

THIRU ANBIL DIVYA DESAM THROUGH THE EYES OF THIRUMALISAI ALVAR

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ABSTRACT

Thiru Anbil Divya Desam, located near Trichy, is celebrated as one of the 108 sacred abodes Divya Desams of Lord Vishnu. Dedicated to Sundararaja Perumal Temple (Vishnu) and Sundaravalli Thayar, this temple holds immense spiritual significance, immortalised through the hymns of Thirumalisai Alvar. In his compositions from the Naalayira Divya Prabandham, Thirumalisai Alvar vividly praises the Lord's divine beauty, grace, and role as the protector of devotees. His verses reflect themes of surrender (Saranagathi), cosmic love, and the sanctity of the temple as a refuge for the faithful. The article explores Alvar's poetic descriptions of the deity, his connection to the temple's serene atmosphere, and his portrayal of the Lord as the liberator of souls. Additionally, it examines how his hymns influenced the temple's rituals, festivals, and cultural legacy. Thirumalisai Alvar's works continue to resonate with devotees, offering timeless spiritual insights and reaffirming Thiru Anbil's prominence in the Vaishnavite tradition.

Introduction

The Sundararaja Perumal Temple in Anbil, near Tiruchirappalli in Tamil Nadu, is an ancient shrine dedicated to Lord Vishnu. Situated on the serene banks of the Kollidam River, the temple is one of the 108 Divya Desams, revered in the Divyaprabandham by the Azhwar saints (6th–9th centuries CE). The presiding deity, Lord Sundararaja Perumal, known as Vadivazhagiya Nambi ("handsome and charming one"), is worshiped alongside his consort, Goddess Sundaravalli Thayar, epitomizing grace and compassion.¹The temple is rooted in legend, where Lord Vishnu is said to have blessed both Brahma and Sage Suthaba through divine manifestations, enhancing its spiritual significance. Its tranquil location by the Kollidam River, coupled with early Tamil architectural marvels, adds to its sanctity and cultural legacy.

Divya Desam

Divya Desams are 108 sacred temples dedicated to Lord Vishnu, revered in the Nalayira Divya Prabandham, a collection of Tamil hymns composed by the Alvar saints between the 6th and 9th centuries CE. These temples hold immense spiritual significance in the Sri Vaishnava tradition and are considered essential pilgrimage destinations for devotees

of Lord Vishnu. The term "Divya Desam" translates to "Divine Abode," and these temples are celebrated in the poetic hymns of the 12 Alvar saints, who ardently praised the glory of Vishnu. Visiting these temples is believed to bring blessings and spiritual fulfillment, as they are regarded as places where Lord Vishnu manifested his divine presence. Each Divya Desam reflects different aspects of Vishnu's attributes, roles, and cosmic functions, emphasizing his omnipresence and underscoring the unity of his various manifestations.

Divya Desam and Anbil Sundararaja Perumal Temple

Anbil, one of the revered Divya Desams, is home to the Sri Vadivazhagiya Nambi Perumal Temple, located near Lalgudi in the Tiruchirappalli district of Tamil Nadu. This sacred shrine, dedicated to Lord Vishnu, features the presiding deity Vadivazhagiya Nambi in a reclining posture, accompanied by his consort, Sundaravalli Thayar. Renowned for its serene ambiance and Dravidian architectural style, the temple is celebrated in the hymns of Thirumalisai Azhwar in the Naalayira Divya Prabandham. Steeped in legend, it is said to be the site where Lord Brahma worshipped Vishnu to gain clarity about creation, adding to its spiritual significance among devotees.

Methodology

This study employs the historical methodology to examine the Alvars Devotional of Vaishnavism temple. The historical method allows for a thorough exploration of primary and secondary sources, including inscriptions, literary texts, and temple records, to construct an accurate understanding of the religious and cultural significance of the anbil temple. The approach is both analytical and descriptive, aiming to trace the development and importance of contributions of Thirumalisai Alvar in anbil temple through an examination of various historical sources.

Objective

- ❖ To comprehensive understanding of Anbil Sundararaja Perumal Temple, as one among the 108 Divya Desams.
- ❖ Explore the Alvars devotional vision in Sundararaja Perumal Temple in Anbil.
- ❖ Highlight the role of Thirumalisai Alvars Verses on temple rituals and festivals.

Alvars

The term "Alvar" in Tamil refers to one who has delved deeply into the truths of devotion, attaining profound bliss through surrender to Vishnu. Alvars, immersed in emotional devotion, envisioned Vishnu in his auspicious form (Divya Mangala Vighraha) and joyously composed hymns in Tamil (Pasuram) and Sanskrit praising his divine qualities. Their devotion led them to experience immeasurable, boundless joy, often described as Paramananda (supreme bliss). As renunciants, the Alvars embodied complete detachment from worldly attachments (Sarvasanga Parithyagis) and laid the foundation for Vaishnavite devotion and Visishtadvaita Siddhanta (qualified non-dualism). Their teachings inspired luminaries like Nathamuni, Yamunacharya, and Sri Ramanujacharya, who harmonized the Sanskrit Vedas with the Dravida Divya Prabandham (Tamil hymns). The Alvars were revered as divine sages, believed to manifest aspects of Vishnu, and their spiritual legacy became integral to the evolution of Vaishnavism.

Thirumalisai Alvar

Thirumalisai Alvar, one of the twelve revered Tamil Vaishnavite saints, uniquely blends martial valor with profound devotion to Lord Vishnu.² Born into a Kshatriya tribal community, his identity as a warrior highlights courage and leadership, while his hymns in the Naalayira Divya Prabandham reflect spiritual surrender and deep emotional devotion. His birth is symbolically tied to Vishnu's Sarngam (divine bow), representing his role as both a protector of dharma and a devotee transformed by divine grace. Initially focused on worldly pursuits, Thirumalisai Alvar underwent a spiritual awakening through Vishnu's intervention, leading him to compose hymns filled with intense bhakti (devotion). These hymns celebrate Vishnu's dual role as a powerful protector and compassionate savior, emphasizing themes of divine mercy, eternal justice, and the transformative power of surrender.³ His works embody a balance of external strength and internal spiritual evolution, inspiring devotees to harmonize physical action with devotion. Thirumalisai Alvar's legacy continues to resonate in Tamil Vaishnavism, portraying the ultimate union of strength, humility, and divine grace.⁴

Thirumalisai Alvar and Anbil temple

The Anbil Temple, enriched by the devotional contributions of Thirumalisai Alvar, played a significant role in the growth and propagation of Vaishnavism, becoming a central hub of religious and cultural activity:

Fostering Vaishnavite Devotion: The hymns composed by Thirumalisai Alvar infused the temple with spiritual significance, spreading the ideals of Vaishnavism and cultivating a thriving culture of devotion to Lord Vishnu. His works inspired devotees to embrace Vishnu's divine attributes and teachings.⁵

Pilgrimage and Scholarly Hub: The Anbil Temple likely attracted pilgrims and scholars, establishing itself as a vital spiritual and intellectual center. This influx of visitors not only deepened religious practices but also facilitated cultural and philosophical exchanges, enriching the temple's legacy and the broader Vaishnavite tradition.⁶ The Pallava era provided a foundational backdrop for these developments, blending religious fervor with advancements in temple architecture and cultural expression. Figures like Thirumalisai Alvar, combined with the establishment of iconic temples such as Anbil, highlight the Pallavas' transformative influence on the spiritual and cultural landscape of South India.⁷

Thirumalisai Alvar, a prominent Vaishnavite saint, contributed significantly to Tamil devotional literature through his compositions in the Naalayira Divya Prabandham. His pasurams (hymns) extol the divine beauty and grace of Vishnu and are rich in poetic imagery and philosophical depth. Regarding Thiru Anbil Divya Desam, the Alvar's pasurams are part of the Periya Thirumozhi, where he vividly describes the Lord of Anbil (Vadivazhagiya Nambi) and the temple's divine significance. Thirumalisai Alvar portrays Anbil as a sacred space where Vishnu resides in a serene and majestic form, emphasizing its importance as a site of divine grace and a haven for devotees seeking spiritual solace. His pasurams are both a celebration of the temple and a call for devotion, blending personal surrender with universal themes of divine mercy and cosmic order. The hymns also reflect his spiritual transformation and serve as guidance for devotees aiming to attain liberation (moksha).

The Azhwar, praised the glory of Lord Vishnu in their hymns, tying Anbil's local heritage to the broader tapestry of Tamil spiritual literature and religious history. This ancient

structure draws pilgrims, historians, and spiritual seekers alike, serving as a testament to the enduring influence of Tamil devotional traditions.

*"Potri seya vorka udaikkeezh ponnadu minnaadu
Naatrisiayum maandaalu nankillai - thotramaila
Endhaiyanbil aathi yinaiththa maaraiyadikke
Sindhaiyanbil aadaar silar."*⁸

Translation and Meaning

The verse roughly translates as follows:

*"Beneath the golden canopy of worship, prosperity shines bright; Without the
blessings of righteousness, we are left bereft. Those who worship the sacred forms*

*(of Vishnu) in Anbil, with purity of heart, Are beyond the troubles and distractions
that others face."*⁹

This verse emphasizes the sanctity and divine power of Sundararaja Perumal, revered as a protector of those who worship with devotion. It suggests that worshipping here brings blessings, protection, and mental peace.¹⁰

Meaning of the Verse

Potri seya vorka udaikkeezh ponnadu minnaadu: This line suggests that the temple's sacred grounds are likened to something precious, shining like gold. The act of worship is viewed as an honorable duty, and praising the divine within this sacred space is akin to polishing a priceless gem.¹¹ It reflects the idea that a temple should be respected not just physically but as a sanctified space that connects the divine with the worshiper.

Naatrisiayum maandaalu nankillai - thotramaila: Here, the verse critiques superficial acts of worship or external displays, emphasizing that true devotion transcends mere decoration or ritualistic performance. This perspective resonates with Bhakti ideals, where the emphasis is placed on the inner emotions and personal connection to the deity rather than material embellishments.¹² The line underscores the sentiment that love for the divine cannot be measured by outward pomp but must come from the heart.

Endhaiyanbil aathi yinaiththa maaraiyadikke: This line signifies that only those with a sincere heart and genuine love are worthy of receiving divine blessings. It implies that divine grace is selective, drawn toward devotion that is true and heartfelt rather than based on pretense or formality. In Bhakti tradition, this sincerity is a recurring theme, reinforcing that an authentic spiritual connection cannot be bought but is earned through genuine love and dedication.¹³

Sindhaiyanbil aadaar silar: The final line identifies those who engage in rituals without an authentic sense of love or spiritual connection. It draws attention to the notion that true devotees are distinguished by their inner devotion, which goes beyond ritualistic observances. For those who lack true affection in their hearts, rituals are seen as empty acts, lacking the depth required to form a bond with the divine.

Festivals at Sundararaja Perumal Temple

The Sundararaja Perumal Temple is a historical and spiritual center celebrated for its vibrant festivals that connect devotees to its rich cultural heritage.¹⁴

Brahmotsavam Festival:

This grand annual festival reflects the temple's significance and its roots in Vedic traditions. Spanning several days, it includes elaborate rituals, processions, and the artistic adornment of deities with flowers and textiles, showcasing the region's craftsmanship. The festival fosters a sense of community and devotion while honoring the temple's legacy.¹⁵

Vaikunta Ekadasi:

Celebrated with great enthusiasm, this festival symbolizes spiritual liberation (moksha). It draws large crowds to mark the opening of the gates to Vaikunta, the heavenly abode of Lord Vishnu. The rituals and communal gatherings emphasize the temple's enduring role as a hub for worship and societal unity. These festivals continue to bridge the temple's historical past with the present, reinforcing its cultural and spiritual importance.

Conclusion

Thiru Anbil Divya Desam stands as a shining testament to the enduring devotion of the Alvars, particularly Thirumalisai Alvar, whose hymns capture the spiritual essence of this sacred site. Through his poetic vision, Thirumalisai Alvar brings to life the beauty, grace, and boundless compassion of Vadivazhagiya Nambi, portraying the temple as a haven for seekers of divine grace and eternal refuge. His verses not only exalt the physical and divine aspects of the temple but also convey universal themes of surrender (*Saranagathi*), divine love, and the promise of liberation. The Alvar's descriptions of Thiru Anbil's serene atmosphere and the deity's unmatched beauty resonate deeply with devotees, making the hymns an integral part of the temple's worship practices. Even today, the Alvar's hymns serve as a bridge between past and present, inspiring devotion and fostering a deep connection with Lord Vishnu. By preserving and revering these works, we ensure that the legacy of Thirumalisai Alvar and the spiritual significance of Thiru Anbil continue to guide and uplift countless devotees. Thiru Anbil Divya Desam, through the eyes of Thirumalisai Alvar, offers a timeless message: faith and devotion lead to divine grace, and through surrender, one can experience the eternal embrace of the Lord.

End Notes

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