apprehended the nature of the Deity through *Jñāna*, really does it with the help of *Para- Jñāna*, transcendental knowing, rather than ordinary inference. If any one tried to find out conclusive arguments of a Udayana about the existence of God here he would certainly fail in the attempt.

5. Inference through analogy is confined to the wonder of creation. It is this wonder that is at the bottom of creative manifestation. It is not in the laws of nature that we should seek the secret of divine manifestation, but in the wonderful contrasts *ad infinitum* which are strewn in plenteous measure everywhere. Miracle is the differentium between natural order and Divine order or supernatural order. Both indeed comprise the universe. But the Divine order reveals itself in the natural, in order to reveal, as it were, the unbounded greatness and superiority of God's unceasing will and relation to the universe as its inner lord and power.

The very first verse of Poygai ĀḶvār reveals the wonder:

"Deeming the world as bowl
The full sea as ghee
The fierce-rayed Sun as the wick-flame
I have twined a garland of speech for the feet
Of Him who wields the red flaming discus, so
That there may be freedom from the ocean of misery.¹

The world is compared to the lamp-bowl in which oil is poured and the wick is lighted. The earth has parts, *sāvayava*, therefore it is considered to be an effect. Indeed all the entities herein mentioned are parts of one creation. The sea which is supported by the lamp-bowl supports the flame. But the lighter of all these, and the flame that reveals the structure of the universes, point to a transcendent maker. Seas obey him and the Sun keeps to his measures regularly. The proof so far given is for the efficient causality. Here earth, water and Sun stand for the original three elements mentioned by the Upaniṣads and they also indicate the existence of the air and ether. All these are not independent of any control, but are consubjective to a ruler. Indeed the mutual support that is regulated in this analogy is due to a power over and above all of them.

¹ MUDAL TIRUVANDĀDI, I Cf. Trans. by J.S.MHooper, "HYMNS OF ĀḶVĀRS" p12 note 1.

6, Another meaning which is conjectured or suggested by this first description really shows that it is almost impossible for any finite being who is himself a part of the whole to legislate for whole nature. And the totality of phenomena are subservient to the Ruler. But the Ruler is already envisaged as the wearer of the discus, which can destroy or annihilate or burn away the misery of mankind. Creation itself is taken up for the sake of revealing the transcendent nature of the Divine in a variety of ways so as to abolish the misery of man.

The second verse says

" When was the ocean churned?²
When were the waters poured
for accepting the world as a gift?³
None of these have I known.
That is the ocean which thou hast sent to sleep⁴
After making it calm and quiet.
This the earth which thou hast created, divided
and having swallowed up, brought forth.⁵

The idea clearly is that none knows when creation (again) took place except that it is a periodic process of origination, and dissolution. The second part of the verse intimates the story of Viṣṇu having received the universe as a gift from Bali, who had conquered all. The wonder is He who is the creator is said to have received it as a gift from one who was immeasurably lower than Himself. God thus seeks His own possession, His creation from His dependents. It is the expression of miracle of God who has granted man the freedom of an independent life and existence, which man in his egoism asserts against his own true good most often, but which the religious seer, like Bali, seeing exercises his freedom, his most supreme gift by God in God's favour, for the sake of eternal life and being. God thus whilst granting the soul its freedom of choice also grants it unique opportunities of willing to choose rightly the dependence on Him. Further this particular episode of Vāmana reveals the *ātimānuṣa*, transcendent-manhood of God, the miraculous wonderful activity of God, which dazzles the wit of the human being. The creative activity as well as the redemptive activity, which is typified by the acceptance or seeking as gift the possessions of man, however exalted that be, in the form of a seeker for a place, just a small resting place, the smallest that man might ever ask, metaphorically suggests the seeking by God of

² The story of the churning of the Ocean.

³ Cf. story of Bali.

⁴ Dissolution

⁵ Lit. vomited forth Mh.B.Vana 187. Bhāg. P. XIII

man just that wee-bit of space in his heart so that He may by that pervade his entire being, and the three worlds. Love comes by the only door, like a beggar craving for just a little place in the heart, but having entered, it pervades and perfumes the entire being. Such is the inner symbol of the redemptive miracle of Trivikrama, the three-stride-Lord. These two activities have not been seen by man; nor for the matter of that was the dissolution or the withdrawal of creative activity something that anyone could have seen, except that solitary Being, the One Supreme, who alone throws it out at the time of a new creation.

These three processes of creation, sustention or redemption and dissolution, are not capable of being perceived by man, and all that we know about these can only be through hearsay, and can never be proved by inference or perception. "Neither that Ocean of Milk, that was sent to sleep, to rest, nor this Earth that has been withdrawn and ejected out of Thee, know of that state of Thine when they were so absorbed. Both these were enveloped or pervaded by Thee at all times. Thus both these have Thee as their cause." The Trivikrama-exploit of God reveals this all-pervasive causal nature, a nature that cannot be know except through Śruti justifying as it were the *Vedānta -Sūtrās: Śāstrayōnitvāt.* (1.i.3).

7. The third verse continues the myth which stands for the complete conquest and rulership of God.

The Earth with one foot thou hast covered,
With another the earth-girting ocean,
Thus hast thou extended thy limbs..
The path which revealest thy limits I do not ken.

This is the supreme nature of the Divine as the all-enveloping Deity, and the wonder of such infinity is represented by the myth of the Lord of three strides. This story is found as early as the Veda, and this is amplified and given a concrete mythology in the story of Bali.

In the Ṛg Veda 1.22, Viṣṇu is described as the guardian.

" The gods be gracious unto us even from the place whence Viṣṇu strode through the seven regions of the earth!
Through all this world strode Viṣṇu; thrice his foot he planted and the whole was gathered in his foot-steps' dust.
Link ye on Viṣṇu's works, where by the Friend of Indra close-allied, hath let his holy ways be seen.
The princes evermore behold that loftiest place where Viṣṇu is, laid as it were an eye in heaven.
This Viṣṇu's station most sublime, the singers, ever vigilant, lovers of holy song, light up." (16-21) (Griffith's trans.)

This is also related in the Ṛg Veda I. 154, where Viṣṇu is described as having thrice set down his foot-steps, 'widely striding', 'He within whose three wide-extended paces all living creatures have their habitation', "who alone with triple step hath measured this common dwelling-place, long, far-extended"; "who verily alone upholds the three fold, earth, heaven and all living creatures". In the very next hymn I.155 it is said " A mortal man when he beholds two steps of him who looks upon the light, is restless with amaze," "But his third step doth no one venture to approach, no, nor the feathered birds of air who fly with wings."¹ We find again in Ṛg Veda VI. 49 that Viṣṇu "thrice-measured out the earthly regions". "When one so great as thou affordest shelter may we with wealth and with ourselves be happy."

Again we find in verse 10(M.T)

"It is said that thou ate the earth, the mountains the wave- beating Ocean, air, the sky:

When we think and enumerate thy measureless qualities, O discus-adorned Lord!
Was thy mouth then as big as the universe?

Poygai Āṭvār sings

"The gods (immortals) make efforts to reach the feet of lord
wearing the tulasi garland,

The great souls according to prescribed rules, vedic chant and other
practices, having made themselves praised, are the first beings.

Those who fitted to follow the passionate and dark qualities, discover the lords suitable
to them and praise their gods by painting them on the wall;

And by installing idols, praying to them as "Our Lord" and will be following them.

But,

The form of the Lord who hath measured the universe verily is the Primal thing.

(13-14)

8. In the 73rd verse the Āṭvār shows that the support of all the universes is the Lord. It is not enough to state that he is the cause, and that he is primal, full of *Sattva*, who caused the dissolution of the universe, but that He is the supporter of the universe.

"O Mind! Praise thou Him who is adorned with beautiful
leaves of Tulasi,

Or accuse or do evil or desire Him as thou pleasest.

He is the supporter of the watery Ocean,

The mountain, the wide sky, Air, the body and the soul.

1 Cf Ṛg veda VII. 49 "Both thy two regions of the earth O Viṣṇu we know: thou God knowest the highest also." Wallis: COSMOLOGY OF THE ṚG VEDA (quoted by R.Griffith): "The two lower regions are within the range of our perception: the third belongs to Viṣṇu whither he stepped with the third of his ascending strides."

He is the cause of all and their supporter. It is because of this is He called the Viṣṇu. It is seen that though the word Nārayaṇa is used and Varāha and Tiru-Veṅgaḍaṃ are also used, no mention of Vāsudeva is made. Kṛṣṇa and Yaśoda, Pūtana¹ and others pertaining to the story of Kṛṣṇa are mentioned. None however about the enjoyments and ecstatic dances of the gopis and others.

9. The relation between the individual souls and the Lord are described. God's approachability has been already stated to be difficult, yet He Himself comes near and tries to share the life of His children so to speak. His transcendence does not make Him an alien to the universe. For, this is His universe. All the other gods are merely instruments of His.

The ear, tongue, eyes, nose, body these five sense-organs;
the red flame, earth, air, water and sky these five elements;
the incessent consciousness, sacrifice, excellent dharma,
Will not these be said to be the instruments of the Lord Varāha?

All the creatures, elements or sense-organs, and actions as well are all dependent upon Him and are subservient to His will, and thus become His instruments.

10, God is partial to His devotees as well as amenable to them (*Āṣṛta-Bhavya*) (verse 22), as is seen in his utter homeliness with his foster-mother. The mystical consciousness is so deeply attached to the object, that it feels companionship and even control through love over God, even as one feels with one's dearest friends. The relationship then with God is at once one of submission, instrumentality and creatureliness. The body-soul relationship between the soul and the Lord is spoken of in the 28th. verse.

" Faultless veda-owning Brahmā was born of thy navel;
The conqueror of the Tripura is in some portion of thy
body."

Thus when the Lords of the universes are in several portions and are several portions of His body, how much more are the ordinary souls?

God saves all those who seek refuge even as He did in the case of the elephant, Gajendra.

Thus the relationship of the individual souls to the Lord is fourfold, as effects, as instruments, as dependents and as body. God is, in relation to them, approachable, even knowable, Who is seeking to help mankind out of His own splendid love for His

¹ cf. BHAGAVATA. X.3

creatures.

Thus it becomes possible for man to seek Him. A deistic God who is utterly transcendent cannot be approached at all. An unknown God may well not be known at all. The love for God is a fact; the miraculous reciprocation by God by way of āvatārs is indeed the substantial truth of religious experience.

Thus the āḷvār sings:

Then in the womb I was lying, I turned in the direction of the Lord of śrirangam. I folded my hands, (in submission). I know nothing.

O wavering soul! Now can I forget the Person whose luster is of the Ocean?

(6)

The minds of those who have fixed their minds well so as to be free from doubt, and who with the help of thought have clearly known me, will without difficulty attain the feet of the Lord adorned with Tulasī, like the calf its mother.

(30)

My tongue will not praise any one but Him;

My hands will not serve any one but Him who measured the Earth;

My eye will not look at any one but only on the form of Him who sucked out the poison from Pūtana's breasts;

My ear will not listen to anything except His names. (11)

For all are His instruments to be used exclusively for His work as the next verse (12) already quoted states. This verse is, as it were, repeated again later on:

"My hands will not be folded except for Him;

My ears will listen to nothing but to the hymns of praise of Him;

My tongue always will chant the praises of Him who has the snake as his bed.

(63)

If I desire I shall desire thy feet,

If I sing all the day, I shall sing only thy praises,

If I wear anything on my head, it shall only be the feet of the wearer of the discus, whatever happens to me. (88)

I shall not hanker after another's wealth,

I shall not steal the soul which is sought after by the Lord¹ (or which belongs to him). (64)

This shows that the religious consciousness was so profound that the seer refuses to consider his body as his own. The knowledge that they belong to Him as His instruments expressed earlier in verse 12, is carried to its logical conclusion here. The idea is very similar to the Upaniṣadic idea where the individual is instructed not to covet any one's wealth and who, if he did so covet, may well be considered to have

¹ Īśa. Up. 1

murdered himself.²

Once the individual has lost the sense of his utter independence and has recognized the Supreme Creator who is seen to possess all-lordship, all-power and approachability, who is Good, gracious and merciful, who is seeking His souls so to speak, then there is no fear at all.

To our Lord Who is difficult to meditate upon,
Who is afar,
Who has a thousand names,
If one but folds ones hands, one's will not be oppressed by karma
Nor will one go to Hell,
Nor will one tread the path of pain even a bit. (p.65)

And whilst this is the case with one who is devoted to the Lord with his entire being, *sarva-bhāvena*, to one who does not devote himself to God what happens? Such a one can never reach the supreme abode.

“Can one who does not daily wear the feet of the Lord gain the supreme abode?”
(v. 91)

For it is by wearing the feet of the Lord that one invokes the kindness and the goodness of God. For it is only through His grace that we can attain the supreme abode. Not by anything else. And to attain Him is most simple.

11. The ĀḶvārs, all of them, had immense belief in the actual residence of Gods in many forms in the temples. Idol-worship gets its sanction from these seers. The fundamental nature of idol-worship is that it is the most accessible form of the Divine.² It is true that in the West idolatry, as worship of mere forms without understanding the philosophical background of God's nature, had led to its abandonment. In India it is found that idol-worship not merely fulfilled an actual need as an object of meditation and concentration for most persons who are incapable of thinking and enjoying the nature of Divine Being, but was at the hands of Āgamas such as Pāñcarātra and Vaikhānasa, made into a philosophical doctrine. The justification of that procedure consists in the fundamental principle of God's love to His creatures which makes Him incarnate Himself on all levels. The religion of the Āgamas suffused with the realisations of saints, who have never for once given up praising god in the several forms of his descents, not to speak of his descents into every type of species,³ have

² Īśa. Up. 3

² Cf. INDIAN IMAGES: B.C. Bhattācārya, P.xvii ff.

³ Commentary on verse 92 by Periya-Vācchān-Pillai.

made idol-worship an important part of religious life. It an essential and intrinsic object of religious consciousness. It appears however that the first three Ālvārs, and especially the first, think of four places as fit places of worshipping the Lord.

At Tiruvengadam, the celestial city (Vinnagaram),
The Yathōktakāri with inexhaustible flowers.
The tall temple of the excellent town (Tirukōilūr)
He at those four places is standing, sitting, lying down and treading.
If thus one should contemplate on Him, sorrows will vanish.
(v. 77)

And the commentator adds, sins and sorrows that pertain to the four ways of our actions typified by the postures of God will vanish. Tirumalai (Tiruvengadam) is described to be the place where Śrī Kṛṣṇa loved to dwell.

The Mountain that surpasses in brilliance and mental radiance of the Eternals, which extinguishes the fire of the sins (accruing to) those who seek more riches, those who renounce God, (*kevalins*) and those lovers who always meditate on the ways of being inseparable from the Beautiful Tulasi-adorned Being, is Tiruvengadam.

(v.26)

The obstacles to riches, the obstacles to God-realisation and the obstacles to self-realisation are all annihilated by Tiruvengadam. Tiruvengadam is mentioned in more than half a dozen verses as the meditable object.

"O mind meditate on the Lord, the Supreme Man, as thine own being, that
He exists to protect us; that
He resides in the minds of the meditator, that
He is lying on the sea,
He is on the Vēṅkaṭācala Hill,
And that He is indwelling in the heart.⁴

This last prayer shows the all-comprehensiveness of meditation. It is this special quality of unified and integral meditation that marks off this idol-worship as different from idolatry of the West. We are not aware of the idol in the West as anything more than a totemic object. On the contrary, the word used to signify the idol is Arca, or arcis, the ray of light, effulgent, transcendent, revealing the Supreme even here, as it alone can and does.

⁴ The Pāñcarātra Vyūha theory seems to be intimated here.