DIALOGICS OF CULTURES
IN ANCIENT INDIAN LITERATURES

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First Word

Living in a plural world poses its own problems. Increasingly so, as people tend to become more and more intolerant toward each other, toward the way one thinks and lives often contrary to the other. This intolerance is presumably based upon a sudden rise of awareness of difference among people. People different from us in looks, in language or in beliefs usually become suspect. Of course, difference between individuals is normal, but to transfer this notion of difference on to clans and communities and thereby seek community identities often creates problems! The notion itself is problematic because within the confines of this notion, human awareness begins to operate, creating barriers, categories in order to divide people in societies. To put it differently, since to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life, or to misquote Wittgenstein, a form of culture, it is mainly one's culture that is up against another's! And if cultures assert their own difference to the point of no return to norms of understanding, there will be, as Wayne C. Booth would suggest, "chaotic warfare" (p 527).

Modern societies are replete with notions of ethnicity, cultural/religious identity which are often valorized in recent times to the point of unreason, plunging ethnically different communities into conflict situations. This new awareness of one's distinct ethnic identity often plays a horrendous role in our present-day world: for, your 'difference' is made a special privilege which you would proceed to deny to others who differ from you in terms of clan, creed or colour. Remember the Hutus and the Tutsis of Rwanda, Burundi who massacred each other in millions, not to mention Lebanon or the ethnic cleansing that proceeded, say, from Kosovo to Kashmir! That is ethnicity in its unspeakable ugliness.

To take a different but major tack, in face of the notions of ethnic identities (mooted above) and the subsequent conflicts they breed in societies across the world, the present study shifts its focus to the early phases of Indian civilization to see whether the so-called 'Aryans' and the 'Dravidians,' some of the earliest communities in recorded history, were also engaged in intense hostility when their cultures encountered each other. Or did they try to make sense of the Other in a cross-cultural exchange? Obviously there are lessons to be drawn here, for as Heidegger would say, "...the past always lies ahead of us, or is impending, or comes to meet us from the future" (as cited by Fred Dallmayr, 2000, p 6). The language cultures referred to here that would "come to meet us from the future", therefore, are Sanskrit whose texts go back to the second millennium BC, Tamil whose first extant text is of c 300 BC, and Kannada whose extant written text is of the seventh century AD. Did, say, Sanskrit and its northern culture with an 'Aryan identity' come into conflict with the ethnic identities in the south? Why is it that Tamil or Kannada classics do not register any protest against the inroads that the Sanskrit culture made on them or is it that the notion of identity as something exclusivist had not occurred to them, and the people were ready to negotiate with the new culture and its concepts?

Since the notion of 'identity' has figured in our discussion, it is time we took a hard look at this term. The term is multi-layered in meaning and nourished by a cumulative history of European thought, and it is not easy to get an Indian (Sanskrit) word for it. The terms available are *ananyata* or *asmita*, which do not carry the connotation of a marker, an 'identity' tag. Moreover, *ananyata* can also mean unique, and *asmita* strongly connotes presence without distinctly calling for a 'label' marking an entity! Besides, *ananyata* has a negative connotation — that is, what is not *anya*, the Other — whereas the term 'identity' sounds very positive, if not coercive! What has happened to Sanskrit which otherwise is so rich in philosophical terms and theories, one wonders! Is the concept of 'identity' then a part of our colonial legacy?

Since the term is currently used in English with strong political overtones, one turns to Western philosophy, and who should one find therein but Descartes, the renowned philosopher of 'identity.' Wasn't he the man who established the existence of man by his one singular (poetic) formulation (in 1619 to be precise) which supposedly took the entire Western thought system by storm? Most thinkers today trace the notion of identity to Descartes' formulation: *Cogito ergo sum*. Scholars have found Descartes' *sutra* to possess three important aspects contributing to the growth of 'identity' concept. The first one is implicit in the formulation itself: that is, the thinking part of man as 'self-defining', self-affirming. The second aspect points to the 'I', which by virtue of its presence confirms the existence of the external world whose knowledge it consolidates. The third aspect empowers the 'I' by virtue of its possession of this knowledge. And this knowledge, in short, empowers the subject and confers upon it an 'identity' tag which becomes exclusivist — that is, it excludes others from its purview. Consequently, the subject reduces the external world to the familiar contents of its mind, and it is now the shrunk world that revolves around the self and its mind! (vide Leela Gandhi, pp 34-36).

No wonder that a host of thinkers of the recent past, designated as 'anti-humanists', revolted against such a 'humanist'-centred epistemology. Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida, to name a few, have all adopted an anti-humanist stance because they thought that the Cartesian *cogito* (with its linear logic) ends up in a blind alley which occludes the sight of the Other. What is unmentioned in *cogito* becomes synonymous with the Other, says Foucault (1970, p 226), and that is where the problem lies. That there are other orders of reality, other frames of reference, and other styles of living is lost sight of in the blind aggrandizing of the self and its invented world. The Cartesian reductionism in its extreme form will end up in some kind of 'talibanization' of the entire society and its concerns!

Conversely, moving in the Other direction, Theodor Adorno, the arch exponent of 'non-identity', traverses so far as to envisage, says Fred Dallmayr, the possibility of destabilizing the Cartesian *cogito*, which is deeply lodged in the European collective psyche, through his now well-known 'negative dialectics', which presumably would lead to a kind of "free-floating non-identity" (2001, p 188). This is astonishingly parallel to the kind of 'non-identity' that the *bhakti* saint-poets of both the Tamil and Kannada language cultures could be said to have experienced and practised in the Indian context through their *bhaktimarga* (more of this later).

Edward Said sounds more forthright when he says that all identities are constructs and "the job facing the 'cultural intellectual' [is] not to accept the politics of identity as given," recounts Dallmayr, "but to show how all representations are constructed, for what purpose, by whom, and with what components" (p 193). Dallmayr adds in his comments that "postmodernism is bent on opening windows onto alterity ... and nonidentity ... and this bent ... may well be the most ennobling and redeeming quality in contemporary Western thought — by cleansing that thought of its tendencies toward egocentrism, acquisitiveness, and intellectual cannibalism" (2001, p. 178).

What follows in the present study, therefore, is a broad theoretical framework within which we try to make sense of the three language cultures, with their separate 'identities', as they interacted with each other, resulting in a mutually shared enrichment of their ancient texts with themes, motifs, and metaphors. What is discernible, though, in the encounter as cultures began to interact with each other, are two contradictory, yet complementary processes at work — for instance, Tamil both appropriates features from Sanskrit but resists it, and when it resists, it does so fiercely, nationalistically, while Kannada interacts with Sanskrit much more in the appropriative mode, but choosing things, aspects with ‘circumspection’. Resistance is often felt as a necessity because if a culture is to survive with distinct markers and is to be sustained against the (r)evolutionary forces of history, then it has to get its instruments of survival consciously honed so as to resist further erosions.

The ‘comparitism’ attempted here has another layer to it. The history of thought, whether of the East or West, is dense and this history is constantly engaged in rethinking, creating new perspectives. Moreover, concepts by their very nature tend to be fluid and freely partake the fluidity of time, thereby animating the logic of the ambiguous. The present study therefore tries to ‘use’ theories, notions from the West whenever they can shed further light on the Indian texts. Besides, concepts implicit and embedded in the Indian texts create a certain conceptual space wherein new alignments, ‘family resemblances’ to modern/post-modern notions can be envisaged. To put it differently, the interface between the three language cultures, richly heteroglossic, can be seen to house a context of ‘answerability’ between the ancient and the modern/postmodern dispensations. Hence, the cognitive mapping of inter-theories, homologies, remembered and juxtaposed whenever they appear to be relevant to the present study.

* * * *

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TRS SHARMA

Prolegomenon

This study is about cultural encounters. It is an inquiry into cross-cultural interventions in the early phases of Indian civilization—an *essai*, if you will, in comparative thinking/literature. Furthermore, in face of the notions of ethnicity and cultural identities much valorized in recent times, this project attempts to explore the encounters between three well-defined literate cultures of ancient times, and thereby attain a certain pointed relevance to our times. It constitutes a piece of cultural and conceptual history that is worth remembering today.

When the northern Sanskrit culture encountered the southern cultures such as Tamil and Kannada, how did these cultures interact with each other? The interface between Sanskrit and Tamil, to take Tamil first, provides a contested cultural space wherein we envisage a constant, continuing recoding—a recoding that confers on each other mutual, albeit fluid, identities. While reading the classical Tamil texts, my emphasis will be on the intricate, subtle civilizational process involved in the encounter. The present-day reader who is more used to seeing conflicts between different cultures would really be hard put to finding them in these texts. On the contrary, what these texts record, register does not smack of any deep hostility or resistance to Sanskrit, as one is prone to expect when Tamil confronted Sanskrit. The encounter very often resulted in quiet and prevalent forms of negotiation, readjustment, and an excursive poetics of culture—as seen, for instance, in the *bhakti* hymns of the later periods.

There are, besides, a couple of subtexts to this alleged 'encounter' discussed here. One such subtext which is somewhat pervasive in the discussion deals with the well-known syndrome called Unity versus Diversity. Haven't we all come under the ubiquitous power of this syndrome at some moment or other? We have often uttered it without spelling out the many layers involved, the nuances implied. Perhaps we need to see how ideologies clash, fuse, and assimilate, and where human agency intervenes. Is it that ideologies assume a powerful life on their own, assert, shape human lives and social order or can they be controlled or modulated so as to change direction and their conflictual thrust by human intervention? This study is based upon three cultures as mooted earlier, Sanskrit, Tamil and Kannada, as they are seen confronting each other in their textual representations.

The other subtext to this inquiry deals with the history of subjectivity of the Self which figures in Tamil culture, its poetry, as the latter moves from a very 'secular' (non-religious laukika) mode, say, from a mode of strict impersonality to one of very personalized, intimate relation with one's god as it happened in the *bhakti* period. Thus, it is also a study of diachrony, of transformations that take place in Tamil culture, and in the conceptualizations of the Self when the two cultures encountered each other. However, what finally gets reflected are the synchronic moments, shall we say, a hall of mirrors which reflect images of definition and symbols of consolidation of themes, the expressional modes, and the ideological stances that emerge from both Tamil and Kannada texts.

Peter Brooks, while writing a preface to Todorov's book *Introduction to Poetics* (p. v), moots the question whether we can look at literary history as "diachronic poetics", that is, a poetics as evolving through processes of history. Apparently, behind the intermittent changes and variations of genre (say, from Sangam poems to *bhakti* poems in Tamil), there are perceptible historical changes. History often determines choices of genre and changes in the configuration of poetics.

Therefore, as an alternative to literary history *per se*, the kind of diachronic overview attempted here tries to identify certain broad conceptual structures embedded in the classical literary texts of Tamil and Kannada, and the cultural forces which sustain them from outside. The intent is to show how both these structures and forces help shape the poetics implicit in these texts and activate meanings, setting the parameters wherein the poets operate.

The other point that needs to be discussed is the notion of Indian literature as such and its ontological status. Enough perhaps has been said by now about the notion of Indian literature as being ONE though written in different languages, and it is written, it is pragmatic to assume, by the people inhabiting or linked to India. But this monolithic notion of an Indian literature is rather a pure abstraction, and is felt more as an absence than presence. Conversely, it can also be argued that despite the fact that each language displays a seemingly different literature, its internal configuration based on specific socio-historical conditions, each literature can be seen as working within a system of references common to other Indian literatures. This notion as such is a composite one though, and its virtual presence comprehends the entirety of Indian writing. It is, strictly speaking, 'unnameable,' but it focuses on certain recurring paradigms and patterns of concern and sensibility. It also points to certain common sources, the meta-level negotiations at both the folk and Sanskritic layers taking place through myth and ritual between the human and the extra-human. In fact, it would be interesting to trace some of our modern movements to the ancient archival roots of common concern and watch the trajectory of a 4,000 / 5,000 year literary history mapping the countries of the Indian mind.

Culture versus Civilization

Since concepts like culture and civilization are going to figure largely in our discussion, we had better take a look at them in the perspective of a literary context. Culture is a universal concept, and has engaged almost all humanistic disciplines. Terry Eagleton feels that culture is “one of the two or three more complex words in the English language, ... and the term which is sometimes considered to be its opposite – nature – is commonly awarded the accolade of being the most complex of all.” He further goes on to say that “though it is fashionable these days to see nature as a derivative of culture, culture, etymologically speaking, is a concept derived from nature. One of its original meanings is ‘husbandry’, or the tending of natural growth...” (p. 1). So we have here a kind of interplay, perhaps a dialectic envisaged between nature and culture, thereby rendering ‘culture’ as an ambiguous, complex, and a rather contrarian notion.

Stephen Greenblatt, the new historicist critic, somewhat helpfully observes (p. 227) that the concept of ‘culture’ has been particularly dear to students of literature. And within a literary context, we may describe this concept in broad terms as an ensemble of beliefs and practices in a society. Obviously, apart from ‘nature’ being a complex term, both ‘culture’ and ‘civilization’ too have multiple meanings, and are often used as identical terms, at times as opposites. When we call someone ‘uncivilized’, we mean that he lacks ‘culture’, which in this context stands for civil/polite behaviour induced by a steady cultivation of philosophic and literary values or the pursuit of fine arts. Even in the ordinary sense, ‘civil’, or *civis* and *civitas* signify, what is, in the words of Raymond Williams (p 13) “orderly, educated, or polite”. Williams adds that the notion of “‘civilisation’ expressed two senses which were historically linked: an achieved state, which could be contrasted with ‘barbarism’, besides the sense of an achieved state of development, which implied a historical process and progress. This was the new historical rationality of the Enlightenment, combined with a self-referring celebration of an achieved condition of refinement and order. It was this combination that was to be problematic” (ibid). This description combines both the synchronic and diachronic aspects involved in any large historical movement. For instance, in a synchronic context ‘civilisation’ comes to us as ‘culture’, and often with strict parameters pointing to a religious identity: as when we use the term ‘Islamic culture’, what is emphasized is its exclusivist dimension. Can we say at this point of our discussion that ‘culture’ is something internal whose external realities are involved in greater historical/civilizational processes? It is with this perspective that one often associates, in the words of Williams, “culture with religion, art, the family, and personal life” (p 14). The ‘problematic’ rests clearly in the interface between the two terms, terms which overlap. There is, in short, a whole variety of meanings these terms command.

In the synchronic domain itself, there are problems: meanings differ as when, say, an anthropologist and an ‘elitist’ (who would ignore anthropology), both look at the term. As Martin Jay puts it (p 112), there has always been a basic tension between the anthropological and elitist meanings of these concepts. For an anthropologist, “culture signifies a whole way of life: practices, rituals, institutions, and material artefacts, as well as texts, ideas and images. For the elitist, culture is identified with philosophy, literature, scholarship, theatre, etc., the allegedly ‘humanizing pursuits’ of the ‘cultivated’ man” (ibid).

The basic tension between culture and civilization can easily be perceived when we look at socio-political processes. While the culture of a community tends to freeze, reify so as to acquire a label, a religious identity—an identity which raises almost primitive passions in men in its defence or at moments of its celebration—the latter (the civilizational force) can be seen exerting pressure on culture to move toward freeing the constraints. Furthermore, the religious/ritualistic hold on culture can weaken when ‘secular forms’ of human activity such as imagination and subjectivity—“the deepest resource of the human spirit” as Williams calls them (p 15)—rise in society to question the strangle-hold of religious institutions. Many of these changes as occurring within societies can be witnessed when *bhakti* or *sufi* movements began to prevail.

The civilizational process here gets linked to the secular forms that we have talked about and forms part of a much larger movement within history, a shaping force which often changes the contours of a culture. It sometimes works unseen and parallel to historical processes but othertimes in opposition to them. It works, often imperceptibly or intangibly, beneath even violent historical processes and takes us by surprise with its uncanny reach and spread into what is usually perceived as native or indigenous. While cultural forces are contrastive by nature and tend to be exclusivist, civilization expands and mutually influences different cultures. Here, the example of Sanskrit with its spread and reach during the first millennium and the first half of the second millennium AD throughout South-East Asia may be cited—a historical/civilizational phenomenon which will be discussed later. The concepts, however, point to the continuing processes, and no wonder they often overlap.

For a literary context, however, we need to restrict the meanings of these concepts so that they may be used much more precisely and with greater urgency of relevance. The concept of culture that would be more in line with literary studies, as Stephen Greenblatt suggests, would "gesture toward what appear to be opposite things: constraint and mobility" (p 228). By 'constraint', Greenblatt means a set of limits within which social behaviour is contained. Only artefacts survive such social conditions, 'limits', which produce them. They negotiate, or even subvert the latter. As they absorb the surrounding culture, they manage to be 'mobile', ringing variations on the prevalent. This 'mobility' has something to do with creating variations on received themes as in, say, Shakespeare or Kalidasa. Both borrow themes from earlier sources and improvise in their own several ways. This is one kind of cultural exchange. The most telling example of this mobility or migration of theme/plot is the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*. The epic as a narrative tradition has undergone numerous retellings in both oral and written forms, the refashioning of the story done in the light of the prevailing ideology and the cultural context of a particular community. Vālmiki's rendition of the Rāma story may still be the ur-text which has been a rich resource on which poets have drawn to produce an infinite series of narratives. It acts as a pool of epic elements such as theme, plot, characters, their mutual relations, names, geography, incidents, and each poet in India and in South-East Asia has reconfigured these elements to produce his version of the Rāma story consistent with his local intentions. The epic in a way unifies people culturally, civilizationally through the permeation of the ur-story. However, this is one kind of unifying force against which history often revolts!—because of other cultural, non-literary factors.

When a culture functions as a structure of limits, it acts as "the regulator and guarantor" of movement. Sangam culture (say, 300 BC to AD 200) of the Tamil land, for instance, illustrates this point. The poets during this period wrote dramatic monologues in which they visualized their characters, the young lovers, as traversing within a certain geographic and cultural ambit with seven variant landscapes. The *bhakti* poets, who came on the scene some three centuries later, roamed endlessly in a geographic landscape, raising shrines and temples, singing hymns, converting people to their ways of faith and subverting ever so gently, persuasively the established norms of social hierarchy—thereby indirectly testifying to the notion of cultural mobility. Greenblatt, however, takes one step further to aver a paradox that "it is only through improvisation, experiment, and exchange that cultural boundaries can be established" (p 229). Each culture in a way, therefore, creates its own idiom, an idiom which usually negotiates the alien. It can absorb the alien elements within limits, but if the alien is too exotic or far-fetched, the idiom will reject the alien. This process works within what

Greenblatt calls 'a ratio of constraint and mobility' which varies from culture to culture—certain cultures dream of a perfect stasis between them while others dream of absolute mobility and freedom. By and large, it may be said that Eastern cultures do manage to keep to a condition of stasis, especially when historical forces are held in balance, and do not acquire a sudden ferocity for radical change. Western cultures, on the other hand, which often make a cult or fetish of freedom—as, say, in sexual morals—tend to move toward absolute mobility. However, the way artefacts function in any society will have a certain liberating and liberalising influence on people, despite the aberrations in social practices that cultures, subject to continual internal turmoil, often breed.

Social historians also talk about material culture, the way machines, tools, accessories are used with meanings in personal, social rituals. However, the phrase "material culture" itself, according to Eagleton, is "a tautology" because the term 'culture' is derived from 'husbandry', a material base! It is in culture, therefore, that "both 'base' and 'superstructure' as in Marxist parlance" are brought together (pp 1-2). This is the point at which the notion of civilization comes in, for it decides the nature and sophistication of the tools being used. Can we say, then, that artefacts though rooted in particular cultures reach out to civilizational values, which as a collective force work toward syncretism and a basic form of liberalization.

At this point, we need to consider one more factor: the post-modernist condition, much talked about in critical theory, that we face today. Our aim though is to theorize cultural forms, practices and identities in ancient times, and the contrary forces that work on them. However, the era from which we operate is an era of 'posts': 'post-structure' has afflicted all other movements, turning them into post-modernism, post-feminism, post-history and post–philosophy. It is apparent that the terms of academic enquiry have been recast with the result that the very notion of culture has undergone several transformations.

Since what counts as culture seeps into the intellectual texture of our everyday life, we need to become aware of the nuances implicit in our inquiry. Do we then have to redraw the parameters of our inquiry into what cultures mean? What does it mean then if some of the post-modernist assumptions bear upon our inquiry?

For instance, a post-modernist would apparently deny reason the status of a universal concept, for he is prone to see it as culture-specific. Even knowledge that we earn through scholarly labour is supposedly controlled by our "interest position", the implicit viewpoint, which often aligns with social conventions. And when it comes to social realities, it is argued that, in the words of Bimal K. Matilal, "Each culture has its own axiomatic construction of reality which is an integral part of what we call the world view. The ethical system of each culture is embedded in such an axiomatic construction of reality." But then, to accept this position wholly is to accept as matter of faith a form of crass relativism—a relativism which would justify, to cite a contemporary example, even such a demonic culture as the Taliban's!—a culture conceived as a "windowless monad" (to use Richard Berstein's phrase, as cited by Matilal, p 247). When it comes to subtler forms of reasoning, what one confronts is the argument that it is not always strict logic that controls, determines one's enquiry. It is often contingency, temporal pressure or "situational logic" that draws the contours of our conceptualizations. This is the kind of ontological relativism—of the 'anything goes' kind—that we may have to confront frequently. Matilal himself envisaging this problem argues and pleads for a "theory of minimal universal morality ... for a minimal number of universal, by which I mean culture-neutral or context-neutral, moral values" (p 252).

How does one face this crass relativism—which persuasively argues its case under the guise/shibboleth of cultural identity? Can we be both particularist, that is, rooted in a particular culture, and still reach out to universal values? Can we evolve some universal principles, as Matilal has shown, without being universalists? Or to use Derrida's terms, will we be able to keep the absolute singularity of the idioms of a culture alive and yet work toward a universalization? (*Surfaces*, Vol 6, p 108) And more significantly, can we keep away from the kind of cultural particularism which shuts out the world at large, and demonises what it encounters as the inimical Other? When an external religious force with a distinct culture, to cite an ancient event, like the invading Kalabhras from adjacent regions struck Tamil land during, say, the second century AD (more of this later), some of its virulence did touch the Śaivites and the other religious groups, but this did not result in senseless massacres. There were some local skirmishes though, as the literature of the period bears witness. However, each of these faiths extant at the time, the Vedic brāhminical, Śaivite, the Jain and the Buddhist to name the major ones, usually get defined rather narrowly and in exclusivist terms. One way to offset these lacunae is to see where the polarities representing different, discrepant cultures meet, converge, and then map out this space as containing the 'commonalities' among cultures. These commonalities, the way they are negotiated through a historical process, are what apparently seem to be at work in our ancient texts. Such a process can only be designated as civilizational. This point will be further discussed and reprised in the following chapters.

*Toward the Saṅgam (*cankam*) Age*

So there are ways and ways of looking at cultures. One way, the easier way perhaps, of looking at a culture in perspective is to dichotomize it, label one part of it as mainstream, another part as 'subaltern', and envisage both of them in conflictual terms. And to see the mainstream as being allied to the fine arts and philosophy, and the 'subaltern' as being allied to material culture. This procedure comes pat, and yields spectacular results! A cursory glance, for instance, would enable us to construct a world where Sanskrit is the 'mainstream' imperial language wielding royal power through the patronage of kings, and Tamil or Kannada the 'subaltern' voice, symbolizing protest against the hegemony of Sanskrit, and questioning its power or cultural relevance. After all, weren't "Sanskrit, brahmins and temple", in the words of A.K. Ramanujan, "part of the imperial design?" (1993, p 106). The actual event or the state of affairs, however, could be much more complex.

The position of Sanskrit in the first millenium AD was indeed complex. As Sheldon Pollock has argued (pp 6-11), the status of Sanskrit as a global/cosmopolitan language remained unquestioned throughout South Asia during the first millenium AD. It was translocal/transregional in its reach and spread, even though it did not touch the grassroots wherever it spread. It was always patrician. It maintained an elitist stance, and nurtured an intellectual aristocracy as its constituency. Its inherent qualities were such that its disciplines in grammar, metre, its conceptual structures, and its "aesthetic capabilities" gave it the status of what Pollock calls a 'cosmopolis'. This notion of 'cosmopolis' is something that spreads from above like an unseen roof covering transregional cultural space—like the position of English today in the global context. Languages such as English today, French as in the 19th century Europe would always remain elitist terrains—for they command a geopolitics of intercultural knowledge and power. Sheldon Pollock talks about the position of Sanskrit as being a premodern phenomenon of globalization. Sanskrit was never enforced from one centre of authority, it was always diffuse in its manifestation but, paradoxically, authoritatively authentic! It had become, in the words of Pollock, "rootlessly cosmopolitan". Its elite constituency was transregional: a cultural empire with no "imperial governance". It was a 'force-field' (to borrow the phrase from Martin Jay) coming into existence without a centre, and it was sheer metonymy at work. We need to acknowledge this strange geo-political position of Sanskrit during those days. Pollock refers to Sanskrit as having spread throughout South-East Asia during this time till the 14th century (ibid).

There are various traditions and 'little' traditions located at different nodes, both in space and time, of a cultural web, and the 'subaltern' voice raised against a dominant strand of a culture is also engaged in dialogic transaction, and the give and take goes on unceasingly. The 'subaltern' encounters the 'imperial' often in a state of *frisson*, appropriates it to its cultural idiom and even seeks legitimacy for it. Tamil, usually said to be the most unique of the southern languages in confronting Sanskrit, and in no way a 'subaltern' in status for that matter, is a case in point.

For, Tamil developed its own ingenious, indigenous ways of coping with, accommodating, and appropriating notions, concepts, and aspects of grammar from Sanskrit. In fact, it is surmised on sound archaeological, linguistic, textual grounds that both 'Aryans' and 'Dravidians' existed in contiguous regions as early as the Vedic period, and there existed cultural and linguistic exchange between the two groups.

Recent linguistic studies have further confirmed that the Vedic Sanskrit texts register the presence of non-Aryan or proto-Dravidian elements, and that nearly 500 words of the *Ṛg Veda*, the earliest written document in world history, are traceable to Dravidian sources (*Encyclopaedia of Tamil Literature,* Vol 1, p.215). George L. Hart III further confirms that "the influx of Dravidian elements into Aryan culture at about this time is clearly indicated by the great numbers of Dravidian words ... [finding] their way into Sanskrit... during the period of the epics" (p 117). Besides, scholars have highlighted the fact that the two language groups—Dravidian and Indo-Aryan—have in the course of their long evolution in the adjacent areas of the sub-continent developed shared features, "family resemblances", which would mark them off as a new Indian language family:

“These shared features can be seen at both the linguistic and literary levels of the two groups. Though Tamil differed from Sanskrit, it shows structural affinities with modern Indian languages derived from Sanskrit. This also points to the state of prolonged bilingualism lasting for a whole millenium, say, from c 1500 BC to 600 BC” (ibid., p 215).

If the Dravidian presence is patent in the *Ṛg Veda*, it also becomes “a substratum remoulding the phonology and the grammar of the Prākrits, dravidianizing them radically in structure and impinging on their vocabulary” (Ibid). This process of dravidianization of Northern speeches giving rise through centuries to Prākrit languages (like Śauraseni, Mahārāṣtri, Māgadhi, etc) of different regions is only one strand, a linguistic strand out of several ones, merging into a great fusion of Aryan and Dravidian cultures at about this time and influencing in diverse fields of human activity like religion, philosophy, poetry, drama, and the fine arts. In this context, one should mention, once again, George L. Hart’s study that deals extensively on the mutual interactions of these two language cultures at the time: specially the Tamil themes occurring in Indo-Aryan before the Prākrit *Sattasāi* got written (pp. 258-291). Conversely, one comes across the northern elements occurring prominently in texts of the Tamil anthologies (pp. 51-80), to witness the exchange, the give and take, taking place between Sanskrit and Tamil. For instance, the Vedic form of worship with chanting of mantras at the time of sacrifice, the fire-rites, finds its counterpart in a milder, perhaps a more aesthetic form, in the southern parallel of temple-based practices, the ‘pūja’ and flower-offerings. Though the term ‘puja’ occurs in Yaska and Panini meaning ‘worship, adoration’, reports K. Satchidananda Murthy, the term itself is derived from a Dravidian root *pucu*, to mean ‘to paint, daub, to smear’, that eventually led to the ritual ‘*abhiṣeka*’ with turmeric, sandal paste and red ochre, usually smeared on images of linga and other deities (p 119).

It is further established that during the Saṅgam age, say, from 300 BC to 200 AD, the Southern cultures slowly assimilated elements from the North, from the Vedic and a little later the Jaina and the Buddhist faiths. For, the theory of isolation of the South from the North reinforced by Vindhya ranges and the Dandaka forests has been proved to be a myth, for even during the Vedic period there was commerce between the South and the North as seen by references to pearls in the Vedic mantras, and also commercial routes by land and sea as evident from the Buddhist sources. During the time-span of, say, 800 BC to AD 200, Sanskrit had attained a pan-Indian status as a cultural resource language and a means to important concepts, and forged links with countries in the East like Java and Indo-China. The Sangam bardic poetry, which is supposed to be wholly indigenous and peculiar to Tamil, already "showed evidence of a limited use of words of Sanskrit origin" and at times points to "a milieu in which Northern values and concepts had gradually gained acceptance" in the South (*Encyclopaedia*, Ibid).

Furthermore, in this context of shared heritage carefully established through linguistic and textual evidence, the Aryan 'invasion' theory has been seriously questioned in recent times, and the notion of the Vedic Aryan culture as being foundational of pan-Indian culture has also come under a cloud. This may point to the pre-Vedic age, for "the cities of the Indus civilisation predate the Vedic culture by at least a millenium", writes Romila Thapar (p 10). The decline of the Indus cities and their culture is now being attributed to ecological changes. These changes apparently occurred because the magnificent river Saraswati, which finds mention in the *Ṛg Veda* nearly fifty times (as compared to the Ganga which is mentioned only once, according to Francois Gautier), dried up due to an immense drought which overtook the entire region around 2200 BC. And as groups of people in large-scale migration moved to neighbouring areas and down south in search of better living conditions, the “Aryan’ gods they carried with them got domesticated in the southern regions. Indra and Vishnu of the *Ṛg Veda* appear in *Tolkāppiyam,* the earliest extant text of the Tamils, (usually ascribed to a time anywhere from c. 300 BC to AD 100). And long before *Tolkāppiyam* got composed, writes P.S.S. Sastri, the “three Ṛgvedic gods (Viṣṇu, Indra and Varuṇa) were recognised to be the presiding deities of different regions (*tinais)*. From this, it is evident that long before the text *Tolkāppiyam* got written, Aryans and Dravidians lived together” (*Tolkāppiyam—Collaṭikāram,* xxiv). To pursue this line of history a little further, according to K.A. Nilakanta Sastri (p 309), the Vedic religion had spread all over the country by the beginning of the Christian era if not earlier. And the ritual literature of *Śrauta*, *Gṛhya* and *Dharma sūtras* by Apastamba is likely to have flourished somewhere about 300 BC in South India. The Vaikhānasa *Gṛhya sutra* is said to contain the idiom of the Dravidian languages (ibid). Despite this comprehensive spread of Sanskrit culture all over the country, Sanskrit itself, as the language of the gods and of the Vedas, gets divorced from the popular roots of culture. It gets caught up in a process of ‘refining’ by the rules of Panini’s grammar (4th century BC) and becomes ‘timeless’—a source and resource language for other languages to draw on for both concepts and vocabulary.

It is against such a backdrop that one encounters in Tamil a unique text, and the earliest extant, in *Tolkāppiyam* by the author-critic-commentator Tolkāppiyar. The text with many faces, and providing many points of entry, is of great interest to a cultural historian. While the text adumbrates a historical process of continuous interaction between Sanskrit and Tamil, it sets in motion in unmistakeable terms, a process of Tamilization, even as it freely borrows concepts either directly from Sanskrit or, as some scholars believe, from a tradition of heritage common to both. *Tolkāppiyam,* for instance, registers the social conditions of the Tamil land in terms of social stratification, rather a loose fit of the northern four-fold *varṇa* system, though it does not mention the fourth *varṇa* category. There were no distinct groups such as kṣatriya and vaishya, and the fourth caste could accommodate all the occupational classes in the Tamil land: "Kṣatriyas, vaishyas and vellāḷās could wield weapons; brahmins too could be kings like members of the second caste. These prescriptions go counter to the northern notion of caste" (*Encyclopaedia*, p 5). The text further refers to eight forms of Gandharva marriage as mentioned in the Vedas, besides the ritual wedding under parental care. And proudly, it pits against the northern marital practice its own southern versions of love and marriage.

As for aesthetic theory, *Tolkāppiyam* mentions the eight *rasas* and all the 32 *vyabhicāribhāvas* that one finds in Bharata's *Nātyaśāstra* as being portrayed in *akam* poems. The mention of *rasas* testifies to the fact that there must have existed a constant interchange of concepts and ideas between the two communities. When Tolkāppiyar, the author, refers to concepts such as *ulakiyāl valakku* and *nātakavalakku*, he reminds the reader of Bharata's notions of *lokadharmi* and *nātyadharmi.* Bharata's notion of *lokadharmi* points to a style of representation which is somewhat akin to our notions of 'realism', while the *nātyadharmi* mode translates/transmutes this kind of 'realism' into dramatistic terms, thereby moving away from the notion of the verisimilar. In Tolkāppiyar, while *ulakiyāl valakku* stands for what is good in life, *nātaka valakku* is the technique similar to Bharata's *nātyadharmi* in conception, the technique by which 'what's good in life' is translated into poetry. The Tamil critic retains his variation on what Bharata meant by *lokadharmi* by lending it a distinct ethical thrust. But he falls in line with Bharata when he talks about art and its capability to transform life. In terms of chronology, however, it is hard to decide who borrowed the concepts from whom, and whether the concepts just floated around in the Vedic or post-Vedic milieu that both Tolkāppiyar and Bharata had access to, one can perhaps speculate endlessly.

However, it is quite likely, even plausible, that Bharata might have lived in close proximity with the Dravidian community, for the early roots of Indian drama are traceable to Sangam (*cankam*) literature wherein ample references to musicians, dancers, actors and actresses occur, whereas such references to dance and drama in Vedic literature are occasional or incidental. In fact, we learn from Sangam literature that, to quote,

> there was a whole fraternity of singers and dancers visiting courts of kings and chiefs in the Tamil bardic period ... The *kuttar* (community) were dancers-cum-actors, who performed dance dāmas on a variety of themes travelling with their women called *kuttiyār* in troupes and used a number of musical instruments ... The *viraliyār*, usually taken as the feminine form of *kuttar* ... served as a class of minstrels, accompanying their husbands or performing on their own, heroic themes ... praising patrons. They were much respected in the society of the heroic age. Auvaiyār, the great woman-minstrel poet, called herself a *virāli* " (*Encyclopaedia*, p 3).

Despite the proximity of Sanskrit and its concepts, however, through a principle of exclusion, which is a precondition to the formulation of a strong linguistic/cultural identity, Tamil both asserts and assimilates. While it assimilates several concepts into its cultural idiom, it asserts, unlike the other Dravidian languages, its linguistic independence and develops its own lexicon for the concepts it gets from Sanskrit. Besides, it asserts in face of Bharata or his earlier critical tradition, a unique kind of poetics as working through Sangam poetry (c 300 BC to AD 200). In fact, Tamil owes little to Sanskrit models as far as literary influence is concerned except for mythological and religious motifs from Sanskrit/Prākrit sources. And by and large in its 'secular' thematic concerns, and in its native verse forms, Tamil shows little influence of Sanskrit—a topic which will be discussed in the next chapter. As for lexical borrowing, *Tolkāppiyam* recognises "northern (Sanskrit) words as a distinct source of Tamil vocabulary apart from indigenous words" (*Encyclopaedia*: p 217). And of the few concept-words from Sanskrit that Tolkāppiyar borrows, he is careful to see to it that the loan words adapt to the structure of Tamil, and their constituent sounds agree with the latter's phonology.

Chapter 1

Tamil Literature: Sangam (*cankam*) Poetry and Eco-Poetics:

Akam and *Puram* Modes – Of Love and War

Tolkāppiyam displays another salient feature when looked at closely. It shows an extraordinary flair for taxonomy—the flair, being an early pan-Indian phenomenon, wide-ranging in Sanskrit discourses, which also characterises Bharata's *Nātyaśāstra*, Vatsyayana's *Kāmasūtra*, to name a couple of texts. Besides, the Tamil text, apart from its study of Tamil as language, formulates a unique kind of poetics in its third section, *porulaṭikāram,* based on the study of Sangam poetry with its division of '*akam*' and '*puram*' modes, the one delineating the 'interior landscape' of the bardic imagination, and the other the heroic, the exterior portraying society as a whole. In '*akam*' mode of verse, the central theme being love between two young lovers, love occurs in all its variations. In the *puram* mode, poets talk about poets in search of patrons, about kings and war, and about the court life in general. These two categories are, however, not exclusive, but complementary. That is, *akam*'s presence is a necessity to define the *puram* category and vice versa. Tolkāppiyar does envisage, though, that both the categories can occur in a single reading frame, a long narrative combining both the modes. And in the later stages of Sangam poetry, such narratives were written—Dr Carlos cites the example of *Nedunal Vādai* which begins in the *akam* mode but ends as a *puram* poem (p 22).

Sangam poetry, in short, is poetry of love and war conceived in the matrix of a coherent secular milieu, within a system of codified relations between nature and human feeling. It is this taxonomy of feeling as being closely interwoven with five variants in landscape and the corresponding flowers that Tolkāppiyar works out explicitly in his text and codifies in sūtra form—the sūtra form being the vehicle for most of ancient Sanskrit thought.

We witness *Tolkāppiyam* as representing a Sangam poem, especially an *akam* poem, as a many-layered text. On the verbal surface one encounters the familiar attributes of a dramatic monologue, which points to the rudiments of drama being implicit in the poems. The personae are impersonal character types, a lover, his beloved, her girl-friend, usually a mediator, a step-mother sometimes, more often a mother with complaints about her daughter who is ever prone to elope with her lover. And it was binding on the part of the poet to use his voice only through the personae, and ensure a total impersonality of tone in the poem. Here is an *akam* poem which illustrates the impersonal tone and the intimate bind of human feeling and landscape, its flora:

What Her Girl-friend Said:

These fat cassia trees
are gullible:
the season of rains
That he spoke of
then he went through the stones
of the desert
is not yet here

though these trees
mistaking the untimely rains
have put out
their long arrangement of flowers

on the twigs
as if for a proper monsoon.
(tr. Ramanujan: 1994: 44)

When we get to the deeper layers of the poems, we encounter an elaborate code of poetic representation, which runs as a subtext through the entire corpus of '*akam*' poetry and controls the goings-on in the main text. And the impersonality characterizing the early classical poetics of Tamil is the result of a rare combination of the specific and the universal. The human relations mentioned in the poems are, for instance, specific—of mother, step-mother, daughter, lover, and the girl-friend. So is the geographic region, the undulations of landscape, based on the five categories of land: the pastoral, the mountain, the agricultural tract, the coastal region, and the desert sands, each region being symbolized by a particular flower and a feeling. But the characters appearing in the poems are nameless, identified only by their occupation, region or sex, and therefore universal. What is remarkable is that this convention was consensually observed by poets of successive generations during a period of, say, 200 to 300 years.

Sangam poetry, in short, is unprecedented, and scholars like T.P. Meenakshisundaran, A.K. Ramanujan and Kamil Zvelebil among others have written with great insight and feeling about this classical poetry, and shown how the symbolic landscape it achieves enacts various moods and fortunes of love. Here is a poem "What the Concubine Said", the first part of which may be quoted to show how the theme of infidelity is associated with landscape, with 'the fresh-water shark':

You know he comes from
where the fresh-water shark in the pools
catch with their mouths
the mangoes as they fall, ripe
from the trees on the edge of the field.

At our place
He talked big .... (tr, Ramanujan: 1994: 110-11)

The concubine obviously sounds ironic and bitter. The following poem makes it even clearer how landscape, described as "black soil" and "cactus desert", characterises the relation between lovers, ending up in 'separation':

What She Said:
Will he remember, friend?
where the curve of the parrot's beak
holds a bright-lit neem

like the sharp glory
of a goldsmith's nail
threading a coin of gold
for a new jewel

He went across the black soil
and the cactus desert.

Will he remember? (ibid)

The landscape and the human emotions are so closely interwoven that the mountain, forest, fields, sand and coastline, the entire social space the lovers traverse takes on poetic meanings, and yields thereby a rich orchestration of resonant overtones. While the theme of love, despite its many facets, is somewhat exclusively limited, what stand out as memorable are the landscape and the poetic ecology of mind that goes with it, constituting what is called 'eco-poetics'. To put it differently, this notion of 'eco-poetics' is virtually based upon a system of eco-semiotics, bearing many-layered meanings and values arising from the interrelations of nature and culture, landscape and feeling, and internalized by a whole community of poets and their readers. It is a landscape which becomes culture before it can be viewed as nature—a construct of a 'secular' symbolic imagination.

If landscape and cultural ecology happen to be the eidetic core of Sangam poetry, there are other orientations within the Sangam life-world which point to other salient features. For instance, Sangam poetics, exclusivist as it sounds and comprising themes of love and war, displays twin impulses: a phenomenological experiencing of landscape of love, flower and feeling which provide a special vocabulary for expressing it, and for interiorizing it along with the social relations of men and women involved in love, elopement, separation, and betrayal, all knit together by community values. This classical form of Tamil poetry, in short, provides a system of signifiers which initiates a verbal currency, an eco-semiosis, very specific to a culture, and thereby envisages the conditions of possibility for an alternative discourse (an eco-aesthetic, shall we say, an alternative to the one we practice today under the aegis of Western forms of criticism).

A brief look at some of the other details comprising '*akam*' poetics, mirroring a cohesive culture that a particular community enjoyed, may be in order here—the cohesiveness, though, was based upon a semi-tribal society, slowly evolving and moving toward the semblance of a monarchy. Details which would indicate clearly, despite the overall 'secular' tone, elements of divinity, somewhat pantheistic, informing the symbolic representations: '*Akam*' poetry envisages five kinds of landscape as mentioned earlier, and each kind is associated with "a deity and named for a flower or tree characteristic of the region" (Ramanujan 1967, p 105). A jasmine, for instance, stands for the forest, and is overseen by a deity called 'mayon'. 'Kurinci', a mountain flower, symbolizing the hills, is overseen by the folk-god, Murugan. While a tree with red flowers stands for the pastoral region, a water flower represents sandy seashore overseen by the wind-god. The fifth region is the desert waste.

Similarly, there are five different flowers characterising the *puram* category, and these floral details constitute the two principal binaries (Carlos 24-25).

The poetic schema at work envisages further that the year is divided into six seasons, and day into time-units like sunrise, midday, sunset, nightfall, the dead of night, and dawn. Besides, each phase gets its characteristic images from a particular landscape, for each of these landscapes has its own repertoire of images. The landscapes "out there," in short, constitute a semiosphere or "the interior landscapes" (to invoke A.K. Ramanujan) of Tamil poetry—a poetry that marks the tribal/feudal nature of society, pregnant with the incipience of a folk-religion. As Kamil Zvelebil writes, when poetry "reflects some kind of religion, it is mostly the rites and ceremonies connected with the daily life of the people (such as marriage ceremonies, etc.), or in bardic war-poetry, reflections of tribal cults and their survivals" (*The Smile of Murugan*, 1974, p 14, as quoted by G. John Samuel, p 36).

Despite such a portrayal, Sangam/*akam* poetry displays striking limitations, for it is essentially 'elitist'. Tolkāppiyar makes it clear while explaining the poetic conventions of *akam* poems that the characters figuring in them are invariably from the upper/leisure classes, and that slaves, servants, errand men are not to be portrayed in them. The servants do, however, figure in some later poems (as in *Kalittokai*) but the tone in them would be satirical. Sangam poetry in short is both tribal and 'elitist', and this unique feature is accomplished through an elaborately worked-out arabesque of poetic design, a feature not found in Sanskrit.

Yes, there is a radical difference which sets apart Tamil poetics from that of Sanskrit. That Sangam culture and its poetics supported by its categories and conventions is wholly indigenous to Tamil land has been well-established by scholars. Besides, it is obvious that Sanskrit poetry has neither *akam-puram* categories of verse, nor their well-defined conventions in symbolic meanings linked to landscape with topographic nuances. Another characteristic of *akam* poetry, that is, poetry confined to the thematics of love in its multiple forms (say, union, separation, trysts, the woman in love waiting for her lover and physically wasting away while waiting, the male lover visiting the town and the prostitute!), is the complex way that *dhvani* or suggestion works in the text.

Dhvani in Sanskrit poetry functions as connotation and usually ramifies to bring in a certain amount of intertextuality, that is, echoes from other and earlier texts. But in *akam* poetry, it is not simply connotation; it is much more than that. Tolkāppiyar considers *dhvani* exclusively in relation to *akam* poems. Since every object in the surrounding fauna and flora, and especially the flora, is assigned a certain meaning, each flower signifying a certain landscape and feeling to go with it, when these objects configure in a poem, a whole parallel world of interrelated meanings emerges before our view to which each object, bird, beast, flower contribute their specific meanings. It is altogether a new grammar of love the *akam* poems generate and enact. A set of conventions formalized and accepted by a whole community of poets and their audience give rise to forms of allegory where one witnesses both kinds of "proprieties" that Tolkāppiyar talks about—both the actual world of land, flower, their interrelations, and the virtual world of dramatized emotions related to love. The five-fold convention of feeling, of '*tinais* or eco-types', as explained earlier constitutes a language within language, says A.K. Ramanujan (1996, p 250). It is this symbolic language which helps depersonalize the poems. The figuration of thought which operates within these poems, as Ramanujan puts it, is "metonymous metaphor" (1996, p 26). That is, both the actual and the virtual worlds coexist with frequent interactions.

This is not the usual connotational range of a poem that one finds in Sanskrit, but a world of meaning, not specified in the *akam* poem, an allegory very different from what is stated in the poem. What surrounds a love situation is the resonance of nature's largesse, some of whose richness becomes untranslatable—unless one masters this subtext of codes. This is in sharp contrast to Anandavardhana's notion of *dhvani,* where the latter draws on both the intertextuality based on earlier texts and the larger semiotics of culture—but nothing like a world of eco-semiotics with fixed meanings as in a Sangam/ *akam*-poem.

Furthermore, an *akam* poet can write only in terms of a dramatic monologue —that is, the poet could not have written in his own voice, according to *Porulaṭikaram,* the third section of *Tolkāppiyam.* The poet had to wait nearly three centuries before he could gain his own individual/subjective voice with which to speak—a historic/al event which could take place only during the *bhakti* phase of Tamil poetry! It took that long for a notion of subjectivity to grow in literary terms and stabilize itself on the poetic scene. However, the poet's voice functioning through the guise of a 'persona' is another distinguishing feature of Tamil poetics. The poem often consists of one sentence, and assumes the presence of a silent listener. The context, comprising assignations, trysts, visits, complaints, posits an addresser and an addressee. Often the girl's friend is an intermediary, and it is her portrayal of the situation which comes through in the poem. The identities of speaker and listener at times do not have clear demarcations or indicators, nor the time of day or night. When the colophon speaks of the presence of two or three characters, the text presents only the heroine. And when the heroine apparently speaks, the colophon attributes it to the words of her friend (G. John Samuel, p 26). This vagueness or blurred distinction is something intended, according to Tolkāppiyar, and used as a conscious technique called 'munnam'. The technique is supposed to further enrich the connotation with ambiguities which the reader is expected to unravel. This deliberate blurring of edges and intra-crossings among configured elements in a poem or artefact is what today goes under the fashionable rubric of post-structuralist writing! Some of it perhaps was visualised and practised during the Sangam period. This indeed is one more aspect of its unique poetics. One can sense here the possibility for a new theory of reading or its beginnings in Sangam poetry.

Now, what does this culture of Sangam poetry mean in terms of our conceptualization as enunciated earlier in our inquiry? This culture as we have seen is "close to its earlier sense of 'cultivation'—the internalization and practice of a code of manners", to appropriate Greenblatt to our inquiry (p 228). This insight is integral to Sangam literature where the *akam* poems consistently follow a certain intricate code of human relations as seen in the verbal penumbra of signification determined chronotopically. The *puram* poems celebrate civic and warrior virtues as embodied in chieftains and kings of the era. Sangam culture as a whole working as a culture of limits/ constraints that Greenblatt talks about functions also as a "regulator and guarantor of movement" (*ibid*) for such limits do become meaningless without movement. It is only through improvisation, experiment and exchange, Greenblatt insists, that a culture is kept alive, its boundaries defined. But then, aren't we up against a paradox here? Because as per this view, a culture delimits itself and yet transgresses limits. It both contracts and expands. Consider, for instance, the post-Sangam phase of literary history when a different ideology seizes hold of the human imagination as during the 'ethical phase', and more so during the *bhakti* age, when the divine *deus ex machina* would play a major role in the internal dramatics of the human psyche. The result is that further improvisation takes over the imaginary space, breaking all the Sangam moulds with the prevalent culture expanding, becoming more inclusive. This new phenomenon renders obsolete the earlier code of manners. A major form of negotiation takes place between different forms of poetic articulation, and new cultural codes come into being with new linguistic formations.

Consequently, one realizes at this juncture the enhanced relevance of *Tolkāppiyam* as a text which stands witness to the most crucial point of intersection of two cultures, of the North and South, for the Northern gods of the *Ṛg Veda*, as mentioned earlier, like Indra, Varuṇa, and Viṣṇu as Tirumāl (also called 'māyon' derived perhaps from 'māyā' of Sanskrit) have already made inroads into the South, and are invoked in *Tolkāppiyam,* along with the folk god/hero Muruga. But this is only one aspect of the cultural incursion or, shall we say, a civilizational thrust. For, during the time of *Tolkāppiyam*, there were already three competing ideologies, the Vedic, Buddhist and the Jain which were active in Tamil country, and the learned men of the time knew Sanskrit and Prākrit well enough to negotiate with them. Even the term Sangam meaning "an academy or fraternity" was probably borrowed, as many scholars feel, from the vocabulary of the Buddhists. The incorporation of the Northern gods into the Southern pantheon, and their gradual reception by the communities marks, on the one hand, the break-up of the Sangam world and its organic, 'secular' enclosure. As every break-up often points to a break-through, the Tamil poetics undergoes changes, extends its parameters, accommodating alien elements and propositional values. But then, even as Tamil freely took philosophical concepts from the Upaniṣads, appropriated these 'alien' elements into its cultural process, it also gave quite a bit to Sanskrit and Prākrit at this initial contact with them. George L. Hart traces rather painstakingly the occurrence of Tamil conventions and themes in Indo-Aryan poetry in his book *The Poems of Ancient Tamil: Their Milieu and their Sanskrit Counterparts*. It is, therefore, important to realise at this stage that when cultures are inchoate and still in the making, there is underneath it all a larger historical dialectic, of interaction between different languages and their literatures, and where each culture feeds on the other and grows fuller, richer, shedding in the process some of its own nativist elements, which have outlived their relevance. Cultures through such interchanges tend to grow more catholic, cosmopolitan, liberal and accommodative. One perceives that this trend has already set in in the later Sangam anthologies such as *Paripāṭal*, followed by *Tirumantiram,* where the fusion between the Vedic and the Tamil hymns is nearly complete.

Sanskrit versus Prākrit

It is now fascinating to watch, before we get to the Bhakti age, the sense of keen rivalry often found not only between competing ideologies of the Vedic, the Jain and the Buddhist but between their languages, Sanskrit and Pāli / Prākrit dialects, all of them being alien to Tamil. Curiously, even though Prākrit owes its birth to Sanskrit or as Sanskrit got 'dravidianized' into Prākrit, the relations between them were not very amicable. 'Family quarrels' were common among Prākrit and Sanskrit poets. Sanskrit remained an elitist language privileged by the patronage of both kings and philosophers, and poets writing in their Prākrits felt somewhat 'subaltern,' self-conscious and found it necessary at times to assert that their medium was superior to Sanskrit—especially when it came to portraying love and its many avatars. The Prākrit poet of the South claims, as in the following poem, that his medium handles love and its many erotic niceties much more deftly, sensitively than Sanskrit:

> Love and Prākrit poems, both
> when pressed hard,
> perish,
> for they are soft and gentle
> and suffer greatly
> under love-bites.
> (*Ancient Indian Literature* (AIL), Vol 2, p 755, tr. author)

For the Prākrit poet, his medium's delicacy and refinement is a proven fact, for he asserts self-assuredly that

Whoever queries
in Sanskrit
when a poetic recitation
in Prākrit is on,
is hurling a rock
on a bed of flowers. (AIL, Ibid)

At times when a Prākrit poet got peeved, felt cornered by the kind of milieu marked by the arrogance of Sanskrit, he did not hesitate one bit to hurl curses on the latter:

May Sanskrit poetry
and with it all those poets
who composed it
be burnt to ashes!
The fire crackles
when a house of bamboo burns. (AIL, Ibid)

Sanskrit also provokes a counter-discourse in Prākrit in an important and distinctive way concerning gender dominance. That is, if the male desire dominates thematically in Sanskrit lyrics, the female desire is celebrated more often in Prākrit verse. Or to be more specific, while women are invariably described as objects of desire in Sanskrit poetry, it is the reverse in Prākrit: for once, man is rendered as an object of desire for woman!

My Lover

I salute those days
when my lover returns from tour,
kisses me savagely;
and kissing me
asks, ‘Is everything all right with you?’

That day is the blessed day,
that night wholly auspicious,
that moment all nectarine,
when my lover pays a surprise visit. (AIL: p 769, tr. author)

Prākrit versus Tamil

Despite these bickerings, disputes, it is Prākrit and Pāli with their religious literatures brought to Tamil land by Buddhist and Jain monks which thrived in the southern region for centuries, thereby somewhat sidelining Sanskrit. In fact, during this period, say, from the first century to the seventh century AD, Jainism and Buddhism wielded great influence on Tamil though in wavering, varying proportions.

With the spread of heterodox faiths and their shrines, there was also literary interaction between the Tamil verses of the Sangam age and Prākrit (but not Pāli), and it was now Tamil's turn and privilege to contribute to Prākrit verses several of its traits. Scholars have noted several common features, affinities in themes of 'secular' love and styles of representation between *akam* love poems and the well-known *muktakas* (poems, stanzas that are self-complete) of *Gātha Saptaśati*, an anthology of Prākrit (in the southern-most mahāraṣtri Prākrit) verses put together by Hāla, a Śātavāhana king (first century AD) of Andhra pradesh, followed by another anthology, Jayavallabha's *Vajjālaggam* (anywhere between 750-1300 AD). As G.L. Hart points out, "virtually every poem of the Hāla anthology uses one or more of the Tamil conventions". Before we look at some of the poems from both Tamil Sangam period and Prākrit, we need to get this part of history straight. History helps here in fixing a local habitation for what appears to be those free-floating *muktakas*, and would testify to the syncretic nature of these anthologies. Siegfried Lienhard has this to say about Hāla's *Sattassāi*:

> The centre of the Śātāvahana state was the city mentioned in the Vajjālagga, Pratisthana ... the seat of the court. The fact that points of similarity can be found between the Prākrit poetry of the *Sattasāi* and the oldest Tamil poetry can perhaps be explained by the southerly situation of this culturally very advanced kingdom and by its contact with the Dravidian language and literary traditions on its southern and eastern borders. Hala's reign coincided with the flowering of Tamil Sangam lyrical poetry which, having already reached perfection in form and content, quite possibly exercised an influence on creative writing in Maharastra. A Śātavāhana coin dated 168 or 170 AD bears a short inscription in both Prākrit and Tamil: a certain indication that during the second half of the 2nd century, Tamil was spoken in the Śātavāhana kingdom as well as Prākrit, then the lingua franca of Southern India.
>
> (Lienhard, p 82)

Lienhard also mentions that many of the poets, both male and female, anthologised by Hāla are from Southern India, and "most of the poetry included in the *Sattasāi* was probably composed in the four hundred years from the 1st to 4th centuries AD when Prākrit was the most privileged language in Andhra and other places"(p 83).

Now to compare: in *porulaṭikāram*, Tolkāppiyar enunciates that an *akam* poet can write only dramatically and through the use of personae, and not use his own voice or utterance. As remarked earlier, the poet had to wait nearly four centuries for the advent of the *bhakti* period before he could use his own voice, and gain its authentic signature. Tolkāppiyar states that this impersonal poetic utterance can occur under several forms. It is a dialogue presented monologically, and the context is integral to the dramatic situation. Prākrit poems share a similar framework and ethos: the *muktakas* or short poems in Hāla's *Gātha Saptaśati (sattasāi* in Prākrit) and Jayavallabha's *Vajjālaggam* present similar situations.

What She Told her Daughter:

Dear daughter, don't cry
That you have been married to an old man.
It is a nice village
Which has arbours nearby;
And a temple hidden by trees,
Frequented by numerous youths.

Or this one,

Dear daughter,
There are hemp fields to the east
And ashoka groves to the west;
To the south, there is a banyan tree.
Surely, one can't find such a village
Unless one had done meritorious deeds earlier ...
(both from *Vajjālaggam,* AIL: Vol 2, p 755, tr. author)

For instance, they both use individual verse forms to generalise love themes without any effort at individuation, or any specific mention of names. The stress in both is on the contour of the emotion portrayed in an event ingeniously created, wherein men and women do not matter as much as their feelings of pleasure or pain, love, separation, and waiting. They both conform to monologues which dramatize in a general way imaginary episodes, leaving the reader to infer love situations. Though the Prākrit verses lack the kind of complex symbolic codification comprising landscape, feeling and flower that figure in *akam* verses, they seem to compensate this lack by a certain exuberance of erotic wit and raillery – they are *sṛngāra muktakas*. However, both kinds of poems revolve around young lovers, a messenger-maid, a meddling mother who advises her daughter regarding love. Of course, *akam* poems have many more characters than the Prākrit ones. However, the other common motifs which bring them together are trysts by night, the *abhisārikas* (female lovers) going in search of their men, whose infidelity they know, and the female lover waiting with forbearance and "wasting pangs". Here is a part of an *akam* poem:

> What She Said:
>
> Bless you, my heart.
> The shell bangles slip
> from my wasting hands.
> My eyes, sleepless for days,
> are muddied. (Ramanujan, 1967, p 23)

The following is a Prākrit poem from the anthology, *Vajjālaggam*, with the familiar image of wasting hands and slipping bangles:

> What Her Girl-Friend Said:
>
> O handsome young man,
> that girl, pining for you,
> has become thin day by day;
> she walks with her hands raised
> Being afraid the bangles may slip off ...
> (AIL: Vol 2, p 762-63, tr. author)

If the similarities are remarkable, the divergences are equally significant, and sharp: Prākrit verses do not display any depth in dramatic possibilities as the *akam* poems do. They are far more direct, and whatever suggestion they have can be gauged fairly from the poetic surface. There is no serious involvement in love on the part of the speaker, for he is quick to see the ludic, the leer of the witty always lurking in the interstices of love. In fact, the Prākrit poets seem to love presenting the erotic from varied perspectives, and revel in their talent for wit, often reckless/riotous wit. While the similarities do raise the problem of influence, the differences emphasize the ‘svadharma’ of a particular cultural milieu in which the poems were composed. Witness the radical difference in the following typical Prākrit poem:

Lady, slow down
as you move forth
holding nearly half
of your dress high.
Doesn’t it bother you
that your waist,
weary of having carried
your buxom breasts,
may break any moment?
(*Gātha Saptaśati*, AIL: Vol 2, p 713, tr. author)

The poets can sound engagingly cynical and operate in ingenious ways, which is unlike an *akam* poet:

It is possible to track
the motion of fish in water
or trace
the flight of birds in the sky.
But there is one thing hard to find,
The inscrutable heart of a woman.
(*Vajjālaggam*, AIL: Vol 2, p 767, tr. author)

Or this one, playful, erotically suggestive but rendered wholly with an impersonal tone the speaker adopts in the poem:

Even after
consummation,
the young bride doesn’t know

the love-making is over.
With an unceasing heart
she thinks
there’s still something to come!

Or this one, erotic, gentle, even majestic:

Having to bear the burden
of her heavy breasts and hips,
the woman slows her gait;
she appears
to be a moving cottage,
nay, a mansion in motion
inhabited by the love-god,
Mara. (*Gātha Saptaśati,* AIL: Vol 2, p 713, tr. author)

The Prākrit verses also display a kind of secular irreverance toward the mythical gods, and can think up or fabricate funny situations. The following is a rare muktaka on Śiva from *Vajjālaggam*:

When in a love-dispute,
enraged Parvati, with her foot,
struck at the moon-crested Śiva;
the latter busied himself
with his hands, and tried
to prevent the moon from
tumbling down his head.
(*Vajjalāggam*, AIL: Vol 2, p 767, tr. author)

The Prākrit verses, to sum up, can be erotic, irreverent and witty, even farcical at times—attributes which distinguish them from the Tamil verses. The tone in these verses is explicitly droll, is one of raillery, even a kind of dry wit, and does not share the strict impersonality of the *akam* poems. Furthermore, these verses do not take love and its attendant feelings seriously. Though characters and episodes in both Tamil and Prākrit are generalised into stereotypical situations, the lovers involved in Tamil poems are, contrarily, deeply committed to their feelings, which are presented with much greater depth and subtlety. Prākrit verses obviously do not enjoy the rich hinterland of *dhvani* that *akam* poems do.

Chapter 2

Muruga Takes Us to the Threshold of Bhakti

Sangam poetry is, no doubt, centrally this-worldly, 'secular', as remarked earlier, but at the periphery there already lurks a dark folk-god Muruka (Muruga). The spectacle of this folk-god undergoing many transformations during the Sangam period pointing to significant cultural influences coming from the north is remarkable. This surely highlights the kind of readjustment that takes place almost imperceptibly both in the poetic sensibility of the community and its widely accepted social legitimacy. Muruga enters first as a warrior god in *kuruntokai*, one of the earlier Sangam anthologies:

> This hill of Lord Murukan —
> who wears
> anklets and bracelets
> whose arrows and elephants' tusks
> turned red as they
> slew the demons
> on the blood-stained battle-field.
> (AIL: Vol 3, p 113)

After a while the folk-god, in the context of lovers ever inclined to elope or of male lovers playing truant with their loves, turns into a "fiery" punishing god:

> It is said
> the fiery god
> living on the *katampa* tree

in the public square
will punish wicked men;
but my lover of the hills
is not wicked. (AIL: Vol 3, p 117)

Muruga, the 'fiery' punishing god invoked by the *akam* lover of Sangam poetry, now calls for a special focus in the changed context of *Paripāṭal*, a later Sangam anthology, because the latter operates under a different perspective, and takes us to the very threshold of *bhakti*. We begin to witness the folk-god from now on constituting a conceptual structure which reveals the interweaving of iconographic strands from both the North and the South. When a 'secular' ideology undergoes a change to acquire religious overtones, Muruga as folk-god gets promoted to the Vedic pantheon through gradual stages of sanskritization, and the secret loves and elopements of the Sangam period make way for the notion of 'chastity' in an unmarried girl. In *Paripāṭal* (c 300 BC – AD 200), a middle or late Sangam anthology of 22 poems, the poem which celebrates the greatness of the river Vaikai (Cauvery) comes out explicitly 'in favour' of chastity:

Vaikai of rich floods: you are like
Peacock-sheened girls who have rejected
Secret loves in favour of a chaste life.
(AIL: Vol 3, p 153)

The cultural life of the Tamils seems from now on to revolve around the river Vaikai: the girls reject the "secret loves" of the Sangam period, and believe that bathing in the river during *thai* month by virgins ensures happy marriage. This practice of ritual bathing initiates a major change in the sexual mores in the community, and almost anticipates its consummate literary form attained in the hands of the woman-saint Āṇṭāḷ of the Bhakti age in her *Tiruppāvai* songs (9th century). This concept of chastity, however, would have sounded like prudery in an earlier age, say, in the *akam* phase of Sangam poetry! One finds that new "structures of feeling" are already in formation within the community, and will soon give rise to new genres and conventions, replacing the old. We also witness in these poems poets praising the gods Tirumāl (Viṣṇu) and Cevvel (Subramanya), the latter being a Sanskritized deity, evolving from the former folk-god Muruga. In fact, Muruga is now being sucked into the vortex of transformative forces unleashed by several Northern gods!

Of the Northern gods figuring in Tamil religious imagination at this stage,Viṣṇu is perhaps the earliest god to find frequent reference in Tamil, say, almost from the inception of the Sangam age onward. We witness the larger presence of Viṣṇu as Tirumāl, beloved of Lakshmi, as already being domesticated, now a naturalized god in Tamil households. But we also confront a paradox here: for, at the initial stage of cultural osmosis, it is the fierce aspect of the northern gods that seems to fascinate the Tamil religious imagination. Viṣṇu as Vāmana, for instance, taking his three large global strides, covering with the first two strides the world and the heavens, and with the third the head of a demon-king Bali whom He tramples down into the nether world is a recurring image in poetry during this period. Even someone like Karaikkāl Ammaiyar, the first Śaiva female saint of Tamil land, who devotes an entire hymn to the praise of Śiva, makes a brief reference to Viṣṇu in his aggressive form as "Lord Tirumāl, Who measured the universe" (AIL, Vol 3, p 215).

The section on Tirumāl in *Paripaṭal* narrates the story of the fierce god Narasimha, one of Viṣṇu's several avatars, half-man, half-lion tearing the demon Hiranya-Kashipu to pieces—this was Viṣṇu's fourth avatar. This section also refers to another avatar of Viṣṇu, the Varaha when the latter descends into the sea and rescues the world which has been spirited away by the demon Hiranyāksha. The Sanskrit myth has already seeped into the Tamil imagination.

It is now fascinating to watch in the literary archeology of Tamil writing how Muruga, the inchoate god of Sangam poetry who appeared on its periphery, passes from the Sangam to the later periods, say, during a course of 5 to 6 centuries to attain the full-fledged status of a god, and almost takes us to the threshold of the *bhakti* period. We witness the successive transformations overtaking this indigenous god as a Sanskrit myth catches up with the folk motif. In the section “Cevvel” in *Paripāṭal,* one notices a kind of montage taking place as the poet superimposes god Subramanya on Muruga. Cevvel (which means ‘russet-hued’) is the Tamil name for Subramanya as the latter emerges fullblown, a six-faced, twelve-shouldered god, out of Muruga. The section describes the god’s birth: as child he appears on a lotus in a pond and is brought up by Kārtikai women. Even as a child, Muruga is so brave he worsts Indra in battle. And the vanquished Indra gives a part of him as peacock to serve as Muruga’s mount, and Agni, the fire-god, all praise for Muruga, gives a portion of himself as cock to be imprinted on his banner. In a later poem, “A Guide to Lord Muruga,” a late classical poem by Nakkirar (c 5-6 century AD) in the anthology *Pattupāttu*, he is referred to as “a red god ... as the child of six mothers ... the tall god of the hills”. And he “strikes fear into those/who do not worship him”. And then He is transformed into Subramanya, and fondled by Kārtikai women. Muruga evolved into Cevvel with twelve hands outshines the fame of Indra, the northern god:

> . . . even when (as) a babe that could hardly move
> out of the lotus where you were born! ...
> . . . O, blessed one whose forms are six!
> You born of women six . . .
>
> (AIL: Vol 3, p 109)

A folk-god is now mixed up with Aryan sources, origins, and “well-read in books ... wealth of the brahmin priests”! Muruga, who exists at the periphery in the Sangam age, is now assimilated through 'aryanization' and Sanskritization into a more inclusive culture. The god who was found inhabiting the kadamba tree earlier is seen in *Paripāṭal* wearing "the *kaṭampa* garland that sports/circlets of scented blossoms!" One can also notice Vedic culture permeating rather steadily if somewhat tardily in the Tamil land. Tardily, because while the chanting of the Vedas in Maturai, the capital of the Pandiyan kings, marked the coming of dawn, in the capital cities of the Ceras and the Colas, where the people are said to be less 'cultured', only "the cock's crowing/marks the end of night"—for no Vedas were chanted in those cities at dawn—laments the poet of *Paripāṭal*! The permeation of Vedic culture took place at its own leisurely pace, nothing was forced or coerced, says Prema Nandakumar (AIL, p 115). The adage that man does not live by bread alone, that he needs a myth to live by—finds its illustration in Subramanya, a syncretic god, who fulfilled a certain lack of mythical fervour, or better, further enriched the indigenous mythology of the Tamils by fusing elements from the folk and the Sanskritic lores.

The myth of Muruga grows further and expands as the deity is now visualised as a lover of women, protector, and godlike. Almost resembling Krishna of *Bhāgavatam,* he is caught up in a cultural process of deification. For instance, in *Pattupāttu*, in its last section "A Guide to Lord Muruga" (mentioned earlier), we witness a different aspect of Muruga, akin to Krishna:

For vehicles
He has a ram,
A peacock;
A faultless rooster
On his banner,

The Tall one
With bracelets on his arms,
With a bevy of girls, voices

Like lutestrings ...

his hands large
as drumheads
    hold gently
    several soft-shoulderd
    fawnlike women;

he gives them proper places
    and he dances
    on the hills...

(AIL, Vol 3, pp 183-184, tr. Ramanujan)

In the cross-cultural interchange of the ‘Aryans’ and the ‘Dravidians’ of the early period, one witnesses two parallel processes at work—the process of Sanskritization and that of Tamilization. Both run parallel, without a clash, and contribute meanings from their respective ‘semiospheres’ toward the successive reconstructions of Muruga. If the Sanskritic culture gives Muruga, for instance, an ‘Aryan’ wife in Devayani, the Tamil lore, not lagging behind, provides him with a second wife called Valli from its folk heritage. And during the *bhakti* period when the northern culture seems to have penetrated deep into Tamil thought and culture, Muruga seems to undergo further metamorphosis. He is now given an ‘Aryan’ parentage with Śiva as father and Uma as mother so that he could be appropriated into the Sanskritic pantheon. Though Muruga comes anterior to Śiva in Tamil writing—for Śiva figures nowhere in *Tolkāppiyam* nor in Sangam literature – Śiva appears all of a sudden in Muruga’s parentage during the *bhakti* period. Again, in “A Guide to Muruga”, Muruga emerges as the most prominent of the Tamil gods during this period, and is further transformed with six faces and twelve arms and identified as Kārtikeya, the Aryan war-god and the son of Śiva. Muruga in his polymorphous avatars alternates between Subramanya, the typical southern god, and Kārtikeya, the Aryan war-god. He in his new incarnation retains both the Aryan and Dravidian identities! The poem describes how the three gods, Viṣṇu, Śiva, and Indra on deputation along with sages, gandharvas, and thirty other minor gods, all Aryan, wait upon Muruga! The poets who celebrate these gods keep their tone strictly impersonal and in the overall *puram* mode. Besides, they succeed by and large in keeping their selves under wraps as it were, for the self (and its distinct voice) does come up only later, perhaps much later, demanding its share of attention only within the frame of *bhakti*!

If the rise of Muruga is spectacular, the rise of Śiva with the subsequent decline of Muruga in literary representation is equally fascinating, if somewhat intriguing. After Muruga attains the status of the son of Śiva, as J.V. Chelliah remarks, he "disappears from Tamil literature and Śiva and Viṣṇu monopolize the field" (*Pattupāttu: Ten Tamil Idylls,* p 312).

But Śiva's Vedic prototype is Rudra, a subordinate god of the Rig Veda. And in the Yajurveda (which comes after the Rig Veda), there is the well-known hymn *Śatarudrīya*, whose crucial importance Indira Peterson emphasizes while tracing Śiva's prototype back to the Yajurveda hymn—the earliest text to mention names, deeds, and attributes of Śiva (p 26). In this context, the importance of *Śatarudrīya* as the earliest source text cannot be overemphasized. These praise poems were often replicated in the *Bhagavad Gīta* and at places in the *Mahābhārata*. The famous *Viṣṇusahasranāma* is a case in point: when recited with devotion, it is believed by the devotee that one can feel "the magical powers of sacred names". Therefore, to consider the conceptual history of Śiva as the god growing from the Vedic age to the age of *bhakti* poets is to trace an astonishing continuity of the *āgamic* tradition through Muruga to Lord Śiva as lover/protector, and lord of the *bhakti* saints (of the 5/6th century AD). In fact, it is always in the Sanskritic context that the *bhakti* poets wrote, innovated, and sang their variations on the Ś*atarudrīya*, and thereby created a new literary genre. We will discuss this aspect later. At present, it suffices to note that Muruga as folk/pastoral god gets transported from the Sangam period where he was at the periphery and not as influential as to change the course of events in human affairs, to the *bhakti* age where he now appears as a full-fledged god Subramanya, a god in his own right and claiming the lineage of the great Śiva.

Chapter 3

Precursors of Bhakti: Ethical Writing–Competing Ideologies: the Epic Narratives – Woman Power

With the predominance of Śiva as god among other gods, the poetic changes, becomes more inclusive, the Tamil culture turning distinctly religious, devotional—for the god as mediator between the medium and the 'massage', or message if you will, becomes the new aesthetic! In the hymns of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār (Śaivite woman saint of c 5th century AD), for instance, Śiva is already visualised as engaged in a cosmic dance, a dance in the burning ground, perhaps the earliest example to figure in a Tamil hymn, which is said to constitute the core of Tamil Śaiva mysticism. For, in the frequent conceptualization of Śiva as Natarāja by the Tamil saints, the god becomes supreme among the Hindu gods, culminating in the famous icon (as in Cidambaram and other temples) which holds in delicate balance the exquisite art of sculpture and the mystical philosophy of worship. In philosophical terms, the figure of Nataraja appears at a point in the confluence of two epistemes, one from the North and the other from the South, resulting in the words of Alexandra Wenta, a "doctrinal blend of local cults, the grāmadevatās" and many strands of Kashmir Śaivism (p 4). The transformation of Rudra, a minor god in the *Ṛgveda*, into a cosmic Śiva in the Tamil context is now complete. And with this cosmological change in the status of a god, to adapt the lines of W.B. Yeats,

> All changed, changed utterly
> A terrible beauty is born."   (Easter 1916)

That is, Śiva, the ash-smeared mendicant of the mountains and cemeteries of the Northern legends, gets metamorphosed through cultural poetics into a cosmic notion, into a piece of sculpture in Tamil hands as Natarāja. Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār addresses this icon in one of her hymns thus:

> When your feet move, nether worlds give way.
> When thy head is lifted, domes of heavens crack.
> When your crossed hands with bracelets move
> the very cardinal points will shiver.
> This universe cannot bear
> the vigour of your dance. (vide Ramaswamy 131-32)

We may briefly mention here that Ammaiyār herself, after she was released by her husband from her wifely duties, begins to live in the graveyard where she visualizes Śiva as dancing his colossal dance of destruction, and where she transforms herself into a "ghoulish skeleton". What looks like a lone, existential moment in the life of a woman saint at the time, say, during the mid-sixth century AD, initiates a trend that becomes progressively a pan-Indian Bhakti movement. Is this not a kind of 'moral luck' (that Bernard Williams talks about in *Moral Luck*, pp 22-26), a moral luck of colossal consequence in terms of a great pan-Indian historical movement when one looks at it in hindsight, what was once a seemingly random, isolated, and solitary event at the time!

* * * *

However, in the second and third century AD, when the Jains and Buddhists came to Tamil region from the North, it was a different story. And during this time Buddhism played its part, somewhat as a sub-cultural diaspora, though on a pan-Indian scale. These several movements, Vedic, Jain and Buddhist were, however, in a way, competing with each other for a hegemonic pan-Indian status. And they may be said to constitute together a web of relational but often oppositional doctrines which, however, offered a larger framework within which people could think and forge their systems of belief. Further, these doctrines enabled the people to move a little away from their traditions, folk and tribal beliefs, exclusively held till then, by giving them a larger perspective, and several ideologies to relate to. In this collective enterprise to come to terms with various and often opposing doctrines or strands of religious thought, the thinkers, the elite, and their followers were fused together often under royal patronage into distinct communities. While the three faiths conceptually held in common the key doctrines of *dharma* and *karma*, their ritual practices, ways of worship differed greatly, thereby conferring on their followers distinct identities.

Despite these built-in conflicts in ways of worship and religious practice, there was a certain catholicity of outlook among the general populace, for it was common for people of those days to visit both temples and the viharās. In one of the later Sangam anthologies, *Maturaikkānci,* a poem by Mankuti Marutam, the poet describes an evening scene in Madurai wherein householders, women with children visit (after temples) the Buddhist and Jain vihārās to offer flowers and incense amidst the cool shades of the surrounding trees. The poem further exhorts the king not to invest his faith with wealth and luxury but realise the transient nature of all life. This theme of illusion, of the ephemeral seems to have become a familiar poetic theme, as stressed in *porulaṭikāram.*

Kanchi was an important Buddhist centre then. The term 'sangam' itself may owe its origin to the Buddhist term 'sangha', that constitutes one of the three jewels (triratna): Buddha, dharma, and sangha. Sangam in Tamil (as mentioned earlier) refers to an assembly of scholars or an academy. It is also used in the sense of 'conch-shell' in classical literature. The epic *Maṇimekalai* uses this word in both the senses, the conch and assembly. The Sangam period is datable (as mentioned earlier) roughly from the 3rd century BC to the 2nd century AD. History reports that around the 3rd century AD, a new merchant class had emerged because of the growth in maritime trade and the change in political power, which passed from the hands of the early Cola and Pāṇṭiya dynasties to the Kalabhras who invaded the Tamil land from Karnataka and Andhra. The latter patronised both the Buddhist and Jain faiths. During this period, Buddhism seems to have made rapid progress with the patronage of kings and the business community, say, after the 4th century AD. Great monks and thinkers such as Buddhaghosa, Dignaga, Dharmapala, and Dharmakirti, all from Tamil country and around Kanci, the Buddhist centre of those days, wrote many Pāḷi works and commentaries on Pāḷi *Tripītika*. Many of them established links between Ceylon in the South, Nalanda in the North, and the Buddhist centres in China.

Furthermore, as D.R. Nagaraj says in his critical work on Allama Prabhu, the twelfth century Kannada Śaiva saint, the Vedic lore has two aspects: the gross and the subtle. The gross aspect stresses on the importance of ritual sacrifices while the subtle aspect emphasizes the *Omkāra* or the *praṇava* aspect. The brahminical stand was that there was no difference between the two and that both the gross and the subtle can be unified. Moreover, as brahminism progressed, it tried to gain prominence in three key power centres: in the area of ritual practices, social power and the spiritual power. It is in the process of unification of the three centres that brahminism strove to get ahead of other social groups, and in the process it strode the path of reductionism. Though it sought a pan-Indian status, it shrank itself intellectually, socially, and what it lost in the catholicity of outlook, it gained in cohesive authority (pp 26-28).

But the revolt arose against this authority from the *śramaṇa* tradition, and also from within the brahminical groups against the ritualistic hegemony of the brahmin. For instance, the pancarātra Vaiṣṇavas and the pāśupatha Śaiva groups of brahmins contested the authority of the Vedas and thereby established their heretical schools of thought and practice. That is, in the field of theory there was freedom of inquiry, and thinkers were free to migrate from one school of thought to another without much hesitation or guilt. The resistance was there, however, by the promoters of each faith and it was registered in different ways to the invasion of any new faith. For instance, there was within the Vedic tradition a discontinuity which effected a paradigm shift in cultural poetics—say, a change of texture in verse, the pithy, laconic 'suttiram' giving way to the descriptive, the digressive, and didactic narratives, finally accommodating the vibrant metaphors of *bhakti*.

This phase of Tamil literary writing, usually called the post-Sangam or epic period, say, from AD 200 to 600, witnessed the advent of five major epics, of which the two, *Cilappatikāram* (c second centrury AD) and *Maṇimekalai* (c fifth century), are well-known and available in their entire form. Both the epics are unique in that they dispense with heroes and revolve around two heroines, not of royal descent, in contradistinction to the Sanskritic, royal, hero-oriented epics. On the other hand, while Sangam poetry draws a distinction between *akam* and *puram* modes, and is sustained by an elaborate code of conventions wholly indigenous to Tamil region, the epics clearly depict the Tamil contact with Northern culture and, incidentally, erase most of Sangam's distinctions. With the Jains and the Buddhists, now come in a big way from the North, the Sanskritic culture gets marginalized for a while. However, Tamil culture seems to open up at this point from a position of insularity, and develops a sort of resistance poetic with an explicit ethical thrust, and one witnesses the phenomenon of the literary and the cultural coalescing.

The Jain monks and the Jīvika sects who countered the influence of the Vedic world with a de-sanskritizing zeal, however, indirectly helped further the process of Tamilization. The society did not possess any priestly class as such, and merchants constituted the middle class—from which comes the hero of C*ilappatikāram*. The class of courtesans, dancers, musicians and prostitutes played a prominent role in the social life of kings and cities. The temples had not yet become centres of culture, and had kept a low profile in the life of people, though the cult of Muruga was already wide-spread. A text like *Maṇimekalai* provides us with a glimpse of this Dravidian world, where theological and philosophical debates were held among the Jains, Buddhists and the Vedic scholars. The Mahayāna form of Buddhism with its theories of karma and transmigration of souls, similar to those of the Sanskritic life-world, had got a foothold in the South. Therefore, the spectacle of each faith, elbowing its way to the centre-stage through appealing to kings and, subsequently, converting them so that it could wield political power and influence in society, seems to be a recurring phenomenon during this period.

The earliest extant epic C*ilappatikāram* was composed in the latter half of the second century AD by Ilango Adigal (the brother of a Cera king), who got converted to Jainism. While the ideological fervour and concepts such as dharma and karma come from the superimposed faith, the music and dance theories come from the Tamil region. The epic narrative, as one can see, is still new to Tamil, and reads, haltingly, more as a collection of poem-units put together than as a sustained narrative. The new literary form structures toward a narrative which, though awkward at many places, develops a new poetics under the alien influence. In the meantime, there emerges a new phase of ethical writing in Tamil, maybe as a kind of response to the invasion of the Kalabhras on Tamil land.

The Ethical Splurge: Competing Ideologies

If during the Sangam period the poets wrote about love and war, and communities as a whole settled down to a sense of stability, in the post-Sangam period this kind of poetry makes way for the advent of ethical literature, which includes the two major epics mentioned above apart from eleven other ethical works. The poetic texture changes, as mentioned earlier, it relaxes, thaws its strict sutra form. The reason for this major change in writing can be traced to a historical event of the Kalabhras, an alien community from the Karnataka/Andhra region who invaded the Tamil country of the Ceras, Colas, and the Panṭiyas, disturbing the peaceful life of the people. Can this socio-political upheaval and the cultural disruption be the reason for a paradigm shift, giving rise to an upsurge of ethical and religious writing? The alien Kalabhras seemed to have favoured the Jain faith as against the Sanskritic culture, although their rule was disliked by the Tamils. In an age of anxiety and uncertainty with fluid borders of one's country ever shifting under fresh conquests from warring lords, tribal chieftains, and kings in the making installing tentative, inchoate monarchies, it is probable that the collective psyche of a people needed guidelines for living. The poets moralized and laid down codes of conduct to stabilize society. The maxims of *Tirukkuraḷ* by Tiruvalluvar, for instance, advised kings and the commoners with wit and wisdom to tread the path of righteousness.

According to scholars, of the eighteen ethical works that emerged from AD 100 to 600, only six works deal with '*akam*' theme, one on '*puram*', and the rest eleven of them are ethical works. This ratio marks the passage from the 'secular' to the ethical (with perhaps the religious in the offing), and the *Kural* of Tiruvalluvar, "a manual of ethics, polity, and love", represents this transition where the chief concern of the Tamil consciousness is predominantly ethical and 'secular' without any pronounced interest in either God or religion.

The transition is also from the somewhat bare, elemental poetics based on the amoral categories of '*akam*' and '*puram*', which ensured an iconic definition of Sangam poetry to a composite three-some category of 'aram' (virtue), '*porul*' (matters concerning polity), and 'imbam' (love) as in the *Kuraḷ*.

The latter category obviously seeks a near equivalence to the well-known Sanskritic concept of *puruṣārtha*—the three Ends of Man, and initiates, excursively, a more comprehensive theory of ethical life. The concept figuring in the *Kural* for the first time seems to complete the process of sanskritization. It is not only the content of *Kural* which relates strongly to *Śāntiparva* of the *Mahābhārata* and to many statements in Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra*, but even structurally organizes itself after the *puruśārtha* model. The concept of *puruṣārtha,* as we know, is a composite triad, an ensemble of the three goals of man—'dharma' (virtue, natural law), '*artha'* (wealth), and '*kāma'* (desire), leading onto a supplement, the fourth goal '*mokṣa*' (liberation). It is a philosophical package accepted as such and is common to all the systems of Indian philosophy. It is more than probable that the notion of *puruṣārtha* might have worked as an influence in the fashioning of the Tamil triad. Except that the poet who wrote the *Kural* does not bother himself with *mokṣa*, the theme of liberation. This is because the *Kural* having come under the influence of Jain and Buddhist faiths, which strongly favour the ethical over the theological, tries to steer clear of God and his many mythical avatars. Instead, the text tries to combine the ethical in Vedic texts with the 'secular' fervour that the heterodox faiths stood for. It was during this time that the caste hierarchy was consolidating. And Thiruvalluvar at one stroke as it were seems to settle the issue of caste by saying:

> Call them Brahmins who are virtuous
> And kind to all that live.

The second line specially invokes the Jain tenet of kindness to all, reverence for all living things. Valluvar chooses that part of Hindu philosophy which comes closest to the Jains—the *puruṣārthas*, the foundation for an ethical life. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri speculates that "the author was most probably a learned

Jaina divine and his close acquaintance with the works of Manu, Kautilya, and Vātsyāyana is unmistakeable" (p 332).

But the more interesting phenomenon is that the three-fold category of Tamil ethical writing does not so much make a clean break with the earlier categories of '*akam*' and '*puram*' as subsume them. That is, the notion of '*puram*' gets refined, and is honed through a redefinition to yield the notion of '*porul*' (of right governance), and the notion of '*akam*' lends itself easily to a narrowing, and is redefined to mean '*imbam*'. Since the *Kural* is conceived in the overall orientation of a Buddhist and Jain ethos, it cannot help adding '*aram*', a diluted notion perhaps of the Sanskrit *dharma.* If we believe in the history of ideas, and in the two cultures intermingling, then it is not surprising that while the Tamil triad, filiatively, subsumes the earlier Sangam categories, it is itself conceived, affiliatively, in the light of the Sanskrit notion of *puruśārtha,* and enjoys intertextual echoes with other earlier texts. While its affiliations are with Sanskrit texts, linguistically it seeks its filiative links with Sangam literature, with *Tolkāppiyam*, the attempt to use Tamil words with Dravidian origins.

From Sangam through *Kural* to *bhakti* literature, the increase in the use of Sanskrit locutions and concepts is palpable, with *bhakti* coming full circle with the Upaniṣads. Paranār, a subsequent poet paying his tribute to Valluvar for his priceless *Kural,* invokes Viṣṇu—which is one way of canonizing a work as sacred authority:

> Viṣṇu himself became a dwarf
> and with two big feet covered earth and heaven;
> and the dwarfish feet of Valluvar's *Kural*
> spanned all the world and what it holds.
>
> (AIL, Vol 3, p 235)

Gotamanar goes one better when he invokes the Vedas which brahmins chant in order "to achieve the desired end". But look at Valluvar's *Kural,* he asserts—it demands "no skill in chanting". Another admirer in the anthology of poems in honour of Valluvar *Thiruvalluvarmālai* (eleventh century) confirms that the verses "are indeed like the Vedas" (AIL, Vol 3, p 236).

If the *Kural* therefore achieves a moral authority through its concern for a good life on earth and being rooted in a milieu rife with ideological fervour, the second well-known work *Nālaṭiyār* in an attempt to cover a whole range of contemporary philosophical postures goes to the other extreme of turning away from life to celebrate asceticism and renunciation. While the Jain influence is suspected in *Kural*—say, its antipathy to meat eating—the influence comes out strongly in the latter work, composed, as it is said to have been, by a group of 8,000 Jain ascetics who had taken refuge in the Pānṭiyan kingdom to escape famine in their own land. Of their mammoth work, only 400 quatrains were salvaged, rearranged, and edited by one Patumanār —of which 130 of them relate to virtue, 260 to wealth, and only 10 to love. This proportion is significant because love figures as the least important element, wealth taking a much greater share. This is indeed a far cry from Sangam phase which celebrated love, apart from heroism in war, almost exclusively. Can we say that a northern religion cuts into the southern life-world with a strong dash of world-denial? The disdain for life's pleasures with which the religious principle asserts its favouring of misogyny can be seen in the following two quatrains from *Nālaṭiyār* (3rd-4th century AD):

Do I give up my purpose
if the base and the blind
say a woman's eye is like a lily
in limpid stream, a sporting fish
or a spear?
No, I'll persist in my ways
seeing the true nature of the eye,
a scooped-out palm date

drained of its juice.

(AIL: Vol 3, p 238)

Such is the feeling of an anchorite in the making, and the verses proceed to denigrate even marriage:

Onerous it is to dissolve
the marital bond even if one's wife
is barren and without good traits.
And so it is that the sages of yore
had made marriage a synonym
for dread, since he who weds dons sorrow.

(ibid, p 239)

While there is no mention of god or religion in *Nālaṭiyār*, man being chained to a cycle of births and deaths is a recurring theme, followed by the Jain motif of deliverance from a hurly-burly life. While ethics, personal purity gain a privileged position in a dispensation which elbows out all the gods, assigns them only an agnostic, ancillary position, it tends to hierarchise ascetic life over worldly life. The work as a whole celebrates misogyny and disgust for the senses and sensuality, as mentioned above, proclaiming that marriage is a "synonym for dread". With the sole emphasis on ethics of a rigorous kind, theology gets either sidelined or downgraded, and consequently, with glowing intensity of an ethical life, there comes ineluctably a privileging of asceticism.

Epic Narratives: Woman Power

The next salient phase in ancient Tamil writing deals with *bhakti*: *bhakti* as a grassroots movement, as a historical event marking the end of the rule of the Kalabhras, and as operating a counter-discourse to the mainstream Sanskritic ritual-prone tradition. But to realize the significance of this movement, we need to take a close look at the climate of philosophical eclecticism prevailing during this period of, say, 400 years (from the 2nd to the 6th century AD). Which means, in specific terms, to undertake a detour in our inquiry at this point in order to get a closer look at the verse epic *Maṇimekalai*, to see how it constructs its world through 30 long poems to delineate the intellectual temper of the age—an age against the backdrop of which *bhakti* inscribes itself.

The protagonist Maṇimekalai, who refuses to accept the role of a dancer and courtesan that her class/caste has thrust upon her, takes to the Buddhist way of liberation. That is the main theme or story of the epic. Prince Sattan, the author of the work, leads her through an ideological trip (before she decides to take to renunciation) through the theorists and ideologues of the period, say, from the Ājīvikas (wandering Buddhist monks), Nirgranthas (Jain ascetics), Kāpalikas (monks who wore skulls), Kalamukhas ('black heads,' a sect whose members feigned madness), and the exponents of the Vedas, Sānkhya, Vaiśeṣika, and the Nyāya logic, to the non-dualists and the materialists. Here was God's plenty which created an ideological space for constant speculation and debate, and offered people in the marketplace, as it were, options, alternative faiths and dispensations. Sitting with these learned scholars, the protagonist pursues her inquiry, even as each school of philosophy is shown in the epic as jockeying for a place in the sun with, of course, Buddhism coming out the winner.

In short, during this period Tamil land was an ideological melting pot, the Jains and Buddhists under political patronage used to engage Vedic thinkers in philosophical debates which continued right into the *bhakti* age. It was indeed a polemical age when the heterodox faiths had challenged the brahminical views of "social ordination", of rituals, sacrifices and social hierarchies. It is however to the credit of the epic C*ilappatikāram* that it demonstrates that all the ideologies were held in a state of hegemonic balance. And these several faiths as they seeped into the Southern awareness, had transcended gender and the social role models of women. With the plurality of these traditions thriving around, there were available for the seeker many contexts of choice, say, for Maṇimekalai, the protagonist to examine each school of thought and prepare for herself a full and adequate response to it.

Furthermore, we witness in *Maṇimekalai* a Northern religion like Buddhism making not only inroads into the South but infusing the writer with a renunciatory passion which cuts into the space occupied by the arts of dance and music. The conflicts emerge between the principles of life-affirmation and life-denial, between the arts and religion. The *akam* poetry had evolved a language of flowers, which figures somewhat tentatively in the verses of *Maṇimekalai*: a garden where a marble room

> ... was built by Māyan in bygone days
> to show through the language of flowers that
> unlike what the austere ones speak of ... this
> phenomenon favours them who say karma
> follows not where no attachment is.
> (AIL: Vol 3, pp 217-218)

Buddhism strikes at the fine arts, music and dance. The supernatural plays its role in protectng Maṇimekalai from both the young man, Udayakumaran who is after her, and the profession of a danseuse. Many goddesses, Buddhist and local deities, intervene to save the heroine for the heterodox faith. In this context many previous births are remembered, which is another important Buddhist tenet.

When custom demands strict observance of social mores, Buddhism favours the contrary, helps in both endorsing revolt and sanctifying change. To continue the story, Maṇimekalai's revolt against the custom which enforces her profession as danseuse on her is a case in point. Cittirapati, grandmother of Maṇimekalai, remonstrates with the young woman who is about to enter the Buddhist order: "Is it not a matter of shame for us/ when we accept the garments of a nun?" Udayakumāran, her irrepressible suitor, gets confused between two pulls, one from goddess Maṇimekala asking the prince to leave the young woman alone and not pursue her, and the other by her grandmother exhorting him to continue his pursuit so that the caste obligation is fulfilled. Finally, Buddhism succeeds, with its missionary zeal and offer of succour to the poor as ameliorative measures being brought about by the miracle vessel given to her as a boon. Maṇimekalai, in hermit's clothes and blessed with the vessel which remains brimful of food, goes to the prison to feed the poor inmates.

The religious and cultural eclecticism prevalent at the time can be further illustrated by C*ilappatikāram*: the protagonists in the epic, Kovalan and Kannagi, for instance, marry by Vedic rites, but their parents in later life turn into Ājivika ascetics. Mātari, a cowherd woman, looks upon Kovalan—"a pious Jaina householder" for her—and his wife Kannagi as avatars of Kṛṣṇa and Yaśoda. The Northern myth comes in handy when she feels she has to say something significant about her guests. She holds a collective dance enacting the myth of Kṛṣṇa with other cowgirls but offers worship to a Jain deity! A collage of voices, viewpoints with slightly varied perspectives arising from three different but allied religions constitutes the complex texture of the two epics, even though what pervades the textual space in the overall orientation is the Buddhist-Jain ethos.

This ethos, however, seems to have played a crucial role in shaping the tone and tenor of description, certainly a moderating role when compared to that found in Sanskrit poetry. For instance, when it comes to describing women in the latter, certain parts of the body gain synecdochic emphasis, the way a poetic convention singles out certain features of the female body. The Tamil verses, on the other hand, usually highlight 'shoulders, arms, hands' as synecdoche to women's good looks as opposed to Sanskrit verses where, as in Kalidasa, for instance, breasts, lips get prominence. Kannagi is described as "she, the golden vine", her "shoulders radiant with armlets". But when the poetic attention shifts to Kovalan, then it is the turn of philosophical concepts such as Karma and dharma which figure in characterizing him. The notion of Karma, the main precept in Jain faith, plays a pivotal role in the epic, providing ready answers to inexplicable events: it was Kovalan's "Karma that he is felled by a sword hurled at him which cut him across". And again, "struck/by his inevitable Karma, Kovalan fell". For even as Kovalan falls, the choric voice of an Envoi intervenes to remind the reader of a Jain tenet: "O the wrong done to Kannaki's husband/by inexorable Dharma warped the Panṭian's sceptre" (AIL: Vol 3, pp 190-94). And the same "inexorable dharma" is activated in order to coincide, this time, with Karma. In contrast to the main events underpinned by the Jain tenets, we have the village herdswomen reenacting the "boyhood dances of Māyavan and Balarama". The myth of Kṛṣṇa lends the metaphoric frame and aura to the folk dances of the cowgirls of Tamil land. The blend of the North and South in the mythic imagination of the Tamil epic is complete. The ideology of the Jains, myth of Kṛṣṇa and the brahminical rituals, all mingle to give us incipiently a composite notion of one culture, eclectically growing, blending different strands from often unlikely, disparate sources. Even Sangam poems appear as if in disguise. For, when Mātari performs the round dance in the presence of Kannagi with other herdswomen, the 'theme' song they sing smacks of *akam* poems:

> This girl with a wreath of honey flowers
> Loves him who leaps without fear on the black bull.
> Or this one, again,
> The shoulders of this vinelike girl belong
> To him who tames the bull with small, white spots.
> (AIL: Vol 3, 196)

There are seven such theme songs that Mātari sings along with other milkmaids, all of them echoing the characteristics of *akam* love songs. This internal syncretism that the epic displays, the way it assimilates and grows marks the enriching of the Tamil poetics of culture. Through this process of appropriation of motifs from both the Northern and Southern cultures into its folk-lore idiom, the epics become pan-Indian.

To sum up this mutually accommodative phenomenon, we need to stress that the ideological lines often overlapped among these several faiths, and any poet negotiating these several cultural domains was bound to trip across these mixed-up lines. It is only natural then that a Jain monk writing the epic C*ilappatikāram* or a Buddhist monk writing *Maṇimekalai* incorporate without any clash of ideological interests the Vedic, Jain, and Buddhist elements with smooth transitions from one faith and its legends to another. Furthermore, the epics illustrate at this point in time that the commingling of different cultures seems to have taken place quietly without any protest whatever being registered in Tamil writing. A diachronic view would uncover the series of negotiations generated among civic relations, historical events, and forms of literary articulations. If it is a submerged 'negotiation', as it seems to be, it points to a social, emotional, and intellectual re-education (Encyclopaedia, p 227), these different literary forms thematising their own locations in a growing, expanding culture. This no doubt marks the early phases of civilization when there was no concept of ethnicity as such, and whatever racial, ethnic differences did exist did not matter much. The social groups and communities, involved in a civilizational process, learnt from each other, borrowed freely, adapted new concepts, new gods and cults, and enriched their collective heritage. Their ethnic identities were fluid and still in the making. Tamil grew richly and variously, but appropriating elements from Sanskrit culture on its own terms, and innovating on the rich thematics in the interfaces between the 'secular' and the devotional. It also gave back richly, variously what it appropriated, through sculpture and temple architecture, apart from a rich body of motifs and metaphors that found their way into Indo-Aryan poetic repertoire, as described by George L. Hart (pp 211-258). What followed, therefore, are creative adaptations, or shall we say, cultural 'transcreations' such as temple dances, music, and sculptures. This process of absorption/assimilation can only be called cultural alchemy, civilizationally negotiated. We need to tell this process apart from a purely cultural one, which is subject to reification and therefore to rigid racial/ethnic identities. To reiterate the point that something wholly new can come out of encounters of cultures, as Thani Nayagam states, it was roughly at this time that the notion of *vihāras* in the North seems to have taken the shape of temples in the South, and the notion of 'puja' (mentioned earlier), a Southern practice, seems to have replaced the Northern practice of 'yagna' (pp 210-211). Therefore, the modalities of reception and assimilation of cultures are much more nuanced than what is apparently perceptible.

Woman Power: Growth of Subjectivity

It is also at this time that the woman power seems to have moved decisively centre-stage. The epics explicitly thematize power—the power of the human will in the brooding shadow of a land with fluid borders subject to frequent conquests by neighbouring rulers—as residing not in the royal personage nor in the rudimentary politics of the chieftains and kings, but in the utterances of women, in Kannagi's curse, for instance, on the erring Pāṇṭiyan king. While one noticed, by the way, as with Ammaiyār—perhaps the first woman saint of Tamil land—the self had moved from the periphery to the centre as it were, with the two epic women protagonists, the power-centre of 'vak' (articulation) decisively shifts from male to female. Reinforcing this *vak Śakti* was the concept of *ananku,* which further empowers Kannagi. *Ananku* is interpreted by George Hart as symbolizing 'female sexuality' for he writes that it is also sacred power to be feared and "is said to dwell in a woman's breast... Any woman sexually attractive was thought to be filled with *ananku*" (pp 97-98). But then this sexuality within marriage is transformed into a spiritual power or power of chastity. The notion of *ananku* is even personified in *Cilappatikāram* as "the youngest sister/of the seven virgins, who made Śiva dance" (AIL: Vol 3, p 207). However, this *ananku* can also turn into a great destructive force when unleashed by a chaste woman and as in the epic by Kannagi who feels betrayed, and whose blazing anger avenges the murder of her husband. Another term used in this context is *pattini daivam,* which means 'goddess of chastity', who is supposed to wield enormous spiritual power.

Besides, it is at this point that the cult of *korravai*, a deadly spirit which is a remnant from the Sangam archive, touches Kannagi, and her arousal of anger can only be appeased by the destruction of Madurai. In canto 20 of the epic, the gatekeeper, while reporting to the Panṭian king about Kannagi's arrival, visualizes her in this manner:

> She is not *Korravai*, the goddess of victory
> with the fierce spear in her large hand ...
> She is not *Ananku*, the youngest sister
> of the seven virgins, who made Śiva dance.
> She is not Kali who lives in the dreadful forest.
> She is not Durga who tore apart the broad chest
> of Daruka. (ibid)

The above lines overtly deny what they covertly presage, confirming retribution as when he, the gate-keeper, invokes both the indigenous and pan-Indian goddesses. Even as epics empower women by investing them with religious authority and personal moral force, something more needs to be said about this force being hitched to the notion of *pattini daivam*, as mentoned earlier.

The notion of chastity has a long history in Tamil culture, which converts it into a cult and is said to have enormous spiritual powers. In fact, it constitutes itself into a tradition which attributes divinity to chaste women. It also means loyalty to the man the woman has chosen in marriage. Even the Sangam poets sang of her divine powers, and felt that it was chastity which "makes a woman calm and self-controlled, and therefore divine". The *akanānuru* sings of a "good maiden who was the light of her family with her divine chastity" (Nadarajah, p 78). Sangam poets further deified a chaste woman by comparing her to Arundhati, the chaste wife of Vasiṣtha, who was transformed into a Northern star. A poem from *Kalittokai*, a Sangam anthology, which Nadarajah refers to, praises a woman thus:

> She is resplendent with chastity,
> fit to be revered and extolled,
> like the northern star. (as quoted, p 80)

When a *mullai* flower blooms, it becomes symbolic in an *akam* poem of conjugal chastity, for a wife's chastity is "as perfect as the *mullai* ... A chaste woman is deemed to be as powerful as the sages who could curse or command the elements" (Nadarajah: p 80). When Kannagi curses, Madurai burns. This notion is again reiterated in *Tirukkuraḷ*:

> She whose husband is her only god
>   says, 'Rain' and it rains.

Or this one about a "true wife":

> A true wife never tires guarding
> herself, her husband and their name.
> (tr. P.S. Sundaram, p 24)

However, the point to be noted here is that the notion of chastity did not mean for the Sanskrit/*Prākrit* poets what it meant for the Tamil writers, that is, it did not grow into a cult as such with the former. The notion did not enjoy the kind of poetic intensity, its deification and frequent reiteration that one observes in Tamil classics.

However, at what precise point in this account of chastity does the *Korravai* myth enters, one cannot explain in general terms. But, in specific episodes, whenever a chaste woman is driven to extreme distress, her curse can spell disaster to the victimiser, his family and the town—as Kannagi's curse in Pānṭiyan court. It is at this point that the *Korravai* cult with all its destructive power touches Kannagi. And in the process the cult sheds some of its earlier associations with gore and animal sacrifice as evident in the *puram* tradition and gets somewhat 'sanskritized' within the ambit of the notion of chastity! In short, these two undercurrents, *pattini daivam* and *Korravai*, representing both the benign and malign powers of the two goddesses (say, Durga and Kali/*Korravai*), reinforce the Kannagi myth.

The story of Kannagi, however, does not end here; it has a sequel. A Ceylonese oral myth takes over at this point. It is said that when Kannagi with her spiritual power restores Kovalan to life, and the latter as he came to, asks for Mādhavi (his beloved outside wedlock), Kannagi on hearing Kovalan's first words, in great anger, turns herself into a five-headed cobra, leaves Madurai and reaches Sri Lanka. Hence, many serpent temples in Sri Lanka are dedicated to Kannagi. "Paranār, a Sangam poet," writes Vijaya Ramaswamy, "specifically refers to Kannaki and the consecration of a memorial stone to her by the king Cheran Chenguttavan in a verse from the *Puram Nānuru*. The evidence also states that the stone was ceremoniously washed in the Ganges water before being installed in the Chera country as goddess of chastity" (p 49).

Now, with this live oral traditions in mind, we can look at the epics, and the way they empower women, their empowerment being marked by a mythic discourse based on historical events, folk cults, and on vidyādharās (celestial beings) who intercede within the framework of the epic, to help the women protagonists overcome adversity. While the paraphernalia of interlacing discourses with polyphonic voices is common to most epics, what is unique about these two epics without heroes is the explicit spiritual empowerment of women which initiates a new tradition, a genealogy in Tamil writing, that would both reprise and anticipate the dissenting/non-conformist women poets of the Sangam and *bhakti* periods—women like Auvaiyyār, Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār, and the incomparable Āṇṭaḷ. Now we need to consider, in a detour, perhaps the first known woman poet of the Sangam age: Auvaiyār, who called herself a *virāli* or a minstrel-poetess and came much before the epics got written, say, toward the peak Sangam period and who "ranked with the leading poets of her time, Kapilar and Paranār" (Ramaswamy, 9) and who could use both the *akam* and *puram* modes for her songs, firmly sets the tone of female assertion. Despite the overall impersonality of *akam* convention, the persona in her poems comes through with a subjective force and touched with anguish of love, as in the following poem anthologised in *Kuruntokai:*

What She Said
Shall I charge like a bull
against this sleepy town,
or try beating it with sticks,
or cry wolf
till it is filled with cries
of Ah's and Oh's?
It knows nothing, and sleeps
through all my agony, my sleeplessness,
and the swirls of this swaying south wind.

O what shall I do
to this dump of a town!

(tr. Ramanujan, 1967: p 31)

Her poems/songs mark a crucial transition from a prescribed impersonality of tone of the Sangam period to a strongly subjective voice of volition and assertion, anticipating the strong-willed heroines of the epics and the women-saints of the *bhakti* period. This one, again, with a positive defiant note of hurt by Auvaiyār from the same anthology may be cited:

When I think of him, my heart burns.
Yet to turn my mind away from him is beyond me.
Deep, like the sky,
is this love that hurts me.
He whom I love is undeserving.

(tr. R Parthasarathi, AIL: Vol 3, p 71)

Apart from this subjective assertion of voice as part of Auvaiyār's poetics, she has an additional dimension: though her name means 'a female ascetic' (Ramaswamy, p 58-59), her concerns were for the most part social, even profane. Perhaps it is still a mystery how she was called a 'saint-poet', for there was hardly anything transcendental about her concerns. On the contrary, as a 'female bard by profession' she had access to many a powerful patron about whom she sang in praise in the *puram* mode like this one:

In a golden cup he
offered me strong old liquor which
fired my blood to a frenzy
and he feasted me right royally.

(vide, Ramaswamy: 60)

And no wonder she was "envoy of her patron Anji to the court of Tondaiman, probably in the hope of a military alliance" (ibid). Therefore, as mediator in the game of political power between patron-chiefs, she was assured of the comforts or discomforts of ever-wavering patronage. As a political/social activist, perhaps a dissident at large, she pours out her frustration in the following stanza:

> Shall I attack these people, shall I strike them?
> I do not know.
> Or shall I find some reason and cry out
> To the city that sleeps
> not knowing my suffering
> while the moving wind swirls
> and pulls me to and fro. (vide Ramaswamy, 61)

Despite what appears to be a romantic turbulent life, Auvaiyār, it is said, was much admired by the feudal lords of the era for her political acumen and was invited by them to attend "a grand Rājasuya sacrifice performed by a Chola king". It is noteworthy that such an episode testifies more than anything else the Vedic influence of the North expanding and "penetrating Sangam society and polity" (ibid).

If Auvaiyār's is the first female voice to be heard in its own right, then we may turn to Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār, the first female saint of Tamil as noted earlier. If history takes care of what happens on the visible plane, the generic fabula usually deals with what is quasi-visible/invisible and tries to reconstruct the phenomenological. That is, if the saints are historical personages, what transformed them into saint-poets? Here is the story of Ammaiyār of Kāraikāl in Pondicherry. She seems to be one of the earliest rebels to have questioned and subverted the role model of a woman as wife prescribed by her society. A life built on silences and oppression in patriarchy suddenly finds a voice to subvert the systemic grip. But such a rebellion could take place only under the garb of *bhakti*. Her story begins with her original name as Punitavati, a prettty wife living under the constant watch and oppression of a jealous husband. But when confronted by the second marriage of her husband, she walks out on him. Another version of the story has it that the husband with his second wife, realising that his first wife has extraordinary spiritual powers, prostrates before her and asks for her blessings. Anyhow, after this incident, she turns into an ascetic, and through the rigours of penance gets emaciated and worships Śiva, not as symbolic linga, but as Natarāja dancing in the cremation ground. In one of her songs on the *ūrdhva tāndava*, Śiva's cosmic dance, she "introduces herself as *peyar* meaning a 'demoness'" (vide Ramaswamy, p 129). Canonized as Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār, she came to represent both *peyar* as destroyer and *Ammaiyār* as creator, the reproductive mother, thereby renewing the earlier Sangam folk cult of Korravai, the 'tooth-goddess' or the malign goddess who needs to be appeased. In fact, we need to recall here the frequent refigurations of Korravai, similar to those of Murugan in the Sangam and post-Sangam periods. If Murugan, a folk-god, joins the mainstream Sanskrit culture through many intervening avatars, so does this fertility goddess Korravai who always looked for appeasement. While she is said to be Korravai in the Dravidian tradition, she is goddess Durga in the Sanskritic, both the goddesses enjoying the dual powers of generation and destruction. In the epic C*ilappaikāram,* Korravai, who symbolized in the Sangam tradition both "harvest and war", gets promoted to the rank of a sister to Viṣṇu and consort to Śiva—Is this the moment of instantiation touching super-human beings in the process of sanskritization? For, "she is described as the three-eyed goddess (very like Śiva) "whose crown is adorned with the crescent moon, whose lips, red as the coral, are parted in a smile, whose waist is encircled by a serpent, whose arm wields the trident and whose feet, bedecked with anklets, rest upon the severed head of the demon Mahiṣāsura in the Sanskritic tradition" (ibid, 45-46). In the same breath, the epic also refers to the episode of devotees in a state of ecstasy offering their own heads to Korravai. *Maṇimekalai* also refers to the same goddess in a form cognate with Sanskritic Vana Durga!

To get back to Ammaiyār, it is said that through tantra which would evoke Korravai, she turned into a skeleton to scare away men who lusted after her. (Ramanujan: 1999, p 275). She describes in her songs how she can assume her demonic/ ghoulish form and witness, even take part in Śiva's dancing in the cremation ground. She was well-known during her time as a saint with 'demonic rapture' and said to have acted out a kind of "divinity in delirium" (to use the words of Jan Patocka, cited by Derrida, 1995, p 42). Her eleven songs, each one on the *tāndava nātya* of Śiva, celebrate both the destructive and creative aspects of the cosmic dance. In one of her songs, she describes herself as follows:

> She has shrivelled breasts,
> and bulging veins
> * * *
> the demon woman wails
> at the desolate cremation ground
> where our Lord
> whose hanging matted hair
> blows in all eight directions
> dances among the flames
> and refreshes his limbs.
>
> (as cited by Norman Cutler, p 121)

In her visualizing of Śiva, she is also aware of the Sanskritic traditional concept of Śiva as *ardhanārīśwara*, that is, Pārvati, Śiva's consort figuring as the left part of his body. One of her hymns recounts,

> O mind, before your past karma takes effect
> meditate upon him who
> has consort Uma as part of his body
> who has killed Yama
> and adorns his forehead with sacred ash.
>
> (as cited by Ramaswamy, p 133)

This period may be marked as the proto-*bhakti* phase, but the sanskritizing process is already seen completing its course this early in many of her verses. She says in another song that

> He who is the Vedas, the meaning of the Vedas
> the cause and result of the Vedas
> whose roots neither Brahma nor Viṣṇu could fathom
> then what are we before Him?
>
> (ibid, p 134)

She also refers to the basic *mūla mantra*, the five-syllabled one—na ma śi vā ya, the very essence of Śaivism. Her exclusive devotion to Śiva, besides, has a particular historical significance, for, as Indira Peterson remarks, “The poems of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār (AD 5th century?) are the earliest examples we have of Tamil hymns exclusively addressed to Śiva. In the Tamil literature preceding the Tevāram saint-poets [the Nayanārs], Śiva has no ‘indigenous persona comparable to Viṣṇu as Māyon, the pastoral god of the late classical Tamil poems, who is a blend of features from indigenous and Sanskritic religion” (p 24). Thus, her place in Tamil religious literature marks the crucial transition from the later Sangam period to the Sanskritic āgamic tradition.

But then Ammaiyār seems to be an early aberration if we think of the other saint-poets who came on the scene almost a century later to usher in a major historical movement in India. Moreover, her path to spiritual freedom was through a form of extremism, a combine of the indigenous elements of the *korravai* cult and the classical legend of Śiva as Natarāja—which is once again an unusual combination of elements not seen later in the *bhakti* manifestations. The three later prominent Nāyanārs do notice, however, the demonic aspect of her mysticism and would only refer to her as *peyar* (demoness) with reverence, but do not repeat or continue her unique ways to *bhakti*.

Chapter 4

Bhakti and its Other Partakers: Saint Poets – Nāyanārs and Āḷvārs

To get back to our earlier discussion, it is against such a free-for-all, eclectic, ideological climate as represented by the Tamil epics and the ethical strands of the three principal faiths that the *bhakti* movement arose in Tamil land around the 6th/7th century AD. The Sanskrit term 'bhakti' means 'partaking of god', devotion to a personal god, and signified a form of religion which absorbed the spiritual notions of the Vedas and grew rapidly as a popular movement in the South. The idea of devotion to a personal god may be as old as the Upaniṣad and the Gīta, but the connotation that bhakti acquired in the hands of the Tamil saints is exceptional, and the movement as such occurs first in Tamil land. The loving hymns the Tamil saints sang to a Viṣṇu or a Śiva construct situations wherein a personal relation develops with the god, the saint eventually longing for a physical union. The iconic and sensory details in these poems are often charged with incandescent sexuality, which sublimates in rapture leading to mystic experience. This is the growth of subjectivity taking place—the self coming out in multiple avatars—but strictly within the aura and enclosure of religious fervour. This is a new note in Tamil writing because a major switch had taken place from a note of impersonality characterizing Sangam poetry to one of personal intimate anguish of a lover in love with a god. It is Confessional poetry as we know it in the West but with a difference; it occurs within the framework of *bhakti*. However, it is the new assertion of subjectivity, one's personhood, for the poet-saint who has had enough of the impersonal attitudes of the Sangam age. We can cite in this context the poet-saint Māṇikkavācakar, one of the four major Tamil poets in the Śaiva tradition (the other three being Appar, Sambandar, and Sundarar, who preceded the former almost by a century) whose two collections of poems, *Tiruvācakam* and *Tirukkovaiyār* (9th century), are renowned in *bhakti* literature, and who uses all the *akam* themes to highlight bhakti. The poems explicitly present the paradigm of a transmutation of man's love for a woman through sublimation to love for one's god, which is more enduring. When the poet gets possessed by Śiva, the violence involved in such a possession finds articulated in his verses. Here are some of them from *Tiruvācakam*:

He grabbed me
lest I go astray.

Wax before an unspent fire,
mind melted,
body trembled.
* * *
Unyielding, as they say,
as an elephant's jaw
or a woman's grasp,
was love's unrelenting
seizure.

Love pierced me
like a nail
driven into a green tree.
(tr. Ramanujan, 1999: 304)

Tirukkovaiyār, for instance, has 400 verses exemplifying 400 conventional situations of *akam* poetry beginning with the birth of idealised love on the first meeting of lovers and going through successive stages to the separation of lovers in the married state, and men resorting to public women. Of course, an allegorical significance is read into the verses which are framed by *bhakti*. Obviously, this phase marks the diachronic change from Sangam to *bhakti* with its religious fervour occupying the centre space. Such a transition points to the birth of new "structures of feeling" (to use Raymond Williams's concept), and an expansive poetics shaping under historical pressure.

This sudden upsurge of *bhakti* from the sixth century on gained mass support, for it is said that the heterodox religions like Buddhism and Jainism with their emphasis on self-denial, and their arguments based on logic-chopping to prove the futile pursuit of 'artha' and 'kāma' did not go down well with the Tamils, who longed, not surprisingly, for a soulful, life-affirming faith. Surely a new paradigm was in the making, as a strong theistic force working from within the collective psyche of the people surfaced by way of resistance and became pervasive in the *bhakti* period. It is also at this time that the notion of pūja (as mentioned earlier, p 13), of temple worship, in short, the poetry or the artistry of worship with flower, fruit, and incense offered to the deity seems to have replaced largely the Northern custom of yajna, that is, oblations to the fire prescribed in the Vedas. The *bhakti* saints in a way had revived interest in the ā*gamic-purāṇic* mythology, and when temples were built with royal patronage, the conditions were rife for developing a *bhakti* milieu which enveloped the entire society.

If a grassroots (or 'subaltern') movement is an essential part of history, the other part, the patronage of kings, too mattered a great deal during those ages, and intervened in favour of *bhakti* like a godsend at this juncture. The Pallavas, who were once Jains, conquered Kancipuram, and the Pāṇṭiyas occupied Madurai; both wresting royal power from the unpopular Kalabhras, got eventually converted to Śaivism. This historical event provided a great boost to the new movement, for no religion could survive and prosper during those days without kings favouring it. These kings once converted to Hindu faith patronized both the Śaiva and the Vaiṣṇava movements, and thereby initiated a rapid decline of the Buddhist-Jain influence in Tamil land. And what is of special interest at this point is that the Sanskrit culture, pushed to the margins during a period of nearly 500 years, now makes it back to the centre and blends with Tamil to give *bhakti* a substantial theological content. However, what gives *bhakti* its distinct identity is the emotional, erotic fervour, which is an indigenous part of the folklore, which the poet-saints brought to bear on their hymns. To sum up in pan-Indian terms, both 'mārga' and 'desi' forms interfuse in the *bhakti* hymns.

Besides, we notice at this point the way the cultural and the textual both create a space between them for a many-sided negotiation, for they coalesce at one historical moment, go apart at the next as the Sanskrit did when the prevailing heterodox culture takes a stance opposed to it, but come together once again as Sanskrit and Tamil did during the *bhakti* period. A culturalist, however, often forgets that this involves a two-way transaction. He is interested only in repudiating the canonical text, and turns to local discourses/institutions and tries to reconstruct his text from within the ambit/gambit of the prevailing discourses. What escapes his attention, however, is that the *bhakti* hymns which the saints sang gave rise to new institutions, revivals and the canonization of new gods, temples, and new pilgrim places. Can we say then that the canon often sets the process of new canonizations to evolve and arrive?

Furthermore, significant changes took place during this time in Tamil writing. While Sangam poetry generalised its love situations and was preeminently impersonal, as mentioned earlier, and the post-Sangam ethical writing of another 500 years had pushed aside the Self and its sphere of subjectivity, maintaining the style of impersonality, with the advent of *bhakti*, the Self and its persona came to the fore for the first time (that is, if we discount the voices of Kannagi and Maṇimekalai) in

Tamil writing. For the change from the ethical to the devotional, *bhakti* was also a change from the impersonal to the intimate, from a denial of the Self and its subjection to an external *aram*, the ethical code, to its assertion, with *bhakti* internalizing and modifying all that *aram* stood for. As indicated earlier, this is the confessional, autobiographical phase in the growth of the notion of personhood or subjectivity. And this growth takes place mainly within the framework of *viraha* or separation from one's god—that is, when the self introspects, becomes aware of itself or awakens to the reality of its many possibilities. For, in *viraha* or separation from one's god, the self grows, asserts, humbles itself, and grows enormously, cosmologically, going through a whole morphology of *bhakti*. This is from one angle essentially a story of subjectivity of the self, the way it finds self-expression in a multiplicity of voices. It is sheer theatre!

Incidentally, it becomes necessary at this point to make it clear what we mean by the term 'subject'. What is the nature of the 'subject' and 'subjectivity' that we keep referring to here? What is its ontological status? The subject by its very nature, as we know, is constantly in a state of flux. It always gets split, fragmented and is apparently unstable. It is a series of events in the domain of the signifiers, to remember Lacan, wherein it is always in pursuit of its ontology. At moments, however, as Catherine Belsey puts it, "within the existing constraints it [the subject] is able to improvise or contest the existing norms, to reaffirm or to resist the dominant meanings" (p 22) of culture, the way the *bhakti* poets always did. The subject, therefore, that figures in the hymns and songs is only the 'speaking voice' for us, not necessarily to be identified with the 'real-life' author. As Norman Cutler would suggest, it is the "implied author who exists solely in the words of his composition" (p 28). However we use nomenclature to identify the voices we hear in the poems of these saint-poets.

Now the next phase in our story of subjectivity happens to be, when the self tries to negate itself consciously and seeks its own annihilation in a state of surrender. In the presence of a personal god whom the devotee visualizes with all the mythic attributes, crown, bracelet, serpent and all, the Self—his own unbridled self—is all he has which he surrenders to his god in sheer love, joy, and ecstasy. He would however re-live/re-enact all the Sangam themes, dramatizing the situations of *kaḷavu* and *karpu*, the clandestine and the marital love. Furthermore, if the Sangam poems are dramatic monologues with character roles, the hymns the poet-saints sing are both monologues and dialogues with a god. As for character roles, the saint himself takes on many roles and acts out this drama of passion for his god.

As is well-known, *bhakti* came in two forms and gave rise to two distinct traditions—the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava, both operating a counter-movement in contrast to the hierarchical Sanskritic tradition. They functioned, to begin with, outside the brahminical fold, but soon made headway to the centre of social attention. The saints devoted to Śiva—and there were 63 of them, canonized—were called Nāyanārs or Nāyanmārs, and those who worshipped Viṣṇu—there were twelve of them—were called Āḷvārs (meaning 'those who dive deep').

Nearly a century before the Nāyanārs came on the scene (in the seventh and eighth century) with their full-fledged *bhakti* philosophy of śaivism, there had appeared a whole set of precursors, called the Siddhās (Tamil: *Cittar*) who represented a counter-discourse. They were called Siddhās because they were said to have achieved 'magical powers', that is, *siddhi* by practising *haṭhayoga*. They belonged to the low-caste groups made up of "shepherds, temple drummers, artificers, robbers, potters, fishermen, hunters. Of the eighteen Siddhās as acknowledged, there were only one or two Brahmins and vellāḷas". They constituted a strong voice of dissent against other *bhakti* poets, their forms of worship and ceremonies. As K. Meenakshi remarks further, they sang in their folk style, a distinct lexicon, sometimes the verbal bordering on the vulgar, and were very popular with the masses. They were "anti-ritual, anti-ceremonial, anti-caste and rebels to the core" (pp. 111-134). The following typical two-line stanza, cited by Meenakshi, illustrates their sheer unconventionality:

> "Shall the stone be God?
> What shall I do but laugh!" (p 115)

Among the Siddhās, the saint poet Tirumūlar, the earliest of them, with proto-nāyanār reflections as in the text *Tirumantiram* appears on the scene in a major way during the second half of the 7th century AD. This text lays down the central spiritual premise of Śaivism, an interrelated triad of *pati-paśu-pāśam*, where *pati* is God, *paśu* is the individual soul in ignorance of its true nature and *pāśam* is bondage of māyā. This work is regarded as a seminal text of Śaiva siddhānta which sounds like "qualified monism". The three entities are real and different, but they are inseparably bound with Him, the supreme reality. This proto-śaiva siddhānta was later popularised by the Nāyanārs, whose tenets were: One, the whole of mankind is one family, and the Lord we worship is One only. Two, our body is the temple of the Lord, so it is not to be despised but taken care of as a sacred trust. (This feeling is surely in contrast to what the Sanskrit terms 'śarira' and 'deha' actually mean, etymologically: *śīryate iti śarīram,* that is, body is that which decays. The other term fares no better: for *deha* is *kalanko deha ucyate*, that is, impurity is said to be the body. On the contrary it is bhakti which sacralises the body!) Three, the ultimate reality is One, and all of us belong to the same family. All these tenets in one way or other owe their origin to the Upaniṣads.

The phenomenon of turning in, with spiritual introspection, becomes a possibility. Further, the attitude expressed toward the body is wholly in opposition to the Jaina approach to the body as 'dirt', as something to be discarded: In *Tirumantiram*, conversely, it is, time and again, the sacralising of the body that one witnesses:

> Time was when I despised the body;
> but then I saw the god within
> and the body, I realised, is the Lord's temple.
>
> (AIL, p 212)

At another place, Tirumūlar avers,

> Within this body are many holy waters;
> they take not gentle dips in them
> and drive karma away.

Tirumūlar goes one step further when he declares that "devotees are walking temples". The poetic imagination ranges wide and covers both the worldly and the other-wordly, sublimating all thought as one turns inward.

> Think of wood
> image of toy-elephants recedes;
> think of toy-elephant
> image of wood recedes;
> think of elements five
> thought of param recedes,
> think of param
> thought of elements recedes.

With the coming of Nāyanārs on the scene, the hymns they sang displayed three strands. The first strand reenacts the thematics of the earlier classical Tamil poetry in both the *akam* and *puram* modes. For instance, the hymns visualise the devotee's love for Śiva in terms of a woman's love for her lover as in the *akam* mode—with landscapes now transformed into sacred geography where the shrines and temples came up and to which the saint-poets with their devout followers undertook pilgrimages. They further transformed the *puram* mode—wherein poets praised their kings/chieftains—into one of praise-poem, their personal gods replacing the kings/ chieftains through a process of metonymic displacement in reverse. At this point, the classical cultural roots of the bard's praise for his overlord mingle with the brahminical heritage of the Śaiva religion. Besides, the hymns had other sources, and were composed, as Indira Peterson argues, in the milieu and poetic ambience of the Vedic hymns and the *stotras* or panegyrics. The earliest example of Sanskrit *stotras* is of course the Vedic hymns sung in praise of the gods and in the context of the ritual sacrifice, and later reiterated in the *Gītā* and in th*e Mahābhārata*.

Both kinds of saints, the Nāyanārs and Āḷvārs, and their followers lived more or less harmoniously, though their common enemy seems to be the Jains. The Nāyanārs however were more vociferous in their critique of the Jains and Buddhists, while the Āḷvārs by and large ignored them. But at this point we need to enter a caveat: all was not well with these several *bhakti* movements and their counterparts/cohorts among the Jains and Buddhists. There were often virulent forms of rivalry among these several faiths. While both the Vedic and the non-Vedic faiths revolved around the same concepts such as dharma and karma (with, of course, slight variations in nuance of meaning in relation to different religions) and thereby constituted the forces of unification, what brought about frequent skirmishes, often verbal insults, as recorded in Nāyanārs' hymns, are the widely differing ritual practices which conferred distinct identities on communities. Here is the social phenomenon of communities united by ideology but kept apart often in hostile camps by different ritual practices. For, when the heterodox faiths sought distinct identities, conflicts arose. And it is to be noted that while the Nāyanārs reacted sharply, often vituperatively, the Āḷvārs, by and large, and almost totally engrossed in their own life-worlds, ignored them. But the paradox is that even opposing doctrines integrate people in a strange way, for they come together in terms of available options and get united in opposition!

Both the saints and their devotees were great fabulators. The hagiographic tales about these saints are extremely fascinating, and some of them bear retelling here. If history takes care of externals, of what happens in the life-world, fabula reconstructs the phenomenological. While the saints are historical personages, what transformed them into saint-poets, the existential or the experiential cannot find historical representation. It can be represented only by fabulation, or what in Sanskrit is called *aitihya*. Appar, the first of the three *Tevāram* saints, a śaiva vellāḷa by birth, as the hagiographic account tells it, initially had turned to Jainism in his search for a fulfilling religion, while his sister was a fervent devotee of Śiva. He became a Jain monk of the Digambara sect and was renamed, Dharmasena. He was soon made head of a Jain monastery. In course of time, however, he suffered from acute colitis, and could find no remedy for the intense pain. His sister, a devout Śaiva follower, suggested he pray to Śiva and gave him the sacred ash and the five-syllabled mantra, "namaśivāya". She took him to the temple at Atikai, where, it is said, he burst into song and was cured miraculously. At the end of the song, he is supposed to have heard the Lord's voice declaring, "I name you Tirunavukkarasar (king of speech)" (Peterson, p 283). This sudden conversion is said to have brought about swift retribution from the Jains, who persecuted, even tortured him, leaving him with a sense of bitterness against them, which is apparent in his hymns:

> Not knowing the true path,
> shaven-headed and red-eyed,
> eating out of my hands,
> I wandered through long street of towns . . .
> (tr. Peterson, p 291)

Another hymn begins with the lines,

> A shaven monk, I stood by the words
> of the base, ignorant Jains
> I was a hypocrite, running away
> and bolting the door
> at the sight of lotus-eyed women.
> (tr. Peterson, p 292)

And about the 'torture' that he underwent, one of the hymns recounts:

> When the Jain rogues bound me to a rock,
> and swiftly cast me into the sea —
> It was surely because I chanted with my tongue
> the good name of Aran
> of Nīlakkuti, where the paddy grows tall in the fields,
> that I was saved.
> (tr. Peterson, p 296)

Sambandar, another nāyanār saint of the seventh century, a contemporary of Appar, is most virulent in his tirade against the Jains and the Buddhists. He is said to have mastered Vedic learning by the age of three, having been taught by Śiva himself. He undertakes a journey to Madurai where the Pāṇṭian king supported the Jains, but the queen being a devout Śaivite invites the saint to the royal court. Disturbed by the excesses of the Jain monks, the queen pleads with Sambandar to drive out the monks. He is said to have defeated the Jain monks in debate, performed miracles, and reconverted the Pāṇṭian king of Madurai to Śaivism. He was virulent at times in opposing the Buddhist and Jain schools and his fulminations occur even in the hymns he sang:

> With Aran of Alvay by my side

> I will easily defeat those filthy Jain monks
> who wander like elephants in rut,
> and eat their food standing, embarrassing pious men,
> And mutilate the good Sanskrit of the Āgama and mantra texts,
> loudly declaiming in the corrupt Prakrit tongue.
>
> (tr. Peterson, p 278)

Mutual recriminations must have gone on for quite a while between these several sects, for with Māṇikkavācakar (mentioned earlier) the story goes that he held a vigorous debate with the Ceylonese Buddhists at Cidambaram, and the outcome of the debate was such that it marked the decline of Buddhism in Tamil country. It is said that as a result of this debate, the then Sri Lankan king and his daughter got converted to Hinduism.

Among the Āḷvārs, Thirumangai Āḷvār seems to be a sole exception, for before he attained the status of a canonized Vaiṣṇava saint, it is said, that he burgled into a Buddhist *vihāra* (monastery) and carried away sacred objects of great religious value. The final *coup de grace*, however, seems to have been administered by Śankara (eighth century) who with his advaita doctrines established Hindu monasteries all over India and thereby, it is said, accelerated the decline of Buddhism. Furthermore, when the powerful Cola kings switched their allegiance to śaiva faith, the decline became rapid with the loss of political patronage.

But such sectarian disputes did in no way affect the pan-Indian vision of these different faiths, all of them functioning in several parts of the subcontinent. All the three faiths nurtured a pan-Indian view of religious culture. The view of a composite culture also weighed with these poet-saints of Tamil who, inspired by a Sanskritic god—for Śiva as god came from the North—sang/wrote great poetry. In one of the hymns, Appar, one of the three *Tevāram* poets, invokes such a composite vision:

> See the god!
> See him who is higher than the gods!
> See him who is Sanskrit of the North
> And southern Tamil and the four Vedas!

In fact, there is ample evidence to show that the *Thevāram* poets wrote, innovated, chanted their variations in the Sanskritic context, say, not only on the Ś*atarudrīya* (as noted earlier), but also in the ambience of Sanskrit court poets who "like the Tamil saints, lived in a bhakti culture in which the gods, temples, and image worship were emphasized" (Peterson, p 27).

When it comes to autobiographical details, all the Nayanārs write about themselves in their hymns, refer to those moments of crisis in their lives, those defining moments when an inner conversion to god-consciousness takes place. But none perhaps can equal the third prominent Nāyanār, Sundarar, in both assertive candour and sheer variety of stances and roles that his self plays out with such consummate sophistry engaging itself in an incessant, sparring debate with his god Śiva. Truly a legend is born when as a 'coercive devotee' of Śiva, he announces that he did not choose Śiva, it was Śiva who chose him! How did this happen? Here, once again, legend is parallel history, and explains things history cannot. The *aitihya* surrounding Sundarar qualifies eminently for retelling: At Tiruvārur as a young man, he falls for the temple dancer Paravai and marries her. And together they serve at Śiva's temple and the pilgrim devotees. However, when on a visit to Tiruvorriyur, Sundarar falls in love with a vellāḷa girl Sankili who made floral garlands at the local shrine. The devotee appeals to Lord Śiva to help him marry the girl. One of the hymns recounts:

> Born a miserable wretch, I became yours.
> What shall I tell you?
> Tell me, what shall I do
> for the sake of my darling Sankili?
>
> (Peterson, p 307)

Śiva consents to his appeal, and in the true tradition of the Sangam poetry, plays the role of an intermediary (similar to the role of the maid/messenger in *akam* poems) and appears in Sankili's dream. The Lord pleads with Sankili, who agrees to marry Sundarar but on one condition that the latter would never leave her and her town. Such a promise would be hard to keep, thinks Sundarar, and so he thinks of a ruse to which Lord Śiva becomes a party. He asks Śiva to leave his linga in the sanctum and reside himself in the courtyard of the temple under the makil tree so that he can "take a non-binding oath in the sanctum" (Peterson, p 305). But the Lord demurs and plays a game which favours Sankili, for he advises her to insist that Sundarar take his oath under the tree in the courtyard. The latter gets trapped and takes his oath under the makil tree. It was indeed a happy marriage for Sundarar and Sankili in Tiruvorriyur, but not for long. For when the spring festival arrives, a *vasantotsavam* in Tiruvārur, his deep-seated memories stir, and he remembers Paravai, his wife, and the temple dance at the shrine. Unable to resist his strong feelings, he leaves Sankili and the town, and sets forth for Tiruvārur. And on the way he is struck blind—in many hymns he talks about his sudden blindness, the Lord punishing him even though such a harsh punishment he thinks he did not deserve. He even holds Śiva complicit in many of his deeds—"the dear friend who aided me in my many crimes,/and graciously blessed me/with Paravai, my woman with the lovely bright eyes" (p 306). And Śiva's complicity is explicitly established in the following lines:

> Who is so fortunate as I, bountiful Lord?
> Knowing that you accept
> even my deceptions and offences as good deeds,
> I have committed many sins.

As for his sudden blindness, he is inconsolable:

When I cried, thinking ‘My Lord forgives
His devotee’s faults,’
I sinned. Heedless of blame, you have blinded me.
(ibid, p 309)

And he believes the Lord blinded him just to please Sankili:

You who dwell in great Orriyur, town of cool groves,
God who blinded me to please Sankili,
Free me, your devotee, from suffering ... (p 308)

And in another hymn, conciliatingly he accepts his wrong-doing:

O god with the three eyes, you who dwell in Orriyur,
If you think it is fair to take away my sight,
give me at least a stick for support. (p 307)

But the next moment, he cannot help reproaching Śiva, engage him in a dispute, wrangle with him for all his ills:

Sell me, if you wish, for I am not a helpless pawn,
But one who willing became your slave.
Though I have committed no offence,
You have made me a blind wretch.
Why did you take away my sight, O Lord?
Now you alone should bear the blame.
Though you won’t give me back my eyes,
may you live long, my Lord! (p 311)

These querulous debates he carries on incessantly with Śiva reminds one of the English metaphysicals, say, George Herbert (16th-17th century) and G.M. Hopkins (19th century), though for sheer variety in verbal duels with his god, and the anguish portrayed in such exquisite dramatic terms, there can be no parallel in religious literature. Furthermore, it is this full growth of subjectivity, where the 'subject' is in perpetual crisis, and resorts to 'confessional poetry', the genre as popularized in the West. This is the kind of poetry where the subject sits in judgment over his self, and recounts episodes that are both self-damning and self-redeeming—the redemptive grace in the Indian context being conferred upon the devotee by god, that is, bhakti mediating to absolve the sins of the devotee. The verse form acquires the argumentative structure, the subject accepting blame one moment, and shifting the blame the next moment on to his beloved Śiva! And Śiva, complicit in all his crimes, insists the devotee, should accept the blame!:

> O son, my gem, O bridegroom,
> You have become my evil planet as well!
> I can't bear it when my women refuse to listen to me,
> calling me a blind wretch!
> How can I live without eyesight ... (ibid, p 307)
>
> But then the Lord is portrayed as uncaring:
> What do you care if your servant,
> who tirelessly sings your praise,
> clinging to you like a calf at the cow's flowing teats,
> loses his sight, runs into hills,
> falls into a pit? (p 311)

But the devotee's ties with Lord Śiva remain unbroken, and disclose other equally fascinating aspects. He asks Lord Śiva for not only spiritual grace but material gifts, such as grain, and even entreats his god to send "men to carry the grain, gold, silk, good rice with ghee, a fine horse, and flashing sword"! Sundarar makes it clear to Lord Śiva that he needs these material goods in order to provide for his wives and family:

> You have a woman as half your self;
> the Lady Ganga lives on your spreading matted hair;

> You know well the problems
> of supporting two good women.
> ...
> I got some grain.
> Primal Lord, God of miracles,
> Send me men to carry the grain! ...
> What can I say? Have you ever been blamed
> for sharing your body with Uma
> whose lips are red like the ripe *tontai* fruit?
> ...surely you know that Paravai is faint with hunger!
> Help me in my need!
> Send me men to carry the grain! (pp 313-314)

Sundarar is perhaps the only saint who unabashedly operates within the framework of material culture! For the devotee after a while turns very demanding with his god. The tone is even one of reprimand and censure, for he can now afford to be niggling and carp on his god!

> You wander begging for alms
> in many towns, singing hymns, teasing women,
> practising your tricks ...
> You who conceal your wealth,
> won't you take pity on me some day?
> Give me strands of pearls, necklaces of diamonds
> and gems to wear,
> give me musk and sandal paste and sweet perfumes ....
> (p 315)

The next moment he treats Śiva to a nice rebuke, and asks

> Is it also proper, is it as a form of penance,
> that you seduce innocent young women
> with long, coiled hair?
> Tell me, when will you give me bars of gold
> to end all my trials .... (*ibid*)

He presents a list of demands to Śiva, of course, again with a 'well-deserved' rebuke:

> ... I go about serving you.
> Yet you wander as you please, insulting people,
> picking fights,
> doing repulsive deeds, boasting of worse.
> Give me sweet perfumes, fine clothes,
> and jewels from your store.... (p 316)
>
> Is this fair? If you cared for me,
> would you cheat me like this?
> I want a blazing golden sword, gold flowers,
> and silk sash,
> and curry and fine rice with ghee to eat
> three times a day .... (p 317)

But then the final surrender to Lord Śiva follows for everything he needs:

> O Lord, who is the only support
> for sweet-voiced Sankili and Paravai, and myself,
> to whom else can we turn?
> Help me in my need, for I am your true devotee.
> (*ibid*)

The most remarkable trait in bhakti, however, which is amply manifest in Sundarar's hymns, is this: that in them the usual bipolarity of the sacred and the profane disappears, and what one gets is a continuum which comprises at one end the consciousness of sensuality and at the other the sacralised surrender of self to his personal god. There are no cracks visible in this continuum. This is in one sense an apodeictic theatre in its totality—an internal theatre wherein the god Śiva hypostatizes into a character with whom the devotee engages in a constant apostrophization. To put it differently, bhakti becomes a pretext for self-dramatization and opens up a malleable theatrical space for playing out one's sacral fantasies. It creates a meta-language based on a social network of myths, temples, and artefacts in stone of legendary gods. The entire 'associative structure' (to use Friedhelm Hardy's phrase) of the *akattinai* (landscapes of love) gets transposed to this theatrical apparatus, for one of Sundarar's dialogues with Śiva begins:

> You who share your body
> with the goddess with the sweet-smelling hair, (p 314)

or this one,

> ... who wears a silk cloth on her wide, bright mound of
> Venus... (p 316)

and in the same breath he describes his wife, "fair Paravai" as one "whose mound of Venus/is like the cobra's spreading hood...." (p 314)

Toward the end of his life, it is said that many miracles did happen, and the Lord did oblige the devotee's requests/demands! Sundarar, it is claimed, performed the miracle of saving a boy from a crocodile. He quelled the floodtide of the Kaveri, and overcame highwaymen in a remote forest. He was friends with the Cera king and "his travels in the Cera land are based on historical fact" (Peterson, p 319). Further, the story of Sundarar is going to have a happy, soteriological ending. It concludes with his ascent to Kailas. Śiva is said to have sent him an elephant on which to ride to heaven. His last poems recount this incident: "When I lived a false life," reads one of the hymns, "not knowing the way to yoke the senses," and, as he writes in another hymn, addressing his heart,

> O heart who took delight in worldly life,
> As I wallowed in the deep pit
> Of powerful karma caused by the love of women,

he concludes with a sense of brimming gratitude,

> ... he (Śiva) separated my soul from flesh,
> and gave me a glorious elephant
> on which to rise to heaven,
> welcomed by all the gods! (pp 320-321)

In short, to make a general remark, the devotee with his Self released through the mediation of bhakti from social norms and constraints assumes many avatars. He re-constitutes himself in bhakti as lover and enters into a dialogue, a rapport with his personal god. He invests his god with all the human attributes, and makes him complicit with his discursive self. In the process, he usually disregards gender differences: he even upsets structures of feeling based on societal gender discrimination. For, he plays both man and woman in his relation with Śiva or Viṣṇu: he is bride and beloved, one moment; the male lover, the next. He celebrates androgyny. Isn't his own Lord Śiva half-woman? For Sambandar, Appar, both Nayanārs, Śiva is "my honey", "he is also my lord" and "he is a thief who has stolen my heart".

The story of Āḷvārs is not very different either when it comes to the notion of androgyny. Kulaśekhara Āḷvār, at a more sober level, for instance, takes on the persona of Devaki, mother of Kṛṣṇa, and rues his/her fate that (s)he could not enjoy the pranks of the boy Kṛṣṇa, like Yaśoda, her foster mother. This androgynous nature of the devotee stands out in bold relief when he takes on this time the (male) role of Daśaratha and grieves his misfortune in banishing Rāma to the forest at the behest of Kaikeyi.

The switching of gender roles with these saints occurs rather frequently in their relation to god. This intimate theatre of love runs as a subtext through the entire corpus of bhakti hymns. While the saints, at times, were intensely personal in their songs and sang in a confessional mode, their sense of communality brought them closer to the ordinary people.

One observes in ancient Tamil writing, as suggested earlier, an astonishing literary process of continuity and change. While the bhakti poems reenact all the *akam* love situations with even one or two characters, the erotic element comes off as more pronounced in the bhakti poems than in *akam* love poetry. Bhakti may be said to get its components from two principal sources: one, from folklore there emerges a process of eroticisation, and the other from Sangam/*akam* heritage a deepening process of interiority.

Bhakti, therefore, presents a subject which is keenly conscious of gender. Appar, for instance, visualizes the devotee as the love-lorn heroine who frequently figures in *akam* poems. The persona in one of Sambandar's hymns is the heroine's girl friend—a familiar figure in *akam* love poems. In fact, all the *akam* themes, motifs are refocused and replayed in the dialogic transaction of the devotee's self with his beloved god but located in different contexts. Nammālvār's hymn to god Viṣṇu, for instance, subsumes the *akam* attributes; or, shall we say, the *akam* poem with its several motifs dissolves into a bhakti poem in the hands of Nammālvār:

What Her Girl-Friend Said:

They haven't flowered yet
the fat konrai trees
nor hung out their garlands

and golden circlets
in their sensual canopy of leaves
along the branches,

dear girl,
dear as the paradise of our Lord
who measured the earth
girdled by the restless sea,

they are waiting
with buds
for the return
of your lover
once twined in your arms.
(tr. Ramanujan: 1985, 158-59)

But with Āṇṭāl, the woman Āḷvār poet of the 9th century, a significant change occurs. There is no switching of roles, nor any androgynous desire as such in her songs, and her approach to her beloved god Kṛṣṇa is essentially feminine. The female Self has asserted itself at last. Even in Kāraikkal Ammaiyār it was the female self which assertively assumes the folk 'demonic' role of Korravai, but does not ever change its gender, as it frequently happens with the male saints. It accepts its role as a female without assuming any guise or character role. This is perhaps true with most women saints—they remain feminine to their fingertips.

In Āṇṭāl, we have a Vaiṣnava saint of the first half of the ninth century, whose hagiographic account creates a 'numinous' aura around a girl in a small Tamil town, Srivilliputtur. Believed to be a clone of Sīta of a former aeon, and like Sīta found as an infant girl by Viṣṇucitta, a priest in the local temple, while "hoeing the ground for his sacred basil" (Vidya Dehejia, p 7), she is raised as his own daughter. As a young girl, she threads flowers daily into a garland meant for Lord Ranganātha of the temple and hands it over to her father for the evening pūja. But before she hands over the wreath, she would wear it herself round her neck and adorn her hair with flowers to gaze into the mirror to see if she could be a bride fit for the god Ranganātha.

This routine continues till one day the father discovers Āṇṭāḷ's secret, and the 'desecration' caused by her. Deeply disturbed, the father performs the pūja that evening but without offering the garland to the god. Behold, that very night god Ranganātha comes to him in his dream and tells him that the garland worn by Āṇṭaḷ is very dear to him, and that he should resume offerng it as usual! The father decides that Āṇṭaḷ is no ordinary girl and that she is destined to be a lover saint of her god.

This legend of the garland being accepted by lord Ranganātha gets celebrated time and again in the songs that the subsequent saints wrote and sang. Uyyakkontar of Srirangam (10th century), cites Vidya Dehejia (p 11), wrote as a prelude to Āṇṭaḷ's *Tiruppāvai*, the following verse:

Let us meditate upon
Andal ....
the lady who gave
to the lord of Arangam
this polished garland of songs,
the fine poems of Tiruppāvai ...
the lady who gave to the lord
the garland of flowers
she had worn.

A century and a half later, reports Dehejia (p 12), one Parāśara Pattar composed a Sanskrit verse to precede the singing of *Tiruppāvai* the following lines, a part of which may be quoted:

She awakened Krishna
who slumbered beneath
the rising breasts of Nīlādevi.
She enjoys the lord
whom she enslaved
with her discarded
garland of flowers.

In her verses of both *Tiruppāvai* and *Nācchiyār Tirumoḷi*, though the principal lover god is Kṛṣṇa, many avatars of Viṣṇu get telescoped. Kṛṣṇa emerges as polymorphous, that is, sometimes he is referred to as Viṣṇu who slumbers on his serpent in the milky ocean. And then he appears as a child who lies upon the banyan leaf. He is also Vāmana, perhaps one of the earliest references to appear in Tamil writing as it did in Ammaiyār's verse (as commented earlier), the dwarf who spans and measures the worlds by his cosmic strides. He is Govinda (cowherd lord), is lord of the Venkata hills, Tirupati. He is also lord of Arankam (Srirangam). And even as Kṛṣṇa is seen "high up on a tree with the garments of the Gopis", he is addressed as lord of Lanka, Rāma! In short, all the avatārs, including Varaha and Narasimha, appear in her verses to finally merge in Kṛṣṇa, her composite god. Furthermore, Kṛṣṇa, an avatar of Viṣṇu, is incorporated into a Tamil ritual and is relocated in Tamil land. She asks her companions in her several verses to take her to all the sites of Kṛṣṇa where Madurai is visualized as Mathura (of the North), and Ayarpati as Gokula in Brindāvan in order to reenact the early episodes of the Kṛṣṇa legend. She interiorizes the northern god Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa into Ranganātha, a southern lover-god in the manner of an *akam* lover.

Accordingly, the erotic sentiment comes out in Āṇṭāḷ's songs in a much more striking and celebratory manner, more than it did in the preceding women saints. In fact, the true meaning of 'āḷvār' is realised in all its depth with Āṇṭāḷ. For the term 'āḷvār' signifies one who is "immersed in god; the root verb *aḷ* means to immerse, to dive, to sink, to be lowered, to be deep," as Ramanujan explains (1993, p ix). Āṇṭāḷ sings fearlessly about her longing, "immersing" herself in her anguish for the physical touch of Kṛṣṇa. She conceptualizes her divine love in the discourses of the body, as love between a young girl and her lover, dramatizing herself in erotic terms. She entreats, for instance, the love-god Manmatha to plead with her beloved Kṛṣṇa on her behalf, and make him

caress me
with his sacred hands
my shapely breasts, my slender waist....

She pleads with the clouds to tell Kṛṣṇa if he would stay with her

for one day
enter me
so as to wipe away
the saffron paste
adorning my breasts.

And addressing the ocean, she confesses how the lord had entered her:

O green deep ocean
the lord entered into you,
mixed and churned you,
deprived you of your nectar.
That Māyān entered into me too,
churned me,
drained me of my essence. (*Nācciyār Tirumoḷi*)

And there are times when Āṇṭāḷ feels abandoned by her lord, and in sheer rage and desperation, she gives vent to her feelings as in the following verses in *Nācciyār Tirumoḷi*:

My soul melts in anguish —
he cares not
if I live or die.
If I see the lord of Govardhana
that looting thief,
that plunderer,
I shall pluck

by their roots
these useless breasts,
I shall fling them
at his chest,
I shall cool
the raging fire
within me. (tr. Dehejia: 35-36)

The song ends with an act of defiance—a performative gesture which enacts the Kannagi motif in C*ilappatikāram*, as the latter flings one of her breasts at the burning Madurai. To sum up this history of subjectivity of the self—a self as pronounced and transgressive as in Āṇṭāḷ, it can be said that for once a woman's sexuality expresses itself uninhibitedly within the sacral aura of *bhakti*, and in so doing, the subjective self has shed all traditional, societal shakles in its pursuit of self-fulfilling freedom.

In her *Tiruppāvai* songs—songs that are sung even to this day in traditional homes—however, her tone is more moderate, celebratory, and the songs in praise of Kṛṣṇa, of his childhood and adult games with gopis, the cowherd women, initiate an annual ceremony of ritual bathing and singing for groups of girls seeking marriage in the month of Mārkaḷi, the Tamil month corresponding to mid-December to mid-January. This ritual practice recalls the earlier motif extolled in *Paripādal* (which came toward the end of the Sangam age), wherein the "peacock-sheened girls who have rejected/secret loves in favour of a chaste life" bathed in the river Vaikai during the *Thai* month—which follows Markaḷi! The *pāvai* vow the virgin girls take in *Tiruppāvai* is symbolic of a spiritual journey, and acquires at this point in time a definitive form through *bhakti*. The first stanza sounds like Āṇṭāḷ's prologue, a call for her girl friends in the early morning to join her in the *markaḷi* vow "which enjoins a bath in the [river] waters followed by worship and prayer" (Dehejia, p 33). *Thiruppāvai* is obviously the earlier work related in calendar to *markaḷi* (December-January) followed by *Nācchiyār Tirumoḷi*, its very sensuous lyrics linked to Thai month (that is, January-February). And both the works, it is suggested, are "meant ... to feed into one another as do the months of the calendar" (*ibid*).

One predominant element of Tamil culture which becomes part of its poetics, and thereby constitutes its difference, is its music—music which fuses and transforms the elements it borrows from Sanskrit. For, music comes as integral to the literary production in Tamil. *Tolkāppiyam* refers to the deeply rooted tradition of music in Tamil culture. Sangam poetry as it associates landscape and its variants such as mountain, pastoral, arable, coastal and wasteland with different emotions of love with flora and fauna peculiar to each region, it also characterizes each region with a specific musical tune and instrument to go with it. There are references to singing minstrels, dancing girls in the earliest Sangam texts. The bards, well-versed in music, were also strolling players who were constantly on the move and seeking patronage of chieftains and kings. Since they were wandering tribes, they had an intimate knowledge of both nature and man. In fact *Cilappatikāram*, the first Tamil epic, contains an elaborate account of the science of music. The epic makes an effort to integrate poetry, music and drama. A Tamil scholar comments that "our knowledge of music in Tamil today we owe primarily to *Cilappatikāram* and to its two commentators" (*Encyclopaedia*, p 176). The epic talks about the origin and nature of the musical notes. It "analyses how music is rendered through the instrument of the human body by controlling the breath from the *mūlādhāram* to the *śirasu*, the centres for resonance being head, forehead, vocal chord, chest and abdomen ..." (Ibid). This rich tradition of music, looked upon as integral to poetry and literature, continued with the Nāyanārs and the Āḷvārs who sang their *bhakti* hymns and used music for the propagation of their religion. They also initiated the practice of singing hymns of the *Tevāram* in every temple. The singers were called *otuvārs*, and were specially trained, appointed in each temple and maintained by the Cola kings. Ancient inscriptions talk about the Cola patronage to *Otuvārs*. And both the literary and the musical at their high points māyābe said to hold together the *Tevāram* songs in exquisite balance.

As for Tamil influencing Sanskrit, it is widely acknowledged that the Sanskrit work *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, composed in the South around the beginning of the 10th century, almost replicates the tone of emotional bhakti of the Āḷvārs, and Āṇṭāḷ in particular. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri (p 381), the well-known historian, adds that the *purāṇa* enjoys a special connection with the Tamil country, its composition being facilitated by the Tamil *bhakti* milieu which had flourished around this time. It also "amalgamates the glowing feelings of bhakti with Śankara's *advaita*". Furthermore, George Hart has come up with what sounds like hard evidence of various kinds, of Tamil motifs, metaphors and themes finding their way into Sanskrit works. He also proposes that in the early phases of Tamil classical writing, the assimilation and the dialectic of exchange of themes and variations, that is, the thematic and figurative correlatives, are seen in abundance in both the literatures. He lists more than a hundred Tamil themes occurring in Indo-Aryan poetical works (p 277).

Now what remains to be mentioned, and emphasized is the social dimension of *bhakti*, already much commented upon by others. Of the Nāyanārs, say, the three poet-saints, Sambandar, Appar, Sundarar travelled far and wide in the Tamil countryside with fellow pilgrims, devotees from all castes and walks of life, singing hymns to Śiva, and visiting temples. They are represented in legend and song as bards and minstrels carrying a lute or *vīna* and becoming thereby a part of the period's folklore. In their frequent travels, they mapped out a 'sacred geography' in secular space. The symbolic landscape of '*akam*' poetry is now sacralized through the installing of several shrines, and this transformation highlighted the way that landscape has figured and is celebrated in Tamil writing. The temples the saints visited were hallowed by their presence in the community and gradually became centres of Tamil culture, of arts, music, dance, and sculpture. Besides, their efforts had perhaps gained an unexpected dimension: they became forces of integration among communities and created a sense of communality, a pan-Indian feeling through singing in praise of their personal gods. Although the gods like Śiva, Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa came from the North, they were assimilated, without resistance, into the South Indian pantheon. They were, however, to undergo a transformation, for, it is said, that the early Dravidians addressed god as king and built a house ('koyil' meaning temple) to honour him. This surely points to the process of humanization the Aryan gods underwent at the hands of the Tamil *bhakti* poets. The tradition continues, and that is how the gods have their weddings ('kalyānotsava') and their wives, their morning ritual awakening ('suprabhāta') in temples to the reciting of mantra, and to the music of pipe and drum.

As a corollary to the *bhakti* movement, it is now widely recognized that it enabled people to overcome social/caste barriers, those who sought to escape from them. Of the sixty-three Nāyanmārs, only eight or nine of them were from the upper caste, and the others could transcend the caste hierarchy through bhakti and finally attain canonization. What is striking is how bhakti provided a legitimate escape route for those who tried to overcome caste, and could legitimize their transgression. It is perhaps a culture's way of coping with such non-conformist moves, for by legitimizing non-conformism, the system legitimizes itself. Or in the words of Gadamer, who has brought back the notion of 'tradition' into his method of hermeneutics, "tradition exists only in becoming other than it is" (Alan How, p 208).

However, it is now a fact of history that the movement of *bhakti* acquired a remarkable historical dimension. For, it began as a nucleus in the Tamil heartland, grew and developed over a period of five to six centuries into a pan-Indian movement. But at the core of the movement, what activated it was Tamil cultural poetics as the latter developed with a history that sustained it. If poetics, as Paul Ricoeur would have it, is "the art of constructing plots with a view to broadening the individual and collective imaginary" (1997: 71), then Tamil poetics with its sheer spread and reach over centuries and emplotment of themes, motifs spanning the secular and the devotional with incremental enrichment may be said to constitute "the collective imaginary" of the Tamil texts. The movement, however, spread in the neighbouring Karnataka by the 12th century, and then moved on to Maharashtra and Gujarat. And in the East to Bengal and Assam, eventually encompassing the entire country by the 16th century. *Bhakti*, in short, is a Tamil innovation developed within a Tamil context—an innovation on what Tamil had taken from Sanskrit, and for which no Sanskrit parallel to such a movement existed during this time or earlier. "...What has happened in India is a two-way process of interchange and acculturation," comments Vidya Niwas Mishra as he refers to the civilizational process at work in Indian history, "rather than a process of extinction or absorption" (S.C. Mallik, ed. p 58). *Bhakti*, to sum up, is a movement, therefore, which can be said to have flourished for nearly ten centuries, say, from the 6th to the 16th century in the cultural history of India.

Chapter 5

Kannada Literature: Tamil and Kannada Land, its People and their 'Identity'

Now, to move from Tamil to Kannada is to become aware of a different problematic within which ancient Kannada writing functions. But before we spell out the specific features of this problematic, we may set down a general premise regarding the commonalities that all South Indian languages including Tamil share between them: that is, they all operate individually against the backdrop of Indian culture or a pan-Indian perspective. The milieu comprising many religious, ideological formations, though vast, intricate, diverse, had integrated the religious, social and literary facets of ancient India of, say, 300 BC to AD 900 to a great extent. What unites these diverse strains/strands, according to T.V. Venkatachala Shastri, are the two major influences which he calls "the peninsular and the Indo-Gangetic", and which have "nourished, sustained and enriched the culture of the land"—the influences "flowing sometimes apart, sometimes in confluence" (AIL, Vol 3, pp 375-76).

Besides, all Indian literatures trace their origins in religious lores, and here Sanskrit and Vedic faiths do play a major role in the evolution of regional literatures. But then there comes a time when the supremacy of Vedic religion with its stress on rituals, or to put it differently, when the Vedic hymns with their superb elemental poetry gave way to elaborate rituals, and the meticulous rules for observing them, this Vedic hegemony was challenged by the heterodox faiths such as the Buddhist and Jain, whose exponents propagated their faiths in the regional dialects closer to the common folk of the area, such as Pāli and

Prākrit. The local dialects came in handy only as an alternate channel of communication for propagation of one's faith—though this trend did not prevent heterodox scholars from writing either in Sanskrit or Prākrit whenever they felt like debating serious philosophical issues. However, with the changed situation of an alternative mode of communication being available, the regional languages and literatures came into their own. The impact of the Vedic, Buddhist and Jain religions, and Sanskrit and Prākrit languages can be seen in the formation of ancient Kannada language and literature. The *mārga* and *desi* elements coalesced in the formation of a lexicon, and in the use of forms, genres of writing. Above all, religion played a crucial role in triggering literary production. The notion largely held by scholars is that the third century BC marked a turning point in the evolution of regional literatures in India. For instance, when the Buddhist influence spread to the southern regions of India through the edicts of Aśoka, regional languages came to the fore, and brāhmi-based scripts took distinct forms (AIL: Vol 3, p 376). It is surmised that Kannada as language existed around the 3rd century BC. It is also probable that the earliest attempt to write in Kannada started with the Buddhists, whose intent was to reach a larger audience through the local medium. But then one cannot be sure that written literature in Kannada existed before the 5th century AD. The rise of Prākrit literature, though, must have been a clear incentive for Kannada language and literature to emerge.

Scholars have speculated on sound historical and linguistic grounds that both Tamil and Kannada once belonged to a common root of a proto-Dravidian origin, and that eventually Kannada drifted away from this common root. Here, we are obviously talking of a movement of Tamil "from pre-history to proto-history of Dravidian languages with the adaptation of Aśoka's (272-232 BC) southern brāhmi script to the pre-literary Tamil phonological system, and when the original proto-Tamil orality gave way to the earliest limited literacy, sometimes in the third-second century BC, in a few foci of early Tamil civilization such as Madurai, Tiruccendur, and the Kaveri delta. Pre-Tamil developed into proto-Tamil and pre-literary Tamil then" (*Encyclopaedia of Tamil Literature*, p 46). This is about the story of Tamil.

However, as far as Kannada is concerned, the trend to move away from proto-Tamil in course of time became more pronounced. On the other hand, Kannada found itself during this period much more open to Northern influence than Tamil. For, it moved closer to Sanskrit. Sanskrit was not virtually the Other for Kannada as it was for Tamil. And the trend to move away from Tamil and move closer to Sanskrit constitutes the new problematic within which Kannada evolves and develops. It looks as though cultures too have their identity crises, for Tamil tried to guard zealously its linguistic identity against Sanskrit. But Kannada displayed neither fear nor self-consciousness while dealing with Sanskrit for it assimilated freely the linguistic and lexical materials from it.

Even the earliest inscription in Kannada, say, the Halmidi epigraph (c AD 450), begins with an invocatory stanza in Sanskrit and then swiftly moves into Kannada prose, though with Sanskrit words and compounds. It registers the gift of two villages to a hero, a Kadamba who defeated the Pallavas. The similes used in the epigraph pertain to Śiva, and the notion of heroism is celebrated in terms of mythic figures, and the slaughter of animals. In contrast, though, the Bādāmi epigraph of Kappe Arabhatta (c 6th century) is in Kannada verse with the exception of the second stanza which is in Sanskrit! (AIL: Vol 3, p 393). Obviously, confidence in the use of Kannada for commemorative purposes was building up. In fact, Kannada needed Sanskrit as a constant frame of reference, something to get close to and yet stand away from, and in relation to which it could muster its own native resources. Besides, the Bādāmi inscription makes an effort to delineate the character of Kannada people of the day and construct the sense of a distinct linguistic community. That is how perhaps the early communities, who sought a distinction of being, tried to invent themselves in relation to a language. The inscription mentioned above invokes Mādhava (lord Kṛṣṇa), for instance, as a point of comparison with Arabhatta to prove that the latter was an exceptional man in the age of Kali Yuga!

The point to be noted here, however, is that Kannada did not have to confront Sanskrit the way Tamil did. To bring out the crucial difference in their relations with Sanskrit, we need to turn to Tamil once again. Tamil's confrontation with Sanskrit is much more complex, for the entire history of this relationship is characterised by "ambivalences and contradictions", as Sumati Ramaswamy avers (p 70). One notices further that there were, as Ramaswamy explains, "three dominant ways in which the relationship between Tamil and Sanskrit" (*Ibid*) were worked out. First, the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava poet-saints, as we have already seen, took for granted the parity between the two languages "as literary and salvational languages". Myth has it that "as Śiva commissioned Pāṇini to write the grammar for Sanskrit, he assigned Agastya to do the same for Tamil. Since Śiva is the patron of both languages, who can doubt" the parity of the two! The second position was somewhat influenced by what happened during the time between the seventh and the thirteenth centuries, "the Sanskritization of Tamil vocabulary, syntax, and genres ... and the consolidation of Sanskritic 'Hinduism' as the dominant religion of the land". Since Tamil was indebted to Sanskrit in several ways, it was deemed by some that Tamil was 'subaltern' while Sanskrit was 'patrician'. The third position which got crystallised in the 16th and 17th centuries points to what many felt that Tamil was far superior to Sanskrit, for by this time Tamil had acquired a halo around it as being both royal and god itself—Tamil as the 'Divine imaginary' (*ibid*).

We have already seen how the Sanskrit gods Śiva and Viṣṇu were appropriated and localised in this process so that they could emerge as Tamil gods, who were enchanted with the land, its music and dance, and above all with its language. The hymns of Nāyanārs and Āḷvārs had attained the status of a Tamil Veda, and they divinized Tamil by positing ties between language and the deities of the Vedic pantheon. Tamil gained by this metonymic transposition both sacrality and godhood, and for many Tamil scholars, therefore, the language became infinitely superior to Sanskrit! Notwithstanding these ambivalences, Sanskrit was virtually the principal Other for Tamil. And Tamil needed the Other in order to grow, expand, and invent its own identity in relation to the Other. Tamil conceived this Other, therefore, as being in direct confrontation with it, and that it was more a hurdle than a help if it got too close to Sanskrit! Tolkāppiyar, himself a Sanskrit scholar (as is well-known), tried to build for himself in Tolkāppiyam a strong canonical voice to ensure that Tamil, while it borrows from Sanskrit freely, retains its indigenous lexical and phonological strength and purity.

In relation to Kannada, however, Sanskrit enjoyed a privileged though amicable position, despite the fact that its hegemony was already being shaken by the use of Pāḷi and Prākrit, and the Vedic religion had given rise to counter-movements in Buddhism and Jainism. As Kannada writing received concepts, myths, and ideology from the Vedic and Jain religions, the Jain elements gaining a predominance over others, Sanskrit and Prākrit both had a direct hand in shaping the Kannada language and literature. The position of Sanskrit, as remarked earlier, was unique in the sense that it was involved in a process of what Sheldon Pollock calls a “pre-modern globalisation” (p 13). Sanskrit governed, rather paradoxically, without having a centre of governance, the process of shaping and structuring other vernaculars. Its empire extended through South-East Asia, its influence being mainly due to its disciplines of grammar, metre, and its “aesthetic capabilities” (ibid), which the regional elites had admired and emulated in their own languages. The globalizing movement of Sanskrit was mainly elitist and had hardly touched the grassroots. However, the vernaculars got shaped in close proximity with Sanskrit language, and the latter's resources were utilized in the context of the elite and royal patronage. But then what we need to note at this point is that Sanskrit did not straightaway fall into the Foucauldian mould wherein strategies of power dominate. Sanskrit was instead a "relational power", exerting its influence through sheer presence or metonymy on the geopolitical domain of knowledge and power. Both Tamil and Kannada locate themselves within the geopolitics of Sanskrit whose power as mentioned earlier is 'relational', ubiquitous, having multiple ends, and dispersed—where to 'govern' would mean to structure the possible fields of articulation.

Pollock, however, refers to the momentous decisions that must have taken place in the definitive switch-over to the vernaculars from Sanskrit and Prākrit and refutes the two dearly held positions on the issue. One, what prompted the switch-over to the vernacular were reasons of religious propagation, and another that the vernacular movement was a grassroots movement. Both these explanations are inadequate to fully grasp the situation, says Pollock. Religion did not always play a role in the use of the vernacular, for the Jain monks like Jinasena and Guṇabhadra (ca. AD 850-900) chose Sanskrit for writing their treatises!—even though the earlier Jain writers wrote in Prākrit. And the use of the vernacular for literary expression was prompted chiefly by the royal patronage and the commissioning of writing by the learned and elite communities—as it happened with Pampa, the Kannada poet, who, as he confesses at the beginning of his epic poem *Vikramārjunavijayam*, was commissioned by his king and the elite community of the court to compose it in Kannada champu (Pollock: pp 8-21).

However, where perhaps Pollock seems to go overboard with his theory, his ardent espousal of Kannada over against Tamil, is at the point where he claims that *Kavirājamārgam*, the first extant literary-critical work available in Kannada, “may in fact be the first work in world culture to constitute a vernacular poetics in direct confrontation with a cosmopolitan language” (p 20). First of all, it would be erroneous to say that the transaction between Sanskrit and Kannada, which forms the bulk of the Kannada text, amounted to a “direct confrontation”. To call the many faceted filiations that characterised the Sanskrit/ Kannada relationship in the text a “confrontation” is a misnomer. Furthermore, what Pollock manages to overlook here is that the cosmopolitan/local dichotomy which he uses in order to highlight the linguistic/literary operations taking place in Kannada is not unique to it, for the same dichotomy operated centuries earlier in Tamil during the time of Tolkāppiyar. But Pollock quotes Zvelebil to suggest that Tamil was interested only in sorting out the standard/non-standard aspects of Tamil, and not in the larger issue of transaction between the cosmopolitan and the local (p 20). The reality, however, seems to be different, for there was facing Tolkāppiyar the entire superstructure of Sanskrit ‘cosmopolis’ (to use Pollock’s term) to draw on, and appropriate into his poetics whatever he thought fit. While fully aware of the cosmopolitan nature of Sanskrit, Tolkāppiyar works with the local with a much more clarified, self-consciously ‘nationalist’ agenda than Srivijaya in *Kavirājamārgam*. And as he fashions the first vernacular poetics in India, defines, and legitimizes it, it gains a certain uniqueness over against Sanskrit because of Sangam poetry preceding it. *Porul-aṭikāram*, the third section of *Tolkāppiyam*, deals with the science of poetics relating to love poetry of Sangam age and the sixth chapter deals with *rasa* or sentiments as they figure in poetry. The author does refer with affiliative frequency to the emotive poetics reprised in Bharata and to the three Ṛgvedic gods (Viṣṇu, Indra and Varuṇa) as presiding deities of different *tinais* (landscapes) in the symbolic structure of Sangam poetry. Furthermore, there are parallels in this poetics to Bharata’s concepts of *lokadharmi* and *nātyadharmi*.

Tolkāppiyar was aware of the eight kinds of marriage mentioned in Dharmaśāstras, Kāmasūtra, early alankāra literature, the source-book of Nātyaśāstra ... works on vyākarana, Nirukta ... and made use of them in planning *Tolkāppiyam*" (Tolkāppiyam, p xxxiii). This fact perhaps needs to be emphasized, that the cosmopolitan/local dichotomy works as actively with Tolkīppiyar as it does with Srivijaya, except that the former makes it a part of his agenda to preserve a structure of improvisation which would ensure enough 'elasticity' (to adapt Greeblatt's term, 228). He seems to come out with a clear 'nationalist'-linguistic agenda rather than a more overtly syncretist, filiative agenda of Srivijaya. But Pollock seems to disregard completely the mutual give-and-take that characterized inter-linguistic/cultural transaction between Tamil and Sanskrit.

To counter further Pollock's argument, it is necessary to point out that the kind of poetics fashioned during Tolkāppiyar's time was such that it was all-inclusive, and could incorporate both the indigenous folk motifs, legends and the cosmopolitan elements/concepts from Sanskrit/Prākrit culture. Conceptually, for instance, the twin epics, *Cilappatikāram* and *Maṇimekalai,* come much closer to the celebration of the *puruṣārthas* than what one usually imagines. Since the four *puruṣārthas*, as criteria, are supposed to underlie the thematic structure of a *mahākāvya*, *Cilappatikāram* can be seen as dealing with the first three, *dharma, artha and kāma*, while the fourth, the concept of *mokṣa* happens to be the thematic core of *Maṇimekalai*. Furthermore, the latter epic appears as a sequel to the former, thereby fulfilling the filiative order since Maṇimekalai, the central character of the eponymous epic, happens to be the daughter of Kovalan and Mādhavi of *Cilappatikāram.* Apart from this, *Maṇimekalai* contains a long exposition of fallacies of logic "which is obviously based on the *Nyāyapraveṣa* of Dinnaga, a work of the 5th century AD" (Nilakanta Sastri, p 338). This unceasing transaction with

Sanskrit concepts, in short, determines in a way the structural elements of the twin epics.

Another point needs to be stated here: at the early stages of growth of Tamil writing, poets did not pursue Sanskrit epics for literary models as their counterparts did in Kannada—say, Pampa or Ranna. Instead, what really came to their rescue was the strong folk tradition as represented in Sangam poetry, the folk myths such as *pattini daivam*, the koravai legends, and the Jain and Buddhist tales and their faiths. The ubiquitous folk traditions in Tamil did not create any space for Sanskrit epics to play their part, and the traditions came enriched with song and dance which, as we have witnessed, embellishes *Cilappatikāram* through and through. The Sangam age casting its benign shadow over the entire Tamil literary space was found to be a natural asset.

Now to return to Kannada: the Kannada inscriptions, on the other hand, have already shown how both Sanskrit and Kannada worked together, and how in them usually the rhetoric came from Sanskrit and documentation regarding the details of donations made to the recipient came from the vernacular. The earliest extant literary work available in Kannada is *Kavirājamārgam*, as mentioned earlier, which is said to have been written by either a king, Nṛpathunga, or his minister Srivijaya in AD 850 —though many scholars believe that it was Srivijaya, a poet patronised by Nṛpatunga, who wrote the work and dedicated it to his patron. What is perhaps curious, if somewhat co-incidental, is that both the earliest extant works in Tamil and Kannada are treatises on language and poetics! Both try to territorialise their identity in terms of the land and its people. That is, both Tolkāppiyar and Srivijaya are concerned about providing their respective peoples a habitation with geographical contours, and a name, a collective, linguistic/poetic identity, in short, a poetic signature. But there is a difference. If in Sangam poetry landscape and its topography turn into implicit signifiers, to use the words of Ramanujan, in the Kannada work there is a conscious attempt at signification and accentuation of the land, its people and their territorial mapping:

Stretching from Kaveri to the Godavari
Is the land, ocean bound
And highly acclaimed all over the world,
Where live people who speak the language of Kannada.

Now that the land is identified and demarcated as Kannada land, the process of naming will take over in the poet's subsequent effort at mythification: "The poet is the namer," said Emerson, "a language maker," naming things as they appear and in their essence. The Kannada text, consciously promoting an essentialist hermeneutic, attempts to mythicise both its land and its people. An origin, a source from which a future history could develop, has to be found and mapped. So the text inscribes in lofty terms that if the land stretches from the river Kaveri in the South to the Godavari in the North, then the people inhabiting this land are endowed with an innate poetic sensibility:

In articulating what is written,

and interpreting what is spoken,
those living in this region are indeed experts;
with inborn talents, they are of mature mind
and can compose poems with no special effort.

That is the myth, the "inborn talents", and the poet continues in the same strain without batting an eyelid:

Leave alone the learned, even others
are well-versed in the use of their mother tongue.
little children and yes, even the mute

can offer guidance in well-chosen words.

Besides, the people of this land have a high sense of propriety in speech and understanding, and are born critics. For, they can critique a poem spontaneously and without any knowledge based on the formal study of poetry!

Even those who are not well-read
know they can, if they so decide,
spot any literary lapse,
and get to grips with it,
and censure it.

In sum, the land, people, and poetry come together within a luminous circle to constitute Kannada culture. That is how a poetician constructs a language community, invents a myth, a literary history, and other signifiers for its identity.

But then, it is within the context of the Sanskrit treatises on poetics of Bhāmaha, Dandin, Udbhata that Srivijaya composes his Kannada poetics. The text was also composed at a crucial historical moment when Buddhism was on the decline in Karnataka because of the rise of Jain faith strongly founded by Jinasena and Ajitasena, when the reigning Cālukyas had embraced Vaiṣṇavism during AD 700-900, and when to the South in Kanchi, the Śaiva-dharma had firmly rooted itself—the three faiths and their syncretic traditions assisting each other and enriching the culture around. The scholar-critics of those days enjoyed a special privilege: they were bi/tri-lingual for they knew their Sanskrit and Prākrit apart from their regional language. And they could operate on several discursive terrains comprising Sanskrit, Prākrit or Kannada. When they chose their vernacular for writing in close relation to the cosmopolitan Sanskrit model, which often resulted in translation or adaptation, they could afford to be both interpretive and critical. While the vernacular through Sanskrit acquired cosmopolitan features, it also aspired to be different and oriented to using Kannada resources. Srivijaya had this unique advantage: though his main source happens to be Dandin's *Kāvyādarśa*, from which he borrows freely, translates it word for word many a time, he also innovates at places where it touches Kannada and his own reading experience of the extant Kannada poetry. He discusses the relation between Sanskrit and Kannada and the optimal conditions under which Kannada can benefit from Sanskrit. Instead of the minimalist strategy involved in the linguistic manoeuvring that ancient Tamil employs in its relation with Sanskrit, Kannada seems to envisage as its model a maximalist connection with Sanskrit.

Srivijaya had, no doubt, a clear agenda when he set out to write his grammar and poetics. As V. Seetharamaiah rightly points out when he quotes T.S. Eliot that Srivijaya's goal was to "purify the dialect of the tribe", to cleanse the spoken dialects of the detritus of slovenly folk usage and move toward a standardized form of language suited to literary production (p 144). The poetician meets Sanskrit at various levels: he negotiates at the level of *guna-doṣa*, the merits and demerits of the ways poets borrow from Sanskrit lexis, at the level of *śabdālankāra*, the phonic aspect of the borrowings from Sanskrit and Prākrit, the sense of rhythm, metre-rhyme, the cadence of verse, etc., and finally, at the level of *arthālankāra*, the semantics of poetry. All the levels at which negotiations are carried out are crucial, according to Srivijaya, to the task of cleansing the language and elevating it to poetic use. His main aim is to see that Kannada gets refined and rendered fit for producing literature, and in the process the language standardized, made more euphonious.

Kavirājamārgam presents three chapters, the first being *guṇa-doṣa* in poetry, the second *śabdālankāra*, and the third being *arthālankāra*, and in all the three chapters Srivijaya follows the Sanskrit rhetoricians closely. But while appropriating the theories to Kannada context, he is aware of the earlier and contemporary Kannada poetry available to him at the time. Sanskrit theories therefore undergo subtle changes, attain new orientations as the examples to illustrate the theories come from the extant Kannada poetry.

The first chapter, as mentioned earlier, discusses the concept of *guna-doṣa*—a concept he borrows from Dandin—comprising four subsidiary notions which refer to a variety of guises under which lexical deficiencies occur. Though the discussion here follows closely both the Sanskrit rhetoricians Bhāmaha and Dandin, in emphasis and application it goes beyond both the models. He calls the four notions *śrutiduṣṭa*, *arthaduṣṭa*, *shrutikaṣṭa*, and *kalpanokti kaṣṭa*, and cites examples from extant Kannada verse to make his points. Ś*rutiduṣṭa* would refer to a situation where words pun on meanings not intended by the context, for what is heard may mean/suggest obscene or irrelevant meanings. *Arthaduṣṭa* overlaps with the former, suggesting once again 'wicked' meanings not intended by the context. Ś*rutikaṣṭa* has something to do with the way verse-rhythm sounds on the ear, which should not end up in cacophony. *Kalpanokti kaṣṭa* refers to meanings which ramify to such an extent that it would be hard for the imagination to grasp or grapple with! Therefore, whether it is matter related to metre-rhyme, to verse rhythm, concatenation of words, or grammar, it is Srivijaya's singular effort to think of Kannada solely and independently of Sanskrit.

But *Kavirājamārgam* (the royal path for poets or the royal poet's path) is not without its ambiguity, especially when we view the text in the overall perspective of early Kannada literature. While the text mythicises the land and its people, as mentiond earlier, it does not lose sight of reality or to be precise, 'the uncultivated' readers of poetry. Quite early in the text one reads as the verse highlights the nature of the gross reader:

"This is fine, this flawed,"
How can the uncultivated tell

One from the other?
They, like animals,
Love equally whatever comes
Be it hay, plant, or cattle-feed,

—there comes, some ten stanzas later, the moment of mythification, when even "little children" in Kannada land "and yes, even the mute/can offer guidance in well-chosen words". The work in short creates this ambiguous (somewhat incoherent) space wherein an earlier statement sometimes can deconstruct the later mythopoeic proposition. It signifies a dual loyalty or allegiance of the author to Sanskrit on the one hand because the latter is a cosmopolitan mine of concepts and linguistic treasure-house to draw on, while on the other, essentially, to Kannada which needed a boost, a careful nurture and expansion in terms of conceptual and linguistic range. Such a dual loyalty did not bother Tolkāppiyar, who was simply out to help himself to whatever Sanskrit can offer to fulfil or complement his agenda. This duality, however, in Srivijaya is counterpoised by a predominant early trend in his Kannada treatise of a dual vision of fact and fantasy—the fantasy of a land with idealised people and the reality of the 'uncultivated' who required a poetics and a language with immense possibilities for growth.

Pampa (AD 942), the first great poet of Kannada—he is also called *Ādikavi*, the poets' poet—who could realise the enormous potentiality of Kannada as a poetic medium, also takes on the task of a similar mythification, a high-toned discourse almost endorsing the views of Sri Vijaya, when he describes the Kannada speaking region 'Banavāsi', which occurs in his epic poem *Vikramārjuna Vijayam* (often referred to as *Pampabhārata*):

Men
drawn to free and

uninhibited life,
lost in enchanting melodies,
in concerts, in learning,
are lucky to be born
human!
If I can't be born
a human,
may I be born
a humble bee
or a cuckoo
in such a land
as Banavasi.

Jainism had come to Kannada land a little before the Christian era. And it had come in a big way, and faced no resistance from the people as it did in Tamil land. Jainism, both as faith and as social practice, gained wide currency, and almost the entire extant literary writing of the early period, say, from the 9th to the 11th century AD, took place under its patronizing gaze. In fact, ancient Kannada writing was constituted by Jain writers who in their ideology and poetic practice were obliged to live a dual life. Their faith was known in ultimate terms as life-denying, and upheld the value of renunciation. But before renunciation was to be realized as a supreme value, there was this life to be affirmed and enjoyed to the hilt. Therefore, in most Jain writings, there was this central dilemma, a fine balancing of the tendency to high life, a life of luxury and sensuality that the kings, who figure greatly in Jain myths, exemplify with the contrary tendency (which would afflict them later, and all of a sudden) to renounce.

Pampa, the archetypal poet of the period, may be cited to illustrate this dilemma. Though the poet's faith in the value of renunciation as emphasized by Jainism is not to be questioned, he could hardly resist the allurement of flesh or its poetic representation. In the following passage "Ideal love" from the *Ādipurāṇa*, an epic written to celebrate the first Tīrthankara, the saint who gave Jainism to the world, in one of the stories in the work, the protagonists Vajrajangha and Srimati are portrayed as locked in a blissful embrace just before their deaths:

> Though the fumes swirled
> and closed in,
> the lovers, who had pledged
> to lifelong love,
> did not loosen their embrace,
> but together ended their life.
>
> What greater blessing can there be
> than to die together
> in each other's arms? (tr. author)

After we read this about their final union, several lines later, there comes the Jain religious warning:

> How strange, then,
> that fools still put faith
> in such pleasure ...

The earlier verbal celebration of the flesh seems to question, if not subvert, the efficacy of the later message of faith. For the Jain poets, the dilemma does create this dual/Janus-faced space wherein the call of the flesh is as real as the call of the spirit and both are portrayed with equal zeal and verve. But then the question is, what happens to the subjective voice of the poet? Is he able to find his volitional voice, and exercise his choice, assert his preferences either within or outside the framework of his faith to which he is committed? Perhaps a tentative answer can be suggested here: while the subjective or poetic self, on its long and arduous way to gaining an independent voice, takes the first step of making its implicit choice through representation of the sensual in all its enchantment, it does so in a seemingly strict impersonal way and apparently to suggest how the myriad hurdles waylay the journey to salvation. It is perhaps a subjective choice exercised in poetry but offered in the guise of strict impersonality! We will take up this thematic later when we get to a full discussion of Pampa.

After *Kavirājamārgam*, however, the next notable work in Kannada is *Vaddāradhane* (written probably at the end of the 9th century), which is the first prose narrative found in old Kannada. Prose, usually supposed to be a latecomer in the evolution of literary genres, as it appears in this work seems to be a lone exception. It comprises 19 stories of Jain *mahā puruṣās* (exemplary men), who were also called *upasarga kevalis,* that is, ascetics who got cleansed through adversities. The Jain telos superimposed on these stories transform them into moral exempla and spiritual fables. However, many stories at bottom remain 'secular' in tone, though the overall orientation is explicitly didactic in that it drives home the value of liberation through self-denial and a joyous acceptance of an austere life. Some of the stories are told in a spirited, racy style. Many have story-within-a story model—the usual Sanskrit story technique—with folktales and animal stories. And each story is interspersed with quotes from Sanskrit and Prākrit, and characters often from folk origins such as *Gambhire*, *Vidyuccora* are etched out vividly. One of the stories wherein the protagonist Agniraja marrying his own daughter and getting a son by her recalls the Oedipus myth.

One of the notable stories from *Vaddārādhane* is the tale of Bhadrabahu. It has for its backdrop the story of Cānakya from the Mauryan history. It is always the larger issue, the cosmopolitan thrust, the effort to reach the skies as it were that Kannada presents in its textual enterprise! For, as Venkatachala Sastry says, "the story refers to cultural events, trade transactions, sports and amusements, literature and fine arts. It also depicts dress and ornaments, the social manners of the age" (AIL, p 331).

Now, to turn to Pampa for a proper discussion: we have already mentioned Pampa in terms of structural fissure, the central rupture that the great Jain writers faced in their literary productions. Since Pampa's preeminence as a poet remains undisputed even to this day, we need to take a closer look at some of the available biographical details which would constitute a paradigm for our classical poets. This paradigm consists of an inherent dilemma, a set of equally weighing, crucial dualities in which most of our Jain poets are located. Pampa was born a Jain in AD 902, though his forefathers had professed the Vedic faith. However, his father had become a Jain, but the rich legacy of the Vedic culture was still very much around. It is probable that he spent many years perfecting the art of poetry and finally became a poet in the court of Arikesari (AD 930-955), son of Narasimha the Second of the Calukya family of the Vemulavada branch, which had accepted the sovereignty of the Rashtrakutas of Malkhed. Though himself a Jain, he was obliged to work with and celebrate his king who was a Vaiṣṇava. His works indicate that he was well-read in Sanskrit and Prākrit classics and was thoroughly familiar with both the epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. He had mastered the Jain philosophy and was conversant with music, dancing, painting, sculpture, medicine, politics, economics, erotics and embroidery. He was an all-rounder, as many of the classical poets were. It is no exaggeration to say that Pampa was the most learned of Kannada poets. And his decision to write in Kannada in a way determined the history of Kannada literature. It is of course well-known that he was commissioned to write in Kannada both by the king and the learned men of the court.

The poet, it is said, wrote two of his celebrated works in less than a year. He wrote his first work *Ādi Purāṇa*, which depicts the life and teachings of Ādinātha, the first tīrthankara, and is based on Jinasena's *Pūrva Purāṇam* (c AD 850) in Sanskrit. As was customary with poets of those days, he translated many passages in the original Sanskrit but recreated several others wherever his imagination took charge and launched out on its own. And he could reduce the original text of about 10,000 stanzas to a bare 1,600 verses and some prose passages. He employed prose for narrating rituals, religious concepts, and philosophical ideas, which are in high-flown Sanskrit diction. But there are also situations involving natural human feelings, which occur frequently.

Perhaps a general remark may be made at this point regarding the free borrowings, even literal translations at places that the poets of those days made. There was no anxiety of influence on the part of the poet because there was no such notion based upon individual achievement. The notion that "the author is dead" is invented only in an age where the cult of individuality dominates, and where the individual writer is 'anxious' to own his work as his sole achievement. The notion of presence of the author was very much alive during those days at least in the consciousness of the writer with the result he did not bother to prove its presence—except at the beginning of the work—at every turn of his imagination. He knew he was active only in the context of his literary model which he let influence him freely, and whenever the occasion called for it. It was the age of anonymity which programmed the writer to be impersonal in his narration and seek universalist principles to control it.

K Krishnamurthy (pp 1-18) makes a strong case for Sanskrit influence, its many-sided role in the overall achievement of the poet. He suggests that Pampa's model of poetic style was Bana's *pāncāli* rather than Kalidasa's *vaidharbi*. Extremely well-versed in the Sanskrit classics, his use of *alankāras* took after the manner of Bharavi and Magha. The critic further stresses the fact that Pampa often indulged in their use, not so much either to strengthen theme or character in his epic but often to flaunt his verbal skills, his adroitness in using the *alankārās*, and he even created situations in order to use them—and all the 18 ways of description which Sanskrit poetics enunciates. Pampa in this essential sense continues the Sanskrit tradition not only in adapting to his different purposes the Sanskrit philosophical and literary tradition, but even poetic styles, replete with sṛngāra features canonized in poets such as Amaru and Bhartṛhari.

However, to get back to *Ādi Purāṇa:* There are ten stories of the previous births of the tīrthankara in the work. In the first five stories, the poet shows how the desire for enjoyment can be intense and pre-eminently sensuous. In the succeeding stories, with the dual, opposing thrust, the desire wears off, yielding place to renunciation and culminating in the realization of everlasting joy. However, when the theme of desire, *kama*, figures in the story, Pampa's poetry takes wing to build supreme fictions, and has given many memorable episodes, one such being the episode of Vajrajangha and Srimati cited earlier. The other episode which stands out in the epic is 'Nilanjana's dance'—a sensuously realised episode in an otherwise dharmic epic poem. In the original Sanskrit Jinasena describes this incident in only five stanzas, giving 32 of them for the conversion that Ādinātha undergoes. In Pampa, the incident gets transformed into a vibrant dramatic event in 28 stanzas:

In the context of Ādinātha's sudden apocalyptic vision which hastens his conversion to *mokṣamārga*, Pampa depicts in this episode a magnificent scene in which the celestial danseuse Nīlānjana dances her way into the hearts of kings only to disappear all of a sudden from the stage because her time has come. It was Indra who had arranged the programme in honour of Ādinātha, and since he did not want the spectators to know the sudden vanishing act of Nīlānjana, he puts another dancer in her place to continue the dance. But Ādinātha soon becomes aware of this ruse, and he realises that life afterall is transient and decides to follow the path of renunciation, a life of austerity and penance. The poet makes ample use of his knowledge of music and dance in portraying the scene of Nīlānjana—the passage eminently deserves quoting:

> No poet
> can do justice, no,
> nor any king either,
> to the looks and figure
> of this celestial dancer;
> so gorgeously was she
> attired, wreathed, and bejewelled.
>
> All the rasas
> stood still
> at the moment
> when she stood poised
> behind the curtain,
> this voluptuous creeper of the lovegod's
> flashing like lightning
> from behind the clouds.
>
> * * *
>
> When she entered
> the marble dance floor,
> rhythm in her eyebrows,
> she guided the bows
> that faltered on the strings around her
> and thereby had turned herself
> a violinist.
>
> Both men and gods
> watched her without
> batting their eyelids,
> when the nectar which the lovegod
> had hid in the navel
> and around the arms of this celestial bride

spilt into their riveted eyes.

While she swung
her creeper-thin wreaths,
and arrayed her flowing silks
solely thro' the motion of her limbs,
the postures of her dance
looked
as if the lovegod
had put up
a sparkling display
of his erotic
domain.

The ravishing figure
of Nilanjana,
tender as a creeper,
her time having come,
all of a sudden,
swift as lightning,
vanished from the world's stage! (tr. author)

Even as Indra puts on the stage a standby so that the show would go on, and

While the entire audience thought,
Their eyes and mind merged in delusion,
That it was none else
But Nilanjana who danced,
Ādināthа, alone, all-wise,
knowing what had happened,
wondered
if all life wasn't, after all,
as ephemeral as the dance.

After this incident, Ādinātha's disillusion follows:

> He said to himself:
> "Even as this
> charming machine
> of a woman, under one's
> insistent gaze, melted away,
> this life with its transient nature
> has taken firm root in me.
> It's now time I discarded it."

Eventually Ādinātha renounces worldly pleasure and takes to the path of *mokṣa*. We have in the cited passages an amalgamation of the sensuous best that is found in Sanskrit poetry and the Jain story of disillusionment that usually follows any celebration of desire.

The second half of the poem shows how the desire for personal power, pomp and glory, comes in the way of one's attaining everlasting happiness. The story centres round Bharata and Bāhubali, two of the many sons of the Tīrthankara. Bharata wants to become the emperor of the world after conquering all the kings in battle. He thinks that his brother, Bāhubali, should also accept him as his master. But Bāhubali does not. So they fight each other in a novel way, without the use of weapons. The armies of the two adversaries act as mere spectators. Bāhubali, who is better endowed physically, defeats Bharata, his elder brother, and is about to throw him to the ground when suddenly, good sense prevails, and he lowers his brother gently to the ground setting him free. His soldiers shout in joy. This offends Bharata's sense of pride. In a fit of rage, he hurls his discus at his brother, Bāhubali. The discus gently circles thrice around Bāhubali and goes back to his hand, ready to obey his command. Bāhubali refuses to retaliate. He tells his brother that power, wealth and pomp are real sources of evil and so, relinquishing his kingdom, he seeks the path of penance. He goes away to a lonely place to stand still like a statue, deep in meditation. Bharata is shamed by his brother's action. He repents and loses all interest in power and glory. This action-packed story is made sublime by Pampa, whose characters appear titanic in their majesty and grandeur.

While *Ādi Purāṇa* was meant by the poet to be read as a dharmic text, his other well-known work, *Vikramārjuna Vijayam,* was to be read, as the poet himself proclaims, as a *laukika*, that is, a non-religious or 'secular' text. Pampa's dual position is once again evident here: he is seen here as giving up the tradition of Jain epic writing, its explicit modalities of storytelling, and its worldly and other-worldly protocols. Of course, as mentioned earlier, the Vedic tradition of Vyasa Bhārata, its legacy and ambience was very much around him. His forefathers were Vedic, but since his father was a Jain convert, Pampa's own Jainism was of recent origin. Yet, what determined his creativity, more than anything in terms of socio-religious factors, was the supreme Jain philosophy of *Anekāntavada* which underpins the poet's effort and provides the poet ample space in which he could figure out reality under various perspectives. That reality is not one and that it takes on new facets with the change of perspective is the epistemological core of *Anekāntavada*. This fluid kind of epistemology harks back to Bhartṛhari's idea of perspectivism (probably during the second half of the fifth century, and in the first kanda of *Vākyapadiya*) "that things appear differently from different points of view, or in different conceptual frameworks" and to the Jain thinker, Haribhadra's *Ṣaddarśana-Samucchaya* wherein 'darśana' is used in the sense of 'perspective' (Jan E.M. Houben, "Bhartṛhari's Perspectivism," p 318-319). Now, it is interesting to note that we get this notion, its analogue, developed in the West by Nietzshe, in his idea of perspectivism "that the world is knowable, but ... interpretable otherwise, it has ... countless meanings.... And that all ideations take place from particular perspectives". So a change of position from the *dhārmic* to the *laukika* would also bring about changes in the vision of reality that one can capture in language. So, it can be said that the notion of *anekāntavāda* enables the poet to work under plural perspectives and try his hand at multi-layered narration.

Pampa wrote this epic, for he was commissioned to write both by the king, his patron, and the learned men of the court. Though Arikesari, his patron king and a Vaiṣnava, was only a vassal under the Rāṣtrakkūtas, he was a dynamic, able and astute political leader, and it was this aspect which prompted Pampa to make his patron the hero of his work, comparing him with Arjuna. The poet celebrates his patron's greatness and valour, all in the name of Arjuna. Contemporary political history figures a great deal, and in its concise form with 14 cantos comprising 1,600 verses and some prose passages, the epic reflects the social, cultural, diplomatic activities of those days. Further, his own experience of warfare enabled him to make his description of the heroic deeds of Arjuna detailed and graphic. It is, however, significant that though Pampa, being a professed Jain, chose the Hindu myth and theme, there are places where the influence of Jainism is discernible. There are within the text any number of resonances, internal echoes, images which amply suggest the Jaina feeling that all that prowess Arjuna possesses, the victories that he achieves at great costs are virtually ephemeral, and that the mighty characters like Bhiṣma and Karṇa prefer to valorize their own ideals of non-violence to victory in battle.

This *laukika* text appears in *campu* form (a mix of prose and verse) as an abridged version of Vyasa's *Mahābhāarata*, incorporating all the important episodes of the epic, and displays how a local text can acquire all the features of globality. The poet works the epic material over to fit the parameters that *Kavirājamārgam* described: "Between the Godavari and the Kaveri ..." This is the cosmopolitan/vernacular poetry that Pampa produced, to evoke Pollock once again.

In the present text, the dualistic dilemma that the poet faces becomes much more explicit. However, this does not mean that the poet himself is afflicted by a split personality. On the contrary, the poet turns this dilemma into a metaphoric asset and expands the parameters of his poetic narration within the generic reach of an epic. Now the question may arise at this point: does the epic form in the hands of Pampa attain some kind of unitary focus, as some critics have affirmed. On the contrary: the epic form itself as it has evolved in India from Vyasa *Mahābhārata* consists of a whole theatre of possibilities. The epic genre can accommodate within its thematic space multiple layers, diverse perspectives, as mentioned earlier, thereby falsifying what Michael Bakhtin contends (in his essay "Epic and Novel", 1941) that while the novel "flourishes on diversity... it is the same diversity that the epic attempts to eliminate from the world". This is not so with Indian epics: for many centres of 'narrative gravity' function within the epic's corpus, and many dualities are found countering each other. Therefore, any study of the epic, principally its content, involves three different but allied perspectives—they are the mythical, historical, and the ideological. These three strands often interweave and comprise the overall allegorical framework.

Pampa seeks to re-territorialize in Kannada land the mighty Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* through the deft use of the dual-faced rhetoric of allegory. If the mythical strand of the Kannada epic comes from Vyasa, the historical material comes from the poet's contemporary world. If Pampa's patron king Arikesari is equated with the legendary Arjuna, the poet's contemporary world is critiqued, as K.V. Subbanna says, against the background of Vyāsa's epic (p 95). On the other hand, there occurs at the ideological level the encounter between the Vedic and the Jain ascetic or *śramaṇa* values. Between different frames and motifs, it is well nigh impossible to create organic unity. Since the poet works at various levels and with different perspectives in the epic form, it is more probable that structural fissures occur. It would indeed be futile, therefore, to look for some kind of structural unity in the epic form. The epic by its very form is many-centred and multi-layered and opens up the possibility of different readings. To put it differently, an epic is a force-field of rhetorical display, and the poet is like an impresario in a theatre who controls and manages different and often contradictory impulsions and episodes based on differing ideologies, the Vedic and the Jain. Of the varied stylistic devices available to the poet, the classical and the folk (*mārga-desi*) are the most prominent in Pampa for, as he himself says, "One needs to enter into the folk idiom, and having entered, needs to confluence the 'mārga', the classical, and through such a poetic union alone can a poem throb and scintillate" (L Basavaraju, p 14: translated).

As is well acknowledged, Pampa undertakes the task of conflating Arjuna with Arikesari, his king, and what is *purāṇic* or legendary with what is contemporary. However, there are other facets to Pampa's epic, often distracting though firmly holding the reader's interest: a number of episodes which form no part of the principal theme nor could they add to the general tenor of the epic – episodes hardly relevant to the main theme, of the rivalry of royal cousins of the *Mahābhārata*. Two such episodes (what may be thought of as wholly irrelevant) may be cited here: one, a full-scale description of the prostitutes' quarter; the other, a hunting expedition that ends with floral and water sports. The first episode concerns Arjuna, who deeply in love with Subhadra whom he intends to marry, steals out of the palace the night before under moonlight, with pleasure-loving entourage and enters the prostitutes' quarter. This episode provides the poet the occasion to display his expertise on the goings-on in the underworld. The poet with gusto and relish categorizes pimps and go-betweens of his times: some are professional and well-attired, he declares, and some are occasional, part-time and practise their trade as a hobby. Similarly, among the prostitutes, some are housewives looking for an extra income, and some ready to oblige for a garland or necklace. While some are full-fledged courtesans, others flaunt their wares as if they are like nectar welling up from a pot of country liquor. These several episodes are added, presumably, in order to fulfil a classical convention that a poet of repute should be able to write eighteen kinds of description.

Being 'secular' in his approach to the Sanskrit epic, Pampa creates for himself enough space in his epic enterprise so that he can further change the sequence of events, rewrite many of them, add new incidents. He makes Arjuna the hero and calls his epic *Vikramārjunavijayam*—"The Victory of the Mighty Arjuna". Almost every chapter begins with the eulogy of Arjuna and ends with lines in praise of his prowess. If in Vyāsabhārata, Draupadi is wedded to five men, in Pampa, she is married only to Arjuna. In fact, there are 15 notable changes, which scholars have listed, that the poet has made, apart from minor ones (Venkatachala Sastri: pp 62-64). And when the Kurukshetra war is over, it is Arjuna and Subhadra who are crowned king and queen. Here, though his Jain faith is kept in abeyance, his dual interest rests on both the king and the exigencies of the epic story retelling. This kind of duality is permanent with the Jain poets, and the retelling takes the direction of innovation as far as Arjuna is concerned, and through him his own king, who is the main subject for celebration.

While renunciation as supreme value is a Jain tenet, and the poetic text is always structured teleologically with this end in view, it does not prevent the poet from celebrating what is sensuous in nature or sensual in man-woman relation. While describing Hastināpura, the poet notes that

In the flower-decked arches
that adorn courtesans' bowers
lovers twine in embrace and
bevies of comely girls
abandon themselves in revelry.

> Under the golden domes
> are the halls of dance;
> strains of mellifluous music
> come from the sanctums of temples.
>
> Flags, proud emblems of kings,
> flutter high in the sky
> from palaces that
> rise like hills of gold –
> mocking the heavens –
> proclaiming
> the glory of
> Hastināpura.

Perhaps the most splendid passage of poetry in Pampa's epic, which often goes unnoticed, occurs in the second canto. It describes very touchingly the tragic death of Pandu in spring. Though engaged in austerities, he is infatuated with the beauty and youth of Madri, his wife, whom he embraces in a fit of passion only to die under a curse on him. The season of spring comes through replete with human sexuality, and its protagonists, Pandu and Madri, as erotically primed and fated in death:

> The south wind presses hard
> on the Madhavi blossoms
> and the jasmine in fresh efflorescence,
> squeezing out their sweet fragrance.
> The bees compete to outwit
> the wind in this sensual game as the koel sounds
> its sweetest notes.
>
> Boughs of mango rich with fresh sprouts
> bob up and down
> in rhythmic symmetry.

All this cradling, sounding,
Swaying swings —
O! What a wondrous welcome to Spring

* * *

Nature-bride infatuated with Spring
breaks into shrill green and
sprouts in cascades in layer upon layer
showering on him
sweet mangoes.

Deflowered in his warm embrace
in the hermit arbour,
dripping lusty juice of the season,
she sprouts leaves and flowers
of mango in mature fruition.

* * *

In such a season Madri,
smarting with passion
like a cow-elephant
strolled proudly in the forest
dallying with the caresses of Spring.

Thus bedecked
she was a match
for the arrows aimed
by the god of love himself.

It was then that
Pandu, the king,
emerged from the hermitage
to stroll in the garden.
Madri
pushed aside
the entangled flowers

swinging in her hair,
the garland of flowers
caressing her breasts,
and cleared her face
of the jasmine veil
of bees rushing to savour
the fragrance of her lotus face.

She rushed forward
like an elephant cow,
wanton, lovelorn,
desire oozing out of her infatuated eyes.

Ignoring
the curse on him
Pandu took
the rushing Madri
in his arms
as if to embrace the goddess of death.

Her tender arms
like the delicate stalk of a lotus
tightened their embrace around his neck,
the noose of Death
touched
with a potent venom.

One of the spin-offs of the continual transaction between Kannada and Sanskrit, especially in the context of the latter's epics, is that the Kannada poets felt free within the epic framework—and this is the paradox—yes, free to interpret, be critical of the way that Valmiki or Vyasa had presented their characters in their epics. They usually picked on 'negative characters' such as Rāvaṇa, Duryodhana or Karṇa, and uncovered probable facets hidden in the apparently uni-dimensional villains. Despite their overall villainy in the Sanskrit epics, Kannada poets brought out some redeeming characteristics in them.

Another poet of importance worth considering here for his close 'filiation' to a Sanskrit poet, and for sheer innovation and metaphoric strength is Janna. Janna's *Yaśodhara Carite* (AD 1209) written in the form of campu reads like a test case, for it highlights the poet's transaction with a Sanskrit text with the same story by Vadiraja written in the 11th century AD. The Kannada text by Janna illustrates clearly how it constitutes a paradigm for vernacular appropriation. Such an appropriation, no doubt, depends on several factors in order for the vernacular to attain a cosmopolitan status: one, the text deals with a pan-Indian folk motif which the poet works over into his imaginative idiom and orientation. Two, he infiltrates this folk legend with his Jain doctrine which is again pan-Indian. A detailed study of this text therefore would provide insight into an aesthetic process by which a poet appropriates a 'global' Sanskrit text, innovates on it and makes it his own in the vernacular—a text with a cosmopolitan format to it.

Perhaps a bit of biography would help here: Janna, the Jain poet of the 12-13th century AD, figures indisputably among the major classical poets of Kannada literature. The others who also professed the Jain faith and came prior to Janna are Pampa (whose immense contribution to Kannada literature we have already seen), Ranna, and Ponna in that order. Piecing together from available sources a credible biography of Janna is, however, not easy, though some conspicuous events in his life are well-established, which would point to a poet's equipment and scholarship, the kind usually required for transacting business with Sanskrit. Born into a family of eminent scholars in the latter half of the 12th century near Halebidu, once the centre of art and sculpture in Karnataka, he held high positions in the court of Hoysala kings —similar to Pampa, who held the office of the army commander in the court of Arikesari the

Second. Janna's chief patron was king Viraballala, who conferred on him the much envied title 'Emperor among poets' and made him the chief court poet. In the reign of Ballala's son, Narasimha, he became judge and minister to the king.

As both man and scholar-poet, Janna was extremely well-accomplished He had learned all the Sanskrit classics, grammar, and philosophy under the tutelage of well-kown scholars of the age. It was a world where a knowledge of Sanskrit, Prākrit was a privileged necessity, a prerequisite for any intellectual enquiry or creative enterprise. Apart from his prodigious learning, he was a good athlete. He even prided on his good looks, and boasted in his verses of his knowledge of music, dance, and the art of love. He is said to have composed a minor work on erotica in the early phase of his writing. His main achievement, however, rests on *Yaśodhara Carite*, a short epic narrative in metrical verse consisting of four cantos, a total of 319 stanzas, which he is said to have completed on 20 September 1209 (a date as translated from the Hindu calendar!)

Poetic convention in those times was such that classical poets like Pampa, Ranna, and Janna, at the beginning of their verse narratives sought to give their works a religious aura. That was one way of promoting a local text to a global text, the said religion being pan-Indian. In the first couple of verses they would invoke the blessings of their favourite god or goddess and dedicate their works to patron kings, whose valour and royal prowess they would celebrate with ceremony. Next, they would declare that whosoever reads, recites, or listens to the recitation of their works would earn pious merit and the grace of god, and his/her wishes would be granted. It was the *phalashruti*, a convention, a cosmopolitan protocol followed by all classical poets. "On the eighth day of the waning moon," writes Janna at the beginning of *Yaśodhara Carite*, "the devout reader who undertakes a fast, keeps a vow, and listens to the recitation of this work would turn towards Dharma and the path of liberation." After this initial invocation, there would usually burst out cascades of panegyric which, in the manner of classical Sanskrit poets, the poet would sing in self-praise and in the cause of self-promotion. Modesty, it would seem, was no virtue with these classical poets. In his many such self-representations, Janna makes out through eulogy his pre-eminence and virtuosity in composing poetry and in shaping his life. He lays claim, in silken courtly phrases, to numerous achievements. He says he is proficient in nine systems of grammar, rejoices in logical argument, and usually triumphs over his opponents in a colloquium. He can merrily sail along if it comes to competing in the art of love or dancing. He explicitly states that he is chief among poets and is patronised by the Hoysala kings under whose 'snow-white canopy' he has sought shelter and rich comfort. He asserts that he is friend to men of high learning and himself a repository of worldly wisdom, a locus of wit, an ocean of kindness and mine of courage. The poet ends this part of the introductory verse with a flourish: " ... and who else but Janna, born of Kashyap clan, can be a receptacle to all this mighty assemblage of qualities!"—thereby throwing a challenge to poets in the making and to come.

The story of Yaśodhara has been a popular myth in India since the seventh century AD. Stripped of religious overlay, the central thematic of the royal queen breaking up her marriage through infatuation for a mahout, can be traced back to a fictional paradigm as inscribed in several folktales and legends current in most parts of India in the early centuries. It is usually a housewife, a chieftain's/king's wife who would desert her man and commit adultery with a cripple or a foot soldier of lowly origin. Such a theme seems to have exercised its fascination upon poets in Sanskrit and several vernaculars in India. The first known work on Yaśodhara comes from the seventh century by one named Prabhanjana, who is said to have written it in Prākrit. And long before Janna came to write his work, many versions were available in both Sanskrit and

Kannada, apart from those in Hindi, Gujarati, and Tamil. It was truly a pan-Indian myth or folktale, a transregional fabula awaiting transformation in the hands of a classical religious poet who holds dear to his heart a pan-Indian faith. However, the immediate source for Janna was Vadiraja's work in Sanskrit written in the 11th century. Thus, it has had a history of centuries of traversing through various versions of vision and revision!

Janna's work is almost, but not quite, a translation. It is outstandingly a 'transcreation' of Vadiraja's Sanskrit version. The latter has 300-odd stanzas to Janna's 319. At places Janna translates verse for verse but at crucial moments of action and interpretation, he follows his own poetic hunch. What is remarkable about Janna is his iconographic grit. His metaphoric vigour is indeed much greater, more diverse, and colourful than Vadiraja's. Often, in place of a cliché in the original, Janna puts a striking image—for instance, the depiction of spring as blood-smeared. Spring, usually associated with love and dalliance, is here imaged in the context of bloody violence, and takes on aspects of terror through the carnage of animals and the intended human sacrifice:

> The mango trees around the shrine
> had burst into flower, and over them
> dropped the flowers muttaga,
> pink like flames.
> Pink,
> as chunks of flesh, smeared
> with gore and fresh from the blood-reek
> of the sacrificial altar, and spread out
> beneath the foliage to dry in the sun.
> Nay, it seemed Spring was bloodthirsty,
> and had hustled in Winter by the scruff
> and slain her at the altar.
> Hot-gales blew in fury over lotus groves
> that had come to blossom

like pilgrims that danced on red-hot coals,
vow-drunk,
as the parrots twittered their welcome. (tr. author)

There are other crucial moments in his text when Janna innovates on the source text and adds his signature, as in the cool argument with which the queen in the story tries to convince her maid about her love for the wholly disfigured mahout, and to point to what is authentic in her. And much later, to mention one more instance, Mari's transformation at the end when the evil goddess forsakes violence and killing and is converted to a life of compassion—all these are Janna's own fiats. Now that he has a cosmopolitan text for a framework, the poet, showing no anxiety of influence whatever, moves much more freely according to his perceptions than the parameters of a translation would allow. For instance, there occurs a most remarkable poetic blend of the *desi* and *mārga* elements in the scene where a casual meeting takes place between a refined, spiritually enlightened sage and one of the king's guards, obviously a semi-literate plebeian, a bumpkin perhaps. One can see here the kind of humour that Janna brings out through the situation:

Meanwhile
one of the king's guards
by name Chandakarma who was
on the beat around the pleasure garden
met with a sage, called Akampana,
at the foot of a tree ....
... The sage was seated in
the lotus pose
in deep meditation.
The entire commerce of his senses
was lost in the breath,
the breath
in the mind,

and the mind was caught
at a point
between his brows whereon
the inner eye
focused —
a stilled centre.

Though the guard could not gauge
the sage's powers with his gross senses,
he folded his palms by instinct,
and bent low before the sage ...
'Master, the likes of us
would ask, what price
meditation?
Of what avail is it for a man
to sit naked and meditate till
the anthills grow over him?
So, why do you sit here
unwaveringly, and
what is it you meditate upon?'
asked the stolid guardsman ....
The sage answered him:
'Listen, my friend,
we meditate on the Atman,
the inner soul
who is alone,
pure, perfect.'

'Then, wherein dwells the soul?
asked the guardsman eagerly.
'The soul fills you,
clothes you,
and dwells in every atom
of your body.
He is Complete Awareness.

Yet
he is other than the body
which is built out of
the four primal elements:
earth and water and air and energy,'
replied the sage Akampana.
'Holy Sir,
what you say doesn't make sense to me.
I've asked many
if there exists a soul.
When they have said Yes,
to put it to test
I've cut deep into animals
With a knife to see
Whether I could find any soul.
Surely, Sir, I don't pretend
To have seen one, ...
I killed animals, pealed
the skin off their backs,
chopped and minced their flesh.
Their bones I reduced to powder.
I untied the knots of their guts,
still I couldn't find the soul.
Tell me wherein it's hid —
if at all it exists!
Tell me, Sir, if a pit is dug and
a thief pushed in, and the earth drawn
over him in layers, and all the cracks
sealed up with mortar; and after
keeping him for a time, the over-
layers are removed, and we see only
the body, as we surely do,
where does the soul fly to?
If you say the soul is different from
the body, does the earth swallow it up?

And one more point, I say.
A thief is put on one side
of the scales, weighed and taken
the measure. Now stifle him
to death by forcing close his nostrils
and mouth, and take his weight.
The weight remains the same,
which shows the very living self
is the body, and
they are not two different things.' (tr. author)

And at a moment's notice as it were, the poet can change the register and give us a scene that is 'Sanskritically' gossamer, patrician:

On the far bank
A courtesan shining white and
decked with rubies played
with clusters of spouts,
cradling herself amidst them —
like the crescent moon
caught in the magic shrine
of a pearl-drop
floating in a lotus cup.

In short, what Janna takes from Vadiraja, what he leaves out, and what he adds by way of interpretive nuances and an earthy strength—all put together gives Janna's work a new dimension, or in the terms we have used a la Pollock a vernacular/ cosmopolitan look, resulting, finally, in a panache that is wholly Janna's!

Another short verse narrative, "The Episode of Candaśāsana", which in a sense is a major episode embedded in his longer epic poem, *Anantanāthapurāṇa* (AD 1230), presents a thematic which is complementary to the story of Yaśodhara. So, in an overview of the poet's two major verse narratives containing the stories of Yaśodhara and Candaśāsana, what stands out as a striking motif common to both is the problematics of love/ infatuation outside marital life—love in its unconventional, destructive form. Nothing is more cataclysmic in a man's life, as Janna intends to show—and this is Janna's emphasis—than his failed or frustrated love for a woman, and nothing more powerful than infatuation which drives a man away from life, away from the path of *mokṣa*. If the main episode in *Yaśodhara Carite* is the queen's 'unnatural' passion for the lowly mahout, in the "Episode of Candaśāsana" —from his longer poem *Anantanātha Purāṇa*, whose main intent is to celebrate Anantanātha's canonization into the Jain pantheon—the major episode comprises a young prince's infatuation with his dear friend's wife, a theme startling in its unconventionality in the Indian context.

The story in the "Episode" is as follows: Prince Candaśāsana comes to visit his friend Vasuṣeṇa in a neighbouring state and falls irredeemably for his dear friend's wife, Sunanda, when she comes to serve them dinner in the royal dining hall. The infatuation eventually grows into extreme passion under whose excessive dictates he kidnaps her so that he could marry her and be one with her. But when Sunanda repels his advances, Candaśāsana under the thrall of desire brings a dummy head to tell her that he has killed her husband in battle and she could as well consent to live with him. Sunanda gets highly distraught at the turn of events and seeing no way of escape, commits suicide. Candaśāsana, true to his imperial passion, immolates himself by jumping on to the funeral pyre of Sunanda—be one with her at least in death!

If this legend foregrounds an episode of high passion gone blind, *Yaśodhara Carite*, the earlier and better known work, highlights with dramatic vividness the blind desire of a queen which brings about the ruin of several lives. This time it is the woman, the queen, who turns out to be a rebel and deviates from the marital norm. As she carries on her secret amour with a mahout, King Yaśodhara, who has just succeeded to his father's throne, is filled with disgust at the sight of his faithless wife and decides to renounce the world. At that moment his mother intervenes and, not knowing the real cause of his distress, prevails upon him to offer sacrifice to Māri, the tribal goddess. One discerns at this point a subtext in the narrative with two warring forces of signification: there is, on the one hand, a tribal religious custom, which enjoins animal sacrifice to appease the ever-wrathful goddess, embedded in the collective memory of the community to which the mother takes recourse, and on the other, the official courtly religion of compassion for all life which the text finally intends to validate. While the king resists his mother's suggestion of actual sacrifice, he still commits an act of violence in thought when he agrees to perform a symbolic act of sacrifice to please his mother. It is at this point that the drama shifts from the physical to the psychological plane, when the narrative emphasizes the sinfulness of violence even in thought, for it is from thought that all violence is generated. This is the cosmopolitan, universalist aspect of the text which gets highlighted in Janna's text. Yaśodhara hacks a hen, made of flour-paste, at the sacrificial altar of Māri, and his act of violence in thought itself would cost him and his mother six lives, that is, both mother and son are born six times as bird, beast, and man to atone for the violence they committed in thought as the young Yaśodhara cut down the flour-paste hen. In their sixth incarnation, they are born as brother and sister and join the order of the Jain monks in their quest for grace.

Structurally, the narrative falls into two parts—the 'here' and the 'hereafter': while the 'here' lays the scene for the enactment of the human drama, the 'hereafter' uncovers the rebirth cycle of the tortured souls, according to Jain faith, in search of redemption. Also, one might add here a word about the classical/

cosmopolitan nature of the text: the metre that Janna uses for his narrative verse is called *kanda*. Its movement and rhythm is usually restrained, neither too swift nor too staid. While the structure and tone of his narrative conform to the classical tradition, the poet often resorts to the indigenous and the local for idiomatic vigour, lacking in the Sanskrit original. As court poet Janna functioned, as mentioned earlier, under the direct patronage of the Hoysala kings of Karnataka, he was bound therefore by both politics and religion as practised by the state. But the original text that Janna followed is, to reiterate the point, pan-Indian, both in relation to language and the thematic which is Jain.

While the love relations that the poet deals with are unconventional, and outside the marital frame, his presentation of the narrative maintains the classical paradigm. There is no straight or linear narration. It is reportage, and is mostly done by a reliable, participant narrator who is involved in the fortunes of the story. Most of the tale is told by Abhayaruci, the boy brought for human sacrifice before the folk goddess. And the Jain solution sought for in the narrative is Māridatta's change of heart—the king responsible for the preparation of the sacrifice—and his conversion to the religion of compassion for all life.

A further probe into Janna's text would reveal not only its literary and philosophical facets but demonstrate how a vernacular (local) text takes off from a Sanskrit source-text with the poet's imagination free to innovate and acquire a universalist stature. There are three salient points in the narrative of *Yaśodhara Carite* to be noted in this context. The way Amṛtamati, the royal queen, has been represented with her 'improbable' love for the deformed mahout; the poet's verbal strategies and stances which are deployed in order to bring about the desired changes in the archetypal narrative; and the Jain cosmology with its built-in value terms of Karma and the cycle of rebirth.

The way the queen has been depicted in the tale has been found problematic by many critics. They seem to overlook the fact that men and women who figure in the epic text are not characters but represent powerful tendencies. That the characters do not have much of an internal life in the text is pretty obvious. But if anyone has a near life of her own, it is Amṛtamati, for she participates in a two-fold function: as tendency or puppet in the hands of the love-god Māra and, paradoxically, that is, seen purely in human terms, as someone who exercises her choice. There are, within the frame of the narrative, numinous agencies working toward such a scenario. The poet, through the recurring images of hunt and victim, reiterates the presence of such an agency in the figure of Māra whose gratuitous hand is seen in the management of human affairs. Māra as puppeteer pulls too many strings. He puts Amṛtamati as decoy to lure Yaśodhara, and after their marriage, lures away from him. While the poet's intent is to make the queen instrumental to the king's renunciatory efforts, the poetic logic which insinuates such a move on the part of the king, works through the images of hunt and of amourous love in a context of opulent royal splendour.

The queen, though a puppet in the hands of Māra, exists in her own right, for she chooses within the constraints of the royal moment, clear-eyed, unfettered, to be absolutely 'damned'. She takes the decision to opt out of the marital relation and look for fulfilment with the mahout. It is her authentic choice, and the way she argues with her maid when the latter chides her on her poor choice, confirms her sense of volition. It is her individuated voice that we hear, subjective, volitional (perhaps obsessive) when the self comes to the fore in all its individuation—the voice that we hear in Kannagi and Maṇimekalai, the Tamil protagonists. It is here that Janna innovates on the Sanskrit original to identify the unconscious urges, which in their relentless drive toward fulfilment seek, rationalization. While arguing with her maid, the queen improvises, rationalizes convincingly, contesting the existing norms of social acceptability: the queen asks the maid what she thinks of her choice of lover, and the maid answers,

> O my mistress
> where on earth did you find this,
> your charmer, I wonder. Surely,
> there can't be a man in all the worlds
> who can be a match to him.

But the irony is lost on her, and the maid paints rather thick a disgusting portrait of the mahout.

> Amṛtamati looked, for a moment,
> bewildered like a hind
> caught in the range of the hunter's arrow.
> She felt choked in her throat ...
> She said:
> 'Dear maid,
> who would cast aside musk
> because it is black,
> sandal
> because its wood is gnarled,
> and scorn the rainbow though
> its back is bent?
> You silly, old-fashioned girl,
> the very vices in the person
> we love turn into virtues.
> Yes, it's true, we ask for good looks,
> nice figure in men if we wish
> to fall in love with them. But once
> in love, and lost in your man,
> why make a fetish of good looks!
> The thing accomplished,
> who would worry about its cause?

> Today he's my god, my all, I see
> in him the very moon and stars
> and the love-god resident.' (tr. author)

It is, however, curious that, in order to drive home the religious point and the value of renunciation against a life of luxury on earth, the poet is obliged to represent woman as decoy, a lure, and subject to infatuation. Is it that whenever there is commitment to a religious faith, woman is invariably obliged to become a casualty? What results in the text therefore is a charged discourse, charged heavily against women—which completes, in a way, the later representation of woman in the legend of Anantanātha as someone steadfast, over-determined by virtue as Sunanda in Candaśāsana's story. The poetic intent of the text on Yaśodhara, however, which writes the rhetorical directionalities clearly into the text by making the woman faithless, irresponsible, even unresponsive to Yaśodhara's love, to render her a 'pervert', in short, is to demonstrate how urgent it is for the king to deny earthly pleasures and move positively toward renunciation and the path of mokṣa. Nevertheless, the human drama is enacted incontestably, convincingly. Amṛtamati, on the one hand, might look like playing her role at the behest of Māra but, on the other, and seen from a different perspective, plays the role of agency as far as Yaśodhara's ordeal is concerned and shifts the role of victimizing to him, so that he can play out his destiny in the fullness of time. Because of this ambivalent position that the queen occupies in the story, the victim becomes the victimiser! The text is proof enough and shows how a fabula transforms itself under the pressure of a deep commitment to a faith which proclaims universal features, and in the process uncovers several perspectives on an episode, often contradictory, like the victim turning a victimiser.

As for Yaśodhara, he is more sinned against than sinning. He is marked as victim from the beginning though he is also destined for *mokṣa* after a cycle of births. Wife and mother, both the women, play havoc with his life. It is part of the textual rhetoric to portray women as either irredeemably wilful or irrepressibly superstitious. If mother insists that he offer sacrifice to the evil goddess and thereby commit violence and incur tainted karma, the wife deceives and finally kills him by guile. After his royal life/death, when the close nexus of love/lust/anguish is worked out in the five incarnations of animal and bird, he attains human life once again on his sixth birth. And that is when the epic narrative begins. It is Yaśodhara in a way, or better, in his rebirth as his own grandson, Abhayaruci, bearing still the traces of his grandfather, and narrating the tale. And the chance or coincidence is such (chance, coincidence occurring in all the classical/cosmopolitan texts) that the boy, recounting his travails through several births to king Maridatta, discovers only toward the end of his narration that the king is no other than his own maternal uncle! And the uncle is about to undertake human sacrifice to appease Māri at whose altar he proposes to kill the boy. The Jain telos, however, gives the fitting closure to the tale by the conversion of Māridatta from a life of violence and carnage to a life based on the supreme value of non-violence and compassion. Not only is the tale transformed into a cosmopolitan text but even the characters in it get converted, reborn into a new faith.

Then there is the question of Māra, his ubiquitous, Puck-like role in the human drama. This legendary love-god is transregional, moves across linguistic boundaries and often turns into a cross-border terror to the unwary men and women! He is referred to in many verbal locutions, through diverse allusions in the Hindu/Buddhist/Jain legends and purāṇās. He is the omnipresent god of love and his weapon is a bow made of sugarcane and a string of flowers. And whoever becomes the target of his flower-decked arrow—the narrative bristles with images of hunt, arrow, and victim—will be promptly love-struck. Māra is usually called by many names: Madana, Manmatha, and Māra. The noumenal agency of Mara is, however, intertextually derived and Janna (though a proclaimed Jain) draws obviously on the Hindu legends of Manmatha/Māra and his numerous representations, interventions in human life. This is, quite commonly, a familiar site for any Indian reader.

Though the overt intent of the poet, as remarked earlier, is to inscribe Jain values, it is striking that what gets foregrounded in the narrative is the story of love/lust in the context of the gory slaughter of animals, the craven love of Yaśodhara for Amṛtamati, and what looks like her primordial infatuation for the mahout. The first two cantos which comprise the 'here', the earthly existence, have all the rhetorical splendour expended on it with the result that the 'hereafter', which records the cycle of births and deaths, somewhat sags in narrative vigour. Or to put it differently, the ambivalence which the poetic imagination suffers is seen in the lack of a certain verve that affects the second half of the narration. The first half with its taut and colourful narration seems to marginalise the latter's rather relaxed and theologically controlled telling of the story. It is possible at this stage to look at the text as comprising the poet's intent and the poetic logic both working in tandem and controlling the structure of the text, forcing it into a bipartite division.

The poetic discourse therefore presents two different foci—foci very similar to the ones we witnessed in Pampa—holding the story together. That is, the text clearly shows the bipartite division—the here and hereafter. Though the worldly part is fascinatingly told, the telos which controls the goings-on in the 'here' is located in the 'hereafter', in the accumulated karma which works itself out to salvation. We are, in short, inescapably faced with two radically opposed ways of placing human existence and deriving meanings of this existence in the light of the other. The poet shows explicitly that life moves on in alternate frameworks—this is by and large true with all Jain poets. While the celebration of the 'here' calls forth unusual poetic resources, images sometimes surrealistic as at the Mari's shrine, the belief in rebirth reveals poetic possibilities—the infatuations of one's life appear and even operate in subsequent lives—as the episode of the peacock shows when the bird pounces on the mahout to peck his eyes!

Now the other larger issues follow in keeping with the cosmopolitan nature of the transformed text. That is, to consider the narrative in its eschatological frame is to discern certain crucial issues as being implicit in the Jain systemic configuration: the role or function of death as described in Jain philosophic discourse, for instance. It is also pertinent at this point to compare this role of death with its western typologies. This will bring out the culture-specific philosophical difference between two perspectives. For, in western terms, authentic experience, as George Steiner argues while writing on Heidegger, occurs only in relation to time and death, that is, in the context of what Heidegger calls "being-toward-death", because death is the ultimate. There is a dual tradition in the western paradigm of glorifying death, death as enjoying eschatological centrality, as in St. Augustine, Pascal, and Kierkegaard, who all emphatically see death as central to man's solitary life. The other tradition points to the Romantic poets who, like Keats and Rilke, in the words of Steiner (p 103), identified death as "life's most intense and crowning realisation". This standpoint is most pronouncedly seen in Heidegger, whose "refusal to see death as an 'event' arises out of the total construct of 'being' and time'". What results from this construct, therefore, is his famous notion of 'Being-toward-death', which is accompanied by a "bracing awareness of one's finitude" (ibid). For, "without finitude there can be no truth" and hence it is within the context of one's finitude that a certain ethical fervour grows and gains meaning. Ethical imperatives therefore become stronger in such a paradigm.

In the Indian versions of eschatology, what is ultimate is what ensues one's physical death. In Hindu/Jain/Buddhist philosophic discourse, death is always presented as the penultimate. Death is to be looked upon as only a transition from one guise of life to that of another. It is not terminal in the ever-renewing life cycle of the soul. Therefore, in earthly life what is authentic is NOT 'being-toward-death' but being-toward-*mokṣa*, an experience which helps the self transcend the mundane. Hence, all the classical poets including Janna promise such a *mokṣa*-like experience to their readers because of the spiritual import their works carry. This is the notion of 'phalaśruti', the reward that the reader gets after his devout reading!

Amṛtamati in the narrative transcends the mundane but only when she feels one with the voice of the mahout. It is *her* authentic experience and she is ready to pay any price for it. That she would follow the instinctual urge and get to the very end regardless of consequence is how she fulfils her natural 'being-toward-death'. But the other way obviously favoured by the Jain paradigm is fulfilment through 'being-toward-*mokṣa*', the terms that Amṛtamati is not even aware of and that Yaśodhara chooses in order to attain deliverance. Therefore, what sets the terms of discourse is this theophanous/theonomous bipartite existence of man in the 'here' and the 'hereafter'. The latter together provide the coordinates of man's existence.

This utopian vision of release from life, culturally privileged and almost righteously articulated, has been the focus of collective congregate activity, as in the various bhakti movements that swept through India, say, from the 6th/7th century to the fifteenth. The terms of discourse are derived from the grand narratives of *mokṣa-mārga*, the path of deliverance, in both the Hindu and Jain legends. They have, during those epochs, become powerful instruments of social change, breaking down the barriers of caste/class differentiation.

In such a context as the above, where the *mokṣa-mārga* is the supreme value and where, with the special emphasis the paradigm gains because of the unique Jain faith of a hagiocentric world in which God is dead but man can become perfect, a saint, through a cycle of rebirths, the ethical imperatives are bound to suffer and lose their force when viewed in relation to the life hereafter. The ethical fervour in the west as it arises through a sense of urgency in the context of finitude, of being-toward-death, is conspicuously absent, as some have noted, in eastern thought. But this is an erroneous notion because what brings into eastern thought, the whole question of ethics and the need for ethical action in life, is the notion of karma and its functional possibilities.

The doctrine of karma has a special relevance here for it surely raises the vernacular status of the text to the cosmopolitan plane. It is the ‘doctrine of just deserts’, says Max Weber (cited by Bimal K. Matilal, p 39), “the most consistent theodicy ever produced”. The doctrine is *a priori* and common to most philosophical systems of India. In Jainism, however, it moves to the centre-stage and provides a ‘master-key’ to the understanding of life. Karma is conceived in Jainism as something material which gets attached to the soul like dust, and so the Jains believe that the highest goal in life is try to cleanse all old karma and prevent the influx of the new. With the “right exercise of one’s volition” and self-effort, so runs the argument, man can better his condition: “The fundament of Buddhism and Jainism,” writes T.R.V. Murthi, “is the autonomy of the Moral Law (karma), the freedom which we feel and exercise in our actions, in our involvement and which determines what we are and what we should be ...” (p 334). The freedom to act, therefore, the moral obligation to avoid vice (*pāpa*) and opt for virtue (*puṇya*) rests squarely with man. Thus, the moral imperatives are restored to man in Jain thought. They are, however, given a larger time-span, a span ranging over several lives for their realization so that the Self may undergo progressive sublimation and finally attain *mokṣa*.

One final observation may be made at this point. With the bipartite division, the text makes a shift from the secular to the hagiocentric world where ‘miracles’ are real—like, for instance, the hunting dogs being rendered innocuous by Sage Sudatta. Further, the shift from the secular/religious to the transcendental is characterized by a politics of rebirth, which implies that the secular continuities of traces of human passion or greed bind the 'here' and the 'hereafter' together. These traces, according to the logic of karma as represented in the Jain texts, persist in arduous, specular iteration of previous lives until they are worked off through rebirth and atonement. The poetic discourse, too, in a similar fashion, attempts to inscribe the specular articulacy of the interfacing coordinates, the phenomenal and the noumenal.

A few critical points may be made about the episode of Candaśāsana occurring in Janna's Jain epic *Anantanātha-purāṇa*. Candaśāsana is a negative character —somewhat similar to those like Rāvaṇa or Duryodhana in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* whom Pampa and Ranna have already tackled, and come to grips with. It is obvious, therefore, that while Candaśāsana as a diabolic hero is morally condemnable, his pursuit of passion, and seeing it through to the very end, lends him a stature that is near tragic. He is essentially unconventional, a rebel in life and in death, and the stature he attains is mainly due to his uncompromising and fearless stance he adopts in his attempt to fulfil his passion which combines both lust and adoration, the carnal and the idolatrous. What is unjustifiable, even when pushed to the logical limits, may not get entirely justified. However, his portrayal graduates to the rank of tragic status.

Furthermore, his sense of rebellion, accentuated by his flamboyant nature, upsets several norms. If it costs him a male friendship because he breaks the norm of a close human relationship, it infringes, when he decides to commit 'sahagamana' with Sunanda, his friend's wife, on the exclusive female privilege of committing immolation as inscribed in Jain literary writings. The queens, it is said, even vied with each other in undertaking 'sati' when the king died!

The episode reads like a narrative in the realistic mode with no reference either to the noumenal or to the fantasy tales of rebirth. Even the eternal recurrence of Māra which one usually witnesses in these stories is casually mentioned here more as a metaphor than an agency intervening in human affairs. The narrative reads like a secular drama of love/passion outside wedlock, similar and dissimilar to the passion depicted in *Yaśodhara Carite.*

The last point to be made is that this episode as presented by Janna comes close to observing the three unities we are familiar with in Greek drama—unities of time, place, and action. The action is continuous with no time lapse between incidents. There is no large-scale shifting of place either: action takes place inside a small territory comprising two kingdoms, Paudana and the Fort. Already the realistic mode was well on its way, and if the poet so desired, was well within his reach so that he could structure the human drama with psychological realism.

Chapter 6

Kannada Mystics: Bhakti Movement Contra Poetics Allama Prabhu Muktāyakka – Akka Mahādevi

The next phase in our enquiry, proleptically, is one of *bhakti* in Kannada literary culture homologous with bhakti in Tamil which we have examined. In some unseen ways, and more as a kind of a groundswell, subliminally, almost seismically *bhakti* spread from Tamil through Kannada land by 12th century, and from thereon to Maharashtra, Gujarat, Bengal and the rest of India. By hindsight we know now that it was a pan-Indian socio-religious movement, a historic/al event—a civilizational move if you wish, which began in Tamil land and moved on to Kannada, sweeping through the rest of India like a 'spiritual contagion'. The two literatures from their proto-Dravidian roots moved in different directions, grew through their inherent internal strengths, and in keeping with the genius of their respective life-worlds, inscribed their separate identities. But after centuries of independent growth, they seem to converge to a point through bhakti where many similarities become manifest. The frameworks within which bhakti operates in both Tamil and Kannada are the same, namely how a man or woman relates to his/her personal god.

The differences are, however, many. And the most remarkable difference between the two happens to be that while the bhakti hymns and songs came in Tamil as a natural outcome from the preceding literature, keeping all the indigenous elements more or less intact, the bhakti movement came to Kannada land more as a mighty rupture with the immediately preceding literature. It may however be looked upon as continuing the larger historical/civilizational process. This process began in Tamil and moved on to Kannada but within the Kannada literary context, it turned out to be a discontinuous event—a striking deviance from the trajectory of the earlier classical literature. As we have seen in *Kavirājamārgam*, the first nascent effort at constructing a Kannada poetics, Srivijaya gives a close reading of Dandin's *Kavyādarśa*—which turns into a creative 'misreading'—and thereby ushers in the age of Pampa, Ranna and Janna. This Sanskritic tradition continued more or less quietly, and unhindered. But the great wave that overtook the entire literary space, more as a disjunction, is the *bhakti vacanas*. It was indeed a contingent discontinuity when the *vacanakārās* came on the scene. They wrote, uttered divine paradoxical truths as if the earlier literature simply did not exist. There was no harking back in the *vacanas* to the earlier poets as it happened with the Nāyanārs. Furthermore, *vacanas* contitute a new genre and are much closer to the oral poetics.

A *vacana* is 'what is said' or 'uttered'. It is conceived in opposition to both *śruti* which is 'what is heard', and *smṛti* which means 'what is remembered'. It is spontaneous utterance, and it marks a new beginning, not just a reprise of earlier themes and motifs transposed into new forms or a new perspective. To put it differently, *vacanas* have no beginning, no end, theirs is a brilliant interregnum. That is, nothing that had gone before had prepared the Kannada literary space for the advent of *bhakti* in Kannada. By implication, this movement had rejected all that had gone before, the entire poetics, the forms and genres. It was absolutely a novel, revolutionary movement. No wonder, Allama Prabhu, the most remarkable of the *vacanakārās* and a maverick among them, made fun of all those earlier poets who wrote in the direct shadow, or better, in the penumbral comfort of Sanskrit as, "chattering parrots" (as cited by D.R. Nagaraj, p 52).

But the *vacanakārās* and the *bhakti* saints of Tamil were also 'great integraters' as they were called, who brought, to quote Ramanujan, "the high to the low, esoteric paradox to the man in the street, transmuting ancient and abstruse ideas into live contemporary experiences; at the same time, finding everyday symbols for the timeless" (1975, p 39). Regarding their spiritual peregrinations, they were very similar to their counterparts in Tamil land, for

> they "travelled within and across regions, claimed kindred saints of other regions in their genealogical tree of gurus. Thus the Virashaiva saints named the 63 Tamil saints among their forebears. Saivism knits faraway Kashmir with South India, and within South India the saints of Tamil, Kannada and Telugu. Both Kabir of the Hindi region, and Chaitanya of Bengal, were inspired by southern precedents."
>
> (ibid)

If the *vacanakārās* deviate from the earlier Kannada poets, they seek much closer links with the Vedic and Upaniṣadic thought. Regarding the assimilation of thought from the Upaniṣads, Sānkhya, tantra and yoga into vīraśaiva theology, scores of books and treatises have been written, and obviously there is no need to repeat the influences. Suffice it to indicate here through one or two examples how a syncretic process takes hold of the *vacanakārās* when they dealt with ancient thought in Kannada. The first stanza in *Iśāvāsyopaniṣad*, so well-known,

Īśāvāsyamidam sarvam yatkim ca jagatyām jagat

gets tranformed into Kannada idiom by Basavaṇṇa that is easily accessible to a Kannada speaker:

Wherever I look, you are there,
you are the shape, form of whatever grows, expands,
you are the shoulders of this universe,

you are its eyes, its face, its feet,
O Lord of the meeting rivers.

One more example may be cited, this time from a less-known Vīraśaiva saint named Ādayya who appropriates in his vacana the famous first stanza of Puruṣa Sūkta, the 'Hymn of Man', which says, "This primal Man has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet. He pervades the earth on all sides and extends beyond as far as ten fingers. It is the Man who is all this, whatever has been and whatever is to be" (tr. Wendy O'Flaherty, p 27). This is Ādayya's version of the *virāt puruṣa*:

Feet below the netherworld,
Head well above the very heavens,
Brahma's egg the crown,
the skies the very face,
the moon and the burning sun his eyes,
around his shoulders the ten directions
the mighty space his body ...
(*vacanadharmasāra*, 22-23)

Of course, there is much more to it than what we have been able to indicate by the examples. The entire theological baggage which the saints carry with them is often so heavy that unless the reader reads up in commentaries those references to it in the *vacanas*, he would be wholly mystified. This fund of knowledge comes to them from many sources, the chief source being Kashmir Śaivism—which is also called 'śaktiviśiṣṭādvaita'.

This form of Śaivism has two strands: one, *spandaśātra;* two, *pratyabhijñāśāstra*. Around AD 850, Vasugupta of Kashmir composed *Śivasūtra*, and his disciple Kallata wrote *Spandaśāstra*. Both these texts are founded on the belief that Śiva through his miraculous powers split himself into numerous selves, and through his other powers created the world. Further, they propound that each human self in real is only a part of Śiva, and the divinity of the self is only obscured by what is called *malatraya,* the source of contamination for all selves. So liberation can be attained through discipline and single-minded worship of Śiva. While the other school "pratyabhijña" ('divine recognition') propounded by Somananda followed by Abhinavagupta conceives liberation as something that results out of the gradual recognition of one's divinity which is within oneself. Both these schools in a way constitute a composite pattern of looking at life, for it does not believe that the world is *mithya* or false. For them the creator, the created and the selves are *anādi*, without beginning. The world for them is neither real nor unreal, for it is created by three components: Śiva, the creator, is the *mūla kāraṇa*, the first cause. His powers, the instruments of creation, are *nimittakāraṇa*, that is, instrumental cause. And 'māyā' ('māyā' in Sanskrit) is the *upādānakāraṇa,* the material cause. Furthermore, and to complicate matters, the śiva śaraṇas visualise the journey of their spiritual ascent in order to attain *aikyate*, oneness with god Śiva, in six phases, called 'shatsthalas'. These phases are further categorised into two strands and are given separate names: the first three phases are action-oriented, and the second three knowledge-oriented. Allama Prabhu himself, the most prominent among the Śaiva saint-poets, obliges us by offering a *vacana* which describes this spiritual ascent in six steps: (See Tipperudraswami, pp. 18-40)

> Having turned a devotee thro' trust (*viśvāsa*),
> and from within trust thro' discipline
> become a *maheśwara*, and from within
> that discipline thro' receiving,
> a *prasādi*, and from within
> that receiving thro' one's experience

a *prāṇalingi*, and from within
one's experience, thro' awareness
a *śaraṇa*, and that awareness
gaining an inner harmony,
a state of non-feeling resting in difference —
Yes, that's *aikyasthala,* the site of oneness,
O Lord of caves ... (1963, p 40, tr. by the author)

Now add to these six phases, the six positions that the ascending self attains—apart from the 24 evolutionary categories of Sāmkhya, that try to explain the *prakṛti-puruṣa* enterprise and its evolutes—and you will finally end up with 36 categories comprising the Śaiva *siddhānta*. To consider the entire system so diligently put together from several sources is to see how heavy grew the philosophical baggage which the saint-poets carried with them, and how it determined their *vacanas* stylistically. This has happened because of the long heritage of Śaiva thought consolidating through various schools, say, from Kashmir Śaivism to various indigenous schools in the South, schools such as Pāśupatas, Kāpalikās, Kālamukhās, small sects that flourished in Tamil land and Karnataka, and that got subsumed under the great influence of Basavaṇṇa in Kannada.

Allama Prabhu

Of all the Kannada saint-poets, it was Allama Prabhu who is probably the most metaphysical, enigmatic, theologically oriented saint who exemplifies many of these doctrines through allegory and concept metaphors in his *vacanas*. In his reflections, he is said to be in continual dialogue with Abhinavagupta and other tantra exponents. He frequently takes recourse to esoteric symbolism, paradox, contrariety as method, and as D.R. Nagaraj—one of the well-known critics of Kannada—claims, designs his own poetics based on them almost in opposition to Sanskrit poetics (pp 51-53).

In his well-known Kannada work on Allama Prabhu, Nagaraj raises many crucial issues concerning relations between Sanskrit and Kannada specially in the context of Vīraśaiva *vacanas*—issues that are intimately related to the present discourse. Hence, a discussion becomes necessary at this point. Nagaraj, to sum up, raises three salient issues: first, the way a philosopher like S.N. Dasgupta reads the poetry of a *vacanakāra* like Basavaṇṇa and assesses its truth value. The second issue is that of the Vedic in relation to the Buddhist and Jain traditions. The third issue is one of Sanskrit poetics in the context of a radical aesthetic or better, a certain contra-poetics that Allama designs for himself.

Nagaraj rightly takes to task S.N. Dasgupta, the reputed exponent of Indian philosophy, whose chief error, as Nagaraj points out, was to see the Kannada saint-poets through the lens of Sanskrit Śaiva doctrines—as his assessment of Basavaṇṇa, the Kannada saint-poet and reformer, testifies. Hence the philosopher's contention was that Basavanna and the Vīraśaiva literature that followed really did not contribute much to the growth of Śaiva philosophy.

Implicit in this issue is the question: how do you read a vacana? It is probable a philosopher may have problems with literature and that he may not be adept in reading poetry and assessing its truth-value. That the doctrines in Sanskrit in their transition, say, from the Vedic-Upaniṣadic source to any vernacular would undergo changes, almost a metamorphosis, and that they interweave with the regional life-worlds giving rise to images, symbols, motifs and local myths that are often alien to Sanskrit lore, seem to escape the philosopher's grasp. And that these new concept metaphors forged in the smithy of a poet's experience in relation to a region and its vernacular, newly minted with nuances often would be qualitatively different from the originary matrix in Sanskrit is something that a philosopher might miss—it is like missing the trees for the woods! Furthermore, there is an intimate reciprocity that follows, and a reverse process begins, for in a *desi* movement when metaphor, images are used as integral idiom in the construction of concepts, they affect the original source and often change its tenor, its contour. Mainly because the *vacanakārās* were poet-philosophers, and their concept metaphors enjoy a connotational range which would engulf the Sanskrit context. Nagaraj rightly cites the example of Sanskrit term *śūnya* becoming 'bayalu' in Kannada, the latter term radiating meaning in concentric circles as it were till the outer ring disappears—like Yeats' falcon caught in the widening gyre of modern history! The Kannada term means both field/ space and spacelessness, sheer void!

In fact, what a paternalistic Sanskrit would give rise to in its protégé would often be unpredictable: see, in Kannada, it gives rise to two opposed traditions—one represented by Pampa, Janna with the 'parent' poetics, its syntax, its numerous models, all of them being active in the structuration of their works as mentioned earlier. The other tradition, of the *Vacanas*, rejecting all the intervening period of literary achievement as derivative and persiflage, and launching out a new path but going back for its vital linkage to one of the two important Sanskrit traditions, not the Vedic ritual-prone *mārga*, but the other *mārga*, the Upaniṣadic-reflective tradition. In any great tradition of philosophic/spiritual /religious thinking, there are always available, sources of what affirms and what negates, sources that posit and those that dissent or subvert. The subsequent literature will always have the option, in fact several options available in the great tradition, to choose from, hark back to, and innovate on—and the innovations often turn out to be supplements which would grow expansively, and even in opposition to the original! It is at this crucial juncture that *vacanas* seem to take their birth.

Besides, with the advent of the *vacanakārās* marking the other tradition, a major change may be said to have occurred in the thrust and tenor of Kannada literature as a whole: Nagaraj characterises this change by referring to the distinction of *vastuka/varṇaka* (Nagaraj: p 102)—a distinction that Allama himself makes in a vacana (no. 314: L Basavaraju)—that is, the change is from a narrative-centred writing to the descriptive centred one. On a different but similar take, Ramanujan moots the question by referring to the concepts of *kathā/kāvya*, and to the French terms *sujet/recit*. If Pampa and Janna gave us narratives with strong 'rational' content, the *vacanakārās* offered us philosophic poetry, which is *varṇaka kāvya*, a discourse (recit)—fulfilling, as it were, the wish of Wittgenstein as expressed in his *Culture and Value* that "philosophy ought really to be written only as a form of poetry" (as cited by Marjorie Perloff, p xviii).

The second crucial question one faces and that Nagaraj raises is the Vedic in relation to the Buddhist and Jain traditions. Here, Nagaraj seems to overtly favour the heterodox as opposed to the orthodox. While there is nothing wrong in asserting one's personal preference, as long as one reasons out cogently, one needs to see that the other traditions do not suffer reductively. In the context of the heterodox *śramaṇa* tradition, he finds the Vedic tradition somewhat regressive. At this point his thinking takes a sudden sociological turn for, he argues, that the Vedic impact on society resulted especially in the hierarchy of caste, with the 'brāhmanya' (the brahminhood) capturing the three power centres, the social, political and the spiritual. Of course, as he rightly points out, the Buddhist and śaiva traditions tried to close their ranks in a frame of "exchange and resonance" (to remember Stephen Greenblatt) and countered the brahminical attempt to fuse in the socio-political arena the three power centres mentioned above. Furthermore, while the Śaiva schools with the *śramaṇa* influence on them managed to align themselves with the latter, the *vaiṣṇava* schools are left in the lurch as it were, in the eyes of Nagaraj, with no redemption whatever coming forth from outside the Vedic faith. For, despite Saint Ramanuja's reformist effort at removing social barriers and advocating *viśiṣṭādvaita* (which by the way is very much akin to *vīraśaiva* school), and initiating the *pancarātra* tradition, wherein the brahmins began to accept temple worship and the rituals that go with it, the *vaiṣṇava* literature, asserts Nagaraj, looks upon wordly life and *mokṣa* as separate and opposed categories, and relegates whatever did not fit in with the *mokṣa* category to the worldly sphere. The result was, Nagaraj judges, that whatever one did as a householder, a *gṛhasta*, could be justified as one's 'svadharma' (p 32). We are left wondering how he could suddenly arrive at such a perfunctory conclusion. That there was the most outstanding concept in Sanskrit thought, the *puruṣārthas*, common to all the six systems of Indian philosophy, and figuring in all the various Vedic schools of thought, 'puruṣārthas' which puts all the four components, dharma, *artha*, *kāma*, *mokṣa* on a single axis, and thereby annuls any possibility of an opposition between living and *mokṣasādhana* is something that Nagaraj overlooks. Moreover, dharma, the first component of *puruṣārtha*, is a composite concept, and accepted by all the Vedic schools, including the *Vaiṣṇava*. The concept is plural, multiple in character, and enjoys a five-fold formulation, ensuring a certain moral code to be followed by all the Vedic faiths: they are *ahimsa, satya, āsteya, brahmacarya* and *aparigraha*. In this context, the much misunderstood term *brahmacarya* needs to be redefined in relation to the human condition—it is, as Daya Krishna defines it (p 23), the virtue of ahimsa in the arena of sexual activity. Furthermore, dharma, the first puruṣārtha, the philosopher insists, is concerned with the 'other' in the moral context: that is, it "involves some awareness of the 'other' and her/his claims on oneself" (p 60)—it is this notion which promotes moral consciousness as an integral component of all human activity, and such a notion, no doubt, leads to moral dilemmas or "dharmasankata", as in the epics. Nagaraj does not seem to consider any of the preconditions of dharma laid down clearly before anyone starts exercising his ‘svadharma’. That is, *svadharma* cannot act contrary to the dharma in general. He therefore offers a distorted view of the *Vaiṣṇava* school of thought. If only he had looked up the Tamil Āḷvār literature, perhaps he could have avoided such a misapprehension!

The third important issue Nagaraj moots is one of Sanskrit poetics. For he avers that Allama, the poet-saint-philosopher, ignored all the earlier classical poets in Kannada who preceded him, and rejected the poetics and the literary models they derived from Sanskrit for their poetic practice. However the critic envisages, rather curiously, a correspondence between what he calls the ‘golden age’ of *rasa* doctrine and the brahminical effort at the new traditionalization of the three power centres that the Brahmin community was aiming to monopolise. This was during the period 11th and 12th century when the *dharmaśāstrās* became important texts for dividing social strata and establishing the caste hierarchy. Nagaraj does not explain how the *rasa* doctrine got into this nexus. He posits, however, a close link between *rasa* and the Brahmin caste! (p 29) He gives no historical evidence whatever, it is just his guesswork. He proceeds instead to demonstrate how Allama designed a poetics of his own in contrast to Sanskrit poetics chiefly through his own poetic practice—for the saint-poet did not issue any poetic manifesto as such.

In this context Nagaraj takes up the *rasa* doctrine for further comment—a comment that is very typical of many a modernist/ post-modernist critic—that *rasa*, the master metaphor of Sanskrit poetics, seems to be omnivorous, and that it succeeds in gobbling up all the other critical schools such as *alankāra, rīti, dhvani*, for all the three schools ultimately end up getting translated into the lexicon of *rasa*. It is true that these several contending schools of criticism while asserting their independence also sought alliance with *rasa*, and thereby some kind of social legitimacy. However, if one were to go through the literature of those times, one will soon find that fierce debates were held among the various schools, and subsequently each school tried to appropriate the concept of *rasa*, and subsume it under its own brand of formulation. Each school, whether it is *alankāra* of Dandin and Bhāmaha or *dhvani* of Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta or *rīti* of Vāmana, tried its utmost to get to the hegemonic position but did not quite make it. Partly because the composite notion of *rasa* could provide enough critical space within it, and configure the entire community of these allied concepts therein. These various schools marked distinct stages in the final attaining of *rasa*, thereby ensuring a certain concreteness to the concept metaphor. In this context, it is important to realise that we need to redefine ancient concepts in order to unlock their creative potential and bring out their relevance to the present-day concerns—hence, the imperative that we do not foreclose the possibilities of redefining *rasa*. Often the modernist critic sees the concept as frozen in its pristine antiquity and does not envisage its potential for historical growth. He arrests the concept at a phase in its rather slow evolution during its bhakti period when it got equated with *sṛngāra* (erotic love), and sounded hedonistic. Nagaraj therefore concludes that no *bedagina vacana* (that is, an esoteric poem based on riddles, or bearing aporetic features) can arise from within the space of *rasa siddhānta*.

However, at this point, and specially with saint-poets like Allama in mind, it is worth taking a second look at the *rasa* theory. This would enable us to see if this theory can provide a method or a clue, that is, if one of the components structuring *rasa* can negotiate what is essentially ineffable, unsayable, and therefore what can sound as esoteric or riddle-like. Instead of freezing a concept at a particular stage in its evolutionary history, we need to see that even concepts as ancient as *rasa* have a way of evolving through redefinition. For one of the components of *rasa* which almost cries out for a closer look in this context is *vyabhicāri bhāva*, whose etymology indicates what is deviant, wayward and inconsistent. This *bhāva* in the human psyche in its active mode can subvert what is ordered, customary or conventional. It is this concept of *vyabhicāri* which can provide in complicity with *dhvani* an adequate theory and explanation for the paradoxical verbal strategies that Allama often employs. For what is unsayable gets both said and unsaid through *dhvani*. And that *dhvani* and *rasa* both can fuse in one's heightened awareness, a state of mind that has a staying power for mystics is something that many a critic may fail to consider.

Now, before we get to the question of Allama's counter-poetics on which his more complex vacanas are based, we need to state that Allama is given to composing two kinds of *vacanas*, in two distinct forms. In other words, there seem to be two processes, two modalities at work in Allama's *vacanas*, and they may be designated somewhat roughly as the conceptual-discursive-performative and the experiential- rhetorical-allegorical. The first kind appears in straight elemental style, with implicit wit based on 'folk wisdom', the second appearing in what is called *sandhyābhāṣa* or in "twilight language" (a language in which his esoteric poems appear, which sometimes partakes both the modalities, the blend coming through richly, resonantly). We will discuss this latter technique a little later. The first kind may be illustrated by the following *vacanas*:

If mountains shiver in the cold
with what
will they wrap them?
If space goes naked
with what
shall they clothe it?
If the lord's men become worldlings
Where will I find the metaphor,
O Lord of Caves

(tr. Ramanujan, 1973, p 151)

Or this one:

> With a whole temple
> in this body
> where is the need
> for another?
> No one asked
> for two.
> O Lord of caves
> If you are stone,
> what am I? (tr. Ramanujan, 1973, p 153)

He can sound philosophical in this poetic mode a la Nagarjuna and instantiate the latter's notion of *pratītya samutpāda* (or "interdependent arising") but without changing the elemental style, as in the following *vacana*:

> Where was the mango tree,
> where the koilbird?
>
> From where to where spreads
> across space this kinship?
>
> Mountain gooseberry
> and sea salt:
> When was this kinship made?
>
> And when was I
> kin to the Lord
> of Caves?
> (tr. Ramanujan, slightly changed, 1973, p 149)

One discerns here a subterranean kinship, a latent principle of "interconnectedness arising" in nature and existing among objects apparently disparate and located far distant in space! This kind of *pratītyasamutpāda* can be discerned again in a *vacana* wherein Allama upbraids those who do not understand the ways of the Lord:

> At the touch of fire, as everyone
> knows, grass burns to ashes.
> You need to know that fire inheres in grass
> fire gulps water, water gulps fire.
> The earth devours all, even the sky,
> You, languid ones, think you know.
> If you can, realize
> it's the stance of the Lord of Caves.
> (L Basavaraju: 2005, p 340, tr. author)

And when it comes to the notion of 'embeddedness' in things, Allama seemingly pushes the frontiers of this 'interconnectedness' to the notion of 'samavāya' (or inherence) as in the following *vacana*:

> As fire inheres in stone
> a reflection in water
> tree in the seed
> silence in words
> so is your kinship
> O Lord of Caves,
> Can the fire rage from the stone?
> Can the tree articulate from the seed?
> (L Basavarju, 1969, p 66. tr. author)

He is also seen taking an adverse position against the Vedic affirmations, his 'countervoice' rising in pitch, as in:

> The Śruti gets it wrong
> when it claims God is
> in the tiniest of the tiny
> in the mightiest of the mighty.

Can there be a deluge
where linga exists?
The Lord of Caves dwells
nowhere other than
in the feel of the devotee.
(L Basavaraju: 2005, p 114, tr. author)

In another *vacana* (his robust rationalism being at work!), he is much more explicit regarding his reservations on the entire system of conventional learning, and sounds very derisive:

What's called the Veda
is a matter of chanting!
The śāstras are a gossip at the marketplace
the purāṇās only a meeting of goons
And logic is a pair of combating rams,
what's called *bhakti* just a show for profit! —
for the Lord of Caves is the Absolute
beyond reach!
(L Basavraju, 1969, pp 129-130, tr. author)

He can be likewise ironical, sarcastic, sounding even imperious, as in:

Devotee, Devotee, they cry!
Before they shed their dependence on earth,
on water,
on light,
on air,
on sky and sun and moon,
and on the soul (atma)
They call themselves devotees

who worship the *linga*,
and I am amazed at them,

O Lord of Caves.

(tr. Ramanujan, 1999, p 314)

And when it comes to Kashmir Śaivism, of which he was fully aware and from which he was decisive in standing apart from that school of thought, he refers to it as the Śaivite Northern school with its bias for *tantra*—whose modalities were developed and exemplified under the auspices of Abhinavagupta. In fact, it is said that in his reflections, Allama was in continual dialogue with the latter and other *tantra* exponents. So Allama develops in a couple of *vacanas* a 'countervoice' to the Northern cult of *tantra*, fashions his poetic strategies in face of both the poetics of Sanskrit and that of Kashmir Śaivism. The following *vacanas* express Allama's strong reservations on the use of *tantra* and Kaula *sampradāya* by saints of the North in their attempt to reach the mystical heights.

With the shower of rain
over the Northern way,
famine occurred,
the entire fauna of the region perished.
In the cremation ground they all burned.
There, I will look for you (in vain),
O Lord of Caves.

(L Basavaraju, 2005, pp 288-89, tr. author)

For Allama, the 'rain' (referred to in the above *vacana*) meant virtually a cloudburst (*meghavarṣa*) of sensual desire—the sensory, carnal desire ritualized in the *tantra* schools of Kashmir Śaivism. The second *vacana* is equally disapproving of the 'northern' way:

I saw a burning linga in a temple
made of lacquer.

There was no one for worship.
Those seekers of knowledge
of the Northern dispensation,
the māyā milling around them,
I saw the fire inside the tree burn the tree.
The linga of the Lord of caves stood there.
(L Basavaraju, 2005, p 481, tr. author)

Furthermore, Allama's notion of language as it ought to be used in a *vacana* is equally uncompromising. Like a true mystic, Allama distrusts language. He knows that the devotee has to transcend words in order to get to the Lord. Most devotees, he feels, get lost in the commotion/celebration of words, in what he calls *śabdasambhrama*:

In their exuberance with words
they can't see what's behind them
nor can they see what's in front of them.
They aren't even self-aware
the reason why, O Lord of Caves
all the three worlds have been vandalized!
(L Basavaraju, 1969, p 149, tr. author)

Words often bewitch or infatuate devotees for a while, but soon get sterile through overuse. Besides this overuse, there is another language-trap which ensnares almost all devotees, a concept if you will, which has folk origins and invites anthropologists to study its ramifications. The term is 'sūtaka' (defilement or pollution), and its use and observance of customary 'pollution' is widespread specially among various folk communities and orthodox families. Allama uses the term in a unique way by extending its meaning and coins the phrase 'śabda sūtaka'. This phrase *śabda sūtaka* or verbal pollution points to the garrulous or voluble habits of preachers/glib politicians and writers, if not poets! The following *vacanas* instantiate this concept with irony and are addressed to Basavaṇṇa, his contemporary saint-poet, in a dialogic frame: Basavaṇṇa was then the minister in the court of king Bijjala at Kalyana where the entire vīraśaiva congregation used to assemble for philosophic debates with Allama as the central figure and chief interlocutor and where he was ceremonially and reverentially seated on a throne called 'śūnya simhāsana' (the throne of *śūnya*/ void):

As for mind
When mind attains
a pointed oneness
when life-breath to life-breath
is held in divine unison
when mind, body and speech
are held together in a single vision
then, look, if words get defiled (*śabda sūtaka*)
surely it is not to be borne!
Hey Basavanna, since you're a devotee
of linga of the Lord of Caves
it is deeply disturbing!
(*Vacana* 1021, L Basavaraju, 2001, tr. author)

The following *vacana*, seemingly contradictory, but in reality points to the person who suffers from "self-created doubt", a kind of *sūtaka*—from a predicament of self-defilement!

They say words get defiled!
How can words be defiled?
Isn't this a self-created doubt, a *sūtaka*?
Can wind be stained with dust?
Listen, Basavaṇṇa, the linga of the Lord of Caves
doesn't share this feeling!
(vacana 1198, L Basavaraju, 2001, tr. author)

The following *vacana* upbraids Basavaṇṇa with rather unusual harshness:

> Cudgel in hand, anger in mind,
> Why all this talk of Linga, tell me Basavaṇṇa?
> When you consider a jangama (a wandering monk)
> as linga, you turn into a *śabdasutaki*,
> A word-defiler; tell me Basavanna,
> Why bother with this talk of *bhakti* of a genuine devotee?
> And mark, Basava, only when iron
> touches the philosopher's stone,
> does it get alchemized into gold,
> not by itself a magic stone!
> Look Basava, you need to know and realize
> the Lord of Caves is that magic-stone
> the genuine coin of gold!
> (vacana 1263, L Basavaraju, 2001, tr. author)

The notion of *śabdasūtaka* is somewhat intricately bound up with another primal distinction that characterizes all saint-poets—a distinction that Ramanujan too talks about. It is about the categories of *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* by which the saint-poets may be better understood. Both the Tamil and most of the *viraśaiva* saint-poets are 'saguṇa' in the sense they visualise their gods in human form with qualities, and as real persons in their avatars. They invoke their gods, praise them, chide, or try to entice them. Allama would consider this piece of 'dalliance', the dialogics they carry on incessantly with their gods as 'śabda sūtaka'. Demonstrably, theirs is an 'I-Thou mode', which is essential to their intensities, intimacies. In contrast, a 'nirguṇa' poet like Allama uses mainly simple, hard, primary images as 'alankāra' and has for *rīti* (verbal style) only paradox, and negation to fall back upon. This is to affirm through negation—a negation buttressed by a whole *śramaṇa* tradition with Nagarjuna's 'śūnyavāda' to underpin his stand, his strategies.

However, in a later essay, Ramanujan has this to say on the categories mentioned above: “The distinction iconic/aniconic is a useful one, as nirguṇa/saguṇa is not.” But the next sentence that follows seems to contradict the earlier sentence: “All devotional poetry plays on the tension between saguṇa/nirguṇa, the lord as person and the lord as principle. If he were entirely a person, he would not be divine, and if he were entirely a principle, a godhead, one could not make poems about him. The former attitude makes *dvaita* or dualism possible, and the latter makes for *advaita* or monism” (*The Collected Essays,* p. 295). We need, however, to stress at this point that the distinction iconic/aniconic is certainly not as useful as Ramanujan makes it out to be. There are always degrees of iconicity between what we consider as a vivid image at one pole and the trace of an image at the other. This is similar to the contrasting pair ‘saguṇa/nirguṇa’ mooted above, for in the latter pair there are, once again, degrees of reification that a particular god undergoes as one visualizes. To cite an instance from another culture, consider the biblical verse of St. Paul of Corinthians (of the New Testament) which presents its version of the ocular problematic, of the differential process of gradual reification:

> For now we see in a mirror, dimly but then
> face to face. Now I know in part, but then I
> shall know just as I also am known.
>
> (I Corinthians 13:12)

A similar predicament occurs in the following *vacana* of Allama:

> Pictures were drawn on three walls:
> the picture on the first wall looked
> very much like a picture.
> The picture on the second wall

showed up intermittently.
The picture on the third wall had disappeared,
never to return. O Lord of Caves,
your devotee stands beyond this triad!
(L Basavaraju, 2005, p 473, tr. Author)

What occurs here is in Jean Baudrillard's sense a 'simulation' in its final phase (as it undergoes a three-phase process) wherein nothing is left, no referent whatever! The traditional gloss offered, however, is as follows: the three walls or canvases figuring in the *vacana* stand for the three kinds of bodies—the gross, the subtle and the cause. Mind does draw these pictures, the one drawn on the gross body stays as *jada*, rigid/inert. While the mind trapped/ trammelled in *dvandās*, sometimes engaged in the sensuous, other times in *virakti*, the detached, always see-sawing. When the *sādhana* continues, the mind matures and stands still in *sthita-prajna*, the *kāraṇa*, the cause, then the picture on the body disappears never to return. The devotee will have crossed all the three *tanutrayas*, attaining the final phase of liberation! (vide Ramanujan, 1999, pp 309-10).

If the original matrix of the image disappears without leaving behind even a 'trace' or a referent, as in Baudrillard's notion of 'simulation' in its third phase, in Allama the image turns internal, indicating its inward spiralling journey through meditation:

For all their search
they cannot see
the image in the mirror.
It blazes in the circles
between the eyebrows.
Who knows this
has the Lord. (tr. Ramanujan, 1973, p 167)

When the ocular problematic animates, then more explicitly perhaps, the seen, the unseen, and the quasi-seen are together articulated in the following *vacanas*:

Show me how
That walking without feet,
Touching without hands,
Tasting without a tongue
Show me how that Other, that Absolute,
That begs,
With all Feeling for a begging bowl,
And begs 'Give me now the Absolute.'
Show me that, O Lord of Caves.
(tr. Ramanujan, 1999, pp 315-16)

A similar enigmatic presence/absence is attributed to Allama himself who showed up at the door of Basavaṇṇa at Kalyana when the former called on the latter and whose figure was both seen/unseen but his physical presence felt rather strongly by Basavaṇṇa's followers! The latter believed in Allama's extraordinary powers of kenosis, the act of 'self-emptying"— his physical achievement of *śūnya*!

Though seen by eyes
he has no shape or form
though touched by hand, he has no body!
Though moving, he is motionless
though vocal he is wordless
He is neither form nor formless
(Thipperudraswami, Śū*nya Sampādane*, pp 2-3, tr. author)

However, the 'saguṇa/nirguṇa' pair referred to above has a distinct advantage over the other, for it succinctly represents two kinds of attitudes, two kinds of philosophic thought subsumed under it.

The following *vacana* by Allama, surely of the 'nirguṇa' category, would dazzle the reader with Vedantic glorification of light, which incidentally makes language, metaphor effete, a tautology:

Looking for your radiant light,
I saw:

it was like the sudden dawn
of a hundred million suns,

knots of lightning-creepers
for my wonder.

O Lord of the caves,
if you are this effulgence (*jyotirlinga*)
there can be no metaphor.
(tr. Ramanujan, 1973, p 168, with changes, author)

Yes, if you are all light and no person, then there can be no metaphor, no language because the latter can come about only through differentiation, through the principle of *dvaita*. Reading this *vacana*, one thinks of Vico who talks about poetic imagination as being in touch with divinity since the days of the first men who roamed the forests and turned later into poets. Their ‘‘recognition of the numinous” was the basis for many a poet to attain a certain spiritual intensity. Allama stands testimony to the experience of incandescent delight he felt at the sight of the ‘numinous’, may be in the ‘nascent state’ that Vico is referring to. However, when the numinous differentiates, and takes on the shapes of myriad gods, a Śiva or Kṛṣṇa, metaphors of divinity are born. Vico calls this close tie with the divine the ‘imaginative universal’, which according to him provides the source for some of the primal metaphors that ‘become categories of perception and value’ (as cited by Schaeffer, p 94). For him, “the age of metaphor is the age of the gods”! The kind of poetic logic that works in *bhakti* and deploys its tropes, the figures of thought in the hymns and songs is the kind that Vico characterises as “coming from logos whose first and proper meaning was fabula, fable ...” (*ibid*).

Further, the ‘logos’ that Vico mentions originates in a religious event and derives from it its unique historical force. It generates fables, fabulas or *aitihya*, and what pervades the *bhakti* ambience in a community of believers is precisely this powerful trend in fabulation.

Now to return to the second kind of poetic stylization, mooted above: how does Allama conceive his counter-poetics, and work it out in his complex *vacanas*, that is, counter the overwhelming presence of Sanskrit poetics—the only available frame of reference at the time? His poetics consists of several devices, one of which happens to be the principle of negation. He invents/fabricates through this principle of negation (that is one among many verbal ruses that the saint adopts—a *vyabhicāri bhāva* if one were to identify it in terms of *rasa* paradigm), and we need to remind ourselves at this stage that it is often through negation that a well-established tradition like that of *rasa* offers space for its own subversion. What is this subversion all about? It is true that Allama, as Nagaraj claims, reacted rather sharply against Sanskrit poetics as it filtered through *bhakti* poets in its mode of *sṛngāra*—wherein gods were humanized, given attributes of human emotions. This procedure for Allama would be tantamount to being controlled by a *māyāsūtra* (the string of illusion)—often leading the devotee to *śabda sūtaka*! In contra-distinction, Allama devises his poetics based on paradox, irony, and through a deliberate distortion of images, through riddles that he could puzzle through to what is unsayable—for the final experience of *aikyate* or oneness with the divine where, beyond words, monism in its completeness is supposed to be experienced. However, as Nagaraj rightly points out, poetry can result only from a state of *dvandvās*, dualities (p 67). A *dvaita* base is essential to poetry, for to fuse with the deity is to pass beyond language! The poet in Allama knows it better for he proceeds to instantiate many a device of which the first one may be said to be the principle of negation. That is, one can negate, as

Ramanujan points out (p 315), only after one has affirmed the existence of something! The following vacana illustrates this:

> It's not an image, no *mūrthi* made of the body
> nor of life and breath . . .
> not made of Śiva, not made of Śakti:
>
> How can I then metaphor this image?
> A body that cannot be seen,
> a lustre that cannot be envisioned,
> a stance for which there are no metaphors:
>
> How can I speak, O lord of caves,
> of this joy made visible
> and how can I speak of causes?
>
> (Tr. Ramanujan, 1999, p 314)

Or this one wherein language affirms indirectly, implicitly through negation:

> When the *linga* that cannot be seen
> came to my hand,
> I cannot speak, I cannot ask.
> This to me is a wonder of wonders.
> That *linga* called the lord of caves
> is sheer space, is nothing, is without form:
> if it should take form
> and come to my hand,
> I cannot speak, I cannot ask.
>
> (tr. Ramanujan, 1999, p 315)

Here the anga (hand or body) and linga (the absolute), 'as primordial pair,' have become one, passing beyond language—wherein one cannot speak, for "the rest is silence!"

In the following poem, Allama, through parallel images, sloughs off from himself what is of the world, thereby negating the world, to get to his Lord—this act of negating incarnating in poetry!

I was
as if the fire in the tree
burned the tree

of the winds of space
took over the nostrils
as if the doll of wax
went up in flames
I worshipped the Lord
and lost the world. (tr. Ramanujan, 1973, p 156)

Or this one with cosmic negation of worlds wherein images, the tiniest of them (an ant) confronting the mightiest with meanings that puzzle, the objects somewhat arbitrarily configured—the entire *vacana* needing to be solved by reference to metaphysical notions:

Outside city limits
a temple
in the temple, look,
a hermit woman.
In the woman's hand
a needle,
at needle's end
the fourteen worlds.
O Lord of Caves,
I saw an ant
devour whole
the woman, the needle,
the fourteen worlds. (tr. Ramanujan, 1973, p 157)

Obviously, what is at work in this *vacana* is a poetics of indeterminacy (to use the title of the book by Marjorie Perloff). This is not a symbolist poem. Literal objects, entities randomly chosen from disparate contexts such as woman, temple, needle and ant are brought together in a metonymic relation, but none of the objects carries any symbolic meanings— certainly not in the context in which they appear. To put it differently, these fragmented images appear one by one without coalescing into any identifiable, meaningful network. Or shall we say that the *vacana* is framed as a series of synecdoches without any reference to totality. On the other hand, the tiniest 'ant' is invested with cosmic power to destroy (not unlike the nuclear fission!) the fourteen worlds! This can only be dream logic, or shall we say that it is Allama's dreamscape, for what is created in the *vacana* is a non-relational surrealist world—a world wherein paradoxes are truer than certainties! The poem is based on a kind of 'literalist poetics'. Now if we are to look for an allegorical meaning, that is, if the mystery or enigma is to be solved in the above *vacana*, then one needs to equate the city with the limits of the body, the temple as inner mental form, the hermit woman as *jñānaśakti*, the power of knowledge, holding the needle (mind) on which are balanced the fourteen worlds. If the 'ant' is enlightenment, it devours all these distinctions! (vide Ramanujan: 1973, p 198)

Besides, the above *vacana* bears the characteristics of what we have mentioned earlier as *sandhyābhāṣa*: a twilight language—a language through which the poet engages what is unsayable. It is a language which inheres in what is enigmatic and riddle-like. And it is through this language that Allama invokes cosmic transactions through the use of primary images. He combines an abstract concept with a concrete image, fuses the logical with the lyrical, even pushes the logical to the extreme and converts it into an image. In his vision and scheme of things, the atomic and the cosmic are one and interchangeable, as we have seen in the above quoted poem. He seeks the inconsistent among consistents, transgresses all the norms and gets perturbed at the sight of homologies (*sāmyate*).

Sandhyābhāṣa

(1)

The technique called 'sandhyābhāṣa' has its provenance in the linguistic heritage of India. Its presence, its use to construct riddles and enigmas goes back to the Vedic times—for instance, the Ṛgvedic hymn, titled as "The Riddle of the Sacrifice: *Asya Vāmasya* (tr. W.D. O'Flaherty: 1.164, pp 71-76) is a well-known riddle. It is equally well-known that several *vacanas* of Allama figure under the rubric of *Sandhyābhāṣa* (or 'Bedagina vacanas' in Kannada, which Ramanujan translates as 'fancy poems'). It is now patent that Allama writes two kinds of *vacanas*, as mooted earlier: one kind is usually straight, somewhat satirical, often admonitory. The other kind is esoteric, allegorical, aphoristic, and often overtly contradictory. The "riddle-like questioning poems", as Ramanujan calls them, draw rather heavily, if not consciously, on an ancient, pan-Indian tradition of *sandhyābhāṣa*—a system of "cryptography intended to conceal the secret doctrine from the uninitiated and the outsider". It is "a dark ambiguous language of ciphers" that was common to systems of yoga and tantra. Besides, there was a wide network of Natha and other esoteric cults with a common pool of ideas (1973, p 49). Mircea Eliade explains its etymology and says that the first part of the term 'sandhya' originally appears as 'sandha' which means both 'vacana' and 'twilight'. And it later varies to 'sandhya', the term meaning 'twilight language' or ('the language of secrecy', as Ramanujan terms it). Also, Mircea Eliade calls it 'intentional language', and refers to *Hevajra-tantra* which calls *sandhyā-bhāṣa* "the great language" (*mahābhāṣam*) of the yogins (pp 249-251). The use of *sandhyābhāṣa*, so predominantly evident in Allama, is presumably aimed at taking apart the logical/linear coherence of language in order to invent a new language infused with allegory and based upon contrarieties, paradoxes and a deliberate distortion of images.

The following vacana displays images conceived in the penumbra of a twilight language with, says Ramanujan (1973, p 48), a certain " surrealist brilliance":

> They don't know the day
> is the dark's face,
> and dark the day's.
> A necklace of nine jewels
> lies buried, intact, in the face of the night;
> in the face of day a tree
> with leaves of nine designs.
> When you feed the necklace
> to the tree,
> the breath enjoys it
> in the Lord of the Caves.
>
> (tr. Ramanujan, 1973, p 153)

The *vacana*, obviously, has strong symbolic and allegorical elements and is structured in terms of a binary. The gloss on traditional lines would read more or less as follows: it is day against night or light against dark wherein 'dark' signifies the unaware, and light as 'knowing' or being aware. When a necklace of "nine jewels" scintillating across the night sky, symbolic of the seductive world, is fed to the tree of the fully-aware, the linga, the Absolute, inhering in the vital Breath of a śaraṇa or saint feels true joy. Allama's own early struggle with and swaying between the phenomenal and the noumenal worlds is shadowed in the above *vacana*. The following *vacana* shows a different facet of the saint's experience as he finds and begins to live in the company of holy men, the mystic saints of the day.

A little bee born
in the heart's lotus
flew out and swallowed
the sky.
In the breeze
of his wing, three worlds
turned upside down.
When
the cage of the five-coloured swan
was broken, the bee fell
to the ground with broken wings.
Living among your men,
O Lord of Caves,
I saw the lovely tactic
of truth's coming on. (tr. Ramanujan, 1973, p. 150)

Once again, Allama uses primal, elemental images in this riddle of a poem with 'bee' and 'swan' carrying allegorical meanings! What the necklace as an image signified in the previous poem, the 'bee' performs a similar task in this vacana. The 'bee', an emblem of *ajñāna*/ignorance, born in one's heart/mind, can overturn one's entire life-world. Allama for quite a while, it is said, drifted along in life wholly un-aware of the final goal and was a prey to many a delusion till he realised how the enticing world around, the cage, needs to be broken so the five-coloured 'swan' (the traditional symbol for the soul) may be liberated. Here, the 'five-coloured' is significant: it points to the nexus of the five basic elements (the *pancabhūtās*, *pṛthivi, āpas, vāyu, ākāśa* and *tejas*, that is, earth, water, air, ether and fire or luminous/numinous energy), sublimating through a qualitative change into what is usually indicated by the term 'soul' (imaged here as swan) or perhaps what Heidegger called 'Being'!

Western Parallels: Role of Allegory

(2)

However the allegorical part of *sandhyābhāṣa* witnessed above, and as Allama uses frequently in poetry raises questions. And since allegory as a figure of speech or a figuration of thought plays a crucial role in Allama's *vacanas* in their bid to tackle what is unsayable, a discussion on allegory becomes imperative at this point. We need to discuss both its strengths and its drawbacks.

The following discussion, therefore seemingly extraneous, becomes relevant, even integral to it as it sheds further light on Allama's flair for constructing a *vacana* in allegory as well as in other distinct forms. Therefore as a detour, we will do well to remember at this point that there is a parallel Western school of criticism, which, curiously, seems to fall in line, homologously, with or be even aligned to Allama's method of conceptualization taking place in his *vacanas*. This school perhaps has never been very dominant in the West, but survived and cropped up from time to time. Whenever it occurs, it changes its hue a little, acquires a new slant, a new force perhaps of the personality of the critic who expounds it. Not seeking a long genealogy for it, one can say that it took its birth definitively more as a sharp reaction to the New Criticism which flourished in the States during the '50s and the '60s. This adverse reaction was ably represented by critics such as Yvor Winters, J.V. Cunningham, and much later in a subtler form by Paul de Man. Winters advocated the role of reason in shaping and controlling human experience while composing poetry so as to avoid excessive emotionalism, sentimentality and an easy form of associationism which usually offers through whipped-up images false intensities. He emphasised intellectual grit as a prerequisite of great poetry. Paul de Man, who believed equally in the salutary role of reason, took up rhetoric as an effective site for further inquiry and discussed the relative importance of both metaphor and allegory as discursive instruments. And allegory as a figure is what de Man prefers to metaphor, and what motivates his theory of rhetoric. This approach to poetry is in full accord with the 'robust rationalism' that Allama is usually known for.

Now what is it in the nature of metaphor that de Man objects to? This inquiry in a way is relevant to our understanding of Allama, Akka and others. The principle of metaphor is to aestheticise, affirms de Man, to seek unity amidst disparate elements. And in seeking to unify, metaphor helps but turns out to be the clear 'villain'. Metaphor is indeed the 'totalizing instance par excellence'. For it levels all differences, and by subjugating them, totalizes power. Metaphor has a strong political implication for de Man. Hence, it can be thought of 'as a language of desire and as a means to recover what is absent' (p 63). It is mainly this language of desire, desire experienced through *śṛngāra* (translated reductively as erotic love) in *bhakti* poetry—which sought union with a personal god but never really attained it—that Allama was opposed to. Furthermore, apart from its active erasing of all difference, metaphor presupposes a 'necessary link', an 'organic link between the poles of exchange' (p 22). All metaphysical systems are totalities precisely because the positing of resemblance between the terms erases their difference. Allama rightly takes recourse to paradox and contrariety as rhetorical tools in his *vacanas* in order to arrive at his truths so that he can circumvent the linear thinking of metaphysics as set forth in philosophical language.

Now, what is allegory, and why does de Man prefer it to metaphor? Even though allegory happens to be 'the most general vision' of metaphor, its stress on details, its use of literal signs entail no resemblance to the meaning intended by allegory. Often the allegorical meaning becomes secondary, to put it somewhat crudely, because the details involved in the allegory could always assert their own meanings. The allegorical meaning and the literal meaning enjoy 'a relation of non-coincidence'. Since it nullifies any process of identification between the two segments, it is "what permanently disrupts the totality specific of the figure of metaphor" and de Man calls it 'ironic allegory' (p 31). Jacques Derrida endorses this view of allegory in his *Memoires: For Paul de Man* when he says that the figure 'represents one of language's essential possibilities; the possibility that permits language to say the other and to speak of itself while speaking of something else ...' (p 11) Allegory is what taps the rhetorical potential of the signifier, and together with metonymy is what holds out in texts, literary and philosophical, against the powers of aestheticization—and in Allama's case, shall we say, *śṛngārization*. It is *śṛngāra*, one can argue, which totalizes the effect of an entire poem—as it frequently does with Akka and Āṇṭāḷ—it is uni-dimensional. If you give up *śṛngāra* as metaphor, as a unifying force in a poem or a *vacana*, as Allama does, then there will be other centres of energy, or sites of inquiry which can render a *vacana* or a set of *vacanas* into riddles, a 'force-field' of contrary effects. Furthermore within the allegorical frame Allama can afford to be ironical, hortatory, teasing, even imperious. The following *vacanas* illustrate many of these features unambiguously: for a riddle-like poem, this one teases the reader with a miracle!

On a mound of live coal
I saw a pillar of wax stand!
And on the pillar of wax
I saw a swan
the pillar burned and
the swan took wing
O Lord of Caves,
where did the live coal disappear!

(L Basavaraju, 1969, p 7, tr. author)

As for riddles, there are several: the vacanas under this genre are terse, engage primal images, and keep for the most part an impersonal tone of a 'realised' soul. The following *vacana* may be quoted to illustrate a typical surrealist, Picasso-like splintered images that Allama evokes:

A running river
is all legs.
A burning fire
is mouths all over.
A blowing breeze
is all hands.
So, lord of the caves,
for your men,
every limb is Symbol.

(tr. Ramanujan, 1973, p 165)

The *vacana* reads like a riddle, as it incorporates different body parts. In this context, the reader may be reminded of the 19th century American poet, Emily Dickinson, for both of them often work with primal, primary images and deal with their themes in a riddle-like manner. Further, to draw a specific comparison, Emily Dickinson had the Protestant hymn books as her model to fall back upon for a philosophical base, even though the base does not spread evenly in her poems. Her recurring themes, very Christian mostly, were love, death, immortality and beauty in the surrounding nature. Her lines were gnomic, her images kinesthetic. Do these two poets, though far apart in time, space and culture, testify to the fact that homologies do occur, that is, if we believe in the 'collective unconscious' underlying different life-worlds, deep down at the global, universal level? The following poem by Emily Dickinson reads like a riddle and deals with primary images:

Our journey had advanced;

Our feet were almost come
To that odd fork in Being's road,
Eternity by term.

Our pace took sudden awe,
Our feet reluctant led.
Before were cities, but between,
The forest of the dead.

Retreat was out of hope-
Behind a sealed route,
Eternity's white flag before,
And God at every gate. (p 157)

And curiously, the elf-like delicacy, which often characterises Emily Dickinson's style and sensibility, seems to occur in Allama encasing the following *vacana*:

The wind sleeps
to lullabies of sky.
Space drowses,
infinity gives it suck
from her breast.
The sky is silent.
The lullaby is over.
The Lord is
as if He were not. (tr. Ramanujan, 1973, p 164)

Two poets from two wholly different worlds but similar in poetic sensibility! For, Allama invariably works with primary images (like Emily Dickinson), such as light and dark, bee and swan, fire and breeze, sound and water, and hunter and deer—images that carry rich allegorical meanings. See, one of them starts with this:

A wilderness grew
in the sky.
in that wilderness
A hunter.
In the hunter's hands
a deer.
The hunter will not die
till the beast
is killed.
Awareness is not easy,
is it,
O Lord of Caves?

A simple gloss may clear the obscure meaning of the allegory: if 'wilderness' is chaos that grows in the mind because of desire (the hunter) that can only kill life (the deer), then the desire will not die till life does! The prose equivalence works fairly well here. The other *vacana*, this time with perfect clarity, and again playing with light and dark is the following:

Light
devoured darkness.
I was alone
inside.
Shedding
the visible dark
I was Your target
O Lord of Caves. (tr. Ramanujan, 1973, p 164)

However, while the strengths are many as we have seen in the above *vacanas*, the allegorical form can also spell a poetic disaster—that is, when the theological baggage the *vacanas* carry hardly work and become a stylistic dead-weight. The complex system of tenets does not work as poetry, nor does it lead to any effective religious statement. The following *vacana*, a part of which may be cited, instantiates this tendency in the saint-poet:

> I saw an ape tied up
> at the main gate of the triple city,
> taunting
> every comer.
>
> When the king came
> with an army,
> he broke them up at one stroke
> and ate them.
>
> He has a body, no head, this ape:
> legs without footsteps,
> hands without fingers;
> a true prodigy, really ...
>
> (tr. Ramanujan, 1973, p 151)

This is a riddle, wholly allegorical which may not work poetically for many, and needs for its understanding lessons in Sanskrit Śaiva theology—the monkey is equated with mind, a well-known simile in yoga. The triple city, explains Ramanujan (ibid, p 197), signifies three kinds of bodies everyone has, the *sthūla* (the gross)*, sūkṣma* (the subtle), and *linga*, the imperishable paradigm of the human body (perhaps similar to the Platonic Form, non-material, eternal, changeless, supremely real but 'participating' only in objects and humans). The triple city has one main-gate, that is *samsāra*, the life-world, and the explanation goes on interminably! The *vacana* sinks under the sheer weight of its own Śaiva theology. This is the one danger that elaborate allegories suffer from, and Allama seems often to exult imperiously in taking such poetic risks.

Now, to sum up this part of the discussion, the philosophical baggage the *vacanas* carry, as it is obvious, can hardly be transformed into neat metaphors. It can only be allegorised, and that constitutes the problematic. But then allegory as a figuration of thought can also be their strength, specially when both the narrative arms of the allegory are equally well-balanced. Philosophy which is an integral part of the *vacanas* does give them a ballast, the intellectual grit that underpins them. It is both its strength and its weakness as poetry. Allegory, as Christopher Miller defines it (as quoted by Gayatri Spivak, p 156*),* "is taken in its broadest sense as designating a distance between discourse and its object ..." Now, the central paradox in the *vacana* enterprise is that the saint-poets, even though they sought *aikyate* or oneness with the Lord, the genre they chose to work with had to be intrinsically allegorical because of the internalised philosophical doctrines they carried with them. They had to negotiate the 'distance' between their discourse which comprised philosophic search and the 'object' which was the goal of oneness with god. By instinct perhaps, they knew that metaphor unifies, but annuls philosophy and its separate identity in the effort to totalize their experience, while allegory respects *dvandvās*, dualities. However, the philosophical tenets, when dense, often hang out. Their aim was to seek union, their method quite the opposite. In this context, we need to remind ourselves that to contemplate union with god is to move beyond language—the reason why Allama looked upon language with suspicion.

* * * *

But then the dilemma that Allama encounters in the face of what is unsayable is common to all mystic poets. It is through 'traces', or through paradoxes and through the use of cosmic images, archetypes that a saint-poet can signify what it is to be mystical, experientially, phenomenologically. Basavaṇṇa is quite explicit on this point: he states that when the 'transcendent absolute' touches him, that existential moment is experienced as a sensation: "... the flesh melts in pleasure / How can I talk to anyone/ of that." Allama has similar *vacanas* indicating the impact of the dynamic 'absolute' on him, for such an experience is "without precedent, without models...":

> There has been nothing like this before:
> had it been so, how could this be?
> It is because it isn't,
> so it has happened this way.
> Like longings from all directions
> reaching their end,
> that linga of the Lord of Caves,
> took my body towards it.
> (tr. Ramanujan, 1999, pp 314-315)

One striking difference between the Tamil saints—who came early in terms of chronology, the time when the Śaiva thought was still in its incipient forms—and those in Kannada is this: that Tamil saints were the pioneers in the bhakti movement, and as such did not have to carry all that theological baggage. They seem to concentrate instead more on the mutual intimate relationship they sought with their personal gods, and on the musical aspects of their hymns, the musical tradition being much stronger from the very early days in Tamil land. Moreover, in their awareness, the dualities of the world were kept much more strongly, the 'māyā' principle being much more active in their imagination. They probably realized that because the *aikyate* or oneness with god being a distant possibility, it is something always to be yearned for, but never fully attained. In contradistinction, Allama seems to rest in a state of *siddhi*, and as a *siddhapuruṣa* he makes his highly allegorised pronouncements. In fact, none of the conflicts and struggles common to other saints seem to touch his poise, and his *vacanas* hardly say anything about his life. They seem to emerge after his enlightenment and subsequent 'conversion' into the new faith. The subjective voice of the struggle, yearning and dealing with the mundane world seen amply in the other Vīraśaiva saint-poets is conspicuously absent in Allama. So, for the most part, he assumes an impersonality of tone while exhorting people to traverse in the ways of spiritual pursuits. While exhorting, he can satirize, tease, shock, scold but in his poetic *vacanas* since the desire to convey the unsayable becomes paramount, the subjective voice recedes, and the poet looks for other verbal strategies. Hence, Allama's excessive use of allegory, paradox, riddles. Among the Kannada saint-poets, he wholly, and exceptionally, stands apart from the rest of them for he assuredly gives the reader the feel that he is not bothered by *māyā*, the play of dualities.

This brings us to the realm of theology, metaphysics and their intimate relatedness to the constellation of allegory, metaphor, and other figurations of thought. *Vacanas* emerge from this composite nexus of concepts and conceits, figures of various hues, and tend to be preponderantly allegorical rather than metaphorical. One cannot metaphorise heavy theological-philosophy. The latter resists being made literary. Here is a *vacana* by Akka, not too frequent in the woman saint, and very similar to Allama's, which would work well for the reader provided he knows the philosophical categories involved in it:

I have Māyā for mother-in-law;
the world for father-in-law;
three brothers-in-law, like tigers;

and the husband's thoughts
are full of laughing women;
no god, this man.

And I cannot cross the sister-in-law.
But I will
give this wench the slip

and go cuckold my husband with Hara, my Lord.

My mind is my maid:
by her kindness, I join‘
my lord,
my utterly beautiful Lord
from the mountain peaks,
my lord white as jasmine,
and I will make Him
my good husband. (tr. Ramanujan 1973, p 141)

The Kannada saint-poets had internalised the entire philososphy of Ś*aktiviśiṣṭādvaita.* A.K. Ramanujan comments on the above *vacana*, pointing out “how all the relationships mentioned are those of marriage. The house is full of in-laws, legal and social ties. Not one person is related to her by blood ... A net of legalities binds her. These are what you enter into, not what you are born with. This elaborate build-up of legal bonds is shattered by the cuckolding climax of the poem, with the lord as the adulterous lover” (1999, p 327). With this explanation, perhaps the vacana works, but the deeper significance of the *vacana* will be lost if we do not attend to its allegorical aspect. This is where the Sānkhyan philosophy intervenes: Māyā in the *vacana* is the primal illusion, the three brothers-in-law are the three *guṇās, sātvic, rājasic* and *tāmasic* which together in different proportions make us what we are—and they keep a ‘tiger-watch’ on us! The husband is karma, ‘the past of the ego’s many lives’. The sister-in-law is apparently the *vāsana*, the ‘smell’ that karma carries with it. The mind in the vacana is supposed to be the mind which helps her meet her Lord. Furthermore, the *vacana* has also internalised some of the conventions of Sanskrit love-poetry. We have in the background the mythical legend of Radha, a married woman as an ‘abhisārika’, seeking love of Kṛṣṇa outside marriage, which is a familiar icon in Sanskrit love-poetry. Akka uses this 'abhisārika' motif unambiguously, and such a literary filiation points to the paradoxical status of the *vacana* form: that *vacana* is a novel invention in terms of genre, locutions (for it combines the folk idiom, *desi*, and the classical *mārga* lexis), and a new found subjectivity of the personal, often a confessional voice, and yet it is so deeply allied to the great tradition.

Śūnya Sampādane

(3)

ALLAMA PRABHU—MUKTĀYAKKA

Apart from Allama's own *vacanas* as they have come down to us, there are several dialogues he is supposed to have held as the chief interlocutor with some of the most prominent saint-poets of the day, a series of episodes wherein Allama figures as the chief ācārya, the principal Guru testing others and initiating them into the canon. This is the second avatar of Allama, as visualized by a devotee three centuries later in his imaginative work, a work of high creativity, well-known in Karnataka as *Sūnya Sampādane.*

The title *Sūnya Sampādane* (the acquisition of *sūnya* or emptiness/void), sounding like a paradox, is a text composed by a vīraśaiva devotee named Shivaganaprasadi Mahadevaiah in the 15th century. What is so remarkable about this work is the historical moorings of the text, and the poetics involved in it. The text is the first attempt undertaken by a devotee some three centuries later, to put together what might have transpired in the form of philosophical dialogues among the Vīraśaiva saints of the 12th century!—which is known to be an age of miracles and politico-religious conflicts. The composition is based on historical records, oral narratives, even what was hearsay among the devout followers of a later age. In short, the dialogues of Allama Prabhu, the chief preceptor among the saints, with Muktāyakka, with Basavaṇṇa and with Akka

Mahādevi (to list just the three prominent ones among many) as inscribed in the text, is an attempt to historicise the movement and mythicise the saints of an earlier age. The saints figure in the text as characters imagined by the narrator's historical awareness, his ideological slant, and his desire to institutionalise the mystical movement. The characters come through vividly as they engage themselves in a theological colloquy.

These dialogues, however, on a small scale, are also reminiscent of Manimekalai, the character (that we discussed in the Tamil section) in her search for a philosophic position in the eponimous epic in Tamil, wherein, as protagonist, she sits with scholars to discuss various schools of thought prevalent at the time. This event occurs in the epic prior to her final decision to embrace Buddhism as her faith.

To get back to Allama, some of the great concepts that get debated among the saints with Allama Prabhu guiding the arguments are 'kuruhu' (trace/identity, the material world figuring in the memory) and 'arivu' (which is consciousness matured through meditation and spirituality). The world and its material objects literally and symbolically pertain to the world of 'kuruhu' for they remain as traces in one's consciousness which the saint is required to transcend in order to attain true 'awareness'. The process of debate that Allama conducts with various śaiva seekers such as Basavaṇṇa, Muktāyakka and Chennabasava and others demarcates the stages through which the protagonist saint himself had traversed in order to acquire the mystical status of *śūnya* (voidness). The character of Allama as conceived by the author is both that of a dialectician and interlocutor, and is seen engaging the other saints in philosophic arguments. The poetics at work in this unique cultural text *Śūnya Sampādane* is based upon the author's dialogic imagination and the way, Mahadeviah, the author, negotiates other saints in their encounters with Allama.

Several such colloquies held by Allama in the course of his wanderings as a 'Jangama' (an ascetic constantly on the move) centre on language, the nature of words and their relation to 'para' (the supreme). Words become pearls in silence, says Allama in several of his vacanas, and such a 'pearl' is true liberation. On the other hand, volubility is often the real enemy for the spiritual seeker and turns even pearls into drops of water. For, to think in the rather overdetermined diurnal context, as thinking usually goes, is to spew an avalanche of words. The saint has called it 'śabda sūtaka' (as mooted earlier)! Moreover, words for him suggest only inadequacy, and if they try to express what is inexplicable, they turn into lies. But if they are not looked upon as being caught up in binaries, and instead if one realizes that at the core of words is wordless stillness, then one will have really 'arrived'.

The text opens with an 'aitihya', a fabula (that Vico talks about), surrounding Allama which is well-known, and deserves to be retold. It begins with Śiva's spouse Parvati in Kailāsa getting perturbed at the equipoise of Allama, who was close to Śiva in his former birth, and was called Nirmāyā, that is, someone who was beyond the reach of *māyā.* So it was Parvati (feeling jealous perhaps) who decides that Allama should take birth on earth and get infatuated with Kamalate, a beautiful maid she chooses from her retinue. This is how the text *Śūnya Sampādane* begins with an episode: the episode is about the love-infatuation of Allama for Kamalathe but is soon followed by his inconsolable grief at her sudden death. The final spiritual rebirth of Allama, however, ensues when he discovers in a cave, in his listless wandering, a sage in deep penance who hands him the *linga*, and this gift initiates Allama to undertake the Śaiva mission to spread the message of the new religion. In fact, we have any number of 'aitihyas' regarding both the Saiva and Vaiṣṇava saints, and their mystical conversions. What is striking, however, in all these fabulas is the invariable interweaving of Sanskrit myth and the vernacular reality. That is, in the mythical ambience of a 'cosmopolis', new religions, social orders and life-styles do emerge!

If the Sanskrit gods of mythology, and the ardent bhakti they inspired in both the Tamil and Kannada saints reified over a period of time into distinct forms of religious worship, they also provided conceptual sites for women to operate from with remarkable freedom and devise their own identities—identities as 'female' saint-poets both on the philosophic and social planes of living. The most outstanding instance is the philosophic dialogue that occurs between Muktāyakka and Allama Prabhu as inscribed at the beginning of *Śūnya Sampādane.*

The dialogics between the two saints, mostly in the 'nirguṇa'-mode, seem to replicate rather strongly the philosophic dialogues of the Upaniṣads. The context is that Muktāyakka has just lost her yogi brother Ajagaṇṇa who was also her spiritual mentor and is at present inconsolable in her sorrow.

Allama visits her and tries to engage her in a conversation, which turns out to be soteriological. The vacanas that emerge during this spiritual dialogue occur in a language which can only be called 'sandhyābhāṣa'. The use of this 'twilight language', to repeat, is presumably aimed at taking apart the logical/linear coherence of language in order to invent a new language based upon contrarieties, paradoxes. As Mercia Eliade puts it, "The semantic polyvalence of words finally substitutes ambiguity for the usual system of reference inherent in every ordinary language" (p 250). Such vacanas in Kannada, as mentioned earlier, are called *bedagina vacanas.* They might even be called poems of dalliance with god! The reader would find himself "in a universe of analogies, homologies, and double meanings" (ibid. p 252). In Western conceptual/linguistic framework, the term that comes somewhat close to the Indian, is what Julia Kristeva calls the 'semiotic': the term meaning the part of consciousness that remains untainted by the name and the law of the Father, that is, the patriarchal 'traces' that structure both language and society. This untainted part in the human consciousness (untouched by the Father figure) has within it subsumed 'the desire of/for the mother' (cited by Ramaswamy, p 164). It is the twilight zone which Lacan calls the 'imaginary', to which mostly the mystics and the artists apparently have access. Perhaps the nearest parallel in European poetry is the example of Rimbaud, who believed in making poems by consciously aspiring to be a mystic, and who therefore pronounced as his poetic manifesto that "the idea is to reach the unknown by the derangement of all the senses, ... (that is) by a rational disordering of all the senses" (Wikipedia accessed on 27/2/13). And this is also the zone which once gave rise to the unique classic in Sanskrit *Yogavāsiṣṭa,* which specialises itself in the poetic locutions of the absurd and the negative—for, what we get in the classic is a series of *non sequiturs*! The following is a typical passage from the said classic:

> The story of the Three Unborn Boys:
> The mother once told the following story to her child:
> In a city which never existed there lived three princes,
> two of whom were never born and the third never
> entered the womb of any mother. They once went out
> and took their bath in three rivers, two of which were
> already dried up and the third contained no water at all.
> (Y*ogavāśiṣṭa Mahā Rāmāyāṇa*, p 36.)

In a similar vein, Allama constructs a vacana to highlight the 'absurd', the alogical, as in the lines:

> Women without bodies
> pound rice without grains,
> and sing lullabies
> to the barren woman's son.
> (tr. Ramanujan, 1973, p 163)

In the following vacana, Allama plays deliberately as it were with the figure of synaesthesia, a mix-up of senses and their corresponding activities to confuse the reader, may be to frustrate the latter's poetic expectation—but perhaps to drive home a deeper meaning as in the following vacana:

I saw:
heart conceive
 hand grow big with child;
ear drink up the smell
of camphor, nose eat up
the dazzle of pearls;
hungry eyes devour
diamonds.
In a blue sapphire
I saw the three worlds
hiding,
O Lord of Caves. (tr. Ramanujan, 1973, p 150)

This is perhaps the Indian variety of synesthesia, which M.H. Abrams defines as 'a sense transference' (p 315). Ramanujan explains this riddle poem: "the linga (or Śiva) is born in the heart, manifests itself in the hand as an *iṣṭalinga* for action and worship. ... the camphor is self-awareness, perhaps because camphor sublimates, burns without residue. The pearl (by a pun on the word *mukti*, meaning both pearl and salvation) is a symbol of salvation. Diamonds are the cosmic meanings. The blue sapphire is the *māyā*, illusion. Note ... the surrealist 'disarrangement of the senses', to express mystical experience" (ibid, pp 196-97). This genre has its own primordial genealogy, for it is one with the very nature of language which, in the idiom of Heidegger, both conceals and unconceals.

Now what is relevant here is how Muktāyakka negotiates the 'imaginary' in order to bring out her mystical thoughts and the kind of intellectual freedom she enjoyed in her pursuit of spirituality. In the interlocution which ensues between her and Allama, when questioned by the latter regarding her attitude to her brother's death, Muktāyakka says:

> “The earth gets everything chewed up in its jaws.
> Not being aware of this end, the world looks pitiful.
> O brother, how am I going to live now?
> Not being able to tell dark from light,
> I have become a doubter. Your death, Ajagaṇṇa,
> is like giving me a mirror with my eyes covered.”
> (L Basavaraju, 1969, p 20, tr. author)

She makes it explicit that her lamenting her brother’s death is mainly because her spiritual training which she received from her brother came to an abrupt end and she couldn’t learn the ultimate secret of mystical yoga which alone could have altered her life.

The following discourse that Allama carries on with Muktāykka is worth remembering. To test her, Allama interrogates her regarding her identity (‘kuruhu’): “O mother, tell me who you are?” Her answer comes in a gnomic uncanny manner:

> What can I say
> When you ask me who I am?
> The body carries no illusion,
> nor my thought is deluded!
> If you call and ask me
> I have no identity (*kuruhu*).
> Born to none, coming out of no womb,
> With a mind not my own,
> brother, what can I say?
> I came after the birth of my brother
> Ajagaṇṇa, the ever effulgent
> now gone into the Unknown!

Allama, pleased with the words of Muktāyakka and sensing her spiritual plight, articulates in sheer wonder:

> The unseen have you seen, the unheard have you heard,
> the intangible have you touched, the impossible have
> you achieved, what is beyond, you have known, what
> is unfounded have you made certain. O Lord of Caves,
> I bow in reverence to Ajaganna,
> your śarana."

Now it is Allama's turn to introduce himself:

> All hail to you, O mother!
> Before the earth and skies were,
> before the waters flowed,
> before the fire could burn
> or winds blow
> my mother was born.

And long before ...

> Without being born, my father grew.
> Out of their loins I came
> and my five sisters
> who bereft of shame
> made me their man

This part of the discourse ends. And the number 'five' in 'five sisters' points to the five organs of sense, and Allama with his contrary consciousness creates such utterances that foreground the absurd and the negative. He achieves such an 'absurd' idiom through rewriting what in *bhakti* poetry the saints love, lust after, and play out their wooing, courting games, as the following *vacana*, rather shockingly, demonstrates:

> Five sisters, young and old,
> are queens of the self-same king.
> When he would have the youngest, the eldest one

plays bawd to him.
When he would have the elder, the younger one
plays bawd . . . when he would have
the two together, knowing well,
he cannot one by one,
has them both at once,
one of the others looks red in the eye,
another gives advice, the third
makes ready the bed.
When he hugs both and takes them both at once,
it's like water that with water blends . . .
O Lord Kalideva,
because your saint Siddaramiah
has showed the path and set me
within the abode of truth,
I say again and again,
Hail, O hail !

(Vacana 57, *Śūnya Sampādane*, Vol 3,
Bhusnurmath, S S., and L.M.A. Menezes, eds.
Text and Translation, 1968, Dharwar)

The above *vacana* would surely sound outrageous if the other meaning of the allegory, the five basic sense organs (signified here by the five siblings, parallel to those in the *vacana* quoted above) as being intimately and mutually involved, is lost sight of!

As the dialogues proceed, Muktāyakka's responses become much more enigmatic, mystical:

The bee that sports in the sky
the desire of the gem
reflected in a tear-drop —
these are beyond my ken
The scriptures and the holy texts
know not how to sing their praise.

Soundless, toneless
see, if you try to fathom
it's *agamya*
What words can indeed sound
this insubstantial silence,
and how can I ever forget
my Ajaganna.

During the course of this 'vivāda', the somewhat polemical conversation, she reveals the mystic experience she had, and which she owes to her brother:

Listen, he would tie anklets made
of void to the feet of a watery doll
and hand it to a doll made of void to fondle.
He would place a doll of camphor
on a throne of fire
when the fire melts
and the camphor remains.
I was struck dumb
at the yogic powers of Ajaganna! (tr. author)

Muktāyakka has glimpsed the 'other shore', the shore of complete non-identity, wherein man's multiple identities melt and are dissolved in an awareness of cosmic space—is this the 'śūnyata' that the Buddhists speak about? There are indeed touches, strong 'traces' of *yogavāśiṣta* in many of these utterances. But what is noteworthy here is how a woman mystic fashions her own subjective/individuated voice through constant search, interlocution and through the epiphanies she has experienced in the 'semiotic' zone—the 'mother-phase' of the child, psycho-analytically speaking, as noted earlier.

In short, the female-saints felt empowered in the face of behavioural norms for women, set down by patriarchy and its 'brahminical' dharmasūtras. They could break all social norms, transcend barriers, even defy gender politics. What was socially untenable became acceptable, even reverential when women appeared in the garb of *bhakti*. In their mental state of god-intoxication, with sometimes physical symptoms such as trances, ecstasy, even hysteria, they were taken by their societies to be holy women. It was divine madness as with Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār, or with Meera in the North, a Rajput princess, it was defiance of all social norms—for Meera is literally said to have danced on the streets, singing "Meera dances with anklets on her feet, defiant of worldly censure or family shame" (as quoted by Ramaswamy, p 21). This can be looked upon as an unprecedented gain in terms of evoking literarily the female desire and its unambiguous individual voice.

We have already discussed the categories of 'saguṇa' and 'nirguṇa' in relation to saint-poets but we need to remind ourselves how these categories have their own genealogy in the *kaula* doctrine of Kashmir *tāntric śaivism.* This doctrine is based upon the sensualities of the human body and their gradual spiritualization. This is the *tāntric* method handed down by Abhinavagupta, which the *bhakti* poets had internalized and converted into erotic emotions to be played out in their inner theater of love and ecstasy. To put it differently, *tantra* got spiritualized in the hands of the *bhakti* poets, and all the more so with women saints, who could sing in a vocabulary which is both sensual and spiritual. With women saint poets this was rather the rule than the exception, the sole exception being Karaikkāl Ammaiyār, whose hymns and songs do not portray any sexual overtones, nor for that matter Muktāyakka whom we have just discussed. With Allama, we have already seen how he stood apart from his other contemporaries: he did not approve of the human body being involved in any spiritual enterprise. In fact, as noted earlier, he seems to be in a continual debate with Abhinavagupta and other tantra exponents. As D.R. Nagaraj argues, Allama seems to be countering, even mocking the *tantra* approach to human body and its sensualities as represented by Abhinavagupta, whose position was that *tantra* does sacralize the body and its many predilections in its spiritual journey to union with Śiva. Though Allama disapproved vehemently the *tantra* style of internalising body's essentialities which other bhakti poets did, he did not, however, prescribe for himself a diction 'unpolluted' by tantra lexicon! For, he seems to use deliberately locutions which border on what may be called 'obscene'. He uses them, though, even crudely, but to make a point most emphatically, as in the following *vacana*, wherein he castigates those who in the guise of preaching unison with Siva are given to rampant sexuality:

> If mouth turns into vagina,
> hand an organ of sense,
> then, why not consider
> mouthfuls of food that hand
> conveys are mystic drops (bindu)!
> If it is thus a primal sense-object
> then, O lord of caves,
> why at all this monism!
>
> (L Basavaraju, 2005, p 531,tr. author)

The vacana describes carnal desire of 'religious' perverts in terms of gluttony! This is perhaps to use iconicity with a vengeance in order to promote an aniconic approach to one's god!

* * *

Two Women Saints: Āṇṭāḷ, Akka Mahādevi
Is Proto-feminism at work?

Now to remember two outstanding women saints from among many: Bhakti's special gift to them is precisely this. In face of patriarchy and the norms it had set down for women, these saints for the first time could articulate 'female' desire, the sensuality and ecstasies of the body, this intense awareness of 'desire' irradiating their vocabulary and language. Patriarchy seems to have looked the other way during such events, for it could not have raised its voice against religion or god! The form of bridal mysticism which most, almost all, women saints practise is also, strangely enough, a part of patriarchy, for women can only be brides even in their mental state—though occasionally Akka Mahādevi would question this (we will come to this later), they can only surrender to male passion, their lover-gods being eminently male! While, on the other hand, the male saints can play both male and female, also gender their gods as the poetic mood dictates and practise androgyny—as the Tamil saints do, as Basavaṇṇa, the Kannada saint, does in the following vacana:

Look here, dear fellow:
I wear these men's clothes
only for you.

Sometimes I am man,
sometimes I am woman.

O lord of the meeting rivers
I'll make wars for you
but I'll be your devotees' bride.
(tr. Ramanujan, 1973, p 87)

And when Basavaṇṇa genders his god, he can at times do so in the most outrageous fashion, call his god a 'whore', as in the following vacana:

I drink the water we wash your feet with,
I eat the food of worship,
and I say it's yours, everything,

goods, life, honour:
he's really the whore who takes every last bit
of her night's wages,

and will take no words
for payment,
he, my lord of the meeting rivers!

But when it comes to women saints such as Āṇṭāḷ and Akka, they do not change their gender, nor do they change the gender of their gods, for they are very much at ease with themselves, and with their male gods. They play their feminine part to the hilt, and in their mode of bhakti they resist patriarchy to realise their own singular identities. Besides, through becoming intensely aware of their female sexuality in a personalized, intimate relation with their lover gods, they draw the firm contours of subjectivity of their selves. They seem to feel and think with their bodies. However, they also reinforce in some way the patriarchal norms by taking on 'feminine' attributes.

Both Āṇṭāḷ and Akka are 'saguṇa' poets, but with a difference. While for Āṇṭāḷ, her lover-god is Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu with all 'saguṇa' attributes, Akka is often tossed between the two polarities. Her Śiva is both 'saguṇa' and 'nirguṇa'. She is often seen dithering in the interface between the two poles. He is 'nirguṇa' one moment when she finds in comparison all earthly husbands wanting, utterly inadequate:

I love the Handsome One:
he has no death
decay nor form
no place or side
no end nor birthmarks.
I love him O mother. Listen.

I love the Beautiful One

with no bond nor fear
no clan no land
no landmarks
for his beauty.

So my lord, white as jasmine, is my husband.

Take these husbands who die,
decay, and feed them
to your kitchen fires! (tr. Ramanujan, 1973, p 134)

Yes, Akka would opt for ‘nirguṇa’ Śiva only in the context of earthly husbands, who decay fast. But, at another moment, when it concerns her lord Śiva, she would surely go in for ‘saguṇa’, for ‘dvaita’ or the world of dualities, wherein Śiva will have lovely attributes, and she can stand back to admire them—as in the following *vacana*:

Locks of shining red hair
a crown of diamonds
small beautiful teeth
and eyes in a laughing face
that light up fourteen worlds —
I saw his glory,
and seeing, I quell today
the famine in my eyes. (ibid, p 120)

And in one of her vacanas, she says that she loves to keep away from her lord so that she could double her pleasure when she meets him and be one with him:

Better than meeting
and mating all the time
is the pleasure of mating once
after being far apart.

When he's away
I cannot wait
to get a glimpse of him.

Friend, when will I have it
both ways,
be with Himāyāt not with Him,
my lord white as jasmine? (ibid, p 140)

This is the central dilemma with all bhakti poets: to be one with Him and yet Not one with Him so that one can experience the heightened awareness against the diurnal round of human activity!

Now to compare: Āṇṭāḷ visualizes Kṛṣṇa or Ranganātha always as 'saguṇa', with attributes, as a lover who teases, plays with her and enacts herself as an archetypal 'abhisārika'. There doesn't seem to be any effort on her part to see her god as 'nirguṇa'. Compared to Akka, Āṇṭāḷ is more lyrical, romantic, but as easily given to articulating her feminine desire as Akka. There is a certain streak of violence in both Akka and Āṇṭāḷ—perhaps much greater in Akka—made explicit in their poems when it comes to articulating the sensual aspect of their love for their lover-gods. The following is a *vacana* by Akka:

Look at
love's marvellous
ways:

if you shoot an arrow
plant it
till no feather shows;
if you hug
a body, bones
must crunch and crumble;

weld,
the welding must vanish.

Love is then
Our lord's love. (ibid, p 142)

It is being in 'dvandva' that gives her both desperation and desire to look for the intensities of union, an intensity which has a corporeal aesthetic of its own: the female body, its awakened sexuality cathecting an internal drama, takes on the motivation of a continuous narrative wherein the longing and frustration, both playing out, results in a state of anguish. Now, compared to Akka who can be tough, earthy and philosophical at the same time, Āṇṭāḷ is more lyrical, less trammeled by philosophic doubt, and rarely as violent in phrasing as Akka—except perhaps for the one rare instance, a rare threat rather, which stands out from the collection of her songs named "Nacciyār Tirumoḻi":

If I see the lord of Govardhan
that looting thief
that plunderer,

I shall pluck
by their rooots
these useless breasts.
I shall fling them
at his chest.
I shall cool
the raging fire
within me. (Dehejia, 30)

And conversely, as mentioned earlier, there is a constant philosophic query, an interrogative mode in the *vacanas* of Akka, not usually found in Āṇṭāḷ. In fact, the range of Akka both in terms of religious ideology and erotic poetry is far greater than what one finds in Āṇṭāḷ. One obsessive concern rather constant with Akka seems to be the concept of *māyā*. She knows its glamour, its temptations, and poetizes it in numerous *vacanas*. On the other hand, she can passionately vilify the world of *māyā* as in the following *vacana*:

Why do I need this dummy
of a dying world
illusion's chamberpot,
hasty passions' whorehouse,
this crackpot
and leaky basement? (Ramanujan, 1973, p 133)

But she can also be more philosophical, subtle about the insidious nature of *māyā*, as in the following:

Like a silkworm weaving
her house with love
from her marrow,
and dying
in her body's threads
winding tight, round
and round,
I burn
desiring what the heart desires. (ibid, p 41)

And she prays to Śiva to cut through the net and release her. Here *māyā* is something internal. The constraints begin always from within, the prison is self-made, a cell within which the insect of the self works out its own destruction. But this is also the *māyā* which she needs—that's the paradox—and which she can also do without. It is *māyā* that rests on the 'dvandvas,' and that offers her the "techniques of ecstasy" (to use Mircia Eliade's phrase). At times, she is fully aware of the internal process by which *māyā* grows like a powerful force from within, expands spreading its dominion through the entire body, mind and spirit, with the result one is helpless against its onslaught, as the following vacana testifies:

> Illusion has troubled body as shadow
> troubled life as a heart
> troubled heart as a memory
> troubled memory as awareness.
>
> With stick raised high, Illusion herds
> the worlds.
> Lord, white as jasmine,
> no one can overcome
> your Illusion. (ibid, p 118)

However, both Āṇṭāḷ and Akka rewrite in several ways the Sanskrit thought, culture and its lore they had inherited. Āṇṭāḷ rewrites Kṛṣṇa's legend at Mathura in her hymns, transposing it to Tamil land and its geographical terms, thereby giving Tamil a pan-Indian status. She was doing very similar but in a small way what Pampa in Kannada did, the rewriting of the 'pauraṇic', the *Mahābhārata*! Akka, however, avoids relocating legends but rewrites Upaniṣadic thought in terms of the experience of her inner struggles. And both seem to share the same kind of *aitihya*, for legend has it that both were given away as brides in a ceremonial marriage to their respective lover-gods: Āṇṭāḷ in a ceremonial bridal dress enters the temple at Srirangam and merges with lord Ranganātha, Akka is said to have merged with Śiva in Sriśailam.

But when it comes to life as both of them lived, there is once again a difference: compared to Akka, Āṇṭāḷ, from what one can gather from her songs and the legends that surround her, seems to have had a fairly sheltered life and was not an object of social disapproval. Her adopted father Viṣṇucitta being himself an 'aḷvār' saint who is said to have treated her with love and kindness, she does not seem to have run up against social hurdles. Her dealings with her society and the external world seem to be minimal, her hymns and songs certainly do not carry those rifts, conflicts that surface very often in Akka's *vacanas*. On the contrary, like Ammaiyār of Tamil, Akka had to leave her husband, cut clean her relations with the world of men, wander homeless in search of other like-minded saints, and in the process, "in a gesture of ultimate social defiance," threw away her clothes, covering herself only with her tresses. Āṇṭāḷ, on the contrary, did not have any *bhakti* congregation or collective of saints to look for and relate to, and she was not even aware of her *bhakti* as being part of a social movement!

What follows from a study of the female saints amounts to a great spin-off when we consider their impact on women's studies: we have discussed as one of our subtexts the growth of subjectivity of the self literarily, both in relation to the hymns of Nāyanārs and Aḷvārs, and the *vacanas* of the vīraśaiva saints. Furthermore, the assumption of androgyny on the part of the male saints, and the vigorous questioning on the part of the female saints of the processes by which patriarchy genders people in order to establish its socio-political dominance have had a great impact on the legacy of thought that has come down to us. It is one thing to be born a female but quite another to go through the proper acculturation as a woman that each society has devised. It is precisely the rules of such a society that Akka flouts.

Strangely enough, post-modernist theory has questioned the very notion of sexual identity in the very terms that the female saints had done centuries ago. The *vacanas* had taken a stance—a stance which in today's parlance can only be named 'feminist'—opposed to the Sanskrit dharmaśāstrās which had prescribed rules for living for women and ensured their dependence on men. The vīraśaiva saints, and especially the female saints among them, had questioned the process by which patriarchy genders people in order to establish its socio-political dominance. Their questioning is surprisingly in consonance with what today Simone de Beauvoir observes in *The Second Sex*: wherein she comes up with two major premises. One, the body whose anatomy makes for absolute difference needs to be looked upon NOT as a natural fact but an historical idea. The second premise follows from the first: one is not born a woman, but rather becomes a woman.

The female saints had raised the question: who is this 'I', the subject who embodies this idea of gender, who acquires a gender as its cultural signification? Is this an 'I' that precedes gender or is the human body always already gendered? Is subject-hood co-extensive with gender? Is there an ontological status of the subject prior to gender? For we know that gender is not something passively received. Even before the vīraśaiva movement had begun, Devara Dāsimayya, a Kannada saint, probably of the tenth century, had declared:

> If they see
> breasts and long hair coming
> they call it woman,
>
> if beard and whiskers
> they call it man:
>
> but, look, the self that hovers
> in between
> is neither man
> nor woman
> O Ramanatha. (tr. Ramanujan, 1973, p 110)

And Basavaṇṇa who came later confesses: "Sometimes I'm man, sometimes I'm woman." Akka pronounces, "What if we are named women when we can feel/think in 'male' forms." This attitude of the female saints toward sex, gender leads us to the notion of subject positions when one wonders whether there is any single category as that of ‘woman’. The recent theories (that is, if one sets aside the Buddhist and Jain points of view on the dubious ontology of ‘subject’) have shown that the subject is no longer a person but a position, a ‘process’, and only a site of meaning undergoing a radical dispersal of identity. Accordingly, sex and gender enjoy no ontological status: if a man takes on the attributes of the feminine, as several male *bhakti* saints do, or a woman takes on the attributes of man or the masculine, as Akka declares in the pronouncement just quoted, she/he is only amplifying the notion of what it means to be a man or woman. Such a mixing of gender attributes, arbitrarily fixed in any society, underwrites the necessity to re-conceptualize what it means to be a man or woman. In such a context, the very notions of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ become fluid, interchangeable, indeterminate, and lead to a ‘carnival’ of gender voices as in the hymns and vacanas, giving rise to a proliferation of genders, not just two, but several of them! In short, gender becomes subject to cultural or religious innovations. These positions are linguistic constructs, as many post-modern theorists have felt, and as the female saints have shown amply and in several ways.

At this point in time, one wonders whether anyone has really tried to use the pronouncements of the Indian female saints in formulating an indigenous literary ‘feminist’ theory!

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To sum up the entire discussion on the *bhakti* movement in Kannada, we need to state that while the vacanakārās prevailed in a major way and were active, the parallel Sanskrit strand in Kannada writing was still very much alive, only it kept a low profile. The period before the advent of *bhakti* saints had witnessed the era of grand narratives. This was equally true with Tamil literary production: the Nāyanārs and Āḷvārs came on the scene only after the grand narratives of *Cilappatikāram* and *Maṇimekalai* had enriched the Tamil literary culture. The epic universe of Kannada, too, as we have seen, was ushered in by Pampa in *Vikramārjuna Vijayam*, wherein his patron king Arikesari was transposed into the epic world of *Mahābhārata* and conflated with the heroic character of Arjuna. The Kannada historical material was thus inscribed into the mythology of the epic form. Both Pampa and Ranna took well-known episodes from the epics and reinterpreted them without altering the framework of the story. They looked instead for the redeeming features in Karṇa and Duryodhana, and thereby displayed their individual visions by dramatizing the episodes so as to bring out the high moral traces in the character of their anti-heroes. Meanwhile, they also learned to hone their tools of epic narration in Kannada, innovating new metres and firmly establishing a tradition of literary writing. The constant recycling of the puraṇic material thus went on till, say, the nineteenth century with, of course, a conspicuous break, a significant rupture during the great Vīraśaiva movement.

Such a break or rupture, to compare, is not witnessed in the Tamil literary production. There was a subliminal continuity in thematic concerns from Sangam poetry, diffracting and proliferating, as we have seen earlier, in the hymns of Tamil saints under broader *bhakti* perspectives. The *bhakti* poems with their generic reach and depth had provided wider spaces for accommodating earlier themes, motifs already celebrated in the earlier texts. Through their hymns these saints could renew their ties with the earlier texts, and re-enact all the Sangam motifs in their passionate relation with god *Śiva*. The Kannada saints, on the contrary, did not have any prior indigenous texts such as the Sangam poems of love and war to relate to or renew their ties with the past. Their past was only the distant Vedic/ Upaniṣadic or the not so distant Kashmir brand of Śaivism that they could relate to or relive in their Vacanas. So they had to innovate on both form and content of their literary creations. If the form with suggestions of the aphoristic came from Sanskrit stylistics and the prevalent folk idioms of the times, the content ineluctably came from the metaphysical speculations of the Upaniṣads and the *Śaktiviśiṣṭādvaita* of Kashmir. Therefore, what controls and activates the virtual world of the *vacanas* is the religio-metaphysical epistemology: that is, the transition is from the actual to the virtual, say, from the sensible to the intelligible, from the earth-bound *a posteriori* to the world of the *a priori*. In contrast, the Tamil saints are much more down to earth, and through their hymns it is possible to reconstruct the actual world, often fraught with sectarian conflicts, as with those of the *Tevāram* saints. There were, no doubt, similar sectarian clashes between the Jains and the Vīraśaivas in Karnataka but rarely do they figure in the *Vacanas*. What seemed to bother most the Kannada saints are the ontological questions of *jīva* and *para* or *saguṇa/nirguṇa* relations with the supreme Other—(and how the supreme Other can become one's own self). Such metaphysical issues do not seem to bother much the Tamil saints. The latter is more firmly tied to the phenomenal, sensible life-world, and their god Śiva is much more personalized, much more real with whom they can establish a sparring relation, as seen especially with the *Tevaram* poets. Sundarar in this context, for instance, even constitutes a paradigm of Tamil saints: he plays out his power games with his friend/partner and mentor Śiva, and his querulous, nagging relation with Śiva continues in Āṇṭāḷ in her relation with Kṛṣṇa!

Now to get back to the Jain poets of Kannada who constitute the early mainstream literary tradition: their dual vision of the affirmative and the negative, this essential binarism, controls the poetic logic of the entire corpus of Jain writing. Pampa, as we have seen, spends his rhetorical energies on, say, scenes such as 'Nilānjana's dance' or the incomparable passages on Mādri and Pāndu, the latter succumbing to the curse after union with his woman, only to give way to the contrary 'śramaṇa' feelings of life-denial. The erotic and the ascetic moving in tandem but functioning under the pressure of two contrary foci, the here and the hereafter, as we have already witnessed in the earlier chapter, figure prominently in Pampa, in Janna, as in other Jain poets. The problematic of this essentially dual literary trend—which lasts till the advent of the bhakti period in the twelfth century—is replicated in the social sphere by their writing frequently under the patronage of Hindu kings. While all of them wrote Jain religious works celebrating the story of a Tīrthankara, thereby fulfilling their religious obligation, many of them like Pampa and Ranna wrote one non-religious work wherein the poet could eulogise his patron king.

Now a comparison with the Jain poets of Tamil land is bound to occur at this point. While the Jain poets formed the mainstream literary figures in Kannada and founded a strong classical tradition from the tenth century on, their counterparts in Tamil land after a brief but resplendent achievement in, say, *Cilappatikāram*, *Nālaṭiyār* and perhaps with some Jain influence in *Tirukkuraḷ*, seem to recede into the background, yielding their literary space to the Śaiva saints. Furthermore, there is seen more of the negative and the renunciatory strain in Tamil poetry of the Jain monks as *Nālaṭiyar* amply testifies: that life chained to a cycle of births and rebirths and the theme of seeking deliverance, both are recurring motifs.

In Kannada, on the other hand, when the bhakti poets appeared, they constituted a grand interregnum, and the parallel Sanskrit-Kannada tradition outlined in the earlier chapter was somewhat overshadowed. Their *bhakti* poems, which spread in Karnataka in the twelfth century, were able to break out of the purāṇic straitjacket of the classical poets—the straitjacket that the Tamil poets and saints had done without during the entire first millennium AD!

Now, to sum up the achievement of the *vacanakāras*, the great contrarieties which constituted the dual vision of nearly three centuries in Kannada, the ‘secular’ and the religious, the erotic and the ascetic, could come together under the alchemy of *bhakti*. In Allama, in Akka, and Basavaṇṇa, the vacanas become very powerful because of the fusion of the intellectual and the sensuous, both working together and in unison. They had forged a new idiom which drew freely on both the Sanskritic/conceptual and the folk/sensory locutions with a sustained poetic vitality not easily found in other literatures. The saint-poets, the makers of divine poetry, had, in short, blazed their philosophic-poetic trail, blending all disparate emotions in terms of the literary, and had finally achieved an integral vision through their mystical genius. Philosophy and poetry had blended so freely that we are offered a truly philosophic poetry or poetic philosophy. They surely seem to fulfill the dream-wish of a Wittgenstein who would say that "philosophy ought really to be written only as a form of poetry!"

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