

# THE TRIPLE STREAM OF KNOWLEDGE IN The Viśiṣṭādvaita of Rāmānuja

Śrī Ramanuja's philosophy is considered to be ubhayavedanta, by which it is naturally understood to comprise Vedānta as received from the Vedic scripture including the Upaniṣads, and the Tamil literature consisting of the hymns of the āḷvārs. The idea apparently behind this is that both these literatures speak about the nature of reality from two different points of view but which in reality may be seen to be correspondential. Many scholars try to interpret the more detailed portions of the āḷvār-philosophy or theology from the stand-point of Ramayana and certain Purāṇās, especially the Viṣṇu, Bhagavata and Harivamsa. These two streams of tradition give apparently to most an adequate integral exposition of the nature of Brahman or Godhead. A third stream however, is not emphasised though it is present certainly throughout. It is the tantra literature especially the Pāñcarātra. It is clear to thinkers that the agama literature had played a very important role and the very structure of religious theology owes a great deal to this literature. The concept of the Divine or Godhead as fivefold, as *Para*, transcendent, as *Vyūha*, cosmic, *vibhava*, manifestative and descending into the cosmic scheme, as *antaryāmi*, as selfing in the individuals and as *Arcā*, the adorable object of worship even in matter, reveals the fundamental principle of Hinduism, which always upheld the integral oneness of the Divine in His infinite manyness of functions in relation to the cosmos. Again the concept of *līlā*, becomes much more clear and unambiguous in the context of Pāñcarātra, not merely because Śrī Kṛṣṇa was as *Vāsudēva* the adored object of the Pāñcarātra-method of realisation, but because it gave a definite and enlarged meaning to the concept of creativity. The *Gītā* indeed supplies the tantric synthesis.

The āḷvārs were fully informed in this method and in fact any understanding of the āḷvārs could be considered to be adequate only when we can see in them culmination of the visions of God as Absolute, Sole seer, and Self of reality as preached and practised by the Vēdānta, and as the transcendent, immanent, descending and uplifting Providence, in their vision of the mysterious fusion and dynamic intermingling of these two visions leading to the experience of beauty, both supra-creational and creational.

To illustrate this point I shall render into English the smallest work of Tirumaṅgai āḷvār (Tiru Vēzukūṛṟirukkai).

Once thou created Brahmā, resident in thy navel, primeval, vast, situate on the petals of the (navel) lotus;

and the two lights (thereafter)

Once thou destroyed the terrible triple-fortressed Lanka with thine fiery-mouth arrows discharged from the incomparable bow carved with ivory at both ends;

Once thou hast sought three feet of earth, wearing the tripleplaited sacred thread on thine resplendent chest as Brahman (and) unequalled thou didst measure with thine two feet the three worlds;

Once whilst all the quarters trembled thou mounted the beautiful plumaged bird (Garuda) and destroyed the great grief of the helpless elephant, with its hanging trunk, threefold juices and two ears, in the lake, deep and full of water;

In Thee the brahmins who keep the three fires, the four vedas, the five sacrifices and six works, seek refuge;<sup>1</sup>

(Thou) hast a nature un-knowable to the yogis, who have withdrawn their sense-organs within their bodies and destroyed the four (hunger, sleep, fear and sex) and have established themselves in the One (harmony) having renounced the two (passion and darkness), and by that practice have destroyed births caused by twofold (good and bad) action;

(Thou) hast a nature wonderful and impossible to be known by Him, the three-eyed, four-armed, in whose matted hair the five-mouthed serpent and Gaṅgā are impressed;

(Thou) hast lifted up the seven worlds with thine tusks;

(Thou) art useful for the six-fold<sup>2</sup> ecstasies spoken of (in the scriptures);

(Thou) hast in thine beautiful hands the five shining weapons;

O Lord! who have beautiful four hands and art of the colour of the Ocean, thou art wrapt in Yoga-sleep<sup>3</sup> whilst with one pointed mind, the clear moon-faced eternally youthful two spouses enjoying thee, are at all times massaging thine two feet with their flower-like exquisite hands;

Thou hast established the four (castes) and art<sup>4</sup> the five elements;

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<sup>1</sup> Dakṣiṇāgni, Āhavanāgni, Gārhapatyāgni, Ṛg, Sāman, Yajus and Atharvaṇa, Dēva, Pitṛ, Bhūta, Manuṣya, Brahma Yajñas, Yajanam, Yājanam, Adhyāyanam, Adhyāpanam, Dānam, Pratigrahama are the meanings of the references to three, four, five and six to this line;

<sup>2</sup> Madhura, Āmla, Lavaṇa, Tikta, Kaṭu, and Kaṣāya are the six ecstasies

<sup>3</sup> Yoga-sleep is the period of creation or Līlā of the Absolute Person.

<sup>4</sup> The commentators here make this to mean that God is the Lord of the five elements and they form His body. It is a case of sāmānādhikaraṇya.

Thou hast slain the seven bulls for the sake of the lady<sup>5</sup> whose hair is buzzing with six-limbed bees;

Thou art impossible to be comprehended by those who follow the six systems;<sup>6</sup>

Thou keepest (on thine chest) the lady<sup>7</sup> whose hair has five qualities;

(Thou) grantest the four,<sup>8</sup> (thou) art the three forms,<sup>9</sup> (thou) granted the twofold fruits;<sup>10</sup> Being One, thou pervadest all;

O Transcendent Being, who art in Yoga-sleep<sup>11</sup> on the serpent wafting its hoods to the chants of the Brāhmṇās at Tirukkuṇḍandai where flows the Ponnai amid places of exuberant gardens with flowers over-flowing with honey and excellent foliage; where are groves which have invaluable gems and where good grains and paddy grow, where are golden houses with flags aloft as it were hindering the movement of the moon in the sky, fully wealthy,

May the sorrows which happen to me depart from me,

I have sought thine feet. Lord, protect me from Saṃsāra.

In the above forty six lines of this Hymns of surrender we have a complete illustration of the multiplanal nature of God, the Absoluteness and Sovereign transcendence of God as well as the beneficence of the Deity fully inculcated. It reveals the *tattva*, *hita* and *puruṣārtha* and thus gives an integral account as far as it goes and reveals that it is only an integral surrender, or surrender to the godhead in all levels of His and our existence that can help the attainment. The Viśiṣṭādvaitic doctrine of prapatti, is a theory in keeping with the vision of the integral Organic nature of the Deity. The realisation of the divine is for the purposes of life and not otherwise, for the purposes

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<sup>5</sup> Nappinnai is the lady referred to. It may be stated that there is no reference in any manner to her in the Bhāgavata or Harivaṃśa. It does not appear that she is Rādhā. She is a unique South Indian figure introduced into the life of Śrīkṛṣṇa by the Āḷvārs.

<sup>6</sup> The six here are considered to refer to the heretical schools. But it appears that they really refer to the orthodox schools, for not by philosophy but by surrender and grace alone could the Divine be attained. This is the special doctrine of the Āḷvārs and Bhaktas.

<sup>7</sup> Śrī is mentioned as having the five qualities of softness, coolness, fragrance, lengthiness and blackness which are referred to her hair.

<sup>8</sup> Dharma-Artha-Kāma-Mōkṣa Puruṣārtha.

<sup>9</sup> The commentator holds that these are Brahma, Viṣṇu and Rudra, but they could also refer to Samkarṣaṇa, Pradhymna and Aniruddha.

<sup>10</sup> The original has *iha* and *para*. The commentator wrongly states they are good and bad

<sup>11</sup> Yoga-sleep is the period of creation or *līlā* of the absolute Person.

of perfect or integral union, not escape, into the Absolute.