

**Tallapaka Annamacharya** (1408-1503) was a famous poet-saint who wrote thousands of felicitous songs in Telugu in praise of Sri Venkateswara, a celebrated iconic form of Sri Vishnu, whose temple stands on the top of the hill Venkatadri in Tirupati. He was a pioneer in hymnography in Telugu and could handle both the erotic (*sringara*) and spiritual (*adhyatma*) strains with equal skill. He left his impact on other composers of hymns like Kshetravaya and Tyagaraja. His songs enjoyed great popularity in his own days. But they gradually went out of vogue for some inexplicable reason, and were forgotten for over three centuries. The sustained efforts of dedicated scholars and musicians during the last thirty years have revived their popularity among the Telugu people. But he is still unknown to others, and this monograph is designed to introduce to them the illustrious life and work of this venerable minstrel of God. Its value is enhanced by the inclusion of fine translations of nearly thirty of his select songs, to bring out his religious ardour, loftiness of thought, and beauty of expression.

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The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.

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# ANNAMACHARYA

ADAPA RAMAKRISHNA RAO



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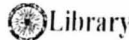
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To the Supreme *rasika*  
**Sri Venkateswara**





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## Preface

Affirmation of faith in the presence and power of a Supreme Spirit, the One without a second, the Effulgent Being that dwells beyond the realm of darkness, the only unfailing Friend of all creatures, in song and verse is given to a few blessed souls, and Annamacharya belongs to that happy band of God's own minstrels. Their rapturous utterances at once enrich literature and give us a taste of the agony and ecstasy experienced by the human soul in its quest of the Divine Spirit.

Annamacharya wrote thousands of songs in Telugu, one of the major languages of the Dravidian family, in praise of God. He chose to visualise God in the enchanting form of Sri Venkateswara, a manifestation of Vishnu, the all-pervading Lord of the universe, and the God chose him as his poet laureate, and eagerly awaited the hour of recital of fresh hymns by him every day.

In his lifetime, some five hundred years ago, Annamacharya's lyrics enjoyed immense popularity, but for some mysterious reason they gradually went out of vogue and were completely forgotten till they were rediscovered in the last century and published and popularised in this. The devoted efforts of scholars and musicians in the last thirty years have succeeded in making the Telugu people understand and appreciate his genius. But his name is still unknown to others, though his hymns are marked by such a loftiness of thought, intensity of religious feeling, and felicity of expression that they richly merit comparison with similar compositions of poet-saints in other languages. This monograph is intended to meet the need.

The task, however, was not easy. Here was "God's plenty" in the form of nearly fifteen thousand songs, and I had to operate under certain constraints. In my choice of his lyrics I was guided by the desire to present the wide variety that characterises them in thought and feeling, tone and tenor. All translations that appear in the book are mine, and I have scrupulously striven to retain both the letter and the spirit, and capture the flavour, of the original texts.

It is not often that one gets the opportunity of introducing to the world at large a poet-saint of the stature of Annamacharya, and I am fully conscious of the privilege that has been granted to me. In performing this edifying task I have received many "little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love" from my friends, and suffice it to say that though they remain nameless here, they are by no means unremembered on that score.

ADAPA RAMAKRISHNA RAO

Prasanthinilayam  
2 October 1987

# 1

## *The Theological Setting*

Religious fervour on occasion finds felicitous expression in the form of devotional poetry, which, happily, constitutes one of the chief glories of Indian literature. Hymns of exquisite beauty, like the ones addressed to Mitra, Varuna, and Ushas, are already to be found in the *Rig-Veda*, the oldest scripture of India, and, in fact, of the world. The genre was further enriched in course of time by many poet-saints, who produced in various Indian languages immortal love lyrics that run the whole gamut of religious experience, ranging from initial attraction, through the agony of separation, to the ecstasy of the final reunion. The songs of the Alvars and the Nayanmars in Tamil, of Jayadeva in Sanskrit, of Vidyapati in Maithili and Chandidas in Bengali, of Surdas and Mirabai in Hindi, of Narsinha Mehta in Gujarati, of Namadev and Tukaram in Marathi, and Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa in Kannada, to mention only a few, are universally acclaimed as repositories alike of spiritual rapture and poetic excellence.

The Telugu poets Annamacharya, Kshetrappa, Ramadas, and Tyagaraja belong to that blessed circle of God's chosen minstrels. They knew quite well that music has the inherent power of transporting terrestrial creatures to celestial realms, and employed their talents in music and poetry for the edification of their souls. Sarngadeva observes in his *Sangita-ratnakara* that man can achieve all the four objectives in life (*purusharthas*) through music, but devout composers of hymns have treated it as a means to attain only religious merit (*dharma*) and salvation (*moksha*).

Annamacharya is to be reckoned first among the hymnographers in Telugu not only from the view-point of chronology but also for his superb artistry and the range of his feeling and thought. He was a pioneer in the field, who could handle both the amatory and the devotional strains with equal facility and thus show the way to his successors. The eroticism that pervades Kshetraya's love lyrics on Krishna and Tyagaraja's rapturous praise of the glories of Rama are undoubtedly reminiscent of his treatment of these elements in his hymns.

Annamacharya lived in the fifteenth century, and spent most of his life in and around Tirupati, the most popular place of pilgrimage in South India. The shrine of Sri Venkateswara, one of the most cherished manifestations of Vishnu, is situated there, on the top of a range of hills with seven major peaks, and it is for this reason that devotees often refer to the deity "as the Lord of Seven Hills" or simply "the Lord of the Hills". As the topmost hill on which the shrine actually stands is called Venkatadri, he is also hailed "The Lord of Venkatadri".

Quite early in his life Annamacharya came under the spell of the bewitching figure and the overflowing grace of Sri Venkateswara and became converted to the Visishtadvaita sect of Vaishnavism, which holds *bhakti* (devotion) and *prapatti* (self-surrender) as the easiest means to salvation. On account of the new religious affiliation he became an inheritor of the glorious tradition of the Alvars, the God-intoxicated poet-saints whose hymns to Vishnu in classical Tamil partly form the basis of the doctrines of the sect, as expounded by its chief preceptors, Yamunacharya and Ramanuja.

Like the Alvars in a bygone age Annamacharya spent his life singing the glories of Vishnu, proclaiming his supremacy, and preaching the doctrine of absolute surrender in countless lyrics. It is claimed that not a day passed without his composing at least one song as a fresh offering to the Lord. His profound sense of vocation as well as his utter self-effacement is clearly reflected in one of his songs.

Accept, O Lord, these acts  
of adoration, offered at your feet,  
fresh flowers that spread  
your glory far and wide.

A single song is enough  
readily to save us;  
let the rest lie hidden  
in your treasure house.

Mighty is your name,  
easy to utter, richly rewarding;  
you are my saviour,  
and these, my treasures.

You prompt my tongue  
to utter a thousand hymns,  
and make me proclaim  
your splendour for ever.

O Lord with a thousand names,  
who am I to sing your praises?  
Out of your boundless grace  
have you granted me the favour.

I am but a tool in your hands,  
and claim no credit for the songs;  
your servant am I, Venkatesa,  
accept these, my votive offerings.

As in song after song Annamacharya alludes to the figure and the attributes of Sri Venkateswara and to his shrine and its surroundings, and as the essence of the theology of the Visishtadvaita school of Vaishnavism is invariably present in all his hymns like fragrance in flowers, some knowledge of the emergence of Vaishnavism and its basic concepts and of Sri Venkateswara and his form is necessary for a proper understanding of the saint's life and thought.

Vedic seers affirm that God is one without a second and that it is the learned who speak of the One as many. One of the most fascinating among the numerous conceptions of the Supreme Being is that of Vishnu, the benign sustainer and protector of the universe. As he pervades the entire cosmos, he is called Vishnu, and as he is the ultimate goal of all beings, he is hailed Narayana. Endowed with all auspicious qualities, which include affection, tenderness, generosity, compassion, and sweetness of heart, he is ever eager to bestow his grace on those that surrender themselves to him.



Vishnu was at first seen in the expanded consciousness of sages and seers in the early Vedic times and identified by them with the rising sun and thus regarded as a solar deity; but he grew in stature quite rapidly within the Brahmanical tradition and came to be proclaimed "the highest of the gods". A well-known hymn in the *Rig-Veda*, whose recitation is considered obligatory at the commencement of all rituals, avers that "the wise constantly behold the highest place of Vishnu as an eye spread in heaven."<sup>1</sup> In another verse Dirghatamas offers the advice: "O you who wish to attain the realisation of the supreme truth, utter the the name of Vishnu at least once with the firm faith that it will lead you to such realisation."<sup>2</sup> Certain terms in that scripture such as *Urukrama*, *Trivikrama*, and *paramam padam* with reference to Vishnu clearly establish his primacy among the gods even in those days, though it must be admitted that he was then mainly associated with ritualistic sacrifice (*yajna*), and that his pre-eminence as the god of grace and the sole object of devotion was a subsequent development.

The amalgamation of Vishnu of the *Rig-Veda* with the cosmic god Narayana of the *Brahmanas* and then with the popular deity Vasudeva-Krishna of the Vrishni race in due course resulted in the emergence of Vaishnavism, a religion which holds Vishnu to be the Supreme God and devotion to him the main objective of human existence. Vaikuntha is his dwelling-place, Lakshmi, his divine consort, and grace (*prasada*), his chief attribute; the creation, sustenance, and destruction of the countless worlds in the universe are his *leela* (sport), and the promotion of *dharma* (righteousness) and destruction of evil, his main functions. To punish the wicked and protect the virtuous he comes down to the world in a physical form from time to time, and such a form is known as *avatara* (descent).

According to Vaishnava theology descent or incarnation is only one of the five forms through which Vishnu manifests himself. In the *para* (transcendent) form he is Vasudeva, the Supreme Being, beyond the reach of human experience. The *vyuha* (emanative) form is his functional manifestation as the creator, sustainer, and the destroyer of the universe. The *vibhava* (incarnate) aspect is related to his descent into the world in a physical form. In the *antaryamin* (immanent) form he dwells in the hearts of all beings, regulating their feelings. And finally in the *archa* (iconic) form he becomes easily accessible to his devotees, and receives ritualistic worship from them in temples and their homes.

Among these five manifestations the form of the consecrated image (*archa*) is the most sought after by devotees for the quite understandable reason that it enables them to enjoy the beauty and splendour of the Lord and experience his divine presence here and now. It is no wonder then that several poet-saints should have expressed the wish to be born again and again in this mortal world and cheerfully bear the attendant afflictions, rather than be transported to eternal life in a world beyond, if only they are assured of the unceasing bliss of beholding Vishnu in their favourite iconic form in life after life.

For ritualistic worship devotees make use of both aniconic and iconic forms of Vishnu. While the *salagrama* stone is regarded by them as his aniconic, symbolic, form, the consecrated image is viewed at once as a focus for concentration and as the actual embodiment of the deity.<sup>3</sup> *Vishnu-Samhita*, a prescriptive text on ritualistic worship, explains that it is difficult to meditate on God without a form, and that wise people, therefore, choose an image for meditation, though they know quite well that the form is only a superimposition and not a reality. The votaries of Visishtadvaita sect, who are also known as Srivaishnavas, however, go a step further and assert that the image is not a mere device for concentration but is, in fact, a figure charged with the presence of the Lord. *Saulabhya* (easy accessibility), it must be noted, is one of his characteristics, and so, they maintain, he graciously assumes the form of an image to facilitate worship by his devotees.<sup>4</sup>

Temples consecrated to Vishnu or to one of his popular incarnations like Rama and Krishna are found all over the country, and Srivaishnava literature holds 108 of them as particularly holy. Among them, again, the shrines of Sri Ranganadha in Srirangam, Sri Varadaraja in Kanchipuram, and Sri Venkateswara in Tirupati, are the three most celebrated places of pilgrimage in the South, and for ages they have also served as major centres for the propagation of Vaishnavism in the region. Vaishnava devotees implicitly believe that the images in these three temples and a few others are self-manifest (*svayam-vyakta*) and not the handiworks of any human agency, and that each of them represents a particular aspect of the deity. Sri Ranganadha, reclining on the five-hooded serpent Sesa in the state of *yoganidra*, is thus considered a manifestation of Sri-Maha-Vishnu in Vaikuntha; Sri Varadaraja is Sriman-Narayana; and Sri Venkateswara, the preceptor of the doctrine of self-surrender, proclaimed in what is regarded by the Sri Vaishnavas as the *charama sloka* (last verse) of the *Bhagavad-gita*.<sup>5</sup>

According to the treatises on Hindu iconography the image of Vishnu should be shaped in either standing (*sthanaka*), or sitting (*asana*) or reclining (*sayana*) posture. Sri Venkateswara appears in the *sthanaka* posture, gracefully standing on a lotus pedestal. He wears a gold crown studded with precious gems, and his figure is adorned with many lustrous ornaments which include pretty discs for the ears, bracelets, anklets, and armlets in the shape of five-hooded coiled serpents. His forehead is partly covered with a broad white camphor mark, divided in the midpoint by a thin vertical line of musk, while his eyes, which resemble full-blown lotus petals, are in *samadrishti*, looking neither up nor down but straight at the devotees offering adoration to him. Those benign eyes and a delicate smile on the lips together make his face glow with a rare celestial beauty.

As Sri (Lakshmi) dwells on his bosom, he is also known as Srinivasa. He holds the weapons *chakra* (discus) and *sankha* (conch) in his two upper arms, while the lower right arm is in the *varada* (boon-giving) gesture, and the left arm rests a little above the knee in what is described in iconographical parlance as *katyavalambita* gesture. The significance of the position and form of the lower arms needs some explanation.

Sri Venkateswara is renowned for his lavishness in bestowing boons on the supplicants far beyond their expectations, and the trait is visually projected by the open right palm from which they flow without let or hindrance. The palm, moreover, points at his own feet, symbolically indicating the import of Krishna's final instruction to devotees in the *Bhagavad-gita*: "Seek refuge in me alone". One who holds fast to his feet is thus assured of deliverance from all sins and, consequently, of eternal bliss. The position of the left arm a little above the knee, likewise, is an assurance that to a devotee of Sri Venkateswara the problems of worldly existence will only be knee-deep and that he may be sure of receiving unflinching divine protection in his hour of need.

Myths and legends, understandably, surround the manifestation of Sri Venkateswara on the top of the hill called Venkatadri and the origin of the shrine there, and it is impossible to separate fact from fancy in the highly colourful accounts of the events found in such mythological works in Sanskrit as *Varaha Purana*, *Brahmanda Purana*, and *Bhavishyottara Purana*, books of uncertain authorship and doubtful dates.

The first verifiable reference to the place occurs in Panampananar's *Sirappayiram*, a laudatory Tamil work on the oldest treatise on grammar

in that language, *Tolkappiyam* (c. fifth century B.C.), in which mention is made of the Vengadam hill-Venkatadri - but not of the god who dwells on it. Though the Sangam poet Mamulanar of the second century too does not refer to the presence of Sri Venkateswara on the Vengadam hill in his poetical work *Ahananuru*, he alludes to the festivals that take place there and confer prosperity on the celebrants. A subsequent work of the same century, Ilango Adigal's epic poem *Silappadikaram*, however, not only mentions the Vengadam hill but also states positively that the God who stands on it is the blue-hued Vishnu who holds the weapons *sankha* and *chakra* in his arms. But a joyous celebration of the sanctity of the hill and the glory of the Lord in song and verse is to be found only after the advent of the great Vaishnava poet-saints, the Alvars, on the scene.

The term "Alvar" means "one who is immersed", and in the present context it denotes an ardent devotee who is ever immersed in God, "the deep of deeps".<sup>6</sup> Twelve such devotees of Vishnu, who lived between the sixth and the ninth centuries in the Tamil speaking region of South India, are traditionally recognised as Alvars. All of them were poet-saints, and most of them wandered from one temple to another, rapturously singing the praises of Vishnu, and thus spreading devotion to him wherever they went, and also enriching literature with their soul-stirring lyrics. As they moved about in a perpetual state of God-intoxication, every object and every sight did seem to them appalled in celestial light and became an occasion for exultation in the shape of hymns of transparent beauty. They burst into song as readily at the sight of a dark cloud or the blue waters of the sea as that of a consecrated image in a holy shrine, as the colour of the cloud or the sea evoked in their minds remembrance of the dark-complexioned God (*Tirumal*). It is no wonder then that they wrote as many as four thousand hymns in praise of his power and glory. These compositions in Tamil were lovingly gathered into a volume called *Nalayiram* ("Four thousand") or *Divyaprabandham* ("Divine Composition") by the Srivaishnava preceptor Nadhamuni in the tenth century, and they are being recited every day, along with Sanskrit hymns from the Vedas, in all major Vishnu temples in South India even to this day.

The Alvars are held in such high veneration by the Vaishnavas that each of the 108 places they sang about has consequently come to be regarded as a divine place (*divya-desu*). In Tamil they are called *padal* *petra padigal* ("places that received a song"). Two of them, Vaikuntha and the Ocean of Milk, are celestial, while the rest are located on earth.

And Tirupati figures quite prominently among them for the excellent reason that many of the Alvars had visited the shrine, and no fewer than ten of them ecstatically sang the praises of the Lord of Venkatadri.

Annāmacharya was well acquainted with the hymns of the Alvars for at least two reasons: first, he was himself a latter-day "Alvar", "one who was immersed in God", and thus shared their emotional mysticism, and as a composer and singer of devotional lyrics on Vishnu he was naturally drawn to the songs on the same theme by his illustrious predecessors; and secondly, the foremost exponent of the Visishtadvaita school of Vaishnavism, Ramanuja, rightly thought that "the real proof of the being of God is the being in God",<sup>7</sup> and accepted the utterances of the Alvars as equally authoritative with the word of God in the Vedas, and as a convert to the sect Annāmacharya had devoted many years to the study of its theology which derived support in part from *Divyaprabandham*. In fact, the work is considered the quintessence of the Vedas and is therefore regarded by the Srivaishnavas as *Dravida Veda* ("the Tamil Veda") and *Panchamagama* ("the Fifth Veda"), and, significantly, one of the titles by which his grandson refers to Annāmacharya is *Panchamagama-sarvabhauma* ("Supreme Master of the Fifth Veda").

At least a passing acquaintance with a few songs and verses of the Alvars on Tirupati and Sri Venkateswara will therefore be necessary to understand the hoary Vaishnava hymnological tradition to which Annāmacharya belonged, and it will also facilitate a comparison between the thought-processes and emotional responses of these mystic poets to the grand theme of the glory of Vishnu.

As is the God, so are his devotees. Exuberance is bound to characterise the acts of the votaries of Vishnu, and scholars have identified as many as 197 hymns in *Divyaprabandham* which make a definite reference to the Tirupati hill and the shrine on it. Most of them proclaim the sanctity of the hill, and incidentally describe its scenic beauty. They assert that Sri Venkateswara is none other than Vishnu who reclines on the serpent Seshha in the Ocean of Milk, and celebrate his gracious accessibility in the *archa* form to the saint and sinner alike. Another recurring theme is bridal love, which finds graceful expression not only in several lyrics of Andal, the lone lady among the twelve Alvars, but also in the compositions of some others in the group.

It has been felicitously observed that just as the juice of sugarcane crystallizes into a sugar cube, so did the overflowing compassion of Śrīnivasa solidify in the form of Venkatadri.<sup>8</sup> The hill has been sought after from time immemorial for its power to destroy the sins of the pilgrims. There are several allusions to this belief in the hymns of the Alvars. The first among them, Poygai Alvar, for instance, observes:

Only the hill Vengadam  
can put out the flames of sin  
of those who seek worldly wealth,  
or the knowledge of the self,  
or the Lōrd adorned with garlands  
whom they deem their sole refuge;  
the hill that lights up  
the hearts of freed souls,  
and draws them from heaven.

Three types of seekers are mentioned in the verse: the materialist who is of the earth, earthy, desiring nothing beyond the world; the intellectual to whom God is only a concept to be grasped through scholarship and speculation; and the devotee that longs to surrender himself to Vishnu, the god who enjoys adornment and is offered garlands in the course of worship. The Lord stands majestically like the wish-yielding tree (*Kalpa-vriksha*) in Hindu mythology, ready to grant each his wish, and the hill facilitates the process by first destroying their sins.

Tirumalisai Alvar proclaims that even remembrance of the sacred hill ensures for one a place in heaven.

Whenever I heard the word "hill",  
I sang only of Vengadam,  
and earned for myself an eternal home.  
The Consort of Lākshmi is caught  
in the net of my devotion,  
and I am trapped by his feet.

In a moving expression of his ardent desire to visit the hill, he states in another hymn that till the happy day arrives, he consoles himself by drawing its outline and gazing at it.

I beseech the Lord of Vengadam  
to let me serve him.

I long to reach the hill,  
 where rivulets swell  
 with rain waters  
 and leap from heights,  
 loaded with gems.  
 The elephant, frightened,  
 runs amok,  
 and is caught by the python.  
 I draw the figure  
 of the hill  
 in sand  
 and keenly watch it.

Another Alvar, Kulasekhara, also has a cluster of verses on this theme in which he reiterates the sentiment that his life will truly be blessed, if he is born as a bird, or a fish, or a shrub, or a tree, or a stone slab on the hill sanctified by the Lord who holds the conch Panchajanya in one of his arms.

I do not seek sovereignty  
 over the higher worlds,  
 or the favours  
 of the charming Urvasi  
 in Paradise.<sup>9</sup>  
 Let me but become  
 some petty object  
 on the golden hill  
 Vengadan,  
 so that I may remain  
 near the Lord with coral lips.

It is the easy accessibility of Vishnu, who is otherwise hard to attain, in the enchanting iconic form of Sri Venkateswara on the Tirupati hill that drives these poet-saints into such a state of ecstasy at the very mention of its name. According to Visishtadvaita theology the Lord is distinguished at once by his *paratva* (absolute supremacy) and *saulabhya* (gracious accessibility).<sup>10</sup> An analogy, attributed to Ramanuja, clearly brings out the operation of the two characteristics. Just as a lame man cannot mount an elephant, even if he is asked to do so, an insignificant creature of this imperfect world cannot approach the Supreme Being on his own. The elephant, however, can kneel down to enable the lame man to mount, and so can the Lord descend to the earth either as an incarnation or an icon

and thus provide easy access to devotees. Between the two forms, again, the consecrated image is cherished more dearly because the incarnation is meant to serve a specific purpose during a limited period of time, whereas the *archa* form assumes for the devotees a certain permanence and a visible reality. This idea is well brought out in a verse of Poygai Alvar.

He freed the earth,  
lifted the hill,  
killed the trembling Kamsa,  
rests in the ocean,  
the stretch of unending waters;  
he stands steadfast  
only on Vengadam,  
he whose hue is  
like the blue sea.

He assumed the Varaha form to save the earth from an untimely deluge, and as Krishna he lifted the Govardhana hill, and killed Kamsa. Those mighty deeds could however be witnessed only by the people who had the good fortune of living during the days of the two incarnations.

Nammalvar also identifies Sri Venkateswara with two of the ten famous incarnations, Krishna and Vamana, and holds out the assurance that the hill Venkatadri will free the pilgrims from all afflictions.

All our woes  
are sure to end  
when we seek  
the Vengadam hill,  
where lives the Lord  
who has come down  
from heaven,  
he who once saved  
the cows and cowherds  
from torrential rain  
by lifting a hill,  
and measured the worlds  
with his steps.

Legend has it that when on a certain occasion Lakshmi left her divine consort in heaven in a fit of anger and descended to this world,



Vishnu was unable to bear the pangs of separation from her, and so he also left Vaikuntha and came down to the earth, and chose to remain on Venkatadri. The Alvars repeatedly proclaim that even the liberated souls who dwell for ever in heaven come down to worship him in Tirupati, because he is more easily accessible here than there.

To Nammalvar the Lord of Venkatadri is Krishna in all his divine splendour, the cowherd hero who performed the feat of lifting the Govardhana hill and holding it on his little finger to protect the cows and the simple folk of Gokula and thereby teach a lesson to the benighted Indra. But Krishna was also a sweet little child who craved for the moon, and in a charming lyric Periyalvar visualises the scene in a mood of maternal affection (*vatsalya*), identifying himself with Yasoda, the guileless foster-mother of the divine cowherd:

Though you scatter light  
on all sides,  
O bright, round moon,  
you are no match  
for my dear son's face.  
The lovely child,  
who lives on Vengadam,  
beckons you.  
Come fast,  
so that his arm  
may not ache.

While Periyalvar thus considers Sri Venkateswara as the child Krishna, who plays pranks and teases his mother by running away from her when she tries to adorn his hair with strings of jasmine buds, his foster-daughter, Andal, regards the Lord as her divine lover, and expresses anguish at her separation from him in several love songs, characterised at once by intensity of feeling and felicity of expression. Following the time-honoured tradition, in one of them she sends a message to the Supreme Beloved through the dark clouds which resemble his complexion.

O clouds,  
spread over the sky  
like a blue canopy,  
has my Lord also come  
along with you?

He who dwells on Vengadam,  
where rivulets flow  
with clear waters.  
Does he deem it  
a heroic deed,  
making me shed tears  
which soak my breasts?

Bridal mysticism, which represents the devotee's soul as the bride, God as the bridegroom, and their union as spiritual marriage, is a common feature of many religions, and it is thus sometimes employed by the Alvars to express their passionate attachment to the Lord. Though it uses the symbol of marriage, the relationship is totally free from sensuality. It is at once characterised by the joy of union (*samslesha*) and the agony of separation (*vislesha*). This alternation between the two states is a precondition for the final enjoyment of unitive consciousness. In *samslesha* the soul is momentarily caught by God and experiences union and ecstasy; in *vislesha* it pines away from an intense feeling of unrequited love. In the first of these experiences eternity contracts into a moment, while in the latter, every moment stretches into eternity. The mystics understandably dwell at length on *vislesha*, as the separation (*viraha*) leads them to constant remembrance of the Supreme Beloved, and this feature is seen in many of Andal's love lyrics.

The predominant sentiment in the hymns of the Alvars, however, is one of devotion and self-surrender, the easiest means, open to all beings, to attain eternal bliss. This absolute faith in the path of *bhakti* and *prapatti* is eloquently expressed by Nammalvar in a well-known hymn.

Unwilling to suffer  
a moment's separation,  
the goddess Lakshmi,  
seated on a lotus,  
dwells for ever  
on your bosom.  
O Lord,  
whose glory is matchless,  
Ruler of the three worlds,  
my Saviour,  
You are eagerly sought  
by immortal gods  
and sages alike

on the Vengadam hill.  
 Having no other refuge,  
 I turn to your feet,  
 and find shelter  
 in their shade.

Such lofty and moving sentiments, uttered by the Alvars in moments of rapture and extensively interpreted by eminent Vaishnava commentators, were quite familiar to Annamacharya, because he had studied *Divyaprabandham* with great care, and also heard the hymns recited every day in the Tirupati shrine with which he was closely associated all his life.

He was, in fact, the Lord's poet laureate, and deemed it his duty and privilege to offer to the divine master at least one song of praise every day. It is said that Sri Venkateswara used to look forward to the daily recitation of the lyrics with as much eagerness as their author. The poet, as a devotee with no other refuge, and the Lord, as his gracious saviour, needed each other so much that Annamacharya could go so far as to claim,

If I didn't exist,  
 on whom could you  
 shower your grace?  
 Your renown for mercy  
 you owe only to me!

You find in me  
 the foremost  
 among the ignorant;  
 a mighty mountain  
 of swelling pride;  
 one, affluent  
 in cravings  
 of the senses.  
 How can you afford  
 to forsake  
 a creature like me?

I am verily  
 the lord  
 of the kingdom  
 of worldliness,  
 quite well known

for deeds  
and misdeeds  
that bind one  
to the wheel  
of recurring births.  
Where can you find  
a match for me?

Only when you save  
such an unworthy being  
will you gain praise  
for graciousness;  
you acquire merit  
on my account,  
and I derive sustenance  
from you.  
O Venkatesa,  
each of us stands  
to benefit  
from the other.

Friendship (*sakhyam*) is one of the nine modes of devotion mentioned in the *Bhagavata Purana*, and it is evident from the tone and thought of the hymn that Annamacharya belonged to the fraternity of highly evolved souls who can address the Lord with such familiarity because at times they look on him as a very dear friend.

## 2

### *An Eventful Life*

Popular accounts of the lives of saints freely blend fiction with fact and invest ordinary, natural events with the contours of miracles so much so that they invariably fail to stand the test of reason. But, then, Truth can be grasped by the heart as well as the head, and it has been well said that "the heart has its reasons of which reason is ignorant". A spirit of unquestioning veneration on the part of admirers alone does not create the halo; the very nature of saintliness gives rise to popular legends. A saint, after all, is not a normal human being; he is so completely charged with the spirit of God that a compassionate glance from him may at once shatter the sorrow and suffering of its recipient, and a cry of anguish bring forth an immediate response from the Effulgent Being who dwells beyond the realm of darkness. It is a situation calling for the suspension of disbelief in some measure.

It is not therefore surprising that descriptions of some miraculous events should find a place in the earliest biographical account of the poet-saint Annamacharya, a poetical work in Telugu entitled *Annamacharya-charitramu*, written by his grandson, China Tiruvengalanadha, who is popularly known as Chinnanna. It has, however, much value as history for two reasons: Chinnanna gathered information about the main events in his grandfather's life from the members of his family; and he composed the poem when people who were acquainted with the saint were still alive, and it received their tacit approval. Facts appear behind the veneer of piety in it, and these were not questioned by his contemporaries.

Annamacharya was born of Nandavarika Brahmin parents in Tallapaka, a somnolent hamlet situated not far from Tirupati, in early fifteenth century, most probably on the 22nd of May, 1408. His forefathers obviously acquired the surname "Tallapaka" from their association with the village for long. Legend has it that a group of nine Saivite ascetics, Navanadha Siddhas, attained success there in their alchemic experiments aimed at transmuting baser metals into gold.

Though Annamacharya's parents, Narayana Suri and Lakkamamba, belonged to the *smarta* sect whose adherents hold Siva and Vishnu in equal veneration, they appear to have been ardent votaries of Vishnu. Even their names, Lakshmi and Narayana, suggest that their ancestors too must have been devoted to Vishnu. The reason for the preference is perhaps to be sought in the existence of an ancient temple of Krishna, locally known as Chennakesava, in the village, with which the family seems to have had close association for some generations.

It is said that desiring a male child the pious couple went on pilgrimage to the shrine of Sri Venkateswara on the top of the hill Venkatadri, and met with an unusual experience there. Within the precincts of the temple they saw in a vision Nandaka sword, one of the five chief weapons<sup>11</sup> of Vishnu, and in due course they were blessed with a son in answer to their prayers.

The story about the mystic vision of Nandaka sword and the subsequent birth of Annamacharya is in consonance with the traditional belief of the Vaishnavas that their saints are the embodiments of the objects and the attendants of Vishnu in Vaikuntha. Periyalvar, thus, is considered an incarnation of Garuda, and Poygai Alvar, of Panchajanya *sankha*. Pey Alvar too was an embodiment of Nandaka sword. And Annamacharya, like Nammalvar before him, was born under the star Visakha in the Vaisakha month, and both of them miraculously received spiritual enlightenment when they were sixteen years old.

"Annamayya" was the name chosen for the child by the happy parents, and Chinnanna clearly states that he was named after Vishnu. Scholars have sought to explain the statement by making a reference to the Vedic text "*Annam Brahmeti vyajanat*", which indicates that *annam* (food) is God, but a much simpler explanation may be found in the fact that the term "*annam*" is one of the thousand names of Vishnu in the celebrated hymn *Vishnu-sahasranama-stotram*, found in the Anusasana

parva of the epic *Mahabharata*. It is not only chanted every day during ritualistic worship (*archana*) in many temples of Vishnu, but also recited with fervour by the devout all over the country as an auspicious *mantra* (mystic formula) with immense power to confer both material and spiritual benefits.

In his famous commentary on the hymn Sankara explains that Vishnu is *annam* in the twin senses of the eaten and the eater, because he is the intellectual food of the enlightened ones, and he devours the universe during the great deluge (*pralaya*). Parasara Bhatta interprets the same term from the view-point of the Visishtadvaita sect in his commentary entitled *Bhagavad-guna-darpana* by pointing out that Vishnu, one of whose attributes is nectarine sweetness, allows himself to be enjoyed by his devotees. And Satyasandhatirtha Yati, whose commentary is based on the Madhva tradition, invokes the support of the same scriptural passage as Sankara—*adyate atti cha*—to explain it to mean both the eaten and the eater. Vishnu is thus the spiritual nourishment of wise men as well as devotees, and is therefore called *annam*.

The boy Annamayya appears to have been quite bright in his studies and his songs bear sufficient testimony to the fact that he had received sound instruction in classical learning at an early age. He was fond of frequenting the shrine of Chennakesava, and of singing and dancing in the presence of the deity, employing terms of endearment in addressing him. It is said that even at that age his casual utterances were marked by literary spark and his singing carried the intimations of an immortal musical genius.

It appears that he grew weary of the ways of the world when he was only a boy of eight years. A seemingly trivial incident is said to have caused in him deep disgust for worldly attachments, and prompted him to turn at once to the only unfailing friend of all weary souls, the gracious Vishnu.



He seems to have suffered ill-treatment at the hands of his sister-in-law, who often scolded him, probably on account of his excessive fondness for singing and consequent neglect of domestic chores. He was instructed one morning by his parents and by his brother and sister-in-law to go to the pasture-land and fetch grass for the cattle. He carried a sharp sickle with him, and while cutting grass he accidentally cut his little finger with it. Drops of blood began to trickle down his finger and the sight filled

him with indignation. He blamed his people for his plight, and concluded that the pain caused by the wound could somehow be suffered, but his sister-in-law's sharp tongue would be infinitely more unbearable. So he decided to sever his relations with his family and run away from home.

Just then a happy band of pilgrims, who were on their way to the shrine of Sri Venkateswara, appeared on the scene, and the sight decided for Annamayya his destination. They were dancing ecstatically and singing devotional songs in chorus to the accompaniment of instrumental music, and the performance was often interspersed with joyous shouts of the divine names "Hari" and "Govinda". The spectacle fascinated the boy, and he travelled in their company to Tirupati.

In those days the shrine of Sri Venkateswara could be reached only by ascending the seven hills on foot, and early one morning the party of pilgrims started climbing the steps that would lead them to their goal. As Annamayya was still a boy and as he had had no food from the morning, he felt exhausted after a while and lagged behind them. Unable to bear hunger and fatigue, he lay down on a flat rock on the way, and soon fell asleep. Then, according to Chinnanna's account, Padmavati Devi, the divine consort of Sri Venkateswara, appeared before the boy in the guise of a gentle matron, and spoke to him with affectionate concern.

Annamayya opened his eyes and pathetically cried that he was unable to see anything. The goddess then told him that the hill was made up of sacred *salagrama* stones, and that it was a sacrilege to walk on it with one's footwear. On hearing her words he threw away his sandals and at once regained his sight. The compassionate mother Padmavati fed the boy with the sacred food offered to the Lord, and disappeared from the scene after showing him the way to the shrine on the top of the hill Venkatadri.

The boy wondered at the vision, and in a burst of ecstasy he composed a poem of a hundred verses, *Sri-Venkateswara-Satakamu*, nominally addressed to the god, but actually extolling the grace of the Divine Mother.

This incident, described at some length by Chinnanna, is quite in harmony with the Visishtadvaita concept of the role of Sri (Lakshmi) as the divine mediatrix between the contrite human being and the Supreme Lord. As the very embodiment of mercy, she pleads with the Lord and



intercedes on behalf of penitent souls. Yamunacharya first alludes to this role of the goddess in his hymn *Chatussloki*, and the idea finds its most moving and memorable expression later in Ramanuja's *Saranagati-gadya*. Several hymns written thereafter, like Srivatsanka Misra's *Sri-stava*, Parasara Bhatta's *Sriguna-ratnakosa*, and Vedanta Desika's *Sri-stuti*, dwell at length on her motherly concern for the helpless beings of the world. It is on account of this concept of the intercession by Sri, the Divine Mother, that the Visishtadvaita sect has come to be known as Srivaishnavism. Moreover, she is regarded as the first of teachers in a well-defined line of spiritual preceptors of the sect, and, thus, shows the seeker the way to the Lord.

It may be further noted that Sri is represented as sitting on a full-blown lotus flower and dwelling on the bosom of her divine consort, Vishnu. It is a symbolic projection of the idea that she dwells constantly in his heart. She resides there in order to soften the Lord's heart and persuade him to be lenient towards erring souls. Sri Venkateswara's consort, Padmavati ("the lady who holds the lotus"), is an incarnation of Lakshmi, and she is quite often referred to in the South by her Tamil name "Alarmel Mangai" ("the young lady seated on a flower").

Having received nourishment for both body and soul at the hands of the Divine Mother herself, Annamaya could easily climb the remaining steps and reach the top of Venkatadri. He bathed there in the famous temple-pond Swami Pushkarini, and visited the other holy places nearby. Then he entered the shrine of Sri Venkateswara and saw the Lord's charming figure in the sanctum sanctorum. He recorded the experience in a song.

I beheld  
the Supreme Lord  
of the universe,  
and was sanctified.

I beheld  
the waterfalls  
that wash away sins,  
and other sacred spots,  
and the holy pond  
whose praises  
the wise ones sing.

I beheld  
the majestic hill,  
bright with gems  
from the hoods  
of serpents,  
splendid pavilions,  
and golden altars,  
shedding lustre  
from the nine  
precious stones,  
and glittering towers  
that rise to dizzy heights.

I beheld  
the matchless  
lotus-like feet  
of the Lord  
that mystics grasp  
in their inner vision,  
and the divine arm  
that points  
at the steady hill.

I beheld  
the Lord of Venkatadri,  
and was sanctified.

Annamayya was later to write many such songs to express his joy at the sight of Sri Venkateswara's fascinating form, describing him at once as "a treasure-trove left by one's thoughtful elders", "a dark cloud that quenches one's thirst", "the wish-yielding celestial gem Chintamani", and the "infallible panacea for all worldly ills", but it is noteworthy that even in this early composition he shows clear understanding of the significance of the Lord's right arm pointing at his own feet, resting steadily on the immovable hill, concretising thus the concept of self-surrender.

Several miracles are associated with Annamayya's sojourn on the hill during his first visit. On the second day of his stay there, which happened to be Ekadasi, a day considered highly propitious for the worship of Vishnu, the boy bathed in a sacred pond, and while his clothes were getting dried, he composed a poem consisting of a hundred verses (*satakam*) on Sri Venkateswara. On reaching the temple he found the

doors locked. It appears that he then started reciting the poem, and the doors miraculously opened to afford him entry into the shrine.<sup>12</sup> And at the end of his recitation a pearl necklace adorning the deity slid down to signify his pleasure. The Vaikhanasa priest who witnessed these wondrous happenings was filled with awe, and recognised the boy's intense piety.

Soon thereafter a Vaishnava ascetic (*yati*) named Ghanavishnu was directed in a dream by Sri Venkateswara himself to seek out the dark-complexioned boy Annamayya, and formally admit him into the Vaishnava fold by administering to him the five sacraments<sup>13</sup> prescribed for the purpose. When told about the Lord's directive, Annamayya was delighted. He promptly received initiation into Vaishnavism, and thus became the first member of his family to join the Visishtadvaita sect. He also acquired thereby the honorific "*acharya*" ("expounder", especially of the Vedas) and came to be known henceforth as Annamacharya.

While the boy was thus spending his days on the hill, melodiously singing devotional songs to the delight of the pilgrims that thronged the temple, and learning the basic doctrines of Srivaishnavism which unequivocally proclaims,

Sunshine or shade,  
come what may,  
the Lord of the Hills  
is our sole refuge,

his mother somehow managed to trace him there, and succeeded in persuading him to return home with her, holding out the promise that he would be given complete freedom to continue his devotional activities at home.

Annamacharya must have spent the next eight years in intense spiritual pursuits because, it is commonly believed, on the strength of a copperplate inscription discovered within the precincts of the Tirupati temple, that when he was sixteen years old he was blessed with a mystic vision of Sri Venkateswara. The inscription further states that he started composing devotional songs in praise of the deity from that day, and that he continued the practice till the last day of his life.

It needs to be noted that according to Chinnanna's biographical account Annamacharya had been composing songs and verses

spontaneously even from his boyhood. It should therefore be assumed that his experience of theophany when he was sixteen years old further intensified his love for the Lord, and made him solemnly resolve to compose henceforth, as an act of piety, at least one hymn in praise of him every day for the rest of his life.

Sometime thereafter he became a *grihastha* ("man with a family"; literally, "householder") by marrying two girls, Tirumamma and Akkamma, in deference to the wishes of his parents. Tirumamma, also known as Timmakka, was herself a poet who wrote the narrative poem *Subhadra-kalyanam* and thus acquired the distinction of being the first noteworthy woman poet in Telugu. Her son Narasinganna also appears to have been a poet of considerable merit, though his identity has not yet been conclusively established. And Akkamma gave birth to Peda Tirumalacharya, a true inheritor of his saintly father's sense of vocation and the twin gifts of composing hymns charged with devotional fervour and singing them in an ecstasy of delight. Their children too were well-known poets, and thus Annamacharya and his descendants enriched Telugu literature with works on a wide variety of subjects for over 150 years. Peda Tirumalacharya, moreover, continued the observance of his father's pious resolve to offer at least one new hymn every day to Sri Venkateswara.

A strong urge to master the Visishtadvaita theology led Annamacharya, sometime after his marriage, to seek the guidance of a reputed Vaishnava preceptor of the age, Adivan Sathagopa Yai, the founder of a *matha* (monastery) in Ahobalam, a well-known place of pilgrimage in the region. Annamacharya appears to have lived with his family there, spending several years with his teacher, studying the scriptures of his sect, especially the collection of the hymns of the Alvars called *Divyaprabandham*, and the *Ramayana* of Valmiki which is regarded by the Srivaishnavas as *Saranagati-sastra* ("treatise on self-surrender"). He fully grasped the import of *prapatti* which leads the devotee to assert,

It is enough  
to remember Hari  
in one's heart;  
he himself  
will attend to the rest.

It is a situation in which the utter helplessness of the devotee is well matched by the ceaseless flow of the Lord's grace so that there is absolutely no room for despondency. This spirit of reassurance understandably pervades several songs of Annamacharya, and one of them clearly brings out his firm faith in the Lord's readiness to save him, unworthy though he is.

I am  
a lowly, miserable being  
and  
you are the Supreme Lord  
of the universe.  
Your glory alone  
shall prevail  
for ever.

I fail to comprehend  
the mystery of birth  
and of death;  
how then can I  
ever comprehend you?  
Being my creator,  
you will have pity on me.

I do not care  
to think of sin  
or of virtue;  
how then can I  
think of you?  
As you dwell  
in my heart,  
you alone will  
make me pure  
and protect me.

I fail to notice  
my unclean state  
and despicable plight;  
how then can I  
notice your grace?  
You cannot, of course,

forsake me,  
and so you will  
save me  
for ever.

Over the years Annamacharya continued the observance of his vow to offer at least one new hymn to Sri Venkateswara every day. Even when he happened to visit the temples of other deities, especially during his journeys, and sang their praises, he invariably ended the songs with a specific reference to the beloved Lord of Seven Hills, with whom he identified all the others. Thus the name of Sri Venkateswara appears as the signature (*mudra*) in all his songs.

Some of his exquisitely wrought songs in the erotic vein which present the longing of the human soul for union with the Divine Spirit through the symbolism of physical love, modelled on the classical descriptions of the love-sports of Radha and the other Gopis of Vraja with Krishna, probably belong to this period. He also wrote at the same time several songs which emphasise the transience of human life and the primacy of spirituality.

The loftiness of his sentiments, the felicity of his language, the intensity of his devotion, and the melody of his voice soon began to attract the attention of people at large, and Chinnanna underscores the saint's popularity when he states rhetorically that they wondered whether he was Tumbura, Narada, or a Gandharva, moving on earth in human form.

When Saluva Narasimha Raya, who was then the chieftain of Tanguturu, a town near Tallapaka, came to know about the saintliness of Annamacharya, he approached the poet with great reverence and humbly begged him to visit his place and stay there as his honoured guest. Pleased with his humility, which is considered one of the signs of a true Vaishnava, Annamacharya acceded to his request and stayed with him for some time.

Narasimha Raya began to thrive and prosper, and soon rose to be the ruler of the fort at Penugonda in the Vijayanagar Empire. He attributed his prosperity to the blessings of Annamacharya, and regarded him as his benefactor and preceptor. At his invitation Annamacharya went to Penugonda and stayed there for a while. Occasionally he used to sing his hymns on Sri Venkateswara in the court for the edification of the people assembled there.

On a certain occasion Narasimha Raya requested the poet to sing an erotic song on the deity. Annamacharya obliged him by reciting a fresh composition of his in which there is a suggestive description of the teasing of the heroine (*nayika*) by her female companions when she comes out of the bed chamber after spending the night in love-sports with her lord.

Why do spots of musk  
appear here and there  
on the soft, crimson lip  
of the young lady?  
Can it be  
a love-note  
from her  
to her dear lord?

Why have the corners  
of her pretty eyes  
turned red?  
O friends,  
can it be that  
her arrow-like  
sidelong glances  
were stained with blood  
when she drew them back  
from her beloved lord?

Why do the lady's breasts  
shine so brightly  
through her bodice?  
O friends,  
can it be  
summer moonlight  
that spreads  
from the crescent marks  
etched on them  
by her playful lover?

Why are the lady's cheeks  
bedecked with rows of pearls?  
O friends,  
can they be  
drops of sweat

that appeared  
during her dalliance  
with the passionate lord,  
Sri Venkateswara?

Marks on the nether lip to indicate passionate kissing, reddening of eyes to suggest sleeplessness, crescent marks on the breasts formed by scratches with fingernails, and drops of sweat on the face as a result of physical exhaustion, no doubt, are conventional images in Indian love poetry; what makes the song a memorable piece of literary art is the marvellous imagination of the poet which provides startling explanations for the familiar signs.

When Annamacharya recited the song in the court, Narasimha Raya was so deeply moved by its luminous beauty that he made the poet repeat the recitation several times and joyously exclaimed that it was indeed an excellent specimen of pure poetry. Then, in a state of euphoria, he transcended the bounds of propriety and requested the poet to compose a similar song on him. It is true that Narasimha Raya's deep love of poetry was partly responsible for his preposterous request; but the fact should not be overlooked that acquisition of wealth and power had clouded his judgment to such an extent that he could go so far as to ask a saint, who regarded his songs as votive offerings and acts of adoration to the feet of Vishnu, to employ his art for the glorification of a petty ruler of a small kingdom like himself.

Annamacharya was deeply offended by Narasimha Raya's request, and plainly told him that his gifts of music and poetry were dedicated to the service of Hari and that he would never employ them to extol men.<sup>14</sup> As the confrontation took place in the presence of his courtiers, Narasimha Raya felt insulted, and in a fit of rage he ordered that the poet should be bound with chains and locked up in prison. His servants promptly carried out the orders and stood guard on the four sides of the prison-house.

Annamacharya contemplated the situation, and his thoughts naturally turned to the supreme saviour, Vishnu, one of whose names quite appropriately is *Pranataatihara* ("Destroyer of the afflictions of devotees"). He uttered a song impromptu, expressing his unwavering faith in the efficacy of the Lord's name in extinguishing the flames of suffering.



In moments of hunger  
or of fatigue,  
one's only succour is  
the name of Hari;  
there is no other way.

In moments of want  
or of isolation  
or of capture  
and incarceration,  
one's only support is  
the blessed name of Hari;  
however much one may overlook,  
there is no other way.

In times of distress  
or of scandal,  
or of evil or of fright,  
one's only succour is  
the name of Hari;  
however much one may search,  
there is no other way.

When bound in chains  
or sentenced to death,  
or waylaid by creditors,  
the only means of release is  
the name of Venkatesa;  
however much one may struggle,  
there is no other way.

At once the fetters that bound him fell off. The awe-struck guards rushed to their master and reported the miraculous happening to him. Narasimha Raya, however, was not inclined to give credence to their words, as he was still puffed up with pride and smarting under the recent humiliation. He thought that their story was false and that they were probably promised a handsome bribe to circulate it.

He went to the prison to find out the facts himself. He once again ordered the guards to bind Annamacharya's hands with chains, and openly mocked at him, suggesting that he should secure his release by singing a hymn. The saint smiled at his foolishness, and sang again the same song which proclaims the power of Hari's name to end all afflictions.

Immediately the chains fell off from him in full view of the besotted ruler, who now realised the greatness of the saint, fell at once at his feet, and humbly sought his forgiveness. Annamacharya did forgive him, but warned him strongly against hurting the feelings of the votaries of Vishnu. He told the benighted ruler that the blessings which could be obtained through meditation (*dhyana*) in the Krita age, by sacrifice (*kratu*) in the Treta age, and by ritualistic worship (*archana*) in the Dvapara age, can easily be secured in the Kali age by merely singing the glories (*kirtanam*) of Hari, and that those who chant the praises of the Lord should therefore be treated with reverence.

Annamacharya then decided to eschew the company of such worldlings and proceed to Tirupati to live in peace. It must be pointed out in this context that in spite of their association with men of affluence and power, even kings and emperors at times, including Saluva Narasimha Raya who later became the ruler of the Vijayanagar Empire, Annamacharya and his descendants never wrote a song or verse in honour of a mere mortal. Gifts and honours came to them unsought, and they accepted prosperity and adversity, praise and insult, in a spirit of complete detachment, cherishing only Sri Venkateswara as their precious treasure in the midst of inevitable vicissitudes of fortune. An interesting episode in the life of the great Vaishnava preceptor Yamunacharya centres on the idea that Vishnu is the most invaluable treasure-trove left by one's ancestors. Annamacharya fully imbibed the spirit of Vaishnavism, and reiterated his conviction that Vishnu alone is the Supreme Lord of the universe, and that he alone should therefore be served with single-minded devotion. His view of the degradation involved in serving one's fellow men to the neglect of one's primary allegiance to the Lord is effectively voiced in one of his songs.

Why should one  
be born a man,  
serve another,  
and live in misery  
day by day?

Why should one frequent  
places of squalor  
to fill one's belly,  
and demean oneself  
before others

for a morsel of food,  
 or yield to passions  
 and be caught  
 in the quagmire  
 of worldliness?

Let one serve  
 the graceful Lord  
 of Venkatadri,  
 who dwells  
 in all beings  
 and assumes  
 all forms,  
 and thereby attain  
 heavenly bliss.

It is evident from one of his songs that Annamacharya had encounter another painful experience sometime in his life when he lost the consecrated images of his tutelary deities,<sup>15</sup> whom he worshipped ritualistically every day, and carried with him wherever he went. How, when, and where they were lost and whether the mishap was a result of deliberate hostility on the part of someone cannot be determined from the content of the song, but it is certain that he at once let out a cry of anguish, pathetically appealing to the devout and heroic figures of Hindu mythology, Hanuman, Garuda, Prahlada, Arjuna, Sesha, and Kartaviryarjuna, to restore the deities to him, as the time for the daily worship was fast approaching. The aid of Hanuman was sought because, according to an apocryphal story, when a demon named Mahiravana, a cousin of Ravana, held Rama and Lakshmana captives in *Patala* (the nether world), Hanuman secured their release by killing him. Garuda, likewise, freed Rama and Lakshmana, when they were bound with snake-bonds by Indrajit, in the battlefield in Lanka. Prahlada could make the Lord appear in the form of Narasimha in a pillar, while Arjuna could have the vision of the cosmic form of the Lord during the war at Kurukshetra. Sesha is a close attendant of the Lord, and thus has constant access to him. And, according to *Mantra-ratnakara*, stolen or lost articles can be regained by invoking the name of Kartaviryarjuna, a great devotee of Vishnu.

The circumstances leading to the recovery of the images are not known and the fanciful stories in circulation about the incident are pure fabrications of some enthusiastic but uncritical scholars, the fertility of

whose imagination is matched only by their utter disregard for supporting evidence. It should however be noted that the consecrated images of Sri Venkateswara and his consorts, Sridevi and Bhudevi, belonging to Annamacharya's household, are now preserved in a temple in Srinivasamangapuram, a village near Tirupati.

To be human is to be miserable in some measure, and suffering falls to the lot of saints and sinners alike. Lives of saints the world over bear testimony to the fact that they invariably pass through a state of agony before they experience the ecstasy of beatific vision. The Dark Night of the Soul does precede the dawn of everlasting bliss. There is however this difference that while suffering often embitters the worldly people and leads them towards atheism or agnosticism, it drives the devout closer to God, intensifies their piety, and accelerates the process of their spiritual evolution. And, it may be added, if they happen to be gifted poets like Annamacharya, it also enriches literature by providing stimulus for the composition of imperishable hymns which profess affirmation of faith in the midst of encircling gloom.

Annamacharya went from Penugonda to Tirupati and resided on the Venkatadri hill for some time. There he wrote a short narrative poem entitled *Sringara-manjari*, describing the passionate longing of a young girl for Sri Venkateswara and the fulfilment of her wish. And the practice of offering at least one fresh hymn to the Lord every day continued uninterrupted. He then composed numerous songs that vividly describe the pomp and spectacle, rituals and festivals, associated with the shrine, besides ecstatic expressions of the joy he felt at the sight of the sacred hills and the Lord inside the shrine. Quite a few hymns also deal with the ephemeral nature of worldly relations and the paramount importance of devotion and self-surrender.

While climbing the hills during one of his many visits to the Lord's shrine he must have noticed the resemblance between the peaks of the hills and the hoods of serpents. In fact, mythological accounts of the *kshetra* (holy place) regard the whole range of hills as the serpent Seshha come down to earth from Vaikuntha to provide a base for the Lord's *leela* (sport) in the world. A well-known hymn of Annamacharya brings out the sanctity of the hill and the shrine standing on it.

Lo and behold  
the abode of Hari,  
shaded with the hoods  
of a myriad Seshas!

Behold the lofty  
 hill Venkatadri,  
 the rarest of sights  
 for even Brahma  
 and other gods,  
 the permanent home  
 of countless sages;  
 behold and adore  
 the hill of bliss.

Close by appears  
 the Seshadri hill,  
 choice resort  
 of gods from heaven,  
 behold the eternal,  
 priceless treasure,  
 topped with towers  
 of dazzling gold,  
 with countless Brahmas  
 resting on them.

Behold the hill Venkatagiri,  
 seat of heavenly bliss,  
 the source of glory  
 for Sri Venkatesa,  
 a veritable treasure-house  
 of overflowing riches,  
 holy of holies,  
 the Venkatadri hill.

Exponents of the Visishtadvaita sect maintain that after explaining to Arjuna several means open to men to secure release from the cycle of recurring births, Krishna teaches him the easiest means at the very end of the *Bhagavad-gita* when he tells him: "Seek refuge in me alone. Do not grieve, for I will deliver you from all sins." The Lord's feet, which are the sole refuge of the devotees, are therefore treasured by them as especially dear objects of adoration, and Annamacharya composed several hymns in praise of them. In one of his most famous songs he recalls with fervour the various incidents associated with the Lord's feet during his many incarnations on earth.

This is the foot  
that Brahma washed,  
the foot that enshrines  
the spirit of Brahman.

The foot that rose  
to measure the earth,  
and was placed  
on Bali's head;  
the foot that kicked  
the starry sky,  
and gave protection  
to the foe of Bala.

The foot that freed  
a woman from sin,  
and was placed  
on the serpent's head;  
the foot that Lakshmi  
presses with love;  
the foot of the god  
who rides a horse.

The foot that grants  
countless boons  
to great ascetics;  
your blessed foot,  
the realm of bliss,  
that proclaims  
that Venkatagiri  
abides for ever.

As Vamana he measured heaven and earth, humbled the demon king Bali, and restored Paradise to Indra, the enemy of Bala. As Rama he freed Ahalya from the taint of sin by a mere touch of his foot; as Krishna he danced on the hood of the serpent Kaliya; and as Kalki he will move about on horse-back to destroy forces of evil.

Annamacharya appears to have spent the last years of his life in relative tranquillity, spending his time mostly at Tallapaka and Tirupati by turns, and participating in the annual Brahmotsava festival of Sri Venkateswara without fail. He received several grants of land, besides

other gifts, unasked, from his admirers, and spent the income from those sources quite lavishly in the service of the Lord by instituting new festivities and food offerings.

From specific references in two poetical works, *Sripadarenu-mahatmyamu* and *Sakuntala-parinayamu*, by one of his grandsons, Revanuri Venkatacharya, it is learnt that Annamacharya performed the *Kalyanotsava* (marriage ceremony) of the goddess Alarmel Mangai with Sri Venkateswara, assuming the position of the bride's father. In the past Periyalvar had the honour of being hailed by the Vaishnavas as the Lord's father-in-law, as he had performed the marriage of his foster-daughter, Andal, with Sri Ranganatha, and Annamacharya appears to have enjoyed the same distinction among his contemporaries with regard to Sri Venkateswara.

In consequence of his unceasing devotion and consecrated service (*kainkarya*) to the Lord, he acquired certain miraculous powers; his will was certain to prevail, and his utterances in the form of a blessing or curse were sure to materialise. Both Peda Tirumalacharya and Chinnanna refer to the story about a cashew tree in their writings. Once Annamacharya plucked a few bright red fruits from a cashew tree and offered them to Sri Venkateswara in the course of his ritualistic worship. He deeply regretted the act later, when he tasted one of them and found it sour. He then willed that the tree should yield only sweet fruits henceforth, and at once his wish was granted. And when a poor Brahmin who needed money to get married sought and received the saint's blessing, he was at once able to secure the funds, as a passer-by made a generous donation on the spot for the purpose. Soon supplicants began to gather round him to obtain relief from their afflictions through his benign intervention.

When he was quite old, Annamacharya appears to have been visited by the great poet-saint of Kamataka, Purandaradasa, either at Tirupati or in Vijayanagar, and the two devotees of Vishnu, it appears, were delighted to meet each other and talk about their compositions. Purandaradasa must have been very young at the time. One of his hymns, "*Saranu Saranu Surendravandita*", closely resembles a popular song of Annamacharya, "*Saranu Saranu Surendrasannuta*", often employed in congregational singing in the South. The subject of Purandaradasa's praise, however, is Sri Narasimha of Ahobalam while Annamacharya's hymn centres on Sri Venkateswara.

Annamacharya lived to a ripe old age, and could look back with satisfaction on his extensive service as the chief hymnist (*Sankirtanacharya*) of Sri Venkateswara himself. His descendants claim that he had composed 32,000 songs over the years. He was happy to find his children and grandchildren following in his footsteps, worshipping Vishnu, and distinguishing themselves as creative writers. It is known that he performed the *Brahmopadesa* (initiation into the recitation of Gayatri *mantra*) of one of his grandsons, China Tirumalacharya. And according to reliable inscriptional evidence, he entrusted the sacred task of offering a fresh hymn to the Lord every day to his son Peda Tirumalacharya, and passed away on the 23rd of February in 1503.

Annamacharya had always regarded life as a theatrical show,<sup>16</sup> full of pretences and vain pursuits, and never for a moment did he waver in his faith that attainment of the realm of Vishnu should be the prime objective of human life. He voices the view quite forcefully in one of his well-known songs.

Life on earth  
is no more  
than play-acting  
and heaven, the fruit  
of ceaseless striving.

Certain is one's birth,  
and certain, one's death;  
the passing show  
between one's beginning  
and the end is  
no more than  
play-acting.  
The visible world  
spreads around one,  
and beyond it lies  
the final goal, heaven.

Certain it is,  
one consumes food,  
and wears apparel;  
all the rest is  
only play-acting.



Heaven is attained  
by transcending  
both virtue and sin.

But there is no end  
to one's evil  
or one's good.  
Time laughs at man  
and moves forward  
and the show goes on,  
as ever.

On the top dwells  
the Supreme Lord,  
Sri Venkatesa,  
and beyond the skies  
lies heaven.

It is certain that Annamacharya played his role in the theatrical show with consummate skill, and, when the appointed hour arrived, he made his final exit from the stage with a profound sense of fulfilment.

### 3

## *Votive Offerings*

The earliest recorded prayers of man to the divine forces that hold sway over his existence are undoubtedly the hymns of the *Rig-Veda*. The supplicants who first uttered them in a state of rapture soon felt that the gods could be propitiated more felicitously by singing, rather than merely reciting, those poetical compositions. So they set their hymns to music, and produced the *Sama-Veda*, from which, according to Bharata's *Natya-Sastra*, Brahma extracted the art and science of music. The power of music as an enlivening aid to devotion was thus recognised at the very dawn of civilisation, and Krishna obviously endorses the belief when he tells Arjuna that among the Vedas he is the *Sama-Veda*.<sup>17</sup>

Singing the praises (*kirtanam*) of Vishnu, therefore, figures quite appropriately among the nine modes of devotion mentioned in the episode of Prahlada in the *Bhagavata Purana*.<sup>18</sup> In fact, that monumental work on the primacy of devotion declares that though the Kali Age is characterised by many shortcomings, it has one supreme virtue in that man can easily attain heaven in this age by merely singing the glories of Krishna.<sup>19</sup> The emergence of the Bhakti movement and the Bhagavata tradition spread this practice all over the country, while the obligatory recitation of the Tamil hymns of the Alvars in the Vishnu temples in the South appears to have prompted poets to compose similar devotional lyrics in the other languages of the region as well. It is said of the poet-saint of Karnataka, Sripada Raya, for instance, that his observation of the singing of the devotional songs of the Alvars in the Vishnu temple at Srirangapatna was in some measure responsible for his composing similar

hymns in Kannada. And Annamacharya, who was acquainted with his hymns as well as with the lyrics of the Alvars, became the first *vaggeyakara* in Telugu.

In his *Sangita-ratnakara* Sarngadeva defines *vaggeyakara* as a person who can create both the *vak* and the *geya*, the text and the music, of a song. He is at once the poet composing the song and the musician setting it to tune, and is therefore known also as *ubhayakara*. Annamacharya not only composed and sang thousands of devotional songs, but also wrote a treatise on the subject in Sanskrit, entitled *Sankirtana-lakshanam*, and thus provided inspiration to generations of lyricists in Telugu through his precept and practice.

In his biographical account of his grandfather Chinnanna positively states that Annamacharya had composed 32,000 songs over the years. The figure does appear incredible, but for several reasons his statement cannot be dismissed as an exaggeration. It is known from a copperplate inscription of the sixteenth century that Annamacharya was blessed with a mystic vision of the beloved lord, Sri Venkateswara, when he was only sixteen years old, and that the blissful experience prompted him to make a vow to compose at least one hymn in praise of the deity every day for the rest of his life. And he lived for almost eighty years thereafter. The Tirupati temple with which he was associated has always been known for its numerous rituals and festivals, pomp and pageantry. The popular Telugu saying about the temple, "*nitya-kalyanam, pachcha-toranam*", which means that green festoons of mango leaves may be seen there any day because every day is a festive day, is quite true. And whenever he happened to be staying on the hill, Annamacharya lovingly participated in all the activities associated with the deity, and often composed a number of songs impromptu to celebrate the events. According to Chinnanna, wherever he might be staying at the time, he made it a point to visit Tirupati during the Brahmotsava festival every year, and quite a few of his songs describe the various processions associated with it. Moreover, he often visited places like Ahobalam and Vijayanagar, and composed hymns in praise of the deities in the shrines there and on the way, though he never failed to identify all of them with Sri Venkateswara at the end of every song. In view of these facts it is reasonable to suppose that he composed more than one song on many days during his long life as the *sankirtanacharya* of the Lord of Seven Hills.

His son, Peda Tirumalacharya, who was a distinguished hymnist in his own right, knew well the value of those songs, and took care to

preserve the precious treasure by getting them inscribed on copperplates, along with some of his own hymns, and storing them in a small room, known as *Sankirtana-bhandagara* ("treasure house of hymns"), within the ramparts of the temple. A few inscriptions found there indicate that he also made liberal endowments for the proper care of the copperplates as well as for hiring singers to sing the hymns in the shrine on certain special occasions.

It may be noted that this practice of getting literary works engraved on copperplates to ensure their preservation is confined only to the members of the Tallapaka family, as far as Telugu literature is concerned; even in the entire country it appears to be an unusual measure, which was resorted to in ancient times only in the case of a few religious texts of Buddhism and Sayana's commentary on the Vedas.<sup>20</sup> And it was also an expensive undertaking, made possible in the case of the Tallapaka poets by the munificence of Peda Tirumalacharya's royal patron, Achyutadeva Raya, ruler of the Vijayanagar Empire.

There is evidence to indicate that Annamacharya's songs enjoyed immense popularity for about two centuries, when they used to be sung regularly in the Tirupati temple and were also used by devotees for congregational singing in even distant places like Pudukkottai in the South. But, for some inexplicable reason, they gradually went out of vogue, and even the name of the poet-saint came to be forgotten, partly owing to the conspiracy of silence on the part of Telugu scholars in the past, who did not consider the author of mere songs written in popular idiom worthy of their notice.

Even the existence of his songs on copperplates in Tirupati appears to have been forgotten by people, because the first reference to them after the lapse of nearly three hundred years occurs in a note written by a British Civil Servant in the nineteenth century. In his Introduction to his *Grammar of Teloogoo Language*, published from Madras in 1816, A.D. Campbell wrote: "Having heard that a number of poems engraved on some thousand sheets of copper had been preserved by the pious care of a family of Brahmins in the temple on the sacred hill at Tirupati, I deputed a native for the purpose of examining them, but with the exception of a treatise on grammar, of which a copy was taken, the whole collection was found to contain nothing but voluminous hymns in praise of the Deity."<sup>21</sup>

Another hundred years had to pass before the Tirupati Tirumala Devasthanams, which controls the administration of the temple of Sri

Venkateswara, could take possession of the copperplates, get transcripts of the songs made and edited by competent scholars, and undertake their publication in a number of volumes. In the process it was discovered that several numbered plates from the original collection were missing and that only 14,358 songs<sup>22</sup> of Annamacharya could finally be traced. It means that more than half of his compositions have been lost to posterity in the course of transfer of their custody from one agency to another after their discovery in the nineteenth century.

Annamacharya's songs fall into two broad divisions: erotic songs (*Sringara-sankirtanalu*) and spiritual songs (*Adhyatma-sankirtanalu*). The fact that the label *sankirtana* appears in the copperplates for all his songs, irrespective of their tone and content, is a clear indication of their essentially devotional character. For, the terms *kirtana* and *sankirtana* denote sacred songs which either directly or through suggestion praise the glories of God or of venerable sages and saints. Such songs invariably employ simple music and rhythms, because in their case the text is more important than the music. It may be added that such songs cover a broad spectrum of feeling and thought and deal not only with intense devotion to the Lord, but also with such themes as the vanity of human achievements, the fleeting nature of time, and the urgent need for self-surrender to ensure one's salvation.

In Indian literature religious eroticism is as old as the *Bhagavata Purana* which felicitously presents the allegory of the deep longing of the human soul for God through the lyrical description of the amorous sports of the Gopis of Brindavan with Krishna. He is hailed *Gopala* (cowherd), and the cows in this context symbolically suggest the souls of beings that are drawn to the Supreme Lord. The name of Radha, the principal figure among the Gopis, does not find mention in the work, but there are hints in the descriptions of their dalliance to suggest that one of the Gopis was his favourite.

Out of those hints found in the *Rasa-panchadhyayi* section of the *Bhagavata Purana* emerged the cult associated with the love-sports of Radha and Krishna which was to inundate Indian poetry for centuries with what Vaishnava treatises on poetics describe as *madhura rasa*, the religiously sublimated erotic sentiment (*sringara*). Explaining its significance, Sri Aurobindo observes: "The desire of the soul for God is there thrown into symbolic figure in the lyrical love cycle of Radha and Krishna, the Nature soul in man seeking for the Divine soul through love,

seized and mastered by the beauty, attracted by the magical flute, abandoning human cares and duties for this one overpowering passion and in the cadence of its phases passing through first desire to the bliss of union, the pangs of separation, the eternal longing and reunion, the lila of the love of the human spirit for God."<sup>23</sup>

This treatment of the theme of love transforms the apparently profane into the sacred, the powerful sex impulse into a deep spiritual urge. As Sushil Kumar De explains, "this attitude is a kind of erotic mysticism which seeks to express religious longings in the intimate language of earthly passion, for it conceives divine love as a reflex of the human emotion".<sup>24</sup> It effects the integration of religious, erotic, and aesthetic elements, while enriching literature with immortal lyrics of exquisite beauty.

Indian rhetoricians too have accorded the pride of place to *sringara* among sentiments in their extensive discussion of literary theory, and come up with quite an elaborate classification of various types of heroes and heroines in their amorous relations. The theorists of classical Indian drama, for instance, describe eight stylized psychological states of relationship of the heroine with the hero: *swadhina-patika*, the lady who has the lover completely under her control; *vasaka-sajjika*, who adorns herself and her bed-chamber in expectation of the lover; *virahotkanthita*, who is disappointed by the non-arrival of the guilty lover; *vipralabdha*, who is deceived by the lover through deliberate unfaithfulness; *khandita*, who is outraged by the discovery of marks of unfaithfulness on the lover's person; *kalahantarita*, who is separated from the lover owing to her rigid stand in a love quarrel; *proshitabhartrika*, who pines for the lover who has gone abroad; and *abhisarika*, who goes out to meet the lover at the place of assignation.

Annamacharya was as familiar with this classification of heroines in the works of classical rhetoricians as with the lore of Gopis and Krishna in the *Bhagavata Purana* and Jayadeva's *Gita-Govinda*<sup>25</sup>, and illustrations may easily be found for all the eight types in his erotic songs. In fact, several songs can be found to illustrate each of these eight psychological states of heroines in their amorous relations with their lovers, so extensive was his output. It must, however, be noted that though his acquaintance with the theory and practice of his distinguished predecessors in the realm of erotic poetry is quite evident, sometimes he shows his originality by traversing beyond the bounds reached by them

in his description of the state of the heroine's mind. And his songs deal with both longing and fulfilment, the agony of separation and the bliss of union, with equal felicity.

His imagination is so rich that even when he employs conventional imagery, he is often able to come up with a refreshingly different portrait of a character or description of a situation.

The lady's youth is  
a veritable fortress  
to safeguard the Lord's  
domain of pleasure.

Her sidelong glance is  
the flash of lightning  
to dispel the darkness  
enveloping his mind.

Her graceful face is  
the luminous moon  
that makes his wide,  
lily-like eyes bloom.

Her bee-like tresses weave  
a veil of darkness  
to afford seclusion  
to the beloved lord.

Her slender arms are  
indeed soft tendrils  
to support the creeper-like  
love of the lord.

The splendour of her lotus-face is  
like the lustre of molten gold  
to spread far and wide  
the bounty of Sri Venkatesa.

The doe-eyed lady's heart is  
a creation of the God of Love,  
designed to nourish  
the passion of the lord.

It is obvious that this song abounds in many conventional images. The heroine's face, for instance, is round and bright like the moon, and the eyes of the hero are long and wide like petals of the water-lily. The connection between the rising of the moon and the blooming of water-lilies, likewise, is an age-old poetic convention. The skill of Annamacharya lies in his exploitation of these rich associations by making the moon-like face of the heroine effect the opening of the lily-like eyes of Sri Venkateswara. And apparently even God has his moments of depression when the gloom which fills his mind can be driven away only by the radiance of his divine spouse's glance! There is a vague suggestion here and there of earthly passion, but, then, one is not allowed to forget altogether the essential divinity of the pair of lovers either.

Annamacharya was the first notable composer in Telugu to handle the erotic strain in devotional poetry, and his successors could only imitate, but not excel, his artistry in the genre. As his output was considerable, so was his range quite extensive, and consequently there is hardly an emotion pertaining to love, human or divine, that does not find memorable expression in some song or other of his. Whether it be the pain of passionate longing or the bliss of fulfilment, he deftly conveys the intensity of the feeling through a series of highly evocative pictures which sometimes are refreshingly different from the familiar, conventional images of classical love poetry. This feature is clearly seen in a popular song of his, which employs a folk metre known as "ela pata", and vividly describes the initial agony of the heroine and the final ecstasy through a number of verses, each constituting a neatly etched picture in a gallery of fascinating portraits.

Watching you from the roof-top,  
I long for your love,  
and spend my days in sighs,  
Venkatesa,  
where have you gone  
all the while?

Tossing on the jasmine-bed  
I spend sleepless nights  
singing of you,  
Venkatesa,  
moonlight has turned hot  
like a midsummer day.



Whenever I press  
 your pretty ring  
 against my swelling bosom,  
 Venkatesa,  
 it leaves a vivid mark,  
 as on sealing-wax.

When I heard the cuckoo sing  
 from the mango grove in spring,  
 I mistook it for your voice,  
 Venkatesa,  
 and invited you  
 to come to my side.

When I approached  
 lotus flowers in the pond,  
 mistaking them for your eyes,  
 Venkatesa,  
 they turned into the arrows  
 of the God of Love.<sup>26</sup>

Those sweet words of love  
 we once exchanged  
 have become frescoes without walls now,  
 Venkatesa,  
 firmly do they cling  
 to my mind.

I send you a love-note  
 through a pigeon,  
 and ardently pray to God,  
 Venkatesa,  
 that you should soon  
 be brought hither.

I trust your word  
 with all my heart;  
 shower your grace on me,  
 Venkatesa,  
 dispel at once  
 the gathering darkness.

At long last are you  
united with me,  
and lavished your love,  
Venkatesa,  
Verily is it  
a feast to my soul.

The heroine who experiences intense grief on account of her separation from the lover is a familiar figure in Indian literature, and many poetic conventions have grown round her looks and behaviour. She burns from desire so acutely that even moonlight and mild breeze hurt her, and her choicest invective is invariably reserved for the God of Love who torments her with his flower-arrows. All in all, she is a creature of the earth, earthy, and it appears impossible to present her in an admirable light. Yet a poet-saint like Annamacharya can raise her from the level of animal passions to the heights of spirituality by endowing her with characteristics found only in practitioners of rigorous religious austerities.

Can there be a greater blessing,  
or austerity, or glory  
than this?

The young lady's life is fruitful;  
she has severed  
all vain attachments  
like an adept in yoga;  
her desires have turned passive,  
and are marked  
by clear signs  
of steady wisdom.

By her unceasing attachment  
to the Lord,  
her heart has become the seat  
of perpetual rapture;  
the lotus-eyed lady  
could subdue her mind  
and attain tranquillity.

Through constant contemplation  
on Sri Venkateswara,  
she has gained knowledge  
of her divine nature;

as the lady is enveloped  
in the Supreme Lord's grace,  
her mind is filled  
with ceaseless stillness.

It is difficult to gather from this description the fact that it presents the picture of a heroine who is passing through the state of separation from her lover, as the familiar signs of anguish are nowhere mentioned. Instead, it suggests that through constant meditation on the Lord she has been able to achieve spiritual union - *yoga* - with him, which is the ultimate goal of all religious austerities.

In another song, however, which also deals with the enraptured state of the heroine, Annamacharya clearly states that she is undergoing the state of physical separation from the Lord.

It is quite a surprise,  
signs of separation from you  
are not to be found  
in the young lady's looks.

As you appear in her vision  
when she thinks of you,  
she embraces empty space.  
No doubt, she learnt  
from someone  
that you pervade  
even the void.

As she sings your praises,  
she discerns your form,  
and gazes long at open space;  
she must have heard  
from someone  
that you are present  
in all directions.

As she constantly dwells on you  
in word and thought,  
you have taken her into your arms,  
O Lord of Venkatadri,  
we realise now the truth  
that you are omnipresent.

Though this is classified as an erotic song because it describes the behaviour of a young woman who suffers separation from her lover, it actually presents the psychological state of a devotee who has reached an advanced stage in spiritual evolution, and in such songs the distinction between the erotic and the spiritual disappears, as does the demarcation between human love and religious fervour. It may also be noted that on the copperplates containing Annamacharya's compositions the label "*Sringara-kirtanalu*" extends even to a set of songs that often employ folk tunes and metres and lovingly describe the boyhood pranks of Krishna in the hallowed tradition of the Alvars.

His spiritual songs (*Adhyatma-kirtanalu*) understandably have a far wider range and deal with a variety of themes like the primacy of devotion to Vishnu, efficacy of *saranagati* (self-surrender), the vanity of worldly achievements, the blessed state of a true devotee, the fatherhood of God, and the brotherhood of all human beings that transcends superficial distinctions of race and religion. And they hold a mirror up to the changing phases of the poet's relations with the Lord. He recognises Sri Venkateswara as the Supreme Being who pervades the entire universe; now he praises him, and now he offers him adoration; at times he quarrels with him, and then promptly seeks his forgiveness; and, on occasion he does not hesitate even to make fun of him, such is the closeness he feels towards the divine master. His unconditional surrender to the Lord is as evident in the songs as his boundless affection for him. The emotion he expresses in them is not mere devotion; it is a passionate attachment that knows no bounds. The celebrated definition of *bhakti* (devotion) by the sage Narada as being "of the nature of Supreme Love of the Lord" can clearly be understood with reference to these songs.

Many are the ways that lead to the Godhead, and as a follower of the Visishtadvaita sect Annamacharya extols self-surrender as the easiest means to reach the goal. In song after song he emphasises its facility and infallibility. Other practices too may secure the desired end, but they lack the ease and grace of the path he advocates.

When the trunk is there,  
 why should one carry water  
 to the leaves at the top?  
 When you reside in the heart,  
 why should I be concerned  
 with other objects?

Some claim to follow  
the path of the Vedas,  
but the Vedas are only  
facets of your glory.

Some seek to conform  
to the ways of the world,  
though all the worlds are  
products of your power of illusion.

Some try to suppress  
the desires of the heart,  
failing to perceive that  
even they rise at your will.

Others struggle to subdue  
the body and the senses,  
whereas, dear Lord,  
even they are your creation.

Why should one run hither and thither  
to attain this easy end?  
When a pond filled with water is near by,  
why should one dig in a dry river-bed?

I have surrendered myself to you,  
O merciful Lord, Sri Venkatesa,  
why should I be concerned with  
religious pursuits of the market-place?

The happy lot of the wise individual who has surrendered himself at the feet of the gracious lord Vishnu, likewise, is a favourite theme of Annamacharya, and in his zeal to carry the message of hope and succour to the afflicted beings of the world he wrote several songs on the subject.

One who relies on the Lord  
has no cause for grief,  
as the gracious Consort of Sri  
shields him in every way.

The servant of a thoughtful master  
is in no way perturbed;  
and the wife of a good man  
knows no discord.

While the father is attentive,  
the son has no worry;  
when the land yields a rich crop,  
there can be no dearth.

A mighty king is not afraid  
of an attack from foes;  
and one who is blessed with affluence  
does not face want.

The taint of sin  
is unknown to the righteous;  
and no harm can befall a person  
who is pure at heart.

He who has a spiritual teacher  
will have no lack;  
and one who is sure of heaven  
is not troubled by delusions.

Sri Venkateswara abides with us  
to ensure our well-being;  
we, his servants,  
know no constraints.

Annamacharya's imagination has the vibrant capacity for celebrating the divine spirit in the mundane world in many familiar forms, and endowing everyday activities with a wealth of religious meanings. In one of his songs, for instance, he presents Sri Venkateswara as a weaver and seller of handloom sarees,<sup>27</sup> quite a common sight in the countryside; but the process of this divine craftsman's fabric-making is as unusual as the materials he uses for his purpose are uncommon.

It may be noted in passing that the area surrounding Tallapaka, Annamacharya's native village, has been quite well-known through the ages for expert weavers of cotton fabrics. They claim Alarmel Mangai, the divine consort of Sri Venkateswara, as their sister, a girl born in their family, and thus claim kinship with the Lord. Moreover, members of the Tallapaka clan have been their spiritual preceptors and recipients of honours and generous gifts from them from time to time, according to the records dating back to the days of Peda Tirumalacharya.

He is seen in every lane,  
 the weaver of sarees,  
 who moves in the shade  
 to sell his wares.

Choosing the five elements  
 as cotton yarn  
 of many hues,  
 and stiffening the threads  
 with a dab of fickleness,  
 he twists passions on light spindles,  
 and fashions for sale  
 superfine sarees.

While his wife sprinkles  
 golden drops of illusions,  
 he fastens plaits of crooked deeds,  
 and designs sarees  
 with furrow-like stripes.

In the market place of beings  
 he offers for sale  
 clothes of worldly existence,  
 basing the prices  
 on their past deeds;  
 he makes garments  
 and sells them at will,  
 this friendly seller  
 of handloom fabrics,  
 the mighty Lord,  
 Sri Venkateswara.

God is the seller of various kinds of clothes in the marketplace of the world, and created beings are buyers. Worldly pleasures, experiences, are the clothes offered for sale, and the kind of clothes a person gets and the price he has to pay for them depend entirely on his past deeds. Moreover, the entire transaction takes place at the will and pleasure of the divine seller. Thus the poet's imagination transforms the simple craftsman into the divine dispenser of the fruits of one's past actions, and sustains the metaphor to illuminate several aspects of human existence.

In dealing out the fruits of their past actions (*karma-phala*) to worldly beings the Lord may be quite strict and business-like, but his

relations with his devotees are quite another matter. Striking a note of familiarity with him, Annamacharya playfully asserts that in such deals the devotees always have the upper hand.

You do not know the art,  
but we reap a rich harvest  
out of you, O Lord;  
surely your devotees are  
cleverer far than you.

With mere devotion we catch you  
and firmly hold you in our hearts;  
placing a basketful  
of Tulasi<sup>28</sup> leaves  
at your feet,  
we buy salvation  
from you, O Lord;  
your devotees, it is certain,  
are adepts in the art  
of striking rich bargains.

By bringing to you the products  
of your own creation,  
we manage to gain  
your boundless grace.  
By offering only a salutation,  
we transfer all our burdens  
to you, O Lord; .  
your servants indeed are  
well known for their cleverness.

Fetching a pail of water from the pond,<sup>29</sup>  
we sprinkle a handful on you,  
and get whatever boons we seek;  
your devotees excel in such arts,  
Sri Venkatesa,  
they certainly are  
cleverer far than you.

Easy accessibility (*saulabhya*) is one of the prominent attributes of Vishnu according to the Visishtadvaita school. Its chief exponent, Ramanuja, addresses him as a veritable ocean of motherly love towards



those who seek refuge in him (*asrita-vatsalyaika-mahodadhi*).<sup>30</sup> Turning this laudable characteristic into an apparent weakness, Annamacharya playfully suggests that his worshippers take full advantage of the fact that he can easily be pleased with simple acts of adoration, and reap rich harvests out of their devotion. What appears to be an exposure of a certain deficiency in cleverness on the part of the Lord actually turns out to be a handsome compliment to him for his gracious concern for the well-being of his devotees. This song serves thus as a fine example of the figure of speech *Vyaja-stuti*, mentioned in Indian poetics, which occurs when praise is expressed in the guise of fault-finding.

In another and rather unusual song in the same vein Annamacharya uses the framework of the Doctrine of Karma to sing the praises of the Lord through apparent criticism. According to that well-known law of cause and effect which is the bedrock of the Hindu faith, whatever befalls a person in the present life is the result of his deeds in the past, as his soul goes through successive states of existence, good deeds bringing happiness, and evil ones yielding sorrow and suffering. It thus maintains that a person's past actions determine his present and future experiences. The poet applies it to Sri Venkateswara himself, and plays on the belief in the inevitability of having to reap the consequences of one's past actions, to proclaim his divine splendour. The Lord, at whose will all the worlds and all beings that dwell in them come into existence, is, of course, beyond the operation of the Law of Karma, and Annamacharya was very well aware of it, but in a mood of friendly banter he makes fun of the divine master by twisting the signs of his glory into blemishes.

Who can escape the effects  
of his past?  
Even you have to suffer  
for your misdeeds,  
God though you are.

For the sin of binding  
creatures of the world  
with rugged familial ties,  
you are made to carry  
a lady on your bosom,  
God though you are.

Since you have caused beings  
to sink and rise  
in the sea of existence  
for no reason whatever,  
you are made to sleep  
on the waves of an ocean,  
though you are the first  
among the gods.

Since you have driven us  
without respite  
towards hills and ponds  
for our livelihood,  
you too have to dwell  
among hills  
without a murmur,  
and be hailed  
the Lord of the Pond.<sup>31</sup>

Sri Venkateswara is also popularly known as Srinivasa because his divine consort, Sri (Lakshmi), the goddess of prosperity and auspiciousness, constantly dwells with him, seated on his bosom, thus adding to his grandeur. His reclining on the serpent Sesha in the Ocean of Milk, likewise, is a revelation of his blissful state, a manifestation of his divine splendour. And his choice of the top of the hill Venkatadri for his stay on earth in *archa* form is also a sign of his power and glory as well as of his infinite compassion for those who seek shelter at his feet. The hill and the pond situated by the side of his shrine have been praised in glowing terms, on account of their inherent sacredness, from time immemorial by numerous poets, including Annamacharya himself. The beauty of the song lies in the poet's wanton playfulness, his deliberate misrepresentation of actual indications of the Lord's divine majesty as signs of his suffering in consequence of the misdeeds of the past. And the extent of freedom he enjoys in his dealings with the divine master is also clearly evident from it.

In one of his songs Annamacharya states that though many study the Vedas, few recognise Hari, and that mere study of scriptures does not bring solace to men. He adds that *sankirtanam* (singing the praises of the Lord) has appeared in the Kali age to facilitate the salvation of such people, and declares that these hymns constitute the fifth Veda, the Veda of Venkateswara. *Divyaprabandham*, the collection of Tamil hymns of

the Alvars, is regarded by the Vaishnavas as the Fifth Veda and also as Dravida Veda. Annamacharya's description of the hymns in praise of the Lord as the Veda of Venkateswara must be viewed against this background and it is a clear indication of the religious fervour which went into the making of his devotional songs.

He was one of those blessed souls who could clearly grasp the meaning and purpose of existence quite early in life, and pursue his objective with total dedication, unswayed by the pomp and show, the glitter and glare, of the world at large. He lived in the world, of course, and lived a full life, tasting both the sweetness and the bitterness that go with it, but without forgetting for a moment the truth that it is only a passing show, a theatrical performance. In one of his songs he compares the attractions of the world to the tinsel of the market-place and the dew drops of the night. He was convinced that absolute, unconditional surrender to Vishnu was the safest and easiest way to escape the human predicament. And he was moved by compassion at the miserable plight of fellow beings, felt an inner compulsion to share his blessedness with them, and so he composed thousands of songs in the hope that his words might serve as lamps to their feet and as lights to their path.

He realised that his message had to be carried alike to the king and the commoner, the scholar and the illiterate. So he chose every available form, from the well-knit classical strain to the loose, lilting folk-tune, and every mode, from luscious eroticism to rigid asceticism, at times plain didacticism, and at others subtle suggestion, to proclaim in ringing tones the burden of his appeal:

It is enough to seek shelter  
at the feet of Hari;  
he himself will  
take care of the rest.

Moreover, he assures the devotees of the Lord's grace both here and hereafter, and offers quite an interesting explanation for the assurance. Sri Venkateswara has two consorts – Sri Devi and Bhudevi. When he is taken out on festive occasions, the processional deity (*utsava-murti*) is flanked on either side by the images of the two goddesses. Since Sri Devi is the heavenly goddess Lakshmi, and Bhudevi is Mother Earth, Annamacharya draws the inference that the interests of the devotees are fully taken care of.

Sri Venkatesa,  
you move with two consorts,  
Sri Devi on one side,  
and Bhudevi on the other;  
what wonder then  
that we should prosper  
alike on earth  
and in heaven?

## 4

### *Precious Heritage*

It is folk-songs that first flourish in any literature, and, only then, stylised metrical compositions; the oral tradition invariably precedes the written works. The songs deal with every significant aspect of man's mundane life, and trace his eventful journey all the way from the cradle to the grave. Sometimes they describe the vicissitudes, not of an individual, but of the entire race. The simple lyrics may thus give poignant expression to the emotions stirred by "old, unhappy, far-off things, and battles long ago", or be concerned with "some natural sorrow, loss, or pain, that has been, and may be again". The strains are not always melancholic, of course. The joy occasioned by the birth of a child or a wedding ceremony may find expression in a lively ditty, and the victory won on a battlefield may provide the stimulus for a stirring ballad, overflowing with heroic sentiments and patriotic fervour.

Such, certainly, is the case with Telugu literature. Classical poetry, based on *marga* (Sanskritic) tradition, made its first appearance in Nannaya's *Mahabharatamu* in the eleventh century; but there is evidence to show that an indigenous (*desi*) tradition had already been in existence for sometime by then, consisting mainly of folk-songs on a wide variety of themes, employing simple rustic tunes. The two strains seem to have flourished side by side for a few centuries. While learned poets followed the *marga* tradition and chose metres and diction borrowed from Sanskrit to write elaborate narrative poems, the common folk continued to compose simple lyrics in the native idiom in the *desi* tradition. Palakuriki Somanadha, a Saiva poet of the thirteenth century, alludes to many such

songs in his poem *Panditaradhya-charitramu*. He uses the term *padamu* (song, lyric) to denote folk-songs and mentions several types, such as *tummeda padamulu* (songs addressed to the bee), *prabhata-padamulu* (songs associated with daybreak), *vennela padamulu* (moonlight songs), and *nivali padamulu* (songs sung during the *aratrika* ceremony, when lighted camphor is waved before the deity). Unfortunately the entire stock of those anonymous compositions is lost to posterity, because they were intended only for oral transmission, and none cared to commit them to writing.

So it was left to Annamacharya in the fifteenth century to give a well-defined form to the song (*padamu*) in Telugu, and to raise it to literary heights through his lofty thought and superb craftsmanship. It was on that account that his immediate successors conferred on him, quite appropriately, the title *Padakavita-pitamaha* ("Creator of lyric poetry"). He rendered yet another service to literature by providing the theory of composition of devotional songs in his Sanskrit treatise *Sankirtana-lakshanam*. The terms *padamu* and *sankirtana* appear to have been treated as synonyms by the Tallapaka poets.

According to ancient treatises on music a type of musical composition known as *prabandha* had been in vogue in Sanskrit for ages, with a number of structural and technical variations, based on *raga* (tune), *tala* (beat), *sabda* (word), *artha* (meaning) and *sandarbhya* (context), and they were the forerunners of the songs classified as *padamu*, *sankirtana*, and *kriti*. Annamacharya was quite familiar with those classical compositions, but wisely chose not to get entangled in the maze of their complicated patterns. Instead, he evolved a plain and simple framework for his *padamu*, based on indigenous tunes.

A Vaishnava poet named Krishnamacharyulu wrote a series of devotional compositions entitled *Simhagiri Narahari Vachanamulu* in Telugu towards the end of the thirteenth century and called them *sankirtanamulu* and *dhyana-sankirtanamulu*. They are rapturous addresses to Sri Nrisimha of Simhachalam, and though they were meant to be sung, they were couched only in musical prose and did not quite acquire the form of songs. It is for this reason that they are classified as *vachana-gitamulu* (songs in prose). Annamacharya was acquainted with them, but owed little to them in evolving the structure of his own devotional songs.

The form of his lyrics may have been shaped to some extent, however, by the hymns of the Dasa poets of Karnataka. The Haridasa movement started in that region towards the end of the fourteenth century, and the devotional songs of the poet-saints Narahari Tirtha and Sripada Raya were known to Annamacharya, and it is reasonable to suppose that they did in some measure influence both his choice of his vocation and the form of his songs.

The song (*padamu*) as devised by Annamacharya has two main units: *Pallavi* and *charanamu*. *Pallavi* is the opening statement in a line or two, expressing the central idea, and also serving as a refrain throughout the song, while *charanamu* is the subsequent verse, usually in the form of a quatrain, intended to support and at times illustrate, the main statement. In most songs several such verses are strung together to fortify the thesis stated at the outset. It may be noted that Annamacharya often presents three such verses in sequence in a song to lend support to the thought outlined in *pallavi*. Occasionally it so happens that the main idea cannot be compressed into one sentence, and in such a case a supplementary sentence is introduced between *pallavi* and the first *charanamu* (verse). This additional statement is called *anupallavi*. When it is introduced, the song expands into a three-part structure. Tyagaraja most often employed such a triadic mould for his hymns, whereas Annamacharya preferred the two unit form, introducing *anupallavi* only occasionally.

The two-unit framework, which is common to a great many of Annamacharya's lyrics, can best be understood by examining the structure of one of his spiritual compositions.

Your devotees are inundated with blessings;  
where can we find another God like you?

You wait forever with a raised palm<sup>32</sup>  
to offer protection to your loyal servants;  
you have spread everywhere your mystic name  
that washes the sins of the world away.

You bear the goddess Sri on your bosom,  
in order to dispense wealth to seekers;  
bent on purifying afflicted beings  
you make a river flow from your feet.

You have brought forth Brahma from your navel,  
 so that he may fill the world with creatures;  
 to keep a constant vigil on all sides  
 you stand on the top of the hill Venkatadri.

The first two lines constitute *pallavi*, the initial unit of the song. They are followed by three quatrains, and these verses together, called *charanamulu* in Telugu, form the second unit.

This song, addressed to Sri Venkateswara, is designed to extol his infinite grace. The countless blessings that are showered on his devotees establish his supremacy among deities, and this central idea finds emphatic expression in *pallavi*. The verses that follow it are intended to elaborate and illustrate the Lord's grace by making references to a few specific instances of his benign concern for the devotees. It may be observed that each verse can be further subdivided into two parts: each part, consisting of two lines, enumerates a proof of his grace. Thus there appear six illustrations to buttress the main thesis: (1) he is always in a state of readiness to protect those that have surrendered themselves to him, and this concern is indicated by his raised palm which serves as a sign of reassurance; (2) he himself ensures the spread of his sanctifying *nama* (name) and *mantra* (mystic formula) everywhere, with a view to freeing the afflicted beings of the world from sins and thus relieving them of suffering; (3) he constantly carries Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity and auspiciousness, on his bosom so that he will always be in a position to grant the boon of affluence to his seekers; (4) he lets the most sacred river Ganga, whose waters wash away the accumulated sins of bathers in all the three worlds, rise from his feet so that they may get purified and thus escape the consequences of their past misdeeds; (5) as a part of his *leela* he has created Brahma, who, in turn, acts as the Creator of all beings, and thus fills the worlds with creatures to promote his sport;<sup>33</sup> and (6) he stands on the top of a hill so that he may watch in all directions and thereby ensure the welfare of his devotees. Thus the three verses, constituting the second unit of the song, produce a cumulative effect and fully amplify the initial observation that Vishnu is the most gracious of all deities, and that his devotees therefore find themselves in a state of perpetual blessedness. Etymologically the word *kirtanam* means "singing praises", and it is evident that for performing the task quite effectively Annamacharya's songs richly deserve the label. And it is also for this reason that his contemporaries conferred on him the felicitous title *Harikirtanacharya* ("Master of the art of singing the praises of Vishnu").



In an age in which fame and wealth were reserved only for those authors who chose to write in the *marga* tradition and bring out translations or adaptations of Sanskrit classics, and in which popular songs and lyrics were treated with unconcealed contempt by scholars and critics, Annamacharya remained a composer of devotional songs in colloquial style and in the *desi* tradition, only because he could not conceive of a greater honour or blessing than being a *Harikirtanacharya*. It is, nevertheless, a sad reflection on the lack of taste and discrimination on the part of the scholars of the day who ignored the literary claims of the song. The reflections of a British Civil Servant, A. Galletti, on the subject clearly bring out this fact. In his essay on "*Gramyam and Grammar*" he observes: "Among other peoples and in other eras the great ages of literature have begun with song. The Andhra nation sings naturally, constantly, melodiously. ... But Telugu literature has ignored and despised Telugu song; it has imported an alien prosody, in which the language moves unceasingly, as though constricted by borrowed garments."

The unusual prestige attached to Sanskrit studies in the Andhra region in those days and the consequent dominance of the Sanskrit element and literary traditions in early Telugu literature seem to have been responsible for the prevalence of such an attitude towards the song among scholars, who considered it suitable only for the entertainment of women and rural folk, and dismissed it as unworthy of their notice. And this scholarly haughtiness seems to have been a feature peculiar to Telugu. It is clear that a place of honour was readily accorded to lyricists in other languages. The *pasurams* of the Alvars and the Nayanmars in Tamil, the hymns of the Dasa poets in Kannada, the *abhangas* of the poet-saints in Marathi, the *padavali* of the Vaishnava minstrels in Bengali, and the numerous devotional compositions of poet-mystics in Hindi, for instance, have always been treasured for their literary value.

It is true that the songs of two major Telugu composers, Kshetrayya and Tyagaraja, did receive some recognition in the past, but this was based on purely extraneous considerations. Kshetrayya's *Muvva-Gopala-padamulu* owe their popularity to the fact that they are eminently suitable for *abhinaya* (interpretation through gestures) in dance recitals; and the *kritis* of Tyagaraja have received recognition not so much for their literary merit, immense though it is, as for their musical qualities which make them the first choice of Karnataka musicians when participating in concerts. In him we find a poet-saint who deemed Rama his sole master and spent a life-time offering him adoration, pouring out

his feelings in song after exquisite song, now praising him, now making fun of him, blaming him for neglect on occasion, and sending forth a cry of agony for his divine intervention at times, in fact, running the whole gamut of human emotions in his dealings with him, and it is regrettable that he is yet to receive adequate recognition for his poetic achievement, apart from his invaluable contribution to South Indian classical music.

Among Annamacharya's contemporaries who chose to tread the *marga* tradition and thus found a place for themselves in the annals of literature Bammera Potana comes close to him in thought and spirit. Religious fervour, an irrepressible zeal to propagate devotion to Vishnu on the slightest pretext, and a tendency to ignore the rigid code of conventional grammar for the sake of melliflence, are characteristics common to both. Potana attempted a free rendering of the *Bhagavata Purana* into Telugu verse, and his *Maha-bhagavatamu* has always enjoyed immense popularity among Telugu readers on account of his intense devotion, superb narration, felicity of phrasing, and the sustained melody of his verse. And yet he too had to suffer critical neglect at the hands of scholars, especially grammarians, for ages, for his non-conformity to the norms of prescriptive grammar. Little wonder, then, that a popular poet like Annamacharya, whose songs make no claim to sophistication of any kind or conformity to classical restraints, should have been subjected to their icy scorn and total neglect.

Consequently he had to wait for over three hundred years to receive critical attention, and during that long stretch time had conspired with chance to hide all knowledge of the very existence of carefully etched copies of his songs on copperplates in the precincts of the Tirupati temple. A few of those plates lay hidden in Ahobalam, and some, it appears, in Srirangam. Even palm-leaf transcripts of his songs were in existence in the Thanjavur region during those days. In spite of the fact that copies of his hymns thus remained scattered over such a wide region, no reference to them is to be found in the literary records of the last three centuries, and it was left to scholars in the present century to unearth the treasure and estimate its worth.

There is enough evidence in the surviving writings of Annamacharya to show that he had received sound instruction in Sanskrit classics and poetics from his father and other teachers in his boyhood. He was acquainted with Jayadeva's *Gita-Govinda* and had composed quite a few songs in Sanskrit, besides writing a treatise in that language on the

structure of devotional songs, entitled *Sankirtana-lakshanam*. It appears that he had written twelve *satakas* (poems of a hundred verses) in Telugu, obviously in Sanskrit metres, though only one of them has survived the ravages of time. He also seems to have rendered Valmiki's *Ramayana* into Telugu in *dvipada* metre (couplet). Though the work is lost, another narrative poem of his, written in the same metre, *Sringara-manjari*, has been traced and published. In view of these facts it is reasonable to assume that Annamacharya could easily have written long, narrative poems in the classical vein and thereby gained respectability in contemporary literary community, if he so desired. His decision to follow the indigenous (*desi*) tradition, instead, and compose popular songs is a measure of his ardent devotion to Sri Venkateswara and compassion towards his fellow beings. He had a message of hope to communicate, there was some urgency about putting it across to the tortured beings entangled in a life of worldliness, and he wisely chose the song as his medium for the purpose. Thus he became, in a sense, the progenitor of lyric poetry in Telugu. He became the pioneer in this field and showed the way to Kshetrayya and Tyagaraja. They undoubtedly benefited from his guidance and wrote exquisite lyrics, though it must be pointed out that their range was limited in comparison with his. His devotion was an amalgam of many ingredients: knowledge (*jnana*), a sense of detachment (*vairagya*), a feeling of close friendship, a touch of maternal love, the attitude of a servant (*dasa*), and a blend of eroticism and spirituality. It is hard to come across such a variety of relationships between a devotee and the Lord elsewhere.

In his eagerness to propagate devotion and absolute surrender to Vishnu he employed every known folk-art form, and the range and richness of his collection have added greatly to our knowledge of the folk-songs in vogue in the fifteenth century. Several complimentary references to the *desi* musical tradition of the Telugu people are to be found in ancient treatises like *Brihaddesi*, *Sangita-chudamani*, and *Abhilashitartha-chintamani*, and even the structures of some types of songs are defined in them. The works of the Saiva poets of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries like Nannechoda and Palakuriki Somanadha have shed some more light on them. The publication of Annamacharya's songs now enables scholars to correlate the theory with practice and classify them into groups on the basis of their themes and forms. His songs based on folk-art forms include *jola-patalu* (lullabies), *Sobhanalu* (wedding songs), *dhavalamulu* (songs of benediction in weddings), *suvi patalu* (songs sung while pounding rice), *samvada-padamulu* (duets), and *dobuchi padamulu* (songs sung while caressing babies).

As Annamacharya's service to literature was immense, so was his contribution to the Telugu language quite extensive. His vocabulary is so vast and replete with so many terms which have now become obsolete that lexicographers are still labouring to determine the meanings of several words that occur only in his works. Even in the case of the words and phrases that also appear elsewhere in the writings of his age, his usage often serves as a clue to them in arriving at their precise meaning. His songs abound in scores of felicitous phrases which have entered the common stock of everyday speech, besides idiomatic expressions, wise saws and popular proverbs, picturesque images, startling similes, and daring metaphors, blending to add a fresh flavour to his style. In any reckoning of the Makers of the Telugu language Annamacharya's name is bound to occupy a prominent position.

The charm of his similes lies in the fact that they are drawn from everyday life, and not treatises on poetics. They carry the odours of rain-drenched fields, freshly cut grass, wild flowers, burning logs in the sacrificial fire, and the melting butter in the cottager's kitchen, all familiar sights in the Andhra countryside in bygone days. The following song clearly indicates his happy choice of comparisons from the world around him.

Where was my knowledge,  
and where my wisdom?  
My time is wasted  
like the oblation  
poured  
into a heap of ashes.

Prompted by desires,  
I pursued  
this course and that  
in the vain hope  
of gaining profits.  
My time is lost  
like the deer  
that disappeared  
into a bush.

In the foolish belief  
that my suffering would end

I bore the heat  
of endless woes.  
My time has melted away  
like butter  
by the side  
of the kitchen fire.

In the pursuit  
of happiness,  
I wandered in vain  
from place to place,  
without perceiving  
the Lord of Venkatadri.  
My time has turned  
into an imaginary tale.

The poet's regret that his time has not been spent wisely is expressed in the song with the aid of four similes: (1) In the performance of a *yajna* (ritualistic sacrifice) clarified butter (*ghrita*) is poured into the sacrificial fire as oblation to secure the desired end. Pouring it into a heap of ashes, instead, is a sheer waste. The simile underscores the fact that his time was spent in futile acts. (2) If the hunter loses track of the deer he has been pursuing, he has to return home in vain. When the deer is allowed to give him the slip and hide in a bush, the hunter's time is wasted literally in a vain pursuit. (3) If butter is kept close to fire, it melts, and thus loses its original form, and the process is automatic. The poet's time also has melted away, though such was not his intention. (4) An imaginary tale is an imaginary tale, and none gives any credence to it. The only Reality in this world of shadows is Sri Venkateswara. The time spent in trying to perceive him alone is the time wisely spent. Seeking happiness elsewhere is as much a mistake as taking fiction for fact.

Enough has been said to establish the fact that as a literary artist Annamacharya occupies a position of eminence in the world of letters. So there is no need to gloss over his deficiencies. Perfection, after all, is an attribute of God, and all human endeavours are characterised by some degree of imperfection. His works are no exception.

Quality does not always keep pace with quantity, and when one's output is so extensive, it is inevitable that it should be marked by unevenness. Repetitiousness is another unavoidable shortcoming in the case of a writer like Annamacharya whose literary exercises covered such

a long span of time and resulted in the composition of thousands of songs. When two or three of his songs deal with the same sentiment and employ almost identical arguments and illustrations, one of them, naturally, shines like a bright gem, and the others look rather dim in its presence like uncut diamonds.

His songs were written for the ear and not the eye. To achieve certain musical effects, he was obliged to resort to assonance, alliteration, rhyme, and rhythm at certain fixed points in the framework of his songs, and thus compelled to choose some words for their sound and not sense. The presence of such superfluous words naturally lessens the effectiveness of the passage. This, however, is not a widespread feature of his work; when stirred by a blissful sight or profound sentiment, he produces lyrics of exquisite beauty and perfect craftsmanship, where every word fits into its context like a precious gem in a well-wrought ornament.

Exuberance, rather than restraint, was a common characteristic of the literature of his age, and his work also is not wholly free from thoughts and expressions which would have gained in intensity and elegance, if only they were tempered by a certain amount of introspection.

All these, however, are minor flaws, and they do not diminish Annamacharya's achievement as a hymnographer of a high order; to invoke the celebrated simile of Kalidasa,<sup>34</sup> they are like the dark spot in the moon, which does not in any way lessen the brightness of the heavenly luminary.

Any estimate of the rich legacy left by Annamacharya to literature and culture must make at least a passing reference to his pioneering role in shaping South Indian classical music, which is known as Karnataka ("that which delights the ear") music. Though *raga* (tune) is the basis of all Indian music, the composition (*kriti*) has gained greater importance than *alapa* (elaboration of *raga*) in Karnataka music. The two, *raga* and *kriti*, of course, are inseparable, and there is only a shift in emphasis in the Southern school, resulting in the abridgement of *alapa* and elaboration of the composition. Such texts have always been important in the evolution of music, and the works of composer-saints have played a prominent part in accelerating the process. The first among them in point of time was Annamacharya. Musicologists readily concede that his devotional songs and the treatise on their structure, *Sankirtana - lakshanam* paved the way for the emergence of Karnataka music.<sup>35</sup> His

younger contemporary, Purandaradasa, perfected it, and is therefore, deemed its progenitor on account of the extensiveness of his contribution. The greatest figure in the field was Tyagaraja, who owed much to his distinguished predecessors Annamacharya and Purandaradasa, in evolving the structure of his compositions and perfecting the system of music. What is equally important, he learnt from them the great truth that music is an effective means to the attainment of the Godhead. In one of his well-known songs he asks, "O mind, is there a better path than music and devotion?"

An attempt has so far been made to present the many facets of Annamacharya's achievement in the field of arts; it now remains to stress the importance of the greatest service he rendered to his fellow men by ceaselessly propagating the gospel of universal brotherhood, on the basis of the sublime revelation that God is one, though men call him by many names.

It is true that Annamacharya visualised God in the form of Sri Venkateswara, one of the most charming manifestations of Vishnu, and constantly propagated the Vaishnava doctrine of *prapatti*; but, then, he never for a moment thought of Vishnu as a sectarian deity, concerned with the well-being of only a narrow section of humanity which claims to profess Vaishnavism. His Vishnu is the Supreme Spirit, the Heavenly Father of all beings.

The very word "Vishnu" means "he that pervades". It is derived from the root "*vis*" which means both "to pervade" and "to enter". Hence "Vishnu" means "the all-pervading", "one who is not limited by space, time, and substance." According to *Vishnu Purana*<sup>36</sup> "he is named Vishnu because the whole world is pervaded by the energy of the great Self." And Krishna tells Arjuna in the *Mahabharata*,<sup>37</sup> "As I pervade the horizons, my glory stands foremost, and as I measured [the three worlds] with my steps, I am called Vishnu." Vishnu, thus, has always been regarded as the Supreme Spirit, Eternal Brahman, with form, and Annamacharya always looks on him as the Divine Father, Eternal Friend, and the Sole Refuge of all beings.

In one of his songs he visualises him as the embodiment of the gods and goddesses of numerous sects and thus stresses his universality.

Whatever one thinks of you,  
that you become, O Lord,  
it is obvious that  
the size of the pancake  
depends on the quantity  
of available flour.

The Vaishnavas lovingly  
adore you as Vishnu;  
while those who profess Vedanta  
hail you Parabrahman;  
Devout Saivites look on you  
as the god Siva;  
and the Kapalikas sing your praises  
as Adi Bhairava.

The Saktas worship you  
as the goddess Sakti;  
and the *darsanas* visualise you  
in countless ways.  
To those that show little regard,  
you look small;  
and to those that think nobly of you,  
you appear lofty.

The weakness does not lie  
with you;  
you are like a lotus  
in the pond  
that rises and falls  
with the level of the water.  
The waters  
of the river Ganga alone  
are to be found  
in all the wells  
by the riverside.

You hold us  
under your sway,  
O Lord of Venkatadri,  
I surrender myself  
to you,  
and this to me is  
the Ultimate Reality.



Absolutely untenable claims are sometimes made, on quite flimsy grounds, by men with little knowledge but excessive sectarian bigotry, to the effect that Sri Venkateswara is either Siva, or Sakti, or Kartikeya, in spite of the fact that he was positively identified as Vishnu as early as in the second century by Ilango Adigal in his celebrated epic *Silappadikaram*, and that it was confirmed by the testimony of one Alvar after another over the ages. References to the presence of certain marks and symbols of other deities in the iconic form of the Lord are found even in a few hymns of the Alvars themselves, though they never for a moment doubted the fact that he is Vishnu. Annamacharya's song too is intended to establish the oneness of God and the essential identity of the names and forms of the various manifestations of the Supreme Spirit.

This truth was well brought out ages ago by the sage Vyasa in his *Mahabharata* when in the great hymn *Vishnu-sahasranama-stotram* in the Anusasana parva of the epic, which is intended to proclaim the numerous attributes of Vishnu, he incorporated several names of other deities such as *Sarva, Siva, Sthanu, Sambhu, Rudra, Skanda, Aditya, and Bhanu*. Sankara's commentary on it "emphasises that the object of adoration of this hymn is that Supreme Deity, the Light that lights up all existences, the Inner Ruler Immortal, the Author of the creation, preservation and destruction of the worlds and the Redeemer who terminates the bondage of *karma* by imparting the saving knowledge."<sup>38</sup>

Annamacharya's view of a true Vaishnava is quite consistent with his cosmic concept of Vishnu. A worthy inheritor of the glorious tradition of the Alvars and the Acharyas, he transcends the narrow limitations of caste and status in asserting that only he is a Vaishnava who is a true devotee. Quite a few of his songs deal with this theme. In one of them he observes that caste distinctions are confined only to the physical body and that the soul is ever pure. Entertaining such differences is a sheer waste of time, and it is difficult to determine the caste of persons like Ajamila, who was born a Brahmin, lived with a woman of a low caste, and was finally redeemed by Vishnu. Only he may be said to belong to a "good caste" (*sujati*) who recognises the importance of service to Vishnu.

In another song he declares that it is not the accident of birth but the cultivation of character that makes one a true devotee.<sup>39</sup>

Whoever he be, of whatever caste,  
only he counts who sees Hari.

He who is devoted to truth,  
and shuns criticism of others,  
filled with compassion for all beings,  
he treats his neighbours as himself.

Pure at heart, full of self-restraint,  
he holds fast to righteousness;  
free from the tangle of rites and rituals,  
he is ever mindful of devotion to Hari.

He lives among others with good will,  
untouched by a sense of hostility;  
he knows the true nature of the Self,  
and willingly serves Sri Venkatesa.

Vaishnavism has always promoted a liberal outlook on the question of caste, and insisted that what really matters is not the accident of one's birth in a particular caste but the intensity of one's devotion to the feet of the gracious Hari. The Alvars belonged to various castes, and at least one of them, Tiruppanalvar, was born of the so-called untouchable *panchama* parents. A story featuring that venerable mystic clearly brings out the superiority of devotion over caste in the Vaishnava tradition. In deference to the traditional belief that the proximity of a member of his caste would pollute the Brahmins, he always kept himself at a distance when bathing in the river Kaveri at Srirangam. And yet by accident he once happened to cross the path of Lokasaranga Muni, a servant of Sri Ranganadha. Wild with anger at the outrage, the Brahmin hurled stones at him, and after 'purifying' himself by another dip in the river he went to the temple with a vessel filled with water for ritualistic worship. But the Lord would not allow the proud Brahmin to enter the shrine, insisting that he should first undergo punishment for the grievous sin of stoning a revered saint. So the Brahmin, Lokasaranga Muni, had to carry on his shoulders the 'untouchable' Tiruppanalvar, in spite of his protests, and circumambulate the shrine to expiate his sin.

Again, the greatest preceptor of the Visishtadvaita sect, Ramanuja, was once so deeply moved by compassion at the miserable plight of his fellow men that he climbed the pinnacle of the Vishnu temple at Tirukkottiyur (Goshipuram) near Srirangam and openly taught the sacred *ashtakshari mantra* ("Om Namō Narayana") to all the people that gathered there, irrespective of their caste or condition, so that they might be freed from the stifling bondage of worldly existence.

Annamacharya's songs are characterised by this breadth of vision, and proclaim in ringing tones the profound truth that God's grace is available to all.

God is one, he is one  
he is one, he is one.

There is no room here  
for distinctions  
of high and low;  
Hari is the indweller  
of all beings.  
Creatures are all alike here.  
Hari is the indweller  
of all beings.

The solace of slumber is  
the same to the king,  
and to his guard  
who rests close by.  
same is the high land  
where the Brahmin dwells,  
and the low land  
where lives the untouchable.

Carnal pleasure is the same  
to all creatures,  
celestial beings, insects, brutes.  
Day and night are the same  
to the rich and the poor.

Hunger is the same to one  
who eats mild, tasty food,  
and to the one who consumes  
stale, unclean stuff.  
It is the same wind that blows  
over dirty, stinking spots,  
and clean, fragrant objects.

The same sun shines  
on the elephant and the cur.  
The mighty name of Sri Venkatesa  
is equally powerful  
to save the sinner and the righteous.

In a world in which man is separated from his fellow men by the narrow domestic walls of religious fanaticism, doctrinal incompatibility, sectarian bigotry, and mutual suspicion, it is not often that one comes across such a profession of unity, harmony, and understanding. If the Heavenly Father of all beings, irrespective of the outward distinctions of country and language, race and religion, and caste and creed, is one without a second, his grace surely is available to everyone who seeks it, whatever his spiritual affiliation, or mode of worship.

This attitude is in complete harmony with the sentiment expressed in a popular verse: "Just as the water that falls from the sky (rain-water) invariably flows into the sea, so do the salutations offered to all deities reach Kesava (Vishnu)." This is precisely what Krishna means when he tells Arjuna, "Even those devotees who worship with full faith other gods, worship me alone."<sup>40</sup>

Annamacharya captures this catholicity of outlook in the realm of the spirit when he declares in a song his conviction that everyone in the world is a Vaishnava, knowingly or otherwise.

There is none in the world  
who is not a Vaishnava,  
since the entire universe  
is charged with Vishnu's power.

When Vishnu pervades every object,  
why make distinctions among gods?  
Whatever be the form one conceives,  
one is bound to be sanctified.

It matters little whom one worships,  
and on whom one meditates;  
it is enough if one grasps the truth  
that there is none that is not  
a manifestation of Hari.

Impelled by the wavering mind,  
some may worship other forms;  
Even so, the Lord of the forlorn,  
the great Lord of holy Venkatadri,  
is bound to extend his gracious hand  
to all beings without distinction.

Annamacharya thus employs the term "Vishnu", not in a narrow sectarian sense, but to connote the Supreme Reality, the Lord of the Universe, who is the Divine Father of all beings. As his children, we are bound by natural bonds of kinship, and belong to one universal family. There is room here, not for hatred and suspicion, but only for understanding and love. This timeless, but ever timely, message, perhaps is the most precious legacy left to his fellow men by this venerable minstrel of God.

## NOTES

1. I.22.20. For an explication of the verse see A.K.Majumdar, *Caitanya, His Life and Doctrine, a Study in Vaisnavism* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1969), pp. 2 - 4.
2. I. 15.3.
3. Diana L.Eck, *Darsan, Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Chambersburg, PA:Anima Publications, 1985), p. 45.
4. John.B.Carman, *The Theology of Ramanuja, an Essay in Inter-religious Understanding* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 244 - 48.
5. In his final instruction to Arjuna towards the end of the *Bhagavad-gita* Krishna tells him, "Giving up dependence on all human efforts at moral and spiritual elevation, seek refuge in me alone. Do not grieve, for I will deliver you from all sins" (XVIII: 66). Followers of the Visishtadvaita sect refer to this verse as *charama sloka* and regard it as a *mantra* (mystic formula for constant meditation), along with *Ashtakshari* and *Dvayam*.
6. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York: E.P.Dutton, 1911), p.425.
7. P.N.Srinivasachari, "The Visishtadvaita of Ramanuja" in *The Cultural Heritage of India* (Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission, 1983), III, 300.
8. The first verse of Vedanta Desika's *Daya Satakam*.
9. Kulasekhara Alvar expresses his aversion to sensual pleasures with even the courtesans of Paradise (*svarga*) in yet another context in his celebrated *Mukundamala* ("A Garland to Vishnu") in Sanskrit:

I offer adoration  
to your feet,  
O Lord,  
not in order to transcend  
the woes of duality,  
or to escape  
the tortures of hell,  
or to enjoy sports of love  
with the graceful courtesans  
of celestial regions;

I seek  
only to keep you enshrined  
in my heart  
in life after life.

10. A.K. Ramanujan, *Hymns for the Drowning - Poems for Vishnu by Nammalvar* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), p.124.
11. Among the innumerable weapons of Vishnu five are considered the most important: Sudarsana *chakra* (discus), Panchajanya *sankha* (conch), Kaumodaki *gada* (mace), Nandaka *khadga* (sword), and Sarnga *dhanu* (bow).
12. A similar story is told about the poet-saint Tyagaraja. It appears that when he entered the temple during his pilgrimage to Tirupati he could not see the deity because a curtain obstructed the view of the sanctum sanctorum. Then he sang the well-known song *Tera tiyaga rada* ("Why don't you remove the curtain of malice from me, O Venkataramana") and at once it slid off, affording him a glorious view of the Lord, and prompting him to burst into another song, *Venkatesa ninu sevimpanu* ("One needs a myriad eyes to enjoy your beauty, O Venkatesa").
13. The five sacraments of the Visistadvaita sect are (1) *tapa*, branding the shoulders of the initiate with the figures of *chakra* and *sankha*, (2) *pundra*, wearing the Vaishnava sectarian mark on one's forehead, (3) *nama*, assuming a name suggestive of one's new position as a *dasa* (servant) of Vishnu, (4) *mantra*, formal initiation into the chanting of *Ashtakshari* and the ancillary *mantras*, and (5) *yaga*, the rite of surrender (*saranagati*), usually performed by the preceptor on behalf of the disciple.
14. Tirumalisai Alvar, who was once unceremoniously ordered to leave Kanchipuram along with his disciple Kanikannan, when the latter refused to eulogise the king of the city, expresses the same sentiment in the statement,
 

I will not sing  
the praises of men  
with my tongue,

 in the eleventh verse of his *Nanmugan Tiruvandadi*.
15. Tyagaraja too had a similar experience. He once lost the consecrated image of his household deity, Sri Rama. It appears, it

was thrown into the river Kaveri by his elder brother in order to spite him, but it was miraculously restored to him after some time. The agony he suffered during the period of separation finds poignant expression in a few songs of his, such as *Endu daginado* ("Where is he hiding?") and *Nenendu vedakudura* ("where shall I search, O Lord").

16. The world as a theatrical stage and life as a dramatic performance are, of course, ideas shared by many cultures, but it may be of interest to know that the term "Ranganadha", by which Vishnu is known in the Srirangam shrine, may be interpreted as "The Lord of the Universal Stage".
17. The *Bhagavad-Gita*, X: 22.
18. VII. 5. 23.
19. XII. 3. 51.
20. See G.N.Reddy's Introduction to Tallapaka Peda Tirumalacharya's Telugu translation of *Sri Bhagavadgita* (Tirupati: Sri. Venkateswara University Oriental Research Institute, 1978), p. XXVIII.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. XXVIII - XXIX.
22. *Ibid.*, p.VI.
23. *The Foundations of Indian Culture* (Pondicherry: Sri. Aurobindo Ashram, 1980), p. 317.
24. See his Introduction to Rupa Goswamin's *Padyavali* (Dacca: University of Dacca, 1934).
25. There is a specific reference to Jayadeva's *Gita-Govinda* in Annamacharya's *Sankirtana-lakshanam*, which was translated from Sanskrit into Telugu by his grandson, China Tirumalacharya.
26. Vishnu is described as the lotus-eyed (*Pundarikaksha*) because his eyes are wide, long, and graceful like the petals of that flower; and the lotus is one of the five flowers used as his darts by Manmatha, the Hindu God of Love.
27. Saree (sari) is a length of cotton or silk cloth draped round the body, worn as the main garment by Indian women.
28. Tulasi, sacred basil (*Ocimum sanctum*), is an aromatic herb, considered holy on account of its association with Vishnu in Hindu mythology, and its leaves are used in ritualistic worship.



29. A somewhat similar thought occurs in a well-known Kannada hymn by the poet-saint Purandaradasa.

Look like devotees  
 who have received boons  
 by only pouring  
 waters of the lake  
 into the lake itself;  
 Live in joy  
 by offering the riches  
 earned through Hari's grace  
 to Hari himself.

Spend your days  
 gazing at  
 the lotus-like feet  
 of Sri Purandara Vithala Raya.  
 Live in joy  
 by offering the riches  
 earned through Hari's grace  
 to Hari himself.

Vithala Raya is the name of the *archa* form of Vishnu in the famous shrine at Pandharpur in Maharashtra state.

30. In *Sriranga-gadya*.
31. The pond attached to Sri. Venkateswara's shrine, called Swami Pushkarini, is celebrated for its power to purify bathers of all sins. Devotees sometimes address the Lord by the Telugu expression "Konetu Raya", which means "Lord of the Pond". The phrase "Kondala Raya" means "Lord of the Hills". These two terms appear quite frequently in the compositions of Annamacharya.
32. The gesture of the raised palm is known as *abhaya-hasta*, intended to assure the devotee that he need have no fear, as the Lord is ready to protect him. The lower right arm of Sri Venkateswara is in the *varada* (boon-giving), and not *abhaya*, gesture. From this and the references to the river Ganga and Brahma it is evident that Annamacharya is speaking of Vishnu and not the iconic form of Sri. Venkateswara.
33. In the *mangala-sloka* (invocatory verse) to *Sri-Bhashya*, his celebrated commentary on *Brahma-sutras*, Ramanuja states that

creation, protection, and destruction of all the worlds are the *leela* (sport) of Srinivasa.

34. *Kumara-sambhavam*, I: 3.
35. V. Raghavan, *Tyagaraja* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1983), p.16.
36. 3. 1. 45.
37. *Santi Parva*, 328. 37.
38. N. Raghunathan in his Foreword to *Sri Vishnusahasranama Stotram* (Bombay : Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1978), p. XIV.
39. The sentiments expressed in the song merit comparison with those of the Gujarati poet-saint Narsimha Mehta's in his famous hymn *Vaishnavu jana to tene kahiye jo peera paraaya jaanere*.
40. The *Bhagavad-gita*, IX: 23.

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