Chapter 3
Equal before the Lord: Negotiating Caste

i) Hypothesis
A subject of much debate in south Indian historiography is the nature of the \textit{bhakti} movement: whether it was a radically egalitarian one, seeking through religious discourse to question, if not completely destroy the hierarchies of caste, or itself the agent of brahmanisation, and consequently of the establishment and strengthening of hierarchies. I will argue on the basis of the Šrīvaišnava sectarian literature that the idea of the egalitarian \textit{‘bhakti movement’} is itself a creation of the post-\textit{bhakti} centuries, the period to which growing rigidity in caste hierarchies is commonly imputed. Was the hierarchized ordering of society abandoned in this egalitarian programme? I believe that the \textit{varṇa} order was never lost sight of and that contemporary socio-economic realities made it expedient for the brahmanical \textit{ācāryas} to evolve a more inclusive if not genuinely egalitarian system. It may be incorrect to generalise from the evidence for all of Tamil society, but I believe that this formulation will bear testing against wider evidence, such as the Šaiva Siddhānta material and the context of the creation of the \textit{Pēriya Purāṇam}, i.e., the hagiography of the Šaiva Nāyaṅmārs.

We saw above that Šrīvaišnava theology offers salvation to the devotees of Viṣṇu even though they be of the \textit{pañcama} caste.\footnote{See Chapter 2.} I will now attempt to show that there was a consistent reiteration that the ‘lowest’ castes have equal (and occasionally, even greater) access to salvation as the ‘highest’. In analysing how the story of Tiruppāṇāḷvār served to reinforce certain points of Šrīvaišnava theology, I established that the ‘life-story’ itself is a careful construct of the era in which it was composed, a position I shall now examine by an analysis of the aspect of caste.

The hymns of the Āḻvārs do often show evidence of indifference to caste, and of treating all devotees of the Lord as one’s superiors.\footnote{\textit{Pērumāḷ} \textit{Tirumōlī} 2.2.} I will examine how the Šrīvaišnava tradition wove these sentiments of the saint-poets into their life stories and the \textit{vyākhyānas} and imputed to them, a greater degree of egalitarianism than they, i.e., the hymns themselves, display. I will first retrace the historiography, examine the assumptions that underlie the construction of the life stories, and analyse these along with examples from the commentarial tradition.
ii) Historiography

Much of the theorising on the nature of the state in medieval Tamil Nadu has resulted from research on the temple and its pivotal role in the society and economy of Tamil Nadu from early medieval times. The conclusions about the nature of bhakti have been related to the larger assumptions about the state system, and indeed, have themselves served as arguments in support of the same.

RN Nandi holds that [Śaiva] monasteries and temples served as the institutional bases of the bhakti concept, which encouraged the doctrine of servitude, of unstinted loyalty and unpaid labour to an absolute superior. The slave attitude (dāsatva) of the bhakti ideology was seen as especially relevant in forming the basis of the relationship between the monastic superior, i.e., the pontiff, and the subordinate staff, particularly the ryots (sic) and essential artificers attached to the temple or the monastic estate. The Nāyanmārs are said to have “used the dāsatva sentiment with profit and obliged the low-born to render compulsory service to the Nāyanmār priesthood.”3 The complete surrender to the will of god advocated in the lyrics of the fourth Ālvār, Tirumālīcāi, and the element of divine grace that informs the poetry of Nammālvār are seen as examples of the same sentiment.4 Needless to say, much of this is simply fantastic, especially as the Nāyanmārs (or the Ālvārs) were not an organized priesthood but peripatetic saints belonging to different castes. In fact, the hagiographies stress the fact that many of the saints hailed from the lowest and ‘untouchable’ castes. I will return to this point later.

Veluthat points out, “What was achieved was to ensure the acceptance of differentiation by all sections of society. The stories of NandanaR who was a paraiya and Tiruppāṇālvār [who was a pānār] apparently showed that even people belonging to the lowly castes could reach the highest rung in bhakti hierarchy, but it really showed what the position of the ordinary paraiya or pānā’s place was”.5 Narayanan and Veluthat however concede that the movement was unlikely to have started as a conscious one.6 The hagiographic accounts of the origins of

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the saints are taken literally; it is, thus, said that Tōṇṭaraṭippōṭi, Madhurakavi, Pēriyālvār and Nammālvār were brāhmaṇa, and Kulaśekhara a ksatriya. “Other Ālvārs belonged to Kallar and even Pāṇa communities of the śūdra caste.” 7 I shall show that while the hagiographic attribution of caste status is verifiable in some cases, it is clearly not in several others. Besides, the inclusion of Nammālvār among the brāhmaṇa Ālvārs is strange—since all our primary sources, i.e., both the hagiographies and the signature verses in Nammālvār’s own hymns, represent him as a village chieftain, likely a velāla. 8 None of the texts assign Tirumankai Ālvār to the kallar9 caste. Further, the leaders of the bhakti movement in South India are said to have been leading a temple movement where devotion to Viṣṇu or Śiva was “reduced to devotion to the deity consecrated in a particular temple”. 10 The popularity of the temple resulting from the bhakti movement is seen as leading to the popularity and acceptance of all that the institution represented including its religion, its norms of social differentiation and the peculiar organization of the forces and relations of production. 11 The conviction about this character of bhakti is so rooted that they even choose to interpret the word, Ālvār12—without citing any evidence—as a literal translation of the word, bhakta, derived from the word, bhaj, meaning, ‘to divide’ or ‘to apportion’. Further, the word bhakta is said to have been originally employed to denote a servant, as one who enjoyed a share in the wealth of his master, and came eventually to denote a devotee imbued with dāsya bhāva or the attitude of service. 13 It has certainly been established that the word ‘bhakta’ itself derives from the root, ‘bhaj’, 14 which carries the meanings stated above. I am, however, unaware if it has ever been shown that its first/earliest usage was for a servant or a retainer. The word was used to mean a ‘devotee’, the concept of devotee itself carrying the meaning of one who was a sharer in the bounty of a transcendental lord. 15

7 Narayanan & Veluthat, ibid, p. 37.
8 A sat śūdra caste of cultivators/landowners.
9 Kallar simply means thief. Kallar suggests an occupational category but it is apparently a caste name. In fact, members of this caste have special privileges in the Śrīvaikuntam temple in Tirunelveli. See Chapter 5-iv. Though the hagiographies ‘credit’ Tirumankai with numerous robberies, they maintain that he was born a chieftain.
11 Veluthat, ibid, pp. 24-25.
12 See discussion on the etymology of the word Ālvār, in Chapter 1-iii.
13 Veluthat and Narayanan, “Bhakti Movement in South India”, op cit., p. 386.
15 Jaiswal, ibid, pp. 110-111.
RS Sharma curiously refers to ‘some heterodox sects (emphasis mine) such as Vaisnavism’ which tried to improve the position of the lower orders.\textsuperscript{16} However, I agree with his contention that the “Vaisnavite teachings were not meant to upset the varna system, but were capable of being interpreted as such”.\textsuperscript{17} Narayanan and Veluthat aver that “although the element of protest and reform are clear in this movement, these aspects are subordinated to the overall pattern of a greater movement—the consolidation and extension of classical Hindu society in early medieval India”.\textsuperscript{18} Brahmanism with its institutional base in the temple-centred agrarian settlements is seen as the dynamic force behind the opening up of river valleys and corresponding agricultural expansion which led to the formation of clear-cut divisions in society.\textsuperscript{19} The existing social structure thus got the necessary sanction and validation from the temple-based religion of Agamic–Puranic Hinduism, eminently spread by the bhakti movement.\textsuperscript{20} This movement began from Tōṇṭaimandaḷam in northern Tamil Nadu, and expanded southwards to include the Pāṇṭiya and Cera territories. By the ninth century, the Kaveri valley itself became the core region of a new kind of monarchical state. “It is significant that the identical trajectory is followed in the spread of the bhakti movement”.\textsuperscript{21} We have seen that while this geographic placement of the bhakti movement seems logical in the case of the Āḻvārs, it is open to question when the Śaiva bhakti stream is considered.\textsuperscript{22}

“Brāhmaṇa leaders had succeeded in organizing the indigenous people as tenants and temple servants, grading them into castes and sub-castes with infinite variations in economic and ritual status. They were in a position to mobilize the manpower of the vast tenant class to royal military service. Kings and brāhmaṇas patronized each other...In time, being a member of bhakti gave a passport for entry into an enchanted world. This was true for kings, merchants or ordinary people; on all of whom it could confer a special brāhmaṇa status through proximity to gods and ‘gods of the earth’. It served as a popular sacrament of initiation. The status of a person rose in proportion to his readiness to submit to the brāhmaṇa oligarchy... The intoxication of bhakti could enable the high to forget their pride and the low their misery. This provided an illusion of equality while retaining the stubborn walls of

\textsuperscript{17} RS Sharma, ibid, p. 55.
\textsuperscript{18} Narayanan and Veluthat, “The Bhakti Movement in South India”, op cit., p. 348.
\textsuperscript{19} Narayanan and Veluthat, ibid, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{20} Veluthat, “Religious Symbols in Political Legitimation”, op cit., p. 27.
\textsuperscript{21} Veluthat, ibid, p. 25-26.
\textsuperscript{22} See Chapter I-iii, section on Sources.
inequality in the feudal order of production and distribution”.\(^{23}\) I agree that society was hierarchically stratified, with some castes and classes clearly exploiting others, and that symbols of religion served to achieve ideological domination by the ruling classes.\(^{24}\) However, the existence of brāhmaṇa oligarchies is as questionable as the ability of bhakti to confer “special brāhmaṇa status”, or of its ever having served as any kind of sacrament. In this context, one could “ask whether religion is simply a reflection of material reality... if religion and caste are always in the service of, and ultimately answerable to the economy... Are they destined to consolidate and reproduce the relations appropriate to the economy?”\(^{25}\)

Narayanan and Veluthat believe that from the tenth century, when the place of the Nāyaṇmārs and Āḻvārs was taken by ācāryas, “all of whom were brāhmaṇas and scrupulous ritualists...there was a return to orthodoxy in all walks of life, especially in the field of culture. The temples with their enormous landed property and established positions in society became the conservative custodians of power and wealth. In the new context, there was no place for the aberrations of the devotee although the exploits of the earlier saints were sung and cherished. Mathas headed by brāhmaṇa ācāryas increased in numbers and championed the cause of varṇāśramadharma. Kings depended no more on the prop of bhakti for consolidating their political power”.\(^{26}\) While religious leadership in the Śrīvaiṣṇava community remained the hands of brāhmaṇas in the period after the tenth century, there is no evidence to the contrary for the preceding period either. Secondly, Śaiva mathas in the second millennium were firmly in the hands of non-brāhmaṇas. Finally, I will argue that it was in the period of the brahmanical ācāryas that a less orthodox perspective on varṇāśramadharma was elaborated.

Stein has pointed out that examples of social mobility in India in medieval times are widespread and persistent, and one of its most dynamic elements.\(^{27}\) He argues further that this mobility was usually not corporate mobility of the contemporary sort, especially as there were sufficient opportunities for individual family mobility. Large tracts of marginally settled lands suitable for cultivation and permitting the establishment of new regional societies set limits on

\(^{23}\) Narayanan and Veluthat, “The Bhakti Movement in South India”, op cit., p. 44-45.
\(^{26}\) Narayanan and Veluthat, “The Bhakti Movement in South India”, op cit., p. 58.
the amount of tribute in the form of agricultural surplus that local warriors could extract, or
for other arbitrariness. Besides, floods, droughts, excessive tribute demands or the denial of
existing or claimed privileges could spur families or groups of families to move to more
remote settlements. Many branches of the velāla community, a powerful and respected
cultivating class are seen to have developed in this manner.28 Despite his “magnificent
obsession”29 with the idea of the segmentary state, Stein does not squeeze into untenable
slots, either the phenomenon of bhakti in the early medieval centuries or the institutional
religious forms that succeeded it from the tenth century.

“(An) aspect of the complicated interplay of religious activities and power relations through
the Coromandel plain during the pre- and early Pallava period is that of the bhakti
movement. The Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava saints were from all social strata from brāhmaṇa to
untouchable. At the same time when Śiva and Viṣṇu worship was apparently still dominated
by brāhmaṇa votaries of the jñānayoga tradition, these works reflect an important folk
devotionalism. Between the arid religion of the jñāna yogis and the excesses of such Śaivite
cults as the Pāṇḍūpatis, Kālamukhas and Kāpālikas, bhaktas of the hymnal tradition presented
a religion apparently suited to the peasant society which was achieving supremacy over the
non-peasant peoples. Theirs was a religious tradition well rooted in the devotional faith of
the peaceful people of the plain. It had other advantages as well, for it was congenial to
brāhmaṇa religious leaders in its philosophical presuppositions, and it offered a most useful
instrument against Jainas and Buddhists”.30

Despite the relative sophistication of this statement, in its view of the bhakti movement as
being both based on folk traditions and related to brahmanical religion, a nuance surprisingly
ignored by many later historians, it remains a partial understanding of the phenomenon for a
variety of reasons. It is based largely on non-scriptural sources, and is made, besides, in order
to bolster Stein’s familiar argument that Buddhism and Jainism were the religions of the
towns while ‘Hinduism’ was dominant in the agricultural regions. While largely agreeing
with his formulation that “in its textual aspects, its devotional hymns and commentaries, the
bhakti movement stands opposed to the restrictive structure that is expressed in the legal and
social texts of the age”,31 I will argue that it is the later scriptures, i.e. the commentaries and

28 Ibid, p. 79.
29 Vijaya Ramaswamy, “Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India: Review article”, Studies
30 Burton Stein, “Brahman and Peasant in Early South Indian History”, The Adayar Library Bulletin,
31 Burton Stein, “Social Mobility”, op cit., p. 80.
the hagiographies which were composed from the time of the ācārya Rāmānuja onwards, that these egalitarian concerns were most clearly and consistently articulated.

Champakalakshmi states that the popularisation of Puranic and Agamic forms of worship was achieved through the ideology of bhakti\textsuperscript{32} but she does not see it as merely a crude agent of brahmanism. Rather, she believes that “bhakti ideology... helped in the transformation of Vedic brahmanism into the sectarian religions of Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism, both of which evolved out of older beliefs of popular worship and cult practices...It is well established that the “brahmanical social order was extended and stablished by a process of Sanskritisation or acculturation and of bringing the peasant settlements into a supportive relationship with the brahmadeyas”.\textsuperscript{33} All the same, she insists that the “movement only served to perpetuate the caste hierarchy by providing a niche for all new entrants within the four-fold brahmanical framework with graded ritual ranking”.\textsuperscript{34} Significantly, she notes that in the later Cola period, Śaivism strengthened itself by “more direct involvement of non-\textit{brahmana} elements in temple administration, establishment and maintenance of monastic organisations and by controlling the functions of collection and distribution of resources”.\textsuperscript{35} I propose that contemporary Vaiṣṇavism in the Tamil macro-region, organized by then into a distinctive sect called Śrīvaiṣṇavism, also consolidated its ranks by opening its doors to non-\textit{brahmana} members and giving them specific ritual and administrative responsibilities in the temple. This was no doubt necessitated, at least in part, by the growing economic and social importance of certain groups like the \textit{velālas}.

What emerges clearly is the gradual but distinct difference in the social formations of the period between the sixth and ninth centuries and that between the tenth and fourteenth. The earlier period saw the beginnings of royal patronage for religious establishments and the extension of agriculture under the aegis of \textit{brahmana} donees both in the Pallava territory in the northern Tamil lands and the Pāṇḍya in the south. From the second half of the tenth century, Cola imperial policy encouraged the accommodation of different social categories in

\textsuperscript{32} R. Champakalakshmi, Religion and Social Change in Tamil Nadu AD 600-1300”, NN Bhattacharyya (ed), \textit{Medieval Bhakti Movements in India, Sri Caitanya Quincentenary Commemoration Volume}, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1989, pp. 164-165.

\textsuperscript{33} Champakalakshmi, ibid, pp. 164-165.

\textsuperscript{34} Champakalakshmi, ibid, p. 167.

\textsuperscript{35} Champakalakshmi, ibid, p. 170.
the fabric of what became almost a ‘state religion’. The canonisation of the Tevāram hymns and the composition of the Śaiva hagiography, Pēriya Purāṇam, were both undertaken directly under royal authority. The development of Vaiṣṇavism is thus doubly interesting, as it did not follow royal diktat or compulsion. That the Nālāyira Divya Prabandham was canonised and the Gpps composed at roughly the same time—indeed independent of royal involvement—indicates a more substantial social reality, one which the Colas were tapping into, to consolidate their rule. If social stratification was heightened by the consolidation of brahmanism, the greater economic reach and social prestige of agricultural groups like the velālas and prosperous merchant groups like the Tīcaī āyirattiyē nīruvar challenged the hierarchy. As patrons of the brahmanical sectarian religions, Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism, expressed through temple worship, these groups claimed greater visibility and prestige in the religious organisation.

Privileges and duties in the routine of temple worship and ritual apportioned to various caste groups were some of the evident methods of accommodating these claims. I believe that the hagiographies and commentarial texts express another important response to this demand for inclusiveness. It must be noted, however, that inclusion does not necessarily mean egalitarianism; indeed, it can lead to minute stratification. A look at the hagiographies of some of the Āḷvārs and indeed of the ‘biography’ of Rāmānuja that forms the longest section in all the Guruparamparās will clearly show how this process was actualised. It will also be seen how the bhakti movement acquired the egalitarian ‘character’ it is so known for—or which, in the writings of Veluthat, Narayanan, Nandi etc, is shown to be a false front.

36 While using this term, I do not at all imply a theocracy, nor draw any parallels with modern states that have a specific state religion or where scripture forms the basis for the constitution. My reference is to the Cola use of Śaivism as a cohesive ideology.
38 TV Mahalingam, 1985, A Topographical list of Inscriptions of the Tamil Nadu and Kerala States, ICHR & S. Chand & Co, Delhi. Vol. II, pp. 513-14. SA 2192. Ref.: ARE 1903, no. 21: SII viii, no 291. The inscription of CE 1168 records the assembling of members of the Citramelī guild in the Sukhāśina Pērumāl temple and contains a eulogy of the guild. It further records the assembling of the members of the Citramelī Pēriyānādu of 79 nādus and the Tīcaī āyirattiyē nīruwar at Titaikūṭi alias Tirucirambāla-caturvedimangalam and the consecration of the images of Bhūmi pirāṭi and decoration of the melitoram. Thereafter, they agreed to make annual contributions towards the expenses of the temple as follows: a padakku of paddy per plough, a kurunī of paddy per head, five kācu from each flower vendor, two kācu from each of the servants (panimakkal), and four nāli of ghee per family of the shepherd community.
iii) Evidence from the hagiographies

We are already familiar with the account of Tiruppāṇāḷvār, the bard-saint who belonged to the pañcama caste.\(^{39}\) The tale of this Ālvār is indeed one of the most striking ones in the hagiography, and in oral retellings is, along with that of Nammāḷvār, the most popular even in brāhmaṇa Śrīvaiśnava households to establish that all are equal in the eyes of the Lord.\(^{40}\) Here, it will be useful to take a clear look at the caste status of the twelve Ālvārs. It must be remembered that in Tamil Nadu, the fourfold varṇa classification is largely inapplicable, owing no doubt to the brahmanical varṇa order being imperfectly superimposed on a social system with its pre-existent hierarchies, such that no more than the essential distinction between the brāhmaṇas—the group at the apex of the varṇāsrama order—and the rest was established. We see thus, a two-fold classification between brāhmaṇas and śūdras, the latter category being divided into the right and left hand castes.\(^{41}\) Groups such as the velāla, to whom Nammāḷvār is said to have belonged, are classified as sat śūdra. With rare exceptions, only royal lineages are classified as kṣatriya, no doubt because of fabrication of genealogies for rulers by brāhmaṇas in return for patronage. Similarly, the trading communities which would, in the Dharmāsāstra scheme, be classified as vaiśya, are, in the Tamil land, also grouped under either the left or right hand śūdra castes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Caste ascribed by tradition</th>
<th>Caste known from hymns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Pōykai-y-āḻvār</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Pūtattāḻvār</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Peyāḻvār</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Tirumalicaiyāḻvār</td>
<td>brāhmaṇa birth, but śūdra upbringing</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Nammāḷvār</td>
<td>sat śūdra (velāla)</td>
<td>Village chief or official</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Madhurakavi</td>
<td>brāhmaṇa</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Kulaśekhara Āḻvār</td>
<td>kṣatriya</td>
<td>kṣatriya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Pēriyāḻvār</td>
<td>brāhmaṇa</td>
<td>brāhmaṇa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Āṇḍāl</td>
<td>brāhmaṇa</td>
<td>brāhmaṇa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Tōṇṭarātippiyāḻvār</td>
<td>brāhmaṇa</td>
<td>brāhmaṇa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Tiruppāṇāḻvār</td>
<td>Pāṇar, outcaste</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Tirumankai-y-āḻvār</td>
<td>śūdra (occupation: kaḷlar, i.e., robber)</td>
<td>Chieftain, warrior</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{39}\) See Chapter 2.

\(^{40}\) Personal experience. True particularly among Tēṅkalais.

\(^{41}\) Numerous studies on the left- and right- hand castes, such as that of Arjun Appadurai, “Right and Left Hand Castes in South India”, The Indian Economic and Social History Review, Vol. 11.2-3, 1974, pp. 216-259 and Burton Stein, Peasant, State and Society in Medieval South India, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1979, pp. 173-215, suggest a difference in status between the two, but different lists based on field studies disagree as to which caste a particular occupational group belongs to.
It is clear from the table that in some cases, there are significant discrepancies between the statements made in the signature verses by some Ālvārs and the castes ascribed to them. The difference is not very pronounced in the case of Nammālvār or even Tirumānkai Ālvār as the ascribed and stated categories may overlap, and yet, they are critically important to the imaging of a community. Besides, though the hagiographies do not attribute any specific caste status to the three mutal Ālvārs (i.e., Pōykai, Pūtam and Pey), in popular modern perception at least, they are all brāhmaṇas. Insights from anthropology suggest that such elements of traditional oral culture can serve as guidelines for understanding of the past in the absence of other evidence.

Let us now look at what the hagiographies have to say about the Ālvārs who are not brāhmaṇa (or not strictly brāhmaṇa), i.e., Tirumālicai, Kulaśekhara, Tirumānkai, Nammālvār and Madhurakavi. I will present the accounts in the traditional chronological order, and analyse them together both for reasons of narrative consistency and cross referencing.

An examination of the hagiographic accounts reveals a peculiar fact—there is practically no detail about the lives of the three mutal Ālvārs. The account of the fourth Ālvār, Tirumālicai, which is as long as the first three are short, tells us little about a real person, being replete with miraculous happenings. Interestingly, none of these four have a proper name, in fact, the names of the first three mean, simply, a pond (Pōykai, from his birth in a pond), and ghosts (Pūtam and Pey—equivalent to the Sanskrit bhūta and preta, perhaps signifying their god-madness). TiruMālicai is simply a place-name, supposedly the saint’s birthplace.

The Mgpp accounts are, as stated earlier, usually far tighter than those of the Agpp. However, the tales in the Mgpp are occasionally so cryptic that they would make little sense if the ‘stories’ they purport to tell were not already familiar to us. Since the Agpp is known to have been composed prior to the Mgpp and the Mgpp itself claims to be a précis version of an earlier hagiography (now lost), composed by the second Brahmatantra Svantra Jiyar, it is

42 Their births are considered ‘perfect’. (See Chapter 5, Mutalālvārka Vaibhavam). Hardy, Viraha Bhakti, op cit., p. 402, footnote 1, states that tradition believes the early Ālvārs to not have been brāhmaṇa. Our informants evidently differ.
43 See Chapter 2 for the account of Tiruppānlālvār.
44 Agpp, Mgpp and DSC are agreed in their chronology; the Agpp, however presents Nammālvār and Madhurakavi at the end.
45 See Chapter 5-ii-a.
46 See Chapter 1-iii.
possible that some of the missing details may have been assumed to be common knowledge, in no need of repetition. The DSC account is embellished with numerous poetic conventions, and in doing so, differs in minor details from the two Tamil hagiographies. Not all of these differences in tellings are critical for my analysis. I shall, however, point out any significant variations in the three accounts.

a) Tirumalicai Ālvār 47 Vaibhavam

In the year named Siddhānta in the Dvāpara yuga, on a Sunday during the dark phase of the moon, under the Makha asterism in the month of Tai was born a son of the Rṣi Bhrugu in the town of Mahisāra (Tamil==Malicai) as a partial incarnation of the Lord’s discus.

Bhrugu, Vasiṣṭha and other sages went to Brahmā to ask him which the holiest spot on earth was for them to meditate in. On the scales, Malicai tipped the balance against all other holy spots put together, and Bhrugu rṣi began his penances there. Eventually, his wife (in the Agpp) gave birth, after a twelve month pregnancy, to a mass of flesh which she abandoned under a bamboo bush. In the DSC and Mgpp accounts, Indra, troubled by the sage’s austerities sent an apsarā to disrupt his penance—and having successfully done so, the celestial damsel abandoned the fruit of the union—a mass of flesh, which eventually sprouted limbs and became a human child.

When the child cried from hunger, The Lord graced him with His vision, satisfying it. Eventually, a childless hunter/ bamboo-worker (Mgpp/ Agpp) and his wife adopted the child which, being supremely detached due to innate knowledge, and having been fulfilled for all time by the grace of the Lord, neither ate, nor drank anything. Hearing of this miracle, an old, wise, childless śūdra accompanied by his wife began to bring an offering of milk for the baby every morning. Eventually, the child, divining their wishes, condescended to accept the offering. The couple drank the remainder themselves, acquired youth and in course of time, a son. This boy, Kaṇikaṇṇan, became learned in all the vidyās, and dedicated himself to the service of the Ālvār.

At the age of seven, the Ālvār started yogābhyaśa. Over the next four hundred years he learnt all that the bāhya (heterodox faiths, enumerated in the Agpp as Śākya, Ulūkya, Aksapāda, Kṣapaṇa, Kapila, Patañjali) and the kudrṣti (incorrect philosophies, including, in the Agpp text, Śaiva, Māyāvāda, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣikha, Bhaṭṭa and Prabhākara) samayas had to say, and

47 Sanskrit name in the DSC is Mahadāhvaya Śūri.
discarded them all as useless. Deciding that the Śrāmanas knew nothing, the Bauddhas missed the truth, that the Śaivas were adpa (mean) and that these philosophies were transient took him, according to the Agpp, another seven hundred years. The Mgpp has the Ālvār begin his meditation on Śriyāḥpati Nārāyaṇa (Nārāyaṇa as the Lord of Śrī which subtly bolsters the Śrīvaiṣṭava understanding of the inseparability of the Lord and His consort, as we saw in the previous chapter), without this second interval, a meditation which lasts in both versions, another seven hundred years.

Once when Śiva and Pārvati were riding on their bull in the skies, the Ālvār, engaged in sewing some rags, moved slightly to keep their shadow from falling on him. Impressed by his single-minded devotion, the divine couple alighted and Śiva offered the Ālvār a boon. The Ālvār was indifferent however, but on Śiva’s pressing him, asked for the grant of mokṣa—if he could. Śiva declared it beyond his powers. The Ālvār then asked in jest that Śiva thread the needle he was using. Insulted, Śiva opened his third eye to let fire pour forth, but the Ālvār opened one in his right toe which blinkered Śiva’s own fire. The incendiary contest escalated rapidly. Finally, the enemy of Kāma acknowledged defeat and Viṣṇu sent down torrential rain to put out the conflagration.

Once the three mutal Ālvārs going on a pilgrimage were astonished at a divine light emanating from a cave. On going nearer, they perceived Tirumālcaī meditating within. Rejoicing at their meeting, they all meditated together awhile before the other three proceeded on their travels. Tirumālcaī then left for Vēhkā in Kāṇcī where he spent another 700 years, while Kanikanṭaṇ attended to his needs. In time, a pious old woman took upon herself the task of keeping the place clean. Once, the Ālvār opening his eyes, saw her and blessed her with unfading youth and divine beauty. The Pallavarāyaṇ (Pallava ruler)48 who soon fell in love with and married her, asked her after some years how it was that she never aged. On learning her secret, he asked Kanikanṭaṇ to fetch his master so that he could revere him. On Kanikanṭaṇ’s loftily refusing, for his master would go nowhere, nor be bid by anyone but the Lord, the king banished him from his kingdom. The Ālvār left with his disciple, asking the

48 Noboru Karashima, History and Society in South India: The Colas to Vijayanagar, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2001, p. xxi, Introduction, mentions Pallavarāyaṇ among important official titles under the Colas. The 20th century Śrīvaiṣṭava understanding of this has been ‘Pallava king’, esp. as the early historians of South India knew the Kāṇcī region to have been under the Pallavas during the presumed period of the mutal Ālvārs. However, since these hagiographies were composed during the late Cola period when the term may have carried the meaning Karashima gives, it is possible that our sources may have been using this term in the latter sense. The analysis presented here is not affected by either usage.
Lord of Vēhkā as he did so, if He would stay where His devotee was not welcome. So, rolling up His serpent bed the Lord, and following Him, the populace of the town, left too. Trees dried up. The repentant king then came to the village the party had camped in for the night, and begging the Āḻvār’s forgiveness, asked them to return. Back in Vēhkā, the Lord lay down again on the serpent Ananta, supporting His head now on His left hand to show that He had gone and come back. The Lord in the temple is accordingly known by the names of Yathoktaṟi (yathā+ukta+kāri, i.e., the one who did as told) and its Tamil equivalent, Cōṇṇavaṉṉam-cēyta Pērumāl.49

Tirumāḷicai-pirān then embarked on a pilgrimage to Kumbhakoṇam. En route, he passed the village of Pērumpulįyūr50 where some brāhmaṇas were engaged in Vedādhīyana, i.e., study of the Vedas. On seeing the südra, they abruptly stopped, but when they wished to resume after the Āḻvār had passed, they found that they could not recall the place they had stopped at. The priest in the temple saw the arcā vigraha turn its head to watch the progress of the Āḻvār down the village, and told the Vedic brāhmaṇas of it. Realising their mistake, they begged his pardon for their bhagavata apacāra (disrespect to a Viṣṇu worshipper). Tirumāḷicai wordlessly scratched a grain of black rice with his nail, and the brāhmaṇas remembered the words they had stopped at: “krṣṇāṁ vṛihīnāṁ nakhanirbhinnam”.51

One of the brāhmaṇas desiring yogaphala siddhi took him to an assembly where a yajña was being performed, causing others to object to a südra being honoured. The Āḻvār then revealed the Sudarśana cakra (Viṣṇu’s discus) enshrined in his chest, causing the wrongdoers to fall at his feet. Then the Āḻvār taught them that followers of Viṣṇu were always worthy of worship. Finally reaching Kuṭāntai,52 he worshipped Ārāvamutan,53 meditated in that most holy of kṣetras for 2300 years, and recorded his experience in Nāmukan Tiruvantādi and the Tiruccanta Viruttam.

49 In the reclining posture, Viṣṇu invariably rests his head on his right hand. The peculiar iconography at Vēhkā seems to have inspired this legend. The ‘campsite’ of the legend is a village known to date by the name Orirukkai, a contraction of oruriivu irukkai, i.e., ‘one night’s stay’. See Chapter 5-iv for discussion of the legend.
50 Literally the ird of the great tamarind tree.
51 The words mean exactly what the Āḻvār’s action indicated.
52 Vaiṣṇava name for Kumbhakoṇam.
53 Name of the lord in Kumbhakoṇam, meaning, ‘nectar that never cloys/ satiates’. The Lord is in a partially reclining posture here. The ten stanzas of Nammāḻvār (Tiruvāyōṭi, 5.8.1-11) which Nāthamuni is supposed to have heard some pilgrims recite, and which inspired him to discover the rest, start with the word, “Ārāvamutan”.

102
The *Agpp* and the *DSC* feature another small, but interesting episode. In Kuṭantai, the Ālvār is supposed to have asked the reclining Lord which tiring cosmic act of His, He was resting after, and to speak “even as He lay as though He was rising”\(^{54}\)—an allusion to the image which is partly risen from the regular reclining posture. (The Lord is said to have risen to answer the Ālvār.)

**b) Nammālvar & Madhurakavi Ālvār vaibhavam**\(^{55}\)

On the 43\(^{rd}\) day of Kaliyuga, on the full moon day of the month of Vaikāci under the Viśākha asterism, on a Friday, in the holy town of TirukKurukū\(^{56}\) was born in a family of *sat śūdras*, who had been Vaiśṇavas for seven generations, a boy of faultless birth. The *DSC* goes so far as to say that all residents of Kurukāpuri,\(^{57}\) of all four castes, were aglow with *bhakti*, the *śūdras* especially so. While the *Mgpp* narrates the story of Nammālvar in the order of his ‘appearance’ on earth, the *Agpp* reserves his story for the last, as “he is the *avayavi*, all the other Ālvārs his *avayava*”.\(^{58}\) The word Nammālvar is itself an honorific, meaning ‘Our Ālvār’, but easily his most popular name among Śrīvaiśṇavas.

While the loquacious *Agpp* gives the names of the Ālvār’s forefathers for seven generations as well as the details of the selection of a bride for his father (from a *bhāgavata* family), even the *Mgpp* gives us the names of his parents—Kāri and Uṭaiya-nānkiyār. Interestingly, while we are told the names of Tirumankai Ālvār’s wife and the courtesan with whom Tōṇṭarāṭippōṭi Ālvār was infatuated, this is the only Ālvār whose mother is named. The child was named Māra which, from the *Agpp* account, appears to have been also his grandfather’s name.\(^{59}\)

The child who was an incarnation of the Lords’ *senāpati* Viśvaksena was no ordinary baby.\(^{60}\)

It neither cried, nor took breast milk. The parents then worshipped the deity of their local

\(^{54}\) *Tiruccanta Viruttam* 61. The poet asks the Lord if He is tired from lifting the earth [in His *avatāra* as a boar] or from traversing the worlds [as Trivikrama]. However, we have seen that the ascription of this poem to Tirumalicai is questionable.

\(^{55}\) Since the hagiographies recite a part of the tale of Nammālvar under the section on Madhurakavi, I shall recount them together.

\(^{56}\) Today known as Ālvār TiruNagari.

\(^{57}\) Sanskrit rendition of TirukKurukūr.

\(^{58}\) *Agpp*, Nammālvar Vaibhavam. *Avayava* = parts, *avayavi* = the owner of the parts.

\(^{59}\) It was, till very recently, a common practice among Tamils to name children after their grandparents or great-grandparents.

\(^{60}\) There is an inconsistency in the *Agpp* account for it mentions the Ālvār’s mother praying to the lord of TirukKurunkuti for a son and being promised by the lord that he would himself incarnate in her
temple, Pōlintu-ninra-pirān, and left the baby under a tamarind tree which incidentally was itself an incarnation of Ananta, the serpent-couch of the Lord, come down to shield the Ālvār from the elements. And under this tree sat the Ālvār in complete silence for sixteen years. The Lord was his food, drink and betel leaf. Seeing that the child was supernatural, the parents named him Caṭakopān.

At this time, Pēriya Pirāṭti, mother of the world, said to the Lord that they must teach the world the way of salvation. Agreeing, the Lord asked Viśvaksena to give Nammāḻvār sakala rahasya, i.e., the sum of all esoteric knowledge. The divine commander then instructed Nammāḻvār (who was, properly, his incarnation) in the tirumantram, dvayaam, mantrārtham and the Drāvidā Veda, besides branding him with the discus and conch, the Vaiṣṇava emblems.

In the closing years of the dvāparā yuga, on the fourteenth day of the waxing moon in the month of Citra, in TirukKolūr in Pāṇṭiyanādu, was born an amśa of the kumuda in a pūrvaśikhā brāhmaṇa vamsa of the Śāmaveda branch. Having learnt the sixteen vidyās, he embarked on a pilgrimage. One night near Ayodhya, he perceived a great light towards the south and set out to discover its source. Even when he reached Srirangam, the holiest of holy womb. The unresolved contradiction might indicate tensions between two traditions regarding the Ālvār. See Friedhelm Hardy, “The Tamil Veda of a Śūdra Saint: The Śrīvaishnava Interpretation of Nammāḻvār”, in Gopal Krishna (ed), Contribution to South Asian Studies. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1979, pp. 29-87.

61 One of the 108 Viṣṇus.
62 The hagiographers probably derived this motif from Tiruvāymōli 6.7.1.
63 Nammāḻvār frequently signs himself thus, for example, Tiruvāymōli 5.9.11. The exact meaning of the word is debated, especially since its etymology is traced by some scholars from Tamil roots and by others from Sanskrit, and all attributed meanings are unsatisfactory. See Chapter I, discussion on sources.
64 See Chapter 2 for the role of Śri in the salvation of souls.
65 See Chapter 2.
66 While this term in popular Śrīvaishnava understanding sometimes refers specifically to the Tiruvāymōli, at others, the entire corpus of Nammāḻvār’s compositions bear this title. Śrīvaishnavas believe that the Tiruvāymōli is divine revelation, merely transmitted by the Ālvār through Madhurakavi to the people of the world, just as the Vedic Samhitās were ‘heard’ by the rṣis of yore. See Chapter 1-iii, discussion on sources.
67 The yuga before the present one, ie, kali yuga.
68 Village near Ālvār TiruNagari.
69 Lotus flower that adorns the Lord.
70 This is a reference to brahmana families who wear their (partially shaved off) hair in a knot just above the forehead. Pēriyāḻvār is supposed to have belonged to such a brahmana clan too.
71 Vedic brahmana families usually specialise in one of the four Vedas, and its corresponding āṅgas.
lands, he saw that it was further south. Eventually, having passed TiruNagari, and finding that the light was now to his north, he retraced his steps to its epicentre—where the beacon disappeared. Under the sleepless tamarind tree, he found a sixteen year old in meditation, and asked, “If from the womb of the small one, the large one is born, what will it eat and where will it stay?” The Āḻvār broke his long silence to reply, “That it will eat and there it will stay”. The Mgpp explains this mysterious exchange thus: “If the all-pervading One is born in the anu (atom), It will experience Brahman. It will not have heavenward aspiration, but become prakṛt, i.e., self-individuated”. And the Agpp, “It will have the body for abode, It being the ātmā (soul)”. Madhurakavi then asked the Āḻvār to accept him as his disciple.

The Lord accompanied by Sri and His retinue granted Nammāḻvār a vision of His divyarūpa (divine form). This experience overflowed in the Tiruviruttam, Pēriya Tiruvantādi, Tiruvāciriyam and the Tiruvāymōli, the first three of which contain the essence of the Rk, Yajus and Atharvan while the last is the essence of the Sāmaveda.

In the Kaṭṭunānciruttāmpu Madhurakavi, who was the ādi-prapanna, i.e., the first Śrīvaishnava to take refuge with a guru, sang of the glory of Kurukūr Nampi, Cāṭakopan/ Kāri Māran as his only god, for it was he who gave him the Veda in a way that could be apprehended by him.

Madhurakavi is known as the pupil who received the essence of the Vedas from Nammāḻvār, i.e., the master’s prabandhas, and gave them in his turn to the world. He is also said to have established, after Nammāḻvār attained Vaikunṭha, an arcā vigraha of his master, and conducted regular worship of the same. While the Mgpp tells us that when Madhurakavi spoke the words, “Nampi of southern Kurukūr”, his mouth was filled with nectar—a clear reference to the first verse of the poem of ten stanzas, the Agpp relates as usual, another interesting tale about the hymns of Nammāḻvār himself. Once during a temple utsava, when

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72 Tamarind trees usually fold their leaves at night, i.e., ‘sleep’. This miracle tree naturally did not!
73 Mgpp, Madhurakavi Āḻvār Vaibhavam. Agpp, Madhurakavi Āḻvār Vaibhavam says, “If in the womb of the acit, (i.e., one without consciousness) is born…”.
74 This esoteric exchange between the two Āḻvārs, master and disciple, is a favourite among Śrīvaishnavas, as an expression of the deep mysticism of the former.
75 The Sāmaveda is considered the greatest/ holiest of the Vedas by Śrīvaishnavas.
76 See Chapter 2-v.
78 See Chapter 5-iv.
79 Reference to Kaṭṭunānciruttāmpu 1.
the Āḻvār’s titles were being announced, students of the Tamil Sangam objected to the glories claimed for him and challenged him to the ‘Sangam test’. Madhurakavi then went to Madurai, the seat of the Sangam, and wrote the opening line of a verse from the Tiruvāymōli on a chit which the scholars of the hallowed academy placed on the ‘Sangam plank’ along with the works of 300 other poets. The plank immersed all the other compositions (in some body of water, presumably), and righting itself, brought up only the work of the Āḻvār. The assembled scholars were naturally awe-struck and repentant, and their chief expressed his wonder in verse: “Can one word of the verses of Vākulābhara be equalled by the songs of worldly poets? Can a house-fly look up at Garuḍa, a glow worm at Sūrya, or a dog at a roaring tiger? Can a jackal walk before a lion or a preta dance before Urvaśī?” Thus did Madhurakavi spread the glory of his master in town and country, and redeem the world.

c) Kulaśekhara Āḻvār Vaibhavam

In an army camp in Kōllinagar (Agpp)/ Vañjikalam (Mgpp)/ Kukkutakūta (DSC), in the twenty eighth year of kali yuga, was born the hero Kulaśekhara in the royal Cera clan, as an amsa of the Kaustubha, in the month of Māci under the Punarvāsu asterism, on the twelfth day of the bright half of the moon.

Having learnt all the arts of warfare, he conquered Kōlli, Kūṭal, Koli, and protected with his sharp lance, bhāgavatas and sādhus (religious mendicants). He delighted in hearing expositions of the Rāmāyana and the mahātmyas of the various divya desas (glories of the holy places of the Lord), and grew indifferent to the pleasures of the palace. One day, while listening to a recital of the Rāmāyana, he was distressed to think of Rāma having to face the 16,000 strong rāksasa force alone, and impulsively summoned his fourfold army to set out to Rāma’s help. His flustered advisors at once recited the next verse wherein Vaidehi (Sītā) embraces the victorious hero, thus healing all his battle wounds.

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[*Tiruvāymōli* 10.5.1]

*Other legends, about the ‘Sangam test’ such as the contest between the Śaiva saint Appar and the Jainas relate that inferior works were drowned in the Vaigai, Madurai’s river. Evidently, there remained a strong sense of the tradition of the Sangam in Madurai long after the ‘Sangam age’; certainly, till as late as the 13th-14th centuries, acceptance by the Madurai scholars was seen as the acid test of good literature.*

*Title of Nammāḻvār, literally, ‘He garlanded by the blossoms of Vākula’. (Latin: Mimesops elengi)

*Kōlli is identified with Uraiyūr, near modern Srirangam.*

*Vañjikalam= modern Cranganore. Geographically, Vañjikalam and Kōlli are fairly distant.*

*Presumably Sanskritisation of Kōlli.*
Another time, his ministers, annoyed with the king’s partisanship towards bhāgavatas, hid the jewels of his grha arca and blamed the Śrīvaiṣṇavas for the theft. Kulaśekhara refusing to believe ill of Śrīvaiṣṇavas, thrust his hand into a pot writhing with snakes, calling for his hand to be smote if the allegation were true. When his hand emerged unbiten, the frightened mantrīs confessed and craved pardon. The king was calmed, but life among those immersed in the ways of the world had become distasteful to him. He longed to live in Srirangam in the company of devotees of the Lord. So he crowned his son king and left for Srirangam where he remained absorbed in contemplation of the Lord. He recorded his experiences in the Pērumāl Tirumōli and the (Sanskrit) Mukundamālā.

The DSC has an interesting addition to this largely consistent narrative. It says that the Āḻvār had a daughter, an āmsa of Nīlādevī, (the third, Tamil spouse of the Lord), whom he ‘gave’ to the Lord of Srirangam along with all his wealth as dowry.

d) Tirumankai Āḻvār vaibhavam

In the three hundred and ninety eighth year of kaliyuga, on a Thursday, in the month of Kārtika, under the Kṛttika asterism, on a purnimā, was born in TiruvĀli- TiruNagari, to Nilaṅ, a man of the fourth varna (Mgpp)/ mlecha varna (Agpp)/ śūdra (DSC), an āmsa of Śāṅga, Viṣṇu’s bow. The child was named Nīlā-nirāttar (blue-complexioned).

The boy became proficient in dhanusāstra, his kula vidyā (the art of warfare which was the traditional art of his clan) and was appointed an adhikāri (official), by the Cola king. With the support of four loyal followers, one of whom could walk on water (Nīrmel Naṭappān), another who cast no shadow/ whose stepping on the shadow of a person rendered the latter powerless (Nīlalai Mitippān), a third who could blow locked doors open (Tolūtuvaṅ), the fourth who could argue endlessly (Tola Valakkan), and his horse, Āṭalmā, he was invincible.

Meanwhile, in TiruvĀlinādu, an incarnation of an apsārā (Agpp)/ divya kanyā (DSC)/ āmsa of Bhūmi (Mgpp), appeared as a baby girl in a lotus pond, and was adopted by a devout Vaiṣṇava vaidyā of TiruNāṅkūr. Here the Agpp gives a long story of her previous life and the curse which caused her to take human form, including her predestination to be the wife of

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86 Icon for domestic worship.
87 Full moon day.
88 Inscriptions show that the adhikārī was an important official in the state administration. See Noboru Karashima, History and Society in South India, op cit., Introduction, p. xxi.
Parakāḷan. The baby girl was named Kumudavalli on account of her having been found in a tank of kumuda flowers. When she reached marriageable age, her father began to worry, especially as her kula-gotra were unknown. Parakāḷan heard of her immense beauty and approached her parents for her hand, bringing suitable presents of clothes and jewellery. Her father was agreeable, but the girl said that she had vowed to marry only a true bhāgavata, who would moreover pledge to feed a thousand Vaisnavas everyday. The love-smitten Parakāḷan thereupon went immediately to the sacred spot of TiruNaraiyūr where he received the pañcasamśkāra, i.e., got himself branded with the marks of Viṣṇu, the śankha, cakra etc. Following his marriage to Kumudavalli, he engaged himself in feeding Nārāyaṇa’s devotees everyday, using up the royal funds given in his keeping for this task. Hearing of it, the Cola king summoned him, but Parakāḷan simply fobbed off the messenger with an excuse. The commander of the royal forces was then despatched with infantry, cavalry, elephant corps and chariots, but Kalikantri mounted on his Ātalmā managed to completely ravage the Cola army. The king himself came to battle next and was similarly dealt with. The DSC, in true kāvya style, expends dozens of verses in descriptions of the battle and the heroism of the combatants, while the Agpp tells us that the jagadeka dhanurdharan (the foremost archer of the world) churned the king’s forces as the devas and asuras had of yore churned the mount Mandara in the ocean. Finally, the Cola ruler, pretending to be impressed by Parakāḷan’s valour, accepted defeat and invited him to the court where he imprisoned him by deceit. He also asked the Āḻvār to make good the losses he had inflicted on the royal treasury. Being unable now to feed Śrīvaiṣṇavas everyday, the Āḻvār too began to fast.

Moved, Lord Varadarāja (≈Perarulālar) of Kāṇcī appeared in the Āḻvār’s dream and said that He had a great treasure in Kāṇcī to enable him to pay off his debts. (Some manuscripts of the Agpp say that Parakāḷan was imprisoned without food in the devālaya (temple) of TiruNaraiyūr. The distressed Nācciyār (goddess) told Nampi (here, the Lord) that they could

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89 Death to his enemies, name of Tirumankai Āḻvār.
90 The DSC’s name for Tirumankai Āḻvār meaning ‘death to his enemies’; the Mgpp and Agpp also frequently refer to him by this name.
91 Tirumankai devotes 100 stanzas in the Pēriya Tirumōli to TiruNaraiyūr.
92 The sthalapurāṇa of TiruNaraiyūr also claims that it was the Lord of Naraiyūr, TiruNaraiyūr-Nampi/Śrīnivāsa/ Vyūha Vāsudeva, who gave Tirumankai the pañcasamśkāras and converted him to Vaiṣṇavism. See A Etirajan, 108 Vaiṣṇava Divya Deśa Stala Varāḷāru, Vaiṣṇava Siddhānta Nūrpatippuk Kāḻakam, Kāraikkūti, 2003, pp. 108-115.
93 Destroyer of Kali, yet another name of Tirumankai Āḻvār.
94 The Agpp text I used specifies that another version holds so. Also, in Pēriya Tirumōli, verses 6.6.1-9, Tirumankai says that the valorous Cola ruler Cēmpiyaṉ Kocēṇkanāṉ worships at the temple here.
not let their son starve so, and induced Him to intervene—yet another instance of the mediation of the goddess which, as we have seen, is a central tenet of Śrīvaiṣṇavism. When the Āḻvār told the Coḷa rājā of his dream, he was allowed to go to Kāṇcī under escort. The Lord there revealed to him substantial wealth, out of which he gave the royal servants the king’s due, and then re-engaged himself in the service of Śrīvaiṣṇavas. Back in the Coḷa court, when his servants recited the miraculous tale to the king, he repented, recognized the Āḻvār’s greatness, and himself employed the funds obtained for feeding devotees of the Lord. On the other hand, Parakāḷan soon ran through the treasure. Since he could not discontinue feeding bhāgavatas, he took to highway robbery—a sort of Robin Hood plundering non-Vaiṣṇavas to feed Vaiṣṇavas. Here the DSC comes into its own, describing with great relish and gore, the numerous successes of the hunter-saint, but adds a curious caveat—apparently, Parakāḷa Sūri only killed hinsak mṛga (violent/ carnivorous beasts)! The great Lord seeing his single-minded devotion, decided to bestow His special grace on the Āḻvār. We saw in the previous chapter that He appeared with His consort and retinue in the forest as a bridegroom and his party whom the Āḻvār tried to rob. In the Agpp and Mgpp versions, Kaliyan succeeded in removing the jewellery of the party and putting it all in a box which however proved impossible to lift. Suspecting the workings of magic, he asked for the spell that would move the box. The Lord then whispered the Aṣṭāksāram in his ear and the enlightened Āḻvār performed saranāgati at the feet of the divine couple. The Lord favoured the Āḻvār with His divya mangala vigraha (His transcendental auspicious form) and then advised him to journey to all the divya deśas. Tirumankai—mānnañ did so and sang of his experiences in the six prabandhas, viz, the Pēriya Tirumōḻi, Tirukkuruntāṇṭakam, Tirunēṟuntāṇṭakam, Tiruvēḷukūṟrirukkai, Ciriya Tirumāṭal and the Pēriya Tirumāṭal, which are the six angas of the four Vedas.

After he had journeyed to the north and south, he reached Kāḷicīṟamā Vinṇanagara, where his titles, Kaliyan, Ālināṭan (lord of Āli), Aṟṟumāri (rain-cloud of grace), Kōṟraḷe- Parakāḷan (sharp-speared one who is death to his enemies), Kōṅku-malar-kulaliyar-vel (lover of women with fragrant-flower-adorned-hair), Mankai-ventan (conqueror of Mankai), Parakāḷan,

95 Again, the sthalapurāṇa of TiruNaraiyur claims this for the goddess enshrined in that temple, which is also called Nācciyār Koyil. See Etirajan, 108 Vainava Divya Deśa Stala Varāḷaru, op cit., pp. 108-115.
96 Warrior, yet another name of Tirumankai Āḻvār.
97 See Chapter 2-iii-c.
98 In the Śrīvaiṣṇava understanding, Nammāḻvār’s four prabandhas are considered the Tamil equivalent of the four Vedas, and Tirumankai’s prabandhas the Vedāṅgas.
99 Modern Čīrḵāḷi, said also to be the birthplace of Jēṉa-sambandar.
Paravādi-matta-gaja (a destructive elephant to other doctrines) and Nālu-kavi-pērumāḷ (master of the four kinds of poetics) were announced. The followers of the Nāyaṇār Tiruvēḷiṇā-Sambandar opposed the last saying that no one could announce himself with that title where Sambandar was present. The Ālvār’s disciples challenged Sambandar to debate with their master. But the Ālvār’s own speech could not flower in that town, which being entirely Śaiva then, had not a single Bhagavata vigraha. Finally, spotting a Vaiśṇava woman, Tirumankai asked her for her arcā vigraha. A battle of skills between the Ālvār and Sambandar ensued. The latter composed a verse which the Ālvār pointed out as being faulty. He, in his turn, sang a hymn in seven divisions that could be arranged as a chariot and left Sambandar speechless. I shall reproduce a little further below the DSC version, which differs significantly from the Maṉipravāla guruparamparā.

The Ālvār proceeded to Srirangam to worship the reclining Lord therein and found the temple in sad disrepair. In order to obtain money for the task of renovation, he decided to plunder the Buddhist vihāra in Nāgapatiṇām which was fabled to possess a golden image of the Buddha. While the Mgpp restricts itself to saying that he managed—with the help of his four remarkable companions—to steal the idol, melt it and use the money to fortify the third prākāra (rampart/enclosure wall) and build the fourth prākāra of the temple, the Agpp and the DSC give delightfully colourful accounts of the expedition.

100 Interestingly, Tirumankai Ālvār who usually signs himself with one or two titles, uses a number of titles including most of above (excepting Paravādi-matta-gaja and and Nālu-kavi-pērumāḷ), and also Aratṭa-mukki (he who subdues the wicked) and Āṭaiyar-Çiyām (lion to his opponents) in the decad devoted to KāḷiçCirāmaVinnagaram, Pēriya Tirumōli, 3.4.10.

101 The DSC calls him Trikavi, which is not a generally known name for Sambandar. Nor are his Śaiva followers or his own devotion to Śiva mentioned. The identification is made possible because of the correspondence with the accounts of the Agpp and the Mgpp and from the reference to his having ‘drunk the milk of Girijā’—a popular episode of the Nāyaṇār’s life-story. Here as elsewhere, it gives preference to poetics, depending on a prior understanding of its content, which might suggest that it was addressing an audience familiar with most of the tales recounted in it.

102 KāḷiçCirāmaVinnagaram, known today as Cirkāḷi is the birthplace of the Nāyaṇār Sambandar. While it is better known for its Śiva temple, there also are eleven Vaiśṇava divya kṣetras in the vicinity, situated very close to each other. In fact, all eleven shrines have divya kṣetra status owing to Tirumankai’s hymns alone.

103 The reference is to the Tiruvēḷuḷirukkaḷi, one of the six prabandhas attributed to Tirumankai Ālvār; it does not bear his signature. The only sacred centre mentioned in this composition is Kuṭatmai. It is surprising that the ācāryas, usually so careful in their elaboration of the hymnal material, should have decided to locate the composition of this poem in Cirkāḷi.

104 Agpp, Mgpp, Tirumankai Ālvār Vaibhavam.
Upon reaching Nāgapaṭṭinam and finding that the idol’s hiding place was a secret known to none but the goldsmith who had fashioned the statue, Tirumankai proceeded, disguised as a Buddhist, with his accomplices to the goldsmith’s house. There he began to lament that the Muslims had destroyed the town and abstracted the idol of the Buddha. The dismayed goldsmith, who wondered aloud how they could have reached the secret cellar where the idol was fastened under the vimāna with a chain to the façade of a water spout outside, was tricked thus into betraying its location. When the Ālvārs’ party entered this secret sanctum, the gold idol perceiving the impending theft, bemoaned its being made of such a precious metal. In the DSC version, the other icons started to proclaim their own unworthiness as being made of base metals and to point to the gold idol as the only one fit to steal. Interestingly, it adds that the Buddha perceiving that it was the gold which had brought this fate upon him, left the idol even as a bee flies from a plucked flower.¹⁰⁵

The Agpp account credits this distinctly dare-devil Ālvār with yet another fraud during the course of his short sojourn in Nāgapaṭṭinam. Having learnt the idol’s whereabouts from the goldsmith (and with time to spare till it grew dark enough for the robbery, presumably), Tirumankai and his four companions went to the seashore where they asked a ship owner to take them aboard his ship. This merchant, Dharmavan, was carrying a load of areca-nuts. Once aboard the ship, Tirumankai asked for half a betel nut, which the hospitable merchant naturally proffered. Then he asked the merchant to accept that half a betel nut in the ship was his. Needless to say, he got the same written down carefully, and once back ashore, demanded that half the cargo on the ship belonged to him.¹⁰⁷ Lamenting his ‘debt of a previous life’, the hapless merchant parted with half the profits from the sale of the betel nuts.

In the DSC, the episode of Tirumankai’s meeting with Sambandar is narrated after the expedition to Nāgapaṭṭinam to rob the vihāra. Parakāla’s having become renowned for his victory over the Buddhists, the boy Nayanār Sambandar surrounded by people singing his praises, set forth from Kālipura¹⁰⁸ to meet Parakāla. But when he saw Parakāla himself

¹⁰⁵ DSC, sargah 14, verse 47.
¹⁰⁶ English syntax unlike Tamil demands an article here; a distinction would be made by the choice of one of the two articles, ‘a’ or ‘the’.
¹⁰⁷ This episode has given rise to a popular proverb in Tamil. (Literally, “Half the betel nut in the ship is mine”) to ridicule one who claims to have contributed much more than he/she actually has to a spot of work.
¹⁰⁸ KAN Sastri, The Colas, University of Madras, Madras, 1935-7, p. 636 reads this as Ālinagar, Tirumankai’s hometown. However, it can be easily identified with Kāli-Cīrāma-Vināgaram, Sambandar’s hometown. Indeed, the DSC offers an explanation of a close translation of the latter
approaching, he promptly dismounted from his horse and inquired about his welfare. He then invited Parakāla into the town and expressed his desire to hear the latter’s compositions. Parakāla however replied that he would not enter a town where there was no image of Viṣṇu upon which Trikavi disclosed that the town had indeed had an ancient temple of the Lord which the avaidikas had destroyed. The Lord of Kālinagara was however being worshipped by an arca ka in his dwelling. Parakāla accordingly entered the town and sang of the Lord of the place in a remarkable composition called the Saptavati impressions by which Sambandar composed a poem in praise of the Alvar. Parakāla left Kālinagara after making arrangements for the ruined Viṣṇu temple to be renovated.

Two very popular episodes of the unscrupulous Āḻvār’s eventful ‘life’ are surprisingly not found in the Mgpp. The Buddhists of Nāgapatīninam, on discovering the theft, traced the Āḻvār’s party by their footsteps all the way to Srirangam, where, with their proof and the backing of the king, they demanded their idol back. The Āḻvār who had already begun to melt parts of the idol and sell them gave them a written commitment that he would return ‘even the little finger’ of the idol after a year. After precisely a year, the Buddhists returned, to be given, not surprisingly, a little finger of gold. The Buddhists did take the case to officials for judgement, but the Āḻvār’s promissory note was well worded, besides which, he had as we saw at the outset, the support of an indefatigable disputant! The DSC adds some other interesting details that I shall consider in a later chapter.

Another time, when the labourers engaged in the construction project asked for their wages, Parakālan promised to pay them on the other bank of the river. Reasoning that even a pāpa performed for the Lord’s service becomes a punya, he had the boat carrying all the hopeful workers sunk midstream. Later he told the outraged families that their grief was misplaced as their drowned loved ones had all earned the blessed feet of the Lord.

Tamil place name: since Rāma had rested here briefly on his way to Lanka, it was called Rāmāvīyat-pura. (DSC, sargah 14, verse 94)

See footnote 103 above.

DSC, sargah 14, verses 89-99.

I have frequently heard these episodes retold with chuckles, but without any disapproval.

DSC, sargah 14, verse 78.

The two branches of the Kaveri circling Srirangam are called Kaveri and Kollītām; the latter translates into ‘the site of robbery’.

Agpp, Tiruppāṉāḻvār Vaibhavam. Eternal service at the Lord’s feet is the ideal destination for the soul.
Each of the three accounts relates a different story before concluding the section on this very colourful saint. The DSC tells us of his returning to his wife Kumudavalli, to apprise her of his numerous adventures. She, along with her father, then entered the pond wherefrom she had first emerged. Seeing them both ascending heavenwards in a jewelled chariot, Parakāla retired to the service of Ranganātha before finally entering perfect samādhi. The DSC makes an oblique reference to an important episode which, strangely, is mentioned only in the otherwise concise Mgpp—an episode I shall examine in a later chapter along with the equally interesting, but quite different episode in the Agpp.

iv) Analysis

The Tiruccanta Viruttam attributed to Tirumālaići Ālvār is a highly esoteric poem of 120 stanzas which offers practically no clue about the poet. The Nānmukān Tiruvantādi, a poem of ninety six stanzas is also attributed to Tirumālaići. Some of the verses in the latter speak of Śiva not only as inferior to or worshipping Nārāyaṇa but also as a part of the composite/universal Lord, Nārāyaṇa. The Nānmukān Tiruvantādi can thus be seen to belong, along with the other three antādis in the iyarpā, to an older stratum of religious thought when the Hari-Hara concept probably still had some validity. The geographical range of the Nānmukān Tiruvantādi and the Tiruccanta Viruttam are similar: roughly an equal number of shrines each in Tōṇṭainādu and Colanādu finding reference in both poems. The Nānmukān Tiruvantādi mentions Venkatam twelve times, Srirangam thrice, and seven other shrines once each. The Tiruccanta Viruttam mentions seven shrines: Venkatam (twice), three shrines in the region of Kāncī, and three in Colanādu, among which Srirangam is mentioned nine times and Kuṭantai five times. Clearly, the focus of the saint who composed this poem was the Srirangam temple, unlike that of the composer of the Nānmukān Tiruvantādi whose major focus was Venkatam. For the present purposes however, I will only examine how the acāryas having, for reasons I cannot determine, ascribed these compositions to the same Ālvār, proceeded to construct a story that blended elements from both these.

115 DSC, sargah 14, verses 100-103.
116 Hardy, Viraha Bhakti: The Early History of Kṛṣṇa Devotion in South India, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1983, pp. 281-293, suggests that the early Ālvārs belonged to a different devotional milieu from the later ones.
117 With the exceptions of the major shrines Arangam, Venkatam, Kuṭantai and Vēhkhā, however, which are common to both poems, the shrines mentioned in each are different.
118 Nānmukān Tiruvantādi 34, 39, 40, 41, 43, 44, 45, 47, 48, 53, 54, 90.
119 Nānmukān Tiruvantādi 3, 36, 60.
120 Tiruccanta Viruttam 60, 81.
121 Tiruccanta Viruttam 21, 49, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 93, 119.
122 Tiruccanta Viruttam 56, 57, 58, 59, 60.
While frequent references to the *Vedas* or their essence—which are both said to inhere in the Lord Nārāyaṇa—do not necessarily indicate *brāhmaṇa* caste, the mention of the ‘sweet sound’ of the *Vedas* or of the number of consonants and letters that make up the *Rk, Yajur* and *Sāman*\(^\text{123}\) is probably more suggestive, considering the *dharmaśastric* injunction against the ‘low-born’ hearing the *Vedas*—for the power and the sanctity of the *Vedas* are believed to inhere in its sound. Some of the cryptic passages which are understood by the Śrīvaishnava tradition to imply various esoteric concepts may also indicate familiarity with different philosophical traditions, justifying, at least partly, the Āḻvār’s reputation as a student of numerous philosophies. Again, the longer poem shows a thorough grasp of a wealth of legends connected with Viṣṇu, both from the Tamil and the Sanskritic–Puranic traditions. Though the majority of the verses of the *Tiruccanta Viruttam* are highly elliptical, a fair number specifically posit Viṣṇu in a hierarchical relationship with other gods, specifically Śiva.\(^\text{124}\) These slighting references to Śiva seem to be the only common factor between this poem and the *Nāṟmukān Tirunantādi*.\(^\text{125}\) Some virulent stanzas condemning Śramaṇas, (i.e., Jainas), Buddhists and Śaivas clearly lies at the root of the story of the Āḻvār’s long study of these rival religious systems before rejecting them all as worthless.\(^\text{126}\) The descriptions of the Lord in various shrines, unlike in the *Amalanāḍidipirān* which mentions only Venkatam apart from Srirangam, convey a sense of the familiar—indicative of easy access into the sanctum, and thus an argument against the low caste status of its composer.

What is thus amply clear is the lack of basis for the Āḻvār’s upbringing by a hunter/ bamboo worker—a detail that could have been omitted by the hagiographies especially since his purported biological father, a sage, was in all likelihood, a *brāhmaṇa*. That it wasn’t, and that this ‘confusion’ of caste forms the basis for further sub-plots in the story is significant. In fact, this theme is played out from the very outset wherein the Āḻvār, despite his upbringing in a clearly low-caste family refuses all nourishment except a devotee’s offering of milk. Food

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\(^\text{123}\) *Tiruccanta Viruttam* 4.

\(^\text{124}\) *Tiruccanta Viruttam* 42, 53, 70, 71, 72, 87, 113.

\(^\text{125}\) *Nāṟmukān Tirunantādi* 1, 4, 9, 10, 20, 31, 42, 43, 56, 73, 75, 78, 82 express the superiority of Viṣṇu over Śiva, Brahmā etc. Also, *Tiruccanta Viruttam* 44 and *Nāṟmukān Tirunantādi* 24 both describe the four *yugas*, by the colours, white, yellow, red and black.

\(^\text{126}\) *Nāṟmukān Tirunantādi* 6 slights Buddhists and Jainas. Stanza 14 disparages those who do not take the name of Nārāyaṇa. Stanza 38 says that the six schools of thought are for those without the heart to seek Him. In Stanza 63 the poet says he learnt the mysteries of astrology, and all about the lord through writings, by word of mouth and by prayer. Stanzas 66, 84 etc express his refusal to worship Śiva. See Chapter 4.
Taboos are the most important of restrictions for the maintenance of ritual purity. That this is scrupulously adhered to, even as the texts place the Āḻvār in a lowly social environment reflects more than ambiguity regarding caste status. It may be recalled here that the Mgpp account of Tiruppāṇāḻvār also has a foundling brought up by a candāla couple on nothing but cow’s milk\(^{127}\)—ritually pure food. There appears a clear intent to draw in diverse social groups into the community of Viṣṇu worshippers, and to promise them grace. It is however an attempt fraught with tension, and anxiety to not destabilise the established patterns of hierarchy. Thus, Tirumāḷicai Āḻvār’s deep familiarity with the Vedas, demonstrated by his recalling to the errant brāhmaṇas the point in their recitation they had stopped at, underscores that a bhāgavata is beyond brahmanical hierarchies, and that knowledge of Nārāyaṇa is superior to, indeed, encompasses knowledge of the Vedas, which are but of Him. On the other hand, even this bhāgavata among bhāgavatas does not break the absolute taboo of pronouncing a phrase of the Veda; he only makes a physical gesture. Thus the very limits are reached, tested, briefly shown to be invalid, but finally reiterated! Similarly, Lokāsārangamuni carrying Tiruppāṇāḻvār on his shoulders into the Srirangam temple oversets established norms of caste hierarchy, but is preceded by the Āḻvār’s refusal to soil the hallowed portals of the temple with his presence. And no less important, this act of transcendence, even though by God’s own orders, is unrepeatable by any other bhakta—Tiruppāṇāḻvār never returns to mundane human existence. One act of transcendence thus leads to another; and the startling nature of one is emphasised by the finality of the other.

The hagiographies are on comparatively surer ground with Kulasekhara Āḻvār who speaks of himself as lord of Kölli,\(^{128}\) Kūṭal,\(^{29}\) Koḷi\(^{130}\) and Köṅku\(^{131}\) as a sharp-spear wielder and commander of an army. The three places to which the poet lays claim have a deeper significance. Kölli, Koḷi and Kūṭal were associated with the Sangam Ceras, Colas and Pāṇṭiyas respectively.\(^{132}\) Equally significantly still, he speaks of himself as one with a parasol! heir to the parasol\(^{133}\) which indicates royal status. Since Kulasekhara is known to be the title of some Cera kings, the Āḻvār is said to have been of the Cera royal lineage.\(^{134}\) The Kerala

\(^{127}\) See Chapter 2-iii-b.

\(^{128}\) Pērumāḻ Tirumōṭi 2.10, 6.10, 7.11.

\(^{129}\) Pērumāḻ Tirumōṭi 1.11, 2.10, 6.10. Kūṭal is modern Madurai.

\(^{130}\) Pērumāḻ Tirumōṭi 9.11, 10.11 Koḷi is identified as modern Uraiyur.

\(^{131}\) Pērumāḻ Tirumōṭi 3.9.

\(^{132}\) The association was pointed out to me by Prof Kesavan Veluthat.

\(^{133}\) Pērumāḻ Tirumōṭi 1.11, 9.11.

\(^{134}\) Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai identified the Cera rule from the 9\(^{th}\) century as the ‘Kulasekhara empire’ believing that Kulasekhara was the abhimāna nāma of the rulers of the dynasty. Prof Kesavan
region had come to be identified with the rule of the Ceras from the ninth century onwards. The fame of this medieval dynasty which took its name from the Sangam Ceras, undoubtedly to gain legitimacy and prestige, continued even after the decline of the dynasty in the early-mid 12th century. What we see here is the hagiographies transposing contemporary/near contemporary reality on to an earlier period by speaking of the Ālvār as a Cera ruler, and by grouping the compositions of this Ālvār as the Pērumāl Tirumōli, i.e., the sacred words of Pērumāl, Pērumāl being the title that the (later) Cera kings took. This follows the pattern that the compilers of the Nālāyiram have generally followed, i.e., prefixing the honorific by which name the Ālvār is known in the Śrīvaiṣṇava community to the word Tirumōli, to refer to the collection of his/her compositions. To read this backwards and posit that the composer of the Pērumāl Tirumōli bore the title Pērumāl, would, therefore, be anachronistic. Further, the name Kulaśekhara was by no means unfamiliar in the Tamil land. A number of Pāṇṭiya kings bore the title Kulaśekhara, as can be seen from numerous inscriptions. There is an attempt to fix Kulaśekhara Ālvār with exactitude based on the assumption that he was a crowned king of Kerala. However, our evidence does not permit this confidence, especially as none of the above mentioned sites can be reliably placed in Kerala; rather, they seem to be located around present-day Madurai and Uraiyyūr. Even Kōnku, which is suspect only because of having been the realm of the Sangam Ceras, is specifically said to comprise Coimbatore and parts of Salem, Tiruchirapalli and Madurai districts. If Kulaśekhara Ālvār was indeed a king of this territory, he should be known to us from other sources, for the eighth-ninth

Veluthat, “State Formation in Early South Indian History”. Paper presented at Jawaharlal Nehru University, 28.03.2009.

135 Personal communication from Prof Kesavan Veluthat.

136 The hagiographers have clearly chosen to ignore the references to Koḷi and Kūṭal in his hymns for the purpose of declaring him a Cera king.


139 Veluthat, ibid, p. 38.

centuries are by no means a dark page in historical records. It is remarkable that so devout a ruler does not appear as a generous donor to any Viṣṇu temple in the epigraphic records of the age of the Āḻvār. Further, it has been pointed out that in a medieval astronomical treatise from Kerala, the *Laghu Bhāskarīya Vyākhyā*, the employment of the literary device of double entendre allows the opening verse to be read as praise of both Śiva and the patron of the poet, Sthāṇu Ravi Kulaśekara. Would a bhakta devoted exclusively to Viṣṇu have appreciated a work that could be a panegyric to Śiva, scarcely respectable in his eyes? Indeed, in the bhakti environment charged with sectarianism, would he have borne the name, Sthāṇu?

Kulaśekhara Āḻvār has sung of five shrines, besides referring once to Ālinagar and a few times to Ayotti (Ayodhya) which, as the mythological realm of his chosen deity must have been especially sacred for him, but is likely to have been notional rather than a physical, geographical reality. The five south Indian shrines are Venkaṭam, Srirangam, TirukKaṇṭapuram, Tillai-Tirucitakūṭam (Chidambaram), and Tiruvittavakkoṭu, with a clear focus on Srirangam. The geographic distribution is as follows. Vaṭanaḍu: 1; Coḷaṇāḍu: 3 and Malaināḍu: 1. On the other hand, Tirumankai of TiruvĀli in Coḷaṇāḍu has sung of three temples in Malaināḍu whereas it is from the hymns of Nammāḷvār, who hailed from Kurukūr in Pāṇṭiyāṇāḍu, that most of the fifteen shrines in Malaināḍu get their status as divya desas. While this evidence is not conclusive, for Tirumankai and Nammāḷvār were in any case more oriented towards pilgrimage than was Kulaśekhara, one would expect that a crowned king who was also a staunch devotee would have chosen to glorify more abodes of his chosen

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141 Kesavan Veluthat, “Imagining a Region: Kerala in Medieval Literature and Historiography”. Paper presented at Jawaharlal Nehru University, 18th March 2009, interactive session, specified that no inscription of the Ceras of the 9th to 12th centuries have been found east of Palghat.

142 Two inscriptive records mention Sthāṇu Ravi Kulaśekhara. The earlier, dated in his sixth regnal year, is the Syrian Christian copper plate grant which gives certain trading rights to the said community. The second, dated in his eleventh year, is a resolution of a temple community. I am indebted to Prof Kesavan Veluthat for the information.


144 See Chapter 4 for the conflicts between Śaivas and Vaishnavas.

145 *Pēruṁāḷ Tirumōḻi* 8.7.

146 *Pēruṁāḷ Tirumōḻi* 8.6, 8.7, 10.1.

147 *Pēruṁāḷ Tirumōḻi* 4.1-10.

148 *Pēruṁāḷ Tirumōḻi* 1.1-10, 2.1-10, 3.1-10.

149 *Pēruṁāḷ Tirumōḻi* 8.1-10.

150 *Pēruṁāḷ Tirumōḻi* 10.1-10.

151 *Pēruṁāḷ Tirumōḻi* 5.1-10.
deity in his own realm. More pertinently, Kulaśekhara’s concentration on sacred sites in the Kaveri delta point to his greater familiarity with this region than with Kerala. It is known that prior to the rise of the imperial Colas, a number of chiefly families were in control of different parts of the Tamil land outside the area of influence of the Pallavas and Pāṇtiyas. I suggest that this Ālvār hailed from any one of these clans with royal aspirations and appurtenances. Undoubtedly familiar with the Sangam poetical conventions, this saint-poet was drawing on the historical tradition of Sangam to boost these royal claims and for legitimation.

While all the Ālvārs praise the Lord by mentioning His deeds of grace and valour performed in the course of various incarnations, Kṛṣṇāvatāra is the greatest favourite, especially for the poetic scope it gives. Kulaśekhara is perhaps unique in his focus on Rāma, which is no doubt the basis for the delightful legend about the Ālvār. The tale also underscores the accessibility of the Lord as one towards whom mere humans may be solicitous as towards a friend in need, or as a mother towards her baby.

Even to one only marginally familiar with Tamil poetry and literature, the power and beauty of the Tiruvāymōli is immediately apparent; it is easy to see why Nammālvār is regarded by the tradition as the sum of which the other Ālvārs are but parts. Nammālvār refers to

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152 See George W Spencer, The Politics of Expansion: The Chola Conquest of Sri Lanka and Sri Vijaya, New Era Publications, Madras, 1983, p 13 for a picture of the ninth-century Pallava and Pāṇtiya dynastic kingdoms as “regional spheres of hegemony” which included, beyond their heartland, a “broad and ambiguous hinterland” ... with “local power centres under the control of chiefs or other locality leaders”.

153 Hardy, Viraha Bhakti, op cit., pp. 231-281 has discusses the influence of Sangam traditions on the poetics of the Ālvārs.

154 However, Pēruṉāl Tirumōli 6.1-10 and 7.1-11 are devoted to Kṛṣṇa.

155 See Chapter 2-v.

156 Pēriyālvār has composed a number of songs purportedly sung by Yasoda for Kṛṣṇa. In fact, they are structured as folk songs that any mother could sing about/ to her child, weaving in references to the divine child. Kulaśekhara Ālvār sings lullabies to the baby Rāma, laments in the voice of Daśaratha after Rāma has left the palace, and in that of Devaki who hasn’t had the joy of bringing up the baby Kṛṣṇa. These form part of a genre known as Pillai-t-Tamil, specifically devoted to the glorification of childhood/ miraculous children. It is likely that this genre had its beginnings in Ālvār poetry. Surprisingly, Paula Richman, who has studied this genre in a full length monograph, says that the first extant pillaiittamil dates from the twelfth century. (Paula Richman, Extraordinary Child. Poems from a South India Devotional Genre. University of Hawai‘i Press, Honolulu. p. 3). Since her bibliography includes Lynn Marie Ate, Pēriyālvār’s Tirumōli—A Bālakṛṣṇa Text from the Devotional Period in Tamil Literature. PhD thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1978 —a text which I did not have access to, but which, considering its very title, should presumably have details of the pillaiittamil poetry in Pēriyālvār Tirumōli, I find this omission surprising.

157 See hagiographic reference to avayava and avayavi.
himself as \textit{Valuti-vala-nātan}, \textsuperscript{158} (lord of the fertile Pāṇṭiya land)\textsuperscript{159} and as \textit{Nagarān}.\textsuperscript{160} As the term \textit{valanādu} technically refers to the administrative division above the village level, Hardy believes that he may have been a provincial administrator, possibly of noble descent.\textsuperscript{161} Madhurakavi however calls him \textit{Nagara Nampi},\textsuperscript{162} a term which in the case of Pēriyāḻvār denotes a temple \textit{brāhmaṇa}. Considering the acute analysis that was brought to bear upon the \textit{prabandhas} by the medieval Śrīvaiṇava ācāryas, it is hardly likely that this reference could have escaped them. Hardy suggests that Madhurakavi may have never actually met Nammāḻvār, but may have been referring to his temple icon.\textsuperscript{163} The earliest epigraphic evidence of the installation of images of the \textit{bhakti} saints is from the late tenth century\textsuperscript{164} which of course does not rule out the existence of images of the saints in a slightly earlier period. However, to picture Madhurakavi as revering merely an image of Nammāḻvār would imply a substantial time gap between the actual lives of the two, which would present immense difficulties in the chronology of the Āḻvārs.

Certainly, Madhurakavi was deeply impressed by the poetry of Nammāḻvār, which he considers the Tamil \textit{Veda}. If he did not learn the hymns directly from the composer (and, by implication, was not influenced by the presence and teachings of the master), but only acquired them from the oral tradition, is it likely that he would have preferred to concentrate his devotions towards the image—assuming that an image existed—of the singer of such songs alone, neglecting even the Lord to whom those songs were addressed? Though there are no easy answers, I think it unlikely. It also reopens the question of Nammāḻvār’s caste and occupation; could Madhurakavi in his reverence have referred to his teacher as \textit{Nampi} in the

\textsuperscript{158} \textit{Tiruvālmoli} 2.8.11, 3.6.11, 5.6.11.

\textsuperscript{159} Translation- Hardy, \textit{Viraha Bhakti}, op cit., p. 254.

\textsuperscript{160} \textit{Tiruviruttam} 100, \textit{Tiruvālmoli} 4.10.11.

\textsuperscript{161} Hardy, \textit{Viraha Bhakti}, op cit., pp. 254-255.

\textsuperscript{162} \textit{Kanṭinuṇciruttāmpu} 3.

\textsuperscript{163} Hardy, \textit{Viraha Bhakti}, op cit., p. 255, footnotes. In fact, this is his reason for discarding a ninth century dating for Nammāḻvār and placing him earlier even though the poet-saint refers in his hymns to two temples that owe their name to a Pāṇṭiya ruler of the ninth century. See discussion below and also in Chapter 5.

more diffuse sense of leader? Why, when there was a possibility of picturing Nammāḻvār as a brāhmaṇa, did the hagiographers choose to give the ‘greatest’ Āḻvār sat-śūdra parentage?

The numerous legends about Tirumankai Āḻvār defy clear-cut analysis, unless the message is simply that single-minded devotion to Viśn̄u excuses the worst of excesses—a message often apparent in the Pēriya Purāṇam as well. A life of piety is perhaps to be considered outside the pale of the laws governing normal social life. At least one example from the Itu, relevant in this context, is meant to demonstrate the supremacy of the Lord. A holy man is said to have once complained to the Lord of Tiruppati that Tirumankai Āḻvār’s hymns were full of self-adulation. The Lord thereupon replied, “There was no self-adulation before he declared his loyalty to Me. After he declared his allegiance, all self-adulation acquires the virtue of praise offered to Myself.” This is supposed to show that God cannot be praised by uninspired men. I believe that this passage also reinforces the notion of the Lord’s unfettered paratva and His promise to redeem, not to speak of such allegiance being sufficient effort for salvation. Here, however, I shall concentrate on only those aspects which have a bearing on the social status of the Āḻvār or his associates.

Since most of the epithets the hagiographies give Tirumankai Āḻvār are derived from his own signatures, it is very likely that he was a warrior chieftain or an official of some royal overlord—who is invariably said to be Cola, reflecting the hagiographers’ contemporary reality. He regularly refers to the mansions, fertile fields and fortifications of his native Alināḍu/ Mankai, and his own generosity, his valour, his horse Āṭalma, and his conquering spear. It is interesting that Kumudavalli, the woman responsible for bringing him to the

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165 A Appan Ramanujam, “Non-Vedic basis of Srivaisnavism”, Bulletin of the Institute of Traditional Cultures, Madras, Vol. 26.1, July – Dec 1982, pp. 45-48. This scholar believes that the word nampi denotes a non-brāhmaṇa priest and argues that before brāhmaṇas took over, south Indian temples had non-brāhmaṇa priests. He concludes, therefore, that Pēriyāḻvār was non-brāhmaṇa too. This is arguable as in at least one of his signature verses, Pēriyāḻvār Tirumōli 2.8.10, the poet speaks of himself as ‘Veda knowing’. Besides, the essay by Appan Ramanujam is a polemical tract grounded in the caste politics of modern-day Tamil Nadu.

166 The largest commentary on the Tiruvāyūmōli.


169 See Chapter 2-v.

170 He styles himself usually as ‘lord’.

171 Both places are situated near each other in the vicinity of TiruNāṅkūr.
Vaiṣṇava path, ¹⁷² was brought up by a vaidya—we have seen the importance of foster parentage in previous stories. Indeed, her father is shown to have worried about the girl’s marriage as her kula and gotra were unknown. I suggest that since the brahmanical scheme permits a marriage of desire (gandharva vivāha) for the warrior classes, Tirumankai Āḻvār seemed a desirable parti in the eyes of Kumudavalli’s father, who may have suspected that she was of apsarā extraction. ¹⁷³

Marriage/sexual union is strictly controlled along caste lines, and the hagiographies allow no breach of the same. True, Tōṇṭaraṭippōṭi Āḻvār is said to have been besotted with a ganikā, but the story is clearly a trope on the power of women to lead potential bhaktas astray. Indeed, many of the Āḻvārs lament that they had wasted their youth pursuing beautiful women and advise their listeners to reject such worthless pursuits and devote themselves to the Lord of Vaikuṇṭha without delay. We often hear that ancient India was the ‘land of the Kāmasūtra’ and free of the notion of ‘original sin’. And that contemporary India, however, is fettered by the shackles of sexual repression introduced only as recently as the nineteenth century by our colonists, while the actual descendants of the Victorians have rid themselves of the same. I contend that this is an oversimplification. Despite the absence of a notion of original sin, and despite the inclusion of desire (and its fulfilment) among the four legitimate goals of human life, ¹⁷⁴ sexuality was surrounded by ambiguity in religious and semi-religious literature. ¹⁷⁵

While love and sexuality have been celebrated in numerous contexts and also given a semi-divine status, as in the context of Kṛṣṇa’s amorous dalliances, it remains equally true that desire and sexuality have given rise to much remorse and self-flagellation. ¹⁷⁶ It has been pointed out that while the Āḻvārs visualised the erotic relationship of the divine couple as that of Kṛṣṇa with the gopīr in general, and with Nappinnai in particular, the ācāryas ‘legitimised’ it by singing strictly of the perfect mutual love of Viṣṇu and Śrī. ¹⁷⁷ The ambiguity over desire is brought out beautifully in the verses of Tirumankai himself. While he frequently repents his wasted years when he was entranced by women with ‘round breasts’ and ‘lightning-like

¹⁷² This aspect belongs only to the hagiographies; there is no mention of Kumudavalli in his compositions.
¹⁷³ After all, it is such a familiar theme that as a learned man, Kumudavalli’s father should have presumed that some unfortunate apsarā was having to live out some curse through an earthly life.
¹⁷⁴ Dharma, artha, kāma, mokṣa.
¹⁷⁵ Women are frequently condemned as snares for spiritual aspirants (always assumed to be men). Any number of Puranic legends or Jātaka tales can be adduced to prove this point.
¹⁷⁶ The hagiography of Tōṇṭaraṭippōṭi Āḻvār is a case in point.
¹⁷⁷ See Chapter 2-iv, 2-v.
waists', he also signs himself with a flourish as 'lover of many wide-eyed women' and 'desirable to women with flower-adorned tresses'. The hagiographies do not however make much of this in the case of this Ālvār, assigning to him a 'legitimate' attachment to a single, semi-divine, devout Vaiśṇava woman. I suggest that this transmutation of the self-confessedly 'woman-entranced' Ālvār into a faithful spouse in the hagiographies is further evidence of the same trend, i.e., of subsuming the concept of erotic love within the conjugal framework.

The above discussion has made it clear that there is a clear match in the caste status as mentioned in the hymns themselves and in the hagiographies in the case of four Ālvārs, i.e., Kulaśekhara, Pēriyāḻvār, Āṇḍāḷ and Tōṉṭaraṭippōṭi. The given and ascribed statuses are not seriously in conflict in the case of two others, i.e., Tirumankai and Nammāḻvār. Thus, the caste status of six Ālvārs, i.e., exactly half the number of the Vaiśṇava saint-poets, is actually unknown and merely ascribed. The case of the first three Ālvārs, said to have had immaculate births, may also be left out of the picture for the present. This leaves us with Tirumalāṅci, Tiruppāṇ and Madhurakāvi, the first two of whom are, in any case, not even historical. Madhurakāvi is said to be a brāhmaṇa even though a reference in his hymn to the scholars of the Vedas regarding him as lowly could indicate low social status. Tirumalāṅci’s status is more ambiguous, and Tiruppāṇ is firmly classed as belonging to the lowest of the low. An analysis of the Therīgāthā and the Therāgāthā suggests that the ascription of caste status to the Buddhist nuns and monks regarded as the composers of these works may encode important messages for the audience of the texts. While a fair number of these renunciants are pictured as hailing from brāhmaṇa families, the low caste status of others is also highlighted. The compilers and commentators of these texts thus pointed to the comparatively egalitarian character of Buddhism, but simultaneously stressed that the Buddhist faith was not merely the refuge of the socially inferior but attracted members from even the highest rung of the social hierarchy. It is possible to see similar factors operating in the case of the Śrīvaiśṇava hagiographers. The low caste status of certain Ālvārs was balanced by the

178 Pēriya Tirumōli 1.1.1-4.
179 Pēriya Tirumōli 6.10.10, v 3.4.10.
180 Kaṇṭinunçciruttāmpu 4. Hardy, “The Tamil Veda of a Śūdra Saint”, op cit., pp. 29-87 believes this stanza indicates that Madhurakāvi’s revering Nammāḻvār as the one who had rendered the Vedas in Tamil must have been regarded with disapproval by the brāhmaṇa establishment. This reasoning, however, can hardly account for the medieval hagiographers’ accounts.
182 Personal communication from Dr. Kumkum Roy.
brāhmaṇa status of others, and in an interesting reflection of the Buddhist situation seen from the Theri and Theragāthas, there is a preponderance of saints from the brāhmaṇa caste, reinforced by others from those of comparatively high social standing.

Tirumankai is the composer of the largest number of verses in the NDP (approx 1350), followed by Nammālvār (1296 hymns). However, as I noted in Chapter 1, only the hymns in the Pēriya Tirumōli, the Tirukkuruntāṇṭakam and the Tirunēṭuntāṇṭakam carry his signature; the Tiruvēḻukūṟirukkai, the Pēriya Tirumātal and the Cirīya Tirumātal are ascribed to him. Tirumankai also appears to have travelled to more shrines of the Lord than any other Āḻvār, even assuming that the poems on shrines in northern India are based on hearsay than on actual pilgrimages. Clearly, such an important Āḻvār deserved—in the eyes of the hagiographers—a sufficiently gripping life-story. Thus, stereotyped laments about a life of sin and wrong doing that can only be redeemed by the special grace of the Lord were embroidered to create the extraordinary bildungsroman. However, I believe that this suggestion that the grace of Viṣṇu is available to every true devotee, irrespective of his deeds, subtly reinforces the notion of the Lord’s grace being available irrespective of a person’s birth. This insistence on the centrality of bhakti, and of belonging to the community of bhaktas over and above one’s caste-community was crucial to the emergent Śrīvaisnava community as will be brought out by examples from the sectarian scriptures.

Here, however, a qualification is necessary. The Śrīvaisnava scriptural tradition began, within about two centuries after Rāmānuja, to exhibit two different doctrinal orientations, the gap between which deepened till they came eventually to be crystallized into two distinct sects, the Tēnkalai and the Vaṭakalai. The animosity that came to characterise their relations is, however, not seen till very much later. Eighteen points of doctrine differentiate the two sects from one another, but the crucial issue dividing them is undoubtedly their position on caste; the Tēnkalai stance being far more radical than the Vaṭakalai.

The Viṣṇu temple at Srirangam had early become the focus of the Śrīvaisnava community thanks to the early ācāryas having established their pontifical seat there. Though Nāṭhamuni

183 Roy, ibid, pp. 81- 83.
184 The verses which bear his signature add up to 1134 while those of Nammālvār’s signed compositions add up to 1202. Tirumankai is considered the most prolific by addition of the poems ascribed to him, for two of which, two systems of counting are in vogue. According to one, Tirumankai’s hymns add up to 1351 while according to the other, sum is 1253.
185 Pēriya Tirumōli 1.1.5 says, “I was a thief. I sinned. Now I have reformed...”. Pēriya Tirumōli 7.4.9, “I am false, wicked, constantly living in misery. Yet I have received his grace... “.
hailed from a small temple town called Viraṇārayanaṇapuram, it was in Srirangam that his grandson Yāmunācārya established the early tenets and practices of the faith. Yāmuna is supposed to have desired Rāmānuja, a young man whose prodigious philosophical knowledge he had heard of and whom he had seen but never actually met,186 to succeed him as the darśana pravartaka (propagator of the doctrine). Some time after the ācārya’s death, Rāmānuja, who had been based in Kāṇcī, moved to Srirangam and spent most of his long and eventful life thenceforth in that temple town. Kāṇcī, which had long been the pre-eminent site of religious learning, not only of the orthodox faiths but also of Buddhism and Jainism, continued to attract Vaiṣṇava scholars. As I have stated before, Śrīvaiṣṇava theology bases itself on two sets of scripture—the Sanskrit Vedas and the Tamil hymns of the Ālvars. It appears that the early Vaiṣṇava scholars were called upon to defend their faith against accusations of heterodoxy—meaning in this context, misinterpretation of the Vedas rather than non-acceptance of its principles—for Yāmuna’s Āgamaprāmāṇya carefully sets out the Vedic basis of the Pāñcarātra Āgamas187 which were central to Vaiṣṇava ritual practice. His other work, the Gitārthasamgraha, similarly interprets the Gitā in the light of Vaiṣṇava bhakti.188 After Rāmānuja’s tour de force, the Śrībhāṣya, established Viśistadvaita as a genuine Vedantic school, Śrīvaiṣṇava scholars did not need to re-establish the Vedic orthodoxy of their faith. Rather, the focus moved towards an in-depth study of the canonised scripture itself—the four thousand hymns of the Ālvars, and the philosophical treatises of their own early ācāryas which, understood to contain the entire teaching of the Vedas, formed the basis of study in their own right.

The definition of the hymns of the Ālvars as the Tamil Veda was in itself revolutionary. Venkatachari asserts that this claim regarding the ‘Drāvida Veda’ was relatively unknown outside Śrīvaiṣṇava circles for very long especially as occasions for public debate were rare.189 While the Sanskrit Veda is śruti, eternally revealed, and by implication anādi, i.e., without beginning, the Tamil hymns were considered to be śruti which has ādi.190 Vaṭākku Tiruvōti Piḷḷai says in the Bhagavad viṣayam, his massive commentary of 36,000 stanzas, more popularly known in the Śrīvaiṣṇava community as the Itu, that the Sanskrit Veda is like

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186 See Chapter 4-iii-b.
188 See Chapter 2-ii.
189 Venkatachari, ibid, p. 18
190 Venkatachari, ibid, p. 18;
the paratva form of the Lord, the Itihasas and Purāṇas like His avatāras, and the Tiruvāymōlī like the arcāvatāra.\textsuperscript{191} This must be understood in the light of Śrīvaiṣṇava theology, where the five forms of the Lord are considered equal, but the arcā form is dearer for being accessible.\textsuperscript{192} As inheritors of two Vedic traditions, orthodox Śrīvaiṣṇavas claim the title of ‘Udbhaya Vedantins’. We have already seen that the very first reference to the Tamil Veda occurs within the NDP itself: twice in his poem of eleven stanzas, Madhurakavi says that Nammāḻvār rendered the Vedas/ the essence of the Vedas in sweet Tamil.\textsuperscript{193} To that extent, the almost extraordinary claim to equality with the Vedas for scripture in a vernacular language was not an innovation of the Śrīvaiṣṇava ācāryas. However, the continuing reiteration of this claim also gives us a clue to how the community imaged itself. The ‘Tamil Vedas’ were accessible to all irrespective of caste not merely because of the Tamil language, but also because, unlike the Sanskrit Vedas, they were seen as inherently meant to bring divine revelation to all. Alakiyā Manavāḷa Perumāḷ Nāyaṅgār\textsuperscript{194} says that the Tiruvāymōlī is like a golden pot that everyone may use whereas the (Sanskrit) Vedas are like a mud pot.\textsuperscript{195} This statement is to be understood against the southern Indian notions of purity–pollution, whereby certain items (like mud pots) are thought to transmit pollution, and must therefore be guarded against the same whereas other materials (like gold) remain pure irrespective of who touches them.

While scholars based in Srirangam gradually began to concentrate on the Tamil scripture, those in Kāṇcī eventually developed a separate specialisation within the domain of Śrīvaiṣṇava studies—study of the Sanskrit texts. This bias may have been partly due to the personal predilections of the scholars, but was partly due to a tangible social reality. Srirangam was the hub of an emergent community of the faithful while Kāṇcī was the seat of philosophers. The needs of the nascent community meant that the Tamil hymns of the Āḻvārs, easily understood and emotionally appealing, were the preferred tools of propagation of the faith. Generations of scholars in Srirangam devoted themselves to expounding the Āḻvār’s poetry, delving into the canon for insights that previous ācāryas may have by-passed. A vast commentarial literature was built up in Manipravāḷa. The Śrīvaiṣṇava term for the commentaries, anubhava grantha, i.e., works of enjoyment, is instructive of how the

\textsuperscript{191} Venkatachari, ibid, p. 21.  
\textsuperscript{192} See Chapter 2-ii.  
\textsuperscript{193} Kaṇminuṇciruttam 8 & 9. Also see Chapter 1-iii.  
\textsuperscript{194} This is not one of the Śaiva Nāyaṅmārs, but the name of a Śrīvaiṣṇava ācārya, the word Nāyaṅār meaning leader.  
community views/viewed the hymns of the Āḻvārs. The emphases in the commentaries were thus on "teaching the community and the purely intellectual pleasure of understanding the rich heritage of the ubhaya vedānta". The first Tamil Maṇipravāla text, the Āṟṟyirappati, a commentary on Nammāḻvār’s Tiruvāymōli by Tirukkurukaip-Pīrān-Pillān, has a heavy Sanskrit component, but over the centuries, the Tamil content grew steadily in relation to the Sanskrit. The very reasons which had privileged the Āḻvār’s hymns in Srirangam over the Sanskrit philosophical treatises also influenced the direction in which these hymns were interpreted. Inscriptions evidence the substantial contribution of merchants, artisans, landowning groups and royal officials to the institution of the temple. To retain the patronage of these groups, indeed to draw in as many social groups as possible into the life of the temple, and to create a broad-based community was undoubtedly an important preoccupation for the ācāryas at Srirangam. I shall examine how the commentarial literature reflects these concerns. Pillāi Lokācārya, regarded as the key figure among the ācāryas of the Tēṇkalai or the southern sect—so called for both its geographical location vis-à-vis Kāṇcī and for its concentration on the scripture of the southern language as opposed to the Vaṭakalai or northern sect with its focus on Sanskrit—was the first to write independent treatises interpreting the Vedānta in a vernacular language. Lester believes that the “style and content of his writings show him to be especially concerned to communicate Vaishnavism to the uninitiated masses of South India... Given... his views on caste...he can be considered something of a social revolutionary”. Lokācārya argues that the bhāgavata transcends caste, and even though he or she may be of the lowest caste, such a one is to be given the highest honour and service. Apparently, after the composition of the Śrīvacaṇa Bhūṣana, some prominent Śrīvaisṇavas objected to his teachings regarding the bhāgavatas. The story goes that Alakīya Maṇavāḷa Pērumāḷ Nāyānār (a contemporary ācārya) took the complaint to the Lord who, through His priest (arcca-mukhena), Himself vindicated Lokācārya in front of the community. Indeed, it is easy to understand why orthodox brāhmaṇas would have objected to the contents of the Śrīvacaṇa Bhūṣana. Let us look at some examples from the text.

“There is no condition of place, time, manner, fitness or fruit for prapatti....Three kinds of persons are fit to perform prapatti to the arcca: the ignorant, the one having superior

196 Venkatachari, The Śrīvaisṇava Maṇipravāla, op cit., p. 87.
197 Robert Lester, The Śrīvacaṇa Bhūṣana of Pillai Lokācārya, The Kuppuswamy Sastri Research Institute, Madras, 1979, p. 3.
198 Lester, ibid., p. 3.
199 Lester, ibid., p. 4.
knowledge, and the one who loses himself in devotion. People like us are prapannas on account of ignorance, the ācāryas of yore are prapannas on account of their superior knowledge and the Āḻvārs by the ecstasy of devotion... Offences against bhāgavatas are of many kinds. One of these is inquiry about their birth. This indeed is more cruel than thinking about the material stuff of (which) the arcāvatāra (is made). Verily, inquiry after the birth of a bhāgavata is like a man inspecting the reproductive organs of his mother. The very sacred thread of such a person becomes a leather strap, like that of Trīśanku, a candāla by karma”. 200 These startling pronouncements are bolstered by examples from older texts as well. 201 We learn of a legend from the Udyoga parva of the Mahābhārata, of Gauḍa, who was punished with the loss of plumage and inability to fly for thinking ill of the place where Śāṅḍilya, a female sage, was staying. 202 And unambiguously, “The price of brāhmaṇism is acceptable if as a result of the Vedas and the like, there is attainment of the Lord; if that indeed is a detriment, then it is to be renounced”. Further, the Śrīvacana Bhūṣaṇa states that for a low-born one, humility is consistent with his birth while the high-born must cultivate humility. Therefore a humble birth is better than a superior one. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa is quoted to establish that even one “who cooks dogs, (svapaca), but has Viṣṇu bhakti is better than a twice-born one without bhakti”. 203 The Lord Himself is shown to have never distinguished between castes. ‘Though Rāvaṇa abused Vibhīṣaṇa as a disgrace to his clan, Rāma embraced him as one of the Ikṣvakus. Rāma performed the brahma medha ritual, (last rites), for Jaṭāyu, and Yudhisṭhira for Vidura. 204 Besides these assertions of the primacy of bhakti, all Vaiṣṇavas who have received the sacred mantra are declared to be equal.

The Īṭu explains and elaborates the hymns with examples from older texts, the epics and popular mythology. Its very interpretations of these popular episodes are interesting. That the text is a product of discourses to the community is brought out by delightful anecdotes about well-known previous Srirangam ācāryas who are, as elders in the revered guruparamparā, models to be emulated. Explicating Tiruvāymoli 1.10.2, wherein Nammāḷvār says that the Lord who unfolds Himself as earth, water, fire, wind and sky, enters and fills his heart when he worships Him with love, the Īṭu gives us this story. Velvēṭṭi Nampiyār is said to have
asked Nampiḷḷai if prapatti—reliance on God alone and ceasing of self-effort—demanded some conditions. Nampiḷḷai replied, “Vibhīṣaṇa who suggested to Rāma the expediency of petitioning the ocean, did not himself, when he came to Rāma as his refuge, bathe in the ocean as previous preparation. What do we infer from this? It was meet for Rāma to adopt preliminary observances, becoming the race of Ikṣvaku, whereas the circumstances of birth as one of the rākṣasa race did not warrant any previous ceremony (for Vibhīṣaṇa). Thus each one must do what is proper to his station in life.” While this statement seems to reinforce the status quo in a manner familiar to us from numerous brahmanical texts, its actually opposite import can be grasped when we look at some other examples from the same text. “Naṇcīyar asked Bhaṭṭar what qualifications were needed to be able to recite God’s names. Bhaṭṭar replied, ‘Son, when a man stumbles on the road, he involuntarily cries out, ‘Ammā’. (What qualification is required for this?) He who goes to bathe in the Ganga need not cleanse himself beforehand by dipping into a salt water pond. So, when we wish to be saved, what more qualification do we require than the desire to be saved? A saviour who is fit to save can also render us fit for salvation’.” It is clear that the purpose is to demonstrate that prapatti, the sole and sufficient means of salvation according to Tēṇkalai doctrine, is open to all, regardless of caste.

The doctrine of prapatti, complete surrender to the Lord, is central to Tēṇkalai belief. In their insistence that prapatti requires no effort, nor any qualification, on the part of the individual, the Tēṇkalai ācāryas challenge the Vaṭakalai who believe in a measure of self effort, a qualification which embraces ritual worthiness. While performance of prescribed duties in accordance with varṇāśramadharma is perfectly compatible with the Vaṭakalai programme of salvation, any self-effort, including such ritual ones is, in the Tēṇkalai view, to doubt the Lords’ all-embracing capability to save and hence to actively oppose His omnipotence.

205 Both are Śrīvaśīṣṭa avacāryas.
206 Old usage for ‘suitable’.
208 In the Bhagavad Gītā, canto 4 verse 13, for example, each person is enjoined to perform the duty proper to his caste. See also, DD Kosambi, “Social and Economic Aspects of the Bhagavad-Gītā”, in DD Kosambi, Myth and Reality: Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1962 (reprinted 2000), p. 12-41.
209 Both are Śrīvaśīṣṭa avacāryas.
211 Mumme, Patricia, “Jiva kartrtvā in Viśiṣṭādvaita and the Dispute over Prapatti in Vedānta Deśika and the Tenkalai Authors”, in SS Janaki (ed), Prof. Kuppuswami Sastri Birth Centenary
Though this doctrinal position does seem to make caste a redundant category, there can be no doubt that tensions remained. The following example reveals the tensions in accommodation of older religious traditions.

Nammāḻvār describes TirucCenkuṉūr as the abode of Vedic seers performing sacrifices. In glossing this, the Īṟu frames a question about how people of the new faith, i.e., of loving devotion to the Lord, could perform ritual acts prescribed in the Vedas, and answers it thus: the ritual of the old law is observed by votaries of the new faith merely to prove their obedience to the divine decree, but not to reap the rewards attached to their performance. If they produce any effects at all, it would be to the benefit of the world in ridding it of its ungodliness.

The ācāryas of old are frequently shown to be indifferent to caste. "A woman had filled her water pots by the riverside of the Kaveri, but there was no one around to help lift the pots on to her head. Kūrattāḻvān, noticing it, helped her, forgetting his high caste and her low one." Another time, Pillai Akalanka Brahma Rāyan, a disciple of Kūrattāḻvān, unwittingly offended his guru’s son Bhaṭṭar, who, as a consequence, left Srirangam for TirukKoṭiṭiyūr. Anxious to conciliate him, Rāyan asked Irukaṭi Maṭa Vāraṇāṇ, weaver-in-chief of the Lord, known to be an intimate servant of Bhaṭṭar, to mediate. The placated Bhaṭṭar then said of the servant that his natural (inborn) humility could not but conquer all. Such examples, of the inherent nature of servitude of the low-born making prapatti natural, of course cut both ways. In another illustration, Mutaliyaṉ and Vanklpurattu Nampi went to worship Ranganatha. There was a great gathering there of the high and the low, the learned and the illiterate. While Dāśarathi took his place among the Śrīvaṅgaṇavas, Nampi joined the humble cowherdesses. Observing Nampi’s unusual conduct, Āntāṅ asked him the reason; Nampi replied, ‘We are swelling with the pride of our caste; these folk are humble and ignorant.’ He then quoted from


\[\text{212 Tiruvāy㎡li 8.4.5, 8.4.10.}\]

\[\text{213 Govindacharya, Divine Wisdom op cit., pp. 165-166, quoting Bhagavad Viṣayam, Book 8, commentary on Tiruvāy㎡li 8.4.5.}\]

\[\text{214 Govindacharya, ibid, pp. 85, quoting Bhagavad Viṣayam, Book 4, commentary on Tiruvāy㎡li 4.9.1}\]

\[\text{215 Govindacharya, ibid, pp. 188-189, quoting Bhagavad Viṣayam, Book 9, commentary on Tiruvāy㎡li 9.4.10.}\]

\[\text{216 Kūrattāḻvān and Mutaliyaṉ are said to be among Rāmānuja’s closest disciples. Mutaliyaṉ was also Rāmanuja’s nephew.}\]

\[\text{217 Another name for Mutaliyaṉ.}\]
the Rāmāyana to prove that the Lord looks more graciously upon the low and humble than on those puffed up with their birth and learning, and said he had hoped, by standing among them, to be thus favoured by the Lord. Nampi then described, on Āṇṭān’s questioning him, how the cowherdesses had prayed. They had said, ‘Dear Lord, eat fruit, drink milk, wear warm robes’, while Nampi had praised Him, ‘Vijayasva, vijayī bhava’ (‘Victory be to thee, Victory be thou’). Āṇṭān is reported to have then said, ‘Brother, even in their ranks, you did not think of discarding your stiff Sanskrit. We are we and they are they how much so ever you may forget and conceal our differences. Come, join our ranks as usual’. This anecdote can indeed be read in two ways. On the one hand, it seeks to demonstrate, as the one above, that the low born are dearer to the Lord for their simple devotion, and better candidates for prapatti, being naturally free of pride. But in its reiteration of caste status and distinction, it resembles numerous brahmanical treatises and could well have served as a tool for maintaining the poor in subjection, while promising them a glorious after-life. What is remarkable however is the self-perception and honest acknowledgement of the differences that persist despite their stated goals, especially since these stories were recited to large, mixed audiences. It also is clear that worshippers of different castes had access to the sanctum, even if they assembled in largely segregated groups.

One day, the washerman of Srirangam brought particularly well washed clothes to Rāmānuja who led him by the hand into the presence of Ranganātha, and recommended him to the Lord. Pleased, the Lord said that for this service, He would condone the offence of the washerman of Krṣṇāvatāra. This anecdote about the rather mysterious forgiveness of sins long-ago committed is interesting in other respects. While it may have meant to demonstrate the accessibility of the Lord and His condescension towards the humble, as also the benefits of intercession by an ācārya, here the great Rāmānuja himself, the idea that the sin of one washerman could be vicariously expiated several aeons hence by another washerman (i.e., a member of the same caste group) demonstrates that caste/birth remained central to the ācāryas’ imagination. I suggest that it might also have reinforced the practice of making


219 Govindacharya, ibid, p. 65, quoting Bhagavad Viṣayam, Book 4, commentary on Tiruvāymōḻī 4.3.5.

220 Properly speaking, ‘that’ washerman should have experienced the fruits of his karma long ago!

221 Intercession by the ācārya is again a key Tēnkalai concept. The ācārya takes on the sins of the disciple and recommends him/her to the Lord. Indeed, Śrīvaiṣṇavas believe that Rāmānuja performed a paradigmatic prapatti on behalf of all Śrīvaiṣṇavas. It offers an interesting parallel to Jesus’ crucifixion on behalf of all humanity. See Chapter 2.
offerings or performing penances on behalf of one’s deceased ancestors, a ritual mediated generally by brāhmaṇas.

Alakiya Maṇavāḷa Pērumāḷ Nāyāṉar is said to have composed the Ācārya Hṛdayam to “reveal the essence of Nammāḻvār’s Tiruvāyūmōli to all devotees without any distinction of varṇa”.222 This is especially so as Nammāḻvār himself is stated to have been born a non-brāhmaṇa. “The Ācārya Hṛdayam attempts to establish that in spite of his birth, Nammāḻvār gained a position unequalled among the Āḻvārs due to his piety, devotion and erudition.”223 The very reason for Nammāḻvār’s birth in a lower order was to raise the status of the group even as Kṛṣṇa was born and lived among cowherds to save the world.224 Alakiya Maṇavāḷa Pērumāḷ Nāyāṉar believes that Nammāḻvār was greater than Veda Vyāsa who composed the Mahābhārata, and Kṛṣṇa who gave the Bhagavad-Gītā to the world, and supports his argument as follows. Veda Vyāsa was an illegitimate child of Matsyagandhi, a fisherwoman, who abandoned him at birth. Kṛṣṇa was separated from his mother at birth and brought up by Yaśodā, a foster mother. Nammāḻvār on the other hand was brought up by his own loving parents225 and the grace of God! Alakiya Maṇavāḷa Pērumāḷ Nāyāṉar adds that Veda Vyāsa was born in a place reeking of fish, Kṛṣṇa in the putrid atmosphere of prison—from where he was transferred to another steeped in the rancid smell of butter, while Nammāḻvār was born amid the freshness of holy tulasi groves. It is interesting indeed that immediately after rejecting birth as a criterion for worthiness, the ācārya claims the superiority of Nammāḻvār using the very same category, albeit those of the circumstances of birth. Veda Vyāsa’s low birth is presumably not a handicap, but his illegitimacy is, and so is Kṛṣṇa’s separation from his biological parents. So too, the accident of their surroundings. There can be little doubt then that the Śrīvaiṣṇava ācāryas striving to create a comparatively egalitarian community could not completely escape the larger conditioning of a hierarchical society of which they were part, and whose prejudices they were imbued with to a far greater degree than they themselves acknowledged.226 This inherent caste distinction is nowhere better illustrated than in notions of purity–pollution. The example of the mud pot given above has meaning only in a hierarchical society where caste-based taboos on commingling and commensality are a lived reality. All the same, its radical potential must also be recognized— it is this very tension

222 Venkatachari, The Śrīvaiṣṇava Manipravala, op cit., p. 38.
223 Venkatachari, ibid, p. 38.
224 Venkatachari, ibid, p. 38.
225 This commentarial argument is rather curious for Nammāḻvār was, according to the hagiographies, deposited by his parents under a tamarind tree soon after birth. See hagiographic account above.
226 The fundamental restrictions of caste in ‘Hindu’ society have never been transgressed, even by the most radical of the medieval bhakti saints.
between a hierarchical society and a limited egalitarian sphere within it that informs the efforts of the Śrīvaiśñava ācāryas.

Two arguments can be presented against my hypothesis. Firstly, all the examples I have chosen are from texts composed by ācāryas of the Tēṅkalai sect. Vaṭakalai Śrīvaiśñava scholars, while unlikely to deny the commentarial literature status as scripture, will no doubt point out that many of the views propagated and endorsed by the Tēṅkalai ācāryas were ‘innovations’ or departures without the sanction of the ‘true’ ācāryas— indeed, it has been argued that the Tēṅkalai guruparamparā or sequence of preceptors is itself fabricated,227 that Rāmānuja appointed Tirukkurukaip-Pirān-Piḷḷān (the first ācārya according to the Mgpp) and not Parāśāra Bhaṭṭar (the first ācārya of the Tēṅkalais) as his successor. Secondly, it may be argued that it was not the Śrīvaiśñava ācāryas but the Āḻvārs themselves who laid the basis for a broad–based, non–hierarchical society. The low-caste background of numerous Nāyānmaṁs and some Āḻvārs is seen as proof of the wide social base of the movement, not to speak of their choosing to sing in the tongue of the people. In fact, many scholars studying different aspects of the bhakti movement in Tamil Nadu have seen it as a clarion call against brahmanical hierarchy. Trying to understand the role of the royal patron and the importance of patronage to the notion of royalty, Peterson says, “In the egalitarian vision of the Tamil bhakti movement, kings and commoners were alike servants of Śiva. The Śaiva devotee bowed to Śiva and to all of Śiva’s devotees irrespective of their social status”.228 [Emphasis mine.]

It is true that the more radical prescriptions regarding caste do come from the Tēṅkalai stream of the Śrīvaiśñava tradition.229 The Ācārya Hṛdayam, a Tēṅkalai text, gives the examples of the sage, Viśvāmitra, who despite being born a kṣatriya became a brāhmaṇa, and of Trisanku of the Ikṣvaku dynasty who became a candāla through the curse of Vaśiṣṭha’s sons, to show

229 Prof KKA Venkatachari (author of The Srivaisnava Manipravala), a distinguished scholar of the Tēṅkalai persuasion, believes that the stories of the Āḻvārs said to be foundlings were attempts by the hagiographers to disguise their low-caste status. He explained it thus: caste status was irrelevant in the time of the Āḻvārs but brahmanical hierarchy was strengthened in the ensuing centuries which is why the Guruparamparāś had to hide the ‘innocent’ facts of low-caste birth by stories of miraculous births. Personal communication.
that birth and caste have lesser significance than deeds.\textsuperscript{230} On the other hand, Vedānta Deśika, the renowned Vatakalai ācārya, is said to have taken the example of the temple cow which despite being worthier than other cows in that its milk and butter are used to make offerings to the Lord does not, in the final analysis, cease to be a cow!\textsuperscript{231} Even Surabhi, the Kāmadhenu, whom all desire, he points out, remains a cow. The Tēṅkalai school holds that a gifted sūdra who becomes a prapanna can be a teacher of a brāhmaṇa and that such a one may recite the mūla mantra with the pratava.\textsuperscript{232} and \textsuperscript{233} Deśika, on the other hand, cites the cases of Vyādha and Tulādhara who, though born in a lower varṇa and thus ineligible to study the Vedas or teach them, were still able to clear the doubts of brāhmaṇas who approached them for clarification on some points of the Vedas. Deśika says they were like guides who direct travellers who have strayed into the forest. But though important as guides, they could not become members of a higher varṇa. Deśika makes an exception for the Āḻvārs, considering them a special category, not to be classified with mortals. In his Guruparamparāsāram, he calls the 10 Āḻvārs the navina dasāvatāra, or new ten incarnations of the Lord.\textsuperscript{234} Deśika follows the Āḻvārs' expressions in acknowledging that a devotee (of Nārāyaṇa) born in a lower varṇa is superior to one without devotion though born in a higher varṇa, but refuses to believe that varṇa status can change.\textsuperscript{235}

As we have seen above, this difference in attitude to caste is partly related to the course of development of the nascent community in Srirangam. Another factor which must be considered here is the contemporary political reality. It has been pointed out that Śaivism became almost the royal cult of the Coḷas. "Patikam [ritual hymn] singing represents a regional cultural form in the evolution of the temple as the channel of communication and the chief mechanism of ideological consolidation for the emergent Coḷa state, the ideology itself being derived from the bhakti of the Śaiva Nāyaṅmārs... The bhakti ideal was consciously

\textsuperscript{230} Ācārya Hṛdayam, stanza 87 quoted in Damodaran, Acarya Hṛdayam, op cit., pp. 55-56.
\textsuperscript{231} Damodaran, ibid, pp. 55-56, citing Vedānta Deśika, Rahasya-traya-sāra.
\textsuperscript{233} Om namo nārāyaṇāyah. Though Deśika denies women and sūdras the right to enunciate the pratava, he says that they would get the rewards attached to it. Vedānta Deśika, Rahasya-traya-sāram, pp. 928-931, cited in Friedhelm Hardy, “Tiruppāṉ Ṭīvār The Untouchable who Rode Piggy Back on the Brahman”, Diana L Eck & Françoise Mallison (ed), Devotion Divine: Bhakti Traditions from the Regions of India, Egbert Forster, Groningen, 1991, p 151.
\textsuperscript{235} Satyamurthi Ayyangar, ibid, pp. xv-xvi.
adopted by the Coláš to integrate the Tamil macro-region into a regional polity with a distinct regional culture”. The ‘recovery’ of the ‘lost’ hymns of the Náyánmárs, their compilation and canonisation, and finally, the composition of the hagiographies of the Náyánmárs was all under the aegis of the royal Coláš. The apotheosis and worship of the Teváram trio, which had begun by CE 945 also seems to have begun under Cola auspices. The metal images of Appar, Sundarar and Sambandar were consecrated by Rájarája I (985-1014) in the great temple at Tanjavur. Inscriptional evidence from other, older Śaiva temples attests to consistent patronage in the mature Cola period.

The trajectory of development of Vaišnávism was parallel to that of Śaivism, but it occurred under very different circumstances. Vaišnávism had received royal patronage under the Pallavas, and continued to do so under the Coláš, albeit on a smaller scale. The Coláš, despite their predilection for Śaivism were too astute empire builders to ignore Vaišnava institutions. However the period of greatest glory for Vaišnavaism in Tamil Nadu lay in the future— in the Vijayanagara period. For the greater portion of the period of this study, therefore, Vaišnava institutions developed without any marked royal patronage or interference. This can have one of two important implications, viz, that institutional developments in Śrīvaiśnavaism were direct engagements with and responses to the contemporary social reality, even more than those of Śaivism, and can therefore offer a window towards understanding the developments in Śaiva institutional structures in Tamil Nadu during the 10th to 13th centuries. In other words, if it was exigencies of state that partially influenced the radical social philosophy of Śaiva Siddhánta, it might be the very lack of state support that made it important for the authors of Śrīvaiśnavaism to conceive as broad a social base as possible for the nascent sectarian community. On the other hand, it is possible to see some of these developments as arising from mutual competition between two closely related devotional sects, both of which were trying to establish their bases among similar social groups. As I have pointed out earlier, both the Śaiva and Vaiśnava hymnal canons were compiled and the hagiographies composed around the same time despite their very different ‘political fortunes’. It is important to remember that the later Cola and early Vijayanagara periods saw the rise to political and

237 See Chapter 1, Introduction.  
238 Champakalakshmi, “Patikam Patuvar”, op cit., p. 207.  
239 Champakalakshmi, ibid, p. 207.  
240 See Chapter 4-iii-b for story of persecution of during Rámanuja and Vaiśnava by an unidentified Coláš ruler.  
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economic power of several new groups whose patronage was no doubt crucial to both the Śaiva and Śrīvaiṣṇava establishments.

Though Srirangam eventually became the epicentre of Tēṇkalai Śrīvaiṣṇavism, important Vaṭakalai groups and lineages continued to be attached to the temple. Secondly, the earliest ācāryas were all based therein, irrespective of which sect claimed them in the subsequent period. The attempt to create a broad-based community which seems, from our 20th-century perspective, to have been a concern of only the Tēṇkalai sect, can be seen from the period of the early history of the community. Though it has been contended that Rāmānuja’s true successor was Tirukkurukaip-Piṟan-Piḷḷān,241 even the staunchest of Vaṭakalai scholars will not deny that Parāśara Bhaṭṭar, Kurattālvān, etc were important early ācāryas associated with Rāmānuja. Though Pinpāḷakiya Pērūmāḷ Jīyar, the author of the Aṟṟpp, clearly places himself in the Tēṇkalai succession, as the first composer (or compiler) of the hagiographies of the Āḻvārs, he set the agenda for future hagiographies.242 Even assuming that the now-lost antecedent of the Mgpp was much older, the fact remains that the available Vaṭakalai hagiography includes details pertaining to caste which it might easily have omitted. I believe that these inclusions are evidence of accommodation and acceptance of what were concerns of the undivided community, and which were eventually marginalised in the development of a sectarian position. Nowhere is this better reflected than in the tale of Tiruppāṇālvār. Considering medieval Vaṭakalai emphasis on Sanskrit scripture, and the entire debate on the means of salvation where birth/caste assumes centrality, the Mgpp could have pictured the poet of the Amalanāḍipirāṇ very differently.243 It might be the fact that the Aṟṟpp version was already well-known and popular that the Mgpp retains it,244 with, however, the important clarification that the Āḻvār was not born in, but only brought up by a caṇḍāla family and, of course, nourished entirely on milk. So also the retention of the tale of the adoption of the abandoned baby, Tirumalaičai Āḻvār, by a low-caste couple, and the insistence on the baby needing no food, having been nourished for all time by the grace of the Lord.

241 Rangachari, “The Successors of Ramanuja”, op cit, pp. 112-128.
242 I have argued in Chapter 1 that the DSC was older than both the Aṟṟpp and the Mgpp; it could then be said to have been the text that ‘set the agenda’. Even so, the DSC as a ‘Srirangam text’ may be considered as illumining the agenda of the early Srirangam ācāryas. Considering the Aṟṟpp first will not in any way change the argument here.
243 Two tanṭiyaṁs, i.e., stanzas of praise, were composed by two disciples of Yāmuna, Pēriya Nampi and Tirumalai Nampi and are, accordingly, dated to the 10th or early 11th centuries. The former, a Sanskrit verse, refers to him as munivāhana, while the latter, in Tamil, speaks of him as pōṉar and also has an elliptic reference to his being carried by a priest to be shown the figure of Viṣṇu in the temple. See Hardy, “Tiruppāṇ Āḻvār”, op cit., p. 133.
244 Perhaps the legend was borrowed from popular tradition. See Chapter 5-iv.
I shall now consider the second possible argument against my hypothesis. I will also take examples from the *Pēriya Purāṇam* to show how the later, institutionalised religious systems created the ‘bhakti movement’, or rather, endowed it with such characteristics as have since come to be seen as its defining features. First however, I will examine the hymns themselves.

As Pēriyālvār, Āṇḍāḻ, and Tōŋṭaṟaṭippōṭī were *brāhmaṇas*, it is reasonable to expect references to brahmanical ritual practices in their hymns. Interestingly however, the poetry of Pēriyālvār, a temple *brāhmaṇa*, and of his daughter, Āṇḍāḻ, are rich in folk elements; indeed “in language and idiom, Pēriyālvār comes closer to ordinary people than any other Āḻvār”.245

Kulaśekhara Āḻvār sings of the Lord of Srirangam as the One praised by Brahmā with the chants of the *Vedas*,246 and as the substance of the *Vedas*.247 He speaks of the Lord as the One spoken of in ‘sweet Tamil’ and in the ‘northern tongue’,248 i.e., the *Vedas*. Though a king, he repeatedly expresses his desire to be united with the throngs of devotees in the temple towns of the Lord, particularly Srirangam. He wishes to “worship their holy feet”, “bathe in the dust of their holy feet”, and “to apply the dust from their feet on his forehead”.249 Nammāḻvār says that those who praise those who praise the Lord who churned the milk ocean for the *devas* and those who serve the servants of the devotees of He who wears yellow vestments are his masters.250 Though the sentiment expressed may be perfectly genuine, the motif of calling oneself the servant of the servants of the Lord was an accepted way of expressing renunciation of pride;251 indeed, we know one Āḻvār only from his title, Tōṅṭaṟaṭippōṭī, i.e., the dust of the feet of [the Lord’s] devotees. Apart from this profession of humility, this *brāhmaṇa* Āḻvār 252 has little patience with those who do not share his faith. Indeed, men learned in the Śāstras are said to proclaim the cowherd Lord/ Rāvaṇa’s killer as the only

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246 Pērumāḷ Tirumōli 1.5.
247 Pērumāḷ Tirumōli 4.8.
248 Pērumāḷ Tirumōli 1.4.
249 Pērumāḷ Tirumōli 2.2, 2.3, 2.4.
250 Tiruvēyūmōli 3.7.5 and 3.7.4.
251 This motif abounds in the hymns of the *Tevāraṁ* as well.
252 He tells us that he is the *tulasi* garland weaver for the Lord at Srirangam; the occupation, and his song for the Lord’s ritual reveille indicate his caste. More directly, he regrets his misdeeds that have caused him to forfeit the rights of priesthood and of feeding the three fires (*Tirumālai* 25). These, and a stereotypical lament for his past when he was a wicked thief and a rogue and ‘caught in the net of fish-eyed beautiful women’ (*Tirumālai* 16) lie at the root of the rather stereotypical story about the Āḻvār.
The Tirupalliṭṭuṭṭi, Tōnantarāṭtipōṭṭi's wake-up song for the Lord, despite its lyrical beauty, could hardly have been a popular song, meant as it was for a specific temple ritual. Many of Tirumankai's and Kulasekhara's hymns could, on the other hand, be sung by the common people, as were many of those of Pēriyālvār and Āṇḍāl.254 A verse of Nammāḻvār's expressing the familiar exaltation of the devotees of the Lord that says, “If even a candāla from among the lowly candālas below the four castes were devoted to the discus-bearing Lord, he would consider as his masters, the servant’s servants of such a one”255 is a radical reorienting of the social hierarchies.

In the verses of Tirumankai, nearly all the holy places of Viṣṇu are described as being inhabited by multitudes of learned Vedic brāhmanas. Temple towns are extolled for their skies thick with the smoke from Vedic sacrifices.256 Indeed, the Vedas are mentioned in numerous contexts. The Lord is praised for having come, in the days of yore, as Hayagrīva to give the flower-born one [Brahmā] the four Vedas that he had lost [to the Asuras].257 When the earth and the sky had not appeared, and darkness enveloped all, He came as a swan and lit the world with the gems of the Vedas.258 He came as a beautiful manikin to Mahābali’s auspicious Vedic sacrifice.259 He is the beautiful One who overpowered the horse [Keśin], who is the husband of Śrī, the Lord of gods, the radiance of coral, the indweller of the seven worlds, time, and the learning of Vedic seers.260 The Lord resides in Nāṅkūr where the chanting of the four Vedas, the six Angas, and the seven svaras reverberates through the eight quarters of the wealthy city.261 In the temple town of Vaṇ-purusottamam, among seers who tend the three fires, recite the four Vedas, perform the five sacrifices and master the six angas, lives the Lord who as a cowherd climbed the kadamba tree and danced on the hoods of the
poisonous snake. These references to Vedic rituals—which number many dozens—point to the brahmanical orientation of this Āḻvār’s devotions.

However, mere reverent references to the Vedas or brāhmaṇas—and these can be found in almost every section of the NDP—do not prove that the Āḻvārs were trying to introduce, spread or stabilise brahmanic worship and superiority in south India. We have seen the consistent reiteration of the superiority of bhakti, consuming devotion, over other, traditional forms of worship. Yet, despite their envisaging a community of devotees who throng the streets of temple towns, mingling without regard for caste, the Āḻvārs reflect the prejudices of their society; one cannot imagine a hymn that praises a sacred centre as one where numerous candālas, pulaiyas or for that matter, even velāḷas or vaniyas live. Tirumankai Āḻvār’s Pēriya Tirumōḷi, which is almost a pilgrimage manual, justifies Veluthat’s assertion that “the leaders of the bhakti movement in South India were leading a temple movement... The bhakti movement went a long way... in popularising the temple”.

Certainly, temple worship was deeply rooted in the Tamil country by the ninth-tenth centuries; indeed, it seems well established even in the earlier period. The Kūram plates of the 7th century CE record donations by the ruler Pallavādhirāja Vidyāvīnita of devadāna and brahmadeya in favour of the temple of Vidyāvīnita Pallava Paramēśvara to provide for the worship, bathing (of the idol), flowers, perfumes, incense, lamps, oblations, conches, drums and the recitation of the Bhārata at this temple. An inscription in the Laksminārāyaṇa temple in Kāvāntātalam, Chingleput ātālu, of CE 883, the 14th regnal year of Pallava Kampavarman, records the construction of the said Viṣṇu temple and the grant of two patti of land and a flower garden at Oṭṭankāṭu village to the temple as arcanā bhoga by a certain Mānasarppan of Kuḷanūr in Venkai nāḍu. In the 24th regnal year of Pallava Nṛpatuṅgavarman, i.e., CE 893, a certain Arikkanta Pērumāḷ made a gift of 30 kalaṅcu of gold for a perpetual lamp to the temple of Viṣṇu Bhāṭāra at Tirumukkūṭai. An inscription of CE 922 (of the 15th regnal year of Parāntaka I) near the entrance into the central shrine of the Raghunāthasvamin temple in Erode records that the people of ElukkaraitTiruvāyappāṭināḍu agreed to pay certain taxes for the worship of Veṇṇaikūṭta

262 Pēriya Tirumōḷi 4.2.2.
263 Pērumāḷ Tirumōḷi 2.1-2.9.
Nāyanaṟ in the temple of Paḻlikōṇṭa Āḻvār. The fees were 1/2 pañam on each tenant, 1/8 pañam from the bridegroom and 1/8 pañam from the bride in each marriage ceremony and one kunri and one maṇḍal of gold as cītukāṭṭupatṭam.268 In CE 934, the sābhā of Tiraimūr recorded in the Mahālingasvāmi temple in Tiruvilāmarutūr that the temple officer and the patipātamulam met in the nāṭaka śālai of the temple and assigned some land of the temple to a person who played the uṭukkai during the three daily services.269 In the Vaikunṭhavāsa Pērumāḷ temple in Nēmālai, is engraved an inscription dated to CE 973 which records the gift of sheep by Āttirayān Nārāyaṇā Vāsudevan for a lamp in the temple called Ticai āyirattai ainnūruvan270—a reference to the famous mercantile community, ‘the 500 of the 1000 directions’. Another from the Vedānārāyaṇa Pērumāḷ temple in Āmūr, Chingleput district, dated to CE 999 registers a gift of land by the mahāsabhā of Aniyūr in Kālattūr koṭṭam as bhāṭṭavṛtti to a brāhmaṇa of the village well versed in a Veda besides the Śāmaveda, in the Pāṇini grammar, in the Mimāmsa etc, without detriment to the money income due therefrom to the Subrahmanya temple at TirūtTani, to which the land had been originally assigned, to teach these subjects to four pupils and feed them daily. There are three more fragments of the inscription, one of which seems to record provision for playing musical instruments during the various temple services.271

Inscriptional evidence in the succeeding centuries showing the involvement of diverse social groups in the life and ceremony of the temple is plentiful.272 Not only did people belonging to different caste and occupational groups make a great number of donations and gifts of land,
sheep, cattle and gold to temples, they were also frequently involved in the conduct of various temple festivities and ceremonies. For instance, an inscription of the 17th regnal year of Rājāraja I, corresponding to CE 1002, from the temple of Varāha Pērumāl in TiruvIlavēntai records the dedication of 12 fishermen’s families (paṭṭinavan kuti) for conducting a seven day festival called Rājāraja devaṇ tirunāl which fell on the nakṣatra Śaṭabhīṣai (evidently the king’s asterism) in the month of Āvāni. The fishermen were required to pay a tax of ¼ kalaṇcu per head earned by them either by weaving or by venturing on the sea, and to render also physical assistance in celebrating the festival. This arrangement, it is stated, was engraved on stone under orders of the two state officers, Ramaṇ Kumār alias Cōla Mūventavela Mārāyan who was evidently the overseer of the district (nādu kankātcī) and Karran Ādditan alias Dāna Mūventavela Mārāyan who was performing the duties of district settlement (nādu vakai). The brāhmaṇas came in for a major share of the enjoyment of the charities made by devotees. In CE 1004, i.e., the nineteenth regnal year of Rājāraja I, a merchant of TiruvOrriyūr in Pulankoṭṭam gifted 30 kalaṇcu of gold to the temple of Varāhadeva in TiruvIlantai. Further, the record says that the residents of Taiyūr, on receiving this amount, agreed to pay interest in oil and paddy to the assembly of TiruvIlantai for burning a lamp in the temple and feeding 35 brāhmaṇas. In CE 1099, the 29th regnal year of the Cōla ruler, Kulottunga I, provision was made for burning two lamps in the temple of Śrīrangadeva in Srīrangam by a person (name lost) who was the Kannada sandhivigrahi and danḍanāyaka of Mahārājādhirāja-paramēsvara-paramabhaṭṭāra-satyāśraya-kulatilaka-tribhuvanamalla (i.e., Vikramāditya VI, the western Calukya king). Some shepherds, Alakiya- maṇavāḷa-koṇ, Karuṇākara-koṇ, Narasinga-koṇ, Tirumāliruṇcolai-koṇ, etc, undertook to supply the required quantity of ghee for burning the lamps. The inscription also refers to the application of lime mortar to the shrine of Senāpati (Viśvaksena) caused to be done by the same donor. Another record of CE 1216, from the Kariyamāṇikka Pērumāl temple in Vijayamangalam in Erode taluk refers to the temple itself as Tirumerkoyil-Cittaramelivillār-Alvar, i.e., the western temple of the Lord Viṣṇu of the Citramelī, an important

273 Mahalingam, 1985, Vol. III, pp. 133-134. Cg 549. Ref.: ARE, 1893, no. 17; SII iii, no. 68. This record from the Pāṇḍava Pērumāl koyil in Kāṇcīpuram dated to CE 1075 records the donation by a merchant named Arulāladevan alias Kumāra Peruvāṇiyān devan Ėriṇcoti, resident of Arumolidevappēruṇṭēruvī in Kāṇcīpuram provided the temple of Tiruppāṭakam with a flower garden and purchased some land from the ēr of Orirukkai in order to maintain gardeners and their families. The ēr apparently sold the land after declaring it tax-free.


276 Mahalingam, 1985, Vol. VIII, pp. 186. Tp 865. Ref.: ARE, 1941-42, no. 204; El, xxxvi, no. 25 (a); SII xxiv, no. 75. Srīrangam.
guild. Interestingly, the gift was placed under the protection of 99 persons belonging to the left-hand castes. In CE 1232, a gift of 32 cows and a lamp stand was made for burning a lamp in the Varadaraja Perumēl temple, Kancipuram, by a resident of Mayilāppūr, Perumāṇḍi Cēṭṭi, s/o Nakkampāṇṭai, of the weaver caste. In CE 1252, Paranesvaran Nārāyanam, a kutirai cēṭṭi (horse trader) of Malaimandalam purchased land to gift to the temple of Srirangam.

That the 'great' temples of southern India are nearly all brahmanical temples, associated with the worship of one or the other of the 'great' gods of the Puranic pantheon is probably responsible for the notion that temple worship originated in northern India. This forms the basis too for the argument that in 'popularising temple worship', the bhakti saints were instruments of brahmanisation. However, considering the fact that all the extant Agama texts seem to have originated in southern India, it is possible that worship at shrines in the manner known to us today may itself have originated in the south. In that case, the Ālvārs and Nāyānmarās may be considered the medium of integrating with an indigenous form of worship, the prestige of pan-Indian Vedic brahmanism.

The picture of co-existence of belief in the primacy of bhakti or God-absorbedness as the religious goal irrespective of social status with acceptance of the hierarchical ordering of society is reinforced by an analysis of the hymns and the hagiographies of the Nāyānmarās. The roughly contemporary Śaiva saints too display familiarity with Puranic religious themes and Vedic praxis. Unlike the Ālvārs, all of whom are considered historical figures, numerous Nāyānmarās seem to be legendary. It is significant that these legendary Nāyānmarās were 'placed' in various castes and occupations from the 'highest' to the 'lowliest'. The stories of some of these devotees of Śiva reinforce my argument that it is not in the

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280 The adjective is not meant to convey any ritual superiority. It simply means the larger, wealthier, more visible temples.
281 Here, 'historical' is used in the sense of their having left written records. See Chapter I-iii, section on sources. It has been pointed out that the number of Nāyānmarās was a response to the Jaina concept of salākāpurūṣas, ideal religious men. However, a few Nāyānmarās besides Appar, Sundarar and Sambandar, like Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār, are historical.
compositions of the Ālvārs but in the teachings of the ācāryas that we must look for the formulation of the radical idea of bhakti.\textsuperscript{282}

Iyarpakai Nāyaṇār, having promised a Śaiva ascetic (who was Śiva himself in disguise) whatever the latter desired, gladly gave him his wife; this Nāyaṇār was a merchant.\textsuperscript{283} Manakkaṇiṉarūṟaṇar, who, for a similar request of another Śaiva ascetic (again, Śiva in disguise), cut off his daughter's exquisite tresses even as she was being readied for her wedding, was a velāla.\textsuperscript{284} Tirunīlakāṇṭhar, the second Nāyaṇār on Sundarar's list of 62 Nāyaṇmārs, so called because the name of the blue-necked Lord was ever on his lips, was a potter who lived in the city of Tillai.\textsuperscript{285}

Ciruttōṇṭar, a physician, who was also a successful commander of the Coḷa armed forces, would not eat without feeding at least one devotee of Śiva everyday. He and his wife were blessed with a child only after many years of prayers to Śiva. One day, when Ciruttōṇṭar, literally, small devotee, had gone out to look for a devotee to feed, none having landed at his door despite his fame as a generous host, Śiva arrived in the guise of a devotee, and left on learning that the master of the house was away. Ciruttōṇṭar, on returning empty handed, rushed to the temple whereto his wife said the devotee had repaired. The devotee said however that it would be impossible to feed him as he had pledged to eat nothing but the flesh of a child not older than five years, slaughtered by his own parents. The Nāyaṇār (to-be) was delighted that the devotee's wish was not beyond his means, and proceeded to, with the perfect cooperation of his wife, slaughter, cook and serve his only son to the ascetic. Not only that, the ascetic insisted that Ciruttōṇṭar join him in the gruesome meal, and after the father had done so, asked him to call his son to join them. The Nāyaṇār replied that he no longer had a son. On the ascetic's insistence however, he did call out, to be rewarded by the boy running in to the arms of his delighted parents!\textsuperscript{286}

\textsuperscript{282} See Glenn E Yocum, "Tests of Devotion among the Tamil Saiva Nayanmars", \textit{Journal of Oriental Research}, Vols. 42-46, 1972-77, pp. 66-71, for an interesting discussion of the same Nayanmars cited here. Yocum also stresses that the model Nayanar is one who surrenders totally to Śiva in all His unpredictability.


\textsuperscript{284} Vanmikanathan, ibid, pp. 347-352.

\textsuperscript{285} Vanmikanathan, ibid, pp. 378-385. Tillai is the Tamil name for the sacred town of Chidambaram.

\textsuperscript{286} Vanmikanathan, ibid, pp. 354-364.
The story of Kalikkampar, a merchant who fed a number of devotees of Śiva everyday, has strong resonances of the Śrīvaiṣṇava insistence on the primacy of bhakti over the more customary marks of social status. An old servitor of the family who had left after a quarrel had apparently become a Śiva worshipper. One morning, when the couple was, as was their custom, engaged in washing the feet of their guests, the wife pouring water from a jug as the husband scrubbed their feet, the wife noticed that the man her husband was serving thus was their former servant, and stopped. When the flow of water abruptly ceased, Kalikkampar looking up and perceiving the reason, simply severed his wife’s hand with a sword, and taking the jug, proceeded to wash the guest’s feet by himself. 287

One of the most startling stories of devotion is told of Kaṇṇappa Nāyaṉār, a hunter by caste. Named Tinnappan by his parents, he roamed the hillsides of Kāḷahasti in search of game. Once, out on a hunt, he strayed onto a hillock where a natural linga of rock commanded his adoration. Kaṇṇappar was concerned that there was no one to feed the Lord, and proceeded to get meat to offer the linga. Being completely ignorant of the ways of worship, he chewed the pieces of boar he had killed to pick the tenderest ones for offering. 288 Then he ran down the hill to a stream below, and filled his mouth with water (having nothing to carry it in). Back on the hilltop, he brushed off the withered flowers and leaves on the linga with his shoes, spewed out the water in his mouth over the shrine to wash it, and adorned it with the flowers he had, en route, tucked in his hair! He then stood guard over the linga all night, quitting his post only in the morning. A brāhmaṇa priest, Śivakośan, who served the shrine, arrived after his departure to be shocked by the desecration—meat around the linga, and strange flowers and shoe marks on its crown. Kaṇṇappar arrived after he had left, having cleaned the shrine and worshipped it ritually, and proceeded with his own unorthodox worship. After this had gone on for five days, the distraught brāhmaṇa asked Śiva to punish the offender. The Lord asked His priest to hide and watch His devotee. That day, when Kaṇṇappar arrived, he saw blood flowing from the eye of the linga. His efforts to staunch the flow with medicinal herbs from the forest failing, he simply plucked out with his spear, his own eye and stuck it into the rock. He had hardly had time to rejoice over his success when the other eye of the linga began to bleed. Never hesitating, Kaṇṇappar proceeded to pluck out his other eye as well, taking only

287 Vanmikanathan, ibid, pp. 495- 498.
288 The similarity to Śabari first tasting the fruit she offered Rāma is apparent. Moreover, it is likely that this particular aspect of the story, absent in the Vālmiki and Kaṃpan versions, first appeared in the Śrīvaiṣṇava exegesis of the Rāmāyana. This statement is not definitive, however, being based on some limited research of my own.
the precaution of marking with his foot, the bleeding spot which he would not be able to see once he had lost his sight.\textsuperscript{289}

The legend of Kaṇṇappar seems to have enjoyed popularity well before the composition of the \textit{Pēriya Purāṇam}, as Appar, Sundarar and Sambandar have all sung about him. While this story emphasizing the value of true devotion over mere rite and form is an old one, a number of the tales of the Nāyānmārs\textsuperscript{290} must have been the creation of the age of the hagiographers.\textsuperscript{291} While the saint-poets do esteem \textit{bhakti} above caste, and express their willingness to be servants of the lord’s servants,\textsuperscript{292} the only examples from the Āḻvār’s hymns that can be adduced for actual veneration by one \textit{bhakta} of another are those of Madhurakavi for Nammālvār, whom as we have seen, he calls \textit{Nagara Nampi},\textsuperscript{293} an epithet designating high status. It is perhaps our modern preoccupations that seek from the saints, further critique of the hierarchies of their society; it is evident, however, that they did not.\textsuperscript{294}

Some anecdotes from the life of Rāmānuja bolster my argument that it was the needs of the nascent Śrīvaiṣṇava community at Srirangam that led to the formulation of a (relatively) egalitarian theology. The hagiographies were much closer in time to the preceptor than to the hoary Āḻvārs—as is clear even from the fanciful dates that are ascribed to the saints. While the ‘beatification’, so to speak, of the \textit{acārya} must have—and did—led to the creation of apocryphal tales about him, the reverence in which the community held him and the fact that the hagiographers were only about three or four generations removed from him has led to the preservation of an astonishing amount of factual detail. This alone can explain why

\textsuperscript{289} Vanmikanathan, ibid, pp. 520- 530. The saint’s name, Kaṇṇappan, owes to his extraordinary sacrifice: \textit{kamma}= eye (Tamil). See also, David Dean Shulman, 1980, \textit{Tamil Temple Myths, Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Saiva Tradition}, Princeton University Press, Princeton, pp. 135-136 for an interpretation of the legend as a myth of the sacrifice of the deity.

\textsuperscript{290} Yocum, “Tests of Devotion” op cit., pp. 66- 71, argues that the tests undergone by the Nāyānmārs are not real tests at all but displays. “When Śiva wants to make known to the world his \textit{bhaktas’} unswerving devotion, he ‘tests’ them knowing full well that they will meet the test—another one of the god’s many sports. (\textit{vilaiyātal}) to show other humans how to live without ego.” p. 71. This agrees with my argument.

\textsuperscript{291} Interestingly, an inscription, date unknown, in the Tālapurīśvara temple, TirupPāṅkāṭu, Cēyyār tāluk, North Arcot district, makes a reference to this story. The record states that some hunters who claimed to belong to the family of Tirukuṇṇapār made a gift for the merit of Sambuvarāya. See Mahalingam, 1985, Vol. I, p. 91. NA 401. Ref.: ARE, 1906, no. 247.

\textsuperscript{292} \textit{Pēriyāḻvār Tirumōli}, 1.1, Tirupalli-\textit{y-elucc} 10.

\textsuperscript{293} Madhurakavi Āḻvār \textit{Vaibhavam}.

\textsuperscript{294} We do have evidence of radical questioning of the caste ordering of society in the works of Jñānēśvar from Maharashtra, but interestingly, he is closer to the \textit{acāryas’} period than the Āḻvārs or Nāyānmārs.
contentious anecdotes and an occasional one that shows Rāmānuja as less than ideal\textsuperscript{295} have been preserved. In some instances, however, memory of more recent events has led to thorough garbling and anachronisms, as in the extraordinary story of Rāmānuja’s going to Delhi to retrieve the icon of the Lord from the Sultan whose armies are said to have plundered the Srirangam temple.\textsuperscript{296}

After Rāmānuja had broken with his Advaitic teacher, Yādava Prakāśa, he began, on the advice of his mother, to perform the kainkarya, service, of fetching from a sacred well, the oblation water for Lord Varadarāja at Kāñcē, and placed himself under the guidance of Tirukkacci Nampi.\textsuperscript{297} Lord Varadarāja was in the habit of regularly conversing with Tirukkacci Nampi, a vaisya, who performed the kainkarya of constantly fanning Him. Rāmānuja noticed the particularly fond gaze (viśeṣa katākṣa) that the Lord inevitably bestowed upon Nampi, and desired to become his disciple. The Agpp elaborates that Rāmānuja prostrated at Nampi’s feet while making the request, and quotes a śloka to establish that there is no need to examine the kula and gotra of truly great persons—details that do not, understandably, feature in the Mgpp. In both versions, however, Nampi refuses on the grounds that it was inappropriate according to varnāśramadharma for Rāmānuja, a brāhmaṇa, to take a vaisya for his ačārya. The Mgpp has Nampi relate to Rāmānuja, an anecdote from the life of Nāṭhamuni. The ačārya had once been deluded into seeing the king and his queens as a party of Kṛṣṇa with his gopiśās, and had begun to reverentially follow them—an act that earned him a reprimand from Uyyakōntār.\textsuperscript{298} He then said that for one who had not, unlike Tirukkāṇṭaṅkai Aṭṭaṉaṉ, renounced food, sleep and even the nityakarmas (the daily rituals), transgression of Śastraic injunctions against caste was not permissible.\textsuperscript{299}

Wishing to clear some doubts about his future course of action, Rāmānuja asked Tirukkacci Nampi to place his questions before the Lord.\textsuperscript{300} Before doing so however, he asked Nampi to

\textsuperscript{295} Agpp, pp. 218-222. Rāmānuja is said to have lost his temper with Kūrattālvān when the latter refused to take down a part of the dictation of Śrībhāṣya. Kūrattālvān was well within his rights to do so as the agreement was that the disciple would not write anything he disagreed with. Eventually, Rāmānuja reflected on the vākyārtha that he had dictated, realised Kūrattālvān was right, and apologized.

\textsuperscript{296} Agpp, Ilaiyālvār/ Ėmpērumāṉar Vaibhavam.

\textsuperscript{297} Agpp, Ilaiyālvār/ Ėmpērumāṉar Vaibhavam.

\textsuperscript{298} Another ačārya.

\textsuperscript{299} Agpp, Mgpp, Ilaiyālvār/ Ėmpērumāṉar Vaibhavam.

\textsuperscript{300} Tirukkacci Nampi is believed by the Śrīvaīṣṭava tradition to have had the unique privilege of holding conversations with the Lord. In general, when the Lord wishes to convey something, He either
come home for a meal. As it happened, the two took different routes to his house, and by the
time Rāmanuja reached after performing his kainkarya for the Lord, Nampi had already eaten
and left to fan Varadarāja. Worse, he found that his wife had swept and washed the place
where Nampi had eaten, and bathed again to purify herself after the vaiśya’s visit. Rāmanuja’s desire to honour the holy man and to eat his leavings was thwarted. He was
deeply grieved that his wife did not understand the true nature of kainkarya and bhagavad bhakti. Eventually, the Lord did answer Rāmanuja’s questions through the agency of Tirukkacci Nampi, who had apparently taken no offence over the incident!

Among the six points of advice of the Lord was the injunction to Rāmanuja to take
discipleship under Pēriya Nampi, one of the šiṣyas of Ālavantār. Rāmanuja accordingly left
for Srirangam. At about the same time, the chief disciples of the recently deceased Yāmunācārya, recalling their master’s desire to instate Rāmanuja as the darśana pravartaka,
agreed that Pēriya Nampi must go to Kāncī to fetch him. The two met midway at Madhurāntakam, where Rāmanuja insisted on being given dikṣa, initiation, immediately.
Both then returned to Kāncī; Pēriya Nampi and his wife established a household in a part of
Rāmanuja’s house. From Nampi, Rāmanuja received instruction in the Vyāsa Sūtra and learnt
the meanings of the hymns of NDP with the exception of the Tiruvāyāmōli. One day,
Rāmanuja asked his wife to get a Śrīvaiṣṇava who had brought an offering of oil, something
to eat. She said there was nothing in the house. Doubting her veracity, Rāmanuja sent her
away on an errand, went inside and found some appam, which he brought the hungry
man. Needless to say, he was distressed with her indifference to Śrīvaiṣṇava tenets.

One day, He appears in a person’s dream; occasionally He speaks ‘arcaka mukhena’, i.e., through the priest—a sort
of Delphic oracle!

301 Traditionally, women of the household are supposed to scour with their hands, the place where a
respected person has eaten. Sweeping is considered sacrilege.
303 Literally, ‘the one who has come to redeem’. The queen in whose court Yāmuna established the
superiority of his philosophical system in the course of a debate is said to have addressed him thus. It
is the traditional name by which Yāmuna’s special students. See Chapter 4-iii-b.
304 A temple town; not a divya deśa however.
305 Here the texts elaborate that Pēriya Nampi gave Rāmanuja the pañca samskāras.
306 Rāmanuja learnt the meanings of the Tiruvāyāmōli from Tirumaiyalaiyāṭān, another of Yāmuna’s
special students. See Chapter 4-iii-b.
307 A filling, fried snack.
scolded his wife, but they left immediately for Srirangam without taking leave of their host. This proved the last straw for Rāmānuja. Deciding that his wife was not fit to be his dharmapātī, he sent her on a ruse to her natal home and took sannyāsa. Eventually, he left Kānci for Srirangam, even as a bride leaves her natal home to go to her marital one.

Ālvantār had arranged that five of his disciples should teach the intricacies of the faith and the philosophy to Rāmānuja; accordingly, he had ‘placed’ a part of his immense learning in each of them. Pēriya Nampi advised Rāmānuja to learn the rahasya granthas, i.e., the meanings of the cārama śloka and the tirumantra, from Tirukkoṭṭiyūr Nampi. Accordingly, Rāmānuja went to TirukKoṭṭiyūr, only to be refused by the ācārya who wished to be certain of his sincerity of purpose. Seventeen times journeyed Rāmānuja fruitlessly to TirukKoṭṭiyūr, for Nampi believed that the rahasyas could only be imparted to one truly deserving. The eighteenth visit was however occasioned by Tirukkoṭṭiyūr Nampi’s own invitation. Though Rāmānuja was specifically asked to come alone, he took along with him to the temple town, his close disciples, Kūrattālvān and Mutaliyāṇṭān, though he left them behind when he went to meet the preceptor. In the Mgpp version, Rāmānuja is said to have been accompanied by a third disciple as well—Naṭāṭūr Ālvān. Before instructing him, Nampi made Rāmānuja promise to never disclose the esoteric meanings to anyone. However, the very next day, in an unthinkable transgression of the teacher’s injunction, Rāmānuja expounded the special meanings to a gathering of Śrīvaiśṇavas in the presence of the deity in the shrine of TirukKoṭṭiyūr. Hearing of this blatant disregard of his express instructions, Nampi summoned Rāmānuja and asked him if he knew the fruit of disobeying a guru. Rāmānuja explained that he had disobeyed knowing it would lead him straight to hell—but

308 Of course, the Gpps see no need to be apologetic about patriarchal behaviour on the part of the ācāryas! In this particular case, it seems Pēriya Nampi’s sub-sect is definitely considered inferior to Rāmānuja’s and he may have felt his wife was responsible for breach of propriety. An excellent example of how, in the very process of negating caste hierarchies within the Śrīvaiśṇava fold, they are reinforced.

309 Agpp/ Mgpp, Ilaivyāḻvār/ Empērumānār Vaibhavam.

310 This was again mediated by another of Ālvantār’s disciples, Tiruvarangap Pērumāḷ Araiyar. TP Araiyar was an accomplished singer- performer of the NDP, and did so in the shrine of Varadarāja. Pleased, the Lord asked him to choose a boon, upon which Araiyar asked for Rāmānuja, to take with him to Srirangam. Lord Varadarāja regretted his rash promise, but had no choice. Agpp, Mgpp, Ilaivyāḻvār/ Empērumānār Vaibhavam.

311 Also known as the dvaya mantram; see Chapter 2-ii.

312 TirukKoṭṭiyūr is a temple town south of Srirangam. The ācārya’s name indicates where he stayed—the significance emerges from the story.

313 Both Kūrattālvān and Mutaliyāṇṭān are counted as Tēṅkalai ācāryas, while Naṭāṭūr Ālvān is a Vaṭakalai ācārya. Sectarian politics is evident!
that his punishment would be worthwhile for securing the salvation of millions. Nampi came to appreciate the generosity of Rāmānuja’s act, and not only forgave him, but also blessed him saying that the doctrine would be known by his name forevermore.\textsuperscript{314}

In popular retellings, this story acquires more dramatic presentations such as Rāmānuja announcing the \textit{rahasyas} from the top of the temple \textit{gopuram}\textsuperscript{315} for not just initiated Śrīvaiṣṇavas, but the whole world to hear!\textsuperscript{316} It is worthwhile considering why it is among the best known of all the anecdotes about Rāmānuja.

Another anecdote seems simply to say that no pollution arises from contact with a person of low caste. The great preceptor used to go to the Kaveri for his bath holding Mutaliyāṁṭān’s hand, but on his way back, he would come holding onto Piḷḷai Urankāvilli Dāsar, a low-born follower. On being asked by his disciples, Rāmānuja explained that Dāsar was a superior being free of the pride in birth. But even the egalitarian Rāmānuja is shown to have had occasional doubts about disregard of \textit{varṇāśramadharma}, doubts which were dispelled by the example of other \textit{ācāryas}. When Pēriya Nampi performed the funeral rites for Māraṇeri Nampi, an out-caste disciple, Rāmānuja is said to have remonstrated with him, asking if it was proper that he should be giving Vedic \textit{samskāras} to an \textit{antyaja} and creating divisions at a time he was trying to reform the world and pave the way to heaven. Nampi is said to have countered that he wasn’t greater than Rāma of the Ikṣvākus who had performed the \textit{brahma-medha samskāra} for Jātāyu or Dharmaputra who had honoured Vidura thus. Needless to say, Rāmānuja was convinced.\textsuperscript{317} If, in this story, Rāmānuja needs convincing of the egalitarian mission of Śrīvaiṣṇavism, the following exchange, recorded in the \textit{Vārtīmālai} of Pinpalakiya Pērumāl Jīyar, shows the preceptor as himself taking the lead in establishing the centrality of the lower caste followers in the religious community. On being asked by his nephew and disciple, Mutaliyāṁṭān, about the difference between himself and Piḷḷai Urankāvilli Dāsar, Rāmānuja is said to have explained the difference between the \textit{cāṭiṭā mutalis}\textsuperscript{318} and the

\textsuperscript{314} Agpp, Mgpp, Ilaiyāḻvār/ Ṣṟēṟṟumāṇār \textit{Vaibhavam}.
\textsuperscript{315} Steeple.
\textsuperscript{316} The text however actually has Rāmānuja say that he would never disclose it to \textit{nāstikas}, unbelievers, but could not possibly keep it from anyone devoted to the Lord.
\textsuperscript{317} Agpp, p. 235-240.
\textsuperscript{318} Those who do not wear the sacred thread, i.e., \textit{of non-brāhma} caste. Lester says they include (today) descendants of both \textit{brāhmaṇas} and \textit{non-brāhmaṇas} who followed the anti-caste ‘Āḻvār/ Bhāgavata Vaiṣṇavism’, the \textit{brāhmaṇas} among them renouncing the sacred thread and top-knot, and giving up the performance of Vedic rites, opting for temple service instead. See Robert Lester, “The Sāttāda Śrīvaiṣṇavas”, \textit{Journal of the American Oriental Society}, Vol. 114, no. 1, 1994, pp. 39-53.
Vaidikas thus: “Ācāryas have a duty towards their fellow men, to carry out social amelioration and therefore must involve themselves in society, but the cāttānis have no such duties and may naturally devote themselves entirely to god.” Rāmānuja further elaborated, “We have worries about brāhmaṇa yatva, gotra, sūtra and kuṭi (lineage) and are disturbed. They concentrate only on the relationship between jīvātmā and paramātmā.”³¹⁹ It is easy to see that while Rāmānuja was concerned to establish the worthiness of non-brāhmaṇa Śrīvaiśṇavas in the larger community, the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ continues to operate and that the superiority granted to the cāttānis is purely in the spiritual sphere.

When the hostility of a certain Coḷa ruler³²⁰ forced Rāmānuja to flee from Srirangam, he made his way with a band of faithful followers to the realm of Biṭṭi deva in Karnātaka. In describing the details of the journey, the hagiographies detail how they were sheltered by Śrīvaiśṇava hunters in the forest. The purpose undoubtedly is to show both the influence of Rāmānuja in far-flung areas, and his acceptance of people of all communities, but as always, the texts betray the brahmanical moorings of their authors. The hunters are said to have brought the escapees honey and raw corn that they could pound and roast themselves, so that they could consume ritually pure food. They eventually escorted them to a brāhmaṇa household where they could be properly fed. However, Rāmānuja asked his disciples to secretly watch the cooking, and only when satisfied both on account of its ritual purity and on the housewife’s bhagavat-bhakti, did he allow them to eat.³²¹

Even if one were to insist on the bhakti movement being egalitarian in its fundamental presumptions, a hypothesis I have shown to be questionable, the fact remains that the ācāryas were eager to create a relatively non-hierarchical community with the promise of salvation open to all irrespective of birth. Rāmānuja’s public exposition of the rahasyas at TirukKottiyūr underlines this determination that the Śrīvaiśṇava faith was not to be exclusivist in character. The evidence from the Śaiva hagiographies too points to an attempt to establish bhakti as the primary defining characteristic of a person as opposed to the age-old primacy of birth. Epigraphic materials recording the effort to recognize the role of different caste and occupational groups point to the accommodations which were increasingly necessary in the second millennium. An inscription of CE 1025 records a decision of the assembly of Rājarāja-caturvedimangalam relating to the grant of lands and house-sites to

³²⁰ See Chapter 4-iii-b.
³²¹ Agpp, Ilayāḻvār/ Īmperumānār Vaibhavam, pp. 241-250.
gardeners, drummers, potters, garland makers, torch bearers and dancing girls of the temple at Rājendracolā Viṇṇagar Āḷvār. Even more tellingly, an inscription dated to CE 1116 from the Naltuṇai Īśvara temple in Puṇcāi, Mayūram tāluk records the privileges granted by the temple authorities to certain members of the anuloma rathakāra castes including blacksmiths, goldsmiths carpenters and stone masons and a similar one dated to CE 1118 from the Ujjivanāthasvāmi temple in Uyyakōṁṭān Tirumalai, Trichy tāluk, records a decision regarding an anuloma caste of rathakāras and what professions and ritual activities they were allowed and which forbidden. These accommodations became critical with the establishment of Vijayanagara rule and the rise to prominence of new social groups.

Burton Stein has argued that the question of śūdra participation in the devotional sects of medieval south India is not an abstract one of reconciliation between the catholicity of bhakti principles and the hierarchies of orthodox Hinduism but whether a powerful and populous section was to enjoy a ritual rank commensurate with its social status. It is indeed this issue that the ācāryas too sought to address. It must be remembered that this period was one which saw a creative effort to of what has been called integration of the great and little traditions (Redfield) and of Sanskritisation (Srinivas). Brāhmaṇas became the conscious and wilful agents not only of a profound, even radical modification of the Vedic and Sanskrit elements of their tradition. Though the egalitarian programme of the Śrīvaisnāvas did not remain limited to theology and the promise of salvation to all regardless of birth, it never attempted more than a formal and limited critique of caste. The Tēṅkalai commentaries mounted this critique, questioned established hierarchies, and reinforced this promise. Though the Vaṭakalai position came to stress adherence to varnāśramadharma, it could not entirely repudiate its heritage: the primary structures for reiterating the Śrīvaisnava belief in the fundamental equality of all before the Lord had been laid in the ‘life-stories’ of the saints.

325 Burton Stein, “Social Mobility” op cit., p. 81.