

**Being Kṛṣṇa's Gopī: Songs of Āṅṅāl and Ritual Practices
in Tamil**



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“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.”¹

Medieval bhakti movements on Kṛṣṇa bhakti have an exclusive account on the phenomenon of eroticism and sex-impulse, especially surrounding the images of Kṛṣṇa, Rādhā, and Gopīs². This is obvious from the literatures of Vallabhaites, Chaitanya of Bengal, Gītagōvinda and others. Presumably, this forces one to define the term bhakti as a process of surrendering one's desires, including that of sex-impulse to the lord. Kṛṣṇa bhakti lays the ground for such a relationship between the Lord himself and with the images of Gopīs³ created by poet-saints. An intense and much adorable divine – human communion is made possible in Kṛṣṇa bhakti through an adulthood medium of man-woman relationship.

Rachel McDermott's analysis of bhakti in the context of divine-human communion elucidates adequately the study I attempt to undertake in this paper. "The word bhakti is usually translated as "love" or "devotion", although "reverence" and "honor" are also within its purview. As a concept, bhakti refers to a specific human approach to a 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."⁴ This paper, attempts to study the divine-human communion between a

¹ Pande, 1989, p. xxxi.

² “Love has long been a central metaphor for religious experience. ... The chief mood of bhakti is the erotic (srīngāra), seen almost entirely from an Indian woman's point of view, whether in its phase of separation or of union. (Ramanujan, 1982, p. 316). This paper attempts to study the srīngāra rasa in Āṅṭāl's songs from the point of view of separation, as opposed to union.

³ Tamil name for Gopī is Gōpiyarkaḷ or Gōpi, but the North Indian literatures refer to this as Gopī. This paper uses both of these forms.

⁴ McDermott, 2001, p.6.

male god and a female devotee Āṅṅāl, who is revered by the tradition as goddess, due to her success in uniting with Kṛṣṇa, fulfilling her desires. It is also attempted in this paper to provide a brief note on an account, in contrast, of the Tamil poet-saint Nammāṅṅār's devotion to show how the relationship between a male god and a male poet-saint falls under the realm of bhakti in terms of love and devotion with a complete surrender to the Lord, which Nammāṅṅār refers to as "Take Over", perhaps without the discourse of sexual-impulse.

Āṅṅāl's (one of the twelve saint-poets called panniru Āṅṅārs 'lit. twelve of those who were engulfed in god's love'⁵) two works namely Tiruppāvai (sacred cowherd girl – containing 30 versus) and Nācciyār tirumōḷi (sacred words of the Goddess – containing 143 versus) are studied in this paper with a close look at how they become a basis for an ongoing ritual in Tamil culture, and it is explored how they ensue the explorations of indigenous religion in South Indian bhakti movement. Nācciyār tirumōḷi of Āṅṅāl, in particular, is an example of a poet communicating to the Lord with her deep emotions using the words of eroticism and vulgarity. But strikingly, what one does not see in Āṅṅāl's works, however, is any mention of illicit relationship between Gōpīs and Kṛṣṇā, that one would expect to see in Kṛṣṇā bhakti as laid down from other sources - among the promising one from Bhagavata purāṇa⁶. Rather what one sees in Āṅṅāl's Kṛṣṇa bhakti is a mood of denial from the Lord to Āṅṅāl. Further, an emphasis is made in this paper for how both of the two works of Āṅṅāl as noted above constitute a logical sequence characterizing Āṅṅāl's personal attachment to Kṛṣṇā in a straight forward manner from happiness to frustration.

1. Authorship

⁵ The works of twelve saints constitute a total of about four thousand songs – called Nālāyirat tivyaṅṅ pirapandam 'four thousand divine collection' – on Lord Viṣṇu.

⁶ "Kṛṣṇa's affairs with gopīs 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 gopīs infatuation by relating it to a universal reaction in all beings." (Hardy, 1983, p. 499).

The poet-saint Āṅṅāl composed her songs in the seventh century A.D., laying out her emotions and mystic experiences with the Lord in a total of one hundred seventy three delightfully composed songs. In her attempt in capturing the heart of the Lord, she alludes to the young unmarried girls, whom she categorizes Kōtais, to join her in praising him, who, according to her, can fulfill their long lasting desires.

...vāy pēcum
naṅkāy! eḷuntirāy! nāṅātāy! nāvūṭaiyāy!
caṅkoṭu cakkaram ēntum tatakkaiyan
paṅkayak kaṅṅānaip pāṭu...⁷

O! the talkative girl!
O! the young girl! Wake up! Don't be shy!
O! the one with a tongue!
Sing of the Lord, the one who holds a Conch and discs!⁸

This divine authorship, however, is transferred to human when the songs become the source of inspiration for the young unmarried women, and when they use them as an object for expressing their own devotion to the Lord by reciting them in group. Besides, by chanting Āṅṅāl's songs as part of their devotion to the Lord, the women enact the role of Kōtais in place of Āṅṅāl.

manattukku iniyānaip pāṭavum nī vāy tiṇavāy!
init tān eḷuntirāy, itu enna pēr uṇakkam!
anaittu illattārum aṇintu - ēlōr empāvāy!

To sing of the beloved open your mouth!
Wake up! Why this tiring sleep,
in front of everyone in the house?
O! the young one! Wake up!

Addressing the Lord to be as Kōtais' beloved by Āṅṅāl implies the fact that the authorship of Āṅṅāl's songs is thus belonging to both Āṅṅāl - being the composer of the

⁷ The original songs of Āṅṅāl is reproduced in this paper based on the collection and translation by Sundaram, 1987. Unless otherwise mentioned, the translations are mine.

⁸ Sundaram, 1987, p. 16.

songs, and any young unmarried women who recite them. Thus, the emotions and mystic experiences expressed by Āṅṅāl in her songs should be identical to what is experienced by young women while chanting the songs.

The songs of Āṅṅāl are composed with the poet's emotions communicated in three different stages, each stage constituting her altering moods: first the joyful mood of praising the Lord of his adventures and exquisite forms; second the poet's curious and longing mood opting for an union with the Lord; and third a mood of frustration resulting from Lord's denial of her pleading. Interestingly, the three Tamil months (December through March) in a sequence are interrelated to each of these three moods by way of signifying these varying emotions. In a par with these three different moods, I attempt to categorize the songs under the following four major headings: a) Praising the Lord, b) Pleading or begging the Lord for an union, c) The Lord's denial and d) The poet's frustration out of desperation. It is shown in this paper how these emotions expressed in Āṅṅāl's songs coincide the mood of young unmarried women (audiences of Āṅṅāl) who play the major role in performing the ritual associated with Āṅṅāl's songs from December through March.

The ritual performed in Tamil tradition during the month of Mārkaḷī (December - January) of every year by young unmarried women, has an overt intention of pleading to the Lord for a life mate, but has a covert meaning of fulfillment of their longing with the Lord. Despite the fact that the songs of Āṅṅāl constitute a logical sequence from the joyous mood of praising the Lord of his aesthetic forms and adventurous deeds to a frustration mood, expressing her feelings in vulgar ways opting for the union with the Lord, only the former set of songs are adopted and chanted as part of the ritual, and the latter set of songs (Nācciyār tirumōḷi) are either ignored or not as popular as the others due to their vulgar contents. Thus, devotion from the point of view of the poet includes expression of both overt beauty as well as innate erotic feelings explicitly; but from the point of view of the audiences, the vulgarity is either suppressed or ignored during the

process of making ritual practices. “Āṅṭāl'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.”⁹

Time, space and mood:

Jayadēvā in his Gītagōvindā conforms rather categorically that the Spring time is the time for love for Kṛṣṇā.

When spring's mood is rich, Hari roams here

To dance with young women, friend –

A cruel time for deserted lovers.¹⁰

Both tiruppāvai and Nācciyār tirumoḷi songs are intertwined each other constituting a sequence of fluctuating emotions and feelings of the devotees during the three consecutive Tamil months namely mārkaḷi (December – January), tai (January – February) and māci (February – March), which are the equivalents for Spring in Tamil seasons. Out of these three months, the month of mārkaḷi is considered an evil month, as it is believed that during this month evil spirits roam around causing harmful diseases. For this reason, the tiruppāvai songs are chanted by young women early in the morning, while decorating the entrance of their houses with color powders and making drawings (Kōlam) to prevent the evil spirits from entering the house. Besides, the songs of tiruppāvai are meant for praising the Lord of his magnificent youth. This has an underlying implication for young women of pleading the Lord for an union with their marriage mates in the month of tai that follows. The month of tai, on the other hand, is considered very auspicious, and is believed to bring solutions for all long lasting predicaments. This is the month when the harvest festival is celebrated with freshly harvested grains from fields. Particularly, songs from the first part of Nācciyār tirumoḷi are recited during the month of tai, with an underlying motivation for an union with their

⁹ Dehejia, 1990, p. 5.

¹⁰ Miller, 1977, p.51.

love mates. Followed by these songs, entailed are a set of other songs implying a denial from the lord by way of Him destructing the drawings made by young women. Finally the last part of Nācciyār tirumōḷī, which expresses the feelings of women out of desperation and discontent are meant to be recited in the month of māci.

Praising the Lord

The thirty songs of tiruppāvai enlighten young women in a rather commanding tone for how praising and worshipping of the lord would bring his grace to them.

Mārkaḷit tiṅkaḷ mati niṛainta nannaḷāl
On a full moon day in the month of māraḷai
nīrāṭap pōtuvīr pōtuminō, nēriḷaiyīr
Go take a bath – you ornamented women!
cīrmalkum āyappāṭic celvac cīrumikāl!
O! the rich and little cowherd girls!
Kūrverḷ koṭuntoḷilan nanta kōpan kumaran
The cruel sharp speared Nanda's son,
ērārnta kaṅṅi yacōtai iḷāñciṅkam
young lion like man of Yasoda, whose eyes like fish
kārmēnic ceṅkaṅ katir matiyam pōl mukattān
one with cloud like body, red-eyed and with a face like moon
nārāyaṇaṇē namakkē paṛai taruvān;
The lord Narayana will offer his gracious drum to us
pārōr pukaḷap paṭintu - ēlōr empāvāy.
Let's sing his praise and gain his grace.

This type of songs mainly highlight the significance and the merits of worshipping the Lord by female devotees in order for them to attain the Lord's grace for the sake of their marriage. Contrary to this, however, as we will see in section 3 below, nammāḷvār's devotion to the Lord do not seem to imply any personal expectations from the Lord. The resulting merits by singing the Lord in tiruppāvai are not only personal in nature, but also for the benefit of everyone at large. Particularly, the songs suggest how praising the Lord would result rain; a good cultivation in the fields; how the cows yield abundant milk; and how one can eliminate sins from this life and the past life. Āṅṭāl expresses

the benefit of worshipping the Lord with her own beautifully composed poems with allegoric representations:¹¹

....

Vāyināl pāṭi, manattināl cintikka,
Pōya piḷaiyum pukutaruvān ninṛanavum
tīyiniyil tūcu ākum; ceppu - ēlōr empāvāy.

Singing the Lord with your mouth,
thinking the Lord with your mind
Your mistakes of this birth; mistakes of your last birth
He will remove **like the dust in fire!**
Be aware! O! the Cowherd Girl!

Removing ones sins is a theme that is typical of Tamil bhakti that one can find invariably both in Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva traditions. Tiruvīlaiyāṭṭaṭ purāṇam, one of the Śaiva works, for example, promises the devotees of removing sin by touching the divine water, as opposed to what one reads from Āṅṅāḷ's songs that removal of sins occur by singing of the Lord.

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 it is done with or without one's knowledge¹².

¹¹ Allegorical representation of poet's feeling is also a familiar tool in Mīrā's songs as well:

herī maim to prema divāni
mero darada na jānai koya!
ghāyala ki gata ghāyala jānai,
jo koi ghāyala hoyā!
Jauhari ki gata jauhari jānai,
Kyā jānai jina koya!
“Fiend, who can know my love's deep anguish?
Only one wounded knows how it hurts,
Only a jeweler knows a lost gem's worth.

..... (Bahadur, 1998, p.41)

¹² Parancoti Munivar, 1969, p.122.

Coincidentally, the image of "Fire" is used in both of these songs to indicate the power of the Lord that is capable of destroying one's sins. Followed by the songs for the month of mārkaḷi from tiruppāvai the songs for the month of tai begin from Nācciyār tirumoḷi. These songs expose the desire of women, after their long service rendered to the Lord during the month of tai. Notably, in these songs, Āṅṅāl pleads the god of 'love' to arrange for an union with the Lord, rather than directly asking the Lord in person.

Tai oru tiṅkaḷum tarai viḷakkit
All through the month of tai, I swept the floors
taṅ maṅṅalam iṭṭu māci munnāl
drew the drawings (kōlam), until the month of **māci**
aiya nuṅ maṅṅal koṅṭu teru aṅintu
Adored the streets with the grains of sand
aḷakinukku alaṅkarittu, anaṅka tēvā!
adorned the beauty, O! the lord of love!
uyyavum āmkolō? Enṅu colli
just to be united with the lord! Having said this
unnaiyum umpiyaiyum toḷutēn
I pray you and your younger brother as well,
veyyatu ōr taḷal umiḷ cakkarak kai
the Lord with a disc that spits fire
vēṅkaṭaṅku ennai vitikkiṅṅiē.
unite me with the Lord of Vēṅkaṭam.

I pray you! O! the Lord of Love!
For the entire month of **tai** until the month of **māci**
I swept the floor; adorned with drawings
I adorned the streets with grains of sand
This is
for me to unite with the Lord
The Lord with the a disc that spits fire
The Lord who lives in Tiruvenkatam
O! the Lord of Love, unite me with him.

This song, in particular, with rather a mild tone of voice, sets the ground for the forthcoming desperate mood of the poet. The symbolic mention of the Lord of Kāma in this song and in the rest of the songs in Nācciyār tirumoḷi decree the state of mind of the

poet, as though she is summoning a mediator between herself and the Lord Kṛṣṇā for the sake of their union.

The songs of Māci constitute the mood of devastation and desperation as a result of the denial from the Lord. This is understood from the Lord's destroying the drawings and decorations that the women made throughout the month of tai out of their sheer love on the Lord.

Vellai nuṅ maṅal koṅṭu ciṅṅil
vicittirap paṭa vīti vāyt
telli nāṅkaḷ ilāitta kōlam
azhitti yākilum, untan mēl
uḷlam oṭi urukallāl
ūrōtam onṅum ilōm, kaṅṅāy
kaḷḷa mātavā! Kēcavā! Un
mukattana kaṅkaḷ allavē!

O! Rogue! Madhava, Kesava
Don't you have eyes?
With small white sand
we made these drawings on the street!
You destroy them without mercy!
Even if you destroy these,
Our hearts will only suffer and melt,
But they will never be mad at you!

The Denial:

Kēsavā destroying the drawings and the decorations are symbolically referring to his unacceptability of Āṅṅāl's repeated request for her union with him.

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

when in sorrow.¹³

The songs of māci, thus, constitute the denial of the Lord, resulting a desperate mood and consequently the cause for singing of songs by Āṅṅāl with the contents of abundant eroticism and vulgarity. Notably, the excessive use of sexual terminologies in her songs are understood in the context of Āṅṅāl's admitting the fact of how her private body parts and mind are meant for the Lord ever since her birth.

.....

cāy uṭai vayiṟum en taṭa mulaiyum
my abdomen covered with clothes and my strong breasts
taraṇiyil talaippukaḷ tarakkiriyē.
are for the lord who excels himself in the world.

However, note that the Lord's act of destroying "Castles" in Kṛṣṇa bhakti literature is meant for expressing Kṛṣṇā's playful mood in the middle of the Kōpīs. But, in the context of the Kōpīs in tiruppāvai, who long for a personal union with the Lord, His destroying the drawings, and the subsequent songs of frustration by the poet indicate a mood of denial rather than a mood of playing with them.

The depth of anguish felt by Āṅṅāl upon rejection by the Lord is expressed strongly with allegories:

Pārkaṭal vaṅṅanukkē
Paṇi ceytu vāḷap perāviṭil, nān
aḷutu aḷutu alamantu ammā vaḷaṅka,
āṛḥa um atu unakku uṛaikkum, kaṅṅāy
uḷuvatōr eruttinai nukaṅkoṭu pāyntu
ūṭṭam inṟit turantal okkumē!

¹³ Dehejia, 1990, p. 81.

If I can't live with my service rendering to
the Lord of ocean of milk
you will realize I will be crying like
**a laboring ox being poked with a nail
and left without any food!**

The use of the allegory “laboring ox” suggests that she is a deserving person to be shown affection and be offered an union by the Lord. Strikingly, Kṛṣṇa bhakti as shown in other literatures from Bengal, and Rajastan denotes of Kṛṣṇā's making use of the Kōpīs for his sexual desires, and they do not mention any note of denial, as we see in Āṅṭāl's songs. For example, Jayadeva's Gītagovinda accuses of Kṛṣṇā having illicit relationships with the 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, Mādava! Go! Keśava, leave me!
Don't plead your lies with me!
Go after her, Krishna!
She will ease your despair.¹⁴

To quote a Mīrā's song in a related context, but with a note of subtle deception by Kṛṣṇā.

Jōgiyāri pratiḍi rō mul
hil mil bāt baṇāvan mīṭi
pīchē jāvat bhūl
tōḍat jej karat nahīñ sajanī
jaise camelī ke phūl
mīrā kahe prabhu tumare taras bin
lagat hivḍā 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

¹⁴ Miller, 1977, p. 107.

the thorn of waiting pierces without end.

Neither in tiruppāvai nor in Nāccīār tirumōḷi, one can see the act of submission and blissful mood from the part of Kṛṣṇā. Only Āṅṅāḷ despairs, laments and calls on the Lord of Love in desperation for help.

Viraha state and the mood of desperation:

Expressing 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 3rd century B.C. One of the genres of Sangam classics called aham contains exclusively of the theme of women's separation from their male partners and their alluding for a reunion with their lovers out of desperation. Such songs lament about the torturous feelings that the female lovers undergo due to their partners' abandonment in a cruel and unwitting manner.

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.¹⁵

This poem, by the Tamil poet Auvaiyār, like any other poem from aham type of songs, illustrate the grievance of a woman whose husband left her and never returned. Despite numerous gossips and rumors among the people in the neighborhood, he didn't seem to return. This poem allegorically uses an image of a tree that grew out of every grief that the woman goes 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. The largely grown

¹⁵ Cutler, Norman and Paula Richman, 1992, p. 34.

tree with lots of flowers is a symbolic representation of the woman's enormous distress and sorrow.

The element that is missing in such poems, however, in comparison with bhakti poems is the element of devotion to god and mysticism. Interestingly, many aham poems identify one of the anticipated consequences of separation as the acts of 'gossip' and 'rumor', which are not part of the concerns of the religious poems, despite the fact that the saint-poets do lament about lord's separation and abandoning them without mercy. This substantiates the fact that the saint-poets seclude themselves in a mystic world that is beyond the scopes of the material world, mostly surrounded by their kith and kin. Furthermore, what one perceives in Sangam poems in most cases is 'separation' after a legitimate union of the lovers. But, as one can imagine from the following verse by Āṅṅāl, separation happens without any prior union, despite the case that separation and its resulting mental state of agony that the poets experience are obviously identical to one another in both cases - material versus spiritual instances. Songs of Āṅṅāl in Nācciyār tirumozhi, for instant, invariably contain the theme of separation out of denial and consequently poet's desperate desire to unite with the lord. Unlike in tiruppāvai, where Āṅṅāl assumes herself as one of the cowherd girl, nācciyār tirumōḷi is best known for its explicit vulgarity and eroticism expressed out of desperation. Āṅṅāl's desperation to unite physically with lord Kṛṣṇā may be further understood from the following verse where she begs Kāmā, the lord of love to arrange for her union with Kṛṣṇā:

Kāy uṭay nelloṭu karumpu amaittu,
With tender rice and sugarcane
Kaṭṭi arici aval amaittu,
With cooked flattened rice
vāy uṭai maṛaiyavar mantirattaal
with the sacred mantras
Manmatanē! Unnai vaṅangkukirēn;
Oh! The lord of love! I pray you!
tēyam mun aḷantavan tirivikkiraman
The lord of the three world,
tirukkaikaḷāl ennait tīṅṅum vaṅṅam
with his sacred hands, to touch me on

cāy uṭai vayiṟum en taṭa mulaiyum
my belly covered with clothes, and my strong breasts
taraṇiyil talaippukaḷ tarakkiṟiyē.
are for the lord who excels himself in 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?”¹⁶

Āṅṭāl’s desire to unite with Kṛṣṇā results out of her dislike of the material world and its mortal men.

.....
ūṇṭai āzhi caṅku uttamarkku eṇṟu
For the god with discus and conch,
unnittu eḷunta en taṭa mulaikaḷ
grew firmly my strong breasts
māṇṭavarkku eṇṟu pēccup paṭil
If it is to be offered to any human,
vāzhkilēn kaṇṭāy, manmatane!
I will not live – you see! O! Manmata – the lord of love.

“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.”¹⁷

As we will see in section 2, the reason for Āṅṭāl’s developing a feeling of aversion with the material world is because of her excessive attachment to the Lord Kṛṣṇā since her birth through her father, who is also a Kṛṣṇā devotee.

This hatred of the politics and orthodoxy of their time and desiring to unite with the Lord following the spiritual path have also become the motivating force behind Mīrā’s Kṛṣṇā bhakti. However, Mīrā’s bhakti to Kṛṣṇā is not the same as Āṅṭāl in that she desires a union as a servant; a play mate and the like, but never as a life partner as Āṅṭāl does.

mhāṇe cākar rākhĀ jī
Please keep me as your servant.
Giridhārī lālā cākar rākhĀ jī

¹⁶ Hardy, Friedhelm, 1983, p. 418.

¹⁷ Hardy, Friedhelm, 1983, p.418.

Giridari Laal, please keep me as your servant

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

DekhĀ māi hari maṇ kāTha kiyĀ.
āvaṇa kah gaĀ ajĀ ṇa āyā,
kar mhāṇe kōl gayĀ.
khān pān sudh sab bisariyĀ.
kāi mhāro prāṇ jiyĀ.
thārō kōl viruddha jaga thārō,
the kĀi bisar gayĀ.
MīrĀ re prbhu giridhar nāgar,
the biṇ phaTā 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 wisped
Yourself away, lifter of the mountain
Without him my heart splinters.¹⁸

The separation and the subsequent longing for a union with the Lord are the factors involved in expressing the devotional experiences of the women saint-poets - a concept Friedhelm Hardy illustrates in his book as Viraha-bhakti.¹⁹ Suguna Ramanathan, on the other hand, categorizes this state of mind of the poet singers to be in a secluded and lying "outside the boundaries": One lives in a world of discourse a practice of power with boundaries, norms and perspectives. These boundaries are formed with a background of class, caste, patriarchy and so on.²⁰ On the other hand the poet saints put themselves away from these boundaries and make a link with God by way of Bhakti. The fifteenth century poetess Meera breaks out all the norms and finds herself within a boundary of her love with the God. A boundary that is free from class, caste and other hierarchies.

rāṇājī! ab na rahūngi tōri haṭkī!
Your Highness! Now, you can't put me inside four walls!

¹⁸ Futtehally, Shama, 1994, p. 57.

¹⁹ ibid. "Viraha-bhakti": 'devotion in which the sentiment of "separation" is cultivated'. P. 9.

²⁰ Futtehally, Shama, 1994, p.12.

Where as, as we will see below, Āṅṅāḷ's aversion from the surrounding world came as a result of her obsessive personal relationship with the god, thus differing totally from Mīrā's environment, which is socio-political in nature.

2. Material world surrounding the life of Āṅṅāḷ

Āṅṅāḷ is one of the seven Āḷvārs (immersed in the depths of enjoyment of god) whose devotion to the lord Viṣṇu formed the foundation for an indigenous mode of bhakti in Tamil Nadu as opposed to the previously followed Vēdic and other religions traditions such as Jainism and Buddhism. The contributions of Āḷvār's and the Saivaites Nāyanmārs revitalized the religious milieu throughout the subcontinent. Āṅṅāḷ's life and poetry are celebrated every December-January (mārkaḷi and tai of the Tamil months). The viraha state of Āṅṅāḷ and her desperation to unite with the Lord is mainly because of her ceaseless exposure to the lord from her early childhood by his father Viṣṇucitta, one of the devotees of lord Viṣṇu.

Āṅṅāḷ's origin is presumably mystic in nature, as she was found by a devout brahmin named Viṣṇucitta who lived in Villiputtur, a town near Madurai. Viṣṇucitta discovered her under a tulasi plant during his daily duties of procuring flowers for the worship of the Lord at the local temple. Having no family of his own, Vishnucitta felt it was God's grace that gave him this child and named her Kōtai, or "gift of Mother Earth." Filled with joy, he took her home and raised her as his own. Kōtai grew up in an atmosphere of love and devotion. Viṣṇucitta showed affections on her in every respect, singing songs to her about his Beloved Kṛṣṇā, teaching her all the stories and philosophy he knew, and sharing with her his love of Tamil poetry. The love Viṣṇucitta had for his Beloved Lord intensified further in his daughter, and as a result she was passionately in love with Lord Kṛṣṇā. Even as a child, Kōtai made up her mind to marry none but the Lord of Brindavana, and refused to think of any human being in

similar terms. She imagined what it would be like to be His bride, playing the role of His beloved, enjoying His presence.

A story that is popularly known to the hearts of Tamil Āṅṅāḷ's devotees, thus, plays a major role in keeping her memory alive, more than the beauty of her songs of tiruppāvai. As part of his daily routine, Vishnucitta would make a flower garland to be adorned in the necks of Kṛṣṇā in the temple. Unknown to her father, Āṅṅāḷ adorned herself daily with the flower garland he prepared for the Lord at the temple. After admiring her reflection and thinking of herself as His ideal bride, she would put the garland back for her father to take to the temple and offer to the Lord. One day, Vishnucitta noticed a strand of Kōtai's hair on one of the garlands. Shocked and saddened by this unruly behavior of hers, he mistreated Kōtai for her misuse of the garland and discarded it. He carefully prepared a new one and offered it to the Lord, begging His pardon all the while.

That night, the Lord appeared to Vishnucitta in his dream and asked him why he discarded Kōtai's garland instead of offering it to Him. He told Vishnucitta that He missed the scent of Kōtai's body in the flowers, and that He preferred them that way. Would he please continue to give the garlands once worn by Kōtai? Overcome with emotion, Vishnucitta awoke and cried with tears of both joy and remorse. It dawned on him that his daughter was someone whose love of God was so intense and pure that even he had not comprehended its extent. Her spiritual greatness was such that the Lord Himself wished to share her presence. From this day on, she became known as "Āṅṅāḷ", the girl who "ruled" over the Lord.

Āṅṅāḷ blossomed into a beautiful young woman as she came of adulthood age. When asked to marry, however, she stubbornly refused, saying that she would only agree to marry Sri Ranganatha, the Lord at the great temple town of Srirangam. Vishnucitta despaired, wondering what was to become of his daughter. One night, Lord

Ranganatha appeared in his dream and asked that Āṅṅāl be sent to Him in all her wedding finery. Simultaneously, the Lord appeared before the priests at Srirangam and asked them to prepare for the coming of Āṅṅāl. Vishnucitta once again was filled with both joy and sadness; joy that his beloved daughter would attain her goal, but sadness at losing her at the same time. He made all the wedding preparations and arranged for Āṅṅāl journey in a palanquin to Srirangam.

Āṅṅāl waited with excited anticipation as the wedding party approached Lord Ranganatha's shrine. As they entered the temple, she jumped out of the palanquin, unable to restrain herself any longer. Running into the temple sanctum, she embraced Lord Ranganatha and disappeared in a blaze of glory, having joined her Lord. She was only fifteen at the time. This popular story, known to the readers only through oral tradition is not documented neither in her songs nor in any other works.

Thus, the authorship of the divine poet Āṅṅāl in conjunction with this popular story of the public constitute a new authorship that is responsible for a ritual practice adopted through the ages with the fond memory of the divine poet-goddess Āṅṅāl. Even though much of what is said in this story has its origin from the oral tradition, some information such as the relationship between Āṅṅāl and Viṣṇuchitta is yet mentioned in some of the songs of Nācciyār tirumōḷi.

paruntāl kalirrukku aruḷceyta parman tannaip pārin mēl
virntāvanattē kaṅṅamai viṭṭuccittan kōtai col
maruntām eṅṅru tam manattē vaittuk koṅṅu vālvārkaḷ
peruntāl uṭaiya pirān aṭikkīḷp piriyātu eṅṅrum iruppārē.

Those who would treasure as a balm
These words of **Visnuchittan's Kodai**
What is seen on the earth
In the woods of Brindavan
Of the great Lord of Heaven
Rescuer of the elephant

They will reach the sacred feet of the Lord
Never to be parted from him!

Having made Āṅṅāḷ's poems the source for reaching the Lord, she is now one of the best loved poet-saints of the Tamils. Pious tradition reckons her to be the veritable descent of Bhumi Devi (Mother Earth) in bodily form to show humanity the way to His lotus feet. She is present in all Sri Vaishnava temples, in India and elsewhere, next to her Lord, as she always desired. As George Hart rightly puts it, “while the theory of Tamil religion has kept the northern ideal, the practice has adhered to the indigenous model, which demands that gods be modeled after human kings.”²¹ The indigenous model the Tamil tradition created undoubtedly is that one of the Gōpī's, which is Āṅṅāḷ, a model for the Tamil Nappiṇṇai, and the Northern image of Rādhā, the official wife of the Lord Kṛṣṇa.

The hagiography of Āṅṅāḷ as presented here undoubtedly has historical relevance in most important respects. Today, the tulasi garden in which she was found is preserved in Srivilliputtur. Vishnucitta's house, adjacent to Lord Vishnu's temple, has been converted into a temple in honor of Āṅṅāḷ and contains the well in which she admired her reflection while wearing the Lord's garlands. Most of all, however, Āṅṅāḷ is remembered for her poetry, in which she often strikes autobiographical notes about her love for her Lord. She describes herself as a young girl, still not fully mature, pining away for Him. She beseeches her friends, the god of love, and even animals for help in her quest to attain Him. Finally, she describes her good fortune of being the daughter of Vishnucitta, the best of the devout, who lives in Srivilliputtur and adores the Lord.

Literary Appreciations and Allegoric Representations:

Āṅṅāḷ's songs are not only popular for their theme in terms of expressing her deep emotions in a more passionate and exquisite manner, but also known for her handling of the theme with a wealth of gratifying allegories and metaphors, resulting a high degree of

²¹ Hart, 1979, p.14.

literary appreciation. This is evident from a set of songs where she expresses her jealousy with the white conch, which, according to her, attained the esteemed privilege of obtaining the taste of the Lord's mouth. She addresses the white conch of her feelings with the signature verse: O! the White Conch in the hands of the Lord!

karuppūṛam nāṛumō? kamalp pū nāṛumō?
tirup pavaḷac cevvaṅyāntān tittiirukkumō?
maruppu ocitta mātavantan vāyḥ cuvaiyum nāṛṛamum
viruppuṛṛuk kēṭkiṛēn col. āḷi-veṅcaṅkē!
Can Camphor stink? Can a white lotus stink?
Or, at least, would the Lord's Coral lip sweeten?
I plead you with my anguishing desire!
Would you reveal the taste of the Lord's mouth and its smell?
O! the sea-born white conch! Tell me!

Āṅṭāl's long lasting desire to be united with the Lord and obtain the pleasures one could possibly obtain by way of sexual-union is implicitly stated through her reference to the Conch, that attained the privilege of browsing the mouth of the Lord, despite its origin from the ocean.

unnōṭu uṭanē oru kaṭalil vāḷvārai
innār inaiyār enṛu eṅṅuvār illai kāṅ;
man āki niṅṛa matucūtan vāyamutam
pannāḷum uṅkiṛāy, pāñcanniyamē!
No one wonders your kins
who still live in the sea are!
But! you taste the sweet Ambrosia!
For ever
from the Mouth of the Madusūdan!

3. Lord's Takeover of Nammāḷvār

While the mystical path of the woman saint Āṅṭāl is filled with elements of eroticism and sexual-impulse, subsequently her 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 Āṅṅāl influenced women. Unlike Āṅṅāl, Nammālvār's verses are known for expressing a love solely on the nature of affection between god and devotee in the deepest manner possible. Nammālvār expresses his ultimate desire with the Lord in terms of the term "Take Over", a state of being possessed under the control of the Lord. The 1, 102 verses (called Tiruvāymoḷi²² – meaning 'holy words of mouth, words of the holy mouth' or 'utterance/poetics of the holy/sacred') written by Nammālvār somewhere during 880 to 930 A.D. (p.xi) allude the magnificence of the Lord in 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.”²³

Nammālvār, who was born in a village called Tirukuṟukūr 'sacred tiny town' (today's Ālvārtirunakari) in the Southern part of Tamil Nadu, sung these poems after his six years of silent meditation under a tamarind tree. Thus, like Āṅṅāl, Nammālvār's origin is also presumed to be mystic, which gives a divine value to his songs. The name Nammālvār literally means “our own Ālvār” – 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 given to him at a later point²⁴.

The significance of the works of Nammālvār and the eleven other saints may be understood well from how the word Ālvār (a term resulted after the appreciation of the saint's performance) is used. The Tamil term āḷ means “to be deep” and “to immerse”.

²² 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 renowned saints or by their special mentions in religious literatures; names of popular religious works; names of people with divine qualities etc., take this prefix to denote their sacred nature. The Śaivā saints celebrate 274 holy places and the Vaiṣṇavas celebrate a total of 108 places including Vaikuṇḍam 'the Heaven'. All the terrestrial places are usually called pāṭal peṟṟa pātikaḷ or pāṭal peṟṟa stalaṅgaḷ 'places that received songs'.

²³ Ramanujan, 1981, p. xi.

²⁴ 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 bridged hair – signifying the lord Śivā'; and māṟan 'person with black colored body – signifying the lord tirumāl – māl means black – Viṣṇu.'

In the context of one's thoughts, this word can be metaphorically used to mean 'to be engulfed in' or 'to be completely filled with'. The suffix āṛ is used both as a human plural suffix referring to many people, and also as a singular masculine honorific suffix. Thus, this word in its entirety means "those whose thoughts are filled in entirety 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 allegorically referred to as "swimming and rejoicing/enjoying in the ocean of god's love". The following expression in Tamil illustrates well the metaphor between the act of swimming with that of being in love with god.

Anpenum inpak kaṭalil nintit tīḷaippar'
 Love –called joyful ocean-in swim-and enjoy/rejoice
 Lit. One enjoys swimming in the ocean of love
 'Saints enjoy themselves by being in love with the Lord '

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 the lord Viṣṇu. He is taking a peaceful nap (ānanta cayanam 'joyful sleep') on a snake bed in the ocean of milk. The name āḷvār, thus, interacts with the Lord's joyful mood of sleeping on the ocean of milk with that of the saints' enjoyment of the Lord's love; so does the term Bhakti, a blissful state of the saints whose mind is totally filled with the love of the Lord. A. K. Ramanujan interprets this as a state of the saints, who are "taken over" by the love of god.²⁵

The Lord Stands as Everything: Following poem of Nammāḷvār reveals who the Lord is and what his relationship with the other objects in the world are:

nām avan ivan uvan,
 we-inclusive he-that-impolite he-this-impolite he-in-between
 avaḷ ivaḷ uvaḷ evaḷ
 she-that she-this she-inbetween she-who
tām avar ivar uvar,

²⁵ Ramanujan, 1981, p. 83.

one's-self(own) he-that-polite he-this-polite he-in-between-polite
atu itu utu etu
that this this-inbetween which-thing
vīm avai ivai uvai,
they-we they-neuter these-neuter inbetween-neuter
avai nalam, tīṅku avai
they-neuter good, bad they-neuter
ām avai, āy-avai
thus they-neuter became-they-neuter
āy niṅṛa avarē.
Become stands/remains he-in certainty (p. 122).

According to the Vaiṣṇavā theology Lord exists in everything and he himself becomes everything – all human, neuter and all the other elements of the universe are contained in him; and thus he has become everything. The meaning of this poem can be well understood by juxtaposing the last line of this verse āy niṅṛa avarē ‘he indeed stands as’ with every word in this poem. Thus, “nām-āy niṅṛa avar” ‘he(the Lord) remains as we-all’; “avan-āy niṅṛa avar” ‘he(the Lord) remains as him-that person’ and so on. Vaiṣṇavā’s concept of god is a case of saḡuṇa – ‘god with entity’ as opposed to nirḡuṇa one without any form or entity.²⁶

The Takeover and Possession:

A.K. Ramanujan concisely identifies the spirit behind the idea of ‘possession’ in the context of Hinduism and other similar practices from other religions including American Indians and elsewhere by quoting Weston LaBarre’s view from *The Gost Dance: Origins of Religion*. The words ‘takeover’ and ‘possession’ are used 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” from the point of view of Nammāṅṭvār’s obsession to Viṣṇu and the other in the context of the use of the Tamil word ‘cāmiyāṭi ‘god-dancer’²⁷. ‘Takeover’ is an instance of one’s obsession to the Lord as a result of exercising an extraordinary Bhakti or devotion.

²⁶ Ramanujan, 1981, p.136.

²⁷ ibid. p. 116-21.

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 carried out by the god with devotee's body as vehicle, where as in the former case, performance – singing of the Lord – is carried out by the devotee himself with 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 āḷuḍaiyāṇ enṛahdē koṇṭu 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 muṛṇavum tānānān
voluntarily grace offered me fully became-he
he offered his grace voluntarily to me and he became fully of me

mīnāy āmai yumāy narasiṅkamum āy kuṛaḷāy
fish-became turtle-became pig-also became
He took the forms of fish, turtle and dwarf

kānār enāmumāyk kaṛkiyāminnam kārvaṇṇanē.²⁸
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 renovate the cosmos). He is the one with dark colored body.

This poem and the other similar poems²⁹ allude how the Lord came into Nammāḷvār with expressions such as:

..I've caught him, I contain in him now;
...occupied me, became all of me³⁰;
took Nammāḷvār into the Lord himself
... and filled me over into himself³¹;

²⁸ Ramanujan, 1981, p. 83.

²⁹ ibid, p. 76-85.

³⁰ ibid. p. 83.

³¹ ibid. p. 76.

he stands there consuming me³².

These instances result due to Nammāṅṅvār's excessive obsession to the Lord by his mind, but with his body is still under his own control. In the case of Cāmiyāṅṅṅ however, both mind and body of the devotee are taken control of the god. Yet, both cases take place as a result of the devotee's true Bhakti – a performance conducted with the union of both body and mind.

Music and the tradition of ōtuvārs:

Āṅṅvārs' texts are being passed on from generation to generation with much emphasis on music (icai) and mime (avinayam), and with less emphasis on the poetry³³(p. 110). Both tiruvāymoṅṅṅ and other Tamil religious texts are sung in temples by a group of people called ōtuvārs 'the ones who chant the religious songs'. It is often believed that their performance of singing with rhythm and melody is more appealing and carrying the spirit than the meaning. Further, the antāṅṅ³⁴ 'end becomes the beginning' type of Āṅṅvārs' poems facilitate the singing of them with an aesthetic appeal.

Another significant point to mention in the context of A.K. Ramanujan's work is that his mention about the "shift" that took place during the Bhakti period. Both the Vaiṣṅavā (of Āṅṅvārs) and saivā (of Nāyanmār's) 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 pūjā are continued even until the present in temples and other sacred places of Tamil Nadu keeping the shift alive for ever, same as

³² ibid. p. 77.

³³ Ramanujan, 1981, p. 135.

³⁴ All of Tiruvāymoṅṅṅ poems are sung in such a way that the last word of all the poems become the first word in the following poem – resulting a string, a garland to offer to the Lord.

Āṅṅāḷ's tiruppāvai rituals are being experienced with abundance of mysticism and devotional fervor.

Concluding Remarks

An attempt is made in this paper to investigate the nature of devotion and mystic experience of the medieval Tamil poet-saint Āṅṅāḷ and Nammāḷvār, the two of the twelve Āḷvārs. This study and a simultaneous comparison of the Kṛṣṇa bhakti tradition in the North and the east reveal that the imaginatory aspect of illicit relationship between Kṛṣṇa and Kōtai including Kṛṣṇa's erotic relationship, his playful mood and the like are missing from Āṅṅāḷ's poems. Rather, what one sees in Āṅṅāḷ's poems is an element of denial of the Lord, and her desperation as a result. The devastating desperation of Āṅṅāḷ is presented to the readers by a set of verses in Nācciyār tirumoḷi revealing her deep feeling in a very erotic and vulgar language. Nācciyār tirumoḷi is a typical example for how the relationship between a male lord and a woman devotee would be like in the perspective of a human seeking for a communion with a divine, with sexual-impulse as the transcending factor. The other extreme form of divine-human communion is the perspective of Nammāḷvār's concept of "Take-Over", an intimate mystic experience that one would accomplish as a result of deep personal devotion to god. The divine-human communion takes place in a massive way, when the authorship of the mystic experience of the poet-saints is transferred to human in the form of ritual practices.

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