Conclusion

This study was begun with the aim of investigating aspects of continuity and change in the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition between the period of bhakti devotionalism of the 6th to 9th centuries CE and community consolidation under brahmanical ācāryas approximately from the 10th to the 14th centuries. This examination was spurred by the ongoing debate in scholarship on Śrīvaiṣṇavism: the traditional view of unbroken continuity from the Āḷvārs through the ācāryas being challenged by some modern scholars who argued for a radical reorientation of the tradition under the latter, and other modern scholars reiterating the traditional claim, with qualifications. I have argued for a middle position, i.e., that while there were important continuities with the Āḷvār tradition, there also were significant changes in keeping with the changed socio-economic and political conditions as well as the demands of an emergent community. I have done this largely through an analysis of the hagiographical accounts and comparison of the same with the information available in the hymns of the Āḷvārs, though other materials such as the commentarial literature, the sthalapurāṇas and inscriptions have often illumined an argument or provided critical proof.

Some of the changes discussed above are reflected in the interpretation of the hymns of the Āḷvārs. Indeed, it was from this point that the debate was triggered off, Friedhelm Hardy holding that the brahmanical ācāryas largely allegorized the ecstatic emotionalism seen in the Nālāyira Divya Prabandham. Vasudha Narayanan and John Carman from their examination of the earliest commentary on the Tiruvāymōli, Tirukkurukai Pirān Piḻḷān’s Ārāyirappati, Nancy Ann Nayar from her study of the poetry of Kūresa and Parāśara Bhaṭṭār, and Stephen Paul Hopkins from that of Vedānta Deśika, concluded that emotionalism remained an important aspect of the devotionalism of the ācāryas and was by no means whitewashed in the later tradition. Embedded in this concern with emotionalism is the understanding of the entire tradition represented by bhakti, and its compatibility with the philosophy of Viśiṣṭādvaita. I have examined the hagiographical accounts of two of the saints, Āṇḍāl and Tiruppāṇālvār, to see how the life-stories themselves can express the theological vision of Śrīvaiṣṇavism. Important aspects of Viśiṣṭādvaitic philosophy and Śrīvaiṣṇava theology were not merely expounded through the commentaries on the hymns and exegesis of texts like the Rāmāyana for lay devotees, but were carefully woven into the life stories of the saints. Besides showing, in Chapter 2, how the hagiographies of Āṇḍāl and Tiruppāṇālvār can be read as expressions of the salvational programme of Śrīvaiṣṇavism, I have tried, throughout the study, to point out other philosophical-theological issues that emerge from the hagiographical accounts.
A significant number of modern studies on the Tamil region have used the bhakti material as an important source for studying the social, economic and political structures. However, it appears that a distinction has not always been maintained in such studies between the literary productions of the bhakti hymnists and the later productions of the Śrīvaiṣṇava ācāryas. Of the vast body of this latter literature, in the form of commentaries (the five earliest on the Tiruvāymōli alone adding up to the size of the Mahābhārata), hagiographies, philosophical works and stotras (praise poems), it is essentially the traditions about the saints emerging from the hagiographies which have been extensively used in such studies because they appear to situate the saint-poets socially. This study has attempted to show that the hagiographies being later constructs, removed by several centuries from the bhakti hymnists, reflect the social realities of the early second millennium rather than the last third of the first which is when the Ālvārs sang their songs to and about Viṣṇu. In other words, the stories of the lives of the saints, both the Ālvārs and the Nāyānmars, that enjoy wide popularity among the Tamil people, may not have much relation with the saints themselves. Rather, they may be creations of a later period which portrayed the saints in specific ways for specific purposes. To use this picture to speak about the social situation of the 7th to 9th centuries is, therefore, anachronistic.

One of the important premises of this study has been that literary productions must be situated in their historical context. While ideology cannot be considered a mere handmaiden of socio-economic forces, ideas do not take shape in a vacuum either. The hagiographical literature, thus, reflects the preoccupations of the ācāryas which was, in the Śrīvaiṣṇava case, the construction and consolidation of a community of devotees of Viṣṇu. However, while members of the lowest caste could be included within this community on the spiritual plane as bhāgavatas, it was finally within the hierarchical framework of brahmanism; here lay the fundamental tensions which were never satisfactorily resolved. A partial repudiation of orthodox varṇāśrama dharma was attempted through emphasis in the commentaries on the equality of all irrespective of caste, and the portrayal by the hagiographies of some of the saint-poets as hailing from the lower castes. On the other hand, this investigation revealed that the ācāryas' 'reconstructions' of the lives of the saints were often bound by old, well-entrenched local traditions about them. It appears too, that there was an equally established folk tradition of revering these saint-poets.

The signature verses in the hymns of several saints do help to situate them socially and geographically. There is, thus, clear evidence of at least some of the saints hailing from non-brāhmaṇa castes. It is clear too that the ācāryas subjected the hymns of the Ālvārs to careful
scrutiny and constructed their life-stories by weaving in autobiographical details and other references that could be construed as such scattered in the hymns. Since the Śrīvaṁśa hagiographies have been one of the most important source materials for this study, it will be well to relate here, the tale of Tōntaratippōṭi, the only Āḷvār whose story has not been told above. It will be seen how the hagiographical account knits together elements from his compositions with contemporary reality.

Tōntaratippōṭi Āḷvār Vaibhavam

In the 289th year of Kali yuga called Prabhava varśa, on a Tuesday under the Keṭṭai asterism of the kṛṣṇa caturḍaśi (14th day of the dark half of the lunar cycle) during the in the month of Mārkali, was born in Maṇṭankuṭi, an amśa of the Lord's garland in a brāhmāṇa family of the Yajurveda śākhā.

Named Vipranarāyaṇa, the boy soon learnt all the Vedas and Vedāṅgas, and being deeply devoted to Alakiya Maṇavāḷan, started performing the kainkarya (service) of weaving and offering flower garlands for the lord of Srirangam everyday. One day, as he was engaged in his usual task of tending to his flower garden, a beautiful varastrī/devastrī named Devadevi rested awhile with her friends in the bower, and was surprised at his complete indifference to her. The M̄gpp adds that Vipranarāyaṇa was so detached from worldly affairs that Pirāṭṭi (the divine consort) asked the Lord if he could ever be interested in material things. The Lord, in sport, decided to make him attached to sensory objects and sent Devadevi with her friends to his garden. Piqued at his indifference, Devadevi laid a wager with her friend that she would enslave the man within six months. She cast off her rich jewels, and in the garb of a simple woman, she approached the brahmāṇa and asked to be allowed to share in the service to the Lord. After six months, during which she worked beside Vipranarāyaṇa, weeding and watering the plants, there was a heavy downpour. Upon Vipranarāyaṇa inviting her into his cottage for shelter, she seduced him, making him lose himself entirely in her. From this moment, he lived only for the pleasure of her embraces and forgot his dharma, spending all he had on her. Devadevi (predictably) abandoned him when he ran out of wealth, but Vipranarāyaṇa, unable to bear separation from her, lay unconscious in the street outside her door. The Lord and His consort passing by saw this, and the goddess asked her husband to restore their devotee to his former self. Accordingly, the Lord arrived at Devadevi's door

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1 M̄gpp, M̄gpp, Tōntaratippōṭi Āḷvār Vaibhavam.
2 Both the M̄gpp and Agpp feature this intercession by the goddess, but the Agpp labours the point. See Chapter 2-ii, footnotes 60-62.
carrying the golden water-pot used for the deity’s ablutions, and giving his name as Alakiya Maṉavāḷaṉ.⁴ said he had brought her a gift from Vipranārāyaṇa. Delighted, Devadevi welcomed her distraught lover back. The next morning, however, the temple functionaries discovered the theft and reported the matter to the king. The vessel was soon traced and Vipranārāyaṇa was accused. After a suitable interval in which he protested his innocence, and came to repent his long folly, the Lord appeared in the king’s dream (Agpp) spoke arcca mukhena (through the temple priest) (Mgpp) that He himself was responsible for the deed, and had had Vipranārāyaṇa punished in order to cleanse him of his accumulated karma. The Āḻvār went back to stringing Tirumālai⁴ for the lord with steadfast devotion and became a servant of the servants of the Lord.⁵ Devadevi is also said to have repented her old ways, and giving up all her possessions, to have devoted herself to temple service.

This account is a fairly typical trope on the dangers posed by women to spiritual aspirants. However, the specifics of the story show how the hagiographers knitted in references in the hymns of Tōṅṭaraṭippōṭi with contemporary reality. His speaking of himself in the signature verses as one who makes tulasi garlands for the lord⁶ and as a flower-basket-bearer⁷ indicates that he was a temple functionary, very likely a brāhmaṇa. The possibility is reinforced by his expressing regret at his ‘forfeiting the rights of priesthood and the acts of feeding the three fires’.⁸ It is not clear whether this is merely a stereotyped expression of lowliness or if the Āḻvār was actually penalised for some misdeed by revocation of priestly rights; the hagiographical tradition evidently read this along with several laments about the times he was caught in the ‘net of fish-eyed women/ women with long tresses’⁹ and the time he was a thief, keeping company with rogues¹⁰ to create a plausible story. In this context, some inscriptions of the 13th century acquire great interest. An inscription of the reign of Rājarāja III from the Tanjavur region records the calumny of some Śivadrohins. Two Śaiva brāhmaṇas are said to have stolen a jewel from the goddess and given it to a concubine, and committed further atrocities by confining to a dark cellar in the temple, a temple servant who claimed his due

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¹ This is the name of the processional deity in the Srirangam temple. Many ordinary folk would have been named after the lord as they still are.
² Malai means garland; Tirumālai is also the title of one of Tōṅṭaraṭippōṭi’s compositions.
³ The name Tōṅṭaraṭippōṭi means ‘dust of the feet of devotees’; this is how the Āḻvār signs the Tirumālai and the Tiruppayāḷuṭci.
⁴ Tirumālai 45.
⁵ Tiruppayāḷuṭci 10.
⁶ Tirumālai 25.
⁷ Tiruppayāḷuṭci 10.
⁸ Tirumālai 25.
⁹ Tirumālai 16, 33, 36.
¹⁰ Tirumālai 16
share of food. They also apparently maintained false accounts, flouted royal orders, purloined temple paddy and hid one of the temple icons. The record details the remedial and punitive actions the Śivamaheśvaras took.\textsuperscript{11} Another inscription of Māravarman Kulaśekhara’s reign records the misdeeds of a temple manager who brought and kept as his concubine a brāhmaṇa widow from a foreign land (probably non-Tamil), used the cooked offerings of the temple for himself, misused the treasury, took bribes and felled the trees in the devadāna land. The punishment meted him is not known as the rest of the record is damaged.\textsuperscript{12} No doubt, misuse or purloining of temple property by temple functionaries was an ever-present anxiety and a story incorporating such elements would have found resonance among its listeners. Whether the composer of the Tirumālai and the Tiruppālīyēḻucci was actually a reformed thief or not is beside the point. What is important is that the hagiography manages to enunciate a clear ‘moral’ in a story that seamlessly weaves in the saint-poets’ own words and expresses contemporary concerns.

The earliest strata of Tamil literature and epigraphs in the Tamil land establish the presence and, indeed, popularity of Jainism and Buddhism. It has been argued that bhakti oriented towards the Puranic deities Śiva and Viṣṇu was a means of countering the challenge of the heterodox faiths to the brahmanical order. The hymns of both the Āḻvārs and the Nāyaṇmārs frequently exhibit antipathy towards the Jainas and Buddhists. The trend continues in the hagiographical literature too, but we find the condemnatory statements in the hymns giving way to stories of actual confrontations. Needless to say, the bhakti saints emerge as the winners in all these, and often inflict violent punishment upon their defeated opponents. Further, it is interesting that the stories in the hagiographies devote far more attention to contests with Jainas than with Buddhists though an examination of the hymns of the saints does not reveal a parallel bias. In fact, a majority of the hymns that refer to the Jainas and Buddhists pour scorn upon them in equal measure; indeed, they usually speak of them almost in the same breath. Thus, even as the hagiographers wove in the motifs of antagonism and condemnation present in the hymns of the saints, they reworked and refashioned them to reflect contemporary concerns. While Buddhism seems to have largely disappeared from the Tamil land after the first millennium, except from port towns where traders from lands where it was a living faith congregated, Jaina presence was persistent though confined to certain


\textsuperscript{12} South Indian Inscriptions, 1908, no. 125. Cited in Soundara Rajan, ibid, pp. 94-95. SII Nos. 308 and 225 of 1927 are also said to deal with similar cases of fraud and misappropriation of temple property.
areas. This must have meant a continued diversion of resources—however small a percentage of the total patronage—to Jaina establishments in the period of the composition of the hagiographies, and accounts for the far more bitter tales of rivalry in connection with Jaina monks than with the Buddhists who had more or less ceased to receive patronage.

The pattern of engagement with the Śaivas is characterised by attempts at one-upmanship rather than outright conflict. One finds any number of hymns in the *NDP* which refer to Śiva desiring or receiving the grace of Viṣṇu, worshipping him, or admitting that a particular act such as granting salvation is beyond his powers. The Puranic myth of Ganga’s descent onto Śiva’s matted locks is elaborated further: it is the water with which Brahmā is said to have washed Nārāyaṇa’s feet after His cosmic act of measuring the three worlds that flowed onto Śiva’s head as the Ganga. Similarly, the legend of Brahmā and Viṣṇu trying to find the limits of the cosmic *linga* and failing is a favourite one with the *Tevāram* hymnists. In the hagiographies, however, we find several tales of philosophical debates, sometimes with Advaitins and at others with those who deny the superiority of Viṣṇu—though this is often not specified unless the opponents are Jainas or Buddhists. One gets the impression that by the 13th-14th centuries, the Śrīvaishṇava *ācāryas* were more or less resigned to their lower social and political influence compared with the Śaivas, and concentrated on emphasizing, to the community of the faithful, the superiority in philosophical debate of the early Śrīvaishṇava teachers—including some Āḻvārs like Pēriyāḻvār who is portrayed as having successfully established the supremacy of Viṣṇu *bhakti* in the Pāṇṭiya royal court. In fact, the story of Rāmānuja’s persecution by the unidentified Cola ruler may also have meant to convey simply the perversity of fate that led to the Śrīvaishṇava community falling upon bad times despite the evident greatness of its *ācāryas*. I am not suggesting that the entire story is a fabrication; in fact, this study has consistently tried to see how the available material was creatively reworked by the Śrīvaishṇava *ācāryas* to create patterns of meaning relevant to the age of the composition of the hagiographies.

The heyday for Śrīvaishṇavism, so to speak, was from the late 14th century onwards with the establishment of Vijayanagara rule. Many of the Telugu warriors and the Nāyaka rulers in the succeeding centuries patronised Vaiṣṇava temples and *mathas*. It was in this period that the Śrīvaishṇava pilgrimage network was elaborated, both with the construction of temples to Viṣṇu and the composition of *thalapuranas* glorifying sacred centres. Pilgrimage was an important motif in the *bhakti* tradition, in fact, the *Tevāram* poetry of the three most important Nāyaṇmārs, Appar, Sundarar and Sambandar, can be considered pilgrimage poetry. While
only Tirumankai among the Āḻvārs had a strong focus on pilgrimage, many of the others have described several holy places of the Lord and almost all of them display temple-oriented bhakti, i.e., their devotion was primarily directed not to a transcendent god but to a deity enshrined in a temple. This immanent deity was, of course, equated with and worshipped as the cosmic god as well. The emphasis on pilgrimage which is likely to have begun towards the later part of the bhakti period was elaborated upon and consolidated in the subsequent age.

The Śrīvaiśñava tradition is a complex product of the appropriation of a Tamil folk devotional cult by a brahmanical tradition. This Tamil devotionalism, expressed powerfully in the hymns of the Āḻvārs, was itself deeply influenced by Puranic–Sanskritic conceptions of the cosmic lord Viṣṇu. It had borrowed too, several aspects of the brahmanical world-view including that of the sanctity of the Vedas. What it did, however, was to stand this notion almost on its head by claiming that the Puranic deity Viṣṇu was the essence and embodiment of the Vedas as also their original giver. Thus, the Tamil songs in praise of Viṣṇu were, to this Tamil devotional cult, and indeed, in the eyes even of some of the composers of these songs, a rendering of the Vedas in Tamil, or better still, the very essence of the Vedas themselves. Nāthamuni’s claim of Vedic status for the Tamil hymns was, however, revolutionary in brahmanical, Sanskrit terms. Nāthamuni is credited with the ‘discovery’ and compilation of the hymns of the Āḻvārs. What he was clearly also attempting was brahmanical acknowledgement of the centrality of these hymns—which appear from the epigraphic evidence to have been popular from the late ninth century—in temple worship. His grandson Yāmunācārya furthered this process of accommodation through his Āgamaprāmāṇya which argues for the Vedic validity of the Pāñcarātra. Yāmuna’s successor in the lineage of preceptors, the ācārya Rāmānuja, formulated a theistic Vedāntic philosophical system, the Viṣiṣṭādvaita, that established the Vedic basis for bhakti devotionalism derived from the Āḻvārs. The ‘integration of Āḻvār bhakti in Śrīvaiśñavism’—which is the title of this study—generated doctrinal as well as social tensions which the new leaders of the community, the Śrīvaiśñava ācāryas, tried to address through the composition of hagiographies, commentaries on the works of the Āḻvārs, and philosophical works. It is some of these mechanisms of integration that this study has attempted to examine.