Shrines, Shamanism, and Love Poetry: Elements in the Emergence of Popular Tamil Bhakti

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WHAT ARE THE historical roots of popular Hindu bhakti in South India? That is, what factors contributed to the rise of widespread devotion to a personal god, more or less monotheistically[1] conceived, which first appeared in South India about the beginning of the seventh century of the Christian era? This question raises one of the many thorny historical problems in the history of Indian religions. But it is an important question if we are to understand how the present amalgam of ideas and practices which we call Hinduism arose from earlier Indian religious traditions.

First, what is "popular Hindu bhakti?" By this I wish to indicate that emotional outpouring of love to God characterized by such activities as singing, dancing, weeping, and the repetition of the divine names—in short, what the great Tamil saints repeatedly called "the melting of one's heart and mind" *(uḷḷam uruku)* in love to God. What I specifically do not intend to signify is the restrained, by comparison almost austere, devotion set forth in the *Bhagavad Gītā.* I am focusing upon *popular* devotion, not the rather lofty philosophical bhakti which Kṛṣṇa teaches to Arjuna. In terms of devotional literature I shall limit attention to vernacular poetry, excluding Sanskrit works which could have reached only a limited audience. Thus the type of devotion I shall concentrate upon is better characterized by the chanting of "Hare Kṛṣṇa" than by refined philosophical expression. Indeed, most of the great Hindu devotional saints were ecstatic

[1] Ninian Smart calls the philosophical expression of this conception of the deity "trans-polytheistic theism." That is, polytheistic worship is not denied, "but a much greater value is placed upon theistic worship and insight." Ninian Smart, *Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964), p. 215.

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poets whose verses were meant to be sung by the common man. Although their works are far from devoid of intellectual content, their source of inspiration was the immediate emotion-laden experience of love between man and God. As with John Wesley, the "warming of the heart" was fundamental and took precedence over doctrinal elaboration.

The first great upsurge of popular Hindu devotion occurred in South India from the seventh to the ninth centuries. From there it gradually spread northward into the Kannaḍa country and Maharashtra, into Bengal and North India. Our knowledge of this bhakti movement in the South is based upon an extensive corpus of devotional hymns written in the Tamil language by devotees of Viṣṇu and Śiva. The great saints among the Vaiṣṇavites came to be called Āḻvārs, ("those who have gone deep or plunged down" into the knowledge and love of God), of whom there are twelve. Amongst the Śaivites there are sixty-three saints designated as Nāyaṉārs or "masters." Many of these devotees, among them several of the most prominent ones, spent their lives wandering from temple to temple singing and composing as they went hymns about their experience of God. Certainly this tendency of important devotees to lead a life of religious wandering was a key factor in propagating the devotional cult.

In spite of the availability of an extensive body of devotional literature, the emergence of bhakti as a popular mode of religious expression is problematic when viewed against the background of antecedent religious traditions. Its intensely personal theism founded on a relationship of love between God and man is only vaguely foreshadowed in Vedic, Upaniṣadic, and Epic Sanskrit literature. And yet suddenly around the year 600 we witness the rise of a devotional movement which for all intents and purposes appears to be the fruition of a long line of development rather than a fledgling attempt at religious innovation. Although we cannot discount the influence of works like the *Bhagavad Gītā* and *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, we cannot reasonably attribute the great outpouring of religious devotion in seventh-century South India entirely to the gradual filtering down to the masses of ideas found in these two works. I would suggest that perhaps just as important were indigenous Tamil traditions which found a new form of expression in the bhakti movement. I shall call these the indigenous spiritual roots of Tamil bhakti. But before dealing with them it is necessary to describe briefly the peculiar historical circumstances of seventh-century South India which seem to have set the stage for the appearance of the bhakti movement.

The political history of South India during the period when the Tamil bhakti movement was blossoming, while complex in detail, can fairly accurately be described in general terms as the struggle between the three major powers in the area, each trying to enhance its own dominion at the others' expense.[2] These

[2] Historical details in this and the next paragraph are based upon Chapters VII and VIII of K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *A History of South India: From Prehistoric Times to the Fall of Vijayanagar* (3rd ed.; Madras: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 115-169.

were the Cālukyas in the North centered in Bādāmi, the Pāṇṭiyas in the South with their capital at Madurai, and lying in between, the Pallavas of Kāñcīpuram. Only the Pallava and Pāṇṭiyaṉ kingdoms were in Tamil-speaking areas, while the language of the Cālukya region was Kannaḍa, another Dravidian language which has almost no surviving literature from this period. The political history of the area is important for our purposes only in so far as the religion to which a particular monarch subscribed influenced that religion's status in the region under his control.

For about three centuries immediately preceding the rise of Pallava power at the end of the sixth century, South India seems to have experienced a "dark age" of political confusion. A mysterious group called the Kalabhras, nearly unanimously referred to as being evil, evidently held power at least toward the end of this period. In spite of the political instability, there was ample literary activity in Tamil, much of it Jain and Buddhist inspired, which indicates the growing influence of those religions at that time. K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, a leading authority on South Indian history, speculates that the Kalabhras themselves may have been Buddhists and that their rise to power may have been motivated by religion.[3] There is certainly evidence of religious antagonism in the bhakti movement itself, and perhaps it might partially stem from persecutions suffered during the ascendancy of the Kalabhras.

Several of the most prominent bhakti saints are credited with effecting the conversion from Jainism of certain Pallava and Pāṇṭiyaṉ kings. Later, in the ninth century, Māṇikkavācakar, the greatest Śaivite devotional poet, is reputed to have defeated Buddhists from Ceylon in debate. That the controversy with Buddhism and particularly Jainism was intense is evidenced by the numerous derogatory references to these religions in the devotional literature. If we can believe the historical accuracy of certain passages, the competition was not always peaceful, and a Pāṇṭiyaṉ king upon his conversion from Jainism is purported to have ordered the impalement of 8000 Jain ascetics. Hinduism's highly touted tolerance was not a characteristic of the early bhakti sects.

What is remarkable, however, is not merely the intensity of the controversy with other religious systems but what in retrospect might be called the tactics of the bhakti movement. Indeed, kings were converted and their patronage was courted, but more significant are the elements pervading the devotional hymns which enhanced their appeal to the masses. In both form and content the hymns reflect this popular appeal—the opposite of the religiously elitist thrust of both Jainism and Buddhism, which are first and foremost monastic traditions, and also entirely different from the elaborate Vedic sacrifices which some of the South Indian kings had taken to staging (one of the early Pallavas even undertook the performance of the *aśvamedha*).[4]

First and most obviously, the bhakti poets appealed to the common man by

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 144.

[4] Romila Thaper, *A History of India*, Vol. I (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 169.

using the vernacular, Tamil, rather than Sanskrit. Less immediately apparent, but just as significant, is the unmistakable intention that these poems be sung over and over again, not only at the temple but while performing everyday routine tasks. For example, Māṇikkavācakar wrote a series of remarkable hymns to be sung while doing certain daily mundane activities, e.g., while bathing in the tank in the morning, while preparing an aromatic bathing compound with mortar and pestle, while picking flowers, and even several hymns for accompanying the playing of popular village games. For example, here is a stanza of the hymn to be sung while making a bathing compound:

O you good ladies
  who have wide eyes
  like the *pāṉal* flower
let us pound the gold dust
and sing
and incessantly praise
Him who is
  the pure clear essence
    of the sugar cane of knowledge,
  the syrup
    whose goodness is difficult to obtain,
  the honey
    of which we can never get enough,
  the savor
    of ripe fruit,
the mighty King
  who enters the mind
  and remains sweet,
the Dancer
  who cuts off rebirth
and makes us His own [*āṇṭukoṇṭa*].[5]

The continued popularity of these hymns is indicated by their current widespread use by Tamil villagers whose daily routine has changed little from that of their forbears of more than a thousand years ago.

But not only does the style of Tamil bhakti poetry lend it mass appeal, various motifs and themes running through the hymns also make clear bhakti's

[5] *Tiruvācakam* 9:57-60. Translations from the *Tiruvācakam* are mine. Line numbers refer to the Tamil text of G. U. Pope's edition.

There are references in Tamil Caṅkam literature to verses sung by women while grinding grain with mortar and pestle. In *Kuṟuntokai* 89 a girl sings of her lover while pounding paddy, probably a discreet means of announcing her love to her parents so that a speedy marriage might be arranged. In *Malaipaṭukaṭām* 342, reference to this kind of song (called *vaḷḷaippāṭṭu*) occurs in the context of the praises sung of King Naṉṉaṉ. And Canto 29 of the *Cilappatikāram* mentions "pestle songs" praising the monarchs of the three kingdoms of ancient Tamilnad. All these references indicate a secular content for these songs. Indeed, this supports one of the arguments presented in this paper, namely, that the bhakti poets "spiritualized" certain images and forms found in the predominantly secular poems of early Tamil literature. On *vaḷḷaippāṭṭu*, see K. Kailasapathy, *Tamil Heroic Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 234.

divergence from "virtuoso"[6] doctrines like Jainism and Buddhism and from elaborate official royal cults like that of later Vedic sacrifice. Anyone could become a devotee of God, i.e., of Viṣṇu or Śiva, and no severance from the world was required. Bhakti was compatible with the everyday worldly tasks of the common villager. Pilgrimage, the practice of austerities, and the learning of sacred texts were not necessary. The only requirement was a mind at all times fixed on God. Perhaps this is nowhere better expressed than in four short verses by Tirunāvukkaracu, a prominent Śaivite of the early seventh century:

Why bathe in Gaṅga's stream, or Kāviri?
  Why go to Comorin in Koṅgu's land?
Why seek the waters of the sounding sea?
  Release is theirs, and theirs alone, who call
  In every place upon the Lord of all.

Why chant the Vedas, hear the Śāstras' lore?
  Why daily teach the books of righteousness?
Why the Vēdāngas six say o'er and o'er?
  Release is theirs, and theirs alone, whose heart
  From thinking of its Lord shall ne'er depart.

Why roam the jungle, wander cities through?
  Why plague life with unstinting penance hard?
Why eat no flesh, and gaze into the blue?
  Release is theirs, and theirs alone, who cry
  Unceasing to the Lord of wisdom high.

Why fast and starve, why suffer pains austere?
  Why climb the mountains, doing penance harsh?
Why go to bathe in waters far and near?
  Release is theirs, and theirs alone who call
  At every time upon the Lord of all.[7]

As opposed to the Brahmanical tradition, the early bhakti poets laid no emphasis on caste. One could not be disqualified from becoming a devotee because of caste. In fact, several of the twelve Āḻvārs were of low caste and one was a woman. At least thirty of the sixty-three Nāyanārs were from non-twice-born sections of society, and one was even a pariah and two others were women. But it should be noted that the bhakti movement had only minimal effect in terms of social reform. Its goal was otherworldly—devotion to God, and within that context social status was deemed unimportant. It did little to alter the secular social *status quo*. If, on the one hand, the Āḻvārs and Nāyaṉārs were able to develop a form of religious expression within the great tradition of the Brahmanical gods that was accessible to all segments of society and that was compati-

[6] On religious "virtuosi," see Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), pp. 162-165.

[7] F. Kingsbury and G. E. Phillips (trans.), *Hymns of the Tamil Saivite Saints* (Calcutta: Association Press, 1921), p. 57.

ble with worldly pursuits, on the other hand, they neither tried to change the society nor alter the worldly pursuits.

In view of the religious situation in South India prior to the appearance of the Āḻvārs and Nāyaṉārs, bhakti seems to have filled a religious vacuum. It is doubtful that Jain and Buddhist monasticism ever deeply affected the Tamil masses. And the Brahmanism of some of the early southern kings, eager to enhance their status, hardly touched the life of the common man either. In addition, as already noted, the period when Jainism and Buddhism were strongest in South India was one of political instability, which most likely contributed to the religious ferment of the early bhakti movement. But while the political situation may have played a part in the rise of bhakti, basically the Tamil bhakti movement, in view of the other religions' irrelevance to the life of the common man, was an attempt to find a form of religious expression and practice within the context of both indigenous ideas and pan-Indian traditions which would be meaningful to a wide range of people at a fairly deep level.

And now I come to the crux of my paper—the indigenous spiritual roots of Tamil bhakti; for I would claim not only that the bhakti movement aimed at mass appeal but that it also appropriated significant elements of popular, indigenous, non-Sanskritic culture. In short, it was popular not only in appeal, but also to a certain extent in spirit. In this regard I shall focus on three aspects of early Tamil culture which seem to find expression in the bhakti movement. These are (1) the veneration of specific sacred places considered to be the dwelling place of a god or spirit; (2) shamanistic practices; and (3) the expression of love between man and woman found in the earliest Tamil poetry. In each of these three instances our source of information is the earliest collection of Tamil literature, known as Caṅkam poetry, and the earliest Tamil epic, the *Cilappatikāram* ("The Story about the Ankle Bracelet"). Caṅkam poetry is generally thought to stem from the first two centuries of the Christian era. The poems are divided into two types: *akam* ("internal") or love poetry, and *puṟam* ("external") or war poetry. There is dispute about the date of the *Cilappatikāram,* although it is most probable that the epic is at least several centuries earlier than the first Vaiṣṇavite and Śaivite bhakti poetry.

The focus on sacred places in early Tamil religion is amply confirmed in Caṅkam literature. There is some evidence that certain places originally derived their sacredness from a tree or stone which was considered to embody sacred power. Although it is a matter for speculation why particular locations originally came to be thought of as holy, it is clear that by Caṅkam times, i.e., by the beginning of the Christian era, shrines associated with particular deities were flourishing in South India. This is particularly true of the god Murukaṉ, a peculiarly Tamil deity who later became assimilated with Śiva's son Skanda. Murukaṉ is said to favor hilltops for his abode. The principal passage of sustained religious content in Caṅkam literature, the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai* ("The Guide to Holy Murukaṉ"), reveals in its very structure of presentation the shrine-

oriented worship of the early Tamils.[8] The *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai* is devided into six parts, each of which bears a subtitle referring to one of Murukaṉ's hill shrines, at least three of which, however, can no longer be traced historically.[9] This strong identification of religious practice with particular places where God is thought to "dwell" is a motif which occurs over and over again in the later bhakti texts. Indeed, reference is made to over 500 shrines and temples in the Śaivite devotional literature alone.

One could enumerate many more instances where shrines are mentioned in pre-bhakti Tamil literature,[10] but in order that we might proceed to the perhaps more intriguing elements of shamanism and love poetry, I shall cite no further references to temples. I am not claiming that Hindu temple worship got its start in South India. My point is simply that the orientation toward sacred places that was so pronounced in the bhakti movement was also a salient feature of early Tamil religion.

There are scattered references to shamanism in pre-bhakti Tamil literature, if we assume that shamanism refers to an ecstatic experience in the course of which communication, usually divinatory, occurs with a supernatural being. South Indian shamanism does not seem to include the aspects of "ascent" and "magical flight" which Eliade stresses in his classic study of Central and North Asian shamanism.[11] The ecstasy and the presence of the deity are usually manifested in the course of a frenzied dance. In fact, the most common Tamil word for shaman is *cāmiyāṭi*, literally a "god-dancer", and modern ethnological accounts of South Indian shamanism report that the god is said to descend (*iṟaṅku*) on the individual.[12]

Again it is noteworthy that the worship of Murukaṉ included shamanistic features. The priest associated with Murukaṉ worship was called a Vēlaṉ, "a spearman," because like Murukaṉ himself he carried a spear. Murukaṉ too is frequently given the name Vēlaṉ. More significant is that "the worship often

[8] Some passages of the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai* are indicative of post-Caṅkam religious ideas and practice. The poem may not have assumed its present shape until as late as the eighth century. However, there is much in the poem which reflects early traditions. Kailasapathy specifically notes, "it [the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai*] seems to contain old material such as that pertaining to the cult sites specifically associated with Murukaṉ." Kailasapathy, *Tamil Heroic Poetry*, p. 36. Fred W. Clothey, on the other hand, argues quite persuasively that the tradition of *six* cult centers is a late accretion. See "Pilgrimage Centers in the Tamil Cultus of Murukan," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, XL, No. 1 (March, 1972), 84-88. We can conclude that early Murukaṉ worship was shrine-oriented but that it did not necessarily center on *six* specific sites, a number indicative of symbolism associated with Skanda.

[9] Clothey, "Pilgrimage Centers," p. 85.

[10] *Paṭṭiṉappālai* 52, 249-250; *Maturaikkāñci* 467, 615; and the *Cilappatikāram*, especially Cantos 9, 12, 14, and 28.

[11] Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Bollingen Series LXXVI (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

[12] Carl Gustav Diehl, *Instrument and Purpose: Studies on Rites and Rituals in South India* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1956), pp. 177 and 234.

took the shape of a dance called *Veṟiyāṭṭu* or *Veṟi Ayardal*,"[13] or "*Vēlanāḍal*, an ecstatic dance by a priest possessed by Vēlan [Murukaṉ]."[14] In *Paṭṭiṇappāḷai* 155 the female devotees of Murukaṉ are pictured as dancing the *veṟiyāṭṭu*. Several Caṅkam passages indicate that the Vēlaṉ uttered oracles and could effect cures when possessed.[15] Another form of religious dancing associated with Murukaṉ's cult, although not strictly shamanistic as is the dancing of the Vēlaṉ priest, was the *kuravai*, a dance for women. *Maturaikkāñci* 611-619 gives a vivid description of this occasion:

> Again, as soothsayers [vēlaṉ] dread attribute ills
> To Muruga [Murukaṉ], women wearing *kurinchi* blooms
> That ope in rainy months, adore with zeal
> This god who wears the blooms of *kadamba*.
> To strident sounds of instruments they tread
> Rude rustic measures [*kuravai*] in the temple courts
> Embracing one another joining hands,
> And much indulge in noisy cries and songs.
> Such as one hears at rustic festivals
> In which they celebrate great Nannan's day.[16]

Although in certain sections the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai* depicts an already rather Brahmanized form of worship, it too speaks of the performance of the *kuravai* dance at Murukaṉ's shrines. In this case Murukaṉ himself is felt to participate in the dancing, directing his attention to the "tender-shouldered damsels" whom he is said to embrace in his "drum-like arms."[17]

In the *Cilappatikāram* there are several examples of shamanism. Here it appears primarily as a local phenomenon and occurs outside the purview of the Jain and Buddhist practices mentioned in the epic. For example, the whole Twelfth Canto depicts how a forest woman of the Maṟavar tribe performed a frenzied dance, became possessed by a goddess, and then communicated the wishes of the deity to the assembled group, and subsequently how a young Maṟavar girl impersonated the goddess. In the Seventeenth Canto a group of cowherd women perform a dance, which while not actually involving possession, dramatizes an event in the legends about Kṛṣṇa. The dance is designed to quiet the cattle who

[13] N. Subrahmanian, *Saṅgam Polity: The Administration and Social Life of the Saṅgam Tamils* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1966), p. 353.

[14] K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *The Development of Religion in South India* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1963), p. 22.

[15] Subrahmanian, *Saṅgam Polity*, p. 365. In *akam* poetry the possession of the Vēlaṉ priest occurs in the context of attempts to diagnose the unmarried heroine's love-sickness. This, like the "pestle song" noted above, is another means of making her feelings public so that a marriage will be arranged. See *Naṟṟiṇai* 286; *Akaṇāṉūṟu* 22, 98; *Aiṅkuṟunūṟu* 241-250; and also *Kuṟuntokai* 23, where the diviner is female.

[16] J. V. Chelliah (trans.), *Pattupattu: Ten Tamil Idylls* (Madras: South India Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society, 1962), pp. 265 and 267.

Also cf. *Kuriñcippāṭṭu* 175 which mentions the dancing of Murukaṉ's female devotees, without, however, designating it as *veṟiyāṭṭu* or *kuravai*.

[17] *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai* 215-217 in Chelliah, *Pattupattu*, p. 355.

had suddenly become strangely agitated. And at the end of the epic the possession of a woman named Devandi by the god Paṣaṇḍa-śattaṉ, her patron deity, is very graphically described.

While none of the Tamil bhaktas could, strictly speaking, be called a shaman, they often use expressions and manifest features which suggest an ecstatic experience reminiscent of shamanism. One form or another of the verb *āṭkoḷ* is met with very frequently in Tamil devotional poetry. *Āṭkoḷ* is a reflexive form of the verb *āḷ* ("govern," "reign") and thus literally means "rule for oneself," or even more literally "take to oneself in order to rule over [a person]." In translations of Tamil bhakti literature *āṭkoḷ* is usually rendered by "accept," "accept as your slave," "take possession of," or even "possess." All these translations are legitimate, for this is how God acts toward his devotees—he rules over them as his slaves, he accepts or possesses them. That is, he becomes the driving force in their lives. This particular expression would not be quite so noteworthy if it were not often coupled with other evidence of ecstatic, shamanistic-like experience. Dancing in ecstasy is an ever recurrent motif in the bhakti literature. God fills his devotees with frenzy when he accepts them. He melts their minds. Perhaps a few examples from Māṇikkavācakar's poetry will give us a better idea of this aspect of bhakti:

> While Indra, Māl [Viṣṇu], Ayaṉ [Brahmā],
> and all the other *devas*
> stand in the sky,
> Śiva graciously visits
> the earth
> and accepts as His slaves [*āṭkoṇṭu*]
> people like us.
> He with holy ashes
> smeared on His shoulders,
> the Lord of glorious Peruntuṟai,
> comes and melts our minds.[18]

> For those on earth,
> for those in heaven,
> for those under the earth,
> and for all others
> He is difficult to know.
> But for us He is easy.
> The renowned One,
> the Lord of the South,
> the Lord of Peruntuṟai,
> filled us with madness,
> graciously granted the way
> not returning (to rebirth),
> came and entered our minds
> as the ambrosia
> of which we never tire.[19]

[18] *Tiruvācakam* 8:13-16.
[19] *Tiruvācakam* 8:7-11.

Or one might cite this particularly exuberant example of devotional expression, which if taken literally would not seem to be very conducive to disciplined pestle-pounding:

While our pearl-adorned breasts rise and fall as
we lift the pestle,
While beetles swarm in our hair,
While our minds move with Śiva,
While teardrops brim in our fish-shaped eyes,
While we dance madly with our Lord,
While others still go from birth to birth,
While the Father is full of mercy,
Let us, dancing, pound the gold dust.[20]

Or finally a passage reflecting Māṇikkavācakar's personal experience of Śiva and other people's reaction to his behavior:

He seized me
so that I not go astray.
Like wax near the tireless fire
my mind melted.
I worshipped.
I cried.
My body trembled.
I danced.
I wept aloud.
I sang
and praised Him. . . .

Like a nail
driven into a young, tender tree
His love pierced me.
Like the swelling sea
I grew agitated.
My mind became tender.
My body trembled.
Though the world mocked me,
calling me "demon" [*pēy*],
I abandoned shame.
The local people's despising talk
my mind bent
into ornaments of praise.[21]

Māṇikkavācakar was not the only Tamil devotee who appeared to others as if demon-possessed. Two of the earliest Tamil bhaktas suffered the same accusation. Kāraikkālammaiyār, a female devotee of Śiva, is thought to have taken on ḷvār, a Vaiṣ-the emaciated body of a demon (*pēy*); and the very name of Pēyā ṇavite, is indicative of his apparently frenzied, "demon-like" behavior. Or mov-

[20] *Tiruvācakam* 9:37-40.
[21] *Tiruvācakam* 4:59-62, 64-70.

ing to the centuries following the bhakti movement, one finds the motif of possession occupying a not insignificant place in the Śaiva Siddhānta, the philosophical system originating from Tamil Śaivite bhakti. In expounding the Siddhānta conception of *jñāna-samādhi*, the pinnacle of religious experience, Aruḷ-nanti in his *Civañāna Cittiyār* ("The Perfection of the Knowledge of Śiva") writes that those who attain this goal "become like children and mad men and possessed persons, and they may delight in singing and dancing also" (III:8: 32).[22] In the *Tiruvaruṭpayaṉ* ("The Fruit of Holy Grace") Umāpati also utilizes the motif of demon possession and elaborates it so as to find in it a key image for describing the nature of salvation:

> Till you are in a state like that of one possessed [*pēyoṉṟuntaṉmai*], remain destitute of all action.
> *Com.* One possessed by a spirit is under that spirit's absolute control, and is incapable of any independent action; so remain thou inactive, till all thine acts are under the control of the King.
> *Sum.* Here we are told what mature *Samāthi* is.[23]

Philosophically, it is significant that Śaiva Siddhānta retains the reference to possession; for Siddhānta's understanding of the *advaita* relationship between God and the human soul is that of maximum personal involvement rather than ontological identity. Also, the idea of possession serves well both the Tamil Śaivite poets and philosophers with regard to their emphasis on the primacy of Śiva's grace at every moment of the soteriological process.

While there are many similarities between the characteristics of devotional expression and those of early South Indian shamanism, bhakti lacks some of the key features of shamanism. In no case does a devotee function as a diviner, a curer, or a medium. His "possession," his God-intoxication, has no reference to third parties. It is solely the manifestation of his communion with God, which is an end in itself. But although bhakti is, in important respects, a phenomenon different from shamanism, we can see how shamanistic practices could have prepared the ground for the appearance of popular devotional religion. The intensely personal theism and supercharged emotion of the bhaktas are more comprehensible when viewed against the background of indigenous South Indian shamanism than they are if we attempt to understand these aspects of bhakti solely as developments internal to the Brahmanical tradition.

The best has been saved for last—love poetry, and to be sure, Caṅkam *akam* poetry is very fine love poetry. What I wish to suggest is that the love of the

[22] J. M. Nallaswami Pillai (trans.), *Sivajnana Siddhiyar of Arunandi Sivacharya* (Madras: Meykandan Press, 1913), p. 237. Tāyumāṉavar, an eighteenth-century Tamil Śaivite poet, ascribes the same three characteristics to *jñānis*, vis., that they are like little children (*pālar*), demon-possessed persons (*pēyar*), and madmen (*pittar*). See verse 778 in the collection, *Tāyumāṉavar Pāṭal*, ed. K. Nagalinga Mudaliyar (Madras, 1906).

[23] *Tiruvarutpayaṉ* 8:7 as translated in the prefatory "appendix" of G. U. Pope (ed. and trans.), *The Tiruvāçagam or 'Sacred Utterances' of the Tamil Poet, Saint, and Sage Māṇikka-vāçagar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), p. lvii.

devotees for God in some respects represents a spiritualization of the love between the sexes as depicted in *akam* poetry, or perhaps better said, the literary expression of bhakti draws upon the imagery of *akam* poetry, applying what was considered secular there to a new, religious context.

The peculiar beauty of *akam* poetry is in its use of natural images to heighten, and in several instances completely to represent, emotional states experienced by people in love. For example, this poem from the *Kuṟuntokai*, one of five anthologies of *akam* poetry:

What She Said

Don't they really have
in the land where he has gone
such things
as house sparrows

dense-feathered, the color of fading water lilies,
pecking at grain drying on yards,
playing with the scatter of the fine dust
of the streets' manure
and living with their nestlings
in the angles of the penthouse

and miserable evenings,

and loneliness?[24]

The point of the natural description in this poem is that even sparrows lead a happy, harmonious family life. This observation only heightens the sense of the heroine's separation from her husband who has gone on a trip leaving her and her children behind.

In *akam* poetry the landscape is divided into five well-defined regions, each containing a set of designated natural features appropriate to it, which are then symbolically associated with a particular phase of love. For example, poems set in the hill region treat of lovers' union; the pastureland is the scene of patient waiting; the seashore symbolizes anxiety and separation; the agricultural region is the setting for lovers' unfaithfulness; and the desert provides the backdrop for elopement, hardship, and long separation.[25] Thus, without mentioning any human emotions at all, it is possible for a poem to symbolize an emotional state:

What Her Girl-Friend Said

In the seaside grove
where he drove back in his chariot
the *neytal* flowers are on the ground,
some of their thick petals plowed in
and their stalks broken

[24] *Kuṟuntokai* 46 in A. K. Ramanujan (trans.), *The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), p. 40.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 107.

by the knife-edge of his wheels' golden rims
furrowing the earth.[26]

Although no reference is made to the heroine's condition, we know from the imagery of the seacoast and *neytal* flowers that this is a poem about the separation of lovers. After the joy of union the hero's departure is marked by harsh and violent images of knife-edged chariot wheels and broken flowers, suggesting the fragile nature of love and its liability to sudden rupture, thus increasing the heroine's and her friend's anxiety about eventual reunion with the hero.

The bhakti poets, both the Āḻvārs and to a lesser extent the Śaivites, found the language and imagery of love between man and woman congenial to the portrayal of the relationship they experienced with God. The bliss of union, the anxiety of separation, and the desolation of abandonment all find expression in the devotional literature, just as they do in *akam* poetry. What is remarkable is that in certain cases *akam* imagery appears to be applied virtually unchanged to devotional subjects. For example, Nammāḻvār, one of the great Vaiṣṇava poets, wrote the following verse:

Evening has come, He has not.
And the kine are wriggling in content,
For the bulls, bells jingling,
Have mated with them.
The cruel flutes are prating.
Within the bright, bright jasmine buds,
And the blue lily
The bee is fluttering and dancing.
The sea breaks open, leaping up to the sky, and cries
and cries.
What is it that I can say?
How can I escape and save myself,
Here, without Him?[27]

The time of day, the natural details chosen, all, according to the *akam* system of symbolic conventions, are appropriate to the state of separation between lovers. While nature on all sides reminds the poet of the joy and contentment of the consummation of love, this only serves to increase the agony of his separation from God.[28]

One of Nammāḻvār's four major works is the *Tiruviruttam*, a lengthy poem of 100 stanzas, which throughout employs the imagery and emotions of *akam* poetry to portray the devotee's yearning for union with Viṣṇu. In most of the stanzas he pictures himself as the mistress longing for her absent lover. For example, this verse from the viewpoint of her girl-friend:

[26] *Kuṟuntokai* 227 in *ibid.*, p. 73.

[27] *Tiruvaimoḻi* 9:9:10 translated in A. Srinivasa Raghavan, "Mystical Symbolism in the Work of the Alwars," *Proceedings of the First International Conference Seminar of Tamil Studies*, Vol. II (Kuala Lumpur: International Association of Tamil Research, 1969), p. 117.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 118.

Hot in this village now doth blow the breeze
Whose nature coolness is. Hath he, this once,
The rain-cloud hued, his sceptre turned aside
To steal the love-glow from my lady, lorn
For tuḷasī, with wide eyes raining tears?[29]

Likewise, Māṇikkavācakar wrote an extended erotic poem (*Tirukkōvaiyār*) on the *akam* model which traditionally has been interpreted as a description of the love between Śiva and the soul. And in his great work, the *Tiruvācakam,* although we find no consistent application of Caṅkam imagery, there are scattered individual verses which reflect the influence of the Caṅkam poets' sensitivity to nature[30] and the influence of early Tamil notions about the various stages of love. One stanza uses a particularly heavy dose of standard early Tamil erotic terminology about how the female partner will adorn herself, embrace her lover, feign aversion for him, whither away when he goes away, and then bloom again when he returns — except, of course, the object of love in this case is Śiva.[31]

Still another motif of *akam* poetry which recurs in the bhakti literature is *maṭal ēṟutal* ("riding the palmyra stem"). In Caṅkam society a frustrated lover could publicly give vent to his exasperation by fashioning a saw-horse from palmyra stems and riding it through the streets while loudly praising his loved one. This was considered an extreme action and its actual performance is not countenanced within any of the five *akam* landscapes of normal, acceptable love, although the threat of performing *maṭal ēṟutal* may be described.[32] Tirumaṅkai Āḻvār wrote two devotional poems incorporating this theme, *Siṟiya Tirumaṭal* ("The Little Holy *Maṭal*") and *Periya Tirumaṭal* ("The Great Holy *Maṭal*"). Tirumaṅkai's object in depicting *maṭal ēṟutal* in a devotional context was to indicate the true bhakta's extreme love for and dependence upon Viṣṇu.[33] In view of the above examples, some of them showing the unmistakable influence of the Caṅkam love imagery and penchant for natural description upon the bhakti poets, one can readily conclude that the devotees often experienced their relationship with the deity in deeply personal, sexual terms, and moreover, expressed this experience by spiritualizing the relationship between man and woman represented in the earliest Tamil poetry.

In conclusion, let us cast a brief glance back upon the *Tirumurukāṟṟupaṭai.* There is a very interesting passage near the end of the poem which anticipates some key features of later bhakti. The worshipper is instructed to prostrate himself while praising Murukaṉ at one of his shrines. After supplication has been made to the god, we find this passage:

[29] *Tiruviruttam* 5 in J. S. M. Hooper (trans.), *Hymns of the Āḻvārs* (Calcutta: Association Press, 1929), p. 63.

[30] E.g., see *Tiruvācakam* 7:49-52.

[31] *Tiruvācakam* 8:97-102.

[32] E.g., see *Naṟṟiṇai* 146, 152, 342, 377; and *Kuṟuntokai* 14, 17, 32, and 173.

[33] K. C. Varadachari, *Āḻvārs of South India* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1966), pp. 115-124.

He'll then assume a form of power divine
And towering to the skies, but will conceal
His ancient face divine quite from thy sight,
And only show his ancient youthful form
Diffusing fragrance sweet. He will then say
In choice and loving words, "Remove thy fear.
I know thy quest." He will salvation grant
So precious and so hard to gain, that thou
Alone on earth girt with the ocean dark,
Wouldst seem to escape impending ruin great.[34]

God's assuming a relationship of love toward his worshippers and his granting them salvation are here clearly set forth for the first time in Tamil literature. Although the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai* already displays partial Brahmanization of Tamil religious practices, it is perhaps not insignificant that several of my so-called indigenous spiritual roots of popular Tamil bhakti converge around the figure of Murukaṉ, "the deity *par excellence* of the Tamils."[35] A shrine-centered cult, shamanistic features, and a nascent form of bhakti, all associated with the worship of Murukaṉ, seem to appear in new form in the later bhakti movements. Perhaps this ancient Tamil cult, when brought into contact with Brahmanical traditions regarding the quest for salvation and the cults of the gods Viṣṇu and Śiva, given the historical situation of seventh-century South India, provided the stimulus for the development of popular Tamil bhakti.

Whether the cult of Murukaṉ was of crucial importance in determining the nature of the Tamil bhakti movement is a debatable hypothesis which begs for more research. My more limited purpose in this essay has simply been to show that the rise of popular Tamil bhakti is an understandable occurrence in view of its immediate historical background and in view of antecedent religious and literary traditions in South India. While the bhakti movement is often considered to have had a "Sanskritizing" effect on Tamil religion and culture, we must not lose sight of the concomitant indigenization of Brahmanical traditions. Both the Brahmanical and indigenous traditions contributed to and were modified in the evolution of a new form of Hindu religiosity, the cult of devotion. Indeed it is this very refraction of Brahmanical, Sanskritic traditions through the various prisms of vernacular language and local tradition that resulted in the many-faceted phenomenon which we call Hinduism, an example of cultural and religious synthesis which must be considered one of the great accomplishments of Indian civilization.

[34] *Tirumurukāṟṟupaṭai* 284-295 in Chelliah, *Pattupattu*, p. 359.
[35] Subrahmanian, *Saṅgam Polity*, p. 354.