



ROLE OF THE SAINTS TO THE SPREAD OF VAISHNAVISM IN SRIRANGAM

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Abstract:

Srirangam played a significant role in the political history of India, from almost a very early period. In the field of religion, its role was not small either. Religion is the fundamental factor of Indian history, long before the Stone Age when man was governed by unshakable faith in God. The history of India is replete with a number of religions and faiths. The religions of India have run through the country like its rivers and enriched and glorified its knowledge, arts, culture, etc. Right from very ancient times, Tamil Nadu been had governed by religious thoughts and actions, as evident from historical evidence. The inscriptions of Vaishnavism, at Srirangam, give adequate proof of the rich contribution of Srirangam, to the growth and development of religion. Vaishnavism had its good growth at Srirangam even from the sangam period. The reference made in Silappathigaram with the names Vishnu, Mayon and Nilamaninediyonkoil is testimony to the existence of such names during sangam period. The other names Vishnugopa, Kumaravishnu and Narasimha widely found, during pallava period, indicate Vaishnavism was present in those days. Pallavas had special concern for the Vaishnavite compared to their attitude to saivaite. There has always been a competition between the Vaishnavites and Saivaites to show their God as the superior one. This continued for several hundred years as shown in the literary works and also in the architectural works found in the rock-cut temples in Mahabalipuram. However, whether it was Vaishnavism or Saivism, the growth and prosperity of these cults depended mainly on the patronage given by those who were in power in those times.

Role of the Saints to the Spread of Vaishnavism in Srirangam:

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The Bhakti Movement made radical changes in the society. Since the Pallava Period, Hinduism flourished in two directions. The Alwars and Nayanmars spread the Hindu Principles, among the common people. During this period, for this first time in the history of South India, the Hindu religion reached the masses. As a result, the corporate system of worship developed. This was one of the greatest achievements of the Bhakthi Movement.

The Island of Srirangam was recognized early as a sacred site, lying within the holy river Cauvery. Two temples were founded here, one dedicated to Vishnu as Ranganatha and another to Shiva, as Jambukeshvara.² Vaishnavism and Saivism were the two eyes of Hinduism. Religious and devotional activities of the Alwars 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. It is proposed to review the position of Vaishnavism in Srirangam.

Vaishnavism in Srirangam:

Sanskrit word Vaishnavism refers to a cult of Vishnu belonging in the existence of Vishnu everywhere – omnipresent. The tamil word 'Vainavam' takes its origin in the Sanskrit word 'Vaishnava' Vaishnavism believes Vishnu as the foremost god in the world and found in everything around us. Vishnu is considered to be the protector of life and worshipped as the saviour of life. The cult following Vishnu in Tamilnadu is called Sree Vainavam. Several acharyas, over centuries, spread the ideals of Vainavam and remained as the messengers of Vaishnavite principles.³

Of the trimurti, the second one is Vishnu who stands as the guard to all the living things and also the universe. The Hindus in Indian worship Vishnu as their only deity who can save them from all the earthly problems. Indians find Vishnu as the symbol of love, care, security and protection. There is a belief in Hindu mythology that Vishnu appears in the world whenever chaos and devils surround the world to destroy it. Vishnu, the protector of the world, is believed to have existed in the world time and again in the name of Rama, Krishna, Buddha and Mahaveer and in countless other names. The tower of the temple, with 13 storeys crowded with images, symbolizes the innumerable number of incarnations he had taken in the world. All the figures and

sculptural or stucco works on the gopuram provide a realistic multi dimensional effect of the Hindu mythology which is similar to the European style of architecture belonging to the medieval period. The temple at Srirangam has been acting as a high house to those who want to attain spiritual awaking through the practice of divine love in every aspect of their worshipping the God.⁴

Srirangam has flourished, over the centuries, and reached the peak among the Hindu shrines only because of the patronage given by innumerable number of kings, emperors and saints who not only supported the growth of the temple with material but also with their spiritual insights which helped the people lessen their miseries. Ramanuja was one of the saints who served this temple till his last days and left an indelible mark in the history of the temple.

Sri Ranganatha Temple:

Srirangam is a river island formed by the cauvery and coleroon at Tiruchirapalli one of the largest cities in Tamilnadu. The temple housing Sriranganatha deity is situated in the middle of the Island majestically with its tall towers. This shrine is one of the holiest shrines in Tamilnadu for those who follows vaishnavism and believe that Vishnu is the ultimate God who protects the people from evils. With seven concentric walls and 21 towers on all directions make this temple appearance gorgeous. It is believed that Vibhishana, a saint, carrying the idol of Ranganatha, on his way to Srilanka, took rest for a short time by keeping the statue on the ground. When he prepared to go he tried to take the idol from the ground but it got stuck to the ground. So, he built a small shrine which became a popular abode for Lord Ranganatha on the bank of river cauvery. The entire temple campus with great walls, towers, mandapas, halls with 1000 pillars were constructed over a period of 300 years from 14th to 17th century A.D. Apart from being the most important vaishnava shrine Srirangam is included in the 9 shrines famous for their planetary identity – Navagraha sthala.⁵

Vadakalai and Thenkalai:

Basically the cult Vaishnavism exists with two branches or two groups and each of them follow their own concept of God, rituals, rites and benefits of worshipping God. The divisions are Vadakalai and Thenkalai according to the authoritative book in Tamil title 'Sanga Thamizhar Samayam'. But after the period of Emperurnanar, during the period of Koorathazhvan, Thirukkurugai Piran Pillan, Sri Vishnu Sithar alias Engalzhuvan, Sri Barasapara Battar, though there were administrative differences in Vaishnava religion, there were no differences of opinion, regarding customary principles and activities. During the period of Sri Vethantha Desikar, he had clearly stated his difference of opinion. In his period, there was difference of opinion between himself and the earlier Achariyars. But there is no proof, either directly or indirectly, regarding the two classifications (Vadakalai and Tenkalai) of Vaishnavism.⁶

The important religious leader, who was associated with Kanchi, was Yadavaprakasa. Vijayananthi, one of the earliest works on lexicography, was written by 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 A.D.), who was the propagator of the Visishtadvaita 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 Ramanucharya was so great that he attracted 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, the temple record of Srirangam, states that Alavandar deputed Alwar Tiruvararanga Perumal 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 Periyannambi, another disciple of Alavandar, was sent to Kanchi, on a similar mission, with 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 Periyannambi, 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 Periyannambi and succeeded Alavandar as the pontifical head of the Mutt at Srirangam.⁷

Alwars:

Among the Vaishnava centers of pilgrimage Srirangam equals the famous Tirupati of Venkatachala or Venkatesa and has been eulogized by almost all the Vaishnava saints or Alwars 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 took to banditry for the sake of embellishing with the looted money, the Lord of Srirangam, he is said to have looted the golden image of Buddha, at the Vihara in Nagapattinam and with that gold, renovated certain parts of the Temple. The name of minor Alwars such as Tondaradippodi and Tirupanalwar, born at Uraiyyur near Srirangam, were 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 by the Alwars:

The Alwars 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 referred to the Temple of Ranganatha at Srirangam and no other place, among the 108 holy Vaishnava Shrines, have been universally praised by all the Alwars.

This accounts for the special importance and sacredness of the Shrine at this place. The praise, by these Alwars, about the various shrines are contained in the Tamil work, *Nalayiraprabhanda*. Srirangam is the most important of the hundred and eight Divya Desas recognized by the Alwars, in their sacred hymns.⁸

Poigai Alwar: "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".⁹

Bhutatt Alwar: "It is you Lord that during your avatar as Sri Krishna tore to pieces the Bakasura¹¹ who disguised himself as a crane and troubled your devotees. You preside over the shrines at Srirangam, Tirukkoshtiyur, Tirupati, Tirunirmalai, Tanjore, Tiruthankal and Mahabalipuram to bless the devotees".¹⁰

Pey Alwar: "O Lord, it is to save the sufferings of your devotees on earth that you incarnated as Vamana and begged of King Mahabali three feet of land".¹¹

Tirumalaisai Alwar: "Who could know properly the merits of this Lord, who 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".¹²

Nammalwar: "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 I turn my eye I feel you. It is to protect the virtuous you incarcerated on earth as Sri Rama. To distribute *amrita* (ambrosia) to Devas you incarnated as *kurma* (tortoise); you saved Prahalada by slaying Hiranyakasipu. To remove the 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 (*Ocymum sanctum*) plant at your feet saves all from their sufferings by their accepting it heartily".¹³

Kulasekharalwar: 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 *garbhagraha* and be adoring you. Sages Tumhuru Narada as also Brahma, Siva, Indira and other devas are ever mediating on you at this place. The *Panchayudha*, i.e., the five weapons: *Chakra*, *Saranga*, *Gada*, *Danda* and *Sangar* 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 in your Krishnavatar.¹⁴

Periya Alwar: "At one time, to enable the virtuous Pandava kings long by saved king Parkshit. To place the ardent devotee Vibheshana, you remain you here facing the south, wherein his kingdom lay. You saved Gajendra¹⁸ 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".¹⁵

Tondaradipodi Alwar: "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 me 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 you. Sri Rama who, by the more dispatch of a solitary arrow made the vast ocean disappear, blessed Vibheshana in this form of your almighty.¹⁶ The prescribed daily rites of one could also be neglected provided he is before you always."

Tirumangai Alwar: "You made Brahma, the God of Creation, appear in navel. You shine at this spot like the most precious gem".¹⁷

Tiruppanalwar: "Being the first that appeared in creation it is you only could save the whole world".¹⁸

Conclusion:

Vaishnavism had its good growth at Srirangam even from the sangam period. The reference made in Silappathigaram with the names Vishnu, Mayon and Nilamaninediyonkoil is testimony to the existence of such names during sangam period. The other names Vishnugopa, Kumaravishnu and Narasimha widely found, during pallava period, indicate Vaishnavism was present in those days. Pallavas had special concern for the Vaishnavite compared to their attitude to saivaites. There has always been a competition between the Vaishnavites and Saivaites to show their God as the superior one. This continued for several hundred years as shown in the literary works and also in the architectural works found in the rock-cut temples in Mahabalipuram. However, whether it was Vaishnavism or Saivism, the growth and prosperity of these cults depended mainly on the patronage given by those who were in power in those times.

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 9. Ibid., p. 620.
 10. A. M. Paramasivanandam, *Ancient Temples of Tamilnadu*, Tamil Kalai Publishing House, Madras, 1981, p. 106.
 11. This Alvar first appeared in Kurukkathitree in Mahabalipuram on Avittastar (day).
 12. There is a sculptural representation of this Asura in the gopuram at Tirukkukvalai near Kilvelur, Nagapatnam taluk.
 13. In a Sevvali flower in the tank attached to a Vishnushrine in Mylapore, he first appeared. He had renounced the world and led an in different 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.
 14. 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 last lyended his days in Kumbakonam.
 15. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, *The Colas*, p. 149.
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