Poet who immortalised devotees

"Sekkizhar Vizha" is celebrated around this time every year in Kundrathur, in memory of the poet-philosopher. LAKSHMI DEVNATH ***writes...***

"ULAGELAAM UNARNTHU otharkku ariyan..." Thus begins the *Periya Puranam* of Sekkizhar. It is said that the first word "Ulagelaam" boomed from space when Sekkizhar (1133-1162 AD) sought divine guidance at Tillai, before the commencement of his commissioned work in the month of Chittirai (March 15 — April 15) under the constellation of Tiruvadirai. However, every story necessarily has to have a beginning and this is how this one begins.

The Chola kings ruled Tondai Nadu (northern Tamil Nadu), in the 12th century. Puliyur Kottam was one of its 24 divisions. Kundrathur formed a part of this Kottam. In this place and in the clan of Vellalas an illustrious son was born. He was named Arunmozhithevar.

As time went by, his poetic abilities and deep wisdom earned him repute. It reached the ears of the incumbent Chola king Kulottunga-II also known as Anapaaya Chola.

The king appointed Arunmozhithevar as his chief minister. This was just the beginning of a course of events that proved beneficial for both the king and his chief minister. While the king gained wisdom, his minister ascended the firmament of both religious and literary history. His name receded into the background giving place to his family name and Sekkizhar the poet-philosopher was born.

Anapaaya evinced deep interest in the Jain literary work, *Sivaka Chintamani*. Though ranked as one of the five big gems of Tamil literature along with the famed *Silappadikaram* of Ilango, the general consensus was that it did not preach everlasting truths which are so essential both for this life and one beyond. The distressed chief minister suggested that the king divert his attention to 'Siva-katha' for eternal benefits. This advice well heeded set off a chain of events. The king requested Sekkizhar to chronicle the stories in the form of a 'Puranam' (a detailed exposition) for the benefit of mankind. He provided him with both men and material and Sekkizhar proceeded to Chidambaram. Herein was born the *Tiru-thondar-puranam* popularly called the *Periya Puranam*. But the genesis of this was to be found in another succinct literary work of just 11 verses sung in the 9th century.

Tiruthondathogai, a tribute paid to all the 63 Nayanmars individually, was sung by Nambi Aarooran, (840-865 AD) reverentially known as Sundarar.

His hymns along with Sambandhar's and Appar's constitute the *Devaram*. Historians generally believe that the Nayanmars lived between 300-865 AD.

Later years witnessed a complete disappearance of their works till it was retrieved in the tenth century by Nambi-aandar-Nambi by the grace of Polla pillaiyar of Tirunaarayur. Expanding on the theme of the Tiru-thonda- thogai, Nambi composed a small work called the *Tiruthondar Tiruandadi*. Thus Sundarar's work, to a large extent, and Nambi's work, to a lesser extent, formed the basis on which Sekkizhar structured his *Periya Puranam*.

The 'Puranam', a work of 4,253 verses is divided into two cantos and is actually a conglomeration of 72 puranas. Its 'arangetram' (launch) was held at the thousand-pillared hall of the Chidambaram temple. People thronged from various places to listen to Sekkizhar's exposition that he completed in exactly one year from the starting date. The king honoured him with the title of 'Uttama-Chozha-Pallavan'.

Apart from the history of the Nayanmars, obeisance is paid to all the devotees of Siva listing them under various categories thus forming 72.

The idea of including all other devotees of Siva is again a more detailed version of the tenth verse of Sundarar's work. The first words of each stanza of Sundarar's poem form the chapter headings of the Puranam. To this theme Sekkizhar has added two more chapters describing Kailas and Sundarar's ascent to it. The Puranam ends with the opening word — 'Ulagellam'.

Every word of the *Periya-Puranam* oozes devotion. The objects of worship are the devotees of Siva (Sivanadiyar). The religious and literary worth of the Puranam has earned for itself a hallowed place. It is ranked as the 12th in the *'Panniru - Tirumurai.* Sekkizhar's facile style with its judicious and apt use of words, lucid description of Nature, clarity and discreetness in expression has led many a later literary savant to explore the poetic worth of this great composer.

However, Sekkizhar's claim to fame rests primarily on this laurel-he was an 'adiyarukku adiyar' (devotee of the Lord's devotees). This earned him the title of 'Thondar Sir Uraitthaar' (one who spoke of the greatness of his devotees). To this date 'Sekkizhar vizha' is celebrated every year at Kundrathur. Religious and deeply philosophical, his life revealed the truth of Coleridge's words "No man was ever a great poet without at the same time being a profound philosopher