

About the Speaker, Mr. Pradeep Chakravarthy

Pradeep Chakravarthy (B.1975), hails from Ananthakrishnapuram - a village not far from Azhwar Thirunagari near Tirunelveli.



Pradeep studied at the J. Krishnamurthy Foundation's school in Chennai, and then in Madras Christian College, J Nehru University, New Delhi, and finished off with an MBA at the London School of Economics.

Back in Madras in 1998, he worked briefly with companies in manufacturing and BPO before heading the soft skills training function in Chennai, as well as for two of the largest business units of an IT giant.

Pradeep has a passion for history and heritage. He has published more than a hundred articles in leading dailies, most of them on temples – always the less famous ones. He has edited and published a volume of his mothers Tamil articles recently. Two of his books, one on the Cultural History of Thanjavur and the other on Vaishnavism in Tamil Nadu are in the press. He is currently writing a book on lesser known temples in Tamil Nadu.

Pradeep is a Carnatic music aficionado and listens only to Padams and Javalis. He has another unusual interest; he is an accomplished aquarist – he tries to breed native Indian fish, and is the editor of an Internet-based forum on aquariums. Pradeep and his wife Anusha live in Madras.

THE ARAYAR SEVAI

By Pradeep Chakravarthy



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What is the Arayar Sevai?

The Arayar Sevai is a unique upachara or offering to Vishnu made in three Vaishnavite temples in Tamil Nadu – Srirangam, Azhwar Thirunagari and Sriviliputtur and in the Melkote Thirunarayana temple in Karnataka.

Performed by a specific family who hold the hereditary rights to this offering, the Arayar, through music and hand gestures expounds the meaning of the Tamil verses composed on Vishnu by the 12 Alwars - saints(who lived at various periods between the 7-8th Centuries) that are found in the Divya Prabhandam. In addition to this, the Arayars also perform two other worship services that have a combination of music and drama called the Muthukuri Sevai and the Pallu Pattu.

The performance is today done only by one family in Srirangam and two families each in Azhwar Thirunagari and Sriviliputtur. In Melkote the Arayar only sings the verses in the ancient pannas (equivalents of the ragam). In this paper, we will examine briefly the history of the Arayar Sevai, its different forms with specific reference to the Azhwar Thirunagari temple.

The performance is called Arayar Sevai after the performer who is called an Arayar. There are several explanations for the word; two of the more popular ones are –

Arayar means king and since the Arayar is a master of the verses of the Alwars in the Divya Prabhandam and is able to demonstrate their meaning through music and dance to the general public, he is called an Arayar of the Divya Prabhandam

“To tell”, is also a meaning for Arai and the Arayar who tells of the songs in the Divya Prabhandam becomes an Arayar.

The worship (Sevai) offered by the Arayar is therefore known as Arayar Sevai and this is also referred to as "Kondattam" or a celebration of the greatness of Vishnu by the Arayar.

In texts, common parlance and inscriptions, Arayars are known by other names as well,

Vinnappam Cheyvar – they speak directly and only to the lord and make their requests only to him

Nampaduvan – The sing the praises of our lord - Nam Perumal)

Isai Ariyum Peruman – Referring to their ability to sing the Prabhandam.

Thambiranmar – root words are probably than-piran-mar, meaning those who belong to the lord and indicative of the Arayar becoming an Azhwar himself when performing the Arayar Sevai.

The Arayar is always a male and has to follow a specific dress code and perform a vow before each performance.

The Origin of the Arayar Sevai.

In the 10th century, in a village called Kattumannar Koil (Viranarayanapuram), there lived a person called Naathamuni who was the son of Sri Iswara Bhattar. The period he lived in is still not fully agreed upon but scholars put it at around ACE 825 to 918.

One day Naathamuni heard a group of pilgrims sing a song of 11 verses on the Sarangapani Deity in Kumbakonam. The last verse said,

"Sweeter than the melody of the finest flute"

This decad from a thousand are by Kurugur's Sadagopan. His refuge, are in the feet of Krishna,

- The lord who sucked the breasts of the ogress.

Recite them to be loved by all those around you.

Thiruvaimozhi 5.8.11

Entranced by the verse, Naathamuni asks for the rest of the thousand. The pilgrims direct him to Kurugur since the poet is Sadagopan from Kurugur. When he goes to Thirukurugur, no one seems to know any other verses. He meets a disciple of Madhurakavi who teaches him, "Kanninun Siruttaambu" a song on Sadagopan by Madhurakavi. "Recite this under the same tamarind tree 12000 times", he is told. He does so and receives not only the song he wanted but many others. He compiled them into the 4000 Divya Prabhandam and set them to tune and instituted the Arayar Sevai.

The 4000 verses are composed by twelve saints who lived between the 5th and the 8th centuries and sang in praise of Vishnu are known as the Azhwars. The verses are revered by Vaishnavites and continue to be recited in temples. They are known as the Tamil Vedas.

The collection consists of four parts of thousand songs each. They are - :

1. Mudal Aayiram or First Thousand contains 947 songs. It includes:
 - a. Periyazhwar Thirumozhi (473 songs) of Periyazhwar, including Thiru Pallaandu.
 - b. Tiruppaavai by Andal (30 songs)
 - c. Naachiyar Thirumozhi by Andal (143 Songs)
 - d. Perumaal Thirumozhi by Kulasekhara Azhwar (105 songs)
 - e. Thiruchanda Virutham by Tirumazhisai Azhwar (120 songs)

- f. Tirumaalai by Thondaradi Podiazhwar (45 songs)
 - g. Tiruppalli Ezhuchi by Thondaradi Podiazhwar (10 songs)
 - h. Amalaanathi Piraan by Thirupaanazhwar (10 songs)
 - i. Kanninun Siru Thaambu by Madhurakavi Azhwar (11 songs)
2. Peria Thirumozhi or Greater Hymns contains 1134 songs, all sung by Thirumangai Azhwar.
 - a. Peria Thirumozhi (1084 songs)
 - b. Thiru Kurun Thaandagam (20 songs)
 - c. Thiru Nedun Thaandagam (30 songs)
 3. Thiruvaimozhi by Nammazhwar. It contains 1102 songs.
 4. Iyarpa is the last division in the Divya Prabhandam and contains the following:
 - a. Mudal Thiruvandaadhi by Poigai Azhwar (100 songs)
 - b. Irandaam Thiruvandaadhi by Bhootath Azhwar (100 songs)
 - c. Moondraam Thiruvandaadhi by Pey Azhwar (100 songs)
 - d. Naanmugan Thiruvandaadhi by Tirumazhisai Azhwar (96 songs)
 - e. Thiru Virutham by Nammazhwar (100 songs)
 - f. Thiru Vaasiriyam by Nammazhwar (7 songs)
 - g. Peria Thiru Andaathi by Nammazhwar (87 songs)
 - h. Thiruvezukootrirkkai by Thirumangai Azhwar (1 song)
 - i. Siriya Thirumadal by Thirumangai Azhwar (40 songs)
 - j. Peria Thirumadal by Thirumangai Azhwar (78 songs)
 5. Ramanuja Nootranthaathi (108 songs) of Amudhanar, and it was added to the text compiled by

Naathamuni. Neither is it on Vishnu nor is it by an Azhwar.

Many of these songs sing the praises of Lord Vishnu enshrined in various places all over India and Nepal and even the two states of being in heaven. The places referred to are revered as the holy '108 Divyadesams'

Madhurakavi Azhwar is an exception because though he sang only of Nammazhwar but, he too is counted as an Azhwar. Given his devotion for Nammazhwar, no verse by Nammazhwar may be recited without reciting the 11 composed by Madhurakavi.

Today they are recited by devotees sitting facing each other in all Vishnu temples. It is only in the three temples in Tamil Nadu that they are also sung and danced by the Arayars,

Naathamuni classified the Divya Prabhandam into Iyarpa which was meant to be chanted and Isaippa which was suitable for singing. With his nephews Keelai Ahatthu Aazhwan and Melai Ahatthu Aazhwan Swami Nathamunigal set the paasurams of Isaippa to tune (pan) and trained his nephews to sing and worship the prabhandams in front of the Lord at Srirangam. In doing so his intention was to captivate the general public to understand the verses of the Azhwar through music and dance. Naathamuni himself composed two slokas on Nammazhwar and these are recited as a part of the Thaniyan for Nammazhwar's Thiruvaimozhi. Inscriptions in temples and commentaries on the Divya Prabhandams tell us of the Arayar Sevai being performed in Kanchi, Thirumaliruncholai also called Azhagar Koil, Triplicane, Thirupathi, Thirukurungudi, Thirukannapuram and Thiruvananthapuram. None of these temples have Arayars today. In most of these places even old timers cannot recall Arayars in the temple.

An interesting mention on the origin of the Arayar Sevai is mentioned in the temple records of Srirangam called the Kovil Ozhugu. Here it is mentioned that Thirumangai Azhwar sang and danced his Thirunedunthandakam in front of the Uthsava deity of Srirangam and also caused for according the Thiruvaimozhi status on par with the Vedas. The records go on to say that in the Margazhi month, the deity of Nammazhwar was taken from Azhwar Thirunagari was taken to Srirangam, the Thiruvaimozhi verses performed and the deity brought back. We are not sure as to when this practice was stopped.

Two branches of Vaishnavaites:

Temples where Arayars perform today in Tamil Nadu are administered by those who belong to the Thenkalai sub sect of Vaishnavaites.

The origin of the two sub sects – Vadakalai and Thenkalai is a post 10th century phenomenon since these differences are not heard of in saint Ramanuja's times. They are called Vadakalai (Northern) and Thenkalai (Southern) though in reality there is no geographical polarization to justify their nomenclature. They probably emerged in the time of Sri Vedanta Desika whose contemporary was Pillai Lokacharya.

The two key differences between the sub sects are that the Vadakalai's (who wear the Thiruman as a "U") give equal importance to Perumal and Lakshmi while the Thenkalai's (who wear the Thiruman somewhat similar to a "Y"), regard Lakshmi as the prime devotee.

The more basic difference is in terms of the attainment of God. Vadakalai tenets say that our relationship to God must be like that of a baby monkey to its mother. The little

monkey constantly clings to the mother, similarly we need to constantly – through a teacher – work towards realization of the supreme and do this through the rituals of "saranagathi / Prapathi". Thenkalai tenets compare our relationship with God to that of a kitten and a cat. The kitten is – without much effort on its part, taken by its neck and deposited in a safe place by the Cat, similarly, they believe by leading a pious life and hope that by attending to the temple rituals and paying allegiance to the pontiff salvation will occur.

In practice, both sub sects have fairly similar rituals in the temples and elsewhere but in the temples, Vadakalai's tend to give prime importance to Sanskrit texts and Thenkalai's to Tamil texts. As an extension, generally Vadakalai's tend to have a greater focus on Vedic rituals than the Thenkalai's. Both venerate Ramanuja. The preceptor for Vadakalai's is Vedanta Desika and for Thenkalai's it is Manavala Mamunigal and Pillai Lokacharya.

In the 17th and 18th century, the sub sects were often in violent disagreement with each other. Fortunately today this is less so and both sects have at least learnt to coexist with each other and will hopefully learnt to be more appreciative of each other in the future and work towards the common cause of Vaishnavism and Hinduism.

The Arayar Sevai



Being a unique performance for the Lord through music, gestures (Abhinaya) and explanations, the Arayar Sevai is more than just a music dance performance. The Arayar both through gestures, and after words through words, explains the verses in manipravalam – a combination of Tamil and Sanskrit words. Arayars therefore need not only knowledge of music and dance but a deep understanding of Vaishnavaité philosophy. They also need

to know the verses of the Divyaprabhandam and their meaning (both literal and metaphorical) by heart since no recourse maybe made to actual texts while the Arayar Sevai happens.

The Arayar Sevai is an intense form of worship. The Arayar before the performance fasts maintains a vow of silence and is in deep contemplation of the lord. Before the performance, his ritual attire is unique. He wears a conical crown that has the marks of the Thenkalai sub sect of Vaishnavites, since all Arayars belong to this sect. The cap signifies eternal bliss for when the Arayar performs he ceases to exist as an individual and instead becomes the Azhwar whose paasuram he performs. The Karnapatras on either side of Kireedam cover his ears and therefore muffle other distracting noises. It is significant to note that only the Arayar during the Arayar Sevai is allowed to wear headgear within the temple precincts.

The Arayar also wears a long garland that was worn by the deity and has a parivattam, an upper garment worn by the deity tied around his head. All these acknowledge the blessing and honour given to him by the deity. In his hands he has the cymbals or Kulitalai or thalam. They are used to keep the beat and their sharp tone assist in focusing attention.

The Arayar Sevai is always done inside the temple precincts and in front of the Uthsava deity and never the main deity in the garbhagriha. However before and after every Arayar Sevai, the Arayar "reports" the same to the main deity in the sanctum.

The Arayar Sevai commences with the AruLa paTTu (Issuance of the gracious commandment by the Lord to the Arayar) through the priest. The Arayar then comes forward saying: Aaindhen! Aaindhen!

He then dons his headgear and accepts the parivattam and garland from the priest and begins using the thalam.

The thalam of Naathamuni, who created this practice is said to be in Azhwar Thirunagari. He then takes a suitable position a few feet in front of the deity and begins. Significantly, the Arayar is not required to commence his rendition of the paasurams after the customary recitation of the thanians. The tapping of the floor with his right foot and the use of the Thalam consecutively three times signifies the closure of one line/one unit respectively. Thanians are short verses preceding the Divya Prabhandam verses that pay homage to the Azhwar and other Vaishnavaite acharyas

Occasion of performance

The Arayar Sevai is performed during the Pagal Pathu – Rapathu festival in the three temples. This festival falls in Margazhi. This period falls within the Anadhyayana kaalam or a time when except for the Tiruppaavai of Andal no other Divya Prabhandam can be recited. Called the Thiru Adhyena Uthsavam, on certain other festival occasions, there is, in Sriviliputtur alone, an Arayar Sevai. Kaiseka Ekadesi is another occasion for the Arayar Sevai to be performed.

The Arayar Sevai consists of the following

Kondattam,

Kondattam are short phrases extolling the greatness of Azhwar's experience of Perumal and Thayar. They are usually followed by a simple song.

Vyakyanam

During the Pagal Pathu period, the Uthsava deity is beautifully decorated and the Arayar Sevai happens in front of the deity. Depending on the particular day the Arayar will take up a select set of paasurams sing them along with the rhythm using the thalam and perform abhinayam to convey the import of the paasurams with Hand gestures, steps using their legs and body/facial gestures. These gestures are not elaborate as seen in the Natyam traditions but subdued and used sparingly. Also the Arayar may walk a few steps in front or back or sideways.

The explanation of the paasurams is done with a commentary called the vyakhyanam. A certain pattern is followed in the choice of paasurams at Srirangam, Sriviliputtur and Azhwar Thirunagari corresponding to the local history and tradition of the temple.

Typically only the first and last verses of the paasuram are performed but in that the Arayar brings out the entire import of the song. Some of Nammazhwar's verses are written as if Nammazhwar is the Nayika pining for her lord; these are couched in metaphor that the Arayar explains in graceful gestures.

The Rapathu Uthsavam happens for 12 days immediately after the Pagal Pathu Uthsavam and this happens after dusk. Here verses by other Azhwars are chosen.

The Dramatization of certain episodes with appropriate abhinayam is done on selected days at Srirangam, Sriviliputtur and Azhwar Thirunagari during the adyayana Uthsava. The slaying of kamsa, the Vamana Avatharam, the churning of the milky ocean and the birth of Sri Andal are enacted on special days.

The Muthukuri Sevai

The Muthukuri Sevai is the prediction of future /good fortune is made by the Kattuvici (soothsayer) to the love-lorn lady (Nayaki), with the help of pearls (Muthu).

Here Arayar sings certain paasurams and performs abhinayam simultaneously taking the role of Nayaki, her mother and the soothsayer. This is performed on the ninth day of Pagal Pathu at Srirangam, the 10th day at Azhwar Thirunagari and on 3 occasions at Sriviliputtur.

Before the actual performance of the Muthukuri, the Arayar enacts the paasurams that talk of the story of how the ocean was churned by the devas and asuras for amrita. This lasts for about an hour and then begins the Muthukuri Sevai.

Thirumangai Azhwar's Thirunetunthantakam. In this, most verses talk of the Nayika's mother lamenting on the condition of her daughter, who is consumed with a passion for her lord... The mother calls the Kurathi to predict when her daughter will get over this. The Arayar plays the role of the mother, the daughter and the Kurathi. When the Arayar plays the role of the mother, the garment held in his hand with a knot at the top symbolizes the daughter.

The mother asks the Kurathi, who has caused her daughter this pain and what medicine must be used. She complains that her daughter talks to her pet birds, dreams of someone and cries for no reason; she then calls the Kurathi who first introduces herself and talks of the different lands she has been to.

The Kurathi quickly diagnosis that the Nayika is suffering from the pangs of being separated from her Nayaka, the Lord of Srirangam. She then performs the actual soothsaying called "Kudal ezhaithal", here, rice is spread

out on a large platter and the Kurathi draws concentric circles, all the while saying, the names of the Lord in different temples and referring to the Nayika as Ranganayaki Nachiar. Each sentence ends with Kuden (will join) and Kudilen (will not join) The Arayar then, to indicate the mother talking her daughter to Srirangam, paces the long Mandapam (in Srirangam, the Arayar does it standing in the same place) and goes closer to the Uthsava deity.

Here the Arayar takes on the role of the girl's mother and complains to the lord of what he has done to her daughter and asks the lord for a solution. The Arayar then recites a paasuram form Periyazhwar's Thirumozhi where the Azhwar takes the role of the mother who comments on her daughter having been taken by the Lord. We thus understand that the Muthukuri Sevai ends with the Lord having taken the Nayika.

The entire performance with the initial praise of the lord during the churning of the ocean takes around 3 hours.

Pallu paTTu

The Pallu paTTu is sung on the Gajendramoksham festival (Thiruvural thirunaal) and when the Uthsava deity is taken back to the sanctum at the end of each day in pagal and ra pathu. The symbolism here is the lord going to the core of the temple and therefore attaining his complete greatness. The pallupattu is also sung when the feet of the uthsavar is placed on the head of the processional image of Nammazhwar as a representation of Nammazhwar receiving the divine blessings.

When these songs are sung the Arayar uses an mridangam accompaniment (replaced the parai an ancient percussion instrument) and only sings them. Significantly these are the only songs sung by the Arayar which are not composed by the Azhwars. There are 13 songs and all of them are in simple Tamil. Some are of the heroine pining away for the lord and others describe the beauty and greatness of Vishnu. They are only sung and no commentaries are given nor are they danced to. When some of these songs are used in the vyakyanam, then they may be accompanied by abhinayam.

There are legends of how an Arayar who stayed with a lower caste community learned/sang these songs. Desiring his return to the temple, Lord Vishnu himself is said to have appreciated these songs and got them included. We however have no clear evidence of how this non-brahminical form of singing became included into the temple ritual.

The Pallu paTTu in this context is not related to the Pallu genre of Tamil poetry.

Pranaya Kalakham

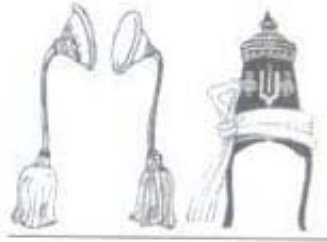
This happens on—. It is the staging of a mock quarrel between the Vishnu and Lakshmi where the latter accuses the former of infidelity. How the Arayar intercedes, enlists the support of Nammazhwar and reunites the divine couple is the story.

In doing this, the Arayar intercedes on behalf of the Perumal and singing and performing different verses of the 4000 Divya Prabhandam, the Arayar creates a conversation between Vishnu and Lakshmi where the latter is suspicious of where the former has been all day and how the former protests his innocence.

It is only in Azhwar Thirunagari that this happens in complete form. In Srirangam this happens without the conversations, the abhinaya and the pacing of the feet by the Arayar.

Padi yetham

When the processional deity returns to the sanctum, as the deity ascends the steps, the Arayar walks backwards while facing the deity and sings verses. This is done for all processions for Azhwar and for those of Polindu NinraPiran where he is in procession without the Thayar deities. The custom here is of welcoming back the lord.



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Resource persons

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Sri. Srinivasa Arayar, Azhwar Thirunagari/Madurai
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Prof.S Chandrasekaran for the line drawings.

About the Arayar, Mr. S Srinivasan

Srinivasan comes from a family of Arayars who have dedicated their lives to this ancient and unique form of worship. Hailing from Azhwar Thirunagari, he learnt the basics from his father and other family members for more than fifteen years. Much of the learning was by patient watching and then rigorous practice. He has performed with three generations – grandfather, father & younger brother for more than 38 years. The Arayar tradition of the Azhwar Thirunagari Adhinathar temple is well known for the scholarly discourses as well as the pacing of the Arayar across the floor and for the musical quality. All of these are inherent in his performance.



He regularly performs in the festival and the performance is always rich in devotion and tradition.

Srinivasan is married and works in the Finance function of a well know industrial group in Madurai.

At the January 2009 Heritage meeting, after Pradeep's lecture on the Arayar Sevai, Srinivasan will perform selected verses from the Arayar Sevai as done in the Azhwar Thirunagari temple, in front of the idol of Polindu Ninra Piran and other deities.