Chapter 2

The Ardently Loving Lord: The Promise of Salvation in Śrīvaiṣṇavism

i) Hypothesis

"Devotion, or bhakti, was not a new element in Vaiṣṇavism; it held a major place in the Bhagavad Gītā and earlier works, and it was already accepted as one of the ways of salvation along with karma and jñāna. In its earlier form, however, bhakti was primarily meditation or concentration of one’s thoughts on the deity. In the Bhāgavata [Purāṇa], as for the Āḻvārs, it is a passionate devotion of one’s whole life in complete surrender to the Lord, a way of life that is not one among many, but the only way to true salvation".¹

This immersion in the Lord was not, however, a consistently joyful experience, if the hymns of the Āḻvārs are any indication. The songs of the earlier Āḻvārs express a submissive devotion to a supreme and sublime God,² meditation upon whom is its own end. However, Nammāḻvār, Tirumankai, Pēriyāḻvār, Āṇḍāl, and to a lesser degree Kulaśekhara, often speak in more intimate voices to their Lord. While the motif of the girl in love with her divine beloved is the most striking one, there are poems in the parental voices of Yaśodā,³ Devaki⁴ and Daśaratha.⁵ Despair fights with ecstasy, and hopelessness is seen as often as expressions of fulfilment upon a meeting in the classical lover-beloved poems. Clearly, the saints despite the overwhelming bhakti that allowed them to scold the beloved could not take their divine lover for granted.

There is, however, a sense of determinism that informs the hagiographical accounts of these saints. Let us take an example from the epic, Rāmāyaṇa. The story of Rāma’s killing of Rāvanā exists on numerous planes, firstly as the actual occurrence in the story as Rāvanā’s punishment specifically for abducting Siūi and generally for embodying evil, and secondly as the logical conclusion of Viśṇu’s ridding the earth of the scourge who had secured miraculous boons from Śiva as a result of meditation, and therefore as the reason and justification for Viśṇu’s avatāra as Rāma. There is a third level too: Rāvanā and Kumbhakarṇa are, as Hiraṇyakaśipu and Hiraṇyākṣa in an earlier epic episode and Śiśupāla and Jarāsandha in a later

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² Mutal Tiruvantadi 11, 13, 14; Iranṭām Tiruvantadi 10, 11, 12.
³ Pēriyāḻvār Tirumōli 2.1.1-10; 2.2.1-11; 2.3.1-13; 2.4.1-10; 2.5.1-10; 2.6.1-10; 2.7.1-10; 2.8.1-10 etc.
⁴ Pērumāḷ Tirumōli 7.1-11.
⁵ Pērumāḷ Tirumōli 9.1-11.
the incarnations of Jaya and Vijaya, the faithful guards of Viśṇu’s palace who would not let the sage Durvāsa in when the Lord was resting. On being cursed to separation from the Lord, they chose, against a thousand dhārmic lives devoid of His presence, three short lives of evil redeemed by death at the hands of the Lord. The past, the present and the future are all linked in a cosmic scheme, and the lives on earth and netherworld are in a piece with otherworldly ones. The Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiographies similarly speak of the Āḻvārs on three different planes. At the outset, they are incarnations of one or the other attributes or accoutrements of the Lord; secondly, they are human devotees with the occasional human failing but super-humanity often lingering just below the surface. Their human trials and tribulations may be merely for the enlightenment of common folk, though they may sometimes result from the Lord’s līlā. Besides, the Lord becomes tangibly present on one or more occasions in their human lives. Finally, there is no doubt about their eventual destiny—as nitya sūris blessed with the joy of dwelling in the eternal presence of the Lord in Vaikuṇṭha.

Had the Āḻvārs this certainty themselves, we would certainly never have heard Nammālvār in his lovesick sleeplessness asking the ocean with its restless tides if, like himself, it had also lost its heart to the faithless Lord⁷ or Āṇḍāl’s threat to pluck her breasts from their roots and fling them at the ‘thief’ if He failed to unite with her.⁸ But the early Śrīvaiṣṇava ācāryas assured the community of the faithful that the Lord shall not fail to unite with the devotee, indeed He could not, yearning as He Himself was for the redemption of His bhakta. They expressed this conviction in stotras (poems of praise), in commentaries, in esoteric treatises and in the hagiographies. It is of course possible to argue that more esoteric and decidedly philosophical texts with fewer frills for popular taste could have served the purpose of elaborating the theological vision of the Śrīvaiṣṇava ācāryas better. Such texts were certainly composed, in fact, in great numbers. But for the lay devotee, the stories of the Āḻvārs could convey the Śrīvaiṣṇava salvational programme far more lucidly. I will examine how this unity of purpose was achieved in the different strands of literary and philosophic composition, especially through the hagiographical accounts of Āṇḍāl and Tiruppānālvār and indeed, episodes in the lives of the other Āḻvārs.

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⁶ Earlier and later here refers simply to their popular Puranic rescensions.
⁷ Tiruvāymōli 2.1.3.
⁸ Nācciyār Tirumōli 13.8.
ii) Background

Śrīvaiṣṇavism is composed of three major strands, a long-standing tradition of Viṣṇu bhakti, embodied most profoundly in the Tamil context in the hymns of the Āḻvārs, the ritual precepts of the Pāñcarātra Āgamas, and the philosophical system of Viśiṣṭādvaita, qualified nondualism, the philosophical doctrine propounded by Rāmānuja. The Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiographies credit Nathamuni, a Vedic brāhmaṇa attached to the temple of Vīranārāyanapuram, with the "discovery" and compilation of the hymns.9 We have already seen that there is sufficient reason to doubt this claim.10 From the earliest levels of Śrīvaiṣṇava literature, an attempt to knit in these streams of the tradition is apparent. Not considering Madhurakavi’s praise of his preceptor Nammāḻvār as the author of the Vedas in Tamil, in the Kaṇṭinunciruttāmpu,11 as that falls within the Āḻvār corpus itself, the earliest instance of the Tiruvāyumōţi being equated with the Sanskrit Veda is a tanjīya (a free-standing stanza of praise) on Nammāḻvār, attributed to Nathamuni.12 It is likely, however, that this stanza is a later composition.13 The first commentary on the Tiruvāyumōţi, the Ārāyirappati, by Tirukkurukai Pirān Pillān, the first ācārya in the Vaṭakalai apostolic succession after Rāmānuja, which too makes this claim, is said to have been composed on the express instructions of Rāmānuja himself.14 In the Sanskrit language, this claim is first made in a composition by Parāśāra Bhāṭṭar,15 the first ācārya after Rāmānuja in the Tēṅkaiḻai guruparamparā. Whether or not the hagiography is accurate in recording the wishes of Rāmānuja, it cannot be denied that the Vedic equivalence of the Tiruvāyumōţi was accepted within the Śrīvaiṣṇava community in the generation immediately following Rāmānuja himself. Despite the absence of all reference to the Tamil hymns in Rāmānuja’s own works, one may therefore safely accept the centrality of the NDP to the early Śrīvaiṣṇava community.

The extant writings of Yāmunācārya, Nathamuni’s grandson, and predecessor of Rāmānuja in the lineage of preceptors, are all in Sanskrit. There emerges clearly from these the attempt to forward Nathamuni’s programme of establishing the Vedic orthodoxy of the devotional

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10 See Chapter I, Introduction, section on Sources.
11 Kaṇṭinunciruttāmpu 2.
12 KKA Venkatachari, The Śrīvaisnava Manipravala / The Manipravala Literature of the Śrīvaisnava Acaryas, 12th to 15th Centuries AD. Anantacharya Indological Institute, Bombay, 1978, p. 15.
13 Venkatachari, ibid, pp. 11-15.
14 Agpp, Ilaiyāḻvār Vaibhavam.
literature. The Pāñcarātra Āgamas received their first (extant) defence in the Āgama-prāmāṇya of Yāmunācārya where the ācārya argues that the Pāñcarātra is as authoritative as the Vedas since it has a divine origin like the Vedas. Since the Śrīvaiśnava philosophical tradition which adopted the Pāñcarātra Samhitās considered their theological portions inessential, they were lost when the former was established. Accordingly, the Pāñcarātra texts came to be regarded as manuals of ritual for Vaiśnava initiates. There is good deal of agreement in the treatment of these subjects between the Samhitās and two Śrīvaiśnava texts, the Tattvatraya by Pillāi Lokācārya (a senior contemporary of Vedānta Deśika) of the Tēṇkalai school and the Yatīndramatadīpika by Śrīnivāsadāsa of the Vaṭakalai school.

While the Sanskrit writings of Yāmunācārya do not appeal for scriptural authority to the Tamil hymns as they do to the Vedas, the influence of the former is marked. Devotion to Viṣṇu is evident in his Gitārtha-samgraha, a brief verse summary of the Bhagavad Gītā, the Sotraretatā, and the four verses in praise of Śrī. The Vedic brāhmaṇa status of Nāthamuni’s family with its Sanskrit learning was important for the pan-regional prestige of the nascent community oriented towards Viṣṇu worship. In fact, the word Śrīvaiśnava occurs in an inscription in the Tiruvenkaṭam temple at Tiruppati as early as 966 CE implying the existence of at least a small community by this name by the mid-tenth century. Rāmānuja gave this devotional tradition the seal of Vedic authority by his theological interpretation of Bodhāyana’s Vedānta Sūtras, traditionally considered the essence of the teachings of the Upaniṣads, in his major work, the Śrībhūṣya. The refutation of Śankara’s Advaita and the establishment of Viśistadvaita, a Vedantic system on theological principles was largely the handiwork of Rāmānuja, considered the greatest ācārya (not the founder, as is sometimes erroneously believed) by the community of the faithful. Rāmānuja is credited with nine

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19 Matsubara, ibid, p. 35.
20 Matsubara, ibid, p. 39. Śrīnivāsadāsa is, however, placed in the 17th century.
treatises, the authorship of some of which has recently been contested. The arguments of Robert Lester and Pandit Agnihotram Ramanuja Thatachariar against Rāmānuja’s authorship of the three Gadyas and of the Nityagrantha rest on their assumption that the Śrībhāṣya alone is the key to understanding Rāmānuja, and that views which do not strictly conform to those expressed in the former are those of later Śrīvaiṣṇavas. However, Carman has convincingly shown that most of the passages or doctrines to which Lester and Pandit Agnihotram have taken exception are equally removed from the trajectory of the development of those doctrines in both the Vaṭakalai and Teṅkalai sects. Even earlier, van Buitenen, despite some questions regarding the authorship of the three Gadyas, had concluded in favour Rāmānuja’s authorship arguing that Rāmānuja was not only a philosopher but also a theologian and officiating priest, as is evident from even his Gitābhāṣya.

Though Rāmānuja was primarily a Vedic brāhmaṇa of the Vaṭama sect, there can be no doubt of his deep devotional orientation. The accounts of the Agpp and the Mgpp describe his natal family as both Somayāji and as being devoted to Viṣṇu. Even if these accounts were to be dismissed as inherently biased, we have the evidence of his own writings. There are a number of passages in the context of meditation, devotion, or commitment [where Rāmānuja’s emphasis shifts to] God’s gracious and loving nature and His desire to bring His devotees to a state of eternal communion with Him. Indeed, devotion to Viṣṇu could be confidently said to be one of the predominant motifs of Rāmānuja’s thought. Though Rāmānuja refers to the Pāñcarātra Āgamas only rarely, it is important to note that he considers them sanctioned by orthodoxy. In fact, Daniel Smith calls him a champion of the Pāñcarātra cause. Besides, Rāmānuja positioned himself strongly in the tradition of Nāṭhamuni and can thus be considered an adherent of the Pāñcarātra system. Rāmānuja’s cultic life is in fact said to have

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26 Agpp, pp. 140-141. See Chapter 4, Ilaiyālvār Vaibhavam.

27 Mgpp, pp. 50-54.


29 Nancy Ann Nayar, Poetry as Theology, op cit., p. 105.

been the most creative factor in the formation of his Vedānta. Lott further argues that Rāmānuja certainly continued the policy of fusing the two great traditions, Vedic and Vaiṣṇava. Having said this, let us now look at the broad outlines of Śrīvaiṣṇava doctrine. It must be kept in mind that the tradition is not frozen in time at the point of the merger of the three streams mentioned above—indeed there is no such point in time when such a merger neatly took place—but that the interweaving was a process that was carried on over some generations, mainly through the continuous interpretation of the Tamil hymns.

The great majority of the Pāñcarātra Āgama texts have not yet been sufficiently studied. The literature spells out the ritual framework of worship, elaborating the principles of construction of temples and shrines, and the format of worship. Some of these features such as worship with fragrant flowers and leaves seem to have been common to the Āḻvārs’ devotional expression too. Dennis Hudson asserts that the Āḻvārs were deeply influenced by the Pāñcarātra; in fact, he reads the poems of Āṇḍāḷ and Viśṇucitta as illustrations of Pāñcarātra principles. Though his analysis offers an interesting new perspective from which to examine the bhakti hymns, the insistence on this interpretation seems unjustifiably reductionist, especially considering the many layers of meaning that have been read into it by medieval ācāryas, themselves heir to the Pāñcarātra tradition.

The ācāryas, as we have seen, wrote their theological treatises in Sanskrit. Being not only inheritors of a Brahmanic–Upanisadic tradition, which used Sanskrit exclusively, they were also consciously positioning themselves in a continuing discursive philosophical tradition. They were drawing on the Upaniṣads, commenting upon and elaborating (each in his own light) Upanisadic ideas. One of the most important, indeed, among the earliest to interpret the Upaniṣads was Śāṅkara in the 8th–9th centuries. His commentary on the Bhagavad Gītā, and on the Upanisadic philosophical systems can almost be said to have promoted the system of Vedānta (also called Uttara Mīmāṃsā) to the supremely pre-eminent position. It would be no exaggeration to say that the Upaniṣads considered principal today are those that Śāṅkara

32 Lott, ibid, p. 32.
chose to comment on. Indeed, after Śaṅkara, it was impossible for any philosopher who wished to interpret the ancient scriptures differently to bypass Śaṅkara’s interpretation. The original Vedantin had to be engaged with, and at least partially refuted before any other hypothesis could be presented. It is thus in this convention that we must place Rāmānuja and the later Vaiṣṇava thinkers like Nimbārka, Vallabha and Madhva. Several modern scholars have in fact concurred in their view that Śaṅkara put artificial constructions on the *Vedānta Sūtras.*

Some of the later philosophers could speak without reference to Śaṅkara only because they placed themselves largely in the philosophical tradition of Rāmānuja, who was seen as having already refuted Śaṅkara sufficiently. A number of Śrīvaishṇava scholars after the thirteenth century composed philosophical treatises exclusively in Maṇipravāla, since they were addressing, and debating with, only other scholars within the larger Śrīvaishṇava community itself. There seems to have developed at least in Srirangam, a tradition of exposition of the verses of the Āḻvārs to a wide public, presumably composed largely of lay Śrīvaishṇavas. The interpretations of these hymns were based on the philosophical treatises studied by the smaller circle of ācāryas, and the numerous, elaborate and extensive commentaries that were composed from the twelfth century onwards. The hagiographies written in Tamil, as comparatively less abstruse texts, and consequently accessible to a larger segment of the populace, could have then served as vehicles for a dissemination of this theological vision. Even specific ritual practices exclusive to Śrīvaishṇavas, though possibly evident in the daily life of the temple, were reinforced and given sanctity by their inclusion within the hagiographies, as having been practised by the Āḻvārs and ācāryas of yore.

In the *Vedāntasāra,* considered to be Rāmānuja’s earliest work, he stressed the idea basic to the theology of Vedānta that god is the material cause of the universe and the efficient cause of its periodic origination, continuing existence, and eventual dissolution. Both his *Bhagavadgītābhāṣya* and Yāmuna’s *Gītārthasaṃgraha,* which the former follows closely, regard jñānayoga and karmayoga as only preparatory stages which result in contemplation of the ītman but not in the attainment of god, which is the final goal. God can only be attained through bhakti to which the disciplines of jñāna and karma are indispensable means. JAB van Buitenen believes that in the *Gītābhāṣya,* Rāmānuja “loves to dwell upon the devotional

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36 See Chapter 1, Introduction, section on Sources.


38 Carman, ibid, p. 61.
and emotional aspects of the continuous representation of god”.39 The aspects of god’s nature that are important in redeeming the devotee and bringing him into communion with Him are the ones that receive the greatest praise from Rāmānuja in this text.40

To Rāmānuja, the notion that “God has a particular name, Nārāyaṇa, implies that god has a particular bodily form about which the scriptures inform us, a form not only in His phenomenal manifestations or descents (vibhava or avatāra) but also in His supreme state”.41 There are a number of passages in Rāmānuja’s writings in “the context of meditation, devotion or commitment in which there is a noticeable shift in emphasis to stress God’s gracious and loving nature and his desire to bring His devotees into a state of eternal communion with Him”.42 He believed that although the immediate occasion of the Lord’s descents was to relieve the earth’s burden of evildoers, their deeper intention was to provide a refuge for those who resort to him by becoming a visible object to all mankind and accomplishing such tasks as would win the hearts and eyes of all creatures.43 Despite his belief that God who is inaccessible to men and even gods like Brahmā has made Himself accessible to his worshippers in the phenomenal realm,44 Rāmānuja never uses the term saulabhya for he holds that attainment of god is anything but easy.45 Rather, the Lord’s accessibility is a gift of staggering magnitude. By the time of the later commentators, however, the doctrine of the divine grace and the attributes expressing divine saulabhya had become widely accepted and indeed fundamental to the Śrīvaishṇava theology.46 In fact, Rāmānuja’s immediate disciple Kurattālvān, expresses his relish in the Sundarabāhustava, at the condescension of the inaccessible Supreme Being in manifesting Himself in Tirumālirūṇcolai to be accessible to humanity.47

More openly expressed in Rāmānuja’s Vedantic writing than the conception of saulabhya and paratva is the śarīra-śarīri bhāva.48 The universe is the great body of the Lord, of which He is the inner controlling self. Though Rāmānuja wrote little about the prapatti aspect of the

40 Carman, The Theology of Ramanuja, p. 61.
41 Carman, ibid, p. 167.
42 Carman, ibid, p. 72.
43 Carman, ibid, p. 78.
44 Carman, ibid, p. 79.
45 Carman, ibid, p. 79.
46 Carman, ibid, p. 87.
God–man relationship, the devotees’ utter dependence on the Lord, just as the body is dependant upon its controlling self is a persistent theme.49 The self-body analogy most directly and richly explicates the meaning of the dependent relationship.50 The picture that emerges from the works of Rāmānuja is that the Supreme Brahmān, the primeval person is Viṣṇu, consort of Śrī, possessed of all auspicious qualities and entirely free of impurities.51 Śrīvaiṣṇava doctrine allows every individual, male or female, high- born or low (among the Tēṇkalais only), access to the Lord’s grace. Prapatti has radical potential, being an “existential act on the part of the individual which qualitatively changes his life from being a sansārin to a prapanna”.52 In the three Gadyas, Rāmānuja expressed his devotion and surrender (śaraṇāgati) to the Lord.53 The act of prapatti itself was eventually formalised into a ritual one, with the individual prapanna surrendering to his preceptor and being initiated in the three esoteric mantras mentioned above. Among the Tēṇkalais, Rāmānuja is believed to have performed the act of prapatti on behalf of his whole community; this paradigmatic prapatti is repeated by every individual ācārya taking on the faults of his followers, and securing his/her redemption. Such surrender assures liberation as is made explicit by Vedānta Deśika,54 though it may be delayed if 1) the devotee sins frequently, 2) is attached to worldly objects and 3) has contact with other deities. The human response to God’s loving and redemptive action is typically designated by the term bhakti.

One of the most important and characteristic ideas in Rāmānuja’s theology is the śeṣa-śeṣi concept. Though he does not use the terms very often, his definition of the soul-body relationship hinges on them.55 He defines the terms in the course of a debate with one school of the Karma-Mīmāṁsakas. Śeṣa for Rāmānuja is “an object possessed, whereas the possessor is śeṣi”.56 In the thought of his followers, the idea that it is the function of the śeṣi (the master) to look after his śeṣa becomes of prime importance, for it is on this that the confidence of the prapanna in his salvation hinges.57 Vedānta Deśika defines the Lord as śeṣi, the one for whose

49 Lott, ibid, p. 42.
53 Śaraṇāgatigadāya, Śrīrangagadāya, Vaikunthagadāya by Rāmānuja.
54 Vedānta Deśika, Śrīmad Rahaṣṭrayasāra 193.
56 Carman, ibid, p. 148.
57 Carman, ibid, p. 149.
purposes material things exist and the master whom intelligent beings are obligated to serve.\textsuperscript{58} The Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition does not ‘oblige’ god to save his dependants but has tended to assume that He would eventually save those who surrender themselves to Him.\textsuperscript{59} This fundamental doctrine of Śrīvaiṣṇava theology has, however, two variant interpretation, i.e., whether continued effort is required on the part of the individual soul after the surrender or if it is entirely the grace of the Lord which is salvific; the difference is one of the eighteen points of distinction between the Tēnkalai and Vaṭakalai schools.

The role of Śrī in the salvation of the individual soul is one of the critical points of difference between the northern and southern sects. The earliest reference to Śrī in specifically Śrīvaiṣṇava writings is in the Catuḥśloki of Yāmuna. In Rāmānuja’s own writings, there is acceptance of the doctrine of inseparability of the Lord and Śrī. Later commentators on his Śarvaṅgagatigadya interpreted his surrender to Śrī at the beginning of the composition as illustrative of the goddess’ role as puruṣakāra (intercessor). Her role as mediatrix in salvation was developed intensively in the doctrinal compositions of Śrīvaiṣṇava ṛcāryas who succeeded Kūresa and Bhaṭṭar, Rāmānuja’s immediate disciples.\textsuperscript{60} Pēriyāvācchi Pillai explicating stanza 19 of the Tiruppāvai makes the necessity of a mediatrix explicit by showing that the gopīs are Pinnai’s dependants, because she is the only one who can make Kṛṣṇa available to them.\textsuperscript{61} In the further development of the concept of the centrality of the divine consort, Śrī in the Vaṭakalai understanding is inseparable from and infinite like the Lord himself, acting both as upāya and upeya, whereas for the Tēnkalai, she is the first among finite souls, ranking above an ordinary jīva, yet lacking the Lord’s autonomy, lordliness and supremacy.\textsuperscript{62}

The four thousand hymns of the Āḷvārs take us on a multi-dimensional emotional-devotional journey. This is not the place to examine the complex hues of the mystic poetry; I shall, accordingly, focus on only some aspects of the same. Though a deep sense of viraha frequently informs this poetry, it is equally easy to find verses that speak of the (experienced) joy of union with the divine, or of viraha intensified after, and due to, an experience of union.

\textsuperscript{58} Carman, ibid, p. 150.
\textsuperscript{59} Carman, ibid, p. 150.
\textsuperscript{60} Nayar, Poetry as Theology, op cit., pp. 222-223.
\textsuperscript{62} See Mumukṣuppatti of Pillai Lokācārya with Maṉavāḷamārūni’s Commentary, Translation by Patricia Y Mumme, Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute Series no. XIX, Bombay, 1987, pp 19-20
Equally, numerous verses speak of the bliss of serving the Lord in His shrine—the Śrīvaiṣṇava word for beholding the image in the temple, what is called darśana in Hindi, is sevai (=seva) carrying the connotation of service. This seems to be a reflection of the Āḻvār tradition of interchangeably speaking of ‘seeing the Lord’ in any of His shrines and of offering worship with flower garlands etc. Indeed, in the hymns, this life that offers the opportunity of serving the Lord in His temple shrine is often spoken of as superior even to heaven.

The rich pilgrimage poetry of both the Āḻvārs and the Nāyaṉmārs underscores the fact that Āḻvār bhakti was rooted in this world. Bhakti rarely aims at renunciation as the ultimate goal and is radically opposed to the strand of classical Hindu thought which would reduce the world to mere māyā (divine illusion). The Tamil bhakti tradition is rooted in realism; the myths that the bhakti poets inherited are “meaningful only in the context of a basic acceptance of the world in which they take place—even if a consciousness of their symbolic rather than simply factual content is never truly lost”. Indeed, human life is seen as offering greater opportunity for the soul to commune with the Lord. In the penultimate verse of the Tiruppāvai, Āṇḍāl asks not for mokṣa, final liberation, but entanglement with Krṣṇa in life after life, continuous service to Him for seven lives to come. He is both the goal and the means to the goal, a point to which I will return later. The intensity and depth of viraha may itself arise from the final, actual impossibility of union with the Divine in this corporal existence. While the emotions expressed in the hymns themselves alternate between joy and despair, the commentarial tradition tried to impose uniformity through interpretation. The hagiographies record an early instance of the same. Rāmānuja is said to have been tutored in the Tiruvāyumōli by Tirumālai Āṇḍān, one of the five disciples of Yamuna to whom the old preceptor had imparted the sum of his teachings in order to be passed on to Rāmānuja. When Āṇḍān was expounding a certain verse of the Tiruvāyumōli, Rāmānuja is said to have objected to it on the grounds that the Āḻvār’s statement in that verse, according to that interpretation, seemed inconsistent with the verses immediately preceding and following it. When Āṇḍān

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65 Shulman, ibid, pp. 56-57.
66 Tiruppāvai, 29.
69 Agpp, pp. 193-199.
70 *Tiruvāyumōli* 2.3.3.
remonstrated with his disciple for dissenting from the views of Ālavantār (Yāmuna’s honorific in the community), terming his interpretation a “creation of Viśvāmitra”, (i.e., baseless fabrication, a reference to Triśanku svarga), another disciple mentioned having once heard Ālavantār give the alternate interpretation. While this incident is important in the hagiographies for establishing Rāmānuja’s instinctive apprehension of Yāmuna’s own ideas, and thus his position in the guruparamparā, it is important for us as a record of the centrality of creative and constant interpretations of the hymns. It is crucial too in demonstrating that Rāmānuja’s interpretation was in the interests of logical consistency: devotion in his view must consist of unremitting remembrance of the perfections of god. Few later commentators dared—unlike Rāmānuja—to dissent from the opinions of their predecessors; what we see in the growing commentarial literature is the aggregation of interpretations. Each commentator elaborated on the views of earlier ones. While uniformity was often therefore imposed at the expense of the more turbulent emotional landscape through which the hymns meander, ambiguity remained in a number of aspects. While this life remains important in the opportunity it offers for service to the temple icon, there can be no doubt that in the formulations of the ācāryas, final liberation was obtainable only in the after-life. Rāmānuja describes the glories of Vaikuntha, the Lord’s celestial abode, in the Vaikuntha Gadya, one of the works whose authorship is disputed by Lester. and Ālvār devotionalism, on the other hand, was frequently focussed on particular images in particular shrines. This absorption in the arcā (image-incarnation) finds indirect support in one of the key concepts of early Śrīvaiṣṇavism, viz., the parity of the different forms of the Lord. Pāṇcarātra doctrine envisages the Lord in five forms — para, i.e., transcendent Lord in His supreme heaven, vyūha, emanations, vibhava or incarnations such as Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, arcā, and finally,

71 Agpp, p. 193-199.

72 Rāmānuja was not Yāmuna’s direct disciple; in fact, they never ‘met’ each other—it seems a point so well established and well remembered that the hagiographies do not attempt to gloss it. This might explain the emphasis on detailing Yāmuna’s desire to see Rāmānuja established at the pontificate in Srirangam, and elaborating instances of Rāmānuja having apprehended the unspoken wishes of Yāmuna. The incident mentioned above thus gives further credibility to Rāmānuja’s preceptorship.

73 Carman, The Theology of Ramanuja, op cit., pp. 210-211.

74 See above, footnote 23.

75 There are exceptions, however. Vedānta Deśika says in Varadarāja Pañcāśat 49, “Oh lord of Varanāśila! As I constantly visit your beautiful form, the place that is untainted by anxiety, I have no desire even for Vaikuntha—by truth, I swear!” [Translation by Katherine Young, “Dying for Bhukti and Mukti”, op cit., p 395]. The influence of the poetry of the Ālvārs is discernible here.

76 Nayar, Poetry as Theology, op cit., pp. 105-133.
antaryāmi, the indweller in all creation. The concepts of antaryāmin, avatāra and arcā are modes of God’s approach to the human self for its salvation, and thus the principle of initiating grace. Piḷḷai Lokācārya’s analogy of the five forms of water is telling: a man thirsting for water is similar to the soul thirsting for salvation; the antaryāmi is like water underground, the para form like water surrounding the world-egg, the vyūhas like the milk-ocean, the vibhavas like seasonal rivers while the arcā is like standing pools in these rivers.

The emphasis upon transcendence in Nammalvar’s thought is believed to establish God’s supremacy; the emphasis upon immanence his condescending grace. “If God were merely transcendent mystery, there could be no personal relationship and no self-understanding which would be adequate for living; if he were merely immanent, one would have no assurance of the ground of faith.” Unlike later commentators who developed a contrast between the paratva and saulabhya of the Lord, i.e., His transcendence and accessibility, Rāmānuja did not; rather, he maintained their simultaneity (though, as we have seen, he did not use the specific term saulabhya). The Lord, in Rāmānuja’s thought, does not give up His essential nature even during His partial descents, i.e., as avatāras. Rāmānuja himself does not mention the word arcā, though his Śrīraṅga Gadya is devoted to the image of the Lord at Srirangam. In their Sanskrit stotras, Kūresā and Parāśara Bhaṭṭar express their enjoyment of the tension inherent in the polarity between the Lord’s supremacy and His accessibility. Several of Bhaṭṭar’s verses actually suggest that the Lord prefers to dwell in the accessible and worshipsirable temple icon than even in Vaikuṇṭha. Indeed, the Lord is thought to desire His devotees as ardently as they desire Him. Returning from a visit to the temple of the Lord in Tiruvāṅiṇḍrapuram, Vedānta Deśika came upon a glorious vision of the lord Devanayaka in the middle of the night. The Lord wanted to know why he was leaving without composing

77 Nayar, ibid, p. 105; Carman, The Theology of Ramanuja, op cit., p. 179; Matsubara, Pancaratra Samhitas, op cit., pp. 117-144.
79 Śrīvacana Bhūṣana 39, cited in Mumukṣupati of Piḷḷai Lokācārya with Maṇavāḷamūmuni’s Commentary, Translation by Patricia Y Mumme, op cit., p 201.
80 Kaylor and Venkatachari, ibid, p. 36.
81 Carman, ibid, p. 251. Also, the above statement by Kaylor and Venkatachari reflects a conscious attempt to look at Nammalvar’s thought from outside the prism of the commentaries.
82 Carman, ibid, p. 251.
83 This, the devotion to an arcā form, is the main reason for Lester’s rejection of the authorship of this text by Rāmānuja.
84 Nayar, Poetry as Theology, op cit., pp. 131-132.
songs in his honour. Desika sang, “You never turn from your devotees, O Acyuta,/ whose minds/ like moonstone that sweats/ under shining moonlight/ melt into a flood of tears at the sight of your face.”\(^{85}\) Says Nayar, “The mutuality of the relationship between Viṣṇu and his devotees is a distinctive element of the Śrīvaiśṇava tradition, and as such, represents an important point of continuity between the Āḷvārs and ācāryas”.\(^{86}\) Indeed, this finds expression in Rāmānuja’s Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya\(^ {87}\) in his gloss of Kṛṣṇa’s words to Arjuna, “You are dear to me”. Rāmānuja represents the Lord being unable to bear separation from His devotee, thus causing him to attain Him.

Meditation upon and recitation of three esoteric stanzas are central articles of Śrīvaiśṇava faith.\(^ {88}\) These three are: 1) the astāksaram, i.e., Om namo nārāyanāyah 2) the dvayamantram, i.e., Śrimad nārāyaṇa caraṇau śaraṇam prapadye, Śrimate Nārāyaṇāya namah, and, 3) the carama śloka, i.e., sarvadharman parityajya, māmekam śaraṇam vrajā/ aham tvā sarvapāpebhяв mokṣayiṣyāmi mā śucaḥ. The last śloka is from the Gītā. It is considered by the Śrīvaiśṇava community the essence of the teaching of the Lord, hence, the appellation carama. It is interpreted by the community as the promise of the Lord to grant salvation to all who take refuge in Him. I will return to this point later.

### iii) Evidence from the hagiographies

Āṇḍāl has a unique position among the twelve Āḷvārs by virtue of being the only woman among them. From the Tiruppāvai, a poem of thirty stanzas, emerges the picture of a young woman intensely devoted to Kṛṣṇa. Her other composition, the Nācciyār Tirumōṭi, comprising one hundred and forty three stanzas that make fourteen poems, is among the earliest literary pieces suffused with ‘bridal mysticism’. The early ācāryas and commentators accorded a special status to Āṇḍāl, not merely because of the impassioned quality of her verse but owing perhaps to her gender too. Other Āḷvārs, notably Kulaśekhara, Namālvaṁ and Tirumankai have also composed verses in the voice of a woman yearning for her divine beloved, but as Pinpalakiya Pērumāl Jiya, the author of the Agpp phrases it, the love of a man for a man is

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\(^{85}\) Steven Paul Hopkins, *Singing the Body of God: The Hymns of Vedāntadeśika in their South Indian Tradition*. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2002, pp. 3-4. The translation of Deśika’s hymn is also Hopkins’.

\(^{86}\) Nayar, ibid, p. 197.

\(^{87}\) Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya, 18.65.

\(^{88}\) It is difficult to tell when they became important. Certainly, the hagiographies represent Yāmuna as having reposed their esoteric meanings in his disciples, and Rāmānuja as having taken particular pains to obtain the meaning of the dvayam from Tirukkoṭṭiyūr Nampi—a particularly popular incident. See Chapter 3.
like water flowing uphill whereas that of a woman for a man and of a man for a woman is as natural as water flowing downhill.\textsuperscript{89} Āṇḍāḷ came to be considered variously an incarnation of Bhūmi, the earth-goddess who is one of Viṣṇu’s two chief consorts, or of Niḷā/ Nappinnai, the Tamil bride of the Lord. I will first briefly recapitulate the story given in the hagiographies. I will point out the significant variations between the three accounts—of the Agpp, the Mgpp and the DSC—that might have a bearing on the present analysis. In general, the Mgpp account uses more Sanskrit, and being almost entirely without decorative embellishments, is much shorter than that of the Agpp.

As in the case of the hagiography of every Āḻvār, the Agpp account reproduces at the outset Sanskrit verses from the DSC, describing the astrological and environmental details of the time of the saint’s birth, followed by the same in Tamil prose, while the Mgpp gives the same details in Sanskrit- dominated Maṇipravāla prose.

\begin{itemize}
  \item[a)] Āṇḍāḷ \textit{Vaibhavam}\textsuperscript{90}
  In Śrīvillipūttrā in the Pāṇṭiya land, Kodai\textsuperscript{91} was born in the month of Āsāḍha/ Āṭi, in the \textit{Pūrva phālgunī} asterism, the fourth day of the waxing moon, on a Tuesday in the 98th year of Kaliyuga called Nala. The earth goddess in the form of a baby was discovered, we are told, by Pēriyāḻvār (literally, the Great Āḻvār), also called Viṣṇucitta, as he was digging the soil for a \textit{tulasi} plant, even as Janaka discovered Sītā. She was named Curuppārkuḷal Kodai by her foster parents. Viṣṇucitta, the priest of the temple of Vaṭapatraśāyi (the Lord as a baby reclining on a banyan leaf), used to string flower garlands to offer the Lord each day. As Kodai was growing up, bedecking herself in all her finery, she would try on the garlands in her father’s absence, to see if she would make a fit bride for the Lord, if He would accept her. Viṣṇucitta saw her in the act one day and was distressed that the offering to the Lord had been polluted thus. That day he offered no garland, and craved the Lord’s pardon for having offended Him unknowingly in the past. However, the Lord appeared in Viṣṇucitta’s dream to tell him that he preferred the garlands worn in and made fragrant by Kodai’s hair. The Āḻvār, her father, wondered if his daughter was Śrī, Bhūmidevi or Nappinnai. She came henceforth to be known as Cūṭikōṭutta Nācciyār, literally, the lady who gave the Lord what she had worn.
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{89} Agpp, pp. 47- 50.
\textsuperscript{90} \textit{Vaibhavam} =Glory. All translations from the hagiographies have been done jointly by (late) Prof J Parthasarathī and me.
\textsuperscript{91} Given name of Āṇḍāḷ.
Even as the *tulasi* plant is imbued with fragrance, the Näcciąyar grew through the stages of infancy, childhood and youth with *para bhakti*, and *para jñāna* leading to *parama bhakti*. As she came of age, her attachment to the Lord grew so much that Kṛṣṇa *viraha* became intolerable to her. She then performed the Mārkaṇḍī *nompu*, a traditional vow performed by maidens during the month of December–January, involving rising early in the morning, going to bathe in the river and abstaining not only from wrong doing, but also from milk, ghee, decorating the hair with flowers, and lining the eyes with kohl. She then prayed to Kāma to grant her Kaṇṇan (the Tamil name for Kṛṣṇa).

As Āṇḍāḷ came of age, Pēriyāḻvār worried about her marriage even as Janaka had worried about Sītā’s. Āṇḍāḷ however declared that she would not live to hear of her marriage with a mortal, and would look at none other than the Lord Māyaṇ of Tirumālirūṅcolai. The Āḻvār then asked Āṇḍāḷ which of the one hundred and eight Lords she would marry, and on her request, recited the specific glories of each of the Lords. The DSC account waxes eloquent at this point; in fact the verses—in the best style of Sanskrit flowery *kāvya*—that describe the beauty of a few temple towns and shrines, and the specific attributes of some of the 108 Viṣṇus, the love-yearnings of the Lord and of Āṇḍāḷ for each other and their eventual marriage, constitute over two chapters of the eighteen that make up the DSC.

Āṇḍāḷ finally decided to wed the lord Alakiya Maṇavaḷan, (the name of the *utsava mūrti* or processional idol at Srirangam, literally, the bridegroom-lord), a choice her father approved of. The Lord relieved the Āḻvārs’ worry about how the marriage was to be accomplished by appearing in his dream to tell him of His acceptance. He then sent His attendants to Śrīvilliputtūr with fitting paraphernalia, to bring the bridal party to Srirangam. Āṇḍāḷ was carried in a covered palanquin to the accompaniment of music and chants of praise. On reaching Srirangam, she feasted her eyes on the beauty of the Lord, and pressing the coils of the serpent bed of the Lord, she climbed up, and in front of the astonished eyes of all including the Pāṇṭhiya king, disappeared into the Lord. The Lord graciously announced that the Āḻvār was now His father-in-law, even as was the king of the milk-ocean, and presented him with

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92 C Minakshi, says, “The *pavai nombu* is equivalent to Katyayani *vratam*. The *pavai* represented Katyayani and was made of sand on the riverside”. *Administration and Social life under the Pallavas*, University of Madras, Madras, 1938, p. 204.

93 An important temple of Viṣṇu on the outskirts of Madurai.

94 Only a few shrines/ gods are actually named and described.

95 According to Puranic mythology, Śrī, the consort of Viṣṇu, is believed to be the daughter of the Ocean of milk.
all the due honours. Then bidding the Lord farewell, Pēriyālvār returned to Śrīvilliputtūr with a father’s sadness over the parting.\textsuperscript{96}

I must point out at this juncture, a curious, but frequent collation of the names of the processional idol and the mūla mūrti, the immovable icon, made often of stone, though occasionally of other materials like stucco, or even wood. While it is Alakīya Maṇavālañ that Āṇḍāḷ is said to have chosen to marry and indeed, upon whom she gazed, on finally arriving at Srirangam, it is the mūlavar, Ranganātha/ Pēriya Pērumāl, who in this instance is not named, who reclines on a serpent bed, and into whom she presumably merged. The Śrīvaiṣṭava tradition recognizes both the distinct individuality and the identity of the two, even as it recognizes the identity and distinctiveness of the Viṣṇus of the different shrines. I shall explore the implications of the same in a later chapter.

The \textit{DSC} has an additional section on Āṇḍāḷ’s \textit{viraha} where she is described as wasting away with secret love for the Lord.\textsuperscript{97} “Was not the \textit{kankana}\textsuperscript{98} he took from Bali as Vāmana sufficient for him that he now covets my \textit{kangana} (bracelet)? Why does he who crossed the sea as Rāghava for Janaka-Nandini not think of me? He dived in the ocean to rescue the earth, does he not see me drowning in the ocean of sorrow now?” A sakhi finally induces her to share her secret and, learning that it is the Lord she has lost her heart to, draws the pictures of the 108 Lords. Āṇḍāḷ lowers her face in shyness on seeing the picture of Ranganātha.\textsuperscript{99}

Finally, the \textit{DSC} account makes some interesting connections with the lives of some other Āḻvārs. In the \textit{svayamvara}, which is located in Kurukāpuri (the birthplace of Nammāḻvār), all the Āḻvārs except Nammāḻvār and Tirumankai/ Parakālañ take part as uncles of the bride, being as it were, brothers of her father due to their kinship through the Lord. The Āḻvārs then praise Śaṭhakopa, hear his \textit{prabandhas} and recite theirs and Godā’s to him. Sages and celestials arrive for the wedding as do the 108 Viṣṇus. Śaṭhakopa then asks Godā to make her choice, announcing the suitors, “40 gods from Colaśa, 18 from Pāṇḍyadeśa, 13 from Keraladeśa, 22 from Tondīr, 2 from the Madhyadeśa and 11 from the north.”

The hagiographies tell us that Tirumankai Āḻvār, after being dismissed by his overlord, the Coḷa ruler, for misappropriation of funds—which he did in order to fulfil his promise to his
wife to feed a thousand Śrīvaisñavas everyday—took to highway robbery.  

One day, the Lord appeared with his retinue disguised as a bridegroom with his wedding party. After relieving them of almost all their wealth, Parakālaṅ, in trying to pull out with his teeth His finger ring (which was too tight to be removed), realized that it was the Lord himself. While in the Agpp and the Mgpp accounts, this is an independent incident included in the account of Tirumankai Ālvār, the DSC makes the wedding party that of Ranganātha and Āndāl’s.

b) Tiruppānālvār Vaibhavam

In the month of Kārttikai, on the second day of the dark phase of the moon in the Rohiṇi asterism, a Wednesday, in the year 343 of Kaliyuga, was born an amśa (part avatāra) of the Śrīvatsa (Viṣṇu’s chest mark), in Uraiyyūr. Beyond this, since the DSC, Agpp and Mgpp accounts differ rather drastically on major points, three separate retellings are in order.

Along with the other details of the birth, the Agpp adds that the Ālvār was born in the pañcama varga, i.e., as an outcaste. It then continues the ‘Tiruppānālvār Vaibhavam’ by telling us that the Lord bestowed His grace upon the new-born child, filling him with sattvagwa (pure qualities). It quotes next, a story from the Kaiśika Purāṇa where a bard called Nampāṭuvār in TirukKurunkuti was spared by a blood thirsty brahma rākṣasa (a demon who was a brāhmaṇa in a previous birth) for singing songs in praise of Viṣṇu. After further likening him to Nārada for his proficiency in music, the Agpp tells us that the Ālvār never stepped inside the area between the rivers Kaveri and Koḻitam as befitted his caste. Rather, he stayed on the southern bank of the southern river, in front of the ghāṭ facing the shrine, and sang the Lord’s praise with viṇai (lute) in hand. Just as the Lord was Himself drawn to Bhīṣma when the latter lay on his bed of arrows meditating on Him, Pēriya Pērumāḷ Himself was attracted to the Ālvār.

At this point, some manuscripts add that the Goddess asked her consort how He could allow His bhaktas to stay out thus. The Lord agreed, but when He called him, the Ālvār refused because of his humility and low birth. As the Ālvār was engaged in meditating on the Lord one morning, a temple priest named Lokasārangamuni brought the pot for the Lord’s ablution waters to the river. Seeing the outcaste, he commanded him to remove himself, but the God-absorbed Ālvār didn’t hear. Lokasārangamuni flung a stone, drawing blood from the Ālvār’s face, and rousing him. The Ālvār, profoundly sorry for having distressed a bhāgavata (worshipper of Viṣṇu), went away. After having duly bathed and ritually recited the daily

100 See Chapter 3, Tirumankai Ālvār Vaibhavam.
prayers—the *nityakarmāṇuṣṭāṇam*—the priest carried the water pot back to the temple with all the paraphernalia of umbrella, fly-whisk, drums and instruments. In His shrine, the Lord was deeply disturbed that His *bhakta* should have suffered so. Pirāṭṭi (literally, the lady) too added that the bard so intimate to Them could not be allowed to suffer, or remain outside.

When Lokasārangaṃuni entered, the Lord closed the doors of His shrine and remonstrated with him in private.

This episode, very central in popular retelling of the Āḻvārs’ lives, is however not found in some manuscripts, which simply state that the Lord appeared in the priest’s dream and instructed him to bring the bard to Him on his shoulders.

Lokasārangaṃuni came to the bathing *ghāṭ* where *brāhmaṇaś* bathed, and bowing to Tiruppāṇāḻvār praying at a respectful distance, conveyed the Lord’s message. The Āḻvār protested that having been born in a caste outside of the four castes, and having no redeeming personal qualities himself, he could not place his feet in the hallowed grounds of Srirangam. The priest then asked him to climb onto his shoulders; the Āḻvār obeying the Lord’s bidding did so. Thus, he carried the Āḻvār into the presence of Alākiya Maṇavāḷaṇ just as *ādivāhakan*, the primordial carrier/vehicle, transports souls across Vaitarāṇi, the river of forgetfulness, to the Lord’s abode, Vaikuṇṭha. The Āḻvār then drank in the beauty of the Lord—which is described in the hagiography through quotations of Sanskrit verses and from hymns of other Āḻvārs—beginning with His sacred feet, and poured out his overflowing love in a beautiful poem of ten stanzas beginning with the phrase (and hence called the) *Amaianādipirān*—the flawless, primordial Lord. As he was singing thus, the Lord absorbed into Himself the Āḻvār in his bodily form, even as those who wear fragrant roots in their hair do so with the mud sticking to it.

In the *Mgpp* version, a baby abandoned in the fields was found by a childless couple who, despite being performers of good deeds, were born in the *caṇḍāla* caste due to misdeeds in previous lives. They brought the child up on cow’s milk, so that (the future Āḻvār) was unpolluted by the consumption of impure foods. As soon as he began to speak, he began to sing praises of the Lord to the accompaniment of the *vīnai*. His upbringing in a *caṇḍāla* family prevented him from entering the temple; following custom therefore, he stayed at the banks of the Kaveri, focussing on the Lord.

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101 *Agpp*, p. 65. The editor specifies that this is found only in some manuscripts.
Periya Perumāl, pleased by his devotion, instructed Lokasārangamuni in a dream to fetch the Āḻvār to Him on his shoulders. When the priest approached the devotee with the Lords’ instruction, the Āḻvār replied that he was of an unapproachable caste and unfit to enter the sacred shrine. Interestingly, the text even adds that he said this for the hearing of common folk lost in crass customs! While the rest of the tale is similar to the Agpp’s, the Mgpp pronounces that even if one is pure by birth, one must follow the customs of the world, and gives the example of Kṛṣṇa who grew up among cowherds—that it became apparent when the young Kṛṣṇa went to the sage Sāndipani for Vedic learning, that he was a cowherd only by upbringing, and not by birth.

The brief DSC account says that the child born in an antima kula (last caste), never even cried, but was ever immersed in singing the Lord’s praises with vīnā in hand, on the southern bank of the Kaveri. Pāñanātha Sūrī102 was superior to even a devotee of yore called Kaisīka who had been born in the svapaca jāti. Lakṣmī and her Lord rejoiced at his singing without thought of sleep till Lakṣmī asked that their devotee be brought close to them. The Lord then commanded Lokasārangamuni/ Śuka to do so, and the Āḻvār, carried despite his protests on the muni’s shoulders into His presence, sang of the glory of the Lord from toe to head.103

c) An Episode from the Parakāla Sūri Vaibhava in the DSC104

While all the three major Nāyānmaṛs seem to have travelled from one shrine of Śiva to the other, most of the Āḻvārs seem to have made far more restricted pilgrimages. Nāmāḻvār, the second ‘most-travelled’ saint, has sung of about thirty five holy places of Viṣṇu, while Tirumankai Āḻvār’s major work, the Pēriya Tirumōli, praising eighty five shrines, is almost a pilgrims’ manual, not unlike the Tevāram hymns.

Once on his way to Venkaṭam, Parakāla and his retinue were hungry and thirsty. At that time they encountered an old Vaiṣṇava who bore on his forehead the ṛrdhva puṇḍra or mark of Viṣṇu. Parakāla asked him if he could tell him from his holy books what destiny held for him, and to give them what food he had on his person. (Evidently, the Āḻvār had no scruples about depriving a Vaiṣṇava of food if he himself was hungry!—see chapter 3). The old Vaiṣṇava, who was Viṣṇu himself in disguise, told him that his future would be harimaya (filled with the

102 Sanskritised name of Tiruppāṇāḻvār.
103 DSC, sargah 7, verses 18-28.
104 DSC, sargah 14, verses 6-16.
Lord), and then distributed the delicious food he was carrying to the Ālvār’s party—a mere handful each of which satisfied them entirely. Parākāla then asked the brāhmaṇa who he was. Here the text says significantly, “Since the Lord is always in the vasa, bondage, of Vaiṣṇavas, He gladly answered.”105 Thus, the brāhmaṇa replied that he was a resident of western Kāṇći, by the name of Aśṭabāhu Narasimha,106 and so saying, vanished.

iv) Analysis

It is evident that this ‘life-story’ of Āṇḍāḷ is based on a careful reading of the hymns of Āṇḍāḷ. Let us try and retrace some of the steps that the hagiographers must have taken—for it is first in his commentary on the Tiruppāvai, in contextualising her verses, that Pēriyavāccān Piḷḷai, the teacher of Pinpalakīya Pērumāḷ Jiyar, is said to have first elaborated the legend of Āṇḍāḷ.107 The Tiruppāvai begins with a call to maidens to join in the vow mentioned above, and promises that careful observance of the same would lead to such boons as a bountiful monsoon, golden heaps of paddy, and plentiful milk from their cows.108 Māṇikkavācakar, one of the Śaiva saints, takes a similar penance for the theme of the Tiruvēmāpāvai, a collection that forms part of the Śaiva canon. It appears that our present knowledge of this custom of the pāvai vrata is based essentially on these two medieval works. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa interpreted the pāvai, a sand figure or mother goddess central to the vow, as the goddess Katyāyani;109 a statement that must be accepted in the absence of other evidence. Āṇḍāḷ turned its focus to the worship of Kṛṣṇa. However, what is amply clear is the devotional focus on Kṛṣṇa. Āṇḍāḷ frequently alludes to various feats of Viṣṇu in His various incarnations—measuring the worlds in three strides,110 killing Rāvaṇa and Kumbhakaṇṭha111 etc. But references to events from the Kṛṣṇāvatāra doubtlessly predominate. Āṇḍāḷ, like the other Ālvārs, is familiar with the legends of Viṣṇu (as is further evinced in the Naeciyar Tirumōli), and is conscious of the identity of His different forms, even when concentrating on any one specific form, either as avatāra (incarnation), or as arcā (iconic incarnation).112 Indeed, when speaking of the Lord installed in any of the numerous shrines dotting the Tamil land, or the

105 DSC, Sargāḥ 14, verse 12.
106 The reference is to a divya kṣetra in Kāṇći, that of Aśṭabhujaśvāmi, where the Lord is imaged with eight arms.
107 Hudson, “Bathing in Kṛṣṇa”, op cit., p. 553. Hudson ignores the prior claims of the DSC in attributing the first instance of the elaboration of the legend to Pēriyavāccān Piḷḷai.
108 Tiruppāvai 3.
109 Hardy, Viraha Bhakti, op cit., p. 416.
110 Tiruppāvai 3.
111 Tiruppāvai 12.
dozen or so beyond the borders of modern Tamil Nadu, the Ālvārs regularly allude to His residence in other shrines, and even address the Lord in a particular shrine as the one who dwells in another. However, I will return to this subject in a later chapter.

Āṇḍāḷ frequently speaks of ‘northern Mathura’, and the banks of the Yamuna, but not only as distant holy places of the Lord. The voice in such verses is that of one of the gopīs of the cowherd clan who addresses some hymns to her friends and cousins, rousing them to join in the early morning rituals of the vow and, in others, addresses Nappinai as Nandagopa’s daughter-in-law—showing an interesting amalgam in the southern mythic imagination of the identification of the Tamil bride of the Lord with his specifically northern persona. Finally, a large number of hymns are naturally addressed to Kṛṣṇa himself. While in some verses Āṇḍāḷ asks for various boons such as prosperity for the land, forgiveness for past sins, or even for the ritual implements necessary for the performance of the vow itself, the penultimate verse expresses the running theme—the grant of eternal service to the Lord.

The Nācchiyār Tirumōli is more complex in its organization than the Tiruppāvai. In the opening poem of ten stanzas, Āṇḍāḷ asks Kāma, the god of love, to unite her with Kṛṣṇa. She details the rites she has performed for securing her beloved. It is in this poem that Āṇḍāḷ speaks the words considered decisive by the Śrīvaiṣṇava community, that she would not live if there were even talk of marrying her to a mortal, indeed, that it would be such sacrilege as jackals sniffing at the (Vedic) sacrificial oblation meant for the gods. In the sixth poem, she sings of her dream of her wedding with the Lord. It is interesting as a window to marriage rituals in the 8th–9th centuries, almost all of which (with the exception of the elephant-back ride of the newly-wedded couple) continue to feature in the modern Śrīvaiṣṇava wedding, not least because of the sanctity in which the Divyaprābandham has been held since at least the 11th century. Both medieval and modern scholars of the Śrīvaiṣṇava persuasion have, however, treated this dream as indicative of a prophetic revelation, an eventual fait accompli as it were. In the hymns spoken in the voice of a lovelorn maiden, Āṇḍāḷ asks to be united with 1) Kṛṣṇa (or one of the other names of Viṣṇu such as Govinda, Hṛṣikeśa, Vāmana, Tirumāl etc), or the

113 Tiruppāvai 5.
114 Tiruppāvai 9, 10.
115 Tiruppāvai 18, 19.
116 Tiruppāvai 3.
117 Tiruppāvai 5.
118 Nācchiyār Tirumōli 1.5.
119 Nācchiyār Tirumōli 6.1-6.10.
Lord of Vṛndāvana\textsuperscript{120} and of Tuvāra\textsuperscript{121} (Dvāraka), and 2) the deity in specific shrines in the Tamil land. Since the former are generic, I shall here concentrate on the latter, particularly due to their significance to our hypothesis. Though she mentions His presence in Venkaṭam,\textsuperscript{122} Kaṇṭapura,\textsuperscript{123} Villiputur,\textsuperscript{124} Māliṟūṉcolai,\textsuperscript{125} and Kuṭantai,\textsuperscript{126} impassioned hymns are addressed only to the Lord in Venkaṭam,\textsuperscript{127} Māliṟūṉcolai\textsuperscript{126} and Srirangam,\textsuperscript{128} apart from Āyppāti (literally, cowherd-hamlet, which in Śrīvaisṭava lore has acquired the status of one of the 108 sacred places of the Lord).\textsuperscript{129} The emotion of viraha predominates in the penultimate song,\textsuperscript{130} but the last,\textsuperscript{131} structured as a dialogue between two gopīs, is strangely an anti-climax to this set of extraordinarily intense poems. It may perhaps be explained by the fact of the compilation being much later than the actual composition of the hymns, when considerations other than gradation in emotional intensity might have predominated. Hardy holds, in fact, that the erotic-emotional content of the poems was anything but significant in the Śrīvaisṭava circles where the compilation is likely to have occurred.\textsuperscript{132}

Tai is the Tamil month that follows Mārkaḷi (Sanskrit Mrghaśīrṣa), which falls between mid-December and mid-January. This month is traditionally considered inauspicious for the performance of weddings, and the fact that this seems as true of northern India as of the south may indicate its origin in some hoary past. There remains the fact of the pāvai nompu being performed in the month of Mārkaḷi, with the attainment of good husbands as one of the stated objectives. After the austerities of the coldest month of the year, Kodai speaking as a gopi and thus by definition a lover of Kṛṣṇa, asks for no more than the pleasure of service in life after life, Tai (harbinger also of spring in Tamil Nadu), allows expression of love and longing, besides holding out the promise of the grant of the desired boons. I therefore suggest that stylistic and ritualistic considerations—the fact that the Tiruppāvai, an internally ordered unit, begins with the words, "Mārkaḷi tingal" (literally, month of Mārkaḷi)—may have been critical

\textsuperscript{120} Nācchiyār Tirumōli 14.1-14.10.
\textsuperscript{121} Nācchiyār Tirumōli 1.4.
\textsuperscript{122} Nācchiyār Tirumōli 4.2.
\textsuperscript{123} Nācchiyār Tirumōli 5.5.
\textsuperscript{124} Nācchiyār Tirumōli 4.1.
\textsuperscript{125} Nācchiyār Tirumōli 13.2.
\textsuperscript{126} Nācchiyār Tirumōli 8.1-8.10.
\textsuperscript{127} Nācchiyār Tirumōli 9.1-9.10, 10.1-10.10.
\textsuperscript{128} Nācchiyār Tirumōli 11.1-11.10.
\textsuperscript{129} See Chapter 5-iv.
\textsuperscript{130} Nācchiyār Tirumōli 13.1-13.10.
\textsuperscript{131} Nācchiyār Tirumōli 14.1-14.10.
\textsuperscript{132} Hardy, Viraha Bhakti, op cit., pp. 480.
in the choice of the poem beginning with the phrase "Tai öru tingal" ("the month of Tai") as
the first of the other collection by the saint-poetess.\(^{133}\)

Since Āṇḍāḷ often describes her own youthfulness, physical beauty, and dense black tresses
adorned with flowers when asking the Lord to join her, the early Śrīvaiṣṇava ācāryas often
read her hymns as autobiography; indeed at times, it seems difficult not to do so. Combined
with the details in the signature verses: that she is the daughter of Putuvai/ Villiputtūr’s priest,
Viṣṇucitta of the Veyar clan, who is well-known to us from his own 400 odd hymns, the
hagiographical account shorn merely of the miraculous—particularly the incident at the end,
of Āṇḍāḷ’s merger with Ranganātha—seems almost entirely believable. Yet, the fact remains
that a substantial portion of what the hagiography tells us is entirely unverifiable, and it is
some of these aspects that will engage our attention.

While hymns 11.1 to 11.10 are dedicated to the Lord of Srirangam, and are composed in the
erotic-emotional mode, Āṇḍāḷ does not specifically ask to be united with him. It is important
to remember that it is to the Lord of Venkaṭam (and once to Tuvaṟai) that Āṇḍāḷ repeatedly
asks Kāma to deliver her.\(^{134}\) The Agpp says that when Pēriyāḻvār desired to know whom Āṇḍāḷ
wished to marry, she answered saying that she would look upon no one but Māyan of
Māliruṅcoilai.\(^{135}\) This temple town is geographically closer to Śrīvilliputtūr than Srirangam,
and thus likely to be more familiar to Āṇḍāḷ than the former. The impression is strengthened
by the hymns themselves— unlike those on Srirangam, Āṇḍāḷ’s twenty stanzas on
Māliruṅcoilai are rich with descriptions of the landscape. Why then did the ācārya-
hagiographers choose to make her the bride of Aḻakiya Maṉavāḷan (litt, the beautiful
bridegroom) of Srirangam, particularly when it is inconsistent with Āṇḍāḷ’s purported
statement?

Srirangam, Venkaṭam and Māliruṅcoilai seem to have attracted pilgrims as early as the fifth-six
centuries CE. In the Cilappatikāram,\(^{136}\) Kovalan and Kaṟṇaki meet, while travelling from
Pukār to Madurai, a brāhmaṇa from the western hill country. He tells them that he is travelling
to see the great Lord in Venkaṭam and the Lord reclining on the serpent in the island: an

\(^{133}\) See also Katherine Young “The Spirit and the Bride say ‘Comet!’ Continuing a Hindu-Christian
Nācciyār Tirumōli as a coda of the observance of a fourteen-day ritual performed in the month of Tai.

\(^{134}\) Nācciyār Tirumōli 1.1-1.10.

\(^{135}\) Agpp, pp. 47-49.

\(^{136}\) Cilappatikāram, Canto V.
evident reference to Srirangam. Further, he praises Mālirunkunram (=Māliruṇicolai), advising the couple to go there. These sacred centres continued in importance in the centuries to come, but Srirangam certainly grew to be the pre-eminent sacred shrine. It has been pointed out\textsuperscript{137} that the three early Ālvars focussed on shrines in Toṇṭainādu—the Venkaṭam–Kāṇci environment,\textsuperscript{138} while Nammāḻvār sings of far more temples in Malainādu (the modern Kerala region) than does any other Āḻvār. A greater number of temples in the neighbourhood of their respective hometowns, including smaller ones, feature in the hymns of most Āḻvārs, though almost all sing also of some major shrines, irrespective of which region they hail from. While Venkaṭam is mentioned by eleven Āḻvārs, all twelve laud Srirangam. This island shrine became the pontifical seat of the Vaiśnava ācāryas from the time of Nāṭhamuni onwards, and though important teachers hailed from towns such as Tirukkoṭṭiyūr, Kacci (Kāṇci) etc, Srirangam remained the epicentre. Rāmānuja himself, though based in Kāṇci before assuming the leadership of the community, moved to Srirangam after the demise of Yāmunācārya. While Kāṇci, and specifically the shrine of Hastigiri therein, became important in the medieval centuries as the centre of the Vaṭakalai or northern sect, Srirangam, despite its greater association with the Tēnkalai stream, continued to remain the temple, so much so that in popular Śrīvaiśnava parlance as well as in the medieval Śrīvaiśnava texts, the word ‘koyil’ (literally, temple) unqualified by any adjective or place-name refers to Srirangam.

It is thus only natural that the prime importance of this shrine should be enhanced by the hagiographical literature. While, according to the theology, all the Viṣṇus are equally the great Lord Himself—the Lord evidently suffering no diminution from His simultaneous presence in numerous shrines—and though even the terrestrial Viṣṇus are absolutely at par with the eternal Lord reclining in the milk-ocean, or in Vaikuṇṭha surrounded by the celestials, Āṇḍāl’s svayamvara would have less significance if it were not to underline the centrality of Srirangam.

The acme of spiritual progress in Śrīvaiśnava theology is parama bhakti, the apogee of devotion, which Āṇḍāl is said to have been imbued with. But the path to this pinnacle is through devotion to and knowledge of the divine Lord—para bhakti and para jñāna. There is disagreement between the two sects about the relative importance of devotion and knowledge for the attainment of the goal of salvation, the northern school with its Vedic-Sanskritic tilt

\textsuperscript{137} Hardy, \textit{Viraha Bhakti}, op cit., pp. 257-261.

\textsuperscript{138} Hardy, ibid, p. 258.
stressing more on the individual’s ritual capability and textual learning and the southern on prapatti, surrender. The latter is a means not denied but qualified by the Vaṭakalai sect.

A second and theologically pregnant issue emerges from the story of Āṇḍāḷ. Since it is mirrored in the story of Tiruppāṇālvār, the only Āḻvār said to belong to a paṅcama caste, I will take them up together.

In the case of Āṇḍāḷ, we saw how the hagiography draws upon the material available in her hymns. The singer of the Amalanāḍipurān however gives us not the least clue about himself. There isn’t even a signature verse. The tradition recognizes it to the degree that the name given to the hymnist is merely generic—Tiruppāṇālvār literally means, the bard-saint. Apart from a wry comment that the poet of the Amalanāḍipurān must indeed hail from one of the so-called lower castes, to have—unlike most of the other saint-hymnists—effaced himself so completely from his composition, it remains almost impossible to discover his identity unless some hitherto unknown text is discovered. However, some features of the poem itself can be considered. The ten stanzas of great lyrical beauty are composed with first syllable rhyming, a style often met with in classical Tamil poetry. The poet shows awareness of various acts of Viṣṇu in his avatāras as Nṛśimha, Vāmana-Trivikrama, Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, and of some other cosmic acts of His. While the poem is specifically in praise of the physical form of the Lord of Srirangam, he twice mentions the Lord’s residence in Venkaṭam. The descriptions of Venkaṭam are minimal and stereotyped, allowing the supposition that the Āḻvār’s knowledge of the place was based on hearsay—something which the hagiography too implies by its insistence that he spent his entire life singing on the southern bank of the Kaveri, across from the shrine of Ranganātha. Perhaps the sense of wonder at the beauty and the rich adornments of the Lord that the poem expresses may have also led to the formulation that the singer was in the presence of the arcā for the first time. The poem ends with the impassioned declaration that the eyes (of the Āḻvār) which have feasted on the nectar that is the Lord of Srirangam will see nothing else.

It is of course possible to read this as poetic hyperbole, but the Śrīvaishṇava community evidently chose not to do so. Again, a literal interpretation of the rapturous expression could equally easily have lead to the story ending with the Āḻvār becoming blind after the ‘divine vision’, maybe a blindness made glorious by an unending vision of the Lord in the ‘inner eye’.

139 I am not arguing for the veracity of the hagiographic account, but merely presenting the plausibility—after all, good poetry can well convey a sense of childlike wonder even at the familiar.
Indeed, the roughly contemporary Periya Purānam relates the story of a blind Nāyaṇār Taṇṭiyāṭikal, who was compensated for his sightlessness by jñānakkan, the eye of knowledge or gnosis. The more dramatic ending in the Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiography is not however an arbitrary choice; rather, it embodies a coherent theological vision of the community.

v) The Integration

As we have seen above, Āḻvār poetry oscillates between expressions of the bliss of union and the despair of viraha. The Āḻvārs speak of the changeling Lord—bestowing His grace and tormenting by denying union—as Māyin (possessor of māyā, illusion); His māyā explaining the inexplicable, as it were. Nammāḻvār cries out, “You seem to come to me, my radiant Lord, but never stay. Now how can I join You, if you do not stay and give me strength?” Āṇḍāl asks in despair, “O dark monsoon clouds! I sing the praise of the Lord of Venkaṭam who emerged victorious from the battlefield. I fall apart like withered Calotropis milkweed leaves in the rain. Alas! Will he never send a word of hope?” In the highly elliptical Tiruvananta Viruttam we find, “I have no thoughts but of you, no kith or kin but you. Oh! You of countless māyā, you must promise never to forsake me”. But a little further down, this poet expresses his confidence that “The Lord will grant eternal goodness: freedom from return to the earth”, and finally ends with, “Pursuing me through countless births, the cloud-hued Lord has now come into my heart and revealed his endless glories. My old sins cut away, my blessed soul has found its home”. Tirumalai says, “O Lord, you have decided that the faithless ones should fall into the throes of fourfold birth. But you also wait for an occasion to relieve them of their curse. Did you not free the waning moon of his curse? Did you not send your discus spinning and relieve both elephant and crocodile of their curses?” Not all the Āḻvārs possess this assurance, however, or when they seem to, it doesn’t last. Nammāḻvār rejoices, “The Lord is easy to reach for devotees through love. His feet are hard to get for others, even for the lady of the lotus. Oh, how easily he was caught and bound to the mortar,

141 Tiruvāyumōli 3.2.5.
142 Nācchiyār Tirumōli 8.8.
143 The Tamil word used is māyā.
144 Tiruvananta Viruttam 91.
145 Tiruvananta Viruttam 112.
146 Tiruvananta Viruttam 120.
147 The Tiruvananta Viruttam approximates mature Śrīvaiṣṇava theology far more than other works in the NDP. See Hardy, Viraha Bhakti, op cit., pp. 439- 441.
148 Nāmukkāya Tiruvantādi 12.
pleading, for churning butter from the milkmaid’s churning pail!” But the dejection of separation is never far away. “Māyakkūṭṭan (the one who dances the dance of māyā)[150] of southern Kuḻantai surrounded by groves and tall mansions, the discus-wielder went away, borne on his dancing bird. I followed him and lost my heart, my bangles, my all. Now I stand shamed before my bangle-decked friends, what more can I lose?” and Kulaśekhara Āḻvār expresses this dependence on the Lord starkly, “O Lord of Vittuvakkoṭu surrounded by fragrant groves! If you do not help me overcome the obstacles you place in my path, I have no refuge but you. A child beaten by the mother cries to be pacified by the mother alone”.153

Even this small selection of hymns demonstrates the untenability of Burton Stein’s belief that the hymns [of the NDP] expressed the central ethos of the bhakti faith: divine and redemptive grace conferred by a merciful god upon a loving devotee.154 What emerges rather is the degree to which modern historiography has accepted the medieval ācāryas’ valuation and representation of the bhakti saints and their compositions. Considering that for every verse that declares, “O lord Nārāyaṇa, you may grace me today, or tomorrow, or some time later, but your grace is definitely coming. I cannot be without you; nor can you without me”,155 there are others that express the fear of rebirth and endless karmas,156 it is difficult to postulate that Āḻvār bhakti was grounded in an assurance of salvation. Rather, it was the acaryic tradition beginning with Nāṭhamuni, most strongly shaped by the theology of Rāmānuja, and further elaborated, defined and, in the process, modified in the succeeding generations, that made the redemptive intention and qualities of the Lord its central feature. Indeed, it is these

149 Tiruvāymōli 1.3.1.
150 Today, the name of the utsava mūrti in the temple town of Kuḻantai. See Chapter 5.
151 Tiruvāymōli 8.2.4.
152 I checked two separate editions of translations of this hymn, one of which also gives detailed exegesis in Tamil. Both editions claim on their respective front pages that they are based on the ‘commentaries of pūrvacāryās’. Neither glosses the word with the meaning that springs forth as the most obvious. While one merely reproduces the word as a proper noun in English, the second does not even do so. Instead, in the Tamil exegetical section, we find that the lord is said to be riding Gauruḍa who is described as dancing with the intoxication of being the carrier of the glorious lord with his discus and conch, like one who has consumed madhu.

References:

153 Pērumāḷ Tirumōli 5.1.
155 Nāṉmukkāṉ Tiruvantādī 7.
156 Pēriya Tirumōli 11.8.1-5.
elaborations and the gradual modifications that they entailed, particularly in the two different environments of Srirangam and Kâñcî, such that the Srirangam ācâryas were more deeply involved in writing commentaries on the hymns of the Ālvârs and explicating these to mixed audiences157 while the ācâryas in the more cosmopolitan Kâñcî were concerned to defend Râmânuja’s system against rival philosophies (which involved their continued engagement with proving the Vedic compatibility of Viśiṣṭâdvaita) that eventually led to the formation of two distinct theo-philosophical systems within the larger umbrella of Śrîvaiṣṇavism.

The importance of the commentaries in shaping the understanding of the Ālvârs’ hymns is seen from the fact that within sixty years of Râmânuja’s death, two commentaries had been written on the Tiruvâyûmôli, using the ideas of Viśiṣṭâdvaita Vedânta to interpret Nammâlvâr’s hymns.158 The commentaries try to impose a certain degree of uniformity over the hymnal expressions of the Ālvârs, at least when dramatic emotional swings occur repeatedly within the same hymn.159 In her analysis of the stotras of the early ācâryas, Kûreśa and Bhaṭṭar, Nayar shows that the latter, despite closely following the Ālvârs in their devotional expressions, “integrating Ālvâr devotionalism into their Sanskrit poems”,160 carefully eschewed expressions of Viṣṇu as Mâyîn.161 In his arguments against Śankara’s conception of the Supreme Brahman as nirguna (without qualities), Râmânuja emphasizes the Lord’s infinite auspicious qualities. For Râmânuja, there can be no ambiguity in the nature of the Lord. Nammâlvâr, on the other hand sees god both as poverty and wealth, heaven and hell, enmity and friendship, poison and ambrosia,162 joy and sorrow, confusion and clarity, punishment and compassion,163 town and country, wisdom and ignorance, incomparable light and deepest darkness,164 good and evil, unity and separation, remembering and forgetting165 crookedness and straight-forwardness, black and white, truth and lie, youth and old age, shadow and sunlight, smallness and greatness, shortness and length, mobility and immobility.166 However, a Lord capable of evasiveness or confusing his devotees, as He often is in Nammâlvâr’s

157 The audiences would have been mixed in terms of their caste affiliation.
159 See above where the hagiographies record Râmânuja’s insistence on a new interpretation of certain hymns of Nammâlvâr.
160 Nayar, Poetry as Theology, op cit., p. 207.
161 Nayar, ibid, p. 207.
162 Tiruvâyûmôli 6.3.1.
163 Tiruvâyûmôli 6.3.2.
164 Tiruvâyûmôli 6.3.3
165 Tiruvâyûmôli 6.3.4.
166 Tiruvâyûmôli 6.3.5.
thought, would be to “play into the hands of those philosophical schools for whom a God-with-attributes (saguna brahman) was lower than the unqualified Brahman, and is himself a effect of māya”.  

167 The Lord is characterised by nirmalatva, blemishlessness, freedom from all taint—this is brought out in the well-known episode of Rāmānuja’s life168 where he breaks with his Advaitin teacher, Yādava Prakāśa. Explicating a certain Upanisadic passage, Yādava is supposed to have described the eyes of the Lord as being red like a monkey’s behind. Deeply saddened, Rāmānuja explained the passage as describing the Lords’ eyes as beautiful like a blossoming red lotus.169 That this should form, in the understanding of the Śrīvaiṣṇava community, the basis of its greatest preceptor’s break with the Advaita tradition rather than such issues as the oneness of or distinction between Brahman and created beings, speaks as much of the community’s self-perception as of its specific, theological orientation. Thus, when ācāryas like Vedānta Deśika composed poetry of separation following the Āḻvār tradition, they carefully attributed this inability to achieve union to their own inferior bhakti or lack of good qualities.170 The Āḻvārs however are considered parama bhaktas, their devotion wanting nothing.

The Lord, in the Śrīvaiṣṇava understanding, enjoys His creation, and the service and devotion of his worshippers. Indeed, He delights in the sight of them in His temples.171 For the Āḻvārs, whose Lord arbitrarily unites with and forsakes His devotees, the motif of Krṣṇa’s relationship with the gopīs was symbolic. For the ācāryas however, the central erotic relationship of the Divine is not Krṣṇa and the gopīs of Vṛndāvana; it is the inseparable union of Viṣṇu with Śrī.172 In fact, Śrī acquires a significant ontological status in the developing theology of the community, with important differences in the perception of the two sects. It has been pointed out that Pillān and later commentators used categories not intrinsic to the poems, but those borrowed from Sanskrit. Where the hymns merely hint at a topic, the commentators use

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167 Nayar, Poetry as Theology, op cit., p. 207. See also, Bharatan Kumarappa, The Hindu Conception of the Deity, Inter-India Publications, Delhi, 1979 (first published 1934), pp. 196-205, for Rāmānuja’s refutation of the doctrine of māya.
168 Agpp, pp. 142-144.
169 See Chapter 4, Haiyālvār Vaibhavam, for details.
171 Nayar, Poetry as Theology, op cit., p. 209.
172 Nayar, ibid, p. 217.
formulaic phrases from Sanskrit to explain the idea. Thus, if Śrī is mentioned in a hymn by one of the Ālvarś, the commentators take it as a symbol of divine intercession.\textsuperscript{173}

I will return here to the point raised by the carama śloka—the command of the Lord to eschew all other dharma and to resort to Him alone, and tie in some of the points I have made earlier. The interpretation of the manner of taking refuge in the Lord forms the basis of some of the crucial points of dissent between the Vaṭakalai and Īḻkalai sects of the Śrīvaishṇava community. These are, briefly: 1) Does saranāgati or prapatti constitute the sole means or is it one of the means to salvation? 2) Does the devotee have agency in the action of taking prapatti, or is it too the result of the grace of God? 3) Is Śrī, who serves as mediatrix between the prapanna and the Lord, an essential part of the Supreme Lord, or merely the first among created beings, and in a position far elevated above all other created beings? The debates that have engaged Śrīvaishnavas for about five hundred years need not detain us here; our purpose is merely a familiarity with the theological framework.

What emerges clearly is the salvational nature of Śrīvaishṇava theology, the promise of the Lord to save His devotees. The Rāmāyaṇa in Śrīvaishṇava understanding is essentially a prapatti stotra.\textsuperscript{174} Rāma’s offer of asylum, protection and perennial love to Vibhisaṇa is central to the Śrīvaishṇava doctrine of saranāgati and the Lord’s boundless grace is seen as reflected in his declaration to Sugrīva that his grace was open to all supplicants, even Rāvana if he sought it.\textsuperscript{175} We saw the emphasis in the DSC account of an incident from the life of Tirumankai Āḻvār on the Lord’s compulsion to respond to His devotees. The theme is further developed in legends from specific shrines. The sthalapurāṇa of Tirukkaṇḍamankai recites the story of a devotee named Lakṣminarayanasvāmi. This bhakta, who had no family, spent all his time doing kainkarya at the temple. When the temple doors were opened on the morning after the devotee’s death, not only were darbha grass and sesamum discovered in the shrine, but the Lord’s veṣṭi (lower cloth) was found to be wet and his sacred thread in the reverse position (signifying the performance of tarpana and last rites). The Lord who had become kinsman to his devotee is accordingly called Bhaktavatsala.\textsuperscript{176} As the Lord delights in the service of his devotees and is so eager for their salvation, He is ever looking for an excuse to


\textsuperscript{175} Rangaswami Aiyangar, ibid, p. 31.

save them. The act of prapatti gives Him the excuse. While both schools believe that the devotees’ faults are not impediments to salvation, the northern sect holds that the Lord in His love, is blind to the devotees’ faults, while the southern goes so far as to say that He relishes the faults of His devotees, the better to express His mercy and grace. In their exegesis of the Rāmāyana episode of Sītā meeting Rāma after the war in Lanka was over, Tēnkalai scholars say that Rāma was displeased that Sītā had bathed before coming to him even though she had acted merely as he had instructed because he really wanted to see her at once and as she was.  

Indeed, the merits of the devotee do not endear him/her to the Lord any better. The Tēnkalai ācāryas take the example of Rāma asking Sītā during their stay in the forest not to wear even a necklace as it would interfere in their lovemaking to say that one’s merits, instead of increasing the Lord’s pleasure in communing with the soul, may actually obstruct it. Both Tēnkalai and Vaṭakalai positions will, however, be answered by the very telling phrase in the Tiruppāṇālvar vaibhavam, “the Lord absorbed into Himself the Ālvar in his bodily form, even as those who wear fragrant roots in their hair do so with the mud sticking to it”.

The Lord here is, as we know from the hagiography, the accessible arcā at Srirangam; equal to the transcendent Lord who resides in Vaikunṭha, eternal service to whom is the goal of the ācāryas’ devotion, itself expressed as nitya kainkarya (daily service) to the temple icon.

The Ālvars, who repeatedly sang about their surrender and looked to Him alone for protection, are, for the Śrīvaisnava, the ideal prapannas. Their exemplary devotion is brought out in different ways throughout the hagiographies. Their births being described as avatāras of different aspects of Viṣṇu, such as His discus, mace or Śrīvatsa (chest mark/hair tuft), or of one or the other of His eternal attendants, may serve to establish their worship-worthiness in the community of believers; certainly by the time of the early ācāryas, the practice of installing the images of Ālvars in temples is known.  

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178 Mumme, ibid, pp. 208-209.

179 There are however, instances in the writings of the ācāryas where they state that worshipping the Lord in a particular temple icon, they have no desire for even Vaikunṭha. See, for example, Vedānta Deśika, Varadarāja Paścāt.

have specially graced the new-born infant. More relevant than these instances of miracles however are the descriptions of the exalted bhakti of the Āḻvārs. Of the twelve Āḻvārs, four are placed according to the traditional dating in an earlier yuga, while eight belong to the kali age. This suggests that they may be religious models for those living in this, the most degenerate of all yugas. Despite their doctrinal differences over the relative merits of bhakti and prapatti for salvation, both schools recognize three stages in the evolution of the devotee, the last of which brooks no questions regarding its sufficiency for salvation. These three are, para bhakti, spiritual perception of the Lord, para jñāna, intimate spiritual knowledge of Him, and parama bhakti, the apogee of devotion that will never tolerate separation from Him. It may be recalled that the Agpp mentions Āndāl having grown through these three stages. Bhakti is considered by Rāmānuja as both the goal of the religious life and the means to the goal. Service is natural to the human soul who is, as we have seen, the dāsa (servant) or šeṣa (disposable property, remainder) of God who is the Šeṣi (possessor, of all).

The Śrīvaiṣṇava theological position distinctly differs here from the Āḻvārs’ more diverse pronouncements. The devotion of the saint-poets was entirely directed towards the Lord; his accoutrements such as the discus, conch shell and lotus, and even his consort serving only to glorify him. While they often praise their chosen deity as the lover of the lotus-born one and/or lord of the earth goddess or as he who bears the ‘lady’ on his chest, they do not ask his consort to intercede with the Lord on their behalf. Indeed, it seems to be the Lord alone who has not merely the power to save but the grace to will the salvation of his devotees. Pēriyāḻvār expresses this succinctly, “Even if Lakṣmi herself were to give adverse reports about His devotees, He would say, ‘My devotees would never do that and if they did, they did


181 Agpp, Mgpp, Tirumālicai Āḻvār Vaiṭhavam, Namāḻvār Vaiṭhavam. See Chapter 3.


183 I am using Dennis Hudson’s translation/ interpretation of these concepts. See Hudson, “Bathing in Kirshna”, op cit., p 548.

184 Carman, The Theology of Ramanuja, op cit., p. 222

185 Carman, ibid, p. 214, citing Rāmānuja’s Vedārthasamgraha.

186 Pēriyāḻvār Tirumōli 8.10.4.

187 Pēriyāḻvār Tirumōli 1.1.2; Pēriyā Tirumōli 3.1.2.

188 The expression used is ‘lotus-lady’. 
well.' Will anyone choose to serve a master other than my Lord of TiruvArangam?\textsuperscript{189} It would be inaccurate to postulate a distinct theological vision of the Ālvārs on the basis of this verse. I reiterate my argument that the great degree of variety in the hymns of the saint-poets were systematised and streamlined by the commentarial tradition.

It is in the lives of His bhaktas par compare that the Lord can demonstrate what is true for every devotee, the promise to redeem. What can only be assumed for even the greatest of preceptors, Rāmānuja, believed by the faithful to be an avatāra of Ananta, the serpent upon whose coils the Lord reclines in His transcendent abode, can be visibly perceived in the lives of two Ālvārs, Āṇḍāḷ and Tiruppāṇālvār. The Lord does not fail to answer the bhakta's call to unite with Him. It is indeed possible for the Lord to not save, as theologians of both schools struggle to explain in their debates on the sufficiency or otherwise of the means to salvation, His lordliness, and His unfettered freedom to act as He pleases. To say that the Lord must save is to confine Him, to deny His ultimate agency. So, while the Lord may choose to not redeem the prapanna, Śrī, the mediatrix, will ensure, from Her motherly compassion and Her eternal closeness to the Lord, that He does.

Āṇḍāḷ being considered herself an incarnation of (one of) His consorts could thus approach Him through her own devotion and be absorbed into Him—where she belongs. In the case of Tiruppāṇālvār, it was Śrī who urged the Lord to not let the bard-saint remain separated from them. Both these earthly lives ended with bodily merger in the icon at Srirangam, perfect illustrations of the ultimate union of individual souls with the Supreme One, who is, in Śrīvaiṣṇava thought, completely incarnated in the consecrated image.

The integration of the Tamil tradition was a consistent creative project, carried out largely by the interpretation of the verses of the Ālvārs in the light of Viśiṣṭādvaita principles. The vast commentarial literature in Maṇipravāḷa was not merely an academic exercise limited to the scholarly, but formed the basis for regular discourses to lay followers. The Tamil hymns, meant from the outset to be sung and experienced—being considered anubhava grantha—and from at least the twelfth century, also elaborated in commentaries and expounded to an audience of devotees in the temple complex, were not, however, the only means of this integration. The very stories of the lives of the saints, while serving for the edification of the community and constituting examples of the ideal life of bhaktas, underlined and reinforced this vision.

\textsuperscript{189} Pēriyālvār Tirumōḻi 4.9.2.