History of Tamil Literatures for the Dissemination of Alvar Pasurams

R. Maheswari
Assistant Professor, Department of History, D. G. Govt. Arts College for Women
Mayiladuthurai, Tamilnadu -625258.

Abstract

Although Alvar Pasurams are original songs that have been chanted before the idols of the Lord Vishnu throughout Tamilnadu, there are at present many commentaries and allied writings relating to the Pasurams for promoting the songs in Nalayira Divya Prabandam. The historical datelines of the origin of such Vaishnava books have not been put in order so far. So, this paper attempts to trace the history of Tamil literatures that had appeared for the dissemination of Alvar Pasurams in South India.

Key Words: Tamil literatures, Alvar Pasurams, Vaisnava books, history.

Introduction

The Holy text of Vaishnavas, which is an anthology of 4000 Pasurams written by the twelve Alvars between the 675 AD and 835 AD, is popularly known as the Nalayira Divya Prabandham. During the period of Alvars, in fact, the Pasurams were sung with devotion by the disciples of the Alvars who were habituated in and around the native place of respective Alvars and to some extent the Pasurams might have reached the hands of some Vaishnava scholars. These pasurams were collected and made into a single manuscript in palm-leaf script by Nathamuni of Kattumannan koil, another name of Vira Narayanapuram. As a scion of good Brahmin family, Nathamuni (823-918AD) was well known for his excellence in Sanskrit and Tamil literatures; he was in the Srirangam shrine and listened to Ramayana when Kambar had inaugurated opening ceremony for his Ramayana manuscript in the year 885 AD. Since there was a quarrel with the King Kulothunga Chola, Kambar had awaited to inaugurate his Ramayana in the royal court, but he couldn’t have such opportunity; the Nalayira Divya Prabandham might have inaugurated before the Ramayana and it could have motivated Kambar to inaugurate his poetry before the lord of Srirangam when the quarrels arose. In fact, there had hardly been any text in Tamil for Vaishnavism other than Alvar’s Pasurams in the middle of 9th century, which might have motivated him to gather the Alvar’s Pasurams. Therefore, it would have in all probability been taken in palm leaf transcript during 850-885 AD for the preservation as well as promotion of Vaishnavism. However, Tamil researchers are of the opinion that before Nathamuni had gathered the 4000 Pasurams many songs written by the Alvars might have faded away as they didn’t get positive reception.

Tamil Literatures about Nalayira Divya Prabandham

The Holy Scripture Nalayira Divya Prabandham was for the first time printed and published as sacred text by Koormachariyar of Thiruputkuzhi in 1856 when there was no other printed version of the text available to the people; that text included all the Pasurams of Alvars except Periya Tirumoli, and was once again published in 1869. The first complete volume of this text was published, according to the pattern of recital, by Appavu Mudaliyar of Mudichoor near Thambaram in the year 1865; that text got much appreciation among the people as he included the lyrics of the songs. Following this, Arangachariyar of Triplicane published it in the year 1873, K. V. Thirukatchinambi Dasar published it in 1908, Krishnamachary of Sedaloor had printed and issued the text in 1917, T. C. Parthasarathi Aiyangar of Chennai had published it in 1939, and Madhava Dasan of Mylapore had brought out the text in 1943. Annankarachriyar of Kanchi had published Nalayira Divya Prabandham in 1927 and thereafter he had translated that text in Telugu and Hindi and published it 1942; with his painstaking effort this text reached throughout India to promote the Bhakti movement of Alvars. B. Rathina Nayakar has published it in his B. Rathina Nayakar & Sons publication in 1959, 1961, 1963, 1968, 1970, 1973 and 1982. In 1973, the Tamil scholar K. Venkatasami has published the original text, which was printed and issued to public by Thiruvenkadathan Tirumantran of Chennai; its subsequent reprints appeared in 1976, 1980, 1981 and
Srivathsan, on behalf of Little Flower & Co, published this text in 1984, 1986, 1991, 1996, 2000, 2004 and 2009. S. Krishnaswami Aiyangar of Puthoor Agraaram in Trichy had published this text in 1984 and 1989. Further, in 2011, R. V. Kamalakannan, on behalf of Varthamanam Pathipakam, written simple annotations to all the pasurams of Alvars and published them along with the original text. A simple survey taken from the people around the Divya Desams conveys that many families of Aiyangars (64 / 100), Agamudaiyans (32 / 100), Balia (58 / 100), Nakaivas (34 / 100), Chetti (26 / 100), Nardas (9 / 100), Vellalas (21 / 100), Kallan (11 / 100), Ambalachikarans (28 / 100), Naidu (11 / 100), Mudaliars (26 / 100), Devangas (35 / 100), Idaiyars (25 / 100), Elavans (17 / 100), Kamalals (13 / 100), Maravans (9 / 100), Pallans (1 / 100), Nairs (2 / 100), Oddes (1 / 100), Thiyans (1 / 100), Upparas (3 / 100), Vannans (2 / 100) and Navithans (1 / 100) had own copies of Nalaiyira Divya Prabandham in their houses, which testifies to the fact that this sacred text is even now appreciated by people of different castes in Tamil Nadu. The other castes of people have hardly own the copies of this sacred text because most of them are Saivites and some do not have the habit of reading the pasurams; Muslim or Christian converts in no way admit the recitation of the Alvar pasurams.

In 1951, R. Kesava Aiyangar has published the first 1000 hymns of the Nalaiyira Divya Prabandham. Following this, S. Vaiyapuri Pillai edited and published the first 1000 hymns in 1955 and then other hymns were released in 1956. Detailed comments to Nammalvar’s Tiruvoymoli was given by Thirukkurigai Pillai, Nanjeevar, Periyavacchan Pillai, Vadakutheruvetti Pillai, Mannavalavu Muni, C. Krishnamacharyar and V. K. Ramanujadasan. Kokkali Jerayan had written wonderful commentaries to the Thirumangai Alvar’s Periya Tirumol in seven volumes in 2003, Periyalvar Tirumol in 1998, Nacchiyar Tirumoli in 1999, Tiruppavai in 2000, Perumal Tirumoli in 2000, Thiruchandavirtham in 2001, Thirumalai in 2001, Thiruppillieluchi in 2001, Thirukkurunthandakam in 2002, Thiruneduthandakam in 2002, Periya Thirumadal and Siriya Thirumadal in 2004, all which are brought to the world by Maharani Pathipakam, Chennai. These are in fact complete works of the 4000 hymns of Alvars.

Mathrubootheswaran’s “108 Vaisnava Thiruthal Magimai” (2011) and R. V. Kamala Kannan’s “Astaprabandham” (2011). These books, though fail to give facets of all pasurams of individual Prabandham, highlight the essentiality of the pasurams by revealing the characteristics of selected pasurams and the twelve Alvars who were the masters in promoting the Vaishnava Bhakti among the people. In addition to this, they trigger off the people to accept the pasurams of Nalayira Divya Prabandham for the veneration of the lord Narayanan in temples and houses. Commentaries raised for the Pasurams facilitate the Vaishnivites and others to understand what do the pasurams really mean. These literatures on Alvars’ Pasurams seemed to be a great boon not only in the linguistics point of view but also for the preservation and promotion of Alvar pasurams in the middle of the people.

Conclusion

There are about 90 Tamil books revealing different aspects of Alvar pasurams that were originally written by the twelve Alvars during the 675 - 835 AD and they have been published in the form of printed books since 1856. The first book of Alvar pasurams was Nalayira Divya Prabandham published by Koormachariyar of Thiruputkuzhi in 1856 while the last book published on this subject was published by Kamala Kannan in 2011. New Tamil books on Alvar pasurams has not been noted thereafter due to dissemination of their songs through internets and mobile phones for devotees.

References and Endnotes

6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p.113.
10. Ibid.
13. Survey of people in the localities around the Divya Desams in Tamil Nadu.
15. Ibid.
16. T.V.Sathsiva Pandarathar, Tamil Ilakiya Varalaru, Annamalai University, 1957, p.551; C. Krishnamacharyar, Nammalvar Aruliy Tiruvoymoli, Chennai, 1925,p.ii;