

Dr. Shuddhananda Bharati

Alvar Saints

To
all seekers of
the soul's beloved



ASSA
Editions

Editor's Notes

Alvar Saints

A land is known by its saints and seer-poets. There is a galaxy of them in the annals of the Tamil land and its literature. Lack of adequate translation in popular languages keeps them shimmering in obscurity.

Dr. Shuddhananda Bharati, the author of this book, has written many works upon the saints, seers, poets and heroes and critical interpretations upon their messages. In the words of the great savant, Dewan Bahadur K. S. Ramaswami Sastriar, "Shuddhananda Bharati (Swamiji) is a yogi, a mystic, and a poet who has much kinship with Kalidasa and Keats as well as Valmiki and Wordsworth." Our sincere gratitude is due to Dewan Bahadur K. S. Ramaswami Sastriar for his critical and luminous foreword. Sri Sastriar was a profound scholar, a prolific writer in whom the oriental and occidental cultures find their rational synthesis. Our thanks are also due to Sri Bhaktavatsala Aiyangar, Headmaster, who has written an appreciation to this work, after carefully going through the message and the proofs.

Let the Divine Will and the public sympathy lead us to the realisation of our sincere aspirations!

It is a real pleasure for me to present this treatise on *Alvar Saints* to you. Thank you, Dr. Shuddhananda Bharati for having transmitted *Alvar Saints* to us. The first edition of this book is dated on January 1, 1942.

Christian Piaget

Song of Unity

*Unite. Unite, Unite, Oh Souls
Unite and play your roles
Unite in mind, unite in heart
Unite in whole, unite in part
Like words and tunes and sense in song
Let East and West unite and live long
Trees are many; the grove is one
Branches are many; tree is one
Shores are many; sea is one
Limbs are many; body is one
Bodies are many; self is one
Stars are many; sky is one
Flowers are many; honey is one
Pages are many; book is one
Thoughts are many; thinker is one
Tastes are many; taster is one
Actors are many; the drama is one
Nations are many; the world is one
Religions are many; Truth is one
The wise are many; Wisdom is one
Beings are many; breath is one
Classes are many; college is one
Find out this One behind the many
Then life shall enjoy peaceful harmony*

Peace Anthem

*Peace for all, peace for all
For all the countries peace
Joy for all, joy for all
For all the nations joy
A rosy morning peace
A smiling summer joy (Peace for all)*

*All for each and each for all
This is the golden rule
Life and Light and Love for all
For all that live our love (Peace for all)
Work and food and clothes for all
Equal status for all
Health and home and school for all
A happy world for all (Peace for all)*

*No idle rich, no more beggars
All are equal workers
No more tears, no more fears
The heart is full of cheers (Peace for all)*

*For he or she or it or rest
This collective life is best
This Universal Life is best
North or South, or East or West (Peace for all)*

*Peace for plants and birds and beasts
For hills and streams and woods*

Peace for all, peace for all

Immortal Peace for All

Presentation of Dr. Shuddhananda Bharati

11th May 1897 – 7th March 1990

The wise one to the cosmic age

Although more than 90 years old, in his school in the south of India, *Kavi Yogi Maharishi* (great divine visionary, wise poet), Dr. Shuddhananda Bharati worked like a young man of twenty. When he was asked his age, he answered: "My age is Courage!" The Yogi wrote several hundred works in English, French, Tamil, Hindi, Telugu and Sanskrit; five thousand songs, and fifteen hundred poems in French. The magnum opus of the man conscious of the presence of God in him, *Bharata Shakti*, (in 50,000 verses) described his ideal: only One Humanity living in communion with only One God in a transformed world! *Bharata Shakti* is a monumental and unique work. The Yogi depicts the essence of all the religions, of all the prophets and saints, all the approaches of yoga and all the cultures on an allegorical fabric. It is a book for any age which all spiritual researchers and all nations should read and meditate on. His commitment is summarized in his book celebrating his life, *Pilgrim Soul*. The three poems mentioned in the opening express perfectly his ideal. His mantra, *Aum Shuddha Shakti Aum*, nourishes our souls and guides our steps toward the inner joy *Ananda*. It means: The light of Grace and power of the pure supreme Almighty bless us of peace, happiness and prosperity! Let the beauty and greatness of soul of Dr. Bharati Shuddhananda bloom and scent the entire Earth of its divine message and his spiritual and unifying benefactor!

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Foreword

It is with more diffidence than confidence that I pen this foreword to the valuable work *Alvar Saints* by the great Yogi and mystic, who is at the same time a great master of poesy and music, viz. Sri Swami Shuddhananda Bharati. But, if my diffidence is much, my joy is all the more, because I have now got the privilege of linking my name to his noble and honoured name.

The author's kinship of mind and heart and soul with the saints, whom he describes and interprets and glorifies in his work, is remarkable and has enabled him to dive in the ambrosial ocean of the Alvars' souls, just as the Alvars had, in the author's own words, "Taken a deep plunge into the ocean of divine consciousness." Well does he say in apt and ardent language: "An Alvar is a golden river of love and ecstasy which finds its dynamic peace in the boundless ocean of Sat-Chid-Ananda. An Alvar is a living *Gita*, breathing *Upanishad*, a moving temple, a hymning torrent of divine rapture. The Alvars were so simple, so humble, so much immersed in the Divine and so super-conscious that they did not even care for the publicity of their sublime psalms. They did not preach like the missionaries. Their life was a ceaseless stream of divine communion. They took utter refuge at the feet of the Divine. Their mind was immersed in the Narayana-consciousness. Their heart was the sanctum of Narayana. Their tongue sang only his glory."

In the *Padma Purana*, there is a most charming story about the *Bhagavata*. Bhakti Devi (goddess of devotion) was born

in the Dravida country and attained her fullness of stature in Karnataka and became old in Gurjara (Gujerat). Her two sons, Jnana (wisdom) and Vairagya (dispassion), also became old. All of them were in a state of extreme decay and decrepitude. But on reaching Brindawan, she became rejuvenated and young and ravishingly beautiful, while her sons continued to be in a sad and helpless and decrepit state. That was a very ludicrous situation. But none of the sages could help her. Narada came there and told her: "Please do not grieve. Remember the lotus feet of Sri Krishna. You are inexpressibly dear to Him, dearer to Him than His very life and being. At your call, He enters into even lowly huts and hearts. He has commanded you to invigorate and save His devotees. He gave you salvation as your slave and these Jnana and Vairagya as your sons. O, divine lady! There is no Yuga equal to the Kaliyuga. In it, I shall house you in every home and every heart. Otherwise I shall give up my title as the servant of the Lord (Hari Dasa). God cannot be attained by penance or scripture or knowledge or action, but only by devotion. The most shining examples of this truth are the Gopis." Thereupon she replied: "I am grateful to you for your praise and prayer. But wake up these sons of mine and put energy into them if you have a real regard for me." Then Narada tried speaking into their ears all the *Vedas*, all the mantras, the *Bhagavad Gita*, etc. But all this labour of love was of no avail. Then the eternal and ever-youthful sages, saints and seers – Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanatsujata and Sanatkuraara – advised him to try the *Bhagavata*. He tried that elixir and to his surprise, he found that the old became rejuvenated and full of youth and beauty and vigour. Bhakti Devi

thereupon took her sons in her arms and danced in joy, praising the love and compassion and mercy of God. The hearts of all were filled with a superhuman 'rasa', an aesthetic and spiritual exaltation. Thus the birth place of bhakti was Tamil Nadu.

The finest flowering of Godward devotion is to be found in Tamil devotional literature consisting of *Thevaram*, *Thiruvasakam*, *Thiruvaimozhi*, *Thiruppugazh*, *Thayumanavar's* songs, *Thiru Arulpa* etc. Though I am a student of many literatures and have got a special admiration for Sanskrit literature, yet I assert such a view deliberately. The Tamil hymns are sweet beyond expression and quiver with the passion of perfect love and self-surrender unmatched elsewhere. All the same, we must not forget or ignore that all the heartfelt outpouring in the songs of saints all over India in diverse languages would not have come into being but for the epic triad unmatched anywhere in the world – the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavata*.

The *Bhagavata* is the scripture of devotion ne plus ultra. Its stately and sonorous verses have no peer anywhere. Yet, its sublime philosophy owes everything to the *Bhagavad Gita*. Did not Sri Krishna say in the *Gita*: "I can be known thus, only through integral, unalienated devotion"? The *Gita* is in its turn the essence of the *Upanishads*. It is in these sublime *Upanishads* that we must seek the glorious origin of the wonderful songs and psalms of the saints of the Tamil Nadu as well as the devotional hymns of India as a whole. The devotee in the *Isa Upanishad* looked into the innermost soul of the sun and found it to be one with his own soul.

The *Bhagavata* describes nine aspects of love – sravana, kirtana, smarana, pada sevana, archana, vandana, dasya, sakhya and atma nivedana (hearing about the glory of God, singing His glory, remembrance of His auspicious qualities, service of His lotus feet, worship, obeisance, service, comradeship and self-surrender). Madhusoodana Saraswati says that only persons of melting tenderness of heart can tread the path of bhakti, and that to them God reveals Himself quickly, and with delight. There is an ascending scale of values in realisation – shanta, dasya, sakhya, vatsalya and madhurya bhava (tranquil equilibrium of mind, service, comradeship, tender parental affection and ecstasy of love).

The author aptly and admirably praises in Chapter V the madhura-bhava of Sri Andal. Diverse are the psychic realisations, *viz.* that I am His; that He is mine; that I am He. All the Godward paths lead to God.

Some persons use the term mysticism as if there is mystery or magic about it. Others ridicule it, linking it with mist and mystification. Mysticism is exalted and radiant and joyful intuition, which functions when we shed desire, and love all the children of God and adore the Father of all. Plotinus says that it is a vision which is the birthright of all but which few use. So long as we have the jaundice of desire, everything looks yellow. Get rid of it and we can see all things in their natural, divine light. The supernatural is the natural to the mystics. Dean Inge says well: "The mystics are the morning stars of the race, pioneers in an unchartered land."

They

“Can crowd eternity into an hour
Or stretch an hour to eternity.”

As the *Upanishad* says: “We must clothe the naked world with God and make it fragrant with perfume divine.” New visions of beauty shine before the eyes of a saint. He alone can see and enjoy the Viswaroopa (universal form) of the Lord. He hears the unheard melodies and enjoys divine scents unfelt on the earth and soars “Into an ampler ether, a diviner air.” To Him the rescinding controversies about dualism and monism are but the crackling of thorns under the pot, because he has seen the golden thread of God threading the gems of the spheres. He hears the music of the sphere and sees the angels at work in the august tasks of service and salvation unto humanity. By his songs and prayers:

“The whole round earth is in every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.”

– *Tennyson*.

Symbolism and imagery are inevitable when an attempt is made to express divine experience in human speech. The best way to realise the mystic mood is to rise to it ourselves:

“And thought leapt out to wed with thought
Ere thought could wed itself with speech.”

But when the mood comes and goes and leaves a joyous dim recollection behind, we have

“The tone of meditation slipping in between
The beauty coming and the beauty gone.”

(Wordsworth's Sonnets)

When the mood is on, “Every common sight doth seem
apparell'd in celestial light, the glory and freshness of a
dream” and when it goes, “There hath passed away a
glory from the earth.” The experience

“Visits with inconstant glance
Each human heart and countenance.”

– *Shelley*

When in our ordinary moods, we recollect our exalted and
vibrant mystical moods, the phenomena of the earth
become symbolic and suggestive. The dawn symbolises a
sudden inner illumination. The fluting shepherd suggests
Sri Krishna. Rabindranath Tagore calls the flowers a letter
in multi-coloured ink from the lover to his beloved. Sex-
symbolism is found in the utterances of all mystics even
more than Nature-symbolism, because sex is the door to
psychic union even more than the sight of external natural
loveliness. God is the Eternal Bridegroom of the Universe.
Saint Appar sings:

“Like the faultless tunes of the Vina,
Like the evening moon,
Like the soft southern breeze,
Like the gentle toucfe of spring,
Like the lotus tank full of fleeting bees,
Is the soft sweet-scented shade of the
Lotus feet of the Lord.”

Saint Manickavachakar calls the Lord, "O Honey! O Nectar! O Sweet Juice of the sugar-cane!" He describes the devotees as "persons who have a super-human love which melts their hearts." In the same way, the Alvars sing of the Lord as Eternal Child, the Eternal Bridegroom, the Eternal Father, the Innermost Essence, the All, the Beyond. Saint Nammalvar calls the Lord as the Five Elements, the Entire Creation, the Immanent Sweetness, the Over-soul. He sends a flower as a messenger from the soul to the Oversoul. He calls the Lord his lamp and life.

Let no one think that devotion is ever to be divorced from individual morality and social service. The *Katha Upanishad* says: "None who has not ceased to sin or who has not become calm and collected and full of radiant inner peace and purity can attain God." It is devotion that blossoms into genius and virtue and love. Emerson says: "When it breathes through man's intellect, it is genius. When it breathes through his will, it is virtue. When it flows through his affection, it is love." A selfish immoral mystic is a contradiction in terms. Dr. D. Jevdet Bey says: "The ostensible object of the religions is to develop among men the spirit of concord, of love and compassion; it is preferable to abandon the remedy if, instead of curing, it aggravates and perpetuates the disease." Religion should be a passion for individual and social righteousness and spiritual communion and for the spread of these values everywhere in the world. Equally is the man of religion in need of the community. He seeks communion with God in solitude and meditation, and then feels an urge to share his experience with others – a sharing which augments the spiritual possession of both, because spiritual goods,

unlike material goods, increase by sharing and multiply by division:

“True love differs in this from *gold* and clay
That to divide is not to take away.”

(Shelley's Epipsychidion)

Bertrand Russell, an acute and much-maligned thinker, says well: “To abandon this struggle for private happiness, to expel all eagerness of temporary desire, to burn with a passion for eternal things, – this is emancipation and this is the free man’s worship.”

The author of this work, Sri Swami Shuddhananda Bharatiar, has abandoned all struggles for private happiness and has expelled all eagerness of temporary desire and has a splendour of thought and speech due to his burning passion for eternal things. May his message warm our hearts and make bright our paths in life!

Dewan Bahadur K. S. Ramaswami Sastriar
AVL., B.A., Retired District Sessions Judge
Madras, January 1, 1942



Appreciation

The inner meaning enshrined in the Pasurams of the Alvars required the erudition of a Bhattar in days of old, to yield their contents to the lay public. The orthodox style of the latter day commentaries, learned no doubt, stood in the way of the hymns being correctly understood by the uninitiated. To the English knowing public therefore, Sri Swami Shuddhananda Bharatiar's *Alvar Saints* is really a boon.

In a style so terse, so soul-stirring, so racy, and yet so lucid, Swamiji expounds the message of the divine hymns in his own inimitable way. For who has read this rare book that did not feel a thrill of genuine religious fervour as Swamiji translates word for word the Pasurams of Andal, the *Divine Consort* of Nila, the *Divine Democrat* of Nammalvar, the *Prophet of Cosmic Consciousness*?

This is a book for all to read, to re-read and to digest.

Sri R. Bhaktavatsala Iyengar, B.A., L.T.
Headmaster, School, Tirumayam
Madras, January 1, 1942

The Alvar Saints

Their life and teachings

My daily salutations to the Alvar Saints – Parasara Bhatta

1. Who are the Alvars?

The lamp of divinity, which is the glory of India, was flickering; the tempest of foreign contacts was fast quenching the flame of divine love. Man's self-sufficient vanity began to forget the Divine Will behind the world-play. It began to cry down the voice of the omniscient Rishis whose spiritual laws were the bed-rock of India's civilization. A sort of moral paralysis prevailed over the soul-elevating doctrines of the *Vedas*. People were wasting their time either in endless logomachy or in sectarian quarrels. The popular mind was caught in the tangle of I and mine and a thick gloom of nihilism covered the land. Even kings were caught in it. To save the land from this crisis, so unnatural to the soil, Kabir, Guru Nanak, Tulsidas, Ramdas, Tukaram, Chaitanya and other spiritual stars appeared in North India.

Two sets of saints rekindled the flame of God-love in the heart of South India. One set of devotees was the Saivite Saints. Manikkavachakar, Jnana Sambandar, Appar and Sundarar were the most important among them. Thousands of their hymns are sung today. Their sacred utterances have been embedded in two grand amaranths of divine literature widely known as the *Devarams* (Garlands of Divine ecstasy) and the *Tiru Vachakam* (The sacred utterance). The hymns of the saivite saints have been handed to us in twelve volumes. Their saintly life and the miracles of

their inspired hymns have been clearly recorded in two big poetic works.

Another set of saints that purified the atmosphere of South India was the Vaishnavite devotees known as the Alvars. The Tamil expression “Alvar” means one who has taken a deep plunge into the ocean of divine consciousness. An Alvar is a golden river of love and ecstasy which finds its dynamic peace in the boundless ocean of Sat-Chid-Ananda. An Alvar is a living *Gita*, breathing *Upanishad*, a moving temple, a hymning torrent of divine rapture! The Alvars are twelve in number. Their soul-thrilling hymns dedicated to Narayana, Rama, Krishna, etc., are 4,000 in number. The Alvars were so simple, so humble, so much immersed in the Divine and so superconscious that they did not even care for the publicity of their sublime psalms. They did not preach like the missionaries. Their life was a ceaseless stream of divine communion. They took utter refuge at the feet of the Divine. Their mind was immersed in the Narayana-consciousness. Their heart was the sanctum of Narayana. Their tongue sang only His glory. Their body came around His temple. Their passion poured itself into torrents of love at the feet of Narayana. Their eyes saw everywhere, in all, in every event, Narayana. Their hands worshipped Narayana with pure flowers. Their soul was wedded to Narayana. Their life was the breath of Narayana. As a master, father, friend, beloved, child, they loved and adored Narayana. “The He and the I have all been dissolved in Him even like milk and honey. My heart even in sleep leaves Him not! While I was ignorant of myself, I was fed up with I and mine. Now I see I am Thou; mine is thine; O Lord divert not my mind;

keep it ever firmly united to Thy feet. O people, think of Narayana! Speak the glory of Sri Krishna! Do not waste your words in extolling the worldly rich! Worship Narayana daily with the immortal flower of love. Sing His glory alone! He is the Creator; He is the world; He is the King! Utter His thousand sacred names! All evils shall fly away! He is rare even to the Devas. He is easy of attainment to His lovers! Love Him alone, O people that yearn for the freedom of bliss!" This is the spirit in which the Alvars lived and spoke. Their hymns were dedicated to Rama, Krishna, Narayana, Narasimha, etc., worshipped in 108 important Vaishnavite temples of India. Sri Vaikuntam, Sri Villiputtur, Sri Ghoshtiyur, Sri Rangan, Tiruppati, Kumbakonam, Triplicane are some of the important Vaishnavite centres of South India. The Alvars have also dedicated hymns to the Divine worshipped in the temples of Badari Narayan, Ayodhya, Muttra, Salagram, Brindavan, etc. The Alvars are said to have lived between the seventh and the ninth century AD. Their hymns were collected and handed down to humanity by a devotee and erudite scholar called Sri Nada Muni. Sri Ramanuja was the divine messenger that gave a definite shape and wide publicity to the Prapatti Marga (The Path of Surrender) shown by the Alvars. The Vaishnavite scriptures hold, that Mahavishnu sent down in the form of the twelve Alvars, His own Srivatsa, Kaustubha, Vaijayanti, Vanamala, Sri, Bhu, Nila Devis, Ananta, Garuda, Vishvaksena, Sudarsana, Panchajanya, Gada, Nandaka, Saranga, etc., (the meanings of these terms are given in the life of each Alvar), to redeem the world to the Bhakti Marga. The Alvars were born in different castes but are all equally

worshipped. For as they say, they are one holy family that live in the Divine, glorifying His name. They alone are low that do not love and worship the Divine. The *Divya Prabandham* embalming the 4000 hymns of these seer-poets, is a veritable treasure of divine knowledge full of light, love, beauty, harmony and bliss. They are mantras of the real, torrents of beatitude, and we feel the thrill of the divine presence wherever they are sung by the Bhaktas even today. All the Vaishnavas, at home and in the temples, in all worships and ceremonies and rituals sing in chorus the *Divya Prabandham* called *Tiruvoy-Mozhi*, the inspired word from the sacred lips of saints. The lives of these saints are revelations of the divine grace. They have a transforming effect. Let us begin with Vishnuchitta.

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