CHAPTER ONE

Shaiva and Vaishnava Bhakti Cults in the Southern Peninsula

Just as Buddhism had gone about consolidating itself in the frontier regions and countries neighbouring India — Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in the south, Burma (Myanmar) in the east, Tibet and Central India in the north and north-west — even so within India, it had gained a stronghold in areas where Brahmanical traditions were weakest. Thus the missionaires of Buddhism and Jainism established themselves in South India. Later, the leaders of the Brahmanical way found that the masses in these areas could be won over only by going to them and speaking to them in their own language. Accordingly, the truths of the Upanishads, the conclusions of the philosophical systems, the basic beliefs and practices of Hinduism — all these were brought to the people in their own language, often in a homely style, enlivened with poetry, wit and satire, through songs by men of spiritual realisation, the saints. Thus arose all over the country popular religious poetry and song.

(V. Raghavan 350-351)

This popular religious movement which began as a revolt from within the system, came to be known as the Bhakti (devotional) movement. It began in southern India in the Tamil speaking region where poet-saints arose from the time of the Pallava rulers of Kanchi (fourth to ninth centuries A.D.). In “reclaiming the kings and the people for Hinduism”, the poet-saints roamed about, singing their compositions to Vaishnava and Shaiva deities enshrined at various temples. For the purpose of verse-writing, they used and transformed whatever they found handy: Vedic and Upanishadic notions, Buddhist and Jain concepts, conventions of Tamil and Sanskrit poetry, prevailing ideas of love, service, women and kings, mythology of folk religion and folk song, and the play of contrasts between Sanskrit and the mother tongue, to list a few of them. Early Bhakti poetry that arose from such churning, was extremely rich and vibrant. Here are some
sample poems by two of the finest of Vaishnava and Shaiva Bhakti poets of the seventh and tenth centuries – Nammalvar and Basavanna respectively

a) Evening has come
but not the Dark One
The bulls,
their bells jingling,
have mated with the cows
and the cows are frisky.

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

The sea leaps into the sky
and cries aloud.

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

(Tr. Ramanujan Hymns For The Drowning 33)

b) Nine hounds unleashed
on a hare,
the body’s lusts
cry out:
Let go!
Let go!

Let go! Let go!
cry the lusts
of the mind
Will my heart reach you,
O Lord of the meeting rivers,

before the sensual bitches
touch and overtake?

(Tr Ramanujan Speaking Of Shiva 69)

Early Bhakti which began in the eighth century, is often seen as the logical fall out of the South’s interaction with the North, the rigid brahminizing of the South and its reformation by the popular cult of Bhakti thereafter. We shall therefore first trace the nsing graph of Sanskrit and Vedic culture and then follow it on its route to the south of India.

During the rule of the Gupta dynasty in Northern India (320 to 540 A.D.), Hindu culture came to be firmly established. The Guptas called themselves bhagvatas—devotees of God—and went to special lengths to identify themselves with the lineage of God Vishnu. They adopted the names of the Gods, and put the figures of Lakshmi, Vishnu’s consort, and Varaha—his incarnation as a boar, on their coins. Many coins released by the artist-king Samudragupta who succeeded Chandragupta I in 335 A.D., show him playing the Veena (lute). Thus was established the precedent of a royalty blessed by divinity, a royalty authorised by the Gods and therefore, a species apart. “By the fifth century, Vishnu, Shiva, their families, minions, and enemies seem to have become as real as the human dynasties” (Ramanujan Hymns For The Drowning 105). The Guptas had also patronised classical Sanskrit. The language of the Gods became the language of royal inscriptions, court poetry, mainstream literature, theatre, and the sciences. The Sanskrit language flourished.

As for the oral and vernacular traditions, whatever was deemed worth preserving (mostly medical, astrological or astronomical lore and legendary folklore), soon acquired a second, parallel life. Sometimes it even found place in Sanskrit texts. “Sanskrit preserved, as in amber, much that was oral in the local, ‘little’ traditions, and in this special and precise sense, Sanskrit sankritised. There were degrees of ‘Sanskritisation’, of which classical Sanskrit was the supreme example” (Ramanujan
A popular form of spoken Sanskrit was Prakrit which had its local variations from region to region. In its initial stages Prakrit had three main varieties: 1) Shaurasani, the main western variety, 2) Magadhi—the eastern dialect, and 3) Pali which was spoken popularly in both the above-mentioned regions. The southern varieties of vernacular languages like Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada, stemmed from a Dravidian root, but they too had a vocabulary which owed much to Sanskrit.

In the post-Gupta period, i.e., between 500 to 900 A.D., the western Deccan and the area south of Tamil Nadu became the lap of significant development, exchange, growth, and reform in the fields of commerce/navigation, education/literature, and religion. During the Gupta period, northern India had witnessed the acceptance of the Aryan pattern, its consolidation by the ruling royalties, and the brahminisation of both religion and education. Now around the turn of the sixth century A.D. and until about the ninth-tenth century, it was the south of India that responded to what had been a gradual assimilation of Aryan ideas and institutions. During this period, there were three major kingdoms in South India: (a) the Pandyas of Madurai (established in the south of Tamil Nadu), (b) the Chalukyas of Badami (in the north-western region centering around Nasik and the upper Godavan), (c) and the Pallavas of Kanchipuram who reigned over the south-eastern regions of the peninsula.

Amongst the later group of Pallava rulers, Mahendra-varman I (600-630), was responsible for the growing political strength of the Pallavas and established the dynasty as the arbiters and patrons of early Tamil culture. He was a contemporary of Harsha of Thanesar and curiously enough was also a dramatist and poet of some standing, being the author of a play, Mattavilasa-prahasana (The Delight of the Drunkards). Mahendra-varman began life as a Jaina but was converted to Shaivism by the saint Appar, a conversion which was to have disastrous results on the future of Jainism in Tamil Nadu. But his reign was not merely one of poetry, music, and temple-building; wars were also to be fought. (Romila Thapar 169-70)

The period beginning from mid-sixth century to the tenth century was speckled now and then by the long serialised Chalukya-Pallava wars. The Brahmins from the North had come as keepers of the Vedic tradition, which they believed to be the most sacrosanct
and valuable contribution of northern India. As keepers of the Vedic tradition, they were venerated in the South and found their supporters in the kings of the peninsula, who grabbed the sanctified halo of snob-eliteism, that "sense of higher status" that conforming to the Vedic pattern bestowed upon them. As Thapar puts it:

The brahman's claim to being in communication with the gods, and their supposed ability to manipulate the unseen powers, was more convincing to the Tamil kings than the claims of the indigenous priests. An additional incentive to accepting the vedic pattern was the promise of heavenly rewards (184-85)

The desire among the royalty to qualify as being of divine origin and lineage, inspired it to go to ridiculous lengths in patronising the Brahmins, donating their wealth in wrong places and performing elaborate sacrifices/rituals which also involved sometimes, immense expenditure of the state's wealth. The following is a humorous account by Thapar:

Amongst the Pallavas, kingship was held to be of divine origin and hereditary, and they claimed descent from the god Brahma. On one occasion, however, when there was no direct heir, a king was elected, but this was not looked upon as something unheard of. Kings took high-sounding titles, some of which such as maharajadhiraaja, were borrowed from northern usage. Others were of local invention, such as dharma-maharajadhiraaja (i.e. great king of kings ruling in accordance with the dharma), and the more unusual aggitoma-vajapay-assamedha-yaji (he who has performed the agnishtoma, vajapeya, and ashvamedha sacrifices), which sounds rather like a self-conscious declaration of conformity with Vedic ideas. (174)

Such was the assimilation of Aryan systems by the Dravidian culture - suffocating the lower castes and encouraging snobbery among the privileged Brahmin and Kshatriya communities. Its rejection by the Bhakti cults of Vaishnava and Shaiva devotees was soon to follow. The presence of other religious faiths like Buddhism, Jainism, and Islam, probably accelerated the process of the movement.

With the development of trade and mercantile activity, under the Pallavas in the south-east, and the Chalukyas in the north-west, Arab settlements had begun to appear along
the coastline of the peninsula – especially along the Malabar coast – from the eighth
century onwards. The Arabs settled permanently in the coastal regions of south India, where they were welcomed as traders and given land for their trading stations. They were free to practise their religion as had been the case with Christians in earlier
centuries or Zoroastrian refugees who had sought asylum under the Chalukyas, in the previous century. The present day Malabar Muslims are descendants of those eighth
century Arab settlers. They being mainly traders, were not actively concerned with large scale conversions to Islam, and therefore adjustment with local society was easier, and communication unhindered. “But it is very possible that indirectly, and merely as it were by their presence, they contributed in some degree towards the budding and bursting forth of those great religious reforms which, in the absence of doctrines altogether new, introduced into Hinduism a new organisation and a new spirit ...” (Hedayatullah Kabir: The Apostle of Hindu-Muslim Unity 78-79)

According to a more popular opinion, the contact between Hinduism and Islam before the twelfth century was not enough to generate permanent influence or borrowing. As R.C. Majumdar comments, the situation after the twelfth century was different, for by that time Islam had established itself in India and penetrated its roots more and more deeply as the centuries passed by. The other very major threats to Hindu religion were the religions of Buddhism and Jainism which became very significant in the early first centuries. Both Gautama Buddha and Mahavira (their founders), were of the Kshatriya caste, and opposed the Brahminical orthodoxy. The two religions*1 (see notes) were reformatory in approach, since they discouraged animal sacrifices, appealed to the socially down-trodden, opposed the caste system and used the vernacular form of Prakrit for spreading their respective faiths. They were the first to raise a consolidated protest (fifth century B.C.), against the unfair hijacking of god by the Brahmins, and their arid systems of ritual and caste that denied dignity to a large segment of mankind. As a result they both appealed to the socially disadvantaged classes, and were well received by the Vaishyas who were economically powerful, but were not granted corresponding social status, and the Shudras who were obviously oppressed. As Romila Thapar observes.

The pattern of association of these two heterodox sects – Buddhism and Jainism – with urban centers and largely with the lower castes was repeated in later centuries with the various phases of what came to be
called the Bhakti movement. The formulators and leaders of reformist religious sects often drew their strength from lower caste urban groups. The social content of their teaching was an essential part of their religious doctrine. During this period from the sixth to the fourth century BC, there was considerable economic prosperity, particularly with the expansion of trade. (68-69)

Although political control still lay largely with the Kshatryas and Brahmins, the mercantile classes were economically in the ascendant. Buddhism and Jainism were their answers to Brahminism. The sway of the two religions continued to grow in the coming centuries and received royal patronage as well. Chandragupta towards the end of his life converted to Jainism and became an ascetic. The zealous battle-going Mauryan king, Ashoka is well-known for his conversion to Buddhism and his propagation of the same. Royal patronage no longer remained the exclusive privilege of the Vedic tradition. Simultaneously with the rise of the mercantile community between 200 B.C. and 300 A.D. both Buddhism and Jainism saw their heydays. After this point in time, the seeds of decay and descent began setting in. Differences in the interpretation of the preceptor’s teachings, formation of sub-sects, distancing from the common man and isolation in monasteries, were some of their pitfalls. New cults of devotion to Vishnu and Shiva – the Bhagvata and Pashupata cults – with an emphasis on personal worship rather than sacrificial ritual, had arrived upon the scene. Jainism and Buddhism had to gradually give way to this new form of religious worship.

Having surveyed broadly, the inter-relations between the interweaving layers of royal patronage, caste, religion, land ownership, economic opulence and the changing hands of power in the South India of the seventh to twelfth centuries, I shall now move to the scene of the Shaiva, Vaishnava and the Virashaiva Bhakti saint-paints. Tamil society, at the threshold of the Bhakti era, was characterised by caste hierarchy with a sharp division between the Sanskrit literate class and the vernaculars. This was the logical fallout of the Aryanisation (or brahminisation) of the South. A process initiated in the Gupta period (320 to 540 A.D.) with the spread of classical Hinduism through Sanskrit, it had exerted great influence and secured instant favour with the Southern royalty. The politics of exclusion that followed the Aryanisation process in turn created a large section of, a non brahminical, ‘non-privileged’ class (Shudras, Vaishyas, and other non castes),
that was desirous of raising its status and hence vulnerable to conversion. The presence of the more democratic religions of Buddhism and Jainism, was seen as a welcome opportunity for status-promotion. Soon the Hindu orthodoxy perceived Buddhism and Jainism as a threat. Reformative steps were introduced within the Hindu fold to stem the flow of conversion. And thus evolved the religion of Bhakti – the emotional route to God – within the parallel cults of Shaiva and Vaishnava Bhakti.

The Bhakti movement in the South, "provided a powerful ideology for the simultaneous widening of the material base and integration of the various components of Tamil culture – social, economic, and political" (R. Champakalakshmi “Religion And Social Change In Tamil Nadu” 162). Champakalakshmi divides the period of Tamil Nadu's evolution into two phases: (i) from the seventh to the ninth century, and (ii) from the tenth to the thirteenth century. In the first phase he traces the changes occurring at the rural level. The evolution of an agrarian base led to the emergence of well-organised units called the nadus, wherein common agrarian problems and corporate activities were shared, and the hierarchical caste structure was introduced. This was followed by the identification of a typical folk or tribal deity with a pre-eminent godhead, or as A.K.Ramanujan would say, "the little traditions merged into the larger tradition" or more specifically the local deity or religious cult which was absorbed by the pan-Indian godhead of the brahminical religion. Besides these, there were also the ongoing conversions into the non orthodox religions of Buddhism and Jainism by the trading communities. Sea trade was on the ascendant. Around this time we see the emergence of urban features in the coastal towns and inland centres of trade and administration.

Considering that between centuries 200 B.C. and 500 A.D., there had been socio-religious tension between the Brahmin orthodoxy and non-orthodox sects, the period that followed between 600 A.D. and 800 A.D., saw the revival of vedic religious icons, Shiva and Vishnu, not with their orthodox accessories, but through the Bhakti cult. The Bhakti cult recognised no middlemen between the devotee and God. It revolted against the tyranny of brahminical ritual and caste practices; but it was also perceived as having brought back the Puranic religion:

Marked by intense religious conflict, persecution and royal conversions in favour of the 'orthodox' religions, the first phase witnessed the establishment of Puranic religion through the bhakti cult, supported by
new institutional forms. It also represented the culmination of the process of acculturation, i.e., the assimilation of folk cults into, and imposition of local cults over the brahmanical religious systems of Vaishnavism and Shaivism. The religious aspects of the change are seen in the spread of Puranic and Epic stones, new iconographic concepts, both Vaishnava and Shaiva, introduction of Agamic worship and above all building of temples by the ruling families (Champakalakshmi 163-164).

The popularisation of Puranic religion and Agamic forms of worship was achieved through the ideology of Bhakti or devotion expressed through the emotionally powerful hymns of the Bhakti saints. The former was sponsored by elite groups for mutual benefits like social dominance and political influence while the latter (which is the area of our concern) assumed the form of a popular resurgence intended to bring a mystic religious experience within the reach of the uninitiated “common” folk through a personal communion between the individual and God through devotion. Hence also its choice of the vernacular medium.

Tamil hymns composed by the Vaishnava and Shaiva saints in the Tamil lingua and made available for community singing (kirtana), added to the movement’s popularity by providing not only spiritual delight and therapeutic relief/outlet/release; but also by making concessions for the lower caste and outcaste by allowing them access to the Puranic Gods. The Bhakti ideology thus aided the transformation of Brahminism into the sectarian religions of Shaivism and Vaishnavism, both of which evolved out of older beliefs of popular worship and cult practices.

Shaivism is based on the dual principles of Shiva-Shakti. It came to acquire a wider base compared to Vaishnavism. This materialised due to the incorporation of mother-goddess worship which absorbed all tribal and popular forms like the tree and pillar, and deities associated with funerary practices. Muruga a Tamil tribal deity was absorbed in the Shaiva pantheon. General scholarship is of the opinion that Shiva was the deity of groups belonging to the lower categories of agricultural classes and the craftsmen clan, professionally and socially differentiated from the higher agricultural groups and ruling families. Vaishnavism was largely the accepted faith of the ruling elite, esp. the landed chieftains called velir. Therefore Mayon – the deity of the Mullai region and pastoral
tribes was perhaps the only major popular local deity to get associated with the Vedic Vishnu and the Brahmnic God Narayan. The concept of Vishnu as protector of the earth, as the husband of Sn or wealth or prosperity, and the inclusion of the earth-goddess Bhudevi as his second consort—all such connections made Vaishnavism the religion of the upper classes. By and large Vishnu remained alien to Tamil society. Shiva—the destroyer of evil—became the pan-Indian God of large numbers of lower classes. We can safely assume that such integration of local and pan-Indian religious traditions must have involved, in varying degrees, an exchange of rites, customs and beliefs.

The local deities and their symbols had been absorbed under the two heads of Shiva and Vishnu. Next came the conversion of local cult centres or spots, like an enclosed tree trunk or a pillar used for worship. Such spots were replaced by a temple or a shrine devoted to the worship of Shiva or Vishnu, more often to Shiva. The priests of the converted local cult centres were also integrated into the new order of worship. Such temple priests, particularly those called Shiva-brahmins (of a very inferior caste), later came to be distinguished from the more orthodox (and superior in rank), Smarta-brahmins or those brahmins who followed the Vedic and Smriti rites. Vaishnavism had its major centres in the northern and southernmost parts of Tamil Nadu and a few in the Kaveri delta region. Shaivism was mainly concentrated in the Chola region—i.e. the Kaveri valley and in and around the Pallava and Pandyia capitals of Kanchipuram and Madurai. Their number was thrice that of the Vaishnava centers. The Bhakti movement which we perceive as a popular movement of the lower classes, however did not appear so at its inception.

Bhakti ideology in the South, emanated in an urban milieu. Its propagators came mainly from the upper strata of society. Among the twelve Vaishnava saints (called Alvars), only two belonged to the low castes. Similarly, a majority of the Shaiva hymnists known as Nayanars, also hailed from the higher castes. There were mystic poets, scholars and aristocrats who spoke of the equality of all men at the feet of the one God. The contributions of these two groups of saints form the bedrock of Tamil culture and, according to V. Raghavan, "still form the most appealing part of Tamil literature. The period from the seventh century to the ninth century covers the ages of the more important ones among these; others followed and kept the tradition in full vogue.
throughout the subsequent centuries” (353). These “others” were probably from the less privileged classes as the following comment of Champakalakshmi suggests:

The propagators came mainly from the upper strata or castes but the movement acquired popular character with the inclusion of the members of the unprivileged castes like the potter, weaver, bard, fisherman, washerman, hunter and the untouchable pariah. . in the hagiological work of the twelfth century AD. However the Brahmana remained the medium through whom initiation into the bhakti religion and ritual forms of worship could take place. Thus the movement served only to perpetuate caste hierarchy by providing a niche for all new entrants, within the fourfold brahmanical framework, with graded ritual ranking. (167)

The above must be true to a large extent, but to completely dump the phenomenon, and come down upon the Brahmin saints so harshly, (mind you these Brahmins were saints, not ordinary priests,) would be grossly unfair. They were first and foremost saints (who were also poets), and then Brahmins. The fact is that hymnists in the initial stages of Bhakti were predominantly from the upper strata of society, largely because they were literate, had access to literary education and the leisure required for thought and scholarship. In an age when only the Brahmins and Kshatriyas had a right to education, when the merchant class – the Vaishyas – had converted to either Buddhism or Jainism, and the remaining Shudra and other non-classes lived like “the scum of the earth”, it would be expecting too much change too fast. The seed of Bhakti had to be sown by some brave and enlightened bhaktas of God, and then allowed to germinate. How else can one account for the consistent spread of the Bhakti movement and the mushrooming of so many poet-saints from the lower rung of society, in the centuries to come? In fact the Brahmin saints did an excellent job by flagging off the Bhakti movement and thereby throwing open the doors of the temples - even if the incentive behind their actions was, (1) to counter the proselytising menace of Buddhism and Jainism among the lower classes, and (2) to safeguard the stronghold of Hinduism by giving it a breath of fresh air. For instance in the twelfth century A.D. at the time of the codification of the Shaiva canon, a deliberate attempt was made to introduce several fictitious saints in addition to the historical figures, to increase the number to sixty three, many of whom were drawn from the lower castes, including the pariah or untouchable
The number sixty three being a direct borrowing from the Jaina Puranas dealing with the sixty three great beings.

Some desirable changes were to take place in the second major phase of societal transformation between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. This was also the period of the Chola dynasty. The Cholas took active interest in the development of temple centres and used the temples to widen the sphere of their royal authority. For instance, the establishment of educational institutions, hospitals and mathas around the temple, enhanced the beneficial aspects of the temple's role and projected the royalty as a very powerful and genial presence. However, it was Shaivist temples and the Shaiva faith at large that flourished under the Chola reign. "The Cola attitude towards Vaishnavism was initially one of lukewarm support, but later turned into neglect and active persecution at least by the time of Ramanuja in the twelfth century" (Champakalakshmi 171).

How did the Shaiva Bhakti movement spread? Initially it developed through the consolidation of the Shaiva religious network centring around the temple. Development of Shaivist monasteries was the second institutional phase through which all extreme forms and non-conformist elements of Shaivism were integrated into temple organization and thereon became part of Tamil social organisation. The extreme Shaivist forms included the Kalamukhi, Pashupata, the Kapalika, and the Siddhas. Besides practising medicine, alchemy and Hatha yoga, the Siddhas were also against ritual ceremony and proposed suppression of devotion/bhakti in favour of ethical principles and quest for knowledge. They were also anti-Brahminism. (Kabir the Sant of sixteenth century North India can also be cast in the same line of Bhakti, influenced by Hatha yoga. One obvious difference being that he was not a Shaivite, and shunned association with any kind of cult or religion). The Kalamukhs and Pashupats were a sect of social and religious reformers—a group of non-conformists, who were brought into the system, claimed Brahmin status, and came to occupy a position of authority through the headship of the mathas in the ninth-tenth centuries, and later through the patronage of the Chola royalty, as temple priests and preceptors.

The shift had already begun. The centre, i.e. the Brahmin, was dislocated and the peripheral boundaries were shrinking. Temples in the tenth-eleventh centuries had been...
marked with a high degree of royal participation, the twelfth-thirteenth centuries would witness the increased role of local landed magnates, itinerant merchant organizations and corporations of land-owning groups. There was more direct involvement of non-Brahmin elements in the temple-administration. This can firstly be attributed to the shift in money-power. Skilled classes like the weavers and the merchant-class had become prosperous. Land ownership was no longer a privilege of the Brahmins and the velala land owners. As the inscriptions of the twelfth-thirteenth centuries indicate, this neo-rich class of the weavers and merchants, \( (kaikkolas \text{ and } saliyas) \), acquired greater control over land and participated actively in gift-giving activities. Eventually, they acquired administrative control of major temples and were seen as members of the executive committees administering temples:

Specialization of crafts and revival of South Asian trade from the tenth century A.D. led to the creation of special quarters within the precincts of the temple centre, for weavers, craftsmen, oil mongers etc. and separate quarters for members of trading guilds and markets. “ (Champakalalakshmi 170)

Secondly, an impetus to speedy liberalization in temple worship was the desire to retain the popular sway which Shaivist faith had come to establish. There was Tirunavukkarashu, the seventh century poet and scholar who on being reconverted to Shaivism from Jainism, in turn had reconverted the Pallava king Mahendra Verman, to Shaivism. Another instance were the Nayanars: Jnanasambandha (seventh century), and Manikkavachakar (eighth century) of Madurai, who contributed immensely towards the spread of Shaivism in the Pandya court. The songs of the Nayanars are surcharged with devotional feeling. The following verse sample by Manikkavachakar weaves the symbolism of “divine nuptials”:

\text{Melting in the mind, now standing, now sitting, 
now lying and now getting up, 
now laughing and now weeping, 
now bowing and now praising, 
now dancing in all sorts of ways, 
gaining the vision of the Form (of the Lord) 
shining like the rosy sky 
with my hairs standing on end}
when will I stand united with,
and entered into, that exquisite Gem of mine (the Lord)!
(Tr V Raghavan 354)

Besides a common ideology and a distaste for rituals, the Nayanars also shared an
instinct of hostility towards other contending faiths like Buddhism, Jainism and of course,
Vaishnavism. The sentiment was reciprocated by the Vaishnava Bhaktas. In the
following poem for instance, Nammalvar dismisses the Linga worshipping Nayanars
along with the Jain and Buddha followers:

You believers in Linga mythologies
and you Jainas
you Buddhists

becoming all of you choppers of logic
becoming even your gods

he stands there
our lord.

come see him in Kurukur
where rich ears of paddy
fan him like ceremonial yak-tails

In this place without lies
come praise him. (Tr. Ramanjan 57)

Vaishnavism, as discussed before, had initially been patronised largely by high-caste
Brahmins and the landed elite, this being one reason why it had not fared as well as
Shaiva Bhakti. Reformative attempts were made in the twelfth century when Ramanuja
(1017 to 1137 A.D., born at Sri-perum Budur), tried to provide Vaishnavism with a wider
base of popularity. Ramanuja believed that liberation was possible only after death. It
was a person's Bhakti, true love, devotion and meditation that led to the goal of mukti (liberation). But God's grace (prasada) plays the greatest part without which man's efforts cannot bear fruit (Both Kabir and Nanak, laid emphasis upon 'divine grace' in their ethos of Bhakti) Ramanuja's philosophy, Visishtadvaita (i.e., non-duality with qualifications), holds Brahmin as supreme reality, the jiva and the world being realities deriving their existence and powers from Brahman but ever remaining distinct from Him. In Ramanuja's philosophy, the Brahmin in his personal aspect is taken as Vishnu. Consequently the philosophy/poetry of sages who became spiritual followers of Ramanuja came to be known as Vaishnava.

Ramanuja tried to synthesise the Vedic philosophy with the emotionally powerful element of Bhakti. He also strove to ensure the more complete participation of Vishnu-worshippers hailing from different social strata, by ascribing to them some important aspects of ritual and management. Consequently, a new category of Shudra functionaries called the sattada mudalis (holy men who do not wear the sacred thread,) came into existence. The Shaivas viewed Vaishnava attempts at reform as a serious threat to their strong religious network. However Ramanuja's attempts at liberalization were not shared by his successors in the south, and by the fourteenth century there arose among the Vaishnavas its well-known schism into the northern (vadakalai), and southern (tenkalai) schools, based mainly upon their differences regarding the participation of low-caste members in the ritual of worship. The southern, i.e., tenkalai school of Vaishnavism being narrow and orthodox in approach, did not become as popular as Shaivism did, in the peninsula. But its liberal cousin – the northern vadakalai school of Vaishnavism spread widely in the north-west-east of India and produced many great Bhakti poets and saints hailing from the entire cross-section of class, caste and society.

Before we proceed to look closely at the parallel Vaishnava Bhakti movement in seventh-tenth century Tamilnadu, I would like to make a small digression – a fast forward – to the logical progression of the Shaiva Bhakti into the Virashaivas (also called the Lingayat sect) of the tenth-twelfth century Karnataka. Virashaivism the Shaivist Bhakti cult of Karnataka, was more radical and reformist in its approach. It produced some very fine and powerful Bhakti poetry. The reader is sure to find in it,
echoes of Kabir's and Nanak's sarcastic prodding, their iconoclasm and their essentially postmodernist approach to the world and existence as such. The Virashaivas, were a group of kannada-speaking Shiva bhaktas living in the tenth–twelfth century Karnataka. They challenged the Hindu caste system and attacked the religious and secular role of Brahmins. They questioned and dismissed the role of Brahmins, brahminical ritual, sacrifice and superstition in worship. The following verse by Basavanna is a caustic example:

The sacrificial lamb brought for the festival
ate up the green leaf brought for the decorations.

Not knowing a thing about the kill,
it wants only to fill its belly:
born that day, to die that day.

But tell me:
did the killers survive,
O lord of the meeting rivers? (Tr. Ramanujan 76)

They had instead their own small rituals; for instance they wore the *linga* – a small stone-emblem of Shiva – in a chain or string around their necks. The devotee's relation to the *linga* he wore on his body was that of a 'son of the house': when the *linga* was accidentally lost, the devotee often committed suicide. The poetic form of Lingayat Bhakti was called a *vachana*. A *vachana* means, 'saying the thing said' already. The *vachanas* are religious lyrics in Kannada free verse. They are a literature that scorns artifice, ornament, learning and privilege, and enjoys the honor of being Karnataka's wisdom literature. Here are a few sample poems from Ramanujan's *Speaking Of Shiva*:

Did the breath of the mistress
have breasts and long hair?

Or did the master's breath
wear sacred thread?
Did the outcaste, last in line,  
hold with his outgoing breath  
the stick of his tribe?

What do the fools of this world know  
of the snares you set,  
O Ramanatha?

(Devara Dasimayya Tr Ramanujan 105)

Bodied,  
one will hunger.

Bodied,  
one will lie

O you, don't you rib  
and taunt me again  
for having a body

body Thyself for once  
like me and see what happens,  

O Ramanatha.  

(Dasimayya Tr. Ramanujan 107)

The following poem is by Mahadeviyakka, the woman poet-saint of that period who had given up clothing and used her long tresses instead to cover her body. Interestingly she
chooses to address her lord Shiva by the epithet “my lord white as jasmine”, which also becomes her signature line.

Who cares
  who strips a tree of leaf
  once the fruit is plucked?
Who cares
  who lies with the woman
  you have left?

Who cares
  who ploughs the land
  you have abandoned?

After this body has known my lord
  who cares if it feeds
  a dog
  or soaks up water?  (Tr Ramanujan 127)

And two poems by Allama Prabhu also translated by Ramanujan. Both the poems link us with Kabir’s Ulatbamsi style which in fact was in line with the Siddhas or Natha Yogis tradition of verse writing.

When the toad
swallowed the sky,
look, Rahu
the serpent mounted
and wonder of wonders!
the blind man
cought the snake.

Poets of the past
are the children of my concubines

Poets to come
are infants of my pity

Thus, O Lord,
I learned
without telling the world
(154) The poets of the sky
are babies in my cradle
Vishnu and Brahma
are my kinsmen and sidekicks
You are the father-in-law
and I the son-in-law,
O Lord of Caves. (161)

Known as the Kannada Upanishads, the vachanas record "great voices of a sweeping movement" of protest and reform in Hindu society, and stand (I am still following Ramanujan), witness to "conflict and ecstasy in gifted mystical men" A vachana translated by Ramanujan

How can I feel right /about a god who eats up lacquer and melts,/ who withs when he sees fire?/ How can I feel right/ about gods you sell in your need, / and gods you bury for fear of thieves?/ The lord of the meeting rivers,/ self-born, one with himself,/ he alone is the true god. (Basavanna 84)

Since most Virashaiva poets were not bards or pundits in a court, but men and women hailing from a large cross-section of society, the vachanas use the colloquial Kannada. They disregard the strictness of traditional metres, the formality of literary genres, divisions of prose and verse, and work their way through innovations and spontaneity of free verse. No wonder the result of such churning is rich, vibrant and lush.

The four saints and greatest poets of the vachana tradition were Dasimayya (probably the earliest), Basavanna, Allama Prabhu and Mahadeviyakka. History ascribes to Basavanna (1106 to 1167 or 1168 A.D) the onus of initiating and establishing the Virashaiva movement in tenth century Karnataka. Basavanna was a dynamic political activist and a social reformer of his times. At the age of sixteen he had abandoned home to set off in search of his only lord Shiva. It was in Kudalasangama – land where the three rivers meet – that he received religious education and finally found spiritual realization. Hereafter he became his lord's man and prepared himself to create a
society of Shiva's men. In a brief span of one generation Basavanna helped create a new community.

A. K. Ramanujan paints a vibrant picture in his introduction to the poet saints in *Speaking Of Shiva*.

He helped create a new community. Many great men like Allamaprabhu, saint of saints, were in Kalyana in that ar and shape the ideas of the Virashaivas. Many others like Siddharama, Machideva, Bommayya (the lute-playing Bommayya), and the remarkable radical woman saint Mahadeviyakka were part of the company of saints. A religious centre called Anubhavamantapa, (the hall of experience), was established in which the great saints met for dialogue and communion, shaping the growing new community. A hundred and ninety thousand jangamas or mendicant devotees are counted as having lived in Kalyan under Basavanna's direction, helping spread the new religion. (64)

The history of Bhakti would not repeat such a glorious phenomenon where many great saint-poets existed together in the same place at the same time and all were focused upon one shared creed of Bhakti and its ideals. Sikhism in the fifteenth century provides some sort of a parallel to the Lingayats. It was also a consolidated effort that denied all existing religions, to form a new creed of a reformist religion, thoroughly opposed to the ritualistic oppressive tendencies of religion, caste and social customs. But before we come to that, we shall turn back to eighth century Tamilnadu, to trace logically the parallel emergence of the Vaishnava Bhakti movement and trace its journey upwards from Tamil Nadu to the Deccan and from there its glorious career throughout the country.

In the earlier stages of the Bhakti movement in the peninsula, Shaivism was more popular (it still is), while in the later stages Vaishnavism took over the torch of Bhakti spreading swiftly in the West, North and East of India. The extraordinary popularity of Vaishnavism did not begin with the Alvars*3 who were great saint poets nevertheless; it began with the great Ramanuja of the twelfth century A.D. Ramanuja tried to broaden the horizon of Vaishnava following which had been limited so far to the privileged and prosperous alone. He ensured greater non-Brahmin participation in the temple's services
and a liberal environment. On the front of scholarship, he tried to synthesize the Vedic
with the Tamil Prabandhic tradition of the Alvars and to reconcile the metaphysical
seventy of the Vedanta with the personal and emotionally powerful tradition of Bhakti. As
a result of Ramanuja's efforts, a new category of Shudra functionaries called the sattada
mudalis (holy men who do not wear the sacred thread), came into existence. And to
some extent, the worship of the twelve Alvars, including the Shudra Nammalvar and the
bard Tiruppanalvar was also a result of this liberalism in temple worship.

The contributions of the Alvars have come down to us through the Tamil Sangama
anthology (Paripadal). Their devotional sentiment is marked with a tone of unconditional
submission expressed during those blessed moments of inspiration and their spiritual
vision of the endearing lord Mayon (the hued one) whom they identified with the dark-
hued Vishnu or Vasudeva Krishna, becomes a cannibal in Nammalvar's following
poems, taken from Hymns For The Drowning:

My lord, my cannibal
While I was waiting eagerly for him
saying to myself.
If I see you anywhere
I'll gather you
and eat you up,
he beat me to it
and devoured me entire,
my lord dark as raincloud,
my lord self-seeking and unfair (69)

Elsewhere Nammalvar says:

. I've caught him
the big-bellied one
not content yet
with all that guzzling
on the sevenfold clouds
the seven seas
the seven mountains
and the world that holds them all
I've caught him
I contain him now  (Tr Ramanujan 79)

Tradition recognizes twelve Alvars They were Poykai, Putam, Pey, Tiruppan, Tirumalicai, Tontaratippoti, Kulashekan, Penyalvar, Antal (a woman poet), Tirumankai, Nammalvar, and Maturakavi, in the order of their listing in the *Tramanucamurrantati*, the earliest and most authoritative work mentioning the Vaishnava saints in chronological order. Of these, the first three called the *mudal alvars*, belong to the seventh century. In an attempt to identify Vishnu with Shiva and merge the overlapping Bhakti traditions, the Mudal Alvars propounded the Hari-Hara sect. But, no such response was forthcoming from the devotees of Shiva – the *Nayanmars* – and the tradition of the mudal Alvars was discontinued by the remaining nine alvars who lived in the ninth century, parallel to their counterparts (the Shaivites/Nayanmars), changing and revitalizing Hinduism and checking the spread of Buddhism and Jainism while absorbing some of the features of their rivals; features like the use of the vernacular, the defiance of Vedic authority, relaxation of caste-based restrictions, and creation of their own religious text. A.K.Ramanujan recaptures the Tamil countryside:

The saint-poets wandered all over the Tamil countryside, inspiring and converting kings, brahmans and peasants, affirming in poetry the holiness of hundreds of Tamil places dedicated to vishnu or shiva. Their pilgrimages, their legends and their hymns (which they sang by the thousands), literally mapped a sacred / geography of the Tamil regions and fashioned a communal self image that cut across class and caste. They composed the most important early bhakti (i.e. devotional) texts in any Indian language. The two rival movements despite differences in myth and ritual created and shared, a special idiom, a stock of attitudes and themes, and a common heritage alive to this day. (*Hymns For The Drowning* ix)

Although elitist in its wider context, earliest Vaishnava Bhakti was charged with a spirit of reform and humanism, often propagating the cause of the true devotee, who could then be a Shudra or a Chamar. The Alvar lyrics emphasise the eternal, pure, and
unblemished sentiment of the human mind, submitted in favour of the endearing who is
divine, all immanent, omnipotent. Tirumangai describes his own state of affairs as
follows: "Womenfolk, being adorned with ornaments laugh at me, but no shame, no fear,
no courtesy remains with me now. If they become pleased to laugh at me, let them do
so. I am totally ignorant of them. I do not like to win over my endearing Nilamani hued
one. I prefer to be in association of Kurugundi instead of a jasmine creeper." Of the
twelve Alvars, only two belonged to the lower castes, the rest came either from the
Brahmin castes or from higher va/a/a, i.e. Shudra, ruling classes. (During the upward
course of Vaishnava Bhakti as it spread across the west, north and east of India, within
a century, the trend changed. It produced many fine poets who were generally from the
lesser privileged castes and classes).

Nammalvar (880 to 930 A.D.) regarded as the greatest of the twelve Alvars was a
Shudra born into a princely va/a/a family. He lived for about fifty years, though some put
it at a mere thirty five years. He was born in Alvartrunakam in Taminadu, after a
desperate amount of praying and penance on the part of his parents. However as a new
born baby he behaved so strangely that the crestfallen parents were compelled to
abandon him at the feet of a local Vishnu idol. From there he began his career in
sainthood. He was the most famous and most prolific of the twelve Alvars. Out of the
four thousand poems that make the Alvar literature, Nammalvar alone accounts for one
thousand two hundred and ninety six poems. The magnificent hymns, of which we have
seen a few examples, were poured out by Nammalvar when he initiated his first disciple
and also broke his life-long silence. The following is a poem by Nammalvar about
creation and the warrior god Vishnu. Ramanujan has translated it beautifully:

First the discus
rose to view

then the conch
the long bow,
the mace,
and the sword;

with blessings
from the eight quarters,
he broke through
the egg shell of heaven
making the waters bubble,
giant head and giant feet
-growing away from each other,
time itself rose to view:
how the lord
paced and measured
all three worlds! (Tr. A K Ramanujan 4)

After his death, Nammalvar’s images (the images of a Shudra saint), were installed in temples of south India, and revered as the very feet of God. So also his poems. They came to be chanted in temple services and processions since the eleventh century. Thus, “a non-sanskritic, non brahminical religious literature ... became central to the brahmin orthodoxy. Inscriptions as early as the eleventh century mention endowments of land for the maintenance of reciters of the Alvars’s hymns.” Natamuni, a priest at the Srirankan temple (10th century), was the first to compile in an ordered manner, the four thousand hymns of the twelve Vaishnava saints and to arrange for their recitation. His compilation was called “The Four Thousand Divine Compositions” (*Nalayira Divyaprabandham*). Orthodox Shri Vaishnavas regarded the *Four Thousand* as equal to the four Vedas. In a significant move, the Sanskrit and Tamil, the Vedas and the *Four Thousand*, were integrated in their domestic and temple services. The singers of the Tamil hymns led the temple processions, walked before the god; and the Vedas followed behind:

(i) He who took the seven bulls
    by the horns
he who devoured the seven worlds
made me his own cool place
in heaven
and thought of me
what I thought of him
and became my thoughts (Nammalvar, Tr. Ramanujan 50)

(II)

O ye ills tormenting me for long!
listen, I tell you now, this body of mine
has become the holy shrine
of the great Lord, the Cowherd Krsna
mark that, O ye ills that oppress me!
I tell you one more word,
you have no longer any hold on me
know that and go!
This is not the old town,
it has now been taken over
as a protected place. (Penyalvar, Tr. Raghavan 356)

As poems, the Alvars's hymns were the forbearers of later Vaishnava poetic traditions, influencing nearer home, the Warkan movement of 12th century Maharashtra, and the Padam tradition of 15th century Andhra Pradesh. Padams were composed throughout India. Early examples in Sanskrit are those occurring in Jayadev's famous devotional poem Gitagovinda (12th century). Padams are short musical compositions of a light classical nature. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries they were sung and danced to by the devdasis or resyas and their counterparts, both in the temples and royal courts. Telugu padams being devotional in character are included in the wider corpus of South Indian Bhakti poetry. The following sample poem is by Annamayya, short for T. Annamacharya, (translated by Ramanujan):

These marks of black musk
on her lips
red as buds
what are they
but letters of love
sent by our lady to her lord?
Her eyes the eyes of a chakora bird, 
why are they red in the corners?
Think it over my friends:
what is it but the blood
still staining the long glances
that pierced her beloved
after she drew them from his body
back to her eyes?

...(When God is a Customer 49)

Further on in time, the Vaishnava saint Sri Krishna Chaitanya's Vrindavan school of Bhakti became a major source of influence. It influenced in particular, the poet saints of Gujarat Narasimha Mehta, Akho and Mirabai were all immersed in Krishna-bhakti. The following is a song by Mira:

I’m like
the cloth
that someone dyed.
I’ll go now
play at hide
and seek to please

my lord
wearing five
teasing colours.

When found
I will become
one-hued with light.

..............
my love
he is here
inside
He does not leave
he doesn’t
need to arrive.
Says Meera, I gaze
at the path day and night.
(Tr. Shama Futehally 79-80 )

Some vestiges of the Bhakti school of poetry went as far as the nineteenth century and found expression even in the English language in the inspired and highly spiritual poetry of poets like Aurobindo Ghose and Rabindranath Tagore. The following is one of Tagore’s songs from the Gitanjali (Song Offerings), 1949:

You came down from your throne and stood
at my cottage door.
I was singing all alone in a corner,
and the melody caught your ear. You came
down and stood
at my cottage door.
Masters are many in your hall,
and songs are sung there at all hours.
But the simple carol of this novice
struck at your love.

One plaintive little strain
mingled with the great music of the world,
and with a flower for a prize
you came down
and stopped at my cottage door (23-24)
Both Tagore in the twentieth century and Mira in the sixteenth century, talk about the coming or going of someone. That 'someone' (it could be specifically Krishna or just a reference to the divine,) at times is perceived as residing within, especially after the poet saint has arrived at a certain stage of spiritual enlightenment. A further progression on the mystic path would be the stage when the poet begins to talk about the creation of the world, universe, and to describe God as well, in sublime terms. Most of the later poetry of any mystical poet, we find, is absorbed in such themes of creation and the infinitude of divine reality. It is this which binds Bhakti poets from Nammalvar and Basavanna in the eighth-tenth century, to Narasimha Mehta, Namdev, Kabir, and Nanak between the thirteenth-sixteenth centuries to as recent as, Sri Aurobindo and many other lesser known mystic poets in the twentieth century. It is this element of mysticism and continuity with the tradition of Bhakti which lends such depth and familiarity to Aurobindo's verse. Just two stanzas from his short poem "Surrender":

O Thou of whom I am the instrument,
O secret spirit and Nature housed in me,
Let all my mortal being now be blent
In Thy still glory of divinity.

My heart shall throb with the world-beats of Thy love
My body become Thy engine for earth use;
In my nerves and veins Thy rapture's streams shall move;
My thoughts shall be hounds of light for Thy power to lose.

(Sri Aurobindo: Collected Poems 153) [emphasis mine]

Characteristic pan-Indian themes, symbols and dyadic metaphors thus find some of their first and finest expressions in the poetry of the Alvars and the Lingayats. They work around such themes as the lord's creation as play (līla), the incarnations of Shiva and Vishnu, Krishna's childhood and Shiva's cosmic dance; adopting at times the stance of lord and devotee, master and slave or that of lover and beloved. Besides quoting in translation, a fair amount of representative Shaiva and Vaishnava verse, composed between the seventh and twelfth centuries in South India, this chapter has also tried (a) to trace the socio-cultural changes that preceded and ultimately inspired, the inception of
4) Three major poets of the Padam tradition were Tallapaka Annamacharya (1424-1503), Ksetraya (of whom little is known), and Sarangapani (early eighteenth century), who took the Padam tradition further away from their setting among temple bells to the erotic ambience of the world of courtesans.

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the Bhakti genre, and (b) to read inherent poetic continuities that it shares with Bhakti poetry of the later period

Notes

1) In 510 BC when Mahavira (aged thirty), renounced his family for asceticism, he wandered for twelve years until he gained enlightenment in 498 BC. Initially confined to the Ganges valley, Jainism spread to western parts of the north and south of Mysore. Its vow of non-violence and strict limiting of property (i.e. landed property), made it popular with the trading community and the money-lenders. Thus Jainism came to be associated with the spread of urban culture. The prince Gautama Buddha (born in 566 BC.) too had left his home and family one night, to become an ascetic. After six years of wandering as an ascetic, he turned to meditation as a means of salvation. On the 49th day of meditation he received enlightenment and gave his first sermon at the Deer Park in Saranath, four miles away from Benaras (Varanasi). Buddha preached the eight-fold path of nirvana (enlightenment) which enlisted eight principles of action—right views, resolves, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, recollection and meditation, the combination of which was described as the Middle Way. Later Buddhism spread to many other parts of Asia.

2) The term "son of the house" may reflect the practice of rich masters and kings adopting servants as "sons of the house" who lived inseparably with them, and committed suicide when the masters died. Inscriptions of the period amply attest to the practice. The cabalistic interpretation of linga-wearing is that the linga represents the wearer's soul, which is not different from the divinity, Shiva. (Chinamadurum 312)

3) The Alvars were devout saints who wrote the earliest devotional poems of Vishnu. The root verb 'al' means, "to immerse, to dive, to sink, to be lowered, or to be deep". Therefore Alvar means, one immersed in God.