

Being Kṛṣṇā's Gōpi: Songs of Anṭāl, Ritual Practices and the Power Relations Between God and Devotee in the Contemporary Tamil Nadu

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Abstract This essay illustrates how the dichotomies between divinity and mystic experiences of the poet-saints along with *bhakti* on the one hand, and kings and poets of the sovereign states on the other hand exhibit diverse forms of power relations within the realms of Tamil literary tradition and Tamil culture. The interrelationship between textual tradition and devotional processes has impacted upon the power relations among the poet-saints, devotees and divinities in a number of different implicit ways throughout South India from the beginning of Christian era. As for Tamil, the power relations that originally existed during the pre-Christian era between kings and poets within a dialog of patronship, singing of the victories, praising of kings' caliber and so on transformed into a very diverse form of power relation during the medieval and modern periods where divinity, mystic experiences of the poet-saints along with the perception of *bhakti* play a major role in determining the power relation, demonstrating the paradigm of what Michel Foucault claims that power cannot be understood only as a juridical edifice of sovereign king, institution, group, elite, class rather a technique, a form of power.¹ Two works of Anṭāl namely *Tiruppāvai* (sacred cowherd girl — containing 30 versus) and *Nācciyār tirumōḷi* (sacred utterances of the Goddess — containing 143 versus) are analyzed closely as to how they along with other similar texts play a significant role in the evolvement of diverse forms of power within the South Indian *bhakti* tradition, and thus exhibit a power relation involving the poet, text, divine and the devotee.

Keywords Tamil textual tradition; medieval Tamil Nadu; Religious rituals; power.

Introduction

“One aspect of the Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* which had great social implication was erotic. Mystic experience of the divine sports is almost entirely governed by the erotic feeling and wholly steeped in it, the other sentiments only touching its fringe. The glorification of the sex-impulse is supreme.”²

Bhakti evolved and took a shape in the context of South Indian textual tradition from 6th and 7th C.E. onwards. As a concept, *bhakti* refers to a specific human approach to a revered figure — in this case, a divine — that is distinct from knowledge or ritual practice. The deity is loved, adored, and sought with a desire for a divine-human communion, quite contrast to what the earlier tradition exhibited within the realm of sovereign power involving kings and poets. Thus, the poet-saints’ tradition of the Tamils that became prevalent from the medieval period onwards, especially under the auspicious of both Śaivite (*Śivanaṭṭiyārkaḷ*) and Vaiṣṇavite (*ālvār*) traditions brought forth a vibrant religious culture among the Tamils within the paradigms of spirituality, personal desire with favorite god, obsessive devotion and the like. In consequence, the amalgamation of both literary and religious practices forces one to rethink how power and its exercise upon subjects play a prominent role in the South Asian culture through literature and religion.

Medieval *bhakti* movements have an exclusive account on the phenomena of eroticism and sex-impulse, especially surrounding the images of Kṛṣṇā, Rādhā, and Gōpīs.³ This is particularly obvious from the literatures of Vallabhaites, Chaitanya of Bengal, Gītagōvinta and others. Presumably, this leads one to define the term *bhakti* as a process of surrendering one’s desires, including that of sex-impulse to god. *Kṛṣṇa bhakti* lays the ground for such a relationship between the Lord himself and the images of Gōpīs⁴ as depicted in the writings of the poet-saints, who play an important role in the South Asian literary textual tradition as well as religion. An intense and much adorable divine–human communion was made possible from the writings of the poets of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* through an adulthood medium of man-woman relationship. The discourse of power relations in the context of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*, thus, constitutes a complex network of objects involving the divine being the supreme power and the poet-saints along with the devotees being the subjects, upon whom the power of god is exercised.⁵ The passionately composed poems of the poet-saints and a number of rituals that the devotees perform, rather obsessively with a passionate integration of such poems are, thus, needed to be defined as, what Foucault calls, the techniques of power.⁶

The word *bhakti* is usually translated as “love” or “devotion”, although “reverence” and “honor” are also within its purview. As a notion, *bhakti* refers to a specific human approach to any revered figure — in this case, a goddess — that is distinct from knowledge or ritual practice. The deity is loved, adored, and sought with a desire for a divine-human communion.⁷ The forms of power relations, thus, can be understood in two different perspectives. First, between Aṅṭāl and the Lord Viṣṇu within the form of divine-human communion of a male god and a female devotee, and second between Aṅṭāl as the divine power and her ardent devotees, who are normally young unmarried women occupied themselves in a series of rituals mostly by chanting the poems of Aṅṭāl. In both instances, the poems of Aṅṭāl play a crucial role in demonstrating as to how they become responsible in manifesting and nurturing the forms of power surrounding the divine object, and at the same time making the devotees to be the subjects of power being acted upon- a process that can be studied within Foucault’s terminologies as production of power as well as subjects, upon which the power is exercised.

Aṅṭāl is one of the twelve poet-saints, who are commonly called *paṅṅiru Alivārs* “lit. twelve of those who engulfed themselves in god’s love”⁸, and she composed two principal sets of poems namely *Tiruppāvai* and *Nācciyār tirumoli*. *Nācciyār tirumoli* poems of Aṅṭāl, in particular, are the attestations for a poet communicating to the Lord with deep emotions especially employing the words of eroticism and vulgarity. But strikingly, what one does not observe in Aṅṭāl’s works, however, is any mention of infatuation between *Gōpīs* and *Kṛṣṇā*, as is overtly expressed in other sources — among the promising ones is Bhagavata *Purāṇā*.⁹ Rather, what one sees particularly in Aṅṭāl’s *Kṛṣṇa bhakti* is a desperate mood of denial from the Lord. These two works of Aṅṭāl, thus, constitute a logical sequence of characterizing Aṅṭāl’s personal attachment to Kṛṣṇā in a straightforward manner as moving from contentment to frustration. In both contexts, the moods of both contentment as well as frustration that Aṅṭāl conveys through her poems constitute the implicit process of power being subjugated upon the individual as Aṅṭāl, who is deemed to be the subject/devotee by revering god obsessively. Thus, the depiction of *bhakti* within the exquisitely presented textual forms is to be considered as nothing other than an attribution or endorsement of power to god. Subsequently, the expression of one’s devotion or *bhakti* by engaging in the rituals of one form or another, strictly conforming to the textual forms is nothing other than a case of subjection, i.e., being exercised or subjugated upon by the power, which is thus assigned to the element of god. In essence, what is attempted in this paper is that any form of religious obsession, is nothing other than what Foucault terms a form of power which makes individuals as subjects. Subject can be either subject to someone else by control and dependence,

or tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both cases suggest, according to Foucault, a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to (Cf. Foucault, “The Subject and Power” 212).

Authorship

The poet-saint Aṅṭāl in the seventh century A.D., laid down her emotions and mystic experiences with the Lord Viṣṇu in a total of one hundred and seventy three delightfully composed poems. Not only Aṅṭāl's poems continue to occupy a central place in daily Śrīvaiṣṇava temple liturgical services and Śrīvaiṣṇava Brahmin marriages, the brides in the marriages are also adorned as Aṅṭāl.¹⁰ In an attempt to capture the heart of the Lord, in one of her poems, Aṅṭāl alludes to the young unmarried women, whom she calls Kōtais, to join her in praising Him whom, according to her, has the power to fulfill their long lasting desires.

vāy pēcum
 naṅkāy! eḷuntirāy! nāṅātāy! nāvuṭaiyāy!
 caṅkoṭu cakkaram ēntum taṭakkaiyan
 paṅkāyak kaṅṅanaip pāṭu...¹¹

Oh! the eloquent girl!
 Oh! the young one! Wake up! Not to be shy!
 Oh! the one with a talented tongue!
 Sing of the Lord with Conch and discs!¹²

The divine authorship, however, is transferred profusely into young unmarried women who, in the tradition, sing these songs as part of a ritual that is performed annually from December to March in the contemporary Tamil Nadu. Thus, one finds the same intensity of emotion and love in parallel, both in the context of how these poems were composed by Aṅṭāl during the medieval period, and also in the context of how the devotees recite them in Sri Vaiṣṇavite temples frequently as part of their rituals. Besides reciting Aṅṭāl's songs to express their devotion to the Lord, the women also proudly enact the role of Kōtais in place of Aṅṭāl.

manatukku iniyānaip pāṭavum nī vāy tirāvāy!
 ini tān eḷuntirāy, ītu enna pēr uṛakkam
 anaṭtu illattārum aṅintu! - ēlōr empāvāy!
 To sing of your beloved, unlock your lips!
 Get up! Wonder, why this deep sleep,

in front of everyone in the house?

Oh! the young one! Get up!¹³

The tone of voice as elicited from these poems, especially in the context of commanding the women to praise the Lord instead of remaining idle at home, is nothing other than a form of exercise of power upon the devotees. In this respect, the emotions and the mystic power as one can experience from Aṅṅāl's poems by reading them are analogous to what is experienced by young women during their recitation of the poems in a very passionate manner. Hence, these poems do contribute to the endorsement of power upon god and it subsequently being exercised upon subjects/devotees under the realm of devotion and *bhakti*. Thus, the subjects tirelessly express their devotion in a selfless, flawless and dedicated manner by engaging themselves in rituals and prayers of various kinds. In other words, the more engaging and poignant the poems are the more power is understood to be exercised upon the devotees in the forms of *bhakti* and dedication. What can one suppose further is that the consciousness of the poet-saints are nothing other than the prime factors as to how the consciousness of the devotees are shaped and re-shaped rigorously and fervently in the Tamil tradition.

The songs of Aṅṅāl are presumably composed with poet's emotions as communicated in three different categories, and each of which represents a typical mood of Aṅṅāl: first, the joyful mood of praising the Lord of his adventures and exquisite forms; second, the poet's curious and longing mood to opt for an union with the Lord; and finally, a mood of frustration resulted from Lord's denial of her request. Notably, the three Tamil months that fall from December through March in a sequence are correlated to each of these three moods progressively transforming from one month to the other. Along the line of these three distinctive moods that the poems convey, one can suitably categorize all of the poems of Aṅṅāl under four major headings namely, a) praising of the Lord by the devotee, b) pleading or begging to the Lord for union, c) the process of Lord's denial and d) development of poet's frustration out of desperation. Thus, these fluctuating emotions, as one can observe from Aṅṅāl's poems, are thus transformed into the young unmarried women of the contemporary Tamil Nadu — the audiences of Aṅṅāl — who engage themselves in conducting the ritual by chanting these poems passionately in front of the Lord.

The rituals as performed in Tamil tradition during the month of Mārkaḷi (December -January) of every year by young unmarried women has an overt intention of pleading to the Lord for a fitting life mate, but with a covert anticipation of expressing their longing for the Lord himself, in the same tenor as to how the poet-saint Aṅṅāl laid down her emotions in her poems.¹⁴ Despite all of Aṅṅāl's songs

which constitute a logical sequence from a joyous mood (of praising the god) to a mood of frustration (with notorious vulgar forms of expressions), only the set of songs (i.e., *Tiruppāvai*) that represent the joyous mood are adopted and recited as part of the rituals, and the other set of poems (i.e., *Nācciyār tirumoli*) that represent the mood of frustration are ignored and considered inappropriate for rituals mainly due to their explicit references of vulgarity. Thus, the devotion the way it is represented by the poet contains within it both the praising of the Lord as well as expressing her innate erotic feelings. But from the point of view of the audiences, or the devotees, however, the vulgarity is either suppressed or ignored during their ritual practices considering mainly due to the social stigma surrounding them. “Aṅṭāl’s uninhibited expression of the pain of separation from the beloved, and her incessant yearning for his presence, adding to an occasional use of sexual terminology, appears to have been responsible, in part, for its neglect.”¹⁵ This, in fact, contributes to the status of modern sex as Foucault discusses in his *History of Sexuality* as to how the primary attitude of modern society toward sex was opposed, silenced and, as far as possible, eliminated (Cf. Gutting 92).

Time, Space and Mood

Jayadēvā in his *Gītagōvindā* conforms rather clearly that

the Spring time is the time of love for Kṛṣṇā.
When spring’s mood is rich, Hari roams here
to dance with young women,
a cruel time for deserted lovers.¹⁶

Both *Tiruppāvai* and *Nācciyār tirumoli* songs are intertwined together constituting a sequence of fluctuating emotions and feelings of devotees during the three consecutive Tamil months namely, *Mārkaḷi* (December–January), *Tai* (January–February) and *Māci* (February–March), which are the equivalent periods of Spring in Tamil seasons. Out of these three months, however, the month of *Mārkaḷi* is considered to be an evil month, as it is believed that the evil spirits roam around during this month causing many harmful diseases to people. For this reason, the songs of *Tiruppāvai* are sung by young women only early in the morning while decorating the entrance of their houses with drawings (*Kōlam*), which are believed to prevent the evil spirits from entering into houses. Also, the songs of *Tiruppāvai* are popularly known for their praising of the Lord of his magnificent youth and thus have an underlying implication for young women to plead the Lord for an union with their marriage mates in the month of *Tai* (January-February), the month that follows. The month of *Tai*, on the other hand, is

considered to be auspicious, and is believed to bring resolutions to all of the long lasting predicaments. It is also the month when the harvest festival is celebrated with freshly harvested grains from the fields, symbolizing the commencement of a joyful life.

Particularly, the verses from the first part of *Nācciyār tirumōli* are recited during the month of *Tai*, with an underlying intention for a union with their love mates. Followed by these verses, entailed are a set of other verses implying, in contrast, a denial from the Lord by way of Him destructing the drawings of the women. In this respect, the last part of *Nācciyār tirumōli*, which astoundingly expresses young women's emotions of desperation and discontent, are, thus, meant to be recited in the month of *Māci* (February-March). Thus, the three objects of the paradigm of time, space and mood constituted wholly by the textual tradition of medieval Tamil Nadu not only form the part and parcel of a stubborn and unstoppable power relation between the divine and devotee throughout the generations, it also tempts one to analyze this paradigm within the purview of what Foucault considers as 'discourse of knowledge'.¹⁷ If any textual tradition formulates the *power relations* using a set of discursive rules of rituals, and if such paradigm of power versus subject continues to exist historically, one is forced to isolate such a discourse of knowledge as being the cause of both the production of subjects as well as power. Power, for Foucault, is not just the ruthless domination of the weaker by the stronger and it can be a manifold relations of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of production, in families, limited groups, and institutions, are the basis for wide-ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 93-4).

Praising of the Lord and Subjugation of Power

The thirty songs of *Tiruppāvai* mainly enlighten young women in a rather commanding tone of voice, as to how praising and worshipping of the Lord brings them His grace without failure. The order of things that one is supposed to perform as part of these rituals are delineated in the poem (Tiruppāvai 474) as below:

Mārkaḷit tinkaḷ mati niṟainta nannāḷāḷ
 On the full moon day of the month of Mārkaḷi
 nīrāṭap pōtuvīr pōtuminō, nēriḷaiyīr
 Take the auspicious bath, O! the ornamented girls!
 cīrmalkum āyappāṭic celvic ciṟumikāḷ!
 O! the charming and little cowherd girls!¹⁸

The significant reason why one adores the Lord, among many others, is due to his devouring charm, fierce look and endearing body which, again, can be attributed to the various forms of power that he exhibits:

kūrvēṅ koṭuntoḷilan nanta kōpan kumaran
 Fierciful Nanda's son holding a sharp spear
 ērārnta kaṅṅi yacōtai iḷaṅcinkam
 young lion like man of Yasoda, whose eyes resemble fish,
 kārmēnic ceṅkaṅ katir matiyam pōl mukattān
 with clouds like body, red-eyed and a face like the moon¹⁹

Upon praying, he would bestow all of us with his precious grace, an act of subjugation of the individuals.

nārāyaṇanē namakkē paṅai taruvān;
 the lord Narayana shall offer his grace
 pārōr pukaḷap paṭintu - ēlōr empāvāy.
 for the renowned, sing of his praise to attain his grace, Oh! my girls.²⁰

These lines are, thus, mainly intended to highlight the significance and merits of the act of praying to the Lord by female devotees in order to obtain His grace as well as a life mate, precisely the way how Aṅṅāl intended to marry the Lord. Contrary to this, however, as we will see below, Nammālvār's devotion to god does not seem to imply any such personal expectations, instead his poems are intended to simply surrender to the Lord's feet.

Praising the Lord entails one to obtain the material benefits such as rain, good cultivation, abundant milk from cows, besides the spiritual benefit of elimination of sins from present and past life. Aṅṅāl, thus, alludes to the benefits of surrendering oneself to Lord, or as being subjugated by the power of the Lord through many captivating imageries:²¹

...
 vāyināl pāṭi manatināl cintikka
 pōya piḷaiyum pukutaruvān ninṅaṅavum
 tīyinil tūcu ākum; ceppu - ēlōr empāvāy
 Singing of the Lord with your lips,
 thinking of the Lord within your intellect,
 your sins of this birth and the previous birth,

He will eliminate, like the dust fallen in the fire!
Be aware! O! the Cowherd girl!²²

Confiscating ones sins is a consistent theme that one can find in Tamil *bhakti* tradition throughout, invariably both in Vaiṣṇavite and Śaivite poems. This is especially obvious from the poems of the *Tiruviḷaiyāṭar purāṇam*, one of the Śaivite works, where the god promises the devotees of getting rid of their sins when touching the divine water.

Touch this divine water, either knowingly or unknowingly,
be assured you are purified from all your sins and
reach the unattainable heaven
as sure as how a finger that touches the dreadful fire gets hurt
no matter whether it is performed with or without one's knowledge.²³

The imagery of "fire" as attested in both of these poems is mainly to signify the fierce power that the Lord carries and with this power he is believed to be competent of destroying the devotees' sins everlastingly. This, perhaps, requires many sacrifices from the devotees in terms of their ceaseless service and dedication to the Lord, similar to what Foucault refers to in the context of referring to the differences between pastoral power and royal power. "Pastoral power is not merely a form of power that commands; it must also be prepared to sacrifice itself for the life and salvation of the flock. Therefore, it is different from royal power, which demands a sacrifice of the subjects to protect the throne" (Hubert and Paul Rabinow 333).

Followed by the songs for the month of *Mārkaḷi* from Tiruppāvai are the songs for the month of *Tai* from *Nācciyār tirumoḷi*. While the former set of poems symbolizes the poet's mood of contentment with the Lord, the latter set of poems is made to symbolize the mood of desperation mainly due to a denial from the Lord. Thus, these poems are largely meant for revealing the relentless desire of those women who aspire themselves to unite with their love mates, especially after their long service that is rendered to the Lord during the month of *Tai*. Notably, in these songs Anṭāl pleads to the god of "love" to arrange for an union with the Lord; and in analogous situation the women who recite these songs as part of their rituals desire to be united with their own love mates.

Service to the Lord:
Tai oru tinkaḷum tarai viḷakkit
all through the month of *Tai*, I swept the floors

taṅ maṅṭalam iṭṭu māci munnāḷ
 drew the drawings (kōlam), until the month of Māci
 aiya nuṅ maṅal koṅṭu teru aṅintu
 ornamented the streets with the grains of sand
 aḷakinukku alaṅkarittu, anaṅka tēvā!
 beautified the beauty itself, Oh! the lord of love!²⁴

Desire:

uyyavum āṅkolō? eṅṅu colli
 would I be united with the Lord? Having asked this,
 unnaiyum umpiyaiyum toḷutēn
 I worshipped you and your belongings as well.²⁵

Spiritual power that the Lord enjoys:

veyyatu ōr taḷal umiḷ cakkarak kai
 the Lord in his hand owns a disc that spits fire
 vēṅkaṭaṅṅku ennai vitikkiriyē.
 unite me with the Lord of the celestial.²⁶

With a unique mild tone of voice, this poem sets the ground for the forthcoming desperate mood of the poet. The symbolic mention of the Lord of *Kāma* in this particular poem and in the rest of the poems of *Nācciyar tirumoḷi* decree the state of mind of the poet, as though she is summoning a mediator between herself and the Lord Kṛṣṇā for a union.

The songs that are sung during the month of Māci (February-March), on the other hand, constitute the mood of devastation and desperation due to Lord's blunt denial of uniting with Aṅṭāl. This is especially obvious from the Lord's destruction of the drawings and decorations that the women made throughout the month of *Tai* out of their sheer love with the Lord.

Vellai nuṅ maṅal koṅṭu ciṅṅil
 vicittirap paṭa vīti vāyt
 teḷḷi nāṅkaḷ iḷaitta kōlam
 aḷitti yākilum, unṅan mēl
 uḷḷam ōṭi urukallāl
 ūrōṭum onṅum ilōm, kaṅṭāy
 kaḷḷa mātavā! kēcavā! un

mukattana kaṅkaḷ allavē!

Oh! Rogue! Madhava, Kesava
Don't you have eyes?
with small white sand,
we made these drawings on the street!
you destroyed them mercilessly!
even if you destroy them,
our hearts will only suffer and melt,
but they will never get mad at you!²⁷

The intensity of devotion and the absolute surrender to the divine — despite god's absolute denial — by the devotees do express the effects of power's exercise as Foucault would call it (Cf. McHoul and Wendy Grace 87). This is further evident from a number of confessions that the women make openly while revealing their implicit intentions of sexual fantasies that they have with the Lord.

The Denial

Lord's destruction of the drawings and the decorations symbolically refers to his unacceptability of Anṭāl's repeated requests for union with the Lord.

. . . .
You kick and touch
and break them.
What use to you
of such teasing?
Lord dark as the ocean,
holding the flaming discs,
you know well
even jaggery tastes bitter
when in sorrow.²⁸

The songs of *Māci*, thus, constitute the denial of the Lord, resulting a desperate mood and consequently becoming the cause for her singing of the songs with expressions of abundant eroticism and vulgarity. Notably, the reason for the employment of sexual terminologies throughout Anṭāl's poems are evident from her confession that her private body parts have been the exclusive belongings of the Lord himself ever since her birth.

.....
 cāy uṭai vayiṛum en taṭa mulaiyum
 my abdomen with curves, and my sturdy breasts
 taraniyil talaippukaḷ tarakkiriyē.
 are meant exclusively for the Lord who stands out in the world.²⁹

Lord's act of destruction of "Castles" in Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* literature in general is meant for expressing Kṛṣṇā's playful mood among the *Kōpīs* as against the mood of denial as one finds in *Tiruppāvai*.

The amount of anxiety that Aṅṭāl experienced due to rejection by the Lord is expressed intensely in a poem with an imagery of her distress being judged against an Ox being poked with a sharp nail:

.....
 pārkataḷ vaṅṅanukkē
 paṇi ceytu vāḷap peṛāviṭil, nān
 aḷutu aḷutu alamantam mā vaḷaṅka,
 āṛravum atu unakku uṛaikkuṁ, kaṅṭāy
 uḷuvatōr eṛutinai nukaṅkoṭu pāyntu
 ūṭṭam inṛit tuṛantal okkumē!
 If I can't live offering my service to
 the Lord of the ocean of milk,
 you will learn that I will be crying like
 a laboring ox being poked with a nail
 and left without any food!³⁰

The imagery of *laboring ox being poked with a nail*, thus, proclaims the fact that she becomes a deserving individual to be shown affection and subsequently to be offered the union with the Lord - a case of deep intensity of 'subjugated power' upon the devotee, that one can term within Foucault's terminologies. Strikingly, Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* as denoted in other literatures from Bengal and Rajasthan illustrates Kṛṣṇā's exploitation of the *Kōpīs* for his own desires, without any reference to the denial as we see in Aṅṭāl's poems. To cite an example, Jayadeva's *Gītagōvinta* accuses of Kṛṣṇā as having illicit relationship with cowherd girls.

Why I shocked that you roam in the woods
 to consume weak girls?

The fate of Pūtanā shows your cruel childhood
bent for killing women.
Damn you, Mātavā! Go! Kēśavā, leave me!
Don't plead your lies with me!
Go after her, Krishna!
She will ease your despair.³¹

To quote a song of Mīrā's in a related tone of voice, but with a note of subtle deception by Kṛṣṇā:

jōgiyāri pratiḍi rō mul
hil mil bāt baṇāvan mīṭi
pīchē jāvat bhūl
tōḍat jejkarat nahīñ sajanī
jaise camelī ki phūl
mīrā kahe prabhu tumare taras bin
lagat hivdā mē
To love one not earthly
this is not the root of pain, my friend.
He will speak — oh! so sweetly!
then snap love like a jasmine stem.
Says Meera devoutly
the thorn of waiting pierces without end.³²

Neither in *Tiruppāvai* nor in *Nācciyār tirumōli* one sees such acts of submission and blissful mood of Kṛṣṇā. Rather, Anṭāl despairs, laments and calls for the Lord of Love in desperation for help.

Viraha State and the Mood of Desperation:

Articulating women's *viraha* state of mind in literature has been a familiar topic in Tamil poems even from the age of Sangam, which dates back to the 3rd century B.C. One of the genres of Sangam classics called *Akam* (love life) contains poems exclusively with the theme of women's separation from their male partners and their subsequent alluding for a reunion with their lovers out of desperation. Such songs frequently lament the torturous feelings that the female lovers undergo due to their partners' abandonment in a cruel and unwitting manner. This is apparent from a poem of the Tamil poetess Auvaiyār of the Sangam genre:

How can I understand? The North wind
 swells and moves knowing no limit,
 the pain that rises in my breast brings forth a little shoot,
 it spreads its thick trunk of despair in my soft heart,
 puts out lovely branches made of the rumors in the town,
 opens new, shining growth of unremitting love,
 grows into a great, shameless tree sung by poets,
 and shades all the earth,
 putting out flowers of evil gossip — and still
 he doesn't come.³³

Despite many gossips and rumors among the people from the neighborhood, the lover doesn't seem to return, and this fact is expressed in this poem allegorically with an image of a tree that grew out of every grief that the woman went through after her separation from her lover. The pain started with a little shoot; put out many branches as a result of the rumors in the town; and bloomed with many flowers because of the shameful gossips in the neighborhood. Thus, the largely grown tree with abundant flowers symbolizes the woman who is filled with intense distress and sorrow due to her lover's separation.

Significantly, many of the *Akam* poems identify one of the anticipated consequences of separation as the act of “gossip” and “rumor,” which are not the common traits that one can find in religious poems. Despite the presence of such elements like the poet-saints' lament for lord's separation and abandonment without mercy, no mention of either “gossip” or “rumor” is found in parallel in religious texts. This further substantiates the fact that the poet-saints seclude themselves in a mystic world that is beyond the scope of the material world with ordinary people — a celestial world where one can ponder about acquiring “salvation,” “merits” and so on. This resonates what Foucault rightly calls in the context of pastoral power that it is a form of power whose ultimate aim is to assure individual salvation in the next world (Cf. Foucault, “The Subject and Power” 214).

Furthermore, what one finds very appealing in the context of the large portions of Sangam poems is understanding of a mood of ‘separation’ only after a legitimate union of the lovers — a practical idea without having anything to do with either the celestial world or any extraordinary power. On the contrary, though, as one can note from the following verse of *Aṅṭāḷi* that separation occurs without any prior union with god. *Aṅṭāḷi*'s desperation to unite physically with *Kṛṣṇā* may be further understood from the following verse where she begs *Kāmā*, the lord of love to arrange for her union with *Kṛṣṇā* (*Nācciyār tirumōḷi* 510):

Sacrifice:

kāy uṭai nelloṭu karumpu amaittu,
making the tender rice with sugarcane
kaṭṭi arici aval amaittu,
making the tough flat rice

Mystic:

vāy uṭai maṛaiyavar mantirattāl
by the sacred chants of the eloquents,
manmatanē! unnai vaṇaṅkukinṛēn;
Oh! The lord of love! I pray you!

Power:

tēyam mun aḷantavan tirivikkiraman
The lord who measured all of the three worlds,
tirukkaikaḷal ennait tīṇṭum vaṇṇam
to stroke me with His sacred fingers

Bio-Power:

cāy uṭai vayirum en taṭa mulaiyum
my belly with curves, and my sturdy breasts
taraṇiyil talaippukaḷ tarakkiriyē
exclusive to the lord, who excels himself in all of the world.
“Can’t you grant me this greatest honor on earth: that with his sacred hands
he ”
touches my soft large breasts and my splendid abdomen?”³⁴

Anṭāl’s desire to unite with Kṛṣṇā results out of her hatred of the material world along with its mortal men.

. . . .

ūṇṭai āḷi caṅku uttamarku eṅṛu
for the god with discus and conch,
unnittu eḷunta en taṭa mulaikaḷ
my strong breasts that show off steadily
māṇṭavarkku eṅṛu pēccup paṭil
if they are to be offered to any human,
vāḷkillēn kaṇṭāy. manmatanē!³⁵

I will not live — you will realize! Oh! Manmata — the lord of love.³⁶

The reason for Aṅṭāl's act of developing a sense of aversion with the material world and desiring to unite with god is because of her excessive devotion to the Lord Kṛṣṇā since her childhood through her father, who is also a devotee of Kṛṣṇā. The excessive devotion to the Lord Kṛṣṇā can thus be attributed to the repressive power on Aṅṭāl by god's spirituality, as one can understand within Foucault's terminology, but in an innate sense of not involving any physical force whatsoever. Her opening up of her sexual privacies to the Lord and subsequent references to the Lord's physical beauty should be understood in the context of Foucault's expression of bio-power, according to which the sexual body establishes the type of power (Cf. Foucault, "The Subject and Power" 168-69).

In contrast, however, Mīrā's *bhakti* to Kṛṣṇā is not the same as Aṅṭāl in that she desires a union as a servant; a playmate and the like, but never as a life partner as Aṅṭāl does.

mhāṇe cākar rākhā jī
Please keep me as your servant.
Giridhārī lālā cākar rākhā jī
Giridari Laal, please keep me as your servant³⁷

Again, one sees the mood of "separation" and "abandonment" in many of Mīrā's songs on a similar ground:

Dēkhā mai hari maṇ kā thā kiyā.
āvaṇa kah gayā ajā ba āyā,
kar mhāṇe kōl gayā.
khān pān sudh sab bisariyā.
kāi mhāro prāṇ jīyā.
thārō kōl viruddha jaga thārō,
the kāyi bisar gayā.
mīrā re prbhu giridhar nāgar,
the biṇ phaṭā hiyā.
Look how he wounds me again.
He vowed to come but never made it.
Food, drink, my senses — All gone — tell me
where to find them?
why must you shame what you say?

You've whispered
 Yourself away, lifter of the mountain
 Without him my heart splinters³⁸

The separation followed by her longing for union with the Lord are thus understood to be the conducive subject matters of a devotional experience for the women poet-saints — a concept Friedhelm Hardy refers to in his book as *Viraha-bhakti*.³⁹ Suguna Ramanathan, on the other hand, categorizes this state of mind of the poet singers as lying “outside the boundaries of the norms”: One lives in a world of discourse, a practice of power with boundaries, norms and perspectives. These boundaries are uniformly constructed within a particular class, caste, patriarchy and so on.⁴⁰ Thus, the poet-saints attempt to position themselves aside from such boundaries in order to make a direct link with god by their intense devotion. The fifteenth century poetess Mira, for instance, moves away from all of the norms of the routine life and places herself within a boundary that contains in it only her love and god — a boundary that is free from class, caste and other hierarchies of the material world.

rānāji! ab na rahūngi tōri haṭkī!
 Your Highness! Now, you can't isolate me within the four walls!⁴¹

Whereas, Aṅṅāl's aversion from the material world comes only as a result of her obsessive relationship with god and nothing else.

Lord's Takeover of Nammālvār

While the mystical path of the woman saint Aṅṅāl is filled with the elements of eroticism and sexual-impulse, the popular myth of her hagiography having led to a tradition of a ritual practice performed by young unmarried women, a male poet-saint Nammālvār's verses, on the contrary, have influenced the male public as much as Aṅṅāl's poems influenced the women's community — an effect of literary cultures that can be understood in the context of power being exercised upon both male and female invariably. Unlike Aṅṅāl, however, Nammālvār's verses are known for their expression of love exclusively in the kind of affection between god and devotee in the deepest manner possible. Nammālvār expresses his ultimate desire with Lord to be what he calls as *āṭkōl* “Take Over”, a state of being possessed by the control of the Lord. The 1,102 verses (called *Tiruvāymoḷi*⁴² — meaning ‘holy expressions of the mouth, words of the holy mouth’ or ‘utterance/poetics of the holy/sacred’), which are believed to be composed by Nammālvār between 880 and 930 A.D. allude exclusively the magnificence of the Lord in a number of beautifully written verses.

“Anyone who reads his poems can see why the poems are at once philosophic and poetic, direct in feeling yet intricate in design, single-minded yet various in mood.”⁴³ Nammālvār, who was born in a village called *Tirukurukūr* ‘sacred tiny town’ (today’s *Alvār tirunakari*) in the Southern part of Tamil Nadu, sung his songs after his six years of silent meditation under a tamarind tree. Thus, like *Anṭāl*, Nammālvār’s origin is also presumed to be mystic in nature, and it eventually attributes to a divine value to his songs. The name “Nammālvār” literally means “our own *Alvār*” — “people’s saint.” Like all the names of the other eleven poet-saints, the name of this saint is also a nickname, which must have been a later addition.⁴⁴

The significance of the works of Nammālvār and the eleven other saints may be understood well as how the word *Alvār* (a term resulted after the appreciation of the saint’s performance) is used. The Tamil term *āl* means “plunge into,” “deep” or “immerse,” which can be metaphorically interpreted as “engulfed in” or “filled with.” The suffix *ār* is used both as a human plural suffix referring to many people, and also as a singular masculine honorific suffix referring to a single individual. Thus, this word in its entirety means “those whose thoughts are fully filled with” the thoughts of the Lord. They ponder at all times nothing but the fame and the excellence of the Lord; their love to the Lord is so deep in that their state of mind is metaphorically referred to as “swimming and rejoicing/enjoying in the ocean of god’s love.” The following lines in Tamil illustrates well the metaphor of how the act of swimming and being in love with god are entangled to one another.

anpenum inpak katalil nīntit tīlaippār

Love — called joyful ocean-in swim-and enjoy/rejoice

Lit. One enjoys swimming in the ocean of love.

‘Saints rejoice swimming in the blissful ocean of love of the Lord’⁴⁵

The Lord Ranganathan of Sri-Rangam (located in an island of the river Cauvery near a town in the Southern part of Tamil Nadu called Tiruchirappalli) is an incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu. He is taking a peaceful nap (*ānanta cayanam* ‘joyful sleep/blissful sleep’) on a snake bed in the ocean of milk. The name *ālvār*, thus, interacts with Lord’s joyful mood of sleeping in the ocean of milk along with the saints’ delight of Lord’s love; so does the term *bhakti*, a blissful state of the saints, whose mind is totally engulfed in the love of the Lord. A. K. Ramanujan interprets this medium as a state of the saints who are “taken over” by the love of god.⁴⁶

The Lord Stands as Everythin

One of the greatest powers of god, as stated by Nammālvār in one of his poems is

that he is omnipresent and remains as everyone, everything and everywhere in an all-encompassing manner:

nāṃ avan ivan uvan,
we-inclusive he-that-impolite he-this-impolite he-in-between
avaḷ iḷaḷ uḷaḷ eḷaḷ
she-that she-this she-in between she-who
tām avar ivar uvar,
one's-self(own) he-that-polite he-this-polite he-in-between-polite
atu itu utu etu
that this this-in between which-thing
vīm avai ivai uvai,
they-we they-neuter these-neuter in-between-neuter
avai nalam, tīṅku avai
they-neuter good, bad they-neuter
ām avai, āy-avai
thus they-neuter became-they-neuter
āy niṅṅa avarē
Become stands/remains he-in indeed (Ramanujan 122).

The theology of Vaiṣṇavā tradition, in general assumes that Lord prevails in everything and he himself prevails as everything — all human, neuter and all the other elements of the universe are contained within him; and thus he happens to be everything. Thus, the Vaiṣṇavā's concept of god is what one may term as *saguṇa* — “god with entity,” as opposed to *nirguṇa* “one without any form or entity”⁴⁷.

Spiritual Behaviors of *Takeover* and *Possession*

A.K. Ramanujan discusses the two spiritually loaded terms *takeover* and *possession* in Hinduism and other religions, including among American Indians and elsewhere, by quoting Weston LaBarre's view from the book *The Gost Dance: Origins of Religion*: “The words *takeover* and *possession* are employed more or less synonymously, but two different modes of *possession* of god may be distinguished. The two modes being one in the context of the word *takeover*, as stated in the Nammālvār's poem as ‘obsession toward Lord Viṣṇu,’ and the other in the context of how the Tamil word *cāmiyāṭi* ‘god-dancer’ is understood in Tamil's culture.”⁴⁸ *Takeover* is an instance of one's obsession to the Lord as a result of exercising an extraordinary *bhakti* or devotion. *Cāmiyāṭi*, on the other hand, is an instance of performing a dance or related action by anyone without his or her own consciousness, especially due to

god's *possession*. In this case, the performance is believed to be carried out by god himself by entering into devotee's body as a vehicle. Whereas in the former case, the performance — singing of the Lord — is carried out by the devotee himself within his or her own consciousness. It is believed that both of these receptions are possible only when a devotee gets the *aruḷ* 'grace' of the Lord.

Takeover

ānān āḷuṭaiyān enṛahdē ukantu vantu
 became-he person-possessed that-he had-become possessed came-he
With his own status of being a possessor of all human, came (to me) happily.

tānē yinnaruḷ ceytu ennai muṛravum tānānān
 voluntarily grace offered me fully became-he
he offered his grace voluntarily to me and he became fully of me

mīnāy āmaiṅyāy naraṅkamum āy kuṛaḷāy
 fish-became turtle-became pig-also became dwarf-became
He took the forms of fish, turtle and dwarf

kānār enāmumāyk kaṅkiyāminnam kārvaṅṅanē.⁴⁹
 Seen-not became-that-way Kalki-became-yet dark-colored-he
He is yet to take the form of Kalki (a form that is believed to refine the cosmos). He is the one with dark colored body.

This poem and the other similar poems⁵⁰ ascribe to the idea of how the Lord came into the consciousness of Nammālvār himself, especially by using such expressions like:

... I've caught in him, I contain in him now;
 ...occupied me, became all of me;⁵¹
 took Nammālvār into the Lord himself
 ... and filled me over into himself;⁵²
 he stands there consuming me.⁵³

Such instances of possession of god as entering into the consciousness of Nammālvār takes place due to his excessive obsession to god only in his mind, but not with the control of his body. In the case of the process of *Cāmiyāṭi*, however, both mind and body of the devotee are taken under the complete control of the god. Yet, both cases are believed to be occurring due to devotee's profound *bhakti* — a performance

conducted with the union of both body and mind.

Music and the tradition of *ōtuvārs*

Aḷvār's texts were passed on from one generation to the other with much emphasis on music (*icai*) and mime (*avinayam*), and with less emphasis on the poetry⁵⁴. Both *tiruvāymolī* and the other similar Tamil religious poems are sung in temples especially by a group of people called *ōtuvārs* "lit those who chant religious songs." It is often believed that it is their manner of singing with rhythm and melody are more appealing and having a captivating power than the meaning of the poems themselves. Besides, the unique trait of *antāti*⁵⁵ "end becoming the beginning" type of these poems of Aḷvār's contribute to their recitation with powerful aesthetic appeal.

Another significant point to mention in the context of authorship of textual tradition is what A.K. Ramanujan mentions as *shift* that took place during the *bhakti* period. Both the Vaiṣṇavā (of Aḷvārs) Śaiva of (Nāyanmārs) works during the *bhakti* period in Tamil Nadu caused many shifts, according to him. ". . . from hearing to speaking; from watching to dancing; from a passive to an active mode; from a religion and a poetry of the esoteric few to a religion and a poetry of anyone who can speak . . . From the sacrificial-fire rituals (*yajñā* or *hōma*) to worship *pūjā*." Not to mention the fact that the ritual practices of 'singing,' 'dancing' and performing rituals are continued even until the present in temples and other sacred places of Tamil Nadu keeping these shifts alive for ever, same as Aṅṭāl's *Tiruppāvai* rituals being performed with abundance of mysticism and devotional fervor on an ongoing basis — an aspect of ritual life that requires to be researched, pondered, to be, in periyāḷvār's sense, engulfed in (*āṭkoḷ*) within one's consciousness in a deep and intimate and personal manner. Thus, the literary texts need to be contextualized within the the realm of how they become instrumental in creation of power with concurrent shifts, as well as how they subsequently become responsible for making the devotees to be subjugated by such implicit power.

Concluding Remarks

The captivating power of literary texts lies in the social knowledge as presented in many literary forms with poignant metaphors, similes, figurative expressions and so on. Literary texts with such elegant presentation of knowledge employing many aesthetically appealing elements within them, on the other hand, lead one to the enjoyment of them in a number of different media, such as being a composer, a reader, a singer, and as a passive listener, as what Ramanujan calls the *shifts* of the media. They also are instrumental in making them fully surrendered to the objects, as portrayed in them as "gods" as well as following rituals very passionately adhering to

the various discursive rules as formulated within such texts.

Thus, the exquisitely composed poems of Aṅṭāl, Nammālvār and the Śaivite poems of the Nāyanmārs contribute not only to the empowerment of the religious figurines of various kinds, they also become responsible for the production of enormous rituals as well as zealous devotees, who are rigorously engaged in such rituals. Consequently, both the processes of empowerment of the mythical religious figures, as well as the exercise of such power upon subjects in the realm of *bhakti* result mainly due to the sophisticated and charismatic nature of religious texts, a phenomenon that is very common in many cultures, but more common in the South Asian culture as discussed in detail in this paper in the context of *Kṛiṣṇa* and *Śaivite bhakti*. What can be termed as a discourse of *bhakti*, thus, is fully responsible for formulating a rigid structure of power relations, which contain within it not only the form of religious literary texts, but also many knowledge of rituals, habits and customs. As a result, the dire expressions of *bhakti* surrounding such religious texts represent the form of power that is exercised upon those who engage in it. This paradigm, which is a formulation of desire, spirituality and other forms of religious expressions, stands very rigid and strong in nature and it becomes unchangeable, unalterable or can be suppressed by any means, whatsoever. This is mainly because this paradigm of textual tradition exhibits within it a complex power relation between the mythically produced god and its human devotees, who are duly disciplined by its power an everlasting obsessive *bhakti*, a devotee's consciousness bring forth. The discourse of *bhakti*, and the power relations that embody within it, thus, brings forth an analogous circumstance of what Foucault constructs as a system of power relations in his *Discipline and Punish*: "The man described for us, whom we are invited to free, is already in himself the effect of a subjection much more profound than himself. A "soul" inhabits him and brings him to existence, which is itself a factor in the master that power exercises over the body. The soul is the effect and instrument of a political economy; the soul is the prison of the body" (Foucault, "Discipline and Punish, Panopticism" 30). The subjected devotees with their compulsively entangled *bhakti* on god and religious texts they admire are, thus, confined inside a prison cell, which is nothing other than their soul, in Foucault's terms.

Notes

1. Foucault 1983, 212.
2. Pande 1989, xxxi.
3. "Love has long been a central metaphor for religious experience. . . .The chief mood of bhakti is the erotic (sringāra), seen almost entirely from an Indian woman's point of view, whether in its phase

of separation or of union. (Ramanujan 316). This paper attempts to study the sringāra rasa in Aṅṭāl's poems from the point of view of separation, as opposed to union.

4. Tamil name for Gopī is kōpiyarkaḷ or kōpi, but the North Indian literatures refer to this term as Gōpī.

5. “. . . form of power applies itself immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law or truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him” (Foucault, “The Subject and Power” 212).

6. *ibid.*

7. McDermott 2001, 6.

8. The works of twelve saints constitute a total of about four thousand songs — called Nālāyirat Divyap Pirapantam “four thousand divine collection” — on Lord Viṣṇu.

9. “Kṛṣṇā's affairs with Gōpīs begin in autumn, immediately after the heavy rains caused by Indra. . . the gopīs hear Kṛṣṇa play his flute in the forest, and the whole world becomes entranced by him. It is this song that introduces the erotic fascination of Kṛṣṇa and motivates the Gōpīs infatuation by relating it to a universal reaction in all beings” (Hardy 499).

10. Venkatesan 2010, 33.

11. The original songs of Aṅṭāl is reproduced in this paper based on the collection and translation by Sundaram, 1987. Unless otherwise mentioned, the translations are author's own. The references to the poems are made from the sequence of poems in the compilation of Nālāyirat Divyaprabandam ‘four thousand songs of the Alvars’. Tiruppāvai poems are included between 474 and 503 and Nācciyār tirumoli poems are included between 504 through 646.

12. Sundaram 1987, 16.

13. Tiruppāvai: 485-6

14. “Andal Thiruppavai: Vijay TV, one of the popular television stations in Tamil Nadu, pays tribute to the saint poetess with the Paasurams recited throughout the month of Margazhi. Children from Padma Seshadri Schools will sing the 1,300 Paasurams while Dr. Damal Ramakrishnan will offer explanation. ‘Andal Thiruppāvai’ will be telecast Monday-Sunday at 6 a.m” (The Hindu, December 2009).

15. Dehejia 1990, 5.

16. Miller 1977, 51.

17. For a detailed discussion on how Foucault's idea of discourse of knowledge needs to be interpreted in a non-linguistic context of social knowledge, see McHoul and Grace, 1993: 26-56.

18. Tiruppāvai:474-1

19. Tiruppāvai:474-4

20. Tiruppāvai:474-7

21. Allegorical representation of poet's feeling is also a familiar tool in Mīrā's songs as well:

herī maim to perma divāni

mero darada na jānai koya!
 ghāyala ki gata ghāyala jāni,
 jo koi ghāyala hoyā!
 Jauhari ki gata jauhari jānai,
 kyā jānai jina koya!
 “Friend, who can know my love’s deep anguish?
 Only one who wounded knows how it hurts,
 Only a jeweler knows a lost gem’s worth. . . . (Bahadur 41)

22. Tiruppāvai: 478-6
23. Parancoti Munivar, 1969, 122.
24. Nācciyār tirumōḷi:504
25. Nācciyār tirumōḷi:504-5
26. Nācciyār Tirumōḷi: 504-7.
27. Nācciyār Tirumōḷi: 505.
28. Dehejia, 1990, p. 81.
29. Nācciyār tirumōḷi:510-7
30. Nācciyār tirumōḷi:512-3
31. Miller 1977, 107.
32. Fathuehally, Sharma, 1994.
33. Cutler, Norman and Paula Richman, 1992, 34.
34. Hardy 1983, 418.
35. Nācciyār tirumōḷi: 508-5
36. “See! I could not live if other men enjoyed my large breasts that grew while I meditated on Kṛṣṇā; it would be like a jackal that roams in the forest stepping upon and sniffing with its nose at the oblations offered by Vedic Sages. (Hardy, Friedhelm, 1983, 418.)
37. Sharma 1994, 57.
38. ibid.
39. ibid. “Viraha-bhakti”: “devotion in which the sentiment of ‘separation’ is cultivated.” 9.
40. Sharma 1994, 12.
41. ibid.
42. The term *tiru* means “sacred” or “divine.” It is common in Tamil that the names of places that have any historic relevance due to either by the visit of any renowned saints or by their special mentions in their religious texts; names of popular religious texts; names of people with divine qualities etc., take this prefix especially to denote their sacred nature. The *Śaivite* saints celebrate 274 holy places and the *Vaiṣṇavas* celebrate a total of 108 places including *Vaikunṭam* “the Heaven.” Thus, all of the terrestrial places are commonly called *pāṭal perra patikaṅkaḷ* or *pāṭal perra stalankaḷ* “places that received songs.”
43. Ramanujan 1981, xi.

44. This nickname must have been given to him as a result of the appreciation of the readers — a case of the relationship between a performer and audience. However, his original names are believed to be *caṭakōpan* ‘angry one with braided hair — signifying the lord Śivā’; and *Māran* “a person with black colored body — signifying the lord *tirumāl - māl* meaning black—Viṣṇu.”
45. Ramanujan 1981, 83.
46. *ibid.*
47. Ramanujan 1981, 136.
48. *ibid.* 116-21.
49. Ramanujan 1981, 83.
50. *ibid.*, 76-85.
51. *Ibid.*, 83.
52. *Ibid.*, 76.
53. *Ibid.*, 77.
54. Ramanujan 1981, 135.
55. All of Tiruvāymoḷi poems are sung in such a way that the final word of all of the poems becomes the first word of the following poems — resulting a string of garland to be offered to the Lord.

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