

"THE THENNACHARYAS"

A clarification, with particular reference to

Sri Vedanta Desika, currently solicited by some
North Indian Scholars.)

Speaking about the traditional school of philosophic thought, the 'Thenkalai Srivaishnavites' are being loosely referred to as 'Thennacharyas' or 'Thennacharya Sampradayeas'. There is, however, no *per contra* denomination as 'Vadavacharyas', although the terms 'Thenkalai' and 'Vadakalai' are in vogue. As could be seen from the line 'Vadakalai, Thenkalai, vadugug kannadam' in the opening section of 'Kamba Ramayan', these four words refer to the four languages (viz.) Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu and Kannada respectively. It would appear that those Vaishnavites who extend special patronage to Sanskrit go under the name and style of 'Vadakalais' while those who similarly bestow loving care on Tamil, in an extraordinary degree, are known as 'Thenkalais'. None can, however, throw a leguete light on the point of time at which these appellations came into being - the mystery of the names of the two languages being applied to their patrons as well. The beauty, rather, the pity of it is that the expressions 'Thenkalai' and 'Vadakalai' have not occurred in any of the works of the 'Poorvacharyas'. But these words have invaded, with a vengeance, the records of the law Courts during the last hundred years and woven a huge volume of forensic literature around them. Again, these two words, associated, rather indentedified with the particular contours of the caste mark worn by the two sections of Vaishnavites on their foreheads, leave one guessing, in vain, their etymological bearing or kinship. To the mere strickler in words, this might sound strange, if not preposterous, and yet, through sheer usage, it has become too fundamental to be questioned. Leaving it aside, for the present, it would indeed be profitable to examine what exactly 'Thennacharya Sampradayam' connotes and who, in this context, are known as 'Thennacharyas'. Sri P. B. A. Swami, more knowledgeable and painstaking than whom none is available in our midst, has thrown aadequate light on this, from time to time, and has once more focussed the attention of his numerous readers on this, in the 97th discourse of his "Upanyasa Satadvayam", reinforced, in greater depth, in "Vaidhika Manohara-163" just published.

The expression 'Thennacharya' is not to be confounded as referring to any of the current - day Vaishnavites or the 'Thenkalais'. As a matter of fact, it refers mainly to the 'Poorvacharyas' - the ancient preceptors such

as Nathamunigal, Alavandar and other Srivaishnava Acharyas. While approaching the Ashram of sage Agastya, Sri Rama spoke to Lakshman, as follows:—

“Dakshina dikkrita yena saranya punyakarmana”. (தகஷிண திக் க்ருதர சூத்ர சரணய புண்பகர்மண). Again, in ‘Perumal Thirumozhi’ Sri Kulasekhara Azhvar has reverently alluded to Agastya, the great progenitor of the Tamil language as ‘Vandamizh Mamuni’ while Vedanta Desika has said in glowing terms in his Dramidopanishad Tatparya Ratnavali, that the Tamil language which beamed forth from Agastya came to be acquired and handled by the Great Saints. All the Sri Vaishnava Acharyas, who drank deep of the nectarine hymns of the Azhvars would thus be eligible to be dignified as ‘Thennacharyas’, as contra—distinguished from the Smarthas and Madhvas, who were not conversant with the Divya Prabandhams. So then, there need be no doubt lingering in anybody’s mind whether Sri Vedanta Desika, who shone in the Vaishnavite firmament 600 years ago, in all splendour, came under a different section or group outside the ken and compass of the glorious galaxy of the ‘Thennacharyas’.

That Sri Vedanta Desika was as much a ‘Thennacharya’ as any other contemporaneous Vaishnava Acharya is amply borne out by the fact that apart from his own extra-ordinary devotion to the Divya Prabandham, he has been enshrined and worshipped in the temples, at several pilgrim centres having the Thennacharyas as their age-long votaries. The pundram (caste-mark) worn on the relative idol in all such temples including the one in the temple at his birthplace is the same as the one worn by the ‘Thennacharyas’ (viz) ‘Thenkalai’.

Unbridled malignance, on the part of a few, here and there, manifesting in vandalistic designs on the temple at the birthplace of Sri Desika, at Srirangam and elsewhere, aimed at changing the caste-mark on Desika’s idol as well as the temple walls, was sternly dealt with under the law, as it should be. The suppressed desires and unrealised ambitions, goaded on by the injured pride of the misadventurers, however, led to their setting up during the last 100 years and even less separate shrines for Vedanta Desika with ‘Vadakalai’ caste-mark in private dwellings, estates etc., outside the precincts of the ancient temples, where, in the eyes of the law, such an act would be sacrilege.

It may be mentioned, in this connection, that Thirukachi Nambigal, even though of Non-Brahmin origin, is worshipped in Sri Vaishnavite temples on a par with other Poorva Acharyas. Some of his shrines are also in the management and full control of Saivites who trace their origin to Thirukachi Nambigal. But they have not taken it into their heads to convert the idols of

Thirukachi Nambigal according to their own creed, with Vibuthi (holyash), etc. smeared on the forehead, but have seen to his worship according to his Vaishnavite creed itself. How noble would it be if the Vadakalais emulate the same example in the case of Sri Vedanta Desika also.

That (1) Sri Vedanta Desika lived in great amity with the contemporaneous Acharyas and made the fullest use of the knowledge imparted through the works of the seniors, like Nanjeeyar, Periaavachanpillai etc., (2) the tenets being studiously singled out by a section of the Vaishnavites as stamping out their separate identity, were not actually subscribed to by Vedanta Desika and (3) the only authentic life-history of Vedanta Desika is the 'Acharya-Champu', all others being garbled versions, spurious interpolations etc., maliciously engineered by a few innovators, have been succinctly brought out by Sri P. B. A. Swami in his numerous works during the last forty, odd years. He would still not be tired of presenting these facts over and over again until the desired objective, viz., reconsolidation of the rank and file of Vaishnavites under the common aegis of 'Sri Ramanuja Darsanam', is achieved. Those who might be in a vein to dub this as an utopian dream will do well to realise that all that is needed is the dawn of the requisite measure of intellectual honesty which would help tear off all ill-conceived notions and prejudices and see things in their proper perspective, with the aid of the many solvents dispensed by P. B. A. Swamy, unremittingly. This, however, seems to be a far cry judging from the trend of events during the last hundred years and the feverish activities now apace, in connection with the celebration of the ensuing 701st birth anniversary of Sri Vedanta Desika, with an unmistakable tinge of fanaticism.

It may be mentioned, in this context for the benefit of those who point the accusing finger at the 'Thenkalais' for not reciting in their temples the 'Desika Prabandhas' and cry down their devotion to Desika, that there is hardly any point in it. *Ab initio* there is nothing like 'Desika Prabandhas', as Sri Desika did not bring out a separate prabandham, as such. In his esoteric works such as 'Sampradaya Parisuddhi', there are slokas as well as Tamil songs at the beginning, the middle and the end. These songs forming an integral part of the respective works do not and cannot constitute separate prabandhas. Curiously, however, these songs have been culled out and styled collectively as 'Desika Prabandhas' and individually as 'Amritaaswadini', 'Amritaranjani' and so on, in recent times, on a piece with several other innovations. What is worse, certain pieces such as 'Adaikkalappathu' composed by others have also been palmed off as 'Desika Prabandhas' and smuggled in. Even

otherwise, it has to be noted that the 'Thenkalais' do not recite, in their temples, all the compositions of the 'Poornacharyas', for example, 'Gnana Saram' and 'Prameya Saram' composed by Arnlala Perumal Embaraman, and the 'Ashta Prabandhas' of Divya Kavi Pillai Perumal ayyangar.

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