



ISSN: 2230-7850

IMPACT FACTOR : 5.1651 (UIF)

VOLUME - 7 | ISSUE - 1 | FEBRUARY - 2017

## SRIRANGAM- A GREAT CENTRE OF VAISHNAVA CULT

**A. Sivasamy**

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of History, Annamalai University, Annamalinagar.

### Abstract :

The twelve Tamil Vaishnava Alvars had sung much about the Vaishnava shrines in their respective *pasurams* which are compiled as *Nalayira Divya Prabhandam* by Natha Muni. The Vaishnava Shrines are scattered in different parts of the Indian sub-continent. According to Vaishnava principles the dwelling shrines of Lord Narayana in the form of *archa*, which is accessible by devotees are called *Divya Desam*. The total Vaishnava shrines, 108 in number, sung by 12 Vaishnava Azhvars known as *Divya Desam*, are known for their sanctity and sacredness. Among the five forms of God called *Param, Vyuham, Vibhavam, Andharyamituam* and *Archanai*, the last one alone can be seen and observed either by devotion or *Bhakti* for achieving his grace. That also is possible in all the places where Lord Narayana is abodes. Hence the shrines or places or abodes or temples in which God is

installed in the form of idols or images are called *Divya Dedam*. The 40 *Divya Desam* in Chola Nadu are located in Tiruchirappalli, Thanjavur and other districts also. Among all the *Divya Desam* or *Purana kshetrams*, Srirangam is in the forefront and sung by the Azhvars.

**Key Words:** Religion, Vaishnavism, Bhakti, Achariyars, Alvars, Srirangam, Ramanuja, Saivism, Vadakalai, Tenkalai, Alavandar, Divya Desas, Hymns, Festival.

### INTRODUCTION :

The role of Srirangam in the political history of India from almost a very ancient period is remarkable. In the sphere of religion, its role was not small either. Religion is the fundamental factor of Indian history, long before the stone age when man has been governed by unshakable faith in God. The history of India is abounding with a number of religions and faiths. The religions of India have run through the country like its rivers and enriched glorified its knowledge, arts, culture etc. It is known that right from very ancient times Tamil Nadu has been governed by religious thoughts and actions, from historical evidence.<sup>1</sup> The inscriptions of Vaishnavism give adequate proof of the rich contribution of Srirangam in the growth and development of religion and faith in Tamil Nadu.

The Bhakti movement made radical changes in the religion based society. Since, the Pallava period, Hinduism flourished in two directions. The Alvars and Nayanmars spread the Hindu principles among the common people. In the period, for this first time in the history of South India, the Hindu religion reached to the masses. As a result, the joint system of worship developed. This was one of the greatest achievements of the Bhakti movement.



The island of Srirangam was recognized early as a sacred site lying within the holy river Kaveri, and two temples were founded there, one dedicated to Vishnu as Ranganatha and another to Shiva as Jambukeshvara.<sup>2</sup> Vaishnavism and Saivism were the two eyes of Hinduism. Religious and devotional activities of the Alvars and Nayanmars resulted in the growth of Vaishnavism and Saivism at Srirangam. These principles radiated in the society through religious movements. It enjoys even today the position of one of the sacred places of pilgrimage in India . The paper is proposed to review the position of Vaishnavism in Srirangam, during the period under study.

### **Vaishnavism and Srirangam**

Vainavam is the Tamil word for Vaishnavism in Sanskrit. The meaning for the name 'Vishnu' is omnipresent (Sarva Vyabi). The learned persons say that the Lord Kannan exists everywhere, even exists in pillar and atom. Vaishnavists thought the supreme God existing everywhere, by given a shape to him and naming as Vishnu and they pray to him. In practice, they follow Vaisnavism. He is the one who has created the world, saving it and also destroys it. There are also other names for Vishnu, that is Narayanan , Vasudevan etc. The names also indicate that he exists everywhere. Vainavam was without any patronage. Since Vishnu is worshipped with Sree, in Tamil Nadu, it is known as Sree vainavam. Considering the sree Vainava righteous conduct alvars and achariyars have developed. These achariyars are the people who spread Vainava principle in the medieval period. The acharyas we re in fact the makers of modern Vaishnavism.<sup>3</sup>

Vishnu, the second deity of the trinity of Hindu gods, is responsible for the sustenance, protection and maintenance of the created universe. A gentle, loving god representing the heart, he is the focus of intense devotional worship by large percentage of the Indian population. To ward off the extraordinary perils that threaten creation, Vishnu frequently incarnates himself. He has appeared as Rama, Krishna, the Buddha and other incarnations. The Nanmugan gopuram, shown in the photograph, is 13 storiyeys tall and completely covered with intricately carved, brightly painted statues of the many carnations of Vishnu. More than being just an extraordinary expression of art, these sculptures function as three-dimensional story-books of Hindu mythology. Similar in purpose to the stained glass windows of Europe's cathedrals, these beautiful sculptures were intended to visually communicate religious myths to a largely illiterate population. For 2000 years the temples of Srirangam have been a center of Bhakti Yoga, which may be defined as the practice of devotional love of god as a spiritual path leading to enlightenment. Because of the generous financial support of the temple by numerous dynasties of ancient India, Srirangam has always been a haven for persons wishing to dedicate their lives to the practice of meditation and devotion. Many of India's most loved saints and sages have spent time at Srirangam including the Eleventh Century sage Ramanuja who lived and was buried temple grounds.

### **Srirangam Ranganatha Temple**

Located in the city of Tiruchirappalli, on a small island between branches of the rivers Kaveri and Coleroon, stands the massive temple of Srirangam. The most revered of the 108 pilgrimage shrines of Visnu and the largest temple complex in all of India, it is surrounded by seven concentric walls (the outermost wall having a perimeter of over 3 kilometers) and 21 towers called gopurams. Srirangam enshrines a statue of Vishnu reclining on great serpent. A legend tells that this idol, known as Sri Ranganatha, was being transported across India to Sri Lanka by the sage Vibhisana. Resting from his efforts for a while, he set the statue upon the ground, yet when ready to continue his journey, he found the statue had magically bound itself to the earth. A hundred hands could not budge the idol, so a small temple was built over it. The temple complex which has since grown around the statue has been rebuilt and enlarged many times over thousands of years and its original date of founding is unknown to archaeology. Most of the temple complex standing today, including a grand hall of 1000 beautifully sculptured pillars, was constructed between the Fourteenth and Seventeenth Centuries.

Srirangam is also listed as one of the Navagraha sthalas, or temples representing the planets. The south Indian temples in this group are: Suryanarcoil - the Sun ; Tirupati -the Moon ; Palani-Mars; Madurai- Mercury ; Tiruchendur –Jupiter; Srirangam –Venus; Tirunallaru -Saturn .

There is a large volume of evidence to show that Vaishnavism also flourished in Srirangam from the Sangam age. The *Silappadigaram* of the Sangam age refers to Vishnu as Mayon and his temple as Nilamaninediyonkoyil. Some of the early Pallava kings bear the names, such as Vishnugopa, Kumaravishnu, Narasimha etc. They call themselves as Parambhagavata Bhaktya Aradhits Simhavishnu and the invocatory verses to Vishnu in their inscriptions reveal only their association with Vaishnavism and the Bhagavata-cult. It was only during the period of the Pallavas of the Simhavishnu line that the Vaishnavites strove very hard to establish the superiority of Vaisnavism against the parallel movement of the Saivites. During the Pallava period Vaishnavism indeed enjoyed a unique honour and position as evidenced by the structural and rock-cut temples built by them. Attempts were made by the adherents of Saivism and Vaishnavism, throughout the long religious history of the Tamil Country, to place Siva or Vishnu in an exalted position with the help of Puranic literature that were written from time to time. The fluctuations in their growth and influence were mostly dependent on the political powers which took sides in this silent battle of the religions.<sup>4</sup>

### Vadakalai and Thenkalai

In Vaishnavism there are two divisions of peoples; (i). Vadakalayar (Vadakalai) (ii) Thenkalayar (Thenkalai)

In the Sangam age, there was no deviations such as Vadakalai and Thenkalai. This is established in the book, '*Sanga Thamizhar Samayam*'. But after the period of Emperumanar, during the period of Koorathazhvan, Thirukkurgai Piran Pillan, Sri Vishnu Sithar alias Engalzhuvan, Sri Barasapara Battar , though there were administrative differences in Vaishnava religion is existed. But there were no difference of opinion in customary principles and activities.

During the period of Sri Vethantha Desikar, if one could read and understand the books written by Achariyars, Sri Vethantha Desikar has clearly stated about his difference of opinion. In his period, there was difference of opinion between himself and his predecessor Achariyars. But there is no proof either dither or indirectly regarding the two classifications (Vadakalai and Thenkalai) of Vaishnavism.<sup>5</sup>

The important religious leaders who was associated with Kanchi was Yadavaprakasa. The *Vaijayanti*, one of the earliest works on lexicography, has been attributed to him. Born near Kanchi and a resident of Kanchi, he had the privilege of being the preceptor of the renowned religious reformer, Ramanuja (1017-1137 AD.) who is the propagator of the Visisht Advaita philosophy. The doctrinal differences between the teacher and the taught were, however, settled and the teacher Yadavaprakasa, who was originally a follower of the advaitic faith was converted by his own pupil to Vaishnavism. The reputation of Ramanujacharya was so great that it spread far and wide attracting the attention of the pontiff at Srirangam. The Pontiff Alavandar, otherwise known as Yamunacharya is believed to have made many attempts to bring Ramanuja to Srirangam and to install him on the pontifical throne as his successor. The Koyil Olugu, temple record of Srirangam, states that Alavandar deputed Alvar Tiruvaranagaperumal Arayar on a special mission to Srirangam where he pleased Lord Sri Ranganatha with his musical talents and sought divine permission to take Ramanuja to Srirangam. The same work adds that Periyambadi another disciple of Alavandar, was sent to Kanchi on a similar mission, with inscriptions to recite the stotratna, a string of poems in praise of Lord Varadaraja specially composed for this occasion. Enchanted by the beauty and melody of the composition, Ramanuja, on hearing its recital, readily agreed to accompany Periyambadi to meet and pay respects to the author of the composition. The meeting did not materialise as Alavandar passed away before Ramanuja reached the outskirts of Srirangam. The advice of the great acharya, which was posthumously conveyed to him, had the desired effect and, in accordance with the wishes of the deceased, Ramanuja took religious guidance under Periyambadi and succeeded Alavandar as the pontifical head of the math at Srirangam.<sup>6</sup>

## Alvars

Among the Vaishnava centers of pilgrimage it vies equally with the famous Tirupati of Venkatachala or Venkatesa, better known in the North as Balaji, and has been eulogized by almost all the Vaishnava saints or Alvars among whom some lived at this place and made it the scene of their devotional activities. Prominent among them were Kulasekhara, the Chera king who renounced his kingdom only to devote his life to the service of this god and settled down at Srirangam with his daughter Cherakulavalli, and Tirumangaimannan or Alinadan, the chief who betook to banditry for the sole purpose of embellishing with the looted money, the Lord of Srirangam. He is said to have looted the golden image of Buddha at the Vihara at Nagapattinam and with that gold renovated certain parts of the temple. The name of minor Alvars such as Tondaradippodi and Tirupanalvar who was born at Uraiyur near Srirangam are also connected with this temple. Ramanujacharya, the great apostle of the Visishtadvaita Srivaishnavism spent as many as 60 years of his long life as the administrative head of this temple and effected many reforms in its internal management.

## Hymns of Alvars

The Alvars have praised the Gods presiding over the various shrines in India. They have composed hymns about one or the other of different shrines. But all these have taken up in their works only the temple of Ranganatha at Srirangam and no other place of the Nutteltutirupadas-108 holy Vaishnava Shrines have been praised by all. This accounts for the special importance and sacredness of the shrine at this place. The praise by these Alvars about the various shrines are contained in the Tamil work Nalayiraprabhanda.<sup>7</sup> Srirangam is the most important of the hundred and eight Divya desas sung by the Alvars in their sacred hymns.<sup>8</sup>

Poigai Alvar<sup>9</sup>: “The blue-colored Lord Mahavishnu is worshipped here in the name of Sri Ranganatha. Even the sacred vedas could not properly mention the merits of this deity. Let me ever be thinking of Him to save me a re-birth again”.

Bhutattalvar<sup>10</sup>: “It is you Lord that during your avatar as Sri Krishna tore to pieces the Bakasura<sup>11</sup> who disguised himself as a crane and troubled your devotees. You preside over the shrines at Srirangam, Tirukkoshtriyur, Tirupati, Tirunirmalai, Tanjore, Tiruthankal and Mahabalipuram to bless the devotees”.

Payalvar<sup>12</sup>: “O Lord, it is to save the sufferings of your devotees on earth that incarnated as Vamana and begged of King Mahabali three feet of land”.

Tirumalisai Alvar<sup>13</sup>: “Who could know properly the merits of this Lord, who at the alone at the time of destruction of the whole world, floats in the Ocean of Milk. In Anbil near Srirangam you are much praised and worshipped. I feel insensible while concentrating my thoughts on you. It is to save the world that you preside at Kumbakonam, Kanchipuram, Tiruvellore, Srirangam and Anbil”.

Nammalvar<sup>14</sup>: “After coming in sight of you, O Lord! I feel restless. During the deluge you kept the earth in your belly and thus protected the universe. Where ever I turn my eye I feel you. It is to protect the virtuous you incarnated on earth as Sri Rama. To distribute amrita (ambrosia) to Devas you incarnated as kurma (tortoise); you saved Prahlada by slaying Hiranyakasipu. To remove pangs of a mortal you shine at this spot. By uplifting the mountain Govardhana in your Krishnavatar you made the people understand what you were, You, at times, appear as Siva, Brahma and so forth in various forms. Even the Tulasi<sup>15</sup> (Ocimum sanctum) plant at your feet saves all from their sufferings by their accepting it heartily”

Kulasekaralvar<sup>16</sup>: The gem on the hood of the serpent, over which you preside, gives special attraction to the place. I am ever anxious to stand by the side of stone pillars close by your garbhagriham and be adoring you. Sages Tumhuru, Narada as also Brhama, Siva, Indira and other devas are ever mediating on you at this place. The Panchayudha, i.e., the five weapons- Sankha, Chakra, Saranga, Gada and Danda with all powerful Garuda guard you on all sides. To save Arjuna, you by Chakra hid the sun during the day and thus caused night to prevail. By sucking, you overcame the disguised Bhutaki tour Krisnavatar.

Periyalvar<sup>17</sup>: “At one time, to enable the virtuous Pandava kings long by saved king Parkshit. To place the ardent devotee Vibhishana, you remain you here facing the south, wherein his kingdom lay. You saved Gajendra<sup>18</sup>

when he cried for your help I also entreat you thus to save me at times of my distress. You represent the Panchabhutams (five elements) at this sacred place.”

Tondaradipodi Alvar<sup>19</sup>: “I feel the greatest pleasure is praising you, O Lord ! As during the life of a mortal, major part is covered by sleep during childhood, old age, etc., I do not pray for a re-birth as thereby my mind to think of you is shortened. All Hindus except the Buddhists and Jains, who act contrary to the vedic dictate must get themselves free from their human birth, and worship you. Sir Rama who, by the more dispatch of a solitary arrow made the vast ocean<sup>20</sup> disappear, blessed Vibhishana in this form of your almighty. The prescribed daily rites of one could also be neglected provided he is before u always.”

Tirumangai Alvar<sup>21</sup>: “You made Brahma, the God of Creation, appear in your navel. You shine at this spot like the most precious gem”.

Tiruppanalvar<sup>22</sup>: “Being the first that appeared in creation it is you only that could save the whole world”.

### Ekadasi Festival

The Ekadasi festival which is observed in Srirangam takes place on the eleventh day of each fortnight in the year and there are thus annually some 24 of these celebrations occurring alternately in the darker and brighter phases of the moon. The festival is said to commemorate the victory of the Ekadasi goddess who overcame the asuras (demons).<sup>23</sup>

The shrines visited and glorified by them became holy places (Divya Desas). The temple at Srirangam and the Deity enshrined therein have been sung by all of them. A total of 247 hymns in the Nalayiram is found to be dedicated to the Lord of Srirangam as shown in the following Table.

| Name of Alvars       | Number of Hymns Sung to Srirangam |
|----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Periyalvar           | 35                                |
| Andal                | 10                                |
| Kulasekhara Alvar    | 31                                |
| Trumalisai Alvar     | 14                                |
| Tondaradippodi Alvar | 55                                |
| Tirrukppanalvar      | 10                                |
| Tirumangai Alvar     | 73                                |
| Poygai Alvar         | 1                                 |
| Bhoothatalvar        | 4                                 |
| Peyalvar             | 2                                 |
| Nammalvar            | 12                                |
| Total Hymns          | 247                               |



All the Acharyas have composed stotras in praise of the Lord and Ranga Nachiar. Vedanta desika composed Paduka sahasram (1008 slokas) in different meters. Numerous inscriptions appear on the walls and other places. They exceed over 600. They furnish us with a variety of information about the benefactions made by the ruling classes from time to time and also about the social, economic and political conditions.

Thus the Sriranganathaswami temple in Tiruchirappalli district was existed even during the period of the twelve Tamil Vaishnava Alvars. But the temple gained popularity after Ramanuja. Even though the Alvars have sung them. On par with the Srirangam temple, which is hailed as *Priya Kovil*, the other 107 *Divya Desams* continue the rituals and traditions. After the completion of *Ardhajaman*, it is believed that all the other deities assemble at Srirangam. As the hereditary *Mirasdars*, *Sabayor* and *Sthalathar* maintain this temple, the other temples also follow suit. It is worth to mention that all the *Vadakai* and *Tenkalai* set of Vaishnavite people in all the 108 *Divya Desams* execute their worship in a uniform pattern on the basis of the directives issued by Ramanuja. Hence these temples have identical fairs, rituals and festivals. Srirangam, the citadel of Vaishnavists and the place from there all the *Vaishnava Samprodaya* spread to different parts of the world. Only in this temple Mandapa Kambar released his *Kambaramayana*. Ramanuja ordered to establish his 58 mutts only from there. Thus this centre is known for its historical value and importance.

### END NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Sethuraman, G., **Tamil Nadu Samuthya Panpattukkalai Varalaru**, Pannai Pathippagam, 1993, Madurai, p. 40.
2. Clare Arni and George Michell, (eds.), **Eternal Kaveri: Historical Sites Along the Greatest River**, Marg Publications, Mumbai, 1999, p. 76.
3. Krishnan Iyengar, S., **Sri Vaishnava Pharamam**, Madras, 2000, pp. 6-8.
4. Srinivasan, C.R., **Kanchipuram Through The Ages**, Agam Kala Prakasham, Delhi, p. 256.
5. Krislmaswami Ayyangar, S., **Early History of Vaishnavism in South India**, University of Madras, Madras, 1920, pp.1-2.
6. Srinivasan, C.R., **op.cit.**, pp. 257-258.
7. Jagadisa Ayyar, P.V., **South Indian Shrines**, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1982, p. 618.
8. Paramasivanandam, A.M., **Ancient Temples of Tamilnadu**, Tamil Kalai Publishing House, Madras, 1981, p. 106.
9. He first appeared in the tank attached to the temple of Tinivekkha at Conjeevaram as an Amsa (form) of Panchajanya. Being the first of all the Alvars, he was named as Mudalalvar (*mudal* in Tamil means the first). His contemporaries were Bhutattalvar and Peyalvar who all chanced to meet at Tirukoilur and who for the sake of the god of the people composed various works.
10. This Alvar first appeared in Kurukkathi tree in Mahabalipuram on vitta star (delphijnt) day.
11. There is a sculptural representation of this Asura in the gopuram at Tirukkukvalai near Kilvelur, Nagapatnam taluk.
12. In a Sevvali flower in the tank attached to a Vishnu shrine in Mylapore, he first appeared. He had renounced the world and led an indifferent sort of life; hence he was named Peyalvar. Even now the well is pointed out and it is held in much reverence by the Vaishnavites.
13. He was born as an Amsa (form) of Sudarsana and had a very keen contention with rudra. Though neglected by the sage Bhargava to whom he first appeared he fared well and visited Triplicane and lastly ended his days in Kumbakonam.
14. He was born and brought up under the Tamarind tree in Alvar Tirunagari. It is on a Vaigasi Visaka day he was born. For ten years he prayed under this tree. His original name was Maran.
15. The legend in connection with this holy plant is that the Asura Jalandara, who immensely troubled the devas, had in his wife Brinda such a chaste and pure woman that her virtue guarded him against all his wrongs. It is her good qualities that prevented even the gods from overcoming him. At last, Vishnu promised to bring slur

on her modesty by engaging Himself with her while the Devas were fighting with him. Accordingly in the disguise of their husband he approached her as though he came out victorious in the fight while she was fasting and praying for her husband's success. When she went out to extend her arms to embrace Him she detected the fraud played by the Lord; thereafter she entered the funeral pyre immediately. The Lord Hari atoned for the wrong done to this innocent woman by causing her premature death and He intended to give her salvation; but this course he had to adopt for the good of the Devas, who were much teased by this wretched Jalandara. While thus in his anxious moments his tears fell over the ashes of Brinda, up arose a pretty little plant which he called in joy Tulasi (*tula* means 'equal' or 'like' and *asi*, 'thou art'). From that time this plant became the chief object of worship to Vishnu. Even the most fragrant flowers are not equal to this plant in the eye of the Lord. The place where Brinda died was called Brindavana or the garden of Brinda. Later on even the pots and spots where this plant was reared began to be named accordingly. This salvation to Brinda at the hands of the Lord took place on the Twelfth day in the light fortnight of the month of Kartika (November-Dvadasi and the worship to Vishnu under this plant then is said to secure special merits.

16. He was King of Quilon and as a strong devotee of Mahavishnu, relinquished his government, went to Srirangam and remained there worshipping the Lord. He worked a miracle when he was charged to prove his innocence of theft, by dipping his hand in a pot containing a snake and coming out unscathed.
17. He was born at Srivilliputtur as an amsa of garuda. Being a strong devotee of Sri Krishna he composed hymns in His honour. He demanded large wealth from king Vallabhadeva of the Pandya Country and out of it renovated the temple at Srivilliputtur. To him appeared the famous Andal as daughter from the earth on a Adi Puram day. He was first named Vishnusittar. He spent his last days in Srirangam.
18. It is said that this incident, which has been copied in most of the sculptural representations at all places, originally took place in the mountain of Trikuta and the details thereof are mentioned in bhagavatam.
19. Born at Tirumandankudi, he proceeded to Srirangam while young, raised flower gardens and worshipped Sri Ranganada daily with the flowers there from. He is always sculptured with a basket (kudalai) on hand containing flowers.
20. The details of this incident are narrated in Ramayana and the place where this incident occurred is identified as Tirupullani in Ramnad district.
21. He had his birth in a low caste as an amsa of Saranga in Tiruvali Tirunagari near Shiyali and was Commander-in-Chief of the Chola army. He is always represented in sculptures with a sword in hand. It is he that renovated most of the Vaishnava shrines. He had a keen contest with the famous Tamil saint Sambandar at Shiyali and that defeated the Buddhists in Nagapatnam, removed the golden Buddha figure and out of it had the Vimana at Srirangam covered with gold plate.
22. He appeared in a field at Urayur near Trichinopoly and was picked out by a low caste man. While hesitating to approach the Lord in the temple, he was carried on shoulder and the Lord ordered his being freely admitted to his presence.
23. Jagadisa Ayyar, P.V., **op. cit.**, p. 614.



**A. Sivasamy**

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of History, Annamalai University, Annamalinagar.