

Essays on
Gupta Culture

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FROM CLASSICISM TO BHAKTI

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INTRODUCTION

IN this paper we attempt some notes toward a chapter of Indian poetry—the transformation of classical Tamil genres into the genres of bhakti. Early bhakti movements, whether devoted to Śiva or Viṣṇu, used whatever they found at hand, and changed whatever they used—Vedic and Upaniṣadic notions; mythologies; Buddhism; Jainism; conventions of Tamil and Sanskrit poetry; early Tamil conceptions of love, service, women, and kings; folk religion and folksong; the play of contrasts between Sanskrit and the mother-tongue.¹

The Gupta period (fourth-sixth centuries A.D.) was not only the great classical period of Sanskrit literature, but, it also truly prepared the ground for the emergence of bhakti. For instance, the Gupta kings called themselves devotees of god (*bhāgavatas*). They took the names of the gods; put the figures of Lakṣmī, Viṣṇu's consort, and Varāha, his incarnation as a Boar, on their coins; made mythology a state concern, enlisting particularly Viṣṇu and his heroic incarnations for their politics. The Guptas sponsored Viṣṇu and believed almost that Viṣṇu sponsored the Gupta empire. Kṛṣṇa as a god with his own legends and cults emerged in the later Gupta period. Not only were the first Hindu temples built and the first Hindu icons sculpted during this period, but the official forms of Hindu mythology were set down in great syncretic texts called the *purāṇas*. By the fifth century A.D., Viṣṇu, Śiva, their families, minions, and enemies seem to have become as real as the human dynasties.

1. For an essay on this theme, see Ramanujan (1981).

In South India, the Pallavas had arrived by the sixth century A.D. Their inscriptions record the end of an era in South Indian history and the beginnings of a new one. In the culture of this time, the two "classicisms" of India, that of the Guptas and that of Tamil classical poetry, seem to have met. Of the various elements mentioned earlier, we shall study in detail only one—the *puṛam* tradition of Tamil heroic poetry—and the way its conventions were transformed by the Vaiṣṇava bhakti poets. After a few preliminary remarks on classical Tamil poetry, we shall look at one of the earliest poems on Viṣṇu in the *Paripāṭal*, a late classical anthology (fifth-sixth century A.D.); we then focus upon the poetry of the first three *ālvārs* (c. sixth century A.D.) before we examine the work of Nammālvār (c. eighth-ninth century A.D.), the greatest of the Vaiṣṇava poet-saints; we close with remarks on the use of classical Tamil models in an influential theological work, the *Ācārya Hṛdayam* (c. thirteenth century A.D.). We have narrowed our story to early Tamil Vaiṣṇava poetry and to only one element of the classical Tamil heritage. Similar studies can be undertaken for other Tamil or Sanskrit elements and other poets (Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava) of the bhakti tradition.¹

I. CLASSICAL TAMIL POETRY²

A few elementary remarks (or reminders) about classical Tamil genres may be appropriate at the outset. *Caṅkam* or classical Tamil poetry is classified by theme into two kinds: poems of *akam* (the "inner part" or the Interior) and poems of *puṛam* (the "outer part" or the Exterior). *Akam* poems are love poems; *puṛam* poems are all other kinds of poems, usually about good and evil, action, community, kingdom; it is the "heroic" and "public" poetry of the ancient Tamils, celebrating the ferocity and glory of kings, lamenting the death of heroes, the poverty of poets. Elegies, panegyrics, invectives, poems on wars and tragic events are *puṛam* poems.

The *Tolkāppiyam*, the most important expository text for the understanding of early Tamil poetry, distinguishes *akam* and

1. For a more comprehensive study of Tamil bhakti poetry and its constitutory elements, see Cutler (1980).

2. For detailed studies and translations, see Ramanujan (1967).

puṛam conventions as follows: "In the five phases of *akam*, no names of persons should be mentioned. Particular names are appropriate only in *puṛam* poetry." The dramatis personae for *akam* are idealized types, such as chieftains representing clans and classes, rather than historical persons. Similarly, landscapes are more important than particular places.

The love of man and woman is taken as the ideal expression of the "inner world", and *akam* poetry is synonymous with love poetry in the Tamil tradition. Love in all its variety—love in separation and in union, before and after marriage, in chastity and in betrayal—is the theme of *akam*. "There are seven types of love, of which the first is *kaikkilāi*, unrequited love, and the last is *peruntinai*, mismatched love." Neither of these extremes is the proper subject of *akam* poetry. The middle five represent well-matched love and divide its course, now smooth, now rough, into five kinds, moods, or phases: union, patient waiting, anxious waiting, separation from parents or lover, infidelity. Each mood or phase is paired with a landscape, which provides the imagery: hillside, wooded pastoral valley, seashore, wasteland, and fertile fields. The bhakti poets, however, "revived" the *kaikkilāi* genre in poems that express the anguish of the devotee who is separated from god.

Unlike *akam* poems, *puṛam* poems may mention explicitly the names of kings and poets and places. The poem is placed in a real society and given a context of real history. The *Tolkāppiyam* also divided the subject matter of *puṛam* poetry into seven types, but in this case all seven are of equal standing. The type called *pāṭāṇ* (elegy, praise for heroes, for gifts, invective) was very popular among classical *puṛam* poets, and somewhat transformed, it was equally popular among bhakti poets. Poeticians regarded *pāṭāṇ* as the *puṛam* equivalent of *kaikkilāi* in *akam* poetry which also is well represented in the poetry of the saints.

II. THE HYMNS TO TIRUMĀL IN *Paripāṭal*

By and large the poets of the *caṅkam* anthologies did not compose poems on religious themes. Though we find references to deities and we catch glimpses of ritual practices, rarely do these occur as the principal subject of a *caṅkam* poem.¹ However,

1. As Hart has shown, the early Tamil poems contain a wealth of

there are two notable exceptions to this generalization. The *Tirumurukārruppaṭai*, one of the ten long songs, is a poem in honor of Murukan, the Tamil god who, by the time of this poem, had coalesced with the Sanskrit Skanda, the warrior-son of Śiva and Pārvatī. This poem is composed in the form of an *ārruppaṭai*, a genre which accounts for three other long poems among the ten (*Cirupāṇārruppaṭai*, *Perumpāṇārruppaṭai* and *Porunāṇārruppaṭai*) and for a number of shorter poems included in the *puṇam* anthologies. The setting of an *ārruppaṭai* is a meeting between two bards, who apparently depended on the patronage of generous kings and chieftains for their survival. In an *ārruppaṭai* one bard praises the liberality of his patron to the other and urges him to seek his livelihood by visiting the court of this generous ruler. In *Tirumurukārruppaṭai* the roles of the two bards are taken by an initiate in Murukan's cult and a neophyte. The god is praised as a patron-king would be in other poems of this genre, but the gift he offers his suppliants is personal salvation instead of the food and wealth kings usually gave to bards who sought their patronage. In the eleventh century A.D., *Tirumurukārruppaṭai* was incorporated into the eleventh *Tirumuṇai* ("sacred arrangement") of the Tamil Śaivite canon.

We also find some moving devotional poems in *Paripāṭal*, one of the later *caṅkam* anthologies. Originally, this anthology, which takes its name from a poetic meter, included seventy poems dedicated to the gods Tirumāl (Viṣṇu), Cevvēḷ (Murukan) and the goddess, the river Vaiyai (presently known as Vaikai) and the ancient Pāṇṇiya capital Maturai which is situated on its banks. Only twenty four poems have survived however: seven to Tirumāl, eight to Cevvēḷ, and nine of the Vaiyai poems. The seven poems to Tirumāl included in *Paripāṭal* are the only explicitly Vaiṣṇavite poems in the *caṅkam* corpus. Critics have suggested that *Paripāṭal*, *Tirumurukārruppaṭai* and *Kalittokai*, an anthology of *akam* poems in the *kali* meter, belong to a later era than most of the other poems of the classical corpus. Zvelebil suggests 400-550 A.D. as a probable date for *Paripāṭal* (Zvelebil, 1974 : 50).

According to the *Tolkāppiyam*, love (*kāman*) is the proper information concerning ancient Tamil conceptions of the sacred (Hart, 1975; especially pp. 21-50). But they are not religious poems.

subject for poems composed in the *paripāṭal* meter, but in reality the poems of *Paripāṭal* deal with both *akam* and *puṇam* themes. The theme of love, treated in accord with the rules governing *akam* poetry, appears primarily in the Vaiyai poems. Many *puṇam* elements appear in the poems dedicated to the gods Cevvēḷ and Tirumāl, but there they have been transformed to serve poetry which is simultaneously devotional and heroic.

The panegyric genre is the most visible feature shared by the Tirumāl poems in *Paripāṭal* and *puṇam* poetry. Somewhat artificially, the *Tolkāppiyam* subdivides the *puṇam* universe into seven sub-genres called *tiṇai*, and one of these, *pāṭāṇ tiṇai*, is the genre of "praise". A large portion of the poems included in the *puṇam* anthologies are classified under the heading *pāṭāṇ*, and even *puṇam* poems classified under other *tiṇai* often include words of praise for a warrior or a king. The *puṇam* world is a world of kings, chieftains, and heroic warriors. The classical poets, therefore, praised their patrons for their valor in combat and for their virtuous rule. Most of the Tirumāl poems in *Paripāṭal* are poems of praise for the god, and they display a number of the specific thematic "situations" or *tuṇai* which are characteristic of *puṇam* poetry. Thirteen of the eighteen *tuṇai* which are treated in the *puṇam* anthology *Paṭiṇruppattu* (Kailasapathy, 1968 :195-96) are in one way or another related to the theme of praise, and many have direct counterparts in the poems to Tirumāl. Following is a list of the thirteen :

<i>centuṇaiippāṭāṇ pāṭṭu</i>	poem in praise of hero's fame : in praise of might, mien, and glory.
<i>iyammoḷi vāḷttu</i>	theme of extolling a hero by attributing to him all the noble deeds of his ancestors.
<i>vaṅcittuṇaiippāṭāṇ pāṭṭu</i>	poem in praise of invading warriors : king's wrath and praise of him.
<i>nāṭu vāḷttu</i>	blessing the country : in praise of wealth and abundance in the land of the hero.
<i>vākaiṭtuṇaiippāṭāṇ pāṭṭu</i>	Praise of victorious hero : victor wears <i>vākai</i> flowers and rejoices over vanquished.
<i>kaḷavaḷi</i>	battle-ground : the theme of a minstrel praising the spoils of a victorious king in war.

<i>vākai</i>	in praise of conqueror : the bard exalts victory leading to liberality.
<i>virālivārruppatai</i>	directing a danseuse : directing a danseuse to a generous patron.
<i>kāṭci vālttu</i>	praise of a sight : reaction on seeing either a great hero or a hero-stone, etc.
<i>paricirruaippāṭān pāṭtu</i>	praise of hero and request for largesse.
<i>pāṇārruppatai</i>	directing a minstrel (lutanist) : usually one minstrel directing another to a generous patron.
<i>mullai</i>	hero's victory : praise of the hero including reference to his wife.
<i>kāvaṇmullai</i>	praise of rule : extolling king's rule for providing shelter and security.

We can almost say that all we need do is substitute the word "god" wherever the words "hero" or "king" occur in this list, and we end up with a list of thematic elements in the *Paripāṭal* hymns to Tirumāl. Themes such as praise of a hero's (god's) fame, praise of a victorious hero (god), and praise of a king (god) for providing shelter and security fall into this category. In other instances we find elements in the poems to Tirumāl which are analogues of *puṣam* elements. For example, *iyaṇmoli vālttu* is defined as the situation in which the hero is praised by attributing to him all the noble deeds of his ancestors. References to the heroic deeds Tirumāl-Viṣṇu performed in his various *avatāras* function in much the same way in *Paripāṭal*. The god's *avatāras*, if not an ancestral lineage in a literal sense, can be viewed as such in a metaphoric sense. Here the noble deeds of the god's "ancestors" literally *are* his own deeds : he sets his own precedents.

In his excellent study of *puṣam* poetry Kailasapathy analyzes a panegyric poem from one of the classical anthologies and identifies nine thematic units in the poem which, he tells his reader, "are traditional and typical of the entire bardic poetry" (Kailasapathy, 1968 : 208). Kailasapathy's prose translation of the poem and his nine thematic units are given below :

"Worthy scion of those kings who ruled the whole world with undisputed wheel of command ! The kingdom of your ancestors extended from the Comorin river in the south to the high mountain Himālayas in the north and from sea to sea in east

and west. Their subjects wheresoever they lived—in hill, mountain, forest, or town—unanimously praised them. They eschewed evil and their sceptre was stainless; they took only what was due and were just and impartial. O warlike lord of Toṇṭi ! Your town is fenced by mountain; the white sand in its broad beaches shines like moonlight. There grow tall palms laden with bunches of coconuts. There are also extensive fields; and in the back waters flowers blossom which are like bright red flames. Even as a mighty and proud elephant contemptuous of the pit-hole whose mouth is cunningly overlaid, impetuously falls into it, and with its full-grown tusks gores the sides, fills it up with earth it has dug up, steps over and joins its loving herd, so you escaped because of your irresistible strength and now remain in your realm and among your kindred, who are extremely happy. Those defeated kings whose lands and precious jewels you captured, now feel that they could only regain them if they gained your sympathy; those who retook their lost possessions (while you were in captivity) now live in mortal fear of having provoked your fury; they feel certain of losing their forts surrounded by moats, encircling woods and thick walls atop of which fly their tall banners. Consequently, all these alien kings hasten to serve you. Such is your might and I come to praise it. O great one ! The innumerable shields of your warriors vie with the mass of rain-clouds; large swarms of bees settle on your war-elephants, mistaking them for huge hills. Your large army—the nightmare of your foes—is vast as the ocean upon which the clouds drink; the sound of your war-drums resembles the roar of thunder which makes venomous snakes tremble and hand down their hooded heads. But great above all is your unlimited munificence." (*Puṣanānūru* 17)

Thematic units

1. The extent of the king's domain.
2. Toṇṭi, and its description.
3. Some aspects of the king's benign rule.
4. Reference to his illustrious ancestors.
5. The simile of an elephant escaping from a pit-trap.
6. The reactions of the king's foes.

7. Description of forts.
8. Description of the king's troops, elephants, etc.
9. His boundless munificence.

If we were to similarly analyze the hymns to Tirumāl in *Paripāṭal*, we should find that they display many of the same thematic units. In *Paripāṭal* 2 (translated by AKR), which appears as an addendum to this paper, we find at least strong hints of six of Kailasapathy's thematic units. The following description of Tirumāl's chest appears in the *Paripāṭal* poem :

"Wearing jewels
many-colored as rainbows
bent across the high heavens
on your chest, itself a jewel studded
with pearls, you always wear
the Red Goddess
as the moon
his shadow."

Immediately following this passage is another that makes "reference to the king's ancestors".

"You as the Boar
with white tusks, sharp and spotted,
washed by the rising waves, lifted
and wed the Earth-maiden
so not a spot of earth
is ever troubled by the sea."

The recital of the god's mythic history can be regarded as a transformation of the thematic unit which appears in the *puṣam* poem. Here the god's ancestor, the Boar, is his own *avatāra*.

Following this is an extraordinary depiction of Viṣṇu in battle which brings to mind Kailasapathy's thematic units, the reactions of the king's foes, and description of the king's troops, elephants, etc. (Here it is not troops, but Tirumāl's potent weapons, the conch and the discus, that are described.)

"O lord fierce in war,
the loud conch you hold
sounds like thunder

to the enemy
rising as one man,
unafraid in anger,

rising like a hurricane
to join battle;

banners break and fall,
ears go deaf,
crowns shiver on their heads,
and the earth loosens
under their feet

at the thunder of your conch.

O lord fierce in war,
the discus in your hand
cuts the sweet lives
of enemies;

heads fall and roll
wreaths and all;
their stand lost,
like the tens of thousands
of bunches
on the heads of tall black palmyra-trees
not stripped yet
of root, branch,
frond or young fruit,
falling to the earth
all at once;

not one head
standing on its body,
beheaded all at one stroke, they
gather, roll, split,
come together and roll apart,
and lie dead at last
in a mire of blood.

That discus
that kills at one stroke;
Death is its body,
its color the flame

of bright fire
when gold burns in it.”

The similarity between this battle scene and another depicted in a poem from the *puṛam* anthology *Paṭiṛruppattu* is truly remarkable :

“beheaded bodies, leftovers,
dance about
before they fall
to the ground;

blood glows,
like the sky before nightfall,
in the red center
of the battlefield”

from *Paṭiṛruppattu* 35
(trans. AKR)

The *Paripāṭal* hymn to the Tirumāl (*Paripāṭal* 2) celebrates the “king’s” benign rule and his boundless munificence.

“If one looks for your magnificent patience
it’s there, wide as earth;

your grace,
a sky of rain-cloud
fulfilling everyone”.

And in another passage,
“As soon as your heart
thought of ambrosia,
food of the gods,
the deathless ones received
a life without age,
a peace without end”.

The poet’s metaphorical description of Tirumāl’s grace as “a sky of rain-cloud” has many parallels in *puṛam* poetry where a king’s generosity is frequently compared with the rain.

“It was as if rain showered down
with thunder whose voice makes men tremble,

nourishing the forest
whose grass is burnt by the bright rays of the savage sun :
he gave rice and ghee and spicy meat.”

from *Puranānūṛu* 160
(trans. Hart, 1979),

The association between generosity and rain is a strong one, especially in the Tamil area where, except for the three months of the unpredictable monsoon, water can be scarce. In the hymn to Tirumāl the metaphor is significant in yet another way, for Tirumāl’s complexion is blue-black; he is often said to resemble a storm cloud. Sometimes he is even said to be the cloud that sends life-giving rain.¹ *Māl* or *māvōṇ*, literally means “the dark one.” In Sanskrit he is *nīlameghaśyāma*, “dark as a black cloud.”

Conspicuously absent from *Paripāṭal* 2 are references to sacred places which could be considered the counterparts of the king’s domain, his capital and his forts in *puṛam* poetry. But these elements appear in other Vaiṣṇavite poems of *Paripāṭal*. The fifteenth song is a eulogy of Māliṛuṅkuṅṅam, “Māl’s dark hill,” which is located about twelve miles north of Maturai and even today is the site of a popular Viṣṇu temple known by the name

1. For instance, *Tiruppāvai*, a very popular bhakti poem by the woman poet Āṇṭāl, identifies Kṛṣṇa with a rain-cloud :

“Kaṇṇaṅ, Storm cloud,
Don’t hide!

Black as the Era’s First One,

You dive into the ocean;

You scoop up its waters

And raise peals of thunder.

Your lightning flashes

Like the cakra held by Padmanābha,

The Lord with shoulders renowned for their beauty.

And you thunder like his conch.

Send your rains right away

Like a shower of arrows from the Śāraṅga-bow,

So the world will prosper.

We too rejoice

And bathe in *mārkaḷi* month.

Accept, Consider our vow.”

Tiruppāvai 4

(trans. NC)

Aḷakar Kōyil.¹ Unlike the other Tirumāl poems which are hymns of praise addressed directly to the god, in *Paripāṭal* 15 the poet extols the glories of Māḷirunḱuṅṅam to a human audience.

“This is the place where the lord
who wears garments of gold
stays with his brother
like a halo of cool sunbeams
shimmering around a core of darkness :

Think about it, mortals,
and listen—
fragrant blue lilies
blossom in all its ponds,
the branches of *aśoka* trees
growing at their edge
are covered with blossoms,

the colors of green fruit
and ripe fruit
play against one another
and bright clusters of buds
on the *kino* trees
burst into bloom :

the beauty of this place
is like the Black God himself.

You people
who have never gone there to worship,
gaze on that mountain and bow down :

the name Iruṅḱuṅṅam
has spread far and wide,
on this great, bustling earth
it boasts fame in ages past

1. Aḷakar, the name Viṣṇu bears in this temple, means “the beautiful one”. As Cuntarar, Śiva bears a name with identical meaning in the great Mīnākṣī-Cuntareśvarar temple of Maturai.

for it is the home of the dear lord
who eradicates delusions
for people who fill their eyes
with his image.”

from *Paripāṭal* 15
(trans. NC)¹

The poet praises Māḷirunḱuṅṅam, the most praiseworthy of all the earth's mountains, because it is the god's abode on earth. (The poem begins with an introduction to the many great mountains on earth, and then Māl's mountain is singled out as the most dazzling of all.) The eulogy of Tirumāl's locale reminds us of the *puṣam* poet's eulogy of his patron's country and its capital city. In particulars, however, this loving picture of Māl's dark mountain is more like an *akam* landscape. The *puṣam* poet does not usually linger over descriptions of nature. For him, the fertility of the countryside is useful primarily as a reflection of a hero's glory. But careful description of natural scenes lies at the very heart of *akam* poetry. Its interior drama of anonymous characters is bodied forth in the details of the scene and is set not in particular places, but in landscapes—the mountains, the forest, the seashore, the cultivated countryside, and the desert. Here, every landscape is a mood. In *Paripāṭal* 15 the poet evokes a mountain landscape by describing mountain pools and flowering plants (in the passage cited above), waterfalls and birds (in other passages), much as an *akam* poet would. However, here natural detail is not meticulously coordinated with the human psyche as in *akam* poetry. It is probably fair to say that Māl's dark mountain stands somewhere between the specific locales of *puṣam* poetry and an *akam* landscape.

The thematic units which link the Tirumāl poems in *Paripāṭal* with other classical Tamil poems do not in themselves constitute a complete profile of these early Tamil hymns to Viṣṇu. The authors of these poems relied a great deal upon classical Tamil sources, but they also received influences from other quarters. *Paripāṭal* 2 opens with a stirring account of the earth's creation which, but for its language, could have been

1. In these translations from *Paripāṭal* I am indebted to François Gros' French renderings (Gros, 1968).

lifted straight out of a purānic cosmology. Later in the same poem we come upon a very striking passage which, detail for detail, identifies Tirumāl with the Vedic sacrifice. In these poems we also find descriptions of Tirumāl which are addressed to the god himself. While the *puram* panegyric is the Tamil prototype for this element in the *Paripāṭal* hymns, one is also reminded of Vedic hymns where descriptions of gods are addressed to the gods themselves. In *Paripāṭal* such descriptions can be divided into two kinds. The first kind is physical and iconographic, as in *Paripāṭal* 1 where the poet salutes Tirumāl :

“Lord with eyes the color of flowers
red as fire,
with body the color
of an open *pūvai* blossom,

Tiru rests upon your chest
and fulfills her desire,
your chest adorned
with a sparkling jewel,

clothed in garments of gold,
your body is like a dark mountain
surrounded by flames”

from *Paripāṭal* 1
(trans. NC)

The second kind, quasi-philosophical descriptions of the god, closely follows an Upaniṣadic pattern. Here philosophy is grounded not so much in logic as in esthetics; it is both idea and experience, a description of the lord's ubiquity as well as its celebration :

“Your heat and your radiance are found in the sun,
your coolness and your beauty in the moon,
your graciousness and your generosity are found in the clouds,
your protective nature and your patience in the earth,
your fragrance and your brightness are found in the *pūvai*
blossom,
the form you manifest and your expansiveness appear in the
waters,
your shape and the sound of your voice in the sky :

all these things—near, far, in-between
and everything else,
detach themselves from you, the source of protection,
and rest in your embrace.”

from *Paripāṭal* 4
(trans. NC)

Such passages show that the authors of the *Paripāṭal* poems, perhaps the earliest devotional poems in Tamil, were heirs to two classicisms. In these poems Vedic and Tamil bardic traditions meet and interweave to form a distinctly Tamil devotional poetry.

III. PURAM INFLUENCES IN THE POETRY OF THE “FIRST THREE ĀLVĀRS.”

The hymns to Tirumāl in *Paripāṭal* are devotional poems, but they are not sacred poems in the same sense as the poetry of the twelve Tamil Vaiṣṇavite saints, the *ālvārs*. *Paripāṭal* certainly extends the classical literary universe into the realm of devotion—but its classical associations have always overshadowed their devotional subject in the minds of Tamil audiences. Proof of this is easy enough to find : *Paripāṭal* is counted as one of the eight anthologies of *caṅkam* poetry, and the hymns to Tirumāl were not canonized with the *ālvārs*' poems.¹

By most estimates the first three *ālvārs*, Poykai, Pūtam and Pēy, who are collectively called “the first three” (*mutal mūvar*) in Tamil, lived some time during the sixth century A.D. They, therefore, lived not much later than the *Paripāṭal* poets, but their poems are very different in form and effect. Each of the early *ālvārs* is credited with an *antāti* of one hundred verses in the *venpā* meter, a meter which was also used by the authors of the didactic works often grouped together as the *patineṅ kilkannakku*, the so-called “eighteen minor works” which date from about the same time. When we turn to the poems of the first three *ālvārs* after reading *caṅkam* poetry, we immediately sense that we are dealing with a different poetic sensibility. *Caṅkam* poetry is, by this time, a classical literature, part of a poet's learning. Only an audience well-schooled in classical

1. Even though they are not canonized, the *Paripāṭal* poems are clearly related to the later *ālvār* poems. They share the Viṣṇu mythology, the sacred geography, the motifs, the ideas. See Damodaran, 1978 : pp. 262-67.

literary conventions could have understood these poems composed in a language far from the language of everyday speech. The bhakti poets, on the other hand, used an idiom which must have been close to the Tamil spoken during their time; they make a point of it. The work which has been accorded the highest place of honor in Tamil Vaiṣṇavite canonical literature, Nammālvār's *Tiruvāymoḷi*, literally means "the sacred spoken word" (*vāy*, 'mouth' + *moḷi*, 'language'). Māṅikkavācakar's *Tiruvācakam*, a Śaivite text of equal renown, bears a name derived from Sanskrit *vāc*, 'speech'. Bhakti poetry is also poetry for performance. Tamil Vaiṣṇavites and Śaivites regularly recite the hymns of the saints in their homes, and at least since the tenth century A.D. the hymns have been recited in the major temples of Tamilnadu (Nilakanta Sastri, 1955 : 637, 639).

Unlike classical poetry, the poetry of the saints is a "personal" poetry, though they too use personae or masks. In *akam* poetry the personality of the poet is almost completely effaced by internal narrators and a conventional poetic vocabulary. Only in *puram* poems we often understand the narrating voice to be the poet's own, but still only a few of these poets ever tell us much about themselves in their poems.¹ Even the *Paripāṭal* hymns to Tirumāl, which follow the panegyric model, tell us a great deal about the god, but not much about the poet who eulogizes him. The early *ālvārs* were more inclined to leave traces of their personalities in their poems, even while following panegyric models. One *ālvār* is not like another.

As Zvelebil points out (Zvelebil, 1974 : 93-94), the *pāṭāṅ* genre, or poem of praise, continued to be an influential model for the saint-poets. He condenses the parallels between the classical panegyric and the poetry of the saints in the following scheme :

1. Zvelebil cites a story from the *Tiruvilaiyāṭal Purāṇam* (51 : pp. 30-37) (seventeenth century) which makes this point in an amusing manner.

"The forty-eight poet-academicians in Maturai composed innumerable beautiful poems which, however, were so much alike that those who wanted to comment upon them could not ascribe them to individual poets, unable to recognize any difference (*veṟupātu ariyātu*) and being much amazed (*viyantū*); not only that, the poets themselves could not recognize their own poems, and were bewildered. It was Śiva-Sundara himself who appeared in their midst in the guise of a poet, sorted out their works, and accepted the chair of the president of the Academy" (Zvelebil, 1974 : p. 43).

"The bardic poet's praise of the patron; he asks for gifts; the patron grants him gold etc.; rarely, but still, the poet scolds the patron for his wretched and miserly attitude.

The poet-saint's praise of Śiva or Viṣṇu; he asks for knowledge of himself, and of God; God grants him knowledge, grace, redemption; rarely, but still, the saint blames and reproaches God for his misfortunes."

This scheme is a useful one, for it relates two bodies of Tamil poetry, but the saints' poems do not all fit neatly into this scheme. We find in the poetry of the saints many poems that are not addressed directly to a god. Not all *puram* poems are addressed to a patron. Often the bhakti poet speaks about his lord to an audience who is either explicitly invoked or whose presence must be inferred. The voice of the saint is the pivot on which these poems turn, and this voice is given flesh and blood in the saint's sacred biography which is as well known as his poems : Tamil Vaiṣṇavites and Śaivites hear the life-stories of the saints in their poems.¹ In this poem by Poykai, for example, we overhear the poet talking to Viṣṇu about the best-known event in the composite biography of the first three *ālvārs*.²

1. The poets of the *puram* poems, like Kapilar or Auvai, often have legendary biographies, like the saints, which are considered explanatory of the poems. See Kapilar's poems on his friend and patron, Pāri. There are fewer examples of this matching of poems with poet's life in the *akam* poems : see index of poets in Ramanujan (1967), especially the note on Ātimanti (p. 120).

2. In this poem Poykai speaks of an experience which ended in a revelation. The three early *ālvārs* did not know one another until Viṣṇu simultaneously induced in each a desire to visit his shrine at Tirukkōvalūr (Kōval). On the night of his arrival, Poykai sought shelter in the small antechamber of a *ṛṣi's āśrama*. Not much later Pūtam and then Pēy arrived with the same intention, and the three devotees gladly shared the small room though they had to stand to fit inside. As if to add to their discomfort, Viṣṇu enveloped Tirukkōvalūr in a blanket of storm clouds so thick the three saints couldn't even see one another, though they stood only inches apart. Huddled together, the saints began to feel more and more crowded for no apparent reason. Finally, in a flash of insight, they realized that Viṣṇu too had joined them in the tiny room, and they at once were able to see by the light of the lord's grace.

“Lord who lifted a mountain to block the driving rain,
in this beloved town of Kōval
you neither departed through the gate
nor came inside,
but chose to stay, together with your goddess,
here in this entrance hall.”

Mutal Tiruvantāti 86
(trans. NC)

Poykai, Pūtam and Pēy were early voices in the evolution of a personal poetry of devotion in Tamil. If *Paripāṭal* represents an extension of classical Tamil poetry, the *antātis* of the first three *ālvārs* represent the beginning of a new kind of Tamil poetry. Not surprisingly, the classical influences are not pervasive in the poems of the early Vaiṣṇavite saints. Nevertheless, many verses display or extend classical motifs and techniques. Pēy envisions Viṣṇu as a mighty warrior who looks after his devotees' well-being :

“The victorious lord
who wields eight invincible weapons,
the eight-armed lord
who aimed his wheel
and cut down the crocodile-monster in the pond¹
is our refuge
down to the soles of his feet.”

Mūnṛām Tiruvantāti 99
(trans. NC)²

Poykai's invocation of Viṣṇu in the first line alludes to the story in which Kṛṣṇa lifted the mountain Govardhana to protect the cowherds from a downpour sent by the jealous god Indra. The mythological allusion is an ironic complement to the biographical event. In the myth Kṛṣṇa shelters the cowherds from the rain sent by Indra. In the biographical story Viṣṇu inundates Tirukkōvalūr, and his devotees are forced to run for shelter.

1. “The eight-armed lord” is a reference to Viṣṇu in his form Aṣṭabhujākāra. This poem alludes to the story of Gajendra, the elephant, who was a devotee of Viṣṇu. When Gajendra was gathering lotus blossoms to offer the god, a crocodile grabbed him by the leg and began to pull him into the pond. Gajendra called to Viṣṇu for help, and the god saved him.

2. All translations of poems by the first three *ālvārs* and by Nammālvār credited to NC in the paper appear in Cutler (1980), and the *Tiruppāvai* translation found in note 4 appears in Cutler (1979). All translations of Nammālvār's poetry by AKR appear in Ramanujan (1981).

Whenever Viṣṇu is invoked as protector and hero we detect resonances of the bards' eulogies of their patrons. Here the heroic mode has become a signifier for devotion, as in this poem by Poykai :

“My mouth praises no one but the lord,
my hands worship no one but the lord
who bounded over the world,
my ears hear no name, my eyes see no form
but the name and form of the lord
who made a meal of the poison he sucked
from the she-devil's breast.”

Mutal Tiruvantāti 11
(trans. NC)

The *caṅkam* bard commends himself to the liberality of his patron, and, similarly, Poykai implies that he gives himself over to Viṣṇu without reservation. We sense that Viṣṇu is more than capable of protecting Poykai from his enemies. After all, didn't he destroy the she-demon Pūtanāsura when he was only an infant ? For the *ālvār* devotion takes the form of incessant contemplation of Viṣṇu's heroism.

IV PURAM ELEMENTS IN NAMMĀLVĀR'S POETRY

Nammālvār's position in Tamil Vaiṣṇavite tradition is a special one. The Śrīvaiṣṇava *ācāryas* equated his Tamil poems with the four Vedas, and the poems of the other *ālvārs* with the “limbs” (*aṅgas*) and “subsidiary limbs” (*upāṅgas*) of the Vedas. The other *ālvārs* are described as *aṅgas* for Nammālvār who is their *aṅgī* (one who possesses limbs). Tradition also accords Nammālvār a critical role in the story of the canonization of the *ālvārs'* hymns.¹ The personal voice which we begin to hear in

1. When Nāthamuni, the first Śrīvaiṣṇava *ācārya* (tenth century A.D.), happened to hear a group of Vaiṣṇavite devotees singing a few verses by Nammālvār, he was so taken with these hymns that he resolved to learn everything the saint had composed. Unfortunately, at this time there was no one who knew more than the few verses Nāthamuni had heard, but still he remained firm in his resolve. After he recited the hymn of praise for Nammālvār, composed by the saint Maturakavi, twelve thousand times, Nammālvār came to him in a yogic vision and taught him not only his own compositions, but the hymns of all the other *ālvārs*. Nāthamuni later

the compositions of the early saints comes to maturity in Nammālvār's poems.

Nammālvār was a prolific poet—his greatest work *Tiruvāymoḷi* alone contains over one thousand verses—and thus there is considerable scope for variety in the saint's poems. Multiple strands of influence come together in Nammālvār's poetry, as in the bhakti tradition as a whole. In *Tiruvāymoḷi* love poetry, mythology, philosophy and heroic poetry alternate with one another and blend together in new ways. A great deal has already been written about Nammālvār's use of *akam* conventions,¹ but commentators on *Tiruvāymoḷi* and Nammālvār's other poems have not paid nearly as much attention to the significant *puram* elements in the saint's poetry. The following poem about Rāma's conquest of Laṅkā is as graphic as the battle scene from *Paripāṭal* 2 and draws as freely on the imagery of battle :

“Crowding each other
face to face
as the arrows sang
and jangled

demon-carcasses fell
in hundreds

rolled over
like hills
the sea stained with blood
backed upstream into the rivers

arranged these in their canonical form and instituted their recitation in the temple of Śrīraṅgam.

By the estimates of most modern scholars, Nammālvār and his disciple Maturakavi were the last of the twelve *ālvārs*, and they lived sometime during the ninth century A.D. However, Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition places Nammālvār fifth in the chronology of the *ālvārs*, after Poykai, Pūtam, Pēy and Tīrumāḷicai, and consequently dating of the saint's lifetime has not been unanimous.

1. Two recent works which attend to *akam* elements in Nammālvār's poetry are Srinivasa Raghavan (1975) and Damodaran (1978). Zvelebil (1973 and 1974) and Varadarajan (1972) take a longer view of the *akam*/bhakti connections in Tamil literary history. For a more general account of love symbolism in Indian bhakti, see Vaudeville (1962).

when our Lord and Father
ravaged the island

and left it
a heap of ash”

Tiruvāymoḷi 7.4.7
(trans. AKR)

Nammālvār also eulogized places sacred to Viṣṇu in a manner that calls to mind the *puram* poets' songs of praise for the lands ruled by their patrons. The saint composed a set of ten verses in praise of Viṣṇu's abode at Māḷiruñcōlai (“Māl's dark grove”), the same site near Maturai known to the *Paripāṭal* poet as Māḷirunḱunram (“Māl's dark hill”). Nammālvār may well have composed these verses as a bhakti equivalent to the classical *ārruppaṭai* or “guide to patrons”.

“Casting off the strong bonds of deeds,
wandering in search of salvation,
reaching the magnificent temple
on the mountain, veiled in clouds
at Māl's dark grove,
home of the lord who lifted a great mountain,

that is real strength.

To gather strength,
turn from evil deeds
and travel to the temple
on the mountain, surrounded by clear pools
at Māl's dark grove,
the temple of the lord
who upholds virtue with his wheel,

that is real skill.”

Tiruvāymoḷi 2.10.4, 2.10.5
(trans. NC)

Here Nammālvār encourages his audience to travel to Viṣṇu's temple at Māḷiruñcōlai, much as the *puram* poet urges other bards to travel to the court of his patron where they are sure to receive

food and other gifts. But the bhakti poems differ from the classical *ārruppaṭai* in at least one important way. An *ārruppaṭai* documents a conversation between two bards at a specific point in time, and the noble deeds of the patron-hero are deemed historical events. Nammālvār's poems celebrate a god-hero who performs noble deeds in mythic time, no less real than historic time; and because they do not particularize their audience, they are immediately relevant to all audiences. The virtue of pilgrimage to Viṣṇu's sacred places is universal in its appeal.

The *puṣam* influences in Nammālvār's poetry are not confined solely to poems which are directly descended from *puṣam* prototypes. Images of Viṣṇu the warrior-hero appear in many and varied contexts. They often appear as telescoped references to particular incidents in the god's mythology. One favorite episode is the story of Rāma's conquest of Laṅkā. Another is Kṛṣṇa's betrothal to the cowherd maiden Pinnai: Kṛṣṇa won Pinnai for his bride by subduing seven of her father's bulls in a bull-baiting contest.¹ The following poem, which gives us a glimpse of the intimate sparring which the bhakti poet and his lord sometimes engage in, includes allusions to both these incidents:

Lord burning bright as a lamp
who conquered seven bulls
and turned splendid Laṅkā to ashes,

don't trust me!

When I reach your feet of gold
don't let me run off again.

Tiruvāymoli 2.9.10
(trans. NC)

Puṣam images also slip into poems that are directly descended from *akam* love poetry. Almost one-third of the verses in *Tiruvāymoli* take over the situations and characters of *akam* poetry,

1. In the classical corpus, the *Kalittokai* anthology (seventh century? A.D.) has poems on bull-baiting contests. They describe heroic fights with bulls in an *akam* context, as a lover's ordeals before he can win his beloved's hand. Here again *akam* and *puṣam*, love and heroism, meet. These poems probably celebrate an ancient cowherding custom, and resonate in the Kṛṣṇa-Pinnai myths.

only here the *ālvār* is traditionally identified with the narrative voices of the heroine, her mother and her girl friend (three of the conventional character-narrators of *akam* poetry),¹ and the hero, who does not take a speaking role in Nammālvār's love poems,² as he does in classical *akam* poetry, is identified as Viṣṇu. These two poems, the words of the heroine's mother, include the ubiquitous allusion to Rāma's conquest of Laṅkā.

"What Her Mother Said
Like a bar of lac
or wax
thrust into fire
her mind is in peril
and you are heartless.

What shall I do for you,
lord who smashed Laṅkā,
land ruled by the demon?

Night and day her peerless eyes
swim in tears,
lord who turned Laṅkā's fortune into smoke,
don't scorch this simple girl
or make her gentle glances wither."

Tiruvāymoli 2.4.3, 2.4.10
(trans. NC)

By virtue of the heroic deed they allude to, the epithets in these poems bring to mind *puṣam* themes, but they function within the poems very much like the suggestive insets of nature images in *akam* poetry. The *akam* poets devised subtle, implied

1. The stock characters of *akam* poetry include the hero (*talaivaṅ*), the heroine (*talaivi*), the hero's friend (*pāṅkaṅ*), the heroine's girl friend (*iḍḷi*), the heroine's mother (*naṟṟāy* or *tāy*) and her foster mother (*cevilli tāy*). In its colophon each *akam* poem is designated *talaivaṅ kūṟṟu* ("the words of the hero"), *talaivi kūṟṟu* ("the words of the heroine"), etc. For further discussion of the narrative structure of *akam* poems, see Ramanujan (1967).

2. There are some verses in Nammālvār's *Tiruviruttam* in which the hero is the speaker, but in these the hero is not explicitly identified as Viṣṇu (e.g. *Tiruviruttam* 50).

comparisons (called *uḷḷurai*: "inner statement") between events in nature and a drama of human characters, and in the saints' poems mythological allusions sometimes function in a similar manner. In these verses Nammālvār implies that Viṣṇu, the lover, can save the love-lorn heroine as he saved Sītā from the demon Rāvaṇa, or, by neglecting her, he can destroy her utterly as he demolished Rāvaṇa's kingdom, Laṅkā. In 2.4.10 the connection is reinforced by the images of burning which join purport and vehicle in the implied simile.

V. AKAM TRADITION AND BHAKTI POETRY

The two great classical Tamil gods, Cēyōṇ, the Red One (Murukaṇ), and Māyōṇ, the Dark One (Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa) are lovers and warriors. One presided over the hills, the other over wooded pasture-land. They were the gods of both *akam* and *puram* milieus.¹ Bhakti poets are direct inheritors of this erotic/heroic ambience and its poetic genres.

The *akam* tradition runs deep in Tamil bhakti poetry. This is generally recognized by traditional and modern scholars, and if we have mainly attended to *puram* threads in the saints' poems, it is only to redress the balance. A strong *akam* strain appears in Tamil devotional poetry a little later than the *puram*. *Tirumurukāṅṟuppaṭai*, which may be the earliest devotional poem in Tamil, is a direct outgrowth of a *puram* genre. As we have seen, the poems to Tirumāl in *Paripāṭal* contain many *puram* elements, but *akam* and *puram* elements are mixed together in the *Paripāṭal* poems to Cevvēl (another name for Murukaṇ), who appears in this text both as a warrior god and as the lover of Vaḷḷi, the mountain maid who became his consort. Murukaṇ's love affair with Vaḷḷi evolves in much the same way as the affairs of *akam* lovers, beginning with clandestine meetings on the mountain slopes.

In these late classical poems the characters, situations and images of *akam* poetry are absorbed into Murukaṇ's mythology. In *puram* poetry the bhakti poets found an ideal language to express the devotional idiom of master and servant, as they found in *akam* the idiom of lover and beloved. We find touches of *akam* influence in the poems of the early *ālvārs*, but in the works

1. For a detailed treatment of these early Tamil gods, see Zvelebil (1977).

of later Vaiṣṇavite poets such as Tirumaṅkai and Nammālvār we find poems dominated by an *akam* vocabulary. Nammālvār most clearly displays the imprint of classical Tamil love poetry in his *Tiruviruttam*, a poem of one hundred verses, and in the two hundred seventy love poems of *Tiruvāvmoli*, the so-called *akapporuḷ* portion of the text. These verses are precisely keyed to the conventions of *akam* poetry, and in most, Viṣṇu is cast in the role of the *akam* hero. It is almost paradoxical that Nammālvār, a poet who puts so much of himself into his poems, should draw so heavily upon *akam* tradition, because in classical *akam* poetry the poet is completely concealed from his audience by the veils of internal narrators and an elaborate repertoire of conventional situations and images. Śrīvaiṣṇava commentators, however, attempted to neutralize the distance separating poet from poem in this genre by identifying Nammālvār with the female character-narrators, especially with the heroine to whom they gave the name Parāṅkuśa Nayaki.¹ (And in so doing they violate one of the fundamental principles of *akam* poetry—that its characters are never named.) According to this influential interpretation, Nammālvār's love poems document the poet's own love affair with god. Thus in this poem, which describes a situation which is very familiar to the audience of *akam* poetry—the heroine is languishing in separation from the hero—we are said to hear how Nammālvār suffers when he is left alone without Viṣṇu's support.

"What She Said

Evening has come,
but not the Dark One.

Without him here,
what shall I say?
how shall I survive?

The bulls,
their bells jingling,

1. This name is a "feminization" of Parāṅkuśa, one of the several names by which the saint is known. Parāṅkuśa, which literally means "he whose goad is held by another" denotes the *ālvār's* complete dependence on Viṣṇu.

have mated with the cows
and the cows are frisky.

The flutes play cruel songs,
bees flutter in their bright
white jasmine
and the blue-black lily.

The sea leaps into the sky
and cries aloud."

Tiruvāymoli 9.9.10
(trans. AKR)

In bhakti a whole poetic tradition is taken over as a signifier for a new signification. Here bhakti is the new signification, and classical poetry, like Vedic and Upaniṣadic concepts, *purāṇa* mythologies, folk motifs and the many other sources from which the bhakti poets gathered their materials, is its signifier. An example will make this clear. Here is a classical Tamil poem :

"These fat *konrai* trees
are gullible :

the season of rains
that he spoke of
when he went through the stones
of the desert
is not yet here

though these trees
mistaking the untimely rains
have put out
their long arrangements of flowers
on the twigs

as if for a proper monsoon."

Kōvatattan
Kuṟuntokai 66
(trans. AKR)

And here is what Nammālvār does with it. He follows the classical score closely, yet transposes it to a new key :

"They haven't flowered yet,
the fat *konrai* trees,
nor hung out their garlands
and golden circlets
in their sensual canopy of leaves
along the branches,

dear girl,
dear as the paradise of our lord
who measured the earth
girdled by the restless sea :

they are waiting
with buds
for the return
of your lover
once twined in your arms."

Tiruviruttam 68
(trans. AKR)

In the earlier poem, the flowering tree, the rain, the anxious beloved, etc. were the signifiers for the erotic mood of waiting (*mullai*). In the later poem, the entire erotic tradition has become a new signifier, with bhakti as the signified. Now the classical tradition is to bhakti what the erotic motifs are to the tradition.

SIGNIFIER ₁ (rain, flowering tree, etc.)	SIGNIFIED ₁ (the erotic mood/ akam)
SIGNIFIER ₂ (the entire erotic tradition)	SIGNIFIED ₂ (bhakti)

Or, we can speak of "framing" the erotic poem in a new context of bhakti—in *Tiruviruttam* 68 above, the "framing" is achieved by the presence of a reference to Paradise and the lord who measured the earth. Past traditions and borrowings are thus re-worked into bhakti : they become materials, signifiers for a

new signification : as a bicycle seat becomes a bull's head in Picasso. Often the listener/reader moves between the original material and the work before him—the double vision is part of the poetic effect.¹

VI. THE TAMIL CLASSICS AND VAIṢṆAVA THEOLOGY

Nammālvār's *akapporuḷ* poems may represent a peak in the history of classical influence in Tamil Vaiṣṇavite tradition, but they do not represent its end. Śrīvaiṣṇava commentators developed elaborate allegorical interpretations of the *ālvārs'* love poems.² Aḷakiyaṁaṅavāḷaperumāḷnāyaṅār, the author of *Ācārya Hṛdayam*, a theological work of the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, develops a theological interpretation for every detail in the *akapporuḷ* verses of *Tiruvāymoli*.³ Even the heroine's ornaments carry an allegorical meaning in this interpretation. The commentator's mode of exegesis is a secondary signification

1. The diagram and the examples are from Ramanujan (1981).

2. Following their canonization by Nāthamuni in the tenth century A.D., the hymns of the *ālvārs* were treated as sacred literature in Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition. Side-by-side with the Vedas and other sacred texts in Sanskrit, they were recited in temples and valued as a *pramāṇa* or basis for religious-philosophical discussion. Beginning in the late twelfth century A.D., the Śrīvaiṣṇava *ācāryas* began to write commentaries on the works of the *ālvārs*, and of all the *ālvār* texts *Tiruvāymoli* received the largest share of attention. The *ācāryas'* commentaries on the *ālvārs'* poems are sometimes referred to as *anubhavagranthas* or "works of enjoyment" to signify that these works embody the *ācāryas'* "enjoyment", i.e., esthetic and intellectual experience of the *ālvārs'* hymns. The *ālvārs* in turn are revered because they dedicated themselves to "enjoyment" of the lord. The word *anubhavagrantha* is revealing, for it shows that the *ālvārs'* hymns are polysemous texts. Each commentary is the record of a meeting between the *ālvārs'* poems and one especially well-schooled member of the *ālvārs'* audience. Five commentaries on *Tiruvāymoli* have become classics in Śrīvaiṣṇava theological literature, and perhaps the most influential of these is the *Mūppattāyirappaṭi* ("the thirty-six thousand") by the thirteenth-century commentator, Vaṭakkuttiruvīti-ppiḷḷai. (The name of the text is derived from the number of *granthas* or metric units it contains.)

3. The author of *Ācārya Hṛdayam* is the son of Vaṭakkuttiruvīti-ppiḷḷai (see note 2) and brother of Piḷḷai Lokācārya, who is looked upon as the founding father of the Teṅkalai or Southern school of Śrīvaiṣṇavism. *Ācārya Hṛdayam* ("the *ācārya's* heart") is not a direct commentary on the verses of *Tiruvāymoli*. Instead, the author aims to acquaint his audience with Nammālvār's innermost thoughts and feelings.

system.¹ In his discussion of the heroine's physical characteristics, for example, he isolates a number of metaphors which Nammālvār and other poets often include in their descriptions of the *akam* heroine. From the quality which binds purport to vehicle in each of these metaphors, he develops a theological interpretation. In this way, the commentator takes over the poet's metaphorical identification of the heroine's forehead with the moon as a signifier for the purity of the soul. We may envisage the interpretive process as follows :

SIGNIFIER ₁ (moon)	SIGNIFIED ₁ (forehead)
SIGNIFIER ₂ (lustre)	
	SIGNIFIED ₂ (soul's purity)

The commentator thus uses the signs of bhakti poetry to generate theological discourse.

The *akam* dimension of Nammālvār's poetry receives far more attention in *Ācārya Hṛdayam* than the *puṣam*, but the latter is not overlooked altogether. The author also develops the idea that Viṣṇu presides over the universe as a king presides over his realm. He equates the traditional five functions of the king with the five aspects of Viṣṇu that are discussed in Pāñcarātra āgamic literature (Damodaran, 1976 : 96).² The five functions of the king are equated with the five aspects of Viṣṇu as follows :

1. For a discussion of signifier, signified, and secondary systems, see Barthes (1968).

2. The Sanskrit sectarian texts called *āgamas* are ideally supposed to cover four topics : *caryā*, *kriyā*, *yoga* and *jñāna*. In general *caryā* denotes rules pertaining to the maintenance of temples; *kriyā* pertains to the conduct of ritual and the construction of temples; the *yoga* portion deals with methods of physical and spiritual discipline; and the subject of the *jñāna* portion is religious philosophy. There are two important Vaiṣṇavite āgamic schools : the Vaikhānasa and the Pāñcarātra. The Vaikhānasa is usually considered to be the more conservative of the two, and Rāmānuja's campaign to introduce Pāñcarātra modes of worship into Vaiṣṇavite temples is usually interpreted as a drive to popularize Vaiṣṇavism. The Śrīvaiṣṇava *ācāryas* introduced many Pāñcarātra ideas into their writings.

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| 1. The king reigns in state on his throne surrounded by the insignia of royalty. | 1. The lord reigns in heaven (<i>paramapada</i>) in his <i>para</i> aspect. |
| 2. The king circulates among his subjects incognito during the night. | 2. The lord dwells within all creatures in his <i>antaryāmin</i> aspect even though they may not be aware of his presence. |
| 3. The king consults with advisors and deliberates how to best maintain the welfare of his subjects. | 3. The lord reclines upon the snake Ananta in the milk-ocean and contemplates how to best sustain his devotees in his <i>vyūha</i> aspect. ¹ |
| 4. The king hunts wild animals. | 4. The lord comes to earth in his <i>vibhava</i> (<i>avatāra</i>) aspect and destroys demons. |
| 5. The king relaxes in his pleasure garden. | 5. The lord stays in temples on hills and in forested areas such as Tiruvēṅkaṭam in his <i>arcā</i> aspect. |

While it is true that classical Tamil *puṣam* poetry is a poetry of kings, heroes, and warfare, Aḷakiyamaṇavāḷapperumālnāyaṇār's discussion of Viṣṇu's kingly attributes is guided by discussions of a king's duties found in Sanskrit *śāstras*, but blended with classical Tamil conceptions. In this respect Śrīvaiṣṇava exegetical tradition is like the poetry it purports to explain: like the *ālvārs*, the *ācāryas* were heirs to two classicisms, Sanskrit and Tamil.

1. The four *vyūhas* or "emanations" of Viṣṇu are Vāsudeva, Saṅkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna and Aniruddha. In mythology these are the names of Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa's brother, his son, and his grandson. According to the *vyūha* doctrine, Vāsudeva represents the supreme reality, Saṅkarṣaṇa primeval matter or *prakṛti*, Pradyumna cosmic mind or *manas*, and Aniruddha represents cosmic self-consciousness or *ahaṅkāra*. From the latter springs Brahmā, the creator of the phenomenal world. Apparently it is because the *vyūhas* give rise to Brahmā that they are associated with the reclining Viṣṇu who "gives birth" to the creator-god through his navel.

The transposition from poetry to theology takes the same form as the earlier transposition from classicism to bhakti. It keeps the signifiers, transposes them to another level, and writes them with new signified elements. In bhakti poetry, both signifier and signified are "experiential", their relation is poetic. In the theological commentary, the signified has become abstract, and the relation between signifier and signified is allegoric. In this theological allegory, the love-lorn girl's messenger-bird is really the *guru* who mediates and relates her to god; her mother is no mother, but the soul's "conviction in the right means"; her hips and breasts are no longer erogenous and of the flesh, they are but the soul's attainment of bhakti and the lord's enjoyment of the soul.

With this commentator we are in the thirteenth century. The saints' poems are a permanent part of the Hindu religious scene. They live on, in all their full-bodied beauty and devotional power, subject of sect and temple politics, of allegory and ingenious commentary, of ritual and festival; they are also the moving resource of singers, thinkers, poets, and ordinary men. The saint as man speaking to god as beloved and protégé, offering Him his interior *akam* and exterior *puṣam*, is at the same time, in the same words, a poet in a tradition, a "man speaking to men". His past gives him a language for the present.

Hymn to Tirumāl (Viṣṇu)

"When the sun and the moon,
given to alterations
from the oldest times
went out,

and the fresh golden world above
and the earthen one
were ruined :

there were ages of absence
even of sky
rolling time after time;

sound was born first
in the first age of sheer sky—

womb of every growing germ
though yet without forms,

then the ancient age of winds
driving all things before them,

the age of red fire
in flames,

the age of mist and-cool rain
falling,

and when all four elements
drowned in the old flood,
the particles of earth
lay there,

recovering their own
natures, getting themselves
together;

then came the age of great earth
lying potential
in them all;

beyond the times counted
in millions, billions, trillions,
quadrillions and zillions,

came the time of the Boar
that raised the earth
from the waters
and let it flourish;

knowing that it is only one
of your Acts,

no one really can know
the true age
of your antiquity;

O First One, Lord of the Wheel,
we bow,
we sing your praise.

O you,
to those who say
you're younger, and brother
to the conch-colored One,
you appear young;

to those who say
you're older
than the one dressed
in clothes dark as all-burying darkness
with a gold palmyra for banner,
you appear older;

in the wisdom of the ancients
sifted by the high ones
with flawless intent,
you're in a state of in-between;

yet in any search
of things one can see
in this state or that,
you show only your own,
the excellence
of your most ancient state.

Wearing jewels
many-colored as rainbows
bent across the high heavens
on your chest, itself a jewel studded
with pearls, you always wear
the Red Goddess
as the moon
his shadow.

Which doesn't agree at all
with those who read the Vedas
and say,

You as the Boar,
with white tusks, sharp and spotted,
washed by the rising waves, lifted
and wed the Earth-maiden

so not a spot of earth
is ever troubled by the sea.

O lord fierce in war,
the loud conch you hold
sounds like thunder

to the enemy
rising as one man,
unafraid in anger,
rising like a hurricane
to join battle;

banners break and fall,
ears go deaf,
crowns shiver on their heads,
and the earth loosens
under their feet

at the thunder of your conch.

O lord fierce in war,
the discus in your hand
cuts the sweet lives
of enemies :

heads fall and roll
wreaths and all;
their stand lost,
like the tens of thousands
of bunches
on the heads of tall black palmyra-trees
not stripped yet
of root, branch
frond or young fruit,
falling to the earth
all at once :

not one head
standing on its body,
beheaded all at one stroke, they
gather, roll, split,
come together and roll apart,
and lie dead at last
in a mire of blood.

That discus
that kills at one stroke :
Death is its body,
its color the flame
of bright fire
when gold burns in it.

Yours is the lustre
of the great dark blue-sapphire;

your eyes, a pair
of famed lotuses;

the truth of your word
certain as the returning day.

If one looks for your magnificent patience
it's there, wide as earth;

your grace,
a sky of rain-cloud
fulfilling everyone;
so say

the sacred texts
of the learned brāhmans.

O lord with the red-beak
Garuḍa-bird
on your banner,

you're like all that
and also like all else,

you're in these,
and in all things.

As said in the Vedas :
in the sacrificer's word,

in the sacrificial pillar
built step by step,

and also in the seizing
of the sacrificial animal
strapped to that pillar,

the kindling of a raging fire
according to charted text
and famous tradition,

and in the building of that fire
to glowing light
and prosperous flame

is your form,
your food :

in such,
brāhmins see
(and even aliens agree)
your presence.

As soon as your heart
thought of ambrosia,
food of the gods,
the deathless ones received
a life without age,
a peace without end;

O lord unfathomable,
at your feet
we bow,
clean of heart,
putting our heads to the ground

over and over
we bow,
we praise,
we celebrate

and we ask O lord
with our dear ones around us
we ask :

May our knowing
know
only what is."

Kirantaiyār
The Second Song,
Paripāṭal
trans. by A. K. Ramanujan

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VĀKĀṬAKA ART AND THE GUPTA MAINSTREAM

JOANNA WILLIAMS

THE caves of Ajantā (Ajantā) have been used for a variety of purposes : as a bridge to eternity (by the donors), as dwelling halls (by monks and later inhabitants), as historical and religious documents (by modern scholars). The historian of Indian art may on the one hand seek to appreciate and understand them as fully as possible in their own terms. On the other hand, he may concern himself with their relationship to the art of contiguous times and places. It is the geographical aspect of this last question to which this paper will be addressed. Baldly put, is Ajantā part of Gupta art? If art historical boundaries followed political ones, the answer would clearly be no. We know that this region came closest to Gupta hegemony at the beginning of the fifth century A.D., when Prabhāvatī Guptā, daughter of the emperor Candragupta II, married Rudrasena II of the main branch of the Vākāṭaka dynasty, ruling in the area of the modern Nāgpur. This powerful woman continued as regent for her sons, but by the second half of the fifth century A.D., when the Ajantā caves were excavated, the Gupta dynasty was a dying if not a dead letter and was unrelated to the Vākāṭakas. Moreover, the caves fell within the territories of the western or Vatsagulma branch of the Vākāṭaka family. Nonetheless, narrowly political divisions seem useful neither in general for Indian art, nor in particular for the Gupta period.¹ Such a definition would,

1. For illustrations which give a very just picture of the Gupta oeuvre, see J. C. Harle, *Gupta Sculpture* (Oxford, 1974). A reaction against excessive