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**Lesson: Bhakti and Puranic Traditions in South India c.  
700-1200 CE**

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## **Introduction**

The period from seventh century onwards in the history of south Indian religions is marked by a fervid devotion to a personal god which found expression in numerous devotional hymns which were collected and edited in a canonical form at a later time. The *bhakti* movement that flourished in south India during seventh to twelfth centuries CE was in some way inspired by the northern example. The movement had two groups— one, Shaiva and the other, Vaishnava. The worshippers of Shiva were known as Nayanaras and of Vishnu, Alvars. The Sanskrit term *bhakti*, meaning “partaking (of god), participation, loving devotion”, derived from the root *bhaj*, has been broadly applied both to a type of religiosity and to the popular movements through which devotional religion spread in India. (Peterson, 1991, 4)

## **The Social background of the bhakti movements**

Bhakti was a popular religion of intimate relationship with a gracious god, and the new bhakti devotionalism was characterized by ecstatic modes of expression. The phenomenal rise of the bhakti saints in the sixth century in south India is marked by various socio-historic factors. This period is marked by the emergence of powers like Chalukyas of Badami in the western Deccan and the Pallavas and the Pandyas in the south. The rulers of the dynasties patronized brahmanical ideologies which got reflected in the iconography of their caves and the structural temples from Badami to Mahaballipuram. Another significant development during this period was the land grants given to *brahmanas* and temples by kings who in return sanctified their authority. The spread of land grants led to the expansion of agriculture in uncultivable areas and forests. In this background, it can be suggested that the emergence of the *bhakti* saints represents a rebellion against the strict caste system as many of the *bhakti* saints belonged to the lower castes; however, some of the prominent saints belonged to the *brahmana* caste. Another explanation of the rise of the saints in the Tamil country was to overcome the oppressive Jain and Buddhist faiths imposed on the people by their rulers.

With the coming of the saints, a new religion was heralded which was marked by miracles being performed by the saints and visiting them could bring a soul close to the source of power. (Dehejia, 1988, 3)

### **The bhakti saints of south India (The Alvars and Nayanars)**

The bhakti saints can be broadly classified into two streams – the Alvars and Nayanars. The Alvars were the followers of Vishnu and the Nayanars expressed their devotion to Shiva. The bhakti movement led by the Alvars in the Tamil country led to the overthrow of the Jain and Buddhist faiths and the establishment of the supremacy of brahmanical worship. A significant role in this movement was played by the Shaiva Nayanar saints Appar and Sambandar. They actively questioned the authority of the Jaina and Buddhist faiths by engaging in debates and performing miracles. Other Nayanar saints like Sundarar and later Manikkavacakar continued their hostility and opposition towards the heterodox sects. On the other hand, the Alvar saints quietly propagated the path of Vishnu bhakti and sang the praises of their lord. Their devotional rigour and constant admiration is reflected in the four thousand devotional verses that they composed.

### **The Alvars**

The term 'Alvar' means 'those who are absorbed in the divine'. There are twelve Vaishnava saints. Vishnu temples usually contain separate shrines with stone or bronze figures of the twelve Alvars. The Alvar philosophy is deeply indebted to the Vedic and Puranic scriptures. The Alvars were also conversant with the *agamas* which provided them with the concrete worship of the icons. The Alvar saints felt that Transcendent Being is verily also the one who is the godhead whom mankind knows and loves, for He is with man and revealing Himself to man. (Varadachari, 1966)

The first three Alvars are known as Poykai, Putam and Pey. They wandered from one shrine to another in search of god. The first Alvar saint Poykai intuited god's existence through his transcendent knowledge, saint Putam through maturing gnosis into devotion and saint Pey through the intuitive conjunction of knowledge and devotion attained the

supreme vision of was a 12th century called the *Divyasuricharitam* by Garudavahana. In Alvar bhakti, the relationship between the devotee and Mayon (Krishna) was often expressed in terms of the lover-beloved relationship. It has been suggested by Friedhelm Hardy that the mythological references in the *Tiruvantatis* represent the earliest stage of Alvar religiosity and highlights the prominence of the Krishna *avatara*. (Hardy, 1983)

Poykai Alvars first verse reveals the wonder nature of god's creative being which is expressed by means of similes drawn from life. The Alvars were overpowered by the concept of the myth of the Trivikrama and Poykai continued the usage of the myth in his verses. Putam enumerated the exploits of Vamana-Trivikrama, the incident of *Putanavadh*, the *Varaha avatara*, the *Shaktasura* episode in his verses which suggest of him being familiar with the avatars of Vishnu. Pey represented the three gems of spiritual experience of god, as possessing Shri in His divine heart, as the most beautiful and satisfying Being and as the most kind and as the healer of all sorrow and abolisher of sin and fear of death. The first three Alvars were worshipped as incarnation of Vishnu.

Other significant Alvar is Kulashekhara. He is unique among the Alvars in many ways. He seems to have had mastery over the Tamil and Sanskrit languages. In his hymns to the supreme godhead (Perumal) called Perumal Tirumoli, Kulashekhara traces the growth of his consciousness. The Tirumoli comprises of 105 hymns and is divided into ten sections.

Saint Nammalvar is considered as the founder of the Sri Vaishnava philosophy. Born in a low caste, he spent his life fasting and conquered the breath which causes transmigration by the grace of god. He wrote four works namely, *Tiruviruttam*, *Tiruvasariyam*, *Tiruvayamoli*, and *Periya Tiruvandadi*. As his verses provided poetry to the ordinary people, he is called Nam-Alvar or 'Our' Alvar.

### **The Nayanars**

Later traditions have recognized the number of Nayanars or adiyars, as sixty three. The term Nayanar means 'leader'. Most of them were individuals though occasionally a group of devotees was counted under one name. While all the sixty three saints are

worshipped, a special status is attached to a group of three saints who have acquired greater significance than the rest. The three Shaiva saints are referred as Muvar or "Three Revered Ones"- Appar, Sundarar and Sambandar. Often, this group of three is expanded into the Nalvar or "Four Revered Ones", by the addition of the important saint Manikavachakar, who didn't belong to the original sixty three saints but lived a century later than the last of the groups.

First among the Tevaram trio was *Tirunavukkarasu* (king of the holy tongue/ speech) also known as Appar. He was a Vellala (peasant proprietor) from Tiruvamur, believed to be a contemporary of the Pallava king Mahendravarman I. though born in an orthodox Shaiva family he was attracted to Jainism in his early life, and joined the monastery as a monk. Appar's sister Tilakavatiyar, a devout Shaiva convinced him to put his faith in Shiva. Angered by the poet's devotion to Shiva, the Jains persecuted and torture him, but he emerged safe from all his trials and succeeded in reconverting the Pallava king to Shaivism. In iconography, the saint is often portrayed holding the hoe with which he cleared the temple courtyards of weeds and grass (Figure 1). This image is suitable both for the Tamil Shaiva ideal and of humble service (tontu) and Vellala farmer's attachment to the land.



*Figure 1: Appar, 12<sup>th</sup> Century. Source: Maishy Charan*

Sambandar whose popular name is a shortened version of Nanacambandar or Tirunanacambantar, began composing hymns when he was a child. (The great philosopher, Shankara refers to Sampantar as the "Tamil Child" in one of his hymn). Born in a brahmana family, in Cirkali, a coastal town near Chidambaram on the mouth of the Kaveri, Sambandar is said to have mastered Vedic learning by age three, when he miraculously received the gift of sacred poetry from Shiva himself. The child saint embarked on a career of incredible religious activity. Accompanied by devotees, Sambandar made four great pilgrimages to the Shaiva shrines in the Tamil region. At every shrine he composed Tamil hymns in various complex meters and rhythms. In the iconography, he is child, holding the golden cymbals (*talam*) that Shiva himself gave him to keep his tender hands from getting sore while keeping time (*tala*) to the hymns. (Figure 2) He is also shown holding the divine cup of wisdom.



*Figure 2: Sambandar, 12<sup>th</sup> Century. Source: Maishy Charan*

Nampi Arurar or Sundaramurti, also called Sundarar (the "Handsome One"), was born a Shaiva brahmana in Tirunavalur on the river Pennai. On his wedding, Shiva appeared at the assembly and claimed him as his devotee and bondservant. The saint received Siva's grace in Tiruvennyenallun. Although he lived mostly at Tiruvarur, he made pilgrimages

and composed hymns at various Shaiva shrines. His hymns are full of autobiographical material, especially in connection with his marriages to the temple dancer Paravai in Tiruvarur and the Vellala woman Cankili in Tiruvorriyur. The saint mentions kings and local chiefs as his friends and benefactors, which include, the Chera king Ceraman Perumal, and the Pallava feudatory Naracinka Munaiyaraiyan among them. The saint is said to have ascended to heaven on awhile elephant with his friend, the Chera king. In the iconography, Sundarar is depicted as a handsome, well-dressed, princely young man, often accompanied by his wives. (Figure 3)



*Figure 3: Sundarar, 10<sup>th</sup> -11<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Source: Maishy Charan*

#### Manikavachhakar

Manikavachhakar came a little later than Sundarar. He was born in a brahmana family in a village near Madurai. His name literally meant 'one whose speech is like ruby'. His hagiography suggests that he was a minister of a Pandyan king. He is said to have debated Buddhists from Ceylon at Chidambaram. His hymns constitute the *Tiruvacakam* (The sacred world) which forms the eighth section of the Tamil Shaiva canon. His poems reflect his frantic devotion for Shiva and strong dislike for the Vedanta. His protest against advaita-vedanta is significant as it represents the core of the bhakti cult.

## **The Tevaram text**

The collection of the hymns of the three saints- Appar, Sundarar and Sambandar is called the Tevaram, which serves as the primary scripture for Tamil Shaivas. The Tevaram hymns reflected many features of Tamil culture, and differed in many respects from the authoritative sacred texts of the Great Tradition, composed in Sanskrit. The text functions as a symbol and motivator of sectarian and communal identity. Some of the Tevaram hymns suggest that the bhakti cult leaders had to compete with powerful Jain and Buddhist monks to gain and retain royal support for their religion. The importance given to the temple and ritual worship in the Tevaram hymns highlights the most striking feature of early Tamil bhakti. However, many later bhakti sects protested against and detached themselves from image and temple worship. A. K. Ramanujan suggests that the medieval Virashaiva sect rejected both the "great" and "little" traditions of Hinduism. (Ramanujan, 1973, 22-23)

In the Tevaram hymns the earliest literary evidence of a vigorous popular Tamil bhakti cult centering on Shiva is found. The poet saints portray Shiva as the bhakti god whose grace ends his devotees' *karma*. Appar, Sambandar and Sundarar travelled with fellow devotees from all castes to worship and sing of Shiva at various shrines present in the Tamil countryside, especially along the banks of the river Kaveri. Together, the trio sang hymns to Shiva as the god of shrines situated in 274 sacred places. Of these, 269 are south Indian shrines the saints visited in their pilgrimages and the remaining shrines belong to the Himalayan regions. (Champakalashmi, 2011)

## **Woman bhakti saints**

In south India, a group of saints who transformed the religious milieu were not only men. Although works such as *Periyapuram* places women in a negative character, they equally participated in the bhakti tradition. Andal was the only woman Alvar saint whereas Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Mangaiyarkkarasiyar, and Isainaniyar were Nayanars saints.

## **Andal**

Andal, known also as Kotai or "She of the fragrant tresses", was one of the twelve Alvars of Vishnu and the only woman amongst them. She was a prominent saint in the first half of the ninth century. Kotai was regarded as an *amsa* of Vishnu's second wife Bhudevi, the goddess earth. She is believed to have achieved the closest possible relationship with Vishnu which procured her the title Andal meaning, "she who rules". Andal wrote two books, dedicated to Krishna – the popular *Tiruppavai* of thirty verses and the *Nachchiyar Tirumozhi*, a set of fourteen hymns in one hundred and forty three verses. The *Tiruppavai* is sung mostly by young unmarried girls in the month of *Markali* (December-January). It is believed that singing the thirty verses will bring maidens an early and happy marriage. (Dehejia, 1990, 4) *Nachchiyar Tirumozhi* is not chanted in temples or at religious festivals. According to Dennis Hudson, the reason for prohibiting the *Nachchiyar Tirumozhi* from temple rituals is because of the fact that its hymns are the expression of a singular, individual path to god, which is inappropriate as a mode of worship for the common people. It appears that the communal ideal of the *Tiruppavai* led to its greater significance in temple ritual, whereas *Nachchiyar Tirumozhi* could not reach the same because of its unique path of a single saint.

## **Karaikkal Ammaiyar**

Karaikkal Ammaiyar's life incidents are mentioned in the *Periyapuranam*. From her poetry it appears that bhakti ideology accommodated women like her. She rejected her femininity both in her personal life and on the public front. She was married to a rich merchant Paramatattan. The story of the mango tells about her divine gifts and how her husband after discovering this abandoned her. As once her husband gave two mangoes to Punitavati, she gave one to Shivanatiyar. When her husband came for lunch she served him the other one. When he demanded for the second one, she prayed to the lord. Through divine grace, she managed to produce another mango when her husband demanded it. Anxious by her divine powers he left her and married another woman.

Shattered by this incident she renounced the worldly pleasures. She abandoned her physical beauty and good health. She turned into a skeleton as she concentrated all her energies in devotion to Shiva (Figure 4). She was blessed by Shiva and granted the boon of being an eternal witness the dance of Shiva. She then composed her first poem called *Arpudatirvandadi*. Her other important works are *Irattai-manimalai* and *Muttatiruppatikarikal*. All her compositions are of great significance as R. Mahalakshmi points out that 'Karraikal Ammaiyar's hymns are the first which seek to locate Shiva in a particular site in the Tamil region'. (Mahalakshmi, 2000, 23)

It appears that both the bhaktins portrays different forms of sexuality. Andal chooses to disappear in her love for Vishnu and Karraikal Ammaiyar renounced her sexuality with her devotion for Shiva. By doing so the bhaktins rebelled against the patriarchal precincts of an ideal wife and woman.



Figure 4: Karraikal Ammaiyar. Source: <http://huntington.wmc.ohio-state.edu/public/index.cfm?fuseaction=showThisDetail&ObjectID=30027651>

### **Bhakti and caste**

The bhakti saints belonged to various sections of society. Around two third of the saints were brahmanas. However, there were also people from other social backgrounds which included a washerman, cowherd, weaver, potter, hunter, fisherman and robber. Two saints, the Vaishnava saint Tiruppan Alvar and the Shaiva saint Nandanar are described as untouchables. Nandanar earned his living by slaughtering animals and used the leather for making drums and strings for musical instruments. He desired to see Shiva dancing in Chidambaram, but was denied access to the temple. However, as per ordered

by Shiva to the temple priest to light a fire on temple gate from which Nandanar passed through unharmed. He is said to have disappeared under the foot of the dancing Shiva. Tiruppan Alvar was also an untouchable and wished to see Vishnu at Shrirangam. Vishnu appeared to one of the brahmana temple priests in a dream and ordered him to carry Tiruppan on his shoulder to the sanctum. It is believed that after singing his last song, he merged into the image of Vishnu. It seems that saints from lower castes had effectively created a prominent position in the movement.

### **The Ideology of bhakti and feudalism**

Scholars have illustrated that the ideology of bhakti was connected with the growth of feudal structures in India. ( D. D. Kosambi, 1999; R. N. Nandi, 1986) It has been often suggested by scholars that in the peninsular India, from the sixth century CE onwards, there was appearance of brahmanical religion with its impact on social and religious processes. (K. A. Nilakantha Sastri, 1955; Kesavan Veluthat, 1993; R. Champakalakshmi, 1996) Kesavan Veluthat and M.G.S. Narayanan has suggested that the beginnings of a feudal structure were visible in this period. (Veluthat, Narayanan, 1978, 34) These hypotheses need serious probing. In the Tamil country it seems that the ideology of bhakti served various functions. It was an instrument of social protest; it opposed the brahmanical orthodoxy as well heterodox faiths, and a movement towards socio-religious reform. (Champakalaskhmi, 1996, 143)

### **Puranic Religion**

The bhakti movement led by the Alvar and Nayanar saints marks the beginnings of the brahmanical socio-religious order, which is reflected in the dominance of the Puranic Vaishnava and Saiva sects and the decline of the 'heterodox' sects- Jainism and Buddhism.

Puranic religious tradition was central to the development of religion in India. In the early medieval period, significant developments in the brahmanical traditions appeared due to assimilation and absorption of folk traditions into the brahmanical fold. These

elements were Sanskritized and was sanctioned by Vedic authority by the brahmanas. This gave birth to Puranic religion which was different in many ways from Vedic brahmanism. The key markers of which were: propagation of brahmanical ideals and sectarian interests and absorption of local cults and associated practices with directions on daily existence.

In south India, the development of religion and its social base was an outcome of the intertwining of the northern and southern traditions along with the regional pattern of the Puranic processes. It is evident from the sources that in south India, the Vedic and the Puranic traditions emerged as an enclosed combination of regional differences and peculiarities. It is marked by the evolution of different pantheons around the chief deities Shiva and Vishnu.

The early medieval period is marked by changing socio-political organization based on land grants leading to agrarian expansion with the temple as the legitimating institution, instrumental in the emergence of territorial kingship and a brahmanical social order (*Varnashrama*). Vedic *yajna* was replaced by *dana* and temple worship, both played vital role in legitimation and expansion of agrarian economy. This was an outcome of not just one religious or spiritual head but it involved many *brahmanas* well versed in Vedas, who were donees of land grants, composed Puranas with rich mythology of Shiva and Vishnu, served as temple priests and followed Agamic canons for temple rituals and worship. This was the historical context in which Shankara (c. 788-821 CE), and the establishment of the philosophy of *Advaita*, through his commentaries on the *Upanishads*, the *Brahma Sutras* and the *Bhagvadgita*, together known as the *Prasthan Trayi* are situated.

### **Shankara, his life and teachings**

Shankara was one of the most influential thinkers who lived in the late eighth and early ninth centuries. He gave up ritualistic religion and took up to sannyasa. His literary works range close to 400, which are diverse in character. The extant biographies of

Shankara date from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries. One of the most popular is Madhava's *Shankara-Digvijaya*. This describes Shankara as travelling all over the subcontinent, meeting and debating with philosophical opponents. Shankara's active participations led to the establishment of *mathas* at Varanasi, Kashmir, Badari, Puri, Dwarka, and Sringeri. Each of these mathas had its own set of pontiffs.

Shankara's philosophy provided a philosophical base which attributed to the Puranic deities a universal and transcendental character. According to Shankara, the performance of Vedic sacrifices was for those who aspired for material, worldly gains, but the Upanishads contained the way to supreme knowledge. In his monistic doctrine, *brahman* is the ultimate reality. It is without qualities (*nirguna*). Shankara identified two levels of reality- conventional reality and absolute reality. The goal of Advaita is liberation from the cycle of rebirth, which consists of the realization of the oneness of the atman with brahman. Shankara is believed to have founded the Dashanami sect and to have established monasteries known as the Amanaya mathas. The Sringeri matha is claimed to have established by Shankara himself. By ascribing it to Shankara, the medieval spiritual leaders were perhaps trying to authenticate sectarian reorganization and consolidation of Vijayanagara empire.

### **Shaivism and Vaishnavism in south India**

The spread of Puranic Agamic religion in early medieval peninsular India can be assigned to a period from the fifth century CE in Deccan. The important ruling dynasties in Deccan from the fifth to the fourteenth centuries CE – the Chalukyas of Badami, the Rastrakutas of Manyakheta, the later Chalukyas of Kalyani, the eastern Chalukyas of Vengi, the Kakatiyas of Warangal and the Hoysalas of south Karnataka sponsored the two major Puranic religions, Shaivism and Vaishnavism. Some of the ruling dynasties invoked deities like Skanda-Karttikeya, Hariti and Saptamatrikas in the prasasti portion of their inscriptions. It has generally been argued by scholars that in the Tamil region, the Pallavas of Kanchi and the Pandyas of Madurai (c. 6<sup>th</sup>- 9<sup>th</sup> centuries CE) adopted the

Puranic ideology of Vaishnavism and Shaivism, introducing the brahmadeya and the temple as the institution forces for their propagation. A significant feature of Vaishnavism and Shaivism was the incorporation of many non-Vedic and non-brahmanical goddesses, tribal/folk deities into the brahmanical fold. For example, the Chalukyas of Badami in the western Deccan (c. 6<sup>th</sup>- 8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE) by asserting the Saptamatrika as nourishing their family, also brought into prominence the position of goddess Lajja-Gauri and Yellamma, who may have been popular pastoral goddesses. In the Tamil region, a major transformation of the Sangam *tinai* (eco-zonal) deities such as Korravai, Mal and Murugan as regional deities through Puranic process of incorporation emerged, thus acquiring a dominant position in the Vaishnava and the Shaiva pantheons. (R. Mahalakshmi, 2011) In order to understand the processes in the early medieval period, leading to the evolution of the Puranic religions, it is important to explore the development of the Vaishnava, Shaiva, Shakta and other similar cults in south India.

### **Vaishnavism in South India**

One of the most significant of the Puranic religious systems to emerge in the early stage of their evolutionary and formative period was Vaishnavism. The cult of Vaishnavism was in a highly developed state throughout south India during the period, c. 700-1200 CE. This is substantiated and considerable archaeological and literary data. Although the name is derived from Vishnu who was the solar god of the Vedas, it does not mean that the god was the root of the Puranic cult. It is in the latest sections of the Mahabharata that the term Vaishnava occurs.

### **Srivaishnavism**

South India witnessed a great upheaval of Vishnu bhakti, especially its emotional dimensions. The Bhagavata Purana refers to a class of Vishnu bhaktas known as Alvars who sang, mostly in Tamil. These Vaishnava saints with their purest and simple Vishnu

bhakti laid the ground for the teachings of the acharyas of the Srivaishnava school. Its founder Nathamuni or Rangamallacharya probably flourished in the early tenth century CE. He was an admirer of the songs of Namma, and collected all the poetic works of Alvars saints into four groups comprising 4000 verses. These verses helped him to prepare tenets of his school, the philosophy of which came out in his Sanskrit work, *Nyayatattva*. The doctrine of absolute self surrender to the god, was one of the chief characteristics traits of the Srivaishnava theology and was further elaborated in the teachings of the subsequent acharyas of the order.

Although the foundation of the Srivaishnava order was laid by Sri Ramanujacharya during the last decades of the eleventh and the first quarter of the twelfth century, the term Srivaishnava appears to have been in circulation long before the birth of Ramanuja. The main centres of Srivaishnavas are located in the four linguistic divisions of the south.

In Andhra Pradesh, the most famous of the early Srivaishnava centres was located on the Vengadam, the present Tirupati. Saints like Pogai Alvar, Tirumalaisai Alvar and Nammalvar Alvar are associated with this centre. The early Srivaishnava hagiographers identified 13 divyadesams in Kerala. Of these, Tirukkakarai near Ernakulam, Tiruvallah and Tirumullikkalam are associated with the early Srivaishnavas. With the conquests of the Chola rulers Rajaraja and Rajendra, the Srivaishnavas settled on the banks of the Kaneri, Kanva, and Palar rivers in south Karnataka. The most important centres were Tadi Malingi Malur and Mallurpattana. In Tamil Nadu there are many important centres however, the most significant of the early Srivaishnava centres are at Uttaramerur and Srirangam. They are dated from the late ninth century.

Majority of the Srivaishnava centres had Vishnu temples which were stopped by pilgrims. The increase in the number of pilgrims led to the establishment of *agarams* or feeding houses. The early Srivaishnavas were diverse in nature. *Emperumanadiyars*, or servants of Vishnu, settled on the Tirupati hill and participated in the assembly or *sabhaiyar*. This *sabha* comprised of 108 Srivaishnavas and functioned as the agent of temples. The split

in the community due to differences between the sabhaiyar of Tirumundiyan and the sabhaiyar of Tiruchchanur during the tenth century led to the decline in the standard of worship. However, with the appointment of Anandalvar by Ramanuja in the late eleventh century helped in its revival.

The Srivaishnava movement of the ninth-eleventh centuries was marked by the harmonious adjustment with the Shaivas in most areas, gradual consolidation of their position in some settlements so as to become a predominant group, multiplication of *agarams*, and festivals and intensification of social, economic and religious activities. The wandering groups of devotees in Tamil country bore distinct mark of the sect on their forehead, body, carried symbols and chanted hymns from the *Tiruvaymoli*, the *Tirupapanjadi*, and others. Special attractions for the pilgrims were dark nights of the month along with fairs and festivals.

It appears that a Vaishnava sect, identified with the Srivaishnavas was spreading over a large part of south India, about a century and a half before Sri Ramanujacharya. Several records, from the late ninth, tenth and early eleventh centuries, mention the activity of the members of the sect. Between Nathamuni's systematization of 4000 verses of the Alvars and the appearance of Ramanuja, the Srivaishnavas were headed by Pundarikaksha, Ramamishra and Yamunacharya.

### **Ramanujacharya**

Ramanuja was the greatest of the Srivaishnava archaryas. He was born at Sriperambudur in 1016-17 in a learned brahmana family. As a youth he showed great interest for shashtric lore and became disciple of the monist Yadavaprakasha of Kanchipuram, an able exponent of the teachings of Shankarcharya. However, Ramanuja questioned many explanations of the shashtric passages offered by his teacher. This was possibly due to his leanings towards bhakti ideology and aversion for monistic interpretation of Vedanta. Ramanuja spent most of his life in Srirangam, and composed several works in which the Srivaishnava tenets were illustrated. Two of his greatest

works are Sri-bhasya, a commentary on Brahmasutra, and the Srimadbhagavadgita. In his commentaries and treatises, Ramanuja tried to refute the absolute monism of Shankara. However, the contemporary Chola rulers of the region wanted Ramanuja to renounce Vaishnavism and adopt Shaivism. As he hardly complied with the order, he moved to the Hoysala princes of Karnataka. He lived there in his old age and breathed his last around the end of the twelfth century.

The teachings of Ramanuja were based on the contributions of his predecessors, especially Yamunamuni. The Vaishnava teachers realized that to undermine the strong hold of Advaitavada and inculcate the tenets of bhakti, it was necessary to interpret the Upanishadic dictums in a convincing manner. In order to question the teachings of Shankara, the Vaishnava acharyas of different schools such as those of Ramanuja, and Madhava had to exercise their own intellectual insight to describe the Vedantasutra passages according to their own perspectives. Yamunamuni's conclusion about the threefold form of the eternal entity of Brahman was elaborated by Ramanuja. He added that the Brahman was the material cause of the universe. The Sankhya tenets of prakrit and the 24 tattvas were given a prestigious position in the theory of creation in this system, as it was done in the Pancharatra doctrine. The five-fold aspect of Vasudeva – para, vyuha, vibhava, antaryamin and arca were recognized by the teachers of this school. They equated their god with Brahman, and accorded a very important position to the individual soul. Ramanuja's Vaishnavism can be seen as intertwining between the Vasudevism of the old Pancharatra system and the Narayana and Vishnu elements. Srivaishnavism mostly confined to the south and developed further after Ramanuja under the leadership of Vedantadeshika, Ramananda and other teachers of the school.

### **Shaivism in South India**

Shaivism gave rise to many schools of philosophy and religion like Virashaivism in Karnataka, Shaiva Siddhanta of Tamil Nadu, Shivasvaita of Kashmir, Pashupata of Gujarat and Shaivism of Bengal. In the Tamil country, apart from the emotional Shiva

bhakti preached by the Shaiva saints Nayanars, the period also witnessed many of the Sanatan acharyas, the composers of the 14 siddhantashashtras, which, like the Shaivagamas, expounded the Shaiva philosophical tenets. An important school of Shaivism in the south was that of the Virashaivas or Lingayats. This was systematized and developed by Basava, a minister of the Chalukya king Vijjalaraya of Kalyani (c. 1157-67 CE).

### **Shaiva Siddhanta**

The Shaiva Siddhanta school was prevalent in various parts of India in the eighth to the tenth century CE. It is believed to have been refined and developed in Kashmir, preserved and then altered in Tamil Nadu. Shaiva Siddhanta has as its core texts the Puranas and focussed more on temples, while the Vedanta schools of this system developed in conjunction with sectarian affiliations. It recognized three eternal principles – God (Shiva himself), the universe, and souls. It was believed that Shiva had created the universe with his will and energy. Shaiva Siddhanta accepts the authority of the Vedas, the Agamas and the hymns of the saints, but interprets the Vedic tradition through the perspective of Shaiva bhakti. This school provided a philosophical and metaphysical aspect of Shaiva bhakti. The most important exponents in south India were Meykandadeva, Arulnandi Shivacharya, Marai Jnana Sambandhar, and Umapati Shivacharya. *Shivajnanabodham*, composed in thirteenth century by Meykanda contains the basic doctrines of the school.

### **Virashaivism**

The early medieval period saw the emergence and increasing popularity of the Virashaivas or the Lingayat movement. The sect originated in north-western Karnataka, around twelfth century CE. Virashaivism was founded by five teachers – Renuka, Daruka, Ghantakarna, Dhenukarna, and Vishvakarna. Although all the leaders were brahmana, the movement got support from artisans, farmers and traders. The movement was driven against caste hierarchies and brahmanical orthodoxy. It rejected the Vedic

tradition, sacrifices, rituals, and superstitions. It was highly critical of Jainism which was flourishing in Karnataka.

The popularity of the movement is credited to Basava or Basavanna. Akka-Mahadevi was a woman saint belonging to this tradition. The Virashaiva movement spread to other parts of south India from the place it originated. A striking mark of the sect was that male as well as female members wore a *linga* called the *ishta-linga* on their body. According to Virashaivism the *linga* is the ultimate reality. They attached no importance to temple worship. A great deal of significance was attached to devotion of Shiva. The *vachanas* were composed by saints and served as core ideas of the sect. According to Virashaivism, one need not renounce the world to attain salvation. It emphasizes right and pure living and attaches the utmost importance to perfection in all walks of life. Thus Virashaivism aims at establishing brotherhood among men by elevating them morally, socially and spiritually. (Malledevaru, 1973)

### **Exercise**

### **Further Readings**

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