

## The Alvars

The Alvars are the twelve Vaishnava saints of South India who flourished between the sixth and ninth centuries of the Common Era (see Aleaz 451). The Tamil word Alvar indicates they were God-intoxicated people. They were wandering saints who eulogized Lord Visnu (Aleaz 451). The Alvars maintained no caste rigidities and they belonged to different caste groups. Seven of them were Brahmins, one was a Ksatriya, two were Sudras and one was of the low Panar caste. One of them, Andal, was a woman (Aleaz 451). The Alvars practiced different forms of devotion but the most common is called *prapatti* (self-surrender), a form different from the general pattern of *bhakti* [more technical in nature and confined to the three upper castes] (Aleaz 451). The Alvars being devotees of Visnu have access to the many temples dedicated to the god (see SMS 207). During their visits they composed devotional hymns in praise of Visnu. These hymns promoted devotion and surrender by glorifying the greatness of Visnu. Although their hymns are replete with the ideas of the Vedas, their uniqueness lie in the great emphasis on devotion and surrender, which are rarely found in the Vedic Mantras or in the highly metaphysical pronouncements within the Upanisads.

Twelve Vaishnava saints helped revive devotional Hinduism (*bhakti*) through their hymns of worship to Vishnu and his avatars, they even included a woman amongst their ranks, Andal. The collection of devotional hymns of the twelve Alvars total 4000 and are collectively called *Nalayira Divyaprabhandham* (SMS 207). The merit of the hymns of the Alvars lies in the fact that they take into account all the five aspects of God (essential nature (*svarupa*), attributes (*guna*), personality (*vigraha*), incarnations (*avatara*), and activities (*lila*)) and describe them in great detail. God's activities of

creation, protection and dissolution of the world are repeatedly mentioned in the hymns of the Alvars (SMS 208). Both dissolution and creation are helpful to them; in the former, they cease from their endless efforts to escape bondage and get necessary strength and opportunity to realize their aim. God's activities include those that are performed for the protection of celestial deities, for punishing the evil doers and rewarding the pious individuals.

According to tradition, the Alvars are regarded as divine incarnations, incarnations of Lord Visnu's weapons, ornaments and vehicles (SMS 207). For example, SMS states that Andal is considered to be a manifestation of Bhudevi, a consort of Visnu. Thus they were the descendants of Visnu, but the *Nalayiram* reveals them as ordinary human beings who came under the total control of divine grace. In order to present the superior nature of Alvars, the Acaryas attributed them with mythological dates. They popularized the *Nalayiram*, and wrote commentaries on the works of Alvars. Through these commentaries, the Acaryas once again brought Sanskrit into prominence, against the preference for Tamil among the Alvars (Aleaz 451).

The literature that came from the Alvars has contributed to the establishment and development of a culture that broke away from the ritual oriented Vedic religion and rooted itself in devotion as the only path for salvation (SMS 207). The Alvars are claimed to display the full significance of the mystic union between the human soul and the lord of the world, and this has provided a practical interpretation to the Upanisads (SMS 207-208).

The Acaryas held a philosophical interpretation of the hymns. During the time of Alvars, Buddhism and Jainism were considered as mere Northern influence over the

South. The Tamil Sangam works even reflect a pleasant attitude among religions. It was only after the influence of Aryans, that the Alvars began to consider that Jainism and Buddhism were alien, and that they should be removed from Tamil Nadu. The Tamil Vaisnava saints have used the Tamil classical principle love sentiment (*akam*) to express their spontaneous religious experience. Later, the Tirumal (the deity whom they regarded as supreme Godhead) of the Alvars was absorbed into the Visnu of the Aryans. The Aryans combined their deities and the regional deities of Tamils through new myths and interpretations (Aleaz 452).

The Alvars were exclusively committed to their own religion. The exclusivist response of the Alvars was expressed at least in three different ways. The first one was the way of peace and tolerance. Aleaz states, the second pattern was marked by aggressive, antagonistic and intolerant attitude. The third form was expressed through the 'disturbed' psychological state of the converts, and the last two methods were hostile in nature and led to fanatic activities. The exclusive nature of the Alvars was vivid in their relation with Buddhism and Jainism, at one level, and Saivism at another level. Besides the exclusive claims of the Alvars, there was also scope for an inclusive perspective in the works of the Alvars. Narayana was considered the indweller in other deities and it is only through his grace that they function (Aleaz 452). There are also traces of relativistic outlook in the Alvars where all religions are attributed with the same purpose. In the view of Aleaz, there was scope for a liberal perspective to deal with the problem of religious pluralism in the *bhakti* tradition of Alvars, which he calls 'one-much' response. For example, there are many references in *Tiruvaymoli*, which is the most prominent among the poems, to suggest that the same Tirumal has become Brahma, Visnu and Siva (Aleaz

452). Tirumalisai indicates that God is one and rewards everyone irrespective of the deity he/she worships. This view is relevant today because Indian people have a tendency to accept the various names and forms of God as the expression of the one Supreme Reality, which cannot be fully comprehended by the human intellect (Aleaz 453). Each religion is thus a process in understanding the Ultimate, which is a mystery, and accepting the ultimate as mystery solves the issue of many religions and binds people of different faiths together for one purpose.

## **Bibliography**

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### **Other Readings**

1. Narayanan, Vasudha (1985) *Hindu Devotional Literature: the Tamil connection*. Religious Studies Review, (11)1:12.

### **Related Research Topics**

1. Hymns of the Alvars
2. Relationship of Buddhism and Jainism with Alvars
3. The Twelve Alvars

### **Related Websites**

1. The Nammavalar Alvars Saints  
<http://www.ramanuja.org/sv/alvars/nammalvar/alvars.html>
2. The Poetry of the Alvars  
[http://books.google.ca/books?hl=en&lr=&id=0z02cZe8PU8C&oi=fnd&pg=PA187&dq=The+Alvars&ots=NhJr4FsAru&sig=ExlAcxL7lFngNdYQ-4p\\_jaaWCM#PPA187,M1](http://books.google.ca/books?hl=en&lr=&id=0z02cZe8PU8C&oi=fnd&pg=PA187&dq=The+Alvars&ots=NhJr4FsAru&sig=ExlAcxL7lFngNdYQ-4p_jaaWCM#PPA187,M1)

### **Key Words:**

Prapatti  
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Nalayira Divyaprabhandham  
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Akam  
Tiruvaymoli

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