

Images of God in Nāyanārs and Alvārs: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Nāyanārs and Alvārs are sectarian traditions that originated around the same time in Tamil speaking region and marked a radical shift in devotion towards god. Modern scholarship often studies the two traditions separately without paying attention to the thematic features of their poetry. This paper highlights the thematic affinities in the works of Nāyanārs and Alvārs saint poets by reading their poetic corpus in a comparative framework.

Keywords: Nāyanārs, Alvārs, Bhakti Movement, Comparative Literature, Thematology

Bhakti existed in the Sanskrit tradition long before it took its vernacular flavor. For Panini, *bhakti* is an action noun derived from the Sanskrit verbal root *bhaj*, which means “to divide, apportion, share.” In a broad semantic field, it may also denote the notions of “belonging, being loyal, and even liking” (Hawley 5). In this sense, *bhakti* is a shared imagination and pursuit of god among a community of *bhaktas*. This notion of sharing gives bhakti a sense of community, and makes the prime objective of bhakti not just devotion towards god but also towards fellow *bhaktas*. *Bhagavad Gītā* was the earliest text to expound on the notion of *bhakti* while it was fully conceptualized in the *Bhagavat Purana*.

Sanskrit was the supralocal language of India like Latin or Greek of Europe, but only the educated and people from some castes had access to it. Practicing religion through Sanskrit barred the majority of population from actively taking part in devotion to god. In order to bring the uneducated, illiterate majority within the fold of bhakti and give it an intimately personal nature, a mother tongue had to be devised for bhakti. George L. Hart suggests that bhakti emerged in the vernacular from the confluence of Sanskritic religion and mythology with Tamil conceptions of kings and women (Hart). A.K. Ramanujan is also of the opinion that early bhakti took whatever mythopoetic traditions were at hand in its transformation from Sanskrit to regional dialects (Ramanujan 104). Only in the personal language could bhakti serve its purpose of reviving Hinduism, which was losing ground to reformist movements like Buddhism and Jainism. By using a localized language, bhakti was given a local flavor in the language and the place where the

language is spoken. With the treatment of bhakti in the mother language, no one was incapable of bhakti. Anyone can practice bhakti and reach god. A.K. Ramanujan eloquently writes of this localization of bhakti in his Afterword to the translation of Nammālvār:

“To Nammālvār, god is not a hieratic second language, a Sanskrit to be learned, to be minded lest one forget its rules, paradigms, and exceptions: he is one’s mother tongue. In his view, god lives within us as a mother tongue does, and we live in god as we live in language – a language that was there before us, is all around us in the community, and will be there after us. To lose this first language is to lose one’s beginning” (Ramanujan 137).

Tamil was the earliest of the regional languages of India to be written down. Its literary tradition goes back to the first century A.D. or B.C. Given the long history of the Tamil language, it is hardly a matter of surprise that the earliest bhakti hymns to appear were in Tamil. The *Paripāṭal* features seven hymns to Tirumāl (local version of Vishnu) and eight to Murukan (a local deity of beauty, youth, love, and war). These hymns are the blend of erotic (*akam*) and heroic (*puram*) traditions and borrow independently from the “panoply of Sanskritic myths, epithets and motifs” (Ramanujan 109-110). Even the Tamil Saiva sect was in its full glory by the sixth and seventh century A.D.

The hymns that have come down to us borrowed freely from the models and tradition that preceded and were already in circulation. The Tamil bhakti saints drew from an extensive repertoire that was available to them. Irrespective of the sectarian divide, their primary quest was to formulate a diction that champions the Tamil Hindu religion, which was not only continuous with the Tamil religious and cultural past, but also rooted in Tamil aesthetic and literary tradition. Whether Alvārs (Vaishnava tradition) or Nāyanārs (Saiva tradition), the foremost agenda of the Tamil bhakti saints was to check the rising popularity of Buddhism and Jainism, which they saw alien to the Tamil culture. It must be noted that Tamil and Sanskrit existed side by side in the Tamil country for many centuries. Sanskrit was the language of pundits and philosophers, and almost all Hindu philosophy was written in Sanskrit. Even the compilers of the Tamil hymns based their anthologies on the Vedic model and called them the Tamil Veda. Therefore, it was only natural that the diction of Tamil bhakti borrowed significantly from this hieratic pan-Indian language. Bhakti was the bridge between “high” and “low” (Ramanujan), and even within the Tamil context, the folk meters and folk genres were mixed with classical Tamil models of the Sangam era. The Alvārs and Nāyanārs might have imagined a different god, but their imagination of Him followed a similar trajectory. The extensive repertoire that was available to Tamil bhakti saints was the same, which resulted in a similar conceptualization of different gods. My paper is an attempt to

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look at the inherent resemblances and differences between the poetic output of Alvārs and Nāyanārs. By reading English translation of hymns by Tamil saints in both Vaishnavite and Shaivite traditions, I will try to show how the Tamil saints were imagining different deities in more or less the same way in order to defeat a common enemy, i.e. Buddhism and Jainism.

Arguing towards a typology of Tamil bhakti hymns, Norman Cutler asserts that the poet persona of addresser addresses the hymns to four different addressees, i.e. to deity, to the audience, to his own heart, and to an unspecified addressee. In another type, neither the addressee nor the addresser is specified, while a special type of signature verses are also common in the combined corpus of Tamil bhakti hymns (Cutler 19-38). Within the ambit of this model, I have tried to point out common themes that underscore the Tamil bhakti hymns by Nāyanārs and Alvārs. This attempt, I believe, will not only prove Cutler's typology but also highlight a shared thematology in the corpus of Tamil bhakti hymns.

Imagining a Saguna God

In the following verses, Tamil saints address the deity of their devotion directly, illustrating the first type of Cutler's model. The absent audience stands aside and overhears the words of the poet. The direct addressal to the deity depict the personal relationship of the poet with the deity and convey information about the god to the audience of the hymn, who might be absent from the context of the hymn but is an active participant in its performance. The poets in the following two hymns speak directly to the deity and imagine him in saguna (with attributes) form. It has been argued that the saguna-nirguna distinction in the conceptualization of the god has existed in Sanskrit literature for long (Prentiss 21), however it has also been suggested that this distinction in the conceptualization of the bhakti of the vernacular is a fairly modern trend (Hawley). I want to argue that because the Tamil saints were acting as mediators between their fellow devotees and the deity, they had to "see" the god as iconic and make it perceivable for the fellow devotees. The saints, being mediators or *gurus* as A.K. Ramanujan calls them, were interlocutors and acted as "seeing eyes," conceptualizing the image of the deity for the devotees to "see" it. The attributes given to these deities are human, however the god's hair and chest and waist and limbs would transcend the humanness in some way. Not always, the attributes given to the god are good, but the attributes are glorified, nonetheless.

Campanar II.13.8 Valanculi

1

O dazzling light
praised by your devoted servants
in Valanculi where bees sing,

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drunk on cool fragrant honey
flowing out of blossoming flowers,
tell me why you once
wandered about as a beggar, singing songs.

2

O god bright with a budding white smile,
you who live in Valanculi
where the large white egret
and the heron with open bill
look for prey among surging white waves,
tell me why you roamed the world,
carrying a dank white skull. (Peterson 123-124)

The first two hymns by Campantar are part of a longer decad. Here the poet sings of Siva as having humane form who wanders the world begging and singing. The hymns refer to the Bhikshatana (Supreme Naked Beggar) manifestation of Lord, discussed in Saiva Agamas. The confronting voice of the speaker draws attention to these hymns: the addresser demands an explanation from the addressee as if he is addressing a friend.

Pey Alvar: Munram Tiruvantati

2

Today I saw your feet
and I cut myself free
from all the seven births,
Lord with the splendid basil-covered chest
like a mountain dipped in gold,
you captivated Tiru
when you first caught her eye,
Tirumal,
my mind is all yours. (Cutler 128)

Peyalvar's god has human attributes that somehow transcends his humanness. His chest is covered with basil (tulasi) and appears like a "mountain dipped in gold." He's seducer who captivated Tiru (Laxmi), consort of Vishnu who is believed to reside in Vishnu's chest, when he "first caught her eye." On the *darsanam* of Lord's feet, the speaker is freed from the chain of rebirth, hence he offers his mind to the service of Tirumal. The voice of the speaker is not so confronting like Campantar's but is quite submissive and evokes the master-slave relationship between the devotee and the deity.

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Temple and Shrines

The Tamil bhakti saints wandered all over the Tamil countryside in order to spread their message of bhakti and converted whomever they came across, irrespective of caste, class, or gender. In their attempt to localize Vishnu and Saiva in the Tamil land, they sang of numerous places in the Tamil land where the two deities are manifest. The Saiva saints sing of 274 sacred shrines or temples, the Vaishnava saints of 108, of which 106 are terrestrial and 2 are celestial (Ramanujan 107). The poets use conventional metaphors to sing of these holy places and paint a picture of abundance and prosperity at these places. These shrines are free of diseases and drudgery of life. These are places where the Lord sits in his full glory and bestows his benevolence upon his devotees. Let us take an example.

Nammālvār: 4.10.5

You believers in Linga mythologies
and you Jains
you Buddhists
becoming all of you choppers of logic
becoming even your gods
he stands there
our lord:
come see him in Kurukur
where rich ears of paddy fan hum like ceremonial yak-tails.
In this place without lies
come praise him. (Ramanujan 57)

Campantar: 1.59 Tunkanaimatam

1

You who seek a place to perform penance
to end the chain of existence,
which is nothing but birth and death and insidious disease,
become servants at the shade of our Lord's feet,
worship Tunkanaimatam temple in Katantai
surrounded by trenches and walls,
where the sweet sound of Vedic chant
rises in every house! (Peterson 156)

These two hymns are example of the second type of Tamil bhakti hymns described by Norman Cutler. Both of these hymns are addressed to the audience/devotee of Tamil bhakti. In both these hymns, the respective speakers try to draw the audience towards the greatness of the Lord. The poet localizes the God in the Tamil country and links him with the cultural past of the land. In the first hymn, Nammālvār not only castigates against the Saivites, Buddhists, and Jainists but also asks the listener of the hymn to come and see the prosperity of the Tirumal (Vishnu) in Kurukur. The second hymn while not so critical of followers of other sects, typically glorifies the land of Katantai as that of prosperity, fortified against the “insidious diseases,” and free of “chain of existence.”

The Immanent Absolute

Choosing a rather obscure rhetorical structure, the Tamil bhakti poet employs a narrative mode where the speaker is identified within the hymn but the addressee is not specified. The poet invites the audience to take part in the narrative of the hymn from the outside and reserves the entire canvas of the hymn for his own persona to speak about the ways of the God (Cutler 26). God, for the Tamil bhakti saints, is immanent and all encompassing. He is both within and without, here and not here, everywhere yet nowhere. He is the absolute who reigns supreme over everyone and everything. For the Tamil bhakti poets, everything is a manifestation of the God. I have tried to illustrate this omnipresent, omnipotent nature of the Tamil deity in the following examples.

Nammālvār: 6.3.6

Being all three world
and nothing

being desire
being rage
being both the flower-born Laksmi
and anti-Lakshmi
black goddess of ill luck

being both honor and shame
our lord lives in Vinnakar
city named sky
which the gods worship lovingly

and in my evil heart
he lives forever
flame of flames (Ramanujan 16)

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Nammālvār's conception of god in the above hymn is that of a supreme ruler who reigns over all three worlds. His Vishnu is both unconscious matter and conscious spirits. Being both Laxmi and Kali, he is both good luck and bad luck. He is someone who dwells in the corrupted hearts of his followers and in the city of plenty, which even the lesser gods worship. In all beings reside god and from god originates all beings. A.K. Ramanujan refers to the Tamil deity as one's mother tongue, accessible everywhere (Ramanujan 137).

Appar VI.268.8 Pullirukkuvelur (Vaittisvaran Koyil)

The lord whom the gods
praise with a thousand names,
the one who gives the unattainable treasure
to his faithful devotees,
he who is all mantras and tantras and healing potions,
and through his grace cures our incurable disease,
the warrior who took up his mighty bow
to burn the three cities,
the Lord in Pullirukkevelur -
I, who have failed to sing his praise,
have wasted my life (Peterson 200).

Appar conception of god in the above hymn is similar to Nammālvār's, however he takes it one-step ahead. Siva, in this verse, is the source of all knowledge. He is the healer of all ills that plague humankind, yet he is the ultimate destructor who destroyed the three great cities of prosperity, power and dominance on earth, in sky, and in heaven in his Tripurantaka manifestation. On another level, the hymn celebrates the Lord as the healer who cures the incurable disease of existence itself. He is the absolute, superior and above all.

Localizing the Cosmic

The Tamil bhakti poet employs a rhetorical structure where neither the speaker nor the audience is explicitly invoked within the hymn. These hymns offer a wide plain for the listener and reader to infer, and a wide canvas for the poet to sing about his lord. To illustrate this type of Tamil bhakti hymn, I have chosen two hymns that celebrate god as local and translocal; the poet merges the cosmic persona of the deity with his local identity.

Appar IV.39.10 Aiyāru (Tiruvaiyaru)

When the ignorant demon

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tried to lift the great hill, he felt faint;
seeing his pain, the wise god
pressed down with his little toe, till
the demon was crushed,
and fell down on the earth;
yet when he gained wisdom,
The Lord who dwells as honey in Aiyāru
blessed him with his grace. (Peterson 129-130)

In this hymn, Appar sings of the Rāvananugraha manifestation of Lord Siva, where Rāvana appears as a “paradigm for the repentant sinner who is redeemed by the infinite grace of the god” (Peterson 130). While the action of the myth takes place in the cosmic world as Rāvana tries to shake the Mount Kailash but is trapped beneath it by the Lord, Appar foregrounds the myth within the Tamil country where the Lord who dwells in Tiruvaiyaru, a temple town in the modern day Thanjavur district, redeems the “repentant sinner.”

Nammālvār: 2.5.7

The lord fierce as a bull in battle,
who wears a crown of gold
and cool flowering basil,
the lord who sleeps in the milky sea
with a snake for his bed
vanquished seven bulls to win Pinnai,
girl with arms graceful as bamboo,
and pierced seven spreading Sal trees
covered with blossoms
rich in honey. (Cutler 143)

Nammālvār also works a similar theme in his hymn where he localizes the cosmic Lord, who “sleeps in the milky sea (*Kshir Sagar*) / with a snake for his bed (*Śeṣanāga*),” by conflating the cosmic myths with local variants. The story of Kṛṣṇa successfully beating seven bulls in bull-baiting competition to win a Tamil bride, Pinnai or Nippinnai, a girl from the community of the cowherds is native to the Tamil country. This overlapping of the Tamil myths with the cosmic myths of the Lord foregrounds the deity into the Tamil land, and helps in better assimilation of the hymn with the people of the Tamil country.

Moksha

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Tamil bhakti saints often speak to their own being in their hymns. The poet is both the speaker and the addressee in these hymns, while the deity and audience are silent observers. He may address his own heart, mind, or breath. The prototype to these forms exist in the Sangam tradition, but the major difference between the Sangam prototype and the bhakti variant is that the bhakti poet speaks to his own heart in his own persona while in the former, the poet dons a dramatic persona to address his heart (Cutler 25). The poet often speaks of his relationship with the deity and sheds some light on the path towards liberation as is evident in the examples below.

Campantar, II.117.3, Cāykkātu

Good heart,
think of the Lord every day.
Who knows the course
of life and death?
If for my Lord of Cāykkātu alone
will my head daily bear flowers,
my ear hear his great name,
and tongue praise him in song,
good karma will surely be mine. (Peterson 256)

Campantar's hymn speaks of liberation that can be attained by the *bhakta* by following the path of Siva. According to Saiva Siddhanta, Siva performs the five acts of creation, maintenance, destruction of universe, concealing himself and revealing himself for his own play (*krida*) and for the liberation of beings. The liberation can only be attained with the grace of Siva. The aspirant has to perform daily rituals throughout the life, the impurity, *dravya* covering the soul, is gradually removed and the aspirant finally achieves liberation (Flood 200-228). The poet persona in this hymn speaks to his own heart directly about this path to liberation, but indirectly to others who listen or read it. Moksha, the ultimate aim of life in Hinduism, is only available, as per Campantar, by good grace of the Lord. The heart, in order to get good karma, must think of him every day, perform rituals for him, listen his deeds from a teacher in whose body the Siva is manifest, and sing his praises. While on one level the hymn reads like note to self, it is advice that Campantar would impart to his fellow devotees.

Peyalvar: Munram Tiruvantati, 44

He became the world, the Eon,
and the ocean,
he became red fire
and the sun's brilliant far-flung rays,

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O my heart,
give your whole being to the feet of the lord
who wears a crown of pure dazzling gold. (Cutler 129)

Peyalvar's hymn is another instance of the speaker addressing his own being, while actually shedding light on the nature of the deity for the fellow devotees to understand. The speaker of this hymn bids his heart to surrender his "whole being" to the lord. The epithets used to describe Vishnu in this hymn are in continuity with the Sri Vaishnavism theology as formulated by later Vishishtadvaita philosophers. Ramanujan, the best-known expounder of Vishishtadvaita, conceptualized God as omnipotent who creates the manifold world out of Himself by a gracious act of will. For Ramanujan, God is the absolute reality composed of unconscious matter (*cit*) and finite spirits (*acit*), and there is no other reality outside or independent of God (Satischandra Chatterjee 382-398). The Alvārs hold that none of the three paths to liberation described in Gita – *bhakti*, *jnana*, *karma* - are enough. The foremost things required for liberation for these saints and later theologians is total surrender (*prapatti*) (Ramanujan 142). This *prapatti* is what Peyalvar calls for in the penultimate line of this hymn. Like the Campantar hymn, the poet persona not only asks his heart to follow the desired path of "total surrender" at the feet of the Lord, but also shows the way to fellow devotee. Hymns of this type, then, works on two plains, it shows light to one's own heart and bids others to do the same. The philosophical message is imparted in simple rhetoric for fellow devotees to follow.

Despite the sectarian divide, that even led to the persecution of followers of one sect by another (Colas 248), the Tamil bhakti traditions thrived in mutual accord with each other. They shared literary models and formalistic patterns, and used a common repertoire of genres to spread the words of God. The combined corpus of Tamil bhakti poetry served as a model for devotees on which they modeled their own imagination of the divinity. The Tamil bhakti didn't completely eradicate the hegemony that existed in the affairs of temple; however, it revived a dying faith and lit a fuse, as A.K. Ramanujan would call it, that would radicalize devotion all over the Indian countryside in the centuries that followed and helped the cause of the vernacular in deterritorialization of the territory of Sanskrit.

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