

KULASEKARA ALWAR



In the line of Alvars, the so-called "high" and "low" castes are very well represented which testifies to the fact that caste or class does not count when dealing with the Almighty Lord who sees no distinctions of birth but only the devotee's sincerity, purity of heart, absolute God-love. Love begets love.

FROM ROYAL CLAN

Kulasekara Alwar (8th Century A.D) belonged to the Kshatriya clan and his powerful kingdom is known as Kollinadu, pertaining to the Chera dynasty. After conventional schooling, with emphasis on the nuances of martial arts, Kulasekara was crowned king. He learnt the scriptures from capable Gurus and achieved perfect mastery in Tamil and Sanskrit. His kingdom shone as the most prosperous in the south which prompted the jealous Chola and Pandya kings to wage war on Kulasekara, only to be defeated by the powerful Chera forces. As atonement, the Pandya king gave away in wedding his charming daughter to his victor. The generous-minded Kulasekara pardoned the invaders and never harboured ill-will.

Kulasekara shunned luxury and preferred the company of saints. He enjoyed hearing epics like Ramayana, Mahabharatha, Sri Vishnu Purana etc., from learned Pundits. On a certain occasion, a scholar was giving a Ramayana lecture and was on the topic of the ignominy suffered by Soorpanaka who had her nose mutilated by Lakshmana. As reprisal, her brother Ravana ordered deadly Asura "Khara" to

exterminate Rama and Lakshmana. With his demoniac black-magic Khara descends on Rama's hermitage with his army of deadly Rakshasas. Lakshmana reaches for his bow, but Rama bids him to look after Sita and proceeds to tackle the Rakshasa army single-handedly.

At this juncture, a tense Kulasekara sprang from his throne and screamed: "Get ready our entire army..elephants, horses, all warriors... We must rush at once to Rama's rescue... rush...rush..."

The king's outburst took the court by surprise, The narrator quickly gathered his wits and hastily added: "Single-handedly, Rama destroyed the Asura army in no time". Kulasekara heaved a sigh of relief. Such was the matchless mysticism and involvement of the Alwars!

SATYA PARIKSHA

The courtiers were, however, unhappy that the palace had become the haven for hordes of mendicants on whom the king lavished hospitality while he had no time for urgent state affairs. A sinister plot was hatched to 'set right things.

A precious diamond garland from the puja room was found missing the next morning. Needless to say less to say it was a ploy of the disgruntled elements. "Surely. one of the mendicants ought to have appropriated it", the rumour went round. A pained Kulasekara swore that none of the Bhagavathas would stoop to a sin like that. To prove his point he inflicted upon himself a severe Test of Truth-Satya Pariksha

A deadly cobra was ordered to be brought in a mud pot. To reassert the innocence of the Bhagavathas, the king would insert his hand into the pot. If what he said was truth (Sathya), the snake will not harm him.

When the lid of the pot was removed and, as Kulasekara put his hand into it, cobra entwined his arm like a pet and descended to the floor. With expanded hood, it kissed the king's feet before vanishing.

TURNING POINT

However, this instance became a turning point and Kulasekara realised that he could no more continue the dual role of sovereign and saint. He vacated the throne in favour of his son and banished himself to the woods. He spent the rest of his lifetime trekking from shrine to shrine and worshipping at the Divya Sthalas (divine shrines). It was during this time that he authored the 104-versed "Perumal Tirumozhi".

The Alwar has given remarkable expression to the Saranagathi concept in his work. There are some delightful pasurams on Rama and Krishna, some in Nayaki Bhava, and many on the Archamoorthy vaibhava as witnessed in sacred shrines like Tirupati, Srirangam, Tirukkannapuram, etc. The Alwar also visited some shrines in Kerala (known as Malai Nadu).

The ten pasurams he sang in praise of Tirumalai and the Lord Srinivasa there are exquisite. He says, one should be blessed to have some connection with that exalted

hill shrine. "Lord Venkatesa! I wish I had been created as an animate or inanimate thing in thy abode there as an animal, a bird, tree, rock, ravine, pond, or a fish in that pond. Better still, as the granite step that culminates into thy Sannidhi (sanctum sanctorum), where I shall remain forever savouring thy fascinating form and thy coral-red lips!" (Perumal Tirumozhi, 4-9).

SARANAGATI TATHVA

The saranagathi bhava of the Alwar is superlative. He has sung ten pasurams on the shrine Tiruvithuvakkodu (near Shoranur in Kerala) where the serene sylvan setting and the winding silvery waters of the river Bharathapuzha made the Alwar spend quite some days there. This is where, it is said, the Pandavas performed an Yagna at the conclusion of their Vana Vasa (banishment by the Kauravas). Additionally, it is reputed to be the venue where Lord Narayana revealed Himself to His dear devotee, Ambarisha. The Murthy here, appropriately, is known as Abhayaprada (Devotee's Resort).

The ten pasurams Kulasekara Alwar sung on Tiruvithuvakkodu portray the noble aspects of Saranagathi (Perumal Tirumozhi chapter 5). He says: "Lord! I suffer in the terrible clutches of my indestructible Karma (record of sins). I seek succour under thy benevolent feet as you are the sole dispenser of Karma. I am like a helpless infant. In an irritable mood, a mother may chide the child and even push it away. But it will not be long before she succumbs to the pitiable cries of the child and hugs it to her bosom. Like that mother. I am sure you will grace this sinner with kindness, sooner or later".

In another pasuram, the Alwar points out that a faithful wife's fidelity to husband cannot be conditional. Whether or not she is treated well by him, she owes absolute, unswerving loyalty to him. "Similarly", the Alwar says, "I shall not deviate from my single minded devotion to thy sacred feet".

ANANYAGATITVAM AND MAHAVISWASAM

Sheer helplessness (Ananyagatitvam) and Total Trust in Him (Mahaviswasam) are two important aspects of Saranagathi.

When ponds dry up in the summer, the fish that lived in them perish. Do they seek an alternative, the Alwar asks. "Like that fish, I have pledged absolute loyalty to you, my Lord, and not look to another source for succour".

In another pasuram the Alwar reiterates: "You are like the surgeon's knife. Pain by that knife does not cause hate in the patient's heart. Contrarily, the patient's love and respect for the doctor flourishes".

"The red lotus blooms only when the rising sun's warm rays fall on it. Could it be forced to bloom by bringing near it a flame?" the Alwar asks in another pasuram.

"The meandering waters of the river attain calm only when they reach their ultimate haven the sea. And I will attain tranquillity only by merging with that Ocean of Unfathomable Grace-my Supreme Lord", says Kulasekara Alwar.

The Alwar decries seeking material gifts from the Almighty. For the majority of us the aim of God-worship is material boons. "I have no such demands, no preconditions. Lord, all I desire is YOU..... YOU alone..... in whose powerful arm the blazing Chakrayudha shines gloriously". The Alwar adds: "Despite your unyielding stance towards me. I shall never give up the desire to possess you".

SANSKRIT SCHOLAR

Kulasekara Alwar has authored several works in Sanskrit, notable among them being "Mukundamala". In this mellifluous work there is a sloka of exceptional beauty starting thus: "Jihwe Keertaya Kesavam Muraripum Chetho Bhaja Sridharam.....".

The sloka is a command to man's mental and physical faculties, that –
tongue should ceaselessly chant the glory of Kesava;
ears should hear the stories of His matchless valour;
eyes should constantly savour His magnificent majesty;
nose should rejoice smelling the fragrance of the sacred
tulasi that adorns Him; and
legs should trek tirelessly to His shrines.

This sloka, in other words, calls for gratitude to the Lord for His benevolence in gifting us this human life. Unfortunately the precious gift is frittered away by us. He granted us wisdom and intellect to discriminate between piety and profanity. The faculties granted by Him-referred to as Manas, Vak and Kayam - must be deployed solely in search of the Supreme Truth. Failing this, one would become an ingrate, positive to be relegated to hell.

Kulasekara Alwar was a great, noble soul whose sacrifice and humility are peerless.

LONG LIVE THE GLORY OF KULASEKARA ALWAR