Chapter 1
Introduction

“What she said”

Evening has come
but not the Dark One.

The bulls
their bells jingling,
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.

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

This could well be a classical love poem from the Sangam Tamil collection, Akanānūru, the poems of the “interior landscape”, made familiar to us by AK Ramanujan’s excellent translations. And it does share a lot of features with the poems of that anthology—for one, this poem is also originally from Tamil, and has also been translated by Ramanujan. Though the similarity does not end there, it is actually a product of careful reworking of the older idiom, the established conventions of Sangam poetry, to convey a new sensibility. This new poetry breaks one of the cardinal rules of the akam genre—that none of the protagonists be named. For here, the beloved, the one causing the heroine the sufferings of love—in—separation, is, as in the puram genres, identified, as The Dark One. And to the initiated, this clue tells all—it is not a generic dark lover but the Cosmic Lord who swallowed the seven worlds and then lay as a baby on a banyan leaf, who smote the demon Hiranyakaśipu as a man-lion, who killed Rāvana in his avatāra as Rāma, who, as Kṛṣṇa, held aloft as an umbrella the mountain Govardhana to protect His cowherd community from torrential rains, who sleeps on the


hooded serpent in the milky ocean, and in Srirangam. He is also Māyon of classical Tamil, the dark lord of the *mullai tinai*, the pastoral landscape.

Māyon or Māl of the Sangam poems already exhibits features of the northern Kṛṣṇa; in fact, it is difficult to always tell which elements of the composite god are Dravidian and which draw on northern sources. His early identification with Kṛṣṇa, Viṣṇu, and, indeed, with Nārāyaṇa, the supreme aspect of Viṣṇu, in the *Cilappatikāram*, a late Sangam text, must certainly owe to northern influence. But a more important element from our point of view was the localization, the ‘fixing’ of the transcendental god. “The universal god becomes a personalized god, almost ‘visible’, his presence must be tangible, almost physical, ‘here and now’, contrasting with aniconic Vedic worship... A person with whom one may enter into an individual, highly personal, intimate, exclusive relationship and close contact”. The immanence of the deity in the landscape—Murukan/ Cēyyon in the *kurinji tinai* and Māyon in the *mullai*—that seems to have been fundamental to the Tamil ethos, and the relationship with this rooted deity, were to become significant for the trajectory of development of religious ideas in early medieval Tamil Nadu.

The 6th to 9th centuries CE in Tamil Nadu saw the emergence and flowering of a deeply devotional form of religion which, as it acquired a distinct character, came to be called *bhakti*. *Bhakti* devotionalism which was eventually to become one of the most important aspects of the religious landscape of the subcontinent was focussed primarily on either of the two gods, Śiva and Viṣṇu (or his *avatāras*), who came to be elevated far above the rest of the fairly extensive contemporary pantheon, and indeed above each other, in the minds of their respective devotees. The Śaiva tradition recognizes sixty three saints called Nāyaṉmārs,6

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4 Zvelebil, ibid, p. 249.
5 These are the most commonly accepted dates for the Ālvārs and Nāyaṉmārs. Tradition naturally places them in a long bygone age, and even till the beginning of the 20th century, numerous traditional historians tried to prove the early date of the Ālvārs with evidence from scriptures. One example will suffice. In explicating verse 8.9.10 of the *Tiruvāymōli*, the *Itu* (see Chapter 3) records this: Nammālvār described TirupPulliyūr as a spot blessed with abundance. Bhaṭṭar, (a medieval ācārya), jestingly remarked, ‘How could our saint describe this place as blessed when its inhabitants are racked by rents and debts?’ Ref.: A. Govindacarya, *The Divine Wisdom of the Dravida Saints*, CN Press, Madras, 1902, p. 172. Govindacarya reads this as proof of the great interval of time between the Ālvārs and the ācāryas, the Ālvārs’ naturally having been a ‘golden age’ of plenty.
6 Tamil singular: Nāyaṉār; plural: Nāyaṉmār. I shall, however, add an s to the plural, i.e., spell the word as Nāyaṉmārs so that it reads better in English.
while the Vaiṣṇava tradition reveres twelve Āḷvārs. While many of the Nāyaṇmārs may have been legendary, since only a few have left behind compositions, the twelve Āḷvārs have usually been thought to have been historical figures, as there are hymns attributed to all of them.\(^7\)

The Śrīvaiṣṇava community based largely in Tamil Nadu and in parts of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh venerates the Āḷvārs as saints and devotees par excellence of Viṣṇu. Needless to say, Viṣṇu is the supreme godhead for the Śrīvaiṣṇavas who designate themselves so in order to distinguish themselves from other Vaiṣṇava sects and secondly because of a crucial theological belief in the inseparability of Viṣṇu and Śrī, the latter signifying both the god’s Īśvari and acting as mediatrix between the god and his devotee. This theological position was elaborated between the 11\(^{th}\) and 14\(^{th}\) centuries by brahmanical ācāryas.

The Śrīvaiṣṇava corpus of scriptures comprises the following:

1. The hymns of the Āḷvārs in Tamil collected as the Nālāyira Divya Prabandham (henceforth NDP).\(^8\)
2. Philosophical works in Sanskrit, including commentaries such as Rāmānuja’s Śrībhāṣya and Gītābhāṣya expounding authoritative texts and independent treatises such as Vedānta Deśika’s Saṃkalpasūryodaya.
3. A vast body of commentarial literature on the NDP in Tamil and in Maṇipravāḷa developed from the 11\(^{th}\) century onwards.
4. Hagiographies of the saint-poets and the early ācāryas of the community composed in Sanskrit and in Maṇipravāḷa.
5. Stotras (praise-poems) composed by various ācāryas in Tamil, Sanskrit and Prākṛt.

In addition to these, the sthalapurāṇas of about a hundred shrines also constitute the bases of the belief and worship patterns of the community, though they do not have the same kind of canonical status as the above.

The Śrīvaiṣṇavas believe that there is a direct preceptorial line from the lord Viṣṇu through the Āḷvār saints, particularly Nammāḻvār, to Nāṭhamuni, the first of the Śrīvaiṣṇava ācāryas. Orthodox Śrīvaiṣṇava scholars also, therefore, believe in the continuity of the religious tradition from the Āḷvārs to the ācāryas. This position draws directly from the ācāryas

\(^{7}\) See discussion below.
\(^{8}\) Literally, 4000 Sacred Compositions.
beginning with Nāṭhamuni who saw themselves as direct spiritual descendants of the Āḻvārs. In 1983, Friedhelm Hardy challenged these age-old assumptions in his path-breaking *Viraha Bhakti*, arguing that the ācārya of the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition reinterpreted the hymns of the Āḻvārs to fit their contents into their own theological positions, in the process more or less erasing the deeply emotional content of the hymns, ⁹ at least some of which draw on the rich erotic-emotional *akam* genre of Sangam literature. This position thus implies a decisive break between the Āḻvār bhakti tradition and Śrīvaiṣṇavism as a religious system that developed in the early centuries of the second millennium. Critical scholarship in the field since Hardy has concentrated on marshalling textual evidence either to support or to refute his thesis. I believe that while the traditional claim that the ācāryas were faithfully following the Āḻvārs in both letter and spirit needs modification, there being significant departures from the themes of the saint-poets in their writings, it is equally incorrect to posit a radical break in the tradition. Indeed, I propose to show the ācāryas engaging, through the compositions of hagiographies and commentaries, in a creative project to integrate Āḻvār bhakti into Śrīvaiṣṇavism.

Secondly, the traditional understanding of continuity has had important consequences for modern historians’ understanding of the phenomenon of bhakti in the Tamil context. The arguments that have been made about the role of the Āḻvārs and Nāyanmārs in their contemporary society have, I suggest, often been chronologically inaccurate, being based on substantially later sources. In other words, the picture we have of the bhakti movement in the Tamil land is one that is frequently refracted through the eyes of the hagiographers of the 12th -14th centuries.

In this study, I shall examine the source materials closely to distinguish elements of continuity between the Āḻvār and ācārya traditions as well as differences between the two. This examination will also bring out the ways in which the later tradition addresses contemporary concerns through the medium of hagiographies and interpretation of the hymns of the saints, ‘creates’, as it were, the bhakti movement, carefully weaving older elements, popular legends and details available in the hymns of the Āḻvārs themselves with the theological and social vision of the brahmanical ācāryas.

The hymns of the Āḻvārs and Nāyanmārs express a religious consciousness which seems to privilege profound emotionalism over formal ritual, and yet, itself establishes a certain ritual

⁹ Hardy, *Viraha Bhakti*, op cit., pp. 46, 480.
of worship popularly known as pūjā. There certainly were devotees of the two high-gods of brahmanical Hinduism among different social groups: kings and queens as well as ordinary persons belonging to diverse castes have left ample testimony of their piety in inscriptions recording gifts to temples of Śiva and Viṣṇu, and to brāhmaṇas engaged in their worship. Did the ‘bhakti movement’ in the Tamil country invite fisherman and farmer, hunter and housewife to a devotional milieu stripped of hierarchy, as Kabir in North India nearly did? Or did it call out, in deeply moving language, for them to renounce long held faiths in ‘false gods’ if those were incompatible with their own, to embrace one where they might become members of a community of the faithful (Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava), equal perhaps spiritually, but distinctly nailed to a hierarchical, unequal social system? While lay bhaktas obviously came from all castes, I will consider whether the bhakti ‘movement’ itself was one that challenged the caste hierarchy, or was merely an agency for the spread and consolidation of hierarchical brahmanical religion in the south. Another aspect I will examine is how the Śrīvaiṣṇava community wove in motifs from the hymns of the Āḻvārs to express its antipathy of the heterodox faiths and of the rival ‘orthodox’ bhakti sect, i.e., Śaivism. Lastly, I will examine how the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition as it developed in the second millennium elaborated the theme of pilgrimage found in the poetry of the Āḻvārs to create an elaborate religious complex centred around and spread out over nearly a hundred temples in the Tamil land.

ii) Background

a) Ruling Dynasties

The development of the religious tradition called bhakti took place against the background of profound political changes in the Tamil land. The period just prior to the flowering of bhakti saw the Kālabhra dynasty in control of large parts of Tamil Nadu. Believed to be supporters and patrons of the heterodox religions, the Kālabhras are reviled as enemies of civilization by conservative historians. Accuta Vikkanta of the Kālabhra kula is denounced by later Tamil literary tradition for having kept in confinement the three Tamil kings, Cera, Cola and Pāṇṭiya. KAN Sastri’s contention that their rule was a “long historical night” seems to be


11 Indeed, it has been surmised that the reason for the rise of bhakti religion in the Tamil country was to overcome the oppressive Jain and Buddhist faiths imposed upon the populace by their rulers. See S. Vaiyapuri Pillai, History of Tamil Literature and Language, Madras, 1956, p. 100.

12 Sastri, ibid, p. 139. However, one wonders if vanquishing their enemies and extending their power wasn’t what kings were traditionally supposed to do.

13 Sastri, ibid, p. 139.

14 Sastri, ibid, p. 139.
based on the above and on the Kālabhras having supposedly abrogated devadāna and brahmadeya rights, though it is uncertain whether the concept of brahmadeya was prevalent in the Tamil region as early as the 4th–5th centuries. The prejudice against these kali aracars (evil kings) runs so deep however that the period of their rule is referred to as the “dark period” in the history of Tamil Nadu, or as the Kālabhra “interregnum” suggesting that it was considered merely an unpleasant interruption of an otherwise continuous ‘Hindu’ political domination. Though the later Sangam works, including the great Tamil epics—the Cilappatikāram and the Maṇimekalai (which, among other things, attest to the spread and influence of Jainism and Buddhism), were composed in this age, the evidence for the reconstruction of the political history of this period is admittedly scarce. Available insessional and literary records only allow a patchwork picture of the political history of Tamil Nadu between the fourth and sixth centuries to emerge.

The early Pallava rulers of Kānci had started as a political power in south India in the beginning of the fourth century CE. It was however in the last quarter of the sixth century that Kālabhra rule in northern Tamil Nadu was brought to an end by the Pallava Simhavishṇu. About the same time, Kaṭūnkoṇ and his son Māravarman Āvaṇīcūḷaṇaṇi put an end to Kālabhra power in the Madurai region and re-established Pāṇṭiya power there. Political records from this time onwards are less obscure but no less confusing, for the next two centuries were an age of repeated conflicts between the three major regional powers—the Čāluṇyas of Bādāmi, the Pallavas of Kānci and the Pāṇṭiyas of Madurai. Towards the middle of the eight century, the Rāṣṭrakūṭas took the place of the Čāluṇyas in the main triangular

15 Sastri, ibid, p. 139. KAN Sastri, The Culture and History of the Tamils, Firma KL Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1963, p. 19 also mentions the 9th century Veḷvikuṭi grant of the Pāṇṭiyas making a statement to this effect.
16 Sastri, A History of South India, p. 139.
17 Sastri, ibid, p. 142 speaks of a “many sided religious revival that checked the growth of Jainism and Buddhism”. In The Colas, University of Madras, Madras, 1935-37 (revised edition, reprint, 1975), p. 637, he refers to “the battle against heresy” and The Colas, p. 107, records his appreciation of the “pious exertions of the Āḷvārs and Nāyānmārs who led a great Hindu revival...[so that] the spread of the protestant faiths was stopped and the orthodox creeds restored to their place of dominance”.
18 BGL Swamy, “Kalabhra interregnum”—A Retrospect and Prospect”, Bulletin of the Institute of Traditional Cultures, Madras, Vol. 20.1, pp. 81-148, 1976, argues that on the basis of the Veḷvikuṭi copper plate inscription that the “so-called ‘Kalabhra interregnum’ was only of an extremely short duration lasting for a couple of years during the period of Rajasimha I (about the middle of the 8th century)”.
conflict, though the two branches into which the Cālukya family had split and the Gangas of Mysore took sides in it, sometimes with decisive results. The Coḷas of the Sangam era seem to have disappeared altogether unless they survived in the Telugu Coḷas in Rayalaseema.

The accession of Nandivarman II Pallavamalla of the junior branch of the Pallava family in circa CE 733 is narrated in sculpted panels in the Vaikunṭha Pērumāḷ temple at Kāṇcipuram. Pallavamalla succeeded Parameśvaravarman, and was not unopposed. Tirumankai Aḻvār in his hymn on the temple of Aṣṭabhuja Svāmī in Kāṇcipuram mentions Nandivarman’s son and successor, Dantidurga (c 795–845 CE), also known as Vairamegha, who was related to the Rāṣṭrakūṭaś from his mother’s side. Interestingly, the period from the seventh century inaugurated a great age of temple building in both the Pallava and Cālukya realms which gained momentum and reached its culmination in the Coḷa period. After a brief fall from glory, the Pallavas were again in the ascendant in the mid-ninth century under Nandivarman III (844–866 CE). A Tamil inscription of this ruler mentioning a Viṣṇu temple and a tank called Avaṇināraṇam after one of his titles has been found in Takua-pa in Siam, attesting to his vigour in propagating the Vaiṣṇava faith.

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21 Sastri, ibid, p. 139.
25 Pēriya Tirumōli 2.8.10.
26 Mahalingam, *Readings in South Indian History*, op cit., p. 41. Hardy, *Viraha Bhakti*, op cit., p. 264 cites KAN Sastri (book not mentioned, publication year given as 1966, p. 156), to say that Dantidurga alias Vairamegha was a Rāṣṭrakūṭa ruler who ‘went down to Kāṇc, and after a demonstration of force, struck up an alliance with Nandivarman II Pallavamalla to whom he gave his daughter Reva’.
The middle of the ninth century saw the emergence of Cola power.\(^\text{30}\) For over three centuries from this time, the Colas were to dominate the region of modern Tamil Nadu, despite some significant setbacks and gradual diminishing of their territory from the late 11\(^{\text{th}}\) century onwards. The Pāṇṭiyas were defeated in the first quarter of the tenth century, but the period of real glory of the Cola rule dates from the accession of Rājarāja I in CE 985.\(^\text{31}\) With the accession of Kulottunga I in CE 1070, the Cola dominions passed into the hands of the Eastern Cālukyas,\(^\text{32}\) but the elements of continuity in polity and, indeed, even in the family name adopted,\(^\text{33}\) were significant enough for the empire to still be called Cola. Disintegration set in from the twelfth century and by the mid-thirteenth, the Cola empire had disappeared. The Pāṇṭiyas who had continued in the Madurai region, albeit as a minor power during the period of the imperial Colas, and had engaged in several wars with them during the time, rose to power again in the early thirteenth century.

After the final collapse of Cola power in CE 1279, the resurgent Pāṇṭiyas had to contend with powers such as the Kākaṭiyas and Hoysalas attempting to establish a foothold in the Tamil land. To the ever-shifting balance of power among these and the changing political scenario must also be added the arrival of a new force, the armies of Allaudin Khalji under the generalship of Malik Kafur in 1310, and again in 1324-25. Eventually, the brothers Harihara and Bukka laid the foundations of the future empire of Vijayanagara at modern Hampi in 1336.\(^\text{34}\) After the Madurai sultanate was overthrown (as a result of several campaigns between 1365 and 1371), Vijayanagara power was extended to most of the Tamil region. It is important to remember that this century of warfare had introduced two new elements in the social fabric of the macro region—Muslims and Telugu warriors.\(^\text{35}\) The integration of new people into established locality societies was not a new feature in itself, for migration and conquest have a far longer history in this region. What is crucial is that besides the well-recorded movements of brāhmaṇa specialists from the Andhra region to the Kaveri basin or ritual specialists from one temple to another to install and maintain a particular bhakti ritual form, there were also

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\(^{30}\) Sastri, ibid, pp. 165.

\(^{31}\) Sastri, ibid, pp. 171.

\(^{32}\) This is considering the strictly patrilineal succession, for Kulottunga I’s mother was a Cola princess and the Colas and Eastern Cālukyas had been intermarrying for several generations.

\(^{33}\) They continued to call themselves Colas, no doubt because of the prestige the name had acquired.


\(^{35}\) Burton Stein, *Peasant, State and Society in Medieval South India*. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1979, p. 366.
movements of lower groups accompanied by their "progressive inclusion in the expanding agrarian and trade systems of the macro region".36

b) Socio-economic Structure and the State

While there is broad agreement on the contours of the political history of south India during the period of our study, the framework for the study of the socio-economic structure is a matter of ongoing debate. I shall only trace the broad outlines of this debate. Nilakanta Sastri, among the earliest and highly influential historians of south India, saw the king in the 7th–9th century period as "an autocrat in theory", whose rule was, however, modified in practice by several factors such as the involvement in the administration of members of the royal family, hereditary high officials and numerous corporate organisations and feudatory monarchs.37 The Cola state was described by Sastri as a Byzantine royalty functioning as a centralized monarchy with the help of a large and complex bureaucracy.38 The empire was divided for administrative convenience into valanāḍus or māṇḍalams, these being divided into nāḍus and further into kūrrams.39 As land revenue was the mainstay of public finance, its assessment and collection were critical functions of the administration which, in Sastri’s view, penetrated down to the village level.40 Sastri’s study of the history of south India up till the Vijayanagara period remains invaluable in that he established the details of the political chronology, drew the basic outlines of economic structure and placed on the historical map such institutions as the ār, sabhā and nagaram among others, which have received detailed analysis at the hands of later historians. South Indian historiography tended, therefore, to acquire a conventional character despite a fundamental contradiction in Sastri’s formulation, i.e., the apparent co-existence of a highly bureaucratised state, especially from the Cola period onwards, with largely autonomous institutions in the primary rural and urban centres.41 Among the first to challenge the conventional historiography was Burton Stein in the sixties of the last century. Borrowing the model of segmentary state first used by Aidan Southall to explain the Alur society of east Africa, he described the south Indian peasantry as organized in a number of ethnically cohesive and spatially compressed units. Stein saw "peasants without lords

36 Stein, ibid, p. 368.
37 Sastri, ibid, p. 161.
38 Sastri, ibid, pp. 191–192.
39 Sastri, ibid, p. 193.
40 Sastri, ibid, pp. 195–196.
41 Sastri, History and Culture of the Tamils, op cit., p. 59.
establish[ing] and maintain[ing] great states, enduring and complex local institutions and elaborate religious institutions". 42 Political authority and control were seen as local in several crucial ways. The scope of constituent units of the state was considered limited to well-defined and persistent ethnic territories, whose chiefs came from the dominant ethnic groups of the local territory and corporate bodies that participated in the public business of the locality. 43 To quote Stein,

"I have called this system segmentary in two senses: first, that while there was a single centre of ritual sovereignty represented by the king in special relationship to the Vedic god, usually Śiva, worshipped in the one great temple of the capital, political sovereignty was widely dispersed and stylistically imitative of the royal centre, and second, that each of these realms was a replica of the prime centre, again in terms of ruling style (i.e., the names adopted by chiefs, the gods worshipped by them, the emphasis upon and the same sort of prestational activities)". 44

Stein believes that there was a fundamental continuity from the Cola to the Vijayanagara periods in that the political system continued to be segmentary or pyramidal and that religious institutions such as the brahmadeyas continued to occupy a central place. 45 Stein’s hypothesis of the segmentary state was complimented with modifications in the studies of Kenneth Hall and George Spencer among others. Hall believed that an important feature of the political landscape of south India between the mid-ninth and the thirteenth century was the stability of “administratively autonomous” villages and regional assemblies known as īr, nādu, brahmadeya and nagaram, despite the rise and fall of several imperial dynasties. 46 Spencer argued that the central paradox of the Cola state “is that its expansionist tendencies reflected the inherent limitation of royal power, rather than its concentration, and the consequent necessity to devise profitable enterprises to enrich the court and strengthen its network of subordinate alliances”. 47

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43 Stein, ibid, p. 8.


While Stein’s formulation addressed to some degree the disjuncture between the autonomous village and the all-powerful state, it has been called into question in its turn on several accounts. Pointing out that Stein’s approach can be characterized as ‘the replication of uniformity approach’, Carol Breckenridge has pointed out that his primary concern has been with the state—or king-making. The state is treated as a political institution rather than as a social form and characterized largely without reference to the social forms and forces from which it arose and drew its sustenance.\(^{48}\)

The limitations of Stein’s model have been demonstrated by Hermann Kulke in the context of regional ideology and the function of the integration exercised through land grants in Orissa\(^ {49}\) and by Y Subbarayalu in the context of the changing character of the Cola state.\(^ {50}\) Subbarayalu grants partial applicability of the segmentary model to the early Cola state. Though he shows that the status of the king changed from that of a chief to that of an emperor,\(^ {51}\) he asserts that the Cola king was not the sole ruler of the country. A number of chiefs of small ruling lineages maintained a variety of subordinate relations with the superior Cola monarchs.\(^ {52}\) These chiefs were, for all practical purposes, masters in their localities, with their own courts, officers and army, but acknowledged the overlordship of the Cola kings.\(^ {53}\) They also patronised local temples with large money and land gifts.\(^ {54}\) Subbarayalu, however, points out that the inscriptional record is silent about these chiefs from about CE 1000 for about a hundred years and that they become prominent again from the reign of Kulottunga II onwards. The later chiefs were generally in charge of the protection of their localities and got in return sizeable revenue by way of major taxes on land and minor levies on local artisans and were, significantly, largely independent. They also maintained their own armies.\(^ {55}\) Subbarayalu points to the changes over time in the forms and functions of revenue collection, the structure of the nādus and management of temple affairs that Stein’s conception overlooks.\(^ {56}\)


\(^{51}\) Subbarayalu, ibid, pp. 267-268.

\(^{52}\) Subbarayalu, ibid, p. 269.

\(^{53}\) Subbarayalu, ibid, p. 270.

\(^{54}\) Subbarayalu, ibid, p. 270.

\(^{55}\) Subbarayalu, ibid, pp. 270-271.

\(^{56}\) Subbarayalu, ibid, pp. 280-306.
Champakalakshmi believes that Tamil Nadu underwent a complex process of political evolution in the early medieval period under the Pallavas and the Colas. While the polity of the Sangam Colas and Pāṇṭiyas were "kingdoms in the making", there was a gradual transformation from a tribal to a peasant society and economy in the early centuries of the common era, particularly in the river valleys where these kingdoms were emerging. The entrenched micro-regions such as the nādu and the koṭṭam posed, in the early medieval period, "a greater challenge to a state synthesis, however ideologically or militarily powerful the ruling groups may be".57 Societal development and institutional forms of integration were accordingly complicated. Champakalakshmi considers therefore that a single model would not suffice to explain the character of the state and suggests that it could instead be approached as a "multi-centred power structure".58

The [Pallava] state emerged by the eight century more as a system of alliances with long established-chieftaincies and entrenched peasant groups of the koṭṭam and nādu, when integrative measures assumed political dimensions through the sabhā and the temple which played positive and constructive roles in political legitimisation and synthesis.59 In Cola times, Tōntaimanḍalam, Pāṇṭimanaḍalam and Kōṅkumaṇḍalam may be considered as ‘nuclear regions’ which were ‘integrated’ with the help of religious ideology,60 as in the case of Orissa. Champakalakshmi writes,

“Economic integration was achieved not only through the brahmadeya and the temple but also by the Cola recognition and adoption of the nādu and nagaram, the agrarian and mercantile organisations, as viable institutions of state synthesis. Urban development consequent upon this economic expansion created a new societal situation with which the existing forms were incapable of coping and hence new forms of supra-local organisations arose requiring a different political organisation for the survival of the state. While the Colas failed to meet this need adequately, the temple survived as an integrative force and built itself into the new state system that Vijayanagara introduced.”61

58 Champakalakshmi, ibid, p. 164.
59 Champakalakshmi, ibid, p. 165.
60 Champakalakshmi, ibid, p. 165.
61 Champakalakshmi, ibid, p. 166.
Vijaya Ramaswamy challenges Stein’s categorisation of the nādu as an ethnically cohesive society, pointing out that the numerous jātis that inhabited the nādu were closely endogamous and claimed mythological origins that challenged and conflicted with those of others.62 Nor was the nādu an administratively cohesive unit, comprising, as it did, ārs i.e., non-brāhmaṇa villages, brahmadeyas i.e., brāhmaṇa settlements, devadānams and paḷlicantams i.e., lands belonging to Hindu or Jaina temples, and lastly nagarams. She questions Stein’s identification of the nāṭār with the dominant peasantry and the brāhmaṇa-velāla alliance63 and his categorisation of the left hand castes as artisanal and the right hand as agricultural.64

Noboru Karashima differs from Stein in his understanding of the importance of the nādu and consequent denial of the existence of a bureaucracy in the Cola state.65 He argues on the basis of inscriptional evidence that under such powerful Cola rulers as Rājarāja I, Rājendra I and Kulottunga I, efforts were made to integrate the state politically and centralise it by destroying the barriers between nāduś and incorporating them into the imperial administration,66 but concedes that the segmentary model may have some applicability from the Pallava to the early stage of Cola rule.67 He also cites inscriptional evidence for the strengthening of private landholding, emergence of richer landlords and consequent differentiation and stratification in rural society along with the appearance of military landholdings in the middle and late Cola periods.68 During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, older groups of privileged landholders of earlier centuries such as the brāhmaṇas tended to lose their land while new groups of landholders emerged, with important ramifications for the social formation of the Vijayanagara period.69 Differentiation within the velāla community came about with local magnates accumulating landed property even as many others from the lower sections of the community lost their right to land and became dependant on others.70

63 Ramaswamy, ibid, pp. 310-313.
64 Ramaswamy, ibid, pp. 316-317.
66 Karashima, ibid, pp. xxvi.
67 Karashima, ibid, pp. xxx.
70 Karashima, ibid, p. 123.
DN Jha argues that royal grants of land or villages to brāhmaṇas, temples and officials led to expansion of temple personnel. The fiscal concessions and immunities which accompanied many of these grants would have led to greater economic bondage of the peasantry, many of whom worked as tenants on devadāna lands. These aspects would have combined to weaken central authority and tended to give south Indian temples a feudal character.\(^71\) Karashima, however, counters that the inscriptive evidence for grants by rulers of villages to brāhmaṇas, temples and others in the Cola period, either as kanīyāci (right of possession) or as devadāna (right to enjoyment of revenue) grants, is decisively in a minority to justify positing the emergence of feudalism or serfdom.\(^72\)

Based on an analysis of some Pallava and Cola inscriptions, DN Jha suggests that land grants to temples affected their internal organization and gave them feudal dimensions.\(^73\) A significant feature that emerges from his study is that temple servants from the time of the imperial Pallavas were paid in-kind for services rendered to the deity. In Cola times, payment in grain continued, but increasing references point to assignments of land for remunerating temple employees.\(^74\) Jha however relates this to the country-wide decline of money economy owing to languishing foreign trade in the pre-Cola period.\(^75\) The practice of paying temple staff through allotments of land is seen as symptomatic of the growth of feudalism whose essence lay in the organization of the entire socio-economic structure on the basis of land.\(^76\) Several inscriptions from the Pallava period onwards testify to the fact that temples leased land out to tenants, and resulted in the growth of what may be called a feudal land tenure.\(^77\) Jha further contends that the unprecedented growth of temples and religious establishments, tīrthas and the temple-centred bhakti movement served as a major prop of brahmanical authority.\(^78\) Large numbers of donations were made by merchants from the Cola period onwards, perhaps from the desire of the members of the newly emergent commercial classes

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\(^74\) Jha, ibid, p. 205.

\(^75\) Jha, ibid, p. 206-207.

\(^76\) Jha, ibid, p. 206-207.


to gain social power and prestige. Jha speculates that priests might have fabricated dignified origins for their merchant patrons in return for financial support, though he admits that there are no clear indications of this in the sources.

In a strident criticism of the segmentary model as applicable to the medieval south Indian state, Kesavan Veluthat points to Stein’s distinction of three kinds of nādus without offering any support for the same. He also critiques Stein’s argument that the absence of major wars of conquest thwarted major change in the society, observing that this is to assume that only war and conquests bring about major changes and to ignore that evolution in the means and relations of production can lead to such changes. Drawing on the critiques of Stein’s model presented by Champakalakshmi, Karashima, Jha, Subbarayalu and Ramaswamy, Veluthat argues that the feudal model proposed by Kosambi and elaborated by DN Jha and RS Sharma may have greater validity in understanding the character of the state in medieval south India. Analysing archaeological and literary sources, he concludes that the literature centring around temples, i.e., the bhakti literature, expressed the ideology of the emergent-feudal social formation in south India. He proposes that the very architectural forms of the time, i.e. the great temples, with the “huge sanctum sanctorum in the middle, encircled by many circumambulatory passages and the prākāras, as also the chief deity enshrined attended by a number of lesser deities point to a hierarchical pattern in society.”

Religious activities and the institution of the temple were clearly central to the socio-economic structure of medieval south India. Indeed, it can be argued that it would be impossible to comprehend the forces that gave medieval south Indian history its unique thrust without an understanding of the religious complex of the times.

c) Religion

We have already seen that the cult of bhakti to a personal god came to flower in south India about the same time as the Pallavas uprooted the Kālabhras and established themselves in

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80 DN Jha, ibid, p. 120.
81 Kesavan Veluthat, “The Role of Nadu in the Socio-Political Structure of South India (c AD 600-1200)”, in DN Jha (ed), The Feudal Order: State, Society and Ideology in Early Medieval India, Manohar, Delhi, p. 184.
82 Kesavan Veluthat, The Political Structure of Early Medieval South India, Orient Longman, Delhi, 1993, pp. 7-9.
83 Kesavan Veluthat, Political Structure, op cit., p. 12.
Bhakti has been traced by different scholars to various earlier sources. The word finds its first mention in the Śvetāsvatara Upaniṣad where something akin to unique devotion to Īśvara is elaborated. Much confusion arises, however, from the broad range of meanings that are read into the word bhakti, with the result that, as in much of ‘Hinduism’, nearly anything can be proved to be like everything else. Bhakti as devotion to a personal god is perhaps the most common and partial definition, for evidence for such devotion can be traced in much of the religious history of India, or indeed even elsewhere in the world. In fact, Krishna Sharma does state that it constitutes a part of every religion, arguing against the explanation of bhakti as a religion, cult or doctrine. She believes that bhakti means devotion to god only in a general sense, with no implication of any particularised image or conception of God. Holding that bhakti can be both nirguna and saguna, she believes that the genesis of nirguna bhakti can be traced to the very emergence of the “Hindu concept of Brahman” for the impersonal atman is described as the ‘dear one’ in the Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, and because it is said in the Kathopaniṣad and Muṇḍakaopaniṣad to be unknowable through learning or knowledge.

Many later Vedic texts are, with better justification, considered devotional in character. Jalauka, grandson of Aśoka, the Mauryan emperor, is known to have been a devotee of Śiva. The Gītā, often dated to the two centuries preceding the beginning of the Common Era, is usually seen as the first text to speak of bhakti as it came to be understood. Suvira Jaiswal has argued that bhakti in the Bhagavad Gītā is “pure affection for the highest being who, although he has the whole world within him and is inconceivable, has also a physical adorable form with whom the devotee may experience a feeling of close intimacy comparable to that between friend and friend, father and son, lover and beloved, but there is no tinge of emotional love”. It has also been argued that the bhakti yoga spoken of in the Gīta, though a possible source for the later movement, is very remote from the kind of emotionally charged religiosity that is implied in speaking of the Nāyaṇmārs and the Ālvārs of Tamil Nadu, and of the bhakti saints of north India a few centuries later. Then again, the Tirumurukāṟṟupatul, a late Sangam poem devoted exclusively to one deity, Murukan, has been considered the earliest

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86 Sharma, ibid, p. 41.
87 Sharma, ibid, p. 46.
88 Sharma, ibid, p. 47
textual evidence of bhakti in India. In the Paripātal, a roughly contemporary anthology, we find fine examples of a mature expression of the exclusive worship of Māl or Viṣṇu, interspersed with poems devoted exclusively to Murukan.

Though Murukan, the deity par excellence of the Tamils, never suffered a complete eclipse, his cult was put rather in the shade from about the sixth–seventh centuries by the rise of the cults of devotion to Śiva and Viṣṇu. It is possible to argue that the cults of these latter gods, central to pan-Indian Hinduism, did not really supersede that of Murukan, and that Murukan and the numerous Amman, village and folk goddesses, remained powerful in their own right throughout the period among the lower caste and class groups, and that Murukan in particular continued to exercise a hold on the religious imagination of at least some sections among the higher castes too. But these sections, significantly, happened to be those that worshipped Śiva as the Supreme Lord, and accommodated Murukan as his son—a consequence of the Puranic synthesis of the old Tamil deity with the Sanskritic Skanda–Kārttikeya, a complex merger between what have come to be called the great and little traditions. This brings us back to the first hypothesis that the devotional cults of Śiva and Viṣṇu were indeed the most significant features of the devotional landscape of early medieval Tamil Nadu.

Both these monotheistic streams were deeply sectarian, hostile to not only Buddhism and Jainism, commonly perceived as heterodox for denying the authority of the Vedas, but often to each other as well. In fact, it has been argued that the bhakti movement despite being commonly perceived as opposed to the hierarchies of caste, was really directed against the heterodox cults. Tirujñānasambandar, one of the major Nāyanmārs, devotes one stanza in each of his 400 hymns to expressing his contempt for and hostility towards Buddhists and Jainas. Appar, another of the three major Nāyanmārs, famous in the tradition for converting the Pallava ruler Mahendravarman from Jainism to the worship of Śiva, often pours scorns on the “false doctrines” of the Jainas, perhaps with an insider’s perspective, having been a Jaina monk before he turned to Śiva. Tirumankai Ālvār, glorified in the hagiographies for

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94 See Chapter 4, Incidents from the Account of Appar/ Tirunāvukkaracar in the Pēriya Purāṇam.
abstracting and melting a golden idol of Buddha to embellish the Viṣṇu temple at Srirangam, takes issue with Śaivism too.\textsuperscript{95}

It has been argued that in the “early days of the [Pallava, Pāṇṭiya and Cola] monarchies, the monarch may have found the support of these movements quite useful. The movement in its turn derived much benefit from royal patronage, especially in making use of state power for winning their conflicts with rival sects in a physical way”.\textsuperscript{96} The examples cited in support of this contestation are the above conversions and that of the Pāṇṭiya Neṭumāraṇ from Jainism to Śaivism by Kulaicirai Nāyaṇār. These stories are, understandably, very popular in the hagiographies, but while the legend regarding Appar may have some historical basis, there is no evidence for the second. Besides, the relation of emerging royal power with the bhakti movement is not clearly established. The fact that there was a partial chronological overlap between the two (and again here, the equation is frequently made with the Coḷa, though the accepted dating of the Āḷvārs and Nāyaṇmārs places almost all of them in the pre-Coḷa or at best, the last among them in the early Coḷa phase) does not automatically mean that the ideology of bhakti was particularly suited to validate royal power. It has not been explained why Buddhism and Jainism were unsuited to perform the same task. This is especially significant since Buddhism and Jainism were popular in the Tamil land in the late Sangam age, especially among merchant communities, as is seen from the Cilappatikāram and the Manimekalai, not to speak of the compositions of Jaina authors of Sangam works, notably Tōlkāppiyar the grammarian and Tiruvalḷuvar the author of the Tirukkural. The hostility expressed towards Buddhists and Jainas in many of the hymns of the Āḷvārs and Nāyaṇmārs also points to their prominent position in society. The above argument obviously assumes that Śaivism (or bhakti religion) had a wider popular base and therefore served as a better tool for legitimation of royal power. While there can be no doubt that Śaivism was carefully used by the imperial Coḷa to project their own sovereignty,\textsuperscript{97} it needs to be emphasized that it holds true for the period from the second half of the tenth century onwards.

What also emerges from the above evidence is that these saints were not located in a religious vacuum, nor were they mystics far removed from the rough and tumble of ordinary life. In fact, I will argue that mystics too need to be firmly located in the contexts of time and space

\textsuperscript{95} See Chapter 4 for detailed discussion.


for their expressions to be properly understood. The context for us is early medieval Tamil Nadu where brahmanical Hinduism was in the ascendant and aggressively attempting to counter the influence of the heterodox religions. Thus, the post Kālabhra period naturally saw the brahmana\(s\) keenly striving for patronage, and all means, including decrying the Buddhists and the Jainas as deceivers and propagators of false doctrines, were deemed fair. That a number of evidently inspired men (and some women) chose at such a time to sing, in highly emotive language, of their love for Śiva or Viṣṇu, was an interesting coincidence.

Implicit in the above statement is our belief that these saints did not form a ‘movement’ in their lifetimes. The hagiographical accounts make at least some of these saints contemporary to each other. For instance, the Nāyaṇār Appar is said to have been a senior contemporary of Tirujñānasambandar\(^98\) who is said to have addressed the former as ‘Appa’ out of respect, thus giving him the name by which the saint is known to Tamils. A musician of the pāṇar caste named Tirunīlakaṇṭayāḷppāṇar is said to have accompanied Sambandar on his travels and set his hymns to music.\(^99\) Sambandar and Tirumankai Āḻvār are said to have met and engaged in a poetical contest.\(^100\) The two Nāyaṇmārs—Cerāmaṇ Pērumāl and Sundarar—are said to have been friends and companions during their extensive pilgrimages.\(^101\) Pōykai, Pūtam and Pey, the three mutal Āḻvārs, are supposed to have been born on three consecutive days and met in TirukKovalūr.\(^102\) Further, they are said to have travelled for some time together to sacred shrines of Viṣṇu and met Tirumalaiči Āḻvār during their peregrinations.\(^103\) All the same, with the exception of Periyāḻvār and Āṇḍāl, the two Vaiṣṇava saints who were father and daughter, as is clear from the hymns of the latter who frequently signs herself the daughter of Viṣṇucittā of the Veyar kula,\(^104\) temple priest in Śrīvilliputtūr, which we know the former to have been from his own songs,\(^105\) most of the other instances of contemporaneity may be largely legendary. The two other prominent exceptions must also be pointed out. Madhurakavi Āḻvār

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\(^100\) Ārāyirappāṭi Guruparamaparā Prabhāvam (henceforth Agpp), Mūvāyirappāṭi Guruparamaparā Prabhāvam (henceforth Mgpp), Tirumankai Āḻvār Vaibhavam; Divya Sūrī Caritam (henceforth DSC), Śrī Parakāla Sūrī Vaibhavam. See Chapter 3-iii-a and Chapter 4-iii-d.
\(^102\) Agpp, Mgpp, Mutal Āḻvārkal Vaibhavam, DSC, Kāsārayogi avatāra, Śrī Bhūta Sūrī avatāra, Śrī Mahadāhvaya Sūrī avatāra. See Chapter 5.
\(^103\) Agpp, Mgpp, Tirumalaiči Āḻvār Vaibhavam, DSC, Śrī Bhaktisāra Sūrī avatāra. See Chapter 3.
\(^104\) Nācciṟṟ Yār Tirumōḷi 6.10, to take just one example.
\(^105\) Tiruppallāntu, 11 (Periyāḻvār Tirumōḷi, 1.11), for instance.
speaks of Kurukür Nampi, i.e., Nammāḻvār, as his preceptor.\textsuperscript{106} While traditional scholarship takes this claim literally, it has been doubted whether Madhurakavi was referring to a living person or the idol of the saint which he revered.\textsuperscript{107} The Nāyaṉār Sundarar speaks of the lineage of bhaktas in which he includes Appar and Sambandar and even his own parents; in fact, it is his hymn known as the \textit{Tiruttōṇṭar Tōkai}\textsuperscript{108} (literally, the anthology of the holy servants) that forms the kernel of the stories of the sixty three Nāyaṉāmars later elaborated in the \textit{Pēriya Purāṇam}. This does suggest that by the time of Sundarar, there was a consciousness of a community of exceptional devotees beyond the common folk among whom the saints lived and sang their hymns and exhorted to join in their worship. It must, however, be remembered that Sundarar’s list of sixty two predecessors is largely legendary, based on folklore and remembered history. Though modern historiography seems to suggest that the saints had a common mission, it is difficult to trace in the hymns of the saints themselves, Śaiva or Vaiśṇava, any distinct connecting thread other than ecstatic devotion to their chosen god. The fact that several of the saints reviled the Jaina and the Baudhā ascetics, or called to the community of devotees to join them in their singing and worshipping Śiva/ Viṣṇu, are to be traced to the socio-religious context in which they were operating rather than to a well-formulated agenda.

While completely accepting the rootedness in society, and even a distinctly social mission of these saints, I do not, on the other hand, deny them an individual, exclusive inspiration. In other words, I do not propose that the \textit{bhakti} saints were mere agents of a larger conspiracy, as it were, of proselytising. I believe that personal spiritual endeavour and emotionally surcharged devotion were the moving forces behind the saints, but saints are human too, and they reflect the ideas and prejudices of their times. In doing so they become, both consciously and unconsciously, agents of a certain kind of change that was being engineered in multiple ways in their time. As products of their time and as individuals with natural egos—notwithstanding the claims of abject humbleness they make in their songs—they were very likely fired by a missionary zeal. To regard Appar’s conversion of the Pallava ruler Mahendravarman from the Jaina faith to Śaivism, or Sambandar’s similar conversion of the Pāṇṭiya ruler Arikēsari Parāṅkusa Māravarman as blatantly mercenary acts, intended to divert

\textsuperscript{106} \textit{Kamṭinunirciruttāmpu} 1-10.
\textsuperscript{107} Friedhelm Hardy, “The Tamil Veda of a Sudra Saint: The Srivaisnava Interpretation of Nammalvar”, in Gopal Krishna (ed), \textit{Contribution to South Asian Studies}. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1979, pp. 28- 87. I, however, incline to the view that Madhurakavi was an actual disciple of Nammāḻvār. See Chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{108} \textit{Tevārām} 39.
the royal coffers from Jaina monasteries to Śiva temples, would surely be to reduce these saints to mindless cogs in a juggernaut, but to see them as acts of devotion with exclusively other-worldly concerns would be equally inappropriate. In fact, much is made in the hagiographies of such startling and important conversions by both traditions, Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva, indicating their real-worldly importance. It has been suggested that the notion of a bhakti ‘movement’ is a “cultural step-child of the nationalist movement” and dates to perhaps no earlier than the fourth decade of the last century.109 Indeed, it has been convincingly argued that the idea of a coherent movement owes to Hazariprasad Dwivedi’s translation of Grierson’s notion of bhakti as a religious revolution into the Hindi phrase, ‘bhakti āndolan’.110 There is evidence of a self-consciousness of bhakti being a unique religious idea with a specific chronological and geographical progression from about the early eighteenth century.111 While I will continue to use the phrase, ‘bhakti movement’ for reasons of convenience, I believe that the unity of purpose that the phrase conveys was one that was only constructed, in the case of the Tamil land at least, by the ācāryas composing hagiographies between the 12th and 14th centuries.

Similarly, the extensive pilgrimages undertaken by some of the saints need also to be contextualised in a tradition of pilgrimage that had already come into being in the Tamil land, as is evident from late Sangam works. The Tirumurukāṟṟupatái, being a text in the āṟṟupatái genre of puram poetry which advises poets about munificent patrons, directs pilgrims to the sacred spots, the ‘residences’ of Murukan.112 The Paripāṭal describes pilgrims to the mountain shrine of Mālirunkunru113 (modern Tirumāliruṅkūḷai/ Ajakarmalai near Madurai).114 In the

110 Hawley, ibid.
111 The Bhāgavata Mahātmya, 1.48-50, records this answer from a beautiful maiden asked by the sage Nārada about her identity, “I was born in Drāviḍa,/ Grew mature in Karnāṭaka,/ Went here and there in Mahārāṣṭra,/ Then in Gujarāṭ I became old and worn/ … For long I went about in weakened condition/… But on reaching Vṛndāvana I was renewed…” John Stratton Hawley’s translation. Ibid.
112 R Champakalakshmi, “From Devotion and Dissent to Dominance: The Bhakti of the Tamil Alvars and Nayanars”, in R Champakalakshmi and S Gopal (eds), Tradition, Dissent and Ideology. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1996, p. 137 dates the Tirumurukāṟṟupatái and the Paripāṭal to the fifth-sixth centuries. These are the most commonly accepted dates. However, Peterson, Poems to Siva, op cit., p. 4, footnote 7, dates the texts to the 6th–7th centuries.
113 The word means the mountain where Māl resides. The modern names of the place mean the sacred grove of Māl or the mountain of the beautiful lord.
114 Paripāṭal, v 15. Cited in Katherine Young, Beloved Places (Ukantarulina nilankal): Praise of Tamil Nadu and the Making of Indic Civilization, Unpublished Manuscript, p. 2. Also quoted with a
Cilappatikāram, Kovalan and Kannaki are said to have met, while journeying from Pukār to Madurai, a brahmāna, native of Māṅkāṭu in the region of Kutamalai or the western hills, travelling to feast his eyes on the Lord reclining on his serpent bed in the island shrine. He further describes the beauty of Netiyon (the tall one/great one) on the peak in Venkatam hill and, after praising Tirumālirunkunram, advises them to journey there. Indeed, the brahmāna even tells them that he intends to go to the sacred places of the Lord “who measured the earth”.

The Tamil pilgrimage tradition, though reflective of the larger medieval emphasis on tīrtha that is elaborated in the Purāṇas, has some unique features which derive from the ancient Tamil concept of the immanence of divine powers or of specific deities in the landscape. The Tamil land is itself considered holy as is clear even from the Sangam poems. Specific sites came to be associated with specific incidents in the Purāṇas which had, by the early medieval centuries, obviously achieved considerable popularity. Sthalapurāṇas, popular texts which detail the mythic greatness of specific shrines and the merits accruing to pilgrims at the shrine were produced in great numbers from about the sixteenth century. It has been suggested that the saints sang about the feats of Viṣṇu and the legends connected with him without any particular reference to the deities enshrined in the temples they visited and that this localizing of the myths might itself have been a product of the age which produced these sthalapurāṇas. It was, accordingly, the later Colas and Pāṇṭiyas who were inspired by certain hymns to entitle particular deities. While this was true in several instances, some of which I shall examine, the hymns themselves give ample evidence of territorially locating the Lord and his activities, of “singing temples into existence”.

The Viṣṇava Ālvars and the Śaiva Nāyaṇmārs sang in Tamil, the language of the masses, and not in Sanskrit, the usual language of erudition and scholarship and, consequently, of the

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115 Likely to be a reference to Srirangam.

116 Modern Tirumalai/Tirupati.

117 Modern Tirumālirūṇcolai near Madurai.

118 Cilappatikāram, canto XI. Cited in Katherine Young, Beloved Places, op cit., p. 18.


120 Champakalakshmi, Vaisnava Iconography in the Tamil Country, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1981, p. 188.

121 R. Champakalakshmi, ibid, pp. 188.

privileged elites. The later, northern Indian bhakti saints also expressed themselves in the vernacular but, while noting this parallel, the contrast needs to be established as well. Though Sanskrit did, even in the Tamil country, carry prestige and was associated with the priestly elite, and though the Tamil tradition also mythically traces its origins to the north through the Vedic seer Agastya, the earliest origin myths also place Tamil on a level of equality with Sanskrit. Tamil itself boasts a literary tradition of at least 600 years by the time of the earliest bhakti saints. Analysis of the hymns of the Āḻvārs demonstrates clearly their familiarity with the conventions of Sangam poetics which, as suggested by various scholars, was far from rustic.\textsuperscript{123} Not only are Sangam motifs strewn throughout the corpus of the devotional poetry of the Āḻvārs, the Nālāyira Divya Prabandham, the akam genre of classical Sangam poetry is, as has been pointed above, elaborated and creatively reworked in the devotional love poetry of some Āḻvārs, notably Āṇḍāḷ and Nammāḻvār. The ancient literary tradition might have continued to be known and well loved, such that the Āḻvārs' hymns might have found reception in an audience well attuned to its resonances. The Sangam poems composed in a language far removed from daily speech may not have been accessible to the lay Tamil speaker unlikely to be versed in classical literary conventions; the hymns of the bhakti saints, on the other hand, make a point of being close to the Tamil spoken during their time.\textsuperscript{124} At the same time, this also reinforces the hymnists' own superior familiarity with the classical tradition, and a distinct presence of 'craft' as opposed to literary naiveté. Tamil itself was a 'divine gift', a boon, and despite its closeness to the speaker as mother tongue, worthy of reverence.

Though some poems of the Sangam corpus are designed as soliloquies, they often address a listener, usually a stereotyped other such as the girl-friend or the mother. Bhakti poems expand this audience to include the world of devotees of the Lord. The audience is invited to join in the worship, indeed, in the joy of looking upon and serving the Lord in His temple. The natural world, woven into the emotional heart of Sangam literature, serves yet another purpose in bhakti poetry—glorification of the lands where the Lord resides. That these poems were meant for a wide audience is made clearer still by the promise held out in numerous poems that faultless, loving, meditative recitation or singing of the same would secure happiness in this world and hereafter.


\textsuperscript{124} Cutler & Ramanujan, "From Classicism to Bhakti", op cit., pp. 191-192.
Pointing out the distinctions between the *saguna* and *nirguna* orientations among the medieval saints such as Kabīr, Dādu, Sūrdās and Tulasīdās, which make the application of the same term with a definite meaning for all of them problematic, Sharma argues for a much more open category that would allow the rubric of *bhakti* to include such entirely different religious ideas as the prayerful Vedic hymns and the medieval mystic Caitanya’s ecstatic god-absorbedness. Such a generalisation cannot, however, serve as a tool of analysis. In his densely researched monograph, Friedhelm Hardy maps the data from widely varied sources in Sanskrit, Pali and Tamil to arrive at a historical overview of emotional *bhakti*. At the very outset, he sets out his minimum acceptable definition of *bhakti* as follows: There are three separate planes of which the mystic is aware and which condition his emotions. These are the personal or experiential, the poetic, and finally, the mythic. Each of these levels reveals three elements—the aesthetic, the erotic, and the ecstatic. Hardy chooses to consider as relevant to his study only those aspects of devotionalism which fulfil these criteria at all levels. It will be seen that with the exception of the erotic (which is not a necessary component either of all the Ālvārs and Nāyaṇmārs or all the later northern Indian saints), these criteria will help to include within the orbit of *bhakti* saints and poets from the 6th–7th century Ālvārs and Nāyaṇmārs to the 15th century Tulasīdās. This definition makes *bhakti* a useful analytical category for a fairly large geographical and chronological span, without imposing any conditions on its ideological content, nor on its social or economic background. It is in this sense that I shall use the term, though I am specifically concerned with the Ālvārs of Tamil Nadu. An exhaustive survey of the early source material enables Hardy to identify the earliest appearance of motifs and themes associated with the highly pervasive and influential Kṛṣṇa devotionalism of the early medieval Ālvārs and the later medieval saints of northern India. In the story of the origin and development of *bhakti*, there is place for aspects of folk religion, for worship with flowers, garlands, perfumes, parasols, banners and bells etc, i.e., an aesthetically thrilling, sensuous worship, for the myths of the cowherds on the banks of the Yamuna in which the myths of Kṛṣṇa’s childhood and his amorous sports with the *gopīs* are crucial, and for the regular treatment of the amorous relationship in secular literature. One may detect a tentative identification of Kṛṣṇa with Viṣṇu in Hāla’s *Sattasāi*, but it is definitive in Kālidāsa’s *Meghadūtam*. Kālidāsa in fact, knows of Kṛṣṇa as both the lover of the *gopīs* and a manifestation of Viṣṇu. The *Mahābhārata*, whose earliest layers reach well back into

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127 Hardy, ibid, pp. 8-10.
128 Hardy, ibid, pp. 119-236.
129 Hardy, ibid, p. 62.
the first millennium BCE, is unaware of the *gopi* episodes except fleetingly, and that in its much later stages. On the other hand, the *gopi* themes as well as *Kṛṣṇa*'s miraculous childhood in Vraja are mentioned in detail in the *Harivamśa*, supposedly an appendix to the *Mahābhārata*, that originated in the early centuries of the Christian era.

Hardy traces the change and development in the form and content of the Ālvars' hymns in chronological sequence, showing how emotionalism grows from very nebulous bases in Pey, Pyūtam and Poṭyakai to its greatest intensity in Nammāḻvar, Tirumankai, Āṇḍāl and Pēriyāḻvār. There are, however, distinct differences in the approaches of each of these four saints, apart from the obvious one of Pēriyāḻvār's envisaging the Lord essentially in non-erotic forms, unlike the other three. Hardy believes that the compositions of the latest Ālvars themselves seem to eschew this intense erotic emotionalism,¹³⁰ but Hardy sustains this argument only by alteration of the relative chronology of the Ālvars—while there is little independent proof for the traditionally accepted order, there is not much more to dispute it either, at least for the historical Ālvars. In fact, a much later date for Nammāḻvār than Hardy prefers seems likely.¹³¹

Hardy's primary argument in his path-breaking *Viraha Bhakti* has, however, been that the ṛṣayās between the 12th and 14th centuries gave an entirely unwonted interpretation to the hymns of the Ālvars, reading the intensely emotional outpourings of the saints expressed often in unmistakeably corporeal terms allegorically, as the soul's seeking after the divine or as illustrations of philosophical concepts.¹³² Orthodox Śrivaistāvā scholars who see an unbroken tradition from the Ālvars to the ṛṣayās, notwithstanding the late-medieval split into the Tēṅkalai and Vaṭakalai sects emphasizing sometimes radically different philosophical doctrines, have largely condemned his position as blasphemous if not dismissed it as that of an outsider "who doesn't really know".¹³³ This position draws directly from the ṛṣayās, beginning with Nathamuni/Rāmānuja who saw themselves as direct spiritual descendants of the Ālvars. Not only the faithful, however, but even many modern historians trained to think of all religious systems as merely carefully designed ideologies of oppression, might equally subscribe to the notion that besides doctrinal differences, of interest to none but the theologian, there is little to distinguish between Āḻvār bhakti and the Viśiṣṭādvaita philosophical school which, together, constitute Śrivaistānavism. While there have been important studies on the pilgrimage tradition, on the sectarian divide and its material fallout in

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¹³⁰ Hardy, *Viraha Bhakti*, op cit., pp. 434-442.
¹³¹ See below, discussion on dates.
terms of temple control and lay following, Rāmānuja’s role in the consolidation of the Śrīvaiśñava tradition of temple worship, the philosophy of Viśiṣṭādvaita and its compatibility with Ālvār devotionalism, the implications of Hardy’s argument have meant that almost all such studies either bolster or question it in some way.

Vasudha Narayanan and John Carman have analysed the first commentary written on any the hymns of the Ālvārs, the Ārāyirappāti, on Nammālvār’s Tiruvāyūmoli, in Maṇipravāla, in the 12th century by Tirukkurukaip Pirān Pillān, one of Rāmānuja’s immediate disciples, to show continuance of the theme of emotional bhakti.134 The Jesuit scholar Francis Clooney, despite his excellent survey of Nammālvār’s Tiruvāyūmoli, seems to be following the Christian missionaries of the early twentieth century in his appreciation of Śrīvaiśñava monotheism, which he traces directly to the Ālvārs.135 But this assumption must be fractured somewhat—for the first three Ālvārs do not even always distinguish between Śiva and Viṣṇu, the two gods who became uniquely supreme in two different religious traditions. Nancy Ann Nayar concludes from her study of the Sanskrit stotras of Parāśara Bhaṭṭar and Kūreśa, two major ācāryas of the last and immediately post-Rāmānuja years, that intense emotionalism not only did not die out from the Śrīvaiśñava tradition, it continued to find expression in the poetry of the ācāryas.136 Steven Paul Hopkins, focussing on the poetry of Vedānta Deśika, tries to chart a middle path and argues that while the traditional claim that the ācāryas were faithfully following in both letter and spirit the Ālvārs isn’t entirely baseless, there are significant departures from the themes of the saint-poets.137 There is of course no denying that the earliest ācāryas, themselves of Vaiśṇava persuasion over and above their Vedantic moorings, drew deeply on the spiritual heritage of the Ālvārs. My position is similar to Hopkins’, but I shall arrive at it through an examination of the hagiographic material combined with examples from the commentaries, which were, as pointed out above, expounded to large audiences in Srirangam from at least the 12th century.

133 Personal communications from Profs. KKA Venkatachari and (late) J Parthasarathi.
137 Steven Paul Hopkins, Singing the Body of God: The Hymns of Vedāntadeśika in their South Indian Tradition, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2002, p. 7 and passim.
I have already stated that I do not believe that the ācāryas and the Āḻvārs constitute one seamless, homogenous tradition. There appears, rather, a well-woven synthesis, one deeply emotional, based firmly in a this-worldly tradition, and another highly intellectual, owing its primary impulse to a philosophy of world negation (though substantially modifying the notion of māyā or illusion). The Āḻvārs’ devotion seeks union with the object of adoration, the Lord’s feet, not just post-mortem, but in a sensuous fashion. This found expression often as a desire for service to or union with the temple idol. However, as Hardy points out, the ultimate empirical impossibility of corporal union with the transcendental divine gave birth to a poetry of exceptional emotional intensity in the viraha bhāva, seeming, in its most despairing cry of separation, to exult in the depths of ecstasy it could plumb. As David Shulman puts it, “Having inherited the goal of world renunciation from an earlier stage of Indian religion, bhakti stands it back on its head and directs man back to life on earth.” The ācāryas on the other hand, while not dismissing worldly existence as mere illusion, do not see the body as a vehicle for achieving their ultimate destination which, for them, as for the Āḻvārs, is the Lord. However, there remains a subtle difference here as well—the hoped for bliss that lies firmly in the afterlife for the teachers is eternal service at paramapada—the feet of the Lord; this life is a mere preparation of the soul by focusing on the Lord and providing service to him in the temple. Interestingly, we find in some of the Āḻvārs’ hymns the celebration of a human life as one in which service to the Lord is possible—in the temple—and thus as good as what can possibly be attained later, and certainly better than what even the devas (minor divinities) can enjoy. These differences, which mark critical departures from the Āḻvār bhakti tradition while seeming to reiterate it, are central to the way the incipient community imaged itself.

KA Nilakanta Sastri believes that the bhakti cult had its origins in northern India whence it spread to the south, though the historical links for the same have been lost. As a nationalist historian, he sees the Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva bhakti streams as not only contemporary (which they indeed were) but also as cooperative, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Indeed, he even mentions a “friendly meeting” between Tirumankai Āḻvār and the Nāyānār Jñānasambandar, though our sources suggest that it was a contest for supremacy.

139 Shulman, Tamil Temple Myths, op cit., p. 21.
141 Sastri, ibid, p. 39.
142 Sastri, ibid, p. 39.
143 Sastri, ibid, p. 46.
attended by sectarian rivalry. The hostility of the bhakti creeds to Buddhism and Jainism is explained as a result of their “offending the Hindu sense of religious decency”... in denying the authority of God and of the revealed word, the Veda. Sastri states that the bhakti movement left behind, apart from the compositions of the saints, a large body of legendary history. However, despite the categorical declaration, “It is important... to keep in mind... that hagiography is not history. More often than not, hagiography is reflective of the societal concerns, or even the social ideology of the period in which it is composed,” he continues to read these ‘legendary histories’ as statements of fact, excluding perhaps only the obviously supernatural episodes. Despite commenting on the use of the vernacular in these hymns and their “setting to simple tunes which the masses loved to sing”, Sastri does not draw the conclusions that others, especially some modern Srivašnavas have, i.e., that the bhakti movement was, at least theoretically, anti-hierarchy and anti-caste. This is not surprising considering Sastri’s belief that the caste system was an excellent solution to the problem of efficient division of labour, leading to all-round harmony.

Reacting to this over-simplification and to the neglect of the fact that the varna order entailed differential access to resources, a number of Marxist historians have seen the bhakti movement as merely another tool for the propagation of social hierarchies while effectively ‘integrating’ the lower castes in the social system and, indeed, in securing their co-operation in their own oppression. Central to their thesis is the feudal model, which is seen as characterising not only the political and economic structure but, equally, the entire network of relationships in society. Religious processes are thus seen to bolster the feudal hierarchy.

Suvira Jaiswal argues that “by the end of the Mauryan age, Aryan society was firmly established into a social structure based not on tribal loyalties but on varna divisions. To hold this form of society together, devotion and loyalty were essential attributes which could take the place of earlier tribal bonds and ensure the smooth functioning of the state. In such conditions, a religion based on devotion and faith, which also had a messianic appeal, could have maximum appeal for the people, and in the early centuries preceding the Christian era religious thinking in practically all sects was deeply coloured by hopeful devotional ideas...
The idea found its best expression in the *Bhagavad Gītā* which preached devotion to a god who incarnated himself repeatedly for the good of his devotees and maintained the social and religious laws". In the context of the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism, AK Warder sees a trend towards an outlook appropriate for an ideal feudal society, wherein the independent responsibility of the individual, stressed in early Buddhism, gave way to a world of benevolent Bodhisattvas able to protect and to make their dependants happy, provided only that they place all their trust in them. An equation is drawn with a society where kings and landowners administered their property with its submissive inhabitants.

The north Indian *bhakti* tradition of the medieval period, with its possible syncretism with Islamic devotional streams, has been the subject of extensive scholarly research. This scholarship often sees *bhakti* as a radical, egalitarian movement that mounted a stringent attack on traditional hierarchies which are central to brahmanical systems of worship. This image is occasionally projected onto the South Indian tradition of *bhakti* so that the latter is often seen as reflecting similar concerns and as being a mass movement that questioned the framework of caste, despite its being much earlier in time, and hence not a maturation in any sense, of the northern *bhakti*. Indeed, I propose that in the case of Śrīvaishṇavism, this egalitarian image of the *bhakti* saints, being a construct of the ācāryaic tradition, itself has a long history. However, a number of scholars hold that the *bhakti* saints contributed to legitimising brahmanical hierarchy and state power in the centuries of Pallava domination and Cola ascendancy.

This perspective on the content of religious ideologies of the early medieval period is fairly pervasive. MGS Narayanan and Kesavan Veluthat recognise as *bhakti* the movement which took shape in the early medieval period in Tamil Nadu and both spread to and expanded in the northern part of India in subsequent centuries. Holding the feudal socio-economic context as central to *bhakti*, their attempt in numerous essays has been to painstakingly elaborate the

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152 Warder, ibid, pp. 171-174.
153 MGS Narayanan & K Veluthat, “Bhakti Movement in South India”, in SC Malik (ed), *Indian Movements; Some Aspects of Dissent, Reform and Protest*, Indian Institute for Advanced Studies,
ways in which the Tamil bhakti saints served to strengthen the emergent hierarchical social situation or maintain the status quo. Thus, almost every aspect of the bhakti movement is seen in terms of a strict base–superstructure framework. Characterising the bhakti movement as an “aggressive movement, used for legitimising the particular socio-political formation which was taking shape in South India by the 8th–9th centuries CE”, Veluthat states that only “appearing to cut across caste lines”, bhakti ensured the acceptance of caste and its ideology by all sections of society. Rajan Gurukkal believes that the historical context of bhakti is the “expansion of a structured agrarian society of contradictory relations.....where it mirrored the way the subjected and exploited lived in relation to the objective conditions of their existence”. He further states that it glossed over their oppression in the real world by offering other worldly explanations. Indeed, Veluthat states that the deity–devotee relationship represented by Puranic and Agamic literature is typical of the lord–serf relationship in a feudal society. RN Nandi sees the growing emphasis in the bhakti literature, from Tirumallicai onwards, on surrender to god as being “in keeping with the ascendant faith in an absolute superior which dominates social relationship in a feudal society. The saints’ focus on temples has similarly been seen by these scholars as a driven effort to establish brahmanism with its temple–oriented worship. This tends to ignore the long-established Tamil notion of the immanence of the divine in cult centres spread across the land. The temple culture, with its ritual practices which served to strengthen the established hierarchy could only flourish because of the particular ideological–cultural context, which presumably predated the feudal social formation.

At the root of most of these formulations lies the belief that ideology is false consciousness that “does not solve actual problems, but merely diffuses them and in the process may justify,
reinforce and perpetuate human suffering". Chakrabarti points out that ideology is too complex a concept to be simply pushed into such compartments as true or false. However, its function in a society cannot be understood without reference to the question of power; ideological support legitimises the authority of the dominant social group. While messages of power and hierarchy are thus naturally embedded in the religious complex, it must also be remembered that they are not dictat external to the society they address, but a part of its existential reality.

The treatment of ideology as a mere handmaiden of the socio-economic structure tends to close from exploration avenues that may possibly offer different, or even, more nuanced interpretations. I find it difficult to visualise the Ālvārs and Nāyaṉmārs as recruits in an organized propaganda machinery. The arguments of Veluthat, Nandi, Rajan Gurukkal and MGS Narayanan do not fall into the error, however, of generalisations from studies of bhakti in north India to postulate an anti-caste, egalitarian ideology as the characteristic of the movement from its beginnings.

Hardy has shown that while the hymns of the later Ālvārs continue to be of a deeply devotional nature, the emphasis shifts from the relation of lover and beloved to bhakti itself as a nearly unattainable ideal and to a complete dependence on god. It is possible to argue that if this new language is read as further evidence of feudal social formations, the earlier erotic expressions should then be read as indicative of a different social structure. V Subhramaniam reaffirms the essence of Tamil Ālvār and Nāyaṉār bhakti in the transformations of the “Akattinai eroticism into erotic love for the lord”, and of the “Arruppattai idiom into an evocative style of praise for the lord as patron king” respectively. He adds that both the Ālvārs and the Nāyaṉmārs used the other genre as well, though to a lesser extent. This does not deny the possibility of reflection of the feudal socio-economic apparatus in the hymns of the saints, but it does certainly allow us to look for broader meanings in them.

160 Chakrabarti, ibid, p. 9.
161 Chakrabarti, ibid, p. 10.
162 Hardy, ibid, pp. 431- 433.
164 Subhramaniam, ibid, p. 21.
Indira Viswanathan Peterson, whose work is concerned with the Śaiva Nāyaṉmārs rather than with the Vaiśṇava Āḻvārs, sees in the bhakti cult of early medieval Tamil Nadu the model for later regional bhakti movements. She characterises it as a popular religion which formed “devotional communities that cut across caste, sex and other hierarchies of orthodox Hinduism.” She does, however, qualify her statement saying that the Tamil movement was marked more by communal solidarity than by social protest. George Spencer believes that “the movement towards doctrinal simplicity which is reflected in the hymns is matched by the social eclecticism of the saints themselves”. This assumption that the bhakti religion was more inclusive during the age of the wandering saints is based on an acceptance at face value of the hagiographical accounts. I will endeavour to show that it was actually under the leadership of the brāhmaṇa ācāryas, in the Śrīvaśīva case at least, that the more open and liberal character that is associated with the bhakti movement was developed. Besides, as has been pointed out above, it was from the late tenth century that bhakti, especially Śaiva bhakti, became a tool for legitimisation of royal power.

R. Champakalakshmi avers that the bhakti ideal emanated in a context of social differentiation, where conflicts centred around social dominance, influence and patronage. She also links some crucial changes in the cultural landscape to the changed socio-political-economic circumstances under the Colas. It was in the Pallava era that we see the first efflorescence of bhakti in the Tamil land. This was a period when the Puranic world view and brahmanical ideology were more systematically used by the ruling family with a conspicuous shift in the focus of political and economic power from the brahmadeya to the temple. Stories of religious conflict were narrated in hagiographic works like the Pēriya Purāṇam of the 11th–12th centuries when the Colas encouraged the collection of hymns and composition of hagiographic works in order to revitalise the bhakti ideology. Spencer agrees that the reigns of Rājarāja I and Rājendra I, spanning the period CE 985 to 1044, were important for the strengthening of sectarian Hinduism in general and of Śaivism in particular. It was one of

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165 Peterson, Poems to Siva, op cit., p. 9.
166 Peterson, ibid, p. 89.
169 Champakalakshmi, “From Devotion and Dissent to Dominance”, op cit., p.158.
“consolidation between the innovations of the earlier bhakti enthusiasts and the new departures under the later innovators such as Rāmānuja.”

N. Jagadeesan contends that the bhakti movement was a response to the challenges of the heterodox (he calls them heretical) organisations of the Buddhists and the Jainas. It was, like the temple and the later mathas, one of the ways of resistance and reformation of ‘Hinduism’, and an agency for the overthrow of religions with a proselytising mission. Jagadeesan does not, unlike many traditional scholars, burden bhakti with a Vedic ancestry. Rather, he suggests that bhakti came at a point where the dryness of Vedic ritual and the abstruseness of Upanisadic metaphysics turned the masses towards the ‘heresies’ of Buddhism and Jainism. He believes that Śankara approached Buddhist metaphysics insofar as a personal god was irrelevant to both, whereas Rāmānuja approximated to the Buddha in his (mildly) democratic predilections. Interestingly, the first part of this position concurs with the Śrīvaiṣṇava criticism on Śankara as Vedānta Deśika, the 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> century theologian–scholar, revered later as the greatest of the Vātakalai ācāryas, often reviles the followers of Śankara as praccanna bauddhas (Buddhists in disguise). The latter argument is again based on tradition: the hagiographies tell us that Rāmānuja broadcast from the balcony of a temple in TirukKoṭṭiyūr a particular esoteric teaching that his own preceptor had imparted to him on the condition of absolute secrecy. On being questioned on this unforgivable lapse, i.e., disrespect to the guru, he is supposed to have expressed his willingness to bear the worst punishment possible—eternal damnation, if only it would secure the salvation of the multitudes. The hagiographies make much of this incident. I suggest that this careful modulation of the caste order was common to both the saints and the teachers, neither wishing to topple the established structure of society, and both offering limited mobility. Whether the Āḻvārs were comparatively more radical than the later ācāryas as is suggested by some scholars can only be ascertained after determining how much we know of the Āḻvārs that is not viewed through the prism of the ācāryas. While I do not by any means wish to suggest that the society of the 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries in Tamil Nadu was egalitarian, I would like to explore how the rigidly stratified society of the 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries chose to represent the religious past, carefully


172 Yatirāja Vimśati by Varavaramuni, Edited by Satyamurti Svami.

173 Agpp, Mgap, Ilayāḻvār Vaibhavam.
preserving varṇāśramadharma even while suggesting transcendence, if only in the after life, or on the spiritual plane.

iii) Sources

The sources for our study are both literary and archaeological. About 16,000 inscriptions from the earliest times to the 14th century have been discovered from the states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala.174 Approximately 9000 inscriptions belonging to the Cola period alone have been reported and copied by epigraphists.175 All the Cola inscriptions except a few have been found on the walls of temples and are concerned with religious gifts.176 I will use this wealth of inscriptive material to test any hypothesis and to bolster any argument I formulate about the development of the Śrīvaiṣṇava community and the ways in which it engages with Ālvar bhakti. Where the inscriptive evidence directly challenges accepted positions regarding important issues—as it sometimes does—I shall argue for a revision of conventional wisdom. In fact, I will make use of the inscriptive evidence in the present chapter, the Introduction, itself, to make some important points and to engage with certain debates about the sources.

The literary sources of our study comprise selected critical texts from the vast body of scriptural literature of the Śrīvaiṣṇavas. The earliest of these is the Nālāyira Divya Prabandham, the corpus of 4000 hymns of the twelve Ālvars. These four thousand hymns are, to be precise, four thousand stanzas, about three thousand of which make up a few hundred poems, usually of ten or eleven stanzas, though longer ones are not uncommon. The last stanza in a majority of these poems is a combination of signature verse and phalasruti. There is some dispute regarding the origin and meaning of the word Ālvar, several scholars supporting the formation of the word from the root, ‘āl’, which means depth, and hence denoting those who plunged or immersed themselves deep in the ocean of devotion.177 Since ‘al’ means ‘to rule’, some linguists understand Ālvar to mean leader or ruler.178 Despite the poetic appeal of the first etymology, the second derivation finds support from the fact that the term for the contemporary Śaiva saints, Nāyaṇmārs, also means ‘leaders’. It is significant in

176 Subbarayalu, ibid, p. 265.
177 Ramanujan, Hymms for the Drowning, op cit., p. ix; Carman and Narayanan, The Tamil Veda, op cit., p. 3.
178 Hardy, Viraha Bhakti, op cit., pp. 250-251 favours this view.
this context that the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition in the earlier phase recognized only ten Āḻvārs.\textsuperscript{179} This can be understood to mean that Āṇḍāl and Madhurakavi were not considered Āḻvārs till a slightly later period.\textsuperscript{180} The word Āṇḍāl means ‘she who ruled’ and can thus be considered a feminine equivalent for Āḻvār in the sense of a lord or a ruler.\textsuperscript{181} It thus follows that, as a woman, she was not called an Āḻvār.\textsuperscript{182} Madhurakavi might have been excluded from the early classification of Āḻvār as he himself professed to be a disciple of Nammāḻvār; it was only later, as the preceptorial tradition developed, that his crucial position as the link between the Āḻvārs and ācāryas was recognized.

Inscriptional evidence also leads us to believe that the second meaning, leader, or more accurately ‘lord’ or ‘ruler’, is perhaps more suitable. A great number of inscriptions suffix the word Āḻvār to the name of the god in a Vaiṣṇava temple just as in numerous Śiva temples, the deity has the suffix, Nāyaṇār. For instance, a Pāṇṭiya inscription of CE 1236 in the Tiruvāḷiśvaram temple in Kilappavūr, Tēnkaśi tāluk, records a gift of land by purchase for offerings to the temple of Tirukkavilīṉavarumūṭaiya Nāyaṇār.\textsuperscript{183} From the temple of Kariyamāṇikkap Pērumāl in Iṭaiakkāl, Ambasamudram tāluk, comes the record, dated CE 1192, of a gift of one accu for burning a twilight lamp in the shrine of Senāpati Āḻvār in the temple of Jayatōnka Viṅgarsārūra Mēṃpērumān of Vaṭattalaikkalam.\textsuperscript{184} A Pāṇṭiya inscription of CE 1134 from the Venkaṭācalapati temple in Kilappavūr, Tēnkaśi tāluk, records gift of land for daily expenses of the temple of Muṇaikatimokar Viṅgars Āḻvār.\textsuperscript{185} In fact, even the presiding deity in a Śiva temple may be addressed as Āḻvār as is seen from the following inscriptions. One dated CE 953 from the Pīḷḷikeṉaṉa temple in Tiruvērumpūr registers a gift of land by purchase from the Pērunkuri sabhā of Śrīkaṇṭha caturvedimangalam for the

\textsuperscript{179} An inscription of the 25\textsuperscript{th} regnal year of Vijayarājendrādeva , i.e., Śaka 1153= CE 1231-32, from the Utamalpet tāluk, Sankarāmanallūr village, Coimbatore district in the Karivārārāja Pērumāl temple records gifts of land for offerings to the ten Āḻvārs in the temple of Alakar at Tirumalirurificolai in Kiliṟaiyanumuttanādu, a sub division of Paṭimpanḍalam. The grant also provides for a festival in the temple called Vijayarājendrán sandi. See Mahalingam, 1985, Vol. IV, p. 153. Cb 737. Ref: ARE, 1909, no. 135: Ibid, part ii, para 40.

\textsuperscript{180} Vedānta Deśika in the Guruparamparāsāram, p. 7, speaks of ‘the ten Āḻvārs’. Cited in KKA Venkatachārī, The Śrīvaiṣṇava Maniṇiprāvāla/ The Maniṇiprāvāla Literature of the Śrīvaiṣṇava Ācāryas: 12\textsuperscript{th} to 15\textsuperscript{th} Centuries AD, Anantacharya Indological Institute, Bombay, 1978, p. 13. Also see Sastrī, The Culture and History of the Tamils, op cit., p. 112, “The Vaiṣṇava movement ... is represented by the ten Āḻvārs—some reckon them as twelve including Āṇḍāl and Madhurakavi”.

\textsuperscript{181} Hardy, Viraha Bhakti, op cit., pp. 250-251, also argues for this meaning.

\textsuperscript{182} Many Śrīvaiṣṇavas even today speak of ‘eleven Āḻvārs and Āṇḍāl’. Personal observation.


maintenance of four persons who were singing *Tiruppattiyam* hymns in the Tiruverumpiyāḻvar temple with *utukkai* (stringed musical instrument) and *tālam* (beat/rhythm) during the three services.\(^{186}\) Another inscription of the same date from the same temple refers to it as the temple of Tirumalaimēḻēḻvār.\(^{187}\) An inscription of the third year of the reign of Cola Parakesarivarman in the Otavaneśvara temple in TirucCāturaī, Tanjavur *tāluk*, refers to the temple as that of TirucCorruturai Āḻvār, while earlier and later inscriptions speak of TirucCorruturai Mahādevar and TirucCorruturai Uṭaiyār.\(^{188}\) A record of CE 995 in the Ujjīvanāthasvāmi temple in Uyyakōṇṭān Tirumalai, Trichy *tāluk*, says that a gift of a gold diadem (*sṛīmuti*) was made by Cēmpiyan mādeviyār, the mother of Kaṇṭan-Mudrāntakadeva-Uttamaṇacoladeva to the deity of Tirukārkuṭiyāḻvār in the brahmadeya of Nandipanmangalam.\(^{189}\) Even more tellingly, an inscription from Pullalūr village in Chingleput *tāluk*, after recording a donation for a perpetual lamp to a temple, says that if the Sivabrāhmaṇaṇas failed to maintain the lamp service, the *ūṟūḻvār* and the members of the *vāṭiyam* of the year were authorised to collect a fine and maintain the charity.\(^{190}\) Clearly here, the *ūṟūḻvār* were the rulers or lords of the *ūr*.

The hymns of the Āḻvārs have been gathered together in four books called the *Mutal Āyiram* (first thousand), *Iraṇṭām Āyiram*, (second thousand),\(^{191}\) *Iyarpā* and *Tiruvāyomōli*.\(^{192}\) A brief discussion about the authorship of the hymns is in place here. The Śrīvaishṇava tradition reveres twelve Āḻvārs who are usually considered to have been historical figures in that they have all left behind compositions, unlike many of the Nāyaṇmārs, who are known to us only through hagiography and are consequently considered legendary. While Books I and III are anthologies of the compositions of several saint-poets, Books II and IV comprise the works of Tirumankai Āḻvār and Nammāḻvār respectively. However, it needs to be pointed out that of the twenty two separate compositions that comprise the *Nālāyiram*, eleven do not bear any clear signature verse allowing us to identify the composer. This can have two potential implications, namely, that the unsigned hymns might have been the work of any one or more of the seven known ‘historical’ Āḻvārs or that, there might have been eleven other saints who

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\(^{191}\) The numbers of hymns in the first two books are however 947 and 1134 respectively.

\(^{192}\) See Table no. VI in the Appendices.
composed bhakti songs besides the named seven. In other words, were there only seven Ālvārs or were there eighteen instead of the twelve that we are familiar with from the hagiographical records? The first possibility is unlikely as poets who carefully embedded their names in some of their compositions would not have neglected to do so in others. Further, there seems to be a definite chronological gap between the first four Antādis of the Iyarpā that are widely accepted as the earliest compositions, and the other hymns. The Śrīvaiśnavī hagiographies hold that the three mutal Ālvārs, i.e., Pōykai, Pūtam and Pey, and Tirumalācīai were the earliest Ālvārs; indeed, the word mutal means first. We will see too that the ‘life stories’ of these four Ālvārs are either the sketchiest or the most fantastic and incredible. A perusal of the hymns ascribed to these four, collected as the Mutal Tiruvantādī, Iraṇṭām Tiruvantādī, Mūṇrām Tiruvantādī and Nāṇmukan Tiruvantādī in the third book Iyarpā, shows that there is no reason they could not have been the work of one composer. On the other hand, there is equally little reason why the Tiruccanta Viruttam, a highly esoteric work of 120 stanzas that forms part of Book I, should be ascribed to the author of the Nāṇmukan Tiruvantādī. I agree with Hardy that the Tiruccanta Viruttam is different in tone from much of the rest of the NDP; Hardy even suggests that it anticipates Vīśiṣṭādvaitic philosophy. The last two compositions in the NDP, the Ciriya Tirumaṭal and the Pēriya Tirumaṭal, also appear entirely different in texture from the other hymns; indeed, they read in part like lists of pilgrimage centres. It is possible that these two were comparatively later compositions that were added to the collection to make up the round figure of 4000.

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193 In fact, the number could be anything in between the two limits if more than one of these works were composed by a single individual, either from among the historical Ālvārs or an anonymous saint.
194 See Chapter 5, Mutal Ālvārkal Vaibhavam.
195 See Chapter 3, Tirumalācīai Ālvār Vaibhavam.
196 Hardy, Viraha Bhakti, op cit., pp. 439-442.
197 Two examples will illumine the point. Hymns in the NDP usually assume that the context of a Puranic story will be known to the listeners and refer to the ‘lustful woman of the rākṣasa clan’ or the ‘sister of the arakka (rākṣasa)’ (Pēriya Tirumōlī 3.7.3, 3.9.4, Tiruvāyuvōlī 2.3.6) whose nose was severed by the lord and almost never by name. The Pēriya Tirumaṭal 76/144, surprisingly, takes her name Cūṛpaṇakā (Śurpaṇakhā) while speaking of the incident, and thus appears closer to the later tradition which was more pedagogic. The Pēriya Tirumaṭal 71/13 statement that “the Vedas extol dharma, artha, kāma and mokṣa as the fourfold path of virtue”, seems equally uncharacteristic of the NDP.
198 There is remarkable similarity in the two works besides a fair degree of correspondence of the sacred centres mentioned in them. See Table VI e.
199 The counting of the ‘stanzas’ in these two works is rather unconventional, and varies according to whether the Rāmānuja Nīrtrantādī is to be counted as part of the NDP or not.
Modern historians have largely accepted the traditional relative chronology of the Ālvārs, placing the first three in the sixth–seventh centuries, i.e., around the beginning of Pallava domination of Tōṇṭaiyanaḍalām. The reasons for the same may be adduced from the fact that the four antādis in the Iyarpā seem to constitute a stage in the religious development that falls between the devotionalism of the Paripāṭal and the bhakti of the later Ālvārs. Also, they exhibit a special form of theistic yoga combined with temple worship and indications of the composite Hari-Hara conception that was eventually abandoned in favour of the belief in Māyā as the sole, absolute Lord. Another important aspect to note is that the number of shrines mentioned in the four antādis of the Iyarpā are comparatively fewer than those mentioned by the other Ālvārs. More significantly, a majority of the temples mentioned by them are in Tōṇṭaiyanaḍalām, whereas the later Ālvārs have sung of many more temples in Colanādu and Pāṇṭiyanaḍu. In fact, only eight sacred places in the Cola and Pāṇṭiya nāḍus have been mentioned in these four works, of which some like Arangam, Tirukkoṭṭiyūr, Kūṭantai and Mālirūṇcolai seem to have acquired a pan-regional fame by the late Sangam period. It can be argued thus that the initial locus of the bhakti cult was in the northern part of the Tamil region and that in the middle period it moved towards the Kaveri delta. Finally, the Ālvārs placed last chronologically, i.e., Pēriyālvār, Āṇḍāl and Nammālvār, focus more on sacred sites in Pāṇṭiyanaḍu though they do sing of shrines in Colanādu and in the northernmost parts of Tamil Nadu as well. The fact that the northern part of Tamil Nadu was the first to be brought under the political sway and settled rule of kings inclined towards patronage of brahmanical institutions lends some credibility to this hypothesis. None of this

200 Hardy seems to be one of the few sceptics, Viraha Bhakti, op cit., pp. 247-256.
201 See footnote 112 above.
202 Hardy, Viraha Bhakti, op cit., pp. 281-281.
203 Hardy, ibid, p. 283.
204 However, Tiruppan Ālvār, (also one of the ‘ascribed’ Ālvārs), mentions no shrines except Arangam (Srirangam) and Venkaṭam, and Tōṇṭarāṭippōṭi restricts himself to singing of just Srirangam. Madhurakavi’s devotion is directed entirely towards Nammālvār whom he calls Kurukūr Nampi.
205 See also, Hardy, Viraha Bhakti, op cit, pp 256-261 for an excellent argument for placing the early Ālvārs in the Venkaṭam-Kānci environment.
206 Śrīvaśīnaṇa name for Kumbhakoṇam/ Kūṭamūkku.
207 See above, quotes from Paripāṭal, Cilappatikāram etc.
208 See Appendix, Tables VI b and VI d.
209 The Kailāśanātha temple in Kāñcipuram, the rock-cut cave temples and the shore temple in Mahabalipuram are all dated to the Pallava period. Other rock cut temples bear inscriptions of the 7th century, such as the one which says that Gūsabhāra excavated a spacious temple of Murāri named Mahendra Viṣṇugṛha out of the rocks on the banks of the Mahendra taḷākai in the city of Mahendrapura. (See Mahalingam, 1985, Vol. I, p10. NA 46. Ref.: ARE 1896, no. 13; ibid, 1943-44, no. 83.) Also, the first inscriptive mention of the singing of Tiruppatiyam, belonging to the 8th
militates against the possibility of the four antādis in the Iyarpā being the work of one hand. The hagiographies, however, preserve a legend which is difficult to ignore considering the fact that inscriptive evidence attests to its popularity in the period before their composition.\textsuperscript{210}

The question of the other seven compositions is more vexed. The fact that the hagiographical tradition has chosen to attribute authorship of one of these unsigned poems to one of the earliest saints, i.e., Tirumalāci Āḻvār, who we have already seen is not ‘historical’, and the other to a ‘new’ poet, i.e., Tiruppāṇ Āḻvār, and the other five to two of the Āḻvārs known from their other compositions is therefore significant. It is fairly clear that the hagiography of Tiruppāṇ Āḻvār serves some important purposes in communicating to the larger community the theological and social vision of the Śrīvaiṣṇava acāryas, which I shall investigate in the second and third chapters. The hagiography of Tirumalāci also serves to underline various issues important for the Śrīvaiṣṇava community, though these are also established through the stories of some other saints. Coming to the other five compositions, it seems unlikely that either Nammāḻvār or Tirumankai Āḻvār, the two most prolific Āḻvārs who have left behind 1202 and 1134 signed hymns respectively, would have neglected to affix a signature verse to their other compositions. And yet, it is these two saints that the hagiographers have chosen to credit with the authorship of the other five works.\textsuperscript{211} To what degree did the medieval acāryas rely on oral tradition in the composition of the hagiographies? Had popular memory failed to preserve any traditions of some other saints whose songs had also been recited and handed down the generations as had those of the remembered saints so that the acāryas decided to invest them with the sanctity that already belonged to the two most prolific saint-poets? Why did they not ‘invent’ other saints and suitable life histories for them, as they did for Tiruppāṇ Āḻvār, and ascribe these songs to them? This of course begs the question as to whether even the story of Tiruppāṇ Āḻvār was already a part of folklore—early epigraphic evidence documenting it is yet to be found—when the acāryas wove it into the guruparamparās.

A literary examination of the unsigned compositions to substantiate or refute the traditional ascription of authorship is beyond the scope of this work. In quoting from any of these said texts, that is, the four Tiruvantādis in the Iyarpā, and the Amalaṉādīpirāṉ, I will go by the

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\textsuperscript{210} See Chapter 5.

\textsuperscript{211} Three are ascribed to Tirumankai and two to Nammāḻvār.
traditional ascription, i.e., refer to a particular verse as having been sung by Póykai, Pütam, Pey, Tirumalíci or Tiruppān Āḻvār as the case may be. In other words, since the poems exist and one ahistorical name is as good as another, I will follow the tradition in the names of the poets. In the event, however, of quoting from the Tiruucanta Viruttam also attributed to Tirumalíci,212 the Tiruvāciriym or the Pēriya Tiruvantādī attributed to Nammālvār, the Tiruvēlukūruruikkai, the Ciriya Tirumāṭal or the Pēriya Tirumāṭal attributed to Tirumankai, I shall only take the name of the composition referred to. It is important to note here that the Śrīvaisnava hagiographies especially relate the context in which Tirumankai Āḻvār is supposed to have composed the Tiruvēlukūruruikkai.213

The problems in dating the bhakti saints will be brought out further by a brief comparison with the dating of the Nāyanmārs. The saints Appar and Sambandar are thought to have lived between CE 570 and 670 while Sundarar is the placed around the end of the seventh and the beginning of the eighth centuries.214 Zvelebil believes that Sambandar’s mention of the Pallava general Ciritttōnţar, who destroyed the Cālukya capital of Vatāpī in CE 642, gives us some idea of his date. Appar is presumed to have been a contemporary of the Pallava king Mahendravaran I (CE 580–630). Sundarar is seen as a contemporary of the Pallava king, Narasimhavaran II (CE 690–710?).215 It has been noted that the Tamil Śaiva cult was born and flourished in the Kaveri delta, the richest rice-growing region in the Tamil country.216 On the other hand, the focus on and placement in the milieu of Tōntaimañdalam, presumed to have been the early focus of the bhakti cult is, as we saw above, crucial to dating the early Āḻvārs in the 6th–7th centuries.

Secondly, all three poets of the Tevāram, i.e., Appar, Sambandar and Sundarar, speak of king Koccēnkaţān as a great temple builder; indeed, Sambandar identifies at least two specific temples as those built by him.217 Koccēnkaţān is also known from Tirumankai’s hymns on

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212 The Tiruucanta Viruttam appears entirely different in style and focus from the Nāmukan Tiruvantādī leading us to doubt that they could be the works of the same composer. See also Hardy, Viraha Bhakti, op cit., pp. 439- 442.

213 The Āḻvār is said to have composed the poem ‘structured like a chariot’ during a poetical contest with the Nāyaṉar Sambandar. See Chapter 3, Tirumankai Āḻvār Vaibhavam and Chapter 4, An incident from the Parakāla Śuri Vaibhavam.

214 Peterson, Poems to Siva, op cit., p. 18


216 Peterson, ibid, p. 39.

217 Sambandar, III. 276 and 277.
TiruNaraiyur\textsuperscript{218} where the Āḻvār too speaks of him as one who raised seventy temples to Śiva. While this ruler is mentioned in the past tense by both the Tevāram trio and by Tirumankai Āḻvār,\textsuperscript{219} he would have to have lived about two centuries previous to Tirumankai if the 7\textsuperscript{th} century dates for Sambandar are admitted. The other problem arises from the mention of the ruler as a Coḷa by Sundarar,\textsuperscript{220} for the Nāyaṉār should have lived long before the age of the imperial (and temple building) Coḷas. If it is admitted that the reference to the dynasty owes merely to the prestige that the name continued to enjoy in the Tamil land long after the Sangam era, and that this king was merely mythical, the references to him in Tirumankai’s poem become more problematic. If this was merely a legendary patron of Śaiva temples, there would be little reason for the Āḻvār to single him out from among the numerous Nāyaṉārs as a worshipper of Viṣṇu at TiruNaraiyur. Moreover, the tone of the entire poem combined with the specific reference to his victory over his enemies in a battle at Aluntil\textsuperscript{221} suggests that this was a historical person, possibly one of the chieftains of the Kaveri region who claimed to be descendants of the ancient Coḷas. Koccēṉkaṉāṉ has, besides, been identified as the grandfather of Vijayālaya, the founder of the imperial Coḷas, by the discovery of the Velanceri Copper Plate of Parāntaka I.\textsuperscript{222} I suggest that this presents an argument for revising the dates of the Tevāram trio to the eighth–ninth centuries.\textsuperscript{223}

Tradition holds that the hymns of the Āḻvārs were all but lost for many millennia till the ācārya Nāṭhamuni recovered them after meditating ‘on the feet of Nammāḻvār’, the most revered among the Āḻvārs, in the village of the Āḻvār’s birth, Kurukūr. Nāṭhamuni was the priest of the temple of Māṇṇār in Viranārāṇapuram. Some pilgrims arrived ‘from the western country’\textsuperscript{224}/ TirukKurukūr\textsuperscript{225} and recited eleven extraordinarily moving stanzas,\textsuperscript{226} the

\textsuperscript{218} Pēriya Tirumōli 6.6.3-9.

\textsuperscript{219} The references in Pēriya Tirumōli 6.6.3-9 admit reading in both the simple present and the past tenses.

\textsuperscript{220} Sundarar, VII. 98. Translation by Peterson, Poems to Siva, op cit., p. 196. I do not know if the other two Nāyaṉārs also speak of him as a Coḷa king.

\textsuperscript{221} Pēriya Tirumōli, 6.6.9.


\textsuperscript{223} This would also agree better with the dating of most of the Āḻvārs, with the geographical distribution of the temples in the Tevāram, and with the inscriptional evidence. The story connecting Appar with the Pallava ruler Mahendravarman is, in any case, a late one and can scarcely be an argument for an early date for the Nāyaṉār. I do not, however, support tenth century dating for the three Nāyaṉārs suggested by BGL Swamy, “The Date of the Tevaram Trio : An Analysis and Reappraisal”, Bulletin of the Institute of Traditional Cultures, Madras, Vol. 19.1, 1975, pp. 119- 180.

\textsuperscript{224} Agpp, Nāṭhamunikaḻ Vaibhavam.

\textsuperscript{225} Mgpp, Nāṭhamunikaḻ Vaibhavam.
last of which indicated that they were part of a larger work of a thousand stanzas. Upon being questioned they said they knew no more, but Nathamuni was inspired to try and discover the rest. He repaired to Kurukūr,²²⁷ the birthplace of Nammālvar,²²⁸ where disciples of Madhurakavi Ālvār taught him the Kanninun Ciruttāmpu,²²⁹ which was all that they knew. By repetition of the sacred poem 12,000 times, Nathamuni obtained, as a divine gift, the hymns of not only Nammālvar but also all the other Ālvārs, which he then proceeded to classify and compile, to set to music and to teach his disciples so that they should be preserved for posterity.²³⁰ The Śaiva tradition preserves a parallel story of the passing into oblivion and miraculous recovery of the hymns of the Nāyaṇmārs. According to the fourteenth century composition of Umāpati Śivācārya, the Tirumuraikāntapuruṇam, literally the story of the discovery of the Tirumurai, the Cola king Rājarāja is said to have been moved to tears upon hearing a few verses from the poems of the mūvar. He searched far and wide for the rest without success till he heard of an Ādiśaiva brāhmaṇa boy Nampi Āntār Nampi, whose extraordinary devotion caused the image of Vināyaka to actually consume the offering of bananas he brought him. Nampi put the king’s request to Vināyaka who revealed that the sacred hymns were hidden in a chamber in the great temple at Chidambaram. The Cola king reached the chamber only to discover that it was locked, and its door marked with the hands of the three saint-poets. When the temple priests said it could be opened only if the three saints came in person, the king arranged for the celebration of a great festival in which the utsava mūrtis (processional idols) of the three saints were ceremonially brought to the chamber. Within were found the manuscripts of all the hymns buried under an anthill, most destroyed beyond recovery. A divine voice, however, informed Rājarāja that whatever the world required had survived upon which he had the hymns of the mūvar arranged in seven volumes (the Tirumurai) while those of other saints were compiled in four more volumes.²³¹

These legends have usually been thought to signify the temporary loss and rediscovery of these sacred hymns,²³² the miraculous features of the process of recovery serving to justify

²²⁶ Tiruvāyūmōli 5.8.1-11.
²²⁷ Modern Ālvār Tirunagari.
²²⁸ Tiruvāyūmōli 5.8.11 is the signature verse giving his name as Kurukūr Caṭakopan.
²²⁹ Madhurakavi Ālvār’s poem of 10 stanzas devoted to Nammālvar.
²³⁰ DSC, sarga 16; Agpp, Mgpp, Nathamunikal Vaibhavam.
and enhance their sanctity. The Śaiva legend serves the additional purpose of underlining the centrality of the shrine at Chidambaram. In the context of the Śaiva canon, the Tevāram, François Gros says, “We have to assume that the meticulous arrangement was a posteriori and came in to replace the mysterious chaos of history with a formal classification, and scattered manuscripts with a definitive version, proof against variations and alterations. Leaving aside the chronology and factual history which exist only in vestigial form, there remains a coherent grouping within the boundary of its premises, the cultural environment constituted by the apogee of the Tamil middle ages”.

According to the traditional Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiographies, the dates of the Ālvars range from the dvāpara yuga to the first four centuries of the kali yuga (whose fifth millennium we are in), which of course are not credible. It has been argued that references to Māmallai were not possible before the town had been established by the Pallava ruler Narasimhavarman I, alias, Māmallai, in the second half of the seventh century. The occurrence of the name Madhurakavi, son of Māran, as a minister in Pāṇṭiya records of CE 770 in connection with the excavation of some shrines for Viṣṇu is interpreted as referring to the last Ālvar. Nammāḻvār’s mention of the temples of Śrīvaramangalam and Varaguṇamankai may be more reliable pointers to his date as the temples derive their name from the Pāṇṭiya ruler Varaguṇavarman (also called Jaṭila Parantaka Nēṭuṇcaṭaiyan) whose reign is dated 765-815 CE. The only Ālvar to be dated with some confidence is Tirumankai owing to references in his hymns to Nandivarman Pallavamalla II, the ruler who constructed the Vaikunṭha Pērumāl temple in Kāñcipuram, as the one who defeated the southern Pāṇṭiya king in the decad dedicated to the said temple and to his son Dantidurga alias Vairamegha in the

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233 Peterson, Poems to Siva, op cit., p. 16.
235 Mutal Tiruvantādi 70, Pēriya Tirumōlī 2.5.1-10, 2.6.1-10.
236 TA Gopinatha Rao, The History of the Srivaisnavas, Madras University, Madras, 1923, p. 16.
237 Gopinatha Rao, ibid, pp. 18-20. Two inscriptions of Jaṭāvarman Parantaka, one in Sanskrit and the other in Tamil, were found by the author on Anaimalai hill near Madurai. The identification of the minister with the Ālvar is, however, disputed by Krishnaswami Aiyangar, Early History of Vaisnavism in South India, Oxford University Press, London, 1920, p. 46, and Hardy, Viraha Bhakti, op cit., pp. 255- 256 footnote no. 55.
239 Pēriya Tirumōlī 2.9.1-10 dedicated to Parameccura Viṇṇagaram.
decad dedicated to Āṭṭabuyakaram. Tirumankai can therefore be placed in the second half of the eighth and the early ninth centuries. Dating Përiyāḻvār on the basis of his reference to Pallavamalla is less certain, especially as the word “mallāṇṭa” in the Tirupallāṇṭu hymn offers the possibility of another interpretation. Some modern scholars have tried to work out the dates of the Āḻvārs by deciphering the astronomical references in the hymns and interpretation of epigraphic evidence.

Though we are far from possessing accurate dates for the Āḻvārs, we can be fairly certain that there was probably less than a century between the last of the Āḻvārs and Nāṭhamuni. The Anbil plates of the fourth year of Sundara Coḷa alias Parāntaka, dated to approximately CE 960, have yielded material of immense interest to scholars of Śrīvaishṇavism. The document records a grant of land to a minister of Sundara Coḷa, a learned brāhmaṇa named Aniruddha, a native of the village of Premāgraḥāra. A devotee of the god Ranganātha of the temple at Srirangam, he is said to have made rich donations to the temple at Srirangam for feeding a large number of brāhmaṇas during the Pankuni festival. His parents, grandfather and great grandfather are all described as great devotees and generous donors to the temple of

241 Përiya Tirumōḷi 2.8-1-10.
242 A set of five copper plates of Paṭṭataṅmangalam discovered in TirutTuraipūṇṭi tāluk, Tanjavur district, dated to the sixty first year of the reign of Ko Vijaya Nadivikrama who, it is argued, refers to Nandivarman Pallava II, refers to a grant of land to the brāhmaṇas of the place by a Mangalanāṭālvāṅ, who appears from the Sanskrit portions of the plate to be a Viṣṇu bhakta. The epithets used to describe him seem to agree with those Kaliyaṅ gives himself in Përiya Tirumōḷi. The grant refers to him as Pallava bhṛtya, a vassal of the Pallava. That Kaliyaṅ spent his early years in service of this king is shown in Përiya Tirumōḷi 1.9.7. It is argued that this donor was none other than the Āḻvār. Ref.: SV Varadaraja Ayyangar, “The Date of Tirumangai Alvar”, Journal of Indian History, Vol. 26.2, 1948, pp. 131-134.
243 Përiyāḻvār Tirumōḷi 1. “Mallāṇṭa tin toḷ manivāṇdū” may mean the gem-coloured, great shouldered One who ruled over Malla (i.e., Pallavamalla) or the mighty gem-coloured One with shoulders like a wrestler”.
245 Sanskrit rendition of Anbil. The village is in the Tirucchirapalli tāluk of Tirucchirapalli district, and hence very close to Srirangam.
246 Father’s name is Nārāyaṇa, grandfather’s Aniruddha, and great grandfather’s Ananta.
Ranganātha. Aniruddha is said to belong to the Jaimini sūtra and to the Āvenī gotra. The last verse in the Sanskrit praśasti portion informs us that the composer of the document was Mādhnava Bhaṭṭa Yajvan, son of Bhaṭṭa Datta of the Parāśarya vamsa and that he was a very learned man and a disciple of Śrīnātha. The epigraphist, who also happens to have authored The History of the Srivaiṣṇavas, points out that the gotra Āvenī is often mentioned in South Indian inscriptions in connection with the names of Śrīvaiṣṇavas as also in their literature. Further, he draws attention to the Vaiṣṇava names of the ancestors of Aniruddha, and the astronomical calculations of Mr Svamikkannu Pillai which date the births of Nāthamunikaḷ and Āḷavántār to CE 823 and CE 916 respectively. Śrīnātha is accordingly identified as the Śrīvaiṣṇava acārya Nāthamuni and it is suggested that the composer Mādhnava Bhaṭṭa was a student of Nāthamunikaḷ who is reputed to have had a very long life.

Considering that the hagiographies themselves claim a wide, appreciative contemporary audience for the hymns of the saints, the legends of loss and recovery do not seem credible. Besides, inscriptive evidence gives the lie to these legends. We hear of persons who had to sing the Tiruppattiyam i.e., the Tevāram in the Bilvanātheśvara temple at TiruMallam, North Arcot district, from an inscription of Nandivarman III Pallava's time. While the term Tiruppattiyam has come to refer to the verses of the first three Nāyaṉmārs, it seems to have been used for the Vaiṣṇava hymns too during the 10th and 11th centuries, as is made evident

248 Gopinatha Rao, The History of the Srivaisnavas, Madras University, Madras, 1923.
249 I believe these dates are excessively early; in fact, if the Śrīnātha mentioned in the inscription is indeed Nāthamuni, he can reasonably be placed in the tenth century which would agree with all our evidence. Besides, I find the attribution of nearly 120 year-long life spans to all the three major early acāryas, Nāthamuni, Yāmuna and Rāmānuja, scarcely credible.
251 SII Vol. III part 1, pp. 92-93.
from an inscription of the 16th regnal year of Rājendra Cola I (CE 1028) from the Venkaṭeṣa Pērumāḷ temple in TiruMukkūṭal. Apparently, certain vaikhanāsas of the temple reached an agreement regarding the recitation of Tiruppatiyams therein.254 Again, according to an inscription of the third year of Rājendra I (CE 1015), the Śrīvaishṇavas who recited the Tiruppatiyam in the presence of Rāghavadeva in the Sundaravarada Pērumāḷ temple in Uttiramerūr were to receive the food that was offered to the deity.255 Two other inscriptions in the same temple, of the 19th and 26th regnal years of the same ruler record the creation of endowments of land for the maintenance of three Śrīvaishṇavas who were to recite the Tiruvāṉmōli in the temple.256 It seems unlikely in these contexts that the term, Tiruppatiyam, could refer to the hymns of the Śaiva saints. Inscriptional evidence till at least the thirteenth century is certainly more bountiful from Śiva temples regarding Śaivite material, but offers important clues for the reconstruction of Vaiṣṇava history too. We hear of provision for the recitation of Tiruppatiyams during the time of Āditya I,257 Parāntaka I,258 Rājarāja I.259 Indeed, there are at least ten inscriptions of the 10th century which refer to the singing of Tiruppatiyams in various temples pointing clearly to the fact that the hymns were not only widely known, they were popular as a meritorious, devotional practice during the late ninth and through the tenth centuries. Two inscriptions of the reign of Uttama Coḷa (accession CE 970) from the Mahālingasvāmī temple in TiruvIṭaimarutūr, Kumbhakonam tāluk, record endowments of land for the maintenance of a musician to sing before the deity, deśi songs260 which are likely to refer to the hymns of the Tamil bhakti saints. A tenth century inscription dated to the thirteenth year of Sundara Pāṇṭiyadeva found in the Saumya Nārāyaṇa temple in TirukKottiyur village,261 TirupPattūr tāluk, registers an order of the assembly to the temple authorities to give two prasādas and betel every day to the śrīkāryam (temple manager) as an act of appreciation (sanmānam) for his having arranged for the recitation of Tirumōli before the deity during the ten day festival in Mārkāli. An inscription of CE 1012 from the Alakīya

254 Swamy, ibid, pg 98; SII, no. 183 of 1915
258 Swamy, ibid, p. 102; SII 149 of 1936-37.
259 Swamy, ibid, p. 99; SII 423 of 1908.
261 This is a very important sacred site mentioned by Pēriyāḷvār in the Pallāṇṭu hymn and, in the hagiographies, said to be the hometown of an important ācārya from whom Rāmānuja learned the rahasya granthas. See Chapter 3.
Narasimha Pērumāl temple in Ėnnāyiram in Viḷuppuram tāluk records a substantial gift for a variety of things including appointment of four persons for the recitation of the Tiruvāyōmōḻi and for the maintenance of an institution for Vedic study.²⁶² An early eleventh century record from the Trivikrama Pērumāl temple in TirukKoyilūr registers a gift of 96 sheep for a perpetual lamp for the deity and the sale of land to Kausikaṇ Anṇāvaṇ (mentioned in an inscription of same temple dated to CE 1008) by the sabhā of TirukKovalūr for offerings of 100 appam (a sweetmeat), betel leaves etc to the deity on the occasion of Tiruvoṇam Tiruveṟṟaināḷ (a festival) in the month of Aippaci. A payment of one kācu was to be made for the person singing the Tirunēṟṟuntāṇṭakam.²⁶³ The vaikhānasas of the sthānam agreed to maintain the charity.

In CE 1028, the vaikhānasas of the Venkaṭeśa Pērumāl temple in TiruMukkūṭal, Madhurāntakam tāluk, entered into an agreement with certain officers to use the surplus paddy due to them, which had been discovered by an enquiry into the accounts of the temple, for reciting the Tiruppattiyam in the temple for the first time.²⁶⁴ A few decades later, an inscription of CE 1070 in the Srirangam temple records the purchase of land from some persons and its endowment for services to god Anantanārāyaṇāsvāmin of TiruArangam and for the recitation of the Tiruvāyōmōḻi.²⁶⁵ Another epigraph of CE 1085 from the same temple provides for the recitation of Tirupallīy-elucce– Tiruvāyōmōḻi during the wake-up ritual of the deity.²⁶⁶ An inscription from Srirangam dated to CE 1088 says that a hymn by Kulaśekhara Āḻvār beginning with the phrase, Teṭṭṭāṟuntiral was to be recited before the deity during the course of a three-day festival.²⁶⁷ As early as CE 998, the Lord in one of the three shrines in the Viṣṇu temple in Ukkal in the Chingleput district is called Tiruvāyōmōḻi deva in an inscription of the thirteenth regnal year of Rājarāja I.²⁶⁸ Inscriptional records of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries continue to register donations for the maintenance of the singing of the hymns of the

Ālvārs. A record of CE 1203 from the Rāmasvami temple, TirukKoil records the provisions made for offerings to the god while *Tiruppāvai* was being recited.\(^{270}\) & \(^{271}\) In the light of this overwhelming evidence for the awareness, not to say popularity, of the Tamil hymns of the Ālvārs and Nāyāmārs, the legends of the rediscovery of the hymns must be examined for the multiple messages they encode. The miracle tales, weaving in the intervention of the god of each sect in this process of the rediscovery of the hymns, would have helped establish them as revealed scripture. But it is equally likely that the later Śrīvaiṣṭava tradition claimed these well-loved hymns in order to acquire the prestige of tradition. I propose that it was not the hymns which needed to be invested with sanctity, but the Śrīvaiṣṭava community, probably initially a small, brahmanical one,\(^{272}\) which, through association with the well-loved songs of the Ālvārs, was seeking to address a larger audience and weld together a greater community.

In CE 1202, a record was made in the Kirikal temple in Kallitaikuricci, Ambāsamudram *tāluk*, recording a gift of land to the temple of Nālāyira Viṇṇagar Ēmpērumān.\(^ {273}\) From CE 1204, we hear of Nālāyira–Iśvarāmuttaiyār in the Tirunelveli district.\(^ {274}\) From a Pāṇṭiya inscription of CE 1209 in the Kulaśekhara Ālār shrine in the Gopālasvāmi temple in Mannārkoyil, Ambāsamudram *tāluk*, we learn, among other things, that the king Jatāvarman alias Tribhuvanacakravartin Kulaśekhara, on the occasion of his presence at the Nālāyira-van-tirumāndapam to hear the *Tiruppāvai*, remitted all the taxes on certain grant lands.\(^ {275}\) These inscriptions of the early thirteenth century where the adjective *Nālāyira* is applied to the temple/ the Lord in a temple/ canopy, establish that the hymnal canon was certainly ordered


\(^{271}\) *Tiruvaṅmōḷi* is the name given to the collection of the 1102 hymns of Nammāḻvār. *Tirunēṟuntuṅṟakam* is Tirumankai Āḻvār’s composition. *Tirumōḷi* is a name given generally to the songs of the Āḻvār; suffixed to the honorific of an Āḻvār or some defining adjective, it signifies a particular composition such as *Pēriyāḻvār Tirumōḷi, Pērumāḻ Tirumōḷi, Nācchiyār Tirumōḷi* and *Pēriya Tirumōḷi. Tirupalī-y-eḻuccci* is the wake-up hymn to the lord, composed by Tōṉṭarātippoṭi Āḻvār. *Tiruppāvai* is the name of the collection of 30 songs of Āṇḍāḷ.

\(^{272}\) See discussion in Chapter 5.


and well-known by the said name by the twelfth century, if not long before as claimed by the
hagiography.276

One of the most important innovations of the period of the early ācāryas was that the Nālāyiram came to be acknowledged as scripture on par with the Sanskrit śruti.277 This is a radical step in that it is the first and (with the exception of the Śaiva canon a few centuries later)278 perhaps the only time a claim is made that a language other than Sanskrit can express revealed truth and can possess the sanctity and authority of the Vedas.279 The name given to the hymns of the Āḻvārs is, accordingly, Drāvidaveda, i.e., the Tamil Veda. It can be argued that this unusual claim was first put forward by Madhurakavi Āḻvār in the Kāṇminunciruttāṃpu.280 Madhurakavi, in this remarkable poem in praise of and devotion to his preceptor says quite clearly that Caṭākoṇa/ Kāri Māraṇa281 graced the Vedas and rendered their inmost meaning in his thousand songs.282 The Śrīvaśñava tradition believes that the four works of Nammāḻvār are the Tamil equivalents of the four Vedas,283 that it is therefore the inheritor of a twofold Vedic heritage, in two languages, and puts forth this belief in its claim of ubhaya Vedānta. Doubtlessly too, the ācāryas explicating the hymns saw ‘confirmation’ of this in Nammāḻvār’s claim that it was the Lord himself who sung His own praise though his mouth.284

The problem of how the canon came to comprise the particular hymns it did doesn’t admit easy solutions. Let us consider, for example, an inscription from a ruined Viṣṇu temple in

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276 I tend to accept the hagiographic claim in this case since the absence of inscriptional evidence to attest the literary sources does not mean that the latter necessarily lie.
277 Venkatachari, The Śrīvaśñava Manipravala, op cit., p. 4.
278 Peterson, Poems to Śiva, op cit., p. 52 says that the Nāyaṁmārs’ hymns this were referred to thus by the twelfth century hagiographer, Cekkilār.
279 Venkatachari, The Śrīvaśñava Manipravala, op cit., p. 4.
280 Kāṇminunciruttāṃpu, vs 7-8
281 ‘Nammāḻvār’ is an honorific, meaning simply, our Āḻvār; he signs himself Māraṇa/ Kāri Māraṇa and as Caṭākoṇa, Madhurakavi Āḻvār’s Kāṇminunciruttāṃpu verses 7 & 9 refer to Kāri Māraṇa as Caṭākoṇa. The meaning of the word Caṭākoṇa remains unclear though various interpretations are offered.
282 It must be clarified that the Tiruvāyūmōti comprises 1102 stanzas, but since the refrain in every eleventh stanza says “these ten of a thousand”, they are loosely considered a ‘thousand songs’, though not in the tabulation of the corpus.
283 Sometimes only the equivalence of the Tiruvāyūmōti with the Veda is claimed. On the other hand, the compositions of the other Āḻvārs are considered the angas of the Vedas and meticulous numerical equivalents between the angas and upāngas of the Vedas and the Tamil works of the Āḻvārs are drawn. Various conflicting equivalents exist side by side without any effort to reconcile them.
Tirumālipuram in Arakkoṇam tāluk. Dated in the tenth year of Rājakesarivarman 'who destroyed the ships at Kantalūr Śālai', i.e., Rājarāja I (accession CE 985), it records a gift of gold by Kulakkuṭaiyān Aruṇilai Śīkrṣṇa alias Mūventa Piṭavūr Veḷān and stipulates that a Tiruppatiyam beginning with the words, "Kolanār kulal", composed by the donor's father in praise of Govindapātiyālvr, was to be sung on the occasion of a festival. Since this hymn does not feature in the NDP, it seems reasonable to assume that the formal codification of the hymns of the saint-poets had already been completed and that tampering with the canon was not acceptable. On the other hand, the Śaiva canon, which was arranged in the reign of Rājarāja I by Nampi Anṭār Nampi, was added to till the middle of the twelfth century. It would appear therefore that the Śrīvaiṣṇava Guruparamaparās are correct in recording that Vedic status was claimed for the Prabandham from the time of Nāṭhamuni himself.

Modern literary theory recognizes that literary form needs to be thought about not merely in terms of rhyme and meter but also as a structure of communication between author and audience. In the case of the Tamil devotional hymns, this has been traditionally true, as Tamil Hindus have always turned to the legends of the saints’ lives to illuminate their poems. Our primary source of information about the Āḷvārs is, other than the incidental biographical details scattered in the hymns, usually in the signature verses, the Guruparamparā prabhāvams (henceforth Gpps), i.e., the Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiographies (literally, 'the splendour of the succession of teachers'), composed between the 11th and 14th centuries. In this study, I will consider three major hagiographies, the Divyasārīcaritam (henceforth DSC), a Sanskrit kāvya composed in Srirangam by Garuḍavāhana Paṇḍita, and two Maṇipravāḷa texts, the Ārāyirappati Guruparamparā Prabhāvam (henceforth Agpp) composed by Piṇḍalakiya Pērumāḷ Jiyar and the Māvōyirappati Guruparamparā Prabhāvam (henceforth Mgpp) by Trtīya Brahmatantra Svatantar Jiyar.

284 Tiruvāyumōli 7.9.1-10.
286 Sastri, The Culture and History of the Tamils, op cit., p. 115.
288 Cutler, ibid, p. 6.
Malipravāla, literally gems and coral, is a language composite of Sanskrit and Tamil with a Tamil syntactical base.\(^{291}\) It has been called a “situational language in that it developed in specific circumstances (to expound Udbhaya-Vedānta to a diverse religious community whose mother tongue was Tamil) and was used in specific contexts (religious instruction involving the larger tasks of writing vyākhyānas [commentaries] and sampradāyagranthas [works concerning the tradition]).\(^{292}\) The first text to be composed in Malipravāla was the Arāyirappati, a commentary on Nammāḷvār’s Tiruvāyumoli by Tirukkurukaip Pirān Pillān,\(^{293}\) between 1100 and 1150 CE, apparently at the instance of Rāmānuja himself. The Gpps, which fall in the category of sampradāyagranthas, had therefore a clear purpose. While meaning to be ‘histories’ of the preceptors, stretching backwards from the contemporary acāryas to the saint-devotees of a long-bygone age, whose near mythical lives are meant to serve not only as models and as inspiration but also as objects of devotion in their own right, they also sketch out a conception of the community in the vision of its leaders and articulate a well defined ideology.

One must reiterate the interval of approximately three centuries between the last Āḻvār’s earthly existence according to the most commonly accepted dates and the composition of the first hagiography. The DSC is usually considered the earliest, though BV Ramanujan believes it to be a much later work, belonging to the 15th century.\(^{294}\) The controversy is based on a chapter considered by most scholars a late interpolation, but seen by Ramanujam as integral to the text. The usual basis for assigning an early date for this work is a reference to Rāmānuja, the revered founder–acārya of the community, in the present tense. Besides, the narrative stops before Rāmānuja’s death in CE 1137. It has also been noted that the Agpp mentions the DSC and quotes it as its source in at least twelve places.\(^{295}\) Yet another reason for assigning an early date to the DSC is the fact that a popular episode in the life-story of the preceptor Rāmānuja which is elaborated at some length in the Agpp and the Mgpp, not to speak of later chronicles, is absent in the DSC. The Agpp, and the Mgpp (dated to the late 13th–14th centuries), and later temple records like the Koil Ōluku from Srirangam credit Rāmānuja with having travelled to Delhi to recover the processional idol of the deity of the temple Rāmānuja

\(^{291}\) Malipravāla denotes a number of composite languages such as Sanskrit–Tamil and Sanskrit–Malayalam. This study is concerned only with texts in the Sanskrit–Tamil combine.


\(^{293}\) Venkatachari, ibid, p. 61.


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established in TiruNārāyaṇapuram in Karnataka.296 This idol is said to have been taken away by Muslim invaders. The first Muslim invasion of the Tamil land took place in 1310 CE, and was followed by others in the course of the century. The story is necessarily fictional as Rāmānuja could naturally not have been involved in any attempt to reclaim an idol looted by Muslim invaders.297 What is likely, however, is that after a series of invasions, popular memory began to project them into the distant past as well. The authors of the Agpp and the Mgpp, perceiving the past through the eyes of the present, wove in the tales of the historic invasions in recent times into the hagiography of Rāmānuja. Though the DSC speaks of Rāmānuja’s flight to TiruNārāyaṇapuram, which in the other texts is the frame-context for the story referred to above, it makes no reference to any ‘Tulukka/ Turuška’298 in any way, thus strengthening our belief that it is an earlier text. A third point which has bearing on the case will be discussed below.

The Śrīvaiṣṇava community seems to have split by the eighteenth century into two sects, the Tēṅkalai and the Vaṭakalai. While eighteen points of difference in the philosophical conceptions are elaborated,299 and the history of difference is traced to late 14th–early 15th centuries, the period of the ācāryas Maṇavāla Māmuni and Vedānta Deśika, who came subsequently to be venerated as the founding ācāryas of the Tēṅkalai and the Vaṭakalai sects respectively, it appears that the actual split may have had to do as much with control of temples and resources as doctrinal differences.300 One of the consequences of this split is that the lineage of preceptors after Rāmānuja differs in the case of each sect. Equally important from the point of view of this study is that owing to the markedly different positions of these two sects of the Śrīvaiṣṇava community on such key issues as caste status of devotees in the community, the means to and eligibility for salvation and the role of the guru, the sectarian concerns are woven into the fabric of the life-stories of the saints in the texts produced by each

296 V.N. Harī Rao, (ed. and trans.), Köil Olugu: The Chronicle of the Srirangam with Historical Notes, Rochouse and Sons, Madras, 1961, p. 105. The Köil Öloku does not, however, connect Turuškas/ Muslim rulers with the episode.
297 See Chapter 4 for the story.
298 Corruption of ‘Turk’; generic term for Muslim in the southern Indian vernaculars.
sect. I have accordingly chosen the earliest of the Tēnkalai and (available) Vaṭakalai\textsuperscript{301} Gpps, the \textit{Agpp} and the \textit{Mgpp} respectively. A fairly reliable ways of dating these hagiographies is by computing the dates of the latest of the preceptors mentioned in each. The proper lineage of teachers is absolutely crucial in the Śrīvaiṣṇava notion of salvation, one’s association with one’s own teacher stretching backwards to Rāmānuja who, by his paradigmatic \textit{saranāgati}, secured the redemption of all his followers. An \textit{ācārya}'s role is said to be that of a mediator and unifier (\textit{ghaṭaka}) between the \textit{jīvas} and the \textit{paramātmā}.

The \textit{Gpps} are therefore meticulous in recording the lineage: indeed, the very name of these scriptures indicates the same. Pinpaḷakiya Pērumāḷ Jiyar, the author of the \textit{Agpp}, claims to be the disciple of Pēriyavāccān Pīḷḷai whose birth is dated to 1228 CE.\textsuperscript{303} The composition of the \textit{Agpp} is accordingly placed in the late thirteenth or the first half of the fourteenth century.\textsuperscript{304} In the case of the \textit{Mgpp}, internal evidence is substantiated by epigraphic evidence as well. An inscription of CE 1359 in the Varadarāja Śvāmi temple in Kāṇcē mentions a Brahmatantra Svatantar as the head of a \textit{matha}.\textsuperscript{305} This points to a date in the late 14\textsuperscript{th} or early 15\textsuperscript{th} century for the third Brahmatantra Svatantar, the composer of the \textit{Mgpp}.

Later hagiographies of each sect relied heavily on these earlier ones, omitting or elaborating specific details in accordance with the circumstances of their composition. I will occasionally draw on some of these sources, especially the \textit{Vārttamālai}, an anthology of the sayings of the \textit{ācāryas} compiled by Pinpaḷakiya Pērumāḷ Jiyar, the author of the \textit{Agpp}, the \textit{Yatirāja Vimśati} of Varavaramuni and the \textit{Rāmānuja Divya Caritai} of Pīḷḷai Lokān Jiyar. I will also consider supplementary evidence from such \textit{vyākhyāna} texts as the \textit{Ītu} of Vaṭakkutiruviṭipīḷḷai, the \textit{Śrīvacana Bhūṣana} of Pīḷḷai Lokācārya and the \textit{Ācāryahṛdayam} of Aḷaṇṇiy-Śri Gopala-Nāyanār whenever necessary to complement an argument or to test a proposition.

The \textit{sthala-purāṇas} are a later genre of literature and usually less authoritative than the above sources. However, they constitute an important source of information about the myths and

\textsuperscript{301} The \textit{Mgpp} composed by Tr̃̄ṭīya Brahmatantra Svatantar Jiyar claims that it is an abridged version of the earlier \textit{Pannirāyirappāṭi Guruparamparā Prabhāvam} composed by the Dvitiya Brahmatantra Svatantar Jiyar which, however, is lost to us.


\textsuperscript{303} Venkatachari, \textit{The Śrīvaisnavā Manipravāla}, op cit., p. 77.

\textsuperscript{304} I incline to the latter date to accommodate Malik Kafur’s invasion of CE 1310.

\textsuperscript{305} \textit{Epigraphica Indica}, XXV, no. 34.
legends associated with the numerous shrines. Many of the temples dotting the Tamil land derive their status if not sanctity from the Ālvār and Nāyanār saints having sung the praise of their chosen deity in specific shrines and thus mapping what has come to be called a sacred geography. The Tamil pilgrimage tradition, both Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava, has of course engaged much scholarly attention. It would be interesting to examine how the pilgrim map, as it appears in the NDP, compares with the frequent elaborations in the hagiographies and to discover the germs of the standardised medieval network.

Considering the absence of any contemporary documentation of the lives of the Ālvārs, many modern Śrīvaiṣṇava scholars have assumed that the hagiographies are based on oral traditions and that the different tellings in the three major hagiographical texts represent either multiple such traditions or the natural embellishments and changes that occur in oral traditions. It is evident, however, that many of these ‘differences’ are purposeful and reflect the differing viewpoints over crucial sectarian issues. Significantly, the DSC seems comparatively innocent of these confrontational issues, but in one central issue of establishing the proper lineage of the preceptors, it seems to bolster the Tēnkalai viewpoint in suggesting that Rāmānuja appointed Parāśara Bhaṭṭar as his successor. This might suggest one of three things: a) the DSC is a later text, of the Tēnkalai persuasion; b) it is contemporaneous with Rāmānuja, and that Parāśara Bhaṭṭar was the successor appointed by Rāmānuja, in which case the Vaiṭakalai sect patently changed the order of succession—which is very unlikely; and c) the DSC is contemporaneous with Rāmānuja and the two verses which speak of the succession being passed on to Bhaṭṭar are a later interpolation. Indeed, the verses in question don’t seem to agree with the few that follow in that the latter of the two speaks of Rāmānuja’s imminent end whereas the last few verses indicate his continued pontificate—technically possible, but stylistically clumsy for a carefully crafted literary work. In sum, therefore, our evidence can be taken to reinforce the belief that the DSC is an older text than either the Agpp or the Mgpp. This however is not to claim that the DSC is closer to the ‘truth’. For, a search for the ‘truth’ of the lives of the Ālvārs seems unlikely to be a fruitful journey. Merely bringing the saints down from the almost uncorrupted dvāpara age and the very beginnings of the Kali age when darkness had not gathered so thick, down to a more mundane time as the late first millennium CE will not restore historical accuracy to them. Nor will simply stripping these tales of the fabulous and the miraculous.

307 i.e., scholars who are personally Śrīvaiṣṇavas.
308 Personal communication from Prof KKA Venkatachari. Also see discussion above.
The ācāryas have, to be fair, scrutinised the verses of the Āḻvārs with immense care to glean whatever detail can be obtained about the saint’s lives from their own words, and then embellished the same. I shall examine these details in the hymns against the stories woven around the lives of the saints to discover the areas where the imagination of the hagiographers has been at work. Needless to say, this creativity was purposeful. It is not fairy tales that have emerged as the final product but texts which enunciate a specific vision of the community. It shall be my purpose to discover, through an examination of the means employed, this vision.

309 DSC, sargah 18, verses 14-15.