The Absolute as Luminosity: The ideal and movement of Saint Ramalingar

YAMASHITA Hiroshi

1. Introduction

Saint Ramalingar (irāmaliṅkar,¹⁾ 1823-1874) was a mystic and one of the exponents of the southern phases of the Hindu Reform Movement in nineteenth-century India. This article attempts to shed light on his devotion and practices from a new perspective. In this context, we are not concerned about the metaphysical aspects of his theology, but rather with the imagery of God and the mode of worship in his versifications.

Ramalingar intuitively knew the Supreme to be immanent and yet indescribable beyond externalization or materialization. Further, it could be emblematically represented in an amorphous form of, for example, flame. In his cult, light lit in a lamp installed in the innermost portion of the sanctuary was, to be exact, not a substitute for a *vigraha* but none other than an exemplification of the shapeless Infinite in a tentative form of flame. His unique religion of God as 'effulgence' (*cōti*) thus evolved, with light as the centre of ritual worship.

Ramalingar's ideals were crystallized into three distinct institutions, namely Caṅkam, Cālai and Capai in their abbreviated names. After the establishment of the first two institutions, an edifice was finally constructed to provide devotees a place for a universal mode of worship. This prayer hall, known simply as Capai or, in its unabbreviated name, Camaracutta-caṇmārkka-cattiya-ñāṇa-capai, the 'Hall of True Wisdom of the Universal Brotherhood,' was eventually completed in 1871. This building was designed in the shape of full-blown lotus flower which provided expression to the human body as the abode of God. Inside the structure, there are seven curtains indicative of sevenfold power with which one can unveil the seven secrets of the Lord. Behind all these curtains, there exists a thick glass slab of about five feet tall in which a bright lamp is installed. In the innermost chamber, the sacred fire in a lamp was lit, being symbolic of the Supreme. Except for the lamp, nothing was installed inside the sanctum sanctorum. Ramalingar's notion of Godhead as symboli-

(24)

The Absolute as Luminosity (H. YAMASHITA)

cally expressed by the term, the Great Effulgence (*peruñ-cōti*), gained its fruition by the construction of this magnificent hall. The symbolization of the Supreme as light has been firmly maintained to date. A lamp forms a nucleus in their rituals even today.

In the doctrinal aspect, he placed significant emphasis on a kind of religious universalism in his specific terminology of *caṇmārkkam*, which is translated as the 'Universal Religion' or 'Universal Brotherhood.' He also preached *cīva-kāruṇṇiyam*, compassion without distinction among all living beings. His movement, which is known as the Caṇmārkkam, continues till date. An organization, Ramalingar Paṇimanram, responsible for the matters related to publicization and social service, publishes his writings, establishes branches of the Caṇkam and many other operations centred on the Cālai and the Capai.

His versifications were compiled into the six cantos of *Tiruvārutpā*, the vast collection of his poetical works. Apart from that, he published many other collections of works in separate volumes.

2. Saint Ramalingar's Imagery of God void of Anthropomorphism

We focus on the manner of his literary expression of God — not as a concrete figure of an icon with well-defined attributes but abstractedly as the effulgent flame of a lamp. According to Ramalingar the Absolute ought not to be referred to as any material object. It could only be provided a representation which indicates the divinity metaphorically. An often repeated *mantra* cited below, which is believed to be bestowed by the Almighty to Ramalingar, is quite typical of his 'light-centric' ideal of worship.

Arutperuñcōti Arutperuñcōti
Taṇiperuñkaruṇai Arutperuñcōti

His novel device of the representation of God, not in an anthropomorphized shape but only figuratively as light, is reflected in his numerous poetical creations as well. His verses overflow with the imagery of Godhead as Grace-light (*aruṇ-cōti*) or the Great Grace-light (*aruṭ-peruñ-cōti*), as observed in the poem as follows.

aruḷoḷi viḷaṅkiṭa vāṇava meṇumōr /
irūḷa veṇṇuḷat tēriya viḷakkē /

(*Arutperuñcōti Akaval* 1495)

In this poem from his *Arutperuñōcti Akaval*,²⁾ light emitted from a lamp (*vilakku*) is symbolic of the Divine Grace to illuminate the true Self and extend immense compassion to stray spirits. God and His impartial mercy are represented as a lamp and its luminosity, respectively. Hence, the concept of Grace and that of light are combined into one compound word *aruḷ-oḷi* that refers to the Light of Grace.

The Absolute for Ramalingar is not the entity thoroughly free from qualities (*nirguṇa*) as typically observed in neuter, impersonal *brahman* defined by Advaitins, but personal God in the sense that He is omnipotent as well as omniscient and endowed with measureless auspicious qualities including compassion, munificence and magnanimity as proclaimed in the orthodox Tamil Śaiva theology.

pōrriṭu vōrtam pilai ā yiramum poruttaruḷcey /
vīrrolir nāṇa viḷakkē marakata meṅkarumpē /
ērrolir orri yiṭattār iṭattil ilaṅkum uyir /
mārrolī rumpacum poṇṇē vaṭivuṭai māṇikkamē /

(*Tiruvāṟṟupā* 1426)³⁾

viratamā tikaḷum tavirttumeyñ nāṇa /
viḷakkiṇāl enṇuḷam viḷakki /
iratamā tiyanal teḷḷamu taḷittin /
keṅkarut taṇaittaiyum purintē /
caratamā nilaiyil cittelām valla /
cittiyait tayaviṇāl taruka /
varatane enrēṇ vantarū cōti /
valaṅkiṇai vāliniṇ māṇpē /

(*Tiruvāṟṟupā* 4664)⁴⁾

In the above-quoted stanzas in the vast collection of his *Tiruvāṟṟupā* also, the Absolute — depicted as the generous Forgiver of sins and misdeeds, the blissful Bestower of boons and the glorious Illuminator of the darkness of nescience — is found intimately related to the concept of light in his poetic inspiration.

It is important to note that, though it may not form a sole imagery of the Supreme in his poetical works, the symbolization of God as light or luminosity is so prevailing that about half of nearly six thousand poems in its entirety in the *Tiruvāṟṟupā* collection is exclusively dedicated to *cōti*, the embodiment of God.⁵⁾ Ramalingar's representation of God

(26)

The Absolute as Luminosity (H. YAMASHITA)

as effulgence, which can be traced back to his fundamental experience in his boyhood under the confinement to his assigned room, was finally materialized as a shining lamp installed in the innermost chamber of the Capai at the headquarters of his movement at Vāṭalūr during his last years.⁶⁾

Another characterization of the Absolute in his poetry is found in the repeated emphasis on His immanence. This theme is crystallized in a poetic expression, for example, in the verse from the *Tiruvārūṭpā* presented below.

ētum ari yātiruḷil iruntaciṛi yēnai /
 eṭuttuviṭuṭ taṛivuciṛi tēyntiṭavum purintu /
 ōtumarai mutarḷkalaikaḷ ōtāmal uṇara /
 uṇarvilirun tuṇartti aruḷ uṇmainilai kāṭṭit /
 tītuceṛi camayaneri cellutalait tavirtut /
 tiruvaruṇmeyp potuneriṇi celuttiyum nāṇmaruḷum /
 pōtumayaṇ kēlmakaṇē eṇṇumayak kellām /
 pōkki eṇak kuḷḷirunta puṇitaparam poruḷē /

(Tiruvārūṭpā 3053)⁷⁾

In the realm of theology, he indulged in advocating the monotheistic principle on the Divine. For him, truth is one, and, as a logical consequence, there should not be any discord or conflict in worshipping one and the same God. The ideal of the coexistence of religions and faiths was proclaimed by him as the natural extension of this view. The representation of God as the light or flame was consistent with, and favourable to, the above notion of the Absolute proposed by this saint.

cātiyu matamuṇ camayamum poyyēṇa /
 ātiyi luṇarttiya varuṭperuṇ jōti /

(Aruṭperuṇcōti Akaval 211)

As for Lord Śiva, *līṅga*, a phallic symbol, has been used traditionally to signify the deity. Ramalingar, in contrast even to this customary practice, employed a lighted lamp to denote the divinity while he was generally regarded as a Śaivite saint without reservation. He not only refused to endow God with polymorphic characterization but also, in all probability, consciously refrained from indicating Him with gender distinction, although it is not deniable that he occasionally mentioned the Absolute under the particular name of

Civan, correspondent to Sanskrit *Śiva*, with the masculine suffixation in his literary works.

3. Ramalingar as a Heterodox Śaiva Saint

Ramalingar was not an orthodox Śaivite saint. His initial aspiration and the following movement led by him, which strictly opposed the existing religious establishments, provoked strong antipathy of the Śaivites, in particular Śaiva-siddhāntins.⁸⁾ It was mainly a result of his critical attitude toward the polarized sectarian identity among the Hindus and the unprecedented idea of the Almighty to be represented merely as a symbolic flame. This exemplification, in contrast to the conventional mode of representation of Śiva in the form of *liṅga* or an elaborate icon, was intended by him to overcome the difference between the two outstandingly influential schools, namely Vedānta and Śaiva-siddhānta, and synthesize both the tenets predominant in traditional Tamil thoughts⁹⁾. The verses from his *Arutperuñcōti Akaval* presented below provide a poetic expression to his full conviction that the Supreme as compared to the glow should transcend the established authorities of the Vedas, the Āgamas or any other school of thought.

vētamu mākama virivum parampara /
nātamuñ kaṭanta ñānameyk kaṇalē /

(*Arutperuñcōti Akaval* 1543)

camayañ kaṭanta taṇipporuḷ veḷiyāy /
amaiyun tiruccapai waruṭperuñ jōti /

(*Arutperuñcōti Akaval* 61)

This representation of God without anthropomorphism in the form of light or flame helped his emphasizing the worship of the Supreme substantially beyond the bipolar sectarianism ascribed either to Śaivas or Vaiṣṇavas. In fact, he admired Śiva and Viṣṇu equally¹⁰⁾. It is true that he commonly assumed his place in the genealogy of Tamil Śaiva sainthood. However, what he termed as ‘Śiva’ was not god in an ordinary sense with sectarian colouring, but something surpassing the realm of the Śaiva-Vaiṣṇava bigotry, since the Absolute was occasionally designated by him as neither Siva nor Viṣṇu but only as *civam* in the neuter singular without gender-related suffixation.¹¹⁾

Ramalingar’s approach implied his scepticism on, and moderate challenge to, the reform movements of the same period led by the modernized, intellectual Hindus chiefly

from northern India, who presented formless, abstract God void of any visualized exemplification for personal worship. Ramalingar held that a visible object for ritual purposes is required to appeal to the mass and retain their presence and faith within the Hindu fold. A lamp or light as a sacred symbol was in fact a practical invention or compromise to fulfil the demand for some concrete object in ritual worship.

Ramalingar's device for representing God as a flame to be typical of something beyond name and form was undoubtedly the product of his inner struggle to preserve his devotion intact by the modernist attack on the Hindu spiritual heritage. The reform he inspired, which was derived from his keen awareness of alien blames, can also be understood properly in this context. In reality, he proposed the reforms which promoted prohibition of animal sacrifice, eradication of superstitions and extermination of social prejudices accompanied with discrimination by birth among the Hindus.

Saint Ramalingar's foresight and uniqueness had a paradox within themselves. He attempted to reorganize the Hindu mode of ritual towards rationalization by abolishing excessive idolization of the Divine. At the same time, he employed a symbolic object of worship in a form, as simple and abstract as possible, of a lighted lamp in order to meet the requirement for daily worship of ordinary Hindus. All these were interpreted as accommodations of a traditional religion at the dawn of the modern period. His universalistic ideal might imply a euphemistic message to his own people with religious and cultural multiplicity to join forces to overcome the foreign rule and accusation.

-
- 1) The honorific name of this saint 'irāmalin̄kar' in its Tamil transliteration is widely accepted by academics. However, this article spells his name as 'Ramalingar' in accordance with the common practice among Tamil people. He used to be known as 'irāmalin̄kam' (popularly spelt as Ramalingam), the word ending in '-m' instead of the honorific suffix '-r' before he gained his reputation. However, here, for the sake of convenience, we use his name 'Ramalingar' when even referring to him in his childhood.
 - 2) The *Arut̄peruñcōti Akaval*, the 1596 line-long stanza and decade in *akaval* metre, presents the quintessence of his religious experience. This was composed by him in 1872 about a couple of years before his demise.
 - 3) II.75 Vaṭivuṭai-māṇikka-mālai 41. 'Orri' in this context refers to the celebrated Śaiva Temple in Tiruvorriyūr. The Tamil text is from Ūraṇ Aṭikaḷ (ed.), *Tiruvāruṭpā* (2 pakutikaḷ), Vaṭalūr: Camaraca Caṇmārkkā Ārāycci Nilaiyam, 1978, p.250.
 - 4) VI. 86 Tiruvāruṭ-perumai 10. The Tamil text is from Ūraṇ Aṭikaḷ, *op.cit.*, p.887.

- 5) Sawami Saravanananda, *Arutperunjothi Agaval: Thiruvartuprakasa Vallalar*, Madras: The Ramalinga Mission, 1989, p. iii. The rest of the poems, approximately three thousand in number, are on many gods and goddesses worshipped traditionally.
- 6) The exact number of the poems is 5768 in 671 decades. Cf. Vanmikanathan, G., *Ramalingar*, New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1980, p. 45.
- 7) V.1 Appu-mālai 25. The Tamil text is from Ūraṇ Aṭikaḷ, *op.cit.*, p.552.
- 8) For some details of the lawsuit against him raised by Ārumuka Nāvaḷar (1822-1889) and others, see Meenakshi Sundaram, P., *History of Tamil Literature*, Hyderabad: Marathi Sahitya Parishad, 1965, p.71f., and Varadarajan, M. (tr. E. Sa. Visswanathan), *A History of Tamil literature*, New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1988, pp. 221-223.
- 9) See Annamalai, Sp., *The Life and Teachings of Saint Ramalingar*, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1988, pp.111,117.
- 10) Varadarajan, *op.cit.*, p. 223.
- 11) For the idea of *civam*, see Annamalai, *op.cit.*, p.116f. Zvelebil indicates that the conception of *civam* prevails in the poems of Tirumūlar as well, who was the foremost of the earliest Cittars. See Zvelebil, K.V., *The Poets of the Powers*, London: Rider and Company, 1973, pp. 74-75.

〈Key words〉 Ramalingar, Śaivism, Tamil, Hinduism, bhakti, cittar

(Professor, Tohoku University)